



STRIKE FIRST, AND STRIKE LAST

Fundamental tactical methods of De Campo 1-2-3 Original,
and the genius of Jose Diaz Caballero

By: Robert J. Parkes



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De Campo 1-2-3 Original is a Filipino Martial Art developed in 1925 by Jose Diaz Caballero, when he was only eighteen years of age. To put this historic moment in perspective, the De Campo system was founded just a few years after the establishment of the Labangon Fencing Club (1920-1930), recognised as the first-ever public Arnis/Eskrima club in the Philippines. It is said that Jose Caballero developed his system by watching and analysing the performance of his local Cebuano eskrimadors in competitive duels. Over the founder's lifetime, the De Campo system would gain a fearsome reputation as an effective stickfighting system, largely a result of Jose Caballero's own notoriety as an undefeated champion of numerous documented *juego todo* ("anything goes game") public stick-fighting matches.

While Jose Caballero undoubtedly had personal attributes and qualities that made him stand above his peers in the competitive arena, his system is replete with tactics that are sure to enhance the combative effectiveness of any eskrimador who invests time in their practice. However, one of the things that gives De Campo 1-2-3 Original its unique tactical expression, and that reveals something of Jose Caballero's genius, is the way many of the tactics layered into his system contribute towards a single strategic outcome to "strike first, and strike last, even when your opponent initiates the attack".ⁱ

The *Juego Todo* Crucible

Before exploring some of the core concepts of De Campo 1-2-3 Original, it is worth noting something about the context in which its tactical concepts were developed. *Juego todo* matches have often been sensationalised as 'death matches' because the combatants fought with real sticks and no protective armour. In fact, one of the most common names for the Filipino Martial Arts (FMA), *Arnis*, is based on the Spanish word *arnés*, carrying with it the implicit suggestion that the arnisador's stick was both their sword and their armour.ⁱⁱ During the lifetime of the founder, *juego todo* matches were often organised 'no holds barred' stick-fighting competitions held during town fiestas, in which locals would gamble on which eskrimador (or arnisador) was likely to come out victorious.

In practical terms, *juego todo* matches functioned as public stick-fighting tournaments or duels, and Jose Caballero must have observed that winning was probable if you could be the first to land one or more devastating strikes, paralleling the kind of 'first blood' sword fighting duels of Early Modern Europe. This duelling aspect of FMA is present in its second most common name, *Eskrima*, which is the Filipino pronunciation of the Spanish word *esgrima* meaning 'fencing', and in a similar vein carries the implication that the eskrimador can wield their stick as if it were a sword. Serious injury was an ever-present possibility during a *juego todo* duel, so a successful first strike certainly provided a tactical advantage, leading Jose Caballero to warn his students that if a stick-fight went longer than three seconds, one should be careful.

It was in the crucible of the *juego todo* arena that Jose Caballero undoubtedly tested and refined his system, which he then shared with those lucky enough to be accepted as his students. Among his more famous students were Ireneo 'Eric' Olivaides (founder of Eskrima De Campo JDC-IO), Edgar Sulite (founder of LAMECO Eskrima), Paterno P. Zabate (founder of 1-2-3 De Campo Heneral) and his sons, Manuel 'Mawe' Caballero and Salvador 'Badur' Caballero. Since the untimely passing of his father (Grandmaster Mawe) and his Uncle (Grandmaster Salvador), Master Jomalin Caballero has assumed his place as *Bininlan* (heir to the system), and is supported in preserving and spreading the art by the international training director, Maestro Paolo Pagaling, and a growing world-wide network of qualified *Magtutudlo* (Instructors).

What's in a name?

There have been many theories proposed for why Jose Caballero named his art De Campo 1-2-3 Original. Among older eskrimadors, *De Campo* (literally translated as 'of the field') has often been used as a synonym for *Largo Mano*, the 'long-hand' style of Eskrima that tends to use distancing as a defensive tool, while seeking to 'defang the snake' (destroy the weapon hand of the opponent) before executing a barrage of combination counterstrikes. This description seems reasonably apt when discussing De Campo 1-2-3 Original, so long as one also understands that *Largo Mano* does not only refer to fighting 'at range' but is also suggestive of ways of manipulating measure (the distance between you and your opponent) through clever use of striking angles, footwork, and body movement to maintain hitting distance with the last 3 inches of the stick, even when in close proximity.

