



Fencing Lessons with Tom

Find a Way Through - Reconnaissance

Sweat saves blood, blood saves lives, but brains saves both. – General Erwin Rommel

I find doing a mundane chore, like mowing the grass, is a time when my mind can slip into neutral, allowing a more easily obtained reflection upon the game we play. My wife has been known to complain about the occasional zig zag patterns and missed lumps of grass which is easily fixed.

You are a fencer – the game you are playing is a straightforward sport of amazing complexity – if you're going to move upwards from your current ability, you absolutely have to think about the game. Viewing it from every possible angle you can think of helps a lot. You then need to practice what you've thought about. **Question everything, and find your own answers.**

Modern technology also has its advantages for study. The internet is great for research, but there is a hidden danger in this. You can easily suffer information overload. When that happens, you will find yourself even more confused, and possibly angry over your brain freeze.

If you've ever attended one of my classes, you will have heard me say, "Don't worry about remembering this (whatever it is I'm speaking of). Just keep it in the back of your mind, and eventually it will stick." Trust me – it helps prevent that overload.

The other thing I always say is, "If you ever have a question about fencing – ask me."

Everyone learns differently.

The absolute best way to teach fencing is 'one on one' instruction.

One of the hardest methods is the group lesson, because you lose the communication process within the group. Meaning: in a group of students, some will understand, some will sort of understand, and the rest will be totally lost.

There is another way to help yourself – book learning.

One of our country's top foil fencers, Albert Axelrod told me fencing books were how he learned to fence. Mr. Axelrod was a five-time Olympian for the United States, won a bronze medal at the 1960 Olympics, and was the only American men's foil fencer to reach the finals at the world championships until Gerek Meinhardt won a bronze medal in the 2010 World Fencing Championships. (thank you Wikipedia) When Mr. Axelrod was in high school, fencing was

suspended for the summer, so he went to the library and checked out books to study from. When school recommenced in the autumn, no one on the team could beat him.

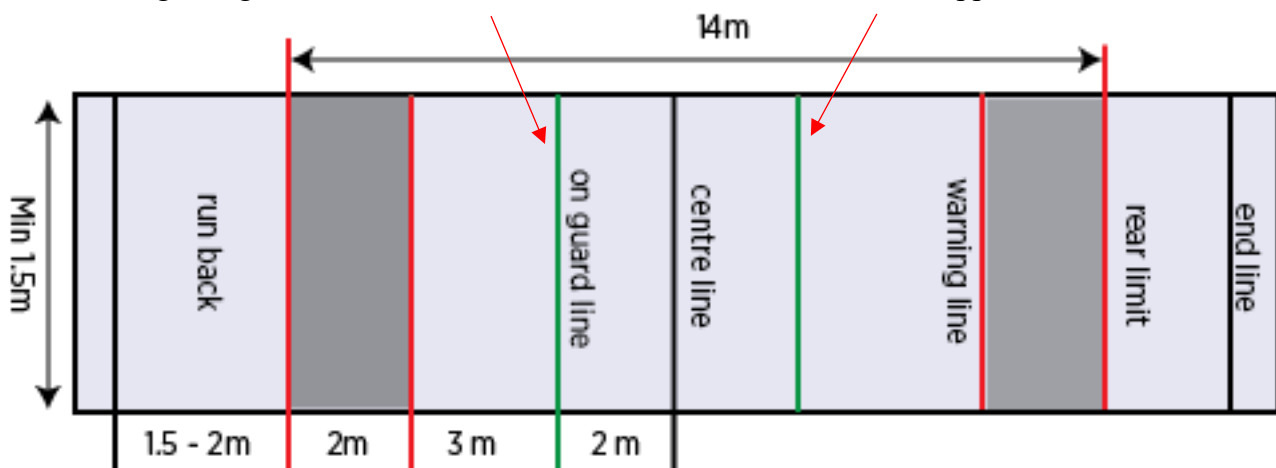
Me to you: Should you ever have a question about fencing – ask it. I’m always happy to sit and talk about fencing, as are most of your fencing friends and coaches. Email works too.

