Today on *Across the Fence* we épée, parry and touché. We’re crossing swords with the men and women of the University of Vermont’s fencing club. Good afternoon to joining us I am Judy Simpson. The word *fence* the art of using a sword was first used by Shakespeare in the play *the merry wives of Windsor.* But fencing dates back long before the baird to a time when duels were more than mere swordplay. Thankfully duels to the death have become passé and the focus of fencing is now on self-improvement, camaraderie and competition. Here is across the fence is Keith Silva.

Could you say and spell your name, please?

*Sylvia Sword:* “Sylvia Sword. S-W-O-R-D.”

You’re kidding, right?

*Sword:* “No. No. That’s actually my name.” (laughs)

*Sylvia Sword* ... not to put too fine a point on it ... is a member of the University of Vermont’s fencing club. Open to all UVM students ... fencing is designated as club sport at UVM and receives its funding from the student government association. The club competes in regional and national tournaments.

(music background)

The roots of fencing stretch back into antiquity, the renaissance, and eighteenth century France. While fencing is one of four sports that have been featured in every modern Olympics ... it has long been eclipsed by the matinee
... but what gets projected on the big screen isn’t fencing ... that’s playing with swords.

Sylvia Sword/University of Vermont Fencing Club: “It’s not like you see in the movies. (laughs) I’ve studied some stage fighting and it’s all, it’s all it’s like in the name it’s staged and you work it out with your opponent in the scene and none of it is natural. It looks organic when they do it on stage, but fencing is the real organic sword fighting.”

The heart and soul of the UVM Fencing club is found in Megan Lind and Keegan Harris. Each is an accomplished fencer ... quick to share their passion and sharp when it comes to the artistry and strategy of the sport they love.

Keegan Harris/ University of Vermont Fencing Club: “There are two major schools of thought in fencing, one is that, victory is excellence and then the other is that excellence is victory and I’m of the latter school. So, I lose a lot, but for me that is the secondary purpose. It’s more of sort of an introspective thing. It’s a very philosophical pursuit and that often gets overlooked, but that’s what I’m all about.”

Megan Lind/ University of Vermont Fencing Club: “I’m a very passive person so it’s funny when I tell my friends that I’m a fencer they’re like really because they have that vision of the sword fighting and the bashing of swords and so me being more of a calm quiet person and seeing this more aggressive side to me and competitive spirit is interesting. I think that I’m kind of a technical person I like that really technical aspect of the sport where you have to work on these little things in order to see improvement. Right down to the footwork and the way you hold your hand and everything so it’s very technical as I said.”

Fencing is as much about the footwork as it is about any other physical aspect of the sport.
Being successful as a fencer means being good on one’s feet.

Lind: “The very first step is footwork you have to learn the on-guard position and then advance and a retreat and just really simple footwork and it’s just focusing on refining that until it’s perfect. Because that is the foundation of the entire sport, the movement because you need to be able to move towards someone to attack someone and move away to get out of someone attack reach out of someone’s reach. That is the first thing you teach and after that it’s letting people know that not just using that brute force to attack someone it’s more refined and you need kind of a finesse and a grace to it in order to successfully pull off an attack.”
Harris: “what we try to do at the club generally when we’re trying to bring people up is to really reinforce that foundation so that when people do non-standard things they do by choice rather than by accident because that’s how you get better on the strip is when you’re doing something that startles your opponent, not that your opponent can take advantage of.”

Trying to explain the rules, nuances, and subtleties of any sport to the uninitiated is tricky … and fencing is no exception to the rule.

Sword: “I think what surprises people most when I tell them about fencing is telling them about the rules. Because there are a lot of rules in foil not so many in epee, which is great, but I think that people don’t think about that when you see two people hacking away at each other with swords you don’t think about the rules of the game.”

Bouts are held on what fencers refer to as ‘the strip.’ There are three different weapons in fencing: epee, foil, and sabre. The weapons are wired as well as the jackets and the scoring is decided by both man and machine.

