

From: "John Till" <johntill@comcast.net>
Date: January 22, 2013 1:02:50 AM EST
To: "Gordy" <hillshead305@gmail.com>
Subject: RE: Casting practice

Dear Gordy,

This is a subject which is very near and dear to my heart. During the last 24 months I've had a nerve/tendon disease in my hands which is necessitated almost nonuse of my hands. I did get a bit of a break last summer and immediately seem to have torn a tendon in my elbow resulting from excessive casting after a year of rest. I only mention this because I have not been as active in your group discussions as I would like to be. This afternoon I performed my first real practice in my backyard for close to 45 minutes and I will therefore take a swing at your questions. Initially, I will apologize for the length of my answer, but even with a rather lengthy answer, the answers are rather short and I could add I supposed to each one. My numbers below correspond to your questions:

1. What (if anything) do YOU do to be ready to practice when the opportunity to do so arises?

I keep a rod strung up above one obscure wall in my dining room. Additionally, if the sun is not too bad, I have cut a piece of pipe insulation and I suspend the rod in the pipe insulation and basically leave it up at night so that I can practice in the morning for 15 or 20 minutes before I take on other chores, for example work. I practice in my backyard which is only 60 feet deep--- which is enough room for a roll cast and if I want to roll cast for distance I can hit the fence so to speak. I also practice in the street in the front of my house---and no the street does not seem to really ruin a line unless of course you decide you want to drag across the asphalt. My house is a single-story house and there is a large overhanging tree immediately over my right shoulder and so in some ways the obstacles teach me to be a better caster in that if I failed to track to the right, I catch the tree and if my back cast drops it all I hit the house—and therefore I have learned to cast, standing 10 feet away from the house, and causing the line to go over the roof.

2. Many books have been written about learning fly casting. Precious few of them include details on effective ways of PRACTICE. One book, published in the U.S.A. in 2009, has 241 pages, 105 of them devoted to practice.

Can you tell us its name and author?

I pride myself on watching most casting DVDs as they come out and ordering and reading books on casting. The book to which you are referring is Fly Casting A Systematic Approach, by Sheila M. Hassan. I cannot resist referring people to one of my favorite books for self-analyzing casting problems and therefore making a person a better teacher and that book is the Orvis guide to better fly casting by Al Kyte. Al forwarded a copy of his rough draft to me and I took a fly rod for about 50 hours and performed each one of his tasks one at a time and made detailed notes; I was flattered when some of my suggestions were incorporated into his book. He is not only a great teacher but a great man. He has truly written a great book which in my opinion is not receiving the praise that it deserves. [Joan Wulff also did a rewrite of her book and I believe that that was sometime in 2012 perhaps; I have went said book to one of my students and so I'm not certain of the year.]

3. Do you think there are some folks to whom fly casting comes so easily and "naturally" that they can be considered "born casters" who need little practice to become experts?

My initial reaction is that I do not believe that there are people who are "born casters."—And yet, there are certainly some people who seem to pick up fly casting much quicker than others— I am reminded of a couple of small ladies whom I taught who were professional dancers and they seem to have more coordination than most human beings. There are certain people who can move the fly rod and almost instantaneously seem to correct for what might be considered erroneous strokes; but in some ways casting a fly rod is different from any other sport for example there is basically no follow through in connection with learning the basic stroke-- most casting strokes require an abrupt stop on the up cast and an abrupt stop on the forward cast (arguably drift/forward movement after the stop on the forward cast could be considered follow through I suppose.) As Mel Krieger used to say fly casting is very easy to understand, the only problem is getting the brain to communicate with the hands. There are certain basic moves that the hands, arms, shoulder and body go through in making an efficient and good cast--those are not necessarily common sense. I have seen some excellent self-taught casters who have really talk themselves quite a bit from videos and books--- but I still maintain there is nothing like at least a couple of hours with a trained fly casting instructor to really put that person over the top.

4. What do some fly casting instructors do to be as effective as possible in getting their students to actually go out and practice after teaching sessions?

I think that an instructor should first start off by making reasonable efforts to convince students that if they practice, they can become proficient fly casters. On the other hand, if one does not practice, one will not become an efficient fly caster. I suggest to students that they pantomime with a pen or some object in the rod hand in front of a mirror, that they use a yarn rod, and a flashlight or laser pointer run along the ceiling to improve their tracking; I also suggest to them that they should keep a rod strung up or at least a rod near the door and that they should not wait to attempt to practice on water unless they live on a pond, but should instead practice on lawn, asphalt, or any other surface. There are many "tricks" that one can suggest, for example fly casting is really like riding a bicycle it is not nearly as difficult as tennis or golf, but practice is required if one is to become a proficient fly caster. Although some people disagree with me vehemently, namely my friend Mel when he was alive, I believe that the Joan Wulff Wrist-Lock or some similar device is very helpful when even the "watch your wrist and nothing else" suggestion doesn't work.

