

Paul Sise  
Fencing Master  
11-24-23

## Thinking About Fencing: The Aggression Scale of Fencer Tactics

There are many ways to classify how fencers approach their bouts. Using fencing terms we could call them attackers or defenders or counter-attackers. Perhaps we could say they are first or second-intentioners. Some coaches favor the terms "eyes-open" and "foreseen or partially foreseen." Some fencers may not so much have a favorite style but certain moves that they prefer (or habitually use) that can be used to define them. Using more common language we might call them aggressive, passive, impulsive, or patient. Some fencers may be difficult to classify because they easily and frequently change their style to better fit the needs of the bout.

Now what I am going to write here is certainly not ground-breaking, but I can't say that I recall this being written about for "The Swordmaster" before so I thought I'd take a crack at it. As coaches we are well aware of the importance of distance, direction change, and preparations and how they are employed to give fencers tactical advantages using actions from the standard tactical-wheel. For instance, it is good to have a plan, enter distance with a preparation related to the plan, and if the opponent reacts as we hope we then execute our plan to score the touch. For instance, if my opponent seems to favor retreating and making a parry 4, I'll plan to make a feint attack. Lately though I have been focusing more on how distance, preparation, and execution are related and I have to give some credit to the book L'Esprit de L'Epee by Remy Delhomme, Jean-Francois di Martino, and Frederic Carre. They spend a chapter discussing "fencer profiles" which inspired me to think more about this and to create lessons based upon it. They start with a fairly simple look at fencer styles based on a few variables. 1) Does the fencer enter distance or allow the opponent to do so? 2) Who initiates the bladework? and 3) Who finishes the bladework and hits? They then create four basic profiles which they describe as the "Presser" the "Conquerer," the "Blinder" and the "Counterer." They then go into some detail concerning what bouts between them look like, who has the key to whom's lock, and how fencers hybridize these "profiles" into many other sub-profiles. The book is very good and I think it is worth reading if you can find a copy and have some skill at reading French. (My French isn't particularly strong but the writing is fairly accessible and mostly in the present tense.)

I eventually formulated my own simpler version of how to classify fencer tactics and how to incorporate them into lessons, and that's what I'll share with you here in the rest of this essay. I use a number scale or continuous spectrum from most aggressive to least aggressive which my students find easy to remember and understand. After only a short introduction my students have been able to correctly identify where they are on the scale and where their opponents are on the scale. Drawing a diagram on a white-board helps. They were also able to shift between styles very easily because they could sense how they were all connected and were able to identify exactly how their opponents were changing. (I found this to be the weaker point of how it is presented in L'Esprit de L'Epee where each style is given a name, some of which are hard to remember or differentiate, especially when the number of profiles goes up dramatically when they try to describe sub-sets or hybrids of the profiles. That being said, if French was my primary language I'd probably be better able to remember and incorporate their terms and descriptions.)

On the following diagram the left hand side indicates that the fencer enters the appropriate distance to begin the fencing phrase. The right hand side indicates that the fencer allows or invites the opponent to enter the distance.

I enter distance.      Come to me.  
-----!-----

Then underneath we can use numbers to further divide the fencer style by asking the following questions. a) Does the fencer attempt to score as the distance change is created? b) Does the fencer make a preparation designed to provoke a response and then counter or punish the response? c) Does the fencer simply seem to wait for the opponent (without making a preparation with the blade) to attempt to score and then shut down the opponent with a defensive or counter-offensive action?

I enter distance.      Come to me.  
-----!-----  
1      2      3      4      5      6

Here are the descriptions of the six tactical styles on the scale:

1 - Most aggressive. The fencer enters distance and attacks. The attack could be simple direct or with a blade take or a beat. The opponent is viewed merely as a target to be hit. This is an acceptable tactic for a fast, strong, and confident fencer. Most attacks in the box in saber would be examples. Note that this does not suggest fencing recklessly. There may be quite a bit of time used to set up the attack or hide the intention to attack, but when the opponent is vulnerable and the time is correct the fencer initiates with a strong will to score immediately. The final action can be described as "eyes-closed."

2) Somewhat less aggressive, this fencer is pushy but patient. The fencer enters distance and makes a preparation with the blade designed to provoke a response that can be capitalized upon. We can throw together tactically disparate actions into this method because they all lead to the same result, meaning a preparation, response, and counter-response. The preparation could be a false-low line attack to coerce the opponent to counter-attack which leads to scoring with counter-time. The preparation could be a beat or a sweep of the blade. It could be a false attack to the guard (in epee or saber). It could even be a feint that provokes a parry that is to be deceived and finished with an attack in a new line. The fencer might be trying to get the opponent to attack, to parry, to open a line, whatever. He or she just want a response that can capitalized upon, ideally one that has been planned for so that the touch can be executed immediately and without hesitation. This works well in epee where as the fencer extends while entering distance the response could be a parry or a counter-attack, and the initiating fencer may want to confirm which one the opponent will react with before blasting through to try to score a touch to the opponent's torso. If there is no usable response from the opponent the fencer can always back away and try again later. This is often referred to as "eyes open" fencing or "partially foreseen."

