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Notes on Training: Forms, Intervals and Skill Progression

Martial arts, by and large, are systems for applying a theory of what should work best in combat, when under the extreme duress of the combat environment. Those of us working with research-based arts (as compared to living traditions where the source is the instructor) often lack training in that most vital component of taking the art from the page to the duelling ground: training methodology. There is not much use in knowing how an action should be done to save your life and take your opponent's, if the command to do it gets stuck between brain and body, leaving you standing helplessly by as your opponent applies what he can actually do. This article is meant as a guide to my students that are taking classes or running branches, and is perhaps of interest to other martial artists. In it I outline some basic components of training: solo form, pair drills, skill progression and interval training. Conditioning, preparing the body to execute all of the above, is taken for granted (as I trust all my students are working from the conditioning guidelines in the syllabus). For specifics of individual drills or forms, readers should refer to the syllabus as published online.

Form and Function: using solo forms for martial training.

If you have ever been working on a martial technique with a partner, had trouble getting it, and taken a break to work through the motion required on your own, in the hopes that it would help you do it in the partner drill, then you intuitively understand the main point of using set forms to practise martial arts. There are arts that do nothing but form, and others that have abandoned form practice as useless: most lie somewhere in between. It has been my experience that forms are a training tool, and like any other tool, if used correctly they are very useful, used wrong, they are a waste of time.

Form practice is often shrouded in a great deal of pointless mystique: "practice this form diligently, grasshopper, at 7am and 7pm for seven years, and you will become unbeatable", saith the master, which grasshopper duly does and is then thoroughly annoyed when he gets pasted in his first fight. This article is intended to describe the underlying theory of the forms practice we do at my school, in the hopes that my students will better understand why we do things the way we do, and to give those outside the school some useful ideas about training the forms they know, or writing forms to help themselves practise whatever art they are interested in.

Well constructed forms are comprised of techniques, connective steps and conditioning exercises, assembled according to an aesthetic typical of the art to which they belong.

The techniques are applications, supposed to work against specific attacks in specific directions. If you don't know the applications, in detail, you're just doing choreography.

The connective steps allow the techniques to be put together into some kind of pattern, which is usually determined by the presence or absence of multiple opponents, the size of the training space, and in some cases aesthetics.

Conditioning exercises such as jumps, rolls and spins may be part of the fighting techniques, but are more usually included to build strength, agility and power. Some forms are adapted purely as conditioning exercises, the primary purpose of the form being to improve health and strength rather than convey martial skill.

Whatever form you practice, it is vital to understand not only every application of every step, but also what is included for the sake of the pattern, and what for health or conditioning. Practising forms without that knowledge is like practising a language phonetically, with no idea of what the sounds actually mean. You may make some fatally embarrassing mistakes when finally using the language in conversation.

Forms are usually written to encapsulate one aspect of a style, or the whole style. You can usually tell which by seeing how many forms you are expected to learn. The form(s) provide a zip-file, if you will, that when practised, drill the artist in the most important actions of the style, and serves as a notepad or table of contents for the rest.

There is some evidence to suggest that forms have been used in European martial arts since their inception, but very few descriptions survive. The Bolognese tradition (from 16th century Italy) has the richest vein of forms detailed in the surviving treatises: Marozzo's assaulti and Dall'Agocchie's "way that one must follow when stepping in the said guards" (page 11 verso) spring to mind as obvious examples. As Dall'Agocchie says, "this stepping is one of the chief things you must practice if you want to have grace with weapons in hand." (12 recto) (translation courtesy of Jherek Swanger.)

There are, in my experience, only two types of student: those that practise, and those that don't. Those that practise invariably spend at least as much time training on their own as with a partner, simply because partners are hard to find at home, at the office, waiting at bus-stops, etc. Solo training is a vital part of learning any skill, and form is uniquely adapted to making solo training effective. We can't always have a partner available, nor necessarily much space or time to train in. Knowing a few forms allows a student to get the most out of even a short practice, as it provides a clear structure to follow, and a source of ideas for further training. While doing a form, the student might notice that their thrusts lack power, so is inspired to go spend some time thrusting at targets. Or they may notice that their stance is weak, and go do their dedicated stance work, etc. Even if all they practice is the form, then if that form is well conceived, they will cover all the main points of their style, and have spent their time profitably. Nothing can replace partner work in set drills, nor sparring: but nothing can replace solo technical practice either.

