

The Sword's the Thing

JAMES KEITH



WRITERS COMMENT: Fencing has not only been a fun and rewarding hobby for me, but has supplied an apt topic for many a project during my undergraduate career in the Humanities. It was with great pleasure that I chose it for my final article in John Boe's Journalism class, as I had much more freedom in how I was going to approach it than in previous courses. I have always loved to tell stories, and here was a perfect chance to stretch my creative muscles. I admit that the idea for the narrative portion of my article came after I realized that I didn't have enough on the interview to make a full-fledged piece, but it only took a little wrangling to marry the two together. I'm proud that I was able to do so with relative ease, and glad that John, consummate storyteller that he is, appreciated it.



—James Keith

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I didn't tell James Keith, but when he said he was going to write about fencing, I was less than excited. I had taken fencing for one day in college, found it both difficult and boring, and gone back to basketball for my required P.E. activity. But James took the topic and with skill and hard work used his personal experience (dramatically rendering a match of his), his interview with his teacher, his knowledge of fencing, some of this and some of that, to make a delightful piece that totally won me over. While I am not ready to pursue fencing myself, I can now see the delights of saying, "En Garde!"

—John Boe, University Writing Program



Steel and Sweat

A GLINTING SILVER BLADE FLASHES TOWARDS ME and I feel the familiar hot pain as its tip buries itself into my gut. “HALT!” cries a voice next to me, and the blade drops away, my very visible assailant (dressed all in white) stepping back a few steps. Though I can’t see his expression behind his mask, I can bet he’s got a self-satisfied smirk plastered across his face. I rub the now tender spot on my belly, which is covered by three layers of protective clothing. The tough and heavy synthetic jacket and half-jacket underneath have done a good job in preventing too much damage from the blunt blade. But the bruise, now welling up, attests that I still had a meter length piece of steel thrust into me, no matter how safe the sword had been made. I am participating in a fencing match, and I love every minute of it.

I am currently fencing a tournament at the Davis Fencing Academy, and my smug opponent is a young stripling of about 15. Although he has gotten an earlier start than I in his fencing education and has been under the tutelage of a very good coach, I should be, by all rights, wiping the floor with him. The name of the game is determined by whichever of the three weapons are used. Valid areas to score hits (or touches), protocol for what attacks have priority, and general mindset all vary between the foil, the *épée* and the saber.

A Gentleman’s Game

THE FOIL IS THE MOST BALANCED of the three weapons, with valid target area restricted to the chest and midsection, and governed by a system called “right-of-way.” This set of rules was created based on the idea that, if you were dueling with real swords (and with a weapon like a foil you aim to kill), you’re still dead if you and your opponent stab each other simultaneously. Thus, right-of-way holds that, if you are being threatened or attacked, you must defend yourself *before* you counter-attack.

Right-of-way is also preserved with the saber. This time, though, target area is from the navel up, out to the wrists, and includes the head. As the modern sport has descended from the cavalry saber, the target area was based on the idea that it was ungentlemanly to harm your opponent’s horse, as you would both be mounted. While points are scored in foil by stabbing your opponent with the tip of your weapon, in saber you gain points by slashing with the edge. This usually makes the pace of the game

much faster, and those who fence saber are much more aggressive as a result.

On the other end of the spectrum is the *épée*. One could argue that it is the most realistic of the three weapons, in that the target area is the entire body and there is no right of way. As its ancestor was the dueling rapier, the idea of “first-blood” determining the winner is still preserved in modern *épée* combat, as the sword-arm is the first thing an *épée*ist aims for, being the easiest to reach while staying out of harm’s way.

Dancing with Fortune

RETURNING TO THE MATCH AT HAND: We are fighting with this last type of blade, the *épée*, and though it may be slow and methodical compared to the other weapons, it still requires a good deal of speed. The thing with fencing is that you always play to your strengths; you try to make your opponent fence the way *you* want him to. As such, I’m a tad on the slow side, but I make up for it by having amazing reach. The little squirt standing across from me has me outclassed in the former, but he’s young and inexperienced; he doesn’t yet know how to use it. Though he’s now two points ahead of me in a five point bout, I can still pull this off.

I manage three points, or touches, in quick succession. He doesn’t know how I like to fence, and he’s charging in blindly. As he goes to beat my blade aside or bind it in his own, I circle my blade around his and hit his exposed arm, or I simply back away and extend out, my long arms easily outreaching his. Now it’s my 3 to his 2—could be anyone’s game.

The next touch goes slowly. Sometimes it’s only a matter of seconds before someone scores a point. Sometimes it takes almost a minute. Time seems to stretch when you’re on a fencing strip. Thirty seconds seems like an eternity when you’re testing your opponent’s defenses, feinting here and there, and looking for an opening. I get lucky and he runs on to my blade, forgetting my reach. 4–2.

