

# Broken Plow WMA



Italian Rapier & Sidesword

## Intro to Rapier Student Training Manual

*January 2026 Edition*

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# Preface

## Welcome to Broken Plow WMA's Rapier Program

Our modern system to train in Italian Rapier is rooted in the Venetian masters Capo Ferro, Giganti, and Fabris. While they are our primary sources, we also take other historical rapier and sidesword content as secondary sources. We use modern knowledge of martial arts, kinesiology, sports medicine, and the written assessments of historical content as tertiary sources.

This is to say, we are not purists! We didn't pick a single master and try to follow his writings and plates as if they are gospel. Doing so would ignore historical context & fads, modern knowledge about health & movement, and would ignorantly assume that the masters gave every detail you needed to know away in their writing. That latter point is very important to any revival martial art because we don't have a living lineage that has passed down all of the minutiae that these masters assumed their students already knew. It also wouldn't incorporate the practical means and methods that they used when coaching in the Sala delle Armi (Hall of Arms). That said, there is no bullshido here! We have real reasons for everything we do and they aren't a secret. Our classes are structured with a specific lesson plan in mind. While it is natural for questions to arise, sometimes we will defer answering a question if it fits into an upcoming lesson or postpone it until proper research can be done.

If you are new to Broken Plow, there are some things that you should know. We have a few rules. The first rule is "Don't be a dick!". That rule is so important and universal that it is also the second rule! From there we set our culture's core values: If you break something, say something! You get out what you put in. Don't waste my time, your peers' time, or your own. You are entitled to come and train as part of a larger group. Personal growth is what this thing is all about and the best way to grow is to invest in those around you. The more you lift your training partners up and the more you push them to be their best, the more they will also support and push you!

Remember that learning rapier isn't a race. You aren't getting a certificate or degree. This will never pay your bills and you shouldn't let it stress you like a job. All of our owners, instructors, mentors, and support team are unpaid. We split the bill on our childhood dream come true. You are here to grow as an individual, and Growth is measured against who you were yesterday, last month, last year, etc. You are welcome to compete in officially scored tournaments but please remember: Tournaments are games! Games have rules that try to reward one set of behaviors and punish another. Games are great training tools and games with higher stakes (tournaments) are a great pressure test of a fighter. Winning or placing in a tournament can be impressive and rewarding; however, winning tournaments and glory are not a requirement of personal martial arts development.

You are about to embark on an eight-week course to learn enough fundamentals to join our regular Rapier class. At the end of the eight weeks, you will either be invited to join the regular class or will be put on a reinforcement lesson plan to fill the gaps. At the end of this course you will know enough to get through the first 30-40 mins of any regular class session (warmup and fundamental drills), basic footwork, guard positions, basic thrust and cut attacks, and a few fundamental sparring tactics. We focus on giving you enough of the basics to thrive in a regular multi-level martial arts session.

Many people are intimidated by the multi-level “regular” class. They are usually anxious that they will slow the class down, fall behind, or be a burden. None of these fears are justified. When more experienced students mentor new students, it is a major learning experience for both of them. To truly understand something requires more than the ability to do it well. Understanding comes when you can explain it succinctly, help someone succeed at it, and give people feedback to improve their rendition. By advancing to the regular class, you are helping your upperclassman peers with the next step in their journey.

Lastly, I want to address the fact that this is an adult-oriented training program. We allow some older minors to participate but the class isn’t designed around them. If you are the parent of a youth in our class you need to be present for class! You don’t have to participate but you do need to be in the room and attentive. None of our team can replace you as a parent and we want you to maintain that role actively during class. Our class isn’t designed to protect your minor from adult language, thoughts, or context. Don’t get me wrong, we won’t allow your kid to be harassed, exploited, or abused! You have to decide if your kid is mature enough for this environment and you must accept the additional labor that may come with your child being exposed to an environment that is designed around adults who are off the clock. We are a social club with a beer tap after all.

Welcome home,

**JAZZY**

Jonathan “Jazzy” Bucci  
Partner  
Head of Italian Rapier & Sideword

## Our Relationship to Other Organizations

Many people ask us about other groups and styles of enjoying historical or European swords. I'll touch on the most common ones briefly. Think of it as a scale.

**LARP** is Live Action Role Play. This often has elements of foam swords, magic, and more. Some members come from that world but we find this has the least overlap.

**Boffer Fighting** is also foam swords but is much more sporty/combative. While it may take skill and stamina, it is not really a martial art.

**SCA** is the Society for Creative Anachronism. This is where we get a lot of cross participation. The SCA is a longstanding organization of people who get together to live the best part of medieval times without the worst parts. They have a lot of fighting and some of those fighters are incredible. They do not organize themselves into structured martial arts classes, rather they train in groups. These can be as organized as us but they often are not. This group also focuses on dressing up and pageantry in a way that we don't. If this sounds interesting, we would love to give you more information.

**Olympic Sport Fencing** and **Classical Sport Fencing** are sports and not martial arts. The skill required to compete at the olympic level is immense but that isn't the same thing as training for a fight. We get people who are former sport fencers and also one or two who do both. Sport Fencing brings in many athletic people who have a good understanding of timing. That said, sport fencing has evolved as a game to the point where it is massively disconnected from a real fight and the rules of an actual duel.

