

Fly Casting Practice

by

Mark Herron

As published on **TheCuriousFlyCaster.com**

(<https://thecuriousflycaster.com/>)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Table of Contents

Fly Casting Practice.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Getting the Concept.....	2
Why Practice Fly Casting?.....	2
How to Practice? With Purpose and Structure.....	3
How Practice Works and What Works in Practice.....	4
Focus of Attention.....	5
The “Just Right” Feeling.....	5
The Comfort Zone.....	6
State of Mind.....	6
Giving Yourself Time – Slow and Slower Motion.....	7
Habits, Good and Bad.....	7
What to practice.....	8
Objectives.....	8
Identifying the 20%.....	8
My Practice Regime.....	9
The 20%.....	9
Warm Up – 5 mins.....	9
Back Cast Drill – 5 mins.....	9
Forward cast Drill – 5 mins.....	9
Dynamic Roll Drill – 5 mins.....	9
Accuracy Drills – 20 mins.....	9
Odd spot – 5 mins.....	9
Practice Regime Update.....	10
Minimal Effort Casting Drill.....	11
Accuracy Casts in Both Directions.....	11
Timing of Drills.....	12
Purpose.....	12
Practice Regime Update 2.0.....	12
My recent practice sessions have been adapted to:.....	12
Practice Regime Update 3.0.....	13
Practice Regime Update 4.0.....	15

Fly Casting Practice

Introduction

Last year I contemplated writing an in depth article about casting practice, essentially part four of the series and story of mechanics, biomechanics and sensory motor learning. I decided against it then because site visitors seemed to be less interested as the story progressed. Despite that and with some awareness of urge and inevitability, I found myself writing repeatedly about practice in my blog, simply because my own practice kept on providing evidence that there was so much more to practice than mindless repetition. So, with lock-down time on my hands it was time to concede, collect, review and refresh what I've learned about practice, both theoretically and experientially. Here it is. Couldn't help myself.

Before going on I want to acknowledge the valuable feedback provided by my reviewers: *Blake Robertson, Mike Shaw and Vince Brandon*. Thanks guys. It is appreciated.

There are mountains of content, physical and digital, out there on the subject of fly casting. The majority of it is concerned with identifying and curing faults in technique. A little of it is about what to practice – drills and such. There is very little about why we need to practice and only a tiny amount of content devoted to understanding and applying the principles of practice as informed by science or experience. Why is that? Why is fly casting, even as a sport or end in itself, so apparently separated from or indifferent to other sports and movement science? Compare this with the massive efforts made to identify, accumulate and refine a body of knowledge about optimal training and skills development in so many professional sports such as golf, football, baseball, cricket, basketball, tennis and on it goes. I'd hazard a wild guess that more is known about this stuff in European handball than in fly casting, probably including competition fly casting.

For sure there is a demand issue and most anglers just want to fish and if they catch fish then who needs lessons, much less regular practice? Fishing is their sport; casting is just a means to that end. Of course, that is their legitimate choice and I'm pretty confident they won't be avid readers or regular visitors to sites like this one.

But, ask a professional fishing guide, any of them, what limitations their clients often demonstrate and I'll wager my house on the most common answer.

I don't pretend to have exhaustive knowledge of sports science in general or skills practice in particular but I think I know enough now to offer a few collected thoughts about casting practice – thoughts which follow on from understanding a bit about casting mechanics, biomechanics and sensory motor learning. My own experience has been informed and re-shaped by applying what I've learned along the way. practice is where the rubber meets the road.

Getting the Concept

What is practice – as opposed to doing? That might seem like a “dumb” question with an obvious answer. There is, however, more to the question than first appears. Practice is where you learn to do new things and to do old things better. Practice is mindful. Contrastingly, mindless repetition is doing the same things the same way without much prospect of learning or improving. If fishing is the doing bit then yes, if you decide to learn new things and consciously set about trying to do old things better, then improvements are certainly possible, especially if you fish a hell of a lot. But, seriously, how often is that decision made and carried out? Assuming it was how much improvement is likely to be made, compared with time dedicated to practice?

