

DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Foil-Specific Footwork

Actions & Exercises



The footwork actions unique to foil fencing – right-of-way preparation, off-target management, and the precise distance game that defines the weapon.

Derek Snyder

ELITE FENCING COACHING
dereksnyderfencing.com

A Note from Coach Derek

The general footwork manuals in this series teach you how to move. This guide teaches you how to move like a foil fencer.

Foil footwork is different from épée or saber footwork because the rules are different. Right-of-way means your footwork must establish and maintain the attack. Off-target hits stop the action, which changes how you manage distance. And the restricted target area means your approach and attack angle must be more precise than in épée.

Every action in this guide is specific to foil. The exercises train the footwork patterns that foil fencers use most often in competition. If you fence foil, this is your weapon-specific movement toolkit.

— Coach Derek

How Foil Rules Shape Footwork

Foil's rules create specific footwork demands that don't exist in other weapons. Understanding these demands is essential for training foil-specific movement.

Right-of-Way and Forward Motion

In foil, the fencer who initiates the attack with forward motion and arm extension has priority. This means foil footwork is inherently offensive – you must move forward to establish and maintain the attack. Retreating too much gives up right-of-way. The “marching attack” (continuous forward movement with the point threatening) is a fundamental foil action that doesn't exist in épée.

This creates a unique tension in foil footwork: you need to move forward to establish priority, but moving forward carelessly exposes you to the counterattack or the parry-riposte. Foil footwork is about moving forward with control, intelligence, and the ability to react to what the opponent does as you approach.

Off-Target and Distance Reset

When a foil fencer hits off-target (arm, leg, mask), the action stops but no point is scored. This creates a tactical footwork element unique to foil: after an off-target halt, both fencers return to en garde and the distance resets. Fencers who understand this use off-target hits to disrupt the opponent's rhythm and reset unfavorable distance situations.

Foil footwork includes deliberate off-target targeting as a tactical tool – something that has no equivalent in épée (where everything scores) or saber (where off-target below the waist stops action differently).

The Restricted Target

Foil's valid target is the torso only. This means foil footwork must set up attacks to a relatively small area – the chest, belly, and back of the torso. The approach angle matters more in foil than in épée because you can't score on the arm, hand, or leg even if your distance is perfect. Your footwork must deliver your point to the lamé, not just to the opponent.

KEY CONCEPT: Foil footwork serves the right-of-way. Every step forward is a tactical statement: “I am attacking.” Every step backward says: “I am yielding priority.” Understanding this changes how you train every movement.

Foil-Specific Footwork Actions

1. The Marching Attack

The marching attack is continuous forward movement with the arm extending progressively, maintaining right-of-way throughout. The fencer advances 3–6 steps with the point moving forward, then finishes with a lunge. The key is that the arm extends gradually during the march — it doesn't snap out all at once. The progressive extension establishes and maintains priority under the current interpretation of right-of-way rules.

Execution: Start at long distance. Begin advancing at medium speed. On the first or second advance, begin extending the arm — not fully, but with the point moving forward and threatening. Continue advancing, extending progressively with each step. The arm should be at approximately three-quarter extension by the third or fourth advance. Finish with a full extension and lunge. The entire sequence — from first advance to final lunge — should look and feel like one continuous offensive action.

Common Mistake: Extending the arm fully too early. If you reach full extension on step 2, you've used your arm before your feet have closed the distance. The arm extension should match the distance closing — arriving at full extension just as you enter lunge range.

Exercise: 10 marching attacks from long distance with 4 advances + lunge. 10 with 5 advances + lunge. 10 with 6 advances + lunge. 3 sets. Partner provides light resistance (retreating) to simulate a real opponent. Coach or partner evaluates whether the arm extension was progressive and maintained throughout.

2. The Advance with Point Threat

A single advance where the arm extends to approximately half-extension, point threatening the opponent's chest. This is not an attack — it's a preparation that establishes right-of-way and forces the opponent to react. If they parry the half-extension, you disengage. If they retreat, you continue forward. If they counterattack, you have priority.

