MHS Competency Cores

(work in progress)

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←*Note: this document has several tabs*

Teaching Philosophy

There are certain metahistorical truths in fencing, based on fundamental physical realities, that express themselves differently through individual weapons. The best way to convey this is to have an established curriculum that takes students through the ideas in a progressive order. Certain weapons are better suited as introductory weapons (i.e., foil, baton) because they prevent a "diagrammatic" view of fencing. From this scaffolding, the principles can be applied to specifics, but the transition from what is known to what is unknown must be managed carefully, introducing concepts one at a time in a logical order and in a logical tactical context.

Excellence in fencing comes from doing the basics very, very well with impeccable timing and distance. Furthermore, there is an optimal way to do efficient technique, handed down over time, and it can be taught and learned.

This document is intended as a reference and a primer. It presents a schematic of weapon concepts, then a definition of tactical ideas and their interrelation. From there, it presents the core concepts in each weapon and how they can be internalized by lessons. It ends with the concepts in German longsword (using Forgeng's translation of Meyer), broken out by tactical use.

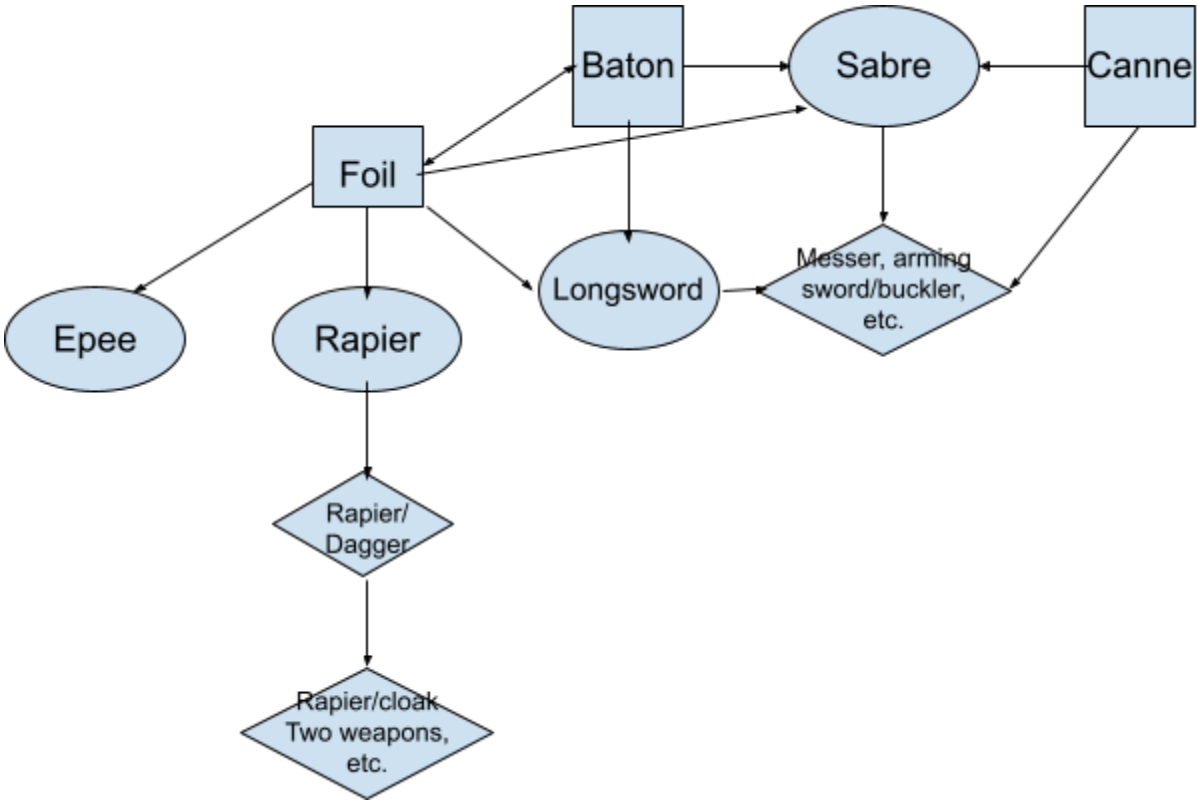
Schematic of Weapon Concepts

	One-Handed	Two-Handed
Impact (no thrusts, no edge/point)	Canne*†	Baton*†
Cut and thrust	Sabre*†, messer, arming sword, etc.	Longsword
Thrust and cut	Rapier	Rapier and Dagger
Thrust only	Foil*†, Epee*	Spear

