

THE ECU CAVALIER  
SCHOOL OF FENCING  
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

# BEGINNERS' COURSE

**Introduction**

Welcome to the *ECU Cavalier School of Fencing - Beginners' Course*. These notes are designed to help you remember some of what you will learn today. Each successive week of the course we will add to your knowledge and to these notes.

- *Joining the club:* Once you have decided that fencing is the best sport in the whole wide world, we invite you to join our club, learning more about fencing foil, sabre and epee. After the beginners course you will have access to our intermediate footwork and blade work classes; ongoing group sessions wherein you can refine what you learnt in the beginners class, and learn much, much more.

**COURSE OUTLINE**

**Week 1**  
**Introduction to foil**  
 • Rules and character  
**Footwork**  
 • The en-guard position  
 • Gaining and breaking ground  
 • The lunge and recovery  
 • Fencing distance  
**Blade work**  
 • Parts of a weapon  
 • Grip  
 • Foil target  
 • Direct hit  
 • Disengagement  
**Bouting**  
 • The piste  
 • Etiquette

**Week 2**  
**Footwork**  
 • Timing and speed  
**Blade work**  
 Revise straight attack and disengage  
 • Counter disengage  
 • Revise Foil convention – right of way  
 • Lateral parry – quarte  
 • Direct ripostes

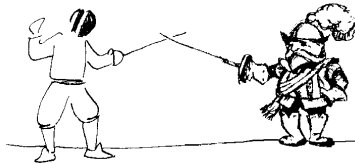
**Week 3**  
**Foot work**  
 • Balestra  
 • Flèche  
**Blade work**  
 • The fencing positions (lines);  
 • Types of parries - hand positions (supinated, pronated)  
 • Semi circular parries (octave)  
 • Circular parries (counter sixte)

**Week 4**  
**Introduction to épée**  
 • Rules and character  
 • En-guard, distance and target  
 • Attacks to advanced target (arm)  
 • Riposte-in-opposition (sixte)

**Week 5**  
 • Revision of épée  
 • Attacks to advanced target (foot)  
 • Counter attack/stop-hit  
 • Riposte-in-opposition (seconde)

**Week 6**  
**Introduction to sabre**  
 • Rules and character  
 • En-guard, distance and target  
 • Attacks by cut  
 • Parries at sabre (quinte)

**Week 7**  
 • Revision of sabre  
 • Attacks by cut (chest)  
 • Parries at sabre (quarte)  
 • Indirect attacks



## 1. Footwork

### The en-guard position

The en guard position is the basic position of feet, body, arms and legs. To be en guard is to be prepared to execute defensive actions when attacked, or to be able to launch an offensive action whenever an opportunity presents itself.

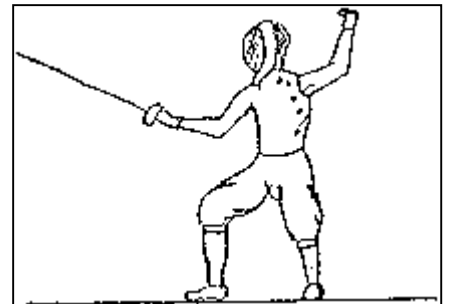
Place the feet shoulder width apart and at right angles, the heels being in line. The leading foot is pointing towards the opponent, while the rear foot is turned at an angle of 90 degrees from it.

The trunk of the body is turned so that the chest is halfway towards the opponent, head erect.

The sword arm is now raised until the hand is at a height level with the right breast, the arm half extended should find the elbow clear of the body, approx. the breadth of a hand from it and over the right thigh. The hand should be over and slightly outside the right knee with the fingers turned in half supination.

The left arm shall now be raised and brought to a position where the upper arm is level with the left shoulder. The whole arm will now form a graceful arc.

The feet, body and arms now in this position the knees will be bent equally, allowing the body to be balanced on both legs. Do not allow the body to lean forward or backward whilst carrying out this maneuver.



### Gaining and breaking ground (advancing and retreating)

Is the action of stepping forward or backward. It is the footwork used in fencing to gain or maintain distance.

