

# THE ECCENTRIC FIGHTER

*Tactics for Single Combat*



by David S. Hoornstra  
KNOWN IN THE  
SOCIETY FOR CREATIVE ANACHRONISM  
AS  
DAIBHID “RUADH” MACLACHLAN

This is a printout in reader spreads of the first 60 or so pages of this book, begun in CE 2000.

If it is never finished, that will be because the advances into period, researched combat methods will make this obsolete.

Maybe not. I hope so.

Daibhid

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## *Tactics for Single Combat*

by David S. Hoornstra

*known in the SCA as*  
Daibhid Ruadh MacLachlan  
Founding member, Cynnabar  
Baron of Court  
Sergeant of the Order of the Red Company

To Stephen Tuck  
Known to his friends of the S.C.A. as  
Count Thorvald the Golden

#### ON THE COVER

The author, in the foreground, demonstrates one of the techniques discussed in the text. His casual block of a not-so-casual attack provided by Dave Ross (Baron Straum – long before he won that title) is a simple parry from modern fencing.

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Ann Arbor, Michigan

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#### *About the author*

David S. Hoornstra is a graphic designer in Ann Arbor, Michigan, known in the SCA as Daibhid Ruadh MacLachlan. He began fencing in 1962 at the age of 15, and taught the sport at several Ann Arbor clubs during the 1970s while pursuing competitive ranking in foil and epee.

He joined the SCA in 1974, but disdained to enter SCA combat until 1978, the year he helped found the group now known as the Barony of Cynnabar. His first SCA combat teacher was Sir Aldric of the Northmark, although he had already received valuable guidance in that direction from his old fencing-master, John D. Bailey. When Daibhid returned from overseas (U.S. Coast Guard), Bailey was already an experienced SCA fighter known as Svea Wartooth, and co-founder of the Great Dark Horde. David's 1999 manual, *Some Commentaries on Tactics and Strategy for use in the SCA*, was dedicated to him.

"Baron Daibhid" fought in over ten Pennsic Wars, several in the Cynnabar Shield Wall. He was teaching combat in his second term as Cynnabar's Knights-Marshall when Straum von Bairzog began the Second Era of Cynnabar's martial power.

Daibhid was involved when fencing came into use in Midrealm, but due to modern issues was unable to keep the rules we use favorable to period swordplay. Still, Daibhid's Ann Arbor Sword Club students have made Cynnabar a fencing force to be reckoned with.

**I**t's been said that "tactics win the fight; strategy wins the war." It's more than a matter of scale. The differences between deciding how to move troops and knowing how to move your sword are profound. My previous booklet *Strategies for Use in the SCA* lays them out in simple form.



This book is a result of people asking about the tactics I use. I have a different style with a lot of variety, and I am told I'm fun to fight and to watch.

Many of the techniques I use every week come from ten years of training with dukes Eliahu ben Itzhak and Dag Thorgrimmson. But this book is about the new ones that came after 1992, when everything changed.

I was a "good enough" fighter, but I wasn't gaining as much ground as I wanted to. Nor was my fighting as much fun as either my fencing or theatrical swordplay.

When I stopped to reflect on ten years of SCA fighting, it came out that, for me, the most fun of all had happened in demos, where winning didn't matter, but being bigger than life did.

So one day I decided to forget about trying so hard. I chucked my "typical SCA" stance and went into my "old fencing-master" persona. This was an arrogant manner I had

picked up from Maestro Istvan Danosi, whose fencing squads had won six straight NCAA championships. Danosi's foil teaching stance looked deceptively casual, but against an advanced fencer, that point-to-the-left guard enabled him to make devastating parry-ripostes to *any* attack. The whole package of wiry strength, speed, and deep knowledge made Danosi a formidable person to face.

I had imitated the technique as an instructor in the eighties, but when in the nineties I took up that old familiar stance in armor with a rattan sword, it was as if I were the master and whoever faced me just a student.

Contrary to all expectation, it worked *—really well*. Suddenly, I was playing at modern competition foil speed among fighters in slow motion.

I added my 30 years of fencing experience to my 15 years of fighting without getting a minute older. Adding my Tuesday-night moves to my Sunday-afternoon moves opened a whole toolkit of tactics, and I began the enjoyable process of adapting them to the SCA.

Now, after ten years of that, I am ready to share what I have learned. Unfortunately, there's more to it than the basket of new moves. There are underpinning basics to learn.

While my previous booklet was born of annoyance, this one was born of *enjoyance*.

Plenty of fighters win more than I do. But *nobody* has more fun.

# CHOICE OF WEAPONS

This book emphasizes Sword and Shield because it is the first authorization in Midrealm, because it is capable of a nice display for the gallery, and because, the way I do it, it is great fun.

There is no need for me to replicate the really good, useful, available period manuals for longsword and pole weapons.

If I were attempting a period combat re-creation manual, I'd do this differently. But an SCA combat form is not merely a martial art. It is part and parcel of the Society, and how we do it becomes part of the atmosphere, whether visual or social. What I promote here is dictated not simply by what will win, but by my vision of the SCA.

Sword and Shield in the SCA is open to much variation. My choice of a tourney-size heater fits my views on re-creation, game theory and the providing of good entertainment to spectators.

I favor period re-creation where feasible. While sword and shield on foot is well documented on the battlefield, it is historically "iffy" as a tournament form. I have seen no report of any *tourney* in which it was the prescribed weapon form.

But as an icon of the Middle Ages, the S & S combo is sanctified by illuminations of tourneys and equestrian seals from William the Marshal's time to Henry VIII. Pe-

riod tournament rules include these weapons on horseback in the lists. In lance play, the heater shield of war is replaced by 1400 by the specialized concave jousting shield.

Given the SCA's present limitations, I consider sword and shield—tourney-size shield—a reasonable substitute for jousting as a list-field spectator sport.

Plus, coats of arms are designed to fit short heaters.

War heaters are different. With the SCA limited target and no grappling, individual combat with them is defective as a game, ugly to watch and boring to do. It's essentially siegecraft. The best tactics for the tourney heater are useless with war shields. They cover too much target to allow a good invitation.

My curved heater is just short enough so I can reach all my fingers around the point while the top is against my collarbone.

These tactics are designed for similar opposing weapons. This is not only for tactical predictability. The history of tournaments and duels carry equality of armour and armament between combatants to extremes. Only by eliminating any possible advantage of one *weapon* over another could one determine which combatant was superior (or whom God or Fortune favored that day).

"Equal weapons" is not about historical accuracy. It is the rule-book foundation of every competitive sport. It is the principle which determines that when we win, we do so because of personal ability, not hardware advantage.



# WEAPONS OF CHOICE

## Sword

My tactics let the sword, not the arm or wrist, do the hard work. Therefore my single sword is a bit more massive than most.

Along the same lines, I carve my grip down so I can hold the sword loosely between thumb and forefinger-knuckle. When I want more snap in a blow, I squeeze the first two fingers, which pull a leather loop called a combat strap (a borrowing from modern sabre).

This loop is sometimes all that keeps the weapon from falling on the ground, so loosely do I sometimes hold it.

Some find it amusing that the main sword of one who uses so many techniques from fencing *has no thrusting tip*.

There are many reasons thrusting in armored combat is a low priority for me.

- I know how easy it is to deflect most thrusts; I'll show how to throw the ones that are difficult to stop.

- Thrusting with a heavy sword unders SCA conditions is risky. When a body thrust doesn't succeed, you are often left wide open.

- The thrusting tip softens "tip shots" which, with my massive sword, are often acknowledged as good. The presence of a thrusting tip can render the first three to six inches of the blade useless in terms of blow acceptance.

- The thrusting tip renders my already-massive sword tip-heavy.

## Shield

I use a curved plywood heater with heater-hose edging and a solid grip as close to the upper left corner as the steel hand-guard allows. The grip stands off enough so I can shift my hand around on it. Heater-hose edging renders my aggressive-shield technique safer for my opponent. The weight (actually mass) provides stopping-power.

### *Elegance is an engineering term*

We owe to our audience the privilege of doing SCA combat at "medieval" events. The day the only spectators are the fighters themselves, we will have to admit that ours has become an ordinary modern minority sport. To put off that day, I encourage, in place of the period re-creation we cannot do, cultivating as much elegance and grace as is consonant with sound combat technique. From what I am constantly told, the two can indeed be combined.

Elegance, after all, is an engineering term for efficiency of form and function. And after 400 years of getting the bugs out of it, fencing is known for its grace by those who know neither its physical demands nor its efficiency.

It is also for spectators that I prefer heater shields for their heraldry and impressive capability, and suggestion of the medieval.

# Coming to a list field near you: a

I am not the only one introducing “new” combat methods. There is so much research and study going on right now that I expect that in less than ten years, SCA fighting will look completely different.

And while ten years ago I was near the cutting edge of this movement, I am now on the periphery, keeping only one small candle burning at the Ann Arbor Sword Club.

Midrealm fighters got a whiff of this in 1998, when Dr. Jeffrey Singman (now Forgeng) gave a lecture/slide show surveying the known medieval combat manuals. Since then, ambitious SCA members have tackled the two large tasks of translating and interpreting these manuals to make the techniques usable to us.

For seven years, I had been Jeffrey’s fencing partner as he practiced di Grassi’s technique using period swords here in Ann Arbor. He was also translating and interpreting the fourteenth-century German “Tower of London Fechtbuch” Ms. I.33 (Latin), now in print from Chivalry Publishing.

About 1999, one of the other Ann Arbor fencing instructors handed me a beautifully-produced video called the *The Blow by Blow Guide to Swordfighting in the Renaissance Style*. It’s a 96-minute fight choreographer’s guide by Mike Loades, combat master at seven London drama schools. Absolutely top-drawer.

In 2000, Mark Rector’s translation of Hans Talhoffer’s Fechtbuch was published with an introduction by John Clements.

Also in 2000 came Sidney Anglo’s *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe*. This 300-page, densely-packed work surveys much of the material of interest here and offers much material unavailable elsewhere, especially from the enormous, previously untouched R.L. Scott collection in Glasgow.

In 2002, Bob Charron (Duke Conn MacNeil), who had seen Jeffrey’s work, gave a paper on Fiori’s 14th-c. fencing manual at the International Congress in Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, followed by a clear demonstration of many moves from the book. His translation is soon to be published by The Chivalry Bookshelf.

The Chivalry Bookshelf is a publishing company started by Brian Price (Sir Brion Thornbird), long known as the publisher of *Chronique*, *The Journal of Chivalry*. Brian is the prime mover of the Company of St. George, an SCA subgroup in the Bay Area of California devoted to period armor and pas d’armes. He is also the author of *Techniques of Medieval Armor Reproduction*, the most lavishly published work on armoring ever.

At Pennsic War about 1997, I came upon a circle of knights paying rapt attention to an instructor and his partner, neither of whom was “belted” in the SCA sense,



# new martial arts Renaissance.

demonstrating German longsword with “wasters” (hardwood practice swords). Not being a knight, I hung back until Sir Brion Thornbird welcomed me in, offering his own waster so I could follow the moves.

The instructor was Christian Tobler, whose *Secrets of German Swordplay* was later published by Brian’s Chivalry Bookshelf. It’s a translation, with action-photo interpretation, of Sigmund Ringeck’s Commentaries on the verses of a 14th-century German master named Leichtenauer, which adds up to a combat manual unheard of in the SCA a few short years ago.

Tobler teaches wherever invited (for a fee), for instance at the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Jeffrey Forgeng, as a chaired curator, has been hosting and teaching period fencing workshops.

We at the Ann Arbor Sword Club, like many clubs across the country, now do German Longsword as well as SCA Rapier and modern fencing.

In September 2002, all three of the above-mentioned luminaries were joined by English and Italian masters as well as participants from around the world at the WMAW (Western Martial Arts Workshop) near Chicago. Martial arts classes from Savate to English walking-stick were taught. This year it’s in Argyle, Texas. ([www.wmaw.us](http://www.wmaw.us))

Another one takes place in August in Lansing, Michigan. ([artofcombat.org](http://artofcombat.org))

We in the SCA have much to look forward to.

## LEARNING FROM A BOOK *ain’t easy!*

In a martial arts dojo, you see lines of students repeating an instructor’s moves. What you are seeing there is not a master teaching pupils. Once teachers get past the myth-making urges of their own egos, they realize that they do not really cause learning. We make the information available, and *students teach their own bodies* to do the moves.

That line of students reflects the fact that it’s more efficient to make information available to groups, and that for most people, it’s easier to do the hard, repetitive, physical work along with fellow-sufferers.

Because this is on paper instead of in a gym, you’ll have to work harder, but take heart: your brain is a marvellous computer, and given the tools, it will devise wondrous actions you will come to use without conscious thought.

Some martial arts books look as though the author had trouble communicating with the artist. No such problem here. The artist ... *c’est moi!*

# TACTICAL PRINCIPLES

In his SCA tactics workshops in the late 1990s, Sir Saeric Scireham (MKA Steve Traylor) emphasized the use of local superiority to demolish the opposition in group combat.

