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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Saber-Specific Tactics



The strategic principles, march management, and decision-making frameworks for the weapon where speed meets right-of-way and every exchange is a controlled explosion.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Saber tactics are built on a paradox: the weapon demands explosive speed, but the fencer who wins is not always the fastest. It's the fencer who controls the tempo, reads the opponent's timing, and makes the right tactical choice in the fraction of a second between "Fence" and the touch.

Saber's right-of-way rules, combined with the speed of cutting actions, create a unique tactical environment. Every exchange has a structure: the march (the opening approach), the engagement (the moment of the attack), and the resolution (the touch or the defensive response). Understanding this structure – and learning to manipulate it – is what separates competitive sabreurs from fast fencers who swing hard.

This guide covers the tactical thinking that makes saber offense, defense, and bout management work at the competitive level.

– Coach Derek

The Structure of the Saber Exchange

Phase 1: The March

Every saber exchange begins with the march — the simultaneous forward movement of both fencers from the en garde lines (4 meters apart). The march is not just footwork; it's a tactical negotiation. Both fencers are accelerating toward each other, and the tactical question is: who commits to the attack first?

The fencer who initiates the attack during the march (by extending the arm and accelerating) claims right-of-way. But committing too early exposes you to the opponent's check-step or parry-riposte. Committing too late means the opponent claims priority and you're defending. The march is a game of chicken: who blinks first, and when?

Tactical Options During the March:

Attack first: launch your cut early in the march to establish priority. This works against opponents who are slow to start or who hesitate in the march. The risk is that an early attack is predictable and can be parried.

Attack second: let the opponent commit to their attack first, then parry and riposte. This works against aggressive opponents who always attack first. The risk is that if you hesitate too long, the opponent's attack lands before you can parry.

Check-step: break the march with a half-step to disrupt the opponent's timing, then attack in the moment of confusion. This works against opponents who have a set rhythm in their march.

Phase 2: The Engagement

The engagement is the moment where the blades interact — the attack, the parry, or the simultaneous exchange. In saber, this moment happens incredibly fast (often under 0.3 seconds from the first blade movement to the touch). The tactical decisions at the engagement are almost entirely instinctive, trained through thousands of repetitions. You don't think "parry 5 then riposte to flank" in real time — you recognize the pattern and your trained response fires automatically.

This is why tactical training in saber is about building the right automatic responses. If you've trained to parry 5 and riposte to the head, that response fires when you see a head cut. If you've trained to attack the flank when the opponent raises their hand for parry 5, that response fires when you see the raised hand. Tactics at the engagement level are trained, not planned.

Phase 3: The Resolution

After the first exchange, one of three things happens: a single touch is scored (the action is over), a simultaneous attack is called (no touch, reset), or the first actions are incomplete and the fencers continue the phrase with parries, ripostes, and renewed attacks. The resolution phase is where tactical composure matters most — the fencer who stays calm and executes their trained follow-up actions wins more extended exchanges.

KEY CONCEPT: Saber tactics operate at two speeds simultaneously. The march and engagement happen at full speed — explosive, instinctive, trained. The strategic decisions (which tactic to use, when to change your approach, how to manage the bout) happen between touches — deliberate, analytical, conscious. Train both speeds.



The Six Core Saber Tactics

Tactic 1: Win the March

The simplest saber tactic: attack first with maximum speed and commitment. Launch your march a fraction of a second before the opponent, accelerate faster, and deliver your cut before they can establish their own attack. If both fencers attack and both hit, the fencer who started first gets the touch under right-of-way.

This tactic works against slower opponents, against opponents who are thinking too much, and in the early stages of a bout when the opponent is still scouting. It's a brute-force approach: pure speed and timing. The limitation is that it's predictable – if you always attack first, the opponent will set up their defense to exploit your predictability.

When to Use: The first touch of the bout. Against opponents who are hesitant. After a break or timeout when you want to re-establish momentum. When you're behind and need a quick touch.

Tactic 2: Parry the March

Instead of attacking during the march, advance with the intention of parrying the opponent's attack and riposting. This tactic concedes the attack to the opponent and bets that your defense is better than their offense. You advance during the march (to maintain distance), watch for their cut, take the parry, and riposte immediately.

This tactic works against opponents who always attack first, who are faster than you in the march, or who have a predictable attack (always cut to the head, for example). The risk is that if the opponent doesn't attack, you're advancing with no offensive plan.

