

Slack is Evil

By Beth Jappay

“Slack is Evil”.

This truism was cited in each of the past 2 weeks of my casting classes. Not only is slack a problem with fly casting, it is also a big problem in fly fishing, or more specifically in “catching” fish.

A few years ago my buddy Carmen and I were fishing the salmonfly hatch on the Rogue with our guide and friend Pete Peterson.



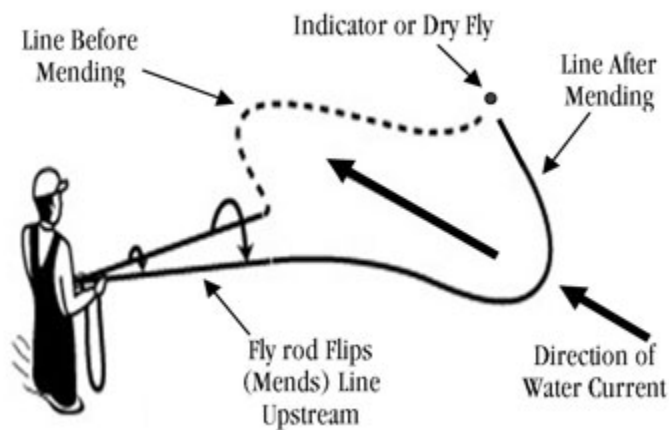
Carmen is a decent caster, we were using the same fly, and Pete was positioning the boat so well that she could reach the best-looking water almost as well as I could. Yet I noticed that I was hooking up about three times the fish that she was. Paying close attention I noticed that I was much more actively managing my line than she was. Though we were drifting in the river, the flies were not traveling the same speed as the boat. I was constantly adjusting the line --mending, stripping line in, letting line out, so that I avoided “drag” on the fly, kept slack out of the line and maintained a good connection to the fly. I noticed that Carmen was...not. What often differentiates the advanced from the intermediate fly fisherman is line-handling skills.

There is a good reason that “tight lines” is a common salutation between fly fishermen. Bait fishermen don’t need to worry about keeping in contact with the hook: the fish swallow it and hook themselves. Gear fishermen don’t have any slack when they are retrieving their lures. In contrast the fly fisherman is trying to fool the fish into thinking the fly is a source of calories; the fish will quickly figure out that what it took into its mouth is not food and will spit out the fly. Hence the need to “set the hook”, which will not occur until the lifting of the rod has straightened

the line, removing any slack. Maintaining contact with the fly is one of the more important skills to be successful when fly fishing.

One of the reasons Euro Nymphing is such a successful method of fishing is that, if done correctly, there is inherently no slack in the set up. Lake fishing with a full-sinking line is another situation where there shouldn't be any slack.

When fishing with a current or strong wind dry flies, indicators, and floating fly line will develop a belly in the line from a sideways wind or current. This needs to be corrected with a mend:



When indicator fishing it is even more important to avoid the development of a belly in the line. There is already a “hinge”, which is the perpendicular angle made between the floating line and the leader dropping into the water. A hook set is only going to be successful after the lift of the rod has straightened the line, removing the hinge. If you add in a line belly or slack caused by wind or current, the chances of a successful hookup drop considerably. If a belly develops in a line on the water, a mend should be done to straighten the line again, and the experienced fly fisherman is constantly mending his or her line. It takes skill to mend the line without moving the fly or indicator. I remember a couple of years ago when I was fishing on the Mckenzie with a guide and he had me fish a back eddy while he rowed to keep the boat in place. I moved the dry fly back up the eddy by mending every couple of seconds, and picked up 3 nice cutthroat in that spot.

With indicator fishing however, often the indicator is deliberately moved upstream during the mend in order to keep the faster-moving indicator from dragging the slower-moving and deeper fly forward and up.

Success is more likely if the cast is adjusted to **prevent** the development of slack. For example, if the current is flowing or the wind is blowing right to left, the cast should be completed with a reach mend to the right.

