



By the sword

Fencing might not be your first thought when considering a new sport, but it's surprisingly easy to get started. Just make sure your wits and manners are equally sharp



Words: Tanya Jackson Illustration: Rob Bailey

It's quite something, watching a one-to-one fencing lesson. Unencumbered by the wires, boxes and beeps of a normal practice session, the nimble footwork and thrust-and-parry of two people locked in battle but retaining impeccable manners and self-control is certain to resonate with the romantic in everyone.

And rightly so. There is a reason why Alexandre Dumas's enduring musketeer tale is revisited by Hollywood with every new generation, attracting megastars including Douglas Fairbanks, Michael York, Gérard Depardieu, Jeremy Irons and Gabriel Byrne. The sport, which came from the French nobility, is infused with the principles of etiquette, honour and good manners. As such, those who become proficient in it imbue those qualities – hell, even Oliver Reed looked dashing

with a sword. But, of course, it offers much more than just the chance to revisit childhood fantasies.

'When you fence, you have to think,' says five-time British champion James Williams, who has been putting a student through his paces in a tutorial at City Fencing Club in Greenwich. 'You can't simply fight. If you want to develop, you have to understand that it's more than just "Wallop!" It's actually, "I'm going to wallop you... [he waves his hand elegantly] like that.''

Williams speaks with the ease and confidence of someone at the height of his fitness; however, physical prowess isn't an absolute requirement: the skill of fencing demands quick wits and agility, developing flexibility, balance, coordination and intuition. It also requires an unwavering focus, which means that combatants don't necessarily

notice the 450 calories being burned up each hour. Picking up a sword is probably one of the most effective and rapid ways to tone up the lower body, particularly the stomach, thighs and bottom.

The sabre, Williams's blade of choice, is one of three weapons that have their own sparring methods – the others being the épée and foil. The épée (the French word for 'sword') is a thrusting weapon used to spear an opponent in any part of their body. The foil is its lighter cousin, designed as a practice weapon for épée and sabre, and combining some of the qualities of both.

The sabre is the cutting weapon passed down through the centuries by the French cavalry. Of the three methods, sabre is the most recognisable. It is in this that film stars train for swashbuckling roles. Sabre is also the most energetic method,



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the battleground running to 10 metres, enabling participants to shuffle crab-like at great speed.

'Yeah, sabre's for the younger ones,' says Jacqueline Hibbert, secretary at London Fencing Club, near Old Street. One of about 5,000 female fencers in the UK (the gender split is equal in this sport), Hibbert represented her club in this year's World Veterans Fencing Championships, in France. Not bad when you consider that she first picked up a blade just eight years ago.

'One of the best things is watching students learning the skill and, sometimes, becoming good quite fast,' says London Fencing Club manager Tim Gadaski. 'It's great seeing the way that new people interact with each other.'

Gadaski's club offers taster sessions in which beginners can borrow all the kit they need to try

out the sport. It also organises team-building events, fencing trips and social functions.

If you're put off by the prospect of spending even more time away from home, you might be interested to know that people of all ages are welcome to the 'piste'. The City and London clubs are two of the many across the capital that welcome both children and adults. Fencing can do wonders for a child's self-confidence, fitness levels and balance – not to mention provide relief from stress during exam time.

'People take up the sport for different reasons,' says Williams. 'If you get red mist, you react, so people will try and wind you up. They want a reaction and will use it against you. But when you're fencing, you're in control – you can use it as a tool to support yourself and be more resilient.'

Getting kitted up is surprisingly inexpensive. Leon Paul is the industry-standard brand, and starter kits begin at just a few hundred pounds, rising to around £1,000 for a top-of-the-range sabre kit. Weapons are generally around £100, so the degree of equipment one-upmanship is kept to a minimum. There's also a strong social element to fencing: sweating, shouting and venting your frustrations with the same group of people creates a bond you won't get from doing 40 lengths in the local pool.

'In the club, we're a family, and people chat,' adds Williams. 'Don't get me wrong, though – when you get high tension, it's full on! But there's etiquette in fencing. You shake hands. Win or lose, you always shake hands.' ● cityfencingclub.org; londonfencingclub.co.uk