

Fencing's Spiritual Crisis: A Glimmer of Hope?

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Beset with the groans of many fencers exasperated with rule changes, with increasing disaffection of fencers who seek a return to fencing's connection with actual swordplay, and with a ruling organization that has often treated symptoms rather than causes, fencing today is in crisis. In chatrooms, at clubs, and in the pages of the few periodicals devoted to the art of defense, one sees that something is wrong, and what is worse, little sign that the situation will improve. The problem is complex. On the one hand, fencing is wrestling with problems such as dubious techniques made possible by electrical scoring and overly flexible blades, while on the other, fencing struggles to maintain its place in the world of sport. If one has read the recent interview with the new technical director of FIE, Ioan Pop, one may see a glimmer of hope for fencing. In answer to the question of attacks with a bent arm in foil and sabre Pop said:

For me, foil and sab[r]e with a bent arm is no longer conventional fencing. It is practiced in this way of course but this is not fencing anymore. Fencing is a dialogue between two fencers with actions and basic technique. However in foil at the moment, there are two parallel monologues instead of a dialogue. Fundamentally, we have gone way off track. If the action does not threaten with the point, the direct attack no longer exists, neither does the compound attack. From both sides we have destructive actions rather than an action and a reaction.¹

Pop's position is not new, nor is it revolutionary. Attacking with an extension of the arm has been fundamental in virtually every treatise on fencing for six hundred years. If this is so, and it is, then what is Pop responding to?²

¹ Jean-Marie Safra, "'Our Role is to Help the Federations that Need Us:' Interview with Ioan Pop, Technical Director of the International Fencing Federation," *Escrime Internationale* 6:44 (2003): 33. On-line access at http://www.fie.ch/Federation/Escrime_internationale_44.htm. For more on the crisis in fencing, see Jean-Marie Safra, "President René Roch Reviews the Year 2002 and Speaks about his Projects," *Escrime Internationale* 43 (2003): 10 (answer to the question "Does this mean that you have given up hope of reforming foil?"); Jean Link, "'Foil's Identity Crisis:' to the attention of Maitre Ioan Pop, International Technical Director," *Escrime Internationale* 40 (2002): 16.

² For an excellent overview of the development of fencing technique, and the importance of extending the arm, see William H. Gaugler, *The History of Fencing: Foundations of Modern European Swordplay* (Bangor: Laureate Press, 1998). Hereafter, Gaugler, *History of Fencing*. See also Gaugler's excellent essay "Right of Way and Fencing Time," *American Fencing* 37:6 which contains the best summary of the extended/extending issue, and Maitre Adam Adrian Crown, "Grim Realities: Observations on the Matter of Extending the Arm," <http://www.classicalfencing.com/articles/Grim.shtml>. As a good example of an exception to the rule, see Maxwell Garret, Emmanuil Kaidanov, and Gil A. Pezza, *Foil, Saber, and Épée Fencing: Skills, Safety, Operations, and Responsibilities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994). The "flick" is treated along side traditional attacks (p.134-135). Overall, this book is written with a focus towards converting traditional practice to the changes in the game rather than with traditional pedagogy itself. For more sources on "traditional" fencing pedagogy, see n. 13.

Electrical scoring allows fencers to make attacks, particularly in foil and sabre, which one could not make before. Nowadays, the “flick” in foil and the “slap at the bell guard” in sabre are established techniques in the repertoire of most competitive fencers. It used to be that if one made such an attack, one lost a touch. A bent arm meant that one was breaking off an attack (or parrying) and a point directed anywhere but at target was deemed non-threatening. Many fencers do not care if there is a discrepancy between these attacks and traditional fencing technique (most younger fencers are unaware that any such discrepancy exists), but it is a problem that FIE has tried to work around or solve for a number of years. Ioan Pop’s answer—enforce traditional fencing techniques—is not novel either, but to hear it from FIE is.

In a follow-up question, Safre asked “Is the current situation not due to a much greater mobility on the piste? In other words, can we go back? Is it desirable to return to fencing as it was practiced in 1935 or 1955?”³ The technical director’s response is worth quoting in full:

I am not saying that we must go back to the past. But all the same I ask the question, how can we expect the spectators to be interested in fencing if we no longer know what we are doing? We have come to a position where there is a total lack of consistency between the rules and the refereeing. We cannot say in the rules that the attack must be performed with the extended arm and then do exactly the opposite on the piste or when coaching. Moreover, teaching becomes superficial and minimalist. It becomes limited to actions that speculate and rely on the human limits of the referee’s perception instead of developing the basics and technical complexity of our sport.⁴

Pop’s answer contains several points worth following. First, he does not believe that we need “go back to the past.” if we have rules and practice consistent with traditional fencing technique there is no need to. Second, Pop recognizes that the current rules under which competitions operate are not only inconsistent, but also not the answer—part of the trouble is the attitude of the competitors, coaches, and referees and rule changes alone will not fix that.

