



Anthony DeLongis

FENCING:

The Martial Art of the WESTERN WORLD

The Wake-up Call

Most American Martial Artists are ignoring a wealth of advanced bladed weapons techniques and combat strategies that are literally right under their noses. Their pursuit of excellence, always an admirable goal, has caused them to set their sights on distant shores and the martial stylings of China, Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines. Each an excellent choice which can bear rich fruit in the quest for knowledge, these techniques have survived the test of time because they work. However, any serious study of bladed weapons should include a dive into the deep wells of European swordplay — commonly known as *fencing*.

In *The Art and Science of Fencing*, Nick Evangelista states, "Fencing evolved relentlessly over the centuries, transcending national boundaries and cultures. The language of fencing comes to us after being studied and tested in the blood of our ancestors." The literature, dating back to the fifteenth century, is diverse and plentiful, intensive and specific. For over four hundred years men of the sword have lived and died by the blade, refining their theories and training

methods — recording their discoveries as a legacy to future generations. (That's us.) I guarantee that any Martial Art you currently study will be enhanced by training with the European sword, the Martial Art of the western world. Bruce Lee found considerable inspiration here, so will you. *Need convincing?* Read on.

Fencing historian Edgerton Castle notes in *Schools and Masters of Fence* (1885), that the art of sword fighting in Europe evolved as a result of the introduction of firearms to warfare during the sixteenth century. During the middle ages, the sword was almost exclusively an offensive weapon. Defense depended largely upon the wearing of metal body armour. The armourer's art reached its shining glory in the mid-fifteen hundreds; at which time little bits of metal propelled by exploding gun powder effectively eliminated armour as a major obstacle to downing one's foe. In effect, heavy plate body armour just slowed you down, and made you an easier target. It was soon abandoned.

At this time knights and nobles consulted men who had not been able to afford armour, those men who depended on their skill and ingenuity with the sword for their con-

tinued survival. The first group to successfully establish a unified and organized methodology of arms training was the *Brotherhood of Our Beloved Lady and Saint Mark*, in Frankfurt. Known as the *Marxbrueder*, they received a letter of privilege from the Holy Roman Emperor in 1487 and started a university where they could organize the teaching of the art as well as the licensing of new masters. It was a place where aspiring swordsmen could come to earn their degree in arms.

The German Masters

There is a common misconception that a disciplined and systematic system of arms training did not emerge until the appearance of the rapier in the mid-sixteenth century. A long overlooked library of *Fechtbuecher* (fencing manuals) by German sword masters dating from 1389 to 1612, demonstrates conclusively that medieval swordsmanship was detailed, disciplined and deadly. Heading the list of innovative teachers was **Johannes Liechtenauer**, the fourteenth century fencing master whose methods and combat theories provided the foundation which ran through nearly all the fencing manuals that survived from medieval Germany. In *Fight Master Magazine*, (Vol XXI, number 1), author **S. Matthew Galas** has assembled a unique and revealing history of Master Liechtenauer, his successors and the fencing editions they published.

Master Johannes Liechtenauer focused on the trinity of knightly weapons: the lance, the long sword and the dagger. He taught their applications for foot or mounted, whether in armour or social dress. Wrestling was incorporated as vital to the art; he also stressed grappling and throwing techniques for each weapon. He even included special wrestling maneuvers for use in mounted combat, designed to drag or fling the opponent from his saddle. He called his methods of combat the *Kunst des Fechtens* — the art of fighting. Guided by Liechtenauer's teachings, the medieval sword master attempted to produce a fully rounded warrior who was familiar with and equally adept at, all the weapons he would commonly encounter.

The German "long sword" is what we refer to as a hand-and-a-half or "bastard" sword. It was not the unwieldy monstrosity we have been misled to envision. While sufficiently heavy to do damage to an armoured opponent when swung with two hands, it was light enough to wield effectively against an unencumbered, more mobile foe. From four to four-and-a-half feet in length, it was well balanced and weighed three to four pounds. Against an armoured opponent, the swordsman held the grip in his right hand and grasped the middle of the blade with his left. The warrior could then utilize short spear techniques to produce strong, accurate thrusts into gaps in the armour as distance closed. **Hans Talhoffer's** manual, dated 1443 (republished in 1459), even illustrates a simultaneous draw-and-counter strike to the hands to thwart an adversary's attack. A technique which is very reminiscent of the sophisticated disciplines of *iaido* [Japanese sword].

