

## \* *En Garde!*



**M**artial artists tend to believe that the only true arts come from Asia. Yet there are many, often in the guise of sports, that have their roots in the West. But while recent years have seen boxing and wrestling finally gain their just recognition within the martial arts world, surely traditional weaponry is still solely the province of Eastern-based martial arts, right? Not quite. Anyone ever seen *Zorro*? *The Three Musketeers*? *Robin Hood*?

Fencing, the modern Western version of swordplay, has been an Olympic sport for more than 100 years and a form of competition—both sporting and dueling—for longer than that. Seeking a deeper un-

derstanding of this often-neglected martial way, I recently paid a visit to the Fencing Academy of Westchester in Hawthorne, New York. Run by head coach Slava Grigoriev, a two-time Olympian from Kazakhstan, it's one of the premier fencing facilities in the Northeast.

"I came here in 1999 and had a lot of invitations to coach," Grigoriev said. "Then I started to meet people at competitions who were enthusiasts for the sport or who were parents of children that fenced but didn't want to travel far. So they helped me open the school near them."

Grigoriev used his connections in international fencing to recruit top practitioners

from Eastern Europe as instructors at his school. The academy currently boasts eight coaches, almost all former Olympians or national champions in the three fencing disciplines. For the uninitiated, those disciplines are the foil (a light, thrusting weapon used under a structure of tightly defined rules with targets confined to the upper body), the epee (a thrusting weapon that's used to target the entire body) and the saber (the only weapon that can strike with the edge, although its targets are also confined to the upper body).

"The footwork is similar for each weapon, but because the rules are different, the tactics and strategy differ drastically," said

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## ◀ FAR EAST /

Stephen Jan, a longtime practitioner of the Chinese martial arts and a nationally ranked foilist who trains at the academy. "You could argue [that the] epee is the most realistic because you can hit anywhere."

Believing that the epee and saber would prove the most familiar, I decided to give them a try.

The first thing you notice while fencing is the amount of protective gear required: heavy canvas pants and a jacket, which are usually worn over your regular workout clothes, plus a plastic chest protector and gloves. Then there's the cage-like helmet that protects your head. If you're doing the saber, there's an additional jacket and an even heavier helmet, all of which leaves you sweating like a steam bather.

The discomfort aside, the sport is actually very enjoyable. Nothing compares to plunging the blunted point of your sword into your opponent's well-padded heart. Like karate tournaments, the action happens in flurries with stoppages every time there's a clash to determine who scored. But unlike karate, there's less dispute over points. That's because both fencers' swords electronically register whether a strike makes contact and whose strike lands first.

One difficult aspect to adjust to is the lack of emphasis on power. Because all that's

required is a light touch, you don't need to draw the weapon back to strike—which takes some getting used to, especially with the saber. That, combined with the fact that you cannot use your free hand in any way, removes many of the realistic applications from modern fencing. But that's OK because the question of what would work in a real fight never enters the equation.

"The intentions of dueling [and the intentions of] sport are completely different. You can't afford to make mistakes in real combat, so you won't take risks," Jan said. "But I believe any sort of experience dealing with an opponent who doesn't cooperate is good. And fencing helps develop a feel for distancing."

After getting a sense of the sport, I found I was able to apply lessons from other martial arts effectively on the *piste*, the long, narrow area to which fencers are confined. Because the weapons all have hand guards, fencers tend not to move their sword hand a great deal. But from years of getting my weapon hand whacked by *kali* sticks, I instinctively kept it in motion, which appeared to confuse some of my opponents, allowing me a chance to score. Similarly, using the up-and-down motion of wrestlers to change levels seemed to create openings for me. And even though I'd

always had trouble actualizing the triangular footwork of *kali*, I found the perfect opportunity to employ it here. Fencers like to face their opponent sideways to minimize available targets. But by taking that diagonal step forward to the right and thrusting diagonally to the left, I managed to perfectly skewer one foe. I wasn't winning every match, but I held my own against most of my opponents. And let me tell you, those 8-year-olds are tougher than they look.

In truth, it's probably beneficial for any martial artist to step outside his normal arena and attempt a different type of combative competition. If anything, the realistic usefulness of trying fencing—or any other martial art—is seeing whether you can apply some of your training in an unfamiliar situation. No matter what type of training you normally do, chances are that if you ever have to use your skills, it will be in a situation you're not completely familiar with.

So grab a sword and step on the *piste*. You might learn something. Even if you don't, it's still a lot of fun. ✂

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