Execution: Advance one step while extending the arm to half-extension (elbow still slightly bent, point aimed at the opponent's torso). Hold the position for a beat. The opponent must now decide how to respond. Based on their response, execute the appropriate follow-up: disengage if they parry, continue the attack if they retreat, or finish with priority if they counterattack.

Exercise: Partner provides one of three responses randomly (parry, retreat, or counterattack). You execute the correct follow-up. 20 repetitions. 4 sets. Track your correct follow-up percentage.

3. The Priority Recapture Step

When you lose right-of-way during an exchange (the opponent parries and gains the right to riposte), you must retreat to avoid the riposte and then re-establish your own attack with a new forward motion. The priority recapture step is a retreat (to avoid the riposte) immediately followed by an advance with arm extension (to re-establish your attack). This is a foil-specific sequence that doesn't exist in épée.

Execution: After your attack is parried, immediately retreat one step. The moment your back foot lands, advance forward with arm extension to re-establish the attack. The transition from retreat to advance must be instantaneous — no pause. The arm extension on the re-attack is what re-establishes priority.

Exercise: Partner parries your initial attack and ripostes. You retreat to make the riposte miss, then immediately advance-lunge with a new attack. 15 repetitions. 4 sets. Focus on zero pause between the retreat and the re-attack.

4. The Preparation Feint with Footwork

A footwork-driven feint that uses an advance and arm extension to draw the opponent's parry, followed by a disengage and continuation of the attack in a different line. The footwork component is the advance that sells the feint — without forward movement, a feint is not convincing in foil because it doesn't threaten right-of-way.

Execution: Advance with a direct arm extension toward the opponent's inside line (line 4). When they take parry 4, disengage around their blade (a small circular motion with your point) and continue the attack with another advance or lunge to the outside line (line 6). The disengage must happen during the advance, not after — the feet and blade move simultaneously.

Exercise: 10 feint-disengage attacks to line 4 then 6. 10 feint-disengage attacks to line 6 then 4. 3 sets. Partner provides a real parry each time. Evaluate whether the feint was convincing enough to draw the parry.

5. The Flèche

The flèche (French for "arrow") is a running attack unique to foil and épée. The fencer launches forward by crossing the back foot in front of the front foot and sprinting past the opponent. In foil, the flèche is a devastating attacking tool because it covers distance faster than a lunge and arrives with enormous forward momentum.

Execution: From en garde, lean your upper body forward while extending the arm fully. As your weight shifts past the point of balance, push off the front foot and cross the back foot in front. Sprint past the opponent. The touch must land before or as you pass — if you miss, you must continue past and cannot turn back to attack. The arm must be fully extended before the feet cross.

Key Detail: The flèche is banned in saber but legal in foil and épée. In foil, it's most effective from medium distance where the opponent doesn't expect it. The element of surprise is critical — a telegraphed flèche is easily parried or avoided.

Exercise: 10 flèches at a target from medium distance. Focus on arm extension before foot crossing. 4 sets. Rest 30 seconds between sets. Then 10 flèches against a partner who can parry or dodge. Track hit percentage.

6. The Retreat with Blade Threat

In foil, retreating while keeping the blade extended and threatening can create a tactical trap. The opponent sees you retreating (yielding right-of-way) and pursues with their own attack. But your blade is still aimed at their chest. If they attack without controlling your blade, you have a counterattack that may be granted right-of-way under point-in-line rules, or you can parry their attack because they've pursued you into your defensive range.

Execution: Retreat 2–3 steps with the arm fully extended and point aimed at the opponent's torso (point-in-line position). Maintain perfect en garde depth during the retreat. When the opponent attacks into your extended blade, either hold for the point-in-line call or take a parry and riposte as they close distance.

Exercise: 10 retreat-with-blade-threat sequences against a pursuing partner. Practice both outcomes: holding point-in-line and taking the parry-riposte. 3 sets. Partner attacks at variable timing.

