

Short-Line Nymphing: Another Perspective

By Bill Carnazzo, December 2011

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A few years ago while fishing the Pit River with my friend, guide Chris Parsons, he and I were talking about short line nymphing in general. Chris remarked that short-lining is about as close as you can get to pure fly fishing. I didn't think much about that little gem at the time, but its seed took root somewhere in my psyche. Now and again it pops to the forefront of my consciousness (usually after catching a big fish), causing me to try to parse its meaning. I think perhaps I've finally come to terms with it: Short-lining pits the angler and his/her rig against the trout in a very direct manner in an environment foreign to the angler but home to the trout, thereby demanding that the angler know exactly where the sunken flies are during the drift, and exactly what they are doing, all without the benefit of a floating indicator. To sum this gestalt up, I'll use another of Chris' aphorisms: the angler must learn to "be the fly." I can't express it any better than that.

Catching trout that are feeding subsurface seems to be a mystery and a source of frustration for many anglers. I have heard this frustration expressed by guide clients many times. My usual response is that it's just another skill to be learned—indeed, one that must be learned since fish feed subsurface, we're told, 90% of the time. I also make a point of telling them that there are no absolutes, and a lot of options are available, including floating indicators with a dead drift approach—mostly a passive system once the drift is set up. I also explain that there are active systems that don't rely on a floating indicator, where the angler sets the drift up and controls it by various means other than mending the line.

My favorite among active nymphing systems is the short line technique. For now, think of short line nymphing as a technique that uses a heavy rig lobbed upstream with only 2-3 feet of fly line outside the top guide, and a drift that maintains a tight connection between rod tip and flies. More detail on the elements of this system is provided below. There are a number of short line nymphing concepts, each of which has bred sundry variants and nuances (see, for example, Andrew Harris' excellent article published in this magazine, June, 2010 issue). All of these can be effective when practiced by a competent nymph fly fisher. As diverse as they may seem, they share a common objective that, for me at least, defines the holy grail of successful nymph fishing: consistent and reliable visual take detection through "communication" between angler and flies. "Visual" is the operative term in this paradigm; the angler who waits for the "feel" of the take is missing most eaters.

So why reprise Andrew Harris' recent article when the theme—short line nymphing—is the same? The short answer is, well, I have a slightly different perspective on the subject, having taught it for over 20 years. Disparate perspectives, in my view, are good. The longer answer (which I'll keep short) has to do with providing more detail on the "how to" of presentation, line control, and rigging.

The “tight-line” style of short-lining

Among the various short line nymphing systems used by fly fishers, the one that I find most effective in pocket water situations is what I call the “tight line” method. Many years’ experience with this method, demonstrated to me a very long time ago by my friend and fellow guide Ron Rabun, has proven to me that it can outperform other systems in the hands of a good nymph fly fisher. The tight line system can be traced back to the late Ted Fay, the guru of the Upper Sacramento River—in fact, many older anglers (I’m one of them, folks) refer to tight lining as the Ted Fay method. But I’m told that the late Mr. Fay learned the technique from none other than the venerable Joe Humphreys.¹

“Czech nymphing,” which is probably tight-lining’s closest relative, is a relatively recent practice, at least in this country. The Czechs’ idea is to give the flies as much up-front-and-personal time with bottom-hugging fish as possible by limiting casting activity to what is essentially a lobbed upstream roll cast. Multiple heavy flies are used to get the rig down and keep it there without adding weight on the leader, and slack is minimized by controlling the drift with a short line and a horizontally positioned rod that leads the rig downstream. As will be seen below, this approach closely resembles the modified Ted Fay/Joe Humphreys system that I use. Who knows, maybe the Czechs came here to learn from Joe and Ted.

