

Capo Ferro 101:

Basic philosophies and techniques from *Simulcro Dellarte Edelluso Della Scherma* “Great Representation on the Art and Use of Fencing”

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Capo Ferro wrote his text *Gran Simulcro Dellarte Edelluso Della Scherma* “Great Representation on the Art and Use of Fencing” in the year 1610. Capo Ferro was a swordsmaster in Siena, Tuscany but dedicated his work to the son of the Duke of Urbino, Fedrigo della Rovere, in the hopes that the text would be adopted into the library and subsequently the minds of the court of Urbino. In the introduction to the text Capo Ferro states that it is not enough to merely wield a sword to be considered valorous in its possession, rather one must study the art of fencing. To facilitate this study we will go over some of the basic philosophies and techniques as described in “*Great Representation...*” The body of the text is separated into three sections: The Art of Fencing, The Use of Fencing, and the plates. We will focus on the basics as discussed in The Art of Fencing with a brief discussion on The Use of Fencing and the plates as well as a few drills.

The Art of Fencing:

In the first section Capo Ferro discusses the principles of what he calls The Art of Fencing. Initially he reviews a few abstract philosophies of fencing. These philosophies are worth analyzing in depth as part of your study of fencing, but are outside the scope of this class. Further into the primary section Capo Ferro transitions from abstract to material concepts. The section does go into specific form with regard to the position of the body, the method of striking, and other mechanics, but it is the explanation of when and why to utilize these actions that is the focus of this section. Before we talk about form we will discuss two concepts that you can utilize even if using a form other than the one CF describes: the Purpose of Defense, and the purview of Tempo and Measure.

The Purpose of Defense

To understand the motivation behind the principles discussed in “*Great Representation...*” it is important to understand the purpose for taking up arms according to Capo Ferro. Fencing is first and foremost a defensive art, that is to say a way to protect oneself against an armed opponent.

“...defense is the principal action in fencing, and that no one must proceed to offence, if not by

way of legitimate defense.” Ch. 1:4

“Fencing is an Art of defending oneself well with a sword.” Ch. 2:24

(On the sword)

“It’s purpose is defense, which signifies chiefly to hold the adversary so distant that he cannot offend me,...” Ch. 3:33

“Hence the words ‘to defend’ signify ‘to offend’, and strike, which is the final and subsidiary remedy of defense, in case the enemy should pass beyond the boundary of the first defense...” Ch. 3:34

From these points we can judge that the best way to approach an encounter is to do so while remaining defended. This does not mean that you *cannot* move into offense and strike, but must do so with preservation as the primary goal. The main means of offending while in defense is with ‘constraint’, also called stringing, gaining, or binding the sword.

A *constraint* is when your sword or ‘off’ hand is in such a position that your opponent’s sword cannot attack in a straight line to hit you as your sword or other defensive equipment is in the way. This is achieved by placing your point of greater leverage against a point of lesser leverage on the opponents weapon (A.K.A. your ‘strong’ against the opponents ‘weak’). Your sword’s leverage grows stronger as you move from the point to the hilt. If you put a stronger part of your sword against a weaker part of the opponents sword they will not be able to move your sword with theirs and must adjust which gives you time to strike safely. An empty hand has greater leverage than any point on the opponents sword.

Tempo and Measure

Capo Ferro defines measure as “... a just distance from the point of my sword to the body of my adversary in which I can strike him...” Ch. 4:44.

Capo Ferro describes three distances, as determined by the length of one’s attacks, that he refers to as Measures.

The Narrowest Measure (also known as simply *Narrow Measure*, or *Close Measure*) is the measure in which one can strike the adversary while they attack forward with either a small movement of the arm or with a slight retreating step.

The Fixed Foot Narrow Measure (also known as the *Medium Measure*, or *Middle Measure*) is the measure in which one can strike the adversary by only pushing the arms, body, and legs forward (but without taking an increased step as in a lunge).

The Wide Measure is the measure in which one can strike the adversary with an increased step

(i.e. a lunge).

Each of these attacks in the various 'Measures' takes a certain amount of time to execute. While an individual may make an attack faster or slower than any other particular person Capo Ferro defines the time it takes for a specific person to make their specifically timed attack in terms of 'Tempos'.

