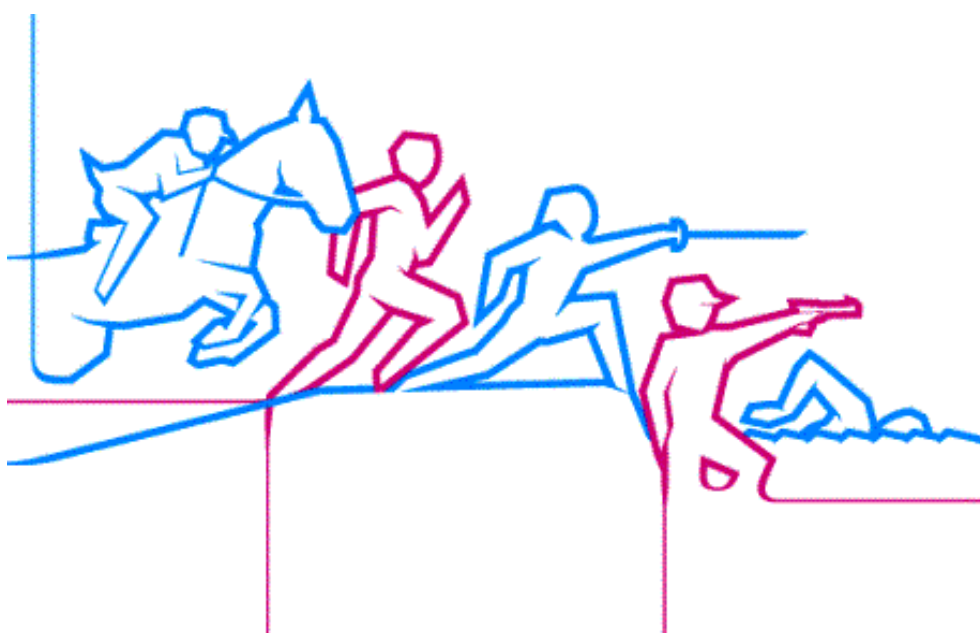


Stefano Gardenti

*The sword*  
*In the*  
*pentathlon*



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...next cousins  
of the demanding Pentathlon

## Introduction

The hits that the fencer wins on the platform can have different assumptions: being the genuine result of a well-executed and well-executed counter in space and time, they can also originate from an opponent's mistake or even be the benevolent or the malevolent implication of the work of the famous blindfolded goddess. Then, obviously, the jab is valid in itself and everyone is very prosaically certain not to deny any of it.

What I mean by this incipit of mine is that the development of this short monograph has the obvious purpose of trying to theorize as much as possible what is then, as just noted, quite often distorted by the reality of the platform. This does not mean that one cannot avoid researching and systematizing all the greater opportunities offered by the fencing technique, both in the epee used in the modern Pentathlon (as well as in foil and sabre).

And it is precisely in this multidisciplinary sport that the swordsman's need to try not to leave anything to chance is even more affirmed: while in the so-called Olympic fencing, each match is resolved in several hits (as is well known, 5 in the opening round and 10 or 15 in the direct elimination), in the Pentathlon there is instead the single jab, albeit from the point of view of the European round-robin which therefore does not foresee any elimination. In the first, the victory is the result of a long technical dialogue that tactically superimposes the hits during the match, while in the second, as they say, ... it is just a hit and go.

The fencing technique is obviously the same, but the tactics and above all the strategy are already completely distorted by the regulatory parameters of the clash: seen from the outside, an Olympic swordsman looks the same as one in the Pentathlon, but this is not the case.

I speak to you after a couple of personal experiences of Italian rounds played with numerous Pentathlon students: they were young and full of energy, I am now just

an old fox on the platform ... but I assure you it was tough and I can also safely confess that I didn't win these race clips.

As mentioned above, shooting with a single hit is not like shooting with several hits, above all the psychological setting changes, which therefore cannot fail to affect the platform: the strongest, whether physically or technically, precisely because of the randomness constituted by the single shot loses its starting advantage on paper and all matches become very equalized, a kind of fight between outsiders.

Well, having explained all this, I think it is quite clear what moved me to this job: the need to select, within the epee specialty, everything specific that can be used in the first instance by the pentathlete when he gets on the fencing platform; obviously no magic formulas, nor famous hits like that of the Gonzaga – Nevers, but only a technical attempt to limit fortuitous hits as much as possible, especially those to one's detriment.

Maestro Stefano Gardenti

in Florence in February 2022

## General consideration

A treatise on fencing is certainly made up of more than a few pages: speaking of blows we start from the famous straight blow and, alternating between attack and defense, through compound actions, exits in time and counter-time on one side and simple or feigned responses on the other, we arrive at the last theorized shot, that is, the feint in time.

