

Good Form

by

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*Smiles... One of my loves is history. Another of my loves is fencing, which I taught for a number of years. The history of fencing has all but disappeared. The sport has morphed into something not even close to the original which saddens me. All the small reasons and niceties of the sport are now gone.

Gone, too, are the tactics (for the most part) and the precise back and forth tink-a-tink of blade on blade action that so defined the sport.

Without getting into a whole dissertation of this ancient sport (all the way back to the ancient Egyptians) I would like to point out a few things as evidenced by this photo from the first

Olympic games. I do not know who the fencers were, nor do I know anyone of note in the crowd, though I seem to recall the King of Greece attended the fencing matches. There is a reason he was there, and it had nothing to do with politics; good fencing back then was very much akin to watching a fine ballet. There was no 'rush in' by the participants simply to put on an electric light. Conversely, if your movements were not clean and concise your touch would not be recognized since all scoring was done by the human eye.

You've heard of the expression, 'Good form!'? Now you know where it came from and why.

Fencing came as a practice for sword fighting. It was thought, wisely, that a young man, who might have to fight a duel, should learn how to 'stay alive'. This is where the rules came from. Being this is a game, it has a back and forth actions similar to that of a tennis match. If I attack you (serve), you have to defend yourself, and then you can attack me, where by, I have to defend.

That's as simple as it gets and it goes downhill from there in 'things confusing'.

So, if you guessed the gentlemen in the image above were fencing, you guessed wrong. They are in the middle of performing what was known as 'The Grand Salute'.

Look at the piste (fencing floor) beside them and you will see they are not wearing their masks. The fencer closest to us is also holding his foil backwards as he lunges while the other fencer holds his foil down and off to the side.

The Grand Salute held two functions. The first was as a warm up exercise, allowing the fencers to properly stretch before beginning the game. The second was also a study in 'form'. Fencing then was not just won by touches alone. The four gentlemen standing on the side of the piste wearing top hats were the judges. They would be the ones to determine if a touch was made (or not), and they also would grade the fencers on their form.

Now then, if you ever had a question as to the dangers of the sport; yes it is and was dangerous. An elder fencer I interviewed once told me a story of a friend who almost died. He was in a saber match, and his opponent's blade broke. When this happens, the broken blade is very rigid and the blade is sharp. In this case, his opponent was making a lunge and the broken blade passed through the fellow's chest, going from armpit to armpit. They didn't even know it happened until the blade was withdrawn and he collapsed. The blade had just missed his heart and he was out of the hospital in only a few days.

This same injured fellow later served with General Patton during WWII. While shaking his fist at an enemy aircraft, he so infuriated the pilot, he came back and strafed him, hitting him in the jaw.

He survived that one too, but just barely.