

The Demystification of the Spanish School

Part I

by Maestro Ramón Martínez

The Spanish School of Swordsmanship, "*La Destreza*," is the most misunderstood subject in the history of fencing. It has been misrepresented by fencing scholars for the past one hundred years as an ineffectual and artificial system of swordsmanship full of absurdities. The intent of this article and others to follow is to present a clearer and more accurate picture of what "*La Destreza*" is.

The principal obstacles to the comprehension of *La Destreza* are the geometry and philosophy that are the foundations of the school. These two aspects have been ridiculed and completely dismissed as totally incompatible with training for the practical management of the *arma blanca* (white arm). It is of vital importance to approach the treatises of the Spanish Masters with an understanding that these men were highly educated individuals. They bring to their writings a wealth of mathematical and scientific knowledge along with a philosophy replete with mystical thought. It is presumptuous and non-productive of fencing historians to dismiss the complex frame of reference from which this system was derived. The focus of this article will be to present the geometry in a more comprehensible form.

"*La Destreza*" can not be translated literally but can be interpreted as "high level art and skill." Don Jeronimo de Carranza is considered the father of the Spanish School and given the title "*El Primer Inventor de La Ciencia de Las Armas*" ("The First Inventor of the Science of Arms") by Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez. He is referred to by this title not only by his students but by countless other masters as well. Carranza himself clearly states that he is the creator of this school. His teachings were carried on by his disciple and successor, Narvaez.

It was the belief of both Carranza and Narvaez, as well as all of the subsequent masters of the Spanish School, that science, which is irrefutable, can and must be applied to swordsmanship. Their aim was to use science to improve the art of the sword, thus proving the validity, effectiveness, and perfection of their system. The definition of science must be taken into account before continuing. Science is knowledge, as of general truths or particular facts, obtained and shown to be correct by accurate observation and thinking. The science of geometry is the best manner in which "*La Destreza*" can be set forth because it is incontestable, being demonstrated to be exact by proofs.

During this time period there was an interest in all things that were of classical origin. The science of mathematics, a major part of classical thought, was thoroughly studied in Spain during the intellectual movements towards humanism. "One of the most important of the great methodological achievements of the early Greek mathematicians was the development of the methods of analysis and synthesis, for these methods constitute the basic inferential procedure of Greek geometry. Analysis, according to the Greeks, commences with the assumption of what is to be proved and then proceeds backward by successive inferences to theorems or

axioms or postulates generally accepted or previously proved. Synthesis is, of course, the reversal of this procedure, starting with the previously accepted or proved theorem and proceeding therefrom to the proof of the new theorem." [1] This way of thinking is clearly evident in Narvaez' use of the phrase, "*conocimiento de la cosa por su causa*" (understanding of the effect by its cause).

The question arises: What is the purpose of the study and application of geometry to swordsmanship? The importance and relevance can be seen in the study of geometry itself. From a text book on geometry;

"Plane geometry as usually taught has several primary objectives. The most important are: (1) to develop an understanding of the meaning and nature of mathematical proof; (2) to improve the quality of thinking in non-mathematical situations; (3) to further develop mathematical concepts of an arithmetic and algebraic nature; and (4) to provide an understanding of plane and space relationships for a better appreciation of nature and the arts as they apply to daily life." [2]

Of particular relevance to the study of *La Destreza* are points two and four. Point two is key to training the swordsman to achieve a manner of thinking that will aid him in analyzing a given combative situation and act upon the circumstance in a logical manner. Geometry was used to train the swordsman to think logically, methodically, and unemotionally. It enabled the swordsman to develop a coolness and detachment necessary for the implementation of this scientific method. Point four is applicable to generalship as will be discussed later in this article.

In reference to the geometry of swordsmanship in "*La Destreza*" Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez states; "*Finalmente quiero que entedays, que el fin de poner La Destreza en demostraciones, es para que procedays con mas conocimiento.*" (Finally, I wish you to comprehend that the end to which *La Destreza* is placed in demonstrations (proofs) is in order that one may proceed with more understanding.) What does Narvaez mean by this? Narvaez is clearly stating that the geometric proofs are set forth to enable the swordsman to see how the placements of the body, arm or sword are most effective in relationship to adversary's body, arm or sword. The proofs show how movement can be applied efficiently. When this is transferred into practical application the swordsman can proceed with conviction in the resulting success of the technique.

The stance, attack and defence, are all within a circular concept. All fighting takes place within an imaginary circle on the ground. According to Girard Thibault in his treatise *Academie de l'Espee* (1628), the circle's diameter is determined by the length of the swordsman standing straight with his heels together having his arm and index finger extended over his head. The distance from the ground to the tip of his extended index finger is the diameter of the circle. According to Carranza and Narvaez, the "*Diestro*" as the swordsmen are called, assume an upright, semi-profiled posture with the heels slightly apart. The arm is held straight forward at shoulder level holding the sword with its blade parallel to the ground and menacing the adversary. The points of the swords are held in front of each other's sword hilt. This is what determined the diameter of the circle.

