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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Foil-Specific Bladework

Actions & Exercises



The blade actions that define foil fencing — attacks, parries, ripostes, disengages, beats, binds, and the finger work that makes the point hit the lamé.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Foil bladework is the most technical of all three weapons. Because you score with the point only and on a restricted target, every blade action must be precise. A touch that lands two inches too high hits the mask (off-target). A touch that lands on the arm (off-target) wastes your attack and stops the action.

This guide covers the blade actions specific to foil: the attacks, the preparations, the parries and ripostes, and the finger techniques that separate a competent foil fencer from an excellent one. Each action is described with the exact hand mechanics and includes exercises for deliberate practice.

Foil bladework rewards patience and precision over speed and power. The fencer with the cleanest, most accurate point control wins the close bouts. These are the skills that build that precision.

— Coach Derek

Offensive Blade Actions

Foil offense revolves around getting the point to the lamé. Every offensive blade action is designed to either deliver the point directly or set up the delivery by removing the opponent's blade from the path.

The Direct Attack

The simplest and most important foil action. From en garde, extend the arm fully and lunge, delivering the point in a straight line to the opponent's torso. The thumb stays at approximately 1 o'clock throughout. The wrist stays firm. The point travels in a straight line from your en garde position to the target. No blade manipulation, no feint – just a clean, direct extension.

Hand Mechanics: Thumb at 1 o'clock from start to finish. Fingers maintain grip pressure throughout – don't squeeze tighter during the extension. The wrist is neutral, not flexed or extended. The point should arrive at the target before the front foot lands on the lunge.

Exercise: 50 direct attacks to a target at chest height. Focus on straight-line point travel. Film from the side and check that the point doesn't deviate from the straight line. 2 sets.

The Disengage

A blade action that moves the point from one line to another by passing under or over the opponent's blade. In foil, the disengage is used to avoid a parry or to change the line of attack. The movement is small – a fingertip action, not an arm motion.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde with your blade in line 6 (outside), drop the point under the opponent's blade using finger manipulation only (thumb and index finger lower the point by about 3 inches). As the point clears their blade, guide it up into line 4 (inside) with the fingers and extend. The entire disengage is executed by the thumb and first two fingers. The wrist doesn't move. The arm extends after the disengage is complete.

Common Mistake: Making the disengage too big. If your point drops 8–10 inches, you've wasted time and created a wide, visible movement. The disengage should be 3–4 inches at most. Small, fast, invisible.

Exercise: 30 disengages from 6 to 4 against a partner holding their blade in line. 30 disengages from 4 to 6. Focus on small, fast finger movement. 3 sets. Partner evaluates visibility of the disengage.

The Beat Attack

A sharp, percussive strike against the opponent's blade to knock it aside, immediately followed by a direct attack into the opened line. The beat is a wrist and finger action – a snap, not a push.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, snap the middle of your blade against the middle of the opponent's blade using a quick wrist-finger motion. The beat should be sharp and short – think of it as a slap, not a shove. Immediately after the beat, extend the arm and attack in the line that the beat opened. The beat and the attack are virtually simultaneous. Thumb stays at 1 o'clock throughout. The hand doesn't move laterally – the blade does the work through finger and wrist action.

Exercise: 20 beat-attacks to line 4 (beat the blade from inside to outside, attack to inside). 20 beat-attacks to line 6. 3 sets. Partner holds their blade in line. Focus on a clean, sharp beat followed by immediate extension.

The Bind (Prise de Fer)

A blade action where you capture the opponent's blade with yours and carry it from one line to another while maintaining contact, then attack in the new line. Unlike the beat (which is percussive), the bind is sustained contact. You're controlling their blade for the duration of the action.

Hand Mechanics: Engage the opponent's blade with your forte on their foible (your strong part against their weak part). Rotate your wrist to carry their blade from one line to another — for example, from line 6 to line 4 by pronating from 1 o'clock to 10 o'clock while pressing laterally. Maintain blade contact throughout the carry. At the end of the carry, extend and attack in the new line while their blade is still displaced.

Exercise: 15 binds from 6 to 4 with attack. 15 binds from 4 to 6 with attack. 3 sets. Partner provides moderate resistance. Focus on maintaining blade contact throughout the carry.

The One-Two (Compound Attack)

A feint followed by a disengage when the opponent parries the feint. This is the fundamental compound attack in foil. Extend toward line 4 (feint). When the opponent takes parry 4, disengage to line 6 and complete the attack. The feint must be convincing — it must look like a real attack to draw the parry.

Hand Mechanics: First motion: extend arm toward line 4 with the point threatening (this is the feint). As the opponent's parry begins, execute a disengage (fingertip action, 3–4 inches) to line 6 and complete the extension. The arm does not retract between the feint and the disengage. It stays extended throughout — only the point changes direction through finger manipulation.

Exercise: 20 one-two attacks (feint 4, finish 6). 20 one-two attacks (feint 6, finish 4). 3 sets. Partner provides a real parry on the feint. The attack must land on the lamé.

The Doubleé (Double Disengage)

A compound attack with two disengages. Feint to one line, disengage when the opponent parries, then disengage again when they take a second parry. This is the answer to an opponent who uses counter-parries or who recovers from their first parry fast enough to take a second one.

Hand Mechanics: Extend toward line 4 (feint). Disengage to line 6 when they parry 4. When they recover and take parry 6, disengage again back to line 4 and complete the attack. Two complete disengages, each executed with the fingers while the arm stays extended. The arm never retracts. The point traces a figure-eight pattern through fingertip control.

