

# Fighting for those of Small Stature

*By Centurion Romanus Vesperanius*

*I wrote the following piece to try and help fighters of my size throughout the Known World. Please forward this piece to any applicable list. Reading it may also help larger fighters understand smaller fighters better.*

*Centurion Romanus*

This essay is addressed to those who are of relatively short height (under 5'5") and of lighter weight (under 150 lb.). I decided to write this because it has come to my attention through my years in the Society that there is a stunning lack of information and technique for the fighter of small stature. I cannot count the number of people that have approached me saying that until they saw me fight they did not believe a smaller person had a chance on the field. I feel that this is due to the fact that the majority of fighters are big, burly guys. Never mind the fact that the Romans who conquered the majority of the Known World were considered tall at 5'3", today's Society fighting is based on a bigger person's mentality. To cut to the heart of the matter, a small stature person simply cannot do the same things someone twice their size and mass can do. On this same note, someone 6'4" cannot do what someone 5'4" can. I will take this time to admit that not every smaller fighter will be a "great" fighter, but then very few fighters of any kind ever become "great". With practice and diligence and dedication I believe any fighter of smaller stature can be as good or better than any average size fighter. Since the purpose of this essay is to give smaller stature fighters some hints on how to fight better I have decided to present it in the fashion I would teach a newer fighter. The first area is weapons and armor, second stance, third movement followed by a series of "essential" shots for the smaller fighter, and finally a few tips that don't fall into one of the other categories.

## Weapons and Armor

Your gear is one of the most important aspects of fighting. From your helm to your boots, it is important to have the right equipment for the job. For first time fighters I would recommend a helm that is fairly light and unadorned. When you make your helm (or have it made) pay particular attention to your vision. As a smaller person you are going to be looking slightly up more often than not. Until you learn to look at your opponent's body with your eyes, rather than tilting your head, your helm is going to pull your weight off backward. This can be minimized by including a clear path of vision slightly upward rather than just straight ahead. I would also recommend making sure you have plenty of air circulation in your helm. Having a bar faced helm or large breathing holes is a big plus.

Moving down the body I would suggest using as much leather for your armor as possible. Metal looks very pretty but weighs you down, is hot and costs more than other types of armor. Metal knees are one part of armor I do recommend including. I, and other shorter fighters I have talked to, have a chronic problem of being hit in the knee people try to overcompensate for height and swing too low. As we are smaller in stature than the normal fighter we have less natural "padding" than others. To even the odds I recommend using thigh protection of some sort. Leather with blue closed cell foam padding glued to it is very good. Leg armor does not restrict your movement if made properly and doesn't slow you down either. Being able to walk the day after practice is an encouragement to get you back out on the field next practice.

Boots! Get a pair that fit you well! Finding good fitting boots was the biggest problem I had with getting my armor together. Larger people have no idea how hard it is to find a really good set of fighting boots in a men's size 6 1/2. Lace up, buckle on, or slide on the important things to remember are making sure your foot doesn't slide side to side or front to back and that they don't weigh you down. For starters combat boots are O.K. but you will find you may want to move on to something that looks more period. NO NO NO to tennis shoes! They have terrible ankle support (like none) and look like tennis shoes. Lastly, make sure that your boots have good traction. One of the advantages slight fighters have is being able to stop on a dime, even in poor weather conditions. Don't give that advantage away by having slick soled boots.

Always wear a cup. Even female fighters. Nothing hurts worse than getting cupped by a 300 lb. fighter without a cup on. Trust me on this one.

Swords vary from person to person but a good rule of thumb is when grasping the handle of the sword the tip should just touch the ground. Beware of heavy rattan. You don't need to use a log to hit harder. With the low profile thrusting tips now available I will say use them if you want but don't over use them. I prefer to use a sword that is weighted towards the hilt. This allows the sword to do more of the work and allows for a quicker recall of the weapon.

The last item you will take onto the field is the shield. This is the most important piece of gear that you have. If your shield is not right for you nothing you do will increase your skill on the field. For slight fighters I recommend using a large shield. While round shield are period for some, they require quick reflexes, a long reach and fast feet. After becoming proficient with a large shield I would say to try one but not at the beginning. I would say to use Kites, coffins, Roman Cavalry and big heaters.

