Fundamentals: Footwork
Safety class. Do this first!

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Guy Windsor:
Hello, and welcome to the first class of the Fundamentals Footwork Course. Today we're going to have a look at safety. It is critically important for your long term training benefit and your general health and happiness that you don't ruin your joints while you're practicing swordsmanship. The first, the most important, the fundamental thing that I want you to take from this course is efficient, accurate, smooth, clean movement that obeys the rules that your skeleton follows. Okay? Zero injuries. Which means that because I have not examined your legs, and I have not examined your spine I may well give you exercises that are bad for you personally because of some pre-existing condition or a motorbike accident you had when you were 15 or whatever. If there's something we're doing that's wrong for you, don't do it. If there are exercises that are fundamental to the course and you need some help in figuring out how to adapt them for your particular condition, then by all means get in touch and I'll see if I can help.

With that said, let's start with a very gentle warm-up and the purpose of this is to establish your natural range of motion, not to change it at this stage. Let me define range of motion. The range of motion is how far a joint can travel in its proper path. For example, I might at this stage, just woken in the morning get down to about here but after a decent warm-up, I might get my hands on the floor. This is my full range of motion. To change that, I have to do flexibility exercises and those flexibility exercises will come at the end of the class. There's a good reason for this. When you increase the range of motion of a joint past its previous set point, you weaken the area around it temporarily. If you train with any kind of intensity during that recovery period, you are likely to injure yourself. So we train first and extend range of motion afterwards. In this warm-up we are going to be establishing your current range of motion. We're not seeking to change it at this point. Is that clear? Because this is safety first, remember?

This is a footwork class so let's start with the feet. Put your weight on one foot, take the other foot off the ground and gentle ankle rotations. If it helps, you can imagine you're holding a bowl of whisky in each hand. —The other way and make sure your toes are involved. You'll notice I'm barefoot for this. I imagine you're probably not. It doesn't really matter so much what you wear on your feet but I would strongly advise against -- change feet -- I would advise against anything with a thick, padded or stiff sole because you want at this stage to be able to feel everything that's going on in your feet. The other way. Nice and relaxed, get those ankles rolling around. Now knees are critically important and they're perhaps the most vulnerable joint in the swordsmanship footwork system. Put your hands on your kneecaps and gentle turns, not too big. The other way. Okay. Circles this way and the other way. Very relaxed, very gentle. Don't worry, those super athletes among you, there will be some tough stuff later on in the course but this is week 1 safety so it's all about not

hurting yourself. Am I clear? Rein it in, people. And relax. Gently bend and straighten a little bit, checking for any signs of -- oh, don't do that.

We're sort of running a diagnostic on the legs at this point. Shake them out. Very gentle. Now put your weight on one foot, lift the knee and just open gently. Notice that my hips stay still. Again you can hold your bottles of whiskey if you like but what I want you to focus on is keeping the hips still as the knee goes out. This is not about how far you can go in total. It's about how far your thigh can go out relative to your pelvis. Okay. And the other foot. I'm on a creaky floorboard. That's better. The building I'm doing this in was built in about 1650 so it's a little bit wiggly-wobbly but very beautiful. Remember the hips stay still. And relax. Put your feet a little bit wider than your shoulders, something like that, and legs and back basically straight, gently round. The other way. And relax. Now we're not going to be doing much with the shoulders today because again we're emphasizing footwork to begin with.

What I want you now to do, feet flat on the ground about shoulder width, I want you to see how far you can sit down before your heels come off the ground. Now for those of us with a decent natural range of motion, you can get all the way sort of bottom to ankles without any trouble but I would say three quarters of my students when they first start training after years of this crap have very restricted range of motion in the hips, restricted range of motion in the ankles and all sorts of shoulder stuff. We'll go into the shoulder stuff probably on the next class but for now let's just have a look at the hip, knee, foot relationship. If I show you that from the side, there are two ways to get down. You can stick your arse out which is the weight lifter's squat. Absolutely nothing wrong with that so let's start with that. Stick your arse out as far as it will go, sit down and then see how much further you can go. It's perfectly all right if you get stuck somewhere about here.