I usually teach our forms as a sequence of applications that are drilled with a partner before adding to the form. So, we would start with the application of step 1, and practice that in pairs, then solo. We then cover step 2 as a partner drill, then solo, and then as part of the form (steps 1 and 2 together, plus any connective steps necessary). Incidentally, when writing a form I try to keep connective steps to a minimum, and have at least 5 or 6 applications strung together without them to start with. This process continues (often over several practice sessions, especially for a longer form) until the form is complete. If we are talking about normal human beings, the students will by now have forgotten or elided at least some of the steps, and so it is vital to keep the applications fresh by periodically

practising them in isolation.

Once the form is learned, the student can start working on polishing the details: where exactly should the left foot be and why, what guard position does this blow finish in, how extended are the arms at this stage of the attack, etc.

When the form is reasonably fluent, we introduce repetitions at different speeds:
1. "treacle speed", very slow, as if wading through treacle. This builds stability, strength, and gives the student time to notice as many details as possible.
2. "walking speed", a comfortable pace at which the form remains accurate. This gives a sense of the flow of the form, its rhythm, and should be quite relaxing.
3. fast: as fast as possible. This builds speed, obviously, but also highlights the slippage away from clean technique that speed inevitably brings.

As an idea of the speeds involved, our longsword syllabus form at treacle speed takes me about 1 minute, at walking speed about 30 seconds, and fast about 25 seconds. Most seniors have a walking speed about 30-38 seconds. With long practice, treacle speed gets very, very slow, and walking speed gets faster; fast gets quicker too, but most importantly gets more precise.

All this focus on the form in isolation can lead to the applications falling by the wayside, so once the student can go through the form at a reasonable pace, cleanly and quickly, we introduce partners, who will give the correct attack or other stimulus at the correct measure and correct time, as the person in the middle goes through the form. Multiple partners are needed as the form goes in several directions, to save time on the partner running around to the right place for the next technique. Ideally, the flow of the form, and its content, is identical with and without these assistants, but in real life there is always some slippage.

So, we introduce the time element. Let's say we have 4 students, A, B, C and D, all wearing light protective gear. A starts, and goes through the form at walking speed, which is timed. A takes 32 seconds from start to finish. We add a 5 second margin, and allow him 37 seconds with partners. B, C and D, if they know the form well, will know exactly which line each attack should come in, and at what distance, and which steps are attacks themselves, so they should in theory be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. Ha. The form with its applications is then timed, and everyone does one push up for every second over the 37. This eliminates a lot of faffing about on the second run through, which is usually better. Next we time B, and A, C and D are the assistants. And round we go. By the time everyone has been in the middle, they should all have a very clear idea of which applications they had forgotten, and which of their partners caused them the most push-ups for forgetting. It creates an element of stress, which helps the students concentrate on the essentials: making the applications work.

This exercise is invariably followed by several rounds of slow form, which allows the students time to include the things they learned from the timed rounds into their solo work. I find this greatly improves the students' ability to practise the form effectively; the applications are drummed in under pressure, and form becomes associated indelibly with function. It also gives a very clear idea whether the assistants know the form properly or not; if they do, the right place to stand and the right thing to do for the next step are

obvious, and require no real thought. Students caught not knowing where they should be have only a superficial understanding of the form; exercising it this way does more than any number of solo repetitions to help the student internalise what each step is for.

Once the students really know the form, it becomes a mnemonic aid not only for the specific applications, but also the general principles and classes of technique in the system. For instance, step 2 of the syllabus form is a roverso fendente blow. This acts as a chapter heading "cutting practice", under which the student can write "pell practice", "tatami cutting", "tyre striking" "cutting drills x,y and z", etc. This serves primarily to remind the student to go and do all those things, but also to remind the student that the blow in the form is the end product of all that training, and must represent the edge alignment learned on the tatami, the power generation learned on the tyre, the ability to move directly into other blows learned in the cutting drills, etc. Step one has even more potential depth: the defence of the sword in the scabbard against a dagger strike. This serves as the chapter heading "dagger plays"and/or "drawing the sword" and/or "segue sections" (those parts of the treatise that connect one section to another, including the bastoncello plays, dagger against sword, sword against dagger, sticks and dagger against spear, etc. See my article "A Swordsman's Introduction to Fior Battaglia" for more details); a huge body of material worthy of a whole set of other forms. This provides a useful class tool, in that we can go through the form, and then split the class into groups, each group working on variations, alternative applications and related material for a given step. We can work through the form step by step this way, or allocate a different step to each group. We call this process "unzipping the form"

