

Complete Rapier Course: Safety Briefing

“Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are nothing without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end.”

Edward Whymper’s admonition, from *Scrambles amongst the Alps*, elegantly encapsulates the correct attitude to all potentially lethal activities. Substitute “practice swordsmanship” for “climb”, and there is the correct mindset for any swordsman, beginner or expert. Take it to heart before you start training with a partner.

When training with weapons you hold your partner's life in your hands. This is a sacred trust and must not be abused.

Disclaimer: I accept no responsibility of any kind for injuries you sustain while you are not under my direct personal supervision. During this course you will be taught how to create safe training drills, and I am certain that if you follow the instructions there is a very low likelihood of injury. But if I am not there in person to create and sustain a safe training environment, I cannot be held responsible for any accidents that may occur.

Principles

The basic principles of safe training are:

1. Respect: for the Art, your training partners, the weapons, and yourself.
2. Caution: assume everything is dangerous unless you have reason to believe otherwise.
3. Know your limits. Just because it’s safe for somebody else, does not necessarily mean it’s safe for you. Never train or fence when you are tired, angry, or in any state of mind or body that makes accidents and injuries more likely.

Most groups that keep going for more than a year have a pretty good set of safety guidelines in place. Make sure you know what they are, and follow them.

My senior students routinely train with sharp swords, often with no protection. That’s not as dangerous as it sounds, when you remember that they have been training usually for 5+ years at that point, under my supervision.

Safety first: you cannot afford time off training for stupid injuries. Life’s too short.

Whatever training you are doing must must must leave you healthier than you started it. You will not win Olympic gold medals this way, but you won’t end up a cripple either. The path to sporting glory is littered with the shattered bodies and minds of the unlucky many who broke themselves on the way. Don’t join them.

Every time I find myself teaching a group I don’t know, I tell them that the class will be successful from my point of view if everyone finishes class healthier than they started it. Most injuries in training occur either during tournament (highly competitive) freeplay, or are self-inflicted during things like warm-ups. In my school (and other classes) we have a zero tolerance policy on macho bullshit. If any exercise doesn’t suit you, for any reason, you can sit it out, or do some other exercise. If you are sitting it out, a good instructor will ask you why, and help you develop alternatives or work up to the exercise in easy stages, but will never pressure you to do something that might injure you.

This is also true of work-related injuries, like forearm problems from typing, or the ghastly effects of sitting all day. By avoiding the things that will hurt you, you will naturally seek out

the things that are good for you. Hungry? Avoid sugar, avoid processed foods, and lo! there's a fresh salmon salad. Tired? Sleep is better than barbiturates, no?

This requires good risk-assessment skills (I recommend *Against the Gods*, the Remarkable Story of Risk, by Peter Bernstein) and the courage to take risks that truly serve your overall aims. A safe life is not worth living, but foolish risk-taking will not make your life meaningful.

Try adopting these key habits:

- Before any new activity, do a risk/reward calculation. How risky is it, and how rewarding?
- Practice saying no to training suggestions: even safe ones. Most people do stupidly risky things due to peer pressure. Being able to say no to your peers is perhaps the most important skill in reducing injury rates. If this is hard, make it a habit to decline at least one suggestion every session, until it's easy.

Equipment

Without doubt the single most important bit of safety equipment is good common sense. Fence according to the limits of your equipment, exercise control and respect the weapon at all times, and you will never have a serious injury. Minor bumps and bruises come with the territory.

There were some masters who believed that the safest course is to fence with sharp weapons and no protection. This is how it was often done in the past until the invention of fencing masks (though there are tournament records and declarations as early as the 14th century that record the use of blunt practice weapons; King Rene d'Anjou's treatise of 1470 is perhaps the best source). Such masters are right in theory, in that freeplay with sharps is the best way for students to learn absolute respect for the weapon, and the importance of absolute control. There are a few contemporary masters with whom I will fence like this, and there is nothing like it for generating a perfect fencing approach. But try explaining that to the insurance companies, or in the event of a slip, the police or coroner. It was often said in the eighteenth century that you could tell a fencing master from his eye-patch and missing teeth. Never forget that even a blunt blade can break bones. When free fencing, or when practicing drills at speed, it is essential that you wear appropriate safety gear. You do this not for your own sake, though self-preservation does come into it, but for the benefit of your training partner. Your protection allows him to hit you safely. Choosing protection is a very controversial subject. Too little, and you can end up badly hurt (even in practice). Too much, and you can't fence properly. Firstly, it is important to establish what style of fencing you will be doing. If you are practising armoured combat, then buy the best fitting, best made armour that you can from an armourer who knows how you intend to use it and has seen what you want to do. This is the hardest style of fencing to appropriately regulate, because accurate technique requires you to go for the least armoured spots (throat, eyes, armpits, joints), but safety requirements obviously prohibit that.