Fig. a

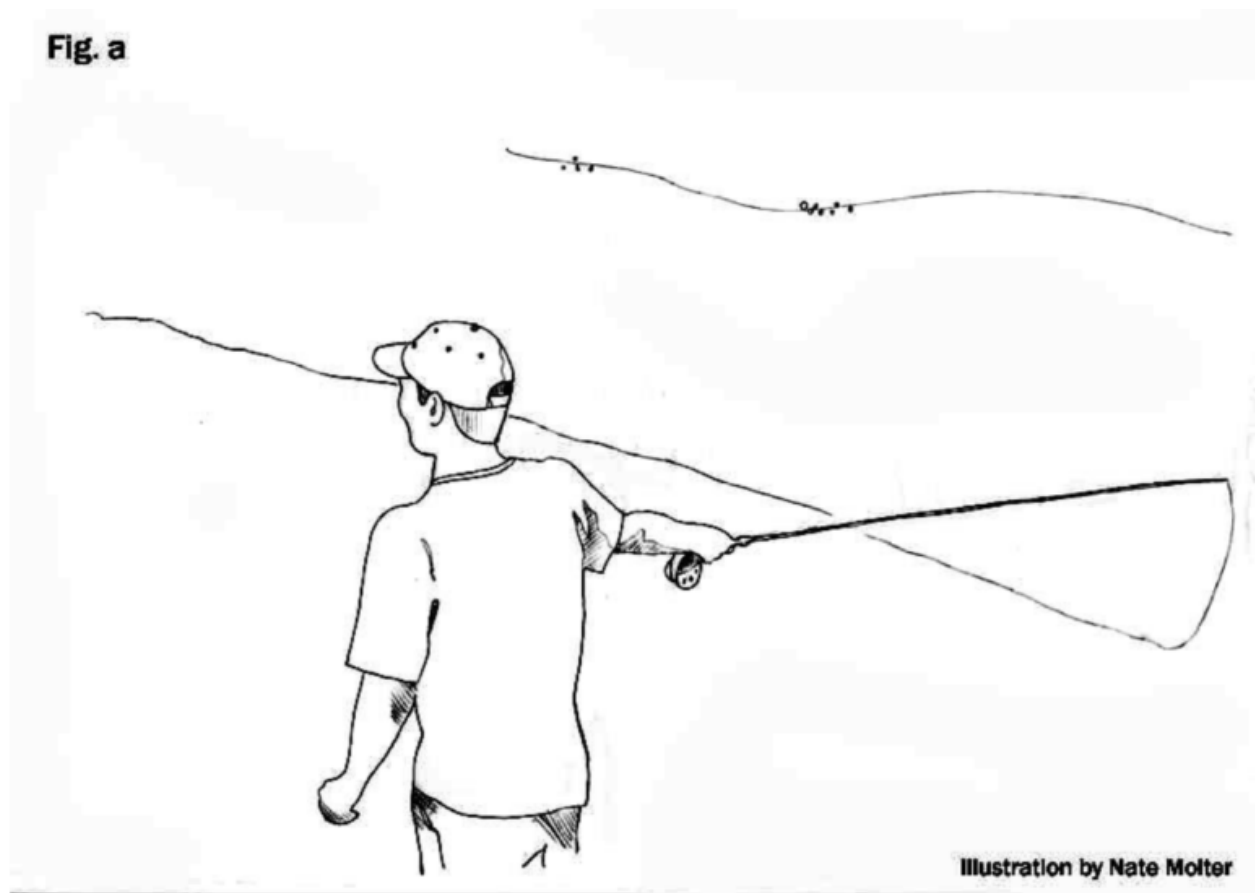
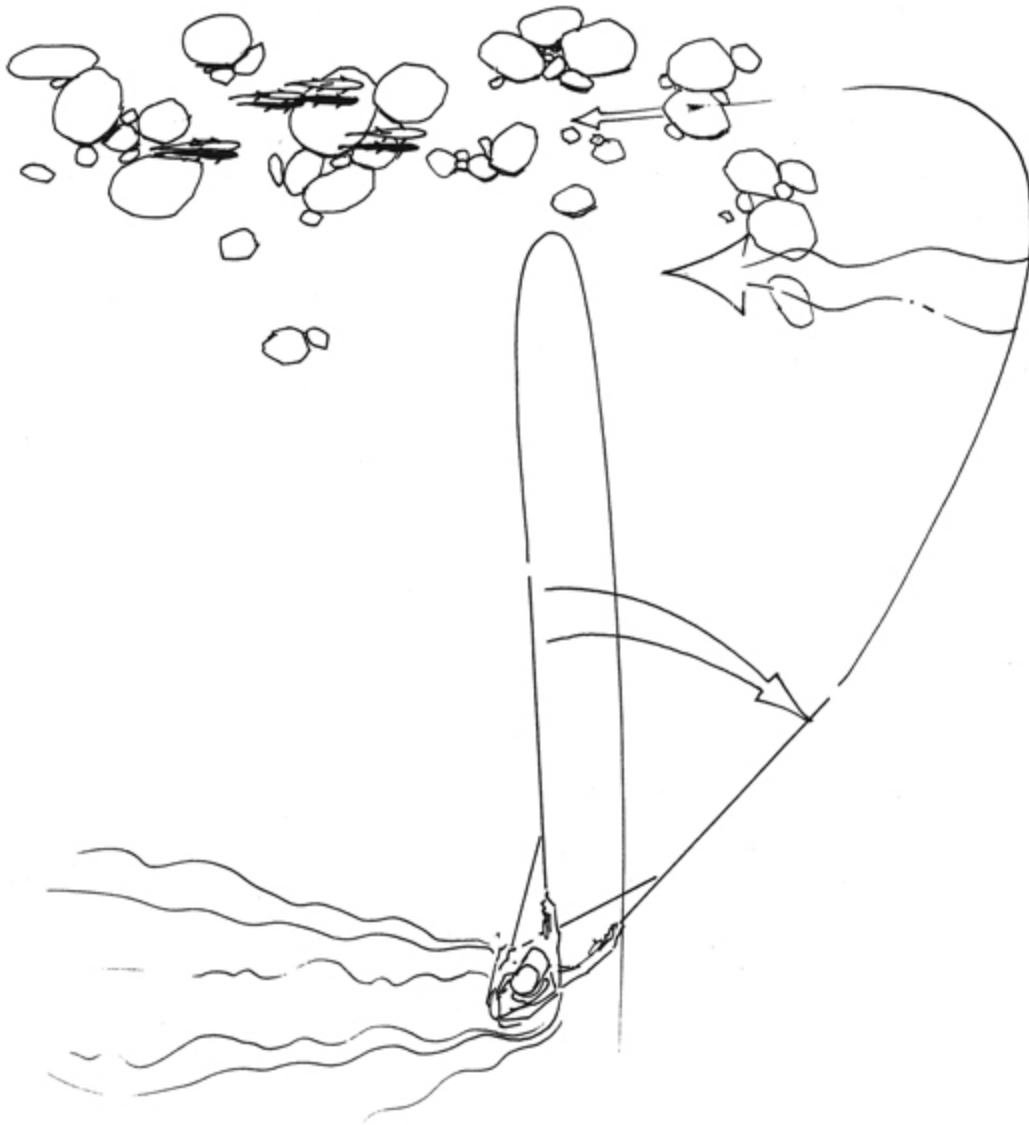


