

DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Saber-Specific Footwork

Actions & Exercises



The footwork actions unique to saber fencing – explosive forward movement, the march, the check-step, and the speed game that defines the fastest weapon.

Derek Snyder

ELITE FENCING COACHING

dereksnyderfencing.com

A Note from Coach Derek

Saber footwork is the fastest in fencing. The weapon's rules – right-of-way, cuts and thrusts, target above the waist – create a game built on explosive acceleration, split-second timing, and the ability to cover distance faster than the opponent can react.

If foil footwork is about controlled forward pressure and épée footwork is about precise distance management, saber footwork is about speed. Who accelerates first. Who arrives first. Who can change direction fastest when the initial attack fails.

The flèche is banned in saber, which means all forward movement must stay within the advance-lunge framework. This constraint actually makes saber footwork more explosive, not less – because every inch of distance must be covered with advances and lunges rather than a running attack, the acceleration in each step must be maximal.

These are the footwork actions that define competitive saber.

– Coach Derek

How Saber Rules Shape Footwork

Right-of-Way and the Simultaneous Attack

Like foil, saber uses right-of-way to determine who scores when both fencers hit. But saber's interpretation of right-of-way is more aggressive than foil's. In saber, the fencer who starts their forward motion first — even by a fraction of a second — is considered the attacker and gets priority. This makes the initial burst of speed the most important moment in every exchange.

The "simultaneous attack" — where both fencers launch forward at the same time — is the signature action of modern saber. When the referee judges the attacks as truly simultaneous, no touch is awarded. But if one fencer started even slightly before the other, that fencer gets the touch. This means saber footwork training obsesses over reaction time, acceleration, and the ability to launch forward a split second before the opponent.

The Flèche Ban

The flèche (the running attack where the back foot crosses in front) is banned in saber. This rule exists because saber's right-of-way and cutting actions combined with the flèche would create dangerous collisions. The ban means all saber attacks must use the advance-lunge: the front foot steps forward, then the back foot follows, and the lunge drives the front foot out while the back leg extends.

Without the flèche, saber fencers have developed the multi-advance attack — a series of explosive advances that close distance rapidly, finished with a lunge. The footwork pattern is advance-advance-advance-lunge, with each advance faster than the last. This acceleration creates the effect of a flèche within the legal footwork framework.

The Four-Meter Box

At the start of each touch in saber, fencers begin at the en garde lines, which are 4 meters apart (approximately 13 feet). This means the initial approach covers a specific, predictable distance. Saber fencers train their opening footwork patterns to cover exactly this distance, arriving in lunge range after a precise number of advances. The consistency of this starting distance makes the initial march a rehearsed, optimized sequence.

KEY CONCEPT: Saber footwork is binary: you are either accelerating forward or recovering backward. There is very little neutral-distance fencing in saber compared to foil or épée. Every exchange begins with explosive forward movement, and every exchange ends with one fencer retreating to recover. Train acceleration and recovery as separate, distinct skills.



Saber-Specific Footwork Actions

1. The March (Opening Attack)

The march is the signature saber footwork action. From the en garde lines (4 meters apart), the fencer executes 3–4 explosive advances followed by a lunge. The entire sequence takes approximately 1.5–2 seconds. Each advance is faster than the one before it, building momentum toward the final lunge. The arm begins to extend during the final advance, establishing right-of-way before the lunge.

Execution: On "Fence," immediately advance with the front foot. The first advance is medium speed – not maximal. The second advance is faster. The third advance is explosive. The lunge launches immediately after the third advance, with the arm fully extended and the cut arriving as the front foot lands. The acceleration from slow to fast is critical: starting too fast leaves you nothing to build on, and a constant-speed march is too predictable.

Common Mistake: Starting at full speed. If your first step is your fastest, you have nowhere to go. The march must accelerate. The final advance and lunge are the explosive moments – the first two advances are the setup.

