

THE BLADE CONTROL PRIMER

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The abilities of local fencing officials have come far in recent years. Yet, we still have work to do in some areas of officiating right-of-way weapons – foil and saber. Many of us need more work in the area of "blade control" calls. We do well with left and right calls. In other words, with respect to distinguishing which fencer started the attack and which fencer was counter-attacking, we do well. And, with respect to which fencer started an attack and then stopped or hesitated, allowing the opponent to take the time, we do well. But sometimes, we do not always properly distinguish which fencer had control of the blade. We occasionally fail to properly distinguish a beat attack from a parry riposte, or a *pris de fer* from a parry riposte. Therefore, please read this *Blade Control Primer* and continue to work at the difficult task of fencing officiating.

PRELIMINARY MATTERS: It is very important for the fencing official to move along the fencing strip with the fencers in order to see between the fencers to the scoring machine lights. It is an important talent of the experienced fencing official to be able to watch the fencers and at the same time to see the lights of the scoring machine. Generally, it is best to watch the foibles of the fencers' blades. Allow your peripheral vision to see the fencers' body and foot movements, and allow the scoring lights to be part of the background. Your attention will be drawn to the scoring lights naturally when it is important, as long as you are in the proper position to see between the fencers to the scoring lights. Also, as you become more experienced as a fencing official, you will be able to more clearly see the intentions of the fencers. This is important in determining which fencer has blade control in any given situation. The fencing official should at all times be able to answer the question, "Did the fencer(s) intend the blade contact I just saw?" Of course, it is also important for the fencing official to use his or her ears to hear blade contact, but sometimes, the sound of blade contact can be misleading. It is common for fencing officials to hear blade contact and assume there has been an intended fencing action, but without also seeing the blade and hand movements of the fencers, a wrong conclusion may be made. The sound of blade contact alone is usually not enough to make a correct judgment. It is also important for the fencing official to see the actions of the fencers, along with the sound of the blade contact in determining which fencer controlled the action, and of course, it is important to see between the fencers to the scoring lights.

ATTACK ARRIVED, OR PARRY RIPOSTE?: One of the most common blade control issues is the determination of whether the attack arrived, or whether it was successfully parried and riposted. Or, alternatively stated, whether the attack arrived or the parry was late (i.e., mal parry or bad parry or insufficient parry). Of course, many highly ranked fencing officials dislike the term "mal parry," because, from their perspective, the attack either arrived or it was parried. There is no in-between determination, such as, late parry or bad parry or insufficient parry. Nevertheless, as a practical matter, using the term, "mal parry," may be useful when the fencing official sees the attack arrive and hears an obvious but late parry and wishes to let the fencers know he or she heard the blade contact but saw it was late. But, back to the originally posited dilemma: Attack arrived,

or parry riposte? How does the fencing official know? The fencing official knows by being in position to see between the fencers to the scoring lights. When the fencing official sees the attack hit, he or she will see the corresponding scoring light illuminate before he or she hears the sound of any blade contact. Why? Light moves faster than sound. If the attack arrived, the properly positioned fencing official will see the scoring light come on and then hear the sound of the mal parry. He or she may say, "Attack arrived," and nothing more, as anything that happens after a valid touch arrives is usually not described; it being irrelevant. Or, the fencing official could say something like, "Attack arrived from right; mal parry from left," especially if both fencers look at him or her quizzically after the action because they do not themselves know whether the obvious blade contact in time to be a parry. (Cf. Rule Book, t.6, foil t.56(a), saber t.60).

