

# Foil Fencing

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## Introduction.

The word foil is used in several spellings (foyle, file, &c.) by the English writers of the last half of the 16th century, but less in the sense of a weapon of defence than merely as an imitation of a real weapon. Blunt swords for practice in fencing have been used in all ages. For the most part these were of wood and flat in general form, but when, towards the close of the 17th century, all cutting action with the small-sword was discarded, foil-blades were usually made of steel, and either round, three-cornered or four-cornered in form, with a button covering the point. The foil is called in French *fleuret*, and in Italian *fioretto* (literally bud) from this button. The classic small-sword play of the 17th and 18th centuries is represented at the present time by fencing with the *epee de combat*, which is merely the modern duelling-sword furnished with a button, and by foil-fencing. Foil-fencing is a conventional art, its characteristic limitation lying in the rule that no hits except those on the body shall be considered good, and not even those unless they be given in strict accordance with certain standard precepts. In *epee-fencing* on the contrary, a touch on any part of the person, however given, is valid. Foil-fencing is considered the basis, so far as practice is concerned, of all sword-play, whether with foil, *epee* or *sabre*.

There are two recognized schools of foil-fencing, the French and the Italian. The French method, which is now generally adopted everywhere except in Italy, is described in this article, reference being made to the important differences between the two schools.

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## The Foil

The foil consists of the blade and the handle. The blade, which is of steel and has a quadrangular section, consists of two parts: the blade proper, extending from the guard to the button, and the tongue, which runs through the handle and is joined to the pommel. The blade proper is divided into the *forte*, or thicker half (next the handle), and the *foible* or thinner half. Some authorities divide the blade proper into three parts, the *forte*, middle and *foible*. The handle is comprised of the guard, the grip and the pommel. The guard is a light piece of metal shaped like the figure 8 (Fr. *lunettes*, spectacles) and backed with a piece of stiff leather of the same shape. The grip, which is grasped by the hand, is a hollow piece of wood, usually wound with twine, through which the tongue of the blade passes. The pommel is a piece of metal, usually pear-shaped, to which the end of the tongue is joined and which forms the extremity of the handle. The blade from guard to button is about 33in. long (No. 5), though a somewhat shorter and lighter blade is generally used by ladies. The handle is about 8in. long and slightly curved downwards.

The genuine Italian foil differs from the French in having the blade a trifle longer and more whippy, and in the form of the handle, which consists of a thin, solid, bell-shaped guard from 4 to 5in. in diameter, a straight grip and a light metal bar joining the grip with the guard, beyond the edge of which it extends slightly on each side. Of late years many Italian masters use French blades and even discard the cross-bar, retaining, however, the bell-guard.

In holding the foil, the thumb is placed on the top or convex surface of the grip (the sides of which are a trifle narrower than the top and bottom), while the palm and fingers grasp the other three sides. This is the position of supination or thumb-up. Prona-

tion is the reverse position, with the knuckles up. The French lay stress upon holding the foil lightly, the necessary pressure being exerted mostly by the thumb and forefinger, the other fingers being used more to guide the direction of the executed movements. This is in order to give free scope to the *doigté* (fingering), or the faculty of directing the point of the foil by the action of the fingers alone, and includes the possibility of changing the position of the hand on the grip. Thus, in parrying, the end of the thumb is placed within half an inch, or even less, of the guard, while in making a lunge, the foil is held as near the pommel as possible, in order to gain additional length. It will be seen that *doigté* is impossible with the Italian foil, in holding which the forefinger is firmly interlaced with the crossbar, preventing any movement of the hand. The lightness of grasp inculcated by the French is illustrated by the rule of the celebrated master Lafaugre: Hold your sword as if you had a little bird in your hand, firmly enough to prevent its escape, yet not so firmly as to crush it. This lightness has for a consequence that a disarmament is not considered of any value in the French school.

