

They're off in their own little world

■ Fencers get little sponsorship or attention — and that's fine with them.

By **EMILY NIPPS**
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — They took over part of the Hyatt Regency for a weekend, sharing space with raucous teenagers in town for the Eminem concert.

They sneered, lunged and hacked at each other in their own nearly invisible corner of the sports world.

There were 202 competitors and about 100 spouses and fans for the Veteran's Fencing Championships, the Olympics for fencers age 50 and up. They came from as far as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, but only the United States, Germany and Great Britain brought the maximum 40 competitors.

"It's a lifetime sport," said Tampa's Terry Abrahams, a 65-year-old



Times photo — MICHAEL RONDOU

Tampa's Terry Abrahams, 65, parries before moving in to defeat Ann Cornwall of Great Britain during the Veterans World Championships.

who represented the United States in the women's 60 foil. "When you get old, it actually helps your fencing."

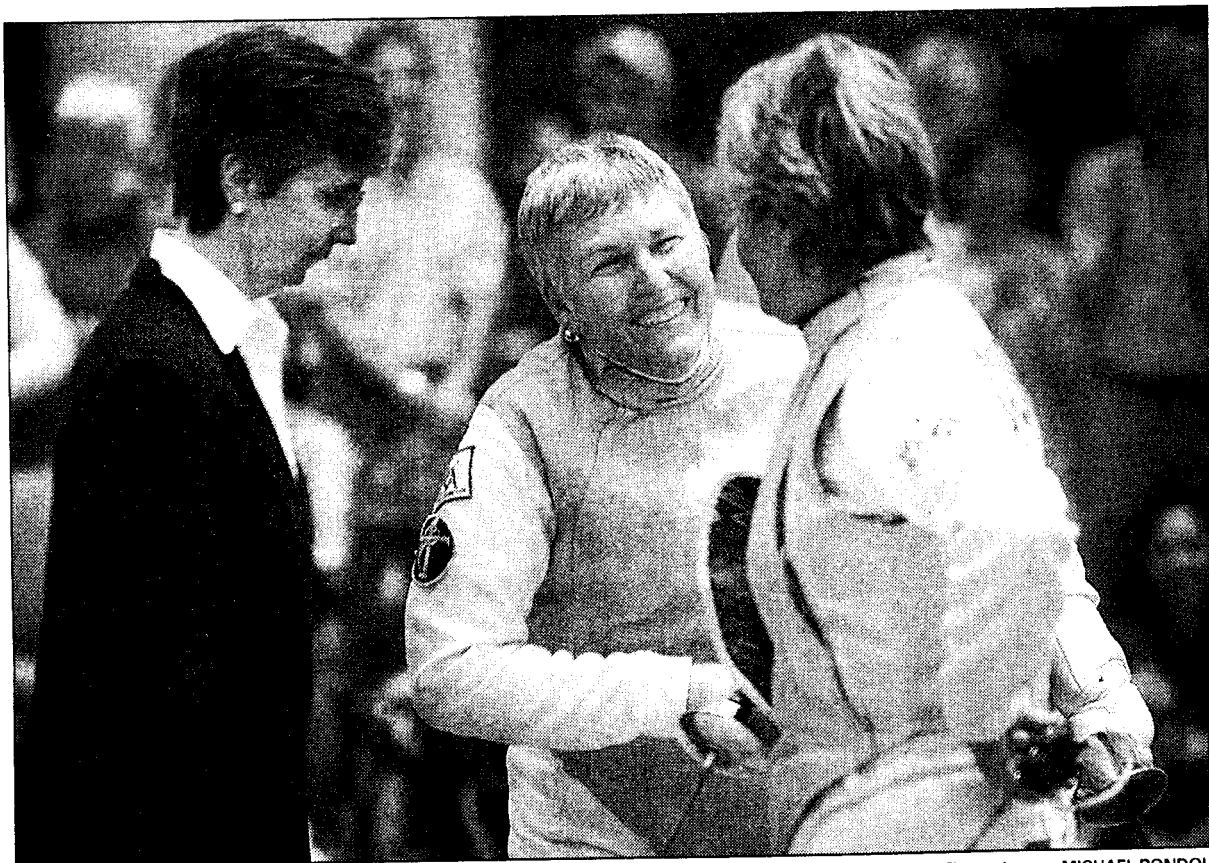
These people were walking, talking, poking, prodding proof that one doesn't need to be a physical giant to be a fencer. It helps, however, to be a mental one.

Self-defense, fitness and machismo are the wrong reasons to fence. If your reasons for fencing are emotional, analytical, even political, you're getting warmer.

Football players and boxers don't make good fencers. Ballet dancers

Please see **FENCING 7C**

HILLSBOROUGH



Times photo — MICHAEL RONDOU

Abrahams, center, shakes hands with Cornwall after winning a women's 60 foil match. Abrahams was one of three Floridians who represented the U.S. at the Veterans World Championships.

Fencing from 1C

and black belts do.

In fencing, it's not the strongest who wins, but the smartest. It's not who moves faster, it's who thinks on their feet. Strategy, technique and balance far outweigh size and strength.

Abrahams, one of three Floridians who represented the United States, has been fencing since she was 15, before fencers were wired and tethered to electric scoring machines. She has dropped the sport several times for babies and other life choices, but something keeps drawing her back.

"It takes a brain, I think, and I like that," she said. "We like to say it's like a chess match at 1,000 miles per hour. Because of that, there really are no dumb fencers.

"People either like it or they don't. A lot of people come after seeing it in the movies."

