

# Henri de Saint Didier - Summary

Chris Slee [chris@sleech.info](mailto:chris@sleech.info)

25 September 2012

## [Henri de Saint Didier - Summary](#)

### [Saint Didier's Fight](#)

#### [Postures](#)

[High Posture](#)

[Medium Posture](#)

[Low Posture](#)

[The Left Hand](#)

#### [Sword Actions](#)

#### [The Six Strikes](#)

[Low Cutting Attacks - Sequence 1](#)

[Low Cutting Attacks - Sequence 2](#)

[High Cutting Attacks - Sequence 3](#)

[High Cutting Attacks - Sequence 4](#)

[Thrusting Attacks - Sequence 5](#)

[Thrusting Attacks - Sequence 6](#)

#### [Parries](#)

#### [Footwork](#)

[Triangle Stepping](#)

[Quadriangle Stepping](#)

#### [Disarms](#)

[The First Prinse](#)

[The Counter to the First Prinse](#)

[The Second Prinse](#)

[The Counter to the Second Prinse](#)

[The Third Prinse](#)

[The Fourth Prinse](#)

#### [Drawing the Sword](#)

[Premier Desgainement](#)

[Second Desgainement](#)

[Third Desgainement](#)

Saint Didier wrote what is essentially a training manual for sidesword combat with the enormous title of "*Traicte les secrets du premier livre sur l'espee seule, mere de toutes armes*" ("Treatise on the Secrets of the First Book on the Sword Alone, Mother of All Arms," 1573). It outlines a ranges of drills and exercises but has little to say directly about what the act of fighting looks like or how to approach the fight.

Reduced to its essentials, Saint Dider's book highlights five key principles. If you understand these, you understand his work.

- All attacks rely on the second intention. The initial strike serves solely to moving into close distance and force the opponent out of his or her guard posture.
- Disengaging under the blade then lifting the hilt into a hanging parry is the means to gaining a second intention attack.
- All actions defending against these attacks are simple double time parries followed by a thrust in response. No single time responses are shown in the text.
- While stepping offline to the side from which one attacks is encouraged, the key to the fight is to move around the opponent towards the opponent's outside.
- Movements of conclusion (in which one combatant disarms the other by grabbing the hilt) is an essential part of the practice.

These notes assume that the reader is familiar with the standard (Italian) notation of second, third and fourth hand positions.

All comment, questions and suggestions are gratefully received.

## Saint Didier's Fight

Unlike Joachim Meyer, who published his The Art of Combat (1570) at rough the same time, Saint Didier says little about his concept of the fight and how to approach it. There is rarely anything that appears to be explicit tactical advice in his text. However, there are several oblique references from which we can deduce something of the fight he envisioned - although I cannot make any claim to accuracy here; it's all too vague.

Swordplay is compared to sport. In Saint Didier's view, a good handball player ("*jeu de paulmes*", the forerunner of tennis) has the physicality necessary and general concept of movement (fore-hand, back-hand, etc) to make a decent fencer. Is this only a comment on the degree of athleticism needed to become a skilled fencer or is there a more general equivalence suggested?

*"Faut noter que les armes, et la paulme sont are cousins germains,et qui scaura bien jouer a la paulme, facilement et tout (sic) scaura bien tirer des armes."*

(It should be noted that arms and tennis are first cousins and whoever knows well how to play tennis will know well how to throw arms about.)

He speaks at length in the supplementary material in the text about the similarity between handball and swordplay making these points:

- The *maindroit* and *renvers* are the same action as the forehand and backhand strokes in handball. There's no *estoc* (thrust) in handball.
- Movement is the key. Standing still during a bout or a volley is a sure road to defeat.
- The fencing equivalent of keeping one's eye on the ball is to watch the point of the sword rather than watching the eyes or gaze of the opponent.

Saint Didier also makes the claim that the similarity between fencing and handball is plainly evident to practitioners. The enormous effort he goes to in the text to point this out, he says, is to encourage beginners and students to cross-train.

In the text, all encounters start with the opponents standing facing each other with their swords in their scabbards. The first action in all sequences is to draw and pass backward with the right foot. This serves not only to put one in guard but to put one out of striking distance. (The next action is to attack by passing forward into distance.) Although it's not stated, all encounters end in one of two ways. Either the Lieutenant's attack fails and the Provost's counter-thrust strikes home or the Lieutenant makes a movement of conclusion and disarms the Provost.

