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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Saber-Specific Bladework

Actions & Exercises



*The blade actions that define saber fencing – cuts, point attacks, parries,
and the explosive hand speed that makes saber the most dynamic weapon.*

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A Note from Coach Derek

Saber is the only weapon that scores with both the edge and the point of the blade. This means saber bladework includes an entire category of actions – cuts – that don't exist in foil or épée. Cuts to the head, flank, chest, and belly are the primary scoring actions in saber. Point attacks (thrusts) exist but are secondary.

Saber bladework is also the fastest of the three weapons. Because cuts travel a shorter path to the target than thrusts, and because the cutting edge covers a wider hitting surface, saber exchanges happen at a tempo that foil and épée fencers find startling. A saber exchange from first movement to touch typically takes less than one second.

This guide covers the cuts, the thrusts, the parries, and the tactical blade actions that define competitive saber. Speed matters, but clean technique is what makes speed effective.

– Coach Derek

Offensive Blade Actions: The Cuts

The Cut to the Head (Cut to 5)

The most common scoring action in saber. A downward diagonal or vertical cut that lands on the top of the opponent's mask. The cut to the head is the default attack in saber because the head is the closest part of the valid target area and the most accessible during the forward march.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde (hand at approximately chest height, blade angled slightly upward), lift the blade by raising the hand and rotating the wrist so the blade arcs upward and over. The cut travels in a smooth downward arc, landing on the top or side of the mask. The fingers guide the blade — the shoulder provides the power, but the wrist and fingers control the angle and timing of the cut. The hand finishes at approximately forehead height with the blade pointing slightly downward after contact.

Common Mistake: Winding up. If the blade goes behind your head before the cut, you've telegraphed the action and wasted time. The cut starts from your en garde position and goes forward. The preparatory motion is minimal — just enough to create the cutting arc.

Exercise: 50 cuts to the head against a target or partner's mask. Focus on minimal wind-up and a clean, snapping cut. 2 sets. Film from the side and check that the blade doesn't travel behind your shoulder line.

The Cut to the Flank (Cut to 4)

A lateral cut to the side of the opponent's torso, below the arm and above the waist. The flank cut is the primary alternative to the head cut and is used when the opponent's head defense (parry 5) is too strong or when the flank is left open during their attack.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, bring the hand across your body to the inside (toward your non-weapon side) while rotating the wrist so the blade sweeps horizontally. The cut travels laterally from your inside to your outside, landing on the opponent's flank (the side of the torso under the weapon arm). The hand finishes at approximately chest height on your weapon side. The cut must be crisp — a sweeping motion, not a push.

Exercise: 30 flank cuts against a padded target at torso height. 30 flank cuts against a partner in full gear. 2 sets. Focus on a clean horizontal cutting path with a definitive stop at contact.

The Cut to the Chest (Cut to 3)

A diagonal cut landing on the opponent's chest, traveling from high to low on the weapon-arm side. The chest cut is used when the opponent's guard is high (protecting the head) but their chest is open. It's a shorter cut than the head cut and arrives slightly faster because it doesn't need to travel as far upward.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, extend the arm forward and slightly downward while rotating the wrist to bring the cutting edge across the opponent's chest. The cut is a short, diagonal slash rather than a full arc. The hand moves forward (not sideways) and the wrist does the cutting work. This is a finesse cut — less power than the head cut, more precision.

Exercise: 30 chest cuts against a target at chest height. Alternate between attacking the left chest and right chest. 3 sets.

The Cut to the Belly (Cut to 2)

A cut to the front of the opponent's abdomen, just below the chest. The belly cut is the least common of the four primary cuts because the belly is lower and harder to reach during the forward march, and most defensive attention is on the head and flank. But this makes it effective as a surprise action — opponents who are focused on protecting their head and flank leave the belly open.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, lower the hand and extend forward, bringing the blade in a short downward arc to the opponent's belly. The wrist supinates slightly (thumb rotates toward 2-3 o'clock) to angle the blade's edge into the target. The belly cut requires the hand to be lower than for the head or chest cut, which means you must deliberately drop your hand during the approach.

Exercise: 20 belly cuts against a low target. 20 belly cuts during an advance-lunge, combining the hand drop with the forward footwork. 3 sets.

COACH'S TIP: The cut to the head is your bread and butter — it should be your best action. But if the head cut is your only action, opponents will park their parry 5 on top of their head and wait. You need the flank cut, chest cut, and belly cut as alternatives to keep the opponent guessing. Think of it like a pitcher in baseball: the fastball is your best pitch, but you need the curve and the changeup to make the fastball effective.



