

# HOW TO TEACH FENCING



THIS ARTICLE IS INTENDED as a more formal presentation of the fencing classes taught in the “WMA (Western Martial Arts) in SCA” track at the 2011 Pennsic War. My intent was to introduce the SCA to modern fencing pedagogy, which, besides having a lineage going back to the 16th C, is a very efficient method of internalizing a system of swordsmanship. I hope it will prove useful to SCA fencers, no matter whether their goals are strict historical recreation or successful competition. The method is, of course, not original to me, but found in most modern coaching handbooks.

I will mainly be applying this method to actions common to late 16th and early 17th C rapier treatises, though of course, any source for any weapon, be it historical or living tradition, will do. For a fuller explanation of the actions described below, see Tom Leoni’s translations of Giganti’s treatise of 1606, published as *Venetian Rapier: The School or Salle* (Freelance Academy Press, 2010) and Capo Ferro’s treatise of 1610, *The Art and Practice of Fencing* (Freelance Academy Press, 2011). PDFs of the original treatises, with illustrations, are available from William Wilson’s historical fencing page at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~wew/fencing/manuals.html>.

## RUNNING A CLASS

FOR MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS in learning, it is essential to run a practice as an organized class. Class should begin at a predetermined time and begin and end with a group salute. The salute is a fundamental point of etiquette that begins any class and, much like the bow in Asian martial arts, mentally divides “training time” from “job, school, and kids time.” It’s okay and somewhat inevitable for people come late; after all, we do live in the real world. In such a case, late arrivals should warm up on their own and then join in. However, knowing what time things officially get started will help people to get there on time and make most effective use of their training.

A good division of class time is 25% warm-up and footwork, 25% basic skills review and introduction of new material, 25% tactical drills, and 25% actual fencing. The warm-up is intended to get the body and mind ready

to fence. Secondary goals include improving fitness and flexibility. Since most people don’t have the leisure to be full-time swordsmen, warm-ups should incorporate as many fencing skills as possible, and work fencing muscles. Games, such as glove-tag using fencing footwork, footwork games, boffer tag while jumping on one leg, partnered push-hands footwork and so on, are all good warm ups – anything that is fun, builds skills, and gets the heart rate up.

Stretching and calisthenics are good things. However, never stretch a cold muscle! Stretching should come only after warm-ups. Furthermore, most recent research shows dynamic stretching is superior to the static stretching that many of us learned in high school. Many excellent athletic training manuals are available, so I will not waste more space on this.

## OPTIONS DRILLS AND LADDER DRILLS

THE OPTIMAL WAY to learn to make fencing actions effectively is to build from simple to complex: first practice fundamental movements – i.e., make disengagements, or *cavazione* in rapier parlance, in the air – then combine movements into

techniques: disengage and lunge as part of solo practice; then perform these techniques in time with a partner: the partner tries to gain, or *stringere*, your blade; you disengage and lunge. Once a degree of physical mastery is acquired, we can

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deploy these same actions in tactical situations. To this end, we can use options drills.

Options drills bridge the gap between practice and free play. An options drill, simply, is a sequence of tactically linked actions that are practiced in turn. It is based off the *ladder drill*, in which a series of actions are performed, first repeated together in a block (AAA, BBB, CCC); then serially (ABC, ABC, ABC). The options drill takes our ladder drill and randomizes it – CCABABBC, etc.

Ladder drills make use of *foreseen* actions, whereas options drills build on this by using *partially foreseen* actions. A *foreseen* action is one with a known beginning and a known end. If Fencers A and B are doing the series of three actions in a blocked or serial fashion, each knows what is going to

happen, making it a foreseen action. A *partially foreseen action* has a known beginning but an unknown end. In other words, a partner may do one of several things. For instance, in an options drill, Fencer A might always begin with the same attack, but not know whether Fencer B will respond with a circular parry, lateral parry, or counterattack; we would call Fencer B's response a partially foreseen action.

Finally, we have *unforeseen actions*. An unforeseen action is, as the name implies, a surprise. For instance, if Fencer B preempts Fencer A's attack with her own lunge as he comes into measure, that would be an unforeseen action.

Here are some sample actions typical of the systems taught by early 17th C rapier masters such as Giganti and Capo Ferro that we can synthesize into a drill:

**Action 1** FENCER A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade – *stringere* – to the inside or outside. If Fencer A is right-handed, this will be in his own lines of fourth or third. Fencer B does nothing, so Fencer A lunges and hits her with blade opposition.

This action is shown in Capo Ferro Plate 6 and Giganti Plates 2 and 3, and discussed in Giganti Plate 4. Though most of the time, rapier masters assume that the adversary won't be so foolish as to do nothing against an opponent aggressively moving forward to dominate their blade, it is good to rehearse the basic action.

**Action 2** FENCER A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade to the inside or outside. Fencer B counters the threat by dipping her point underneath to change the engagement and close the line – to fourth if Fencer A had gained her blade on the outside, to third if on the inside. In the tempo she makes, Fencer A makes a disengagement – *cavazione* – going around her guard to hit with opposition.

This action is similar to Giganti Plate 6, though what I am asking Fencer B to do is out of line with most rapier masters' advice: Instead of making an offensive *cavazione* to attack Fencer A as he moves forward, I am instead having her err by simply making a defensive action with no offensive component, thus giving Fencer A an opportune tempo in which to hit her. We can't always rely on our opponents to do the right thing!

