An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Combat

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Foreword

The exercising of weapons puts away aches, griefs, and diseases, it increases strength, and sharpens the wits. It gives a perfect judgement, it expels melancholy, choleric and evil conceits, it keeps a man in breath, perfect health, and long life.


This document is designed as an introductory guide to historical martial arts of the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. I developed this content between 1999 and 2014 at the Higgins Armory Museum in conjunction with the Higgins Armory Sword Guild and the Higgins Academy of the Sword. The material is intended chiefly to support basic-level instruction and training for courses taught at the Higgins Armory, ranging from one-hour “drop-in” samplers for the general public to somewhat longer 4- to 8-session courses. Naturally, the content and approach is geared toward the museum setting for which it was designed.

This was always a working document, subject to continual revision and reworking, but now that I no longer expect to be teaching this material on a regular basis, the document is unlikely to change much in the foreseeable future. I am therefore putting this “final” version up on the web in case it is useful to others. My only request is that rather than sharing the document, you share the URL so that others can access it directly from me rather than through a third party.

Many people had a hand in making the Higgins swordplay program shine in its heyday: I would particularly like to acknowledge Dr. Patri Jones Pugliese (1950-2007), cofounder of the program, who was instrumental not only in developing our group, but in driving the historical combat renaissance of the 1990s by making photocopies of original manuals available to readers around the world; and Dr. William R. Short, whose tireless and ingenious efforts in documenting the work of the Guild can still be seen in some of the illustrations to this text.

Jeffrey L. Forgeng
Summer 2014
1. Introduction

The following materials describe basics of the “Liechtenauer” system predominant in German sources of the 1400s-1500s. Johannes Liechtenauer was a famous combat master of the 1300s whose verses on combat remained central to German martial arts for centuries afterwards. The verses are difficult to interpret, but the techniques are explained in a variety of later writings, of which the most important are the “Starhemberg” manuscript (1452), Hans Lecküchner’s *langes Messer* (falchion) treatise (1482), Paulus Hector Mair’s *Ars Athletica* (c. 1550), and Joachim Meyer’s *Art of Combat* (published version 1570, manuscript draft c. 1568).

A much smaller, but still important, body of material on the longsword survives from Italy and Iberia. The most important Italian source is Fiore dei Liberi’s treatise of 1409, written toward the end of the author’s career, and surviving in four manuscript versions, as well as a late-1400s derivative work by Filippo Vadi. The most important Spanish source is the *Compendium on Knightly Arts* by Pedro Monte, composed in Spanish sometime around 1490, and published in an expanded Latin translation in 1509.
The longsword serves as an excellent all-around training weapon, due to its versatility. This document is intended to support about 4-6 hours of class time. More or less the same curriculum can be used for the single-handed cut-and-thrust sword.

2. The Weapon

A German longsword of c. 1400 (Higgins Armory Museum 1996.02.1). Wt. 3 lb. 3 oz.

The longsword, also called the bastard sword or hand-and-a-half sword, was the classic weapon of the knight in the late Middle Ages. It was chiefly used in the 1300s and 1400s, but survived as a sport weapon into the 1700s. It was designed to be useable either with one hand or two—one hand being essential for knights on horseback, two hands offering additional possibilities when fighting on foot. Surviving examples typically have a blade about 40" long, and a grip of about 10", and weigh around 3-5 lbs. Specialized sport versions were designed to flex like modern fencing weapons; such weapons were around by the mid-1400s.

The forte (French for “strong”) has powerful leverage, and is used for defense and controlling the opponent’s weapon. The foible (“weak”) has little leverage, but travels more quickly than any other part of the blade, and is used for attacking. This and the following illustrations show fencing longswords rather than combat versions.

The two-hand grip of the longsword added some power to the weapon’s attack, but more importantly it allowed greater blade control, as well as making it possible to generate full-strength cuts from the action of the two hands working in concert.
The long edge attacks with more reach and power; the short edge allows angled attacks that can get around the opponent’s defenses. They are also called the “forward” and “rear” edges, or the “true” and “false” edges.

This illustration from the early 1500s shows the same flex found in surviving examples of practice longswords today.

3. Grip

The grip on the sword should be relaxed and fluid, firming up when the situation calls for it. The main hand is next to the crossbar, the secondary hand is on the pommel. The secondary hand grips the pommel lightly, constantly changing position on the pommel to allow the sword to move quickly and fluidly. The main hand shifts back and forth between the “fist” grip and the “thumb” grip depending on the needs of the moment.
Fist grip

The fist grip holds the weapon with the main hand next to the crossguard closed as a fist. It aligns the weapons with the motion of the elbows and shoulders, and is optimized for long and powerful cuts.

Thumb grip

The thumb grip slips the thumb over the crossguard onto the shield of the weapon, rotating the blade by 90 degrees to align it with the rotational motion of the wrists. This grip is optimized for speed, maneuverability, and thrusting. It allows cuts to be delivered by the action of the wrists, at a different angle from the orientation of the arms.

Drill: 8.1 Basic Moulinets
4. Guards and Straight Cuts

Guards serve as positions of readiness when out of range, and as waypoints and decision points in the course of an encounter. The tables on the following pages illustrate some of the chief guards as waypoints in the straight cuts. Note that the illustrations show variants of the guards based on specific tactical situations, not necessarily the “official” form in which they are taught.

Ox and Plow are the two chief positions of readiness; moving back and forth between them, and from one side to another, is called *winding*.

**Ox (Ochs)**

*Ox on the right and left sides. In the default position for Ox the crossbars are horizontal and the combatant uses the thumb grip, the shield of the blade resting on the thumb. The Ox is a versatile guard that protects the head, while threatening a thrust or a cut from almost any angle. It is the end point of the Thwart and Squinter Cuts.*
Plow (*Pflug*)

Plow on the left and right sides; note the use of the thumb grip, which is the default for this guard. The Plow protects the side of the body, and can threaten a thrust or lateral or rising cut. It is a more defensive position than Ox: it offers fewer attack options but is less physically demanding.

