

**A QUICK GUIDE TO EPÉE FENCING**

**or**

**“FENCING FOR DUMMIES”**

**by J. Lee**

# Some interesting facts about fencing

## Some famous people who were fencers:

Grace Kelly, Basil Rathbone, Danny Kaye, Winston Churchill, Cornel Wilde, Neil Diamond, Rene Descartes, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Sir Richard Burton, T.H. White, Harry Hamlin, Aldo Nadi, Erza Pound, Jose Ferrer, Bruce Dickinson, Robert Montgomery, Bo Derek, General George Patton, Alexandre Dumas, Lonnie Anderson, King Olaf V, Paul Newman, Richard Thomas and Errol Flynn.

## Fencing can be engaged on 2 levels:

- (1) as an exercise
- (2) as a competitive sport

## There are several steps in developing your skills:

### Basic

- (1) learn the basic moves
- (2) practice foot work
- (3) concentrate on technique
- (4) engage in practice bouts

### Competition

- (1) learn the rules
- (2) etiquette and sportsmanship
- (3) electric weapons
- (4) develop strategy
- (5) teamwork and team spirit
- (6) winning

### Individual training

- (1) private lessons
- (2) regular tournaments
- (3) ranking

(4) mental concentration

(5) Advanced skills and tactics

## Fencing terminology

- en garde - starting ready position.
- strip - the area designated to be used for fencing.
- touch - a term for being hit by a sword.
- foil, epee, sabre - the three weapon types in competitive fencing.
- parry - a defensive action to block an attacking blade.
- riposte - a response to an attack after successfully blocked the attack.
- remise - an action to attack after an initial attack has missed the mark.
- mask or helmet - a protective head gear while fencing.
- glove - a protective gear for the fencing hand.
- grip - the handle on the weapon. Different grips are available to be chosen (French, Italian, Belgium...)
- beat - action to tap the opponents blade.
- attack - an offensive action to try and score a touch.
- lunge - a forward motion to try and extend your reach in an attempt to score a touch.
- fleche attack - An offensive action to commit all out to score a touch.
- stop thrust - a defensive move to attempt to hit your opponent while he is on the attack.
- disengage - to move your blade and maneuver around the opponents blade.
- retreat - a defensive move to back up and maintain a safe distance away from an attacking opponent.
- point - the tip of a weapon and the contact when a touch is made.
- blade - the long part of the weapon.
- guard - the round protective metal part of the weapon.

## Basic moves

- En garde - starting position.
- Advance - step forward.
- Retreat - step backward.
- Lunge - a simple attack.
- Step lunge - combining an advance and follow by a lunge.
- Balestra - an attack with more force and penetration.
- Fleche - an all out attack.
- Stop thrust - a counter action to interrupt an impending attack.
- Bounce - a back and forth motion on both feet in preparation for attack or defense.
- Redouble - another attack following a failed attack.
- Cross over step - A fast way of advancing forward without threat of being attacked. Used to close the distance between you and your opponent.

## Epee targets

Epee fencing has a very simple target - the whole person including mask, body, arms, legs and feet. The only off target is the floor and the weapon.

1. Primary target is the upper body. It is the biggest and easiest to hit. It is also the most defended region.
2. The Mask and blade of the mask is also valid target. This is especially vulnerable when your opponent leans forward.
3. The weapon arm and wrist area is an excellent target. It is the closest part of the opponent. It is difficult to aim because it is small, round surface and moving.
4. The forward leg and shin is also a good target. It is also closer than the body but lower.
5. The front foot is a good target but very difficult to hit. It is a good surprise move especially against a tall fencer.
6. The lower torso and groin are valid targets as well.
7. The back arm and back leg are also valid targets but seldom the target. They are the most distant target.
8. The guard of your opponent's weapon is off target. It is grounded such that if you are fencing with electrical setup, the lights will not score when you hit it. However, one tactic is to aim for the guard and slide off it to hit the wrist area. A very effective move at times.

## A simple guide

Some tips to remember when fencing.

- Always keep your balance.
- Breathe regularly and through your mouth.
- Relax your big muscles and stay loose.
- Don't grip your weapon too tightly. Hold it like a bird and as an extension of your arm.
- Maintain a safe distance from your opponent. (a distance just short of a lunge attack that will hit your opponent)
- Maintain control of your point at all times.
- Make small quick motions with your parry and riposte.
- Use the guard as a shield to block your opponent's weapon or blade.
- Be alert at all times and don't be surprised by a sudden attack (lunge or a fleche attack).
- Maintain a small profile by positioning your body at an angle and stay upright and don't lean forward.

