

The MID-ATLANTIC SOCIETY For HISTORIC SWORDSMANSHIP

Combat Tactics for the German Longsword July, 2011

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PREFACE

In the modern study of historic swordsmanship, sparring becomes the substitute for actual combat. This is not just mere simulation. At MASHS we sparring as if the swords are sharp. So the tactical applications of the techniques that we learn become important in surviving the encounter.

As I have mentioned on numerous occasions during training at MASHS, success in the study of all swordplay is based on an integrated comprehension of four fundamental precepts. These are:

1. Understanding the offensive system of the weapon; i.e., knowing how the sword is used to attack.
2. Understanding the defensive system of the weapon; i.e., knowing how the sword is used to defend against attacks.
3. Understanding tempo; i.e., knowing how timing is used in swordplay. This involves knowing that every action by you or your opponent constitutes a tempo and how that is integrated into the offensive and defensive actions.
4. Understanding measure; i.e., knowing how distance is used in swordplay. This involves knowing that there is a proper distance between you and your opponent from which offensive and defensive actions can be made, and that measure is based on your own stature.

Further, as an aid to novice practitioners in their understanding of the use of the German longsword, I have devised an additional four basic foundational precepts specific to the weapon. These “cardinal rules” bear repeating here because they also form the basis for good tactics that intermediate and advanced practitioners should employ when in combat.

1. If your sword is on your right side, lead with the left leg; and if your sword is on left side, lead with your right leg. Conversely, whichever your lead leg, make sure your sword is on the opposite side of your body.
2. As much as possible keep your sword in between your opponent’s sword and your body.
3. As much as possible, keep the edge or tip of your sword threatening your opponent.
4. In moving, do not cross your feet.

Another foundational precept in German longsword is a thorough understanding of the concept of the *Vor*, the *Nach*, and the *Indes*. Knowing how these three concepts relate to combat initiative allows the practitioner to maintain control of fight, and how to regain it if it is lost. So these also bear repeating.

1. *Vor* – The Before: This is the offensive principle of longsword tactics. It demands that you develop a keen sense of when to safely attack. For example, can you attack during your opponent's preparation? Can you break your opponent's guard and find an opening? Can you provoke an attack that forces a certain strike that you can defend and counter? Can you launch a feint that will draw a desirable action from your opponent that will allow you to finish in a different line of attack? Can you upset your opponent's tempo or measure? These are just a few of the dynamics of being in the *Vor*.
2. *Nach* – The After: This is the defensive principle of longsword tactics. It demands that you develop a keen sense of how to respond if your opponent attacks first, not only in a manner that keeps you from getting hit, but also allows you to regain the *Vor*. For example, can you defend an attack with an action that simultaneously protects you and strikes your opponent? Can you safely attack your opponent during his attack by out timing him? What opportunities do you have to regain the *Vor* if you and your opponent cross swords? These are just a few of the dynamics of being in the *Nach*.
3. *Indes* – Immediately: This is the principle of being able to judge what is going on at the moment of engagement, or sword contact. In other words, you must development a keen understanding of *Fublen* (feeling) or blade pressure so that you know how to react properly. From this you must instantaneously decide what technique to employ to allow you to regain the *Vor*. The principles of *Indes* and *Fublen* are inseparable.

TACTICAL COMBAT RULES

So keeping all the above in mind, how do we integrate them into an effective combat system. Here are some rules and tactical applications that I believe can lead to success in combat.

1. Remember the Hierarchy of Defense. With this you can see how the *Vor* and the *Nach* come into play.
 - a. Attack before your opponent, either in the preparation of his or her attack or by breaking his or her guard.
 - b. Void the opponent's attack and counter attack in time.
 - c. Defeat the attack and counter attack in single time.
 - d. Static parry and immediately counter attack.
 - e. Void the attack without counter attack.
 - f. Static parry without counter attack.

2. The Rule of *Fuhlen*. The rule is simple. If your opponent goes hard you go soft, and conversely if he or she goes soft you go hard. This involves two dynamics, applied first to the sword and secondly (but no less importantly) to the body. The majority of initial actions will lead to the swords crossing. Usually referred to as coming to the bind. You must instantly sense the pressure applied to your blade by your opponent. If he is pressing hard, go soft and yield your sword thus freeing it for a counter strike. If your opponent goes soft at the bind, you can offset it with hard pressure thus opening a line for the attack. If at the bind you feel your opponent trying to push forward with footwork, yield by stepping off line. If you feel your opponent may have been off balance on his attack, you can try to press him and further weaken his stance.
3. Keep your Sword Free. This is the corollary to the rule of *Fuhlen*. Remember that your sword is needed not only for offensive actions but for defense as well. You must keep your sword free as much as possible so that you can quickly move from attack to defense. Your sword is your shield. Use your primary guards such as *ochs* and *pflug* to defend instead of attempting more complex defensive actions. Use of simple blade work enhances your chances of keeping your sword free.
4. Fight in your own Measure. This recognizes that it is very likely that you and your opponent will not be of the same stature. Why is this important? In order to execute your attack correctly, it must be done from your measure. Put another way, in order not to miss your target you must execute your attack from a distance where it will properly land. You should not let your opponent's stature dictate where your measure is. So if your opponent is taller than you, don't let that difference force you to fight at a greater distance than what would be effective to complete the attack.
5. Acknowledge Tempo. Tempo can be defined as the time in which a simple fencing action occurs. Put another way, the time that it takes to make an attack that is executed in one simple action constitutes a tempo. For example, you move from *alber* to *ochs* to defend against a cut. That action is a single tempo. Even changing footwork with a simple passing step constitutes a single tempo. Tempo can be short or long. Why is this understanding important from a tactical perspective? More often than not, a successful attack requires more than one fencing tempo. Knowing this, when you attack you must maintain continuity of tempo. In other words, don't break off your attack if you are fully committed. Conversely, if you are in the *Nach*, you can thwart your opponent's attack by interrupting his or her tempo thus regaining the *Vor*.
6. Keep your Footwork Simple and Fluid. Good balance and a strong foundation are essential for effective blade work. A wider stance is often preferred over a narrower one. In moving, if a gathering step is more effective to maintain measure over another passing step, use it. If a lateral or compass step can help you void an on-coming attack rather than a retreating passing step, use it. Remember the "cardinal rule" about footwork. It is very important not to stay in one position or one guard too long. Keep moving!

