FENCING III (FOIL)

Committed to Excellence through Training Tomorrow’s Athletes

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Foil
Advanced Footwork

- The Balestra
- The Fléche
Advanced Footwork

Advanced footwork enables a fencer to execute the balestra and the fléche attacks.

The Balestra

The balestra (jump – and – lunge) is similar to the advance but is performed more explosively and quickly. The fencer begins by forcefully swinging (extending) the leading foreleg without elevating the leading knee. As the leading leg is stretched, the rear foot is quickly moved forward a distance equal to that covered by the leading foot. Both feet should land simultaneously. The lunge starts immediately after the jump is completed.

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LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE BALESTRA

1. Observe yourself in a mirror. As you perform the balestra, do you move toward your opponent in a plane at parallel to the floor, or do you jump in a parabolic manner? How much of the sole of your leading foot can you see in the mirror? The higher you elevate your foot, the slower the execution of the balestra, giving your opponent the opportunity to recognize your attacking intention and react accordingly.

2. Extend your weapon arm as you practice a jump forward followed immediately by a lunge. Check your performance in the mirror.

The Fléche

The fleche is a fast attack from middle or long distance in which the fencer leaps forward by a leaning or running action that, as a rule, causes one to pass the opponent.
It is important to note that after completing the fléche the fencer becomes vulnerable because it is almost impossible to start a new action. Upon the reversing one’s fencing position the opponent has an opportunity to score by executing an immediate riposte. The fléche has an advantage over the balestra or advance-lunge attacks because it can be executed in one fencing time. It becomes very difficult to score with a counterattack against it.

The execution of a fléche resembles a prolonged cross-advance. As it starts, the wait is smoothly shifted forward, ahead of the leading foot, until the balance is lost. The rear leg initiates the fléche, but the ball of the leading foot provides the explosive impulse needed to drive the fencer toward the opponent and leave the floor. The extension of the leading leg immediately follows the driving action. As in running, the rear leg then crosses over the leading leg, helping the fencer regain balance and pass rather than collide with the opponent. A fencer should avoid body contact with the opponent.

The hit should score when the leading foot is extending, and not later than the landing of the rear foot. In a fleche, the back toes should be pointed forward, the shoulders remaining parallel to the floor. If the shoulder line changes, the back hip will tend to rise, causing the fléche to be shorter, higher, and as a result slower.

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**THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE FLÉCHE**

*Practice in slow motion the following sequence of movements starting from the on-guard position:*

1. Shift weight to the leading foot, thrust and score.
2. To regain balance, cross advance.
3. On guard.
4. Repeat #1, 2 and 3 with gradually increasing distance and speed.*
Advanced Attacks and Parries

- The Low-Line Attack
- Semicircular Parries
- Compound Attacks
  - The One-Two Attack
  - Low-High and High-Low Attacks
  - Doublés
- Compound Ripostes
- Secondary or Renewed Attacks
  - The Remise
  - The Reprise
  - The Redoublement
- The Stop Thrust
- The Action of Second Intention
Advanced Attacks and Parries

The Low-Line Attack

Low line attacks are directed at the target area below the bell guard. With the advent of electrical fencing, low line attacks and parries have become popular, necessary, and effective. Even though a foil point directed under the arm may not be visible to the fencer, the hit will be detected by the electrical scoring machine, which signals the referee that a hit has been made. For that reason, many instructors believe that the low line attacks and parries should be taught early in the fencing progression.

Attacks to the low line are generally made –

- When the opponent’s foil hand is high,
- When a change in strategy is indicated,
- When a fencer wants to open the high line by drawing the opponent into the low line.

To execute low line attacks, direct the point below the opponent’s guard toward the elbow. The arm is lowered with the final movement. The blade should bend laterally on contact with the target to avoid the opponent’s arm. The blade will bend laterally if the fencer finishes with a hand in supination (for an attack to the groin area, inside low line) or pronation (for an attack to the flank, outside low line).

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**LEARNING EXPERIENCE – LOW LINEAttacks**

Execute the following with footwork:

1. **Fencer A:** Attempt to engage blades in sixth position.
   **Fencer B:** Disengage into the groin area, lunge, and score.
2. **Fencer A:** Attempt to engage blades in fourth position.
   **Fencer B:** Disengage into the flank area, lunge, and score.
Semicircular Parries

In a Semi-circular parry, parry seven or parry eight, the point of the weapon describes a sweeping arc as the blade moves from the high line to the low line or vice versa.

Parry 8. When engaged in sixth position and threatened by a low line attack, the fencer should parry by describing a near semicircle or arc space with the point moving counterclockwise for a right-handed fencer. Riposte either to the low line or the high line.

Parry 7. When engaged in fourth position and threatened in the low line, the fencer should parry by describing a near semicircle or arc with the point moving clockwise for a right handed fencer. In parry seven, the arc is rounded because it sweeps the point off target. The hand is supinated throughout the parry. Riposte either to the low line or the high line.

The various combinations of semicircular parries are from 6 to 8, from 8 to 6, from 4 to 7, and from 7 to 4. Combinations of parries from 6 to 7 and from 4 to 8 are also very promising but require more experience.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE – LOW LINE AND SEMICIRCULAR PARRIES

1.  Engage the blades in sixth position.
   Fencer A:   Disengage into the outside low line.
   Fencer B:   Execute semicircular parry eight (and riposte).

2.  Engage in eighth position.
   Fencer A:   Disengage into high line.
   Fencer B:   Execute Semi-circular parry six (and riposte).

3.  Repeat the exercise with engagement in fourth and seventh.
**Compound Attacks**

The compound attack consists of one or more feints and may be used when a simple attack fails to score because of the strong defensive reaction of the opponent.

A fencer must gain distance on one’s opponent at the beginning of the attack by imitating the feint. To resemble the real attack, the feint must penetrate as deeply as possible, threatening the target before the fencer starts the final action.

Having mastered the direct thrust, the disengage, and the cutover, a fencer has acquired the foundation for compound attacks. Developing and successfully executing compound attacks will require practice to coordinate the blade movements, the weapon-arm extension, and the footwork. As a fencer becomes more adept in using compound attacks, the partners should concentrate on increasing the speed of the parry, making an honest effort to contact the fencer’s blade.

