

Paul Sise
Fencing Master
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Quick Coaching Tips - Flip the Ratio to Teach Your Student Patience

I think it is safe to say that every good coach makes use of unforeseen actions in their lessons. For example, if the theme of the lesson is simple attacks, the student will make an attack and will expect to hit the target. The coach will probably set up the phrase (or allow the student to set up the phrase) many times and if done correctly, the student will score the touch; at least the student will most of the time. Sometimes the coach will unexpectedly respond with a parry and riposte. This forces the student to stay alert and makes the feel of the lesson slightly more realistic. The usual advice is to use unforeseen actions sparingly so that the student can focus on learning or improving the skill associated with the lesson theme.

Lesson theme - feint attacks

Lesson goal - to learn or improve making feint attacks

Unforeseen action - coach does not respond with a parry, hoping the student finishes simple direct/straight.

Percentage of actions unforeseen 10% to 20%

Goal of unforeseen action - to keep the student alert and responsive to change

Risk - 1) The student does not finish simple direct/straight if the coach does not parry, but instead incorrectly evades a non-existent parry and ruins the attack. This most likely leads to the student giving the coach a free parry and the coach should riposte mercilessly. Using more than one unforeseen response helps prevent this situation. (Likewise, if the theme is simple attacks and the unforeseen action is a parry, the student may start to predict a parry and incorrectly try to deceive the non-existent parry and ruin the simple attack.)

As our students gain experience and skills our lesson goals will also change. How do you teach a student to be patient, tactically flexible, and to maintain their concentration? How do you make lessons more bout-like and realistic while still keeping some sense of order as a lesson? We have to make one assumption, and from that we can establish a training concept. The assumption is that the opponent will attempt to be uncooperative.

A fencer (Foil, epee, saber) makes a feint attack, hoping for a response of a parry in four, so that a touch can be made to the high outside line. Previous experience tells the fencer that this action can and should be successful if taken when the opportunity arises. But the opponent is uncooperative by nature and well trained so that he or she will not reflexively and predictably respond with that four parry each time. The defender's options include 1) the hoped for parry four. 2) retreats 3) retreat one or more steps and eventually parry (but which parry will it be?) 4) counter-attack 5) parry with an advance to crush the distance, etc. My point is that the opponent has several options, only one of which is the desired response. How should the coach design a lesson for this? Should he just work on improving the feint attack and chose one or two of the other responses as unforeseen actions? That could work, but it isn't the only way. We can do better.

Assuming that the student has the technical proficiency to make a convincing feint attack we should look at the problem (uncooperative opponent) and set a goal or two that helps solve the problem. Note that skills that help the fencer prevent the problem from becoming more difficult are also valuable. Remember I said that the feint attack should work if done at the right moment, so skills

that improve the chance of creating the moment are useful, but we also need to develop skills that allow us to act correctly when that moment comes. Finally, skills that prevent situations which would lower the chance that the opponent makes that parry four are also helpful. (For example, if the opponent becomes aware that the desired response is a parry four then he or she will try to avoid using it.)

Lesson theme - feint attack into high inside line to draw a parry 4

Lesson goals - To develop patience, maintain an adequate level of alertness, and avoid unintentionally sending information to the opponent through telegraphing, signs of impatience, or desperation.

Unforeseen action(s) - practically everything except the desired parry 4 response

Percentage of actions unforeseen - 80% to 90%

Goal of unforeseen actions - To challenge the student's sense of patience, creativity, and tactical flexibility. The student does not have to score with each phrase. In fact, if the coach does not give the desired response the student may choose to abort.

Goal of the partially foreseen action of parry four - to finally give the student the situation that will allow the touch to be scored...this tests the student's ability to maintain focus and concentration under stress.

Throughout this lesson the student is highly mobile and splits his or her time between dealing with the coach's actions (including attacks, mobility, changes of blade position, etc.) and trying to set up the feint attack. Very rarely does the coach respond to the feint with the desired parry four response, but will usually back away, parry differently, or counterattack. The coach may also try to hinder the feint itself by preventing the student from getting the time or distance to properly set up the action. But then, just when the student's patience and focus may be waning, the coach finally makes that precious parry four. Can the student finish properly and score? Or does the student blow it at the crucial moment? This lesson is exciting, has tension, and gives value to the action when it is successful - just like a fencing bout. Sounds like fun doesn't it?

I call this concept *flipping the ratio*, and can be a way of creating not just option lessons but also bouting lessons. If a coach's response is normally done 80% of the time, it now is only done 20% of the time. This works especially well for feint attacks and countertime actions, but is applicable to just about any action or tactic. How many of you coaches reading this have had students who make a feint and then change lines even though you haven't parried? This lesson type can be helpful for breaking that bad habit as well.

As always, I invite you to be part of this conversation. Do you already give lessons like this and have some thoughts on the matter? Or if you haven't given this style of lesson already please try it out and let me know what you think.