



JEAN-LOUIS

THE BLACK FENCER IN WESTERN SWORDPLAY

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In the Huntsville Fencing Club, as in many clubs, we commonly lose most of our younger fencers as they head off to college or to jobs out of the area afterward. One of our collegiate fencers recently transferred to a school in an area of the country whose black population is, for lack of a better phrase, almost non-existent. In an email she joked to me of the friendly surprise on the faces of a few members of a fencing club when she, not only a black woman but a black fencer, showed up. Of course, there should be no surprise at all at black fencers, especially in the context of recent memory. Black fencers, as well as fencers of color in general, are commonplace in modern fencing, and have contributed significantly to the international standing of many fencing nations, including the US.

This is not to suggest, of course, that black fencers in the US or other nations in the twentieth century did not face racism. As late as 1949 the Amateur Fencers League of America (the previous name of the USFA) still had a "negro fencing ban" in place (in protest of which Columbia University withdrew its fencers from AFLA competition), and the US Olympic fencing team did not have a black member until Uriah Jones qualified in saber in 1968¹. Still, it is indeed comforting to note that most fencers I know see other fencers only as fencers, and do not regard race as an issue of any sort. In spite of its highly competitive nature, one of fencing's hallmarks today is its capacity to help push social barriers down.

Holding on more strongly, however, is the notion that black fencers are relatively late arrivals to a pursuit that for at least the past two centuries was considered by many to be elitist in a social sense, and for most of its history was generally believed to have been a "white" art and science, and not only in the common color of its modern uniform. In fact, black fencers have been actively involved in "modern" fencing since at least the seventeenth century, and probably long before. Our rich modern Western fencing heritage comprises quite a few armes blanches: the rapier, smallsword, épée de combat, spada de duello, and foil; a variety of sabers ranging from heavy cavalry sabers to the light dueling saber, plus the broadsword, backsword, shearing sword, spadron, singles-ick, falchion, and cutlass; and the modern foil, epee, and saber, both "dry" and electric, we fence with today. All of these weapons have had significant numbers of black practitioners and masters over the centuries.

It was via the slave trade that most fencers of African descent were first introduced to Western swordplay, although North Africans, especially among the Moslem corsairs, were undoubtedly familiar with it via sea roving, armed conflict,

and European renegades. By the seventeenth century, references to black fencers were common. A traveler to Barbados wrote of black slaves who "play[ed] at Rapier and Dagger very skillfully, with their Stookados, their Imbrocados, and their Passes: And at single Rapier too, after the manner of Charanza [Carranza]²." Wealthy Spaniards in the New World often had retinues of as many as a dozen liveried black slaves, all armed with rapiers.³ In spite of Spanish racial demarcation, many Spaniards of mixed black and white parentage in the Old World and the New carried rapier and "poniard," and were thoroughly acquainted with their use. The great early seventeenth century poet, novelist, and swordsman Francisco de Quevedo even described "mulatto" swordsmen in Spain in his picaresque novel *El Buscón* (The Swindler)⁴. Black and mulatto pirates carried cutlasses and other swords among the multi-ethnic buccaneer, filibuster, and pirate crews that ravaged the Caribbean. Similarly, slaves and former slaves who served aboard Age of Sail men-of-war and privateers were trained in the use of the cutlass, and generations of black soldiers in Western armies were introduced to Western swordplay.⁵

The early Spanish governments in the New World had forbidden weapons among slaves, but in spite of this, "slaves continued to be as dexterous with the machete or the saber as with the hoe⁶." Slaves and free men of color eventually became the backbone of Spanish defenses in the New World, and were typically armed and formidably adept with both the lance or spear, as well as with the machete or cutlass⁷. Such prowess may have derived from both Western and African forms of swordplay. We do not know to what degree slaves may have incorporated African methods of swordplay into their practice of any of the various Western forms. However, we do know that many African peoples were expert with the sword and had their own forms of swordplay. Traveler Catherine Hutton, for example, described Bijuga warriors of the early nineteenth century:

² "COLUMBIA REJECTS NEGRO FENCING BAN; Team Drops From Loop After A. F. L. A. Request to Keep 2 Members From Event," *New York Times*, December 1, 1949; Carolyn Battista, "Opening Doors With the Point of a Sword," *New York Times*, November 14, 1999; Frank Litsky, "Uriah Jones 2nd, 75, a Pioneer for Black Fencers in the U.S.," *New York Times*, July 4, 2000.

