

Backyard cutting

The open side upward diagonal cut - Problematic for some

The upward diagonal cut is difficult for some, myself included and its not made any easier by my lack of formal training. In fact it's taken me some time and the advice of a fair number of people to be able to get this particular cut down, to the point where it no longer feels awkward.

My main issue was that because of the way this particular cut moves from the right hand side to the left, the left arm ends up becoming restricted or bent at the elbow. This pushes it in towards the ribs and as a result of this it feels awkward and restrictive.

Through speaking with others I found that my problem wasn't unique. In fact it seemed that until I pointed it out, the majority of people who had this problem hadn't really noticed that there was anything wrong with their own technique. It was only when they tried to explain to me how to properly make the cut that they realised that they too had work to do in refining it. In retrospect this doesn't surprise me. I have found many times that if you find that you cannot adequately explain something to someone else, then the likelihood is that you don't understand it as well as you should do. I am often guilty of this, especially when it comes to things based around manual dexterity.

I'm hoping that the few pointers that I can give here will help anyone else experiencing the same problem, but you should know that this is simply what I've done myself and I have no formal training, just what I've gleaned from my own practice and the advice of my peers. These five main points may help, they may not. As they say, your mileage may vary.

1) The gap between your hands and how the length of the tsuka affects this.

If your hands are separated by too large a gap then you will find that your left hand is forced closer to your body during the cut because it always sits behind the right one. Make sure that your left hand is positioned on the bottom of the tsuka and then place your right hand at around two fingers width above it. Larger gaps between the hands do facilitate better leverage but impede flexibility. If you have a particularly long tsuka then on doing this, you will find that you have a large gap between the index finger of your right hand and the tsuba and you will need to do some fidgeting around to get a grip that feels best for you. I find that one fingers gap between the tsuba and your index finger is the most that is practical and any more than that and will make the sword feel unwieldy and more like an axe. The optimal length of the tsuka then, as you can see depends on the size of your hands. I used to have a tsuka of 12" but once I realised how much it impeded my practice I quickly became fond of much shorter ones. Having distinctly average sized hands, I find 10" is about right for me but of course everyone is different.

2) Make sure your grip on the sword is correct

The grip on the sword is very important if you want your cuts to feel more natural. When you grip the sword, you put most of the strength of the grip into your two smallest fingers with the last two fingers holding more loosely. The angle of the hands to the tsuka should be at around 45 degrees. These two points are true for both hands. Holding the sword straight out in front of you, roll your wrists inwards so that they sit above the tsuka as you look down onto it. All the stress, all the pressure of impact should now be sent up through the arms rather than twisting against your wrists. This will help to prevent injury and the wringing motion also benefits the consistency of your cuts and strengthens your grip. It feels weird at first but it feels more natural over time.

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3) Nice wide arcs

Don't be afraid of making large movements with the blade, this is the way that it is intended to be used, not tucked in against the body. The tip of the sword performs best when it is moving fast and the best way to make this happen without straining yourself is to let the sword do the work for you by employing its length and that of your arms.

The best way to practice these sort of arcing movements especially I find with this cut, is slowly. Making this motion in slow motion allows you to feel where your arms actually should be as you bring the blade around your body. You should use the full length of your right arm and feel where the left arm needs to be to best support that cut. This is another practice technique that feels very strange but I find if you can do this slowly then it will improve your performance when you try it faster.

4) Make sure you cut from your body as well as with your arms.

This cannot be overstated. When you do this cut, your body must turn with it. In fact to be fair your body is always supposed to be doing the majority of the work for you whatever the cut. Don't make the same mistake as me, of thinking that your arm muscles are going to be primarily important. They are not! If you are having problems with any cut, put down the sword and take the time to look at the way that you are moving your body.

I found that one method with this cut is to take a small step back with the left leg as you are lining up the sword. This causes your body to turn in the same direction and the blade then follows through that much easier. One of the reasons that this cut can feel tight or cramped is because you run out of room on the left hand side so by turning your body and allowing it to do part of the movement for you, you are reducing the distance that your arms have to move in order to facilitate the cut. Of course, this is not without its problems as it places the blade closer to your right leg. This shouldn't be a great issue however, just as long as you're careful, but many people like to err on the side of caution and I can't say that I blame them.

The way that most people do it is to simply take a step forward with the left leg and twist your body as you cut. This has the same effect of making sure that you aren't letting your arms do all the work. Not only does this mean that they don't have to move as far, but also importantly, it engages your entire core.

5) Stopping the blade.

Letting the blade carry on too far after the cut is, I think, another of those things that everyone who starts cutting does in the beginning. Unfortunately as we're often too focused on the separation of the target, it's very easy to train in this bad form until we don't even realise we're doing it. If we let the blade carry on too far, our ability to do multi cuts like doubles or returns, is impacted horribly. We also run the risk of pulling muscles and we don't have as much control as we should. With this particular cut, because of the restriction of movement on the left hand side, it's obviously beneficial to keep it as short as it needs to be, stopping as soon after the you pass through the target as possible. This takes practice of course and I think the best way to do this is with dry cutting. I know I bring up the benefits of dry cutting, or cutting without a target quite a lot but it's helped me immensely so it would be poor of me to not mention it here.

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So.. to close, everyone is going to approach their cutting slightly differently and this is an aspect that presents itself boldly in freestyle cutting. I've seen many different explanations of how to approach cutting and even though I haven't found 100% of it useful, I have always taken something away from what each person had to say and used it to improve my technique. I hope that someone will find something amongst what I have said here, similarly useful. Be safe.

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