The Difficulty of Judging an Attack in Modern Foil

By James B. Tschen Emmons and Dennis T. Le

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Perhaps it has happened to you. It is *la belle* in your last d.e. bout. At the command "allez!" you extend your weapon at your opponent's exposed chest, you advance, lunge and the point arrives. At the same command, your opponent advances, his arm near his head, his point hovering somewhere above him, and he whips to the back. Ha!, I've got him you think. The director calls "Simultané!" and you resist the temptation to rip off your mask and challenge the call. How, you wonder not for the first time, was it possibly a simultaneous action?

The Rule Book: Tradition versus Practice

Directors, or referees, have a very difficult job. Not only must they determine the actions in a bout, many of which happen at incredible speed, but also they must face the sometimes dramatic behavior of foil-wielding primadonas. As difficult as this responsibility is, directing is further frustrated by its guidebook, the *Referee's Manual*.[1] While excellent in many respects, the manual has a critical problem—its section on the attack. The definition, such as it is, is more a discussion reflecting the problem of electric foil (and sabre) than it is a definition. Worse even than that the manual hides this fact behind tradition, a tradition it actually ignores in formulating its "definition" of the attack.[2] Had the writers of the manual drawn upon the rich, well-documented theory of attack, one with far more consensus than they make out, they would not only have helped the referee in doing his job, but also, and perhaps as importantly, they might have helped prevent non-standard attacks like the "flick" from corrupting fencing.

To make calls well, referees must have a reliable, consistent manual, especially for a sport as complicated as fencing. It is no wonder that the on-going battle about tempo, right of way, and dynamic attacks like whip shots still rage when a referee is informed that a point in line, when executed correctly, is "the highest level of priority" but that an attack may, or may not, require such a clear threat. The culprit for this wishy-washiness is electric scoring, a method of keeping track of points that is decades old. When fencers began playing to the score box rather than to directors well versed in traditional fencing

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[1] *Referee's Manual*. Fencing Officials Commission, United States Fencing Association (January 2002). Hereafter, *RM*.

[2] For an excellent overview of the development of fencing technique, and the importance of extending the arm, see William H. Gaugler, *The History of Fencing: Foundations of Modern European Swordplay* (Bangor: Laureate Press, 1998). Hereafter, Gaugler, *History of Fencing*. See also Gaugler's excellent essay "Right of Way and Fencing Time," *American Fencing* 37:6 which contains the best summary of the extended/extending issue, and Maitre Adam Adrian Crown, "Grim Realities: Observations on the Matter of Extending the Arm," http://www.classicalfencing.com/articles/Grim.shtml. As a good example of an exception to the rule, see Maxwell Garret, Emmanuil Kaidanov, and Gil A. Pezza, *Foil, Saber, and Épée Fencing: Skills, Safety, Operations, and Responsibilities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994). The "flick" is treated along side traditional attacks (p.134-135). Overall, this book is written with a focus towards converting traditional practice to the changes in the game rather than with traditional pedagogy itself.

pedagogy, the game changed.[3] The flaws in the referee's manual are proof positive that we have reaped what we have sown.

The very first line in the section on attacks states that and attack "is something that has been discussed for centuries."[4] This is true, but what was left out was that there has also been more consensus about what comprises an attack for nearly six of those centuries. With the exception of a few fencing "treatises" written recently, nearly all treatises, whether from French, Italian, German, English, or Hungarian maitres agree that an attack is an offensive action made with an extended arm, the point threatening target area, and with no significant break in the line as the point is moved towards its destination.[5] Next, the manual states:

> There are, it sometimes seems, two schools regarding this question. One states that the arm must be fully extended in order to be attacking; the other school is just as adamant in stating that whomever starts moving forward with even the intent to hit is the attacker. The truth is somewhere in the middle.[6]

The first school, that of traditional fencing pedagogy, is well documented and available for all to read. The second, however, is not so much a school as the position held by those who believe that anything that makes a touch is perfectly okay, no matter how divorced from the spirit of fencing such a touch might be. The rules of right of way (ROW) were developed to provide a system for judging touches; the rationale behind these rules of right of way and priority were derived from the logic of the duel. If one is being attacked, one should think defense; if one is attacking, one should do so in such a way that one's chances of success are high. If one is "moving forward," but not really threatening one's opponent, and that opponent makes a counter-attack, one should lose a touch. After all, if one had time to move one surely had time to threaten and if there is no threat, why should an opponent not attack?

Defining the Attack: To Extent or to Extend Slowly?

Leaving the rule as is would, on the face of it, cause few problems so long as a fencer made sure that the extension was done quickly (so as to be indiscernible from a fully extended arm). However, the ambiguity, which allows for a slowly extending or quickly

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[3] Electrical scoring in foil was first adopted by FIE in 1957 (sabre in the early 1990s). By the early 1970's, fencing instruction began reflecting the changes wrought by electric scoring, see for example PierreThirioux, *Escrime au Fleuret* (1977) and Gaugler's discussion in *History of Fencing*, 428ff.

