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10 Questions With Ramon Martinez

12-15 minutes



Ramón Martínez

is a traditional master of arms, teaching classical and historical fencing. He studied with the late Maître d'Armes Frederick Rohdes in New York City for ten years. Maître Rohdes was one of the last fencing masters to teach fencing as a martial art. He is the world's preeminent authority on the Spanish school of fencing *La Verdadera Destreza* and is the director of the Martinez Academy of Arms in New York City. It is with great joy and honor that we have Mastro Martínez here at the CombativeCorner for an exclusive

interview. For more information on Maestro Martínez please visit his website by click on his picture above.



How did young Ramon get interested with fencing?

As a child I was already interested in fencing at an early age. I knew then that it was something that I could do and felt that it would always be a part of my life. I was fascinated with the sword by viewing the old Disney Zorro television series starring the late Guy Williams. This was an inspiration for me. Consequently I continued to view any television program or movie that had “sword fights” in them. Later, I would also read novels, history books or any story I could find that contained any aspect of swordsmanship.

You were able to study with Maître d’Armes Frederick Rohdes in NY for 10 years. What are some of the things that stood out about him as a teacher?

What stood out to me was his old world manner and strictness. He was absolutely uncompromising in his adherence to a martial tradition that encompassed mind, body and spirit. He gave his profession one hundred percent of himself and expected no less from his students.

His character was demanding, tough, fair but never personally abusive. He was truly an old world 19th century master living in the 20th century. Entering his academy was like taking a step back in time. It was a place of truth and not of games. Anything less was not tolerated. It was attended by some of the toughest fencers I have ever seen or faced. I will always be grateful that I was privileged to have such a person be part of my life. Without him I would not be where I am today. There is not a day that goes by

when I do not think of him.

Thinking back on your beginning years as a fencer, what part(s) of fencing came “easy” and what part(s) “hard.”

I am fortunate in that the technical aspect of fencing came relatively easy for me. It was the perfecting of it that was the most difficult. I have learned that the quest for perfection is the journey and not the destination. I am still on that journey. What was and still is the greatest challenge for me is controlling my fiery temper. Maître Rohdes would always tell me that my greatest adversary is the person I see in the mirror every morning. He would always say to me; “He who the gods would destroy they first make mad.” As I have grown older it has been proven to me time and time again that he was right. In my research I have read countless numbers of fencing texts from the 16th – 19th century and most masters will make a point of saying that you must learn to control yourself. 17th century Spanish master Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez said; “It is easier to put out a fire than to mitigate an ire.”

I’ve read that you hold no allegiance to any particular school of fencing – however, when comparing yourself with other fencers, how does your style/approach differ?

I follow the way of my master and his masters. Period!

I am a traditional swordsman and master. For me modernism and sport are not in my consciousness. I will not compromise in any aspect of the art & science as a martial discipline. My personal style of fencing is strictly classical and my method of teaching traditional.

I had the rare privilege of learning both the French and the Italian schools of fencing and much more from a master that knew both.

This is the reason that I am not politically nor culturally biased toward any school of fencing. Each school of fencing has its strong and weak aspects. Either can be devastatingly effective when utilized correctly by an expert.

I want to make it clear that I do not mix apples and oranges. I keep everything that I teach in its own place. When I teach French fencing I strictly adhere to the tenets of the French school.

Furthermore, I follow the doctrine of that school in accord with the period of the weapon that I am teaching. I do the same with Italian and Spanish fencing. For example, French foil fencing of the late 19th century is not the same as late 17th century French small-sword, Classical Italian foil is not at all the same as 17th century Italian rapier. Finally, the Spanish school (La Verdadera Destreza) is totally different in its application of theory, its mind set, structure and form.

Each school has its own form, that form facilitates the biomechanics within that school, so that it can be utilized efficiently and effectively. The technical aspect of each school relies on the expression of the form for efficacy. For me form does not follow function as some people say and believe. On the contrary I always say that form and function can never be separate as the form was created to insure that the function is efficient. Form is not just an after thought used solely for decorative purpose to ornament what you are doing.

Fencing must be a balance of self-mastery, total comprehension of fencing theory and scientific application. I tell all of my students that they cannot even hope to control a person or a situation before they can control themselves.

Students often have a hard time understanding the difference

(besides the grip being used). If we are talking about aspects (other than the gripping of the weapon) what philosophical, strategic or postural differences does the foil fencer exhibit?

I think that the definition of the classical fencer by Maître Louis Rondelle answers this question the best;

“The Classical Fencer. – A classical fencer is supposed to be one who observes a fine position, whose attacks are fully developed, whose hits are marvelously accurate, his parries firm and ripostes executed with precision.

