

THE IMPORTANCE OF SKILL PROGRESSIONS IN THE WESTERN MARTIAL ARTS

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Non studying any physical discipline, it is important to develop a plan for making maximum progress, and for using one's time efficiently. If you're fortunate enough to have an experienced teacher in your area of the Western martial arts, he will develop the class and individual lessons plans necessary. But if you're in a self-study group, developing a plan of action and following it through can be a daunting task.

The most important thing to remember is that skill development always proceeds from the basic to the complex, and your approach should reflect this. It is very tempting, when first working with a manual such as Ridolfo Capoferro's *Gran simulacro dell'arte e dell'uso della scherma*, to jump right into the plays illustrated in the book. It's especially tempting for the fencer experienced in a related discipline, such as classical, SCA, or sport fencing. But it is essential, if you wish to become proficient in the methods of the text or texts you choose to study, to take the time to develop core proficiencies that will ensure later success with more complex material. After all, it's extremely unlikely that Capoferro opened the first session with a novice student by saying, "Let's work on the splendid *contratempo* action described in Plate XX of my book," and it's equally unlikely that he failed to drill advanced practitioners of other systems in the basics of his own system.

For the purposes of this article, I am not going to subdivide into classifications of "novice," "beginner," "intermediate," "advanced" and the like. I'll just refer to "basic" and "advanced" skills and skill progressions.

Development of Technical skills - Technical vs Tactical Skills & Drills

First, we should make the distinction between *technical* and *tactical* skills and drills. Technical skills are the execution of the specific techniques of the system, basic or otherwise. Body mechanics,¹ footwork and bladework are all groupings of technical skills, each group encompassing a wide range of individual techniques. Tactical skills are the application of technical skills in a fighting situation. One of the most common mistakes people make in their

training is to focus on *tactical* work to the exclusion of *technical* work. This generally consists of a few repetitions of a skill or two, followed by some bouting to “try to use it,” or a series of “what if I do this?” explorations. Both of these are fine things to incorporate into your training – at the right time and place. First, however, you must develop and become truly proficient in your technical skills.

What are Basic Technical Skills?

Each system, and to some extent each teacher of a given system, will define this differently. In general, for most western martial arts, basic skill groupings include guard positions, footwork, and simple bladework, such as attacks in a single motion or basic defenses in one or two motions. If the system has a wrestling or grappling component, the set of basic technical skills may include these, or may focus on these. In the fighting system of Fiore dei Liberi (circa 1410), for example, the wrestling section provides fundamentals for later bladework, and the two are tightly integrated. In the rapier systems of Salvator Fabris (1606) and Ridolfo Capoferro (1610), the seizures of the adversary’s weapon with the non-weapon hand do not appear to be grouped among the fundamental skills. The essential points to remember are that you must proceed from the simple to the complex; that you must examine the system carefully to determine what the basic, fundamental skills are; and that most fights are won by using simple techniques done at a high skill level.

Developing Competence in Basic Technical Skills

When you have identified your system’s basic skills and organized them into logical groupings, it’s time to practice. If you’re just beginning, two or three elements are plenty of work for a single night. For example, you can start by practicing the individual guard positions of the system, move on to practicing the basic footwork, and then practice one or two of the basic techniques. Examples of the latter include performing a simple attack: thrust and lunge; cut and lunge; or thrust/cut on a pass or gathering step – whatever is appropriate to your system. For example, when I teach either the classical Italian weapons or the Italian rapier, I begin with the guard positions, move to the basic footwork, and then combine that basic footwork into an attack. Here’s an excerpt from a Capoferro syllabus:²

1 Guardie - terza, quarta, seconda, “terza outside”

- A) form hand positions of second, third, fourth, second-in-third
- B) form guards and practice shifting from:
 - terza to quarta
 - terza to terza outside (eg, with hand 2nd in 3rd)
 - terza to seconda

2 Seeking Measure and Tempo

- A) Practice advance and retreat, shifting between guards without partners
- B) With partner, advance and retreat, keeping out of measure (approximately tip to tip)
- C) One person designated *Attacker*, the other *Defender*. Attacker makes 2 advances while Defender makes 2 retreats; Attacker makes additional advance, swords inside, remaining in terza to gain wide measure, while Defender stays in place
- D) Attacker advances and retreats at will, Defender keeping distance (out of measure); Attacker must close to wide measure by tempo change, swords inside
- E) Repeat D & E, swords outside

3 Practicing *Stringere di spada*³ (closing on the sword)

In pairs:

