

Di Grassi:
On Rapier and Dagger



Rosalind Delamere

Figure 1:



High Ward

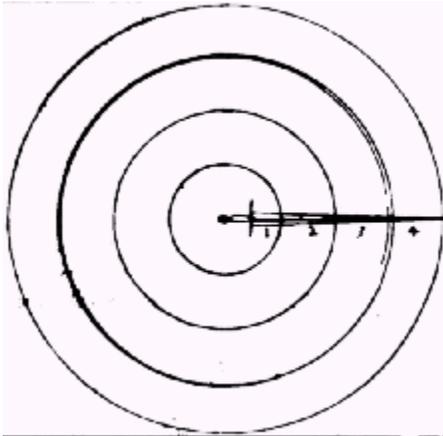


Broad Ward



Low Ward

Figure 2:

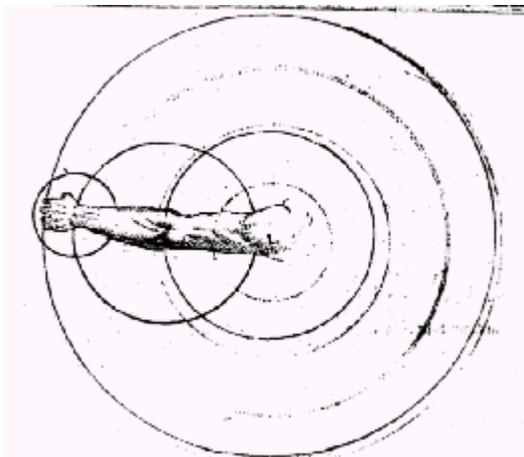


Parts 1 and 2: Parrying-These parts have little force but they are closest to the hand so they have more strength.

Parts 3 and 4: Striking-These parts are the fastest and have the most force.

*The circumference of the sword (tip) is the fastest part of the sword and carries the most force for the blows. However, the real strength and power of the sword is found in the hand making the parts of the sword closest to the hand the best for parrying. This portion of his theory is most useful when applied to edge blows and parries.

Figure 3:

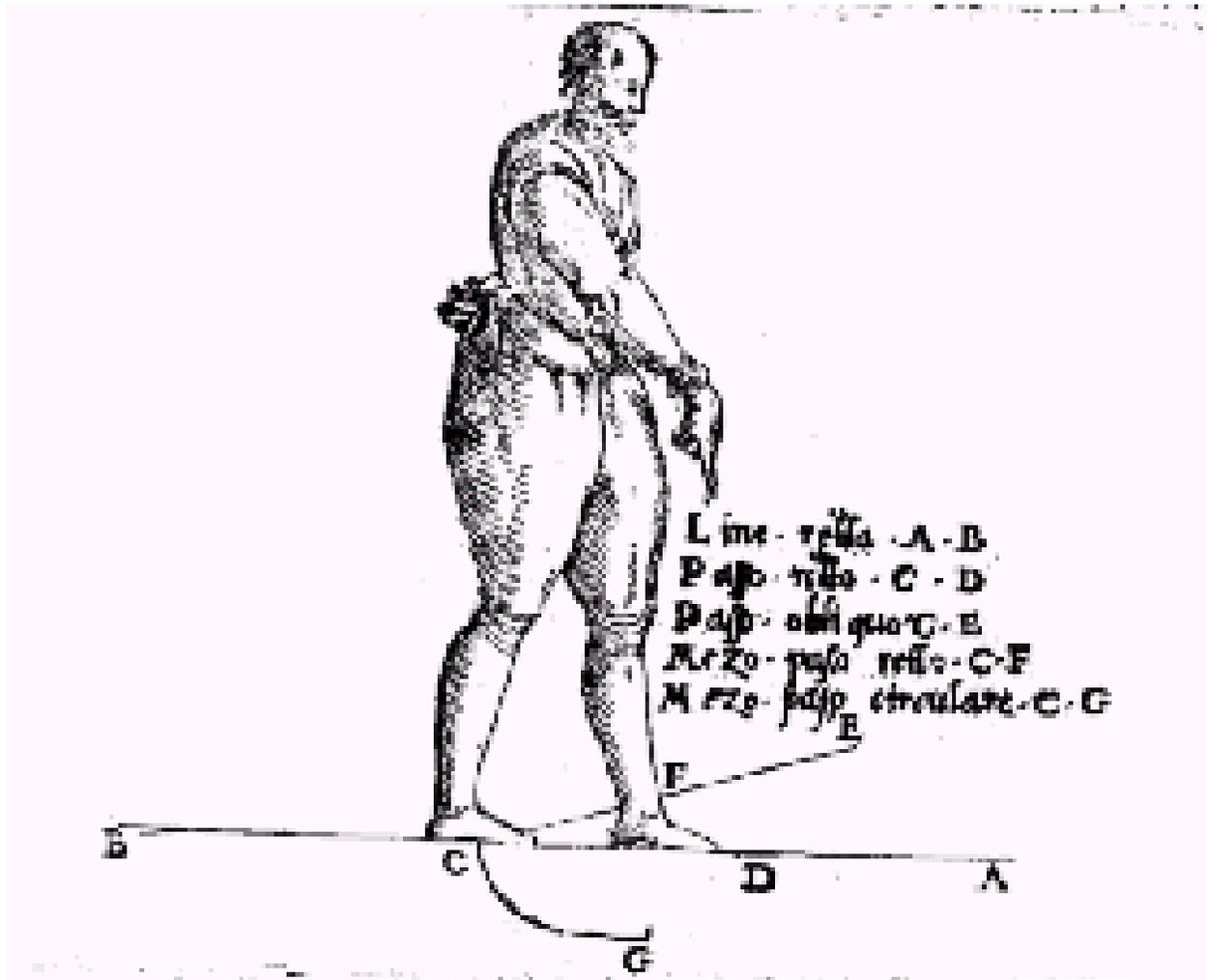


1) The Wrist: The circle of the wrist is the smallest. Because of this, the wrist is the fastest part of the arm since it only has to fetch a very small compass to move.

2) The Elbow: The circle of the elbow is larger than that of the wrist. This larger circle gives the elbow more strength, but it also makes its movements slower.

3) The Shoulder: The circle of the shoulder is the largest of the three having a diameter of the whole arm. This gives the shoulder the most strength of any of the circles, but it also makes it the slowest too.

Figure 4:



On line AB:

Whole Straight Pace: C-D

Half Straight Pace: C-F

Whole Slope Pace: C-E

Half Circular Pace: C-G

AKA: Compass Step

Terms

1. **Low Ward:** The ward framed by holding the sword arm straight down from the shoulder. The sword is held by the knee with the point pointed towards the enemy. [\(figure 1\)](#)
2. **High Ward:** The first ward framed when the sword is drawn from its scabbard. The arm is led straight up with the sword pointed down towards the enemy's face or chest. [\(figure 1\)](#)
3. **Broad Ward:** The broad ward is framed by holding the sword arm directly out from the shoulder away from the body. The sword is pointed in line towards the enemy. [\(figure 1\)](#)
4. **Reasonable Pace:** Di Grassi's measure of movement. It is not specifically defined as a set distance (ex. 1 foot) because not all rapier fighters are the same size and thus would not have the same "reasonable pace". It is the distance for which and individual fighter is comfortable moving one movement forwards, backwards, etc.
5. **To Void:** To move you body out of line of the attack.
6. **Divisions of the Sword:** The sword is divided into 4 equal parts with part 1 being the part closest to the guard and part 4 being the part closest to the tip. Since parts 1 and 2 are closest to the hand and therefore the strongest they are to be used for parrying. Since parts 3 and 4 are closest to the tip and the fastest they are to be used for attacking. [\(figure 2\)](#)
7. **Divisions of the Arm:** The arm is also divided into 3 parts, each part forming a circle at which it is the center and the rest of the arm is the diameter. The wrist is the fastest, but the weakest. The elbow is not as fast as the wrist, but since it is closer to the body, it is stronger. The shoulder is the slowest part of the arm but since it attaches directly to the body it is the strongest. The shoulder is too slow to be used for parries and edge blows, so rather they should come from the elbow and the wrist. [\(figure 3\)](#)
8. **Footwork** [\(figure 4\)](#)
 - **Whole pace:** A movement made when the rear foot is brought in front of the fore foot without moving the fore foot. It can be made forwards, backwards, sloped, or circular.
 - **Half pace:** A movement made when the rear foot is brought next to the fore foot and left there or moved forward. Again this movement can be made forward, backwards, sloped, or circular.
 - **Straight pace:** A pace made in a straight line forwards or backwards.
 - **Crooked/Slope pace:** When the rear foot is brought forward of the front foot, but at an angle so as to void the body out of line of the attack.
 - **Circular pace:** A circular movement of the front or rear foot (usually the rear foot) to the right or left of the body.
9. **Thrust:** An attack with the blade in which the point of the sword is thrust towards the opponent.
10. **Edgeblow:** A cut made with the edge of the blade in which the blade is moved from right to left.

