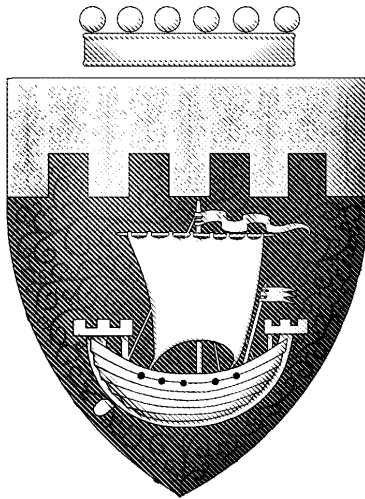


SOME  
COMMENTARIES  
*on Strategy and Tactics for use  
in the SCA*



by David S. Hoornstra

*known in the SCA as*  
Daibhid Ruadh MacLachlan  
*Baron of the Court*  
*Sergeant of the Order of the Red Company*

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To Master John D. Bailey, Master of Fence, Known in the SCA as Svea Wartooth, who taught me to never stop analyzing the opponent and never stop changing my game.

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Ann Arbor, Michigan

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### ***About the author***

David S. Hoonstra is a self-employed graphic designer in Ann Arbor, Michigan, known in the SCA as Daibhid Ruadh MacLachlan, Baron of the Court and a Sergeant of the Order of the Red Company. He began fencing in 1962 at the age of 15, and taught the sport at several Ann Arbor clubs during the 1970s while pursuing competitive rank in foil and epee.

He joined the SCA in 1974, but disdained to enter SCA combat until 1978, the year he helped found the group now known as the Barony of Cynnabar. His first SCA combat teacher was Sir Aldric.

Recently, "Baron Daibhid" completed a three-year term as Cynnabar's Knights-Marshall. He has recently reactivated his fencing authorization.

# SOME COMMENTARIES *on Strategy and Tactics for use in the* SCA

by David S. Hoornstra

*known in the SCA as Daibhid Ruadh MacLachlan*

This essay is intended to offer some pointers for applying strategic thinking to our martial games. My primary focus in this is on individual tournament combat in armor, but most of the concepts apply equally well to melee combat and to fencing. I began chess at age ten, but my first fencing master, John Bailey, encouraged my interest in analytical thinking much farther starting in 1963.

In college advanced Army ROTC classes, I learned the relationship between strategy and tactics as used in the military. I also learned the relationship of these field concerns to other military processes such as training and intelligence gathering.

By the time I took up SCA combat, I had been teaching fencing on my own for five years while competing well enough to be among Michigan's top five in two out of three weapons. I believed I could use that experience in the SCA, but at the time there were important social reasons to learn "the SCA way" rather than to demonstrate my own knowledge.

But I continued to learn on my own. When I read *The Book of Five Rings*, the 17th-century strategy classic by Japan's "sword saint," Shinmen Miyamoto Musashi, it made a great deal of sense.

It was only a few short years ago that I "came out" and quit doing it "the SCA way" and began to use the experience I gained as a competitive fencer and fencing teacher. And only in my recent three years as a group knights-marshal did I get a chance to teach based on my own knowledge, and evaluate the results.

Now it is clear to me that these commentaries are long overdue.

## **Tactics and Strategy: definitions**

Because tactics and strategy seem so similar on the surface, many people confuse them. The word Strategy means, in its roots, "high-level," and strategy does operate at the highest level of whatever theatre of operations. Strategy is army command-level; tactics are company, platoon, or squad-level. The very real, func-

tional differences should be obvious from a few observations.

- Tactics are tools; strategy is choosing or even creating tools to meet the situation.

- Tactics are standard procedures that are practiced and drilled, while strategies are individually tailored to the situation. In SCA combat, a wrap to the leg is a tactic. The rational thought process of deciding that, in order to nullify this particular opponent's deadly footwork, you need to take the leg, is strategic thinking.

This is not to say you can't reuse a strategic concept for a new, but analogous situation. But you still have to do the strategic analysis to know it's the best strategy.

- For any given strategic plan, there may be any number of tactical methods to achieve it. So even after a strategic plan has been devised, there are tactical decisions to be made.

- Tactics can be practised and drilled, but the only practice for strategists is analytical thinking. But the training to use strategy includes intimate knowledge of all the tools, of which your array of troops and tactics are only two of many. Intelligence gathering and analysis of intelligence information are essential to success.

