



# Fencing Etiquette

## INTRODUCTION

Fencing etiquette is the rules and customs, which are applied to the behaviour of students of Historical Swordsmanship. It is essential in the study of the art because it is the spirit within the art itself. It is also important because Historical Swordsmanship with either rapier or other period weapon was the purview of the gentlemen of the period, and as such, for an accurate interpretation of the art of Historical Swordsmanship the participants should always act in a manner which befits the ideals of the period gentleman. That is not to say that what we of the modern era now term Historical Swordsmanship is solely the purview of gentlemen, both ladies and gentlemen take an active and essential part in the modern expression of the art.

Such spirit and ideals are fundamental to the approach and performance of the student. If the student masters the concepts behind the spirit of Historical Swordsmanship and applies them to his approach to studying, then he will perform in an honourable fashion, and through such performance become known as a gentleman. If the student does not accept the concepts behind the spirit of Historical Swordsmanship in his study, he will not consider performing in an honourable fashion to be important, and as such will never attain true mastery of Historical Swordsmanship. Thus through his martial skill he may win, but he is not able to aspire to the higher ideals of Historical Swordsmanship and only gains notoriety for his efforts.

This document is designed to educate the new student in the manners and courtesy of the art of fence, and bring to light the importance of such concepts for the more experienced fencer. It is hoped that through this document an appreciation of the concepts, ideals and spirit that imbues Historical Swordsmanship will seed itself into those who read it and an acceptance of the importance of such concepts to Historical Swordsmanship, Western Martial Arts and life in general.

### The Code

*"The accumulated collection of written and unwritten rules and customs, as well as the traits, characteristics, philosophy and behaviour of the ideal swordsperson ... loosely and generally referred to as the code. As in the code of chivalry or the code duello." (Maestro Evangelista, 2000)*

*"...It's more what you would call a set of Guidelines" (Pirates of the Caribbean, 2003)*

The code which fencers follow is essential to their attitude, and the approach to their study. It is this code which sets out modes of suitable behaviour both on and off the piste. This code of etiquette must be integral to the fencer's mindset as it sets out how they will behave. It is through this code of etiquette that Historical Swordsmanship gains much of its flavour, and as such it is greatly important. It is essential that the code be considered both when actively participating in Historical Swordsmanship and in general in the wider world. This is because without the use of the code in everyday life, the code will never really become a part of the student, and will seem artificial and unnecessary.

This code goes far beyond good sportsmanship because it is not only applied while actively participating in Historical Swordsmanship but also at all times before and after. The fencer must act with courtesy to their opponents before and after any exchange because it is important that an opponent is respected, thus general manners are essential. This involves acting in a congenial manner toward all that are present, and not just one's opponents. This is because Historical Swordsmanship is an art that deals with weapons. This means that higher levels of behaviour are necessary to prevent careless acts which could result in injuries or even death. It is also within these levels of behaviour that the elements of safety, which are vital to fencing, are instilled.

## Before The Class Starts

### - Show up On Time for your Class

This means turning up at least **15 minutes** before the class starts so that you are ready and settled before the class begins, that your equipment is ready and you are outfitted with what you need to use for class.

Monday Classes: Class begins with Salute at 7:45pm - Class ends with Salute at 9:45pm

### - Come to Class with all of the Proper Equipment

If you are taking a class on rapier and dagger, be sure you have both a rapier and a dagger. If your class requires protective gear, be sure you have it. This does not mean that a beginning student needs to provide this equipment from day one, but should obtain it when they are able once they have decided that they wish to further their studies past the first few weeks.

### - Check your Equipment

All equipment should be checked before it is packed for class, and when it is unpacked when you get home. However, whenever equipment is taken out of your bag, you should always do a safety inspection of that equipment before you use it.

If you are lending someone some equipment for use during your class, it is **your responsibility** to check it is safe **before** lending that equipment to anyone for any purpose

If you are borrowing some equipment either from the Academy or from an individual, it is **your responsibility** to check that the equipment is safe **before** you use it for any purpose.

If you are unsure as to how to check any piece of equipment, **ask the instructor before you use it.**

### - Turn off your mobile phone

Do this at the very beginning of class. Obviously, those people who have a need to keep their phones on (doctors on call, husbands whose pregnant wives are expecting soon, etc.) are an exception, in these cases the student should always inform the instructor of this first. But in general, there is nothing more distracting for the instructor to have his train of thought interrupted by the ring of a mobile phone.

### - Give it your all

You owe it to yourself, your partner and your instructor to give all of your attention and commitment to what you're doing in class. Execute all of your actions in earnest: all of your attacks on target with intent and all of your parries as if you were defending from a real attack. That doesn't mean everything needs to be full speed; that means you perform all techniques with your full mental and physical attention.

