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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Intermediate Footwork Manual

20 Tactical Exercises



Move beyond the basics — build the distance control, rhythm changes, and tactical footwork that win bouts.

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A Note from Coach Derek

If you've worked through the Beginner Footwork Manual, you can stand in en garde, advance, retreat, and lunge with correct form. That's the foundation. Now it's time to make your footwork tactical.

Beginner footwork answers the question: "How do I move correctly?" Intermediate footwork answers: "Why am I moving, and what does this movement accomplish?"

Every exercise in this manual has a tactical purpose listed at the top. That purpose connects the drill to something that happens in a real bout. When you practice these exercises, don't just do the movement – understand why you're doing it. That understanding is what separates a fencer who has good footwork from a fencer who uses good footwork.

These 20 exercises build on the beginner manual. If any of the foundational movements feel shaky, go back and strengthen them before adding tactical layers. A house built on a weak foundation doesn't stand.

– Coach Derek

How to Use This Manual

Each exercise includes a tactical purpose, a description, key details for execution, and recommended reps. The tactical purpose is the most important part – it tells you when this movement matters in competition.

These exercises are organized into five categories: Distance Management, Rhythm and Tempo, Offensive Preparation, Defensive Footwork, and Strip Awareness. Work through them in order the first time, then mix and match based on what you need to improve.

Prerequisite: You should be able to perform all 20 exercises from the Beginner Footwork Manual with correct form before starting this manual.

COACH'S TIP: Practice these drills with a partner whenever possible. Footwork in isolation builds form. Footwork against another person builds tactical awareness. Both matter, but tactical footwork only becomes real when there's someone on the other end of the strip.

Distance Management

Distance is the most important variable in fencing. These exercises teach you to control the space between you and your opponent — closing distance when you want to attack, opening distance when you need to defend, and maintaining the exact distance where your actions work best.

1. The Pendulum

Tactical Purpose: *Controlling distance by advancing and retreating at a consistent depth without committing.*

Advance one step, retreat one step, continuously. Keep the same en garde depth throughout. The rhythm should be smooth and metronomic — forward-back-forward-back with no pauses. After 30 seconds, your partner calls “go” and you launch an attack from the forward phase of the pendulum.

Key Details: The step size must stay identical every time. Do not let the pendulum drift forward or backward. Your opponent should not be able to tell which forward step is the real attack until it happens. Keep your upper body quiet — no leaning or telegraphing.

Reps/Duration: 30-second pendulum sets with partner call. 8 sets. Alternate who calls.

2. The Stealing Step

Tactical Purpose: *Gaining distance imperceptibly to set up an attack.*

Start at long distance from a partner. Advance normally, but on every third or fourth step, make your advance slightly longer than the others — about 2–3 inches more. The goal is to close distance gradually without your partner noticing the change. After 6–8 advances, you should be close enough to attack from what looked like a safe distance.

Key Details: The stealing step must look identical to your normal advance in tempo and body position. Only the step length changes. If your partner can tell which step was the stealing step, it's too obvious. Practice until the difference is invisible.

Reps/Duration: 10 sets of 8 advances with 2 stealing steps mixed in. Partner provides feedback on visibility.

3. The Measured Retreat

Tactical Purpose: *Controlling distance while retreating to set up a counterattack or parry-riposte.*

Your partner advances toward you continuously. Retreat to maintain exactly medium distance — close enough that they could lunge but you could parry. Do not open the distance to long range. Do not let them get to close range. Hold the distance for 30 seconds, then your partner attempts a lunge. You parry (or simulate a parry) and step forward to riposte.

Key Details: The retreats must match the size and tempo of your partner's advances exactly. If you retreat too much, you lose the counterattack opportunity. If you retreat too little, you get hit. This is the single most important defensive footwork skill in fencing.

Reps/Duration: 30-second retreat sets. 8 sets. Alternate roles with partner.

4. The Distance Trap

Tactical Purpose: *Deliberately creating a false sense of distance to lure the opponent into attacking short.*

From medium distance, take two quick retreats to open the distance. This makes your opponent think you're giving ground. Then immediately advance one large step and lunge. The two retreats bait the opponent into following; the sudden advance catches them mid-step when they're not prepared to defend.

Key Details: The two retreats must look reactive, like you're being pushed back. Then the advance-lunge must be explosive with no pause. The contrast between “giving ground” and “attacking” is what makes this work. If you pause between the retreats and the attack, the trap fails.

Reps/Duration: 12 repetitions. 3 sets. Practice with a partner who advances on your retreats.

COACH'S TIP: Distance management is the difference between a fencer who attacks and misses, and a fencer who attacks and scores. If you're consistently falling short or getting hit on the way in, the problem is almost never your lunge — it's your distance preparation.

