

Academy of Historical Arts



Syllabus for Historical Fencing

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AHA Syllabus for Historical Fencing

What are the key things that, as instructors, we should try to teach in every discipline? When abstracted from the details of individual techniques or styles, what concepts are important across every discipline of HEMA?

The six key areas that should be addressed in every discipline of HEMA are as follows:

- defence of one's self
- artfulness
- health and safety
- healthiness
- development of character
- history

A good and complete study of any HEMA discipline should cover all of these areas. Here is a brief description of what is meant by each area heading:

- defence of one's self

The object of fencing should be to defend one's self to such a degree that one can remain safe during sparring against other people. HEMA is not about scoring touches on the other person, but rather learning how to use a discipline to defend one's self against an opponent. Defending one's self should be very important throughout the study of HEMA.

- artfulness

As with any martial art, a student of HEMA should strive towards technical excellence and correctness. Flailing with a sword and waving it about with no considered purpose or thought is not what a skilled fighter should be doing, and so students should be encouraged to learn how to perform all techniques and defences skilfully, technically and correctly. Furthermore, one should learn to fight as described in the manuals for any given system; simply taking a bit of this discipline and a bit of that sport without proper context and understanding then mixing it with lazy footwork and bad posture does not pass for good HEMA. Artfulness should cover the low level details of technique and posture but also the correctness and authenticity of the style that people are learning.

- health and safety

Health and safety must be paramount. If exercises and activities are unsafe then they should not be allowed to happen. The students must learn to keep themselves safe and also to keep partners safe. Instructors must learn to run lessons in a way that is safe for everyone and must also be able to crack down on unsafe behaviour the moment it appears.

- healthiness

People should not become less healthy by undertaking these activities. General health and fitness should improve; strength and stamina should improve; general and specific posture should improve; understanding of joints and joint health should improve. At every stage of practicing HEMA, everyone should be improving their healthiness in every way, and injuries (those caused by others and also those caused by self) should not be allowed to happen.

- development of character

The study of HEMA is not just about learning to fight in the style of any given discipline. As a proper martial art, its practitioners should improve in many more subtle ways as well. Self-discipline and self-control should improve, along with the ability to handle stress and stressful situations. Furthermore, people should be pushed to handle more responsibility as and when they become able, and the development of a student into a skilled instructor should be encouraged whenever it becomes appropriate to do so.

- history

When HEMA is abstracted from a proper understanding of history and social context, it loses a lot of its value and meaning. Although students should not be receiving history lectures in lieu of proper training, students should still be learning about history through the medium of the historical European martial arts. Social context and sensitivity to historical documents should be promoted so that people are not studying in isolation without proper understanding of the source material and where HEMA comes from.

So within these category headings, there are several outcomes towards which every lesson (or at least, every series of lessons) should strive to achieve. It is the belief of the senior instructors within the Academy of Historical Arts that studies of HEMA that neglect any of these points are necessarily deficient, and therefore every study of HEMA should strive towards achieving all of these outcomes as described below:

Defence of One's Self

- practitioners should learn and develop self defence skills. Skilled practitioners should be able to use the discipline to defend themselves and to keep themselves safe in a fight.
- practitioners should develop an appropriate sense of self-preservation and avoid sacrificing themselves in order to score a simple touch on an opponent.
- practitioners should avoid aggression; instead they should develop assertiveness, and the ability to pause and pull back even in the process of throwing an attack.

Artfulness

- practitioners should be able to use their technical skills and artfulness in their discipline to spar and stay safe against an opponent of any size, any strength and any speed, who uses any style of HEMA.
- skilled practitioners should be able to demonstrate and prove effectiveness of techniques in drilling, sparring and cutting / breaking / destructive tests.
- practitioners should develop an understanding of the "hows" and "whys" involved in the techniques of the discipline, beyond "because that's how my instructor does it".
- practitioners should learn to enter distance safely with attacks, rather than committing to suicidal charges or mad lunges.
- practitioners should develop an understanding of the concepts of distance, range and timing.

- practitioners should learn to conduct the fight at different distances and to use the appropriate techniques and solution of their chosen discipline to manage the different scenarios. Furthermore, practitioners should become able to control a fight in every stage, including the ability to withdraw safely after an exchange without suffering an "afterblow".

- practitioners should attempt to fight and to perform in an appropriate and "correct" style (for example, longsworders should not just be throwing whips or doing kendo fighting "because it is easier").

- practitioners should learn to maintain good form, posture and technique even while under pressure.

- practitioners should develop situational and spatial awareness.

Health and Safety

- health and safety should always be paramount in every activity in every lesson.

- practitioners should learn to wear correct protective gear for the activities undertaken.

- practitioners should learn to be able to moderate their power with regard to the activity, partner/opponent and level of protective gear present.

Healthiness

- practitioners should achieve regular improvement in health and fitness.

- practitioners should learn and develop competent footwork, stance and posture, with due regard for joint health and longevity.

- practitioners should keep in mind any existing conditions suffered by selves and others.

- instructors should work to develop lessons and exercises to allow inclusion participation even by people with existing conditions.

History

- practitioners should be learning the actual techniques, positions and exercises from the manuals. Some extrapolation should of course be allowed (and maybe even be necessary!) but any course of study should rely on the extant sources and their advice.
- practitioners should develop historical sensitivity, and instructors should attempt to kindle an interest in history and tradition amongst students.
- instructors should use the study of HEMA to correct misconceptions about history. For example: the study of the Scottish martial traditions should correct the inaccurate belief that the Battle of Culloden was all about "Scots vs English", or the study of armoured combat should correct the myth that "knights who fell over in armour could not get back up again".
- instructors should pace the introduction of history and information to students so that the students do not suffer information overload, and so that the students are not frightened away. Context and history should always be part of the lessons, but delivery and introduction should be paced appropriately.

Development of Character

- practitioners should develop self-control and discipline, and the habit of taking responsibility for themselves.
- practitioners should develop control and accuracy over the body, weapon(s) and the mind.
- practitioners should become better able to handle stress and pressure, and to manage nerves before a serious performance or test.
- instructors should push advanced students towards handling more responsibility with coaching and teaching.
- the practice of HEMA should help practitioners become able to come to terms with personal fears and issues.