

The Other Wild West: Fencing in New York in the 1880s and After

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2001

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Austrian Women's Rapier
Team (1888)

(Art courtesy of
Metropolis Fencing)

“Honneur aux Armes!” is the inspiring inscription over the entrance to a fencing academy in Broadway near Forty-third-st., the Salle d’Armes of Regis Senac, formerly Maître d’Armes in the Grand Imperiale of France. Covering the four walls of the Salle is a glistening array of rapiers, broadswords, duelling-swords, and foils. In the middle of the room stood yesterday the master, teaching two of the jeunesse derée how to open up vistas in the body of an imaginary opponent, when a tribune reporter entered just in time to “wave back the shadow of death to come.” . . .

“What is the value of learning the art?” asked the reporter.

“It equalizes circulation by forcing the whole body to be in action, it quickens one mentally, trains the eye to be alert, and-pardon me, Monsieur-it teaches one to keep his temper under control.”

—From the New York Tribune, January 6, 1883

New York in the 1880s was rapidly on its way to becoming the cosmopolitan metropolis of today. Already, it was a world-class city, where Old World culture met American new money. Though it is well known that fencing was all the rage with Parisian gentlemen at this time, there should be no surprise that,



in keeping with the fashionability of things from the Continent, there was also a healthy interest in the art in New York. In the Tribune interview with Senac, for instance, the Maître indicates that “we average 100 pupils a year, for the most part among the people of leisure. Actors and actresses occasionally take lessons for stage purposes, or merely to discipline the body into flexibility.”

Even if the Tribune (one of the more highbrow papers of the day) ran only some two dozen articles on fencing through the decade, the fact that this pastime was mentioned at all in a paper that had only twelve pages speaks of some special significance. Indeed, until 1887, the compiler of the index of subjects covered in the paper seemed to think that “fencing” deserved its own category, rather than having it grouped under “sporting,” as were rowing, cricket, and lacrosse. Plainly, to the editor, something about “the art of the foil” made it stand out—it was not a game, it was art. Though of interest perhaps to only a small fraction of the paper’s readership, it was nonetheless near and dear to the hearts of the upper crust, and thus deserved mention.

The interview with Maître Senac¹ begins the series, and is plainly intended to give the reader an introduction to this fashionable pursuit. Indeed, the whole reads amusingly like the modern “frequently asked questions” lists published on the Internet. Queries include: “And how soon can one become an expert in the art?”; “Isn’t there a certain amount of danger in the use of the foils?”; and “But the expense of an outfit?” Some things, apparently, have never changed.

Senac’s was not, of course, the only fencing school in the city. The other was headed by one Captain Hippolyte Nicolas (or Nicholas), who taught a “method partly borrowed from the Italian school but principally original” at the “New-York Fencing Club on Twenty-fourth St.,” which institution is still in existence. An article comparing the two schools, dated February 22, 1885, is, on the whole, is rather well-informed. Maître Senac’s method is, of course, praised as most orthodox and correct, representing the classical French school at its finest. “There is but one school, and this school has but two fundamental principles: to touch one’s adversary and not to be touched one’s self.”

Conversely, Captain Nicholas’ teachings may have been less orthodox, but are nonetheless fascinating. He preferred his students to hold the foil with the arm extended and the point ascending, which is in keeping with a southern Italian style, but with the hand in tierce (the Italian *terza*), since in that position “a greater leverage is obtained upon the sword of one’s adversary.”² This last detail is unusual, but it is characteristic of an earlier Italian style, more in keeping with schools of rapier or smallsword use. Parries were executed entirely through circular motions: one in tierce; one in quarte. Footwork was similarly conservative, with the students standing closer together and rarely lunging. On the whole, Captain Nicholas appears to have taught his students a modified version of an old-fashioned form of Italian fencing that had not changed much from the days of Rosaroll and Grisetti. Of the latter two masters, Egerton Castle has said that their play “retains many of the characteristics of the rapier fence of the seventeenth century.”³

The reporter draws the final conclusion that the true artistic temperament was taught at Maître Senac’s, while Captain Nicholas seemed to be more popular, at least with the *hoi poloi*. Indeed, though the *salle* of the former could boast a hundred pupils in 1883, by two years later, the Fencer’s Club had thrice as many members. (Of course, it would be logical to assume that even the proles of the fencing world were likely to have been upwardly mobile *petit bourgeoisie*, at the least in this period.)

Much has been made of the rivalry between the Italian and French schools in this period. On May 29, 1886, at a benefit for the Italian Benevolent Society at Tammany Hall, a name long synonymous with political powerbroking, the event that caught the *pape’s* eye the most was an exhibition between Maître Senac and Errico Casella. Indeed, though the evening’s entertainment had included several other



performances, the headline the Tribune ran the next day (May 30) read:

FENCING IN TAMMANY HALL.

