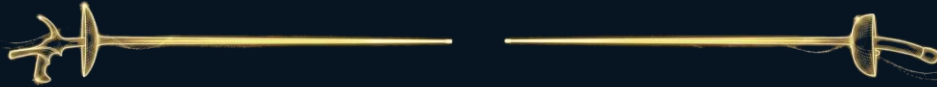


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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Tactical Playbook

Reading Your Opponent



Distance, tempo, patterns, blade cues, and the observation skills that turn information into touches.

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A Note from Coach Derek

The best fencers I've ever coached are not the fastest or the strongest. They're the ones who see things other fencers miss.

Tactics in fencing are not complicated. They're about paying attention. Noticing what your opponent does when you push them. Noticing what they do when they're ahead, when they're behind, when they're nervous. Noticing their patterns before they notice yours.

This playbook teaches you how to read an opponent systematically – what to look for, how to gather information, and how to turn what you see into a plan. It's not about memorizing actions. It's about building the habit of observation that makes every action you already know more effective.

A fencer with ten actions and good tactics will beat a fencer with fifty actions and no plan. This guide helps you become the first one.

– Coach Derek

Why Tactics Matter More Than Technique

Every fencer reaches a point where learning new techniques stops being enough. You know how to attack, parry, riposte, counterattack, and use footwork. But you're still losing bouts you feel like you should win. Why?

Because technique is what you can do. Tactics are knowing when to do it.

A perfectly executed attack at the wrong distance scores nothing. A simple direct attack at the perfect moment scores every time. The difference is reading the situation — understanding what your opponent is giving you, what they're taking away, and what they'll do in the next two seconds.

Tactics are not about being clever or tricky. They're about being observant. The fencer who gathers the most information in the first thirty seconds of a bout has a massive advantage for the rest of it.

COACH'S TIP: You don't need to outsmart your opponent. You need to out-observe them. The information is there on every single touch. Most fencers are too busy reacting to notice it. This guide teaches you how to stop reacting and start reading.

The Four Things to Read

Every opponent gives you information in four categories. Learn to read all four and you'll have a complete picture of how to fence them.

1. **Distance** – Where do they want to be? How far away do they stand? Do they crowd you or keep you at range?
2. **Tempo** – How fast do they move? Do they accelerate suddenly or maintain a steady rhythm? When do they pause?
3. **Patterns** – What do they repeat? What is their go-to action? What do they always do from a specific situation?
4. **Blade Cues** – What does their blade tell you? Where is their point? Is their arm extended or retracted? Are they inviting you to attack a specific line?

The rest of this playbook breaks down each one in detail.

Reading Distance

Distance is the most important tactical variable in fencing. The fencer who controls the distance controls the bout. Everything – what actions work, what defenses are available, who has the advantage – depends on where the two fencers are relative to each other.

The Three Distance Zones

Long Distance: Neither fencer can hit the other without taking at least two steps forward. This is the safe zone – the place where you can observe, plan, and prepare without immediate threat. Most observation happens here.

Medium Distance: One advance-lunge or one explosive lunge can reach the target. This is the danger zone – the distance where attacks are launched, invitations are set, and most tactical decisions are made. The best fencers spend most of their time managing this edge.

Close Distance: The fencers are almost within arm's reach. At this range, the fencer who acts first usually scores. Close distance is chaotic and favors the more aggressive fencer. Getting here should be intentional, not accidental.

What to Watch For

- Does the opponent prefer to fence at long, medium, or close distance?
- Do they step forward to close distance, or wait for you to come to them?
- When you advance, do they hold their ground, retreat, or counterattack?
- When you retreat, do they follow you or let you go?
- Do they attack from too far away? (If so, they're impatient – exploit it.)
- Do they get too close before deciding what to do? (If so, they're hesitant – pressure them.)

Tactical Responses

Against a fencer who crowds you: Retreat to create space, then counterattack or parry-riposte as they follow you in. Don't let them dictate the distance. If you're uncomfortable, they're winning the distance battle.

Against a fencer who stays far away: Use footwork to close distance gradually. Small advances, not lunges from too far. If they won't engage, walk them to the end of the strip. The back line is a powerful weapon.

Against a fencer who retreats constantly: Don't chase. Advance steadily and let them run out of strip. When they hit the warning line, they'll be forced to make a decision – and panicked decisions are bad decisions.

