

LEARNING TO CAST — AND TEACH

The benefit of an International Federation of Fly Fishers experience

By Andre van der Werff

MY first encounter with fly-fishing was when I noticed a stranger casting a fly over a body of water and, like many a novice, I was mesmerised by this strange but tranquil and poetic act of casting a fly-rod.

Over the years I have tried all the facets of flyfishing including tying my own flies, but my fascination with the gentle art of fly-casting never left me and was always something I strived to improve on.

Now I've had some casting lessons over the years, but I was never taught the mechanics of good fly-casting nor its analysis of fault identification and the necessary corrections. Most lessons were directed towards emulating the tutor's own fly-casting style. I have consequently read a number of books on the subject and although the technical information was readily available, I found that books were not very good teaching tools. It was John Gierach who said in one of his books, "Casting lessons are great, books and videos can be great too, but they're static and can amount to what Neil Postman calls 'information without proper instructions'. Pure information just lies there on the page or scrolls robotically across the screen where you either get it or don't. Proper instruction comes from an instructor: someone who can change tactics when he looks into your eyes and sees that the light hasn't come on yet."

So, when I heard of the IFFF Casting Instructor's course, found that it is based on the five essentials of casting, and that they also make a distinction

between basic fundamentals and casting style, I sat up and took notice.

Although this was a casting instructor's course, my initial intention was not to become a teacher, but rather just to improve on my own casting so that my overall fishing experience would improve. Good casting should improve your catch rate, because (if nothing else) you will be false casting less, resulting in you fishing more. The ability to reach fishing spots which previously may have been out of your reach, dramatically improved accuracy and efficiency and longer drag-free drifts all come from better casting. The added bonus is that you will be less tired after a long day's fishing as good casting is less taxing on the body. This equates to having a more all-round pleasurable experience on the water.

My research on the IFFF website <www.fedflyfishers.org> got me very excited and I wasted no time in signing up for the course which was arranged locally through the South African Flyfishing Association (SAFFA). You can find more information on their website <www.flyfishsouthafrica.co.za>.

SAFFA identified good fly-casting as the most basic and useful tool to enhance one's flyfishing experience and therefore decided to invest in fly-casting tuition. Ask any fishing guide to pinpoint the most frustrating part of their job and they will tell you that it's the inability of their clients to present a fly in the correct manner and in the right spot — i.e. lack of casting ability.

SAFFA was looking for a structured and uniform teaching program that not only tested a tutor's casting ability, but also the ability to teach casting to stu-

dents with a variety of personalities, skill levels and learning preferences. They therefore decided to partner with the International Federation of Flyfishers (IFFF) which is the world's recognised leader in fly-casting education.

SAFFA invited a Certified IFFF Casting Instructor, William van der Post from Holland, to come to South Africa to do the initial introduction for all the registered candidates in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. He was also going to run through the preparatory test procedure and course material.

William soon identified that loop formation was the single biggest area that needed addressing and this became the focus of his workshops. Helping candidates reduce the size of the casting loops enabled them to achieve accurate casting and greater distance and to cast better into the wind with the least amount of effort. Under William's guidance we had to consistently cast narrow loops on both the forward and backward casts with loops no wider than four feet and with reasonably parallel legs. It became clear that all the casts build on each other and it was good to start with the essentials of fly-casting and get those perfect before moving on to the test requirements.

A few months after William's visit Tim Rolston, a well known Cape Town-based flyfishing guide who passed his IFFF Casting Instructor's exam in the UK earlier in the year, travelled across South Africa to run follow up sessions with all the candidates. Tim assessed our progress and worked through the test requirements. This was an enjoyable experience and after one and a

half days' of intense training and practice, we realised that we still had a long way to go. We would have to put in a lot more time honing our techniques if we were to have any chance of passing the stringent exam.

An important part of the exam was demonstrating a very good understanding of casting techniques and mechanics. We also had to be able to transfer this knowledge and teach these skills to any student. We were encouraged to each enrol a beginner student and practice our teaching skills on them so that we would be comfortable with teaching when it came to the exam.

I was very fortunate that Leslie Thiert of the Jacaranda Flyfishing Club invited me to practice on their new members and novice casters. This seemed like the perfect win-win situation as we could work on our newly acquired skills and the newbies to the sport could learn the correct way of casting right from the start, thus preventing them from forming bad habits.

That exercise turned out to be a great success and we were invited back to do another session, this time aimed at an intermediate level of casting. This experience was a great help in preparing me for the upcoming exam and also a big confidence booster. I was surprised that I enjoyed the teaching part so much and found it to be a very rewarding experience.

Next came weekly training sessions of around four hours each with my casting partner Leslie, then daily one to two hour sessions during the last two weeks leading up to the exam.

Thomas Berggren an IFFF Master Caster on both single-handed and Spey rods came all the way from Sweden to examine all the South African candidates and was assisted by Tim Rolston.

The allocated time for the exam was three hours per student and consisted

of three distinct parts.

- **Certified Casting Instructors Workshop and Written test:** This part tests the candidates' overall knowledge of flyfishing and all aspects of the mechanics of fly-casting. It's a comprehensive written test on various aspects of casting and teaching.
- **Performance test:** All instructors must be skilled, well rounded casters. This second part of the test is to demonstrate a high level of practical knowledge. The candidate casting instructor must show mastery of all casting tasks set by the examiners.
- **Teaching test:** The largest part of the test requires candidates to demonstrate an ability to teach casting. This includes the ability to convey concepts; identify, analyse and correct flaws; field questions and make the learning accessible and enjoyable to any level of student. Students learn in three different ways: by seeing it/visual; by hearing it/verbal and by feeling it/kinaesthetic. All casting instructor candidates have to show that they are able to teach fly-casting in all three ways.

This qualification stands out because all lessons are based on the essentials of fly-casting and do not intend to change a student's personal casting style, nor try to teach a student to adopt the tutor's style of casting. In addition the tutor's teaching ability is of utmost importance and his/her teaching ability to all levels of students is thoroughly tested.

Forty-two candidates signed up for the course, but due to various reasons ranging from their personal motivation (some were only there to improve their casting), time constraints, the intensity of the course, its duration, and other commitments, only 18 students took the final exams. Of those, five

were finally internationally certified.

It was a long but very rewarding process of about 11 months in total and it took many practice hours to become certified, but all of us who saw it through to the end found it to be a worthwhile experience.

A big thank you to Cheryl Heyns from SAFFA for arranging this and also for the financial contribution from SRSA and Lotto that she procured. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for most of us as South African candidates. Many of us don't have the opportunity to travel internationally on a regular basis and at the moment that's the only other way that one can acquire this qualification.

SAFFA is currently in the process of implementing this qualification locally and are up-skilling potential coaches to be recognised and registered SAFFA Casting Tutors. The next step will be to get Master Casting Instructors certified through the IFFF in order to train and assess local prospective Casting Instructors.

Specific mention must be made of Tim Rolston who played such an important role in getting candidates prepared; Ken Quick and Linda Gorlei who worked as the regional co-ordinators and Mark Yelland who did a great deal of practical work with the candidates. Thank you!

Congratulations to Tim Rolston and Matt Rich from the Cape, Richard Gorlei and Gillies McDavid from KZN as well as Evert Minnaar from Gauteng who are all registered IFFF Casting Instructors. I'm proud to say that I am also now a registered IFFF Casting Instructor.

Please contact any of these CI's for casting tuition if you feel the need to iron out those niggly faults and improve your casting or if you want them to teach casting to a beginner — it will be well worth it.