To my mind, these are sporting bouts or they indicate that all fights in Saint Didier's world start in the polite company of the court. I can't see in the text a concept of a street fight or a fight against unequal weapons or unequal numbers of opponents. Combat in the text comes across as quite a mannered and genteel affair, regardless of the level of potential lethality.

I suggest that Henri de Saint Didier is writing lessons plans to teach his students how to be accomplished young gentlemen rather than masters of combat. This is swordplay for courtiers, not warriors.

## **Postures**

Henri de Saint Didier outlines three basic postures: high, medium and low. This last has two variants subordinate to the general posture..

The high and medium postures seems to be untenable in any form of actual bout, be it sporting or deadly in intent. These two postures are the outcomes of drawing one's sword and stepping back with the right foot (see Drawing the Sword below) in order to provide the maximum amount of time and distance in which to size up the opponent's next move. The only actions that I can make work from these postures (other than initiating the The Six Strikes sequences) are defensive: parrying with the sword hand in fourth position, the hanging party, and enveloping and beating away to the right.

This, however, may say more about my lack of skill than Saint Didier's text.

### **High Posture**

Stand with your left foot forward and your right hand (holding the sword) in second position a little higher than your right shoulder pointing at your opponent's head (specifically, Henri de Saint Didier says at your opponent's left eye). Your left hand is held before your chest to ward away any thrusts. This posture is predominantly defensive and is most often used by the Provost as a way of starting a sequence in which he defends the lieutenant's attacks.

### **Medium Posture**

Stand with your left foot forwards and your right hand (holding the weapon) in second position at the same level as your right shoulder pointing at your opponent's chest. Your left hand is generally held blow (Henri de Saint Didier uses a number of terms referring to the left hip region) to ward away thrusts. There is an occasional variant in which you stand with your right foot forward. In this case, the left hand is generally positioned under your sword arm.

## Low Posture

Stand with your left foot forward and the right hand (holding the sword) in third position directly in front of you. Your left hand is held before your chest. It is suggested in the text that this is the more aggressive position to adopt compared to the high and medium postures.

There are two variants of this position which are called out specifically in the text. In the first, your stand with your left foot forward and your sword hand held low on the left (the Italian third/fourth position?). In the second variant, your stand with your right foot forward and your sword hand held low to your right (the Italian second/third position?).

## The Left Hand

Saint Didier is very specific about the purpose and placement of the left hand when fencing. It is the last line of defense to ward off thrusts that get past the parry. Placement is a little more difficult to define clearly. In general, however, if the sword is held high the left hand is held low and if the sword is held low the left hand is held high. Often, the left hand is in front of the face or the belly. When in a forward stance (ie: right foot forward) the hand is held under the elbow of the sword arm.

## Sword Actions

There are three fundamental actions on the sword: a cut from the right, a cut from the left, and a thrust. Saint Didier does not define the cuts according to the line as other masters did but by their target. Thus, a cut from the right may be made from above or from below without any differentiation in the text. Having said that, almost all cuts appear to be either downward diagonal or horizontal strikes. The only place where cuts from below may be read, I dispute that this is what the text means.

Here is the list of terms that Saint Didier uses and that are used throughout this document. Synonyms are given.

- **Maindroit** (lit.: right hand): This is a cut from the right corresponding to a right wrath or right middle cut in Joachim Meyer's practice or a *squalembro* or *tondo* in the Italian tradition. Saint Didier compares it to the *avant-main* (forehand) in handball and tennis.
- **Renvers** (lit.: reverse): This is a cut from the left corresponding to a left wrath or left middle cut in Joachim Meyer's practice or a *riversa* or *riverso tondo* in the Italian tradition. Saint Didier compares this to the *arriere-main* (backhand) in handball or tennis.
- **Estoc**: This is a thrust which may be performed with the sword hand either in second position with the true edge of the sword directed to the outside and the fingers facing downwards, or in fourth position with the true edge of the sword directed to the inside and the fingers facing upwards. These positions are also used for parrying.
- **Desrober**: This is a disengagement of the hilt under the blade of the opponent which puts the point of the sword on the opposite side of the opponent's sword to the hilt. The hilt is then lifted in order to make the opponent's blade slide to one side. In effect, it is transforming a *maindroit* into a hanging parry to the outside in order to prepare for a *renvers* as a counter cut, and transforming a *renvers* into a hanging parry to the inside in order to counter cut with a *maindroit*.