Again, this is not to say there are not "ready-made" strategic concepts. History does repeat itself; concepts like "divide and conquer" will continue to be recycled.

- Strategy vs. Strategem: strategy is the master plan for achievement of a specific goal. A strategem

is a specific maneuver or operation based on strategy.

Here are a few examples to differentiate strategic concepts from tactics:

### **SCA individual combat tactics**

Rising Snap

Wraparound

Shield Snatch

Head-leg feint

Charge

Forehand/backhand combination blows

Ducking blows

### **SCA melee tactics**

Shield wall charge

End-around sweep

Deploy flanking skirmishers

### **Strategies**

Nullify opponent's aggressive offense

Overcome opponent's defense

Neutralize opponent's key players

Each of these strategic concepts is completed by a phrase like "in order to allow our subsequent actions to complete the victory."

### **Complexity**

Levels of complexity alone cannot distinguish strategy from tactical thinking or planning. Either strategy or tactics can be very complex or very simple.

### **Strategy and the SCA fighter**

Most SCA fighters never bother with strategy in individual combats. Most of our new-fighter training only mentions it by confusing it with tactics, and true strategy is almost never used except at the

highest levels of competition, i.e. Crown Tourney finals.

Most of us, in most SCA combats, just throw our most comfortable tactics at the opponent. In the traditional maim-and-kill scoring system, most individual combats are too brief for analysis and change-of-game within the bout itself. By the time you discover your tactics are ill-chosen, you have already lost the bout, and may even be eliminated from the tourney at the same time.

This delays using what you learned from your defeat to come back and defeat that same opponent until your next tourney encounter. That could be weeks or months. I have heard at least one crown winner tell of using strategy devised for a particular opponent in the previous crown tourney – the last time the two had fought. That’s a long time to remember exactly what happened.

Strategy based on intelligence-gathering over such long time gaps tends to be of the crudest sort, usually a matter of choosing tactics from the SCA’s limited standard repertoire.

Strategy is not part of the new fighter’s normal curriculum because even those teachers with a grasp of it have their effort used up on basic things like conditioning to carry armor and lift a shield, the basic blows and blocks, and

some rudimentary footwork. The average fighter takes as much as a year to get comfortable enough to authorize, and at that point there is usually a change in the teaching/learning process.

Sometimes the new fighter will be taken as squire by a member of the Order of Chivalry and begin a new path of learning. Or he/she, tired of being told how to do things and emboldened by the authorization rite of passage, prefer to go on their own.

Those who remain independent, even in a group with instructively senior fighters, tend to learn very erratically after autho-

**“Never fight a land war in Asia.”**

– The Sicilian in *The Princess Bride*.<sup>1</sup>

rization, often from misinformed sources.

By comparison, modern fencers continue to take intensive lessons

long after they become strong competitors. That isn’t because fencing is more complex; it’s only because the sport is mature. Its teachers have long since systematized the teaching process. Not to say we all teach the same way, but there are many basics taught in fencing as a matter of course that are very seldom taught to SCA fighters.

A common fencing concept is that we are all coaches to each other; we are all strategists and analysts of the competition. It is a given in fencing that to succeed you must be constantly analyzing the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses and be ready to change your approach quickly to either turn a bout around or to

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1. Novel and screenplay by William Goldman; 1987 MGM movie directed by Rob Reiner

preserve your victory against the opponent's change of strategy.

Strategic thinking is fostered by the format of both bouts and tournaments in the fencing world. A five-touch bout encourages the fencer to analyze the opponent and make changes during the bout to turn the tide and seize victory from the jaws of defeat. In a five-touch bout, you have to be brain-dead to suffer a total loss: at the minimum you get five chances to *learn*.

All but top-level tournaments are organized on the pool system to maximize the learning opportunity for each combatant. Typically, this gives even the worst fencer five bouts. With typical pool seeding, these five bouts offer a complete spectrum from the worst to the best fencers in the tourney. The result is a rich competitive learning experience.

This helps teach strategic thinking. If most fencing events were one-touch double elim, like SCA events, the average fencer would take ten years to learn what most pick up in two.

There are few books on fencing strategy per se, but most fencing suppliers carry Musashi's Book of Five Rings as a strategic-thinking manual. In one sense, this essay is aimed at making what I have learned available to SCA fighters—from that book as well as in fencing and SCA combat.