What sense then are we to make of the 1-2-3 epithet in the art's title? It has been reported that Jose Caballero described his art as being as easy to learn as 1-2-3.ⁱⁱⁱ The core curriculum itself is also divided into three stages: Primary/Elementary, High School, and College. Perhaps more importantly, we also know from stories Edgar Sulite told his students,^{iv} that the Grandmaster would wait for a count of three seconds when facing an opponent in a duel. If the opponent attacked within that time, Jose Caballero would explode into action with his own intercepting counterstrike (his preferred option). However, if his opponent had not attacked by the time he had completed his *uno-dos-tres* count, Jose Caballero would launch his own non-telegraphic lightning fast attack, usually structured in three-strike combinations,^v aimed at taking the opponent by surprise. I'll address the triple-strike pattern a little later.

Jose Caballero's 1-2-3 tactical formulae seems to have been inspired, at least in part, from his penchant for Western gunslinger movies. He is known to have likened his system to the art of "the quick draw".^{vi} So, his goal was to out-draw his opponent, whether his opponent moved first or not. This idea of the fast draw is also noticeably supported by the system's signature hanging guard type stances, in which the tip of the stick points towards the ground in low *abierta* and low *serrada* guard positions. These stances not only allow the weapon arm to relax, facilitating fast non-telegraphic movement, they also work to bait the opponent, appearing to present the 'unprotected' head of the De Campo stylist as a target, especially when encroaching on the opponent's space by combining the hanging guard with a forward lean.

Striking to Kill a Snake

Jose Caballero has been quoted as saying: *Ingon ana ang mobunal. Morag mopatay ug halas nga buot mopaak nimo* (“That is how you strike. Like killing a snake that wants to bite you.” Authors’ translation), suggesting the importance of speed, timing, power, and precision, if one is to strike effectively. There is a visible and experiential whip-like action to the strikes in De Campo, something that works extremely well when the weapon of choice is an impact-weapon like the stick. Anyone who lives in a country where they have to defend themselves against poisonous serpents will know that a fast whip-like action is necessary if you are going to break the back of a snake. Together with the idea of the fast draw, the concept of striking like you want to kill an attacking snake, can be seen to form the strategic core of De Campo 1-2-3 Original, and finds expression in a host of tactical concepts embedded within the art’s fundamental techniques. Jose Caballero set out these techniques in a ‘lesson plan’ structured, as noted earlier, into three levels that mirrored the institution of modern public education: Primary/Elementary, High School, and College. This ‘lesson plan’ forms the basis of practice in the system. The curriculum is mostly centred on single stick methods (though many have application to the *pinuti* sword), with High School being the exception, focusing predominantly on double stick methods. Without going into the specifics of all the techniques in the system, it is worth noting the principles in play, that start to reveal the tactical genius of the founder.

Half-Strike / Full Strike Combinations are Primary

The fundamental techniques of the Primary curriculum each involve different ways of combining an initial half-strike, with a follow-up full strike. In De Campo, a half-strike makes contact with the target, but does not pass through it. A full-strike passes through the target, and may start and end on the same side, even if it crosses the centreline (as is seen in a *Redondo* technique); or commences on one side of the body and terminates on the opposite side. The method of combining the strikes varies, and includes: (1) sticking on impact with the half-strike, then pulling or drawing to perform a second strike on retraction; (2) bouncing back from the target on impact with the half-strike, then pulling the weapon through the target along the same trajectory as the initial strike, to perform a second strike without retracting into a guard position between strikes; and (3) bouncing back from the target on impact with the half-strike, then conserving the momentum of the bounce to power a *Redondo* (circular) follow-up strike, facilitated by flipping the wrist. These techniques are arguably built on a specific tactical insight, that half-strikes often allow for a faster recovery between strikes, and thus provide an opportunity to shorten the time between initial contact and the follow-up.