*Denotes living-tradition weapon

†Denotes conventional (priority) weapon

Skill/Weapon Progression



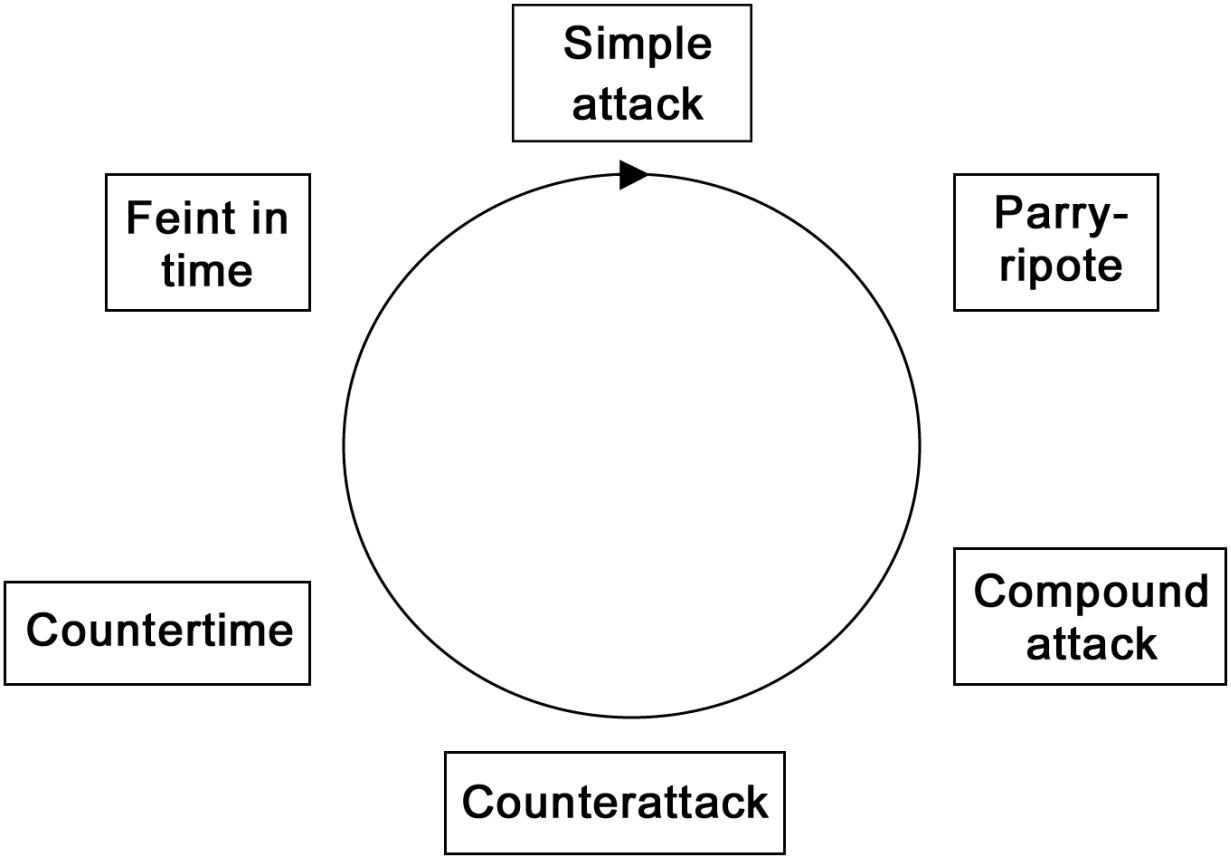
- Squares are *introductory* weapons suitable for initial instruction
- Circles are *core* weapons
- Diamonds are *advanced* weapons and combinations (after a year or more of practice)
- Arrows indicate ideal progression

The competency “exam” for progression past an introductory weapon is a judged bout in which the fencer performs the techniques within that style.

