

WHAT IS A PREPARATION?

Introduction

"On the preparation by the left, the attack from the right arrives. Touch right." This is a call heard across the country by fencers. But when the referee says "preparation", what does that mean? What is a preparation? Is a preparation always done before an attack? Why, or why not?

A brief history of preparation

Fencing instruction - even until the 1960s - consisted primarily of instruction in blade preparations. Attacks were often preceded by an action, or multiple actions, on the blade. Fencing distances were close, often never exceeding advance and lunge. Coaches invariably taught from engagement. The student was taught to out-manoeuvre his or her opponent's blade work. Footwork was used simply to score in the final action of the attack.

In the 1970's and 1980's, this begins to change. A new breed of fencers begins to compete on the international stage. These fencers were more athletic, and capable of very explosive footwork actions. International coaches began to stress the control of the distance and the dynamic of the bout over blade play. Their protests and influence in turn effected how fencing actions were being called by referees.

International referees, facing pressure from influential National coaches, begin to call time with a bias towards the attacking fencer, with the attack defined by aggressive taking of the space by one fencer over another. Footwork became to be the driving force in fencing actions. Any action of the blade was permissible as long as the "attacker" was moving forward.

Fencers adjusted to the new dynamic they were exposed to in training and found in the officiating. Blade preparations became secondary to capturing space and momentum on the attack. Fencers, to deny their opponents any advantage, begin to fence more and more with an absence of the blade, forcing their opponents to penetrate very deep on the attack and driving the need to develop an attacking style that favoured fast and powerful footwork as the preparation to the attack. This new approach of making preparations with the feet - as well as the willingness of referees to acknowledge such preparations - changed the priority weapons (foil and sabre) dramatically. Each element drove the other in a spiral. (Whether that spiral was up or down was a matter of much debate that continues to this day).

In the last ten years the pendulum has been swinging towards a more middle ground between the aggressive physical style of the 1980's and the more "classical" approach to calling time emphasizing the execution of blade actions. Worried about television exposure and their space on the international stage of sports, as well as complaints that

fencing in the weapons of priority has lost complete touch with its roots, the FIE is urging a more rigorous look at fencing time, which invariably will impact preparations and how they are done.

Use of a preparation

Why prepare at all? Many fencers prepare without thinking *why* they prepare. A preparation has a number of uses. If the preparation doesn't meet one of these uses, it should not be done. These uses are:

- To steal time from the opponent.
- To provoke a response.
- To gain information.
- To give false information.

At the beginning of a bout, the fencers start at a distance at which it is very difficult (if not impossible) to simply attack and score. Neither fencer has an advantage in "tempo" over the opponent. Each fencer attempts to put the other fencer at a disadvantage in tempo. This disadvantage may be in distance (in which the attacker - unbeknownst to the defender - is close enough to score with a sudden attack), in the relative positions of the blade (the defender may have moved their blade to protect one target, only to be attacked in another, or the attacker may have temporarily seized control of the defender's blade) or both. This advantage in position or tempo is created by preparation on the part of the attacker.

The fencer may find it easier to score off of a response from the opponent if they can predict the opponent's intentions or abilities. If the fencer is fencing an opponent known to them, the fencer will have an idea of the preparations that will allow an attack to score (or the coach will have that information from previous bouts). The fencer may make some reconnaissance to insure that their information is still current, but for the most part, he or she is confident of making a preparation and getting a known response from the opponent that the fencer will use to their advantage. For instance, a fencer may make an attack from out of distance - knowing that this will provoke a parry and riposte from the opponent. The fencer judges that they can make a parry and score with a counter-riposte.

In this case, the initial, false, attack is the preparation needed to provoke a riposte from the opponent so that the fencer may score with a counter-riposte.

Preparation is linked to Maitre Zbigniew Czajkowski's ideas of "known beginning" and "known end" in attacking. The fencer makes a preparation to get a known response from an opponent, which the fencer uses to his or her advantage to score. When facing a new opponent, the fencer may use preparation (or even false preparations) to gain information about the opponent. For instance, the fencer rapidly closes with an opponent and makes a strong beat on the inside of the opponent's blade, but does not carry through with an attack. The opponent makes half parry of the high inside line to defend against an expected attack. The fencer now has information needed to make a pre-planned attack with a beat and disengage against the opponent.

Of course, the clever opponent is always attempting to do the same: use preparation to gain information. If it is the opponent making a preparation to provoke a response, the fencer can recognize this as an attempt to gain information. The fencer retreats (increasing their safety margin) while showing the opponent the beginning of a parry of the high inside line. When the opponent closes and makes the "real" attack, the fencer is ready and closes the outside line to score with an opposition counter attack. In this case, the fencer responded to one preparation by a preparation in return, giving the opponent misleading information.