³ Thomas Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World* (1648; repr. edited by J. Eric S. Thompson, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 73.

⁴ Francisco de Quevedo, *The Swindler*, in *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels*, translated by Michael Alpert (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 107, 123; Francisco de Quevedo, *Obras de Don Francisco de Quevedo Villegas* (Amberes [Antwerp]: Henrico Verdussen, 1726), vol. 1:369, 378.

⁵ Olaudah Equiano [Gustavus Vassa], *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 184; Benerson Little, *The Sea Rover's Practice* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2003), 68.

⁶ Anonymous, "The Horrors of San Domingo, Chapter III," *The Atlantic Monthly* 10, no. 59 (August 1862), 216

⁷ Benerson Little, *The Buccaneer's Realm* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2007), 46-50.

¹ "COLUMBIA REJECTS NEGRO FENCING BAN; Team Drops From Loop After A. F. L. A. Request to Keep 2 Members From Event," *New York Times*, December 1, 1949; Carolyn Battista, "Opening Doors With the Point of a Sword," *New York Times*, November 14, 1999; Frank Litsky, "Uriah Jones 2nd, 75, a Pioneer for Black Fencers in the U.S.," *New York Times*, July 4, 2000.

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"[I]n the use of the broad sword they are most expert and active¹." African women were often adept with the sword as well. Olaudah Equiano, a slave who his people when he was child: "There were many women as well as men on both sides; among others my mother was there, and armed with a broad sword²." He noted further that "All are taught the use of... weapons; even our women are warriors and march boldly out to fight along with the men³." Slaves brought these and similar martial traditions with them to the New World. Black fencers are also well-documented in North African forms of swordplay, which are generally assumed to have derived from Persia, the Arabian Middle East, and India⁴.

In eighteenth and nineteenth century Western swordplay, we find not only black swordsmen but noted fencing masters of African heritage as well, although without doubt there were probably many such masters in the previous century. One of them was the great eighteenth century fencing master, the chevalier de Saint-Georges. Born in Guadeloupe of mixed black and white parentage in the first half of the eighteenth century, he rose to prominence as a fencer, fencing master,

¹ Catherine Hutton, *The Tour of Africa* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1821),

² The Bijuga are a Senegambian tribe of Guinea-Bissau, and are today commonly referred to as the Bijogo.

³ Equiano, *Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ For example, Eugene Paul Metour, *In the Wake of the Green Banner* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 62-63. On the origins of North African swordplay, see for example Richard Burton, *The Book of the Sword* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), 163.

and violinist, first in Paris then in London. Popular "with the ladies," his public exhibition bout with the chevalier d'Eon—the famous cross-dressing swordsman—became the talk of London. Saint-George was considered by many to be the finest swordsman of his time⁵. Another well-noted black master was Soubise, originally a servant to the Duchess of Queensbury, and later an assistant to the famous fencing master Henry Angelo. Soubise's exuberant, rakish reputation eventually got him exiled to India, where he opened his own highly successful salle⁶.

Another famous master of African descent was Jean-Louis Michel, an orphan likewise of mixed black and white parentage who emigrated to France in the late eighteenth century during the Haitian revolution. As a youth he began his study of swordplay under a Belgian master and persevered in spite of the racial prejudice directed at him by provosts and students. He soon became a Napoleonic soldier as well as a redoubtable swordsman who scorned all "superfluous movement" in fencing. He once defeated, one after the other, thirteen Italian soldiers, fencing masters or provosts all, in forty minutes during a duel between his French regiment and an allied Italian regiment. Later he became a regimental fencing master, and in 1830 founded a famous fencing salle

⁵ Richard Cohen, *By the Sword: A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions* (New York: Random House, 2002), 92-95.

