

Epée Weeks 1 & 2

Introduction

Epée, the most-practised of the three weapons in modern fencing, is described as “the art of making the fewest mistakes”. It is the same length as a foil, with a slightly heavier blade – especially towards the guard – with the guard itself being slightly larger in size (to protect the hand). The main characteristics of épée fencing are that there are no restrictions on target area – you can hit your opponent from head to toe – and that there is no Right of Way; if two fencers hit simultaneously, both of them count as valid (known as a *double hit*). Epée fencing is a lot less like the EuroVision song contest, and far more straightforward to watch and understand.

First vs. Fast

In foil and sabre, Right of Way tends to give the attacker priority; because of this there is a tendency for a faster, more attacking style of play. Right of Way, however is seen as a luxury by epeeists as they have to avoid being hit whilst making their own; therefore, the principal of épée is different from the other weapons: a defender will always hold advantage over their attacker as long as they are (a) ready, and (b) a good distance away... as soon as one person launches an attack, they're vulnerable and the other person has an opportunity to counter-attack. For this reason, the pace of épée is a little slower than in foil and sabre, with each player looking to draw out the other – forcing a mistake – in order to score. So, the idea in épée is not necessarily to attack the fastest, but to be the one that hits at the first opportunity (like a game of chess).

En Garde

You may not realise it, but the position of your point when you come en garde directly influences what happens during the match. Keeping your point in line, threatening your opponent's target, may sound like a sensible idea... which it is, but only when faced with a lemming. Anyone experienced will use it against you, beating your blade, pressuring it, taking it, and doing all sorts of devious things in order to draw out a response from you and, eventually, a mistake that will lead to you getting hit. However, take your point away from your opponent (known as *absence of blade*) and you also take away their options. By keeping your hand where it is but moving your point aside, your opponent cannot pick up your blade and is therefore forced to attack directly. In turn, this will give you a better opportunity to counter-attack and, more importantly, give you some control over your opponent. So although you may not know when they'll attack, at least you'll know where they'll be aiming for.

Counter-Attack

Epée is an opportunistic weapon. Fencers always look to hit – without being hit themselves – at the earliest moment possible, and a classic example of this is the counter-attack (also known as *stop hit*), hitting your opponent when they go for your open target (see En Garde, above). First move your point to the side so that there's an angle of attack, and then place your point on their wrist by using your thumb and index finger. Remember that it's your POINT that scores the hit, not the side of the blade. Have *one* shot at the target and then – regardless of whether or not you hit – step back out of range of your opponent's attack (where you may want to do a parry riposte).

Extending your hand forwards is a bad idea when someone's coming towards you and, if you miss, you'll be too close to them with your blade caught in a bad position – allowing your opponent an easy hit. Using only your fingers helps as it's a quicker movement and, if you miss, your guard and blade will be in an ideal position to pick up your opponent's blade in a parry.

Hoover 'Em In

The French call it “*l'aspirateur*”, or “the Hoover”. In fencing, as in general life, if someone tries to hit you your automatic reaction is to want to hit them back. This basic instinct can be turned to your advantage: on the recovering from an attack, if you go back to a safe distance whilst leaving your blade in absence, the bulk of your target will be exposed and more often than not the temptation will be too much for your opponent and they'll likely try and attack you... providing that you're ready for it, and at a safe distance, you can use your absence of blade to angulate a stop-hit to their wrist and then step out of the way again (you may need to come up with a parry afterwards just to make sure you're safe).

Riposting & Opposition

Direct or indirect? Attached or detached? – These are the options you have when making a riposte to hit your opponent. Some combinations will work better than others depending on the situation. A *direct* riposte is one that goes directly from the position of your parry and travels straight to the target (if it's open). With an *indirect* riposte, your point hits a target that's not in a straight line – for example, if your opponent goes to parry, you can avoid their blade and hit them on the other side of the chest, on the leg, on the foot, or even on the hand.

Also, it's worth thinking about what happens with your opponent's blade during the riposte – in the other weapons, Right of Way means that as long as you've done a parry, any successful riposte will count in your favour, no matter what the opponent does. In *épée*, however, losing contact with your opponent's blade during the riposte can be a dangerous thing, allowing them to slip off and hit you (often resulting in a *double hit*). *Detached* ripostes – when you lose contact with your opponent's blade – are fine if their point is nowhere near you; *attached* ripostes – when contact between the blades is kept throughout the action – are a safer option in most cases.

