

'THE ART OF THE SWORD'

By JAMIE PILARCZYK

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While they could take on swashbucklers, pirates, Zorro and even Errol Flynn, the Tampa Bay Fencers are a pretty peaceful group.

They practice twice a week at the Northdale Recreational Center, honing their skills to pinpoint precision with moves that are made, or supposed to be made, with split-second thought.

The group of about 20 members practice for several reasons. For some, it is a long-awaited opportunity to try something they have always wanted to do. For others, to improve enough to make it to competitions.

For Matt Lisa, 16, joining the Tampa Bay Fencers was a suggestion from his mother who noticed a flier hanging in the center, which is just west of the intersection of Northdale Boulevard and North Dale Mabry Highway.

"At first, I thought it'd be easy," said Lisa, a sophomore at Sickles High School and a Citrus Park resident. "But it's hard and takes a lot of work."

Lisa was only on his second day of the sport last Monday but said he could already feel the workout in his legs.

"Fencing uses a lot of leg work," Lisa said.

Done on a 6-foot-by-40-foot strip, the duel is comprised of touches so fast they are scored electrically in competitions. The idea is to score a certain number of points before the opponent does, and depending on the type of sword fight — epee, sabre or foil — touch-





Above, Eric Paracka, left, a two-year veteran who placed 54th out of 254 in the national competition this summer, gives Matt Lisa some tips on how to better his posture while fencing. At left, the Tampa Bay Fencers, numbering close to 80, vary in age and skill level, from 10 to older than 60 and from beginners to maestros. At right, Damien Lehfeltdt, 15, left, started fencing after learning about the sport from a Swedish friend. Tamisan Latherow, 20, right, likes the history of the game.



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es that count are in a marked area on the body, such as just the chest and back or everything from the hips up to the head.

A big part of the physical side involves lunging, which can reintroduce fencers to muscles they had long forgotten, said Louis Marsh.

"Guys aren't meant to lunge. Especially 47-year-old guys," said Marsh, laughing. He joined in February and has since lost 20 pounds. "The first couple of weeks I was crying."

Marsh makes the drive from Apollo Beach with his niece, Kaydee Gay, so the two can spend some time together.

"I think I watched Zorro too

much as a kid," Marsh said. "I've always wanted (to learn fencing.)"

Along with the physical side, the greater aspect of fencing involves the mental challenge of knowing what the opponent is going to do and how they will respond to the moves in advance so that a counter move will defeat them.

"It's physical chess," said Eric Paracka, 15, who is an avid sword collector and was introduced to the sport two years ago through a birthday present from his father — lessons in fencing.

Paracka made it to the national competition in Atlanta this summer and

placed 54th out of 254 competitors. His parents drive him to the Northdale complex from their New Port Richey home every week.

"If he keeps going, in my mind he could be an Olympian," said instructor Terry Abrahams.

And Abrahams should know. She finished second in the national competition in the women's veterans division for women ages 50 and older and will be competing in the World Fencing Championships in Tampa on Labor Day weekend.

Abrahams, 65, isn't the only champion in the club. Mikhail Sonkin, who moved to Carrollwood 10 years ago from the

Ukraine, was the champion fencer in his country in 1961. He started fencing in middle school when a teacher mentioned the game and 43 years later, Sonkin still has a passion for it.

"It's the best kind of sport," Sonkin said.

Don Conrad Uy of Northdale rounds out the leadership in the club, serving as the main instructor.

Uy learned how to fence from a mentor who took him under his wing. When his mentor passed away from cancer, Uy made a promise to never quit fencing.

"This is a way to give back, to return the favor," said Uy, 34.

While the instructors at Tampa Bay Fencers are certified by both the US Fencing Association and the US Fencing Coaches Association to teach Olympic-style fencing, they have also been trained in the French and historical styles.

Membership costs \$25 a month and includes group and private instruction and unstructured practice. The Tampa Bay Fencers meet from 7 to 9 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays. Children may start as young as 10 years old.

For more information, contact the Tampa Bay Fencers at its Web site, www.tampabayfencers.com.