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Mending Your Ways - part 2

As discussed in the last article, mending is the repositioning of fly line on the water to allow control over the effects of drag on the fly. Most commonly, mending is used to counter faster currents which form a belly in the line. Mending is used to create a "mirror image" belly in the line to control the effects of drag.

Mending Technique

Creating the desired curve in the line is accomplished by lifting the line off the water with the rod tip and (at least for short mends) rolling the wrist in the direction of the intended mend. One of the keys to a proper mend is to lift the line with the rod tip before moving it laterally. A sideways move that does not lift line off the water will eliminate all slack, produce immediate drag, and draw the fly out of the fish's feeding lane. (In fact, this is a useful striking technique when the angler has a lot of line on the water.) This lifting motion should preserve slack in the cast, so that the slack can be repositioned, rather than eliminated. It also allows the line to break the surface tension of the water, making it easier to move.

This common semicircular wrist motion will produce a wide, sweeping motion in the rod tip, and the following line will create a wide belly when the mend is made. It may be helpful to recognize mending as a modified form of casting, in which a loop of line is directed to a target. The common mending motion is much like the wide open stroke of a beginning caster, and the resulting shape in the line works fine at short range, where the length of the rod and the caster's arm is sufficient to flop the line into position. Remember, however, that if the mend is being made right under the rod tip, the angler may be better off to approach the fish a bit closer and get in a position to reach across the problem current with the rod tip, so that mending may be unnecessary. A longer rod can be a big help in this situation.

If the mend needs to be positioned farther away from the caster, a different motion is needed. As Swisher and Richards point out in Fly Fishing Strategy, one option is to make a larger mend by forming a larger arc with the rod tip. This can be accomplished by raising the casting arm before rolling the wrist and hand over to form the mend. This exaggerated arc tends to create a larger—but very wide—belly in the line when the mend is made.

A better approach for longer mends is to form a true casting loop in the line. After the initial lift is made, and the line is climbing away from the water's surface, the rod tip should be driven parallel to the water in a line toward the mending target. As with roll casting and overhead casting, the smaller leading edge of the resulting elliptically-shaped loop is more efficient in achieving long distances and in fighting the effects of wind. With practice, the caster can "kick" the mend to varying distances, allowing the

mend to be placed on specific lines of current, even those a long distance from the caster. This is especially useful when deep water or strong currents precludes a close approach to the fish, a common situation on large Western rivers.

Stack mending is the technique of introducing additional slack to a presentation, "stacking" this extra slack on a single line of current. The common applications of this mending technique are on downstream angles. A downstream stack mend is sometimes called feeding or "shaking" line, as slack line is shaken through the guides onto the current line with a flip of the rod tip. When the cast is angled straight downstream (or nearly so), the tip is flipped vertically, so that the additional slack is deposited on the current directly beneath the rod tip.

This technique reaches its ultimate expression on California's Fall River. On this large spring creek, wading is limited because of restricted access and deep undercut banks, so the standard technique is to fish from small prams, anchoring above pods of feeding fish, and presenting the fly almost straight downstream. This allows for very long drifts, but the angler should recognize that a point of diminishing returns is reached when the fly gets too far downstream. You may be able to shake the whole fly line through the guides, but once the fly gets too far away, seeing the rise and reacting quickly enough to strike the fish can be difficult.

If the angle of presentation is not straight downstream, the tip is driven horizontally, so that the line can be moved onto a current line to the side of the caster. As with mending a fixed amount of line, stack mends can be made with a simple roll of the wrist and hand, or by loading the rod and "kicking" a horizontal loop to longer distances. It takes practice to develop the feel to create enough tension to move the line yet introduce slack at the end of the move, but this advanced mending technique will produce good drifts in very difficult situations.

The keys to stack mending are to have all of the needed line stripped off the reel before starting to shake the line through the guides (rather than trying strip it off the reel as the stack mends are made) and to shake out a foot or two of slack line at a time. Trying to feed line at a continuous rate, rather than flipping it out a chunk at a time, almost always creates enough tension in the line/leader/fly system to produce drag. As discussed in the last article, it is critical to make a slack line presentation and then start the mending process before drag starts to set in.

In the next installment in this series, I will discuss some common problems in mending, and offer solutions to these problems. I will also make suggestions for practice to improve mending technique.