Parry-riposting is a clear cut way of demonstrating to a referee that you've dealt with your opponent's attack before hitting them back. However, hitting in *opposition* does away with the niceties of right of way... when hitting in opposition you make one sole action: instead of parry and riposte, your guard and point travel directly to the riposte position, blocking out the oncoming attack in the process.

Close the Door

Right of Way, in foil and sabre, is a luxury to *épée*ists. Regardless of whether or not you hit them, if your opponent hits you at roughly the same time (within 0.25s) then they'll score a point, too. So, try to take care of the threat of your opponent's blade before closing in for the kill – avoid detached ripostes (below, especially *quarte*) for example. In French the term used is “ferme la porte”, or “close the door” – once you've gathered your opponent's blade with your guard, push it out to the side which will allow your point an easier passage towards the target.

Choices

Remember that the whole of the body counts as valid target in *épée*. Consider hits to wrist, arm, leg, and foot whenever you feint, attack, or riposte.

Foot Note

If you go for a foot or leg shot on your opponent, try not to look at the target. Try to extrapolate where that target is – guess where the target is by knowing what else is known – for example, if you can see their hand, drop your point a little and your aim changes to leg; drop it further and you go to foot. The danger of looking at the target is that your whole body will drop when trying to score the hit, making it easier for your opponent to counter-attack, and making it harder for you to recover to a safe distance out of trouble.

Epée Weeks 3 & 4

About Time

Fencing is so important that it has its own time, called *fencing time* (or *tempo*). Consider that time and distance are linked – so the further away your opponent is, the longer it'll take to hit them – and with this in mind, in a fight there is what's called *one-tempo* and *two-tempo distance*. ("Tempo" just means "time"). One-tempo distance is where you can hit your opponent in one move, for example with a direct lunge or *flèche*, and two-tempo distance is where the opponent is slightly further away, and you need two (or more) movements to get to the target.

If you or your opponent is caught napping during a fight, this is often a good opportunity to score a quick point using a one-tempo attack. If, however, they are too far away then you'll need to do what's called a two-tempo attack: drawing out your opponent with the first action, before hitting them with a second. So when you're fencing, before anything happens be aware of the distance between you and them: can you hit them in one move; can they hit you in one move; do you need to draw out them out before attacking?

Flicking

A *flick* is where you use the weight of the point, throwing it around an obstacle in order to hit. Unless you're a trained killer, going for flicks will often lead to one or more of the following: taking too long to wind up for the flick, exposing yourself (your hand in particular) and allowing your opponent to hit you; missing disastrously, allowing your opponent to hit you; standing there admiring your feeble attempt for too long, allowing your opponent to hit you; hitting your opponent with the flat of the blade instead of the point, causing pain. So: flicking, don't do it. Not for at least another 5 years!

Preparation

If you can understand this statement then you'll go far: "The art of fencing is knowing what your opponent wants to do, and then make him do what he *thinks* he wants to do". When fencing at good distance, and against someone who knows what they're doing, if you want to win then you'll often be required to be sneaky, underhanded, devious and despicable. (This makes fencing fun). Pay attention to what your opponent's doing, what they're good/bad at, and draw a response by using a *preparation* – beat, pressure, feint, *froissement*, *coulé* (see the glossary at the end) – before hitting them somewhere else.

Second Intention

When you miss, or the person you're trying to hit does something completely unexpected, use Second Intention. This system (and style) of fencing involves trying to hit your opponent once and then – no matter what – hitting them again for good measure. In the event that you do hit your unwitting opponent twice, all you have to say is "oh, sorry" (you don't have to mean it, it's more out of politeness)... but at least you'll have scored the point, which is much better than missing them on the first attempt and then feeling sorry for yourself after they hit you. Remise, reprise, counter-riposte, counter-time, counter-attack... check the Glossary at the end – there are lots of ways to amend perfectly good plans gone wrong.

Freebies

There's a saying that "distance is the best defence" – if you're fencing anyone that knows what they're doing, and you fall asleep on the spot, then they'll hit you (with a one-tempo attack). Remember to stay sharp and at a good distance!

Note: this is the last course handout – next week we'll be doing a small competition and test!

