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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Épée-Specific Tactics

The strategic principles, bout management techniques, and decision-making frameworks for the weapon where every touch counts and both lights can score.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Épée tactics are fundamentally different from foil and saber tactics because of one simple rule: there is no right-of-way. Both fencers can score at any time, on any target, without needing to establish an attack.

This creates a weapon where patience, risk management, and the ability to score without being scored on are the dominant tactical skills. In foil, you can win touches by having priority even if your attack isn't perfect. In épée, the only thing that matters is whether you hit and whether the opponent doesn't.

These are the tactical principles that separate competitive épéeists from fencers who simply fence épée.

— Coach Derek

The Core Tactical Principles

Principle 1: Avoid the Double Touch

The double touch is the defining tactical problem of épée. When both fencers score within 40 milliseconds, both touches count. In a bout to 15, a double touch moves the score from (for example) 8–7 to 9–8 — the leading fencer has gained nothing and the trailing fencer has narrowed the gap by one touch.

This means the fencer who is winning should avoid double touches at all costs. Every double is a gift to the opponent. Conversely, the fencer who is losing can use aggressive, high-risk actions that invite the double because the double actually helps them by preventing the leading fencer from pulling further ahead.

Tactical Application: When you're ahead, fence more defensively. Use counterattacks and parry-ripostes rather than simultaneous attacks. When you're behind, increase your aggression — the double touch is your friend.

Principle 2: Target Selection as Tactics

In foil, every touch goes to the torso. In épée, you choose your target based on distance, the opponent's guard position, and the tactical situation. Target selection is itself a tactical decision.

The hand is the closest target and the lowest-risk attack. The body requires closing more distance, which exposes you to the counterattack. The foot and thigh are unexpected but require modified hand positions. The shoulder and upper arm are accessible through flicks and angulated attacks.

Switching targets throughout the bout keeps the opponent guessing and prevents them from settling into a comfortable defensive position. An opponent who only has to defend their hand can focus all their attention there. An opponent who has to protect hand, body, and foot is spread thin.

Principle 3: Time and the Clock

In épée, the clock is a tactical weapon. Each period is three minutes. If the score is tied at the end of the third period, there is a one-minute priority period where one fencer is randomly given priority — if no one scores in that minute, the priority fencer wins. This creates enormous time pressure.

The fencer who is winning should slow the bout down. Longer pauses between engagements, more time at distance, fewer risks. The fencer who is losing should speed the bout up. More aggressive approaches, faster tempo, more attacks. Managing the clock is a legitimate and important tactical tool in épée.

Tactical Application: Always know the score and the time remaining. If you're up by 3 or more with less than a minute left, there is almost no reason to attack. Let the clock run. If you're behind with time running out, you must attack — even risky attacks are better than letting the clock expire.

> **KEY CONCEPT:** Épée is the weapon of risk management. Every action has a risk-to-reward ratio. The best épéeists don't take the most risks or the fewest risks — they take the right risks at the right moments.

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Tactical Patterns in Épée

The Waiting Game

Many épée bouts at the competitive level feature long stretches where neither fencer attacks. Both are at long distance, making small adjustments, probing with half-advances, and waiting for the opponent to make a mistake. This is not passive — it's deliberate. The fencer who attacks first in épée often loses because the attacker exposes their arm and body to the counterattack.

The waiting game is won by the fencer who can maintain concentration longer, who can resist the temptation to attack prematurely, and who recognizes the right moment when it appears. Patience is not inaction — it's controlled readiness.

> **COACH'S TIP:** If you find yourself attacking out of boredom or frustration, you're losing the waiting game. The moment you attack because you're tired of waiting (instead of because you see an opening), you've given up your tactical advantage. Train yourself to be comfortable at distance for extended periods.

Preparation and Provocation

Instead of waiting for the opponent to make a mistake, the épée fencer can provoke a mistake through preparation actions. A preparation is any action that isn't a scoring attempt but is designed to create an opening for the next action.

Common épée preparations: the beat (sharp strike against the opponent's blade to displace it), the press (sustained pressure against the opponent's blade to push it aside), the change of engagement (moving your blade from one side of the opponent's to the other), and the absence of blade (withdrawing your blade entirely so the opponent has nothing to engage).

The preparation is the question. The opponent's response is the answer. Based on that answer, you choose your attack. If they react to the beat by pulling their hand back, attack their body. If they react by counterattacking, parry and riposte. If they don't react, attack their hand directly.

The Counter-Time Play

Counter-time is the épée equivalent of foil's second intention. You deliberately invite the opponent to counterattack, then parry their counterattack and riposte. This is particularly effective in épée because the counterattack is such a common response to forward movement.

How it works: advance with arm extended (looking like you're preparing an attack). The opponent extends their arm for a counterattack to your hand. Instead of continuing the attack, take a small parry (parry 6 or parry 2) to deflect their counterattack, then riposte to their now-exposed hand or body.

Counter-time works because it uses the opponent's most natural response (the counterattack) against them. The key is that your initial advance must look genuine — if the opponent suspects you're fishing for their counterattack, they won't give it to you.

The Scoring Zone

Every épéeist has a "scoring zone" — the distance range where their attacks are most effective. For some fencers, it's very close (inside fighters who score with body attacks and short hand attacks). For others, it's at the edge of maximum reach (distance fighters who score with long lunges and flèches to the hand). Understanding your own scoring zone and the opponent's scoring zone is critical.

If your scoring zone is closer than the opponent's, you need to close distance and fight inside. If your scoring zone is farther, you need to keep distance and fight at the edge. The tactical battle is often about which fencer can impose their preferred distance.

