

An interview with Henry Mittel

Henry Mittel (HM) is one of our most consistent winning tournament casters. Born in East Germany, Henry came to the United States in 1991 and eventually earned his Ph.D., in Physics from the University of Central Florida. He worked in Florida, but later moved to the San Francisco Bay area. A few months later, he discovered the Oakland Casting Club ponds. In less than 24 hours he was participating in his first casting tournament in the U.S. Jim Chapralis, *The Creel* editor, conducted the following interview:

Q: How did you get interested in tournament casting and how old were you?

HM: I did some simple fishing in Germany while on vacation with my parents. I also wanted to fish near my home but had no idea how to get a license or where to fish. Then in 5th grade—I had just turned 11—there was an after-school activity called, “Tournament Angling” the German term for casting. I just heard the “Angling” part and joined in the hope to get a fishing license. Well, before long, they had us in the school yard, where they put out some wooden targets, and showed us how to cast 7.5 gram (1/4 oz.) plastic plugs at the targets. I enjoyed that but it might not have been enough to keep my interest. Two weeks later, there was a countywide competition near my hometown, Schleusingen. We—the new kids—were asked to participate.

At the tournament, I discovered my latent competitive spirit. I had fun trying my best, although the only two practices we had at that point hadn’t really taught me anything. During the following year, I participated in a few more tournaments, but was not winning.

I discussed this with my mother. She asked me why the kids from the neighboring village were so much better. I knew they had practiced with a coach several times a week. So I practiced by myself all fall, sometimes in the winter, even in the snow, all of spring. I kicked butt the next year, at least at the county level.

Q: What attracted you to tournament casting?

HM: Well, it’s a good feeling to hit a target. Ask all the shooters, archers, bowlers, soccer players, and others out there. The wooden targets we used made a very satisfying sound when hit. Later, I stayed with it because of the way it made me feel. Whether in practice or in a tournament, there is something about concentrating on my casting, tuning everything else out, and then

hitting the target or getting that distance cast out that just goes and goes.

Q: What type of fishing do you like?

HM: Spinning and, to a lesser degree, fly fishing for trout are my favorite types. Although, carp, when feeding on the surface, can be a blast. Fine bobber fishing can be interesting too with a lot of action.



Q: Do you feel that tournament casting has helped you in fishing?

HM: Definitely! I know what it takes to cast far. I can deal with obstacles. I can brake the lure before it snags on the other bank. I can fish in some places where almost everyone else cannot or has to trample too close which scares the fish off. Tournament casting also introduced me to fly casting and then to fly fishing, which opened up a whole new type of angling for me.

Q: How many years have you been seriously involved in tournament casting (when you've actually trained and practiced longer hours)?

HM: It was mostly 6th to 12th grade. Then, I had to take a 3-year break because of military service. In college, I didn't have much time for practicing until my second-to-last year, which seemed to be the high point in my casting career then. I won a few medals at the East German B-Nationals and ended the year with a far-out personal best in the 5-event all-around (still 20% behind world class). That makes about eight years of at least semi-regular practice.

Of course, I should add the last two years. After I joined the Oakland Casting Club, it took only a few of our small tournaments to get me really hooked again, even though the ACA accuracy events are dramatically different from what I knew. A month later, I had decided to participate in the Nationals and started practicing as much as a full-time job will allow.

Q: Which are your favorite games: Distance? Accuracy? Fly? Plug?

HM: At one time I would have said ¼ oz. plug distance spinning and Arenberg Event (¼ oz. accuracy with prescribed casting styles). Then I learned the two-handed spin distance! That's so much fun. So it was and still is clearly the plug games. But lately, I have learned more about the fly games. Especially, the Salmon Fly [two-handed distance fly] can be such a blast when the line goes and goes and goes!

But I still prefer the plug events ahead of the fly games and the distance games ahead of the accuracy games, but who knows about the future?

Q: Which is your very favorite event? Let's say you were on a deserted island and could practice only one event. Which would you choose?

HM: Well, if I were on that island only for a month or two, I would clearly choose the two-handed spin distance. If the "engagement" was indefinite, I might choose Salmon Fly. Maybe I wouldn't want to risk getting sick of my current favorite!

Q: You've made it to the top-among the very elite casters in the U.S. How often to you practice and where do you practice?

