

Epee Concepts and Lessons

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Beyond the initial learning of the many skills and strokes employed in fencing there is the need to learn how those actions fit into the context of the bout. What's more, the fencer needs to become comfortable with his skills so that he can rely on them under stress. Fencers tend to have personal favorite strokes and strategies. Some seem to always be attacking while some prefer to hang back and counter attack. These preferences are rooted in their personality, skills, and physical ability. That being said, it is important for the fencer to be able to switch seamlessly between offense, defense, and counter-offense in order to successfully deal with various opponents. Fencers must also strive to improve the quality of their technique. As such, no matter the skill level or experience of the fencer, there is great value in practicing drills and taking individual lessons.

I emphasize the goal of 5 Attempts to score = 5 Touches. I could say 5 Attacks = 5 Touches, but the reality is that the touches could come from any offensive action, which includes attacks, continuations and ripostes. Touches can also be made by counter-offensive actions. Granted, the fencer may not be able to score with each genuine attempt, and that touches may be made rather unexpectedly, such as through a reflexive response, but the emphasis is on setting up the phrase to increase the likelihood of scoring during genuine attempts to score. This is a very efficient but somewhat conservative method of fencing. The fencer does not waste a great deal of energy frantically and futilely attacking, hoping (rather than expecting) that eventually one of his attacks will score. Instead, emphasis is placed on careful observation of the opponent, ignoring extraneous actions, creating and employing a strategy, and patience. False attacks are used but they are meant to help control the opponent. Phrases that include secondary or backup actions are also emphasized. These actions are sometimes called "safety" actions, like a safety net that protects you should you fail your initial action. An example of this would be planning a specific remise or parry-riposte in case the attack or counter-attack misses.

Care should be taken to emphasize the importance of preparatory actions in all weapons, but I argue that epee, with its lack of rule enforced right-of-way, requires the most attention to the preparations in order to safely and successfully deliver single light touches.* The longer the fencing bout takes, the greater the percentage of time devoted to preparatory actions. Consider this, in an epee bout that ends by time with a score of 3-2, how much time during that bout was taken by the 3 scoring actions by the victor? By comparison, how much time was devoted to learning about the opponent, setting up the distance, attempting to control the opponent, and setting up the phrase that scored those touches, all the while attempting to prevent the opponent from successfully scoring? The complexity and length of the bout is dependent in part on the relative skill and experience of the opponents.

The fencer should have a high degree of accuracy in his point control to make use of opportunities to score. It is one thing to be beaten by a superior opponent and another thing entirely to lose because your attacks simply miss the target.

In addition it must be emphasized that one of the keys to successful offense is a strong defense.

An attacker with a weak defense will not only run into trouble if his attack fails, but will in fact contribute to the failure of his own attack. The attacker with a weak defense may make half-hearted attacks due to his own anxiety about being hit. The rules of right-of-way in foil and saber help to reduce this anxiety, but in epee there are no rules to protect you against a sudden counterattack. By contrast, a fencer with confidence in his own defense will fully commit his attacks, knowing that if he fails and the opponent becomes threatening that he will be able to adapt and protect himself.

Concerning speed - Developing speed is usually one of the last parts of learning a technique or tactic. The student should first learn to do the drill slowly and smoothly. Balance and control must be maintained. Gradually, as the student becomes comfortable with the drill, speed can be developed. This builds confidence, which is a required element of speed in planned actions. Reflexive actions require frequent repetition in bout-like lessons in order to develop.

The efficiency of the action affects the perceived speed. If we remember that $\text{Distance} = \text{Rate} \times \text{Time}$, we recognize that if we reduce the distance that the blade travels, but maintain the same velocity, it takes less time to reach the destination or target. A disengage attack, for example, made inefficiently, using a large wrist or arm movement to change the blade position will seem to the opponent slow and easy to parry. By contrast, as small and efficient disengage made by the fingers will seem fast. In both examples the actual velocity may be the same, but the more efficient action, traveling a lesser distance, seems faster. Times to look for opportunities to improve efficiency include actions like disengages, circular parries, and choice of target. For example: If the attack is to the thumb should the continuation be made to the shoulder of the weapon arm or to the shoulder of the non-weapon arm? The weapon arm shoulder is closer therefore the tip needs to travel less distance therefore the amount of time it takes to reach is lower.