The heart of the tight line system is keeping slack entirely out of the line, from rod tip to flies. This skill is aptly termed “line control”—meaning not just the fly line, but also the leader right down to the flies. To maintain line control once the line is cast upstream, the angler must accurately judge the location of the flies and their drift speed, and move the rod tip downstream ahead of the flies while keeping the line and leader tight to them. If slack is eliminated, there is a direct connection between the flies and the top of the leader, so that any unusual or subtle line movement or action such as slowing, stopping, or changing direction is visible to an observant, attentive angler. If slack is present between flies and the upper part of the leader, the slack will absorb any aberrant leader movement or action, and take activity will not be visible. I suspect that many candidates for “fish of a lifetime” have been missed because of fatal slack in a nymph rig’s drift-i.e., lack of line control.

For those of us who are visually challenged (which includes me but apparently not Ted Fay) and can’t clearly see the leader where it enters the water, it is essential that the leader incorporate a visual aid that will help detect aberrant movement. Ron Rabun addressed this problem by designing a form of in-line indicator made of three short sections of “Amnesia” monofilament—two of red and one of green—knotted together and placed between the leader and the end of the fly line (see below for a full description of the in-line indicator).

The elements of the tight line system are relatively simple to master, with a modicum of practice and concentration. They are: gear and rigging; reading the water; the cast and drift; take recognition; and proper hook-set technique.

The gear and rigging

My rod of choice for this system is a nine or nine and a half foot medium action stick, made for a 3, 4 or 5 line. The line should be a neutral-colored, front-loaded, weight forward floater, which will readily turn the rig over. Lines abound, but a good example of the type of

¹ In checking with Joe Humphreys in 2014 it was learned that he had never met nor fished with Ted Fay. This article was published before the knowledge of Ted Towendolly’s role in developing and then sharing this technique with Ted Fay was well understood...Editor

line that works well is Rio's "Grand." It comes equipped with a short, relatively heavy front taper. Lines that feature a long belly work well for mending line during a floating indicator drift, but don't seem to work as well as the heavily front-loaded types for turning over a relatively heavy rig. The entire leader, including the butt section (if any), the in-line indicator, and the tippet, should approximate the rod's length.

The in-line indicator consists of three pieces of 25 pound monofilament, each about 4 inches long after the double uni-knots (Ron Rabun used blood knots) which join them are tied. The first and third pieces should be fluorescent red or orange and the center piece should be fluorescent green. The two middle knots will be bi-colored, which greatly aids concentration as the rig drifts since for many people the eye will tend to focus on these knots. The indicator is looped at both ends (another of my modifications to Ron Rabun's setup). One end of the indicator is looped to the butt section or fly line loop, and the other end is looped to a 7 1/2 foot 3x or 4x leader. There are options available for in-line indicators. For example, before Ron introduced me to his system, I simply slid a short piece of pink or green fly line (with core removed) over the butt of the leader and watched that during the drift. Colored plastic sleeves were also available, and I've also used leaders with a red butt end, small colored sticky foam, and strike putty. These all worked passably well, but once I began using Ron's solution I never looked back. The different colored sections, the length, and those sexy bi-colored knots work well for me—and, based on feedback, for my clinic students and guide clients.

Next, the last 24 inches of the 7 1/2 foot leader is cut off and discarded. A 30 inch length of 3x or 4x tippet is now tied to the end of the leader with two uni-knots that are left untightened and apart for now. Between these two knots, a 10 inch piece of 3x tippet material is tied in with another uni-knot and tightened down after moistening. With the tippet and the leader in hand, the area between the two untightened uni-knots is moistened and they are pulled together tightly. The tag ends are then pulled tight and clipped. The result is a dropper that is perpendicular to the leader.

An option to making the in-line indicator and using a standard 7 1/2 foot leader, is to purchase a pre-made system that consists of: (i) an in-line indicator looped to a 5 foot tapered leader that terminates in a swivel; and (ii) a tippet section with the dropper built in, set up to attach to the swivel. These are marketed as "Bill's Short-Line Rigging System." Also available are separate packages of pre-made tippet sections (see picture).

