

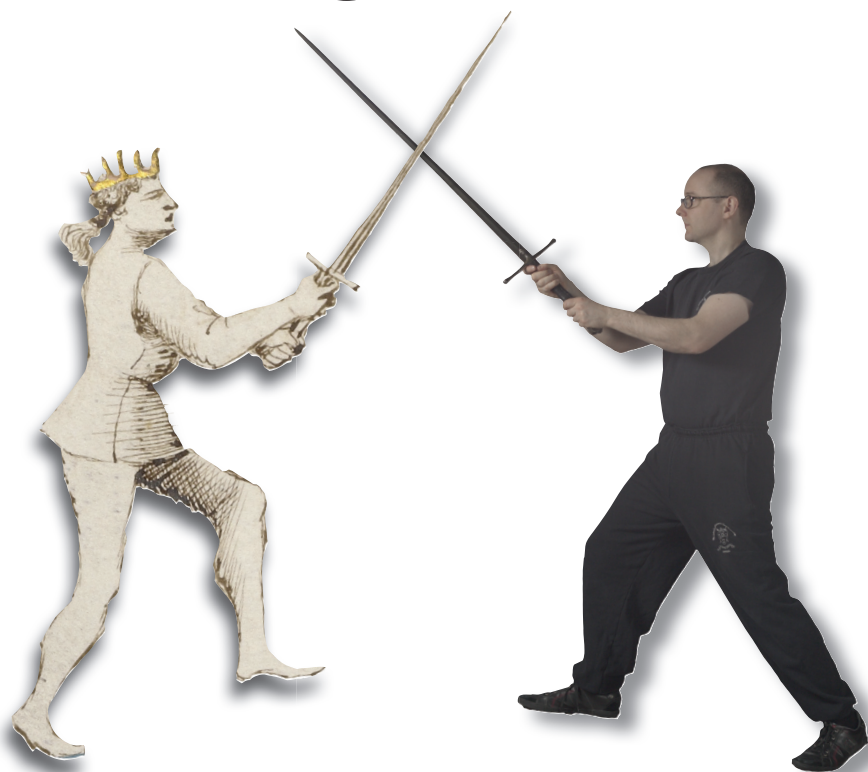
MASTERING THE ART OF ARMS

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VOLUME TWO

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# The Medieval Longsword



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Guy Windsor

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# The Medieval Longsword



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Volume 2

# The Medieval Longsword

Guy Windsor

*For my parents, Roger and Maxine Windsor,  
who have always supported my dreams.*

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# Chapter Seven

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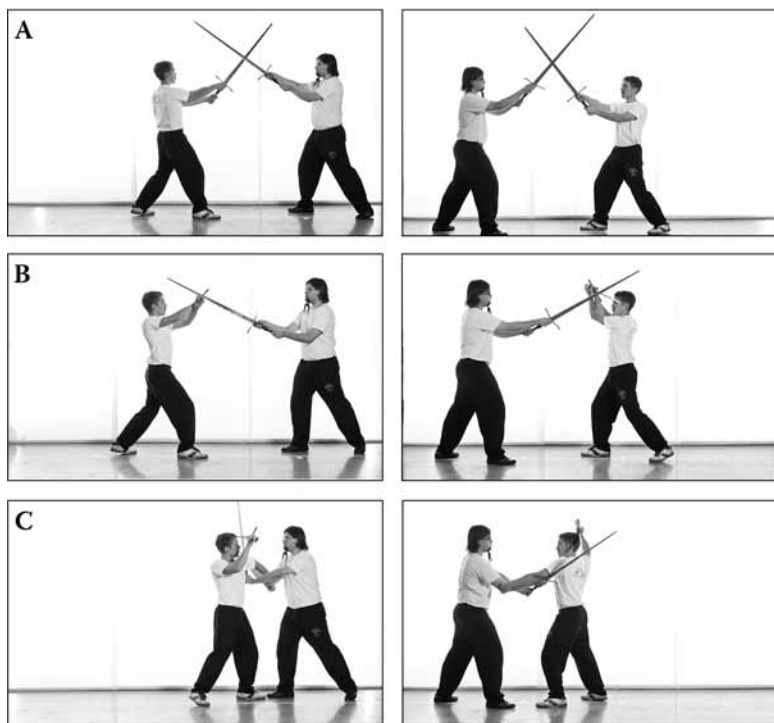
## COUNTER-REMEDIES, THEIR COUNTERS, AND IMPROVING THE GUARDS

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**H**aving practised defending from the left and the right against cuts and thrusts, you should have a pretty good idea what to expect from your opponent when you attack. Understanding the opponent's options when you launch an attack makes successful counter-remedies possible. The “universal” counter-remedy is found in the mounted combat section, the eighth play of the master of *coda longa* on horseback provides “a counter to ALL the plays that come before”: as the opponent parries, “turn your sword and strike him in the face with the pommel”.