The Four Straight Cuts and their Guards

*Diagram of the cutting lines from the Meyer manuscript of 1568.*

The Wrath and Low Cuts pass through the Stroke Lines.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scalp Cut (Scheitelhaw)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High (or Day, vom Tag)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longpoint (Langort)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fool (Alber)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wrath Cut (Zornhaw)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrath Guard (Zornhut)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longpoint (Langort)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change (Wechsel)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Middle Cut (*Mittelhaw*)

- Middle Guard on the left (*Mittelhut*) [Note that the cut is shown here going from L to R]
- Longpoint (*Langort*)
- Middle Guard on the right

Low Cut (*Unterhaw*)

- Side Guard (*Nebenhut*)
- Hanging Point (*Hangetort*)
- Unicorn (*Einhorn*)

*Drills:* 8.2 Mirroring Drill, 8.3 Improvised Katas and 8.4 Straight Cuts

5. The Targets
The opponent’s target area is divided into 4 quarters along lines down the center of the body and across the sternum. (The horizontal line through the head is an additional subdivision, not important here.)
6. Stepping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passing Step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back; the left foot points forward, the right foot angles out. Step forward with your right foot so that it is now in front, pivoting your left foot so that it is now angling out. This is a pass forward on the right foot. The passing step changes the lead foot and also opens or closes the distance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From black to red is a pass forward on the right foot*
**Triangle Step**

Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back; the left foot points forward, the right foot angles out. Step forward and to the right with your right foot so that it is even with your left foot, and step back with your left foot so that your feet are now in mirror position from where they started. This is a triangle step on the right foot. The triangle step changes lead foot and moves slightly to the side, without changing distance.

This step can be varied to achieve different effects. For example, the first step can move forward to close the distance, then the second one moves sideways to bring the fighter offline.

*From black to red is a triangle step on the R foot; from red to black is a triangle step on the L foot*
Gather Step/Sliding Step

These are two variations of a step used to change location without changing the relative position of the feet. The Sliding Step moves the leading foot first, the Gather Step moves the trailing foot first.

Gather Step: Stand with your right foot forward and your left foot back. Gather your rear foot toward your forward foot, then step forward on the forward foot to come back into your initial stance. This is a gather step forward on the right foot.

Sliding Step: Same, except that the leading foot moves first.

These steps can be done in any direction. A sliding step done straight forward or back is the standard step for classical fencing.

Back Step

Stand with your right foot forward and your left foot back. Step with your left foot backwards behind your right. This is a back-step on the left foot. The back step is often used to remove the body from danger while delivering an attack.

Drill: 8.4 Two and Four Quarters Drill
7. Techniques from Armored Combat

The halfsword techniques of armored combat were also incorporated into unarmored longsword. See the Armored Longsword section for further discussion of halfsword.

Halfsword Guards

![Image of the Low and High Guards at Halfsword. The same guards are also used in unarmored combat.]

Murder-Blow (*Mortschlag*)

![Image of the figure on the left delivering the Murder-Blow. This is easiest to set up by starting in a halfsword guard.]

*Drill:* 8.3 Improvised Katas, adding in Halfsword techniques
8. Drills

8.1 Moulinets

Practice the three basic moulinets:

1. “Helicoptering” overhead
2. Blade descending in front of you
3. Blade rising in front of you

8.2 Mirroring Drill

Begin in Plow. Leader moves forward and back with passing steps, changing sides, or stays at distance with a triangle step, switching sides without changing distance. Follower maintains distance and orientation by imitating leader’s stepping. When ready, leader can also change guards, and follower imitates.

8.3 Improvised Katas

Practice randomly running through all the techniques you know (guards, cuts, etc.). Use this document to remind yourself of your repertoire of techniques. This drill can be done solo, or as a mirroring drill, with people taking turns leading. It is an excellent warmup drill.

*Simple version:* Use only passing steps or only triangle steps

*Advanced version:* Mix up the stepping; you can also choose to cut through or end the cuts in Longpoint

8.4 The Straight Cuts Drill [Meyer 1570: 2.4v]

Start in Fool with your right foot back.

Lift your sword into High Guard, passing through Hanging Point with crossed hands, blade to the left, as you bring the sword up (guarding your forward leg on the outside).

Deliver a Scalp Cut, passing forward on your right foot, ending in Fool.

Lift your sword into High Guard, passing through Hanging Point with uncrossed hands, blade to the right, as you bring the sword up (again guarding your forward leg on the outside).

Deliver a Scalp Cut, passing forward on your left foot, ending in Fool.
Repeat this an equal number of times on the right and left sides, then do it stepping backwards on each cut.

Repeat delivering Wrath Cuts (“Butterfly” Cuts), Middle Cuts, and Low Cuts (“Reversed Butterfly”). Start each series from the position where the cut ends, as you began the Scalp Cut series from Fool. Both forward and backwards, the cut will come from the side that starts with the foot back.

**Variants:**

1. End the cuts in Longpoint
2. Do the drill with triangle steps
3. Do the drill with gather steps (note that the cut will come from the side that starts with the foot forward, where passing and triangle steps will cut from the side that starts back)
4. Deliver a different cut each time
5. Randomize the forward and backward stepping, also throwing in triangle steps and gather steps
6. Mix up these variants

**Two-Person Mirror Version:** Leader and follower face each other, leader leads the actions, follower imitates, maintaining distance.

**Two-Person Attack/Defense Version:** Attacker ends the cuts in Longpoint, defender catches the cuts by winding into Ox or Plow—catch Scalp and Wrath Cuts with Ox, catch Middle and Low Cuts with Plow.

**8.5 Driving and Brawling [cf. Meyer (1570) 2.6r ff., 3.32r ff., (1568) 63r ff., 82r ff.]**

These are combination drills adapted from Meyer’s material on the dusack, rapier, and quarterstaff.

1. Begin with a High Cut, then deliver a Low Cut from the opposite side.
2. Begin with a Wrath Cut, then deliver a Low Cut from the opposite side.
3. Begin with a Wrath Cut, then deliver a Middle Cut from the opposite side.
4. Begin with a Middle Cut, then deliver a Middle Cut from the opposite side.
5. Begin with a Wrath Cut, then deliver a Wrath Cut from the opposite side (Meyer calls this combination the Cross).

6. Begin with a Low Cut, then deliver a Low Cut from the opposite side.

7. Begin with a Wrath Cut from the R, then slash back up along the same line (leading with the rear edge); then bring the sword up and around for a Wrath Cut from the L, and slash back up through the same line. Sometimes called “Ribbon Cuts”; Meyer calls it a Cross Change (1570) or Double Change (1568).

8.6 The Two and Four Quarters Drill [Meyer 1570: 1.27v]

Two Quarters—Solo Version
Start in Longpoint with your right foot back (you are out of range of the opponent at this stage).

1. Let your blade drop to your left side, and bring it around to deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing forward on your right foot, and ending in Longpoint. (The passing step brings you into range.)