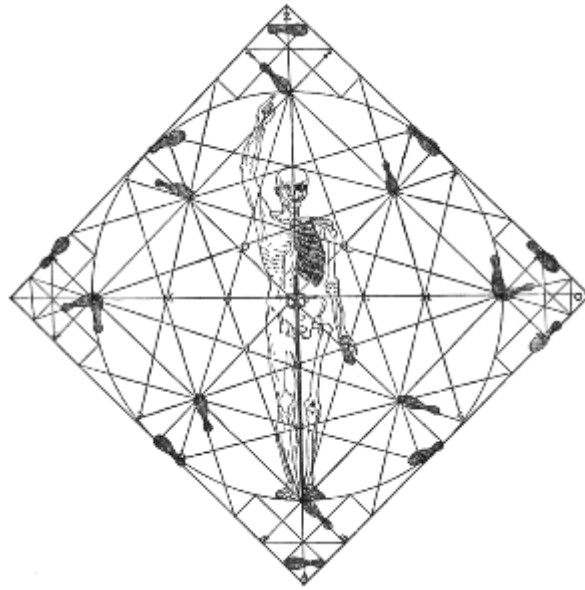


Fig. 1: Thibault's circle

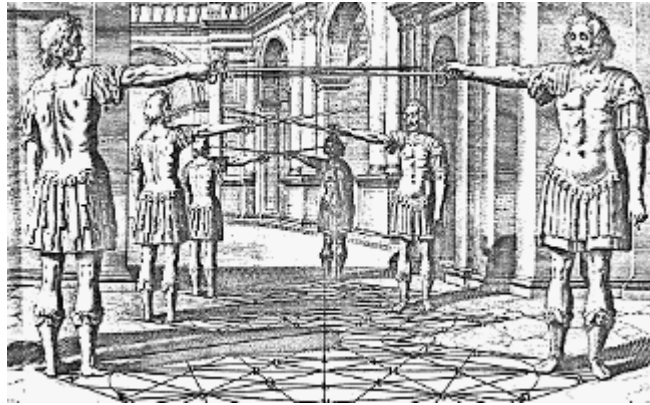


Fig. 2 (foreground): Guard position from Thibault's treatise

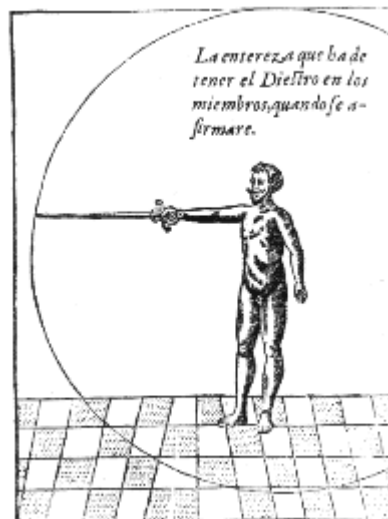


Fig. 3: Guard position from Narvaez' treatise

The supreme error that has been committed by modern fencing historians is to assume that the demonstrations in the treatises of the Spanish Masters were to be subscribed to literally in a combative situation. It is ridiculous to imagine that Spanish swordsmen stopped an armed confrontation, carefully measured a circle on the ground and then began the fight! Equally

absurd would be the idea that a swordsman in those circumstances would ponder if he was properly stepping from point A on the circle to point B across chord AB of the circle.

Another erroneous assumption propagated by many fencing historians that needs to be corrected is their assertion that the circle is in a fixed location. The imaginary circle moves with the swordsmen as they engage in combat. *La Destreza* is fought in dynamic movement within the circle. The circumference of the circle is in the consciousness of the *Diestro*. It is well etched in the thought processes after years of theoretical and practical study.

Unlike other systems of swordsmanship *La Destreza* is based on movement and not solely on technique. What is meant by movement is specific actions of the weapon and body. Each technique (*treta*) in *La Destreza* is formed by a combination of movements that compose the technique. As in dancing each step is learned separately, and when performed there are enumerable combinations that create the dance. So it is in Spanish swordsmanship; the varied combinations of movements create techniques (*tretas*).

The contemporary Italian schools of swordsmanship focused mainly on set techniques. There are a variety of "Guards" that are merely static postures from which to launch an offensive or counter offensive action. The later modern fencing definition for the term "Guard" does not apply here, as these 16th-century positions did not guard the swordsman at all.



Fig. 4: Guard positions from Marozzo



Fig. 5: Guard positions from Vigianni

(It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that the concept of a position that actually "Guarded" the swordsman emerged in the writings of Ridolfo Capo Ferro in his treatise *Gran Simulacro...* (1610).)

