

Sword in One Hand Fundamentals

Introduction

Fiore dei Liberi was a late medieval early renaissance master of the knightly arts during the late fourteenth early fifteenth century. Four treatises, which bear his name, were created that still survive today. Within these six hundred year old manuscripts are explanations on how to fight in and out of armor using grappling, daggers, swords, spears, pole axe, and mounted combat. Below we will be looking at one of these weapons, Fiore's spada a una mano or sword in one hand.

The Sword

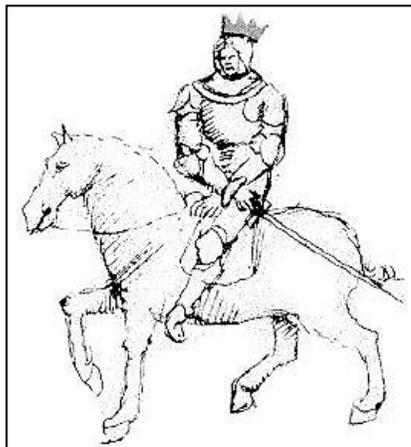
First let's look at the sword Fiore uses for his sword in one hand. The sword he shows us in his different treaties is the Hand and a Half Sword or Bastard Sword also commonly known as the Longsword. It is the same sword he uses for sword in two hands and half-sword. Why does he not use different swords for different tactics? The reason is simple, it's more efficient. The name "hand and a half" is a relative modern term used to describe the type of sword shown. The blade length on average is thirty-four to thirty-eight inches long. The grip is long enough to allow the use of both hands when required, but the sword is light enough to allow the user to fight holding it with only one hand. The weight of this type of sword is generally between two to four pounds though four pounds tends to be a little on the heavy side. While an Arming Sword could be used, arming swords are generally shorter and have a grip just long enough to accommodate one hand. When two hands are used on an arming sword, the left hand usually has only the pommel to grasp. On the other end of the spectrum is the Great Sword. The Great Sword, also known as the War Sword, generally has a wider, thicker blade than the hand and a half sword. Because of this, the Great Sword could be a heavier weight and only a few ounces of weight can cause quicker fatigue. This sword does not lend itself to single handed use as well as its small brother.

Fundamentals

Proper footwork when fighting with a weapon or empty handed is key to good balance and often means the difference between victory or defeat. An unstable warrior who cannot move about freely will be at a disadvantage. Therefore a strong *Ellefante* or elephant stance is important. An erect posture with proper foot placement is critical for good form. Basic footwork is vital. Fiore lists the basic footwork needed to attack or defend in his treatises: *Acressare*, *Dicressare*, *Passare*, *Tournare* and *Travasare* as well as the three *Volte of the Body*: *Volta Satbile*, *Mezza Volta* and *Tutta Volta*. By now you

should have a basic understanding of the footwork through your training with the longsword.

While learning footwork is an important part of combat, so is understanding what to do with the weapon you are about to use. Within Fiore's treatises he gives us plays for the sword in one hand. These plays teach the fundamentals of using the sword in one hand, ideas not taught in other sections of the manuals. The Getty, named *Fior di Battaglia* or the Flower of Battle, shows us the *posta* and gives us an explanation of the footwork needed to perform his plays. The beginning *posta* in his sword in one hand is not named in any of the four treatises where he is fighting on foot. He simply states in the Getty that "...I'd still mess you all up with this guard, which is so good and strong."



You must go to his mounted combat section to learn the name of this *posta*. There he calls it *Coda Longa*. It is unlike *Coda Longa* from the sword in two hands as with two hands *Coda Longa* is performed on the right side of the body with the left foot forward. If this was tried on the left side, the hands would cross and that would result in a weak guard. Furthermore it is not one of the *poste* he gives us for sword in two hands. But in the sword in one hand, the beginning *posta*, *Coda Longa*, is performed from the left side with the right foot forward. Since the *posta* is on the left side, we could refer to it as *Coda Longa Sinestra*. It could also be called *Coda Longa Mezzana*. *Coda Longa Sinestra*,