To step forward (advance) is to carry the leading foot forward, approximately a foot's length and to follow up with an equal displacement of the rear foot maintaining the same distance between the two feet.

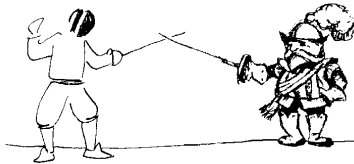
The leading foot should be raised and lifted cleanly off the floor and land heel first in a normal walking action. The rear foot will be lifted from the knee, the heel leaving the floor first, to be replaced at the correct distance by resting the toes first.

To step back (retreat) is to carry the rear foot back approximately a foot's distance and to follow up with the leading foot with equal displacement.

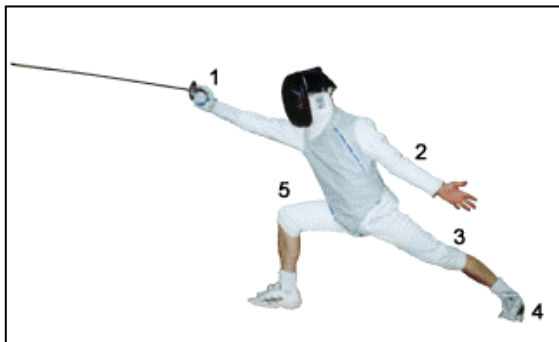
The length of the step forward or backward should be regulated so as not to develop into large or ungainly steps. It should be under control, smooth and rapid and allowing the fencer to maintain balance evenly and easily. Care must be taken not to drag the feet along the ground, also concentrate on not bobbing your head up and down as you move, all movement should be below the waist and isolated from the upper body.

### The lunge and recovery

The lunge is a method to cover the distance that will allow the fencer to reach his or her adversary to deliver the attack. It is composed of: -



- The sword- arm is extended quickly and smoothly forward to a position slightly higher than the shoulder (which should not be lifted or contracted), with the point threatening the opponent's target.
- The toes of the leading foot are raised and the heel cleared of the ground. Simultaneously, the whole body is thrust forward with rapid, but smooth extension of the rear leg, combined with a dropping of the rear arm, to a position just above and parallel with the rear leg, palm upward. The front leg in its path forward should just clear the ground where it will land heel first at the end of its travel.
- To recover, the attacker co-ordinates the bending of the rear leg with the pushing back of the leading foot and the raising of the rear arm. The front leg is pushed back to the position it originally took in the 'en guard position' and the rear arm is brought back to its original position. Finally, the sword-arm, which has been extended throughout, is returned to its original position only when the return to guard has been completed.



### Points To Note On The Lunge

- Sword hand slightly higher than the shoulder. Sword-arm straight.
- Back arm parallel with rear leg
- Back leg straight.
- Back foot flat on the floor
- Front knee above instep
- Body upright.
- Head erect

### Fencing distance

Also known as fencing measure, this is the distance that two fencers maintain from each other during a bout. It is relative to the reach of a fencer and not measured in metres.

- Short Distance – when a hit that can be made without a lunge, just an extension
- In Distance - when a hit can be made with a lunge, but not a simple extension
- Out of Distance – when a hit cannot be made even after making a lunge

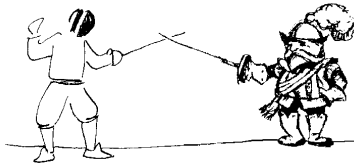
## 2. Blade work

### Parts of a weapon

- Tip
- Foible – The most flexible half of the blade closest to the point
- Forte – The stiffest part of the blade closest to the guard
- Guard
- Cushion
- Handle – Either French grip or pistol grip
- Pommel – On French grip foils, screws the weapon together and balances the weapon
- Grip (foil and epee)

The grip is the manner in which the sword is held and is conducive to ease in the wielding of the foil. The handle is shaped in such a way so as to fit comfortably in the hand.



