

# WE CAN STILL LEARN A LOT FROM VERNESSEON SIEUR DE LYANCOURT

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## **Abstract:**

The article is devoted to the great fencing master of the XVII century—Vernesson Sieur de Lyancourt: his views on fencing and methods of conducting exercises. He was a great fencing master whose teaching was very efficacious and realistic, and who introduced many new and practical ideas about how to conduct fencing training and, particularly, individual lessons. The author presents and explains the Master's ways of teaching technique and tactics, stressing their efficacy, logic, and common sense. He is of the opinion that the presentation of the great Master's views and practices, not only has cognitive value, but might serve as a practical guide as many of his ideas and teaching methods could be taken advantage of, and developed, in modern, competitive fencing. The author emphasises the point that, in order to understand the present and try to foresee the future, one should know the past well. An intelligent coach tries, of course, to avoid repetition or use of outdated ideas and practices, and dismisses "functional fixation" but, at the same time, takes advantage and develops old practices and ideas which might be good, efficacious, useful, stimulating, and applicable in modern times.

## **INTRODUCTION**

*"The future is made by the past."*  
Anatole France

*"Be careful in teaching, because an error committed in it is viewed as a premeditated crime."*  
Talmud

A good coach ought to look for new solutions, take advantage of the progress of science, and widen his knowledge and abilities. In doing so, he should not neglect the experience of his predecessors—sometimes even those that are centuries old. While trying to dismiss everything which is outdated, not useful, and no longer valuable, he should, at the same time, strive to dig out from the past, and take advantage of, all which is lasting, right, efficacious, and progressive.

In fencing, many theories and practices are now completely obsolete and out-of-date. Yet, there are certain old principles, ideas, and practices which are still valid today and ought to be developed and applied. A good example of this might be the views and practices of the great XVII century fencing master, Vernesson Sieur de Lyancourt [2, 5, 10], whose personality, teachings, and theories I try to present, stressing, especially, his very logical, modern, and practical ideas.

In the XVII century—after the epoch of the rapier and dagger, together with the introduction of a new weapon: the small sword (l'épée de la cour), the first weapon adapted for both offensive and defensive actions (parries)—there appeared a new practice weapon: foil. The introduction of the foil as a practice weapon was meant to make exercises safer, as masks were not yet used, and the small sword—a light and well-balanced weapon, with a relatively short and light blade and sharp point—was very dangerous to use in practice.

For many decades, the foil was used as preparation for fighting with sharp weapons—the small sword and then the modern epee—and, to begin with, all stances, movements, and actions were “real” and served the teaching and perfecting of fencing actions applied in a duel or battle.

At the end of the XVIII century, fencing—apart from being direct preparation for duels, battles, and military training—also became a recreational sport activity [1, 4, 5]. Then, fencing with the foil—in the Italian and, especially, French, schools—became more and more “artificial”, artistic, and full of conventions, and, by the end of the XIX century, ceased to serve as a preparation for duels with the epee [5, 7, 8]. One should, however, mention a little known fact that, in the first half of the XIX century, in France, many duels were fought with sharp foils [6].

With the development of foil fencing as a recreational sport, foil gradually became, as already mentioned, very conventional (especially in the French school) and diverged from bout efficacy, realism, and . . . common sense, all of which had been so characteristic for early fencing masters of the XVII and XVIII centuries, such as—among others—Vernesson de Lyancourt.

In 1686, Vernesson de Lyancourt published a great work, entitled *Le Maistre d'armes ou l'exercice de l'espée seule (Master of Arms or Exercises with Epee Only)*, underlining, in the title, that the dagger—an indispensable and integral part of rapier fencing for a very long period of time—was no longer to be used in practice, nor in a real fight (a second edition of his book appeared in Amsterdam, in 1692). His textbook was considered a kind of holy gospel of fencing for eighty years, which even the famous Maître d'Armes Danet [9], in 1766, considered to be the best textbook of fencing.

After a thorough analysis of de Lyancourt's book, I now present his views on—what we nowadays call—methodology.

