

Footwork: For Who and What?

By Maister Henry Fox

Introduction

“Whether you move fast or slow, with large or small steps, your feet must move as in normal walking.”

Miyamoto Musashi

Your footwork must come from a place which is natural to you but also natural to the form of combat that you are performing. This means that one or both of these things may need some change for you to be the most effective at footwork and thus movement about the field. This is something which can be difficult to achieve and will take practice and thus you must be dedicated to the change. To this end the following lesson presents some foundation work on the subject of footwork and how it can be changed or modified to make it more efficient and thus more effective.

Footwork is Suited to the Combat

The footwork which is used in heavy combat and that used in fencing is different and this is due to the different forms of combat, as there are different requirements. What needs to be noted is that both sets of combatants can learn from one another even though there are differences, hence this series of lessons. There are common elements which cannot be avoided.

Both use footwork to gain advantage over their opponents. This is achieved through the use of the control of distance, a fundamental element in all forms of combat, and also the control of position, some of which was spoken about in the last lesson with regard to the “Lines of Power”. Balance is essential in both forms of footwork. Without balance there is no control over direction or power. Finally, each combatant needs to find a method which works for them in that style of combat, thus it is bio-mechanically based and thus will not be the same for all.

Drill: Describe Your Game

1. Have each person in the group describe their method of combat in general, i.e. favourite weapon, general plan etc.
2. Make comparisons between the methods and demonstrate differences and commonality across the styles of combat.

Differences and Similarities

What you will have noticed from the previous discussion is that there are some similarities and differences in the methods and general plans which people adopt in both forms of combat. These need to be recognised as they are an important part of this next step. By acknowledging the differences and similarities common elements can be seen and foundations can be laid for good footwork across the styles of combat.

Differences

The heavy form of combat has a lower centre of gravity, whereas fencing has a higher centre of gravity. In heavy combat shorter steps are generally taken whereas in fencing longer steps are taken. Heavies need to generate power from their stepping motion to power their blows, a fencer does not. This would seem a set of fundamental differences and quite overwhelming, so how can the footwork be useful to both?

Similarities

Both need to be balanced according to the user, i.e. so the combatant does not fall over when moving or performing an action. Both need to move with power, which is found in “grounding” which was discussed in the previous lesson, and will be discussed some more here. Both also need to bend the knees and keep them bent when moving for the movement to be efficient, i.e. no bobbing up and down.

Drill: Similarities and Differences

1. Have the group of people describe the differences between heavy movement and fencing movement
2. Have the group of people describe the similarities between heavy movement and fencing movement

A Method with Common Elements

What you will have noticed from both of the discussions is that there are common elements from the methods of movement in both fencing and heavy combat. The important elements of similarity are where a good foundation for footwork can be based. Being that fencing footwork is often more formalised than heavy footwork it will be used as a foundation but will be adapted using the common foundation principles discovered. This will be combined with the elements of importance found in the previous lesson for greater efficiency.

Rules for Footwork

There are 5 rules for footwork which I use for teaching fencing footwork, actually there are six, but the sixth will be explained later. For the purposes of this lesson it is most important to remember and use the five rules here.

1. Balance

You need to stay balanced when you are moving otherwise you will not be able to throw an effective blow nor use effective technique. More to the point you will be likely to fall over.

2. Facing.

You need to be aware of where your opponent is at all times and ensure that you always keep your weapon between you and your opponent. You also need to be facing your opponent to see what they are doing.

3. Bend Your Knees

You will move more efficiently if you have your knees bent. You will also be able to develop more power for movement with your knees bent and also more power for your shots.

4. Point Your Toe

Point the toe of your sword foot at your opponent as this will line this side of your body up with your opponent and make you more accurate. It will also line

your knee up with your toe and make you more stable and thus less likely to injure your knee or ankle.

5. Don't Cross Your Feet

This will leave you unstable and unbalanced, thus breaks the first rule. This is a “bendy” rule as there are times when your feet will cross briefly in some footwork.

