

# Secrets of the Sword by Baron de Bazancourt

*A review and digest by Tommy Dragna*

I initially thought this text would be a smallsword treatise. I was happy to find the Baron was here to discuss how to train swordsmen, and less about the technical aspects of how to use the small sword. The Baron gives large amounts of information on how to train young gentlemen to be competent duelists. The book, presented as a dialogue between de Bazancourt and several young noblemen, who ask him questions on how to be a competent swordsman while smoking cigars and drinking brandy every night for 11 nights.

De Bazancourt states he is often at odds with the modern “professors” of fencing. He gets his students fencing quite early on, stepping out of the initial cross to be a smarter fencer, and he shows them how to stand and allows them to adjust to their body. He spends one of the nights discussing how to take a total novice to be able to fight a duel the next day. He gives advice on dueling in general, and his distaste with the dueling with pistols.

What I have found interesting is his casual acceptance of dueling and the death involved in that. This is different from Italian masters of the 1600’s onward who are increasingly against the duel. This all at the same time, where the gentlemen de Bazancourt is speaking to are quickly not learning how to fence, and not wearing swords. The gentlemen seem to be highly curious about how to learn how to fence if challenged to a duel.

Having said all of that, I really liked much of what de Bazancourt had to say. His treatise should be read by instructors or would-be instructors. The text is short and easily digested night by night. Each night is a self-contained discussion, which makes the reading and understanding of his ideas much easier. One of the nights could easily be dissected into an engaging first lesson.

One can always talk, and one enjoys talking about a subject in which one is interested. That is one of the general truths. And as I have always been devoted to the practice of arms, I found myself talking at some length and expounding some views of my own, which I have tested by practical experience and observation till they have established themselves in my mind as axioms.

*I have done this exact thing*

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. There was a time, and a time not so very remote, when a knowledge of sword-play was considered one of the credentials of a gentleman.

*The ability to defend oneself is the first step of being a peaceful man.*

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if I were writing a manual of fencing my first object would be to get rid of the alarming jargon of technical terms, which are supposed to be indispensable—a formidable array, quite enough, I freely admit, to give pause to the most resolute, and to blanch the cheek of the keenest aspirant.”

I do feel the archaic terms  
persist because it gives people  
a heightened sense of themselves

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26 February 2025 13:31

"We are told to draw a hard and fast line between two schools,—probably for the convenience of putting ourselves in the right and our opponents in the wrong.

This is a way of erecting  
walls between colleagues.

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22 February 2025 21:19

you would find a gathering of amateurs, who are devoted to the practice of arms, who keep up the traditions with taste and culture,

This should be the goal of every  
modern sales

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26 February 2025 13:33

"Molière's famous maxim,—'Hit and don't be hit back,'—asserted itself triumphantly

A weakness of Right of Way is the encouragement of the loss of this maxim

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. Do not attempt to force A. to be graceful and elegant, if he is not built that way. Permit B. to develop his own style in his own fashion, and do not try to make him a servile copy of yourself, merely for the sake of emphasising your superiority. |

Allow your students to develop their own interpretations, but ensure they can defend them.

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26 February 2025 13:36

My first lesson would be devoted to showing him theoretically and practically the vital importance of establishing a perfect concert or balance between the various movements.

A new student must be shown how to move his body, for fencing does not come naturally to the uneducated.

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22 February 2025 21:38

You will be able later to modify these elementary studies, by adapting them to suit the position which comes to you most naturally.

I will show you what is perfect so you may adjust it to yourself

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If you cannot avoid stooping, lean forward rather than backward. By carrying the body forward you are no more exposed than you were before; for the body by its inclined position protects itself, presents a smaller surface, and makes it more difficult for your opponent to fix his point, when he might otherwise hit you; but if you throw the body back, you lose the power of making a quick attack and a quick riposte.

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“The graceful curve is not an absolute necessity. Place the arm behind your back if you prefer to do so, for if you bring it to the front you drag forward the left shoulder, and thereby expose a larger target to your opponent’s point.

*The point is to have the off-hand out of the way; secondarily, to keep the shoulder back.*

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When once you have learnt by practice how to harmonise your movements, and have realised how great a power at a given moment the faculty of making these movements with ease and rapidity may be, then, and not till then, venture to take your personal inclination into account.

Here he is saying you need to practice with the proper method before adjusting too much to yourself. Know the rules before you break them.

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23 February 2025 12:20

I should make it my principal aim to form and cultivate a habit of executing all movements at speed. I should insist less on precision of control than on smartness of execution,

This is contrary to all other masters I've read. Precision then speed seem to be the norm; and from my experience, the truth as I had to re-learn precision by slowing down.

The strict limitation of the number of strokes to be taught renders their execution proportionately easier, and makes a clear impression on the mind.