Now to help you, you can hold onto something that will stop you falling over backwards. A door is convenient. If you're extremely big and heavy and the door is small and light, you might want to pick something a bit sturdier. Tie a rope around a tree or something. Be careful that the door can actually take a bit of pull on it and what I do is I just hook a finger over each of the door handles and sit back that way. That just gives me a little bit of support and it helps past the difficult balance point there. Take a minute to practice that. Shows you from the side and you may find that you can only do it with your feet splayed out. That's okay. So long as the knees go out over the feet, I don't mind. Let me just turn so you can see how this knee is tracking. From here. Now it's not a question of right or wrong, it's a question of adapted to purpose.

Let's have a look at a different way of going down. For this one you remain completely upright. You can imagine like you're holding onto a tree or something and you sit straight down and it requires a completely different range of motion in the hips and the ankles. I have lots of students who can manage that and only about half of those can manage this all the way down. Again you can use the door for this to give you that little bit of extra support. Now we've established how far you can go. Maybe you're at this point here and at this point there. That's okay. We'll look at building that range of motion later on but the critical thing is at this stage you don't push it. Go as far as you comfortably can and no further. Now perhaps the critical thing is whether the knee tracks the foot and here's why. As your weight goes onto your foot, your leg tends to bend. If that bend is in the line of the foot, the thigh and the foot are supporting the knee and you don't get any twist. The knee can go all the way heel to arse-- if yours doesn't yet, don't worry, it will eventually -- which means that you can in theory -- let me show you this from the side. Don't do this. This is just a

demonstration. You can get all the way in a lunge to the ground without any risk to your knee at all. However problems tend to start when the ankle isn't flexible enough and the heel comes off the ground so the knee is no longer supported or there is a twist. It's the twist that we're looking at right now.

So here's an exercise for you. Start with your feet about shoulder width, take a step forward and just gently push your weight onto your front foot and back and keep an eye that your knee is tracking the line of the foot. Now here's the rule and this is invariably true. Wherever the toe points, that's where the knee should go. As the weight comes off the foot, turn the toes 45 degrees in, put the foot down, gently bend and straighten the leg, sinking your weight onto the foot and coming off it again. Back to the middle, 45 degrees out, knee tracks the foot. If incidentally, you're doing this with a friend, have your friend squat down over there and tell you whether your knee is tracking your foot or not. The restriction here is in the hip generally so I can turn my foot 90 degrees out no problem and my thigh will still go that way and this is just fine. If your hip mobility is restricted, what will happens as the foot goes further out is your knee will go across in this ghastly, horrible way because the thigh can't go out far enough to make that line. Generally speaking, in my experience, problems of knee tracking the foot tend to come from hip flexibility. So we'll be having a bit of a look at hip flexibility in this class.

Let's do the other leg. Again super relaxed, super easy, start shoulder width, take a step forward. This foot could be wherever is comfortable. Don't worry about it. It's just your stable base. Knee over the foot. Nice and relaxed. If you have a mirror, that's great and you can watch the knee tracking the foot. In a perfect world, the center of the knee is around this toe here so not the big toe, the one next to it. I'm sure it's got a proper name but I don't know what it is. Forty-five degree in, knee tracks the foot. To the front. Forty-five degrees out, knee tracks the foot. That's in the hip that allows that range of motion. If this is easy, no stress, no strain, then by all means try the 90 degree version and the important thing is the knee is going that way. Are we clear? If I turn it sideways on, the knee is coming directly towards you.

Let's have a little look at gait. There's a lot of discussion in the historical swordsmanship community of should you step on the heel, should you step on the ball of the foot, should you be on the toes, whatever. It stems from not understanding how feet work. It's really simple. If you are walking, what you should do is the foot goes out, heel goes down, the weight rolls onto the foot. I'm exaggerating it slightly so you can see it better but that's it. This is walking. I would suggest doing it barefoot on a hard surface so that you can feel that motion really clearly. If you're running, you need more spring to absorb the arrival of your weight onto the foot so you tend to run on the balls of your feet or at least you should do. That means the weight is arriving there. The heel isn't very far off the ground but it's there and the weight is upright and you get this natural, lovely springiness sort of thing. Try it. The third natural gait for a human being is the sprint. In sprinting, you're up on the balls of your feet. I can't sprint in this tiny space because I'll smash my head into the wall but you get the idea. So you're up on the balls of your feet like so.

