

# Sharpening Your Casting Skills

*Exercises you can do at home to help you meet onstream casting challenges*

JOAN SALVATO WULFF

**F**LY CASTING, as a sport, is much like golf. Both encompass accuracy and distance and, to meet the challenges of each game, we can vary the tools of the game. In golf we use clubs with different angles; in fly fishing we vary rod length, line weight and leader construction. Golf and fly casting both require practice. Golfers seem always to have known this, but anglers are just coming to that realization as the competition for the available fish gets tougher on our trout streams and other waters.

No matter how intellectually "smart" you are, it is muscle memory that responds to the brain's direction. Muscles are not computers; putting the information in once isn't enough. It takes training, and training takes time. Not fishing time; serious fishermen know that is too valuable to use for practicing. Standing on the front lawn waving a fly rod around can be dullsville, but there *are* ways to make practicing at home a challenge you'll willingly accept and perhaps even enjoy. Defining targets and setting specific goals are the keys.

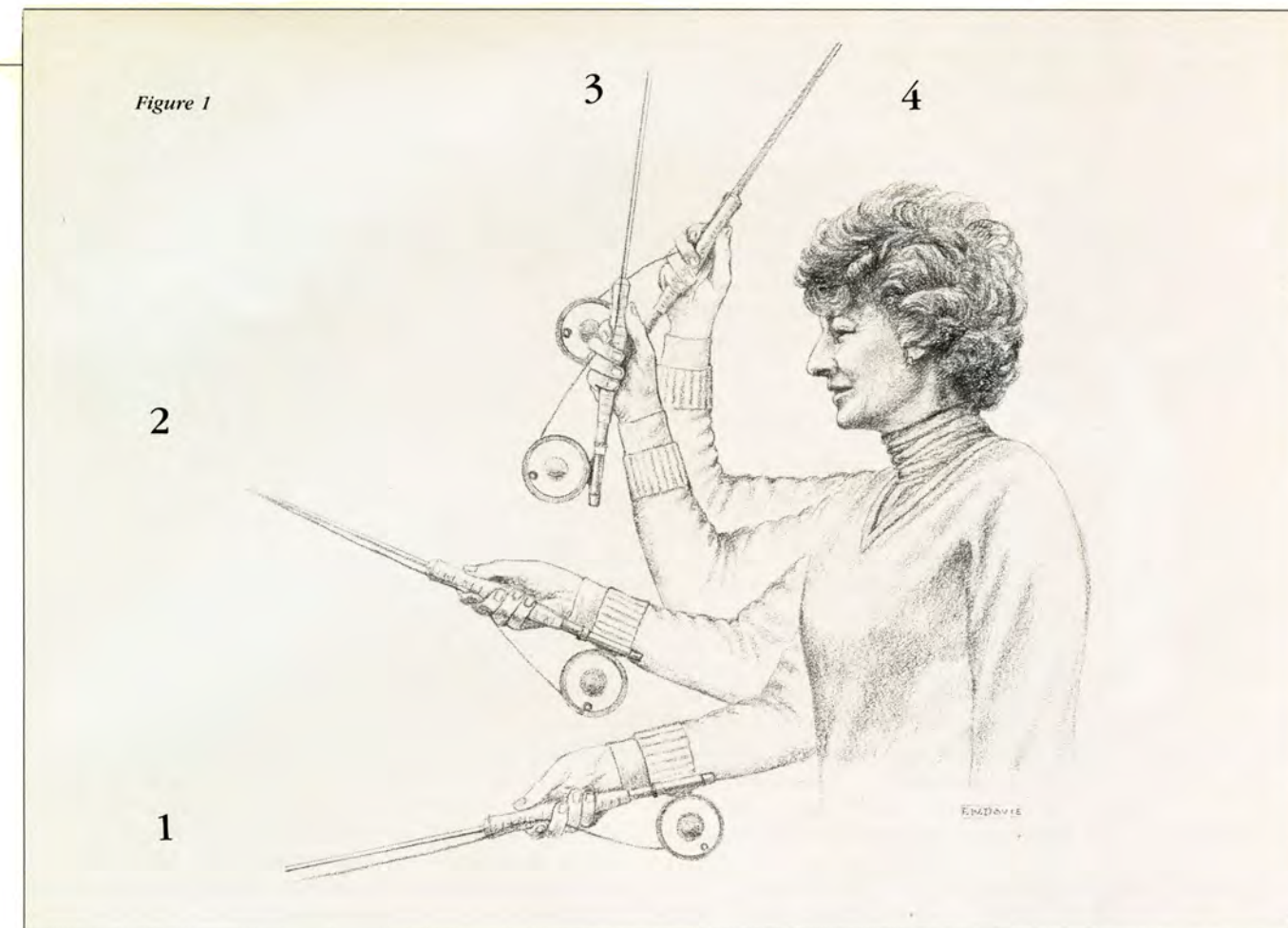
## Practice Exercises

CASTING TO TARGETS should help develop your eye/hand/target coordination and allow you to focus on the heart of the casting stroke—the power snap, which forms the casting loop. Slot casting forces you to make your line loop unroll within physical limits, while also

building your line speed. Hovering and curve casts should give a new dimension to the control you can exercise in aerial mending. Reverse casting can solve some of your backcast obstacle problems and can make you more flexible in your approach to other problems. Circular casts can lead you into shortened backcasts, adjustable to meet different fishing circumstances, and they will broaden your scope as a "complete" caster.

A 6-weight outfit is ideal for these exercises because it is relatively light but has enough weight to work effectively even if there is some wind. Use a progressively tapered leader, seven and a half to 9 feet long, tapering from .021" at the butt to .007" or .008" (3X or 4X) at the tip. Attach a piece of brightly colored yarn or a highly visible fly with the hook cut at the bend.