11. Reverse edgeblow: A cut made with the edge of the blade in which the blade is moved from left to right.

First, let's have a short review of Di Grassi's basic theory before we begin to look at his instructions for fighting with rapier and dagger.

Two Necessary Things

Di Grassi holds that there are two things necessary to the art of Fencing: Judgement and Strength. Judgement brings with it knowledge of how to fight and the timing one needs to properly execute fencing techniques. However the art of fencing is not purely intellectual. It is also physical. Strength is just as integral to fencing as judgement because strength enables a fighter to execute blows according to his judgement. Without strength a fighter is not physically able to execute the actions that his judgement tells him are the best for a given situation. A man may think that because he knows which attack is the best for a given situation that he will be able to execute his attack, but without strength such an execution is impossible. However without judgement a fighter is reduced to barbarically executing unplanned and “unenlightened” attacks.

Di Grassi teaches that a fighter can gain both Judgement and Strength above that which nature has already bestowed upon him. A fighter may gain judgement by following 5 advertisements, which Di Grassi outlines in the beginning of his manual:

1. The right or straight line is the shortest (in most cases). If you want to strike in the shortest line strike in a straight one.
2. He that is nearest hits soonest.
3. A circle has more strength at the extremities of its circumference than at its center.
4. A man can withstand a small force easier than he can withstand a great force.
5. Every motion is accomplished in time.

Di Grassi also outlines how a fighter can gain Strength. According to Di Grassi, three parts of the body are very important to fighting and should be exercised often so that a fighter can accustom his body to the actions and movements of fencing. These three parts of the body are the feet, the arms, and the legs and a good fighter needs to be able to coordinate these during fighting to be an effective fencer.

When a fighter exercises his arms, he should take into consideration not only the hands and the arms that are moving but also the object that they are moving: the sword. A fighter should practice striking and not only with the point but also with the edge as the movements required to make edge blows are not natural and need to be learned so that the fighter can improve his blows. Also, don't forget to practice with both hands so that you will be able to fight equally well with both the left and the right hand. Exercising the arms will not only help you gain strength so that you can fight with heavier blades, but it will also help you fight more nimbly with lighter blades.

To practice footwork a fighter should practice making a “reasonable pace”. He should also practice stepping farther and farther to improve his stride and flexibility so that his “reasonable pace” will get longer and he will be able to move farther more quickly. A fighter should also practice body voiding so that he can more effectively move his body out of line.

The Sword

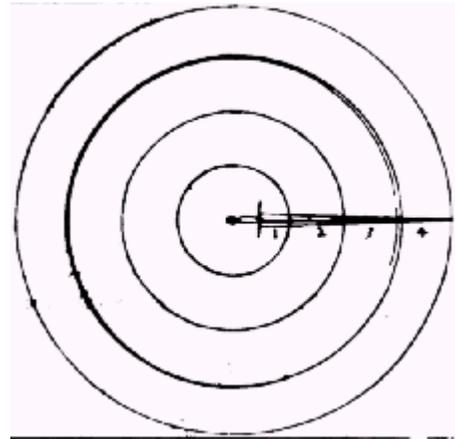
Di Grassi defines the sword as being “of reasonable length” with edges and a point. The edge blows of the sword form a circle or at least a half circle where the hand is the center and the length of the sword is the diameter. Thus, for Di Grassi, a blow requires not only skill but also a sense of time and “advantage” with which a fighter gauges when his sword is near enough to strike the enemy. Thrusting requires that a fighter stand in such a way that when he strikes his stance does not force him to loose time. For example, if your arm is too far forward, your feet are too far backwards, or your body is so disorganized that you have to draw back your arm before you can properly strike or you have to perform some dangerous motion to strike then your stance is causing you to loose time in your attack. You must be able to strike before you are struck. You must be able to maneuver your body so that your sword is closer to your enemy than his is to you.

