

Reels to Balance One-handed Bamboo Rods

Balancing a single-handed rod with a reel poses more challenges in the form of trade-offs than does balancing a two-handed rod (see my article on this topic in Shop Talk). Even more so than with a two-handed rod, characteristics of the angler come into play when balancing a single-handed rod with a reel. The primary characteristics that create nuances in balancing a single-handed outfit concern an angler's casting style, fishing style and preferences, physical strength, sense of timing and coordination, and duration of time continuously casting and fishing. You'll be able to add others as you search for the optimal balance for yourself. In two-handed casting, you anchor the bottom of the rod with your underhand, an important factor in differentiating between balancing an outfit for two-handed casting and for one-handed casting.

You can tell if you have an optimal balance by the level of soreness and fatigue after a prolonged period of fishing -- say a day of continuous fishing -- as long as your casting mechanics are good enough (B rather than A suffices) and your strength can handle whatever weight of rod, reel, and line you're using. Some of the pains relate mostly to the upper and middle back and to upper arms (rotator cuffs), though I've known people that have suffered from lower back issues, all related to the interactions of the weight distribution of their equipment and how they used it. You may never be completely pain- and fatigue-free; paying attention to the distribution of weight across your equipment rather than focusing solely on the absolute weight can foster improvements over time.

My Personal Woes!

Upper and middle back pain, sometimes debilitating, were a serious limiting factor for my enjoyment of fly fishing for almost 40 years. A shop owner in Michigan made a serious, and somewhat humorous, attempt to inform me about weight distribution between rod and reel and its effects on casting, but I didn't believe him. Rather, I interpreted his spiel as a ham-handed way of trying to sell me a new, heavier reel. I spent another 30 years in frustrating physical pain in my upper and middle backs, which would become extremely tight after a few hours of fishing. The pain made sleeping difficult and any relaxation impossible. As I think back on those years now, many of my fishing friends and acquaintances suffered similar issues.

What we shared was a quest for lightness and a method of fishing. We were always looking for the longest rod and the lightest reel. Our shared method of fishing involved "rambling" with nymphs for steelhead in streams and rivers on Michigan's west coast. We didn't call it rambling; it was "deep-water nymphing." Long rods, lead on the leader, and lightweight reels resulted in a weight distribution that strained muscles during casting. The technique requires a high rod tip; elevating the rod tip with a light weight reel below the hand also strains the muscles up the arm and through to the back. We were convinced that the solution to our pain lay in absolute lightness rather than in weight distribution, so it never occurred to us then to try a heavier reel to counterbalance the weight at the tip of the long rod.

The Basic Tradeoff

Most fly-fishing techniques require an elevated rod tip. Dry-fly fishing (and its variants, Skues and Sawyer style upstream nymphing) and wet fly swinging use an elevated tip to control line and the path of the fly. Fly rods are also used for rambling (tumbling nymphs, glo-bugs, worms, and other baits along the bottom with weight on the leader -- Euro-nymphing) and trotting (placing flies and weight beneath a float, bobber, or other floating strike indicator). These techniques, too, require an elevated rod tip -- "high-sticking." The only technique with a lowered rod tip is stripping. You might also lower the rod tip to increase the speed of a swinging fly for Atlantic salmon, but rarely for any other species. A reel heavy enough to counterbalance the elevated tip will reduce muscle strain.

The other side of the tradeoff involves casting. Unlike two-handed casting, single-handed fly casting does not stabilize and counterbalance the tip with the under hand on the butt of the rod. A reel of adequate weight to counterbalance the tip of a long fly rod (rods under 7 ½ feet are more forgiving) is likely too heavy for most to cast comfortably using the casting technique of their choice, unless they are quite strong. I recall the tournament casters from my youth: many preferred to use no reel on their fly rods for distance events. They couldn't fish all day with no reel, because holding the tip up would have been very fatiguing without a counter balance. They were satisfied that their loop control was better without a reel. They all gripped the rod with their thumb on top of the rod handle, which in itself requires more strength to control the rod than other grips. They were all quite strong in the hands, wrists, and arms.