**HEMA** is Historical European Martial Arts. HEMA is a subset of Western Martial Arts. The difference is one of community and organization. The HEMA Alliance is a non-profit that helps non-profit clubs get insurance, bank accounts, tax exemption, and more. We are a for-profit business and so we can't be a subsidiary of HEMAA. Individual members can join. Jazzy even sat on the HEMAA Governing Council for a term to work on insurance and safety policy. From a communal standpoint, HEMA is the name of an international community that studies and competes WMA together. There are people who don't claim to be HEMA but simply WMA. We feel that Plow is WMA first and HEMA associated. The owners of Plow have staffed, run, and represented the HEMA community on the national and international stage. There are also other HEMA clubs in the Pittsburgh area with a variety of experience and programs.

# Lesson 1: Introduction to Footwork & The Sword

Footwork is the first thing that every fencer starts with. We also need to talk about the sword itself. The first lesson is about both of these things. You also learn the Salute in Eight.

## Fighter's Stance

A fighter's stance must be grounded. Your front foot is pointing directly down-range in the direction of your opponent. Your front knee is aligned to hinge in that same direction. Your back foot is turned 60-90 degrees to the outside of your front foot. Your stance is wide enough that your heels are able to pass one another.



In your Defensive Stance, your weight is over your back leg. This has the effect of leaning away from your opponent. In your Offensive Stance, your arm/sword extends and then you shift your weight to be over your front foot.



In a Presented Stance, your sword arm and leg are forward. You are presenting your sword. In a Refused Stance, your sword arm and leg are back, with your parry or dagger hand and leg forward.



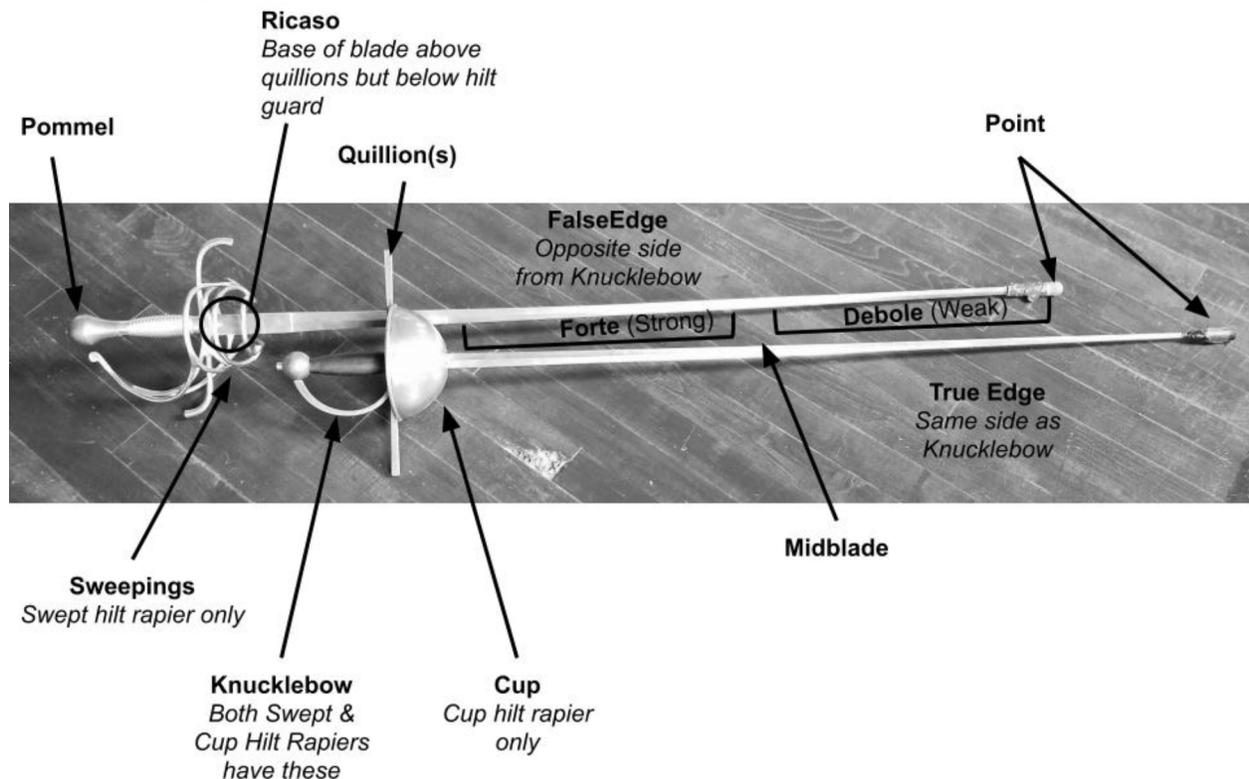
## Passare

The Passare is a cross-passing step. You start and end in your defensive stance. To advance, you bring your rear foot forward (without turning the foot) and place it in an inverted position in front of your front foot. To retreat, you pull your front foot back and invert it behind your rear foot.