- A) Advance and retreat, keeping out of measure (approximately tip to tip)
- B) Attacker makes 2 advances while Defender makes 2 retreats; Attacker makes additional advance, swords inside, shifting to quarta to gain wide measure (close to but not touching the opposing steel, with a stronger part of the attacking blade overlapping the weaker part of the defending blade)
- C) Attacker advances and retreats at will, Defender keeping distance (at out of measure); Attacker must close to wide measure by tempo change, swords inside, shifting to quarta as in C above
- D) Repeat B & C, swords outside, shifting to terza outside (eg hand in second-in-third position)

4 Attacks

- A) Practice the lunge
- B) Add to exercises 3B and 3C above: at the moment the Attacker has closed on the Defender's sword, complete the action with a thrust (full extension) followed by a lunge, gaining in opposition on the opposing steel and closing the line. Defender accepts the hit. Repeat for outside line.

5 Parries

Solo:

- A) From terza, parry quarta with arm well-extended (elbow flexed, weapon and hand well in front of the body) and point

above weapon hand, simultaneously drawing up left foot, then extend and lunge

B) Repeat for seconda

In pairs:

C) Attacker closes inside, shifting to quarta to gain wide measure, and thrusts & lunges, delivering hit.

D) Defender then parries quarta as practiced above, striking attacker with riposte (no lunge). Attacker remains in lunge.

E) Defender then parries quarta, striking Attacker as he recovers and retreats, lunging to do so.

F) Repeat above, for parry of seconda.

G) Repeat 5E and 5F above, adding advance-retreat as in 3B and 3C above.

Maintain Competence in Basic Skills

The five sections above represent several weeks' worth of work for a beginning group, and the group will constantly review and practice all the elements above even as they move on to more advanced work. This sort of practice is not mindless repetition: everything must be observed closely and any errors or inconsistencies brought to the student's attention, either by the teacher or by fellow students if the group has no formal teacher. You needn't "perfect" a given action before moving to the next, but you must perform it with reasonable competence and consistency. Constant, constant, constant review of basics will be of immense value to you.

As your group advances, make certain that a part of each practice – forty-five minutes to an hour of a two hour session, for example – is devoted to rigorous practice of fundamental elements. Certain elements should be repeated at each session, such as basic footwork, basic cuts and thrusts and basic defenses. Other elements can be rotated in on a regular basis: more advanced footwork patterns, practice in shifting among a specific set of guards, or slightly more advanced attacks and defenses. But your maintenance program must be a regular part of your practices.

Developing Advanced Technical Skills

The line between basic and advanced techniques is somewhat murky, and as I mentioned previously it depends on the system being studied and the person teaching it. But in general, when you move from doing work that involves a single action on each person's part to multiple actions, you're getting more advanced. Regular practice of parts one through five of the sample syllabus above will prepare the student for the somewhat more difficult material in section six:

6 Cavazioni⁴

Solo:

- A) From terza, advance while simulating a cavazione under.
- B) From terza, retreat while simulating a cavazione under.

In pairs:

- C) Cavazione under to acquire measure:
 - i) Attacker closes in quarta, wide measure. Defender executes cavazione under and acquires measure in terza outside, with a small step forward.
 - ii) Repeat with close in terza outside and defender shifting to quarta.
- D) Cavazione under to slip measure:
 - i) Attacker closes in quarta, wide measure. Defender executes a cavazione under and slips measure in terza outside, with a small step backward.
 - ii) Repeat with close in terza outside and defender shifting to quarta.
- E) Cavazione against gaining:
 - i) Attacker closes in quarta. Defender slips measure and executes a cavazione under.
 - ii) Attacker closes and gains in quarta, and lunges to hit.
 - iii) Attacker closes and gains in quarta to the inside. Gaining should be subtle, not harsh. Defender, IN REACTION, slips measure and executes a cavazione (back to terza).
- F) Repeat D above, except attacker now lunges and defender shifts to terza outside for the cavazione.
- G) Repeat E above, adding strike in seconda.
- H) Contracavazione to acquire measure:
 - i) Attacker closes and gains in quarta; defender slips and disengages terza outside; attacker executes a contracavazione and advances.
 - ii) Repeat on outside.
- I) Contracavazione to attack:

- i) Inside, as H-i above, but lunge and strike.
- ii) Outside, as H-2 above, but lunge and strike.

This section incorporates most of the skills learned previously: forming guards, seeking measure and tempo, *stringimento di spada*, and attacks. It includes the new skills of disengagements and counterdisengagements. Only the parry is not included, but it could easily be incorporated into the exercises. The student who has assiduously practiced the material to this point is now ready to proceed to the more complex actions that are shown in the plates.