Exercise: 20 marches from the en garde line to a target at lunge distance (approximately 4 meters). Time each march. Focus on smooth acceleration. 4 sets. Track your fastest time while maintaining clean technique.

2. The Check-Step (Half-Advance)

A deliberately short advance that breaks the rhythm of the march. Instead of continuing the acceleration, the fencer takes a half-step forward, pausing the advance for a fraction of a second. This disrupts the opponent's timing – they expect the march to continue accelerating, and the check-step creates a momentary mismatch in their defensive timing.

Execution: During the march, replace one full advance with a half-advance (the front foot moves only 4–6 inches instead of 12–18). Hold the position for a split second – just long enough to see the opponent's reaction. If they launch their attack expecting your continued march, you've drawn their attack early and can parry-riposte. If they hesitate, you resume the march and attack with priority.

Exercise: 15 marches with a check-step on the second advance, then finish with the third advance and lunge. 15 marches with a check-step on the third advance. 3 sets. Partner retreats as if defending the march – evaluate whether the check-step disrupted their timing.

3. The Explosive Advance-Lunge

A single advance immediately followed by a lunge, covering maximum distance in two movements. This is the medium-distance saber attack – used when the opponent is too close for a full march but too far for a standing lunge. The advance and lunge are virtually simultaneous; the back foot lands from the advance and immediately drives into the lunge.

Execution: One explosive advance. The moment the back foot lands, launch the lunge. There should be zero pause between the advance and the lunge. The arm extends during the advance, so by the time the lunge launches, you already have right-of-way established. The total distance covered should be 6–8 feet.

Exercise: 20 advance-lunges at maximum distance. Measure the distance covered and track improvement. 4 sets. Partner stands at varying distances – you must judge whether the advance-lunge will reach and commit fully.

4. The Fall-Short (Deliberate Short Attack)

An intentional attack that falls short of the opponent. The fencer marches forward and lunges, but lunges to a distance that won't reach the opponent. The purpose is to draw the opponent's parry or counterattack against an attack that doesn't arrive, then score on their response. This is the saber version of second intention.

Execution: Execute a normal march, but on the final lunge, deliberately shorten the lunge by 6–12 inches. The lunge looks real — full arm extension, full commitment — but falls just short. The opponent, expecting the attack to arrive, takes a parry or retreats. You recover forward from the short lunge and score with a renewed attack into the opening they created by reacting to your false attack.

Exercise: 10 fall-short attacks followed by renewed attacks. Partner responds to the first attack naturally (parry or retreat). You score on their response. 3 sets.

5. The Retreat-and-Launch

A retreat (or double retreat) immediately followed by an explosive advance-lunge. This is the saber counterattack footwork pattern. Instead of standing your ground when the opponent attacks, you retreat to make their attack fall short, then immediately launch forward to score before they can recover from their failed lunge.

Execution: As the opponent begins their march, retreat one or two steps to open distance. Their lunge falls short. The instant their lunge arrives (and misses), push off the back foot and advance-lunge into their exposed body as they hang in the failed lunge position. The transition from retreat to attack must be explosive and immediate — any delay allows the opponent to recover.

Exercise: 15 retreat-and-launch sequences against a partner's march. Partner marches and lunges. You retreat to make it fall short, then immediately advance-lunge. 4 sets. Time the transition from last retreat to first advance — target under 0.3 seconds.

6. The Direction Change

An explosive change from forward movement to backward movement, or vice versa. In saber, direction changes must be instantaneous because the opponent's attack or defense is timed to your current direction. If you're advancing and suddenly retreat, the opponent's timing breaks. If you're retreating and suddenly advance, you catch them mid-pursuit.

Execution: During an advance, plant the front foot firmly and push off backward into a retreat. Or during a retreat, plant the back foot and drive forward into an advance. The change must happen in one step — no transition step, no pause. The body weight shifts direction instantly. The key is leg strength: the direction change is a plyometric action that requires explosive push-off from whichever foot is planted.