The Tactical Wheel

This is like a game of Stratego, where one tactical idea “defeats” the next. It is obviously greatly simplified, but is useful for organizing actions into legible drills and exercises. (You can, of course, also change variables like distance, timing, execution, etc.)

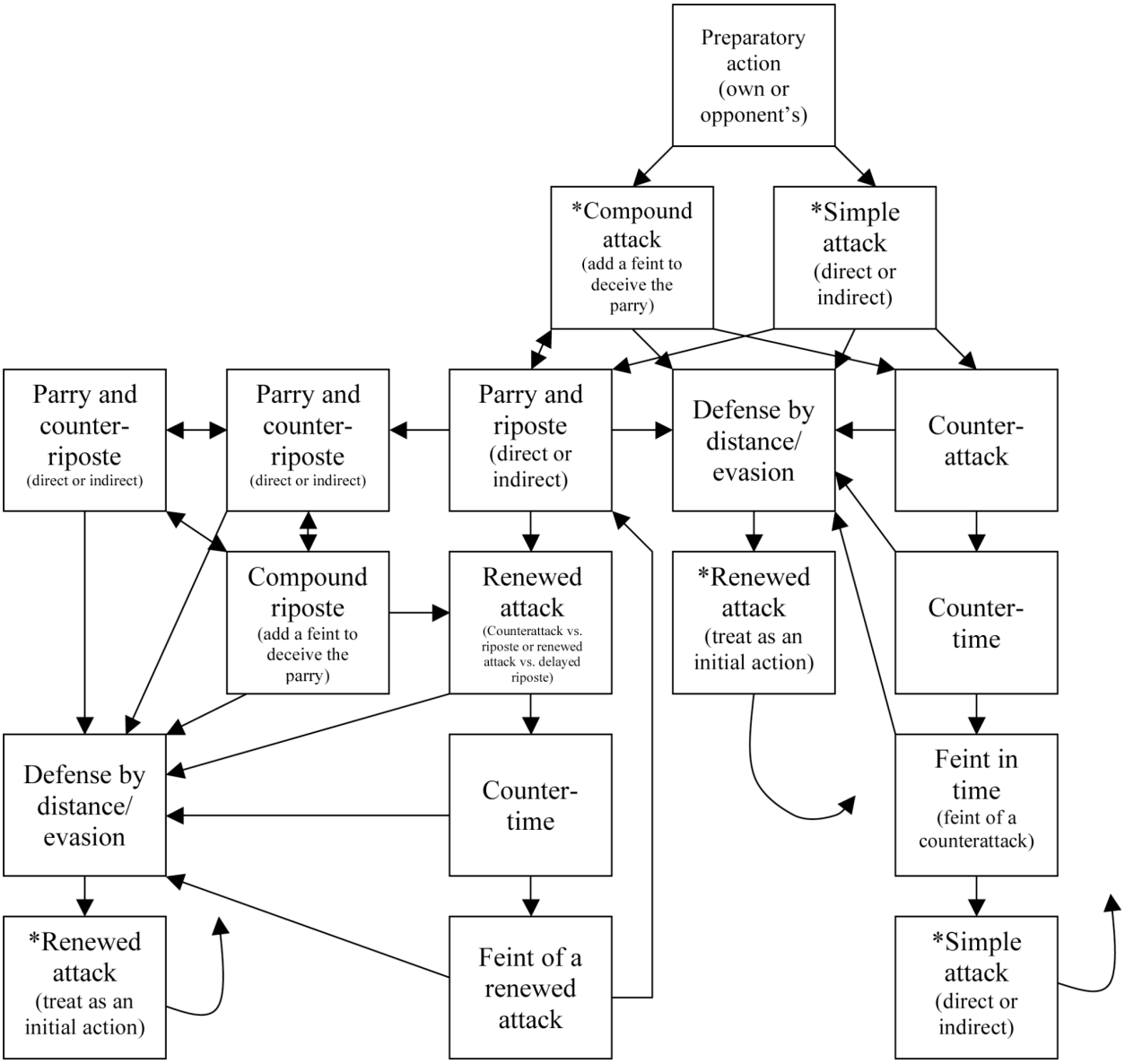
See **Fundamental Definitions** for the meaning of each term.