All this obviously not for pure speculation, but in compliance with all the possible pragmatic relationships between the tools of the two contenders: all assumptions that therefore need to find confirmation in the discovery of the so-called opposite, "condicio si ne qua non" in order to be able to override the opponent.

From this point of view, every single hit has its ratio; however there are mechanisms which, at least pragmatically, offer more well-founded guarantees.

For example, the straight blow, as we know, is based on the speed and the choice of tempo of its executor who therefore prevails over the opponent with free iron; while an iron and wire grip, starting from a domain of the opposing blade and then using it as a rail, appears as a more guaranteed action.

However in fencing a lot also depends on the relationship between the two fencers: their physicality and their technical background.

So this division between more or less guaranteed shares is not an absolute value, but must then be examined on a case-by-case basis.

Another very important discriminant is also the specialty in which you find yourself quibbling: the so-called conventional weapons filter real events, at least initially, through rules of theoretical precedence: thus the attack, if developed correctly, has priority in the judgment for the attribution of the jab and a successful defense with the iron has the right to precedence of your answer.

The matter is of a completely different nature, if instead we speak of the specialty of the sword: here Cronos, the Greek god of time, is the master and, as is well known, whoever manages to anticipate the jab of the sword wins the blow. opponent, with whom at most it can share it in the case of a certain simultaneity.

In the sword, therefore, reality reigns in an absolute way; therefore, the hypothesis that there may be hits more guaranteed than others, albeit with the benefit of an inventory, may have some *raison d'être*.

The weapon wielded by pentathletes is a sword and so here we are at the title of this new work of mine.

## The discriminants

The pentathlete, as we have just said, is a full-fledged swordsman: compared to the close cousins of Olympic fencing, he has the same technique, the same equipment, he teaches and shoots with his room mates; but there are some "buts", that is, some discriminating factors that significantly alter its performance.

The first consists of the score suitable for achieving victory: a single hit; the second regards the regulation time of the match, only one effective minute.

Well, perhaps at first sight these two differences seem to play a secondary, not a decisive role; but instead, in hindsight, they create two completely different settings for the clash.

The Olimpica fencer actually, as previously mentioned, has a sort of technical dialogue with his opponent: the five hits in the first qualifying round, at the limit nine in the case of four all, are not few; but the fifteen of the direct elimination, at the limit twenty-eight in case you reach fourteen all, are really a lot.

What does this mean? It means that the winner of a match must repeatedly hit his opponent several times and this necessarily creates a real technical dialogue, which takes turns from jab to jab on the basis of the previous one.

The case of the pentathlete is different, who instead has the possibility of playing, bout after bout, only one card.

The regulation time goes together, just one effective minute: obviously, as only one jab is up for grabs.

It is now a question of synoptically reading the situations of the two different types of athletes, trying to understand what and how much of the overall world of one can be valid for the other; all this with the declaimed aim of outlining what can be useful above all to the swordsman who competes as a pentathlete.

## Technical aspects

One of the first technical elements that we try to make the fencer understand is the importance of knowing the characteristics of his opponent.

The Olimpico has a large part of the long duration of the bout to "understand" who he is facing and therefore work out the most appropriate opposite.

Instead, the pentathlete, precisely due to the conciseness of his fight, has only two sources available: the examination of the physicality of the antagonist and perhaps a previous knowledge of him as he has already met him. He indeed he can use the technical means of the sounder, but the duration of the match somewhat relativizes this possibility.

Therefore, the evaluation of the difference in length of the armed arm and, consequently, also of the type of grip, anatomical or French, used by the antagonist is of the utmost importance. Indeed, an arrest of whoever has the longest limb is also lawful for a big target, while otherwise one must necessarily choose the advanced target or resort to parry and reply.

A second technical element of the utmost importance for the fencer is the care in setting the measure, i.e. the precautionary distance from the opponent.

The Olympian has plenty of time to check and gradually record this sort of pentagram of fencing phrasing.

The pentathlete has only one minute per opponent; and, be careful, the immediate optimal registration of the measure will be important not only for the purposes of his defense, but also in case he wants to unleash his own attack.

Therefore, if it weren't already important for the fencer in general, it is of the utmost importance for him to train specifically both in moving backwards and in the forward momentum capacity to reach the opponent's targets.

A third important technical element for the fencer is the determination to deliver the blow.

The Olympian has numerous opportunities to try to respect and perfect this elementary technical behavioral principle.

The pentathlete must instead elect determination as an absolute vital principle.



A fourth fundamental technical element f However, the Olympic swordsman must alternate his strokes also in order not to give the opponent constant references, therefore he also uses the so-called free iron strokes.

The pentathlete, not haunted by the same functional problem, must know how to take advantage of the undoubted advantages deriving from the appropriate use of his blade on his own initiative.

