

Weapon Grip and School, by William M. Gaugler, Director, Fencing Masters Programme, Dept. Military Science, San Jose State University  
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The violence of contemporary fencing has become the subject of much discussion within the fencing community. To the average observer, the once elegant art of swordplay has been transformed into a rough-and-tumble spectacle in which force and chance play dominant roles. Prominent figures in the amateur world of fencing such as F.I.E. President Gian Carlo Brusati, Secretary General Edoardo Mangiarotti, and Technical Delegate Sidney Romeo, as well as professionals like Maitre Raoul Clery have expressed concern over the recent turn of events. Attention has been focused, at least in part, on the weapon grip and its effect on the nature of fencing. The so-called anatomical grip, now in almost universal use, is frequently cited as a principal factor in the decline of fencing technique.

Under the leadership of Ing. Renzo Nostini, President of the Italian Federation of Fencing, a strong movement has developed in Italy to return to the traditional weapon with crossbar and ricasso. In the March 1984 issue of the Italian fencing publication, Scherma, announcement was made that the Council of the National Academy of Fencing at Naples has determined that examinations for instructor's and master's diplomas will follow rigorously the method of the Italian school, including, use of the Italian foil grip. The probable consequences are obvious: with teachers setting the example, pupils will follow. Letters printed in Scherma during February and May of 1984 make it apparent that the decision to return to the traditional grip was not motivated by national pride, but rather was the result of serious technical considerations. The design of the Italian weapon clearly offers, in the opinion of many professionals, distinct advantages.

The current Italian preoccupation with grip and school is not without precedent. Anyone familiar with the history of Italian fencing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century knows that Italy was, during that time period, divided into two camps on the basis of grip type and system of instruction. The bitterness created by this rivalry lasted well into the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their conflict seems to have had its origins in the Napoleonic Wars when large numbers of Italians served in the French armies, including Italian fencing masters. Some of these, on returning home, taught a modified form of fencing in which elements of the French system were incorporated.

One of the most influential of the veteran fencing teachers was the Florentine master, Alberto Marchionni, whose book, Trattato di scherma sopra un nuovo sistema di giuoco di scuola italiana e francese, was published in 1847. His mixed school used the traditional Italian method of instruction as a base, but included many French features such as the numbering system for parries, use of the coupe or cut-over, and a curious weapon with a French handle combined with a Neapolitan bell guard, and a ring that served the same function as a crossbar. Moreover, while he questioned certain aspects of French fencing technique, his criticisms of the Neapolitan school, and in particular the widely-read work by Rosaroll and Grisetti, La scienza della scherma, printed in 1803, sent many of his southern colleagues into a rage. He committed heresy in the eyes of the purists; and given the political climate of Italy just prior to its unification, it is not difficult to comprehend how the questions of traditional values and nationalism became explosive issues. Was the Italian school of fencing to be polluted with foreign elements, or was it to remain purely Italian?

But the matter did not reach a climax until the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was Maestro Giuseppe Radaelli who became the chief target of conservative attacks. Radaelli was director of fencing instruction at the military school at Milan, an advocate of the mixed school, and the exponent of a new system of sabre fencing. His manual, Istruzione per la scherma di sciabola e di spada, written by a disciple, Captain S. Del Frate, was published in 1876 by the Ministry of War. This patronage made it de facto the official textbook for military instruction. In his volume Radaelli followed Marchionni in employing the French numbering system for parries, use of the cut-over, and the newly-devised weapon combining French and Italian elements. Still, there was nothing astonishing in this since Cesare Enrichetti, director of fencing courses at the military

academy at Parma, in his book, Trattato elementare teorico-practico di scherma, published in 1871, had taken the same direction.

But the mixed school's opponents in Naples were not slow to react. They found allies in the Ministry of War, and through their intervention, were able to put the two systems, northern and southern, on trial. In 1882 the Ministry announced a national competition for a text which was to serve as a sole manual for military fencing instruction. The book was to encompass foil and sabre technique, and to contain a history of fencing with particular emphasis on the Italian contribution.

Of the ten works submitted for consideration two were involved in the final selection: Radaelli's book, and a treatise by a young fencing master from Naples, Masaniello Parise. Parise's work was an elaborate exposition of the Neapolitan system, with a breakdown of compound actions, and complete tables of actions, and counteractions. After much deliberation, the Commission chose Parise's text. Parise was appointed first director of the new military masters school at Rome, and his treatise, Trattato di scherma di spada e sciabola, was published in 1884 by the Ministry of War. The fencing school at Milan was closed, and all training of military fencing masters delegated to the new school at Rome.

In retrospect, there were weaknesses in both systems. Radaelli's foil technique, with its wide cut-over actions, exposed the fencer to counterattacks, while Parise's sabre method was completely outmoded. As a result of the competition, both systems borrowed from one another. Followers of the mixed school returned to the old, simpler numbering system of parries, tightened the cut-over, and used again the traditional Italian weapon. The Neapolitan school, now known as the Roman-Neapolitan school, adopted the more extended lunge of its rival, eventually acknowledged the value of the cut-over, and quietly modernized its sabre technique. The changes in sabre methodology were achieved by Parise's assistants, Maestri Salvatore Pecoraro of Portici, and Carlo Pessina of Catania; both men were trained in the Radaellian sabre school. Their book, La scherma di sciabola, published in 1910, the year of Parise's death, became the official text for sabre instruction at the Military Masters School at Rome.

