

Height Differences in Epee Fencing  
and  
Strategies for the Shorter Fencer

by

Paul J. Sise

November, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for certification as Fencing Master

## Table of Contents:

1) Introduction	3
2) Analysis of Taller and Shorter Fencers	6
3) The Danger Zone	12
4) Survival Strategies for the Shorter Fencer	14
5) General Observations and Advice	18
6) Preparation	26
7) Finishing with Fleche	34
8) Responses to Two Specific Tactics Employed by Taller Fencers	39
9) Psychological Warfare	44
10) Bout Analysis	45
11) The Short Blade	51
12) Footwork	55
13) Drills and Lessons	61
14) Conclusion	67
Resources	70
Recordings and Special Thanks	71

## 1) Introduction:

Fencing, like most sports, has a great diversity in its participants. We have diversity in physical characteristics such as age, height, strength, speed, and overall athleticism. There are also the psychological and emotional variables, such as courage, aggression, patience, cunning, and capacity to endure stress to name a few. It is clear that some characteristics offer people an advantage. It is generally accepted that it is better to be quick than slow, better to be strong than weak, better to be intelligent than dim-witted, etc. In some sports we expect the elite athletes to share certain physical characteristics. Basketball and volleyball tend to have very tall athletes, for instance. We see success in fencing, even at the elite levels, from a variety of individuals with different physical characteristics. There is no ideal platonic form of a fencer. Epee fencers though tend to be taller, but height is not a requirement for success in epee. As coaches, we need to be aware that we need to modify our teaching to adapt to the needs of the individual. Not all people can be fit into the same fencing mold. As Czajkowski states in Understanding Fencing, “Every fencer should be treated by the coach in a different way. The fencing master should avoid trying to push the pupil into an artificial “champion profile,” but should help him to develop his specific, individual style of fencing...”(2005)

I will be focusing on an aspect of this diversity, specifically, the shorter epee fencer. Stereotypically, epeeists tend to be the tallest fencers of the three weapons. This is seen especially in men’s epee, considering that the height range for men tends to be greater than, and start at a greater average height than the height range for women. What

a significant advantage, then, does a an unusually tall female epee fencer have when she is over 6 feet tall fencing against women of average or less than average height!

The average female height in USA is about 5' 4." The average male height in USA is about 5' 10."

Can a shorter fencer beat a taller fencer? Height alone will not win a bout. It can however, at the lower levels especially, make it much easier. Considering that the majority of fencers in the U.S. are recreational or locally competitive, and that there is such diversity in height amongst those fencers, it is to our advantage to consider this issue.

The inspiration for this paper came from a young woman I worked with while I was coaching the UMass Amherst fencing club. Her name was Jeanette. She came to the club as a freshman and already had some experience fencing epee. My first thought looking at her petite 5'1" frame was that she certainly didn't look like what you'd expect an epeeist to look like. For her though, it was epee or nothing. She joined the team, worked hard, came to practice, and competed.

Early on I realized that I couldn't teach her to fence epee the way I might fence epee. I outweighed her by eighty pounds and was over a foot taller than she was. Telling her to make a strong beat attack or to attack to the torso would be foolish. I needed to look at epee from her perspective, which was a challenge that provided me with the opportunity to grow as a coach. Together we slowly developed a personalized system for her fencing that relied on avoiding being within the distance where she could be hit but couldn't hit back, emphasis on controlling the opponent's blade, and both offensive and defensive second intention, especially countertime.

After two years she was seeing some success, but despite displaying a good understanding of the game and being in good physical shape, her results on the piste lagged behind those of her peers. It seemed all too easy for her opponents, who were usually larger women, to overpower her blade or avoid her blade. She was often distraught and frustrated at her lack of success. She was determined to improve, but the thought lingered that she just might never be a good fencer. Considering that she was largely successful in other aspects of her life such as academics and music, this lack of success was something with which she had trouble dealing.

Toward the end of her second year at UMass Jeanette came to me and complained of pain in her forearm and wrist. I asked her about what she had been doing recently, which drills, how tightly she was holding her grip, etc. When she picked up her epee and swung it around a few times she grimaced with pain. It was obvious to me, at that moment watching her laborious attempts to move her blade that some change needed to take place for her to continue to be able to fence. We discussed options such as taking a break from fencing, physical therapy, and switching to foil, but it was clear that she wanted to continue to fence and epee at that. On a whim, I ordered an electric epee with a number 2 length blade and gave it to her the next week. I didn't tell her it was a children's length blade, but a Jeanette sized epee. Her eyes lit up once she took it and she exclaimed loudly how happy she was that it seemed to fit her, not just her hand but her body type.

Over the course of the next season she continued to fence, take lessons, and compete. The smaller blade not only eliminated the arm pain, but it also allowed her to make quicker, more accurate moves. The blade also facilitated the up close and personal style of fencing that she was developing. She did not become an unbeatable fencer

machine, but her enjoyment of the sport and her success on the strip both increased dramatically. She was, in fact, able to win against some opponents who only a year previous were handedly beating her!

Jeanette was not unique. It wasn't long after Jeanette started to see success with the short blade that I introduced the idea to another petite fencer, Belinda, who was suffering from tendonitis but refused to give up fencing epee. After four months of using a shorter blade her tendonitis was gone and we saw an increase in speed and accuracy that led to greater success in bouts as well as increased enjoyment.

And so we come to the two issues that I will deal with in this paper. Firstly, that an understanding of the issue of height difference in conjunction with a specific training program can be useful for the shorter fencer, and secondly that a shorter blade, normally reserved for youth, may be a beneficial for some fencers to alleviate strain and improve the overall quality and enjoyment of fencing. In this paper I will compare and contrast shorter and taller fencers, offer strategies for the shorter fencer, and discuss shorter blades as an option for some fencers (particularly petite women) to alleviate pain caused by unwieldy full sized blades as well as increase their blade speed and accuracy.

## **2) Analysis of taller and shorter fencers:**

In Understanding Fencing, Czajkowski states that at the highest levels there are a variety of body types represented. "In fencing, one ideal champion profile does not exist. World class results are achieved by various types of fencers: fencers of differing ages; fencers of different schools; tall and short, lean and plump..." (2005) There is no ideal body type for fencing, though at all levels, particularly the beginning and intermediate

levels, there is an advantage to being able to outreach the opponent but that advantage is itself not required to be successful overall. It seems reasonable that so long as a fencer does not have any glaring weaknesses and that he makes the best use of his strengths then he can succeed against a variety of opponents. Again Czajkowski states, “Top fencers win, not because they have no weak points...(but) because they manage to develop their potential possibilities – their strong points – to the highest degree.” (2005) Let us then look at fencers in relation to height and see what are those strengths and weaknesses.

-Advantages for taller fencer:

1) The taller fencer has an advantage at greater distance because of his or her reach. He can hit his opponent from further away while out of reach of his opponent. The taller fencer has in most bouts, several opportunities to make use of this advantage, where he need only hit his opponent first while distance is closing. He has this opportunity at the beginning of every bout and between every valid touch since the guard lines place the fencers out of distance. The shorter fencer must each time avoid being hit in the danger zone and then make his own touch, which is a more complicated and difficult responsibility.

2) Longer legs can produce longer lunges. Many tall fencers do not use the full reach of their lunges because of the increased time it takes to make the lunge, and perhaps more importantly, the increased recovery time. A shorter lunge made by a tall fencer may be able to cover the same distance as a long lunge made by a shorter fencer, but will feel relatively easy to recover from by the taller fencer. That may be the genuine advantage to having longer legs when fencing.

3) Long arms create longer thrusts that aid all offensive and counter offensive actions.

This produces the ability to have a large range to strike from with the lunge. Long arms also aid in making attacks with angulation. If the opponent parries, the fencer may be able to angulate to reposition the point and still strike.

4) With height there may be associated strength and mass. Strong and long arms can produce very powerful beat attacks, blade transfers, and parries.

5) At the beginner level, well before their shorter counterparts, tall fencers will have some success in competition simply due to height and reach. Greater reach means he can rely on attacks and counter attacks while using defense as a backup. Counter attacking at the right moment takes much less training, experience, and skill than what is required for success by a shorter fencer.

6) Height and strength may aid in creating a psychological advantage. This may be both in the form of self-confidence in the taller fencer and self-doubt in the shorter fencer.

Generally this advantage is seen between fencers who are unknown to each other. Once the true ability of the opponents is discovered this advantage may increase if the shorter fencer feels he is the inferior or may fade if the taller fencer proves the inferior.

7) Actions from the shorter fencer that normally would score with a single touch against an opponent of similar height have a greater chance of ending in a double touch if the taller fencer counterattacks to the easy to hit torso.

-Disadvantages for taller fencer:

1) Long lunges tend to be harder or slower to recover from. This isn't the case for everyone and is not a concrete rule.

2) If a long attack misses or is parried, the taller fencer is at risk from an attack by a shorter fencer who closes the distance. The taller fencer must withdraw his point and weapon arm before being able to make a touch.

3) Taller/larger fencers often have a slower footwork cadence. They may be able to cover distance quickly, but are at a disadvantage when changing direction. I will expand on this in a following paragraph.

4) Taller fencers who rely solely on their height and reach to make their touches may have a harder time developing beyond the novice/intermediate stage.

5) They may be attacked to either the high line or low line by the shorter opponent.

There is a distinct advantage for equal height fencers to attack to the high line, and many attacks will still be to the high line, but a smaller opponent will see the underside of the weapon arm easier, and be tempted to hit it, and the leg more often. The taller fencer therefore needs to worry about being hit on both the high and low lines while fencing a shorter opponent.

6) They may have greater difficulty making a riposte at close distance.

-Advantages for shorter fencer:

1) Shorter fencers are often quicker. If a fencer can make more actions than his opponent in the same amount of time, then he has a distinct advantage.

2) They are attacked to the high line most of the time. The fencer does not need to place as much emphasis on defending the low line, and can focus most of his anxiety on defending the high line.

3) They may be underestimated by their opponents. If the taller fencer overestimates his chances against his smaller adversary, whom he expects to be a pushover, then he will not fence with optimum effort and care. This can be a big advantage for the shorter fencer during the beginning of the bout before the taller fencer becomes aware of his opponent's abilities. Note though that if the taller fencer gains a sense of self-confidence but still makes an effort to fence his best and not to underestimate his opponent, that this can become a disadvantage for the shorter fencer.

4) They have less target area and may be harder to hit. A shorter fencer may be able to duck and avoid a touch to the shoulder, for example, while making a successful counter attack. This can be particularly frustrating for the taller opponent.

5) At close range they may be able to hit while the opponent is temporarily vulnerable.

6) They can more comfortably make a successful riposte at closer distance than the taller fencer can.

7) Attacks and counterattacks made with angulation to shallow targets are easier, particularly digs to the underside of the opponent's hand and the touch to the knee.

-Disadvantages for shorter fencer:

1) Lack of reach means attacking or counterattacking to deep target without controlling the opponent's blade is risky if not suicidal.

2) Success requires greater skill than simply extending the arm. Success then comes much later for the shorter fencer than the taller one, which can be disheartening. Success may require more advanced tactics such as second intention.

- 3) A smaller frame may have less strength and mass associated with it, so beat attacks may be weaker. Flicking may be impossible due to lack of required strength for some individuals.
- 4) For some fencers, particularly petite women, there is the greater risk of developing discomfort, fatigue, and injury in the wrist and forearm due to the use of the weapon.
- 5) May be at a psychological disadvantage. Upon seeing his shorter opponent, the taller fencer's self-confidence may increase. So long as the taller fencer does not allow himself to underestimate the shorter opponent, this self-confidence can be a strong advantage for the taller fencer. The shorter fencer can contribute to this disadvantage if he allows himself to feel self-doubt or be intimidated. Note though, that if the taller fencer underestimates the shorter adversary, that this can become an advantage for the shorter fencer.
- 6) May be required to be quicker and faster in order to be successful.
- 7) May be required to expend more energy during the bout in order to accomplish his goals.

