

## Journal of Western Martial Art

by Ken Mondschein



As with most things in the martial arts, the story of fencing is not a simple one. If you ask one person to tell you what "fencing" is, he might tell you that it's a modern sport. Ask a second, and she might describe fencing as a five-hundred-year-old martial tradition. Yet a third might mention Zorro, Cyrano de Bergerac, and other fictional heroes. All of these explanations are, in their own ways, correct. Therefore, the question becomes which fencing we are speaking of? In his article, we will seek to tell the story of the Western European tradition of swordsmanship, from its beginnings to how it is practiced today.

### **History**

Swordsmanship, of course, has existed for thousands of years. Egyptian wall reliefs from about 1190 BCE illustrate bouts using protective equipment, and the cultures of the ancient world, such as the Greeks and Romans, set up systematic schools of instruction for their youth. Likewise, medieval warriors, from Charlemagne's paladins of the eighth century to the Crusaders of the eleventh century, no doubt learned their martial skills from their elders, and passed them on, in turn, to their juniors. However, specific techniques can only be traced back to the late Middle Ages, for this is when the first surviving book on the subject was written. This manuscript, catalogued in the British Library as I-33, was written in about 1300 by a churchman in southern Germany. The text is in Latin, with illustrations depicting a priest and his student performing various techniques with sword and buckler (a type of small shield). It seems that the monks of the Shaolin monastery in China were certainly not unique in pursuing matters both spiritual and martial.

During the Middle Ages, schools of swordsmanship comparable to those of feudal Japan arose throughout Europe. These were sophisticated and deadly battlefield arts, all designed to dispatch an adversary or adversaries as quickly as possible. Schools and masters of arms taught weapon and empty-handed arts suitable for use in any situation: mounted or on foot, in armor or unarmored, against one adversary or in a melee. One favored weapon was the German langshwert or Italian spada da una mano e mezza, known in English as the longsword or bastard sword. This was a light, straight, double-edged cutting-and-thrusting sword, meant to be used in two hands. The use of shorter swords, daggers, armor-piercing weapons such as poleaxes, and specialized weapons, such as spiked shields used for judicial duels, was also taught.

Notable medieval masters included Johannes Liechtenauer, who is credited with founding the widely influential and long-lived German school of swordsmanship, and Ott, a Jewish wrestling master who served the noble Hapsburg family of Austria. Ott's style of unarmed defense resembled the jujitsu of the Japanese bushi in many respects. The pragmatic art of close combat in the West favored neutralizing the opponent swiftly through joint locks and takedowns. Unlike

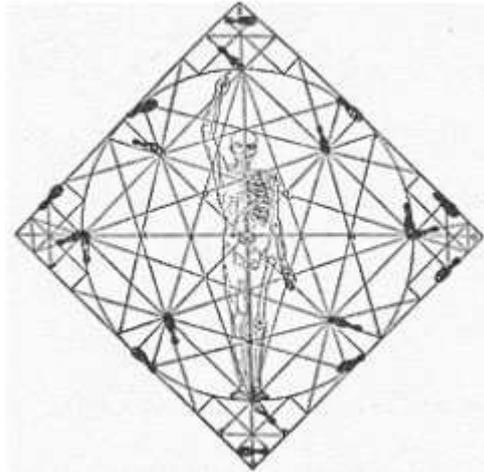
modern karate or tae kwon do, there was little emphasis on kicks and punches in the medieval fighting arts, though these certainly did exist.

The story of fencing as it exists today, though, really begins in late fifteenth-century Spain, for that was where the custom of wearing swords with everyday civilian dress was most widespread, and where the first known schools of specialized instruction in a civilian style of swordsmanship existed. Beginning in the 1530s, we also find treatises on civilian swordsmanship being published in Italy. The schools of use for these relatively light, single-handed weapons, the Spanish *espada ropera* (or "dress sword"), and the Italian *spada di lato* ("side-sword," in the sense of a "sidearm"), were not very much changed from the earlier, more military styles. However, in 1553, an Italian architect, philosopher, and amateur swordsman named Camillo Agrippa published a book that would prove widely influential. Agrippa's *Trattato di Scientia d'Arme* ("Treaty on the Science of Arms") advocated a rationalistic approach to swordsmanship. This book made many lasting technical contributions to the art of civilian swordsmanship.