HM: I typically do two or three distance sessions per week. On my commute home from work, I stop by a public park, which has several soccer fields. Each session is 1½ to 2 hours (if my lower

back allows) and I try to fit two events into each session.

I do plug accuracy practice during my lunch hour. There is a grass strip between two parking lots next to my company. I set up a wooden target, and I try to cast every workday but sometimes I can't.

On Saturdays, I practice fly accuracy at the ponds - typically 3 to 4 hours (including breaks for coaching, etc.). That's about 12 hours in a normal week plus the time at Sunday tournaments.

Q: Do you get nervous in competition? If so, how do you control this?

HM: I get a little nervous – not as much as it used to be. For bigger tournaments, I get nervous anywhere from minutes to weeks before the competition. I kind of know that this nervousness prepares me for the event. During the event, I am typically busy concentrating on the things I should do. If that works, I can do well. Of course, I get nervous if I am getting a really good score and only a couple of shots are left. Breathing deeply helps but the only thing that really does it is to concentrate not on the score but what I need to do to cast well.

Q: Suppose you have a good game in accuracy going and you miss a target with a “bad” cast. What do you say to yourself or what do you do to recover?

HM: Minor bad casts can be overcome by either stepping back both physically and mentally to regain composure or by ignoring them and concentrating on the things I need to do. Really bad casts are very difficult to handle. The only thing helping me is the thought of redemption: Let's at least get the rest done right.

Q: In your tournament-casting career you've had many fine accomplishments. What do you think is the single most important victory or accomplishment? What are the second and third most important?

HM: Having seriously challenged Steve [Rajeff] and Chris [Korich] in the All-Around at the 2003 Nationals comes to mind. It has gotten me an unexpected amount of attention. But I think I

am proud of it only because I was able to learn a number of fly-casting events to the point that I am competitive. In four out of the six fly games, I was able to make significant improvements over the 2002 Nationals.

Otherwise, my 6th place in the two-handed spin distance at the ICF world championships in Bled, Slovenia (2002) seems to be my



peak so far. That's not really impressive but I hope to improve on that in the coming years.

Q: How do you sum up your accomplishments in the International Casting Federation (ICF) championships?

HM: There was a time when I would have been immensely proud of having made it to the world championships last year. That had been a distant goal in my early years of casting. I wanted to become good enough to deserve to compete with the *best of the best*. Unfortunately, making the ACA team isn't necessarily a big casting achievement because there are not enough casters who are interested

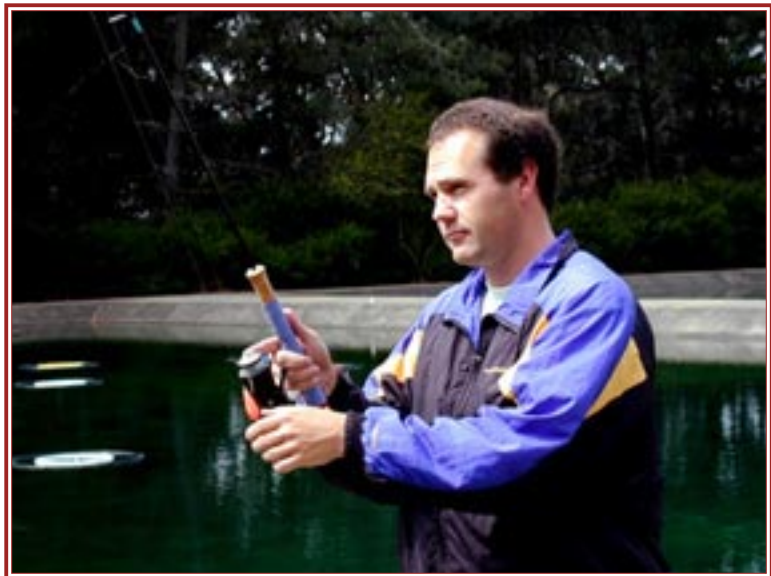
in competing in the ICF games to fill the allotted number of casters on a team. Instead, I made it my goal to prove that I belonged in a competition of the world's best. I think I achieved that with a 6th place and a number of places in the top 15 of various events. Of course, doing better than that—including possibly winning an event some day—is my current goal.

Q: Do you think that the ACA and ICF should have the same rules? Do you feel that a compromise is in order?