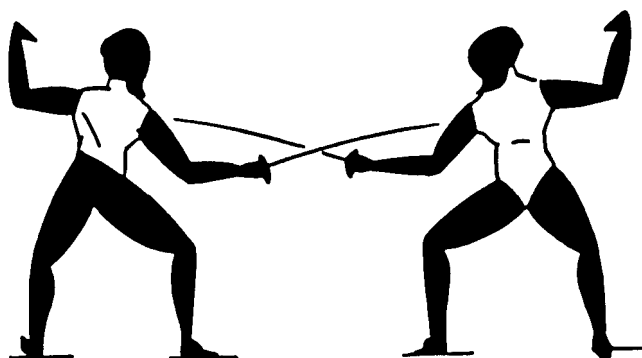


It should be placed in the palm of the hand and under the fleshy part of the thumb. The front part should rest on the middle of the index finger and the thumb placed FLAT on top. These are called the manipulators. The remaining three fingers should be placed along the side of the grip, with the first phalanx of each finger in contact (the aids).

The weapon should be carried in a state of relaxation in order that the principle of finger play can be carried out. This is the basis for the French school of fencing. A faulty grip can cause a tired and contracted hand. *CARRY THE WEAPON. DON'T GRIP.*

### Foil target

The target in foil is the trunk of the body, both front and back. It does not include the arms, head or legs. See Figure:



### Direct hit

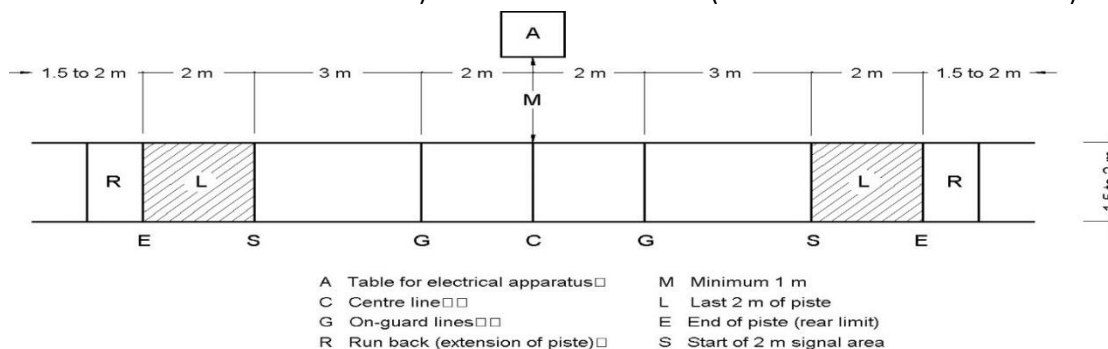
The direct hit or straight thrust is the first of the four simple attacks. It is an attack in the line in which the fencer is engaged. The arm is extended and followed by a lunge.

### Disengagement

The disengagement is the second of the simple attacks. It is made by passing the point under the opponent's blade into the opposite line. Whilst this action is being made, the arm is extended to make a threatening movement to the opponent and is followed by a lunge.

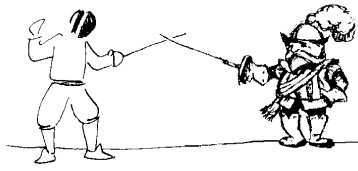
## 3. Piste dimensions

The piste is the field of play for the fencers. It is 14.0 metres long and 1.5 to 2.0 metres wide. In competition a metallic mesh linked to a central scoring device to ensure hits on the piste are not recorded covers it. There are 5 lines on the piste to show the centre line; the on guard lines (2 metres either side of the centre line) and the rear limit lines (7 metres from the centre line).



For electric foil and épée the conductive surface must cover the whole of the length and breadth of the piste, including its extensions (run back) (cf. Article t.13s, m.57)

## 4. Bouting etiquette (Salute and hand shake)



## 1. Foot work

### Speed and distance

Try to vary the speed and distance of your footwork. The fastest movement should be the final lunge. Try to accelerate your movements towards the final attack, however more important at the moment is that your steps flow into one another rather than being “stop-start”.