## Who needs strategy?

A good SCA fighter today can win many fights with no strategy whatever. Levels of ability vary so widely in the SCA that most of the time a bout is settled entirely by

the better fighter using whatever tactics he feels comfortable with that day.

Choosing tactics based on what's fun is okay. I do it all the time – without dignifying it by the term “strategy.” I resort to strategic thinking when I wish to defeat someone who is faster, stronger, or possessed of tactical skills that jeopardize my chance of victory. If you never have such occasions, you have no need to read further.

Strategy can be your plan to defeat a single opponent on a specific day, or a plan to win a war. It could even be your plan to become an excellent fighter, but that's a little vague. Generally, strategy requires an objective. Whether it's “defeat Duke Dag at 2-sword” or “stop Rommel in the Sahara,” the plan starts with an analysis of the obstacles to be overcome and the risks likely to be encountered.

Rommel's ability to move quickly posed a serious problem for the Allies. Their most obvious tactics – defensive containment lines– failed because he could simply run around them.

Duke Dag's quick combination attacks also pose a serious obstacle to victory. The most obvious tactics thrown at him usually fail too.

In both of these cases, concern for the enemy's attack threat can logically lead to the very same strategic-level proposal: “Nullify his ability to use his best tactic.” Applying this strategic directive to two different situations leads to two different sets of tactics. In Rommel's case, it was “cut off his

fuel supply;” the Panzer divisions rolled to a dead stop. In Dag’s case, if you wish to nullify that quick left-feint-step-in attack, you must either interrupt the sword moves or disrupt his preparation for that attack.

Some would say “take his leg,” but that’s without a risk analysis, which reports that Dag is a master at trading his leg for your head. In the case of Rommel, he posed little direct threat to the attack on his fuel supply lines, which were cut at sea.<sup>1</sup>

Later, we’ll list more strategic concepts, but first we must address processes on which strategic thinking depends.

## Analyzing the opponent

Nullifying anyone’s ability to use his best weapon depends on knowing two things: *what that weapon is*, and *on what else it depends*. And while people will certainly tell you what they think about other people’s strengths, you must ultimately develop your own observation ability.

Some might tell you that you can’t do this effectively until you yourself are good at the moves you are trying to analyze. Not true. Knowing where to dig and how to use a shovel are independent skills.

Once upon a time, a rising young fighter had trouble with an opponent’s aggressive, flying 2-sword attack. His lady – a fencer

but not a fighter – told him how to deal with it in Zen-like strategic terms. “Be a rock dividing the waters,” she said. He knew how to use the shovel well enough. He went on to become Duke Eli.

A bonus that can come from analyzing others’ strengths and weaknesses is the ability to analyze your own. It’s a lot harder to coach yourself than others, and not everyone’s lady happens to be a great coach– but *somebody’s* got to do it.

## Divide and conquer

It’s easier to analyze anything if you have a system. Most of us automatically break down our estimate of an opponent into at least attack and defense categories, but there are more. “Attack” and “defense” are too vague to be valuable unless he is extremely good at one and notably bad at the other.

We need more details to overcome the better fighters, because a fighter who seems to master you can seem like a monolith until you look really close. With a checklist, you have a chance to spot the cracks and choose an appropriate strategy. Here’s a list.

- **Mobility.** How’s the footwork? Are his feet parallel or in a solid T-stance? Can he quickly change direction? Does he pivot or side-step a charge well?
- **Balance.** How does he walk? Is he solid or tentative? Does he have a great-looking charge, but then have to collect himself? Is his upper body too far forward or too far back?
- **Flexibility.** Can he gain extra reach or change his body height

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2. I am not saying this is the best strategy for everyone against Dag; only that it is a good first step for those who conclude his attack is the prime strategic concern.

and angle quickly by leaning and bending at knees and hips? Can he duck or slip blows? Or does he tend to be a solid block?

- **Strength.** Is he scoring on people with mere wrist-flicks or does he have to use the whole arm? How fast does the shield come up?

- **Endurance.** Does he get winded quickly? Are there signs that his shield arm goes early (a lot of sword-blocks and retreats)? Does he move a lot early and then get static?

- **Armor deficiencies?** Is the armor slowing him down or depriving him of actions due to constriction?

- **Defensive technique errors.** Does he table his shield? If so, what kinds of opponent action trigger this? What does he over-react to? What gets him excited or worried?