## Preliminaries

**To Come on Guard.** The position of on guard is that in which the fencer is best prepared both for attack and defence. It is taken from the position of attention; the feet together and at right angles with each other, head and body erect, facing forward in the same direction as the right foot, left arm and hand hanging in touch with the body, and the right arm and foil forming a straight line so that the button is about 1yd. in front of the feet and 4in. from the floor. From this position the movements to come on guard are seven in number:

1. Raise the arm and foil and extend them towards the adversary (or master) in a straight line, the hand being opposite the eye.
2. Drop the arm and foil again until the point is about 4in. from the floor.
3. Swing the button round so that it shall point horizontally backwards, and hold the hilt to the left thigh, the open fingers of the left hand being held, knuckles down, against the guard and along the blade.
4. Carry the foil, without altering the position of the hands, above the head until the arms are fully extended, the foil being kept horizontal and close to the body as it is lifted.
5. Let the left arm fall back behind the head to a curved position, the hand being opposite the top of the head; at the same time bring the right hand down opposite the right breast and about 8in. from it; keeping the elbow well in and the point of the foil directed towards the opponents eye.
6. Bend the legs by separating them at the knees but without moving the feet.
7. Shift the weight of the body on to the left leg and advance the right foot a short distance (from 14 to 18in., according to the height of the fencer).

In the Italian school the fencer stands on guard with the right arm fully extended, the body more effaced, i.e. the left shoulder thrown farther back, and the feet somewhat farther apart. At the present time, however, many of the best Italian fencers have adopted the guard with crooked sword-arm, owing to their abandonment of the old long-foil blade.

**The Recover** (at the close of the lesson or assault). To recover in advance : extend the right arm at right angles with the body, drop the left arm and straighten the legs by drawing the rear foot up to the One in advance. To recover to the rear extend the right arm and drop the left as before, and straighten the legs by drawing the forward foot back to that in the rear.

The Salute always follows the recover, the two really forming one manœuvre. Having recovered, carry the right hand to a position just in front of the throat, knuckles out, foil vertical with point upwards; then lower and extend the arm with nails up until the point is 4in. from the floor and slightly to the right.

**To Advance** Being on guard, take a short step forward with the right foot and let the left foot follow immediately the same distance, the position of the body not being changed. However the step,

or series of steps, is made, the right foot should always move first.

**To Retreat** This is the reverse of the advance, the left foot always moving first.

**The Calls** (*deux appels*) Being on guard, tap the floor twice with the right foot without altering the position of any other part of the person. The object of the calls is to test the equilibrium of the body, and they are usually executed as a preliminary to the recover.

**The Lunge** is the chief means of attack. It is immediately preceded by the movement of extension, in fact the two really form one combined movement. Extension is executed by quickly extending the right arm, so that point, hand and shoulder shall have the same elevation; no other part of the person is moved. The lunge is then carried out by straightening the left leg and throwing forward the right foot, so that it shall be planted as far forward as possible without losing the equilibrium or preventing a quick recovery to the position of guard. The left foot remains firmly in its position, the right shoulder is advanced, and the left arm is thrown down and back (with hand open and thumb up), to balance the body. The recovery to the position of guard is accomplished by smartly throwing the body back by the exertion of the right leg, until its weight rests again on the left leg, the right foot and arms resuming their on-guard positions. The point upon which the French school lays most stress is, that the movement of extension shall, if only by a fraction of a second, actually precede the advance of the right foot. The object of this is to ensure the accuracy of the lunge, i.e. the direction of the point.

**The Gain** This consists in bringing up the left foot towards the right (the balance being shifted), keeping the knees bent. In this manner a step is gained and an exceptionally long lunge can be made without the knowledge of the adversary. It is a common stratagem of fencers whose reach is short.

## Defence

For the purpose of nomenclature the space on the fencers jacket within which hits count is divided into quarters, the two upper ones being called the high lines, and the two lower ones the low lines. Thus a thrust directed at the upper part of the breast is called an attack in the high lines. In like manner the parries are named from the different quarters they are designed to protect. There are four traditional parries executed with the hand in supination, and four others, practically identical in execution, made with the hand held in pronation. Thus the parries defending the upper right-hand quarter of the jacket are *sixte* (sixth; with the hand in supination) and *tierce* (third; hand in pronation). Those defending the upper left-hand quarter are *quarte* (fourth; in supination) and *quinte* (fifth; in pronation). Those defending the lower right-hand quarter are *octave* (eighth; in supination) and *seconde* (second; in pronation). Those defending the lower left-hand quarter are *septime* (seventh; in supination), more generally called *demi-cercle*, or half-circle; and *prime* (first; in pronation).