## Simple Step

The simple step is actually not as simple as the Passare but it is the simplest one you can use tactically. Starting in a defensive stance, you shift your weight slightly forward and slightly raise the front foot. Once your front foot starts to touch the ground, use the hip-flexor muscle in your rear leg to pull that leg forward to reinstate your fighter's stance.

## Parts of the Sword



## How to Hold The Sword

Hold your sword firmly but gently. Think of holding a baby bird. If you squeeze too hard, the bird will have a very short day. If you don't hold firm, the bird will get away. You must hold your sword firmly but without fatiguing yourself from committing muscles unnecessarily.

Hold out your hand like you plan to shake someone else's. Place the sword in your hand and curl the middle, ring, and pinky finger around the grip. Allow the index finger to point forward but keep it inside the guard, along the ricasso. The pommel will rest in the middle of the base of your palm.



# Lesson 2: Being Offensive

This class will start by reviewing the footwork and then introducing the upper body warmup.

## Four Primary Guards

These four guards are working their way around clockwise.

Prima has the knucklebow at 1 o'clock, as if you just finished drawing the sword.

Secunda has the knucklebow at 3 o'clock, protecting your outside.

Terza has the knucklebow at 6 o'clock, mostly as a transitional position.

Quarta has the knucklebow at 9 o'clock.

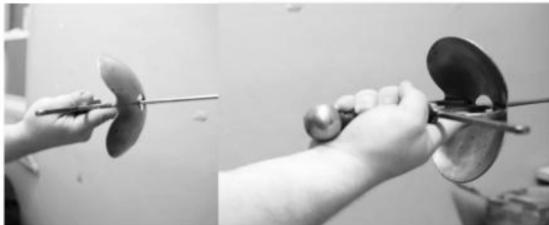
Quarta Inside has the blade across your body from your hand, protecting your inside.

Quarta Outside has the blade in line with your hand, protecting the outside like Secunda.