It is worthwhile, if only out of academic curiosity, to note the difference in linear velocity and angular velocity when discussing taller and shorter fencers because of the difference in limb length. Imagine two points on a spinning disc such as a record album. One point is at the edge, the other is nearer to the center. The points both make one rotation per second, but the outside dot travels a greater distance to make a full rotation. To bring this back to fencing, the taller fencer can move about the strip quickly and cover distance quickly despite his legs appearing to move slowly in comparison to those of the shorter fencer. This goes for all footwork actions including the lunge and recovery. The

shorter fencer must expend more energy to move his legs quicker to keep pace and distance with the taller fencer. This is because the distal points of a limb, much like the dot on the edge of the record album, cover more distance in the same time than points closer to the joint despite their being connected. The longer the limbs, the more distance can be covered relative to the speed at which the limb straightens or flexes. The longer limbs, though, the greater amount of force needed to initiate their movement from a static position. Longer limbs also would require more effort to change the direction of their movement. Of course, if the fencers are in good athletic condition there should be little or no thought on the difficulty or inefficiency of moving their limbs due to limb length. They probably have other things to worry about while fencing.

### **3) The Danger Zone:**

The danger zone (or zone of unilateral vulnerability) is the distance range where one fencer can be hit on deep target such as the elbow, shoulder, or torso while being unable to make his or her own touch on the same target area on his or her opponent. While moving through the danger zone, the shorter fencer is at a disadvantage and the taller fencer, with his greater reach, is at an advantage. It helps to understand Wojciechowski's term "critical distance," here, which is "the relative distance at which one can reach the target even if the opponent starts to move back, (albeit, too late)." (1995 Theory, Methods and Exercises in Fencing) The danger zone is the range of distance where a shorter fencer is within the opponent's critical distance but has not yet achieved his own critical distance.

For a shorter fencer to hit the opponent's hand without moving into the danger zone, the opponent's weapon arm must be fully extended and the shorter fencer must also have his weapon arm fully extended. This is due to equivalent blade length. The reality though is that these types of touches are extremely rare.

It is the responsibility of the shorter fencer to recognize when he or she is in the danger zone, to avoid being hit while in the danger zone, to score touches whenever possible, and if required to move through the danger zone to the safety zone to score a touch. The safest way to move through the danger zone is to take control of and keep control of the opponent's blade while rapidly closing the distance. The shorter fencer making a riposte with bind and fleche exemplifies this.

The danger zone is not an exact distance but a range. The range is dependant on the height discrepancy between the opponents. If, for instance, both fencers tried to score using reach alone and both choose to hit the torso as in foil, the taller fencer, with his greater reach, will hit the shorter fencer long before the shorter fencer gets close enough to touch. If the fencers are further apart, expanding the distance to epee distance, and the taller fencer cannot hit the torso of the shorter opponent using his reach, he may be able to hit the forearm, but the degree of difficulty has increased. As such, as the shorter fencer approaches the taller fencer, he must be aware that he will become vulnerable to attack before he is able to score touches himself. He must also be made aware that as he gets even closer the degree of danger escalates, as the taller fencer is able to hit more of her target area. Eventually though he gets close enough to be able to score his own touches and the risk to both fencers evens out. Finally, if he gets very close to his taller opponent and instigates infighting, he himself will have the advantage. It may be

acceptable to the shorter fencer to fence in the outer portion of the danger zone where he may be putting his arm at risk but not his torso. Essentially he'd be keeping strict epee distance but not approach foil distance.

The greater the difference in height between the opponents the larger the danger zone is. Experiments at my fencing club have shown that if the shorter fencer is only one or two inches shorter then the danger zone may be insignificant. If the danger zone range is small then the shorter fencer may be able to accommodate for it by making his lunges a little longer than usual, or by protracting the weapon shoulder a bit more than usual. If the shorter fencer is four or more inches shorter then the danger zone becomes very real and needs to be respected. This is because it requires the shorter fencer to use an additional tempo in order to make up the reach disparity. In that additional tempo used for an advance by the shorter fencer, the taller fencer can be making his extension, allowing him to initiate a threatening action before the shorter fencer is able to do so. Such a discrepancy in height is very common in mixed gender fencing, and still fairly common in same gender matches. If the shorter fencer uses anything less than a full-length blade while the taller fencer uses a full-length blade then the danger zone is increased.

#### **4) Survival Strategies for the shorter fencer:**

Here we will see that various coaches advise three simple rules for fencing taller opponents. They are 1) Stay out of reach. 2) Don't get hit when you are in reach. 3) Get

in close and hit. Simple enough, perhaps, but the important issue here is how this all relates to the concept of the danger zone.

Castello recognized the existence of the danger zone, though he did not have a name for it. He suggested that:

*Short fencers, like tall ones, must give careful consideration to their proper distance, though in a slightly different way. At close quarters, the shorter fencer has the advantage, for he can score on “jabs” more easily than a tall fencer with long arms. The short fencer, therefore must build his attack around methods of “closing distance” which give him the maximum safety. This can be done, for the most part, by attacks on the blade, binds, or envelopments.*

Castello notes that one way of breaking through the danger zone is to advance while making a bind. He describes the technique:

*In executing a bind, the short fencer should advance so that his body is “inside” the taller man’s point- that is, the opponent’s point must have passed beyond the attacker’s body so that it cannot be brought back into a threatening position except by a slow jab. The bind and advance must therefore be executed almost simultaneously. (1931 Theory of Fencing)*

Alaux agrees that binds and other such actions are helpful against taller fencers. He notes that the shorter fencer can “Gain control of the blade before developing the attack

by using attacks on the blade or taking-of-the-blade to get the right-of-way or gain a safe tempo when executing the attack.” (1975, Modern Fencing) Alaux also suggests that it is important for the shorter fencer to deny the taller adversary the right to a clean riposte. “He tries to close in at the end of his attack to deny his opponent the opportunity to riposte.” (1975, Modern Fencing) Not only then is it to the shorter fencer’s advantage to control the blade while getting into distance to strike, but it is also important to continue to force that close distance and control the blade in order to continue to keep and advantage, one where the shorter fencer is both safer and more likely to score than his opponent.

As the shorter fencer is entering the danger zone she should be ready to deal with a counterattack and should either use countertime to continue in and hit, or he may wish to parry the counterattack with a retreat. The latter is a more cautious route, where the shorter fencer abandons the chance to score in order to prevent the opponent from scoring. This may be necessary in matches where the taller fencer is ahead in points. Once the shorter fencer has passed successfully through the danger zone he should strike without hesitation.

The taller fencer should force himself to maintain a distance that allows, with patience, the ability to hit the hand thus making the most of his reach advantage. If the taller fencer is having difficulty hitting the opponent’s hand he may decide to concentrate his effort to attack the biceps or torso. This can be an advantage to the shorter fencer who can take the blade, step in, and strike. Castello noted:

*The tall fencer should seldom attempt to hit his opponent's body, for in making such an attempt, the tall fencer is giving up the natural advantage which his reach gives him. In order to hit the body, the tall fencer has to step within range of this shorter opponent, and the latter may score a hit on the tall fencer's hand, or arm, or leg, which ever may be the nearest vulnerable spot. As long as the tall fencer concentrates on his opponent's arm, he has the advantage. (1931, Theory of Fencing)*

He will also find comfort at this distance with a remise or reprise to the torso should the initial attack to the hand fail. Likewise, the smaller fencer wants his opponent to attack deeper so that he comes into his distance, so that he can parry riposte, infight, etc. The shorter fencer, therefore, must prevent the taller fencer from concentrating on and maintaining longer distance. Making extra efforts to get in and out of distance quickly so that the taller fencer can never find himself in proper distance can do this. Not only does this help the shorter fencer to protect himself, but this also plants the seeds of doubt in the taller fencer's mind. He may begin to doubt that he is capable of, with reasonable effort and effectiveness, controlling the distance, and that doubt will erode the taller fencer's game. Castello writes:

*As a rule the shorter men make up in speed and agility what they lack in reach...He should stay well out of distance – keeping always in mind the longer reach of the tall opponent – until he is ready for a decisive engagement. Then, if he is ready to attack he must make full use of his speed and agility to get within striking distance, and*

*just as rapidly to open the gap again in case the attack should fail.* (1931 Theory of Fencing)

## **5) General Observations and Advice:**

The shorter fencer has some options concerning his guard position. He may want to keep the tip slightly up and pointed at the opponent's hand to maintain a constant threat. For a left handed fencer vs. a right handed fencer the shorter fencer has a lower guard position which places his point just under the opponent's guard with his point aimed at the taller fencers hand. This gives the shorter fencer a good position to make a stop-hit but may put him at risk for having his blade taken. If the opponent favors taking the blade then he (the shorter fencer) should keep the blade parallel to the floor to make it harder to beat or bind. He could also hold it to the side or very low. It is important to remember though that the fencer's blade should be in motion so that it will not be easily taken. The on guard position is dynamic. The shorter fencer may wish to keep his feet slightly further apart with his legs bent deeply to facilitate making changes of direction, or he may simply wish to broaden his stance and deepen the bend in his legs during changes in direction.

The shorter fencer needs to place emphasis on protecting his high line somewhat more than his low line. (The shorter fencer, like all epeeists, would more likely counterattack his opponent's low line attacks, and in addition would be attacked to the low line somewhat less often than to the high line, and thusly would, when parrying, most likely be parrying in the high line.) If the shorter fencer's strength is a parry 6 and

riposte then this can be advantageous. In parry positions 3,4, and 6, the tip may be held somewhat higher to create a larger defensive wall of steel. The fencer may wish to supinate his hand for parry 4 in order to make use of the strength of his thumb to oppose the opponent's blade if the opponent is much stronger. For the same reason the shorter fencer may wish to select parry 3 instead of 6 for defending the high outside line. The blade position in 3, 4, and 6 should have the tip somewhat past the guard to allow the opponent's blade to slide down to the forte and guard. Parries of 1 and 9 (or high 6 if you wish to call it that) are useful for added variety, as transitional positions, and for getting under the opponent's blade in order to press and close the distance to initiate infighting.

The shorter fencer is at a disadvantage when it comes to attacking and counterattacking the torso when he does not have control of the opponent's blade. He may be able to hit these deeper targets without controlling the opponent's blade physically if he can control it through trickery. Feints and false attacks are always an option if the opponent can be fooled into reacting to them. Any time the opponent's blade is moving to a parry position and therefore not ready to strike, there is a small window of opportunity, a tempo, to score. This is true for fencers of any height, but is especially important to realize for the shorter fencer as it may be the only way he can create an opportunity to hit his taller opponent on deep target without physically controlling the blade.

Controlling the distance creates physical security and can plant doubt into the mind of the opponent. There is also the chance that running the opponent back and forth will also tire him out. Evangelista says that a strategy to fencing shorter opponents is to "keep the shorter fencer out of distance by retreating often, causing his actions to forever

fall short. This with both frustrate him and tire him out.” (1996, The Art and Science of Fencing) Yes, this is a valid strategy, but it can work both ways. If the shorter fencer has the speed and stamina, he may very well do the same to his taller opponent. Since the shorter fencer must expend more energy in both bladework and footwork to match his taller adversary though he needs to be sure that he is employing this strategy against an already weary opponent, else he risk tiring himself out.

Finally on this matter of distance, Alaux suggests that against a taller fencer, the shorter (foil) fencer should “Gain the distance by using quick footwork combined with rapid feints to put him off balance.” (1975, Modern Fencing)

The shorter fencer may employ the beat attack as a first intention offensive action if he is strong enough to effectively displace the opponent’s blade. If he is not strong enough, then the beat will serve only to stimulate the opponent’s defensive or more likely counteroffensive reaction, and will therefore help the opponent instead of himself. The beat attack, therefore, would be best used to set up countertime, where the shorter fencer makes a beat attack and hopes for the counterattack, in order to abort the original attack and take the opponent’s blade, allowing him to control the opponent’s blade which gives him some added safety while he scores a touch.