**Action 3** FENCER A advances into measure, gaining the adversary's blade to the inside or outside. Rather than reacting passively, Fencer B now makes a disengagement – *cavazione* – to attack, whereupon Fencer A hits by time thrust, closing the line laterally and hitting in third or fourth – see Giganti Plate 5 and Capo Ferro Plate 7.

As you can see, the actions have the same preparation: Fencer A's coming into distance and gaining the blade; only Fencer B's reaction changes.

Once the actions can be performed individually, they can be practiced serially, and then Fencer B can vary her reaction randomly – sometimes doing nothing, sometimes

only making a defensive change of engagement, sometimes attacking with a *cavazione*. After Fencer A is comfortable, Fencer B can start introducing random actions – stepping back so that her partner must attack with a pass, for instance. In this way Fencer A learns what to do against various reactions to his initial gaining of the blade.

*Distance. Timing. Velocity.*

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## THE INDIVIDUAL LESSON

THE INDIVIDUAL LESSON is the method by which the knowledge and “feel” of fencing has traditionally been transmitted. This is an art that has been passed from master to student for centuries: We have documentation of it as far back as the 1500s – it is essentially Saviolo and Marozzo’s teaching method – and no doubt it is far older.

The individual lesson is a form of operant conditioning. Essentially, the trainer – traditionally and historically, the fencing master; today, the “coach”; for SCA purposes, a marshal or more experienced fencer – stands in for the

adversary. They give the stimulus; the student gives the response. However, there are important differences between cues one gives in a lesson, and the way one actually fences!

This method can be used to teach the use of any hand-held weapon. Techniques can be taken from any source, and the individual lesson is an ideal way to internalize a system of historical fencing.

A good lesson is like an essay: It has a plot. We start slow, build, elaborate on our points, and then sum them up.

### Lessons come in several flavors:

- Teaching: A new technique is taught, or an old technique applied in a new way
- Training: The student must perform specified techniques in a high-stress situation
- Warm-up: The student is prepared for a tournament bout

There are a few other types of lessons, such as the “check” lesson, but we won’t get into them here.

One *always* starts slow and simple and then builds from there. We first perform an action at extension distance, then advance, then lunge. From there, we can introduce a new

action. Actions are always performed slowly at first, then with increasing velocity and precision. Once all the necessary actions are introduced, we can do them serially, blocked, and randomly. We then throw in random actions, proceed from instructor-initiated to student-initiated actions, and so on.

### Important points for the individual lesson:

- The teacher must have a good knowledge of fencing in order to draw out proper execution and technique. This means one must know what the action that one is asking for should look and feel like. Needless to say, your blade presentation, timing, etc., must be precise – though intended to help the student, not hinder them.
- The teacher can’t “win” in the lesson. “Winning” in the lesson is when your student “kills” you correctly, over and over, and then goes on to become a perfect exemplar of the Art – or does well in tournaments – or achieves whatever his or her goal is. The very worst “teachers” are those bullies who build up their own egos by beating their students into a pulp.
- Unlike when actually fencing, the teacher’s knees are only slightly bent and he or she uses “cheating” coaching footwork.
- Since you are being hit repeatedly, you should wear somewhat heavier equipment than normal, including a coach’s plastron and, if necessary, a mask cover.
- It is also useful to use lighter weapons, preferably – for the teacher – with a shell or bell guard so as not to entrap the student’s weapon. I personally teach with a 40" épée blade on a Dennis Graves cup hilt, but I know that épées are being phased out in SCA kingdoms and may be illegal where you live. There is no shame in learning technique with an épée or Darkwood rapier foil – depending on what’s legal in your kingdom – and working up to a heavier weapon. I have often seen people trying to muscle a rapier that is too heavy or unbalanced for them, fighting the weapon and often developing overuse injuries. Using a light training weapon is also a period practice.
- Pay attention to form; it serves function. You can use fixing actions to correct this: Get the student to freeze in place on an action and fix their posture. Hint: If they fall over, it’s a balance issue.
- The following are the watchwords of fencing: Distance! Timing! Velocity! If something is going wrong, you probably need to correct one of these.
- An understanding of fencing theory and mechanics is indispensable for analyzing historical fencing and for reconstructing it as lessons. There is no space to discuss all of this here; see your local fencing master for details. The US Fencing Coaches’ Association can be found on the Web at USFCA.org.

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## AUTHOR

**KEN MONDSCHIN** holds a Ph.D. in medieval history from Fordham University and a prévôt certification from the USFCA. He teaches history at several Massachusetts colleges, and historical fencing at the Higgins Armory Museum and the Pioneer Valley Fencing Academy. Ken is the author of *The Knightly Art of Battle*, on the J. Paul Getty Museum's copy of *Fiore dei Liberi*; *The Art of the Two Handed Sword*, a manifesto on historical fencing pedagogy cleverly disguised as a text on Italian spadone; and is the translator of Camillo Agrippa's seminal rapier text. In his spare time, he enjoys writing more books, running at people on horseback with big sticks, and, occasionally, sleeping. His fencing website is [historicalfencing.org](http://historicalfencing.org).

