

PART VI

LEARNING THEORY

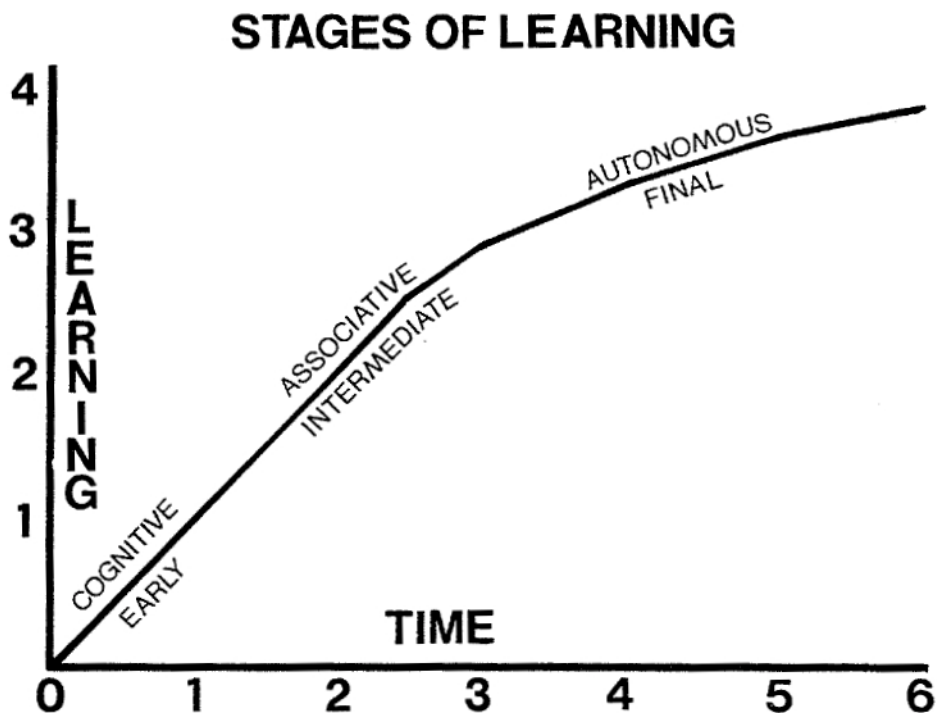
STAGES OF LEARNING

Studies in human performance theories show that human beings go through various stages of learning, although these stages of learning are not clearly defined. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to say exactly when one has progressed from one stage to the other. Nevertheless, with continued practice in perceptual motor skills it is possible to perceive that the performer has arrived at a particular level of learning, even though the transition from the previous level had not *been* noticed.

It is the opinion of the writer that the stages of learning defined in 'Human Performance' Fitts and Posner 1969, are the most appropriate for the stages experienced in the learning of a perceptual motor skill such as fencing.

These are recognised as three (illustration 109):

1. **Early or cognitive.**
2. **Intermediate or associative.**
3. **Final or autonomous.**



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During the cognitive stage the beginner is deeply involved in trying to understand the task. The task in the sport of fencing is to engage an opponent in combat for a specified number of hits and to try to win. Great attention must be paid to cues which later on would go unnoticed. Gross errors are made in technique and co-ordination in an attempt to achieve the end product, to score hits on the opponent.

Visual cues from the opponent, so essential for the correct tactical application of technical skills, are totally missed and the beginner's concentration is almost totally involved in his/her own performance. Generally, the performance is a matter of trying to fit old habit patterns into a new skill.

During this phase, instruction and demonstration is of utmost importance but should be of a very general nature, accepting as good subroutines which only vaguely resemble those which are considered correct.

During the associative stage, subroutines which have been learned as single units during the early stage are practiced and combined to form new sequences. Wrong habits and incorrect responses to cues are corrected, changed and gradually eliminated.

Part-Whole learning appears to be the most suitable for the learning of fencing skills during this phase. Hence the common practice universally is the individual lesson (part practice) followed by competition to try out the part learned (whole practice) then back to the lesson again to deal with the feedback from competitions - and so on. This method is accepted in fencing circles by masters and pupils alike.

Many of the technical skills learned during the intermediate stage where single units such as simple attacks combine to make compound attacks and parries and ripostes are joined to make counter ripostes. These may be taught and learned in group practice.

Refined application of these movements, however, such as tempo variations, point control and tactics are obviously best taught in a coach/pupil learning environment. This is the only way the advanced knowledge and ability of the coach can adequately and effectively be transmitted to the pupil. It must be obvious to the reader that one of the main limitations of group practice is that of working with someone of the same technical standard.

Group practices, explained in detail in the Level I Manual, must still play a large part in the Level 2 program. There is no better way of dealing with the pure mechanics of the sport and this method should be the foundation of club activity. Groups at intermediate level can be instructed by assistant coaches, leaving the senior coach available for the more advanced fencers.

It is recognized however, that in certain clubs it may not be possible to get groups together owing to different arrival times. Under these circumstances, the only way to tackle learning is in the individual lesson.

When the mechanical processes of stroke production, distance, mobility and timing are being performed without obvious thought and concentration, the fencer has arrived at the **final or autonomous stage of learning**. During this stage, component processes become increasingly autonomous.

These skills require less processing and the mind is freed to deal with the more important factors of the combat:

- stroke selection related to visual clues from the opponent.
- technical/tactical solutions.
- distance and tempo.
- laying traps and avoiding those laid by the opponent.
- all play an increasingly dominant part of the fencer's thought processing.
- The advanced fencer is less subject to interference from other environmental distractions not immediately related to the task.
- selective attention is constantly improving.
- perception becomes more refined enabling the selection of only the most important cues from the display.

In the autonomous stage, the performer is able to preselect movements and tactics based upon observations of the opponents game, an essential quality for success in competition.

PROJECT - OR PROBLEM SOLVING

Most learning situations evolve around the coach telling the group of beginners what has to be done and creating practices on preconceived ideas of the coach.

Here is a method called Project learning where the coach gives the group a problem to which they must find the answer. Another title for this method, is therefore, **problem solving**.

As with all combat sports, fencing is ideally suited to the problem solving method. From the moment the fencer is placed *en garde* he begins to search for information from the opponent upon which to base his plan of action. The whole game evolves around finding solutions to problems and producing these solutions in the form of effective physical actions.