Illustration by Nate Molter



There are even more advanced casts that can be used for certain situations, such as using a hump cast when casting to the other side of a seam.

Fig. c



Casting to fish directly upstream or directly downstream requires different adjustments. When casting upstream, either the rod needs to be lifted or the line needs to be stripped back in as the fly moves closer, so that the slack is removed. As the fly moves back downstream, line needs to be let out or the rod tip needs to be lowered to maintain contact with the fly as it moves away. Here is a [link](#) to a great YouTube video by Mary Ann Dozer that demonstrates these line handling skills.

In addition to keeping a tight line, line handling skills also involve planning ahead to avoid developing knots in the line. Since a hung-up line can result in losing a fish that makes a run, a good habit to get in is to constantly check loose line after casting or while stripping for knots. With enough practice this can become automatic. In addition keep in mind that knots happen more often with a line that has a lot of “memory”, meaning that it tends to curl up when it is taken off of the reel. It is well worth the time to stretch out this type of line when you are first taking it off of the reel, prior to fishing.

Shooting line while casting has its own sets of problems, since if there are any knots in the line it will hang up in the guides. When casting from a deck, stripping basket, or stripping apron it is important to first cast the full line out onto the water, and then strip it back onto the deck, so that the first line to head out the guide is on the top of the pile and the last line to go through the guides is on the bottom of the pile.

Shooting line when standing in water with a current requires a different solution. Loose fly line on the water will be dragged away, creating too much resistance to shoot line effectively. In that

situation it is best to gather loops of line into the non-dominant hand, to be released when shooting the line.



There are a few different ways of doing this, and this is my favorite [video](#) describing some of those techniques.

Ready to take your fly fishing to the next level? Consider whether working on line-handling skills should be your next priority.