

Moments to Go

SERFO 2023

This workshop was drawn (with some minor adaptations) from Allen Evans' excellent "Coaches Compendium" website, in particular his article on the Advance in Preparation Drill: https://www.coachescompendium.org/ADVANCE_IN_PREP.HTML The good ideas are entirely his, while any errors introduced by my variations are my own.

There are two key ideas to take away from this workshop:

- You can reach farther than you can hit
- Do not launch your attack when the time is not right

I'll be demonstrating the exercises with foils today, but you can apply this to any form of fencing just fine. Depending on the precise system and tactical model you're using, you might want to structure drills around other preparations than just 'distance', but the essential idea is to have all three parts of: preparation; go/no go conditions; resulting action (or lack thereof).

Demonstration #1: Critical distance

Illustration: student comes en-garde, coach stands at the distance of the student's maximum lunge. On the student's timing, they lunge and touch. Reset. Again on the student's timing, they lunge, but this time the coach attempts to parry riposte - this should be an easy touch for the coach. Finally, set up at the 'one-tempo' distance for the student (approx extension + 15cm), and have the student lunge on their timing - this time the coach's parry should be late.

- How far can you *reach* vs how far can you *hit*
- Approximately extension plus 15cm
- More if you have a well coordinated lunge, less if you don't
- Uncertainty from your opponent will extend critical distance
- "Preparation" is everything you do to get to get to critical distance

- If you don't have it, your direct attack will very likely be stopped - plan accordingly (e.g. attack indirectly with a disengagement)

Demonstration #2: Preparation

Illustration: student comes en-garde, coach stands at critical distance. Student takes one step back. Student does their advance (in prep) and watches the coach as they advance. If the coach does not retreat, the student continues into a lunge, making a seamless attack. If the coach does retreat during the advance, the student calmly comes to a balanced stop.

- The purpose of your preparation up the conditions for your attack
- Might involve footwork, blade work, feints, psychological trickery, whatever
- Understand what situation you are trying to *achieve*, which is based on the attack you are trying to do.
- Don't just do your attack automatically after your prep. Do you have the situation you're after?

Exercise #1: Advance in prep drill

As demonstrated. Use a line on the floor to set your 'advance to here' point for easy repeatability.

Coach: make up your mind early, step back *immediately* - the moment they pick the front foot up.

Student: your goal is to be seamless in either case.

- If you attack, a smooth advance-lunge (pa-pow!)
- If you abort, a clean advance finishing in an entirely stable position

Exercise #2: Avoiding a sweep

This is the same drill as before, but now if the coach stands still they should do a (slow) sweep for the student's blade. The student disengages the sweep and finishes by hitting with a lunge.

Coach: give your invitation wide and make the sweep nice and clear.

Student: again, the focus is on executing seamlessly

Exercise #3: Sweep or retreat

Now we expand to four options: the coach can sweep for the blade or do nothing; and the coach can retreat or stand still.

Coach: make up your mind early. You need to start both the hand and/or the step before the student's front foot lands on their advance.

Student needs to stay very on the ball:

- Attack if the coach waits, by disengage if needed
- Wait if the coach retreats
- In particular, watch out for disengaging a search and automatically lunging despite a retreat

Exercise #4: Stop-hit

As soon as the fencer starts to advance, the coach can extend their arm to present the point in front of the student. The student should respond by taking or displacing the blade before finishing their attack with a lunge. The details of how they do this are unimportant for the exercise, as long as they don't jump onto the point.

Start with just two options: present the point, or retreat with no blade action.

Student: the focus is still on seamless action, either take the blade and finish over a smooth advance lunge, or stop and reset cleanly.

Exercise #5: All options

Now the coach can bring in all the hand cues presented so far:

- Keep the hand still
- Search for the blade
- Extend for a stop-hit

And mix each with the two footwork options: retreat or stay still.

While the student needs to address the coach's blade action (displace or disengage or go straight), it must be emphasised that this is a *distraction*. Their focus must always be primarily directed to the question of distance.

Exercise #6: Repeated steps

So far we've done a single prep step for the student on every action, and if the coach retreats then the drill just resets. But if one fencer advances and the other retreats, what has actually changed about the situation? Nothing.

So, you can chain this together. When the coach retreats, the drill has already reset, so the student can take another advance. Start out just with the footwork and add blade actions from the coach to build difficulty.

Coach: you need to be very sharp with each retreat so you aren't late.

Student: try to avoid picking up too much momentum and losing control.

I wouldn't bother taking this drill for more than 3-4 steps from the student. It is incredibly hard to maintain even that long.

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