Theorists could object at this point that in fencing theory there is no attack action better than the other, but only the most suitable action according to the so-called attitude with the opponent's weapon. In fact, they could give the practical example of searching for iron to make a binding: it is true that once they have succeeded in doing so, the dominance of one blade over the other is evident, but it is also true that in this way one can suggest to the antagonist himself the suitable opposite of the avoidance in time.

We can agree on this observation, provided however that the fact is explicitly stated that the technical rate, precisely of a quarried or circulated in time, is quite high, assuming in fact on the part of the executor a good visual apperception, a pulse speed able to get in tune with that of the search for iron operated by the antagonist and above all with a choice of time borrowed, so to speak, from the precision of a Swiss watch; such in fact are the qualities to successfully carry out this type of exit on time.

Therefore, for all these considerations, in order to be able to react to an action of this type on one's iron, one must necessarily be a fencer of a certain technical level.

A fifth equally fundamental technical element for the fencer is that, where possible, of exploiting the so-called advanced targets as the destination of one's shots.

In fact, the Olympic swordsman, in order not to expose himself too much spatially with an attack aimed at a big target, let's say that he aims properly at the advanced ones.

In this regard, the pentathlete should be even more cautious with respect to the choice of the trunk of the body as recipient of the jab, as it presupposes a vehement forward movement, to produce which one must necessarily execute a lunge forward step or even a dig (a unless it has been possible tactically to shorten the measure). And this choice, due to the fact that the lunge considerably lowers the ratio between the two heights of the armed arms and the flèche considerably unbalances the fencer's entire stance, seems to be a technical choice of no return, or in this case we play the famous through and through.

What does this mean? That the perfect pentathlete should never use such extreme modes of forward movement? Absolutely not, as the value of the observations and considerations we are carrying out is obviously only theoretical and statistical. If then, in this regard, we consider the high percentage of strokes that at the end of a competition is randomly assigned by the blindfolded goddess, no master would dare to take a pen in hand!

In short, what I have tried to express in this first part dedicated to technique is that there are, in my opinion, some elements which, duly complied with, should allow the pentathlete to run fewer risks than necessary: then naturally we agree on the fact that the hits can literally come from everywhere! or the fencer is that of knowing how to do it

## Tactical aspects

It is known that the tactic is that dimension in which a shot of fencing theory, lowered into the space-time dimensions of the platform, is shot in the hope of touching the opponent and thus putting a piece in the mosaic of one's victory.

The importance of tactics in the pentathlete's match should not even be commented on, this in relation to the formula of one hit and go used in the competition: for the pentathlete, technique, tactics and strategy are reduced only to a single episode, precisely the single hit of the its formula.

If we want to draw a parallel with his Olympic cousin, it is the situation in which the latter finds himself competing in the Italian round on four all, in the direct elimination on fourteen all or finally in the team competition on forty four all; in other words and more concisely we fight for the last decisive hit.

In this situation the fencers of the two different disciplines find themselves in conditions of absolute equality.

However, with a difference of fundamental importance: the Olympian is at the end of a long phrasing of jabs, which allowed him, like the rest of his opponent, to get to know the characteristics of the antagonist; while the pentathlete is faced with the possibility of uttering a synthetic monosyllable.

Therefore, from a technical point of view, in the first case it is a matter of being able to summarize all the previous information in the most appropriate opposite; instead in the second it is a real leap in the dark, beyond previous knowledge due to previous races.

These considerations of a general nature, in my opinion, lead the pentathlete to have to put into practice a concept of tactics that is even more pragmatic than what it already is by nature.

All this with a dutiful and obvious premise: the treaties, unfortunately (!), are unable to describe a winning shot, but only a shot that combines advantages, but also contraindications; it is the ability to shoot it at its best and the reaction capacity of the opponent who will then issue the definitive sentence on the shot itself. Therefore the following notes must obviously be interpreted with this technical spirit: they are only theoretical excursus, in any case possessing at least one of their statistical value.

In the first place, as previously mentioned, it is essential to immediately pay maximum attention to the measure, because it is the matrix of every fencing action: starting an attack from afar is generally a real and proper suicide, just like not having space to build their defense.

Secondly, the center of gravity of the tactic revolves around the length of the armed arm or, even more specifically, on the relationship between the lengths of the armed arms of the two contenders.

In fact, a marked difference cannot fail to suggest to those in possession of greater forward expressiveness a wait-and-see tactic: in this case, simply extending the limb to fire a stopper blow is the simplest of actions. Instead, whoever has a shorter armed arm must necessarily resort to actions on the iron, such as for example the serve or, perhaps better, the iron and wire grip. Obviously whoever intends to throw the stop shot will have to make it difficult for the opponent to find his own iron, keeping it outside the line position where it can be easily intercepted and in any case always vigilant to be ready, if necessary, to free himself from an opposing ligament or, in the event of a hit, to promptly realign its tip.