- **Attack technique errors.** Does he open with the shield when he swings his sword laterally? Does he open up his left leg when advancing? Does he tend to stand up straight after each little flurry of action?

- **Pattern/habit analysis.** Does he *always* go to the head/leg feint after his first direct attack fails? What patterns or habits can you detect? Is his repertoire limited?

- Take a look at **his opponent.** What should your subject be doing about him? What is he missing? What is he trying? What does that tell you about his analytical ability?

- **Judgment.** Does he blow his energy on attacks inappropriate



CANALIZING THE ATTACK

*Having provided a tempting opening, the author makes his pre-planned sword-block.*

*Photo: Michigan Daily*

for his opponent - then be out of gas later? Does he pick the wrong weapon for his opponent?

- **Morale.** Is he a happy fighter? Optimistic? Pessimistic? How does he handle difficulty? Does he expect to win most of the time?



- **Desire.** Perhaps most important of all, how badly does he feel the need to win? Is he in control of his desire, or does his desire control *him*?

- **Combat mentality.** Is he crafty and patient, or bold and aggressive by habit? What does he get out of fighting? What is his attitude about winning vs. fun fighting? Is he a gambler or a systematic personality? How flexible is he mentally? Does he welcome adjusting to new things or go into rebellion or denial?

In rare cases, you could turn just one of these observations into a victory over the fighter you've observed. For instance, a fighter who likes to get it over with one way or the other, whether because of innate impatience or because of the weight of his armor, will have problems if you wait him out. Most of the time, though, it isn't going to be that obvious. You may end up trying three or four gambits based on your observation before you score.

Which points out the need to test your observations. He could have been just having a bad fight, or not warmed up when you analyzed. One use for strategic analysis is the development of tests you can run. If you think he may be weak at something, make him do it, but don't be too obvious unless you want him to awaken to strategic thinking while you're trying to beat him.

The checklist above applies equally well to teaching others and to maximizing your own resources.

## Strategic Creativity

Don't expect that simple observation is going to give you the victory immediately. It may tell you that right now you don't have the tools to beat this guy. In which case it might pay to develop them. If there are things other people are doing to beat this guy, by all means imitate them, but bear in mind that he may learn to overcome those tactics by the time you learn them.

That concern has led me to create moves to solve specific problems. It's one thing to dream up a move, but another to carry it out. In one case it took me two years to develop the ability to execute the move I devised, but it was well worth it. But in another case I simply borrowed a move from modern fencing and it worked immediately.

## Maximizing resources

Part of strategy is marshalling your forces to best advantage. Turn that analysis on yourself. Should your armor be lighter or stronger? Should you work on upper-body strength? Do you have habits that play into the enemy's hands? Do opportunities slip away because you are not balanced enough on your feet to accelerate into the blow you needed?

More important, are you mentally ready to engage in strategy? Can you cast aside all assumptions and preconceptions and observe clearly and without bias what is happening at this moment? You will be defeated just as quickly by over-estimating Dag's ability as from under-estimating it. And you will be defeated even quicker by

judging your own ability incorrectly either way.

One common error is to confuse one's intentions with what actually happened. You planned to strike the helm, and, sure enough, there was that metallic *crack!* What you didn't expect, and therefore didn't realize, is that he blocked with his sword guard. This sort of thing causes arguments all the time. We are all prone to this. We must all cultivate detachment and clear vision, removing expectation.

### Visualize victory

Sounds like a contradiction to the previous paragraph, but I *don't* mean picturing your blow caving in his helm. Rather, visualize his guard open and your blade ready to score. How do you create that situation?

One way is to work backward from that picture. What can you do to get his weapons, not *out* of the way, but *into a position* where they cannot block the shot you have in mind. You can't expect him to just drop his guard at the right moment. You will have to entice each weapon into the position that suits you. He has to think the move is a good one.

One of my standard ways to do that is to make my head a tempting target and observe when he falls for it. My countermove is planned to begin when he launches that all-out forehand. Sometimes I offer my shield to be snatched. If he goes for it, I will know exactly where both his sword and his shield are going to be in about a half-second... leaving his head open if I'm ready to take it.

But we're getting sidetracked into mere tactics. Let's get back to strategy. It's time to lay down a few strategic concepts you can mull over. These fall into five overarching super-concepts, each of which require you to follow up and fill in the blanks to get your victory. We start with the simplest and most direct in each case.

