

The MID-ATLANTIC SOCIETY

For HISTORIC SWORDSMANSHIP

Hand Work for the Dueling Sword

Prepared by Larry Tom, January, 2012

As part of our training in the use of the dueling sword, I have placed great importance on the need to have a good body posture and good footwork. This is true with all of swordplay, and is absolutely vital to achieve success in the duel (or in the case of the modern practitioner, the bout). The goal is to be able to move in a manner that provides stability for successful blade actions, yet allows for the flexibility needed to adjust to the subtle changes in tempo and measure that is characteristic of fencing. Put simply, you have to have good footwork so that when you encounter your opponent you can focus most on your blade work. The integration between blade work and footwork is paramount to good swordsmanship. Thus, equal importance is placed on the hand positions with the dueling weapons. The hand positions are the foundation from which all the guards, invitations, engagements, and ultimately the attacks are derived.

As we continue this discussion, remember that the target can be divided into four quadrants as it relates to your opponent's sword. If you visualize two lines, one vertical and one horizontal, intersecting at the guard of the sword, you now have the four quadrants. These are named high outside, high inside, low inside, and low outside as it relates to the body. The phrase "lines of attack" characterizes the direction of your attack into one of the quadrants.

So how do the hand positions relate to blade work? Here's how:

- The hand positions relate directly to the guards, each of which protects one of the four quadrants. Once you assume one of the guards, you have closed that quadrant off from your opponent's attack, leaving the other three quadrants vulnerable to an attack.
- Because you are aware that the guard in which you position yourself only protects you in that one quadrant, you are "inviting" your opponent to attack in one of the other quadrants. The key in the invitation is to anticipate and even direct your opponent's attack so that you in turn can successfully defend and counterattack. Note that often the guard and invitation have the same purpose and are interchangeable in fencing pedagogy.
- In the invitation, there is no contact with your opponent's sword. The phrase "fencing open" is often used to describe this situation. However, once you make contact with your opponent's sword, you have now come to the engagement.
- From the engagement typically, but not always, comes the attack. With the dueling sword there are many times when you can successfully land an attack without engaging your opponent's sword, especially when you are doing a direct attack with a beat, or counter attacks such as stop thrusts or voids. However, if you do a direct attack with opposition, you obviously will be making contact with your opponent's blade.
- The hand positions are essential to the defense against your opponent's attacks. When parrying you must use the proper hand position in order for the parry to be successful.

You can perhaps see that each part of blade work flows one from the other until it culminates in the attack, and all of this comes from the hand positions. Thus:

**Hand positions = Guards = Invitations = Engagements/Disengagements = Attacks +
Parries = Riposte + Counter attacks**

So what are the hand positions used in the dueling sword?

In the French system, there are essentially two, namely the hand in supination (palm up) and the hand in pronation (palm down). Prime, seconde, tierce, and quinte are performed in pronation. Quarte, low quarte (septime), sixte, and low sixte (octave) are performed in supination.

In the Italian system, there are six hand positions as follows:

1. Prima. The palm of your hand is turned to the outside and the cross bar of the sword is vertical.
2. Seconda. The palm of your hand is turned down (pronated) and the cross bar of the sword is horizontal.
3. Terza. The palm of your hand is turned to the inside and the cross bar of the sword is vertical.
4. Quarta. The palm of your hand is turned up (supinated) and the cross bar of the sword is horizontal.
5. 2nd in 3rd. The hand is turned so that the cross bar is on an angle with the high end pointed to the inside and the low end pointed to the outside. In this position the flat side of the blade is facing downward.
6. 3rd in 4th. The hand is turned so that the cross bar is on angle with the high end pointed to the outside and the low end pointed to the inside. In this position the flat side of the blade is facing upward.

The tables on the next pages indicate how each of these hand positions translates into guards, invitations, engagements, and parries. An important observation to make is that within each of the systems, not all the hand positions have practical application to the art of the dueling sword. In the French system the invitations, engagements and parries in Quarte, Sixte, Seconde, Octave and Septime have the greatest efficacy. Tierce can also be used. Prime and Quinte have limited application and is seldom, if ever, used. In the Italian system, the invitations, engagements, and parries in first, second, third and fourth, with their respective hand positions, are the most practical. However, note here also that the second and third invitations can be performed with one of two hand positions. It is note worthy that the hand positions of prima, seconda, terza, and quarta are derived from the rapier systems of the Renaissance period.

This may all seem very confusing. So, let me conclude with a few observations that may make this discussion less daunting. First, just focus on the system of your choice and not worry about learning the other. Second, despite the many variations between the French and the Italian systems, the two share many common hand positions. Third, in the final analysis when it comes to the dueling sword there really are only a few ways in which the practitioner can execute successful blade work.

THE FRENCH SYSTEM

Hand Position	Guard/Invitation	Engagement	Parry	Comments
Supinated	Quarte, covers high inside	Quarte, covers high inside	Quarte, parries attacks to high inside	*Quarte is a commonly used parry.
Supinated	Low Quarte or Septime, covers low inside	Low Quarte or Septime, covers low inside	Low Quarte or Septime, covers low inside	*Septime can be used as a parry, but it is preferable to counter attack instead of parry riposte.
Supinated	Sixte, covers high outside	Sixte, covers high outside	Sixte, parries attacks to high outside	*Sixte is also a commonly used parry.
Supinated	Low Sixte or Octave, covers low outside	Low Sixte or Octave, covers low outside	Octave, parries attacks to low outside	*Octave can also be used as a parry, but as with septime the counter attack is preferred.
Pronated	Prime, covers high inside, seldom used	Prime, covers high inside, seldom used	Can be used as a parry in close measure	Rarely used
Pronated	Seconde, covers low outside	Seconde, covers low outside	Seconde, parries attacks to low outside	*Is used interchangeably with Octave, but Seconde tends to be the stronger parry.
Pronated	Tierce, covers high outside	Tierce, covers high outside	Tierce, parries attacks to high outside	Parry sixte is preferred, however the tierce hand position is ideal for upward angled attacks such as to the underside of the arm.
Pronated	Quinte, covers low inside	Quinte, covers low inside	Rarely used	The Quinte parry can be effective as a means to take your opponent's blade during a fleche attack.

*Note again, that these hand positions are the most commonly used in the French System for guards, invitations, engagements, and parries.

THE ITALIAN SYSTEM

Guard/Invitation	Hand Position	Engagement	Parry	Comments
In First, covers low inside	3 rd in 4 th	Same as the guard and invitation	Same as the guard and invitation	Use with caution as the arm is exposed.
In Second, covers low outside	2 nd (Seconda), or 4 th (Quarta)	Engagement, in either hand position, covers low outside.	The parry, in either hand positions protects against attacks to low outside.	Both hand positions can be found in the early rapier systems. Seconda is the stronger of the two.
In third, covers high outside	2 nd in 3 rd , or 4 th	Same as the guards and invitations.	Same as the guards and invitations.	Very effective
In Fourth, covers high inside	3 rd in 4 th	Same as the guard and invitation.	Same as the guard and invitation.	Very effective
	1 st (Prima)	Not used	Prima parry, can be used when in close measure and your opponent's point is past you.	The Prima hand position is also derived from early rapier systems and can be used in the attack coming from high to low, especially with opposition to the outside line.
	3 rd (Terza)	Not used	Not used	The Terza hand position is also derived from earlier rapier systems and is effective in the attack, especially in gliding actions.