

# The Ann Arbor Sword Club Story

## Context and background

The world of fencing in the western world is a large tapestry with a millenium of history, much of it only recently beginning to be comprehended and embraced. This new understanding is changing what we understand by the word “fencing,” and the Ann Arbor Sword Club has participated actively in much of that change.

A fencing club, like a swim club, can be a self-contained unit or connected to others through competition or associations. One can fence in a variety of contexts, from a few friends practicing together, to an athletic center or a fantasy organization of which fencing or martial arts is but one facet.

From its establishment as an Olympic sport at the beginning of the twentieth century, fencing in America was a tiny-minority sport with its complex rules and foreign terminology. Europeans dominated world competition while American fencing remained a poor cousin. Collegiate teams and the Amateur Fencers League of America (AFLA) were the pathway to Olympic and world competition. Fencing masters were usually immigrants trained in Europe. Few of them got paid outside of a few universities and exclusive institutions like New York Athletic Club. Most local clubs were indeed outsiders, taught by true amateurs.

When our story began in 1962, active fencing in the United States was a strictly modern sport with foil, sabre and epee for men. Electric scoring was being developed. Women were allowed to fence only foil and, as in tennis and other sports, compete only against women. They were not yet beginning to be taken seriously.

Historical fencing wasn't either. When fantasy fans started the Society for Creative Anachronism in 1966 (knights in armor, feasts, revels and costumes), there were no books on period jousting or combat. They re-invented armoured combat, and even the armor, from wildly inaccurate movies. Armor in museums was static and heavy-looking.

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In the fifty years since, everything has changed. By 1990, women could fence in all three weapons worldwide. Title Nine expanded women's collegiate sports in America. Gold medals were won by Americans for the first time, many of them women. While there are separate men's and women's teams in collegiate and Olympic competition, mixed-sex tournaments are normal across the country.

During the same period, historical fencing has exploded in the western world. Medieval combat manuals have been translated not only into modern languages but into an active sport, separate from modern fencing, using thousands of replicas of period weapons that did not exist in 1775. While the SCA does fencing and armoured combat in a fantasy, costumed context, HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts) uses modern-sport armor, with no concern for costume or other fantasy elements. In this movement, women have been equals from the start.



1973 Collegiate Great Lakes Championships – Sabre, old rules, no electric scoring



SCA combat 1974



American Fencing 2013  
the USFA official magazine

## Our story

In July 1962, teenager David S. Hoornstra started his fencing career with amateur instructor John D. Bailey in Sault Ste. Marie in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Bailey was a Border Patrol officer, Marine veteran, pistol and nightstick expert, into karate and medieval history. Our club reflects much of Bailey's philosophy and attitudes.

Sault Ste. Marie was a declining cultural backwater, but Bailey quickly grew the Sault Fencing Club to 35 people. At 15, David was one of the youngest, but one of the most inspired. (For more on Bailey's legacy, see *In Memoriam – John D. Bailey* by David on this site.)

David became assistant instructor after one year. Fencing and art became his two avocations while he finished high school and entered Michigan Tech Sault branch. In 1966, David transferred to U-M, Ann Arbor, but couldn't afford fencing. When Bailey was transferred to Detroit, new coach Barry Newcomb moved the Sault club into MTU-Sault.

In late 1967 David was back at what was now Lake Superior State College. As both student and assistant to coach Newcomb, he helped LSSC Fencing attain varsity status in 1969, but graduated before the team was formed.

After graduation David joined the US Coast Guard and did a two-year tour in the West Pacific. No fencing there. Transferring to CG Base Sault Ste. Marie, he served as assistant varsity coach for LSSC Fencing's 1972-73 season. Traveling with the team, meeting coaches, officiating, and hosting an AFLA tournament, David began to understand the wider world of fencing.

Benefiting from Newcomb's strong competitive coaching, David and varsity fencer Steve Gerrish qualified to the AFLA Nationals in epee in '73. The Coast Guard paid David's way. Eliminated in the first round, he learned that to succeed he would have to live in a strong fencing area. The Coast Guard offered security but not stability. But it also taught him to go for what he wanted.

So, later that year, he took an early out for art school at Michigan, back in Ann Arbor, where he was invited to teach at the fledgling U-M Fencing Club. The club grew; his students began competing; one won a "C" classification in his first tourney; another was offered a full scholarship to fencing powerhouse Wayne State. But U-M Athletic Director Don Canham would not listen to pleas for varsity status. In 1976 David, no longer a student, was marginalized when the club was taken over by an influential faculty member.

