

## Closed Form Heater: A Voice from A.S. IV

SCA fighting is a new sport. Although there is a substantial amount of surviving information on the use of weapons in period, we have made very little use of it; most of what we do is of our own invention. One result is that we can watch how fighting styles have changed and evolved around us over the past twenty-seven years and how they continue to do so.

I was trained in sword and shield fighting in about A.S. IV by Master Edwin Bersark, one of the early SCA fighters, trainers, and theorists of fighting. In the early years of the Society what he taught was, I think, the nearest thing we had to an orthodox style, although even then there were quite a lot of fighters, including good ones, who used other forms. In more recent years, in large part as the result of the efforts of a later fighter and theorist, Duke Paul of Bellatrix, other approaches have come to dominate Society fighting.

Edwin's form, with some modifications, is what I still use. I thus find myself in the odd position of fighting a style so old that it is new—most of the fighters I encounter, at least in my part of the Middle Kingdom, are almost entirely unfamiliar with it. The purpose of this essay is to explain that style of fighting, in its original form and as I have modified it over the years. I hope that others will find the information interesting, both as a part of our history and as a way of fighting that still seems to be reasonably effective.

The explanation has three parts. The first is a long extract from a pamphlet on fighting that I wrote about A.S. IX. Aside from correcting spelling mistakes and renumbering the figures, I have left it unchanged from the original and included the original drawings by Lady (now Mistress) Alia bint Ulek ibn el Kharish; she also did the drawings I have put at the end of this article. The second part is a new addendum to the manual, covering things that were not explained in the original, in some cases because I did not then know them. The third is a brief discussion of differences between the style I am describing and what seem to have become the dominant styles, along with some comments on advantages and disadvantages of each.

### a manual on The Use and Construction of the Weapons of the Current Middle Ages



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### Fighting

The best way to learn the use of medieval weapons is to locate a knight willing to take you as squire, or a trained fighter willing to train you. Failing that, find another novice to train with. In the following pages I cover the things I would say to a novice at his first training session. While I hope these comments will be useful, they are no substitute for practice; one cannot learn the use of a broadsword from a book.

Broadsword and shield is the most common weapon form. Others are mace and shield, axe and shield, short sword and shield, two sword (commonly a short sword in one hand and a broad sword in the other), greatsword (a two handed sword used without a shield, unless you have three hands), two handed axe, and pike maul. A fighter should first learn the use of broadsword and shield.

The first thing to learn is that the shield is not a counterweight to be flung out picturesquely behind you. It is to hide behind. Take up a position with your left shoulder pointing at your opponent (assuming you are right handed). Hold your shield perpendicular to the line between you and your opponent and

perpendicular to the ground, as shown in figure 1. You are now entirely protected by your shield, except for your head, which comes above the shield and can be protected by raising it, and your legs, which are below, and can be protected by lowering the shield. Have your opponent strike several blows, between waist and shoulder high. Your shield, without moving, will block them.

This is the basic stance for sword and shield fighting (also mace and shield, axe and shield, etc.). As nearly as possible you remain in it at all times—even when striking a blow. The most common, and most dangerous, error is to “open up” while fighting, usually when striking a blow. To open up is to turn to face your opponent, swinging your shield out of line. This exposes your sword arm and right side.

### Striking Blows

The first and simplest blow to learn is aimed at the right side of your opponent’s helm. Start with your sword hand and sword behind your head. Your hand comes over your head and across so that the sword circles from (your) left to right, striking him on the right side of the helm, as shown in figures 2a, b, c. If the sword is stopped (by his helm, as in 2c, or his shield) it bounces back, and returns to its starting position, returning the way it came, as shown by figures 2a, b, c, b, a with the arrows on the last two reversed. If the sword is not stopped (if, for instance, you aim too high and the blow goes over his head or if he blocks the blow and your sword glances over the top of his shield) it continues its circle, ending up where it began, behind you, as in figures 2d, e, f, g. Note that in the entire process of striking the blow and bringing the sword back you never move out of your stance, and your sword hand never goes farther forward than the rim of your own shield. The edge of the sword which strikes the opponent in this blow will be called the front edge, and the blow will be called the first blow in the remainder of this manual.