One sees the depth of the crisis most clearly within the rules governing fencing and their enforcement. The rules for foil (**t. 56**), for instance, state:

1. The simple attack, direct or indirect (cf. **t.8.**), is correctly executed when the extending of the arm, the point threatening the valid target, precedes the initiation of the lunge or flèche.
2. The compound attack (cf. **t.8.**) is correctly executed when the arm is extending in the presentation of the first feint, with the point threatening the valid target, and the arm is not bent during the successive actions of the attack and the initiation of the lunge or flèche.
3. The attack with the step-forward-lunge or a step-forward- fleche is correctly executed when the extending of the arm precedes the end of the step forward and the initiation of the lunge or flèche.

³ Jean-Marie Safra, “Our Role is to Help the Federations that Need Us:’ Interview with Ioan Pop, Technical Director of the International Fencing Federation,” *Escrime Internationale* 6:44 (2003): 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*

4. Actions, simple or compound, steps or feints which are executed with a bent arm, are not considered as attacks but as preparations, laying themselves open to the initiation of the offensive/defensive action of the opponent (cf. **t.8**).⁵

Of note, these rules for judging an attack in foil use “extending” versus “extended,” a subtle, but significant difference in the use of the verb. “Extending” can be interpreted to mean that one can establish an attack *without* an extended arm, with an arm in *the process of being extended*.⁶ A director has a lot of leeway in interpreting an attack; he can call it an attack if one is in preparation or if one has a fully extended point. Rule four, just to complicate things, states that an action executed with a bent arm is preparation. Is an “extending” arm not bent? What should help the director, and seems so rarely to do so, is the second half of the attack: the point threatening the target. How, if one’s blade is behind one’s head, is one threatening target area with the point? It seems the easiest solution would be to change “extending” to “extended,” call an attack with an *extending* arm *preparation* and an attack with an *extended* arm, point threatening target, an *attack*.

Enforcing this rule, and perhaps clarifying the meaning, might help eliminate “flick” attacks. If one starts an attack, but fails to establish an extension, or, breaks the arm after having extended the arm, one loses the attack. After all, “the foil is a thrusting weapon only:” what place is there for any other attack in foil but a thrust?⁷ If directors stop rewarding dubious touches, coaches will stop encouraging their students to make dubious touches. As few fencers, if any, enjoy defeat the competitors themselves will stop using “flicks” and “slaps” too.

Sabre’s dilemma is thornier. According to rule **t.70a** it is permissible to make a touch in sabre with the flat sides of the blade: “All touches made with the cutting edge, the flat or the back of the blade are counted as good.”⁸ In layman’s terms this means that one can make a cut with part of the sabre that on a real weapon would not be dangerous. What explains such a bizarre rule is that FIE was trying to compensate for a problem with electric sabre: the problem of whipover. This slapping “attack” occurs when a fencer strikes either the forte or bell-guard with sufficient force to whip the blade around a *good* parry, one that had the blades been real would have stopped the attack.⁹

Rather than treat the cause—poor fencing—FIE treated one of its symptoms. The assumption was that any attack that makes the light go off must be valid because the *light went*

⁵ *Fencing Rules 2000 Edition*, United States Fencing Association, Inc. See **t56**, 1-6, page 24. Online access <http://www.visi.com/~hue/fencing/Rules99.pdf>. Hereafter, *USFA Rules*.

⁶ The official rulebook for fencing has said more or less the same thing re extended/extending since the twenties, but as Gaugler and others have pointed out, the 1970s witnessed a change in pedagogy that has made a clearer distinction a must. Cf. n.8.

⁷ *USFA Rules*. See **t46**, page 21. Even with the changes in fencing pedagogy that followed in the wake of electric foil one still sees, for the most part (cf. n. 2 and the book by Garret. et al.), that an extended arm should precede the lunge on an attack. The 1970s saw a major shift in fencing instruction based on techniques derived from those that were useful “on the ground” to techniques geared more to scoring with the flexible weapon of electric foil. See Gaugler, *History of Fencing*, 428 and the example of Pierre Thirioux’s *Escrime au Fleuret* (1977).

⁸ *USFA Rules*. See **t70a** and following, page 30. Online access <http://www.visi.com/~hue/fencing/Rules99.pdf>. For the ridiculousness of such a rule when compared to historical example, see the example of the young German lieutenant whose attacks landed with the flat of the blade, a mistake his opponent was quick to seize upon and which cost the lieutenant his nose (Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton: UP, 1994), 63. See also his source, *Das Kleine Journal*, no. 30, January 30th, 1893).

