

Schola Saint George

COACHING NOTE #4: Using a Pell *A fundamental and authentic training tool*



Figure 1: Manuscript BL Royal 20 B XI de re militari 1300-1325

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“Deliberate Practice” is through to be a key to motor control and kinesthetic learning.¹ Most SSG students come to practice once a week, or in the case of those who are trying to excel on one of the tournament circuits, two times or more. But for those who really want to excel, some form of daily practice is tremendously effective. “Pell work” is a superb kind of deliberate practice that goes back at least to Rome.

In *de re militari*, the late Roman writer Flavius Renatus Vegetius synthesized late Imperial military practice.² Starting in the thirteenth century, his work was copied and adapted, providing

¹ The cornerstone researcher is K.Anders. Ericsson, who with Ralf Krampe and Clemons Tesch-Römer authored “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” *Psychological Review* 100 (1993), 363-406 (linked on our coaching members page). Since then Ericsson has expanded on his theory with a number of book-length works. Malcom Gladwell popularized his ideas in *Outliers*, New York: Penguin, 2009, while Daniel Memmert has attempted to extend the idea of deliberate practice to tactics in *Teaching Tactical Creativity in Sport*, New York: Routledge, 2015, also listed on the SSG members’ coaching resources page.

² A free Kindle edition is available on Amazon, trans. John Clarke, but it is not the best for scholarly work. The translation by N.P. Milner is recommended, published as *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997. There is a great deal more in Vegetius than just using the “pile” or pell; it’s

one of the only military manuals available to the knights and men-at-arms of the Later medieval period. Starting in the early fourteenth century, lightly illuminated versions of Vegetius' manuscript were popular throughout England and in France, where adaptations were often compiled into chivalric miscellanies that also contained law codes like the *Tree of Battles* and romances.³ All were thought to be teaching texts for the young chivalry.

One of the things Vegetius wrote about was the use of a pile implanted into the earth, against which Roman soldiers would practice on a regular basis using double-weight swords. Such movements, from the strong and weak sides, enable combatants to blend their movements together, combining strength and precision, refining movement patterns and testing new ideas. While a pile wouldn't strike back (one hopes), if we judge by modern analogues (the SCA, boxer's heavy and speed-bags), a pile or "pell" can let a combatant make a lot of integration progress in a short time.

MY EXPERIENCES

I was first introduced to the idea of a "pell" in an SCA context in 1980 or so. Using round fence-posts, set into the ground or into a reinforced bucket of concrete with feet, some were plain while others were covered in rope, or carpet (I don't recommend this, but it was common). Using rattan weapons, one could beat upon the post for quite a while, exercising wind, building strength and precision. I used mine three times per week or more.

For WMA students, working against the pell with a rebated weapon is possible, but it might risk breaking the blade, with the attendant risk of injury to someone or something should be blade sail away. An oak stick fitted with a padded leather cap for thrusting, and perhaps a wrap of a handle, will suffice, though the edge orientation would be lost. SCA combatants solve this problem with tape, defining the edge of their batons, but I'm not sure it's necessary. Rattan is actually very good since it absorbs some of the impact.

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

For beginners, the pell is a very good place to teach core kinesthetics, since they can hit it with full power. For intermediate or advanced combatants, exercises should include working to create both single and compound blow combinations, working both edge and point. Of particular value are drills that have the combatant striking and then making a *volta* to the other side, and/or drawing the hilt down to position the point for a well-powered *punta*. Blow combinations in threes, fours and fives are useful on the field, VERY useful, because they form a coherent motive or collection of refined movements.

I would advocate working both at static distance (more useful for armoured work) and with fluid entering and withdrawing movement patterns, exercising the most common phases of a fight. This can dramatically improve the combatant's movement integration. I'd recommend wearing

recommended to give a little time to for those who might be serious about the historicity of their swordsmanship work.

³ The best work giving a full context for the medieval impact of Vegetius—which appears to have been extensive during the later middle ages, is Christopher Allmand, *The De Re Militari of Vegetius: The Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. This work is highly recommended for the most serious students of the period; Allmand is also a highly respected scholar of the Hundred Years' War.

the actual shoes one will fight in, and working on the principles of *stabilitas*—watch out for making silly errors that you don't correct.

For those using a shield or buckler, as the combatant above depicts, using it in conjunction builds strength and reminds the combatant about necessary shield position. Armour, like a mail shirt, gambeson or arm harness, can be added for weight, once movements are smoothed unarmoured. You can also use a pell as a target for the *lanze* or short spear—learning to throw multiple blows in quick succession is a key skill we don't exercise in any other way; the same goes for poleaxe.

For those who really want to advance, just fifteen minutes per day would have a dramatic effect on motor coordination and refinement. AND, best of all, such exercises can be done solo. Do a lot of blows, and it's aerobic, too.

A simple pell can be built for maybe \$30-\$40, or less, if you have access to a yard. If not, you can build a mobile one, like the one at [Forth Armoury](#). Do not use a living tree! Telephone poles are also not recommended, nor are patio poles, or anything that's not specifically intended as a pell. Some people have used heavy bags, but I think a pell works better. I prefer just a plain post, which is about \$15—get something up quick and get started, rather than waiting for the perfect thing.

Once a combatant begins fighting regularly, pell-work is still a fantastic, medieval (and Roman!) way to build integration and movement skills.

Selection from a c. 1460 adaptation in Middle English, mss. info here, ll. 348-368:

348 Of fight the disciplyne and exercise
 349 Was this: to haue a pale or pile vpright
 350 Of mannys hight, thus writeth olde wyse;
 351 Therwith a bachelor or a yong knyght
 352 Shal first be taught to stonde & lerne fight;
 353 A fanne of doubil wight tak him his shelde,
 354 Of doubil wight a mace of tre to welde.

355 This fanne & mace, which either doubil wight is
 356 Of shelde & sword in [con]flicte or bataile,
 357 Shal exercise as wel swordmen as knyghtys,
 358 And noo man (as thei seyn) is seyn prevaile
 359 In felde or in gravel though he assaile,
 360 That with the pile nath first gret exercise;
 361 Thus writeth werreourys olde & wise.

362 Have vche his pile or pale vpfixed faste,
 363 And, as in werre vpon his mortal foo,
 364 With wightynesse & wepon most he caste
 365 To fighte stronge, that he ne shape him fro,---
 366 On him with shild & sword avised so,

367 That thou be cloos, and prest thi foo to smyte,
 368 Lest of thin owne deth thou be to wite.⁴

From around the web



But really, just a post in the ground is all you need.
 STEP BACK FROM THE COMPUTER – Go out and make the thing!

Like a Bowflex, a pell contributes nothing unless you use it regularly.

“The Pell” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMGgCaHYTeE>

“Control on the Pell” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5irpz5nfmM>

“Mark your Pell for Training Purposes” - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_uIVlfzutc

“Bastard Sword in SCA Combat” – [describes useful longsword drills.](#)

“SCA 1-6 pell drills” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGL8aIB6bic>

“Adding footwork to pell drills” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkJ7lvYvfPg>

⁴ *Kyghthode and Bataile*, ed. R. Dyboski and Z.M. Arend, London: Early English Text Society, 1935. This text is available on the SSG members page website, under MEMBER RESOURCES: CHIVALRY. Grappling with the Middle English can be a challenge, but there is a lot of interesting material.