The role of the plates

Many historical fencing texts contain, in addition to their discussions of basic principles, large sections comprised of plates illustrating specific actions, usually accompanied by descriptive text. These appear, on first look, to be an exhaustive catalog of more or less advanced techniques that are the fruit of the system: learn these “plays,” and you have a technique for any situation. It’s tempting, when working with the old texts, to begin with the actions illustrated in the plates, but the plays are built on the basic skills and principles in the author’s work, and these are mostly found in the dense pages of descriptive material that accompanies the plates. The plays are in fact designed to illustrate how the fundamental principles and techniques of the system can come together in a tactical setting, so while the student who starts with the plates may gain a rough understanding of *how* a specific action is performed, he is unlikely to grasp *why* the action is performed as it is. What conditions of time and measure arose to make this play an appropriate choice? What was it about the adversary’s disposition and his selection of tactics that made the action illustrated a logical choice?

If the student has not developed a thorough understanding of the basic theory and principles, he or she really can’t use those principles to observe and assess the adversary, and to develop a plan of attack – a strategy. And by not thoroughly learning the fundamentals of the system, the student is unable to use the techniques shown in the plays, or to use the techniques in new combinations – combinations not shown by the author, but that nevertheless correctly follow the martial principles of the system. Techniques, as will be mentioned later, are the necessary foundation of tactics.

Let’s look at a some examples from Capoferro. These two plates illustrate multiple technical and tactical possibilities. Plate 7 builds quite naturally on the actions practiced in the model syllabus:

Ridolfo Capoferro Plate 7 - Full Exercise



- A) D approaches & gains inside of C (seeking measure)
C executes cavazione & thrusts to chest of D (C attacks in primo tempo, the assumes D has not yet committed to an attack)
D counterattacks to left eye of C with a firm foot or increase of foot (an attack in contratempo, as the measure is wide)
- B) D approaches & gains inside of C (seeking measure)
C executes cavazione & thrusts to chest of D (C attacks in primo tempo; this assumes D has not yet committed to an attack)
D counterattacks to left eye of C with a firm foot or increase of foot (an attack in contratempo, as the measure is wide)
C parries with false edge and returns mandritto to face of D,
or C parries with the true edge and returns an imbrogcata to the chest. (C defends and attacks in dui tempi)

This incorporates the guard positions, measure and tempo, stringimento di spada, attacks, parries, and disengagements. The student who has worked on the previous material is well-equipped to handle this action, but would probably flounder if attempting to do it “from scratch,” with little or no preparation.



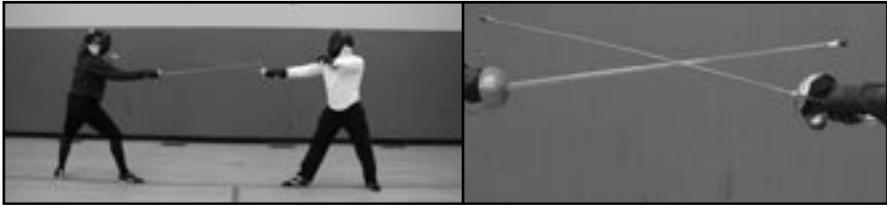
Begin from out of measure



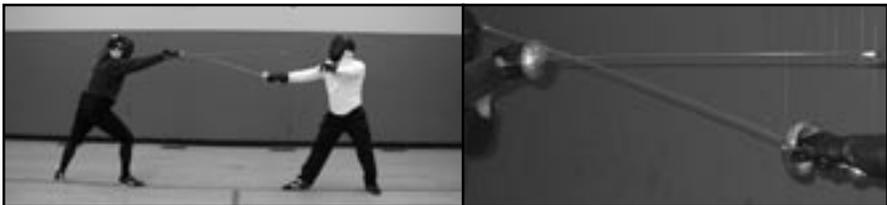
Detail of blade relationship



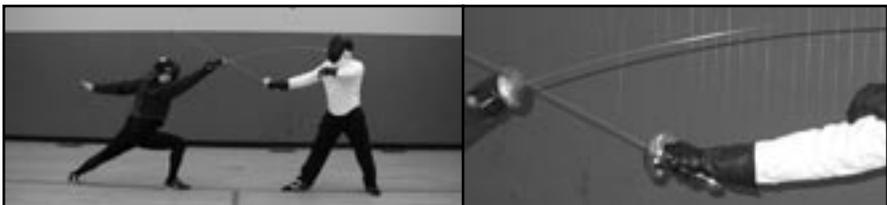
Closing on the opponent's sword (stringere di spada)



Cavazione in tempo



Counterthrust in seconda



Successful attack



...but the attack can be parried before it arrives...