2. Deliver a left Low Cut, doing a triangle step on your left foot, ending in Hanging Point. (The triangle step moves you toward the other side of your opponent while maintaining distance.)

3. Deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing back on your left foot, cutting all the way through to Change, and recover to Ox. (This is called cutting away, and serves to protect you as you move out of range.)

Variants:
1. Start the cuts in all four quarters of the opponent; each time, the second cut comes diagonally opposite the first. The basic version is R Wrath, L Low, so add R Low, L Wrath; L Wrath, R Low; L Low, R Wrath. You will need to alter the footwork accordingly.

2. Randomize where you deliver the first cut.

3. Cut all the way through with the first two cuts.

4. Start from Ox instead of Longpoint.

5. Deliver the cuts with the short edge (Low Cuts delivered this way are called “Slashing”).
**Two Quarters—Paired Version**
The attacker does the same as in the solo version. The defending sequence is as follows:

Start in right Plow.

1. Triangle-step on the right foot, winding up into left Ox to catch the cut.
2. Triangle-step on the left foot, winding down into right Plow.

You can cut away when the attacker cuts away.

Similar defenses can be used against the variant attack sequences. Each time, the defender triangle-steps away from the cut, catching it by winding into Ox for Wrath Cuts, Plow for Low Cuts.

**Four Quarters—Solo Version**
Instead of doing just 2 cuts, the attacker delivers a cut to all 4 quarters of the opponent, as follows:

Start out of range in Longpoint with your right foot back.

1. Deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing forward on your right foot.
2. Deliver a left Low Cut, triangle-stepping on your left foot.
3. Deliver a right Low Cut, triangle-stepping on your right foot.
4. Deliver a left Wrath Cut, triangle-stepping on your left foot.

Cut away with a Wrath Cut, passing back on your left foot, and recover to Ox.

*Variants:*

1. Repeat this pattern beginning in a different quarter (following the numbers as in the following diagram).
In the first sequence, the initial attack is from the upper right quarter (the outermost “1” above), then lower left (2), lower right (3), upper left (4). The second series begins with 1 in the lower right, 2 in the upper left, and so on.

2. Cut all the way through with the cuts.

3. Deliver the attacks as Thwart Cuts

4. Pull or run off with some of the cuts

**Four Quarters—Paired Version**
The attacker does the same as in the solo version. The defending sequence is as follows:

Start in right Plow.

1. Triangle-step to the right, winding up into left Ox to catch the cut.

2. Triangle-step to the left, winding down into right Plow.

3. Triangle-step to the right, winding across into left Plow.

4. Triangle-step to the left, winding up into right Ox.

You can cut away as the attacker cuts away.

Similar sequences of defenses can be used against each pattern of attacks.

8-Cuts Drill: Same concept, attacker does attacks on all 7 lines plus a thrust.
9. The Five Master Cuts

The five “Master Cuts” of the German longsword tradition exploit the respective advantages of the fist and thumb grips. The Wrath and Scalp Cuts take advantage of the power and reach of the fist grip, respectively. The remaining three use the angulation afforded by the thumb grip to close off the opponent’s line of attack in one of the three dimensions, while simultaneously posing some degree of threat.

**Wrath Cut (Zornhaw)**

Described in Section 4. The Wrath Cut is the simplest and most powerful cut, and can also be used as a defense against most cuts.

**Scalp Cut (Scheitelhaw)**

Described in Section 4. The Scalper is a long cut that goes straight for the head, attacking at maximum range. It is the classic response to an opponent in Fool, delivering an attack that comes in as far from the opponent’s sword as possible.

**Thwart Cut (Zwerchhaw)**

Start in right Ox (using the thumb grip) and helicopter your blade around your head to end up in left Ox; repeat in the other direction. This is a pair of Thwart Cuts. The Thwart Cut protects against downward cuts while threatening the opponent with a lateral cut; it is the classic response to an opponent in High Guard, protecting against the threatened cut from above while striking at the same time.

*The figure on the R is executing a Thwart Cut against a High Cut. By helicoptering his blade overhead, he has closed off his body from attacks from above, while threatening his opponent with a horizontal cut.*
**Squinting Cut (Schiellhaw)**

Start in right Ox (using the thumb grip); drop the blade to moulinet past your left shoulder, scooping around to cut from the left side with the short edge, ending up in left Ox (but with the crossbars vertical). Depending on the tactical situation, the hands can drop down toward Plow. The same cut can be done from the opposite side. The Squinting Cut threatens the opponent with a downward cut while protecting against lateral cuts; it is the classic response to an opponent in Plow, protecting against the threatened cut from the side while striking at the same time.

*The large figure on the L is executing a Squinting Cut against a cut coming from his left. By wheeling his blade on the left side of his body, he has closed off his body from attacks from that side, while threatening his opponent with a vertical cut.*

**Crooked Cut (Krumphaw)**

Start in Crossed Guard and with the blade to the left and the left foot back; sweep the blade around and to the right in a moulinet motion to end in Crossed Guard on the opposite side, stepping with the cut. This cut can be repeated, describing a figure-8 moulinet with the blade.
Crossed Guard; it would normally be done with the thumb grip. This version with the blade angling to the left would normally be done with the left foot back, but execution depends on the tactical situation.

This is the most defensive cut, as it clears the space between the combatants, but it does not defend and attack at the same time, unless it is used against the opponent’s arms. It is the classic response to an opponent in Ox: since the Ox can attack from pretty much any angle, the Crooked can protect against any possible interrupting attack.

The figure on the R is executing a Crooked Cut against a Middle or Low Cut. By sweeping his blade through the space between him and his opponent, he can intercept a cut from any direction, though he cannot simultaneously attack.

9.1 The Master Cuts Drill

Do each Master Cut forward and back as in the Straight Cuts drill (Section 8.2). Variants 2-6 will also work.
10. Sample Encounters

10.1 Basic Encounter

This sequence builds stage-by-stage to show the dynamics of a simple swordfight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in L Plow</td>
<td>Start in L Plow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Cut to B’s R shoulder</td>
<td>Remain still—this tests A’s control. Once A has successfully demonstrated the technique, reverse roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once both sides had successfully demonstrated control, add parries and ripostes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in L Plow</td>
<td>Start in L Plow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Cut to B’s R shoulder</td>
<td>Shift to R Plow, then Middle Cut over A’s blade to A’s L shoulder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull back to hanging parry, then bring sword around for a Wrath Cut to B’s L shoulder. When done smoothly, this is actually a moulinet action.</td>
<td>The drill can cycle from here; then reverse roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parrying in Plow
Finishing action: As B parries in L Plow, B steps in with the parry, then lifts A’s sword with his own to pass under it with a pass forward on the L foot behind B’s lead foot. As he comes to the other side, he controls A’s weapon: this will be either with his left hand to deliver a pommel strike; or with his hilt to deliver a disarm (grasping B’s hilt with his left hand) or a throw (sending his left hand in front of B’s shoulders).

