

Umbrella Fighting

This originally appeared as a series of posts on my blog, survive.philosoph.com

Part 1: Fencing Parries

Many years ago, someone tried to mug a friend of mine. My friend stabbed at the mugger's throat with his umbrella and with his other hand attempted to "*drive his nose up into his brain*".

Those of you with some knowledge of anatomy or martial arts, such as those who have read [my book](#), will know that you cannot drive the nose into the brain. It is, however, a very good defensive strike and my friend's spirit and tenacity was correct even if he did learn his fighting moves from novels.

The umbrella can be a viable weapon. In Robert Sheckley's "*Hunter/Victim*" there is a diverting passage where the protagonist is

trained to use an umbrella. In this scene Blackwell is being trained as an assassin before being sent to liquidate a drug dealer:

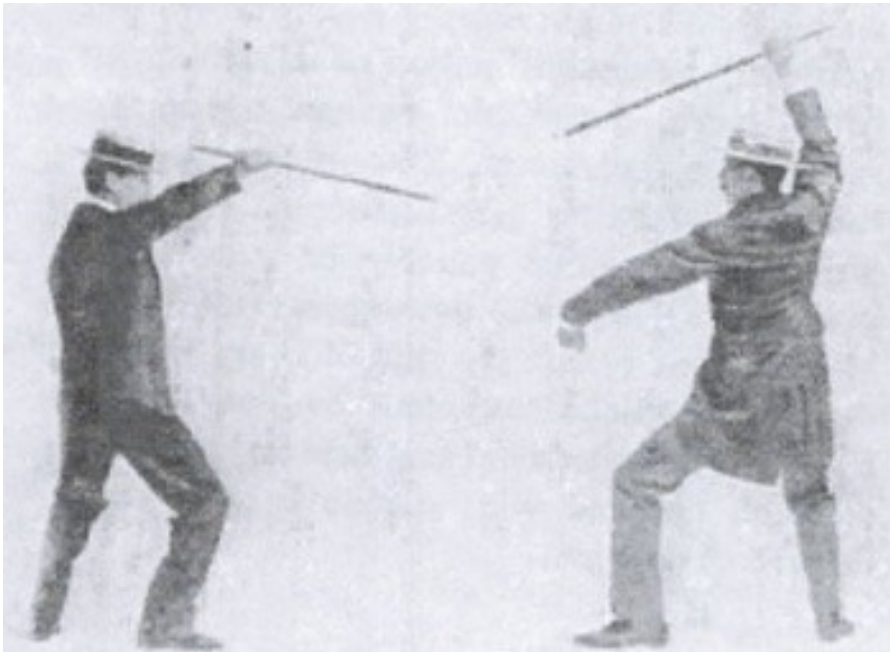
"For close-in work, you'll use a hand-gun, or one of those lethal toys our Development Section is always coming up with. But to my way of thinking, a walking-stick is better than any hand-gun made, and an umbrella is better yet."

McNab was an expert in umbrella fighting.

"I'm not talking about a sword-umbrella, mind. Too risky if you get caught. Too specialized. What I'm discussing here is a plain umbrella with a wood or bamboo shaft, though we have a model made of surgical steel that's the best of the lot. You can sharpen the point. And if the handle is rounded and weighted with lead, you've got a murder weapon at either end."

McNab demonstrated the basic moves: the feint in which you pretend to open the umbrella, the lunge for the target, the first riposte, the second riposte, the follow-up

with the weighted handle. Blackwell practised faithfully several times a day. He became proficient, though never got as good as McNab, who had spent a lifetime in rainy climates practising his trade.



Two ways immediately suggest themselves to use an umbrella defensively. One is to use it two-handed like a swagger stick, as described by Fairbairn and also in [my book](#).

The other is to use it like a fencing sword.

An umbrella and a fencing sword have several things in common.

