



A Line is a Line is a Line

When hosting referee seminars, my job is to instruct. However, I always wind up learning from the attendees what aspects of the rules they really don't fully understand.

Invariably, the same questions are asked and, without fail, the questions asked most often revolve around "the line."

Let's try to make the line understandable, clarify the rules and applications, and put to rest any misconceptions about the line.

How do you gain the line?

The point-in-line is a specific position in which the fencer's sword arm is kept straight and the point of his weapon continually threatens the opponent's valid target.

This rule, t.10, is black-and-white and unambiguous.

Yet, there are at least fifty shades of gray.

When I started fencing at the Fencers Club back in the mid-1970s, the late Albert Axelrod, who won bronze at the 1960 Rome Olympics, was still practicing nightly. In addition to having the strongest and most dynamic hand, Axelrod imposed his will by utilizing something only he claimed was a line. He would angle his shoulder to wrist at a downward angle and then cock his wrist back upwards while putting the line out. Axelrod claimed that his "arm" was straight (well, technically, from the shoulder to the wrist his arm was straight). It was obviously not a line, at least as the rules intended, but it was not pleasant for referees or competitors to tell that to Axelrod.

Maybe the rule should be better defined to say that there needs to be a straight line from the shoulder to the point.

Must the line be aimed at the opponent's high line?

I've been teaching the Fencing Officials Commission seminar for many years. In the Certified Referee Instructor syllabus, it clearly states that the line must be in the high line.

(The FOC was unable to formulate an official stance prior to this issue's deadline, although I did receive input from several of its members.)

Yet, rule t.10 clearly says the point must threaten the opponent's valid target.

According to past President of FIE Arbitrage Chaba Pallaghy, the point-in-line is able to threaten anywhere on the valid target as long as there is one continuous line from shoulder to point.

Let's take a look at the following example. Daryl Homer is 5'8" and Tim Morehouse is 6'2" – a half a foot taller. If Daryl puts out a proper line while in the en garde position, that point is likely to be well below Tim's high line. There is no reason for it not to earn the right-of-way.

So, let's put an end to the high line claim.

How can you lose the line?

The line can be lost by either an action by the opponent or an action by the line-holder.

The opponent may beat the blade while in line. After the beat, and without hesitation,

the opponent must now make an immediate new attack.

The opponent may parry an attack made with an already established line. After the parry, and without hesitation, the opponent must make an immediate riposte.

The fencer in line will lose the line by:

- Changing the target area being threatened
- Making a coupe against an action made by the opponent
- Making an anticipatory disengage. This is probably the most common way the line is lost. A fencer is allowed to disengage to avoid the opponent's attempt to take the blade (the derobement). However, a fencer who anticipates this attempt to take the blade, while the opponent has made no attempt to take the blade, loses the line.

How does footwork affect the line?

This has changed over the years. In fact, it wasn't that long ago that when a fencer with the line advanced, lunged or fleched, it was deemed to be a new attack and the line was lost if the opponent counter-attacked at the same time. Pardon me, as the reality was that the opponent was now considered to be the attacker and the former line-holder as the counter-attacker! As a referee, this was confusing, to say the least.

Whatever the case, footwork once caused a line to be lost. Fortunately, that convoluted and counter-intuitive application was deep-sixed.

I argued for years with my father Dan, who was the first American referee to officiate the Olympic finals in all three weapons, about one particular aspect of the line where footwork was involved. He claimed that a fencer retreating with the line should not have the right-of-way, as it was not threatening the opponent. I reasoned that the opponent who knowingly impaled himself on the retreating line had less claim to the right-of-way, especially because he was the last to move and provoked the double touch. In fact, the rules state that if two fencers are in line and one lunges, causing both to be hit, the fencer who provoked the double touch is deemed to be touched. So, why wouldn't the same logic carry in the lunge vs. retreat scenario?

established, nothing footwork related can cause it to be lost.

Can the line be automatically established after an attack falls short?

This is a sticky one. Very sticky.

On the day before the start of the 2007 World Championships in St. Petersburg, Russia, the referees were given an edict that an attack which fell short and was left in line automatically established the point in line.

A subsequent meeting of 45 coaches and team captains, which I chaired, voted 44-1 that this application was dead wrong. The

redoublement) Fencer A may do after the initial attack fell short.

This is in spite of Fencer A's secondary action often commencing slightly before Fencer B's new attack, even without any hesitation, started.

***Keep in mind that the laws of physics state that an object in motion remains in motion. That would be Fencer A. Fencer B, in direct contrast, must stop on a dime and then change directions. So, it makes perfect sense that Fencer A's continuation of the short attack may start before Fencer B's correctly executed new attack, again made without any hesitation.

As per the last issue's column, video replay viewed in slow motion perfectly illustrates the above example and definitely distorts the phrase in favor of Fencer A's second action.

Yet, this is universally applied worldwide and Fencer B always receives the right-of-way as long as there is no hesitation.

So, I reason that this concept is exactly the same when Fencer A's attack falls short ("Attack no"), and is then either left or placed in line. Fencer A does not get a second shot with this line, as it is a secondary action same as a remise, reprise, or redoublement. Fencer B gets to make the new attack without hesitation.

Doug Findlay, the 2012 FIE Foil Referee of the Year, says: "Establishing a line after an attack which is short is, by definition, a second action. It does not have right-of-way if the opponent immediately initiates an action. Of course, this is different than the fencer who intentionally makes a short attack with no attempt to hit and establishes the line with the intent of derobing."

Iana Dakova, member of the FIE Arbitrage Commission, says: "There is no window of time to establish the line after an attack falls short if the opponent makes an immediate new attack without hesitation."

Ioan Pop, the Technical Director of the FIE, says: "The line is a special position which must be in place before the last part of the attack begins. The argument is in the favor of the line not automatically gaining the right-of-way."

While Gertrude Stein said, "There is no there there," I will say that once the attack falls short, "There is no line there." At least not automatically. ■

Gertrude Stein said that "a rose is a rose is a rose." Well, once established, and regardless of footwork, "A line is a line is line."

The following is from a document provided by past President of FIE Arbitrage, George Kolombatovich:

Common Law: There is nothing in the Rules Book about what one may do with one's feet while having the point in line. Once the point in line has been established, advancing, retreating, lunging, or just standing still does not affect the validity of the position. There is only one exception to this, and that is when both fencers have established a point in line. In this case, if one of the fencers moves forward and impales him/herself, that fencer is considered as touched.

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The bottom line is that once a line has been

referees most definitely did not call it the new way and, a few months later, the FIE Arbitrage Commission issued a memo clarifying that the line was not automatically established after a short attack was left in line.

However, this is 2013 and, incredibly, there are undeniably two distinct points-of-view about how this should be called.

Again, I was unable to get an official stance from the FOC prior to this issue's deadline.

Here's how I see it.

First, let's take a look at the single most common call in saber, but also seen in foil.

This is the "Attack no," scenario where Fencer A's attack falls short. Fencer B, without any hesitation, is allowed to make a new attack and gain the right-of-way regardless of whatever secondary action (remise, reprise,