

Oval or Belgian Casting Basics: John Pettigrove

The History

The Belgian Cast or Oval Cast

For a very long time what we call the oval casting style has been ideal for the angler fishing under high banks, overhanging trees, in the wind on big rivers, and in estuaries.

My grand dad taught himself to cast a fly rod in Maine as a boy. He made a big high back cast up toward the shore and then launched his fly line out across the water. It was amazing how ugly that back cast looked but how far the line would go. Great anglers Lee Wulff and Billy Pate used similar casting styles. What Lee Wulff called the Oval cast and Billy Pate just called a fly-cast is often known as the Belgian Cast. It goes by several names including the oval cast, the elliptical cast, the High line /High-speed cast, and the continuous line tension Cast.

This Cast was taught in Europe during the nineteen thirties by an Austrian river keeper, Hans Gebetsroither. Gebetsroither called his cast

the elliptical cast. The name Belgian Cast was coined by the fishing editor of Field and Stream Magazine, AJ McLane, in the nineteen fifties to commemorate the unorthodox casting style of a Belgian fly caster and world casting champion, Albert Godart.

Both Lee Wulff and Hans Gebetsroither developed their cast for short, bamboo fly rods. As rod-making technology changed and improved Gebetsroither's elliptical cast remained popular in Europe but Wulff's oval cast was largely ignored in North American.

In the last few years Prescott Smith, a well-known bonefish guide from a distinguished family of anglers on Andros Island in the Bahamas, has revived the oval style of casting. Smith's casting style is well suited for casting on windy salt-water flats. It is quick and efficient. An angler can change directions easily, eliminate false casts and cast into almost any wind.

The Oval Cast, as shown in the following figure, consists of a wide side arm back cast and an overhead forward cast. The curved path of the rod, the change of casting plane between the back cast and the forward

cast, and the straight line forward delivery makes the cast much like casting a spinning rod or a major league pitcher throwing a fast ball.

The effectiveness of the cast is due to its quick delivery and high line speed.

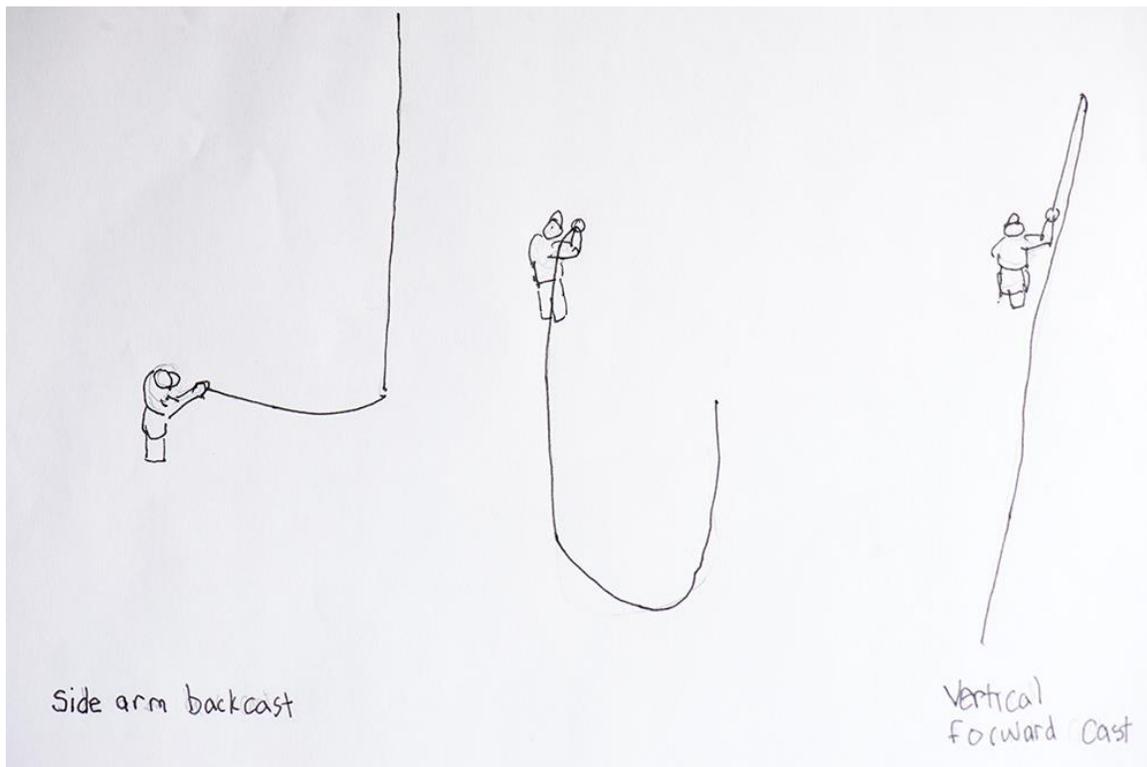


Figure 1

On the left in figure 1 you can see the side arm back cast followed by the change in direction and a change in the casting plane from horizontal to near vertical. On the right side of figure 1 the forward cast is then directed overhead as a straight line forward cast to the target.

