

Short-Line Nymphing: Technique

BY BILL CARNAZZO

(From Bill's blog, ca. 2011)

The cast and the drift

Experience has taught me that the first cast to a fishy looking spot can be the most productive cast, dictating a cautious, thoughtful approach; a cast that is executed properly and accurately; a tight drift; and focus on the in-line indicator for any telltale aberrant movement. Too often I have observed fly fishers cast quickly into a nice pocket before properly adjusting weight and line length— in other words, using the first cast as a “test” or “adjustment” cast. This is, to be blunt, a serious error, irrespective of whether the angler is nymphing or drifting a dry fly. Make that first cast count!

Casting the tight line rig is not a pretty sight—it's actually more of a lobs than a cast. Let's begin with the “how” of the cast. The cast begins with approximately 2 feet of the fly line outside of the top guide, with the rig positioned downstream. The rod is raised to nearly vertical and held there momentarily to allow for rod loading and aiming the cast; in other words, the cast is not one fluid motion. The rod is then snapped forward with the tip pointing at the desired drop spot for the flies. There should naturally be no slack in the line at this point as the line and leader are stretched out by virtue of the cast; from here it is up to the angler to establish and maintain line control in order to keep the drift slack-free.

Next, let's look at the “where” of the cast, meaning the direction which the rig is cast, because correct fly placement is critical to an effective drift. With the tight line method, the flies should land at a 45-degree angle upstream of the angler. There are, to be sure, situations where a likely looking pocket across the stream can only be reached with a perpendicular cast because stream depth or strong current prevent safe wading to an ideal casting position. But these occasions are the exception rather than the rule, and most casts should be made upstream.

Now let's consider the drift. As soon as the flies hit the water, the reel is immediately lifted and the rod tip is kept down; the rod itself remains horizontal for the drift. If the tip is lifted, only one thing can happen since the line is tight: the flies will be pulled up from the bottom and away from the fish. For the tight line method to be effective, the flies must drift at or near the bottom. Remember: the drift begins with the splash of the flies; don't pause downstream rod movement on the assumption that the flies need to sink, because they will sink immediately.

Don't be concerned that the noise generated by the splash of the flies will put the fish down; there is plenty of ambient noise in pocket water already.

With the rod horizontal, the rod tip leads the flies downstream, keeping line, leader and indicator taut without pulling the flies unnaturally. The flies should never be allowed to drift under the rod, as this results in loss of line control (i.e., slack) and therefore loss of communication with the flies. The leader should enter the water at and remain at a 45-degree angle upstream from the rod tip to the water surface during the drift.

Careful attention to drift speed is essential during the drift. If the leader or indicator is moving at the same speed as the top water, judging by bubbles or floating debris, the subsurface flies will "drag" or move too fast since in general the current at the bottom is slower than on top due to the effects of friction. The remedy for this is additional weight which, besides getting the flies down also functions to slow the entire rig down to proper drift speed. With experience, this situation will become easy to spot and remedy with the right amount of additional weight.

Once the line, leader and flies have drifted to a point directly downstream of the angler, the next cast can be commenced. Once the entire pocket has been thoroughly covered by successive casts, adjacent areas can be covered in the same manner without changing position, by adding another foot of line outside the top guide. With experience the angler should be able cover even more water from the same point by casting with 4 or 5 feet outside the top guide while still maintaining the constant line control that is critical to success with the tight line system. In general, as the cast is lengthened, additional weight must be incrementally added to the system in order to maintain good line control.

Take recognition and hook-setting technique

Success with the short line technique requires skill in both take recognition and proper hook-set technique, as the trout are lightning quick and seldom take the flies with gusto; indeed, most takes are subtle and not particularly easy to spot irrespective of what type of rig and indicator are used. My experience has been that where the take is sharp and the leader jumps, the fish is generally small; where the take is subtle and the leader/indicator barely pauses or just slows down when it shouldn't, there is a good chance that it is a large fish. But that's just a rule of thumb, and sometimes there just are no rules.

Avoiding the "vertical" hook-set technique when nymph-fishing for trout will greatly reduce fly fisher stress and, with enough practice, will increase hook ups. When the rig leaves the water because of a vertical rod lift, a lot of unpleasant things can happen: acquiring or giving one's guide an unwanted ear ring (in which case the guide is liable to become grumpy); getting practice removing massive

tangles and knots; learning how to extract the rig from the canopy or berry bushes; or experiencing all of the above at one time.

To eliminate this bothersome fuss the angler needs to learn to set the hook with a quick horizontal downstream flick of the wrist. The rig remains in the water, allowing completion of the drift if the hook-set motion is not answered by the tug of a fish. Gravity does not bedevil rod movement and the flies move unhesitatingly and directly. No ear rings, leader snarls or line-snatching trees or berry vines to kink one's day. Life is good.

But when to set the hook? Simply put: Any time that the indicator twitches, hesitates or moves in an inexplicable direction, just do it. The culprit can be a fish, a rock, a stick, a leaf or...whatever; since the "take and spit" happens so quickly and the price of not setting can be loss of a nice fish, there is simply no time or room for speculation. In other words, as I drill into my clients, don't second guess, just react. When I hear "It was a rock," I ask "Are you certain?" We all know the answer to that question.

Because in-line indicator activity (or just plain leader activity, if an in-line indicator is not used) is often quite subtle, single-pointed focus and concentration are a must. The correlation between distraction and lack of productivity is clear and direct. For most fly fishers, subtle take detection is a skill acquired after long days of "paying dues" on the stream. As a guide, I often find myself patiently describing the client's many undetected takes when the client expresses the typical frustration experienced by beginning to intermediate nymph fishers. Still, I have found that such gentle prodding is instructive, assists the client in maintaining focus, and produces results.

I've been very fortunate to have had the opportunity, over many years, to teach the Ted-Fay¹ style short line nymphing technique to many anglers. Most stay with it, incorporate it into their arsenal, and become intuitive short-liners; some find it too difficult or frustrating. For me, short of the grab of a winter steelie on a swung fly, there is nothing sweeter than spotting a subtle take on a short-line rig, setting the hook, and feeling the head-shake of a surprised and angry trout.



¹ Ted Fay learned the method from Dunsmuir Wintu Ted Towendolly in the mid-1940s. This fact was not established at the time of Bill's article in 2011.