Figure 1 shows the mechanics of the casting stroke. Briefly, there are a maximum of three parts to the backcast or forward cast: 1→2 the loading move, 2→3 the power snap and 3→4 drift or follow through. This is the backcast. Look at it in reverse for the forward cast. The heart of the cast is 2→3, 3→2, the power snap, because that move determines, exactly, the path on which the line will unroll. The line always follows the motion of the rod tip. The power snap can be the whole stroke with a very short line but, as the line is



lengthened, that move may not be sufficient to produce smooth casts and, consequently, the loading move from 1→2 (or 4→3 for the forward cast) becomes necessary. The effective casting stroke ends with the power snap. Drift or follow through remains your final option for adjustments in the cast.

Think of the casting stroke, overall, as an acceleration to a *stop!* You begin slowly and end quickly. In these basic mechanics, drift (on the backcast) or follow through (on the forward cast) is a slowing down along the same path *after* the stroke ends.

**The grip.** Hold the rod in your hand as if it were an extension of your forearm. Wed the grip to the underside of your wrist, to start, and check Figure 1 to see its relative position during the cast. Position your bent thumb (or forefinger if you prefer) on top of the grip in line with the rod shaft.

**The casting stroke.** For purposes of simplicity, the description that follows is for one length of line on both the backcast and the forward cast, without shooting any line, which would otherwise change the angle of the forward cast.

By understanding the parts of the cast, you can more easily master the techniques of shooting line, hauls, and aerial mending. You shoot line after the power snap, haul with the power snap, and mend aerially during the forward cast follow-through time. Backcast

drift time can be used to reposition the rod to change the casting angle, or direction, for the next forward cast.

Use a pencil to simulate a rod as you read through the following mechanics of casting.

## Backcast Mechanics: Read 1→2→3→4 on Figure 1

**THE LOADING MOVE 1→2** gets the rod, line, leader and fly moving as a unit along the path of the projected backcast. The weight and drag of the fly line bends the rod from the tip downward during this move; hence the "loading."