For instance, prior to Agrippa, colorful mnemonic names for guards and stances, such as the *porta di ferro* ("iron door") and *posta di donna* ("lady's guard") were in common use throughout Europe to describe positions taken for attack, defense, or to invite an attack from the adversary. To some degree, these paralleled the stances or positions taken by Japanese swordsmen. Agrippa replaced these descriptive names by a simple system of four guards, numbered sequentially from the position the hand naturally takes when the sword is drawn from the scabbard: *prima*, *seconda*, *terza*, and *quarta*. This system, with additions, is still followed today.

Agrippa also placed great emphasis on using the point, which, he argued, is superior to a cut, since an object moving in a straight line will reach its destination faster than an object traveling in an arc. This idea would prove greatly influential in the development of fencing. As in Japan, swordsmanship remained an essential part of the education of every gentleman, and the sword was a required dress accessory for certain social classes. Unlike Japan, where the katana was the all-purpose sidearm of the samurai, a specifically civilian weapon emerged in Europe. From Agrippa's time on, we begin to see the first uniquely civilian sidearm, the rapier, come into its own. A rapier is a long, single-handed sword constructed primarily for thrusting. Though sometimes carried by gentlemen serving in their country's armies, its unwieldy length, limited cutting ability, and considerable cost made this practice more a mark of status than a wise choice in battlefield weapons.

Changing social attitudes, as well as the practicalities of using a long, agile blade, saw grappling techniques diminish in importance, though not entirely disappear, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. So, too, did other technical aspects change. By the late 1600s, various national styles had become well established throughout the nations of Europe. Italian fencers used a long blade, often in conjunction with a parrying dagger held in the non-dominant hand. As time went on, footwork became increasingly linear, though circular and angular motions, as well as various evasive actions, were also practiced. The Germans followed the Italians in many things, but favored blades with more developed cutting edges, and also kept up the use of older weapons, such as the *langshwert*. The Spanish, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, developed a sophisticated and deadly school of fencing, *La Verdadera Destreza* ("The true art and skill") based on humanistic philosophy.



La Destreza, today often erroneously called the "Spanish Circle," "Magic Circle," or "Mysterious Circle," used geometric concepts to train the mind of the fencer. The French, meanwhile, favored a blade that, as time went on, became increasingly shorter, quicker, lighter, and almost edgeless.

This French version of the rapier eventually came to be called the smallsword. The French kings founded an academy in Paris, and the masters-at-arms there enjoyed a teaching monopoly. Both because of the effectiveness of a lighter, more agile blade, and for reasons of international style, the French school of fencing became widely influential throughout Europe. Smallsword fencing is the direct ancestor of the most common styles of fencing of today.

## The Classical Age

Following the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, the sword, and emblem of the aristocracy, was no longer worn with civilian dress. However, the practice of dueling did not cease, though the code that governed such occurrences grew more elaborate. For this grim purpose, the French devised the *épée du combat*, a dueling sword used for thrusting only. The Italians followed in this, and also favored the dueling saber, a light cut-and-thrust weapon. The Germans favored a somewhat heavier saber. Fencing with the foil, originally a practice weapon for the smallsword, continued to develop into a sophisticated art that let swordsmen use their technical mastery of all the techniques of killing in a context where injury was highly unlikely.

This "classical age" was really the fullest development of the art. While fencing has changed quite a bit since the nineteenth century, it had reached a recognizable form by this time. Though fencing, like dueling itself, became more formal, forbidding the use of such techniques as disarms, the skills of fencing always remained grounded in reality. Duels were serious affairs, and not infrequently ended with disfiguring or fatal results. Likewise, disarms and other "rough play" continued to be taught, if not used, and have passed down to the present time in certain traditional schools.

By the late nineteenth century, the three classical fencing weapons had become established and were used in international competitions. These weapons were the foil; the *épée*, fitted for non-lethal purposes with a three-pronged safety tip (the *pointe d'arret*); and the blunted fencing saber. Other weapons, such as the cane (French: *la canne*), the *grand canne* or two-handed stick, bayonet, quarterstaff, and singlestick, an Anglo-American substitute for the saber, were also commonly practiced for sport and self-defense, though they are rare today.

Fencing was an integral part of the first modern Olympics, and the FIE, or Federation International d'Esgrime, was founded in Paris in 1906 to oversee rules and standards for international competition. These rules codified French fencing practice into the international standard. Under the FIE rules, the foil scores touches only to the torso. Double-hits in foil are resolved using a concept known as "priority," often commonly referred to as "right-of-way," that originally evolved to emphasize defense over suicidally counterattacking. Saber allows the entire upper body as a target, though at one time it also included the leading leg. Saber fencing also uses the concept of priority to resolve double-hits. The épée, which allows touches to the entire body, has no such rules, and is considered a more perfect mirror of the duel.



