



CHAPTER 8

A Personal Small Stream Approach

“Fly fishing reflects the values of its practitioner and this remains the essential issue. Essentially, how do you want to catch a fish. Do you prize artistry or results? You learn about yourself over time and you become more patient or less, more discerning, or less.”

David Coggins *‘The Optimist – A Case for the Fly Fishing Life’* (Scribner, 2021)

What I wanted from the trout streams near Cape Town was to maximize my contentment and minimise the risk.

Tom Sutcliffe, the doyen of South African fly angling authors points out that these streams favour a specific approach:

“You search the runs and holding spots with short casts, concentrating on the water right ahead and to the sides of you, avoiding long casts wherever possible. In fact, the thing that most astounds visitors is how ‘short’ we fish on Cape streams.

It’s a technique that relies on covering holding water with quick, well-placed drifts, avoiding drag and watching for any sign of a take like a hawk.

In a sense it’s almost a form of ‘abbreviated’ fly-fishing, in that it’s close in, the drifts are short and quick and you’re doing a lot more casting than usual.”

Although I no longer hunted, I wanted to re-create my school-day memories of stalking pigeons with an air-rifle, inching forward, senses on hyper-alert.

To do that I had, as a fly angler, to create a system which allowed me to fish successfully in comfort using tackle and techniques that would compensate for middle-age physical inadequacies such as poor balance, eyesight and casting co-ordination.

Like many fly anglers, I imagine, I did not seek to redress those shortcomings by half an hour of casting practise every day.

I sought, instead, to create the fly which would, to quote the work of Nobel laureate Nikolaas Tinbergen, incorporate a ‘super normal releaser’ which would prompt a trout to move out of its normal feeding lane to intercept it.

I also sought to develop a presentation system that would make it easier for me to see the fly land and to follow its drift thereafter and to ascertain which knots would be easiest for my trembling hands to tie and least likely to break.

Casting

Long casts ruin dry fly presentation by creating more opportunities for drag. Gary LaFontaine – The Dry Fly – New Angles (Greycliff Publishing Company, 1990)

I divide fly casting into two schools, the Joan Wulff approach which, very broadly speaking and in my subjective perception, emphasises minimum effort and the Lefty Kreh approach which enables one to cast long distances into the wind.

To my mind the best casting approach for small streams means loading the rod and letting it do its work with the minimum of upper torso movement.

In the energy-sapping heat of South Africa's steep-sided stream valleys, energy-saving pays big dividends.

As Tom Sutcliffe points out, small stream fly fishing involves short casts and short casts require abbreviated casting arcs.

To encourage this, as Art Flick explains in his interview for that informative book *Wisdom of the Guides: Rocky Mountain Trout Guides Talk Fly Fishing* (Frank Amato, 2005), he teaches people to cast by making them stand on a cement block – too much arm and upper body movement and you fall off the block. "They have to use the wrist", he said.

I've heard that ghillies boat fishing the Scottish lochs adopt a similar approach, telling the angler who is not letting the rod do the work, to cast with their fly box held against their bodies by their casting arm – too much arm waving and torso moving and they are short of their flies.

To illustrate this, I would demonstrate to beginners that I could cast 20 feet of line and leader with my casting arm pressed tightly against my rib-cage – just by flexing my wrist.

This was achievable provided the meter or so of line beyond the top guide was heavy enough to load the rod tip – which usually meant one line weight heavier than the rod is factory-rated for.

Also in *The Wisdom of the Guides*, Jennifer Olsen who guides in Montana and Sweden says when newcomers struggle with casting it is because they can't feel the rod bending:

"So the first thing I do is overline the rod. Immediately. At least by one line weight."

Restricting upper torso movement and enhancing casting accuracy can best be achieved by emulating the stance of the participants in a sport where nothing else counts – Olympic pistol shooters. A right-handed shottist stands with the right foot forward. So too, do darts players.

Art Lee devotes a chapter to this in his book *Lore of Trout Fishing* (Human Kinetics, 1999). The chapter is entitled 'The "Right" Foot Forward'.