Tampa's Steve Lombardo, a 41-year-old who began fencing two weeks ago, was one of the few locals who came as a fan. He folk dances with Abrahams, who finished ninth in her event, and con-

THE WORLD OF FENCING

HISTORY: The first modern Olympics in 1896 featured men's foil and sabre fencing, but sword fighting as a sport originated in ancient Egypt.

WEAPONS: Foil — Has a rectangular cross-section blade and a small bell guard that covers the fencer's hand. The most common starter weapon, it emphasizes defense and clean attacks. It also has "right-of-way" rules, differentiating between the offending fencer and defending fencer during attacks. The target area is the torso. **Epee** — Has a triangular cross-section blade and large bell guard, and is heavier and stiffer than the foil. Rules are simple, and there is no right-of-way during attacks. The entire body is a valid target area. **Sabre** — Similar in size and shape to the foil. In addition to being a point-thrusting weapon like foil and epee, the sides of the blade are also used, making it a cutting weapon. Right-of-way rules are used, and the target area is from the hips to the top of the head.

THE MATCH: Two fencers duel on a long copper strip called a piste and are wired to electronic scoring machines that pick up "touches" by the weapons. Matches are usually to five or 10 points.

GETTING STARTED: Beginners may research Tampa Bay area fencing clubs by visiting the "Info For Members" link of www.usfencing.org, the official Web site of the United State Fencing Association. Local clubs include the Tampa Bay Fencers (813) 787-4526, Tampa's Fencing Academy (813) 885-3645 and Engarde Fencers in Clearwater. **COSTS:** A basic starter kit (mask, glove, jacket, weapon) will cost approximately \$125. To compete internationally, equipment can cost several hundred dollars a year, depending on wear and tear. Entry fees for tournaments usually range from \$10 to \$50 per weapon.

— Compiled by Emily Nipps.

Americans.

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and they do it for themselves, not non-fencing readers. Despite be-

Tampa's Steve Lombardo, a 12-year-old who began fencing two weeks ago, was one of the few locals who came as a fan. He folk dances with Abrahams, who finished ninth in her event, and considered her his inspiration for joining the Tampa Bay Fencers. Well, one of his inspirations.

"It's something I always wanted to do," Lombardo said. "When I watched Zorro as a young boy, I thought it was neat."

Fencing is not for the faint of heart. When competition gets heavy, especially in epee and sabre, it can hurt.

Nor is it for the close-minded. A serious fencer can get by with speaking one language but must understand at least a little bit of French. *Allez* (begin fighting), *prises de fer* (taking the blade), and *corps a corps* (body-to-body contact, illegal in foil and sabre) are part of fencing vocabulary. If someone speaks the language of music, even better: "Tempo," "beat" and "rhythm" are common terms in training.

Finland, France, and Italy turn out strong fencers, though the United States tends to dominate in both men's and women's events. Japan is fairly new to the scene and gleaned a bronze from its dozen qualified fencers.

The camaraderie among the the Veterans fencers, though, seems tighter than that of their younger counterparts. Olympic fencers are studious and severe, but Veterans are often seen laughing before and after a match.

Compared to the younger circuit, Veterans fencing is like a vacation. For some of the retired travelers, it is a vacation.

"You hear so many great stories just sitting around the bar at night," said Lou Felty, a 64-year-old woman from Louisville, Ky., who also came to support the

used, and the target area is from the hips to the top of the head.

Americans.

"This one guy last night is part of the Porsche (automobile) family, and he got kicked out of Germany for making illegal license plates."

Felty has been fencing for 40 years, and still is fascinated by the speed and mental demands.

"The thing is, you have to have a really good mind to be competitive," she said.

"You have to be telepathic in some ways, you have to read every little movement. Maybe your opponent has done something twice, like raised her hand up before she hits, and you recognize it. Though at this level, the chances of this happening is not so likely."

Fencers, like many athletes, separate themselves from the world with their own language and inside jokes. What outsider knows (or cares) that foil fencers are prissy, epee fencers sweat and sabre fencers are brutes?

Sabre fencers, as the joke goes, don't hit below the belt because it could cause brain damage. A true epeeist, fencers quip, is easily detected by the nose.

"Smelly epee is a redundancy," said Rita Comes, a 41-year-old woman from San Francisco who fenced in a first-year women's sabre demonstration.

"You can tell when epee fencers are in the room, getting ready to compete. Their bags will be stacked against the wall, and you walk by and get a whiff, and it burns your eyes. And you know men's epee must be about to start."

Fencers analyze, scrutinize and dissect their sport in essays, books, newsletters and Web sites,

and they do it for themselves, not non-fencing readers. Despite being some of the longest-standing Olympic athletes, competing in the first Olympics in 1896, fencers are rarely, if ever, televised or publicized.

Vermouth maker Martini & Rossi occasionally sponsors major national and international tournaments, and Coca-Cola has been known to give support. But sponsorship for fencers, even at the Olympic level, is rare.

And that's fine with them. Most fencers accept early on that the cost of competing can range from \$125 for beginners to several thousand dollars for world-class traveling. Last year's Veterans Championship, for instance, was held in Martinique, France. Abrahams, who competes mostly in Florida events, said she spends about \$400 or \$500 a year.

Americans fared well at the Veterans World Championships, winning the most medals (three gold, three silver and seven bronze) followed by Great Britain (11 medals) and Germany (9).

Comes was thrilled to finish fifth in the sabre demonstration and vowed to stick with fencing until she couldn't take it any further. She sold a successful stock a few years back and uses the money to fund her fencing circuit trips.

Her Veterans' ranking climbs every year, but it's not the medals that keep her coming back.

"It's a geek sport, so there's so many funny personalities," Comes said.

"You see a lot of the same people at these things, and you get to know their style and stories. It's like our own little subcommunity."

— Compiled by Emily Nippes.