7. Do not Chase your Opponent. Continuity of your attack may require that you have to gain on your opponent in order to maintain your measure, especially if he or she retreats. However, there is an inherent danger in pursuing your opponent haphazardly in that the more you chase your opponent the more your own tempo and measure become skewed. It is better not to pursue, but return to guard and await your opponent to come back to measure.
8. Do not retreat (if at all possible). This is the corollary to number 7 above. Staying in the *Vor* requires that you not give up ground unnecessarily. Retreating can save you from an attack, but it also puts you in the *Nach* and forces you to take more tempo to get back into measure. Simply stated, giving ground results in loss of measure and puts you in a disadvantage. If you do find you need to back away from an attack, consider moving off line in your retreat rather than in a straight line. By voiding the line of the attack, you have a better chance of staying in the *Vor*. Remember the hierarchy of defense.
9. Control the center line. After the initial engagement of blades (binding), try to stay centered to your opponent. In doing so, you have more options to maintaining the *Vor*. Also, you have more options in finding openings for attacking your opponent as both sides of your opponent's body is available. If you move to one side of your opponent's body to attack, and are thwarted in that attempt, the measure to your opponent's opposite side is a little longer. This makes attacks to those openings more difficult.
10. Know how to Break your Opponents Guard. Many of the *Meisterbau* are designed to break your opponent's guard. Here's a list of these:
 - a. Use *Zwerchbau* to break *Vom Tag*.
 - b. Use *Krumphau* to break *Ochs*.
 - c. Use *Schielhau* or *Krumphau* to break *Pflug* or *Langenort*.
 - d. Use *Scheitelbau* to break *Alber* or *Kron*.
11. Remember the Windings and other Special Techniques. As mentioned, sword engagement comes more often than not with the initial actions. In that instance, when in the bind, you and your opponent are in the *Indes*. You have that tempo to free your sword and regain the *Vor*. Decisions about what would be the most appropriate technique must be made almost instantaneously. For example, can you execute a *Winden* technique. These allow you, in essentially one action, to displace your opponent's sword, take the *Vor* and counter attack with a thrust. Against a hard bind, can you free your sword with *Zucken* and attack on the opposite line of engagement? If your opponent takes the initiative and attacks, instead of a hard parry can you plan to go soft in your defense, thus allowing your opponent's momentum to carry his/her sword away from you; thus freeing your sword to counter-attack in an open line. Can you use an *Absetzen* technique against someone in *pflug* or *ochs* or *langenort*? Can you attack with one of the *Meisterbau*, such as *krumphau*, *zwerchbau* or *schielhan*? Can you employ a half sword technique when in close range instead of grappling?

12. Do not Grapple if you can Avoid Doing So. Because it is unpredictable, grappling is inherently very dangerous. However, sometimes it is unavoidable. This is the concept of “Wrestling at the Sword” and is another way of fighting once in the bind. What is the proper measure from which to grapple your opponent? If you can touch your opponent’s hands, that is the proper measure. The goal in grappling is to upset your opponent’s stance and balance while maintaining your own. At the same time you also want to keep your sword free. How is this done? Here are a few ways:
- a. You can find an opportunity to control your opponent’s sword hand long enough to prevent a strike, especially from the outside line with your free hand. This will free your sword to make an attack.
 - b. You attack your opponent both high and low to upset his/her balance.
 - c. You attack your opponent frontally by stepping toward him/her forcefully, using your sword to leverage his/her sword up and away. You now have an opening to strike. A variation is to use your free hand instead of your sword.
 - d. When you grapple, be swift and decisive. To do anything less will give your opponent an opportunity to take your tempo and turn the tables on you.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is a daunting endeavor to summarize an entire combat system into a few precepts, it is hoped that by understanding these twelve tactical combat rules and incorporating them in your bouting, you will have a better chance to prevail in the fight. By successfully applying these tactical applications in your longsword play you should be able to maintain the *Vor* as much as possible. But once in the *Nach*, you also should be able to regain the *Vor*. Keep your actions as simple as possible. Do no more than is necessary to find and attack any opening your opponent makes available to you. And if an opening is not readily available, use the most direct action to create one. If your initial attack fails press the attack, especially if you are still in measure. However, be mindful of Rule 7 above. Focus on tempo and measure, and make sure your blade work is integrated with your footwork.

GOOD LUCK IN YOUR COMBAT.