

The Value of Timing in Tactics by Zbigniew Czajkowski

"Fencing is a game of subtlety, and bluff can be met with counter-bluff"
- Charles L. de Beaumont

The following could be considered among the most important aims of a tactical fight and the most salient aspects in fencing.

Very generally one may say that the main purpose of a fencing action is to forestall or be ahead of the opponent. In epee this is literal. One has to forestall the opponent in time. A hit, to be valid has to be a fraction of a second earlier. In sabre and foil forestalling takes a more subtle form. A sabre or foilist, when counter-attacking, must either close the line of the opponent's attack or be ahead in a period of fencing time. In offensive actions he fights to be ahead in gaining the right of way - he must be first to initiate the attack and that not only in his own but, above all, in the president's opinion. The conception of forestalling or keeping ahead of the opponent is expressed not only by the mere speed of movement but also, and perhaps above all, by the necessity for more selective and acute perception and by the necessity for faster translation of information. To put the idea colloquially the fencer has to be a thought ahead of his opponent.

A factor of immense tactical importance is surprise - the ability to act in a way unpredictable for the opponent. The more skillful the fencer in exploiting this element of surprise, the less his opponent will be able to anticipate the time, speed type and intention of the action employed.

A very important feature and aim of tactical combat is the ability to gain the appropriate distance in a situation most inconvenient for the opponent. For example, if, after manoeuvring, one gains lunging distance at a moment when the opponent is concentrated and waiting for an attack, it is not sufficient. It is far more valuable to gain the distance when the opponent is temporarily off balance, not concentrated or expecting something quite different. Generally speaking, one may state that practically all fencing actions and the footwork accompanying them aim, in a way, at gaining "nearness" while preserving combat initiative.

Of equal importance in tactics is recognition and understanding of the opponent's actions and intentions, at the same time concealing one's own and misleading him (confusion of display).

Tactics in their application are connected with technique and other factors of training and fights. This point will be discussed below.

The main task of tactical fencing activities are: a) to avoid being hit, b) to prepare an action and, c) to score a hit. These tasks are given here in a logical time sequence, but in practice they are intermingled.

Purposeful and efficient application of tactical principles on the strip depends upon the general physical fitness, technical skill and degree of psychological preparedness.

The ability to conduct a bout and use proper tactics is closely connected with the fencer's psychological state, his power of concentration and self control. Undue nervousness, over excitement, lack of confidence, overestimation of the opponent's strength, apathy, insufficient warming up, prevalence of inhibitory processes - all these factors may hamper the fencer in conducting a tactical bout, realization of tactical solutions and display of his technical abilities. Conversely, self control, adequate degree of excitement and consciousness of his own experience and technical and tactical abilities positively influence the psychological state of the fencer, increasing his calm assurance, dexterity and courage in action.

For tactics to be successful careful attention must be paid to choice of time. Every fencer, even one who has just begun to do loose play, has been told and realizes from experience how important it is to choose the right time for attacking his opponent. Of course we realize that the expression "choice of time" is inadequate. There is also a question of distance, tactical situation and taking the opponent by surprise, all of which make a very complicated phenomenon nearly as difficult to describe as the conception of time or space.

It has been noticed long ago that certain situations are more conducive to scoring a hit. This has been called in English "timing" or "choice of time", in Italian "scelta di tempo", in French "L'a propos". The expression used by Polish fencers "zaskoczenia" (literal translation - "surprise") or "wyczucie zaskoczenia" (feeling of surprise) better depicts the situation than an expression which only considers the element of time.

Most fencers textbooks, while stressing the element of "choice of time" delicately side step the difficult problem of defining, describing and discussing it.

The well-known fencing masters Paul Battesti and Louis Prost simply call it the ability to choose the moment most favourable for the execution of a fencing action.

Kazimerz Laskowski, the director of the military school of fencing before the war in Warsaw stated that "tempo or surprise is the moment of taking unawares an opponent who, at that particular moment, is hit most easily by an unexpected action".