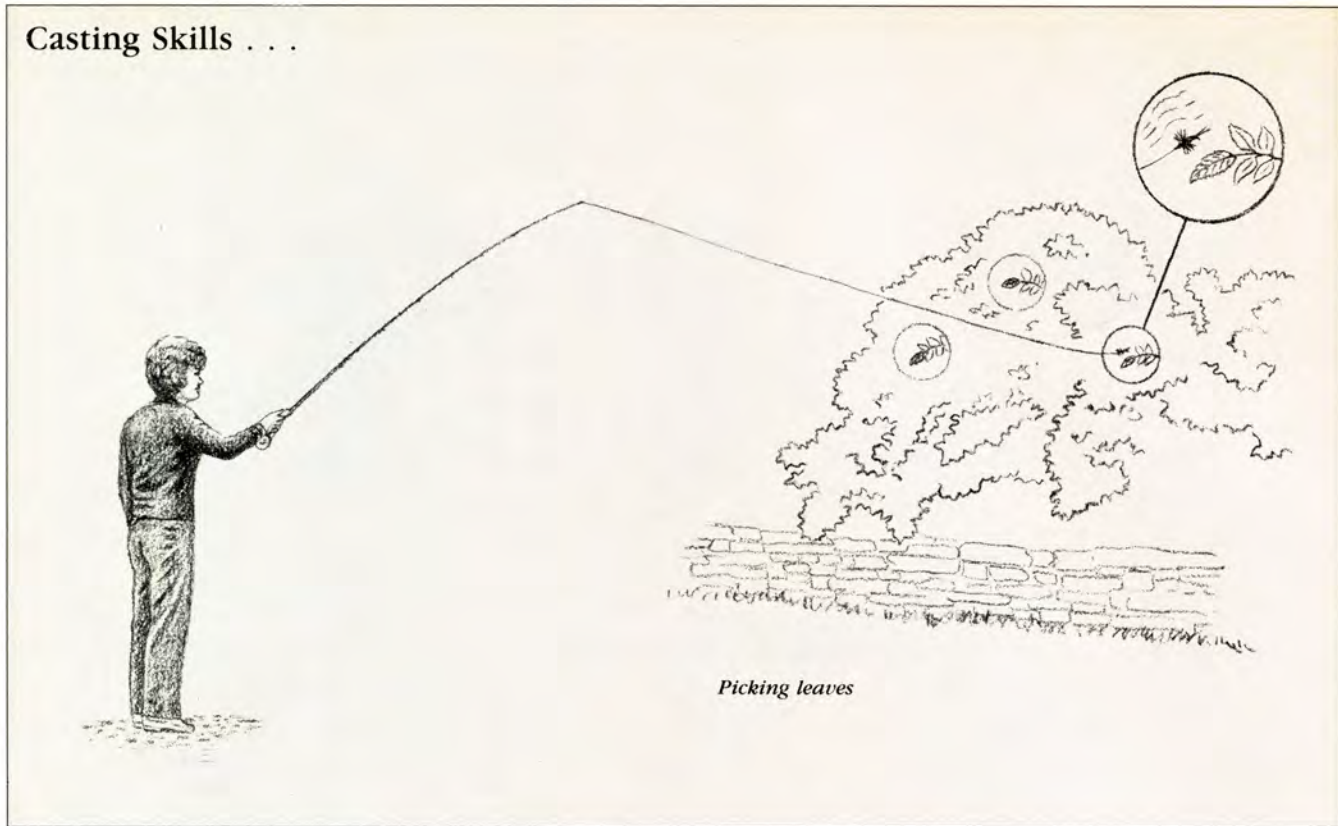
It is important that you start your casts with no slack in the line and the rod tip lowered. Also, move the rod, rod hand, your wrist and forearm, as a unit.

Start the acceleration by lifting the line off the grass/water until you reach the line/leader connection and only the leader and fly remain there. Don't rip it off; lift it up.

The power snap 2→3 takes the leader and fly off the grass/water. When the fly has broken clear, the backcast stroke is finished. The power snap is a short, quick movement of forearm and hand from the elbow, plus a lifting of the whole arm from the shoulder. This keeps the backcast path straight and inclined inward. It includes an instant of concentrated force to reach peak



## Casting Skills . . .



Picking leaves

acceleration in the stroke and again to end it abruptly. The rod unloads (transfers the built-up energy to the line) as the butt section stops and the rod tip flips over from one side to the other, taking the line with it to form a new loop. All is determined; the casting stroke ends here.