You can't really fly fish and practice your casting at the same time, at least, not without diminishing the pleasure and effectiveness of one or both activities. When I'm fishing, ideally, I don't want to think much about my casting and that's especially true when I am sight fishing. See the fish, see the shot, take the shot. Anything else is a distraction.

Having “defined” practice let's move on to the Why, How and What issues of casting practice.

Why Practice Fly Casting?

That is now the easy question. To get better at it. To maintain and improve our casting skills. That is, for the same reasons that all sorts of people including elite athletes, dancers, martial artists and musicians practice, because practice is the basis of their mastery. Beyond talent, aptitude or physiology, practice is how we achieve whatever level of skill we aspire to – from ordinary to exceptional.

How to Practice? With Purpose and Structure

My casting practice, research and writing are all interconnected in the sense that I don't preach what hasn't been meaningfully practiced. After finishing the piece on Sensory Motor Learning I got a recommendation to read *Practice Perfect*¹ by Doug Lemov et al., so I bought the book, read it, and decided to re-jig my practice regime.

Now, I won't go into detail about the book but a key message from the authors is that the best coaches and elite sports people analyse their sport for the required skill set in two ways. First, they determine the essential and fundamental skills and secondly, they break those skills down into simple components and practice them intensively.

This kind of structured approach is a good fit with my other research (and the trend line of my own practice). It is also focussed and rigorous. To put it in two words – it is purposeful and mindful. Consequently, everything in a practice session becomes intentional. Time is not for wasting.

This is the very opposite of heading down to the park and banging out a whole lot of casts, mostly at maximum distance. Yeah, I know, this level of structure might sound a bit anal but try it and see. My somewhat sceptical expectations were proven wrong. I now make a point of practicing with a specific purpose – sometimes to learn something new and sometimes as a general tune-up to maintain and improve existing skills. Either way it's enjoyable work rather than drudgery.

Determining the essential and fundamental skills is concerned with choosing the 20% of things that really matter (most) and concentrating on improving their performance.

There is another aspect of structure I want to recommend and that is also to do with purpose in the more specific sense of setting and pursuing objectives. I could, but I won't, give you lengthy and detailed accounts why this is extremely useful for organising and directing all sorts of activities. Trust me when I say, from extensive professional experience as a researcher and consultant, that clarity of purpose is extremely useful for individuals and groups organised at any scale to get things done effectively. Understanding why you are doing what you do and whether or not it's working both makes meaningful sense of the work and enables navigational guidance on progress and performance.

¹ Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better Authors: Doug Lemov, Katie Yezzi, Erica Woolway, Publisher: Tantor, ISBN: 9798212938303

Returning to the planet's surface, for several years my overall objective for overhead casting practice has been to expand the zone within which I can easily and confidently make a covering cast from 60' (≈ 18 m) to 80' (≈ 24 m). When I go for a practice session I know in advance what, within my overall objective, I want to get from it – a fix or a fine tune. If some additional problem emerges then it too can get attention.

An outline of my standard practice regime will be provided later on. It might pay to mention now that it reflects my fishing bias toward freshwater impoundments and flats fishing in the saltwater. Somewhat different deal maybe if I mainly fished small streams. I'm not saying, I only ever practice with strict adherence to the regime and never do anything else. However, it has worked well over the past year so I am sharing it with you (again) fwiw². Like cooking, use the recipe for ideas and make the meal your own.

How Practice Works and What Works in Practice

The Sensory Motor System (SMS) controls our movements, voluntary and involuntary. It is a wondrous and very complex thing, the exact workings of which are still not entirely understood despite significant research effort. The SMS is what enables us to learn, perform and refine voluntary movements – including fly casting. To get the best possible results from casting practice it helps to understand how that system learns best in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency.

I've have tried without much success to come up with a simple shorthand version which is accessible and which makes sense of how we optimise our learning of casting movements. The best I can offer is that learning to move better is about shifting more and more from consciously thinking about a voluntary movement to performing it unconsciously – without thinking about it.

Unconscious control uses neural patterns and channels of command and feedback which are much faster and more efficient than conscious or cognitively driven movement. We might all remember learning to ride a bicycle. At first, we are clumsy and a bit uncoordinated but eventually we can ride fast and smoothly over all sorts of terrain without much or any conscious thought about what we are doing and what to do next. A far more detailed account of these processes is available in Sensory Motor Learning³ for those who want to go there. Learning to do something “without thinking about it” is the result of automating most if not all of the processes involved. That is the end game of practice.

