

# DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

## Épée-Specific Footwork

*Actions & Exercises*



*The footwork actions unique to épée fencing – distance management without right-of-way, the full-body target, and the patience game that defines the weapon*

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# A Note from Coach Derek

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*If foil footwork is about attacking with priority, épée footwork is about controlling distance without giving anything away.*

*Épée has no right-of-way. Both fencers can score simultaneously – and both touches count. The entire body is valid target. There is no off-target. Every touch counts, every opening is real, and every mistake in distance is punished.*

*This changes everything about how you move. Épée footwork is slower, more deliberate, and more precise than foil footwork. You don't march forward to establish priority – there is no priority. You move to find the exact distance where you can hit and they can't, or where their attack falls short and your counterattack lands.*

*These are the footwork actions that épée fencers use to win at the highest levels.*

*– Coach Derek*

# How Épée Rules Shape Footwork

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## No Right-of-Way

Without right-of-way, there is no tactical advantage to moving forward first. In foil, the fencer who advances with the arm extending has priority. In épée, the fencer who advances carelessly gets hit on the hand. This fundamental difference means épée footwork is more cautious, more measured, and more focused on distance than on initiative.

The practical result: épée fencers spend more time at long distance than foilists. They close distance in small, controlled increments. They rarely march forward in a continuous advance. Every step is deliberate, and every step forward is accompanied by the awareness that the opponent can score at any moment without needing to establish an attack.

## The Entire Body Is Target

In foil, only the torso scores. In épée, the hand, arm, foot, knee, mask, and body all score. This dramatically changes footwork because the closest target is almost always the hand and forearm — the parts of the body that extend toward the opponent.

Épée footwork must protect the hand and arm throughout every movement. This means the en garde position is deeper (to keep the hand farther from the opponent), the advances are shorter (to avoid extending into the opponent's range), and the retreats are more decisive (to open distance quickly when the opponent attacks).

## Simultaneous Touches (Double Touches)

When both fencers hit within 40 milliseconds of each other (1/25 of a second), both touches count. In a 15-touch bout, double touches hurt the fencer who is ahead — if you're winning 8-7 and you double, the score becomes 9-8 and you've lost a point of your lead. Épée footwork is designed to avoid the double touch by creating situations where you can hit without being hit.

**KEY CONCEPT:** Épée footwork serves distance. Not priority, not territory — distance. Every step you take should either create the distance you need to score safely or deny the opponent the distance they need to score at all.



# Épée-Specific Footwork Actions

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## 1. The Distance Probe

A half-advance — moving the front foot forward approximately half the distance of a normal advance, without moving the back foot. This micro-step tests the opponent's distance response without fully committing to a closer position. If the opponent doesn't react, you're now slightly closer and can follow with a full advance or attack. If they retreat, you've learned that they're responsive to distance pressure.

**Execution:** Slide the front foot forward 4–6 inches. Keep the back foot planted. Hold the position for a beat. Watch the opponent. If they flinch or retreat, note it — they're distance-sensitive at this range. If they hold, you're at a closer fighting distance and can decide your next action.

**Exercise:** 20 distance probes against a partner. After each probe, call out whether the opponent retreated, held, or advanced. 3 sets. Track the accuracy of your read.

## 2. The Deep Retreat

A double retreat executed as one action — two retreat steps blended into a single, explosive backward movement. In épée, you often need to open more distance than a single retreat provides, especially against attacks to the hand or arm that arrive from medium distance. The deep retreat opens distance dramatically and often causes the opponent's attack to fall well short.

**Execution:** From en garde, push off the front foot and execute two retreat steps in rapid succession. The two steps should blend together so the movement feels like one long, fast retreat rather than two separate steps. Maintain en garde balance throughout. Don't lean backward — your weight stays centered over your feet.

**Exercise:** 15 deep retreats from medium distance. Partner attacks with an advance-lunge after a random delay. Your deep retreat should make their lunge fall at least 6 inches short. 4 sets.

## 3. The Step-and-Extend

A small advance (or half-advance) combined with an arm extension toward the opponent's hand or forearm. This is the fundamental épée attacking preparation. Unlike the foil march (which aims at the torso), the step-and-extend threatens the closest target — the hand. The opponent must either pull their hand back (giving you information and possibly causing them to break their en garde position) or deal with the threat.

**Execution:** Advance one step while extending the arm, aiming the point at the opponent's wrist or forearm. Don't commit to a full lunge. Hold the extended position. If the opponent retreats, you've gained distance. If they pull their hand back, you've disrupted their guard. If they attempt to take your blade, you can disengage.

**Exercise:** 20 step-and-extend actions against a partner. Partner responds randomly: retreat, hand withdrawal, or blade action. You identify the response and react accordingly. 3 sets.

## 4. The Épée-Specific Lunge Recovery

In foil, after a lunge you typically recover forward and continue your attack or establish right-of-way. In épée, after a lunge you must recover backward immediately — because if you missed, the opponent's immediate counterattack to your now-exposed arm or body is devastating. The épée lunge recovery is faster and more explosive backward than the foil recovery.

**Execution:** After the lunge lands (hit or miss), immediately push off the front foot and pull the front leg back to en garde position. The recovery should be as fast as the lunge itself. The arm pulls back during the recovery to protect the hand and forearm. Don't hang in the lunge — every fraction of a second you stay extended is a moment where your body is a wide-open target.

**Exercise:** 20 lunge-and-recover sequences at a target. Time the recovery: it should take no more than 0.5 seconds from full extension to en garde. 4 sets. Partner stands ready to counterattack if your recovery is slow — this provides real feedback.