The drift 3→4 (think of it as follow-through) is a backward movement as the new loop unrolls. Continue your hand along the path already determined by the casting stroke while slowing down in preparation for the coming change of direction (the forward stroke).

### Forward-Cast Mechanics: read 4→3→2→1 on Figure 1

THE LOADING move forward 4→3 takes place in the same place as the backward drift move. It is used to get all of the line, plus leader and fly, turned around and following the rod tip, as a unit, beginning the forward acceleration toward the target. This move positions the rod for the power snap.

The power snap 3→2 will be in the same space, but in an opposite direction (forward/downward now) from where it was on the backcast because we are not shooting line. Again the power snap includes the instant of concentrated power in the stroke to reach peak acceleration and also to stop the butt abruptly so that the rod tip and line flip over to form a new forward loop.

Think of the forward power snap as a turnover arc. The line turns over the rod tip to form a new loop as the rod is pushed through a short arc that begins with the rod shaft 90 degrees from the target and ends with it approximately 45 degrees from the target. More

about this in the exercise, Picking Leaves.

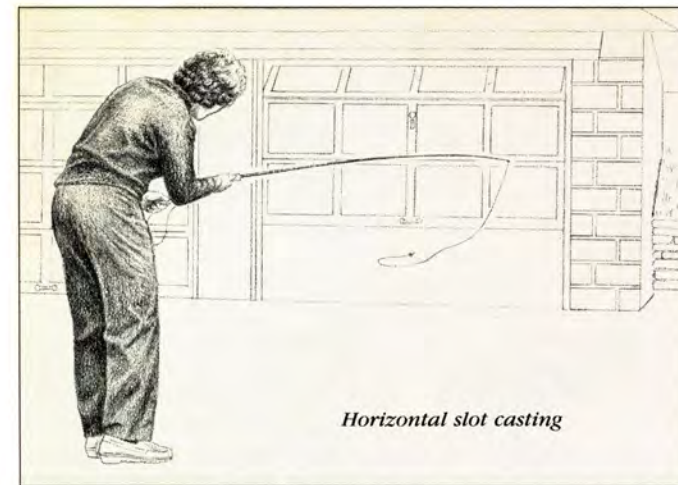
Notice that the wrist remained straight but not stiff on the backcast power snap. (Note: If you have trouble keeping a straight wrist on the backcast, put the end of the rod butt inside your shirt cuff.) On the forward cast, a push with the thumb during the power snap will initiate helpful wrist action. Check the position of the end of the rod butt, relative to the underside of the wrist, to help you determine the power snap movement.

The follow through 2→1 helps make the line land gently. After the power snap has determined where the line will go, the arm lowers on the follow-through to make the line land gently. Notice that it is the same space that the loading move occupied on the backcast pickup. Forward follow-through time is used for aerial mending when you need it.

### Picking Leaves

CHOOSE A BUSH, a tree with low-hanging branches, the face of a building, a car, a truck, a fence—anything that has individual parts or designs that will give you targets at various levels from far left to far right. Extend ten feet of line, no more, between rod tip and leader, to determine the distance you'll stand from your target.

**Part 1:** Do only the power snap portion of the cast, false casting backward and forward, to make your fly touch the leaf of your choice. The movement of hand and forearm will be perhaps six to eight inches. In addition to hinging at the elbow, lift and lower the whole arm from the shoulder as you do the backward and forward moves, even though you could do them with



Horizontal slot casting

just wrist movement. This will train your muscles for longer casts.

Determine an imaginary line that runs between your eyes and a target leaf. Using the first six inches of the rod shaft (where it comes out of the cork grip) as a reference, make the backcast power snap, ending with the rod shaft 90 degrees or perpendicular to that eye/target line. This will now give you a hand/target line for the forward cast.