Tactical Application: In the first few touches, test your range against the opponent. Where can you score? Where can they score? The fencer who establishes their preferred distance wins the majority of the remaining touches.

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Bout Management

The Pool Bout (First to 5)

Épée pool bouts are notoriously tight. Because there's no right-of-way and both fencers can score, many pool bouts feature scores like 5–4 or 5–3 with multiple double touches. Your pool bout strategy should prioritize clean scoring over speed.

Don't rush to 5. A 5–1 victory and a 5–4 victory both count as wins in the pool. But careless attacks that create double touches can turn a 3–1 lead into a 4–4 tie. Be disciplined.

If you're up 4–2 or better, switch to pure defense. Let the opponent come to you. Counterattack and parry-riposte. Make them earn every touch while you coast to 5.

The Direct Elimination Bout (First to 15)

Long épée DEs are wars of attrition. The three-period structure (each 3 minutes with 1-minute breaks) gives the bout a rhythm that you can use tactically.

First Period: Establish your distance and gather information. Who attacks first? How does the opponent respond to your preparations? What target do they prefer? Don't overcommit — being down 2–4 after the first period is recoverable.

Second Period: Implement your tactical plan. Use what you learned in the first period. If they counterattack a lot, use counter-time. If they wait, use preparation and provocation. If they attack aggressively, use parry-riposte and the deep retreat.

Third Period: Score management. If you're ahead, slow down and protect the lead. If you're behind, increase tempo. If you're tied, fence your best actions with full commitment. The third period is where composure wins.

The Priority Minute

If the DE is tied at the end of regulation, a one-minute priority period begins. One fencer is randomly selected as the priority fencer — if no one scores, the priority fencer wins. This completely changes the tactical dynamic.

If you have priority: you have no reason to attack. You can stand at distance for the entire minute and win by default. The opponent must come to you, which means they're attacking into your defense. Play purely defensively: counterattacks, parry-ripostes, and distance management.

If you don't have priority: you must score within one minute. This creates pressure but also clarity — you know exactly what you need to do. Attack with purpose. Use your best preparation-into-attack sequence. Don't waste time with elaborate setups. Close distance, commit, and score.

> **COACH'S TIP:** The priority minute is won or lost before it starts. If you've practiced your best attacking sequence against a purely defensive opponent, you're ready. If you haven't, the pressure of the priority minute will overwhelm you. Practice this specific scenario in training at least once a week.

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Reading the Épée Opponent

Hand Position Tells

In épée, the opponent's hand position reveals their intentions. A high hand (guard at chest level) protects the body but exposes the underside of the wrist. A low hand (guard at hip level) protects the hand but exposes the body. A hand held far forward is aggressive but vulnerable to the counterattack. A hand held back is defensive but limits the opponent's attacking reach.

Watch the hand during the en garde phase. Where the opponent holds their hand tells you which target is open and which tactical approach they're using.

Distance Habits

Most épéeists have a preferred fighting distance. Some like to be very close, where they can score with short hand attacks and body touches. Others prefer long distance, where they can use their reach advantage and avoid exchanges at close range. Identifying the opponent's preferred distance early in the bout allows you to either deny them that distance or exploit the vulnerabilities that come with it.

Response Patterns

When you advance, does the opponent retreat, counterattack, or hold? When you extend your arm, do they beat, bind, or wait? When you attack, do they parry-riposte or attempt to score simultaneously? These response patterns repeat. Once you've seen a pattern twice, you can plan for it on the third repetition.

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Tactical Exercises

Exercise 1: The Risk-Reward Bout

Fence a 15-touch bout where you assign risk values to your actions before executing them. Low risk (counterattack, parry-riposte): safe but may not score. Medium risk (preparation-into-attack): moderate exposure. High risk (long lunge, flèche): high reward but high exposure. After the bout, review which risk level produced the most touches. Adjust your risk tolerance accordingly.

Exercise 2: The Double-Touch Penalty Bout

Fence bouts where double touches count as −1 for the fencer who was leading at the time of the double (if tied, −1 for both). This trains the leading fencer to avoid doubles and the trailing fencer to create them. It fundamentally changes how you approach each exchange based on the score.

Exercise 3: The Clock Bout

Fence a 3-minute bout where the goal is to be ahead when the clock expires, not to reach 15 first. This trains clock management: when to attack, when to wait, when to slow down, and when to speed up. Whoever is ahead at 0:00 wins, regardless of whether either fencer reached 15.

Exercise 4: The Target Rotation Drill

Fence 5-touch bouts where each touch must be to a different target: touch 1 to the hand, touch 2 to the body, touch 3 to the foot, touch 4 to the arm, touch 5 to any target. This forces target versatility and prevents the habit of always attacking the same place.

Exercise 5: The Priority Simulation

Fence simulated priority minutes. One fencer has priority, the other doesn't. One minute on the clock. Fence 6 rounds, alternating who has priority. Track outcomes: does the priority fencer or the non-priority fencer win more? What tactics work best in each role?

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Final Coach's Note

Épée tactics are the thinking person's game in fencing. Without right-of-way, every tactical decision is purely about probability and risk management. There's no referee to interpret your attack. There's no rule that gives you the touch because you started first. You score or you don't. You get hit or you don't.

This simplicity is what makes épée so tactically deep. Without the framework of right-of-way, you have to think harder about when, where, and how to score. You have to read the opponent more carefully. You have to manage risk more deliberately. And you have to develop the patience to wait for the right moment instead of forcing the action.

The best épéeists in the world are not the fastest or the strongest. They're the smartest. They see patterns others miss, they manage risk better than anyone else, and they have the composure to execute their plan under pressure. That's what you're training when you train épée tactics.

— Coach Derek