1. Defender waits in *zenghiaro* (so, right foot forwards), while you begin in *donna destra*
2. You attack with a *mandritto fendente*
3. Defender parries by beating your sword up and to his right
4. Allow your blade to be beaten across, keeping your hands to your right. This covers against the defender's riposte
5. Let go of the handle with your left hand, extending your left arm, and pass in with the left foot
6. Wrap up both of the defender's arms, leaving him helpless for the pommel strike. You may also present the point of the sword.





A Juhani (no beard) has attacked; Joni (with beard) has parried from zenghiaro; B Juhani turns his sword to cover Joni's strike and; C wraps Joni's arms with his left arm, immobilising him for the pommel strike.

We have, then, a three-step drill: the attack, the remedy, and the counter-remedy. Or, cut, parry, wrap. This should be practised step by step, so: cut; cut, parry riposte; cut parry riposte, wrap and pommel strike. 1, 1-2, 1-2-3; 1, 1-2, 1-2-3.

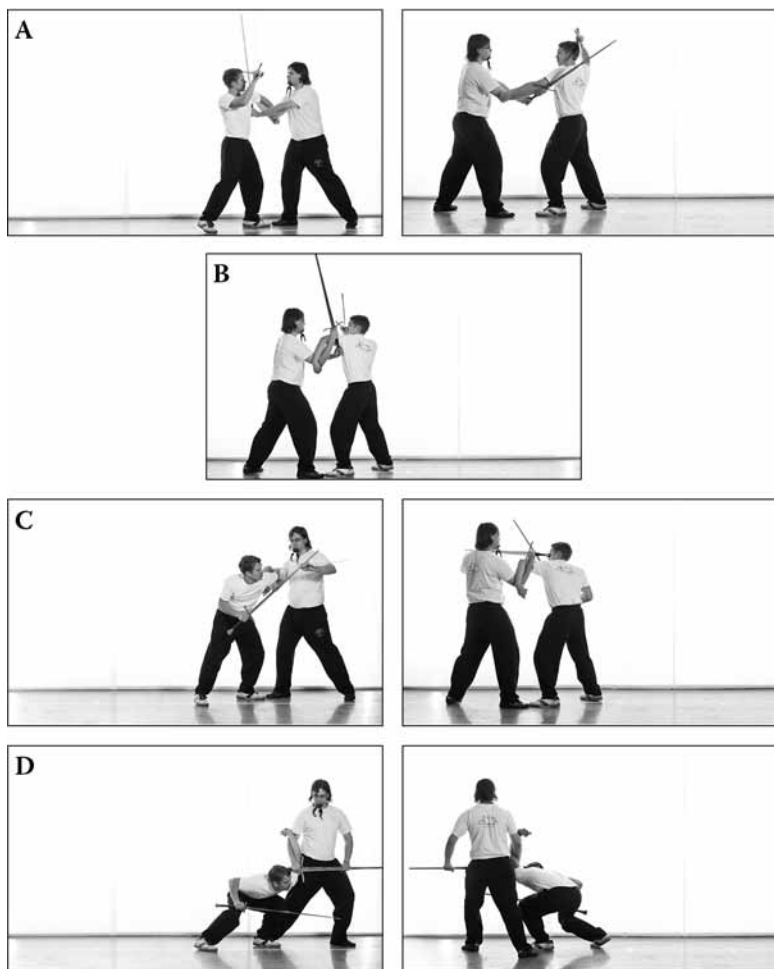
This is because each technique is designed to work against a committed attack of some sort, but it is very common in training for people to “take turns”. If you know your cut is supposed to be parried, you can forget to cut properly. It is absolutely crucial that you execute every action as if you believed it would work or else you are not only practising poor technique, but also failing to provide your partner with a proper stimulus for his response, in effect training him to react wrongly. Practising by stepping

the drill ensures that every action is concluded properly at least once, and, critically, sets up the problem for the next technique to solve.