Thirdly, the pentathlete must try to develop very fast actions on the so-called advanced targets, obviously limiting himself to those represented by the wrist or forearm: therefore, extensive use of angles and also of strokes. Here the discourse

becomes purely statistical: it will be positive to have created a possibility of hitting the opponent without him being able to react, thus compensating for an equal opportunity to his advantage.

Fourthly, where one decides to attack with an action on the iron, it is advisable to resort to the edge preceded by transport, especially the one called second flanking: in fact in this case the contact between the two blades extends over time and above all, it changes the reciprocal positions, in this case making it more difficult for the opponent to free himself from this hold.

Fifthly, an observation could be made about the backbeat, or rather that ingenious mechanism that can be put in place to neutralize the opponent's prompted exit in time and finally deliver one's blow. Undoubtedly this type of thrust, at least in its intentions by inducing and restricting the opponent's reaction, is characterized by a certain level of technical caution and therefore it could well be applied in extreme situations such as that of the dispute of the last hit for victory. However, it is a very complex shot, both from a conceptual and technical point of view, a shot already, precisely because of these characteristics, not frequently applied on the platforms where the Olympic swordsmen compete; so it would be even more difficult to see it applied by pentathletes who, due to their numerous training fronts, undoubtedly have less time to mechanize the gesture. In any case, the backbeat is and probably remains the best guarantor stroke contemplated by the treaties; as we well know, only *feint in tempo* exists as a suitable counter to it, which is precisely the last thrust theorized by the treatises. Allow me to say: If a pentathlete came into full possession of it ... it would work wonders!

## Strategic aspects

On the Pentathlon platforms, those of epee, the perspective is really short, shorter would not be possible: a single hit and ... on to the next one.

The so-called "ultimate ends" are so close that it seems almost impossible that even in these conditions it is possible to elaborate strategies; I would however have some reflections to bring to your attention.

The first, the most striking, is undoubtedly the one connected to the regulatory duration of the match: only one minute, actually effective. Knowing how to play under time pressure is a very important weapon: there is the danger of making it expire and paying the penalty with a double defeat and, on the other hand, that of precipitating the jab with all the harmful consequences that can derive from it .

As a senior Olympic swordsman, when I hear about one minute, I obviously connect the situation to when, in the event of a tie at the end of regulation time, we were still allowed just one minute to avoid a double defeat; I still remember the added emotional strain I felt on these occasions. But I'm probably wrong here, because the pentathlete, finding himself competing in this way from the very first moment, has metabolized the components of the situation.

And then other types of evaluation can come into play in what is the starting point of the match: that of preferring to lose together with an opponent considered stronger, rather than trying to beat him; or that of taking into account the current general classification of the Italian group and therefore deducing who has less or more drive to seek victory; or other similar.

A second consideration could instead concern the space, especially the area of the platform where you want to bring the match: you can try to push the opponent to the rear limit to solicit an expected reaction; on the contrary, one can sip one's

retreat so as not to get entangled in the antagonist's strategy; finally, a counter-thrust can be applied to the adversary's pressure to trigger a pre-established technical scenario.

## Conclusions

I immediately confessed it: the border between the next cousins pentathlete and Olympic is extremely diaphanous; in these pages I have competed, I hope with success, with the famous umbratility of the philosopher Giordano Bruno.

Their match is 80% identical: swords and equipment are the same; the platform on which you compete is identical (apart from the peculiarity of the double rollers to speed up the race times); as far as I know, there are no specific fencing treatises for pentathletes and therefore one attacks and defends oneself through the same opposites; you sweat and suffer in perhaps different ways, but you still sweat and suffer.

The remaining 20%, as we have seen, consists of the difference in the regulation time available, in the possibility of a double defeat and above all in the formula of the match, that magnificent and exhausting Italian group, which pits everyone against everyone else.

After all, the dispute over a stroke between two swordsmen, whatever their sporting connotation, is always the same and there can be innumerable and very different configurations in which they can find themselves: a well-thrown jab, both in attack that in defense, that touches; a poorly executed jab which instead is the antechamber of the antagonist's winning blow; maybe a convulsive melee decides everything.

Yet, lifting a few veils, I hope I have managed to seize some opportunities more pertinent to those who fight with different purposes than those which, in his time, were mine, as an Olympic swordsman; I also remember meeting, albeit rarely, some pentathletes and I also remember how difficult they were precisely because of their



particular way of fighting jab after jab, as if they were, as they say, "on the last resort".

Anyway thanks to the challenging modern Pentathlon as it gave me the opportunity to go once again in search of the philosopher's stone of fencing, of that art - science with a thousand multifaceted faces, all equally beautiful and fascinating.

Maestro Stefano Gardenti