...and the riposte delivered as an imbrocata.

Ridolfo Capoferro Plate 8 Full Exercise



- A) D approaches and gains inside of C
C executes a cavazione and turns a riverso to D's leg
D retires right leg while delivering stramazzone to C's arm

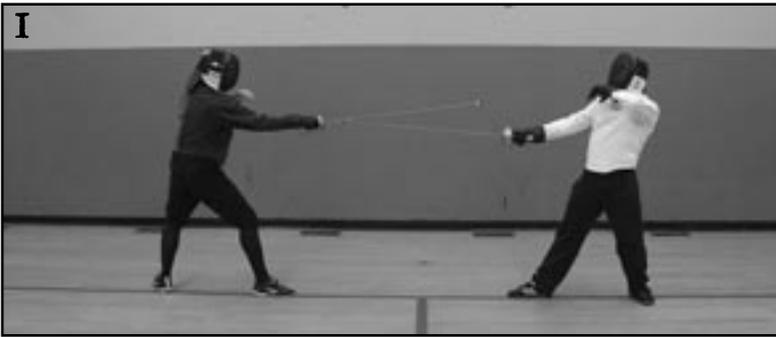
Alternately, D retires right leg while delivering thrust to C's face in seconda

What isn't illustrated, and what can be missed if one looks only at the picture, is the action figure C should have taken:

- B) D approaches and gains inside of C
C executes a cavazione and turns riverso to face and mandritto fendente to the head

So plate 8 tells us what to do in the event someone strikes at the legs, and in the second part it discusses how to avoid this fate: don't strike at the legs, strike instead at the head. If the technique is done correctly, C's sword will oppose (or block) that of D. Performing these actions is vastly more difficult for the student who has not been prepared by the exercises in the earlier part of the syllabus, because it is there that the student learns command of the guard positions from which to attack and defend, learns to control measure with confidence, and learns to control the weapon itself.

The above exercise becomes tactical when it is done in conjunction with the action in another plate (see plate 10 next page).



Sean (left) gains on David's sword.



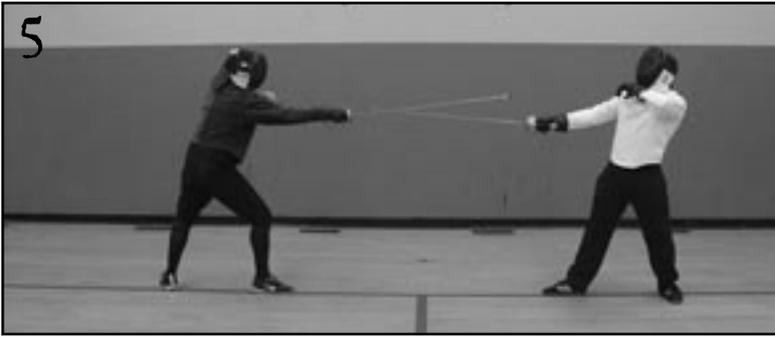
David executes a cavazione in tempo...



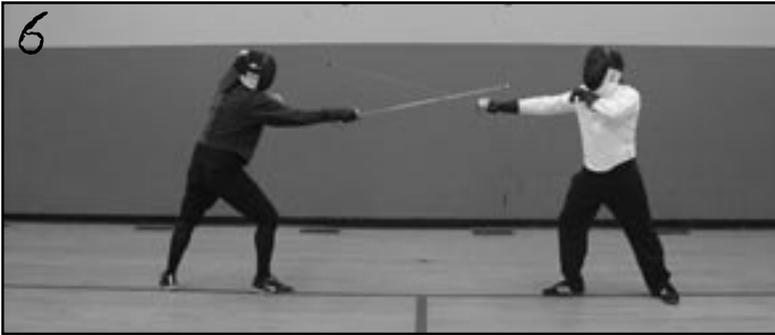
...and throws a riposte at the leg.



Sean withdraws the leg and cuts to David's arm.



Alternatively, as Sean gains David's blade...



David can throw a riperso at Sean's head...



...closing the line against his blade...



...and completing the action with a mandritto fendente.