5. Your intermediate student asks you how long her practice sessions should be after after she returns home following your class. What do you tell her?

I first start off by suggesting that when any student starts to feel tired or starts to have aches or pains, that they should stop practice at that point. How long they should stop depends upon the person and the circumstances--- when I teach fly casting at GGACC, I usually have students cast for 45 minutes and then they take a break and I discussed various principles and then out they go again for another 45 minutes and then they come in once again for short break and then they go for half an hour. I usually define an "intermediate" caster as a person who can efficiently shoot line. I find that intermediate casters usually have fairly decent muscle memory and that they are using the fly rod effectively and so they are not as prone to injury or being tired as a beginning caster and therefore I would suggest that they practice, at one session, 30 to 45 minutes or even possibly as high as an hour. Of course there are some casters who can even cast longer than an hour and so long as they are enjoying it and they are practicing correctly, have at it. I will define below what practicing correctly means. It is nice if they can practice six or seven days a week but certainly I recommend that they practice every other day for at least 20 minutes per day.

6. Would you recommend the same periods of time for practice for a Master candidate to prepare for his/her exam?

Bouncing off my answer to number five, a master candidate should be able to cast for a long period of time without tiring and/or injuring him or herself. When I was practicing for my exam, I would often practice two hours at a time. I would only quit because I had other things to do. So to answer the question specifically, I would say that a candidate for a masters should practice the exam over and over and over again so that he or she is able to almost do it in his or her sleep. It is really critical that the MCI be able to make his or her cast look easy and smooth-- therefore practice practice practice.

7. In general, which of the tasks listed on the Master Performance test would you recommend spending the most time practicing ?

It is impossible for me to answer this question with a simple reference to one particular task. I have seen candidates who can easily throw 95 or 100 feet and that same candidate may have problems with aerialized mends or managing the rod. On the other hand I have seen candidates who are excellent at aerialized mends, and can barely make 70 feet. Once again I would suggest you take the exam, you go through it two or three times completely. Then go back for the third or fourth time and when you fail to perform a specific task, that you practice that task over and over and over again for perhaps 30 or 40 minutes. I'm probably going to intrude on an answer below, but you should be able to perform the task easily and smoothly and be able to do each cast better than the specific described task--- for example, if you can only cast 85 feet, what if you are nervous, what if it is raining like the devil, or windy, etc.? And, don't forget to have a friend or at least a videotape look at what you're doing

8. Why?

I believe that my answer to number seven covers the answer to this one.

9. *"There is practice which yields lasting results slowly if ever, and practice which is highly and more rapidly productive."*

" HOW you practice is more important than how often or how long you practice"

What is meant by those statements ?

I would tend to adopt the second paragraph "how you practice is more important than how often or how long you practice." I cannot provide a simple answer to this question. Once again, adopting a statement that I heard Mel Krieger make about 35 years ago, "give me a person and let me have 15 minutes with him or her and then put a fly rod in their hands and let them practice for 25 hours in a week and then come back to me and I will correct any faults which they might have." The more one practices with the rod and waves it around, the more that person should gain a knowledge of what happens when the rod is moved in a certain manner. Once one has a basic understanding of fly casting and has moved away from the category of being a rank beginner, then certainly it is important how you practice-- if you do something wrong 100 times, your muscle memory will remember of course the wrong way. I often say to students, "SLOW down, I would rather see you make 10 casts properly, then 20 casts using an improper method or form. " [Arguably the first

learning what occurs when the rod is moved in a certain way; it is still my opinion that such practice is not really a waste of time because the person will learn ultimate rod control after a little correction from a good casting instructor.]

10. When practicing distance casting, do you actually measure your achieved distances ?

Yes of course I measured distances when I am practicing to achieve a certain distance. It seems to me that we all think we are casting farther than we actually are and we may be surprised when we actually measure the distance. I have learned that by taking wide steps I measuring 3 feet with each footstep; however, I also have a 25 foot l ruler in a bag which I will often use if there is ample time. I will often practice in the same area and therefore I know how far 100 feet is. When I am attempting to do, for example aerialized mends, I will actually measure 15 feet, 25 feet and 35 feet and then I will put a cup or hat, etc. at the various distances.

11. If you answered, YES to 10., tell us how you do that.

Once again I seem to answer this question. I should add that I often practice at GGACC casting ponds in San Francisco and we have distances marked out at 5 foot intervals-- out to 200 feet, or more.