Alongside these three weapons, though, legacies from the past remained. Sword and dagger was still commonly taught in places such as Naples and Sicily, and, in 1888, a team of women fencers from Vienna put on a demonstration of "Neopolitan" in New York City. Likewise, two-handed sword fighting survived in the French and Italian forms of grand canne, and even as late as the 1930s, an attempt was made to revive the old school of German longsword as part of Adolph Hitler's volkscultur movement. These martial artifacts are still alive today. Not unlike the koryu bujitsu, or feudal warrior arts of Japan, they are handed down from master to student, and remain a vital, though increasingly rare, part of Western martial culture.

## Fencing Today

Today, on the cusp of the twenty-first century, the vast majority of fencers participate in the sport of fencing, also variously called Olympic fencing, competitive fencing, or electric fencing. As much as the teaching of kendo and judo in Japan is standardized under the Japanese Ministry of Education, so, too, is the FIE the central organizing body for competitive fencing. The governing bodies in other countries, such as the United States Fencing Association, which oversees such aspects of competitive fencing in the U.S. as insurance, rankings, and the selection of the Olympic team, all comply with the standards and rulings of the FIE.

As in any sport, the objective is to win, which is accomplished by scoring hits, or touches, as they are termed in fencing. All competition fencing weapons make use of an electrical scoring apparatus. When a hit is scored, an electrical circuit is completed, setting off a scoring light. Exactly what constitutes a valid hit is determined by the rules established by the FIE, and may be rather abstract, bearing little resemblance to what a fencer would do if his life were actually on the line. In épée fencing, for instance, a touch to the foot sufficient to set off the electric scoring machine is a valid hit, whereas the counter-thrust to the attacker's throat that arrives an instant after is not counted as valid. The relatively safe nature of the sporting weapons makes actions that would be unthinkable with sharps quite effective in competition. Likewise, though martial arts such as kendo and judo maintain rituals and etiquette descended from their feudal forbears, the rituals in competitive fencing, such as the salute and the handshake after the bout, are often almost perfunctory.

However, there is also a growing minority of classical fencers who seek to preserve fencing as it was practiced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in all its sophistication, but also in a manner consistent with the realities of dueling with sharp weapons. Part of this is an attempt to preserve the rituals, etiquette, and mindset that have come down to us from the past.

Classical fencers see fencing as a martial art, and argue that, without a connection to the age when dueling was a reality, and constant reference to the realities of using sharp weapons, fencing loses its meaning and becomes merely a sporting event played with expensive equipment under rules incomprehensible to a non-initiate.

There is also a significant number of historical fencers, whose numbers have been growing in recent years. For reasons of historical interest, tradition, or romanticism, historical fencers concentrate their study on weapons that historically predate the three classical weapons. Some historical fencers practice weapons such as longsword or sword and dagger in traditions stretching back centuries. Masters versed in these arts, however, are few and far between. Other students of historical fencing attempt to reconstruct the practice of lost weapons arts from written evidence and practical experience.

Finally, theatrical fencing should not be neglected, since it is an art unto itself. Indeed, much of the interest in fencing is generated by superbly executed scenes such as the duels in *Rob Roy*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *Dangerous Liaisons*, both choreographed by the legendary William Hobbs. However, the aim of theatrical fencing is quite different from that of classical, historical or sport fencing. In any of those disciplines, the objective is to enter into the adversary's distance, preferably in a subtle, deceptive manner, and hit him. In theatrical fencing, the actor seeks to maintain a safe distance, to show the audience clearly what is happening, and to keep his partner unskewed. It therefore requires a very different mindset.

For further reading, we recommend classic works including Egerton Castle's "Schools and Masters of Fence," Arthur Wise's "Art and History of Personal Combat," Richard Francis Burton's "Book of the Sword," and Baron Cesar de Bezacourt's "Secrets of the Sword." Some excellent recent publications include J. Christoph Amberger's "Secret History of the Sword," Sydney Anglo's "Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe," and Mark Rector's "Medieval Combat." For those interested in finding instruction, excellent online resources include the Martinez Academy of Arms homepage at [www.martinez-destreza.com](http://www.martinez-destreza.com) and Kim Moser's classical fencing resource page at [www.kmoser.com/classicalfencing](http://www.kmoser.com/classicalfencing). This article was originally published in [Fightingarts.com](http://Fightingarts.com) and re-published in JWMA with permission from both author and [fightingarts.com](http://fightingarts.com).

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