The stress on active footwork, the horizontal, diagonal and vertical cutting lines, including withdrawing cuts at



Nick Evangelista

close range, were combined with stances that offered optimum positions from which to launch an attack. All these elements offer parallels to be explored by the modern Martial Arts practitioner. However, this is only the beginning.

The Introduction of the Rapier

In Europe, the scholarly bent of the Renaissance [14th—17th C] did much to encourage the study and analysis of swordplay in an attempt to discover ways to provoke predictable behaviors during combat. In 1536, the Italian fencing master **Achille Marozzo** wrote *Opera Nova*, the first of the Renaissance tomes approaching sword fighting as a science.

Camillo Agrippa simplified fencing technique with his emphasis on logic-over-fantasy and is credited with introducing the rapier as an instrument for thrusting. In 1570, Agrippa's disciple, **Giacomo di Grassi**, published his own treatise; translated into English in 1594 as *His True Arte of Defense*. He developed the cutting and thrusting rapier with a basket hilt for greater hand protection, and further refined the divisions of the body for attack and defense. These are parallel concepts basic to the study of classical Filipino *eskrima*. Grassi also popularized the use of the dagger as the ultimate companion weapon for the rapier in combat — developing a fighting style similar to the Filipino *espada y daga*. **Salvator Fabris** assembled the best ideas of his contemporary fencing masters to create a single, defined style. **Ridolfo Capo Ferro** changed the circular form of attacking by passing or crossing over the feet — by offering the driving linear power of the "lunge."

For centuries, swords had been envisioned as edged weapons for lopping off the important bits of an opponent. Initially, the rapier offered attacks with both edges, as well as the sharpened tip of its lighter, longer and more flexible blade. The development of the rapier in the sixteenth century transformed fencing techniques. Suddenly, men were poking neat and lethal holes in one another; provoking a fierce and heated controversy, which raged for years, over which method of combat was more effective — the cut or the thrust. By the first quarter of the seventeenth century, the

point weapon had established its superiority. With its economy of movement and needle sharp tip, the rapier proved the more efficient tool for dispatching an enemy. In France alone, more than 40,000 noblemen died in sword fights from 1600 to 1780, mostly by encountering the death dealing efficacy of the point attack. It's hard to argue with what works.



The Spanish Influence

Weighty rapiers had generated slow movement which required the blade be kept relatively close to the body and needed the supporting structure of the both legs. Reaching out too far or attempting too complex an action put the fighter in positions that were hard to defend, and invited counter attacks. Like their predecessors, rapiermen fought in a circular fashion, not unlike modern boxers. This allowed them to keep themselves protected, even on the offensive.

The *Spanish Mysterious Circle* refined these principles to high art. By constantly menacing with the point, the center line is maintained by the extended blade, thus the body offers the smallest of vulnerable targets. The opponent is faced with a dilemma: to reach his foe, he must somehow avoid or remove the ever threatening blade. The Spanish practitioner coolly waited for his man to commit his body and weapon to an attack which he avoided by stepping forward or back on an angle; then countered with superior blade leverage — facilitated by his knowledge of geometry and physics — to control the central line. He simply angled his body and blade to shift center and established a new line which he dominated. The attacker literally impaled himself

on the Spaniard's extended point.

The great [Portuguese] explorer, **Ferdinand Magellan** was the first to expose the Philippines to the European style of sword fighting. He lost his life in a battle with **Raja Lapu Lapu** and his warriors on Mactan Island on April 27, 1521. **Jeronimo de Carranza** wrote his definitive text on swordplay, *Libro Que Tratta ella Philosophia de las Armas* ("Book on the Philosophy of Arms") in 1582. His pupil and disciple, **Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez** formalized the Mysterious Circle and the *verdadera destreza*, the "true art of the fence," in his volume *Los de las Grandezas de la Espada* ("The Book of the Greatness of the Sword"), published in 1625. The Filipino fighter could not avoid exposure to European combat techniques throughout the years of Spanish settlement and occupation from 1571 until the Philippine Revolution in 1896. It is natural that these ideas, as well as the later evolutions of European sword combat would be absorbed and incorporated into the Martial Arts of the Philippines. We can deduce that Filipino Martial Artists took a long and careful look at Spanish sword techniques, absorbing what was useful and adapting the knowledge to suit their own weapons and temperament.