Offensive Blade Actions: Point Attacks

The Direct Thrust

A point attack to the opponent's chest or belly, delivered with a straight arm extension identical to a foil direct attack. In saber, the thrust is legal but less common than cuts because cuts arrive faster and cover more target area. The thrust is most effective as a surprise action against opponents who are focused on defending cuts, or when the opponent's guard position creates a clear straight line to the chest.

Hand Mechanics: Identical to the foil direct attack. Extend the arm fully with the thumb at 1 o'clock, point aimed at the center of the opponent's chest. The thrust must be fast and direct – if the opponent sees it coming, they can parry it easily because the point travels a straight line (predictable) while cuts travel in arcs (harder to predict).

Exercise: 20 direct thrusts to a chest-height target during an advance-lunge. Mix in with head cuts – alternate: cut, cut, thrust, cut, thrust. The thrust should be indistinguishable from the beginning of a cut until the arm extends. 3 sets.

The Flèche Thrust (Point-in-Line Attack)

Although the flèche footwork is banned in saber, the concept of a straight-line attack with maximum reach still exists through the point-in-line. Establish a fully extended arm with the point aimed at the opponent's chest before their attack begins. If the opponent attacks into your established point-in-line without deflecting the blade, you have right-of-way under the rules – your touch counts and theirs doesn't.

Hand Mechanics: Extend the arm completely before the opponent's attack begins. The point must be aimed at the valid target (above the waist). Hold the extension. The arm must not bend – any withdrawal of the arm voids the point-in-line. The thrust arrives on the opponent's chest as they advance into your extended blade.

Exercise: 15 point-in-line establishments against an attacking partner. Hold the line while retreating. Partner attacks without controlling your blade. Track how often the point-in-line is respected by the referee (or a judging partner). 3 sets.



Defensive Blade Actions

Parry 5 (Head Defense)

The most important defensive action in saber. Parry 5 defends against cuts to the head by raising the blade horizontally above the head with the cutting edge facing upward. The blade forms a roof over the top of the mask, blocking the downward cut.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, raise the hand above and slightly in front of the head. Rotate the wrist so the blade is horizontal (parallel to the ground) with the edge facing up. The blade should be approximately 4–6 inches above the top of the mask — high enough to catch the incoming cut, close enough that the parry is strong. The hand is at approximately forehead level, slightly forward of the head.

Common Mistake: Raising the blade too high or too far back. If the blade is 12 inches above your head, the opponent's cut arrives before the parry is in position. If the blade is behind your head, the parry is late. Parry 5 should be compact: hand high, blade level, position slightly forward.

Exercise: 50 parry 5 responses against a partner's head cut. Partner attacks at varying speeds. Focus on clean contact between your blade and theirs. Immediately riposte after each parry. 2 sets.

Parry 3 (Chest Defense, Outside)

Defends the outside (weapon-arm side) of the chest by positioning the blade vertically on the outside with the edge facing outward. This parry blocks chest cuts and some diagonal cuts that angle toward the outside.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, move the hand to the outside (weapon-arm side) at chest height. The blade hangs vertically with the edge facing the opponent's blade. The guard is at approximately shoulder height, and the blade tip points downward. The parry catches the incoming cut on the strong middle portion of your blade.

Exercise: 30 parry 3 responses against chest cuts. Immediately riposte with a cut to the head or flank after each parry. 3 sets.

Parry 4 (Chest Defense, Inside)

Defends the inside (non-weapon-arm side) of the chest. The blade positions vertically on the inside with the edge facing outward. This parry is particularly important against flank cuts and diagonal attacks to the inside.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, move the hand across the body to the inside at chest height. The blade hangs vertically with the edge facing outward. The wrist pronates to approximately 10–11 o'clock. The parry sweeps the incoming blade from inside to outside, deflecting it away from the target.

Exercise: 30 parry 4 responses against flank cuts and inside chest cuts. Riposte immediately to the head. 3 sets.

Parry 2 (Belly Defense)

Defends the lower torso by positioning the blade low with the edge facing downward-outward. This is the least common saber parry because belly cuts are the least common attack, but it's essential against opponents who target the abdomen.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, lower the hand to approximately hip height on the weapon side. The blade angles downward with the edge facing outward. The tip points slightly toward the ground. The parry catches low cuts and belly attacks.