The responsibilities of the coach in developing this method are twofold:

1. To provide the group with sufficient information and demonstration so that they may arrive at reasonable conclusions within a reasonable period of time.
2. To channel these conclusions into effective knowledge and ability which will promote the progress of the group within the rules and restrictions of the sport of fencing and are specifically applicable to the weapon concerned.

Having understood the responsibilities of the coach, it is now necessary to create the learning situation.

It requires considerable experience and understanding of the subject matter to deal with all of the technical problems and solutions in fencing but here are two simple examples to illustrate the method.

1. How to Attack

Information required - "Stand *en garde* opposite your partner with the tips of your swords opposite each other. You will see that you cannot reach each other's target by extending the sword arm. Now find out how to reach the target by moving the front foot only and then by moving the rear foot only."

Practice - The class will inevitably arrive at movements similar to the lunge and the cross over action of the fleche. Make a mental note of the technical faults you see such as balance, bent sword arm, poor footwork, etc., so that you can correct these later.

Now isolate certain problems in order to guide the group into the correct technique.

Problem 1:

"Speed of attack is important, do you move the sword arm first, or the foot?"

Practice.

Problem 2

"By leaning forward, which movement can you do best, lunge or fleche?"

Practice.

Problem 3:

"When you lunge you will find the rear foot turns and drags. How does this effect your fencing distance and what can you do about it?"

Practice.

Problem 4:

"When lunging, where should the front foot be relative to the knee in order to assist in the recovery back to the en garde position?"

Practice.

2. How to Avoid Being Hit

Information required - "The object of the game is to score a hit on the opponent without being hit yourself. One fencer will attack and the other will find out how many ways there are to avoid being hit."

Practice - Don't be surprised to see some in the group sidestepping, ducking, stepping back or running away. These are all ways of avoiding the hit and permissible evasive actions. You will of course want to channel their effort into the parry so you will have to give them a lead by saying "now try warding off the attack with your own sword".

This will produce a type of crude parry and now the necessary technical control can be applied as follows:

Problem 1:

"Which part of the blade do you use to deflect the attack remembering you need a strong parry?"

Practice.

Problem 2:

"How far does the blade have to travel to clear your own target?"

Practice.

Problem 3:

"How many different ways can you parry the attack?"

Practice.

Problem 4:

"Bearing in mind that you will be trying to hit the opponent after successfully parrying the attack, how far should the point move away from the target?"

Practice.

- If you think up every technical point you would teach in a part-whole learning situation then pose it as a question to the class, you have the answer to project learning.
- Before your next lesson, make a list of the technical points in the lesson and write them down as questions.
- Very soon you will be able to mix part-whole learning with problem solving, making your lessons more interesting.
- You will also find that some fencing movements are better suited to project learning than others and conduct your lessons accordingly.

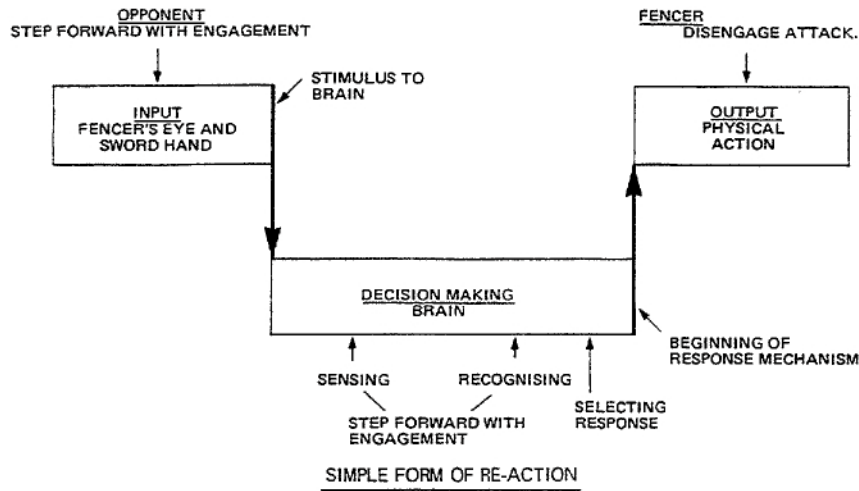
WHAT IS REACTION TIME?

It is the time taken by each individual person to respond to a given stimulus. The type of conditioned or learned response made in all fencing movements must not be confused with the reflex action inherent in all living creatures called the *reflex arc*. We are, in the main, dealing with reactions which require some sort of decision making in the cortex of the brain. The simple diagram on page 103 show what happens.

The **input** is the stimulus one receives from the opponent's actions. The **decision making** part is very complex and involves *sensing* and recognising the input, selecting the right part of the input upon which the fencer is going to act, and selecting the movement which is going to counteract it. The **output or response** is the physical act of the counteracting movement. Reaction in its simplest fencing form is a pre-selected or premeditated response where each component is known beforehand, e.g. the fencer has observed that the opponent is in the habit of stepping forward and engaging the blade in sixte. It is decided that the next time this happens he will attack by disengage upon this preparation. It happens just as expected and a hit is scored.