### A. Nullify the defense.

1. **Overcome the defense** with attacking speed and accuracy.
2. **Wear down the opponent's defense** by constantly attacking, faking attacks and changing tempo so that he must keep blocking and trying to anticipate your next attack.
3. **Open up the opponent's defense** with shield snatches and sword-interference moves. These also can be used to wear down the defense, and barely rise above the level of tactics.
4. **Draw out the defense** by tempting him to attack one target, then another such that he never returns to full guard and leaves himself open for your counterattack.

### B. Nullify the offense

1. **Anticipate and block every attack**; refuse to be drawn out; save all resources for defense until he is tired and frustrated.
2. **Maintain a constant threat** to his sword side. Make it clear that he attacks only at a serious risk of instant counterattack.
3. **"Canalize" his path of attack.** Close off every opening but one, and prepare a good counteroffensive for anything he does in that direction.

4. (a lot like 3) **Invite specific attacks** for which you are well prepared. Tempt him, then frustrate him. You can do this obviously or subtly. For instance, there is one fighter in our region who specializes in picking off your sword elbow. He can be gotten to go for a very subtle, apparently-accidental elbow opening.

5. **Engage his attack weapons** with yours to prevent proper use. Yep...just lay your sword blade on his, and his effort will have to go into freeing up his weapon. If he isn't used to it (who is?) he will be distracted from strategic thinking at the least.

6. **Confuse his attack planning** by changing the picture you present to him. Every position you can think of offers different attack possibilities to him. Watch him carefully. As soon as he decides what to do, change the picture.

7. **Confuse his attack execution** by changing distance. Many attacks are made with specific footwork moves that set up specific attack or feint angles. Stepping in, out or to the side at awkward moments can throw these attacks into the trash, and often open the opponent to counterattack.

An opponent who loves an advancing wraparound tends to use two or more steps to get to the point from which the wrap will be effective. That usually means he's committed to the swift step-in. It's that *commitment* you can take advantage of. He can be treated to a short retreat as he starts, then a sudden hard stop that puts your shoulder into his chest. I've had

such opponents hit themselves in the face with their own "wrap."

8. **Disrupt complex attacks** by varying the defense. Advanced fighters often set you up with pattern-and-variation to catch you defending in a pattern. Others count on blows bouncing off your shield to create combinations. A little change on your part can put such attacks off the rails, so make a point to unpredictably change the way you frustrate any given blow. The only thing you should provide consistently is the "wrong" defense for his attack.

At this point I am forced to echo Musashi, who, rather than beat a point to death, said, "you must study this closely."

### C. Confuse his Strategic Plan

If you have a clue about his strategic plan – for instance, if he tries any of the above– you can choose tactics to nullify them. Some are more obvious than others, but once you have used them, you should be able to spot the signs. Most of the "draw-out" plans are nullified by refusing to react to what your opponent does. Choose your own path. Just because he throws a rising snap does not mean you must, willy-nilly, make the obvious shield-block.

If any strategic line is blocked, choose another. Expect your opponent to catch on ... he may be reading this now. Learn to change not only what you do but how you do it. Be sophisticated, but look simple.

A sucker move that is too obvious to use from a standing start

may work in the heat of action because the opponent doesn't have time to analyze. You may not have the presence of mind now to do something subtle at high speed, but this comes under the category of creating the tools you need. You should resolve to work towards that level. When you are finally able to pull off that kind of move, it is such a "rush" it can obliterate minor concerns like winning the bout.

When changing positions or varying defenses, be wary of setting up patterns that your opponent can read and use. If your opponent is really sharp, you can fake an accidental pattern while waiting for him to time it out and ambush that attack.

Be aware of your effect on your opponent. Is he under-rating you? or perhaps over-rating you? Those who over-rate you can get over-excited and tire themselves out. This can backfire, though. If you appear *too* tough, the opponent may just get pumped enough to beat you.

You *can* be too sophisticated for the situation. Dag tells wryly of a bout he lost because his opponent didn't recognize his best feint. It was too subtle.

No matter what, be ready to change your entire strategic plan instantly should you see any sign that your intelligence reports were wrong... for instance, you're dealing your best rain of blows and he's ... grinning.

## D. Undermine his morale

Duke Dag has mastered this art form, leaving nothing to chance. His appearance and posture are intended to radiate confidence. On the field, his expression is stony, his speech patterns terse, giving nothing away. His fighting stance is calm and deliberate, just waiting for you to make your big mistake.