My tactics for individual combat use the same principle. By applying leverage, timing, and explosive speed, these tactics allow you to apply overwhelming force at key points in space and time to pave your warpath.

Many of my tactics are analogous to those of the field.

While you may be able to get good results by simply following the directions in the Tactics section, you will do much better if you go through the Basics section first.

## More principles

**1. Fight to win, not to avoid losing.** The latter process tends to fulfill the fears on which it is based.

**2. Complex thought – simple actions.** My tactics mostly live up to this principle, but to use them you must have the actions down cold; for instance the numbered parries in the section on Defending with the Sword.

**3. Territory doesn't matter as much as tactical objectives.**

There are two ways to defend; territorial and tactical. The territorial theory is: if he can't get his sword into my near zone, he can't kill me. But perimeter defense ties up your resources.

Tactical defense, by contrast, uses your resources to limit and annul

your opponent's specific threat.

For instance, tactical defense may choose to prevent your opponent from even throwing a blow by trapping it with your sword while it's still on his shoulder.

Or, you can intercept a blow early in its path, before it can change targets.

Tactical defense uses active footwork because it is more efficient to make your opponent miss than to tie up your weapon in a blocking action.

## 4. Use each weapon to its best advantage.

The sword is quicker and more mobile than any shield, and it can reach twice as far. Further, in our rules, the sword is privileged to go places and strike things the shield may not. So in these tactics the sword usually gets the cavalry or commando assignments.

But the shield gets its share of victories too. Its mass allows it to take out both sword and shield if, as mentioned above, force is concentrated behind it.

**5. Put yourself in command.** Eliminate any chance for your opponent to control you or dictate choices. E.G.: your defense does *not* depend on his choice of attack.

**6. Initiative does *not* always mean moving first.** It means making moves which compel responses you can influence and gain advantage from.

For more principles, see my 1999 *Strategies* booklet.

# Want to be ordinary?

You can manage that without reading this.

There are many nuggets of “accepted wisdom” in the SCA. It may take you a while to tell what is wisdom and what is merely accepted. Anyone can read this and learn the moves herein, But if you want to become an exceptional fighter, there are two things you must do.

First, you must overcome the natural urge to fit the “normal SCA” mold. It is ironic how strong are the forces for conformity in a group of misfits like ours. Many will hesitate to jeopardize the feeling of belonging that leads to conformity.

Fighters get brainwashed not only about “correct” methods but about what is and is not possible. A few years ago, when I showed a new fighter how to score using only his forearm, he told me “I can’t score a kill from there.” This guy *had just acknowledged that very blow from a weaker opponent* – me. (A few years later, he won the crown of Drachenwald.)

This fellow had believed what he was told, but fortunately, the damage wasn’t permanent. Within a very few minutes, he was using my “incorrect” blow so well I had to call “hold.”

Second, you must learn that, while most of the theories and methods accepted in your group have value, there are many exceptions. It is by learning to use the exceptions instead of being abused by them that you will become an exceptional fighter.

The fighter I just described had exceptional arm strength which had been completely overlooked by his instructor. That is typical: SCA instructors assume you are not in shape; fencing instructors look for strengths you got from other sports.

It’s understandable: instructors prefer a solid body of established technique, an authority to reference, so they don’t have to prove every point personally. Fencing has such a basis, but SCA combat isn’t there yet. No established technique is coming any time soon (not even this one).

You will have to make a conscious effort to step beyond. It will set you apart. Loneliness may force you to find consolation in making impossible blocks and landing unexpected blows. By questioning everything, and getting answers, you will help build the SCA Method.

This book is designed in bite-sized chunks that come in three varieties. Most of them are the nuts-and-bolt techniques you came for. The second variety – many of the early pages – offer perspective on fighting you won’t find elsewhere.

The third kind is a sprinkling of one-page features that showcase and credit those who showed me most of the marvels I have gathered here. I offer these in hopes that, when, not if, SCA combat moves beyond these techniques, their contributions to chivalry, excellence and fun will not be forgotten.

**I**t's been said in our group that the techniques I teach won't work for others; that they work for me *only* because I have special abilities. Bosh.

I was born in 1946 and am *not* in shape. It's 25 years since I ran a mile. Agile? I can't *imagine* doing a back flip. There was a time I fenced 5 days a week and competed intensely, but that ended 18 years ago. For the past decade, I have gotten no more than two exercise periods per week.

There is nothing I do, physically, that you can't learn to do, given a sound body and mind.

My old fencing master told me "Never take any one person's word as gospel –not even mine. Go out and ask other teachers. Somebody else may know a better way."

Obvious truth? Not in the SCA. Our sport has long suffered from overdone respect for authority.

Some old-time fighters are uncomfortable with the idea that "their" sport could learn anything from fencing because of the image they have of "Wire weenies." Don't jump to conclusions. While modern Olympic fencing looks like it's all speed and leverage, I found out late, to my cost, that strength *really matters* in it.

The wider world of fencing, which includes the research groups, benefits from 1000 years of development, most of that with heavy weapons.

Everybody cherishes myths.

- Until proved otherwise (1980), I thought SCA rattan play would trash my fine fencing skills. Fact:

## Age & Treachery

will beat youth  
and skill  
every time.

I got nowhere in modern fencing competition until I got some strength from SCA combat.

- Theatre people distrust competitive fencers, fearing their reflexes will somehow override the purpose at hand. Fact: skill is skill. Desire is desire. Both apply to whatever the present purpose is, whether it's hitting the opponent or keeping him safe. We at the Ann Arbor Sword Club have 25 years' success doing both.

### Treacherous influences

John Bailey, my first fencing master, was a devotee of ancient swordplay who taught me bits from other martial arts.

In college, I caught the fight-choreography bug, but didn't really develop it until later, when my fencing students and I became involved with the Ann Arbor Medieval Festival. After seeing the 1974 Three (and Four) Musketeers movies, we tried to imitate fight arranger Bill Hobbs' very physical, free style with blades wider than previously seen in rapier sword-fight movies.

By 1978 we were using extra swords made for those same Musketeer movies. We also used cheap 5-lb. wall-hanger "bastard" swords, striking sparks a lot.

While traditional fight choreography tried to make out-of-range moves look dangerous, we were "in the round." Further, we were

unwilling to trust estimated distance and someone's memory of what they were *supposed* to do. The result: our performances got their realism from real defensive techniques at close quarters. We had to learn to parry well enough to save our skins *and* the swords.

When we started the Ann Arbor SCA chapter in 1987, I took up SCA combat. Sir Aldric of the Northmark, the second knight of Northwoods and a legend in Michigan for his heavy blows, was my first SCA fighting instructor.

In 1980, I was a participant in a U of Michigan Professional Theatre Program workshop co-sponsored by the Society of American Fight Directors. "Rapier Week" was taught by the late "Paddy" Crean, one of Errol Flynn's former fight directors. More about him later.

Starting in 1980, Eliahu ben Itzhak brought Duke Laurelyn's influence to Cynnabar. We all pretty much followed his lead through the 80s. While Eli and Dag dominated the Crown Tourneys, I was into demos and period events. Our steel swords gathered dust.

In the late 80s, I used theatrical combat tricks to add excitement to SCA demos at the Michigan Renaissance Festival. I discovered that my "period-esque" moves could actually be pretty effective. More important, I found I was most effective when I was having fun.

In 1992, Dr. Jeffrey Singman (now Forgeng) introduced me to serious period fencing with c. 1575 fencing-sword replicas. With coinshod cork safety tips, about 3.5 lb. each. Armor? A pair of gloves.

We also studied quarterstaff

from Swetnam's manual, trying to knock each other off a log.

## **Bringing it together**

During the past few years, my three swordfighting "worlds" have been coming together in a methodology that satisfies my desires for period fantasy, fun, and victory.

Not to say it's complete. I try to learn more every day and improve my technique at every opportunity. I feel I can afford to let you learn my tricks, because, like William the Marshal, "I still have the hammer and anvils to make more."

## **A different philosophy**

Most SCA fighter development philosophies focus on imperfection, expecting to score only when somebody makes an error.

If you wait around for errors, the waiters will beat you. This is not a manual about honing off imperfections, but for building a solid structure. My fight does not struggle to be 1% less imperfect today than yesterday. (My struggle is to actually quit when I'm exhausted, even now, at 60.)

This is intended to show you how to score elegant, "slam-dunk" unopposed blows on your opponent; to achieve checkmate before the telling blow is even launched.

It is intended to share some of the joy of combat beyond good physical exercise with friends, beyond the excitement of sharp blows given and received, and beyond the fantasy provided by "normal" SCA combat ... but never beyond the rule of courtesy.

Above all, it is intended to share the magic that puts a grin on my face every time I don the helm.

# FIGHT BASICS

**Don't even think of skipping this section. Because...**

You and I may have different notions about what to call Basics.

- Basic does not mean “beginner.” It means skill common to and prerequisites of what follows; the tricks, techniques and tactics you came here for.

- Basic includes very specific footwork moves most SCA teachers do not show you.

- Basic includes how to apply to SCA combat the six standard parries every first-year sabre student can do in his sleep. Most experienced SCA fighters still use the most rudimentary “blocking” techniques with the sword, and cannot tell you the difference between a block and a parry.

- Basic includes subtleties of balance, handwork and more.

Most SCA fight instructors teach the reversed fencing advance/retreat, but it comes out slow and clumsy— not good enough for many of the tactics in this book. You will need to learn to carry your body precisely on two springs we call legs, and learn to advance and retreat, like other martial arts, without losing your guard position.

SCA coaches refer to baseball when they teach the hip-turn for sword-blows, but they forget that the batter is in a static, usually wide stance. Baseball is the only major sport that doesn't require

specialized footwork.

Most SCA combat instructors don't teach detailed footwork because they have never learned it themselves. All fencers do footwork drills. SCA instructors don't require it. But to be exceptional, you must *master* footwork.

When coaches say “footwork,” what most people hear is “work.” But think what a glory footwork is to the other sports.

- In football, the sudden change-steps and stutter-steps that allow Barry Sanders to evade tackles are more than just running.

- Hockey “footwork” is ice-skating. Defensemen must play skating backwards. Most players can leap over a down player without falling. Ever try a “hockey stop” on skates? (I'm still trying.)

- Basketball: the running finger-roll layup (your last contact with the floor is at the free-throw line) requires exact footwork precisely co-ordinated with difficult ball-handling.

All these, and many more without even counting soccer or the Asian martial arts, require difficult footwork to be perfect while much of the player's attention is on other things, like the ball, six to eleven opposing players, or difficult stick moves.

So, the SCA fighter who takes basics, especially footwork, seriously, will be in good company.



# TIME, MOTION, AND BEING IN EARNEST

A competent fighter must understand time and motion in detail. You need to know the difference between quickness and speed, between moving fast and hurrying, and between what looks or feels fast and what *is* fast. It pays to be aware of how speed affects your ability to change the sword's direction and target.

These are all discussed later.

This one's about seeing when your opponent is going to move – and when he can see *your* intention. Most people make little muscle-tensing actions before launching serious effort. When they are detectable to the opponent, they are called “telegraphing.” Often, they betray not only the imminence of a move, but specifically which move is coming.

Good athletes, including SCA fighters, learn to eliminate or suppress these signals. Advanced fighters learn to fake them to dupe their opponents.

Other people can see things clearly too. You must not give away your fight to such. Learning to avoid telegraphing your moves requires seeing your own patterns very clearly. Ask your friends to advise you of bad habits, but you'll have to do the hard work of replacing them. Fortunately, the secret of that is on this page.

Seeing clearly requires a calm frame of mind, a good view, and freedom from distractions like pain or armor problems.

Do do allow yourself to suffer any kind of fear. Add as much armor as necessary to eliminate the fear of impact pain. That won't be enough. You will continue to feel nervous in practice until you feel you have experienced every possible impact. You must get to a point of comfort with your armor and blow force where you can *welcome* any impact you might reasonably get. Only then will you be cool enough to evaluate every incoming blow solely on its tactical, not physical, threat.

Your ego will still be unwilling to be scored on. You can eliminate most of that concern by setting up defenses that are almost impossible for a sword-and-shield man to score on. *Yes, you can.* That comes a little later. We have to put a few more basics in place first.

Your best ally in cutting off the flow of secrets to your opponent is good form, especially balance.

Trying not to flinch and telegraph is an oxymoron. It impossible to practice NOT doing something. *Flinching is eliminated by comfort.* Telegraphing is *squeezed out* of your repertoire by maintaining constant, active control of all parts of your body. The ability to keep things in the right place, and the definition of what that right place is, is what we call “form.”

In every effective martial art, form deserves an entire section to itself.

# *Good form:* **STANDING TALL ON BENT LEGS.**

Guys in their twenties used to ask me where I (mid-fifties) got the energy to outlast them in practice... *and then* the guy after them. Good form is part of the answer.

Most people think of “**form**” – you know, straight spine and head-up position– as superficial. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

*Good form is not a slavish conformity to someone’s idea of good posture. Good form is a masterful insistence on always being in a position of strength.*

Grace and poise are side-effects of the process of gaining full control of your body.