The Tactical Tree

The “tactical tree” takes the tactical wheel one step further, attempting to diagram all possible actions. Obviously, different weapons favor different solutions.

See **Fundamental Definitions** for the meaning of each term.



Fundamental Definitions

These are fundamental classical-modern fencing terms, which are useful for describing actions across systems.

1: Tempo

Fencing time, or *tempo*, is considered relatively in accordance with Aristotle's definition of time as "the number of movement in respect of before and after" (*Physics* IV, 11). To define the concept, one simple action (that is, a single fencing movement) is one tempo or unit of fencing time. Thus, an extension is one tempo, a lunge is one tempo, and an extension coupled with a lunge is also one tempo, provided they are executed together smoothly as one action. However, a feint followed by a real attack or an advance (two footfalls) are both, by definition, two tempi. Note that this time can be longer or shorter relative to other times: a long lunge and a short lunge are both one tempo, but the one is obviously a longer tempo than the other.

The German school rather uses the "before" and "after" (*vor* and *nach*) though what this means is not stable over time and changes according to context.

Tempo, in Renaissance rapier treatises, has another definition: The opportune moment to strike.

Note that fencing tempo only exists if the fencers are in (or entering) measure.

2. *Scelta di tempo* or *l'á propos*

Scelta di tempo (choice of time) or *l'á propos* is the term for choosing the favorable moment to strike the adversary. This may be as a result of the adversary's action (for instance, a careless step into distance) or a reaction to the fencer's own action (for instance, a momentary stutter of movement due to changing his or her stance), because of a psychological lapse (having either made or parried an unsuccessful attack, they momentarily relax their attention; or perhaps they have a moment of doubt and rethink their tactical plan; or perhaps they are so concerned with performing some preparatory action that they are unprepared for an attack), or any other imaginable scenario. We may think of it as a "sense of surprise." It has a large psychological component.

3. Distance (*Misura*)

Distance is the relative space between the two fencers. A fencer may be said to be "in distance" when they can strike his adversary in one tempo. We may further subdivide this distance as:

- *close*, or *grappling*, distance where the fencer can touch the adversary's arm or body with their hand (which is then further subdivided into far, medium, and near distances).
- *extension distance*, where the fencer can touch the adversary's body with their weapon by simply reaching out their arm
- The distance, where an extension combined some article of forwork is needed to reach the adversary (*step, lunge, demi-lunge, or pass* distance)

- *out of distance* where two actions (a step or pass, combined with one of the aforesaid footwork actions) and thus two tempi are required to hit.

It is possible to be simultaneously at different distances with respect to different targets on the adversary's body; e.g., you can be at extension distance to the hand but lunge distance to the head or leg.

4. Preparatory actions and the attack on preparation

A *preparatory action* is any action made to facilitate the attack, be it footwork (say, a false retreat or false advance) or bladework (engagements, beats, expulsions, etc.).

An *attack on preparation* uses this tempo to forestall, spoil, and interrupt the would-be attacker's plans—and hopefully hit them.

5. Engagement, opposition, pressure, and sweeps

- *Engagement* refers to any situation where the blades are in more than momentary contact, while *opposition* refers to the mechanical advantage of one sword, considered as a lever arm, on another, deviating it from the line of attack or defense.
- *Opposition* is therefore nothing more than using the leverage of the strong of one's blade on the weak of the adversary's. You can also use opposition to counterattack, riposte, counter-riposte, or make a renewed attack. It also gives you a tactile sense of where the adversary's steel is, so as to better move one's own body away.
- A *pressure* is an action on the blade where one presses on the other, deviating it from the line. This is properly done with a stronger part of one's own blade against a weaker part of the adversary's.
- When a relatively large, slow attempt to engage is made (usually to draw an attack) it is sometimes called a *sweep*. This is a useful concept for drilling.

6. Line

"Line" may refer to several things: lines of attack and that of defense, as well as the line of direction.