This can be adapted for left-handers by executing the throw from R Plow.

Pommel-strike

Setting up a disarm
10.2 Advanced Encounter: The Double-Thwart [Meyer 1570: 1.26r]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in Fool</td>
<td>Start in right Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come up into High for a Scalp Cut</td>
<td>Sweep up to the left to set up a Thwart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliver Scalp Cut, passing forward on the R foot</td>
<td>Deliver a Thwart from the R, with a R triangle step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To protect against the Thwart, the Scalper will have to fall on the middle of B’s blade.</td>
<td>Ideally, pull the Thwart before contact, and deliver a Thwart from the L with a triangle step. B now has the initiative, so A will act in response to B’s actions in the rest of the encounter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block B’s Thwart with a L triangle step</td>
<td>Wrench A’s blade to your R to open a target for another Thwart from the L.$^{1}$ The stepping for the wrench and Thwart can be either a gather step or back-step toward the L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block B’s Thwart, stepping toward the L if possible</td>
<td>Open the distance with a Middle Cut from the R, passing back on the L foot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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$^{1}$ Meyer actually calls for a short-edge cut with crossed arms. The L Thwart has crossed arms, but is done with the long edge.
Cut toward the incoming cut to block it (the swords may contact each other, but now you should be out of range)

Cut away with a High Cut

Cut away

11. Drop-In Workshop Curriculum

Because this document goes into more depth than other Study Guides, below are the items for a typical 15-20 minute drop-in segment.

1. Warmup drill
2. Background on the weapon (section 2)
3. Grip (section 3)
4. Moulinets (section 8.1)
5. Stance (Plow and Ox only, section 4)
6. Moving: Mirroring Drill (section 8.2)
7. Basic Encounter (section 10.1)

12. Selected Sources


Meyer, Joachim (2006; rev. ed. 2014). *The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570*. Transl. Jeffrey L. Forgeng. London: Greenhill Books. One of the most important martial arts texts in the medieval German tradition; my introduction to the text surveys the material. There also survives a manuscript iteration of this material from c. 1568, now at the library of Lund University; I have completed a translation and expect to publish it in 2016.


Tobler, Christian Henry (2010). *In Saint George's Name: An Anthology of Medieval German Fighting Arts*. Wheaton IL: Freelance Academy Press. Includes a translation of the “Starhemberg” manuscript, one of the most important medieval German sources on martial arts.


1. Introduction

The following materials describe basics of cut-and-thrust swordplay with a single-handed sword. The techniques are relevant to all blade weapons that are long and heavy enough to be used for cutting attacks. These include all types of broadswords, the sax, Messer, cutlass, and saber. Important sources on such weapons include: Hans Lecküchner’s Messer treatise (1482); Joachim Meyer’s Art of Combat (1570); Achille Marozzo’s Opera Nova (1536); Giacomo di Grassi’s Art of Handling Arms (1570); and Angelo Viggiani’s Fencing (1575).

The techniques for single sword are actually largely the same as those for the longsword, only done with one hand on the hilt rather than two. The main difference is in footwork: because only the dominant arm is used, the tendency was to keep that side of the body forward, using sliding steps rather than passing steps. This was especially true after about 1500.

The material here is highly simplified and somewhat generic in order to cover a variety of weapons and periods including medieval broadsword, basket-hilted sword, cutlass, and saber. It is designed to support short introductory segments (c. 15-20 mins.) in the Higgins Armory’s workshops. For a more extensive curriculum, one can essentially use the content for the longsword.
2. The Weapons

Broadsword, c. 1300 (HAM 2428). 2 lb. 13 oz. Overall length 35 7/8", blade 29 7/8".

The double-edged one-handed sword of the Middle Ages had its roots in the Celtic *spatha*—in Romance languages, the term for a sword is a derivative of this word (It. *spada*, Sp. *espada*, Fr. *épée*). Today this type of sword is often called a broadsword. Viking Age examples typically have parallel edges, a rounded tip, and a small handguard, suggesting that they were not much used for thrusting or parrying, but were primarily slashing weapons used in conjunction with a shield.

Broadsword, early 1400s (HAM 2007.03). Wt. 3 lb. 8 oz. (excavated condition). Overall length 36 1/2"; blade 29".

After 1000, the handguard tended to become longer and the blade tapered more strongly to the tip. After 1400, it became common for swordsmen to slip their forefinger over the crossguard for improved blade control, leading to the development of complex hilts to provide better protection for the hand. By the late 1500s, broadswords of this type sometimes had “basket” hilts that provided full protection to the hand. The Highlander’s broadsword was a late survival of this type.
During the 1500s, one branch of single-sword evolution led to the development of the rapier as a weapon specialized for civilian combat, such as dueling and self-defense (see the Rapier section of this document). By the late 1500s, the long, thin rapier was fully developed as a type distinct from the all-purpose single-handed sword, which had a shorter, broader blade, and was equally usable in military and civilian settings. Single-handed sword technique tended more toward cutting attacks, where the rapier was optimized for thrusting. Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet (c. 1591-95) highlights the culture wars between advocates of traditional English swordplay with the broad-bladed single sword, and the fashionable gentlemen who favored the newfangled Italian rapier.

A subclass of the single sword are versions that have only a single edge. These often have some degree of curvature in the blade, and they can vary greatly in size. The early medieval sax could be anything from a long knife to a short sword. Its late medieval equivalent, the lange Messer (“long knife”) had short utility versions comparable to a small machete, and long versions that were wielded with two hands. In English such weapons were known as “wood knives” or “cutlasses.” The single-edged design made the blade more robust, and hence more suitable for utility purposes (such as cutting firewood or chopping through
brush). They were carried by farmers and huntsmen in their work, and high-end versions were made for noble hunters.