Janos Kevey gives his conception of timing as follows: "by the expression Tempo we mean the moment which is the most favourable for the beginning and execution of fencing action... in such a moment the opponent is helpless and not capable of making a defensive moment".

The Hungarian author of a known textbook on sabre fencing Zoltan Ozoray Schenker wrote "a fencer must catch the moment when his opponent is totally or partially incapable of an action", and "such favourable moments occur when the opponent executes badly thought out purposeless blade movements or footwork, when his attention is distracted and his readiness for action is diminished. Such moments occur also when the opponent is, for example, preoccupied with planning the bout or is distressed by its unsuccessful course".

Well known to British readers, Professor Leon Bertrand in his "Cut and Thrust" describes timing in slightly more detail and in combination with other elements. He advises that, in construction of attacks the fencer should employ three essentials: "what the Italians call 'scelta di tempo' - choice of time, judgment of distance and speed. They are three further lodges in the main stratum. The first is by far the most important of the three. Assuming the possession of the highest technique, the sabreur stands or falls by the precedence or lack of this vital sense. Choice of time means the selection of psychological moment to launch the offensive. It means executing the movement when your opponent is unprepared or least expects it. That is choice of time in broadest significance. The final definition of 'scelta di tempo' is the seizing of the precise fraction of a second to move at the slightest sign of mental irresolution on the part of your rival. He may be keyed up to the highest pitch of concentration yet that fractional measure of time must come when, by some movement of thought, that concentration wavers. This lapse must be reflected by some sign, infinitesimal perhaps, but it is your "cue", your signal, and on this golden opportunity you must act immediately. If we could imagine a highly sensitive machine registering a graph of your adversary's mental concentration, we should visualize an undulation line and we should attack with every downward turn of the pen, with the recording of each depression".

Generally it is accepted that when a fencer catches his opponent by surprise, when the opponent is off balance and not fully concentrated that the fencer has chosen the right "tempo". Everybody knows that it is extremely difficult to sustain the highest concentration of attention for a very long time and invariably lapses of attention occur in a bout; a fencer, concentration on his own attack, may forget about his defense; a competitor manoeuvring on the step may expose himself dangerously to his opponent's action; a fencer executing blade movements may open certain lines of his target - such and similar situations may be taken advantage of for surprise action. The ability to take advantage of and instantly take advantage of such situations is usually inborn but it may be further developed by special exercises and constitutes the "sixth sense" of a fencer.

When describing the clever seizing of opportunity to score a hit and in the majority of definitions (see above) the expression of "movement" and "time" are commonly used. Even the names given to the "sixth

sense" of the fencer by various fencing schools are closely connected with the conception of time. And yet it is very obvious that this is not a question of mere time. The opportune application of an action in a bout, taking the opponent unawares is closely connected with many factors of the tactical situation such as distance, movements of the two fencers, the opponent's state of attention etc. etc.

"Timing" or fencers "feeling for surprise" may be, perhaps, a little more exactly described as the choice of occasion, closely connected with the opponents activities and attitude with the general situation of a bout, most favourable for the successful execution of an action.

A fencer may take advantage of potentially suitable situations or he may himself create situations suitable to his purpose by careful preparatory action.

The above definition, like all attempts at simple definitions of complicated phenomena, is inadequate. In order to better understand the "scelta di tempo", so complex and difficult to define, and yet so important in fencing, we have to discuss it more fully on the base of personal experience as competitor and coach, observation of many tournaments, reflections and literature.

The right choice of time using the expression in English for as I know no better expression in English, means, in a very broad sense,; to surprise, to attack, to take by surprise etc.

Prof. Tadeusz Kotarbinski, one of the creators of praxeology, writing his general theory of conflict, when talking about surprise, stated: "We may assume that taking the opponent unaware derives its technical value from anticipation and from misleading the opponent or, at least, from taking advantage of the opponent's mistakes or lack of knowledge" (this last here meaning lack of information or inadequate appreciation of the situation).