At Florence, Livorno, and Milan the northern school, in its modified form, continued to flourish despite the fact that it no longer had official sanction. Military instructor's and master's diplomas were issued only by the Military Masters School at Rome, while civilian diplomas were awarded solely by the National Academy of Fencing at Naples. Among the most influential masters of the northern school were Maestri Ferdinando Masiello of Florence, Eugenio Pini and his pupil, Beppe Nadi, of Livorno, and Giuseppe Mangiarotti of Milan. Masiello's, La scherma italiana di spada e di sciabola, published respectively in 1887 and 1903, made significant contributions toward the development of a unified school. Ironically, both masters considered themselves representatives of the mixed school.

Pini's use of triple feints in developing point control, and compound actions with the cut-over, were passed on to generations of champions by Pini's successor, Beppe Nadi, whose most remarkable pupils were his own sons, Nedo and Aldo. Collectively they won nine gold and one silver medal at the Olympic Games. Aldo Nadi, after turning professional, defeated virtually every World and Olympic Champion who would fence him. Like Nedo, he used all three weapons equally well, but regarded foil as his principal arm. In his method of instruction foil served not merely as the beginning weapon, but as the foundation and key for sabre and epee technique.

The argument favoring the Italian grip and wrist strap was succinctly put by Maestro Nadi in his book, On Fencing, published in 1943. On page 44 he wrote:

Its outstanding advantage lies in (the Italian foil's) superior power. The handle is bound to the wrist by a leather strap...which insures a strength and firmness of grip...More important, it lightens the burden of the fingers, thus permitting most of their effort to be

employed in directing the point (offense). Furthermore, the strap increases effectively the power of the parry (defense).

Maestro Nadi's lessons embodied everything that was characteristic of traditional Italian fencing: efficiency, speed, and mobility. He demanded extraordinarily tight point control, a light touch, firm command over the opposing steel, rapid execution, and dynamic attacks accomplished with a step or jump forward. Above all, he stressed economy of motion.

How different Aldo Nadi's fencing was from the wild and inelegant swordplay we are confronted with today. Maitre Leon Bertrand, on page 119 of his book, Cut and Thrust, published in 1927, quotes the celebrated Italian master, Candido Sassone, as saying "that the attack should succeed eight times out of ten." In the recent Olympic Games at Los Angeles it was not uncommon for a fencer to make three or four attempts before a touch was scored. And more often than not, the hits arrived by chance. With the fencers twisting and turning, effecting acrobatic contortions, and rushing together to jam their weapons into one another, all vestiges of organized fencing disappeared; nearly every movement seemed to be improvised on the strip.

That there exists a relationship between the style of weapon and school is inescapable. The design of the arm favors the execution of particular actions, and prompts a specific tactile approach. In this respect, the French school provides an excellent example. Until the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was little difference between the Italian and French schools. The crucial factor in the separation seems to have then the introduction of a practice weapon without the crossbar. An early version of this may be seen in Labat's text, L'art en fait D'armes, published in 1696. The straight handle permitted good point control, but was not well suited to effecting actions on the blade.

By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the French foil was fitted with a figure-eight shaped guard, and required a large padded glove to protect the armed hand. With the stuffed glove actions on the blade necessitating sensitivity of touch became a problem, so French masters placed stress on actions such as the cut-over which avoided blade contact. Expulsions and transports, though still in the repertoire of movements, were relegated to a secondary position. Emphasis on separation of parry and riposte may also have resulted from use of a weapon without a ricasso or crossbar, since it would tend to be less sensitive to blade contact. Opposition parries linked with gliding ripostes, as commonly practiced in the old Italian school, could not have been as easily effected with the French foil. Even today, with the modern French bell guard and abolition of the padded glove, French masters often show a predilection for actions without blade contact, and are prone to adopting a defensive rather than an offensive posture. The relationship of grip and school in France can be traced in La Boessiere, Traite de l'art des armes (Paris: 1818); Louis-Justin Lafaugere; Traite de l'art de faire des armes (Lyon: 1820); Cordelois, Lecons d'armes (Paris: 1862); Camille Prevost, Theorie pratique de l'escrime (Paris: 1818); and Georges Robert, La science des armes (Paris: 1900).

The same bond between weapon and school prevails in Italy where fencers, regardless of the type of grip they employ, favor a form of swordplay that is derived from their traditional weapon. Certainly, no 17<sup>th</sup>- or 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian swordsman would have felt secure in a duelling situation if he could not sense his adversary's blade; and a riposte accomplished by releasing the parried steel would have been regarded as sheer folly. In similar fashion, contemporary Italian fencers continue to work along the blade when possible, and to rely heavily on offensive movements. Radaelli is said to have summarized the Italian tactical approach by stating that the parry does not exist; in other words, if the offense is correctly executed, there is no defense.

It would appear then, despite talk of an international school, that there still are distinct Italian and French schools, and that these are closely tied to their traditional weapons. The orthopedic grip, popular largely since the advent of electrical foil fencing, is used by fencers of both schools, and has been adapted to suit the peculiarities of each of the systems. But it has also deprived swordsmen of the advantages that the traditional arms have to offer in point control and

sensitivity. And these are unquestionably major factors in fencing safety. With the Italian and French weapons greater precision and delicacy of touch are possible. If thrusts are executed in the orthodox manner using either of these arms, the hand is generally in supination and the sword arm fully extended, so that the point fixes firmly on the target and the blade bends consistently in the same direction.

By insisting on use of the Italian foil grip in its examinations, the Council of the National Academy of Fencing at Naples has taken the first step toward a return to classical fencing; in other words, efficient, elegant, and safe swordplay.