THE CHAMPIONS OF AMERICA AND OF ITALY MEET
---THE HONOR OF AMERICA SUSTAINED.

Casella was known as “the champion swordsman of Italy,” while Senac had won both the title of “Champion of America” and the city’s heart three years prior, apparently in the tradition of the determined immigrant making good in the New World. Though there was no winner, per se, in the match, the reporter’s observations of the differences between the two styles are illuminating:

. . . Senac’s style was characterized by his pistol-shot lunge, combining the precision of a rifle and the agility of a wild cat. The Italian lunged little, never developing his whole reach. The Frenchman’s parries and counters were as small as a young girl’s finger ring; the Italian’s play was larger, though quick and correct. The salute over the fencers adjusted their masks and prepared for serious work. For an instant the points of the foils flashed as they played about each other; then with a lightning-like sweep Senac placted [sic] his foil upon the Italian’s breast. It was the first touch, and would have been the last had there been no buttons on the foils.⁴

This was not the only bout between champions of the rival schools to take place in New York. In 1906, Lucien “Merigia” [Mérignac], the “French fencing expert, who is called champion of the world” successfully defended his title against Guiseppe Galante, “the Italian champion.”⁵ The rather close match was scored as a prize fight, with Mergina winning two bouts to one, and the remaining five called as draws. Though the play must undeniably have been top-quality in nature, the fencing was also undeniably defensive in nature, with as little as one touch, and sometimes none, being made in a three-minute period. Apparently, Maître Sarnac’s mandate “to touch one’s adversary and not to be touched one’s self” was still honored two decades after his having uttered it.

Almost a year after the his contest with Casella, on March 29, 1887, the Tribune records another match between Maître Senac, no longer a “Frenchman” but “the well-known fencing master of this city,” and one Louis Treuchet, “recently come over from Paris.” The contest was for “the championship of North and South America” and the princely sum of \$1000. No less a venue than Cosmopolitan Hall hosted the event, and the prize money itself speaks of significant underwriters. Even if the gallery was mostly composed of fencers and other sportsmen, there were not a few luminaries among the crowd that the newspaper account reads almost like the Society page.

The assault took the form of two rounds with foils, each lasting fifteen minutes. After the second round, the score was tied, 11-11.

. . . Then followed the assault with rapiers. It lasted also fifteen minutes, and points told on all parts of the body, and the cold steel rang with a wicked clang as now thoroughly aroused contestants clashed together for fame and victory.

With swords from the start Senac did not seem as much at home as his antagonist whose dodging and leaping and twisting, while not quite so “correct” as the manner of Senac, enabled him to “get there” with unerring accuracy. Troughert scored 6 points to Senac’s 3, thus winning the match and the championship by the small majority of three points out of a total of thirty-one.



Alas, this time, the hometown hero was defeated. (As for the choice of weapons in the third round, J. Christoph Amberger points out, “rapier” was common 19th-century parlance for the *épée du combat*.)

Another public showing, though fought for lesser stakes, is yet more interesting so far as the subject of historical weaponry goes. On April 22, 1888, the *Tribune* again records an exhibition, this time performed by nine swordswomen visiting from Austria and Germany who “gave an interesting exhibition of fencing with foils and sabres, and of Neopolitan fencing with sabre in one hand and dagger in the other, a new thing in this country,” though apparently one not unknown-and not unpracticed by females-in Europe. Several of the women are mentioned as being “pronounced accomplished swordswomen by experts present.”

Sabers in the nineteenth century were true cut-and-thrust weapons, heavier and stiffer than the modern ones, weighing and handling more closely to their historical antecedents than to the featherweight modern electrical saber. Barbasetti himself remarked “the [Italian] sabre . . . is but a modification of the ancient *épée* with two cutting edges, and continues without interruption the traditions of this weapon.”⁶ In the context of its use in a Germanic country, anything from to an old-style dueling saber to a *schläger* might have been used. Most likely, the weapon was weighted for the cut, not the thrust, even though the *épées* used in that day were heavier, albeit better balanced, than their modern sporting counterparts. If the women and their teacher, Professor J. Hartel, were truly using sabers, perhaps it was because, to their minds, there was virtually no difference, and, in any case, no viable alternative.

However, the photo of the ladies at the right seems to show them posing with foils, which offers two possibilities: the picture was staged with substitute weapons (a distinct possibility), or that reporter was mistaken. If the latter, then the ladies perhaps fenced “Neopolitan” sword and dagger as taught in the French academy, as Angelo showed in his famous eighteenth-century treatise.

