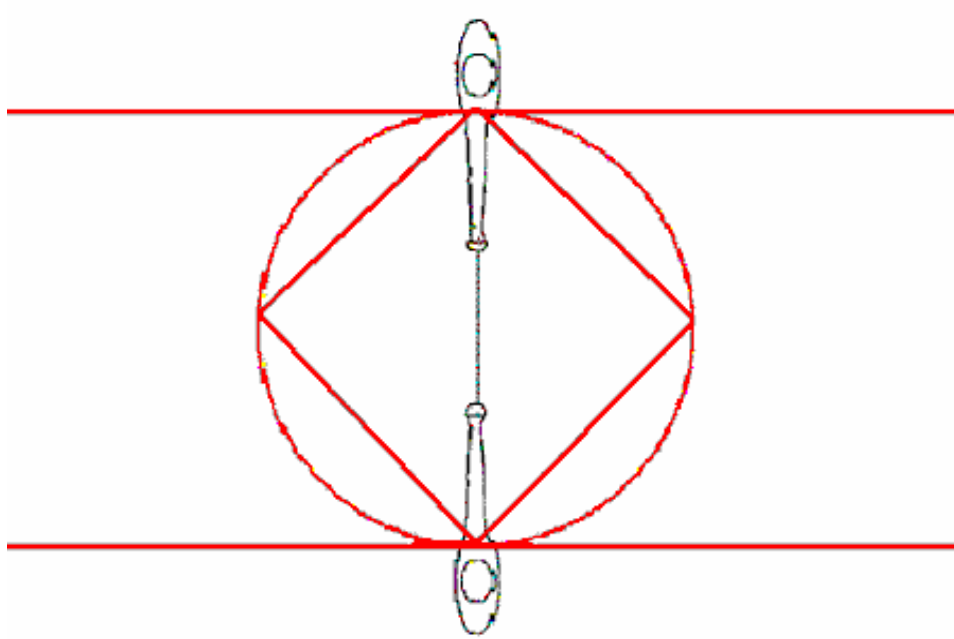


El Primer Fundamento

The First Foundation



The Body of man is the first foundation of the Destreza.
~ Carranza

A method for practicing and teaching Spanish footwork – Part II

By Puck and Mary Curtis
August 4, 2006

This is the second in a series of articles on Spanish fencing and builds on the information found in *El Círculo y la Cruz*.

The following is a work containing both translation and interpretation of primary sources that reflects the authors' current understanding. The authors welcome critical commentary and peer review.

If you have questions or comments, please send them to:
Destreza@gmail.com

The Spanish system of swordplay is sometimes called *La Verdadera Destreza*¹ or “The True Art.” It has a modern reputation for being mysterious, arcane, and overly-complicated. In his book The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe, Dr. Sydney Anglo reinforces this idea by stating:

Carranza assumed that, in order to achieve mastery of the sword, it was necessary to understand primary causes. Unfortunately, since he considered almost every kind of knowledge (mathematics, perspective, anatomy, medicine, astronomy and music) relevant to fencing, it was inevitable that his book should grow into a vast, rambling and, ultimately, rather crazy edifice.

Perhaps the question should be, “Are these subjects relevant to fencing?” These topics were already part of the education of a Renaissance intellectual. For example, Leonardo Da Vinci’s notebooks cover philosophy, music, astronomy, naval warfare, perspective, and many other topics.

Mathematics, perspective, anatomy, and medicine directly affect fencing and our understanding of combat. Astronomy is the study of objects in motion and existed well before modern physics. There has never been a doubt that physics affects swordplay.

Miyamoto Musashi uses carpentry as an analogy for swordplay even if the two subjects seem entirely unrelated:

The attainment of the carpenter is that his work is not warped, that the joints are not misaligned, and that the work is truly planed so that it meets well and is not merely finished in sections. This is essential.

Similarly, Carranza uses music as an analogy not only for fencing, but also for a teaching method. Here, he echoes the sentiments of Musashi:

...the Maestro should imitate the Musicians who when they tune their instruments, stretch some strings and relax others until they have tuned the instrument perfectly, and they tune in agreement with the rules and proportions of music; because if one raises all the strings at one point or lowers them all in another they would not make the Harmony that results with each one in its place,...

