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ZBIGNIEW CZAJKOWSKI
The Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education, Katowice

TACTICS IN FENCING – PREPARATORY ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Even most perfect execution of an action (sensory-motor skill) in a fencing bout – although very important – is not enough. A fencer must learn certain tactical skills, among other things, the sense of timing (sense of surprise). He ought to know how to take his opponent by surprise. A fencer may surprise his opponent by the choice of action and/or by the situation in applying real (ultimate) actions on the fencing strip. To apply various actions (attacks, defences and counterattacks) successfully fencers should use preparatory actions. Preparatory actions – well chosen and executed – facilitate successful application of real actions. In the main part of the article the author describes most important preparatory actions: reconnaissance – exploratory actions; conceiving one's own intention; misleading the opponent; directing the opponent's game; manoeuvring on the strip; and hindering the opponent's game.

GENERAL REMARKS ON TACTICS

The tactical preparation of a fencer is the main part in his development as a competitor. That is the most difficult part of his training but also the most practical one.

Vitali Arkadiev

Once a fencer has learned the mechanisms of basic fencing movements, the activity loses its primary, total physical requirements and becomes more of a mental exercise. Concentration, self-control, and a quick decision command muscles and reflexes for successful scoring.

Michel Alaux

Every young fencer experiences a great deal of difficulty when it comes to his first free bout with an opponent. His fencing master has taught him certain movements, and also indicated when and how to use them in a bout. However, when on his own in a bout, facing an active opponent, the

fencer does not know which movements he can use and when.

After many encounters, both in training and competition, with a real opponent, he learns, step by step, to apply his fencing actions in a bout. Slowly, he develops the ability to evaluate his opponent and to choose the most appropriate action in a given tactical situation.

The selection of the right stroke is probably the most basic tactical ability of a fencer. This is closely connected with timing, “feeling of surprise”, and acuity of perception.

Fencing tactics are described, briefly, as using all fencing actions, both preparatory and ultimate ones, in such a way as to avoid being hit, score hits against one's opponent and thus ensure victory.

Tactics could be defined in a simplified manner as applying technique in a bout. We could say, a little more precisely, that tactics are a fencer's application of all his technical and tactical knowledge, motor qualities, and psychological

preparedness for the purpose of winning a bout or achieving the best score, taking into consideration the strength, technique, fencing style and tactics of his opponent.

Tactics are closely connected with technique and other factors of training as I have described in other articles and books. The significance of timing – “feeling of surprise” – is described in many of my books and articles. In this article, I would only like to emphasise the most important features of tactics and discuss one of their important factors: preparatory actions.

TECHNIQUE AND TACTICS

Technical versatility is the basic of richness of tactics and enables the fencer to surprise his opponent, not only with the speed and choice of time, but also with the variety of actions. It is obvious that if a fencer has a rich technical repertoire, then his tactical “plays” and solutions will be more effective and more surprising for the opponent.

Various ideas and practical solutions require mastery of an extensive technical base. In gymnastics, figure skating, diving and similar sports based on closed motor skills (internal motor habit patterns), it is most important to reproduce, with as much precision as possible, the prescribed form of a movement – conventionally accepted as full of gracefulness and beauty. In these sports, technique is the most important goal – a purpose in itself. In fencing technique based on open motor skills (external motor habit patterns) is not a purpose in itself, but should serve as the basis for the psychological and tactical preparation of a fencer.

It is well known from practical experience – even if not everybody wants to admit it – that excellent technique, in the narrow sense of the word, does not guarantee success in competition. Technique, important though it undoubtedly is, must be combined in a bout with physical and psychological abilities and tactical capabilities.

It is obvious that a fencer should not think about how to execute a stroke during a bout, but must concentrate on watching his opponent and on preparing his tactics. This is why a fencer’s technique must be highly automated and flexible – on a high level of an open motor habit pattern. The level of technical competence certainly influences

the style and tactical repertoire used by a fencer. He may choose and perfect his technical actions while creating his own style of fencing tactics.

