Adaptive Fencing

for Fencers and Teachers

Journeywoman Amanda Martel

While fencing has long been taken as an art more accessible to those with physical limitations, there is still space to improve in adapting our techniques and our teaching to allow the greatest number to fence to their potential. Thus I present to you my system for Adaptive Fencing.

This class is focused specifically on physical limitations that restrict access to unaltered fencing techniques — I'm not qualified to speak directly on disabilities that aren't as motor/mechanically based.

Paulus Hector Mair
MSS Dresd.C.93, page 222r
"An over-strike against an under-strike"
Included for humorous depiction of my spine.

The goal of this class is not to teach a specific style or system of fencing, because the adaptations that one person needs might not work at all for another. The classic example is fencing from a chair — essential for people with certain leg-focused limitations, but impossible for people with certain lower back limitations. Even between two people with the same diagnosis, individual variations can still be found and need addressing.

I will be using examples from my own Adaptive Fencing style simply because it's the one I'm most familiar with, and the story that is mine to tell.

Adaptive Fencing as a concept, then, is more focused on equipping disabled fencers, and fencing teachers with disabled students (or prospective students), with methods to design a set of adaptations that address the specific needs at play.

Stage One — Evaluate

The first step in creating an Adaptive Fencing style is to assess what obstacles the fencer is facing. I find it useful to consider them by the fencing actions involved, rather than a disability-specific view. What actually matters to the fencer is what their obstacle means when fencing, not how it got there.

This can be one of the longer, and more detailed focused parts of the process. Some things can be discovered by the fencer's knowledge of their own body and limitations, often in combination with either their or a teacher's knowledge of which movements will be required for a typical fencing style.

Other times, the obstacles are discovered over time as part of the training process. Where physical disability or limitation is known to be on the horizon, it is more important than ever to start with slow and careful work, with attention paid to anything that may present itself.

I have found that one-on-one partner work can be best for this — either a disabled student and their teacher, or a disabled fencer and a training partner of reasonable skill and control. Even an experienced fencer adding adaptations will benefit from working with a partner, as things seen from the outside can add a useful perspective.

In many cases, this evaluation stage will become an ongoing process, given how many physical disabilities are progressive in nature. It does however get easier, as the changes from one step to another become smaller adjustments overall.

I divide these obstacles into three general types, detailed below as they each require different approaches to achieve the best effect. But first, we should define what is meant by Action.

What is an Action?

Throughout this class, I refer quite heavily to an Action. It has a somewhat broad meaning, and that is very much by intent. An Action is any movement, series of movements, or even individual component of a movement, that could be the specific problem for a particular fencer.

Consider the lunge, specifically the shorter version of the Italian lunge, in which the front foot is kicked forward by approximately its own length. In this sort of analysis, we can consider the following components of the lunge to be Actions:

- The sword arm is raised from its guard position and extended.
- The sword-side shoulder is extended to reach the arm further forward, applying some degree twist through the torso.
- The body is leant forward from the hips and/or waist.
- The weight is transferred heavily onto the front foot.
- The front foot is kicked out to complete the movement.
- The weight is pulled back from the front foot to an even position.
- The sword-side shoulder is recovered to a normal position.
- Either foot is moved to recover a normal stance.
- The sword arm is recovered to its guard position.

Now, in most systems for teaching fencing, it would be absurd to look in such granular detail at so simple a motion, but for Adaptive Fencing, any one of these could present an obstacle of one kind or another, and this type of step-by-step analysis can help to find the specifics of what the adaptation will need to be to solve the problem.

With that established, we now consider the three classes of Action that I divide obstacles into:

First, The Unavailable Action

Some fencing actions are simply off the table by not being able to achieve the motions required. They are rather benign, because there's no danger or risk involved in just not doing something.

The most obvious example of the Unavailable Action would be a fencer who is limited to fencing from a chair for whatever reason. No amount of adaptation and good will can give that fencer access to a lunge.

