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10 Questions with Jeannette Acosta-Martinez



Maestro **Jeannette Acosta-Martínez** is a traditional master of arms, teaching classical and historical fencing. Maestro Acosta-Martínez is on the Board of Directors of the Association for Historical Fencing, was one of the original founding members of the International Masters at Arms Federation and is married to fencing master **Ramón Martínez**. In 2009 she created a three-volume instructional DVD on the French school of small-sword, *L'École Française: A Practical and Combative Guide to the French Small-sword (Palpable Hit Productions)*. For more information on the Martinez Academy, please visit their website by clicking on the above image.

10 Questions

How did you get your start in Fencing (& how did you gravitate to the small-sword in particular)?

I moved to New York City to apprentice as an antique restorer in the late

seventies. As part of my training I often went to auctions to learn to evaluate the authenticity of antique furniture. In the 1980's Sotheby's and Christies often had antique arms and armour auctions. I became interested in all the swords I saw and decided I needed to learn more about them. I gravitated to the small-sword early on because at that time they were frankly less expensive than rapiers. In 1982 I decided I should learn a little fencing to help me understand the usage of these elegant swords. I felt that learning to fence would help me to better understand why they are constructed as they are. I therefore looked in the yellow pages (as one did in those days) and found several schools of fencing. I decided to visit all of them and decide which one I preferred. I made my appointments and went to the Rohdes Academy first as it was by location closer to where I worked. The old world atmosphere of the salle and Maître Rohdes's demeanor appealed to me and I knew immediately that I did not need to look any further. I liked the traditional approach in the teaching and the strict etiquette of the school.

What are your thoughts regarding sport fencing and do they have any merit when it comes to being considered a "martial art"?

When I began I did not know there was a difference between sport fencing and classical fencing. I just understood that I was learning fencing. In a rare stroke of luck I was able to study for a year and a half with Maître Rohdes before he passed away. He instilled in me the love of classical fencing, but more importantly for me the love of learning about the art and science. The first time I saw sport fencing was in the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 and it was then that I understood I was learning something very different. I don't have any thoughts regarding sport fencing, as it is a completely different entity. More importantly I don't like to speak about subjects I know nothing about.

If smallsword fencing is considered "combative," why are the deep targets of the torso (like that in foil) emphasized? It would seem that L'Ecole Francaise would focus on hits to any open target (i.e. wrist/forearm, knee, etc).

Fencing is the art of defense. The primary consideration in an assault, a duel or street self-defense is to prevent the adversary from hitting you. In order to accomplish that you may have to attack. In the attack you must make choices that prevent the adversary from attacking you at the same time or attacking you at all. As the weapons move with relative ease, the best way to be safe is to control the adversary's blade with opposition. Hence French small-sword fencing is an opposition system. The foil was the training tool for the small-sword, so practicing targeting the most lethal areas helps to develop the necessary skills required in fencing, for example: knowing your exact lunge distance (determined by the rear foot without sliding in), control of the adversary's blade in opposition, proper placement of the hand in the thrust to provide cover, *sentiment du fer* (tactile sensitivity with the blade), yielding parries, etc. Also, one is learning from the beginning that this is a lethal art. Striking someone in the wrist or arm may not stop the adversary; a thrust to the body may not stop them either, but the probability is greater because of shock to the nervous system and its demoralizing effect.

Here is a quote that addresses that from: *The art of Fencing or, the Use of the Small Sword* by Monsieur L'Abbat, 1743, translated from the French by Andrew Mahon:

Many people say that with sword in hand the rules of the school are

not observed, and that tis sufficient to have a good heart. It is certain the people who are subject to this error, are not capable of following the rules which are to be acquired only by putting a good theory in practice; which, by frequent use, disposes the eye and the parts of executing so well, that it is almost impossible to act other wise: And as to the practice of schools and of the sword, tis the same; for no one ought to do anything with the foil, but what he knows by experience to be without risk, according to his rules. In some cases, it is true, what is esteemed good in one, is not in the other. For example: thrusts with the foil are good only on the body, and with the sword they are good everywhere; and that in an assault with the foil, the joining is reckoned as nothing, whereas in battle tis the seal of victory: but except in that, it should be alike in everything.

Sport fencing has a parry quinte that defects the blade to the inside and downward, whereas in small-sword fencing it's a "sweeping" (supinated) parry that deflects the opponent's blade to the outside (or inside). Why are there such differences in how parries are represented in sport, Italian (referencing Gaugler's The Science of Fencing) and French Small-sword?

Different schools of fencing (the 19th century French school, the 19th century Italian schools, the 18th century French school of small-sword) view theory differently. Therefore classifications of parries are different and changed over time.

For example:

In the 19th century southern Italian school, the parries are classified by the hand position and correspond with the positions of the grip in the engagement: *prima, seconda, terza, quarta, mezzocerchio*

In the 19th century northern Italian school, the parries are designated numerically. However not all masters agree on what they are. Some use: *prima, seconda, terza, quarta, quinta, sesta, settima, ottava*. Other masters use: *prima, seconda, terza, quarta, quinta (which is mezzocerchio) and or quarta bassa*. These parry positions are not necessarily the same as the Southern school.

In small-sword the parries are designated both by hand position and wrist position (supination and pronation). They are also designated by their relation to the adversaries blade (to the outside, to the inside, above or below) and in the case of demi-circle; the semi-circular movement from high outside to low inside.

In the French school during the 19th century the thrusts, the parries and the engagements all have the same numbering designations. i. e. prime, seconde, tierce, quarte, quinte, sixte, septime and octave.