**The One-Two Attack**

The one-two attack consists of two disengages. The first disengage is a feint into the open line. The second disengage deceives the opponent’s lateral parry – that is, as the opponent parries the disengage, the fencer evades the parry by returning to or disengaging into the original line of engagement.

“The shortest distance between two points is a straight line” is an axiom that can be applied to the one-two attack. The blade and arm move straight forward. Use only the fingers as manipulators to lower and raise the point. When the one-two has been learned, it can be combined with other basic skills.

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**LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE ONE-TWO ATTACK**

1. *Engage the blades in 6th position.*
   
   *Fencer A:* Feint with disengage into inside high line.
   
   *Fencer B:* Parry 4.
   
   *Fencer A:* Disengage into the outside high line, evading the parry, and score.

   
   *Fencer A:* Feint with disengage into the outside high line.
   
   *Fencer B:* Parry 6.
   
   *Fencer A:* Disengage into the inside high line, evading the parry, and score.
Low-High and High-Low Attacks

Low-high and high-low attacks are designed to deceive the semicircular parries.

The low-high attack is begun from an engagement in the high line. The feint to the low line is directed beneath and parallel to the opponent’s arm. As the opponent executes the semicircular parry, the fencer should deceive the blade by disengaging into the high line.

The high-low attack starts from an engagement in the low line. The feint is made to the high line. The fencer should deceive the opponent’s parry, scoring in the low line.

Doublés

The double is a two-part attack used to deceive a circular parry. In the double, the first action is a feint with disengage intended to draw the opponent’s circular parry. The second action is a circular motion to deceive the circular parry. The blade should remain ahead of the opponent’s circular movement while progressing toward the target. The fencer’s point describes a continuous circle and a half, ending in the same line into which the feint was made.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE – DOULÉ ATTACK

1. Engage the blades in 6th position.
   
   Fencer A: Feint with disengage into the inside high line.
   Fencer B: Circular parry 6.
   Fencer A: Deceive the parry, and score.

2. Engage in 4th position.
   
   Fencer A: Feint with disengage into outside high line.
   Fencer B: Parry circular 4.
   Fencer A: Deceive the parry, and score.
Compound Ripostes

A compound riposte consists of one or more feints while making the riposte. To execute the compound riposte successfully, a fencer should delay the lunge, allowing sufficient time for completing the feint(s).

The compound riposte has many variations built around the extension, the disengage, and the cutover.

The primary difference between compound attacks and compound ripostes is that in compound attacks the weapon arm is more fully extended in the feints, while in compound ripostes the weapon arm is extended only on the final movement. (A compound fencing action, whether an attack or a riposte, is merely a combination of simple actions.)

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**LEARNING EXPERIENCE – COMPOUND RIPOSTE**

1. **Engage the blades in 6th position, middle distance.**
   - **Fencer A:** Attack with a disengage.
   - **Fencer B:** Parry with circular 6.
   - **Fencer A:** Anticipating direct riposte, parry 6.
   - **Fencer B:** Deceive parry 6, feint with disengage (one).
   - **Fencer A:** Parry 4.
   - **Fencer B:** Deceive parry 4 with a disengage (two), and score.

2. **Engage in 6th position, middle distance.**
   - **Fencer A:** Attack with a disengage.
   - **Fencer B:** Parry with circular 6.
   - **Fencer A:** Anticipating direct riposte, parry 6.
   - **Fencer B:** Deceive parry 6, feint with a disengage.
   - **Fencer A:** Parry circular 6.
   - **Fencer B:** Deceive circular 6 by doubling through with final movement, and score.
Secondary or Renewed Attacks

The remise, reprise, and the redoublement are renewed attacks executed against an opponent whose parry and/or riposte is not decisive. A fencer who doggedly pursues and renews an attack will score many more touches than the fencer who attacks and, missing or falling short, breaks off the attack and recovers before initiating another attack.

The Remise

The remise is a replacement of the point on the target while the attacker is still in the lunge. It is used against an opponent who parries but hesitates, who fails to riposte, or who uses compound ripostes. Immediately following the opponent’s parry, the point is directed in the same line as the original attack.

**LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE REMISE**

*Engage the blades in 6th position.*

*Fencer A:* Disengage and lunge.

*Fencer B:* Parry 4 and return to central guard position without riposting.

*Fencer A:* Replace the point on target in the inside line.

The Reprise

The reprise is a new indirect attack (either with disengage or cutover) against an opponent who delays or fails to riposte. It is executed while a fencer is still in the lunge.

**LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE REPRISE**

*Engage the blades in 6th position.*

*Fencer A:* Disengage and lunge.

*Fencer B:* Parry 4 and hold the parry.

*Fencer A:* While in lunge, disengage and score.
The Redoublement

The redoublement is a renewed attack against a fencer who uses passive defense by retreating or who does not riposte. It is achieved by immediate recovery after a main attack and the launch of a new attack to score.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE – THE REDOUBLEMENT

With absence of the blades, middle distance.
Fencer A: Attack with lunge.
Fencer B: Retreat.
Fencer A: Recover forward, lunge, and score.
The Stop Thrust

The stop thrust is a counteroffensive action that is successful against the opponent’s compound or indecisive attack. It is executed by scoring as the opponent initiates a compound attack, attempts to take the blade, or hesitates.

In order to succeed, the stop thrust must arrive before the attacker has begun the final movement of the attack. If the stop thrust is used against a simple attack, and if both arrive, the counterattacker will be declared hit – even if the stop thrust landed first.

To execute the stop thrust properly, the fencer must choose the right moment to launch the counterattack, then follow through without hesitation and without giving away the intent. When there is doubt about whether the original attack or the stop thrust has the right-of-way, the decision will generally be in favor of the original attack.

The Action of Second Intention

The action of second intention is a false offensive or defensive movement to lure the opponent into a committed reaction. The fencer convinces the opponent that he or she can score with the stop thrust by pretending that a compound attack or an attempt to take opponent’s blade is planned. Having lured the adversary into a counterattack, the fencer defends oneself while executing a false attack, and scores in second intention (counter-time).

The fencer who parries the opponent’s riposte and scores with a counter-riposte may also be executing a second intention. Convincing the opponent that the initial action is real requires a sense of timing and distance, strong defense, and a quick offense on the part of the fencer.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE – SECOND INTENTION

1. Engage the blades in 6th position, middle distance.
   
   Fencer A: Attack indirectly into the inside line with a short lunge.
   Fencer B: Parry 4 and riposte.
   Fencer A: In lunge position, parry 4 and score with counter-riposte.