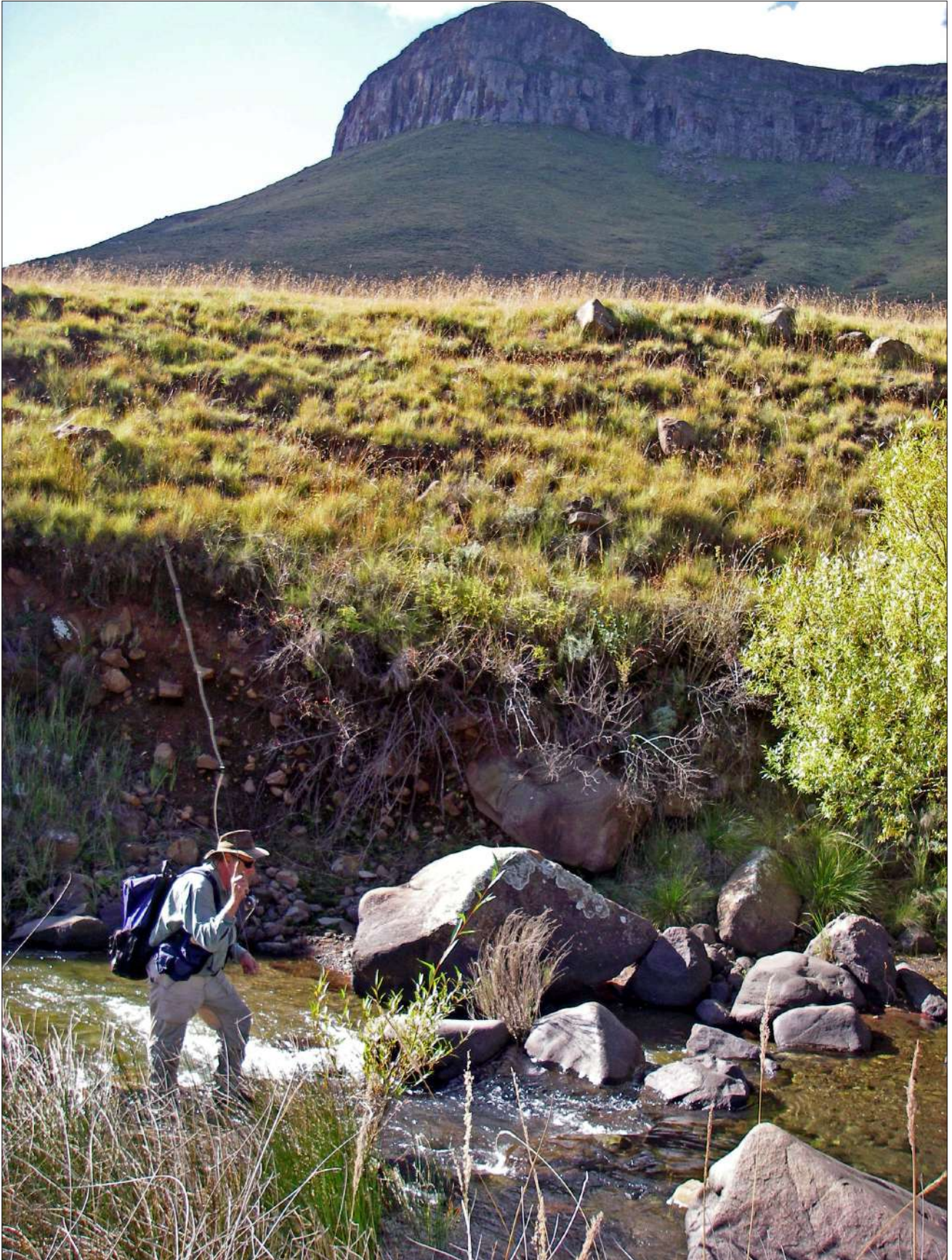
The casting stroke is short, stopping the rod at 12 o'clock on the back cast and ten o'clock on the forward cast.

Casting with your forefinger on top of the grip makes it difficult to take the rod beyond 12 o'clock on the back cast.

And, as Tom Sutcliffe always intones, "Left hand down!"

This creates a tight loop with a minimum of effort.

If you want to see some other-worldly fly casting when tightly hemmed in by vegetation then buy the DVD or do a YouTube search for the three-part series 'A Casting Approach to Dry Fly Fishing in Tight Brush by Joe Humphreys' which is also available in YouTube Clips. Another concise explanation of the hand positions and pressures required to generate tight loops and accurate casts can be found by doing an internet search using the key words 'Joe Loughran' plus 'Squeeze Cast'.