Second, The Dangerous Action

The most critical to consider, some fencing actions are actively dangerous to the fencer. I do not use this word lightly. These are the actions with a high likelihood of causing immediate injury, and should be avoided at all costs.

My personal example of this is a deep lunge, as favoured by later-period texts. If everything is executed perfectly, the strain on my knee and ankle will be unpleasant. A slight slip from leaves, or a stumble from uneven ground, may render me unable to walk for a week.

Third, the Taxing Action

Much more common in the consideration, we have those actions that are not unavailable to the fencer, and not immediately dangerous, but will nevertheless cause some combination of fatigue, pain, and cumulative injury, with the effect that they should be minimised or avoided.

My personal example of this is raising the sword from a low ward, to extend for an attack, which puts dynamic stress through my lower spine in a way that slowly wears down my ability to repeat the motion.

Stage Two — Calculate

Once a particular obstacle has been identified, and categorised as above, the next step is to determine what the responses to it should be. The details will vary greatly for each given example.

One of the most visible adaptations seen on our list fields is fencing from a chair. This is an excellent approach for those whose obstacles are focused in their legs or hips, if not prevented by other issues. On the other hand, fencers with back issues can often find their issues exacerbated by fencing from a chair, as all the movement that would be handled by the legs is instead transferred to the back. This is why I don't fence from a chair — a bad health day that stops me standing for long periods will also make excessive leaning a deeply unpleasant time.

As a general principle, you should look at the identified obstacles from the first stage, and consider what the response to it should be.

Unavailable Actions

For an Unavailable Action, then the response is something that achieves the actual intent, without using something that can't be done. In the case of fencing from a chair, this is often a set of body leans (both extensions forward and voids backward) to give as much control of exact measure as can be achieved.

Dangerous Actions

For a Dangerous Action, then the response is something that actively avoids the action in question, usually with enough space to also protect against it happening inadvertently. In the case of my own risk from deep lunges, this is done through a combination of altered footwork and a more defensive style that doesn't require lunges of any kind.

Taxing Actions

For a Taxing Action, then the response is something that limits the use of that action where possible, similar to that for the Dangerous Action but with softer limits, up to and including reserving the action for only the most tactically necessary times. In the case of my problems repeatedly extending a blade, the main thrust[pun] of the response is to adopt a guard similar to that used by Giganti, where the blade is kept extended throughout, trading an increased static load for the reduced dynamic load in the more disagreeable parts of my back.

Other Considerations

As well as these on-field adaptations to a fencing style, it's also a good idea to consider what off-field actions could help with the obstacles presented. This can include exercises to help condition against injury, either by strengthening at-risk joints or improving flexibility. Some fencers I've spoken to have used controlled strength exercises, hydrotherapy, stretching, and other related sorts of things.

My qualifications don't stretch to setting out what essentially amounts to a personalised, targeted physiotherapy regime, so I'll leave it at noting that these sorts of thing are a good approach, and you should consider the off-field supports as well as the on-field adaptations.

A Worked Example

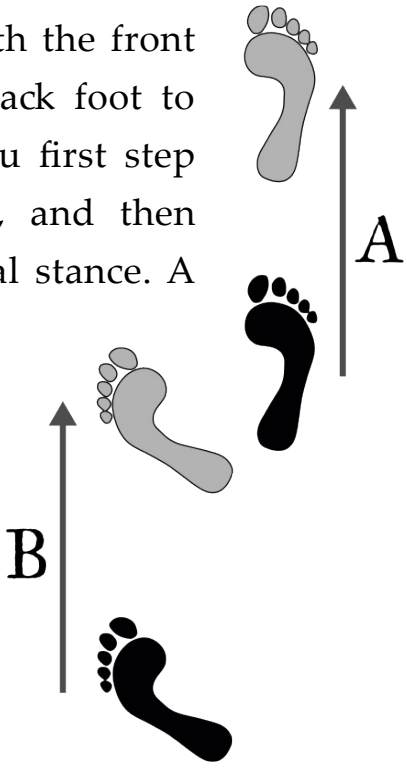
Let us consider my own Adaptive Fencing style, sometimes called Stonewall Style after I was described as being like fencing a brick wall (and honouring certain parts of my heritage), as a worked example to show the process.