Make the forward power snap, moving the rod shaft through a 30- to 45-degree arc on the hand/target line. If the rod shaft was 90 degrees from the target to start with, it will be 45 degrees maximum from the target at the finish of the forward power snap. The character of your rod (length and stiffness) will determine how much of an arc is necessary, from 30 to 45 degrees.

If you've made the right arc and you've done it with precise force and speed, the line will unroll in a narrow loop to the target without sagging. The move must be crisp. Push with your thumb and pull the cork grip back-and-up with the rest of your fingers, much the same as you do on common screen door handles. This is the turnover arc.

As you false cast to target leaves at different levels, *position* the rod shaft, on *each* backcast power snap, 90 degrees from the eye/target line for the next chosen leaf. A good backcast unrolls 90 degrees off the rod tip, creating a backcast that is directly opposite where the forward cast will unroll.

You can cast in any plane in the full 180-degree field, from waist level on the right to waist level on the left, standing in one spot. All of the casting planes on the right (for a right-handed caster), between horizontal and vertical, will be forehand casts, in which your elbow will be close to your body. All planes on the left, from vertical to horizontal, will be backhand casting, and your elbow should rise as the angle of the cast lowers. Leaning to the left, or right, in coordination with the lower planes, will get your eyes and rod hand lined up as closely as possible with the target.

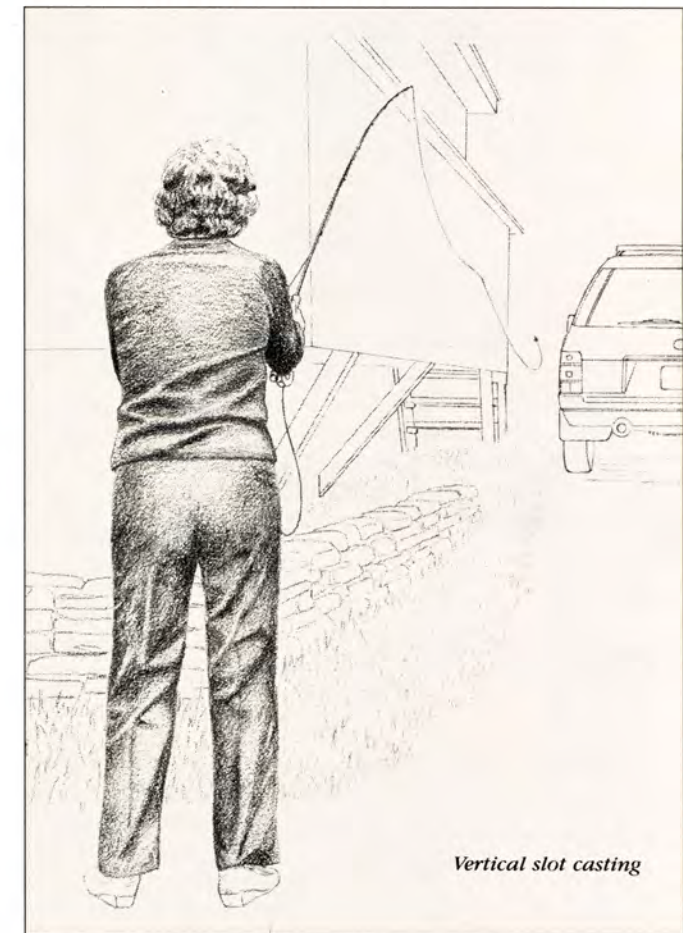
**Part 2:** Move back from the target area and lengthen the fly line to a maximum of 30 feet. Add the loading move before the power snap and the drift or follow-through move after the power snap. Once again choose target leaves at all levels.

To keep the loop narrow, hold the forward-cast power snap arc to a maximum of 45 degrees no matter how long the line or overall stroke. Your arm may extend farther as you make the power snap, but keep check on the rod shaft position above your thumb. The drift/follow-through move will take your rod hand away from where you end the power snap on the backcast, and the loading move should once more position it, 90 degrees from the target, for the next power snap. All of the moves must be made along a straight line, from start to finish, accelerating to a stop. Adjust the angle of that straight line as you change target levels. Low targets will have high backcasts and high targets will have low backcasts.