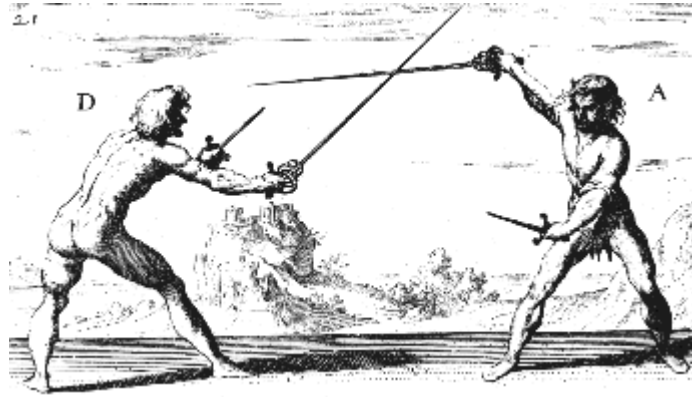


Fig. 6: Guard position from Capo Ferro

The swordsman will shift from one posture to another, looking for an opening in the adversary's defense or seizing an opportunity for an attack as the adversary is changing postures. The swordsman will also attack into an oncoming attack while closing the line of attack (time hits), also known as *stesso tempo* where the parry and the attack become one. In contrast *La Destreza* has only one posture, which is truly a defensive stance. A stance that keeps the adversary at bay by a continual threat with the sword's point is defensive. It creates a strategic problem for the adversary who must penetrate that line of defense to be able to attack effectively and do it with out injury to himself. An attack will not be met by a counter-attack as in the Italian Schools, but will be answered by moving to a defensive position while at the same time controlling the adversary's weapon with the *Diestro's* own weapon. This would seem to be the same as in the Italian Schools but it is not quite. The difference being that the *Diestro* secures his defensive position by moving away from an attack rather than attacking into an attack. It is similar to the manner in which a bullfighter deals with the attacking bull. As the animal attacks the bullfighter veers away at an angle, steps around from the onslaught, and thrusts the "*banderillas*" (long decorated darts) or "*estoque*" (sword) into the bull in one fluid sequence of movements that constitute this particular technique. To put it in simplistic terms, Italian swordsmen see that the best defense is counter attack into the oncoming attack.

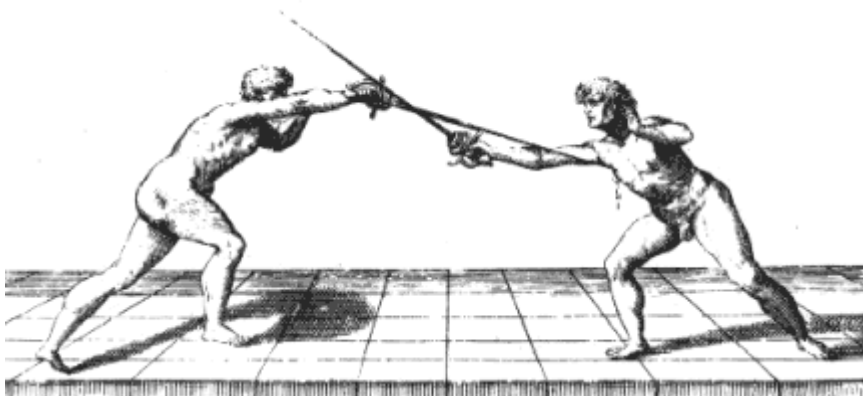


Fig. 7: Stesso tempo from Fabris

(Salvator Fabris in his treatise of 1606, *De lo Schermo...* advises that the only sure manner in which to fight is to meet your adversary's body at the same time it comes forward.) Spanish swordsmen see that the best defense is not to move their body into the path of the attack but to move the body away and shift their weapon towards the oncoming weapon thus covering the line of attack by engagement, opposition or simply placing their sword in a manner to cover the line of attack.

Another difference between the Italian schools and the Spanish school is in the management of the weapon. In the Italian schools, techniques such as cuts or thrusts are classified by the direction from which they travel such as diagonal cuts (*squalemrato*), downward cuts (*fendente*), descending thrusts (*imbrocatta*), and upward thrusts (*stocatta*). In *La Destreza* cuts are classified by the type of movement executed by the swordsman and not from the direction that they travel. These are from the shoulder (*arrebatar*), elbow (*medio tajo*), wrist (*mandoble*). Thrusts (*esotcadas*) are not classified. They are executed from all angles depending on the placement of the weapon and the swordsman's body in relation to the adversary. In the defensive manipulation of the weapon itself there is also a marked contrast. In the Italian schools defensive techniques (parries) are never clearly defined, but are apparently intended to obstruct or block the attack. *La Destreza* has always clearly defined the defensive techniques with the weapon as a redirection or rerouting of the offensive weapon by the placement of the *Diestro's* weapon against the adversary's. The positions are not fixed or numerically designated. They can be applied in an infinite variety of ways. All that is required is to make contact on the adversary's blade with the strong part of the *Diestro's* blade and sword guard. This technique is called *Desvio*.



Fig. 8: *Desvio*

Spanish swordsmen attack and defend by stepping around each other (*Compases*) along the circumference of the circle. The swordsmen attempt to create an opening in each other's defence by varied changes to the rhythm, tempo, and distance. They attack or defend by stepping, passing, or crossing the circle at angles to each other using chords. *Diestros* never do this in a linear manner directly at each other. Given their stance, the outcome of impalement by attacking on the diameter would be unavoidable. Narvaez states, "*Por la linea del diametro no se puede caminar sin peligro.*" (Along the line of the diameter one can not walk without peril.)

All attacks, either by cut or thrust, are always executed at an angle to the adversary on either side of the opposing blade. The chords of the circle indicate the angles from which both offensive actions and defensive positioning are the most efficient. The swordsman does not predict the adversary's response. The responses are set up and caused by strategic movement as Narvaez states, "*ganando los grados al perfil*" (literally, gaining the degrees on the profile, i.e., finding the best position for an attack). This is accomplished by sophisticated footwork which is essential to the mastery of the generalship required in applying the geometry with deadly effectiveness. Narvaez's term for this generalship is "*Llave y gobierno de La Destreza*" (Key and government of *destreza*). If the *Diestro* has accomplished a high level of skill he will be able to command the movements of his adversary by the subtle movements and positioning of his own body. By leading his adversary in this manner the *Diestro* will be able to create the appropriate angle to launch an offensive action at a moment where his adversary is in a vulnerable position.

