

## English Quarterstaff, circa 1600

The following is taken chiefly from The Schoole of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defence by Joseph Swetnam, published 1617, with some additional material from George Silver's unpublished manuscript (Sloane MS. # 376) Bref Instructions Ypon my Pradoxes of Defence... written circa 1599. The two texts are on the whole complementary, although there are clear distinctions and certain disagreements between the two author's combat styles. Most notably, Swetnam absolutely emphasizes the thrust and advises against the blow, while Silver, characteristically, recommends using the two equally. The reader should be advised that on the whole I will favor Swetnam's bias in this paper.

The basics of quarterstaff play are fairly easily acquired, and represent a simple, powerful, and effective form. Mastery of the quarterstaff was clearly highly regarded, as it was a weapon frequently declared in the playing of prizes by the Masters of Defence of London (Sloane MS. # 2530). Moreover, it forms the foundation for English pole arm play.

### 1) The weapon



The quarterstaff is to be approximately 7 to 8 ft long according to Swetnam. Silver advises how to find the perfect length, as shown in the picture above: stand upright, holding the staff upright by your body in one hand, then reach up to your staff with the other hand as high as you can. Then add length of “a space to set both your hands” whereby you may conveniently strike, thrust, and ward—this typically yields a length of 8 to 9 ft.

The staff may have been shod at its ends with metal, and this may be what Swetnam refers to in mentioning “points” at the end of the staff, which could be chopped off or dislodged. Note that the picture above suggests the presence of points, although the weapon represented therein could be a “half pike” instead.

Finally, Swetnam recommends padding the ends of the practice staff with a ball of leather-wrapped wool or flax the size of a tennis ball to prevent losing an eye during practice.

## **2) The stance**

The basic stance is an upright posture, with the knees fairly straight and the feet about one and a half ft apart. The rear leg is upright and the forward leg is thus slightly angled. Bending the knees in guard in English martial arts of the time is considered bad form—it makes the knee a target.

## **3) Thrusting technique**

In thrusting, you may release your forward hand from your staff, holding the butt end only with the rear hand; as soon as you have discharged the thrust, pluck back your staff and grasp it again with both hands, recovering your guard. Thereby you gain additional reach. You may do much the same, but keeping both hands on the staff, by drawing your forward hand back near your rear one and thrusting the staff out with both hands.

As you thrust, you should step forward with your forward foot to increase the pace (although not so extremely as in a lunge), assuming that you and your opponent have similar lengths of staff. If you have a reach disadvantage, you may perform a passing step, i.e. bring your rear foot forward. In either case, be sure to return to your guard immediately upon having thrust.

## **4) General admonitions**

It is best not to let your enemy throw the first blow, but rather to seize the initiative with a false thrust (i.e. a feint) as described later, in section 6a.

Keep your staff always “in his right place”. That is, stay in guard, leaving it only to attack, defend, or change guards, and return into guard as soon as possible.

Do not overparry, “beyond the compass of true defence.” If you do, then you cannot recover in time to defend against the false play—that is, if you parry wide in response to a feint, you will be unable to parry the real attack.

You should always try to have the same foot (and hand) forward as does your opponent. Otherwise, as will be seen, you are open and vulnerable to being struck in the hand.

Do not strike a blow with your staff, but always prefer to thrust (according to Swetnam; note that Silver disagrees). One who lifts up his staff to strike may be hit by the defender’s thrust (as the Italians would say, in mezzo tempo). One who thrusts also has the reach advantage. This is especially true if he thrusts while holding the staff only with his rear hand, since one who throws a blow must keep both hands on the staff; thus one who thrusts gains an extra 2 ft of reach (assuming equal lengths of staffs). It is my preference to use thrusts when being the active agent, and reserve the blow for ripostes if the thrust should seem unfavorable.

## 5) The guards

There are two main guards, one low and one high, and each can be done with either foot forward.

### A) The Low Guard



Whichever foot is forward, the same side hand is to be the forward one (e.g. if the right foot is forward, so is the right hand). The rear hand is at the very butt end of the staff and the forward hand is about one and a half ft from the rear hand. The rear hand is low, at lower thigh height, by the rear leg. Aim the point at the enemy's face. The staff should cross your body, i.e. if the butt is on your left, then the point should be on your right.

The low guard is favored in most cases, especially in good light. It is serviceable with any length of staff or pole arm.

a) If you are attacked above the waist with either a blow or thrust, then strike the opponent's attack, keeping your point at head height. Then immediately thrust at him and promptly return into your guard. Alternately, immediately upon parrying, turn your staff back and strike him on the side of the head that is nearest your staff. Note that by keeping your staff in its right place, the enemy is constrained to only attacking your upper body on the open side, and thus your defense is always the same (if the right foot is forward, you are open on the left and thus you parry by striking to the left—this is called the Fore hand Defence; it “consumeth no time” and is more certain than parrying “backward”, i.e. as you would if you had left the other side open by having your point leaning the wrong direction).

b) If you are attacked with a thrust to the lower body, you may strike it away by turning the point of your staff toward the ground, taking care that your point doesn't “pitch” (stick) in the ground.

c) If you are attacked with a blow to the lower body, you may strike it away as with a thrust (see immediately above) or deliberately pitch your point into the ground 2-3 ft wide of the side struck at (by a swift chopping motion toward the ground), releasing your forward hand to prevent it from being struck. The staff is thereby braced against the ground. Your rear hand should be held high, and “then all parts is defended so high as your head”.

Note that you must be ready to change the forward hand and foot to “lie cross” i.e. to match the guard of your opponent, as previously stated. Otherwise whoever strikes first “can not choose but endanger the other's hand”. If your enemy assaults you upon the contrary side, i.e. when you are not matched, then you must change to match him—but do so while taking a passing step backwards. That is, as he assaults you, leave the rear foot in place and step back with the forward foot and parry; and having parried him, thrust with your rear hand while stepping forward as previously described in section 3. But if you cannot change guards, then to defend a blow, pitch your point into the ground and let go with the forward hand to protect it, then immediately answer with a thrust.

## B) The High Guard



The high guard is a hanging guard. “Look under your staff with both your eyes with the point hanging slopeways downward by your side.” That is, if your right foot and hand are forward, then your left hand is highest, and the point of the staff is to the right of your right side. The elbows should be slightly bent, the arms forward of the body, and the upper hand a little higher than the head.

The high guard is favored on a dark night, because it best protects the head-- one requires good light to see a blow approaching the head in time to ward it when in low guard. However, the high guard is not good with a staff over 8 ft long, else one is likely to pitch the point in the ground. It is also slower to counterattack and more susceptible to feints.

As with the low guard, match the enemy’s way of lying (i.e. have the same foot forward as he does). Note that this does not mean that you have to always be in the same guard as your enemy (see the illustration above), just that you should have the same side forward that he does. The best way to change side to side is “to let your staff slip through your hands like a Weaver’s shuttle”.

a) The enemy will think that your body is undefended. If he thrusts to your body, carry the point of your staff across, close to the ground, to parry, and then thrust at his breast.

b) If he throws a blow to your head, lift up your point and meet the blow half way. Simultaneously draw back your hands to protect your fingers. Having struck the blow away, thrust.

c) If he throws a blow to your side, either pitch the point of your staff into the ground to defend (probably better if he throws a low blow), or change into low guard and meet the blow by crossing with him (probably better if he throws high, i.e. to your ribs).

## **6) False Play at Staff**

a) If both are in low guard, feint a thrust to the enemy's open side, and in one continuous motion drop below the level of his butt end, "as it were a blow", bringing it up 2-3 ft wide of the feint, and hit him in the face, breast, or shoulder. Don't let him hit your feigned thrust. Thereby you make him parry the feint, creating an opening on his previously closed side.