2. Engage in 6th, long distance.
   
   Fencer A: Attempt to change engagement into 4th with advance.
   Fencer B: Counterattack into outside high line with extension.
   Fencer A: Parry 6 and score indirectly with lunge (counter-time).

Remise, riposte, and redoublement may also be executed as actions of second intention.
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Training and Technique
Essentials of Fencing Technique

by Richard Howard, Head Coach Emeritus, Amarillo College of Fencing

What follows is a brief discussion of techniques and technical applications that are considered after some forty years plus of coaching by the writer to be essential to successful fencing. They are broken down into five major categories: Mental Preparation, Physical Preparation, Technical Actions, Tactical Actions, and Terminology. Special emphasis is placed upon the technical aspects of fencing because these have become neglected in recent years in favor of tactics. The technical lesson is almost becoming a lost art which is especially tragic as many top level coaches do not teach stressing techniques. The reason being in a significant number of instances they themselves were never taught the basics. This is of course not to say that tactics are not important, they are of great importance. It is just that coupled together the two make a dynamic and complete fencer. The two facets of the art go hand in hand.

It should be understood that this writing is intended for those already familiar with basic concepts of fencing and as a result does not dwell on lengthy descriptions of already understood terminology. Rather this presentation is simply an outline of what the writer considers the absolute basic information that helps to create a competent fencer. Hopefully it will give both coaches and fencers some useful direction and insights. Also in fencing as in any complex activity there are many differing opinions. This presentation is in no way intended to challenge anyone’s expertise or perspective takes on the subject or their individual teaching or teaching styles. It is instead honestly proffered with the intention of being helpful.

1 Coach Howard has been coaching fencing for over 30 years. He is certified by the United States Fencing Coaches Association and the Academie d' Armes Internationale as a Moniteur D' Esrime in foil, epee and sabre. He is also a professional member of the United States Fencing Association.

Coach Howard was initially trained by his maternal grandfather, Mr. T. E. Anderson, who was a student of Ralph Faulkner at the Falcon Studios in the late 1920's and early 1930's. In addition, as a young teenager, Coach Howard's grandfather placed him under the tutelage of Maestro Nick Toth in Colorado Springs in 1960.

Coach Howard has helped develop the talent of numerous fencers, producing numerous fencers who have competed at the National Junior Olympic Championships and other national competitions, including Juleah Nusz, the 2009 Junior Women's Epee National Champion. He is also a certified fencing referee in all three weapons. He is also the first recipient of the "Fellow Award" from the United States Fencing Coaches Association.

Coach Howard is retired from Amarillo College, where he taught biology for many years. He also served as the curator of the AC Natural History Museum. He is also a concert pianist and has composed a suite for piano called "Prairie Visions," which can be purchased at music stores in the Amarillo area. Coach Howard was recently named "Head Coach Emeritus" of ACFA for his many years of service to fencing in Amarillo.

http://acfencers.tripod.com/essentials.html
Mental Preparation:

Mental preparation includes the developing of reasoning skills such as logic, strategy, tactics, and self-control. It is sometimes asserted that a fencer’s tactical preparation is the most important part of his development as a competitive athlete. Certainly technique is of little value without a competent application of tactical skills, but the reverse is also just as true. Without technique tactical skills have little value. The two disciplines complement each other and do not stand independent. Fencing tactics are the proper application of fencing techniques with precision to score touches and not be scored against. Fencing techniques are the physical actions of fencing which include footwork and blade work coupled with a sense of distance and timing.

With regard to technique numerous coaches stress the idea of mastery of a few techniques and relying on those rather than having a mastery of numerous actions. Although many feel that this is a well-supported idea, in the opinion of the writer, versatility greatly enhances tactical application and greatly improves a fencer’s chances for success. To confront an opponent with a wide range of successful techniques creates an aura of mystery which can serve to confound his confidence. Being able to control or at least influence the confidence of an opponent is the mark of a fencing champion.

Proper technique is not to have simply mastered through drills the various repertory of the sword. Rather it is the correct application of the repertory with reference to timing and distance while consistently introducing variety to footwork and blade work actions and responses.

The real mark of a champion’s skills is flexibility of actions while maintaining a cool head and having an instinctive understanding of his opponent’s potential actions and responses. All of which comes about through dedicated training and practice not just in the physicality of fencing itself but also learning from by observing an opponent. This observation is not just on the basis of their respective skills but also through developing an idea of the opponent’s personality type. Numerous studies have been done on athlete personality types and they are well worth more than a cursory look. Such an understanding allows a fencer not only to understand others but also to have an appreciation of himself with regard to personal strengths and weaknesses.

Most fencers fall into one of a series of personality types: Active Fencers, Passive Fencers, Cautious Fencers, Risk-Taking Fencers, Offensive Fencers, and Defensive Fencers. These personality types are based upon personality dynamics such as: Extrovert, Introvert, Emotional Stability, and Basic Temperament. It should be noted however that these are broad categories and in actual practice most personalities exhibit combinations of these traits. To have an
understanding of these types makes it possible to develop an applied sense of timing that can be used to successfully exploit an opponent’s weaknesses.

Motivation is also an important aspect of mental preparation. Motivation is the drive associated with personal values and needs that stimulate an individual to specific sets of activities to achieve a goal or sets of goals. Positive motivation is based upon a desirable or positive reward compensation. Negative motivation is punitively based and has no value in the realm of achievement in athletic endeavor.

Realistic goal setting is an excellent reinforcement mechanism to assist in the motivation of athletes. During both practice and actual tournament participation goals both short and long term should be in place for each athlete. Coaches should help each fencer in the goal setting process so that goals are both realistic and approachable.

Also a thorough understanding of the concept of the Tactical Wheel as applied to both practice and competitive bouts a fencer can develop a sense of logical organization to his actions on the fencing strip. Both a long and short version of the principles of the Tactical Wheel are commonly available through the United States Fencing Association Coaches’ College and the United States Fencing Coaches’ Association.

Participation in logic based gaming through chess and other related tactical based interactive games may also have a profound effect on fencers.