If the taller fencer makes defensive errors it is preferable to hit him on the hand or forearm if his tempo is quick. If his tempo is noticeably slower, as may be the case, the shorter fencer may press to hit the deeper target without controlling the taller fencer’s blade. Normally though, touches to the body are associated with actions where the taller fencer’s blade is under control.

On the shorter fencer's offense, a variety of actions and tactics to keep the taller opponent unsure is most successful, both when attacking the hand and, if being more aggressive, going in deeper to the torso and leg. Nick Evangelista suggests, "The tall epeeist will attempt to use his height and reach to his advantage, both physically and psychologically. To counter this, you must press in on him relentlessly, attacking his hand." (1996, The Art and Science of Fencing)

The ability to parry during an advance is critical for the shorter fencer for several reasons. The first is that many fencers will attack during their opponent's advance. It is advantageous for the shorter fencer to close the distance while controlling the opponent's blade in order to make the riposte because it puts the attacking point behind the target area. Advancing with the parry also collapses the distance which negates the possibility of the attacker making a continuation or more complicated response. The shorter fencer can then make a riposte directly or indirectly. If the distance is close and the defender wishes to make a direct riposte the lateral deviation of the engagement (size of the parry) will be exaggerated in order to allow room for the blade. From parry six, an indirect riposte to low line around the guard (as a disengage) is favorable. Finally, if the shorter fencer can manage to advance while making a two or eight parry and can close the distance to short thrust distance (toe to toe) he can make an indirect riposte around the tip (as in a low line coupe). The technique for this is very specific and requires that the opponent's point is safely behind the lead thigh. From parry two/eight, with a bent arm, the blade should be held in line with the opponent's torso. Swing the weapon arm backwards from the shoulder till the hand is past the hip and the release of the opponent's blade is felt. The minimal resistance between blades during the engagement will provide

the change of line once the defender's blade slides off the opponent's point. Immediately, without redirecting the blade, swing the weapon arm forward to place the point on the opponent's belly. The entire phrase from initiating the parry with advance, the retraction of the blade to allow for the low line coupe, and resulting touch must be done very quickly.

From David Micahnik's presentation in Philadelphia entitled "Epee, the Long and the Short of It," (2003) shorter fencers need to force their opponents to take a longer route to hit the target through the use of opposition, deflection, and angulation. Attacks, counterattacks, and ripostes with engagement and angulation would force the taller fencer's point to travel a greater distance to reach the target and score. This increases the time it takes the taller fencer's point to hit the target, and in that additional time the shorter fencer may be able to overcome the opponent's blade, score, or change the distance to favor himself. Micahnik also demonstrated at the San Antonio AGM (2004) that although the length of one's legs cannot be increased, there are ways of extending one's lunge reach via leaning and protracting the shoulder. These minor modifications to the textbook lunge can help even the odds between fencers of different heights.

Flexibility aids in the ability to create long lunges that can help reduce the shorter fencer's reach disadvantage. Proper stretching with the goal of increasing flexibility in the hamstrings and hips should be considered. People of the same height have a surprising difference in their maximum lunge distance due to individual physical geometry and flexibility. Measurements taken at PVFA have shown that flexibility is a significant contributor to the overall length of one's lunge. (See Table 1.) Though overall the tallest fencers had the longest lunges and the shortest fencers had the shortest

lunges, there was variation in lunge length amongst fencers of equal height. Some shorter fencers were able to produce lunges with comparable length to those of people who were four or five inches taller than they were. Likewise, some fencers produced shorter lunges than expected for their height. Those differences were attributed primarily to flexibility, or lack thereof. (I recognize that the proportion of limb length to torso length also contributes to this variability. Those with short torsos and long limbs will produce somewhat longer lunges than people of the same height with longer torsos and shorter limbs.) Beware the fencers with experience in ballet or eastern martial arts. Though a fencer may be shorter and have shorter reach with thrust, great flexibility and a long lunge may help eliminate a height disadvantage.

Another way to even out the height discrepancy is to use a French grip weapon and hold it by the pommel. This method of holding the weapon is often called pummeling or posting. This adds two or three inches of reach which may make a difference in the attack/counterattack situation. The drawback to doing this is that the fencer gives up some power in manipulating the blade so it is important to avoid blade contact. The shorter fencer who pommels should keep his blade low to avoid offering it to the opponent. He should focus on counterattacking the arm during the taller opponent's attack. The shorter fencer should practice hitting all sides of the opponent's arm and considering his own weapon starts from underneath he should emphasize touches to the underside of the hand and forearm. Should the fencing phrase develop beyond this simple attack/counterattack scenario the added reach from pummeling will prove useful since it reduces the size of the danger zone.

In modern epee, with the counterattack so prevalent, all fencers should be comfortable with countertime, that is, actions used against counterattacks. Since it is to the advantage of the taller fencer to counterattack his smaller opponent, it would seem even more important for shorter fencers to master countertime, in addition to other similar second intention tactics. Castello notes that shorter fencers may employ countertime against taller fencers, but he also warns against its use:

*When the shorter fencer knows his opponent thoroughly, he may resort to false attacks to draw the opponent's return or stop thrust which may in turn be parried so that he may score on the counter-return; but this is unusual I dueling sword...where there are no conventions of right of way, such false attacks are dangerous...* (1931) Theory of Fencing

This concern of Castello's is valid and his advice sound. The epee fencer is a dangerous opponent, capable of, within reason, acting and reacting in a variety of ways, and they are certainly not likely to cooperate with their opponents. The general advice that one should know well his opponent in order to best plan his strategy should always be taken seriously. The more complicated the series of actions the fencer wishes to employ, the more he needs to know about his opponent in order to successfully predict his opponent's responses.

Michel Alaux devotes almost a page and a half of his book to an analysis of the short fencer and the tall fencer. It is found in a section titled "Bouting," but admittedly is within the Foil chapter. Most of his assessments can and should be transferred to epee as

well. Alaux suggests that (in foil) against a taller fencer, the shorter fencer should “Give preference to second intention by provoking counterattacks on the part of the tall fencer which can then be parried and riposted, or to false attacks to provoke a parry and riposte which in turn can be parried and counter riposted.” (1975, Modern Fencing) Alaux seems more comfortable advising to use offensive second intention and countertime than Castello was. Perhaps this is because Castello was discussing one-touch epee, which had little room for error and risk taking, while Alaux was discussing more modern 5 touch foil.

While on defense, the shorter fencer must be wary of the opponent’s continuation of the attack. The taller fencer will often attack to the hand and continue to deeper target. He may do this with an advance to hit the hand and lunge to the body, or a short lunge to hand and make a second kick to extend the lunge to hit the torso, or any variation thereof. The shorter fencer then should be ready not only to parry an initial attack but the remise or reprise as well. He can do this by developing a defense system using multiple parries, or parries followed by envelopments. The initial parry attempts to pick up the attack, and the second parry or envelopment attempts to pick up the continuation. If the continuation is expected, we can consider this a form of defensive second intention.

Fencers should seek out opponents of various height, speed, skill, experience, handedness, and temperament, in order to fully develop their potential to face and defeat the variety of opponents that they may meet on the strip. Many fencers will go out of their way to fence lefties while others purposely avoid them. The same can be said of tall fencers. Perhaps excuses are made, such as “Oh, I don’t want to fence him... he’ll just stick out his arm and nail me, and that won’t be much fun at all.” Well, perhaps it won’t

be much fun, but not everything good for us in fencing, such as exercises and drills, are much fun either, but we do them because they help us to improve.

In addition to fencing taller opponents, it would benefit the shorter fencer to take lessons from coaches who are tall enough to create a significant danger zone, ie, coaches who are four or more inches taller than they are. This gives the fencer the opportunity not only to practice his tactics and techniques against the taller individual, but also to develop a familiarity with a taller body to work against. Familiarity leads to a sense of comfort, and this feeling of comfort will reduce the fencer's stress while competing against taller opponents.

## **6) Preparation:**

Preparation refers to all of the fencing done that leads up to the final genuine action that attempts to score. Preparation includes footwork, bladework, body language, technique and tactics. Most of the time preparatory actions are done mindfully. The fencers do actions to accomplish certain goals. Those goals likely include 1) Learning about the opponent's characteristics and how he responds to certain actions. 2) Physically training the opponent to react a specific way to certain actions. 3) Misleading the opponent to believe a certain action is about to be used so that a different action can be used more effectively. Ideally a fencer will learn about his opponent while preventing his opponent from learning about himself.

There is a great deal to learn about the opponent through observing him fence others as well as personally fencing him. Some questions are simple such as: How tall is he? Is he strong? Is he quick? Is he left handed or right handed? Other questions are a

bit more complicated such as: Is he aggressive? Is he patient? Does he prefer to parry or counterattack? What is his preferred parry? Does he have any habits? Does he do actions on the blade or prefer to fence without blade contact? Does he fatigue easily? Does he use second intention? Does he stand his ground or is he willing to retreat when pushed? What are his strengths? What are his weaknesses? All fencers should try to learn these things about their opponents. The shorter fencer benefits in particular by learning whether or not his opponent expresses any of the stereotypical characteristics of a taller fencer, such as slower footwork and a preference for making the counterattack.

Although a fencer cannot take full control of his opponent's actions he can exert some influence over them through his own actions. By setting up footwork patterns and then breaking them the fencer can trick the opponent into making poor predictions. This allows the fencer to move into and out of distance. Footwork can also be used to influence the opponent to initiate blade actions. Perhaps the simplest footwork pattern is repeating advance and retreat. The fencer can do this at a specific tempo. Making a retreat followed by a double advance that not only penetrates more distance but also accelerates can then break the pattern. This will close the distance. It may facilitate scoring a touch, or perhaps trigger the opponent to react. The opponent may attack or flee for example. If the opponent's reaction is successfully predicted the use of this preparatory footwork to trigger it can be capitalized upon in order to score. I'll discuss footwork more in a following section.

Whatever a fencer intends to do; he should show his opponent something different. False attacks, false counterattacks, and false parry riposte are used to hide intention. False attacks can be used for four main reasons. The first is to hide the intent

to attack a different target than the one that the false attack focuses on. For example, the fencer may make a beat in four and false attack to the inside of the hand in order to get the opponent to start making twitches to parry four position. He would probably have to repeat this a few times for the desired effect. The fencer can then make his beat and make a disengage to the outside of the wrist as the opponent twitches to parry four. The second reason to use false attacks includes the various forms of second intention. The shorter fencer absolutely should be using these strategies. For offensive second intention, the shorter fencer makes a false attack, somewhat shallow and slow using a short lunge, but with a straight weapon arm, in order to draw the opponent's parry and riposte. The shorter fencer then makes an immediate parry counter-riposte and scores with an accelerating footwork action such as a redouble or more likely a fleche. A big advantage to using this strategy is its affect on distance. If the shorter fencer were to make a first intention attack from advance lunge distance he has a great deal of distance to cover to hit the deeper target areas and is of course vulnerable while he moves in. With offensive second intention, the shorter fencer need only penetrate part of the distance to the target. When the opponent parries and starts the riposte he will come forward which will collapse the distance if the shorter fencer does not flee. The shorter fencer is free to make his parry and counter-riposte at a more favorable distance than the initial attack.