Learning forms is a skill in itself; students who come with an extensive background in form-based martial arts can usually pick up the syllabus form from start to finish in 15 minutes (provided they have enough basic training that the actions themselves are familiar). Those learning their first form usually take many hours spread over many days, even months. There is an intrinsic advantage to learning forms in that it trains the memory for other things, and develops the mind's ability to notice and record patterns. This is one of the reasons that I incorporate forms of varying lengths and types across the syllabus.

Lastly, we move beyond form by creating spontaneous free-flowing technical sequences using the form as a starting point. Our syllabus form has three techniques done from tutta porta di ferro: rompere di punta, rebattere, and the colpo di villano play. When going through the form, any one of those techniques can be done any time you find yourself in that guard; likewise there are a range of actions done from posta di donna la sinestra, any one of which can be done whenever we arrive in that guard. So the individual applications, plus variations and alternative actions from particular guards, indeed any action within the Fiore syllabus, can be blended into a seamless, endless progression of techniques, using the form as a base, a starting point, and an end.

Interval training

Form practice is also one of the simplest venues in which to introduce the idea of interval training, in which the intensity or complexity of the practice increases and decreases, with an overall increase over the course of the session; this is standard practice in most

training environments, both within a given session and between sessions. In short, start easy, and get harder; when it is becoming too hard, ease off, but not all the way back to the starting level; from there, increase the intensity again, and get past the previous hardest level; then go back a bit, but not as far as before, etc etc. This is most easily illustrated in a graph: the y axis shows intensity level (however it is measured; examples include heart rate, weight lifted, number of repetitions, speed of repetitions, complexity of material, etc.), the x axis shows time.

Interval training
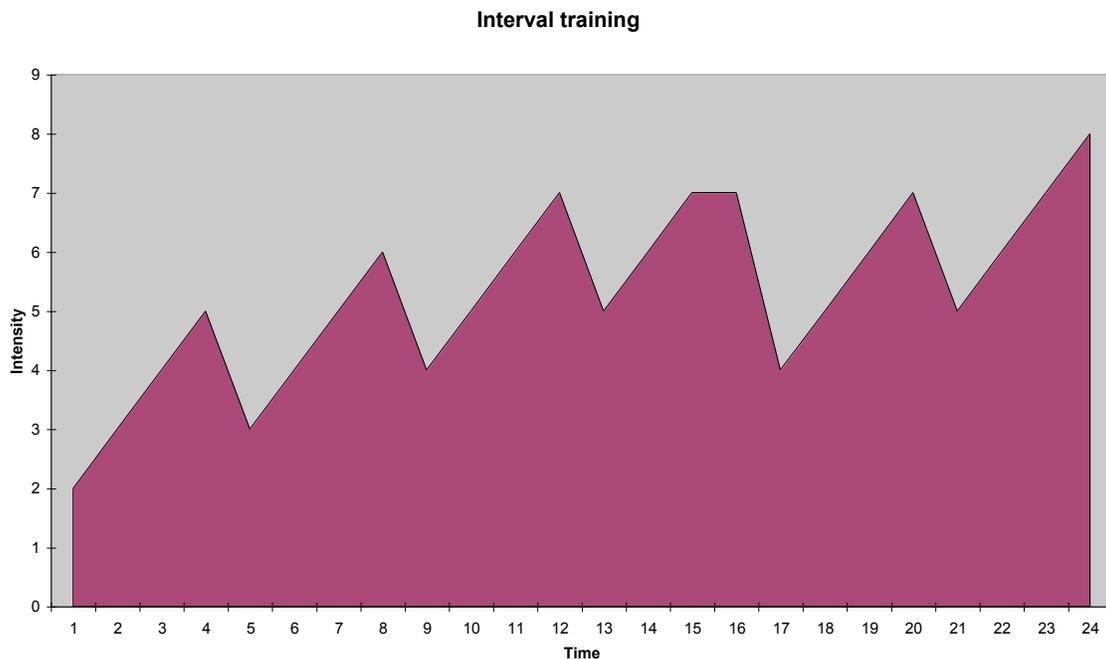
The bottom line (0-24) can be read as units of 5 minutes for a 2 hour class, 24 consecutive classes on different nights, 2 years counted in months. Note that the peak at x=15 is flattened, showing a training plateau, which is broken through on the next run-up. These figures are not exact, obviously, but represent the idea of interval training. My own training tends to go in waves of about 6 weeks of increasing intensity, followed by a relaxation period of light training, then a further 6 week build up starting higher up the scale than the previous. I also run every class in this way, with gradual build-ups and slow-downs.