7. The Inside-Outside Footwork Pattern

Foil's restricted target creates a footwork pattern where the fencer steps slightly inside or outside the direct line of approach to create a better angle to the lamé. Instead of advancing directly at the opponent, the fencer takes a slightly angled step to the inside or outside, creating a diagonal approach that opens a specific line of the target.

Execution: During your advance, angle your front foot 10–15 degrees to the inside (toward the opponent's weapon arm side) or outside (away from the weapon arm). This small angle change opens a direct path to the part of the lamé you're targeting. Inside angle opens line 4 for a direct attack. Outside angle opens line 6.

Exercise: 10 advance-lunges with inside angle to line 4 target. 10 advance-lunges with outside angle to line 6 target. 3 sets. Use a target or partner wearing a lamé to evaluate whether the angle created a cleaner path to the valid target.

8. The Compound Attack Footwork

Compound attacks in foil (attacks with multiple feints) require coordinated footwork where each feint corresponds to a step. The most common compound attack footwork is advance-feint-advance-feint-lunge, where each advance is paired with a feint in a different line, and the final lunge delivers the real attack.

Execution: Advance with feint to line 4 (arm extends toward inside). Advance with feint to line 6 (disengage to outside). Lunge to line 4 (disengage back to inside). Each advance-feint must be convincing enough to draw a parry. The disengages happen during the advance, not between advances. The entire sequence should be fluid and accelerating.

Exercise: One-two attack (single feint): 10 repetitions. One-two-three attack (double feint): 10 repetitions. 4 sets. Partner provides real parries at each feint. Evaluate whether the feints drew parries and whether the final attack landed.

COACH'S TIP: Foil footwork is inseparable from blade work. Unlike épée, where you can work on footwork and blade independently, foil footwork only makes sense when the arm and blade are working together. Always practice these actions with a weapon in hand and an arm extension. Footwork drills without the blade are for conditioning, not for foil-specific training.



Foil Footwork Practice Drills

Drill 1: The Right-of-Way Footwork Game

With a partner, fence footwork-only bouts on a strip. No blade contact. The “touch” is scored by the fencer who achieves a clear attacking position with forward momentum and arm extension threatening the target. If both fencers move forward simultaneously, the one who started first wins priority (partner or coach judges). This trains the footwork-level understanding of right-of-way without the complexity of blade interactions.

Volume: 3-minute rounds. 6 rounds. Alternate aggressor and defender.

Drill 2: The 4-Line Approach

Set up four targets on a wall or body-shaped pad representing inside high (4), outside high (6), inside low (7), and outside low (8). From long distance, approach with foil footwork (marching attack pattern) and hit a randomly called target. A partner calls the target number during your approach, and you must adjust your final lunge angle to hit the correct line.

Volume: 20 approaches with random target calls. 3 sets. Track hit accuracy by line.

Drill 3: The Fleche vs. Lunge Decision

Approach a partner with marching attack footwork. At medium distance, decide whether to finish with a lunge or a flèche based on the opponent’s position. If they’re retreating steadily, the flèche covers the extra distance. If they’ve stopped or are preparing to parry, the lunge is more controlled. Practice making this decision in real time.

Volume: 20 approaches with lunge-or-flèche decision. 3 sets. Debrief each decision with your partner: was it the right call?

Drill 4: The Priority Recovery Race

Two fencers fence a simulated bout where the only way to score is to establish right-of-way through forward motion and arm extension after a halt. Each time the referee calls “Fence,” both fencers race to establish the attack. The fencer who moves forward with arm extension first wins the touch. This trains the explosive response to “Fence” and the habit of seizing priority immediately.

Volume: 20 priority races. Track win percentage. 3 sets.



Final Coach's Note

Foil footwork is attack footwork. Every movement should be setting up, executing, or recovering from an offensive action. Even your defense – your retreat, your parry preparation, your distance management – is ultimately in service of creating your next attack.

Master the marching attack first. It's the most important foil-specific footwork action. Then add the flèche, the compound attack footwork, and the priority recapture step. With those four actions and the general footwork from the main manuals, you have everything you need to move like a competitive foilist.

– Coach Derek