## 2. Blade work

### Lateral parry – quarte

A parry is the technique of knocking your opponent's blade away defensively. Parries are named according to the area of your target they protect. The foil target is divided into 4 distinct sections; these will be discussed in greater detail next week. For this week it may help you to know that 'quarte' is the high, inside line, in other words, it is the top half of your torso on the side of *your* off hand (for a right-hander *your* left hand side, for a left-hander *your* right hand side).

Whilst there are many different parries, they can be grouped into:

- Lateral (simple or direct) parries
- Semi-circular (indirect) parries
- Circular (counter) parries

A lateral parry covers your target area in a horizontal straight line. *Parry quarte* is an example of this type of parry. The hand is moved in a single plain from the en guard position to the left (for right handers or right for left handers). The hand and point are kept in line, the blade finishes parallel to where it started (don't let your blade swing wide). The defender's forte (strong part of the blade) will oppose the foible (weak part of the blade) of the opponent's foil. This is the principle of defense, “opposition of forte to foible”.

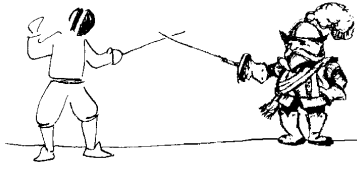
### Direct and indirect ripostes

A riposte is the offensive action following the successful parry of an attack in which the fencer has right of way.

There are four simple ripostes as there are attacks:

- Direct
- Disengage
- Counter-disengage
- Coupe (not covered in the beginner's course)

A direct riposte touches the opponent without leaving the line in which the parry was made, while an indirect riposte will change line, for example a *Riposte by disengagement*: a riposte which touches the opponent in the opposite line to that in which the parry was formed (by passing under the opponent's blade if the parry was formed in the high line, and over the blade if the parry was formed in the low line).

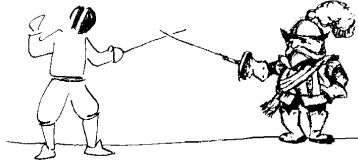


### **Counter disengage**

This is the third of the simple attacks. It is the action of deceiving a change in engagement. Whilst this action is being made, the arm is extended to make a threatening movement to the opponent and is followed by a lunge.

### **Foil convention – right of way**

Right of way is gained by a fencer who threatens the opponent's target with the view to attacking, or riposting after a parry. The two opponents cannot score a point at the same time, i.e. you must be either the first to attack, or if your opponent attacks you first defend yourself with a parry to gain the right of way for your riposte.



## 1. Foot work

### Balestra

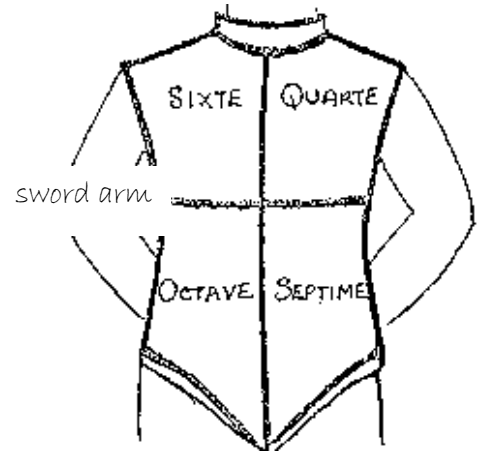
This is a short and quick jump forward starting with the front foot and both feet landing together. It is neither high, nor long.

### Flèche (arrow)

A forward leaping delivery of the attack. This is an alternative to a lunge made with a series of steps similar to the start of a sprint. This is an explosive move, the hit should be immediate, a common error is to run down the piste chasing your opponent.

- The sword- arm is extended quickly and smoothly forward to a position slightly higher than the shoulder with the point threatening the opponent's target.
- Pushing from the front leg, throw yourself forward toward your opponent, leaning forward to the point of almost losing your balance.
- Bring your back foot around to regain your balance, run past your opponent on their open side.
- The timing is such that the hit should arrive before the rear foot lands from the first step.

The bout is stopped once you pass your opponent or if you step off the piste.