The Casting Stroke

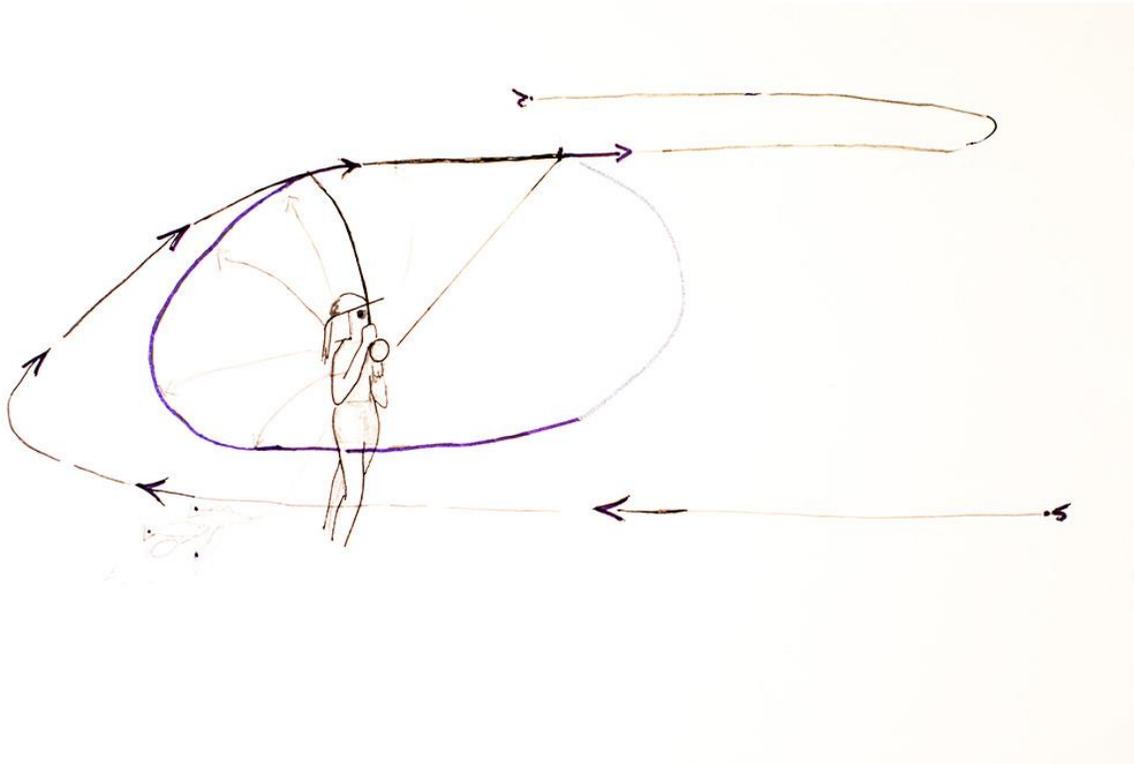


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the curved casting stroke in the oval cast. The solid line is the path of the rod tip and the broken line is the path of the fly line. As the angler swings his rod through the curved casting stroke the line forms a big high loop behind the caster.

The necessary line speed depends on the momentum of the fly line developed during the casting stroke. As in all styles of fly-casting it is the back cast that loads the rod for the forward cast.

The Back Cast and Constant Line Tension

A learner's first step to mastery of any-fly cast is to perfect the back cast. There are two different back casts: 1) straight-line overhead back cast where the fly line passes vertically over the rod tip during the cast or 2) the oval cast where the line passes beneath the rod tip and forms a loop behind the caster. 2) The loop, sometimes called a D-loop, uses the tension of the line to load the rod. This back cast is a "constant tension" cast where the tension or tightness in the line loads the rod on the forward cast.

It is the weight and speed of the line that gives a cast its power. The linear momentum of the line powers the overhead cast. A standard straight-line cast requires a slight pause on the back cast after the rod stops to unload. During that pause, unless the caster's timing is very precise, there can be loss of control and slack can develop before starting the forward cast.