For second intention countertime, the shorter fencer expects his opponent to make a counterattack instead of a parry, so he makes a false attack designed to draw the counterattack. He does this by making his attack quickly, but from longer distance and with a bent arm. The shorter fencer needs to ensure that he will not be hit during the same tempo as his false attack. The attack should be made to the thigh or waist so that

the counterattack is sure to come above the attacking arm. The attack can be made to the toe, but that risks having too much distance that the shorter fencer's arm will have to travel during the defensive portion of the countertime. Once the opponent makes his counterattack, the shorter fencer breaks off his false attack and makes his parry and riposte to the torso with accelerating footwork, such as a fleche. Note that a false attack can and should be turned into a genuine attack if the opponent does not react in a manner to protect himself, with his parry, retreat, or counterattack. The third reason to use a false attack is to hide the intention to score by a counterattack or parry riposte. Somewhat aggressive false attacks, which look genuine but unsuccessful, may be useful for keeping the opponent occupied with his own defense, keep him away, and buy the shorter fencer some time. Less aggressive false attacks may incite the opponent to attack as well as falsely boost his confidence. Once the opponent commits to an attack, the shorter fencer is able to counterattack or parry riposte, or if distance allows, counterattack and parry riposte. The opponent may of course have a remise or reprise to back up the attack and the shorter fencer should be wary and ready to parry that, as the final offensive action made by his opponent. Again, once the parry is made, the shorter fencer will attempt to accelerate and strike while the opponent is taken by surprise. Finally, the fourth reason to use false attacks, according to Ben Wieder of the University of Pennsylvania epee squad, is that they can be useful to desensitize the opponent to attacks so that he does not react appropriately to them. The false attacks should have a recognizable look to them, perhaps a bit slow or hesitant. Once the opponent has been properly trained to ignore these false attacks, a false attack can be turned into a genuine attack. Mr. Wieder suggests using a footwork combination of advance-lunge and then fleche, in order to

penetrate the distance and strike. If the opponent cannot be trained to ignore attacks then countertime will prove to be more successful.

All of this comes down to hitting the opponent without being hit. Preparatory footwork puts the opponent into striking distance. Preparatory bladework puts the opponent's blade in a non-threatening motion or position. Once both of those goals are accomplished then the fencer is clear to strike. Here is an example of how it can be done: Two fencers bounce in and out of advance lunge distance. The fencer on the left notices makes several sweeping blade actions in order to learn his opponent's reaction. He finds that the fencer on the right has a preference for avoiding blade contact. The fencer on the left advances while making a circular sweeping action of the blade similar to a circle six parry. The goal is to force the opponent to avoid the blade, which he does. As the opponent evades the blade his point drops and he exposes the top of his wrist. The fencer on the left stops short his circular action, makes a quick advance, and strikes with first intention to the opponent's thumb. If need be, the fencer on the left is free to remise to deeper target with a fleche. He may also, if the opponent parries, make a reprise to the toe and then quickly recover and retreat. Preparations, which falsely show a weakness or opening in order to convince the opponent to attack, are called invitations, which are made by moving the blade to a parry position, sweeping the blade, or even feigning distraction. A fencer, wishing to be attacked in the high outside line in order to make a parry six riposte would sweep the blade into 4 (much like a coach would cue for a disengage to the high outside line). The fencer would then upon seeing the desired disengage made his 6 parry riposte, or change it up to a circular 4 parry or semicircular 7 if the action has been already done and there is the desire to remain unpredictable.

False counterattacks are somewhat useful for a shorter fencer. This strategy can be played in multiple ways, depending on the viewpoint of the shorter fencer and temperament of the taller opponent. Firstly, the false counterattacks may dissuade the opponent from attacking. Considering that the attack is the most common method of scoring touches, if you can prevent your opponent from attacking, if only for a short amount of time, then you have done yourself a great service. Unfortunately this is not terribly likely because it is successful counterattacks that are more likely to force the opponent to refrain from attacking. Primarily though using false counterattacks, along with not reacting to false attacks, hides the fencer's intention to make parry riposte against attacks made by the opponent. The shorter fencer can use this to his advantage because if the opponent attacks without the expectation of a parry then his attack will be committed and less likely to deceive a parry when it does come. Care should be taken not to overuse false counterattacks because it may provoke the opponent's countertime. False counterattacks have a larger role in foil and saber because they can be used to force the opponent, who already has established right of way, to commit to his attack, thereby allowing for a parry riposte.

False parries and parry ripostes are done for three main reasons. The first is simply to show the opponent a preference for a particular type of parry in order to later use a different parry. The shorter fencer can, for example, twitch his hand showing an uncontrolled habit to make parry four laterally against any of his opponent's threatening actions. The opponent may then plan on making a feint to the high inside line to draw the parry four and a deceive it to strike in the high outside line. When the opponent attacks, the shorter fencer starts a retreat, makes a parry of circle six (or perhaps parry seven and a

bind to six), and then makes advance and lunge or fleche on the opponent's recovery. The second use of false parries or parry-ripostes is to hide the genuine intention to counterattack. This works quite well because demonstrating the desire to parry can inspire the opponent to make a compound attack. The method of dealing with compound attacks is the counterattack. To help ensure that the opponent makes a compound attack the shorter fencer should combine a retreat with his false parry. The shorter fencer should avoid parries that would force the opponent to finish to the high outside line, unless he is comfortable making a counterattack with engagement. (There is a fine line between making a counterattack with engagement and a parry riposte in six. The primary difference is that the counterattack requires more confidence.) Instead, he should force his opponent to finish to the low line. He can do this by making false parries of circle six and of parry one. Once the opponent makes his feint, the shorter fencer should jump backwards quickly and fake the start of his habitual parry and then immediately switch to counterattacking the genuine low line attack. Ideally, the touch is made to the attacking arm. As always, striking deeper target risks a double touch or even being hit first. The third reason to make false parries (sweeps) is to invite or force the opponent to place his blade elsewhere in order to open an opponent's line or to take it and strike. I discuss this elsewhere in this paper.

Not all epee fencing follows this pattern of preparation followed by successful scoring action. One of the difficulties in teaching tempo is that there are a few tangible qualities to it. Czajkowski refers to it in Understanding Fencing as a "feeling of surprise." (2005) Many simple attacks are successful simply because they are launched quickly and without telegraphing, thus taking the opponent by surprise. A quick fencer

armed with a keen sense of tempo is very dangerous. Ideally the shorter fencer can time these quick surprise attacks while the opponent is beginning an advance, immediately after the opponent has missed, or while the opponent is having a lull in his concentration. To some extent the opponent's body language displays his level of focus but it is difficult to gauge.

Picture, if you will, two epeeists fencing each other. They are bouncing around giving and taking only an inch or so with each hop. Both have their guards up and are highly focused. You can cut the tension between them with a knife. Occasionally they each make a false attack or sweep of the blade. Then suddenly they both fleche and a double touch is the result...or perhaps they collide like trucks. Clearly this is not the best of epee, but it does happen even to the best of epee fencers. What was it that inspired them both to fleche at the moment they did? There was no specific distance change, no blade tempo change, no foot tempo change, nothing easily reproducible on paper at least, but there was something felt; a sense of the moment. Perhaps it was impatience. Perhaps it was a feeling of "now or never." If anything, it is more than sheer coincidence. Each fencer was taking a gamble based on his experience, and was confident enough to act because enough the required preparation seemed successful. A fencer's string of thoughts, and those of his opponent, could look like this:

I wonder what he's thinking.

I think I'll get a little closer and see what happens.

I haven't attacked in a while, and my last attack was good, maybe I should attack.

He seems to be ignoring my blade actions.

He's not doing much except bouncing there. Is he waiting to parry? No, I don't think so.

Well, I'm at the right distance to attack if I fleche...he still hasn't done more than bounce back and forth. The distance is right. The distance is right.

We've been staring at each other, what, twenty seconds now? The distance is right.

I should take the initiative before he does.

It is worth noting that Fencing by David and Gennady Tyshler, 1995, has an excellent section on preparation and masking intention, including various drills to practice.

### **7) Finishing with Fleche:**

The fleche is an attacking footwork action used at lunge or advance lunge distance. It is done in one tempo and relies on both quickness of execution and surprise to be successful. Actions made with a fleche will most often be directed to the high line. Perhaps the only disadvantage to the fleche is that once a fencer commits to executing it the fleche cannot be aborted.

Characteristics and advantages of the fleche and how they benefit shorter fencers:

- 1) It is a surprise action.
- 2) It is a fast action and makes use of quick legs. The speed of the fleche as well as being a 100% commitment action makes for a good final action that requires acceleration from a previous footwork action such as an advance, or lunge.
- 3) When making a pris de fer the acceleration and power of the fleche transfers to the blade, allowing the force of the shorter fencers body, along with leverage, to overcome the strength of the taller fencer, rather than simply the force created by the shorter fencer's weapon arm and hand.
- 4) It covers the distance of an advance lunge in only one tempo
- 5) It can be initiated just as easily as a change of direction after retreating as it is from when already moving forward.
- 6) It is versatile in that it can be used to score with attacks, ripostes, and continuations. It can also be used with counter offense in some situations, such as responding to a poorly executed attack with a counterattack with engagement.

The fleche may be used with first intention to hit the torso if the shorter fencer is certain he will be successful, but there is greater risk in this because it requires that the

opponent react late, not at all, or his counterattack to miss. With proper tempo and explosive footwork a powerful athlete can rely on the fleche, but if the shorter fencer simply charges in with a poorly timed fleche to the torso he is likely to be hit with a counter attack. Preparations should be made to set up an attack or continuation with fleche. Generally, the attacker should convince the opponent to move his blade to a non-threatening position (for instance to a parry position in response to a feint) or should physically take control of the blade, before launching the fleche, in order to avoid the counterattack. Either way, the opponent is denied the use of a tempo and the shorter fencer's scoring action needs to initiate during that lost tempo. The parry riposte with fleche is very useful because it is a reaction to the opponent's committed action and the opponent is vulnerable after being parried. The shorter fencer can also maintain some control over the opponent's blade by means of engagement or bind during the riposte.

A parry can only defend one line at a time. Exploitation of this fact is a key element of fencing. A compound attack (feint attack) that ends with a fleche is common in epee. For example, from advance lunge distance the attacker can make a feint to the high outside line to coerce his opponent into a parry six position. This allows for a deception of the parry and a touch to occur on an open target, perhaps the thigh, inside arm, or torso. Should the attacker plan for the torso, he can concentrate his efforts into speed rather than the technique required to hit a lower percentage shot target. Thus, once the defender parries, the attacker can deceive, fully straighten his arm, and launch his fleche. Even if the defender takes a retreat the attacker should catch him. If the defender makes a second parry in order to stop the genuine attack, for instance parry four, he may indeed make blade contact but may or may not catch the blade in time to be successful.

Attacks with engagement are useful because they physically prevent the counterattack. They can be done in one tempo (*pris de fer*) or can be set up with preparation. The attacker may, for instance, from advance lunge distance step in with a sweep or press and make an immediate retreat in order to learn the opponent's reaction. This may on the first attempt provoke a disengage attack, which if predicted will allow for a parry and riposte. If the opponent deceives the sweep and simply changes line, the attacker repeats the action and immediately, with acceleration, makes a second blade action to engage and trap the opponent's blade, extend, and fleche.

If the opponent's footwork is aggressive he may be made to fall prey to a trap using his aggression against him. The shorter fencer, particularly a small and quick athlete will have the advantage of a quicker change of direction. He can make several retreats while feigning desperation with his bladework and body language. If the opponent chases and allows his momentum to build the trap is set. The shorter fencer will continue to retreat, but will lean forward as he does so, in order to move his center of gravity forward. Finally, instead of another retreat he straightens his arm and fleches forward. The opponent will make another advance and the distance will close faster than to which he is capable of adjusting and the shorter fencer's fleche will score or at worst result in a double.

The riposte with fleche is a relatively safe and effective action against a slower opponent and may be necessary in order to catch an opponent who can make a quick backward recovery. The method of riposte is rooted in the chosen parry and also to some extent the type of attack made by the opponent. A sudden and fast attack made by the opponent will likely result in a beat parry (of four perhaps) by the defender. If the

distance is closing rapidly then the defender is safe to riposte without engagement (a riposte as in foil) because the attacker will not be able to make a replacement in time. If the attack is from long distance and the defender sees it coming, he can select his parry and make a parry with engagement at a distance that is comfortable for him. If the parry is four, then he has two options for riposte. The first is a direct riposte with engagement, but that requires the opponent to bend his arm on his recovery. If the opponent makes an insistence or keeps his arm extended while he makes a rear recovery, the defender should bind to seven and then straighten his arm completely and fleche to the chest. If the parry made is six or circle six, then the best option is a direct riposte with a fully extended arm with a high hand, thus closing out the opponent (preventing a disengage), and striking the upper chest, shoulder, or even mask. If the opponent manages to release his blade early in the riposte the best he will likely do is a double touch.

