

The 25th Year of the Fencing Masters Program at San José State University

By William M. Gaugler

*Maestro di Scherma and
Director, Fencing Masters*

Program, San José State University

The year 2004 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fencing Masters Program at San José State University. It was initiated in the fall semester of 1979 under the auspices of the Department of Military Science (Army R.O.T.C.), with the encouragement and support of the Chairman, Col. Robert Elder. The aim of the SJSU program was to produce certified fencing teachers, both military and civilian, comparable in training and level of professional skill to Italian and French fencing masters.

And since I was educated largely in Italy, and received my fencing master's diploma from the Accademia Nazionale di Scherma in Naples (founded in 1861) I naturally based the pedagogical system of our newly-founded fencing masters program at SJSU on that of the celebrated Scuola Magistrale Militare di Scherma in Rome (established in 1884), an institution which grew directly out of the Accademia Nazionale di Scherma in Naples. It was unquestionably the ideal model for a new school, since its graduates had already successfully played significant roles in both teacher education and in the training of top-level competitive fencers in twentieth-century Italy, Germany, and Hungary, that is, in three of the four major fencing nations.



Maestro Ralph Sahn watches a lesson.

The need in the United States for a serious fencing teacher-training program has long been recognized, for as early as 1892 the French fencing master, Louis Rondelle, a graduate of the renowned Ecole Militaire de Joinville-le-Pont (training fencing masters from 1872 onward), wrote on page 198 of his book, *Foil and Sabre: A Grammar of Fencing*, that with the "growing interest [in fencing in the United States] comes the demand for capable teachers, and hence the need of a Normal School of Fencing." Indeed, he advocated the creation of a school "where every man would be obliged to stand a rigid examination before he was permitted to teach." And Rondelle's views were

echoed fifty-one years later by the Italian fencing master, Aldo Nadi. On page 6 of his book, *On Fencing*, Nadi lamented the fact that a proposal at New York University to initiate a course for fencing masters was rejected.



A line of masters and students on guard.

Both Rondelle and Nadi realized that affiliation with an accredited institution of higher education would be essential for the establishment of a fencing masters school with a certification program. In such a school students could be led over a period of years through a systematic progression of studies in fencing theory and practice. This was well known to be the most efficient and economical way to transfer theoretical knowledge and practical skills. And fundamental to such studies is the realization that teaching fencing and fencing are two different things. Teaching fencing requires a profound understanding of fencing theory, and the logical progression of actions from simple and compound attacks to parry-ripostes, counterattacks, countertime, and second intention, while fencing necessitates the development of a few actions and counteractions that will bring success on the competitive fencing strip, such as in foil fencing a feint direct to the outside low line and a disengagement to the high line, or a beat in fourth followed by a straight thrust to the inside high line, and if these are parried, a rapid counterparry riposte. Indeed, too often there is the common notion that a strong amateur fencer can, without formal pedagogical training, effectively teach others to fence, when, in fact, he or she is able only to pass on isolated favorite actions remembered from past lessons. And those memories, unfortunately, provide only a fraction of the vast range of actions and counteractions known to fencing masters.

It is this organized body of 500 years of fencing knowledge employed by professionals that we have sought to preserve in the Fencing Masters Program at SJSU, and to transfer to our students. Whether or not we have been successful can only be measured through program evaluations made by outside authorities. Two such