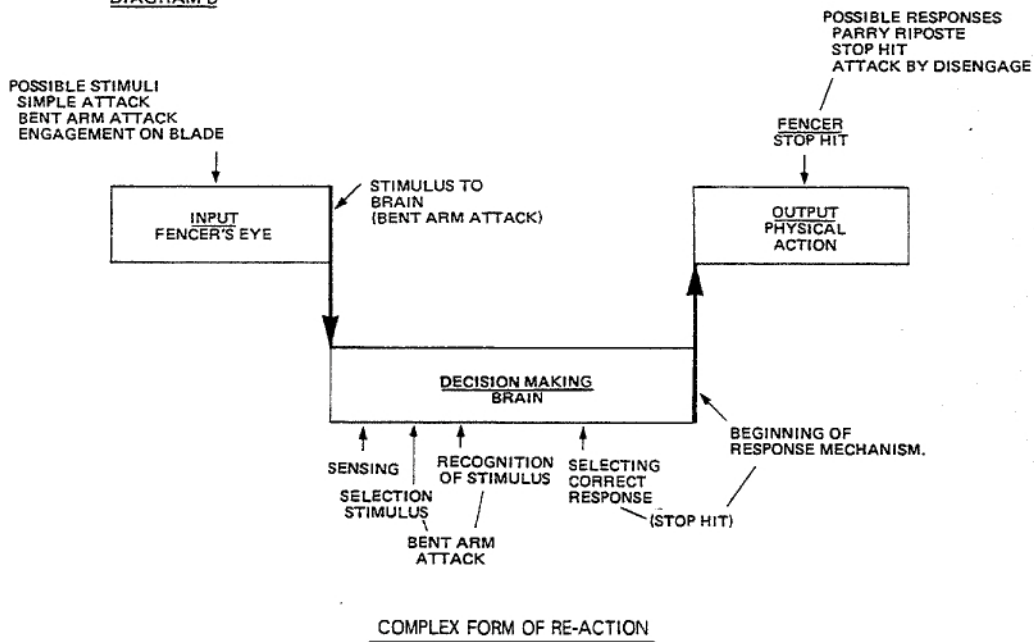
The whole action is conditioned by correct observations of time, movement and choice of the fencing movement as the answer. The input is the stimulus of the opponent actually stepping forward and engaging the blade. The decision making is the realization it has happened and selection of the motor response of the attack by disengage. The output is the actual physical act of doing the disengage attack.

DIAGRAM A



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DIAGRAM B



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In its complex form, reaction is sometimes called **multiple choice** because several components of the whole are unknown. In fencing, the possibilities are endless as one rarely finds oneself in combat in a situation where everything can be completely preconceived. The combat conditioning for this multiple choice reaction is when the fencer has observed that the opponent may do one of several preparations and that he must make a different response to each. This *will lengthen the decision making time* by adding to the realization that the stimulus has happened, the recognition of which one of the several alternative stimuli has occurred and the selection of the correct response for that particular stimulus.

A not too complicated example would be;

- if the opponent does *a simple* attack I will *parry and riposte*. -
- if he moves in with a bent *arm* I will *stop hit*
- if he *engages* my blade I will *attack*.

Here we have a multiple of three possible input stimuli and three corresponding output responses. Considering that most fencing movements happen in less than one second, that is from perceiving the input to the end of the response, it can readily be understood that time involved in making the decision is very short but nevertheless has an important effect upon the overall speed of the fencer. It is also interesting to note that the speed at which the signals travel along the nervous pathways is approximately 120 feet per second.

It now becomes obvious that the main part of reaction time is taken up in making decisions and in the execution of the movement. Fencing practice and lessons from a good coach are the best ways of reducing these time factors and the practice must involve decision-making in the form stated above and not be based upon simple reaction movements, although they must not be totally neglected.

Technical speed of fencing movements is also reduced in this way by improving balance and co-ordination. Performance can be improved by generally strengthening the muscles used in fencing and producing good muscle tone (see Fencing Fitness page 117).

Throughout a fencing bout both fencers are constantly bombarded by a huge stream of stimuli, not only from each other's movements but also from the immediate environment around them, people, lights, sound, etc.

Concentration

In order to be able to employ all of one's power, one must learn to direct attention onto the important cues of the bout. Really good fencers are able to direct their attention almost to the exclusion of all else. They are able to filter out the unnecessary information and only let through the bits which are important to the work at hand.

This **selective attention** improves reaction time, aids the stimulus-response mechanisms and frees the fencer to react clearly and decisively to any given stimulus.

The writer is constantly being asked "which part of the opponent must I watch during a bout?" This question, which is of significant importance to concentration, can only be answered generally as it must obviously relate to the type of movement one is going to make at a particular time. For instance, if the fencer is timing an attack on the opponent's engagement, he must concentrate his attention upon the opponent's blade and sword hand. If the attack must only be done when the opponent jumps forward with the engagement, then the attention is divided between the blade and front foot. Quite often, important cues such as these are missed because we are influenced by other extraneous goings on or our own thoughts relative to what has happened before.

If one is not selecting a particular move, one should generally take in the total view of the opponent in order not to react unnecessarily. This may be achieved by looking *through* the opponent rather than *at* him.

THE COACH AND THE BEGINNER

One of the most rewarding experiences any human being can have is that created by the interaction of two personalities - the beginner and his/her teacher. The impression made upon each other during those first few meetings can mould their future relationship, their respect and understanding of each other and their willingness to learn from each other. Yes, indeed, each must learn from the other if there is to be a meaningful relationship.

Of course, there is an order of importance when one considers this interaction. The teacher/coach is confident in his/her knowledge of the subject. The beginner is experiencing something new and for the first time. Consequently, beginners are unsure of themselves, suspicious and apprehensive about the first meeting. It goes without saying that the teacher should be the leader in establishing a relationship, in making the first contacts, in putting the beginner at ease and preparing the ground for a future relationship. **Understanding** the problems experienced by the beginner with even the most seemingly simple situation is undoubtedly top of the priority list.

This understanding, so essential to creating a happy and relaxed atmosphere in which the beginner can learn, will reap its own reward and produce the confidence the beginner needs to bring out the best of his/her abilities.

Hand-in-hand with understanding is another very human quality - **patience**. Patience to let the beginner progress in his/her own time, encouraging them by not expecting too much and by praising performances which may not look too good to the expert but most certainly is the product of extreme effort and concentration on the part of the beginner.

This approach will most certainly pay off in the beginner's continued interest and enjoyment of the sport of fencing and will do much to keep a group of beginners together.

There are only two rules to remember.

Rule Number 1: People play sports they enjoy and which provide a personal sense of achievement.

Rule Number 2: Coaches cannot change rule number 1, they can only encourage it.

MOTIVATIONAL PROBLEMS IN TEACHING BEGINNERS

Generally, a fencing coach faces the following situations when teaching children, adolescents and adult beginners;

- when teaching students using the method of group instruction.
- when using an individual lesson as a basis for instruction.

Training with younger (9 - 14 years of age) and older (15 - 20) juniors

Teaching a group of children and older juniors is not an easy task for the beginner coach because of the tendency for children to drop out. Drop-outs usually occur after a month or two of fencing training for reasons such as boredom, discouragement, loss of enthusiasm, etc. Due to a poor coaching technique and the instructor's inability to communicate with his students, beginners give up the sport before they really give it a try. Therefore, during the first period of fencing training, it's extremely important that the training sessions are organised in a fashion which will maintain the interest of students for a longer period of time.

