

GOTTA HAVE GEAR

BALANCE TAPER FLY LINES BY NATHANIEL LINVILLE | Review by Brian Clark

For years now we've been hearing about the "arms race" in fly rods, how manufacturers keep pushing rods that are ever stiffer / faster, and how that's problematic. I agree, but I also don't. As discussed at some length in the Elevate Fly Casting column in both this and last issue, more "technical" rods (read: faster / stiffer) offer a risk <> reward trade-off that favors highly skilled casters. Many folks who don't practice casting obsessively would arguably be better off throwing medium-action (read: softer, slower) rods that provide more feedback to the caster and are more tolerant of mistakes in timing and power application.

That said, we've also been hearing for years that the proliferation of fly lines is likewise problematic. Too many specialized lines, too many nuanced choices in terms of tapers and coatings and cores, too much disconnect with the classical weight ranges (more on that below), and — for serious casting nerds, far too many lines with short, heavy heads that are wonderful for a few scenarios and inefficient for many others. Again, predictably, I both agree and don't.

For those willing to digest the mountain of technical minutiae and navigate the rod + line pairing gauntlet, it's a glorious time to be alive. There are now tapers for every niche, the coatings are better than ever, many modern lines are far more durable than their antecedents, and despite the potential environmental negatives associated with that durability, there's increasing attention being paid to the ecological impacts of plastics and forever chemicals.

That said, the myriad of choices can be downright intimidating for the novice, and prices have definitely gone up. It's also true that the old AFTTA (formerly AFTMA) table which attempted to connect grain weight ranges (for the first 30FT of line) to rod weights is now adhered to by only a handful of line models, muddying the waters around rod weight designations and making it harder still to trust out-of-the-box line pairings. That doesn't present a big problem for the expert caster with access to lots of lines and rods, but the tables and numbers and nomenclature can bewilder the beginner seeking simple answers to get started. Worse, it's clear that many fly shop folks and even some people providing casting instruction don't fully grasp

the performance compromises associated with differing line tapers and weight distributions.

Those trade-offs have not only been crystal clear for Nathaniel Linville, owner of The Angling Company, a fly shop in Key West, Florida, as well as too many tournament wins and IGFA records to list here, they bothered him to the place where he designed his own taper — with the help of some friends. Linville is dedicated to the saltwater game, and his casting philosophy and instruction focus on the efficient pursuit of flats species, especially permit and tarpon. Let's talk through a few of the concessions related to particular line designs, then we'll get to how the Balance Taper attempts to solve them.

For these purposes, assume that modern weight-forward fly lines are composed of two sections: the head and the running line. Most of the weight is in the head (thus "weight-forward") where it can help transfer energy from the cast to the leader and fly, and the way that weight is distributed through the head can lead to very different outcomes.

Brick-on-a-String (BOAS) Lines

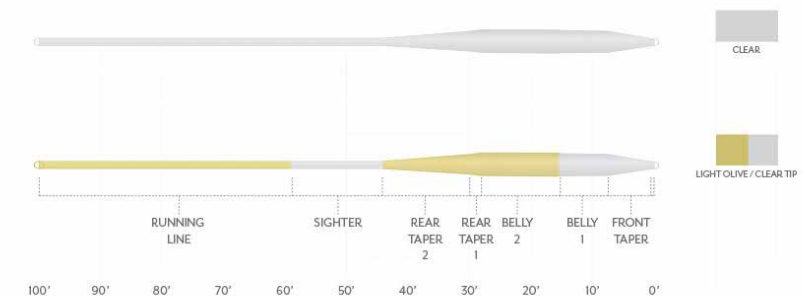
Around 15 years ago, several lines with relatively short (under 40FT) and overweight (according to the AFTTA table mentioned above) heads hit the market and immediately acquired a following. With these "aggressive" heads, even a small amount of line out the rod tip can get a cast moving, so these tapers are great for making quick, short casts with fast modern rods, and they can flip over large, heavy, or wind resistant flies at relatively close range. So long as most of the fishing action is happening close to the boat, that's all fine and good.

Here come the compromises: because the running line is so much thinner than the head, it struggles with aerodynamic efficiency as the casts get longer. Sometimes we say that the running line can't "support" the head. Although it's possible to shoot these lines to longer distances (because the head is heavy relative to the running line), it can be challenging to carry cast them delicately and accurately much beyond 40FT.

Long Belly Lines

In contrast to the BOAS, consider a line with a longer, thinner head with weight distributed more evenly over a larger percentage of the overall line. Many of these lines run closer to the AFTTA weight ranges, and they demand better casting technique to get the whole system moving, but they offer much more control and are more efficient for longer shots. Longer belly lines enable experienced casters to "carry" more line (that is, keeping more line aloft while false casting), allowing for greater accuracy and more delicate presentations at longer range.

Nathaniel and his crew sought to strike pragmatic compromises with their line, keeping most of the benefits of the heavier heads — quick deliveries to nearby targets — while extending the head and rear taper (the section behind the head) to provide more support for longer casts. They also put a great deal of work into determining the best distribution of mass for each rod weight, taking into account modern trends in rod design. The Balance Taper has been available exclusively from The Angling Company for a few years, but it just recently came into the mainstream lineup of Magnitude lines sold by Scientific Anglers. It now comes in Smooth and Textured, and also as Full Clear or with a Clear Tip. The SA Magnitude versions run US\$149.95 to \$179.95, whereas the older opaque TAC line is \$129.99. These lines are made only in 7WT to 12WT.



Did they succeed? We've been testing the 7WT and 10WT for over a year, and I've become a fan. These are seriously salty lines made for energetic casters. Despite boasting a head that's well over 40FT, they've kept a significant amount of weight up front; this gets things going rapidly without much line in the air, enabling very quick shots to fire-drill pop-up fish near the skiff, and it's possible to flip and control heavy flies at short range. The compromises become more evident for casts in the 50FT range and beyond; the Balance Taper is much, much better than the BOAS lines, and hero shots out into the 70FT+ range are altogether doable for the advanced caster. Much beyond that . . . well, it's a pretty heavy head to manage with a thin running line, and the overhang catches up eventually, making it challenging to carry more than 50-60FT. But this is clearly an ambitious angler's line intended to perform at realistic saltwater fishing distances, not a taper made for pure academic casting. It's a solid pairing with most modern saltwater rods.

TAC Website: www.anglingcompany.com/balance-taper-fly-line

SA Website: scientificanglers.com/product/magnitude-smooth-balance-clear-float