Glossary

- **Prime, seconde, tierce, quarte, quinte, sixte, septime, octave, neuvieme:** positions in fencing.
- **Absence of blade:** when the blades are not touching; opposite of engagement.
- **Attaque au fer:** an attack that is prepared by deflecting the opponent's blade, e.g. beat, froissement, pressure.
- **Balestra:** a forward hop or jump, typically followed by a lunge or flèche.
- **Beat:** an attempt to knock the opponent's blade aside or out of line by using one's foible or middle against the opponent's foible.
- **Bind:** an action in which the opponent's blade is forced into the diagonally opposite line.
- **Broken time:** a sudden change in the tempo of one fencer's actions, used to fool the opponent into responding at the wrong time.
- **Corps-a-corps:** physical contact between the two fencers during a match.
- **Counter-attack (or "stop hit"):** an attack made against the right-of-way, or in response to the opponent's attack.
- **Counter-disengage:** a disengage in the opposite direction, to deceive the counter-parry.
- **Counter-parry:** a parry made in the opposite line to the attack; i.e. the defender first comes around to the opposite side of the opponent's blade.
- **Counter-riposte:** an attack that follows a parry of the opponent's riposte.
- **Counter-time:** an attack that responds to the opponent's counter-attack, typically a riposte following the parry of the counter-attack.
- **Coulé:** an attack or feint that slides along the opponent's blade.
- **Croisé (or semi-bind):** an action in which the opponent's blade is forced into the high or line of the same side.
- **Cut-over (or coupé):** an attack or deception that passes over the opponent's tip.
- **Derobement:** deception of the attack au fer or prise de fer.
- **Direct:** an attack or riposte that finishes in the same line in which it was formed, with no feints out of that line.
- **Disengage:** a circular movement of the blade that deceives the opponent's parry, removes the blades from engagement, or changes the line of engagement.
- **Displacement:** moving the target to avoid an attack (dodging!).
- **Double (-hit):** when two fencers hit each other at the same time (in épée, within 0.25s).
- **Doublé:** an attack or riposte that describes a complete circle around the opponent's blade, and finishes in the opposite line.
- **Engagement:** when the blades are in contact with each other, e.g. during a parry, attack au fer, prise de fer, or coulé.
- **Envelopment:** an engagement that sweeps the opponent's blade through a full circle.
- **Feint:** attacking into one line with the intention of switching to another line before the attack is completed.
- **(Fencing) Time:** the time required to complete a single, simple fencing action.
- **Finta in tempo:** lit. "feint in time"; a feint of counter-attack that draws a counter-time parry, which is deceived.
- **Flèche:** lit. "arrow" in French, a short- to mid-ranged running style attack.
- **Flick:** or "*coup lancé*" in French, an attack using the weight of the point to hit around an obstacle.
- **Forte:** the lower, stronger part of the blade.
- **Froissement:** an attack that displaces the opponent's blade by a strong grazing action.
- **In Quartata:** an attack made with a quarter turn to the inside, concealing the front but exposing the back.
- **In Time:** when a stop-hit arrives at least one fencing time before the original attack.
- **Indirect:** an attack or riposte that finishes in the opposite line to which it was formed, by means of a disengage or coupé.
- **Insistence:** forcing an attack through the parry.
- **Invitation:** a line that is intentionally left open to encourage the opponent to attack.
- **Line:** the main direction of an attack (e.g. high/low, inside/outside), often equated to the parry that must be made to deflect the attack; also point in line.
- **Mal-parry:** a parry that fails to prevent the attack from landing.
- **Middle:** the middle section of the blade, between the foible and forte.
- **Parry:** using the forte of your blade to block an incoming attack.
- **Passé:** the act of moving past the opponent.
- **Phrase:** a set of related actions and reactions in a fencing conversation.
- **Plaqué:** a point attack that lands flat.
- **Point in line:** or just "line"; an extended arm and blade that threatens the opponent.
- **Preparation:** the initial phase of an attack (before right-of-way is established).
- **Presentation:** offering your blade to your opponent for them to engage it.
- **Pressure:** an attempt to push the opponent's blade aside or out of line.
- **Prise de Fer:** also "taking the blade"; an engagement of the blades that forces the opponent's weapon into a new line, e.g. a bind, croisé, envelopment, opposition.
- **Redouble(ment):** a new action that follows an attack that missed or was parried.
- **Remise:** immediate replacement of an attack that missed or was parried, without withdrawing the arm.

- **Reprise:** renewal of an attack that missed or was parried, after a return to en garde.
- **Riposte:** hitting your opponent after parrying their attack. *riposte*.
- **Second Intention:** a false action used to draw a response from the opponent, which will open the opportunity for the intended action that follows, e.g. a counter-riposte.
- **Simple:** an attack (or riposte) that involves no feints.
- **Simultaneous:** when two fencers hit each other at the same time, with neither having established priority.