BEAT ATTACK: Despite the change in timing of scoring machines, the attack is still the essential move of fencing, and a properly executed attack is still given priority. (Cf. Rule Book definition t.7). A beat attack is an attack with a beat on the opponent's blade showing blade control by the attacking fencer. (Cf. Rule Book, saber 78). As stated on the FOC website, an attempt to parry a beat attack is not proper. In other words, where a fencer starts an offensive action with a beat to the foible of the opponent's blade, an attempt to parry the beat – which produces one sound – is still a beat attack and not a parry riposte. The same is true of counter-attacks which cause incidental blade contact. The attack takes priority over counter-attacks which incidentally cause blade contact noise. For a counter-attack to take priority over an attack, the counter-attack must completely close the line of the attack which usually results in one scoring light being illuminated. (Cf. Rule Book, definition t.8(c)(2) = stop hit with opposition). How does the fencing official know there has been a beat attack or a parry riposte? The fencing official sees the intention of the fencers (both of them) as manifested by their movements. This requires seeing both the blades and the foot and hand movements. As previously stated, it is probably best to focus one's eyes on the foibles of the fencers' blades. The peripheral vision can easily distinguish which fencer started moving forward first. When focusing on the foibles of the blades, the fencing official can see which fencer's arm and blade first started extension toward the target, and whether in connection therewith, there has been an arm or hand movement causing a corresponding movement of the blade in a recognized pattern of beat or parry. The fencer executing a proper beat attack will in almost all cases start his or her feet and blade moving forward first, and along therewith, the fencing official who is watching the foibles, will see a turning of the advancing fencer's blade into the opponent's blade. If the beat attack is properly parried, there will be two sounds, the first will be the beat, and the second will be the parry. Of course, there will also be two blade and wrist movements which correspond to the two sounds. The first will be the blade and wrist movement of the advancing fencer into the blade of the opponent, and the second will be the blade and wrist movement of the defending fencer into the blade of the attacker after the beat has been made.

PARRY RIPOSTE: One of the fundamental defenses in right-of-way weapons is the parry. Parries occur in recognizable lines of defense corresponding to the recognized lines of attack. In order for a fencer to properly parry, the blade of that fencer will move into the line from which the attack is coming and close that line of attack. There will be blade contact and a sound – which may be slight – and then, if there is a riposte, an extension of the defender's arm and blade toward the opponent. Where one fencer advances, and the other fencer retreats and closes a line to cause blade contact and then hits the fencer who advanced and turns on the scoring light, it is a parry riposte. A remise of the attack, even if it hits and turns on a scoring light first, does not take

priority over a slow but continuous parry riposte. The only way a remise takes priority over a parry followed by a correctly timed riposte is where the remise results in one scoring light being illuminated. Where a fencer advances and starts an attack, and the retreating defending fencer closes the line of the attack causing blade contact and slowly but continuously makes a riposte and both scoring lights are on, the riposte has priority. Under the current scoring machine timing, in order for the riposte to be too slow, there would only be one scoring light illuminated, the one caused by the remise. If both scoring lights are illuminated, the riposte should be awarded the touch. (Cf. Rule Book, definition t.7, 8, foil t.56(a), 57, saber t.79).

PRIS DE FER (Taking of Steel): A properly executed *pris de fer* attack is an attack. That means there is an offensive movement of the fencer executing the move. He or she is typically moving forward and taking or picking-up the opponent's blade. The blade contact is initiated by the offensive fencer, and he or she typically picks-up the foible of the opponent's blade and moves it out of the way, as the offensive fencer's arm extends to the target completing the move. The perceptive fencing official is usually able to distinguish a *pris de fer* from a parry riposte by seeing the intent of the fencers. In order to properly execute a *pris de fer*, an offensive fencer must take or pick-up the opponent's blade showing control. It is very difficult to parry a properly executed *pris de fer* attack. A successful defense typically involves retreating to make the offender's attack fall short. This is the case because once a defending fencer's blade is taken or picked-up, it is very difficult for the defending fencer to regain control without moving backward to create time. For this reason, if a referee recognizes a successful *pris de fer* attack but does not witness the defending fencer retreat, and if only one blade contact is heard, it is most likely a touch for the attacking fencer. (Cf. Rule Book, foil t.60(1)(e), saber t.76(2)(e)).

MEETING OF THE BLADES; NO CLEAR CONTROL: Occasionally, and usually where both fencers are standing flat-footed, there may be a simultaneous meeting of the blades without any clear control followed by mutual arm extensions causing both scoring lights to be illuminated. In such a situation, the fencing official may state in substance, "There was a meeting of the blades but no clear control; doubtful; no touch." However, where the fencers are moving, there is rarely a meeting of the blades without control. If a fencer is advancing upon the opponent and initiates blade contact, there is a beat attack. Where a fencer is retreating and closes the line into which an attack is coming causing blade contact, there is a parry.