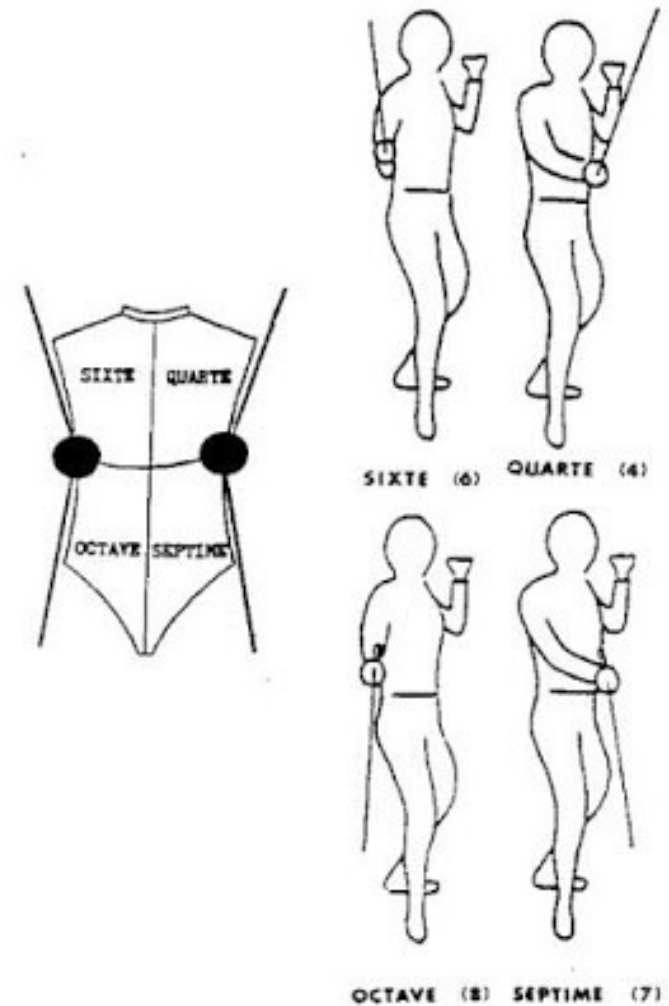
Both primarily use the point, and both are of little use for swung strikes. The umbrella is padded and the foil or *épée* is unsharpened. Even “sharp” fencing swords such as the rapier and smallsword were only sharp enough to deter the blade being grabbed and lacked the weight and bevel to produce a deep cut. With a cane or umbrella your opponent will be more aware that the weapon may be grabbed. The umbrella lacks a guard, so your hand is more vulnerable. It may be more prudent to make your opening moves with the umbrella not presented forwards. Shown left are a rear-guard and a hanging guard position used with a walking cane.

When looking at fencing swords as an inspiration for real world defensive moves, a few caveats must be kept in mind. The first

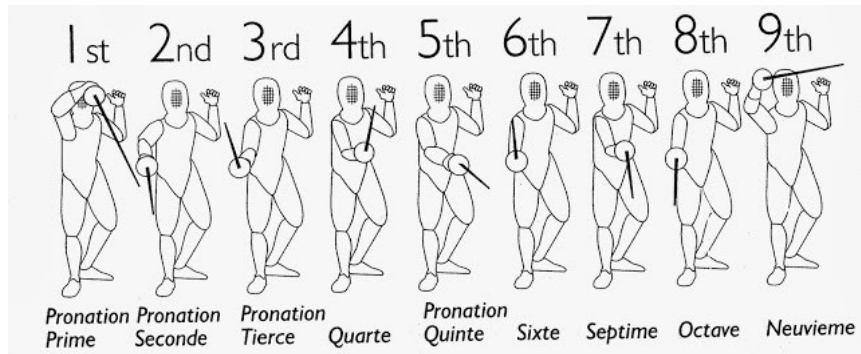
is that rapiers, smallswords and their derived fencing weapons were used a little differently to other swords. For most swords, a parry is taken on the flat or sometimes the back of the blade. With the rapier and smallsword, the parry is more commonly taken on the main edge or the outside of the blade. Modern fencing is a sport, and the weapons used are much lighter than their real weapon equivalents. Moves that can be executed with finger and wrist movements will be slower and require more strength with heavier or bulkier weapons. Sport fencing involves limited target areas. For the foil, hits can only be made on the torso. For the sabre only above the waist. The defensive moves taught for these weapons concentrate on defending these targets. Ырїе uses the whole body as a legitimate target but the fencer will have little experience against heavier or longer weapons.

Fencing is, of course, a broad topic. so

today's blog will just consider some of the parries possible with a fencing sword or an



object such as an umbrella.

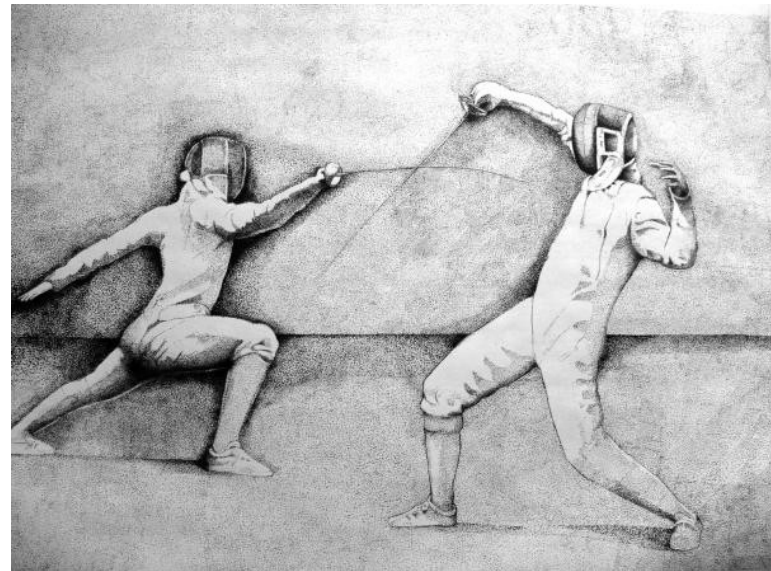


In [my book](#) I describe how defensive techniques can be considered to involve four quadrants: High Outside, Low Outside, High Inside and Low Inside. This can be seen to hold true for fencing. The characteristic feature is that since the fencing weapon (or broly!) attacks with the point, all of these defensive moves are made “in-line”, with the point directed towards the attacker for a quick counterattack.