Rhythm and Tempo

Every fencer has a rhythm. These exercises teach you to change your own rhythm deliberately and to disrupt your opponent's timing. A fencer who moves at one speed is predictable. A fencer who can shift between fast, slow, and still is dangerous.

5. The Three-Speed Drill

Tactical Purpose: *Developing the ability to change speed on demand during a bout.*

Move down the strip using advances at three distinct speeds: slow (deliberate, 2 seconds per step), medium (normal training pace), and fast (competition sprint). A partner calls the speed changes at random intervals: "Slow!" "Fast!" "Medium!" You transition instantly without breaking form.

Key Details: The transitions must be immediate – not gradual. When the call comes, the next step is at the new speed. Your en garde depth, knee bend, and upper body position should remain identical at all three speeds. Speed changes happen in the legs, not in the posture.

Reps/Duration: 45-second sets with random speed calls. 6 sets. Switch roles with partner.

6. The False Acceleration

Tactical Purpose: *Using a speed change to draw a premature reaction from the opponent.*

Start with slow, deliberate advances. After 3–4 slow steps, suddenly accelerate into two fast advances – but do NOT lunge. Hold your position. The goal is to make your opponent react to the acceleration (by retreating quickly, counterattacking, or flinching) without you actually committing. Once they react, you've gathered information about their defensive response.

Key Details: The acceleration must look like the beginning of a real attack. Arm can extend slightly during the fast advances to sell the threat. But do NOT lunge. This is about drawing information, not scoring. If you commit, you lose the advantage.

Reps/Duration: 10 repetitions against a partner. After each one, note their response. 3 sets.

7. The Pause-and-Explode

Tactical Purpose: *Using stillness to create an explosive attack that's impossible to anticipate.*

Move at medium speed for 4–5 steps. Then stop completely. Stand perfectly still in en garde for a full 3 seconds – no movement, no weight shifts, no blade motion. Then explode into an advance-lunge at maximum speed. The contrast between stillness and explosion makes the attack extremely difficult to defend.

Key Details: The pause must be complete stillness. Any fidgeting telegraphs that something is coming. During the 3 seconds, you should look like a photograph. Then the explosion happens with zero warning. Arm extends first, then the feet move. Practice the transition from zero to maximum speed.

Reps/Duration: 10 repetitions. 4 sets. Build to 5-second pauses as you develop comfort with stillness.

8. The Broken Rhythm Advance

Tactical Purpose: *Making your approach unpredictable by varying the timing between steps.*

Advance down the strip, but vary the pause between each step randomly. Step-pause-step-step-long pause-step-step-step-pause-step. No two intervals should be the same. Your opponent should never be able to predict when your next step is coming.

Key Details: Each individual step should be technically perfect. The variation is in the timing BETWEEN steps, not in the steps themselves. Think of it like a jazz musician who plays correct notes but varies the rhythm. The notes are the same; the music is completely different.

Reps/Duration: 30-second sets of broken rhythm advances. 8 sets. Partner reports whether they could predict your timing.

COACH'S TIP: The most dangerous rhythm change in fencing is the transition from moving to still to explosive. If you can master the Pause-and-Explode, you have one of the most effective attacking tools in the sport. Elite fencers use this constantly.

Offensive Preparation

These exercises build the footwork that sets up your attacks. Good attacks don't start with the lunge — they start 3–4 steps before the lunge, when you're creating the conditions for the attack to succeed.

9. The Marching Attack

Tactical Purpose: *Building forward momentum to pressure the opponent before the final attack.*

From long distance, advance continuously at medium speed for 4–6 steps, then accelerate into an advance-lunge. The initial advances are not the attack — they're the preparation. They push the opponent backward, compress the distance, and create the forward pressure that makes the final lunge reach.

Key Details: Maintain steady acceleration throughout — each advance should be slightly faster than the last, building momentum into the final lunge. Don't start fast. Start deliberate, then build. The opponent should feel increasing pressure, not a sudden sprint.

Reps/Duration: 10 marching attacks from long distance. 4 sets. Vary the number of preparatory advances (4, 5, or 6) so the attack is unpredictable.

10. The Half-Lunge Feint

Tactical Purpose: *Using footwork to draw a defensive reaction before the real attack.*

From medium distance, extend your arm and drive your front foot forward about half the distance of a full lunge. Hold for a beat. This is the feint — it looks like a lunge is coming. Watch the opponent's response: do they parry? Retreat? Counterattack? Then recover to en garde and execute the real attack based on what they showed you.

Key Details: The half-lunge must be convincing. If it looks half-hearted, the opponent won't react. Arm fully extended, front foot driving forward with intent. The hold at the end is crucial — it gives you time to read the response. Then the recovery must be fast, back to full en garde, before the real attack.

Reps/Duration: 8 half-lunge feints followed by a full attack. 4 sets. Record what the opponent does each time.