In the first place, the instructor must be very much aware of the reasons (motivational factors) why youngsters join a fencing club. For the children and adolescents they are probably some of the following reasons:

- fencing works on their imagination, it's a sport unlike other sports, involving elements of the fight in a fashion of a *romantic duel* like the one described in *The Three Musketeers*.
- fencing is one of the ways to achieve a status amongst a group of peers.
- social reasons: they expect to meet and make new friends or their friends are already there.
- they are directly motivated by their parents, friends, fencing demonstration, etc., and expect a lot of fun, blade actions and fencing combat during the initial period of training.

Whatever the reasons, usually at the beginning, children are highly motivated and determined to be good *fighters*. At this point, the instructor's role is not only to teach and improve the technical skills of fencers but also to maintain in these youngsters the motivational aspects and enthusiasm.

This can be accomplished by creating more up-to-date training sessions. The first 3-8 months seem to be crucial. During this period of time potential fencers will decide whether or not to continue with fencing. When a person first comes to a sport club he/she wants to enjoy the activity in which he/she is involved. Older fencers will remember the time when they had to go through a very rigid foot work training, typical of many old schools of fencing, when students would sometimes wait for a year before they were allowed to touch a foil.

Let us put the fencing coach in a concrete situation. Presume he or she has just finished a level II clinic and has the enthusiasm to organize a group of youngsters to teach them fencing. He makes a series of mini-fencing demonstrations, motivates children and as a result has a group in his club who have the desire *to be fencers*.

The method he will probably use will be group instruction assuming that he has enough fencing equipment in his/her club. Whatever method is used, the most important factor will be the way training itself is organized, and the number of elements it contains to keep the interest and enthusiasm of the group alive. The Level I manual provides a large choice of games and exercises connected with fencing which will play a supporting role to the instructor in realizing his goal: to make his training interesting. At this stage the fencing techniques are not a purpose unto itself. Through various fencing games and mini-epée tournaments, the group can be taught basic foot work, basic fencing techniques and timing principles, maintaining an increasing interest in the sport. Concerning techniques, the principle at this moment should be: better a little and correct than a lot and bad. In a group of youngsters we will eventually look for our future champions, so it is important that they do not learn things now that they will have to unlearn later.

Other important things to remember at this point are:

- the instructor should make each child feel *special*.
- the instructor should be fair in judgements, avoid taking sides and favouring better fencers (it is often the case that better performers are given more attention and practice time than lesser performers).
- every child should feel that the instructor appreciates his/her efforts.
- fencers should be encouraged especially if they make a mistake.
- mistakes should be corrected in a positive way (many times all the pupil hears is what they are doing wrong - they are rarely told what is good and correct about the exercises).
- relative discipline should be maintained in the group. Children like to know what to expect and they need someone with authority to follow.
- parents should be told not to be too pushy. Not *every* child has championship potential.

Some important motivational factors and strong reinforcements are those resulting from success. In mini-tournaments with a group of beginners some will win and others will lose. While winners feel a sense of achievement and a stronger attachment to the sport, the losers may become discouraged and lose interest and eagerness. During the initial stages of fencing with beginner groups, it is important to find another form of encouragement during training sessions in order to decrease the drop-out rate, especially amongst the weaker and less motivated students. Perhaps more numerous mini-competition as well as verbal encouragement and checking for other skills and aptitudes they may show during training. Underlining positively all good actions and moves may also prove to be helpful in avoiding discouragement with young fencers.

The social aspect is also a significant factor in motivating children. Keeping the group together by some social events such as travelling and excursions, get-togethers and informal meetings might consolidate the group and make them work as a team and help the instructor to keep the members interested in continuing with this sport.

The adult group (20 - 60)

Adults (20 - 60) have different motivations for fencing and different priorities when they begin training. Generally, we find two groups amongst them:

- 1) Recreational Group - those who want to get acquainted with a sport and continue with it on a once or twice a week basis but do not wish to enter competitions.
- 2) Competitive Group - (usually younger adults 18 - 40) who think about eventually entering a successful competitive career.

To start fencing training at the ages of 20 - 40 seems somewhat late, people at that age rarely become world class fencers but it is not impossible. The writer knows many examples of adults starting late in life and achieving success at national championship level.

Usually there are three most important motivational factors in adults of both sexes to start fencing training:

- social reasons, to meet people.
- fitness, a natural need for physical activity.
- fulfilment of a romantic dream (The Three Musketeers model).

In individual cases those three factors might be combined with different priorities, or just one or two of them might play some motivational role.

Concerning the social life, short *get-togethers* after training, occasional dinners in a restaurant or at someone's place can play a cementing role in keeping the members closer to each other.

The principles of fitness and fun will be the same as with children and older juniors except we do not use the same games and plays for adults as we do for children. Training sessions should be simply dynamic enough to give everybody enough physical exercise either by a warm-up and fitness testing, by foot-work or by individual lessons and free fencing sessions.

The Three Musketeers dream is fulfilled by technical training in a group and/or an individual lesson form, and by a visible progress, especially when students start to fence free training bouts and see improvement in their movements. The quality of an individual lesson depend naturally on the instructors teaching skills and the amount of time he can devote to each student. There is one principle every instructor should keep in mind, however. It is very discouraging for many students if the duration of an individual lesson given to the students on the same level differ drastically. People usually read it as favouring the student who was given a longer lesson and subconsciously feel jealous and worthless.



PART VII
COACHING PHILOSOPHY

COACHING PHILOSOPHY (continued from Level I)

In the Level I *Mini Fencing* Technical Manual, the C.F.A. coaching philosophy detailed some important factors related to the teaching of fencing to beginners. Such factors as motivation, enjoyment, interest, enthusiasm, how beginners learn as individuals and in groups, are more important in the early, cognitive stage than the mechanics of the sport.

The Level I coaching philosophy is an attempt to divert the attention of the coach away from the technical process of teaching fencing movements and to concentrate upon methods which support human factors such as interest and enthusiasm while presenting the sport as a 'whole' activity.

