

The Return

Many factors conspired to bring back the Sword Club in 1998.

- In 1992, the SCA's Midrealm had sanctioned fencing, recognizing David H. as an expert, appointing him to the rules committee.
- In the mid nineties, Dr. Jeffrey Singman (medieval studies) recruited David as a partner in studying Di Grassi's 16th century sword techniques. They needed a better place to do it than the back yard. David was also ready to "get back."
- Terry Gruber was ready to get back to fencing too.

Tae Kwan Do Master B. C. Yu had a dojo in the Colonnade shopping mall where fencing time could be rented on Tuesday evenings.

David agreed on terms. Jason Radine was happy to return the equipment we requested – a little less than half of what the Sword Club had originally brought to the Y. Terry renewed our non-profit charter and pretty much took over the administrative tasks.

By agreement between Terry and David, the atmosphere in the revived club was radically different from the pre-Y days. The space was not large. They did teach a variety of students, but instruction wasn't the main point. No scheduled classes, no pressure, no hard-riding lessons. Instead, a relaxed-but-spirited, supportive, not-too-competitive atmosphere.

The Ann Arbor Dueling Society

Several of the people who came to us for a little extra work were moderately-experienced fencers and Ann Arbor Y members for several good reasons, who wanted to get things going there again. We were glad to offer advanced lessons and some pointers on teaching and organization. Terry Krueger, Kevin Bloom and especially Bill Emerson made good use of their time with us. The Y's new building helped too.

In about 1998 they launched a fun, active club, strictly modern and USFA-competitive in focus. Their motto is "drinkers with a slight fencing problem," and they faithfully attend the Old-town bar every Thursday evening after fencing. They also cut a swathe in USFA competition the way the Sword Club used to.

Bill, who learned to fence at Michigan State, teaches basic classes and invites guest instructors to drop in (we do). They also put on the "Duelist Open," Michigan's biggest USFA tournament every August at the Y. For the past five years, David has been designing the T-shirts.

With these two clubs active in their different ways, we have the best of both worlds. When the Sword Club discovers potential competitive modern fencers, we suggest they get over to the Y, and they reciprocate in kind. The result is a community of fencers that meets our needs.



Jason Radine, shown in our Michigan Theatre *Three Musketeers* Live prologue, was the last Sword Club instructor of the Ann Arbor Y era.



Bill Emerson, left, teaching at the Y. (Ann Arbor News photo)

Other Clubs

Nearby active clubs are listed on the website, but a couple deserve special mention here.

- U-M club. Former Sword Club member Jim Vesper has coached the U-M club for over a decade after a stint at EMU's short-lived varsity program.
- "The Ring of Steel." Former Ann Arbor Y student Chris Barbeau started this theatrical swordfight group active in Renaissance fairs and other events. Former "Ring" members often come to the Sword Club for historical fencing.

A new era: The Pittsfield Union Grange

After a couple of years at the dojo, Master Yu installed a foam floor throughout. This ended our fencing there. David had rented the Pittsfield Union Grange several times for SCA activities, so he had little difficulty gaining acceptance for our activity.

The Grange is a rare survival from the age of agrarianism, a place for farm families to meet and create bargaining power for farm produce. The modern non-profit group hosts mostly dance groups and home-schooling. The main floor is smooth hardwood (low traction), so Terry and David bought fifty yards of rubber hall runner to lay down as fencing strips. These get a lot less use now because historical fencing needs less traction.

In every way the Grange was a step up from the dojo. In addition to the upstairs hardwood, the tile-over-concrete basement floor offers good traction for modern fencing, although the ceiling is not sabre-friendly. Plus, we can use the kitchen and enjoy refreshments after fencing.

For several years we under-utilized the space while moving slowly towards a new vision for the club. Few fencers from the pre-Y era have returned; the membership had to grow from scratch. Terry and David certainly knew how to teach modern fencing classes but neither was in a hurry to return to that grind. It was historical fencing that brought classes back.

The march towards history

Many forces conspired to pull us closer to historical swordplay. First, David Hoornstra's deep involvement in the SCA had led him into medieval scholarship. When the Midrealm decided to allow SCA rapier fencing in the early nineties, David was in the thick of it, pushing for more authentic swordplay.

Around 1992 Dr. Jeffrey Forgeng, a medieval scholar and author, joined the Middle English Dictionary project here. He was researching period fencing, working with Royal Armouries curators to get access to manuscripts. In about 1996, he asked David to be his sparring partner to study Di Grassi's 1575 fencing methods. By 1997, four or five fencers were playing with 3-lb. rapiers and daggers in David's back yard weekly.

