Ákos Patócs

InterAct Fencing

Sabre

Publio

Interact fencing

SABRE

Ákos Patócs

2016

Publio

www.publio.hu

To the Reader

The primary goal of INTERACT FENCING – SABRE is to provide help in the better understanding of the weapon for fencers and novice coaches, and also, to assist the conscious and creative construction of individual lessons and pair exercises.

In describing exercises and elements of technique by the help of Hungarian terminology and introducing part practice and corrective exercises I aimed to compile an acquirable, objective teaching material that can be applied easily in your everyday training practice. The method of discussion (read-watch-read-execute) and the video content accessible via QR codes is a unique way of presenting and elaborating on the material not just in fencing, but also in the teaching methodology of other sports.

Some QR-coded videos demonstrate the actions themselves, others show the action and also its preparatory exercises. Videos were shot in the Debrecen Fencing Club and in TFSE Fencing Club by the help of three fencers (13, 18 and 28 years of age) and TFSE coaches. The quality of executions reflect their current disposition and knowledge level, we do not consider it a pattern to follow, but rather as a possible mode of execution or as an example. Also, these exercises serve as just a sample, the number of possible variations is high, every coach has to develop their own exercises adapted to their fencers and circumstances.

The first draft of the book was a collection of notes taken for private use; I wanted to collect and organize what I have learned from my masters, professors and pupils, which later in my work of coach education and evaluation proved to be an indispensable tool.

In the past decades the coach education and the course material have barely changed, unlike the processing and the application of that material. Fencers of national and international pistes have to face monthly new situations, new approaches, and such solutions that they have not encountered before. Fencing develops by leaps and bounds, its continuum is unbroken, hence coach education must keep the pace. Similarly to other sport branches, it is high time to reconsider (and at the same time adhering to values) and supervise rigid doctrines, books, teaching principles and methods, and if failing the test of modern times, they should be revised accordingly.

By the principles and techniques introduced in INTERACT FENCING – SABRE, a new examination system was set up conforming to all the needs and prescribed rules, moreover, in contrast to the previous practice, this examination succeeded in establishing an objective performance assessment.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the complex nature of movement acquisition –its success or failure is influenced by multiple factors. To ensure the effectiveness of the learning process (i.e. to make it clear and easily comprehensible for pupils) figures and detailed descriptions, exercises, sample practices and QR coded videos assist you throughout your reading.

Some of the statements written in 2016 may not be valid or irrelevant in a few years due to the rapid development of fencing or rule changes, however, I considered significant to compile this book, because the approach, the format and mode of discussion represents a novelty, and it can give some new perspectives to the sport. Though, some might not like this way of presenting information (just as I myself still do not use a smart phone), but I am sure others will benefit from it greatly.

Acknowledgements

Here I would like to express my thanks to the University of Physical Education and to the Department of Combat Sports for their support in the renewal of the examination system, and its introduction in fencing education and also in different levels and areas of coach education.

Also, I want to thank Katinka Battai Sugár, Ádám Urbán, Gergely Kotsis and Dr. Gábor Pézsa for their help in demonstrating the recorded exercises, and László Dávid, who did an excellent job with cutting the videos and with the creation of their homogeneous design. Furthermore, the observations and suggestions offered during the video compilation were really helpful, thank you Miklós Kósa and Gergely Sárközi.

- **Movement Action in General**

Movement action as a tool for the acquisition of general learning knowledge /education.

Cultivated movement, movement knowledge and basic movement forms and skills form part of general knowledge. Every educated people should possess a body culture knowledge base. Body culture consists of elements like psychomotor skills, conscious maintenance of healthy lifestyle, which besides motor content presupposes lifestyle techniques, personal hygiene habits, and related theoretical knowledge. In addition to its actual expediency, the age and skill appropriate body culture of pupils and sportsmen carries future values and benefits (physical, psychological and social health, healthy physical development, etc.), so long as it means creating the chance of the better life.

Open and Closed Skills

Within the field of sports sport branches can be classified into open and closed skills sports. This classification was used by E. C. Poulton, who differentiated open and closed skills according to the origin of stimuli, therefore, it is based on the analysis of the effect environmental factors have on action, to what extent a skill is influenced by factors such as opponents, teammates and target objects and tools in relation to the sportsman executing the action. Climate factors could be taken into consideration only in extreme cases.