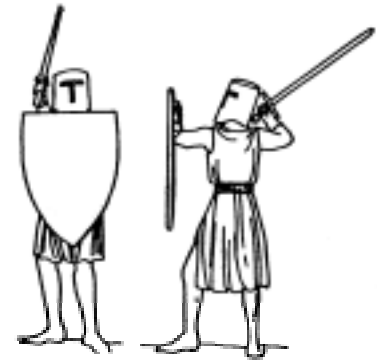


Figure 1: The Basic Stance



Figure 2: The First Blow

As I have described the blow, both sword and hand describe roughly a horizontal circle, as shown in figure 3. The blow can be varied by making the circle more nearly vertical, up to the point where the sword moves in a vertical circle, coming down on the top of the opponent’s helm. In this case the sword must be stopped by something, either the opponent or his shield, and bounced back the way it come; if the circle were completed it would intersect your own shield.

The second blow you should learn is aimed at the left side of your opponent’s helm. If you strike this blow in the way that feels natural, you will again hit the opponent with the front edge of your sword. This is the same blow described before, except that the vertical circle has tilted over even further and become a horizontal circle from right to left. There are serious difficulties with striking the blow in this way and I do not teach it.

The problem is that as your sword comes around, you reach a point, shortly before you hit your opponent, where you must either turn with the blow, opening, or else turn your sword over, striking with the flat. This is more easily shown than described; try the blow and you will see what I mean. Be careful to start standing sideways to your opponent, and to try to remain in that position.

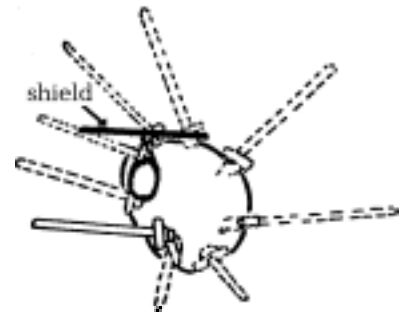


Figure 3 (view from above)

The correct way to strike this blow is with the back edge of the blade, the opposite edge to that used in the first blow (medieval broadswords were usually doubled edged). In other words, you turn your hand, and sword, over before you strike. This feels clumsy and unnatural until you get used to it. Also, since the force of the blow tends to knock the sword out of your hand, instead of into it as with other blows, the chance of losing your sword is greater.

To see how this second blow works, strike the first blow slowly, horizontally, so that the sword circles from left to right. Now do the same blow running backwards in time—as if you were running a film in reverse. The sword will come around in a circle from right to left, with the back edge leading, as shown in figure 4. Here again, the sword may either rebound the way it came (figure 4a, b, c, d, e, d, c, b, a with the arrows reversed on the last four) or complete the circle, as shown on 4a-g. This is the correct second blow. For most fighters it becomes comfortable only after considerable practice. Like the first blow, it can be struck in a vertical as well as a horizontal circle.

The third blow is struck under your shield, at the back of your opponent’s left thigh (assuming he is right handed

and in correct stance). It is usually struck with the front edge of the sword, although it may be struck with the back edge. See figure 5.

There are two important points to remember about these blows. The first is that while striking the fighter remains in stance, protected by his shield. He never opens. The second is that every blow ultimately returns to where it starts. Either it makes a full circle, or it is stopped by the opponent's body or shield, and returns the way it came. The reason for this is that a blow must start fairly far back in order to be struck with sufficient force to penetrate mail. A sword in front of you and standing still is worthless. As soon as the blow is struck, the sword must get back to a position from which it can strike another blow.



Figure 4: The second blow done correctly

In striking, always remember that a blow with the tip of the blade will be weak, and probably ignored. The sword should hit about a third of the way down the blade from the point.