**Forefinger on top of the grip, left hand down. Tom Sutcliffe
fishing the Coldbrook Stream in Barkly East**

Here is a summary of his approach using short rods and I seek to bring it to the attention of the widest-possible audience here:

“A key to accurate casting with these short rods (5’ to 7’) is to execute both your back cast and forecast with a very short casting stroke, the shorter the better. Smooth acceleration to an immediate stop, almost like punching a wall, then hold the rod stopped until the cast is almost completely laid out.”

“Another tip... to increase speed and accuracy very quickly... AS YOU ARE EXECUTING YOUR BACK CAST... OPEN YOUR 3 LOWER FINGERS... control the rod with your thumb and fore finger – keep the back of the rod handle up against the fleshy part of your hand. HOLD THE ROD WITH THESE TWO FINGERS THROUGH THE BACK CAST... Then, just as you are finishing your fore-cast... SHARPLY SQUEEZE... THE 3 FINGERS TOGETHER AGAINST THE LOWER PART OF THE ROD HANDLE and your thumb against the top of the rod handle... THIS GIVES A FINAL, RAPID ACCELERATION TO THE STOPPING of the rod... SPEEDING UP THE LINE AND IMPROVING ACCURACY... TAKES A LITTLE PRACTICE BUT REALLY IMPROVES A CAST IN A TIGHT SITUATION.”

“If there is a disadvantage with the short rod, I think it is more likely to be with the fisherman than the rods. I am not talking about line speed, or well executed hauling, I am referring to applying power at the wrong time during the casting stroke (most likely at the beginning of the forecast). A shorter rod (with a fast or even medium fast action) will not be very forgiving of overpowered casts.”

Enhancing short casts with short rods is a rod which loads easily and split cane is the material which best meets this criterion. A new generation of fiberglass rods is edging closer to that ideal.

The nature of delicately fishing the trout streams near Cape Town with a dry fly often involves fishing in hot weather and making many casts every hour.

Because I am slightly built, and was middle-aged when I started fly fishing, my assumption was that the one-ounce rod was a desirable goal, which meant carbon fibre.

If you want to build the ultimate low-mass seven-and-a-half-foot fly rod for fishing small mountain streams, you start with a single-piece 0-weight Sage Dart.

At the time of writing in late 2021 I started reading *Mostly Bamboo – Eighteen Bamboo, Fiberglass and Graphite Fly Rod Makers in Japan* by Yuki Bando and I started re-thinking the role of the one-ounce small stream fly rod.

Lightness as a goal is important but, what is more important I now realise, is the easy-loading capability of a rod material in achieving the twin goals of casting with minimum effort and maximum accuracy and this is outlined in the ‘Haneda here’ chapter 4.

Advances in fiberglass technology have resulted in increased interest among small stream fly anglers in seven foot or shorter light-line fly rods.

I recently saw some drone footage of a fly angler on a Cape stream. What was startling was the level of water disturbance on a conventional back cast.

The line literally sliced into the water, dispersing water on the back cast, something emphasised by the bright sunshine which is the norm on southern hemisphere trout streams.

I sought to counter this in two ways – first by greasing the line and the leader with Mucilin, the least-expensive heavy paste on the market, to glide it off the water on the back cast and secondly by starting the cast using an abbreviated roll-cast, what Lefty Kreh calls the ‘roll pickup’.

It assumes that you are using a rod which loads with a meter of line outside the top guide – split cane, fiberglass or an over-lined carbon fiber rod specifically designed for short-range, delicate-presentation fishing such as the current Sage Dart.

You execute the first part of a roll cast, sliding the line off the water as delicately as you can. Then, as

the line unfolds over the water on the forward stage of the cast, you do not complete it but go straight into a conventional back cast. This disturbs the water less than a conventional back cast.

I did that all the time, on every possible cast until it became second nature and this approach is based on another important premise, that repeated false casting on a small stream increases the possibility of failure.

The steep-sided mountain valleys on the trout streams near Cape Town are hot in the middle of summer and energy conservation to facilitate concentration was important to me as a slightly built and middle-aged person. I was, for this reason, grateful for the fact that, as a graduate from spin-fishing, I had become accustomed as a right-handed caster to reeling with my left hand.

It is an easy skill to master with a little persistence and it brings significant benefits if you consider how often in a fishing day you switch the rod from hand to hand if you both cast and reel with your right hand. Most people are right-handed and, while small stream trout rarely take line from the reel, controlling a fish from your more-adept hand and reeling with your left gives you more control and saves time.