So, when using the form for this, you can for instance do 5 repetitions of increasing speed, from treacle to fast, then a 1 minute break, then 5 repetitions from walking to fast, 1 minute break, then 5 fast, 1 minute break, then 6 repetitions from treacle to fast, etc. See how far you get; if you make it to 10, start the next session with 6 reps, and build up to 11, etc. Once you're starting on 10 reps per set, replace the breaks with super-slow repetitions. This is becomes viciously hard fitness training with built-in technical and tactical training. Sometimes it's fun to finish training a quivering wreck.

If you find you hit a plateau from which you cannot improve to the next target, the trick is to fall back a couple of paces and take another run at it. Let's say you're doing push-ups; you want to be able to do 50, but at the moment 20 is the limit. So, start at 16 for a couple of days, then add one per day till you hit 19 (just short of the present limit), then

reduce back to 17, build up to 21 (hurrah! One limit gone!), then back down to 18, etc. You keep this up till you hit 32, where you get stuck. After a couple of days of trying, drop back down not to the previous starting point (probably 28), but to the one before (27) or even further. Then take another run up at it. With luck and hard work, you should pass 32 the next time you get there. This principle applies equally to form training, and swordsmanship training in general: when you hit a plateau, go back down a few steps (this is the only solution I know to the perennial problem of the intermediate's plateau, where a relatively senior student gets stuck at the same level for months, feels he cannot improve, and quits in frustration, because he does not know to take a couple of steps back). The solution to the problem you are working on is rarely in the problem itself, but more usually in the steps that lead up to it. Cross reference with the compound counter riposte drill (see below) shows the principle at work in a technical drill context.

Freedom by Degrees: developing core skills into freeplay.

All serious martial arts have set drills as part of their training curriculum. Most also include sparring at some point earlier or later in the student's progression towards mastery. How any given art views freeplay, sparring, or whatever you choose to call it, determines its nature. Some view it as basically unnecessary: the art is the drills. Some view it as the single best indicator of a student's progress. And for some it is the sole measure of success. In my opinion, freeplay is essential in the same way that when learning a foreign language, having spontaneous, unstructured conversation is eventually necessary. But how many native speakers understand the structure of their own language? When it comes to European swordsmanship arts, sparring is always at least somewhat unrealistic: the arts are usually intended to ensure victory in mortal combat; but we cannot have fatalities in training. So, while sparring is the closest we ever come to duelling, it is not and cannot be a truly accurate simulation of the duel. We have our historical sources to tell us what works when losing is death; we cannot know without breaking several laws and abandoning common sense, whether what we are practising is equally effective. However, sparring will tell us something about how well we can execute the techniques we practise in a more random context. Perhaps the most important indicator of whether a school practises a martial art or a combat sport is whether the students train to become good at sparring, or spar to become better at training. Because modern sparring contexts are pretty far removed from historical duelling reality (which had its own rules of engagement like all combat scenarios), a club or school that emphasises success in sparring as the primary goal of training, has developed a sport out of an art. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, nor anything particularly modern about it: combat sports are as old as martial arts, and have always been closely related. Things change somewhat when we consider the interpretive nature of the current state of western martial arts. The process goes like this:
1) find a source to work with,
2) develop canonical physical interpretations of the plays and techniques in it,
3) extrapolate the cardinal principles (if they are not directly discussed),
4) compare and contrast the source with others of the same lineage and others of the same period,
5) develop a training regime for becoming proficient in the system.