Harris: “The electronic component of it is there to aid referees and this is been a big problem since, you know, before there was electricity it was a big problem because people would lie and say no, no, no I didn’t get hit. So electric equipment makes it easier a lot easier for a referee to see, yes, indeed someone got hit, yes indeed someone didn’t.”

When one fencer ‘touches’ their opponent a signal is sent to what’s called the ‘jury box’ … it’s then up to the referee to make the final call and score the point. The first to five points wins the bout. In competitions … scores from individual bouts are tallied towards an overall team score … call it a ‘one for all and all for one’ kind of a thing.

Lind: “You can improve yourself and push yourself as hard as you want to and do as well as you want to. You put the commitment and the time in, but at the same time you also have that team atmosphere and you have your team cheering you on during bouts and, you know, we do cheers and we’re all really excited for each other. It’s individual and you have that team aspect at the same time which is what I really love about it.”

Style and beauty are present in all sports … from the arc of a ball to the movement of the human body itself. The poetry of fencing is found in its grace and its elegant violence.
Lind: “It really is beautiful to watch. That technicality of it and the grace and it is sometimes likened to ballet and dance. So it’s really wonderful to watch the movement.”

Harris: “I’m an especially acrobatic fencer, although, I’m ashamed to say that’s because I’m not very good at the distance game. What happens is I get way too close and because I’ve spent years getting way too close I’ve learned ways of, of working with it, but, I think, the picture of a really, of a really, of a really good fencer is someone who never, there’s sort of this, this poise and this sense of remove as though they weren’t thinking about anything and they just their hands and their legs and put them where they need to be and these subtle motions. That’s beautiful, that’s what I wish I could do.”

Sword: “You make up your own style, I guess. I love the grace of it, personally, that’s like always been more of my thing, not the so much the I’m going to cut you in half, but more like I’m going to cut you in half in a way that’s like really beautiful and graceful you know [laughs].

What else is there to say to Sword’s point, other than, touché? At the University of Vermont, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Welcome to both of you you brought some schools of the trade and Megan one of the started out talking a little bit about the sword that you have.

Megan.: OK. I am an epist this is the weapon that I use. It's a little heavier than most of the other weapons and it's similar to the foil it has a tape and the end of it so when you make your attack you'll hit with the tip on the end.

Judy.: It's like a little clicker.

Megan.: Yes it will depress in the button goes off and it will close the circuit that were attached to and it will register that I had made a touch.

Judy.: What's the difference with the handle here? It's a little bit more dramatic than the other swords we have.

Megan.: In epee the primary target area is your forearm. Because of that the bell guard is slightly larger to protect your forearm a little bit more.
Judy.: Is that the prime target they're going for when you're an epist?

Megan.: Usually yes. The first target area would be the arm and then you might remeet to the body.

Judy.: Keegan one and you show us the other two.

Keegan.: This right here is a foil. This is my beloved foil. It is similar to the epee in that it is a point weapon so all the touches are scored with a point alone. But unlike epee foil is governed by some very particular rules call the rules of right of way that make the actual mechanical operation of it when fencing very different. It has a limited target area. In epee the primary target area is the arm but you can hit anywhere. If you want to get cheeky you could somebody on the toe and gloat about it but in foil if you hit someone on the toe it's no good for touch. You have to hit them on the torso. The other here is what's called a saber. It is similar to foile in that it's governed by rules of right of way but unlike the other two weapons you can score touches with both the point and the entire length of the blade. It's the only cutting weapon.

Megan.: It does not have the button on the end.

Keegan.: The three of them together make up the full ensemble. These days people focus on fencing one weapon but a lot of people dabble in all three. I do a tiny bit of epee and Megan wrecks me at it.

Megan.: That's not true all the time.

Judy.: Talk a little bit about the masks over there.

