



## Salvator Fabris for real: Staying safe in a duel

Florian Fortner  
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### Introduction

Earlier fighting books, like the ones of Bolognese authors Achille Marozzo [4] and Antonio Manciolino [3], describe two “modes” of fencing: The play with the “spada da gioco” and the earnest fight with the sharp “spada da filo”. The advice and technique they give for these modes differ greatly.

The authors who wrote from the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th century do not mention that distinction. Among them are famous names like Ridolfo Capoferro [1] and Salvator Fabris [2]. They assume the fight is a duel with sharp swords that you need to survive, and not a friendly play to demonstrate your prowess. They have the argument that parrying in obedience is a sign of fear, so they advise to always defend and wound in the same tempo, in order to avoid giving the enemy a tempo to wound by just parrying, thereby drawing out the fight which means more risk.

The cornerstones of these systems are:

- Guards are optimized for the single sword, leaving as few and small openings as possible
- Mostly linear footwork, sequential movement of the feet, body, and sword
- Thrust-centric attacks, if possible in *stesso tempo*

- Always constraining the opponents blade (*stringere, trovare, contrapostura*), which allows for a steady and safe approach

## Sharp Blade vs. Practice Blade

A sharp blade does not only make you respect the threat more, it also changes your perception. The point and debole are far less visible than a blunt blade with a thick tip–protector. Therefore, most master’s recommend to fix your gaze at the sword hand or hilt, because these parts up to the forte of the blade are better visible and indicate the orientation of the point. Whereas, if you try to follow the point, you will be deceived more easily.

## Principles

1. Separate movements of feet, body and blade

Always keeping a degree of freedom to react to an attack of the opponent is one of the founding principles of rapier fencing. As soon as we move the feet, the body with the center of gravity, and the blade at once, we are unable to change the motion until it is finished, which offers the enemy a prime tempo to attack. However, if we split the motions up sequentially, we can always react with the part that is not moving in tht instant.

2. Keep your head safe

When bending forward from the hips, we have to make sure we do not impede ourselves by leaning exactly over our own thigh, but leaning slightly inwards, so that, viewed from above, our sword–hand is over the knee and our main opening, the right armpit and chest, are inside the front knee.

This allows our head to sit lower in relation to the extended sword–arm, which greatly reduces the exposed openings above the arm.

3. Always maintain a counterposture/stringere/trovare

To reduce the enemy’s options for unexpected attacks while approaching, you should always keep your forte in the path from their point to your body (stringere/trovare). Ideally keeping your body out of presence of their point (counterposture).

4. Quick recover from a lunge

After we attack with a lunge, we might have hit, but our own safety is only ensured if we can recover swiftly and protected by our forte. Therefore, over-extended lunges are more dangerous, as the way back is a longer tempo in which we could be hit.

5. Passing forward to the enemy's body

An alternative highly praised by Fabris, is "passing all the way to the enemy's body", which effectively takes us past the threat of the enemy's point & edge quickly.

Taking this to the extreme, is "proceeding with resolution & without stopping".

Note that this is not easy to simulate with blunt blades, which do not penetrate through a body without meeting much resistance. When we hit with a thrust, we either bounce back from the blade flex, the opponent is pushed backwards when the blade is stiff, or in rare cases, the blade might break. For the execution of the exercises we will resort to "intentionally missing" the thrust.

6. Following up with a wrist cut

In case the enemy pushes our blade out of line, or the measure is too close because both opponents moved forward in the same tempo, we can resort to a cut from the wrist in the manner of a wheel—a *tramazzone*. This type of cut keeps us covered while our point is out of line. This is even more useful when off-hand weapons like daggers or capes are used.

## Exercises

1. Being well covered in guard and attack

Both start one step out of measure.

- A: give a suitable tempo, like a step into wide measure.
- B: seize the tempo and attack with a direct, lunging thrust.
- A: try to hit the opponent's head with a cut if it is uncovered.

2. Retreat quickly from a lunge extension

Both start one step out of measure.

- A: give a suitable tempo, like a step and a blade push.

- B: seize the tempo and attack with a lunging thrust by cavazione.
- B: immediately retreat from the lunge and keep your forte turned toward the opponent's blade.
- A: try to hit the opponent with a cut or thrust if he is too slow or uncovered on either side.

### 3. Passing forward

Both start one step out of measure.

- A: give a suitable tempo, like a step into wide measure and a blade push.
- B: seize the tempo and attack with a passing step below the blade in *seconda* (outside) or in opposition in *quarta* (inside), intentionally missing the opponent, so you can take more passes forward until you reach their body.

### 4. Cutting from the wrist (Fabris plate 30, [2, p.57])

Both start one step out of measure.

- A: find the opponent's blade on the outside
- B: step forward and push their blade outwards
- A: cut a *mandritto tramazzone fendente* over the head from the wrist to the opponent's head.

### 5. Yielding in close measure

If the opponent, in the previous exercise, comes too close to free the point for a thrust by cavazione or a tramazzone cut, you can:

- Yield to *seconda*, by moving your hilt to the outside while keeping the point on line so their pressure meets no resistance, and pass towards their body.

or, if they push your blade so far out of presence that you cannot keep the point on line you can:

- Drop your point to your outside (like a hanging parry) while lifting your sword hand to deliver a pommel strike to the opponent's head on the outside (Fabris plate 179, [2, p.244]).

## References

- [1] Ridolfo Capoferro. *Gran Simulacro dell'Arte e dell'Uso della Scherma*. Salvestro Marchetti, Camillo Turi, 1610.
- [2] Salvator Fabris. *De Lo Schermo Overo Scienza D'Arme*. Henrico Waltkirch, 1606.
- [3] Antonio Manciolino. *Opera Nova*. Nicolo d'Aristotele, Venezia, 1531.
- [4] Achille Marozzo. *Opera Nova*. 1536.