

How Did They Train Back Then?

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Historical fencing today is a rich environment from which we can look back in history and choose to draw from some 600 years of weaponry forms, styles and practices. For fencing we have the advantage of being able to slip into a sturdy mask and freely assault, safe in the knowledge that our facial features will retain their natural proportions.

These are luxuries that pre mid-18th century practitioners of fence did not have, not to mention personal insurance. Some people find it hard to imagine just how they managed to practice actual techniques with steel, up to speed, and incorporate them into free-play safely without the use of such external protective measures.

If we look at the surviving examples and historical records of what types of steel blades were used for practice, we find a couple of different types. The first is the specifically made training blade, as seen in the longsword section of German fencing master Joachim Meyer's treatise of 1570. These blades are of a different shape and section as compared to sharps, but retain the same weight and balance. The edges are completely dulled, as the section is usually rectangular. Original examples of these are to be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Dean Castle Museum in Scotland, where each collection retains a pair of such weapons (1). Other examples of this type of training blade can also be found on some 17th century practice rapiers (2).

The other blade type used was that of the sharp itself. Before we generalize any further, to speak of a sharp blade is as to speak of a fast horse. Some horses are faster than others. We do not hear of legendary blade sharpness which could cut through a knight and his squire in one blow, but the edge holding of a functional European longsword, sidesword or rapier which is about that of a used kitchen knife.

A sharp blade can be easily adapted with a wood and leather button system to at least provide a safe point for the thrust, as seen illustrated in many original fencing treatises (3). This has the advantage of saving on the purchase of a separate steel blunt for practice, when you could use that which you already carried. Angelo Viggiani in particular recommends the use of sharp blades for practice, as this promoted the essential approach for any actual encounters and developed a necessarily good defense (4).

Sharp blades were used for the public stage fights of the 17th and 18th centuries, where the English broadsword (such as the type described and used by George Silver in *Paradoxes of Defence* 1599) and the falchion were popular weapons. There are many contemporary accounts of these stage fights which detail the variety of weapons used (5). The noted late 17th century English diarist, Samuel Pepys, tells us that while attending a stage fight at the New Theatre in London on June 1 1663, he checked one of the swords used and "found it to be very little, if at all blunter on the edge that the common swords are" (6). Actual bouts fought to blood only with no protective equipment present a similar approach to that of a controlled *salle* bout, both of which are only safely achieved not by way of external safety measures, but by the application of internal control.

The aim is to successfully apply technical practices with realistic timing, i.e. at speed, and not present a danger to your fencing partner in the *salle*. A blow that is delivered at full speed which is pulled just short or lightly touches the intended target is a surer sign of a well-controlled technique than one that lands with force. Consider historical fencers in the *salle* with unrebated weapons and no masks practicing



techniques aimed at the head. From the fencing master's point of view, semi-conscious or dead students are simply no good as they don't make good advertising and they don't pay! Better received is the controlled blow with the sharp blade than an uncontrolled blow with a dull weapon. There can be no question as to the importance of control.

If we look at the age-old comparison of the fencer and the fighter, the artist and the ignorant (7), we find that the fighter may be physically strong and fast at delivering his instinctively heavy blows. This advantage, however, is of little use against a trained fencer who has control of distance, timing and technique. The fencer's delivered attack need only be intentionally projected a few inches deeper than the same blow that is practiced with the same speed, control and intent in the salle, and it will run or cut through the relevant part of the opponent's anatomy. If a fencer possesses the ability to control a blade such that from a full-speed delivery it stops at any intended point, then the ability to follow through with that action is without question.

This was and still is an essential element of an historical fencer's technical practices. In order to fence today with any degree of skill, as original practitioners from the salles of Maestri Dei Liberi, Marozzo, Capo Ferro, Carranza, Hope or any other true fencing master of the past, the same approaches to the sword must be adopted, namely:

That the weapons used, however rebated, be regarded as sharps
That you fence as though no protective equipment is worn
That all blade actions are executed with control

The observation of the above should lend the mindset and approach of the fencer closer to that of a true historical salle fencer who would apply the same controlled techniques in any live encounter with sharps with the following through of offensive intention. We have improved upon our external protective environment for good safety reasons, but the internal essence of our training and fencing approach should be unchanged from that of the past, in mind, in body and in spirit.



1. *The Academy of the Sword—Illustrated Fencing Books 1500 - 1800*, Donald J. LaRoca, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1998 p27.

2. *The Sword and the Centuries*, Alfred Hutton FSA, London, p74. This actual sword is presently on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Armi Bianche Italiane, Lionello G Boccia and Eduardo T Coelho, Milano 1975, sword number 533/534.

3. *Kurtze jedoch deutliche Beshreibung handlend vom Fechten auf Stosz und Hieb*, Johann Georg Paschen, Halle 1664.

Anfangsgrunde der Fechtkunst nebst einer Vorrede von dem Nutzen der Fechtkunst un den Vorzugen dieser Anweisung, Anton Freidrich Kahn, Gottingen 1739.

L'arte de l'Epee, Monsieur L'Abbat, Toulouse 1690.

4. *Lo Schermo*, Angelo Viggiani, Venice 1575, fol 52 v-3.

5. For details of such accounts, see *Schools and Masters of Fence*, Egerton Castle, London 1885 p189-190 and 202-209.

The Sword and the Centuries, Alfred Hutton FSA, London, p259-309.

6. *Leaves from the Diary of Samuel Pepys*, London, 1901, p36-37.

7. The recognition of such has been made know by fencing masters throughout history, from Maestro Fiore dei Liberi (*Flos Duellatorum* 1409/10), “any person who has a generous mind will appreciate my work and I hope he won’t widespread it among those who would not use it properly”, to Sir William Hope (*Scots Fencing Master*, Edinburgh 1687), “there are but few good swordmen to be found, and many of them get the name of Artists who are really but Ignorants”.

