

Why Do Renaissance Fencing?

By: Baron Henry the Fox, AA, OGR
Provost Lochac Royal Guild of Defence

The most interesting, and often most difficult question to answer, especially for the practitioner of Renaissance fencing is, why fence? What is the use of fencing? Why bother going to all the effort? In a way, points have to be conceded to this sort of questioning. It is an “outdated” style of combat, which belongs to a period up to 500 or so years ago. There are no gold medals at the end of it, unlike sport fencing, and not to mention the many confusing issues that abound with the recreation of this martial art. This is a question of outsiders to the fencing community and members of the community also. The question is often best answered by each individual practitioner. But we can highlight some general points of relevance in answer to this perplexing question.

There are many influences, which may cause a person to become interested in fencing, these all have an impact on the individual. The media, especially in regard to movies often influences people in this. A person may see a movie and become interested due to the flair, which is shown by the characters in the movie. With special attention to rapier combat, movies such as “The Three Musketeers”, “The Mask of Zorro” and “The Musketeer” all show rapier combat as a combat art with much skill. Unfortunately, these movies do not show the hard work that is required to develop such a level of skill.

People are also influenced by friends and family, especially those who are already involved in groups which do fence. A person may become influenced by the skills demonstrated by a relation or friend. Others may become interested because of a search for something new; these people often have a background in sport fencing and wish to explore new skills. Still others are interested in fencing because of the different styles and approaches, which are possible, and some become interested because of a level of competition that is not found in other sports.

A person’s own individual values and passions also influence a person’s interest. Values that are expressed in rapier combat and not so much in other combat arts. Others simply develop a passion for the arts of their own culture, and especially those from older times. It is often these passions and values, which will sustain a person through the long process of training.

Rapier fencing not only teaches new skills but also teaches control, among other things. It also teaches a new approach on how the world should be viewed through the teaching of the social elements that are important. Rapier combat also teaches strategy, strategy which is not only useful when fencing but also in other aspects of one’s life. These things that fencing teaches are of benefit to all, and not just those who fence.

The reasons for learning to fence are many. Some people learn to improve their fitness, and rapier combat does supply some of the requirements for this. Some people learn to gain a new set of skills, and fencing does teach those. The reasons for learning to fence are personal, but learning how to fence does teach many things. Fencing gives both intellectual

and physical pursuits. On the intellectual side, fencing teaches new ways of thinking, and opens many avenues for intellectual research, and these often improve the physical side. The physical side is much more obvious in the skills, which are learnt and used. Rapier combat especially is much closer to a combat art than sport fencing and it does supply a lot of the intensity without the downside of physical harm. Fencing teaches gracefulness in its movements, style in its actions and finesse. These all translate into things outside of fencing.

Renaissance fencing, when it comes to tournaments is competitive. The important thing that needs to be questioned here is why a person should win. There are reasons for this, and each must be considered. Winning can supply a sense of achievement, and an enjoyment of victory, this must be tempered with grace and consideration. It can supply recognition from fellow fencers and this is also a good thing. It can elevate a person's esteem and prestige; there is a certain amount of glory achieved in winning. Most of all, it demonstrates excellence in a combat art and performance of the skills that have been learned.

With winning comes responsibility. The winning of the tournament may not confer responsibility, but the method of winning the tournament in the first place. What is important here? The method by which you win is important. A person who wins with brute skill and force will not be as respected as a person who wins with grace and style will. It is the influence of the "perpetual gentleman" which changes a person from a duellist into a gentleman. To exhibit courtesy to one's opponent displays a certain good nature, which the rapier combatant should possess. This will be influenced by a person's values, and will develop a view of the person by others. This consideration of courtesy should be at the fore whenever a person takes the field in tournaments or in sparring. Is it not more of an achievement to win with grace, style and courtesy than to win by brute force? This should be at the forefront of every rapier combatant's mind. We are attempting to recreate a gentleman's art, so shouldn't we also act like gentlemen in the execution of this art?