**Medieval Swordsmanship**

**ES 186**

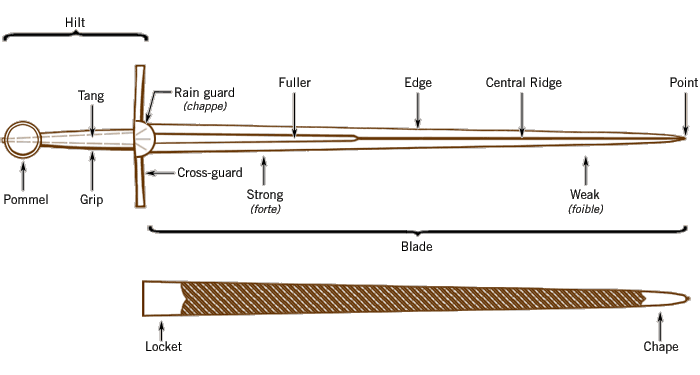
**Lesson 1 – The Stance and The Step, The Grip and The Cut**

* Introduction to the Western Martial Arts
* Anatomy of the Longsword
* Foundations of Swordsmanship
* The Stance
* The Step
* The Grip
* The Cut
* Footwork and Movement
* Advancing pass
* Gathering pass
* Slope pass
* Compass pass

# The Western Martial Arts

* The goal of this course is to introduce you to the study of the medieval longsword based on the 14th and 15th century German tradition, specifically the teachings of **Johannes Liechtenauer**, Grandmaster of the German school of fencing
* The study of medieval longsword, poleaxe, sword and buckler and the like are all part of the **Western Martial Arts (WMA)** or the study of armed and unarmed combat as practiced in Medieval and Renaissance Europe and Britain as opposed to the *Eastern* martial arts that most of us are familiar with (karate, kung-fu, tae kwon do, etc.)
* Unlike the eastern arts, we lack an unbroken tradition of instruction in the WMA; what we know comes from the translation and interpretation of period fighting manuals. Thus it is important to realize that we will not be studying point sparring or stage combat but the real thing, sword combat as practiced by knights, nobles and men-at-arms for use on the battlefield and in judicial duels. You will be leaning an ancient martial tradition.
* A common misconception that many people have regards the weapon itself. A steel longsword typically weighed approximately three pound and was very light and graceful weapon. A heavy weapon is a slow weapon, and in a fight slow will get you killed.
* I also hope you appreciate that this is a highly sophisticated combat art. Oftentimes the impression most people have is that western sword combat was a brutal affair with no refinement or skill involved. I think you'll see pretty quickly that this is by no means the case.

# The Anatomy of the Longsword



# The *Long Edge* (the edge of the blade facing your opponent)

# The *Short Edge* (the edge of the blade facing you)

**700-1200:**

* Broad, flat, thin blade moderately tapered towards the point ideally suited for cutting.
* Vikings, Anglo-Saxons and Normans after the fall of the Roman Empire.
* Typical armor included a helmet, quilted cloth armor (*gambeson*) and a shield; leather and mail armor were rare and cutting swords were highly effective against this type of defense.

**1200-1350:**

* Increased use of mail armor, adoption of full mail *hauberks* and addition of steel and hardened leather plates made single-handed cutting swords less effective
* Swords became increasingly tapered resulting in a stiffer blade better suited for thrusting between plates and into vulnerable areas and with grips large enough for two hands to generate more power.

**1250-1550:**

* Plate defenses continues to become common leading to a greater reliance on powerful thrusting attacks that could exploit gaps between the plates
* Slender, strongly-tapered blade with a diamond cross section, very acute point and longer grip

# The Grip

The longsword is held with two hands on hilt, the lead or **primary** hand being just below the cross-guard and the **secondary** hand being at the base of the sword (just touching or partially covering the pommel).

* The sword is gripped by applying **moderate** tension (just enough to maintain control of the weapon) to the hilt with the thumb, small, and ring fingers leaving the index and middle fingers relaxed and in light contact.
* The fingers are not to be fully tightened *until the moment of impact*. This affords a solid grip when it is most needed (striking a target) and creates a “snapping” motion of the wrist, particularly as the index and middle fingers contract, to accelerate the tip.
* Mechanically, the longsword is a lever where the blade rotates about a point or ***fulcrum*** located ***between the primary and secondary hand***. The two hands move in conjunction during the cut; the primary hand pushes the sword forward while the secondary hand pulls the sword back.

