

GREENSWARD

Fencing in Bryant Park: Dilettante Duelists Swing Sabers During Lunch Hour

By [Kim Velsey](#) 4/04



The Battle of Bryant Park (Kim Velsey)

Above the gentle hum of conversation and the less gentle hum of traffic rumbling past on Fifth Avenue, one could hear the chirping of birds and the clanking of metal as a small group of New Yorkers took turns thwacking each other with swords.

Bryant Park, which decades ago was one of the most notorious needle parks in the city, is now a veritable wonderland of ice skating, fashion tents and movie nights. Except for Tuesdays this spring, that is, when the gauntlet—if not the grittiness—returns in the form of free sword-fighting lessons taught by coaches from the Manhattan Fencing Center.

“They’re practicing a straight attack to the head,” said fencing center director Julia Gellman, who interpreted the group’s exercises for both *the Observer* and perplexed passersby.

Some spectators were eager to jump into the fray, but in fencing, as in so many other things, timing is paramount. “After we go over the rules and footwork, it’s kind of dangerous to come in late,” explained Ms. Gellman, as she proffered a sign-up sheet for the following week. *The Observer* would have to sit this duel out.

“If he’s attack, I attack!” yelled Coach Andrew Lamianski in his charming Belarusian accent, demonstrating how one parries a sword attack to the head by swiftly thrusting his or her own saber into the opponent’s side.

Mr. Lamianski, who was wearing an almost, but not quite, matching Adidas track suit and color coordinated black and blue sneakers, looked exactly as *The Observer* thought a fencing coach should. A former member of the Belarusian national team, he moved lightly despite some middle-aged heft, deftly ducking between students’ swords to offer pointers and an occasional shoulder pat/“very, very good” or the less effusive, “alright”/approving nod.

Ms. Gellman told us that the uninitiated might think a sword is a sword is a sword. But this is not so.

There was the saber (the light swords in use today), the foil (next week’s lesson) and the épée “the heaviest one of all and it leaves the most black and blues, so it’s the least popular.”

An older French man came to inquire about the class. *Did he want to sign up?* asked Ms. Gellman.

“Maybe next week,” the man declined gently. “When we are 10, 12 years old we used to play, we are watching the old movies with this.”

The man, who very politely refused to give his name, noting that years earlier he had been warned against speaking with journalists, particularly American ones, opined that it was “very very interesting. Today there are hardly any movies with this.”

He lost himself in memories of the swashbuckling silver screen for a moment, then perked up with a question, “The swords—they are real, no?”

“Quite real, but not sharp,” Ms. Gellman responded.

“But I don’t understand why it’s free and why they are doing this,” the man pressed in his Gallic purr. “There is an objective?”

“Because we’re the Olympic club and we’re right around the corner and no one has any idea we exist,” said Ms. Gellman, in a tone of bemused exasperation. “All of the Olympic men’s and women’s sabre teams train with our coaches.”

If they make the team, they come here to train? we wondered.

“The other way around,” she patiently corrected. “If they want to make the team, they come here to train with our coaches.”

The French man sipped his deep orange smoothie reflectively, “If I were younger,” he mused wistfully before wandering away.

Ms. Gellman, who did not seem the type to indulge in wistfulness, said that she used to fence, but no longer does.

“No time. I’m directing,” she explained matter-of-factly. “It’s really popular with adults now, but back when I did it, it was mostly children—parents were trying to get their kids a scholarship somewhere. St. John’s or Duke or Penn State..”

The list of places one could get a fencing scholarship went on and on. We were impressed.

Gathering the students in a circle, Mr. Lamianski demonstrated the gentlemanly structure of a bout (salute, attack, parry, hit, handshake) and recounted what, from the snippets we could catch, seemed to be an instructive (and uplifting? possibly even heartwarming?) anecdote about winning and the nature of competition. If not for the masks, we are sure we would have seen reflective, enlightened looks on the students’ faces.

So who were these would-be warriors training on their lunch breaks? It was hard to tell.

Their heads and torsos were obscured by helmets and matching white jackets, leaving only legs and feet, a cross-section of New Yorkers’ hindquarters: pinstriped trousers with shiny banker shoes, Converse and skinny jeans and, our favorite, the most fearsome of the fighters, a woman—the only woman—with buckled suede boots, leggings and a russet-colored braid that fell over one shoulder. Unlike the others, who slouched lazily when they rotated out of the pairs exercises, she practiced savage-looking attacks.

“Usually, we have more women than men because they’re the more adventurous ones, but not today,” Ms. Gellman said with a shrug. Otherwise, many of the club’s fencers were “children and Wall Street guys... they say it’s a great stress reliever and they think it helps them learn strategy.”

The hour passed in what seemed to be the blink of an eye. Soon the masks were tumbling off, revealing sweaty brows and red faces.

There were four fencers from HSBC's I.T. department—"It's an irregular activity. We figured it would be a nice way to spend the break," said Nick Soukeras, he of the pinstriped pants and shiny shoes.

"I'm just visiting a friend in New York," said the girl with the braided hair, Adrian Wittenberg. "I was wandering around yesterday and saw the sign."

Alex Gray (jeans, converse, a handlebar—or was it a D'Artagnan?—mustache), said that his girlfriend read about the class online "and was like, you need to go!" ("I used to do a little fencing when I lived in North Carolina," Mr. Gray explained).

Watching Ms. Gellman and Mr. Lamianski zip the swords into large duffel bags, we felt a little sad. But fencers would soon return, jugglers and ping pong players, too, park operations assistant Sarah Xu assured us. In the summer, the park would even host the Swedish lawn game kubb.

Was anything too dangerous for Bryant Park?

Ms. Xu considered this for a moment. "We don't allow jugglers to throw knives or anything" she said. "I think that would be too dangerous."