The defense to this is simply not to parry too widely, "beyond the compass of true defence" and to keep your point up. Thus you can hope to respond to both the feint and the real attack. One method is to parry the first thrust with the Fore hand Defence and the second by dropping your point and meeting him below.

b) You may slip a blow rather than parry it. Bring your staff upright close by your head on the side to which the enemy throws the blow (in case it actually reaches you) but withdraw your head and body a little. When his blow overshoots (which it will even more so if he uses a pole arm), give him a blow to the head or a thrust to the back.

c) You may feint a downward blow, but draw your point back as it falls and so convert it into a thrust. This is risky, though, as the skillful opponent responds to the feint with a thrust.

d) To hit the enemy in the head with a downward blow, proffer the blow, but check it before it meets him. He will parry wide, and then you can throw a determined blow. However, this is also risky, for the same reason.

e) Feint a thrust to the foot, but raise the point and thrust to the face or breast. If the enemy parries low in response to the feint he will be unable to raise his staff in time. Again, this is risky, because the skillful opponent will simply pluck his leg back and counterthrust.

## **7) Closing with the Staff**

a) From the low guard, feint a thrust to the face, and simultaneously take a passing step forward. As you close, go into the high guard, thereby carrying your enemy's point over your head with the rear (high) portion of your staff. Then turn the butt end of your staff into his face, or "trip up his heels if you be cunning at wrestling". If he has any short weapons about his person, disarm him or hold him fast.

One counter to this is to take a passing step back and change guard, thrusting at him with your butt end.

b) If you are in low guard with your left hand forward, and the enemy tries to close, then once your staffs are crossed, slide your right hand up to your left, release your left hand, and extending it under your staff, grab the enemy's staff with your thumb down and hand above his, and push his staff to your left. Immediately upon making this opening, hoist your staff up with your right hand, point over your right shoulder, and stab him in the face or body with your butt end. Even if you can't reach his staff, grab his arm and thrust him with the butt end of your staff. Then, if you are stronger, trip up his heels. If you are weaker, step back.

You can do the same maneuver with your right hand forward, just omitting the slide of the right hand.

## **8) Facing Other Weapons**

### **A) Against pole arms**

The staff is said to have the advantage against most pole arms, provided that the staff user has a certain amount of skill in the false play. The main reason is simply that the staff is more nimble. However, if the pole arm is longer than the staff, then greater reach is still a significant advantage.

If the staff man is good at falsing, then the pole arm man will parry beyond his true compass of defense because of the head weight of his weapon, and therefore will be unable to recover in time to parry the true thrust.

If the pole arm man throws a blow, it behooves the staff man to slip the blow as previously described (in section 6c), keeping the staff upright until the blow passes, and then throwing a blow or thrust; alternately, he could lower the point of the staff until the blow passes and then thrust low. Again, these slips work because the head weight of a pole arm makes its blows go wide.

### **B) Against a sword (or rapier) and dagger**

The staff has a great advantage against shorter weapons. Silver asserts that one man with a staff may hold off two men with swords, because by a little motion of his feet he can describe a much greater compass with his staff. Indeed, one Richard Peecke wrote a brief account entitled Three to One in which he describes using an improvised quarterstaff to defeat three Spaniards with swords in 1625. Nonetheless, Swetnam maintains that unless the staff man is very skillful, the odds are with one skilled with the rapier and dagger.

One should use the low guard, aiming for the breast. Always thrust, because if you throw a blow, the enemy may "parry double", i.e. with both his weapons crossed, and close. Do not let go with the forward hand when thrusting, but rather keep both hands in place to more easily thrust again in case the enemy encroaches.

If the enemy tries to strike at the tip of your staff (to cut the point off) then lower your tip to slip his attempt, and thrust.

Note that for the enemy, the best guard is to hold the dagger about one foot from the hilt of his sword, on the inside, to make a cross, held high. Against a blow, he should parry double to the appropriate side and riposte with a thrust in supination; against a thrust, he should parry double downward.