When to Use: Against aggressive opponents who attack first every time. When you've identified the opponent's preferred attack (head cut, flank cut). After losing several marches and needing to change the dynamic.

Tactic 3: The Check-Step Disruption

Use the check-step during the march to disrupt the opponent's timing. The check-step creates a momentary pause in your advance that throws off the opponent's planned attack. They're timing their cut to arrive as you close to a specific distance – the check-step changes that distance at the last moment.

The check-step can be used offensively (pause, then attack in the confusion) or defensively (pause, draw the opponent's attack early, then parry-riposte). The versatility of the check-step makes it one of the most powerful tactical tools in saber because the same footwork action can set up multiple different outcomes.

When to Use: When the march is becoming a 50/50 coin flip and you need to change the odds. When the opponent has figured out your march timing. When you want to create uncertainty and force the opponent to react rather than execute their plan.

Tactic 4: The Delayed Attack

Advance during the march at a slower-than-expected tempo, arriving in the attack zone slightly later than the opponent expects. This creates a timing mismatch: the opponent has already committed to their parry or defense at the moment they expected your attack to arrive, but your attack hasn't come yet. When their defense passes through empty space, you deliver the cut to the now-open target.

The delayed attack is particularly effective against opponents who have fast, reactive defenses. Their speed becomes a liability because they react to the timing they expect rather than the timing you actually deliver.

When to Use: Against opponents with excellent defensive reflexes. When the opponent is successfully parrying your attacks. As a change of pace after several fast marches.

Tactic 5: Second Intention

Deliberately execute an action that you expect to be defended, then score on the opponent's defensive response. In saber, the most common second-intention play is: attack to the head (expecting parry 5), when they take parry 5, their riposte comes to your head — take parry 5 of your own and counter-riposte to the flank (which is now open because their arm is raised).

Second intention is the thinking fencer's weapon. It requires you to plan two moves ahead and to execute the first move (the "sacrificial" attack) with enough conviction to draw the opponent's real defense. A half-hearted first attack doesn't draw the real parry, and the second intention fails.

When to Use: When the opponent's defense is too strong for direct attacks. Against opponents who always riposte to the same target after parrying. In DEs when you've scouted the opponent's parry-riposte pattern.

Tactic 6: The Defensive Trap

Retreat from the en garde line instead of advancing, inviting the opponent to attack into your prepared defense. This is the most counter-intuitive saber tactic because saber is an attacking weapon, and retreating feels like conceding. But the defensive trap uses the opponent's aggression against them: they attack with commitment, you parry with preparation, and your riposte scores against their now-exposed body.

The trap works because the opponent expects you to advance. When you retreat instead, their march covers more distance than planned, they arrive off-balance or at the wrong distance, and their attack is less controlled. Your parry catches their overextended cut, and your riposte finds the target.

When to Use: Against opponents who are winning every march. As a surprise tactic to reset the bout dynamic. When you're physically tired and need a low-energy touch. When the opponent has been attacking recklessly.

COACH'S TIP: Rotate through these six tactics during a bout. If you use the same tactic three times in a row, the opponent will adapt. The ideal pattern is: march (tactic 1), check-step (tactic 3), parry the march (tactic 2), second intention (tactic 5). By cycling through different approaches, you keep the opponent guessing and prevent them from settling into a comfortable defensive rhythm.



Bout Management

The Pool Bout (First to 5)

Saber pool bouts are the fastest in fencing. A 5-touch saber bout can be over in under two minutes. Because of the speed, there's very little time for tactical adjustment. Your pool bout strategy should be simple: one primary tactic for the opening touches, one backup if the primary doesn't work.

If you score the first two touches with the same tactic, keep using it until the opponent shows they can stop it. Don't change what's working. If you're down 0-2, change immediately. In a race to 5, you can't afford to lose 3 in a row figuring out what doesn't work.

The Direct Elimination Bout (First to 15)

Saber DEs are long enough for tactical evolution but fast enough that momentum swings are dramatic. A fencer can go from 5-8 to 10-8 in under a minute if they find the right tactical approach. The three-period structure creates natural checkpoints for adjustment.

First Period: Establish which of the six core tactics works best. Test the march, the parry, and the check-step in the first 5-7 touches. Identify which tactic gives you the best success rate.

Second Period: Exploit what you've learned. If parry-riposte works, use it as your primary approach with the march as a change of pace. If the march is winning, use it 60% of the time with the check-step and delayed attack as variations. Build a lead or erase a deficit.