### Use of the Shield

Your shield is opaque; you cannot see through it. While you are blocking a blow, therefore, your view of your opponent is partly or entirely obscured; if you keep your shield up after blocking, say, a blow at your helmet, you will never see where the next blow is coming from. Or going to. Hence the first rule in using your shield is to get it back into position as soon as possible after blocking a blow.

Instead of holding your shield up against your opponent's blow, and waiting until after the blow to pull it down, you should bounce your shield off his sword. Thus his blow does the work of reversing the direction your shield is moving.

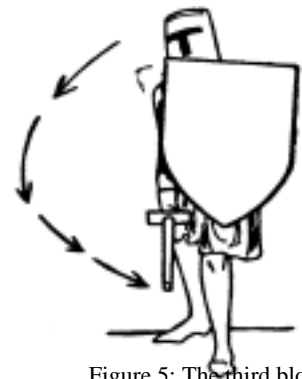


Figure 5: The third blow

The second rule is to block with the edge of your shield, not the face. Your shield should always remain perpendicular to the line between you and your opponent (one exception is noted below). If your opponent strikes at your left side (actually your left back if you are standing properly sideways) your natural instinct is to swing your shield out, and catch the blow on the face of the shield. This is a great deal of work, and leaves you wide open (see shield snatches, below). Instead, take the blow on the edge of your shield; you can do this without even moving. Similarly, a vertical blow down at your head is taken on the top edge of the shield. The orthodox way to block a blow at your leg is by straightening out your shield arm, as in figure 6, so the shield moves down, still perpendicular to the ground and to the line between you and your opponent, and turns over. You are then blocking a blow at the back of your thigh with the side of the shield which normally guards the front of your trunk.

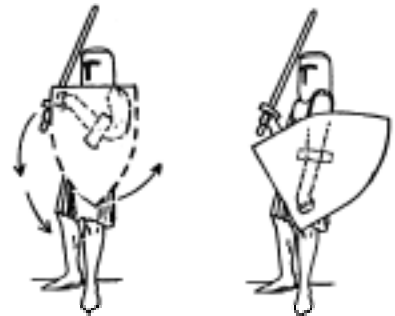


Figure 6: Blocking a leg blow

I am shorter than most of those I fight, and find that by making my heater a little longer than normal I can guard my legs by simply bending my knees (which lowers me) and slightly dropping the shield. Longer fighters can get the same effect by using a kite shield. With either this or the orthodox block, the shield should be brought back to its normal position immediately.

The two basic rules in using a shield are that the shield should always be in position—in front of you, vertical, perpendicular to the line between you and your opponent—and that it should be returned to that position immediately after blocking a blow. There is one exception to the former rule. It is possible to strike a blow such that the sword, when it hits, angles down from the hand, reaching over the opponent's shield, as in figure 7. This is especially common with the second blow. It can be done only when the fighters are very close together, as should be clear from the figure. Against an opponent considerably taller than yourself, it is impossible to block such a blow with the shield vertical; your opponent can reach higher than you can. This is shown in figure 7a. It may therefore be necessary to swing the shield somewhat over you as a "roof"; this is shown in figure 7b. In a sense the shield is still perpendicular to the line between you and your opponent; his end of the line is simply very high. Although you are breaking the rule, you are achieving its purpose—maintaining the largest effective area for your shield in relation to the direction from which your opponent is striking.

## Offensive Shield Work

The shield is used not only to block blows, but also to knock down or pull out of line the opponent's shield. One common trick is the shield snatch or the shield jam. You strike the opponent's shield on its left side. He, foolishly, swings the shield out to catch the blow on the face of the shield, thus opening. You come in, catch the inside of his shield with the right edge of yours (probably catching his shield between the hand grip and the edge) and pull his shield even farther open, while striking with your sword. The same maneuver can be done if your opponent opens as he strikes at you (usually using the wrong version of the second blow, as discussed above), although in that case it may be more effective to just cut at the exposed arm.

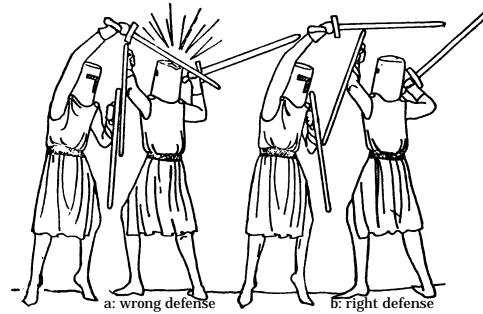


Figure 7

When your opponent keeps his shield properly in position, try an overrun—charging him and driving his shield down with yours. Or a shield snatch—reaching in with the right edge of your shield to pull his open. This is dangerous; you are more vulnerable than he is, and he may shield snatch you. Of course, since you start the attack you have the advantage of knowing what is going on first. Such an attack is especially dangerous against a physically strong opponent, since he can pull your shield open better than you can pull his. For offensive shield work in general, a heavy shield is useful.

## Training

One way to train is to pick up a sword, put on your gear, and go to it. Since you are doing many things at once, all new, you are likely to do most of them wrong. This develops bad habits. That is why pells work and sword and shield work, which let you concentrate on one thing at a time, are useful.

A pells was and is a post against which fighters practice their blows. It should be man high and very sturdy. You may wish to wrap it in burlap or the like, to minimize the wear on sword and swordarm. You should wear gauntlets and shield when practicing, even though the pells will probably not hit back. Your shield shows you whether you are holding stance or opening on your blows, and also limits the blows you can strike (striking through your own shield is difficult). Gauntlets affect the way you hold your sword; you must learn to strike while wearing them.

Sword training consists of striking at an opponent who is defending himself but not striking back. Shield training is what the opponent is doing. You should stand close enough together so that a blow which gets through hits about a third of the way down the blade from the point, as described above. Try not to move your feet. Do not use your shield offensively. The objective is to practice the basics of striking and blocking blows.

The fighter who is striking should start slowly, concentrating on form. As the fighters get better, the speed increases, until eventually blows are struck full speed and full force, in rapid sequence (about one a second). You should practice series in which the sword moves smoothly from one blow to the next without stopping. Decide in advance on the sequence of blows. For instance, the first blow, rebounding off the shield, coming back around and full circle into the second blow (remember that first and second are the names of particular blows, illustrated in figures 2 and 4), rebounding off the shield, coming back around into the first blow, this time a little more vertical, rebounding up and around into the third blow, rebounding back into a (vertical) first blow. This series, full force, should take about four seconds. Remember to turn your hand over going from a first to a second blow.

Once you can do series, you should practice more complicated things, such as body feints, in which you move so as to appear to start a blow, hesitate, then actually strike just as your opponent lowers his shield to see what is happening. Or one and a half circle blows, in which the sword glances off the top edge of the shield without slowing down, and keeps going around in a horizontal circle to strike a second blow as the shield comes down from the first. When the fighters get tired, they can exchange roles, since each has exhausted only one arm. As they become more skillful, they should spend more time actually fighting each other, but even a trained fighter will still find shield and sword work useful.

## Exercise

While most fights are over quickly, some may continue for a long time. A fighter should be in good physical condition. The muscles that control sword and shield are especially important. For the former do shield exercises;

put on your shield and block an imaginary blow to the left side of your head from above, one to the right side from above, then one to the back of the left leg. Repeat. You should be able to go through this sequence at least a hundred time; three or four hundred is better. Pells work is probably the best exercise for the sword hand. In addition, try anything that strengthens grip, wrist, and arm. Jogging is said to be good for endurance.

#### Final Comments

Weapons and their use are individual matters; what one fighter does another considers suicidal. This manual contains my opinions; I do not claim that they are infallible. There are doubtless many fighters who disagree with me on one point or another, and are willing enough to argue the matter on the field.

