



ON GUARD!

*Sugar Land Fencers
Embrace Challenges of the Sport*

Written by Tonya Ellis Select Photography by Marisa Hugonnett

The swashbuckling action of fencing may conjure up images of the Three Musketeers or Zorro, but aficionados say it's more than just the sport of fairy tales. In Fort Bend, the game of physical chess is beginning to flourish. The challenges of the game can quickly sharpen a player's mental and physical acuity. "It's a fantastic sport that makes you use your mind and body," says Manuel Rodriguez, a coach at the Missouri City Fencing Academy. "It's sometimes considered physical chess."

Fencing through the Ages

Fencing is a type of swordplay that has been around for centuries. Egyptian carvings dating back to 1200 BC depict fencing bouts. Modern-style fencing began in Spain in the 1500s, and the fighting technique quickly caught on. In the 16th century, more noblemen were killed in fencing duels than in war. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the sport grew in Europe and became less deadly, as lighter swords were developed and face masks came into use.

Fencing made its way to America via French and Italian immigrants in the 1860s, and was an included sport in the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. Today, it is a safe leisure sport enjoyed around the globe.

Swordplay Strategy

Fencers score points by touching target areas on opponents. They wear protective gear on their bodies and faces that includes electronic sensors. The sensors light up and register points when touched by a sword.

Fencers compete in matches or "bouts" using one of three weapons:

Foil - This is a light, rectangular, 35-inch blade. To score points in foil, fencers must touch an opponent's torso with the tip on the sword.

Epee - This weapon is the same length as the foil, but twice as heavy. Competitors must use only the tip of the sword to touch an area of their opponent's body.

Saber - This weapon is the same length and weight as the foil, but fencers can use the tip and cutting edge. The target is from the opponent's waist to the top of their head.

Safe Sport

Enthusiasts call fencing the safest sport around. "Fencing has the lowest injury rate of any sport combined," says Rodriguez. "It's something adults can do without worrying about a lot of injuries." Cheryl Collins says she had no fears when her son John, age 13, caught the fencing bug. "All their weapons get checked prior to bouting," she explains. "What I also like is that both boys and girls, men and women can fence. All different age groups and physiques can participate."

Fencing classes run \$70 per month, and equipment costs \$100 to start and \$200 for competition gear. Most competitive fencers practice three times a week. It takes about three months to be ready for low-level tournaments. Kids as young as 8 can fence. Currently, fencing isn't included in Sugar Land school sports programs, but classes at the Missouri City Fencing Academy can be used for Fort Bend ISD physical education credits.

Atypical Athletes

Fencers generally aren't your average athletes, says Rodriguez. "Usually, kids who are drawn to the sport are kids who don't fit the normal school-type activity - the sports where you have to be super tall or super big," he says. "They are drawn to the mental, as well as the physical challenge."



Known as physical chess, fencing can help improve mental acuity



Fencers wear protective gear with electronic sensors that light up when touched by a sword

Kharmyn, Ally, John, Kaden, Chris, Maks, Jeffrey, and Zarina are all fencing students at Missouri City Fencing Academy



This was also the case with John Collins, his mother says. "We kind of went that whole route with other sports, and I was just trying to find something that might hold his interest." John likes competing in tournaments best. "The kids have to know a lot of rules, and they have to strategize while they are bouting," he says. "It's a mentally challenging sport." SLM

TONYA ELLIS enjoys freelance writing and spending time with her husband and three children.



When competing in bouts, fencers can use an epee, a foil, or a saber as their sword

5 Fencing Facts

- Athletes competed in fencing in the original Olympic Games in Greece
- Fencing is only one of four events included in every modern Olympic Games since 1896
- Fencing is conducted on a narrow mat to replicate combat in confined quarters
- The tip of the fencing weapon is the second fastest moving object in sport, behind the marksman's bullet
- Famous fencers include Jimmy Buffett, Madonna, Tom Cruise, and Catherine Zeta-Jones

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Fencing is one of the safest sports around and is great for athletes of all ages




Ally Ryf, 12, regularly competes in fencing matches



French and Italian settlers introduced fencing to the U.S. in the mid-1800s

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