Here's the thing. If the action that you're doing is a walking step and a lot of the sources for example particularly Bolognese sources talk about 'walking with the sword' so there's an indication there. If it's basically a walking step, then the heel should arrive first and then the weight transfers onto the ball of the foot. If it's basically a running step then you should be arriving on the ball of the foot. If it's a sprinting step, you're probably not doing swordsmanship anymore unless you're

running very, very quickly away from somebody who's a lot better than you are which is a perfectly valid use of sprinting. In the exercises that we do, I will specify when necessary whether it's a heel rolling onto the ball or directly onto the ball of the foot because it's important that you get it right but it's not determined by some artificial thing. It's purely determined by the kind of gait that your body is in when you're making this particular action.

Let's have a look at weight placement. This is very important and again it's where accidents tend to happen. Generally speaking, whenever you are fighting anybody in any system, your weight is either on one foot leaving the other foot free to do stuff or it's on the other foot. If for example we take a guard position from the longsword, the weight is primarily on this foot leaving this foot free to move without me having to commit my weight to anything. With a rapier it would tend to be on the back foot most of the time leaving this foot free to do stuff without my body moving. You need to be able to create guard positions in which your weight is 100% on one foot or the other because if my weight is on my front foot, I can pass forwards without changing my weight until the last moment. So I don't have to telegraph my motion by bringing my weight onto my front foot before I pass. If my weight is on the back foot, I can take my front foot behind me to get out of the way or to retreat without telling my opponent anything and of course I am organized to lunge. If my weight is on the back foot, I can pass back and I can lunge without movement of the weight. If the weight is on my front foot, I can pass forwards, at least I can get my foot moving forwards or I can in theory lunge backwards but don't do it or I can spring backwards without further commitment of my weight.

Weight placement is extremely important for tactical reasons and also for mechanical reasons because if my weight is completely on one foot, this foot is free to do whatever it likes which means that I have a range of options that I just don't have if there's some weight already on the foot. In the next class we're look at moving the weighted foot but that's a rather more advanced skill so let's stick with the basics for now. What I would like you to do is step so your weight goes onto one foot. I'm not worried about style at the moment, just about the idea and then bring that other foot out and just to demonstrate that you can do whatever you liked with it, life the knee and step. Put the weight onto it, life the knee. So far, so easy. Imagine you had a glass water here on a little shelf. The water should not change level as you do this. Slow and gentle and of course you can go backwards. Again it doesn't matter what style you practice. The skill we're practicing here is shifting the weight from one foot to the other completely and demonstrating that completeness by lifting and replacing the unweighted foot and doing the whole thing with a center gravity staying at the same height. This is really important. Let me explain.

The hallmark of good footwork is efficiency. If I'm coming towards you and my weight -- God, that feels horrible -- is going up and down as I do it, I am expending energy to go up and then falling, up and falling, up and falling. If I'm coming towards you smoothly without my weight going up and down, I'm using less energy to do it and all of that energy is coming towards the target. Also I'm not giving you great big signals about my steps. It's hard for you to tell what my feet are doing when all you have to tell you is what's happening in my torso. It's getting bigger, it's getting smaller. You may have noticed we spent a lot of time on one leg. This is really useful footwork training because whenever you move there is always a moment when you're standing on one foot however you're stepping. It doesn't matter what your style is. There's always that moment when you're standing on one foot. Ideally when you're standing on that one foot, you are completely supported and your balance is just fine.

Your homework for this week -- some people don't like the term homework but I can't think of a better word for it -- is I want you to spend at least some time standing on one leg and standing on the other leg as part of it. I want you to work on your squatting position so you're nice and comfortable. It may take you two years to get into the squat. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It matters that you start practicing now. If you already have completely range of motion in your squats, you can leave that bit out. Also whenever you walk anywhere and I hope you walk a lot, I want you to walk silently. Now this is a creaky floor. It's about 350 years old. As you step, I want you to imagine that you're balancing a glass of water on your head and you're walking on a creaky floor but you're sneaking up on somebody and you don't want them to know so make no noise. Your feet should be completely silent. Silent feet are good feet. Whenever you walk anywhere, walk silently with an imaginary glass of water balanced on your head. Use a real glass if you like but I suggest make it plastic because it will fall off quite a few times. Do it with an empty glass to start with and this will help you with your general mechanics of motion and once we've got those begun nicely, we can build on that base. Well done. Next up I'm going to teach you how to expand your range of motion but that will be in a separate clip because it's basically a separate issue. Bye bye.

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