A high-end hunting sword, c.1490, of hand-and-a-half size (HAM 2007.01).
*Overall length 44", blade 36 1/2", wt. 2 lb. 7 oz.*

By the 1500s, the curved, single-edged sword was becoming increasingly common as a military weapon. In the 1600s, under Islamic influence, this style of weapon contributed to the rise of the saber as the sidearm of choice for light cavalry. Shorter versions were carried by footsoldiers, and known as hangers, or by sailors, and known as cutlasses.
3. Grip

The sword is usually held in a “fist grip.” The grip is normally relaxed and fluid, firming up as necessary prior to contact.

4. Guards

Guards serve as positions of readiness when out of range, and as waypoints and decision points in the course of an encounter. This document only covers the four most basic guards—high and low on the right.
and left sides, but the full range of guards documented in the longsword document applies to this weapon as well.

High Guard

*High Guards as shown by Lecküchner, Marozzo, and Viggiani. This is a versatile guard that protects the head, while threatening a thrust or almost any cut.*
Low Guard
Low Guards as shown by Lecküchner, Marozzo, and Viggiani. This position protects the side of the body, and can threaten a thrust or cut from below. It is a more defensive position than the High Guard: it offers fewer attack options but is less physically demanding.

5. Training Drills and Sequences

5.1 Moulinets

Practice the basic moulinets. This is a good exercise for limbering up the hand, arm, and shoulder, while relaxing the grip on the sword. It is also a fun, flash move that can be easily practiced at home, and it has practical applications in combat, as will be illustrated below.
1. Blade descending in front of you

2. Blade rising in front of you

5. Moulinet #1 in action (Ablauffen)

5.2 Switching Sides

Begin in Low Guard, switch guard from one side to another. The point stays centered on the opponent’s forehead, while the guard shifts from one side to the other, just far enough to close the line.

5.3 Mirroring Drill

Once the students can switch guards, add sliding steps (=fencing steps) in a straight line forward and back. Pair the students and have one lead, switching guards and slide-stepping forward and back, while the follower mirrors, maintaining distance and imitating the leader’s guard.

5.4 Basic Encounter

This sequence builds stage-by-stage to show the dynamics of a simple swordfight. It can also be practiced as a flow drill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in R Low Guard</td>
<td>Start in R Low Guard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Middle Cut to B’s L side (armpit level)  
Remain still—this tests A’s control. Once A has successfully demonstrated the technique, reverse roles.

Once both sides have successfully demonstrated control, add parries and ripostes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in R Low Guard</td>
<td>Start in R Low Guard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Cut to B’s L side</td>
<td>Shift to L Low Guard, then Middle Cut over A’s blade to A’s R side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop point to catch the cut with hanging blade, continuing this moulinet action to cut to B’s R side.</td>
<td>Parry in R Low Guard, then cut straight out to A’s L side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop point to catch the cut with hanging blade, continuing the moulinet action to cut to B’s L side.</td>
<td>Parry in L Low Guard. At this point the sequence can cycle. Once both sides have mastered it, reverse roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Finishing action:* As B parries in Low Guard, B *steps in* (passing step) with the parry, either straight, if parrying to the outside (R for a righthander), or clearing with his sword to pass under the blade if parrying on the inside. As he does this, he controls B’s weapon: this will be either with his left hand to deliver a pommel strike; or with his hilt to deliver a throw, sending his left hand in front of B’s shoulders.

The same thing works with lefthanders; again, if the parry is on the inside line, the defender follows up by passing under the blade to throw the opponent.
6. Selected Sources


Meyer, Joachim (2006; rev. ed. 2014). The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570. Transl. Jeffrey L. Forgeng. London: Greenhill Books. One of the most important martial arts texts in the medieval German tradition; my introduction to the text surveys the material. There also survives a manuscript iteration of this material from c. 1568, now at the library of Lund University; I have completed a translation and expect to publish it in 2016.

1. Introduction

The following materials describe basics of rapier swordplay. Important sources on the weapon include Camillo Agrippa’s *Science of Arms* (1553), Joachim Meyer’s *Art of Combat* (1570), and Giacomo di Grassi’s *Art of Handling Arms* (1570); but there is a huge number of other treatises on this weapon from the 1500s and 1600s.

The use of the rapier is complex, and different masters advocated various systems for using it. The material here is highly simplified and somewhat generic. It is designed to support short introductory segments (c. 15-20 mins.) in the Higgins Armory’s workshops. These workshops can be taught on a controlled safety basis using the rapiers with large spherical buttons (which are based on safety buttons actually used in the period). For smaller students, these weapons can be too heavy, requiring the use of Italian foils instead, in which case they will need to wear fencing gear.
2. The Weapon

Italian sword of the late 1400s, showing some early rapier features: the blade is relatively light, and the hilt has a knuckleguard, arms of the hilt, and a side-ring (HAM 3262). Overall length 40 1/2"; blade L.34 5/8"; blade width at hilt 1 1/4"; Wt. 2 lb. The lost grip would have been made of a wood core wrapped with leather and wire.

There is no hard and fast line between the rapier and the cut-and-thrust sword (which is described in the Single Sword document): a Renaissance sword can be classed as a rapier to the degree that it is designed and used for thrusting in preference to cutting. Early versions of the rapier emerged in southern Europe (Spain and Italy) around the late 1400s. Known as the espada ropera (“clothing sword”) in Spain, by the mid-1500s it had reached France, where it was known as the épée rapière, and by the late 1500s it was known in England as the rapier.
As the original name suggests, the weapon was designed to be worn with civilian clothing, which allowed for a thinner and longer blade, compared to the more robust swords needed on the battlefield. Although longer and thinner than the medieval broadsword, it was about the same weight: surviving examples are typically about 2-3 lb. The modern Italian fencing foil derives from a practice version of the rapier. The long, thin blade of the rapier is what made it best adapted for thrusting attacks, in contrast to broader bladed single swords, which might be equally suited for cuts and thrusts, or chiefly cutting weapons that could at need deliver a thrust.
Northern Europeans of the late 1500s saw the rapier as a foreign weapon: some embraced it as a lethal yet stylish international fashion, others rejected it as a foppish affectation better suited for killing one’s countrymen in the streets than the nation’s enemies on the battlefield. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1591-95) highlights the culture wars between traditional English swordsmen and the fashionable gentlemen who favored the newfangled Italian rapier.

3. Grip
The grip is normally relaxed and fluid, firming up as necessary prior to contact. The index (and sometimes middle) finger is slipped over the crossbar onto the ricasso.
4. Guards

Guards serve as positions of readiness when out of range, and as waypoints and decision points in the course of an encounter. This document only covers the two most basic guards—right and left low guards. For the purposes of simplicity here, the dominant side of the body is always kept forward.