The general form I have described was taught to me years ago by Master Edwin Bersark. Insofar as it is good form, the credit is his. There are doubtless many details in which my form, as it has developed, differs from what he teaches, for better or for worse. In the latter case the fault is mine.

Cariadoc



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### Addendum to the Manual

*The Third Dimension:* One detail I did not mention in the manual was that, when doing the first and second blow, the circle goes more smoothly if your hand is quite low in the part of the blow represented by Figure 2 e and f, where your wrist is in the process of turning over. Your hand then rises from f to g to a. You do not have to do it that way, but it is easier, and for some reason makes the turnover less of a strain on the wrist. I also find it useful to do the second blow in such a way that while the hand is rising from d to e on Figure 4, the point of the sword is dropping relative to the hand. The result is that the sword comes in almost horizontally to the opponent's left temple; this makes the sword less likely to glance than if the sword, like the hand, was rising at the moment of impact.

*Leg Shots:* The manual's discussion of the ordinary leg shot, done with the front edge of the sword, fails to explain the associated movement of shield and body. Imagine you have a spike driven through you, front to back, at about your belly button. To throw the blow you pivot around this horizontal spike. Your shoulders move to your right (backwards from the standpoint of an opponent facing you, since you are standing with your left side towards him) and your hip moves towards your left. This swings your shield arm and shield up, your sword arm down. The shield is still in front of you, but it is now slightly higher and angled, with the top edge closer to you than the point. This leaves enough room for your sword, moving in a descending spiral, to pass under the point of the shield on its way to the outside of your opponent's left leg. Your body and sword arm are fully protected by the shield at every point in the blow.

The wrong way of throwing this blow, and the way most people naturally try to throw it, is to pivot around a vertical axis running from the top of your head through the middle of your body, moving your shield arm and shield back (to the opponent's right) and your sword arm forward. This gets the shield out of the way of the sword but it also gets it out of the way of your opponent's sword if he happens to be throwing a blow at your sword arm, shoulder, or right temple while you are throwing one at his leg.

An alternative way of throwing the leg shot is to use the back edge of the sword, just as with the second blow described in the manual. This can be done, like the blow I have just described, as a

horizontal blow; it will wrap farther around the opponent, striking the back of his left leg.

There is another and, in my experience, more effective way to strike at the leg with the back edge of your sword. The sword describes an almost vertical circle, with the tip passing just above the ground before rising into the opponent's left leg. One weakness of the blow is that, when it hits, the blade is moving up and only slightly inward. If the opponent's leg is straight the blow will probably glance up it. Most opponents, however, will be in a partial crouch, which gives just enough angle for the blow to bite.

This blow has two advantages. The first is that, because it comes in vertically rather than horizontally, an opponent who defends his leg by putting the point of his shield slightly to the left of his leg will fail to block the blow. The blow will come into the notch between his leg and the point of his shield. The second advantage is that, because the sword is at almost a right angle to your arm when it hits, it is possible to throw the blow around your own shield. This means that you can throw it without moving anything but your sword and sword arm, which makes it less likely that your opponent will notice what you are doing.

*Arm blow:* When your (right handed) opponent strikes at your left leg or left temple, he is quite likely to expose his sword arm. You would like to be able to hit it without exposing your own arm in the process.

Get in stance. Put your sword hand at about the middle of the right edge of your shield, with the sword running horizontally at about a 45° angle out from the face of the shield. If you now add an imaginary opponent who is striking at your left leg and has swung his shield out of line in the process, you will see that the edge of your sword blade is lying across the top of his forearm. The angle between your sword blade and your forearm is about 120°—which is how you are able to reach around your own shield, striking him without exposing your arm. Figure 8 gives front and top views of the blow; both show it at the point I have just described. The sword blade is moving almost straight down.