In 1974, he had been introduced to the SCA by Bob Asprin, another Bailey student who taught fencing for the Ann Arbor Recreation Department. In 1976, Bob decided to write science fiction full time. He dropped the SCA, quit his day job and he asked David to take over his fencing class.

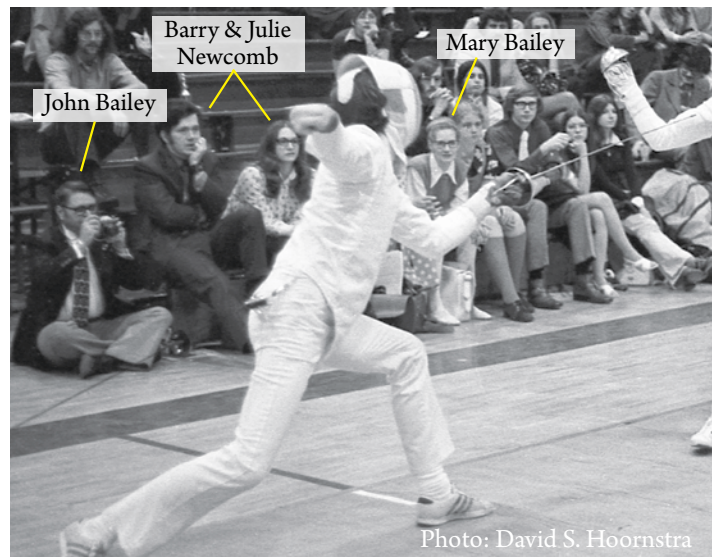
It was quite a contrast from the club format. It was clear that, in the limited time available, it would be difficult for students to advance beyond foil or get into competition. There was little group continuity from one session to the next. Some of the adult students shared David's interest in historical and theatrical fencing.



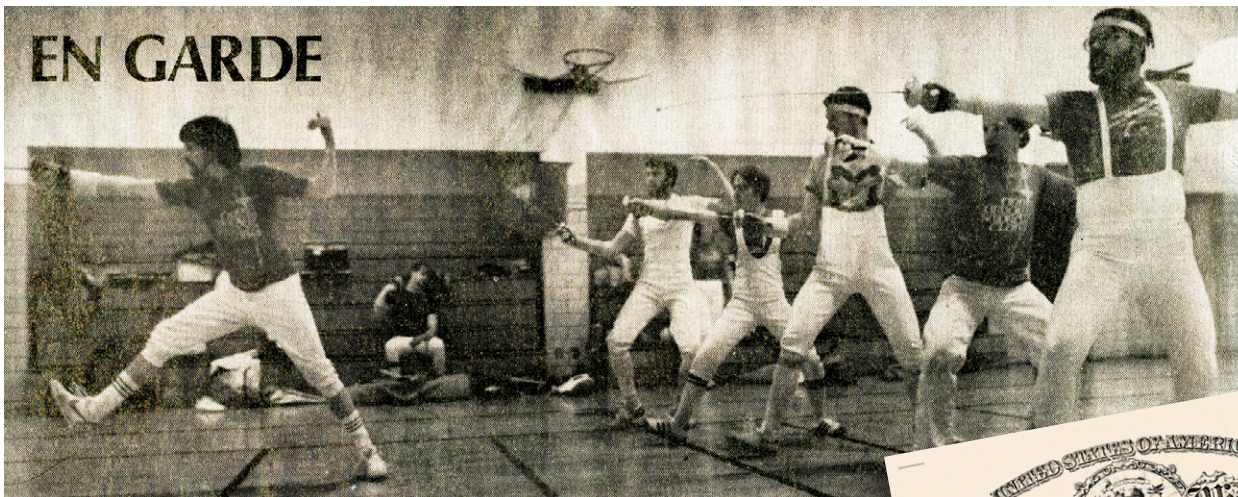
John Bailey gives David S. Hoornstra a lesson c. 1964



Barry Newcomb presents awards at the Laker 4-Weapon, 1972



LSSC's Steve Gerrish winning the Michigan State Finals, 1973



David leads footwork practice at Eberwhite School (Ann Arbor News clipping, c. 1980)

## Founding of the club

In 1977, David Hoornstra negotiated a deal with the rec department. The group bought out the equipment and created the independent Ann Arbor Sword Club. It extended the hours, renting the same school buildings. The name reflected our interests beyond modern fencing. Lawyer/member Robert Helm got us incorporated with the State of Michigan as a non-profit as of May 1978.

