

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

(Strategy is the Art of applying those measures necessary to secure victory in a combat situation; Tactics are the afore-mentioned measures)

In his “Art of War”, the famous Chinese general Sun Tzu actually steps aside from his all-encompassing warfare dissertation and scrutinizes the lowest unit of his army: the fighter, that solitary pawn in the middle of his gigantic war-machine. A swordsman, say. And General Sun Tzu describes the ideal foot-soldier thus: first, he must be an expert at wielding his weapon –of course—and, more importantly, he must consider his body and his mind as the army that wields the weapon; not just the body, not just the mind, but the body AND the mind.

And because they are both what constitutes that army, they must work in unison striving together toward that one goal: the defeat of the enemy; the mind must not ask the body to do something it is not prepared to do; and the body must never place itself in such a spot from which the most brilliant mind could never extricate it.

First, let us modern swordsmen take care of the body; let us exercise it (how does one hour a day of footwork combined with handwork sound?), let us run, walk, push up, sit up, lift, squat, etc., until our body becomes – pardon the cliché – the finely-tuned machine we will need to defeat our enemies, one by one. All that exercise will eventually (pretty soon, actually) help us feel better about ourselves. Every hurdle of effort which we are able to clear will make us winners, albeit on a small scale, but as we all know, “The longest journey begins but with a simple step” (Musashi Miyamoto)

Feeling better about ourselves will make it easier for our mind to perform the task (yes, task, not tasks) at hand: conceiving what it will take to earn that gold medal. Our mind is capable of storing an infinite number of data and will sometimes bring that data to the fore when we least need to have it there. When attempting to get that touch or those touches that will get us that V, we really don’t need to have our mind remind us that we had better send her some flowers if we want peace in our relationship; we really don’t need it to be rehashing an argument we lost anyway. What we do need is a mind fixated on one thing and one thing only: VICTORY.

Let us then teach our mind to keep close ranks with our body, let us teach it to empty itself of everything except the will to win, no matter what effort the body will have to produce, no matter what pain it will have to endure. Once we have accomplished that domination over our mind and body as a unit, we have placed the odds in our favor and we can then dominate our opponents.

Now that our mind-cum-body army is ready, let us begin to think of the different strategies and tactics we will need to implement so as to come out of our bouts on top. This presupposes of course that we are experts or on our way to become experts at wielding our weapon. **Epee Strategy And Tactics**

Before we get into the thick of Epee strategy, let us by all means cover some of the do’s and don’t’s of this complex subject, perhaps to start with the simple stuff and build on it as we go along. Here we go...

- A. Don’t lunge or fleche against an extended arm – in other words, try not to commit suicide;
- B. Don’t go for the body when attacking someone taller than you without at least pretending to take his / her blade;
- C. Don’t stand still while performing a riposte following a simple tack / beat parry – your opponent’s remise or reprise will reach you before your riposte can score;
- D. Do threaten your opponent’s hand CONSTANTLY – this is where his / her attack or counter-attack will originate;
- E. Do have a plan when advancing or retreating – gratuitous motion will lead you to trouble ;
- F. Do practice counter-attacking to the arm or hand – a counter-attack to the body will get you a double-touch at best;
- G. Do fence every touch as if the score were always 4-4 or 14 -14 And finally...

H. Don't ever underestimate your opponent; Epee will make you look like a fool more so than Foil or Sabre if you commit that capital sin.

And now to the meat of the subject. Epee is mainly a counter-offensive weapon; certainly, touches can and will be scored with simple attacks, as long as these attacks are directed to the hand or forearm, and as long as the attacker KNOWS the opening will exist by the time the point lands. Mostly, though, the counter-attack will present a safer and more reliable opportunity. BUT, in order to counter-attack, we must make our opponent attack us. This can be done in several ways, all of which entail pushing the opponent while threatening him /her all the while until he /she HAS to attack, or at least believes he / she had better attack. To wit:

1. In the middle of all our pushing and threatening, let us, all of a sudden, drop our guard giving our opponent an opening atop our forearm, for example; the attack will surely come to our forearm and we will counter-attack with a dunking (?) motion so as to get our forearm out of the way.

2. Let us perform a preparation, say an engagement of sixte, with the purpose of drawing out our opponent; here comes the attack, probably a counter-disengage, but as things would have it, an engagement of sixte looks a lot like a counter-of-sixte (same motion, actually) and a straight "riposte" will shoot out of our "preparation" and hit the attacker atop the arm.