As a matter of record, prior to the Philippine Revolution of 1896, **Don Jose de Azes** operated a school of Spanish fencing and Filipino eskrima called *Tanghalan ng Sandata* (Gallery of Weapons) in Manila. It was located inside the



Ateneo de Manila, the Jesuit high school where the upper-class teenagers of Manila received their education. Philippine national hero **Rizal y Mercado** graduated from the Ateneo de Manila before studying medicine, philosophy, literature and fencing at the University of Madrid. The knowledge of the European sword arts was definitely there for the taking.

The Spanish Style and the Mysterious Circle

Throughout Europe, dueling increasingly became a part of everyday life.

Let us take another look at the Spanish Mysterious Circle. In *Inside Karate*, (July 1998), *The Martial Art of Zorro*, weapons technique and theory was discussed. The weapons were long and double edged, narrowing to a sharp point. The hand was guarded by a shell or cup, often with an upturned edge to catch the adversary's blade. The *quillons*, or cross-guards, extended horizontally beyond the guard to facilitate controlling the opponent's weapon when binding his blade. They also increased the Spaniard's leverage to force his adversary's point out of line and ensure his own successful counter-thrust.

The prevailing footwork, or compasses, were logical and simple. They consisted of the *pasada*, a short advancing step of about twenty four inches; the *pasada simple* (about thirty inches); and the *pasada doble*, consisting of two *pasadas*, stepped with alternate feet.

Cuts were delivered from *tajo* or forehand (in Italian, *mandritti*), and *reves* or reverse (in Italian, *roversi*) with varying degrees of arm movement and strength. *Arrebatar* was meant to cut with the whole arm, from the shoulder. *Medio tajo* was a cut from the elbow, the familiar *redondo* — found in many systems of kali. *Mandoble* was a cut delivered very near the point by means of a flip of the wrist, not dissimilar to the fanning motion of a kali *abanico*. Cuts were delivered on the downward vertical or *fendente*, and the upward vertical or *mantante*. Cuts were made on the diagonal lines as well as the *tondo*, or horizontal plane, from either the fore or backhand side.

The back or *dritto* edge of the blade was also put to good use. A *falso dritto* was an ascending forty-five degree angle cut, with the back edge aimed at the left leg, the hand held in pronation (palm down). Similarly, *falso manco*, was an under-hand rising back-edge cut with the hand in supination (palm up) aimed at the right leg.

My friend **F. Braun McAsh**, the Sword Master for *Highlander: the Series* (season two through six), a noted scholar and expert with the rapier, offered two sixteenth century rapier attacks he particularly likes. The *squalembat*, or *squalembat*, is an ascending cut, often delivered to the groin or inner thigh with the hand in either pronation or supination. It is particularly effective after a feint to the head. The *stramazone*, or *stramazello*, is a tearing cut with the tip of the weapon, made with the point and not the edge of the blade. By rolling the wrist and palm from pronation to supination, or vice versa, the point is raked across

the target, administering minor but significant wounds from extremely long range.

Thrusts, or *estocada*, were given with a stab or quick extension of the arm due to the nature of the passing attack. They were delivered either *imbrocatta* (over the arm), or *stocatta* (under the arm of the opponent). It is an interesting aside to note the Filipino style called *estokada*, is very thrust oriented. The *stesso tempo* (single time) — the parry and counter attack combined — was

the soul of a fight with long rapiers.

The position of the hand in supination or pronation added considerably to the leverage on the blade initiated by the angulation of the body and the position of the blades at the point of contact. In fact, a favorite technique, the *punto reverso* defeats an attempted parry in *seconde* by lunging to the left, across center line and turning the palm upwards into supination to drive the blade around and through the defender's blade.