The two core changes from a technical standpoint are to the system of footwork, and to the set of guards used. There is also an aspect of fencing mindset used as part of the adaptations, that guides which of the Taxing Actions are used or avoided.

Footwork

First, we consider my reduced mobility, and some associated risks. With ankles that roll easily, knees that can sometimes be unstable, and a back that objects to large steps, a lot of the standard fencing footwork involves Taxing Actions. Lunges in particular reach into the territory of the Dangerous Action.

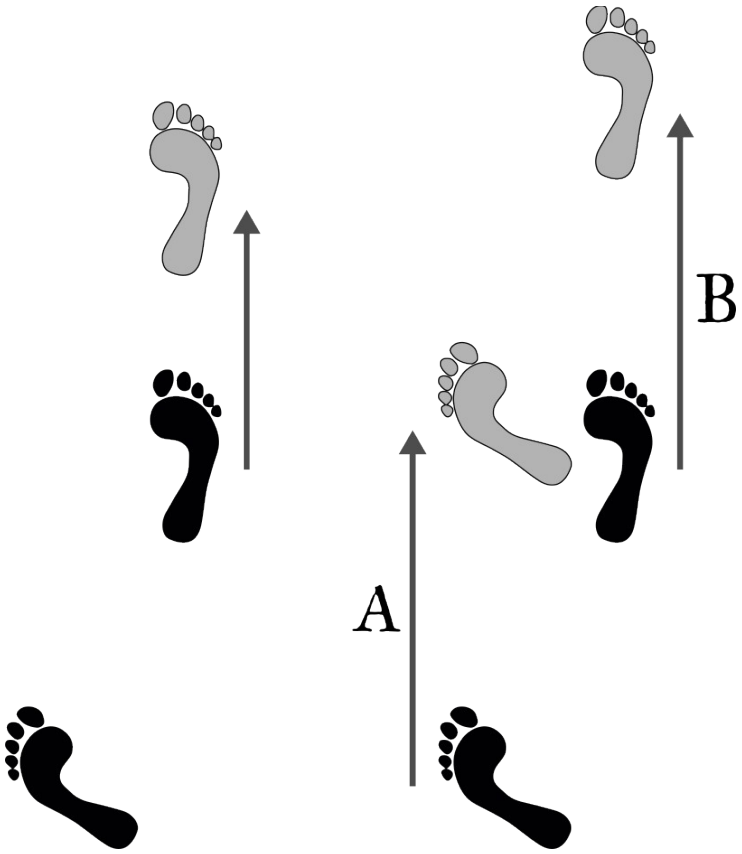
To counter this, I've adopted a systen that involves closing footwork rather than opening. To clarify: In the standard footwork that I was taught, to move forward, you first step out with the front foot, opening your stance, and then recover the back foot to return to a normal stance. In closing footwork, you first step forward with the back foot, closing your stance, and then recover the front foot forward to return to a normal stance. A similar logic applies to other movements.



In the diagram to the right, opening footwork is where step A is made and then step B, where closing footwork is where step B is made and then step A.

This closing footwork means that I never risk overextending in a step, even if I slip on leaves or similar hazards. It also gives advantages in the control throughout the motion, as the midpoint has a contained closed stance that can be extended in any direction, where opening footwork is less changeable in the middle of the movement.

Consider these two footwork diagrams, for one of the more detailed adaptations, in an attack.