If we say that the role of technique is to enhance tactics, and that tactics depend on technique, then we have to emphasise that the real basis of tactics and tactical abilities is technique. We mean technique, however, in the wider sense of the word: not limited only to a structure of movement – which some conservative fencing masters have thought up till now – but as a modern, flexible and universal knowledge, combined with a whole gamut of special, technical, and other qualities.

The following technical – and other – qualities are helpful in the development of fencer’s tactics:

- a high degree of automation of movements and their relaxed, economical, and purposeful execution;
- the ability, while executing a movement, to take into consideration time, space and the whole tactical situation (open motor skills, adapted to changeable situations);
- speed of movement, its correct rhythm, and the capacity to accelerate or change the movement direction;
- speed of simple and (various kinds of) other sensory-motor responses;
- high levels of co-ordination, dexterity, and swiftness of movements; the ability to apply and execute the same stroke in a fast and variable manner, depending on conditions;
- the ability to control muscular contraction and relaxation at the appropriate times;
- the ability to fluently build up compound actions, based on simple basic strokes;
- fencing-specific endurance in all its aspects: combating muscular, sensory, mental and emotional tiredness;
- the ability to reproduce, in actual movements, the mental picture of an action;
- high quality of neurophysiological processes, connected with the execution and application of fencing actions in a bout: sense of timing, selective perception, precision and speed of perception, qualities of attention (high concentration, wide attention range, divisibility of attention, etc.), operative thinking and memory, etc.

The most important factors in fencing tactics include:

- the ability to assess, in a fraction of a second, the situation on the strip (speed and accuracy of perception on a higher conceptual functional level);
- the ability to perform an action unforeseen by the opponent and take him by surprise.

The best tactical application of a new stroke creates a situation in which the opponent has difficulty in anticipating the timing, speed, and real intention of the fencer.

In trying to score a hit while avoiding being hit, the fencer has to forestall his opponent. In foil and sabre, a fencer tries to get priority in the eyes of the director – which nowadays leads to the abuse of conventional rules. In epee, one has to be literally faster than one's opponent. The necessity to score hits "in good time" means, not only the speed of movement, but also, and most of all, more selective, precise and quicker transformation of information. To win, a fencer has to think quicker and see more than his opponent. In competition, slow movements are not so dangerous as slowness of seeing, thinking, and taking decisions.

It is very important for a fencer to be able to come close to his opponent in a bout, in a situation most inconvenient for the opponent. Generally, the purpose of many preparatory movements on the piste is to get within the opponent's "critical" distance, at the same time keeping the initiative and the possibility of ending the action – when the opponent has a lapse of concentration, is off-balance, is preparing an attack, or is surprised by a sudden change of rhythm or distance.

It is also very important to predict the opponent's movement and intention without revealing one's own intention.

A fencer's tactical mastery depends to a great extent on his repertoire and the quality of his preparatory actions, giving him more effective use of the ultimate, "real", actions with which he scores a hit.

After watching a number of significant international fencing events for many years (I have been and still am involved in fencing for more than 70 years), I have come to the conclusion that the principal tactical characteristics of top fencers are as follows:

- 1) The most frequently used successful actions are relatively uncomplicated (simple attacks, attacks with one feint, attacks preceded by action on the blade, parry-riposte, simple counter-attacks, short *phrase d'armes*).

A first intention simple attack is very effective, although difficult to carry out. The success of such an attack depends on timing, speed, precision, and acceleration. Simplicity of style and movements should not be confused with a poor, one-sided, technical, repertoire. Simplicity and crudeness are two entirely different notions.

In training, however, one should use, not only simple, but also complex movements because, used from time to time, they are very effective and they are a first-class means of developing many technical fencing abilities (continuity of action, precision of movement, feeling of rhythm and cadence, motor co-ordination, etc.).

- 2) Great fencers are noted, not only for the simplicity but VARIETY of their actions and tactics characterised by:
 - a) a relatively great amount of strokes used (rich technique);
 - b) alternating actions – offensive, defensive, counterattacks, simple and compound actions, etc.;
 - c) various ways of executing the same strokes depending on the situation;
 - d) clever use of preparatory actions;
 - e) alternative use of premeditated (foreseen), unpremeditated (unforeseen), and partly anticipated (partly foreseen) actions;
 - f) various solutions to the same tactical situation, both in offensive and in defensive actions.