**Prima** - Palm to the outside as if drawing sword



**Quarta** - Palm up



**Secunda** - Palm down

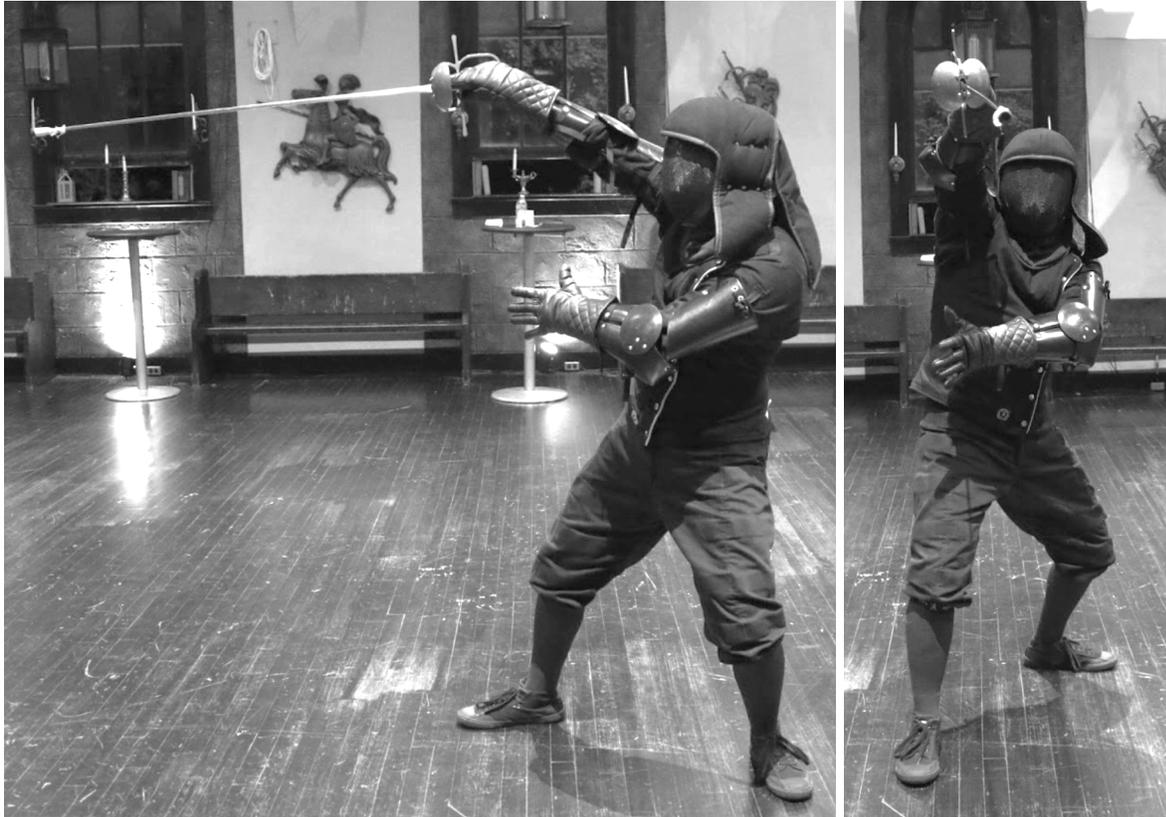


**Terza**- Palm to the inside

*The next two pages have detailed full-body examples of each guard.*

## Prima

*The guard you first draw your sword to. Threatens the face of the opponent.*



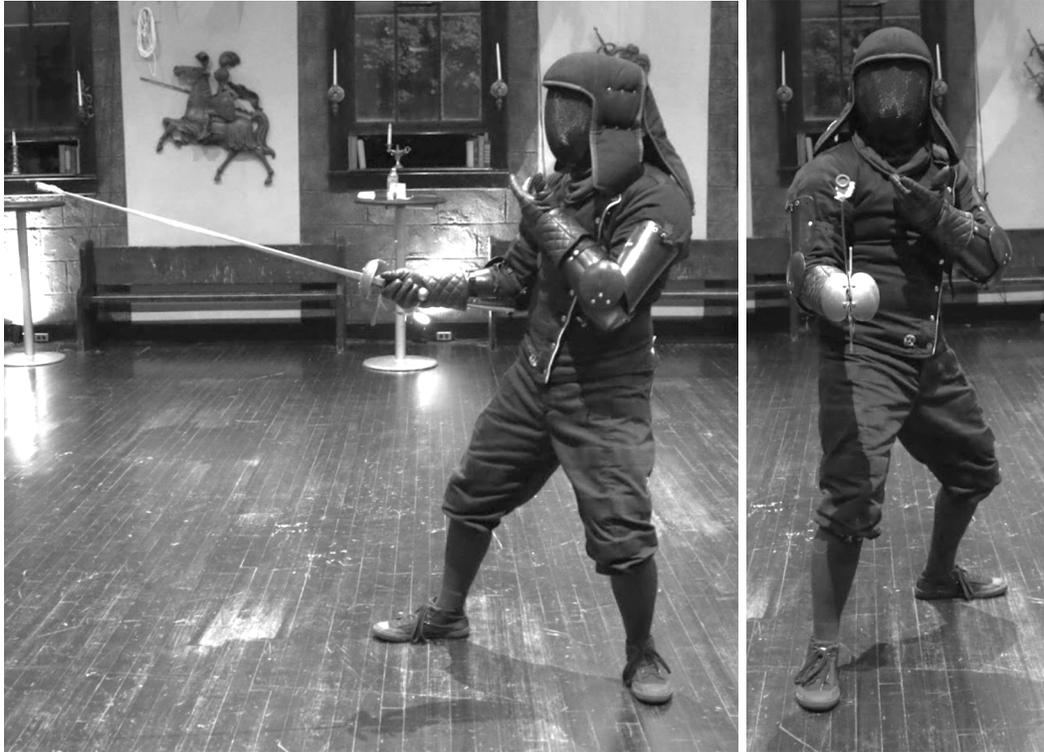
## Secunda

*The palm-down guard that keeps their blade clear to the outside.*



## Terza

*Transitional guard that is neutral in the center. Threatens the face.*



## Quarta

*The palm up guard with two main variants...*



*Quarta Inside*

*Targets opposite shoulder  
Keeps blade clear to inside*

*Quarta Outside*

*Targets mirror shoulder  
Keeps blade clear to outside*

## Structure Drill

This drill is about better understanding your stance and the concept of Path to Ground. Path to Ground is a fairly universal martial arts concept that essentially means that energy that comes into your body from the front needs a place to exit the body safely. This is typically done via the back heel. This is helpful when dealing with Newton's Third Law of Motion: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, when you hit someone there are equal forces being sent back at you. With proper structure we are able to absorb much of that energy and send it into the ground via our foot. When you have good structure, you reduce the risk of getting injured when someone hits you because the forces have somewhere to go. Good structure reduces the likelihood of whiplash when hit in the head, for example.

# Lesson 3: Measure & Targeting

This class will begin with the footwork, upper body warmup, and Salute in Eight. Then we will review the parts of the sword and the four guards.

## Measure

Measure is the concept of understanding distance and what options you have for striking at your current distance. Let's explore measure from the shortest to the longest measure.

- Arm Measure                    *misura braccia*                    *misura strettissima*  
   *measure of the arm*                    *the smallest measure*
- Hinge Measure                    *misura de la piede*                    *misura stretta*  
   *measure of the foot*                    *the small measure*
- Lunge Measure                    *misura larga*  
   *the large measure*
- Demi Passatta                    *misura largaissima*  
   *the largest measure*
- Passatta                    *this action isn't a single measure because*  
   *it requires a second step to complete*

## Practice the form of measure!

Practice the initial measures (arm, lean, and lunge) regularly. They naturally go into each other so we often drill them in this four-part sequence!

### Ready



### Arm



### Hinge



### Lunge



# Stopping Power vs Lethal Force

In a fight you have two parallel goals:

1. Avoid being wounded, especially mortally.
2. Stop the other person's ability to aggress you, which can include wounding or killing them.

"Don't get dead!" is common advice for young fencers. We want to avoid putting ourselves in situations where the other person has an advantage over us. We are reasonably cautious but we also must focus on stopping them. This drives our targeting!