The sixth rule states to “move the foot in the direction that you want to go”. This works for most of the footwork which is used in fencing, but like rule 5, it can be broken to use certain footwork elements. Just like all rules the most important thing is to know how and why they work first then you can know how to bend, or break them properly. Before any instruction of the actual footwork can begin a re-fresher on “grounding” is necessary as all the movement will use this principle for its initial and final position.

Drill: Grounding

1. Stand in your guard.
2. Place your hand just below your solar plexus and breathe.
3. Focus on breathing from your lungs and isolating and locking the muscles under your hand
4. Keep breathing, but now focus on lowering your centre of gravity, bend your knees just a little more if you need a little more focus.
5. Have a partner push on you gently to test your grounding.

Movement

The “grounding” and the principles which it are based were presented in the previous lesson. The movement which will be presented here will use this idea of “grounding” for the initial and final position at least, but will also use it to ensure that your upper body remains separate from the movement, thus able to act independently from your feet. This means that you will be able to almost move your feet and body separately.

The next part of the movement process is to present that the footwork must be “powered”. This means that there must be a concerted effort presented to push the body across the ground from one position to another. This is not made by the hand moving and pulling the body along. Nor is it made by the body throwing itself and the feet following behind. In this method the feet and the legs make all of the effort. For all of the fencers, this method of movement should be the same as the foundation of your lunge.

Drill: Powered

1. Stand in your guard.
2. Slowly extend your rear leg; this should gradually tilt you forward. Stop before you fall.
3. Extend your rear leg a little faster; you will notice that your front leg also wants to move as well as it compensates for the movement. Again, stop before you fall forward.
4. Extend your rear leg quickly and to prevent yourself falling, move your front leg forward. Your upper body should have moved very little.

Directed

So you now have found power for movement through the extension of your rear leg and have prevented unbalancing through the movement of the front leg. Unfortunately much of the power that you could develop here would be completely wasted as it has no direction. Your leg is currently pushing upward, almost making you hop which is next to useless for footwork, especially if you want to keep with the “grounding” principle. This power which you have develop needs to be directed, for now it will be forward, once you can do this you can direct it any direction you like just by pushing with your legs.

Drill: Directed (Part 1)

1. Stand on guard.
2. Rather than just thinking about extending your rear leg, think about extending your rear leg to push you forward. Remember to move your front foot to compensate for this movement or you will fall.
3. Repeat the action for a couple of times until you get the idea.

Drill: Directed (Part 2)

1. Stand on guard with the same arm as the front foot extended, palm forward.
2. Your partner should stand with their palm against yours, just normally to begin with applying a little pressure.
3. Push against the hand using your rear leg as power.
4. The partners hand should be pushed directly back. The partner should take care as sometimes this can be quite strong. If the hand goes up rather than straight back you need to re-focus your power forward.

The result of these two drills should be for you to have both “powered” and “directed” movement. Don’t get too excited, it is not footwork yet. This principle is based on the idea of entropy using the power you need to get where you need; also not wasting energy by directing it places where you do not need to go. Needless to say the footwork which will be most efficient and effective will be “grounded”, “powered” and “directed”. You can use the same drill to focus your power for other footwork movements and other directions.

Footwork Actions

The concepts which have been discussed are how your movement should be made. First, it should be “grounded”, thus you will be moving with a lower centre of gravity and thus more stability. Secondly, it should be “powered”, not throwing your body around or moving with your head, but moving with the power of your legs. Lastly, it should be “directed”, there is no use having the “power” if it is not directed properly, and this means in the direction that you want to go. These are the foundation principles upon which your footwork should be based.

Key Steps

A footwork system should be made of some simple movements no matter how complex the system may be. You need to seek the core of the system to find these movements, once you can find these you will see the foundation upon which all of the movement is built.