Something to note here is the unusual circumstance created when a left-handed fencer is parried in four (particularly an exaggerated forth) by a right-handed fencer, or vice versa. By the nature of their arm and shoulder positions the force applied and resistance to a parry 4 is very strong. If the shorter fencer traps his opponent's blade in a wide parry four, he should notice his opponent, either willingly or unwittingly, making blade contact with pressure during his recovery. It is in fact rather difficult to avoid doing so. Because of this, the shorter fencer should plan to make an indirect riposte with fleche against the opposite handed opponent after a strong parry four. This indirect riposte will avoid the natural inclination of the opponent to return to a guard position with his arm as he recovers.

When the attack or riposte fails to reach the target because the opponent has retreated out of distance a continuation (remise, reprise, or redoublement) of the attack can be made. A continuation can also be made to a deeper target (torso) if the initial attack to a shallow target (forearm) has missed. If the distance is opening and the defender is aware of the threat, the attacker must hit the opponent as soon as possible, within only one or two tempos after the attack, otherwise the opportunity is lost. To do this he must not only continue forward, but accelerate in order to catch the fleeing defender. The fleche is particularly well suited for this. Assuming the initial attack is made with a lunge there are three methods of making a fleche from the lunge position. The first is simply to muscle into it using the strength of the front leg. The second is to pick up the front foot and place it rearward in order to allow the torso to drop forward, thus initiating the loss of balance for the fleche, and the third method is a partial forward recovery. If the need for the fleche predicted or is noticed prior to the landing of the lunge then the transition to the fleche can be fairly seamless by making the forward recovery. Another method of delivering this is to assume the need for the remise with fleche and make a lunge that resembles a giant half advance followed by a forward crossover. This action resembles a fleche from a lunge but is mechanically simpler and prevents any loss of momentum.

If the taller opponent has a preference for attacking and is quick, he will likely make good use of the fleche with a first intention simple attack to the torso and the shorter fencer must be ready for this. Fabrice Jeannet, a French Olympian who stands at 6'4" and holds his French grip epee by the pommel, is an example of one such fencer. He not only has a surprisingly quick fleche attack (simple direct, with beat, and even

compound attack) but he also will fleche (or make a forward crossover as described in the previous paragraph) to make the remise after a failed lunge. Occasionally you can see him lunge and make a forward recovery to prepare for the remise but then stop himself after he realizes that his initial attack with lunge was successful. (Examples of these actions can be seen in the 2006 and 2007 World Championship dvd's in the team events. In 2006, for instance, against Canto from Spain, Jeannet's fifth touch is a remise after a lunge and forward recovery and the seventh touch is a remise with fleche after a lunge and forward recovery.) The shorter fencer may chose to either 1) deal with the fleche when it comes by escaping with distance and parrying. This may allow for a riposte and depending on personal preference may be the better option. Otherwise he may select a second option 2) Preventing the opponent from launching the fleche. Usually offering a consistent threat to the opponent can do this.

### **8) Responses to Two Specific Tactics Employed by Taller Fencers:**

A) What if a tall fencer keeps distance with either the hand very low or way outside and only counterattacks at the last second to the advanced target?

According to Ben Wieder, an option would be to use a pattern of false attacks in order to train the opponent to not react, or react half-heartedly, to them. This may allow for a smoother penetrating attack with advance lunge and fleche. If the opponent cannot be trained then the following options may prove more successful.

The taller fencer using this strategy is relying on his quick reactions and point control. If the taller fencer is successful then the shorter fencer may become unwilling to attack, or at least unwilling to make a simple direct attack. This alone may be a

reasonable answer to this problem. As a general rule, if your opponent wants you to do something, then don't do it. (Likewise, if your opponent wants to do something, then don't let him!) The shorter fencer may opt to be patient and switch to defense or his own counter attacks. Another possible response would be countertime; after all, the opponent is making a counter attack. If the shorter fencer opts to make a false attack to draw the counter attack and then parry it, the parry will need to intercept the counter-attacking blade as a beat parry, with a quick riposte with fleche. Alternately, the shorter fencer may opt to deal with the counterattack with his own stop-hit. Ideally the shorter fencer will attempt to make a parry and riposte after making the counterattack to the arm for added security. This strategy can work well if the physical motion of the taller fencer's arm is predictable and can be visualized by the shorter fencer. The shorter fencer starts his attack while keeping an image in his mind of where in front of him the taller fencer's arm will be as he makes the counter attack. Once the taller fencer initiates his counter attack, the shorter fencer changes targets with his fingers to direct his point to where the taller fencer's arm is about to be and scores the touch. This same strategy may be altered somewhat when fencing someone of opposite handedness, ie, righty against lefty. Here, the shorter fencer makes the initial false attack but he is sure to make it with only partial extension of his weapon arm. The taller fencer will likely counter attack from the outside. As the taller fencer starts his counterattack, the shorter fencer changes to the outside line, fully extends his weapon arm, and raises his weapon hand high and to the outside. His point then can hit the outside of the taller fencer's arm while at the same time preventing his own arm from being hit.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning an unorthodox strategy for equal height or taller fencers to use against opponents who withhold their blades in the low line and counterattack at the last moment, particularly pommelers. The counterattacker will be raising his arm during his counterattack, so one way to hit it is to strike downward towards it during the counterattack. The taller fencer can keep his weapon up high with his elbow bent and forearm and blade pointed to the ceiling. He approaches the counterattacker and extends, striking with a flick to where the counterattack's arm will be during the counterattack. If the counterattacker raises his arm to counterattack, he should be hit with the downward arcing point. If he does not counterattack, the attack will hit air, so the attacker then remises to shoulder/torso/mask. This works very well against an opponent of opposite handedness. If the counterattacker decides instead to attack the upward bent arm of the taller would be attacker, that upward bent arm will straighten with a counterattack which likely will cause the attack to miss, so there is some safety in this. This strategy can be mixed up with the occasional direct fleche to the torso or mask to prevent the opponent from adapting too easily. If anything, it can force the counterattacker to switch to parrying attacks. If his defense is not as strong a game as his counterattacks are then this becomes an advantage to the attacker.

B) What if the taller fencer is comfortable with having the shorter fencer make engagements, allows the shorter fencer to start a press attack, pris de fer, or some other such action where the shorter fencer is attacking or riposting with engagement, and then he (the taller fencer) at the last moment retreats and changes line in order to make a stophit to the arm?

As usual, one of the simplest answers is simply to avoid the situation. If the taller fencer shows a willingness to offer the blade and then to retreat with a counterattack, then his opponent may wish to show him that he are aware of this trap. The shorter fencer could for instance, after making engagement, forcefully press the blade away and then retreat. The taller fencer will not be able to use this to his advantage and may switch tactics.

The shorter fencer can use defensive second intention by making a false attempt to take the blade while expecting the taller fencer to slip away. He (the shorter fencer) can then immediately make a circular parry or a lateral parry by rotating his hand to engage the opponent's blade and strike with an accelerating forward motion. It is very important that the shorter fencer not telegraph his intentions and it is also important that the distance close with a quick and sudden burst of forward motion to strike before the taller fencer can react. This necessitates striking with a fleche or advance-fleche combination. According to Dave Micahnik, if the blade position is very high then the shorter fencer may wish to make a croise and then strike.

The shorter fencer must be wary of a similar situation that may occur during his parry riposte with engagement, particularly from parry 4 and the low line positions of 2, 7, and 8. During the riposte the taller fencer can retreat and change line in an attempt to make a stop hit against the riposte. (This is unlikely to be done against a parry 6 riposte considering how the shorter fencer's arm should be straight and elevated during the riposte and thusly provides little if any target for the stop hit.) This is not easy to do spontaneously, but can have success if planned for ahead of time. The shorter fencer can counter this by making a slow riposte then when the taller fencer retreats and changes

line he can then retake the taller fencer's blade with an intercept parry and score with a fleche.

If the shorter fencer makes strong beats and presses then the taller fencer may concern himself simply with avoiding blade contact. (This requires the opponent to be in some sort of classical guard position with the weapon up and forward, as opposed to being kept low and out of reach.) The shorter fencer can initiate a second attack to the blade, but instead make a false sweep while hoping for the taller fencer to evade it, only so that he, the shorter fencer, can make a second genuine and faster search for the blade, take it, perhaps even make a bind, and score with a fleche. This method, though similar to the previous example, is more disruptive and bothersome. I would suggest this for use especially against fencers who use a French grip and hold it by the pommel. The attacks on the blade, if successful, prevent the taller fencer from employing his own fine sense of point control and stability necessary for the action he was planning. There is also the advantage for the shorter fencer in that he can distract the taller opponent from his plan to score and replace it with a concern for preventing blade contact. He may even fear of dropping his weapon. Obviously, if a fencer is not thinking about attacking, defending, or counterattacking, then he is at a distinct disadvantage. Unfortunately for the shorter fencer there is the risk that the taller fencer, particularly if he is a pommeler, is quite happy to have his opponent try to engage his blade. If the pommeler is not an aggressive attacker, he may be of the more patient sort who focuses on making counter attacks and disengages. Attempting to take his blade, even with second intention, may only open up opportunities for him to slip in and score.

## **9) Psychological Warfare:**

Athletes are required to be strong physically as well as mentally and emotionally. Psychological preparation is an important part of any athlete's regimen, and athletes that take part in combat sports such as fencing require a great deal of fortitude, determination, and mental toughness. There are many resources available to athletes that can help them with their psychological preparation, including coaches, books, and sport psychologists. The shorter fencer should make use of these resources to help give himself the tools necessary to fence well against all opponents, including those who may attempt to use their greater size and strength to intimidate their shorter opponents. The coach may, in his lessons, attempt to desensitize his student to intimidation techniques, by, for instance, and rushing forward at his student unexpectedly.

An important factor in any bout is the scoring of the first touch. To the one who scores goes not only the lead in points, but also a variety of feelings, including accomplishment, relief, and joy. This boosts confidence and helps fuel the upcoming touches. The opponent, having been scored upon, does not feel these affects. He may shrug it off and just focus on getting the next touch, as he should, or he may feel a variety of negative feelings, such as regret, frustration, anger, anxiety, and a partial loss of hope. Considering this, and considering the aforementioned psychological advantages and disadvantages that are related to height differences between opponents, particularly between opponents who do not know each other well, it is very helpful for the shorter fencer to get the first touch. If he doesn't, the taller fencer's confidence is boosted.

## 10) Bout Analysis:

2005 Men's Epee World Championships Leipzig

Semi-Final

Pavel Kolobkov, 5'10" tall, Russia vs. Bas Verwijlen, 6'3" tall, The Netherlands

Verwijlen is a full five inches taller than Kolobkov so we can assume that the height difference is great enough to be noticeable to both fencers. Let's see how these fencers fit the advantage and disadvantage stereotypes that were listed earlier in the paper.

-Advantages for taller fencer, Bas Verwijlen:

- 1) The taller fencer has an advantage at greater distance because of his or her reach. -- Yes
- 2) Longer legs can produce longer lunges. --Yes
- 3) Long arms create longer thrusts that aid all offensive and counter offensive actions. -- Yes
- 4) With height there may be associated strength and mass. --Yes
- 5) At the beginner level,-- Not applicable
- 6) Height and strength may aid in creating a psychological advantage. --Doubtful here.
- 7) Actions from the shorter fencer that normally would score with a single touch against an opponent of similar height have a greater chance of ending in a double touch if the taller fencer counterattacks to the easy to hit torso. --Yes

-Disadvantages for taller fencer, Bas Verwijlen:

- 1) Long lunges tend to be harder or slower to recover from. --No
- 2) If a long attack misses he's at risk... --Yes
- 3) Taller/larger fencers often have a slower footwork cadence. --Here yes, but only because Kolobkov is so fast.
- 4) Taller fencers who rely solely on their height ...--Not applicable.
- 5) They may be attacked to either the high line or low line by the shorter opponent. --Yes
- 6) They may have greater difficulty making a riposte at close distance. --Yes.

