

Oval Casting

Antietam Fly Anglers Casting Rendezvous

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What is the oval cast?

- Also known as the elliptical, Belgian, Austrian, constant tension, wind cast, swing-around, and other names. Not a single cast but a style of casting.
- Take the rod back and forward in separate planes (tilt from vertical) and maintain continuous tension and curving reversal from back through forward phases in one combined stroke. The back phase is usually an off-vertical (tilted) to a near-horizontal plane rotated into a vertical or near-vertical forward stroke. The rod climbs in a curving path as it goes back then makes a U-turn spiraling to finish straight out ahead with a smooth acceleration to a stop as in any traditional cast. See the figure below.

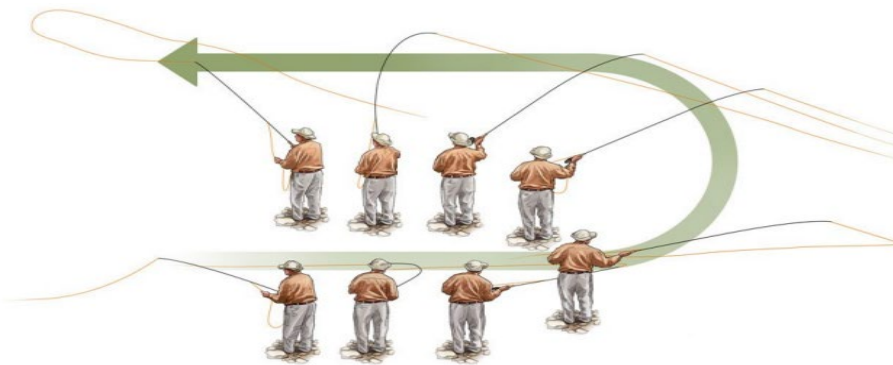


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How is it different from the traditional cast?

- Traditional overhead cast: you stop the rod at the end of the back cast and pause for the loop to unroll.
- Oval cast: you (1) take the rod back and forward in separate planes, (2) maintain continuous tension throughout the combined stroke, and (3) fuse the back and forward movements into an oval around you. It is similar in some ways to roll and spey casts but does use a water anchor and D-loop for starting the forward stroke. Can be reversed with a vertical back cast being turned around into a more horizontal forward cast to hit low targets or avoid obstacles.
- Because the planes are separated, the rod paths can be tilted out or even taken over the opposite shoulder without touching. The rod path can be shaped to meet the casting situation.
- Can easily combine oval and traditional strokes even in the same cast. Does not replace the traditional casting style but extends the conditions in which you can cast more comfortably.

Why learn it?

- Extends the conditions in which you can cast more comfortably; makes you a more versatile angler.
- Can make the cast easier and more forgiving of timing.
- Less chance of creating slack during the stroke or coming forward too early,
- Stay connected by feel as well as eye contact.
- Gives you a longer effective stroke - pulling the rod around a curve and keeping it moving smoothly with no need for a “stroke-stop-pause-stroke” sequence or repetitive false casting
- More easily to control how the loop unfolds, for example by being able to send the line under the rod tip to unroll the loop from below to avoid low-hanging limbs or to skip the fly on the water.
- Your ability to maintain contact with the line tension allows you to shape the path of the strokes to fit the available casting space. If you have an opening to the side and behind you, perhaps overhung with branches, you can pull the back cast path low and curved through the opening and around into the forward stroke to deliver. And more effective use of back cast space means the distance you can cast out front can be accomplished with a smaller linear distance behind.
- Can combine oval and traditional strokes even in a single cast, for example using an oval back cast to change directions and then a traditional false casting sequence to get the distance right for landing the fly.
- Separate planes and continuous tension let you deal with big and/or heavy rigs, wind, back cast obstructions, irregular casting positions.
- Will not confound your traditional overhead casting skills. It may improve them by:
 - Putting you more in touch with the rod/line tension. Teaching you to slow down, smooth the stroke, and stay connected – traits that serve well in navigating traditional casts
 - Giving you moves you can combine with the traditional approach.
 - Encourages a longer and fluid motion which can be therapeutic for a choppy or punchy casting style
 - Reduces the need to false cast less because you have more options for lengthening line and changing casting direction and trajectory.

Objectives for Using the Oval Cast

The oval cast is not panacea. It won't do everything, and it has some quirks of its own. You have to practice it and you have to decide what you want out of the cast and how you will adjust it to make that happen. Think of it as setting objectives for the cast. Following is a menu of objectives for which other casters have used oval casts. Focus on one or two and give them a try.