The different parries are numbered in French and at first glance this seems to have no logic or order. The four most useful parries are:

- *Sixte/Tierce*: High Outside
- *Quarte/Carte*: High Inside
- *Septime*: Low Inside
- *Octave*: Low Outside

Just to confuse things further, the positions are in some instances different for foil, épée and sabre, depending on the target areas to be defended and the differing characteristics of the weapons.



The numbering system becomes a little

more logical if you consider the whole sequence in order.

The first parry is *prime* (*above, right*) and it is sometimes described as the parry you would be most likely to adopt if in the act of drawing your sword. Prime can defend the head and upper torso on the inside line and uses the hand in *pronation* (palm down, knuckles up). An inward parry from high seconde resembles prime.

The point is advanced towards the enemy and nearly opposite the weak-side elbow.

Prime is sometimes called "*looking at your watch*" parry which is helpful in remembering it. The hand would not usually raise higher than the forehead. The hand may be a little higher if defending the head when the enemy is taller.

When defending the head you should be able to easily see under the forte of your weapon.

From prime, the blade is swung like a pendulum to bring the point in line with a

target.

Seconde is a low outside parry with the hand in pronation. The point is directed downwards, relative to the guard but still points towards your foe. If you imagine that the act of drawing your sword was continued you can imagine that your sword that passed through prime might end up down and to your outside.

If the hand in seconde is moved inward so it hangs over the knee, it also defends against low inward attacks.

If you raise your point from seconde, you move into *terce* and can defend your high outside.

Your hand is still in pronation.

Hand should be breast height, in-line with the strong-side shoulder and the point at the level of the foe's eyes and about a hand-width to the outside of the nearest eye, which in this instance will be that on your stronger side. An alternate school of thought

is that the weapon should cross your centreline. From tierce this would put the point to the outside of the eye on your inner side.

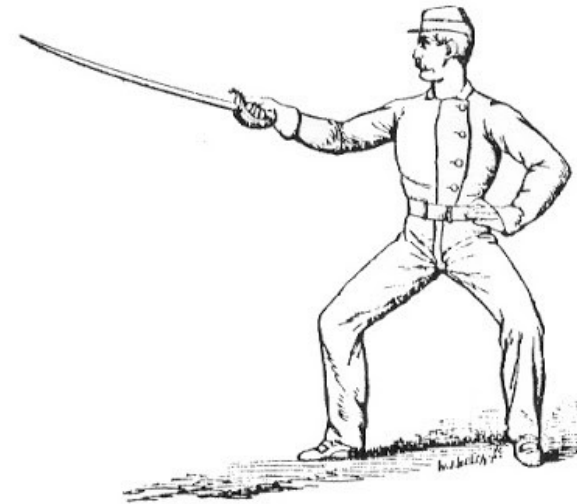


Engaging Guard in Tierce (Outside).

Tierce is one of the primary sabre parries and is used for all weapons that parry with the flat of the blade.

Fencing sabre sources often show tierce and quarte with the hand lower and the blade less horizontal. Our techniques are closer to йрйе.

Tierce is a recommended high outside parry for umbrellas since it is strong and the hand in pronation with the weight of the handle pushing up on it is less fatiguing.



Engaging Guard in Carte (Inside).

If you bring your sword from tierce across your body to parry on the high inside, you will have moved into *quarte* (aka *carte*).

This is the first of the parries that uses the hand *supinated*. (palm up, knuckles down) or part supinated.

The hand is on a line with your weaker-

side shoulder.

Like tierce, the hand is about breast level and the point at the level of and just outside of the foe's eye. This will be the eye on your weaker side, or that on your outer side if you prefer your weapon to cross the centreline.

Tierce protects the outside, but leaves the inner arm exposed. Quarte protects the inside of the body but exposes the outer arm. Thus, you must be adept at switching between the two.

Now you must imagine your foe tries to strike at your head on the outside and you raise your sword up to parry and defend your head. This is the *St. George's parry* or **quinte**. Strictly speaking, the point is a little higher than the guard. If slightly lower, it becomes a high



hanging parry. Ideally the point should still be directed towards your foe when parrying. This parry is so called

because St. George is so often shown in paintings with his sword raised above his head. The actual parry of quinte varies considerably between foil/йрѣ and sabre. For our purposes its variation as a head defence is most useful to us.

Sixte resembles tierce but has the hand in supination. Like tierce it is a high outside defence. Sixte was one of the last fencing parries to be formally named and it reflects that a different part of the blade is used to parry with a rapier/smallsword/foil/йрѣ than with other swords. Switching from sixte to quarte or the reverse is probably a fraction quicker since the hand does not change position.

For fencing sabre, sixte is a parry to a high attack to the inside line.

Septine is the low inside parry and can be thought of as quarte with the point dropped. The hand is in supination.

Move your hand across from septine to the low outside and you have the parry of *octave*. This is a supinated version of seconde.

There is also a parry of *neuvieme*, which resembles a high septine. Neuvieme also gets described as a variant of octave with the blade behind the back. Other fencers describe the “*ninth parry*” as distance, which is a useful reminder that evasion and avoidance are often the best defence.

