

The Grand Assault: A Classical Fencing and Weapons Tournament

By Mark Jacobs

Even for a martial arts [weapons](#) enthusiast, observing the sport of fencing can be frustrating. Watch it and you're usually left scratching your head attempting to figure out which person scored. Looking at the athletes for a reaction doesn't offer many clues, either, because both competitors inevitably jump up and down after every clash, pumping their fists in the air to sway the judges. Such displays are an exercise in futility because the scoring is electronically controlled. So while participating in fencing can be fun, viewing it is like watching raindrops fall and trying to decide which landed first.

When I heard about a fencing tournament named the [Grand Assault of Arms](#), however, it aroused my curiosity—so much so that it overcame any hesitation I felt and caused me to venture to Manhattan for a look.



(Photo by Michael Su)

[The Association of Historical Fencing](#) traces the origin of the Grand Assault back to 19th-century France, where newspaper advertisements described “a time when everything is made grand—Grand Review or Grand Minister.” In its modern incarnation, the two-day affair draws classical fencing enthusiasts from all over the East Coast and encompasses four types of weapons: foil, epee, saber and a wooden sword called a “singlestick.” At the event I attended, several rare styles of Western weaponry were also demonstrated, notably the 5-foot-long staff, the wooden cane and the French dagger.

Although the dagger is seldom seen nowadays, tournament director Ramon Martinez explained that it was used by gentlemen in Europe and the New World well into the 20th century. With an overall length that could reach 17 inches, it was undoubtedly effective.

“My teacher’s teacher, Marcel Cabijos, fought an exhibition match with the American national champion in the 1920s and beat him using a 12-inch dagger against a 3-foot epee,” Martinez said.

In an effort to restore some of the martial qualities exhibited by such fencers in the past, classical fencing dispenses with electronic scoring devices and relies on judges instead. Officials are stringent about what's deemed a point. Whereas the goal in sport fencing is to score before your opponent does, making it more of an offensive game, classical fencers think defense first because they imagine the sword is a real weapon and naturally don't want to get hit by it. Strikes that would be deemed points in modern tournaments aren't recognized in classical fencing if the attacker is struck by his opponent immediately after landing his attack.

Despite this, the rapid action in the foil and epee divisions was nearly impossible to follow. Fencers seemed to clash so simultaneously that the ref often had to explain what he'd seen before asking the judges to render their opinions. In a twist that reflects the supposed defensive nature of the competition, fencers didn't score points; rather, they had points scored against them. Much like in baseball, once you had three strikes accumulated against you, you were out.



(Photo courtesy of Mark Jacobs)

Putting the classical art even more at odds with its modern counterpart—or almost any other modern combat sport—competitors were expected to demonstrate their honor by calling points against themselves, pausing and tapping their foot on the floor.

It wasn't just lip service being paid to sportsmanship, either. In the saber competition, Kim Moser may have cost himself the gold medal when his opponent, Don Conrad Uy, landed a slash that didn't convince enough of the judges to be immediately scored. But Moser signaled to the referee that it was indeed a good hit, so the point—and eventually the match—went to Uy.

“Calling points against yourself is partially an expression of honor,” Moser explained. “But you're also out here to learn, and it doesn't help to try and fool anybody when you are hit.”

As for Uy, he went on to win the gold in the saber and foil divisions. A former sport fencer who's making the transition to classical fencing, Uy has an extensive background in modern competition that seemed to benefit him because he appeared to be the quickest and most aggressive guy on the floor.

“I've been fencing for 20 years, but classical fencing is closer to the style I prefer,” Uy said. “Here, you try to hit and not get hit. In sport fencing, that concept gets lost. But I do think there's some benefit from both—sport fencers can learn from classical fencers and classical fencers can learn from sport fencers.”

What a spectator could learn from the singlestick division is that when someone swings a big hunk of wood at you, you get out of the way. An unusual competition rarely seen outside of classical gatherings, singlestick uses a cutlass-type weapon. A 3-foot-long piece of straight wood with a basketlike hand guard, it makes use of a ring rather than a narrow fencing strip, which allows the competitors to circle and employ angular footwork. Any part of the body above the knees (except the groin) is a valid target.

Although all fencers wear helmets and chest protectors and most opt for elbow and knee pads, the wooden weapons can still deliver a satisfactory whack when they land.



(Photo courtesy of Mark Jacobs)

Producing the most intense and crowd-pleasing action of the day, the division was won by a self-proclaimed “pirate” fencer from Connecticut named Matt Green. A one-time kendo practitioner and sport fencer, Green decided that the pirate life was more to his liking and researched the traditional use of the cutlass, teaching himself how to wield it and testing his theories in private matches that were a bit rougher than the Grand Assault.

“I’ve done a lot of fighting and think I tended to hit a little harder than the other competitors,” Green said.

Whereas most of the singlestick competitors held their sword in a classical saber position, with the tip pointing toward their opponent’s face, Green opted for a more unorthodox position, with his sword hand held high and the tip pointing toward his opponent’s feet. Called the hanging guard, it seemed to throw his adversaries off.

Green scored several clean hits by moving the tip of his sword backward and over the top, coming down on his opponent’s helmet or swinging it in a horizontal circle to strike from the side. “I wasn’t that familiar with the rules, so I just concentrated on hitting and not getting hit and let the rest take care of itself,” he said.

Singlestick, French dagger, sabers, dueling swords—what’s not to like? Now if they can just explain who scored with those darn foils.