Ridolfo Capoferro Plate 10 Exercise



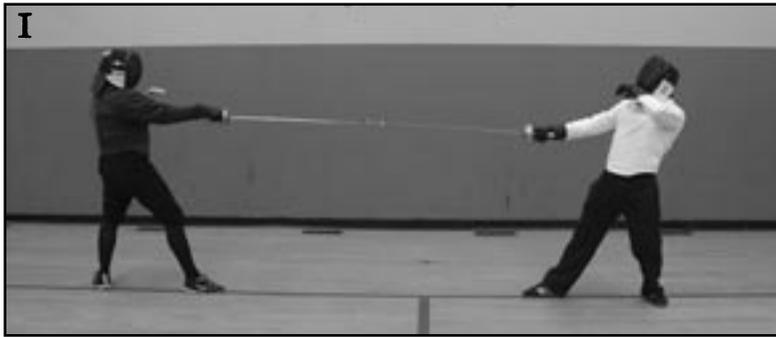
- A) D approaches and gains inside C
- C turns a riverso under D's blade and into his face
- D attacks into riverso in quarta, lunging

The action that successfully concluded plate 8 is here opposed by a thrust and lunge that effectively blocks the cut to the face. This is not a simple action: it requires excellent control of time and measure, and it further requires precise handling of the weapon. Again, practice of basic skills makes it much easier and more approachable. Practice of basic skills also makes the action more understandable: the student can see how several different simple techniques have come together to produce a specific result.

The second portion of plate 10 (which is not illustrated), shows how the above action is defeated:

- B) D approaches and gains inside C
- C turns a riverso under D's blade and into his face
- D attacks into quarta, lunging
- C parries with half mandritto & delivers riverso to D (or delivers a thrust to D's chest)

Again, the action is not simple, much practice is required, and the apparent complexity of the action is much easier to understand when the fundamentals are firmly in hand. But even more importantly, the student who has done that basic work before doing the more complex work is well-equipped to



From outside of attacking measure...



...David gains to the inside of Sean's blade.



In response, Sean throws a riposte to David's head...



...but David lunges hand high in quarta, and intercepts the blow



Alternatively, as David closes...



...Sean feints as if to cut...



...drawing David's thrust and parrying it...



...while Sean delivers his own thrust inside.

see how these actions will play out when actually fighting, can observe his adversary's tendencies and dispositions of body and weapon, and can form a plan of attack. Working in this way produces a fencer who can think and use tactical skills, instead of a fencer who can only fight by rote memory.

When working these types of exercises, which employ actions followed by counteractions, it's imperative that the student understand the logic of the action: once he understands the action of the adversary at its logical culmination (ie the adversary's point in his chest), then he can fully understand the logic of the counteraction. A syllabus must always emphasize the logical progression of actions, of technique building on technique, so that the student understands the whole of the theory involved (either intuitively or explicitly).

Developing Tactical Skills

All tactical work depends on being able to perform specific techniques: if you don't know how to perform an attack to the opponent's outside low line while passing forward with your left foot, then you can't use it when you fence. The tactic is denied to you for the simple reason that you can't perform the technique. If you've only practiced it a few times, it's unlikely you'll be able to use it against an experienced fencer, although newcomers might be fooled – for a short time, anyway. So it's important to get lots of practice in a wide variety of techniques, starting with the basics and working to the more advanced. As you read the sections below, you might find some techniques described that are not familiar to you. This puts you in the position of the fencer who does not know a specific technique: you can't use what you don't know. Unfortunately, teaching each technique is beyond the scope of this article. For now, just hang in there and absorb the general concepts behind skill progressions.

For basic tactical work, I usually take an exercise or two and break it down to an "if-then" situation. One basic possibility is developed from the exercises outlined above: Attacker finds measure and gains the Defender's sword inside or outside, as he chooses. Defender responds with the cavazione in tempo; he has to choose the correct direction for his disengagement; and the Attacker receives the hit. Repeat, with Attacker varying inside or outside more or less randomly. If this is too difficult – and it may be - you can have the Attacker alternate inside-outside every other time, so as to be very predictable.

For more advanced tactical work, you can allow the Attacker to perform the contracavazione, sometimes executing an inquartata; this should have the effect of the Defender having to choose between 1) ricavazione (a regaining of the blade by means of another cavazione), with a lunge or 2) a mezza

cavazione) with a pass of the left foot, lowering the body to the left. These are difficult exercises, and you are well advised to do them first at very (even ridiculously) slow speed, so that you have time to make the appropriate choice. I often refer to this very slow speed as “motion-study” speed. Don’t speed up much over the course of one class, but do speed up over the course of many classes.

Building on the exercise above, still more advanced tactical work would involve a varied response on the part of the Defender in his first action; in other words, the Attacker probes (scandaglio) with a specific action to which the Defender has two specific responses. For example, the Attacker closes measure and gains the line given by the adversary’s sword in quarta. The first possible response of the Defender is to execute cavazione in tempo and lunge, to which the Attacker responds with a parry in seconda with the true edge and a thrust to the chest (note that Capoferro allows a dui-tempi parry-riposte, although his parry is far forward and may in fact strike in one tempo). To this the Attacker must recover from his lunge, riding the riposte with his own blade and closing to the outside, striking the Defender in the face in seconda (see photos next page).

The second possible response of the Defender is to do a mezza cavazione, lowering the body to the left and thrusting on a pass of the left foot to the left, striking in seconda under the adversary’s sword. In this instance the Attacker can parry with a half riverso (a parry to the low outside with the true edge) and thrust to the chest, maintaining opposition on the adversary’s sword (or simply keeping the line closed if the adversary’s steel has been beaten away).

The important thing in these types of tactical exercises is to have a specific choice of two actions for either Attacker or Defender. Eventually the exercise can branch: depending on the Attacker’s initial choice, the Defender will choose, which will give the Attacker a second choice, etc. One warning: the more complicated the exercise, the higher the failure rate - in 20 repetitions by experienced swordsmen, easily half of them will go wrong in some way. Prepare yourself and your students mentally for this. The exercises should be done very slowly at first and should always be based on non-tactical exercises that your people have already performed that evening. Getting fast and accurate with these exercises takes a long time and lots of practice. Beginners shouldn’t do any of the complex ones, so as to avoid getting frustrated. I suggest working out the specifics with a senior student or fellow teacher first, so the class flows smoothly - I always do this for new exercises, just to make sure I’ve thought it through.

You must make careful choices when selecting tactical exercises and must assess the different levels within your group. Students must first be proficient in basic actions, and not all students can perform all exercises, tactical or technical. The technical foundation that supports a tactical exercise must be strong. Rushing people into things they aren't ready for breeds frustration and bad habits. My advice is to set up a drill structure where they perform first one basic drill (choice A of the tactical), and then immediately perform a different but related drill (choice B of the tactical, so there is a single repetition of drill A and one of drill B, back to drill A, etc). Take care to see that the techniques and drill speeds are appropriate to the level of the students, and see how quickly they adapt. Those who adapt more quickly can be moved up a level so that you form two groupings. Group 1 stays at the more basic level and group 2 works at a slightly more advanced pace. Also, people do need to be prepared for the results of an incorrect choice in a tactical - my standard advice for any drill is that if it goes wrong, retire and assume a defensive position, instead of standing up and scratching your head. Never teach yourself to give up: always continue fencing. And it is critical that the choices are real and not contrived; they must whenever possible be the mirror of combat.

Make certain you close with technical drills that the student knows well, so as to reinforce the technique and the sense of control and competence. Leave the student feeling confident in the his or her practice, and do it by reinforcing the correct execution of core technique.

Developing a Program

First, you need to research your discipline. There are two basic kinds of research you will perform: in the library, and sword-in-hand. Library research comes first, and while the subject itself is outside the scope of this article, the importance of it cannot be stressed enough. Become familiar with your text or texts, even if you don't understand all the concepts and techniques discussed in it. Research done sword-in-hand relies on your reading: you slowly begin to work through the various principles discussed in the book, following as closely as you can the discussion presented. Take careful notes of what you do and what you observe about your attempts, and refer to them as you return to the text. But you must also distinguish between research and practice. Practice comes when you have developed enough confidence in a significant portion of your research to begin drilling in it, as opposed to trying out several different variations of a given skill and trying to decide what best fits the author's intent. And if you are actively researching a system while also practicing it, you must be prepared to revise and re-practice basic skills and progressions as a result of new research.

Secondly, you need to organize the results of your research into a useful, accessible structure from which you can plan your practices. Structuring your practice into a logical, organized system can often be the most difficult part of your studies. In researching the pedagogical system found in ancient fencing texts, one should begin with an examination of the organization of those systems. There is very likely a progression of actions that runs from the simple and fundamental to the increasingly complex and advanced, thus permitting the student to learn basic concepts and mechanics before attempting more difficult actions. But you have to temper your expectations: as modern readers we expect a training manual to be written in a series of sections that proceed from the simple to the complex, with clear, concise explanations and copious illustrations. Historical fencing texts were not always written to be “how-to” manuals, and even those that might have been are written and organized in ways unfamiliar to the 21st century reader. A given aspect of theory, or a basic skill, is often discussed at several different places in the text.

Capoferro, for example, in examining the concept of “stringere di spada” (roughly, closing on and covering the adversary’s sword), discusses it briefly on pages 18-19 and 21-22 of the first section of his treatise (“Tavola generale dell’arte della scherma,” General Table of the Art of Fencing); again on pages 29-30 in the second section (“Alcuni ricordi, o vero avvertimenti della scherma,” Some Admonitions, or Truths of Fencing); on pages 32-33 and 38 of the third section (“Dichiaratione d’alcuni termini della scherma, che s’appartengono all’uso,” Declaration of some terms pertaining to the use of fencing); and finally in plates 6 and 15 of the final section of 43 plates. Each of the discussions cited above must be read carefully in the context of the surrounding material in order to glean a good understanding of the process of stringimento di spada, and then it must be put into a framework that allows it to be used in practice, and then this must be repeated with all concepts discussed in the theoretical portions of the work.

One method I have used to organize the material so that it is approachable and practicable is to use the templates provided by a discipline I know very well: classical Italian fencing. First, let me stress that it is vitally, critically important not to confuse the two disciplines: early 17th century Italian rapier and 19th century dueling sword are different disciplines, each with its own logic. The one arose from the other, and the relationships in the theory are fascinating, but there is a world of difference between a two-and-a-half pound rapier with a 44 inch blade, wielded in 1610, and a one-and-a-half pound dueling sword with a 38 inch blade, wielded in 1885. So one must be careful to not confuse the techniques of the one with the techniques of the other.

But what can be usefully employed is the pedagogical structure of the dueling sword as practiced in Italy in the 19th century. The general order of actions employed in the Italian schools of the mid to late 19th century, with some variations, began with simple attacks (attacks made in a single blade motion) followed by simple parries, proceeded to compound attacks (attacks made with more than one blade motion), to actions made against the adversary's blade, to second intention, and then to counterattacks and actions in countertime. Using this general template, I can group the techniques discussed by Capoferro into the logical, easily-followed progressions that are missing from his treatise (and were likely supplied by Capoferro and other teachers on the floor of the sala d'armi). In sections one, two and three of the syllabus above, I grouped guards, measure & tempo, stringimento di spada, and attacks, all of which together roughly correspond to the grouping of simple attacks in the 19th century schools. Parries follow, and then cavazioni. In the actions found in plates 8 and 10 we can see actions in contratempo, as well as actions in second intention. Again, it's not the technique of the 19th century that is used, which would be a serious error; it is the pedagogical structure – the organizing principles.

When you have done your research and devised the general progression of techniques that you're going to follow, you need to develop your syllabus. Classes should proceed in cycles, so that you begin material in one class and follow through with related material in subsequent classes and a progression from the basic to the advanced is developed. A single class or lesson should work one or at most two (depending on skill levels and experience of participants, as well as available time) unified themes over the course of the class. The model syllabus in this article, while not complete as an entire system of fencing, is complete as a sequence of classes. The exact number of hours a given group will require will vary based on a variety of factors, but in general I would expect a novice class to spend thirty to forty hours on it before moving on to another set of basic actions, also grouped from more basic to advanced. (It might include cuts, for example, which were shown in the actions derived from plates 8 and 10). For this second set of skills and concepts the group would already have a good foundation with which to work, and of course they would spend some of their time reviewing their first set of basic skills.

By following a carefully planned program of skill progressions, a group of fencers –whether a formal school with a teacher in charge or a group of friends involved in self-study – can build themselves a solid foundation for rapid future progress.

-Notes-

¹ The term “body mechanics” refers to the placements, postures and movements of the body within a given martial system. These movements are critical foundational elements and must be constantly practiced until they become second nature.

² The syllabus in this article is not a complete Capoferro syllabus, but consists of sections of a larger body of work. The portions used were selected to illustrate skill progressions.

³ *Stringere* is a common Italian verb meaning, “to tighten.” *Stringere di spada* means to tighten on the adversary’s blade. Capoferro’s instructions are specific that one should neither contact nor deviate the opposing steel from the line of defense, but instead “cover” it very closely, stronger against weaker. He specifies a *palmo* from the adversary’s point, roughly 8-10 inches or 20-25 centimeters, without touching the enemy’s blade. One can think of it as covering the line given by the adversary. This is often called “engagement” at rapier, but Ridolfo Capoferro, Salvator Fabris and Nicoletto Giganti called it variously *stringere di spada*, *trovare di spada*, *guadagnara di spada* (literally “to tighten,” “to find” and “to gain” the sword). It is quite different from the domination and deviation of the adversary’s blade found in the 19th century Italian schools. These authors did describe actions wherein they would deliberately press the other blade, but it wasn’t the fundamental action of the engagement - it seems to have been more an occasional tactic, to be employed as the occasion might require.

