

# The Three Wrestlings: A Complete Grappling Subsystem



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# Introduction

Mixed among the multitude of grappling techniques in the various *Fechtbücher* you will find three with numbers rather than names: The *drei Ringen* or the Three Wrestlings. These techniques come from the techniques of Master Ott as published in Ringeck's *Commentaries*. To me, the *drei Ringen* represent the apex of medieval grappling; they demonstrate a complete subsystem of grappling buried within the whole and they contain all of the important principles necessary to understand the art.

Every time you attempt to apply a lock or throw you're leading your opponent in some direction – usually the direction he was going originally or at right angles to that



The First Wrestling from Codex Wallerstein fol. 66v

direction. If you're quick and your opponent is unprepared this can be enough, but it sometimes happens that your opponent will have the skill, reflexes and/or presence of mind to stop and resist what you're doing. What do you do then? The masters tell us to always meet strength with weakness and weakness with strength, so you don't want to get into a contest of muscle to see if you can force your throw or lock in spite of your opponent's resistance, you want to go with his force to use his own strength against him.

One way your opponent can resist is by stepping back with his lead foot to step out of an attack you make; one of the most important *Fechtbücher*, *Gladiatoria*, calls this action The Change (*Gladiatoria*, fol. 45r), and gives us several techniques to use against an opponent who uses it.

While this is only one kind of response out of several your opponent can use, I have chosen this term to represent the entire concept, to wit: transforming one technique into another to match your opponent's resistance whether he steps back as in a literal Change or just pulls back with his arm when you try to straighten it for an arm bar. This is a central theme of the Three Wrestlings.

The First Wrestling is a lever-action throw in which you drive your opponent backward (probably using a *Mordstöße* to break his balance) while lifting his leg to throw him. Having practiced it for many years, I can assure you it is fast, simple and very effective. Leaving aside the Second Wrestling for a moment, the Third Wrestling is a forward trip in which you throw your opponent over your leg to his front corner. So the First Wrestling drives your opponent backward while the Third Wrestling drives him forward, or, to put it another way, you use the First Wrestling when your opponent moves backward (either by design or because you've caused him to) whereas the Third does just the opposite.

The Second Wrestling is an action from The Change: when you attempt to apply the

First Wrestling and your opponent backs out of it you react by following after him with another First Wrestling but to the other side of the body. This is precisely analogous to the *Nachreisen* principle done from the bind that we learn in the German longsword material. You stay “in the bind” and move with your opponent as he reacts to your actions.

The system doesn’t end there, however. Just as your opponent can step back from your First Wrestling, he can also resist it by pressing forward, and from this Change you smoothly convert your First Wrestling into a Third Wrestling, throwing him in the direction of his resistance. Likewise, if you attempt the Third Wrestling and your opponent resists by pulling back from your throw you smoothly convert it into the First Wrestling. Unlike the Second Wrestling, these two actions from The Change aren’t named by Master Ott, but we might term them the Fourth and Fifth Wrestlings respectively.

But it’s not enough to be able to throw an opponent, you also have to be able to counter any technique he might use against you. Fortunately, we’ve been given counters to the two primary throwing action of the *drei Ringen*, so I’ve included these here as well.

Thus, we see that this represents a *system* of grappling concepts wherein once you start your play your opponent really has no good responses to make unless you make a mistake (such as not being aggressive and quick in your execution) and yet there are really only two primary throws in the group. It’s brilliant. I urge you in the strongest term to study this sequence of techniques most closely and to practice them above all others.



The Third Wrestling from  
Talhoffer 1467 pl. 95

## THE TEXT OF THE DREI RINGEN:

### The First Wrestling

The first entrance to wrestling: lead your lower arm over his upper arm in front of his neck, and the other arm in the hollow of the knee. This works for both sides.

### The Second Wrestling

A counter: Exchange the hand that is above, and grabbing him in the front at the neck, with the other hand on his leg. If you can't achieve the first wrestling, then change both hands so that one is at his neck and the other is at his leg. This works for both sides. This break is called the leg break at the arm.

### The Third Wrestling

Strike your lower arm over his, seize also with the second hand and shift the foot of the same side to the rear and throw him in front of you on his face; this works for both sides. Or else seize with both hands together, pull him down by the neck and step behind him with both feet.

These are the Three Wrestlings. One can execute these from the *Zulauffend* (rushing-in) on both sides, and also the counter techniques from them. (Ringeck ff. 68r-69r)



### THE FIRST WRESTLING

Matthew and Hugh stand in guard in the top picture; Hugh will seize the *Vor* and attack in this case, but, of course, this is only one way of using this technique.

Seeing his opportunity, Hugh explodes forward, driving off of his back leg for a long passing step; his step should place his left foot beside or slightly behind Matthew's front foot and to the outside of it. At the same time, Hugh applies a *Mortstöße* by slamming a Hammerfist blow into Matthew's throat. This will serve to break Matthew's balance and ability to resist. Hugh also grabs the back of Matthew's knee from the inside with his right hand.



In the bottom picture Hugh moves his back leg up slightly and then, using both legs plus the strength of his right arm, lifts Matthew straight up and back while pushing firmly with his left arm against Matthew's throat. Done correctly, both of Matthew's feet will leave the ground and the back of his head will slam into the ground, possibly breaking his neck.