Another much employed technique was called variously *inquarta*, *inquartata* and *inquarto*. This was a combination of foot work, body movement and blade leverage (sometimes referred to as *pris de fer*, or "taking of the blade"). The *inquartata* called for a displacement of the body from the line of attack by pivoting on the leading heel while simultaneously throwing the rear (left) leg backwards and sideways to the right. The body was removed from danger while the defending blade was left in center-line to contact and oppose the adversary's sword. The more fierce the attack, the faster the aggressor impaled himself.

Another favorite, the *passata sotto*, was a stop hit in the low-line. Against an



aggressive attack in the high-line, the defender dropped his entire body under the opponent's blade and threw his left leg diagonally to the right while supporting himself with his left hand on the ground. Proper timing was essential.

You will notice that I have seasoned this part of the article with terms that are Spanish, Italian and French. So rapid was the evolution of the art of fencing, so fluid the free flow of information and techniques, it is difficult to describe in a single tongue. My old fencing instructor, **Master Ralph Faulkner** used to say that the language of fencing transcends national boundaries and cultures. Because swordplay had to adapt and evolve in order, quite literally, to survive, fencing has always been a living, vital art.

The French School

As swords decreased in size and the emphasis shifted to attacks with the point, footwork along with the variety and complexity of both attack and defense changed dramatically. The French and Italian schools of fencing began to dominate. The lunge delivered explosive speed and power with the ability to better control distance. The parry and counter-attack were split into two separate actions with distinctive strategies for each element. Combat with the blade had become an exacting science.

For a concise and infinitely accessible introduction to modern fencing techniques, I cannot recommend a better book than Nick Evangelista's *The Art and Science of Fencing*. Nick's analysis of the modern French school of foil fencing defines the best techniques of the classic European "court" or small sword, arguably the most efficient killing sword in western history. There is a wealth of technique and structure, always blending common sense with a respect for the tradition and history of both the weapon and the art. I believe these are the techniques that helped Bruce Lee evolve some of Jeet Koon Do's most effective subtleties like attack-by-drawing (ABD) and progressive-indirect-attack (PIA). Here are some examples, judge for yourself.

The Basics

The parry, is defined as a movement made with the blade to protect oneself by turning the opponent's weapon aside. Early parries were sometimes defensive counter-attacks, like the *stesso tempo* of the Renaissance rapier. The modern parry is purely defensive and can be either a lateral parry or a counter parry. The lateral parry moves back and forth in a straight line. It is sometimes termed a "reaction" parry because it is the most common human response. The



lateral parry stops an attack in the line into which the attack has been made. The body is divided into four quarters, providing eight lateral parries, four in supination (with the palm up) and four in pronation (palm down).

As the name implies, the counter, or *contre parries*, goes around in a circle. The defender's sword tip moves around the attacking blade, forcing it back into the line in which the attack began. Like the lateral parries, there are eight counter-parries, but the four in supination are the most useful.

Parries can be opposition parries, which are a controlled but more forceful response, or detached, which employ the spring inherent in the blade to deflect incoming attacks. This parry is generated from a snapping motion in the fingers and wrist which produces a parry that is firm, without being overbearing. It instantly breaks contact with the blade. It has intersected and flows immediately into a controlled counter-attack, the *riposte*.

The *croise*, meaning "to cross," is a defensive response that is the exception. It is a parry and a counter-attack in a single, flowing action. The strength of the *croise* comes from leverage. By catching an incoming foil's foible near the middle of one's own blade, and angling the steel across the attacker's, a lever is created which will move its threatening point out of line and provide a guide to one's own offensive response. This is a logical evolution of the blade manipulation employed by practitioners of the Mysterious Circle.

There are two types of *riposte*, the direct and the indirect. The direct *riposte* is made in the same line in which the parry was accomplished. Simple indirect *ripostes* carry the counter-attack into the line immediately opposite the one in which the parry was executed. This includes the *riposte by degage'* (passing beneath the opponent's blade), and the *riposte by coupe'* (passing over the top of his blade). "Composed" *ripostes* join together a series of offensive moves to evade the defensive responses of one's opponent. These can avoid either his lateral or counter-parry attempts at defense.

Composed Attacks

There are two types of attacks, simple and composed (or compound). A deception is the evasion of an opponent's parry or series of parries. A composed attack is made up of a feint of an attack, followed by the deception of a parry. Nick Evangelista says it simply, "You scare your opponent with a good, sound bluff into protecting himself, and then you dodge his blade. This effectively creates a hole in his defenses, which makes him easier to hit."