That includes building subtle strengths here and there where needed to do the sport in question. In fencing, the strength gain is seldom obvious to the casual observer, but it’s not trivial.

Good form in horsemanship keeps you on the horse. In SCA fighting, form brings many benefits:

Form is being in the right place at the right time *and* being physically able to make the shot.

Form is outlasting your opponent because you are breathing better and carrying your armor without effort.

Form is never turning your ankle because your feet are always aligned even when off the ground.

Form is having the leisure to block a bit later because you know exactly where every part of your



body is.

Form is being 15% quicker jumping into the hole and 15% quicker making the shot from there.

Good form is precision. It’s how you develop the ability to move like a cat. Some of the most dramatic tournament results I ever got resulted directly from slow-motion practice to optimize each little sub-movement.

Good form means a more productive workout and lasting longer before fatigue sets in.

Half of form is simply good body management. Holding the spine erect and shoulders back (*a bit*, don’t overdo it) actually reduces fatigue; conversely, a slumping torso restricts not only breathing but other organ functions. Add



# GOOD FORM . . . *It only hurts for a while.*

armor and it doubles the problem.

But good form does not include rigidity. Rigid muscles and fixed positions will tire you out faster than repeated movement.

Teaching your shoulders to relax and drop down and back gives you increased arm reach and frees up all your arm actions. Forward shoulders restrict breathing.

Form is maintaining each leg in its own plane. When you set your feet at a 90° angle, the knees must match it. Compromising to avoid opening up at the hips stresses your knees. The hip is the place to set that angle.

The entire hip/pelvis/spine/shoulder/neck group operates interdependently. The back must be not too curved if the shoulders are to get the freedom they need. The spine sits like a stack of bricks on top of the pelvic girdle. If that structure is tilted forward, your lower back muscles will work overtime to hold the rest of your spine in place. When people say they have “put their back out” they are trying to describe the pain that results when those muscles, already overworked, are given an extra stress by an attempt to do something that would have been normal if the back were being operated properly. Good form is a level pelvis and well-rested spinal muscles.

All this is a lot easier said than done, but do it you must if you wish to be more than the ordinary fighter. The effort will hit you in three places:

**1. Moving on bent legs.** This is the area where my old fencing master used to use the terms “hurt, pain, agony.” He wanted me to know which was which so that I could stop my legwork between the pain and agony stages. You can get good legs with a lot of workouts that get you to the wobbly stage, but I don’t think you can get *my* legs without working through serious “burn.”

You do knee-bends until it burns and stop. Rest. Then do fencing advances and retreats until it burns again. Rest. Then do passes – walking around while staying in your low stance until it burns, which will be quicker than the other two. All while keeping your pelvis level.

**2. Hip joint flexibility.** You must open up the knees to obtain real mobility on bent legs (without bent-leg capability you really can’t fight seriously). For me this was really difficult; not to say it has to be for you. When you set your feet at 90° and bend your knees 30°, you should be able to look down from the top of a straight spine and see both feet between your knees.

Fencers are often seen at warm-ups sitting and pressing their open knees down into the floor with their hands or elbows to stretch the hip joints, or more correctly, the muscles that limit outward mobility.

**3. Pelvic leveling.** It can be disconcerting to be told that your butt needs to be tucked under a bit, and difficult to control without mirrors, another tool fencers use to advantage. Every move you

# GOOD FORM IS HAVING A VICTORIOUS ATTITUDE.

make, especially bent-legged footwork, pulls the pelvis in different directions. Your lower back muscles may complain as you learn to control this, but that's the normal result of training muscles normally left slack. Once they are trained, your pelvis will stay in position without noticeable effort, and the rest of your spine will work better and with less pain.

Those three things add up to building yourself a "steadi-cam" fighting platform that will carry your upper body to the scene of carnage and enable it to do mighty deeds.

Agility in armor is a lot easier to achieve with good form. Unless you obsess too much about it. Polishing form is hard work and has to take energy away from other learning processes. Put a little work into it when you can.

I worked at form early in my fencing career, but it really improved under competition pressure. When you're pushed in a fight, one of the ways you can gain an edge is by tightening up your form. With the adrenaline of competition, you can afford the extra energy, and the payback can be dramatic.

Caveat: it is difficult to interpret good form instructions because everyone's starting point is different. A couple inches of "shoulders back" might be totally wrong for you. That's one reason why the sports that stress "good form" are

also the ones with individual lessons and instructors. You can get a lot of good form work, however, out of one eight-week fencing class at a typical Y or rec department.

Failing that, we will try to give you a recipe. Nearly all martial arts stances can be boiled down to this:

*Stand tall on bent legs.*

## Heads up

Head up is number one. Holding the head up frees the breathing passages and improves your outward view.

Hockey players dramatically show the results of head-up vs. head-down play. Gretzky was a head-up player, handling the puck on the ice by touch while using his eyes to see the entire rink. He almost never got hit. But some of the worst hockey injuries have resulted from players getting hit while looking down.

There's a lot more to it. As you learn to duck and dodge, the importance of your starting point will become more acute. You cannot duck at all if your head is already bowed down. You can't swashbuckle from a cringe.

No matter how bent your legs are, your torso must be straight to start with. Then when you need to bend your entire body 90 degrees, you'll be able to reap the rewards and execute the tactics.

Good form is the operating system upon which tactics are played.

*You can't  
swashbuckle  
from a cringe.*



I first became interested in swordplay at age 7, specifically by the illustration above. In that drawing, I saw sword-fighting not as a brutal process but as a form of play requiring both skill and strength. Both qualities seem to be at work as Little John and the sheriff's cook have a go at broadswords in the kitchen.

Even though neither one is outwardly smiling, one can see the zest with which they play. Neither one of those guys *really* wants to kill the other.

Then came movies. Seeing classic swordfight movies like Errol Flynn as *Robin Hood* and *The Vikings* with Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis only enhanced my

fight scene in Zeffirelli's 1968 movie *Romeo and Juliet* (Niccolo Parno, fight arranger) and many fights in *The Three Musketeers* (David Lean, 1974, Bill Hobbs, fight arranger) made it clear that *somebody* was getting a lot closer to the real thing than I was.

These movie swordfights opened a door to period swordplay that neither modern fencing nor SCA combat offered.

The point of this page is that swordplay is not a sport to be modernized. It should be anchored to your own rich fantasy life.

Similarly, this book is not intended to help you win mundane honor. It is intended to help to enrich your medieval experience.

## PERSPECTIVE I

# The Role of Fantasy

desire to do likewise.

At age 10, I cut swords out of splintery laths and lived dangerously with my friends. A few close calls sobered me up, however, and I set it aside until I could learn it more safely.

In the 60s and 70s came the first movie swordfights using authentic-size weapons. The Mercutio/Tybalt

It's unusual for a player to be declared "the great one" in any sport before his career is half done. When the sport is NHL hockey, you expect it to be a tough guy like Gordie Howe, who played pro long enough to co-star with his own sons, and *owned* outright every scoring record by a mile ... for decades.

That's why it's so amazing that his "untouchable" scoring records were so thoroughly trashed—in half the time—by the slim, civilized Wayne Gretzky, who threw hardly any body checks and avoided thousands of them, with neither a really hard shot nor special skating speed.

## See your way to victory.

The experts agree that his special ability was seeing the game clearly. He seemed to know what was going to happen long before anyone else. He analyzed plays and actions as they developed, and would unexpectedly turn up in the perfect position to deflect a puck into the net or pass it to an unseen teammate, knowing exactly where that person would be. He never skated after the puck. Instead, he skated to where it was going to be.

His devastating tactics led the NHL to pass the "Gretzky Rule," ending "four on a side" play during double penalties. That rule was finally retired just before he did.



*A player from tabletop hockey, a game used by Gretzky to sharpen his tactical skills. Wayne appeared in ads with animated versions of such players.*

Ability to see clearly is common to all the world's "great ones," from Musashi to Joe Montana. You are not born with it. You learn it.

1. See the future by putting yourself in the other guy's place. *See through his eyes* and you'll know what he's going to do. *If you know what he knows.*

2. You'll know what he knows if you have studied the game, and everyone in it, in great detail. If we were machines, the fastest fighter would always win. We aren't.

3. Learn to visualize the ending-point; the blow landing on the target, and work your way backward from there. This is how you create tactics.

Chess players still study *Modern Chess Openings* to learn to reverse-engineer great tactics and strategies. Most generals study the history of war to avoid mistakes. Better ones apply strategies from one battle to a situation that *looks* completely different. But great generals create *new* strategies, tactics and even weapons. (See also *Strategic Thinking for use in the SCA*.)

In addition to wide vision and deep knowledge, the greats have two things I cannot teach: obsessive desire to win and obsessive will to work.

# FOOTWORK IS A VERY DECEPTIVE TERM.

## IT'S AN EVEN MORE DECEPTIVE TECHNIQUE.

“Footwork” does NOT just mean how you move your feet. It’s really how you move your entire body with the possible exception of blocks, parries, and cuts – and if you study German Longsword, you’ll find *it can do those things too*.

A fighter must make his or her legs, hips and lower torso into a “mobile fighting platform” on which the upper body, arms and head can twist and turn, hurling blows as if from horseback.

But you can’t control a horse as well as you need to control your fighting platform. To be an adequate fighter, you need to control your position in space to within one or two inches.

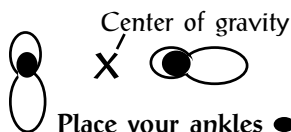
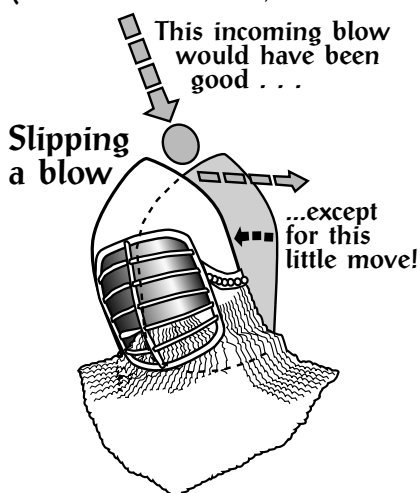
When you “slip” a blow, as little as two inches of position makes the difference between a good blow to your helm and an obvious glance. (This is a nice move, but not one

you rely on constantly. It’s a split-second decision after you know exactly where the incoming blow is going to come down.

To have this kind of positional control requires more than just balance. Balance is affected by all those “form” elements, but the forces of armor-wearing and careless movement will undermine it.

You need a forceful connection to the ground. Your feet grip the ground and thrust you powerfully in any direction you need to go by pushing the ground the other way. It’s as if you were trying to slide a carpet out from under you using only your feet.

Pointing your feet at right angles to each other maximizes the width of your base regardless of the distance between them. Centering your weight between the feet allows you to accelerate equally forward or back. Usually, I put it forward a bit because most of my action is forward.



Keeping the leading foot aimed right at the opponent is more important than the precise angle of the trailing foot. And keeping each knee lined up with its foot is still more important.

The desire to feel stable (or look



# FOOTWORK IS ACTUALLY LEG-WORK.

cool) leads many beginners to adopt a wide stance. A wide stance is okay so long as it doesn't end up straightening your legs, which cuts into your mobility. Straight legs have no pushing potential; you have to bend them before you can use them. That bending action telegraphs every move.

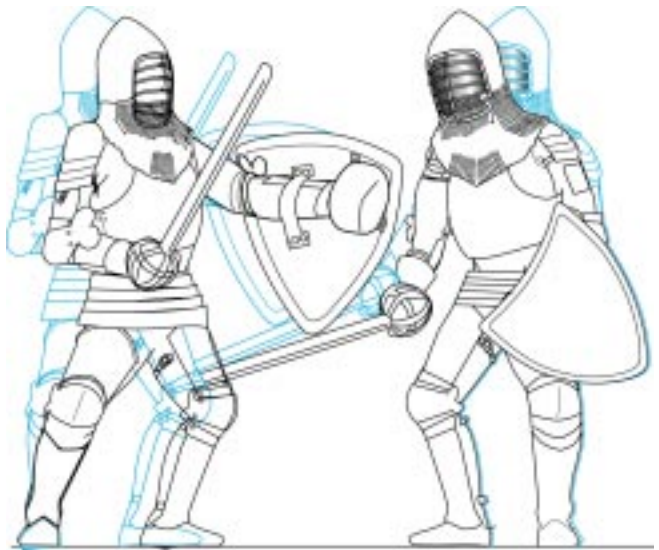
Your legs should be bent enough to propel you forward about 12" at a time. That's not much. Placing your feet about shoulder-width apart will do that without excessive bending of the legs. Excessive bending of the legs will cost you mobility because it makes it harder to pick up your feet.

The figure at the right side of the diagram on this page gives a rough guide to how much bend you should try to maintain.

Those who think a short person needs less knee-bend should fight Calum Creachadir. Last I saw him he was still 5 foot 3 soaking wet, and bends low enough – routinely – to disappear below your average shield top... only to reappear and smack you. (Did I mention he's a *really* good fighter?)

