

Changes in Foil by the FIE, Nov 2003

By Walter Flaschka (12/03/2003)

Foil lockout time will be changed to 300ms
Foil debounce time will be 15ms
Use of the Mangiarotti tip (2mm travel)
Change foil maximum curvature to 1cm
Change foil tip pressure to 750grams
Fleche stays in foil
Invert shoulder no longer an offense in foil
Don't use sabre mask in foil
Don't make bib target in foil
Keep off-target lights in foil

These changes will probably take effect after the 2004 Olympics, around October 2004. They will be propagated initially to the international junior and cadet tournaments, and the changes will eventually be adopted for adult fencing. Most of the time, the changes indicate updates to the scoring boxes, though the "Mangiarotti tip" looks like it may entail changes to all electric foils.

There's an online discussion of the changes at:

<http://www.fencing101.com/vb/showthread.php?s=&threadid=9079>

Online member Veeco captures the essence of these changes:

...I think the general idea behind reducing the lockout timings is to have [fewer] 2 lights actions, thus making the refereeing easier and the actions easier to understand by the fencers.

Basically, the referee will look at the lights, and if there is only one light, that means that the attack or counter-attack in time was valid. If there are 2 lights, then it means that the attack was valid if there was no parry, or that the riposte was valid if the attack was parried.

In sabre, the fact that the lockout time just slightly higher than the human reaction time actually makes a lot of sense. That means that someone who is preparing an attack won't have the time to finish their attack if they get hit during the preparation. Thus they will have to have already launched the attack when they get hit by the counter attack for their attack to be valid. They cannot "react" to the hit during the preparation, because if they do so, their light won't go off. And the referee will only see a one light action, as well as the spectators....

These changes in foil were not explicitly undertaken to kill the flick – otherwise we would have heard an uproar from the German fencing federation. The changes were probably billed as a way of reviving the importance of point-attacks, and all the concomittant point technique like parries, binds, coupés, feint disengages which have been languishing recently at the highest levels.

Shape of foil fencing in the future

For all intents and purposes, it's safe to assume that foil fencing is all tip, now. Since casual flicking will be difficult, an open shoulder is less of a liability, and fencers won't have to move their arms out of line for high 3 blocks.

When the back or shoulder *is* hit, it will be hit with a highly elevated hand with the tip traveling down (i.e., attack from above), rather than with a flick or a whip. This sort of hit can be converted in the last moment to a downward attack on the inside line, which looks quite wicked (see Vanni cf. 2003 La Coruna World Cup).

Fencers will have to keep their opponents in front of their tip, where the tip can hit the opponent front-on. Opponents will try to enjamb footwork, stop-hit, attack in time, or dive under or inside the tip to be safe, so, ergo, the opponent must be kept far away, where attackers are less susceptible to surprise changes in distance.

With the opponent kept further away, fencers will have to hit from longer distance. Lunges will be longer, which indicates that fencers will have to commit to lunges earlier. This, in turn, will give opponents more time to find parries. Thus, the counter-parry riposte is of increased importance, as is a fast backwards recovery.

To get within striking range, fencers can use rehearsed combinations or setups (see David Littell's "Lessons with Victor" monograph, <http://users.erols.com/dlittell/VICTOR2.htm>).

All of this indicates a return to the strict, plausible bladework we all learned during beginner drills. Tempo and bladework will be more "human-friendly" – that is, less a series of tough-to-call accidents when two fencers' tactics collide, and more of a back-and-forth conversation.

Despite all the foregoing, if epee is any indicator, *some* flicking will remain – perhaps to the front or top of the leading shoulder. For most of us, these will be planned flicks to near target, though high-level fencers will still be able to make reflexive flick ripostes.

Prepared attacks

Your preparations must (as always) be sensitive to what opponent is doing with distance. They must stop or conclude *when* the opponent is in distance, not *after* the opponent is in distance. The fudge factor allowed by flicks, glancing hits, and last-minute jabs has been removed.

Because preparations must always keep the opponents in front of the tip, opponents will be able to freeze preparations by pretending to get in distance. They can fake forward, appel, or make a forward check to shut down a long preparation.

Thus, prepared attacks will be a guessing/experiential game, centered around being able to discern when opponents are in distance, or only *pretending* to be in distance. Some rules of thumb: (1) During slow forward preparations, opponent will be able to fake being in distance, but attackers will have time for second intention. (2) During fast forward preparations, opponents won't be able to fake as easily, but what they can fake will seem very real. Attackers will use speed as well as surprise to be sure that opponents are in distance; this isn't necessarily the case today, where relaxed box timing allows the fencer with priority to finish at their leisure.

And, since opponents will often suddenly close distance to be safe from tip attacks, more fencers will end up in near distance in these occasions. Look for a return of infighting, especially behind the head hits with reversed shoulders (2003 World Champs Chinese fencers for this). (If the off-target lights had been removed, however, different story!)

The speed and commitment of attacks, coupled with sudden infighting, will lead to a very physical contact game. Light fencers, or fencers who don't like jostling, should cultivate even longer distance.

To mitigate against closed-distance and infighting, fencers should train up a fast backward recovery from the lunge – done at the right moment, this leaves the distance-closing opponent with withdrawn arm (to get point on a near target) while the fencer is at distance to hit with extension.