## 2. Blade work

### Hand positions

The hand holding the foil may be in three positions, being:

- Supination – palm upwards
- Pronation – palm downwards

Half supination – thumb on top with the palm facing the side (facing left for right handers and facing right for left handers).

### The fencing positions (lines)

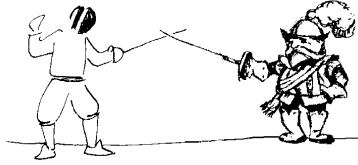
The positions in which the sword arm and the weapon may be placed to cover the target are the fencing lines. Lines are defined by target quadrant and hand position.

The foil target area is divided into four distinct quadrants named as follows: Sixte (high-outside), Quarte (high-inside), Octave (low-outside), and Septime (low-inside).

Lines and Parries with your hand in *supination* have the same name as the quadrant e.g. the parry of *Quarte* will defend the position of *Quarte* on the target.

Lines and Parries with your hand in *pronation* are Tierce (high-outside), Prime (low-inside), Seconde (low-outside), Quinte (high-inside). Pronated lines and parries are used rarely in fencing foil.

We can talk about closing, opening or changing the line. Opening the line is the action of moving the blade away from the line. Closing the line is to move the blade toward the line, thereby defending



the target in that area. To change the line is to move the blade from one line to another and engage the opponent's blade in the line. This can be done by passing under or over the opponent's blade.

### **Circular parries (counter sixte)**

These are parries that follow a circular action and start and finish in the same line. The parry will start in a line, move to the centre of the target area, collect the opponent's weapon and return to the starting line.

A counter sixte parry is an example of a circular parry. For a right-hander it starts in sixte is counter clockwise in movement and finishes back in sixte.

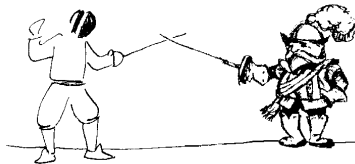
### **Semi circular parries (octave and septime)**

A semi-circular parry moves the blade from high line to low line or visa versa; they describe a half-circle. Octave and septime parry are examples of a semi-circular parry taken from high line to low line. Note that for these parries, your sword arm stays at approximately the same height as it was in the en guard position; your fingers move the blade around.

An Octave parry moves the blade to the centre of target first, then using the fingers drops, the point of the weapon to collect the opponent's blade pushing it to the outside of the octave quadrant. For a right-hander it transcribes a 'C' in the air, and a backwards 'C' for the Left-hander.

A Septime Parry first drops the point of the weapon to the low line, and then moves the blade horizontally across the low line to the Septime position. For a right-hander it transcribes a backward 'L' in the air, and an 'L' for the Left-hander.





## 1. Introduction to épée

### Rules and Character

Unlike foil, épée is fenced with no right of way rules to determine who is awarded a point. Instead épée fencing is based around the simpler, and some argue more realistic, idea that the fencer who hits the other first is awarded the point.

Without right of way, either fencer can be hit by their opponent at any time, including during an attack, which leads to épée being fenced at a slower pace, and often in a counter-offensive style, while patiently waiting for one's opponent to make a mistake.

### En guard position

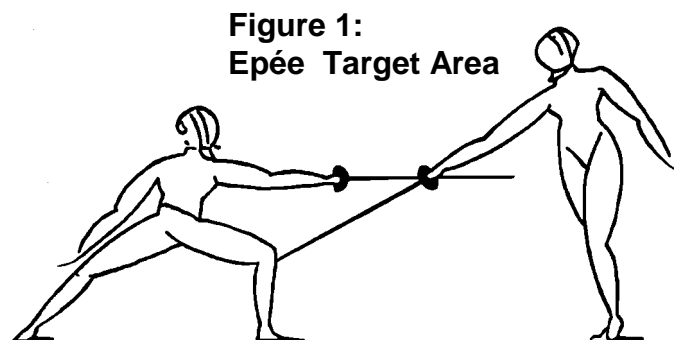
The en-guard position for épée is very similar to that of foil. The basic stance remains the same, i.e. feet at approximately 90° to one another, knees bent and your weight spread evenly on both legs. The most significant difference is the position of your sword arm.

