

The French Art of Stick Fighting

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The humble stick is a universal weapon, known to every human culture. Probably, along with the rock, it was the first weapon known to humankind; chimpanzees have been known to employ tree branches as weapons, though admittedly without much style. Practitioners of Chinese gung fu traditions may call it a *gun*, while the Japanese refer to it as the *bo* or *jo*, depending on its length. More abstractly, the stick may substitute for a more technologically advanced weapon, such as kendo's "wooden sword," the *bokken*, standing in for the katana.

It goes without saying that European civilization has developed its own traditions of stick-fighting, whether for self-defense, for military training, as a process of acculturation and personal development, or as an agonistic sport—traditions that, in short, that participate in all the aspects of what we refer to as "martial arts." It was a weapon used by all social classes: The English populist hero Robin Hood's skill with the quarterstaff is the stuff of legend, but the use of sticks of various lengths also appears in the treatises of the fencing masters who taught the aristocracy, beginning with Fiore dei Liberi's *Flos Duellatorum*, written in northern Italy over 600 years ago. Sticks or cudgels, sometimes referred to as "wasters," were also used to train in the arts of knightly combat. More recently, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fencing masters and professors of the French kickboxing system known as Savate taught well-heeled gentlemen to use their walking sticks to defend themselves against the "Apache" street gangs that terrorized Parisian streets, while humble shepherds from the mountains of Portugal to arid boot of Italy to the rainy pastures of northern France were ready to use their traditional staves not only as a way of keeping their balance on rocky hillsides, but as means of defending their flocks and solving disputes.

I have been privileged to train in Europe with some of the representatives of living systems of both northern Italian and French stick fencing. The Italian system is not mine to describe, but for those willing to apply themselves thereto, I can recommend no better master than Cosimo Bruno, who teaches in Verona, Italy. The system he teaches seems, in my educated opinion, to be a direct descendent of the systems of two-handed sword that flourished throughout Europe up until Napoleon's exportation of the French Revolution's "modernization." (This similarity was also noted by the nineteenth-century fencing antiquarian Alfred Hutton.) In any case, Maestro Bruno is a martial artist of phenomenal—one is tempted to say frightening—skill and knowledge, as well as a gifted teacher. Anyone wishing to learn traditional Italian systems of combat should seek him out directly.

Therefore, instead of wasting my small store of eloquence in a vain attempt to analyze the Italian *bastone*, I will apply myself to describing, as best as I can, the techniques and methods of French stick-fighting in which I trained during my Fulbright grant to France from 2007–2008. Today, French *canne* may be described as an athletic and graceful game, incorporating jumps, body evasions, and low stances. Ideally, it is practiced with a spirit of *détente*, or relaxation: This is not a hard style of smashing and blocking, but something fluid, elegant, and lightening-quick. It is fully ambidextrous: the weapon may be shifted from hand to hand, and two weapons may be used.

The father of the art as it was practiced today was Maître Maurice Sarry, who codified and formalized it as a sporting system in the 1970s prior to its incorporation into the Federation de Savate Boxe Française. The system he founded seems to me to incorporate a paradox: At the same time as one recognizes that it is highly stylized and aesthetic, one can still recognize a real martial core of deadly efficacy, the utilization of universal principles of combat, and many techniques that are not only graceful, but extremely deceptive. Sarry later left the association he founded to collect and preserve French folk traditions of armed combat, such as the use of flails and pitchforks. The result was the Academie d'Escrime Aux Fouets and Bâtons. Maître Sarry died in 1994; it was with one of his students, Frank Betancourt, that I trained. I specifically selected this school because of the diversity of the weapons taught and the emphasis on traditional arts, and I was not disappointed.

The system in which I trained taught four weapons forms: cane (*canne*), walking stick (*bâton marche*), great stick (*grand canne*), and a form incorporating both kicks and strikes with a short, 50-centimeter long stick (the *petit baton*). (The Savate federation, by way of contrast, only uses the cane and walking stick.) It was explained to me that this system is not as formal as practitioners of modern Asian arts are accustomed; some techniques have only informal names, and some are not named at all. Rather than the orchestrated symphony that is a Japanese kata, techniques are strung together in a form of improvised jazz, being more a conversation between the players than the recital of a form.

The cane is a slender wand of 95 centimeters' length, optimally made of chestnut. Because of its light weight and flexibility, one does not have to fear injuring one's friends in the assault (that is, free play) provided that protective equipment is used (at the minimum, a fencing mask), yet the weapon is sturdy enough to be a realistic training tool. Training was not nearly as regimented as the karate dojos and fencing academies I am used to: I was shown the techniques, and when I had mastered these to a certain extent, we engaged in loose play, occasionally a rather alarming speed, without any protective equipment whatsoever save for trust in one another's sense of control. (It should be noted that competition bouts make use of modified fencing masks and body padding.) In these bouts, if I may call them that, we maintained a sort of unspoken "right of way," taking turns attacking and defending. (My impression is that, while the need to "chamber" a proper blow makes a stop-hit more difficult, one is not necessarily prohibited from executing one in competition.) If I ran into a problem with the technique, we would pause, work it out, and drill it. I found the playfulness and very French spirit of *détente*

found in this sort of disciplined-yet-relaxed style of training beneficial, and was able to let go of a lot of the tension that my body had stored up from years of Type A-personality, “hard”-style martial arts.