COACH'S TIP: The fencer who controls the distance doesn't need to be the attacker. Some of the best distance fencers in the world are primarily defensive. They set the distance where their parry-riposte works best, and they wait for you to walk into it.

Reading Tempo

Tempo is rhythm and timing. Every fencer has a natural tempo — a speed at which they move, a rhythm in their footwork, a cadence to their attacks. Reading tempo means understanding your opponent's internal clock and learning to disrupt it.

What Tempo Tells You

A fencer's tempo reveals their comfort level. When they're comfortable, their tempo is steady and predictable. When they're uncomfortable, their tempo changes — they speed up when they're nervous, slow down when they're unsure, and pause when they're planning.

Your job is to break their comfortable tempo and impose your own.

What to Watch For

- What is the opponent's natural footwork speed? Slow and deliberate, or fast and bouncy?
- Do they accelerate into attacks gradually, or explode from stillness?
- Is there a tell before they attack? A weight shift, a pause, a change in rhythm?
- Do they attack on a specific count? (Many fencers attack after exactly two or three advances.)
- Do they react faster going forward or backward?
- Do they slow down when they're behind? Speed up when they're ahead?

Tactical Responses

Breaking their rhythm: If your opponent has a steady advance-advance-lunge pattern, disrupt it. Advance-retreat-advance catches them mid-step. Change YOUR tempo constantly so they can't lock into yours.

Using pauses: A sudden stop after several fast advances is one of the most effective tactics in fencing. Your opponent expects continued movement and prepares for it. The pause catches them committed to a reaction that no longer makes sense.

Matching then breaking: Move at your opponent's tempo for 3–4 touches to lull them into a pattern. Then suddenly change speed — attack when they expect footwork, or go slow when they expect fast. The contrast creates the opening.

Attacking between their steps: Every advance has a moment where the front foot is in the air and the fencer is off-balance. If you can time your attack to land between their steps, they can't retreat effectively. This is called attacking "on preparation."

COACH'S TIP: The most dangerous tempo in fencing is a fencer who is perfectly still, then suddenly explosive. If you can develop that contrast — stillness into speed — you become extremely difficult to read. Practice this in every training session.

Reading Patterns

Every fencer has patterns. Actions they repeat. Habits they fall into. Responses they default to under pressure. The fencer who recognizes patterns first has a decisive advantage.

Where Patterns Show Up

Opening actions: What does the opponent do on the first touch of every bout? Many fencers have a “favorite first move” – a default action they use to start. Watch for it in pools. If they open with the same attack three times, they’ll do it again.

Responses to pressure: When you advance aggressively, what do they do? Retreat? Counterattack? Parry? Most fencers have one dominant response to pressure, and they go to it automatically.

Responses to being scored on: After losing a touch, does the opponent become more aggressive? More cautious? Do they try the same action again hoping it will work this time? Or do they change?

Responses when ahead: A fencer who is up 3-1 in a pool bout will often show you their “comfortable” game. This is valuable information because it’s what they trust most.

Responses when behind: A fencer who is down 1-4 will often panic and switch to their most desperate action. This action is usually simple, direct, and predictable. Wait for it.

Scoring patterns: Does the opponent score with the same action repeatedly? The same attack to the same line? If they scored with a beat-attack to 4 three times in pools, they’ll try it in the DE.

How to Exploit Patterns

Once you identify a pattern, you have two choices:

- 1. Anticipate and counter:** If you know they’ll attack to 4 after two advances, set up a parry-4 riposte. Be there before they arrive.
- 2. Remove the pattern’s trigger:** If they always counterattack when you advance fast, advance slowly. If they always attack when you retreat, stop retreating. Take away the situation that triggers their pattern.

COACH’S TIP: Your opponent has patterns. So do you. After every tournament, review your footage and ask: what did I do repeatedly? What would an observant opponent have exploited? Knowing your own patterns is just as important as reading theirs.

Reading the Blade

The blade is a source of information that most fencers ignore. Where the point is, how the arm is positioned, and what the blade is doing between touches all tell you something about what the opponent is planning and what they're afraid of.

Arm Position

Extended arm: An opponent who keeps their arm extended is either preparing an attack, trying to establish right-of-way (in foil/saber), or trying to keep you at distance. An extended arm is also a target – the hand and forearm are exposed, especially in épée.

