

En Garde!

A group of college students practice and learn a tactical martial art

By Henry North

The Trials of Day One

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

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.

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.

A New Resolve

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.

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.

Round 2 of Fencing Club

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.

Lessons Beyond the Blade

After a few days of personal training, I went back to the fencing club and noticed there were a few people missing. Some of the other trainees mentioned some of the reasons for the missing people, such as being at the movies or being sick, with Clinton responding, “That doesn't give them a reason to miss fencing. You know why World War I started? Because Archduke Ferdinand skipped fencing; if he had gone to fencing practice, he wouldn't have been assassinated.” While he wasn't being serious about this, I could tell that Clinton found fencing to be very important.

“Everyone should fence,” Clinton told me later that day. “It's swords; what guy doesn't like swords, right? It's good stress relief, it builds muscle, it builds a lot of strength in areas in people don't normally get and it actually makes you a little bit smarter.” I definitely understood the part about fencing making people smarter when Clinton advanced my training that day. I was moving on to a new stance that I had seen other people do, but I had to remember so many different steps in order to make sure I was doing it right and realized that it was not as easy as it looked. It would eventually become muscle memory, but the learning was definitely a mental exercise.

My best experience with training happened when Clinton's coach, James Taylor, visited and taught us at the next session that I went to. A forty year fencing veteran, James taught me a lot more than I had learned in the past few sessions that I had gone to. He added more exercises than I was used to, but I was still able to do them. Through his teaching, I moved forward into learning more

stances and maneuvers, including a higher level advancing technique. It was a lot of fun learning from him, because I got to learn new things and practice them with everyone else rather than practicing on my own.

After the initial practice, he split everyone into groups based on the style of fencing they wanted to learn, whether it was saber, foil, or epee, and taught each group specific lessons that went with that fencing style. I almost was able to practice with a fencing sword for the first time, but Clinton made me sit that lesson out and watch instead. Even though I was a little sad about still not wielding a weapon in practice, I was kind of okay with it, since I didn't know which style I wanted to follow anyway. "Sometimes the fencer chooses the weapon, but most of the time, the weapon chooses the fencer," Coach James had told the class. I feel like I got more out of watching than I would have if I had joined because I was able to see all the lessons being taught instead of just the ones for a specific group.

When I asked Coach James after the practice was over about Clinton's statement on how everyone should fence, he agreed. "It challenges you more than any other sport, because it is only you. Whatever you do directly influences the outcome. People, such as actors, study fencing, and it is a good way to incorporate the fencing movements into whatever the aspect of their acting is and gives it grace and also a zing, because you move very quickly in a fencing format. Fencing is a life sport; it is something you can do from the age of eight to eighty. It's a family sport and you can do as much of it as you want. You want to be well trained in it? You can do it because it's just you."

My experience with fencing has been a great one. I have picked up something that will not only make me better physically, but it will also increase my mental capacity. I have made a lot of friends while partaking in the fencing club and even though fencing is a solo sport, I feel better knowing that I have people to train together with. I will continue to learn fencing because after my experience, I agree that everyone should fence. It's an enjoyable mind game like chess, and every aspect of the sport is involved with helping one to better their self.