Now back to the crux of this lesson: Find A Way Through - Reconnaissance.

For this, you will need to use ‘false attacks’, and ‘invitations’.

At the beginning of the match: You are here.

Your opponent is here.



With both fencers at the ‘en garde’ line, neither can hit the other by lunging. The referee will call both fencers to take up their ‘en garde’ positions by saying (loudly) ‘En Garde’. He will then ask, ‘Ready?’ If there is no reply, he will give the command, ‘FENCE!’, and the game begins.

Unless they know what they’re watching, the audience of a bout will see two people dressed in white prancing forward and then poking at each other with their swords. One or two lights will come on, and the referee calls ‘HALT!’. Action stops.

Let us now go back to the above illustration of ‘You are here’. Imagine yourself standing there looking at your opponent, and thinking, ‘What the heck do I do now?’

Remember, you have plenty of time, so don’t hurry things. If your opponent rushes forward, back up. Maintain your distance and stay defensive. Keep a good and practiced parry riposte in your repertoire exactly for this purpose.

Now to figuring out how to handle things. Welcome to ‘false attacks’ and ‘invitations’.

False Attack: exactly what it means.

Starting point: defend yourself first, and then put some distance between you and your opponent. You need to figure out what the other fencer will do when he is attacked. Make your attack short but meaningful. You need to make it look real enough that it will draw out his response while maintaining your distance so you can get out of the way.

If your false attack does happen to hit, all the better, but, since it is false you don't need to worry about the results. You are also just enough out of distance that his efforts will not find you as you recover backwards. The idea is **reconnaissance**. If he executes a parry of counter six, the chances are good he will do this again, and you can deceive the parry with your next attack. If he attempts a counter attack, you will know to make the same false attack causing the same counter attack which you will either parry and then riposte, or take his blade with a ceding parry and accompanied bind or glide attack. (To be discussed later.)

I see the question mark above your head. Yes, I am smiling. I was you many many years ago. I understand your confusion.

Remember that the game you play is simple in context. It comes from actual sword fighting where the referees were Death and Mayhem. The duel was dressed up as honourable, and gentlemanly; though it was neither of these things. Fencing was practice at staying alive.

I will repeat this because it is important: **fencing was practice at staying alive.**

The difference between the French school of fence, and the Italian school of fence was remarkably different.

Italian: To be hit is bad – control your opponent's blade so this will not happen.

French: To be hit is part of the game – so long as the rules give you the 'right of way' you still win the touch.

If the weapon fenced is foil, or sabre, the French school rule of thumb properly applies.

If the weapon fenced is epee, it is better to abide by the Italian school's line of thinking.

Invitations: This is not an invitation to a party; it is an invitation to be attacked.

There are eight guard/parry positions. (Yes, I am smiling because this can be quite confusing.) Do not worry about memorizing these positions as they are only starting points. These numbers are teaching tools. As in any language, there has to be a base of understanding in order to speak fluently.

Moving on: The guard you adopt as your normal stance is your face. It is who you are as a fencer. Think about this; you can recognize the fencers in your club when they are masked and on the strip just by the way they stand and fence. In turn – they recognize you too.

Food for thought: A guarded position is exactly that. It is a defensive posture. It is also BODY LANGUAGE. How your garde is posed speaks volumes to your opponent. Though you may not have verbal thoughts when observing your opponent, your mind will make adjustments to your fencing mindset without your even noticing.

(YES! I found a perfect example and from history.)