As a general guideline, I recommend the following for most weapons:

1. An FIE standard fencing mask. This allows you to thrust at the face (a very common target), and generally attack the head. This does have three major caveats. Firstly, it leaves the back of the head open, and you must be very careful not to strike at this target. An added apron of thick leather affords some protection. Secondly, it does not protect the head and neck from the wrenching force of over-vigorous blows. It is vital that you and your opponent learn control before engaging in freeplay. Thirdly it is designed to

protect the face from high-speed, light, flexible weapons, not slower, heavier, rigid ones. So continually check them for wear, and make absolutely sure that your weapons are properly bated.

2. A steel or leather gorget, or stiff collar, to protect the throat. Points can slip under the bib of a mask and crush the larynx.
3. (For women) a rigid plastic chest guard.
4. A point-resistant fencing jacket rated at least 500 newtons. Sturdy, preferably padded and/or armoured gauntlets, which should extend at least four inches past the jacket cuff to prevent points sliding up your sleeve. I have twice had fingers broken through unpadded mail gloves, and now use a pair of fingered gauntlets from Jiri Kronzak, which cost about 150€.
5. A padded gambeson, or a plastron. If you are making one yourself, bear in mind that it should be thick enough to take the worst out of the impact of the blows, and prevent penetration from a thrust. All openings should be covered. The collar should be high enough that thrusts coming under the bib of the mask do not make contact with your throat. A plastron must wrap around the ribs, and properly cover the collar bones and shoulders. I usually wear a fencing jacket and plastron (as pictured).
6. A box for men (called a "cup" in the US). You only forget this once.
7. Rigid plastic protectors for the knees and
8. For the elbows, of the sort worn by in-line skaters (worn under the clothes for that period look if you prefer), will save a lot of pain, and some injury.

Footwear: on the matter of footwear, few practitioners agree. In the longsword treatises, there are no heavy boots, and certainly no built-up heels. For a completely historical style, it is necessary to wear completely accurate period clothing at least occasionally, because it can affect the way you move. Training barefoot or in smooth leather soled shoes is the most accurate, and often very slippery, though there is some evidence to suggest that knights, at least, wore shoes with whipcord attached to the soles for better grip. I have fenced on wooden floors, concrete, stone, tarmac, grass and gravel, in sports halls, salles, castles forests and on hillsides, in all weathers from heatwave to snowstorm, wearing everything from thigh-boots to hiking boots to trainers to period shoes to barefoot, and my conclusion is that it does not matter what you wear on your feet provided that you understand grounding, body-mechanics and footwork. Excessively grippy soles can lead to joint injury as you may stop too suddenly, or get stuck when you should be turning (particularly in falls at close quarters). The dangers of wearing too slippery soles are obvious. In the salle I usually wear wrestling boots or trainers, and recommend a thin, flat sole.

The Sword

Training swords come in three main types. Authentic sharp reproductions, which are used for cutting practice and some pair work with advanced students, blunt swords that try to reproduce the handling characteristics of the sharps, and fencing swords that are designed to make fencing safer. These all have their pros and cons, and you should use the sword that's right for your style and the kind of practice you will be doing.

It's perfectly all right to use a wooden waster or something similar to start with, but do not imagine that there is any such thing as a safe training sword. Even modern sport fencing blades engineered for fencing sometimes break and puncture people, and anything heavy enough to reproduce the handling of a medieval or renaissance sidearm is going to be able to do damage.

For specific details on choosing a sword, please see *Choosing a Sword*, which is included in the additional material on this course.

Looking after your weapon is largely a matter of keeping it dry, clean, and free of stress risers (a stress riser is a weak point, usually a deep nick, which encourages the blade to fold at that point).