From seconde, the hand may be raised to bring the hand and forearm in line with the strong-side shoulder. This is like tierce, but the point is kept lower than the hand and extends forward and across the body. This is known as **high-seconde** parry.

High-seconde or hanging parry is an effective parrying position. Attacks that

come over the blade are parried with prime and those aimed under are parried with seconde or high-second.

To minimize fatigue, the hand is kept near shoulder level and only raised higher, or dropped, as necessary.

With a blunt weapon, there is a danger that the weapon may be grabbed if high-second is used as a guard position. However, as a parry, high-seconde it is easily executed from a low guard and is the starting position for a number of effective *ripostes* or counterattacks.

While the above list seems extensive, it is worth remembering that in his proposed manual for the battlefield use of the broadsword, [Sir Richard Burton](#) concentrated on just the tierce and quarte (“carte”) parries/guards for this weapon.

Low attacks were met by a low tierce or quarte, attacks to the head by a high version of tierce or quarte.

Tierce and quarte are also the starting position for thrusts.

If practicing to defend yourself with an umbrella. I would build your technique around these two parries/guards first.

Prime, seconde and high-seconde will also prove very useful.

With a sword, umbrella or any similar one-handed weapon it should be remembered that the section nearest the hand is the strongest and this is where attacks should be parried with.



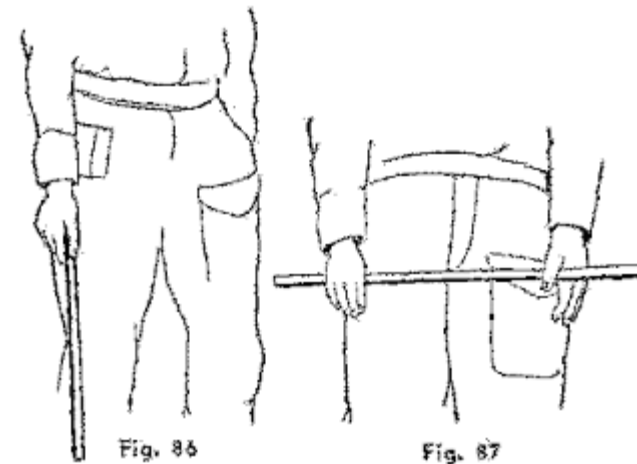
Unlike sport fencing, the free hand should be positioned over the chest to defend it.

This can be seen being done by Harvey Keitel, the moustached cavalryman above in a scene from *“The Duelists”*.

Part 2: Swagger Stick and Umbrella Fighting

In the previous section we considered rapier-related parrying actions.

Later sections will consider offensive actions and counters to your weapon being grabbed.



This section will briefly consider what I call “swagger-stick” techniques. I cover these in more detail in [my book](#), mainly on the section of bumper guards. This format

allows me to reproduce some of W.E Fairbairn's original artwork on the techniques.

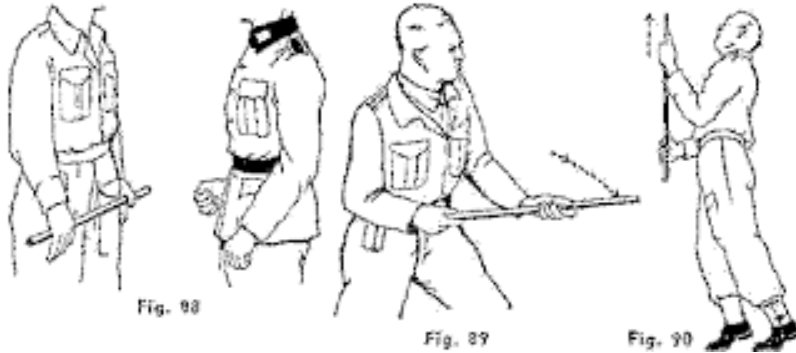


Fig 86 and 87 show how a stick or umbrella can be quickly brought up to the ready position. Simply swing the end up to contact the open palm of your other hand.

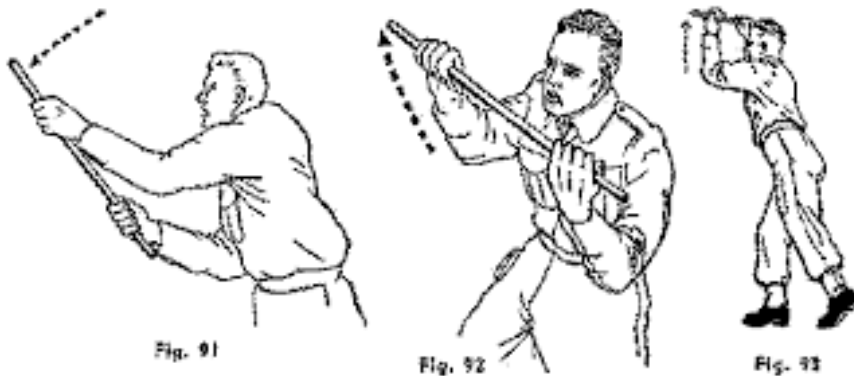


Fig 89 shows the point swung towards the aggressor so that it can be driven in like a bayonet. Fig 90 shows an upward thrust to the throat or under the chin.

