

DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Foil-Specific Tactics



The strategic principles, bout management techniques, and tactical decision-making frameworks that separate competitive foilists from recreational fencers.

Derek Snyder

ELITE FENCING COACHING
dereksnyderfencing.com

A Note from Coach Derek

Footwork tells you how to move. Bladework tells you what to do with the weapon. Tactics tell you when to do it and why.

Foil tactics are shaped by right-of-way, the restricted target, and the off-target halt. These rules create a tactical landscape that is fundamentally different from épée or saber. In foil, you don't just need to hit the opponent – you need to hit them with priority, on-target, at the right moment. That requires a plan.

This guide covers the tactical principles that govern competitive foil fencing. These are not drills. These are the ideas behind the drills – the thinking that turns a fencer who can execute actions into a fencer who can win bouts.

– Coach Derek

The Three Pillars of Foil Tactics

Pillar 1: Right-of-Way Management

Right-of-way is the single most important tactical concept in foil. Every tactical decision you make is filtered through one question: who has priority right now? If you have it, you attack. If you don't have it, you must take it back before you can score. Everything in foil tactics flows from this.

Establishing priority means initiating forward motion with the arm extending toward the target. Maintaining priority means continuing that forward motion without interruption. Losing priority means your forward motion was broken — by a parry, by your own hesitation, or by retreating.

The tactical implication is enormous: foil rewards aggression that is controlled and continuous. A foilist who moves forward with purpose and discipline will win more touches than one who is faster or stronger but tactically disorganized.

Tactical Application: When you step onto the strip, your first job is to seize right-of-way. On "Fence," advance with the arm extending. Make the referee see that you are the attacker. If both fencers hit and the referee must decide, the fencer who looked more like the attacker gets the touch.

Pillar 2: Off-Target Management

When a foil touch lands off-target — on the arm, mask, leg, or guard — the action stops, no point is scored, and the fencers return to en garde. This creates tactical opportunities that don't exist in *épée*.

Deliberate off-target targeting is a legitimate foil tactic. If you're losing the distance game and the opponent keeps retreating out of your attack range, an off-target hit to their arm or mask stops the action and resets the distance. You're back at starting distance, and you can try a different approach.

Conversely, if the opponent keeps hitting you off-target, they're telling you something: their distance judgment is slightly off, or they're aiming for the wrong part of you. Either way, they're wasting attacks. Make them pay by staying calm and setting up your own clean, on-target touch.

Tactical Application: Use off-target hits strategically to reset bad situations. If your opponent has pushed you to the end of the strip and you can't establish right of way, landing an off-target hit halts the action and gives you a fresh start from wherever you are on the strip — you don't go back to the en garde lines, but the halt breaks their momentum and lets you regroup when the referee calls "Fence." If your opponent is drifting to the edge of the strip laterally, an off-target hit causes a halt and both fencers reset to the center line of the strip's width at the same distance from each other, which can take away their angle. If their attacks are landing consistently, an off-target to their arm during their preparation breaks their rhythm and forces a reset.

Pillar 3: Strip Position and Territory

The strip is 14 meters long. The fencer who controls the center controls the bout. Being pushed to the end of the strip limits your options: you can't retreat anymore, which means the opponent can attack without fear of falling short. You're also psychologically pressured — you know you're running out of room.

Strip management means being aware of where you are and deliberately using footwork to maintain a favorable position. The center of the strip is neutral territory. Your half of the strip is your territory. The opponent's half is theirs. Every time you advance past the center line, you're invading their territory and putting tactical pressure on them.

Tactical Application: After every halt, look down. Where are you on the strip? If you're behind the center, you need to advance to reclaim territory before the next touch begins. If you're in the opponent's half, you're in a strong tactical position – maintain it.



Tactical Patterns in Foil

The First Touch Game

In pool bouts (first to 5), the first touch sets the emotional tone for the entire bout. The fencer who scores first gains confidence, forces the opponent to chase, and can shift to a more patient tactical approach. The fencer who falls behind 0-1 often presses too hard, abandons their game plan, and makes tactical errors.

Your tactical approach for the first touch should be your best, most reliable action. Don't experiment on the first touch. Don't try something clever. Execute the action you have the highest confidence in. In most cases, this is a clean direct attack with a marching approach, or a well-timed parry-riposte against an opponent who attacks first.

COACH'S TIP: Before the bout starts, decide your first-touch action. "On Fence, I will advance twice with arm extending and lunge direct to 4." Having a predetermined plan eliminates hesitation and makes your first action decisive.