COUNTER-ATTACKS & ATTACKS INTO PREPARATION: The change in timing of the scoring machines has for the most part eliminated the flick attack that was despised by current FIE leadership as being a trick move. However, contrary to the assertions of its proponents, the current scoring machine timing has not restored the vaunted "conversation of the blades." It has instead rewarded counter-attacks and out of time intentional remises. As a result, the fencing official must be aware of the increased probability of actions designed to take advantage of the current timing of the scoring machines, i.e., counter-attacks, attacks into preparation, and intentional remises. As a counter to these moves, fencers often advance -- usually with short steps -- to feign attacks in order to draw out counter-attacks which are then parried and riposted. Hence, fencing officials now often see parry-riposte actions preceded by forward movement; whereas, during the previous history of electric fencing, this was less common. How does the fencing official determine blade control in this situation? Generally, in the same way as a parry-riposte is determined in the more familiar situation where one fencer moves forward in attack and the other fencer makes a defensive

move closing the line of attack. Again, the key to recognition is to see the movements of the fencers in relation to one another, and be in position to see the scoring lights. Whether or not a defensive action made by a fencer moving forward is in time or whether the fencer moving forward has been hit is revealed by when the scoring light illuminates in relation to when the sound of the blade contact is heard. If the fencing official sees the scoring light caused by the counter-attack illuminate prior to hearing the sound of the blade contact, the counter-attack arrived in time. Of course, as a practical matter, properly executed counter-attacks into an advancing fencer's preparation usually produce one illuminated scoring light. And, of course, it must be remembered that a counter-attack is still just that. Any counter-attack made into an advancing fencer who has initiated an attack -- and is not just moving forward preparing -- is not valid if the advancing fencer finishes his or her attack and turns on a light. (Cf. Rule Book, definition counter-attack t.8(c)&(c)(1), foil t.56(a)(4)&(8), saber t.80(2)(d),(e),(f)).

POINT-IN-LINE: The point in line is a specific fencing position where the fencer's arm is held straight with the point of the weapon continually threatening the target. (See, Rule Book definition t.10). Except for a point-in-line, the notion that a fencer may obtain right-of-way going backward by extending his or her arm before the advancing fencer extends is a questionable notion, and in order for this to be the case under the current timing of the scoring machines, the retreating fencer would likely have to produce one scoring light. However, the point-in-line may be established going backward. The key to whether a point-in-line is established in time is whether the fencer attempting to establish the point-in-line does so before the opponent is within advance lunge distance. (Cf. Rule Book, foil t.56(a)(3), saber t.75(b)(2)). Of course, once a point-in-line is timely established, the opponent must remove the threat of the point-in-line by deflecting it. This is done with a beat attack or *pris de fer* attack. (Cf. Rule Book, foil 56(a)(5)&(6), saber t.76(c). If the fencer with the point-in-line lunges toward an advancing fencer -- which would of necessity be an attack -- there may be a parry to remove the threat. In saber, the point-in-line is usually established by a fencer taking a step backward while extending his or her arm at shoulder height. Where the opponent approaches the point-in-line and extends his or her arm, and the fencers stand flat-footed searching for blade control, it may be difficult for the fencing official to determine which fencer established control, as once blade contact occurs, both fencers usually lunge. The fencing official must watch carefully to see if one of the fencers demonstrates intended blade contact of a certain type and produces it before attacking. Otherwise, a "no clear control call" may be appropriate.

MULTIPLE BLADE CONTACTS: Multiple blade contacts are confusing to fencing officials who fail to follow the action as it occurs. With each blade contact, the fencing official should ask himself or herself, "Was there blade control and did priority change?" It is usually unnecessary to reconstruct multiple blade contacts. Where the fencing official correctly identifies which fencer controlled the final blade contact and which fencer should be awarded the touch -- these could be two different results, depending upon which fencer hit on a valid scoring surface -- it is enough to state in substance, "Riposte arrived from right." After multiple blade contacts, too much description may cause more confusion than it solves.

CLOSING MATTERS: Many years ago, when fencers fought flat-footed in front of one another, and fencing consisted of much "blade play," experienced fencing officials did a good job distinguishing right-of-way by following the action and mentally categorizing it using classic fencing terminology. For example, there might have been an attack, parry, riposte, counter-parry

riposte (that hit valid), and remise. This would typically occur in the middle of the piste with little foot work. Today, fencers move, so the fencing official must also move in order to be in position to see the fencers' actions and the scoring lights to make the correct interpretation of the action. Fencing officiating is not about acting officious and making insubstantial determinations, such as whether a fencer has two body cords at the strip or whether a fencer's socks have fallen down. Granted, these types of determinations have their place, and it is to train fencers for national and international competition where such calls may be used along partisan or nationalistic lines to burden a fencer. Primarily, fencing officiating is about seeing fencing actions clearly and making correct interpretations of the actions, so the better fencers are rewarded with touches scored.

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