² for what it's worth

³ <https://thecuriousflycaster.com/fly-casting-and-sensory-motor-learning/>

What we can also say about practice and sensory motor learning is that we can do certain things which optimise the learning process – that facilitate the shift toward doing things without having to think about them. All these are explained in greater detail in the article linked to above. Here is a brief account of some things known to optimise learning movement.

Focus of Attention

Sports science divides where we put our learning attention into two: internal focus and external focus. Internal focus concentrates on the body movements we should be making. Fly casting literature and traditional instruction is full of this stuff. Do this and don't do that; hold your arm up in the ready position, don't break your wrist, don't grip the rod too tightly, slow down, stop suddenly, and on it goes.

External focus concentrates on what we are trying to achieve, that is, on the intended effects of our movements. Peer reviewed publications support performance gains in accuracy, efficiency and even maximum power production – in a variety of skill acquisition contexts, including sports – using an external focus.

I'm not saying you can stick a fly rod in a beginner's hands, tell them to make narrow loops and stay smooth and they will be experts in no time. Of course, beginners need to know and be shown the basics of what to do and how to move. What I'm saying is that an external focus leads to better performance sooner. It gives you a learning edge. My very strong suspicion is that it does so because the movements become less conscious and more unconscious, sooner.

[Edit] For beginners especially one use of external focus is to call upon movement skills learned previously. Similes like “painting the ceiling” or “flicking water off a brush” are effective, not because they minutely detail the sequence of a movement but because a lot of people have learned how to do it already. Adaption and refinement are shorter roads than learning from scratch. Same deal with using practice to refine technique.

The “Just Right” Feeling

Getting, noticing and remembering the just right feeling is very important. You probably know what I mean already but it's that cast or golf shot or serve or pitch or whatever that felt special because it was surprisingly easy and effortless. This is what you want your new normal to be.

Once experienced, my suggestion for memorising it is to conjure a word picture that evokes that just right feeling as a metaphorical sensory experience rather than a

literal cognitive one. Effectively, you are giving the feeling experience a name so that it can be remembered and recognised. Each of us will make up a different association that makes sense, pun intended. For example when I want to make a long cast, staying smooth and delivering accurately I tell myself to “*cut the cloth*”. This is my shorthand for treating the sky as a cloth that I cut with the tip of the rod as though using a very sharp knife. The idea of cutting smoothly, effortlessly, straight and completely works for me. If I use key words instead of the image the words are “*straight, slow, smooth, full*”. All of that process is an example of external focus.

The Comfort Zone

I'm a firm believer in and frequent user of, the comfort zone. That's where my casting is more likely to be “*just right*” more of the time. For me that's when I am casting to a medium distance. The movements are neither restrained nor strained – nearing the point where technique starts to falter. Gradual extension (or even reduction) of distance without losing the magic feel will work a lot better than continually trying to cast as far as possible.

It's the place I go to learn something new – be that a new type of cast or the refinement I want to accentuate in a familiar cast.

It's also a familiar groove that you can return to as necessary when things start to get a bit untidy as technique breaks down. Come back to the comfort zone and venture forth again when order is restored. In other words, returning to the groove frees up the conscious attention buffer because more of what is going on is being performed unconsciously.

State of Mind

Your state of mind and emotions are also part of where your attention is focussed and these also affect the muscle and tendon presets I have written about in describing the SMS. Anxiety, for example, will cause the presets to tighten, i.e. you will literally “*tense up*”. If, instead of being frustrated or worried about your performance, you are relaxed and confident that improvements can be made then you are more likely to make and keep those improvements.

If you are feeling uptight, mentally and physically, perhaps try a relaxation breathing exercise and have a bit of a shake out to loosen up. If none of that works consider coming back another time. What starts badly rarely ends well.

Giving Yourself Time – Slow and Slower Motion

It is also easier to capture the feel of good form by “casting” in slow motion instead of normal speed. Just as we can see more by watching a caster in slow motion so we can get a better, fuller and more accurate sensory motor “idea” by casting in slow(er) motion.

