

Tying It All Together--The Hungarian Methodology

Contributed by David Littell
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In August 1998 I went to a fencing camp (combined with a coaches program) in Hungary. I learned about the Hungarian methodology for teaching fencing. I found (and continue to find) it extremely helpful. I had learned lots techniques/tactics/strategies/tricks before, but never a system--a unifying set of principles that tie all the ends of fencing together. Below is a description of what I learned and how I've integrated it into working with foil fencers.

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As a caveat and as an apology to Adadar Kogler--an extremely patient and generous teacher--I guarantee that my reporting of the Hungarian system is somewhat inaccurate and colored by own prior fencing experiences. Also, the Hungarian system does apply to all three weapons, but here I've only tried to discuss the implications for foil.

Definitions

Learning the system requires an understanding of some terminology. If the teacher and the students all understand a common language, communication becomes much easier. You may have your own names for these actions, but I recommend that you adopt these because they are short and crystal clear. Here are the key terms.

Hand tempo: Fencer A responds to a hand cue by fencer B. For example, fencer A and fencer B are at a lunge distance. Fencer A advances or retreats and fencer B maintains the distance. Fencer A stops and makes a pass at fencer B's blade. Fencer B deceives, lunges and hits. Fencer B is responding to the hand tempo.

Foot tempo: Fencers are at fencing distance (advance lunge). Fencer A begins to move the front foot forward (begins an advance) and fencer B lunges, with the goal of hitting fencer A before fencer A's front foot hits the floor. Fencer B is making a foot-tempo action.

Accelerated attack: Fencers are at fencing distance (advance lunge). Fencer A begins to move the front foot (advance) and notices that fencer B does not retreat immediately. Fencer A seeing the distance collapse finishes the advance and lunges. Fencer A is making an accelerated attack.

Taking over the attack: Fencers are at fencing distance. Fencer A makes an attack and fencer B retreats out of distance. As fencer A recovers fencer B makes an attack with advance lunge. Fencer B is taking over the attack.

Passive tempo: Actions in foot tempo, accelerated attack and taking over the attack can be accomplished passively or actively. Passive implies that the fencer makes the action simply in response to the opponent's error or action. For example, Fencer A begins to advance and fencer B fails to retreat. Fencer A makes an accelerated attack. Or Fencer A is retreating as Fencer B advances. Prior to an advance Fencer A begins to withdraw the hand. Fencer B makes a foot-tempo attack.

Active tempo: Actions in foot tempo, accelerated attack and taking over the attack can be accomplished passively or actively. Active implies that the fencer makes his or her own opportunity. For example, Fencer A makes a half-retreat (only moves the back foot) so that Fencer B will advance in preparation. When Fencer B complies, Fencer A lunges in foot tempo. Or Fencer A advances quickly then relaxes and begins a slow step forward. Fencer B retreated with the first

step but is a little slow with relaxed slow step. Fencer A has just created an accelerated attacking opportunity.

(Note two other things about taking over the attack. First, Fencer B may be close enough to hit with a lunge instead of an advance lunge. Second, since Fencer B is retreating out of distance, even if he or she makes a parry the action back would be described as taking over the attack. A parry riposte is accomplished within distance. I don't think that this language distinction is all that important except for communication purposes.)

Terminology in action

An offensive fencing action generally involves both a reaction to the opponent's hand (hand tempo) and a distance opportunity. In the Hungarian system, distance opportunities fall in one of three categories, foot tempo, accelerated attack and taking over the attack.

We can learn and teach fencing by practicing the distance opportunities in isolation or the hand tempo actions in isolation. But we also must put them together. Let's say that we have a new fencer that only knows how to advance retreat extend and lunge. Even with this much this fencer can learn about the three moments to go. After that you can introduce a new hand action—let's say feint deceive. Then put it all together by having them practice these actions in all three tempos. Here are three sets of basic exercises to accomplish that.