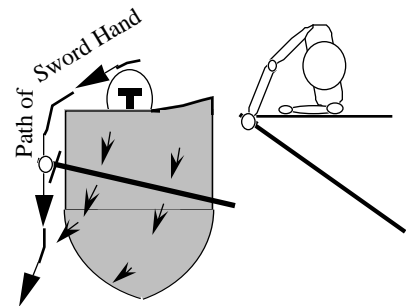


Figure 8: Arm Blow.  
Sword is moving mostly downwards

This is the position you want to be in when you hit him. You start in the normal on guard position and strike the blow as a modified version of the first blow described in the manual. The sword blade, moving in a smooth curve, passes over your head and left shoulder then over the top edge of your shield, angling down until your sword hits your opponent's arm in the position described above. If your sword is not stopped, the point will pass just above the ground about two feet in front of you (i.e. to your opponent's left front) then finish its (almost vertical) circle by rising back up behind you into the normal on guard position from which it started.

Do the blow in front of a mirror. If you do it correctly, your sword hand passes down the right edge of your shield and your sword arm is never exposed.

*Offside Leg Shot:* Almost exactly the same blow can be used to strike your opponent's right leg, especially if he has moved it forward in the process of throwing a blow to your left leg or head. If you do the blow exactly as I have described it and his arm does not get in the way, you may well hit his leg instead. Unfortunately, because the direction of movement of the sword at that point is almost vertical, the blow will probably glance down his leg.

The solution is to lower your shield as the sword comes over it, making possible a more nearly horizontal version of the blow. The problem with this is that lowering your shield exposes your head. The only safe time to throw this blow is when you know your opponent cannot hit you in

the next half second or so—which usually means throwing it as a fast response to one blow and trusting that you will have time to get your shield back up before the next one.

This blow was not part of what I taught at the time I wrote the manual. The reason is that it is unlikely to work against an opponent who is himself fighting in closed form—the right edge of his shield will block the blow before it reaches his leg. It turns out to be quite effective, however, against the more open styles that are now common.

*Snaps:* There are two other blows that I use now and did not use then. One I learned from Duke Paul and the other is modified from it. The first is what I believe was originally referred to as the Bellatrix snap—a term now used rather broadly. It is thrown to the left side of the opponent's helmet with the front edge of the sword and is a much faster alternative to the manual's second blow.

The snap is most easily thrown from a slightly different starting position than I have so far described. The sword hand, instead of being behind the top of the helm, is beside the head just below the right ear. The blow consists of throwing your sword at your opponent's head hilt first, then stopping the hilt so that the blade snaps around in a horizontal circle, striking your opponent on his left temple. The arm movement is not a swing but a punch forward and back; the effect is rather like cracking a whip. Most fighters who are currently active have probably been taught the blow, and many may have read Duke Paul's more detailed descriptions of it.

One important difference between the blow as I do it and as it is commonly taught is in what happens to the sword after you fail to kill your opponent. In my version, the snap is one more example of the principle that all blows are circles. If it glances off the top of the opponent's shield it continues the circle, coming around into another snap, or the second blow, or a leg blow with either front or back edge of the sword.

The other new blow I use is a vertical snap. My arm punches forward; the sword blade describes a vertical semicircle, giving a fast blow to the top of my opponent's helm. Both this and the flat snap require me to break my rules to the extent of opening slightly, so that my blow can go past the right edge of my shield rather than over it.

There is one other addition I have made to my style as a result of encounters with more modern forms. My current shield is about three inches higher on its left edge than in the middle and right. That modification was my response to discovering that Duke Paul, using the flat snap, could hit me on the left temple before I could raise my shield to block.

### **Single Timing and Slot Work**

There are two related elements of Master Edwin's teaching that I neglected in the manual. As he explained it, one can fight in either double time or single time. Double time means that you hit me, I block, I hit you, you block, .... Single time means that when you hit me I block and hit you at the same time, with the result that our blows are almost simultaneous. This allows me to take advantage of the tendency of fighters to expose themselves somewhat while striking.

One approach to learning how to single time your opponent is what Master Edwin called slotwork. The slot is the space between the opponent's sword and his shield. If you put your sword through that slot you will hit something. Slot work consists of learning, for each attack your opponent might make, where the slot is and how to hit it.

