THE CASTING CLINIC
With Al Kyte

CATCH MY DRIFT

In fly fishing, we're partial to the term, 'drift'. We speak of drifting a section of river, of our fly's drag-free drift, and of the invertebrate drift of aquatic insects. We also refer to drift in casting, usually to describe a movement added to our back cast when going for distance. This drifting after the force has been applied was called 'follow through' as far back as 1942 in John Alden Knight's book, *Modern Fly Casting*.

Yet how can we reconcile a follow through with our emphasis on stopping the rod abruptly? How does drift help add distance to a cast? How and when do we add drift to our casting movements? The answers to these questions could lead you to make a change in your cast that improves your loops and timing, as well as the distance of your casts.

In the basic overhead cast, we emphasize stopping the stroke abruptly by physically stopping our casting hand and rod butt. Yet, when experts make long casts, their hand and rod butt may keep moving without noticeable pause between the back cast and forward cast. In studying film, I found this hand movement so smooth that sometimes the only way I could tell when the back cast had ended was by seeing where the rod started to lose its bend. Yet, even with this hand movement, we still experience the sensations of making a firm stop, feeling the rod unload. So we seem to be able to stop the cast effectively, even though the rod continues to drift.

Lefty Kreh provides a classic example of someone who moves his hand in drifting sometimes

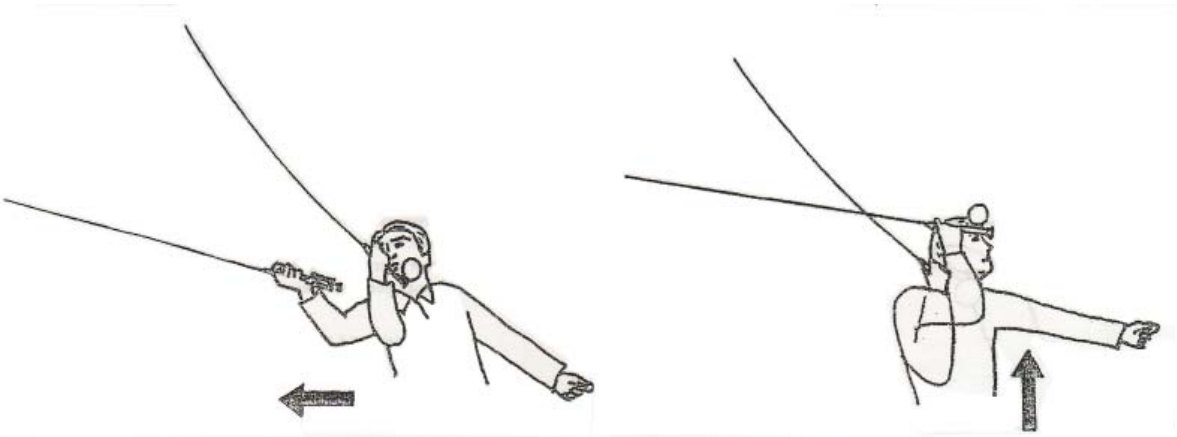

FIGURE 1: DRIFTING THE ROD BACK (LEFT) ADDS STROKE LENGTH. LIFTING THE ARM (RIGHT) INCREASES THE ROD ANGLE FOR THE FINAL FORWARD CAST.

moving it back nearly a foot and a half after his back cast begins unloading. Although we associate hand movement with drift, I wondered if it always accompanies drift. Ed Jaworowski seems to assume so in his book *The Cast*, claiming that he does not drift. Although Ed's hand doesn't drift, his photographs show that his rod does, by opening up an additional 10 to 15 degrees of rod angle after his stop. Jerry Siem's drift opens up as much as 40 degrees of rod angle without any backward hand movement. Apparently a rod may either be drifted farther back or drifted into a different angle, and moving your hand back is just one way to drift a rod.

In fact, most distance casters increase both rod angle and stroke length when drifting. Thus, as Lefty drifts his hand back, his rod tip also drops down (Figure 1). When moving his hand forward again before applying force to his forward cast, he continues to lay his rod farther back toward horizontal. At this point he almost appears to be carrying a javelin forward.

Why drift at all? Why not make the entire backward movement in one motion, as we do in a short cast? Many casters do just that when attempting a distance cast, but often find that their casting loops deteriorate. Why is that, and how can drift help?