Retracted arm: An opponent who keeps their arm pulled back is waiting. They're looking for your attack so they can parry-riposte or counterattack. They're patient. Against a retracted arm, you need to draw a reaction before committing.

Arm that pumps: A fencer who extends and retracts their arm rhythmically is creating a cadence. They're timing their attack to the moment they extend. Watch the pattern and attack when their arm is back.

Point Position

Point aimed at your chest: They're threatening you. Any forward movement from you risks running into their point. Respect this and use blade actions (beats, binds, engagements) to move their point offline before attacking.

Point offline or low: They're inviting you. This is either a genuine opening or a deliberate trap. If their point drops to the side, they may be setting up a counterattack or a parry with a change of line. Test it with a feint before committing.

Point searching: A fencer whose point moves constantly – up, down, left, right – is either nervous or looking for your blade. Ignore the movement and focus on their feet. The blade is the distraction; the feet tell you when the real action is coming.

Blade Engagement

They seek blade contact: A fencer who constantly tries to touch your blade is looking for information. They want to feel your reaction. If you pull away (dérobement), they lose information. If you push back, they learn your strength and direction.

They avoid blade contact: A fencer who keeps their blade away from yours is planning to attack in a clean line. They don't want you to find their blade. Against this, use sweeping parries or attacks with opposition.

COACH'S TIP: In foil and saber, the blade tells you about right-of-way strategy. In épée, the blade tells you about target selection. Learn to read the blade differently depending on the weapon you're fencing.

The Scouting Process

Reading your opponent is not something that happens by accident. It's a deliberate process. Here's how to do it systematically.

Before the Bout: Scouting

If you can watch your opponent fence before you face them, do it. You can learn more in three minutes of watching than in the first minute of fencing.

- What is their primary attack? What action do they score with most often?
- What is their primary defense? Parry-riposte? Distance? Counterattack?
- How do they handle pressure? Do they retreat or stand their ground?
- What distance do they prefer?
- Do they have a pattern on the first touch?
- Are they calm or emotional? Do they celebrate, argue, or stay flat?

First 30 Seconds: Information Gathering

The first 30 seconds of a bout are for gathering information, not for winning. Too many fencers try to score immediately and miss critical data.

- Test their reaction to your advance. Do they retreat, hold, or counterattack?
- Test their reaction to your retreat. Do they follow or wait?
- Test their blade. Extend toward them and see if they parry, beat, or ignore.
- Test their composure. Make a sharp move and see if they flinch.
- Do NOT commit to a full attack until you have a reason to believe it will work.

Ongoing Assessment: Reading Changes

Your opponent is also adapting. What worked in the first period may not work in the third. Stay observant throughout the bout.

- Did they adjust after you scored? What changed?
- Are they getting more aggressive or more cautious as the bout progresses?
- Are they tiring physically? Watch for slower footwork, dropped arm, heavier breathing.
- Are they tiring mentally? Watch for repeated mistakes, emotional reactions, less focus between touches.
- If your current tactic stops working, go back to observation. Don't keep doing the same thing and hoping.

COACH'S TIP: Keep a mental notebook during every bout. After each touch, file one observation: "they retreated when I advanced," "they attacked to 4 after a parry," "they always do the same thing when they're behind." Three observations is enough to build a plan.

Building a Game Plan

Information without a plan is just interesting. Once you've read your opponent, you need to turn what you've learned into a specific tactical approach.

The If-Then Framework

The simplest way to build a game plan is with "if-then" statements. These are conditional responses that you decide on before the action happens, so you're not thinking in the moment – you're executing.

Example: "If they retreat when I advance, then I'll do advance-advance-lunge to the chest."

Example: "If they counterattack when I come forward, then I'll use a feint to draw the counterattack, then finish with a disengage."

Example: "If they attack after two advances, then I'll be ready with a parry-4 on their second advance."

Example: "If they keep attacking to my outside line, then I'll set up in 6 and parry-riposte."

You don't need twenty if-then plans. You need two or three. One primary plan and one or two adjustments.

When to Change the Plan

A plan is not a commitment. It's a starting point. If your plan isn't working after 3–4 touches, change it. Go back to observation and build a new plan based on what's actually happening.

- If they adjusted to your primary action, switch to the counter-action.
- If you scored with an action twice, expect them to prepare for it. Have a follow-up ready.
- If nothing is working, simplify. Go back to one basic action and commit to it with speed and conviction.
- If you're frustrated, return to your mental reset routine. Frustration destroys tactical thinking.