One's feint must menace, it must be convincing

enough to induce the opponent to defend. It should appear exactly like a real attack. The feint serves as a method of discovering how another fencer will react when pushed. It is like asking a question. By carefully watching how he responds to this questioning, strategies can be set-up to manipulate a predictable response. Any advanced Martial Artist is familiar with the tactic, as well as the sensitivity required to convince the opponent, while controlling one's own evasion and subsequent follow through to contact.

Many attacks begin by *engagement*, or a touching of the opponents' blades. A *degage'* breaks contact with the adversary's blade by dropping beneath it and reestablishing contact on the opposite side, in the opposite line. The *one-two* attack is a single feint of *degage'*, followed by a deception of one lateral parry. The blade describes a small "u." This returns the blade to its opening position, in a line that is now open and vulnerable to attack.

The *double'* is composed of a single feint of *degage'* and a deception of one counter-parry. As the counter-parry swings around the feint in an attempt to pick it up, the *double's* evasive track flows suddenly forward in the shape of a small "o." The deception, made from the fingers, travels in the same direction as the parry, causing it to stay ahead of the counter, effectively outrunning it.

Attacks on the Blade

The beat, or *battement*, can knock the opponent's blade aside to open the line for attack, or it can induce a parry that can then be evaded. The *pression* is the lightest of pressures that may control an adversary's blade, pushing it out of the way just enough, before the opponent ever realizes he has been outmaneuvered.

The *froussement*, or *glise'* is as forceful as the *pression* is delicate. As the weapon glides forward along the opponent's blade, a prolonged, violent pressure is interjected into the action. It is both overpowering and menacing, it may be used as a direct attack or as an attempt to provoke a parry that can then be avoided.

"Taking the blade," or *pris de fer*, involves encountering, forcing aside and controlling an opponent's blade as a prelude to attacking. It is executed with the *forte* of the blade on the *foible* of the opponent's weapon. Its success hinges on two elements: how much resistance is encountered, and how quickly and smoothly an attack is implemented following

the taking of the opponent's blade. There are three types of *pris de fer*: opposition, the bind and the envelopment.

Opposition is a firm and continuous pushing of an opponent's blade before an attack. It may be utilized to simply overpower, or as a threatening movement to induce a parry that can be evaded.

The bind, or *liement*, takes hold of an opponent's blade guiding its point from the high-line into the low-line, or from the low-line into the high-line. It employs leverage in the same fashion as the *croise*, and can only be employed against a fully extended sword arm. A bent sword arm presents an inadequate blade angle for the bind to grab onto. As a strategy, it may be used to overpower an opponent, or to remove a blade point that is being deliberately held in line. If one becomes victim to this overpowering maneuver, *never resist*. It will only ensure its success. The best avenue of escape is the non-resisting parry. Drop the foil tip slightly to weaken the hold of the bind, and angle its trajectory away from one's body. Roll the blade across the top of the opponent's weapon. This produces a circular flow to the motion of both foils. This maneuver flips one into the opposite line. Move the sword hand inward slightly to complete the transference, then raise the point up to eye level freeing one from the opponent's grip.

The *envelopment* is similar to the bind, but carries the control a bit further. Rather than carrying an opponent's weapon into another line, it returns the captured blade to the line where it was found. The full-circle action completely ties up an opponent's blade, making it nearly impossible for him to respond to the ensuing attack.

I have offered the merest taste of the wealth of knowledge available. Each weapon from broadsword to small sword, from saber to rapier, has its sport equivalent with vast libraries of both strategy and technique. The applications from a weapon to the empty hand is obvious. The elusive quality of *croise*, or the one-two attack, parallels "sticky hands" in *Wing Chun*. Other elements of strategy together with the application of force and line remain the same with minor adjustments. Like Filipino kali, the study of weapons transfers directly to fighting without weapons. The principles of Fencing, the Martial Art of the Western World, will translate beautifully from the bladed to the empty handed arts of other styles.

What are you waiting for? The equipment is cheap and easy to get. Fencing clubs are numerous and informal. Walk in and get started. You'll be glad you did! ☺

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