### Slot Casting

CHOOSE TARGET AREAS that force you to false cast in one plane. Your line and leader have to unroll completely before the fly touches down. Set up targets that require shooting line to get the most out of this practice. Choose an alley between buildings with a target at the end, a long, narrow tunnel of space between bushes or trees or even a half-opened garage or shed door through which you can put the cast.

How far you can cast of course depends on line design (weight forward will shoot best, of the standard fly lines) and whether or not you have mastered the double haul. Even without this technique, you can shoot line well if you maintain line-hand tension



Vertical slot casting



## Casting Skills . . .

throughout the cast, releasing line to be shot only *after* the power snap.

### Hovering

TO "HOVER" A FLY is to unroll the cast completely above the target area with a little extra power so that the fly hesitates in the air, giving you an instant to judge its accuracy and then to decide whether or not you wish to present it. If you do, just lower the rod and the hovered fly will drop lightly to the surface, usually right side up, for a natural presentation.

Around home, there is no more common or better target than an open, unfilled trash can over which to hover your fly. To make the cast, use a little extra power in your forward power snap and do *not* follow through. The fly should hover a foot or two above the rim of the can.

Normally, in the casting mechanics, the follow-through move comes immediately after the power snap; one blends into the other. To hover a fly, you must separate the two moves by a fraction of a second. You will follow through only after the fly has hovered and you decide to drop it. To false cast with this technique, the backcast will consist of only a power snap and drift. The forward cast will then consist of a loading move and the extra forceful power snap. If your line length is ten feet or less, you can hover a fly with just a power snap, as you did in Part 1 of the Picking Leaves exercise.

Try to limit the extension of your forearm and hand as you make the forceful power snap forward. On very short casts your bent arm will move downward and your elbow will rock backward as you "turn over" the rod and line through a 30- to 45-degree arc with extra force. The limitations of rod shaft position, relative to the target, described in the Picking Leaves exercise, apply here.

The hovering technique works well in headwinds with the point of aim as close to the water as possible to "get under" the wind. Basically a short- to medium-length line technique, because of the shortened casting stroke, long, limp tippets may decrease your ability to hover a fly. Start with a progressively tapered leader and experiment with tippets to find those limitations.



### Curve Casts

CASTING AROUND A CORNER is a last resort for most anglers, used when a more advantageous wading position cannot be reached to make a straight-line cast. If you need a curve and cannot execute it with confidence, you are likely to catch your leader and fly on an obstacle or make a poor presentation. You'll be able to approach the problem with confidence on the stream if you practice at home, learning from your mistakes without losing a fly or putting down a fish. The trash can will do for this exercise or choose a natural object like a bush or tree to simulate your stream condition.

There is more than one way to do a curve cast. This method is the easiest because it works with rods of any action and your eyes will help you execute it.

Make the cast horizontally, forward or backward, toward the target to place your fly. Use a little extra power to make the rod tip bend more deeply if the curve must be deep. After the power snap, do not follow through normally (the back end of the line would hit the obstacle) but instead, draw, with your rod tip, (still in the horizontal plane) the path you want the back end of the line to follow, as it lands on the water. You may have to "slip" line to keep from shortening the cast unintentionally. Just let it go, from your line hand, so that it slides through the rod as the rod is moved away from its original path. If the curve is to the left, and you are right handed, it is almost like drawing a question mark with the rod tip.



### Reverse casting

USE THIS TECHNIQUE when your backcast must be made through a slot or alley, or, perhaps, above an obstacle and you doubt that you can do it without looking.

Stand close to a shed, garage, house, automobile, a tree with openings between branches, or medium high bushes. Place your feet so that you are sideward to the target (open-body stance). You'll make two forward casts instead of one backcast and one forward cast. Turn your upper body to the rear and make a forward cast into the tight space. Once you see that it will unroll without touching anything, 1) reverse your upper body and rod arm, without moving the rod toward your eventual target, 2) put your eye on the target and 3) make the forward presentation.