Concerning the use of a padded epee coaching sleeve- I have found that there are only two situations when the coach should wear a padded coaching sleeve. The first is with beginner fencers. Here, the sleeve makes arm touches a much easier for the student and helps to build his confidence. It also protects the coach from bruises due to poor technique and improper use of distance. Once the student becomes proficient with hitting the arm the padded sleeve should be shed in favor of the sleeve of the jacket. This forces the student to make more accurate touches upon a target that more closely resembles the target of an opponent. Who while competing would wear a big pillow on his arm that can be hit from a mile away? No one, obviously, and neither should the coach. If the sleeve is of soft leather it may hold the point and make it difficult for the student to make a smooth remise. I also find that the better the fencer, the less painful the touch. Touches to the upper arm may be painful even with a sleeve, but the coach shouldn't be hit on the bicep often. He should instead prevent himself being hit on the bicep by making the realistic responses to such an attack, such as extending the weapon arm with a counter-attack or by parry-riposte. Aside from coaching beginners, I find the padded sleeve a must for training the flick. This is fairly self-explanatory, so suffice it to say, the drawbacks of the sleeve are outweighed by the bruise prevention it affords. I also advise that coaches wear a padded overshoe for lessons that include toe touches to prevent bruising.

There are several types of lessons. Some teach new techniques, some teach new tactics, others are meant for review and correction or fixing (making permanent) a learned action. Some lessons are meant to warm up the fencer before competition while others are used by the coach to learn what a new (but experienced) fencer can do. A complete lesson that has the goal of teaching a new technique or tactic would include a warm up, an introductory phase that develops into the body

of main theme of the lesson, variation on the theme, and a cool down.

An example of a complete lesson with offensive second intention:

START LESSON

1) Salute. Do a quick warm up. This would usually be simple thrusts to the torso, a few lunges, a few parry-ripostes, and footwork to maintain the distance. The warm up gradually becomes more intense, allowing the student to feel comfortable with the demands of the lesson. This is done even if the fencer is already warmed from exercise or fencing before the lesson, though the time spent in the warm up can be reduced.

2) Work toward the body of the lesson, laying the foundation for footwork and do a phrase that will require the student to adapt by using the main element of the lesson. (IE, if teaching offensive 2nd intention, start out with student attacking, then coach being hit but then learning to parry riposte, and suggest "Ok, now you need to learn how to deal with my ripostes...etc")

3) Now that there is a reason to learn it, teach and practice the main theme. (for example, coach opens top of wrist, student attacks, coach makes 6 riposte, student makes opposition parry 6 riposte to torso and scores)

4) Now make the phrase bout-like, and demand a recognizable tempo change, where the attack is slow and easy for the coach to parry, but the riposte is faster.

5) Now do it in a couple different lines for variety. Suggest that the student riposte to different targets like bicep, torso, thigh, toe. Perhaps replace the student's opposition 6 parry with a yielding 1 parry.

6) Make corrections as needed. Throw in one or two unforeseen/surprise action (like attacking the student when normally the student is initiating with an attack). Verbally encourage the student with feeling. "YES!" and "All right, come on COME ON!" as opposed to a bland "Ok again. Ok again. Ok again."

7) Do a cool-down. An example of a cool down would be keeping distance slowly with slow, medium length lunges, being sure to exhale during the lunge. If the student intends on continuing to fence afterwards, the cool-down may be a reduced, but it shouldn't be eliminated.

8) Salute, shake hands, and briefly discuss the lesson if necessary.

END LESSON

Before getting into the various drills that can be used to build up a complete lesson, I'd like to present a few fundamental lessons that once mastered will improve the quality and ease of the other more complicated actions:

1) Determining eye dominance and aiming:

It is helpful for the fencer to know which eye, the left or the right, is his dominant eye in order to make aiming easier and more effective. The dominant eye is the eye that sees the same perspective as the person's binocular vision. One way to determine this is to have the student extend both arms and make a small viewing hole between his two hands. Have him look at a distant object through the peephole and alternate between both eyes open, left eye only open, and

right eye only open. The eye that sees the object (the same as with both eyes open) is the dominant eye. Most people will be right eye dominant. Ideally eye dominance will match handedness, but this isn't always the case. Determining eye dominance is especially helpful to people whose handedness and eye dominance do not match.

I advise that the student to look at the opponent's weapon shoulder area, which shows the motion of the arm relative to the torso and also helps the student judge distance from the torso.

Peripheral vision will detect the blade movement and foot movement. Only once the student commits to the idea of attacking should he drop his eyes to focus on the target such as the wrist. Sometimes though that isn't even necessary.

Once the dominant eye has been found, the fencer can improve his ability to aim through visualization. The fencer comes on guard and looks with both eyes at the target. The target should be small and specific, ie, a dime sized spot on the forearm rather than the forearm. The fencer extends the weapon arm and relaxes the shoulder. Now the fencer imagines a line being drawn from his dominant eye that goes along his weapon arm and extends out of the blade to the target like a laser beam. Maintaining a relaxed shoulder, the fencer delivers the touch, using only the fingers to make fine corrections to the aim if necessary. The relaxed shoulder allows the trajectory of the straightened weapon arm to remain the same as it was while in the guard position while lunging. To put it another way, the weapon arm does not drop during the lunge. This is all done very slowly at first, but in time the fencer is able to skip the laser beam visualization and be able to aim and hit at bout pace. Eventually the sense of aim will become refined and aiming can be done using peripheral vision.

