

Featherweight casts

JEREMY LUCAS describes the technique of casting a presentation leader-to-hand without the use of a conventional fly line



Three of the secrets to casting the co-polymer presentation leader are to use a long extension of leader, a long pause on the back-cast, and to make a power snap during the forward delivery.

This changes everything ...” So said my Belgian friend, Elie Beerten, as he climbed out of the San River last autumn having spent an afternoon fishing with a presentation leader. Earlier that day I had demonstrated to our group the leader-to-hand approach, using Elie’s 9ft #3 weight. The San was low and clear after a summer drought and it had proved incredibly difficult to approach the fish using conventional fly line without spooking them. To a large extent these are the sort of conditions which brought about firstly the French leader, or the Euro-style of nymphing, and latterly the leader-to-hand which is capable of both supreme nymph and dry-fly presentation.

Conventional fly casting relies on the mass of a fly line, flexing the spring of a rod in order to deliver the fly where we want it. The modern river methods of either Czech-style or Euro-style nymph involve little or no fly line and, rather, rely on the mass of the nymphs, yielding a more bait-casting type of delivery. As a consequence, these are short-range (5-8m) techniques and not suitable at

longer ranges for low-mass flies such as dries, spiders and lightly ballasted nymphs. Attempts to cast same beyond about eight metres is a struggle and not really what we want in terms of improved delivery of the fly. Over a period of several years, being frustrated when wanting frequently to change from using Euro-style nymph to dry fly, without having to completely change outfits, led me to develop a new leader which was capable of being cast in the conventional sense, with low-mass flies. What I finally discovered completely changed the way I fish.

The standard French or Euro leader is tapered gradually from butt to tippet which builds in a casting problem in that most of the mass is in, or close to, the rod. Very lit-

‘I DESIGNED A LEADER WHICH WOULD NOT BE DEPENDENT ON THE MASS OF THE FLY OR FLIES BEING CAST’

tle mass is towards the tippet. Consider in contrast the classical weight-forward profile of a fly line, loading mass towards the fly and away from the rod tip. Double-haul casting can put a lot of momentum into this high mass area of a fly line, enabling easier access to distance casting. I applied the same simple physics principles in designing a leader which could be cast in a conventional sense, with an overhead, and which would not be dependent on the mass of the fly or flies being cast. This was achieved by using a long level section of comparatively high mass (0.5mm co-polymer).

Fluorocarbon, which is more dense than co-polymer or conventional nylon monofilament, gives even more mass to the leader, but has the disadvantage of sinking if not liberally and frequently greased, which utterly destroys dry fly presentation at range (beyond 10m). Tenkara fishermen prefer fluorocarbon, but then the rods being used for this style are very long (12-15ft) and can therefore hold the dense fluorocarbon leader off the water. With conventional fly rods, some leader must rest on the surface at

ranges beyond 8m and it is essential that this is kept afloat.

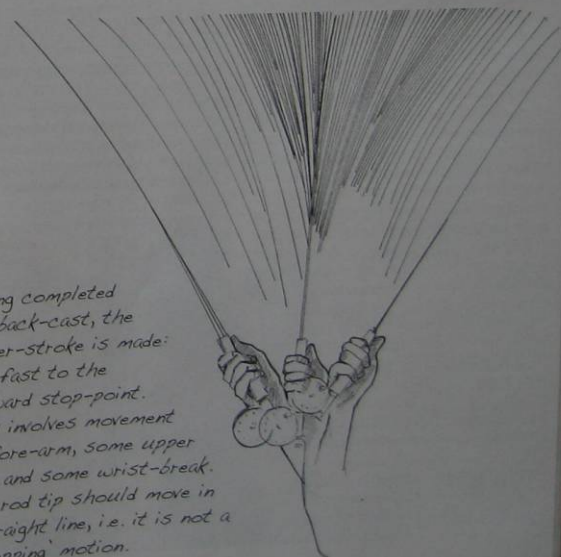
Finally, for the compromise between having sufficient casting mass while not having too much ‘line sag’ between a high rod tip and the tippet, I settled on 0.47mm co-polymer.