## DE LYANCOURT'S ACTIVITIES, VIEWS, AND METHODS OF TEACHING

*“Vernesson de Lyancourt must have been a very sound master and he seems to have eliminated from his teaching most of what was radically wrong in the theories of his predecessors.”*

Egerton Castle

A very clever, interesting, and useful novelty in de Lyancourt's practice was the use of different weapons for the pupil and coach. The master's weapon was lighter than the pupil's (to avoid fatigue of the master's arm while giving many lessons) and longer (which forced the pupil to keep the appropriate distance and perform long lunges). The pupil's weapon was not only shorter and heavier, but devoid of hand protection (protective rings and quillons); it forced the pupil to hold his weapon properly and, while parrying, to rely on his weapon's forte (controlling the opponent's foible with his forte). If the pupil did not parry properly, his master's weapon would glide along his blade, painfully hitting his fingers, reminding him of

the basic principle of defence with parry. Who knows, perhaps one should use such methods nowadays.

De Lyancourt began teaching fencing with the on-guard position and basic footwork. He started teaching the on-guard position with weapon in hand—“levée d’armes”—only after having conducted at least fifteen lessons devoted to footwork. It strongly reminds me of the outdated habit of certain modern coaches who, for many months, teach and perfect footwork without giving weapons to their pupils; this, of course, is a wrong practice because people join a fencing club to learn fencing and the sooner they get a weapon in their hands, the better—the first attempts to yield a weapon are very exciting and motivating for very young pupils.

Coming back to de Lyancourt’s methods, it should be stressed that in order to break the monotony of footwork, the Master interspersed footwork exercises with exercises developing—as we would say today—energy and co-ordination capabilities, ensuring, at the same time, fun, enjoyment, active rest, and psychological relaxation. It was a very good idea and I, in a way, follow his example, being firmly convinced that monotonous, unchanging exercises become boring and kill motivation. De Lyancourt’s mixed exercises—as he, himself, emphasised—developed, among young fencers, flexibility and gracefulness.

Next, the pupil was acquainted with basic weapon positions which, at the same time, constituted parries: the “prime”, “tierce”, and “quarte”, as taught by Besnard; the “seconde” (“pour le dessous”) and “quinte”, after the manner of la Tousche; and “septime” (“circle”), after le Perche.

In teaching parries, de Lyancourt was very realistic—he taught recognising the threatened line and insisted on the pupil choosing the appropriate parry on his own. He did not approve of verbal commands, like, “Parry fourth!”, “Parry sixth!” (one may apply this method only in the first stage of training, especially with children). According to de Lyancourt, the fencing master ought to—with full, “real” thrusts and lunges—“force” the pupil to choose and execute the appropriate parry; this advice from the great master is still very valid. Still today, many coaches imitate attacks in a very artificial manner—without full extension of arm, without any real danger to the pupil—and give an order to the pupil, “Parry!” Even if the pupil did not parry such a “residual” thrust, he would not be hit.

De Lyancourt warned against many other mistakes which are committed, even today, by some fencing coaches, such as applying completely unrealistic movements and artificially facilitating the pupil’s execution of parries, ripostes, and other actions (it never ceases to astonish me to see contemporary fencing coaches apply completely illogical movements; it seems to prove that the obvious thing is the most difficult to notice, and that Ignacy Paderewski was right in saying, “It is easier to destroy a thousand cities than to abolish a myth.”).

De Lyancourt warned coaches against the illogical and unrealistic practice of leaning forewards and waiting for the pupil’s thrust. On the contrary, when a pupil attacks or ripostes, the coach—acting realistically—ought to retire a little, as happens in a real bout, to induce more speed and reach from the pupil.