2) Relaxing the weapon shoulder:

It is important for the weapon arm shoulder to remain relaxed, especially during the lunge. A tight shoulder will force the weapon arm (and therefore the weapon) to drop during the lunge which ruins the aim. Have the fencer come on guard and extend the weapon arm. Then make the shoulder like water, feeling the arm almost disconnect from the torso. Whatever movement the torso makes the arm should not be affected. With the arm extended and aimed, jump up and down with the goal of keeping the weapon arm and epee aimed and motionless.

3) Elbow position in guard position and thrust:

With the weapon arm bent while in the guard position it is important that the elbow be pulled in to line up with the forearm, hand, guard, and point. If the elbow is exposed in the outside line there are two problems. The first is that it is available as target, which is obvious enough. The second problem is that when the elbow is to the outside it forces a small rotation in the bones of the arm when the arm extends and that rotation affects the aim. A poor elbow position will cause the epee point to drop and pull to the inside during the extension. By placing the elbow in line with the forearm and guard that rotation is essentially done before the extension is made so it won't affect the aim during the extension. While extending it is important to keep the elbow, forearm, guard, and point all in a line and parallel to the floor. Don't chop! Retracting the arm requires the same alignment.

4) Application of power in lunge and recovery:

Most fencers beyond the beginner stage can produce a lunge. I have found that many fencers can improve upon their lunges by focusing on some subtle but important parts of the technique. The first is the application of power in the lunge itself. Once the weapon arm has been extended and the front foot is kicked forward the rear leg is straightened. I ask my students "If I want to lunge this way, then which direction do I apply the power from my rear leg?" Students tend to suggest applying the power in the direction opposite that the lunge is directed, i.e., they say to push

backwards. Equal and opposite reaction, right Newton? Well, the thing is that the rear foot is upon the floor. The floor is not behind the fencer, but rather is underneath. The fencer should apply the power from the rear leg directly down and into the floor using the whole of the rear foot. Visualize breaking through the floorboards with the rear foot.

The recovery seems simple enough. Most fencers know to unlock the rear knee and then push off the front leg and come back to guard position. It seems that few realize that the front leg isn't solely responsible for the power required to bring the body back to the guard position. Once the front foot is off the floor the front leg can no longer apply power to the floor and it no longer has much to offer towards the goal of recovering backward. The rear foot, however, is still on the floor. By making use of the traction the rear foot has on the floor, the fencer can adduct the rear leg while bending the rear knee. This allows the fencer to pull himself back into guard position in addition to the push received from the front leg.

5) Use of the fingers:

Use the fingers. Use the fingers! Ok, ok, but how? Here's how. It all starts with the choice of handle. For those of you using an orthopedic pistol grip you need to make sure that the grip you select is small enough to fit into the fingers, not fill the palm, and still be comfortable. I for example wear an extra large glove, but I use a medium visconti pistol grip. This allows me to hold the handle like a writing utensil as opposed to a baseball bat. Once the proper handle is selected the fingers can be used effectively. While holding the epee in parry 6 position with the hand towards supination you can relax the aids (the pinky, ring, and middle fingers). Maintain contact with the handle as you relax them. You'll find that the blade drops downward somewhat. Now squeeze just the pinky finger and use the index finger as the fulcrum. This pulls the blade to the inside. Finally, squeeze the ring and then the middle fingers. This draws the blade back up to the original 6 position. By practicing this rhythmically, first relaxing the aids then squeezing them from pinky, ring, and then middle finger you can develop a nice tight circle six parry. Circle 4 is somewhat trickier because it requires more influence from the manipulators, which are the thumb and index finger, but the basic principle is the same. Using the fingers to create circular and semi-circular actions help the fencer to make efficient circular parries, disengage attacks, and indirect ripostes. Finger control is also helpful in making strong beats without winding up first.

The Lessons - What follows are many epee drills and lessons. Having a written menu of lessons like this can help the coach with his lesson preparation and reduce stress. It also can help prevent the coach from getting into a rut giving the same 4 or 5 types of lessons where there are in fact many more to select from. Variety helps both the coach and student from getting bored. Many of these lessons are appropriate (usually with modification) for foil and saber. Most of these lessons are not technical lessons that teach specific actions, but rather methods of cueing to create a variety of tactical situations for the student. This assumes that the student already has some mastery of footwork as well as the essential components of bladework, ie, the thrust, disengage attack and indirect ripostes, the parries, attacks on the blade, and various methods of taking and controlling the opponent's blade, etc. From these lessons the student is able to practice phrases of actions that have context and purpose. Some of these drills can be used in combination by linking them together in a logical manner.

