

The Ides of March: Part 2 ¶ Constructing Marching Attacks

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Marching attacks are not surprise attacks, but rather constructed attacks. Since they rely on the reactions of the opponent, you'd think they were thoughtful and reactive, but they aren't for the sake of sanity, the attacking fencer is usually running a program. This program consists of a coordinated interdependence of hand and foot movements that together protect the preparations, while forcing the opponent backwards in a defensive mode.

(This article is part two in a three-part series on the Foil Marching Attack. Click here for part one, with demonstration video.)

Marches use dumbed-down bladework to create implied threats. Sweeping motions, bent arms, and cocked hands take the place of standard, tip-based feints and disengages.

By threatening "zones" of target rather than specific target areas, the attacker keeps the defender in a reactive, defensive frame of mind. The defender, without a clear threat to address, is unable to act decisively.

Ideally, the bladework of the marching attack would be straight, meaning it threatens the opponent's target with the point. Disengages would be lateral or vertical, and small, and fast, and many. In the real world, this quickly gets impossible. We have the lightness of the sports weapons to thank for the difficulty of avoiding the blade. Fencing blades, in the hands of Olympic-caliber fencers, look like so much spaghetti in slow-motion video. It's simply too easy to make fast, consecutive parries, both lateral and circular, for a trompement to truly threaten an opponent.

For marching attacks, fencers mostly use a degraded version of bladework. Feints don't threaten target with the point, they threaten target areas by hovering above or in front of them. Derobements don't avoid the blade, they are more like line changes that threaten new target. Watch a fencer on a long march, and their tip moves from zone to zone, first vaguely threatening the high inside, then the high outside, then the high deep inside.

This simplified blade work is an acquired skill, quite different from the regular body of direct point-technique. With the attacker threatening target from above and beyond, and the defender tossing high or wide parries, the fencing starts to look quite "modern." Modern, as in the marching attack is machine-gun tactics. Machine guns suppress enemy movement by building zones of control on the battlefield, zones that deny passage or limit the options of the enemy. Marching attacks are about suppressing the opponent and denying opportunity for action. The defender has one blade, just like the attacker, but they are denied the ability to use it decisively.

Of course, the best feints are still directed straight to target, because they indicate the immediacy of the threat to the defender (getting him to move his blade) but often the implied threat of the hanging tip is enough to get the job done. This is another reason not to march against beginning fencers: They won't assess the threat the same way as the experienced fencers will, and may simply attack into preparation. For these fencers, go direct.

When beginning a marching attack, be wary of starting too quickly initial feints which are too fast have a tendency to freeze the opponent's footwork (they root to the ground to solve the sudden hand problem), and this causes them to be brought into distance quickly. The defender may just decide to make a simple attack, because it feels too late to retreat. The safest marches start slowly, easing the opponent into retreating without alarming them or causing them to "dig in." Only if the opponent begins giving ground is the marching attack developed.

Of primary importance to the marching attack is this: Drive the enemy before you. When they're moving backwards, they can't surprise you as easily with an attack in time. Their parries, if they find them, cannot be followed with a riposte because they're still moving backwards. The safest opponent is a retreating opponent.
How not to get hit on the march

When marches fail, it looks like a train wreck: The defender successfully takes over the attack, and lunges into the

forward-rushing attacker. The attacker, now the defender, tries to save himself with wild parries and target displacement, meanwhile stumbling on his feet trying to shed momentum he looks either drunk or generally inept. This is a failure of footwork and measurement. It doesn't need to happen.

Rule of Thumb: When rushing towards an opponent, you're only in danger when you get to them.

The essence of Decision Point:

When rushing towards an opponent, you're only in danger when you get to them.

When the attacker gets within hitting distance, that is the only time the defender can threaten the attacker. Since the defender can only choose from a limited selection of meaningful reactions at that point, it's possible for the attacker to be ready for all of them.

The whole march (and defense) succeeds or fails based on what happens at Decision Point.

Using Decision Point, a march doesn't even have to conclude as an attack. The march can be used as an invitation so that, at decision point, the defender will make an attack on the preparation. The marching fencer quits the march, and finishes with standard second-intention fencing.