12. Should you, as a Master candidate, avoid practice when it is windy?

Of course a Masters candidate should not avoid practice when it is windy. It may well be that when the testing occurs the wind may be blowing 25 or 30 miles in our or even more; I still recall one time when Floyd Dean and I were testing a person for a basic certification and the wind was probably blowing in excess of 40 mph. The wind was whipping around like a pretzel, neither Floyd nor I could cast any farther than 60 feet no matter what we did. We attempted to have the person being tested stand close to a high building and we tried all four sides, but the wind was so erratic that it really didn't matter and so of course, we were more lenient with his distance cast—it was obvious that he had a good form.

13. Some candidates go out and practice in the rain or when it is snowing. Is this foolishness?

I do not think that it is foolish for people to go out and practice when it is snowing or raining. I know that when I took my Masters exam, the rain was falling in buckets and the wind was gusting up to 35 miles an hour; so once again as I basically said above, one never knows what type of condition one will be tested in. Also, one should have the ability to cast effectively no matter what the weather or such a person will miss out on many opportunities to practice casting and/or to actually go out and fish in adverse weather conditions.

14. Do you see any advantage in sometimes practicing with a casting buddy?

There is an absolute advantage in practicing with a buddy. The buddy may be able to see some slight improper move (for example a slight twist of the wrist), that you will never be able to detect yourself. If you don't have a buddy to cast with, I strongly recommend that videotape yourself. I will often recommend that students videotaped themselves when they say they really don't have anyone to cast with. Of course videotaping has, in some instances, more worth than even a buddy. You can often watch yourself in a videotape and spot something, in slow motion, that even

casting or at least certain problems, I will have them just watch their wrist and tell them not to be concerned with what the line is doing—often we will have them reel in the line and then start with 12 feet of line and go from there. I do not believe the old wives tale that one cannot load a rod with 12 feet of line-- or that once the line gets out to 20 or 25 feet that the beginning student will be able to feel the pull of the line against rod tip.)

15. You have practiced your distance casts to the point that you can make the 85' distance 9 out of 10 times. Are you satisfied with that?.. or is there more you can accomplish as you practice that task?

The fact that you have been able to cast 85 feet nine out of 10 times should not mean that are satisfied. As discussed above it is entirely possible when the candidate actually goes for examination that he will be nervous and/or that there may be adverse conditions which might take five or 10 feet off of his cast. He should practice and practice until he can throw 90 or 95 feet consistently; now it is true that examiners do and certainly should make allowances for when and other adverse conditions, however, if one can smoothly and with confidence cast 85 feet 19 out of 20 times perhaps, then that same person will show that he or she can smoothly, easily, and with confidence make or come very near and 85 foot cast when they are being tested.

16. If you answered YES to 15., tell us some of the things you would try to accomplish to help perfect your distance casts.

There are really two questions and number 15 and I assume that the answer "yes" refers to the second part. I don't know where to start with this except that I would certainly videotape myself and I would have a competent casting teacher look at my cast to determine what if anything I could do to add distance to my cast. You can of course always look at a book like Al Kyte's book to assist you with your casting concerns. Also I would start from scratch and start watching my loops to see whether or not they are the type of loop that I would like to see, then I would start looking at my tempo to see if it is fast enough or (more often the case slow enough) to take full advantage of the rods capabilities, I would look at my tracking, I would look at my trajectory, and consider whether or not my body movement was consistent with the distance that I was trying to achieve and of course hand movement, arm movement and shoulder movement, and lastly I would be watching my back cast to make certain that my timing was as good as I could get it.

17. Do you practice your roll casts on water? On grass? Both?

I practice roll casts on both water and grass.

18. Why?

One never knows what conditions may be present when one is tested. I still recall when I was tested for the basic casting instructor in San Mateo and the 12 of us were only provided grass for all of our casting. How fortunate I was that I had been practicing my roll cast in my 60 foot backyard. I was totally confident that I could go the distance and I could do so in an accurate fashion because I'd been doing so in my backyard. Of course I also knew how to cast even farther on water. I like students to practice their roll casts on grass because in some ways it assists them in performing the proper casting stroke, always keeping in mind that the line follows the rod tip whether it is an overhead or a roll cast. I have my students practice at all types of angles including those below the

may be casting over some type of plants in the water which are very similar to grass; I will often be in a position where it is advantageous to use a roll cast over such plants and in effect it is like roll cast thing on the lawn.