Relatively simplistic lessons can be made more difficult in a variety of ways, such as by playing with tempo, giving some control of the lesson to the student, or introducing false cues that are meant to be ignored. Many of these drills can be modified simply by changing the line that they are written in, changing the actions to second intention, or by changing the footwork. 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. Note that some of the drills are attributed to Gary Copeland. He taught these drills or concepts to me in Epee 3 at the USFA Coaches College. This isn't to say that he invented the concepts in those lessons, but I figured I'd give credit where credit was due. The rest are lessons I've pieced together over the years from my own experience as well as from the influence of various books, USFCA seminars, USFA Coaches College, Swordmaster articles, etc.

1) Hand touches:

From immobility, advancing, or retreating, 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. Use of a retreat allows for a redouble.

2) 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.

3) 4 simple rules (Gary Copeland):

This is a version of Gary's 1-2 drill and is a very good introduction to epee for fencers who normally fence foil. There are 4 simple rules. 1) If the arm is open, hit it. 2) If the arm is opening then hit the arm on the opening line. 3) If the arm is not open you can create an opening with a beat. 4) If the arm is extended you take the blade and hit body.

This lesson would count as a 4 cue and 4 response lesson. It can serve as the framework lesson for a variety of techniques and tactics. Be creative!

4) Parry Riposte or Counter-attack against coach's attack:

Coach makes either straight-arm attacks or bent arm attacks. Student makes parry-riposte against straight-arm attacks and makes counter attacks to the bent arm attacks. The straight-arm attacks should generally be to the top of the student's weapon arm, drawing the student's circle 6 parry. If both the student and coach are right handed, the student should when making parry 4, either make a riposte with bind, or wait till the coach relaxes his weapon arm before making a direct riposte with opposition.

5) Counter-attack followed by parry-riposte:

This is a handy tactic in epee as well as saber, where counter-attacks can be made to the hand or forearms, as opposed to foil which would require the fencer to be close enough to hit the torso. Coach makes bend arm attack to the hip. Student makes counter-attack with retreat. Whether or not he is successful with the counter-attack he then makes a strong parry 2 and should follow with riposte to thigh. The coach may vary his bend arm attack by attacking to any line which forces to the student to find the opening for the stop hit and select an appropriate parry. Riposte can be direct or with a bind. If coach makes a quick recovery the student can riposte with a

fleche.

6) Parry or counter-attack against coach's riposte:

Similar to the previous drill, but begins with the student's attack to forearm which the coach parries. The student, on his recovery must disengage his point from the coach's forte and place his point on the exposed surface of the coach's weapon arm, thus allowing the coach to impale his wrist on the student's point. If the student fails to do so, or if for any reason the student determines ahead of time that the stop hit is impractical, the student makes a fast recovery and makes parry riposte. This drill is good for situations where the student is trying to keep his distance from the opponent, whereas the following drill "Remise and reprise" would force the student to close the distance to hit deeper target. Considering the similarities though, these two drills work well together.

7) Remise and reprise:

Student hits hand with thrust and then makes immediate continuation to deeper target such as shoulder with a lunge. If coach makes parry the student evades and either continues to the same target or chooses a different target such as hip, thigh, or toe. If the student makes the initial attack with the intention of proving a parry in order to deceive it, this makes the tactic a feint attack, though physically it may appear identical to the reprise.

8) Avoid the double touch (countertime):

Here the coach offers the chance for the student to practice countertime. Student attacks and coach immediately counterattacks. The student may try various ways to hit first with speed and concealment of intent, or may try second intention countertime.

9) Controlling the opponent's blade:

This is useful for fencing against taller opponents.

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.)

Coach extends, attacks, or ripostes in order to present a straightened weapon arm. 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 touches to the coach's various targets (chest, leg, foot, etc).

10) Avoiding blade contact:

Simply reverse roles and do the previous drill "Emphasis on controlling the opponent's blade." Student attempts to prevent his blade from being taken and controlled.

11) Instigating infighting (from Gary Copeland):

Student makes strong press in 4 (or a circular sweep in 6) with a fast advance or lunge to close the distance and acquire control of the opponent's blade. 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. Whether or not the student is eventually able to create the infighting situation in bouts, he will become more comfortable and capable during unexpected infighting.

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

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

13) Multiple targets:

This lesson has a variety of difficulties. In the easiest version the coach stands still and opens various lines and the student makes direct attacks to different target areas, namely thumb, forearm, shoulder, chest, thigh, toe, and mask. To cue for indirect attacks, the coach sweeps the blade and student hits while avoiding blade contact. If coach extends the weapon arm, student can take the blade and hit the various targets with binds. If coach attacks, the ripostes can go to different targets.

