

Schola Saint George

COACHING NOTE #2: IT'S ABOUT POWER

A critical skill in Fiorean-style sparring

Written by Brian R. Price
Saturday, 27 April 2018

The SSG is a school of “chivalric” martial arts, so we draw our observations about medieval fighting from an array of surviving sources, not just Fiore dei Liberi. But even in Fiore, it seems clear that the intent is to develop kinesthetic power. This is the key element that distinguishes the “medieval” combatives from their civilian counterparts, from *fencing*. This is *fighting*.

Medieval romance is clear about the importance of power.¹ This is true even after the introduction of plate armour; modern HEMA assumptions about sole reliance on gripping the sword *mezzamente* (as Fiore calls it) or halfswording are not borne up by a review of medieval accounts or contemporary illustrations. Men in war hit each other, and hard.

Avoid the temptation to power strikes from the arms alone. Use the whole body. Use courtesy to strike with safety, but strive to deliver good strong blows. Don't be satisfied with “playing tag.”

Our approach to Fiore's *l'arte d'armizare* assumes that **power was essential to combative success**. You not only have to get to the target—but you have to get there with enough power. Fiore himself rarely uses the verb *tagliare*—“to cut”—instead employing *colpire*—a “blow”, “to strike.” The distinction is important.

When sparring, it's important to realize that the intent is to land one or more significant blows to the opponent. Lesser blows—those that *discomfit*—merely prepare the way for the

“telling” blow so highly prized by medieval writers. In sparring, it's important to acknowledge all blows, but its also important to strive to land the best, cleanest blows possible.

Thus, **sniping is antithetical to good chivalric fighting**. While it's useful to, say, strike the exposed hands on the entry, it isn't usually a fight-ending strike, so such *discomfits* should be followed up with a telling blow—with the edge or point.

Striking the head is the “holy grail” of medieval combat because, no matter how good the helmet (and a solid, 12g. or 2.5mm or better helmet is absolutely recommended), a stout blow causes a temporary reset that enables further violence, if necessary—such as a point being inserted. For this reason, tournament societies like the SCA have often acknowledged a good blow to the

¹ I have written about this in my academic article, “Yron and Stele: Chivalric Ethos, Martial Pedagogy, Equipment and Combat Technique in the Early Fourteenth Century Middle English Version of Guy of Warwick,” *Journal of Medieval Military History* #16, May 2018, 157-186.

head, as we do in the SSG. As a side-note, the widespread use of lightly reinforced fencing masks and lightweight sporting equipment has encouraged combatants to emphasize speed over power, particularly in the HEMA world.

Avoid the temptation to power strikes from the arms alone. Use the whole body. Use courtesy to strike with safety, but strive to deliver good strong blows. Don't be satisfied with "playing tag."

Both the SCA and the ACL-type fighting understands the importance of power. The SCA is essentially a medieval *béhourd*, where, historically, whalebone (actually *baleen*) or ash was used.² Baleen has interesting properties not dissimilar from the softer sparring weapons now used in HEMA. Their use of rattan allows for the delivery of near-full force blows, though these are restricted to above the knee, hands are off-limits, and blows are "acted out"; it's a tournament form, but a very martial one, one that has much in common kinesthetically with Fiore's *l'arte d'armizare* and the surviving historical record.

The ACL and similar groups also recognize power, and they also use rebated weapons with full force. This form of combat, eschewing the effects of any given blow, are more like medieval encounters fought between men-at-arms, such as the famous fourteenth century Combat of the Thirty, where a number of combatants died in the clash. Within ACL blows are not acknowledged, but eventually the combatant yields or is forced to the ground. But the chivalric emphasis on power is underscored in their style of fighting.

Neither the SCA nor the ACL "play tag," and their combatants should be respected as fellow travelers within the medieval military combatives / tournament culture world.

Within HEMA, most of the emphasis is on technique as preserved in the fighting treatises. HEMA has adopted rules-sets that emphasize judged strikes. But, full powered blows are not preferred. Some of this has to do with safety issues surrounding the selection of head and hand protection, but is now cultural. This reflects parallel concerns that would have arisen within the civilian context for the practice of the martial arts during the sixteenth century in particular, the period in which the most descriptive German manuscripts survive. It's a perfectly valid thing to anchor in, but it is different from what the Schola does; HEMA is also a fellow traveler, although one that draws from a very different martial and social tradition.

We try to exercise ourselves through the *ars militari*—the military arts—anchored in Fiore but drawing from other sources in literature, chronicle and in illustrations, ideally using historical equipment.

Within the *ars militari*, power is important and is emphasized. The idea of being able to take a good blow—and then to give one back, is an essential part of chivalric culture. One earns renown in the process. This power is tempered with the civilizing virtues of the chivalric ideal, differently expressed in all richness from the twelfth century to the fifteenth.

² Note that some IMCF/ACL groups refer to their activity as a *béhourd*, *behurt* or some other variant of the word; but this is inaccurate. I'll eventually finish my research notes on the topic.

On the field then, **we must remember to practice harnessing the whole body in delivering a blow**—through the *tre volte* of the body—equipping ourselves so that our opponents may also practice the full measure of Fiore’s *l’arte d’armizare*.