Learn to sense the amount of weight on each foot, and keep them approximately equal. Shading your weight towards the front foot gives a more aggressive stance and makes it easier to advance; tougher to retreat. It also brings your weapons farther in front of your legs, reducing their exposure to attack.

The diagram shows how a little



change in forward lean makes a big change in what your opponent has to do to get at your leg. It's not just that he has to reach further down. To do that, he brings his head closer to your one-shot, and his wrist has to bend outrageously, which weakens his grip and the force of his blow.

## Conditioning

The stance shown above is one of those ways I promised you that you could apply strength. Holding

## ...AND A LOT MORE.

that shield out there is the easy part. (It's straight out of Agrippa.) If your legs are not in shape to start with, fighting on bent legs is really difficult. Beginning fencers find it the hardest thing about the sport. The legs will cramp and ache until they get into shape. Adding the weight of armor makes it twice as hard. But go through it when you're young and you'll have great legs for life.

Don't make it harder by starting out in armor. Do the leg workout described under "Good Form..." it only hurts for a while" before suiting up. Remember, we said high reps, so loading on weight early will defeat the purpose.

This is important no matter whose fighting technique you use. There isn't a viable method out there that stands on straight legs. And weak legs are out of the question. It's important to get really comfortable with this.

This is the doorway to good fighting. If you turn aside here, barring amazing compensating gifts, all the hand-work in the world will not raise your fighting above the mediocre.

### **Mobility**

In one-on-one combat at close distance, footwork mostly consists of constant small adjustments in foot and body position to accommodate tactical needs. Generally it is better to make many small steps than save up to make big steps. The big steps cost balance and

commit you to too much.

### **Advance/Retreat**

Like most fencing and fighting coaches, I recommend the "shuffle" advance and retreat. This simply means moving first whatever foot is closest to where you're going, then quickly bringing the other one the same distance in the same direction.

Some experts tell you to make that back-foot move really *quick*. The idea is to minimize the time when your body is in transit. The sooner the "advance" is completed, the sooner you will be able to do something else. But don't get so zealous that you end up hopping. You want a smooth-moving, "steadi-cam" sort of platform under you.

To avoid tripping over your own feet, which really does happen and is really embarrassing, not to mention making you helpless, pick up the toe of your front foot first. The heel can almost slide forward if the ground is smooth.

When it isn't, you will need to pick up your feet a good inch on every step.

### **Balestra**

This manoeuvre is a "flat jump" forward or back. The word "flat" describes what is supposed to be your trajectory. It is done by pushing the ground sharply in the direction opposite to that in which you want to go with both feet at the same time, picking up both feet at the same time so they won't drag

# WELCOME TO THE FOOT-CAVALRY.

as you fly, and landing with both feet at the same time to a dead stop without any change in your upper body position.

## Combat run

When you need to cover a lot of ground quickly, medium-length, decisive strides are in order. If you can do that without straightening your legs completely, you'll have a better chance of stopping suddenly if you need to. If you can do it while keeping your feet at right angles, better still. A good medium-distance combat run is demonstrated well by Toshiro Mifune in *The Samurai Trilogy*. Be warned: it's a tremendous energy drain and a terrific workout.

## The Pass

This is taking the back foot and swinging it past the other to put it in front, done with both legs remaining bent and the torso remaining the same height off the ground. Bobbing up and down with your footwork will cost you. Keep to a level glide. A pass or a double pass (two long steps, one with each foot) are often used in period manuals on the attack.

I use it to advance and pivot at the same time (or retreat/pivot). From the left-foot-forward starting stance, I bring the back foot past the front foot and around in front of it *by pivoting the whole*

*body*. This maneuver, looking more like a plastic action figure than anything else in my repertoire, turns faces me to the left. The advancing version puts my sword in the opponent's face. This in turn facilitates various projects you will discover as we go along.

## Broken-field maneuvers

Watch a good football running back. Notice how they pick up their feet to avoid tripping over things. Also, notice how they get lower to the ground and they shorten their steps as they approach cornering situations. They corner by making a short leap, landing with both feet with knees very bent, right on the turn-point itself, then springing away off the outside foot the same way a fencer lunges. (To this day, I practice that move at supermarket aisle corners.)

A more conventional football footwork drill is to run through a field full of truck tires, spaced close enough so you have to step in and out of each one.

My college fencing team used to do this: holding your sword horizontally in front of your waist, run in place, batting the sword with a knee at each step.

These exercises, as well as a compulsion to run everywhere, are the source of the leg conditioning that empowers my tactics.



## SHOWCASE I

# Master John D. Bailey

When I was 15, the fencing instructor came to town.

John D. Bailey, to whom I dedicated my Strategy booklet, remains the largest single influence on my life.

He was (*is*) well-versed in a variety of combat techniques. Rated Expert in pistol, with a caseful of trophies. A brown belt in karate, with a specialization in Sai (daggers). Sought out by law enforcement agencies for his workshops in the use of night-stick. The Marines had been insufficiently disciplined for him. He also had – still has– a heart of gold.

He took me on as his assistant instructor and infected me with the teaching bug. At 17, I was helping him give two-man fencing demos all over the area, giving beginning lessons to people twice my age, running class drills, and repairing equipment.

He taught me to drive and hitchhike and showed me –unforgettably– how to buy a car.

He was a medievalist who joined the SCA before I did. He collected swords, studied period swordplay, and taught traditional moves like

Arms of the Baileys (Scotland). The author researched this for him years before the SCA was founded. He called his SCA household the Castle of the Nine Stars.



John D. Bailey.

Oil on canvas, 1965, by the author.

the moulinet and sabre parry septime ...the “master’s parry.”

He tried to teach me life lessons in manhood and courage. He told me “do not go to the killing ground” and “never fight for real unless you have exhausted *every* means of avoiding it.” He wove self-defense skills into his teaching and taught me how to leverage my puny strength to best advantage.

He was an educator with a strong sense of drama. One night I received an impromptu epee lesson with neither masks nor jackets – just a pair of sharp duelling swords with a bloody history.

In spite of a red-blooded American background with little college, he was fluent in Spanish and handy with Latin quotes. He exposed me to a sophisticated, quality-oriented world-view... e.g. fine dining.

For many years, much of the advice he gave me lay quietly, waiting its time. In recent years, it has come to mind and borne much fruit.

# EXPLOSIVE ACTION, RELAXATION &

It is a tenet of modern fencing, as well as some other sports, that we move far too rapidly for the conscious mind to deal with in a normal analysis-and-decision basis. Only conditioning and repetitive drills can provide a body with the skills and preparedness to respond at high speed to changes and opportunities that may only last a half-second.

## **The Relaxation technique**

What coaches call “explosive” speed is simply a sudden acceleration. Athletes train to “explode” from a relaxed state, mentally and physically. One “explodes” with one’s entire body or with selected muscle groups. In the SCA, the “one-shot” to the helm is the classic example.

Relaxation is not the same as slumping. It really *is* possible to selectively relax muscle groups while maintaining good body position.

Paradoxically, relaxation is part of every good athlete’s tools. Tense muscles and an obsessed mind are too tight to react quickly: they have to unclench first. Relaxation is the key to explosively quick action.

Maestro Danosi’s Wayne State varsity fencers used a slap-hands

game to practice combining controlled relaxation with explosive action. Fencer A holds his hands palm up in front of his waist, elbows close to the body. Fencer B places his hands palm down lightly touching them and waits. Without warning, Fencer A tries to pull his hands off and around quickly enough to slap the backs of Fencer B’s hands before he can pull them out of the way. The slightest tensing in advance will telegraph the move and cause failure.

Fencer A keeps trying until he scores; then it’s B’s turn.

## **Mental and emotional**

Throughout the Stanley Cup Playoffs, you hear the commentators repeat that hockey –an obvious physical sport– is 80% mental. Get used to the idea. All competitive sports are —once the physical requirements are met.

But that term “mental” also includes the emotional. If this isn’t fun, you have already lost. Keeping the sport fun is part of winning at it. You could even say that fun is *what* you win. Fun is the source of the energy you need to do drills and condition your body and keep going when you’re tired.

# CONDITIONING

## **Weights and measures**

You can lift weights all you want. Preferably, free weights well within your limits. (If in doubt – any doubt—consult an expert.) But don't go for bulk. Go for high reps and medium speed. Unnecessary bulk is a disadvantage: the thicker your limbs, the harder it is to carry the armor. Ask Sir Gerhard von Goldenherz (formerly Eisenherz, MKA Sean O'Dea), who won the crown of Caid in late 2002. He had very impressive bulk when he built his first suit of plate in the mid-late 1980s. The closer to the bone your armor is, the less it will weigh, but more important, the less it will drag on your movements.

The history of Midrealm kings is a parade of more slim than large men, tending more to the wiry than the bulky in musculature. Dukes Andrew and Comar are exceptions. By the way, it is my belief that the famous “ducal profile” is not a failure of conditioning but the direct result of the home-run-hitter technique of sword handling. Look at Babe Ruth.

When I was 49, I replaced the sole leather in my armor (it had a clear majority) with steel. The weight was reduced slightly but the balance was much better, and

fatigue was reduced noticeably. I became a much more agile fighter than I had been at 45. The armor's weight was closer to the bones.

No technique in this book requires you to lift your opponent, but there are moves designed to bring strength into play without violating our conventions or the tenets of courtesy. So I do encourage building strength.

On the other hand, I don't use exercise machines. You and I, in the lists, need to exert force in unpredictable directions.

## **Power cutting**

Very specific directions. You can learn a lot about throwing effective blows while building very specific muscles by cutting hardwood with an axe. Not just on a chopping block. I have way too much standing dead wood where I live, so I have the luxury of lopping branches at a wide variety of angles. Like a pell, only you see how well you're doing. Again, be very careful.

As you build muscle strength, be careful of your joints. When I got strong enough to yank my armor chest off the ground with one hand, I stretched the tendons in my right wrist, and had to fence left-handed for two years while it recovered.

# THE DOOR TO REAL SWORDPLAY

There's another level to seeing things clearly. Ducking blows requires some agility, but mostly it requires seeing blows clearly. You must discard the myth that blows arrive at light-speed and learn to see exactly when they begin and when they arrive. When you measure that time against the things you can do in that span, you can choose moves intelligently.

Most people don't really LOOK at incoming blows. There is a physical, reflexive tendency to blink (mentally, even if the eyes don't) when a blunt instrument is swung at your face. Maybe it's a mental form of shock, which is a protective reflex. The blow appears to be very rapid if not instantaneous.

Consequently, the typical person blocks every blow as if it were instantaneous, with as sudden a jerk of the shield as possible. We assume that the shield always weighs more than the sword and therefore it is always at a disadvantage time-wise.

Assume nothing. In baseball, an outfielder would never treat a baseball the way we treat incoming rattan. He keeps his eye on it the whole flight, even if it means running into the outfield wall.

## Know thine enemy.

Take the trouble to let someone hit you several times without trying to block. Look at the weapon throughout its path, see its velocity at different parts of its trajectory. Then think of it as a baseball,

and catch it on your shield. Not just any part of your shield, but a specific part. (Not always the same part – distribute the damage, and keep your opponent guessing.)

Most SCA fighters, when a blow is coming towards their head, think not in terms of intercepting the sword but in *covering their target* as if against rain. Rain is random; your opponent's blows are specific, and your tactics can make them downright limited.

For centuries, fencers have faced point thrusts with defensive weapons that cannot protect by walling off target areas but must catch the attack like a ball and usher it to the side. While fencers use global vision well, they don't learn to catch the sword without going through a period of looking right at it.

## **Don't block your head; instead catch the sword.**

This simple principle is the first step on the path to real swordplay.

Another one is to demand the same precision of your blows. There is a common false assumption that precision isn't really possible. *It is*. Good fighters routinely score through a slot scarcely bigger than the width of their blade.

Look carefully at the target, and be specific about what you want to hit. An inch off, and your blow lands on a curve and glances off.

Conversely, you can make an opponent's blow glance off if you know exactly where it is going.

# DEFENDING WITH THE SWORD

## Revolutionize your repertoire.

Any similarity between a “parry” and a “block” ends when the two blades come together. A block merely gets in the way of an attacking weapon, often helping it complete a combination by bouncing it off, while a parry controls it, by either catching it or deflecting it, and often controlling its subsequent course.

Two fencing-based concepts will completely revolutionize your SCA combat repertoire.

First, you can choose every parry in advance. You can do this because you have already limited his options, and maybe even given out an irresistible temptation to make the blow you want him to make, so you can make the parry you want to make – as a setup for the riposte you had in mind in the first place. That’s just thinking ahead and acting accordingly... perfectly normal sports strategy.

Second, that each attack is done in such a way as to prepare the defense in case it fails. That’s merely prudent, but it underlies the insistence in the other martial arts on remaining centered behind a firm blow and being precise about the angle of the sword.

These are very different from the battleship mentality that infects SCA traditional styles: shoot from a distance, defend with plate. This tends to separate the attack hand from the defense hand. People are taught to block close to their

own target at the *end* of the attacking sword’s trajectory, when the blow has built up maximum speed and force.

