

Mastering the Snake

Part One

by Dana Sturn

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The Snake Roll cast is perhaps the most elegant and interesting of all the Spey casts. Watching a really good Snake Roll caster is a treat; the masters can use this cast to deadly advantage on big salmon and steelhead pools. What makes the Snake such a great cast is that it gives you tremendous power and allows for a wide change of direction. A really good double Spey caster can cover a lot of water, but to really hit the farthest lies on the biggest pools the Snake Roll is your cast of choice. It can be used with a variety of line types from shooting heads to full length long bellied Spey lines, and it is a great cast to use with sink tip lines because you rarely have to make a downstream roll cast to lift the tip up for the cast—simply go right into your Snake and watch the line fly. The only situation where the Snake is at a disadvantage is if you are casting in a good upstream breeze—once the line is airborne it acts like a sail and a gust of wind will have you wearing your D loop. In such situations a double Spey allows you to more accurately place your anchor than the Snake (of course, we should only be using the single Spey in an upstream wind anyways, right?)

As a casting instructor I find that the Snake is either the most difficult or, strangely enough, the easiest cast to teach. While most casters initially struggle with the cast, there are those who manage to pick it up immediately. Last week I was teaching a private lesson to a fellow whose total time with a Spey rod had been limited to a few days over one weeklong trip to the Morice River in British Columbia. We spent quite a bit of time working on the basic casting stroke and fundamentals of Spey casting, then moved into fishing casts. He said that he had had trouble with the single Spey, so I showed him the Circle Cast to use as a more versatile alternative to the single. He liked that cast, and in the process of demonstrating it I used a Snake to return the line back downstream again. Intrigued, he asked me to teach him the Snake, which I did. I highlighted the key points of the cast for him, then handed him the rod. His first cast was a beauty, and subsequent casts indicated that he had the Snake nailed. This is a relatively rare event in my experience as most casters take time to master the Snake, but it was fascinating to watch this gentleman pick up the cast with one throw.

The Snake Roll (the cast's original name, although it has also become known as the Spiral Roll) is one of the most popular of the modern Spey casts. Developed in the early 80s by Simon Gawesworth, the Snake Roll is a cast that for many anglers has replaced the double Spey. Quick and powerful, the Snake allows you to easily change a 90° casting angle and, once mastered, can produce casts in excess of 120ft.

Recently I asked Simon Gawesworth about the development of the Snake Roll:

"I developed the Snake Roll sometime in the early '80's. It came about because the pool I used to teach Spey casting on in England was quite wide, but slow flowing - particularly in the summer. The Single Spey was (obviously!) taught from the left bank for the right handed caster. I would demonstrate the single Spey and cast the line across the pool and then wait for it to swing back to the 'dangle'. This could take a long time and so I used to take a short cut where I would roll cast the line back downstream, then because the roll cast was ineffective, would do a second roll cast to straighten the line out again, ready for the next Spey cast.

"As this 'double roll cast' developed, I would speed up the two roll casts until they flowed into one. Like evolution, this took time and I didn't realize I was doing this until my father was teaching with me. He was videoing a particular client and asked if I would go and sort his

problem out. My dad kept filming to compare the client's style to mine and, at the end of the day, when we were watching the playback he saw this 'double roll' and suggested we refined it and tried it as a fishing cast. That is how the Snake Roll was born! Incidentally, trying to name it was hard. I thought that 'Sausage Roll' would be good, but my dad suggested some common sense and we ended up with its current name!"

Making the Snake

The Snake Roll is best learned with a full floating line and a long leader. Attempting to learn with a sink tip will slow you down and teach you all sorts of casting compensations that won't apply to the floating line. It's best to get the cast nailed with a floater and then move on to sink tips (I'll discuss the Snake and sink tips in detail in Part Two).

To begin, let's look at the tackle. You can Snake Roll with any Spey rod, but if you have a few to choose from you might consider starting with a more traditional or medium action rod. A rod that flexes down into the mid section during a typical cast will really allow you to feel the energies of the cast and make it easier for you to judge your timing and power application. Of course, if you don't have a trad action rod you will be just fine with whatever is at hand—no need to go out and purchase another Spey rod. As for your line, whatever you are comfortable with will work, although a line with a long front taper really helps with the Snake Roll.

One of the most critical components of your tackle system when it comes to the Snake Roll is your leader. Extend your leader out to about 15ft in length—this added length will help you achieve an anchor when you are learning (sometimes if the back cast is overpowered the line/leader will not touch down until it is well behind you—the longer leader puts a little more drag on the line and helps to avoid this).

I've found that most people have a little easier time if they learn the Snake with a slightly longer length of line. If you try to learn the Snake with a short line you will probably run into problems with timing and power application. If you already are skilled with the double hander, strip out as much line as you think you can comfortably handle; if you are relatively new to Spey casting, start off the Snake with about 45ft-60ft of line, depending on the length of rod and line style you are using (if you are using pure shooting heads like the Loop Adapted lines extend your line until the back of the head is just outside the rod tip). This length range will put a good load on the rod and allow you to feel the rod working as you move through the cast. With some Spey casts (like the Snap-T or Circle Cast) you can move the rod around almost on faith and not really worry too much about feeling the line and casting motions flex the rod. This is not the case with the Snake. When Snake Rolling it is important that you feel the rod flexing and working through its tapers as you roll the rod.

When preparing to make a Snake Roll cast, don't be afraid to wade out a little—you'll find water that's knee deep-to-waist deep will really help you when you are first learning the cast (your anchor will land earlier in the deeper water). Get yourself into a comfortable stance--forward foot (your upstream foot—for a right handed caster this will be your left foot) pointing in the general direction of the target, your rearward foot comfortably positioned to bear the weight of your body when you make the back cast.