The geometry is not solely limited to the illustration and explanation of the spatial relationship between the adversaries. It also applies to the movements and positioning of the weapons. In all of the Spanish treatises it is constantly emphasized that the control of the opposing weapon must be maintained by "*atajo*" (the taking control of the adversary's blade with one's own, an engagement or opposition).



Fig. 9 (foreground): *Atajo*

The ability to achieve the *atajo* is acquired by the *Diestro* cultivating what was called "*tacto*" by the Spanish Masters. *Tacto* can be best described as the tactile feeling sensed in the hand of the swordsman while holding his weapon. This *tacto* is what enables the *Diestro* to read the strengths, weaknesses, and intentions of his adversary, on blade contact. (*Tacto* is in fact the same as the French term "*Sentiment du Fer*" used in smallsword and foil technique.) In order to achieve this *atajo* the controlling blade must be placed against the opposed blade at the most efficient position which would ensure the maximum leverage and mechanical advantage. This would be determined by the *Diestro*'s knowledge and application of angles. As Carranza states, "*El conoscimeinto que se adquiere con el uso . . .*" (the understanding that is acquired by use) and "*Del uso nase el conoscimeinto*" (From use comes the birth of understanding). This geometric conceptualization is also applied to the movements of the weapon and how they are executed by the *Diestro*. If the *Diestro* raises his sword to make a downward cut, the obtuseness of the angle is determined by the distance and positioning of the adversary as well as the intended target for the cut. The angle of the defending weapon in a counter-offensive action is determined by the angle of the attacking weapon. If the attack is coming towards the head of the *Diestro*, he can deflect or reroute the attack by raising his weapon to cover the attack while simultaneously offending his adversary with the point of his sword. The knowledge of angles also applies to defensive actions such as *Desvio* (deflect, parry; literally, to change course). To execute an efficient *Desvio* the *Diestro* must place his blade against his adversary's blade in such a manner as to not only deflect the attack but to enable him to counter attack in the same movement. This can only be done correctly if the *Diestro* has an understanding of angles and the different mechanical advantages achieved by the placement of his blade on the adversary's blade.



Fig. 10: *Desvio*

When one is learning a system of fencing or any other martial art, it must be done in a logical progression. It has to be practiced by rote, or "by the numbers". It is with this type of training, that the mind and body are focused and tuned to be able to use the method in applications to the never ending variety of circumstances that can occur in a physical conflict. In no way can every changing situation be predicted in the course of combat. However if the mind and body are trained to size up a situation and react in a logical manner the chances of victory along with survival are increased many times over. This precludes reacting in an uncouth illogical manner derived from the desperation of self preservation. Carranza said: "The vulgar (fencer), although he professes knowledge of swordsmanship, is easy to discover when in times of anger and conflict he forgets his professed skill, committing vulgarity in his manner and action." Carranza also warns that: "If the skill of the swordsman is 'invented' the swordsman in a time of danger is forsaken by his false skill."

The Spanish School has been structured, formal, and uniformly systematized throughout its history. In Italian fencing of the same era there is not a singular "school" but "schools" of swordsmanship all differing in regard to master, city, and region (which persisted into the 20th century). The Italian treatises deal mainly with classification and collections of certain types of attacks (*bottas*). Consequently the Italian treatises in comparison are much less difficult to understand. The Italian Schools have a more physical (external reactive) approach in contrast to the Spanish which is more conceptual (internal analytical).

The difficulty in understanding *La Destreza* is that it is a complete system with many levels. It encompasses Science, Art, Experience, Philosophy and Spirituality. These crucial elements can not be viewed out of context, otherwise the entire essence of *La Destreza* will be lost. The mind set, character, culture, religious, philosophical, and political aspects from which *La Destreza* emerged must be taken into account. *La Destreza* is the equal of any of the sophisticated oriental martial arts (along with their socio-cultural aspects) that occidentals have embraced with such awe and reverence. The two main aspects of *La Destreza*, geometry and philosophy, produce a unique and vastly different manner of thinking creating a cold, calculating swordsman. In any martial art a fighter possessed of these attributes is a formidable force to contend with.

It must be concluded that the manner in which *La Destreza* has been interpreted by fencing scholars is unjustified. There is absolutely no "mystery" in the Spanish School of Swordsmanship. Nor are there any fantastic, absurd, or arrogant pronouncements on the part of the enlightened individuals that were the founders of the system. More to the point, the questions that must be asked are:

1. If this system of swordsmanship was so ineffectual, artificial, and absurd, then why did it last virtually unchanged throughout its more than three hundred year history?
2. How was it so successfully practiced by Spanish swordsmen, not only in their native land but against swordsmen of other nations?
3. Why were Spanish swordsmen feared and respected as extremely dangerous duelists?

The readers of this all too condensed and limited presentation will hopefully assume a fresh vantage point in the observation of *La Destreza* and begin to see through the clouds of myths that obscure the full understanding of the system of the management of the "*Espada Ropera*."

Endnotes

[1] Clagett, Marshall. Greek Science in Antiquity (Barnes & Noble, 1994) p.53.

[2] Schacht, John F. and Roderick C. McLennan. Plane Geometry (Henry Holt & Co., 1957) p.v.