This last is the key technique at the heart of Saint Didier's practice. It is the single technique which stands out as different compared to any other fencing manual or treatise that I'm aware of.

## The Six Strikes

Henri de Saint Didier presents three pairs of attack and defense drills as the core of his teaching. From these are to be understood the principles of his system of fence. Each step in the drills is to be performed individually as a phrase in its own right. The next step adds another complete phrase to the sequence. For example,

1. The Lieutenant makes his attack. The Provost does nothing and received the hit.
2. The Lieutenant makes his attack. The Provost parries the attack and counter strikes.
3. The Lieutenant makes his attack. The Provost parries the attack and counter strikes. The Lieutenant withdraws to parry the Provost's riposte and makes his own counter attack.
4. Etc.

The Lieutenant's first action appears in all cases to be little more than an opening gambit to test the how the Provost will react. It is a way of breaking into close distance and prompting a response from the Provost to start the fight.

The text names the Lieutenant's first action in each sequence and the Provost's defense. Then comes the first and second oppositions by the Lieutenant and Provost's first and second follow-ups.

### Low Cutting Attacks - Sequence 1

Images 11-20	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot into the medium posture.	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot into the high posture.
Action and Counter	Make a <i>maindroit</i> to the provost's leg (lit.: knee) passing forward with the right foot. ( <b>Note:</b> the text says to bring the hilt to the left shoulder and drop the point, sounding suspiciously like hanging guard.)	Counter by making a <i>maindroit</i> against the lieutenant's sword arm (not against the sword) passing backwards with the left foot.
First Opposition and Follow Up	Lift the sword hilt to the left shoulder (cf: Meyer's Steer / Left Ox) and make a <i>renvers</i> to the provost's right shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a <i>maindroit</i> to the Provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.

**Note:** An alternative stance for the lieutenant is shown in figures 13-14 in which the left foot is withdrawn on drawing the sword.

## Low Cutting Attacks - Sequence 2

Images 21-28	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the left foot into the high posture. ( <b>Note:</b> The text assumes that this exercise follows on directly from the conclusion of the first.)	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot into the low posture.
Action and Counter	Make a <i>renvers</i> to the provost's leg (lit.: knee) passing forward with the left foot.	Counter by making a <i>renvers</i> against the lieutenant's sword arm (not against the sword) passing backwards with the left foot.
First Opposition and Follow Up	Lift the sword hilt to the right shoulder (cf: hanging guard) and make a <i>maindroit</i> to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a <i>renvers</i> to the provost's right shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's chest.

## High Cutting Attacks - Sequence 3

Images 29-36	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot into the low posture.	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot into the high posture.
Action and Counter	Make a <i>maindroit</i> to the provost's shoulder passing forward with the right foot.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) passing backwards with the left foot and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
First Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a vertical cut ( <i>renvers</i> in third position) to the provost's shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's chest or belly.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a vertical cut ( <i>avant-main</i> in third position) to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.

**Note:** The action described in the text is a false edge cut to the Provost's left shoulder. Saint Didier is quite clear about this ("*tenant le dessus de la main que tient de l'espee en hault*") but I can't reconcile this with the next action of disengaging under the provost's weapon ("*desrobe son espee en passant un avant-main par dessous la garde de l'espee du prevost*").

## High Cutting Attacks - Sequence 4

Images 37-44	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the left foot into the low posture.	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the left foot into the medium posture.
Action and Counter	Feint a thrust the provost's face in order to make a <i>renvers</i> to the provost's shoulder passing forward with the left foot.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) passing backwards with the right foot and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
First Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the provost's weapon and make a <i>maindroit</i> to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a <i>renvers</i> to the provost's right shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's throat.

## Thrusting Attacks - Sequence 5

Images 45-52	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot to stand in the low posture.	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the right foot to stand in the high posture.
Action and Counter	Thrust at the provost's (left) chest passing forward with the right foot and turning the hand from second position into fourth position.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) passing backwards with the left foot and thrust at the lieutenant's face. ( <b>Note:</b> the feet are reversed in the text.)
First Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a " <i>renvers ou estoc</i> " ( <i>renvers</i> cut or thrust in second position) to the provost's right shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's throat.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the the provost's sword and make a " <i>maindroit ou estoc</i> " ( <i>maindroit</i> or thrust in fourth position) to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.