14) Multiple hits and multiple targets:

Similar to the previous drill, but incorporates an initial attack and a remise, redouble, and/or reprise. An additional hit may be made with a flick to the arm during the student's recovery.

15) Simple phrase while advancing and then retreating:

For example, if the student makes engagement in 4 and then thrusts in opposition, this phrase is an opposition thrust while moving forward but is a parry riposte when moving backwards.

16) Stop-hit against riposte followed by parry counter riposte:

Student attacks arm with lunge and is parried. Student changes line by moving his tip around the guard and leaves his arm extended as he recovers. Coach begins his riposte and is hit on wrist as student recovers. Student should follow with a safety action of parry and counter riposte.

17) Attack, redouble, reprise:

With student continuously moving forward and coach continuously retreating, student makes attack to thumb, 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, 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.

18) Single cue and single response with increasing difficult (Gary Copeland):

This devilish lesson teaches the student when to attack. It starts off very simply and easily. Select an attack such as the disengage. That attack will be the action for the whole lesson. It starts from immobility and the coach cues for the attack. The student easily scores. Footwork is added and the coach stops footwork to give the cue. Eventually the coach gives the cue while still moving but still during moments that the student should attack, ie, when the student is in balance and at the right distance, etc. Gradually the lesson gets harder as the coach sometimes gives the cue at inappropriate times. The student must only attack when the timing and distance are appropriate. The coach may even hide the good cues within other blade actions, forcing the student to be patient and to ignore or deal with the extra bladework.

19) Multiple cues and single response:

Fairly self explanatory... the coach makes several different cues which prompt the student to make the same response. For example – sweep in 4, or 6, or circle 6, or circle 4 all draw a disengage to the thigh.

20) Multiple cues and multiple responses (one specific response per cue):

Each cue has a specific response. Three or four cues seem to work best here. For example – Coach makes sweep in 2 = student disengages to hit top of wrist. Coach makes sweep of circle 6 = disengage to thigh. Coach makes sweep to 4 = toe touch. Coach makes attack = student makes circle 6 parry and riposte to torso.

21) Single cue and multiple responses:

This is a good lesson to force the student to explore his creative side, or at the very least practice some variety. One example of the cue would be – Coach extends weapon arm. The student can so many things against this, including counterattack while the extension occurs, beat the blade in various ways and hit, use opposition thrust, take the blade with a bind and hit practically anywhere.

22) Real cues and false cues (Gary Copeland):

A real cue is a cue done at an appropriate time for the action and is designed to allow for the student to be successful. A false cue usually looks similar to the real cue but is generally done at the wrong time, tempo, distance, or direction, and is designed to tempt the student into acting and failing. The student therefore must learn to discern between the real and false cues and to act upon only the real ones. A simple example of a real cue would be- Coach places blade in parry 2 in order to open his wrist for a simple direct attack. The false cue could be opening the line with a retreat which would actually call for a feint attack and not a simple direct attack. The student should therefore ignore the opening during the coach's retreat.

23) Offensive second intention using attack and counter-riposte:

Perhaps the most common form of second intention, student makes a shallow and somewhat slow attack and allows himself to be parried. Coach makes riposte. Student parries the riposte and makes a counter-riposte. There is some variety in how this is done. For example, if the coach makes 6 riposte with engagement, the student may make either opposition parry 6 or may make a yielding parry of 1. If the student's counter-riposte is made with a bind the final target can be varied.

24) Deliberate attack to bell guard and remise:

A clever trick to use against an opponent who has a solid guard position – Student makes a medium length lunge and purposely hit a quadrant of the opponent's bellguard. When hit, the coach reacts by making small retreat and moving his hand in the direction opposite the quadrant hit, meaning if the top of the guard is hit the coach lowers his guard. If the bottom is hit, then the coach raises his guard, etc. The student then makes a remise with a second kick of his front foot and changes his medium lunge to a long lunge and touches the opening target.

25) Mimicking specific opponents:

There are two opportunities to help your student by mimicking the styles of his opponents. The first is when the student comes to you and says “ I just competed and lost to this guy who fenced like this...” As the coach you can mimic the actions or style used by that opponent so your student would be able to be better prepared for their next match together. The second opportunity is the preparation for an upcoming competition. Careful analysis and mimicry of

expected opponents can help the student feel more comfortable, and therefore have a greater chance of success, against those opponents during competition. It is particularly useful for the coach to become proficient at coaching and fencing with his non-dominant hand in order to mimic both righty and lefty fencers.