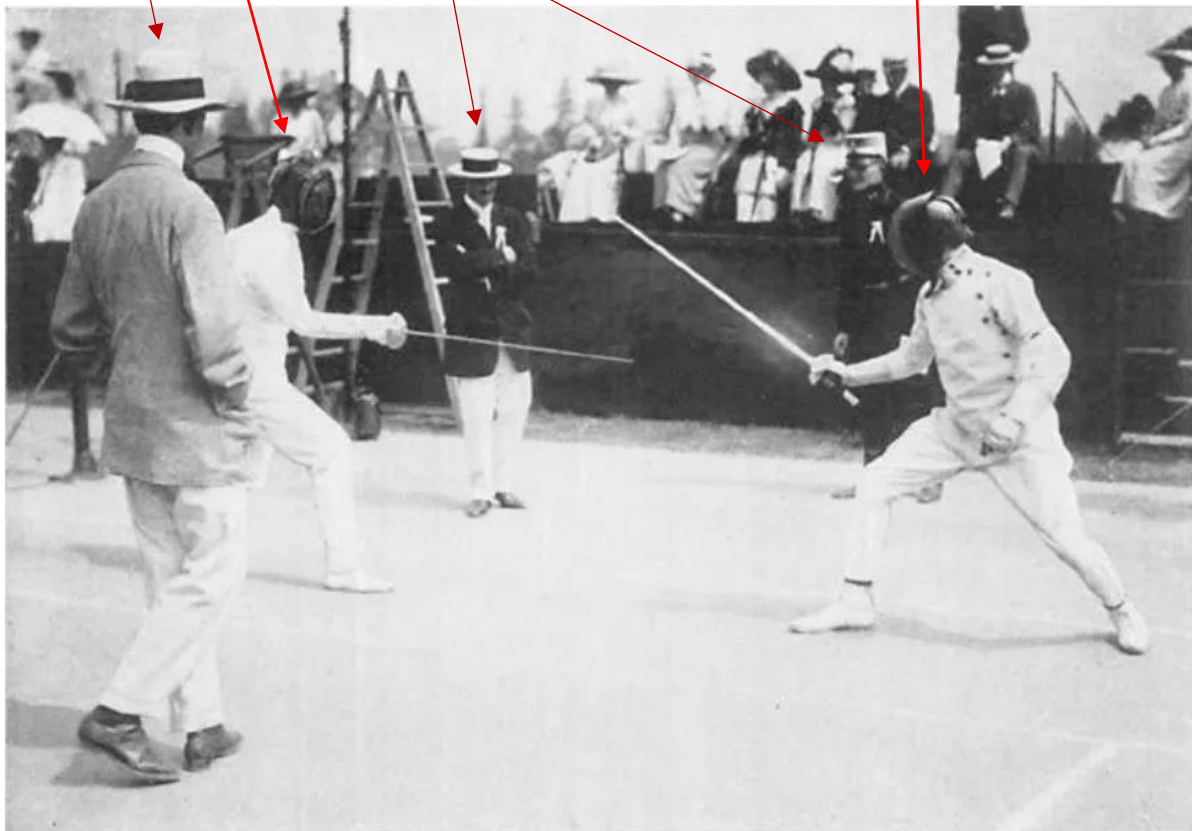
George Patton was selected to represent the United States in the first Olympic modern pentathlon event at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. He placed fourth in fencing placing fifth overall.

De Mas Latr ie (France) is seen in what I consider the perfect guard for epee. His feet are not wide apart, his elbow is about a fist from his side, and his forearm is in a straight line with his blade. His garde would be considered in sixth with the tip below center.

Lt. George Patton looks sloppy, but he is, in actuality, inviting his opponent's attack. He is presenting his knee, and foot as (delicious) targets. Should Latr ie have taken the bait, I have no doubt George would have pulled his leg back out of the way while extending outward to strike wrist or mask. I would guess primarily mask as it would be easier to reach.

Director/Referee

Line Judges



     FENCING, MODERN PENTATHLON.
DE MAS LATRI E (France) 2:nd Man—G. PATTON (U. S. A.), 4:th Man.

I so love the internet just for the information you can find there. In looking at the above image, we all know of General George Patton's future, but then I wondered about his opponent.

Jean de Mas Latrie (23 November 1879 – 5 September 1914) was a French fencer and modern pentathlete. He competed in the individual sabre event at the 1908 Summer Olympics and the modern pentathlon at the 1912 Summer Olympics where he was undefeated in fencing until losing to future U.S. general George S. Patton who was also competing in these events. Patton was the only man Jean lost to in said event. He was killed in action during World War I.

Our sport has a wonderful and long history. When you begin digging, you will be surprised at everything you will find.

I will leave you here then. See you for the next lesson.