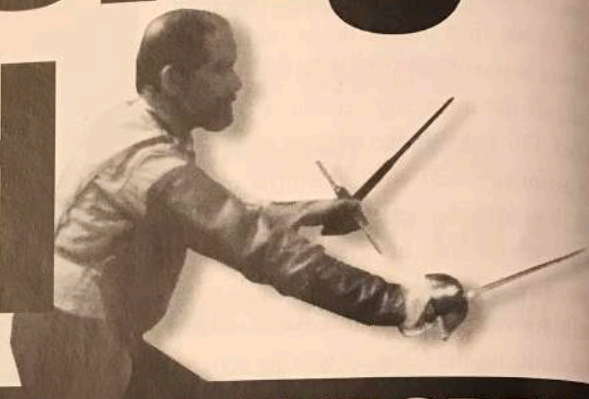
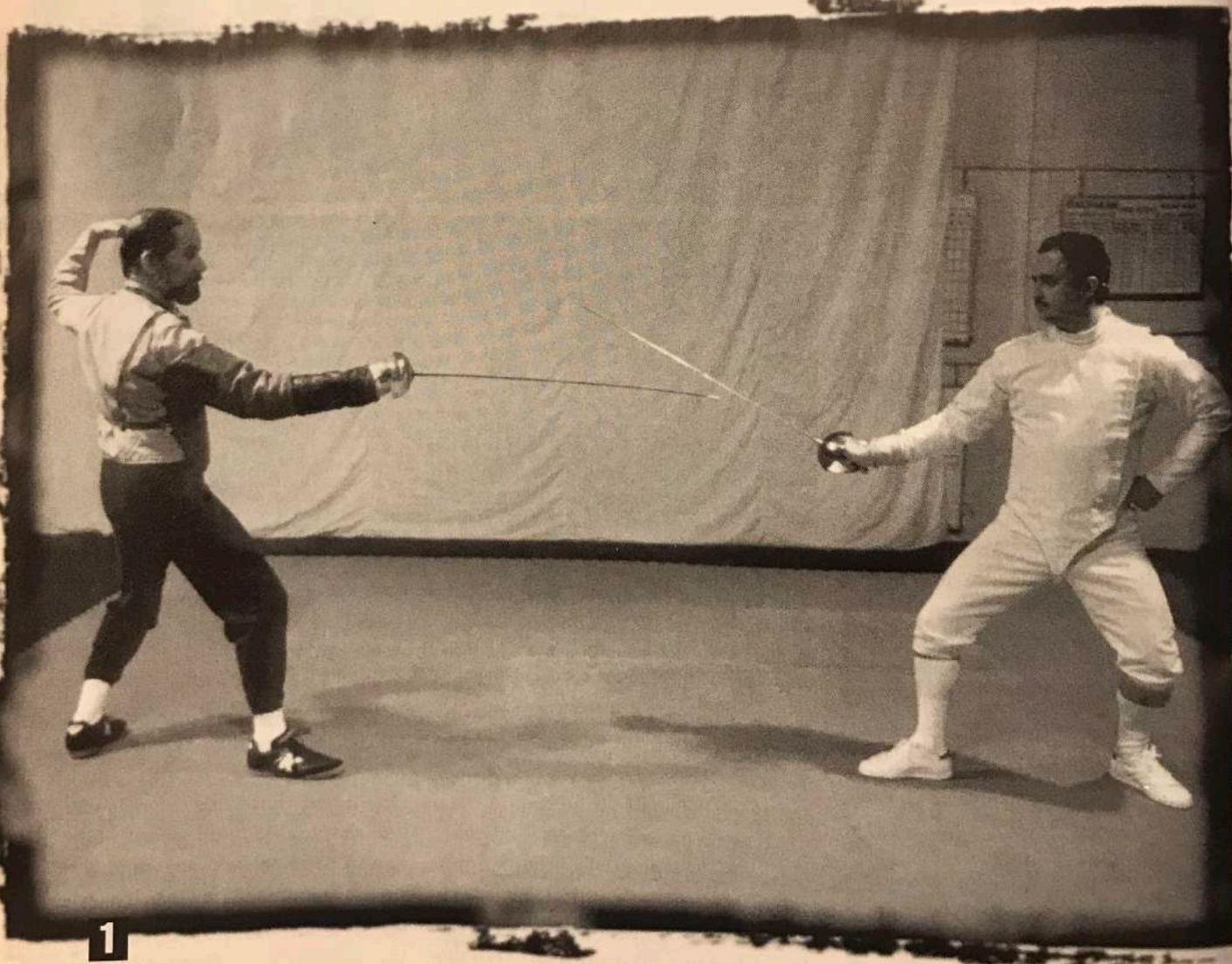