**Physical Preparation:**

Physical preparation includes participation in aerobic, physical strength enhancing, and stamina promoting activities such as baseball, bicycling, racket ball, swimming, tennis, moderate weight room training, and volleyball; all being used as a background physical enhancement to fencing. On simply a physical basis emphasis should be placed on activities that stress not only physical development but also good hand-eye coordination. Such activities should be especially engaged in during off season periods. During the off season it is especially important to maintain a quality level of physical activity just as during the peak season of both practice and tournaments. As far as overall aerobic physical development the writer recommends swimming and as far as hand-eye coordination is concerned racket ball is among the best.

Fencers need to consistently maintain fighting form and a constant state of competitive readiness so that any given time they can perform at a maximum competency level.
There are essentially three stages in seasonal physical preparation for any athlete: pre-season, competition season, and off season periods. During each of these there are specific sets of activities that serve to physically condition the fencer.

Although most of these activities can be considered to be purely physical they are in fact motivationally and emotionally driven. To physically develop properly an athlete has to be considered by himself and those around him holistically as an emotional, spiritual, and physical being.

Pre-season activities should be selected and put in place to increase fitness abilities such as: speed, strength, over all endurance, flexibility–agility, and power. Individual athletes should be encouraged to select specific physical activities that they individually enjoy from a list of non-fencing coach approved sports. In other words the workouts should be enjoyable for the individual athlete rather than a chore. It should also include review and further perfecting of basic physical fencing technique including both footwork and blade work. Also practical application of fencing actions as they apply to strategy and tactics should be a focus. Individual lessons should not exceed thirty minutes at a time and should always begin slowly and progressively gain combat speed. In the writer’s opinion the physical activities should be on a daily basis and individual fencing lessons and bouting should be at a minimum of three times a week.

During competition season physical activities should include non-fencing physical workouts but be centered on fencing including lessons, practice bouts, and tournament participation. Levels of tournaments and expectations for outcome should be determined in planning and goal setting sessions between individual athletes and coaches and should be reasonable with relation to individual levels and technical capabilities. These goals are always on an individual basis and not set in place to blanket the team as a whole.

**Terminology:**

Rather than being presented in the form of an alphabetical list essential terminology is included in the text itself. The terminology associated with the technical aspects of fencing being discussed is only an abbreviated presentation of terms from the existing literature and is a small percentage of that which is taught by the writer to his students. Exhaustive lists of terminology appear in all the body of fencing literature and can often be confusing and sometimes conflicting as many terms have variant meanings from language to language. Even within the various nations that have had a profound influence (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Russia, and Spain) on the development of the art there are variant opinions from one Fencing Master to another.
With each school and system there were and still are many different sometimes heavily argued and varied viewpoints. The writer would encourage the reader to take some time with the major literature commonly available and experience these variations for himself. Currently lists of standardized terminology are easily available from the United States Fencing Association (USFA) and the United States Fencing Coaches’ Association (USFCA).

**Technical Preparation:**

Technical preparation includes but is not restricted to: Footwork and Blade Work. Both of these serve what can be called the fundamental fencing actions: Attack, Parry, Riposte, Parry, Counter Riposte, Counterattack, and Countertime.

In actuality it should also include a study of the history of currently used competitive weapons; their grips, blades, and armory maintenance skills. Every competition fencer should at least be able to dismantle and clean a weapon and also rewire one as well.

Before we can examine footwork and blade work it is necessary to discuss in brief seven fundamental fencing actions.

1. **Attack (coup – French, attaque – Italian)** which can be generally defined as the initial offensive action made by extending the sword arm and weapon while continuously threatening the valid target of the opponent. Although this is the definition present in most of the rule books it has, in the opinion of the writer, been incorrectly expanded to include actions that if executed within advance-lunge distance can strike the target regardless of the initial position of the point or weapon arm, if the attacking action can strike the target in one tempo. An example is the flick attack. Attacks can be either simple (one move) actions or composed (multiple move) actions. All four “prise de fer” and “attack au fer” blade actions can effectively be used as attacking actions as well as preparatory actions.

2. **Parry (parade – French, parata - Italian)** which can be defined as a block of the attack, made with the forte of one's own blade.

Simple Parries are affected in one tempo and terminate the action of the offending blade in the line for which they are named. Of this type there are essentially opposition parries that deviate the offensive blade by opposition alone, blocking parries which simple meet the incoming offensive blade and in so doing halt its progress, and beating parries which literally beat the offending steel knocking it out of its intended line to the target.

Lateral Parries move in a straight line as from six to four or the reverse.
Semicircular parries describe and arc with the tip of the defending blade as it passes from one line to another.

Counterparries (contre parry – French, circolazione – Italian) describe a circle with the tip of the defending blade.

Ceding Parries or non-resisting parries yield to the force of in coming offensive steel instead of resisting it.

It is popular today to call any parry that moves an offending blade from one line to another a “transfer parry.”

All four “prise de fer” and “attack au fer” blade actions can effectively be used as parrying actions.

Also parry riposte actions can either be parry-riposte Single Time – (stesso Tempo – Italian) which means that the actions are together and not separated, or they can be parry-and-repost Double Time – (Dui Tempi – Italian) which means that the actions are separated.

3. Riposte which is an offensive action (counterattack) made immediately after a parry of the opponent's attack. Ripostes can be either direct or indirect. An example of a direct riposte is a “riposte by coule.” An example of an indirect riposte is a “riposte by coupe.”

4. Parry of a riposte which is the parrying of an incoming riposte counterattack.

5. Counter Riposte which is an attack that follows a parry of the opponent's riposte.

6. Counterattack which is an offensive action made against the right-of-way, or in response to the opponent's attack. In short it is an attack into an attack.

7. Countertime which is an attack that responds to the opponent's counter-attack, typically a riposte following the parry of the counter-attack or in other words an attack into a counterattack. Some writers consider “second intention actions” as countertime.

**Essential Footwork:**

To start with it must be recognized that all fencing footwork must be routinely drilled so that it becomes second nature, fluid, and graceful. Improper footwork makes a fencer’s actions jerky and out of proper physical balance. In all aspects of footwork acceleration relative to tempo and cadence is critical. Tempo being the time it takes to complete one fencing action and cadence being the rhythm the tempo is broken down into. For example each tempo has at least an opening and closing action or rhythm. In the past fencing masters considered as many as
four cadences for each tempo. That was of course possible because of the weight and length of the weapons of the day.