Exercise: 15 double attacks. 3 sets. Partner provides two consecutive parries. Focus on keeping the arm extended throughout both disengages.

COACH'S TIP: The quality of every foil blade action depends on finger control. The arm delivers the blade to the target. The fingers control the point. If you can't disengage with your fingers alone — without moving your wrist or arm — every compound action will be too slow and too visible. Spend 10 minutes every practice session on finger drills: disengages, beats, and point control exercises using only the thumb and first two fingers.

Defensive Blade Actions

The Parry-Riposte in Foil

The parry-riposte is the most important defensive action in foil. See the Complete Guide to Parries for detailed hand positions. In foil, parries 4 and 6 are the primary defensive tools, with counter-4 and counter-6 as the advanced alternatives. The riposte must be immediate – the moment the parry contacts the opponent's blade, the arm extends for the riposte.

Foil-Specific Detail: In foil, the riposte has right-of-way. After a successful parry, the defender has the right to riposte, and if both fencers hit, the touch goes to the defender. This makes the parry-riposte extremely powerful in foil – you don't just stop the attack, you have the guaranteed right to score.

Exercise: 50 parry-4-riposte sequences. 50 parry-6-riposte sequences. Partner attacks to alternating lines. Focus on immediate riposte with no delay after the parry. 2 sets. Time the gap between parry contact and riposte launch – it should be under 0.2 seconds.

The Opposition Parry

An opposition parry maintains blade contact after the parry and extends the riposte while keeping the opponent's blade controlled. Instead of a sharp lateral parry followed by a separate riposte, the opposition parry flows directly into the riposte with the blades in contact.

Hand Mechanics: Take parry 4 normally (pronate to 10–11 o'clock). Instead of releasing the opponent's blade after the parry, maintain the blade contact and extend forward, pushing their blade to the outside while your point travels to their chest. Your blade slides along theirs in opposition. The thumb stays at 10–11 o'clock throughout – the hand doesn't need to supinate for the riposte because the opposition keeps you covered.

Exercise: 20 opposition parry-ripostes in 4. 20 in 6. 3 sets. Partner provides strong attacks. Focus on maintaining blade contact from parry through riposte.

The Point-in-Line

Point-in-line is a defensive blade position where the arm is fully extended and the point threatens the opponent's valid target. Under foil rules, the fencer who establishes point-in-line before the opponent begins their attack has right-of-way. The attacker must deflect the point-in-line blade (with a beat or bind) before attacking, or they risk losing the touch even if both fencers hit.

Hand Mechanics: Extend the arm fully with the thumb at 1 o'clock. The point must be aimed at the opponent's torso (on the lamé). Hold the position. The arm must be completely straight – any bend in the elbow means the line is not established. The point must remain on-target even as you retreat.

Exercise: Establish point-in-line and retreat 5 steps while maintaining the position. Partner attempts to attack without beating the blade. If your point stays on-target and your arm stays straight, you have priority. 15 repetitions. 3 sets. Partner provides feedback on whether the line was maintained cleanly.

The Counterattack (Arrêt)

A counterattack in foil is a touch made into the opponent's attack without first parrying. In foil, a counterattack only scores if it arrives clearly before the attacker's touch (a full fencing tempo ahead). If both touches arrive at roughly the same time, the attacker gets the point due to right-of-way. This makes the foil counterattack a precise, high-risk action.

Hand Mechanics: As the opponent begins their attack, extend your arm directly toward their chest while maintaining or slightly closing distance. The counterattack must arrive clearly ahead of the attack. Thumb at 1 o'clock. Full arm extension. The point must hit the lamé (on-target) or it doesn't count even as off-target timing.

Exercise: 15 counterattacks against a partner's advance-lunge. Focus on timing: your extension must begin before their final lunge movement. 3 sets. Coach or partner judges timing. Target: clean counterattack arriving one tempo ahead of the attack.

COACH'S TIP: In foil, the counterattack is a weapon of precision, not desperation. Use it against opponents who telegraph their attacks, who advance too many times before lunging, or who extend their arm late. If the opponent's attack is clean and fast, the counterattack will lose to right-of-way almost every time. Pick your moments.



Bladework Practice Routines

Daily Fingertip Warm-Up (5 Minutes)

Before every practice: 20 disengages (4 to 6), 20 disengages (6 to 4), 20 beats, 20 one-twos. All at half speed with perfect technique. This builds the finger control that makes everything else work.

Weekly Bladework Session (20 Minutes)

Dedicated bladework practice with a partner: 5 minutes of direct attacks to target. 5 minutes of beat-attacks. 5 minutes of one-two and doublé compound attacks. 5 minutes of parry-riposte (alternating 4 and 6). All with footwork – no stationary blade work.

Competition Prep Drill

Free fencing for 5-touch bouts with a rule: you can only score with a specific blade action for each bout. Bout 1: direct attacks only. Bout 2: beat-attacks only. Bout 3: one-two only. Bout 4: parry-riposte only. Bout 5: any action. This forces you to develop versatility in your blade action selection.



Final Coach's Note

Foil bladework is a language. Direct attacks, disengages, beats, binds, parries, and ripostes are the words. Compound attacks and tactical sequences are the sentences. The more fluent you become in this language, the more you can say on the strip.

Start with the direct attack and the parry-riposte. Those two actions will carry you through the majority of bouts. Add the disengage and the beat-attack next. Then the one-two. Then the bind. Build your vocabulary one action at a time, and always with the fingers – never with the arm.

– Coach Derek