If you detach the butt section of the rod, reel attached, and give yourself some slack you can perform the chosen casting movements slowly, adjusting them (more easily) for accuracy, that is, making things move smoothly as and when they should. This is Fitts Law, the trade off between speed and accuracy, used to advantage. When we deliberately slow down, attention space is freed up to improve “accuracy” which in this case means conforming with correct technique.

A similar way of exploiting the speed accuracy trade-off was suggested to me by John Waters. He recommends practice casting at a reduced speed, say 60 -70% of the standard rate, as a means of incorporating improvements to technique.

Importantly, everything else stays the same, including stroke and haul length. This might require you to shorten the line up from maximum carry and distance casts. It may even mean making PUALD casts in one or both directions if turnover is badly compromised by reduced tempo of the movements.

As technique improves then from slow or slower motion we can pick up speed again to normal pace and repeat the process as required to capture, memorise and normalise the improvements we are after.

You can even pantomime the actions without a rod in hand. Simply rehearsing the movement in your mind will have benefits. Indeed some research has shown that improvements are made just by sleeping on it. During sleep the brain consolidates the learning and re-organises the neurons used to execute the movements.

Habits, Good and Bad

In everyday language the transition from the cognitive (conscious) to the autonomous (unconscious) stage would be called “forming a habit”. We have seen how it is possible optimise SMS learning to form habits faster. That was the good news. The bad news, of course, is that the process does not distinguish between good and bad habits.

We all know from experience that the longer a bad habit persists the harder it is to break. Bad habits can be broken but it takes focus, resolve, repetition, discipline and, you know, work. It means going back to where the problem started and forming a

good habit to replace the bad one. Slowing your movements down as suggested above can help. It will take time. If all that means going back to being a beginner then so be it. Fixes? Yes. Quick fixes? No. Besides, it never hurts to go back to basics, for example by casting without hauling, sorting it all out properly and then adding the hauls back in.

If it makes you feel any better, I've spent several years ruthlessly getting rid of any unnecessary effort. It has meant finding ways to cast long and accurately without heaving, at all. The positives I accentuate are smoothness, the natural throwing sequence and staying with the just right feel. All these things facilitate casting in a mechanically and biomechanically efficient way.

What to Practice

It isn't possible to come up with a single casting regime that will suit everyone. We will all have different objectives and different habits – good and bad – we want to either accentuate or get rid of. Of course many casters will share strengths and weaknesses but I can only offer a description and explanation of what I do and invite you to mine it for ideas that will help you achieve what you are after.

Ideally you would work with a competent instructor to devise a programme suited to your needs which will vary, obviously, with skill levels and achievable objectives. That said a thoughtfully designed DIY structure will very likely be better than none.

Objectives

In addition to having an overall objective for my casting practice I often have specific objectives for a particular session such as improving a new cast or casting on the backhand side or single hand Spey casting from one or both sides. Time spent during the session will be adjusted accordingly.

Identifying the 20%

As mentioned above the best coaches and elite sports people determine which skills are essential and fundamental skills. They then break those skills down into simple components and practice them intensively. Some of these essential skills will, of course, be universal but what does and doesn't make the cut for the 20% will vary a bit with the skill level already obtained. Each of us, alone or in concert with our casting teacher, will need to sort out the components and draw up a plan that includes them.

My Practice Regime

Here is my standard 45 minutes practice regime. The terminology is my shorthand so it might not always make sense. I've added some explanations and hope they are enough.

The 20%

- Be Straight (both planes i.e. tracking and Straight Line Path).
- Start slow. Be smooth. Be full. (Power application).
- Optimise Line Tension.
- Optimise Loop Shape (size and form).
- Optimise Hauls – timing, length and straightness.

Warm Up – 5 mins

String up, stretch (body), roll out line 50-60' (≈ 15 to ≈ 18 metres) Overhead and roll casts mixed up – freestyle.

Back Cast Drill – 5 mins.

Loop shape, tracking, hauling, no haul, line tension. 50' (≈ 15 m) carry slowly extended with good form.

Forward cast Drill – 5 mins.

Loop shape, tracking, hauling, no haul, line tension. 50' carry slowly extended with good form.

Dynamic Roll Drill – 5 mins.

45' casts slowly extended with good form.

