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SportingLife

Fencing, I learn, is much more than a point-scoring exercise



Rohit Brijnath

Assistant Sports Editor

A young masked woman is skilfully thrusting a sword at my torso at 10.15am on Wednesday morning and I am bleeding self-esteem while having an epiphany. I might be a writer but all that stuff about the pen being mightier than the sword is bunk. Especially when you're a few feet away from a blade.

In the bowels of the OCBC Arena, Amita Berthier, the world No. 3 junior from Singapore, with hands faster than a rock drummer, is giving me a 90-minute class. On the piste, the 14-metre strip we fence on, we are both holding a foil, a sword that has to be lighter than 500g, flexes up to 9.5cm, has a 90cm blade and in her hands has the look of a live, darting snake.

From behind a fencing mask I see the world through a thousand tiny, steel-mesh windows and through each of them Amita looks like an advancing, intimidating blur. In older times, the tip of the sword had a wad of cotton soaked in ink that left a mark on a white tunic. Now at the tip is a button and if it connects with the lame, the conductive vest which covers my torso, a light will flash on the scoreboard to show she is on target and has scored a point.

Amita is electronically cutting me to pieces and since I cannot halt for prayer it is smarter to respectfully retreat. But if I back away too far, off the piste, it will prove costly. In modern times it is worth a point to my rival; in ancient duels it was considered a loss of honour for me.

I've come to the National Training Centre for two reasons: First because last month Singapore's foil team, seeded 13, showed their competitive edge by ousting the fourth-seeded Poles, fifth-seeded French and eighth-seeded Germans to win

silver at the World Junior and Cadet Fencing Championships. And so if we're going to be writing about this masked clan then we'd better appreciate their art which was one of the original Olympic sports from 1896.

Second, I've hoofed a football like you and wielded a hockey stick, but some sports rest on the periphery of our existence. In their foreignness lies their fascination and so part of me wants to ride a horse with a top hat on, sweep the ice in curling and be part of an old-fashioned duel. Like the painter Edouard Manet challenging a critic to a swordfight simply over an unkind review.

Amita is 17 and a precise, tolerant, charming and, er, merciless tutor. As we warm up she throws in a tale about a fencer in a time of inferior masks who got poked in the eye. Thanks, coach. Then we get ready, layering ourselves with equipment like ancient knights except we're using modern material.

Fencing is a study in dexterity while over-dressed. A T-shirt is worn, breeches and a chest protector of hard plastic. A plastron, an underarm protector,

follows, over which you drape a jacket. A long-cuffed glove is tugged on and the lame, the metallic vest, is shrugged on. Now we look like pale Zorros.

Finally comes the mask.

Now I appreciate why Darth Vader was constantly in a bad mood because the mask is heavy and suffocating. In one sense it dehumanises a rival and yet behind it, Amita says, you can hear both snuffles and trash talk. Unlike boxing, here you cannot see the eyes and thus what they tell you – fear or intent – and so everything must be read from the body, the feet, the hands.

Unwashed pirates waving cutlasses and scowling samurai wielding katanas make for fine cinema. But the swordfighting that Amita introduces me to is a high-speed exercise in technique, tactics and technology – a wire connects me to the scoring system and it snakes from my back, through my jacket sleeve, and plugs into a socket behind the guard of the sword – where the only pain is of exquisite humiliation.

The basics of sport are the hardest such as balance, rhythm, feel, all of them the children of repetition. Amita has the ease of a practised athlete and also the elasticity of the young. I am just a dud D'Artagnan.

Calmly she teaches me stance, posture, parry, riposte, but my sword is too low, my head not straight, my front foot, which should be at right angles to my back foot, too crooked, my lunges half-hearted. Amita is kind but insistent: "Don't worry, hit harder." It is her polite way of saying, "Don't be a wimp".

Confucius, my favourite wise man, once stated "Never give a sword to a man who can't dance". How did he know that about me? But he's right because, like most sport, fencing has its own distinct choreography, all small steps and jumps and lunges. The tempo alters abruptly even as the athletes fake and feint, absorb attacks and respond, and if it looks pretty on TV then on the piste it's exhausting.

Amita often does 20-30 minutes of pure footwork in practice, turning the piste into a sort of aluminium alloy dance floor.

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Amita's gear



Photo: SINGAPORE NATIONAL OLYMPIC COUNCIL SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

Learning to fence



SCAN TO WATCH



<http://str.sg/fencing>

Fencing with boys in Boston has enhanced her stamina and it matters because individual elimination bouts can be up to three periods of three minutes each and from tiredness comes error, from fatigue arrives sloppiness, and I know this because behind the mask I am a panting mess.

But Amita is all ponytailed peppiness, moving at speeds which should be outlawed, and it is this rapid harmony of eye, idea, foot, blade which is most bewildering. I find no data to support the assumption that the tip of the blade

is the second-fastest object in Olympic sport after the bullet, but I am nevertheless happy to testify to it.

I am grateful to Amita for this is a rare excursion, a guided tour through an art form which allows me to feel the basic contours of this sport. She teaches me to salute in respect, an act of etiquette that has survived modernity, and then we shake hands. The lesson is over and I return to the comfort of my notes. Sword put down, pen unsheathed.

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National fencer Amita Berthier (right) executing a parry-riposte and scoring a point against ST assistant sports editor Rohit Brijnath, who describes himself tongue-in-cheek as a "dud d'Artagnan". Amita's point is indicated by a green light, while the white light means her opponent's hit is off target.
ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM