



My Nymphing Enlightenment



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When you ask American baby boomers who grew-up fly fishing, what was the first fly tying and fishing book they read, most say, Art Flick's *New Streamside Guide*, Nick Lyons Books, 1969. Even though rod designer Steve Rajeff grew up in California and this book is primarily about Catskill fly tying, he says this book was very influential to his early tying and fishing. It describes and shows color photos of a handful of insects and his Catskill dry fly imitations of them but only pencil drawings of the insects as nymphs. He did include nymph tying recipes though.

I was taught to fish Catskill Rivers in the early 1970s with dry flies and back then, the hatches were quite prolific. We only carried nymphs in our fly boxes like a hunter carries a compass; only for emergencies. My fellow anglers viewed caddis differently than mayflies and it was more acceptable to carry and use deep larva patterns as well as winged dry imitations when appropriate.

It was only as an adult that I really studied entomology and got serious about expanding the bug hatches I followed and imitated on a hook. Anything that fish eat on the surface excites and inspires me but sometimes those opportunities don't present themselves. That's why I made a conscious effort to prepare myself for trips to Croatia and Bosnia with Paul Arden, since I assumed he would want to catch fish 24 hours a day and I didn't want to be

a stick in the mud!

I read George Daniel's book, *Dynamic Nymphing* and the writings of the British and Pennsylvanian nymph gods. I knew about the groundswell caused by Aaron Jaspers 2010 DVD, *European Nymphing*, but I wanted to learn from authors and guides who had a greater depth of experience there. Aaron was primarily a young school teacher from New Jersey. Daniel learned most of his nymphing from his mentor Joe Humphrey and from Europeans on the World Fly Fishing Championship trail. My goal was to learn the basics and have all the flies and leaders in my fishing pack, ready to use on any trout stream I might encounter.

I had every size of tungsten bead head nymphs, lead wrapped nymphs and un-weighted nymphs in two basic profile; fat and thin. I like to stay with brown, olive and tan for nymph colors. I don't like Czech nymphs because they are too heavy for the situations I like to fish. I will however add weight putty or a split-shot when necessary. After tackling flies came the leaders.

The leader list included; 9m French leader, long-range, coil-indicator leader, tight-line and sighters. I exclude suspending indicators because in my opinion, they reduce the challenge too much. I bought, or tied all of these from Daniel's recipes and put them in Zip-Locs labeled with a Sharpie. I keep these in another Zip-Loc separate from my traditional leaders. The most revolutionary addition to my leader system is the tippet ring. It doesn't seem to impair the turnover and I even use it for dry flies. It can save you from replacing leaders consumed by knotting-on new tippet. I was ready for Europe.

So Paul and I arrived at the Ribnik River in Bosnia in July and found it extremely low with weeds to the surface almost everywhere. With Paul in training for the Hungarian Ironman, he used the trails to get exercise while scouting for big fish by speed walking with his heavy backpack. We fished separately. I waded very slowly and observed the fish behavior from water level. Paul even took breaks to ride his bike up and down the steep mountain roads. I tried fishing small un-weighted nymphs on a tight line but the weeds frustrated my efforts.

I was able to catch grayling and trout on a beetle fly during the bright days and olives hatched every evening till late. On darker days we had wonderful olive hatches that started in early afternoon. The highlight for me was fishing

with Paul in the same pools and sharing the fun into night. We also photographed each other with our fish. Once we had a double on dries in the dark; a nice grayling and a brown and Paul netted them both at the same time with his big McLean Weigh-Net. The next trip we took together that July was to the Gacka River in Croatia.

This famous spring creek meanders through farm country and looks like it was also altered into a defined channel. We were going to Paul's Gacka Gathering he arranged for instructors from the region to share techniques and have a little cast-off. I shared a demo on target accuracy casting. This is where I met Croatia's Alex Puskadija, also known as Sasha. Paul said Sasha is arguably the best nymph fisherman from any of the former Yugoslavian states.

As I wrote in my recent book, Fly-Casting Finesse, Sasha taught me a technique to form a floating tension loop in the fly line as a speed controller and indicator for nymphing. Let's say you make a cast quartering upstream at a 45 degree angle. As soon as it lands, you snap a loop downstream, then mend upstream to form a "U" or "V" shaped loop on the water. The loop should be downstream of the fly and leader and under tension, so the surface current pulls the loop and you can see what's happening to the fly. As it floats downstream, snap out more line to the rod leg of the loop, so nothing drags. The tighter and smaller the loop created, the slower it will float downstream. The wider the loop, the faster it will be pulled by the current. The loop size you create in this mend is governed by the same mechanics as in a cast.

The three of us spent a few days fishing after the gathering. The first afternoon, there was no perceptible hatch when we arrived but saw a big fish rising near the other bank. I tied-on a hopper fly and caught it with the river keeper watching me. There was a nice olive hatch toward dark and we all caught a few fish.

The next morning, Sasha was fishing within sight downstream of me and Paul was on the move, much further down. I caught a couple fish in the deeply flowing river on a BH Pheasant Tail and had one rainbow I estimated around 2 kilos, break a tippet that was too light on a jump. I never saw Sasha unleash his net. Toward dark, Paul walked back upstream to me and told me he caught some nice fish. Paul likes to change flies and use a streamer at dark if there's no hatch occurring. I asked him how Sasha did and he said, oh, he caught five fish. I looked at him incredulously but later learned how

deadly Sasha could be.

Last July, a few years after my first trip, Sasha, Paul and I went to a new waterway in Croatia for a day of fishing. Over breakfast, Sasha and I caught-up and shared we both read Daniel's book and found it very informative. Sasha said, yes, it contains all the dirty secrets! On this trip Paul also added that the best way to get a nymph to sink fast is to make a Collapse Cast. Paul attributes this cast to Herb Spannagl of New Zealand and describes how to make it: <http://www.sexyloops.com/flycasting/collapsecast.shtml> You can do this cast by making a high backcast and making your forward cast trajectory too low, thus making the leader crash without opening. The nymph sinks faster with a piled leader instead of a straight one. Paul also advocates as thin and long a tippet as you can get away with, because it has less water resistance and sinks faster. My leader was two meters long and 6X, or .13mm diameter. Paul was using a French Leader this day and has been using one whenever possible to fully learn its potential.

[To my knowledge, Herb was the first to write about the Collapsed Cast however I'm quite sure that the Balkan fly fishers came to use this technique by themselves and were using the technique a long time before ~ Paul Arden]

Sasha said today's fishing spot was going to be challenging and he's seen people fish it for five days without catching anything! The waterway we were about to fish was actually a manmade canal averaging two meters deep! Its banks are so steep, it's unwadable. All fishing is done from shore. Its only inhabitants are stocked rainbows and their main food source is the scud. According to my hosts, this water does not have any mayfly hatches. Since I didn't see a single fish rise, even to midges or terrestrials, I agreed nymphs or streamers were the best way to successfully fish this water.

Paul led the way upstream and started fishing and Sasha gave me a review of his loop technique, gave me one of his special scud flies and a few split-shot. He emphasized that you should select a heavy enough fly and split-shot (if necessary), to only reach the depth of the fish within a meter upstream of it. That way, you minimize the chance of snagging weeds or bottom.

He wished me luck and marched upstream to scout for big fish. I spotted a decent practice fish and started fishing. I caught that one and a couple more and then I was ready. I walked slowly upstream on the roadbed above the

canal until I spotted a really nice 'bow. I made a shore reference for the fish's position and walked further upstream unseen to make my presentation. I made two tries but couldn't see the fish in the sun's glare, until it jumped straight up with my fly in its mouth on the third try!

It took off downstream and I followed at a near run. Paul and Sasha knew the fish and came running to watch. It stopped about 100 meters downstream, turned and made a few short runs and Sasha said, "Fight it another five minutes, it's not ready!" but I knew I could end the fight then. Using the current, I led it downstream right onto some submerged weeds along shore and landed it. We took a photo and I told Sasha I enjoyed catching it and was ready for more nymphing lessons. He said, today you graduated!

Paul caught two big fish on his French leader set-up that day, one of which I photographed for him. He has his sights on using this deadly technique in Canada and the Yellowstone Region in the US in the near future. I hope to be there too.