

Back to the Basics

by

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I always look forward to August. River trout fishing is grand, the Dean beckons, and the results of the Musto Spey Competition come in on the Speyclave. Every year the casts keep getting longer, and the same fellows are always right up there in the running. The chat on the website is always about what line and rod was used and XLT line sales must take a little jump. But what intrigues me the most is how little discussion there is about the real reason masters like Mackenzie, Gordon and Choate cast as far as they do. These fellows are doing everything as close to perfect as is possible in the situation they find themselves in during the competition. Their collective genius is that they have captured the rock solid basics of spey casting, and a solid command of the basics is what mastering the spey cast is all about.

Loading the rod

Like any fly cast, a spey cast is all about how and how well you load and unload the rod. Being a really good caster has very little to do with how many casts you know or how many fish you catch; it is about how effectively and efficiently you make the rod work for you.

I'll never forget the first time I watched George Roberts's video **Saltwater Flycasting** I was immediately struck by his thesis: advanced flycasting is all about mastery of the fundamentals and the ability to apply these fundamentals at a consistently high level across a variety of situations. Nothing more, nothing less. Like most people I bought the video thinking "ah-hah—here I will learn something revolutionary!" and of course I did, but it was not what I expected. Nail the basics through disciplined practice over a period of time and you will become a good caster.

A speycaster loads a two-handed rod by accelerating the rod through the length of the casting stroke, causing the rod to bend against the resistance of the fly line. At the point of maximum acceleration, the speycaster stops the rod abruptly, causing the rod to unload, propelling the line forward towards the intended target. It all sounds so simple, and for an accomplished caster it can appear effortless. But this appearance is the result of long hours of practice and, in the case of the elite casters, a healthy sprinkling of pure, raw natural talent.

In overhead casting there is an axiom that goes "a good back cast equals a good forward cast" and this is the same for speycasting. A well executed back cast forms a dynamic D loop or V loop that is free of slack and 180° opposite the target. Just like the tight looped and slack free back cast of the overhead cast, a well constructed D loop is the key to an effortless delivery cast. Form a good D loop and you will have the best potential for effectively loading the rod as you come forward into the delivery cast.

When I teach one of the most common things I notice is that casters tend to rush their forward stroke. No matter the rod action, rushing the cast can lead to casting problems, not the least of which is the inability to get the most out of any rod/line combination. Loading the rod is all about acceleration, which by definition

means “moving ever faster” or “increasing speed.” Casting instructors talk about smooth acceleration. When I teach I talk about easing into the cast, starting it slowly. An expression from casting circles that describes this well is “lead before speed”—in other words, start into a cast slowly, increasing speed throughout the stroke until you stop the rod. If you are one of those people who tends to rush a cast you will be pleasantly surprised by how slowly you can begin a cast. There is no rush; there is no hurry. If you are in control of the line and you have set up a good back cast you can cast to most fishing distances with very little effort. Ease into the cast, speed up, then stop. That’s all there is to it.

Some of the slow motion casting video I’ve put up over the past year illustrates this “easing into the cast” quite well. Have a look at <http://www.speypages.com/danastr.mpg> and <http://www.speypages.com/danastr2.mpg>

The best way to practice this is to go back to the basic Switch Cast. The Switch has been called the building block of all spey casts because it teaches the essence of proper D loop formation and allows you to practice the forward stroke over and over again without the added distractions of a directional change. Plus, the Switch Cast can be done on a pond or other stillwater if you can’t get to a river.

controlling loop size and shape

Loop control is another key to efficient spey casting. An angler that can control the size and shape of their loop is in a better position to meet any situational demand. For example, a howling headwind. What is likely to be the best way to approach this casting problem? A tight forward loop cast low to the water will allow a caster to fish at times and places where others can’t. Likewise, an angler casting a heavy sinktip and fly combination will need to cast an open loop to avoid the problem of the line catching on itself, yet they will still need to make sure that they are turning the fly over.

The ability to control loop size and shape is based on an understanding of the mechanics that determine them. Path of the rod tip and pattern of acceleration determine the size and shape of your loops. A relatively straight path of the rod tip with the tip stopping just below the path of following fly line will form a tight loop (<http://www.speypages.com/tightloop.mpg>), combined with a smooth acceleration culminating in a firm stop. Moving the rod tip in a convex path, stopping the rod tip well below the path of the following fly line will form a wide loop.

