

Fencing at UI: A dance of 'physical chess'

Club encourages members in self-discipline, speed and skill

By Kate Baldwin

Daily News staff writer

Dancers and engineers don't have much in common — unless they are facing off in a fencing match.

"Three feet of steel is a great equalizer," said Bob Behal, coach of the UI fencing club.

Students in the University of Idaho's Vandal Swordplay Club learn the assets of strength and strategy, hallmarks of the sport that is often compared to physical chess.

"With a sport like fencing, it's not really out there for people to watch or hear about," said John Porter, the club president and an electrical engineering senior.

"We tend to divorce ourselves from people who talk about dueling," Behal said. "There is certainly a romantic aspect and many love watching 'The Princess Bride' and 'Cyrano de Bergerac' but movie fencing is done to look flashy. "The movements in modern fencing are much tighter and much quieter. I only want to hear one sound — touching the opponent."



Behal

The point is to stay away from the opponents' weapon, whereas in movies, the point is to hit weapons because it's more theatrical, Behal said.

Some newcomers are shocked to learn otherwise.

Porter remembered stumbling across the club while looking for information about the university's snowboarding club. He attended a few meetings and got hooked.

A traditional club will not let students touch a foil for six months after they start, Behal explained.

"We're not quite that bad," he said. "We tend to put people through several days before they get to try to use a weapon."

"Our best hook for getting people is to let them watch a good bout, because that shows them this is completely different than anything they saw in the movies," Behal said. "The speed and concentration of two good competitors draws a lot of folks in."

"A good phrase in a foil bout reminds you of a good tennis volley."

Porter compared the sport to a puzzle.

"You're putting pieces together and trying to figure out what you're going to do and what the other person is going to do," he said.



Roger Ames/Daily News

UI fencing club members Byron Wong, left, and John Porter.

"It's the most intellectually demanding sport I know ... you have to use your mind and always be two, or three, or four steps ahead," Behal said.

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Fencing

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In fencing, players use strategy to draw their opponents into pre-meditated actions. In other words — they bait them.

"You spend time trying to get your opponents to react to you in a way you want them to — to open up or attack in a certain way," Behal said.

But it's also extremely physically demanding.

"It's won or lost with legs. The ability to score or defend yourself is pretty much defined

IF YOU GO

■ **WHAT:** The Vandal Swordplay Club

■ **WHEN:** 6 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays

■ **WHERE:** UI campus, Physical Education Building's small gym

■ **INFO:** E-mail <fencing-club@stuorgs.uidaho.edu>

by how close you are to your opponent," he said. "If I can get close enough I can touch them. If I get too close they can hit me."

Dancers tend to make good fencers because the activities

use a lot of the same muscles, he said, and distance is defined by "how well you move your legs." Still, it can be relaxing.

"I wouldn't say you're turning your brain off, but certain moves become instinctive," Porter said. "A lot of it is what you feel in your hand and in your weapon, and that feeling kind of tells you what you need to do."

At the same time, he said, it can also be challenging, such as when his coaches give a lesson and run him around. "That can be very mentally exhausting."

Another top fencer, Byron Wong, tried team sports like soccer and basketball but con-

tinues to return to fencing.

"You have to learn to rely on yourself and depend on yourself," said Wong, another UI senior in electrical engineering. "And the outcome depends on you only."

There is nothing but thin air between you and your opponent, he said.

"If you can pick up different styles and habits and predict your opponent, it's very likely you'll win," Wong said.

Kate Baldwin can be reached at (208) 882-5561, ext. 239, or by e-mail at <kbaldwin@dnews.com>.