For most of the medieval sources and many of the later ones we are still at the stage where the canonical interpretations of the core plays are changing, sometimes quite radically. As new information comes to light, or we simply begin to understand something that was obscure, we have to go back and re-evaluate our previous ways of doing things. Sparring is useful in this context only because it can sometimes bring to light mechanical or tactical errors in our working interpretation. If we are truly interested in finding out what the masters of old were doing, the phrase "it works in sparring" can be abandoned altogether as irrelevant. They, by and large, are not concerned with what works in sparring, but what works in the duel. However, if an interpretation follows the text, looks like the pictures (where available), follows the core principles of the system as discussed or discovered, makes tactical and mechanical sense, and after drilling it extensively it works in the context it was supposed to when that spontaneously occurs in freeplay, then it's probably right.

So, assuming we have a canonical interpretation and basic set drills to practise it in, what then? Going directly into sparring is like taking someone learning English as a foreign language, and at the point where they can say "Hello, my name is Henri", entering them for the debate team. Instead, we must gradually introduce levels of complexity. I will use two systems, from sources 200 years apart, to demonstrate the process: Fiore's *Fior Battaglia* and Capo Ferro's *Gran Simulacro*.

Let's take them chronologically, and begin with a set drill developed from each book.

Fior Battaglia (1409):

Fiore gives us a clear tactical structure for his system, defined by the four masters of battle, who are: first, the attacker; second, the remedy master, who defends against the attack; third, the counter-remedy master who having attacked beats the remedy; and fourth, the counter-counter remedy master, who beats the attacker's counter. The plays usually show just the remedy master (who defends against an attack with a cover), followed by his scholars, who after a successful cover do nasty things to the "player" who has attacked. Every now and then we see a counter-remedy master, who beats either the remedy master himself or one or more of his scholars (some counter-remedies work only against a specific play; others work against the cover itself and so prevent all the plays that would otherwise follow it). Let's take some concrete examples and build a set drill that encapsulates the system.

The setup: Attacker stands in posta di donna, defender in posta di dente di zenghiaro

1) Attacker attacks with mandritto fendente
2) Defender covers with a roverso sottano, stepping offline to his right with his right foot, beating the attacker's sword up and to the right, then cuts down mandritto fendente to his head (folio 33 recto)
3) Attacker allows his sword to be beaten aside, keeps the hilt forward, and enters underneath the defender's fendente, extending his left arm forward and wrapping the defenders arms in his left, and executes a pommel strike to the face.
4) As the attacker wraps, the defender takes another step off the line with the front foot, and collects the attacker's wrapping arm in a ligadura sottana.

So now we have a four-step drill, with every action predetermined. This must then be trained until it is fluent. No variations, no alternatives. The most common error in set drill is thinking past the technique you're actually doing: if going through to step 4, the

defender's fendente gets forgotten, or the attacker's pommel strike becomes a vague nudge. The best cure for this is twofold: firstly, step the drill, so that every time you go through it, you start with just step one. Reset, and go steps one-two. Reset and one-two-three. Reset, and one-two-three-four. Then back to the beginning again. One, one-two, one-two-three, etc. This sets up the logic for every action clearly, before you have to do it. Secondly, pay attention, and if you feel that your partner is not properly executing his action because he is anticipating your counter, leave the counter out. I often stand still when my partner expects me to cover, and watch his blade hover a metre away from me, out of measure, and ask him when he is actually going to attack.

Then we add a degree of freedom at one step in the drill. The nearer the beginning you allow the freedom, the more the drill will change. We usually start at the remedy: at step two, the defender can do the basic form, or after the cover strike to the attacker's hands, or strike with the point to the face, or enter with a pass and a pommel strike, or enter with a half-sword thrust, or step away and cut to the attacker's arms instead of covering. This should be practiced with no counter-remedy on the attacker's part to begin with. So we now have five new little set drills. When both partners are comfortable with the options available, the attacker can counter. This counter will of course vary depending on the remedy. If you find that the counter-remedy for any given remedy is not working, create a new set drill, taking your counter-remedy from whatever part of Fiore's system offers the closest context. At this stage, the counter-remedy must occur after the cover (except against the cut to the hands, which replaces the cover).

