

What is an attack?

The main problem appears to be the belief that the Rules Book states that the attacker's arm must be extended. What makes an action an attack is something that has been discussed for centuries. There are, it sometimes seems, two schools regarding this question. One states that the arm must be fully extended in order to be attacking; the other school is just as adamant in stating that whomever starts moving forward with even the intent to hit is the attacker. The truth is actually somewhere in the middle.

Look at the Rules Book. Rule t.7 is supposed to define the attack. "The attack is the initial offensive action made by extending the arm and continuously threatening the opponent's target."

Does this tell the whole story? Hardly. To find out what an attack is, there are two important things one needs to understand.

One is that you'll not find the answer by only looking in the Rules Book. (Remember that the Rules Book doesn't even state which arm has to be extending to make an attack.) The Rules Book does not have a glossary so there are no definitions as to what an "offensive action" is or what "threatening" means. The definition as to what is an attack is derived from both the Rules Book and from convention — what is called an attack by the world's best referees.

That it really isn't what one person does that makes an action an attack is the other important point to consider. The attack is defined by what both fencers do in relationship to each other. Here is an example. In a foil bout between Mary and Sue, Mary lunges while extending her arm. Her arm is fully extended and straight just before her forward foot hits the ground. What fencing action has Mary done? Here are three possibilities:

1. If Sue was immobile, in lunge distance, and in the On Guard position, Mary made an ATTACK.
2. If, just before Mary started her lunge while extending her arm, Sue lunged while extending her arm, Mary made a COUNTER ATTACK.
3. If Sue was immobile, beyond lunge distance, in the On Guard position, and advanced after Mary had finished her lunge, Mary established a POINT IN LINE.

In this example, the same "movement" by Mary resulted in three different "actions."

One will overhear something such as the following at competitions all over the world after a top-level referee correctly says "Halt. Attack from the left. Point for the left." when the fencer on the left went after his opponent with his guard next to his hip and then finally started extending just before the opponent — who had been desperately trying to make a parry — ultimately extended his arm: "We've got to let everyone know what's going on. 'They' are calling any aggressive movement an attack."

It is important to realize that the referee is supposed to analyze "actions." In this example — even though there was much "movement" — the end result was an attack.

What makes one's action an attack is one's movement in relationship to what the opponent is doing. Knowing this, take another look at Rule t7 paying particular attention to some key words.

“The attack is the INITIAL OFFENSIVE action made by EXTENDING the arm and CONTINUOUSLY THREATENING the opponent's target . . .”

- INITIAL — you must start your action before your opponent. This does not at all mean who started moving first.
- OFFENSIVE — you must be going toward your opponent. Attempting a parry is not offensive.
- EXTENDING — for those of you who know grammar, this is a gerund; it connotes action. The arm never has to become extended to have a correctly executed attack. To have an extending arm, your hand must be going away from your body.
- CONTINUOUSLY — non-stop. You must keep attacking. If you “break” your attack — stop moving forward or hold back your arm — you are no longer attacking and, if your opponent starts an attack of her own, your continuation may become a counter attack. The attacker who lunges has the attack end when the front foot lands.
- THREATENING — you must present a danger to your opponent. This word really has two parts to its definition. One is the relationship of distance between the fencers in determining whether one is threatening. If your opponent is within advance lunge distance, you can be threatening; you can start an attack. If your opponent is beyond advance lunge distance, you cannot be threatening; you cannot start an attack – even if your opponent were to remain completely immobile, your attack would not start until you were at advance lunge distance. The other part that is important in defining this word is that your point (for foil) or your blade (for sabre) is going toward your opponent's valid target. It is a very common misconception that, for example, a foil attack requires the point to be “aimed” at the valid target before an attack starts.

If one were to only use the Rules Book to decide what constituted an attack one could easily argue in favor of foil fencer John in this completely absurd example: John extends his arm aiming the point directly at the middle of Bob's chest. John then lunges without moving his arm. After John lunges, Bob sticks out his arm. John's point arrives on Bob's arm; Bob's point arrives on target. Is it a point for Bob because John couldn't have been attacking? Since John hit Bob on the arm, John clearly wasn't “continuously threatening the valid surface” of Bob. Here, of course, the referee would say that John's attack was off target and Bob's action was a counter attack; no touch is awarded.

What actually happens so often in competition is the combination of the technical and tactical execution of an action. Example: If a fencer starts a correctly executed attack and her opponent starts retreating while trying to make a parry, the aggressor may very well pull her arm back so that the defensive fencer has no blade to parry. If the parries continue, the aggressor will wait until she is close enough and then restart her attack. If the parrier were to start her own attack while the former aggressor had her arm back, then this attack would have right of way; it would be an attack into a preparation.