Learning to Bait Cast

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Selected pages from Practical Bait Casting.

Practice controlling the reel spool and placing a cast with an early bait-casting outfit.

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CHAPTER II

LEARNING TO CAST

BAIT casting as practiced by an expert is an art combining remarkable accuracy, delicacy of thumbing, and at times great distances. To attain anything like perfection in bait casting requires years of experience and constant practice. Of course, the ability to drop one's lure within a few inches of a lily pad or rock is an advantage not to be underestimated; other things being equal, the most fish usually are on the string of the best caster.

Happily, however, it is not necessary to be a tournament caster for practical fish catching purposes. Good enough casting to catch fish under average conditions can be learned in a very short time, although it is hard to convince those who have tried it only once or twice that this is so. True, surprising things happen the first time one attempts to cast, but not more so than what happens to the beginner in skating or bicycle riding.

A few years ago, a friend was to accompany us on our vacation, and as he was not a caster we impressed upon him the advisability of learning the art. He was

somewhat skeptical, but the week before we were scheduled to leave town, he came to our home and we had a "session" out in the alley. In two hours he was casting fairly well at sixty and seventy feet, and with a few more hours' practice, in the evenings of the following week, he became quite proficient—proficient enough to make the writer exert himelf to keep a fish or two ahead of him during the next two weeks. Of course, he is one of those fellows who quickly "get the hang of things."

The best way to learn casting is to have some experienced caster act as teacher and coach—the rudiments can be learned in an hour or so, and the rest, of course, depends on the aptitude of the pupil and the amount of practice he devotes to the work.

In most of the larger cities, there are casting clubs which have casting pools in the public parks, and the person who wants to learn should go to one of these pools with his tackle. Here he will find plenty of capable teachers, who will gladly lend a hand, without charge, of course, because—well, just because the members of these clubs are invariably good fellows.

Lacking a tutor, the young angler must "pick it up" himself, which is not at all difficult, and we will try to offer here some helpful suggestions. Probably the best place to learn is a clear stretch of water without obstructions of any kind, but the majority of city anglers undoubtedly learned on a lawn or in an alley.

Grass or snow is preferable to bare ground on account of the wear the line gets on the latter.

The only tackle necessary in learning is a rod, a quadruple multiplying reel, a silk-line (preferably soft braid), and a weight of about ¾ of an ounce, which can be either a dipsey sinker or a minnow-shaped piece of wood. Later on the beginner can work down to the regulation ½ ounce and ¼ ounce tournament weights. If one learns by casting in water, let the weight be a regular artificial bait, either a surface bait or a wobbler, as these will float while back-lashes are being untangled.

Let us assume that the beginner is going to learn on the lawn. Let him peg down a newspaper forty feet away as a target, which should be left at that distance until he can hit it regularly.

The reel should be placed firmly in the reel seat on top of the rod. Some writers advise the beginner to place the reel down or on the bottom of the rod, but this is for a different style of casting (which we will deal with later on), consequently this warning may be necessary. See that the guides on the rod are all in a line, then run the line through each guide and out at the tip-top (top guide so called) and tie the weight to the end of the line.

The rod should be grasped firmly with all four fingers around the grip and the thumb pressed against the line on the reel. Some casters thumb the flange or spool-end of the reel instead of the line. The prin-

cipal disadvantage of thumbing here is that the reel can be only partially filled with line, which tends to slow it up. The beginner is advised to learn to thumb the line and later, if he sees any advantage in thumbing the flange, he can easily change.

Reel the weight up to about nine inches from the tip of the rod. With the thumb firmly pressed on the spooled line, point the rod at the target. Now bring it straight back over the shoulder, the arms bending at the elbow, until the hand holding the rod is alongside the caster's right ear, and the tip pointing back, as shown in illustration. Now relax the wrist so it drops. You are now ready for the forward cast.

