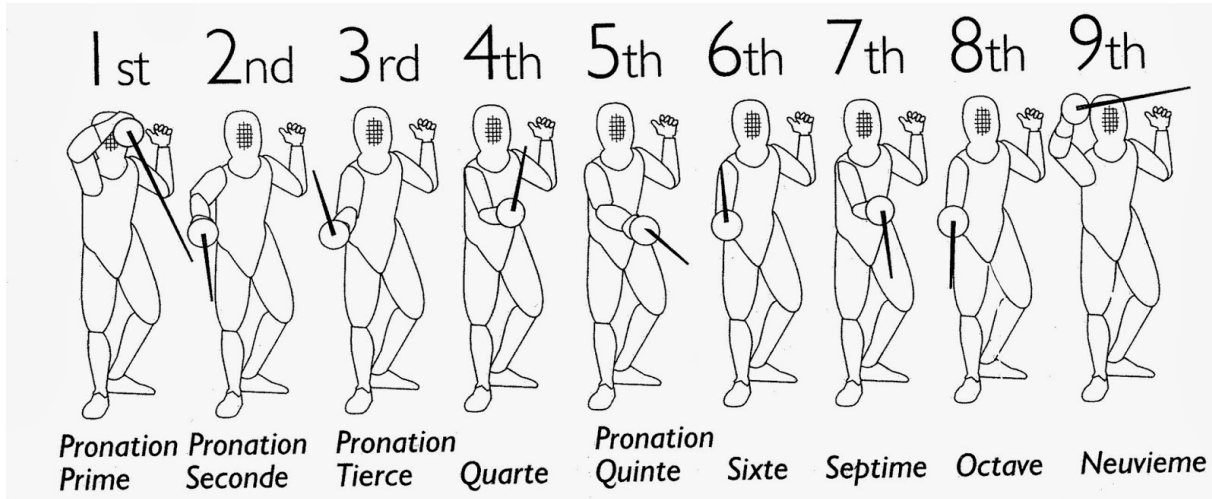


Learning the Fencing Hand Positions – Part 1

Most fencers and coaches will profess there are **Eight** hand positions in foil fencing. Some will say there are nine (I learned Ninth Position as a variation of seventh – “High Seventh,” my coach called it – but to be consistent with the picture below, I will concede there to be **Nine** positions). These positions represent a point in space from where you can have greater leverage over an opponent's weapon, and from where you can safely and efficiently deliver a thrust.



Source: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-NQD2ZB0elM/UpiNXvuTzYI/AAAAAAAAAZA/LPe62UmBIr4/s1600/Parries.jpg>

The picture above shows each of the nine positions, names them in French, and also identifies which ones put the weapon hand in *pronation*. Those not in *pronation* have the hand in *supination*.

Definitions:

Pronation: palm down, toward the ground.

Supination: palm up, toward the ceiling. Traditionally, the thumb is held at one-o'clock for right handers, and eleven-o'clock for left handers.

Looking at the image above, note how the hand positions protect a quadrant of the body. Fourth and First positions protect the high-inside quadrant. Eighth and Second protect the low-outside. Seventh and Fifth protect the low-inside. Sixth and Third protect the high-outside. Ninth protects the top, in case your opponent is really tall or knows how to throw his point over your shoulder.

I believe the most important hand positions to learn are Sixth, Fourth, Seventh, and Eighth. I have written three exercises below to help you find these positions, or at least help you refine your awareness of where they are. Spend 15-20 minutes a day moving through the various exercises, even if you think you know where the positions are. Do these exercises without other distractions. Focus on

which muscles are moving, and on how you can make the movements faster.

Exercise 1: Finding Sixth Hand Position

Stand on guard so that the shoulder and elbow of your front arm are against a wall. Make your weapon hand also touch the wall, keeping your hand parallel to the floor (or maybe at a slight angle upwards). This is Sixth Hand Position.

Helpful hint: You are not holding your weapon for this exercise. If you did, you might scrape the wall with your bell guard.

Exercise 1A: Practice extending and recovering the arm without losing contact with the wall. This is your Thrust. Make sure you are in alignment by keeping your shoulder, elbow, and hand sliding along the wall. Do this without rotating the wrist. When you thrust, your hand moves straight forward. When it can no longer go forward, notice how your hand moves along an upward trajectory following the ball-joint of your shoulder.

Helpful hint: Your hand should either be extended, or it should be recovered to Sixth Position. Try not to leave it in the middle unless you have a tactical reason for doing so.

Exercise 1B: Practice advancing and retreating with your hand and arm staying in sixth position.

Exercise 1C: Practice this pattern, completing each movement before starting the next:

Thrust, Advance, Recover, Retreat.

Exercise 2: Finding Fourth Hand Position

Stand *on guard* next to a wall. For this exercise, your front toes should be parallel to the wall. Your back toes should be pointed at the wall, perhaps even touching it. You should be so close to the wall that, when you bend your knees, your back knee *should* actually be touching the wall.

Hold your foil in your weapon hand and keep it in front of you. Your weapon arm, like your front toes, should be parallel to the wall. Your hand is parallel to the floor. Your weapon is pointed forward, approximately as high as your throat.

To find Fourth Hand Position, move the tip of your weapon so that it touches the wall. It should stay at the same height as when you were on guard. Once your tip touches the wall, follow through with your hand, allowing minimal rotation of your wrist.

Helpful hint: If you move your hand by pivoting from your elbow, your hand will move backward and toward your body. Instead, try to move your hand and elbow by pivoting from your shoulder. If doing it correctly, your elbow will slide through space in front of you.

Stop moving your hand before your bell guard touches the wall. When you have finished the movement, your tip should be touching the wall and should be as high as your throat. Your bell guard should not touch the wall – although it should be close. Your wrist should be bent. This is Fourth

Hand Position.

Helpful hint: Your tip always leads your hand into the position. "Point first" is a common mantra for fencers.

Exercise 2A: Memorize where Fourth is. Spend a few minutes every day repeating this movement until you can stop in just the right place. You should aim to find Fourth as quickly as possible, with your tip lightly touching the wall, and your bell guard never touching it.

Exercise 2B: Try to thrust while in Fourth Position. Move the point into alignment with where your opponent's target would be. Extend the arm without allowing the bell guard to drift inward, and without letting the bell guard touch the wall.

Exercise 2C: Find Fourth Position without standing against a wall.

Exercise 3: Finding Seventh Hand Position

To find Seventh Position, stand against a while in Fourth Position (see Exercise 2). With minimal arm and wrist movement, arc your point away from the wall and then touch the wall in a lower spot. Your point will probably touch the wall below your hip line. Remember: your bell guard should not touch the wall. This is Seventh Hand Position.

Exercise 3A: Practice finding Seventh Position from Sixth.

Exercise 3B: Practice finding Sixth from Fourth.

Exercise 3C: Practice finding Fourth from Seventh.

Exercise 4: Extra credit:

Eighth position is the low-line equivalent of Seventh. See if you can find Eighth Position after starting in Fourth, Sixth, and Seventh.

Standing against a wall helps you to learn just how far you should be moving your hand and weapon. Practice moving from position to position, always stopping sharply once you have reached a position. If you are standing next to a wall, then your tip should touch that wall (lightly), but your bell guard never should.

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