

# Schola Saint George

## COACHING NOTE #1: KEEP IT LOW

*A critical skill in Fiorean-style sparring*

Written by Brian Price  
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From the original SSG Website

As Colin Hatcher wrote in his excellent article, “Develop Your Lion,” sparring is a keystone to learning and internalizing the techniques.

In addition to building confidence, courage, and the other *lione* virtues, sparring also tests the combatant’s assumptions that develop during training. When drilling, for example, combatants rely on a cooperative partner—acting with what Fiore would call *concordia*—in order to set up the circumstances where one or both of the *zugadore* can learn the biomechanical principles at hand.

To a degree these drills and repetitions, while extremely useful, can also create problems. Because the opponent is limited in what they can do; bad habits can and do creep in.

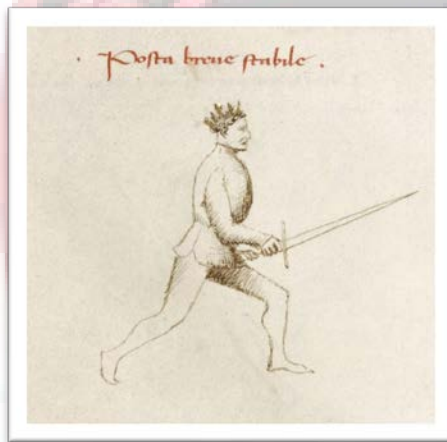


Figure 1: Posta Breve, Getty fol. 24r

### KEEP IT LOW

Over the last few months, when observing sparring of SSG combatants both here in DFW and from elsewhere, I've noticed a trend--the combatant's hands tend to rise up during a sparring engagement. Fiore shows the opposite--the hands are LOW, LOW, LOW. In the Getty especially--which I believe represents his last and much more mature work--the combatant’s hands in *posta breve* are **extremely** low. The lower the hands are, the better the defense. At the same time, the point is better situated to threaten the face and throat. The hilt anchors at the hips; a thrust from this position drives from the hips and harnesses the whole body when making a *punta*.

In *tutta porta di ferro*, also, we see this very low position, anchored at the hips. Note that the sword’s pommel is just above the groin. The upper body is relaxed, but the bag leg is “dragged” a bit. The hands are low, low, low! Keep it low!

In class, many combatants’ hands are at their chest or shoulders. **This creates a major instability**, wastes most of the sword's length in terms of defensive potential, reduces power,

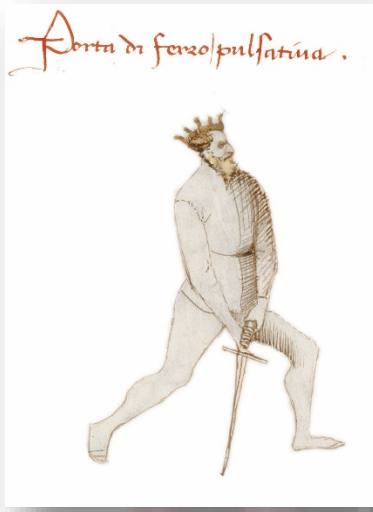


Figure 2: Posta Tutta Porta di Ferro,  
Getty fol. 23v

eliminates the point as a significant threat, offers the forearms for *liguadure* and other forms of *zogho stretto* control, and opens the body for all kinds of attacks. It also is generally more expended than is a lower position. It also exposes the lower body to all kinds of attacks.

To some degree this is caused or encouraged by a “spiral” of rising guards. What I mean by this is that when the opponent’s hands creep upwards just a bit, the combatant’s will generally follow. In an SCA context I used to exploit this psychological phenomenon in fights with a sword in one hand. I would consciously raise my guard just a little. The opponent would usually follow, and I’d reply with a sharp blow just under the hilt to the body. It worked, although one had to be careful about a *doppio*.

Generally, however, if I timed it right or achieved a

high enough position, the opponent was psychologically and physically expended, and rarely was a *doppio* actually the outcome. In class, **avoid raising the hands to the chest or shoulder level**. Keep the *guardie* **low, stabile**. Remember that Fiore seems to associate stability with the earth. That is why, perhaps, the *ellefante*’s center of mass is so low. Imagine what his balance would be like if the tower were on the bottom and the *ellefante* were on top. Or if the balance triangle discussed in *Sword in Two Hands* were inversed, with the point at the ground and the base in the air. This is one effect of bringing the hands high.

The German system *does* use hands-held-high as home base—anchoring at the shoulders rather than the hips—and indeed I argue that one of the key distinguishing points between the systems is where the weight is carried and where the preferred anchor position for the hilt and hands are. We see it also in the later Italian systems, even in Filippo Vadi. The reason, I believe, is because in the schoolhouse, which are represented by the majority of surviving manuscripts, *speed is more important than power*. Casting with the point becomes an effective way to make contact—albeit with less power—than one would find striking from the ground.

For Fiore, it is clearly low; stable, grounded. For Liechtenauer, it is high, the better to rain multiple blows down from above. While this can be effective, it is not Fiore.

Importantly, bringing the hands down brings the point to bear as a threat. Keep the hands **DOWN**, keep them **LOW**. Lower than you think is reasonable, because they will creep up just a bit.

**In sparring and in drills keep the hands LOW, LOW, LOW.** If you think you're low enough, **GO LOWER.**