A Brief Examination of Period Sword and Buckler Applied to SCA Heavy Combat.

Introduction

This document is intended to briefly survey some of the most prominent period sources for sword and buckler fencing from the 14th-16th century, with an eye to applying the techniques and concepts in SCA armored combat.
The emphasis will be on the 6 plays of Master Lignitzer (see appendix for details about the masters discussed), which are found embedded in other German lineage fechtbuchs (fight books), such as Ringeck and Von Danzig. Ligntizer describes a series of engagements that emphasize core concepts of the Lichtenaur tradition. He does not however, describe starting positions or guards. This is most likely because the author assumed a basic knowledge base already gained from the longsword portions of the fechtbuchs. In addition, this document will explore the wards of i.33, the earliest sword and buckler treatise currently known, as well as the "Württemberg Treatise" of Hans Talhoffer (see appendix), and briefly acknowledge some effects of the Bolognese tradition on the interpretation useful for SCA heavy combat, in the works of Master Marrozzo (see appendix).

Core Concepts and Assumptions

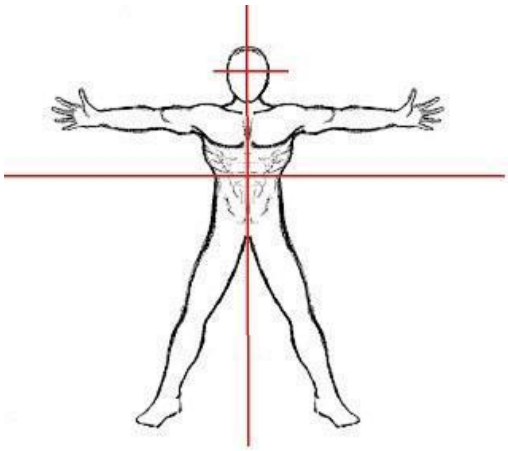
There are several core concepts that need to be explored to understand how and why period techniques were used, particularly if one is trying to use them in SCA baton combat.

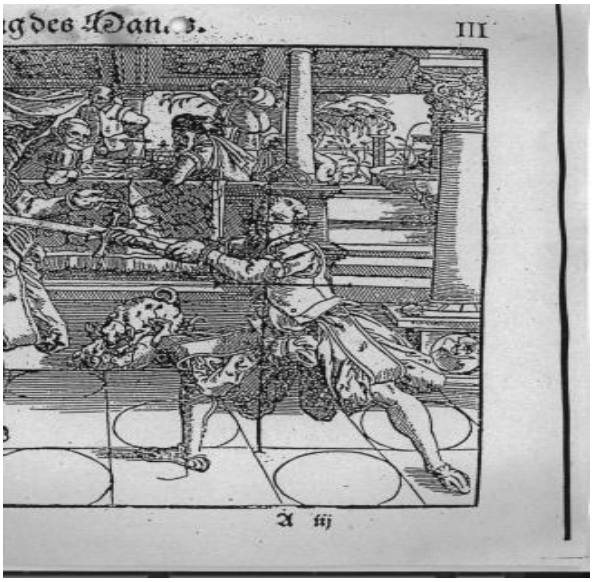
The first important concept to understand is that a buckler is NOT a shield as is generally thought of in the SCA. Although there are several different

starting positions outside of engagement range, the buckler is generally shown paired with the sword at engagement. This provides protection for the sword hand, which was generally holding a simple cruciform hilt without a gauntlet. Lignitzer even tells us in the first play that our sword hand should be held “by the thumb” of the buckler hand, almost mimicking the grip of a two handed sword (MS 1449, 80r). This means that we will generally be attacking and defending with the sword, and the buckler will only separate to close lines after an initial engagement is made. This is very different than what is commonly seen in the SCA, where fighters often want to keep their buckler in a guard position, and punch out to block incoming blows, similar to the way they are taught to use large center gripped shields.

The other concepts in Lignitzer’s plays are those commonly held as central to the German tradition of fencing in general; dominating the center line, controlling engagement through gaining and keeping initiative, using sensitivity to decide if you have to be “hard” or “soft” at the sword, and stepping while cutting. Some of these concepts are more challenging to apply in SCA heavy because they assume dynamics in the fight that might not exist in our particular combat sport. In general, the period manuals assume parity of weapons, which is unlikely to be the case if you are fighting with a buckler in a tournament.