This is a sound principle in foil fencing, where the weapons are so light that the attacker can change the point’s flight path in a quarter of a second – but not with massive weapons, where speed, not the change, is what defeats the last-millisecond block.

This is great in demos, where you want noise and simplicity.

An efficient defense suffers less shock to the sword, shield and arms. Instead of battleships, think aircraft carriers. Intercept incoming airplanes in midflight or – better – on their own flight deck.

A parry or a block can happen anywhere in the space around the fighters. Right next to your head is not necessarily the optimal spot. *Before* he changes the flight path might be more advantageous. From this concept, as well as from good parrying technique, comes a wealth of tactics.

## How to parry

I developed my parrying method using heavy swords for exhibition fights at the Ann Arbor Medieval Festival. Our cheap “wall-hanger” bastard swords weighed 3.5 lbs. each (my SCA 2-hand “claymore” weighs only 2.7). Having one break on a too-solid block was not something we were willing to risk. So we developed parrying techniques designed to offer maximum control to the defender and minimum

## DEFENDING WITH THE SWORD, continued

stress to both blades on impact. We being slim modern fencers, it was also important to minimize shock to our hands and wrists. In the process, I believe, we re-invented ancient techniques.

Although tape-covered rattan is too sticky to slide the way steel slides on steel, the principles that follow apply to SCA combat. And although they were worked out and are most easily understood using two-hand swords, they are even more important when you are parrying with a single-hand weapon.

### 1. Angle and slope

For this section, I am the attacker. Refer to Fig. 1. As my blade approaches, position your weapon directly between you and the part of my blade that

Fig. 1

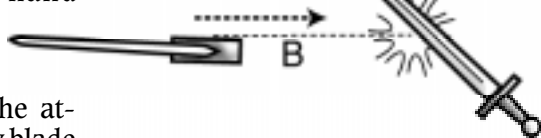
would strike you (A), and aim the edge of your blade directly towards my weapon (as at B) so that the impact will be close to 90° as seen from above. That all adds up to "angle." If you allow any serious variation, either in the angle of the edge or the position of the sword in space, you will feel your sword twist in your hand and

find the cross-guard changing from defender to chopping-block. Further, the more deviation the edge makes from 90°, the more stress on the blade.

To reduce the shock when my sword arrives, you *slope* your point so my edge strikes your edge the way a ski jumper hits the

downslope (Fig. 2). (Slope is A.) My blade slides

Fig. 2



down your blade to the guard, or, if you set the slope the other way, it slides up towards the point. Stopping dead or bouncing straight back at the point of impact is less desirable.

Slope is relative to the angle at which the blow is thrown, and to nothing else. Fig. 3 shows the exact same slope being applied to an overhead attack. Rotating this relationship in space creates the different parries used against cuts.

The less slope you have relative to the line of the attacking force, the closer to a right-angle the impact will be, and thus the greater the stress to both blades.





## DEFENDING WITH THE SWORD, continued

### Protect your hand and wrist!

No matter what forces are being thrown at you, they will wind up putting stress on your hand and particularly the wrist. The first concern is the wrist. Taking a hard shot on a poorly positioned sword can disable your wrist for the day.

The best precaution is to **keep it as straight as possible at all times**. As your wrist bends you can feel your grip weaken, but more important, whichever direction the wrist is bent the ligaments and tendons on the outside of the bend experience a shock on your weapon as sudden, high-leverage stretching forces. Your muscles are not made to soak up this kind of sudden stretch.

The need to keep the wrist straight forces a certain kind of grip on you, a grip that plays perfectly with the slope-blade parry. To understand a good sword-grip requires understanding that the valley through your hand runs at an angle to your forearm about the same as that I suggest for the slope. In Fig. 4, the hand is shown with no thumb so you can see where the sword-grip should lie and the pads that will take incoming shock.

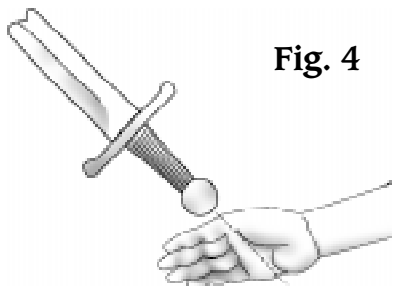


Fig. 4

To complete the grip, the thumb goes on and the fingers wrap gently around the sword. I agree with many SCA authorities in having the grip pivot between the knuckle bone of the first finger and the nearest large bone of the thumb. The sword-grip essentially rests on a pad over some small bones over the ends of your arm-bones, so there's not a lot of shock-absorption there. That's up to the blade and the elbow, which should always be bent during a parry.

### Hard and soft parries

The parry can be either a soft "opposition parry" where the attacking blade slides either down to your guard or up and off your sword-tip; or it can be a hard "beat parry" where it bounces off, whether up or down.

### The "Opposition" Parry

To "capture" my attacking blade, you keep your hand "soft" and allow the impact to push your sword back toward you just a bit, maintaining enough slope so my blade slides down to your guard (Fig. 5) where it is trapped for as long as I keep pressing it forward. That need not be very long.

The spring action of the blade

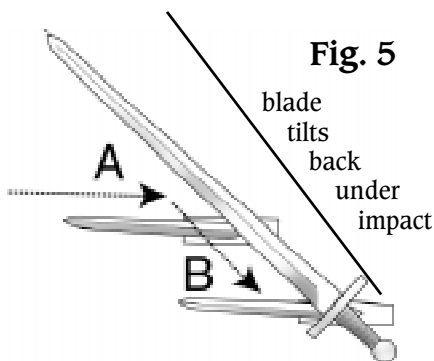


Fig. 5

## DEFENDING WITH THE SWORD, continued

comes from the fingers, which allow the grip to pivot as described in the previous section.

The question always arises: why catch the attack on the blade rather than in the fork of the guard in the first place? The most important reason is to cover for variations in your opponent's aim and avoid hits to your hand or body. The second is that the blade's mass absorbs most of the attacking shock. This shock absorption allows you to capture the blade instead of having it bounce away.

Once captured, you can choose to push my blade away from you, dump it or sweep it downward, or up and over your head and throw it in a new direction for as long as I leave it in your control. Or you can convert your parry into a bind, pushing my blade aside as you attack me.

Now you're in the real fun part of swordplay. Several variations of this process are well-established medieval techniques described in Christian Tobler's *Secrets of German Swordplay* (see page 2).

You will find more in the Bastard/Two-Hand section (with *my* explanations).

### 3. The Beat Parry

"Beat Parry" is a modern fencing term for a percussive, blade-bouncing, non-capturing parry. To save the blade, it is sloped the same way as in a soft parry, which means it is not going to bounce straight back but at some hard-to-control angle. If you've ever thrown

a blow that glanced into open space, you'll know what I mean.

The square-on "block" many SCA fighters consider ideal actually benefits the attacker by giving a predictable rebound.

Without armor, you don't want the blade to bounce downward off a parry into the leg, but an armored SCA fighter expects the force remaining in the blow to be harmless. The unarmored swordsperson restricts bouncing parries to upward deflections that will send the attacking blade past the head, or to firm strikes that send it away.

### Parries 1 through 6 for cutting attacks

The numbered parries shown on the following pages can all be done either "soft" or "hard." The figure shows the six standard positions, each named for the parry that ends in it. I have illustrated the different parries as if you are not bothering with the shield.

While they are all "modern" parries/positions, they date from the era of heavy cavalry sabres and backwords used with one hand and no shield.

Some future edition of this work will no doubt use some other numbering or naming system as I abandon the nineteenth-century parry designations and begin using terms closer to our period. In the meantime, this system works well for SCA work and is easy to remember, something not always true of period manuals.



# PRIME

Prime (“first,” pronounced “preem”) is the position a single-sword might reach when first pulled from a scabbard. It can be high (you look below the guard) or low (you look over the guard).

The high version, done as a hard block, sets up a beautiful riposte to the helm behind the opponent’s shield.

You can use the position High Prime as a guard position, especially with a shield held low, to cover the entire left side of your target, while providing for sudden offensive moves.



*Front – opponent’s view*



*Side – opponent is to right*

# SECONDE

Seconde will forever be associated with Scotland, even though it is pronounced in the French manner, “seh-cone’d.”

Whilk some call it the “coward guard,” late-17th-century Scottish sword-master Sir William Hope’s “hanging guard” method relies on what approximates modern Seconde (Second) and keeping a secure crossing with the opponent’s sword. Hope’s book is included in Mark Rector’s excellent book *Highland Swordsmanship: Techniques of the Scottish Sword-Masters* (which has little to do with the

Highlands but is good marketing).

In the nineteenth century, James MacIlan did a popular series of recreative paintings representing the lost culture and presumed tartans of Scottish Highland clans. I found the one of MacLachlan especially meaningful. The clansman is holding the targe in a position Hope would approve of.

Although he is shown with shield, seconde is really a single-sword parry or position. You start in Prime and sweep your sword across your front to the position shown. It is also elegant to get there from Quinte (fifth), which only requires moving the sword-point through a 90° arc with the hand as pivot.



Front – opponent’s view – shield opened for clarity only



Side view – opponent is to left

This is R.R. MacIlan’s Victorian illustration of a warrior from Clan MacLachlan. As you can see, I carry the weapon higher because it is heavier and I don’t want to have to raise it quickly for head protection.

# TIERCE

Pronounced “teerce” (third), this is the standard guard in modern sabre. It became so only in the 20th century, after sabre moved from cavalry weapon to duelling weapon to Olympic sport.

It is a good guard position for single-sword, but it's not too different from what Earl Sir Brannos uses with his shield as a primary guard (although he angles it more like a roof). While *Seconde* offers good attack opportunities, those who prefer to lie in wait might

*This “open” position is a trap for the unwary.*



*Front – opponent's view*

prefer Tierce's invitation to a fore-hand attack with its terrific back-hand-riposte opportunity.

To parry Tierce, start from *Quarte* or *Seconde*. From *Quarte*, go straight across. From *Seconde*, cut an arc with the tip whilst the hand drops.

But be warned: as a parry, Tierce is weak against SCA swords because it is your backhand and it finishes at an extreme position in terms of muscle tension. Among other things, your wrist is bent.

None of this is a problem using Tierce as a static guard. Just sitting there, it will stop or discourage your opponent's backhand.



*Side – opponent is to right*

# QUARTE

FOURTH,  
PRONOUNCED "KAHT"

This is the main parry at SCA single sword, modern sabre and foil. It is your strong forehand from Tierce.

If you learned nothing from this book beyond "guard Tierce, parry

Quarte, riposte helm," – a simple, powerful sequence– you would have your money's worth. You could, like some world-class fencers, simplify your single-sword game to just that much and be successful.

Tierce is the ideal starting-point for Quarte. The sword sweeps straight across, straightening your wrist from the uncomfortable Tierce as you go.

Do Quarte as a beat when you want to go direct to the helm in single-sword.

You can also get there from Quinte, with the precaution that you start by curling the wrist downward to put the blade quickly between the attack and your forearm.

And you can get there, profitably, from the guard Musashi calls the "Sword of No Sword," which has a page to itself.



*Viewed from opponent's eyes.*

# QUINTE FIFTH, PRONOUNCED "KWEENTE"

Quinte as a "ready" position is a great example of why the term "guard" is insufficient. This is a very threatening, aggressive attitude because the sword is ready to drop just about anywhere on your opponent.

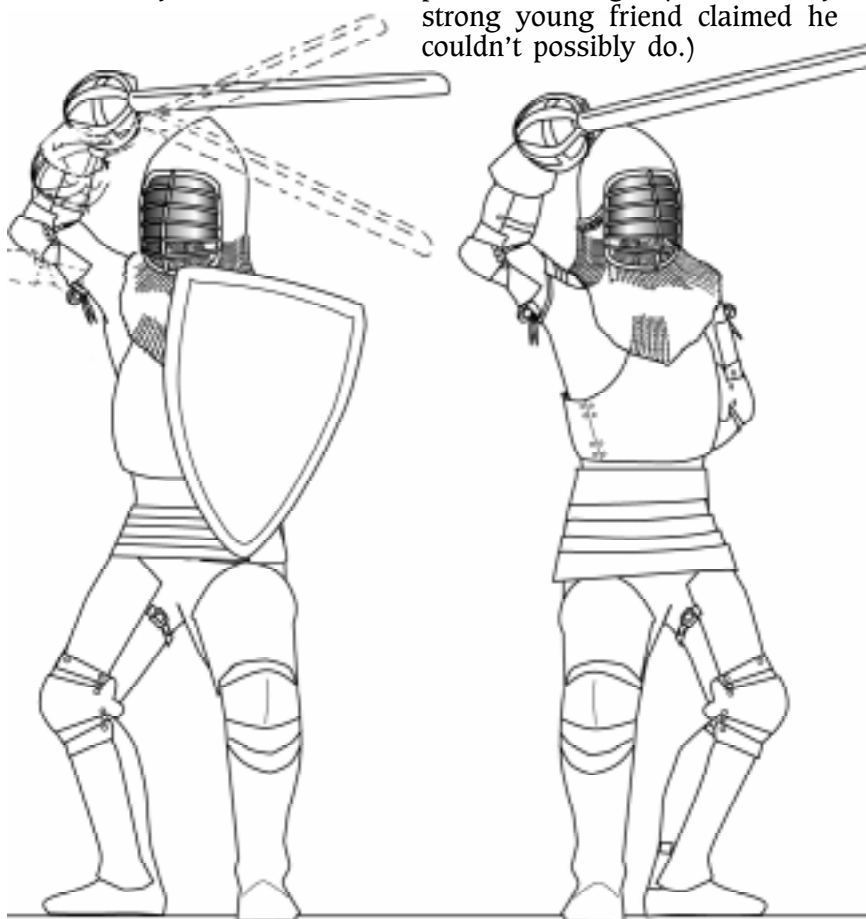
Quinte as a parry is easiest to get to from Quarte or from an attack you just made high on your opponent's right (your left).