The guard in single cane is natural, the stick gripped at the end for maximum reach and held in front of the body at a slight angle. Because a cane is a blunt instrument, proper technique requires that blows be chambered: behind the body, either forehand or reverse, or behind the head. The permissible targets are the top of the head, the temples, and the leg below the shin. There are no attacks with the point, which, as a classically-trained saber fencer, somewhat went against my instincts to end an overly-elaborately composed series of feints with a decisive thrust to the throat. Defense is accomplished with right, left, high, and low parries, corresponding to saber parries of third, fourth, fifth, and prime, albeit with the stick held straight up and down and closer to the body. If the adversary’s blows are on-target, one need not worry about being struck in the hand, it is held well away from the lines of attack in the parry positions.

The distance in this weapon is ideally where one can strike without advancing one’s foot; much like boxing, the fight therefore tends to take a circular form, with both fighters remaining on the perimeter while attacking and evading. It should be noted that proper technique in striking the lower target is lower one’s entire body, bending from the legs, rather than merely leaning forward from the waist, as the latter technique both loses distance by creating an angle between the attacker’s arm and the target and exposes that back of the head to the adversary’s counterstrike. Again, artistic and athletic leaps, ducks, dodges, and the like are encouraged—with the caveat that one always makes a spinning jump to one’s inside.

Switching the cane between the right and left hands is encouraged; one ideally does this behind one’s back, or in a spin, to hide the action. Changing in such a manner, spinning beneath one’s arm to disguise one’s intentions, may not strike some as being very “martial,” but it can be very deceptive. Double cane is also used. This is a very fast form that maximizes one’s offense, allowing two blows to follow in quick succession, and is very hard to defend against. Unfortunately, I was not able to study this permutation as much as I would have liked.

The walking stick, which is generally 1.4 meters long, is a most deceptive weapon. It is held with both hands supinated, that is, with the thumbs facing one another. The weapon is held in a reverse guard on the right or left side of the body, depending on which hand is leading, for, like all of the art, the *bâton marche* is ambidextrous. If need be, one can also hold the cane in the middle to parry blows, that I was given the impression that this was more of a contingency defense. Otherwise, the parries are much the same as in the single cane, adding in saber *sixte*. All parries may be used, no matter which hand is forward; this means that sometimes your arms will be crossed.

Blows with the walking stick are struck by fully extending the arms while sliding the hands towards one another for maximum reach and power. The targets are the same as in single cane, though a thrust to the midsection is also used—though, again, it being that a

stick is a blunt instrument, one must “chamber” the thrust. A blow to the leg may be slipped by passing the leading leg behind the rear, or even leapt over. (There is also one particularly tricky return in which one “pushes” the attack through and then returns a blow to the temple.) Baton marche can be elegant at the same time it is remarkably deceptive: One can make circular manipulations of the cane in developing the attack, let go with one hand, change hands behind one’s head, and—my favorite—make a “helicopter” move in which the stick is carried to the other side of the body.

The 1.8-meter long *grand bâton* is manipulated in a series of *moulinets*, or circular blows. (*Moulinet* literally means “little windmill.”) In this, it is similar to the Italian *bastone*; however, the French weapon as codified by Maurice Sarry is 40 centimeters longer and, it seems to me, a great deal more simplified. Nonetheless, also like the Italian weapon, it is also not dissimilar to the two-handed sword. The parries are the same as the other weapons. To compensate for the weapon’s greater strength and impetus, the stance is lower and footwork is somewhat circular. It is gripped in two hands at the narrow end (the staves having some taper to them), so that the heavier end strikes with greater impact. True free play would require very sturdy protective equipment; we were always very careful when practicing with this weapon.

Given my background in karate and fencing, I found the short baton form extremely interesting. Three main kicks (*coups de pieds*) are used: A front kick; a crescent-kick like kick; and an oblique kick in which the kicking leg is chambered against the outside of the opposite knee. (Admittedly, the occasional side kick slipped in.) All of these correspond to similar kicks in savate. The crescent kick may also be delivered with an (inside) spin. There are several important rules to follow: While attacks can come from straight down, on the diagonal, or backhand, a forehand blow is never delivered, instead preferring to pass the stick to the other hand to make a backhand blow. Also, the unarmed hand always parries the adversary’s kicks, while his baton is parried with one’s own (one is often rapped on the knuckles in practice). Though it occurred to me that one could execute a number of effective and excruciatingly painful holds, presses, chokes, and joint locks with the short baton, there is absolutely no grappling allowed in this form—which is perhaps for the best, since our objective is not to harm our training partners.

While I feel that my karate and fencing background enabled me to pick up more of this elegant art than an untrained individual might have, and to incorporate it into my personal base of knowledge, I don’t profess to be an expert in Maurice Sarry’s system of French cane. If anything, I wish I’d had longer to train in the system. Nonetheless, I hold my time to have been well-spent, and heartily recommend that any visitor to France seek out a qualified instructor of this unique and beautiful martial art.

On the Web:

Academie de Escrime de Fouets et Bâtons: <http://www.ac-efb.com/>