This technique must be done with explosive speed and power. It should be used against an opponent who is stationary or pulling back slightly.



### ARMBAR COUNTER TO THE FIRST WRESTLING

In the top picture Matthew begins to apply the First Wrestling, but while he gets Joe's leg off the ground, he hesitates, giving Joe a chance to react by applying strength to weakness.

In the middle picture Joe stamps his foot down, countering Matthew's attack and driving his weight forward. At the same time, he grabs Matthew's wrist and begins to pull it straight.

In the bottom picture Joe places his foot directly in front of Matthew's leg and rotates his body ninety degrees to his right as he completes the action of pulling Matthew's arm straight and slams his palm into Matthew's elbow to complete the Straight Armbar.



While the counter seems to go directly against your opponent's strength, that isn't the case. In fact, by turning to your right you actually apply power at right angles to your opponent's attack. The addition of a *Mordstöße* would also help greatly; for example, you could use a Straight Punch to the head as you set your foot down, or you could stomp on your opponent's foot, or both.

This techniques comes from *Gladiatoria* fol. 46r.





**FROM THE CHANGE:**  
**THE SECOND WRESTLING**

If you aren't quick enough when applying the First Wrestling your opponent may try to escape by stepping straight back as shown in the top and middle pictures.

If he does this, you need to apply the principle of *Nachreisen* to follow after him *Indes* with another First Wrestling as shown in the two bottom pictures. Since he's moving back to escape you he will already be off balance to the North so this is a very powerful technique.

The key is to move *Indes* – instantly – as your opponent moves as if you were tied together, and to do that you must be careful to *Fühlen* or feel the bind between you to sense his action; think of it as “acting with” rather than “reacting to” his movement.

The Second Wrestling is identical to the First Wrestling, just applied from The Change, so it has no stand-alone version as the First and Third Wrestlings do.





### THE THIRD WRESTLING

In the top picture Matthew reaches for Hugh, who displaces the grab with a circular motion while starting to step in with his right leg.

In the middle picture Hugh converts his displacement into a scooping motion to reach up over Matthew's shoulder as he completes his step, placing his right foot in front of and against Matthew's front leg.

In the bottom-left picture Hugh hooks Matthew's shoulder and then grabs his own hand so as to use the strength of both arms to pull Matthew against his chest. At the same time, Hugh steps back slightly with his left foot.

In the bottom-right picture Hugh rotates his body and pulls with his arms to throw Matthew over his leg.

This technique works best against an opponent moving South, either to attack, as shown here, or because you've pushed him North and he reacts by resisting South.

If you are unable to grab over your opponent's shoulder because he holds his head in tight you can also apply this technique by grabbing around your opponent's head.







### LEG-LIFT COUNTER TO THE THIRD WRESTLING

In the top picture Matthew begins to apply the Third Wrestling.

When he steps in front of Hugh's leg Matthew wasn't aggressive enough about pulling Hugh in to his chest which gives Hugh an opportunity to react.

Hugh lifts his right arm over Matthew's head, striking him in the throat with a Hammerfist as he does so. This *Mordstöße* gives him time to act and helps to drive Matthew backward. At the same time, Hugh pivots on the balls of his feet to face the rear and reaches down to grab the back of Matthew's knee from the inside while bending his knees. Hugh then straightens his legs while lifting with his left hand and pushing with his right to drive Mathew backwards onto the ground.

This technique comes to us from Talhoffer 1467 pl. 208.





**FROM THE CHANGE:**  
**THE FIRST WRESTLING TO THE THIRD WRESTLING**

In the top picture Hugh begins to apply the First Wrestling, but he's not aggressive enough because Matthew begins to resist his attack by driving forward in the middle picture.

Hugh knows to react to strength with weakness, so he goes with Matthew's force. In the bottom-left picture Hugh pulls back just enough to step in front of Matthew's leg while he begins to encircle Matthew's arm with his own. He then grabs his hand to yank Matthew against his chest and rotates his body to throw Matthew with the Third Wrestling.

You can begin see how the Three Wrestlings work to form a complete system; if you apply the First Wrestling and your opponent backs out you follow after him with the Second Wrestling; if he resists by moving forward you go with him again to apply the Third Wrestling.





**FROM THE CHANGE:  
THE THIRD WRESTLING TO THE FIRST WRESTLING**

In the top picture Hugh has begun to apply the Third Wrestling but was insufficiently aggressive so in the middle picture Matthew resists Hugh's attack by pulling back.

Hugh knows to react to strength with weakness, so he steps back behind Matthew's leg while swinging his right arm around in a clockwise circle that will end in a Hammerfist strike to Matthew's throat.

In the bottom-right picture Hugh applies the First Wrestling to finish the play.

This play completes the set of techniques of the Three Wrestlings. We've seen the two primary techniques, a backward throw called the First Wrestling and a forward throw called the Third wrestling, then a transition from each (I'm not sure why the Second wrestling got its own name and the transition for the First to Third and vice-versa didn't) in case your opponent successfully resists you. We've also seen the correct way to counter each of the three Wrestlings. Study this set of techniques carefully; they represent the best of *der Ringen*.



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