

# For those who would; Start Something

By Drew G. Kopf

As the news got around that gunshot wounds could kill, swords and swordsmanship stepped to the rear of the "everybody's-doing-it" bus. Until then, everybody who was anybody, and a great number of "nobodies," like us commoners, learned to keep their foil points on target while avoiding opposing ones. Hundreds of years of meticulously developed "dueling sword" etiquette was hastily adapted for dueling pistols.

The transition was awkward and never quite completed. A gun was far faster than a blade but lacked the artistry, creativity, and therefore provided less of an opportunity for a sense of accomplishment. "Defending one's honor at dawn" degenerated into "shootouts at high noon." As gun range and accuracy increased, what "honor" was left in dueling fell victim to a shot in the dark from snipers in ambush.

Fortunately aficionados studied and maintained the artistic and mentally stimulating aspects of sword fighting, while all but eliminating its baser side. We have, preserved for us, the color, romance and challenge of one-to-one close physical combat with 99 percent of its wound potential carefully distilled out. Vulnerable, as it has remained for centuries, however, is each contestant's ever-exposed ego.

Light, blunted, flexible "weapons" are used to "touch" rather than "run through" or "slash open" opponents. Safety masks, jackets and gloves provide protection from the impact of "touches" by "enthusiastic" beginners and mistakes even the experienced might make.

Acknowledging fellow contestants, officials and spectators by formally saluting them helps link participants with their predecessors of ages ago and the code of chivalry. The primary objective, "to touch one's opponent," is kept in clear focus by limitations established to clarify "on target" touches, which score, "off target" ones, which do not, the boundaries of combat called "the strip," and per-

missible tactics. Safety is uncompromisable. Body-to-body contact and roughness of any kind are punishable infractions. Modern day touches are "given" rather than inflicted.

Searchers for worthy competition have only to step onto "strips" leading to regional, national and international events. The World Championships and the Olympic games loom as awesome mountains ready to challenge the most well prepared and eager climbers who seek a glimpse of "the view from the top."

Who are these searchers, these climbers, these seekers of grand views? Are they the Christopher Columbus's, the Lewis and Clark's, and the Sir Edmund Hillary's in each of us? Perhaps.

To wrench ourselves free from becoming "just a number," which we were allowing ourselves to do in the 1960's, as the electronic computer came of age, the "me generation" emerged. "This 'n that" power, the inner game of "this 'n that," "this 'n that" consciousness raising group, consumerism, chauvenism, feminism, and dozens, if not hundreds, if not thousands of self-improvement courses, books, tapes, programs, and activities told us we were "ok" and urged us to be ourselves.

The unprecedented flowering of individual sports featuring the "me" in each of us has crescendoes from hula-hoops to isometrics, to "bowling is family fun," to new bicycle paths, to "run for your life" jogging clubs, to "get in the swing with golf," to downhill, slalom, cross-country and water skiing, to tennis everyone to the reinstituting of the "Friday Night" fights, to jumping gymnasts, and to the growing idea that "the thrill of victory" is more than something to hear on radio, read in papers, see on T.V. or watch from the sidelines.

The "me generation" is presently addressing itself to "the agony of defeat." Dead or battered, broken bodies are becoming too high a price for brief moments of exaltation. Life has no "instant replay button." We do not get to do it again. Injuries and deaths may only

be prevented, never undone.

Traditional athletic programs highlighting high risk sports are reeling under increasing insurance premiums and negligence law suits. Communities and education experts are evaluating physical education components in current curricula. There will always be "professionals" willing to literally "play their guts out" to entertain people who may later enjoy questioning the authenticity of such "big time" sports spectacles.

For those who would know, first hand, "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," without great risk to personal safety; for those who would think for themselves, not about what others might

think' for those who would be playmaker, quarterback, "anchorman," center forward, line backer, goalie, pitcher, batter, lightweight, welterweight, and heavyweight champion, regardless of their weight, or their height, or their reach, or their age, or their size, or their sex, or their speed, or of physical handicaps they may have; for themselves or for others, for those who would start something, there is Fencing.

Drew G. Kopf teaches and coaches fencing for Dutchess County Community College, State University College at New Paltz, and Vassar College, and has "started something" in the Mid-Hudson Valley.