Fig 91 shows a swinging strike with the point of the stick, while Fig 92 shows a swinging strike with the butt, which would be the handle of an umbrella. These two figures could just as easily illustrate parrying actions with the stick/umbrella.

When used this way, the strongest part of the stick is between the hands and that is the section used for parrying.

Fig 93 could be interpreted as a block to a downward strike to the head. Readers of [my book](#) will know that I'd prefer the stick to be angled for this so the defence has an element of deflection rather than strength against strength obstruction. Fig 93 is in fact illustrating a strike to the Adam's Apple region using the section between the hands. While this can be attempted with an umbrella this section is effectively padded

by the ribs and canopy, so effects will be limited. Be prepared to follow-up on any momentary advantage gained with the point or butt.

For more information on these and other defensive techniques, please see [my book](#).

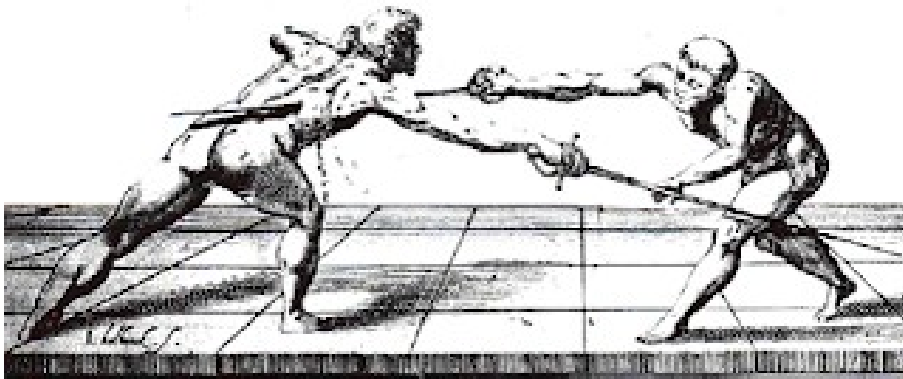
Function often influences form, so I was interested to come across [this](#). Fairbairn's teachings obviously influenced several officers to create "Assault Sticks" to replace their traditional swagger sticks.



"The description is as follows; The whole stick is 22 1/2" long, handle resembles an F-S knife handle, it is a brass pommel cap on the top 1" long, on the other end it is a brass and 2 1/2" steel pointed end. The stacked leather washers are on a steel core. The leather is in perfect condition and

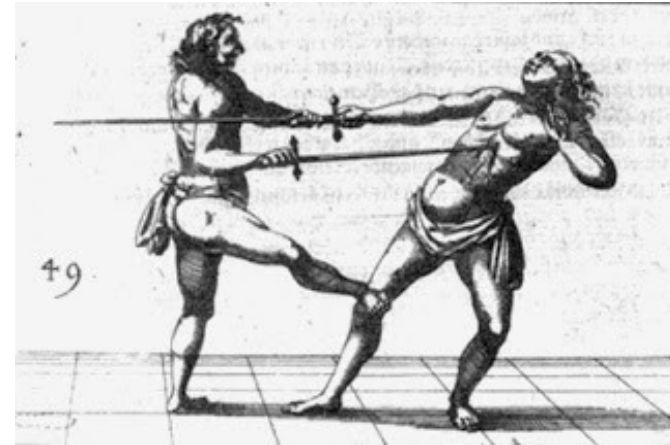
brown in colour. It is a leather lanyard that is 7" long. These are extremely hard to find, British and Canadian Officers carried these. This is a WW2 vintage assault stick”

Part 3: Commanding the Blade (or Brolly!)



Some olden fencing masters called it “Commanding the blade”. This was the action of grabbing a sword blade to control it. Previously I mentioned that rapier and smallsword blades were not particularly sharp. The need for a rigid, light thrusting blade precluded a blade shape that allowed a very sharp cutting edge. Such blades were

sharpened enough to facilitate penetration and deter the blade being grabbed. We know that some blades had some edge since there are accounts of duels being halted due to cuts to the hands.



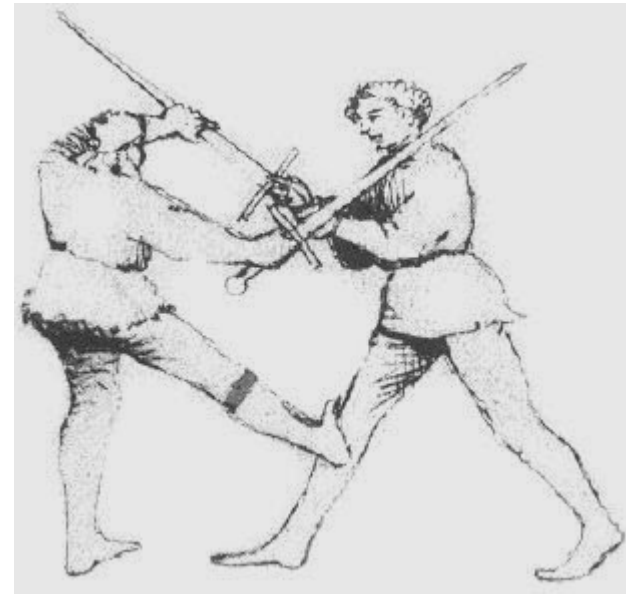
The wearing of gloves was quite common in duels. A gauntlet cuff prevented a point entering down the swordsman’s sleeve. Naturally enough, the free hand was also gloved and some styles of swordplay would use the free hand defensively (*“battre de main”*). A leather glove would provide ample protection against the modest edge of

a rapier or smallsword. Specially designed grasping gloves (*guanto di presa*) are known to have been used and included such features as palms covered in chainmail or backward facing scales that a tip could not get under. Contemporary instructors tell us that even a bare hand could safely grasp a blade, providing it was gripped securely so that no cutting action could be made.