As I mention above, even nowadays many coaches, while conducting lessons, create completely unrealistic conditions and execute completely illogical movements. The bad effect of it is that pupils not only do not learn appropriately chosen and correctly executed actions, but they also do not develop speed of reaction, and do not learn—which is extremely important!—fast and accurate assessment of the tactical situation. Among the most commonly occurring mistakes are: a) demanding the pupil parry an attack that does not really endanger him; b) absolutely artificially facilitating the pupil’s hit by: leaning forward and waiting for the touch; openly exposing an area of target and waiting for the hit; leaning head and

trunk forewords after the pupil's parry, instead of escaping; c) reacting to the pupil's short and inefficient feint.

A few years ago, a well-known Ukrainian fencing coach—a two-time world champion and winner of many important competitions—conducted lessons during our training camp in Cetniewo. Most of his exercises were excellent: a great variety of actions, change of rhythm, great mobility. But, when it came to the crucial moment when the pupil was supposed to score a hit with an attack, riposte, or counter-attack, the coach would suddenly stop, stand on his toes, drop his arms behind him, and expose his breast forewords to be hit. When he asked me about my opinion of his lesson, and I told him about my observations, he was shocked, as it never occurred to him that he committed such a serious error. Who on earth, in a real bout, would do such a stupid thing? De Lyancourt, many centuries earlier, advised other coaches—logically and rightly—to act, in a lesson, realistically and, when the pupil is about to score a hit, rather go back than artificially expose one's breast.

Similarly illogical, manneristic, and harmful is a habit of many coaches who, at the very moment when the pupil must fix his thrust, “bang” the foible of the pupil's weapon with their own weapon. It is obvious—it ought to be obvious!—that a fencer ought to direct his weapon, and quickly and precisely fix the point in the opening area of target. “Banging” the pupil's weapon (a widespread habit among coaches and as stupid and difficult to eradicate as the springtime burning of grass which still persists in several countries in spite of many warnings and disastrous results) leads to the pupil's subconscious lowering of attention or even a complete exclusion of concentration.

Some coaches have a bizarre habit of catching the pupil's blade with their left hand and directing it against their own body. It is obvious that, in such conditions, pupils do not learn how to fix the point to score a hit. Vernesson de Lyancourt was a great opponent of this habit. He even asked the logical question, “Have you ever seen, in a real duel, an opponent who would catch your weapon with his left hand to direct it against his own breast?”

After bad training, there occurs a big disappointment in competition because a fencer who, in a lesson, faultlessly and efficiently parries unreal thrusts, becomes, when fencing against a real competitor, defenceless for the simple reason that his opponent fully extends his arm, wants to score a hit, and . . . hits. In a lesson, the pupil ought to learn—among other things—to differentiate between false, preparatory actions, and real ones. He should apply a parry only when the thrust is really meant to hit him.

The figure of Vernesson de Lyancourt is engraved on the beautiful copperplates of his splendid manual. The engravings depict duels, various thrusts, parries, lunges, and displacements with both fencers elegantly dressed in gentleman's attire. The lunge looks very “modern”. In the on-guard position, the feet are quite widely spaced with the trunk leaning slightly backwards; this is, perhaps to prevent an accidental hit in the face, as masks—as I have mentioned—were not yet used (fencing masks were really introduced only at the end of the XVIII century by Master le Boissière).

The fencing actions take place on spacious terraces with various, rich scenic backgrounds, different in each picture. Richard Cohen, in his recent book [3], gives a very colourful description of these copperplates:

“*Le Maître d'armes* has fourteen copperplate engravings. . . set against some of the most dramatic backgrounds in fencing literature: island castles on cliff tops here, towns and harbours there; in one a troop of cavalry spurs out of a burning village; in another a besieging army is blowing up a town's defences. In the most remarkable illustration of all, elegant gentlemen practice their sport while behind them a full-scale naval battle rages, with ships sinking and cannon smoke everywhere.”

In his book, de Lyancourt teaches how to fight against an opponent who stands immobile, one who moves forwards, one who retires, and against the various movements the opponent may execute with his weapon.