Whichever shield you decide to try, stick with it for at least a year. Each type of shield has to be hung and used differently requiring your body to retrain its responses to a new system of defense. Each type of shield has its advantages and disadvantages for the smaller fighter. Kites and coffins are long and protect your side and front well but leave your face more open to the slot shot. They also leave your head more open to the wrap shot if your opponent chooses to close. The Roman cavalry shield is a good all around shield but tends to leave the very top and upper sides of the head exposed due to the way the shield must be hung and the flat top edge. The heater is the best shield for protecting the upper body but lacks in leg protection. The standard heater measures 2' wide and 3' long through the center. The bottom half tapers to a rounded point. Whichever shield you decide to use stick with it for at least a year before deciding to move on.

I cannot overstate how important good fitting, comfortable armor is. If it is ill fitting or uncomfortable then you won't want to put it on and get out on the field to fight. Once you have your basic protection fit to your specifications you are ready to move on to your stance.

## Stance

After watching my brother slight fighters on the field, I have noticed that the most successful ones carry themselves in a similar manner. Being small is a definite advantage when it comes to a standing defensive stance. The most important part of your stance is how your body weight is distributed. The feet should be about 2 feet apart measuring from the center of the fore foot to the center of the back foot. The leading foot should be the shield foot. Point this toe at your opponent while keeping the rear foot at a 70-degree angle pointing away from your body. Keep the knees slightly bent. This should drop your body weight down through your groin area directly towards the ground between your feet. Next, hold you upper body erect. No slouching forward! If you want to lean, lean slightly backward out of the range of your opponent. Leaning forward destroys your balance, places your weight on your front foot, and keeps you from moving quickly.

Shield and sword position will vary from person to person according to what shots you like to throw and where you need extra protection. To begin with, the shield should be held with the forward edge splitting your body down the centerline. You will know you've found the right spot when you can see your opponent out of your sword side eye only. The front edge of the shield should be held about 12" away from the body. The bottom edge of the shield should be knee height or a little lower while the top edge of the shield should be even with the top of the helm. An important note here is to make sure the shield is hung so the weight is transferred down the arm and not all on the wrist. This will keep your arm from getting tired as quickly. With your shield in this position your entire shield side should be protected while you are in your standing guard.

The sword should be held in a defensive position to protect the sword side of the head. To do this, hold the sword so that the top of the hilt is even in height with the bottom of the shield basket. Next move the entire sword away from the shield to the side about 10". The business end of the sword should angle in front of the face towards the top edge of the shield as if you were making a tent. Don't rest the sword on the edge of the shield, but keep it about 1" from the surface. The entire sword should be cocked (or lean) slightly towards the face allowing you to throw shots without loading the sword first. This position should guard your face from the slot shot, protect your sword side head, and if held correctly, protect your arm from shots. If you find your sword arm is exposed, drop your arm about an inch or so to use the basket hilt as protection. For a small stature fighter a good stance and defense is the best friend they can have on the field. The reason that a good defense is important is that many larger fighters rely on their offense to win the battle. The majority

of large fighters I have watched will attack a smaller fighter in an initial flurry and then step back to survey the damage they've done. They tend to get frustrated after a few of these bouts. It is then that the smaller fighter takes the offensive. By NO means am I suggesting that the smaller fighter stand their ground and take the attack directly on their defense, but a well built defense will certainly confound your opponent and keep you alive long enough to strike back at your opponent. In short, regardless of how good your offense is, if you don't live long enough to use it then it doesn't matter.

Being able to move quickly is a key part of stance. Movement keeps our opponents from targeting gaps as easily and opens gaps in their defense. Not to mention it tires them out. To stay as mobile as possible keep your weight evenly distributed on the balls of your feet. Try not to put too much weight on the front foot, as this will effectively keep you planted for that critical moment as you shift weight to move. Too much weight on the back foot allows you to be easily pushed about and keeps you off balance.

This latter problem is the one most commonly encountered by slight and smaller fighters since we tend to fight while moving backwards. Try to move in an arc towards your opponents shield side, never in a straight line backwards. Since smaller fighters are generally more nimble than larger fighters, moving in an arc disrupts their flow of motion while not affecting yours. The tighter the arc, the better. This type of movement does several things for you. By moving to the shield side, right-handed fighters are protected by both their and their opponent's shield. Smaller fighters also "disappear" from a larger fighters view by ducking behind a larger fighter's shield. Moving in an arc keeps a larger fighter from using their weight and height to their advantage. A final advantage small stature fighters have is better footing in poor weather due to a lower center of gravity. Try to make a larger fighter move as much as possible if the footing is poor or wet, gravity likes them better. Don't be afraid to use this advantage when you can. Again, I cannot over stress the importance of good movement for the smaller fighter; it is the difference between winning and losing.