Accuracy Drills – 20 mins.

Targets set at 50', 60', 70', 80', 90' ($\approx 15, 18, 20, 25, 27$ m)

Cast, Pick Up And Lay Down, cast (PUALD) moving on when 80% land within:

- 2' (0.6m) radius for 50-70' (15, 20 m)
- 3' (≈ 1 m) radius for 80', 90' (25, 27 m)
(Beyond about 70-75' ($\approx 20-23$ m) a PUALD becomes more difficult so I start to shoot line.)
- Go back and reset if 80% isn't achieved then advance again.
- Repeat the back and forward cast drills as required to get back in the groove.

Odd spot – 5 mins

Choose Spey, speciality or off shoulder casting.

A few last things. My targets are fluoro painted golf balls stuck onto 4" (≈ 10 cm) nails. [EDIT] (I now use small plastic sports marker cones.) I use my cell phone as a

timer. I rarely use a measuring tape because I can accurately lay out the course⁴ with steps made at normal walking pace.

I chose 45 minutes to keep it tight. I might spend another 15 mins for less structured stuff but that time could also serve to expand or repeat any of the other sections.

For each of first four drills I focus on the 20% incrementally instead of everything at once – it's really a question of what needs fixing or fine tuning. Don't overload the attention buffer by trying to do too many things at the same time.

So far I haven't been recording results for the accuracy casts as I have found it was enough to count the hit ratio out of 5 shots then move on or move back and then go forward again when the count is good enough – typically 80% which is 4 out of 5.

On my personal ten point scale where zero is no practice at all, practicing somewhat reluctantly, mindlessly and robotically is a one or a two. At the other end, practicing mindfully, purposefully and with a sound structure is up there around eight or nine. It gets up to a ten when I learn something surprising and meaningful.

One more very important thing. If you aren't getting lessons the next best thing is filming yourself casting. All you need is your smart phone or tablet and a tripod with a suitable clip. Uploading to the big screen of a desktop also helps. My phone and iMac are all I need and use. Why? Because there is often a big difference between what you are doing and what you think you are doing. Frame by frame review of video footage is a fantastic tool and will pick up things even the trained naked eye might not catch exactly. This assumes, of course, that you will be able to recognise the things needing work but, watching yourself cast and watching an elite caster cast will almost certainly provide a few clues – overall if not specifically.

Lastly, work and play are not polar opposites. For sure work means being there and staying on task but that rigour doesn't exclude enjoyment or play. Fun isn't forbidden fruit OK?

Practice Regime Update

Tuning up my back cast and practicing delivery off it lead to further reductions in effort on my forward cast. Those things resulted in several changes to my practice regime. I reduced the amount of time spent on accuracy practice for the forward cast to make room.

⁴ <https://thecuriousflycaster.com/2019/08/02/accurate-distances-with-no-measuring-tape/>

Minimal Effort Casting Drill

This is now how I often begin and sometimes end, a practice session. Beginning with it sets the tone and ending with it reinforces that tone as the new normal. I spend at least 5 minutes on the drill at the beginning. If things aren't going to plan I will revert to it before returning longer casting – either direction. It is a clear demonstration and reminder of just how little effort is needed.

Start with a short length of fly line out, say 5-10 feet (\approx 1.5 to 3 metres). Make gentle, short strokes both ways, while making sure the loops are kept tidy.

Reduce effort and keep reducing it until you make the cast fail – incomplete turnover. Trust me, it's not easy until you get a fair bit of line out. No hauling or shooting is allowed at this stage. Try to make slow, easy movements, finishing with soft or hard stops but soft is probably more in the mood.

Gradually, extend the cast out to medium distance or longer if you wish. That's the groove I want to stay in for most overhead (and side) casts.

As a variation and reinforcement try making PUALDs both ways – one back and one forward. Then make a single false cast in one direction before making a delivery in the other.

Extend distance and the length of the stroke but keep the same effortless, smooth and soft stop stroke. Introduce hauling when it becomes necessary to haul in order to preserve low effort casting. See how far can you go extending carry and minimising false casting as well as effort.

This is also how I often finish up, coming in shorter again and maybe sneaking out to medium distance.