But then I get too cocky. Fencing to five points doesn’t take very long. If you’re not paying attention, touches can accumulate fast. He draws me in to attack, then beats my blade aside and stabs my arm like lightning. 4–3.

I change it up and do a running attack, or *fleche*, but I start about a foot too far back. I might as well have started a mile away for how easily he sees me coming. Once more I feel his blade on my chest. 4–4.

This is it: Four—all, *La Belle*, the point where the theme from *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* starts playing. This next point determines the winner. I steel myself and breathe deeply, trying to keep a calm mind. The blade-work becomes fierce, the bell-guards of our weapons clang sonorously as we deflect each other's attacks. I see an opening, circle my blade around, lunge . . . too slow. I feel the tip of his blade touch the underside of my extended sword arm. 5–4. Bout. His game.

Damn it.

My opponent looks surprised, but that's a good thing. Most good touches come from reflexes and muscle memory, and chances are if you ask the swordsman how he pulled it off, he won't have a clue. Luckily for me, this is only one bout in a set of five; I've still got chances to beat people. He can have his victory now, but I'll see him again in the next set of matches.

His coach comes up to congratulate him and give him some tips, an action I accept begrudgingly, as he is essentially telling the kid how to beat me *even more* into the ground. But I have a great deal of respect for the older man, as he is one of the best fencers I know.

Coffee with the Master of Arms

THIS MAN IS SIMON PITFIELD, FENCING MASTER, coach and owner of the Davis Fencing Academy. His figure is that of an *épée*ist: a tall, lanky frame (about 6'5") that may look slightly soft, but hides amazing speed and dexterity. The imposing height is offset by a pair of light blue eyes and a continuous smile, all made more approachable by his Australian accent. He can usually be seen wearing a black leather cuirass, or chest covering, which shows his status as the coach of the *salle*, or fencing hall.

I met Simon for an interview in the early morning on November 20th. Sitting down for coffee at Mishka's, he had traded the look of steely fencing coach for that of a relaxed parent. Dressed causally in a T-shirt and warm up pants, he occasionally dandled his 5-month-old son on his knee as I asked about his life as a fencer.

Simon got his first taste of fencing in 1994 at a summer camp in England, which consisted of a single, 45-minute lesson. That was all it took. The next year, as an undergraduate at UC Davis, he actively sought out the fencing club and stuck with it for all four years before he earned his degree. During that time he also branched out into the Sacramento

Fencing Club and became a member of the USFA, or United States Fencing Association.

At that point the UCD Club was still small, only a few dozen members (compared to the current 50). The Collegiate Circuit, which is now comprised of tourneys at UC Santa Cruz, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, UC Berkeley and UC Davis, only got started in the 1997–98 school year. By then Simon had already participated in many USFA tournaments and had a good deal of experience under his belt. The Collegiate tournaments, which are more geared to novice fencers, presented little challenge to one who had already earned a “C” rating in foil. The USFA gives out rankings to those who place well in events that have their blessing, ranging from an “E” (“Yeah, you’re all right . . .”) to an “A” (“Damn, Jackson!”).

After helping found the Davis Fencing Academy in 1999, Simon began a year’s training to earn his Master of Arms degree, which as he explained means that “If I went to France, I could run a school myself.” The program involved both his skill at fencing (he had to face an Olympic gold medal foilist as one of his tests) and his skill at teaching others. He had to demonstrate several hours of coaching and in the end write a 30-page thesis, after which he was given the title of *Maitre d’Armes I*. The next step above that is *Maitre d’Armes II*, which means that said individual is of high enough caliber that he may coach Olympic level teams. For Simon, level one is all that’s needed, as he seems perfectly happy to run local fencing *salles*.

Training Sequences

BUT HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT TEACHING people to work with swords? According to Simon, it’s “not what you’re teaching but how you teach it.” As it’s a very individual sport and can be pursued for competition, pleasure, or both, it all depends on what the student is looking for. A coach’s first priority, therefore, is to find this out and to vary the lessons depending upon the student’s age and desires.

As for what makes a good fencer, it’s “basically a bit of everything.” Speed, stamina and flexibility come foremost, but almost any type of athlete can become a good fencer, “if you work out the kinks.” Fencing also requires a good deal of mental preparation, the ability to think calmly and clearly when the chips are down, and the ability to reason well. It’s “very much like a chess match” in the kind of thinking a fencer needs to develop in order to be successful.

Hand-eye coordination is also incredibly important, along with a well-developed sense of distance. The first thing one works on when learning to fence is the precise footwork, which is “key for safety.” Knowing where your body is, how long your reach is, and the same information about your opponent is critical so you don’t run him through or get run through in return. While the weapons aren’t designed to pierce, they can break and accidents do happen. But they occur rarely outside of the first set of lessons, as these concepts are fundamental.