3. Let us attempt to take our opponent's blade with an engagement of octave, for example; an attack will surely come, only to be met with a counter-attack with an opposition of sixte or quarte (the latter to give us something unexpected with which further to fool our rival).

These, and other similar ploys will get us the touch as long as our opponent and we are about the same size. Any marked disparity and we have to use a different strategy. If we are taller than our opponent, we definitely want to refrain from attacking; that is probably what he would like us to do so that he may infiltrate himself within our guard – with a parry / prise, for example – where, having a shorter arm, he will be able to make the most of his in-fighting ploys. This does in no way mean we shouldn't be aggressive; let us push him and push him until he has to execute an attack which we will counter. Of course, if he is any kind of a fencer, he will know that counter-attacking is our plan; his attack, then, will probably be of the "second intention" variety.

For instance: he will beat in quarte and when we counter-attack, he will come up with, say, an octave opposition, or, if he is really short, a quarte envelopment, the latter being performed as he gets really close. So.... We make him attack and when he does, we counter-attack with a feint straight, disengage which will get around his octave or his quarte; and further to embarrass him, let us lunge with that counter-attack so as to cut his reaction time to nothing. And we can enjoy the touch even after the fencing purists are through arguing over the fact that our counter-attack is not a counter-attack, but an attack into the attack or an attack in the preparation... Regardless, the days where we could feint to the foot and pick up the counter-attack with a simple sixte opposition as we recovered forward are fast disappearing because today's Epee fencer is not only faster, he is also smarter.

Let us say now that we are facing a giant; we really don't want to perform a simple attack against him, even if his arm is bent, UNLESS THAT ATTACK IS DIRECTED TO HIS HAND OR HIS FOREARM ; attack him to the body and you can say good-bye to that touch; if we're really gutsy, we can even perform a composite attack to his hand or wrist because even a tall person will occasionally parry IF THE FEINT IS CONVINCING AND DIRECTED TO HIS HAND; feint straight, disengage beneath the hand against quarte; feint straight, counter-disengage beneath the hand against counter of sixte; feint straight, disengage atop his hand against his octave, etc. But we had better be accurate because if we miss, we'll be facing a riposte following that missed parry and it won't feel good.

A safer ploy to help us score against that giant is the afore-mentioned "Second Intention" attack; and there are several kinds. The first one that comes to mind is the one most often used in Foil. We attack short, allow our opponent to parry, allow him to riposte and then we parry that riposte and score with our counter-riposte. This is recommended against someone who is very fast of hand: we actually slow down his parrying ability by making him parry from an extended arm. It can be done in Epee but we had better take his blade with our parry so that he won't just remise or reprise and make fools out of us. So, beat to the hand with a three-quarter lunge; he parries counter of sixte and throws a straight riposte toward our hand; we parry counter of sixte croise and celebrate.

Some other ways we can “second intention” that giant:

1. Feint straight to the hand, he counter-attacks straight atop the arm, sixte opposition to the arm;
2. Feint disengage beneath to the hand, he counter-attacks with a feint straight-counter-disengage inside, parry sixte-counter of quarte (composite parry) and croise your riposte to the flank;
3. Feint to the foot, he counter-attacks with a feint straight-disengage low the hand, parry septime enlevee with a forward recovery and nail him in the bread basket;
4. Feint straight to the shoulder, he counter-attacks straight atop the arm, counter-stop-hit (a counter-attack versus a counter-attack) to the arm inside; Etc.

Another VERY IMPORTANT FACTOR that will affect the success of our strategy is, of course, DISTANCE. The basic rule is this: when facing a taller person, fence at close quarters; that should make him attack when normally he wouldn't and when he does he'll be playing right into your hand; when facing a smaller opponent, give him space so that he'll have to work harder even to get close to you and by the time he does, you'll know exactly what he intends to do and pow! You get the touch.

One of the main reasons why General Sun Tzu was so successful in his campaigns was his fantastic invention, the spy. Now since our equipment is so expensive, we can hardly hire anyone to do our spying for us. So we must take care of that important task ourselves. While fencing in a pool, let us observe our future opponents, not only to find out what they like to do but mostly to help us decide right then and there what we should do to defeat him when the time comes.