- Reduce tangles. Because sudden stops and sharp angles breed terrible tangles, the moving tension and rounded path of the oval helps avoid disaster. Because the back and forward strokes travel in different planes, you are less likely to have the fly and leader crash or wrap. Reversing from back to forward without stopping can keep the fly from swinging or kicking down at the end of the back cast.
- Reduce tailing loops. Because you don't have to abruptly start, stop, wait, restart, and speed up in each stroke, you can concentrate on a longer, smoother strokes. Even when a tailing loop happens, the separation the line planes make it less likely to tangle.
- Lower frustration with heavy flies, multiple fly rigs, split shot, and sinking lines. With the oval, there is less chance of you, or your rod being hit because one or both strokes are be tilted out in separate planes and the rigs are less likely to kick down because they are moving behind a tight line.
- More easily wrangle big buoyant flies like bass bugs and streamers. They can sap energy out of a cast and are so fickle in the wind. Maintaining continuous tension allows you to better control the line path and makes the line more responsive to the hauling motion and other line hand movements.

- Better handle the wind. The wind obeys no one, but you can better cope with it by keeping the slack stretched out and minimizing false casting. The separated planes allow you to combine a low back stroke with a climbing more vertical forward stroke to take advantage of a tailwind. Different combinations of planes can be used with head winds or with sidewinds against your casting or off-casting side.
- Deal better with back cast limitations and target obstructions. You can shape the back cast while it is in motion to avoid snags or slide in and out of tight spaces. You can direct the back cast or forward cast with an underhand stroke to make the loop unroll from below to miss overhanging trees, boat docks, or skip flies under obstructions.
- Expand options for changing casting directions. You can scoop back the oval back and around into the forward delivery to the left or the right of you. Likewise, from a pick-up point on one side, you can bring the line around to head straight out from you in the front.
- Improve slack-line presentation casts. Putting slack in the delivery (aerial mending) to let the fly drift freely or purposely curving the forward stroke to the right, left, or to tuck it straight down requires an elevated forward stroke to give you time to create these gyrations. You can use a spiral climb of the basic oval cast to set up for these maneuvers.
- Help beginning casters. The oval cast is good for helping new fly casters get the feeling of the rod as it bends under line pressure and unbends to launch the loop.
- Have more fun casting. The tactile feedback of staying connected are parts of our natural attraction to fly casting. It makes each cast seem a little more personal, a little less mechanical. Oval is like writing in cursive.

How to Make an Oval Cast

Warm-up to learn basic movements and develop sensitivity to the line under tension.

- Hold a rod with 10 feet or less of line outside the rod tip. Better yet, use 5 feet and the rod tip only. Or an indoor practice rod.
- Move the rod in circles in front of you. Never lose the tension. Remember: "If it ain't tight, it ain't right."
- Watch the connection between the rod tip and the line. Concentrate on what it feels like when the rod bends and the line tightens to follow it. Make bigger circles, then smaller ones, slow circles then faster ones, clockwise then counterclockwise. Now move the rod in circles back and forward in different planes - vertical, tilted right or left, diagonally over the opposite shoulder, in a figure eight, and back and forth.
- Now speed up the line and feel how the pressure in your hand increases.
 - Notice how much easier it is to feel the tension when you use your whole arm with very little bending of your wrist. You can easily lose the subtle pressure if you break or flop the wrist too much.
 - Note too how the feeling goes away when you make jerky movements. Put smoothness before speed.
- Stretch the circle into an oval shape, aimed back and front as in a cast. Do not stop the rod, even though your traditional stroke's muscle memory may prompt you to do so. Note that the fly line stays tight and telegraphs pressure all around the "racetrack" path. Close your eyes and keep moving.
- Create another oval and this time make snappy quarter circles with limited twists of your wrist at the opposite ends of the oval.
- Now stop the rod crisply. Feel the rod unload and launch the loop in the direction the tip was pointed. You just made an oval cast. Congrats!

Step-by-Step

These directions are for a right-handed caster. Do the following sequence with the rod hand only. Put the other hand to your side or in your pocket. You will add the line hand into the cast after your rod hand gets comfortable

with the movement. Visualize the cast you are about to make as pulling the rod in a smooth sweep up one rung of a spiral staircase, with the line following horizontally then up around the step rising toward the next rung out to the target. This basic oval allows you to start the back phase low but spiral it into a high trajectory forward phase to catch the wind or to stop the rod high enough to reposition slack on the water as you lower the rod tip. Maneuvers like these would be more difficult with distinct (back and forward) strokes separated by a pause.

