

An Introduction to Teaching Rapier in the SCA

As teachers in the SCA, we have a unique opportunity to share openly about our assorted passions and interests. The development and future of SCA fencing depends on the dynamic and energetic sharing of information and skill. New teachers of SCA-style fencing are vital and should be proficient in sharing at least some of what they know.

This document is geared to the new teacher, who is training a new student to their first authorization. It is divided into several parts:

- I: Introductions to SCA rapier
- II: Teaching stance and movement
- III: De-mystifying the sword
- IV: Integrating skills on the floor
- V: Preparations for authorization
- VI: Future training for the new fencer

This document is not a handbook for teaching technique or style. It is not an instruction manual, going over step by step what lessons teach. Rather, it gives an overview of concerns and issues related to the new fencing instructor.

As a fencing teacher, there is a strong chance you may act as a chatelaine as well, sharing knowledge of the SCA, its traditions, the mores of the fencing community, SCA politics, etc. Its important to encourage the new student (if they are new to the SCA) to experience more of the Society, but don't spend too much time taking their attention or focus from the fencing practice. If they have questions or express an interest in other aspects of the Society, don't hesitate to direct them to your local group's chatelaine or, if necessary, seneschal.

I: Introductions to SCA Fencing

Whether your new student is brand-new to the SCA or an old-school SCAdian, they will still be new to your practice and to the art of rapier. The first, most practical thing you can do is teach them (or confirm with them) the lesson of, "HOLD!" Make sure they are aware that any person, participant or observer, can call hold if they see an unsafe situation. I also like to point out the marshals to them, and make a point of mentioning that we have safety officers present to oversee the practices.

Show off the equipment to the new person, including different pieces of armor and weapons. Encourage them to ask questions about the equipment. Give a brief description of the armor and weapons, pointing out their importance. Show the differences between epees and schlagers, and show the differences between each. Try to avoid specialized language; use general, non-confusing terms. I like to let the new person handle each kind of weapon. I'll mention the differences between each weapon, and point out people on the floor practicing with them.

At this point, leave aside any serious historical discussions. Though, in my opinion, its important for fencers to understand the historical context of our sport, this may not be the ideal time. It doesn't hurt to briefly mention that each weapon form does have an historical context for use (that people in the Renaissance did, in fact, fight with two swords or cloaks, on occasion).

I tend to resist putting new people directly into armor in the first lesson. I encourage the new person to take some time in the practice to sit and watch everyone fence (especially if they've never seen our style of fencing) and ask any questions. Sit with them and point out different fencers and their weapons or fencing styles. Even if this is an old-school SCAdian, encourage them to watch some of the bouts and ask questions about what they see.

When you are answering questions, keep your answers short but thoughtful and complete. It isn't necessary to describe the history of the League of Rapier Academies or the history of Italian rapier instruction. Avoid discussions about SCA or fencing community politics. Help maintain the new person's excitement without getting bogged down in details. There will be plenty of time for in-depth discussion of SCA fencing sociology as time goes on.

II: Walking and Standing

Sometimes the hardest things to learn are how to stand and walk. Just look at any toddler to prove it. Every student is going to have their own issues when it comes to stance and footwork; their body weight, body type, posture, sense of balance, and many other body issues, will have to be considered when you are teaching them how to move and stand. I can't list all the techniques useful to teaching balance and posture; rather, know that each individual will have their own issues about how to properly stand.

Be aware of where the student's center of balance is. Watch how they stand, and which leg they put the most weight onto. Initially, you can use yourself as a model of how to stand. Have the student emulate your stance, then have them move their feet into different positions until they find their center of balance. Keep in mind that what works for you may not work for every student.

The same goes for teaching footwork. Footwork is the foundation for good fencing, and deserves perfection in execution. Be patient while you are teaching; your student will not likely "get it" the first day out. Drill footwork over and over (especially at the beginning of your practice...it's a great warm-up). When you're going over footwork, keep in mind different issues:

- Don't let the body drop between steps. The beginning fencer is likely to bob while moving, having his shoulders drop or roll with each step. Teach movement without the torso rising up and down.

- No leaning. Make sure the student doesn't lean his body and head forwards or backwards while moving. If they are, see if widening or tightening their stance can help that.
- Consistency is key. Insure each step covers the same distance. When they're drilling footwork, have them stop at each step if necessary. This will obviously help them with distance, calibration and tempo later on.
- How are the feet moving? Is the student lifting their feet while they are moving, or are they shuffling their feet? Are their feet pointed the correct way when they step, or are they veering off as they move up and down the floor? Are they tripping over themselves?

One key way of insuring that you'll be able to confidently demonstrate and teach footwork is by insuring that you've mastered them yourself. Don't miss out on footwork drills, and watch your own posture and stance. All too often, we don't have mirrors in our classes, so the student will be watching how you stand and move. Also, *be patient*. Don't rush through footwork, or everything that builds on it will suffer.

III: De-mystifying the Sword

Swords are cool. They're all over our favorite movies, books, comics, games and TV shows. The 3 Musketeers, Cyrano d'Bergerac, Connor McCloud, Drizzt DoUrden...all great examples of sword-chic. Swords are relics in today's age, and have an almost symbolic or ceremonial position. SCA fencers have a unique perspective: to us, they are tools, sporting equipment, and a connection to the past that may not necessarily hold the same element of mystery.