And now to clarify a few things.

A Counter-Attack is an Attack performed in time into the opponent's Attack.

A Counter-Stop-Hit is a Counter-Attack into a Counter-Attack.

A Remise is the replacement of the point after a parry in the same line as the original Attack.

A Reprise is the replacement of the point after a parry in a line different from that of the original Attack

An Opposition is a taking of the blade (prise) that will allow us to score in the same line as where the blade was captured; a Croise will allow us to score after ascribing a quarter of a circle; a Bind – half a circle; an Envelopment – a full circle.

One last word of caution where the application of our Strategy is concerned; no matter what we dream up to help us beat our opponent, our opponent can dream up something that will defeat it and so we must.... Etc.

Foil Strategy And Tactics

If Epee can be considered the Chessmaster's weapon – and rightly so --, then foil should be deemed the adventurer's arm of choice. And Foil is an adventure: because of its maneuverability, its wielder can get himself in as much trouble as is humanly possible and still work himself out of almost any undesirable position, both offensively and defensively. This is not to say the foilist cannot at times be as deliberate as, say, an epeist.

One factor used in determining Foil strategy, a factor that doesn't exist in Epee, is the Right Of Way rule. Put simply, this infamous rule helps the attacker get awarded the touch – whether he gets hit or not – as long as he started his attack before his opponent could start his, and as long as his opponent found it impossible to parry said attack. His attack must land or the other guy gets the touch. The Right of Way can go the defender's way, of course, if he was threatening a valid area of the attacker with an extended arm. If that is the case, the attacker must divert that “point in line” before launching his attack; if he doesn't, he will be deemed to have committed suicide.

That, of course leads us to come up with Rule #1 of Fencing:

DON'T LUNGE OR FLECHE AGAINST AN EXTENDED ARM!!! For a few years, now, we have recommended the attack as our best chance for success in Foil. So much so that it has been said that “Attack, Attack, Attack” was, and is, and probably will always be Salle Pouj's (SECRET) strategy, And why not? Think about it: counting all the simple attacks, with and without a preparation, all the possible one-feint, two-feint and three-feint composite attacks derived from those simple attacks, with and without a preparation, we come up with upward of 500 possible

attacks; there are 8 positions of the hand with which we can perform 16 simple parries; even if we combine these parries, say with other parries in the same line or even a different one, we can hope for, what, 32 possible parries? And that's just attacks away from the blade. So, our good sense tells us, let's by all means attack.

Attacking relentlessly, as our secret strategy implies, will provide us with several advantages; we will soon find out which our opponent's favorite parries are and build our whole bout strategy on that knowledge; while our adversary is busy defending, however successfully – if he's really good – he's still not attacking us; while he's backing up under our onslaught, his parries are getting bigger and bigger until we can almost drive an 18-wheeler inside them. We won't even talk about the psychological advantage this constant pursuit of ours gives us...

So, by all means, let's attack. But with what? Simple Attacks, Composite Attacks, Attacks on the Preparation, Attacks with a Taking of the Blade, what? There are so many choices which, performed with perfect timing will be unstoppable...

Regarding the Simple vs. Composite Attacks dilemma, let us remember this simple rule of thumb (who? – Thumb. – was he a fencer? – Forget it!) :

IF OUR OPPONENT'S HAND IS STILL, OR RELATIVELY SO.... COMPOSITE ATTACK! IF HIS HAND MOVES AROUND A LOT, SAY FROM QUARTE TO SIXTE AND SIXTE TO QUARTE... SIMPLE ATTACK BEHIND HIS MOTION !

The reason for that rule of thumb is this: if our adversary's hand is still, he can go to any parry he chooses as soon as the attack is launched; if his hand is moving he is constantly giving us openings of which we can take advantage with a simple disengage or cutover or disengage low or counter-disengage; something so simple and well-timed he won't be able to parry it, because he's moving his hand in the wrong direction.