## Thrusting Attacks - Sequence 6

Images 53-60	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the left foot into the medium posture.	From the starting position, draw the sword and pass backwards with the left foot into the medium posture.

Action and Counter	Feint a thrust at the provost's right side. Disengage under his weapons and make thrust (in third position?) at the provost's chest passing forward with the left foot.	Pass backwards with the right foot and parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's chest.
First Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the provost's weapon and make a thrust in fourth position to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in fourth position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's face.
Second Opposition and Follow Up	Desrober under the provost's weapons and make a thrust in second position to the provost's left shoulder.	Parry in second position (cf: Italian hand positions) and thrust at the lieutenant's chest.

There are notes in the text about how left-handers should perform this drill.

## Parries

The ways to parry an attack are outlined in the six strikes sequences above.

- Parrying in second and fourth position, depending on the angle of the incoming attack, in order to quickly counter attack from the bind. (*I see similarities here with the atajo of the Spanish rapier style but I may be reading into the text my own prejudices.*)
- Parrying with a hanging blade to either the left or the right, depending on the angle of the incoming attack, in order to counter cut to the opposite side from the attack
- Counter-cuts into the attacker's sword arm to smother his or her attack.
- Using the left hand as a last resort catch-all. This is self-explanatory.

He talks about single time responses ("*tant en assillant qu'en defendant*") in the accompanying text but they are never demonstrated in the lessons themselves.

The safest way for the Provost to parry in second and fourth hand positions is to angle the blade upwards and with the point off-line. While this is not stated in the text, it is for me the easiest way to explain the text, which details the parry and the counter thrust as separate actions within the same phrase of the sequence. If the requirement to parry and counter thrust in the same tempo is removed then forming a true cross (or as close as possible) is encouraged.

The disengagements or hanging parries are used to sweep the opponent's blade to the side. Saint Didier specifically calls out passing the hilt of the sword under the opponent's weapon and lifting the hilt. This has the effect of forcing the opponent's blade to one side allowing a counter cut to the opposite side. This has much in common with Joachim Meyer's admonition to always attack the quarter out of which the opponent has just moved. For example, if the opponent has made a cut from his or her upper right quarter, that's where you should target your next strike.

Saint Didier makes plain that to attack the sword of an opponent who cuts low is the mark of an amateur (*l'ignorans*). A low cut is the perfect opportunity to cut into the opponent's forearm.

## Footwork

Saint Didier's footwork can be summarised into three teaching points. In the sequences, he teaches basic agreement of hand and foot. However, this only shows itself in the Lieutenant's first strike of the sequence and from time to time in the Provost's defenses. Generally, after the first pass either forwards or backwards, the orientation of the feet is static in the basic lessons.

## Triangle Stepping

The triangle step is an exercise in stepping off the line to the right or to the left, pivoting on the rear foot. Only when implemented in conjunction with the sequences does the triangle nature of the stepping become apparent.

When cutting from the right, the front foot is placed offline to the right of the opponent. Blade angulation is used to block the opponent's line of counter attack. For example, a maindroit is accompanied by a step off the line to the right. The fencer's right hand ends in something like fourth position across his or her body thereby providing a measure of mechanical advantage over the opponent.

Similarly when attacking from the left, the front foot is placed off the line to the left of the opponent and the fencer's hand approximates second position, ensuring there is steel between the fencers and the opponent.

The risk of stepping left in this manner is that it can put the fencer in a position of poor balance, in which the fencer is not well placed to give or receive the energy of a blow.

## Quadriangle Stepping

The quadriangle step is an exercise in maneuvering to the outside of the opponent. It is only ever shown using an attack by the Lieutenant from the right. I presume that Saint Didier believes it can be done using an attack from the left but he doesn't say and I can't make it work. (Again, this may say more about my lack of skill than his text.)

The initial attack is made passing forward with the right foot. Note the position of the feet with the right foot directly in front of the left. The first opposition is performed with a wide step or pivot to the left with the right foot, leaving the line of the Lieutenant's feet at an angle to the opponent. In the second opposition, the Lieutenant steps to the left with the right foot such that the feet are in line once more, the right foot directly in front of the left.

There is no equivalent of quadriangle stepping shown for the Provost.

## Disarms

Henri de Saint Didier devotes a good proportion of the text to disarming one's opponent. These maneuvers look to me very similar to the movement of completion on the Spanish rapier tradition. I'll leave it to others with more knowledge of this tradition to comment further.