In the case of my fencing footwork, there are two key steps, the **Advance** and the **Pass Forward**. All the other footwork steps which are taught are either

modifications of one of these steps or part of one of these steps, possibly in a different direction. Before any more detail is discussed we need some more jargon. A *step* is any footwork movement. A *pass* is where one foot passes the other. A *pace* is where the foot does not pass the other.

The **Advance** is a *pace* and is the key *pace*.

In the **Advance** the lead foot advances about the length of your foot and is placed down, the rear foot then follows up the same distance. In the movement of your foot lift your toe, land with your heel, and roll your foot on to the ground. Your foot should skim the ground, but not drag. You should end up with the same position of feet as when you started.

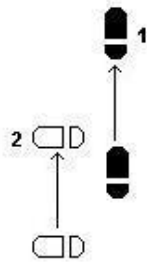


Figure 1: The Advance

The **Retreat** is a *pace* and is the **Advance** in reverse.

In the **Retreat** the rear foot is pulled back about the length of your foot and is placed down, the front foot then follows up the same distance. All of the same advice applies as much to the **Retreat** as it does to the **Advance**.

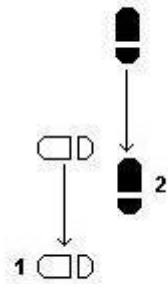


Figure 2: The Retreat

Drill: Advance and Retreat (Part 1)

1. Stand on guard.
2. Advance one pace then retreat one pace. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
3. Advance two paces then retreat two paces. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
4. Advance three paces then retreat three paces. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
5. Repeat this until you are comfortable with the footwork and then increase the speed.

Drill: Advance and Retreat (Part 2)

1. Stand on guard opposite a partner.
2. One partner will lead and the other will follow.
3. Using just advances and retreats. Try and maintain the distance between you. Swap roles after a while.
4. Start slowly then increase the speed.

The **Pass Forward** is a *pass* and is the key *pass*.

In the **Pass Forward**, the rear foot comes forward and passes to next to the toe or ankle of the front foot. The front foot is then extended forward to retain its position in the guard. You should end up in the same position as you started. The **Pass Forward** breaks the rule about crossing the feet, but it is done with purpose to gain distance, thus is an exception. This is the same for the *passes*. It is also this passing which makes them vulnerable.

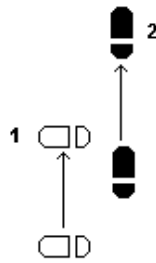


Figure 3: Pass Forward

The **Pass Backward** is a *pass* and is the **Pass Forward** in reverse.

The front foot moves backward until its toe or ankle next to the heel of the rear foot. The rear foot then moves and returns to retain its position in the guard. You should end up in the same position as you started. All of the same advice applies as to the **Pass Forward**. *Passes* are used when out of distance to close in quickly or when in distance to get away quickly. They are rarely used when close due to their vulnerability when crossing the feet.

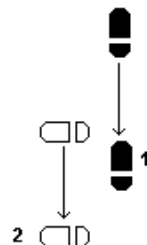


Figure 4: Pass Backward

Drill: Pass Forward and Pass Backward (Part 1)

1. Stand on guard.
2. Pass Forward once then Pass Backward once. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
3. Pass Forward two passes then Pass Backward two passes. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
4. Pass Forward three passes then Pass Backward three passes. Check that you have the same foot position as when you started.
5. Repeat this until you are comfortable with the footwork and then increase the speed.

Drill: Forward and Backward

1. Stand on guard opposite a partner.
2. One partner will lead and the other will follow.
3. Using Advances, Retreats, Pass Forward and Pass Backward. Try and maintain the distance between you. Swap roles after a while.
4. Start slowly then increase the speed.

Needless to say, the **Advance** and **Pass Forward** being “key steps”, the other footwork directions are based on either one of these two steps. Moving sideways, for example is just using either the **Advance** or **Retreat** just forced in a lateral movement rather than a movement forwards or backwards. Of more interest to the heavy combatant would be the triangular step, which is used to change facing and can also be used to develop rotational power. Most of these are what would be called *half-steps*, because they only move one foot.