Occasional rubdowns with a moisture repellent oil and steel wool or scouring pad, followed by a coat of microcrystalline wax, should keep the blade and hilt clean (follow the manufacturer's recommendations if you have a gilt, blued or otherwise ornamented weapon). Do not be afraid to file down any large nicks, and file off any burrs: this is important from a safety perspective, as the blade is most likely to break at a nick, and burrs can be very sharp. The edges of a blunt weapon should always be kept smooth enough that you can run your bare hand hard up the edge and not get scratches or splinters. Even the toughest and most cherished sword will not survive repeated abuse: the best guarantor of longevity for your sword (and yourself) is correct technique.

Rules of Engagement

Once you have agreed to fence with someone, it is important to agree on rules of engagement. This is partly to ensure safety, and partly to create an environment in which you can learn. The two most simple rules are these: confine your moves to the safety limits of your protective gear and to the technical range of the least trained combatant. In other words, do not allow face-thrusts when wearing open helms, or throws when one of you is not trained to fall safely. The rules can be adapted further to develop specific aspects of technique: for instance, you may not allow any close quarters work at all, or even restrict allowable hits to one small target. The idea is to come to a clear, common-sense agreement before facing off. You are only ready for no-holds-barred, totally "authentic" fight simulation, when you can enter such a fight with your judgement unimpaired. Following the rules of engagement will not make you soft, nor will it dull your edge if it comes to the real thing; rather it will develop self-control.

These rules apply to all fencing:

1. Agree on a mutually acceptable level of safety.
2. Wear at least the minimum amount of safety gear commensurate with rule 1.
3. Confine allowable technique to those within the limits of your equipment.
4. Confine allowable technique to the technical ability of the least trained combatant.
5. Appoint either an experienced student or one of the combatants to preside over the bout.
6. Agree on allowable targets.
7. Agree on what constitutes a "hit".
8. Agree on priority or scoring convention in the event of simultaneous hits. Usually it is better to allow a fatal blow before a minor wound, but simultaneous hits should be avoided whenever possible.
9. Agree on the duration of the bout either in terms of hits, such as first to five, or in real time.
10. Acknowledge all hits against yourself. This can be done by raising the left arm, or by stopping the bout with a salute, or by calling "Halt!" and telling your opponent where and how you think she hit you.
11. Maintain self-command at all times.

Safe Training

In my experience most injuries are self-inflicted. It is far more common for students to hurt themselves by doing something they shouldn't, than to hurt their training partners. Here are a few simple guidelines for joint safety, which should be followed during all training. I am using the lunge as an example of a stressful action, but these principles apply to any physical action.

The knee must always bend in the line of the foot. Knees are hinges, with usually a little under 180° range of movement. They do not respond well to torque (power in rotation). So whenever you bend your knees, in any style for any reason, ensure that the line of your foot, the line of movement of your knee, and the line of movement of your weight, are parallel. This prevents twisting and thus injuries. This one simple rule, carefully followed, eliminates all knee problems other than those arising from impact or genetic disadvantage.

Whenever performing any strenuous task (such as lunging, or lifting heavy objects), tighten your pelvic floor muscles (imagine you need to go to the bathroom, but are stuck in a queue). This supports the base of your spine, and helps with hip alignment.

Joints have two forms of support: active and passive. Passive support refers mainly to the ligaments, which bind the joint capsule together. This is basically set, and can't be trained. When training your joint strength, with exercises or stretching, avoid any action that strains the joint capsule. Any action that causes pain in the joint itself should be modified or avoided, as it may damage the soft tissues (ligaments, tendons, cartilage). These tissues have a very poor blood supply and hence heal very slowly.

Active support refers to the muscles around the joint, and these can be strengthened by carefully straining the joint with small weights and rotations. To strengthen a joint you must stress these muscles, without endangering the ligaments. Any competent physiotherapist can show you a range of exercises for building up the active support around your knees, wrists and elbows, where we need it most.

Rest is part of training. Your body needs time to recover, and is stimulated by the stress of exercise to grow stronger. However, the body is efficient, and will withdraw support from any muscle group that is not used, even if for only a few weeks. So regular training is absolutely crucial.

If you can't lunge without warming up, don't lunge except in carefully controlled drills. Warming up is essential before pushing the boundaries of what your body can do.

These safety guidelines have been drawn from *The Duellist's Companion*, *The Swordsman's Companion*, and *The Swordsman's Quick Guide part 1: The Seven Principles of Mastery*. *The Duellist's Companion* and *The Seven Principles of Mastery* are available as downloads in this course's bonus material section.