-Advantages for shorter fencer, Pavel Kolobkov:

- 1) Shorter fencers are often quicker. --Yes
- 2) They are attacked to the high line most of the time. -- Yes.
- 3) They may be underestimated by their opponents. --Not in this case.
- 4) They have less target area and may be harder to hit. --Not much of a difference in this case. Consider a petite female for this advantage.

- 5) At close range they may be able to hit while the opponent is temporarily vulnerable. -- Yes
- 6) They can more comfortably make a successful riposte at closer distance than the taller fencer can. --Possibly
- 7) Attacks and counterattacks made with angulation to shallow targets are easier, particularly digs to the underside of the opponent's hand and the touch to the knee. -- Possibly. We see something of this in the last touch.

-Disadvantages for shorter fencer, Pavel Kolobkov:

- 1) Lack of reach means attacking or counterattacking to deep target without controlling the opponent's blade is risky if not suicidal. --Oddly no, due to being extremely quick.
- 2) Success requires greater skill than simply extending the arm. ---Yes
- 3) A smaller frame may have less strength and mass... --Not really applicable.
- 4) For some fencers, particularly petite women, ...--No
- 5) May be at a psychological disadvantage...--No, not at this elite level, particularly in this case where Kolobkov is the expected winner.
- 6) May be required to be quicker and faster in order to be successful. --Yes, most definitely.
- 7) May be required to expend more energy during the bout in order to accomplish his goals. --Yes, again, most definitely.

Kolobkov wins by making eleven touches to a variety of targets including the hand, torso, back, and hip, while Verwijlen makes one touch to the thigh, eight to the torso, and receives the benefit of one point from Kolobkov's red card for a total of ten points. None of the points were double touches.

Kolobkov is in control almost the whole bout and is patient. He usually keeps his blade low and out of reach, but occasionally he raises the blade, to either make an invitation or a threatening action. He bounces forward and backward, and also retreats to allow Verwijlen to come to him. Verwijlen's guard position is quite different. He takes a competitive guard with the weapon arm bent at the elbow ninety degrees with his forearm and blade parallel to the floor. He rarely if ever deviates from this guard position.

Because the blade is horizontal it is difficult to take and it poses a constant threat. Most touches occur in the middle of the piste or on Kolobkov's half. Verwijlen is somewhat

aggressive and tries to make the best of his opponent's willingness to retreat but he does not get carried away or over commit. He tries to push Kolobkov back slowly by pushing but hopping backward at any sign of Kolobkov's threats. Kolobkov takes an early lead and maintains it through the end of the second period at seven to four. Verwijlen rallies in the third period and, with the help of a red card for Kolobkov for touching his blade with the offhand while on guard, ties the bout ten to ten. At this point Kolobkov starts to become aggressive. He makes forward footwork actions, he makes more aggressive sweeps for Verwijlen's blade, and a flurry of false and genuine attacks. Time expires and Verwijlen gets priority. From the look on Verwijlen's face he is very pleased with himself and perhaps counts tying Kolobkov as a victory in itself, especially after trailing the first half of the bout. Kolobkov has planned his last touch though, and only one second after the referee commands "Fence" he launches a terrifyingly fast attack with a lunge. Verwijlen makes a parry in fourth position and Kolobkov works around the parry with angulation and scores with a remise by recovering forward in his lunge.

Both fencers are exceptionally skilled and are excellent athletes, as would be expected from competitors at this elite level. Kolobkov is older and more experienced and that cannot be discounted. In addition, he makes up for some of the disadvantages of his body type by emphasizing his advantages, in particular his overall lightning speed, footwork, and associated ability to get in and out of distance quickly.

What is interesting about this bout, especially in contrast with Kolobkov's next bout, the final with Jeannet, is that Kolobkov shows his versatility by scoring with a variety of actions in a variety of situations.

Kolobkov's touches:

- 1) Counterattack to the weapon shoulder against a feint and fleche.

- 2) Feint attack to torso.
- 3) Simple direct attack during Verwijlen's recovery.
- 4) Counterattack with crossover retreat during Verwijlen's fleche.
- 5) Parry fourth direct riposte to torso.
- 6) Counterattack flick to outside of hand.
- 7) Simple attack flick to outside of hand.
- 8) Simple attack toe touch with no perceptible preparation. Success was due to speed.
- 9) Counterattack to the back while Verwijlen makes a feint and displacement.
- 10) Remise of simple attack via lunge and forward recovery.

### 2005 Men's Epee World Championships Leipzig

#### Final

Pavel Kolobkov, 5'10" tall, Russia, vs. Fabrice Jeannet, 6'4" tall, France

Here Jeannet seems to have a definite reach advantage. Jeannet is not only six inches taller, but as a much larger person overall seems to dwarf Kolobkov. To make matters even more interesting he fences with a French grip epee and holds it by the pommel. Like Kolobkov, Jeannet is a strong athlete, and is capable of very fast lunges and fleches. Jeannet is also a fairly aggressive and attack oriented fencer. Kolobkov does seem to have quicker overall footwork and the ability to change direction more quickly. I think we can assume that Jeannet has the same strengths and weaknesses that Verwijlen did in the previous bout, so I don't feel the need to list them again with his name in place of Verwijlen's. If anything, Jeannet accentuates both the advantages (reach at lunge distance) and disadvantages (vulnerable after missing if opponent closes distance) associated with height.

This bout is much different than Kolobkov's previous semi-final bout with Verwijlen. Kolobkov does not vary much in his actions or strategy and all touches (by both fencers) are made to the torso, including that be shoulder, chest, or belly area. What is remarkable about this bout is that, including the non-scoring doubles while the score

was tied at fourteen, there were a total of twelve double touches in this bout. By contrast there were zero double touches in the Kolobkov – Verwijlen bout. Not only were there twelve doubles, but also Kolobkov often made these doubles on purpose. Why was there such a marked difference between this and the previous bout? I suspect the answer is hinted at by Kolobkov during the interview shown on the DVD. Kolobkov and Jeannet have fenced each other in the past, including a few times in competition finals. Kolobkov may have had his strategy set well in advance of this bout. To win, Kolobkov must rely on his best attributes, even at the cost of variety. Here is the full bout:

Fencer on Left – Fabrice Jeannet  
 Fencer on Right – Pavel Kolobkov

Circled “X” is for fencer who scored. Both X’s circled denotes a double touch.

	Left	Right	Method of Scoring:
1	⊗	⊗	Kolobkov’s fleche attack. Jeannet makes counterattack.
2	⊗	x	Kolobkov’s fleche attack. Jeannet makes counterattack.
3	⊗	⊗	Jeannet’s fleche attack. Kolobkov’s fleche counterattack.
4	⊗	⊗	Kolobkov’s fleche attack. Jeannet makes counterattack.
5	x	⊗	Kolobkov fleches high while Jeannet’s blade is low.
6	x	⊗	Kolobkov’s remise, but it is nearly a double. This may be evidence of the shorter fencer’s advantage wielding blades at close distance.
7	⊗	x	Kolobkov’s fleche attack. Jeannet displaces with counterattack and Kolobkov’s point goes over Jeannet.
8	x	⊗	Kolobkov fleches and Jeannet escapes and counterattacks, Kolobkov makes a successful remise. ----- Period break.
9	⊗	⊗	Jeannet makes simple direct attack. Kolobkov makes a quick and vigorous counterattack. Kolobkov’s blade is folded in half and must be replaced. This counterattack and double touch was unmistakably on purpose.
10	⊗	⊗	Jeannet’s simple attack. Kolobkov’s counterattack with fleche.
11	x	⊗	Kolobkov’s simple attack fleche. Jeannet makes a counterattack and misses over the shoulder.
12	⊗	⊗	Jeannet’s simple attack. Kolobkov makes fleche counterattack.
13	⊗	x	Jeannet’s feint attack and fleche.
14	⊗	⊗	Jeannet’s simple attack. Kolobkov makes fleche counterattack.

- 15    ⊗    x    Jeannet makes a well timed simple attack. Kolobkov is unable to counterattack effectively because he is attacked and hit while retreating.
- 16    x    ⊗    Kolobkov makes simple attack with quick fleche.
- 17    ⊗    ⊗    Kolobkov makes simple attack. Jeannet makes counterattack.  
----- Period break.
- 18    ⊗    ⊗    Jeannet's simple attack with fleche. Kolobkov's counterattack.
- 19    ⊗    x    Jeannet makes a simple attack to the toe. Kolobkov withdraws foot and fleches. Jeannet recovers from lunge and scores with replacement to torso. Score tied at 14-14 with 2:02 remaining.
- 20    ⊗    ⊗    Kolobkov's simple attack with fleche. Jeannet's counterattack.
- 21    ⊗    ⊗    Jeannet's simple attack. Kolobkov's counterattack. After this touch Kolobkov removes his mask, bends over, and breathes heavily. Is he tiring? Are his nerve's shot? Or is he just relieved he forced a double instead of being hit with a single touch?
- 22    ⊗    ⊗    Kolobkov's simple attack fleche. Jeannet makes a counterattack.
- 23    x    ⊗    Kolobkov seems to attempt countertime by coming forward with his blade and then sweeping into four to take Jeannet's blade. Jeannet evades blade contact and while doing so Kolobkov fleches. Jeannet is unable to retreat or move the blade back into line fast enough and is hit.

Score 14    15  
Victor = Kolobkov

In this bout both fencers are fighting for an advantage and neither is able to effectively acquire it. Kolobkov maintains a one-point lead through much of the bout, but he never really takes control of the bout. Jeannet starts out as the aggressor. He makes four or five failed attacks before the first scoring double touch. Kolobkov raises and lowers his blade, making either feints of high and low or invitations. The entire fight is characterized by tension. Jeannet's strategy seems simple enough---hit first. Kolobkov's strategy seems similar but there is more pressure on him because of Jeannet's reach advantage. If anything, Kolobkov's strategy is ---just make sure to hit so that Jeannet doesn't acquire a lead. Perhaps previous experience with Jeannet has taught Kolobkov that parrying Jeannet is unwise. (In other bouts on the DVDs Jeannet proves to have a dangerous remise and reprise.) Kolobkov seems to have learned that he can rely

on his fleche to close out the 1/25<sup>th</sup> of a second window for a double touch against an attack, so even if Jeannet is attacking and hitting first, Kolobkov's point will strike just shortly after for the double. This makes sense considering the relative point speed of both fencers to the targets. (See Harmenberg for a discussion of relative point speed.) This is a risky but effective way to compensate for the danger zone, at least for Kolobkov, who relies on his athleticism, quickness, and agility to get in and out of range, to strike with attacks for single touches, and remarkably to counterattack Jeannet's attacks to force double touches. If Kolobkov were any less of an athlete he would surely have lost, but Kolobkov wins fifteen to fourteen with his strategy and nerves of steel.

### **11) The Short Blade:**

This section is devoted to a minority in the epee-fencing world – those fencers, mostly petite adult women, who may suffer significant pain in their hands, wrists, and forearms from wielding an epee. Fencers suffering chronic pain may have tendonitis or epicoldylitis, also known as “tennis elbow” which is fairly common in athletes, carpenters, mechanics, etc. As I mentioned in my introduction, one of my students early on in my coaching career had difficulty with this and benefited from switching to a number 2 length blade. This is not unlike a tennis player switching to a smaller or lighter racquet. It is important to note though that with most medical issues, consultation with a doctor, sports medicine trainer, or physical therapist is usually advisable.