Additionally on the subjects both of women in fencing and historical weaponry, on May 4, 1888, at the New York Fencer’s Club Ladies’ Day reception, the gallants bouted before their guests not only with foils, but also with “broadswords,” “duelling swords,” “sabre and bayonet,” and “single sticks.”⁷ The practice of weapons other than the usual foil and saber seems to have been common in the city in both a martial and a sporting context. Senac himself taught “a little instruction in the use of a cane for defence.”⁸

Though Maître Julia Jones, whose long and distinguished career at Hunter College spanned a good part of the twentieth century, is well known, there were also female fencers in New York (aside from the aforementioned visiting Teutonic valkyries). As far back as 1883, Maître Senac mentions that “ladies sometimes take lessons with the idea of reducing their flesh by the necessary activity of the play.”⁹ However, the first newspaper mention of women as active participants, rather than passive spectators, is some twenty years later, in the ladies’ section of the *Tribune* on Wednesday, April 25, 1906. Miss Virginia Verplanck won the Stimson Cup, donated by one Margaret Stimson, in the annual competition between the members of the junior ladies’ class of the Fencer’s Club. Finally, “after the fencing tea, sandwiches, ices and cakes were served from a daffodil laden table by Miss Stimson and Mrs. Ethridge.” The scene might be somewhat banal as far as modern feminism is concerned, but it is significant that women’s fencing was important enough to be considered a “society” event. What relation, if any, the arming of women has to their eventual enfranchisement will have to be the subject of another study. (It need hardly be said that there is no record of women practicing weapons other than foil.)

Also in later years, following the First World War, the interest in fencing seems to have overspilled the society pages and into general interest. Apparently, the idea of the swashbuckling fencer, no doubt helped along by the new art of cinematography, had become firmly en-trenched in the minds of the public. For



instance, in 1922, two notable events made the news. The first is that page one of the second section of the *New York Herald*, on Sunday, January 15, reported Allio Nadi and Lucien Gaudin's plans to decide their long-standing rivalry with a match. As is well known, Gaudin defeated his opponent, who had made the challenge. Amusingly, there was concern voiced in the article that the match not take place, as "it would be likely to reduce fencing to the lower level of professional sports."¹⁰

Similarly, on October 15 of the same year, on the front page of a Sunday edition, the *Herald*, along with other international happenings, reported Greco and Sassone's famous duel before Fox studio cameramen. After seven assaults and a half hour, the duel ended with a punctured wrist suffered by Sassone. The whole, which was based on professional rivalry, might very well have been a publicity stunt save for the very real blood that was spilled. Still, the maestri might very well have been movie stars, escaping their adoring fans by back doors in order to go by car caravan to the movie studios, where they got down to the serious work of the day.

While professional sports are obviously very much in the headlines of today's newspapers and television broadcasts, mentions of fencing are rare. Apparently, neither the aristocratic emulation of the gentleman of the nineteenth century, nor the swashbuckling enthusiasm with which anyone could follow Greco, Sassone, Nadi, and Gaudin as they might follow Douglas Fairbanks or Babe Ruth, have a very wide appeal today. Editors seem to think the public at large is more interested in other sports, and indeed, the ideal has perhaps moved away from the pastimes of aristocrats and gentlemen, and towards the tastes of the middle class that have dictated popular culture since the Second World War. So, too, modern fencing does arguably lack much of the interest that might be generated if the lives of the swordsmen occasionally hung in the balance.

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Notes

1 Regarding Senac, sword historian J. Christoph Amberger has found the following information:

“Regis Senac, the father of Louis Senac, was for many years instructor of fencing in the French army. . . . M. Senac came to the United States in 1872. Shortly after his arrival here he won the fencing championship of America in a contest held at Tammany Hall, New York. He established a fencing school in 1874. In addition to his wide experience as an instructor, Regis Senac also found occasion to put his fencing ability to more serious purposes. In France he participated in three duels and in each encounter was victorious, escaping without a single scratch, while every one of his opponents was seriously disabled.” From Senac, Regis and Louis, *The Art of Fencing*, New York: American Sports Publishing Company (Spalding’s Athletic Library), 1930, p 3.

2 New York Tribune, February 22, 1885

3 Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence* p. 249. See also, Castle, chapter 12, and Gaugler, *History of Fencing* chapter 4.

4 New York Tribune, May 30, 1886

5 New York Tribune, February 28, 1906.

6 Luigi Barbasetti, *The Art of the Foil*, p. 266

7 New York Tribune, May 4, 1888

8 New York Tribune, January 6, 1883

9 New York Tribune, January 6, 1883

10 New York Herald, January 15, 1922