With regard to acceleration it is advisable to set up a series of advances with variance of length of stride and most importantly speed of steps. Of course this all depends upon the Fencing Distance (measure - French) between the two opposing fencers. A good example would be a slightly short slow first step immediately followed by a medium or long fast second step leading into an attack. This change of speed impacts directly on the opponent’s ability to respond effectively to the advance and/or attack. In relation to blade work an example would be starting a thrust slowly and finishing fast.

1. Footwork must start with a proper fencing stance beginning with the correct execution of the On Guard Position (en garde – French, guardia - Italian) as it applies to each of the three weapons.

In foil the writer prefers a center of balance that places the body weight evenly over both feet. Classically the feet are at right angles to each other. In modern fencing however it is better to have the back toe positioned such that it is slightly turned forward. This is more comfortable and allows for more even and rapid forward and backward steps with the advance and retreat. It also places less stress on the knees and ankles.

In épée the same is true except that the stance should be more upright with less bend to the knees. In so doing the fencer offers less immediate target to his opponent.

In sabre the stance the author recommends is much like that in foil except that the body weight is slightly (not totally) shifted to the back foot which allows for a more rapid advance.

With regard to the On Guard position in all three weapons, the writer recommends that the back foot be slightly elevated as having the heel slightly raised and body weight being carried on the ball of the foot rather than the foot being completely flat on the strip.

2. Footwork also includes the simple advance and retreat. On the advance (marcher – French, passo avanti – Italian ) the front foot leads followed by the back foot. On the retreat (rompre – French, passo indietro – Italian) the back foot leads followed by the front foot.

The spacing between the feet established in the on guard position is to be maintained as advances and retreats are executed and completed. That spacing should not exceed shoulder width and not be less than the length of the fencer’s foot. In advancing and retreating the beginning distance between feet should at least approximate foot spacing upon completion.
Also in the past classically there were four tempos to each advance and retreat. Advances were executed heel – toe, toe - heel. Retreats were executed toe – heel, toe – heel. There were four distinct sounds on the Fencing Strip (piste – French). Today it is to the advantage of the fencer to reduce this to two tempos. The front foot is advanced landing on the heel being followed by the back foot landing for the most part flat (or on the ball of the foot) as the toe of the front foot lowers and touches the fencing strip. Classically this foot action generally preceded a lunging attack and was called the Step Lunge (pattinado – Italian).

As much as possible the fencer should have most of his body weight situated on the balls of the feet rather than otherwise as this allows for immediate rapid motion and less resistance between feet and fencing strip. This is to be considered as an average as different actions will automatically dictate differences in foot position.

3. The advance and retreat also include the crossover forward (passe avant – French) and crossover backward (passe arriere – French). In the crossover forward the rear foot is brought in front of the leading foot by shifting weight and balance and then what was the leading foot moves forward and reestablishes its original placement in front. In the crossover backward the leading foot passes behind the back foot by shifting weight and balance and then the back foot moves back and reestablishes its original position. During both of these moves it should be stressed that a proper center of balance be maintained in order to present proper body and blade position allowing for proper offensive, defensive, and counteroffensive actions.

4. The Check Step or Check is an effective way to confuse the tactical thinking of an opponent. Essentially there are two check steps: On the advance check step the fencer takes a half step forward moving only the front foot, visibly indicating an advance then quickly takes a full step back. The retreat check step is just the opposite. On the retreat check step the rear foot takes a half step backward while not moving the front foot, visibly indicating a retreat then quickly changing direction with a full step forward. A few other foot movement applications have been taught with regard to the action. Mostly they are gliding foot actions applied to the same set of motions making the Check more fluid and quicker. They all result in the same thing a deceptive cadence or rhythm.

5. Gaining on the Lunge (raddoppio – Italian) is another essential footwork. Often the term is applied in the old Italian fashion taken as to mean a string of lunges. More correctly however it refers to setting up a lunge by deceptively gaining ground before actually executing the lunge. In this the back foot is carefully brought up to and touches the front foot without the opponent noticing the action, then a full lunge follows. This usually gains at least two to three feet on the reach of the lunge. Generally it is a highly effective deceptive move because it abruptly changes both tempo and cadence.
6. Another essential foot action is the Front Foot Withdrawal or Reassemblement (rassemblement – French). Generally the front foot withdrawal is characterized as being a short retreat. It is executed by moving the front foot back until it touches the back foot. This is generally followed by a Reverse Lunge (echappement - French). It is an excellent set up for a Continuation of the Attack (remise – French). Depending on the fencer’s intention it is advisable to extend the sword arm and weapon challenging the opponent’s target during the front foot withdrawal.

7. The Jump Lunge (balestra - Italian) although not as frequently used as it should be is also an essential footwork. The fundamental focus of the jump lunge must be forward acceleration rather than elevation. The higher the jump places both of the fencer’s feet off the strip too long. When the fencer is in the air he is directly open to attack or counterattack without the ability to conduct an effective defensive action. The main force of the forward momentum is generated by the front foot with a forward kicking action. It should also be noted that the jump lunge is taught today as a connected compound action, it is really two separate actions. Those are: the jump followed by the lunge. The jump lunge if properly executed is both an effective and mentally disruptive way for an attacker to quickly close distance.

8. The Jump Backward (salto indietro - Italian) is really a reverse jump lunge with the main force of the backward momentum being generated by the back foot with a backward kicking action. It is an excellent way to quickly open distance evading a thrust or lunge.

9. The Lunge (fente – French, botta lunga - Italian) although today considered a basic fundamental footwork, was when first introduced slow to catch on. It is well known the Ridolfo Capo Ferro was the first to illustrate the lunge only to be followed later by Nicoletto Gigante giving written description of the action. If at proper distance (different for different fencers) the lunge is the quickest and most effective direct attack mechanism available to the fencer.

The mechanical action of the lunge lends itself to several variations: The first is of course the simple lunge which the writer teaches to beginners as a three cadence series.