Capo Ferro defines a tempo as "... a just length of motion or of stillness that I need in order to reach a definite end for some plan of mine..." Ch. 5:50. In the text Capo Ferro gives the length in terms of 'Tempos' for attacks in the various 'Measures' where the Wide Measure takes a Tempo and a half, the Fixed Foot Narrow Measure takes a single Tempo, and the Narrowest Measure takes a half Tempo. Recognizing this is an important tool for judging the time your opponent is taking actions, and thus the time in which you can act safely. It is also important to know how long in time your Tempo is taking so you can speed up or slow down accordingly to adjust to your opponent's Tempo.

With this in mind we can look at what distance is best to strike your opponent. Capo Ferro states "Seeking measure is an offense in which, in the said Guard, I seek the narrow measure in order to strike." Ch. 11:105. In the text it is stated that one should take constraint within the Wide Measure and strike as the opponent moves into Narrow Measure. This will be covered in more depth in the Drills.

Basic Form

Now that we have discussed some of the universal philosophies from The Art of Fencing we will talk about basic stance and movement from the text.

Stance

When discussing stance Capo Ferro details the placement of each body part separately and in relationship to each other. We will discuss each part individually just as in the text. Once each detail is learned it may be helpful to note the body parts in reverse order as stated here for the purposes of getting into stance.

Head

"The placement of the head, when lying in guard, and in seeking measure, is then just and convenient when it makes one straight line together with the sword..." Ch. 6:62

In practice this means that your blade should generally remain within the center of your vision.



“In lying in guard and in seeking measure, the head is rested upon the left shoulder, and in striking it leans upon the right shoulder.” Ch. 6:63

The head will move from a withdrawn position in stance to a forward position during a strike.



Body

“In resting in guard and in seeking measure, the body needs to be bent, and slopes to the rear, such that the angle which it makes with the right thigh is barely visible, and with the left thigh it comes to make an obtuse angle, so that the left shoulder aligns with the line of the left foot, and the right shoulder evenly divides the pace of the guard in half.” Ch. 7:67

The body should lean backwards so the left shoulder is over the left foot and the right shoulder is halfway between your two feet.



Arms

“In resting in guard and in seeking measure, the right arm must rest somewhat bent, so that the upper arm is extended in an oblique line, so low that the elbow meets the bend of the body, and is in line with the right knee; and the forearm, withdrawn somewhat, forms a straight line together with the sword.

“In resting in guard and in seeking measure, the left arm together with the left thigh and calf have to serve as the counterweight of the body and the right thigh and calf; and the upper arm needs to be extended, so that it is in line with the left knee, and meets the bend of the left flank; and its forearm needs to be somewhat tucked in to oneself, in order by its motion to help to propel the body forward in striking, which it would not do, if it were neglected.” Ch. 8:74-75

Legs and feet

“In resting in guard and in seeking the narrow measure, the right calf with the thigh and its foot point directly forward, and lean back in an oblique line, in the manner of a slope; and the left calf with the thigh and its foot point straight toward your left side, with the knee bent as far as possible, so that the inner side of the heel directly aligns with the point of the right heel.” Ch. 9:83

In this stance the right leg should be nearly straight and follow the line of the body. The left leg should be bent and much as possible with the right toe pointed towards the opponent and the left heel following the point of the left shoulder. The line of the right foot should point towards the heel

of the left foot.

