

Fencing builds body, mind and self-confidence

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On a scale of cool, fencing tops most sports.

Hollywood's helped mold the image of the witty, athletic swashbuckler from Errol Flynn in "Captain Blood" to Johnny Depp in "Pirates of the Caribbean."

Hang out with members of the Huntsville Fencing Club and you'll see a camaraderie that recalls the friendships and fun of "The Three Musketeers." But stay around to watch them fence and you'll witness focus, dedication and discipline that remind you that modern fencing developed from the deadly art of the duel.

With some 45 members ranging in age from 12 to 72, the club has its roots in the MARS Fencing Club started by Marshall Space Flight Center engineers in the 1960s. Two of the founders of the first Huntsville club in the early '70s, John Jordan and Joe Dabbs, helped start the current incarnation.

Some members began early. Karl Kiesler and Jeremy Connor, both 13, have been fencing a couple of years. But Mike Greene didn't start until his 40's.

Karl's mom, Charlene Kiesler, says her son was always "whacking things, pretending to be a pirate" before she signed him up for lessons. She likes the exercise he's getting but even more the discipline and patience he's learning.

Some members arrived with notions gleaned from the silver screen.

"I thought it would be all slashing and poking," says Danielle Green, 17, a home-schooler. Charmed by scenes of swordplay in "The Princess Bride," she began fencing at age 11 and started competing at 14.

"It's harder than I thought," she says. "You have to follow form. You have to be in shape to compete."

Benerson Little, the club's instructor and a fencer for 30 years, touts the sport's physical benefits.

"It works aerobic and anaerobic endurance because you're constantly moving, or you should be constantly moving."

Because fencing works one side of the body more than the other, he recommends running and weight training, especially for competitive fencers.

"It's going to build your speed and reaction time like no other sport," he says. "Fencers, at least elite fencers, have the fastest reaction times of any sport in the world and that includes martial artists."

Little says fencing also "expands your perception" because "there's a lot of things you have to pay attention to."

Fencing's a great way to get in shape, but you don't have to be in great shape to begin fencing.

The club's Web site (www.huntsvillefencingclub.org) reassures: "You need only a few basic physical abilities, a willingness to learn, and the capacity to use your head."

In fencing the strongest athletes don't always win.

"It's not all about force. It's about technique," says Kirstin Anderson, 17, a Grissom High senior who's fenced for three years. "It's more of a dance between two opponents, one trying to outsmart the other one."

Jonathan Thrasher, 24, an engineering lab technician and University of Alabama in Huntsville student, says he's come to appreciate fencing as a kind of physical chess match.

"I think I totally underestimated how complicated it is," he says. "You really have to be thinking ahead of your opponent. People speak of a full-body workout. This is a full-person workout."

And your thoughts must be as fast as your moves.

"You can't stop to think about what you're doing," Little says. "If you do, you'll get hit. You want to get to the point where you don't have to think consciously - be aware of what's going on and think tactically."

Little believes fencing's complete engagement of body and mind can teach lessons that carry over into all aspects of life.

"If I had to sum up what I'd like to see fencing do for fencers it would be to develop self-reliance, self-motivation, self-sufficiency, self-respect, and respect for others," he says. "I'd like fencers to learn not to be intimidated by anyone, to be able to look anyone in the eye, to develop insight, to understand that there is usually more than one solution to any problem, and to never give up trying, no matter the odds."

HFC meets at the Huntsville Athletic Club Tuesday and Friday nights and Saturday afternoons. Visitors are welcome. Contact the club through its Web site for information on classes and other details.

The club offers beginning group instruction in foil and advanced individual instruction in foil and epee. Both foil and epee are thrusting swords, but foil targets only the torso while epee targets the entire body. A new beginning class is set to start this month.

HFC is one of four groups comprising the Alabama Division of the United States Fencing Association. Others are Salle D'Armes Bosco in Toney, Birmingham Fencing Club and Shelton State Corsairs in Tuscaloosa.