Variety of tactical movements – both preparatory and ultimate – confuses the opponent, who does not know what sort of action to expect in certain situations. That makes him less sure of himself and increases his difficulty in planning his own actions. It is worth emphasising because some fencing masters and fencers maintain that for efficient participation in competition it is enough to master a few very well-trained strokes. Such limited training may produce a one-sided fencer who cannot cope with the great variety of styles of different opponents.

A wide variety of fencing actions and tactical ideas, successfully employed by a fencer in a bout, by no means excludes the use of one's own favourite actions. Fencers should, however, both in training and in competition, try not to rely too heavily on their favourite

strokes, thus avoiding the danger of losing the “element of surprise” and of “fossilizing” their repertoire. Overuse of favourite actions in training bouts may transfer them into “reflex-compulsory” actions used by the fencer in the most inappropriate situations.

- 3) A significant attribute of top-class fencers is their own highly characteristic style of fencing and the practical application of their doctrines. Looking at the technique and style of elite fencers, one can recognise the influence of particular fencing schools and particular fencing masters. Apart from these, it is the fencer’s individuality which has the greatest influence upon his style and tactics: body height, temperament, agility, power of concentration and many other personality traits.
- 4) In training we want to teach and perfect a number of basic fencing positions, movements and actions. We want the pupil to master the correct and most typical sensory-motor skills (motor habit patterns) of fencing technique. We teach them the typical basic strokes, not to make everybody fence in exactly the same way, but in order to make them able to find and develop their own individual fencing style in accordance with their character, temperament, body build and personality.

A fencing master should resist the temptation of imposing the same technique and style upon all his pupils; he should undertake the difficult task of helping each fencer to find his own style.

Various fencers favor different fencing styles and tactics. In international competitions, there are successful fencers who represent totally different schools and styles. One should, however, warn those wishing to blindly imitate great champions, as the technique and tactics useful for one fencer could be completely useless for another.

The nervous system type and temperament traits are very important factors in the development of a fencer’s own style and tactics. It is known, for example, that only a fencer with a strong, lively, and balanced temperament and with great mobility of neurophysiological processes can base his style and tactics on lightning-speed improvisation, using unforeseen actions based on compound – mostly choice – reactions. On the other hand, a phlegmatic fencer who is not so fast and whose nervous processes have a certain amount of inertia, must rely in his style and tactics on careful observation and premeditated actions, taking advantage of

simple reaction, and using mostly second intention actions.

VARIOUS TYPES OF PREPARATORY ACTIONS

Success depends to a great extent on the fencer’s ability to deal with the opponent’s game: to evaluate his strong points as well as take advantage of his weaknesses.

Michel Alaux

All fencing actions, from the point of view of tactics, can be divided into actual (ultimate – real) actions and preparatory actions.

Actual actions are ultimate, specific actions intended to ward off a hit or to score a hit, directly (first intention) or indirectly (second intention).

Preparatory actions are numerous and varied fencing actions, not intended to score a hit directly or indirectly, but facilitating and preparing the successful application of actual actions.

Preparatory actions are very often neglected in training; however, they play an important part in competition. Preparatory actions in a bout serve the following tactical purposes:

- general assessment of the situation in a bout;
- misleading the opponent;
- drawing certain actions from the opponent and subtly directing the opponent’s game;
- maneuvering, gaining the field of play and preparing one’s own attacks;
- Hindering the opponent’s concentration and his assessment of distance, etc.

Obvious lack of appreciation of preparatory actions in modern sabre is one of the symptoms of its degeneration. Sabreurs, nowadays, do not seem to remember an apt remark of the old master, Vincentio Saviolo, “Some set upon their enemies with rage and fury after the fashion of Rammes, and for the most part come to misfortune.” [1]

Preparatory actions play an important part in foil and, above all, in epee, which has recently become the most spectacular, versatile, technical, and “just” weapon.