1. Start with your rod tip straight out in front of you with the tip low and the line on the grass or water with all slack removed.
2. Take on open stance, with the left foot (non-casting hand side) forward. This stance will give you more casting space in which to use your rod hand to make a complete oval around and back of you.
3. Grip the rod with the thumb or index finger on top and then rotate your wrist outward about a quarter turn (90 degrees), turning the guides inward and reel flat in front of you. (Note: you are not making the cast with the wrist but with the whole arm. The wrist is partially rotated here so it can help you turn the cast around in step 6.)
4. Keeping the elbow of the rod arm close to the body, lift the line slowly and smoothly off the water. Imagine that you are levitating it rather than pulling it back to you.
5. When the line is free of the water, sweep the rod back, accelerating slowly and keeping the thumb in a “hitch-hiker” position starting from a horizontal plane (wrist still rotated out) but immediately shifting to a climbing, curved path that creates in a large high circle beside and behind you. The line climbs as it follows the rod tip and will probably pass under it as the rod curves back and around to complete the circle behind you. Keep the back stroke moving to avoid losing any of the stretch in the line and the pressure you feel through your hand and forearm. Do not stop or jerk the rod which will show up as wiggles or waves in the line.
6. As the loop, line and leader start to unroll as you reach the end of the circle, raise your hand and turn your wrist in an inward “C” to bring the rod back to face straight to the target in a vertical “thumbs-up” position. This has reversed the rod to be pointing forward now, still climbing, and straight.
7. Smoothly accelerate the rod and then stop it in the direction of the target - just as you would in a traditional forward cast – to form the loop.
8. Lower the rod tip back to the water by following the line down after the loop has completely unrolled.

Notes and Variations

- The rounded reversal (U-turn) is a continuous movement which can be made narrower with less separation of planes, by accelerating and tightening the turn during the wrist rotation.
- You may have to slow (not stop) to negotiate the turn, but you will recover speed quickly as you realign with the target, as long as you don't lose line tension. Your traditional forward stroke muscle memory takes over and finishes the delivery.
- From a bird's eye view, the oval cast creates a tear-drop shaped pattern. This can be narrowed or widened by rotating your wrist less – or more - in the set up for the cast and/or tightening or extending your casting arm away from the body, respectively. You will learn to vary tilt of the turn to set up for a lower or higher forward path.
- The forward stroke does not have to travel straight out in front of you. You may want to reach a target out and across from you, left or right, upstream or down. You can create an oval that travels from your casting side over your head to the left of you, changing directions in one movement rather than a series of false casts. Or you can bring the back stroke from the left of you over your off-side shoulder to come forward on your casting side for the delivery stroke. Lots of possibilities.
- Because you are staying connected to the line in motion, you can extend your arm both back and forward at the end of the stroke and still feel the rod and line. This “follow through” (in front) and “drift” (in back) are done in traditional casting strokes to give the caster more room to execute the opposite stroke and to avoid tailing loops

and tangles in throwing long distances and/or big flies. This lengthening of the rod tip travel is important in compensating for how much the rod bending under the weight of line and stubbornly heavy rig. These extensions can be made smoothly and precisely with the oval cast.

Bringing in the line hand

Integrating the line hand can be a little tricky. You can use the line hand to help keep continuous tension, but not if you yank, release, or drop the line randomly. You must move the line hand in concert with the rod hand, feeling the line and making sure that both hands send the same signals to the rod tip. With a little practice, your two hands will learn to flow together, and you will be making smooth, curving loops and U-turns.

Hauling – pulling with the line hand during a stroke to speed up the line- is just as useful in the oval cast as it is with the traditional cast. It not only increases line speed but can also stabilize and smooth the tension to create a graceful and sleek oval path. You can haul on both the back and forward phases, but your line hand must maintain continuous contact with the line, especially as it comes into and around the U-turn.

The steadiness and timing of pulling and feeding the line back through the guides are important. As in traditional casting, the line and rod hand must move together to create long smooth pulls. Short, bouncing, or jerking pulls destroy the smoothness you are trying to achieve, leaving shock waves and wiggles.

Get the feel of oval rod-hand movement before trying the haul. Then introduce single hauls slowly into the back and forward strokes with the rod in the sidearm plane so you can watch and feel the effect of your line hand. Feel how the hauling increases the tension in the rod and how the rod tries to unbend as soon as you slow it down or stop it.

Practice the timing of the pull and the follow back, learning to avoid jerky movements that interfere with the turning movement. Try to keep your line hand connected through the entire cast through the “O” ring and pinch grip with thumb against forefinger, like the “OK” hand gesture.