## During the Class

- **Never Talk when the Instructor is Talking**

There are certain times when conversations naturally happen in class—usually when students are paired off and performing drills to their own time. However, when you hear the instructor addressing the class, you **stop talking immediately**.

- **Show Respect to your Equipment**

Avoid dropping your weapons and other equipment. While everyone occasionally will drop something, I am amazed at how little respect some people show their weapons. Besides the distracting noise of swords and bucklers hitting the ground, do you really want to treat your equipment this way? Respect for your equipment also means regular inspection to be sure that it is safe and undamaged.

- **Never Give Instruction to Other Students in the Class**

**This isn't your class**, regardless of your level of experience; the students are paying for the instructor's time, not yours. While you might need to talk your partner through some drills, really avoid the temptation to act as a private tutor. However, if the instructor has specifically asked you to take a newer student through some work, you can show them what they need to do, but do not go beyond what the instructor has asked for, and do not show any other students this work until specifically told to do so by the instructor.

- **Remember the Student / Teacher Relationship**

This is something that seems to be overlooked by one or two students in every class. No matter what your experience as any form of martial artist, if you are in someone else's class you are the student. Except for your choice on whether or not to take the class, the student-teacher relationship **is not a democracy**.

- **Remember the purpose of questions**

You are **not** in class to show everyone how smart you are, to stump the instructor, or to expose supposed "flaws" in the style being taught.

Ask questions that are pertinent and will help you understand the material. If you don't like the instructor, don't like the style being taught, or have disagreements with his interpretation of the style, the time to bring it up is after class. (If you don't like the instructor or the style, why are you in the class in the first place?)

One particularly annoying type of "question" is pointing out a perceived flaw in a system by "discovering" a counter to a technique. Every technique has a counter and finding it is not finding a flaw in the system. If you are honestly curious about a counter to a technique you've just learned (for example, "How do I counter the cavazione di tempo you just showed us?"), by all means ask.

However, if you know the counter, don't interrupt the class just so you can tell everyone what it is. This is a topic for after class discussion.

## **During Class Drills**

### **- Respect your Drilling Partner**

You should always maintain proper fencing etiquette with your partner. Give your full attention to your partner when drilling and give a respectful salute when appropriate. This also means that you *perform any necessary hygiene* before coming to class—a grappling class with a partner who smells like a garbage dump and feels like a salamander is a truly awful experience. And while not quite as obnoxious, a smelly or dirty sword-partner also is an unpleasant experience.

### **- Always Remember that Safety is Your Responsibility**

You must always act so that you are not taking unreasonable risks for either your partner or yourself. Not only must you not endanger your partner; you must not allow him to endanger you, and for that matter, you should not allow dangerous behaviour to go on around you without speaking up. Besides your health and that of your fellow fencers, the well-being and reputation of our WMA community could be significantly harmed if someone was seriously injured (or worse) at an event.

### **- Perform the Drills in the Method Demonstrated by the Instructor**

This is a problem that I encounter very often, and it deserves a few words. Always remember that if you have confidence in the instructor (which is presumably why you signed up for his class), you should also have confidence in the pedagogical material he is presenting. Failing to do so can create a number of problems.

### **- Don't Modify the Actions of the Drill**

Besides being highly disrespectful to the instructor, this is discourteous to your partner, whose learning might be hindered by your modification. It is also potentially dangerous, since the reaction to the modified drill could result in an action unanticipated by either fencer. I have found that the majority of people who modify drills do so because they feel the action shown by the instructor is something too basic that they already know

### **- Don't Modify the Speed of the Drill**

If the instructor says "slow," slow it should be. Generally, there is a sound pedagogical reason behind his recommendation--or even one of basic safety. Don't second-guess him.

### **- Don't "Win" When you are Supposed to Take the Point**

This is perhaps the worst infraction of all, and one borne of simple machismo. If you are the one that is supposed to take the point in the drill, it looks really "unprofessional" to improvise a counter so that you score the point instead. If you can't accept that taking a point is a part of learning, maybe fencing is not for you. Besides, your turn to give the point in the drill will come next (if it hasn't already). In any case, this is something to be avoided at all costs.

## **During Open Exchanges**

- **Try to Fence with All Other Fencers, and Encourage Others to do the Same**

Do not spend the entire time available to you for Open Exchange with the same fencer. Open Exchange is a way for you to improve your skills, and test techniques that you have learned during drills in a more 'realistic' environment. If you only fence with a small number of people you will learn how to fence against their style and/or techniques, and will make you a limited fencer. If you spend time fencing as many people as possible you will find that your skills and techniques become more widely applicable, which you will find useful when fencing students outside of the Academy.

- **Always Salute Your Partner**

At the beginning of each bout of Open Exchange, every student should salute their partner. At the end of the Open Exchange every student should first salute their partner, then remove their mask, and then shake the hand of their partner to thank them for their participation in the bout.