False casting is also used to remove water from a sodden dry fly which is a constant problem if you don't grease your fly line down to the hook eye and this creates a significant fish-scaring problem if you are fishing a large-hackled fly like the Tony Biggs RAB

If any part of your leader sinks, this large-hackled pattern is dragged beneath the water surface and audibly leaves it on the back cast. Then as the forward cast begins, the water is dispelled in a fine mist which is incandescent on a bright day. I started greasing my entire leader up to the fly after this was recommended by Tom Rosenbauer in his book, 'The Orvis Guide to Prospecting for Trout'.

I never had reason to regret this in a small stream environment. This brings me to – drum roll and peal of trumpets ...

Ed's immutable first rule of small stream fly fishing which reads:

If you hook streamside vegetation on the back cast and you manage to free the fly ...

... and you do not change the position of your feet or make your next cast over the opposite shoulder ..

... on your next cast the fly will end up in the same place except...

... this time you will not be able to free it.

(South African trout stream guides who supply their clients with flies prefer to use 5x tippets because retrieving flies from streamside vegetation becomes a more viable option than if the client is using a 6 or 7x tippet.)

You will be doing yourself a big favour as a small stream fly angler by watching the original DVD version of the Joe Humphreys video '*A casting approach to dry fly tactics in tight brush*'.

Keeping dry flies dry

I used a three-step approach to drying flies after catching a trout:

Wash the fly in the stream to remove fish slime.

Insert the hook bend into thin rubber band on the front of your fly vest. Stretch the rubber band by pulling the tippet and then twang the rubber band like a guitar string. The resultant vibration expels most of the water on the fly.

Squeeze the fly in tissue paper. Blow on it to fluff it up.

Apply desiccant powder.

Knots

I used three – the Blood Knot for leaders, the Perfection Loop to create my loop-to-loop strike indicator system and the Duncan Loop for attaching fly to tippet.

Gary Borger uses what he calls the 5/7 Blood Knot, particularly when joining mono with a big diameter difference – five turns of the heavier nylon and seven turns with the lighter.

He also has a caution about tying the Perfection Loop:

Do not pull the short end of this knot when making the final tightening. If you do, the knot flips over and becomes a slip knot.

My Perfection Loop-to-Perfection Loop method of strike detection when using tiny flies on shaded mountain streams involves the use of bright mono such as Rio Two Tone Indicator mono for the 3x loop which is then joined to a 4x section which also includes a Perfection Loop.

Grease the leader with Mucilin and then, between the loops, slip some orange egg yarn which has been treated with Watershed or a similar floatant and left to dry.

Skafars leader grease or the new Hareline Sighting Leader Wax increases leader visibility or you can use Loon Biostrike putty on the leader knots.

If you switch from a small nymph or sunken terrestrial pattern to an easily-visible dry fly, simply slip the 3 and 4x loops apart and remove the egg yarn.

The Duncan Loop in its normal configuration slips closed when under tension which provides a little shock absorption when using fine tippets.

I used it with a different goal – to allow the fly movement on the tippet.

There seems to be consensus that the most accomplished small stream fly anglers in the world are to be found in Japan and you'll notice that, for this reason, their dry flies are attached with loop knots and are not attached rigidly to the tippet.

When Tom Sutcliffe and I visited Maclear in the Eastern Cape, we stayed with Ron Moore and his wife Robin who farmed on the banks of the Little Pot River.

Robin routinely beat the men in regional dam fishing competitions. She said she was no better than them and used the same flies that they did. She said her secret was using a Rapala knot – a loop knot which, like Lefty Kreh's non-slip loop knot, allowed the fly more freedom of movement on the tippet.

I approached it somewhat differently because with a hand tremor and poor eyesight I struggled with Lefty's Knot.

I wanted an easy-to-tie loop knot which did not slip under tension.

To achieve this, I used Loon Knot Sense and a 'third hand' when attaching my fly to the tippet with a Duncan Loop.

The heat generated in tightening a knot weakens it which is why we lubricate them with saliva before tightening. Loon Knot Sense is a better lubricant.

When you tie a knot, you need three hands – one holds the hook, another the tippet which leaves you short of a hand to hold onto the tag end of the knot.

When changing flies, I would sit in the shade with the rod across my thighs.