Perhaps Carranza believed that having a sound understanding of these subjects would give the student a strong foundation for the study of fencing. Likewise, the mathematical demonstrations he presents in his treatise are similar to the ones still used by fencing teachers today. While the theory behind the system has the same depth and complexity of any well-developed martial art, *La Verdadera Destreza* is based on simple ideas that become subtle in practice.

¹ *Destreza* is defined in the *Academia Autoridades* (volume D), 1729 – Art of defense. s.f. Ability, art, beauty and propriety with which one does something.

The Circle

One of the most commonly maligned facets of the Spanish system is the belief that the system is tied to a magical circle, occult knowledge, or mathematics so complicated as to be useless. In his book El Buscon, Francisco de Quevedo satires the Spanish circle:

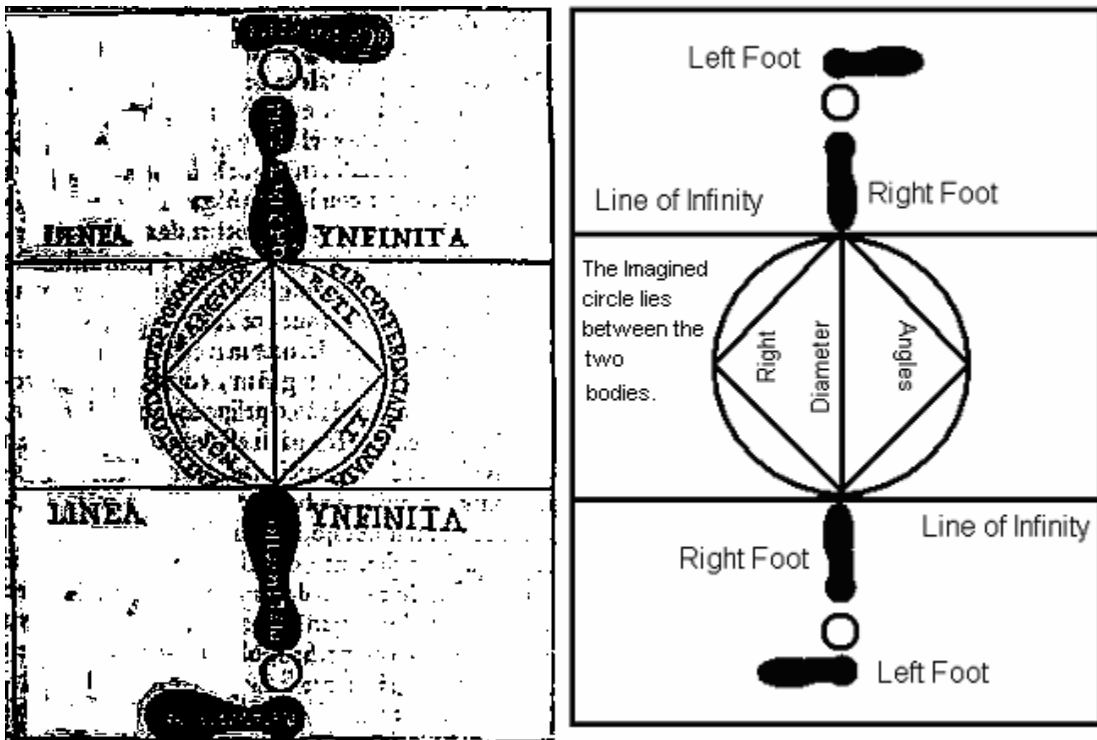
And he started to make such a long explanation that it impelled me to ask him what subject he was versed in. He told me that he was a true swordsman and that he could do it well anywhere. I, moved with laughter, told him:

-Well, truthfully, from what I saw your grace doing in the country before, I took you more for a sorcerer, seeing the circles.