The text presents four exercises and two counter for the first two techniques. Each disarm technique involves parrying the opponent's attack while passing forward to grab his or her hilt or parrying the attack while slipping back then, once the opponent's blade has been controlled, advancing to grab the opponent's hilt.

## The First Prinse

Images 77-84	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the medium posture.	Start in the high posture.

Action and Disarm	Make a <i>maindroit</i> or thrust in fourth position.	Parry in fourth position slipping back the left foot. Immediately the attack is countered, advance the left foot and grab the lieutenant's hilt while keeping the sword aimed at his face.
Follow Up	Escape out of distance.	Pass forward into the medium posture.

### The Counter to the First Prinse

Images 85-88	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the medium posture.	Start in the high posture.
Action and Disarm	Make a <i>maindroit</i> or thrust in fourth position.	Parry in fourth position slipping back the left foot. Immediately the attack is countered, advance the left foot and grab the lieutenant's hilt while keeping the sword aimed at his face.
Follow Up	Pass forward with the left foot. Pass the left hand under the provost's weapon to grab the hilt and twist it away to the outside.	Each comes away with the other's sword.

### The Second Prinse

Images 89-94	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the low posture.	Start in the medium posture.
Action and Disarm	Make a <i>maindroit</i> or thrust in fourth position.	Parry in fourth position and withdraw the hilt to make a <i>renvers</i> .
Follow Up	As the provost parries the maindroit, step forward and grab the hilt. Thrust low to the provost's belly. Withdraw in possession of the provost's sword.	Provost loses sword.

### The Counter to the Second Prinse

Images 95-96	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the low posture.	Start in the medium posture.
Action and Disarm	Make a <i>maindroit</i> or thrust in fourth position.	Parry in fourth position and advances on the left foot to grab the lieutenant's hilt. Pass backwards out of distance.
Follow Up	The lieutenant loses sword.	

## The Third Prinse

Images 97-102	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the medium posture.	Start in the high posture.
Action and Disarm	Make a thrust in second position, passing forward with the right foot.	Parry in fourth position passing back the left foot.
Follow Up	Push the provost's sword to the right with the open left hand while preparing to thrust at the provost's face.	Provost flees in panic.

**Note:** images 103-104 shows the Provost performing the same technique.

## The Fourth Prinse

Images 97-102	Lieutenant	Provost
Stance	Start in the high posture.	Start in the medium posture.
Action and Disarm	Make a thrust in fourth position, passing forward with the right foot.	Parry in fourth position passing back the left foot and preparing to thrust at the lieutenant's face.
Follow Up	Cavazzione under the provost's sword to place the (false?) edge on the provost's arm while moving to the left the tip of provost's blade with the left hand. This sets up a nice opportunity in which any motion made by the provost only serves to cut himself.	Provost flees in panic.

**Note:** images 111-112 shows the Provost performing the same technique.

In all cases, the hilt of the opponent's weapon is twisted to the outside. This is similar to the movement of completion in Spanish rapier.

## Drawing the Sword

Henri de Saint Didier spends a number of pages describing three methods for drawing the sword at the start of an engagement. Each of his lesson exemplars starts with text which says "after having drawn the sword in one of the three ways." These methods are obviously important to what he teaches.

### Premier Desgainement

1. Feet together; hand on hilt
2. "Throw" right foot back then ...
3. ... draw into medium guard (hilt as high as shoulder).

Provost changes the last step to drawing into high guard. The left hand is held either before the face (for medium guard) or before the chest (for high guard).

## Second Desgainement

1. Feet together; hand on hilt
2. "Hold the right foot a little in the air" above footprint (2) "carrying the guard of the hilt as high as the shoulder"
3. Pass the sword above (around?) the head and "strongly extend" the arm into medium guard. (I assume the right foot gets planted at this stage.)

Provost changes the last step to drawing into high guard. The left hand is held either before the face (for medium guard) or before the chest (for high guard).

## Third Desgainement

1. Feet together; hand on hilt
2. Lift the right foot and hold it "a little in the air"
3. Draw into medium guard ("*faisant le premier desgainement*") with the hand in fourth position. The left hand is held behind. (I assume the right foot gets planted at this stage.)

What can we understand from the instruction to keep the right foot a little in the air ("*un peu à cartier en l'air*")? Surely this is not some form of Karate Kid crane stance with a sword?