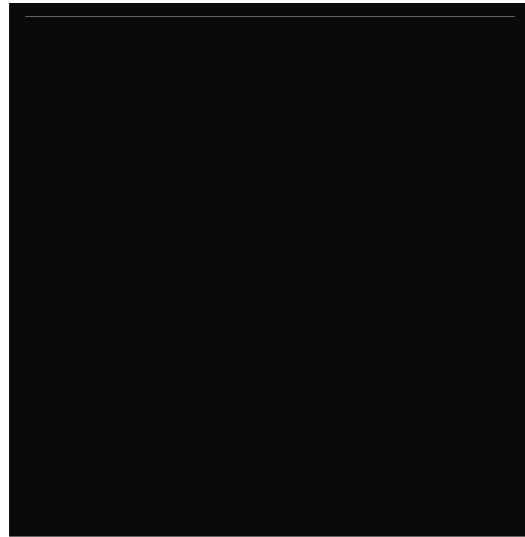


Higgins Armory Sword Guild

Viking Sword and Shield Introductory Course Student Study Guide WRS 18-June-2010

Table of Contents

I. Overview	1
II. The Weapons	2
A. Sword	2
B. Shield	3
C. Practice Weapons	3
III. Safety	3
A. Remember the acronym BLOOD.....	3
B. Delivering Attacks	3
IV. Fundamental Techniques.....	4
A. Guards	4
B. Cuts	5
C. Steps.....	6
V. Drills	6
A. Attack/Defend Drill.....	6
B. Stígandi.....	7
C. Áttavitinn.....	7
D. Haugbúinn	7
E. Four Quarters Drill	7
VI. Sword and Shield Sequence.....	8



I. Overview

This document provides students with some background information on the materials taught in the [Higgins Armory Sword Guild](#) introductory [class on Viking Sword and Shield Techniques](#).

The class teaches basics of fighting techniques for a one-handed sword and a large shield as used by Vikings, as well as safety principles and historical combat fundamentals. Since the Viking people left nothing behind to document their fighting system, we've used many sources to reconstruct the system, notably the medieval and Renaissance German combat treatises (including Meyer, Mair, Starhemberg, and Talhoffer), and the *Sagas of Icelanders*.

The details of this reconstruction are described in the book [Viking Weapons and Combat Techniques](#). The research was done by William R. Short, Matthew Marino, and Eli Huebner, and was informed by Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Mark Millman. Subsequent to the release of the book, substantial additional contributions have come from Reynir Alfreð Sveinsson.

II. The Weapons

The Vikings used weapons very similar to those used by other northern Europeans in the early medieval period. Commonly used weapons included swords, saxes (short swords), axes (both one and two-handed) and spears (the most commonly used weapon). The primary defense was a large, round, wooden shield.



A. Sword

The sword was a one-handed, double-edged weapon with a blade that ranged from 24 to 36 inches long, with 28 to 32 inches being most typical. The total weight was a bit more than 2 pounds. Only a few examples weigh more than 3 pounds.

There are two nice examples of early Viking swords on display in the Higgins Great Hall, and students should make an effort to examine these historical weapons.

1. Parts of the Sword

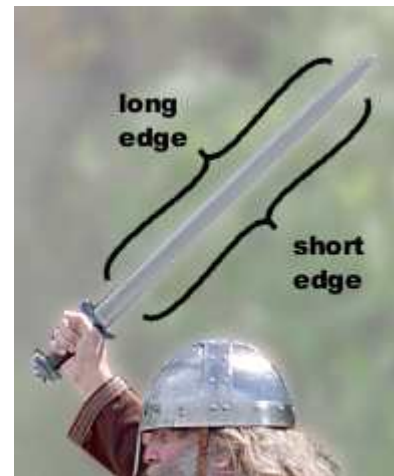


2. Long Edge vs. Short Edge (also known as True Edge and False Edge)

The two edges of the blade are essentially identical, but are used in different ways and so are designated differently.