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The Demystification of the Spanish School

Part II

by Maestro Ramón Martínez

One of the most important aspects of *La Destreza* is the concept of "angular attack and defence." As was presented in the first article, the two swordsmen assume their stance (*Afirmarse*) at opposite ends of the diameter of an imaginary circle, each with their sword arm extended and the point of the weapon continually threatening their adversary. The problem that each *diestro* now faces is how to penetrate that line of defense without being wounded himself. Any attack or defense executed straight at the adversary would, for all intents and purposes, be suicidal. This problem is solved by the use of "angular attack and defense."

In order to accomplish this end, the *diestro* must move off the diameter of the circle and place himself at an angle to his adversary. In so doing, he simultaneously creates a threat to his adversary and removes himself to a position where he is relatively safe. The other *diestro* now finds himself at a disadvantage because, no longer presenting a counter-threat, he is open to attack. However, since both swordsmen are seeking the advantage, he will not remain passive, but rather, as soon as he observes his adversary move to a threatening position, will seek to counter his intention. In this lies the paradox: How does one move to create an angle of attack without being thwarted?

This question is not a simple one to answer. If both adversaries remain still and passive, there will, naturally, be no advantage and no disadvantage. The solution to the problem is generalship. Generalship is command of timing, distance, space, and movement. It is one of the most important aspects of *La Destreza*, and, for that matter, of any martial art.

One of the central concepts to the understanding of *La Destreza* is the concept of *Movimientos* (Movements). These are classifications of specific, isolated actions of the body or weapon. Carranza divided the actions of swordsmen engaged in combat into the individual components that comprise a technique (*Treta*). These *movimientos*, once learned and mastered, can be performed in innumerable combinations.

Some of the *movimientos* are:

Violento: A sudden upward movement of the sword.

Natural: A deliberate downward movement of the sword.

Remisso: A retraction of the sword to either side which precedes another action.

Mixto: A combination of *movimientos* done to either side taking and maintaining control of the adversary's sword with one's own sword.

Along with *movimientos*, the *diestro* learns specific footwork. *Compases* is the general term for the walking steps that *diestros* execute as they walk about the circumference of the imaginary circle. These steps are also classified.

Some examples are:

Passo: A step covering the distance from the center of the heels when one foot is moved and not the other.

Passo en su simplicidad: A step done by either of the feet.

Passos en genero: Steps that are done alternately walking.

Passos mas perfectos: A term for those steps in which the body is considered to be solid, strong and graceful.

Footwork must be performed in a fluid manner, varying according to the intention of the *diestro*. It is important for the swordsman not to be double-weighted; The only time that there is equal weight distribution is in the beginning stance before the *compases* are begun. This is where the art of generalship comes into play. While manipulating timing, distance, space and movement, both *diestros* must be able to instantly size up a situation and act in accordance.

As the two swordsmen begin to move about each other, each observes how the other responds. For instance, if *diestro* A, moving around *diestro* B, sees that his adversary is not strong in maintaining the diameter (which is the safest location), he may position himself at an angle suitable for launching the most efficient attack. However, is B really weak, or is he attempting to deceive A, setting up a trap by giving false responses? If so, then how does A find out his true intentions?

One way in which A, may determine the truth is by subtle, varied adjustments in his stepping. He may, for instance, walk very slowly, or pick up the pace. He might stop abruptly, and observe if B continues. He might take long or short *passos* or cross the circle on a chord. Or, he might advance at an acute angle towards B, and then suddenly veer off at a wider angle, to either side of his adversary's blade. Meanwhile, B might not necessarily have been giving true responses, but rather may have a second, or even a third, intention in his combat strategy.

At the same time that all positioning and repositioning is occurring, blade actions are also being performed. Possible actions include taking the blade (*Atajo*), blade pressures (*Tacto*), redirection of attacks (*Desvios*), cuts, and thrusts. The *diestro* must consider the possibility of each of these when setting up an angular attack.

Each combination of *movimientos* and *passos* previously stated comprise a technique (*Treta*). The following is an example of a *treta* and an angular attack, though it is only one instance of the innumerable possibilities that can occur:

Diestro A performs two *passos en genero* counterclockwise, to *diestro* B's left, along the circumference of the circle. Upon arriving at point C, *diestro* A abruptly halts momentarily and then does a *passo* across chord CD of the circle, traveling at an angle towards *diestro* B. His adversary, not perceiving that *diestro* A had suddenly stopped at point C, continues to move, thus opening the angle for *diestro* A to engage (*atajo*) his blade and proceed along chord CD. As he does so, he thrusts, striking *diestro* B in the face. The angular attack has been successful.

A proper response on the part of *diestro* B might have been the following:

In order to prevent the attack from landing, B must use his sense of *Tacto*. He must press back with his blade against A's *Atajo* by opposing with the strong part of his blade, while simultaneously raising his guard (hilt) and slightly lowering the point of the rapier. It is of vital importance that his opposition be executed edge to edge, and never with the flat of the blade. While performing this opposition, B will also take a small step to his right, thus displacing himself away from the threatening point of A's rapier at a very acute angle. *Diestro* A would then be hit in the face as a consequence of the forward momentum of his own attack.