Triangular Steps

The **Triangular Steps** are *half-steps*, because they only move a single foot to complete their movement. This does not make them any less effective. The **Triangular Step** is based upon Fiore’s “lines of power”, thus based on a lot of the theory which was discussed in the previous lesson. The effect of these steps will be based on these principles and will be difficult to understand without this theory.

So the **Triangular Step** will change a person’s facing and position and will increase or decrease their relative stability depending upon the position of their opponent and themselves at the end of the movement. This will be all dependent upon the two combatant’s “lines of power” and “open and closed feet” at the ending of the movement. For easier understanding there is a beginning diagram from which all of the steps start.

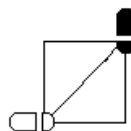


Figure 5: Triangular Step Diagram

For those familiar with Fiore’s principles, they will notice that the “line of power” between the two “closed” feet is present, along with the presence of the two “open” feet. The principle that a combatant who is using this idea wants to maintain

is to maintain the “line of power” and the solid line between his feet. He also wants the front foot, which ever it may be depending on his facing, to be toward his opponent.

These are from a defensive point of view, from an offensive point of view he would want his “line of power” intersecting the middle of the opponent’s at as close to 90 degrees as possible to have the advantage over the opponent. These are things to be thought of once the steps themselves are mastered.

To make a **Triangular Step**, all the combatant does is to place their foot on one of the unoccupied corners of the square and change their facing to make it appropriate to their new position. There are two feet to that can move and two corners that can be chosen, this means that there are four options.

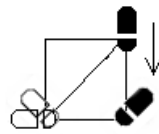


Figure 6: Triangular Step: Backward Right

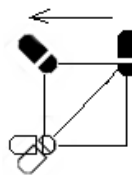


Figure 7: Triangular Step: Forward Left

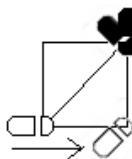


Figure 8: Triangular Step Backward Left

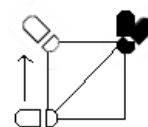


Figure 9: Triangular Step Forward Right

Drill: Triangular Steps (Part 1)

1. Stand on guard.
2. Perform each Triangular step one at a time slowly. Let your legs do the moving.
3. Your body should follow your feet around to the new facing. If it is not you need to “ground” better.

What you have just completed is the simplified version of the **Triangular Steps**, used in a relatively non-offensive purpose, just changing position. There is more that can be had from this experience. If you use all of the skills which you have been taught and really make, “grounded”, “powered” and “directed” steps, these steps can be a great advantage and create a lot of power for movement and actions.

Drill: Triangular Steps (Part 2)

1. Find a partner.
2. Stand on guard opposite one another with forearms together.
3. One uses triangular steps to destabilise other through pressure on forearm, on either side. Forearms should be kept as strong as possible. Swap roles so both have a turn.

What you will find is that when you move correctly at the right position it is relatively easy to move your opponent. If you want another experiment you should both try moving at the same time to see if you can find opportunity to use the same technique in a situation which is more like one you will be confronted with. You will also note that there is quite a bit of energy generated from the movement and this can be also used to power blows in the case of heavies.

Conclusion

Your footwork is undoubtedly important and anything you can do to improve it will be to your advantage. This lesson has touched on some foundation elements and also some footwork mechanics which you might find useful. The most important thing is that to gain the advantage which they speak about you must train them and also use them. In a shortened form of what Musashi says, your footwork has to become like walking. This means so that you don't have to think about it.

The footwork which is taught in my fencing training is mechanical-looking and quite artificial to begin with, but it is designed to teach the students to move effectively. It is founded on the same principles and rules which have been presented here. While footwork drills and training are a little boring at times they are essential, besides, you never know you may find something you did not know about yourself and how far or fast you can actually move.