# The Fencing Sword



THE LIVING TRADITION OF EUROPEAN



1



**By Ramon Martinez**

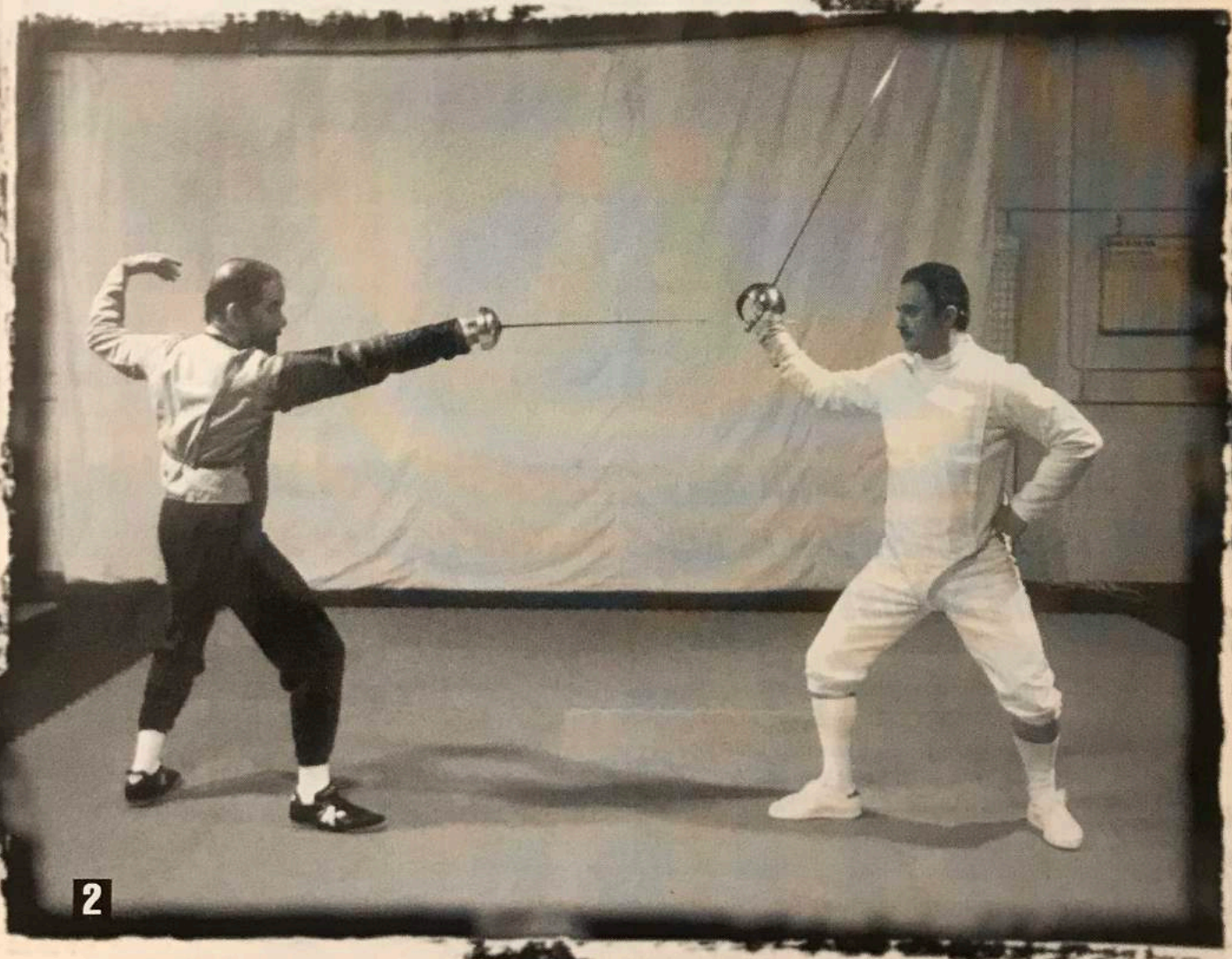
**F**ENCING, AS MANY ARE COMING TO REALIZE, is a highly sophisticated and very evolved martial art. An astute martial artist observing good, classical, or proper historical fencing will immediately realize the validity and effectiveness of this art and science. This article is intended to provide the reader with an introduction to the theory and practice of the European art of personal combat for the duel of honor or for self-defense. It should be noted that this was a separate phenomenon from the use of the sword in war, which itself has a very rich tradition.