Preparations defined

Preparations fall easily into two classes: preparations with the blade and preparations with the feet. Historically, preparations were done entirely with the use of the blade: "invitos" (invitations), beats, presses, false presses, and so forth. Blade preparations have fallen into some disfavour in the last few years. Still, it is worth discussing the blade preparations first, if only as a point of departure for a discussion of other sorts and types of preparation. The blade preparations are:

1. Beat
2. Press
3. Engagement (and change engagement)
4. Feint
5. Sweep (a slow attempt to find the opponents blade – designed to fail).
6. Invitation
7. False attack

Blade preparations have a duel use: they are designed to move, transport, bind, freeze, or otherwise occupy the opponent's blade in one area, so that a final action may be made in another. Blade preparations also can have the added effect of allowing the fencer to "steal time" on the opponent. By using a feint to draw a strong parry, the opponent is "out of place". If the attacker's disengage around the parry takes less time than a second parry by the opponent, the fencer will have "stolen" time away from the defence, increasing the chance that the real attack will score.

Footwork preparations are more difficult to classify in such an ordered manner. In order to be considered a preparation, any footwork done must have some other purpose other than keeping the same tempo/distance between the fencer and the opponent. For instance, while following the opponent, even a simple change of direction could be considered a preparation. Changing the speed of the footwork is another type of preparation. In certain instances, such as a second intention attack with a parry and counter-riposte, the lunge to initiate this sequence - ordinarily considered an "attack" - becomes part of a preparation: a false attack.

Of course, there is a third kind of preparation, when preparations with the blade and preparations with the feet are combined. In modern fencing, the blending of two

preparations is more often the case than either blade or footwork preparations being done in a vacuum.

Combining hand and foot preparations is important. Consider a beat and feint as a preparation - two blade preparations combined into one action. A fencer is slightly out of distance from the opponent and - standing still - makes a beat and feint. The opponent does nothing! This action is not convincing to the opponent and they elect not to respond. Consider in turn a beat and feint that is done with a small advance at the start of the feint. The addition of forward movement on the part of the fencer helps convince the opponent that an attack is imminent, and the opponent starts a reflexive parry. The fencer now disengages and scores with attacking footwork: a lunge or fleche.

For each preparation, the attacker is looking for a response from the opponent that is predictable and can be taken advantage of. For some preparations, there are a variety of responses the opponent can make. For others, the responses are few. For instance, the fencer makes a beat as preparation. The opponent may do any one of the below, in combination with any footwork that might be appropriate:

- Do nothing
- Beat back
- Present a line
- Feint
- Attack

As another example, consider an invitation. The opponent only has three choices:

- Open the distance
- Do nothing
- Attack

A response may be static (with no movement) and done only with the blade, or the opponent may also change the distance when they make their response. For instance, in the case of the beat, the opponent may beat back AND retreat, increasing the distance the attacker must cover in any subsequent action. Some preparations may be answered with a preparation in turn: in the beat example above, the opponent may extend and advance - making a feint - looking for a response in turn.

Ideally, the fencer would like an opponent to respond to a particular preparation in the same way each time that particular preparation is done. This will allow the fencer to make pre-planned actions (on the attack or defence) each time they execute the preparation against the opponent. If the opponent is more sophisticated, they will vary their response to the preparation, leaving the fencer off balance and unable to coordinate their actions. The key to forcing predictable responses by the opponent is to carefully control the distance the preparation is executed at. This distance depends on the preparation being done. For instance, a feint from out of distance will be ignored by the opponent, while stopping to feint at too close a distance will result in an attack on

preparation. The fencer must understand that each preparation has a time and place: a window in which the opponent has only a few responses that can be predicted or controlled.

The preparation must be done in such a way that it provokes an honest response from the opponent. The preparation should not be done in such a way that it puts the fencer doing the preparation at a disadvantage to the opponent, who may be able to turn the preparation of a fencer against them.

Blade actions in the preparation must be controlled and only as large as necessary to provoke the needed reaction. The fencer must execute the blade action while balanced and ready to take advantage of any mistake by the opponent, as well as being poised to run away if the preparation provokes a strong response. Blade actions that are done poorly or not done in proper coordination with footwork create a "tempo" for the opponent to attack in. Often the fencer will try to combine hand and foot preparations together, but poorly coordinate them, resulting in the fencer "out running the hand" and being hit on the preparation by the alert opponent. This often happens when the fencer attempts to make a preparation over a long distance, as in the case of "marching attacks".

The opposite also happens. The fencer must not come so close to the opponent before making a preparation that they should be attacking, rather than preparing. This is often seen in beginning fencers, who manage to get close on their opponent. Instead of executing an immediate attack, the beginner freezes and attempts to prepare against the opponents blade before continuing - making the critical mistake of pausing inside the opponent's lunge distance. The opponent then attacks and scores as the beginner attempts to find or deal with the opponent's blade.