With shield, you must be watch-

ful against attacks to your sword arm. Thus there are point-high and point-low variations.

From Quinte, the easiest riposte is low right (the opponent's left leg). With extra effort, this can be converted to a helm shot.

With enough arm-strength, you can score a very direct backhand to the helm from Quinte, curling the wrist downward as you go to present the edge. (The shot my strong young friend claimed he couldn't possibly do.)



*Front – opponent's view*

*Front view – single sword*

# SIXTE

Sixth, pronounced “seexte,” is the graceful and fun head-parry that sets up a devastating back-hand. In actual practice, it’s not as easy as it looks, and you may block your vision more than incoming swords with it at first.

It is mostly a single-sword parry because even with unorthodox positions it is hard to get the shield out of the way of your elbow when doing this parry. Still, there will be times when you make the perfect invitation and your opponent obliges with the perfect attack for this parry: a rare downward head-shot from a little to your right.

When it comes from your left, his sword traps yours and will be in the way of your beautiful back-hand unless you shed it aggressively left or right, or he lets it bounce upward.

Footwork can gain you rewards here. If you are passing to the left, your backhand has a free shot at the back of his helm. If you parry and step to your right, your blade will come out of the trap and you’ll have a good chance at the head or body shot.



*Viewed from opponent's eyes.*

While masters like John Bailey teach, other professionals work to bring period swordplay to life for us fantasy role-players... theatrically. Some do it in a deadly-serious manner, leading some to the rule that a sword must not be drawn without itself drawing ... blood.

The irony is that while I was such a serious little boy and teenager, and that I was brought into the SCA among the “sword brothers” of the “Great Dark Horde,” I never stopped looking more for the *play* than the killing aspects of swordplay. What I found was inspiring.

When Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet came out in the late sixties, it caused a sensation because of the partial nudity of the teen who played Juliet. What aroused *my* attention (she wasn’t my type) was the difference between the ways the two big swordfights were *played*. I had read the play but never grasped that the Mercutio-Tybalt fight was *all in fun* up to the point where Mercutio died of it. When I caught on, I realized what Nicolo Parno, the fight arranger, had recognized all along: swordplay is supremely, gloriously, fun, even with sharps. Even your worst enemy becomes less so when the spirit of play takes over.

The moment that sticks in my mind is not the slapstick with pitchfork, but the subtler moment after *words* are crossed and Tybalt turns to find a sword’s point next to his ear. He smiles and with thumb and forefinger gently moves Mercutio’s blade away with the supreme grace every fencing instructor, for cen-

## PERSPECTIVE II

# Fantasy II *The Joy of Combat*

turies, has used.

(Okay... she *was* hot.)

My own understanding of the magic came when doing semi-choreographed combat for the Medieval Festival. When you are engaged, with even blunted steel, at speed, and nothing but your sword, your footwork and your wit to save you from ugly, painful and embarrassing wounds, the danger adds a small spice to the action. But, and I cannot emphasize this too much, but that spice is *very slight* compared to the zest of the swordplay itself.

Your first priority is, as it is in SCA combat, to avoid hurting your opponent. But the powerful mix of adrenaline, fantasy and friendship make it even more important.

But you value your opponent even more because, while the spectator can see flashing swords, he is *the only one* who can truly appreciate the art you are weaving. *As you appreciate his.*

The Man in Black expresses it best in the movie *The Princess Bride*. After his opponent begs him to “kill me quickly,” he replies “I would sooner break a stained-glass window.”

This is ALL fantasy, of course. ... isn’t it?

# HURRYING IS A WASTE OF TIME

MOVE FAST –  
JUST DON'T  
*RUSH* IT.

Haste is never desirable. Do not confuse hurry with moving quickly. Hurrying means you are late, something you cannot afford in combat. Hurrying is sacrificing something for the sake of speed, whether accuracy, judgment, or good body position. If you throw your guns overboard, you limit your options. The sacrifice will cost you one way or another. In sports, hurry often costs the point you were trying to score, *plus an injury* through loss of balance.

Getting your opponent to hurry, whether they rush their block, blow, or retreat, can lead to decisive victory. It's much of the value of seizing initiative.

The lessons of military history and modern sports are both quite devastating on the subject of hurry vs. patience. In 1513 at Flodden, Scotland's fighting-age nobility was wiped out right up to the king after losing patience and leaving the high ground. At Stirling Bridge and Bannockburn in earlier centuries, patience crushed impetuous enemies. And, of course, there's Hastings.

In hockey, both top goal-scorers and top goal-tenders are renowned for the patience each can show, getting the other to commit to a shot or a big move. And in modern fencing, the same thing applies. Whoever commits first usually loses.

This is absolutely sound theory, but it's not theory that gives you

control over time. That little stutter-step that causes tackles to miss Barry Sanders; the ability to stop a heavy sword in mid-swing while your opponent's shield hurries past the point of no return; the will to put your body through moves difficult both physically and by their demands for coordination –these are the hard-won tools that allow your mind to make the difficult look easy.

You get those tools by **routinely practicing things that are anything but routine**. Like blows with little hesitations in them.

Still, on the big day, you may be surprised at being unable to execute if your energy is not up. You may have noticed that mental problems become noticeably harder when you are physically tired. To apply them you must have extra energy for your brain.

Accept two facts: 1. The fight is mental. 2. Your brain is physical. Look at the size of your carotid arteries: 20% of the blood pumped by your heart goes to the brain for a very good reason.

Automatic moves, no matter how strenuous, are easier than those that require step-by-step mental supervision and split-second reaction to anticipated moves from your opponent.

But when you succeed at one of these mentally-intense action sets, you are very well repaid.

The compleat fighter needs both kinds at ready command.



THIS IS FROM MY STRATEGY BOOK. IT DEALS WITH THE KINDS OF TACTICS YOU NEED TO BE IN CONTROL OF THE FIGHT. ENJOY.

# Denial

## IS NOT JUST A RIVER IN AFRICA

A classic war strategy is to deny the enemy the means to fight, e. g. fuel, ammo or even food and water. Our game is a little different, but you can use the principle.

**Deny** him the chance to seize the initiative. This doesn't mean you have to force every move, only that you refuse to respond to anything the way he wants, hopes, or expects. To control the encounter, control first your own movements, down to the last twitch.

**Deny** him a target. Instead, offer him terrible obstructions and good reasons not to act. Close him off and shut him down until you're good and ready to strike him.

**Deny** him the luxury of time to think. Keep him busy. He can do his thinking elsewhere; this is *your* time and you're going to run the program. If he disagrees, hit him.

**Deny** him the advantage of room to develop sword speed and the chance to switch targets on the fly. Bomb that airplane (his sword) before it can take off. Extend your shield into his zone of dexterity, leaving him only crumbs of his maneuvering room.

**Deny** him choices. Don't let him get ideas. *You* decide what target he can swing at. *You* decide when it will be open, and for how long. And *you* decide which weeds to dump his blade into when you're done parrying it.

**Deny** him information. Show no pattern. Conceal your natural tendencies. Tell him nothing.

**Deny** him air space. Control the area over his helm with a constant threat. Do as Musashi says: strive for height. If he puts his sword up there, knock it away, leaving only his shield to defend the heights – which leaves his left leg open.

Whenever he moves to adjust the distance to his liking, change it.

**Deny** him hope. Open up an inviting target and let him start to throw one nice blow. Then crush his hopes with a resounding block. Then laugh, as he realizes that...

## RESISTANCE IS FUTILE.

Long before you could rent the video, long before I seriously considered SCA combat as a worthwhile thing to try, Bob Asprin rented the Michigan Theatre to show *The Samurai Trilogy* to Ann Arbor's martial arts community. It became especially memorable when Bob had the projectionist slow down a couple of fight sequences. They were even more impressive in stop-frame than they were at full speed.

It was a real eye-opener for someone who had been to Japan but never bothered to learn anything about Asian martial arts. The three feature-length movies star Toshiro Mifune as Shinmen Miyamoto Musashi, known as the "sword saint" of Japan.

I was so impressed that I went right out and read Musashi's book. At the time, I knew of no European fight manual written by a certifiably successful fighter himself.

The *Book of Five Rings*, written in 1645, is best known in Japan as a businessman's source on strategic thinking, but it was originally the Samurai's sword-fight bible.

For the first few years of SCA combat, my great-sword technique was largely based on Mifune's work.

Musashi was the first Samurai to fight with two full-length

katanas. By the time he was 30, he had killed over 60 men in duels. At that point, he switched to wooden swords and continued to defeat anyone who dared, trying to save the lives of, and teach, those he defeated.

Finally, he retired to a cave to write his masterwork. By this time, he was a true Japanese Renaissance man. He wrote in the style traditional for a classical Japanese treatise, reflected in the "Five Rings" of his book.

Musashi also became an accomplished calligrapher, painter and metalsmith. Some of his surviving paintings stand high among Japan's art treasures –among them this ink-sketch of Hotei watching two birds.

This fact has

special meaning for me: two of the most accomplished SCA fighters I know –Dukes Dag and Eliahu– make their livings in art, albeit commercial. So does Will McLean. And I.

Duke Eliahu ben Itzhak used to quote this passage from Musashi, one worth repeating. "See far things as if near; near things as if seen from afar."

Good perspective is as important to the warrior as it is to other kinds of artist.

## PERSPECTIVE III Musashi



# PADDY

We in Ann Arbor are uniquely fortunate in visitations by persons absolutely unique, often at the top, in their fields. The world's top sensei in one martial art used to come *only* to San Francisco, New York and Ann Arbor. Leonard Bernstein brought the Vienna Philharmonic only to the *same* three cities. But the Royal Shakespeare Company came *only* to Ann Arbor.

In 1980, when Erik Fredricksen was on the theatre faculty at U-Michigan, he was also president of the fledgling Society of American Fight Directors. As one of his sabre partners at the Ann Arbor Sword Club and an amateur fight choreographer, I was invited to join in when the SAFD held its first-ever



Theatrical Combat Workshop here.

It was a three-week, all-day affair accredited by U-M's Professional Theatre Program featuring unarmed combat, quarterstaff, and rapier weeks. 20 people from across the country were enrolled, including a fencing master I recognized from the USFA circuit and an employee of American Fencers

## SHOWCASE III



Supply in San Francisco. My vacation time being reserved for Pennsic and Scotland, I could only attend a few afternoons.

I saved up my hours for Rapier week, taught by Patrick Crean, then with the Stratford Festival Theatre but who decades before had choreographed movie swordfights featuring Errol Flynn. He had also doubled for Flynn in several on-film fight sequences. At seventy,

*Left: me 'n Paddy.  
We all got our  
pictures taken  
using a sword  
Errol Flynn  
had used.*



you could still see how that worked.

It might have been the fine sword I was carrying or maybe Erik's prompting (I had helped him prepare swords for the event), but Paddy chose me to partner him in a demonstration of combat improv. I can see his face now, mugging to the other students as I began my roll out from under his descending sword, which landed with a resounding whack on the table I had just vacated.

# BE HUMBLE

## (BUT DON'T WEAR OUT YOUR KNEES)

I used to religiously act out losing a leg in practicing with Duke Dag. The good news: my “down” fight techniques were well-honed. The bad news: the better I got at defending “down,” the longer it took to kill me, so, against the better fighters, I ended up getting more practice down than up.

Finally it dawned on me that if I didn’t get some practice *preventing* the leg blows thrown by the masters, I could abandon all hope of joining their ranks.

Because being down reduces your target, one can often last longer down than up. That creates false hopes. Be not deceived: “putting up a good fight” from down a leg is a long way short of *winning* from down. Poor crumbs to live on.

My first real improvement as a fighter began the day I started saying “good leg” and remaining on my feet.

There *is* some value in practicing “down” or, say, balanced on a log or with your back to a wall. They help you learn reach, balance and general scrappiness. But overdoing it *will* damage your knees.

