

## **John Jordan's Memoir of Fencing and the MARS and Huntsville Fencing Clubs**

By John R. Jordan, September 15, 2008

It is hard to say that there would have been a MARS Club at NASA and subsequently a Huntsville Fencing Club as we know it today except for the fact that in 1953 while at the University of Tennessee, Billie Sager Jordan, John Jordan's wife, answered an add in the *Knoxville Sentinel* announcing a fencing class at the local YMCA.

Billie decided that the sport was too physical, but John stayed because of the challenge and the level of instruction available. The challenge was from an attractive young lady who fenced foil and fenced it well! From the outset the young lady could touch John with her foil and score a point wherever she pleased, no contest. That reversed later. The higher level of instruction available was from a retired fencing master from Detroit and an Olympic saber fencer from Hungary by the name of Zothmary on the teaching staff.

John remained active in the sport at the Antiaircraft and Guided Missile School, officers' basic, in the fall of 1954 through spring of 1955, and at Eglin Air force Base under the tutelage of a retired Air Force officer by the name of Elmer Woolen, from 1955-1963.

Perhaps there was one "single event" that kept John active in the sport and interest high enough to organize a MARS Fencing Club at NASA in Huntsville, Alabama, after transferring there in 1963. The MARS club would transition into the Huntsville Fencing Club as we know it today after John retired in 1981. While at a Florida Statewide meet at Miami Florida in the late 50's, John had his first and sudden introduction to the epee by the local club president and tournament chairman. The meet chairman took a special interest in John while watching him fence foil with a patented "explosive attack" while "decked out" in his homemade orderly jacket with cloth buttons. The chairman asked John if he was going to fence epee. John replied, he would consider it but did not own an epee. The chairman was quick to reply that he would supply the weapons and a quick lesson to get John up to speed. Little did John know that the chairman had invited the Cuba national epee champion (a lawyer who belonged to a country club where he played golf and fenced) to the meet. There was also a young Frenchman there, with his wife and children, who had his own fencing master drilling him with "circular parries" just before the meet started. There were 8 or 9 fencers in epee. They decided to have each fencer fence all other fencers on three different strips. Non-electric epee was played in three touch bouts with a sharp three prong tip attached to the practice epee by winding dental floss around and through the three sharp tips and around the tip of the practice epee, which had a tip that looked like the head of a 10 penny nail. The wrapping continued until the sharp points barely protruded through the tightly wound dental floss. Also, in order to score a touch each fencer had to apply tooth paste and dye to his tip before each touch.

John had two advantages against the classical epeeist. The first was that an older fencing master in his 70s was directing, and he had a hard time seeing a time differential when John unleashed the foil style explosive attacks. The second was the confusion of the other epeeist when John used foil basics against their more conservative epee basics more attuned to a dueling sword. At the end of the round robin John and the Cuban national champion were tied and had to fence off to determine first place. John had lost one double defeat to the Cuban during the round robin and

the Cuban had lost one bout. In the final bout with the Cuban, John fenced him to a double defeat and was awarded first place by virtue of the defeat the Cuban had encountered versus the double defeat that John had encountered, during the round robin. That win kept John coming back. John still has the old orderly jacket with rips and tears from the sharp tipped epees of old.

Soon after arriving at NASA in 1963, John put an ad in the *Marshall Star* seeking people interested in the sport of fencing. Joe Dabbs and Fletcher Kurtz, our only left hander, were among the first responders. We organized a NASA MARS Club and about a year later Elias Katsaros showed up fired up and ready to go in epee coming off of a 2nd place finish in Greece. Over the years from 1963 to 1981 Joe, Elias, and John usually qualified in the Alabama Division for the nationals in one or more weapons. All three attended the 1972 nationals, and Joe and John attended the nationals again in Hollywood, Florida. All three also taught classes to students at Grissom High School, Chaffy Elementary School, and Mountain Gap Middle School.

After John retired in 1981, the Huntsville Fencing Club was organized to broaden the field for new fencers beyond the few NASA guys who founded the club.

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