Division of the person: German masters divide the body into 4 quadrants, upper left and right, as well as lower left and right. Meyer, a later period German master repeats this division for the head as well, since he says it is such a popular target. (1.4r) Meyer calls these the “four openings”, and refers to these targets constantly when describing techniques.





Unless someone chooses to forgo their usual style and match you, the sword and buckler combatant will be often be facing dissimilar styles, usually a larger shield. This also means that the sword on sword “bind” that is shown and described in many of the period manuals will occur less frequently, if at all, since opponents are less likely to defend with their sword, and less likely to keep them in position to control the center line. It is also worth noting that rattan batons interact in a significantly different fashion compared to steel swords. The batons tend to bounce, rather that “bite” or “bind” when two cuts connect with each other. This, compared with the generally higher power level and percussive style impact, means that most SCA heavy fighters will feel “hard” in the bind, making the period techniques that cut around a “hard bind” more useful that techniques that thrust or cut from a “soft bind”

Looking at medieval manuals in general, the most common described attack is the “oberhau”, which is a descending diagonal cut, usually from the right shoulder. Many of the strategies and techniques described are dealing with or building off of this technique. In SCA heavy however, the

most common attack (and usually the first technique taught) is the “flat snap” This is a horizontal attack designed to defeat the presumed shield of the opponent. Not explicitly taught in the earliest of manuals, the cut that most resembles this technique from the fechtbuchs is the “mittlehau” (literally “middle cut”). This change in body mechanics and angle of attack will necessitate adaptations in how we apply the techniques described in the period manuals.

Finally, the assumed range of the fight is generally different than that often found in SCA heavy combat. The plays of Master Litgnitzer (and indeed most medieval manuals) assume a range where the opponents must step with their cut in order to strike the opponent. Due to the lack of grappling, the type of power generation used, and the disallowance of hands as a legal target, SCA heavy combat is often started at a closer range, and opponents are more likely to stand in close range and trade multiple blows. This means that it becomes incumbent on the buckler fighter to control the range in a manner that allows for the proper use of their tools.

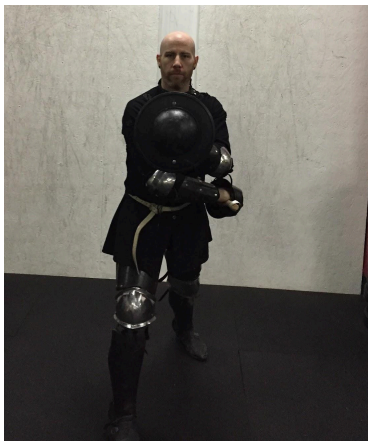
Starting Guards

I.33

We have two ways to determine the stances or guards for sword and buckler used in Lignitzer’s plays. We can extrapolate from the longsword guards used in the contemporary fechtbuchs his plays are embedded in, or we can examine the guards shown in I.33. and Talhoffer.
There is some crossover, so all three will be examined.
I.33 shows seven common wards, being under the buckler arm (1), over the right and left shoulder (2&3), over the head (4), held low and back (5) point forward, with the hand “at the breast”(6) and variations of lonpoint(7).



















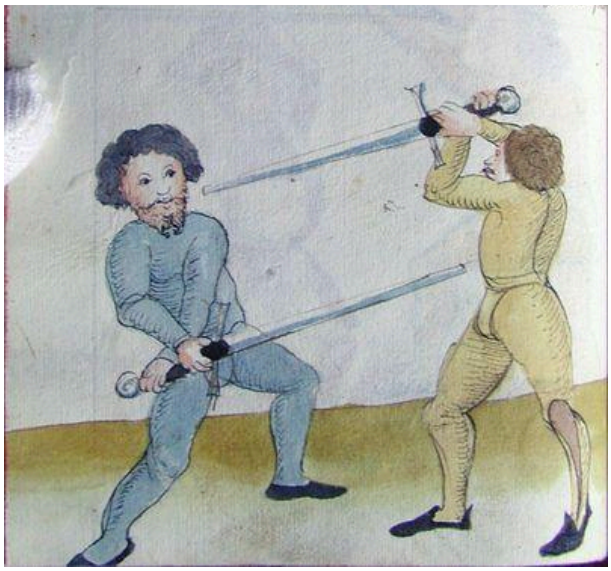
An eighth important position that shows up constantly throughout the i.33 manual is “half-shield”



All of these wards perform a particular function guiding the attacks or responses to attacks.
The author makes a point of stating that all actions from ANY ward end in longpoint (1V)
Why these guards are important- the author of I.33 asserts that all fighters move through these positions when attacking.