In tournaments, where we agree to act out a chivalry fantasy, this kind of play doesn’t seem right to me. Think: can you *stand* the idea of a period knight in the lists attacking a person so badly wounded he couldn’t stand up? Such behavior would have gotten short shrift at Numenberg. One can understand how early SCA people got the idea. It fits right in with figuring

out what will hurt someone wearing mail. (It also fits in with picking legs off insects).

On the surface, winning from down a leg seems like a wonderful underdog fantasy. It’s a fantasy all right, one reinforced every time a beginner sees a knight beating a novice from down a leg. Legs and height are such an advantage that, apart from such serious mismatches, nobody should *ever* lose fighting up vs. down, even given the SCA customs designed to reduce the advantages.

Therefore, when you win one, it’s either because he made a *huge* mistake or because you were far more advanced than he was, in which case *you* should not have been down in the first place! Such a cheap victory is not a worthy objective.

Military history tells us that a man down is doomed; firewood waiting to be chopped into kindling. Our rules and customs mask this reality, but not enough to make of it a good fight.

Chivalrous fantasy aside, it uglifies and slows the pace of every bout in which it occurs because people *take their time* slaughtering the wounded. That in turn limits the number of bouts in every tourney, which means only the top fighters get more than two or three combats per tourney.

Popular myth holds that it’s good preparation for tourneys. It might be—if you expected to win more than a tiny fraction of your

fighters that way. Perhaps you think that when you're a duke, you'll win more of them. –When you're a duke, you'll lose your leg *less*. When, as a duke, you do win a few from down, some of it will be the ducal intimidation factor.

In the mean time, you may find yourself practicing “down” for fear that people will think you lacking in humility. That's a social, not a tactical problem. Socially, you need to be even-handed. If you do not practice on your knees, you can't expect others to let you practice pounding them into the ground.

Nor, by the same token, should you let them guilt-trip you into joining the herd. When you've had enough “down” practice to meet social and tactical needs, refuse politely but firmly to further damage knees – yours *or* your opponent's.

Down-vs.-down is a different matter. Right now, it's a common fight because many people are unable to bring themselves to slaughter the wounded without giving back *some* of their advantage. But the skills you need to win down-vs.-down are the same ones you use standing up at close quarters. And close quarters is a specialty of this book.

When, at a tourney, someone who has taken a leg goes to his own knees, the ignorant call this a “Point of honor!” Usually, honor has nothing to do with it.\* It *may* be courtesy or generosity; it may also be vainglory; but usually it is simply unwillingness to be seen slaughtering the crippled. This attempt to make the best of a bad

situation usually *prolongs* the bad situation. To me the only improvement would be to shorten it. It's a tough choice.

My choice is to suggest the down fighter yield, and if he won't, defeat him as quickly and painlessly as possible, in order to help people realize that any chance the wounded seems to have is artificial and encourage abandoning it.

One could say more, but our concern here is your strategy for developing as a fighter, choosing which skills should get the benefit of limited practice time.

Developing your use of the legs brings many advantages. One example: when you sidestep an opponent's blow, you suddenly have an extra weapon– the one an *ordinary* fighter would have used to block. Fighters who discover this tactical treasury will not be so quick to do without their legs.

Every minute fighting on the knees takes *two* away from developing footwork skills –and hurts the legs you need in prime shape.

If you want to practice “down” something, try down an arm. Fighting single-sword requires neither a wound fantasy nor damaging your body, but practicing it will reap much bigger benefits.

Not because of all the down-an-arm fights you'll have, but because blocking, parrying, controlling the opponent's sword with yours is perhaps the most important skill you can have. Fighting with a single sword is a viable sub-sport that needs no “maiming” fantasy. It is *indeed sword-fighting*.

# How to avoid fighting down a leg.

## Plan A: don't get hit there.

It is a central thesis in this book that you can always put choice on your side. For the exceptional fighter, the power of that thesis is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in choosing defensive tactics.

The typical SCA fighter doesn't make choices; he merely makes standard responses to standard attacks. He also expects standard responses, like a shield block for a head blow (whatever that is). At his most imaginative, the typical fighter may block that same blow with his sword if his shield arm is tired (terrific reason!).

You, the exceptional fighter, recognize that you have at least four ways to prevent his blow from finding its target. Further, you often choose what method you will use before his sword leaves his shoulder (which is a dumb place to store it). He knows nothing of your choices until his sword is in left field where your parry dumped it, or in right field where it flew when you ducked.

Your choices are not simply blocking with sword or shield. You can block with both! You can also duck (not for a leg blow), sidestep, step in or out to make the blow miss, or you can attack his blade as he attacks or even before he attacks. The extra choices are *only* available to you because you choose them in advance, not as a reaction. (No, you're not guessing.)

These techniques are discussed in detail in the articles on Parrying, Distance, Pinning the Sword, Attacks on the Blade, and others.

Even before you get to those chapters, you can try an experiment: during your next S & S practice, focus all your effort on preventing *every* attack from hitting you *anywhere* for just two minutes. Throw no blows. Make up your mind that losing a leg is as bad as a helm shot, because it *will* cost you the bout, and you will be much more fatigued into the bargain.

Yes, you *can* do it if you really want to. See the chapter "Absolute Defense."

One year I decided to learn to juggle. Once I got three balls in the air, the question was how long I could keep them going. Like most beginning jugglers, I began to count how many catches I could make before one dropped. There was a time when 20 in a row was a miracle, but in six months I got so 100 was expected.

Same goes for defense. After you go two minutes, try for three. And so on.

Soon you will discover that most people get hit because they give up defense in order to throw ill-considered blows. You will also discover that many defense techniques create scoring opportunities for you. Keep on defending and watching these openings develop.



# Raise the cost of a low blow.

(Plan B: Okay, so you got hit there.)

As part of my campaign against fighting down a leg (it's so *ugly*!) I try to discourage the practice.

First, I try to set an example. For me, the leg is now such a target of last resort that I often apologize if I hit it, even though it helps people remember to defend it.

Second, if a person insists on fighting me from down I resist the cheap glory of getting down myself in favor of doing my best to dispel any notion that the down fighter has a snowball's chance. (If you put as much into hitting his head as you succeeded with in hitting his leg, he has no chance.)

Third, I go to extremes to demonstrate that one can completely close off the legs from attack and still have a more than competent defense for the rest of one's targets. For instance, one of my "guards" hangs the shield down over my left knee. Another one displays the sword ready to block below the shield on my left.

Finally, should someone be so rude as to strike my leg, I have good plans to make them pay. As a result, I often land a helm shot before my knees hit the ground. That considerably dulls my anguish and eliminates the down-a-leg fight before it starts.

To avoid questions, *you must collapse the leg struck quickly and obviously.* The

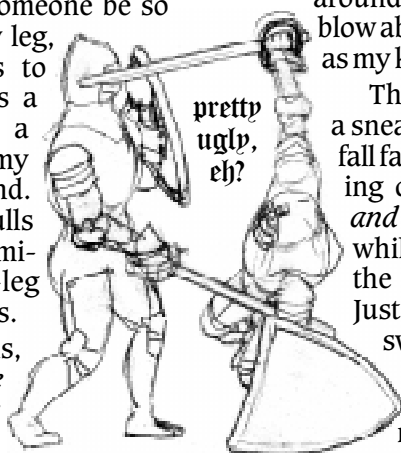
technique involves your total combat setup. It recognizes that to get my leg, the opponent's sword must vacate the high ground where it can defend his head. It also requires the ability to outmaneuver his shield with your sword in a single movement including a feint and a head-strike while you are falling onto your knees.

That can be a very difficult proposition, but good positioning, advance planning and the discipline to follow your plan rather than reacting to his can make it easier. For instance:

Often, my sword dangles above his helm, just waiting for him to reduce his upper defenses. Should he be so tasteless as to go for my leg, which just might happen to be temptingly wide open, my sword strikes his helm through the very air space his sword just left.

Should he take the precaution of using his shield as an umbrella, I am forced to manœuvre the sword around it, landing a body blow about the same time as my knees touch down.

The drawing shows a sneaky variation. You fall far to your left, landing on your left knee *and* your shield edge while your sword cuts the side of his helm. Just for insurance, his sword is under your arm – not trapped but certainly made awkward.





Used to think I knew a thing or two about period swordplay. I had read *Schools and Masters of Fence*. Twice. When the Man in Black in *The Princess Bride* said “I see you have been practicing your Agrippa” I would smirk knowingly.

When I read Soper and Turner’s *Three Elizabethan Fencing Manuals*, I got downright smug. But the fact is, I wasn’t *doing the moves*. Then, Jeffry Singman, Ph.D., arrived in Ann Arbor.

A veteran of the Toronto SCA chapter, a founder of two period re-enactment groups, and co-author of their manuals, he was here to help finish up the Middle English Dictionary.

From the Ann Arbor SCA group he recruited armourer Guichart de Chadenac (John Vernier) to equip him for re-creating the teachings of a 14th-century sword and buckler manual. From the Ann Arbor Sword Club, he recruited me to spar with in his study of di Grassi’s manual of fence.

We spent seven years chasing each other around the lawn with heavy rapiers and crude quarter-

## SHOWCASE IV

# JEFFREY FORGENG

staves. We learned a lot, but were both humbled by how quickly a physically-competent non-fencer could come up to our speed.

Full of energy and learned enough to be overwhelming, Jeffrey still manages to be considerate to those less knowledgeable.

I had put years into trying to sell persona play to the SCA, with workshops and a 36-page *Persona Pilgrimage* that never actually went anywhere. Jeffrey had done this too, but *his* work is in hardcover. With their example and direct advice – “just *do it*” – he put an end to my dabbling.

Now, with a surname change, he is hugely enjoying his dream job as Adjunct Professor/chaired Curator at the John Woodman Higgins Armoury Museum in Massachussetts. There, he hosts more advanced research and teaches period fence (Higgins.org).



*At Cynnabar's Twentieth Anniversary event, Jeffrey, in his di Grassi outfit and stance, used techniques straight from the book to completely stymie my 30 years' experience of swordplay. His translation of Tower MSI.33, a 14th-century German sword-and-buckler manual in Latin is available through Chivalry Bookshelf.*

# LIVE STEEL!

(OOH, AHH.)

Long before Jeffrey Singman (now Forgeng) brought heavy fencing-rapier replicas to my backyard, I was considered by some SCA members as a bit of a “live-steel bad boy.” Dukes and marshals seemed forever on guard after I tried to introduce fencing in the late seventies and later offered steel-sword demos.

To me, they just seemed paranoid. How could people who professed a love of swordplay *avoid* experiencing the feel of steel?

And, please. It’s not *live* steel. It will not explode. This paranoid term was born, with the SCA, in the Viet Nam era, when a “claymore” was the best-known anti-personnel mine.

The festival steel-sword demos we did in the seventies were not competitive. But Jeffrey’s heavy-rapier fencing *was*. Just as I thought I was beginning to live down my bad-boy image, here comes *competitive* heavy steel.

Jeffrey wanted to practice the techniques of di Grassi, whose book, of all the sixteenth-century fencing manuals, made the most sense. For the first time in twenty years, I was pupil, not teacher.

Jeffrey had done the study and had had a pair of fencing-rapier replicas made to period size and weight. I was astonished at the

heft of them, easily as heavy and clumsy as my massive SCA single sword. Especially when you add the traditional safety tip, a ha’penny piece tied on with cloth around a wine-cask stopper.

They were as stiff as a rattan sword.

And we were going to be mostly *thrusting*.

The parrying daggers were the size of butcher knives and the weight of cleavers, with simple four-inch cross-guards. Since safety tips would have made them too clumsy, we refrained from thrusting with them.

We *tried* swinging edge-cuts, but found that those moves offered the best opportunities for the opponent’s thrust.

What I missed most was the modern system of parries. Di Grassi’s primary defense was step aside and counterattack. He seems to have thought parries too obvious to require explanation.

The upshot was that the weapons, the ground and the lack of any armor mattered more than di Grassi’s teaching. It was a running game using all manner of combat footwork and switching hands every twenty minutes to save our exhausted arms.

For all our effort we might score once or twice in half an hour, and that just barely. We might plant a solid shot once in an hour’s fencing, but just as often not.



# ABSOLUTE DEFENSE

**Yes, you can** stop just about anybody from scoring on you, at least in sword and shield. And you don't need an oversized shield to do it.

There are very good reasons to include Absolute Defense in your plan to become a winning fighter.

In SCA combat, people aren't hit because good defense is impossible or even difficult, but because *they make a deliberate choice* to ignore or discount the enemy threat at a given moment. They attack without knowing all the things the opponent can do with their attack. They waltz into enemy range without covering their own counterattack targets. They attack without thinking about anything except what *they* are going to do.

Worst of all, they decide that losing an arm or a leg is not so bad. For the quality of thinking that represents, they may as well lose their heads.

If you followed the earlier discussion about fighting down a leg, you know that defending your legs is just as important as any other part of you.

We in the SCA are misled by our own scoring system which suggests that some targets are more dispensible than others; that we can still win after losing an arm or leg. Do not let silly-game rules distort your common sense. In period, the poor soul who killed his opponent while having his own leg

slashed to the bone was not called the victor: he was merely the one who took longer to die, in much more pain than his opponent.

