

A Brief Look at Fencing Off-handed Opponents

Don Ian of Tadcaster

1. Problems inherent in facing off-handed opponents

As a right-handed fighter, there are many problems that arise from the sudden realization that your opponent is left-handed (and vice-versa). This issue has bothered new and experienced fighters alike since we first fashioned swords out of rock when the Earth was still cooling.

The main problem is that fencing as we know it is a game of angles and counter angles, handed down over centuries of study and thought. This in itself isn't a problem, but for the most part those angles presuppose two right-handed fighters. With this in mind, it's easy to see why lefties have a harder time understanding the concepts in our game, and why right-handers who have years of experience can become rank newbies when facing southpaws: the angles are all wrong!

Most other issues dealing with this subject spring from the problem of angles, and often build into a mental block that can be paralyzing to one's development as a fighter. I'll try to address some common issues and their solutions in this class, but bear in mind that this is the tip of the iceberg.

2. A look at common types of trouble

- a. Swords on the same side ("mirror image") can cause confusion
- b. Traditional angles of attack and defense rendered ineffective or awkward
- c. Sword arm is a closer target and more vulnerable
- d. Off-hand becomes ineffective due to distance from weapons
- e. Secondary weapons and parries ineffective or troublesome for similar reasons (cloak, for example, just doesn't tend to work)

3. Some solutions to these issues

Distance and Time – In fencing, distance and time begin to blend. In other words, by better controlling your distance, you can gain time to react and plan. All of the solutions that follow are easier to employ if you give yourself a little more space to see what's going on.

a. Mental distress

- i. **Mental practice: don't allow the situation to rattle you.**
This one comes mainly with experience, but you can speed things up by having someone you practice with fence you using their left hand...or go to a practice with a lot of lefties. Like Bhakail. Or Quintavia.
- ii. **Arm yourself with options to fall back on. Such as...**

iii. **Fighting one arm at a time, or applying offset theory from armored combat.**

If you can adjust your position while facing your opponent so you are engaging one arm more than the other, you can gain both a favorable angle and a respite from the other hand, be it empty or bearing a secondary. This is especially useful when your opponent has case or dagger, but also handy for getting a pesky cloak out of the way.

You can also borrow from the the heavy-list side to strengthen your guard. When a heavy fighter faces a left-hander, they often move their shield to protect the sword side of their body – where the lefty's blows are more likely to fall. This would be like a fencing position four, on the side opposite your sword arm.

The practical application for us would be to set yourself up in a cross-body ward, such as in Four, to protect the opposite side of your body and force most of your parries to be crossing sixes. This technique allows for a lot of personal exploration and individual variation.

iv. **Begin the fight off-handed.**

That way, if you lose the sword hand or arm, you switch back into your strong hand. This is a strong psychological edge for some fighters, and can sometimes overcome the issues of off-handed opponents in a roundabout way.

b. **Sword arm/hand vulnerability**

While this can be a drawback, it can also be an asset if used to your advantage. Many people feel uncomfortable with the sudden closeness of a blade to their hand, but remember that *your opponent's sword hand is closer to you, too.*

If you can internalize that piece of information, you can turn it from stumbling block to strategy (see item "f" below).

i. **Use a stronger guard**

By this I mean *wider, lower & shallower* than your normal guard position, unless that's where you usually start from. Drop your sword hand slightly, tweak the wrist out to the sword side somewhat, and bring the sword closer to your body to start. This does a few things for you:
First, it forces the weapons out of parallel, which helps strengthen parries by increasing the amount of blade you can employ against your opponent's, hides your sword arm and hand behind your bell or swept hilt and also puts a few more inches between your hand and your opponent's point. In addition, it can help correct sloppy parries.

ii. **Fight in denial**

Turn your body and reverse your footwork (left foot forward, if you're right-handed), putting your sword back and your off-hand forward. This benefits both the sword hand and the off-hand, protecting the one while bringing the other better into play (see item "d" below).

c. **Angles**

While the usual angles of swordwork are less than helpful, angles can still be your friend – if you apply them to your mobility instead. The basic idea of the Spanish Circle and many other period methods is the geometry of safe and dangerous distances and angles. If you work off-line footwork into your practice regimen, you can step outside (literally) of straight-line modern fencing and confound your enemies while increasing your chance to hit without harm to yourself.

Our earlier comment about choosing one arm to fight at a time will also help here, as you can enforce certain helpful angles while negating others that aren't as useful (like the ones that allow your opponent to hit you).

d. **Reasserting the off-hand**

- i. As mentioned above, fighting denied can bring the offhand to the forefront.
- ii. **Practice parry-passing**
For example, capture your opponent's blade in Four then switch to the off-hand, freeing your blade to attack.
- iii. See below for notes on secondaries.

e. **Secondary forms**

- i. **Case:**
As long as you make sure to be ambidextrous with your blade work, case is the great equalizer. It tends to negate handedness, since successful case work requires both blades to work together.
- ii. **Dagger:**
 1. I recommend a mobile dagger technique that allows you to cover larger areas than the standard off-hand half of the body.
 2. Parry-passing works here, too.
 3. Bait and Switch: Offer your opponent your dagger hand. Make it say, "Look at me, the poor dagger hand, all pink and naked..." Of course, this works best with open dagger guards. Be alert for the shot to the dagger hand, and snipe the arm as it extends towards you. Tricky, but useful.
 4. Parry with the long blade and go for the dagger kill. I'm very fond of this, both for the fun of it and for the element of surprise. You'll be close enough to see your opponent's eyes widen.
- iii. **Buckler and rigid parry**
The heavy-list offset theory, as mentioned in item 3a above, works best here... y'know, since you have a *shield* and all. Move your buckler position across your body and work over and around it. While this requires some getting used to, it opens up a world of possibilities when combined with blade angles and off-line footwork.

For example, the over-the-top rotating shot works well and keeps both your point in line and a buckler between you and your opponent. Or, you can use Offensive Buckler techniques such

as punch blocking, sweeping and simultaneous blade and buckler movement.

All of the above work best when combined with a good sense of distance and angles other than straight-on.

iv. **Cloak and non-rigid parry**

To be honest, this form is the *least* useful of the five that we study when opponents are off-handed. The cloak or soft parry is always further from the opponent's blade than is intended, and the very fact that the weapons are on the same side as each other instead of lined up against the off-hand makes it difficult to effectively employ the form.

To counter this, you can use "dirty tricks" like dropping your soft parry object to the side or directly onto opponent's blade (note that you cannot "throw" the object per current East Kingdom rules). Conversely, you could become André L'Espervier, one of the few left-handed fencers to truly make cloak work and work well. (This is a difficult technique that I don't recommend for anyone but the most advanced students.)

f. **When in doubt, snipe the hand**

As much as some people may loathe being known as hand-snipers, the simple fact remains that the hand holding the sword is the closest part of your opponent's body. The hand snipe can be built into other tactics as well, such as moving that pesky weapon away from your opponent's body to open up the kill shot, or as a prelude to a head or foot attack. Remember: just because you shoot for that hand, it doesn't need to mean you want to hit it.

4. **In closing**

As we mentioned in our title and introduction, these are by no means the only issues to arise from facing off-handed opponents, nor are the solutions I offer the only ways to combat the problem. They are, however, a good jumping-off point for further discussions and explorations.

The most important of all the suggestions I can give are these: keep a sharp eye on your distance and don't get rattled. The first will stand you in good stead for all you do in fencing, and the second will allow you to keep a clear head and think back to the options above or others that you will undoubtedly discover in time.

Good luck and happy fencing!

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