The long edge is the “forward” edge, in line with the knuckles, used for powerful blows. The short edge is the “back” edge which, due to the angle of the sword produced by the wrist’s articulation, allows attacks to targets that can’t be reached with the long edge.

Which physical edge is long and which is short depends solely on how the weapon is held in the hand.



3. Grip

The sword is gripped like a hammer, using neither too tight nor too loose a grip. Too tight, and the sword can’t move in your hand as it’s used. Too loose, and it might fly away.

B. Shield

The shield was a large, round, wooden shield, typically 32 to 36 inches across, and usually $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick, weighing 10 to 15 pounds. Some shields were faced with fabric or leather. Most were painted. Most had leather or rawhide edging.

At the center of the shield is an iron boss that protects the hand. The shield is gripped from behind the boss. The hand and arm do not pass through any straps, so the shield can be freely rotated, and twisted from side to side.



C. Practice Weapons

For the class, students will use wooden wasters which are long, more typical of swords used at the end of the Viking age. The practice shields used are made with modern, inexpensive materials, but resemble Viking-age shields in weight and size. Smaller, lighter-weight shields are available for those who are not yet used to the weight of a full-sized shield.

III. Safety

A. Remember the acronym BLOOD.

Balance (B). Balance is necessary for the fencer to maintain control of his or her body. Without control, safety isn't possible. To maintain good balance, the basic stance is broad, with moderately flexed knees.

Line (L). There are two important lines.

Line of engagement. The line of engagement is the projection on the floor of the imaginary line connecting the two fencers. Students should keep their feet well away from that center line because failure to do so compromises balance. In some situations, the line may be crossed to gain some other advantage, but the line should not be approached or crossed without a reason.

Line of attack. The line of attack is the line taken by the weapon to its intended target. Attacking away from the prescribed line or to the wrong target can lead to injury. Further, it can result in students picking up bad habits and incorrect techniques.

Eye Contact (OO). Communication between partners is essential to safety. Making eye contact permits that communication during exercises. However, novice martial artists also need to see what they're doing, so we use a system that we call "checking in". The partners communicate using eye contact before beginning an action, watch what they're doing during the action's execution, and communicate via eye contact again before beginning the next action.

Additionally, students must be aware of their surroundings at all times.

Distance (D). Every action has a correct distance. Attempting to execute actions at incorrect distances can lead to injury to both partners.

B. Delivering Attacks

Safety. We use a technique called *casting* to control the amount of force delivered toward one's partner when cutting. In casting, the attacker always picks a target outside the silhouette of his or her partner's body. When thrusting, the attacker begins by thrusting toward the target, but diverts when the weapon is about a foot away from the partner. Thrusts must begin by traveling toward

the target and may not begin off-target. Pulling blows is *not* an acceptable way to control force whether cutting or thrusting.

Attacking: The weapon leads. Attacks are always delivered by extending the weapon first, and following with the body. In real combat, this would help prevent the obvious stop-attack (a quick cut or thrust that hits some exposed part of the attacker's body before they can bring their attack home).

Defending: The body leads. When defending, the first priority is to move the body, and the second is to use the shield to defend.

IV. Fundamental Techniques

A. Guards

The guards are positions of readiness when out of range, and waypoints and decision points during the course of an encounter.

1. Guards for the Sword

We will use four basic guards, adapted from the German longsword treatises. Most guards can be executed on both the left and right sides. We will concentrate on guards to the right.

High (high cutting guard). A guard in which the sword is held with the pommel above the head, the blade angling back and upward at about 45°. The left foot is generally forward. This position threatens a powerful downward blow.

An alternate version with the sword held closer to the body may also be used.

Ox (high thrusting guard). A guard in which the hilt of the sword is held by the side of the head, with the point hanging towards the partner's face or chest.

Plow (low thrusting guard). A guard in which the hilt is held low in front of the body, with the point directed toward the partner's face.



Change (low cutting guard). A guard with the sword held alongside the student's leg, short edge forward.