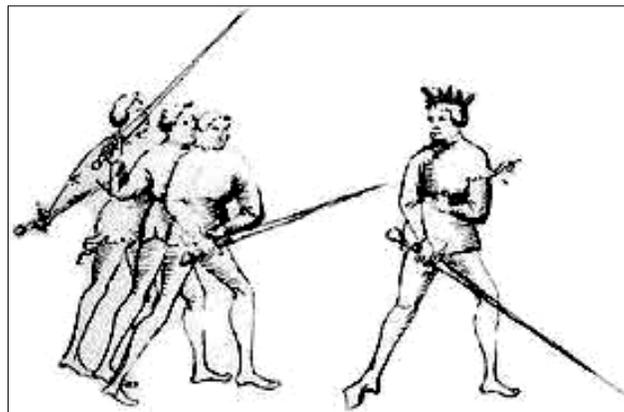
which I prefer, is used for sword in one hand only when both fighting on foot and when fighting mounted.

The footwork needed to perform the plays is also spelled out in the Getty. Fiore states "*I'll perform an accrescimento slightly offline with my forward foot and I will pass obliquely with my left foot...*" If you study the image in the Getty, as well as the other manuscripts, you will notice the master's right foot is perpendicular to the opponent. By performing "*an accrescimento slightly offline with my forward foot*" it allows the user to move further offline as he passes "*obliquely with my left foot.*" While this works well from a static starting position, a fight rarely remains static for long. Moving about in this manner is a bit awkward as well. Utilizing the basic elephant stance with the forward right foot pointing towards the opponent, *left ellefante*, works just as well and allows for more fluid movement. You can then perform a *Volta Stabile* of the body to move the feet and body back into the *posta* shown in the treatises if desired or remain in *ellefante*.

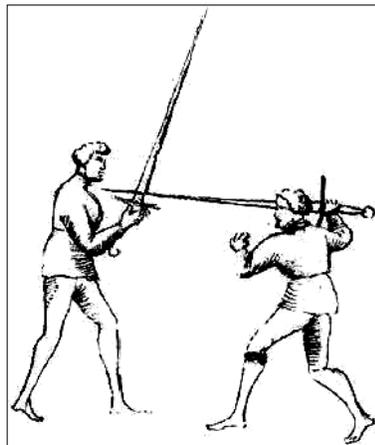
While the posta Coda Longa Sinestra is used for the start of all the plays shown when fighting on foot, Fiore shows us other sword in one hand poste as well. These poste may also be used in attack and defense.

Poste

The first image shown in the sword in one hand section is the Master, in Posta di Coda Longa Sinestra, being attacked by three armed villani or villains each holding a sword. This image gives us two recognizable Fiore poste, Poste Breve (short guard) and Posta di Donna Distra (right woman's guard), for sword in one hand. The third guard is the sword throwing position and is also not named.



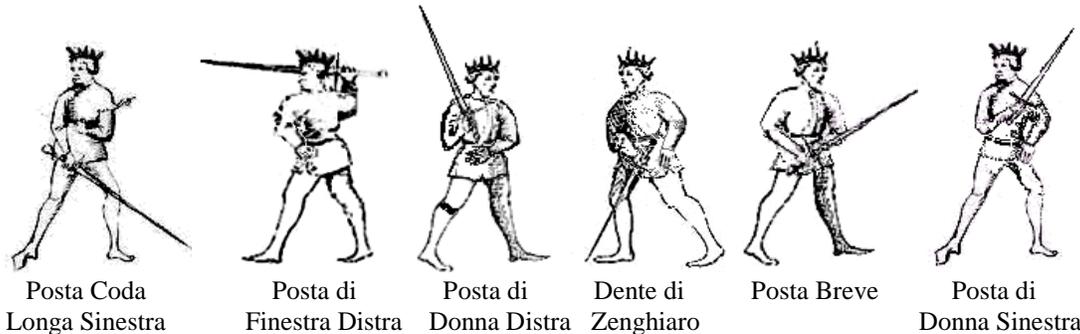
The next image shows the first play. The play ends with the scolaro in Posta di Finestra Distra (right window guard).