A second element in learning to fight in single time is learning how to combine blows and blocks. Consider, for example, the leg blow struck with the front edge of the blade (figure 5). As

I described it earlier, part of the movement is swinging the shield up and out to let the sword go under it. That is very close to what you do when you are blocking a blow to your head. So it is fairly easy to learn to combine the two moves, automatically striking at your opponent's leg while blocking your head.

### **Old and New**

It would take a much longer article than this one to adequately describe the forms currently popular with Society fighters and I am not competent to write it. For the purposes of this essay it is sufficient to briefly sketch some of the characteristics that many of those forms share.

### **Newfangled Fighting**

Typically the stance is half open. Instead of standing with the left shoulder towards the opponent, the fighter takes a position with his shoulders about 45° from the line between him and his opponent. His shield is at an angle to his shoulders of at least 90° (Figure 9a) and often much more (Figure 9b), so that the shield is at least partly edge on to the opponent. This stance makes it possible for a fighter to see, and to throw blows, past the right edge of his own shield.

Blows tend to be punches or snaps rather than the circles I have described. Swords are usually shorter than my standard 40 inches. The sword hand in the on guard position is typically beside the head and sometimes even slightly in front of it.

Two styles of blocking are common. One, taught by Duke Paul, is punch blocking. Instead of blocking a head blow near your own head, you punch the shield forward to intercept the blow early in its trajectory. This has the advantage of making it possible to block a blow without knowing where it is going, since you can intercept it before the alternative trajectories (to the head and to the leg, say) have separated very much.

The other style uses the right edge of the shield, which is the front edge in a half open style, for interposition blocks. Versions of both styles also exist that make substantial use of sword blocks.

### **What Is Wrong With How I Fight**

My closed form has several significant disadvantages relative to the more recent styles. For one thing, visibility is worse; since my shield is in front of me, I must either keep it below the level of my eyes or be blinded by it. That is why I try to bounce my shield off my opponent's sword; I have to get back down fast enough to see the next blow.

The same problem is the reason I have a horn on the left side of my shield (Shown on Figure 8). Without that, keeping my shield low enough to see over it means keeping it low enough so that a really fast opponent can throw a snap to my left temple faster than I can block it. If I were using a half open form, I could keep the shield higher and watch my opponent past its edge instead of over it. I find that the visibility problem is especially serious when I am fighting on my knees, perhaps because I must then keep my shield higher to guard against a standing opponent. In that situation I sometimes find myself forced to shift to a partly open stance.

Another disadvantage comes in throwing blows. My shield side is pointed towards my opponent and my sword side away from him. That means that, with a given length of sword, my range is less than if I was turning my body to put the sword shoulder in front of the body as I struck, as is common in the more open forms. And my blows have to travel farther, which may make them slower.



### And What Is Right

There are, however, compensating advantages. The same geometry that puts my shield in the way of my vision also puts it in the way of spears, arrows, and other unfriendly objects coming from behind my opponent. Someone who normally fights in a half open position must shift to a closed position any time he is facing a shield wall. I can continue fighting in essentially the same stance I use for single combat. Similarly, the half open position is wide open to a left handed opponent, forcing someone who fights in that position to drastically modify his usual style.

A more serious problem with the half open style is that it does a poor job of defending against a right handed fighter capable of throwing blows to his opponent's right side. I mentioned one example earlier—my blow to the off side leg. Another example is the manual's first blow (Figures 2 and 10a, c, d).