The reason period masters tell you not to go after the legs in combat on foot is not because they aren't a valuable target but because of the risks to yourself.

So... the point is, you must learn to defend all targets equally and absolutely. Trading your leg for your opponent's head is a gaming-type decision, not something to make a habit of. When I do it, it is not a choice to give up the leg but a reflex to take the head when it's open. However sound that choice may be in its own context, it has no part in Absolute Defense.

## Why pursue Absolute D?

The first reason to do this is to prove to yourself that you CAN do it. Once you settle this question for yourself, valuable new possibilities open up to you.

First, you dispel forever the notion that you had better kill your opponent before he kills you; that sooner or later he will get you, given enough time. This erroneous notion defines the game as a race, and defines defense as a process of trying not to lose. We already know that trying not to lose is not the same as trying to win; that it hands all initiative to the opponent and often causes the thing it is trying to prevent.

So... what is Absolute Defense if it *isn't* focused on not losing?

# KICK THE HABIT OF DEFEAT

1. When you *know* that, if you are determined, you can stop just about any attack thrown at you, you can relax from the standpoint of anxiety and concentrate on winning. You are now free to *fight*.

2. You have an achievement very close to making yourself unbeatable (even if you can't score on your opponent). And being very, very hard to score on puts stress on your opponent—especially if he believes (however improbably) that sooner or later *you* will get *him*.

3. Your solid defense is a very good place to build a solid counterattack, and then a powerful attack whose movements do not open you up to counterattack.

Against sword and shield, you can achieve Absolute Defense quite soon (only in the SCA where shields are indestructible). You have overpowering advantages: two weapons of defense against one of attack, plus the ability to use body movement to make him miss. There are two kinds of defense: territorial and tactical.

Territorial Defense only concerns itself with offensive weapons entering your target areas. It blocks, parries, dodges, ducks or retreats out of the way.

Tactical Defense uses any trick available to keep the attack from landing, but specializes in proactive means. In warfare, cutting enemy supply lines is the classic example. You can do things like keeping your target moving and the defensive weapons changing

their positions to make targeting difficult (standard boxing tactics).

## The Three Rules of Absolute Defense

Absolute Defense wastes no time or decision-making effort on choosing between options of questionable value. Here are the rules:

1. Every real attack must be stopped or completely avoided. Blows that glance because of opponent error are not acceptable; only those *you control* to the point of glancing count as successful defense.

2. Every false attack must be recognized and ignored. Being drawn out is more than halfway to getting hit.

3. No attack must be started from a state of defense uncertainty. Your opponent's attack and counterattack potentialities must be fully understood before you start anything.

The "*fourth*" rule: Every attack on your defenses—as distinguished from attacks on your target areas—must be rejected in favor of stopping the attack on your target(s). That means, for just one example, if the opponent pushes your shield aside or ties up your sword, your first concern is to cover the opponent's sword pathways or to move out of range, not to wrestle with whatever distractions he throws.

# TERRITORIAL DEFENSE

In our discussion of Absolute Defense, we included Territorial as a type of defense. There are also non-absolute defense methods that include the Territorial concept. This discussion applies both ways.

Territorial Defense uses all the parries described earlier, plus defensive shield work, i.e. blocks and parries, plus footwork and body moves of avoidance. Yes—parries with the shield. Remember that a block is a stop while a parry is a deflection, a change of direction.

## 1. Distance Control

In modern fencing—easily the most refined western martial art—control of distance is the first and most basic defense tool. Masters require you to remain just outside direct-attack distance—that is, the distance at which your opponent can hit you with a simple lunge. The principal drill you get—hours of it—is maintaining that distance by constant little advances and retreats. The result is that a major component of your defense is making your opponent work hard just to launch a “standard” attack!

The SCA sword-and-shield equivalent would be a distance that requires some kind of step forward for your opponent to reach your head with his sword. In fact, we find the best fighters in Midrealm

setting and maintaining just such a distance. You could call this tactical defense, but it’s so basic that we’ll include it here too.

## 2. Target Control

You cannot control all the intelligence your opponent gets on you, but you can control what he sees of you when the two of you are in the lists. You choose where and how to deploy your weapons, how your torso, head and limbs are arranged.

Some people crouch low and bow their heads, peeking from behind the edge of their shields. They may feel like a coiled spring or a tiger, but I have already stated the advantages of an upright body on bent legs, and I’m sticking to that.



*Typical SCA  
S & S  
Guard*



## TERRITORIAL DEFENSE, CONTINUED

It is one thing to look *defensive*, another to look *defended*, and still another to BE defended. You can put the last two to use.

Unless you use an oversize shield, you cannot obstruct every path to all of your valid target areas. You must choose what to leave open and what to cover.

The typical-SCA S&S guard (peeking over your shield) *looks* defended, but as a total system, it's costly. It requires you to block leg-blows with a downward movement of the heaviest weapon you have, which renders it an uphill battle to defend the much more valuable upper target areas. It is this fault in the system that makes the rising snap a household word in the SCA, not the latter's qualities. Fortu-

nately, there are two viable alternatives, one from the period masters and one from me.

The period one is from Giacomo di Grassi, writing in 1575. He (and Marozzo, let's not forget) extend the shield arm towards the opponent, shaded to the side the shield is on so that your view of the opponent is not obstructed. It's just like the goalie advancing to obstruct more of the angles to the goal. It works really well. The down side is that it takes a lot of arm stamina to maintain it, depending on the weight and balance of your shield.

Well... period guys have really strong arms. But seriously, holding a shield at arm's length is no worse than having to stop its downward sweep and whip it upward to catch that damn rising snap... *repeatedly*. And a lot more effective.

Face it... the "standard" method involving whipping your shield around reacting to far easier and faster sword moves is just plain silly. Even in modern foil, only a beginner or a fool chases after the attacking blade. What good fencers do with their defensive equipment is *lie in wait in a good place*.



*Extended shield was at one time standard. This one is from 1575, di Grassi*

## TERRITORIAL DEFENSE, CONTINUED

The illustration from me I call the “tired man” because that’s what it looks like ... and it is efficient, if you can execute the rest of the moves. The shield arm hangs down, holding the shield, or resting it, against the left leg, which is slightly advanced, such that it covers down to the knee. That tells your opponent to not even bother with the leg. That road’s closed. Because it looks so relaxed –which it *is*– your opponent won’t look for any big moves out of that shield, any of which would be uphill. Neither will you. It’s closing off a part of your target that is a pain in the neck to defend any other way, and you won’t have to make any decisions about using the shield for the first few moves against you. All your focus can go into the rest of the defense, with footwork, bodywork and swordwork.

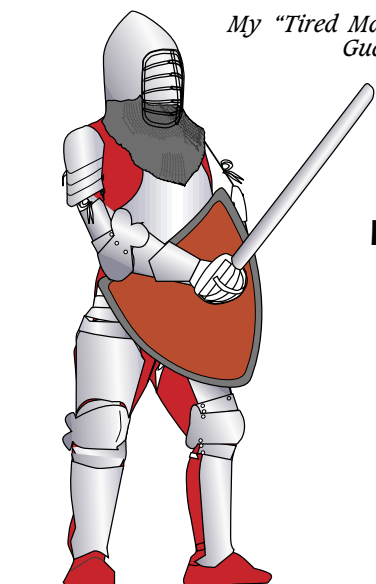
That’s made simple because now

you only have to defend your upper half. The swordwork can be as simple as using guard of tierce and parrying whatever is appropriate from the sabre repertoire, or you can use my Tired Man guard.

I place the pommel of my sword on the front of my shield with the point aiming at my opponent’s right shoulder. Hardly anyone I’ve met knows what to do against this. But whatever they do, there is a simple answer.

For straight-in head cuts and thrusts at my torso, I simply raise my hand and sword straight up the middle in front of me, catching the incoming on the false edge angled such that it dumps their sword off to my right as my weapon continues what is now the backswing for a downward blow at whatever they leave open. No other body parts have to move at all.

*My “Tired Man”  
Guard*



**Images to come.... but by now, I’d**

*Tired man’s simple parry*



## TERRITORIAL DEFENSE, CONTINUED

While this riposte is not strictly defensive in nature, it has the effect of chasing their sword back to help defend against the unexpected threat. It also expresses a certain sense of nonchalant mastery, which opponents always find demoralizing. That, too, is outside the territorial-defense scheme, having a definitely tactical effect.

This just clarifies how hard it is to have clear categories in an art like defense.

A variation is to step into the incoming attack while parrying it with Prime. This step is made with the right foot, which makes the parry easier and brings you facing the sword you just parried, while advancing your sword arm deep into enemy territory. You should fire off a lazy riposte just to keep him from following up smoothly.

This is a perfect example of the efficiency you get when footwork and weapon-work are combined.

It is related to German Longsword technique in keeping the sword in front of you most of the time, where it is easy to control and between you and your opponent's weapon.

For backhands coming to my right, I simply pivot on my heels so the sword is like a bowsprit facing the incoming, which are thereby parried down into my shield. I then pivot back to my normal, if you can call it that, position. If I feel a little aggressive, I extend my sword arm as I pivot back so that the blade whacks the opponent's helm.

For opponents who do nothing against Tired Man, I advance one methodical step at a time until something happens.

### Target Control, continued

The subject was control of the picture you present to the opponent. A variation on Tired Man is a more aggressive-looking stance with the shield somewhat advanced but my sword raised as if I had just

guess you have a pretty good idea of what they'll look like!

*Tired man's bowsprit parry*

*Tired man's parry Prime*

*Sword of Damocles Guard*

## TERRITORIAL DEFENSE, CONTINUED

done one of those vertical parries and stopped. This is the Sword of Damocles.

It looks offensive, but once you are onto the idea of active sword defense, it will make more sense. If you can hit any target from the hilltop, you can also demolish any incoming attack when you have the upper hand. But more to the point defensively, that threatening sword makes them think twice before attacking any old way.

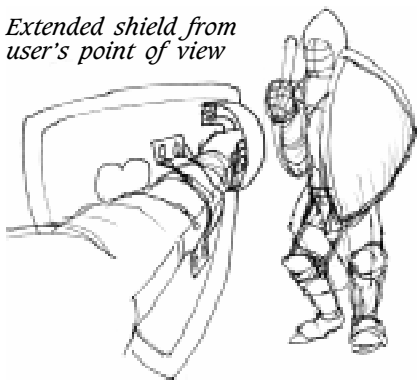
When they do attack, you have all the choices. If they go for the arm, you advance the shield while dropping the sword on their head.

If they get tricky, you drop the sword on their sword or sword arm and *then* on their head.

### The Extended Shield

The extended shield position is a good place because it does three good things for your defense. First, it reduces the viable targets your opponent can see his way to. Second, it reduces the distance and

*Extended shield from user's point of view*



difficulty of defensive moves. Third, it gets the rest of the body involved in its maneuvers instead of putting the entire burden on your poor left arm.

It does something else for your overall fight quality. It gets your left arm involved in the fight, almost the way the left sword is in two-sword. (When we get to Tactical Defense, this will be even more important.)

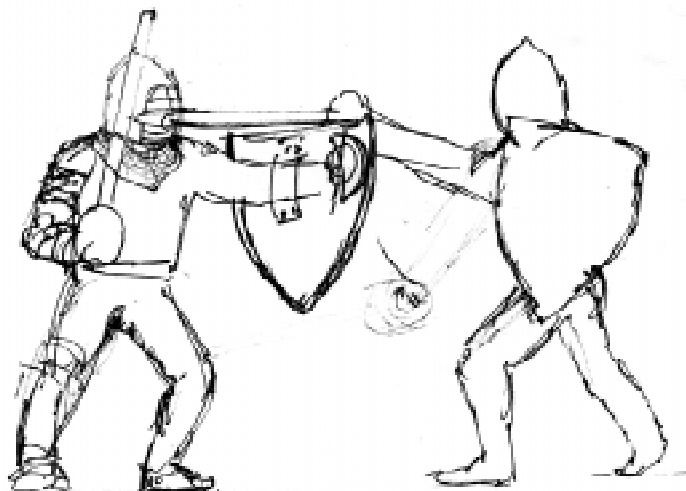
Extended Shield doesn't have to wear out your arm. Any fencer can tell you that holding an extension for long is a mistake. You put it out there at key moments, like just before your opponent attacks. And, to reduce muscle fatigue, you never keep absolutely motionless. You can hang it in front of your leading leg in the meantime, or set the point on your knee.

This is not much more work, if any, than holding your arm bent to a difficult curve in front. Remember how tough that was when you were a beginner? Funny... I don't remember seeing it in any of the period manuals. But the Extended Shield is in every manual that shows one.

The Extended Shield is right there when you want to mess with the opponent's shield or second sword. Since it's already out there, you don't have to worry about telegraphing the shield snatch, but he has to worry about it all the time. And you'll have much more practice dealing with opponents' shield snatch attempts because it's a natural response to ES.

# TRAPS FOR THE WARY

AND THEN THE FUN BEGAN...



More to come....