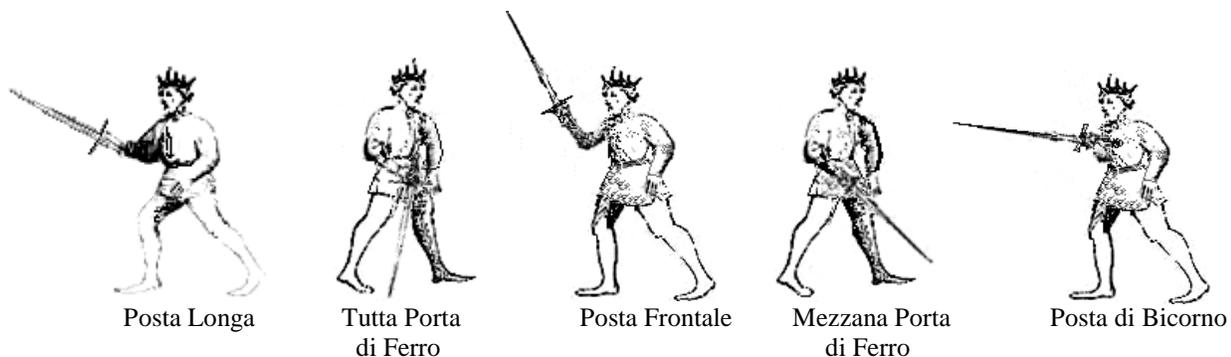
So here we have four poste shown to us within the first two images, Posta di Coda Longa Sinestra, Posta Breve, Posta di Donna Distra and Posta di Finestra Distra. If we move to

the mounted sword in one hand part of the treatises, we find more sword in one hand poste. Posta di Donna Sinestra and Dente di Zenghiaro are shown there along with the other poste mentioned before. That brings us to six poste. Other poste from sword in two hands can be adapted to sword in one hand though they are not shown in the treatises.

Below you can see what these six poste might have looked like if they had been drawn within the original Pisani-Dossi style artwork. They are Posta Coda Longa Sinestra, Posta di Finestra Distra, Posta di Donna Distra, Dente di Zenghiaro Posta Breve and Posta di Donna Sinestra.



Other poste not shown in either sword in one hand section are Poste Longa, Tutta Porta di Ferro, Posta Frontale, Mezzana Porta di Ferro and Posta di Bicorno.



Colpi

Most of the plays within sword in one hand use the same beginning sword movement. Let's look at the sword movement Fiore is demonstrating. Standing in Coda Longa Sinestra, the scolaro passes left with the left foot while bringing his sword up and across his body in a sweeping motion finishing in Posta di Finestra Distra. This sword movement is a true edge sottano reverso. According to Fiore, within the mounted sword in one hand, the opponent's sword is "*beaten to the outside, that is, sideways and not upward... lifting slightly the opponent's weapon.*" He continues on to say "*...this guard counters all blows on the mandritto and riverso side, and is usable against right or left handed opponents.*"

This type of defensive technique can be seen in a number of treatises and used by different masters of the late Medieval and Renaissance period. Talhoffer uses the same guard in his Fechtbuch of 1467. The image, 113r (top), shows two men fighting with Messers. The man in the low guard looks just like Posta Coda Longa Sinestra. The next image, 113v (bottom), shows the similar movement as Fiore, parrying the opponent's blade, though the outcome of this play differs from that of Fiore. Later Bolognese masters wrote about the effectiveness of a rising cut delivered with the true edge followed by a thrust. Dall' Aggachie wrote saying in thirty days of practice using just this simple technique, one could survive a duel against a more experienced opponent. Viggiani's first guard and blow begins on the left side. With the sword still within its sheath it is drawn and a rising reverso delivered which is followed by a thrust or cut.



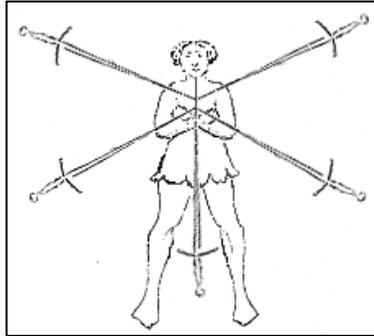
That being said this method of defense and attack is not undefeatable. Therefore, when sparring against someone who knows the same technique, using the sottano reverso should be done sparingly. This means you will need more than just the two poste, Coda Longa Sinestra and Finestra Distra, and one deliverable blow for sword play. So let's look at the seven swords from Fiore's Segno and see how they work with the sword in one hand.