An arterial wound will bleed fast. Without intervention a person can bleed out from an arterial cut or puncture in as little as 2 minutes. If you have ever been in a time bout...you'll know that even thirty seconds is a long time. These targets are what we would consider highly lethal but they don't always have a lot of stopping power.

In a conflict in the 1890s between the US Navy and the Moro Tribesmen of the Philippines, the Navy found that their double action .38 revolvers were not very effective against the tribesmen and their Kris machete-like weapons. Often men who were already minutes from dying of a gunshot wound (or several) would make it to the troops and hack at them with the long knives. This triggered a commission that eventually led to the creation of the famous Browning 1911 Semi-Auto pistol that was used in US military service for nearly a century. We also saw anecdotal examples of this during the initial spread of drugs like PCP and Bath Salts. Stopping Power is defined as the ability to stop an aggressor from continuing to attack you.

In Rapiers, we talk about targets as having Stopping Power, Lethal Force, or both. Here are some examples.

## Stopping Power Targets

- Brain Stem
- Brain via Eyes or Chin
- Sword Shoulder
- Sword Arm
- Heart
- Spine
- Knee

## Lethal Force Targets

- Brain Stem
- Brain via Eyes or Chin
- Heart
- Lungs
- Jugular Artery
- Brachial Artery
- Radial Artery
- Femoral Artery
- Lower Guts (aka Juicy Bits)

You'll notice that there are many lethal targets that just aren't as practical in a fight. Focus on targets that can be reached consistently without worrying about pesky bones or long death sequences. Some stopping power targets are simply a great way to allow you to follow up for the kill with less risk.

# Lesson 4: Lines of Attack & Parry Drill

This class will begin with footwork, upper body warmup, and the Salute in Eight. We will do a quick review of the last few weeks, focusing on Measure and Targeting from last week. By this point you should be confident in the names of the four guards, offensive/defensive stance, and presented/refused stance.

## Lines of Attack

When we break down incoming thrusts, they are essentially coming to one of the four quadrants. Upper Outside, Lower Outside, Upper Inside, and Lower Inside targets are arrayed around your body.

Closing a line refers to blocking the ability for the opponent to be able to strike that quadrant.

Constraining a line refers to reducing the ability for the opponent to be able to strike that quadrant. At times, you constrain a line with your sword so that you are better poised to close it if they decide to attack. Other times you will close one line with your sword and constrain the other quadrant on that same side with your parry hand.

## Using Your Parry Hand

Up until now, you have probably noticed us place our spare hand in specific places. Perhaps you have even tried to mimic us. We do this when we strike along a line we have closed and we want to prevent our opponent from easily disengaging from our blade and striking at the other quadrant on that side.

As a practical rule, use the following parry hand positions to help constrain their next logical option...

<b>Sword</b>	<b>Parry Hand</b>
Upper Right	Lower Right
Lower Right	Upper Right
Upper Left	Lower Left
Lower Left	Upper Left

## Assaulto: The Parry Drill

An Assaulto is a fancy word for a solo form drill. Many asian martial arts call these Kata. The plural form is Assaulti.

The Parry Drill is a simple flow drill that we used to run through the guards before the main content of each class. It gives us a chance to check in on our form and make solid corrections. The Parry Drill is written out in Appendix I.

## Low Guards

The Parry Drill unveils a few guard variants that you are not familiar with. We use Low Secunda to protect the leading leg. We use Low Prima to protect the rear leg. Low Quarta can also protect the inside leg, but we do not use it in the drill. Protecting against shots to the knee is an important skill, especially for tall people.

## Withdrawn Quarta Forearm Void

Another strange parry we talk about is Withdrawn Quarta. We break our rules around keeping the wrist straight in this void because it is important to get our sword arm away from the attacker. We also aggressively push over with our parry hand to clear their sword from the line. This sets us up for a powerful rotational strike into Secunda. Disabling sword arms allows opponents to torture and easily kill you. Learning to protect the forearm and wrist is a critical fight skill.

## Lesson 5: Find & Gain

This class will begin with footwork, upperbody warmup, the Salute in Eight, and the Parry Drill. We will do a quick review of the last few weeks, focusing on lines of attack/quadrants and the parry hand. By this point you should be confident in the parts of the sword.

### The Three Mechanical Advantages in Secunda and Quarta

When you attempt to thrust at someone in Secunda or Quarta, there are three advantages you should strive for.

Leverage	The point where your blade crosses your opponent is closer to the strong of your blade and closer to the weak of theirs. This is not to say that you should have the cross point deep down your sword, only that you should have the advantage of leverage.
Edge in Contact	The point where your blades meet should be along the true or or false edge, never the flat. This makes your sword rigid against theirs.
Blade on Top	Your blade should be above their blade. This best lines up the Muscles in your body to exploit the mechanical advantage.

### Find & Gain

As you enter into attack distance with your opponent, you should be finding a slight mechanical advantage. Once you have it, exploit it by increasing that advantage as you move to strike. First you find the mechanical advantages and then gain those advantages. The strike must be at the apex of the gain, before your opponent is able to move away from your advantage to one of their own.