26) The “blind” opponent:

This does not refer to visually impaired fencers, but rather fencers who seem to act with total disregard for their opponent’s actions. These fencers are difficult to control and predict, which can make them difficult to fence. The coach can be surprisingly successful by making sweeps, seemingly random parries, and thrusts, searching for blade contact, and using *sentiment du fer* to complete the attacks. The student must adapt and fence with the tactic of patiently exploiting openings rather than controlling the opponent or creating openings with feints.

27) *Sentiment du fer* (offensive):

Sentiment du fer means “feeling of the blade.” *Sentiment* – sentimentality. *Fer* - ferrous, iron, the blade. The sense of touch can be just as important as the visual sense in fencing if properly used. Have the student close his eyes and then engage his blade. Ask the student which line you have made contact in, or perhaps ask him to respond with a disengage. The student should be able to tell how you have engaged his blade from his fingers. *Sentiment du fer* can be used while on the offense. Student makes attack. Coach makes a parry. The student, relying on his sense of touch, slips away from the parry and hits with a reprise. A second use of *sentiment du fer* is with the press. Student makes a press. Coach either does not respond or returns pressure. Student, relying on his fingers to sense the difference, either makes a straight thrust or a disengage.

28) *Sentiment du fer* (defensive):

While on the defense the combination of *sentiment du fer* and a working knowledge of the parry systems creates a powerful tool for the fencer. Coach attacks. Student makes parry and expects the coach to make a reprise. Student has a second parry planned ahead of time for the reprise and selects this parry based on the first parry. For example, if the attack is to the thumb and student makes parry 6 then he bets that the coach will disengage by coming below and around the guard to hit either the thigh or chest. Once the student makes that parry 6 he can plan to make an intercept parry of 2 or 8. The instant the student feels the coach’s blade leave his own he knows that the reprise has started. The student then makes his pre-planned intercept parry and riposte. This gives the illusion of super-human reflexes because the decision making process is moved from after the reprise starts to before the reprise starts, thereby allowing the student to go immediately from recognition (that the reprise has started) to the execution of the parry.

29) Choice between low line parries and counterattacks:

This is a little more difficult than simply having the coach make low line attacks and the student either parrying or counter-attacking. There should be a reason for the student to parry and a reason for him to select the counter-attack. The student should lead the footwork. To cue the counter-attack the coach makes a low line attack smoothly and from long distance. To cue for the parry the coach makes his attack suddenly, quickly, and from slightly closer distance.

30) Method of aiming for toe touches:

It is not necessary to drop the eyes to look directly at the opponent’s foot in order to hit it. The opponent’s toe is under his knee, which is under his hip, which is under the line connecting the shoulder to the torso, which is usually under the side of his mask. The student can aim at any point along that line, begin the attack, and once begun he can drop the point to the foot. Have the

student practice this timing his attack to your advance while you sweep your blade to a parry 4 or 6. It is relatively safe for the fencer to initiate a toe touch (without engagement) when the opponent's blade is moving in a direction away from him and the opponent's weight is being placed on the front foot.

31) Counter-attack against toe touch:

The student should practice this to develop the sense of timing, aim, and balance required for a successful counter-attack as well as for a successful recovery should the counter-attack fail. Coach makes attack to toe. Student withdraws the front foot and counter-attacks to the wrist/forearm, shoulder, or mask. A tall fencer with long arms may find it safer and more effective to counter-attack to the mask or shoulder than the wrist. Against a very fast and well executed attack to the toe, the student may have to pivot at his center of gravity, kick his rear leg back into the air, and move his front foot under his center of gravity in order to protect the toe and develop the forward motion of the point to hit. With this action the student should immediately hop back into the guard position after attempting the counter-attack.

32) Yielding parry of 1 and opposition parry 6:

Both of these options are responses to the opponent's circle 6 parry and riposte with engagement. Student attacks. Coach makes parry circle 6 riposte. Student, in time with the riposte, maintains blade contact and makes parry 6. The counter-riposte can be direct, indirect, or with bind. Alternately, the student could instead select to make yielding parry of 1 instead of the opposition parry 6. To do this the student rolls his blade around the other blade during the coach's riposte and moves to parry 1 position. The student may need to rotate at the torso and displace downward. To aid in the counter-riposte the student may need to bend backwards at the waist. Riposte is generally direct and to the belly or thigh. The choice of yielding parry may be desirable compared to the opposition 6 parry when fencing against a physically stronger opponent since the yielding parry uses the opponent's strength against him. This drill can be done as second intention or as a response to a surprise parry-riposte by the coach.