If we look back to medieval instruction manuals, we see that gripping the blade did not start with rapiers. Cut and thrust broadswords are often shown with the blade being gripped. As well as being held by an adversary, the blade was also gripped by the user to execute the “*Murderstroke*”, which involved hammering an enemy with the hilt and guard.

Illustrations also show blades being grabbed so the sword can be used two-handed like a rifle with bayonet. (*Both are shown in the illustration above*).

Blades likely to be used against metal



armour were not generally sharpened to a fine edge, since it would rapidly become blunted or damaged. Hence such blades could be gripped with reasonable safety.

Most modern assailants would not think of grabbing a blade and I'd not recommend it. Blunt weapons such as batons, staffs and umbrellas stand a good chance of a grab being attempted, however.

While this article is about umbrellas, the techniques that will be discussed apply to other weapons too.



1) Weapon grabbed at the end by either one or both hands: If not already doing so, grab the umbrella with both hands. Breaking such a grip uses the counters to wrist grabs detailed in [my book](#), so I will not go into great detail here. Basically, you apply force against the attacker's thumb or

go under and to the outside of his hand. The length of the umbrella and your two-handed grip allows you to apply considerable force.

2) Umbrella grabbed in the middle with one hand: If not already done, grab the umbrella with both hands so his hand is between yours. Rotate the umbrella inwards like it was a sailing ship's wheel. This motion will take you onto the attacker's outside gate, avoiding any attack he was attempting with this free hand. The motion should break his grip or pull him off balance. If you block his advance with your inner leg this can be turned into a throwing action. From his side you may be able to strike him using the butt or point.

4) Umbrella grabbed two-handed with one or both hands outside yours: This is difficult since potentially the attacker has equal or greater leverage, so it is important to gain the initiative by acting rapidly. Rotate your

umbrella inwards as described already. If you encounter too much resistance release your upper hand and hammer-strike his face or head. Another technique is to step your nearer leg across the front of both of his. If your right is nearer step it over to the outside of his right foot. Sitting down with on your rear heel will apply all of your weight to the umbrella and pull him forward. Your leg prevents him stepping forward so if he keeps his grip, he will be pitched forward headfirst. If he releases the umbrella when you descend, ram one end up into his groin or solar plexus. Or hug his legs with both your arms and roll away to bring him down.

Part 4: Counter-Attack!

In the final part of our discussion of the umbrella as a defensive weapon it is time to consider the counter-offensive capabilities of the device.

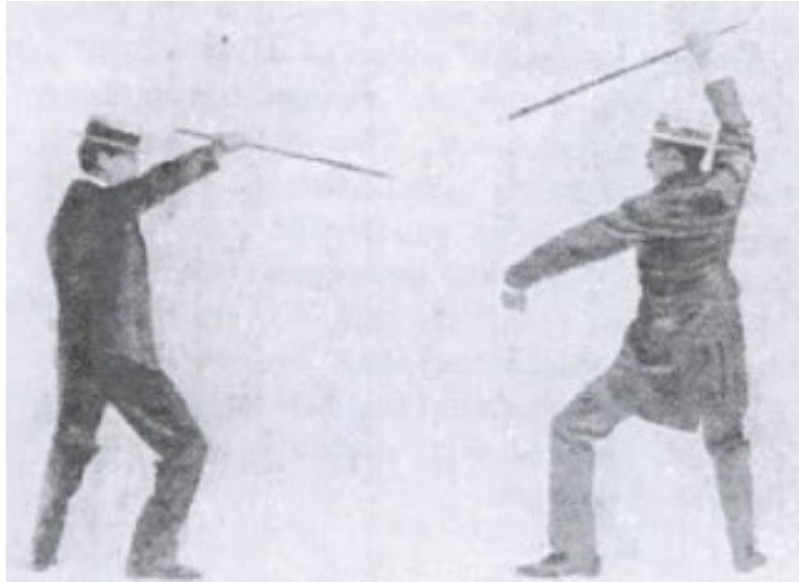
The use of the umbrella in the two-handed “swagger stick” grip has already been covered in an earlier section, as have the defensive moves, so here we will concentrate on the one-handed “rapier style” offensive techniques. Some of the techniques we will discuss will appear familiar from sport fencing but in certain details there will be differences, as will become apparent.

To make learning the basic principles



easier we'll start off with a ready stance. If used for self-defence you will probably need to go straight into an attack when

threatened. The ready stance with sword shown later is a training aid.