## Some attack strategies...

- Tap under the opponents blade and jab at the under hand target. If you miss, try again or if the opponent counter attacks, parry and riposte either with a parry of 4 or parry of 6.
- Make an attack by extending the arm and lunge at the opponent however, at the last moment, drop your point and aim at his shin or his foot. If you miss, retreat or if the opponent attacks, keep the point extended to remise to his body.
- A tactic, called second intention, can be used to draw out your opponent. One such move is to drop your en guard fencing arm position just slightly to expose the top part of your hand. As your opponent attacks the exposed target, you are ready to parry and riposte to his body.
- Initiate a feign attack by extending the arm and move forward one step. As the opponent reacts by parrying, disengage in the opposite direction and lunge at the same time to score a touch.
- Use your blade as a propeller in one direction or the other while moving forward and fishing for your opponent's blade. Once you engage his blade, wait for him to react with a disengage, then make a parry and riposte to score.
- Against a shorter fencer of the opposite hand, (left handed against right handed), you can do a "stop thrust" while the opponent is attacking by bringing your weapon up high and leaning forward and raising on your toes. His forward moving body will step right into your point.
- Another advanced tactic is called "broken tempo". This is a complex move that is not easily described. What it involves is a change in the speed of your normal fencing movement. As you are moving back and forth against your opponent, you initiate an attack at your normal speed but then pause slightly and wait for a reaction from your opponent. If he takes the bait, then you resume your attack with a parry and counter attack at an accelerated speed. This will throw off your opponent's timing and give you the advantage.

## Some training ideas...

Here are some ideas to train your body for fencing.

- Wrist motions - Use a small weight and practice turning your wrist clockwise and then counter-clockwise while holding the weight.
- Climbing and descending stairs - A great exercise for the legs is going up and down stairs. The bigger the steps the better.
- Footwork - Footwork has two components. First, you need to be able to move backwards and forwards quickly and with balance. Second, you need to maintain proper fencing distance between you and your opponent. The second is the harder of the two. In order to maintain proper distance, you first need to know what the proper distance is against your opponent.
- Point control - One action that is specific to epee fencing is point control. Point control is the ability to hit a small and moving object with the point of your weapon. This will provide great defense in making "stop" action against your opponent. One way to practice is to attach a golf ball to a string and hang it approximately at waist level. Practice hitting the ball while in motion.
- Bounce - One of the fencing moves is to bounce back and forth or in place. To help practice, it is good to bounce on a trampoline. It will help with both muscle control and timing.
- Aquatic exercise - When in a pool, it is good to practice fleche attacks with the whole body.
- Stamina - To build up stamina, you can use a stop watch and practice running(sprinting) for 3 minutes, rest 1 minute and run another 3 minutes rest 1 minute and continue running for 3 minutes. These are the duration for a 15 touch bout.
- Fencing grip - First it is a good idea to find a grip that fits your hand. I recommend a "pistol type" grip. It will give you the maximum control and power. There is a proper way to grip your weapon. The way it was explained to me by my coach a long time ago is this - You want to imagine the grip to be like a bird. You want to grip it just tight enough so it won't fly away but not too hard as to choke it to death.  
You want also to be able to manipulate the weapon easily using just two fingers- the thumb and the index finger.
- Breathing - Finally, the most important of all exercises is being able to breathe properly. Most people breathe through the nose. I find it easier and more efficient to breathe both through the nose and through the mouth. You will get more oxygen. Practice not to hold your breath. You want to be able to continuously provide oxygen to your lungs while fencing.
- Strategy practice - Once you have mastered all your basic moves, you want to be able to put them together in what I called a compound move. Your practice strategy is to imagine an opponent doing the moves that you anticipate and then performing the counter moves. You can practice this in your head and then with your weapons and on your feet. You will learn the proper timing to react and to counter.
- Stand in front of a mirror - Practice in front of a mirror and check your position. Make sure your on guard position is safe. Watch for exposed areas.

# Epee Fencing Strategies

In modern competitive fencing, the difference between winning and losing is having the right strategy. Assuming you have learned the basic moves and the rules and you are in great physical shape, what else is there?

Here are some winning strategies for epee fencing.

## Introduction

In epee competition bout, there is no "right of way". That means who ever hits first by 1/25 of a second, will win the touch. There is no "right" or "wrong" moves. As long as you abide by the rules, you can do pretty much anything.

5 touches in 3 minutes or under and you win the bout.

The 3 simple advice I offer is:

1. touch first
2. avoid being touched
3. go for the double touch if you are ahead

The details of my strategies are embodied in the following lessons.