The Triple Strike Combination is Elementary

Signalling its importance in the system, the Grandmaster called the elementary techniques ‘De Campo Original’ and ‘Redondo y Redonda De Campo Original’. The De Campo Original technique has been described as a half-strike followed by an X-strike.^{vii} However, another way of understanding the pattern is *half-strike / full-strike / full-strike*. It is practiced from both *serrada* (closed) and *abierta* (open) guard positions. The initial half-strike and its

immediate follow-up *redondo* (round or circular strike) are often performed as one motion, giving the appearance of a single strike. The half strike is aimed at the hand or elbow of the opponent's attacking limb (though it may also be executed in the fashion of a *payong* or umbrella block) coupled with an immediate follow-up counter, and final finishing strike, following the formula of *intercept-counter-strike*. Alternatively, the half-strike may be executed as a strike that is designed to draw an opponent's counter, placing their hand in the perfect position for one's own immediate counter, which is then coupled with a follow-up finishing strike, in an *initiate-counter-strike* formula (which is sometimes described as 'fake-counter-strike' though the fake should not be devoid of intent to make contact).

An additional method called *Hagad Hubad*, is the sole single stick technique at the High School level, and involves bouncing back from the target on impact with the half-strike, then flipping the wrist to perform a second half strike, then flipping the wrist again to perform a final full-strike. The wrist motions involve switching between a *hayang* (supine) and *kulob* (prone) position of the hand. When fighting in extreme close range, this same *Hayang-Kulob* switching method is used in combination with the stick and pull motion described earlier. The *Hagad Hubad* pattern can be described as *half-strike / half-strike / full-strike* and more-or-less operates as a variation of the De Campo Original technique.

What each of these fundamental striking techniques provide is a way of combining strikes that does not require the complete retraction of one's weapon into a guard position between strikes. Instead, the bounce and wrist flipping methods serve to re-cock the weapon while it remains between you and your opponent. The bouncing method that powers many of these techniques also serves as a rhythm disrupting method, allowing two strikes to occur within a beat-and-a-half, instead of the standard two-beat timing that the opponent would expect. Because the weapon does not have to be retracted to be re-cocked, micro-seconds are shaved off the time between strikes.

Pikpik: The Signature Bicep Tap

When encountering De Campo for the first time, what is likely to draw your attention is the bicep tapping movement that accompanies strikes that start in the *abierta* (open) guard and finish in the *serrada* (closed) position. This rather loud bicep tapping manoeuvre is called *pikpik* (pat or tap). It's purpose can remain esoteric unless one begins to practice the striking routines at speed. The faster one moves, the more obvious it becomes that the *pikpik* action provides a fulcrum around which a striking arm wraps, similar to what happens with one's torso when using a nunchaku. This accelerates the motion of the stick, particularly at its striking tip, creating more of an oval whipping arc. It simultaneously provides an interrupting pivot point for the weapon arm to 'bounce' off, sending the stick back towards the opponent at a speed that is much faster than can be achieved without the *pikpik*. Thus, one of the key functions of the *pikpik* is to again shave micro-seconds off the successive follow up strikes, increasing the De Campo stylist's overall strike-rate. By accelerating the stick's motion, the *pikpik* also has the effect of disrupting the cadence of the De Campo stylist's strikes, encouraging a broken rhythm that can be used to break the opponent's timing. The *pikpik* creates a bouncing action off the practitioner's body, in the same way the half-strike combinations described earlier bounce off the opponent's weapon or body, giving De Campo a visible and subjectively-experienced pulsating aesthetic.

Paspas: Rapid Stomping Footwork

De Campo 1-2-3 Original has a number of footwork methods, beyond the step and slide 'Caballero' footwork (actually called *dakin-as* in the original system), Punong Guro Edgar Sulite incorporated into LAMECO Eskrima. Jose Caballero also incorporated such methods as *kinto* (tiptoe) that facilitates greater reach and is part of the art's *Largo Mano* arsenal, and a unique kind of stomping footwork called *paspas* (rapid). Combined with the striking methods of De Campo, *paspas* works to mess with the opponent's distance perception, break their timing by breaking your own rhythm, allowing micro adjustments in range (while staying grounded in the pocket), and facilitating smooth direction changes as required. It is combined with the characteristic square stance of De Campo, which allows your alive hand to strike or push the opponent using a *tukmod* (shoving) technique, while still being able to hit with your weapon. Combatively, *paspas* emerges in bursts, rather than continuously, which would expend significant energy. Interestingly, Master Jomalin has explained that it was considered essential for any student of Jose Caballero's to practice the curriculum with *paspas* if they were preparing for *juego todo*, in much the way a boxer would skip rope to build light footwork and stamina. *Paspas* was a key feature of training at the Specialization stage, which, still following his public education metaphor, operates like a university Master's degree beyond the 'graduate' level of the College curriculum.