Generally speaking, however, a fencer’s tactical mastery depends to a large degree on his repertoire and the cleverness of his preparatory actions. As a matter of fact, some of the greatest fencers use only a very limited number of real actions, but prepare their application with great variety and ingenuity.

It is important for a fencer to be able to change preparation into a “real” action, as well as to be able to deceive the opponent by a long, slow preparation followed by an accelerated real action, e.g. a slow, preparatory lunge followed by a very fast renewal of the attack by fleche.

Preparatory actions often contain several tactical goals. For example, a false attack serves the purpose of reconnoitering the opponent’s reaction, revealing his intention, misleading him about our own intentions, and gaining good distance for a fast real attack.

Let us now briefly describe some types of preparatory actions:

Reconnaissance/exploratory moves

The aims of reconnaissance, preparatory actions are varied as much as their forms. The general aim of reconnaissance is the assessment of the opponent’s strengths and style of fencing and orientation in the tactical situation during the course of a bout. This entails evaluation of the opponent’s tactical type, technical possibilities, intentions and psychological state.

Among the more detailed aims of reconnaissance, by means of exploratory movements, is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- In what situations does the opponent attack most often?
- Which are his favourite strokes?
- Taken by surprise, does he parry or use counter-attacks most often?
- How does he react to various movements such as a jump forward, sudden attack, beat on the blade, etc.?
- What are the external signs of his concentration or lack of thereof?
- Does he change his posture prior to an attack?

Does he unwittingly betray his intention or is he trying to mislead his real intention, etc.?

Reconnaissance of the opponent’s defence is carried out by the initial movements of various attacks or complete false attacks with a slightly shorter reach. Sometimes, in order to assess the opponent’s defensive system, technique and speed, it is necessary to engage in an parry – riposte exchange. This, of course, is dangerous, but gives us good information.

Evaluation of the opponent’s reaction to various attacks, feints, actions on the blade, and other actions, is carried out by means of cautious,

isolated execution of these strokes, accompanied by steps forward or a half lunge. A general impression of the opponent’s technique, style, and speed is not gained only in the actual bout, but also by careful observation of his warm-up exercises, pre-competition lessons with his fencing master, and, above all, by watching him fence with other opponents.

The importance of reconnaissance to the fencer cannot be exaggerated. This is why lessons should not be limited to practising and perfecting ultimate actions, but should also comprise exploratory and other preparatory movements. In applying a fencing stroke, it is not only the actual execution of the stroke which counts, but also the perception and anticipation of the opponent’s movements.

Counteracting the opponent’s reconnaissance consists essentially of two kinds of closely connected preparatory actions:

- 1) concealing one’s own intentions,
- 2) misleading the opponent.

Concealing one’s own intentions

This is the more passive form of counteraction against the opponent’s reconnaissance. In essence it consists of the ability to not betray unwillingly – by unnecessary gestures and movements – one’s own intention or state of mind. The successful hiding of one’s own intention is only possible when a fencer, in the course of his training – both during fencing lessons and competition – has learned to discriminate finely between real and false actions. This ability is based on compound differential reactions allowing the fencer to discriminate between very similar stimuli.

Misleading the opponent

This may be described as the active form of counteracting the opponent’s reconnaissance. On recognising the opponent’s exploratory movements, the fencer “shows” a certain line of action to use a completely different stroke once a real attack comes.

The active and passive forms of counteracting the opponent’s reconnaissance lead to a subtle and crafty psychological struggle, the greater part of which often taking place in the heads of both fencers. Charles de Beaumont summed up this point excellently when he said, “Fencing is

a game of subtlety, and bluff can be met with counter-bluff.” [2]

A fencer who is making a reconnaissance has to be very careful and try to decide whether the opponent’s reaction to his exploratory movements is really an unwitting betrayal of his intentions or an attempt to purposefully mislead him. After he considers that the opponent betrayed himself unwittingly, it is not the end of his troubles as now he has to decide whether the opponent has noticed his mistake or not. In accordance with each of these possibilities the fencer’s action must, of course, be different.

