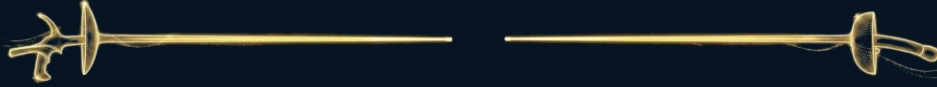


DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Beginner Footwork Manual

20 Essential Exercises



Build the foundation of every fencing action — proper stance, clean movement, explosive lunges,
and the habits that elite footwork is built on.

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A Note from Coach Derek

If I could only teach a fencer one thing, it would be footwork. Not blade work. Not tactics. Footwork.

Every action in fencing – every attack, every parry, every counterattack – starts with the feet. A fencer with average blade work and excellent footwork will beat a fencer with excellent blade work and poor footwork almost every time.

This manual contains 20 foundational exercises that build proper movement from the ground up. They are designed for fencers who are new to the sport or who need to rebuild their fundamentals. Every exercise includes body position notes so you can self-correct, and recommended reps so you can structure your practice.

Do these exercises consistently – 3 to 4 times per week – and you will see a measurable difference in your movement within a month. Skip them, and no amount of blade work will compensate for what your feet can't do.

– Coach Derek

How to Use This Manual

These 20 exercises are organized in order of difficulty and complexity. Start with Exercise 1 and work your way through. Don't skip ahead until you can perform each exercise with correct form.

Each exercise includes a description of the movement, specific body position notes to watch for, and a recommended number of reps or duration. Quality matters more than quantity. Ten perfect advances are worth more than fifty sloppy ones.

You can do these exercises at home, in a hallway, in a gym, or at the club. All you need is about 15 feet of flat space. No equipment required.

COACH'S TIP: Film yourself doing these exercises once a month. Compare the video to the body position notes. You'll catch mistakes you can't feel. Footwork looks simple. Doing it correctly is not.

Foundation: Stance & Guard Position

Before you can move, you need to know how to stand. Every exercise in this manual starts and returns to the en garde position.

1. The En Garde Position (Static Hold)

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, front foot pointing forward, back foot at a 90-degree angle. Bend both knees until your thighs are engaged but not burning. Your weight should be evenly distributed between both feet. Hands up in guard position — weapon hand forward, back hand relaxed behind you.

Body Position: Knees bent and over the toes (not collapsing inward). Back straight — do not lean forward or backward. Shoulders relaxed, not shrugged up. Head centered and level. Hips square to the side, not open toward the opponent. Front heel aligned with the arch of the back foot.

Reps/Duration: Hold for 30 seconds. Rest 15 seconds. Repeat 6 times. Build up to 60-second holds.

2. En Garde with Mirror Check

Perform the en garde position in front of a mirror or reflective surface. Check each body position detail against the notes above. Correct one thing at a time.

Body Position: Same as Exercise 1. Focus on one correction per session: first day fix knee alignment, next day fix shoulder position, next day fix hip angle. Don't try to fix everything at once.

Reps/Duration: 10 repetitions of getting into en garde and checking your position. Hold each for 10 seconds.

Basic Movement: Advances & Retreats

The advance and retreat are the most fundamental footwork actions in fencing. You will use them in every single bout you ever fence. The key principle: the front foot always leads going forward, the back foot always leads going backward. The feet never cross.

3. The Advance (Forward Step)

From en garde, lift the front foot slightly and step forward about one shoe length. The back foot follows immediately, returning to the original en garde distance. The movement should be smooth and controlled, not a stomp or a jump.

Body Position: Front foot lifts only 1-2 inches off the ground — no high stepping. The heel of the front foot touches first, then the toe rolls down. Back foot follows immediately — there should be almost no delay. After the advance, you should be in the same en garde position you started in. Do not stand up or straighten your knees during the movement.

Reps/Duration: 20 advances across the floor. Walk back and repeat. 3 sets.

4. The Retreat (Backward Step)

From en garde, push off the front foot and step backward with the back foot about one shoe length. The front foot follows immediately. Same principle as the advance, but in reverse.

Body Position: Back foot moves first. Push comes from the ball of the front foot. Stay low — do not stand up during the retreat. Same en garde position before and after. Head stays at the same height throughout — if your head bobs up and down, you're straightening your legs.

Reps/Duration: 20 retreats across the floor. Walk back and repeat. 3 sets.

5. Advance-Retreat Combination

Perform two advances followed by two retreats. Then three advances and three retreats. Focus on maintaining the same stance, the same depth, and the same rhythm throughout.

Body Position: Your feet should return to the exact same distance apart after every step. If your stance gets wider or narrower, you're losing structure. Keep your upper body quiet — the movement comes from the legs, not from rocking or swaying.

