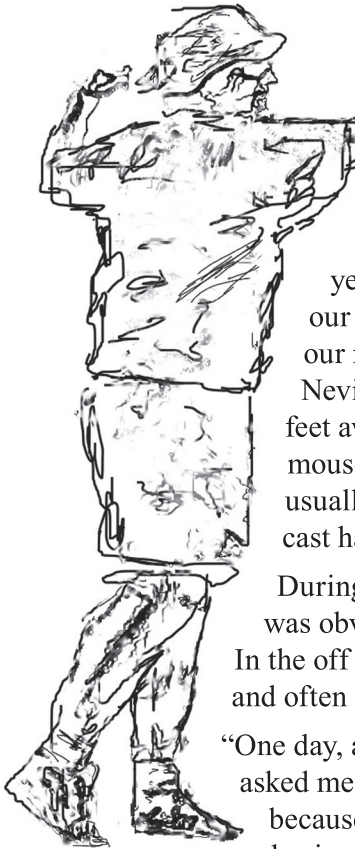


Between casts with Steve Rajeff



IT WAS ONE OF those great trout days on Alaska's Goodnews River. I was fishing with Bob Stearns, who for many years wrote for *Field and Stream*. Nevin, our guide, stressed the importance of casting our mouse imitations right against the bank. Nevin was right. Casts that landed a couple of feet away were usually ignored; however, if the mouse landed a few inches from the bank, it usually was engulfed by a feisty rainbow. The cast had to be precise.

During shore lunch, our talk turned to casting. It was obvious that Nevin knew a lot about casting. In the off season, he worked at a Montana fly shop and often taught fly casting.

“One day, at the store,” Nevin told us, “the boss asked me to teach this young guy to fly cast quickly, because he was taking a number of important business prospects on a fishing trip. The fellow seemed athletic and pleasant. I’ve taught many people the fundamentals of fly casting fairly quickly, so this should be a piece of cake.

“I demonstrated. I explained. Over and over again. The fellow

was one of the most uncoordinated students I've ever had. He just couldn't get the hang of it. I excused myself, and went into the store and told the boss that this guy is hopeless.

"The boss tells me I gotta teach him. He is buying lots of fly-fishing outfits for this business entertainment trout fishing trip.

"The boss was getting impatient. So he came out and said he would teach the fellow to cast. First he stripped all the line from the reel because it was loose. He left all the line on the ground. The boss makes a couple of false casts and drops the fly about 35 feet. 'That's all you have to do. Now you try it,' the boss said and hands the rod to the student.

"The fellow takes the rod and says, 'You mean like this?' and makes a couple of false casts and on the third forward cast he adds a double haul and the entire fly line shoots out through the guides, yanks at the reel, and this is the most perfect, the longest cast I have ever seen in my life!

"I was stunned. I was shocked. Then they both broke into laughter. The fellow turned out to be Steve Rajeff, world casting champion for many years. The boss put him up to it, and Steve did a great job of pretending not to be able to cast." During the afternoon fishing session, I chuckled several times thinking about that story.

I had not met Steve at the time Nevin told me the story, but I have since then on numerous occasions at tournaments. He has always been very helpful and shares information readily even with his top competitors.

Steve won the ACA All-Round Casting Championships in 1972 when he was 15 years old. He has won the All-Round title 31 times and was co-champion twice (with Chris Korich and Henry Mittel). He won the World All-Round Casting title 13 times out of the 17 times he competed. An incredible accomplishment! Besides casting, Steve is one of the finest all-round light-tackle anglers today. I recently interviewed him between his casting tournaments and fishing trips:

Q: Steve, I know you excel in every casting event, but what's your favorite fly event?

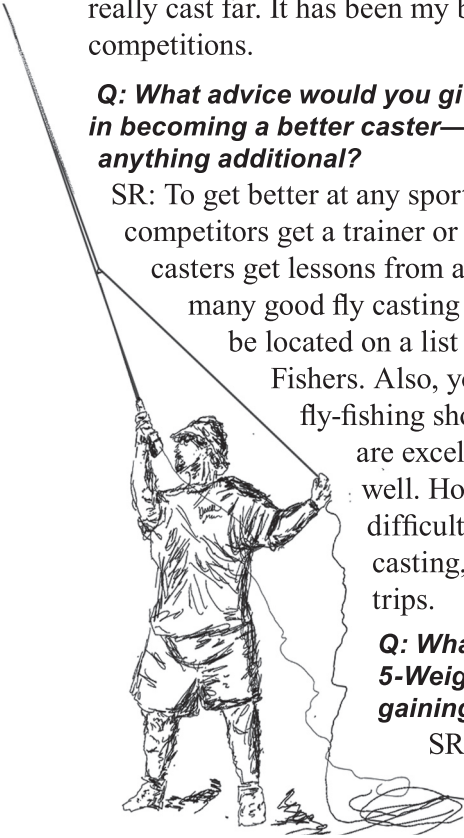
SR: My favorite event is Single-Hand Fly Distance. It takes a combination of excellent technique and strength to make it really cast far. It has been my best event at national and world competitions.

Q: What advice would you give a person who is interested in becoming a better caster—obviously practice more, but anything additional?

