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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Fencer's Flexibility

& Mobility Guide



A complete stretching program for fencers — the stretches that matter most, when and how to do them, and the flexibility benchmarks that protect your body and improve your fencing.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Fencers have notoriously tight hip flexors, hamstrings, and calves. The en garde position loads the legs asymmetrically for hours. The lunge demands extreme hip extension on the back leg and deep knee flexion on the front leg. Repeated retreating shortens the calves and Achilles tendons. And the weapon arm develops tightness in the shoulder, forearm, and wrist that most fencers never address.

Flexibility is not just about touching your toes. For fencers, flexibility directly affects performance: a deeper lunge means more reach. Mobile hips mean faster direction changes. A flexible shoulder means a smoother, faster extension. And maintaining flexibility is the single best injury prevention tool available to you.

The Warm-Up & Cool-Down Protocol in this series covers what to do before and after practice. This guide goes deeper – it's your complete stretching program, designed to be done 3–4 times per week as a standalone session, separate from your fencing training.

— Coach Derek

Flexibility Basics for Fencers

When to Stretch

Static stretching (holding a stretch for 30+ seconds) should always be done when the muscles are warm — after practice, after a tournament, or after a light warm-up. Never do static stretching on cold muscles, and never do static stretching immediately before explosive fencing. Dynamic stretching (controlled movement through range of motion) is for before fencing. This guide focuses on static stretching and mobility work as a standalone session.

How Long to Hold

Hold each stretch for 30–60 seconds. Research consistently shows that 30 seconds is the minimum effective duration for improving flexibility. Holding longer than 60 seconds per stretch offers diminishing returns. Breathe slowly and deeply during each stretch. Never bounce. The stretch should feel like a firm, steady pull — discomfort is acceptable, pain is not.

How Often

For noticeable flexibility improvement, stretch 3–4 times per week, separate from your pre/post-practice stretching. The standalone stretching session takes 20–25 minutes. Many fencers do this at home in the evening or on rest days. Consistency matters more than intensity — a moderate stretch done 4 times a week beats an aggressive stretch done once.

The Fencer's Problem Areas

Every fencer develops tightness in the same places because fencing loads the body in predictable patterns. These are the areas this guide prioritizes, in order of importance for fencers:

Hip flexors — shortened by the en garde position and loaded heavily during the lunge. Tight hip flexors limit lunge depth and speed.

Hamstrings — stressed during lunging and recovery. Tight hamstrings reduce reach and increase the risk of strains.

Calves and Achilles tendons — loaded during every advance, retreat, and lunge. Tightness here leads to Achilles tendinitis, one of the most common fencing overuse injuries.

Groin and adductors — stressed by the wide en garde stance and the lateral component of the lunge. Tight adductors limit the depth and stability of the lunge.

Quadriceps — under constant load in the en garde position. Tight quads contribute to knee pain and restrict hip extension.

Shoulder and rotator cuff — the weapon arm performs thousands of repetitive motions. Tightness and imbalance in the shoulder increases the risk of impingement and rotator cuff injuries.

Forearm and wrist — stressed by gripping the weapon for hours. Tightness contributes to wrist pain and reduces blade control.

KEY CONCEPT: Fencing creates asymmetry. Your weapon-arm shoulder is tighter than your non-weapon shoulder. Your front leg is more flexible in hip flexion but tighter in hip extension than your back leg. Your stretching program should address both sides but spend extra time on the tighter side. Symmetry protects against injury.



The Complete Stretching Program

This 20–25 minute program covers every major muscle group that fencing affects. Do it 3–4 times per week. Start with a 3–5 minute light warm-up to get blood flowing (walk, light jog in place, or jumping jacks) before beginning the stretches.

Hip Flexor Stretches

1. Half-Kneeling Hip Flexor Stretch

Kneel on your back knee (place a folded towel under the knee for comfort). Front foot flat on the floor, front knee at 90 degrees. Keep your torso upright and tall. Gently push your hips forward until you feel a deep stretch in the front of the hip on the kneeling leg. For a deeper stretch, raise the arm on the kneeling side overhead and lean slightly toward the opposite side.

Hold 45–60 seconds each side. 2 sets.