First the thrust is executed (a direct extension of the sword carried by the sword arm in a direct line to the opponent’s target). Second the front foot lifts slightly from the fencing strip and shaving it lightly with a strong kick forward as the back leg acting as a piston thrusts the body forward and locks straight resting the back foot slightly on the edge of the sole of the shoe. The kicking action of the front foot acts a weight redistribution forward and the pushing action of the back leg provides most of the physical strength. It must be noted here that this does not imply or accept the back foot landing on the ankle. Third the non-sword hand is thrown back coming to rest parallel to (but not resting on) the back leg as a counter balance to the forward momentum of the body as a whole.
This simple lunge has two significant variations which are: the “assisted lunge” and the “breaking lunge.” In the assisted lunge the front foot lands directly on the heel and then lowers the remainder of the foot to the fencing strip. Using this as leverage the lunge is effectively drawn forward by three to four inches which is very useful if the lunge lands the blade of the offensive weapon just short of the target. In the breaking lunge the front foot lands flat, effectively shortening the reach of the lunge by a few inches. The breaking lunge is useful against an opponent who unexpectedly closes distance during an oncoming attack. Another lunge variation is the flying lunge in which the forward momentum of the piston action of the back leg is increased causing the fencer to slide or fly forward on the fencing strip.

Depending on the stroke power of the back leg piston this may be as much as three feet which greatly extends the striking range of the offensive weapon. The lunge-in-place or drop-lunge is another. Simply put the lunging fencer simply drops in place into the lunge position. This effects not only a short lunge but also a body displacement. Again the given combat situation dictates the action. Another effective lunge not used nearly as much as it should be is the reverse lunge. The reverse lunge (echappement – French, Botta lunga indietro – Italian) is often preceded by a front leg withdrawal. In this application after the thrust the front foot remains in place and the rear leg slides back until the body rests in the finished lunge position.

Other lunge applications include: Advance Lunge, Retreat Lunge, Front Foot Withdrawal Lunge, Advance Crossover Lunge, Retreat Crossover Lunge, Advance Check Step Lunge, and Retreat Check Step Lunge.

10. Also essential to modern footwork is the Flash Attack (fleche – French, frecciata – Italian) as created by Italo Santelli and Laszlo Borsody in Hungary at the beginning of the 20th Century. The word literally means arrow or flight of the arrow. A number of different variations on fleche technique have been implemented and most have validity. These also slightly vary depending upon whether the flash attack fencer is right handed or left handed. In the writer’s opinion the flash attack is best executed by: executing a thrust by extending the sword arm and weapon challenging the opponent’s line of target while at the same time swinging the back leg around the front leg. As this is being done the weight of the body (leading with the head) is thrown off balance forward. The back leg continues until it is well in front of the front leg. As it comes down on the piste the offending blade strikes the opponent’s target. The attacking fencer then continues in his forward action by passing the defending fencer on his inside line. A right handed attacker will pass the opponent on his; the attacker’s right side which is the opponent’s left side.

As the offending blade reaches the opponent it is most effectively delivered by a slight Angulation or Caver (coup cave – French, angolazione – Italian) of the wrist. A noted variation
of this is one in which the offending blade reaches its target before the back foot comes down on the fencing strip. Both techniques work and have their pros and cons. The flash attack can be used in absence of blade or involving any of the four Takes of the Iron or the four Attacks of the Iron. It can also be used following an advance, retreat, jump lunge, front leg withdrawal, lunge, reverse lunge, crossover forward, crossover backward, check forward or check backward. In all instances it is most effective if unexpected and follows a dramatic change in tempo or cadence.

As a final note footwork should always be coordinated with blade work. In the simplest form there should be one blade action for each footwork action (even if the only thing being accomplished is a simple presentation of a blade) On a higher level two or even three blade actions coordinate per one foot action. These are the standard applications, but it can also work the other way in that there may be multiple footwork actions per a single blade action. These higher order footwork-blade work actions have to be taught slowly and then when perfected brought up to fencing speed. Without such coordination there can be no true success in the fencing experience.

**Blade Work:**

Blade work can best defined as actions of the weapon’s blade generated through the grip of the weapon as influenced by the fingers, wrist, arm, and body. It is essential to remember that the weapon is delivered to and withdrawn from the target with but few exceptions by the feet. The fencer’s grasp on the weapon grip is dictated by two major considerations:

First is the type of grip employed – French, Italian, or Orthopedic.

Second is national style as personalized by the individual fencer.

The French system employs extensive finger involvement based upon the index finger and thumb of the sword hand (manipulators) further balancing the handle with the remaining fingers (aids). Depending upon the size of the flat part of the sword blade near the handle (ricasso – Italian) in question the Italian system uses either the index finger and thumb or the index finger, middle finger, and thumb with less influence of the aids. The handle near the pommel is also strapped to the wrist by a martingale which for the most part immobilizes the fingers, hand, and wrist making most of the blade action come from the elbow. This generates a lot of power which most often is accentuated by a preparatory foot action. In the case of orthopedic grips there are several standard types with numerous variations. What is interesting about the orthopedic grips is that they allow for a composite use of fingers wrist and elbow which really is almost an evolutionary merging of the classic French and Italian systems.
Classically hand positions while gripping the weapon are either prone, supine, or neutral (the hand opening to the fencer’s inside line as in position four). In modern fencing many coaches prefer and teach the neutral position as superior because there is a fraction of a second lost in adjusting the hand from prone or supine. The writer favors this although he still teaches the prone and supine positions as part of standard training.

1. The first of the essential blade work actions is the Straight Thrust (coup droit – French, botta dritta - Italian) which is really the precursor to all other blade actions. Essentially the thrust is the offensive presentation of the weapon directed toward the target of the opponent using only the extension of the arm as the delivery system. To be effective it has to be within striking or touch range. In short the thrust, by its self, is a close or infighting action and in reality precedes all actions which threaten an opponent with an incoming blade. As has already been discussed it precedes the lunge. Depending upon proximity to the opponent the thrust may involve a fully extended weapon arm or one with various degrees of bend in the elbow as the given combat situation dictates.

2. The second essential blade action is really a composite. It is the four Takes of the Iron (prise de fer – French, presa di ferro – Italian).

Of these the first is the Bind (liement – French, riporto – Italian). The four principle binds are six, four, seven, and eight. Binds however can just effectively be taken from two, three, five, and to a lesser degree one. Today binds are most often spoken of in terms of being semi-circular diagonal transfers.

Number two is the Cross (croise - French). This is actually a mini-bind usually taken from six moving the blade down to eight. This is the general method taught today but in the past the action could move either down or up and also from four to eight and the reverse. Most effectively it has the most controlling power from six to eight. In modern terms it is most often called a vertical semi-circular transfer.