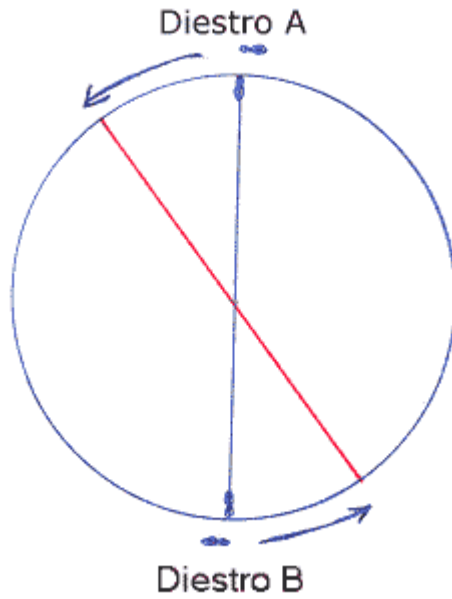
In addition to the aforementioned considerations, proper body positioning and alignment are crucial to the correct execution of these procedures. The *diestro's* bodies must be held in a semi-profiled manner, and they must strive to maintain the diameter of the circle until they execute an offensive, defensive, or counter offensive action. If they were to hold their bodies in an excessively profiled manner, they would not be able to execute the *movimientos*, footwork, or any other action in an articulated, fluid fashion. Rather, all actions would be stiff and off time.

Likewise, if the *diestro* is excessively profiled, his options to shift from one place to another will be more limited, since he would not be able to do so without first readjusting his stance. Conversely, if the *diestro* holds his body in an excessively squared off stance, he will present a large target that will be difficult to defend. Even worse, he would have to shift to a semi-profiled position in order to attack, which could produce excessively large actions and effect the timing.

With regards to footwork in *La Destreza*, it has been mentioned by certain fencing historians that stepping is performed in a "shuffling" manner. This is an absolutely incorrect perception, and is, in fact, contrary to the deliberate and precise methods of the Spanish School. All steps, *compases* and *passos*, of any combination or variety, are executed by the deliberate, accurate placement of the feet. All stepping as was said earlier, is done in fluid motion.

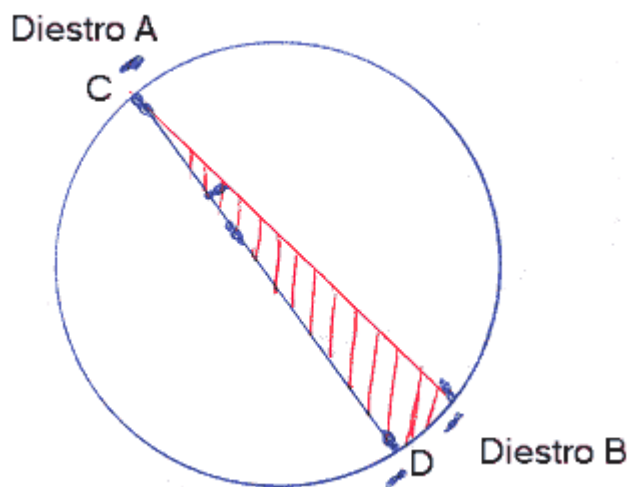
Likewise, contrary to the misapprehensions of fencing historians, thrusts were not delivered in stabbing or jabbing action. In a thrust, the arm is extended and the point is pushed "through" the intended target by the forward momentum of the swordsman's advancing body. The timing of the attack, assisted by the weight of the attackers body behind the weapon, creates the concentrated force that allows the point to penetrate with ease. The swordarm is straight but not locked allowing the force to go out to the point. To hold the rapier with the wrist, elbow, and shoulder locked, like a battering ram is incorrect, and would produce a recoil effect.

Diagram I



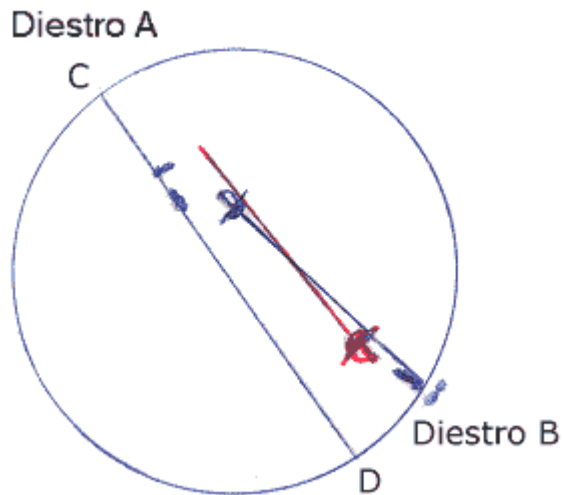
Diestros A and B stand at opposite ends of the diameter. To insure a safe position Diestro B responds by moving and maintaining the diameter. Red line is the new diameter.

Diagram II



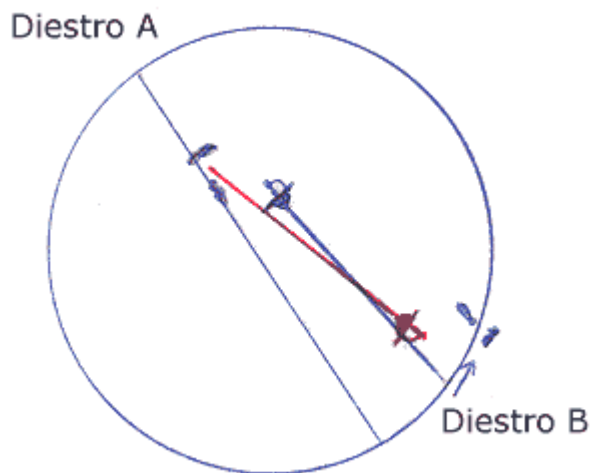
Diestro A stops at point C while Diestro B continues moving, thus creating the opening for Diestro A to attack at an angle. Diestro A steps in at an acute angle along chord CD. Red lines indicate the acute angle.