Having maintained the interest and enthusiasm of the individual or groups over the initial period -- and this is perhaps the most difficult task for the coach - we arrive at a point where the beginner, or beginners in the case of a group, are *hooked* upon the sport. He/she has decided that this is the sporting activity for him/her, becomes a member of the club, pays the fees, enter club competitions, has truly arrived and can be called *a fencer*. From the coaching point of view we have arrived at stage II and Level 2 Technical. We are now dealing with people who want to learn the intricacies of the sword and competition so that they can do better in combat. The operative word is want. There must be a real desire on the part of the pupil otherwise an objective learning situation can not be devised. Add to this the ability and desire of the coach to impart knowledge and we have the ingredients for an effective learning situation which should not fail. Certainly, if this philosophy is followed, the coach will retain the majority of those who come to the club as beginners. Of course some will be lost to other sports, just as some come to fencing via other sports. There are few people who know exactly which sport to take up at the beginning.. Most try several activities before they find the one which interests them most, the one which suits their particular psychological and physiological make up.

The coach should also realise that not all of the beginners will develop into fencers interested in the joy of combat and winning. Motivational drives towards success manifest themselves in many different ways.

- to some, success is winning in combat.
- to others, success is the sweet mastery of intricate technique.
- again to others, success is sought in the social activity of the club environment.

All are important and great effort should be made to satisfy all members of the group.

From Mini Epee to Foil, Sabre or Epee

Your questions answered...

During the initiation of the *Mini Fencing* campaign several questions have been posed about how the beginner transfers from a *Mini Epee* program upon which he/she has been placed to the orthodox swords of modern fencing.

Level I coaches will remember that the Mini Fencing program is based upon a combination of some of the rules and techniques of the orthodox weapons. For example,

- the target is the sabre target,
- the rules are simplified Epee rules,
- the Mini Epee has a foil blade to make it light, flexible and easy to handle, and so on...

The C.F.A. Coaching Committee did not expect all coaches to take easily or immediately to such a radical change of attitude to the teaching of fencing to beginners. Old traditions die hard and a lot of fencing coaches are not going to give up the traditional methods no matter how much logic is put forward.

The method of starting with the foil and going through a long, mechanical process of hours of footwork followed by exacting learning of the complex blade movements is deeply entrenched in our sport, generally to the exclusion of other aspects which the sport of fencing has to offer - presiding, judging, and above all, early experience of combat with its sense of participation, the thrill of winning, the disappointment of losing. Yes! disappointment is an essential emotion for a beginner to experience, even though it is a negative one, it plays an important part in the motivation to learn more and become better. One of Canada's most successful sports projects - PARTICIPACTION - did much to motivate this committee to offer mini fencing as the very first coaching program. **Participaction** is what **Mini Fencing** is all about.

A well known sports psychologist *once* said about sport that it was not just *recreation* but more *RE-creation*. Let's hope that the Mini Fencing concept will lead to the RE-creation of the sport of fencing in Canada.

At this point, there are two important questions that must be answered:

Question #1 - "How long should a coach keep a beginner on Mini Fencing before introducing him/her to the orthodox weapons?"

Many coaches have asked this question. Listening to some of the answers, one hears statements like - one month, three months, one term, we have even heard, "just use it as an introduction on the first evening, then put them on to foil!"

There is not a fixed answer to this question. The object of Mini Fencing is to give the beginner as broad an introduction to the sport of fencing in as short a time as possible and encourage as much participation in the *whole* sport as one can so that beginners can decide quickly whether they wish to stay in the sport or move on to another. An offshoot of this procedure is that the coach does not spend hours of teaching intricate techniques only to find one day that the beginner has left. Why not give them a few hours - a few weeks - a few months of enjoyment playing with the whole game and getting fun out of the electric apparatus?

The answer to the question "how long?" is a personal agreement between the beginner - or class - and the coach. One would hope that the transition from Mini Epee to one of the orthodox _swords would come as a request from the beginner or class in the form of "Hey, coach!, I/we like this sport of fencing, how about giving us some instruction in foil, sabre or epee?"

The time has arrived. The coach gets out the other swords and off they go. How long has it been since they began - who knows? Does there need to be a fixed time if the class is enjoying itself? Another approach could be (the coach) "O.K. class! you have been on Mini Epee long enough and have a pretty good knowledge of what fencing is all about. This evening we are going to look at the other three weapons and see how you like them".

Of course, it may not be as easy as that. A club may only have foils and so the initial transition may be to foil only, sabre and epee coming later.

This poses another important question.

Question #2 - "Should the beginner start orthodox weapon training with the foil and progress to sabre and epee later?"

Many coaches still believe in this approach. One of the main reasons for its survival in clubs was a social necessity. Foil was the only weapon fenced by both men and women.

Consequently, foil fencing dominated club life to the exclusion of sabre and epee. To an increasing extent women are now fencing all three weapons but it will be many years before this newly found freedom will gain enough momentum to make any noticeable effect upon the balance of weapons at club level.

Many hours could be saved, for instance, in starting a beginner on sabre if he desired to do so. Certainly there appears to be no transfer of the thrusting foil technique to sabre with its edge cuts. This is not entirely true with the transfer from foil to epee. However, the biggest barrier experienced by the foilist turned epeeist is the vast difference between *right of way* which develops parry and riposte responses in foil and the use of chronological time which gives priority to the renewed attack in epee. This requires a considerable amount of *unlearning* on the part of the foilist.

Today, evidence leads many senior coaches to believe in the concept that beginners should start with the weapon of their choice or take advice from a coach, who would choose depending upon physical structure and reaction time, etc.

Question #3 - "How does a beginner transfer from a mini fencing program to one of the orthodox swords?".

The short answer is, "with very little difficulty!". To elaborate, the various factors learned in the mini fencing program will prove to be of no hindrance whatsoever in the transfer to foil or epee. The change of weapon is negligible.

- a smaller guard in foil and similar balance due to the foil blade being used in the mini epee.
- a slightly heavier and stronger blade in the epee requiring more control.
- a similar handle, for in both the pistol grip is used.
- basic foil and epee techniques have already been taught.
- basic footwork, distance and balance the same.