Directing the opponent’s game

A good fencer not only takes advantage of his opponent’s mistakes and of certain tactical situations arising in the course of the bout, but tries actively to create such a tactical situation as is convenient for his own plan – warding off an attack to score with a riposte or to launch an attack in a situation favourable to himself. By using certain moves, he draws the opponent’s movements and actions, influences his tactics and even his psychological mood. In other words, he tries to control the opponent’s game.

This ability allows a fencer to foresee and even provoke his opponent’s movements in order to nullify his efforts by means of already prepared actions.

The most typical and extreme example of drawing the opponent’s action is the second intention false attack with the object of drawing the opponent’s counter-attack or parry-riposte. A counter-attack or parry riposte, so provoked, is more easily dealt with (second intention counter-time and second intention parry-counterriposte are, of course, “real”, ultimate actions, not preparatory).

Thus, by certain false attacks, feints, changes of position, maneuvering on the strip and actions on the blade, one may draw concrete, foreseen actions from the opponent. An experienced fencer, however, not only provokes certain actions but tries to influence his opponent’s psyche and tactics. For example, when fencing against an opponent who has a strong defence, one may assume the role of a panicky fencer, very much afraid of the opponent’s attacks. This may induce the opponent to make a rather wild and badly chosen attack, which is easy to parry. A forward movement with an expression of concentration, as if one is going to attack at any moment, may draw out the opponent’s attack,

which again is easy to parry and counter-act in such circumstances.

Maneuvering

Maneuvering on the strip may serve a series of practical purposes. One of them may be to push the opponent into a less convenient position near the end of the strip. One gains distance by performing steps forward, short lunges, and short advance-lunges, accompanied by feints. Maneuvering also plays an important part in defence, e.g. in parrying with a step back. Another important purpose of maneuvering is to find the appropriate distance from which to commence one’s own attack. The struggle for “one’s own distance” is complicated, very often accompanied by various movements of the blade, and consists of steps forwards and back of various lengths and rhythm, sometimes creeping towards the opponent, sometimes executing lively jumps, etc.

Hindering the opponent’s game

Hindering the opponent’s game means breaking the opponent’s concentration, assessment of distance, and application of attack. By various movements and maneuvers, a fencer tries to lower the opponent’s state of concentration, to induce a false sense of security, to make it difficult for him to assess distance and to launch his attacks. A fencer who is about to attack has an advantage when his opponent’s concentration and watchfulness is lulled. This may be attained by drawing the opponent into a rather slow and phlegmatic interchange of footwork or slow, rhythmic movements of the blade.

The ability to control the rhythm of one’s own movement and, by using rhythm, to influence the opponent’s psychology and state of concentration, is the quality possessed by great champions.

There are other, more active, ways of distracting the opponent’s attention, which also make it difficult for him to assess the distance and to find the right moment for launching an attack.

Such preparatory actions include:

- constant jumps forward and backwards;
- combined use of jumps, movements of the blade and actions of the blade;
- very strong, perhaps even brutal, beats on the blade which irritate certain opponents, upset their concentration and lower their precision;

- holding the sword in line against an opponent who favours compound attacks;
- absence of blade and constant movement of the weapon against an opponent who likes engagement and attacks preceded by actions on the blade;
- sudden closing of the distance against an opponent who likes attacks from long distance, etc.

Other, less subtle, ways of distracting the opponent's attention and hampering the initiation of his attacks belong rather to "gamesmanship" than to swordsmanship, and this is why we shall not deal with them.

The description of a few chosen preparatory actions has been, of necessity, brief and sketchy, but I hope that it still stresses their tactical significance and the necessity for studying and practising them.

I think that it is appropriate to end this chapter on tactics by quoting the words of the famous French master, Michel Alaux, who, for some years, worked in the United States: "For most fencers, fencing is a unique combination of quick thinking and elegant movements." [3]

More on the issues of fencing technique and tactics can be found in a number of my works, especially in my recent books [4, 5, 6].

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