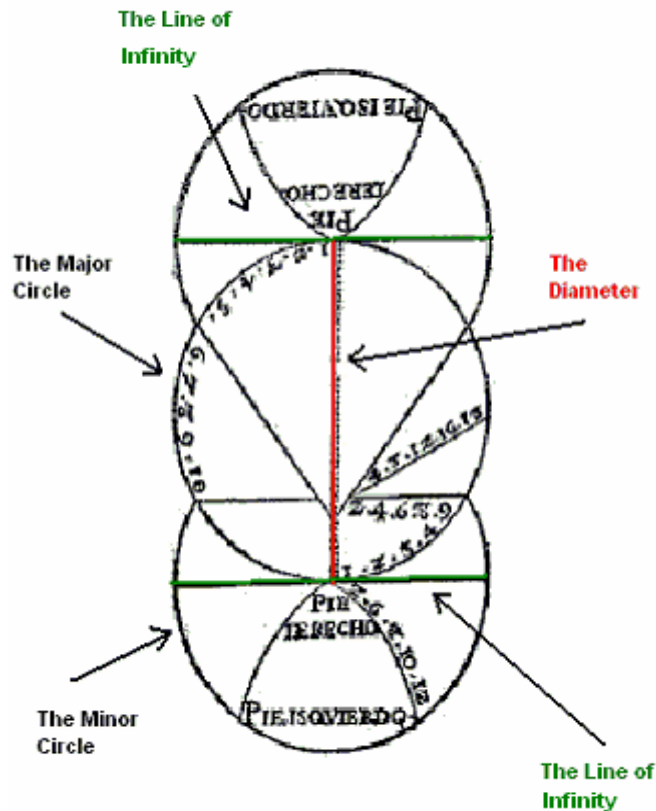
-That –he told me- was what a technique by the fourth circle with the greater compass offered me, continuing the sword to kill the opponent without confession, because he does not say who did it and I was putting it in mathematical terms.

Quevedo's comedy is typical of the criticism directed at the Spanish school, but far from being magical, the Spanish Circle is one of the tools used by Carranza and others to simplify the teaching of distance, footwork, and angulation.

Pacheco's Circle from The Greatness of the Sword



Carranza's circle from *Philosophia* with labels in English



These imaginary circles are meant to be viewed from above, describing the placement of the feet in relation to the opponent and Carranza defines two of them.

The first circle is called the *Major Circle*² which both opponents share. The Major Circle's size is defined by the distance between the leading feet of the two opponents.

The line labeled in red along the center is called the *Diameter*³ which represents the proper fencing distance for two opponents. The Spanish call correct fencing distance the *Measure of Proportion*⁴.

The lines labeled in green are called the *Lines of Infinity*⁵. You can walk down these lines forever and never compromise proper fencing distance. If neither fencer crosses the Lines of Infinity, neither fencer will be able to strike the other.

² From Carranza's *Philosophia* – "That the major Circle is the space that there is between the opponent's right foot and mine, and the minor is that which there is from the right foot of each one to the left"

³ "The line of the Diameter is the line that crosses the entire circle." from *Compendio de la Filosofía y Destreza de las armas*

⁴ "To measure the swords is to choose a means of proportion." from *Compendio de la Filosofía y Destreza de las armas*

⁵ See Pacheco's circle in *The Greatness of the sword*.

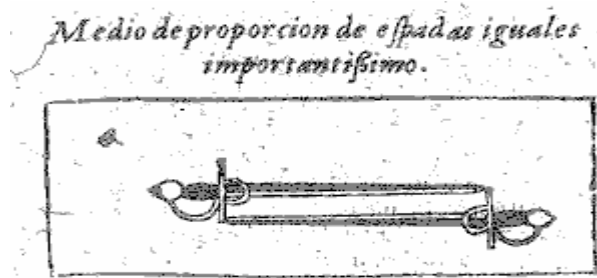
The second circle is the *Minor Circle*⁶ which is defined by the swordsman's feet. In the image you can see the foot positions labeled as *PIE DERECHO*, (right foot), and *PIE ISQUIERDO* (left foot).

The Diameter and the Measure of Proportion

How long is the Diameter? What is the Measure of Proportion (correct fencing distance)?

Don Luis Pacheco de Narváez gives specific instructions about proper fencing measure. The tip of your opponent's sword should be no closer than the crossbar of your own sword. If your blade is shorter than your opponent's, you set the distance based on the longer blade. The following images from Pacheco's Greatness of the Sword demonstrate the correct distance.