Due to the use of the mini epee as the model in the program, there is a slight leaning towards epee. Internationally, epee fencing with its uncomplicated laws, is rapidly becoming the, premiere weapon to fence.

Transfer to sabre will be a little more difficult. The fencer will have to learn to use the cutting edge more than the point but at least he will have had the experience of the sabre target and the *need* to protect the sword arm. He would also have experienced the effect of judging upon the decision of his on or off target.

The more one looks at the problem of transfer from one weapon to another, the more one is convinced that Mini Epee is the best springboard from which to launch out in any of the three directions.

By using some of the information and skills from all three weapons in the Mini Fencing program, a certain amount of preparation work has already *been* done - no matter which weapon the beginner takes up later.

The main and most important concept in Mini Fencing is in the learning principles, *Whole-Part-Whole*, and not the technical skills applied.



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Avoiding Technical Controversy

Canada is not only a bilingual nation, it is also multi-racial. A survey of the leading coaches working in the fencing section of the community show that their countries of origin are: France, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Russia, England, Rumania, Thailand and so on. Many of these coaches are very experienced and well respected in their own country as well as Canada. Can the N.C.C. Committee impose upon these coaches who, after all, will be expected to make the certification program work, a common technique which is bound to be in conflict with the majority and the methods they have used successfully for many years?

The problem would not have been so great some twenty years ago when fencers and coaches followed religiously one or the other classical schools of fencing. These schools allowed little flexibility within their systems and it was possible to easily recognize from which school a fencer or coach originated without knowing their nationality. Since then, these schools have merged in a common interest for international excellence, Russia making the major contribution.

Fencing became less *aesthetic* and more *athletic* during the following years. Less attention was paid generally to exacting techniques involving how to parry or lunge, etc., and more attention was paid in making these movements more effective in competition. The stronghold of supreme aesthetic qualities, the French school, relaxed its control through the insistence of young and progressive coaches.

This modern trend in the evolution of international fencing has provided the answer to the N.C.C. Committee's dilemma. Yes, we can produce coaching manuals without laying down a common technique. We can benefit by the experience of international development over the last 20 years and produce a coaching method which can be interpreted by any coach, Russian, French, Italian - who ever.

These manuals will lay down goals, priorities and principles which are undeniable, regardless from which school the coaches come.

For example, in defining the parry of quarte, the manual could state: "The blade must be carried across the body from the position of sixte, hand in three quarter supination, deflecting the attack clear of the target in the highline. In the final position the hand must remain in three quarter supination, point over the opponent's right shoulder and in line with opponent's eyes. The deflection is made by opposing the defending forte to the attacking foible". This definition implies - and imposes - an exact technical skill reminiscent of the post war French school and will elicit cries of disagreement from those coaches from schools other than French and some coaches even from the modern French school. Are they wrong to disagree? Of course not.

Whether the sword hand is in three quarter supination or the point finishes over the right shoulder of the opponent when parrying in quarte, or, even whether the parry of quarte is taught at all, seems to have no bearing at all upon whether the fencer will be successful in winning in the competition. In other words, there are more important factors when relating technical skills with competitive skills.

How then are we going to define technical skills without becoming involved in controversy? We propose laying down for each movement basic principles which, if applied, should produce an economic and effective technique which can be taught by all of the different coaches in Canada no matter from which school they originate. For instance, in defining the parry of quarte the basic principles are:

1. The defender must oppose the forte of the blade to the attacker's foible.
2. In the finished position of the parry, the point of the defending blade must be in such a position as to facilitate an accurate and fast riposte.
3. The defending blade should travel across the body from right to left (left to right for left handers) in a lateral fashion.
4. The sword hand should remain at the same height all of the time the parry is executed.

5. If the sword hand is withdrawn towards the defenders' target during the parry, the riposte will essentially be slower.
6. If the sword hand is carried too far forward in the parry, it will not be possible to oppose the first principle of defence, the opposition of the forte of the defending blade to the foible of the attacking blade.

We believe that these are basic principles of the defensive parry which can be accepted by all coaches.

These principles of course apply to all of the basic parries explained in this manual. All that is left to define is the path each parry takes.





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PART VIII

FITNESS

WARM UP

It's obvious that before any intensive exercises, a teacher must warm up all muscles of students to avoid any possible injury.. . that's why it's recommended to make a group *warm-up* session before every fencing training if it's possible. Such a session would take about 10 - 20 min., depending on how much time we have, how much space is available and how advanced the group is. With beginners, a longer warm-up is recommended, to be sure their muscles are prepared for special fencing exercises.

At the beginning of a warm-up session, the instructor should not use a typical *speed* or *strength* exercises, especially those which contain elements of competition. That's

why it would not be recommended to start a warm-up with relays, carrying each other, or wrestling. Exercises like running, jumps on one or two legs or some gymnastics for 3 to

5 minutes are always a good way to start any warm-up before the instructor comes to a more intensive part. Exercise intensity will always depend on the general level of physical preparation of the group, and on their age. A more strict form of exercise we will do with a group of adults, more play and different games with a group of children. If we have a group with varied age and level, the intensity should be slowed down for the less advanced, or the group should be divided, until the less advanced achieve a better level of their general conditioning. From time to time, the intensity and the amount of repetition should be increased to assure the improvement of the general endurance and conditioning.

Concerning the choice of different exercises from other sports, we would like to suggest those which are specially useful for fencers and necessary in fencing development.

Gymnastics: stretching exercises,

Track and Field: long jump, multi-jumps, high jump, throws, short runs (60 meters, 100 meters) middle distance runs (400 meters, 1500 meters), jogging etc....

Team games: this type of exercise is specially useful for fencing purposes because:

- a) in team games there are many rhythm changes plus heavy intensity;
- b) movements as in fencing, depend on the situation;
- c) they create such factors and skills as quick orientation, quick reaction, fighting spirit, will to win, team spirit;
- d) they are pleasant and give the active fencer psychological relaxation from strict fencing exercises.

Games are one of the best means to train a fencer's general endurance. The best fencing games serving this purpose are: basketball, volleyball, modified soccer (with small ball - could be a tennis ball - in the salle, without a goal-keeper, with very narrow gates). These team games can be a part of the warm-up program, but **should not** replace completely a warm-up and foot-work.

