

Bouting In Armor

With any martial art you have to practice as realistically as possible to get the maximum understanding of your art. Ideally, you would actually fight life-or-death with real equipment against an opponent who was actually trying to kill you in order to really learn your art. Of course, in our modern day and age this isn't possible, so we have to try to come as close to that as we can and accept the shortfall as the price of living in a peaceful age or location.

There are three primary ways of making practice safe enough: Using "safer" weapons, wearing protection on your body, and reducing the danger of your actions. Unfortunately, all three of these practices reduce the accuracy of what you do. Safer weapons usually handle nothing like the real thing, protective gear on the body limits motion and prevents you from moving as you should, and changing the way you use your techniques obviously limits the reality of what you're trying to do.

Students of the Japanese sword found themselves in a dilemma when peace became the norm in feudal Japan: there was no way to easily test themselves and their art, so as a result they began to search for ways to practice more safely. First they replaced their steel swords with wooden swords (as much to protect their valuable swords during practice as for safety), but they discovered that wooden swords are almost as lethal as steel. Then they created *shinai*; strips of bamboo joined together to form a flexible rod. These were fairly safe, but still caused some damage, so partial armor was added to the mix and the modern sport of Kendo was created. As anyone who has studied Japanese swordsmanship will tell you, however, Kendo bears very little resemblance to real Japanese swordsmanship. In one sense there's nothing wrong with this, of course: Kendo is a wonderful sport enjoyed by many. But for those of us trying to recapture the essence of a lost art it's not a meaningful approach.

Modern students of *der Kunst des Fechtens* face the same dilemma the Japanese faced; indeed, something of the same problem was acknowledged in late-period Germany. Schools of martial arts drifted away from *Ernstfechten* or "fencing in earnest" until all that remained was a martial sport called *Schulfechten* or "school fencing" (*Schulfechten* had existed beside its more martial cousin all along, but now it was all that remained). *Schulfechten* training involved blunted swords and they changed their art to forbid the use of the thrust and to limit the more dangerous grappling techniques (e.g., joint breaks) for safety's sake. Even so, these limitations still left an art that is too dangerous for today's sword students, so we see them taking the same route that the Japanese took: Instead of steel or wooden longswords, they fence with *Shinai* that have been modified by the addition of crossguards and pommels to simulate European longswords and they add protective equipment that limits their movement more than true

longsword fighting would have. As a result, I fear that modern longsword practice may become no more than Kendo and lose completely the tenuous connection we've been building with the lost arts of our ancestors.

Fortunately, however, students of *Harnischfechten* are in a somewhat better, although still not perfect, situation. Wearing safety equipment in armored fighting is not just a necessity of safety, it actually makes our practice more realistic. And while we haven't yet come up with realistic metal training weapons that are safe as simulators, we can still make some pretty acceptable ones that, when combined with good armor, will allow us to fight at almost full speed and power.

Getting accurate and realistic armor, however, is problematic. The simple fact is that the vast majority of armor available today is so incredibly bad that it in no way simulates the way the real thing worked, nor does it provide the necessary safety. To that end I urge you in the strongest terms to limit yourself to the armorers I have recommended below.

Assuming safe, realistic gear, all that remains is to put it into play. To do that, however, you have to know how it was used and create a rule structure for your bouts that adequately reflects actual practice and, at the same time, rewards historically-correct actions and punishes inaccurate ones (by which I mean the rules make it impossible to win a fight by resorting to inauthentic techniques). To that end, here is the rule system that we use for *Harnischfechten* in *Die Schlachtschule: The School of Battle*. Please note that this system is used for all of our armored bouts and so includes rules for pollaxe, spear, halfsword, dagger and armored grappling.

Die Schlachtschule Fighting System:

VICTORY CONDITIONS:

- A thrust to a vital target:
 1. An open face (simulated with a grilled visor)
 2. Armpits (the entire area normally left uncovered by the breastplate but this requires a heavy pushing thrust to simulate overcoming the mail voider)
 3. Inside of the elbows
 4. A thrust to the palm causes you to lose the use of that hand
 5. A single smashing blow to the hand renders that hand useless
 6. Backs of thighs or knees
 7. Groin (but simulate this by thrusting to the inside of the thigh instead)
- Knockdown/takedown (touching the ground with anything except your feet)
- Throws ("set" only – see below)
- Showing the gate (see below)
- Two powerful thrusts of a spear or pollaxe to a closed visor

- Two powerful strikes to the head with a *Mordschlag* or blows from a pollaxe.
- Losing the use of both hands
- Using a *Fechtbuch* hold or lock to hold someone immobilized for 30 seconds

GRAPPLING RULES:

- Grabs, holds and pushes can be done without limitation
- Throws and joint locks should be “set” but not executed. The receiver will then acknowledge he’s been defeated.