⁹ This is different from a mal parry, or “bad parry,” in that whipover renders a good parry useless where a mal parry means the defender’s parry was not sufficient to stop a cut completely.

off. Such logic fails to consider the fact that the blades are so flexible that they often whip around the guard regardless of how well one parries, a weakness in the blade that was only addressed later.¹⁰ This rule also hamstring the director; even if he sees whipover, he cannot overrule the scoring box. Before the advent of electric sabre a director listened for the sound of steel on the guard or arm to help determine a touch; if he heard metal before he heard the dull thud of blade on fabric he knew it was whipover. As the light cannot be overruled, the director must now rely on the box alone, and with blades whirling at such high speeds a director needs the testimony of his eyes and ears too.

Another issue Pop cites is coaching.¹¹ In fairness to coaches, they occupy a difficult position. On one hand, they possess the knowledge and skills bequeathed to them by generations of masters, but on the other, they recognize that teaching traditional technique may hinder their students in competition. This should not be so, but it is. The “flick” is not part of the technical skills of traditional fencing, but it *is* an effective “attack” in competition. Even if a coach does not wish to teach such an attack, he must teach his fencers to defend against it otherwise they will be eaten alive. This is what Pop refers to when he says that coaches are teaching fencers to play to the rules (and to a degree, the director). I would not argue that playing to the director is new—the evidence, including my own competitive experiences, suggests otherwise—but the inconsistencies in the rules and established fencing theory have some coaches focusing more on how to win than on how to fence.¹² Sadly, there is often a dichotomy between fencing well and victory and that should not be.

At this point, simply changing the rules will not help. Fencers have to be willing to clean up their game, or to put it another way, start fencing rather than fly-casting for points.¹³ This is the responsibility not only of coaches, but also, and most critically of all, of fencers. The royal road to ratings these days may be quick with dubious attacks like the whip, but by no definition is it good fencing. The answer to this crisis is simple: rely on solid fundamentals.¹⁴

Like most fencers I am under no illusions about the chances of fixing fencing's crisis. There is so much invested in the status quo, in what we see in the World Cup and Olympics, that we are unlikely to see a return to fencing built on the logic behind swordplay. The FIE cannot fix it, television ratings cannot fix it, wishful thinking cannot fix it, and romanticizing fencing's past cannot fix it either. The only possible thing that can change this is us. Fencers. We must be

¹⁰ The “S2000” blade, the response to the super flexible ones that helped create the problem, is an improvement, but any sabreur who competes or bouts regularly can tell you that the improvement is moderate. One can still whip if one wishes and it will still count in competition.

¹¹ See n. 1.

¹² For a general, readable selection of playing to the director and other questionable activities see Richard Cohen, *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions* (New York: Random House, 2002), ch. 19, “Honor Betrayed.” See also ch. 16, “The Champions.”

¹³ Fly-casting seems to be a popular metaphor for the whip—my thanks to Maitre Adam Crown who I believe was the first to employ it. See Maitre Adam Crown, “The Top Ten Misconceptions about Classical Fencing,” #5, at <http://www.classicalfencing.com/articles/misconceptions.shtml>.

¹⁴ See for example Luigi Barbasetti, *The Art of the Foil* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1932) and *The Art of the Sabre and the Épée* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936); Roger Crosnier, *Fencing with the Sabre: Instruction and Technique* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1966; Clovis Deladrier, *Modern Fencing: A Comprehensive Manual for The Foil, The Épée, The Sabre* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1948); Nick Evangelista, *The Art and Science of Fencing* (Indianapolis: Masters Press, 1996); William Gaugler, *The Science of Fencing: A Comprehensive Training Manual for Master and Student; Including Lesson Plans for Foil, Sabre and Épée Instruction* (Bangor: Laureate Press, 1997); Aldo Nadi, *On Fencing* (Sunrise: Laureate Press, 1994); Julius Palffy-Alpar, *Sword and Masque* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1967); László Szabó, *Fencing and the Master* (Budapest: Franklin Printing House, 1977).

willing to put all the passion we have for fencing into the necessary training to make us not only champions, but into something more than that, something better than that: into good fencers. Victory may be victory, but how much sweeter is victory when one wins well?

Is a return to fundamentals a return to the past? Not really, it is just living up to established fencing tradition. Ioan Pop is advocating that we do just that—make fencing, and the rules that govern it, fall back into line with the techniques fencing developed for centuries and which made it the great crowd pleaser it was up through the early decades of the twentieth century. This will mean not only taking inconsistencies out of the rulebook, but also out of our practice. So, write Ioan Pop and tell him you are thrilled to see FIE take a stand against sloppy fencing. Talk to your coach. Talk to other fencers. It is up to us, and I for one am not going down without a fight. What fencer would?

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