When the knot was constructed and ready for tightening, I would apply the resin, and tuck the hook into the stripper guide on my rod. This would leave my hands free to hold the tippet and the tag end of the knot.

I would then cure the tightened knot with the little Loon UV light - which has since been replaced with the Nano Light - or simply turn my body towards the sun.

On the rare occasions when I wanted to change flies midstream, I would use the snap swivel which I had attached to the front of my fly-fishing vest, tucking the rod butt in the pocket on the thigh of my wading pants which I had a seamstress make for me out of quick-drying synthetic material.

An automatic tuck cast

When I joined the Cape Piscatorial Society in 1978, I fished with the recommended, commercially-available dry fly, the Caribou Spider, a clipped deer pattern with a small parachute hackle around a red chenille post. It was justifiably popular being almost unsinkable and easy to follow during the drift.

There were days, however, when the trout were unresponsive and no rises were to be seen.

The answer, I was told, was to fish a nymph.

How did you know, I asked, when a trout had taken the nymph?

You'll see your line tip move, I was told – but I never detected any such movement.

Then Dave Whitlock came into my life through a series of articles in *Fly Fisherman* magazine.

He advocated sliding a short section of bright orange floating fly line onto your leader, but I took it a step further. I threaded it onto a section of fluorescent yellow Stren nylon and marked the nylon on either side of the fly line with a black permanent marker.

Shortly afterwards, I caught my first trout on the nymph and it vividly brought home to me the words of G E M Skues in *Minor Tactics of the Chalk Stream*:

The indications which tell your dry-fly angler when to strike are clear and unmistakable, but those which bid a wet-fly man raise his rod-point and draw home the steel are frequently so subtle, so evanescent and impalpable to the senses that, when the bending rod assures him that he has divined aright, he feels an ecstasy as though he had performed a miracle each time.

There was nothing subtle in my first experience of catching a trout using a strike indicator.

The orange, yellow and black section of my greased leader slowed to a halt and then dipped below the water surface.

It dawned on me that perhaps my nymph had not hooked the stream bed and, as if in a dream, everything seemed to happen in slow motion as I eventually raised my rod tip and realised that I had caught a trout on a nymph.

I subsequently settled on a loop-to-loop section in my leader into which I slid a small piece of glob-ug yarn previously waterproofed with loon Hydro Stop and allowed to dry.

This, I found, altered the aerodynamics of the leader and, when I used with a small sunken beetle in spring and my copper wire ants in summer and autumn, the leader would stop in mid-air at the end of the cast and the #16 beetle (weighted with a 1mm countersunk brass bead) or the copper wire ant would hinge downwards in an automatic tuck cast.

Joe Humphreys called this the 'Tuck Cast' but it was a technique which was arguably articulated first by Frank Sawyer in his 1970 book, *Nymphs and the Trout*:

To make a nymph pitch and sink quickly, the best method I have found is to stop the rod on the downward stroke in casting and check the running line passing through the left hand just when it is extended horizontally over the water. This check tends to make the nymph curl downwards with the cast and then penetrate the water before the line falls.

I found the orange strike indicator easy to follow on the water and the use of sunken terrestrials

worked well for me.

If there was a favourable upstream breeze, the RAB was a joy to use as it descended softly, was easy to follow for that reason and, affected by the slightest breeze, it seemed to almost quiver during the drift.

Al McClane prescribed them for what he called 'creep and crawl' fishing but they do not seem to feature in the small stream annals of the USA and the UK.

There is a 'RABs and Variants' folder on the CPS website which provides useful information on a type of fly which has become justifiably iconic on the trout streams near Cape Town.

All of these factors enhanced my small stream approach which involved, as Tom Sutcliffe explained at the start of this chapter, exploratory casts with short drifts, fishing the pockets and runs where the broken water surface served to mask my approach.

I avoided the smooth and flat sections of the stream because pocket water compensates for a multitude of sins. Firstly, the window of a trout lying in shallow water is small, so you have less chance of being seen.

Furthermore, it only sees a dry fly when it is relatively close meaning that it must react quickly leaving it little time for scrutiny of the rapidly approaching fly.

One thing I have never regretted is following the advice of Tom Rosenbauer and greasing the entire leader from fly line to tippet when fishing boisterous pocket water.

My small stream approach is not, as recent experience proves, a more productive method than Euro-nymphing with a French leader, it was simply a less-fatiguing method which I found, through trial and error, to be the one that I enjoyed most.