33) Yielding parry of 4 and opposition parry 2:

Similar to the preceding drill "Yielding parry of 1 and opposition parry 6" except that this drill makes use of different parries. Student attacks. Coach makes either parry 2 or makes parry 4 and then binds to 2 and makes riposte. Student rolls his blade over the coach's blade and maintains contact the whole time. Student displaces downwards and makes a very low parry 4. The counter-riposte is generally to the upper torso or side of the mask. Alternately, the student could chose to make opposition parry of 2 and counter-riposte to thigh.

34) Angulation to circumvent parries:

If the opponent makes a parry but does not immediately bind the blade or envelope it, the fencer can continue pushing the point forward and angulate to pass around the parry and still strike target with a remise. This is useful when the attacking fencer has a lot of forward momentum, such as in a fleche attack. If the defender makes a riposte the attacker's remise will likely hit and at worst there should be a double touché. Student attacks. Coach makes parry 4, 6, or 1. Student moves his hand to the same direction as the opponent's blade and angulates so the point will hit while continuing forward with a redouble, fleche, etc. Coach may make riposte to force the student to make his remise smoothly and quickly.

35) Beat or press attack from advance lunge distance:

Emphasis in this drill is on the timing between the beat (or press) and the footwork. Student

starts at advance lunge distance. Student starts his advance with the front foot. Student strikes the coach's blade simultaneously with the landing of his rear foot. Now that the rear foot has landed the student is capable of making his lunge, which he does.

36) Push-pull:

This is similar to the push-pull done in foil and saber in concept but generally using much less of the strip because of the threat of a counter-attack. Student threatens coach and advances once or twice or makes small hops forward. Student makes a change of small hop backward or a retreat and coach advances. This may be repeated two or three times to set a tempo. Student times his attack to land during the coach's advance.

37) Student attacks. Coach has options.

The student should feel comfortable and confident in his attacks. This comes from belief that his attacks will land, and if they don't that he'll be able to deal with whatever happens next. In this drill the student attacks and the coach responds to the attack in a few expected ways. He can 1) not react and get hit 2) parry riposte to force the student to reprise or make parry counter-riposte or 3) counter-attack to force the student to make countertime. At first the lesson is done slowly to get the student used to the different responses. Ideally the coach reacts appropriately to the attacks made by the student. If the attack is well timed, done with a straight arm, done at the right distance, and done without telegraphing then it should score. If the distance or timing is a little off but otherwise done well, then the coach should parry. If the attack is made with a bent arm and does not have a feeling of surprise, then the coach should make counter-attack. The student should be made aware of why the coach reacts the way he does so that in time the student may be able to vary his attacks in such a way to make distinct 1st intention, feint, and second intention actions of various sorts including countertime.

38) 1 st intention attack, Feint attack, and 2 nd intention and countertime in serial pattern and random:

Essentially the goal is to get the student capable of returning to lesson 37 and taking total control of that lesson including the coach's reactions. The student practices the previous lesson's actions in a serial pattern. The coach will respond according to the feeling and qualities of the student's attack. The student can eventually take control of the order to transition to a random pattern. The student needs to make the initial attack a little differently for each.

1 st int) Student makes quick attack intending to hit. Emphasis is on being explosive and not telegraphing. Student times the attack to land during the coach's advance. Student hits before coach is able to parry.

Feint) Student attacks with advance and 90% extension (too little of an extension will draw a counter-attack) at moderately fast speed. Student times attack to occur during coach's retreat. Coach parries. Student avoids parry and accelerates with a second footwork action for the genuine attack.

2 nd int) Student makes slower attack with straightened arm. The point does not penetrate quite deep enough to hit target but gets close. Coach makes parry-riposte. Student makes opposition parry or yielding parry and finishes with a counter-riposte.

Countertime) Student makes a bent-arm attack at moderate speed. Coach makes counter-attack. Student aborts attack to make a quick parry and riposte of the coach's attack.

39) Misdirection of tempo (Gary Copeland):

For example - Student makes footwork and simple attacks at a particular speed. Coach, acting as the opponent, becomes comfortable with the tempo and learns to parry at that tempo. Student

then attacks much more quickly and hits before the parry can be successful.

40) Misdirection of target (Gary Copeland):

For example – Student makes several false attacks to the high outside line forcing the coach to become paranoid about being hit on the outside of the hand. Coach's response of closing the line of 6 becomes twitchy or reflexive. Student then makes feint to high outside line. Coach makes parry 6. Student deceives parry and finishes to another line.

41) Recognizing and avoiding the danger zone:

This is useful for fencing against taller opponents.

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 her point can reach, and afterwards, when both fencers have their arms relaxed, she makes her 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.

42) Respecting the danger zone:

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). The student should use footwork tempo changes and distance stealing footwork in order to reach critical striking distance.