Accuracy Casts in Both Directions

To reinforce the improved back casting I aim at targets and deliver off the back cast as well as the forward cast. For this exercise I add hauls and false casts back in, one at a time. When things are going well I might shoot line for the longer range targets.

Timing of Drills

When I started the new regime each drill/exercise was timed using my cell phone. These days I rarely use the phone, not because I've given up on time management but because I don't really need it now. A drill is performed and when all seems in order it is time to move on. Overall the sessions range from 45 to 60 minutes.

Purpose

The particular purpose(s) to which each session is dedicated will vary but I have resolved never to practice without at least one clear, conscious purpose. Good practice is intentional.

Practice Regime Update 2.0

For a more detailed account of why my practice regime has been updated again please see my posts on “Effort as an Organising Idea for Control”⁵ and “Fly Casting practice 2.0: Efficient Effort”⁶

My recent practice sessions have been adapted to:

- Maximise efficiency by minimising effort
- Modify my casting stroke to protect my casting shoulder – more shoulder flexion and extension instead of horizontal and vertical rotation.
- Restore accuracy after these changes and at distances out to normal fishing limits -i.e, 80’–90’ (\approx 25-27 m).
- To do this, I’ve evolved a combination of existing drills.
- Use minimal effort for full and accurate extension of the line with tight loops
- Start short – c.15’ (4.5m) – casting to targets smoothly
- Ensure loops are neat, narrow and aligned in both casting directions (tracking, tracing and SLP) and watch the dangly bits at the fly end – smooth casting means less dangly bits.
- Preserve the effort profile of that stroke as it lengthens and casts are extended in 5’-10’ (\approx 1.5 – 3 m) increments as far as possible
- As soon as it gets out of shape – loops and/or effort profile – retreat as far as necessary to restore effortless delivery.
- Repeat the process of gradually increasing casting distance rather than keep banging away at or near the point where form starts to deteriorate

Two things help me to regain form:

1. Switching to dynamic rolls which accentuate late rotation and
2. Switching to side casts which allow a full view of the stroke and fly line in both directions.

Also for longer casts, I sometimes just concentrate on carry and getting everything in order there without concern for accuracy and total distance on delivery.

5 <https://thecuriousflycaster.com/2022/06/17/fly-casting-movement-effort-as-an-organising-idea-for-control/>

6 <https://thecuriousflycaster.com/2022/06/17/fly-casting-movement-effort-as-an-organising-idea-for-control/>

Signs that form needs adjustment include casts that didn't go as far they should have or failed to extend the leader. Crucially, any sense of undue effort (breaking out of the desired effort profile) to remove slack or compensate for inadequate extension are sure signs of technique shortcomings. Time to retreat and restore technique before recommencing slow increases of distance.

Hero casts for maximum distance are absolutely forbidden because they virtually guarantee the exertion of unnecessary and therefore unwanted effort.

Practice Regime Update 3.0

I have changed **how** I practice more than **what** I practice. The principles of structured, purposeful and mindful practice are unchanged. Changes in the regime are variations on established themes.

I still practice accuracy and efficient effort and I still do it using the same basic bag of tricks including the triangle method, minimal effort drills, PUALDs, attention to back casts and attention to forward casts together with shortening up and lengthening out. Two things have been changed.

First, practice sessions have gotten shorter and I stop when I am satisfied that I have achieved my objective(s) for the session. I don't keep banging way with repetition to test the extent to which the desired changes are grooved.

- There is a point in any practice where more becomes less and we begin to do more harm than good.
- We can lose form because of mental and/or physical fatigue and fatigue has a way of messing up our grooves.
- We want to finish on a positive note which leaves our recollection connected with the affirmation of success.

Secondly, in keeping with the first point, I mix things up more and more quickly. For example:

- A few dynamic rolls casts might be followed by PUALDs at the same distance and then
- A series overheads in various planes between side casts and vertical overhead casts. Some are made with more false casting and attention to things like carry and haul execution and timing.

- Accuracy drills are no longer performed at measured distances. They are now aimed at targets like a leaf or clump of grass at significantly different distances. Once I get within a chosen proximity of the target it's time to choose another target.
- Each target is treated more as a fishing shot than as a known accuracy/distance drill to be repeated until consistency is demonstrated. Two or three attempts are usually enough.
- [Edit] One more thing. I often play with loop shapes – wider to narrower and back again while casting the same distance. Also vary the casting plane. Helps with control.