Lignitzer’s guards extrapolated from the Fechtbuchs

As stated earlier, Master Lignitzer’s buckler plays are embedded inside of other fechtbuchs of the period. In these fechtbuchs, we are told there are four guards worth knowing.
Ochs (OX) is the upper point forward guard. Plfug (Plow) is the lower point forward guard.
Vom Tag (Roof guard) is the high guard, and Alber (Fool) is the low guard.







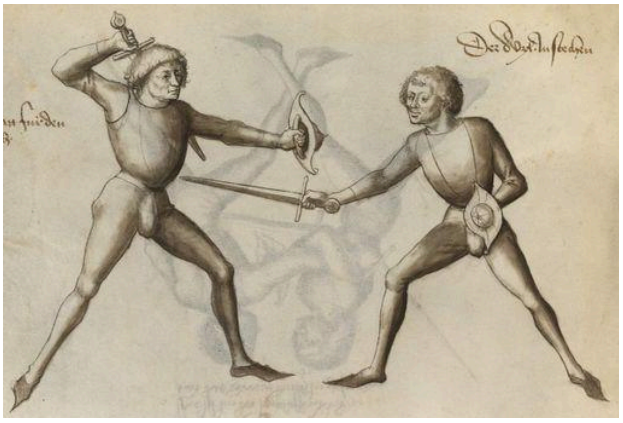






This interpretation of the buckler guards seems supported by the “free stances (117r, 120v) in Talhoffer’s treatise:





Marozzo’s Guards

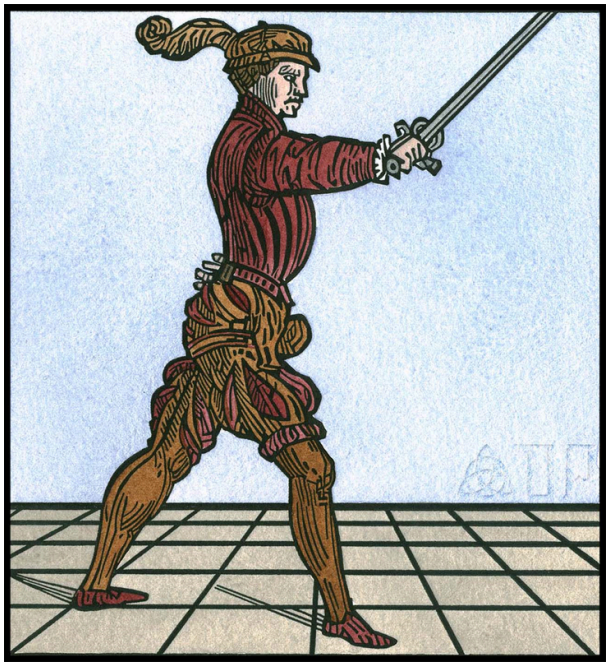
Although we see some similarities in guards, one notable difference is Marozzo’s willingness to carry the sword hand in front of the buckler. I believe this is due to the additional hand protection in proto-complex and complex hilts. Despite the increase in sword forward positions, when we examine Marozzo’s “assaults” with sword and buckler, there is quite a bit of cutting to and around the buckler. These forward guards can be very useful in SCA Heavy combat, particularly when we are in a range where the opponent can attack us without a step.