## The Parries

The tendency of the French school has always been towards simplicity, especially of defence, and at the present day the parries made with the knuckles up (pronation), although recognized and taught, are seldom if ever used against a strong adversary in foil-fencing, owing principally to the time lost in turning the hand. The theory of parrying is to turn aside the opponents foil with the least possible expenditure of time and exertion, using the arm as little as possible while letting the hand and wrist do the work, and opposing the *forte* of the foil to the *foible* of the adversary. The foil is kept pointed as directly as possible towards the adversary, and the parries are made rather with the corners than the sides of the blade. The slightest movement that will turn aside the opponents blade is the most perfect parry. There are two kinds of parries, simple, in which the attack is warded off by a single movement, and counter, in which a narrow circle is described by the point of the foil round that of the opponent, which is thus enveloped and thrown aside. There are also complex parries, composed

of combinations of two or more parries, which are used to meet complicated attacks, but they are all resolvable into simple parries. In parrying, the arm is bent about at right angles.

### Simple Parries

The origin of the numerical nomenclature of the parries is a matter of dispute, but it is generally believed that they received their names from the positions assumed in the process of drawing the sword and falling on guard. Thus the position of the hand and blade, the moment it is drawn from the scabbard on the left side, is practically that of the first, or prime, parry. To go from prime to seconde it is only necessary to drop the hand and carry it across the body to the left side; thence to tierce is only a matter of raising the point of the sword, &c.

**Parry of Prime** (to ward off attacks usually on the lower left-hand side of the body). Hold the hand, knuckles up, opposite the left eye and the point directed towards the opponents knee. This parry is now regarded more as an elegant evolution than a sound means of defence, and is little employed.

**Parry of Seconde** (against thrusts at the lower right-hand side). This is executed by a quick, not too wide movement of the hand downwards and slightly to the right, knuckles up.

**Parry of Tierce** (against thrusts at the upper right-hand side). A quick, dry beat on the adversary's foible is given, forcing it to the right, the hand, in pronation, being held opposite the middle of the right breast. This parry has been practically discarded in favor of sixte.

**Parry of Quarte** (against thrusts at the upper left-hand side). This parry, perhaps the most used of all, is executed by forcing the adversary's blade to the left by a dry beat, the hand being in supination, opposite the left breast.

**Parry of Quinte** (against thrusts at the left-hand side, like quarte). This is practically a low quarte, and is little used.

**Parry of Sixte** (against thrusts at the upper right-hand side) This parry is, together with quarte, the most important of all. It is executed with the hand held in supination opposite the right breast, a quick, narrow movement throwing the adversary's blade to the right.

**Parry of Septime or Half-Circle** (to ward off thrusts at the lower left-hand side) is executed by describing with the point of the foil a small semicircle downward and towards the left, the hand moving a few inches in the same direction, but kept thumb up.

**Parry of Octave** (against thrusts at the lower right-hand side) is executed by describing with the point of the foil a small semicircle downward and towards the right, the hand moving a few inches in the same direction, but kept thumb up.

### Counter Parries

(Fr. *contre*). Although the simple parries are theoretically sufficient for defence, they are so easily deceived by feints that they are supplemented by counter parries, in which the blade describes narrow circles, following that of the adversary and meeting and turning it aside; thus the point describes a complete circle while the hand remains practically stationary. Each simple parry has its counter, made with the hand in the same position and on the same side as in the simple parry. The two most important are the counter of quarte and the counter of sixte, while the counters of septime and octave are less used, and the other four at the present time practically never.

**Counter of Quarte.** Being on guard in quarte (with your adversary's blade on the left of yours), if he drops his point under and thrusts in sixte, in other words at your right breast, describe a narrow circle with your point round his blade, downward to the right and then up over to the left, bringing hand and foil back to their previous positions and catching and turning aside his blade on the way.

**The Counter of Sixte** is executed in a similar manner, but the circle is described in the oppo-

site direction, throwing off the adverse blade to the right.

The Counters of Septime and Octave are similar to the other two but are executed in the low lines.