Extending reach

In addition to the methods already covered, De Campo 1-2-3 Original is also recognisable by two specific striking mechanics that, like the *kinto* footwork already mentioned, extend the reach of the practitioner. Both are related to stick angle. Wherever possible, De Campo 'flattens' the strikes, so the downward diagonal strikes in the system are more horizontal than is typical in other systems. This is not a rigid rule. However, it is a noticeable aesthetic in experienced De Campo stylists. Likewise, De Campo allows the wrist to cast forward in the strikes, breaking the ninety-degree stick-to-wrist angle that is often the default position in FMA systems. As a matter of simple geometry, flattening the strikes and casting the wrist provides the De Campo practitioner with greater reach and timing advantages.

Conclusion: The Genius of Jose Caballero

Jose Caballero was not only a great fighter himself, but clearly had found ways to embed his combative insights into the fundamental techniques of his system. However, this was not done in some random fashion. A careful exploration of his system reveals that his true genius was the layering of multiple tactical methods that all facilitated the development of a capacity to 'strike first, and strike last'. Each of the methods touched upon in this article, provide the De Campo practitioner with tactical advantages in terms of either speed, timing, or range-control. They allow the eskrimador to initiate or intercept with speed, and many of the tactics disrupt the timing of the opponent through the clever use of broken rhythm. Like boxing, De Campo 1-2-3 Original starts with a small set of striking techniques, and just like boxing, the striking methods of De Campo can be sequenced into an almost infinite series of combinations. Embedded in these fundamental methods are tactical insights of the founder,

just waiting for the dedicated practitioner to find as they continue to practice and explore the system.

Studying De Campo 1-2-3 Original

Thanks to the generosity and hard work of Maestro Paolo Pagaling and Bininlan Jomalin Caballero, the system can now be studied via an online course: <https://decampo123.org>

If you happen to live in Australia, or just want to make contact with the author, his contact details are available on the Kali Newcastle Filipino Martial Arts Academy website: <https://kali.com.au>

About the Author

Robert Parkes is an Associate Professor of History Education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He began his martial arts training in 1980 at the age of 14, and has instructor credentials in Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Martial Arts. His first exposure to Filipino Martial Arts was through seminars with Guro Dan Inosanto in 1982, and later received rank in Modern Arnis (Ernesto Presas lineage). He is a qualified *Magtutudlo* (Instructor) of De Campo 1-2-3 Original under Maestro Paolo Pagaling and Master Jomalin Caballero; and a qualified *Manunudlo* (Instructor) of Bernas Estocadas under Grandmaster William Bernas and Manunudlo Paolo Pagaling. He also teaches a supplementary and eclectic Kali Combatives program, and is a student of the Afro-Brazilian art of Capoeira.

ⁱ Gould, D. E. (2014). *LAMECO Eskrima: The legacy of Edgar Sulite*. Tambuli Media, p.15.

ⁱⁱ It is worth noting that while the term *arnés* comes from the same root as 'harness' in English, and referred originally to the armour of a knight (who were mounted warriors) and is now reserved for something we just put on a horse, it could also be applied as a term referring to the weapons carried by the *caballero* (knight). This meaning lingers in Iberian colonies. It is common to hear Filipinos call their stick an arnis; and in Portuguese colonies like Brazil, sticks, particularly in the machete dance-fighting art of *Maculelê*, are often referred to as *esgrima*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucero, R. (March 14, 2018). What's with 1-2-3. Blog post: <https://decampo123.org/whats-with-1-2-3/>

^{iv} Gould, D. E. (2014). *LAMECO Eskrima*, p. 8.

^v This was noted in Dowd, S. K. (2006). Grandmaster Jose D. Caballero. *Filipino Martial Arts Digest (Special Issue: Legends of the Filipino Martial Arts)*, pp. 4-5.

^{vi} Dowd, S. K. (2006). Grandmaster Jose D. Caballero. *Filipino Martial Arts Digest (Special Issue: Legends of the Filipino Martial Arts)*, pp. 4-5.

^{vii} Lucero, R. (March 14, 2018). What's with 1-2-3.