This manner is an art form. You can do theatre too. Choose your own character and script.

Some of my own stances and sword positions are intended to confuse the opponent as much as to create any real angle or distance advantage. In one sense, the more outrageous, the better.

**"We could tangle spiders in the webs you weave." – Richard to Eleanor in *The Lion In Winter*.<sup>3</sup>**

If the opponent tries to make sense out them, we'll definitely have fun.

## E. Change of Game.

In a sense, this is the most fundamental of all strategic concepts. If your original plan doesn't work, you have to be ready to change to a completely different approach on the fly. Similarly, if you're ahead but the opponent is gaining on you (as in counted-blow bouts), you need to change whatever is letting him gain so as to preserve your victory.

This can also be a deliberate plan: do the first few minutes of the fight in one style, then switch.

3. Play by James Goldman; also a 1967 Haworth Productions movie starring Peter O'Toole and Katherine Hepburn. Oscars: Best Screenplay, Best Actress, and Best Original Score (John Barry).

# RELATED CONCEPTS

## Initiative

To many strategists, “initiative” is God. To be sure, its judicious use can make ordinary tactics extraordinarily effective.

Contrary to popular thought, initiative is not merely attacking first. It is acting *in a way that gets your opponent to act in response* rather than on his own plan. Attacking first can make *you* the sucker. Real initiative makes you the leader, he the follower. Both are acting, but you are controlling – to a degree– what happens. Musashi calls this process making your opponent “as if rideable.” In chess, you are on your way to a forced checkmate. Example:

You and he are both right-hand sword and shield. You leave a big opening on your left side, shield low. He goes for it with a big forehand towards your neck. You step in with your right hand high, blocking his attack with point down and trailing, sword cocked for an overhand counterblow. The step-in has put your sword so close to his head that he will have to hurry to block it. You now have the initiative and can maintain it by continuing to threaten deadly blows he must hurry to block.

The *appearance* is that he attacked first. The reality is that you *acted* first, and in a way that led to your controlling the action.

Initiative is not always as clear-cut as our example, but one thing is clear: you cannot have initiative if you are reacting. Therefore, make it a priority to gain and keep your

independence from the influence of your opponent’s actions.

## Building your body of expertise

Mastery of combat skills is an ever-changing target. Each person you use as a benchmark for your progress is himself progressing. The good news for the beginner is that you can make rapid strides, given good starting levels of physical strength and athletic learning ability. Those who have yet to become athletic will face slower progress or harder effort.

Given good athletic ability and the leisure to practice once or twice a week, assuming you can get armor together with reasonable speed, you can gain 80% of the ability of a seasoned veteran fighter in two years. The next 10% will take another year. The next 5%, another, and the last 5% ... who knows? But... in the four years mentioned, that benchmark fighter will have gained another 5% or so.

Gaining the last few per cent is so difficult because to *become* the best there is, you must *experience* the best there is –repeatedly. Since “the best” is a small percentage of the fighters you will ever face or practice with, meaningful contact time will be a little hard to come by.

Sparring with top fighters is great at any stage of your career, but it becomes *really* critical in that last-5% period. That’s because many top fighters only use their best moves when they need to. You’ll only see Duke Dag’s very

best moves, or his fastest speed, or his very-best finesse when he believes he must use them to prevent defeat. You'll have to be pretty good to get him to use them. You'll also have to be very sharp to get anything useful out of the experience.

It's important to realize that certain people are much more competitive-minded than the average. There is a huge difference between how hard such fighters will work to win in practice and what they'll do in a competitive situation. That difference is what makes competitive experience so important. It *is* that different.

So as you approach that last 5%, you have to fight at the top of your game constantly against these top fighters, forcing them to bring out their very best stuff often enough for you to learn how to defeat it. And, as you do so, you will be teaching the top fighters what they have to do to stay ahead of you.

Strategy isn't magic. It can let you defeat a stronger, faster, fresher opponent, but sheer physical strength and ability may overwhelm the brainiest of us. (If it couldn't, I would have a lot less faith in ours being a genuinely chivalric sport.) When you face a Gerherdt von Eisenherz (think Eric Lindros in armor), either overpowering him or outreaching him are out of the question, and clarity of vision and coolness of head are more important than ever.