David, by now a commercial artist, designed our logotype on a German jousting shield with Celtic roundhand letters. The centerpiece was a very special clamshell rapier, one of only 200 made for the 1973-4 *Three Musketeers* movies starring Michael York. Club member David Craig obtained and gave a pair of these collector's items to the club. The spectacular movie fights, directed by Bill Hobbs broke the old foil-based theatrical fencing mold and set the tone for our own theatrical efforts. These remarkably flexible, durable swords survived our early stage-fights and, later, SCA-style fencing, and are still in use nearly 40 years later.

*The next five sections are not so much historical periods as five major influences on Sword Club development through 1990.*

## The US Fencing Association

The club, still 95% modern, soon became a presence in the Michigan Division Amateur Fencers league of America (AFLA, later USFA). Not only did members win substantial numbers of tournament medals, we became USFA officers and tournament organizers. David served as Division Secretary, Armourer, Vice President and Additional Governor (delegate to national meetings) as well as officiating in tournaments. Barb Schutz was Division Treasurer. Terry



Barb Schutz checks scores at an AFLA tournament



Terry Gruber (above left) scores in AFLA competition, circa 1979.



John Bunch (right) wins an AFLA trophy. Later, he was assistant coach UNC Chapel Hill

Gruber and John Hasler (an electrical engineer and Bailey student from the Sault) both served as Division Armourer (maintaining/transporting electronic scoring equipment to tournaments). David and John also traveled to Schoolcraft College for advanced lessons with Maestro Istvan Danosi and his Olympians Greg Benko and Yuri Rabinovitch at the Fencing Academy of Michigan (FAM). Danosi's Wayne State fencing team, laced with former Olympians, took the top trophies in most USFA tournaments.

John Hasler built us a solid-state scoring machine, essential for competition practice. It has served on and off ever since, although Terry Gruber has replaced a few parts. It paid off as two members earned "C" classifications and David Hoornstra reached the epee final at the Midwest Championships. When Women's Epee was instituted, Barb Schutz excelled, taking second in a different Midwest final.

Through 1985, David continued to fenced in the AFLA nationals, where the Board of Governors meets. As a division representative, David got involved in the AFLA's revitalization (new name and logo, new efforts to become a major, legitimate sport). His papers "The Future of Fencing," and "The USFA PR Guide" were circulated and noted nationally, and he served on the USFA publicity committee.

### The Ann Arbor Medieval Festival

David taught a Sunday fencing class at Ann Arbor Art Worlds on Main Street in 1978. Tai Chi instructors Jim Moran and Kathy Millar suggested we do swordplay "Intermezzi" performances at the Ann Arbor Medieval Festival. We were soon regulars.

David Hoornstra, Glauser and Craig, plus Craig Hartley were regulars at theatrical fencing practice. Instead of choreographing every move, David devised an "improv" method with *in-range* cutting attacks along three specific paths and putting variety in the appearance of the action by allowing the defender to parry creatively (as parry he *must*). This allowed our fights to be both realistic and fast-moving.

David H. bought a pair of heavy wall-hanger bastard swords, and we risked our hands and more to strike sparks in front of the Festival audience.

This went on from about 1977 to 1987. We lost a great deal when Davids Glauser and Craig moved to the coasts, but Craig Hartley and Jim Vesper picked up the slack. Jim also appeared with David Hoornstra in the very first Michigan Renaissance Festival in 1979. In 1989 the Festival, its faculty directors retiring, came to an end.



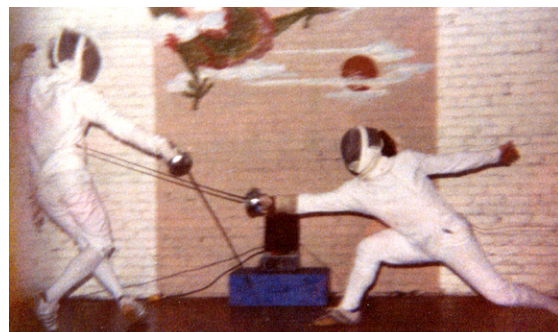
Maestro Istvan Danosi gives a clinic with his son Dr. Steve Danosi.



Foilist (now instructor) Terry Gruber and epeeist Barb Schutz became the Sword Club's first married couple in 1980.