Open Motor Skills

In those branches of sport where motor skills are open in character (e.g. ball games: handball, basketball, soccer, water polo; combat sports: judo, boxing, wrestling, fencing, etc.) environmental factors are in constant movement, their location and speed varies. The competitive situations are not predictable, however, preparation and anticipation are possible and recomended. Athletes' aim is to create a competitive situation in which their actions are successful, since they possess the necessary already learned and stored motor solutions. The number of motor skills that can be learned is high and variable. Motor skills can be adapted to a given situation, and can be modified during execution.

In open skills sports the perception of outside environmental signals is of primary importance from the aspect of success; strategy and tactics, the correct recognition of the opponent's intention and his deception has a crucial role in the outcome of the fight.

The movement repertoire of combat sports range from numerous physical tasks, hand- and footwork, distance keeping or invasion, thorough hits, kicks, blocks or even cuts, parries, or thrust, etc., and these elements organized into actions are executed in the form of a conscious or unconscious activity. Often recurring stimuli are paired with sensorimotor responses. Sensorimotor responses consist of the following steps: perception of recognized stimulus, the observation/procession of stimuli, waiting for the appropriate moment, and the final step of the action is movement execution.

In fencing various sensorimotor responses can be given to the opponent's action depending on the detected stimuli, like simple, multiple or compound responses. Along with physical, coordination and sensorimotor skills and responses, tactics, attention, perception, level of arousal, performance motivation and confidence have also a prominent role in a competitive situation. (Czajkowski 2011).

Closed Skills

Branches of sport in which during the acquisition phase the execution of an action is aided primarily by inward signals. E. g.: athletic throws (like shot put, discus throw, etc.), jumps, gymnastics, figure skating,etc.

Fencing - Sport Profile

Taking its sport profile as a starting point, fencing is a combat sport, its essence to give hits or cuts unto the opponent's valid target by edged weapon in hand, and get as few as possible in the meantime. There is no body contact between the fencers.

To give a hit, a fencer has to execute an action or counteraction from the appropriate distance, with appropriate speed and in the appropriate time by which he can score in the given situation. Usually, there can be more than just one solution in a combat situation.

Fencing challenges competitors mentally and physically, and simultaneously tests their self-discipline, patience, self-control, competitiveness, reactive stress tolerance and determination. Adequate physical endurance is indispensable, since during a bout the whole body is in motion, quick reactions are required, and for this loose sinews are needed. Since fencing improves concentration, it can help children with learning difficulties, and also helps in retaining mental freshness in the case of adults and senior people.

2. Characteristics of Sabre Fencing

Sword

The total maximum length of the sabre is 105 cm. When it is assembled ready for use, its total weight cannot exceed 500 grams. The cross-section of the blade is quasi-rectangular and its length cannot exceed 88 cm. The material of the grip can be made of wood, rubber-covered aluminium or plastic. The total length of the grip and the pommel (i.e. end screw) may not exceed 17 cm. The guard is made of a single solid plate that is smooth on the outside, its surface is evenly convex, without rim or holes.

Target

The valid target has a defining role in the technique of each weapon, particularly in sabre fencing, where the possibility of cuts and thrusts significantly extends the number of variations. While in the thrusting weapons we have to think “only” in a single plane, in sabre the cut places the sword and target of the opponent in a new spatial relationship.

The target is the part of the body that is above the horizontal line crossing the upper points of the bend between the thigh and the trunk of the fencer in the on guard position. If a hit or cut is made off target, e.g. on the hand or the leg, it is not counted as a hit. It does not interrupt the fencing and does not annul later hits or cuts. The chief referee has to penalize the fencer who replaces the target with an invalid one either by covering (e.g. “unarmed hand parry”) or by abnormal movement (e.g. jumping up). In judging the materiality of a hit, only the signals of the machine have to be followed. The referee can judge a hit only in that case when it is properly signalled by the machine. Exception to this rule emerges in the case of penalty hits, e.g. when the fencer crosses the back boundary line with both legs. Hits scored by movements before “Play!” or after “Halt!” cannot be taken into consideration.

