

# Notes on Bolognese Gioco Stretto and Manciolino's *Strette* of the Half Sword (Book Three)

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This is meant to be a short guide to help students understand Bolognese Gioco Stretto (narrow play), especially in the context of the plays of the half sword described in [Manciolino's Opera Nova](#).

**What is Gioco Stretto?** Gioco stretto (also called *Strette* of the half sword or, in English, narrow play) is a collection of actions coming from a particular kind of crossing of the two opposing swords. After the crossing, the Gioco Stretto can involve sword actions, wrestling actions (including strikes) or a combination of both.

**Can any crossing lead to the Gioco Stretto?** No. A crossing of the swords leading to the Gioco Stretto has to satisfy the following characteristics:

- Each sword points to or close to the opponent's presence (i.e., silhouette)
- The crossing is such that each fencer may perform the same action, depending only on who is first to take the initiative
- The crossing occurs roughly at the middle of the opposing blades (hence the name "half sword")

**How does Manciolino (and the Bolognese in general) classify the types of Gioco Stretto crossings, and what do these classifications mean?** The crossings leading to the *Strette* can be either true edge on true edge, or false edge on false edge. In this context, a true edge on true edge crossing means a crossing with the swords to the inside, with their true edges touching each other. A false edge on false edge crossing means a crossing to the outside, with the false edges of the opposing swords crossing each other.

Note: Marozzo states that while a true edge on true edge crossing always involves the true edges touching each other, a false edge on false edge crossing may not necessarily involve the false edges - although it is still always a crossing to the outside.

**What does "narrow" or *Stretto* in Gioco Stretto (narrow play) mean, and how does that involve measure?** *Stretto* or "narrow" in this context means the same as the same adjective in the description of Bolognese guards (e.g., Coda Lunga e Stretta, Porta di Ferro Stretta): featuring the point in line. It involves measure only as a consequence of the optional decision to come to grips with the opponent, not necessarily as a starting distance in the crossing.

**What is the difference between a Gioco Largo crossing and a Gioco Stretto crossing?** The first does not satisfy the characteristics explained in the second item above - namely, features one or both sword-points aimed away from the opponent's silhouette, enables one swordsman only to choose certain actions, and does not occur at mid-blade.

**There are numerous *Strette* plays listed in Manciolino's Book Three (34, to be exact). Are there any crucial elements that may make me choose one as opposed to another?** Yes. There are two crucial elements in this regard:

- How much pressure the two sword exert against one-another
- Which foot you have forward (only true in false edge on false edge plays - true-on-true plays in Manciolino always start with the right foot forward)

**What role does blade-pressure play in the actions of the half sword?** The more the pressure against each-other's blade, the easier it is to yield and to execute a cut on the opposite side. The less pressure, the more it makes sense to perform the first cut without changing sides - i.e., with your sword between the opponent's head and his blade.

Examples of *Strette* in Manciolino that work well when there is a certain amount of pressure against each-other's blades:

- First, true on true
- Second, true on true
- Third, true on true
- Fifth, true on true

Examples of *Strette* in Manciolino that work well when there is little or no pressure against each-other's blades:

- Fourth, true on true
- Seventh, true on true
- Eighth, true on true

**What role does foot placement and footwork play?** If you have your right foot forward when crossed to the inside, it is easier to perform a left-foot oblique pass, which is the preferred step used in conjunction with the yielding *riverso*. If you have your left foot forward when crossed to the outside, it is easier to perform a right-foot oblique pass, which is the preferred step used in conjunction with the yielding *mandritto*.

**How do you arrive at the *Strette* of the half sword?** You can arrive at the narrow play in many different ways, including the following:

- By parrying a cut or a thrust (whether earnest or delivered as a feint or provocation)
- By executing a probing action
- By simply advancing against the opponent and crossing his blade

**Does Manciolino give us examples on how to arrive at a crossing leading to an action of narrow play?** Yes. For instance, Manciolino does so in the three *Assalti* of sword and buckler. Here they are, complete with a reference to which plays of Book Three they mirror (or resemble).

- First *Assalto*, bullet point 27 and following in The Complete Renaissance Swordsman - paraphrased for clearer understanding:
  27. From Guardia Alta, provoke the opponent with a mandritto Sotto il Braccio (which puts you squarely to the outside)
  28. Pass forward with your right foot, delivering a sideways falso, which the opponent will try to parry with the false edge. This is the false-on-false crossing.
  29. Mezza volta, pass forward and thrust to the opponent's face (same as fourteenth *Stretta*, false-on-false)
- Second *Assalto*, bullet point 44:
  44. From Guardia Alta, deliver a stramazzone ending in Porta di Ferro Larga; push a thrust to his right side to provoke a false-edge crossing; then this happens, grab his blade from the inside with your left hand, and deliver a mandritto to his head (or elsewhere). This is a similar action as one described at the end of the eleventh *Stretta*, false-on-false.
- Third *Assalto*, bullet points 64 and following:
  65. From Guardia Alta [...] pass forward with your left foot and push a montante-like thrust that ends in Guardia di Faccia. The opponent will attempt to parry this with his false edge, putting you in a false-on-false crossing.
  66. Pass forward with your right and feint a mandritto to his head, striking his leg instead
  67. Go into Guardia di Faccia to parry any high-line strike from the opponent. This is the same as the fifteenth *Stretta*, false-on-false.

**What is the key to practicing the *Gioco Stretto* correctly?** Here is a short list to bear in mind:

- Understand the *basic* action: this is a reverso from an inside crossing, or a mandritto from an outside crossing

- If the opponent is giving you pressure while crossing, yield, letting his blade slide harmlessly off-line; immediately perform an oblique pass to the opposite side and deliver a cut (start to his head, to keep things simple). Make sure your sword closes the line.
- If the opponent is not giving you pressure while crossing, keep your blade on the same side and deliver a cut to his head. Make sure your sword closes the line.
- Once the above becomes natural, add the other elements gradually. For instance, add the buckler (which in many cases offers an additional amount of opposition), then some of the grapples, etc.