Diagram III



Diestro A's rapier travels at an even more acute angle toward Diestro B. A's rapier controls B's blade by opposition as it travels forward to B's face.

Diagram IV



Diestro B raises his guard (hilt) and deviates the point of Diestro A's rapier (*desvio*). At the same instant B steps slightly to his right and lowers his point toward Diestro A's face. Diestro A impales himself by the force of his own attack.

The Demystification of the Spanish School

Part III

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Three Destreza Attacks against the Common Vulgate Fencer
interpreted from the writings of Narvaez
"Llave y gobierno de la destreza."
"De una filosofía de las armas." (1608)

The following three attacks (offensive maneuvers) from La Destreza were taken from the above mentioned treatise. I have broken down the demonstrations of Narvaez into their most common denominator by simplifying the translated Castilian into fencing terminology that is in common usage today. I would have preferred to translate the original text as it appears but since the aim of this series is to demystify I thought it prudent to use language as well as terms that any well trained fencer having a firm technical foundation can comprehend.

The word "*vulgate*" in the title of this article is the term used by Carranza and Narvaez when they referred to the more common form of swordsmanship practiced during their era.

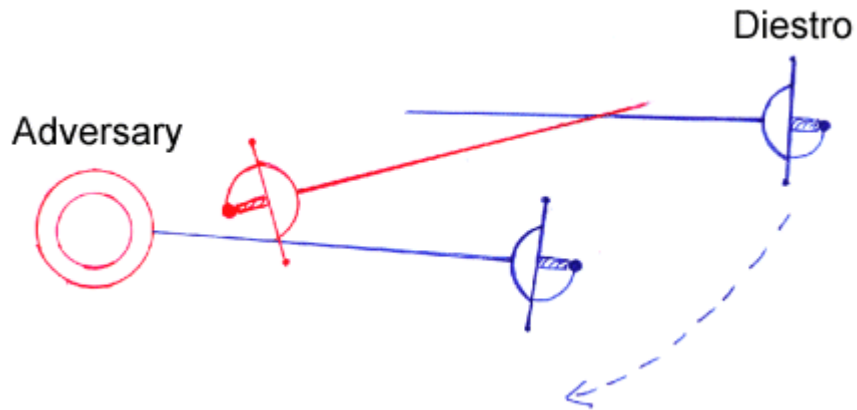
The following are the demonstrations:

"*Tentar*" (literally meaning to feel or probe) being a well known form of making blade contact, and a crude form of Engagement, or Legamento.

If your adversary makes contact "*tentar*" with your sword (engages) by placing his point (*punta*) against the middle (*medio*) of your blade, in *quarte*, or *quarta*, in order to attack your face, you have three ways in which to wound him: two with curving steps "*compases curvos*", and the other stepping straight (*recto*)*.

*The attack is straight, however it is not executed against another *Diestro* versed in the same Spanish system, but a less trained common swordsman.

Attack I



The adversary engages in *quartata* with his hand held just below sternum level.

The circles represent the adversary's body.

The purpose of the circles is to illustrate the relationship of the *Diestro's* blade to the adversary's body.

The broken line (curved arrow) represents the direction taken by the *Diestro* as he is moving around the adversary.

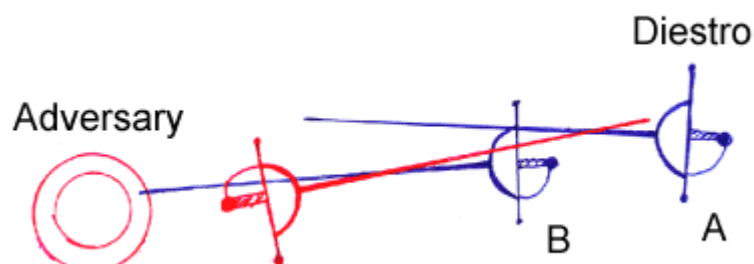
When the adversary first makes contact "*Tentar*" (engages), wound him over his sword.

As the adversary contacts "*Tentar*" (engages) your blade, side step by using a curving step "*compas curvo*" to your left, and freeing your sword without bending your arm (disengaging, *cavazione*). Then by angulation of your wrist strike him by a thrust to the chest over his sword behind his hilt and towards his right side, while simultaneously continuing your circular movement, around him. Do not permit the adversary's sword to meet yours.

You can also answer this preparatory technique at the commencement of your adversary's blade contact "*Tentar*" (engagement, *legamento*) by moving in the same manner as previously described, but by an alternative attack under his sword arm. He will attempt to beat your blade away (in *seconde*, *seconda*), but your counter attack is by a back edge cut (*reves*) to the body (flank or lower abdomen) as you continue walking around the adversary.