Now the fun begins, and the remedier can counter the counter-remedy; and indeed should chose his remedy so that if it fails, he can pull off the counter to the most likely set of counter-remedies. This is the beginning of learning to apply tactics to your decision-making.

So, with one degree of freedom, we already have an incredibly complex and varied drill. The attacker's counter-remedy will vary, but not freely; he has to wait for the cover, and can only attack in one line. This is already a good test of how well you understand the system you are studying: can you as an attacker cope with all the sensible remedies from that position: can you, as a defender cope with all the counter-remedies that the attacker may pull off? If at any stage you find a combination where one of you reliably fails (for example: I attack, you cover and enter with half-sword, my counter-remedy doesn't work), take it out of this context and drill it on its own as a set drill. If neither of you can make the technique work in a set drill, re-evaluate your choice of counter.

Now apply this process to each step of the drill in turn: from the set-up (donna to zenghiaro), the attack (mandritto fendente), the remedy, counter-remedy, and counter-counter-remedy. Allow only one step to be free though. Once that has been drilled in, we can add another degree of freedom: for example, the attacker can come in with any blow, and the remedy can be any of those discussed above (cover and cut, cover and thrust, attack the arms, etc.). Make sure that in this process every technique is recognisably Fiorean: using his guards, his tactical approach, his actions and plays, as best you understand them.

After each step up in complexity, return for a while to the basic, set form of the drill, and create new set drills to fix any technical problems that may occur. Don't forget to allow a degree of freedom at the end: in the basic form that would be the attacker's counter to the ligadura sottana, if he can think of a sensible way to do it. So neither partner knows how long the drill is: four steps or five? This establishes the idea that choreography is not to be too heavily relied on.

Notice that the tactical logic to each action is very clear, and that both parties are holding at least two steps in their head. This is the beginning of learning tactics.

This process culminates in a drill where each party can choose their own guard position, either one can attack however they like, the remedy can be whatever the defender chooses, the counter-remedy is likewise open, and there is no set length to the drill: you keep going with counters and counter-counters until either you separate with no conclusive blow struck, or there is a clear, finishing action on one side. That's called freeplay. Or sparring.

Gran Simulacro (1610)

The usual setup in this system is one fencer standing in guard (let's call him the Patient), the other approaches with a stringering (let's call him the Agent), the Patient responds, usually with an attack by disengage, and the Agent parries and ripostes. The next level is the Patient disengaging with a feint, which the Agent falls for, tries his parry, and gets stabbed.

We begin with a set drill that exemplifies the system, the first play of the book, shown on plate seven.

The setup: patient and agent out of measure, standing on guard in terza.

1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and attacks, lunging in seconda
3) Agent counterattacks, turning his hand to seconda and striking the patient as he comes forward (parrying and striking in a single motion, also with a lunge).

So far so good. Because Capo Ferro says so, the next step should be to allow the patient to disengage with a feint, holding his body back in the book. The agent goes to parry and strike, and the patient parries and ripostes. As with the previous drill, this should be practiced until both parties can execute both sides of the drill. I would also recommend stepping the drill (one, one-two, one-two-three, etc.).

Now we introduce one degree of freedom: the patient can disengage and attack, or disengage and feint. If the agent falls for the feint, he will get hit: if he doesn't, then he can just step back. We can enlarge that degree by allowing alternative responses to the stringering; the patient can attack with a disengage-beat, with a disengage-beat-feint combination, etc. all of which the agent has to deal with.

The second degree of freedom would probably be the choice of guard the patient waits in; Capo Ferro makes frequent reference to specific waiting guards determining the choice of stringering and hence what happens next.

One particularly useful set drill I developed for use in my school we call the compound-counter-riposte drill (the term comes from classical fencing, and means a riposte with at least one feint made after your attack has been parried and you have parried the defender's riposte)

It is fairly long, but when set up and running, it makes an excellent base for adding degrees of freedom.

Setup: patient stands on guard in terza, agent out of measure in terza.