For épée your sword arm must be extended noticeably more than foil, pushing the elbow well beyond a single hand-span from your ribs. At the same time, the hand is brought down in-line with the elbow. This protects your forearm, a valid target in épée, by keeping it behind the guard of the weapon.

### Fencing distance

When fencing épée, the whole body is target. As a result, we fence this weapon at a greater distance from our opponent to provide some degree of protection to areas of "advanced target", such as the sword arm and the front leg.

Despite the greater fencing distance, it is not uncommon for épée fencers to find themselves engaged in a close quarters tussle on occasion.



### Attacks to advances target (arm)

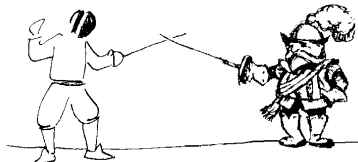
Even with the altered en-guard position and fencing at a greater distance, certain parts of our opponent's body will be consider a more attractive target than others, simply because it is closer. The most obvious of these is the sword arm.

To hit our opponent's sword arm, we follow the same set of movements we would use when executing a lunge in foil, including keeping the hand slightly above shoulder height. As you lunge, you use your fingers to keep the point of the épée trained on your target's forearm and let the movement of your body through the lunge bring the point to the target rather than trying to push at it with the hand.

### Riposte in opposition (sixte)

As we have already discussed, in épée the hit that arrives first is awarded. If both hits arrive together, then both are awarded. Ripostes should be made with opposition; maintain contact with the opponent's blade, keeping their point off your target all the way into the hit.

An important thing to remember when hitting in opposition is to NOT exaggerate the movement of the point of your épée by trying to hit around your opponent's guard, but to simply engage their attack with your parry and push your riposte straight through to a convenient target (chest, shoulder, etc).



## 1. Introduction to épée (continued)

### Revision of épée

As we discussed in Week 4, épée is a weapon with no right-of-way rules and the entire body is valid target. While this may make it sound much easier than foil, the nuances of épée actually make it a very intricate weapon to fence and to be successful one must learn to be both patient and accurate.

### Attacks to advances target (foot/leg)

With the entire body as the target area in épée, making attacks only at the sword arm or the torso can become a little predictable. To change things up from time to time and keep our opponent on his or her toes, literally, a well-timed attack to the front leg, or even foot, can be a handy alternative.

The attack to the foot or leg starts very much like the attack to the arm. In fact in order to disguise this action, you always begin an attack to the foot as if you were intending to hit the arm. As you reach full extension of your lunge, you bend forward at the hips and lower the arm slightly to bring the point of the épée down to the intended target.

Looking at your opponent's foot is likely to give away your intentions so instead of looking directly at the target we try to use the rest of their body to line-up the hit. Your opponent's foot is usually in line with his/her shoulder and slightly further forward. Keeping this in mind we can "aim" for the foot without telegraphing our plan to hit it.

Having to lower your blade and your body to make this hit can leave you vulnerable to a counterattack, which is why we try to disguise it at first. Nonetheless, if disguised properly and used sparingly, the foot-hit is an important weapon in the épée-ists arsenal.

### Riposte in opposition (seconde)

Now that you're aware of the potential threat of the attack to the foot or the leg you need to be able to defend yourself against it. Seconde is a pronated parry [which refers to the position of the hand & wrist] and when it is executed correctly gives us very good control over our opponent's weapon if they attack a low line, in particular between the knee and thigh.

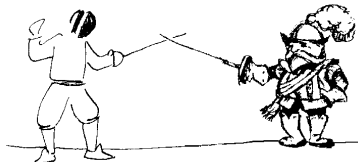
From the normal en-guard position for épée, seconde is a semi-circular parry. For right-handed fencers, the sword-hand is rotated anti-clockwise, swinging the tip of the weapon across the body and down until the blade, guard and arm are all outside the line of the thigh and hip.