Di Grassi’s sword, when striking, forms a circle of a half circle with the hand at the center and the most force of the sword at it circumference. He divides the sword into four equal parts, each having a specific task assigned to it:

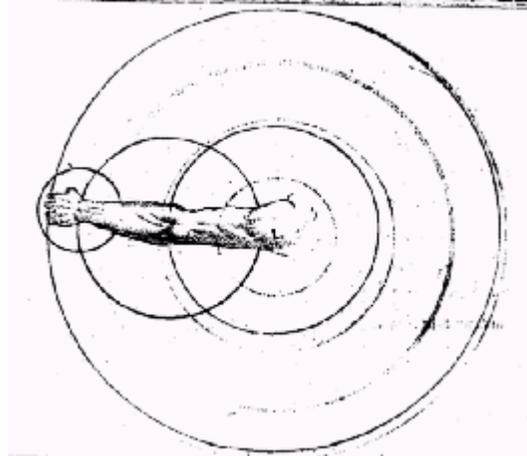
Parts 1 and 2: Parrying-These parts have little force but they are closest to the hand so they have more strength.

Parts 3 and 4: Striking-These parts are the fastest and have the most force.

*The circumference of the sword (tip) is the fastest part of the sword and carries the most force for the blows. However, the real strength and power of the sword is found in the hand making the parts of the sword closest to the hand the best for parrying. This portion of his theory is most useful when applied to edge blows and parries.

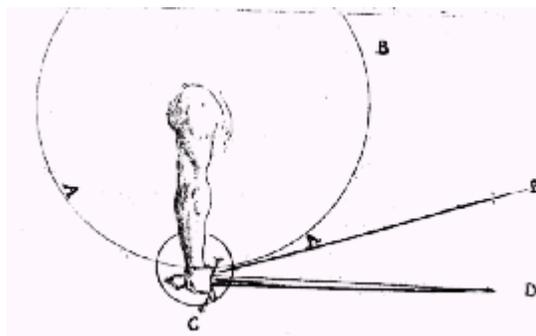


Not only did Di Grassi divide the sword into equal parts; he also divided the arm up in a similar manner. However, rather than dividing the arm into three equal parts of one circle, he divided the arm into three separate circles: the wrist, the elbow, and the shoulder. Once again the theory on which these divisions are based is best applied to edge blows and is also quite useful for beat attacks.



- 4) The Wrist: The circle of the wrist is the smallest. Because of this, the wrist is the fastest part of the arm since it only has to fetch a very small compass to move.
- 5) The Elbow: The circle of the elbow is larger than that of the wrist. This larger circle gives the elbow more strength, but it also makes its movements slower.
- 6) The Shoulder: The circle of the shoulder is the largest of the three having a diameter of the whole arm. This gives the shoulder the most strength of any of the circles, but it also makes it the slowest too.

Di Grassi states in his manual that all blows strike circularly. Because of this statement he also goes into great detail in order to explain how, if the point always strikes in a circular manner, the movement of that blow can be straight. His justification is necessary to explain how a thrust, which is a straight motion and one, which he strongly recommends a fighter use, can strike circularly. Di Grassi reasons that all straight objects with an immovable point at one end and a point that moves at the other (For example the arm which does not move at the shoulder but does move at the wrist) move in a circular fashion. He also reasons that objects attached to the mobile points (a sword in a fighter's hand) move with the same motion as the object they are attached to. According to Di Grassi, the arm moves in a circle and the sword moves in the same circle as it is attached to the arm. However, the wrist also moves in a circle. Its immobile point is its attachment to the arm. When the wrist moves with a circular motion which is contrary to the motion of the arm, the sword will move in a straight line as it's movement is the product of the movement of the two objects (the arm and the wrist) that it is attached to.



