November 2004

Foam Fighters

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2005/iss1/8

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“Dead, do not talk to the living, do not hand anything to the living, do not help the living!” Xipher yells.

The dead laugh. They sit sprawled across the lawn outside Parks Library, panting, sweating, and gasping for breath. Combatants wielding foam weapons slew these “dead.” Now they sit cheering on their friends and teammates, with hair plastered to their faces and sweat dripping into their eyes. Some hand over foam weapons to friends, as they watch other participants continue to battle until death.

One minute, 24 seconds. The battle is over.

It is 7:46 p.m. on a Tuesday evening. The dead get up to join the living, and the two teams regroup for another battle. Each team has about 20 students dressed in medieval garb with a variety of weapons. The students come from a wide range of majors, but all are members of the Tir Asleen Medieval Combat Society, an Iowa State club. As a chapter of the Belegarth Medieval Combat Society, Tir Asleen is based on J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. On Tuesday nights and Saturday afternoons, these students gather to both fight against and socialize with their friends.

“Line it up!” cries Xipher, tonight’s herald. The herald is more than a referee. The herald is god. His word is final. No one questions him on disputes. When I see this god outside of the realm, I know him as Matt Stephenson, a junior in animal ecology and the group’s founder.

“Raise your weapons when you’re ready!” Xipher says.

The teams, tonight dubbed ‘Elf’ and ‘Yes,’ each form a haphazard line and raise their weapons high, yelling at the other team.

“Play on!”

The lines advance slowly toward each other. Combatants bang their swords against their shields. Some yell battle cries. The clash begins. The students fight in groups or pairs. At first, the lines hold, but eventually they
cramble and everyone guards his back. I hear shouting amid the dull
whumps of foam sword on foam sword and the soft thuds of foam sword on
flesh.

“Let’s go get ‘em, Riven!”

“Right side! Push in! Push in! Push around him! Keep together!”

More shouts, yells, cheers, growls.

“Team elf?”

“Kill ‘em all!”

Some death cries. The members of team Elf are falling rapidly.

“Oh crap! I thought you were on my team!”

“Jesus! He’s dead already!”

Then the battle turns, as team Elf rallies.

“Let’s go guys! Be aggressive! It’s three against one!”

“Come on guys! We outnumber him!”

Soon I can only hear cries of ‘elf.’ Team Elf has won. Everyone on team
Yes has been killed. Two minutes, six seconds. A long battle. The teams
regroup.

The rules are simple, as Sally Calvert, battle name Amel, explains.
Generally, if you hit an unarmored limb with a foam weapon, it is lost. The
loss of two limbs causes death, as does a blow to the chest. An additional
hit is needed to kill anyone wearing armor. Rules vary slightly depending
on the class of weapon being used. There are many different types of
weapons, including long and short swords, daggers, javelins, flails, bows,
and arrows, and battle-axes.

There are a few exceptions to the general rules. For example, you can
lose all your limbs to stabbings and not die. However, the only option left is
to roll around on the ground and hope someone kills you. No headshots or
crotch shots are allowed, unless the weapon is a foam rock. The only way
to kill with a rock is a headshot. Shield bashing, tripping, wrestling, and
hand-to-hand combat are all fair

Generally,
demonstrate.

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weapons, including long and short swords, daggers, javelins, flails, bows
and arrows, and battle-axes.

With all these rules and dozens of people fighting in frantic combat, it
seems keeping track of who’s dead, who’s wounded, and who’s still unin­
jured would be difficult, if not impossible. But regulation is actually pretty
simple. “It is all on the honors system,” Amel says. “If you don’t follow the
honors system and people notice, they’ll pretty much just beat you into fol­
lowing it.”

Two guys emerge from the library, looking tired and toting overloaded
backpacks. But the group members battling get their attention. As they
watch the fighting, they begin smiling. After a few moments, they inch
closer to the group. “So, can anyone do this?”

“Drop your packs and jump in!”