STRUCTURE:

Here’s how a bout works: The combatants are armed with the weapon simulators for that particular bout (per DSS simulator rules) and are fully armored. Combat is “in the round” (meaning the combatants aren’t limited to just moving forward and back) and should be performed in a square enclosure fenced off from any spectators but with two openings (called “gates”) opposite each other. The marshal (an instructor controlling the bout) inspects all weapons and equipment, then bids the combatants to salute one another, then he separates them by at least ten feet. He then commands them to begin fighting.

The fighting continues until one or the other combatant has achieved one of the above-listed victory conditions. A single thrust to an open target (meaning one not covered by plate) will win a fight, as will two very powerful strokes of the axe or sword pommel to the head or two very powerful thrusts to the face with a spear or pollaxe when a closed visor is worn. Likewise, knocking or pushing someone down or “setting” a throw or lock will win (see below). Finally, “showing him the gate” means that you push someone out of the fighting area (and yes, this comes from real medieval practice: see Talhoffer’s *Alte Armatuur* fol. 9v).

All strikes and thrusts must be delivered with real force: Light touches, even to a completely bare face, won’t end a fight. On the other hand, much less force is required to pierce the palm of a hand or a face with a thrust than would be required to punch through the mail voider in an armpit or to stun someone through a helmet, so these facts must be taken into consideration. We say that a thrust to an unprotected (and the glove on a palm doesn’t count) target requires “positive” force and a thrust to a mail-covered or a blow to the head or hand requires “heavy” force. Thrusts to targets covered by mail cannot be pool-queue thrusts and must be backed with a push of the attacker’s body weight in order to count.

Thrusts to plate or strikes to plate except to the head and hands simply don’t count for anything. In reality, heavy strikes with the pommel of the sword or the mail of the pollaxe were used to dent in the articulation of the joints (shoulders, elbows and knees) so as to either render the limb hard to move or to create gaps into which you could thrust. While an important part of Harnischfechten, there is simply no realistic way to simulate this effect and so we leave it for classroom

instruction.

Incidentally, the rule about losing the use of your hand is realistic and is based on several accounts of actual fights in which a thrust to the hand occurred but the combatant moved on to grapple. But note: A thrust to a palm or a strike to the hand does not end the fight, it only renders that hand unusable; the victim may continue to fight with his other hand if he can do so.

A word about grappling: Grappling is the most dangerous part of bouting. It is easy to get carried away and slam someone's head into the ground hard enough to cause permanent damage or to break his neck. Joint locks are easy to do and can cause serious damage. Just grappling together can cause your armor to lock with someone else's in such a way that when he falls you go with him and twist a knee or shoulder very badly. On the other hand, grappling is an essential part of all *Harnischfechten* and if you ignore it you will create unrealistic combat.

Because of the inherent danger of grappling we have made compromises with our rules. When someone starts to place a dangerous throw or lock and is about to execute it, he shouts "Set!". His opponent should then yield the bout without resistance. It's certainly true that many people can and do get out of locks and throws, but doing so is simply too dangerous in armor. Likewise, we don't carry a fight down to the ground for the same reasons; when someone touches the ground with anything other than his feet he has lost. Finally, techniques where you hook the legs with your axe should only be taken to the "Set!" point. Of course, these compromises will inevitably lead to "Well I could have..." arguments, but we consider the loss of realism more than compensated by the opportunity to share a beer over these kinds of arguments. Holds and pushes, however, seem no problem and therefore may be done without limitation.

While the combatants should judge their own fights, an instructor should be present within the lists to assist with safety issues (e.g., noticing an armor failure, or that someone is about to fall on something sharp).

Safety is a very important issue. Bouting in armor is, in a word, dangerous. It requires good equipment, a high level of skill, meticulous attention to what's going on, rigid self control, concern for your partner and a great deal of common sense. Even so, even with all those elements in place, injuries are still going to occur. Note I don't say "are likely to occur", I say they will occur. If you're careful and have good gear they're likely to be fairly minor and relatively infrequent, but if you're not ready to accept this fact then just stick with doing drills – you'll still come to have a real appreciation for the art. Moreover, since I'm not with you in person I can't judge your equipment, your training or your behavior, and as a result I can't be responsible for what you do. The practice of any martial art and especially a contact martial art is dangerous. I urge you in the strongest terms to find someone who knows what he's doing to teach you this or any martial art before attempting to fight with anyone else.