### **Cut vs. Thrust**

[1] Though this mismatch would never occur in a formal duel, it here serves the purpose of illustration. The fencer on the right, armed with a saber, is on guard in third position. The fencer on the left is on guard with a dueling sword (epee).

[2] The saber fencer attempts a circular cut at the epee fencer's chest. Before the cut is even halfway finished, however, the epee's point is extended and placed in line. This counter-offensive action is completed before the initial offensive action, thus demonstrating that the thrust clearly takes less time to deliver than the cut. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. A similar illustration of this may be seen in Sir Richard Burton's *Book of the Sword*.

## **CIVILIAN SWORDSMANSHIP**



**2**



## The Straight Thrust as Applied to Unarmed Self-Defense



[1] The attacker, on the left, is in an aggressive fighting posture, the defender, on the right, is in a neutral posture.

[2] When the attacker steps in and attempts a left hook punch to the defender's head, the defender replies by executing a finger-thrust to the underside of the jaw. The counterattack acts as a parry as well, preventing the hook from even landing, while a simultaneous check to the attacker's other hand prevents a second attack or attempt to grapple.



The wearing of the sword as a part of a gentleman's everyday costume first began in fifteenth century Spain, and the term rapier comes from the Spanish *espada ropera*, or "costume or dress sword." Though systematic schools for the military (knightly) weapons had existed through the Middle Ages, the first docu-

quite a different mind-set and technical approach.

### Proper mind-set

The mental aspect of the art is most important. Both aggressiveness and fear must be efficiently harnessed so that a scientific, detached method of self-defense

understand the origins of this attitude, we must take into account the socio-cultural frame of reference from which all arts were considered in this period. In his essential handbook for the Renaissance gentleman, the *Book of the Courtier* (1528), author Baldesar Castiglione calls this attitude of coolness *sprezzatura*. To

***To do something with sprezzatura is "to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. . .***

mentable teaching of the sword as a purely civilian weapon was in 1474, when manuals by Pedro de la Torre and Jaime Pons were published in Madrid and Perpignan, Spain. At the Martinez Academy of Arms, we do not teach military methods of swordsmanship, since fencing evolved from the use of a civilian weapon for personal combat. Indeed, the techniques of the weapons of war require

can be effectively utilized. As applied to swordsmanship, this means that one must put the opponent out of action with the simplest, most direct, and most efficient techniques.

Furthermore, the attitude with which these techniques must be executed, and which is integral to the practice of the European art of the sword, has not changed since the Renaissance. To better

do something with *sprezzatura* is "to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. . . Therefore, we may call that art true art which does not seem to be art; nor must one be more careful of anything than of concealing it, because if it is discovered, this robs a man of all credit and causes him to be held in slight esteem."



The physical principles that fencing is founded on likewise have not, and could not have, changed since the earliest times. Arguably, these principles, based on the laws of physics, are fundamental to the application of all martial arts. They include:

- Timing is how effectively and efficiently one can perform the right technique at the right time.

- Distance is an acquired sensibility and knowledge of the spatial relationship between one's self and the adversary.

- Proportion is the regulation of the range of movement of the weapon and body, in order to execute one's technique most efficiently.

