

Interview: Jim Carpenter

Contributed by Michael Aufrichtig
Sunday, 02 May 2004

Jim Carpenter was a fixture in the US epee standings during the 1990's, with a long career that saw him as a member of the 1996 Olympic Men's Epee team in Atlanta, a two-time medalist in the Pan Am games, a three-time US Team National Champion, three-time member of the US World Team. Retiring from fencing in 1996, Carpenter just couldn't stay away. He is now building the next generation of épéeists as head coach at the Grapevine Fencing Center in Grapevine, Texas. Michael Aufrichtig (of Fencing Footage) interviews Jim Carpenter on his involvement in the sport.

MA: When did you start to fence and how did you get involved?

I started at Northwestern University my sophomore year. My coach there, Laurie Schiller, ran a PE class in fencing. I was looking for something to do and maybe try to stay in shape for the winter semester. I saw the fencing class was being offered so I decided to try it. Fencing was always something I wanted to try and that PE class was my first opportunity. Once I tried it I was immediately hooked. I won the tournament they held at the end of the class and Laurie invited me to train with the team.

I started training hard right away and never looked back...

MA: You went to Germany for some time, how was it training over there? Did it compare to your training at the NYAC?

The training in Germany was awesome! I was able to train with Arndt Schmidt, Achim Bellman as well as a number of other top Germans at the time. My coach there, Manfred Kaspar (the German woman's epee team coach as well as Arndt's coach) really took me under his wing. He gave me 3-4 lessons a week and never charged me a dime for it, it was really unbelievable. There were 5 or so fencers there at the time in addition to Arndt and Achim that could make world cup finals. There were also 10 or so other very good journeymen fencers who would show up almost every night... talk about a high octane training environment! When I showed up in Germany I was a Midwestern B rated foil fencer, when I got back I made the final in the second NAC I fenced in and except for a few blips, I was in the top 5 of the point standings until I retired.

At the NYAC, we came fairly close to recreating that training environment. On almost any night during most of my career at the NYAC, we had 8 out of the top 10 epee fencers in the country. We had a great coach in Aladar Kogler, and then later we had Yefim Litvan as well. We also had a close relationship with Salle Santelli New Jersey, their top fencers would come over to train and we would go over there as well. It made for a great training environment. It was a special bunch of guys, we were all competing for the same few spots on the team, yet we were close friends as well... we would beat the hell out of each other in training and tournaments then go out partying together. Although I'm a thousand miles away in Texas now, I still consider those guys among my closest friends.

MA: What are some of your most memorable fencing experiences? I remember a nationals in 1992 when you had to beat Tris Thompson 5-1 to enable a teammate to go up, and you did. What others?

That was a great one. Let's see, the first time I made a NAC final, I remember almost every touch of that tournament... it's etched in my brain.... it was such a great feeling to have everything come together, to have all that hard work finally pay off. The other was when I made the final at Heidenheim. To make the final at the hardest World Cup was unbelievable for me, on that day I was one of the best fencers in the world, that's a very cool feeling (not to mention it pretty much cinched me a spot on the Olympic team). Funny thing, though, for the most part, I remember my fencing failures much more clearly than I do the great wins.

MA: You were on the 1996 Olympics. What was it like training for that, being in Atlanta and any other comments?

Talk about memorable fencing experiences etched in my mind. I went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows... I remember the match to make the medal round in team epee so clearly, like it was yesterday. It was sudden death overtime against Italy, Tamir Bloom fencing Sandro Cuomo. Tamir takes a seconde bind fleche and tags Cuomo right in the middle of the chest, I jump over the barricade yelling and screaming, fists pumping, only to turn and see.... no light... it didn't go off. Cuomo gets Tamir on a garbage touch next and we're done, no chance for a medal. Italy goes on to win the gold, I don't even know where we ended up... don't care.

Training for the Olympics wasn't really any different than training to make the Olympics. I trained hard all the time.

MA: What are some of the changes in fencing that you have seen over the years that you like and do not like?

I think the biggest change is the resurgence of the local tournaments like the Rose Condon Memorial in Shreveport, LA and the Grand Prix here in Dallas. During my career, most of these tournaments had just about died, because everyone went to the NAC's and skipped the local tournaments. Down here in the Southwest division, the circuit of local tournaments are getting huge, the last one I fenced in had almost 130 epee fencers. That's just awesome! You'd be lucky if 10 fencers showed up at a tournament back when I was fencing seriously.

What don't I like about fencing? Not much really. I think a slight problem is that some of the national tournaments (like Div I Men's Epee) are a little bit small... that takes out the endurance aspect of the sport. But I think it is certainly the lesser of two evils, it prevents collusion, and I was on the losing end of collusion a few too many times while I was fencing, nothing more frustrating than that.

MA: What is it about fencing that made you come back after a 6 year layoff?

It was a simple matter of burning out after '96. Just recently the burn out wore off, and I felt the itch to get involved. Right after we moved to the Dallas area, I started banging around on the North Texas division website.... one of the clubs there, Grapevine Texas Fencing Center, was looking for a coach. I sent their manager/owner, Attila Koscardy, an email

saying I was interested, but I didn't have much coaching experience, although I was a pretty darn good fencer once. He looked up my results on the SUFI website and saw that I was ranked second, right behind Mike Marx in the final '96 point standings. Well, Mike had a whole bunch of the top women's epee fencers, so Attila figured I was a probably a pretty good bet.

MA: Understand you are coaching for a year now. How do you like it and what can you share about your coaching experience so far?

I love it! There's nothing more satisfying than watching one of your students finally start to get it. A couple of my fencers took silver medals at Nationals, after I'd been working with them for only about 6 months that was a great feeling. On the other hand, there's nothing more frustrating than watching your fencers lose.