Attacks on the Preparation:

if we harass our opponent enough, by thrusting our weapon toward every part of his torso, or if we present him with a constant point in line, sooner or later he will try to make contact with our blade, with an engagement, a beat, whatever, and when that happens, we just take off in the opposite direction of his motion; for example, if he decides to engage sixte in order to regain the Right of Way or simply to get our blade out of his figurative face, we counter-disengage inside; if he engages quarte, we disengage above; if he attempts to beat in quarte or sixte, we disengage or cut- over before he can make contact

If we like to attack with a preparation, let us keep in mind that our friend out there can attack us on that preparation. To prevent an untimely touch against us (those are ALL untimely), let us remember to follow our preparation up with another preparation going in the opposite direction (ex.: engage sixte >> change to quarte) or with a parry that will stop whatever he has in mind; such "universal parries" as octave to quarte, counter of tierce to prime, quarte to septime enlevee will come in handy in such situations (ex.: engage sixte >> quarte to septime enlevee, or >> quarte, counter of quarte) let us remember of course to riposte, because as you probably heard somewhere or another, "A parry without a riposte is like a bow without arrows".

Attacks with a taking of the blade (Prise de Fer):

Though Attacks with a Prise de Fer are quite effective, they just aren't the kind of attacks we can execute on a whim; for one thing they demand an ideal situation, i.e., that our opponent's arm be EXTENDING, rather than just EXTENDED; also, our timing must be impeccable – it doesn't take that long for that friend of ours out there to extend his arm.

So we must set it up and the best way to set it up – in keeping with our constant harassment goal – is to push our opponent back and back until he has no choice but to attack; and to do so, he has at one point or another to extend his arm... And as he is EXTENDING his arm we attack his blade with an Opposition in Sixte, a Croise in Quarte or a Bind from Octave to Quarte. Where we attack his blade, of course, will have been determined by what

we know of this fencer (does he like to attack inside, below, above, where?). So, basically, this attack with a *Prise de Fer* is really nothing but an Attack into our adversary's Attack; some refs will even term it a Counter-Attack (what do they know?) and so we must make sure that our *Prise de Fer* is so well executed that our opponent's point has absolutely no chance to land on us.

Now, *Prises de Fer* can be executed against a bent arm – the *Croise*, mainly, but also the *Opposition* – as long as they are executed in one motion and directed to an already open target. As for the *Bind* and the *Envelopment*, we feel they take a little too long to execute as they involve a displacement of our opponent's blade – a displacement to which he will certainly react, perhaps to our sorrow... Another thing we must keep in mind when we plan our *Prises de Fer* is that we shouldn't do too many of them; as hard as they are to parry, with either a *Yield* or a *\Barre*, they can be stopped and we certainly don't want to give our opponent the chance to figure out how to stop us...

Second Intention Attacks

Once in a while – and that's much too often for our taste – we wind up facing someone who always seems to be able to parry our incessant attacks, thanks to his concept of distance and / or to his fast hand. At that point, we can either go the stubborn way and lose the bout or switch to *Second Intention Attacks*. Because some fencers mistake these with *Composite Attacks*, let us, right now, straighten out this unfortunate confusion. A *Composite Attack* is one composed of at least one *Feint* which our opponent will attempt to parry and the *Finale* which is the phase designed to score after we have eluded the parry; a *Second Intention Attack* is one where we allow our opponent to parry and where we parry his riposte and score with a *Counter-Riposte* which we can make as simple or as complex as is needed. This *Counter-Riposte* becomes the actual attack we had planned to launch all along. Now that the confusion has been dispelled, let us give some examples.

Let us say we attack with a *One-Two* – our friend likes to stick to lateral parries; he parries *Quarte* and ripostes straight; knowing from previous analysis and /or scouting that the straight riposte is what he prefers, we expected this and parry his straight riposte with a *Counter of Sixte*, say, and counter-riposte with a *Disengage Low* or, keeping his speed of hand in mind, with a *Low-High Above*. Neat, eh? Another example: we perform our little three-quarter straight lunge, he parries counter of sixte, ripostes low, we parry *Octave* and counter-riposte with an *Opposition*.

Sounds simple? It is, but only if we have thoroughly scouted our opponent and know FOR CERTAIN how he is going to riposte; if we get someone who varies his ripostes the way some people change shirts or girl-friends, our parry of his ripostes, whatever they may be, must be of the universal kind, e.g., *Octave to Quarte*, *Counter of Tierce to Prime*, *Septime Enlevee*, etc.