Let us now analyze this element in a fencing fight. Since a tactical intention (task, resolution, solution) has changes of success only when it is executed in the right time (Greek "kairos", French "l'a propos" Russian "moment") and is adequate to a given solution it is obvious that it is very important a) to be able to seize the opportunity to launch an attack or any other, b) to display psychological resistance in view of the opponent's sudden attack.

Every manifestation of "timing" ("fencing surprise") understood as an opportunity to score a hit, has two aspects:

- a situation - a complex of conditions - giving possibilities of receiving a hit (being caught unawares, being attacked when one least expects it.). This might be called "negative time" or "negative surprise".
- a situation favourable to scoring a hit (catching the opponent by surprise, catching the opponent unawares). This might be called "positive time" or "positive surprise".

Neither positive nor negative time occurs separately. In a fight they occur as two aspects of the same situation, comprising both external and psychological factors. What is "positive" for one fencer is "negative" for his opponent and vice versa.

The full an successful taking advantage of right timing - "positive surprise" - i.e. scoring a hit, may happen only with the occurrence of adequate complex of various factors such as distance, speed, movements, attention etc.

The feeling for "fencing surprise" is inborn but, under the influence of training, it improves in that: a) the ability to recognize and take advantage of appropriate situations with practice and experience b) the resistance to opponent's surprise action is also increased.

"Negative surprise" often leads to temporary escape of technique, both in standard of execution and repertoire of strokes. A high degree of fencer's skill, good automatization and variety of motor habit patterns and ease of application of technique are fundamental factors in increasing the fencer's psychological and technical resistance to "negative surprise". By developing in the course of training technical prowess, general fitness, accuracy of perception, speed of reaction and movements one and at the

same time shapes "sense of fencing surprise", choice of time.

In an attempt to penetrate more deeply into the phenomena of "timing" let us try to classify it.

Thus a competitor who "picks up" the initiative and begins a movement may create a situation in which he falls into "negative time" and receives a hit or, to the contrary, a fencer who imitates the development of a certain tactical situation creates for himself the advantage of "positive time" and so scores a hit.

Among the manifestations of "fencing surprise" are situations which: a) a competitor, usually when defending himself, takes advantage of the situation which has arisen mostly on the opponent's initiative; b) the situation given rise to the "fencing surprise" is created by the fencer, mostly attacker, who imposes his movements and initiative.

We could further differentiate the ways in which a competitor perceives and assesses the tactical situation (only after the assessment of a given situation its motor complement in the form of a fencing action may follow) as: a) visual, b) tactile, c) kinaesthetic or d) auditory. In assessing a situation not only one receptor is involved but several, to varying degrees, e.g. not only touch but sight and motor-muscular sense; not only sight but sight and hearing. For example, in the execution of parry-riposte a very important role is played by tactile sensation but under the control of sight; in timing the beginning of attack to the movement of the opponent's feet not only sight but hearing the rhythm of steps plays a large part. Usually, however, one senses a role in the perception of a particular situation.

To give detailed examples of various manifestations of "fencing surprise" would be space consuming and not entirely necessary as any fencer will do this for himself, calling on the reserves of his rich experience. The most important factors concerning "fencing surprise" can be summarized in the following concise points:

In our discussion on "fencing surprise" instead of time and Moment we have stressed the importance of a complex tactical situation comprising many various factors (which, like all material phenomena, takes place in time.

"Fencing surprise" is an integral part of any bout and an essential factor in the result of the bout.

"Feeling for timing" is inborn but should be cultivated in fencers by perfecting technique, reaction and tactics together.

The conscious strengthening of a fencer's resistance to unexpected situations require a very high automatization of movement - a very high degree of acquisition of motor habit patterns. This facilitates the switch of attention from the execution of movements towards: choice of time, tactical situation and variety of action.

The constant tempo and character of movements (rhythm, direction, amplitude and speed) makes the correct assessments of situation and choice of counter-action comparatively easy. Every change in rhythm, speed, strength and amplitude of movements interferes with the correct assessment of the tactical situation. This caused the demission to be either delayed or incorrect.

The above is probably connected with various processes of inhibition and excitation in the brain cortex and requires further and detailed study by physiologists and psychologist.