SR: To get better at any sport, the wise athletes and competitors get a trainer or coach. In fly casting, the best casters get lessons from a casting instructor. There are many good fly casting instructors now, and they can be located on a list from the Federation of Fly Fishers. Also, you can check in at your local fly-fishing shop. Many fly-fishing guides are excellent casting instructors, as well. However, when fishing, it is often difficult to concentrate purely on casting, so I suggest practice before trips.

Q: What are your thoughts on the 5-Weight Distance Fly Event that's gaining some popularity?

SR: The event is like trying to throw a ping-pong ball the farthest. The line is relatively light and air resistant. It is a game of hand speed and tight loops. He who has the fastest hands and can make a tight loop, which generates the highest line speed, should win. It is an easy event to do, but difficult to do really well. Most casters struggle with making a very narrow loop on the back cast. The longer the line you may aerialize, the longer the cast may go. The key to aerializing a lot of line is having a very tight loop in the back cast. It is a good event because most people already have a 5-weight outfit.



Q: What's your favorite fish—or several species—that you enjoy or find challenging?

SR: I enjoy many species when conditions are right. Among my favorite are steelhead, bonefish, permit, tarpon, trout, Atlantic salmon, yellowfin tuna and barracuda. Seeking any one of these fish can take you to beautiful places and, when the situation is right, can totally captivate your focus and attention, blocking out life's mundane obligations. I have been fortunate to travel to some of the best places for some of these species and would gladly go back there again.

Q: What is your practicing regime. Do you practice or just cast in tournaments?

SR: As a young caster growing up in San Francisco, I would go to the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club almost every day after school, as well as on weekends. I would practice casting while other kids played ball. In preparing for a major competition, I would practice eight weeks with a plan. I would concentrate on events that were my weakest first, lightly practicing my strong events. I would be careful not to get blisters, or any other injuries. Practice time would range about one to three hours every day. About five days before the competition, I would stop casting to give all the muscles, tendons, and ligaments a chance to rest, and concentrate on getting the tackle all ready for the competitions.

Q: What do you think is necessary to improve the popularity of casting?

SR: Prize money and public recognition are the keys to the development of any other sport and a key to developing casting. The reason the 5-weight fly distance events have gained interest is because they are held at sportsmen's shows, typically with a significant prize for the winners: A trip to Argentina, a drift boat, prize money and publicity in fly-fishing publications. There are many casters trying to reinvent the games we cast in competition, but I doubt many more people will try the events unless there is something more to gain than a small medal and recognition by the other casters only.

Q: Which of the many casting accomplishments are you most proud of?

SR: My personal best cast was during the World Casting Championships in Pretoria, South Africa held in 1998. In the Single-Hand Fly Distance Event, I managed a personal best cast of 248 feet and won the event by over 10 feet. The winds were swirling, and mostly from right to left. For about



the time to make three casts, the wind was down court, and I managed a perfect loop and trajectory. I did it with as much power as I could apply, considering a lot of lower back pain from a compressed disc pinching on a nerve. The cast was not an official record. There is a wind meter for international competitions, and the maximum wind speed for setting a record is 3 meters per second (about 8 mph). Although the caster on another court next to me placed second and was 10 feet shorter, they granted him the official record, for whatever reason.

Q: What's your best fishing accomplishment?

SR: Among my most memorable fishing accomplishments was catching a giant tarpon while fishing with my friend Ted Juracsik, maker of Tibor reels. He took me snook fishing in the Everglades, and we spotted a tarpon roll. He suggested changing flies to a larger black one, with a heavier shock tippet. As we approached the area we saw the tarpon roll again, and I let go a 75-foot cast with the 9-weight outfit I was using for snook. On the third strip, the rod was nearly pulled out of my hands and a giant tarpon jumped about 70 feet away. It was huge. Ted laughed and said we are in for it now. With all the pressure the tackle would stand, we had the tarpon near to the boat within 30 minutes, following several long runs and jumps. Ted had poled about a half mile to keep up with the fish. When we were ready to land the tarpon, I

asked Ted if he had a lip gaff. He said he did not have his lip gaff because we were snook fishing.

We tried to lasso the tail with a slip noose off the end of the push pole, but that only scared the fish. Finally Ted instructed me to wind the leader all the way to the rod tip, and lift like hell. As I lifted as high as possible, he reached out as far as he could, and promptly fell overboard. This really scared the big fish, and it swam off in one direction, leaving Ted treading water in another. He yelled out to get the boat over to him right away, because, in the murky water, it was hard to see sharks. Bull sharks are very common in the area, and prone to eating your tired tarpon at the final stage of the fight. I gave a lot of slack in the line, put the rod under my arm, grabbed the push pole, and moved the boat closer to Ted. I staked out the pole with a rope to the poling platform, and regained tension on the line and was delighted to feel the fish was still on. I worked the fish close enough for Ted to wrap his arms around the fish and guide the head to me at the bow of the skiff. I grabbed the lip and slid the giant fish onboard.

It was a miracle. The fish was nearly seven feet long, and bigger around than my 40-inch waist. We conservatively estimated her to weigh 170 pounds.

Q: Steve, despite your having won so many casting championships and having fished for most of the important game fish, your passion for the next casting tournament or fishing trip is very evident.

(Steve smiled as he prepared for his next steelhead trip.)