- The line of attack is the most direct path a weapon can follow to strike an uncovered target by cut or thrust. The line of defense is the position in which a fencer interposes their own weapon to prevent this attack from arriving. To do so is referred to in modern parlance as "closing" the line.
- We may also speak of the "inside" and "outside" lines of attack and defense.
- Finally, there are the "high" and "low" lines. The high line is above the sword-hand, the low line, below. If the sword is held above the head, *everything* is the low line; if held at the floor, *everything* is the high line.

Note that lines are relative to the weapon and body; when using two weapons, we may speak of "outside" the dagger, "outside" the rapier, and "inside" the rapier or dagger (which

would be “between the weapons,” in most circumstances). Likewise, if you change your stance in a two-handed weapon, your inside line becomes your outside line.

A fundamental principle is to strike with cover—to “close the line” in attack to eliminate the possibility of a double hit or afterblow. In other words, one’s own weapon is interposed between the target and the opposing steel so as to present a barrier.

You should also keep the line closed while recovering and withdrawing out of distance.

7. Line of direction

The *line of direction* is an imaginary line drawn from a fencer’s rear heel through their front heel and toe, to the adversary’s front toe and heel. If the adversary is using a more open stance (say, with a two-handed weapon), the line may be drawn to their center. To avoid knee injuries and obtain the furthest reach possible, it is essential to keep the leading foot oriented along the line of direction.

8. Guards

A guard is a position that allows a fencer to defend themselves with the least amount of movement while simultaneously threatening the adversary.

9. Counterguards

A *counterguard* is to take a guard that closes the line threatened by the adversary without touching the opposing steel.

10. Invitation

An *invitation* is when a fencer intentionally opens a line, either by the position of their point or by changing their guard.

11. Offense and attacks defined

An *offensive action* is any action made with the intent to strike the adversary, including attacks and ripostes (but not counterattacks). The *attack* is the final movement of the initial offensive action in which the arms and the weapon are extending towards the adversary.

- A *simple attack* consists of only one blade action (and thus one tempo). It can be *direct* (in the same line of attack) or *indirect* (changing lines by coupé or disengagement).
- A *compound attack* consists of more than one action; e.g., one or more feint. These are modern concepts, but pedagogically useful.

12. Change of engagement, disengagement, and cutover

- A *change of engagement* is when a fencer, having been engaged, quits the opposing steel, moves his or her point around the adversary’s guard, and finds the engagement

again in the opposite line, taking their own engagement but without extending or otherwise creating any sort of threat. Generally this is done because the adversary is dominating one's steel (see 4.2), and is performed with a change in hand position or line.

- A *disengagement* is a simple indirect attack that changes lines by going around the guard with an extension. It differs from the change of engagement only in that the weapon arm extends to threaten the adversary.
    - If the other fencer makes a disengagement in response to your disengagement, their action is called a *counter-disengagement*.
- A *cutover*, also called a *coupé* (French: "blow," "cut," "chop," "strike," "stroke"), changes lines by going around the point. Either can be "over" or "under," depending on line (i.e., from engagement in the low line, a coupé would be *under* the blade). These are modern definitions, but will add clarity and brevity to my instructions.
    - Note that the *coupé*/*cutover* does not *necessarily* imply a cut, but is the action that you make in leaving an engagement or deceiving an attempt to engage in the high line, chambering, and cutting vertically downwards to the adversary's head—thus the name, which simply means "blow" in French.

13. Parries

The *parry*, classically speaking, is an action that deviates the adversary's oncoming steel and prevents it from reaching the fencer's target. Parries fall into several categories:

- *opposition* (deviating the adversary's steel by mechanical advantage, strong against weak),
- *percussive* (parry by beating the blade aside)
- *shielding* (maintaining a closed line)
- *intercepting* (forestalling the adversary's action)
- *ceding* or *yielding* (regaining blade opposition, with or without a change of line)

They can be taken with the true or false edge. Parries may travel *laterally* (from inside to outside or vice versa), s*emicircularly* (from high to low or vice versa) on the same side (inside or outside), *diagonally* (traveling from high on one side to low on the opposite side or vice versa) or *circularly* (from a line back to the same line). A circular parry is sometimes called a *counter-parry* (a term sometimes used incorrectly for the parry of the riposte; the correct sequence would be parry, riposte; parry, counter-riposte).