Swords of equal length



Measure of proportion when the swords are of equal length (very important).⁷

Diestro⁸ with a shorter blade



Measure of proportion of a shorter sword versus a longer sword.⁹

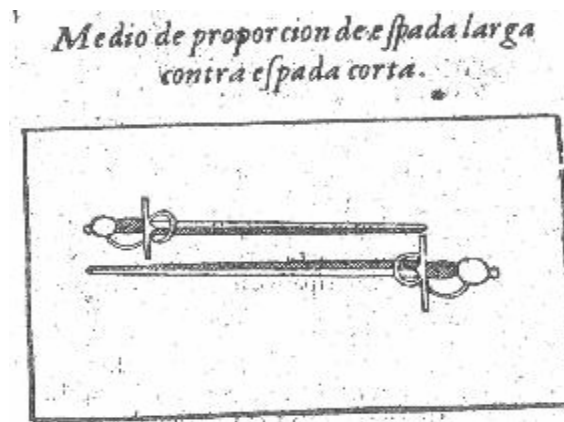
⁶ From Carranza's *Philosophia* – "That the major Circle is the space that there is between the opponent's right foot and mine, and the minor is that which there is from the right foot of each one to the left"

⁷ "Medio de propocion de espadas iguales importantísimo."

⁸ *Diestro* literally means right-handed, but the word also denotes skill. In the context of *La Verdadera Destreza*, it refers to a swordsman who has skill and practices the True Art of Defense

⁹ "Medio de propocion de espada corta contra espada larga."

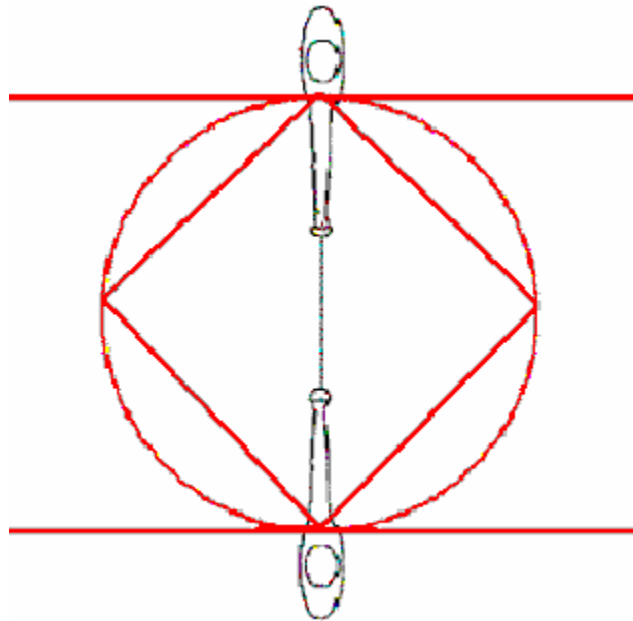
Diestro with a longer blade



Measure of proportion of a longer sword versus a shorter sword.¹⁰

Note: Pacheco's proper distance changes depending on who has the longer weapon. If you have a shorter blade, you want to keep your adversary's longer blade at distance. If you have the longer blade, you want to close the range slightly with your opponent.

Two Diestros find the Measure of Proportion within Pacheco's imaginary circle



¹⁰ "*Medio de propocion de espada larga contra espada corta.*"

Drill 1 - Finding the Measure of Proportion

Now that you understand the Measure of Proportion (proper fencing distance), practice your footwork with a partner.

1. Face your partner with a blade in the Spanish stance.
2. Check the range by reaching out to touch your partner's crossbar with the point of your sword. If your opponent can reach past your crossbar while still in stance, you are too close.
3. Make any corrections that are necessary and then try doing mirrored footwork drills together. Use some of the simple footwork patterns first, and then try the more complicated ones.
4. If your opponent gets too close, correct the distance with your next step.

Build on this Drill

1. Have your partner assume an Italian stance. Check the range by having your partner extend his blade to touch your crossbar as you did in the previous drill. Walk through footwork with your partner and have him periodically extend his arm so you can verify that you are using the correct Measure of Proportion.
2. Try having one person act as a leader while the other tries to maintain the proper distance by following the leader's random footwork. Start slowly and increase the speed.
3. Try the drill with blades of different length. Notice how the goal of each fencer is different as they try to control the distance.

Learning to control the range is an important part of the Spanish system. Soon your defense will be based on your ability to control the measure.

Lateral Movement in Fencing

In his book, Great Representation of the Art and the use of Fencing¹¹ (1610), Ridolfo Capo Ferro states:

I do not know that stepping sideways serves other than to make a good show, and display animosity, and to scout out the strength of the adversary; when somebody goes to put himself in guard in this fashion of stepping, you will be able to avail yourself of all the narrow and just paces, although in my judgment in this the ordinary pace still carries the boast.