[Note: In *La Destreza* cuts are used just as frequently as thrusts. The Spanish Masters were well aware that under certain circumstances that present themselves in actual combative situations, it is more efficient to deliver a cut than a thrust. This will be dealt with in future installments of this series.]

Attack II



A = initial position of the *Diestro's* weapon.

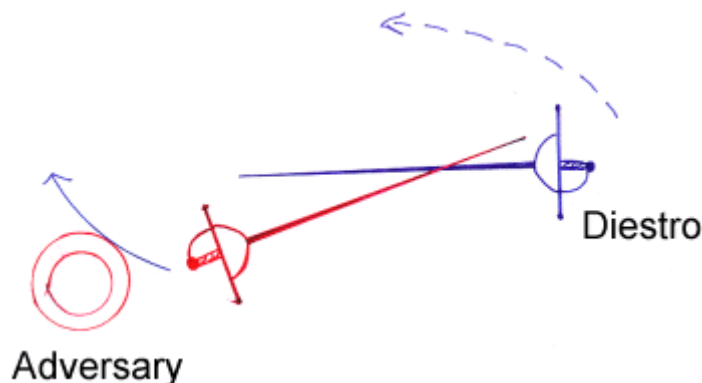
B = the placement of the *Diestro's* weapon at the termination of the attack.

On the adversary making blade contact (*tentar*), wound him directly in the chest.

[This technique begins at the instant when the foible of the adversary's blade is against the forte of your blade because you have allowed him to reach further along your blade with his own.]

On the adversary's engagement with the "*flaqueza*" (foible) of his blade against the "*foreza*" (forte) of your blade, and as he moves to engage, execute a straight thrust by forcefully opposing his blade upward with your own and allowing his blade to fall against your "*guarnacion*" (hilt, guard) while at the same instant stepping directly at him. If on your executing the above mentioned attack, the adversary responds by lifting his point in order to attack your face, you will counter-respond by slightly lifting up your guard and impeding his attempted counter-offensive action.

Attack III



The broken line (curved arrow) represents the direction taken by the *Diestro* as he is moving around the adversary.

The solid line (curved arrow) represents the direction of the cut against the adversary.

If the adversary makes contact "*Tentar*" (engages) intending to wound you by thrust, oppose his sword.

You can defend yourself and strike your adversary in two ways;

One by forming a cut over his blade. You can execute a cut to the face or upper body, just above his blade at the moment of his contacting yours. [Note: Not a cut over (*coupe*)] This can be done by taking a half side step if it is convenient.

An alternative response is to permit blade contact, thereby allowing the adversary initiative to move to execute a thrust. When he does this, oppose his blade and counter thrust.

The other manner in which to strike your adversary by thrust is to attack without losing blade contact or lifting your sword from the adversary's sword. This is done by slightly

reaching further with your arm while having your hand in supination. If the timing of your commitment to the action is timely, as a consequence you will also oppose his blade on your action and strike him by thrusting as previously advised.

The maneuvers described in this 17th century treatise would be described today as "attacks on the preparation." These actions require an acute sense of timing, distance, and above all "*sentiment du fer*" (*tacto*), in order to be executed correctly and efficiently.

The intention of presenting these three attacks is to open a window for the reader and provide a clearer view of the actual application of the techniques of La Destreza. By taking a "hands on" approach to Spanish Swordsmanship, it can be discovered that there really is no mystery, or magic, in the Spanish School. The only mystery is ignorance of the "how" and "why." The magic is the understanding of the "when."

"How" is the precision of the manner in which something is executed.

"Why" is the reason for which something is executed.

"When" is the correct time at which something is executed.

Principles such as the above mentioned are important to the assimilation of La Destreza. Rather than attempting to learn an infinite variety of separate techniques, the *Diestro* learns basic principles that can be mastered, adapted, and applied to an infinite number of circumstances. The esoteric qualities of La Destreza are found in its philosophy and spiritual aspects which hopefully will be presented in future installments of this series.



Maestro Ramón Martínez

Ramón Martínez ([see curriculum vitae](#)) is a teacher of classical and historical fencing. He studied classical fencing with the late Maître d'Armes Frederick Rohdes in New York for ten years. Maître Rohdes ([see bio](#)) was one of the last fencing masters to teach fencing as a martial art. During that time Mr. Martínez became assistant and protégé of Maître Rohdes and was the only one of his pupils permitted to teach with full authorization at the Rohdes Academy. In late 1982, shortly before his death, Maître Rohdes conferred the rank of Fencing Master on Mr. Martínez.

In all, Maestro Martínez has devoted over 28 years to the study and teaching of classical fencing. He has also done extensive research in historical fencing. Many of the most prominent masters of the past centuries left elaborate, highly detailed treatises of the systems and styles which they taught. Maestro Martínez has spent years carefully and thoroughly researching these treatises ([see bibliography](#)) in an effort to accurately reconstruct these varied styles. These ancient and historical forms are then taught as authentically as possible to those of his students who are interested. Maestro Martínez' goal is to teach, promote, and preserve this rare martial art.

Maestro Martínez is a member of the Council of Advisors of Swordplay Symposium International. He is associated with the *Federazione Italiana Scherma Antica e Storica* and the British Federation for Historical Swordplay. He is the current president of the Association for Historical Fencing, founded to promote, preserve and revive classical and historical fencing. He is also one of the founders of the [International Masters at Arms Federation](#).

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