

Right of Way and Fencing Time, William Gaugler, Director, Fencing Masters Program, San Jose State University
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The deterioration of both foil and sabre technique in recent years can be traced directly to misunderstandings concerning right of way and fencing time. The difficulty appears to stem from an ambiguity in the wording of the F.I.E. article defining the attack. Article 10 reads: "the attack is the initial offensive action made by extending the arm and continuously threatening the opponent's target." This has been interpreted by some fencers and directors to mean an arm *being* extended, and by others, an arm *already* extended. The original intention, however, is made perfectly clear by Article 233 where it is explicitly stated: "If the attack, the step or the feints are executed with the arm bent the right of way passes to the opponent." In other words, right of way is *dependent* upon an extended arm.

The F.I.E. rules for foil fencing were originally drawn up in 1913 by the French master Camille Prevost. In his work on foil, *Theorie pratique de l'escrime*, published at Paris in 1886, Prevost wrote on page 44: "...it is essential that extension of the right arm precedes movement of the body..." Maestro Aldo Nadi, and other masters of the classical school, shared this view. In his book, *On Fencing*, published at New York in 1943, Nadi observed on page 89: "...the arm must extend before the right foot moves for execution of the lunge—a rule that must remain engraved in your mind forever. *Hand before foot, always.*" And on page 183 he noted: "The arm must be rigidly extended with the hand shoulder-high before your point strikes the target..." Why did Prevost and Nadi insist that the sword arm be *extended* before the foot was moved? Because an attack with a bent arm could very easily be arrested.

I suspect that the word "extending" was chosen so that the definition could include the cut-over—the only simple attack in which the arm is withdrawn. Executed correctly, the cut-over is accomplished in one blade motion; but the point must be momentarily lifted out of line. Ridolfo Capo Ferro in his treatise, *Gran simulacro dell'arte e dell-uso della scherma*, published at Siena in 1610, warns his readers on page 39 that in executing the cut-over the arm is withdrawn. In his estimation this was risky swordplay, since he and his colleagues relied heavily on counterattacks.

Fencing may be a sport, but it is, nevertheless, based upon dueling practice. And, as is well known, the principle underlying the sport and real combat is the same: to touch and not be touched. Consequently, the same logic that governs the one governs the other. Right of way is not a mere convention, it is a key element in fencing logic. If the attacker has a straight arm and the defender a bent arm, then the defender must rely on: 1) the defense of the steel, 2) the defense of measure, or 3) the counterattack. In other words, he can parry the incoming blade, step out of range of the attack, or counterattack if the attack is compound, faulty, or can be evaded. If the attacker is confronted by an adversary with an extended arm and point in line, he must remove the menacing weapon with an action on the blade before he can complete his attack. Should he fail to do this, then both fencers would be hit, an error in judgment that would be fatal in a real encounter. But in attempting to deviate or deflect the threatening weapon the attacker must make at least two blade movements, the first to remove the menacing steel, and the second to effect his thrust or cut. This exposes the attacker to a disengagement in time, that is, a counterattack that eludes the action on the blade. And this, of course, may set in motion an entire sequence of actions and counteractions from countertime to the arrest in countertime.

Regrettably, the contemporary fencer often tends to regard the niceties of another era with impatience, and perhaps, even a trace of contempt. That is because, in most cases, neither he nor the directors he tries to please have acquired a proper understanding of fencing time. Yet fencing time is clearly defined in Article 9 as "the time required to perform one simple fencing action." Unequivocal as this may seem, one goes to foil competitions and sees directors giving right of way to an attack in which the sword arm has been withdrawn to launch a thrust or execute a cut-over. And in sabre competitions it is common to observe directors awarding right of way to an attack in which the wrist has been cocked, and the point raised, or arm withdrawn during the

execution of what is intended to be a direct head cut. In each of these cases the attack is performed in more than one unit of fencing time, and could be interrupted by a counterattack.

To be a simple attack the cut-over in foil must be executed in a single, rapid motion. If there is a pause after the point is lifted, no matter how slight, the action becomes compound, and is especially susceptible to an arrest. The same, of course, is true in sabre of a direct cut, a circular cut, or a cut-over (descending cut). There can be no break in the action if it is to be considered a simple attack; and in every instance the sword arm must be fully extended *before* the foot moves.

Once the counterattack is respected, fencing action draws closer to its model, the duel; and it becomes easier to judge, and more interesting to watch. Counterattacks are what Maestro Nadi called the "university of fencing." On page 183 of his text he stated: "...The stronger the fencer, the greater the importance of (the counterattack)." Counterattacks were fundamental to rapier play. Capo Ferro, in a section on page 29 entitled, "Of the Vanity of Feints," noted: "Feints are not good because they lose fencing time and measure...while my adversary feints, I thrust (counterattack)." Indeed, fear of a counterattack will encourage a swordsman to use economy in his fencing movements, and keep his fencing clean. And it will eventually lead him to a more complex and interesting game, so that he will learn to invite a counterattack in order to employ countertime.

Competitive fencers will naturally adjust their fencing tactics to the bias of the director. If he favors the attack, even if faulty, then the fencers will abandon counterattacks and concentrate primarily on attacking. As a consequence of such accommodation complex fencing phrases cannot be developed, and the encounter will be reduced to a series of simultaneous attacks. This is, in fact, what we frequently see today in fencing competition.

In summary, giving the right of way to an attack in which the sword arm is *extending* rather than *extended* is pernicious. It destroys the logic of fencing, violates the existing rules of swordplay, and reduces fencing competition to a lottery. But if the F.I.E. articles concerning right of way and fencing time are correctly interpreted and rigorously enforced, the quality of fencing will quickly improve.