## 5. The Lateral Step

Moving offline — stepping to the left or right instead of forward or backward. In épée, lateral movement changes the angle and distance simultaneously, making the opponent's pre-planned attack miss while opening a new line for your counterattack. Lateral steps are more common in épée than foil because there's no right-of-way rule to reward straight-line aggression.

**Execution:** From en garde, step the front foot approximately 6–8 inches to the left or right while maintaining your en garde depth. The back foot follows to maintain your stance width. Your upper body stays square to the opponent. The lateral movement should be small but decisive — enough to change the angle by 10–15 degrees.

**Exercise:** 10 lateral steps left with simultaneous counterattack to the opponent's arm. 10 lateral steps right with counterattack. 3 sets. Partner attacks with a direct lunge. Your lateral step should cause their attack to miss while your counterattack lands on their arm.

## 6. The Long Lunge

In épée, attacks often begin from farther away than in foil, which means the lunge must cover more distance. The épée long lunge uses an exaggerated forward lean and a deeper front knee bend to gain an extra 4–6 inches of reach. The trade-off is that recovery from a long lunge is slower, so it's a committed, one-shot action.

**Execution:** Extend the arm fully before the feet move. Then drive the front foot forward as far as possible, bending the front knee deeply (well past the ankle). The back leg extends fully. The torso leans slightly forward. The goal is maximum reach. Only use this when you're confident the touch will land, because recovery is slow.

**Exercise:** 15 long lunges at a target set at maximum range. Measure your lunge distance. Then 15 normal lunges. Compare the difference — you should gain 4–6 inches with the long lunge. 3 sets.

## 7. The Absence of Blade Footwork

In épée, many fencers keep their blade disengaged — not in contact with the opponent's blade and not committed to a specific line. This "absence of blade" position means the opponent can't take your blade with a beat or bind because there's nothing to engage. Your footwork during absence of blade is slower and more measured, with small adjustments to maintain the optimal distance.

**Execution:** Keep the arm at approximately three-quarter extension with the point low or offline (not directly threatening the opponent's target). Advance and retreat in small steps, maintaining medium-long distance. The blade only commits to a line when you decide to attack or when you need to defend. Between those moments, the blade is neutral.

**Exercise:** Fence 3-minute rounds where you maintain absence of blade for the entire round. No blade engagement. Only score with direct attacks from absence of blade — extend, commit, and hit in one motion. 4 rounds.

## 8. The Counterattack Retreat

One of the most important épée-specific footwork actions. As the opponent attacks, you retreat while simultaneously extending your arm to hit their advancing arm or body. The retreat opens the distance so their attack falls short, while your extension arrives on their arm or chest as they lunge into your blade. This is the essence of épée — making the opponent miss while you score.

**Execution:** As the opponent begins their advance-lunge, retreat one step while extending your arm with the point aimed at their wrist or forearm. Your retreat must begin before their lunge lands — timing is everything. If you retreat too early, you're out of range. If you retreat too late, their attack lands. The goal is to retreat just enough that their point misses while your point arrives on their arm.

**Exercise:** 20 counterattack retreats against a partner's advance-lunge. Partner attacks at random timing. Track hit percentage and whether the opponent's attack missed. Target: landing the counterattack while making the attack miss at least 70% of the time. 4 sets.

**COACH'S TIP:** Épée footwork is a game of millimeters. In foil, being 6 inches too close might mean an off-target hit. In épée, being 6 inches too close means a touch on your hand and a point for the opponent. Every step matters. Every inch matters. Train your distance judgment with the same precision you train your blade work.



# Épée Footwork Practice Drills

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## Drill 1: The Distance Game

Two fencers face each other at medium distance. No attacks allowed. Both fencers advance and retreat, trying to maintain their optimal distance. After 2 minutes, the referee calls "Attack" — the fencer who is at a better distance at that moment scores a point. 6 rounds. This trains constant distance awareness and the ability to maintain your distance against an opponent who is also trying to control it.

## Drill 2: The Hand-Hunting Drill

Fence bouts where the only valid target is the hand and forearm (wrist to elbow). This forces épée-specific footwork: staying at long distance, using small adjustments to create openings, and the step-and-extend to threaten the hand. First to 5 touches on the hand. 3 bouts.

## Drill 3: The No-Double Bout

Fence a full bout (first to 15) where double touches count as 0–0 (neither fencer scores). This trains the épée fencer's most critical skill: scoring without being scored on simultaneously. It changes your tactical approach entirely — you must be more patient, more precise, and more willing to wait for the right moment rather than trading touches.

## Drill 4: The Counterattack Gauntlet

One fencer defends only, using counterattack retreats (action 8 above). The attacker advances and lunges. The defender scores only with counterattacks during the retreat. After 15 attacks, switch roles. Track counterattack success rate — competitive épée fencers should land at least 50% of these.



## Final Coach's Note

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*Épée footwork is the most subtle of the three weapons. There are no dramatic marching attacks or explosive flèches (though flèches are legal in épée, they're used far less often than in foil). Instead, épée footwork is about precision, patience, and the ability to find the exact distance where you can score safely.*

*Master the distance probe and the counterattack retreat first. Those two actions define épée footwork at every level. Then add the lateral step and the step-and-extend. With those four actions and solid general footwork, you have the movement vocabulary of a competitive épéiste.*

*Remember: in épée, the fencer who controls the distance controls the bout. Train your footwork to control the distance, and the touches will follow.*

*— Coach Derek*