

Can Destreza work in a competitive environment?

Focusing on fencing with the single rapier, my key aspects are at the moment:

- => Context
- => Goal
- => Adaptation
- => Practice

I. Context

First, I suggest not mixing up different questions, which will surely come up in the context of the discussion, because they may lead into another direction and turn away from the core of discussion. In these questions there will be no overall agreement, because everybody has a (mostly acceptable) different point of view, which is why I won't answer them for somebody else.

These questions are for example:

- => What is Destreza?
- => What is HEMA?
- => Are tournaments important for HEMA?

For me, Destreza is a system with core concepts, which are useful for any kind of fencing. I'm not one to tell somebody if he's doing Destreza or not, as it would feel pretentious to me. HEMA for me is a martial art and a sport, where I have the opportunity to interpret (not recreate, because it's simply not possible) historical sources. Tournaments are only a piece of what HEMA is to me, but not the cause itself. It's a way to face the most uncooperative opponent, in a somewhat safe manner, and honestly, it attracts people and creates goals to work for.

Destreza sources from the 16th/17th century were written for the contexts given at that time (self defense, fencing in a salle, fencing to impress others etc.) Modern HEMA takes place in a very different context. We are different people now as in the past, using very different weapons and gear, raised with different education, and living with different social standards. But even more, what is the moral approach of Destreza compared to other systems? Is it a system meant for straight forward killing people? You can at least argue about that. In a modern competitive environment you have - in my modest opinion - to accept that it is a sport, and not for killing people in self defense, or to impress a lord or something. The big difference is the focus on self protection, which is the core of any martial arts system. This core gets diluted in a sporting context, because depending on the rules the focus may change towards hitting the opponent. This context not only depends on participating in tournaments. For example, you can face a competitive environment when sparring with new, random partners, and met one who knows only the competitive kind of context himself. In this case, he brings the competitive context to you and you have to decide how to react, mostly during the bout, because in most cases there are no arrangements about context. So you can fence as always, adapt, or quit.

In my opinion the question of how Destreza works is foremost a question of your mind and the context you chose. If your contexts are clear to you, your mind is ready for the second step, which is adaptation. Is it then still Destreza after my adaptation? Honestly, I don't know. Is it important? Not for me. The main question should be, is it good fencing? If it is, then it should be sufficient.

II. Goal

Before you adapt Destreza in a tournament, you have to set yourself a realistic goal. There are many different individual goals to achieve. The most common one is to be successful and win medals. But there are other goals to achieve, too. For example if there are any other awards, like a technical award, which I fancy the most.

And please don't underestimate the individual goals, like winning against one opponent, surviving the pools, executing a special technique (not my favorite one), just to compete or simply gaining experience.

III. Adaptation

To adapt Destreza to other contexts of fencing according to your goals, you have to know its core concepts, such as Angulo Recto, Atajo, Movement of Conclusion, footwork, fencing from the bind, and so on. Diestros know.

The adaptation of Destreza in the special context of tournaments firstly depends on the kind of tournament, because the variety in HEMA is enormous. You have to know the exact rules and adapt the core concepts and your personal strengths according to the rules. For example, if you have a ruleset which favors disarms, in terms of strategy the game should be yours. If it leaves out cuts, you have to adapt your medio proporcionados and play your game with thrusts and disarms. I prefer rulesets with weighted hit zones.

Furthermore you have to examine your opponents. Their style, level, types and mindset of fencing. If you are able to recognize their area of excellence, then don't let them get there. For example you face a very good grappler, then don't advance too much. In a very general way you often face similar fencing types. For example, the beginner who is unpredictable and because of this, dangerous; the aggressive suicidal fencer, the sporty fencer and the expert fencer. In all cases, you have to adapt to your opponent, and secondarily to his style of fencing, because in my modest opinion it's not a question about the style, it's a question about the quality of the fencer. A fitting style can help, but it's the fencer, who makes the real difference. This is why I say that Destreza is not superior to other styles. It solely depends on the fencer. You do you, not your style.

My overall recommendation (and nothing new under the sun) is:

- => Have good distance management and timing.
- => Move and be able to close the line of attack.
- => Control of space.
- => Control the opponent's weapon.
- => Have a solid parry-riposte game.
- => Be patient. Greed kills.