14. Deception

To *deceive* a parry is to evade it so that your blade (ideally) completely avoids the defender's (as in a feint). The difference between this and a disengagement is contextual: A disengagement is the initial attack, whereas the deception happens in response to an attempt to parry.

15. Ripostes and counter-ripostes, direct, indirect, and compound

The *riposte* is the offensive action made after one's own successful parry. A *counter-riposte* is any riposte after the first. We therefore say *parry and riposte*, followed by a *parry* (of the riposte) *and counter-riposte*. (Note again that the term *counter-parry* is incorrectly used by some to describe a parry of a riposte, while others—with more historical basis—use it to describe a circular parry.) We can also deceive a parry of our own riposte by making an *indirect* or *compound riposte*—exactly as for an indirect or compound attack.

16. The counterattack

A *counterattack* is an offensive action made in response to the opponent's attack. Counterattacks are further subdivided into *time actions*, made against the adversary's developing attack, and *stops*, which prevent the adversary's attack from developing. Time actions are usually made with opposition; stops need not be.

Observation: Confusingly, Renaissance rapier masters called the counterattack *controtempo* (or *contratempo*), but it is *not* the same as modern "countertime."

17. Countertime

Countertime, in the modern sense, is any action, offensive or defensive, made against a counterattack. It may be a *foreseen* or *unforeseen* action.

18. Feint in time

A *feint in time* is the modern term for a feint of a counterattack.

19. Second intention

Second intention is a partially foreseen action (discussed below) made after the adversary has been drawn into a habitual action, which can then be used against them. For instance, if an opponent habitually parries, you can allow your attack to be parried in order to make a parry-counter riposte (or, alternately, counterattack the riposte—a *renewed attack*). Similarly, if the adversary habitually counterattacks, you can make an attack from slightly out of distance to draw the counterattack, and then, once they have extended themselves, command their foible and hit with a countertime action. Countertime actions are often made with second intention.

20. Renewed attacks

A renewed attack is a continuation of the original attack without returning to defense. Some situations where this might occur are when the adversary moves back without parrying, delays the riposte, or makes too large a tempo in their defense.

21. Foreseen and unforeseen actions

A foreseen action is simply an action that has a known beginning and a known end; a partially foreseen action has a known beginning and an unknown end; an unforeseen action has not been predicted. For instance, if, in a drill, Fencer A always parries fourth on Fencer B's attack, the parry is a foreseen action. If Fencer A alternates between a parry of fourth and a circular parry in third, it is partially foreseen since we know the beginning (Fencer A will parry, but we're not sure how). If Fencer A sometimes counterattacks, that would be an unforeseen action.

Core Weapon Concepts

These are the basic progressions through the introductory curricula for each weapon. The overall schema is:

1. Mechanical drills
2. Tactical drills (adding movement and options)
3. Bouting drills (designated attacker and/or designated techniques)
4. Unrestricted bouting
5. Judged bouting
6. Extramural competitive experience

Note that we have a Google sheet listing *all* basic skills in each weapon available for self-assessment as you work your way through the curriculum.

Bâton

See also *Three Bâton Manuals* and the videos

1. Three moulinets and two chamberings
2. Hit the target (stationary then with movement)
3. Hit the person (on distance closing, with footwork)
4. Add parry-riposte
5. Hit the target with changing targets
6. Feint attacks
7. Counter parry-riposte with feint attack or parry counter-riposte
8. Hitting shin and counterattack
9. Add shin to bouting games above, including shin as target for riposte
10. Countertime
11. Bouting

Foil

There are any number of excellent introductory classical foil texts (e.g., Gaugler, Barbasetti, etc.).