Mode of Making a Hit

Sabre is a thrusting and cutting weapon. Every cut executed with the edge or the flat side or the point or the tip of the blade is considered to be a hit. Hits cannot be made with the guard. Hits made in this way have to be annulled, and the fencer making such a hit has to be punished according to the rulebook. Within the conventional nature of sabre (from line position) a thrust where the point misses but the blade slides on the target causing a light on the scoring apparatus does not have priority (called passé). Therefore, if the other fencer (attacker) makes a correctly executed cut or thrust this hit has priority. Blade crossing cuts, which simultaneously arrive at the opponent’s target and his sabre, are valid whenever they arrive cleanly on the target area.

Conventions

Sabre, like foil, is a conventional weapon, i.e. the validity of the awarded hits are not determined solely by temporal priority but by conventions laid down in rules as well. The conventions elaborate

the actions of the attacker and defender, so they state the criteria of attack, parry-riposte and counterattack. I will not elaborate further on these conventions, because it is more a question of knowing the rules than that of the theory of fencing.

Distance

In discussion of the characteristics of sabre fencing the significance of the applied fencing distance cannot be emphasized enough. The fact that the arm is part of the valid target means that in some cases not just the concrete distance between the fencers, but the part of the target being attacked is also an important factor in the shortening of the distance to make a hit. The master should never forget this condition. During the course of a lesson he should pay attention to always maintaining the optimal distance for the action being taught.

The closed, short, middle and long distance or the out of distance situation occur in the teaching of all the three weapons and in free fencing as well. In sabre and in epée there could be two or three distances at the same time from a starting position, e.g. from tierce or sixte position. As the sword arm is part of the target in both weapons, if the fencers are situated in a short distance in relation to the sword arm, they are at middle distance in relation to the body.

Holding the Sword

The delicate and secure grip of the sabre is just as basic a requirement of the improvement of a fencer as the correct footwork. Thus, the learning of the proper presentation of the sabre deserves especial attention. The fact that the muscular apparatus of the sword hand is in connection with the muscles of the arm which is related to the surface muscles of the pectoral girdle and the back should not be ignored. Consequently, if the pupil's grip is tense, i.e. he contracts his muscles unnecessarily; he makes it impossible to relax the antagonists during the movement, which blocks the proper execution of any exercise. The sabre should be held rather than grasped. The thumb, the index and the little finger play the main role in the directing of the weapon and in the leading of the blade.

I mention the proper grip of the sword within the characteristics of sabre fencing because there is much less chance of making an error (based on the holding of the sword) with the widely used "pistol" grip, in the case of thrusting weapons, than with the straight grip used in sabre.

The characteristics of sabre fencing can be observed most obviously in the relation of attack and defence. Compared to thrusting weapons, defence is harder in sabre due to the enlarged target and the conventional character, and because it has more dynamic footwork and attacks in comparison to the other two weapons. Moreover, from the point of view of efficacy it does not matter which part of the blade is used to make the hit. The tip does not need to be depressed (as with the thrusting weapons) to activate the machine. As a result of this, sabre fencing does not require as much precision as do the thrusting weapons. That is why it is so much more dynamic and provides the possibility of more spatial variations for the attacker or riposting fencer. Because of the conventional character of the weapon, the 'out of time' counterattack as a defence is not appropriate, whilst in epée it is widely used arising from the enlarged target, the short tempo and the character of that weapon.

3. Classification of Sabre Actions

From

- Strategic and Tactical,
- Teaching Methodological,
- Combat Sports' Theoretical aspects

3.1. Strategic and Tactical Aspect

In my opinion, Strategy and Tactics should not be separated because the fencer should acquire these two related ways of thinking in a complex form.

By *tactics* I mean such a quick and mobile thinking unit that emerges when the fight has already started, in fencing, after the order "Play".

Strategy is the thinking phase before the fight, in which the opponent as an active problem-creating system is not present. The fencer has time to construct a strategy and to logically think over what he intends to do based on his experience and on previous happenings, e.g. known opponent or previous hit. In this phase it should not be forgotten that the opponent is present in this procedure of thought inactively. Thus this phase should last strictly till "Play".

If, for instance, my opponent does something other than what I have calculated strategically, in the absence of tactical thinking I cannot change my original plan, and could easily be beaten. This is because, in my opinion, my opponent was thinking illogically. This is a luxury we cannot afford ourselves nor to our fencers, and is why strategy and tactics later are discussed together.