**Complex or Combined Parries** are such as are composed of two or more parries executed in immediate succession, and are made in answer to feint attacks by the adversary (see below); e.g. being on guard in quarte, should the adversary drop his point under and feint at the right breast but deflect the point again and really thrust on the left, it is evident that the simple parry of sixte would cover the right breast but would leave the real point of attack, the left, entirely uncovered. The sixte parry is therefore followed, as a continuation of the movement, by the parry of quarte, or a counter parry. The complex parries are numerous and depend upon the attack to be met.

**Engagement** is the junction of the blades, the different engagements being named from the parries. Thus, if both fencers are in the position of quarte, they are said to be engaged in quarte. To engage in another line (Change of Engagement) e.g. from quarte to sixte, the point is lowered and passed under the adversary's blade, which is pressed slightly outward, so as to be well covered (called opposition). Double Engagement is composed of two engagements executed rapidly in succession in the high lines, the last with opposition.

## Attack.

The attack in fencing comprises all movements the object of which is to place the point of the foil upon the adversary's breast, body, sides or back, between collar and belt. The space upon which hits count is called the target and differs according to the rules prevailing in the several countries, but is usually as above stated. In Great Britain no hits above the collar-bones count, while in America the target is only the left breast between the median line and a line running from the armpit to the belt. The reason for this limitation is to encourage accuracy. Attacks are either primary or secondary. Primary Attacks are those initiated by a fencer before his adversary has made any offensive movement, and are divided into Simple, Feint and Force attacks.

**Simple Attacks.** The characteristic of which is pace, are those made with one simple movement only and are four in number, viz, the Straight Lunge, the Disengagement, the Counter-disengagement and the Cut-over. The Straight Lunge (*coup droit*), used when the adversary is not properly covered when on guard, is described above under Lunge. The Disengagement is made by dropping the point of the foil under the opponents blade and executing a straight lunge on the other side. It is often used to take an opponent unawares or when he presses unduly hard on your blade. The Counter-disengagement is used when the adversary moves his blade, i.e. changes the line of engagement, upon which you execute a narrow circle, avoiding his blade, and thrust in your original line. The Cut-over (*coup*) is a disengagement executed by passing the point of the foil over that of the adversary and lunging in the opposite line. The preliminary movement of raising the point is made by the action of the hand only, the arm not being drawn back.

**Feint Attacks.** Deceptive in character, are those which are preceded by one or more feints, or false thrusts made to lure the adversary into thinking them real ones. A feint is a simple extension, often with a slight movement of the body, threatening the adversary in a certain line, for the purpose of inducing him to parry on that side and thus leave the other open for the real thrust. At the same time any movement of the blade or any part of the body tending to deceive the adversary in regard to the nature of the attack about to follow, must also be considered a species of feint. The principal feint attacks are the One-Two, the One-Two-Three and the Double.

The One-Two is a feint in one line, followed (as the adversary parries) by a thrust in the original line of engagement. Thus, being engaged in quarte, you drop your point under the adversary's blade and extend your arm as if to thrust at his left breast, but instead of doing this, the instant he parries you move your point back again and lunge in quarte, i.e. on the side on which you were originally engaged. In feinting it is necessary that the extension of the arm and blade be so complete as really to compel the adversary to believe it a part of a real thrust in that line.

The One-Two-Three consists of two feints, one at each side, followed by a thrust in the line opposite to that of the original engagement. Thrusts preceded by three feints are also sometimes used. It is evident that the above attacks are useless if the adversary parries by a counter (circular parry), which must be met by a Double. This is executed by feinting and, upon perceiving that the adversary opposes with a circular parry, by following the circle described by his point with a similar circle, deceiving (i.e. avoiding contact with) his blade and thrusting home.

The Double, which is a favourite manoeuvre in fencing, is a combination of a disengagement and a counter-disengagement.