If the distance between two fencers is too far away when one fencer executes a preparation, the opponent will likely ignore the preparation. The preparing fencer is then obliged to repeat the preparation at a closer distance. The opponent sees the fencer "rehearse" the preparation, giving the opponent a great deal of information about the intentions of the fencer. This also gives the opponent time to develop a response to the preparation. An experienced opponent does not need many "rehearsals" of a preparation to act against the fencer. The fencer who makes a preparation outside of the opponents distance is advised to not immediately repeat that same preparation if they do not get a response.

How to make choices in preparations? A fencer is well advised to manoeuvre with a new opponent for a few seconds at the start of the bout, to get a sense of the opponent's tempo and distance and to gauge the level of the opposing fencer. Preparations may then be done at a distance with a much more realistic chance of gaining an honest reaction. Unfortunately, there is no good rule for what distance this might be. In fact, with a high level opponent, the difference between the distance of an effective preparation and one that the opponent ignores is often measured in inches and fractions of an inch!

Distances are not relative to the preparation, but to the opponent. With one opponent, a preparation must be done at close, very realistic distances, with sharp attention paid to the space between the fencers and the rate the space is changing. With less experienced fencers, the preparation at any space might get a reaction that will be predictable and usable by the fencer.

How to tell one from the other?

Certainly, experience is always the best teacher. However, it is not difficult to gauge the strength of the opponent within the first ten to twenty seconds of a fencing bout. More experienced fencers (who are opponents which will demand careful attention when making a preparation) are likely to move well, keep up with the fencer's footwork, and not rush into making an attack. In short, these fencers will spend the first few seconds of every bout doing what the fencer should be doing: manoeuvring with the fencer to get a sense of their skill level and experience. A less experienced fencer will not move well, not keep up with the fencer's footwork, and often not spend any time doing exploration or reconnoitre. They will rush in, attempting to score with their "favourite" move, or an obvious attack. These fencers are likely to be less experienced and more likely to react to strong, obvious preparations, even executed out of distance.

Once the preparation has been made, the fencer must closely observe the reaction of the opponent. Is the reaction a planned reaction - a deliberate response to the preparation? Or is the response uncontrolled, either instinctual or a panicked reaction? Either one is useful to the fencer/ Does the opponent react at all? Often the lack of a reaction to a preparation (such as a long, slow feint) is in itself, very telling.

The reaction of the opponent will involve the blade, the distance, or both. The fencer must then decide if they have only one problem to solve (the blade OR the distance) or two problems to solve at the same time (the blade AND the distance). Certainly the last action is the more difficult of the two. But failure to notice that the opponent responds to the preparation with a blade action AND a change of distance is the most common mistake made in fencing.

Foreseen and Partially Foreseen Actions using preparation.

After understanding the reaction of the opponent, the fencer will be able to more properly plan foreseen actions in the bout. For instance: the fencer makes a preparation by making a sudden change of direction with an advance. The opponent, startled, makes a half-parry to protect the upper inside line. The fencer returns to manoeuvring the opponent, and again makes a sudden change of direction with an advance. On the basis of previous observation, the fencer executes the foreseen action of disengage and lunge to score.

Sometimes the attacker is not as lucky as in the previous example. Consider the same situation, in which the attacker makes a sudden change of direction towards the defender. The defender retreats, but does not parry. Now the attacker has only *some* of the information needed to make an attack: they know that the defender will chose to defend

with distance. The fencer does not know what blade action the opponent might adopt on the defence.

The attacker does the preparation again, and makes a lunge at the end of the advance. The opponent, convinced by the lunge that this is now the real attack, makes a parry of circular 6 and a riposte. The attacker makes an appropriate parry and counter-riposte to score. Here the attacker only had part of the information he needed to make a successful attack. After the initial preparation, the attacker had to make a second, unplanned action to score. However, the initial preparation in the context of the actions was still valid. Unable to plan the line of the disengage, the fencer elected to make an attack that was slightly short, and fight their way out.

By knowing how to make a preparation, the fencer also learns when preparations are being done against them. This is the perfect time to give the opponent false information, especially when the fencer suspects that the opponent is attempting to gain information about them. When the opponent beats, for instance, the fencer may step back. The next time the opponent beats, they may try to prepare a compound attack. This is the perfect time to execute an attack on the opponent's beat, hopefully catching them by surprise.

Ultimately, this can degenerate into a contest of "...does he know that I know that he knows that I know ...". Often a fencer will try to consider so many choices that they will freeze, and "get caught thinking". Solving THAT problem will be left for another time!