COACH'S TIP: The best game plan in fencing is: do something, observe the response, adjust, repeat. You don't need a perfect plan from the start. You need the ability to observe, adapt, and execute one step ahead of your opponent.

Common Opponent Profiles

While every fencer is unique, most opponents fall into recognizable categories. Here's how to approach each one.

The Charger

This fencer attacks constantly. They come forward with speed and aggression, looking to overwhelm you before you can react.

How to beat them: Use their speed against them. Retreat just enough to make them fall short, then counterattack or parry-riposte. Don't back up endlessly — plant your feet and let them run into your blade. A Charger's biggest weakness is that they commit fully. If you're not where they expect, they're exposed.

The Wall

This fencer waits. They don't attack unless you force them to. They sit back, parry everything, and riposte. They're patient and frustrating.

How to beat them: Use compound attacks with feints to draw out their parry, then finish in a different line. Or use false attacks to draw the riposte and parry THAT. Against a Wall, you have to be the one creating action, but you can't be predictable. Vary your attacks. Change the line. Use second-intention actions.

The Counter-Attacker

This fencer waits for you to attack, then hits you on your way in. They have excellent timing and use your forward momentum against you.

How to beat them: Don't attack with a single action — they'll hit you every time. Use attacks with opposition (keeping your blade in line to close their target). Use feints to draw the counterattack, then take the blade with a parry and riposte. Or slow down your attacks so you can react to their counter.

The Scrambler

This fencer is unpredictable, sometimes chaotic. They throw a lot of different actions, change distance erratically, and are hard to read because even they don't always know what they're going to do.

How to beat them: Simplify. Don't try to out-scramble them. Pick two or three solid actions and execute them with discipline. A Scrambler beats themselves if you stay patient. Let the chaos happen, stay composed, and pick your moments. Structure beats chaos over 15 touches.

The Experienced Tactician

This fencer reads you as well as you read them. They adapt quickly, change their game, and make you feel like they're always one step ahead.

How to beat them: Don't show your patterns early. Vary your actions from the first touch. Use second-intention actions (set up an action specifically to draw their response, then counter that response). And stay in the moment — a Tactician wins by getting in your head. If you stay present and focus on one touch at a time, their planning advantage shrinks.

COACH'S TIP: Most fencers are a blend of these profiles. A Charger might become a Wall when they're ahead. A Counter-Attacker might become a Scrambler when they're behind. Read the fencer in front of you right now, not the one you faced three minutes ago.

Developing Your Tactical Eye

Tactical awareness is a skill. Like footwork and blade work, it gets better with deliberate practice. Here are specific ways to train it.

In Practice

- Before every practice bout, set one observation goal: "Today I'm going to figure out my opponent's go-to action in the first five touches."
- Practice the first 30 seconds as an observation period. No full attacks. Just test and watch.
- After each practice bout, tell your partner two things you noticed about their game. This forces you to articulate what you saw.
- Fence the same partner multiple times in one practice. In the first bout, only observe. In the second, build a plan based on what you saw. In the third, adjust the plan.
- Practice if-then planning out loud with your coach before bouts.

Watching Fencing

- Watch tournament footage (YouTube, USA Fencing, FIE) and try to predict what each fencer will do before they do it.
- Pick one fencer in a bout and identify their pattern within the first period.
- Watch how top fencers adapt between periods in DE bouts. What changes? What stays the same?
- Watch footwork, not just blade work. The feet tell you more about tactics than the blade.

After Tournaments

- Review your own footage and identify your patterns. What did you do repeatedly? What could an opponent have exploited?
- For each bout, write down: What was their primary action? What was my best response? What would I do differently?
- Compare your observations during the bout to what you see on video. Were you right? What did you miss?



Final Coach's Note

Tactics are not reserved for advanced fencers. Even a beginner can start building the habit of observation from their very first bout. "What did that person just do? What will they do next?" Those two questions are the foundation of every tactical decision in fencing.

You don't need to see everything. You don't need to have a plan for every possible situation. You need to see one thing, make one adjustment, and execute one action with clarity and conviction. That's tactics.

The fencer who watches, thinks, and adapts will beat the fencer who just reacts. Be the one who watches.

— Coach Derek