**Force-Attacks,** the object of which is to disconcert the opponent by assaulting his blade, are various in character, the principal ones being the Beat, the Press, the Glide and the Bind. The Beat is a quick, sharp blow of the forte of the foil upon the foible of the adversarys, for the purpose of opening a way for a straight lunge which follows instantly. The blow is made with the hand only. A false beat is a lighter blow made for the purpose of drawing out or disconcerting the opponent, and is often followed by a disengagement. The Press is similar in character to the beat, but, instead of striking the adverse blade, a sudden pressure is brought to bear upon it, sufficiently heavy to force it aside and allow ones own blade to be thrust home. A false press may be used to entice the adversary into a too heavy responsive pressure, which may then be taken advantage of by a disengagement. The Traverse (Fr. froiss, Ital. striscio) is a prolonged press carried sharply down the adverse blade towards the handle. The Glide (Graze, Fr. coul  ) is a stealthy sliding of ones blade down that of the adversary, without his notice, until a straight thrust can be made inside his guard. It is also used as a feint before a disengage. The Bind (liement) consists in gaining possession of the adversarys foible with ones forte, and pressing it down and across into the opposite low line, when ones own point is thrust home. the adversarys blade being still held by ones hilt. It may be also carried out from a low line into a high one. The bind is less used in the French school than in the Italian. The Flanconnade is a bind made by capturing the adversarys blade in

high quarte, carrying it down and thrusting in the outside line with strong opposition. Another attack carried out by means of a twist and thrust is the Cross (crois  ), which is executed when the adversarys blade is held low by passing ones point over his wrist and forcing down both blades into seconde with a full extension of the arm. The result is to create a sudden and wide opening, and often disarms the adversary.

**Secondary Attacks** are those made (1) just as your adversary himself starts to attack; (2) during his attack; and (3) on the completion of his attack if it fails.

1. Attacks on the Preparation are a matter of judgment and quickness. They are usually attempted when the adversary is evidently preparing a complicated attack, such as the onetwo-three or some other manoeuvre, involving one or more preliminary movements. At such a time a quick thrust will often catch him unawares and score. Opportunities for preparation attacks are often given when the adversary attempts a beat preliminary to his thrust; the beat is frustrated by an absence of the blade, i.e. your blade is made to avoid contact with his by a narrow movement, and your point thrust home into, the space left unguarded by the force of his unresisted beat. Or the adversary himself may create an absence by suddenly interrupting the contact of the blades, in the hope that, by the removal of the pressure, your blade will fly off to one side, leaving an opening; if, however, you are prepared for his absence a straight thrust will score.
2. The chief Attacks on the Development, or Counter Attacks, are the Stop Thrust and the Time Thrust, both made while the adversary is carrying out his own attack. The Stop Thrust (coup d'arret) is one made after the adversary has actually begun an attack involving two or more movements, and is only justified when it can be brought off without your being hit by the attacking adversarys point on any part of the person. The reason for this is, that the rules of fencing decree that the fencer attacked must parry, and that, if he disregards

this and attempts a simultaneous counter attack, he must touch his opponent while totally avoiding the latters point. Should he, however, be touched, even on the foot or mask, by the adversary, his touch, however good, is invalid. If both touches are good, that of the original attacker only counts. Stop thrusts are employed mostly against fencers who attack wildly or without being properly covered. The Time Thrust is delivered with opposition upon the adversaries composite attack (one involving several movements), and, if successful, generally parries the original attack at the same time. It is not valid if the fencer employing it is touched on any part of the person.

3. Attacks on the Completion (i.e. of the adversaries attack) are Ripostes, Counter-ripostes, Remises and Renewals of Attack.

**The Riposte** (literally, response) is an attack made, immediately after parrying successfully, by merely straightening the arm, the body remaining immovable. The counter-riposte is a riposte made after parrying the adversaries riposte, and generally from the position of the lunge, or while recovering from it, since one must have attacked with a full lunge if the adversary has had an opportunity to deliver a riposte. There are three kinds of ripostes: direct, with feints and after a pause.

The direct riposte may be made instantly after parrying the adversaries thrust by quitting his blade and straightening the arm, so that the point will touch his body on the nearest and most exposed part; or by not quitting his blade but running yours quickly down his and at the same time keeping a strong opposition (riposte d'opposition). The quickest direct riposte is that delivered after parrying quarte (for a right-hand fencer), and is called by the French the riposte of tac-au-tac, imitative of the sudden succession of the click of the parry and the tap of the riposting fencers point on his adversaries breast. In making ripostes with a feint the point is not jabbed on to the opponents breast immediately after the parry, but one or more preliminary movements precede the actual riposte, such as a disengagement, a cut-over or a double.