So, the basic tradeoff in one-handed casting involves the mismatch between fishing and casting in terms of weight distribution requirement. Most anglers are strong enough to manage this mismatch with short rods. The longer and heavier the rod and the more highly elevated the rod tip while fishing demands more attention to the weight distribution for all-day comfort.

Grips

Most fly-casting instructors advocate the thumb-on-top grip, using a push of the thumb to initiate "the power snap." Watch almost anyone demonstrating at a show or read almost any of the gurus' books. Most of us were initially taught to hold a fly rod in this way and have become very accustomed to doing so. Holding it differently feels odd. We've also practiced extensively gripping the rod with the thumb on top, so holding the rod differently is annoying. A reel heavy enough to counterbalance the rod tip while fishing puts more strain on the wrist muscles, up the arm and over the shoulder to the upper and then middle back areas. If the reel is light enough to cast comfortably with this grip, then the effort expended to maintain an elevated rod tip affects the same muscular areas in the same way.

I once had a customer, a very good angler with whom it was a pleasure to spend time on a river. He loved to fish bamboo rods and experienced little or no discomfort with bamboo rods under 7 ½ feet for a 5-weight. It was torture for him to use a larger bamboo rod because his

strength was inadequate to manage the muscle strain inevitable with how he gripped, casted, and fished the rod with his reel.

In my tournament casting youth, my best events were the revolving spool accuracy events. Most of my fishing then focused on lures, spoons, spinners, and spinning minnows for pike, bass, musky, and walleye near our lake place in northern Minnesota. I cast a lot with that rig. Casting right handed, with a right-hand wind reel, we were taught to turn our wrist so the handles faced up when casting. The loading axis of the rod was in the crook of the hand between the thumb and forefinger, 90 degrees from the thumb. The thumb was not on top of the rod when we cast, but on the inside relative to the reel. Such a grip naturally locks your wrist so you cannot bring it back too far when casting. Nor do you need muscle strength to stop your wrist from cocking too much and to start to unload the rod. Any decent rod will unload itself if you've stopped its movement properly.

I cast a fly rod the same way. Over a long day's fishing, I find it far less fatiguing. I'm not advocating that you adopt an alternative grip. There are other solutions. Charles Ritz developed and practiced hand, wrist, and arm exercises with wine bottles. Increasing your strength and evening out your timing can also mitigate some of the propensity to overstrain underused and undersized muscles!

Casting Without a Reel

Almost all fly anglers have noticed line-hop when casting, that small disparity, usually 3 - 6 inches, in the level of the line in the bottom leg of the loop. Often, speeding up the line with a haul or loading more deeply into the rod can remove some or all of the hop. I am aware of two basic causes of line hop. One results from the taper of the rod. The other results from the slight bounce on the butt of the rod from reel mass reverberating upwards. They can function in tandem or somewhat independently. It can be more vexsome in a hollow rod than in a solid rod.

If you can eliminate some of the line hop by moving your hand up the blank when casting, then it's likely a taper problem. Moving your hand away from the reel would increase the reel bounce effect if that were the source. If you can eliminate some of the line hop by moving your hand down onto the top of the reel seat, then it's likely that reel bounce is causing the problem. Graphite rod designers and bamboo rod makers try their best to eliminate the possibility of line hop due to taper, but they cannot foresee the idiosyncrasies of all individual casters, especially in how smoothly they load and unload the rod, a matter of timing and coordination.

In any case, eliminating as much of the line hop as possible will increase distance. An effective way to manage line hop, to the extent it might be manageable, involves moving your grip as close to the reel as possible, so the sole of your hand is on the reel seat.

Experiment!

When it comes to balancing rod and reel in single-handed casting, it pays to experiment with different reels on the same rod. Lighter weight rods, both bamboo and plastic, will accommodate a range of different reel weights. Longer, and heavier weight rods need a little more care. For me, paying close attention to rod and reel balance begins with 8 ½ foot, 6-weight rods. My choice of reels for smaller rods reflects my tastes and sense of aesthetics more than anything else. For the longer, heavier line weight rods, I pay more attention to trying to match it with a reel that balances with my hand where I like to hold the rod while fishing. I'm always a little surprised how heavy such a reel must be!