

Breaking the Zwerhaw - For Fiorists

HEMAC Dijon 2024

The zwerhaw is one of the most common actions to encounter in longsword competitions or sparring. And yet, since it is entirely absent from Fiore, many fencers can struggle with finding a way to address it while staying “within their system”. In this workshop, we will use the analytical tool of “hidden prerequisites” (pioneered by Johan Harmenberg and Eric Sollee) to understand what makes the zwerhaw work – and therefore how you can disrupt and defeat it.

While we’re working with the zwerhaw as our example, the ideas we’ll be discussing can be used to address many fencing problems. They’re particularly useful when you want to try and handle “weird” moves while sticking to the guidance in the historical treatises you study.

Intro

The key idea this workshop is built around is Harmenberg’s concept of “hidden prerequisites”. For a full explanation you should read *Epee 2.0*, but as a quick summary these refer to the conditions that a particular action or tactic requires to be used - and particularly, conditions which might be non-obvious or easily overlooked when thinking about the move. So for example, if your opponent is excellent at parrying, a potentially hidden prerequisite is that you need to attack them for them to be able to parry. Or if you want to use *mutieren*, then your opponent needs to be offering you the weak of their blade to bind against.

Once we have an understanding of the prerequisites of an action, we can then undermine that action by denying our opponent one or more of those prerequisites. This is often a lot easier than “out-techniquing” the action they’re using by deploying some clever counter in the middle of it.

Crossed Crowns

This is a slightly adapted version of a game written for GD4H by Jack Berggren-Elers. The original version can be found here: <https://www.gd4h.org/hga/gameInfo.php?g=48>

- Work in groups of three, two fencers and a ref. Rotate roles every few reps.
- Initial setup is with the fencers in close distance (easily able to reach the other's hands with one of their own).
 - Fencer 1 will be in an 'ochs' style position, as if they had just cut a zwerhaw
 - Fencer 2 will be in a 'parry' style position, hands lower and point up, binding against the ochs
- Neither fencer is allowed to change the distance, to shove or push the other fencer, or to take either hand off their hilt.
- Target area is anywhere above the waist and actions need to be made with the middle or weak of the blade.
- If both fencers hit, then the fencer who made the highest hit wins the double.

Allow the game to play out for at least 5 minutes, ideally 10-15 mins. Then have a discussion session. Questions to consider:

- What actions were useful?
- What actions felt overpowered?
- Were there any rules that were favouring specific actions?
- Were there any counters you could think of that were blocked by some of the rules?

Depending on what people say, you can play either one of the next two games ("Runaway" or "Grab if you can") next. Pick based on the first suggestion for a potential rules change:

- "Runaway" if people talk about being forced into close distance
- "Grab if you can" if people talk about using grappling to shut down blade actions

Runaway

This is an adaptation of Crossed Crowns. Play this as game #2 if the discussion after Crossed Crowns focused on the distance, otherwise use this as game #3.

- Standard Crossed Crowns rules, except that:
 - Fencer 2 (the 'parry' fencer) is allowed to increase the distance by stepping away.
 - Fencer 1 is not allowed to chase them or take any steps forward
- If fencer 2 steps back and both fencers hit, then fencer 1 always wins the double.
- If fencer 2 steps completely out of distance without anyone hitting, then fencer 1 wins the exchange

Allow the game to play out for at least 5 minutes, ideally 10-15 mins. Then bring people back in and have a discussion again. Questions to consider:

- What actions were useful? How had that changed?
- Was the new option useful? How did you find it was most effective?
- What could you do against someone when you were expecting them to run away?

Grab if you can

This is another adaptation of Crossed Crowns. Play this as game #2 if the discussion after Crossed Crowns focused on the grappling, otherwise use this as game #3.

- Standard Crossed Crowns rules, except that:
 - Fencer 2 (the 'parry' fencer) is allowed to take their weak hand off and grapple fencer 1's arms or sword.
 - Fencer 1 is not allowed to step back or counter-grapple to free their hands.
- If fencer 2 takes one hand off and both fencers hit, then fencer 1 wins the double.

- If fencer 1 steps back to avoid a grapple or freely hit, then fencer 2 wins the exchange.
- If fencer 2 shoves or pushes fencer 1 to force them to step, then fencer 1 wins the exchange.
 - Don't be too keen to judge this - crowding their space and choking up their arms is fine. The point is that you can't win by just bull rushing them and knocking them off balance.

Allow the game to play out for at least 5 minutes, ideally 10-15 mins. Then bring people back in and have a discussion again. Questions to consider:

- How have the useful actions changed again?
- Was the new option useful? How did you find it most effective?
- What could you do against someone when you were expecting them to charge in?
- Could you trick them by threatening to grapple?

Infighting

Finally we'll bring both variations together into one more version of the same Crossed Crowns model:

- Standard Crossed Crowns rules, with both customisations:
 - Fencer 2 (the 'parry' fencer) is allowed to step away or to take their weak hand off to grapple
 - Fencer 1 is not allowed to step back, to counter grapple, or to chase with footwork.
- If fencer 2 grapples, they lose priority in any double
- If fencer 2 steps away, they lose priority in any double
- If fencer 2 steps completely out of distance and neither fencer hits, fencer 1 wins.
- If fencer 1 steps back to avoid a grapple or free their arms, fencer 2 wins.

Allow the game to play out for at least 5 minutes, ideally 10-15 mins. Then bring people back in and have a general discussion about their observations. Once that's reaching an end, move to the conclusion.

Conclusion

Semi-lecture, semi-discussion. Key points to emphasise - bring these out when the discussion is falling quiet:

- Any given action or technique is only effective when its prerequisites are met
- By creating the prerequisites for an action in the rules or setup of a game, we can encourage people to discover that action through playing the game
- When you encounter an unfamiliar action in sparring (maybe one from outside the treatise you study) you can use the prerequisites model to analyse it.
 - Think about what the situation was just before they used their action
 - Useful ideas: distance, momentum, your guard/position, their guard/position
- This might help you find counters from your own treatise to approach it
- Otherwise, you can try to deny some of those prerequisites through your fencing and see if that helps prevent them from using the action successfully

This document may be freely shared with credit. Please borrow or adapt exercises and ideas. Feedback and questions are welcomed: send to Tea Kew on Facebook, or to tea@fechtlehre.org. If you would like me to come teach at your club or event, get in touch and we'll try and make it work.

Further content will be regularly published on <https://www.fechtlehre.org> - please bookmark and check back regularly to stay up to date.