

Swordplay anything but pure child's play

By Alex Dobuzinskis, Staff Writer

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BURBANK - Armed with aluminum swords and wooden sticks, they meet at a park every weekend to get medieval - practicing fighting styles from centuries-old texts passed around on the Internet.

The warriors are students in the Academy of Arms, a newly formed Burbank group with 24 members learning medieval European swordplay taught to soldiers and knights in England, Italy and Germany.

The techniques are historically accurate - and the students are thirsty for the history.

"You kind of get to know what your ancestors might have been like," said Devin McCarthy, 25, who is part Scottish. "My ancestors probably wore kilts, but I'm not into kilts."

The Academy of Arms is one of about 60 groups across the country practicing sword-fighting techniques from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, according to a directory from Western Martial Arts Illustrated.

Practitioners say interest in medieval sword fighting has blossomed with the Internet, which made it easier to pass around texts drawn from manuals locked up for centuries in museums. Most groups have formed in the past decade.

The academy, a nonprofit group, was formed in January with two teachers.

"Although people maybe have come to us because of the romanticism, what we do here is strip away the romanticism and go back to the martial roots of what actually was done back then," said instructor Christian Vivo.

Vivo, 46, a Filipino-American teacher at a Catholic girls school, gives lessons in handling the English broadsword. Screenwriter Shay Roberts teaches German longsword.

They meet with students for evening lessons at the Garri Dance Studio in Burbank, where ballet barres and paintings of girls in tutus cover the walls. On Saturdays, the group holds mock battles at nearby Verdugo Park.

Polite and quick to apologize for missed steps, students in a recent class at the studio practiced slowly swinging at each other and blocking other fighters' thrusts.

Student Shelina Kurwa, 18, attends Renaissance fairs and her passion for that period in history drew her to the class.

But she also likes the fun of sword fighting - even though it may have little relevance in today's world.

"I don't know - if I happen to have a sword and I'm walking around on the street one night, I can kick some butt," Kurwa joked.

Beginners can expect plenty of drilling before they get a chance to try their hand at a mock sword fight - or "free play," as it's called. There are no serious injuries because fighters use only wooden sticks or dull aluminum swords.

And since the techniques are historically accurate, beginners should not expect to learn how to fight the kinds of dramatic, drawn-out duels seen in the movies, Vivo said.

"Most of the stuff that we do," he said, "if you're really doing it, fight's over in two or three seconds."



The Academy of Arms holds a practice of medieval sword fighting at... (Evan Yee/Staff Photographer)



Miles Robinson of El Segundo refines his technique during a... (Evan Yee/Staff Photographer)