Reps/Duration: 2-2 pattern: 10 repetitions. 3-3 pattern: 10 repetitions. 2 sets of each.

6. Advance-Retreat with Tempo Changes

Perform advances and retreats at three different speeds: slow (deliberate, checking form), medium (natural training pace), and fast (competition speed). Do 10 of each at each speed.

Body Position: At slow speed, every position should be perfect. At medium speed, maintain form. At fast speed, the form should hold — if it breaks down, you're going too fast. Speed without form is just falling forward.

Reps/Duration: Slow: 10 advances + 10 retreats. Medium: 10 + 10. Fast: 10 + 10. Rest 30 seconds between speed changes.

COACH'S TIP: The most common beginner mistake is making advances and retreats too big. Small, controlled steps are faster and more balanced than large, lunging steps. Think quick and compact, not big and dramatic.

The Lunge

The lunge is the primary attacking footwork action in fencing. It's how you close distance to score a touch. A good lunge is explosive, fully extended, and recoverable.

7. The Static Lunge (Form Check)

From en garde, extend your weapon arm fully, then push off your back leg and drive your front foot forward. Land with your front knee directly over your front ankle – not past it. Your back leg should be straight and your back foot flat on the ground. Hold the final position for 5 seconds.

Body Position: Front knee directly above the ankle – never past the toes. Back leg fully extended, not bent. Back foot flat on the ground, not rolling onto the side. Torso upright, not leaning forward over the front knee. Weapon arm fully extended before the foot moves. Head up, eyes forward.

Reps/Duration: 10 lunges with a 5-second hold each. Rest 30 seconds. 3 sets.

8. Lunge and Recovery

Perform a lunge, hold for 2 seconds, then push off the front foot and return to en garde. The recovery should be just as controlled as the lunge itself.

Body Position: Recovery starts with a strong push from the front heel. Front foot returns to en garde position – don't drag it back or shuffle. You should end in the exact same en garde you started in. Do not let the back leg bend or collapse during recovery.

Reps/Duration: 15 lunge-and-recover repetitions. 3 sets with 30-second rest.

9. Advance-Lunge

Perform one advance immediately followed by a lunge. This is the most common attacking combination in fencing – the advance closes distance, and the lunge delivers the touch.

Body Position: The advance and lunge should be one fluid sequence, not two separate actions with a pause between them. Maintain en garde depth during the advance. The arm extends during or just before the lunge, not after.

Reps/Duration: 12 advance-lunges. 3 sets.

10. Lunge Distance Calibration

Place a target (water bottle, cone, chair) at various distances. Practice lunging to reach it. Start close and gradually move the target farther away. The goal is to learn how far your lunge can reach and to develop a feel for distance.

Body Position: If you can't reach the target without falling forward, it's too far. A good lunge reaches its target while keeping the back foot flat and the torso balanced. Never sacrifice form for distance.

Reps/Duration: 5 lunges at each of 4 distances (close, medium, far, maximum). 2 sets.

COACH'S TIP: The arm extends BEFORE the foot moves. If your foot moves first, you're not attacking – you're just walking forward. Arm first, then legs. This is the single most important detail of the lunge.

Direction Changes & Rhythm

In a real bout, you never just go forward or just go backward. You change direction constantly. These exercises build the ability to switch directions quickly without losing balance or structure.

11. Two Forward, One Back

Perform two advances, then one retreat. Repeat continuously across the floor. This pattern teaches you to change direction smoothly while maintaining forward pressure.

Body Position: The transition from advance to retreat should be seamless — no pause, no standing up, no resetting. The retreat should be as sharp and controlled as the advances.

Reps/Duration: 20 cycles (2 advances + 1 retreat = 1 cycle). 2 sets.

12. One Forward, Two Back

The reverse pattern: one advance, then two retreats. This teaches you to give ground under control — a critical defensive skill.

Body Position: Same smooth transitions. Don't let the retreats become panicked or sloppy. Retreating is a tactical choice, not a sign of losing.

Reps/Duration: 20 cycles. 2 sets.

13. Random Direction Drill (Self-Directed)

Choose a random pattern of advances and retreats and perform them at medium speed. Example: 3 forward, 1 back, 2 forward, 3 back, 1 forward. Change the pattern every set.

Body Position: The randomness forces your brain to stay engaged instead of going on autopilot. Maintain form even when the pattern is unpredictable.

Reps/Duration: 30 seconds of continuous movement per set. 6 sets with 15-second rest.

14. Command Drill (With a Partner)

Have a partner or parent call out “forward” or “back” at random intervals. React and move immediately. The caller should vary the speed and rhythm.

Body Position: React within one beat of the command. Don't anticipate — wait for the call, then move. This builds reaction time and trains you to respond to what's happening, not what you expect to happen.