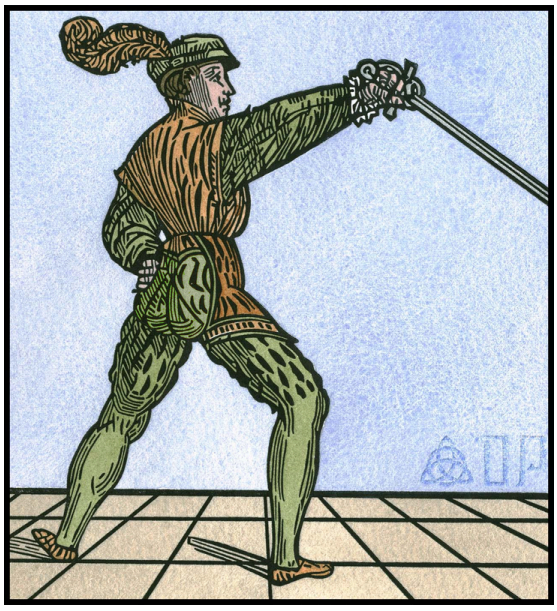


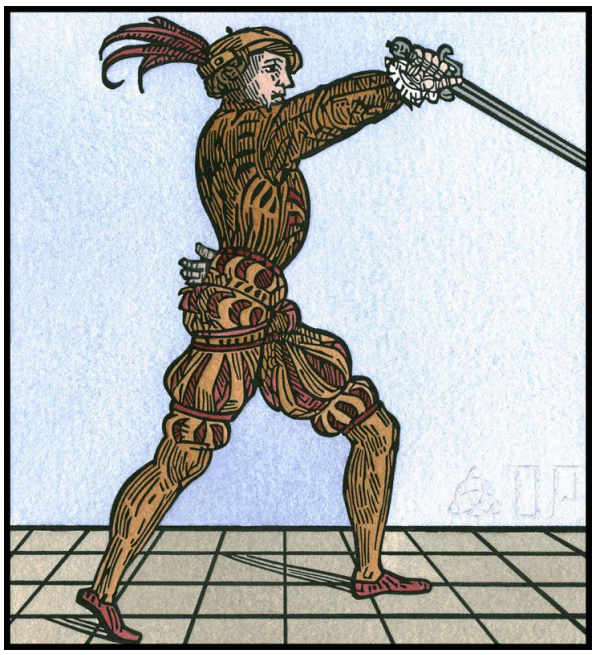


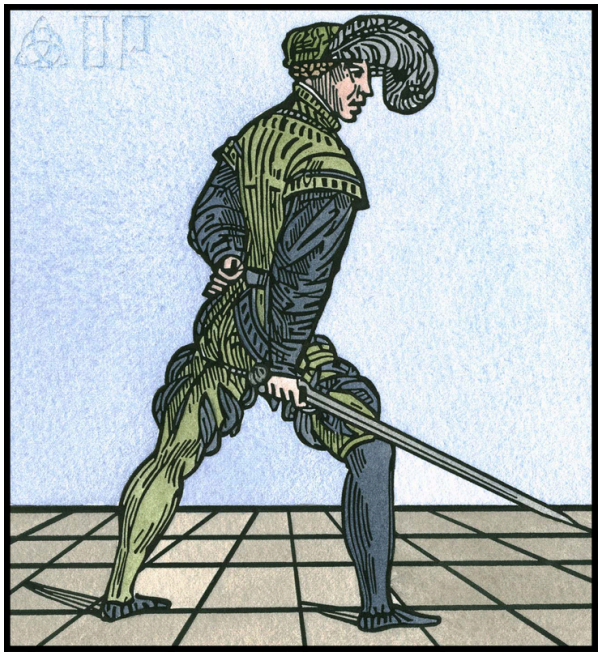










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Footwork

This section is pulled from my previous work on Joachim Meyer's German longsword. The mechanics of the footwork are the same, so I saw no need to reinvent the wheel.

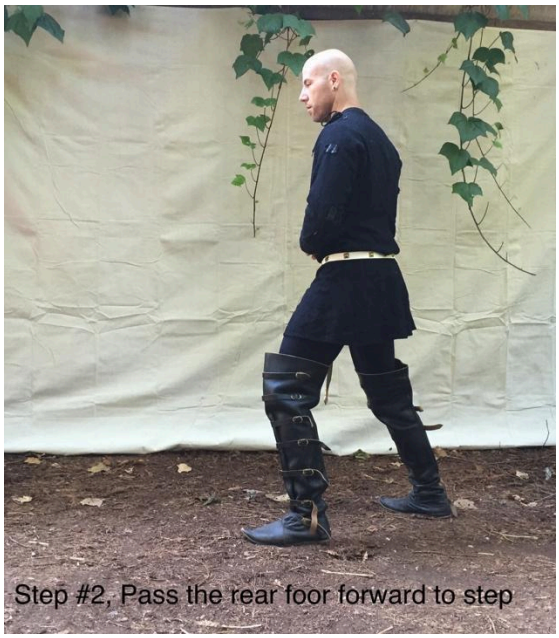
*Note- As I prefer to fight in a sword forward stance, I attack with the gather steps described most often, using the triangle and double triangle steps with my secondary attacks.