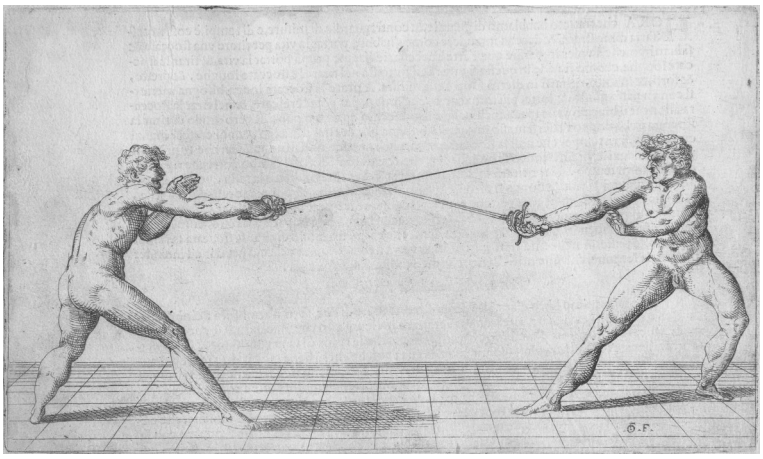
On the left is a standard lunge, of reasonable depth. A single brisk movement forwards to bring the sword forward and complete the attack.

On the right is the closing footwork equivalent to the lunge, where a larger step forward with the back foot is followed by adjusting the front foot back to its normal position in stance.

Even with reduced leaning-based movements from other issues, this gives approximately the same attacking range as a lunge, with the majority of it being achieved on the first step — also keeping it in a similar tempo to a lunge.

Swordwork

Moving up the body, we go from footwork to guard positions. My back problems tend to be exacerbated by extending from a low guard into a thrust or parry. This is definitely in the Taxing Action category, where a standard guard can be acceptable for a bout or two, but as the tourney goes on, the slower my ability to respond with the blade gets. The problem is in the dynamic load from the movement, rather than from holding the weight.



Nicoletto Giganti, Scola, overo Teatro
"Guards, or Postures" 'Figure 2'

To counter this, I use a guard position that is most of the way towards full extension throughout, as inspired by the guards in Giganti's first treatise. This means that moving in and out of guard as the opponent comes into measure is the only time I need to raise the sword, and at a more relaxed pace than the rapid movements from parry and thrust.

There are some challenges to this style of guard, most notably that the difference in reach between the guard position and the attack range is a lot less than in the more typical guards. The response to that is a combination of footwork (as discussed above) and body positioning, both through limited use of leaning, and through moving weight between the front and back feet more actively. The latter gives a change of measure of approximately the length of the stance.

Mindwork

The final part of the adaptations I use is not so much a set of techniques as an approach to combat itself. When mobility is limited, and too much motion around the field presents an increased risk of injury, then taking a more defensive mindset has proven invaluable in keeping myself on the field and out of the first aid tent.

The glib summary of the approach is that no treatise I've read has talked about taking more than two steps forward, and that if you want to attack me you'll have to come over here anyway.

By taking a defensive approach, where I don't chase my opponent around the field and play their youthful energetic games, I can both limit the opportunities to trip over uneven ground and reserve my limited supplies of energy for actually fencing.

This requires a healthy supply of patience or stubbornness, and also a focus on defensive swordwork that will create openings without having to actively manipulate positions on the field. There's some challenge to this, but any balance between offense and defense will have that, and that is fencing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am Lady Amanda Martel, Journeywoman of the Lochac Order of Defense, companion of the Order of the Rapier, former holder of the Sword of Chivalry by the grace of the gathered Baronesses of Lochac.

I have been fencing since 2010, and consider myself a fencer of reasonable skill. I have also achieved the rank of first degree black belt in Taekwon-Do.

When I started fencing, I would not be considered physically disabled. Currently, on the fencing-related disability arena, I have a fascinating mix: I have a form of inflammatory arthritis focused in my sacroiliac joint (the connection between spine and pelvis) but radiating out to most joints, and paradoxically I also have hypermobility. My joints will bend either too much or not enough, but bending the correct amount is beyond them.

I also have chronic fatigue, which is very good for limiting my ability to train to much shorter windows, even when the other problems are not interfering. One of my great joys in responding to this has been to teach the blade rather than step away from the field entirely.