First is the Fendente. This is a true edge colpo delivered in the same downward motion as in the sword with two hands from either the right, mandritto, or left, reverso, side. Fendenti can be delivered from both the Donna poste and Tutta Porta di Ferro. A fendente with one hand will not deliver the same power as with two hands. But with the left hand free, it is able to be used to against your opponent in a number of ways which you will learn later in the sword in one hand plays.

Next is the Sottano. A sottano may be either a true edge or false edge blow delivered from underneath. The sottano like the fendente may also be delivered from the mandritto or reverso sides. The two major differences between the two sottano edge blows, the true edge or false edge, are power and ending poste. True edge sottani will end in the Finestra poste while false edge sottani will end in the Donna poste. As for power, while the false edge is faster, it is inherently weaker than true edge. The first play of the sword in one hand uses a true edge sottano against an opponent's fendente and drives it to the side.

The last colpo is the Mezzano. The mezzano is generally a true edge colpo and can be delivered anywhere between the head and knees and from both mandritto and reverso sides. From the reverso side, a false edge mezzano may be delivered if desired. This might happen after beating an opponent's sword aside from right to left and finding your

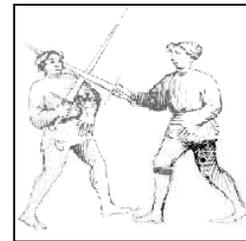
blade beyond his body off to the right. There, a quick false edge mezzano could be delivered. Within the mounted sword in one hand Fiore writes about the reverso tondo. It is a level mezzano delivered to the back of the head written about in play nine of the mounted sword in one hand. It is used as part of a counter to the sottano reverso.



Finally there is the punta or thrust. Like in the sword in two hands the thrust delivered by the sword in one hand may come from any of the five zones (upper right, upper left, lower right, lower left and center) with the tip targeting the center line of your opponent. The most predominate area to thrust from would be the upper right side, from Finestra Distra, as per the first play for sword in one hand. There is also a slight reach advantage of a one handed punta over a two handed punta.

Along with the seven swords there are the three Volte of the Sword. The three volte are Volta Stabile, Mezza Volta and Tutta Volta. As with the sword in two hands, the three volte can be used with the sword in one hand.

The Volta Stabile of the sword is delivered on the same side of the opponent's sword after an incrosa or a redoppiando. Here is a good example of a volta stabile from the sword in one hand. The scolaro uses a true edge sottano reverso to beat the zugadore's sword aside then finishes the play with a Volta Stabile, turning the edge in plane or on the same side and striking down with a colpo to the head or body.



The Mezza Volta of the sword and the Tutta Volta of the sword deliver a colpo on the opposite side of the opponent's sword. While both volte, mezza and tutta, deliver a colpo on the opposite side of the opponent's blade the actions are different. In a mezza volta the sword is simply drawn back far enough to clear the tip of your opponent's sword before striking on the other side. With the tutta volta, the sword rotates around the opponent's sword using momentum taken from the opponent's attack to drive the rotation. The tutta volta uses the wrist action similar to other single hand sword styles from Europe. The difference is many other schools of swordsmanship keep the blade on the same side like in a volta stabile where the tutta volta crosses the sword to strike on the other side.

Transitioning

In the sword in two hands, as you begin to close towards your opponent you begin to transition from posta to posta looking for an advantage over your opponent's posta. Using only Coda Longa Sinestra with the sword in one hand limits your fighting ability. If your opponent knows your plan of action, they may know a counter which can leave you in a

dangerous position. This is why poste transitions are just as important with sword in one hand as with two hands. On page 4 eleven, poste were shown that can be used with sword in one hand. One should practice not only Coda Longa Sinestra to Finestra Distra but also Donna, Breve, etc. Also the use of the left hand to bind, push or twist is used in sword in one hand. The sword in one hand moves quickly in and out of Misura Stretta or close distance, so practicing using the left hand will benefit you.