Follow-up... why is there no parry of sixte, but instead it is called "carte to the outside."

The parry position of "carte outside" is exactly the same position of the parry of sixte. In the 19th century the term sixte replaces carte outside. The term carte outside was used to designate that the hand is in supination and that it is parrying the blade to the outside.

In Small-sword fencing, opposition is created in *carte* and *tierce*. Why is *tierce* a starting position when a hand position of *carte* is so much stronger?

(I ask this question because the realities of combat would have an adversary beat and change lines quickly [and often] and *tierce* doesn't seem like the strongest of hand positions)

The small-sword is a sidearm and could be used for self-defense against another small-sword, rapier, or against a spadron or other cutting weapons. Small-swords typically have knuckle bows to protect the hand. As any tool, you want to use it optimally, hence *tierce* on the outside and *quarte* on the inside orientates the knuckle bow to offer more protection to the hand.

If by "starting position" you mean the *en garde*, then *tierce* was not always the default position. Some masters recommend a middle position where the hand is not in *quarte* or *tierce*. From this position they believe you can quickly close either line. Also the fencer can go *en garde* in *quarte*. Domenico Angelo states: "The guard in *quarte* is the most advantageous, and the most elegant position in fencing."

Also, there should be no difference between how one trains and how one uses the small-sword in earnest. Hence dexterity in the use of both of these positions is a necessity. Fencing masters in the 18th century understood the realities of combat and the French school in the 18th century addresses that.

Why are pronated attacks (such as those from *tierce*, *seconde* and *quinte*) and *parries* so prevalent in the French Small-sword? As Evangelista once wrote "Pronation will invariably generate muscular *parries*. That's why the French style, by and large, avoids pronation in its delivery?"

The French small-sword fencer seeks to control the adversary's blade by proper placement and leverage, not muscular strength. The pronated positions allow for strong beats, *froissements*, *croises* as one is using the same edge as one uses for the same techniques in *quarte*. That said, there are actually more supinated attacks and *parries* used in French small-sword. The use of *sixte* instead of *tierce* did not become common until the second half of the 19th century. Even then, most masters did not discard *tierce*. Correct training will allow the student to develop proper *parries* without generating a lot of force. In fact to develop *sentiment du fer* (tactile sensitivity with the blade) one cannot be heavy handed.

As a masterful fencer yourself, is it hard to contend against a student or challenger (in a bout) using their natural gifts (i.e. athleticism, speed) or even scoring touches in a wild, uncalculating manner?

My obligation as a teacher is to guide the student; not to contend with them. When students are first introduced to the assault in our school, they are only allowed to fence against the master or provost. This is to ensure that the student is given precise responses that he recognizes. These academic assaults have specific rules. The student is the designated attacker. This allows them to use any of the various attacks they have learned. If they are successful, then the master will attack and the fencer cannot step back until he has *parried* and *reposted*. As a teacher my job is to give the students tools to overcome their weakness and to build upon their natural attributes. I use the assault as another means by which I polish the skills of my students. As they build their confidence and become more skillful they are allowed to fence

with others.

Follow-up... how do you deal with a student like this? (to those that say "Well, it wasn't pretty, but it worked!")

Form and function go hand in hand. If a student is just interested in hitting at any cost, they don't belong in our school. As a traditional school, we also work on cultivating the proper mindset. That is to say, the fencer should have a respect for what the weapon can do; the fencer should strive to defend as if the weapons were sharp.

I've noticed that you and your students use a back-weighted en garde "ready" position. Other classical schools, even those that I've seen that do small-sword use more of a 50-50 balance. Is this just to be respectful of the time period or does it come down to personal preference? What are your thoughts on this issue.

The balance of the position of the body when en garde is determined by the weapon and school that one is practicing. In our classical French system we use en garde position that is weighted more towards the back leg. In our small-sword system we have our weight supported on the back leg. In our Italian systems we use a 50-50 balance. The balance point affects how we move and is an intrinsic aspect of each system. That said, we also work with each individual and we will modify the stance to suit their particular physique if needed.

As an avid follower of yours on Pinterest, I noticed that you pin lots of pictures of historical weapons. Besides the small-sword, what other two swords (if you had to choose) hold a fascination/fondness to you (and why)?

I have a particular fondness for rapiers and falchions. I am fascinated by the variety of styles and the decoration that was applied to these swords. The craftsmanship in combination with their functionality astounds me. As an antique restorer I have the utmost respect for craftsmen/artists of the past.

Finally, are there any difference between smallswords? French, English, Scottish, etc?

Yes. However, this is a highly complex and lengthy question to answer. I highly recommend *The Rapier and Small-sword 1460 -1820* by A. V. Norman.

BONUS QUESTION

Besides teaching and fencing, what else is Jeannette Acosta-Martinez passionate about or enjoy doing with her Life?

I suppose I am most passionate about antique restoration. While over the years I have developed allergies that prevent me from doing a lot of the restoration work I used to do, there is still nothing better than bringing a piece of fine furniture back to its former glory. I also enjoy traveling to other countries and visiting museums, churches, castles, etc. I can never get enough of seeing antique arms & armour, furniture, paintings, sculpture, architecture, textiles, etc.

FIN.

We at the CombativeCorner would like to thank Maestro Jeannette for her time and for answering these probing questions. If you have any further

questions for the Martinez Academy, please comment in the section below and we'll do our best to get an answer. For others that are intent on learning all they can of the small-sword, visit and request to join the Facebook Group [Smallsword Symposium](#).

Also, don't forget to re-visit the 10 questions with did with her husband, [Maestro Ramón Martínez](#).

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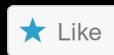
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