

La Misura Nella Scherma (Measure in Fencing)

From Giancarlo Toran, Maestro di Scherma (translated by Tom Leoni)

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Technical articles are always my favorite, although they don't seem to be as popular or to stimulate as much discussion as other kinds. In this piece, I want to discuss the basic principles for understanding measure. I remain ready to answer (with pleasure, time permitting!) any question that you may have on this topic. After this, if the topic proves to be worthy, I'll get more into detail by linking it to specific weapons.

Measure in Fencing

Between time, velocity and measure, measure is the most important factor—said the old masters. Modern masters agree, since the prerequisites for a successful fencing action haven't changed. So, since measure is so important, we need to take a look at what it is and what the best way is to practice its control.

In our discipline, measure is the distance between two opposing fencers. It is a variable distance that depends on many factors. While it can't be measured in centimeters or inches, it must be carefully evaluated, managed and predicted.

One of the first things you'll learn in fencing school is to set yourself in the correct distance to perform an attack. This can be done without moving the feet or legs (i.e. from narrow measure); with a lunge (i.e. from perfect measure) and with an advance (i.e. by advancing once, then lunging). When the opponent is stationary, you must evaluate the distance and decide on the most appropriate movement.

In classical treatises, there are three types of measure for fencing exercises—the three we have just seen. In more recent texts, their number increases to five. With the epee and the saber, you can strike the opponent's extended target with an advance followed by a lunge; with the epee in particular, it is very useful to practice remises from very close measure, almost in a corps a corps. However, all these are pedagogical distinctions; reality is much more complex, and the gradations are virtually limitless. These are just points of reference given to beginners so that they can learn to evaluate measure; but they must be understood with a certain amount of flexibility, in light of the many possible differences in fencers' heights.

In Parise's time, for instance, perfect measure was when two fencers had their weapons in line, with the points passing the opponent's bell guard by approximately four fingers' width. The basic guard was wider back then, and the lunge shorter. Movements were not as fast, since they were based on the idea of the dueling ground rather than the fencing strip—and the dueling ground is unforgiving of mistakes. Today, a more practical point of reference would be standing in guard with the point level with the opponent's bell guard.

Here's a useful exercise. Take a certain measure, for instance by setting yourself in guard, weapon in line, with the point touching the opponent's bell guard (or the bend of his elbow, his chest, or his mid-blade, etc.); then, swap places with the opponent, holding your weapon in first position. One of the two fencers, at this point, should be able to find the same measure—by looking at his opponent, not by using points of reference on the floor of the strip. Lastly, both fencers should place their weapons in line to check whether the measure is again the same.

(What should you look at in this case to make this more successful? This is an interesting question deserving of a thorough answer that is not within the scope of this article.)

Afterwards, it is important to learn to maintain any given measure; when the opponent (or the instructor, or your drilling partner) takes an advancing step, you should retreat one step, and vice-versa, so that the agreed-upon distance remains the same. One of the two takes the initiative, the other follows quickly but always after a short pause: this simple “reaction time” to a visual stimulus takes approximately 2/10 of a second. Checking the measure is an essential part of this exercise. The “leading” partner—i.e. the one deciding whether to advance or retreat—must stop frequently and verify if the distance has remained the same. Otherwise, this becomes a mere leg-exercise not involving the mind.

Maintaining a Certain Measure: Which and Why

If the opponent advances to attack you, wouldn't it be enough to stand as far as possible from him? No, for two good reasons. The first is self-explanatory: it's impossible to retreat to infinity, since the fencing strip is finite. So it's acceptable to retreat, but only enough to avoid receiving the touch. The second reason is not as intuitive: sure, you don't want to receive hits, but you want to deliver them, and to do so you must be close enough to the opponent.

When the opponent stops or does not take the initiative, you must be sufficiently close to him to present a danger to him. OK, but just how close? How far?

It's not a matter of inches (as I've already said), but of safety.

If the opponent attacks, I must have enough time to get away.