REVELATION

Using these long, comparatively heavy leaders on soft-actioned rods that have lately become more widespread (the contemporary light-weight #2 and #3 weights are outstanding in the 9-11ft range), almost immediately transformed the possibilities of presentation at short to medium range. It still astonishes me that we can now cast a single dry fly to 18m while maintaining control and contact all the way through the drift at that range.

With fly line, as I have stressed so often, while casting beyond this range is not the issue, presentation and control certainly are, because of that hugely significant interaction between the water and high inertia of fly line. After fishing a few sessions with dry fly ➔

Having completed the back-cast, the power-stroke is made: very fast to the forward stop-point. This involves movement of fore-arm, some upper arm, and some wrist-break. The rod tip should move in a straight line, i.e. it is not a ‘chopping’ motion.



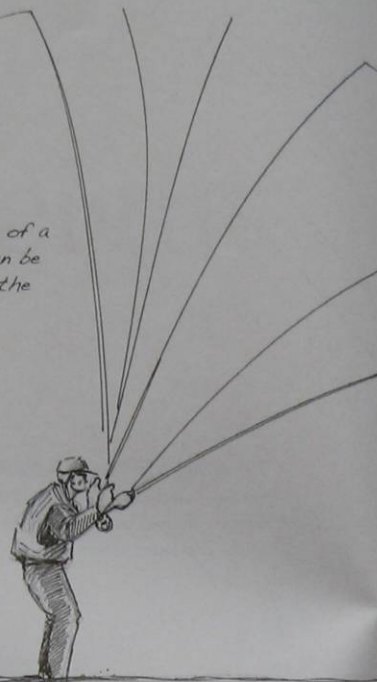
◀ and a floating, or airborne, presentation leader, one understands the boundaries imposed on us by fly line. We discover that there is another, better way. This, however, is not the best of it. For this we should be considering the single, light-weight nymph or, supremely, the dry fly, because now we are thinking about the overhead cast. And as soon as one sees what is possible here, that is the revelation moment. It is absolutely essential, however, that the tackle and set-up is right at this stage, or considerable frustration will ensue. With nymph we can get away with a lot; with dry fly we cannot. The leader has to be right, as described above and in the recent issues, and the rod must be a true #2 or #3 weight. There are #3 weights out there that really are not as designated and I would urge caution. Some of these are more comfortable to use with #5 weights, and totally unsuitable for the presentation leader-to-hand.

COMFORTABLE

Remember that because of its mass, a presentation leader behaves like a weight-for-weight fly line tending towards a #1 weight. The rod, and your arm, has to do some work here. In practice this means that the rod tip must move very quickly between stop-points, which must be just as well defined as in overhead casting with fly line. One finds that the casting works best at full extension. My own presentation leaders are 14m in length, not including the tippet. 11m of the leader itself are out from the rod tip, and this gives sufficient mass to accomplish an overhead cast. In practice, side-casting is actually more comfortable, which I think is something to do with the way the arm is held during the power-stroke, but in any case this brings in another significant advantage to this approach. Keeping the leader low, during a side-cast, reduces the potential for fish-scaring.

Crucially, the pause on the back-cast is

In the ideal conditions of a side-wind the leader can be made to 'float' across the breeze.



much longer than with fly line, because it takes longer for a leader to turn over and reach almost full extension, and as much mass as possible is required to load the rod (hence the low AFTMA rating recommended).

Based on my own experiences with the presentation leader-to-hand, including demonstrating and helping others to use it, I have summarised the essentials of casting as follows:

An appropriate, correctly line-rated rod of #2 or maximum #3, preferably 10-11ft, though 9ft can allow good delivery, and con-

trol, at ranges up to 10m.