Whether you slide your hand back, increase the rod angle, or combine the two, your drift is moving the rod tip back and/or down. Moving the rod tip back provides more stroke length through which it can move forward again during the forward cast. Setting up this longer path for additional force is the most frequently mentioned advantage of drift. The advantages of lowering the tip are often overlooked. Drifting the tip down in back widens the casting angle or arc, which makes it easier to force additional bend into the rod, yet also keep this lowered tip moving along a straight path. Dropping the rod tip even lower in back on the last back cast also sets up an upward-angled forward path for the farthest line carry. If you try to lower your rod tip into this position with a single back-cast move

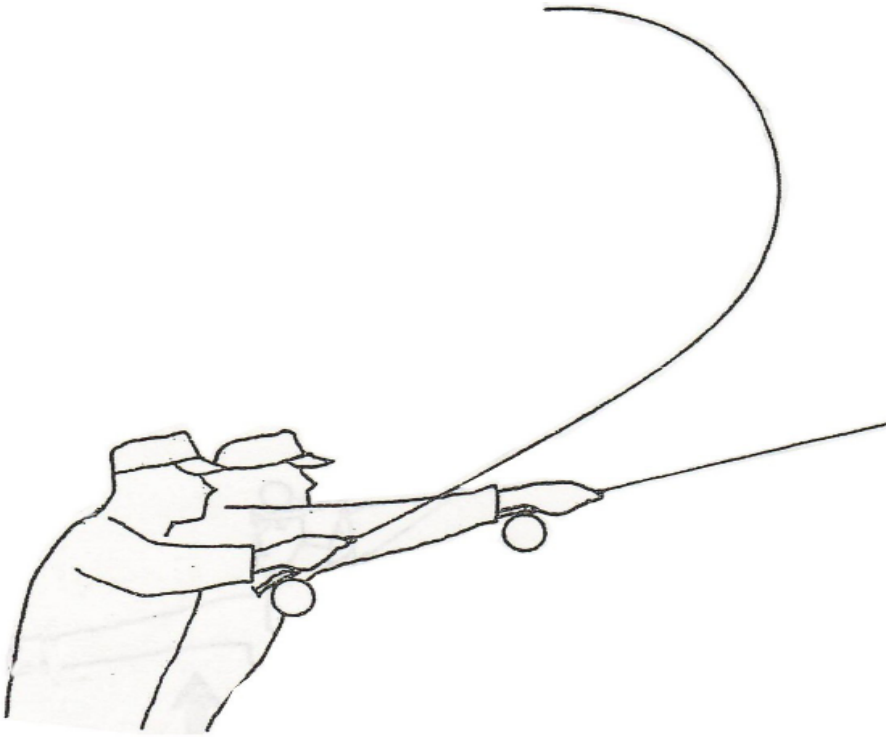

FIGURE 2: LEFTY KREH'S "STOP" AND "DRIFT" POSITIONS ON A LONG FORWARD CAST.

ment, you are likely to pull the fly line down with the tip and see your loops turn ugly.

Drift can also add speed to your cast. Some casters are still making this backward/downward drift as they shift their weight into the forward cast. This is similar to a baseball hitter who continues to move his hands back even though he is already striding forward toward the pitcher. This timing results in continuous motion between the back cast and forward cast, which provides early acceleration and important speed for a long forward cast. The speed advantage of such continuous motiion is particularly noticeable in the longest casts of Jerry Siem and Tim Rajeff.

Drift also offers another advantage, keeping connected to the fly line and fly. When you first learn to cast, there is a separation between the back cast and forward cast - an instant when, as the rod is stopped in back, you lose the feeling of any contact to the fly line. Yet if you drift the rod tip back a little with the flow of line, you can continue to feel its weight. The classic example of keeping connected with the line occurs in a cast sometimes called the constant Pressure Oval or Belgian Cast. Constant pressure is achieved by using the rod tip to pull the line through the change of plane and direction, from a sidearm back cast into an overhead forward cast. Movements that keep you connected to your fly line are particularly helpful when the wind knocks that line off its straight path.

Drift also provides time to reposition your casting arm. When making a long back cast, some casters let their arm almost straighten in following the rod tip back. Such arm extension during a rod's unloading can prolong the tip's positive influence over the layout of a long backcast line, yet offers a weak position from which to start the next forward cast. So, as the line continues to unroll in back, you want to reposition your casting arm forward into your strongest throwing position before applying force to the forward cast. This doesn't mean, however, that you commit the common error of 'creeping' or drifting your tip forward before casting in that direction.