Instead of a line of golf ball targets set at 10" (≈ 25 cm) intervals between 50' (≈ 15 m) and 90' (≈ 27 m) I now use a single target reference point of 80' ($\approx 24-25$ m). I can cast at that target to check both accuracy and efficiency. I can cast in front or beyond it by five, ten or even twenty feet⁷.

Instead of using the reference line of the spaced golf balls I check my tracking by watching the loops in both directions for curvature of the fly leg and by casting between two fixed and distant points like tree trunks in a park and light poles or goal posts at sports grounds. Stopping a few back casts lets me see how they land and check for straightness and extension. Also I can walk around and cast with the wind at different angles – behind me, to the side, or head on.

Changing targets and target distances frequently means repositioning the fly line and drawing in line to shorten up (or working it out to lengthen). This provides opportunities to play with snaps and snake rolls, Speys and dynamic rolls with shoots.

Sometimes I switch to right hand casting instead of my dominant left hand casting. Switching between hands shows the right hand what to do and helps define the nature of the skill difference and the feel difference between the two sides. This is good for the left hand as well.

I now find all this variation more interesting and enjoyable than learning by block or serial repetition casting in a single plane and with a fixed orientation to the wind. My technique is (mostly) up to it, so I don't get lost and have to find my way again. And guess what? This kind of practice is much more like actual fly fishing where targets appear at different distances and bearings. Presenting a fly to them often requires speedy adaptation.

⁷ $\approx 1.5, 3, 6$ metres

None of this changes the inescapable reality that if you want to get good at something you have to do the work. practice is work but there is no reason why it can't be both productive and enjoyable at the same time – a mix of work and play if you like. Finally, I would suggest that changes I've made don't invalidate the original regime and if you are about to embark on more rigorous practice I would still suggest that you shape what you do with the 80/20 split as a guide. Spend 80% of your time on the 20% of things that are most important for your casting.

Practice Regime Update 4.0

The regime has changed again after reading and writing about Fly Casting As Movement. It's worth a look if you haven't already seen that page or the blog posts it incorporates. I've deliberately introduced more play, more variability and greater ease with, and reliance upon, trial and error. Most significantly, however, the focus has sharpened on doing more with less, on eliminating superfluous effort as the key objective and means of improvement.

I've recently gone back to having a line of targets (now plastic cones) about 10' (\approx 3m) apart and I cast to them mostly in a series – either short to long or long to short or a mix. I don't cast repetitively to each target i.e. block practice. When one target has been covered nicely and with good technique, I move on to the next. I still mix things up by choosing random targets in the line or others somewhere around me – to that tuft of grass or a leaf or whatever. All this is a better fit with my fishing.

The clock has been discarded in the sense that I no longer time practice elements or drills. If anything the sessions have become shorter overall because I stop when I've gotten what I want from one and can end on positive note.

The regime changes, now four of them, don't represent a departure from anything I wrote previously about structured and mindful practice. The principles haven't changed. What I do to implement them has changed. Indeed, the fact of repeated changes is evidence of adherence. Change supports mindfulness and promotes play and control through variation.

Most recently I've been spending a bit more time learning to cast with my non-dominant (right) hand. It's fun because it's a different learning experience – the master and the apprentice are learning from one another. It informs me about teaching as well as learning.

I still use PUALDs and cast in different planes as in the triangle method. The latest game I play is to make a series of PUALDs of increasing length, up to and including the longest casts I make. Sometimes the line is on the ground at the start of both forward and back casts. Sometimes I start from the front, make a false back cast and deliver then deliver off the next forward cast. Repeat and lengthen as desired. This offers several insights into the quality and sustainability of my technique. It focuses the mind on what is needed to optimise carry and control. It clearly demonstrates where the business end of the stroke takes place – late rotation. Finally, it allows time for cognitive input to fine tune the effort profile of each stroke. For example I want to get to the point where wrist/hand extension just happens after elbow/forearm extension – no conscious effort at all. I also want to be able to vary at will how much effort goes into wrist extension.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial – NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).