11. The Check Step

Tactical Purpose: *Disrupting the opponent's retreat to catch them flat-footed.*

During a forward advance sequence, suddenly stamp your front foot loudly without actually advancing (a check step). This creates an auditory and visual cue that disrupts the opponent's retreat rhythm. Most opponents hesitate for a fraction of a second after the check — that hesitation is your window. Follow the check step immediately with a real advance-lunge.

Key Details: The stamp must be sharp and convincing. Your body stays in en garde — only the front foot moves. The follow-up advance-lunge must come within one beat of the check. If you wait too long, the opponent recovers and the disruption is wasted.

Reps/Duration: 10 check-step-into-advance-lunge sequences. 3 sets. Practice against a retreating partner.

12. The Patternless Approach

Tactical Purpose: *Eliminating predictability from your attack preparation.*

Approach your opponent using a combination of advances, half-steps, pauses, check steps, and retreats mixed randomly. No two approaches should look the same. After 4–8 movements, launch an attack. Your partner calls out afterward whether they could predict when the attack was coming.

Key Details: This is the tactical culmination of all the previous offensive prep exercises. The goal is to make your approach look different every time so your opponent can never time their defense. Think of each approach as a sentence with different words in a different order.

Reps/Duration: 10 patternless approaches with attack. 4 sets. Partner provides honest feedback.

COACH'S TIP: If your opponent can predict when your attack is coming, the attack will fail — no matter how fast or technically perfect it is. These exercises exist to make your preparation invisible. An attack that arrives unexpectedly from good preparation will beat a faster attack that arrives predictably.

Defensive Footwork

Defense in fencing is not passive. These exercises build active defensive footwork — the ability to control distance, draw attacks, and create the conditions for a successful counterattack or parry-riposte.

13. The Pulling Retreat

Tactical Purpose: *Drawing the opponent's attack by offering a shrinking distance, then exploiting their commitment.*

Stand at medium distance. Take a small retreat — just enough to be slightly outside their lunge range. This should look like you're giving ground. When the opponent follows with an advance or lunge, take one more sharp retreat to make them fall short, then immediately step forward to riposte.

Key Details: The first retreat is the bait — it invites the attack. The second retreat is the defense — it makes them miss. The forward step is the kill — you close the distance they just created by lunging. Timing is everything. Too early and they won't commit. Too late and they'll reach you.

Reps/Duration: 10 pull-retreat-riposte sequences against a partner who attacks on your retreat. 4 sets.

14. The Lateral Step

Tactical Purpose: *Moving offline to avoid a direct attack and create an angle for the riposte.*

From en garde, instead of retreating straight back, step your back foot to the outside (away from the weapon hand) while pivoting your body slightly. This moves you off the line of the attack while staying at striking distance. Practice stepping offline to the outside and then immediately counterattacking.

Key Details: The lateral step is small — 6 to 8 inches. It's not a leap. The key is that it moves your body off the line the opponent is attacking while your weapon stays on target. Your shoulders rotate slightly but your blade should still be aimed at the opponent.

Reps/Duration: 10 lateral steps with counterattack from each side. 3 sets per side. Practice against a partner doing straight lunges.

15. The Active Retreat with Blade

Tactical Purpose: *Combining defensive footwork with blade engagement to set up a parry-riposte.*

Your partner advances continuously. Retreat to maintain distance while keeping your blade engaged with theirs — your point stays aimed at their chest, your guard stays in a defensive position. When they lunge, execute a parry and forward step with riposte. The blade engagement during the retreat makes the parry natural and fast because your blade is already in position.

Key Details: Don't retreat passively with your blade dangling. Keep it alive and engaged. The point should be threatening your opponent even as you retreat. This accomplishes two things: it discourages reckless attacks, and it pre-positions your blade for the parry.

Reps/Duration: 30-second active retreat sets ending in a parry-riposte. 6 sets. Alternate roles.

16. The Counter-Time Retreat

Tactical Purpose: *Retreating to draw a counterattack, then parrying the counterattack and riposting.*

Advance toward your partner as if preparing an attack. When they counterattack (which your advance was designed to provoke), take a short retreat to make their counterattack fall short, parry their blade, and immediately lunge to riposte. This is a second-intention action — your advance wasn't a real attack; it was bait to draw their counter.

Key Details: Your advance must look real enough to draw the counterattack. But you must be mentally prepared to retreat and parry instead of committing forward. This requires discipline — advancing with the intention of retreating goes against instinct. Practice until the retreat feels natural after the bait.

Reps/Duration: 10 counter-time sequences. 4 sets. Partner provides a real counterattack attempt each time.

COACH'S TIP: The best defensive footwork looks offensive. If your opponent thinks you're retreating because you're scared, they'll chase aggressively and make careless mistakes. If your retreats look deliberate and controlled, they'll be cautious — and caution creates openings for you.

