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### Coaching Tip - Teaching a Student How to Parry at the Last Moment of the Attack

Beginner and intermediate fencers often habitually parry very early during the opponent's attack. They may be nervous and highly reactive, still unable to control their natural reflexes. They are at a greater risk of being tricked with feint attacks once their opponents becomes wise to this habit. They need training to parry at the right moment, whenever that may be according to the situation. This may require the fencer to parry as late as possible.

For contrast to the twitchy beginner, imagine more skillful opponents fencing. A direct attack is made at lunge distance. At the very start of the attack, the attacker is aware that the opponent could react in a number of ways. The opponent could retreat, parry, retreat and then parry, counter-attack, etc. The attacker keeps his eyes open and is ready to respond to a reaction. In the very short time that the attack develops, the attacker, upon seeing no response from the opponent, begins to increase his confidence that his attack will land and score a touch. Maybe the opponent will still respond and the attacker can still react to the response, but that fades as the tip gets closer to the target. As the tip is just a few centimeters from the target the attacker has no more thought of the opponent reacting. The attacker is fully committed to finishing the attack and may even be prematurely celebrating his touch. That is when the attacker is taken by surprise by a last moment half-retreat and parry riposte.

A good fencer has full control over all aspects of his defensive game. He can parry early, late, or anywhere in between, while moving forward (to instigate infighting), staying still, or moving back, on his front or rear foot in the retreat, etc. depending on the needs of the situation. The question I'm posing now, and will try to answer, is how can you teach the beginner how overcome his nerves and to parry as late as possible?

For the sake of of this article, I will assume that the coach has an understanding of how to teach the proper distance and necessary footwork skills associated with the student making a successful parry and riposte.

Option 1 - Verbal.

Coach - Makes a realistic, fairly fast attack.

Student - Parries too early. If there is a riposte it has little control and goes over the coach's shoulder.

Coach - "That was too soon. Delay the parry."

Repeat

Option 1 is perhaps the first method a newer coach will try because it seems the least complicated, but does this work? Well, with the rare student, it might just work on the first or second try. For the rest of the students, it may work, with incremental successes and a most likely a good deal of frustration for both the coach and student. It may work well enough with some students that the coach never tries to find a better way. Or, for the rest of the students who struggle with this, the coach may simply try it again in some other lesson after the student has acquired a few more months of experience and has developed some self control. The reason why they struggle is that the anxiety has not been removed. I do not recommend this method.

Option 2 - Coordinating hand and feet.

Coach instructs the student to retreat at the start of the coach's attack, and not to parry until the front foot is landing in the retreat. The coach may even instruct the student to count aloud "1" and "2" and "3" for each tempo, with "1" being the movement of the rear foot and "2" being the landing of the front foot and the parry and "3" being the riposte.

Coach attacks fairly slowly.

Student makes the actions (parry and riposte) in coordination with the coach's attack.

Repeat.

This is a more rigid and classical way to teach this, if not robotic and mindless, but it does work, so long as the student has reasonable body coordination. This method has the advantage that it is a way of getting the newer student to understand that the hand and feet need to be coordinated in various ways in fencing in order to promote balance and efficiency. It also eliminates any nervousness in the student, because they are more focused on developing the coordination than on the fact that they are being attacked. Because it is done slowly, it works well in group classes.

Option 3 - Realistic response by coach.

Coach - Slowly attacks with lunge.

Student - Parries too early.

Coach - Deceives the parry and makes a touch. The coach reminds the student to parry as late as possible.

What usually happens next is several repetitions until the student parries with control and at the right moment. If the student parries at the right moment, but too slowly, he will be hit, and the coach says "Yes, that is the right timing, but it was too slowly done." This will help prevent the student from returning to parrying too early to compensate for the slowness of the previous parry. Note that the student may also cheat by making his retreat too big. In this case, when he ripostes, the riposte will not reach the coach, or the coach may easily parry it.

I imagine that many good coaches will agree that this method works well, and that it has some important advantages. It certainly is the most realistic representation of what would happen in a bout, with the coach simply doing what the opponent should do. The student becomes aware of how well he is doing by whether or not he is genuinely successful, unlike option 1 where the student may make a successful parry, or even a parry and riposte, but be told by the coach that it was still "wrong." This option does not work well in Introductory group classes.

Option 4 - Reversing the goal to become learning how to parry earlier (than being hit).

Coach and student are at lunge distance.

Coach - "Stay on guard. Do not react, but do pay attention and observe. I will attack and you let me hit you."

This is done several times at a moderate (not slow but not too fast) speed with a little variation in the speed, so not every attack is identical. The coach then asks the student to become aware of the timing, from when the attack starts to when the hit is made, and to try to predict when the touch will occur. Then the coach directs the student to start a small retreat and parry quickly just when he expects the touch to be landing.

The student usually parries just as the touch is landing or occasionally slightly before (hooray!), and together the coach and student can work toward having the student consistently parry at the right time which is (for this exercise) just slightly before the touch would occur. This is because the student can now work with his nervous response rather than fight against it, as in option 1. This is also a good

method for refining this skill with people who can already delay their parry reasonably well. It can be used as a drill for more experienced fencers or in a group class of experienced fencers.

I recommend methods 2, 3, and 4. You may find that each method benefits the students in different ways, and that some students will fail with a particular method but finally attain success with another.

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