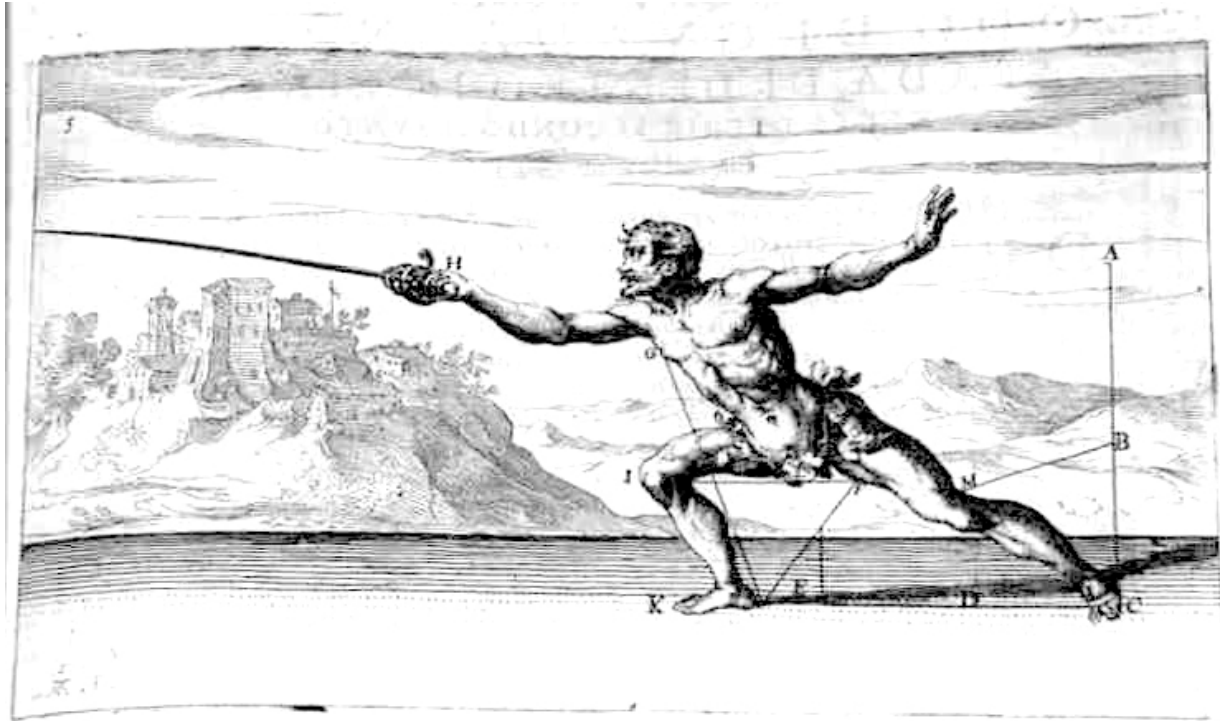


Movement

It is important that when taking steps to maintain your body position as much as possible. Your body should not raise or fall in your steps, neither should your arms falter. Your right foot should remain pointed in the direction you intend to strike forwards which will almost exclusively be in the direction of your opponent. When taking a step lead with your right foot by moving your foot to where you want it to be at the end of your step and then follow with your left foot. You should as much as possible endeavor to keep your right foot pointed towards your opponent to better facilitate falling back into stance after the step.

Attacking and Lunging

When making an attack it is best to move through the steps of your attack as if you were attacking in a widening measure. Thus you should begin with a motion of the arm (as if you were attacking in the Narrow Measure), which leads to a leaning of the body, then a movement of the leg as your weight shifts over your right foot (as in the attack of the Narrow Measure of the fixed foot), and finally you should make the step with your right foot into your lunge (as in the attack in Wide Measure). This progressive attack allows you to adjust as your opponent moves forward or back; you will continue your attack until you strike.



After a lunge the right shoulder should be over the right knee with the left leg almost completely straight and in line with the angle of the body. To recover from a lunge, bend the left leg and follow by moving your body backward, always keeping your sword arm in guard and returning back to your original stance.

The Use of Fencing:

In the second section Capo Ferro discusses The Use of Fencing and how it differs from The Art. In this section details are given on the act of fencing, the mechanics of specific maneuvers, the approach to specific situations and the definition of specific terms used throughout the text. This Use of Fencing directs the motivations behind The Art of Fencing and creates a system of fence which can be then put into practice. More directly where the first section focuses on the why to do certain actions the second describes how to do them.

The definitions and explanations in the second section are all useful in their way, however what is most useful in my opinion are the clarifications that can be cross referenced in the breakdown of the plates, most notably to me the proper use of the disengage and the counter disengage which can be easily misunderstood and misapplied. Some other specifics detailed in this section that may prove useful in practice is the advice for reactions to different styles of opponent, such as "Method one must employ against a bestial man" and "Against those that circle". These entries give us a starting place when deciding how to analyse opponents when initially starting combat.