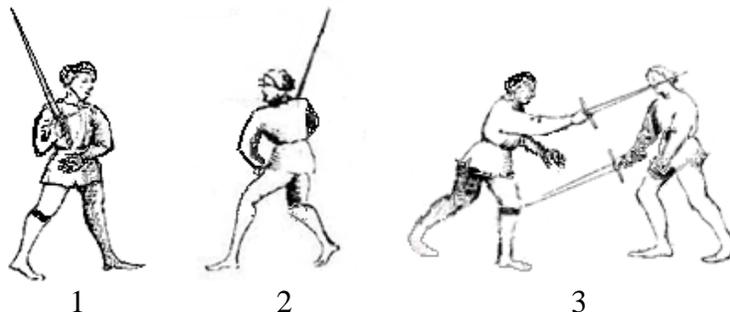
The drills used in sword in two hands may be used with one hand, like the “V” drill. This is a good starting point. Also “posta dances” which are either planned or unplanned sequences of poste linked together can be performed. Posta dances are like shadow boxing or katas in Asian martial arts.

Elephant Plays

During the first twelve weeks of the beginner’s course, a new student learns the six elephant plays. The elephant plays are taken from parts of Fiore’s zogho largo plays to teach the basic offensive and defensive techniques for welding the sword with two hands. These same six plays may be performed with the sword in one hand as well. Below we will quickly review the six plays.

The first elephant play is *Slipping the Leg*. This play teaches two important lessons. First is how to use measure or distance for defense. The second lesson is that attacking the leg may be unwise. In one hand sword combat, the forward leg is often a target because it frequently is the only target in range to your opponent. Using the method of slipping the leg is a good counter to leg attacks. The play is as follows.

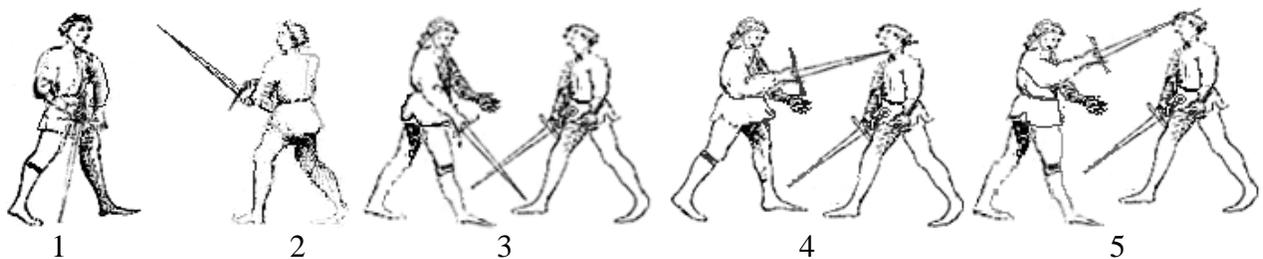
The Scolaro, with the colored garter, is waiting in Posta di Donna Distra (Image 1). The Zugadore is in Posta di Donna Distra (Image 2). The Zugadore attacks with the fendente mandritto towards the forward left leg of the Scolaro. The Scolaro performs a tournare, stepping back with the left leg, while delivering a fendente mandritto at the Zugadore targeting the head or left shoulder area (Image 3). If the fendente does not strike the head or left shoulder and the fendente strikes the chest or arm then the Scolaro will continue with a punta finishing the Zugadore.



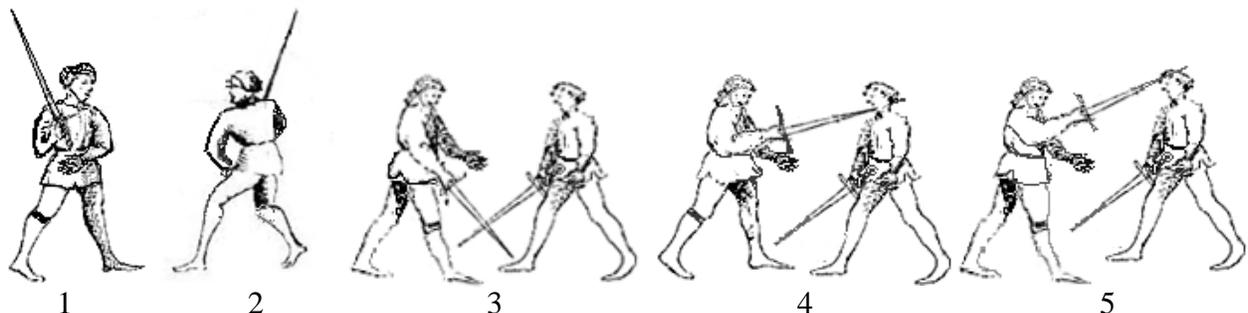
The next two plays, play two and three, use a Rebattendo (to beat) to drive the opponent’s sword to the side as he or she attacks. In both plays the scolaro may start in either Tutta Porta di Ferro or Posta di Donna Distra. To simplify, the scolaro will begin in

Tutta Porta di Ferro in play two and Posta di Donna Destra in play three. Also both plays may be performed using either an ala traversa step or a tournare.