Footwork

Di Grassi believed that fencing was more firmly rooted in footwork than in anything else. It was necessary to provide balance and to help a fighter put force behind his blows. Di Grassi recommends that a fighter stand with his body “stable” and turned towards the enemy. A fighter should make himself as small a target as possible and if he must bend his body, he should take care to bend away from the enemy. When a fighter strikes he should either advance or thrust forward as soon as it is to his advantage to do so. You should always carry your body so as to make yourself firm and immovable. Don’t make any unnecessary movements. Don’t skip or leap. Rather keep your feet on the ground and make firm and unwavering movements. Always strike or defend in one or half a motion and be careful to keep foot and arm movements together.

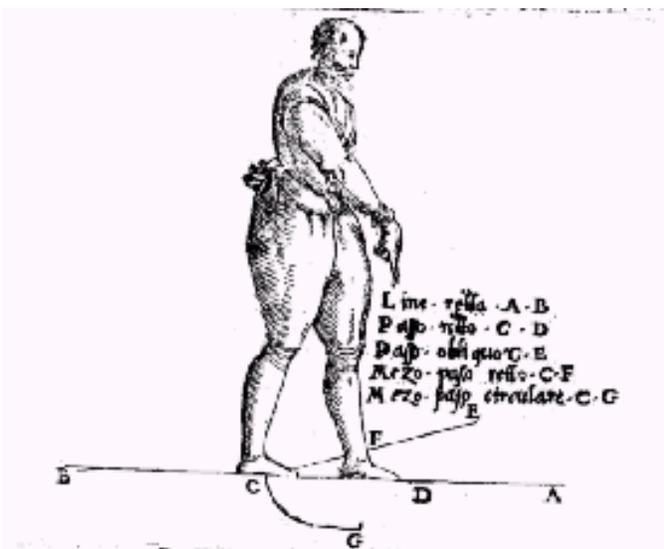
When moving your feet you should always take care to “frame a reasonable pace.” If you want to strike you should advance or increase one foot. Conversely, when defending you should retreat or withdraw one foot, taking care not to put yourself off balance or fall.

Di Grassi does not specify what distance is to be considered a reasonable pace. Instead he explains that since all fighters have different body types a given distance which might be “reasonable” or comfortable for one fighter would not be for another fighter. Thus, since everyone’s “reasonable pace” will be different, fighters should take care to figure out the distance that is comfortable for them.

In Di Grassi’s world, feet move straight or circularly, forwards or backwards, in a half or a whole pace. A **whole pace** is made when the back foot is carried forwards in front of the front foot without moving the front foot. The whole pace can be made in a **straight pace** or a slope (crooked) pace, however Di Grassi notes that a fighter seldom performs a straight whole pace. In a **slope (crooked) pace** the back foot is still brought in front of the front foot, but this time it is placed at an angle so as to carry the body out of line of the attack. A whole pace can also be made backwards, but usually only as a straight pace. A **half pace** is made when the back foot is brought even with the front foot and left there or then moved forwards. When performed backwards, the front foot is moved even with the back foot and left there or from there moved behind the back foot.

A **circular pace** is made when the front or back foot is moved to the right or left in a compass motion.

Di Grassi also stressed the agreement of the feet and hands stating that the strength of the right hand came from the right leg. Similarly the left leg is the strength of the left hand. By this logic, the force of a blow should come from the legs. Because of this, the position of the arms should agree with the position of the legs. For example, if the right leg is behind the body then the fighter should stand so that the right hand is behind the left.



On line AB:

Whole Straight Pace: C-D

Half Straight Pace: C-F

Whole Slope Pace: C-E

Half Circular Pace: C-G

AKA: Compass Step

Wards

Wards are fighting positions that can most easily withstand an enemy's attack and act as a shield against them. They either cover the whole body or allow the fighter to easily change his position to do so. Di Grassi teaches three wards: High Ward, Broad Ward, and Low Ward.

