

Handling Drag

Different strokes for different floats. Here's a variety of casts to help minimize drag.

JIM McLENNAN

I CRAWLED UNDER SOME WILLOWS for shelter from the rain. One of those brief, but heavy sun showers had enveloped an Alberta spring creek in the middle of a gorgeous June afternoon. While huddled under the trees, I caught a glint of something out of the corner of my eye. A good-size trout had started sipping flies in a tiny bay along the far bank, under a low overhanging willow. When I couldn't stand watching him any longer, I crept into position to cast.

The sunlight through the rain made it impossible to see the little blue-winged olive I was fishing. I made several dozen casts that seemed about right but resulted in no takes. Eventually, the fish just quit feeding, the sun came out and I moved on.

On my next visit to the stream, I made a point of checking the same spot. With better light conditions, I could easily see the problem. It was one of those Catch-22 spots requiring a precise slack cast to get a drag-free float, but impossible to reach because of tight quarters. If the fly was dropped in the right place with a normal cast, it started to drag almost before it hit the water.

As usual, the solution to the problem surfaced several months later. A friend and I found some large fish rising gently along the bank of a big river. The fish were so close to the bank they were out of the current flow. My friend made several good pitches to them, but when the fly moved nicely down the current edge the fish wouldn't move out for it. If he put the fly in front of the fish in the still water, even with a good slack cast, drag occurred before the lazily rising fish would take it. After a few minutes, I reluctantly took my chances with the cagey risers. I could see that I wasn't about to make better conventional presentations than my friend, so I tried something silly. I cast a large Letort Hopper so it landed with a splat several inches above the fish in the still water. There was no time to even consider drag—the fish had the fly the instant it hit the water.

This may be an extreme case, but it's a good example of the "if you can't beat it, use it" method of dealing

with drag. By using flies, like caddis or hoppers, which may excite the fish and/or benefit from a little well-timed drag, you can sometimes solve the problem. It would have been worth a try on the spring creek, had I thought of it.

Slack Casts

OFTEN THE MOST USEFUL WAY of dealing with drag is to try to delay it until after the fly has drifted past the fish, or expected lie of a fish, through use of one of several slack casts. A slack cast simply presents the line and leader in something other than a straight line, usually a wavy pattern. The waves in the leader dissipate under the pull of the current while the fly continues to drift naturally. The most common of these deliveries is called the S cast or serpentine cast (Figure E). Simply wiggle the rod tip back and forth horizontally (Fig. E-1) as the line settles to the water (Fig. E-2). It's easy, but, in my experience, not terribly effective. For a slack cast to work, the slack must be in the leader; the S cast normally puts slack in the line.

Dump Cast

I'M NOT AN ADVOCATE of titles for everything, but my two favorite slack casts are ones I'll refer to as the dump cast and the tug cast. The dump cast (Figure B) is a funny-looking thing that, if done properly, can drop an entire 12-foot leader into a hula-hoop. On the forward cast, an arcing hand motion is used to create a wide, high loop. Near the end of the cast the leader and forward part of the line will hang vertically above the water. The leader and fly will drop straight down, resulting in slack, almost all of which is in the leader. The fly lands fairly close to the end of the line, but the enormous amount of slack produced allows you to drop the fly a safe distance above the fish. Its drawbacks are that it's a poor cast in wind, because the high, soft delivery gives the breeze a chance to affect it. The cast also settles too slowly to be effective in fast water. The slack is pulled from the leader before the fly lands. In slow water with rising fish it is the most efficient way I know to put slack in the leader.

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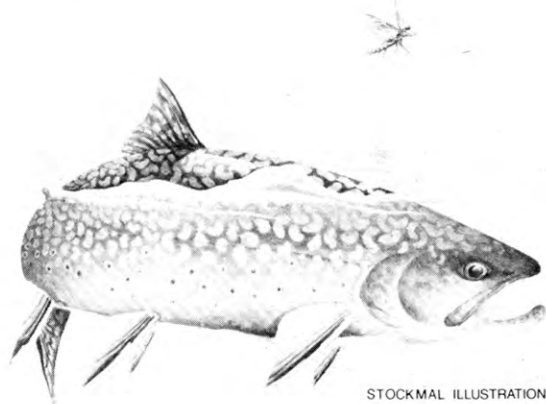
Controlling Drag...