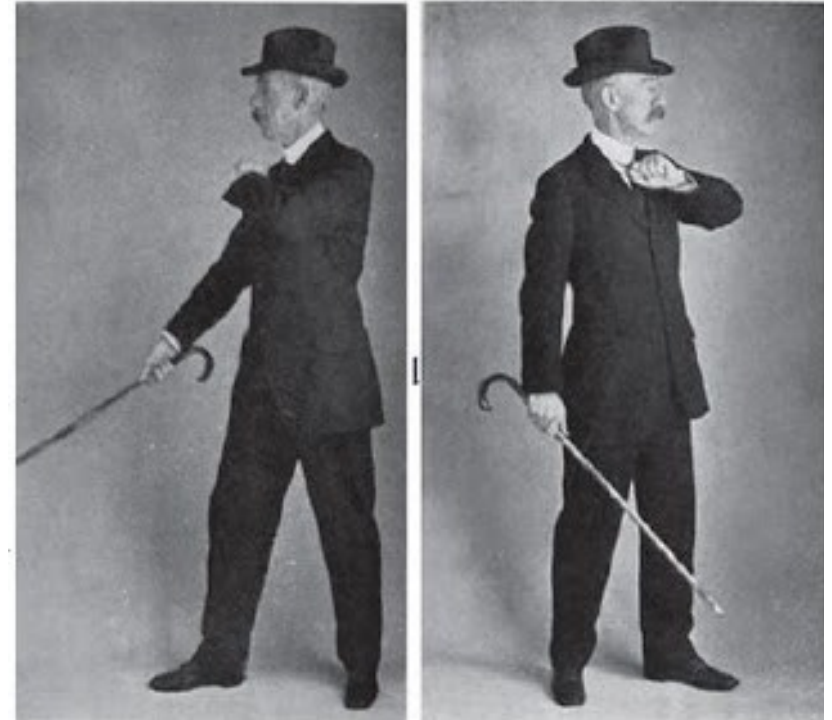


High Hanging Guard (*left*) Rear Overhead Guard (*right*)

Against an actual enemy, you are better advised to use the rear overhead stance shown at the image above or the low guard positions shown in the pair of photos following.

Note position of the free arm.

All these positions reduce the chances of the umbrella being grabbed.



Low Guard

From these guard position, you can step back into a two-handed or sword-style stance as the enemy advances.



Ready Posture

To learn the thrust, adopt the ready posture with your strong side advanced. Your feet will be between 18" and 24" apart.

In his book on broadsword, Sir Richard Burton defines the width of the stance as "two foot-lengths", which gives us a convenient measure by which to proportion this to smaller or larger individuals.

Your knees should be slightly bent, and

your weight evenly distributed.

You will be higher and more erect in posture than a sporting fencer.

Your strong hand, holding the broolly, should raise to adopt the position of tierce. The point will be about level with your weak-side eye and your strong-hand level with the chest on the strong-side.

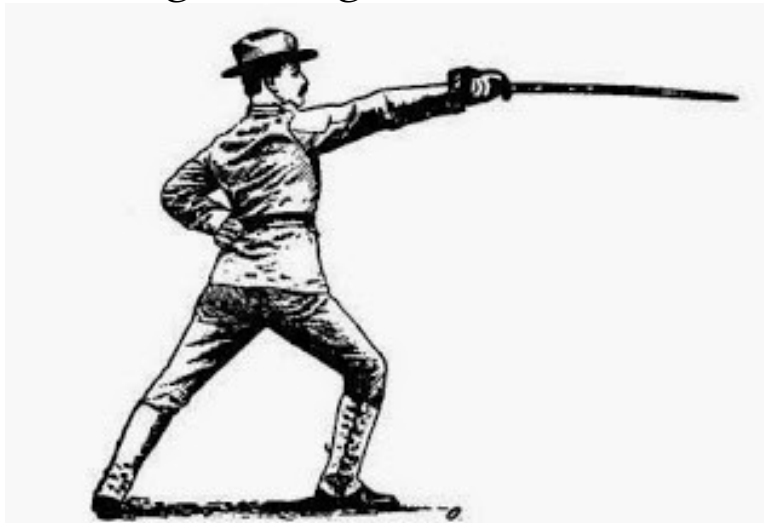
Your elbow should be down and in-line with your hip rather than sticking out. It should be comfortably bent and about a fist width from your torso.



Your weak-side hand will be positioned over your chest ready to defend, as Harvey Keitel is kind enough to demonstrate for us

again.

Next, we learn the lunge. Step your lead/strong-side foot forward so there is four foot-lengths distance between your feet and your rear leg is straightened.



At the same time extend and straighten your lead arm to thrust.

The point should travel the shortest possible course to its target. The point should reach the target before the lead foot touches the ground.

This action may raise your hand a fraction higher than the point and rotate your palm outward if made from tierce. (For a thrust from quarte the palm may become turned outward.)

A thrust made from tierce will have the hand in line with the strong-side shoulder. A thrust from quarte will be aligned with the weak-side shoulder and made with the palm upward.

Thrusts following prime, seconde, and high-seconde parries are made in tierce or quarte, depending on target and direction,

In sport fencing, combat stops when one player lands a lunge. In self-defence, this will not happen so regardless of if you hit your target or not, a lunge must be followed by an immediate withdrawal. This is why the lunge we are learning is shorter ranged than that of the sporting fencer.