High Ward is the first ward framed when a fighter draws his sword from its scabbard. The point of the sword is turned downwards and from this position the fighter can ward his whole body. He can also launch a strong attack by gathering up his back foot and moving forward while striking above hand at his opponent's head. In this ward a fighter should keep his sword point turned towards his opponent's face or chest taking care not to have his point so high that his enemy can get in under it, nor so low that his sword can be beaten down.



The Broad Ward is framed by stretching the arm out directly from the right side of the body. This position provided the illusion that the enemy can get inside your ward but, although the hand and the handle of the sword are far from the body, the sword point is still pointed in line with the enemy and from this position the fighter can still easily strike his opponent. But take care not to move the point out of line or the illusion that the enemy can get inside your guard becomes reality.



The Low Ward (also called the Base Ward or Lock) was considered by Di Grassi to be the most strong and sure of the three wards. He framed his Low Ward with the arm carried low near the knee, directly down from the arm, with the point of the sword raised and pointed towards the left side. From this position a fighter could easily defend all attacks and also strike with great force at his opponent.

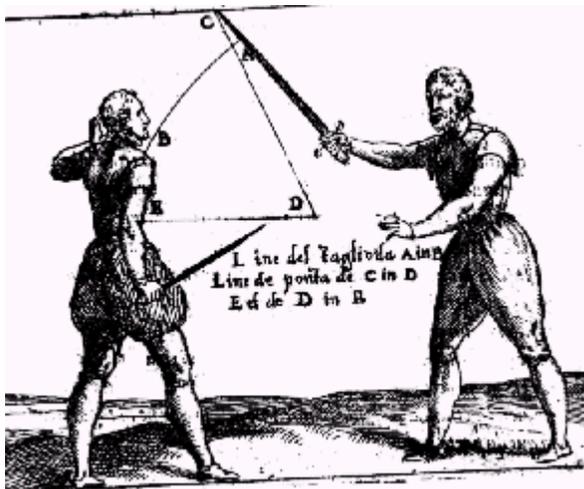


Striking and Defending

Di Grassi advocates the use of the thrust over the use of the edge blow. The thrust can, in most cases, allows the fighter to strike in the least amount of time and for the most part, does more damage than a cut with the edge.

If a fighter would strike with a thrust, he should make a compass step with his left foot (or the rear foot). The compass step should be in line with the fighter's thrust like the "diameter in the middle of a circle". The fighter should finish his thrust by moving the rear foot a half pace forward. This half pace will add strength to the blow and make it longer.

Even though Di Grassi is a clear proponent of the thrust, there are instances where he advocates the use of an edge blow over a thrust. In these cases the edge blow is the preferred attack because it can be made in fewer motions than a thrust. For example, if your point were off line, it would take two motions to attack your enemy with a thrust: one motion to bring the point back in line (C-D) and a second motion to strike (D-E). Such an attack wastes time. Rather than executing a thrust from this position (point off line) the fighter should execute an edge blow because, unlike the thrust in this instance, it can be executed in one motion (A-B).



One Time: A-B (Edge blow)

Two Times: C-D & D-E (Thrust)

Defense

Di Grassi outlines three ways a fighter can defend himself from an attack. The first is to oppose your opponent's blow with your sword, or in other words, parry his attack. Take care when parrying not to draw your sword back. If you do you will end up parrying with the 3 or 4 portion of your sword. Neither of these divisions of the sword is strong enough to oppose your opponent's blow and you will not withstand the attack well. When you parry you should oppose your opponent's blade with the 1 or 2 portion of your blade and advance with a slope pace as you parry (if you are thrusting rather than parrying beat your opponents blade as you make your slope pace). From your new position you have just successfully parried his weapon, voided your body out of line, and brought yourself closer to your opponent and your are now in an excellent position to attack. If you want to attack after your parry, draw your sword back and advance, but take care not to withdraw your sword too far or you run the risk of allowing you opponent too much time to strike or defend.



The second way of defending yourself is used in the context of an edge blow attack. If your opponent moves to strike you with an edge blow, attack him with a thrust before he can strike you. If your opponent sees your thrust coming he may end his attack and draw his sword back to defend himself.