### The shortest distance . . .

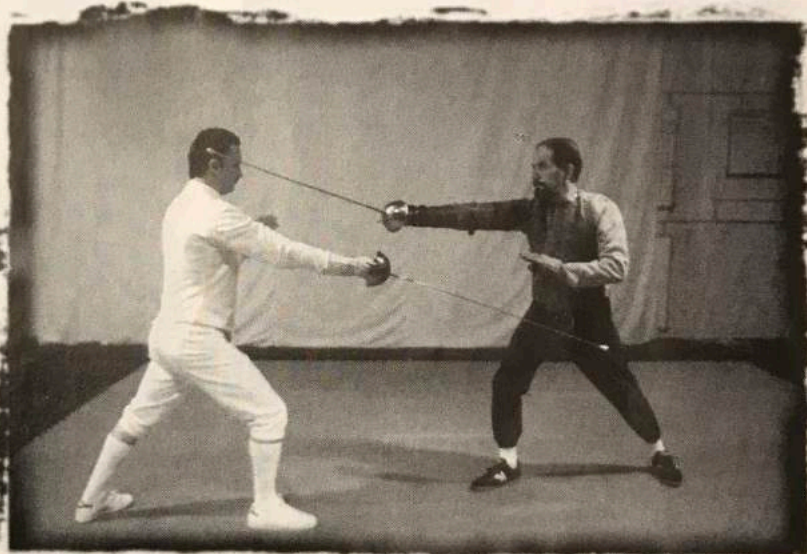
Fencing (apart from saber technique) is distinguished by its emphasis on a thrusting weapon, as opposed to the cut and thrust sword of the earlier, more Medieval style. This is where the intelligent use of distance comes into play. In order to deliver a cut, by the nature of the technique, one must be closer to the opponent. A thrust, on the other hand, may be delivered with less effort and from further away. At the same time, the thrust produces a potentially more lethal wound that can penetrate deep into the vitals of the adversary.

However, the use of thrusting technique requires a considerable amount of training. The cut, like a roundhouse punch, is the more natural and instinctive action. To contrast, the thrust may be

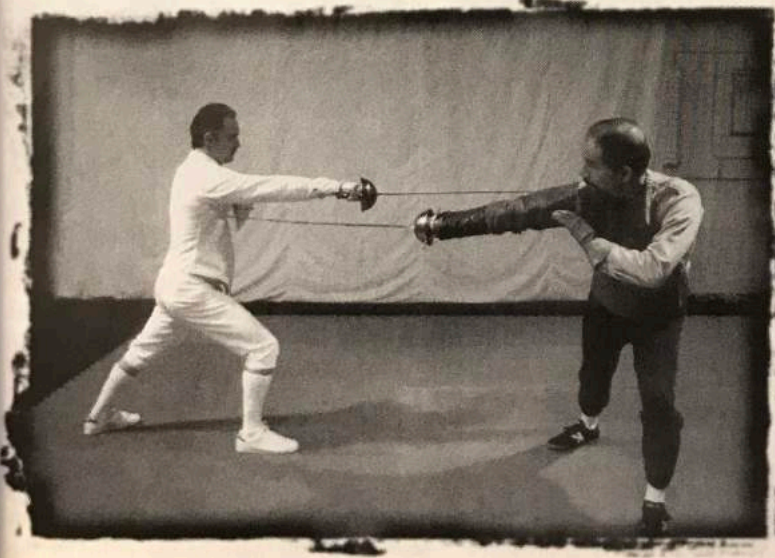
## The Three Types of Defense



The swordsman on the left thrusts to the face of the swordsman on the right, who side steps and deflects the attack by a parry.



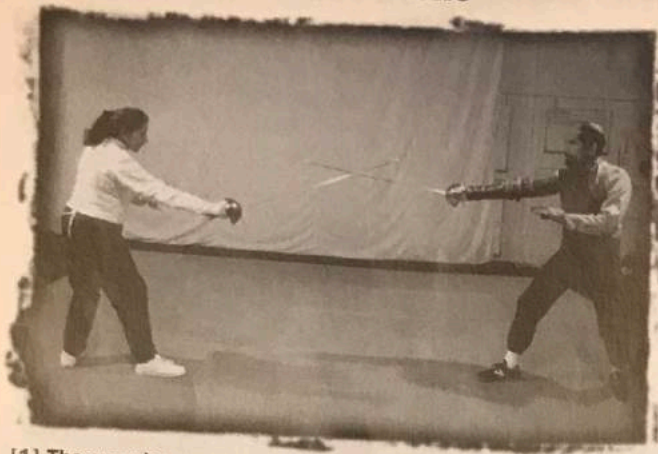
The swordsman on the left attempts to cut to the lower abdomen of the swordsman on the right. The swordsman on the right side steps and counterattacks by means of a cut to the side of the head. An alternative counterattack might have been a thrust to the eye.