To drill this, we start so far out of distance that we must step in to even begin to cross swords at the very tip. This first step in is the find. Then extend the arm, maybe with a simple step if you need, to gain the advantage. Then strike in lean or lunge measure. This should happen as three steps to practice this.

# Lesson 6: Cavazione

This class will begin with footwork, upper body warmup, the Salute in Eight, and the Parry Drill. We will do a quick review of the last few weeks, focusing on Find & Gain from last week. By this point you should be confident in the measures in both English and Italian.

## Cavazione

A Cavazione is a transition from secunda on one side of your opponent's blade to quarta on the other side, OR the opposite. This is a disengage action where your sword passes below their sword. This can be done as you find and gain to strike on the other side OR in response to the opponent pushing your blade online.

A Cavazione should always end in an attempt to thrust your opponent. The only point in changing guards is to use that momentary advantage to strike. Many fencers use this as a fidget and this can be a bad habit.

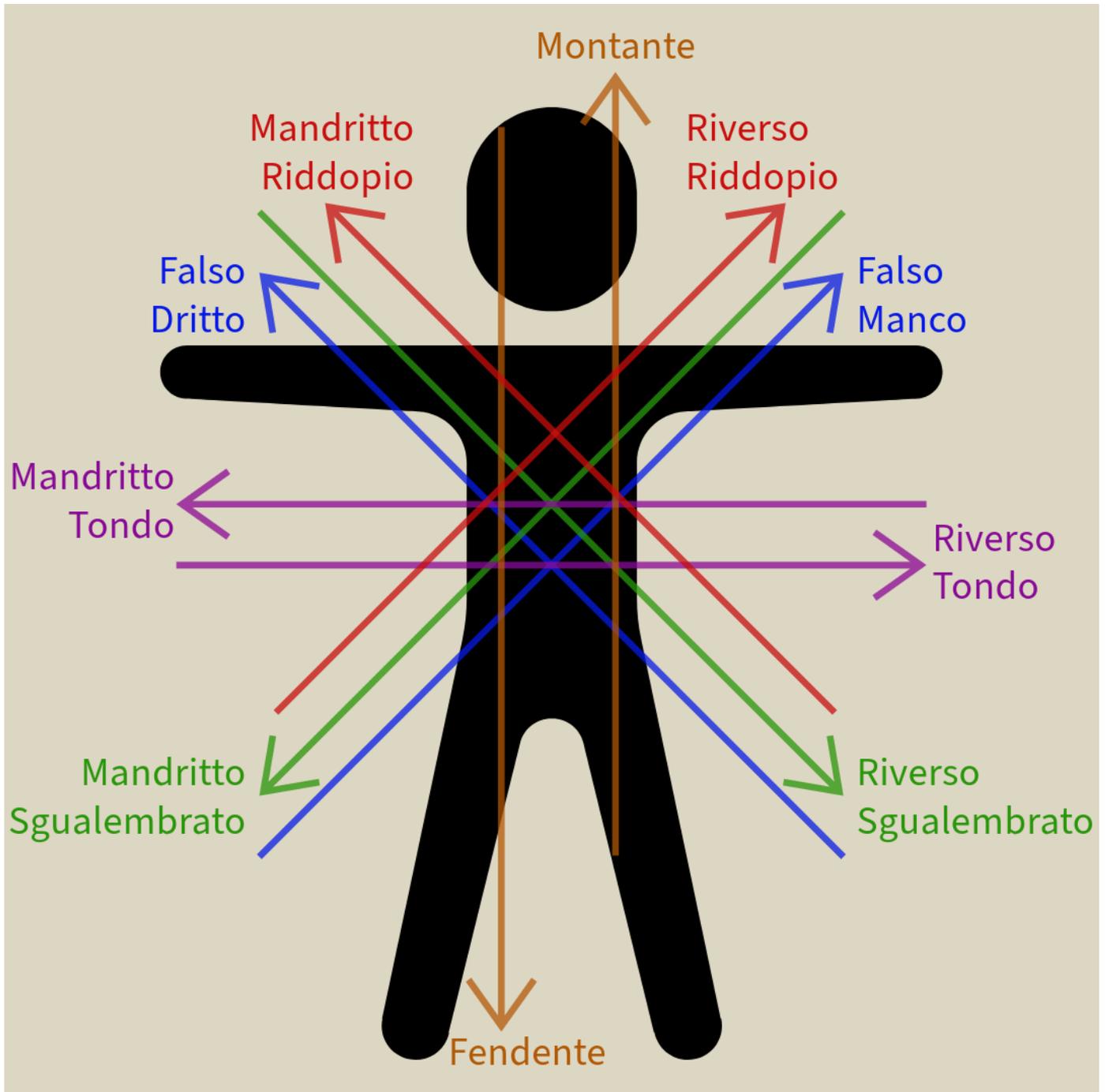
## Defending Against Cavazione

The simplest way to defend against Cavazione is to simply change from secunda to quarta or quarta to secunda while your opponent is attempting to pass below your blade. As you transition, you must move quickly to strike before they abort or outpace you.

There is a fancy counter-cavazione that we will study in the regular class.

