

Stay Within Yourself

I'm a baseball fan, and I recently read an interesting story about the great Hall Of Fame relief pitcher Lee Smith. As Smith was walking out of the bullpen on his way to another late inning appearance to seal a win for his team, a young boy shouted something to him from the stands. "Stay within yourself, Lee," the kid called. Smith glanced up at the boy for a second or two, thoughtfully, and then turned and headed for the pitcher's mound.

"How wise for someone so young," the relief pitcher probably thought. What the boy shouted was related to pitching technique, it was a reminder for the major leaguer to stay within the mechanics of his technique. A good pitcher knows that if he performs within the parameters of his usual technique he'll deliver the ball where he wants to, in the way he wants to. If he pushes himself physically, all will quickly fall apart - the windup, the release, the timing, and ultimately the game.

The same is true for fly casting.

Many fly fishers can make fairly decent casts when they're practicing, but when they go fishing their skill level drops at least a few notches, especially in anxious moments. When these anglers see a school of blitzing bluefish churning the water red just at the limit of their casting range, some "can't miss" cover along the drift where a big trout is likely hiding, or some tarpon, bonefish, or redfish cruising along the flats, their casting technique collapses. The tight looping Dr. Jekyll becomes the frenzied Mr. Hyde. Watching the angler cast, you'd think he was trying to beat out a brush fire with a broom. Trying to cast a large fly can also cause this regressive behavior. Or an angler might concentrate solely on

the fishing and forget everything he learned in practice sessions. But what's the cure?

Like a relief pitcher in baseball, a fly fisher's control over his delivery comes down to his ability - or more accurately, to how he uses his ability. When fishing many anglers simply try too hard, especially in high pressure situations such as sight fishing. They push too much, and their casting falls apart. This is when you must stay within yourself, within the mechanics of your technique. You must regulate your physical ability to perform. You must have discipline.

When you push, your muscles tighten and don't move freely. The result is a slippage in technique, which can manifest itself in many ways - an open casting loop, bad timing, or limited extension of the casting hand, to name just three faults. Bad casting leads to frustration, and to even tighter muscles. Frustration leads to disgust. Pretty soon, you start wondering why you bother fishing at all!

Relax; simply relax. Don't try to do more than you can. Perform as you can perform: stay within yourself. When a big bonefish swims in front of you, say "relax" to yourself before you cast. When porpoising False Albacore get within range, say "relax." If you want to make a long cast, do the same - first say "relax." It might sound simplistic, but it works. Whenever you face a situation in which you you might tighten up, you'll find that your technique - and the resulting presentation - will be improved by repeating this simple mantra.

There is an exception, a time to push your cast when you're on the water: When you're trying to gain distance and accuracy. It's a method I teach my students. After all, the only way to cast farther or more accurately is to try. Just don't try too much at once. Push

only by degrees, and stay in a relaxed frame of mind. Otherwise you'll probably end up tangled in fly line as a result of failed technique.

Here are some helpful exercises you can use to improve your casting without pushing yourself too much. If you want to learn to cast large flies, tie one on and cast it for a short while. Experience how the cast feels. Try to improve the distance of each cast. Then clip off the fly and go back to something more comfortable. Do the same thing the next day, and the next. Gradually you'll get used to casting a large fly.

Are you having a hard time casting beyond 70 feet? Try casting that distance for awhile. Then go back to fishing within your normal distance. Push your threshold for a short time, and switch back to casting and fishing within your ability. Do this every fishing day. You'll improve, maybe in increments, but you'll definitely improve. Plus, you'll have more fun and probably catch more fish. When you make a personal breakthrough, it will become the norm. You'll have expanded the range of your mechanics, and you'll be a more proficient caster for it.

Remember, you can sometimes improve your technique while fishing, but you'll make more marked improvements at a steadier rate during practice sessions. In other words, do most of the work on your technique away from the fish.

If we relax, and try not to overdo, and try to improve only to a prudent degree while fishing, we'll spend less time in a debilitating state of frustration, and more time in that blissful state we're all trying to reach with this pastime anyhow. Just stay within yourself.

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