Whip the rod smartly forward, slightly releasing the pressure of the thumb on the reel as the rod passes the perpendicular. Keep the thumb on the line gently as the weight travels out. The first few attempts usually result in one or two things: The pressure exerted on the spool is too hard and the weight goes out only a few feet, or (more often) it is released altogether and the line runs from the reel faster than the bait can carry it out, resulting in what is commonly known as a "back lash." A description of this calamity would be superfluous in this chapter for beginners—anyone who has ever tried to cast can recognize a "back lash" without reading a description of it in a book.

Nothing but practice will teach the beginner how to thumb the reel properly. It is more or less of a knack and some pick it up more quickly than others, but if

he is persistent, the beginner will soon find that his "back lashes" become beautifully less and less frequent although few casters ever are free from them entirely. The principal causes of back lashes are unevenly spooled lines and attempting to cast too far. The line must be felt by the thumb during the entire cast, and in attempting to throw his weight a great distance, the beginner unconsciously removes his thumb entirely from the reel, and, of course, a tangle is the result.

In the forward cast the rod is whipped forward smartly but easily, the speed increasing as the rod moves forward, the cast ending with a snap of the wrist, unless a very stiff rod is used, in which case a full arm swing is necessary. In making this forward cast, the rod is held so that the back of the hand and the handle of the reel are pointing almost straight up, the reason for this being that the line renders better through the guides with less danger of it clinging to the rod and because the reel runs more smoothly and easily in that position. At the finish of the cast, the thumb is clamped down tightly on the spool of the reel, and the rod is pointing upward at an angle of about 45 degrees.

As the forward cast is being made, the left hand is partially extended, and while the weight is still in the air, or the instant it lands, the rod is shifted to the left hand. The rear end of the reel is held in the palm of the left hand, the four fingers wrapped around the rod directly under the reel, and the thumb guides the line evenly on the reel. Usually the tension of the bait is

sufficient; sometimes a slight downward pressure of the thumb, as it moves back and forth in front of the reel, is necessary.

Some people's hands are too small to hold the reel and rod comfortably in this position and they will find more pleasure in using the thumb and finger method of reeling. In this style, the rod is grasped directly in front of the reel with the last three fingers around the rod (some rods are provided with a forward grasp for this purpose) and the line is guided evenly on the reel, by the thumb and forefinger working back and forth in front of the reel

This guiding of the line on the reel must be done carefully at first, but later on it is performed almost unconsciously; it is important that it be done, however, as an unevenly wound line is one of the very worst breeders of "back-lashes."

When the weight strikes the ground the caster "follows through" with rod until it is pointing at or a trifle above the target. The rod is then kept pointing directly at the weight while the latter is being reeled in. We advise this in spite of the fact that many of the older, and very able, casters retrieve their bait with the rod pointing almost straight up. Our reasons for so advising are stated in another chapter.

The beginner should practice casting at his target at forty feet for some time—say until he can hit it three out of four casts. Then he can move it up another ten feet. We cannot urge the novice too strongly on

this point, as we know the temptation to cast for distance is great, but he must keep in mind these facts: Accuracy is the very foundation of a bait caster's education; distance will follow naturally. Very few casts over sixty or seventy feet are made in actual fishing and, as Samuel Camp remarks: "The man who tries to cast 'clean across' the lake usually gets more exercise than fish." The man who can drop his lure where he wants to is a better and more successful fisherman, always, than he who can cast far but with only a general idea as to where his bait is going to strike.

The cast described above is the "over-the-shoulder" or "overhead" cast. It possesses several advantages over other styles. It it far more accurate (all tournament casters use this method) and there is less danger of hooking your companions when fishing with more than one in a boat. The side caster, if he is right-handed, must always be placed in the right end of the boat and this is sometimes an inconvenience.

It seems to be the general idea that the "overhead" cast is harder to learn, but this is not so. It is so easy to master as the other casts, and should be learned first by all means. The others are simply modifications of the overhead and are easily learned once you know that style.

In the side cast, or "side-swipe" as it is sometimes called, the rod is brought back to the right side of the body, parallel with the water, and is then whipped forward. It is useful when fishing over the end of a



GETTING READY FOR THE CAST

Reel the weight up to about nine inches from the tip of the rod. With the thumb firmly pressed on the spooled line, point the rod at the target.