## Lesson 1 (en-garde):

The en-garde position. There are two basic en-garde positions. One is the standard "closed" position. This is the one where your fencing arm is bent slightly at the elbow and weapon pointing at your opponent. and the guard covering your forearm. This is called "closed" because at this position you are safe from being hit with a simple attack. At this position, you can easily parry an attack from any direction. You can practice this stance in front of a mirror to make sure your forearm is completely covered. You should commit this position to memory and should be able to do it in your sleep or with your eyes closed.

The second en-garde position is the "open" position.

This stance is only used against a fencing who is skilled in point attack to the arm or who has perfected the "point flip" move. Both of these moves may result in touches against you. To avoid them, the "open" stance is with the fencing arm lowered to 45 degrees and the point of your weapon pointing down towards the floor. This way, your opponent will be forced to attack your body.

When the director say "fence", you can usually take a step forward to close the distance between you and your opponent and at the same time gain a small advantage.

## Lesson 2 (fencing distance):

Once you start fencing, you need to keep a proper fencing distance at all times. What is the proper fencing distance?

The proper fencing distance is such that your lunge attack on your opponent should be just short by one step. Of course, the actual distance will vary depending on the height of your opponent and his speed.

Against a tall fencer or fast fencer, you need to increase the distance slightly. Another way to judge is by your blade. If you are in the en-garde position, your blade should cross your opponent's blade approx. one third of the length of the blade.

### **Lesson 3 (offensive strategy):**

1. simple attack to the body with a lunge.
2. beat attack and lunge.
3. fleche attack to the body and off the strip.
4. attack to the toe (toe touch).
5. attack to the mask.

### **Lesson 4 (defensive strategy):**

1. simple parry and riposte.
2. stop thrust.
3. duck down and stop.

### **Lesson 5 (compound strategy):**

A compound strategy or (second intention) involves initiating a false attack and waiting for a response which you anticipate and counter to score the touch.

This requires split second timing and quick reaction and perfect execution.

### **Lesson 6 (remise):**

The remise is one move that should be practiced and perfected.

In epee where there is no right of way, the fencer only needs to focus on hitting the opponent.

Our natural reaction when we miss an attack is to retreat and defend. However, the remise is often a better alternative when you first miss an attack. A more deadly move is to replace the point against your opponent and try to score. The quicker you do this, the better chance you have of scoring a touch or at minimum a double touch.

### **Lesson 7 (surprise moves):**

1. toe touch
2. flip point attack to the arm
3. stop to the forearm
4. duck and stop
5. step aside with rear foot and stop



## **Epee Advanced Strategies**

Once the Director says "Fence", the questions are: When do you attack? When should you use "stop thrusts"? When should you parry and riposte? Timing is everything. Timing and Distance are two sides of the same coin.

### **When to attack?**

One of the winning strategies in fencing is knowing the proper time to attack.

- When you are within your fencing distance.
- During the "preparation" of your opponent. Look for the "telegraph" signs.
- When your opponent's point is out of line or you can beat his blade out of line.
- When your opponent is standing still or just on the move forward.
- When your opponent is distracted. Looking away at the lights.
- At the end of a previous unsuccessful attack. (remise or redoublement)

### **When to use "stop thrust"?**

- When your opponent has an exposed target in his preparation or during his attack.
- When your opponent is executing a compound attack.

### **When to use parry and riposte?**

- When your opponent attacks from a longer distance.
- When you are able to retreat during his attack.
- When your opponent try to "stop" your second intention attack.

### **Additional offensive moves...**

See saw attack - an attack made with the weapon held almost cross sword with the opponent. The attack is performed simultaneously with the feet moving forward doing a cross over lunge and the weapon arm lifting up while the point is traveling downward. The target is the opponents torso. I called this the "see-saw" attack because the weapon is moving like a see saw with the guard rising while the point is dropping. This simple move is effective because it comes as a surprise and with a deep penetration. The position of the blade makes it very difficult to parry while the guard blocks out any stop action by the opponent.

## Chapter 5: Epee movements

Fencing has been compared to playing chess on your feet. That is a very good analogy. As in chess, fencing has a set of moves which can be sequenced into a large combination of variations.

### The basic moves

- Offensive moves
- Defensive moves
- Footwork (keeping your distance)
- Second intention
- Broken tempo

### Offensive moves

1. Simple attack - lunge
2. Fleche attack -
3. Compound attack -
4. Feint attack -
5. Redouble attack -
6. Remise -

### Defensive moves

1. Parry and reposte -
2. Stop thrust -
3. Retreat -

### Footwork

In fencing, there is only one formula. It is one of the basic formula in physics:  $vt=D$  where velocity multiplied by time equals distance.