*This brings us back to Fiore, every play has a purpose.*

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‘The instructor who allows his pupil to commence loose play too soon sacrifices by an act of fatal indulgence the whole future of fencing.’ I do not agree with this view. I cannot even see that it logically applies to those who mean to devote all their time to the study of sword-play, and who are prepared to make a determined effort to reach the topmost summit of this difficult art. Much less, then, to my mind, is it applicable to the generality of men, who have no ambition to become such learned fencers, as we were saying the other evening. The professors wilfully refuse to see this.



Controlled free play early on is a good way for new students to put what they have learned to use and stress-test what they know. I'm sure there is some benefit to only doing footwork for six months, however, we are training swordsmen, not dancers, weapon practice is as necessary as footwork.

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"And yet of all arts, the art of fencing may be considered from the most widely different standpoints, and particularly may be approached with very varied degrees of knowledge and application. Is it so very certain that 'premature loose play,' as the professors love to call it, is so pernicious as they think,—the bad seed that cannot fail to produce an evil crop of vices? Right or wrong, I can only say once more that I am of quite the contrary opinion.

You would never see a painting  
Professor says "you can only wash  
brushes for 6 months, then you can  
start painting" Why should  
our art be different?  
Fundamentals include blade  
work.

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23 February 2025 13:09

"The assault teaches the novice what no amount of lunging at the master's pad can drill into him. It enters him to the sudden emergencies, which in one shape or another arise at every moment, to the movement and exertion and keen emulation of real fighting.

This is theory colliding with practice. Reading all the fencing texts in the world won't make you a fencer if you don't pick up your sword.

“The standard of revolt is raised. Lead on, and we will follow you.”

*Such a French phrase*

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It is quite true that any wound in that despised region would be mortal almost to a certainty. That is a detail; and they forget that a sword, though it may be a civil and gentlemanly implement, is still a lethal weapon.

*A fair argument for eliminating off-target hits.*

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Our object should be to make the resemblance as perfect as possible, and so minimise the chances on which the ignorant and brutal too confidently rely.

*This should be the foundation for all tournament rules.*

—Act as much as possible on the defensive, keep out of distance, in order to prevent your opponent from attacking you without shifting his position, and in order to compel him to advance on your point, the most dangerous thing he can do, and without a doubt the most difficult art to acquire. If you make up your mind to stand your ground whatever happens, and to attack always in exact measure, instead of retiring and advancing with quick and irregular movements, and instead of trying to surprise and overwhelm your adversary with combinations for which he is unprepared, you are to my mind simply acting without the least judgment, or rather you are making a perverse blunder.

The defensive action is the most useful. While the single-action offensive play is seen as most correct, being the Patient is always the better move.

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“The advantages, on the other hand, are manifold. By stepping back you increase the effectiveness of the parry, because by withdrawing the body you, in a sense, double the rapidity of the hand. If the attack has been delivered with sufficient rapidity to beat the parry, by retiring you parry twice, the first time with your blade, with which you try to find your adversary’s weapon, the second time by removing the body to a greater distance,

This can be strengthened by stepping off-line, not just by retreating straight back. An off-line step will put you in a better riposte position and makes you safer from attacks.

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24 February 2025 12:48

To my mind it would be dangerous and unreasonable to adopt them as the systematic basis of your play.

Always pair blade work with footwork. There is no instance where you should be still in half your body.

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25 February 2025 12:06

"If any professor can invent an attack which it is impossible to resist, or a parry which it is impossible to deceive, I should advise him to take very good care to secure the patent rights of his invention without a moment's delay.

This would be more valuable than El Dorado, but equally fictional.

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25 February 2025 12:09

"The man, I repeat, who is content to recite his lesson by rote, however well he has learnt it, can never be anything more than a school-boy; call him that or an accomplished parrot, whichever he prefers.

This is another exhortation of learning fencing without the assault.

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25 February 2025 12:12

Therefore, as a general principle, riposte direct, in the line in which you have found the blade.

In Italian we would call this a riposte by glide in opposition

, then avoid the trap by a disengagement or a cut-over; but only make one feint, never more than one.

Multiple feints chained together are good for the exhibition and the sala, but bad for the ground.

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'By refusing the engagement you can at first keep your opponent out of distance, which will compel him to advance in order to attack you, and so give you fair warning of his intention. You are no longer exposed to the paralyzing influence of a constantly threatened attack, which destroys your liberty of action and judgment; you disconcert your adversary by leaving him in the dark as to the line in which he will encounter your blade; and you can choose your own time, when you are ready to attack or parry, to engage his blade with decision.'

I have often advocated for beginning a duel out of distance, but I appreciate the advice to immediately step away. He who attacks first does not necessarily have control.

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17 February 2025 02:28

If you are talking of a pair of duffers, who charge each other blindly, you may trust them to commit every possible blunder, whether they join blades or not.

The problem with olympic Sabre in a single sentence

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19 February 2025 11:06

Then, when it suits your convenience, when you see a favourable opportunity, when you have by a rapid calculation reckoned up the situation, weighed the chances, taken everything into account, then is the time to offer your sword, then is the time t



o engage your adversary, or by bold decided movements to get control of his blade.  
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The fencer should be patient.  
Take your point away and  
watch the lesser swordsmen  
flail, not knowing what to do.