Exercise: 20 parry 2 responses against belly cuts. Riposte with a cut to the head (the longest-distance riposte, since you're starting from the lowest parry position). 3 sets.

The Circle Parry (Counter-Parry)

A defensive action where the blade traces a circular path, sweeping the opponent's blade out of the way regardless of which line their attack is in. The circle parry is used when you can't identify which cut the opponent is throwing (head, flank, chest, or belly) and need a universal defense. It's slower than a direct parry but catches attacks from any angle.

Hand Mechanics: From en garde, trace a circle with the tip of the blade by rotating the wrist. The circle can go clockwise or counterclockwise depending on preference. The blade sweeps through all four defensive positions (5, 3, 4, 2) in one smooth motion. The opponent's blade is caught and deflected at whichever point in the circle it makes contact.

Exercise: 15 circle parries against random attacks (partner alternates between head, chest, flank, and belly cuts without telling you which). Riposte immediately after the parry. 3 sets.

COACH'S TIP: In saber, the riposte after the parry is just as important as the parry itself. A clean parry without a fast riposte is a wasted opportunity. Train the parry and the riposte as one action, not two. The blade should bounce off the parry and immediately redirect into the cut. Parry-riposte, not parry ... riposte.



Tactical Blade Actions

The Attack on Preparation

Striking the opponent during their preparation — while they're winding up for their own attack but before they've established right-of-way. In saber, many fencers lift their blade before attacking (the wind-up). That lifting motion is preparation, not attack. If you can deliver your cut while they're still preparing, you score with right-of-way because your attack was the first completed offensive action.

Exercise: 20 attacks on preparation against a partner who deliberately winds up before attacking. Time your cut to land during their wind-up. 3 sets.

The Remise (Renewed Attack)

After your initial attack is parried, immediately cut to a different target without withdrawing the blade. In saber, the remise is risky because the opponent's riposte has right-of-way after a successful parry. But if the opponent's riposte is slow or absent, the remise scores. It's most effective against opponents who parry cleanly but delay their riposte.

Exercise: 15 attack-remise sequences. Attack to the head, get parried, immediately cut to the flank. Partner parries but does not riposte. 15 more where the partner ripostes at varying speeds — learn to judge when the remise is safe and when it's not. 3 sets.

The Counter-Attack (Stop Cut)

A cut delivered into the opponent's attack, arriving before their cut lands. In saber, the counterattack only scores if it arrives clearly before the attacker's touch (the referee must see a distinct timing difference). The stop cut to the arm was once the most common saber counterattack, but rule changes have made it less viable. The modern saber counterattack targets the head or chest with a fast, short cut that arrives ahead of the opponent's longer, more committed attack.

Exercise: 20 stop cuts against a partner's march. Aim for the chest or head. Track referee (or judging partner) decisions on timing. Target: arriving clearly ahead at least 50% of the time. 3 sets.



Bladework Practice Routines

Daily Cutting Warm-Up (5 Minutes)

Before every practice: 20 head cuts, 20 flank cuts, 10 chest cuts, 10 belly cuts, 10 direct thrusts. All against a target or in the air with a focus on clean technique and minimal wind-up. This ingrains the four cutting angles and the thrust into muscle memory.

Weekly Bladework Session (20 Minutes)

Dedicated bladework with a partner: 5 minutes of head cut and parry 5 exchanges. 5 minutes of flank cut and parry 4 exchanges. 5 minutes of random cuts with the correct defensive parry. 5 minutes of full-speed attack-parry-riposte sequences. All with footwork – no stationary blade work.

Competition Prep Drill

Fence 5-touch bouts where each bout has a specific limitation: Bout 1, head cuts only. Bout 2, flank cuts only. Bout 3, only thrusts. Bout 4, only parry-riposte. Bout 5, free choice. This builds versatility and forces you to execute every blade action under competitive pressure.



Final Coach's Note

Saber bladework is the most visceral in fencing. The cuts are powerful, the exchanges are fast, and the sound of blade meeting blade is unlike anything in foil or épée. But beneath the speed and power, the same principle applies: clean technique wins. A fast cut with bad form will be parried. A well-timed cut with clean mechanics will score.

Master the head cut first. It is the foundation of saber bladework, and you will use it more than any other action for your entire fencing career. Then add the flank cut and parry 5. Those three actions – head cut, flank cut, and parry 5 – account for the majority of all saber touches at every level of competition.

Speed will come with repetition. Technique must come first.

– Coach Derek