

Off-hand Thoughts: Remembering the Other Hand in Rapier

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by Katrine Blak

Recently a new fencer (even newer to this art and skill than I am) told me of his trouble with remembering to use his off-hand when fighting with a single epee. He had failed his first attempt at authorization the week before, in part because his off-hand remained raised but idle – it was no help in his defense, and an easy target for his opponent.

Rapier authorizations are a confirmation to the marshals that the fencer is safe with steel and in his balance. They also require a show of basic skill – including offensive or defensive use of the off-hand. Although we try to model our play in the Art of Defence in part after the duels and prize fights of the Renaissance (fighting in street clothes with whatever weapons are at hand); in the rules of the East Kingdom, a fencer using a single rapier is assumed to wear a chain-mail gauntlet on the off-hand. This gauntlet protects the hand from cuts, but not from the sharp point of a thrust. Unlike the duelers of the Renaissance, we are not permitted to grab (or in other ways trap) the opponent's blade – but we can deflect it by pushing it away with the off-hand. We may also -- to use as technical a term as I like to -- *snag* the blade. This gesture catches the blade between the open fingers of the off-hand and shifts it away from the body.

I've been fencing for six months, and my memories of my own block with this are still fresh. In this article I'd like to share a few ideas that might help new fencers overcome this hurdle, if they find the need. This is an article about remembering to use the off-hand, not about using it *well*. For that, I look to my betters; and expect to for a long time.

All told, then – it *is* an odd thing that we should forget a hand. Yet this is a common problem in the beginning, and I suspect it arises from how the mind divides its focus in a fight. Our conscious minds might consider some of the things we process when fighting: the rules of the game, distance and sword length, whom we are fighting, the initiation of attacks. On a good day, this thinking works in concert with the natural intelligence the body has – the more instinctive awareness of balance, timing, and the weapons at our disposal. That your primary hand grips a sword reminds the body's intelligence that the sword is there to use, to stick in the other guy (the pointy end!). That your off-hand is empty might cause it to be forgotten.

One: The Dagger

At War of the Roses in New York this May of AS XXXVIII, a more experienced fencer put a dagger in my off-hand. He had noticed I wasn't using it, and had found before that putting a weapon there helps a fencer remember to use it. This was the first time I'd played with a secondary weapon, and the trick worked like a spell. I caught blades with the dagger offensively, and also parried in defense (not well, mind you – but we speak of remembering to try). Behind the scenes, my body's brain was telling me: "You're holding something in your hand. Use it, dummy!", so I did. When he took the dagger away, a little of that muscle-memory remained, and I continued to use the off-hand.

Don Duncan Bachen, Rapier Marshal of the Shire of Barren Sands and a member of the Tadcaster Militia, teaches a variation of this trick. Rather than hold the dagger in the manner of a sword -- with the point toward the opponent – a fencer may try a reversed grip, where the dagger blade follows back of the forearm and the point is toward the elbow. Although originally an experiment in remembering off-hand use, this more

defensive style of the dagger can be quite effective in regular fencing. Don Duncan describes this style in an article, ____ (<http:///>).

Since the technique of dagger use helped me to remember the off-hand, it was the first suggestion I made to the new fencer. He replied that he had tried this already, so I suggested hand extension.

Two: Hand Extension

Another trick to recall off-hand use is to hold the secondary arm nearly straight, so that the hand stays just below the direct line-of-sight. This might feel awkward, and the body-mind might not much care for it; but it serves two purposes: *seeing* the hand may remind the conscious mind to use it, and the hand -- now closer to the opponent's blades -- has a chance to deflect those blades while they are still further away from the body.

The fencer I was attempting to help did find this awkward. I don't blame him; I find it awkward also -- but I think it can help, by way of exaggeration, toward finding a happy medium in off-hand use.

Three: The Centered Focus

Having played with him now, I considered how he was fighting, and how he hesitated whenever I threw a shot toward his off-hand. The conscious mind can paralyze the body in martial play if used too much; I wondered if that was the block he was having. My teacher had once suggested to me, as a solution to another problem, that I focus on a place between his neck and chest, right about the center of the collar bone. When I did so, peripheral vision did more than its lion's share of the work -- finding more of his attacks and parries while my sight was fixed in the middle. My conscious mind was occupied, and the body's intelligence freed to respond.

I suggested this idea to the new fencer, and we began another bout. Now his hand moved without pause to deflect my blade in many of my attacks. His eyes were focused on me -- not the sword -- and the body-smarts had taken over.

Four: Look -- No Swords

An idea I have heard of, but never tried, is to set the weapons aside and play-fence with hands only.

Five: The Wrist-brace

An idea I have neither heard of nor tried -- but might be worth a go -- is the use of an orthopedic brace on the secondary hand and wrist. If bound snugly on the wrist (but not so tightly as to hamper circulation), a wrist-brace might serve as another reminder to the brain to use the off-hand. If there is any lurking fear of damage to the off-hand preventing its use, the brace might provide a sense of protection, even simulating the chain-mail gauntlet to some degree. Such braces are available in some pharmacy stores for carpal tunnel relief or athletic support; but as the price is \$10-\$25 and the use quite short-term, I recommend asking around for one to borrow. Use it only in practice, until off-hand use becomes a habit, for it is likely to interfere with calibration (feeling good shots).

Six: Refused Stance

The final idea, which may be used in conjunction with any of the above, is the adoption of a refused stance. The first stance many of us learn is to have the same foot as the

primary arm forward, and the other back; presenting a somewhat slimmer target to the opponent. In a refused stance, the foot of the secondary arm is forward and the primary foot back – a position that puts the secondary hand, and anything in it, in a stronger place for aggressive offense and defense. This might help off-hand use in a natural way, and even tried on its own, be all a new fencer needs for the technique to click.

Addendum

It is now July of AS XXXIX, and many months since I looked at this article. I'm happy to say that the fencer I was assisting late last year has long since gained confidence in his off-hand use and authorized in single epee. Vivat to him.

Now if I can just induce him to start coming to practices again... Watch for a future article on Taking Care of Reality So You Can Get Back to Practicing, Which Is Of Course the Most Important Thing. Or perhaps more simply: Affectionate and Colorful Nicknames Earned While Missing Practices.