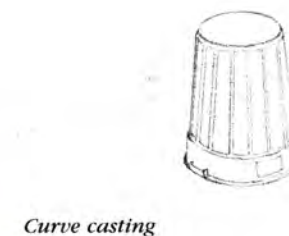
You will be limited as to how long a cast you can make using this technique, by the angle at which your backcast can unroll. Short casts normally use relatively high backcasts and, as the line lengthens, the backcast angle lowers to line up for the best forward cast trajectory. Anything less than optimum, in which the backcast unrolls opposite the trajectory of the next forward cast, will affect the cast. You will have to consider the line length versus the height of the backcast obstacle to gauge your chances of success. Good line speed is necessary to keep the backcast from dropping too far as it unrolls. Being able to watch the cast in both directions may help clarify your mental picture of what happens on backcasts for other situations.

### Circular Casts

TRY A CIRCULAR CAST for situations with limited backcast space. Our traditional straight-line casting style produces a backcast that uses just as much space in which to unroll the backcast as it does for the forward cast, for a given length of line (no shooting). Under limited backcast conditions, we may try to start the forward cast while the backcast is only partly unrolled. This is possible with straight-line casting if the cast is relatively short and your timing is perfect, but there is a much easier way if you can break with tradition in the form of the cast.

For this circular cast, the forward cast can be a straight-line cast but the backcast can be made circular, thereby taking up less space. The backcast can be adjusted from a full backward extension of the line to a very short backcast that avoids encroaching obstacles.

With the shortest extension, the cast is called an *air roll* cast because a portion of the line goes no farther behind the rod than it would in a conventional roll cast.



The focal point of the circular cast is, once again, the power snap. Instead of making the backcast power snap on a straight line, *curve it* in an underhand move that approximates a semi-circle. A curving power snap will make the fly line follow the form of the curve. What the rod hand does, the rod tip will do and wherever the rod tip leads, the fly line will follow.

Try the curving power snap, at first, in a horizontal plane so that you can watch the results easily. Then, to use it for shortened backcasts, turn your body and feet sideward to the target area and make the backcast a few degrees off vertical with the underhand curve. You will see the line come below the rod tip, parallel to the ground, with leader and fly following. At the end of the curving power snap, drift your casting arm upward to lift the line above the leader and fly. Make a straight-line forward cast. If you think this looks like Lee Wulff's oval cast, you are right.

Choose any stationary object near which to practice this technique. Keep the line length constant; change the distance between you and the object and adjust the extension of the circular backcast.

As you shorten the distance between yourself and the obstacle, you must reduce the speed with which you make that backcast stroke to keep the line from extending. Watch it and try to translate what you see to a sense of feeling of the line's weight so that you can eventually use this technique without looking.

Because the backcast is slow, you must pick up the speed you'll need for the forward cast by accelerating, overall, faster, and extending your arm more than usual to keep the acceleration smooth. Shifting your weight to the back foot on the backcast and to the front foot on the forward cast, will help you perfect this technique.

ONCE YOU CAN EXECUTE straight-line or curving power snaps at will, backward or forward, your capacity to solve casting problems in fishing conditions will increase dramatically.

Of these practice exercises, part 1 of the Picking Leaves exercise is the most important, the "guts" of the casting stroke. Mastery of this one exercise will make the others easier challenges to meet. Whether you are new or old at this sport, you'll love the satisfaction that comes with solving problems in your fly-casting techniques. You won't be afraid of taking a chance on the stream, backed up by the muscles you've trained and the problems you've thought out and practiced.

A final suggestion. To prove you are on top of it all, don't just walk from one target area to another. False cast as you go.

JOAN SALVATO WULFF lives with her husband Lee Wulff in Lew Beach, N.Y. Her first book, *Joan Wulff's Fly-Casting Techniques*, will be published in June by Nick Lyons Books.



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