HM: Yes and no, on both questions. Adopting ICF games would allow us to have competitions almost anywhere. These events are cast on grass and any football field—even softball fields will do. The targets and other equipment easily fit on the back of a pickup truck. Hence, it would be relatively easy to take competitions and practice opportunities to the casters rather than waiting for the casters to come to the competitions. I am especially thinking about school kids. However, giving up the significantly more intricate fly games of the ACA entirely would be a big loss—even for someone who grew up with the ICF games as I did. In fact, I know that casting the ICF fly games did not prepare me adequately for many fishing situations. Of course, casting as a sport in itself shouldn't be required to mimic angling. But since casting is also a recreational activity, the variety of available ACA fly games should be maintained since it promotes a larger variety of skills. The Dry Fly Event is a possible exception [it could be dropped]; since its challenges are contained in the Trout Fly game.

I would vote for introducing Trout Fly and/or Bass Bug into the set of international games. However, the chances for that are slim. The biggest reason is the general pressure for fewer, faster events. Furthermore, the ACA at this point in time is barely involved in ICF's growth. Thus, we can't expect the ACA to have a sufficient influence to popularize such changes.

When it comes to the distance games the differences between the ACA and ICF games are fairly minor. There are several reasons for those similarities. The distance games have a more dominant sport aspect, which more strongly encourages unified standards for comparison of performance. As equipment, casting styles, and distances evolved in the past, both the ACA and



Henry uses a pendulum cast for spinning accuracy events. This method was developed in Europe.

the ICF recognized the need for changes and it made sense to align those changes. I think we are at another point in time where another realignment especially of the plug distance games is in order.

Q: What do you think about cash casting tournaments? It appears that some tournaments may be going that way.

HM: I grew up thinking that professional sports take too much out of the fairness of competition. Times have changed. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) doesn't think that way anymore. Also, many countries have a good standard of living these days, so casting equipment is affordable to most who are serious about casting. Hence, the differences money makes in the equipment (and, hence the caster's performance) have become secondary. In other words, money being involved in the sport isn't as much of a concern anymore.

I know how great it is to compete against oneself—just for the personal improvement— or just for the honor of having been the best. However, I also know that any competition can become much more interesting and invigorating if there is something else at stake. Some people may feel invigorated if there is a trophy, others might be delighted about winning a reel, rod, or line. Some people hate dust-catching trophies, are bored by crystal plates, can't use yet another 6-weight line. However, money is in some sense the equivalent to any of the things people may want and seems to be an acceptable compromise.

Q: What is necessary to make tournament casting an important activity. For example, to have some tournament casting events televised, and eventually in the Olympics, etc?

HM: Well, there are other ways, too. In East Germany, it was required to demonstrate some casting skills before one could obtain a fishing license to fish for pike, walleye, maybe bass. Even better skills (not just plugs but also fly casting) were required for licenses for trout and salmon. That way everyone was, at least theoretically, required to have some casting exposure.

Sure, casting as an Olympic sport would be a big thing. But I am afraid, we here in the U.S. would not experience the full benefits from this – since ABC, NBC, CBS wouldn't show much or any of it, as they would elect to televise the more popular games.

Considering the "TVcentricity" of much of our culture, TV is one of our best chances. With my limited imagination, I assume that venues like the Fly Fishing Masters (FFM), where casting is a required part of a fishing tournament, are the way to go. Of course, the FFM hasn't aired yet and we don't know the effect it might have. Generally, we could promote tournament casting as the "fish-friendliest" way of angling. That's kind of the view the FFM people had on it. In addition, learning better fishing skills through tournament casting might help people be kinder to the fish once they go fishing. That's the approach the East German rules took.

Q: What do you think is the single most important factor missing in order to make tournament casting more popular?

HM: Kids! Kids programs, hundreds of groups of kids practicing, competing on many levels as individuals and teams, kids growing up to adulthood who understand tournament casting as both a serious sport and a great recreational activity.

The second most important factor may be that too few of us promote the sport of casting. Let's face it, when it comes to the recreational aspect of casting it's a distant second to virtually all people interested in fishing. Given the choice of spending a few hours trying to catch fish or casting at some fishless pond, we know how many people currently make the choice of going fishing versus going casting. However, if we give the choice between exciting, nerve-wrecking,

action-packed tournaments with meaningful winners and going fishing without catching anything, the outcome could still be in favor of going fishing but with a huge increase on the casting side. The question is how we can GIVE people that choice.