The most important and fundamental strategic and tactical action system is the structure of the five-stage counter tempo (Figure 1). The construction itself is purely strategic, the previously mentioned tactic (so that the lesson should not be merely a demonstration of technical skills) can be sneaked into the education, if during the execution of exercises some unexpected elements are inserted, requiring creative thinking from the pupil e.g. master does not let the pupil hit; or steps in with a parry and the pupil should riposte, or the master steps out of the expected distance and the pupil should make a hit by modifying his attack. During the course of teaching it is very useful to apply this educational method because in this way even the simplest exercises have at least three variations. The correct technique and coordination will be acquired anyway (by the master letting the pupil hit more often), and the pupil faces similar decision tasks in free fencing.

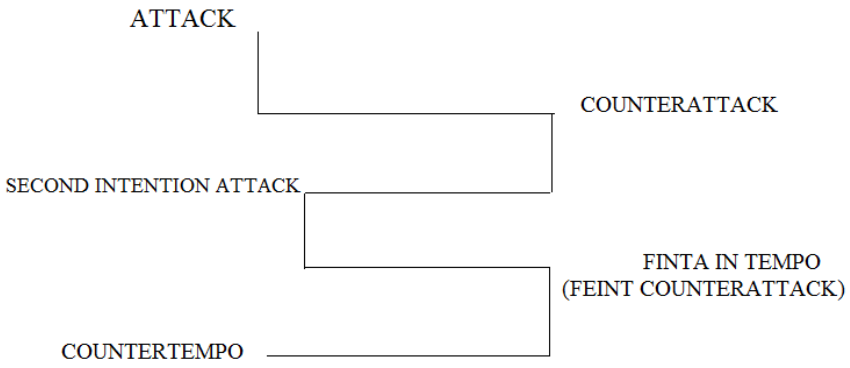

Figure 1

3.2. Teaching Methodological Aspect

There are two approaches to this system of actions. The actions are built on each other linearly or concentrically. These two approaches represent two basically different teaching principles: the linear and the spiral teaching principle.

In the *linear system* the path is taken from the simple toward the more complex. Masters following the linear principle teach new exercises exclusively when their pupils know the previous ones perfectly with ease. Thus the master does not have to waste time for correcting earlier taught exercises as this principle assumes or rather requires perfect knowledge of them.

The disadvantage of the linear system is that teaching time can seem to be lengthy and wearisome.

In the concentric or spiral system we build the exercises that logically can be grouped around one another continuously, spirally. Masters representing the spiral principle do not wait till the execution of an exercise is perfect, though during the course of teaching they often return to the not perfectly acquired, but known exercises. In this way the pupil learns and experiences the essence of the movements and the inner correlations of the sport.

Two teaching methods exist within these two principles: the partial and the global method.

The core of the *partial method* is that after the primary synthesis each leading element is taught according to its place and significance within the whole.The pupil reaches the acquisition of the activity in an inductive way.The partial teaching method, also known as the ‘whole-part-whole’ method, can be accurately applied during correction. So pupils learn the whole broken into components. With this method, pupils can acquire perfect technique. Though if this kind of teaching lasts long or it is exclusive, adaptation to unexpected situations may become harder and this may transform into an obstacle in the way of improvement.

The *global method* starts from the moving as a whole toward the treatment of components, i.e. it is a deductive approach, also known in modern education as 'problem-based' learning. The advantage of global teaching method is allowing the pupil to acquire great knowledge within a short period of time. The essence and usability of moving or movement is taught to the pupil. The appearance of unexpected elements and the improvement does not generate problems. The good problem-solving and situation recognition ability gained through this method are scarcely joined with immaculate technique or aesthetic movements. But "in fencing achievement is measured in hits not in beauty."

Joan N. Vickers (University of Calgary) has conducted psychological research in the field of sport pedagogy (Vickers cop. 2007). She examined the movement keeping ability of two groups six days and ten weeks after the movement learning procedure. One group was taught in a form that she called "blocked practice". Blocked practice meant in this context that the teaching starts with the simple and proceeds towards the complex. Vickers distinguished 4 levels of knowledge and these levels were acquired by the group in a sequential order. She taught the other group in a random practice, i.e. in a global way, without division.

In this case the four levels were learned simultaneously. Before the discussion of the results, we should mention the five basic stages of sport pedagogy (teaching):

- Estimation of starting level
- Providing instruction
- Practice
- Feedback
- Evaluation

The fifth basic event is the most important both for educator (master) and athlete. The fifth phase of motor ability is the championship or competition.