Third Period: Protect or chase. If you're ahead, simplify. Use your highest-percentage tactic and don't experiment. If you're behind, increase variety and unpredictability. Take risks with second intention and the defensive trap. The third period rewards the fencer with the most tactical options.

The Simultaneous Attack

When the referee calls a simultaneous attack, no touch is awarded. In a close bout, this can be strategically valuable or costly. If you're ahead, a simultaneous call wastes time and keeps your lead. If you're behind, a simultaneous call wastes a chance to close the gap.

Tactically, you can influence whether the referee calls an attack simultaneous by controlling the timing of your acceleration. If you want the simultaneous call (you're ahead and want to run the clock), match the opponent's timing exactly. If you want to avoid it (you're behind and need a clean touch), change your timing with the check-step or delayed attack to create a clear distinction between attacker and defender.



Reading the Saber Opponent

March Patterns

Most sabreurs have a march pattern they repeat. Count the number of advances before they attack: is it always three advances and a lunge? Or do they vary between two and four? Do they accelerate smoothly or have a sudden burst on the last advance? Understanding their march pattern lets you predict when their attack will arrive, which lets you time your defense or your own attack accordingly.

Preferred Attack

Does the opponent primarily cut to the head or the flank? Do they use the thrust? The vast majority of competitive sabreurs favor the head cut – but some have a devastating flank cut or a well-timed thrust. Identify their preferred attack in the first 2–3 touches, then park your defense in that line and force them to change.

Defensive Tendencies

When you attack, where does the opponent parry? Do they always take parry 5 (head defense)? Do they use parry 4 (flank defense)? Do they attempt the circle parry? Knowing their defensive preference tells you which line is open for your attack. If they always parry 5, attack the flank. If they always parry 4, attack the head.

Emotional Patterns

Saber is an emotional weapon. The speed and physicality create adrenaline, and many sabreurs make tactical decisions based on emotion rather than analysis. Watch for the opponent who gets more aggressive when they're behind (attack their aggression with the defensive trap), the opponent who gets tentative when they're ahead (attack their hesitation with the fast march), and the opponent who celebrates touches (they're more focused on emotion than the next touch – punish the lapse in focus).



Tactical Exercises

Exercise 1: The Tactic Rotation Bout

Fence a 15-touch bout where you must use each of the six core tactics at least twice. Track which tactic scored and which was defended. After the bout, review: which tactic had the highest success rate against this opponent? That's your primary tactic for the next bout.

Exercise 2: The Scouting Bout

Fence 3 touches against a partner using only the march (tactic 1). After those 3 touches, predict: what is the partner's preferred parry? What is their march timing? Which cut do they favor? Then fence 5 more touches using a plan based on your scouting. Evaluate your predictions.

Exercise 3: The March Variation Drill

Fence 20 one-touch exchanges from the en garde lines. For each exchange, use a different march variation: fast march (tactic 1), check-step (tactic 3), delayed march (tactic 4), or retreat (tactic 6). Your partner does not know which variation you're using. Track which variations score most often.

Exercise 4: The Second-Intention Chain

Practice second-intention sequences with a cooperative partner. Attack to the head, draw parry 5, receive their riposte, parry their riposte, counter-riposte to flank. Then add a third layer: they parry your counter-riposte, you take their second riposte, and counter-riposte again. Build the chain to 3-4 exchanges. This trains the tactical depth that separates advanced sabreurs from intermediate ones.

Exercise 5: The Emotional Reset Drill

Fence a 15-touch bout where after every touch against you, you must walk back to the en garde line, take two deep breaths, and say your focus word before the next "Fence." The goal is to train the habit of emotional reset between touches. Track whether your performance improves in the touches following a disciplined reset versus an undisciplined one.



Final Coach's Note

Saber is a fast weapon, but the fastest fencer doesn't always win. The fencer who controls the tempo wins. Tempo is not speed – it's the ability to change speed, to disrupt the opponent's timing, and to deliver the right action at the right moment.

Learn all six core tactics. Practice rotating through them in training. And develop the tactical awareness to choose the right one in the fraction of a second between "Fence" and the touch. That awareness comes from experience – from thousands of exchanges where you made the right choice and thousands where you made the wrong one.

The best sabreurs in the world aren't just fast. They're fast and smart. Be both.

– Coach Derek