Now, what if we're faced with someone who having heard of our secret strategy, decides to attack us constantly, thereby robbing us of our favorite M.O. When that happens, we must switch from our all out attacking, harassing game to one of timing. Every time our opponent attacks, he offers us an opportunity to time him right out of the touch he expected to score, either by preparing before his attack, thereby giving us an opening, or by advancing a little too big, thereby giving us a chance to steal his distance and nail him on the way in. If we can't attack as we would like, let us make him have to prepare by sticking our point in his face while he's setting up and have to advance by keeping our distance a little wider than we normally would.

When we time or attack on the preparation, let us make sure we parry his attack – it's still coming – and riposte even though we've already touched him. This way, there is no way the *Right of Way* rule can protect him from our well-conceived and well-deserved touch. We saw earlier – if we read our little spiel on *Epee Strategy* – that we had to adapt our tactics to the size of our opponent; thanks to the *Right of Way* rule, our adaptation in *Foil* won't be as drastic; after all, no matter how tall our opponent is, he still has to parry our attacks; of course, we may have to resort to a lot of *Second Intentions* just to get close to him, but, eh, no one said it was always going to be easy... And now, from this very scientific expose of our two favorite weapons, we move to the third one, *Sabre*...

Sabre Strategy And Tactics

If we witnessed a Sabre bout lately, we probably found it difficult, if not impossible to discern any kind of a plan, let alone a strategy, in either of the fencers. We are even tempted to characterize the typical Sabre fencer – where we called the Epee fencer a Chessmaster, and the Foilist an adventurer – as a Kamikazi?

One of the reasons why we have problem noticing even the smallest rationale behind today's Sabre bouts is that everything happens so fast. Advance, advance, lunge with a head-cut, touch! Why did the head-cut work? Was it because the defender expected a cut to the Banderole, or to the Arm? Maybe. Was it because the parry of Quinte – which is most people's parry of choice versus a head-cut is so hard to perform and so far from the basic position of Tierce? Maybe. Was it because the timing of the attack was perfect? Probably.

Then, how do we develop a Strategy when all we seem to have to rely on is good timing? First, we go back to Sun-Tzu and perfect the number one element of any fencing strategy: we become experts at wielding our weapon. We practice going from Tierce to Quinte, from Tierce to Quarte, to Prime, to Seconde until we turn blue and our arm falls off. Then, we practice attacking in such a way that no part of our arm or hand is visible to the opponent; and when we've accomplished this, we get out on the strip and, you guessed it, attack, attack, attack. We will find after fencing a few bouts that our opponents are a little bit self-conscious of their ability or lack thereof to perform the parry of Quinte with any kind of speed; actually, we personally prefer Counter of Tierce to Quinte (don't tell anybody); it does the same job and is harder to deceive than Quinte; it also offers more riposte alternatives. Anyway, most of our opponents are going to be eager to demonstrate to us that their Quinte is adequate; by all means, let us help them by attacking to the head and deceiving that Quinte with a nice cut to the flank. Sabre used to be considered a Counter-Offensive weapon; as you opponent advanced, we retreated while throwing out a Counter-Attack to the Arm, say, then we parried Quarte >> Face and proceeded back to the En Garde line; and we should still be doing it especially since the machine will detect such an event a lot more effectively than our ancient Asseseurs used to. That is if we find ourselves on the defensive (?)

Let us instead use our secret strategy here and attack mercilessly; the Right of Way rule is definitely on the attacker's side for there is no way a parrier will find us as we don't have to extend our arm until we lunge; if our opponent counter-attacks and we hit him with our attack, we win, he loses. The same rule applies in Sabre as it did in Foil as far as Composite Attacks, Second Intention Attacks and Simple Attacks of course, and since it may be a little harder to become a good defender, let us by all means be an attacker and make the ref's job easier. And we always want that, don't we?

Conclusion

If we scanned the above pretty thoroughly, we certainly will have noticed an obvious fact: no matter what weapon we choose to fence, we need to do so with a pre-formulated plan; we need to remember what got us where we stand at any point of the bout will make us stay with what we've been doing or change up, depending on whether we were successful or not; we need to keep in mind that no strategy is full-proof as it is affected by our opponent who should have a strategy of his own: the above is designed to limit that influence; it can never hope to eliminate it. We need to remember that the more active we are, the more we will find out about our opponent, the more easily we'll be able to keep the initiative. And when we win, let us be gracious; if we lose, let us thank our opponent for the lesson. In the meantime let us think of different ways we can attack, attack, attack