![Low Guards on the right as shown by Viggiani.](image)

5. Training Sequences

5.1 Switching guards

Students switch between R and L Low Guard. The point stays centered on the opponent’s forehead, while the hilt shifts from one side to the other, just far enough to *close the line.*
5.2 Maintaining distance
Students pair up, facing each other in Low Guard on the R. The leader moves forward and backward with sliding steps (fencing steps), while the follower maintains distance. (See the Longsword document on stepping.)

5.3 Mirroring Drill
Leader randomly changes guards in addition to moving forward and back; follower imitates the guard and maintains distance.

5.4 Thrusting to targets
A holds sword artificially on the center line; B practices thrusts to each side of the sword.

5.5 Closing the line
A and B both start in either left or right guard. A thrusts to the available target, B closes the line by shifting to guard on the opposite side.

5.6 Riposte
Same as closing the line, but B adds a riposte, keeping the line closed while thrusting.

5.7 Disengage
Same as closing the line, but as B tries to close the line, A disengages into a lunge on the opposite side.

5.8 Counterthrust with opposition
Same as closing the line with a riposte, except that the defense and riposte are executed as a single action by moving into the thrust while closing the line.

5.9 Keeping the inside line
A takes the inside line from B, either by moving his blade across (taking B’s blade with it if necessary) or changing engagement. B responds by retaking the inside line by changing engagement. Once they can do this, A begins the footwork again as in 5.2, while B maintains distance; A intermittently tries to take the inside line, and B responds appropriately.
5.10 Attacking in time

The students reset to R guard. Staying in place, A switches to L guard to take the inside line. B evades contact to change engagement, extending his arm into a short lunge to hit A, closing the line by turning the true edge against A’s sword.

By disengaging and attacking while A attempts to take the inside line, B is acting in time, using the time created by A’s action.

5.11 Grappling

As 5.6, but instead of riposting, A passes forward with the parry to grapple. If he is parrying to the outside line (R for a righthander), he steps in straight; if to the inside line, he lifts B’s blade with his own to pass forward under it. As he does this, he controls B’s weapon: this will be either with his left hand to deliver a pommel strike; or with his hilt to deliver a throw, sending his left hand in front of B’s shoulders.
The same thing works with lefthanders; again, if the parry is on the inside line, A passes under the blade to throw the opponent, if on the outside line, A passes straight forward.

6. Selected Sources


Meyer, Joachim (2006; rev. ed. 2014). *The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570*. Transl. Jeffrey L. Forgeng. London: Greenhill Books. One of the most important martial arts texts in the medieval German tradition; my introduction to the text surveys the material. There also survives a manuscript iteration of this material from c. 1568, now at the library of Lund University; I have completed a translation and expect to publish it in 2016. Meyer’s rapier technique is very similar to that of di Grassi.

Norman, A. Vesey (1980). *Rapier and Smallsword*. The classic in-depth study of these swords.
1. Introduction
The following materials describe basics of two-handed staff weapon combat from European sources of the 1400s-1500s. Relevant weapons include the quarterstaff, halberd, pollaxe, and battleaxe. Important sources on these weapons include the *Jeu de la Hache* (Burgundian, late 1400s), Pedro Monte’s *Compendium on the Military Art* (Spanish, c. 1490), the “Egenolff Fechtbuch” (c. 1531), Paulus Hector Mair’s *Ars Athletica* (German, c. 1550), Joachim Meyer’s *Art of Combat* (German, 1570), and Joseph Swetnam’s *Science of Defence* (English, 1617).

The material here is highly simplified and generic, allowing a single system to be used for multiple different staff weapons. It is designed to support short introductory segments (c. 15-20 mins.) in the Higgins Armory’s workshops.
2. The Weapons

*Battleaxe, c. 1200s. (HAM 1100). The weapon is 38 in. long and weighs 1 lb. 12 oz.*

Staff weapons can include any two-handed weapon with a wooden haft, with or without a metal head at one or both ends. A variety of such weapons were in use from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. The simplest was the quarterstaff, typically around 6 ft. long. Slightly more complex was the battleaxe, having a single-bladed head, and widely used in the early and central Middle Ages. By the later Middle Ages (roughly the 1300s onwards), many staff weapons had complex heads that featured a thrusting tip and at least two striking faces that might include an axe blade, a piercing beak, and/or a crushing hammer. These weapons included the halberd, bill, and pollaxe.

*Head of a halberd, late 1500s (HAM 1273).*

*These weapons are typically about 8’ long and weigh 4-6 lb.*
Military staff weapons were typically around 8 ft. long; the chivalric pollaxe was a bit shorter, around 6 ft. The length and weighted heads of these weapons allowed them to deal powerful blows that could injure armored opponents.

![Head of a pollaxe, late 1400s (HAM 2653). The weapon weighs 5 lb. 12 oz. and measures 6 ft. long.](image)

The quarterstaff was used much like a spear, with the emphasis on thrusting attacks. The techniques in this document emphasize striking attacks (partly for safety) that were more typical for weapons like the axe, pollaxe, and halberd.

All staff weapons can be divided into four sections: tip, forepart, midstaff, and butt.

### 3. Grip and Stance

Staff weapons can be gripped in various ways, and advanced practitioners will shift from one grip to another in the course of a fight. If the weapon is to be used primarily for thrusting, the fighter usually has their dominant hand at the butt and the secondary hand forward: this is the normal position for a
quarterstaff, spear, or pike. If the weapon will be used for striking, the dominant hand will typically be forward and the secondary hand toward the butt. This is a common position for weapons like the battleaxe, halberd, or pollaxe. The hand may be positioned with the thumbs toward each other, or both hands may have the thumb pointing forward. The thumbs-together position is more versatile, the thumbs-forward position has greater reach and power.

The normal grip leaves a longer section of staff protruding at the forepart than at the butt. Sometimes this grip can be shifted so that the staff is held in the middle. This is more effective at close quarters, but reduces the fighter’s range.

4. Guards

Guards serve as positions of readiness and defense. They can be taught through the drill at the end of this section.

High Reverse Guard

This position guards the side of the body while threatening a thrust with the butt or a downward blow with the head of the weapon.
Low Reverse Guard

This position guards the side of the body while threatening a thrust with the butt or an upward blow with the head of the weapon.

High Forward Guard

This position guards the side of the body while threatening a thrust with the head of the weapon. With a pollaxe, the “cross” of the weapon can be held sideways to allow for defenses with the head.