Strip Awareness

The fencing strip is 14 meters long. Your position on the strip is a tactical variable that most fencers ignore. These exercises build spatial awareness — knowing where you are, where the end line is, and how to use the geometry of the strip to your advantage.

17. The Blind Position Check

Tactical Purpose: *Developing awareness of your strip position without looking.*

Fence a practice bout or do footwork drills with your eyes focused entirely on your opponent (or partner). Every 30 seconds, your coach or a third person asks: “How far are you from the back line?” You answer without looking. Then check. The goal is to build an internal sense of position that doesn’t require you to turn your head or look down.

Key Details: In competition, looking at the end line takes your eyes off the opponent. That’s a touch against you. Develop the habit of feeling your position through your feet and peripheral vision. Track your steps mentally — after every 3–4 retreats, you should know roughly how much strip you have left.

Reps/Duration: 5-minute practice bout sessions with position checks every 30 seconds. Track your accuracy.

18. The End-of-Strip Drill

Tactical Purpose: *Practicing effective fencing when your back is near the warning line.*

Start 2 meters from the back end of the strip. Your partner fences normally from full distance. You must defend and score without crossing the back line. This forces you to stop retreating and use parry-riposte, counterattack, or decisive forward movement. Getting pushed to the end of the strip is inevitable in competition — this drill teaches you to fight from there instead of panicking.

Key Details: Do not retreat past the 2-meter mark. When you run out of room, your options are: parry and riposte forward, counterattack, or attack forward to reclaim the strip. Practice all three. The most common mistake is continuing to retreat when there’s nowhere to go.

Reps/Duration: 2-minute rounds starting from the 2-meter line. 6 rounds. Alternate roles.

19. The Strip Push

Tactical Purpose: *Using forward footwork to drive the opponent to the end of the strip and capitalize on their reduced options.*

Start from the center. Advance deliberately toward your partner, pushing them backward. Don’t attack — just advance. When they reach the warning line, they have to either make a stand or get carded. Now attack. The strip did half the work for you — they have no room to retreat, so your attack is much more likely to land.

Key Details: The push must be steady and relentless, not rushed. If you sprint at them, they’ll counterattack. If you walk them back methodically, they’ll run out of ideas and strip at the same time. Use the broken rhythm from Exercise 8 during the push to prevent them from timing a counterattack.

Reps/Duration: 10 strip push sequences to attack at the end line. 3 sets. Partner tries to escape.

20. The Full-Strip Simulation

Tactical Purpose: *Integrating all intermediate footwork skills into realistic bout-length movement.*

With a partner, simulate a full bout’s worth of footwork on a regulation strip (or measured distance). Use every technique from this manual: pendulum, stealing steps, speed changes, check steps, lateral movement, pull retreats, and strip awareness. No blade work — just feet. The bout is won by pushing the opponent off the end of the strip or by achieving a clearly superior attacking position.

Key Details: This drill is the tactical capstone. If you can win the footwork battle without a weapon in your hand, you’ll dominate the distance when you add the blade. Focus on reading your partner’s footwork and responding with the right tool from this manual.

Reps/Duration: 3-minute rounds. 6 rounds. Track which techniques you used and which were effective. Debrief with your partner after each round.

COACH'S TIP: The best fencers in the world fence the entire strip. They use the center, the warning lines, and the space behind them all as tactical tools. A fencer who only knows how to fence from the center is a fencer who gives up 10 meters of tactical real estate. Don't be that fencer.



Practice Schedule

Integrate these exercises into your regular training. Here's a suggested progression:

Weeks 1–2: Exercises 1–4 (Distance Management). 20 minutes, 3–4 times per week. Practice with a partner whenever possible.

Weeks 3–4: Exercises 5–8 (Rhythm and Tempo). Add to warm-up. 25 minutes total, 3–4 times per week.

Weeks 5–6: Exercises 9–12 (Offensive Preparation). 25–30 minutes. Begin combining with distance exercises.

Weeks 7–8: Exercises 13–16 (Defensive Footwork). 30 minutes. Alternate offensive and defensive focus each session.

Weeks 9–10: Exercises 17–20 (Strip Awareness). Full routine. 30–35 minutes. Use Exercise 20 as your primary footwork sparring drill.

After Week 10, these exercises become your standard footwork warm-up and training toolkit. Mix and match based on what you're working on in lessons and what you need for upcoming competitions.



Final Coach's Note

Beginner footwork teaches you how to move. Intermediate footwork teaches you why to move. The difference is enormous.

A fencer who advances because they're trying to get closer is moving without purpose. A fencer who advances because they're stealing distance to set up an attack on the third step is fencing. These exercises bridge that gap.

Don't rush through them. Each exercise has a tactical concept behind it, and that concept is more valuable than the physical movement. Understand the why, practice the how, and your footwork will become a weapon – not just transportation.

– Coach Derek