

BASED ON REAL SWORDPLAY FROM THE OLD WORLD,
WESTERN MARTIAL ARTS IS HOT



RENAISSANCE MEN



John Clements (left) of the Association of Renaissance Martial Arts and one of his students demonstrated swordplay based on methods used in the Middle Ages and Renaissance during a 2010 BLADE Show seminar.

“WE LISTEN TO WHAT THE PRACTITIONERS HAVE TO SAY AND BASICALLY MAKE SWORDS TO THEIR DIRECTION.”

—BARRY ROSS



A single-hand sword for use in the “sword-and-buckler” style, the Model 133 in Albion’s Maestro Line features a dulled-and-blunt-tipped blade ideal for sparring. Weight: 2 pounds, 8.9 ounces. Overall length: 38 inches. (Albion photos)

While the European sword is no longer a realistic choice for personal security, it remains a fertile symbol. Whether a broadsword, rapier or some other design, it conjures images of strength and adventure, and perpetuates both an air of elegance and deadly force.

Dedicated devotees who re-enact accurate European swordplay strive to preserve the history of both the blades and the sparring forms of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Using swords built much as they were in the Old World circa the 14th-17th centuries—the most striking differences being the blades have blunt tips and dulled edges for safety’s sake—the devotees engage in swordplay as it was done half a millennium or so ago. Their study and practice has come to be known as the Western martial arts (WMA).

However, the name does not sit well with the vision of John Clements, director of the Association of Renaissance Martial Arts (ARMA). He said he figures people use the term “Western” to distinguish it as “not Asian martial arts.” Clements proposed that “Western” could refer to the Vikings, the Apache or even the Neanderthal. Combat arts from eras that are almost completely undocumented, he insisted, are just a fantasy invented to pay homage to those time periods.

What ARMA is doing, he maintained, is sound scholarly study. He said the group interprets documented teachings and reconstructs accurate, historic sword-fighting methods using training,

CAS Hanwei makes swords the old-fashioned way, using such materials as 5160 carbon blade steel ideal for providing the kind of flex needed—along with blunt tips and dulled edges—to help prevent injury in Western martial arts sparring sessions. CAS Hanwei’s Barry Ross demonstrates the flex of the CAS Hanwei “Federschwert.”



CAS Hanwei’s “Federschwert” (basically, federschwert is German for “feather”—i.e., “featherweight”—and “sword”) is the company’s Practical Fencing Longsword based on classical training pieces used in Renaissance Europe. Overall length: 51.5 inches. MSRP: \$199. (CAS Hanwei photo)

techniques and tools patterned on those of centuries past. At ARMA, he said, they adhere strictly to what they know from academic research. To varying degrees, it is what most WMA practitioners strive to attain. “It’s only because of the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance that we have material that we can rely on to construct some sort of fighting art as a martial discipline,” he stressed.

ARMA draws knowledge from many technical manuals that present sophisticated, systematic fighting methods based on the principles of the ancients, he pointed out.

“They called it *arts martialis*, or the arts of Mars, which is the Roman god of war,” he specified. “They say it’s a *sceinta*, or a *science of defense*. They called it martial arts and the *noble science*. When they talked this way in the late 14th, 15th and 16th and into the 17th century, and all of our source material is from this era, then it has to be defined as *Renaissance martial arts*.”

Eddie Floyd, founder and chief instructor at Swordplay Alliance schools, said that part of his 35-year passion is generated from the necessity to learn about the past as he trains to perfect and teach historically accurate techniques.

“It’s a self-defense course, and it’s a history course, and it’s a sword-fighting class,” he mused. “You never stop learn-

ing. I get a big kick out of it still.”

Historical Correctness

When the subject of Renaissance sword fighting enters the conversation, popular imagery tends to shift to re-enactors at field-trip fairs or Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) “war” parties. However, do not mention that to Clements because it may set him off. He takes his swordsmanship extremely seriously and does not want any of his work to be confused with what he characterizes as “frivoly.”

“There is quite a distinction between the activity that they do and what I do,” he explained. “They want to play dress up and do costumed role-play. It’s escapism. They say they like history, but it’s just a starting point. And then, history becomes an inconvenience.”

Case in point, he recalled, is the oft-quoted unofficial SCA motto, “The Middle Ages not as they were but as they should have been.” Lamented Clements, “Does that sound historical to you?”

For Clements and a growing number of dedicated Western martial artists, the emphasis is on the physicality of swordplay rather than trying to talk and act like a B-movie version of d’Artagnan of *The Three Musketeers* fame.

“There is a strange phenomenon,” observed Whit Williams, director of Rein-

hardt Legacy Fight Team, named after the late modern sword pioneer, Hank Reinhardt. “If I take a group of students dressed in *gis* [training uniforms used in Japanese martial arts] and teach them katana techniques in a public park, I get onlookers with deep, solemn faces, obviously impressed with the serious study. If I wear fencing gear and use a foil in the same place, I get athletes admiring our serious sport. I can wear the same gear in the same place while holding a European sword and suddenly I’m a re-enactor.”