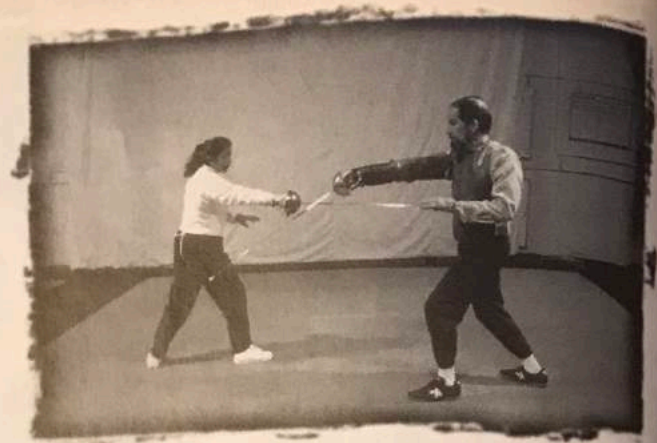
The swordsman on the left thrusts to the body with a lunge. The swordsman on the right evades by a side step, with a simultaneous counter thrust to the body of the attacker.



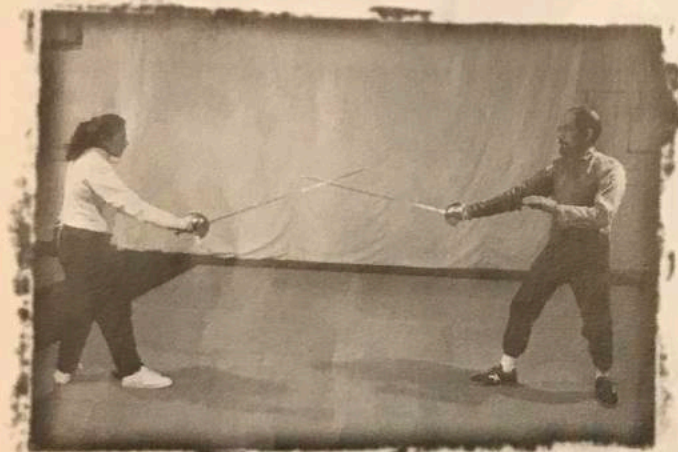
## Counter Offensive Actions



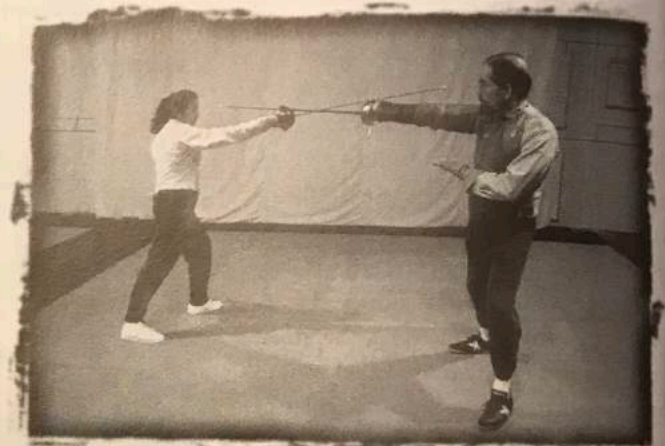
[1] The swordsmen are on guard in third position.



[2] The swordsman on the right makes a thrust to the body of the swordsman on the left. The swordsman on the left counterattacks by doing four things in one action: sidestepping, parrying, moving in, and counter thrusting, all done simultaneously, or in *stesso tempo* ("single time"). The counter thrust with blade contact (opposition) diverts the oncoming attack, while the body evasion further removes the target.



[1] The swordsmen are again on guard in third position.



[2] This time, the swordsman on the left attacks, and the swordsman on the right side steps and counter thrusts with opposition into the attack in *stesso tempo*. The thrust and parry are executed simultaneously.

compared to a straight punch. A wild roundhouse punch can knock a man down, but a well-trained, well-timed straight punch can, with greater surety, break his nose, bloody his face, or disorient him enough for a finishing blow. A straight line, rather than an arc or a loop, will always be the quickest distance between two points.

In fencing, this is applied by always making the extension of the arm and the point towards the adversary the first action in the thrust. This action is the most efficient because the hand, which moves much quicker than the rest of the body, makes the point arrive first. The extension of the arm is followed by the foot, which carries the impetus of the

body behind it.