Low Forward Guard

This position guards the side of the body while threatening a thrust with the head of the weapon.
5. Training Drills and Sequences

Since the staff is essentially an ambidextrous weapon, identical content can be taught to both L and R handers.

5.1 Moulinets

Practice the two basic moulinets for a long staff weapon:

1. Weapon descending in front of you

2. Weapon rising in front of you

5.2 “Driving”

- Start in High Reverse Guard on the R
- Strike diagonally down to Low Forward Guard on the L, passing forward; then slash diagonally back up to High Reverse Guard without stepping
Bring staff around to High Reverse Guard on L, strike diagonally down to Low Forward Guard on R, passing forward; then slash diagonally back up to High Reverse Guard on L without stepping

Bring staff around to original position and repeat.

This drill comes from Meyer’s section on the halberd (3.32r-33r); it allows the student to get a feel for the weapon in motion, it demonstrates the role of the guards as waypoints in combat. Once the drill has been done moving forward, do the same moving backward. Then have students face off, one driving forward while the other drives backward. Then have one student lead, randomizing the stepping. The same drill can be done using triangle steps instead of passing steps.

5.3 Mirroring Drill
Leader switches between guards, and can also move around with passing and triangle steps. Follower imitates the guard and maintains distance. Some of the transitions will effectively be strikes; when ready, the leader can also add thrusts.

5.4 Attacking and Defending on the Staff
- Both start in High Reverse Guard on R.
- Leader passes forward to strike horizontally from R; Follower triangle-steps to parry on forepart of staff.
- Leader passes forward again to strike horizontally from L using the butt; Follower triangle-steps to parry on midstaff.
- Leader passes back to strike horizontally from R; Follower triangle-steps to parry on forepart of staff.
- Leader passes back out of range, both resume initial position, and repeat with Follower attacking.

5.5 Sample Sequences

_Cross block of swinging blow [Anglo 7]_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in High Reverse Guard</td>
<td>Start in Low Reverse Guard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strike diagonally down at B’s shoulder | Strike diagonally up to meet A’s blow  
---|---
| Push A away from behind using the butt [The actual technique in Jeu brings the butt down over A’s forward hand to break his grip].

**Mid-shaft block of swinging blow [Anglo 9, 11]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in High Reverse Guard</td>
<td>Start in Low Reverse Guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike vertically down at B’s head, passing forward</td>
<td>Pass forward to catch in Head Guard, then step with left foot behind A’s forward foot while bringing butt under A’s chin to execute a throw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdraw weapon and step back with right foot, placing the butt under B’s arm to push him away.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The throw (in this case, the weapon is being held with the dominant hand near the rear).*

**Disarm [Anglo 12]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start in High Reverse Guard</td>
<td>Start in Low Reverse Guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike vertically down at B’s head, passing forward</td>
<td>Pass forward to catch in Head Guard, then catch A’s butt with your own to circle it around</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Counter (Made up): Allow the disarm, and steps in, blocking the blow with left hand, stepping with R foot behind B’s forward leg, bringing R hand over B’s L shoulder to throw, taking B’s pollaxe as he falls counterclockwise for a disarm.

6. Selected Sources


1. Introduction

The following materials describe basics of dagger fighting and wrestling from European sources of the
1400s-1500s. Important sources on these forms include Fiore dei Liberi’s *Flos Duellatorum* (Italian,
1409), Pedro Monte’s *On the Recognition of Men* and *Compendium on the Military Art* (Spanish, c.
1490), Master Ott the Jew’s wrestling treatise and Andre Liegnitzer’s dagger plays (German, ?c. 1425-
50), and Joachim Meyer’s *Art of Combat* (German, 1570). Because the dagger is such a short weapon, its
techniques are very closely connected to wrestling. The techniques of wrestling and dagger remain very
consistent across time and cultures.

The material in this document is highly simplified. It is designed to support short introductory segments
(c. 15-20 mins.) in the Higgins Armory’s workshops.

2. The Weapons

Wrestling was a core skill in a knight’s training. As well as teaching basic principles of body mechanics,
it prepared a knight for armored combat in particular: armored duels proverbially came down to wrestling
and dagger work at the end. In addition, wrestling and grappling techniques could be used in all other
weapons forms. Wrestling was also popular as a sport, both with aristocrats and commoners.
The dagger was a common personal accouterment for men in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Medieval daggers were primarily designed as thrusting weapons, some having no cutting edge at all. Before the 1500s, daggers had very little in the way of crossguards; the typical late medieval “rondel” dagger had just a round disk between the blade and hilt.

3. Grip and Stance

The dagger was normally held with the blade projecting downward from the fist, that is from the pinkie side, but sometimes it was held like a sword, with the blade projecting upward from the thumb/forefinger side. The dagger was normally worn on the dominant side of the body, and the downward grip was the natural drawing position for the weapon when worn this way.

One common starting position for wrestling was *Gleichfassen*, the “reciprocal grip.”
4. Techniques

Medieval wrestling techniques typically work by securing advantage over the points of relative weakness on the opponent’s body: chin, neck, elbow, wrist, and knee. Medieval German treatises classify most wrestling techniques as “wrestling at the arm” or “wrestling at the body.” Wrestling at the arm refers to arm locks, which control the wrist and elbow to hyperextend the arm.

If the opponent is armed, the first move is usually to neutralize his weapon, often by grabbing the wrist.

*High Key.* Rotates the arm up and backward, either dislocating the shoulder or forcing the opponent off balance.

![Image of High Key move]

*Low Key.* Rotates the arm down and backward, either dislocating the shoulder or forcing the opponent to the ground.

![Image of Low Key move]

*Arm Bar.* Hyperextends the arm in a straight position, potentially dislocating the elbow, or forcing the opponent to the ground. It can also be done single-handedly by rotating the opponent’s wrist.

![Image of Arm Bar move]
Body wrestling refers to techniques that work on the core of the body. Many of them are variants on the hip throw.

*Hip/Leg Throw.* This move typically throws the balancing system of the shoulders, hips, and legs out of alignment to send the opponent to the ground.

### 5. Drills and Sequences

#### 5.1 Disarm Flow Drill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A (armed with dagger)</th>
<th>B (unarmed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stab diagonally down from R at B’s clavicle</td>
<td>Intercept A with heel of L hand against A’s wrist, palm away. Note that if A is targeting properly, A’s blade will extend over B’s forearm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Send fingers of L hand over A’s forearm at the wrist, scoop counterclockwise to bring the dagger between your chests.