1. Holding the weapon (French/Italian), on guard, sixth and fourth
2. Direct thrust on invitation; disengage on sweep
3. Three attacks (direct, indirect on charge of engagement, indirect on pressure)
4. Wall drill; add parry-riposte
5. Add feint attack to wall drill

6. Add circular parties to wall drill
7. Three distances
8. Advance to engage; react to partner's cue: first three blade cues, then add partner attacks on preparation (parry riposte), partner retreats (feint attack)
9. Apply above to bouting games. Each of the following should then be added:
10. Actions on the blade: beats, glide, expulsion
11. Feints to low line
12. Prises du fer/transports
13. Yielding and ceding parries
14. Footwork: ballestra; patinando
15. Bouting

Historical Movement

1. Dodge-the-stick drill
    a. Set
    b. Freestyle
    c. With disarms

Longsword

See also *Art of the Two-Handed Sword*

Core longsword drills:

1. Six-cut drill
    a. Six-cut with serpentines
    b. Six cut with renewing gather steps
    c. Meyer square
2. Double-tap and elbow breaking exercises
3. Circle drills (keeping cutting-side foot forwards)
4. 5/6 vs 1/7 with triangle steps
5. Three Invitation-parry ripostes with triangle steps
    a. lower to Alber (really Wechsel) to hanging parry
    b. move aside to Plow to windshield-wiper (krumphau) to a helicopter (mittlehau)
    c. raise to Vom Tag and parry with a zornhau and thrust (zornhau-ort)
    d. Same with footwork
    e. Same with footwork and distance invitation
6. Give and take—thrust, parry, wind, mutieren
7. Hard-soft drill ("three bears")
    a. With cuts as parries or as renewed attacks
    b. Same with footwork
    c. Same with footwork and distance invitations

8. Counterattacks (meisterhau with twist; leg slip (uberlauffen) vs. low attack)
9. Getaway-go (nachrisen)
10. Grappling/disarms (grasp arm, grapevine, rear throw, and counter-grappling)
    a. On own entry
    b. On partner's entry
11. Second intention (provoker-taker-hitter)—can be done as set plays or with any technique as a semi-bouting drill
12. Add German-specific material to drills in a progressive and tactically relevant way (see following document)

Rapier

See *The Art of the Rapier* and the videos.

Sabre

See also Barbasetti

1. Holding the weapon
2. Guard/parry positions
    a. Remember to keep hand opposite inside shoulder on riposte
3. Moulinets
    a. With footwork
    b. With lunges
    c. With advance-lunge
    d. Double moulinets
4. Cuts and parry-ripostes on the march
    a. Add low line
5. Circular cuts to cheek (by disengagement)
    a. Doublés
    b. Parries of same
6. Counterattack/parry-riposte (then choice of action—good and bad attacks)
7. Feint attacks
    a. Head-flank
    b. Cheek-cheek
    c. Inside or outside cheek/disengage
    d. Thrust
    e. Feint shallow, hit deep target
    f. Feint deep target, hit shallow target (with lunge-back)
8. Second intention
    a. Parry/counter-riposte
    b. Counterattack vs. riposte
    c. Redirect to low target on retreat

9. Attacks on the blade (beats, binds, expulsions)
10. Transports and ceding/yielding
11. Time thrusts/cuts

German Longsword Concepts from Meyer

1. Definitions: Kunst des Fechtens
    A. Parts of the body: Upper and lower, right and left. (vs. modern idea of lines)
    B. Parts of the sword: (pommel [Knopf], point [Ort], quillons [Creutz] or hilt [Gefeß], haft [Heft] or grip [Bindt], and the blade [Klinge], divided into forte [Stercke] and foible [Schweche], short and long edge [kurtze und lange Schneide].
    C. German Combative Theory
        i. Vor and nach
        Ii. Gleich and Indeß
        Iii. Distances (stages) of combat: Zufechten, Handtarbeit, Abzug
    D. Tactical canon: Continue so long as you have the tempo; the one in the nach must defend until they can counterattack or take back priority.

    1.15 v (Forgeng p. 61): “[Liechtenaeur] does not entirely forbid parrying, namely that you should only learn how to cut; for as it will harm you (as you have heard before) if you will rely on parrying, since you would be compelled to parry too much, so too it is no use to be overly aggressive with striking, or to cut in at the same time against his strokes recklessly as if with closed eyes, for this resembles not combat but rather a mindless peasants’ brawl.”