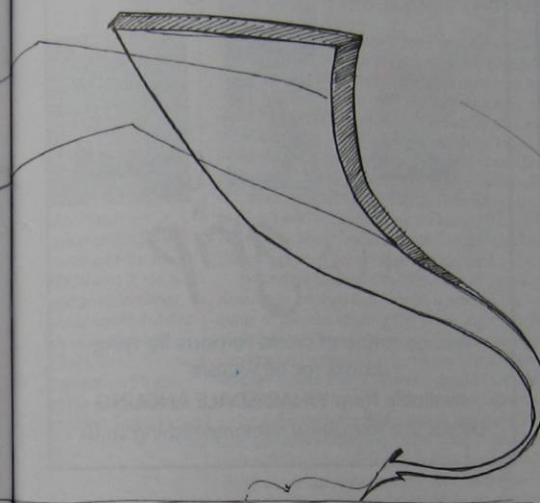
At short range involving a limited length of the leader there is very little mass out of the rod tip. For this you will be relying on the length of the rod and possibly a powerful casting stroke to turn over leader and tippet. At longer range, with most or all of the leader extended, the mass out of the rod tip becomes significant and will begin to load the rod. Conventional overhead (or side) casting is then required, but with a suitable (long) pause on the back and forward casts to allow leader extension and resultant rod loading.

Side-casting is generally more comfortable and because of the lower mass of a leader compared with fly line it is significantly easier to keep the entire rig in the air without the fly or tippet catching in bank-side foliage, ground or water behind the caster. This further allows a long pause after the power stroke.

In all cases the wind is more significant than with fly line casting, but can be used to help the process. A gentle side-wind is best, because the leader can be made to 'float' across the breeze. A following wind of any strength will not allow the leader to straighten on the back-cast (with a dry fly), but this does not matter because the forward cast is carried easily out over the water giving a very soft delivery.

Curiously, one finds that the most challenging conditions for casting leader-to-hand are in dead air situations (flat calm). It is nearly always best to have some breeze, whatever the direction. As with fly line, however, it is counterproductive to attempt to cast a dry fly directly into a wind of any strength, so there is no difference here; either way, attempting this will result in compromised presentation, with the tippet not turning over correctly and the fly dropping close to the leader (or fly line).

Wrist break is OK! In order to move the rod tip very fast between stop-points it is often desirable to turn the wrist as well as us-



Side-casting is more comfortable, assists the power-stroke and reduces fish-scaring.



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ing one's elbow. This is often frowned upon by casting schools because turning the wrist also usually involves the rod tip moving in a curve rather than a straight line, which in turn loses accuracy and energy in the line (leader). I strongly recommend, therefore, that you are aware of the need for the rod tip to move in a straight line on the power stroke. This is essential in order to transfer sufficient energy to the leader.

TRAJECTORY

During the casting process, a leader-to-hand spends more time in the air than a fly line; this is a function of its comparatively low mass. Thus, it is affected a little more by the wind and also there can be a loss of accuracy at first. One learns quickly to use the wind rather than fight it, and also accuracy comes with practice. Indeed, I claim that accuracy can be corrected during the follow through as process, which it cannot with a fly line. As all casting instructors advise: the fly will follow the fly line, which in turn will follow the

rod tip. This is the case with a presentation leader, but while a fly remains on its trajectory during the follow-through phase when using fly line, this can be corrected, even if only a little, with a leader-to-hand, particularly with a long rod.

This is not a casting fault, any more than is wrist break, provided the angler is using it as an extension or development of classical casting principles. Whatever, given enough hours with a presentation leader, accuracy becomes at least the match of fly line delivery.

Casting, finally, is one of the great joys in fly fishing, but it is my belief that this does not necessarily involve fly line in a conventional sense, nor any doctrine stemming from traditional casting practice. The development of casting principles will evolve with our presentation requirements, and this will not render classical casting obsolete.

All casting which enables excellent presentation is beautiful. What we are doing here is exploring the possibilities with tackle and extended casting skills in order to yield improved presentation. I believe this is approaching the contemporary horizon of our sport and as such is entirely worthwhile and laudable.

Jeremy Lucas has been on a fly-fishing journey for over 40 years and now specialises in wild trout and grayling fishing.

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