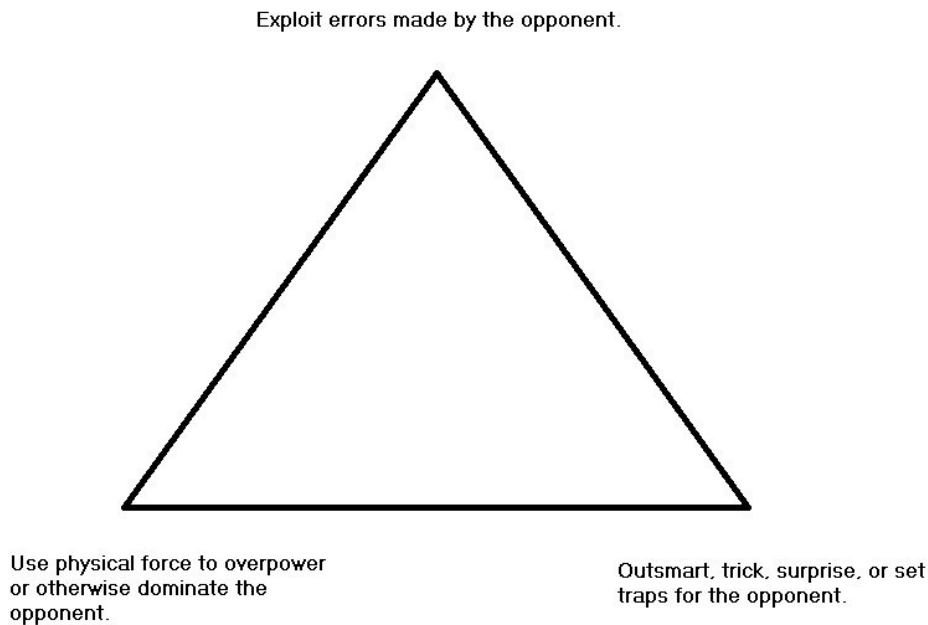


The Fencing Pyramid

2-12-21

How do you think of fencing? There are many ways of course. Here is a simple but useful one.

Imagine a triangle (or better yet see below) with each point being an avenue to creating a touch. At the top of the triangle is exploitation. If your opponent makes an error, or in some way creates an opportunity, you simply take advantage of it. Common examples might be technical, such as making blade actions too large, poor choice of action, telegraphing, being off balance, a poor sense of distance, or a poorly made attack made due to stress and desperation. Errors can be tactical, mental, or even emotional. Any error presented by the opponent has the potential to be exploited. Errors made by opponents vary from person to person, and are much rarer among well trained and experienced competitors, but being human, fencers do make them from time to time, and all fencers are vulnerable to stress and fatigue, both of which can induce errors.



The next point on the triangle is the lower left one. There we see the use of physical force which is used to create touches against the will of the opponent. This is where we use our muscle. This often includes actions against the blade such as beat attacks, pris de fers, and parry ripostes, as well as the use

of speed in simple actions with fleches, flunges, etc. Against a physically weaker and slower opponent, the best way to win may simply be to use your size, strength, and speed. It isn't very elegant, but it gets the job done and isn't as taxing or as stressful as a game of wits.

The third point on the triangle is where we use our brains to outwit and trick our opponent. This is where we see our understanding of tactics come into play, and we make feints, second intention, invitations, and countertime, etc. We also spend more effort on preparations, including tactical preparation (as described by Wojciechowski in Theory, Methods and Exercises in Fencing) such as "disguising intention" and "feeding false information."

Basic Examples

- 1) An epee or saber opponent makes attacks with a bend in the weapon arm and from just a bit too far away. Exploit the error and make a stop-hit/cut to the arm.
- 2) You have discovered that your opponent seems to have a weak grip (due to tendinitis, a slippery grip, is posting with a French handled epee, or simply lack of strength) and is vulnerable to beat attacks. Use beat attacks or try to take the blade.
- 3) Against a well trained and athletic opponent, you make it look as if you are going to respond with a particular parry whenever your opponent makes false attacks. (This is an example of "feeding false information," from Wojciechowski.) Then, seeing the opponent commit to a feint-attack, you respond with a counter-attack. You then say "You almost got me! I was lucky!" but you secretly are thinking to yourself "What a sucker! He fell for my trap!"

Most situations in fencing are a blend of these three ideas, of exploitation, muscle, and brains. It may be half-way between two corners, or somewhere in the middle and involving all three concepts to varying degrees. From moment to moment, the situation moves from some spot on the triangle to another.