If you feel your partner is fluffing the riposte because he “knows” the pommel strike is coming, leave it out. And watch him catch himself in a critical error. This is helpful partnering. Once the basic choreography is clear, randomize the degree to which the drill is taken. For example, defenders decide at random not to parry and see if the original attack would actually make contact. You’ll be amazed how often people’s expectations overwhelm their conscious decisions. It is quite common for the defender, in drill, knowing his strike will be countered, to omit the strike and pull his arms back. If that happens, just push a little with your left hand on his elbow, and be a little more vigorous in your pommel strike. He will hopefully soon learn to put some intention behind his actions.

Fiore shows two solutions to the problem of being wrapped up like this. Both of them require you to act before the wrap is fully in place, and long before you are smashed in the face with the pommel or stabbed with the point. The first, and most important as it is repeated in several variations in *Il Fior di Battaglia*, is to counter-lock with the *ligadura sottana*. Treat the incoming left arm wrap as an attack, and raise your sword arm to collect his left elbow, executing another *accrescere* in the same direction as before, then turn with a *volta stabile* to place him in the lower lock (*ligadura sottana*).

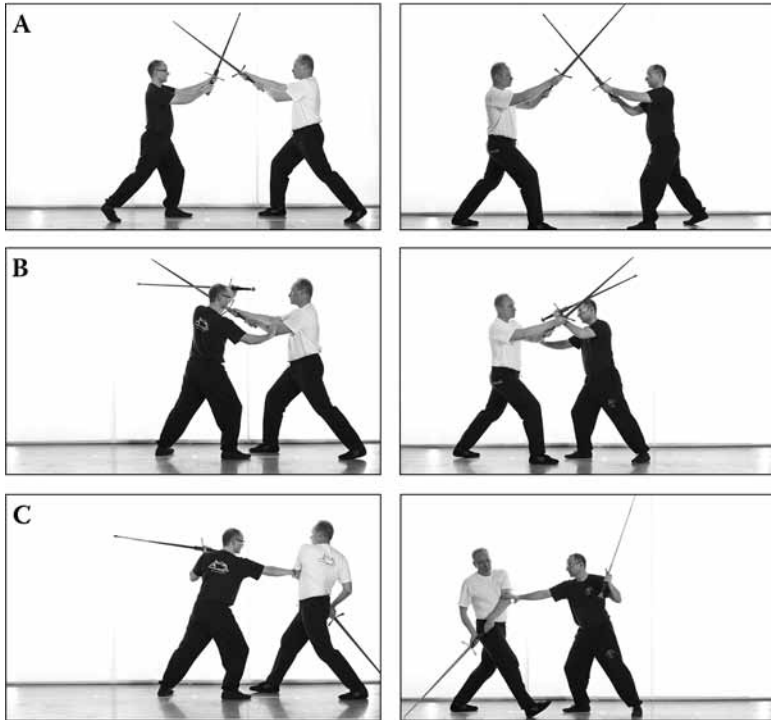
1. As the attacker enters extending his left arm
2. Collect his elbow with your right wrist
3. Break his structure with your step
4. And turn into the lock (carefully!)



**A** Juhani reaches over Joni's arms; **B** Joni lifts Juhani's elbow; **C** Joni grabs his blade with his left hand and; **D** applies the lock.

For more detail on how to apply joint locks, refer to pp. 37–39 of *The Medieval Dagger*.

When practising in a cross-handed pair, you will find that the arms aren't there to be wrapped, so instead push the elbow.



A Guy (left-handed) attacks Ilpo, who has parried; B Guy enters to push Ilpo's elbow; C turning him so he cannot strike.

This is countered by pushing the attacker's sword away and thrusting from underneath.

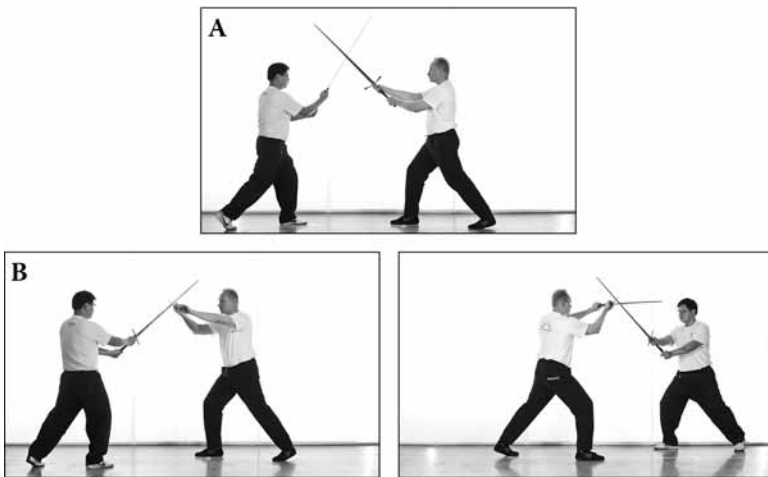


Ilpo intercepts Guy's sword hand, turning him to strike.