On the other hand, angular momentum as the fly line swings the curved back cast powers the oval cast. The cast relies on constant line tension

to load the rod for the forward cast. A circular motion of the casting hand and the double haul (sometimes called a double line pull) generate angular acceleration of the fly line as it moves through a curve on the back cast. As this occurs, the angler experiences the tension in the line throughout the cast and the timing becomes automatic. "If the line does not feel tight it is not right."

This constant or continuous line tension is a feature of all fly-casts where the fly line is swung through an arc or curved path. It is a basic principle in modern Spey casting, underhand casting, Skagit casting, switch casting, roll casting and of course Belgian or Oval casting.

Remember, "If the line does not feel tight it is not right."

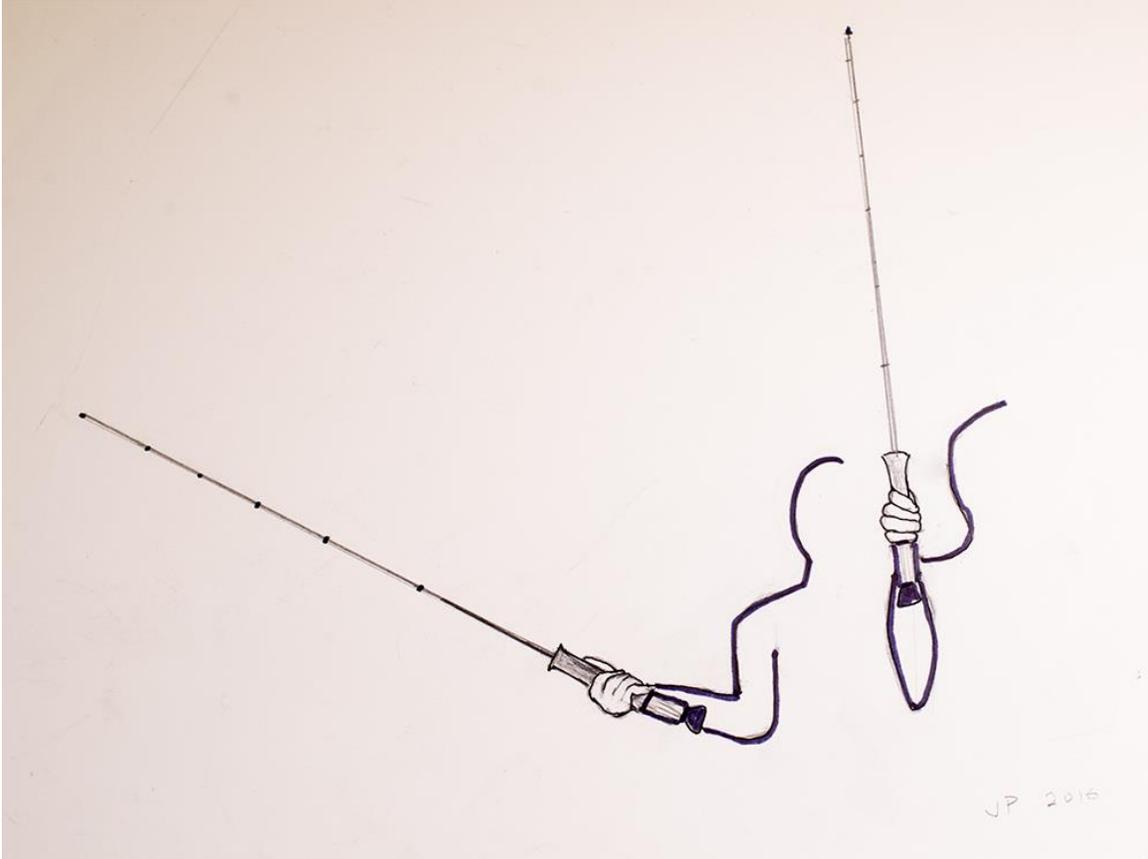


Figure 3

The Casting Planes

During an oval cast the plane of the cast changes from horizontal to vertical. The change in planes is fundamental to the cast. It prevents the line from crossing or creating wind knots and maintains line tension as the direction of the cast is reversed from the back cast to forward cast. Figure 3 shows the casting planes. On the left is the plane of the back cast. On the right is the plane of the forward cast, with the rod

vertical or overhead. These casting planes are often modified or adjusted for wind direction.