Special Fencing Endurance

Special fencing endurance is the ability to move freely on the piste in any direction using all kinds of foot-work with sudden change of rhythm from very slow movements to maximum speed movements in all fencing bouts from the first round to the final. It's clear that during a long tournament fencers get tired, especially when they have to fence many difficult bouts against strong opponents later in the tournament. To be able to use all their tactical and technical skills, fencers must have this special fencing endurance trained up to a high level.

Fencing endurance exercises should not be started with beginners, who do not yet know the structure of movements. Only fencers who are well trained in fencing footwork (steps, lunge, step-lunge, ballestra) can be exposed to a speed and fencing endurance training.

Some example exercises to develop special fencing endurance:

- steps in *en garde* position with full speed (relays, races, etc....);
- lunges, steps-lunge and ballestra-lunges made repetitively at full speed in specified period of time or on specified distance;
- all kind of running exercises in *en garde* position;
- successive bouts without a break with 3-6 fencers;
- bouts up to 10-15 hits and more.

The character of such exercises can be changed by increasing their intensity and the number of repetitions. It can be and is advisable, after fencers reach the desired level of training, to increase the intensity, but of course, the range of difficulty depends on the experience of the group or individual fencer, and should be started in small doses...

Speed is one of the most important elements in a fencer's development, to guarantee some successes in the fencer's career. To train for speed, the following example exercises are recommended:

- run with change of rhythm, sudden speed accelerations and reductions;
- a fleche or step-fleche made during slow run;
- races and relays in *en garde* position, with lunges and with step-lunges;
- races and relays with jumps on 1 or both legs;
- catching a fencing glove with fleche from different positions (low start position - sprints, fencing position, from sitting on the floor, from lying on the floor, etc....)
- exercises with a jumping rope;
- side-jumps over a foil on both or one leg with maximum speed.

In training the speed of hand (exercises with weapons), the instructor must remember that only a fencer who knows the structure of the movement can be exposed to speed-up exercises, especially if the instructor tries to train for maximum speed. In this case, the most important principle is: first precision, then speed. Speeding the fencing movements too early can cause a lack of precision and can fix bad habits (automatically making technical mistakes).

Repeating an exercise with the highest speed can help in its development, but it should be the only way to develop speed. Many times, those fencers who train too much with maximal speed are not the fastest during fencing competition. The reason is that repeating some movements always with the same (*even fast*) speed, leads to the stagnation of speed on the same level. Fencing speed must be trained in very different ways the same exercises and movements must be repeated with different speeds and different rhythm, from very slow controlled movements up to the fastest accelerations.

Also it's very important to remember, that in order to use all kinds of speed exercises in a fencing lesson, the student must do those exercises with a maximum relaxation, so that the movements are fast but not jerky. Only the relaxed hand is able to control its speed and change its rhythm according to the situation in a bout, limiting its movements to the necessary minimum. Jerky speed leads to uncontrolled and imprecise movements, which very soon become automatic and start to hamper the fencer's form from further development. The best ally of fencing speed is muscle relaxation, that rule must be remembered by every instructor.

Examples of Group Warm-up, and Foot work with elements of General Conditioning, Endurance, and Speed

Example

1. Warm-up

- run around the room, join in pairs when running,
- game *tag* in pairs,
- run in pairs around the room (all in one direction) change direction on instructor's signal,
- run in pairs around the room slowly, sprint on the instructor's signal, slow down for another signal,
- instructor creates two (or more) teams with equal number of students in each: series of relays (the winning team gets a point for each winning relay)
 - running forward relay
 - running backward relay relay with steps forward
 - relay with steps backward
 - relay with lunges etc.
- fleches from "low" position (both hands on the floor - like the start of 100 metres run with right leg, left handers - left leg, moved a little forward). This exercise is best done with a glove. Instructor keeps a fencing glove in his hand. He is standing in front of the student at a distance of about 4 meters. Lifting the hand with the glove is a signal for the student to start fleche with his right (left) hand, trying to take the glove from the instructor's hand.
- the same from sitting *on the floor* position: instructor throws a glove up, a student must get up and catch the glove with fleche.
- the same from lying *on the floor* position (on the back, on the stomach, etc...)
- finally, the same from *en garde* position. The instructor can throw the glove across the room, to somebody standing in front of him, and the exercising student must intercept the glove while it's on its way from the instructor to receiver.

Foot-work

- in pairs: one makes a lunge, another presses gently the partners hips deeper to the floor. Change after 30-40 sec.
- lunge with partner's resistance. One is standing in *en garde*, another behind him holds his back hand, while the first one tries to make a lunge, his partner gives him enough resistance to do the lunge in very slow motion. Attn: The student who makes a lunge with resistance must keep his body straight at all times and the back leg must be bent most of the time except for the moment when the lunge is completed. Repeat the exercise 8 to 10 times, then change in pairs.
- lunge individually in student's own rhythm, putting special attention on the kick of the leg.
- lunge on instructor's signal.
- series of small steps forward and backward, following the instructor. On a signal, step-lunge. Put attention to change a rhythm of steps, and acceleration in lunge.
- the same, plus ballestra-lunge. The students keep distance from the instructor, on one signal (for ex.: lowering left hand) they do step-lunge, for another signal (for ex.: lowering both hands) ballestra-lunge, etc.
- steps forward and backward in students own rhythm. On instructor's signal, fleche.
- race in pairs in *en garde* position - steps forward, across the room. Each pair starts the race separately on instructor's signal. Repeat the race 5 to 6 times. The same can be done with steps backward.
- run slowly around the room, on instructor's signal, step-fleche.