END OF THE BACK CAST

Bring the rod straight back over the shoulder, the arm bending at the elbow, until the hand holding the rod is alongside the caster's right ear, the tip of the rod pointing back.

boat or from the banks of a stream where there are branches or other obstructions that prevent overhead casting. It is not so "jerky" as the overhead and consequently does not put so much strain on the line. It is also restful after hard and persistent overhead casting.

The underhand cast is made by bringing the right arm across the body so that the rod is on the left side, the rod tip pointing slightly downward. It is then swept out and across the body again to the right, the pressure being slightly released on the spool of the reel when the rod is pointing almost straight ahead. This cast is not practiced much with the short rod, and is explained further under the heading "Casting with the Henshall rod."

A cast which we might call the "lift" is sometimes made from the shore, when standing on the deck of a boat or from a dock or pier. The rod is pointed down and a little to the rear of the right-hand side of the body, the hand being about at the hip. The rod is then smartly lifted up and out, and the cast finished with the hand about on a level with the eyes. This cast will be found useful in working against a strong wind wherever it is possible to cast standing up. It drops a bait very nicely.

Summary

Reel the weight to about nine inches from the tip; grasp rod firmly with thumb on spooled line. Point

rod at the target. Bring rod straight over the shoulder, back far enough to bring the reel on a level with right ear. Drop wrist. Make forward cast straight at target, slower at first, accelerating speed as you go. When rod is little past perpendicular release thumb pressure some, but not entirely, from reel. Hold rod so that the back of hand and reel handle point upwards. Finish cast with forward snap of wrist. Shift rod to left hand. Point rod directly at the weight. Reel in, guiding line on reel evenly.

CASTING FOR FISH

FOR ADVANCED PUPILS

After the novice has tried his hand at dry land casting, he becomes anxious to test his skill on real fish, which is a natural and laudable ambition.

One of the first things to be learned in actual fishing is to cast sitting down—not at all difficult. Casting standing up is hard work, is dangerous in anything but a mud scow, and besides when the water is smooth and clear one must cast farther to prevent being seen by the fish as a fisherman standing in a boat is outlined against the sky and looks like the proverbial "house afire" to the fish.

One of the troubles experienced by new casters is casting on too direct a line—"shooting the bait" it is called. To overcome this, cast at an imaginary spot above and behind the place you want to strike, and

stop your bait as it goes over. Lengthening the amount of line between the bait and the rod tip before casting should cause your bait to travel higher. If it doesn't the pressure on the spooled line is not released soon enough. In this connection, avoid reeling your bait up too close to the tip as the metal part of the lure may crack the agate lining of the tip top. Before casting, be sure that the line is not wrapped around the tip, or you may throw your whole outfit overboard.

One thing the young caster will learn as he progresses is that in actual fishing, a hard cast is not needed to get a reasonable amount of line out—just a slight movement of the arm and wrist. Snapping the wrist backwards when bringing the rod over the shoulder instead of merely relaxing it will help to put the spring of the rod in the cast. Hard straight arm casting defeats its purpose, because as you increase the power of your cast, you must likewise increase the thumb pressure on the reel or spend time that should be devoted to fishing in untangling a snarled line. Cast with the wind behind you whenever possible.

One of the most important things in casting for fish is to retrieve the bait quickly—it should be started back before, or the very instant, it strikes the water. This is done by aiming over and behind the target, as mentioned before, and stopping the bait suddenly, which takes up all slack line. It should be helped by a slight twitch of the rod to one side. This is done usually when the rod is shifted to the left hand. This quick

retrieve is something the novice should practice diligently—it means more strikes and more fish.

Casting with the Henshall Rod

Scientific bait casting originated with the Henshall rod (discussed in the chapter on rods), which is usually 8¼ feet long. Live bait is nearly always used with this style of fishing. This method has much to recommend it, although it is not practiced as much as formerly, due to the overwhelming popularity of the short rod. Neverthleess, there is no denying that the old style casting and Henshall rod have their advantages. The older men who use them can lay down a long line with remarkable accuracy and they catch their share of fish.