The third method of defense is to void your body out of line of his attack. However, Di Grassi cautions that this manner of defense is not usually performed alone, but rather is generally used in conjunction with one of the other methods of defense.

Rapier and Dagger



For Di Grassi, one of the great advantages of this weapons form is that with the dagger you can both strike and defend at the same time as you now have not only two weapons, but two offensive weapons that are both capable of attacking. It is also less dangerous to attack with an edge blow from the dagger since you do not have to move the point so far off line.

Di Grassi assigns both the sword and the dagger their own areas of the body to defend. Since the dagger is shorter it should be used to defend the entire left side of the body down to the knee. The longer sword should be used to defend not only the entire right side of the body but also the left side of the body from the knee down to the feet. He also stresses that the two weapons should not be used together to defend bows (in an "x" position) since then you can not strike with either weapon until they are recovered which takes two times, during which you can easily be struck. You should use one weapon to parry at a time so that the other is always free to attack or defend.

The wards used for the dagger are the same three used for the sword. To defend with the dagger it should be held out away from the body with the point pointed towards the enemy. The dagger can be held with the flat or the edge towards the enemy depending on which the fighter prefers and which is most advantageous at the time. If the edge is held towards the enemy, the enemy's sword can be parried with the dagger in the 1st or 2nd part of the enemy's sword. The fighter should then advance a straight pace, turn his hand, and position the edge of the dagger where the flat was and drive the sword away from them. A large dagger should be used for this particular parry. If you choose to hold the flat of the dagger towards the enemy then you not only have the dagger to defend with, but also the quillions.

Di Grassi also stresses that when parrying the sword with the dagger or any other weapon, a fighter should take care to parry the weapon to the outside, away from his body. When parrying to the inside line, you run the risk of being struck as you parry the blade across your body.

In his manual Di Grassi offers some points to consider when choosing a dagger for fighting. A good dagger should be strong so that it can withstand blows from an opponent's weapon. It should also be short so that it can be drawn quickly. Thus he recommends a middle size dagger since if you choose one that is too short then it may be too small to withstand blows and if it is too strong then it may be too long to draw quickly or too heavy to maneuver easily.

General Notes on Defense: In warding against thrusts take care to void your body out of the straight line. With edgeblows from the wrist, advance a slope pace and deliver a thrust while advancing a straight pace before he can throw and more edgeblows.

High Ward

Fighter 1: attacking

Fighter 2: defending

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in high ward with the right foot first, advance the right foot forward and thrust downward from high ward. At the end of your attack you should be standing in low ward.

Fighter 2 (parrying with dagger only): Standing in low ward with right foot first, as Fighter 1 begins his thrust from high ward, move the left foot in a slope pace and parry fighter 1's thrust with your dagger away from your body. Advance the right foot and thrust underneath.

Exchange 2

Fighter 1: Standing in high ward with the right foot first, advance the right foot forward and thrust downward from high ward. At the end of your attack you should be standing in low ward.

Fighter 2 (parrying with sword only): Standing in low ward with the right foot forward advance the left foot in a slope pace, lift you sword slightly and with your sword parry Fighter 1's sword outwards. As you parry fighter 1's sword raise your dagger and thrust it into his temples.

Exchange 3

Fighter 1: Standing in high ward with the right foot first, advance the right foot forward and thrust downward from high ward. At the end of your attack you should be standing in low ward.

Fighter 2 (parrying with sword and dagger): Standing in low ward with the right foot forward advance the left foot in a slope pace, lift you sword slightly and with your sword parry Fighter 1's sword inward and transfer it to your dagger. Advance your right foot and strike with a straight thrust of your sword underneath.

(Additional attack for Fighter 1: Standing in high ward with the left foot first, advance the right foot past the left foot and thrust downward from high ward. At the end of your attack you should be standing in low ward. This attack has the possibility of generating more force because it incorporates more of the body's strength)

Broad Ward

Fighter 1: attacking

Fighter 2: defending

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with right foot first, beat Fighter 2's sword to the outside with your dagger and strike with a straight thrust as you advance your right foot forwards.

Fighter 2 (parrying with dagger only): Standing in low ward with right foot first, as Fighter 1 begins his thrust from broad ward, move the left foot in a slope pace and parry fighter 1's thrust with your dagger away from your body. Advance the right foot and thrust underneath.

