



CANDACE C. MUNDY/Tribune photo

Mike Agner and Bob Harder, members of Fencers of Tampa Bay Club, practice fencing touches.

Fencing offers young, old a slice of life

Age is not a factor for 74-year-old Bob Harder, who trains fencers around the Tampa Bay area.

By SEAN C. LEDIG
Tribune Staff Writer

TOWN 'N COUNTRY — When they first clashed two years ago, Don Conrad Uy thought he could take the old man easily. But after they crossed swords, Uy's confidence was short-lived.

"I felt like my arm was being torn off," recalled the 25-year-old after fencing with Bob Harder, 74.

Since then, Uy, now ranked third in foil and fifth in epee in the state, followed Harder from his former fencing club and helped found Fencers of Tampa Bay in October, which meets at 7 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays at the Jackson Springs Recreation Center, 8620 Jackson Springs Road, and Thurs-

days at the Northlakes Recreation Center, 2650 N. Lakeview Drive.

Harder trains his students in all three fencing weapons: foil, epee and saber. In foil fencing, fencers can only thrust with the tip of their weapons into the torso while epee can be thrust anywhere on the body. Saber fencing allows thrusts and cuts anywhere above the waist.

Harder, a retired philosophy professor from the University of Tampa, said he was attracted to the "romanticism" of fencing.

"I was 15 years old and had just read Dumas' "The Three Musketeers," Harder said. That summer, while practicing gymnastics at the YMCA in Burwick, Pa., Harder saw a fencing class and was hooked. Later, while attending the University of Pennsylvania, he became the 1942 collegiate epee champion.

In 1944, he went to France in one of the last waves of the invasion of Normandy. Harder considered the assignment a blessing that helped further his fencing skill.

"After the invasion, I was assigned to

Paris as a 'red-tape cutter,'" Harder said. "On my first night in Paris I was walking down the street and came upon a fencing salon. The instructor was an ex-French army officer. Because he was grateful to the Americans and because I could fence and speak some French, he fell all over me."

Harder later learned he had stumbled into one of the greatest fencing schools in France. Harder's instructor, Maurice Gardere, was a renowned French fencer and inventor of the Gardere grip, once a popular handgrip for foils and epees.

Following several severe asthmatic episodes eight years ago, Harder retired from UT and decided to get back into shape.

"I had turned into a couch potato and I weighed 260 pounds."

Getting back into fencing helped Harder shed 80 pounds and now he doesn't intend to retire from fencing anytime soon.

"I'll probably give it up when I'm 100," he said.

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against it and went to the phone."

them," Doss said.

Fencing a sport for young, old alike

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Age is not a major factor in determining whether someone can fence, said Ted Afield. The 17-year-old is the seventh-ranked saber fencer in the country, and is in training for the Junior Olympics in Little Rock, Ark., next month.

"This is a sport you can do at any age. Even though I'm younger, [Harder's] experience can win out against a superior athlete.

"Fencing is a mental game as well as physical," he added. "It is basically speeded-up chess."

Mike Agner, 35, agreed, adding physical strength alone will not make someone a good fencer.

"For fencing, you need to be light and sensitive, not big and full

of power," he said. "I need to develop finesse and get rid of brute strength."

While Harder believes fencing can be done well at any age, he said he wants to draw more young people into the art.

"They are the future of the art," Harder said. "The popularity of fencing is always going up and down. Maybe more fencing movies, like that new 'Three Musketeers' movie will bring them in."

Harder said he is grateful for young people who now are fencing and enjoys sharing his experience and knowledge with them.

"People in their 60s and 70s have a lot of wealth to share but there are no takers. It is a marvelous thing to be able to grow old and find that people still want you."