⁶ E. D. Morton, *Martini A to Z of Fencing* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1992), 172.



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Montpellier, France. He even taught his daughter to fence, and she became "one of his most distinguished adversaries," defeating many male students in the salle¹. Michel Alaux, who became the master of Jean-Louis's salle more than a century later, coached fencing great Christian d'Oriola, and became a noted master in the US, is one of several who have proudly recounted Jean-Louis Michel's swashbuckling history². Jean-Louis was considered by many of his contemporaries to be the premier "professor of the foil" and the greatest fencing master of the nineteenth century³. Black fencing masters were variously noted in other European countries as well, including a "tall and powerful negro fencing master" who gave public fencing exhibitions in Germany⁴.

Black fencers in the Americas continued to participate in Western swordplay throughout the nineteenth century, and black fencing masters left their marks as well. In New Orleans, the only city in the United States where the sword duel was routine and where men trained in foil, smallsword, saber, and even occasionally, due to Spanish influence, the rapier, there was "Black Austin," a free black man who "taught the small-sword." There was Robert Severin, another free black master who was "afterward killed in Mexico"⁵. And there was Basile Croquère, again of mixed black and white parentage, "who was so excellent a swordsman that, notwithstanding the undeniable color line, many of the most conservative Creole gentlemen did not hesitate to attend his salle d'armes or even to cross swords with him in private"⁶. He was reputedly the finest "colored" swordsman in New Orleans, and one of the best of any race or ethnicity⁷. Given that only in exceptional circumstances did white fencers cross the racial divide, the existence of black masters is proof of a significant number of black and mulatto fencers in New Orleans.

At least one fencer of African descent contributed in extraordinary fashion to the swashbuckling literature of the Western world. Most fencers, not to mention readers in general, are familiar with Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and its sequels, at least through their film versions if not through the books themselves. Far fewer seem aware that Dumas's paternal grandmother was a former West Indian slave of African descent⁸. In spite of his literary success, the author himself often faced racial prejudice, and were he alive today, many would probably consider Dumas, a Frenchman and arguably the father of the swashbuckling novel, to be black. His many

millions of modern readers, however, appear to have paid little attention to this fact. Perhaps this is through ignorance or, more appropriately, because they have felt that race is not an issue, that great stories transcend it, as should human endeavor in all fields, swordplay included, as ultimately should humanity itself. All of us across the spectrum of fencing, from the focused athlete to the swashbuckling dreamer, have an abiding affection for sword and swordplay, which in turn should make us proud of all the many intersecting avenues in the history of fencing. ■



¹ Ben C. Truman, *The Field of Honor: Being a Complete and Comprehensive History of Duelling in All Countries* (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1884), 466.

² Michel Alaux, *Modern Fencing: Foil, Epee, and Sabre from Initiation to Competition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 6-12. See also Vigeant, *Un maître d'armes sous la Restauration* (Paris: 1883). Jean-Louis Michel's salle came to be known as l'Association Jean-Louis. After its demise, the Montpellier Université Club Escrime rose in its place. See <http://www.montpellier-uc.org/escrime/index.htm>.

³ Truman, *Field of Honor*, 459-460.

⁴ Jules Marcou, *The Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1896), 1:23.

⁵ Lafcadio Hearn, "The Last of the New Orleans Fencing Masters," *The Double Dealer*, vol. 1 (New York: Double Dealing Publishing, 1921), 10.

⁶ Louis J. Meader, "Duelling in the Old Creole Days," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, vol. 74 (May to October 1907), 251.

⁷ Hearn, "New Orleans Fencing Masters," 10.

⁸ Hearn, "New Orleans Fencing Masters," 10.