The adversary is not going to stand there and allow himself to be stabbed, however. Most likely, he will do one of three things: he will dodge, he will defend by a parry or block, or he will counterattack simultaneously into the attack. This is where timing comes into play. For a proper attack to succeed, it must be executed within a time period that will limit what the opponent may do. It is important to be aware of the various changes in distance that may occur between one's self, the adversary, and the relationship of the weapons. In turn, this determines the range of movement of the weapon necessary to execute the attack efficiently. For example, when the adversary approaches,

attempting to establish his distance, one may attack in one movement that closes the distance, timing the attack on his approach. For an offensive action to succeed, one must be aware of how close the opponent is, just what his action will be, and what the proportion is. Obviously, it takes less time to make a small action than a large one, and the small motion will be harder to detect. A thrust with a sword, which may be made with only the tiniest of movements, can be difficult to dodge, indeed.

### The art of defense

So, if one can not get out of the way the natural thing to do is to place an obstacle in the path of the point or the



edge. This brings us to the art of parrying. A parry is not a block; it is a deflection of the force of an attack, rather than an absorption. A parry deflects or deviates the attack, absorbing less kinetic impact. Taking a right hook on the forearm can hurt the arm (though it is preferable to being punched in the face), but reaching forward to deflect the blow can save wear

properly necessitates extreme sophistication and coordination, moving oneself out of the way of an attack while deflecting or interrupting the attack in progress. Most systems of martial arts teach a block/punch combination, which may be compared to the parry/*riposte* action common in fencing. However, much as in wing chun, one need not

smallest possible size of the action. It does no good to make a big, circular action with the shoulder if the same desired effect may be achieved with a barely perceptible motion of the wrist. This also applies to body positioning—why leap and vault when a simple side step or turn of the wrist is quicker and more efficient? Fencing is, ideally, very energy-efficient.

## ***For a proper attack to succeed, it must be executed within a time period that will limit what the opponent may do.***

and tear on the limb. Parrying actions can be observed, for instance, in many Chinese martial arts, such as wing chun, tai chi, and jeet kune do. Filipino martial arts, as well, deflect incoming energy, rather than absorb them. However, again, parrying is not an instinctive movement; it must be trained.

Counterattack or counteroffensive actions, applied against the attack before it can develop, rely heavily on these three principles. To perform a counterattack

always observe this principle. An interesting and deadly technique of Italian rapier was the counterattack in *stesso tempo*, or single time. In such an action, one parries and strikes simultaneously, deflecting and hitting in one action. Such a counter-offense is more efficient than parrying and countering, especially with a heavier weapon.

Proportion is very important, as well, as it teaches how to make any action with the minimum amount of effort and the

A smaller motion can counter a larger, if the latter is intercepted in the proper place.

### **Evolution of the sword**

The development of the three “classical” weapons—the familiar foil, epee, and saber—can be traced directly back to the Renaissance-era rapier. As late as the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth, rapier was being taught alongside

*Continued on page 116*

## **The Application of Stesso Tempo to Unarmed Self-Defense**



[1] The attacker, on the right, is in an aggressive posture; the defender, on the left, is in a neutral posture.

[2] The attacker steps in and delivers a one-two combination (a right cross and a straight left). The defender counterattacks in one action by simultaneously executing a parry with the left hand and a finger jab to the throat with the right while lunging backwards.





## Fencing

Continued from page 33

these three weapons, though, to be sure, the techniques were much more refined. The universal principles and theories laid down in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—timing, distance, and proportion—had not changed, though they had been polished into a fine art. If anything, the sword and dagger of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, in all likelihood, more lethal than its predecessor, making use of a lighter, faster, more maneuverable weapon.

As a comparison, putting the foil (an academic training tool) aside, let us look at three combative weapons. The rapier, the earliest, was designed to be a civilian weapon. Originally, it was a reduced cut-and-thrust sword, slightly longer and lighter than its medieval predecessor. As techniques for the development of the civilian weapon progressed, it became apparent that it was more efficient to thrust than to defeat the opponent with cuts. Because of this realization, many changes occurred.

The first was in how the sword was held in order to facilitate a thrust without diminishing the weapon's cutting capacity. Swordsmen hooked one or two of their fingers over the crossbar, permitting easy manipulation of the point. The second was that the hilt itself was developed in order to protect the sword hand. A system of loops and bars went around the cross bar in order to protect the sword hand, which led to the development of the swept hilt. Later on, metal plates were added to further protect the hand, culminating in the cup hilt. The blade itself also changed to emphasize the thrust. It became longer and narrower and also lighter. Even though emphasis was placed on the thrust, these blades were still capable of delivering serious cuts designed to whittle down and incapacitate an opponent.