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● <Secrets of the Sword - baron de ...> Page: 76

19 February 2025 11:08

take no denial, but by force or fraud get possession.

This is just a good line about  
winning

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19 February 2025 11:14

But they may as well make up their minds that the intruder can take care of himself, and will find room for his ample proportions in the domestic circle.

This is how I felt the SCA  
was, though friendlier. There  
was no instruction for new  
people.

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● <Secrets of the Sword - baron de ...> Page: 80

19 February 2025 11:16

“The axiom—‘Hit and do not be hit back’ ought, in spite of everything that can be said against it, to be the motto of all who fight with the sword.

*Too many fencers rely on rules to avoid being hit, instead of steel.*

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19 February 2025 11:29

Thereupon he recovers and remarks with a negligent air: ‘hit in the mask,’ ‘hit in the back,’ ‘arm only,’ as the case may be.

*These are the rules exploiters spoken of earlier*

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● <Secrets of the Sword - baron de ...> Page: 92

19 February 2025 11:30

“Do you suppose that these fencers would pursue the same tactics, if they had to face a naked point instead of the button of a foil, and that they would fancy themselves out of danger, if they laid themselves open to be run through the head or back or neck?

When it is a single touch  
bout, everyone fences Fiore

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19 February 2025 11:34

"I may add that the left-hander's advantage, which consists entirely in his incognito, would exist no longer, if the professors,—who I hope may take the hint,—would make a practice of giving lessons occasionally with the left hand.

I've read a number of times  
to do this. It is good for  
both student and master.

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20 February 2025 01:47

Marquis received a sword thrust in the chest and was killed outright. The Chevalier, besides being a very expert swordsman, is said to have acquired a knowledge of several secret thrusts.'

The superiority of the Italian  
"bracchia di ferro"

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20 February 2025 02:06

"I remember trying by way of experiment, some years ago at Naples, several assaults of this sort with an Italian professor, named Parisi.

A brief search does not show anything. However the style described is consistent with Siculo-Neapolitan fencing.

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25 February 2025 01:53

A second encounter, if it cannot be avoided and if both sides consent, ought not to take place until the next day, or after an interval of at least some hours, unless the party interested, that is to say the man who has already fought, requests that it may take place at once.

I feel this is another good reason for single-touch bouts in tournaments. Everyone should stay fresh enough, and ensure there is time for longer breaks.

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“One wonders how often this same lesson has been repeated. It never varies, and it never ought to vary. Its whole value lies in its simplicity.

Every instructor I know gives the same first lesson every time. Every fair instructor has the same lesson they give. A time-honored tradition it seems.

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He must remember that the excitement of fighting does not leave much room for thought, and he must accordingly take care to limit his instruction to the simplest and clearest ideas, easy to understand and easy to put into practice, such as arise naturally out of the instinctive sense of self-preservation.

En guardia, parries, attacks, and the disengage.

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Defend yourself by retreating;

This follows the hierarchy of defense:

- 1: distance
- 2: deflect
- 3: re-direct
- 4: parry

Distance is the best. Deflecting gets the sword away from you & opens a line. Re-directing moves the attack to your strong line. A parry stops the attack in place.

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I should tell him—as he retires and straightens his arm—to change the line occasionally; that is to say to pass his point under his opponent's blade and threaten him on the other side,

This makes good sense as the disengage is a good foundation for a circle-parry with a riposte.

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25 February 2025 02:20

“Even supposing that you escape from this danger, you cannot go on repeating the process continually; you cannot repeat it indifferently on every attack, or on every semblance of an attack that is made upon you. You must judge your opportunity. Now fencing judgment, especially in a duel, implies knowledge, and remember we are arguing on the assumption that you are ignorant.

The cartoccio is not a beginner play and should be avoided until the basics are mastered.

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26 February 2025 01:50

Distrust your enemy; never be overconfident.

One of the principal rules of the art is that everything is a lie.

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• <Secrets of the Sword - baron ...> Page: 148

26 February 2025 01:51

It is this glorious uncertainty that to my mind makes fighting with swords the only sort of duelling that is fair and sportsmanlike, the only sort in which energy, courage, and resolution always give some chance to the weaker combatant.

I can speak from experience that peacocking often leads to getting stabbed.

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• <Secrets of the Sword - baron ...> Page: 150

26 February 2025 01:55

“What teaches them not to rush at each other’s throat in blind fury? Why, simply instinct, the science of self-preservation which is common to every living thing; and common instinct should teach you the same lesson.

Olympic sabre fencers, take note, you are better than beasts.



I mean the habit of stopping after you have made a hit, instead of immediately recovering your guard and putting yourself out of distance.

"This is better advice than  
"fence until you hear Halt."  
If you make a touch and  
get out, but there is no  
call, at least you are in  
a good position to re-engage,  
staying in the fight increases  
the odds of you getting  
out.

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