2. Couch Stretch (Wall-Assisted)

Kneel facing away from a wall. Place the top of your back foot against the wall behind you (shin vertical against the wall). Step the front foot forward into a lunge position. Keep the torso upright and push the hips forward. This is an intense stretch that targets the hip flexor and quadricep simultaneously. Use a pillow under the back knee.

Hold 30–45 seconds each side. 2 sets. This is a challenging stretch — work up to the full duration.

Hamstring Stretches

3. Standing Hamstring Stretch

Place one heel on a low surface (a chair, bench, or step — knee height or below). Keep the elevated leg straight. Hinge forward at the hips (not the lower back) until you feel a stretch behind the elevated thigh. Keep your back flat, not rounded. The hinge comes from the hip joint, not from curling your spine forward.

Hold 45–60 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

4. Seated Single-Leg Hamstring Stretch

Sit on the floor with one leg extended straight in front of you. Tuck the other foot against the inner thigh of the extended leg. Hinge forward from the hips toward the extended foot. Reach toward your toes but don't round your back — the stretch should be felt in the back of the thigh, not the lower back.

Hold 45–60 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

Calf and Achilles Stretches

5. Wall Calf Stretch (Gastrocnemius)

Stand facing a wall. Place both hands on the wall at shoulder height. Step one foot back approximately 2–3 feet. Keep the back leg straight and the back heel firmly on the ground. Lean into the wall until you feel a stretch in the upper calf of the back leg.

Hold 30–45 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

6. Wall Calf Stretch (Soleus)

Same setup as the gastrocnemius stretch, but bend the back knee while keeping the heel on the ground. This shifts the stretch from the upper calf to the lower calf and Achilles tendon. This is particularly important for fencers because the soleus and Achilles are the most injury-prone structures in fencing footwork.

Hold 30–45 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

COACH'S TIP: The Achilles tendon is the most commonly injured structure in competitive fencing. Keeping the calf and Achilles flexible and healthy is not optional – it's essential. If you do nothing else from this guide, do stretches 5 and 6 religiously.

Groin and Adductor Stretches

7. Butterfly Stretch

Sit on the floor. Bring the soles of your feet together and let your knees fall out to the sides. Hold your feet with your hands. Sit up tall. Gently press your knees toward the floor using your elbows. Don't bounce. You should feel the stretch in the inner thighs and groin.

Hold 45–60 seconds. 2 sets.

8. Wide-Stance Side Lunge Stretch

Stand with feet wide apart (approximately double shoulder width). Shift your weight to one side, bending that knee while keeping the other leg straight. The straight leg should feel a deep stretch along the inner thigh. Keep both feet flat on the floor, toes pointing forward. Hands can rest on the bent knee or the floor for balance.

Hold 30–45 seconds each side. 2 sets.

Quadriceps Stretches

9. Standing Quad Stretch

Stand on one foot (hold a wall for balance). Grab the opposite ankle behind you and pull your heel toward your glute. Keep your knees together and your standing leg slightly bent. Push your hip forward slightly to deepen the stretch on the front of the thigh.

Hold 30–45 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

10. Prone Quad Stretch

Lie face down. Reach back and grab one ankle, pulling the heel toward your glute. Keep your hips flat on the ground. This position isolates the quad stretch without the balance challenge of the standing version and allows for a deeper stretch.

Hold 45–60 seconds each leg. 2 sets.

Glute and Piriformis Stretches

11. Figure-4 Stretch (Supine)

Lie on your back. Cross one ankle over the opposite knee, creating a "figure 4" shape. Reach through and pull the uncrossed leg toward your chest. You should feel a deep stretch in the glute and outer hip of the crossed leg. Keep your head and shoulders on the ground.

Hold 45–60 seconds each side. 2 sets.

12. Seated Piriformis Stretch

Sit on the floor with both legs extended. Cross one foot over the opposite knee, placing the foot flat on the floor. Hug the bent knee toward the opposite shoulder with both arms. Twist your torso slightly toward the bent knee. You should feel a deep stretch in the outer hip and glute.

Hold 30–45 seconds each side. 2 sets.

Shoulder and Upper Body Stretches

13. Cross-Body Shoulder Stretch

Bring one arm across your chest at shoulder height. Use the opposite hand to pull the arm closer to your chest. Keep the shoulder relaxed and down (don't shrug). You should feel the stretch in the back of the shoulder.

Hold 30 seconds each arm. Spend extra time on the weapon arm. 2 sets.