19. Do you know any practice tricks to help you learn to make small loops when roll casting?

I think that the basic tip and the basic trick for students to remember is that the line always follows the rod tip; I remind them what happens if they make a windshield wiper cast when using the overhead and I demonstrate at the same time so that they will be reminded that a broad sweep of the tip causes a wide loop. Also I remind them that one of the first things to look at if they are not happy with their loops, is to possibly make a smaller arc so that the rod tip follows more of the straight-line path and therefore they will perform a tighter loop. So I tell them that they should make certain that during the last six or 8 inches of the roll cast that they should make certain that their rod tip follows a straight line so that a tight loop will be performed. The roll cast requires a little more power in many situations than the overhead cast and although I am slow to recommend to (particularly beginning students) that they use more power, I find that it is almost necessary if they are to make a successful tight loop roll cast. It is important to remind them that the power comes at the end of the cast---the way I usually teach it is that I am thinking of pulling the line forward (rod but first and or reel first) and then simply stopping the rod-- keeping in mind that the rod tip should be driven straight, especially during the last 6 inches of the cast until the abrupt stop. If a student is having trouble with the abrupt stop, I will often suggest that they squeeze momentarily their rod handle.

20. Do you practice making faulty casts?

Yes I practice making faulty casts. I believe that it is common knowledge that a substantial number of candidates fail either the basic or the Masters exam because they cannot make a tailing loop on command. But more importantly than just the tailing loop, I often will run across a student who is having difficulty or is making a faulty cast, and if I do not know how to duplicate the problem, I cannot assist them to correct the problem which he or she may have and that is probably the reason that we are required when we are being tested to throw tailing loops.

21. Do you ever use pantomime when you practice?

I have already mentioned above that I use pantomiming as a teaching tool. I believe that pantomiming is particularly useful in teaching students to Whump the fly rod and to make a positive stop. If the hand doesn't jump a little, then chances are the students are mushing the stop and they will never be able to form a tight loop. Pantomiming is a must for students who wish to quickly learn the drift and/or double hauling. I find it is generally useful in learning any type of casting stroke; in my opinion it is easier to do specialty casts and men's when one has pantomimed them.

22. Do you ever use a short "yarn rod" to practice indoors?

I have already suggested above that students should use a "yarn Rod" to practice. I believe that a yarn rod is useful indoors and outdoors when there is little or no wind. If there is any substantial amount of wind then the yarn Rod becomes very inaccurate and difficult to use outdoors. A student who can throw a tight loop with the Yarn Rod has learned to keep his or her wrist fairly stiff-- with perhaps a slight wrist snap at the very end of the cast (I'm very leery about suggesting the wrist snap

at the end of the cast to beginning students because sometimes snap itself may cause a tailing loop or the student may completely break the wrist open and cause a wide sloppy loop.)

23. Do you practice using different casting styles?

Yes, I practice different casting styles.

24. Why?

I have practiced, to the best of my knowledge, all of the well-known casting styles from the various casting gods. I often find that students have looked at a DVD or have read a particular book and they will attempt to discuss the style in the book or DVD with me; they will often misquote or they will not understand what the author was saying; it is very helpful for the teacher to be able to explain and to discuss what was said in the book or DVD. It amazes me how a person can consider himself or herself a complete casting instructor when they have spent hours of time with Mel Krieger, they have read his various articles and his book and then they attempt to go out and teach a variety of students. I often will use a purely vertical cast if I am casting to a small target or if I wish to achieve more distance and/or more accuracy. There is no question in my mind, that some very good casters can cast farther and with more accuracy with a side arm cast than they can with a strictly vertical cast. On the other hand it is important to know other styles, for example if it is windy then one must go to a side arm style in most cases and perhaps even to something known as a Belgium casting style. Also it is important for the instructor to know the various casting styles because if the student has been practicing one casting style and is familiar with it, then the instructor should be able to instruct that student as to how he or she can improve his or her casting without attempting to change the student's casting style necessarily. Also I have taught veterans from time to time who are wounded and other persons who have physical injuries and they physically cannot cast us certain way; knowing the different styles often enables a disabled person to be a competent caster.

25. When, if ever, would you "go back to basics" during your practice sessions?

I go back to basics quite frequently. I usually use this technique, when I am having some kind of a problem that I cannot immediately correct. As I believe that I mentioned above in answer to one of the questions, I will check my casting arc, check the length of my stroke, my loop, the speed of my cast or the tempo, my trajectory, certainly my tracking, and other switch off the top of my head I just can't think of it this time. Am I breaking or twisting my wrist? I'm doing is rather late at night and I guess I'm just getting tired. One of the most important tips that I would have for any caster, and one which unfortunately I frequently break, is when you are having problems, shorten line 25 or at least 30 feet; it is easier to self-analyze one's casting errors when there is only 25 feet of line in the air as opposed to 45 or 50 feet. When you pick up and new rod or a strange rod, put out 25 feet of line and try a short roll cast and then pick the lineup and try an overhead cast; then let out a couple of feet or so and try a 40 foot roll cast and then pick the lineup and see how you are doing.

JOHN C. TILL

Committee Chairperson JIMMY GREEN SPEY-O-RAMA 2013

Casting chairperson of Golden GGACC

Master Certified Casting Instructor

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