We should notice that the same principle can be applied against a defender parrying from the right side such as from *tutta porta di*

*ferro*. Note that because we are now on the other side, we can't envelope both of the defender's arms under our left, but the outside of his elbow is available to be pushed.

1. Be ready in right side *posta di donna*. Defender waits in *tutta porta di ferro*
2. Attack with a *mandritto fendente*, aiming at his head
3. Defender parries with *frontale*, meeting the middle of your sword with the middle of his own, edge to flat
4. Allow the point of your sword to be beaten wide. Keeping your sword hand up and forwards, allow that momentum to turn your sword around, creating a natural cover against the defender's strike, and presenting the pommel forwards
5. Pass in immediately, using your other hand to control your opponent's elbow
6. Strike the defender's mask (gently!) with your pommel.



A Ilpo has attacked Ken, who parries; B Ilpo enters, covering Ken's strike;



C and pushes Ken's elbow and pommel strikes.

Happily, Fiore also provides a specific counter-counter-remedy to this, in the ninth play of the master of *coda longa* on horseback, in which as the pommel strike comes in, he simply raises his sword to deflect it, and executes a pommel strike himself.

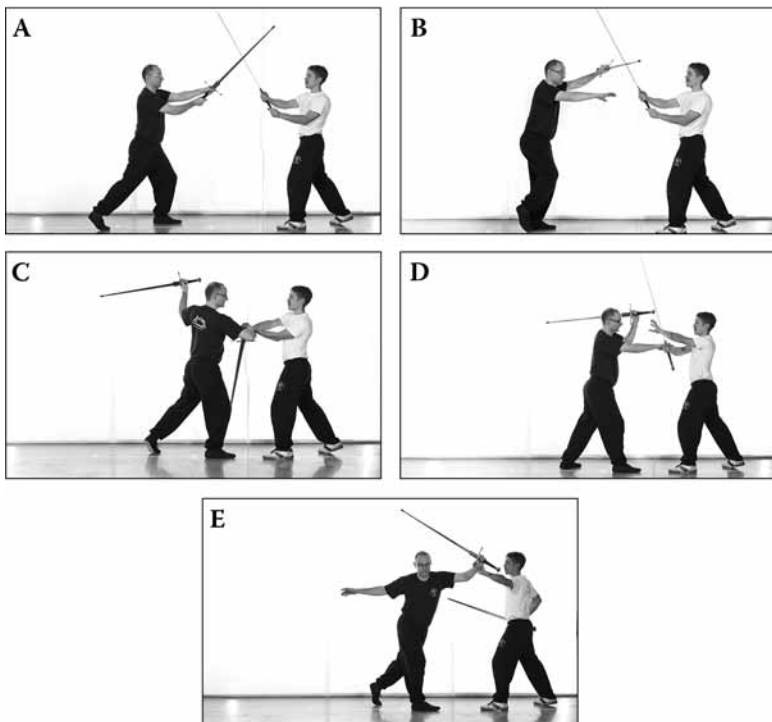
1. Set up the previous drill
2. As you parry and the point of the attacker's sword is beaten wide (end of step three in the previous drill) he enters with the pommel strike
3. Your strike after the parry fails against the attacker's cover
4. As his pommel strike comes in, lift your hands, directing the attack off to the side, and strike the attacker in the face (also gently!).



Ken lifts his sword, bending his elbow, to deflect Ilpo's pommel strike and place his own.

A cross-handed pair will find that there should be the opportunity for the attacker to wrap the arms, but the normal counter to a wrap as shown above in the first set of drills doesn't work quite

right here. So instead, step out of the way and push the attacker's sword up and away with your off-hand.<sup>13</sup>



A Guy has attacked left-handed; Juhani parries from *tutta porta di ferro*;

B Guy covers and is entering; C Guy wraps Juhani's arms and strikes;

D Juhani intercepts Guy's entry and E pushes him off balance to strike.

## Tactical Analyses of the Guards

As we saw in the previous chapters, the guards form the waypoints of the system. They are places to start from, places to finish in, and places to pass through. Small changes in position can have major consequences in action.