For the backwards recovery to be meaningful, the fencer must have enough room – which means the acceptable lunge is one that hits from “far away,” e.g., **the blade bends less than 3 inches against the nearest target**. Huge blade-bending against deep target indicates a dangerous flaw in distance.

Blade preparations

Blade preparations (as preceding flick during a march) are still important, since they can open up opponents. These preparations will still be used, but they will be increasingly finished with a coupé (a flick, where the point sticks on target). Opponents will try to close down blade preparations not just with footwork, but also, increasingly, with the Point in Line (already coming back, c.f. 2003 World Cups DVD).

Because of the block-timing and point-emphasis, fencers must be able to finish their blade preparations on target quickly, should the opponent closes distance with surprise. This means that the tip must *most often* be directed towards opponent's target, and/or the tip must be traveling *towards* opponent's target when distance achieves decision point.

Large, flamboyant preparations with a cocked hand, or backwards-pointing tip will be too dangerous to do much from near distance.

Overall, we're looking at a return of preparations with tip: traditional feint disengage stuff.

Blade actions

Because of block-timing, in-distance ripostes will be direct (or with functional, timely disengages), otherwise they will be prey to stop-time. The most definitive blade actions won't give opponents time to react – see Andre Wessels' *prise de fers*.

Today's flying parries (e.g., beat/parry 7 preceding a back flick) make an audible sound, but often don't remove the opponent's tip or actually defend the target. In future fencing, a smart opponent will continue their extension as a remise, blocking out the riposte. Flying parries are uncontrolled detached or beat parries; one way to assess them is as an offensive preparation on the blade. The move will remain, but will be used less as a defensive measure, and more as an offensive action executed from out of distance.

The parry that defends target (i.e., moves tip away from target) will be oppositional and somewhat lingering. This allows the fencer a maximum of control of his opponent's tip, for the longest amount of time. Look at Romankov in the '89 World Champs for this sort of parry.

Early on, with this new reliance on lateral parries, opponents will be highly sensitive to ripostes. We will be able to parry, twitch the hand, and cause the opponent to search for the riposte they expect. This will be trained out before too long – the winning hand will be calm and unflinching, direct and fast, and reflexive.

Binds, transfers, envelopments – offensive actions which displace the opponents' tips, regardless of the opponents' strength or speed – will make a comeback. We don't see them now, because of the hand-in-invitation, flying parry approach which is common at upper levels. But with tip-attacks and lingering parries, the opponent's blade will more frequently be in a position to be captured by a bind. Indeed since the tip-to-target time must be as short as possible, most fencers will keep their hand in the high line, making them susceptible to these actions. Training should include how to take over the action when the opponent binds – ceding parries.

The "new" binds won't be slow and deliberate (as they're always practiced in drills), but rather decisive and destructive to the opponent's hand. One aspect of binds is that they are muscley, and a good bind can break an opponent's grip for the remainder of the action – keeping one safe from counter-actions. See how Andre Wessels deals with Points in Line – charges forward with target inviting, to make opponent keep the line, and then captures it with a close-out at the last moment (c.f. 2003 Shanghai World Cup).

Fencing will look like...

Timing: More Vezzali than Bau.

Study your Vanni, Cassara, Sanzo. The Italians are using tempo attacks to trend ahead of their opponents in 15 touch bouts. Many fencers go touch-by-touch, but tempo is a more subtle approach that allows fencers to *tend* to hit more than their opponent. Competitors will need a more "executive view" of their bouts to be able to discern these subtleties. For a tempo discussion, there is David Littell's "Hungarian Methodology" (<http://users.erols.com/dlittell/hungarian.htm>). It generally talks about tempo attacks on footwork and handwork.

In American salles, tempo will have to show up in practice bouts, and become a concrete tactical method. Too often it's only brought out in competition, or it appears as an after-the-fact thing rather than a primary cause: "Oh! He had tempo! What a nice bonus!"

Bladework: More Romankov than Matthias Behr; more Golubitsky than Joppich.

Generally, foil will need a re-imagining of classical technique. However, classical assumptions will still be useless to sport fencing at all but the most introductory level. The light weapons, and the strength and expertise of high-level fencers, will still conclude phrases very quickly. For a currently active fencer who is transitioning to strong *prise de fers* and point attacks, check out Andre Wessels; he is point-based, but still unconventional.

Distance: No change.

Competitive distance is already quite long, because marching attacks are dangerous. Marches aren't going away, but their nature is changing – long distance is less an aspect of defense, and more an aspect of offense, now – to keep opponents in front of the tip. Notice the distance of the '88 Olympics individual women's finals, or how Sanzo gets *en garde* several feet behind the line.

Change in distance also doesn't change – fencers will have to be adroit in stopping and starting, and will have to be able to stop their marches immediately, when necessary. This was always so.

When?

Video of high-level competitions in 2003 feature somewhat halting, unfinished-looking fencing. This is foil fencing *in transition*. The bleeding-edge fencers are already moving away from marching flicks towards tempo-based attacks with direct hits. The Germans are prospering in the current environment, but important changes are manifesting with the Italian men's and women's teams. The French and Russian methods will re-assert, and possibly Hungarian tempo will become devastating.