Next comes blade-work, and along with the basic offensive and defensive moves, Simon likes to teach his students simple, commonly-occurring sequences. Although his students often find these sequences useless when fencing each other, as they are all taught by the same coach, they do find that the combinations work on fencers outside their club. Once the basics of footwork and blade-work are in place, speed is then added over time, and from there it’s working on techniques that work for the individual fencer, as they will have their own strengths and weaknesses.

In the end, it’s important for the coach to have good relationship with the fencers, such that “they trust you instantly.” This allows the coach to suggest and introduce new things without being second-guessed, especially in the heat of a tournament. For me, who has had the luck to have a fantastic fencing coach, this concept seems a given. But having seen the hard-headed and recalcitrant fencers that are out there, I can see why Simon stresses it.

As a fencer, I appreciated hearing about these things from Simon. I know now what to expect when I go up against his students. While I respect and like the individuals that are under Simon’s aegis, a little bit of “Know thy enemy” is par for the course in friendly fencing.

Rematch

AN OLD FENCING BUDDY OF MINE has a habit of making somewhat pedestrian truths entertaining. He’d love to describe someone who fences saber as “a Pirate captain sweeping on to the deck of his ship, shouting ‘Avast, me hearties! All grapple lines across! Forward to Glory!’” Thus I took great pleasure in his description of an *épée*ist as “a quiet submarine commander, silently moving into position, giving away nothing, and before you know it, ‘BOOM!’ you’re blown out of the water.”

It was with this in mind that I approached my second match with the stripping at the tournament, though this time it was Direct Elimination. These matches are higher stakes: the one who loses a “DE” is out of the running. As such, they are to 15 points, which usually allows more time for the fencers to get used to each other’s styles, and thus the more adaptable fencer has a chance to shine.

The boy and I salute each other and begin. He initially has the quiet façade of a good fencer, letting nothing show, remaining unperturbed as my blade parries, circles, and feints. Simon has taught him well, so far. But I get a point, then another, then another. We quietly clash in the middle of the strip, the only sound the soft grind of our swords occasionally running against each other. He manages a few good touches, but I’m gaining a wide lead. That’s when it happens.

The Tide Turns

I SCORE A FANTASTIC TOUCH, a clean, clear shot to the arm. My opponent’s frustration finally gets the better of him, and he stomps his foot and lets out a half whine—half growl, almost like he’s throwing a tantrum. It’s very theatrical. But right then, I know one thing for sure. This kid has no chance against me.

You know how in the movies, during the training sequences, when the young protagonist loses his fool head and is promptly rebuffed by the master? The line “never let your emotions get the better of you” is usually used. When you’re angry, you tend to lose focus, concentrating more on the fact that you *are* getting beaten rather than *how* you’re getting beaten. That’s when you do stupid things. Some fencers are able to work past that, but this kid isn’t one of them.

Now I know my advantage, and now the mental part of fencing takes prominence. Forget the fact that he’s faster than I; he’s too busy thinking about our wildly disparate score to use it. At the next “Ready, Fence!” from the judge, I bounce forward and hop back and forth in place, displaying one part of my arm, then another. It’s too much movement for him—he attacks simply. I move my arm out of the way and strike him. 12–6, my favor. He stomps and vocalizes again. This kid is losing it.

I still need to stay frosty, but I can have more fun. I inch close to him, waiting until the tip of my blade is past his guard. He’s not paying attention to distance, and though I’m slow on the takeoff, I spring for-

ward and hit him before his blade has a chance to move mine out of the way. 13–6. Another tantrum, but by now it's gotten old.

We move into distance of each other again. I retreat a step and leave my arm dangling at my side, openly defiant. At this point I could go for the double-touch, that is, let him hit me as I hit him. The fact that we'd both get points doesn't mean much when I'm this far ahead. I want to keep it clean, though, and keep it clean I do, retreating with my arm extended as he charges me. I nick him in the arm. 14–6.

Endgame

NOW I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT LOSING. At one point away, I can be brash. My opponent, his mind temporarily cleared by the very fact that I'm about to win, has the same thought. He angles for my arm, and I parry wide, not thinking about what comes next. But he's ahead of me, circling his blade under mine, and wonder of wonders, goes for my knee. I have just enough time to retreat a step and angle my blade toward him before he comes crashing into me.

I get him in the clavicle, which slightly arrests his motion. I'm sure to keep the weapon loose in my hand so I don't drive it into his shoulder, my arm arcing upward with the force of his body. He does the same, but he's misjudged his momentum. Instead of perforating my patella, the tip of the blade slides off and straight down my shin, pushing the sock down and very nearly taking off the top layer of skin. We end in a tangle of limbs and pain, my elation at having schooled the kid blunted by the fire on my leg.

But I'm still in good spirits as we salute each other and shake hands. After he cools down a bit, I go over and congratulate him on a match well fought. His face lights up with a smile and we chat amicably about fencing wounds being like badges of honor. At the end of it all, what makes fencing like this great is how it draws people together, despite its bellicose nature. Swords and camaraderie, what more could one ask for?