## Essential Shots!

I am a big believer in basics. Before working on any "specialty" shots, have the five basic shots down pat. Those five shots are: Shield side head, Slot, sword side head, Shield side leg and sword side leg. If you become proficient at these five shots you will win 90% of your fights. All of these shots should be thrown in the same manner to let the sword do the work rather than your arm. The sword moves through many stages during a shot. To simplify how to throw the shot I will describe the sword's motion step by step. Hold the sword hilt firmly but not too tightly. Imagine you are holding a hard-boiled egg you don't want to crack. Next, throw your shots from a pre-cocked position as I mentioned earlier. This gives power without having to telegraph the shot. Throw the blow using your upper body and shoulder, NOT your wrist and forearm. This allows you to throw many more blows before getting tired. Directly before you blow lands allow your wrist to slightly loosen or break. This gives your blow greater power and a whipping motion. By breaking your wrist you also get the most "bounce" or rebound that your sword will allow. This bounce is helpful in recalling the sword into a defensive position or to move on to the next shot of a combination.

If you find that you are having trouble getting enough power into your blows, there are three ways to get additional power into your shots. First of these is to only hold the sword with the thumb and fore and middle fingers when starting the blow. Directly before the blow lands grasp the handle quickly with your last two fingers. This puts a great deal of power and speed (or snap) into finishing the blow. This can also be accomplished by adding a "trigger" or leather circular strap to the handle of the sword. The trigger should hold the fore and middle fingers. The trigger also helps with the control of the sword. This last can also be accomplished by carving your handle to better fit your grip.

A second way to gain power is to put you hips into the shot. By this I mean rotating your upper body into the shot as it is thrown. This gives great amounts of power but if used improperly will telegraph all of your shots.

Third is to step into the shot as it is thrown. To do this, set up for the shot and take a half step forward as the shot is thrown. I rarely use this method and hesitate to recommend its use except on the thickest of fighters. By stepping into the shot, all of the fighters weight is behind the blade as well as the power generated by the arm throwing the blow. All in all this could injure someone if it lands unimpeded. A second reason to not step into the shot is that it opens your defense and places your weight on your front foot leaving you immobile if your opponent charges after blocking

the blow. Lastly, stepping forward is a sure sign to your opponent that you are going to attack.

Remember, the power of the blow comes from the technique of the blow rather than the muscle behind the sword. Relying on brute strength alone will tire your arm out leaving you without an offense.

The longer you fight; you will identify which shots work best for you. Find what you like and use it, but again, don't over use it. Only when you are comfortable with the basics should you move on to the more advance shots. Practice your jumping shots as well. Some may laugh at the beginning but changing your angle of attack suddenly will take you opponent off guard. The next series of shots to learn would be: The Wrap, Shield side body, Center body (or gut) shot, Shield hooks, Sword hooks and the Scorpion. These add variety to your offense and will keep your opponent guessing. Don't be afraid to try something new or a "big fighter trick", I guarantee they will not expect it from you. You will use the Scorpion shot the least unless it is against someone on his or her knees or another smaller fighter, but knowing it will help you guard against it being used on you. Various and Sundry

The most difficult fight I encounter is one against another small stature fighter. We become so accustomed to fighting people two feet taller and 150 pounds heavier we forget how to fight someone our own size. I compare it to two left handed fighters on the field. My advice is: Stick to the basics, don't attack the slot or top of the head and use your defense. Resign yourself to a long fight and enjoy!

An important note is the attitude you may encounter while on the field. Some larger fighters feel differently about smaller fighters than about someone their own size. Including how hard they feel someone should be hit or how hard the smaller person has to hit them. Don't let others call your blows for you. If the shot is good by YOUR standard call it, otherwise let them know it wasn't good. They aren't in your armor so they don't know how the shot felt. This tends to be a common problem with smaller fighters. Many larger fighters tend to feel that since we are not as big as them our shot calibration should be lower. If someone calls your shot for you, gently remind them this is a game of chivalry and that you are quite capable of calling your own blows.

Finally, have fun and enjoy yourself on the field. This is something we do for fun and is a hobby. Chivalry first and foremost to our opponents and ourselves on and off the field. Just because you are small of stature doesn't mean you have to watch all the fun from the sidelines!

Centurion Romanus Vesperanius  
Ansteorra