Play two is *Rebattendo vs. Punta*. The Scolaro begins in Tutta Porta di Ferro (Image 1). The Zugadore begins in Posta Breve (Image 2). When the Zugadore attacks with a punta towards the chest of the Scolaro, the Scolaro steps passo ala traversa while performing a fendente mandritto. The Scolaro beats the Zugadore's thrust aside (Image 3). The Scolaro continues with a sottano reverso, a disconcerting blow to the head (Image 4). The play ends with the Scolaro delivering a fendente mandritto to the Zugadore's head or body (Image 5).

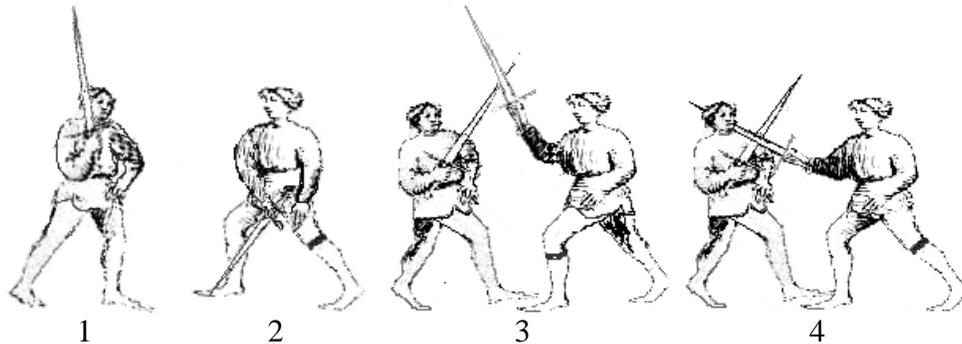


Play three is *Rebattendo vs. Colpo*. Here the Scolaro begins in the same posta as the Zugadore, Posta di Donna Destra (Image 1). The Zugadore is in Posta di Donna Destra (Image 2). This time the Zugadore attacks with a colpo, a fendente mandritto. The Scolaro replies with the same. As the swords reach incrociata or cross, the Scolaro beats the Zugadore's sword aside (Image 3). The rest of the play is the same as play two. The Scolaro continues with a sottano reverso, a disconcerting blow to the head (Image 4). The play ends with the Scolaro delivering a fendente mandritto to the Zugadore's head or left shoulder (Image 5).

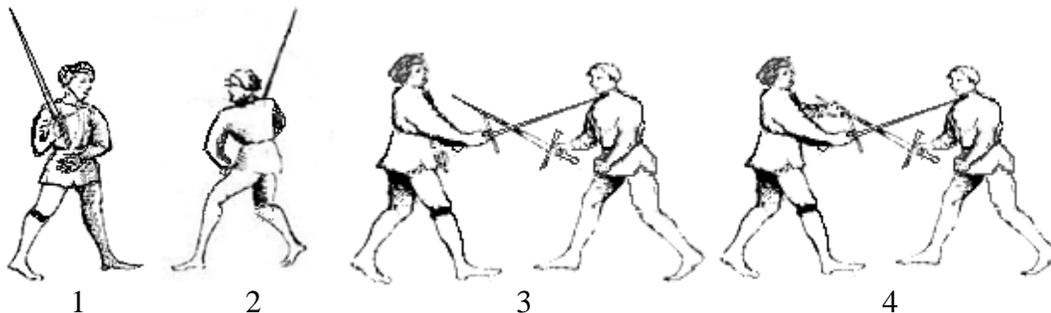


Play four is *Redoppiando vs. Colpo*. The play uses a Redoppiando, a redirecting blow from behind, to push the opponent's blade across his or her body. The Zugadore begins in

Posta di Donna Distra (Image 1). The Scolaro waits in Dente di Zenghiaro (Image 2). The Zugadore attacks with a fendente mandritto. The Scolaro replies by performing a passo ala traversa to the left while completing a false edge sottano reverso redirecting the Zugadore's blade (Image 3). The Scolaro's sword ends in Posta di Donna Distra where a fendente mandritto is used to strike the Zugadore in the head (Image 4).

