

KSU Geography & Anthropology

Figure 1: Emblem of the three fencing weapons

If at First You Don't Succeed, Remise, Remise, Remise: Hierarchy and Identity Among Fencers

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ABSTRACT

Most Americans exposure to fencing comes through the movies, brave heroes dueling for their lives upon some far away land. Due to the unpopularity of the sport, fencing is highly misunderstood and under acknowledged. The academic literature on fencing is comparably sparse. Little is known about how fencers identify and organize between their respective clubs. This research illustrates that there is more to fencing than picking up a weapon and knowing how to score a point or win a bout. Several clubs within the metro Atlanta area were observed and interviews were conducted to understand this tight knit, yet poorly understood, subculture. Some clubs denied the researcher access. Such denial was limiting to the overall scope of the study, but also provided valuable insight into the hierarchies in question. The results of the research suggest that within fencing clubs, the hierarchy is a combination of social prestige among coaches and peers at the higher levels in spite of the available rankings based on skill. On many occasions, the identity of the fencer is directly tied to their coaches and the unique styles that come directly from such exposure. Understanding the power structure and configuration of fencing, and those involved with the sport, may allow for a better comprehension of similar structures in other sports.

INTRODUCTION

Fencing clubs are close knit and thus the power structures within them are vital to make sure the club continues to run smoothly and bring in new fencers. Just how these hierarchies are designed and how they come into being helps define the club and the fencers within them. It is essential then to also focus on just how fencers identify with their club, which is directly linked to who is in charge and why. All fencers have their individual identity as a fencer as well as those things that characterize them as a member of their club. But there are also titles and false identities placed upon them from those outside of fencing. Their true collective identities are significant because they both divide and merge fencers, which illustrates the complexity of fencing due to area, coach, skill level, time, and politics.

METHODOLOGY

The sampling frame for this research was two fencing clubs, Touché Fencing Club* and Woodstock Fencing Club*. With the clubs being so small and the researcher already being a fencer within both, sampling was purposive. Participant observation was conducted during the 2-3 hour practices of the advanced class, with a total of 18 classes observed. Three unstructured interviews were held with Carl Hunt*, Evan Brown*, and Martha Smith*, all fencers that participated in both clubs. Several conversations or unstructured, informal interviews were held with the coach. Toward the end of the research project, 11 surveys were distributed among the fencers of the Touché Fencing Club. In addition to practices, the researcher also observed and participated in two competitions over the duration of the research. This permitted information to be assembled about other clubs and their fencers through the demonstration of coach and pupil interactions and the interactions between clubs.

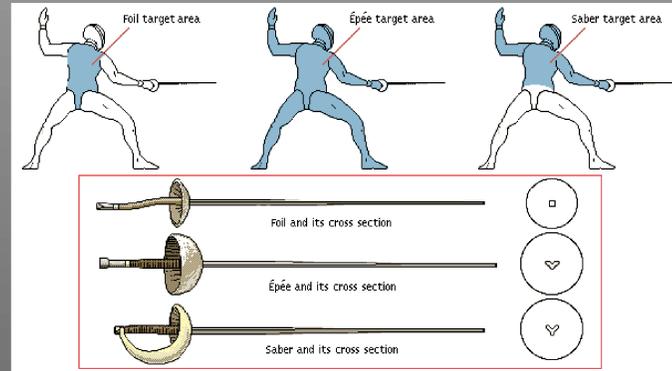


Figure 2: Diagram showing the three weapons and the different target areas for each.

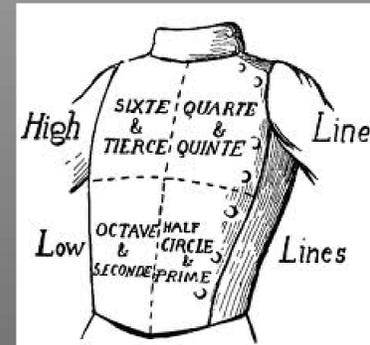


Figure 3: Diagram showing the different parry zones.

“Fencing is more like a martial art than a mere sport. You must be in balance with yourself and use your opponents strength against them.”



Figure 4: Tunisia's Azza Besbes cries on the floor following her quarterfinals defeat in the Women's Individual Sabre.