David and Craig practice



David Hoornstra (left) and David Solo fence epee at A2 Art Worlds with the scoring machine



Terry Gruber (l) and Cassie Carrie (r) teach at the Medieval Festival



Ann Arbor News clipping

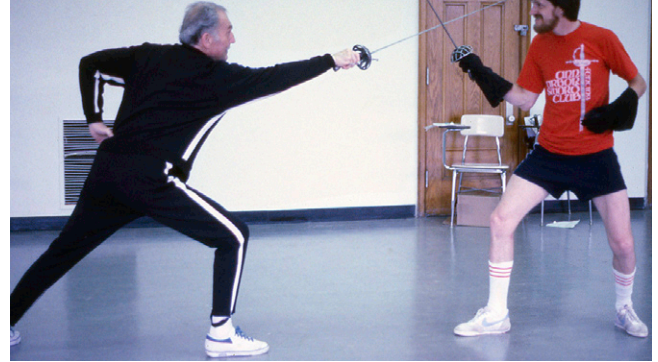
## The Society of American Fight Directors

In the summer of 1979, we often fenced under the raised Dental Building on main campus. Erik Fredricksen, a Theatre instructor at U-M, found us there and joined us for a bit of saber. He turned out to be President of the brand-new Society of American Fight Directors. In 1981, he organized a three-week, full-time Professional Theatre Program summer actors' workshop in combat performance. After helping Erik prepare the weapons, David Hoornstra got to attend Rapier Week, taught by the legendary Patrick Crean. "Paddy," fight director at Stratford Festival Theatre, had been one of Errol Flynn's Hollywood coaches. The SAFD system of fight choreography is now the one in which theatre pros seek certification. After moving around a bit, Erik retired as department chair at U-M.



Erik Fredericksen  
(A2News).

Below, Paddy Crean lets David Hoornstra use one of Errol Flynn's swords.



## The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA)

This international medieval fantasy organization, grandfather of all LARPS, was founded in 1966 in Berkeley, CA by science-fiction and fantasy fans. It spread to the Midwest by 1969 and to Ann Arbor in the early 1970s when Bob Asprin and John Bailey started the subgroup called the "Dark Horde" (as distinct from the historical Golden Horde). David Hoornstra joined in 1974 and founded his own local "khanate," with most members also in fencing. By 1978, many Sword Club members were also the core of what would become the Barony of Cynnabar.

In 1979, David took up SCA armored combat and found that adding upper-body strength made a huge difference in his fencing competition. It would also come in handy later when learning Historical European Martial Arts. In 1980, David became Seneschal of the Ann Arbor chapter and got so involved that his modern fencing activity seriously declined.



David Hoornstra (left) in SCA combat

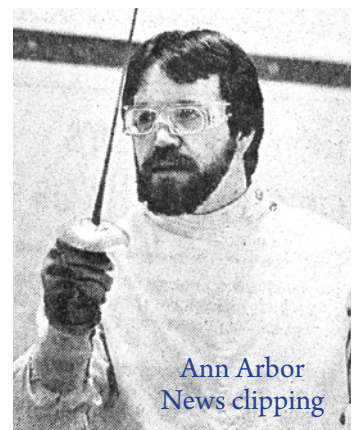
## The Ann Arbor Y and the end of Part I

During the period 1982 - 83, Sword Club membership felt the impact of Michigan's deteriorating economy as people left the state. But our rental costs rose. The problems appeared to be solvable by moving the club into the Ann Arbor Y, one of the places David had been teaching. The question was access to the club. The Y people agreed to find a way for club members and visitors to attend without joining the Y, but that promise was never fulfilled. The impact on the club was a slow-moving but inexorable disaster.

Several club members migrated to the Y, but not enough. Because of the cost of Y membership, the club aspect of Y fencing evaporated between 1986 and 1992.

Y fencers seldom got into competition unless we brought the tournament to the Y itself, which we did once or twice. USFA competitive fencing saw fewer Sword Club members. Meanwhile, David Hoornstra had gradually shifted his efforts over to the SCA and dropped out of competition. Terry Gruber and Joe O'Donnell had really begun to shine as instructors, and David was glad to see them take over the classes.

But then, Joe O'Donnell moved to the east coast. When Terry turned the teaching over to young student Jason Radine, the Sword Club was little more than a name on a patch and file boxes of memorabilia.



Ann Arbor  
News clipping

Joe O'Donnell