During the fifth – evaluative – phase pupils/athletes are usually tense when they have to give account of their knowledge. Will the pupil be able to keep his efficacy on as high a level as possible? The answer is a really strange one, as the group taught in the partial way reached better results on the first four levels than the global group (random practice). *Conversely, in the fifth phase during the evaluation they often failed, while the random group here performed outstandingly well.*(Figure 2) (Vickers p. 181).

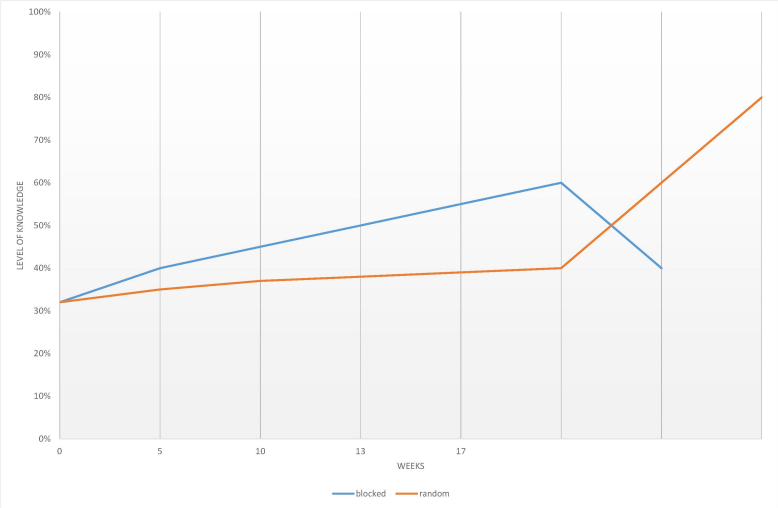

Figure 2

This experiment proves scientifically the significance of global teaching, especially in the solving of life-like (fight) situations.

Notwithstanding, my belief is that every master should be acquainted with both methods and should choose the proper one with the pupil's actual disposition in mind. I can state this so definitively because as a pupil I have had the opportunity of getting acquainted with both principles and methods, and I can relate the advantages and disadvantages on the basis of personal experience.

3.3. Aspect of Combat Sports' Theory (applicable technical elements)

The classification from this point of view differs from the division found in fencing literature. The following table represents those technical elements which are noticed and judged by the referee. (Figure 3 on page 29)

Change thrusts and cuts and disengage cuts are marked because in today's 'modern' sabre fencing the referee – despite the conventions – judges these groups of actions against the executor. It is so, because in most cases he does not notice them due to the great speed. In a competition, a fencer gains only disadvantage through their application, although the teaching of change or disengage thrusts and cuts are essential to the acquisition of correct technique. There are few exercises which would improve the feeling of the blade (sentiment de fer) or kinaesthetic perception to such an extent.

4. Principles of Teaching Methodology

This chapter is based on the book titled The Methodology of Sabre Fencing (A kardvívás módszertana) by Zoltán Beke and József Polgár. General principles will be highlighted here that serve as foundational guidelines in the teaching-educational process where theory should be accompanied by practice.

The most important principles are the following:

- *Principle of Up-to-date Knowledge*: The coach always has to be up-to-date with the latest researches; he/she has to be familiar with the causes and background of good or bad results. Routine is not enough; a coach should aim at the new and the better.

- *Principle of Awareness*: A coach always has to make his/her pupils be aware of what they are doing and why. The athlete also has to stand on the piste possessing a basic professional knowledge and knowing the technical vocabulary of his/her sport.

- *Principle of Demonstration*: in many cases it is easier to demonstrate a movement or a series of movements than explaining them. Thus, during practical sessions the demonstration is of high significance, bearing in mind that side demonstration can also help your pupils.

- Steps:
  - introduction of exercise by the use of correct terminology
  - exemplary demonstration depending on the form of teaching by coach, peer, a member of the group
  - practice of exercise escorted by explanation, we should draw special attention to the essence of the movement and to its main moves, the given movement should be practiced in divided into part and blocks. Parts can be practised separately if their importance requires it, or to avoid mistakes
  - continuous execution of movement

- *Principle of Interrelated Theory and Practice*: During the teaching process such actions should be taught and such situations should be produced that can occur in free fencing and that can be used effectively.