**Medieval Swordsmanship**

**ES 186**

**Lesson 2 – The Primary Guards**

* Review (stance, footwork, vertical *Oberhau*)
* Primary guards
* *Vom tag* (from the Roof)
* *Alber* (the Fool)
* *Pflug* (the Plow)
* *Ochs* (the Ox)
* Primary guard drill

Guards are fundamental sword positions or ways of holding the sword. All attacks begin, end and transition through guardsand they are also essential for defense. There are **four primary** and **four secondary guards** in the German tradition.

***Vom Tag* (from the Roof):**

This guard refers to when the sword is held with the hilt at or below the shoulder with the blade angled backward and is named because it allows very powerful strikes from above. It is important to note that there are multiple ways to assume this guard, however we will be using the following.

The hilt should be held close to the shoulder with the crossguard just below the armpit and the blade angled back slightly (about 15º-30º). For a right *vom Tag*, the left leg should lead while for a left *vom Tag* the right leg should lead. The true edge should be presented in both guards. About 60% of your weight should be on the front foot.

From vom Tag one can cut vertically, diagonally, horizontally or even from below simply by adjusting the angle of the hilt of the sword. Also, one can easily adopt *Ochs* or *Pflug* to set aside incoming attacks.

# *Alber* (the Fool):

In this guard it appears the swordsman is a “fool” for adopting what seems to be a very vulnerable position. *Alber* is held with the hilt in front of the waist with the blade pointed downward at a 45º angle. About 60% of your weight should be on the front foot.

While appearing weak, one can quickly shift into *Ochs* or *Pflug* to intercept an incoming blow or lift the blade upward to deflect a vertical attack. Also, a powerful upward thrust or rapid upward cut using the false edge can be made from this guard.

**EXERCISE:** *Vom Tag to Alber*

1. Beginning with the left foot forward and standing in right *vom Tag*, advance pass forward and transition into left *Alber*.
2. Recover the blade into left *vom Tag* and advance pass forward, transitioning into right *Alber*.
3. Recover the blade into right *vom Tag*. Repeat the drill 10 times

***Pflug* (the Plow):**

In this guard the hilt is held at roughly waist level with the blade pointed forward and upward towards your opponent’s face and is named from the orientation of a plow’s blade as if furrows the ground. Like *vom Tag* there are variants of *Pflug* but we will assume the following position for now.

Begin with your arms extended, the blade pointed forward and the short edge facing upward (to form a right *Pflug* the left leg should lead while for a right *Pflug* the left leg should lead). Twist your hips back drawing the hilt down and back to your waist, keeping the short edge oriented vertically, but with your blade angled upward. About 60% of your weight should be on the lead foot. You’ll notice that:

* If you have a right hand lead and assume a right *Pflug*, your hands will cross and you will need to relax the grip of your left hand to avoid hyperextending the wrist. This will give you the sensation of “cradling” the blade.
* If you have a right hand lead and assume a left *Pflug*, your hands will not cross and you will need to relax the grip of your right hand.
* The opposite will be true if you have a left hand lead.

This guard can be used as a starting point for thrusts from below and as a defensive guard for deflecting attacks coming from the side. Thus, unlike *vom Tag* and *Alber*, *Pflug* is both an offensive and defensive guard.

**EXERCISE:** *Pflug*

* Practice assuming *Pflug* on both sides, becoming comfortable with the grip. Begin in stance with the tip extended and then draw the blade back into guard.

*Pflug* can also be assumed at the termination of a diagonal *Oberhau* although the position of the hands will be different (in front of the body).

***Ochs* (the Ox):**

This guard gets its name as the position of the blade represents the horn of an ox. In *Ochs* the hands are held at or above the head with the blade pointed forward and slightly down towards your opponent’s face or upper chest. For a right *Ochs*, the left leg should lead while for a left *Ochs* the right leg should lead. Like *vom Tag* and *Pflug* there are variants of *Ochs* but we will assume the following position for now.

To assume a right *Ochs* begin in right *Pflug* (right hand lead). Extend your thumb so that it lies along the inside of the blade. Now, without moving the tip, rotate your hands upward so that your thumb is facing down and the blade is horizontal. Like *vom Tag* about 60% of your weight should be on the back foot. As with *Pflug*, you will notice that your hands will cross and that you will have to relax the grip of your left hand.

To assume a left *Ochs* begin in left *Pflug* (right hand lead). Extend your thumb so that it lies along the outside of the blade. Now, without moving the tip, rotate your hands upward so that your thumb is facing down and the blade is horizontal. As with *Pflug*, you will notice that your hands will not cross and that you will have to relax the grip of your right hand. This pattern will be reversed if you have a left hand lead.

This guard can be used as a starting point for thrusts and cuts from above and as a defensive guard for deflecting attacks from above. Like *Pflug*, this guard is both an offensive and defensive guard.

**EXERCISE:** *Pflug to Ochs* (static)

1. Beginning with the left foot forward and standing in right *Pflug*. Have a partner stand in front of you and hold the tip of the sword
2. Transition into right *Ochs*, remembering to shift your weight to your back foot.
3. Shift your weight forward and return to *Pflug*. Repeat the drill 10 times, switch your feet and repeat the drill 10 times.

**EXERCISE:** *Pflug to Ochs* (dynamic)

1. Beginning with the left foot forward and standing in right *Pflug*, advance pass forward and cross your hilt in front of you to transition into left *Ochs*.
2. Recover the blade into left *Pflug* and advance pass forward transitioning into right *Ochs*.
3. Recover the blade into right *Pflug*. Repeat the drill 10 times

*Ochs* can also be assumed at the termination of an *Unterhau* (a cut from below) although the position of the hands will be different (in front of the body) and the blade will be vertical.

**Primary Guard Drill**

This drill allows you to practice transitioning between the four primary guards. Do not strike as you practice this drill! Focus on stance, footwork, balance, blade position and especially transitioning smoothly from guard to guard not power cutting (we'll get to that soon enough).

1. Stand in right *vom Tag*, left leg lead.
2. Advance pass into left *Ochs*, right leg lead.
3. Advance pass into right *Pflug*, left leg lead.
4. Advance pass into left *Alber*, right leg lead.
5. Lift your sword to your left shoulder to form left *vom Tag*.
6. Advance pass into right *Ochs*, left leg lead.
7. Advance pass into left *Pflug*, right leg lead.
8. Advance pass into right *Alber*, left leg lead.
9. Lift your sword to your right shoulder to form right *vom Tag.*