As Floyd pointed out, whatever the pop/public perception, the trend continues toward historic accuracy.

“We get it on,” he grinned. “We ‘pad up’ so we can bend a heavy blade on each other. It is realistic looking. I think everyone is looking for more realism.”

The Sword in Action

The swordplay enthusiast has one necessary tool, but is there a “perfect sword”? The consensus is no. Different attributes of each type of sword are useful in relation to the type of tactics used in varying situations—and in relation to the skills of the practitioner.

For the purposes of Western martial arts especially, swords are classified as *broadwords* or *rapiers*—though granted, this is a huge generalization. Broadwords typically can include almost any kind of



Broadwords and rapiers are the swords of choice among practitioners of the Western martial arts. Two members of the Reinhardt Legacy Fight Team spar during a past BLADE Show West under the watchful eye of the team's Whit Williams (right).

double-edged slashing sword.

"Europeans were long on invention and variation, while short on names," Williams said. "Broadsword is a misnomer that gets used for European swords in general, but most commonly is used for the many variations of one-handed, European, double-edged swords."

Three general variations within the broadsword category are the short or one-handed sword, commonly used with a shield and usually about 36 inches long; the mid-sized bastard or the hand-and-a-half sword; and the long or two-handed sword, commonly about 46 inches in length.

Williams said the current trend is in the bastard or long swords, though, as he pointed out, historically they played a very minor role. He indicated the long swords mostly saw action on the battlefield as anti-cavalry weapons.

Nonetheless, perhaps the oldest argument of preferred sword type comes by way of the fighting style chosen by the swordsman. Does he/she prefer to slash or stab? "Really, the controversy is be-

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SWORDS TODAY

If there is a father of Western martial arts, the late Hank Reinhardt is it. His years of dedication to recreating period swords through his company, Museum Replicas, and his years of exploring, writing about and teaching the subject to friends and admirers lands him in the category of near guru. (Patrick Gibbs photo)



tween a cutting edge or a thrusting blade," Floyd opined. "That encompasses the whole history of the sword."

Floyd said he focuses mainly on the rapier. The long, slender blade is designed for straight-on thrust techniques. But whether poking or pounding, all swords must be well crafted. Hundreds of years of trial and error went into perfecting them. Hence, in its own design, each was almost perfect for what it had to do. For this reason, hollow grinding a yard-long piece of steel without the finer considerations and dubbing it a sword is analogous to someone putting a 36-inch barrel on a pistol and calling it a rifle.

"A sword has a balance point a couple inches in front of the cross guard," Floyd observed. "Historically, that's what they all sought out because it put the cutting sweet spot in the correct place. So many inches from the tip is where it cuts the best, and you can tap it on something and you feel it vibrate until you get to that sweet spot."

Swords Under Construction

Making a quality replica of a sword is not easy. It needs to be physically and aesthetically correct, and also durable enough to stand up to high-impact sparring.

"We listen to what the practitioners have to say and basically make swords to their direction," offered Barry Ross of

John Clements of the Association of Renaissance Martial Arts (ARMA) said ARMA draws on knowledge from many technical manuals that present sophisticated, systematic fighting methods based on the principles of the ancients. (image courtesy of John Clements)



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WORDS TODAY

CAS Hanwei, which specializes in sword replicas. “It’s a little bit difficult because everyone has their own idea what is the perfect sword for this particular discipline, so you sort of have to put a lot of opinions together and come up with a compromise, if you like.”

Ross also said two-handed broadswords are the most popular sparring models, pointing out that CAS sells most of them in the \$200-to-\$300 range.

“The demographic is between 20- and 40-year-olds,” Ross continued. “At the younger end of that range, there’s not a lot of discretionary income, so we cater to that. We are also able to use economy of scale to produce a good sword at a lower price than a custom guy would.”

CAS Hanwei uses mainly 5160 spring steel for blades because of the appropriate flexibility. For handles, Ross said CAS uses a wood core wrapped very tightly with cord and overlaid in leather. It makes for a strong handle with a tactile grip that will absorb sweat.

While typical guard and pommel materials vary from maker to maker, CAS Hanwei uses stainless steel primarily. Aside from the corrosion resistance, the investment casting of stainless can reproduce an accurate shape and weight every time. The tang is pined over the end of the pommel to make the fit tight and reliable.

“We also do some swords that have a thread on the end of the tang with a recessed sleeve nut inside the pommel,” Ross added. “But the market prefers the riveted tang because it was the traditional style.”

For the contact information for the swords and knives pictured, see “Where To Get ‘Em” on page 65.

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