After cutting the dropper back to around 5 inches, a nymph is tied to it; I prefer a loop knot for the dropper fly, preferably a non-slip mono knot or a perfection loop. The loop knot allows the fly to move freely during the drift. The point fly is then tied in at the bottom of the tippet using the same technique. I normally use a small fly on the dropper, and a large fly at the point position, but this is not an immutable rule (a third fly, which I call a "stinger" can be added by tying a short piece of tippet material to the bend of the bottom fly).

There are options for making a multi-fly rig. A dropper can be created by using a blood knot and leaving one of the tag ends long. Alternately, a piece of tippet can be tied to the bend of the top fly and the second fly can then be tied to the other end of the tippet. Or, the piece of tippet can be tied into the eye of the top fly, which allows that fly to protrude from the leader in a perpendicular manner. While all of these are functional, I have found the system mentioned above to be highly effective and easily replaced when necessary. I carry a half dozen extra pre-made tip sections and can have the rig back in the water within minutes. Time is fish, right?

Now back to the rigging. Weights in the form of BB size shot are squeezed onto the tippet between the two flies, at a location approximately 12 inches above the point fly. The reason for this placement is to allow the flies to drift at different levels within the water column. The proper number of split shot is a function of current speed and depth variables which must be assessed as each pocket, riffle or run is approached. However, as a rule of thumb, I generally will rig with two BBs to begin with unless the water is flowing high and/or deep. I prefer the green-colored, non-lead variety of weights.

Reading the water

Unless the flies drift through trout holding spots, the angler may just as well be practicing in the parking lot or grass alongside the stream. Here's a quick overview of "Reading Pocket Water 101:" The savvy pocket water angler looks for current seams, boils behind boulders, foamy water caused by small falls or break-over ledges, in-stream obstructions and other objects which slow the current's flow, and in particular those dark green spots in and around large rocks, slots or bedrock configurations. "Reading the water" is simply shorthand for the acquired ability to quickly spot and assess each of these situations and intuit the proper presentation. Put another way, trout have three basic needs: cover, food, and oxygen (assuming an even distribution of optimal temperature). Optimally, they will be found where these three factors intersect—which is a good segue to "Reading Pocket Water 102," the principle tenet of which is that while the factors mentioned above are the general rule for parsing out fish lies, there are many variables that will create exceptions. In other words, what is a good trout lie at one moment in time may not be so good at another time.

Here are a few of the many variables that will affect the quality of fish habitat and trout behavior: (i) Time of day can make a big difference. For example, when the sun is directly overhead, a seemingly optimal lie will likely be devoid of fish if the sun lights it up. Why? Even though oxygen and food might be found there, cover is lacking and predator-averse trout will seek refuge elsewhere. Later in the day when the sun is more oblique, the light will be flat and the water surface will be opaque with glare—which provides cover—and trout will return. (ii) Seasonal changes affect fish behavior. For example, in early fall larger fish stay "tucked under" foamy boils and lurk in deep slots and dark holes. Because the water is likely to be low, clear, and somewhat warmer during this time, cover and oxygen can be scarce; the foamy boils provide both of those elements, and deep water is ideal for cover as well. Trout lies that were good during the spring and summer generally lose their appeal in early fall. During the late fall when the weather cools significantly, the water thins, and colorful leaves adorn the current and the bottom, trout may be found on shallow bars, in open water and in the tails of pools—sometimes actively feeding with their backs out of the water. Perhaps trout in these conditions feel relatively safe from predators in the camouflage of wild color and flat light. (iii) Weather conditions can be a major factor. Think about personal fishing journals—isn't there always a spot to enter weather conditions for each day on the water? Usually, but not always, a good cloud cover will affect the value of individual trout lies. Cloud cover produces flat light and glare (cover); potentially affects insect activity (think *baetis*) and food availability in a positive manner; and prevents water temperatures from rising significantly, which keeps oxygen saturation higher.

There are other variables that affect habitat suitability, but the point here is that the water must be read differently at different times and under differing conditions. The angler who fails to understand this concept and to adjust accordingly will be at a disadvantage.

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 lob 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-Fay 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.