Tug Cast

THE TUG CAST WILL PUT SLACK in the leader in a breeze, or in tight casting quarters where a high, wide forward loop is impossible (Figure A). Cast low to the water with more line than necessary to reach the target (1-A). The moment the entire line and leader are laying horizontally over the water, make a quick tug with your line hand (1B). This makes the fly jump back toward you before it settles, leaving slack in the leader (Fig. 2-4). It works on the same principle as the well-known method of casting high and hard and stopping the rod abruptly to let the fly bounce back. The tug cast is more accurate. It works well in cramped quarters because it uses a tight loop and is delivered low to the water. It does not, however, provide as much slack as the dump cast.

Pocket Water Pile Cast

Another useful cast for putting slack into the leader in fast water is done by driving the fly at the surface so it hits before the leader unrolls, leaving the fly and leader in a mess near the line end (Figure D). It gets no points for artistic impression, but in fast pocket water it works.



Mending

A COMMON TECHNIQUE AMONG DRY-FLY FISHERMEN attempting to increase the length of drag-free floats is mending. Mending adjusts the configuration of the line after it has landed on the water. Mending is usually done by carefully flipping a loop of line upstream without moving the fly itself. Mends are often used when there is a fish rising across the stream in slow water, with faster water between the fish and fisherman. After the fly lands, and as it approaches the fish, make a quick upstream mend to delay drag. One of two things usually happens. Sometimes the mend jerks the fly violently, and spooks the fish. At other times the fly doesn't jerk, but the mend removes the slack from the tippet, letting the fly drag immediately anyway.

A mend can be used effectively on rising fish if you remember three things. First, see if a mend is required. Estimate what the currents will do to the line and fly before making the cast. Second, a good slack cast is essential prior to the mend, for even the best mend will remove some of the slack from the leader. If there is

plenty of slack to start with, a good mend may leave enough slack for the cast to still be effective. Third, if a mend needed, don't wait until the last minute to make it. Make the mend immediately after the fly lands, while there is still an abundance of slack in the leader. Mending is easier when the fly line is floating well, and all fly lines float best when they are clean.

Leaders

CHANCES OF MAKING a good slack cast with any casting method are improved using a long tippet. A three-foot or longer tippet won't straighten completely, but will fall to the water in waves. Lefty Kreh believes that tippet length is as important as fly pattern when fishing to rising fish. If he gets some refusals, his first assumption is that the leader tippet isn't right. Most often this means that it isn't long enough and, consequently, isn't providing the slack necessary to get a completely drag-free float. (To get the best drag-free floats combine the casting techniques outlined by Jim McLennan with the special hard-soft leader designs found in George Harvey's "Leaders for Selective Trout," FFM Volume 11 Number Three. Many fly shops now offer hard butt-soft tippet leaders that help reduce "micro-drag," in the tippet section of the leader. THE EDITORS)