*** **Key Concept***** All cuts should be performed with a step at the same time (1.24r) Meyer explicitly describes 4 types of steps in his long sword section, and also describes several more in the various devices.

Explicitly taught Steps

1) Passing step- This is much like walking, when one leg passes the other, going forward or backward, so that you end up with the back foot becoming the lead foot in your stance.


Start in your stance


Step #2, Pass the rear foor forward to step

2) Triangle steps- These are steps to the side with the rear foot, so that you are turning your body slightly and reestablishing your centerline. **Don't just cross your feet.**

*Some practitioners interpret this as a crossing step, but I think Meyer's description better fits a more "compass" type step. This is also borne out in

practical application. Crossing your feet (particularly in armor) is a bad idea, and this interpretation takes the body more offline, which Meyer is a big proponent off.





3) Double Triangle step- This is a combination step where you step your lead foot out to the side, then step your back foot around. Finish with another side step with the lead foot.





4) Broken/Stolen steps- Step forward with the front foot, but before you commit, pass backwards.

Described steps

1) Gather step- From your stance, bring the rear foot up to meet your front foot, then step the front foot out. To move backwards, reverse the process. This step is described in great detail in the cutting drills from the Dussack section. (2.4v.1)



2) Shuffle step- The opposite pattern of Meyer's gather step. Step out with the front foot first, and then bring the rear foot up to reestablish your stance. Reverse your motion to move backwards.







3) Traverse- pass your rear foot forward AND offline in a 45d angle. This is usually paired with the back step of the {new} rear foot. Think of this as a double triangle that starts with a passing step instead of a shuffle step.





Lignitzer's Plays

(There are several versions available. This paper will rely on the "Rome" manuscript, and Keith Farrell's translations thereof)

Play #1

"The first play with the buckler from the Oberhaw. Mark when you drive the Oberhaw (over strike / strike from above) to the man: with the pommel go inwards, your sword close to the buckler and your thumb, and thrust in from beneath to his face. Wind against his sword and then go with a snap over and around. "

Explanation- This sequence assumes a tip-up sword defence from your opponent. If you are strong in the centerline, your ride up their sword and thrust them in the face. If they push your sword across to defend the thrust, rotate your palm up (winding) and saber cut around to the offside head or leg.











Adaptation- The most likely defensive responses from your opponent are a cross block, hanging block or shield block. If this is the case, you still wind palm up, and treat the defense like a hard bind. Make sure your sword stays across the centerline in order to provide you with coverage as you transition. You can also initiate this sequence from a defensive motion, blocking your opponent's flat snap and trying to thrust in or cut around.

Core Concepts Shown:

- Gaining the initiative
- Controlling the centerline
- Attacking from out of distance
- Feeling (fuhlen) whether the opponent is hard or soft in the bind
- Winding
- Cutting around

Play #2

From the Underhaw (under strike / strike from below), when he strikes from above. Wind against him to your left side, [with his sword] against your shield. Thus you stand in two shields. So wind to the right side opening and strike in at the mouth. See if he deals with this by raising his shield, and if so then take the left leg. This works on both sides. “
Explanation- Intercept your opponent's attack with a rising cut. Wind your sword and buckler to the left, and cross cut to the offside. If he raises his tools to defend, keep the buckler pressing high to block that line, and attack the leg.







Adaptation- Rise from pflug into your left A-frame block. Counter cut to the offside head head pass back and offline to attack the leg if opponent blocks high, keeping the buckler high to block the high line counter.

Core Concepts Shown:

- Regaining the initiative
- Controlling the centerline
- Feeling (fuhlen) whether the opponent is hard or soft in the bind
- Winding
- Covering the high line with the buckler while attacking low

Play #3

From the buckler, from the Wechelhaw (changing strike), sweep from the left side. From your buckler sweep clearly above with your sword then cut into his head from the left side; wind [to the] opening and thrust into his mouth. If he lifts with the shield and with the sword and defends against this then cut with the long edge in at his right leg. This works on both sides. “ ***Explanation- This is a rising defection under the opponent’s cut, then countering with an offside attack. If they defend, wind in or out to a palm up position and thrust. If the lift their tools to defend, block them with the buckler, and attack the leg.***













Adaptation- Rising deflections can be tough, and an offside cut from the bind is unlikely to have enough power to count in SCA combat. I recommend pulling up into a hanging guard position and attempting the thrust right away, the transition into the cut can remain, although I would gather back diagonally away from the motion of the sword while cutting the leg, keeping the buckler high.