Q: Who was your mentor or mentors in tournament casting?

HM: Growing up in Germany, I had essentially nobody who could help me to improve my casting – beyond the first few lessons. The only person in somewhat of a role as a coach would be Chris Korich. During the last two years, he has given me lessons in Fly Distance (mostly Salmon Fly), revolving-spool plug distance, Bass Bug, and Trout/Dry fly. At the Nationals, he beat me in every single event I just named, but thanks to his pointers and help I was only one point or one dozen feet behind him.

Q: Before a tournament or an event, do you mentally go over some of the strategies for winning or do you just cast?

HM: Well, obviously the “strategy” for winning is to get the best score possible. For that, you have to hit every target or try to make that perfect distance cast. There is not much to think about – other than what it takes to make that happen. Maybe I think about the same things all the time and don’t even realize it anymore. But, yes, there are things that are worth going over before you cast.

In distance events, it’s good to know the average wind direction and confirm that it’s still the same when the clock begins to click. Is the wind steady or should you wait for a gust? Did you check the ground? What about weeds that could tangle the line? In fly distance, it makes sense to have a plan as to how many casts one should try to make. However, that depends mostly on one’s skills. I used to try to make as many casts as possible in the hope to get that one that soars. Now, with a bit better technique, I take breathers to regain strength. If I have a good cast already marked, I may even wait for a favorable wind.

In accuracy events, knowing the wind and lighting conditions in advance makes it easier to adjust accordingly. Perhaps choosing the color of a plug or fly could be important.

Q: Do you use any photographic equipment (video camera, etc.) to check your casting style, particularly in distance events?

HM: Yes, I own a digital video camera. I bought it specifically to record and study the casting techniques of others. Of course, I eventually took footage of myself and what do you know: some major bad technique issues became glaringly obvious. Unfortunately, it is a lot of work to make a quality video to see more than the obvious. I shouldn’t shy away from that effort though – considering the payoff potential. Nor should anyone with access to such equipment.

Q: If you had to eliminate two events from the present ACA National events—in order to make tournament casting more attractive to newcomers and spectators, which two would they be (it may include your favorites)?

HM: I question that eliminating events would make it more attractive to anyone. However, I can see how one-week Nationals are a deterrent for semi-serious casters. So maybe a compromise is in order. We could concentrate on the events of the Anglers’ All-Around. If we dropped 3/8 oz. plug accuracy and Dry Fly from that set of events, the remaining six events could be done on two weekend days. Grand All-Around casters could come a day or two earlier and cast the four larger distance events and maybe 3/8 oz. and Dry Fly. Of course, that would be a big departure from the present path. Some rule changes, which could make such a two-day schedule more manageable,

should be considered. How about ways to make more casting events going on simultaneously? An easier scoring system requiring fewer judges also comes to mind. How about time restrictions in the plug events? Timed cast-offs?

Having the main events on weekend days would help attract spectators. We can use bigger plugs and orange distance lines for the visual effect. Have qualifying finals or a seeded casting order so spectators don't have to wait hours watching the not-so-good casters. Also, a more serious Olympics-style medal ceremony, large displays of scores [scoreboards] and standings would help.

But all those things mean very little unless we get people to want to watch. Unless casting becomes a required part of many fishing tournaments or at least a popularized sideshow we won't draw crowds. How about a casting tournament while the professionals competing in a fishing tournament are out on the water? The crowds that gather to see the weigh-ins could watch the finals of the casting tournament.

Q: Finally, as a top tournament caster, who obviously has his act together, what are the steps you'd advise a beginner or intermediate caster to do in order that he/she may rise to a higher level?

HM: For the beginner: learn the techniques and practice them! For the intermediate caster: learn the techniques better and practice, practice, practice. Motivation is the key at all ages or stages. If one can find ways to motivate oneself—to learn the techniques and to practice—one will become competitive.



Rene Gillibert (left) chats with Henry. Both are world-class distance fly casters. In the 2002 Nationals, Rene won the Angler's Distance Fly Event with an incredible cast of 190 feet (using fly equipment similar to what is used in steelhead fishing). At the 2003 Nationals, Henry cast 180 feet to win the same event.