Hybrid Examples

- 1) In epee, the opponent likes to attack the thigh, and is usually successful, but tends to telegraph the attack by tensing up just before making the lunge. The opponent is also using a French handled epee and is trying to avoid your blade. You respond by making an invitation just at edge of the opponent's lunge distance (set trap), exploiting the error (telegraph), and then making a strong low-line parry and riposte with fleche (physical) to the torso.
- 2) Your opponent has a predictable habit (error) of moving the blade back and forth between the 6 and the 8 position. You test the opponent's reaction by making a beat in 4 against the opponent's blade when it is in the high line. The opponent reflexively twitches to make a beat or parry in 4. You see the opponent lift the blade from 8 to 6, and immediately make a strong beat (a physical preparation) and feint (trap) which avoids the reflexive 4 by the opponent, and you make the touch on the opening high outside line.

Your relationship with your opponent, meaning your relative strengths, weaknesses, and technical-tactical preferences, can be a guide to how you approach the bout. Against a weaker and less experienced fencer you may decide to actively avoid attempting a very complicated tactical game, in favor of simple tactics with an emphasis on stronger blade actions and athletic footwork. (Remember

years ago that time that the intermediate level foil fencer beat you, even though you were "way better", because you were trying all sorts of fancy feints and second intention but it never worked because the opponent didn't respond the way better fencers should normally respond? Later you realized you could have just walked up to the opponent, beat the blade, and hit the torso with relative ease.) Or, against very physically strong fencers, you may decide to avoid blade contact, beats, binds, etc, in favor of a combination of feints, traps, and patient error exploitation.

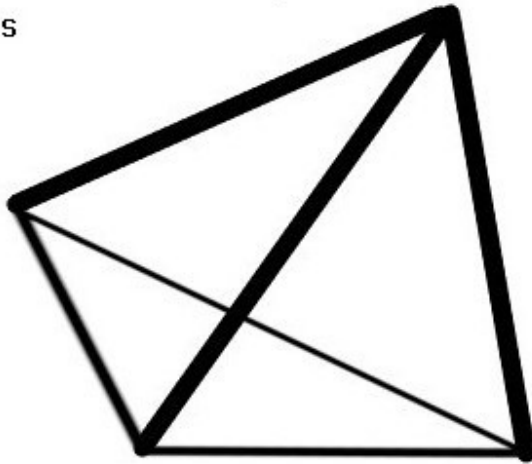
As a coach, it can be helpful to teach your beginners the idea of this triangle because it is a simple and visual framework for them to apply their terminology. Having only three points, it is very easy to remember, is easy enough to understand even for young children, and just plain makes sense even to the newest of students. It is also simple enough to be used as a thought shortcut while actively fencing. (Meaning that long complicated thoughts expressed verbally can't really be used while fencing, but something like this triangle, which can be intuitively felt as well as intellectually understood, may be useful mid-bout.) As coaches, we can even teach this as a very simplistic "if-then" decision tree.

- 1) Is there an opportunity to score a touch with a simple attack or counter-attack? Yes? Then hit the opponent. If no, move to 2.
- 2) Can you find the opponent's blade and forcibly create an opportunity? Yes? Beat or take the blade. If not, move to 3 or return to 1.
- 3) Can you influence the opponent to create an opening, an error, or to move his or her blade into a favorable position to control it (either a particular parry position or an extended arm)? Yes? Trick the opponent. If not, try adding a layer of preparation to 2 or 3. If that doesn't work, return to 1 or 2, or take more lessons and get more experience.

You may be thinking to yourself that a major component of fencing has been overlooked in the triangle, and you'd be right. At this point, we can add a fourth point, one that connects the other three, by turning the triangle into a pyramid. This fourth point includes the king and queen of fencing; distance and timing, as well as everything else we normally associate with footwork, such as how we manipulate the distance to make it greater or smaller, tempo changes, as well as how we make use of the options available to us based on whether we are moving forward or backward. For instance, in saber and foil, based on the fact that we are moving forward, we may want to advance slowly and at a longer distance, while trying to avoid blade contact, until the time is right to accelerate for the final attack, while in contrast if we are moving backward we might be stuttering our footwork and doing everything we could in order to find the opponent's blade. This point on the pyramid is arguably the most important. Being in the right place at the right time and moving in the correct direction and being able to execute the next tempo's action efficiently (being in balance, having good control, etc.) allows for all other fencing actions (including your bladework) to be successful. This axiom should be made very clear to students in their first class, but they will need time and experience to truly incorporate that knowledge into their fencing.

Distance and timing, footwork, distance manipulation, tempo changes, options available to you based on whether you are moving forward or backward, etc.

Exploiting opportunities created by the opponent, taking advantage of the opponent's technical and tactical errors.



Physical force, overpowering the opponent's blade, being faster, etc (use of muscle)

Setting traps, invitations, feints, second intention, tactical preparation, etc (outwitting the opponent)

Remember as always, talk to other coaches and fencers about this and gain their insights. How do you think about fencing?

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