Core Concepts Shown:

- Regaining the initiative
- Defending with a cutting motion

- Controlling the centerline
- Feeling (fuhlen) whether the opponent is hard or soft in the bind
- Winding
- Covering the high line with the buckler while attacking low

Play #4

“From the Mittelhaw (middle strike) make the Twer (cross strike) to both sides and the Schaitlar (skull strike) with the long edge, then make a thrust in underneath.”

Explanation- throw two cross strikes to either side of the head, followed by a high angle scalp cut, pressing with the buckler against the opponents tools when they defend, pulling the sword low to clear the point for a low line thrust.








Adaptation- Attack with alternating flat cuts to the temple, then a wrap or high cut to the head, press the buckler high to cover the line, pull the sword down with a winding motion to the inside, clearing the point for the body thrust

Core Concepts Shown:

- Gaining the initiative
- Forcing the opponent to stay defensive with by applying pressure
- Controlling the centerline
- Forcing the opponent to defend one opening, thereby creating a new opening
- Covering the high line with the buckler while attacking low

Play #5

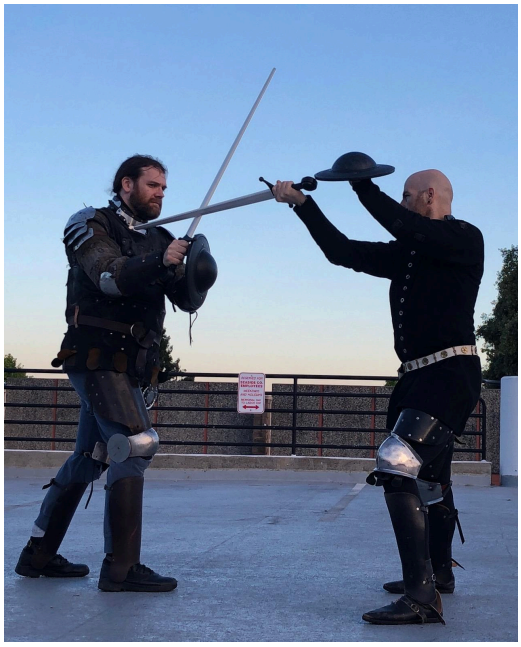
“From the Sturzthaw (plunging strike) make as if to go to [his] left side over his shield with a thrust then with the point change under and thrust swiftly inside his shield. Wind immediately to your left side and if he defends against this then take his right leg with your long edge.”

Explanation- Throw a wrap out of distance, ending in an an overhand thrust position. Step in with the thrust, disengaging inside if the opponent parries. If they parry that thrust to the outside, perform an outside wind. If the opponent continue to push the point offline, cover the high line with the buckler and cut the leg.










Adaptation- Little adaptation is needed, I might exclude the outer wind and proceed straight to the leg attack, covering the high line with the buckler.

Core Concepts Shown:

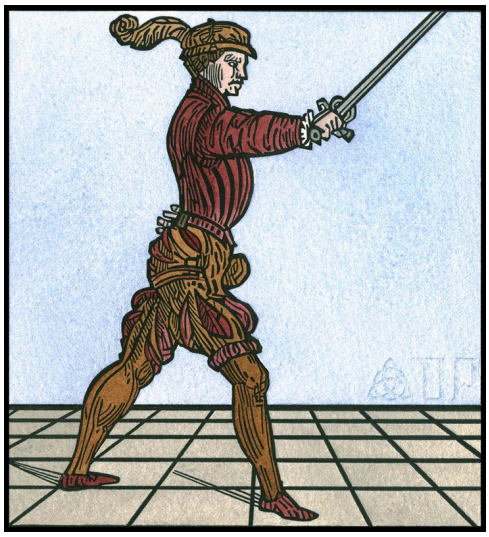
- Gaining the initiative
- Starting your attack out of range with a step
- Controlling the centerline
- Feeling (fuhlen) whether the opponent is hard or soft in the bind
- Winding
- Covering the high line with the buckler while attacking low

Putting It All Together

Application of Guards in SCA Heavy Combat

I prefer the use of sword forward guards for sword and buckler in SCA heavy combat. The closer range that is usually created by opponents in this style of combat sport often make attacking with a passing step impractical or not needed. In addition, the basket hilt used on most one handed swords allows for an expansion of guards that can be used. I find myself using, in addition to the German guards previously mentioned, 2 guards from the later Bolognese tradition, from when complex hilts made it more practical to carry the sword hand in front of the buckler.