Keegan.: The masks are sort of the most important part of the protective here. They're come true resistant up too many many pounds per square inch so we don't have to worry about getting our eyes poked out.

Judy.: That's good. One less thing to worry about.

Keegan.: Yeah you just put one on over your face.

Judy.: And you can see through them fine?

Keegan.: Yes is no different than looking through a screen door. It's just a heavy duty screen door.
Megan.: It takes a little while to get used to it.

Judy.: It's also a target vote as well?

Megan.: In epee it is a target and Sabre as well not in foil.

Judy.: Do you receive any coaching in the club level or is it mostly self-taught?

Megan.: We do have a Coach Dan Crockett love him very much. He always helps us out he gives up a lot of his time to come to practices he travels with us two tournaments and he saved us so many times I know he's helped me on this trip when I'm struggling.

Judy.: So Megan your women's epee team one the United States collegiate fencing clubs national championship in 2011 that's terrific.

Megan.: Yes it was a great tournament a once in a lifetime well we hope not but it was definitely a great moment for us.

Judy.: Where was that?

Megan.: It was in Chicago last year. We almost didn't make it actually. Our flight was canceled last minute so we got a flight to Cleveland and drove 6 1/2 hours with a van but it was completely worth it.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about defending your title are you going to be going back?

Megan.: Yes we will be going back this year. The nationals are at west point this year so we will be going there and we will definitely try and defend our title although this year is a rebuilding year for the women's epee squad because we lost our b strip last year.

Judy.: The strips were your intermediate?

Megan.: Yes so there's an a fencer the b fencer and the c fencer. A is your top ranked fencer b is the little less experienced and c is the little less experienced then b.

Judy.: Did any of you have any experience in fencing before coming to UVM.
Keegan.: Yes both of us fenced through high school. I got my start doing historical work mostly 17th century Italian rapier combat and I've since drifted more and more modern. But I didn't start competing until the middle of high school.

Megan.: I started off my freshman year in high school and unfenced varsity. We had a varsity team in high school.

Judy.: Did you have a lot of beginners on your squad?

Megan.: We do the majority of our squad are beginners.

Keegan.: But half of our nationals team every year is people that I've had no prior experience to fencing except the University of Vermont.

Judy.: What is it that brings people in?

Megan.: All sorts of things? I think it's a definitely unique sport. A lot of times when people hear it that's really cool I want to try that out so I think the uniqueness of it is often were brings people into the club.

Keegan.: I think we are a close knit group too. We are competing sport club but we also get together a lot outside of practice and chum it up. It's a great place for us to be with our friends.

Judy.: What do you think is more important technique or strategy when you're fencing?

Megan.: I think it's a balance of both.

Keegan.: They go hand in hand. Often I tell people when I'm teaching them there are three levels of fencing. When you first start out you have to think mechanically about technique on that level. Once you get that in your backbone you have to think tactically about freeze by phrase what you're going to do in terms of parrying and attacking. When you have that in your backbone then you get to think strategically but in order to be successful you have to be thinking on all three levels at the same time which is very very tricky.

Judy.: It's very technical too I was surprised to see that. That you think you go after your foe or retrieving you need two but there's a lot more to it than that a lot of foot work as you mentioned.
Megan.: Yes Keegan's very good on his feet I need to work a little on that that definitely it's a foundation to the sport.

Judy.: Keegan your senior are you going to continue fencing after you graduate?

Keegan.: Yes I hope to fence my whole life. I am going to be graduating in a couple days so I have a coach in gig with my hometown fencing club the upper valley fencing club in nor which Vermont and I think I'm going to be volunteer coaching for the UVM club once I get out and hoping to compete and local events.

Judy.: Good luck to both of you and thanks for coming in and showing us this a really unique sport.

Megan and Keegan.: Thank you for having us.

Judy.: It was a lot of fun that's our program for today I am Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

Across the Fence is brought to you as a public service by the University of Vermont extension and WCAX TV.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. University of Vermont Extension, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.