The Scouting Touch

In direct elimination bouts (first to 15), the first 2-3 touches are your scouting phase. You're gathering information about the opponent: how do they react to your advance? Do they parry or retreat? Which parry do they prefer? How fast is their riposte? Do they counterattack? How deep is their lunge?

During the scouting phase, use simple, fundamental actions — direct attacks, single feints, and parry-ripostes. These actions give you the clearest information about the opponent's habits. Don't use compound attacks or tricky second-intention plays during scouting — you won't learn anything useful because the opponent's response to complex actions is less predictable.

What to Look For: Does the opponent favor parry 4 or parry 6? Do they retreat or hold their ground when you advance? Do they counterattack into your preparation? Do they attack with a lunge or a flèche? Are they patient or aggressive? The answers to these questions determine your tactical plan for the rest of the bout.

Second Intention

Second intention means deliberately executing an action that you expect to fail in order to set up a follow-up action that will succeed. This is one of the most important concepts in competitive foil.

Example: You attack with a direct lunge, expecting the opponent to parry 4 and riposte. You're not trying to score with the lunge — you're trying to draw their parry-riposte. When they riposte, you take parry 4 of your own and counter-riposte. Your "real" action was the counter-riposte. The initial attack was the setup.

Second intention works because it uses the opponent's successful defense against them. They think they've won the exchange by parrying your attack. But you planned for that parry. You wanted it. And you're ready for what comes next.

Common Second-Intention Patterns:

Attack → draw parry-riposte → counter-parry and counter-riposte. This is the most basic and most common second-intention play in foil.

Short attack (falling short deliberately) → draw the opponent's counter-attack or riposte → parry and riposte as they come forward.

Feint attack → draw the opponent's parry → disengage → but instead of finishing, pull back and draw their renewed attack → parry-riposte.

The Tactical Wheel

Foil tactics follow a circular logic sometimes called the tactical wheel. Simple attacks beat hesitation. Parry-ripostes beat simple attacks. Compound attacks beat parry-ripostes. Counterattacks beat compound attacks. And simple attacks beat counterattacks (because of right-of-way). Each tactical approach has something that beats it.

The practical implication: if an opponent keeps scoring with one approach, don't try harder with the same defense. Shift to the next position on the wheel. If their direct attacks are scoring, use parry-riposte. If their compound attacks are getting past your parry, use the counterattack. If their counterattacks are landing, use a simple, fast direct attack to take right-of-way back.

KEY CONCEPT: The tactical wheel is not a formula. It's a framework for thinking about what to change when something isn't working. If you're losing, don't do more of the same — do the next thing on the wheel.



Bout Management

The Pool Bout (First to 5)

Pool bouts are short and unforgiving. Every touch matters because you only need 5. There's no time for a slow start or a comeback strategy. Your tactical plan for a pool bout should be simple and aggressive: score first, maintain pressure, close it out.

If you score first: maintain your approach. Don't change what's working. If the opponent adjusts, you adjust — but don't fix what isn't broken.

If they score first: don't panic. You're down 0-1, not 0-4. Reset your approach and focus on the next touch. The worst thing you can do is abandon your game plan after one touch against.

At 4-4: this is the most important touch of the bout. Whoever scores has a 5-4 win. Take a breath. Pick your best action. Execute with commitment. Don't be tentative — a tentative action at 4-4 almost always loses.

The Direct Elimination Bout (First to 15)

DEs are long enough for tactical evolution. The bout has three phases: scouting (touches 1-5), implementation (touches 6-10), and closing (touches 11-15).

Scouting (1-5): Use simple actions to gather information. Accept that you might fall behind slightly if the opponent is aggressive — you're investing in information that will pay off later.

Implementation (6-10): Deploy your tactical plan based on what you learned. This is where your compound attacks, second-intention plays, and pattern-based reads come into play.

Closing (11-15): Tighten up. Fewer risks. Higher-percentage actions. The fencer who stays composed and executes clean, simple actions in the final phase wins more DEs than the fencer who tries to be creative under pressure.

The Three-Minute Break

In DEs, there's a one-minute break after each three-minute period. Use this break deliberately. Don't just catch your breath — think. What has worked? What hasn't? What is the opponent doing that you haven't answered yet? What do you need to change in the next period?

The break is also a psychological reset. If you're behind, the break gives you a moment to calm down and recommit to your process. If you're ahead, the break is a reminder to stay focused and not get comfortable.

COACH'S TIP: Write one word on your water bottle or equipment bag that captures your tactical adjustment for the next period. "Parry." "Distance." "Patience." One word is enough. It keeps you focused without overcomplicating your plan.