=> Breathe, use your brain and stay calm.

Independently from rules, against a beginner, you face two problems. The first one, most beginners constantly retreat and you're chasing them through the ring. For me it works to slow down and try to read them. Second problem, is that they tend to react in a very spontaneous way, often without parrying and any self protection, which leads to double hits. You should be aware of their reaction to your attacks. Patience is the key.

The aggressive suicidal fencer is coming to you. He chooses violence, double hits are likely to happen. So invite, stopthrust, counterthrust, or parry and riposte. With stepping out of the line, even simple disarms work well. Search for tells. There are only a few fencers, who don't have any. Beware of cuts to the legs. Be ready for slipping the leg and hitting the head in response. It's recommended to gain some space in the very beginning of the fight.

The sporty fencer can be a major pain in the ass. At first, you should stay calm and not get infected by hasty movements. Closing the line of possible attacks is the major key. Many fencers of this kind don't have more than two attacks in a row in their pocket, so that the parry-riposte game should work. If he's giving you his blade, the game should not be a problem. If he's using a refused blade, you have to work with the concept of the virtual Atajo and mix between upright and lower stances. Especially for diestros solely using the upright stance, the lower openings are in danger.

Against the expert fencer, you can expect some very good areas of excellence from your opponent. They can differ in many ways. If I pick a clean Salvator Fabris or Ridolofo Capo Ferro style fencer for example, you will face a very good trovare/stringere without blade contact, quick cavaziones, and fast thrusts. So your task as a Diestro is to come past their point safely. Probably you might lose in the thrusting game, because it's their area of excellence. In the closer combat, your game should begin. In this case, adaptation becomes very important. Your opponent will not hesitate to use his off arm to remove your blade to the side. Considering many Italian style fencers using heavier blades, I started using my left hand more and more against this kind of fencer, and it gives you a great asset to your technical tool box. Pacheco might have called you vulgar, but why should we limit ourselves for the sake of the opinion of guys, having lived in other contexts? So if I can use my left hand, I do it. If I can safely thrust with a lunge and retreat, then I'll do it. Still I try to avoid extremes of movement. For example I try to avoid the Passata Sotto (because I'm not able to recover fast from it) or the Flèche (because of its lack of protection and complete disbalance.)

If you are facing mediocre opponents, who will give you the blade for executing Atajos, Inclusions etc. and you still have problems, then your construction site might be Destreza itself.

For the adaptation, I offer no solutions, but my approaches, which are some aspects I always tell myself. These are:

=> Play your game: it's the hardest thing to do, because we tend subconsciously to respond to our opponent.

=> Be smart: like Ton Puey said, fencing is a conversation between liars. You have to be the smart one.

=> Look good: your fencing should look elegant and express ease. Your movements should have good form.

=> Stay safe: if something doesn't feel safe, just don't do it. Nothing is worth the injury.

=> Destreza can be vulgar sometimes: don't set yourself stupid limits. Get low, if it's suitable. Lunge, if it's safe. Late Destreza is clearly on your side. Use your off-hand, if it's smart.

=> Fail: learning through failure. Maybe one of the most important points. And if you fail, you fail and not the system. Don't blame the system. Get up and try again. A growth mindset will help you to improve a lot. Search for the solution of specific problems and work on it.

IV. Practice

Nothing is worth it without practice. The adaptation has to be practiced a lot. If you only practice in a gentlemanly Diestro world, it's totally clear that every kind of different fencing will be a demanding task. If you train only one per week, your improvement will be slow. This is why we simulate different types of fencers and fencing styles in our training, travel a lot and try to fence with many different kinds of people. Practice and experience are the major keys for improvement. Train as you fight, train with Aliveness. The more the better.

I often hear Estrechar and Linea en Cruz don't work. Yes, the execution of techniques depends on individual training (is it in my tool box?) and the required stimulus. If there's no fitting stimulus for the execution of the Estrachar, then, it might not be the correct technique for the given situation. So you have to think about your training methods. Another big topic, not to be discussed here. If you focus solely on tournaments, then I recommend just training a few techniques, which cover 80% of the expected situations. And don't get me wrong, the quality of training is much more important than the quantity.

V. Conclusion

In my opinion the question is not whether Destreza can work in tournaments, it is about if I have prepared myself well enough.

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