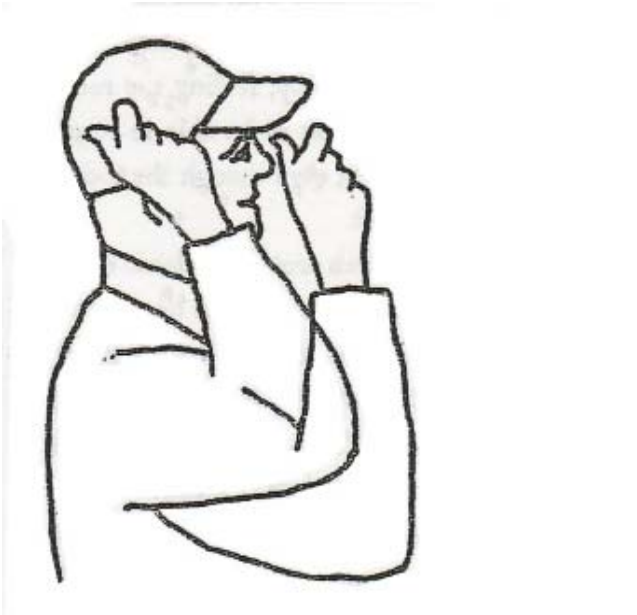

FIGURE 3: TO IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO DRIFT YOUR ROD BACKWARDS, USE A PANTOMIME TO PRACTICE THE LIFT AND DRIFT ELBOW POSITIONS

Although we usually refer to drifting on our back cast, sometimes we see drift after the forward cast, as well. After false casting forward, some casters lower their casting hand and rod a bit to create space for lifting their rod during the next back cast. On the final forward cast, however, they are more likely to drift their casting arm forward. This follow-through movement can change the rod angle for more efficient line shoot through the rod's guides, minimize the shock to the casting arm (most noticeable when attempting to stop a stiff, heavy rod), and, I believe, help dampen any continuing oscillations of the fly rod (Figure 2).

How do you add drift? Jim Green, in his casting pamphlet *Fly Casting from the Beginning*, includes a little drift in his initial instruction, stopping the back cast at one o'clock and immediately 'opening' the wrist another clock position to 'allow the rod to ***drift*** back under the weight and inertia of the line'. This softening of the wrist after the stop is the beginning of a drift that changes the rod's angle. You might try it.

However, I believe most instructors add drift sometime after having taught a basic cast, usually by adding a little backward and/or upward hand movement. Joan Wulff teaches stopping the back cast, then raising the casting arm just enough to move the hand up and back a few inches. She does this by both raising and straightening the elbow a bit. Lefty's style of drift also involves extending the arm at the shoulder and elbow, but in a more horizontal, side-arm plane.

I teach drift when adding distance to a basic cast. I have you start by stripping off enough line to cast 50 to 60 feet and by opening up your stance, dropping your casting side back enough to watch your back casts. False cast the line out, rocking your weight back with each back cast and turning your head back to watch each loop. Stop your rod butt just beyond vertical in back, high enough to force the tip to do the bending, thus forcing a small loop. If accustomed to making long back casts with one motion, you will probably need to shorten your back-cast movement considerably. When you are able to stop the rod early enough to see a tight loop form, add drift by moving your rod hand up and back a few inches. You will probably find that it takes a few casts to remember to add another backward movement after your shortened stop. Even then, I would expect you to make a jerky stop, a distinct backward movement, and another definite stop farther back. With practice, however, your movements become smoother and your stops less obvious.

If this doesn't begin to come together for you within a few casts, you may want to pantomine these drift movements with just your casting hand or holding an unstrung rod. The guideline I suggest is to lift your hand back and up to stop at ear level with your forearm vertical. Then make your drift by raising your arm a little more from the shoulder. Finish with a forward casting motion. We might call these steps, 'lift, drift, cast' (Figure 3). Keep repeating these movements, working to make the two backward stops less definite. Then, try again to feel this smooth drifting as you false cast the line back and forth before releasing your long casts.

Drift is a follow-through movement primarily used to reposition the rod after a casting stroke. Such drift can contribute stroke length, rod angle, speed, a feeling of being connected to the line, time to reposition the casting arm, and a cushion against the shock of stopping a stiff rod. Essentially, I view back-cast drift as a transition movement that provides a way to connect a loop-friendly, restricted back cast with the longer, wider movement needed to drive a long forward cast. If you can catch this drift, I think you're going to love it.