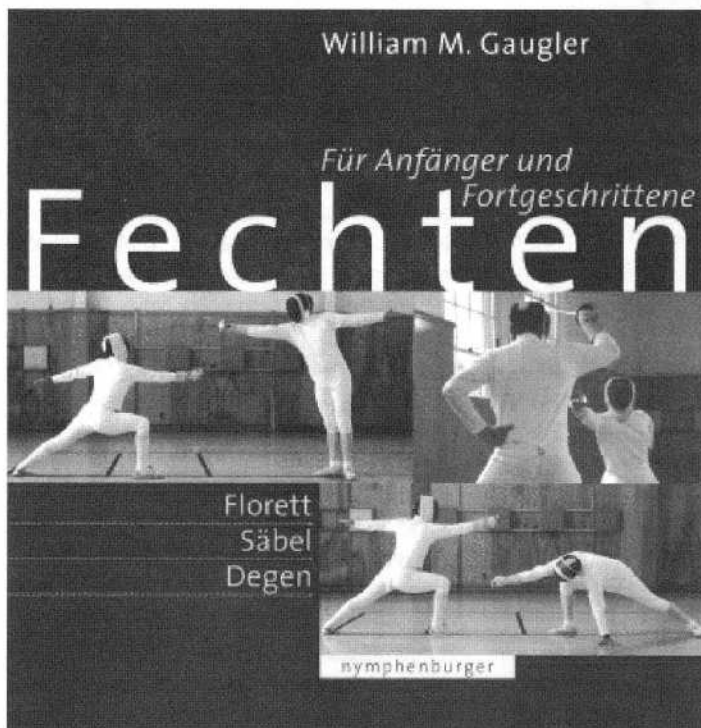
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evaluations for accreditation purposes were, in fact, made of our program:

In May of 1988 Maestri Niccolò Perno, President of the International Academy of Arms and of the Associazione Italiana Maestri di Scherma, and Enzo Musumeci Greco, Member of the Examining Board of the Accademia Nazionale di Scherma in Naples, visited our Campus, examined faculty credentials and instructional materials, worked with our candidates, and served as voting members on our commission of masters. In their official letter of accreditation addressed to Dr. Gail Fullerton, President of San José State University, the Italian masters wrote:

. . . we have concluded that your program for the development of fencing teachers is comparable in every respect to the best programs currently found in Europe. In our view the diplomas issued by your institution are worthy of international recognition.



*The new German edition of Maestro William Gaugler's
The Science of Fencing.*

And in May of 1998 Maestri Giovanni Toràn, President, and Saverio Crisci, Vice President, of the Associazione Italiana Maestri di Scherma, and both, Members of the Examining Board of the Accademia Nazionale di Scherma in Naples, like their predecessors, worked with our candidates, and served as voting members on our commission of masters. In his new foreword to my revised third edition of *The Science of Fencing*, Dr. Toràn observed that our school "clearly bears the Italian imprint, and represents an island of Italian fencing methodology and tradition." And he recalled "the seriousness and rigor of the examinations" and "the adherence to formal procedure."

Nineteen-ninety-eight also marked the final year of the Department of Military Science at SJSU; but we were able to continue instruction and certification under the aegis of the Departments of Theatre Arts and Aerospace Studies (Air Force R.O.T.C.).

By way of general information, our three-year program consists of three levels of certification, Instructor at Arms (six semester units); Provost at Arms (twelve semester units), and Master at Arms (eighteen semester units). The candidate for the Master at Arms certificate must hold an undergraduate or bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university, as well as a provost's diploma or proof of equivalent professional experience, and he or she must write a thesis under faculty supervision on an approved fencing topic. The written, oral, and practical examinations are given once a year. A failed examination can be repeated only once. If on the second attempt the candidate still does not succeed, he or she is dropped from the program.

My hope is that my associates and successors will be able to continue the SJSU Fencing Masters program for another twenty-five years.

As regards number of graduates, since our first credential examinations in 1981 thirty-seven Instructor at Arms, twenty-eight Provost at Arms, and fourteen Master at Arms credentials have been awarded. Among those who earned credentials were members of the United States Olympic and World Championship teams. And now, with the completion of this year's examinations, the first two formally-trained women fencing masters in the United States have joined their male colleagues in the professional ranks: they are Masters at Arms Janine Monteleone Sahn, and Jennifer Walton.

My hope is that my associates and successors will be able to continue the SJSU Fencing Masters Program for another twenty-five years or longer. With students of my pupils now ready to serve on our faculty and to administer the annual oral and practical examinations, I feel confident that we may be able to achieve this end. And with the publication this anniversary year of revised English and German third editions of our text, *The Science of Fencing*, we shall provide a world-wide audience, as we have for the past twenty-one years, with the complete repertoire of actions and counteractions employed by contemporary Italian fencing masters. ❀

Maestro Gaugler is the distinguished author of the most complete volume on the Italian school of fencing today. Copies of the revised edition of The Science of Fencing (Bangor, 2004) can be ordered directly from the publisher, 46-2727.