The Snake Roll can be broken down into two parts: the set up and the delivery. The set up is what we all marvel at when we see a good Snake Roller in action, the grand sweeping arcs of the rod and the rolling loops of line that result. The delivery is the same as the delivery portion of any Spey cast, the point at which the caster moves the rod tip forward from the one o'clock launch or firing position to the completion of the cast. It's the set up that I'll focus on here because it is what everything else depends on. Among other things, the set up establishes the all-important D loop and

determines the amount of power you need during your forward delivery. I'll talk more about the forward delivery portion of the cast in Part Two.

To begin, have a look at Figure 1 below. It's a good idea to etch this image into your mind because it will really help you to make good Snake Rolls. This diagram is for the right handed caster standing on river right looking downstream, water flowing from left to right. The line has come around to the end of the swing and the fly is on the dangle straight below you. Strip in a few feet of line to make certain that the line is tight, and be sure to start this cast with the rod tip on the water's surface. These two last points are critical. Any slack in this cast at the start will really show up later, and if you try to start the cast with a high rod position you are doomed. ("Rod low; line tight"—make this your Spey casting mantra!)

To "make the Snake" you need to think of your rod tip as describing an elegant stylized number "9" similar to the shape of the one on your computer keyboard, but with a more flattened oval at the top. Starting from the bottom of the figure the rod tip will travel in a path that draws an imaginary figure "9":



Fig. 1

Now, what I'm about to suggest might sound a little silly but humour me. Position your torso and arms as if you were holding a Spey rod and walk yourself through the motions of the cast, following the diagram in Figure 2 below. Casting expert Jason Berger calls this sort of thing "pantomiming" and it is really useful in helping to develop some of the muscle memory you'll need to effectively execute the cast. Go through this several times until you are comfortable with it (okay, you might want to close your office door before you start!). The rod tip follows the path of the arrows:

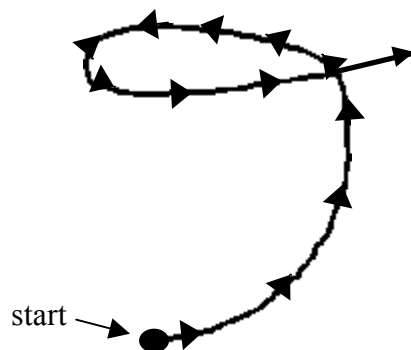
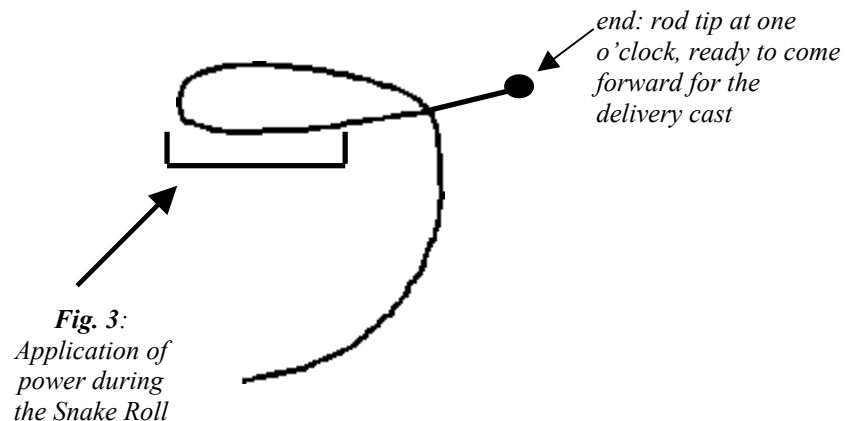


Fig. 2

As you trace the “9”, you will need to incorporate a gradual acceleration of the rod tip. Initially, as you begin the cast, you need just enough power to lift the line and start it moving. As you come up the backside and around the top of the “9” continue to accelerate smoothly. Think of this acceleration as you would the gradual acceleration of the rod that you use in a typical forward cast with either a single or double handed rod. Too little or too much speed applied too early or too late are going to cause you problems, and the only way to really get a feel for exactly how much acceleration you need is to practice the cast.

Once you have the sense of “drawing” that figure “9” with the rod tip, add one more component—the application of power as the rod tip comes around the bottom of the oval. As you come around, really crank the rod around and whip it back and up into your standard launch or firing position for the forward delivery cast (Figure 3).



Simon Gawesworth has some great footage of this power application—what he calls “flipping the egg”—on the Rio **International Spey Casting** video. Simon really gets the rod twisting as he winds up the D loop. You need to adjust the amount of power you use depending on the length of line you have out, but all else being equal, the more controlled power you use during this stage of the cast the easier your forward cast will be.

Once the final application of power is made and you have formed your D loop, timing becomes critical. At the end of your back cast you will need to hesitate a moment or two to allow the line to catch up with you, straighten out and anchor on the water off your downstream shoulder. I generally find that this hesitation is a little longer on the Snake than most other Spey casts, and it takes some getting used to. You can really help yourself along if you get used to watching your D loop. The way your D loop behaves will give you important clues as to how and when to make your forward cast.

Once you come forward with your delivery stroke, happily the Snake gives you immediate feedback: do things right and the forward cast will sail out in a tight aerodynamic loop; do things wrong, and your forward cast will collapse a few yards in front of you or perhaps roll out in a gigantic round loop that will fail to straighten out your leader. At this point it’s enough to say that there will be no question in your mind about whether you’ve done the cast correctly, for in the Snake there isn’t much room for error.

These are the basics of the Snake Roll. In my next article I’ll review the essentials of the cast, then detail common problems you might run into and how to fix them. Finally I’ll discuss the Snake Roll with sink tips and specialized lines.

REFERENCES

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