

Just the Tip

Julian Ajello exchanges his writing pen for a sword in his first attempt at fencing. Photos by Charles Barnes



“BEING ABLE TO RAISE IT ABOVE YOUR head and swing it at another person makes it the most emotional of the weapons,” says fencing teacher Rina Guzman of her favourite weapon, the sabre.

Among the many martial arts are dueling arts, including fencing, which employ the use of various types of swords — the foil, the épée and the sabre. The foil and épée are thrusting blades that may only score points with the tip. When fencing with the foil only the torso may be targeted while the épée may strike any part of the body. The sabre may attack any part above the waist save the hands. Additionally, the sabre may score with the edge as well as the point.

When she started training in her hometown, she began, as most students of fencing do, with the foil. It provides a sound foundation for the blade work needed to master the sport and is, according to Rina, a more technically precise weapon than the other two. Footwork is another necessary component that requires a great deal of practice. When the basics are met the student can begin to learn tactics and strategy.

When Rina moved to Saigon from the Philippines she brought her love of fencing with her and now works with the Saigon Fencing Club. In addition to fencing with the club she has an arrangement with RMIT to use space in one of their gymnasiums to instruct groups. Her classes

focus on basic moves and footwork as well as terminology and are open to all ages and levels.

Now with some of that explained, it was time for my first fencing lesson. I put on a mask and glove and picked up a foil. After acclimating to its strange grip we began by going over the footwork. The move into attack positions, retreat from an attack, and the lunges require precision, balance and more than a bit of grace. Sadly, I think I was shortchanged at birth. I never viewed fencing as a strenuous sport, but after spending a good deal of time in a semi-crouched position and moving back and forth continuously, the calves and hamstrings are the first muscles to start stinging.

o Foot Loose

Once the footwork was understood it was time to move on to blade movements. I think most of my generation secretly wanted a light sabre growing up. While a foil isn't quite the same thing, it was a good deal of fun. The mask concealed the smile that crawled across my face as I heard the metal of the blades collide. Learning the basics of swordplay and how to parry, block and counter an opponent was highly entertaining.

With the fundamentals out of the way Rina and I began to fence. Practicing either footwork or blade work on its own is challenging. Using them together with

strategy and tactics is overwhelming. Trying to remember how to counter and parry while maintaining my balance kept my head swimming. So I did the one thing I remembered best, I lunged. Rina mentioned that oftentimes students are reluctant to hit other people in the beginning. That wasn't a problem for me. Striking someone with a metal sword felt freakishly good. The part that temporarily escaped my attention was that I wasn't the only one with a sword.

The area in which the matches occur is two metres by fourteen metres. It's a constant back and forth in a narrow alley that allows for no lateral movement. Just how tight the quarters are becomes readily apparent when attacked by a superior opponent. After becoming comfortable enough to have fun, Rina reminded me just how little I knew. If it weren't for the mask my jaw might have hit the ground in response to how quickly and efficiently she was able to counter an attack and put the tip of her blade anywhere she wished.

“I have an innate warrior spirit that wants to hit people,” she explains. For her it is that drives her to succeed. As for her belief that an innate desire to hit people lies at the heart of her success in fencing, I for one believe it.

For those interested in fencing lessons or the Saigon Fencing Club please contact Rina on 0908 750840 or email her at rina.marie.s.guzman@intel.com. 

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