The same reel and line are employed as with casting with the short rod, but the reel is placed in the reel seat so that the handle is toward the left when on top of the rod. The cast is made with the reel on top, but when the rod is shifted to the left hand, it is turned so that the reel is beneath the rod with the handle to the right. In casting to the left the movements are as follows:

The angler stands facing the front, but his head is turned toward the spot he is casting at. The rod is pointed downward and to the right. It is then swept out and across the body upwards, the hand traveling from the right hip to the left shoulder.

In casting to the right, the movements are reversed —the rod arm crossing the body from the left hip to a level with the right shoulder. In both casts, the body is swung slightly with the casting arm, so that the movement is steady and without a jerk at the end of the cast.

When the bait strikes the water, the rod is shifted to the left hand, and rolled over so the handle is to the right, the bait reeled in and the line guided evenly on the spool.

Strip Casting

This style of fishing is also called "slack-line" casting, or Greenwood Lake casting from the New Jersey lake where it is practiced extensively. For this, either a Henshall pattern rod, or a heavy, rather stiff fly-rod is used. An enameled line, as heavy as the rod can handle, such as is used in fly-casting, is the most satisfactory, as it is less likely to kink, and its large diameter makes it easy to manipulate with the hand.

The reel is used simply to hold surplus line, so it can be of any kind; usually a large, single action click reel is employed. The baits commonly used in bait casting such as large minnows, frogs, pork, or artificials are all successful with this method. Strip casting can be done either from a boat or when wading but is usually a boat proposition.

Line equalling the length of the rod is pulled through the tip and sufficient line to reach the desired spot is

then pulled from the reel, between the reel and the first guide, and allowed to fall at the caster's feet in loose coils in the bottom of the boat or on the shore. The bait is then swung out, pendulum-fashion, straight ahead by lifting and swinging the rod, the coiled line running through the fingers of the left hand. The outgoing line is stopped by the fingers and then you proceed as in casting a fly. That is, the rod is pointed straight out parallel with the water and all slack is taken up with the left hand. Then the rod is swung back straight over the shoulder and the bait allowed to strike straight behind. As soon as it strikes (you can feel and hear it), it is cast forward again. The forward cast is made straight over the shoulder. Push hard with the thumb and use plenty of wrist action.

As the bait starts forward, the line held in the left hand is permitted to run out between the fingers, but is stopped as soon as the bait strikes the water. The bait is then retrieved by pulling in the line with the left hand, the rod being held parallel with the water again for quick striking. The fish is played by manipulating the line with the left hand and not with the reel. This, together with a spring of the long rod, gives the angler complete control over a hooked fish.

When fishing from shore the bait can seldom be cast behind the angler, but the forward cast is started as soon as the bait "pulls" from behind.

The "side swipe" is also employed in strip casting, not so much line being pulled through the tip top of



THE OVERHEAD CAST

Whip the rod smartly and easily forward, slightly releasing the pressure of the thumb on the reel as the rod passes the perpendicular. This movement is executed with the forearm and wrist only.

the rod but otherwise the cast is the same except, of course, the rod is swung to one side instead of straight back.

It will be seen that strip casting is a cross between bait and fly casting, and is very effective under certain conditions. The best places to use this style of fishing, are large quiet streams, shallow flats, protected bays, or extensive feeding grounds, especially when the fish are feeding on the surface and are rising readily to the splash of heavy baits. A skillful strip caster can cover an immense amount of water as he can make three or four casts to one made by casting from the reel.

Summary

For accuracy and safety, overhead casting. This should be learned first.

For casting against heavy wind or where accuracy is not necessary, or for a rest from overhead casting, side casting.

For casting from shore where back-cast is impossible, under-hand casting.

For casting from deck of boat or dock, especially against wind, "lift" casting.

For casting in open water and with live bait, use Henshall rod with side or under-hand cast.

For casting to cover the greatest amount of water in the shortest time, strip casting.