About the middle of the seventeenth century, the rapier again began to change. Blades became even narrower and hilt dimensions smaller, resulting in a guard that was more saucer-shaped than cup-shaped. The cross bar (or *quillions*) was still a part of the weapon, but many mas-

ters ceased hooking their fingers over it, emphasizing manipulation of the weapon with finger-play rather than wrist-play. The blade also became shorter, lighter, and more maneuverable. More complicated blade actions became possible.

This transitional rapier eventually evolved further into what is known as the smallsword, which was essentially a French weapon. Compared to its predecessor, the smallsword is simplicity itself. In the development of the French school (*le escrime Francaise*), the blade became triangular, and cutting techniques were completely discarded. The small sword, the last sword to be worn with civilian dress, served as the gentleman's sidearm through the eighteenth century. Its agility, combined with the skill of the user, made it an extremely deadly weapon.

With the discarding of the wearing of the sword in everyday life as a result of the momentous changes in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, more emphasis was placed on the art of fencing, rather than on its combative applications. Even so, these combative applications did not disappear. The duel of honor continued into the twentieth century, and, for this purpose, the epee de combat, the final development of the Western thrusting sword, appeared. For most of the nineteenth century, the epee de combat resembled a simplified smallsword, though in the last two decades of the century, this early model was replaced by a cup-hilted weapon with a thirty-five inch *trefoil* blade. At this time, epee technique, ironically enough, reverted in many ways to rapier technique, with the obvious caveat that there are no cuts with its unsharpened edges.

### Sport or martial art?

Martial arts lore is filled with epic encounters between masters of rival

schools. This phenomenon occurred in Europe, as well. For instance, in the late nineteenth century, proponents of the French and Italian schools met in a series of well-publicized and deservedly famous encounters. The Italians had the reputations as firebrands who still saw the purpose of fencing as serious combat; the French, as cool, methodical, and refined students of an academic (some said overly formalized) school. In the end, these encounters were inconclusive. The schools learned from each other—the French were reawakened to the need for a more adaptable type of swordplay that could deal with the Italian aggressiveness, while the Italians began to become more reflective and refined, developing a sophistication and subtlety that was comparable to the French.

To a certain degree, the contrast between the Italian emphasis on combat and the French emphasis on academic perfection may be seen as parallel to the latter-day schism between those who see fencing entirely as a sport, and those who see it as a martial art. Fencing was made a part of the first modern Olympic games in 1896. The FIE (Federation Internationale de Escrime) was founded in 1913 in order to codify all existing technique and facilitate competition between countries by instituting standardized rules. However, fencing has arguably fallen prey to the modern obsession with organization and structure. Though dueling continued well into the twentieth century, its growing rarity, together with the inception of electrical scoring equipment, led to an increasing divide between sporting practice and dueling practice as fencers concentrated on what worked to score points within the rules, and not what would keep them alive, should they be faced with a sharp weapon.

Today, many do not see any point to studying fencing as a combative art. Many, familiar only with the sporting tradition, even deny that fencing is a martial art at all. The central tenets of timing, distance, and proportion have been abandoned, for the most part, in favor of athletic bursts of speed and power. However, there has always been a small but devoted corps of practitioners who continue to





practice Western swordsmanship in the old tradition. Though the sport of fencing and "classical" fencing have been divorced for only some fifty years, since the Second World War, the difference between the two attitudes is like night and day.

At the Martinez Academy, we seek to keep alive the old tradition of the sword as a deadly weapon, not as a sporting implement. All fencing is conducted with the commandment "to hit and not to be hit" foremost in mind. In addition, we also teach the so-called "obsolete" historical weapons, such as the rapier and smallsword. That these techniques pertaining to these weapons are not "obsolete" at all can be attested to by one of our students who was able to stop an assailant twice his size on a New York subway platform one day, using his trusty umbrella and a quick *botte du paysan*—a counter-offensive action in which the sword is held in two hands, one on the hilt and the other on the blade, and a bayonet-like thrust is delivered while stepping in. Much as in the Filipino martial arts, fencing technique can be applied to a variety of implements, or even unarmed self-defense techniques.



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