Reading the Opponent

Pattern Recognition

Most fencers are creatures of habit. They don't realize it, but they repeat the same patterns: the same preparation footwork before they attack, the same parry when they're defending, the same retreat rhythm when they're under pressure. Your job is to identify these patterns and exploit them.

Watch for three things: what they do when they attack, what they do when you attack, and what they do when neither fencer is attacking (neutral distance). Each of these situations reveals a pattern you can exploit.

Attacking Pattern: Do they always start with an advance? Two advances? Do they extend early or late? Do they lunge or flèche? Once you see the pattern, you know when the attack is coming and can set up your parry-riposte.

Defensive Pattern: Do they parry 4 or 6? Do they retreat or stand their ground? Do they counterattack? Once you see the pattern, you know which line is open and can target it with a feint-disengage or a compound attack.

Neutral Pattern: Do they bounce? Stand still? Maintain a specific distance? Do they use blade engagement or keep their blade free? This tells you how to approach and when the opponent is most vulnerable.

Adapting Mid-Bout

The best foilists adjust within the bout, not just between bouts. If your opponent scores the same way twice in a row, you must change something immediately – don't wait for a third touch to confirm the pattern. Two touches with the same action is a pattern. Adjust.

The adjustment doesn't need to be dramatic. Sometimes it's as simple as changing your starting distance by half a step. Or switching from parry 4 to parry 6. Or adding one feint before your attack. Small adjustments, applied at the right moment, can completely change a bout.



Referee Management

Understanding What the Referee Sees

In foil, the referee decides who has right-of-way. This means the referee's perception of your actions is tactically important. It's not enough to have priority — you need to look like you have priority. Your attack must be visually clear: arm extending, forward motion continuous, point threatening the target.

Referees look for three things: who started first (initiative), whose arm was extending (attack vs. preparation), and whether the attack was continuous (no hesitation or pullback). If you want the referee's call, your actions must clearly demonstrate all three.

Practical Implications: Extend the arm early in your approach. Keep your forward motion smooth and continuous. Don't pull your arm back during the approach — even a brief pullback can make the referee question your priority. Make your attack look like an attack, not a search.

Using the Halt

After every halt (when the referee stops the action), you have 2–3 seconds before "Fence" is called again. Use this time. Look at where you are on the strip. Take a breath. Decide your next action. Don't rush back to en garde and wait blankly for "Fence." The fencer who uses the halt to think has a tactical advantage over the fencer who treats it as dead time.



Tactical Exercises

Exercise 1: The Tactical Bout

Fence a 5-touch bout where you must use a different tactical approach for each touch. Touch 1: direct attack. Touch 2: parry-riposte. Touch 3: compound attack. Touch 4: second intention. Touch 5: counterattack. This forces you to practice every tool in your tactical toolkit and prevents you from relying on one approach.

Exercise 2: The Adaptation Bout

Fence a 10-touch bout where after every 2 touches, you must change your primary tactic. Touches 1–2: attack with priority. Touches 3–4: defend and riposte. Touches 5–6: counterattack. Touches 7–8: second intention. Touches 9–10: free choice based on what worked best. Debrief after with your partner.

Exercise 3: The Scouting Drill

Fence 3 touches against a partner using only simple actions (direct attack and parry-riposte). After those 3 touches, pause. Tell your partner what their pattern is — what they tend to do when attacking, defending, and at neutral distance. Then fence 5 more touches using a plan based on your scouting. Track whether your plan was effective.

Exercise 4: The Strip Position Game

Fence a bout where the score is tracked by strip position, not touches. The fencer who pushes the opponent past the warning line (2 meters from the end) scores a "point." First to 3 position points wins. No actual touches are scored – the bout is entirely about footwork and territory control.

Exercise 5: The Referee Perspective Drill

Fence bouts in groups of three: two fencers and one "referee" who is another fencer. The referee calls touches and explains their right-of-way decision after each exchange. Rotate roles. This trains you to see what the referee sees and adjust your actions to be clearer and more convincing.



Final Coach's Note

Tactics are what separate a fencer who can do things from a fencer who can win. You can have beautiful footwork and textbook bladework and still lose every bout if you don't understand when to use which action and why.

The good news is that tactics can be learned. Watch competitive foil. Study how the top fencers set up their touches. Ask your coach to explain the tactical reasoning behind specific actions. And most importantly, fence with intention. Every touch should have a tactical reason behind it, even in practice.

Start with the tactical wheel and second intention. Those two concepts will unlock more bouts than any new blade action. Then learn to read patterns and manage the strip. Tactics are the long game in fencing – they get better with every bout you fence and every bout you watch.

– Coach Derek