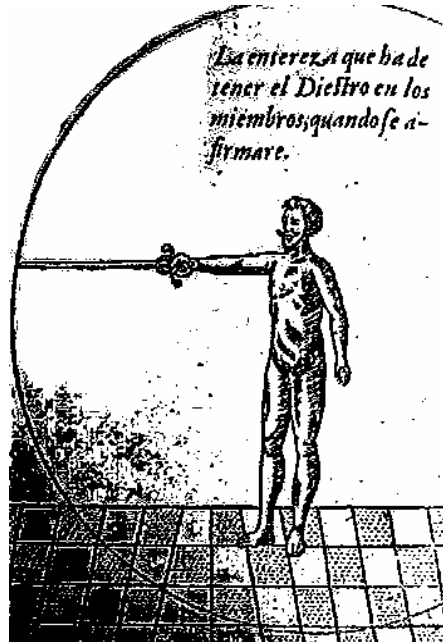
In the Italian system any action is defined by tempo, or the time required to make a movement. Stepping sideways does not take you any closer to your target and it gives your opponent a tempo to act against you. By this measure, lateral footwork could seem inferior, but that is not necessarily the case if you use it well.

¹¹ Gran simulacro dell arte e dell uso della scherma di Ridolfo Capo Ferro di Cagli as Translated by Jherek Swanger and William Wilson

The Stance and the Shoulder

It is time to take another look the Spanish stance that Pacheco illustrates in his text.

Stance from The Greatness of the Sword¹²



*The rectitude that the swordsman should have in his limbs when he assumes his stance.*¹³

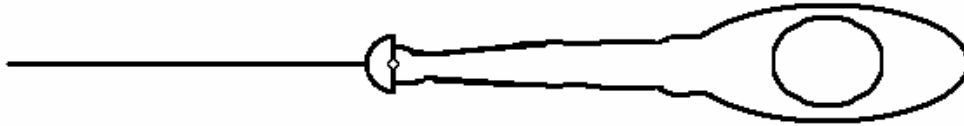
Note that the circle defined in the image shows the maximum amount of reach when you extend your arm forward. This is another way of saying that the shortest distance between any two points is a line, which brings us to a question: If the shortest distance is a line, where does the line begin? Is it the sword? Swords do not attack people without someone holding them so it cannot be *merely* the sword. In Pacheco's image, the center of the circle is the lead shoulder, and we can show this to be true by swinging the sword in the same arc he describes in the image. If we understand that the reach of all attacks is based on the sword shoulder, how can we use this information?

Most fencers present their body in profile with their sword shoulder forward to maximize their reach and limit the exposure of their body to attacks. You can see examples of this in the Spanish school, but it is also true of Italians like Capo Ferro and Giganti.

¹² *Libro de las grandezas de la espada* by don Luis Pacheco de Narváez

¹³ "La entereza que ha de tener el Diestro en los miembros, cuando se afirmar."

A fencer in profile



Pacheco warns against attacking directly down the Diameter and into the opponent's blade.

...along the typical line of the diameter you can also attack, with some extremes of the body, and arm: but it is not as safe as the others. And I am of the opinion (because of the experience that I have) that you should separate from it, that which you can: because in addition to having few propositions, or techniques, that one can do along it, there is a lot of risk, thus because the bodies will be able to come together, as many times has been seen one man hugging with another, and having greater strength to throw his opponent to the ground, and this being cause to kill him, ...¹⁴

By sidestepping away from the sword shoulder we can gain an advantage.

Note: The following image shows the lethal target areas exposed by the profiled stance in red:

Profiled fencer facing a threat

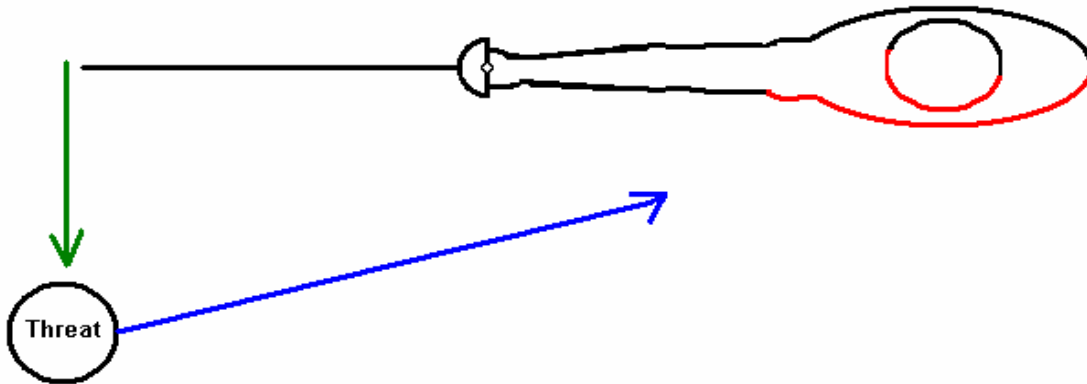


In the preceding image, the fencer's blade provides some protection from an attack and the profiled stance minimizes the target area. However, a side step to the right side can expose the fencer's torso to an attack and possibly avoid the opponent's blade.

¹⁴ From Pacheco's *Grandezas de la espada* page 60.

Note: The lethal targets are shown in red.

Profiled fencer facing a threat after the opponent takes a side step



Note: We can create a similar diagram showing the effect of a side step to the left.

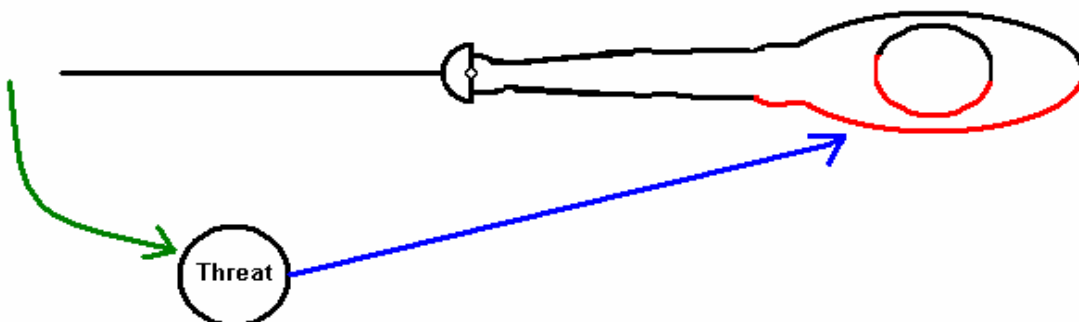
This example demonstrates that when a fencer steps off the center line, he can expose more of the target's body to attack and may be able to avoid their defense as well.

There are two serious drawbacks to the direct side step. The first is time. The fencer sacrifices some time taking the step and the opponent may strike before the fencer can take advantage of the new position. The second drawback is measure. By stepping directly to the right, the fencer increases the distance to the lethal target.

A more effective step is a circular step that takes you both closer to the target and off the centerline to expose the larger striking surface in one motion.

Note: The lethal targets are shown in red.

Profiled fencer facing a threat after a circular step forward



This circular step addresses the problem of measure, but does not address the problem of tempo. This question becomes irrelevant if the opponent lunges. If we assume that both fencers can move at the same time, the circular step can work as a single-action counterattack to a lunge and provides both good distance and an excellent opening to the opponent's torso.

Keep in mind that moving away from an attack (voiding) may not be an effective defense without *some* blade work to accompany it. When a Diestro uses curved steps to counterattack, he closes the line of attack with his blade as he steps and keeps his point in line. The lunging attack is deflected as the Diestro strikes in a single action counterattack.

Note: Closing the line with the blade is different than using a parry to defend your body. The blade creates a wall that guides the opponent's attack along its original course and prevents it from changing direction. The actual defense is the step away from the line of attack; closing the line is a way of controlling where the enemy's blade may travel. I like to call this "parrying with your feet." Indirect counteroffensive footwork is a skill worth practicing.

Drill 2 - Parry with your feet

Try the following unarmed drill to practice defensive footwork. It simulates a simple thrusting attack to the body on the inside line. In this drill, your partner takes the role of a *Vulgo*¹⁵ (a common fencer) while you take the role of a *Diestro* (a skilled fencer).