If you are adept at fencing moves such as the lunge or *flèche* use them but be wary of overreaching yourself or compromising your

ability to withdraw quickly.

Immediately draw back your arm and lead foot, stepping back into a guard stance.

The withdrawal is made by bending your rear knee and springing back off your lead foot. Your weapon should move back into a guard position.

It is recommended that you gain proficiency by practicing the lunge and other footwork without the arm actions.

As well as lunging, you also need to be able to move about.

The basic movement is the sliding step. Move the foot closest to the direction you want to go, place it down and then adjust the other foot.

Longer-ranged movements are made with the passing step. Step forward or outward with the rear leg then bring the other leg forward to resume the lead.

These actions are detailed in [my book](#) so I will not cover them further here.

Sporting fencing is linear and performed

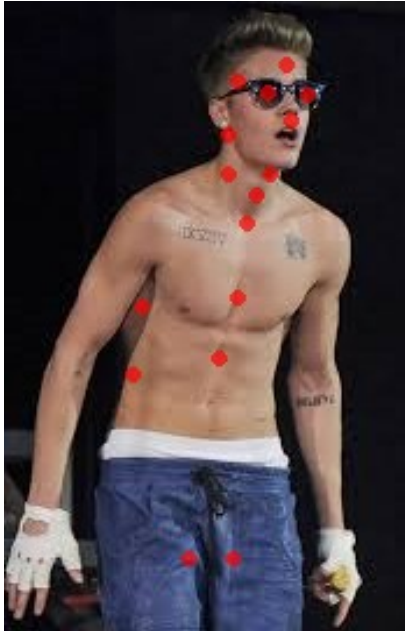
on a narrow strip of floor. Self-defence will involve more lateral movement so utilize the Pa Kua and Ginga footwork detailed in my book to circle a foe or avoid attacks. The *Inquartata*, *Volte*, *Demi-Volte* or *Passata Sotto* moves described in my book in the knife-fighting section are also applicable to umbrella fencing.

The tip of a typical umbrella is not sharp. Usually, it is a narrow but blunt-ended tip and this is quite interesting from a martial point of view.

In modern sporting foil, the torso is the only legitimate target area. When rapiers and smallswords were used as weapons the chest area was actually a target area to be avoided if possible. There was too great a possibility of a penetrating blade becoming stuck.

This is not a problem with the tip of an umbrella, however. It can apply considerable force with little danger of deep penetration, making it highly effective

against the ribs, sternum or the intercostal muscles. The tip also has a considerable effect against softer areas but is best applied at the more sensitive areas.



Our illustration shows just some of the potential target areas. The points marked on the legs are the femoral nerves and arteries. Psychologically, a hit to this area has a similar effect to one directed at the genitals but it is easier to inflict a solid hit here.

If you can get behind the attacker, the kidney region is a good target, but a similar effect can be achieved by hitting the side of the torso as marked.

The targets on the neck and head are more dangerous and should be attacked only if your life is in danger.

So far in this article we have considered the point of the umbrella.

The handle in your hand can be used to strike should your attacker get within the range of your point. Switching to the two-handed moves detailed in the previous section is another option if range decreases.

A number of other techniques can be used with an umbrella.

The umbrella can be used as a single-handed club, striking with the handle. This may be done if the umbrella is being gripped near its middle and there is insufficient time to adopt the fencing or two-handed holds. How effective this will be will depend on the weight, shape and

construction of the handle.

Many umbrellas have a hooked or crook handle and this can possibly be used to hook a neck or ankle and pull an attacker off-balance. A one-handed grip provides reach, but a two-handed grip gives more power and permits a quicker follow-up move.

Another move that can get a foe off-balance is to thrust the length of the broolly between their legs and move it to trip them.

Umbrellas can also be opened, providing a screen or shield.



In 1838, the Baron Charles de Berenger advocated opening an umbrella to distract and hinder an attacker while a handgun was brought into play.

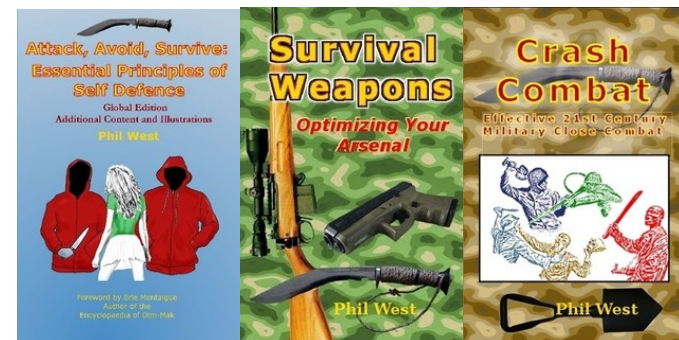
We also find references to umbrellas being carried by the bodyguards of the presidents of France and the Philippines.

A company even offers examples made with kevlar fabric.

While these will not stop bullets, they can defend against lesser missiles such as bricks, acid and eggs.

An opened umbrella may also deter an aggressive animal such as a dog.

The Books



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