

The Good, the Bad and the Downright Ugly: What Makes a Practice Rapier

by Maestro Ramón Martínez

2001

For at least the last five years there has been almost constant argument about what constitutes an effective practice rapier. Many scholars advocate using épée blades, schlager blades, replica rapier blades of varying thickness and rigidity, while some even attempt to work with standard foil blades.

For those who suggest the use of épée blades, they often turn to standard length or the new 40-inch blades which have recently become available. As far as schlager blades, the approach is the same, while the replica rapier blades offer a far more diverse range of qualities.

The fundamental approach from the beginning must be of what type of rapier fencing is being practiced. No one type of blade can effectively simulate all schools and types of rapier play. No blade that exists today is 100 per cent appropriate for rapier play, but there are some which come close, albeit depending on what is being studied.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, there were “rapier foils” made specifically for the safe pursuit of effective training. Examples of these blades can be found, including daggers of similar construction, at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Bardini Museum and Bargello Museum in Florence, Italy. They are remarkably akin to modern Italian foil blades, with a full ricasso and a nail head at the point, with a rectangular cross section very much like those seen today. The main difference is that these blades are much longer and stouter than modern foils, while the qualities in the spring of the metal ensure that the blade returns to its true form after the touch is made.

We would all love to lay our hands on the traditional foil rapier used historically, but unfortunately this type of blade is no longer manufactured, so those who practice rapier fencing are forced to make do with one or more of the less-satisfactory alternatives as mentioned below.

Sadly, no modern practice rapier is 100 percent accurate. Each one has its own drawbacks and flaws, whether it is weight, balance, geometry of blade structure or guard. This often results in blades which are little more than innate pieces of steel in the hands of fencers who adapt their approach to fit that particular weapon. The lack of perfect practice blades is nothing new, as Narvaez was complaining of the same problem back in the 17th century.

For those of us practicing today, we have to carefully consider the truth of the period technique and weapon we are attempting to replicate. The first thing to consider is how a variety of period rapiers were actually handled. Taking early 16th century rapiers, many have never handled an authentic period piece, and sometimes make assumptions to compensate for their lack of knowledge. It is easy to misconstrue the accurate weight and balance of original weapons, while the correct movements which would be found by using an actual period sword are simply missed or ignored for convenience.

A common problem is that many fencers simply dismiss certain techniques because the limitations of inaccurate weapons makes them difficult or even virtually impossible. It is vital to remember that the technique is not at fault—the tool and the fencer are both at fault.



Schlager Blades and Reproduction Rapier Blades

The schlager blade has fundamental problems. It has either an oval or lozenge shape, with no blade width taper and/or distal taper from point to forté, immediately distinguishing its geometry as being not that of a true rapier blade. The schlager itself is designed to be used for the express purpose of cutting and not thrusting, again setting it aside from the actions of the true rapier. Balance is also questionable, while the 40-inch blades perform badly in blade to blade work, which is a requisite for accurate rapier work.

The flex of these particular blades tends to be excessively whippy, a problem also evident in some of the recently produced practice rapier blades. Attempts by the manufacturer to combat this flaw led to too stiff an alternative, but nevertheless, they still remain head and shoulders above the schlager blade for rapier work.

Despite their innumerable flaws, schlagers do have limited merit for the transitional era--the second half of the 17th century--if needs must. While acceptable on grounds of availability alone, schlager blades in any form should be left to what they do best--the mensur.

For early rapier techniques--16th century to the beginning of the 17th century--the manufactured reproduction rapier blade has to be the first choice, particular the heavier and stiffer variety. Even these are heavier than the actual period weapons, because the manufacturing process tends to be stock removal and not hand-forged.

Stock removal has the advantage of being more accessible and practical for this type of rapier blade, and is within the price range of most scholars. For those with more collateral, hand-forged blades are the first choice. Finding someone to make one is another question!

Criticism of stock-removal blades, in my estimation, is completely unjustified. They may range from sheer rubbish to blades of excellent construction which are very serviceable. In reality, all blades today are stock removal and machine finished. Historically, blades of the 19th century and even into the early 20th century were machine-made but hand-finished.

The true measure of a good blade, however, is one which has been worked by hand, even if that means being machined and then finished by hand. No computer or machine can finish a blade as well as the skill of the craftsman's hand.

Épée Blades

In my experience with the 40-inch épée blade, they are neither too stiff or whippy despite the added length, and are perhaps the safest choice for rapier practice within the salle. There has been serious criticism that standard, 40-inch or double width épée blades fail to simulate rapier effectively. The test is what period of rapier play is being studied and replicated.

The 40-inch rapier blade, properly mounted on a cup hilt, is in my opinion ideal for Spanish or Italian rapier technique for the last half of the 17th Century, because the weight and length is appropriate to the techniques being studied.

As far as the cross section of the blade, which is in fact triangular, which many have criticized, this is not historically inaccurate. In the Wallace Collection of London, rapiers exist which have blades of triangular cross section, but they are not hollow ground like the typical hollow ground triangular cross section



blades. They are solid in profile and they taper from forte to foible, which is not a world away from the typical 40-inch épée blade of today.

Some purists may complain, but they are the closest we have to the original without getting into the realm of expensive custom-worked reproductions or actual period pieces themselves. A standard length épée blade, either standard width or double-wide, is suitable for transitional rapier. Practitioners of the French school in particular of the last half of the 17th century will find these blades adequate but not perfect. Again, blades of the period varied in cross-section, which allows practice in all but cuts within the school.

When properly mounted with cup, dish or shell, they constitute a practice rapier of similar--not exact--handling to a period piece.

So which one to choose?

The keys for all serious scholars of rapier play should be:

- * Know exactly which school or style you want to practice
- * Explore the wide range of blades and match them to the period you want to study
- * Identify the pros and cons of each blade type
- * Be aware that every blade has limitations, and only a real rapier blade behaves exactly like a rapier blade should!
- * And above all, remember that you are practicing the art and science of FENCING and not, as some would suggest “accurate rapier fighting.” There is no way possible that one can replicate the conditions of a combative encounter with out resorting to actual blood shed. Fencing is not “pretend fighting.”