Ripostes with a pause (du temps perdu, with lost time) are made after a seconds hesitation, and are resorted to when the fencers are too near for an ac-

curate direct riposte, or to give the adversary time to make a quick parry, which is then deceived. The remise is a thrust made after ones first thrust has been parried and in the same line; it must be made in such a way that the adversaries justified riposte is at the same time parried by opposition or completely avoided. It is really a renewal of the attack in the original line, while the so-called renewal of attack (redoublement d'attaque) is a second thrust which ignores the adversaries riposte, but made in a different line. Both the remise and the renewal are valid only when the adversaries riposte does not hit.

**False Attacks** are broad movements made for the purpose of drawing the adversary out or of disconcerting him. They may consist of an advance, an extension, a change of engagement, an intentional uncovering by taking a wide guard (called invitation guard), or any movement or combination of movements tending to make the adversary believe that a real attack is under way.

## The Assault

The Assault is a formal fencing bout or series of bouts in public, while formal fencing in private is called loose play or a friendly bout. Bouts between fencers take place on a platform about 24 ft. long and 6 ft. wide (in the United States 20 X 3ft.). Formal bouts are usually for a number of touches, or for a certain number of minutes, the fencer who touches oftenest winning. The judges (usually three or five) are sometimes empowered to score one or more points against a competitor for breaches of good form, or for overstepping the space limits. In the United States bouts are for four minutes, with a change of places after two minutes, and the competitors are not interrupted, the winner being indicated by a vote of the judges, who take into account touches and style. In all countries contestants are required to wear jackets of a light color, so that hits may be easily seen. Audible acknowledgment of all touches, whether on the target or not, is universally considered to be a fencers duty. Fencing competitions are held in Great Britain under the rules of the Amateur Fencing Association, and in the United States under those of the Amateur Fencers League of America.

**Fencing Terms** (not mentioned above):

*Cavazione*, Ital. for disengagement.

*Contraction*, Parries of, those which do not parry in the simplest manner, but drag the adverse blade into another line, e.g. to parry a thrust in high sixte by counter of quarte.

*Controtempo*, Ital. for time-thrust.

*Coronation*, an attack preceded by a circular movement from high sixte to high quarte (and vice versa) made famous by Lafaugbre.

*Corps-au-corps* (body to body), the position of two fencers who are at such close quarters that their persons touch; when this occurs the fencers must again come on guard.

*Coule*, Fr. for glide.

*Disarm*, to knock the foil out of the adversary's hand; it is of no value in the French school.

*Double Hit*, when both fencers attack and hit at the same time; neither hit counts.

*Fib*, Ital. for glide (graze).

*Flying Cut-over*, a cut-over executed as a continuation of a parry, the hand being drawn back towards the body.

*Incontro*, Ital. for double attack. Give the blade, to allow the adversary easy contact with the foil; it is often resorted to in order to tempt the adversary into a beat or bind. *Menace*, to threaten the adversary by an extension and forward movement of the trunk.

*Mur*, see Salute.

*Passage of arms*, a series of attacks and parries, ending in a successful hit.

*Phrase of arms*, a series of attacks and parries ending in a hit or invalidation.

*Invalidation*, a hit on some part of the person outside the target, made by the fencer whose right it is at that moment to attack or riposte; such a hit invalidates one made simultaneously or subsequently by his opponent, however good.

*Rebeat*, two beats, executed as quickly as possible together, one on each side of the adversary's blade.

*Reprises d'attaque*, Fr. for renewed attacks.

*Salute*, the courteous salutation of the public and the adversary before and after about. A more elaborate salute, called by the French the *Mur*, consists of a series of parries, lunges and other evolutions carried out by both fencers at the same time. Important exhibition assaults are usually preceded by the *Mur*, which is called in English the Grand Salute.

*Septime enveloppe*, a riposte by means of a twist and thrust after a parry in septime. It envelops and masters the adverse blade, whence the name.

*Secret thrusts*, the French *bottes secretes*, pretended infallible attacks of which the user is supposed alone to know the method of execution; they have no real existence.

*Sforza*, Ital. for disarmament.

*Scandagijo*, Ital. for examination, studying the form of an opponent at the beginning of a bout.

*Toccatol* Ital. for Touched!; Fr. Touch.

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