## **Lose today, win tomorrow**

When, not if, you lose, look

immediately for the cause. That won't usually be enough by itself to tip the scale next time, but if you are close to evenly matched, it could.

It's easy enough to say. But when you're fighting at the limit of your ability, you may not have enough mental room to see and remember everything that happens. It's easier to analyze when you are comfortable. So start today to develop a comfort zone in your fighting. Reduce to a minimum the distractions of armor and clothing. Practice blows with a pell until they are automatic and need no attention.

Don't be too proud to ask your opponent how he got you. Most of us are only too glad to dwell on our victory a few seconds longer. But don't depend on others to observe what matters most to you. You must find a way to remain mentally calm and unconcerned in the midst of the most intense action, while your heart is pounding, you're gasping for breath and scrambling to block another blow.

We're fortunate to know that barring serious armor failure, we won't get hurt. So we can do a few exercises to overcome apprehension and gain coolness under attack. One method is to let yourself get hit—in a normal sparring situation—while studying the process. Instead of trying to block as fast as possible (which could be faster than desirable), find out when the blow really arrives compared to when you first detected its motion. Once you see the whole thing, you'll realize that SCA sword blows are a lot slower than they at first seem,

and you can decide how to deal with each one.

If, on the other hand, you block only by reflex, you'll also block your ability to take control of the action.

Speaking of clear observation, I was embarrassed at fencing practice last year. For the first time in over a decade, I was fencing an A-rated opponent. After hearing me curse at having missed him several times, he informed me that I was insulting him. "I parried you," he said, "and you took all the credit."

I was embarrassed to realize that, at some level, I preferred blaming myself for an error rather than crediting the other person for his success.

But, really, this is a typical human error: focusing on our own actions and intentions tends to block out what the other person is doing. And what the other person is doing is the whole point.

Even experienced observers, under pressure, can lose clarity of vision.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- As you follow the path of the chivalrous tourneyor, I hope you will continue to evaluate and develop your philosophy on topics which will affect your uses of strategic thinking, such as chivalry and period re-creation.

For instance, you may agree with some period knights who say that too much cleverness ill-befits a knight, who ought to be strong and courageous, trusting in his strength, his good right arm, his endurance, his faith and his armour to carry the day, leaving craftiness and deception to lesser beings.

Or, you may agree with period re-creationists who refuse to lighten their armor below a certain "period weight" merely to win SCA honors.

To those who find these areas interesting, I can highly recommend the SCA writings of Will McLean on SCA tourneys and pas

d'armes. His *Compleat Anachronist* booklet No. 94, "Deeds of Arms: Medieval Accounts of Challenges, Jousts, and Tournaments" provides much food for thought to those seeking more "period magic" in their fighting diet.

This essay has no quarrel with these points of view; in fact I support them with all my heart. My intent is not to "sell" strategic thinking as something one ought to do all the time and in all endeavors. The very last thing I would like to see is a more intensely competitive spirit in our encounters at all levels. What I would hope for is more *parity* in our ability levels and more variety in our individual combats.

My only advocacy echoes that of Earl Sir Brannos, who advised me "follow your fun." If strategic thinking is fun for you, then enjoy.

For myself, strategy helps cre-

ate variety and fun in my fighting. While it might be nice to be a winning fighter, the compliment I cherish most is that I am “fun to fight.” While some of those compliments must be due to the fact that I smile a lot while sparring, I prefer to believe they are because the variety of styles and tactics I throw at the opponent are found interesting.

- You can learn a lot in practice, but there is no substitute for the learning you can do in bouts where

something, no matter how flimsy, is at stake. It is almost shocking how exhausting a competitive bout is compared to a practice bout against the very same opponent.

- I have not explained my “strategies” for specific weapon forms such as Great Sword because what passes for strategy with these are usually just tactics. Those who want specifics will welcome my forthcoming treatise “The Eccentric Fighter.”



In addition to Svea Wartooth, to whom this is dedicated, and those mentioned in the text, several people in the SCA have unknowingly contributed to this essay. Four deserve special mention here. To Baron Straum von Barzog, a wide grin for his constant support of my martial activities. To Count Thorvald the Golden, to whom I am a squire, for his confidence and unflagging support of my combative endeavors, my affectionate thanks. To Their Royal Majesties Dag and Elayna, he for many hours of sparring, she for her moral support, and both for their encouragement of my contributions, my most heartfelt gratitude.