## Lesson 7: Basic Cuts

This class will begin with footwork, upper body warmup, the Salute in Eight, and the Parry Drill. We will do a quick review of the last few weeks, focusing on cavazione. By this point you should be confident in the placement of your parry hand as you move from guard to guard.

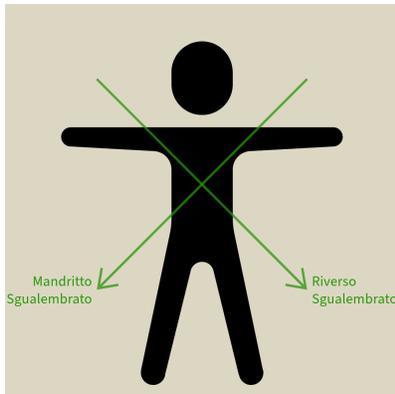
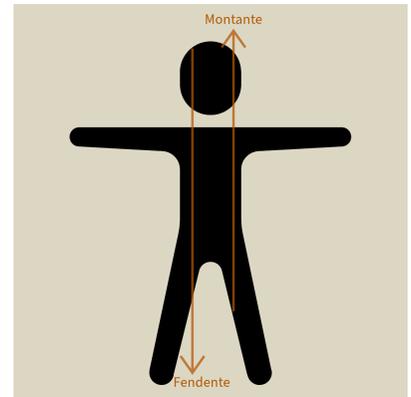


The names and techniques from our system of cutting come from the Bolognese tradition of Side Sword. We have found this the most complete and helpful Italian system for this purpose.

## Fendente & Montante

Fendente is a true edge cut straight down from above, usually to the head. Mandritto Fendente is the same cut but to your sword side of the opponent's head, usually at the shoulder. Reverso Fendente is on the parry hand side of their head.

Montante is a false edge cut from above.



## Sgualebrato

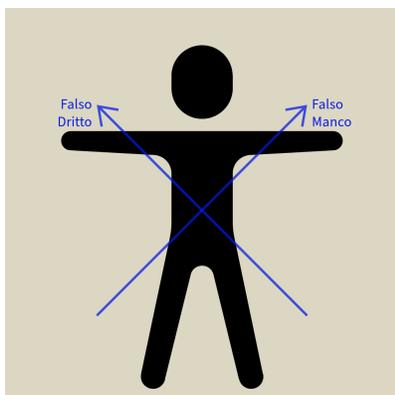
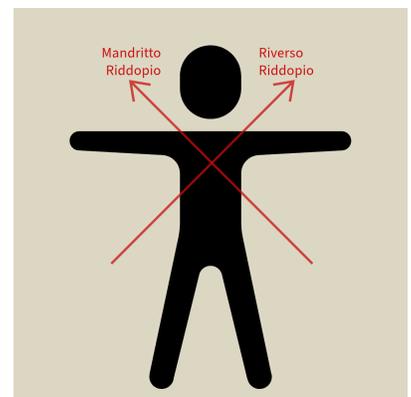
Mandritto Sgualebrato is a true edge cut that starts from your upper outside and cuts to your lower inside.

Reverso Sgualebrato is a true edge cut that starts high on your inside and cuts to low on your outside.

## Riddopio

Mandritto Riddopio is a true edge cut from your lower outside to your upper inside.

Reverso Riddopio is a true edge cut from your lower inside to your upper outside.



## Falso Manco & Falso Dritto

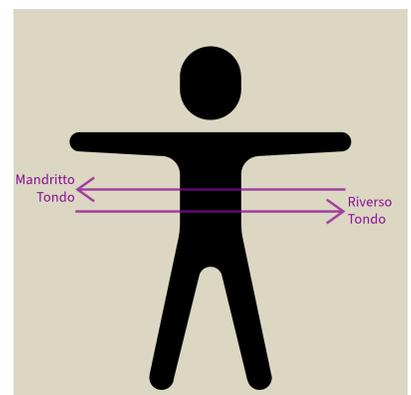
Montante is a false edge strike straight up from below.

Falso Dritto is a false edge strike that starts low on your outside and cuts to high on your inside.

Falso Manco is a false edge strike that starts on your lower inside and cuts to high on your outside.

## Tondo

Mandritto Tondo is a true edge strike that runs parallel to the ground from your outside to your inside, normally this targets the lower belly region. Reverso Tondo is a true edge strike that runs parallel to the ground from your inside to your outside, normally this targets the lower belly region.



# Lesson 8: Review & Light Slow Sparring

This class will begin with footwork, upper body warmup, the Salute in Eight, and the Parry Drill. We will do a quick review of the last few weeks, focusing on cuts from last week. By this point you should be confident in Find & Gain and Cavazione.

## The Purpose of Sparring

Sparring refers to unscripted or improvisational training. It can take many forms and we will discuss some of those forms below. First we must address the purpose of it and why everyone must participate in it. Sparring is separate from competition! You must train the mental and physical triggers that are part of executing a technique correctly. Solo and paired drills simply cannot replace this kind of training.

In Competition, you are fighting selfishly to win a match. There is nothing wrong with this and it certainly adds pressure to your technique. Competition is generally considered pressure testing and is not the same as sparring. Consider it the next step up from sparring, if you like. You are not required to compete to grow in our program; however, you are required to spar.