Step 1:
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta. Patient does nothing, agent extends and lunges

Step 2:
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.

    2) Patient disengages, and attacks, lunging in seconda.

Step 3:
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and attacks, lunging in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda, and ripostes

Step 4
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges, striking the agent.

Step 5
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and ripostes.

Step 6
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and ripostes.
6) Patient recovers and parries in quarta, and ripostes

Step 7
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and feints.
6) Patient recovers and parries in quarta,
7) Agent disengages and strikes

Step 8
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and feints.
6) Patient recovers and parries in quarta,
7) Agent disengages and strikes
8) Patient parries in seconda and ripostes

Step 9
1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and feints.
6) Patient recovers and parries in quarta,

7) Agent disengages and strikes in seconda
8) Patient parries in seconda and ripostes
9) Agent recovers, parries in seconda, and ripostes

Step 10

1) Agent steps into measure, stringering the Patient on the inside in quarta.
2) Patient disengages, and feints, extending in seconda.
3) Agent parries in seconda,
4) Patient disengages to quarta and lunges
5) Agent parries in quarta and feints.
6) Patient recovers and parries in quarta,
7) Agent disengages and strikes in seconda
8) Patient parries in seconda and feints
9) Agent recovers, parries in seconda,
10) Patient disengages and strikes in quarta (the compound counter riposte).

It looks like a lot when written out like this, but this is actually a pretty simple drill requiring only the following techniques: the stringering, disengage in both directions, lunging in seconda and quarta, parries of seconda and quarta, a feint in both lines (an extension followed by a disengage, change of hand position, and lunge). In my experience students that cannot follow the logical progression of this drill (attack with a feint, parried, riposte with a feint, also parried, counter-riposte with a feint) are not yet ready for even light freeplay as they cannot follow the actions as they occur nor plan their attacks.

The first degree of freedom to insert is at the beginning: by stringering on the other side, the whole drill repeats itself with quarta and seconda reversed. Then perhaps allowing an action in contratempo at a given step, instead of a parry-riposte.

This drill also lends itself well to creating a flowdrill, in which there is an endless round of riposte and counter riposte, each with a feint (feint, disengage, lunge, parry, parry, feint, disengage, lunge, parry, parry, etc.). This serves as an excellent test of a student's ability to remain technically accurate after multiple actions. It can then be used to create opportunities for the more advanced actions (parry and riposte in a single time, avoidances, etc.) to be drilled, which brings me on to the question of skill progression.

Skill progression: how do we develop our core skills?

Everything begins with set drills. He does this, I do that, he does the other. This is the best vehicle for acquiring a basic competence in the mechanical actions of the system you are training in, and an idea of the tactical choices that the system emphasises.

We usually begin with the basic mechanical action done on its own, to the air (for example, cutting from frontale to longa; or lunging in quarta, or whatever. We then put this in the context of a target, either inanimate (a pell, the wall target, etc.) or a live partner. We then demand the same action as a response to a given stimulus: in these cases, the partner attacks on the inside line, we parry (frontale or quarta), and riposte (cut to head, lunge in quarta). We then increase the complexity of the situation in which the action is to be performed; as part of a longer drill, or as an option at a given stage, or in freeplay.

Perhaps the single most useful tool for developing the skill to execute a particular action is the flow drill. Every action sets up the conditions for the next one, so we can either choose a context where the actions should remain identical, or where we are expected to

adapt our actions according to the changing circumstances. I will take two specific drills in use at my salle to illustrate these two approaches. They are the rapier flow drill based on the riposte with a feint as described above, and the dagger disarm flow drill built up from three of Fiore's dagger disarms.

Let's take the more mechanically conservative first:

Compound riposte flow drill:

1) Set up the compound-counter-riposte drill as above
2) At step 10, agent parries, feints
3) Patient parries
4) Agent disengages, attacks
5) Patient parries, feints
6) Agent parries
7) Patient disengages, attacks
8) Agent parries, feints
9) Repeat from step 3

So now we have a continual round of parry, feint, disengage, lunge, recover, parry, parry, feint, disengage, lunge etc etc. On its own this presents quite advanced technical challenges to most students: maintaining proper measure, proper parrying technique, the correct execution of the lunge, etc., not to mention disengaging without fouling your point on your partner's hilt. Only when you can maintain the flow for at least half a dozen rounds without losing your form, should you break it.