An alternate low cutting guard is side, with the long edge forward.



2. Guards for the Shield

We will use two basic shield guards.

Outside. (Demonstrated here with the sword in the ox guard.)



Inside. (Again with the sword in the ox guard.)



B. Cuts

We will use four basic cuts. Most cuts can be made from the right or left side. We will concentrate on right-side attacks.



High Cut. A cut directed vertically downwards from above with the long edge, along line A-E in Meyer's cutting diagram (left).

Wrath Cut (Diagonal). A cut delivered diagonally downwards from above on the right side with the long edge, along line B-F (or H-D on the left side).

Middle Cut. A cut delivered horizontally on the right side with the long edge, along line C-G (or G-C on the left side).

Low Cut (Rising). A cut delivered diagonally upwards from below on the right side with the long edge, along line D-H (or F-B on the left side).

C. Steps

Passing step. Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back; the left foot points forward, the right foot angles out. Step forward with your right foot so that it is now in front, pivoting on the ball of your left foot so that it is now angling out. This is a pass forward on the right foot.

Compass step. Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back. Swing your rear foot behind your forward foot. This is a compass step on the right foot.

Gather step. Stand with your right foot forward and your left foot back. Bring your rear foot nearly as far to the front as your forward foot without narrowing your stance (side-to-side), then step forward on the forward foot to return to your initial stance. This is a gather step on the right foot.

V. Drills

A. Attack/Defend Drill

The students face the instructor in the proper stance, with left foot forward. No weapons are used.

The hands precede the body when the student attacks; when defending, the body leads and the hands follow. This helps train students to lead all attacks with the weapon, and to lead defenses with the body.

On the command "Attack", the students extend their hands and arms forward, palms together, and then pass forward, keeping the body facing toward the instructor.

On the command "Defend", the students pass backward and hold their hands up in the air.

On the command "Lunge", the students extend their hands and arms forward, palms together, and then step further forward with the front foot, lengthening the stance while keeping the body facing the instructor.

On the command "Sidestep", the students compass step, turning the body to the side, and hold the hands up in the air.

Students maintain proper stance, balance, and distance while stepping.

Variant: The students hold sword and shield. On attacking steps, the sword is brought forward. On retreating steps, the sword is brought more vertical. N.B. A sidestep with the left foot forward also requires moving the shield from outside guard to inside.

B. Stígandi (*stepping*)

A and B are without weapons. A and B adopt a fighting stance, within range. A leads the exercise by stepping using either a pass forward or a pass backward. B follows, and does the reverse of A's motion so that A and B maintain the proper distance, a good stance, and an awareness of the other pairs of practice partners working on the floor.

Variant: A adds additional steps: compass steps, gather steps.

Variant: A and B hold sword and shield.

Variant: A works to back B into a corner, against a wall, into a column.

C. Áttavitinn (*compass*)

A and B are armed with a sword but no shield. They adopt a standard position. From this point, B verbally suggests an attack for A (e.g., a diagonal attack with the long edge to the neck with a passing step). At slow speed (no more than 1/3 speed), A delivers the attack and B executes a defense. From that position, repeat, with B suggesting another attack, which A executes while B defends. Both students should maintain balance, eye-contact, stance, distance, and use casting. At first, a small number of attacks and targets are used. As students gain experience, more attacks and targets are permitted.

Variant: B suggests only a tool (e.g., long edge) and not a target. A chooses an appropriate target for that tool and delivers the attack. B defends.

Variant: A and B use sword and shield.

Variant: B suggests attacks that are difficult to execute from the current position.

The drill was modified from material originally created by Tony Blauer.