Exchange 2

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with right foot first, beat Fighter 2's sword to the outside with your dagger and strike with a straight thrust as you advance your right foot forwards.

Fighter 2 (parrying with sword only): Standing in low ward with the right foot first, as Fighter 1 begins his thrust from broad ward, parry his sword with your own by making a parry 4 and from the new line thrust at Fighter 1's face while moving your left foot in a compass step to both void you body and lengthen your thrust.

Low Ward

Fighter 1: attacking

Fighter 2: defending

Attack 1

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with the right foot in front, if your sword is between fighter 2's sword and dagger, advance your left foot in a slope pace and trap fighter 2's sword between your sword and dagger. Advance your right foot in a straight line (in relation to your left foot) toward fighter 2 and deliver a thrust.

Attack 2

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with the right foot in front, if your sword is between fighter 2's sword and dagger, beat fighter 2's sword offline, advance one foot forward, and thrust.

Attack 3

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with the right foot in front, if your sword and dagger are born outside fighter 2's sword and dagger, which are born in the middle of your weapons, thrust at fighter 2's face.

Fighter 2: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, parry the thrust toward your left side with your sword.

Fighter 1: Fighter 2's point will be carried out of line. Advance your left foot in a slope pace and make a reverse cut to fighter 2's legs. Withdraw your sword, and deliver a thrust underneath advancing your right foot in a straight pace.

Attack 2

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with the right foot in front, if your sword is between fighter 2's sword and dagger, make a right edgeblow from the wrist (not so much to strike, but to find his sword).

Fighter 2: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward and parry the edgeblow towards your left side.

Fighter 1: Finding his sword, advance your left foot with a slope pace, lift your hand and drive a thrust downwards while advancing your right foot in a straight pace.

*can also be done by transferring fighter 2's sword to your dagger once you have found it with your sword, recovering own sword, and thrusting underneath while advancing your left foot in a straight pace.

Edgeblow defence:

(note: Movements made by fighter 1 were conjectured based on their target and line to provide the attack di Grassi is instructing his students to defend against.)

Defense against a right edgeblow from a high line:

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with a right edgeblow (one moving from your right to your left) in a high line (upper torso to head).

Fighter 2 (parrying with only his dagger): Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, advance your left foot in a straight pace and lift your dagger hand to encounter fighter 1's sword. Finding his blade with your dagger, advance a straight pace with your right foot and thrust underneath.

Exchange 2

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with a right edgeblow (one moving from your right to your left) in a high line (upper torso to head).

Fighter 2 (parrying with sword and dagger): Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, advance your left foot in a straight pace. Lift both of your weapons and once fighter 1's sword is found cut fighter 1's face with a reverse by turning the hand and stay yourself in broad ward. (note: Di Grassi does not specify whether fighter 2 is to parry fighter 1's sword with his dagger and strike with his sword or vice versa.)

Defense against a right edgeblow from a low line (to leg):

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with right edgeblow (one moving from your right to your left) in a low line (legs, lower body)

Fighter 2: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, thrust at fighter 1's thigh and compass your left foot towards the right side.

Defense against a reverse edgeblow from a high line:

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with a reverse edgeblow (one moving from your left to your right) in a high line (upper torso to head).

Fighter 2(parrying with only dagger): Standing in low ward with your right foot first, parry fighter 1's reverse edgeblow with your dagger. After your dagger has made contact with fighter 1's sword, thrust underneath while advancing your left foot in a straight pace.

Exchange 2

Fighter 1: Standing in broad ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with a right edgeblow (one moving from your right to your left) in a high line (upper torso to head).

Fighter 2(parrying with sword only): Standing in low ward with your right foot first, advance your left foot in straight pace and execute a thrust while advancing your right foot in a straight pace.

Defense against a reverse edgeblow from a low line:

Exchange 1

Fighter 1: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, attack fighter 2 with a right edgeblow (one moving from your right to your left) in a low line (legs, lower body).

Fighter 2: Standing in low ward with your right foot forward, execute a thrust to fighter 1's legs that will both hit home safely and hinder his attack.

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