In 1998, invited by SCA knight and medieval scholar Brian Price, David witnessed Christian Tobler's unprecedented demonstration of German Longsword at the SCA Pennsic War. Soon after, Brian's Chivalry Publishing company published Christian's book on longsword, and then Jeffrey's translation of Armouries Ms. I.33, the oldest European fencing manual known.

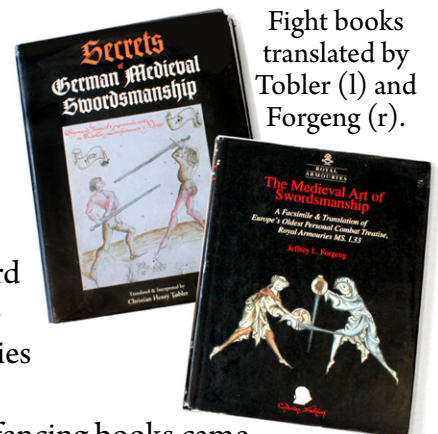
That opened the floodgates. Six or eight more mostly-black-covered historical fencing books came out before the company went bankrupt. These manuals became the new core of the club's knowledge.



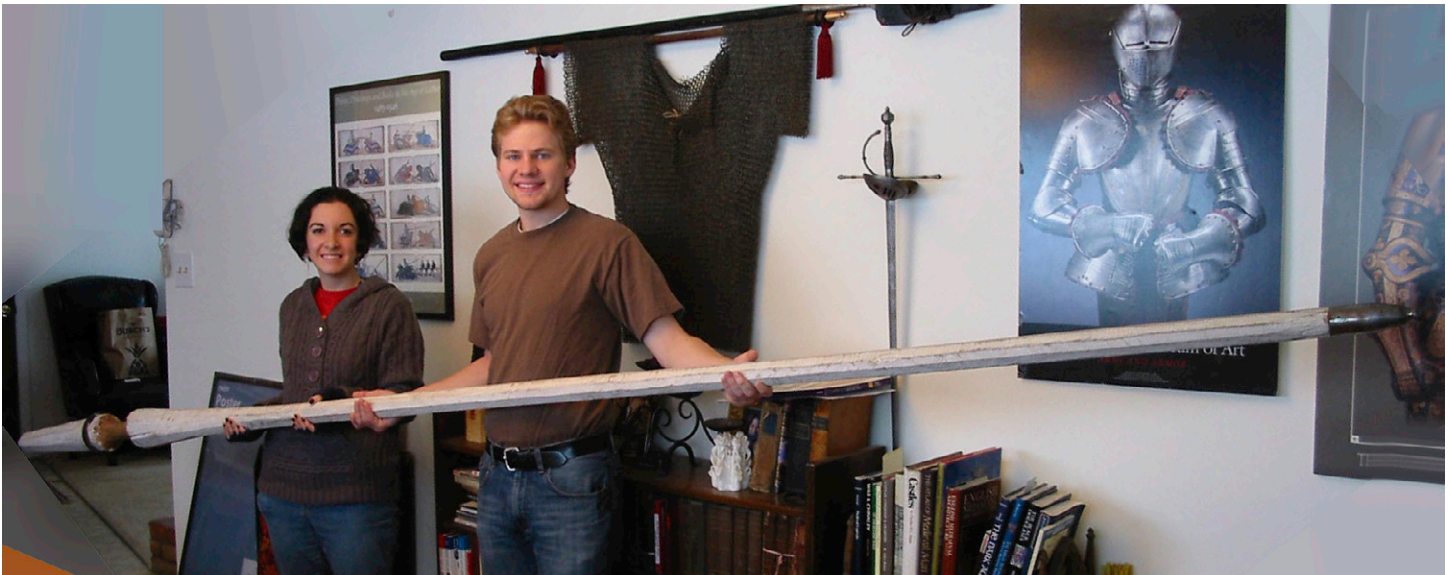
Pittsfield Grange Hall, exterior and (below) interior upstairs



Jeffrey (right) and David demonstrating DiGrassi at a 1999 SCA event. The heavy, stiff rapiers have large safety tips.



Fight books translated by Tobler (l) and Forgeng (r).



The Medieval scholars

Long before this, David Hoornstra's SCA activities had become increasingly authenticity-oriented. By 1996 he had been skipping Coronations to attend the International Congress in Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, meeting military history and chivalry scholars, lunching with museum curators and attending their papers – and parties.

In the 90s, Jeffrey Forgeng had encouraged David's medieval scholarship, commissioning David's artwork for his books. When Jeffrey got his dream job as arms curator at the Higgins Armoury Museum in Worcester, MA, David got invited to visit. With cotton gloves, he was handed original Viking swords and given free run of the artifact storage room.