For most of the march, the fencers aren't in reach of each other. Both fencers are moving quickly, and the distance between them is shrinking but there's still a zone of safety around each. The attacker needs only to remember this simple fact: Nobody will be hit, until the fencers are in hitting distance. The attacker can (and should) make wildly flamboyant and unsafe actions during the marching attack, because this helps to frustrate the opponent. But the attacker must have maximal control and readiness when they get to a certain point: The opponent's Decision Point.

Decision point. Every time the attacker comes into hitting distance, the defender must make a decision about what to do. The defender has four options. They can either (1) keep retreating, (2) make a sweeping parry (or a slappy beat), (3) put out a line, (4) or attack somehow. The marcher knows that one of these four things will be decided. So as the attacker enters this hitting distance, the attacker is prepared for one of these reactions.

All the fun really only happens at this moment, when the attacker gets close. If the defender launches something early, the attacker can pick it up and conclude their march as a simple attack (attack, parry riposte). If the defender launches something late, the attacker has already hit. The defining action happens at the Decision Point, never before, never after.

In short, the attacker is funneling the defender's options into the Decision Point, where the danger is manageable, predictable, and only lasts about one tempo of fencing time. Thus, the smart marching fencer generates threat for a whole long attack, and only has risk for one short highly controlled moment. Moreover, they even get to decide when to experience that risk-moment, because they are controlling the distance.

To make it even easier for the attacker, they might have prior knowledge of the opponent's habits. They might know, for instance, that the opponent favors attacks into preparation. The fencer would thus be ready for the opponent's reaction, but very ready for an attack into preparation. The fencer might even invite the attack by showing juicy open target as they enter the Decision Point.

This is another big secret of marching attacks. Because of their loose construction and dangerous-seeming risk-taking, they are huge invitations. A large percentage of the time, marching attacks are offered as preparations that hope to draw the opponent into an attack on the preparation. An unpolished or weary fencer will see such an approach, and reflexively attack into it, because, ain't it easy? But the march was really a disguised second-intention attack, and the apparent opening was an invitation, and the marcher makes a simple parry riposte. The marching fencer's life is thus made easier: Why chase an opponent for twenty meters, when they will serve themselves to you in three?

Rule of Thumb: Finishing is a small part of marching attacks. Often, finishes are put aside for "normal" fencing. The marching attacker moves forward, putting ever more stress on the opponent. The opponent finally sees an opening (the

attacker has arrived a Decision Point) and commits to an action. The march is no longer needed, as the opponent is now in distance. The marching attacker drops out of the march, and finishes with normal tactical fencing.

Putting the point on

Whenever possible, finish marches with the tip. If the attacker has measured distance correctly, then they will be one flying lunge away from a tip-hit as they come out of the Decision Point tempo.

However, the ideal is not always the reasonable. Opponents have a habit of throwing a wrench into well-executed plans. When distance is too close, the attacker may have to finish with a flick, or (yikes) a pulled hand.

When it comes time to hit, the attacker is generally moving at a good clip. The attacker is finishing the march, or (more often) has drawn a reaction from the opponent that lets them conclude with a direct or short compound attack. Whatever the situation, the attacker is flying forward with a lot of momentum, and the defender is probably nearly still. After all, the defender is either out of strip, or they have flubbed a Point in Line, or they have just had their attack on preparation crushed.

Due to the difficulty of bringing the point to bear on the opponent's target in time, the fencer often finishes with a flick. Unlike straight extensions, the flick doesn't care about too-close distance: The flick will land on opponents at any distance, from near, to way too near. For added measure, flicks can frequently get around parries that would otherwise arrive just in time to block a straight attack. Hitting with the tip is still the best and most reliable method, but it isn't always an option.

There are some upcoming changes in the rules of foil which will deprecate the utility of flicks. When these take effect, it will be important to finish marching attacks in good distance that is, from not too far away to hit, and from not so close that the opponent is inside the tip.

The wild preparations, the long distance, the foot noise, the whistling blades these all give marching attacks a very "nuke them from space" feel. The practiced attacker is rarely in danger for most of the march. It's not uncommon to see fencers trading series of long marching attacks back and forth, both seemingly immune to anything the opponent does.

Next installment: Beating Marching Attacks.