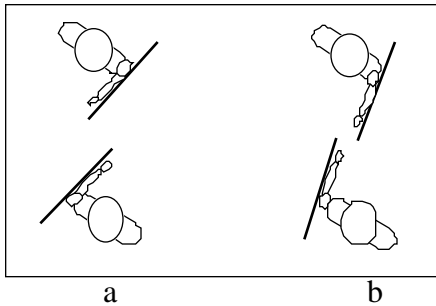


Figure 9

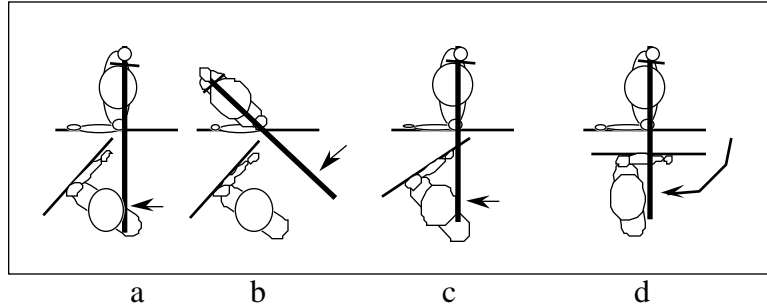


Figure 10

The vulnerability of the right side is not obvious to many modern fighters because the modern forms are well adapted to defend against themselves. It is difficult for a right hander fighting in a half open stance to throw a blow that comes around the left side of his shield to hit the opponent's right temple—which is what the manual's first blow does. If you try to throw the same blow from a half open position, it comes into the right front of the opponent's helm instead of the side and is blocked by the front edge of his shield (see figure 10b). If someone fighting in a particular stance cannot throw a blow, the fact that he cannot block it very well is not important—as long as his opponents use the same stance.

A similar pattern holds for punch blocks and punch blows. In the modern style, at least as commonly taught around here, essentially all blows start as punches going past the thrower's right cheek. That means that a punch block aimed to just in front of your opponent's cheek, if done fast enough, picks up everything.

I was made aware of this feature of the modern styles some years ago when practicing with a fairly good opponent who used punch blocks. I repeatedly hit him on his right temple or shoulder. After a while he congratulated me on how good I was at the punch that goes past the thrower's right cheek then whips around to strike the right side of the opponent's helm. He knew I must be good at it because it was somehow getting past his blocks. I, of course, had never thrown that blow. My shots were going around the left side of my helm, making his punch blocks to the right side of my helm irrelevant.

There are a number of other advantages to the closed form. While you lose speed because the sword has to travel farther, you gain it because the sword is moving in continuous circles rather than stopping and starting again as is often (although by no means always) the case with sequences of punch blows. The longer travel may also make it easier for relatively weak fighters to strike full force blows.

The blows that go with the closed form are well adapted for reaching over shields. Figure 10c

shows how this works against a half open opponent. The attacker's hand is substantially higher than his sword's point; the sword slants down over the opponent's shield to his helm. The point end of the sword, which is low enough so that the shield could have stopped it, passed around the right edge of the shield on its way to the helm. Figure 10d shows the same blow against a fully closed opponent, with the arrow marking the path followed by the part of the sword that ends up hitting the helm. Similar blows to the left side of the helm are possible using the manual's second blow, again with the sword hand substantially higher than the sword point.

Going around the edge of a shield to hit an apparently blocked helm in this way, is, I think, harder to achieve with the shorter swords and more linear blows of the newer styles. On the other hand, there are some effective blows for getting past the edge of a shield that are harder to do in the closed form, in part because your own shield gets in the way.

There is at least one other advantage to the closed form worth mentioning. A common approach to fighting an opponent who has lost his leg is to put the edge of your shield practically against his sword hand, thus blocking all blows. This is much easier to do if your opponent's sword hand is fairly far forward and his shield partly open. In order for an opponent to put his shield edge against my sword hand he must first put it through my shield.

I do not want to end this essay by leaving the reader with the impression that I think the old form is clearly superior to the new. If that were the case, we would still be using it—it would take more than one superbly talented fighter to persuade most of the known world to change its style from better to worse. What I do want to claim is that, judging by my experience and observations, the old orthodoxy, properly modified to be used against the new, is not substantially inferior. It has advantages and disadvantages—and, at present, the advantage of being relatively unfamiliar to fighters in much of the Society.