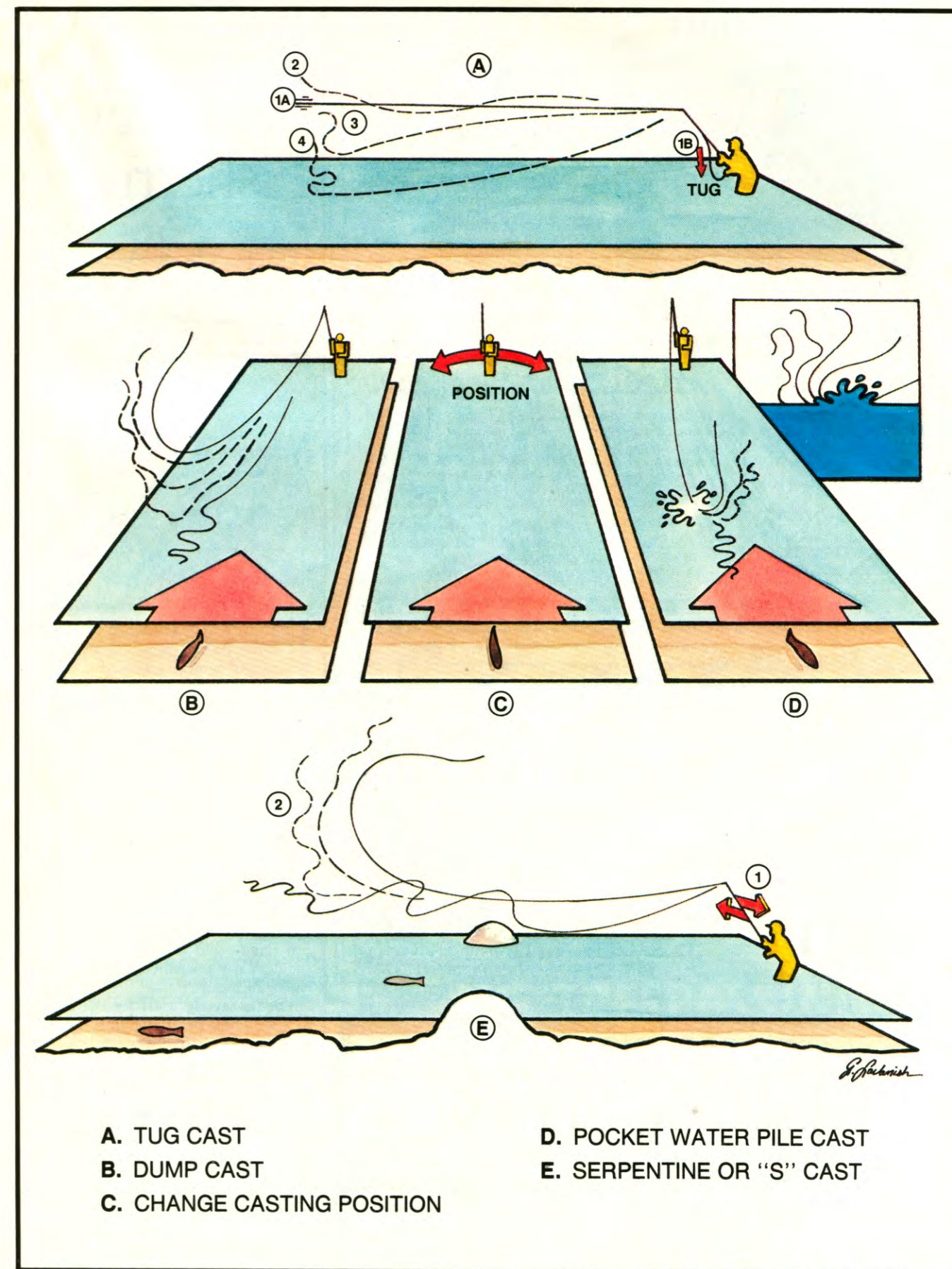
Using a heavily-hackled fly also makes casting slack simpler, because it resists moving through the air and doesn't allow the leader to straighten all the way out.

Applied Tactics

YOU ENCOUNTER A SITUATION when you fish upstream into the tail of a pool from the riffle below. The water in the tail where the fly lands moves much slower than the water downstream where the belly of the fly line lands. In this situation you need slack in the belly of the line as well as in the leader. A dump cast followed by several side to side waggles of the rod tip as the line settles (like the "S" cast) gives the necessary slack in these situations.

The first expert dry-fly fisherman I fished with taught me a valuable lesson with his first cast over a large rainbow rising in slow, flat water. My companion surprised me completely by dropping the fly about 12 inches above the fish, not five or six feet above the fish as I had been trying to do. I thought that he misjudged his cast and had made a mistake...until the fish took the fly. My friend doesn't worry about slack casts, or curve casts or mending very often because he drops the fly very close to the fish and uses a short drift. He fishes a light line with a long leader, and the small amount of slack allows the fly to drift past the fish before it starts to drag. He is good at this tactic, but it takes accurate, consistent casting, allowing virtually no room for error. A poor fly presentation is not a problem if it occurs a few feet above the fish, but if it happens a few inches from the fish, it's sure to spook him. This short-drift method also allows you to get a number of drifts over a fish in a short period, thereby increasing the time your fly is on the water.

It may be that while mulling the situation over, you realize that moving a step or two one way or the other before casting will put you in a better position for a good float, and you won't need to use any of these elaborate casts and mending gyrations (Figure C). That would be the best tactic of all.



A. TUG CAST
B. DUMP CAST
C. CHANGE CASTING POSITION

D. POCKET WATER PILE CAST
E. SERPENTINE OR "S" CAST

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