Velocity is how fast one travels. Once this is determined, time and distance follows in exactly the same proportions. The key to footwork is "keeping the proper distance".

1. Advance step-
2. Retreat step-
3. Change of direction - This is one of the hardest to master. You must be able to change your direction on a dime. Sometimes, it is just impossible.
4. Glide -
5. Crossover -

### What is proper fencing distance?

If everything being equal, the key to winning in fencing is distance. I don't have any real data to back me up, but I do think if you were able to measure winning touches and the distance between

two fencers, I would guess over 75% of winning touches will occur when the "proper" distance was kept by the winning fencer. You hear this a lot on fencing strips - "keep your distance..." but no one explained what is the "proper" distance. As a fencer, you pretty much guess as you go and adjust constantly depending on the situation.

I want to attempt to explain it here.

First of all, there is no one proper distance.

It does vary between different opponents. Second, there are two "proper" distances. One when you are on offense and one when you are on defense. Depending on the height and speed of each fencer, the "proper" fencing distance can vary quite a bit.

Let me first define the "proper" fencing distance when you are on the offense. This is the distance you keep from your opponent when you are confident that you can hit the target with a simple attack. In most cases, this does not change from opponent to opponent. It is a factor of your own speed and technique.

The "proper" fencing distance when you are on defense is the distance you try to keep from your opponent such that your opponent is just shy of hitting you with a simple attack. This distance does vary depending on the height and reach and speed of your opponent.

Remember, during a bout, there are two fencers and each will have their "proper" distances and during the course of a match, the distance will constantly be changing. The key is to know your distances while trying to fool your opponent to think he is maintaining his proper distance.

The other thing to remember is that the distance in question is a fixed amount of "window". It will not work if you keep a distance that is too far away. In that case, no one can be hit and the match will be boring.

### **Here is a real example.**

Fencer A likes to fleche attack. Fencer B likes to play defense. In the middle of a bout, while the two fencers are bouncing around, fencer A will slowly creep forward with each bounce and try to reach his "attack distance". Once he has reached that distance, he will initiate a sudden fleche and more than likely will hit fencer B. What happens is that while bouncing around, he has created a situation that he has reached his "proper" attack distance while deceiving fencer B to think he is still keeping his "proper" defensive distance and out of range. The danger for fencer A is that while he is doing this manipulation, if he comes close to fencer B's attack distance, fencer B may decide to strike first and hit fencer A before he has a chance to fleche. That's what makes an interesting bout.

Sometimes, especially when a short fencer is matched against a tall fencer, it is possible to use the "proper" distance to gain the upper hand. In this case, the proper distance for the short fencer is relatively close. To gain the upper hand, the short fencer can wait for the proper moment and close the distance with his opponent. This way, he will have a better chance of hitting his opponent while the taller fencer is too close to his target. His weapon will over shoot and pass his target.

## Second intention

There are many scenarios of a second intention attack. What is second intention? It is an offensive tactic by a fencer to initiate a false attack with the intention of not completing the attack but to illicit a calculated response from his opponent and then take the proper defensive action in mid stream.

**Example:**

Fencer A makes a simple attack to fencer B's under arm. He really didn't intend to score a hit. He is counting on fencer B to try a stop thrust to his forearm which is partially exposed. When fencer B falls for this, fencer A will execute a simple parry and riposte and score the real touch.

## Broken tempo

Broken tempo is another offensive tactic that is very effective when properly executed. The best way to describe broken tempo is this. Remember Elvis when he performs some of his popular hits. Sometimes, in the middle of a song, he would stop his body motion and music just for a brief moment and then continue as if nothing happened. That is a good example of "broken tempo".

At first, you would think this tactic will never work. When you stop your action in the middle of an attack, you would be vulnerable to stops and counter attacks by your opponent.

The reason it does work is the element of surprise. When you initiate an attack at the proper distance, your opponent is expecting a certain progression. When you suddenly pause, you throw off the timing of your opponent. You force him to change mid stream and that's when you have the upper hand.

**Example:**

Fencer A initiates a beat attack on fencer B. In between the preparation and the final lunge, he pauses briefly. Fencer B reacted to the beat with expectation to parry an attack, but seeing a pause by fencer A, changes his tactic and went for a stop. Fencer A seeing the stop executes a parry and reposte while completing his initial attack. It was the broken tempo that allowed for such moves.