14. Doorway Chest and Shoulder Stretch

Stand in a doorway. Place your forearm against the doorframe at shoulder height, elbow at 90 degrees. Step through the doorway with the same-side foot until you feel a stretch across the chest and front of the shoulder. This opens the chest and counteracts the forward-rounded posture that fencers develop from the en garde position.

Hold 30–45 seconds each side. 2 sets.

15. Overhead Tricep and Lat Stretch

Raise one arm overhead and bend the elbow, reaching your hand behind your head toward the opposite shoulder blade. Use the other hand to gently push the elbow back and down. You should feel the stretch in the tricep and along the side of the torso. This addresses the overhead component of blade work (especially saber parry 5 and overhead cuts).

Hold 30 seconds each arm. 2 sets.

Forearm and Wrist Stretches

16. Wrist Flexor Stretch

Extend your weapon arm straight out in front of you, palm facing up. Use the opposite hand to gently pull the fingers downward (toward the floor). You should feel the stretch along the inside of the forearm. This addresses the tightness from gripping the weapon.

Hold 20–30 seconds. 2 sets per arm. Spend extra time on the weapon arm.

17. Wrist Extensor Stretch

Extend your weapon arm straight out in front of you, palm facing down. Use the opposite hand to gently pull the fingers downward. You should feel the stretch along the outside of the forearm.

Hold 20–30 seconds. 2 sets per arm.

Back and Torso

18. Child's Pose

Kneel on the floor, sit back on your heels, and reach your arms forward on the floor as far as possible. Let your forehead rest on the ground. Breathe deeply and let your back and shoulders relax into the stretch. This is a full-body release that stretches the back, shoulders, hips, and ankles simultaneously. It's an excellent way to end the stretching session.

Hold 45–60 seconds. 2 sets.



Flexibility Benchmarks for Fencers

These benchmarks give you measurable targets. Test yourself monthly and track your progress.

Hamstrings: Seated toe touch — fingers should reach past the toes. If you can't reach your toes, your hamstrings are limiting your lunge depth.

Hip Flexors: In the half-kneeling stretch, you should be able to push the hips forward until the back thigh is vertical or slightly past vertical, without arching the lower back.

Calves: In the wall stretch, you should be able to keep the back heel fully on the ground with the foot approximately 2.5–3 feet from the wall.

Groin: In the butterfly stretch, knees should reach within 6 inches of the floor.

Shoulders: In the cross-body stretch, you should be able to bring the arm fully across the chest without the shoulder hiking up.

Lunge depth: From en garde, a full lunge should produce a front knee angle of approximately 90 degrees with the back leg fully extended and the back foot flat on the floor.

COACH'S TIP: Flexibility improves slowly. Don't expect dramatic changes in a week. Expect gradual improvement over 4–8 weeks of consistent stretching. Take a photo or measurement of your seated toe touch on day one, then again after a month. The visual progress is motivating.



Injury Prevention Notes

The Asymmetry Problem

Fencing develops one side of the body more than the other. Your weapon arm is stronger and tighter than your non-weapon arm. Your front leg is loaded differently than your back leg. Over years of training, this asymmetry can lead to muscle imbalances, joint problems, and compensatory movement patterns that increase injury risk. Stretching both sides equally — and spending extra time on the tighter side — is the most effective way to combat this.

When to See a Professional

If you experience sharp or sudden pain during stretching (not the discomfort of a stretch but actual pain), stop immediately. If you have persistent tightness or pain in a specific area that doesn't improve with consistent stretching over 2–3 weeks, see a sports medicine doctor or physical therapist. Chronic hip, knee, or Achilles pain should always be evaluated by a professional before continuing intensive training.



Final Coach's Note

Stretching is the most undertrained skill in fencing. Every fencer wants to work on bladework, footwork, and tactics. Nobody wants to sit on the floor for 20 minutes and stretch their hip flexors. But the fencer who stretches consistently lunges deeper, moves faster, recovers quicker, and stays healthier longer than the fencer who doesn't.

You don't need to become a gymnast. You need to maintain the flexibility that fencing demands and prevent the tightness that fencing creates. 20 minutes, 3-4 times a week. That's the cost. The return is a longer, healthier, more effective fencing career.

The best time to start stretching was when you started fencing. The second best time is today.

— Coach Derek