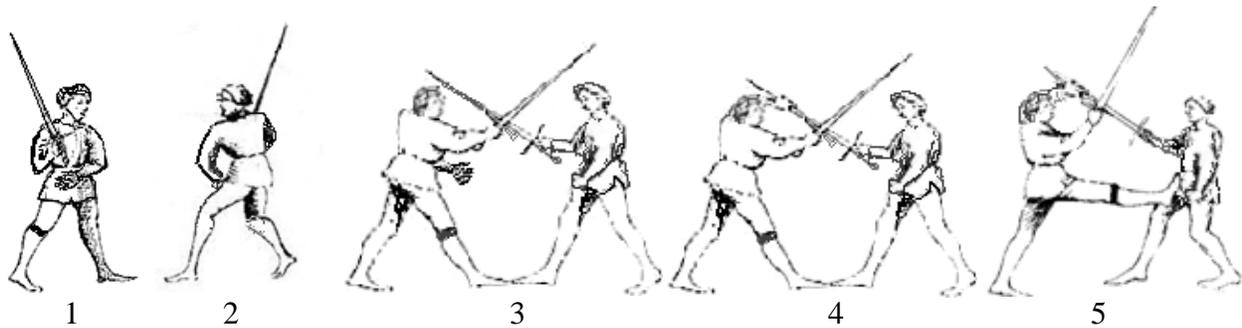


Play five is *Finding the Point*. In this play a punta or thrust is used to counter from incrosa or crossing of the swords. As in sword in two hands, the best method of delivering the punta into your opponent depends on two things, pressure and cover. Lighter pressure and poor cover given by your opponent means a more direct punta may be delivered while harder pressure and better cover means you will have to ala traversa to attack. The Scolaro begins in Posta di Donna Distra (Image 1). The Zugadore is also in Posta di Donna Distra (Image 2). The Zugadore attacks with a fendente mandritto. The Scolaro counters with the same. As they reach incrosa the Scolaro "Tastes the Steel", feels what the Zugadore is doing with the sword, and counters with the appropriate punta (Image 3). Since the left hand is free in sword in one hand, the left hand can be used at the moment of incrosa to grab the Zugadore's sword and extend control as the punta is delivered (Image 4).



Play six is *Capture with Frontale*. In this play, the opponent's sword is trapped using the swords cross guard as it transitions into Posta Frontale from either Posta di Donna

Distra or from incrosa. The Scolaro begins in Posta di Donna Distra (Image 1). The Zugadore is in the same posta (Image 2). There are two ways this play may transpire. First, when the Zugadore attacks with a fendente mandritto the Scolaro answers with the same and they end in incrosa (Image 3). Second, the Scolaro may transition into Posta Frontale straight from Posta di Donna Distra. Once the Zugadore's sword is captured any number of finishing counters maybe executed. Since the left hand is free in sword in one hand, it can be used to grab the Zugadore's sword (Image 4). A kick to the midsection, knee or shin can be performed (Image 5). Once the Zugadore's sword is controlled, a pommel strike to the face, punta to the abdomen or a mezzano to the left torso are just a few attacks the Scolaro may choose to use.



Conclusion

This ends the fundamentals of spada a una mano or sword in one hand. Next we will look at the sword in one hand plays from the Pisani-Dossi treatise as it contains two more plays than is shown in the Getty. We will look at the way the images are laid out and see if there is a reason for the placement of the plays or are they just randomly shown.

Credits

Fiore de' Liberi Fior di Battaglia Second English Edition by Tom Leoni, 2012.

Fechtbuch Codex Icon 394a by Hans Talhoffer, 1467

Fiore dei Liberi's Sword in Two Hands by Brian R Price, 2007

Masters of the Cross Sword by Brian R Price

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