

When it comes to sensitivity and "feel" in fishing, there is nothing that beats a handline. However, sidecast tackle comes very close.

The nature of the sidecast reel puts the line in a position where it can always be run across the anglers fingers, a far cry from the crazy chase required to stay in contact with the line coming back onto a threadline. Overheads offer a high degree of "feel" but lose out to the sidecast in other departments.

With the line always in touch and the ability to spin the reel both forward and backwards with equal ease the angler is in a unique position as regards contact with the bait. He can keep a tight line to an unweighted pilchard surging in and out of the wash, and quickly feed slack to a timid biter. Once a fish is hooked the reel becomes, in effect, a direct-drive winch with heaps more available power than any geared setup. Should it be necessary, that winch will lift fish as heavy as the line will handle to spots of considerable elevation.

Combine these assets with the reels ability to cast anything from unweighted baits to hefty snapper leads, and the fact that they require less maintenance than just about any other piece of equipment, and you come up with a very usable fishing tool. Sidecast reels are by no means the answer to every angling problem, and there are areas where they are not suitable at all, but there are a whole lot of other areas where they are and where anglers continue to use other styles of reel less suited to the conditions.

People shy away from Alveys for a number of reasons. One of the most common is the feeling that they are a big awkward reel requiring a long and cumbersome rod.

It is true that a threadline outfit intended for a similar purpose may be lighter and smaller, however, a correctly balanced Alvey setup can be just as pleasant, and perhaps easier to use. The new generation of fibreglass Alveys are considerably less weighty than their cedar predecessors, and the light-walled blanks to which they may be matched are no strain on even the most feather-weight angler.

The other bogey that puts a lot of guys off sidecasting is the line-twist problem. Due to the fact that the geometry of the reel is swung through 90 degrees and back again in the course of each cast, a certain amount of twist is imparted to the line. Over a period of time this can turn the line into a writhing twisting mess that leaps off the spool and crawls into tangled lumps as if alive. But its not an incurable problem.

Choice of characteristics in the line you fill your Alvey with is one part of the solution. A limper line is less prone to twist than a stiff springy one. By limp we don't necessarily mean soft, the two properties are quite different. Hardness and springiness are characteristics of some of the cheaper nylons, in particular those brands you sometimes see distributed by chain-stores, the moral of the story is a common one, you get what you pay for.

Line characteristics are part of the solution, but they are not the complete answer. The avoidance of line twist comes down, in the long run, to the use of swivels in the terminal rig.

Swivels are one of those little pieces of gear viewed in very different ways by different fishermen. To some they are magic devices capable of all kinds of miracles, to others they appear less than useless. Both points of view can be quite correct.

The big secret to making swivels work is to use the smallest size possible on the line being fished.

Unfortunately this raises the major drawback of swivels, sometimes they break. To be more correct they pull apart. In keeping with Murphy's Law, this only ever happens on really outstanding fish.

The style of swivel most prone to this behaviour is the barrel swivel, which is also the most commonly used. It's not a regular fault, perhaps one in 500 such swivels let go, but it always happens at the worst possible moment. The failure is most often due to one of the eyelets pulling from the body under extreme pressure.

You may decide to live with the slim chance of swivel-failure, or on the other hand you might start looking at more reliable styles. Next step up the ladder is the box swivel. Slightly more expensive than the barrel type, it has a much lower failure rate, and even more importantly it allows you to do your own quality control test by looking at the ends of the eyelet inside the box, thus reassuring yourself that they are mushroomed enough not to pull out.

At the top of the tree are the ball-bearing swivels. These work beautifully and are very strong, but their unit cost puts them outside consideration for run-of-the-mill fishing. When it comes to tackling the big pelagics or hefty jews though, they're worth thinking about.

Regardless of what type swivels you choose to buy their use with a sidecast reel almost obligatory if line twist hassles are to be minimised. Not only should you use the smallest (and therefore most easily turning) swivels suitable to the line test you should consider using more than one in each rig.

The ideal setup is to have a swivel above the sinker as well as the conventional one below it, this is a real boost in beating line-twist. Just how far above depends on how far you want a biting fish to be able to run before it feels the resistance on the sinker, and what kind of drop from the rod tip you handle when casting.

As a final word on Alveys remember that - "low-maintenance" doesn't mean "no-maintenance". Sure you can get sand in the works, you can wash it out in the surf, but it's not a bad idea to wash the saltwater off with a blast from the hose tap at home. The occasional dab of grease on the spindle and handle axles doesn't hurt either. Look after your Alvey and it will look after you probably for a very long time.

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