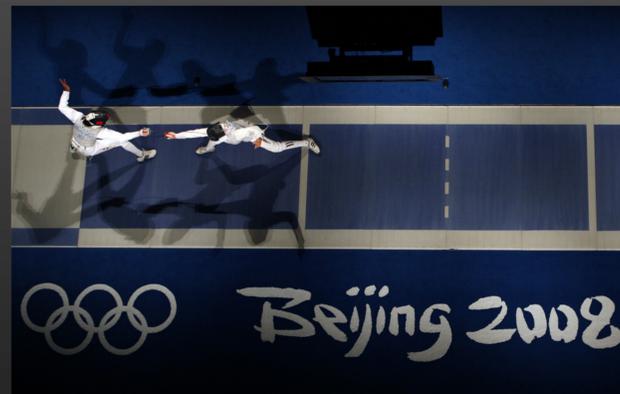


Figure 6: Indra Angad-Gaur of the Netherlands (L) competes against Egypt's Iman El Gammal during the Women's individual Foil elimination.



Figure 5: USA gets bronze against Russia in this foil match.

“My epee is bigger than yours...”

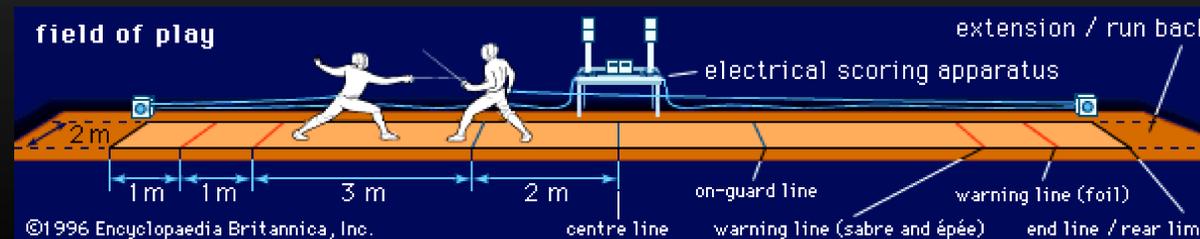


Figure 7: A diagram of a fencing strip and the different dimensions.

FINDINGS

It was found that the hierarchy and identity of fencers are deeply rooted in several aspects of the sport. The coach tended to be positioned at the apex of this hierarchy, as was seen at the Woodstock Fencing Club. However, it was found that the popularity of the group, or more importantly, of the coach, placed an individual in a position of power and influence just below if not right beside the coach. This was found to be the case when all of the fencers ranked the captain of Touché Fencing Club as the person in charge. This was interesting because the captain was not the most skilled and when decisions have to be made for the club, it was up to the officers not the captain to decide. Thus the captain, who fences at both clubs studied, was close to the coach which permitted extra fencing time and other advantages for the captain.

Identity among fencers tended to be attributed to intelligence as a necessity within the sport alongside athleticism, which allowed for competency in competitions and a rise in rank. As heard from the Coach Sean* during practice one day, “This is 90% a psychological sport, if you can control your opponent, even before you step onto the strip, then you win. It’s once you lose yourself that you can lose without even realizing what happened.” This comment demonstrates the kind of frame of mind needed to not only win a bout but raise in rank.

However things like clothing, fencing style, and language divided fencers. Fencing style originates from the club and specifically the coach they are under. Language was another important aspect that verified differences between clubs. Though two fencers can get together and talk about fencing, if one fencer came over to another’s club they could quite easily misunderstand the terminology of that club. Under Coach Sean* is imperative that his fencers know the differences between counterattacks 1, 2, and 3, and hand motions almost like baseball signs from coach to player, so that on strip there is no lack of accurate communication. This language seems to be developed for that very reason, to divide the fencers so that there is clear communication between coach and pupil without allowing outsiders to understand.

CONCLUSION

Fencing is becoming available to a broader audience and with it, it is important to give more people the chance to try this sport for themselves, and to dismiss the assumptions and misunderstandings that sometimes follow. Since the researcher was an established fencer already when this research began she was denied access to some clubs due to the fear that recon would occur. Fencing is heavy in politics and you can be blacklisted purely because you are under a specific coach. This unfortunately happened during this research. Further research then needs to be done to get a better terminology list from other clubs to discover how their members interact with each other inside and outside the club. There were also very tight time restrictions, consequently research from a non-fencer would help clarify any unseen biases that were undoubtedly accumulated within this research.

* Names of the clubs have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

*Sources for Figures 1-7 and references are available upon request.