The subsequent riposte can be delivered in several ways, ranging from simply extending the arm towards the closest target to stepping in to close quarters and hitting in opposition with a bent arm. Feel free to experiment a little with how best to hit some from seconde. If you've made a strong parry openings in your opponent's defences should be rather obvious.

### Counter attack/stop-hit

While parrying is always preferable in foil, and also sometimes in sabre as you will discover in coming weeks, it is not always the best defence in épée. In the time it takes you to find and engage your opponent's blade, you may already have been hit or your opponent may have changed lines (disengage) in the meantime, leaving you very vulnerable. For these reasons, as well as the fact there is not right-of-way issues, épée fencers often prefer to counterattack into their opponent's attack, attempting to hit them first and possibly even "arrest" the movement of their arm in the process.

The counterattack is, in principle, pretty straightforward. As your opponent begins their attack, you simply extend your arm, fast and firm, into position slightly above theirs with the intention of making a touch on their arm as they lunge at you. In practice, the counterattack is a little more complicated than that. You will learn to take into account the height of your opponent's arm, their guard, the timing of their attack, and a tactic called counter-time, which you will encounter if you continue on after this course.



## Introduction to sabre

### Rules and Character

At first glance, sabre can appear to be a mashed together version of foil and epee, as it incorporates Right of Way rules and areas of "forward" target, and almost seems to add cutting as well as thrusting for good measure. However with a little experience, most people come to appreciate sabre as ultimately being a very different weapon. It by far the most dynamic of the three when fenced properly on relies on timing which is subtly different to both foil and epee.

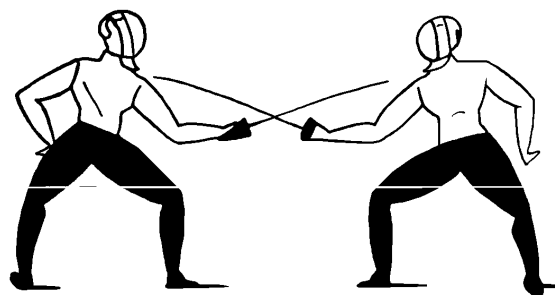
### Enguard, Distance and Target

Sword arm should be a hand's width forward of the ribs, however the arm is a target so ensure that your hand is kept slightly outside the line of your shoulder and the blade is just forward of vertical. Protect the target under your forearm by keeping your forearm parallel to the ground and behind the weapon's guard.

At sabre the upper body, from the hip bones up, is valid target (see the diagram above) including the head and the arms down to the cuffs of the sleeves. Having an advanced target similar to epee means that sabre is fenced at a greater distance than foil, but not as far apart as epee.

One of the most significant differences regarding movement in sabre is the fact that fencers are not permitted to cross their feet when moving forward. This removes the cross-step and the fleche as options available to us.

Additionally, rules regarding the timing of the hit in relation to movement mean that sabre lunges are, generally speaking, shorter than those used in foil or epee, and allow the fencer to recover faster, which you will find is essential to fighting effectively with this weapon.



Sabre Target Area

### Attacks by cut

There is a myth in sabre that the harder you hit your opponent the more hits you score. Not true, you will only end up with a very annoyed opponent! Hold the grip with your fingers and use a squeezing action, combined with an extension of the arm, to make your cuts.

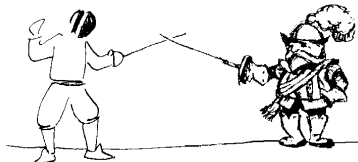
When making a simple attack in sabre, your blade must hit your opponent BEFORE OR AS the front foot lands in your lunge. If your foot lands and you have not made a hit, your attack is considered to have failed and your opponent is immediately given Right of Way to riposte.

### Parries at sabre (quinte)

As has been mentioned, Right of Way convention applies in sabre similarly to how it does in foil. To parry quinte, lift your hand to approximately in line with the top of your head and around 30cm in front of it. At the same time, turn your hand so the guard faces up and your wrist to bring the blade parallel to the ground. To riposte you must first clear your blade from your opponent's by rotating the wrist backwards before beginning the cut.