# EXERCISE: Cutting mechanics

1. Grip the sword with your right hand as primary if you are right handed or your left hand if you are left handed. Hold the blade in front of you with the pommel at waist level and with the blade vertical. Allow gravity to bring the tip down naturally to give you a sense of how the hands and blade rotate during a cut. Make sure you use a proper grip!!! You’ll notice that the rotation of the hands is unequal; the “pushing” hand does more work as pulling upward too much draws the pommel up too high and generates tension in the shoulders.
2. Repeat this exercise, but now contract the middle and index fingers quickly at the termination of the cut to create a “snapping” of the blade. NOTE: Don’t do this quickly at first or with too much power!!!

**Focus** is the point at which all of the energy of the cut will be concentrated (or “focused”) on the target. Physically, the most powerful point of a cut is when all of the muscles have contracted and your movement and the blade stops. All of the energy generated by the motion of the blade becomes “focused” at that point and is transferred into the target. You must place your focus in such a way as to maximize the effectiveness of your attack (i.e. don’t cut your opponent, cut through your opponent)

It is also important to synchronize your **breathing** with the movement of the sword. Specifically, you should tighten your abdominal muscles to exhale powerfully as your arm muscles contract to stop the movement of the blade. If nothing else this will help you remember to inhale during a bout (remembering to breathe can be surprisingly challenging).

Perhaps most importantly, good focus requires good **awareness**. It is vital for a fighter to concentrate on the environment in a match, i.e. their opponent’s stance, distance, guard, etc. When we practice a solo (i.e. no partner) techniques, it is important that you “visualize” an opponent standing in front of you ready to strike so that you can begin to develop this awareness. Letting your guard down in a fight will get you killed.

# EXERCISE:

* Repeat the second exercise (above), this time coordinating your breathing with the contraction of your arms and the focusing of your cut (i.e inhale as you lift the blade up and exhale as you cut). Be sure to focus on your “opponent”!!!

# The Stance

As any student of the martial arts understands, good footwork is the foundation of good fighting. Good footwork creates lines of attack, facilitates defense, and generates the power needed for effective blows. Foundational go good footwork, however, is the stance. Thus, we the next step (pun intended) in our study of medieval swordsmanship is to learn how to stand.

1. To establish the proper stance **width**, stand with your feet are about shoulder's width apart.
2. To establish the proper stance **depth**, step back with your right foot so that the toes of your right foot line up with the heel of your left. Next, slide your right foot back about 1/2 the length of your foot.
3. Turn your right foot inward about 45º. Notice how your right hip naturally rotates backwards while your left shoulder naturally rotates forwards.
4. Bend your knees slightly and stand so that your weight is *evenly distributed* between your front and back foot on the balls of your feet.
5. Maintain good posture (straighten your back, hold your head level, eyes forward, etc.)

There are important reasons for the elements of the stance:

* Angling the torso presents a smaller target to opponent and allows force to be generated by twisting the hips. Additionally, you present a smaller target to an opponent.
* The width and depth of the stance affords stability and efficient movement in several directions (unlike in competition fencing)
* Bending the knees enables you to move quickly; locked knees must be bent first before movement can take place
* Keeping your weight on balls of feet enables you to shift your weight and move quickly
* Good posture helps you keep balance while you fight; the loss of balance can lead to disaster

# EXERCISE: Stance fundamentals

* Practice assuming a good stance, both with a right and left leg lead.

# The Step

*“To fight with the entire body is what you powerfully want to do.”*

* *Johannes Liechtenauer*

Combat is dynamic, with you and your opponent constantly shifting position to put yourselves into better position for attack and defense. It is important that you move in a controlled fashion so that you maintain your balance and can shift your position to respond to a threat. There are four basic steps in medieval swordsmanship and you will first be introduced to the **advancing pass**

**The Advancing Pass** (this step is used to advance or retreat while changing the lead foot):

1. To pass forward, push off and step forwards with your back foot. As you contact the ground with the heel of your advancing foot (always heel first), pivot back heel inward so that your back foot is at a 45º angle.
2. To pass backward, push off and step backwards with your front foot while pivoting your back heel outward so that your back foot points forward. Contact the ground first with the toes of your back foot (always toes first) rotate back heel inward so that your foot is at a 45º angle.