Moments to go

Attack in foot tempo. Fencers establish advance lunge distance. Fencer A moves forward and back. Periodically, instead of retreating when fencer A advances fencer B lunges into an open line (no hand movements required by either fencer). Fencer B must start the lunge at the very beginning of Fencer A's movement and is trying to hit before fencer A's front foot hits the ground.

Taking over the attack. Fencers establish and maintain advance lunge distance. Fencer A controls the distance and fencer B follows. Fencer A occasionally attacks and recovers. Fencer B does not attempt to parry but retreats out of distance and makes an advance lunge to hit as the attacker is recovering.

Accelerated attack. Fencers establish and maintain advance lunge distance. Fencer B leads the distance. Fencer A occasionally makes a distance error failing to retreat quickly and the beginning of fencer B's advance. When fencer B perceives this mistake he or she accelerates the back foot to finish the advance and lunge. The key here is that B must perceive the distance changing at the very beginning of the step.

Note that these drills allow the fencers to begin to master the three moments to go without involving the hand. In fact it's really important to start this way even for fencers that are experienced.

Feint deceive in hand tempo

Try a hand tempo action from an extension distance. Fencer A (the teacher) advances or retreats and fencer B maintains the extension distance. Fencer A stops and makes a larger opening in a line (an invitation). Fencer B begins to extend to the open line and deceives and hits when fencer A attempts to parry.

Now try the same hand tempo action from a lunge or an advance lunge distance.

Feint Deceive in the three moments to go

Fencers establish advance lunge distance. Fencer A leads movement and B follows. When Fencer A makes a bigger opening (invitation) at the beginning of the advance, Fencer B executes a feint deceive in foot tempo.

Fencers establish advance lunge distance. Fencer A leads movement and B follows. Occasionally B fails to retreat fast enough when Fencer A begins an advance. Fencer A begins an accelerated attack with the feint deceive).

Fencers establish advance lunge distance. Fencer A leads movement and B follows. Occasionally Fencer A lunges and fencer B retreats out of distance. Fencer B takes over the attack with feint deceive.

Now hopefully you're beginning to see the point. Essentially any action can be taught this way. These drills can be accomplished by two fencers, a whole group of fencers, or can be the substance of an individual lesson. You can even get on the strip and bout focusing on a single moment to go (accelerated attack) or a single hand action (feint deceive) executed in all three moments. Feel free to invent your own exercises.

After using this system for a while, I'd say it's a complete success. Since every drill or lesson requires practice of the three moments to go today all the fencers that I work with can do any of the three when they see the opportunity (passive) or can set up an opportunity (active). It's also been a great communications tool. For example, in a recent tournament, I said to a student your opponent is hitting you with a feint deceive in foot tempo. It was completely clear to both of us what I was describing and made it easier to determine a solution.

I also don't feel that it compromised anything that I already was doing. It opened my eyes to new opportunities (before I didn't work much with foot tempo) and gave me a name to describe some of the things that I was doing. I don't see how this approach couldn't be integrated with any style of teaching. It's not about whether you flick or go straight or which parries are being executed. It's really about developing a language that efficiently describes fencing tactics and a way to systematically practice tactics and technique at the same time. This system gives me a way to present fencing as something simple and comprehensible--not something that is complex and incomprehensible. I think that is the best gift that you can give your students.

Learning To Do All The Actions At Once

If you have tried the actions above, hopefully you begin to see how drilling the moments to go will really help your fencing. In many ways the passive actions are harder than the active ones because you're asking yourself to stay open to every possibility until the instant an opportunity arrives. In fact, even once you start practicing the active actions, you still must be able to stay open to changing circumstances, since you have to exploit new opportunities too.

To start working on this ability, after working with the basic footwork moments (with or without any handwork) for a number of practice sessions the next step is to start mixing up all the actions. Try the following three drills.

Combine foot tempo and taking over the attack. The teacher controls the distance and the student follows at a full fencing distance. If the teacher attacks the student steps out of distance and takes over the attack. If the teacher withdraws the hand before advancing make a foot tempo action.