People react differently when they hold a sword. Some men I've seen turn into Conan the Cimmerian, giving the sword a couple of "test swings" to seemingly test the balance. I've seen some women pick up a sword with the same thoughtful, fearful concern one may exhibit picking up a loaded gun. (and vice versa). The trick, in my opinion, is to take the mystery out of the weapon, and make it seem more a piece of sporting equipment and accessible tool to the new fencer.

This doesn't mean that I play down the danger of the sword. I always remind the new fencer that this is potentially dangerous, and that the sword should be treated with respect.

Let the student pick up the weapon. Show them how to hold the sword (I tend to have them use a supinated grip with an Italian-grip weapon), and assist them in getting into a guard stance. Again, you will likely have to tailor their guard-stance for them, depending on their body type, and building on their stance.

Most folks have a big Spanish bell with quillions to lend to the new fencer. To me, this is the best weapon the new fencer can start out with. Try to match weapons, if possible (again, you are likely their "mirror", so a similar weapon can be helpful for demonstrations). While teaching blade-work, there are a few principals to keep in mind:

- Teaching how to use the bell as a shield. This is where the teacher having a similar weapon helps. Show how the leading arm disappears behind the bell, when your arm is in the right position. Don't forget to demonstrate the value of the quillions, as well.
- Forego the numbers. I've found that calling the parries by the numbers tends to complicate the new fencer. I call the parries by the part of the body being protected (and I traditionally teach four parries to the new fencer, so this is pretty easy).
- Integrate the riposte while showing the parries. You'll soon show the new fencer how movement integrates with attacks and parries as well.
- Tempo: how many "beats" is a thrust, or a parry, or a beat-attack, or a lunge? Sometimes the easiest way to teach a new skill is to break everything down into steps. Initially, you can break everything down into two or three beats (parry-recover, parry-riposte-recover, etc.). As they progress, get them to work those motions into single time. Initially, though, isolate each part of the movement, until they are fully competent.

IV: Integrating Skills

There will be several issues you'll address with your student: distance, timing and accuracy. While you're doing blade-work, be in at least masks and gloves. Here's where the first lessons in distance can be shown. Show the distance between the bodies and blades, and how proper engagement distance works. Have the student extend his blade, and start to demonstrate how far you want to be when first engaging an opponent.

Next, work ripostes into the parries, one after another. Drill each of them. Then, introduce footwork into the picture. Have the student parry while retreating, or advance and throw a shot. This is best done initially in drills.

When you start bouting, start slow. First, introduce calibration (which is another great opportunity to demonstrate distance). When you start fencing, concentrate on showing the student how to integrate throwing attacks, parries, and moving around the floor. When you make your attacks and parries, stick to only using the parries and attacks you've taught so far. The first few times on the floor, you want to get the student comfortable with movement and making attacks. Turn each bout into a dance, with you as the lead. Encourage the fencer to "keep up" with you as you move, maintaining distance and throwing appropriate shots. Encourage deliberate, thought out movements. The fencing bout should be the opportunity for them to demonstrate and practice the movements they've been previously drilling.

Every bout should be an educational experience, whether the student knows it or not. Slowly show how the footwork integrates with their defense or attack. Encourage good fighting posture, stopping the bouts when necessary to correct problems. Then drill again what you've shown on the fighting floor.

The bouts are a great place to teach fighting etiquette and conduct, as well. Show salutes. Shake hands when the bout is over. Discourage angry outbursts. Show the value of good sportsmanship.

After every bout, discuss what to work on, and what went well. Congratulate the student on positive performances, and point out what needs to be worked on. Use the fighting floor to build up the fencer's confidence, as well as their skills.

V: Prep for Authorization

I don't know anyone who likes to take tests. The stress of the testing environment obviously affects performance: some for the positive, some for the negative. Some of the blow of the authorization experience can be softened by prepping the student ahead of time.

When I first start working with a new student, I mention that one of the things he's training towards is getting him authorized to fence in the SCA; I describe it as a safety demonstration, just to show us that he's safe and competent to fight freely at events. Don't go into too much detail.

As the new fencer nears time for authorization, I talk to them about what authorizing marshals might look for, like calibration, off-hand use, and varied attacks and defenses. I'll use bouts as an opportunity to go over the specifics of what might be looked for in an authorization. I might even do a mock authorization with the student, and go over the rules of the list, as well as the practical skills. When you do this, watch to see how well the candidate handles the test stresses. Don't make the environment too stressful for them, though. The idea is to keep the student relaxed and remembering that SCA fencing is a fun hobby.

Be there for your student at their authorization. Of course, you shouldn't be doing their authorization yourself, but be there for the encouragement.

If the student doesn't pass their authorization, then at the next local practice, work on the skills that have to be improved. Be encouraging. If the candidate passes, then there's nothing left to do but offer your congratulations.

VI: Next steps after the first authorization

You don't have to pressure the new fencer with what style they want to learn next. Encourage them, though, to practice with a variety of forms. Typically, they next learn buckler or dagger, but encourage them to try anything new. Point them to people who work well with different weapons forms.

In Conclusion:

If you want to teach SCA rapier, patience is just as important as your fencing skills. Don't rush through any of the lessons, just to get to something more exciting or interesting. Each lesson or skill set builds upon the last one learned. Keep explanations clear and concise. Demonstrate the skills, and then guide the student through their practice. Listen to the new fencer and tailor the lesson to the individual. Don't forget to teach list filed etiquette and conduct. Lastly, take pride in both your work and the student's.

Every student benefits from positive examples. Working as a teacher in the SCA is a great opportunity to show off our best assets: honor, courtesy, chivalry, and skill. The more people see, the more they want to emulate them.