The first of these guards is “Guardia di Testa”, described by Manciolino (See appendix) as “...executed by stretching both arms towards the opponent. The outstretched arms should be positioned so that the fists are about shoulder-height; the only difference being that the sword-hand should be slightly lower than the buckler-hand. As far as the feet, they can be positioned right-forward or left-forward with a wide step…”



I will also sometime hold the sword a bit lower, similar to Marozzo's Porto de Ferro:



In general, I teach a simplified "3 position system" for sword and buckler in SCA heavy Combat.
I use 3 engaging guards and 3 defensive positions.

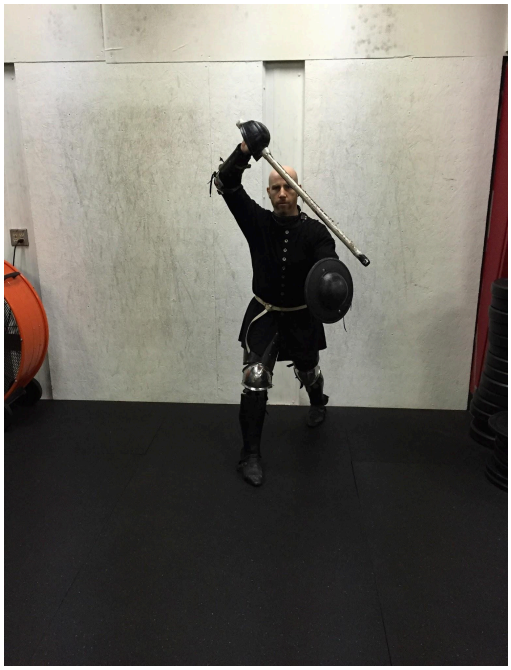
The three guards I recommend are "right A frame", hanging guard and low guard.

For right A frame, the sword is sword rolled back so that palm faces the opponent, with the buckler held retracted at chest level. The sword should be diagonal, with the point crossing to your left side head.This is similar to the Guardia Di Testa Above. The benefits of this guard are a strong offside defense, easy onside attack (cut or thrust) capabilities and easy transitions to onside defense. This guard closes your upper right opening from threat, and easily transitions to defend the other openings. The drawbacks to this guard are that offside attacks require a loading or transition motion to be effective, and good body mechanics are required to land a telling blow without retracting the sword to cut.



The 2nd position is a hanging guard over a slightly extended buckler, similar to the “Fiddle-Bow” Shown in Talhoffer.
The sword is describing a palm up hanging guard reaching over the buckler/left arm and defending the head. The benefits of this guard are a

strong head defense with an easy riposte/counter strike, and easy “flip” on side attacks. The drawbacks are a less versatile initial attack, and the possibility of exposing the arm to offside attacks.