Combine accelerated attack and taking over the attack. The student controls the distance and teacher follows. As the student moves forward the teacher can either retreat (student simply finishes the advance), stop (the student makes an accelerated attack), or lunge in foot tempo (the student steps back and takes over the attack). After a bit the teacher can also advance lunge in foot tempo.

Once you've mastered these two try and combine them with the distance control shifting more naturally back and forth.

Learning To Do Different Types Of Attacks In The Different Moments

Once you begin to understand the moments you can do any kind of attack in each of the moments. Above we described applying the drills to a feint deceive. The two other major types of attacks are withdrawn actions and attacks on the blade. What I mean by a withdrawn action is simply keeping the hand in a bent arm on guard position until the opponent attempts to parry the blade.

Practicing Active Actions

Active foot tempo attacks

The essence of the active foot tempo is getting your opponent to come forward following your rhythm. If you can anticipate their advance, it becomes easier to attack in foot tempo. Right of way always is an issue in foot tempo. If the opponent is extending (and would get the attack if you attacked into it) you can make a beat attack in foot tempo. You may also be able to encourage the opponent to come forward in preparation instead of coming forward with an attack.

Begin to advance. Stop and start to retreat (only move the back foot), at a rhythm that your opponent can follow. If it works, lunge instead of finishing the retreat.

There are a number of ways to get your opponent to stay in preparation as they come forward. One is to make parries as you retreat. If the opponent hesitates to avoid the blade or to figure out what to do next, make a foot tempo action. Even better is to pause momentarily as you parry. If the opponent sees this as an accelerating attacking opportunity step back

and parry or step back out of distance and take over the attack. If you can do this tactic successfully, then the next time you do it your opponent will hesitate, now make a foot tempo action. If you watch tapes of world class fencing, you see this tactic a lot.

Active taking over the attack

Taking over the attack doesn't have to be done at the end of the opponent's lunge, it really can be done any time the opponent stops. Once the fencer stops you can get a jump on them. Before trying these tactics, first practice from a standstill making a quick advance lunge.

You can encourage your opponent's attack by pausing as you retreat (as discussed above). When the opponent attacks, step back and take over the attack.

Another way to encourage the opponent's attack is to advance until you find the accelerated attacking distance. Instead of attacking stop, and step back as they feel the opportunity to attack you. Retreat out of distance and take over the attack.

Now try a slide step (half advance jump), pause. If your opponent really stops with you, you can probably catch them with an advance lunge.

Retreat quickly to lengthen the distance. If this stops the opponent, take over the attack with the advance lunge.

Active accelerated attack

Here the objective is to get the opponent to let you gain distance on them as you begin an advance. You might be able to catch them if you start really quickly (especially if they are at a standstill as discussed above) but it is more likely that you will catch them for some other reason. If you begin in a nonthreatening way the opponent may not retreat fast enough. Or after a number of steps they simply get frustrated and stop to look for a parry. Of course you might also catch them at their end of the strip.

Practice beginning an advance in a nonthreatening manner (try it in a mirror). If mainly the legs moves and the torso is stable and not tensing, it is difficult for your opponent to see what you are doing. You can add a drop of the point give the impression that your blade is moving away from the opponent. Now with a partner begin your advances this way, if the partner is careless with the distance make an accelerated attack.

A similar strategy is what I call fast slow fast. Make a pressing advance that gets your opponent tense and ready, follow it (without stopping) with a very soft and relaxed half step. Your opponent won't be able to help themselves. They will relax and now you can finish the advance and lunge.

Finally don't underestimate persistence. If you advance a number of times down the strip you will often end up with an opportunity. Be sure to go forward with balance and be ready to go as soon as you have that distance advantage.

About the author: David Littel has been involved in the sport of fencing for 30 years. He was a member of the 1988 U.S. Olympic Fencing team and competed in the Seoul Olympics. He fenced in high school in suburban Chicago and was a three time All-american at the University of Illinois. After a 10 year break from competitive fencing Dave reentered the sport at age 30 and made the Olympic team at age 34. He also is an accomplished tennis player and was a tennis teaching professional in his early 20's. You can view more about David and his fencing club at:

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