[4] *RM*, 9.

[5] See for example Luigi Barbasetti, *The Art of the Foil* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1932) and *The Art of the Sabre and the Épée* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936); Roger Crosnier, *Fencing with the Sabre: Instruction and Technique* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1966; Clovis Deladrier, *Modern Fencing: A Comprehensive Manual for The Foil, The Épée, The Sabre* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1948); Nick Evangelista, *The Art and Science of Fencing* (Indianapolis: Masters Press, 1996); William Gaugler, *The Science of Fencing: A Comprehensive Training Manual for Master and Student; Including Lesson Plans for Foil, Sabre and Épée Instruction* (Bangor: Laureate Press, 1997); Aldo Nadi, *On Fencing* (Sunrise: Laureate Press, 1994); Julius Palffy-Alpar, *Sword and Masque* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1967); László Szabó, *Fencing and the Master* (Budapest: Franklin Printing House, 1977).

[6] *RM*, 8.

extending arm and everything in between, is what makes this seemingly benign rule so significant and problematic in *practical application*.

The former requirement of a fully "extended" arm to establish an attack makes it very easy, simple, and clear for a director to distinguish between a given action as an attack or preparation, for any action not made with a fully extended arm is by definition a preparatory action, whether the arm is bent or in the process of extending. Nowadays, with the shift to the extending arm as a way of establishing an attack, it is much more difficult to distinguish between a preparatory action versus an attack because it is difficult to distinguish between an action made with a bent arm and action made with a *slowly* extending arm. So difficult is it to make this distinction *in practice* at every level of competition (even though rule 4 specifically calls out a bent arm action as a preparation), that any action executed with a bent arm or slowly extending arm is more often than not being construed as an attack.

In addition, because a *slowly* extending arm is possible under the "extending arm" rule, making the attack in time (i.e. a counter attack in preparation) is often ignored as well. Typically, what happens is that the attacker will perform an action (and again it is unlcear whether the action is executed with a bent arm or a slow extension) and because the defender perceives this action as a preparation he initiates an attack into this perceived preparatory action and hits, with the attacker eventually finishing his action, sometimes hitting simultaneously, but often times hitting very late. In this scenario, the attacker's action would be construed as an attack with ROW (right of way), because his arm is construed as an "extending" arm to the target area, even if it arrives late.

To compound the problem even further is the current interpretation of the requirement that an attack must be made with the point "threatening target area." Under the old rule, the "threatening target" requirement was equivalent to having "the point in line." The primary difference is that under the old rules, the only way to threaten the target area was to have the point in line when the attack was initiated. Under current rules, however, "threatening target" does not necessarily mean the point must be in direct line with the target; instead, it could be indirectly pointed anywhere in space, so long as the arc of the point would arrive on target when the action is eventually completed. This prevalent coupe-flick combination action could never be construed as an attack under the old rules. When loosely interpreted in such a way, the requirement of "threatening target area" can be met in virtually every instance, for any point in space can be made to eventually arrive on target, and thus this interpretation effectively cancels itself out altogether.

The end result of this shift to the "extending arm" rule, coupled with the prevalent and popularity of the "flick actions", is that *in practice*, actions performed with a bent arm, point out of line, and without time, are permitted and accepted as valid attacks, in direct contradiction to the established theory of swordplay techniques and tactics, and even arguably the *theory and spirit* of FIE rule 1-4. And likewise, the corollary to this action in practical application is that there is now effectively no such thing as an attack into preparation, for in practice there are no such things as preparatory actions if all actions with the arm occurring during advances and prior to the initiation of a lunge are being

characterized as an "extending" arm and given ROW (whatever rule 4 declares). Furthermore, any counter-offensive action against such an action is therefore automatically called as a counter-attack with no ROW, instead of as an attack into a prepatory action.

It is this severe misalignment between today's *practiced* techniques and tactics and established theories of sword play, their relationship to the rationale of the ROW, the black letter ROW itself, and the way these rules are being interpreted and enforced *in practice* that makes up this nonsensical parallel monologue (instead of a dialogue consisting of rational actions and reactions) between fencers, referees, and coaches, which Ioan Pop, the FIE's technical director, has so often referred to.

The Solution

It seems the easiest solution would be to change "extending" to "extended," and explicitly declare that to the only way to threaten target area is to have the point in line, and all the problems arising from the "extending arm" that didn't exist to such a large degree prior to this rule change, will naturally fall by the wayside. Characterize and call an action with an extending arm, or an action with point out of line as preparations (as one learns in any fencing lesson) and an attack with an extended arm, point threatening target, as an attack. If directors call the action properly, fencers, always jealous of points, will correct their game.