Facing an immobile opponent, one should—in the Master’s view—execute a sequence of various weapon movements (misleading the opponent) and then finish with an action resembling, in a way, parry-riposte, executed with one movement only—in other words, thrust with opposition (covered thrust). Present-day foilists often apply, as a preparation for a final attack, such wide, feinting movements to score a hit at the appropriate moment—very often fixing their point with a flick into the opening area of the opponent’s target. Here it is worth mentioning that the famous fencing master Danet [9] did not advise applying in duels thrusts with opposition—although such thrusts were used in practice bouts.

De Lyancourt also gives advice on how to reconnoitre the opponent at the beginning of a bout—his style of fencing, his favourite and most frequently used actions, his reactions when taken by surprise, etc. He advises, among other things, crossing the blades—that is, engaging the opponent’s blade, which facilitates orientation by “feeling of the blade” (“sentiment de fer”): reacting to tactile and kinaesthetic stimuli—and then a small retreat because, as he says, “there are such fencers who, as soon as they notice the opponent’s retreat, throw themselves far forwards, weapon arm extended, with a wild desire to harm their opponent” (it reminds me of the style of fencing of modern sabreurs). Fencing against such impulsive opponents, the best thing to do—according to the Master—is to execute a beat and feint of thrust by disengagement. The opponent, realising that the thrust (feint of disengagement) does not hit, surely will throw himself forwards, and then it is easy to hit him with a stop-hit with opposition. De Lyancourt describes as many as seven ways of executing this action. He indicates how, by a careful retreat, one may provoke the opponent’s risky and careless attack, in order to—being prepared for it—score a hit by stop-hit, straightening one’s legs at the knees and standing on one’s toes.

Against a retreating opponent, the Master advises moving forwards, under the cover of engagement and change of engagement, in order to—taking advantage of one’s own initiative, forward movement, and convenient distance—finish the action by hitting, preferably with a thrust with opposition (covered thrust).

Discussing beats (“battement”), de Lyancourt mentions a feint of thrust to head, which indicates that he did not recognise the conventional target limitations so very strictly respected in later years in foil fencing.

De Lyancourt recommends application of four simple parries and semi-circular parries (“demicercle”). He does not recommend application of circular parries, which he calls “parades en contre dégagement”; he forbids parrying with the left hand, which—a remnant of the old rapier fencing—was still often used.

De Lyancourt was one of the first masters to introduce cut-over thrusts (“coupé”). He taught a long, very modern lunge; and advised sometimes the use of the “pass”—an action beginning with a cross-over movement with the back leg—a forerunner of the fleche. He also taught—and these were remnants of old rapier fencing—voltes and semi-voltes, and—having in mind fighting with sharp weapons—disarming the opponent by catching his weapon with one’s left hand (but he discouraged parrying with the left hand).

It was customary for great masters of that period to write big treatises on fencing at the end of their fencing careers, fully taking advantage of their many years of practice. Vernesson de Lyancourt, however, taught fencing for nearly half a century after having written his book.

He enjoyed immense respect and admiration for many decades. He often repeated that, what he preached and taught, he had learned from his master—of whom he spoke with great gratitude and respect. This also—among other things—may be an example which young coaches ought to take to heart.

I have read the great work of the famous master many times and it always stirs my admiration and provokes consideration. Among other things, reading de Lyancourt's book—as well as watching lessons conducted by different coaches in many countries—makes me wonder why some coaches so stubbornly, and with such obviously pleasure, use actions, exercises, and methods so utterly anachronistic, illogical, and senseless. Here, I mean the already-mentioned silly habit of “banging” the pupil's blade at the moment he delivers the thrust, demanding parries against completely unrealistic strokes, reacting to completely illogical and unthreatening feints, and all other bad habits which I jokingly call “functional fixation”. All this always reminds me of the witty words of F. Schiller: “Against human stupidity, even the gods fight to no avail.”

Studying the life and work, views and methods of Vernesson de Lyancourt gives a very good example of how studying the history of fencing may be useful in many ways: a) knowledge of the past; b) a better understanding of the present; c) the necessity of giving up old anachronistic and inefficient views, methods, and actions; d) appreciation of the value of introducing new ideas; e) cultivation and development of the approaches, behaviours, views, and methods which are still valid and useful.

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