The Plates:

In the third and final section Capo Ferro illustrates, through the use of plates, the practical application of the previous sections as well as a visual reference for much of the mechanics previously described. After general mechanics and positioning is covered in the plates, the text goes on to present situations that may arise and uses these situations to give a context for study of the tenets of the system. It is my personal opinion that the use of these plates is often misinterpreted in the study of defense.

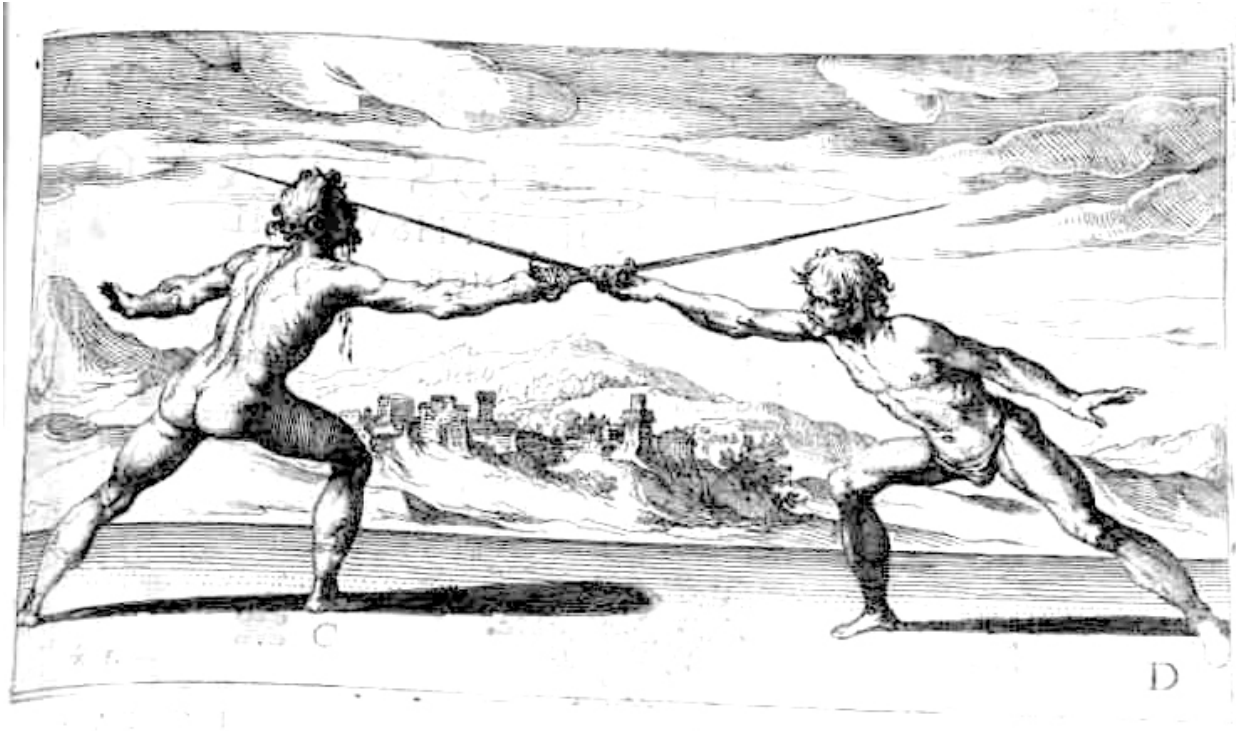
In many plates there is a description of an engagement and how various players may act and react. Often these plates may seem contradictory to the rest of the text, as the fighters depicted will often perform maneuvers specifically stated as wrong earlier in the text. The purpose of the plates, and one that is often overlooked, is not to show what should be done but to give a base to see what a natural engagement might look like and to provide a starting point to begin thinking of the rest of the text. If a properly performed maneuver is put in place of an improper one that may be shown on a plate the subsequent reaction of the opposing fighter would be different and can be extrapolated. This kind of in-depth analysis is truly the power of the plates in Capo Ferro's text. For example here is the text from plate 7:

Plate 7

Le Presenti et sequenti figure mostrano diversi...