Reps/Duration: 45 seconds per round. 6 rounds with 15-second rest. Switch roles if both people fence.

Balance & Control

Good footwork isn't just about speed. It's about balance, control, and the ability to stop, start, and change direction without losing your structure.

15. The Freeze Drill

Perform continuous advances and retreats. At a random moment (use a timer, partner call, or your own count), freeze completely in whatever position you're in. Hold for 3 seconds. Then resume.

Body Position: When you freeze, you should be perfectly balanced and in a correct en garde position. If you're falling forward, leaning back, or standing up when the freeze happens, your movement is out of control.

Reps/Duration: 60 seconds of movement with 4–5 random freezes per set. 4 sets.

16. Slow-Motion Footwork

Perform advances, retreats, and lunges at the slowest speed possible while maintaining perfect form. Each advance should take 3–4 seconds. Each lunge should take 5–6 seconds.

Body Position: Slow motion reveals every flaw. If your knees straighten, you'll see it. If your feet are uneven, you'll feel it. If your head bobs, it becomes obvious. Use this as a diagnostic tool.

Reps/Duration: 10 slow advances, 10 slow retreats, 5 slow lunges. 2 sets.

17. Single-Leg Balance (En Garde Position)

From en garde, lift your front foot 2 inches off the ground and hold for 15 seconds. Then switch: lift your back foot and hold for 15 seconds. This builds the stabilizer muscles you need for explosive movement.

Body Position: Keep your standing knee bent — don't lock it straight. Hands stay in guard position. Core engaged. Eyes forward, not looking at the ground.

Reps/Duration: Front foot lift: 15 seconds x 6 reps per side. Build up to 30-second holds.

COACH'S TIP: If you can't do these balance exercises cleanly, your footwork in bouts is compensating for instability. Fix the balance first. The speed will come.

Speed & Explosiveness

Once your form is solid and your balance is strong, you can start building speed. Speed without form is dangerous. Speed with form is devastating.

18. Sprint Advances

Perform 10 advances as fast as possible while maintaining en garde form. Time yourself or have a partner time you. Try to beat your time each week.

Body Position: Speed comes from the push, not from bigger steps. Quick, compact advances with a strong push from the back foot. If your form breaks down, slow down until it holds.

Reps/Duration: 10 sprint advances. Rest 20 seconds. 5 sets. Track your time.

19. Explosive Lunge from Stillness

Stand completely still in en garde for 5 seconds. Then lunge as explosively as possible. The contrast between stillness and explosion is what makes this drill effective — it trains fast-twitch activation.

Body Position: During the 5-second hold, stay completely motionless. Don't rock, don't shift weight, don't telegraph. When you lunge, it should be sudden and total. Arm extends first.

Reps/Duration: 10 explosive lunges from stillness. Rest 15 seconds between each. 3 sets.

20. Advance-Advance-Lunge Sprint

Perform two fast advances followed by an explosive lunge. This is the most common attacking sequence in competitive fencing. The goal is to make the entire sequence feel like one continuous action.

Body Position: No pause between the second advance and the lunge. The rhythm should accelerate — the lunge is faster than the advances. Push through the lunge, don't fall into it. Recover to en garde after every repetition.

Reps/Duration: 10 repetitions. 4 sets with 30-second rest.



Practice Schedule

Here's a suggested weekly schedule for working through these exercises. Adjust based on your current level and available time.

Weeks 1–2: Exercises 1–6 (Stance and Basic Movement). 15–20 minutes, 3–4 times per week. Focus on perfect form.

Weeks 3–4: Exercises 1–10 (Add Lunges). 20–25 minutes, 3–4 times per week. Warm up with Exercises 1–6, then add the lunge exercises.

Weeks 5–6: Exercises 1–14 (Add Direction Changes). 25–30 minutes, 3–4 times per week.

Weeks 7–8: All 20 Exercises. 30–35 minutes, 3–4 times per week. Full routine.

After Week 8, continue the full routine but start increasing speed on Exercises 18–20. This manual becomes your warm-up for more advanced footwork training.

COACH'S TIP: Consistency beats intensity. Twenty minutes of focused footwork four times a week will produce better results than one hour of sloppy practice once a week. Build the habit. The results will follow.



Final Coach's Note

Footwork is not glamorous. Nobody watches a fencer's feet and cheers. But every coach in the world will tell you the same thing: the best fencers in the world have the best feet.

These 20 exercises are the foundation. Master them and everything else in fencing becomes easier — your attacks land because you're at the right distance, your defense works because you can control space, and your endurance improves because efficient movement wastes less energy.

Do the work. Be patient with yourself. Film your progress. And remember: the fencer who moves best usually wins.

— Coach Derek