* (Here I'm in agreement with the coach and referee Jon Moss in that epee is the only weapon with real right of way, whereas foil and saber have artificially enforced right of way through rules. A fast counter-attack against a slow bent arm attack is something to be respected and not ignored because of a rule! Epee is also the only weapon where the parry actually has to defend the target from being hit, whereas in foil the click of blade contact is all that is required for the referee.)

Update – May 2018

I've been meaning to update the epee lesson manual for some time now. My lessons have evolved quite a bit over the years, and without bogging down into too many details, here are a few thoughts about my current lessons.

1) Even when the fencer is stationary, the legs should be bent and the feet should be continuously moving. This could be a rhythmic bounce, the occasional half advance or retreat and return of the foot to original position, or small half-steps in and out with both feet. Ie, from guard position, half advance, half retreat (simply bringing the fencer to a wider on guard stance) then replacing the front foot back to original position, then finally the rear foot returns to original position, and repeat. The half steps are preparations and should be fairly slow and feel purposeful. Eventually the student develops the ability to be constantly making fine adjustments to the distance, be able to change direction easily, and be able to make larger changes to distance almost instantly.

2) We seem to have a natural understanding of what surprise means, so teaching people that one of the main goals of fencing is to catch the opponent by surprise is helpful, especially with children.

3) My club turns 15 years old this summer. I've trained a good number of fencers in all weapons. My best are epee fencers, but none of the epee fencers at my club have been trained in the same way. All of their lessons have been personalized to their personalities, physical characteristics, skills, etc. Individualization is hardly a new idea, but I'd like to say that it has been very beneficial for my fencers and my club. No two fencers fence alike, so there is variety within the club, and that makes it more fun to fence each other and harder for us to be beaten at competitions.

4) Balancing the need for the student to be able to make lightning fast actions with the often contradictory need for the student to observe the opponent and make decisions based on the opponent's actions is difficult. This usually means slowing the lesson down and increasing the number of potential responses by the coach and putting the responses into a random pattern as soon as the student can handle the individual actions. This means, that I'll very often give a lesson where the student initiates with a preparation and we will skip the usual serial portion of a lesson and go right to a slower but randomized portion. For example, the student makes a short half-advance with a preparation, perhaps a beat in 4 and a threat to the coach's wrist. The coach could 0) do nothing and get hit or 1) parry 4, or 2) parry circle 6 or 3) parry one or 4) parry 2 or 5) counterattack or 6) return beat with or without extending afterward or 7) retreat or 8) do either of 1-6 with a retreat or 8) do either of 1-6 with an advance. 9) The coach could also do 1-6 after having taken a retreat.

That makes for a lot of variety, far more than the usual 3 options done in a lesson, and forces the student to always take that short moment to observe the reactions and be prepared to move either forward or backward. This is particularly important. The student must not build so much forward momentum during the preparation that he cannot then retreat in the next tempo. Once the observation is made, and the decision on how to respond to the coach is made, the final action should be made quickly and decisively. The student should be hitting the torso, arm, and leg, and the attacks may be with or without engagement, depending on the action. This isn't easy, but it works. It doesn't feel like an 18 option lesson though, because to the student, I'm either making a parry or extending my arm, and I may or may not be moving while I do it. From that perspective, it doesn't seem complicated at all. The unforeseen actions all come after the student launches the final attack.

Basically, the coach responds the way the opponent could, so the student can practice handling whatever the opponent may do. As the coach, my responses aren't truly random. Each action I do, I think, tries to build on or relate somehow to the previous two or three. I'll make various parries standing still, then with a retreat, then the counterattacks standing still, then with a retreat, then revisit the parries, then do them coming forward, then the counterattacks coming forward, then mixing them up for a bit, then multiple parries with multiple retreats, then making counterattacks followed by a parry, then mix it up a bit. Occasionally I don't respond and see if the student follows through and hits or just freezes. It takes quite a bit of time to go through all of the combinations of actions. Obviously if a student is having trouble with any particular phrase we will focus on that for a while till the student either is successful or we've decided it will be the focus of the next lesson.

5) It can be hard to guess if the opponent will parry or counterattack against your initial attack or feint. But since it is really difficult to make a counterattack immediately after making a parry,

especially from the low line parry positions, your opponent will probably make a second parry after his first parry is deceived by your feint and that second parry may be wider and more desperate. (The risk is having the opponent automatically riposte whether his first parry is successful or not.) Try this: Have the student feint to the bottom of the coach's hand and have him (the student) keep his eyes open. He should try to make sure he doesn't expose too much of his arm. If he does, you (the coach) should counterattack. If you parry, he should deceive it and threaten your thumb with a new feint. You make another parry, thus making yourself vulnerable to a touch to the thigh or toe. Similarly, try having him: Feint 4, feint 6, hit toe.