Quinte



## Introduction to sabre (continued)

### Revision of sabre

Last week, we explored the basics of sabre; how to hold the weapon, the differences in your en-guard position, and some of simple facets of Right of Way in sabre. While you most likely haven't experienced it yet, sabre fencing has an ebb and flow that comes from these rules and how we try to use them to our advantage.

### Attacks by cut (chest)

The cut to your opponent's chest in sabre starts exactly the same way as the cut to the head. The only difference between the two attacks is a rotation of the wrist. When cutting the chest, you must rotate your wrist ninety degrees clockwise (for a right-handed fencer) while you extend your arm. The earlier you complete the rotation the greater your chance to deceive when making indirect attacks, which we will cover later.

At this stage in your development, make sure your arm is fully extended before you begin your lunge and that your blade is nearly perpendicular to your arm. To finish the cut, squeeze the handle with fingers to push it forward. Just like last week, your blade must hit your opponent either before, or just as, the front foot lands in your lunge otherwise your attack has failed and your opponent has right of way to riposte.

### Parries at sabre (quarte)

Naturally once we recognise the chest as being a viable target for our opponent we need to be able to defend that region when they attack it. Much like the same parry in foil that you were taught in Week 2, parry quarte in sabre is a simple lateral action moving your hand from the sword-arm side of your body to the other side. When using parry quarte make sure that you move your hand far enough across to effectively defend your shoulder.

Where foil and épée parries intercept and deflect attacks, the nature of cutting attacks in sabre mean that parries in this weapon must block the incoming blade rather than simply guide past the body. Nonetheless, when parrying in sabre it is important to not try to cut at your opponent's blade when they attack. Just move your hand into the correct position and hold it there relaxed but firm.

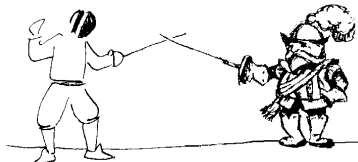
### Indirect attacks in sabre

As we wrap up the course let's quickly look at making an indirect attack in sabre. The indirect attack is used to deceive your opponent and hit them in an area they expose as they move to cover another area you were threatening. Start by launching an attack to your opponent's head as we covered last week. Make sure you keep your arm extended and blade back. As soon as your opponent moves to parry quinte, rotate your hand ninety degrees, in either direction, and squeeze to cut. The action of rotating should have brought your blade clear of your opponent's parry into an "opening line", perfect for scoring a point.

### What happens next...?

Congratulations! You've made it through the basics of what is a very complex and demanding sport. Hopefully you now have a taste of each weapon and fencing in general and should know if it's the sport for you. If it is, have a chat to our Secretary or Registrar to find out how to join.

We look forward to seeing you again soon.



THE ECU CAVALIER  
SCHOOL OF FENCING  
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

BEGINNERS' COURSE

**AFTER WEEK 7**

## **After Week 7**

### **Introduction to the Club.**

**Now that you know that you are going to continue fencing, we invite you to join our Club.**

Please see our Secretary or Registrar to pay your full membership. The payment for the Beginners Course will be deducted from the amount. You will also need to pay your state fencing association affiliation fee to Fencing WA, the Secretary or Registrar will be able to explain the details. You may pay an extra equipment hire fee or arrange to buy your own equipment.

### **Which Group do I Join?**

There is a **Club Session** which is for everyone and runs on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You will be able to follow through with all three weapons, and this will provide the opportunity to discover which weapons you will eventually prefer.

### **To Whom do I go for Advice?**

Best to speak to the Coach Co-Ordinator or one of the Club Coaches if you are at all unsure as to the best way for you to maximise your fencing experience at our club. You may plan to be more competitive at some stage, or you may enjoy fencing at a more leisurely pace.

Anyone of our fencers will be only too happy to help you out with your transition between the Beginners and the Club Session. If you feel a bit lost, or don't know what is going on, please speak to anyone one of our club fencers as they are all more than willing to help or point you in the direction of someone that can.

**We look forward to many happy fencing days with you.**