There are some other options that are worth mentioning. The first option, strength training, may seem obvious to any athlete. Weightlifting does increase strength and can help create the extra mass necessary to counterweight the weight and inertia of the epee,

but for some people this is not enough. Squeezing a tennis ball, silicon putty, or using other devices designed to increase the strength of one's grip is particularly useful. That being said, the strength of the arm is only one component of this issue. The mass of the arm is another component. A large and heavy arm can push and manipulate an epee with greater ease than a smaller arm of the same strength. Because of this, a petite woman, though strong, may still feel unnecessarily challenged by the size, weight, balance, and inertia of a standard epee.

Some fencing equipment suppliers offer ultralight epees. They do have some advantages, such as the obvious lighter weight in combination with full length, but also have some disadvantages. They tend to be more expensive. They also tend to cut weight by reducing the amount of material they are made of, and in many cases, according to the renowned armorer and member of the FIE Semi-Commission, Dan DeChaine, have a greater tendency of breakage. This increases overall cost and is also a safety risk from broken blades and punctured guards.

The choice of switching to a shorter blade has its advantages and disadvantages as well. The advantages include less strain on the fencer's arm, quicker blade actions, and increased accuracy. This comes in part from the epee's overall reduced weight, but mostly from the difference in balance since the center of gravity is closer to the fencer's hand. This is going to be more noticeable for people who find the full-length blades to be cumbersome. Someone who has no difficulty wielding a full-length blade will not see much of an improvement in his or her accuracy. If anything, they will simply notice that it takes less effort manipulating the blade. For those that do find a full-length blade cumbersome the difference can be significant and welcome. For those who suffer from

tendonitis or are easily fatigued, the reduction in strain with the shorter blade may allow for recovery.

The disadvantages to a shorter blade are obvious. With it, the fencer must get closer to the target in order to score. This actually increases the size of the danger zone. Any disadvantage in height in an attack/counter-attack situation will be magnified. That being said, a shorter fencer would avoid that situation as best he can even if he were using a full-length blade. A final, perhaps less obvious disadvantage to using the shorter blades, is that they are not regulated by the FIE, and as such may not conform to the highest of material and manufacturer standards.

If the goal is to be a recreational or low-level competitor and there are true fatigue issues or strain in the arm, then the shorter blade is a favorable option. If the student is interested in more advanced competition (wishes to attain a B rating, as an example) then perhaps a #5 ultralight would suffice, in addition to increasing strength, physical therapy, etc. I think that one of the keys to all this is not making any assumptions about the student's abilities or goals. Instruction should initially be no different compared to the instruction given to anyone else (though we do of course make all instruction somewhat personalized), including the use of the standard full-length blades. Only after a reasonable period of fencing, perhaps a year or two, should the decision to switch to a different blade length or weight be made. This would also approximately coincide with the time that the student would have a firm understanding of fencing fundamentals and would be receptive to learning more in depth tactics. Changes to the student's fencing then would be logical to that student. The coach should offer options, make suggestions, but not force the student into making large changes which he sees as unnecessary or

illogical, especially in situations such as this which separate the student from his peers in some manner. If the student will truly benefit from a shorter blade and a modified strategy in fencing, then the student must embrace this change with a positive attitude and enthusiasm. "I'm excited to be developing a game I can use successfully and is personalized for me. This epee feels like it was built just for me. I'm going to be a giant-slayer!" is much better to hear than "My coach said I'm small and weak so I have to use this kid's weapon and fence differently than my friends."

Currently, the shorter blades are required for youth competitions, but I argue that size is a much better criterion for blade length than age. We sometimes see children that are nearly six feet tall competing. Do they really need short blades?

The Length of blade should be proportional to ones height, weight, and strength - not age. While standing with the epee at the fencer's side and with the point up, where does the point come to in relation to the top of the hip (crest of ileum bone)? I suggest that the point of the epee (with a pistol grip) when placed at your side, should come up to the top of the hips, but really no further. Comparing epee length to hip height will help you determine which length blade is most appropriate. For every inch the point comes above the top of the hip, you should reduce the blade length by that number. Three inches above the hip would mean that a #2 blade might be appropriate. Note that generally a number 5 blade is full length, a number 2 blade is 3 inches shorter, and a number 0 blade is 5 inches shorter. This is not necessarily always the case though, and in fact there are no specific rules relating to the length of the blade and the number stamped on it, other than a number 2 blade is a number 2 because it has the stamp on it.

What follows are the measurements of three adult individuals, all wearing shoes, all using pistol grip epees:

Fencer 1

Height 6'3" tall

#5 blade

Point comes to 3 or 4 inches below top of hip

Fencer 2

5'8" tall

#5 blade

Point comes to top of the hip (or less than one inch above)

Fencer 3

5'1" tall

#5 blade tip comes to 3 inches above top of hip

#2 blade comes to top of hip

Thus, a #2 blade is in the same proportion to Fencer 3 as a full sized blade is to an average height male. You could say that a 5'1" tall person fencing with a #5 blade is the equivalent of a 6'3" tall person fencing with a blade that is 3 inches beyond maximum allowable length, a fictional #8 blade.

## **12) Footwork:**

Advances and retreats are the foundation of footwork in fencing. To truly dominate the opponent, however, requires more flexible footwork and the ability to rapidly and subtly close in on the opponent. This is particularly important for shorter fencers who need to get in to their distance without being hit as they do so, as well as for escaping when necessary. As Harmenberg states in his book, Epee 2.0, the fencer with

the shorter distance controls the distance (2007), so the shorter fencer must make efforts to develop a fine sense of distance and the athleticism to make use of it. Footwork in epee is somewhat different than in foil and saber. We see few if any extended marching attacks or chases down the strip like we can see in foil and saber because in epee there is no rule of right of way protecting the attacker from being scored upon by the counterattacker. There is no disadvantage or shame in retreating in epee. Epee fencers do not lose the right to score simply by moving backwards. More than that, without rules of right of way there is no rule-oriented advantage to being the fencer to initiate the forward attacking action. Simply put, epee fencers do not charge off the line in order to try to acquire right of way the moment the referee says "Fence!"

Finally, most discussions about footwork discuss forward and backward movement. Sometimes there is discussion of lateral movement. Rarely though is there discussion of up and down motion in footwork. Epee footwork has taken on a very dynamic bouncing motion which, though may be seen in foil, is never seen in saber. This is often called a dynamic on guard. Even if the two fencers maintain their positions they are still in motion and are able to explode with a forward motion at any time, or likewise can jump back out of harm's way. We still see the traditional elements of footwork throughout, but this dynamic bouncing is often superimposed upon them.

Harmenberg does discuss the use and advantages to bouncing as an epee fencer. He states that bouncing preserves balance by maintaining the distance between the feet. The fencer does not need to shift his weight forward or backward to move unlike with traditional advances and retreats. Bouncing allows for quicker and faster footwork because of the use of the whole of the foot, including the toes. Bouncing allows the

fencer to delay the decision to advance or retreat in comparison with traditional footwork. Bouncing allows for striking the opponent with shorter attacks. Bouncing hides the intention of direction, i.e., it is impossible to tell if the next bounce will be forward or backward (2007). Considering that the shorter fencers needs to move quickly in and out of distance and benefits from unexpectedly getting in to short distance, it is important for him to become comfortable with putting a little bounce into his step.

When an epee fencer is bouncing around in the dynamic on guard, the fencer's body size establishes a comfortable cadence to the bounce. The bigger the person is the slower the cadence. A smaller fencer can have a very short (meaning quick) cadence that allows for very quick changes of direction or transitions from bouncing to lunging. The heels never touch the floor, but the toes may skim the floor's surface. A little extra push from the front foot will make the fencer hop backwards while a little extra push from the rear foot will make the fencer hop forwards. The forward and backward locomotion can widely range in distance taken, and may be mixed up with traditional footwork. The up and down motion is important to understand. When a fencer is bouncing and wishes to lunge, he must initiate his attack (extension of the weapon arm leading to extension of the rear leg for propulsion) at the right moment in the bouncing, which is at the start of the upstroke while the legs are bent the most and are feeling the load of the bodyweight between bounces. If the fencer begins his attack at the top of the bounce, just as the body weight is moving down, then the lunge will be of poor quality and feel very awkward.

What follows are various footwork actions, their uses, and some descriptions. Note that a small hop or larger jump can be inserted in place of some actions such as the advance, retreat, and even the lunge.

Footwork to close the distance:

Advance

Double advance

Half retreat- extension of the front leg from the knee.

Forward check – half retreat, full advance

Crossover forward

The forward check is something to pay particular attention to in practice. The shorter fencer can make a series of advances and retreats to induce the opponent to following his distance. Once the opponent is lulled into the pattern, including the footwork tempo, the shorter fencer can make his forward check. At the start of the check, the opponent advances, but so does the shorter fencer during the second and main part of the check. The distance collapses much to the surprise of the opponent. This can put the shorter fencer into distance to take the opponent's blade and follow up with an advance and fleche. The backward check will by contrast influence the opponent to retreat in order to open the distance.

Footwork to open the distance:

Retreat

Double retreat

Half advance- extension of the rear leg from the knee, which may inspire the opponent to retreat.

Backward check – half advance, full retreat, used to trick the opponent to retreating.

Crossover backward

Footwork to strike with:

Lunge

Flying lunge – A very powerful explosive lunge where both feet are in the air mid lunge. It covers the distance of an advance lunge but has the advantage of being in one tempo.

Advance lunge  
Patinando- advance lunge with acceleration  
Fleche  
Redouble  
Lunge fleche

Concerning the lunge, there are three ways to recover from it, namely rear, central, and forward. The rear recovery is the most common and it is especially useful when fencing conservatively, or when making false attacks with a short lunge. Central recovery is, I think, underused. A fencer making a central recovery does not give up as much ground as he would with a rear recover. It is useful in situations when it is difficult to predict which direction the actions will take in the following tempos. A fencer who makes a central recovery can recover to the guard position very quickly with minimal strain on the legs and prepare himself quickly for either continuing forward, with any footwork action including another lunge or fleche, or for retreating if the situation calls for it. The forward recovery is also useful, but in a narrower set of circumstances in epee. I suggest the forward recovery for when a redouble or fleche from the lunge position is planned for. In addition to conserving a tempo from refraining from moving backwards before forwards, the momentum built during the lunge is not lost, but instead is transferred into the next forward moving footwork action.

Methods of hiding intention:

Misdirection of tempo and tempo changes

Half advance and half retreat - With these no distance is taken for given but the illusion of taking or giving distance is made.

Forward and backward checks

Inverse advance lunge – Make half advance by bringing the rear foot forward first then lunge. This gives the distance of an advance lunge but is harder to detect by the opponent.

Crossover lunge – this can be done two ways. Full crossover then lunge or by beginning the lunge as soon as the rear foot lands. You can also make a half crossover backward and then lunge.

Having just mentioned the three ways to recover from the lunge I should note that a simple way of hiding intention and tricking the opponent is to switch recovery types. Having made several lunges in a bout using rear recovery, and thus training the opponent to predict it, one can switch to a forward recovery and hit the opponent on his advance. The forward recovery can allow for an additional forward footwork action such as another lunge, crossover, or fleche, in order to remise after a lunge has fallen short.

The inverse advance lunge and crossover lunges should be emphasized for the shorter fencer. He can mask his intention to hit with an inverse advance lunge by making several lunges and advance lunges that fall short, either on purpose or because the opponent pulls distance. Then, once the opponent has a sense of the shorter fencer's distance, the inverse advance lunge can be used. When it starts the opponent will think he will be safe, but the point will penetrate much further and has a better chance of touching. Likewise the shorter fencer can make lunges and crossovers separate from one another. The opponent will become comfortable keeping a certain distance, and then the shorter fencer can combine the crossover and lunge in order to strike. Specifically, the shorter fencer could make a false attack, crossover retreat, false attack, half crossover backward by bringing the lead foot behind the rear foot (but not completing the crossover), and then as the opponent advances the shorter fencer makes a lunge (starting with his lead foot behind his rear foot) and hits while the distance collapses.