D. Haugbúinn (*the grave dweller*)

A and B are armed with sword and shield. A is *Haugbúinn*, the evil zombie grave-dweller. B is *Víkingurinn*, the brave Viking. A and B adopt a guard. At slow speed (no more than 1/3 speed), zombie A delivers attack after attack after attack of his or her choosing, varying the attack and the target as he or she wishes, stepping appropriately for each attack and maintaining a steady, slow rhythm of attacks. Viking B defends against this non-stop onslaught of attacks, using defenses that are appropriate, while maintaining stance, distance, eye-contact, and balance. At first, a small number of attacks and targets are used. As students gain experience, more attacks and targets are permitted.

Variant: With each of A's attacks, B defends and counterattacks to A. A does not defend; he's already dead.

The drill was modified from material originally created by Tony Blauer.

E. Four Quarters Drill

A and B are armed with sword and shield. A and B begin in ox guard. A delivers, one after the other: a right wrath cut, stepping forward on right foot, followed by left low cut with a triangle step on the left foot, followed by a right low cut with a triangle step on the right foot, followed by a left wrath cut with a triangle step on the left foot. A steps back on the left foot and returns to ox guard. For each cut, B steps and positions his shield to deflect A's incoming blow.

VI. Sword and Shield Sequence

This combat sequence, although contrived, represents a martially effective series of attacks and defenses that illustrate some of the techniques we believe were used by Viking combatants. Although we don't expect students to have mastered the sequence by the completion of the course, we do plan to introduce students to the sequence in the class. This sequence, or a very similar one, will be part of the test for students who wish to qualify to join the Guild.

White cuts to Blue's leg:

White (on the left) begins in ox guard, with his shield in outside guard. Blue (on the right) begins in a guard of his choice, with his shield in outside guard.



White thrusts to Blue's head, stepping forward with his right foot. Blue raises his shield to defend.



White pulls the thrust and cuts to the opening on Blue's exposed leg.

This technique shows up repeatedly in the later manuals. A combatant delivers an attack to one quarter. As the opponent shifts his defenses to that quarter, the combatant pulls and attacks to the opening provided by his opponent.



Blue cuts to White's head:

Recap: White and Blue begin as above. White thrusts to Blue's head and then pulls the attack to cut low.

As the thrust comes in, Blue steps out to his right with his right foot and steps back on his left foot, removing White's target. Blue delivers a short edge cut to White's head.

Blue recognizes the feint and removes the obvious target. Then Blue attacks to the opening.

Blue might choose to attack to the head from a higher angle than is shown in the photo. This is very effective, and it allows Blue to deliver either a cut to the head or a devastating thrust to the face.

Although not clear from the photo, Blue has effectively placed his legs out of range. Regardless, a more careful Blue might choose to lower his shield for further protection.



White cuts to Blue's arm:

Recap: White and Blue begin as above. White thrusts and then pulls the attack to cut low. Blue steps out and back to cut to White's head.

When White sees his low target moving away, he brings his sword up in front of him for an attack to the other side. White brings his shield back to block Blue's short edge attack to the head. White slices to Blue's exposed arm.

White, realizing that his target has vanished, retargets his attack. White moves his shield to block Blue's attack, a move which also conveniently positions Blue's arm for the attack.



Blue applies a shield bind to White:

Recap: White and Blue begin as above. White thrusts and pulls the attack to cut low. Blue steps out and back to cut to White's head. White brings his sword up to attack to Blue's arm.

As White raises his right arm for the attack, Blue steps around and aggressively binds White's sword arm with his shield, preventing White from making his attack. Blue cuts to the inside of White's leg.

White's attack to Blue's arm is an obvious choice. As White's sword goes up, a quick thinking Blue might recognize a good opportunity to apply a shield bind to White's raised arm, as was done here.

Additionally, Blue is well set up for a thrust under his shield to White's belly, an attack that White can't easily see.



White declines the shield bind:

Recap: Blue applies a shield bind to White.

White declines the bind. White steps back on his right foot and delivers a quick scalp cut to Blue's head over Blue's shield.

A well-prepared Blue has several good options for blocking this attack.

White's scalp cut, while quick, is not powerful. White could have chosen a better response against an opponent protected with a helmet as Blue is in the photograph.