Going back to our basic Switch Cast once again, it is worth practicing loop formation with the Switch Cast until we can form any loop size we want with the lines we are most likely to use in our fishing. Once we have mastered these with the Switch, changing over to our usual fishing casts and continuing our practice will pay huge dividends when we’re on the water.

Timing

In speycasting, as in most things in life, timing is everything. When we talk about timing in speycasting we are talking about when to begin the casting stroke. I have a few videos up on the speypages that illustrate timing:

<http://www.speypages.com/timing.mpg>
<http://www.speypages.com/timing2.mpg>
<http://www.speypages.com/timing3.mpg>

These clips should give you a good idea of what I mean when I speak of timing. You'll notice that on shorter lengths of line there is a pause in the casting stroke, a definite stop between the end of the back cast and the beginning of the forward cast, but when moving longer lengths of line the rod is in constant motion, drifting as in single hand distance casting. In the coming months I will devote an entire article to the concept of continuous motion casting.

When considering the timing of a spey cast, it is important to remember that you need to adjust your timing to match the amount of line you are carrying. Lines with shorter head lengths in the 50ft range can be cast quite effectively with a pronounced pause between the back cast and delivery cast. Longer head lengths cast easier with the continuous motion spey casting method, and while the pause between back cast and forward cast is longer with longer lengths of line, the incorporation of rod drift between the end of the back cast stroke and the beginning of the forward cast makes it seem like there is no pause. It is important to understand what is happening during the drift, which will be detailed in an upcoming article, but for now be aware that as the line length increases so too does the pause between casting strokes, however drift becomes an important element of the pause so that there actually appears to be less time between strokes during a longer cast.

slack

Slack is one of the biggest problems faced by all casters, but especially two-handers. Left to their own devices, most two-handers will introduce a lot of slack into every cast without really knowing it is happening. Sure, they allow the fly to swing all the way around and then strip in a bit until the line is tight...but...they start all of their casts with the rod tip several feet above the water. The slack line hanging between the rod tip and the water must first be pulled tight before the rest of the line will move, so the first few feet of lift at the beginning of the cast serve only to eliminate slack from the system. As Derek Brown would say, "Bad start." A better approach is to start every spey cast with the rod tip right at the water's surface so that the instant the lift begins the line is tight and moving. This makes for very efficient and effortless spey casting at all fishing distances, and allows an angler to really reach out there and begin to maximize their distance potential. Things that will help you keep slack to a minimum are:

1. remove the coils from your line before each day's casting/fishing by stretching it as it comes off the reel
2. always allow the fly to come around and hang straight below you before beginning your next cast
3. strip in at least 6 feet of line prior to making any cast
4. start every cast with the rod tip right at the water's surface
5. don't rush your casting—go slow and easy and keep and bend in the rod throughout the casting sequence

putting it all together

Mastery of the two-handed fly rod is both art and science, and it is difficult to separate one from the other. The fundamentals of casting the spey are the same no matter the style an individual caster adopts, and casters will likely modify their style

as they learn more and develop as casters. It takes a long time—years—to approach mastery, and the true master is one who has committed himself or herself to lifelong learning. No matter where you find yourself on the skill development continuum, returning to the basics always yields rewards, deepening one's awareness of the need for rock solid fundamentals at every stage. This is especially true if like me you are always challenging yourself, learning new casts or trying to cast longer or cleaner than you ever have before. Eventually you will hit a wall that can only be overcome by a return to the basics. Time and time again I have found myself on a plateau and falling victim to the old habit of simply "trying harder". Back when learning the underhand cast seemed like an unattainable goal to me because of my traditional casting roots I would try everything harder and things only got worse. The same thing happened to me when I was trying to hit 130ft, 140ft, 150ft and beyond. At each plateau, rather than review the fundamentals I would simply work harder, which got me nowhere. Of course I had learned at every stage that this wasn't the answer, but I am a bear of very little brain and, 16 footer in hand working myself to a lather on the casting pond it is easy to forget that the reason why I was casting any farther had nothing to do with how hard I tried. It simply had to do with how well I was executing the fundamentals. And so back to the basics I would go on each plateau, and soon I was making progress again. In this article I've outlined what I consider to be the basics of spey casting in the order of importance. When I practice I do so in this order so that I am building on each fundamental towards the moment that it all comes together in a clean and effortless cast.