David gave his first paper in Kalamazoo in 2000. In 2006, preparing for his third (on lances), he was welcomed behind the scenes by the arms curator at the Tower of London.

At Kalamazoo (2002) he saw Bob Charron's scholarly demonstration of Fiori's 15th-century techniques, and, later, Brian Price's exposition on *Jeu de la Hache* (period manual for poll-axe). Both were well-known SCA knights. Their presentations were a breakthrough: back in 1996, David had been warned not to betray SCA roots among real scholars.

These scholars were pioneers of the Historical European Martial Arts movement that started right on the heels of their books' publication. And the acceptance of the material in the world of scholarship placed the movement on a legitimate basis – a far cry from the “counterculture” “DIY” SCA.

Earlier, our theatrical and historical fencing was based on David's reading of three Elizabethan fencing manuals obtained in the early nineties. He had success in SCA rapier competition by mixing these with modern techniques and our Medieval-Festival “improv” experience.

(Above) Sword Club fencer Joe Munski and friend Jennifer Garfinkle did a U-M engineering study on heavy jousting-lance impacts inspired by this lance. John Vernier had left the ash lumber and the project with David. Terry and David cut our first longswords from the excess lumber, which led to David finally making the lance, also involved in David's third Kalamazoo paper. Background: a period mail shirt, David's medieval library, museum posters and the Sword Club's clamshell rapier.



Jeffrey Forgeng with another member of the Higgins Sword Guild. (Photo used with the kind permission of Dr. Forgeng)



Sword and Buckler at ISMAC 2005 (Lansing, MI)

By the late 1990s, SCA Rapier had invaded the Sword Club, *without* the SCA's "down-a-leg" games. Sword Club members began attending SCA practices, strengthening the local rapier group. In 2011, fencers outnumbered rattan fighters at every Cynnabar practice.

Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA)

The influence of all that scholarly input meant that the Sword Club was re-started on the ground floor of the HEMA movement, experimenting concurrently with other clubs in Chicago, Toronto, on the east and west coasts and in Europe, Canada and Australia.

Jeffrey and his period-weight rapier replicas had gotten us onto a historical basis circa 1998. When he moved out east to Plimoth Plantation in 2000, a few of us ordered replica weapons from Armour Class in Glasgow and kept going.

In 2003, David and Terry Gruber made some rudimentary ash longsword "wasters" from lance-project waste stock. David, Terry, Alex Gleason and Ben Spencer began fencing based on Tobler's book and the insights David had picked up from the above-mentioned experts. Because of our decades of crossing swords, we got quickly to the point where we could confidently spar –non-competitively – at moderate speeds. We could hardly contain our enthusiasm.

Terry and Barb's daughter Andrea and several of her friends heard about it and requested a class in longsword. Terry ordered complete hickory swords from Purple Heart Armoury, now the core of our wooden arsenal. The class ran through the 2003/04 season and made longsword our new habit. The wooden "wasters" were joined by a pair of poll-axes purchased by Alex Gleason and Ben Spencer.

The class experiment marked a turning point in the club's direction. Now that we knew we could teach longsword in a group, the return of regular classes became inevitable.

We had heard for years of big western martial arts events near Chicago, and of the Chicago Swordplay Guild among others. In 2005, David finally attended the International Swordfighting & Martial Arts Convention (ISMAC), this time held in Lansing. There were teachers from England, Australia, even Finland. David took a longsword class with Guy Windsor, gaining perspective on how it was taught by world-renowned experts. Our view remained, however, that we teach best by letting it be fun.

In 2006 jet-tech Ian Robertson walked in. He had studied longsword in German texts but had never actually done it. He soon became one of our valued instructors. When he transferred to Massachusetts, he was able to visit Jeffrey Forging's swordplay group at the Higgins.



David Hoornstra (left), Matthew Stewart-Fulton (dark blue) and Alex Gleason (R) give pointers at an SCA practice.



Alex Gleason (left) and Ben Spencer with the home-made longsword "wasters"



Andrea (right) and a friend with longswords, 2003

The word soon got out that “we were back.” In 2007, The Manchester Kiwanis Club invited us out to do a demo. Then Metzger’s invited us to do German Longsword at their Oktoberfest.

The Saline Celtic Festival

By 2007, David had been running the SCA’s demo there for ten years... now it was AASC’s turn. We put together a wooden list field and banners and borrowed a tent from the SCA. We gathered big crowds with our demos and bigger ones when we gave lessons.



2007: Terry teaches while a happy mom looks on.

The return of class sessions

The experience of teaching the very young to handle swords bigger than themselves got us thinking “no limits.” When we launched the first 6-week “Introduction to Fencing” series in the fall of 2007 we included foil, sabre and two weeks of Longsword in one bundle for all ages. It was interesting and exciting, but after a few years of experience with close calls and too much physical disparity between opponents we decided in 2015 to make it age 12 and up. At the same time we went from a series of six-week sessions through the year to just two, but each is 9 weeks and offers more weapons.

