

En Garde

While doing ethnographic research, I decided to join the Southern Polytechnic State University Fencing Club so that I could get a better understanding of the subculture of fencing. The following is an excerpt of my journal reports on the events of what took place while I was a part of the club.

I had definitely bitten off much more than I could chew.

October 3, 2014 7:15PM

I went to my very first fencing practice, excited about what I was about to learn and experience. I made sure to get there on time and went into the gym with everyone at the same time. We entered a room and were told to rotate our knee caps and ankles, something I had never done before, and once everyone was ready, the command “run” was stated and we were off. It started off okay, but after a bit of running we were told to do other exercises while continuing to run. I couldn’t keep up with it because I wasn’t keeping proper pacing and ended up tiring myself to the point of feeling like I was about to collapse. I asked if I could get water and did not rejoin the running session.

As I sat gasping for breath after only doing a few running exercises, the rest of the group lined up to begin their training. Even though my primary focus was that my chest was on fire, I tried to focus on what was going on as the fencing club members began a set of stretching exercises that I wished to join but no longer had the stamina to continue after stupidly overexerting myself earlier. After the exercising was over, they filed out of the gym to continue practicing outside once the gym closed.

“This is more than what you were expecting isn’t

it?” Clinton Harrison, the leader and founder of the Southern Polytechnic State University fencing club, asked me in passing. Too winded to speak, I just sort of nodded my head. After all, what he said was true: I joined the fencing club because I had an interest in the sport and had expected to learn the techniques and become well versed in a martial art that originated in France. Little did I know, that was going to involve a bunch of exercising that my body was nowhere near used to, since I’m not much of a physically active person. Luckily for me, the exercising was only about thirty minutes long, unlike professional fencers who will train for hours before even picking up their fencing weapon to practice with.

I kind of felt awkward as I sat on the sidelines; I was essentially being given special treatment, but I really didn’t deserve it. It was my stupid error that ended with me like this. I think I was allowed this because it was my first day, so Clinton was cutting me some slack.

October 3, 2014 8:00PM

Even as I started to have doubts about continuing, I decided to keep watching the club practice to see what fencing was all about. I made a mental note to try and remember everything I watched so that I could hurry and catch up with everyone else in my training. To my surprise, most of the club members were practicing stances and techniques without actually wielding a fencing implement, probably to make sure they knew what they were doing before wielding a potentially dangerous weapon.

It went on like this for a while before some of the more trained fencers split off to practice dueling. I watched them clash swords until the club ended for

the day and had no idea what I was seeing happen or hearing for that matter. They kept saying words like “riposte”, “parry” and “right of way”, which I had heard before but had no definition of in this context; however, it was due to watching them practice that I made up my mind to continue with fencing which would mean having to get more physically fit.

After that first day, I asked one of my friends, David James, who also happened to be in the fencing club to help train me outside of fencing practice so that I would be ready to tackle the exercises next time I went to the club. David had been fencing with the club for about two years and had previously trained somewhere else for about year prior to joining the college fencing club, so I had picked a good personal trainer.

October 4, 2014 2:30PM

He started me off running around the campus, and then we went back to my apartment to practice stretching exercises that I only watched before. I was even trained a bit on some of the beginning stances, so I’d be prepared to join in on the next practice and not just watch from the sidelines. He also taught me a lot about the history of fencing as well as answered some of the questions I had about the styles of fencing. “I fence Saber, because it is the best weapon,” David said this with a little bit of a superior tone in his voice and a sly smile. “In all seriousness though, with Foil and Epee, they’re stabbing weapons and they’re both slower and more methodical, where Saber is very fast and it’s a slashing weapon. If you watch a Saber bout on the Olympic level they start each part of the match and both people just lunge at each other, and there’s a brief flurry of exchanges and then suddenly someone has a point and you have no clue what happened.”

I continued training myself on my own after that, remembering what David taught me so I could get better before the next time I could go to the club. I still had a few problems pacing myself at first, but as I continued training, it got much easier to not drain my stamina early on.

October 10, 2014 7:00PM

My next venture to fencing practice went much better; I paced myself better and managed to make it through all of the exercises without having to quit from overexertion. I even joined everyone during the practice after the fact, but since I only knew a few basic stances, I could only do so much. Clinton ended up just having me stay in one stance the entire time until I was comfortable with it, commanding me to “sit” whenever he saw that I had started to ease out of the stance due to my legs starting to hurt a little bit. I figured I should listen to him, since he had twelve years of fencing experience under his belt and knew what training I needed.

Since I am a mostly quiet person, I am more of an observer than an active partaker of conversations, so when the club members talked to each other during practice, I just sort of listened in. While I heard a couple conversations about fencing, a lot of the talk generated around things related to school and references to a computer game. I shouldn’t have expected much else since the club was on a college campus, but I was happy when I picked up that I wasn’t the only one having difficulty with certain fencing-related things, so I could tell I wasn’t too far behind. It also seemed to be a ritual that they go to some fast food restaurant to eat after practice was over. Even though I had declined to go along because I had already eaten, I felt like I had started to become more included as a member of the club.

October 24, 2014 7:00PM

After a few days of personal training, I went back to the fencing club and noticed there were a few people missing.

To be continued...

-From the journals of Henry North