

Footwork – Teaching and Coaching.

The process of acquiring a sound technique in footwork skills is extremely time-consuming. It is, therefore, somewhat disconcerting that little time is given to teaching footwork and its realistic application.

It is not unusual to see fencers training and practising footwork unsupervised, or by coaches who simply shout out footwork drills with little or no specific instruction, correction or explanation of its tactical application.

Neither is it uncommon to see fencers practising poor and potentially dangerous footwork. Some examples of this are:

- ‘skipping’ - where the rear foot is brought up to the front foot during the action of moving forward
- over and/or under lunging
- only practising lunges of a finite length – losing the ability to vary the length of the lunge
- dragging the back foot during steps forward
- rolling the back foot during the action of a lunge
- finishing the lunge with the back leg bent or simply allowing the back leg to collapse
- being off balance after a lunge or after a series of steps
- practising footwork too fast for their current level of skill.

The practising footwork like this will provide only limited success and inevitably inculcate faults, some of which may never be eradicated.

Coaches should be aware that ankle, knee and even hip injuries can be caused by poor technique or by over-training relative to leg strength. This is especially true for children, for whom training should always relate to their level of physical development.

For a fencer to develop and acquire good footwork, the coach must have a thorough understanding of the technique, mechanics and application of all footwork actions and be capable of demonstrating them well.

In developing good footwork, we should aim for:

- starting from a balanced on guard position (i.e. weight evenly distributed between feet)
- finishing in a position that allows a smooth and seamless transition into the next footwork action
- smooth, fluid, gliding actions, executed from the hips downwards
- little or no movement of the body, arms, shoulders (unless the action requires such movement)
- no tension in the shoulders or neck
- head held up and stable throughout the action
- sword arm and sword held in a position relative to moves appropriate to the footwork being practised
- variety in application - no footwork action has a standard measure or distance to cover.
- relating the footwork to be practised to distance and to the opponent.

It might be useful and to ask the fencer to create the mental image of a named competent fencer, who performs the footwork exercise well, and then attempt to replicate it.

Essential and key components of stepping forwards and backwards

- Length of step - *short, mid-length or long*
 - e.g. short step, mid-length step, long step, short step
- Rhythm / Character of the step – quick, slow, sudden, false, passive, aggressive
 - e.g. slow step, slow step, quick step, pause, sudden step

Note: the single step should be practiced relative to technique, length and rhythm before the introduction of a series of steps and or changes in direction

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Essential and key components of the Lunge and Flèche

- Length - short, half or full
- Executed:
 - with the intention of hitting with a single aggressive action on one's own initiative
 - as part of a compound attack
 - on an opponent's recovery or preparation
 - as a renewal (reprise)
 - as a riposte
 - as a counter-attack
 - as a preparation
- Rhythm / Character – quick, slow, sudden, false, passive, aggressive

Note: the lunge and flèche should be practised relative to technique, length and rhythm before the introduction of any action or series of actions, which may precede or follow the lunge or flèche.

Examples of exercises for the lunge and flèche

From the On Guard Position:

- Short, quick lunge (or flèche)
- Slow, short lunge (or flèche)
- Slow, short lunge, recover forwards, quick long lunge - *use forward inertia*
- Step-lunge (or flèche) - *no pause*
- Lunge and reprise forwards three times, holding the lunge position prior to each recovery
- Short slow step-lunge (or flèche)

Essential and key components of Appel, Balestra and Jump - executed both with and without forward movement

- May be executed before or after a step
- May be executed before a lunge or flèche
- Rhythm / Character – quick, slow, sudden, passive, aggressive

Types of footwork exercises

Sequential Footwork – the following should be repeated over the width of, for example, a badminton court

- Step - very short lunge
- Step - half lunge
- Step- full lunge
- Step - step - lunge
- Step - balestra - step
- Step - balestra - lunge
- Balestra - step - lunge
- Short lunge - up rear foot - step - lunge
- Step - flèche (*step through into the flèche, aiming for the action to be fluid, whilst not treating it as two separate actions*)
- Short lunge - up rear foot - step-flèche
- Short lunge - recover back to the on guard position - step - step-lunge
- Short lunge - return to guard - short lunge - return to guard - flèche

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Developing a variation of speed of footwork

Examples of exercises to be practiced from a stationary, balanced on guard position and from a stationary, bouncing action.

- Slowly step forwards three times, followed by three fast steps forward
- Step forwards slowly for approximately 2 metres, then without stopping, execute a sudden and dynamic change of pace to very fast steps for approximately 2 metres then stop suddenly
- Stepping forwards - very small steps (75% smaller than normal)
- Stepping backwards - very small steps (75% smaller than normal)
- Step forward - larger than normal steps (3 to 4 times larger than normal, but not lunging)
- Lunge (passive and preparatory in character) - recover forward – lunge (aggressively)

Developing leg strength

Repeat the above exercises from a deeper on guard position than normal (distance between the feet should be greater than normal). During the exercises, there should be little or no upper body movement

Circuit and Interval Training

Combinations of the above exercises can be used in the form of circuit and interval training.

For example 10 exercises repeated 5 times make 1 circuit. Each circuit is repeated 3 times.

As interval training, each exercise is executed for a set period of time e.g. 30 seconds, and then the fencers rest for 30 seconds before progressing to the next exercise, and so on.

To prevent footwork sessions becoming tedious and boring, the coach should vary the method of presentation.

It is of paramount importance at all times to explain the '**how, why and when**' relative to technique and application.

This is not a definitive guide to footwork training but only a general introduction. With observation and imagination, the coach should be able to devise other exercises and achieve more success.

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