## Anatomy of a touch

I want to describe how a typical touch is made in a bout. Assume there is a fencer A and a fencer B. I will also refer to various timing as t0, t1, t2, t3. t0 and t1 are the time when the fencers are just bouncing around. t2 is the preparation of an attack and t3 is the completion of the attack.

### Scenario 1:

Fencer A and B are in the on guard position. Director says "fence". Fencer A moves forward and close the distance. Both fencers begins to bounce around and fishing for each other's blade. This is the t0, t1 period which can proceed for quite a while. Fencer A initiates a simple attack at t2, and completes a lunge with a hit on fencer B at t3 and action halts.

## Type of touches

As far as scoring goes, all touches are equal. One touch is one point. However, there are different types are touches and here is my classification.

**la Belle** - This is the perfect touch. It is called la Belle (beautiful in French). It was meant to distinguish the tie breaker when the score is 4-4. The final touch should be clear and decisive. It is the most satisfying of all touches. It means you have executed your moves perfectly and made a clear touch on your opponent.

**Double touch** - This is the case when two touches fall within 1/25 th of a second. It counts as a hit for each side. When you are ahead, a double touch is advantageous.

**Lucky touch** - A lucky touch happens when your opponent gets caught in your blade or point and you score unintentionally.

**Sloppy touch** - This is a touch scored after an exchange that is sloppy in execution and one fencer just happens to land a touch before the other.

**Fluke touch** - A touch that happens and no one knows how it came about and probably will never be repeated.

**Panic touch** - A touch scored in the last few seconds of the bout when time is running out and the fencer who is behind tries an all out attack.

**Gimme touch** - A touch scored not due to your skill but due to the dumb mistake by your opponent.

**Signature touch** - A touch by one person that is his best move and signify his uniqueness.

**Toe touch** - A surprise touch that hits the opponent's toe.

# Epee fencing rules

This is a summary of current (2007) epee fencing rules as specified by the USFA. I hope this will help beginners and seasoned fencers alike. Having been a fencer 30 years ago in college, I recently started competitive fencing again. I realized quickly that some rules have changed. I started looking on the web to see if a rules summary exists besides the official rule book which is over 100 pages. I didn't find anything satisfactory. So, I decided to create one.

## Rules Summary

Here are some basic rules in competitive epee fencing.

A bout consists of 5 touches with a limit of 3 minutes. At the end of the 3 minutes, who ever is ahead in touch count is the winner. If a tie score, a priority is chosen at random, and a one minute sudden death is in play.

A touch is registered by a machine and a 1/25 of seconds delay will disable the opponents weapon otherwise it is scored as a double touch.

If a fencer runs off the end of the strip with both feet a touch is scored against him/her. If one foot is off the side of the strip, action is halted and the opponent will gain 1 meter. If the fencer fleches off the side of the strip, no penalties.

If one fencer is left-handed, it is customary for him/her to hook up on the left side of the strip. This is so the director can have a better view of the fencing activity.

To stop a bout in progress, back up a few steps and raise your non weapon hand and stump your foot to get the attention of the Director. He will call halt. Don't stop fencing unless you hear halt.

A yellow card is a penalty for various infractions. You cannot use your non weapon hand for blocking. You cannot turn your back on your opponent. Two yellow card will result in a red card - losing 1 touch.

A direct elimination bout consists of 15 touches and divided into three 3 minutes periods with a 1 minute rest in between.

If injured during a bout, a fencer may ask for a 10 minute delay.

## Competition Considerations

Competitive fencing is very different than fencing as an exercise or as a PE class or even practice bouts. I see some fencers who may be very good when practicing bouts in a club environment but get psyched out when competing in a large tournament. This chapter will help you prepare for that tournament.

### Clash of fencing style

One of the frustrating aspects of fencing competition is losing to someone that is ranked lower. I don't mean an occasional loss. Everyone has a bad day or a bad bout once in a while. I am referring to losing to someone consistently. My coach in college calls this a clash of style. I had a teammate who is less experienced but beats me every bout. In my case, this fencer has a very strong beat. Most fencers will beat your blade with a tap (on a scale of 1 to 10) say 3 but this fencer's beat feels like a 10. This throws off my game. I was not able to adapt my strategy sufficient to win. In a typical tournament, the first round is usually a round robin. This means you are assigned to a group of 6 fencers and everyone will fence every other person. The results are ranked. The person with the most win will be ranked first and so on. In this format, you can lose 1 bout and still come out on top. The next round begins the direct elimination. The fencers are paired according to the ranking and the winner will move on and the loser is out of the match. If you are unlucky enough to come up against someone whose style conflict with yours, you are out. On average, you may be a much better fencer, but never the less, you are eliminated.