Any position you find yourself in can be considered a guard if you understand its tactical and technical properties. Slavishly

<sup>13</sup> These two four-step sequences are set drills in my school's syllabus: First drill, beginning with *tutta porta di ferro*, Second drill, beginning with *zenghiaro*. You can find videos of them on the Syllabus Wiki.

copying a position from the treatise is useless unless you have some idea of what the position is for, what openings it leaves and what strengths it possesses. So let's take a look at the critical components of a position held with the sword. They are:

- Which foot is leading
- Which side the sword is held on
- Where the weight is (forwards or back)
- The position of the sword (forwards, back, left right, high, low etc.)
- How the sword is held
- All of the above, relative to your opponent.

Let's start with the sword. The further away your sword is from the centre, the longer it takes to get there, but the harder it will strike or parry when it does finally make contact. This is because the further your sword travels, the more time it has to accelerate, so the faster it is moving when it arrives. Which part of your sword is supported by the grip—edge or flat? This will determine what you can hit with. (The point should always be supported.)

Whose sword is closer to the centre—yours or your opponent's? If you can get to a position where his sword is too far away from the centre to parry in time, you can hit him easily.

Now the feet: the position of your front foot relative to your opponent determines how close to him you can get with a pass. The position of your back foot relative to your opponent determines how far away from him you can get with a pass back, and how long a pass forwards will take, because it determines how far the foot has to go from start to finish.

The placement of your weight: the main target is your head, which is directly above your centre of mass (or should be!). So the position of your weight relative to your feet determines both how far your weight has to travel when striking your opponent, and how far your opponent has to travel when striking you.



Every guard position is a specific set of compromises, such as:

- A fast pass forwards at the expense of starting with your head closer to your opponent
- A harder strike at the expense of starting with your sword held back and to the side
- Making your opponent travel farther to reach you, at the expense of a longer and therefore slower pass forwards for you
- Keeping your sword closer to the centre, to close the line quicker, at the expense of having less power available when you get there.

Let's take a concrete example of two guards that are often blurred together by beginners: *tutta porta di ferro* and *coda longa*. They both are held left foot forwards, with the weight on the front foot. This allows for a fast and easy pass forwards with the right foot. The sword is held either behind and to the right (*coda longa*) or pointing directly to the right (*tutta porta di ferro*). A strike from either guard usually ends in *posta longa*. If we take a thrust from below from *coda longa*, we see that we pass almost exactly through *tutta porta di ferro*, so it must take longer to do.

Likewise, when parrying from either guard, we would often use *frontale*. Measuring the distance from one to the other, we see that again, *coda longa* strikes harder but takes longer. This means that we must start the movement earlier to get there at the right time (before the attack hits us).

The “correct” choice of guard then is very often a function of measure. The farther away you are from the opponent, the safer it is to keep the sword farther back or offline.

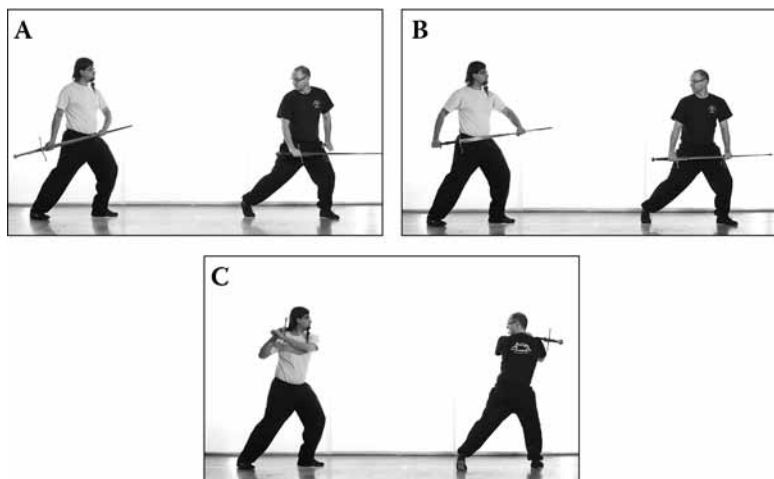
It is necessary to study all the guards that your opponent may use against you, so that you may understand their tactical significance. At an advanced level, you might convey the appearance of being too far from the centre to defend in time, or being too far

back to strike quickly, and take advantage of your opponent's misjudgment of your position. Developing this skill of analysing the tactical elements of a position is also crucial to your success when faced with an opponent who is either trained in a different system, or is using non-standard positions. What can I do from here?



