

Some casting tips

by

Jim Brady

Molly and I were taking a break from yard work recently and reminiscing about some of our fishing trips. She remarked that the first fly rod she ever bought, to take on her first trip to Yellowstone Park, was still her favorite. She bought it as part of a “just add water” package that included a rod, reel, line and leader. It’s a very early generation graphite rod. It’s so early that the length of the blank is covered with clear, raised ridges. All graphite blanks are wrapped in cellophane prior to baking in the curing oven; modern blanks are subsequently sanded smooth. Molly’s graphite is so primitive it preceded sanding; the raised ribs are a dead giveaway.

I surprised her by saying that one of my favorites is another version of that same blank, in an eight foot for five or six weight lines. I struggled with this for years using a five weight only to discover how pleasurable the rod is with the heavier line. This past winter I replaced all of guides except the stripper and tip top with larger guides. Now the rod is a rocket launcher.

I volunteered that I was even using the same line that came with her rod. She didn’t quite understand how the line could be on her reel as well as another until I told her I had cut it in half about twelve years ago, realizing she doesn’t cast much beyond 25 feet so the rest would never come into play. The line is an old peach-colored Cortland 444 double taper that is still as smooth and easy to cast as new. It’s easy to clean and a surprising joy to cast.

I use this rod weekly at farm ponds down the road. My favorite pond is L-shaped. I can cover the entire pond casting from only one bank. There is great satisfaction playing a ten or eleven inch bluegill that vigorously smacked a rubber spider three feet from the opposite bank, about fifty feet away. I enjoy the strong pull all the way in.

I fished there yesterday. While cleaning the line afterwards, I thought about the difference between my fly fishing today compared to starting out in the sixties. The main thing that stands out is my confidence, but there a few subtle things I’ve learned along the way that help me tremendously.

1. Find the right line weight for your fishing. If you’re using a rod labeled by the manufacturer for five weight line for trout fishing in small streams and don’t cast more than fifteen or twenty feet, you might want to consider using a line one size larger. The extra weight will help bring out the action of rod, and reduce the input of your arm. To see if this works for you, borrow a line from a friend, it’s a lot cheaper than buying another line and will give you a lot of information in a hurry.
2. Clean your line. I would like to take a survey to determine how many fly fishermen actually ever clean their line, let alone do so regularly. A dirty line drags through the guides so the energy of the cast is dissipated before the line exits the rod. Soak the line in a bucket of clean water with a squirt of detergent; give it plenty of time to soften the dirt on the line. Wipe down the line vigorously with a clean rag (somehow my old underwear ends its life span this way). Dirt removed from the line will be evidenced by dark streaks on the cleaning cloth. Then wipe down the line again with a second wet rag to remove any traces of detergent. I always clean my line after pond fishing to remove the scum. I do it less frequently when trout fishing but at least

every third day. You will notice the difference immediately. There are several line lubricants on the market you can apply sparingly once the line is clean.

3. Speaking of friction.... I am a rod builder and take note of guide size. Most fly fishermen couldn't tell the difference between a size 4 and 2/0 guide, but I can. The purpose of guides is to direct the flow of the line as it exits the rod. The larger the guide opening, the less contact between the line and the guide. Hence, less friction and less loss of the energy of the cast. Small guides conversely increase the contact between line and guide and remove more energy from the line. But they have an additional, more insidious effect. Small guides hold the line close to the blank and increase the contact between the two, what is referred to as "line slap." This is just another way of sucking the energy out of your cast. One-foot guides are worse than snake guides in this respect; they are a boon to manufacturers (guides can be wound onto the blank in half the time) but a curse for the caster. Not only is the ring through which the line travels very small relative to the opening in a snake-style guide, but the ring is very close to the blank and enhances line slap. The very first rod I cast with one-foot guides felt weird to me. This happened in 1979 but even then I knew something was wrong. Lefty Kreh wrote that tournament casters measure their casts and found one-foot guides actually shorten them. This may not be important to you if you typically don't cast beyond twenty feet, but if you want to fish ponds, lakes or even salt water, distance casting is the basis of your game.
4. The final piece of the puzzle is something most people don't want to hear. Simply put, you need to practice your casting. I think "fly fishing" is a misnomer; "fly casting" is more accurate. I have found my fishing is much more pleasurable simply because I can put the fly where I want it to go. I practice regularly in the back yard. There's about a seventy foot open slot between the trees. I love to take out a rod and line it with several weights to see how it behaves at various distances. I've found a really light trout rod works a little crisper (read: stiffer) with a four weight at twenty feet; I like a crisp rod for dry fly fishing so this works well for me. I always work on my stroke throwing the half-length six weight line. I'm constantly monitoring the loop shape and line speed, all the better to cast for distance in the wind.

When I began fly fishing in 1964, I bought a rod, line and reel. I didn't discover until eight years later that the line was too light (I bought it based on color). A friend, helping me with my casting, put his heavier line on my rod. It was a revelation. In a matter of minutes, casting was easy and natural; I wasn't fighting the rod anymore. In the intervening years, I've learned a bit more as I've noted above. I want you to benefit from my experience. Instead of buying the latest technology of graphite rod, work on making the one you already have function well. Even if you do opt to go for a new rod, you'll learn a lot from the old one. Try different size lines to see what brings out the action of your rod. As to cleaning your line, don't think of it as a task taking up your time, think more in terms of tying flies or putting on a new leader, something you do in preparation for going fishing anyway. And practicing your casting will yield enormous payoffs. When you place your fly where you think it will do the most good, it raises the level of excitement anticipating the strike. When a fish surprises you by cooperating, it's a thrill you'll long remember. Learn to enjoy surprises.