The present and subsequent figures demonstrate diverse manners of striking on the outside, always presupposing a stringering on the inside and a disengage of the point by your adversary in order to strike.

By way of clarification of the following figures, I say that D having the figure marked C stringered on the inside, the same C disengages in order to give a thrust to the chest of figure D. D strikes him with a thrust in the left eye with a fixed foot or an increase of pace as the figure shows. But yet I say that if C had been a shrewd person, when he disengaged he would have disengaged by way of a feint, with his body somewhat held back, and D approaching confidently in order to attack C, C would have parried the enemy's sword to the outside with the false or the true edge, giving him a mandritto to the face or an imbroccata to the chest, and in such a conclusion would retire into a low quarta.



Much can be learned by practicing the mechanics of this plate as represented, particularly in regards to how it feels when an opponent performs particular moves and what is used to counter them. But one can always ask questions such as: “Why should C disengage with a feint when it states earlier in the text that one should not use feints?” or “What if C disengaged with a movement into or out of measure as also stated earlier in the text? Would it make a difference?”

Drills:

The Push Test

When first learning the proper stance for Capo Ferro it is useful to perform the Push Test. To do this test first get into stance with a sword in hand. Have a friend place both hands on the hilt of your sword and push straight towards you. If you are in the proper stance you should feel most of the pressure pushing into your back foot. If you are feeling a large amount of pressure elsewhere in your body or if joints are being forced to bend where they shouldn't, that will indicate where adjustments need to be made. If your arm is bending easily at the elbow it probably means your arm is not straight enough and your hand is not raised to the where the forward pressure is going into your shoulder. If your upper back has a lot of pressure it probably means your shoulders are not turned over your hips. Experiment with changing the position of your body to see how the pressure changes.

Lunging with Constraint with the off hand

This is a drill you can do on your own, all you need is room to lunge. (You don't even need a sword.)

First practice your attacks.

Make 10 attacks using just your arm.

Then 10 attacks with a lean of the body.

Then 10 attacks with a lean of the body and movement over the right foot.

Finally do 10 complete lunges with full recovery.

Once you are comfortable doing this drill you can start adjusting your sword as if you are constraining against a sword. Attack forward as if their sword was coming in from various angles. If you are left handed note that attacks you defend in Second will come from your left side, where attacks you defend in fourth will come from your right.

Make 10 Lunges in a high second as if defending against a sword coming in at your upper right.

Make 10 Lunges in a low second as if defending against a sword coming in at your lower right.

Make 10 Lunges in a high fourth as if defending against a sword coming in at your upper left.

Make 10 Lunges in a low fourth as if defending against a sword coming in at your lower left.

Once you are comfortable doing this drill you can adjust your off hand to cover a secondary line of attack, to adjust for any changes your opponent may make (disengages, secondary attacks, offline steps, etc.)

Make 10 Lunges in a high second as if defending against a sword coming in at your upper right. Push your off-hand forward and cover a line on your lower right to defend against any attacks from that half of your field.

Make 10 Lunges in a low second as if defending against a sword coming in at your lower right. Push your off-hand forward and cover a line on your upper right to defend against any attacks from that half of your field.

Make 10 Lunges in a high fourth as if defending against a sword coming in at your upper left. Push your off-hand forward and cover a line on your lower left to defend against any attacks from that half of your field.

Make 10 Lunges in a low fourth as if defending against a sword coming in at your lower left. Push your off-hand forward and cover a line on your upper left to defend against any attacks from that half of your field.

Attacking in Time

This simple drill will help you and a partner learn the extent of your measures and how to attack within an opponent's time. First do a full lunge and have your partner stand where the point of your sword would be striking them, return to stance and note your partner's distance; that is your

Wide Measure.

Face off in stance outside of each other's Wide Measure. The defender will walk forward in guard, but will not adjust their guard as the attacker constraints. When the defender enters the attacker's Wide Measure the attacker will move their sword to constrain their opponent's sword, only so much that the defender could not lunge forward and strike. Then as the defender moves into the Narrow Measure the attacker should strike the defender. The attacker should endeavour to land their blow at the moment the defender finishes their movement into measure. Do this until the the defender declares 5 good shots in time and switch.