2. Basic Guards and Stances (note a guard does not “guard” anything)
    A. Vom Tag
    B. Ochs
    C. Pflug
    D. Alber (Olber)

3. Footwork
“Therefore each stroke must have its own step, which shall take place at the same time as the stroke, if you wish to achieve anything with the devices you use.” (1.23v–1.24r, Forgeng p. 61).
    A. passing
    B. fencing advance/retreat
    C. demi-lunge
    D. gather
    E. triangle
    F. step left/right
    G. crossover
    H. leg slip
    I. twist

4. Primary cuts (made with footwork, done on both sides)
    A. Olberhauw (*Sturtzhauw)
    B. Zornhauw, vom tag to alber
    C. Mittlehauw, vom tag to vom tag
    D. Unterhauw, ochs to ochs

5. Additional cuts (meisterhau)
    A. Schielhauw
    B. Krumphauw
    C. Zwerchhauw

6. Additional Cuts (non-meisterhau)
    A. Kurtzhauw
    B. Glützhauw
    C. Prellhauw
    D. Wechselhauw (change cut w./feint)

7. Thrusts (discussed in rappier)

8. Moulinets (Looping [Rinde])
    A. Cutting square drill

9. Additional Guards and Stances
    A. Wrath Guard
    B. Longpoint
    C. Change
    D. Side Guard
    E. Irongate
    F. Hanging Point
    G. Kron
    H. Key
    I. Unicorn

10. Parrying techniques
"to teach the cuts is also to teach the parries" (Forgeng p. 60).
    A. Cutting into the parry
    B. Parrying with Kron
    B. Hanging parry [Hengen]
    B. Kniechelhauw (wrist cut) after hanging parry
    C. Slicing Off [Abschneiden]
    D. Behind-the-back parry with Sliding [Verschieben]

11. Feint Attacks
    A. Failing [Fehlen]

i. Failer vs. Crown
B. Changing [Wechseln]
C. The Rose
D. Feint of a renewed attack (1.28v–1.29r, Forgeng p. 73–74)

12. Counterattacks. “The second way to parry is when you parry your opponent and hit him at the same time with a single stroke” (Forgeng p. 61).

13. Handarbeit
A. Binding [Anbinden]
B. Remaining [Bleiben]
C. Concept of Feeling [Fülen]

14. Tactical concept: Nachrisen (getaway-go)

15. Tactical concept: Überlaufen (counterattack with leg slip)

16. Tactical concept: Anreizer-Nehemer-Treffer (Provoker-taker-hitter/offensive second intention):

An exercise:
Attacker makes a distance-closing zornhau on the partner's distance or blade invitation, followed by a hanging parry against their riposte to the ear into a double zwerchau (left-right) with triangle steps. Defender does their best to parry with triangle steps or twisting (like Fiore's volte stabile). Add defender changing distance (making the attacker pass instead of triangle). Add defender either making a retreating unterhau to the arms (if attacker fails and withdraws with arms outstretched to close the line) or a thrust (if attacker draws their arms back after their attack fails).

17. Concept of deceiving (*Verführen*): Disguising intentions
A. Changing intentions (1.31r, Forgeng p. 75)

18. Renewed attacks/actions from the bind

“Thus you shall now go in all devices from the sword to the body, and from the body to the sword. But if he will pull or flit from you, then always take the slice as a help.” (34v1, Forgeng p. 78)

A. Striking around (Umbschlagen)
B. Circle [Zirckel]
C. Winding Through [Durchwinden]
D. Doubling [Doplieren]
E. Winding [Winden] as a renewed attack
F. Defeating a renewed attack with Slicing [Schneiden]

a. pursuing with Blocking [Verstüllen]

G. Pressing Hands [Hendtrucken]

H. Feint of a renewed attack (Pulling [Zucken])

I. Barring [Sperren]

J. Gripping Over [Übergreiffen]

19. Tactical footwork: Broken or stolen steps

20. Additional concepts:

A. Slinging [Schlaudern]

B. Reversing [Verkehren]

C. Snapping Around [Umbschnappen]

D. Grappling

i. Wrenching [Ausreißen]

ii. Running In [Einlauffen]