# EXERCISE:

Practice the advancing pass forward and back remembering the following VERY important points:

* **Don't jump or lunge** – step in a controlled fashion with a feeling that you are “gliding” as you step forward and back.
* **Don't "bob" as you step** – your body should remain relatively level as you step as opposed to “bobbing” up and down as you move.
* **Maintain a good stance** – make sure as you step that your stance isn’t too long or too short, too wide or too narrow and that you have good posture!

# The Cut

To introduce you to the mechanics of cutting while moving, we will strike a vertical ***Oberhau*** (“overhand strike”) from the guard ***Vom Tag*** (“from the roof”) while advance passing.

1. Grip the sword according to the instructions above. If you are right-handed your right foot will be forward and vice versa if you are left-handed.
2. Raise the sword above your head, stopping the blade when the pommel is about a fist’s width away from your forehead but without generating too much tension in the shoulders. The blade should be angled backwards about 30° from the vertical (NOT pointing backward or down). As you are make this motion, shift your weight back slightly so that about 60% of your weight is on your back foot, ***inhale*** as you raise the blade and maintain good awareness of your “opponent.” You are now in overhead ***Vom Tag***.
3. Begin the cut by dropping the shoulders, then straightening the forearms and finally snapping the blade forward with the wrists using the same smooth continuous motion you practiced earlier. You should get the sensation that your arms are “unfolding” as the cut progresses. This is an ***Oberhau*** (“overhand cut”).
4. Finish the cut with the tip pointing downward at about a 45º angle. Your muscles should be fully contracted, roughly 60% of your weight should be shifted onto the front foot, you should **exhale** to properly focus your attack and have maintained good awareness. You are now in an ***Alber*** (“fools”) guard

# EXERCISE:

* Practice cutting *Oberhau*, switch your lead foot and repeat.

1. This time, begin stepping forward with an advance pass by pushing off with your back foot and twisting your hips forward as you initiate the cut. Movement of the body and blade should stop simultaneously as you finish the technique.

***NOTE: It is critical that you initiate your cut prior to your step!***  As you have no shield, your sword must act as a defensive as well as offensive weapon with the sword creating a path of safety for the body to move through. If your movement precedes your cut you run the risk of moving into your opponent’s attack range with no way to respond to their attacks. Furthermore, by initiating the cut as you move, your opponent must react to the threat rather than attacking with impunity.

# EXERCISE:

* Practice cutting *Oberhau* with an advancing pass.

You can practice stepping and then cutting as two separate motions if it you are having trouble coordinating both motions simultaneously. However, you must work to “shorten the gap” between the two until you are able to step and cut as a smooth continuous motion.

**The Gathering Pass** (this step is used to advance or retreat without changing your lead foot):

1. To pass forward, step forward with your front foot while pushing off with your back foot. Make sure you contact the ground first with the heel of your front foot and then slide forward with your back foot.
2. To pass backward, step back with your back foot while pushing off with your front foot. Make sure you contact the ground first with the toes of your back foot and then slide your backward with your front foot.

# EXERCISE:

1. Practice passing forward and back using a gathering pass. Hold your sword with the hilt at your side and the tip pointing forward towards your “opponent’s” head and thrust with each step.

**The Sloping Pass** (this step is used to advance at an angle to your opponent):

1. To pass forward, step forward with the back foot at a roughly 45º angle sliding your new back foot forward as necessary depending on the depth of your step.
2. Hold your sword with the blade resting on your shoulder; as you step forward, lightly cut towards the base of your opponent’s neck (don’t worry about your cut mechanics at this point, just focus on your footwork).

# EXERCISE:

1. Practice passing forward with the sloping pass, “cutting” your opponent as you complete the step.

**The Compass Pass** (this step is used to pivot the body about the lead foot)

1. To pass forward, step forward with the back foot at a roughly 45º angle. Then, pivot on your new front foot turning your new back foot outward and behind you.
2. Hold your sword with the blade resting on your shoulder; as you step forward, lightly cut towards the base of your opponent’s neck (don’t worry about your cut mechanics at this point, just focus on your footwork).

# EXERCISE:

1. Practice passing forward with the compass pass, “cutting” your opponent as you complete the step.