

Threading the Needle: How foil can help your sabre fencing

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Delivering an attack in foil is one of the most challenging problems in any kind of fencing. You have to coordinate bladework, footwork, preparation and commitment to successfully thread the needle of your opponent's defences and place the point on their torso. In this workshop we will use a selection of game-based exercises to discover how to make an effective foil attack, with an eye towards being able to translate those skills back to improve your sabre fencing. This helps illustrate the advice in historical sabre treatises that fencers should first learn foil to develop their fundamental fencing skills, before progressing to the heavier and more complex sabre.

Bring a foil or lightweight sabre, a fencing jacket, a mask and a glove. All exercises will be purely thrust-based.

Warmup

Triangular Tyranny: <https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=138>

Play in groups of three, in a space that's maybe 8-10m square. No equipment required.

Each player has the following goal: they should try to have their two opponents separated by 90 degrees. So one directly in front, one to the right or left. They can use any footwork and move at any speed to try and achieve this.

The game has no halts, play for a few minutes then rotate partners and start again.

All groups should play simultaneously in the same space.

Notes

- This game isn't very directly relevant to foil, but it's a fun way to get people moving and being silly

Step-Lunge Game: <https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=83>

Two roles: attacker and defender

- Attacker has up to two steps (step+lunge, step+pass) to attempt an attack and try to hit the defender.
- Defender has as many steps as they need to avoid the attack. Cannot dodge with the body or use their weapon to parry.
- As soon as the attacker's foot lands for their second step, the roles switch

When a fencer hits with their attack, they score a point. Reset and play again.

Notes

- This is a classic fencing warmup game
- Good for teaching direction changes and distance traps

Intro

Quick speech and discussion, key points to hit:

- Foil is a very old game - first ruleset 1696. Extremely HEMA
- Defined by three key rules:
 - Target: torso only
 - Actions: must hit with a thrust
 - Tactics: attack > counter; riposte > remise
- Most sabre treatises presume that fencers will know how to fence from foil first
- Because the game is so restricted, attacking is hard
- This forces you to learn to prepare attacks well, which is beneficial for all fencing
 - Especially when using thrusts

Introduction to Priority for Foil

- Priority is a comparison of both fencers
- If one fencer moves forward, and the other goes backwards, the attacker is the fencer moving forwards

- If one fencer moves forward, and the other tries to dodge or duck or twist away, the attacker is the fencer who didn't dodge
- If both fencers move forward, one goes direct and the other hesitates with their hand or changes lines/feints, the attacker is the fencer who went direct
- If there is a parry or a blade take, priority goes to the fencer who did the blade take
 - If the attacker and defender go for the blade at the same time, it stays with the attacker
- If the attacker launches and misses, the defender gets priority just like if they had parried

Exercise 1: Foil fencing

Very simple: form groups of three, fence 5 touches at a time according to the guidelines above.

Third participant can call start and help adjudicate touches.

Exercise 2: Circular evasions

This is a coached constraint-based exercise to practice threading the needle and finding a way to the target.

- Setup: a few steps distance (blades not engaged).
 - Coach starts to do a simple repeated change of lines, e.g. circle-6s or circle-4s.
 - ◆ Think "mini golf obstacle" - your job is just to be a moving problem, not to be a challenge
 - Fencer smoothly advances, avoids the blade and hits with a lunge
 - ◆ Don't just go with speed - challenge is to be able to do this smoothly and precisely
- If you're finding it easy, the coach can set up a more complicated pattern
- If it's still easy, the coach can change their pattern as the fencer is coming to the start of their lunge
 - Fencer now needs to be very smooth and careful

Exercise 3: Direct attack

<https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=8>

Both the **[A]** (the attacker) and **[Z]** (the defender) are firm footed facing each other, not moving from their initial guard positions. **[A]** is allowed one attack (no feints or direction changes), within a limited set of parameters that are known to the defender*.

The response of **[Z]** is also specified ahead of time. The traditional version is a parry with no foot movement, but you could also specify that **[Z]** must back out without a parry, or that they may move and parry.

If **[A]** lands the attack twice in a row then **[Z]** will line up one step further than they have been positioning themselves. If **[Z]** succeeds twice in a row they should move one step closer. (If the first pass shows that they started at completely the wrong distance they should reposition without worrying about the "move one step after two attacks" rule.)

* The base version is something simple like 'right descending cut to the head'. More options could be allowed for attacks, however at some point it becomes a variant drill rather than a rules tweak. The Direct Attack is an extremely simple scenario.

Notes

- For this workshop we used a straight thrust to the torso
- **Z** should give a really wide invitation/guard to make the game possible - otherwise the final distance is tiny.
- Extensions for the game if players are finding it easy
 - Indirect finish: **A** can change lines *during* their attempt to hit
 - ◆ Not before, not a feint disengage, just a change of line during the attempt to hit
 - (Not used): **A** should step forwards and backwards, always returning to their marked distance, and launch at a moment of their choosing.

Exercise 4: Indirect attack

<https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=9>

The game has a similar setup to the Direct Attack game, whereby both are facing each other firm footed waiting for the attacker to initiate. You can do the Indirect Attack with a cut, however it is designed, and works much better, as a thrusting game.

- Both the **[A]** and **[Z]** are allowed to move their swords as much as they want while their feet don't move.
- Once **[A]** moves their feet to instigate their attack **[Z]** should parry and begin running away.
- **[A]** can make as many attack attempts as they want until they reach the stop line, somewhere about 2-3 steps ahead of their starting point. (This is usually somewhere behind where **[Z]** starts.)

Win conditions:

- **[A]** wins if they can land an attack. (Obviously.)
- **[A]** wins if **[Z]** moves their feet while **[A]** remains planted.
- **[Z]** wins if they can parry successfully until they get out of range.

Much like Direct Attack the distance should be increased or decreased to make the game balanced for the skill level of the two fencers.

Notes

- People tend to find this game quite confusing. You do not have to match step for step, the defender can just sprint
- You want plenty of space beyond the stop line for the defender to run away

Exercise 5: Sabre march

<https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=61>

A is attacker, **B** is defender. Both start in one step distance from each other, and goal for both is to land a touch.

A starts with priority, and **B** gets the priority for a parry-riposte.

A must continually move forward, if they stand still for more than a moment or step back, they lose. **A** must also start in shoulder or

overhead guard, while **B** may start wherever they want.

Win conditions for **A**:

1. Make any hit
2. **B** crosses the back line

Win conditions for **B**:

1. **A** stops moving forward
2. Make a clean hit while not having priority.
3. **A** goes and misses (no parry or hit)
4. **A** goes and **B** parries

Notes

- This is a classic game based exercise. Here we're using an adjusted version that avoids 'fencing it out' if the attack is parried.
- The defender can use extremely dirty tricks, like just beating the attacker's blade immediately if they're at a bad distance. This is entirely cool.
- Similarly the attacker must be willing to abuse their priority on an attempted counterattack - it's critical for game balance.

Exercise 6: Beat march

This is the Sabre march game for a second time, but with the following adjustments

- The attacker can beat the blade - this should be clearly a beat.
- If they beat the blade they hold their attack against an attempted parry
- If they go for a beat and clearly *miss* the blade the defender wins

Notes

- The attacker can still lose on blade contacts if they're not careful - a ref is very useful here

Exercise 7: Foil fencing

Consolidation exercise to bring everything together - go back to doing foil fencing and do some more of it, see whether it's easier to find and set up touches now.

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