These early 17th century masters did use opposition against the adversary’s blade when executing a thrust, taking strong against weak to close the line and control the adversary’s blade. Capoferro refers to this as “striking according to the point that the enemy will give,” meaning that you should generally execute your thrust into a line occupied by the adversary’s sword, and oppose it strong to weak. This is a technique and tactic that was preserved in the Italian schools as long as they were concerned with dueling practice, which they were well into the 20th century.

⁴ *Cavazione* is the noun form of the Italian verb *cavare*, “to pull out.” This noun form is a fencing-specific term and does not find its way into general usage. While it is correctly translated as “disengagement” in many 19th and 20th century Italian fencing texts that have been published in English, such a translation is misleading in the context of early 17th century Italian rapier play. Ridolfo Capoferro in *Gran siumlacro dell’arte e dell’uso della scherma* (1610), Salvator Fabris in *Lo Schermo, ovvero scienza d’arme* (1606) and Nicoletto Giganti in *Scola ovvero teatro* (1606) all detail in their works a method of closing and covering the line offered by the adversary’s blade that specifically does not contact his blade (see footnote to *stringere di spada*). The effect is to confine him through superior tactical position rather than mechanical domination of his blade. By the late 17th century, as shown in Francesco Antonio Marcelli’s *Regole della scherma* (1686), there was a shift towards contact of blades.

Glossary

This is a partial, limited glossary prepared for this article. For a complete glossary of early 17th century rapier terminology, see *The Art of Dueling: Salvator Fabris' rapier fighting treatise of 1606*, Tommaso Leoni, Chivalry Bookshelf 2005, ISBN: 978-1-891448-23-2

Bladework - an informal term that refers to actions and exercises performed with the sword.

Cavazione - the act of changing lines in relation to the adversary's blade, often in response to his specific action.

Cavazioni - the plural form of cavazione.

Contracavazione - a cavazione executed in response to a cavazione by the adversary

Contracavazioni- the plural form of contracavazione.

Contratempo - an attack performed by interrupting the tempo of the adversary's attack. Contratempo refers specifically to the tempo involved: it counters that of the adversary.

Fendente - a cutting action that is executed with a downward stroke.

Guardia - a position held by the fencer with his weapon and body which leaves him ready to attack, defend, and counterattack.

Guardie - the plural form of guardia. Three of Capoferro's guardie are used in this article:

Seconda - a guardia in which the hand is to the right, even with the shoulder, and palm down.

Terza - a guardia in which the hand is held knuckles down, at the level of the right flank (which faces forward), and blade parallel to the ground.

"Terza outside" - Capoferro also speaks of terza with the hand lowered (relative to seconda) outside the knee.

Quarta - a guardia in which the hand is held palm up and inside the line of the forward thigh.

Hand positions - positions of the weapon hand in space. In early 17th century rapier play, the positions of the hand are closely linked to specific guardie. In later

centuries the position of the hand comes to be held more independently of the guardia.

Imbroccata - a downward thrust of the blade.

Inquartata - a removal of the body from the line of offense by a step of the left (eg rear) foot to the right. The term “inquartata” for this action was not actually used by Capoferro, and may have entered the Italian fencing lexicon with Rosaroll Scorza and Pietro Grisetti’s 1803 rapier text, *La scienza dell scherma*.

Mandritto - a blow (cut) which issues from the swordsman’s right side.

Mandritto fendente - a downward blow which issues from the swordsman’s right side, taking a greater or lesser angle diagonally from right to left.

Measure - the space between two fencers when on guard. Capoferro speaks of wide and narrow measure, and further subdivides them.

Mezza cavazione - a change of line from one side of the adversary’s sword to just below it.

Parry - the act of defending with the blade by opposing the hostile blade.

Quarta - see Guardie.

Ricavazione - a cavazione executed in response to the adversary’s contracavazione.

Riverso - a blow (cut) which issues from the swordsman’s left side.

Seconda - see Guardie.

Stramazzone - a wheeling cut executed from the wrist.

Stringere di spada - Gaining the blade. The act of closing and covering the line offered by the adversary’s blade, without touching it (or without pushing it).

Tempo - the length of time required to execute an action; also the speed at which an individual can act. The intersection of these variables between the two combatants is known as “tempo”.

Terza - see Guardie.

Terza outside - see Guardie.