Breaking the flow: once the flow is established, choose one of you to break it, with an action that prevents the drill from continuing by resulting in a successful strike. The usual first choice for a break is an action in contratempo in place of the second parry. For example, parry your partner's feint, but as he attacks, parry and riposte in one tempo, preventing him from recovering and parrying. Once both partners can do that at will on both sides, try breaking with a contracavazione: when he feints, parry, and as he goes around your parry with a cavazione, follow his blade with a contracavazione, striking him, again in contratempo. If that's easy, try pulling off a scanso della vita, or scannatura, or any other play you are working on.

Counter the break: when you are working on a technique used to counter an action (like the scanso della vita, for example), using the flow drill gives you an venue for finding out whether you can see the action coming in time to counter. First drill the action in its normal context (for example: A stringers on the outside; P attacks by cavazione; A counters with a scanso della vita), and then its counter (A stringers on the outside; P feints by cavazione; A does a scanso; P parries and enters), again as a set drill. Then add one degree of freedom; P can attack, or feint; A does the scanso only if he believes it will work (i.e. he has fallen for the feint). When that is working nicely, set up the flow drill, which A will break with a scanso. If P sees the scanso coming, he counters. If not, he gets hit. P should try to set A up to fail.

So, we have a formula for training: set drill, leads to flow drill, leads to breaking the flow, leads to countering the break. Every action is drilled in isolation, and tested in the flow.

So, let's apply this to the dagger disarm flow drill.

1) Agent attacks mandritto
2) Patient disarms using first play of first master of dagger (same in Getty and Novati).
3) Patient attacks roverso
4) Agent disarms with the first and second plays of the third master of dagger

(shown in Novati only)
5) Agent attacks with sotto
6) Patient disarms using cover of the ninth master (same in Getty and Novati)
7) Patient attacks mandritto
8) Go to step 2…

With practice, this becomes a seamless, unbroken motion of disarms and strikes, with no pauses to reset. If you do get hit, then just keep going; stop only if the drill starts to break down. Of course, these three techniques must be drilled in isolation before being put together into the flow drill. The drill should also be stepped through a few times (1, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4, etc) before establishing the flow.

You will notice that after a round or two, the starting position (usually both parties left foot forward, in measure for the pass) is long gone, and you are executing techniques with the "wrong" foot forward, moving in the "wrong" directions, etc. If, though, your core interpretation is correct, you'll find that the principles that make the techniques work are simple and easily applied in different contexts: break his structure on contact; control the weapon, leverage to disarm, strike immediately.

Fiore tells us (on page 11v) that there are five things we must know to do with the dagger: disarm, strike, break his arms, lock and counterlock, and throw him to the ground. The flow drill has plenty of disarms: so break it with a lock, an arm break, or a takedown, whichever you are working on. If you know the counter to that technique, set up the flow, set up one partner to break it with whatever remedy you are working on, and see if you can pull off the counter.

Then begin adding degrees of freedom: you can attack in any line after each disarm; you can use alternative disarms; you can break with the attacker's counter-remedies as well as the variations on the remedy; you can switch hands; etc etc. You have the entire contents of the dagger and abrazare sections to play with.

Pretty soon, this begins to look like freeplay, which it can become. Given that we are suing the dagger, it is important to distinguish between this and preparation for street defence. In street defence work we are usually looking at surprise attacks, in which case it is vital to have a single, simple response to the threat (often referred to as the flinch). In Fiore's system, and even more so in Capo Ferro's, the core system is not designed as a street defence flinch, but as training for some kind of arranged combat. Surprise is not the primary threat that these systems deal with. So while it is absolutely fine to adapt our historical systems to modern contexts, we should be careful about mistaking freeplay as I am describing it, for streetfight preparation.

The last step in the process of skill progression, adding degrees of freedom to freeplay, is to return to the beginning. Always finish up with slow, careful, technically precise iterations of simple drills. It is your proficiency at the simple actions that determines your ability to use them in complex situations, so always return to the source and repair any damage to your form that the more free-form training may have done.

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