## Slow Sparring or Light Sparring

Working with a limited script of techniques or no script at all is a great way to train your reactions. The purpose of going slow is so that you have time to see what the trigger is, formulate how to react, and then work on the best reaction. If you panic and do it wrong, you take the “hit” and your partner gives you the same thing again until you can work through the best solution. Part of Slow & Light Sparring is that it is done in very limited gear. Usually this is with only eye, throat, and groin protection. Think of it as a goofy slow-mo fight.

## Full Contact Sparring

Full Contact Sparring doesn't mean brutal fighting. It means that you wear the correct protective equipment to work at medium or full speed. Speeding things up really helps refine those triggers. Slow sparring can help you work through the right decisions but it doesn't let you embody the reactions. Full Sparring is designed to do this. It doesn't mean that you have to hit hard, just that you need to hit intentionally and with at least the required minimum force to execute the techniques. The difference between Full Contact Sparring and Competition is intention.

## Sparring & Competition Rulesets

Sparring Games with special rulesets (regardless of how impractical the rules in a real fight) are a great way to teach specific lessons. They will bring out the fencing and reactions that an instructor wants to work on. Competitions are the same thing, where rules reward specific fencing that the event would like to encourage with points. Be better at our thing and win!

# Warmup & Drill Sequences

## Footwork Warmup

- Simple Step Advance      Start in a defensive stance, facing downrange.  
With the right foot forward go down, turn, and come back.  
Then with the left foot forward go down, turn, and come back.
- Simple Step Retreat      Start in a defensive stance, with your back facing downrange.  
With the right foot forward go down, turn, and come back.  
Then with the left foot forward go down, turn, and come back.
- Passare      Start in a defensive stance, facing downrange.  
Right foot forward, advance down and retreat back.  
Repeat a second time on right foot.  
Then left foot forward, advance down and retreat back.  
Repeat a second time on the left foot.
- Lunge in Three Steps      Start in a defensive stance, facing downrange.  
Right foot forward: Arm, hinge, and lunge as three actions.  
Recover forward. Continue all the way down.  
Turn and repeat this with the left foot forward on the return.
- Lunge Smoothly      With good arm, hinge, lunge order, perform a smooth lunge.  
Right foot forward on the way down.  
Left foot forward on the way back.

# Upper Body Warmup

This warmup is a great way to prepare back and core muscles for rapier training.

- Profile Lifts                      Start with feet together, standing sideways.  
Lift the sword out to your side on the call of the number.  
Lower the sword when “hut” is called.
- Squared Lifts                      Start with feet together, standing facing inward.  
Lift the sword straight in front of that arm’s shoulder.  
Lower the sword with the “hut” is called.
- Defensive Ready  
to DefensivePrima                      Start in a defensive stance with the sword at your side in the.  
ready position. When called, transition from Defensive  
Ready to Defensive Prima by swinging the sword from  
the ready position to Defensive Prima.
- Defensive Secunda  
to Offensive Quarta  
the inside  
inside                      Start in a defensive stance with the sword in secunda.  
When called, transition to offensive hinged quarta targeting  
line. Focus on the sword entering the space first and taking  
your time.
- Defensive Terza  
to Offensive Prima                      Start in a defensive stance with the sword in terza.  
When called, transition to offensive hinged Prima.  
Focus on the sword entering the space first and  
taking your time.
- Defensive Quarta  
to Offensive Secunda                      Start in a defensive stance with the sword in Quarta.  
When called, transition to offensive hinged secunda.  
Focus on the sword entering the space first and  
taking your time.

## Salute in Eight

<b>Setup</b>	Ready position (sheathed) with feet together and knees straight.
<b>One</b>	Draw-swing the sword to secunda.
<b>Two</b>	Raise the quillons to be in front of your eyes.
<b>Three</b>	Lower the sword in a quarta salute directly in front of you.
<b>Four</b>	Raise the quillons to be in front of your eyes.
<b>Five</b>	Extend the sword in terza-quarta.
<b>Six</b>	Raise the quillons to be in front of your eyes.
<b>Seven</b>	Extend the sword in secunda-terza.
<b>Eight</b>	Return the sword to the ready position (sheathed).

## Parry Drill

<b>Prima</b>	Parry hand to low outside
<b>Quarta Inside</b>	Parry hand to low inside
<b>Quarta Outside</b>	Parry hand to low outside
<b>Low Secunda</b>	Parry hand to high outside
<b>Withdrawn Quarta</b>	Parry hand to middle outside
<b>Low Prima</b>	Parry hand to high inside
<b>Secunda</b>	Parry hand to low outside

# Acknowledgements & References

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## References

This manual is written and produced by Pittsburgh Sword Fighters, LLC under our brand Broken Plow Western Martial Arts. Our program is our own and has been synthesized from the following sources. No claim of accurate representation or firm adherence to any of these systems are claimed. This reference section is not intended to be an academic format, but simply to honor the sources of our study, the translators who made it accessible, and other thought leaders who have come before/alongside to act as a compass on this journey.

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