The Double haul or Line Pull

Casting distance and in the wind requires high line speed. The energy for high line speed comes from the momentum of the fly line. In combination with oval style of casting the double haul or line pull increases line speed and can power the cast. As the great lee Wulff said: it is line speed, line speed, line speed!

The Oval cast creates line speed with the curved casting stroke on the back cast and constant line tension. The line haul or pull maintains line tension and increases line speed. Once you have that back cast and curved casting stroke down you need to learn to “haul”. A haul is a line pull. A double haul is a forward line pull on the back cast and a backward line pull on the forward cast. Learning the double haul can be tricky but the trick is learning what to do with your hands and keeping them together. It has to be seen and experienced to really get it but learning to “haul” dramatically increases your line speed and distance.

Summary: Three Principles to Remember

- 1) The oval shape of the casting stroke
- 2) The change in casting planes
- 3) Constant line tension. Keep a tight line!

The cast begins with a side arm back cast. As the line passes under the rod tip a high open loop forms behind the caster. As the loop forms the rod hand repositions the rod to begin the forward cast. The forward cast is an overhead cast that rolls the line out over the water just as the forward cast does in straight-line casting.

The rod hand directs or steers the rod and rod tip in a curved motion inscribing an oval or ellipse with the rod. Line tension is maintained though out the cast with the line hand. Line speed is controlled using a forward line pull or haul on the back cast and a backward pull or haul on the forward cast. This sequence of line pulls is the familiar double haul. The double haul is a simple up down motion of the line hand:

pulling the line and then giving back line. Prescott Smith says it is like the gearshift in a racecar.

The more you study and practice haul techniques the better your casts will be.

The Sequence of the Cast:

1. Grip with the rod hand, thumb on top, and then rotate your wrist slightly, turning the guides pointing inward toward your side so the reel is flat, oriented in the horizontal plane.
2. The elbow of the rod arm is kept close to the body during the cast. (Occasionally the elbow extends back ward to lengthen the casting stroke.)
3. Begin with the line pickup lifting the line smoothly off the water to break the surface tension between the line and the water by slowly lift, lifting and when the line is free of the water and only then performing a long line pull or haul on the back cast. It is important that this be smooth to avoid disturbance of the water.

4. The back cast is a side arm cast that sweeps back in the horizontal plane over the water and then upward in a circular or curved motion creating a large high loop that is initiated as the line passes under the rod tip.
5. There is a long forward haul or line pull during the back cast.
6. Without stopping the rod or allowing slack in the line, the rod is repositioned vertically to start the forward cast.
7. The forward cast is overhead as the rod continues to load as it is accelerated forward.
8. There is a long backward haul or line pull on the forward cast.
9. The rod is stopped abruptly to unload.
10. As the rod unloads the angler looks down the rod as if it were a shotgun pointed toward a target. This facilitates aiming and shooting line.
11. Finish the cast by lowering the rod back to the water to allow the line to straighten out in front of you, which is especially important in the wind. (A short line pull, called a check haul, helps to straighten the line in the wind.)

Remember, the circular motion of the rod hand steers the cast and the pull with the line hand keeps the line tight and generates the line speed.

Practice by breaking down the cast.

- 1) 1) With twenty or so feet of line outside the rod tip practice the curved or circular (oval) motion of the rod and line over and over to get the feel of the casting stroke. With your rod hand experience the oval or circular path of the rod practicing or pantomiming loading and unloading the rod

- 2) 2) Again with twenty feet or so of line beyond the rod tip practice the back casts introducing the line pull or haul to power the cast. Learn how to Double Haul with your line hand.

- 3) Identify the casting planes for the back cast and the forward cast.
- 4) Use your rod hand to steer the rod through the cast and your line
- 5) Feel the continuous tension in the line throughout the cast.
- 6) As you master these maneuvers put them together into a complete cast.

To make the cast work requires a little study and practice but a competent fly caster can learn it in a day. For a novice it may take a little longer. Both Lee Wulff and Prescott Smith have gotten beginners casting competently their first day fishing. As they both have said: you know when it's right because the line feels tight. This is a casting style that for the most part has been self-discovered and self-taught. I doubt anyone ever showed my granddad anything.

The pay off learning this cast is you can cast into just about any wind; you eliminate false casting and changing directions becomes a snap.

In addition many other casts use a curved back cast and require keeping the line under constant tension. If you ever decide to try steelhead or Salmon fishing up north you can start off quickly with one of those long double-handed rods. Double-handed rod techniques are assets fly-fishing in the surf. Finally, this technique works well fishing rivers and lakes where you have limited back cast room. It is a great technique to learn and use when you need it.