Guy in a very non-standard guard

At the beginning of the sword in two hands material, Fiore shows us various ways of gripping the sword: for throwing, for defence with one hand, for executing an extended thrust, for fighting in armour, and finally back to *posta di donna*, with a sword, and with a boar-hunting sword held like an axe.



**A** Joni stands to throw the sword; Guy has the sword in one hand. **B** Joni holds his pommel to thrust further; Guy holds the sword by blade and handle, for armoured combat. **C** Joni in forward weighted *posta di donna*, “normal grip”; Guy holds the sword by the blade, in rear-weighted *posta di donna*.

This section illustrates the different ways of holding the sword, so that we can a) use them and b) recognise them if our opponent is about to try something tricky. Every one of these positions has a specific set of tactical and technical attributes, some of which Fiore is kind enough to explain in detail. For a complete translation and explanation of Fiore’s instructions, you can refer to my article *Technical and Tactical Notes on the Longsword Guards of Il Fior di Battaglia*, available free online. For present purposes, you first need to know exactly how to hold each position, and what you will generally be able to do from it. It is critically important that you structure any guard such that you can do what you intend from there without adjusting the position in any way. For example, if your fingers are open on the hilt, and you have to close them before you can strike, that’s a mistake. If you wish to pass immediately, but your weight is too far back on your rear foot and you have to shift it forward before your back foot can move, that’s a mistake. The technical drills so far should have given you an idea of what

you should be able to do from a given position, and so some insight into the precise details of the guards.

The way you enter a position affects which muscles are tense or relaxed while in the position. If this is an unfamiliar concept, try holding a squat, with your hips level with your knees. Use a stopwatch to see how long it takes until it hurts, first when you lower yourself into the position, and secondly when you drop past it and then come up into the same position. Usually, people find that dropping into it makes it easier to hold, as the muscles that are keeping you up are more relaxed, and therefore not working as hard when you get there, so they can keep working for longer. Try it and see.

It is a good idea to practise entering all the guards in as many different ways as make sense, as this gives you further insight into when you should be in what position. To begin with, practising holding the guards may make you static and stiff, so intersperse guards practice with some vigorous moving around.

Let's finish this chapter with my secret weapon when it comes to learning structure. This is the Stability Drill.

## The Stability Drill

You will need a wall clock that has a second hand clearly visible, and ideally a mirror to check details of your position.

1. Start in *posta di donna*. Note the time on the clock. Consciously and deliberately relax all unnecessary tension. Arms, shoulders, back and legs are all probably doing more work than necessary. Your body won't allow you to collapse in a puddle on the floor, so anywhere that you feel tense, try to let go.
2. Relax and sink into the position until you feel a better, more stable guard has been formed. Pause for a few seconds. Note how long you've been in the guard for.
3. Strike into *posta longa*, return to *donna* and strike back into *longa*, with or without a pass as you like. It's generally easier to pass, as it puts the primary strain on the other leg.

4. In *posta longa*, note the time, and start the relaxation process again. You may well feel it in the arms and shoulders. Try to push the point forwards, and imagine the sword being dragged away from you, so you are comfortably stretched out behind it.
5. Allow the sword to lead you into the next guard; perhaps *zenghiaro*, as the end of the blow, or *volta stabile* back to *fenestra*. Repeat the movement back and forth, and relax into the new guard.

Continue this process, noting how long you are usefully able to be in these positions. Stop when you are getting tired or bored. The next time you train, see if you can relax more, and so be able to sustain the positions for longer. The point is to establish a more efficient physical structure for the positions, and the movements between them, so that every bone is in the right place, reducing the muscular effort needed to hold the position, so your muscular strength is available for generating power in the strike. This also helps with any flexibility issues, allowing stretched muscles to relax and lengthen, and builds up the strength of your core muscular support.

I find about 60 seconds in each position, and doing this exercise for about 10 minutes three times a week, is enough to generate steady improvement in power generation, stability, and flow. Ideally, when holding a position (say, *posta longa*), the only sense of tension and muscular effort is in the thigh of the weighted leg. This usually takes about three to six weeks of regular practice.

Afterwards, you should feel energised and relaxed, ready to take on any opponent. If this is not the case, make sure you are not overdoing it, and make sure you are constantly trying to let go of tension, rather than to exert effort to hold the positions.

I hope you enjoyed this free sample, and want to read on.

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Yours,

Guy.