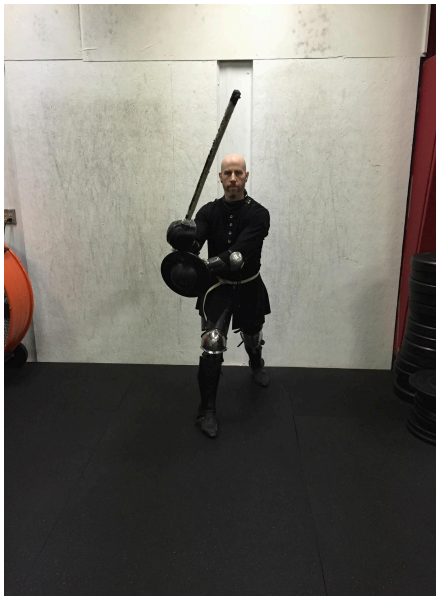


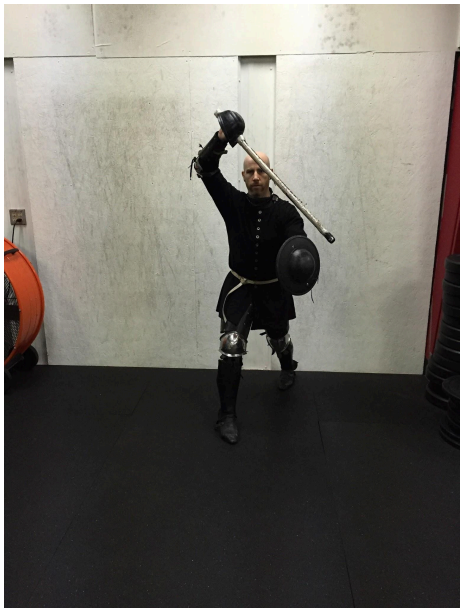
and the 3rd guard is the low guard, similar to pflug/plow. This guard has a surprisingly strong and versatile defense, rising into the hanging guard or A-frame easily, easy low thrusts, and good range management. The major downsides of the low guard are that you leave both upper quadrants exposed to attack, and all cuts require and obvious chambering motion.



Defensive Positions

In addition to the three engaging guards, I also recommend a simplified 3 position defensive system. These are essentially a right A-frame, left A-frame and an active use of the hanging guard. One very notable difference in application between the A-frame defense and the “Half-shield” position from I.33 is the hand stacked atop the buckler, rather than beneath it. This is a sport artifice. The invulnerable hand allows this stacking which increases the amount of area covered safely. This is the “Stacked tools” zone defense concept, meaning that one tool should cover a high and low line at the same time when defending, so as to minimize the number of choices that have to be made defensively. This system of zone defense is based on the “4 openings” of German fencing.





Leg defense should primarily be accomplished by range and angle management. We should be fighting at a range that the opponent cannot just reach down and attack the leg. Ideally, we void the leg while simultaneously striking the head or exposed arm. Secondarily, we should lower our stance and drop the buckler down to intercept the blow, while also covering the high line with the sword, in either the A-frame or hanging position, in case it is a feint or misdirect.

Offensive Concepts

Going into blow mechanics in depth is beyond the purpose and scope of this document.However, there are some important concepts that should be remembered.

- Lead with the sword while attacking! Do not step into range while cocking the sword back and then attack. This brings you into range without a threat, and provides your opponent an opening to seize the initiative and strike you safely.
- The “offset hip” is important while using a sword forward guard. This is when you create torque in your body by allowing your sword-side hip to rotate forward while keeping your sword shoulder back. This allows you to throw a “snap” without a loading motion from a sword forward guard.
- Attack with footwork!- you should not stand in range and try to slug it out while fighting sword and buckler. You should start one step out of range, attack while stepping in (leading with the sword of course), then transition back out of range when the engagement ends. A planted sword and buckler fighter is generally a dead sword and buckler fighter.
- Control the centerline! Attacks should cover you as much as they kill the opponent, and you should generally transition through defensive motions to keep you safe while throwing multiple attacks.
- Honor the “tool exchange”! When attacking high to low, make sure to cover the high line with the buckler when your sword goes low. This does NOT mean waiting for an attack to come, then trying to block it with the buckler. This means that you should train to exchange your tools as part of your attack, so that the buckler is automatically covering the high line when you attack low.

Appendix

Andre Liegniczer (Andres Lignitzer) was a late 14th or early 15th century German fencing master. His name might signify that he came from Legnica, Poland. While Liegniczer's precise lifetime is uncertain, he seems to have died some time before the creation of Codex Danzig in 1452.[1] The only other fact that can be determined about Liegniczer's life is that his renown as a master was sufficient for Paulus Kal to include him, along with his brother, in his list of members of the Fellowship of Liechtenauer in 1470.[2] (Wiktenauer)

Hans Talhoffer (Dalhover, Talhouer, Thalhoffer, Talhofer) was a 15th century German fencing master. His martial lineage is unknown, but his writings make it clear that he had some connection to the tradition of Johannes Liechtenauer, the grand master of the German school of fencing. Talhoffer was a well educated man, who took interest in astrology, mathematics, onomastics, and the auctoritas and the ratio. He authored at least five fencing manuals during the course of his career, and appears to have made his living teaching, including training people for trial by combat. (Wiktenauer)

Achille Marozzo (1484-1553) was a 16th century Italian fencing master. He was born in San Giovanni in Persiceto (a possession of Bologna) to Lodovico Marozzo in 1484.[1] After moving to the city, he studied fencing after the Dardi style in the school of the great Bolognese master Guido Antonio di Luca,[2] and may thus have been an acquaintance of fellow student—and later, fellow master—Antonio Manciolino. (Wiktenauer)

Reference Page

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http://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Andre_Liegniczer#Sword_and_Buckler


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