One must not forget that this regularity is not possible unless the adversary is a party to it. It is then a conventional bout, which consists of parries, attacks, and returns, all rhyming together.”

In contrast to:

“The Blunderer. – Is a fencer who strives to hit his adversary by all means, fair or foul, without preparation or opposition. His arm drawn back of its position, he advances or retreats without necessity, effects a tension on any attack, attempts to execute time-thrusts on simple attacks, beats the blade and changes the engagement without motive.”

The prime directive in fencing is always defense. If there is no defense it is not fencing. Some may repeat the tired old adage “The best defense is a good offense” but that is not necessarily true. This is because the mentality of the real fencer is centered on self-preservation. The premise in all fencing is to touch without being touched. It does a fencer no good to theoretically kill his adversary as he himself is killed in the process.

For years, I'd been taught a standard grip (fr. foil) whereby your

index finger and thumb are up against the cushion (as shown in nearly all modern fencing texts. i.e. Evangelista), but later was corrected by my former fencing instructor that the thumb placement should be approx. 2 inches back on the grip to promote greater sensitivity and point control (I call this grip the “classical”). Is one grip right, and the other wrong? (if so, why?)

The fact of the matter is that there are two ways of gripping the French foil.

The first manner in which to grip the French foil is so that there is approximately one finger’s width between the thumb and the guard. This can be seen in the French treatises of the 19th century. Furthermore, all of the fingers must be in contact with the grip, especially the small finger of the sword hand. This will provide fine point control, and facilitate the development of blade sensitivity.

The second way to grip the French foil is so that the grip rests flat between the first and second joint of the index finger and the thumb flat so that it is just behind the guard but not touching the inside of the guard (cushion). As previously stated the other fingers must be in contact with the grip, especially the small finger of the sword hand. This type of grip will also provide for point control and blade sensitivity.

Of course fencers must be properly educated in the use of either grip so that they do not rely on the strength of the hand to secure it, as this would be contraindicated in the proper use of the French weapon.

What’s one (or two) things that you consider to be a “highlight” in your career?

There are several highlights in my career but there are two that I hold the most significant. The first is when my master named me as his successor. The second is when I presented for the first time in a public forum my reconstruction and resurrection of the Spanish school of rapier (La Verdadera Destreza). This took place when I was a Fellow in Residence at Rutgers University for the Aston Magna Academy in 1995.

What, in your opinion, is the best film available that demonstrates skill with the blade? (*you may of course separate this into historical accuracy vs. entertainment*)

I will say right off that there is no film that portrays fencing historically accurate. However, there is one film that comes close and that is a 1953 movie titled "[The Mississippi Gambler](#)" starring [Tyrone Power](#). There is a very entertaining scene that takes place in a fencing school in 19th century New Orleans that has an interesting depiction of Classical French foil fencing.

In my opinion the best film both for entertainment and in demonstrating skill with the blade is the 1940 film [The Mark of Zorro](#).

The antagonists portrayed by actors [Tyrone Power](#) and [Basil Rathbone](#) engage with sabres in the climax of the film. Both of these gentlemen possessed considerable fencing skill for actors. Mr. Rathbone (At the time known to be the best swordsman in Hollywood) performed the sequences himself. Mr. Power although an excellent screen swordsman was doubled by Fencing Master Albert Cavens who was himself the son of Maître Fred Cavens.

The fencing technique used for this choreography was of the Italian school of dueling sabre. One can see in the movie that the

emphases of the cutting actions were centered on the rotation of the weapon coming from the elbow. This is a characteristic of the Northern Italian School of sabre fencing. However, this was historically inaccurate because the story takes place circa 1830s and the type of weapon used in the movie and its method was not fully developed until the last half of the 19th century. Although these representations of swordsmanship are spectacular and entertaining their purpose is to tell a story and express a situation within a dramatic context.

Are there any mental exercises or meditations you would recommend to strengthen the mind for strategy and creativity in fencing?

What you are asking me about is very personal for each fencer. Every fencer must find his own way. The advise I can give is listen to your master, do not rely on books, do not rely on speed and strength as these fade with age, never anticipate, deal with what is happening; not on what you think will happen, do not attempt to memorize formulaic answers, seek the truth.

Besides fencing, how does Maestro Martinez like to spend his free time?

When I am not teaching, in a library or in my office, I am just like anyone else. I like to spend time with my family and friends enjoying simple things. I am also a movie buff and a fan of Spaghetti Westerns. My hobbies are reading about the history of the Old West and riding horses when I get the chance.



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