

NEWS

Fencing academy stresses sportsmanship, resilience in all-épée tournament

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Kieran Sziede had tried basketball. He tried football, as well as soccer. But he said none of those sports provided the same outlet that fencing did. The young épée fencer — who turned 12 years old on Friday — shared some of what drew him to the sport as two peers traded parries and ripostes nearby Sunday at Cardinal Fencing Academy in Sterling.

Sziede said he had fun with the sport, and that “If I ever get mad, I could just release it in fencing.” He said he’d been fencing for about half a year at the time of Sunday’s tournament.

He was one of five participants in the tournament for 12- to 14-year-old competitors held at Cardinal on Sunday. A tournament for fencers aged 11 and under was held at 9:30 a.m., followed by the 12-14-year-old group at 1 p.m. and a 14 and older squad at 3:30 p.m.

Organizers intentionally allowed for some overlap in the age categories to accommodate fencers with either more or less experience than their peers of similar age.

Cardinal operates as an all-épée — the heaviest fencing weapon, wherein competitors are awarded a point for touching an opponent anywhere on the body — club. All five fencers in the 12-14-year-old cohort faced each other in a series of épée bouts to determine a winner.

Cardinal’s beginner coach, Claire Busch, said the academy focuses on épées alone — excluding the lighter fencing weapons, foil and sabre — to stave off potential infighting among coaches of different fencing styles.

Coaches of different weapon types at a single fencing school can sometimes fight over who gets the beginners, Busch said. “Or you have a student who you’ve invested all this time in, and they’re your beginner. And then they look over and they’re like, ‘Actually I want to do that [weapon] instead.’”

“Rather than deal with [the drama], we just are an all-épée club,” she said.

Busch has been fencing for more than a decade, starting in 2010. She began working with Cardinal’s founder and head coach, Ilya Lobanenkov, at the DC Fencers Club in Silver Spring, Maryland. Busch recalled that Lobanenkov “had always wanted to open his own club,” and left DCFC to launch Cardinal after she graduated high school.

After taking a hiatus from fencing while earning her degree in industrial design from the University of Cincinnati, Busch said she reached out to Lobanenkov in December 2019, asking if she could help out with summer camps the following year. She has been with the club since, becoming the academy’s designated beginner



Kieran Sziede lunges at an opponent during the 12-14-year-old group fencing tournament at Cardinal Fencing Academy on Sunday.

Times-Mirror/Graham Cullen

coach.

While Busch said she loves fencing and working with the academy’s students generally, she especially enjoys emphasizing the sport’s ability to help young people deal with stress and clear their minds.

Fencing is “something that I do for my mental and physical health,” Busch said. “This was my ... only coping mechanism, where I would just go to fencing and leave it all on the strip. And that was how I learned to clear my mind.”

She recalled struggling with ADHD growing up, and said fencing has been pivotal in improving her ability to focus. “I love being able to give the kids that same benefit of, ‘This is something that can teach you how to focus and how to manage stress — how to clear your mind.’”

Twelve-year-old Navid Modanlou finished in first place in the tournament for fencers of his age group. Sunday’s event was his second competition after participating in fencing on-and-off for less than a year before the COVID-19 pandemic began. He described the experiences as, “really fun and exciting, but I get really nervous pretty easily.”

Modanlou said the nerves might make him perform worse than what he should be able to, but techniques including “taking the blade” — where one fencer uses his or her épée to circle around the opponent’s weapon in either a clockwise or counterclockwise motion and redirect its line of attack — helped him stay on par with the



A fencer holds an épée, displaying the hilt’s pistol grip and dome-shaped guard.

Times-Mirror/Graham Cullen

competition.

“Not a lot of people can disengage fast,” he said. Taking the blade is “really useful if your opponent isn’t way above your skill level,” he said.

Summer Smith — whose son, Gavin, finished second in the tournament — said her son “really likes this, because it’s not only physical, but it’s cerebral.” She added that events like Sunday’s “gives [competitors] a taste of how a tournament would be,” as well as “how they respond to stress.”

Smith recalled that when she was inquiring about the club to consider having her son join, “they asked me what instrument he played and what his headspace was like when dealing with loss.” She remembered thinking to herself, “I don’t

think they ask you this when you try out for baseball.”

According to Smith, Gavin said he appreciated that students in his fencing class would talk to each other and offer recommendations on what techniques they could improve upon, rather than providing critical commentary behind other competitors’ backs.

She also touted Cardinal’s emphasis on good sportsmanship and overcoming defeat. “I think those are excellent skills,” Smith said. She stressed the importance of those qualities, “In the modern era, where kids don’t like when things aren’t easy for them, and you have to ... confront that in an actual competitive manner.”