Properly timed, compound footwork actions using acceleration is deadly. The following footwork phrases should be practiced with tempo changes leading to an explosive final action:

Double advance  
Advance lunge  
Double advance, lunge  
Retreat, advance lunge  
Advance, retreat, advance lunge  
Retreat, double advance  
Advance, retreat, advance lunge  
Advance, retreat, double advance  
Advance, retreat, fleche  
Advance lunge, fleche  
Advance, retreat, advance, fleche  
Advance, retreat, advance lunge, fleche  
Advance, false fleche, real fleche

Lateral movement on the strip:

Students should be encouraged to use the full potential of their environment.

Although positioning oneself directly in front of the opponent and maintaining the fighting line is generally wisest, there are times in which lateral locomotion is helpful. This is done in order to acquire a different angle leading to the target, to aid a parry, to avoid collision, or simply to disturb the opponent. With a right-handed fencer, steps to the left should be initiated with the front foot. Steps to the right should be initiated with the rear foot (1995 Theory, Methods and Exercises in Fencing).

### **13) Drills and lessons:**

Lessons concentrate on getting under or inside the opponent's blade, avoiding the danger zone where the opponent can reach you, but you cannot reach him, infighting, displacing, counter-attacking with engagement to body, counter-attacking without

engagement only to the hand and never to the body, binds (transports), and being explosive in attacks and footwork and various forms of second intention including countertime. Obviously every fencer, regardless of height, should develop these skills but they are of particular importance to shorter fencers. The coach should lead the footwork while the student is learning the drill, but once the student has become very comfortable with it, he should take control of the footwork. This will empower the student to take control of the distance, give him a better sense of timing, and will be more realistic.

1) Recognizing and avoiding the danger zone:

In the guard position, both fencers extend their weapon arms. The taller fencer places his point on a chosen, easily hit target, such as the shoulder or part of the torso. The shorter fencer then sees how far his point can reach, and afterwards, when both fencers have their arms relaxed, he makes his attacks no deeper than that original spot. Going any closer would allow the taller fencer to counterattack. While maneuvering on the strip, the shorter fencer makes attacks and the taller fencer makes attacks or counter attacks when he feels the shorter fencer has gotten too close.

Once the Danger zone is defined, drills that make use of the danger zone can be done:

2) The student makes simple attacks and counterattacks without blade contact only to the safe target areas such as thumb, wrist, and distal forearm. Any offensive or

counteroffensive action made to deeper target must be either compound or when controlling the opponent's blade (bind etc).

### 3) Emphasis on controlling the opponent's blade:

Since the shorter fencer will be attempting to control the taller fencer's blade we can assume that the taller fencer will be attempting to prevent his blade from being controlled by derobement/evasions and will also attempt to disengage once his blade is caught. It therefore is to the advantage of the shorter fencer to master controlling the opponent's blade for multiple tempos. (By contrast, the press and beat made before an attack are far riskier, since the opponent may simply replace his point.) Once the fencer gains control of his opponent's blade he should try to maintain control for as long as possible and attempt to score with a series of rapid strikes, most likely while continuing to close the distance. This will require angulation if the distance collapses to infighting distance.

The coach extends, attacks, or ripostes in order to present a straightened weapon arm. The student makes engagement, perhaps as a parry against an attack, then envelopes (circular transport) and then binds (diagonal transport). The drill is repeated with a variety of blade transports with the emphasis on the student trying to control the coach's blade for as many tempos as possible, particularly as the coach recovers from his lunge and retreats. As the skill and confidence of the student increases, have the student finish by making multiple touches to the coach's various target areas.

4) The coach makes either straight arm attacks or bent arm attacks. The student makes a circular parry and ripostes against straight-arm attacks and makes counterattacks to the bent-arm attacks.

5) Remise and reprise:

The student hits hand with thrust and then makes immediate continuation to deeper target, such as shoulder, with a lunge. If the coach makes a parry then the student evades it and either continues to the same target or chooses a different target such as hip, thigh, or toe.

6) Hand touches:

From immobility, advancing, or retreating, the coach presents his hand as target, makes sweeps in 4 and 6, and circular actions, so that the student may make simple direct attacks, disengages, and feint attacks. If the coach uses a retreat this allows the student to make use of a redoublement.

7) Avoid the double touch (countertime):

With the prevalence the counterattack in epee, and its utility against a shorter fencer, it is imperative that the shorter fencer practice countertime. The student attacks and the coach immediately counterattacks. The student may try various ways to hit first with speed and concealment of intent, or may try second intention countertime. The student may abort the initial attack to parry the counterattack or may abort the initial attack and switch to a stop-hit.

8) Instigating infighting:

The student makes strong press with a fast advance or lunge to close the distance and acquire control of the opponent's blade. The student then immediately maneuvers his blade and arm to make the touch while his opponent is still surprised at the sudden close of distance. This all may or may not be preceded by a beat attack to the arm.

9) Defensive second intention/invitation with attempt at blade contact (sweep):

The student makes sweep or press in either 4 or 6. The coach attacks with disengage. The student, expecting this, makes lateral or circular parry and riposte. The riposte may be direct or with a bind and it may be delivered with thrust, lunge, or fleche.

10) Attack, redouble, reprise:

With student continuously moving forward and coach continuously retreating, the student makes attack to thumb, then makes redouble to top of elbow, and finally evades a parry to make a third touch to shoulder. Once the student is comfortable with the actions, the coach will accelerate his retreating through the phrase, starting with a slow retreat and ending with escape footwork. This should provoke a fleche for the final touch.

11) Parrying during retreat, immobility, or advance:

Initiating a retreat just prior to the parry is the norm but is not always ideal. The coach makes attacks while the student makes parries while retreating, staying still, or advancing. Ripostes, both direct and indirect, should be practiced to various targets.

The preceding drills should be combined to allow for a greater variety of realistic situations within a formal lesson. The student, for instance, could combine emphasizing defensive second intention, instigating infighting, controlling the opponent's blade through multiple tempos, and hitting numerous times with successive remises, including a final touch made by a fleche with opposition. Another combination to try would be to have the student maintain long distance in order to focus on making counterattacks to the wrist against the coach's attacks with the use of the occasional attack and countertime made by the student. Finally, many defensive actions can be linked to offensive or counteroffensive actions as a secondary safety net. The student could be doing a drill concerning the counterattack, but should the counterattack miss (or even if it hits) be expected to then engage the blade with a parry, make a bind, and riposte to deep target with various footwork actions.

Relatively simplistic lessons can be made more difficult in a variety of ways, such as by playing with tempo, giving the student control of the footwork, or introducing false cues that are meant to be ignored. Simply changing the line that they are written in, changing the actions to second intention, or by changing the footwork, can modify many of these drills. Usually the manner of making the touch (with or without engagement, with a change of line by making a bind, by flick, with or without angulation, etc) is not specified and is at the coach's discretion. Attacks can be turned to counter-attacks just by changing the direction of the footwork and having the coach initiate the attack. The timing and footwork relative to the blade cue can also be changed to change simple attacks into feint attacks. The student can be forced to reprise when the coach

unexpectedly parries or forced to parry or counter-attack if the coach ripostes. Student can be cued to riposte with a fleche if the coach makes a quick rear recovery from his own lunge (Sise, 2007).

#### **14) Conclusion:**

Fencing is a very old sport with well-developed pedagogies for techniques and tactics. Contemporary fencers reap the rewards of this history and combine it with the advantages of modern science, training methods, and sport theory. It is surprising then that so very little is published on the topic of how height affects fencing. If anything, this paper has been a hard and honest look at something most people seem to take for granted.

After analyzing strengths and weaknesses related to height, we see that the shorter fencer does have tools he can use to successfully dismantle his taller opponent. While some techniques are modified for use against taller fencers, most techniques are little if at all affected by height difference. There is the requirement, however, for the shorter fencer to be aware of certain strategic advantages and disadvantages concerning both himself and his opponent due to differences in height and reach. He must also be prepared to use strategies that benefit him and be prepared to counter the use of tactics that benefit his taller opponent. Emphasis is placed on tempo changes, second intention, controlling the opponent's blade, and avoiding the danger zone. The shorter fencer should restrain himself from making suicidal actions like attacking the torso without controlling the opponent's blade. Finally, an additional tool that some fencers may benefit from is the selection of the shorter blade.

The shorter fencer has his work cut out for him. He is required to fence using greater speed, more energy, and more difficult techniques and tactics than his taller opponents in order to be competitive with them. He is forced to fence in a manner where every action must have a purpose. He must commit to an attack fully, and only after difficult preparatory actions have been successful. He must, essentially, practice well and make his apparent weakness his greatest asset. If he can do this, then no goal should be out of his reach.

**Table 1:**

Name	Gender	Height in feet	Lunge length in	
			feet	
Zeno D.	male	4.75	7.625	
Jenny S.	female	5	7.67	
Jacob B.	male	5	8.25	
Audry M.	female	5.17	8.17	
Laura P.	female	5.17	7.92	
Colin R.	male	5.25	8	
Abby D.	female	5.29	8.83	
Dianne T.	female	5.34	7.29	
Josh R.	male	5.375	8	
Hannah T.	female	5.58	8.96	

Laura M.	female	5.58	8.63
Jake W.	male	5.58	7.92
Kevin M.	male	5.58	8.46
Haley L.	female	5.58	8.08
Aaron D.	male	5.58	8.63
Hannah R.	female	5.67	8.42
Robert F.	male	5.67	8.5
Nathan Q.	male	5.92	9.25
Fred T.	male	5.92	9.17
Benjamin T.	male	6	9.2
Jon L.	male	6	9.21
Rob B.	male	6.08	9
Shawn M.	male	6.08	9.38
Paul S.	male	6.25	9.96

Table 1

This table shows twenty-six fencers, their height, and their lunge distance. They are arranged by height, with the shortest at the top and tallest at the bottom. The lunge distance was calculated by having the fencer make his or her deepest lunge without leaning forward. The measurement was taken from the back edge of the rear foot to a spot on the floor directly underneath the tip of his or her weapon. All fencers were measured at the same location, using a line on the floor for the placement of the rear foot. All fencers used the same practice foil.

## Resources:

Alaux, Michel. Modern Fencing: Foil Epee Saber from Initiation to Competition. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975

Castello, J. Martinez. Theory of Fencing: Foil Sabre Duelling Sword. New York: J. M. Castello, 1931

Czajkowski, Zbigniew. Understanding Fencing: The Unity of Theory and Practice  
New York: SKA Swordplay Books, 2005

DeChaine, Daniel. Email and personal discussion.

Evangelista, Nick. The Art and Science of Fencing. Indianapolis: Masters Press, 1996

Harmenberg, Johan. Epee 2.0: The Birth of the New Fencing Paradigm. Staten Island: SKA Swordplay Books, 2007

Micahnik, David. "Epee: The Long and the Short of It." Demonstration at the Philadelphia USFCA AGM, 2003

Micahnik, David. Epee demonstration at San Antonio USFCA AGM, 2004

Sise, Paul. "42 Views of Epee." A Fencing Coaches Compendium

<http://home.earthlink.net/~allenevans59/42VIEWS.HTML>. 2007

Tyshler D. and Tyshler G. Fencing: What a Sportsman Should Know About Technique And Tactics. Moscow: Physical Education and Science Press, 1995

Wieder, Ben. Personal discussion. Lambertville, NJ USFCA AGM, 2008

Wojciechowski, Ziemowit. Theory, Methods and Exercises in Fencing. Datchet: Libra Printing, 1995

### **Recordings:**

Fencing World Championship St. Petersburg. Fencing Pictures

Men's Epee World Championships Leipzig 2005. Fencing Pictures

Torino Mondiale Scherma 2006 Men's Epee. Fencing Pictures

### **Special thanks to:**

The members of Pioneer Valley Fencing Academy

Jeanette Zissel – The inspiration for this topic and participant in many experiments.

David Micahnik - Advisor