If you are positioned correctly (as in the illustration), A’s dagger will be forced out of his hand by the leverage between B’s hand and forearm.

B takes the dagger in R hand as it comes free.

Repeat with B as the armed attacker, A as the defender doing the disarm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.2 Self-Defense Sequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The following sequences are self-defense scenarios taken from the combat manuals. They normally assume that the combatants are already close to each other. B’s defenses with the left hand will lead to face-to-face techniques; defenses with the right hand will put B behind A. All these techniques are essentially ambidextrous, so the handedness of the student is irrelevant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Left-Hand Defenses</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A (armed with dagger)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatens a downward thrust from above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Catch A’s elbow with your right hand to execute the upper Key (or slip the right hand onto the opponent’s hand to do the Key single-handed).

Extend A’s arm to do an arm bar. The same technique can be done by pinning the opponent’s elbow on top of one’s shoulder, rather than with the hand as shown here.

Extend A’s arm, slip your right arm across the front of A’s chest, and step behind them with your right leg to do a throw.
**Right-Hand Defenses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A (armed with dagger)</th>
<th>B (unarmed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threatens a downward thrust from above</td>
<td>Catch with right hand, thumb downward. From here you can:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catch A’s elbow with your left hand to execute an arm bar or lower Key</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pull A’s arm in front of you while stepping behind them and slipping your left arm across their shoulders to do a throw.

Self-Defense Scenario (Meyer 1570: 3.10r)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A (armed with dagger in belt)</th>
<th>B (unarmed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seems to be thinking about drawing</td>
<td>Grab A’s nearer hand with your same hand (i.e. right to right or left to left), pull that hand toward you, and slip your other hand across the front of A’s chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At this point, A may try to draw with the free hand</td>
<td>Catch A’s free bicep with the hand that is across their chest. If you hold here solidly, A cannot use the weapon, and you can also throw A over your</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Selected Sources


Marozzo, Achille (1536). *Opera nova de Achille Marozzo Bolognese, mastro generale de l'arte de l'armi*. Modena: Antonio Bergolæ. One of relatively few Italian sources on the use of the dagger.

Meyer, Joachim (2006; rev. ed. 2014). *The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570*. Transl. Jeffrey L. Forgeng. London: Greenhill Books. One of the most important martial arts texts in the medieval German tradition; the translator’s introduction surveys the material. Excellent section on dagger with important material on wrestling as well.


1. Introduction
The following materials describe basics of halfsword combat as documented in the “Liechtenauer” system predominant in German sources of the 1400s-1500s. Johannes Liechtenauer was a famous combat master of the 1300s whose verses on combat remained central to German martial arts for centuries afterwards. The verses are difficult to interpret, but the techniques are explained in a variety of later writings, of which the most important is the “Starhemberg” manuscript of 1452. These halfsword techniques were used for armored combat with longswords; they were also sometimes practiced in unarmored longsword combat.

The material here is highly simplified. It is designed to support short introductory segments (c. 15-20 mins.) in the Higgins Armory’s workshops.

2. The Weapon
“Halfsword” refers to the knightly longsword as used in a spear-like grip, with the secondary hand on the middle of the blade. This was the normal position for using this weapon in armored combat: the normal “longsword” position was optimized for cutting attacks, which were ineffective against an armored opponent. For more information on the weapon, see the Longsword document.
3. Grip

The main hand is next to the crossbar, the secondary hand is on the blade. This position allows for greater thrusting accuracy to target the limited openings on an armored opponent. Sometimes the main hand can be brought onto the blade to reverse the weapon for a powerful “murder-blow” technique, striking with the hilt of the weapon. One can also release the secondary hand from the blade to facilitate grappling, although single-handed thrusts are less accurate than with both hands.

4. Targets

Since the edge of the longsword is largely irrelevant to armored combat, attacks are delivered either with the tip or hilt. The tip can thrust to any place that is not covered by armor plates: targets include under the visor, the armpits, inside the elbows, palms, into the cuff of the gauntlet, groin, inside of the legs, and even the soles of the feet. Some of these areas would have backup covering of mail, in which case the combatant would try to lodge his point into one of the mail links and push to break through.

The combatant on the left has planted his point into his opponent’s armpit, and will now try to crowd him to break through the mail armpit gussets. His opponent will try to disengage before this happens.

Attacks with the hilt can deliver more power, and therefore may target the armor plates as well as the gaps. These attacks can be delivered with either the pommel (in halfsword or Murder-Blow position) or crossbar (in Murder-Blow position). The hilt can also be used to catch onto parts of the opponent’s body, and overall the close range of armored combat allows for a good deal of grappling techniques, whether using the hands or the weapon.
Hooking the leg with the crossbar from the Murder-Blow position.

5. Guards

Low and High Guards.
Murder-Blow (*Mortschlag*)

The figure on the left has delivered the Murder-Blow (for maximum reach and power, his right hand would be closer to his left).

6. Sample Encounter

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start in Low Guard</td>
<td>Start in Low Guard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | |</p>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thrust up to B’s face</td>
<td>Counterthrust to A’s face, deflecting his blade in the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step in behind B’s forward leg to snag B’s neck with pomme</td>
<td>Release L hand to force A’s hilt down, while lifting sword to thrust singlehanded to A’s face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step back and release R hand to deflect thrust with forearm, then take blade with R hand to deliver Murder-Blow, stepping forward

Return to halfsword grip to catch A’s blade high, stepping forward, then circle around with hilt counterclockwise to catch A’s hilt, while stepping back to disarm.

The simplest way to adapt this for a lefthander is to have them do the A part, starting on guard with the L hand and pommel forward rather than the point. This would be a less typical yet still possible starting position, allowing for a pommel-bash to the helmet as the opening move. The neck-hook can be done with the point of the sword. The trickiest part is the forearm block: the lefthander releases their L hand from the hilt, using it to deflect the incoming attack toward the L, while bringing the blade in the R hand
toward their R side to set up for a Murder-Blow from the R side (for a L hander, the Murder-Blow is delivered with the R hand toward the point of the blade, the L hand toward the hilt). B’s part is entirely unchanged.

7. Selected Sources


Tobler, Christian Henry (2010). In Saint George’s Name: An Anthology of Medieval German Fighting Arts. Wheaton IL: Freelance Academy Press. Includes a translation of the “Starhemberg” manuscript, one of the most important medieval German sources on martial arts, with extensive material on armored combat.