The distance I need to do so depends on the velocity employed by my opponent to travel that distance and on the velocity with which I retreat. I must first see the opponent, react to his motion (by which time he'll be already a bit closer), and I must move backward to keep myself out of reach of his attack.

We are already genetically disposed to “feel” this distance and this time. All we need to do is adapt all this to the weapon that acts as an extension of our arm, and to be very alert so that the opponent may not take us by surprise.

Exercise – The opponent performs a straight thrust to my chest (lunging, after one or two advancing steps, depending on his choice), then recovers in a position of invitation. I retreat just enough to avoid the touch (i.e. as little as possible), and perform with a straight thrust upon the opponent's recovery and invitation. The parry should not be employed in this exercise.

To score the touch, I must be ready to quickly move forward after retreating, which requires balance and a good in-guard position with the legs well bent; also, I must retreat as little as possible. If I do this just right and I am skillful at controlling measure, the opponent's point will almost graze me. This play can continue endlessly (which is a great exercise for the legs), if after delivering his attack, the first fencer in turn retreats to prevent being hit and readily delivers his “comeback.” This can be continued until one of the two is able to score a touch. In general, this touch will be scored by the one who's better able to keep his balance and control measure; this fencer will have let the opponent come nearer and fully commit to his attack in the mistaken belief that it would reach the target.

Keeping far is easy and instinctive. Keeping near is more difficult and requires practice.

As you get better, you'll "feel" measure. You'll clearly know when you are in your safety measure (or "misura di controllo") or when you are "inside" the measure.

In the course of a fencing assault, you'll "enter" and "exit" the measure. When you enter (a "perfect" measure similar to what Parise described), you will remain there only for a very short period of time: i.e. only for completing your attack, returning to safety after performing a feint or because the opponent's position or motion is not what you had hoped for.

If I am ready to enter because I myself set up the action, I can begin immediately with the final motion. If it is the opponent who set up the action and I am not ready to enter, I will recognize the opportunity only after some delay, and I'll find it hard to profit from it (unless he hasn't himself profited from it first).

Delay – As I've already mentioned, we are talking about something close to 2/10 of a second for a simple reaction. Hence the importance of the concepts of initiative and provocation.

The initiative belongs to the fencer who moves first; the effective provocation (invitation, action on the blade, feint with either weapon or body) belongs to the fencer entering the measure by his own initiative, or choosing the moment in which, by yielding the initiative to his adversary, the latter can enter.

The narrow control (controllo stretto), at the edge of when you enter into measure, allows for effective provocations. As I have mentioned in another occasion, the tactically-important measures are two: measure of control and measure of action. Out or in; or just out—provided that control is really good.

I have called the edge of the measure "critical zone" or "critical point." There, feints work in the different ways in which they may be used—to attack, to probe, to stop the opponent or make him move as desired. An experienced athlete can place himself on the edge of this critical zone and stay there without losing his nerve.

From that distance, you can keep the opponent under pressure and readily make him pay for his mistakes. You can make him move several times on either side to induce him to make a mistake and to better understand his play.

But what if both fencers are experienced?

With this question we enter the realm of true fencing: champions foresee, make plans and place bets (although they often don't even know they are doing so).

Here's foreseeing. If I move to reach my opponent, who's stationary, I have to evaluate the distance I must travel. But, as soon as I move, he could retreat, making my distance longer; or he could advance, making it shorter. If I advance slowly, he can easily get away. If I attack as quickly as possible, he could foil my action by closing down measure.

However, if I have given him the right signals (i.e. more than once beforehand, planning the responses; or right before the action, deceiving him about my intentions), I can then foresee what he may do.

In any case, I can never be absolutely certain. I must bet on an outcome and take the risk. If I act with resolution, even the wrong action can often give a good result; but if I hesitate, even the right action can become a mistake. Why? Let me use an example.

If I act decisively with an action in countertime (I get in measure feinting an attack to parry his counterattack) and the opponent fails to react, I can still execute the motion of the parry and attack, and my chance to score a touch is still good in spite of my wrong prediction. Unless the “mistake” is due to the opponent’s better strategy, having taken the initiative still leaves me with an advantage.