1. Without swords, start in the Spanish stance with your weight centered and a partner facing you.
2. The Vulgo steps forward to simulate an attack.
3. As the Vulgo steps forward, the Diestro steps to the right side away from the attack with the right foot. Pre-turn your right foot to point at your opponent when it lands.
4. Finally, step with the left foot to return to the Spanish stance with your weight centered.

Note: It may feel awkward to do this while standing perfectly upright. I find that withdrawing the hips an inch or two moves my center of gravity forward slightly, which makes this motion much easier.

Note: This is not a lunge. If this starts to feel like a lunge, there is something wrong. Try taking a shorter step.

Start slowly with this drill and increase your speed as you become more comfortable. It may help to have the floor marked so you can monitor where you are stepping. Avoid

¹⁵ In Carranza's time, a common or plebian fencer could be called a *Vulgo*. In our own training we use the terms *Diestro* (skilled swordsman) and *Vulgo* (common fencer) to simulate the winner and loser in a drill respectively.

stepping backwards when attacked, as retreating makes it more difficult for you to counterattack.

When you find that sidestepping becomes natural, try taking a curved step forward and to the right side to gain a better reach during the counterattack. You do not need to step far forward when your opponent lunges.

Build on this Drill

1. Try using circular steps instead of angular steps to move away from the attack.
2. What happens when you step only a few inches or less? Do you still have an advantage? (You should have an advantage, but you may still feel threatened. When you do this technique with a blade, you will have the line closed and that should feel more protected.)
3. Try having the Vulgo vary the timing of the step.
4. Try varying the position of your upper body. What happens if you lean forward slightly and pull your hips back as you step? (When leaning forward, do not displace your upper body by more than 1 and ½ feet.)
5. Try bringing your left hand forward as you step. Could you use it to close the line if you held a dagger or small shield in your hand? Could you use it to catch a cloak if your opponent threw one at your face?
6. Try getting into stance and have a partner throw a fencing gauntlet at your chest. Use the footwork described above to avoid the attack. Start slowly and increase the speed of the throw until the footwork becomes natural. (Avoid making strange dodging actions with your upper body to avoid the glove. Flinching can be used by an opponent during a fight.)

Practicing this footwork is important and it serves as a foundation to many of the techniques. Remember that we are going to add some blade work later to help to cover the adversary's line of attack.

Circular Movement in Fencing

Capo Ferro also specifically addresses opponents that circle clockwise in his treatise:

Because your adversary could easily succeed in gaining the sword against you from the inside by circling, in such case you will immediately disengage your sword through to the outside, carrying your left leg diagonally accompanied by your right, toward the right side of your adversary, putting the point of your sword in a straight line which is pointed at the enemy's right shoulder, and he coming from outside in order to gain it anew, in that coming you will disengage under his blade, and will strike him with a thrust in quarta, advancing your right leg forward into extraordinary pace.

It is important to notice that Capo Ferro views circular footwork as a threat and rather than address it by citing a general principle, he provides a specific counter. In this case, his counter is a double-disengage with accompanying footwork followed by a lunge.

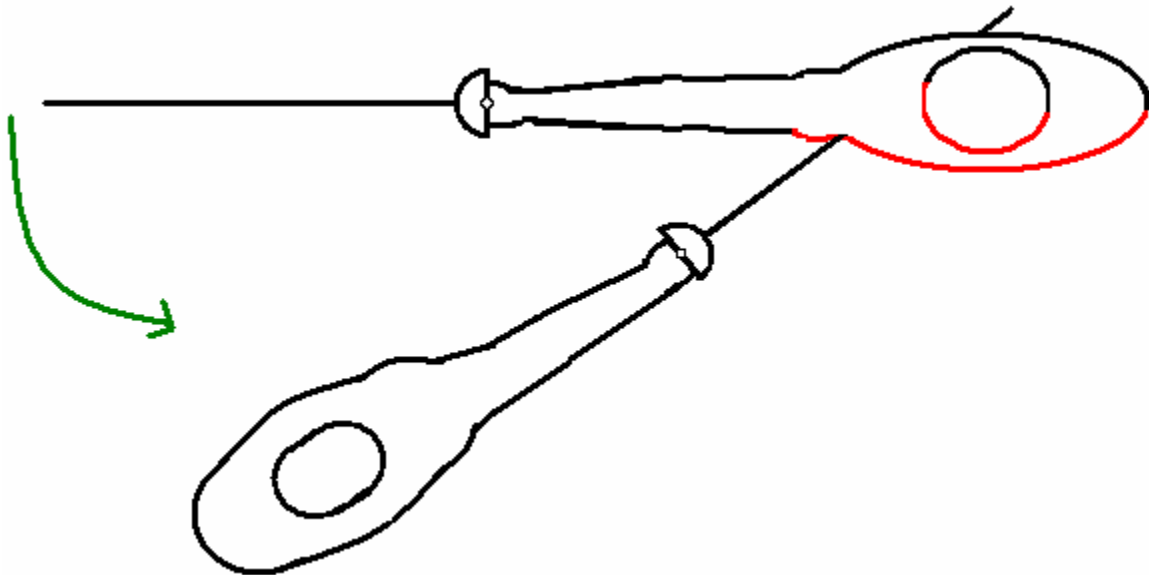
There are some key ideas to take from Capo Ferro's advice:

1. Capo Ferro views circling as a distinct threat because it is an easy way to gain the sword of the opponent.
2. He does not provide a general principle for defeating an opponent that uses clockwise circular footwork. Instead, he describes a specific counter technique that uses two disengages, an angular advance, and a lunge.
3. Capo Ferro does not address an opponent that uses circular footwork in a counterclockwise direction.

Far from being a condemnation of circular footwork, Capo Ferro's recommendation seems to reassert that circular footwork is something that can cause a linear fighter a great deal of consternation.

When circling counterclockwise be certain to maintain the Measure of Proportion. When you step correctly, you will step farther away from your opponent's sword shoulder while simultaneously bringing your shoulder in line with his torso. That gives you a strong advantage and if your adversary does not correct the distance by counter-stepping, you may be able to strike him safely in the head or the torso.

The advantage of circular footwork



Footwork Terminology

The Compasses or Paces

| Term | Definition | Execution |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Forward Compass | A step toward your opponent along the Diameter or centerline. | The right foot advances and the left follows. When you complete the movement, you are in stance again. |
| Backward Compass | A step away from your opponent. | The left foot moves backwards, followed by the right. When you complete the movement, you are in stance again. |
| Compass of Trepidation | A step to one side or the other away from the opponent at a 90-degree angle to the diameter or centerline. | When stepping to the left, move the left foot first, followed by the right. When stepping to the right, move the right foot first, followed by the left. Do not cross your feet. When you complete the movement, you are in stance again. |
| Curved Compass | A curved step to one side or the other away from the opponent along the circle. | When stepping to the left, move the left foot first, followed by the right. When stepping to the right, move the right foot first, followed by the left. Do not cross your feet. When you complete the movement, you are in stance again. |

Conclusion

We have worked from the foundational compasses to counteroffensive footwork. Understanding and using this footwork can allow you strike or counterattack in a single movement. Stepping out of the fencing strip can be a challenging experience, but for a Diestro, there is no better place to be than walking along the circle.

Works Cited

- Anglo, Sydney. The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Capo Ferro, Ridolfo. Great Representation of the Art and Use of Fencing. Trans. W. Jherek Swanger and William Wilson. Siena, Italy, 1610. Tattershall School of Defence: Resources. 11 June 2005.
<<http://www.drizzle.com/%7Ecelyn/jherek/EnglishCF.pdf>>.
- Carranza, Jerónimo. De la philosophia de las armas, y de sv destreza, y de la aggressiō y defensiō Christiana. [Of the Philosophy of Arms, and of Its Art and the Christian Offense and Defense.] Sanlúcar de Barremeda, Spain, 1582.
- Musashi, Miyamoto. A Book of Five Rings. Trans. Victor Harris. Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1974.
- Pacheco de Narváez, Luis. Libro de las grandezas de la espada. [The Book of the Greatness of the Sword.] Madrid, Spain, 1600.
- Pacheco de Narváez, Luis. Nveva ciencia, y filosofía de la destreza de las armas, sv teorica y practica. [New Science and Philosophy of the Art of Weapons, Its Theory and Practice.] Madrid, Spain, 1672
- de Quevedo, Francisco. Historia de la vida del buscón. [History of the Swindler's Life.] Zaragoza, Spain 1626

Translator's Note

All Spanish translations within this article are the work of Mary Dill Curtis from facsimiles of the original Spanish source texts.