Example (for more advanced students)

Warm-up 10-15 minutes

- run around a room, run lifting knees, skipping - run with rhythm change (faster on one instructor's signal, slower on another signal) - run with a change of the direction to opposite on instructor's signal.
- group in a line or in a circle: rotating upper body and hands in different directions.
- jumps across the room on one leg.
 - the same on another;
 - the same on two legs;
 - jumps from squat to squat across the room;
 - the same (from squat to squat) in fencing position;
 - in pairs: one is sitting on the floor with straight legs, another makes 40 to 50 side jumps over his legs with maximum speed.
- in pairs: one keeps partners legs a little over the knees, another makes 10 to 20 dynamic push-ups.
- in pairs: both partners are sitting on the floor in front of each other, feet locked, simultaneously they make 15 to 20 sit-ups.
- slow run around the room

Foot-work 10-20 minutes (depending of the number of repetitions)

- slow steps forward and backward, on instructor's command.
- slow lunge, hold the lunge position, press the hips as far down as possible
 - several lunges in students own rhythm, paying attention to correct execution;
 - several lunges on instructor's signal with a maximum length (with attention on a front leg's kick);
 - several lunges on instructor's signal with a maximum speed and length;
 - in pairs: one is *a leader* another a follower. *Follower* keeps a fencing distance to *a leader* who moves in fencing position forward and backward. From time to time the leader makes a lunge, the *follower* must do a step back at the same time and riposte with his lunge. After one or two minutes, change the leader.
- step-lunge in students own rhythm and different moments of his foot-work (after steps back, forward, etc....)
 - the same on instructor's signal with acceleration of the end of the lunge.
 - in pairs: the same exercise a leader and a follower but using step-lunge instead of lunge.
- ballestra lunge in students own rhythm
 - the same on instructor's command with faster speed;
 - jumps forward - step, on instructor's signal (for ex: clapping hands) followed by ballestra-lunge for another signal (for ex: lifting left hand);
 - in pairs: the same exercise with a leader and a follower but using ballestra-lunge instead of lunge.

Instructor mixes all the foot-work elements; for example:

- for lowering the right arm: a lunge;
- for lowering the left arm: step-lunge;
- for lowering both arms: ballestra-lunge;
- for lifting both arms: fleche ... etc.

(Attn: the choice of signals is of course up to the instructor, but every instructor should try to keep the same system of signals during every training session.)

- At the end of the foot-work, students can do some relaxing exercises; sit down on the floor, relax legs muscles, slow run around the room, relax arms ... etc.

Attention:

A program as proposed above must be realized with modifications according to the level of students, their physical preparation, and their foot-work advancement.

PART IX
EVALUATION

LEVEL 2 EXAMINATION PRINCIPLES

Coaches attending these courses will be evaluated on a pass or fail basis. This will comprise an examination in two parts:

1. **Written paper** - pre-course study. Pass mark 60%.
2. **Practical coaching** - during course. Pass mark 60%.

Note: candidates must obtain a pass in both parts.

1. **Written Paper:**

- 1.1 Included in the following pages is a tear out written paper which must be completed by all candidates before attending the certification course. (pink sheets)
- 1.2 A minimum of five (5) hours has been allocated as pre-course study and the completion of this written paper.
- 1.3 This completed paper must be handed in to the Course Conductor on the first day of the certification course.
- 1.4 The paper will be assessed by the Course Conductor or committee designated by the province.
- 1.5 Copies of these papers will be attached to the course documentation sent to the Technical Director at the C.F.A. National Office.
- 1.6 The written paper questions are based upon the course objectives (theory), stated at the beginning of this manual and are designed to evaluate the coach's understanding of these objectives.

2. **Practical Coaching:**

- 2.1 The final sessions on the Sunday afternoon (three hours minimum) in the case of a weekend course, or the final sessions of the same duration of any other course format (outline - examinations page 80) will be allocated to the practical examinations.
- 2.2 Selection for the practical examination will be made by the Course Conductor during the course based upon;
 - the coach's previous knowledge and ability,
 - understanding of the coaching principles,
 - ability to organize and conduct a group,
 - interest, enthusiasm and personality.
- 2.3 Only coaches who, in the opinion of the Course Conductor, have a reasonable chance of passing will be accepted as a candidate for examinations.
- 2.4 The practical examination will only deal with the conducting of a group practice, all coaches attending the course will form the group for this purpose.

3. **Examiners:**

- 3.1 Two (2) examiners will be designated by the province will not be members of the course.
- 3.2 Examiners must already be certified (technical) at the level of the examination (Level 2).
- 3.3 In cases of indecision, the Course Conductor will give a course assessment which will decide whether the candidate will pass or fail.

Examination Procedure

1. The candidates will draw a card upon which will be written one of the 4 fundamental groups of technical skills.
 - en garde - balance - mobility - distance
 - basic offence
 - basic defence
 - basic counter offence.
2. The candidate's lesson will be confined to the technical skills stated on the card and relating to the chosen weapon.
3. The order of lessons will then be arranged by the examiners, first by weapon, then by progression of lesson as listed above.
4. This will then dictate the order in which the candidates will appear for assessment.
5. All candidates will have a chance to see the group fencing in order to plan the group lesson before being assessed.
6. If the number of candidates exceed the number of cards, candidates with the same lesson card may continue the theme of the previous lesson or progress to another within the same area of technical skills stated on the card.
7. The duration of the group lesson will be approximately 15 minutes.
8. The pass mark is 60%.

Examination Notes

1. The group practice will be based upon the following format;

Before the lesson:

- observe - watch the group fencing
- deduce - decide what your lesson is going to be
- apply - construct your lesson.

During the examination:

- introduction - tell the group what the lesson will be and why (Part-Whole or Project).
- demonstration - show the movement or problem.
- explanation - repeat the demonstration and explain how - why - when.
- activity - get the group to work.
- feedback - observe the work and ask questions
- re-assess - modify the activity or progress.

Note: the final part of the activity must always be a whole practice, trying out the movement under competitive conditions. All of these principles are explained in the Level I Manual page 38. Read also 'Further Considerations' page 41.

2. All candidates must be conversant with all of the fundamentals of the chosen weapon, e.g. en garde, balance - mobility - distance, basic offence, defence and counter offence.
3. The following points are worth considering when observing the group and planning a lesson.
 - technique - are the movements being executed efficiently and physically economically? Watch for such movements as; balance mobility, sword manipulation, lunging and fleching.
 - Distance - is the correct fencing distance being maintained according to the skill and strength of the opponent?
 - Timing - are deceptions and evasions being executed at the correct time. Is speed being used correctly or are they fencing too fast or too slow?
 - Tactics - are they selecting the correct answers to the opponent's game. Attacking or riposting when the opponent cannot retire, stop hitting on bent arm attacks, using counter time on the habitual stop hitter.