Also, unless he stops me with an action such as a feint in time, I can be fairly certain that he has not predicted what I would do, which means that the rest of his action will depend on chance and automatic reactions. But if I have predicted the action correctly and perform it hesitatingly as I get into measure, my hesitation may cause me to perform a weak parry or to give him time to do something else that will frustrate my action.

The moral is this: if you have made up your mind about an action, go ahead and do it without looking back. In other words, once you are in measure, actions become “open circuit” and you have no time to evaluate feedback as you would in “closed circuit” actions. There’s a time to elaborate (in wide measure), and there’s a time to act (in short measure or measure of action).

Now we can take a closer look at the details.

If I need to parry or deliver an attack, my effectiveness depends on the speed of both fencers. A lightning-quick attack is harder to parry than a slower one (apart from the so-called false tempo, which is something altogether different).

To “control” means to react after seeing—or more generally, receiving a sensory stimulus—according to a specific “program.” In fencing, this often leads to moving in the same direction as the opponent: if he advances, I retreat and vice-versa, since the fencer who advances is the one in control, in order to then attack from the appropriate measure (and naturally, after meeting the necessary preconditions).

All this means that the relative velocity of an attack (i.e. the one that counts) can be drastically reduced if you move rapidly backwards in the same direction.

For instance, an arrest to the extended target in epee—the weapon in which a difference in time is determined by the chronograph and is minimal: half of a tenth of a second—can be delivered with relative ease, if you are skilled at quickly retreating. This is because the relative velocity of the incoming strike is quite low.

It is important to train the student in this. Sometimes, the eagerness to be the first to arrive leads to attacks delivered too soon with the arm withdrawn—and the student does not have time to angulate, to oppose or to accurately control the point.

The student must be trained to remain calm (as long as his legs are always prompt) when the opponent’s point is close to his body; or to hit a relatively withdrawn target by only reaching it by a few centimeters; a relative velocity close to zero is more than sufficient to avoid a double hit. To seek it, on the other hand, it is necessary to go against the opponent, summing the velocity of both.

The same principles can be applied to parries and attacks. These too require a good control of measure (and therefore of relative velocity).

If my opponent and I are of a different height and speed, the critical zone will not be the same for both. This does not take into consideration the different striking ‘depths’ involved in the advanced targets; these require different skills. I can feel safe when I am at a certain distance, but I may also be too far for my opponent to strike; for this, he will have to get a little nearer.

I will have an advantage if I can keep my opponent between the two critical distances—mine and his. In that measure, I will always be safe, he always vulnerable.

The greatest burden—also in terms of attention, since attention is very burdensome—will be on him. He will have to either keep out of the greater critical distance, or cross as quickly as possible that area where he is the only one in danger.

Height and speed of both fencers determine the critical distances.

In general, the smaller fencer is also the quicker, which somehow makes up for the difference in height. There is something else very important to take into consideration—the psychological element. The underlying factor is the assessment of distance, but this is influenced by a fencer’s anxiety. When experiencing anxiety, fencers tend to feel safe at a distance that is actually greater than necessary, or even to misread distance altogether. It’s kind of like those kids who draw bigger coins the poorer they are. At close measure, the ability to stay calm and relaxed while still ready to react is a great skill; it takes a lot of work—even from other standpoints—to achieve it.

It is clear (or, at least I hope it is), that the first real battle is not made with technical counters—e.g. I parry, you feint and disengage—but with measure. In some instances, both fencers may think they have understood the opponent’s intentions and will enter the measure at the same time; this is actually when technical prowess really counts, and when the two fencers see which of the two has foreseen correctly. Here fencing becomes like a poker-game.

More often, however, the measure is entered after a veritable battle: the one who prevails is the one who had correctly established the exact moment to enter into measure when his adversary was not ready.

So, from measure we have come to tempo; but this is another matter, although it is closely tied to measure.

Giancarlo Toran