Watchouts and Common Problems

- The oval cast is not a license for your wrist to run free. The shoulder, elbow, wrist, and hand must be educated and synchronized to lead the rod and line through a prescribed path. Avoid flips, flops, wiggles, or sudden gyrations.
- The oval path is best performed using little wrist movement through most of the stroke. Hinging the wrist breaks the sensitivity with the rod and line. Even in the U-turn, make only a limited and deliberate rotation to help flow through the turnaround. Maintain a close, solid connection to your body as a stabilizer with controlled motion by the shoulder and elbow joints. No outstretched arms or wild disco movements with the body. Sleek is what you seek.
- The term continuous (without a break) tension does not mean keeping the same tension throughout the stroke. As is all casting, have to smoothly speed up to keep the rod bending and then rapidly decelerate (or stop) to launch the rolling face of the loop from the rod tip.
- The oval cast does not free you from timing discipline. You are finishing the backcast phase, turning, and setting up the forward stroke in a second. Creeping forward too early out of the back cast shortens the effective (rod-bending) length of the stroke – traditional or oval style.
- You may experience awkward moments in your transition to ovals. You will probably rush it at first or squeeze your hand or snap your wrist and they tics will show up immediately in the line and the momentary loss of tension. Learn to trust your tactile senses let your eyes, hands, and fingers work as a team.
- Alignment (tracking) and accuracy issues can arise if you lose your orientation to the target as you turn and watch the back loop circling. Establish eye contact solidly with the target as you lift the line off the water to make it easier to find that groove again as the back phase of the stroke comes around.
- Not bringing the back cast loop far enough around before the reversal and/or not making a complete U-turn will send the forward cast in an unwanted diagonal in front of you left of the target. If the back cast or the U-turn rotates too far, an opposite diagonal takes the fly to the right of the target. Avoid or correct these issues by

practicing along a straight line on the grass. You will quickly learn to minimize unnecessarily wide or incomplete ovals and to position the U-turn to merge into the forward groove straight to the target.

- Oval casts may be less energy-efficient than traditional casts for the same reasons that big overhead casting loops don't travel as efficiently as narrow loops. Conserve energy with these tips:
 - Reduce the width of the separation
 - Use only as much line as you need
 - Keep the stroke close to the body, and
 - Use the haul to speed up the line and help tighten the loop.
- Oval casts can twist the line and, in some cases, loosen the ferrules, especially on multi-piece rods. You might have to check for these issues regularly.

Summary - Tips for making ovals work better

- Be a smooth operator. Combine the open stance – left foot forward - with a gentle, limited twisting or rocking of the body to keep the oval flowing smoothly and extending your stroke.
- Keep the casting movement close to your body to reinforce the smoothness and channel the reversal (U-turn). The oval path must be as precise and economical as the traditional casting stroke. No erratic hand and wrist jibe or outstretched arms.
- Don't overdo the turning motion. As on a real racetrack, you can under- or over-steer the turns and spin out if you don't synchronize the wheel and the accelerator. Make very restricted rotary movements with the wrist – a quarter turn at most to help the back cast turn around into the more vertical plane of the forward phase.
- Watch the back cast loop to make sure things get lined up for the reversal. You will feel the difference as the sideways pressure on the tip shifts into a pull from the back. Then start forward.
- A turnaround too early will set up the forward stroke to take a diagonal path to the left of your target. A late turnaround will head the forward stroke diagonally to the right. Make the turnaround (U-turn) end right where you want to start forward, straight back from the target with thumb up, sighting the target.

Resources for Learning to Make and Use the Oval Cast

- [Pete Kutzer – Orvis – How to Make a Belgian Cast](#)
- [Gunnar Brammer – Fly Casting Blog – Belgium Cast, Stopping the Rod, Using Your Wrist](#)
- [Tim Rajeff - Heavy Fly Casting](#)
- [David Ebanks – Review of the DVD “Taming the Wind” by Prescott Smith](#)

Other resources

- Gary Borger, 1995: Presentation. pp 217-218. Elliptical Casts
- Mac Brown, 1997: Casting Angles. pp 164-169. Elliptical Style Casting
- Mel Kreiger, 1987: The Essence of Flycasting. pp 104-107
The Belgian Cast (great photo sequence)
- [Lefty Kreh & Ed Jaworowski. Smooth Operators of the Complete Cast. Fly Fisherman Magazine. February/March 2016](#)
- [Joe Mahler – Tips for Effectively Casting in the Wind](#)
- A.J. McClane. 1953. The Practical Fly Fisherman. pp 158-174. How to Cast Beyond Sixty Feet

- Joan Wulff, 1987: Joan Wulff's Fly Casting Techniques. pp 129-136. Curving Power Snaps

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