Note that epee fencers can have great success alternating between tactics 1 and 2, using method 2 to train or desensitize the opponent, and number 1 for the surprise attack.

3) The least aggressive of the fencers who enter distance. They do not initiate bladework, but rather seem to taunt the opponent into attacking (often by entering, leaving, and re-entering distance) in order to set up a parry-riposte or counterattack. Perhaps they can be best described as passive-aggressive! This method can be quite risky but is employed by epee fencers with excellent reflexes and solid

nerves. French grippers (or anyone with a reach advantage) who wish to counter-attack may favor this method especially when they have a higher score than the opponent and wish to force the opponent, under stress of the clock, to risk making an attack. Fencers who do this must have an excellent sense of distance and be able to enter, if only half a centimeter, the distance that will provoke the desired response.

Numbers 4, 5, and 6, are the same except that the fencer does not enter fighting distance, but rather allows or invites the opponent to do so. Come to me, my pretty, and fall into my trap. . .

4) The fencer is attempting to score a touch as the opponent enters distance. In epee we may see this prepared for by the fencer setting up a pattern of moving forward and backward, and then as the opponent follows, the fencer (instead of retreating or hopping backward) makes a single-tempo attack (likely a fleche) as the opponent begins a step forward. This would describe many attacks in the box during a saber bout, and in foil and saber with a continuous marching attack the fencer on the retreat could set up a counter-attack or a beat-attack into preparation with this method. This can be very effective against aggressive and impatient opponents.

5) The retreating fencer decides when, where, and how to be attacked by slowing or stuttering the retreat and performing a blade action to provoke the attacker. This includes any phrase that starts with a false counter-attack as well as any defensive second intention phrase. This is a very common fencing tactic in foil and is often known as active defense, sometimes the end result of a push-pull footwork pattern.

6) Least aggressive. The fencer allows the opponent to enter distance and initiate an attack and expects to make a first intention defensive or counter-offensive action to score a touch. (A second intention action would be number 5.) This isn't to say that the fencer is giving up all control to the opponent because the defender can influence the location and timing of the attack through footwork as well as blade actions made prior to when the opponent is allowed to enter distance. The fencer is confident in his or her defense or counter-offense, may be relying on having room to retreat in an emergency, and is probably riding the very edge of the opponent's attacking distance. Similar to number 3 in epee, this can be a strong tactic for a French grip wielding epee fencer who has a comfortable lead in the score and a reach advantage.

So that's all well and good but we have to find a way to make this information useful. Here are some examples of ways that we can teach this to our students and for them to practice.

1) After a verbal description of the concept ask the student to identify his or her preferred fencing style. As the coach, you set up a bouting lesson where you fence a few touches in each style and ask the student to identify what has changed when you go from one style to the other, and then to say which number it is on the scale. The goal here is to get the student to observe and classify their opponents.

2) Similar format to number 1, but now the goal is to determine which fencing styles have advantages or disadvantages against the student's preferred style. Also look at which numbers don't seem to work well against each other and the process of deciding whether or not to change tactics in order to take advantage of the opponent. Two fencers using method 6, for instance, just run out the clock. One or both fencers must change something in order for touches to be scored.

3) The student is asked to do the reverse of lessons 1 and 2, where now the student cycles through each of the styles and verbally identifies what changes between them and which number they are currently using. The goal here is to break out of the student's comfort zone and become more tactically flexible.

4) In group situations hand out index cards with a number and description on it. The fencers fence a pool or use it in open fencing. At the end of each bout they must correctly identify their opponent's card. (Note that this works with all sorts of tactical training. Cards could say "2, enter distance and make a preparation." but they could also say for instance "Countertime" or "Feed false information.")

5) Set up training bouts where each fencer practices designated tactics. Have them write down the score of the bout and which methods they were employing, and whether or not it seemed like the two tactics meshed with each other or were poor choices. Over time, this can help undecided fencers to identify which styles they feel most comfortable and successful with.

6) Set up training bouts where fencers can alternate between two styles. This teaches some tactical flexibility and helps prevent the fencer from becoming too predictable. Some methods are more powerful when alternating between them anyway, such as 1 and 2. Fencers may also wish to practice combinations like 2 and 5 where the difference is who enters distance in order to practice that most important element of fencing and become comfortable with the nuanced differences between them. (Note that in epee we can see a blend of 1 and 2 if the student enters distance and then initiates a beat attack to the wrist. Yes, we are making an attack (as in method 1) and would like that to score a touch, but the peck to the wrist isn't necessarily expected to be successful, and is therefore something of a preparation. We expect that instead of being touched, the opponent will more likely respond with a counter-beat or parry or some other action, that we can then capitalize upon.)

7) Finally, and this seems obvious, simply give lessons where the student practices variations within one of the numbered methods in order to solidify their expertise over a period of several weeks.

How do you approach this topic? I'm looking forward to reading about how you teach this in an article for "The Swordmaster" that you write in the future!