Exercise: 10 advance-advance-retreat-advance-lunge sequences. 10 retreat-retreat-advance-lunge sequences. 3 sets. Focus on zero-pause direction changes. Each direction change should feel like a single explosive action, not a stop-and-restart.

7. The Side-Step Defense

A lateral step taken while the opponent attacks, moving offline so their cut misses while you remain in distance to counterattack. In saber, lateral movement is less common than in épée because the speed of the exchanges leaves little time for sideways movement. But a well-timed side-step at the moment of the opponent's final lunge can be devastating — their cut passes through empty space, and you're at their side with a clean target.

Execution: As the opponent launches their lunge, step the front foot 6–8 inches to the left (for a right-handed fencer). The back foot follows. The step must happen during the opponent's lunge — too early and they adjust, too late and the cut lands. As you step, deliver a cut to the opponent's now-exposed flank or shoulder.

Exercise: 15 side-step counterattacks against a partner's lunge. Partner attacks with a direct cut to the head. You step offline and cut to the flank. 3 sets. Track success rate — target 60% or higher.

8. The En Garde Line Recovery

After each touch in saber, fencers return to the en garde lines. The way you walk back to the line and reset your stance sends a signal to the opponent and the referee. A confident, deliberate walk back with a controlled return to en garde communicates composure. A rushed, tense recovery communicates anxiety. Train the recovery as part of the footwork sequence — the touch isn't over until you're back in en garde.

Execution: After the touch, stop cleanly. Lower your weapon. Walk back to the en garde line at a controlled, deliberate pace. Set your feet in en garde position. Take one breath. Make eye contact with the opponent. Be ready. The entire recovery should look like a routine you've done a thousand times — because you have.

Exercise: Practice the full sequence: march, attack, halt, walk back, set en garde, breathe, ready. 20 full sequences. The recovery and reset should be as rehearsed as the attack itself.

COACH'S TIP: Saber footwork is 80% about the first three steps. The march, the check-step, and the advance-lunge all revolve around the opening sequence. If you can win the first three steps — start a fraction earlier, accelerate a fraction faster, arrive a fraction sooner — you will win the majority of your saber exchanges. Train your opening three steps obsessively.



Saber Footwork Practice Drills

Drill 1: The March Race

Two fencers start at en garde lines. On "Fence," both march toward the center. The fencer whose front foot crosses the center line first wins the repetition. 20 races. Track win percentage. This trains pure acceleration and the explosive first step that wins the opening exchange in saber.

Drill 2: The Timing Ladder

March with a partner calling "Now" at a random point during your approach. On "Now," you must immediately lunge regardless of where you are in the march. This trains the ability to launch the lunge from any point in the approach – not just from the predetermined final advance. 20 repetitions. 3 sets.

Drill 3: The Direction-Change Gauntlet

A partner calls "Forward" or "Back" at random intervals. You advance on "Forward" and retreat on "Back." The direction changes must be instantaneous. 2-minute rounds. 6 rounds. The caller increases the pace of commands as the drill progresses.

Drill 4: The Full Exchange Simulation

Two fencers fence one-touch exchanges from the en garde lines. After each touch (or simultaneous), both fencers recover to the en garde lines, reset, and go again. 30 exchanges. No pool or DE scoring – the focus is on the quality of each individual exchange: the march, the attack, the defense, and the recovery.



Final Coach's Note

Saber footwork is the most athletic in fencing. It demands the same explosive acceleration as a sprint start, the same direction-change ability as a basketball player, and the same timing as a boxer. If you want to fence saber competitively, you must train like an athlete, not just a fencer.

Master the march first. It is the foundation of everything in saber. Then add the check-step to disrupt the opponent's timing. Then the retreat-and-launch for defensive counterattacking. Those three actions – the march, the check-step, and the retreat-and-launch – cover 90% of the footwork situations you'll face in competition.

Speed wins in saber. But controlled speed – speed with timing, with direction changes, with tactical purpose – wins more.

– Coach Derek