It didn’t take long to max out the space and the equipment. Terry bought more weapons and built another rack for them. In 2008 David bought a house with a large deck, where the club ran through the summer for the first time.

About 2007 we were joined by Matthew Stewart-Fulton. As a child, he had seen our Medieval Festival Intermezzi swordfights. Later, he joined the Ring of Steel, a theatrical swordfight and stunt company run by Chris Barbeau.

ANNARBORSWORD.COM ✦ OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE ANN ARBOR SWORD CLUB

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN USA

Tuesday evenings, 7 - 10 pm
September thru May
at the Pittsfield Grange Hall

SINCE 1977

ACTIVITIES/CLASSES | SCHEDULE/LOCATION | GETTING INVOLVED

MODERN FENCING

HISTORICAL FENCING

THEATRICAL SWORDPLAY

PHOTO GALLERY

INSTRUCTION AIDS

HISTORY OF FENCING

THE SWORD CLUB STORY

RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

FAQ

CONTACT US

HOME

What we do

- Modern competitive fencing
- Competitive “SCA” rapier play
- Historical Fencing (Western Martial Arts – Non-competitive)
 - German Longsword
 - English Rapier
 - Poll Axe
 - Quarterstaff
- Theatrical Swordplay
- Individual and group instruction

Who is the Sword Club?

Two veteran Ann Arbor instructors with competitive experience going back to the 1970s lead a motley crew aged 6 to 60. They find common ground in a most uncommon quest for fun and personal growth. On any given Monday evening, any of us might do modern foil, sabre or rapier or play at German Longsword based on 14th-century combat manuals, SCA-style rapier, or c. 1575 period rapier.

To the POINT
2011 Fall Season
First Session:
Swordplay Skills Class
Sept. 6 – Oct. 11
Registration Open
Email us
to SAVE YOUR SPOT!

SwordBlog
NEWS & NOTES
FROM THE CLUB

AASC site in 2011 with video

Going public: the web

We launched the website in 2003 with an elaborate and somewhat clunky design by David, a made-up “Western martial Arts” logo and scrolling pictures across the top. In early 2007 we added more pictures but had not yet added a class schedule. Even so, the site let a lot of people find us.

By 2011, David had bought a new video-capable digital camera and made an “about” video for the home page. Terry began studying things like keywords and search terms. We redesigned the whole site to be less clunky and easier to read, and tweaked everything to make it place higher in searches.

In 2014 Terry went a step further and got us Facebook and Twitter accounts, which meant we could upload videos regularly on YouTube, linked via Facebook. This put us in direct contact with HEMA groups around the world as well as those looking for a place to do it. Terry also learned to do minor updates to the site.

In 2015, the key word was “mobile friendly.” So Terry got a website template and created a whole new, much simpler site. David bought a program to create a home-page slide show for his Fine Art website and set one up for the Sword Club site too. Some things, including the “Sword Club Story,” were not in searchable form, or could not be directly reformatted, so David created this PDF, updating the story.



Matthew Stewart-Fulton (left) ran our own Longsword Symposium in 2014

Matt had also become an SCA fighter, SCA fencer and David's favorite opponent in both of those activities. He also brought strong wrestling techniques to our rapier and longsword work and quickly became an integral part of our faculty. He volunteered to provide a set of group drills for our first-ever Longsword Symposium, attended by out-of-town fencers and instructors. Unfortunately for us, he got his dream job in the Caribbean in 2014. He visits when he can.

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All this doesn't mean we don't do modern fencing. Indeed, we have found that casual SCA rapier and German Longsword will not keep you in the shape modern fencers enjoy. (Competitive HEMA is another matter.) Terry and David bring the perspective that the physical skills and conditioning of modern fencing make historical martial arts easier to learn and competence more accessible.

For that reason, modern foil and sabre open the nine-week sessions that culminate in longsword. These three skill-sets prepare one for other adventures.

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In 2011, one of those people arrived who have both the drive and type of mind to get into fencing in the most intense way. At age 14, James Hibbitts quickly became a favorite student and instructor to the young. Specializing in foil, he invaded the Ann Arbor Y and brought back several young fencers who added greatly to the cheerfulness of our club.

He overcame handicaps to enter USFA competition and earned his "C" classification in foil less than three years on.



Matthew, in SCA armor, teaches at Celtic Fest 2011



James Hibbitts (center) at "Après-Fencing" with Meija and Brian

We are stopping here for the moment.

More to come in the next section as the Sword Club enters the age of HEMA competition.