Third is the Envelopment (envelopment – French). The action moves the tip of the offending blade around the opponent’s bell guard in a small circle at the same time enveloping or trapping the opponent’s blade. Ideally the motion should be very small and be very tight, the tip of the offending blade beginning the move at the top of the opponent’s bell and finishing in the same position. The four major envelopments are six, four, seven, and eight. Of course they can also be taken from two, three, five, and to a lesser degree from one. The action is either clockwise or counterclockwise depending upon the relative position presented by the opponent’s blade. The guiding factor is to use the envelopment to sweep the opponent’s blade away your most direct target line. (Most envelopments in six for a right handed fencer are clockwise against another right handed fencer. An example is an envelopment six used to
counter a blade in four. Envelopments today are commonly called circular transfers. A common usage is to refer to the envelopment six as the circle six, the envelopment in four as circle four, etc. The fourth is the Opposition (opposizione – Italian). As the name implies the blade is used to oppose or shove aside the opponent’s blade. Again the most common oppositions are six, four, seven, and eight. Oppositions in two, three, five and one are also used. It is very important to note here that each of these four takings of the iron can be used offensively, defensively, and counteroffensively. To defend, attack, or counterattack with them can be devastatingly effective.

3. The third essential blade action is also a composite. It is the four Attacks of the Iron (attack au fer – French).

The first of the four is the Beat (battement –French, battuta - Italian). It means literally to beat or strike the opponent’s blade. The action can either be used as a distraction or as a precursor to another move.

Beats to be effective should be taken with either the strong part (forte - French) of the blade or the “center of percussion” which is the center of the blade. The idea of using the center comes from the fact that it is at that point that maximum strength can be arrived at due to the physical mass of the blade coupling with the maximum inertia generated from the arc of the swing itself. Beats can be taken in combination from any of the eight positions as dictated from the general position and distance of the delivering fencer. The classic example of course is six to four or four to six. The strongest beats are from six to four and from six to seven.

The second of the four is the Expulsion (Froissemment – French, sforzo - Italian). The easiest expulsion to define and execute is from four. The strong of the offending blade lies across the weak (foible) of the opponent’s blade on the inside line and suddenly with strong straight downward forced snapping gliding motion moves from four to seven. The action is executed so strongly and quickly that it actually wrenches the opponent’s wrist and can facilitate a disarm. There are two main variations: one in which the opponent’s blade is forced down and the other that the opponent’s blade is forced strongly to his inside line or outside line depending upon what line the action originates from. An expulsion can also easily be executed by initiating the actions from six moving to eight. It should be noted here that both of the expulsion actions move from high lines to low lines. Low to high line expulsions are awkward and ineffective. The expulsion is generally the precursor to an attack. Most often following an expulsion comes a release of the opponent’s blade followed by an attacking or counterattacking action of some type (intrecciata – Italian).

The third of the four is the Glide (coule – French, glizade – Italian). Using timing, speed and distance it is simply an action in which the offending blade runs quickly and lightly along the
opponent’s blade landing a touch in the same line. It is literally a grazing type action. The action generally takes an opponent off guard because the blade contact and pressure is threatening in both the physical and psychological sense.

The glide is most effectively executed from either six or four but can be done from all eight positions. High line action is however the most effective.

The fourth of the attacks of the iron is the Press (presser – French) The press is an attempt to push the opponent's blade aside or out of line which follows depending on the opponent's response by a offensive, defensive, counteroffensive, or countertime action.

4. The fourth essential blade work action is the Disengagement (degage – French, cavatione di tempo – Italian). The disengage is generally thought of as a simple attack the is executed by the blade traveling from one line to another generally by passing under the opponent’s blade. Originally the name came from the release of one blade from another when they were in contact or engaged.

A Derobement (French) is a type of disengage that is used to evade, that is to deceive any of the four takings of the iron or the four attacks of the iron.

A Trompement (French) is also a type of disengage that is used to evade, that is to deceive, an attempted parry. In short a fencer disengages as he avoids any blade closing on his. A significant rule of thumb is to disengage a closing line and to attack into an opening line!

5. The fifth essential blade work is the Cut Over (coupe – French, cavazion angolata – Italian). The cut over is generally considered a simple indirect attack executed by moving the tip of the blade from one line to the opposite line over the top of the opponent’s blade. It generally moves from six to four or four to six. The action is credited to Andre de Liancour in the mid 1600’s.

**Tactical Actions:**

Fencing tactics are the proper application of fencing techniques with precision to score touches and not be scored against. On the average it takes from three to five years to master the basic blade work and footwork necessary to become a really competent fencer. This is a time of drilling with a coach and working independently to make essential actions muscle memory. In order to be practical and effective they must become instantaneous reflexes rather than the fencer having to think about each one as a possibility and then implement it. In other words actions become instinctive rather than a selection process.
As an action takes place it must be executed in the most economical fashion possible. That is it must be executed at the correct distance, the correct timing, and with no wasted motion. To accomplish this all actions have to have been practiced through drills and actual competition so that they become absolutely relaxed and fluid. By experience after both training and competition a fencer learns not only how to evaluate his opponent but also his own action-responses as well.

A fencing champion is a tactical fencer. When he approaches the fencing strip he already has a plan in place. Tactical fencers are trained to follow through with a series of strategy based actions that provide necessary information for both survival on the strip and success in the bout. A champion begins a bout with what are called reconnaissance or exploratory moves. These test the opponent for patterned responses: attack situations, blade work preferences, parry or counterattack, type of parry, type of counterattack, and responses to sudden changes in distance or timing. Such reconnaissance moves can include: attacks, false attacks, feints, changes of timing, footwork variations, attempted attacks or takes of the blade, parry riposte exchanges, invitations, and responses to second intention actions.

It is also advisable as a part of the reconnaissance procedure to observe potential opponents as they take lessons or warm up with their respective coaches. Routine drill responses and actions will follow through in a bout situation. In pool bouts also take the time to watch them fence. As this is being done check to see if by any body language (posturing) they telegraph their intentions prior to attacks etc.

Champions conceal their intentions and mislead their opponents. The easiest way is during the reconnaissance phase of the bout to respond in patterns other than normal routine and in so doing set the opponent up for responses that will not come, or footwork or blade work that either will not be used or be implemented in ways other than expected.

Experienced fencers also make use of their feet. The weapon is delivered and withdrawn by the feet. Changing tempo, cadence, and distance a swell as using the width of the strip have a profound impact on the outcome of bouts. In addition it is advisable drive the opponent rather than being driven by him.

Body Evasions or Displacements (esquive - French) and their accompanying footwork can be very effective as deceptive tactics especially if executed and timed to the very last cadence of an incoming attack. They can be used very effectively as stop hits or time thrusts. Although technically considered as defensive actions, not having right-of-way, they can occasionally be used offensively to launch an attack at close quarters. A few well known examples are: the Quarter Turn Step and Thrust (volte – French, inquartata – Italian), the Outside Diagonal Lunge with Angled Thrust (intagliata – Italian), The Duck Thrust (boars thrust – English), and the Three
Point Lunge (passer dessous – French, passata sotto – Italian). The last is seldom seen in today’s fencing arena yet it can still be very effective if executed with unexpected timing.

Feints are also very effective blade work tactical deceptions. Examples are: the One-Two, the One-Two-Three, the Circular Disengage (double – French, circolazione e finta – Italian) and the Cut Over (coupe – French, cavazione angolata – Italian). Feints are always best delivered if accompanied with an acceleration or broken cadence footwork.

Fencing champions use distractions or other methods to hinder the opponent’s game. Excellent distractions are: point-in-line, changes in footwork tempo and cadence, conversation or absence of blade as opposed to the opponent’s demonstrated preferences, blade work and footwork combinations, balestra, fleche, and (although not favored by the writer) stalling for time such as asking to straighten a blade or tie a shoe. Using time between rounds in direct elimination bouts by interaction with a coach so that the opponent at least thinks that either a definite strategy is being discussed or that he is the subject of conversation can also have a demoralizing and distracting effect on an opponent.

Tactical fencers control the bout by making the opponent respond by attacking or defending at inopportune times. In addition a quality fencer uses as little energy as possible by setting up situations that cause the opponent to act or react and by so doing using their energy reserves. When it comes down to it in the end a bout or a tournament can easily be won or lost because of energy reserves.

Lastly one of the most important fencing strategy applications is the concept of “Second Intention Actions.” To make the opponent do what you want him to do is to control the bout. Second intention is a coordination of both blade work and footwork to elicit a specific reaction from the opponent. The best and classic example is to initiate a short attack with no intention of landing the touch. The opponent predictably makes a parry followed by a riposte. That riposte is the setup action. It is parried and a counterattack counter riposte is launched landing the touch. Any action that elicits a predictable response from an opponent is second intention whether it involves just blade action or combines blade work and footwork. “All” high level fencers fence in the second intention. It is one of the most important lessons that a trained intermediate level fencer can learn. To learn it however a fencer must have a good practical application knowledge of technique.

Tactically it can be said that a fencing champion is not just a well-trained athlete or technician, but firstly is an astute student of human nature.
Conclusion:

To bring to an end what has become a too lengthy discussion, a competent and complete fencer should be prepared by both his coach and personal experiences. His preparations should include physical fitness, mental preparedness, and knowledge of both technical and tactical aspects of his art. Also fencers should be encouraged to enjoy the experience. If an activity is not fun it is not worth doing. In the writer’s salle there are three rules: Rule One – Fencing Safety, Rule Two -Fencing Fun, and Rule Three - Win!
Training Tips - Tactical Wheels

The logical progression of a fencing phrase can be described in terms of the short and long tactical wheels. These are re-produced below but please be aware that they only provide a partial tactical understanding of the concepts involved based on first intention actions. These actions are those that the fencer intends to work without the unwitting help of the opponent. The tactical wheels “view” of the logic of fencing phrases is closest to reality when fencing the two weapons governed by the “Right of Way” convention in the rules, Foil and Sabre.

Please see the “Key” to help interpret these diagrams. The arrows in the diagrams are equivalent to the phrase “is over come with a … action” where … stands for the next action around the wheel.

Short Tactical Wheel
So if Fencer A tries and succeeds in scoring a hit on Fencer B with a Direct Simple Attack from the perfect distance, this was a 1st intention attack by Fencer A. Another example would be if Fencer B lets the same situation on the piste happen again and when Fencer A tries the Direct Simple Attack again Fencer B will be able to employ a Parry to defend the attack and immediately follow this with Riposte to score. This was Fencer B’s 1st intention, just to make the riposte succeed.

This basic logical progression shows the actions that can make up a simple fencing phrase. These tactical wheels can therefore be used as a guide to fighting a bout or constructing a lesson plan at the beginner/intermediate levels, where only first intention actions are employed.

**Long Tactical Wheel**

The Long Tactical Wheel shows a slightly more advanced logical progression of actions in a fencing phrase. However, a greater appreciation of distance and timing together with a higher
technical ability is required to accomplish the moved in the latter stages of the wheel. This too can be used as a guide to fighting a bout or constructing a lesson plan but at the intermediate/advanced levels employing first intention actions. Please be aware that not all logical tactical progressions a depicted here. For instance the answer to a compound attack can be a compound parry (a series of simple parries). Neither should it be assumed that the logical progression should start with a simple attack. A Lesson plan need not include every stage to be effective training.

**Short Tactical Wheel Including Second Intention Examples**

![Diagram of Short Tactical Wheel]

**Key:**
- Fencers A’s actions =
- Fencers B’s actions =
- 2nd Intention actions =
Here Counter-Parry Riposte and Feint of Parry followed by a Parry Riposte have been included as examples of the many actions available. To make the second intention action work Fencer A must provoke the same a response from Fencer B as in a first intention attack. Fencer A’s action is designed to fall a little short of Fencers B’s target, this will mean that B’s counter action, the Riposte, has further to travel, will take longer to complete and is easier for A to Counter-Parry and Counter-Riposte to gain the score.

**Long Tactical Wheel Including Second Intention Examples**

Here Counter-Parry Riposte, Feint of Parry followed by a real Parry Riposte and a premeditated Counter Time action have been included as examples of second intention actions, many other actions are available, too numerous to allow a clear diagram to be drawn.
This shows that a fencer at an advanced level can and should be capable of switching between 1st and 2nd intention actions during a phrase. This can be done in a predetermined way or as a result of a decision made during the phrase.

Use of tactical wheels during individual lessons or pairs training is very stimulating and enjoyable for both the fencer and coach. The possible combinations are limitless but only a few should be used in any single lesson. The goal is to build capacity not overwhelm the fencer.
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References


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