This is not uncommon. Many current members started this way, and
at each practice a few brave passerby will join the battle. This is only Tir
Asleen’s fourth year in Ames, and the membership continues to grow. On
a typical Tuesday or Saturday, 40 to 50 students show up to fight. And the
popularity of medieval
groups is not just limited to
Iowa State. Tir Asleen is one
of six realms in Iowa, with
dozens more established throughout the country. Xipher, who fought in
high school, started the Iowa State chapter so he could continue to do bat­
tle. This combat sport appeals to many students because it’s cheap, fun, and
not dangerous. The armor and weapons the club uses are not heavy, which
minimizes the gender difference. But the real attraction is the fighting.

“It looks really dumb, but it’s really fun and good stress relief from
school and roommate problems,” says Rebecca Hinshaw, aka Kiira. “You
get to hit and shield bash people! You really get to bond with people when
you’re hitting them. It’s like, ‘Hey dude, I’m gonna hit you. Sorry.”

“If you lose a leg, drag it behind you—there will be no Monty Python
hopping!” Calam says. Only a few members of the group know his real
name, Thomas Poole. Group members only use their battle names when
they’re fighting, and most use outside of the realm as well, so that’s all
many of their fellow members know them by. These battle names are reg­
istered in an international database to ensure that they are unique. That
way, regardless of where in the world they are fighting, no one ever has the
same name on the battlefield.

This time as I watch the battle, I notice some of the people on the
ground aren’t dead. Anyone that loses a limb has to drop to his or her knees.
There is much fighting done by people on their knees. Sometimes they go
unnoticed, slipping among the dead, fading into the background as the
night grows darker. Those on their knees do not have the range of motion
their opponents do, but they can hide behind their shields better and are
harder to finish off. It appears that some people prefer fighting from their
knees.

When I look away from the battle, Amel’s roommate, Shelly Bueche,
aka Dulin, turns to me and grins. “Let’s teach you to fight,” she says. “Grab
a sword. Grab a shield.”

I nervously grab a gray sword and a round, black shield from the pile of
loaner weapons and face her. She takes a few easy warm-up swings, which
I block with my shield.

“Take a swing at me. You can’t kill me if you don’t swing. You won’t
hurt me.”

As I look at her uncertainly, a nearby spectator informs me that the
most common injury in this sport is not bruises. It is tendinitis from swing­
ing too much. I laugh as I realize that I don’t see bruises on anyone, but three
people are sitting out with tendinitis. I take a tentative swing at Dulin. In
doubt she weighs 150 pounds, and I don’t want to break her.

Nate Lawrence-Richards, aka Ahki, who has been watching me and
Dulin, has seen enough. He walks up to me, grins, and says, “You won’t
hurt anyone. It really doesn’t hurt. Hit me as hard as you can.”

He turns his back to me, and I give it a tentative tap.

“Oh c’mon. Swing!”

I halfheartedly swing, not wanting to hurt someone I barely know.

“You can do better than that. Hit me!”

I swing harder and hear that familiar soft thud as the sword connects
with his back.

“That was just a tap! You tap people like that out there, and they’ll get
mad! We don’t go out there to tap each other. We go out there to beat the
crap out of each other! Why else do you think I do this?”

I take a solid swing.

“Harder!”

“It really doesn’t hurt?”

“Nope! Harder!”

Now I am hitting him as hard as I can, put­
ing my whole body into it.

“Again!”

As I’m striking Ahki, Pocor, also known as David Rodgers, the club’s pres­
ident, wanders over. When I turn to face him, Pocor demonstrates his favorite
killing combination. He draws my sword and shield to the left in his initial
assault, then attacks rapidly from the right. It works. I die. He does it again.
I die again. Even though I know exactly what is coming, I can’t stop it.
Apparently, I'm not the only one who falls victim to Poeir's signature move. After months of working to perfect it, this move now kills most of his opponents. And that's the point. Poeir says he fights because he has an inherent violent streak. But that's not the motivation of everyone in the club.

"I don't fight mad," Dulin says, reassuring me. "I just go to have fun. How often do you get to run around in atypical clothing and beat people with foam weapons?"

As the day turns to dusk, I am deemed ready for battle. It is time to join the fray. I am told to yell my team name, Yes, and if someone doesn't answer, kill him. It sounds simple, but in reality, fighting is much more complicated than it looks. My inexperience immediately shows. It's difficult to remember who is on my team, and I keep forgetting to watch my back. My shield hand just doesn't move as fast as my opponents' sword hands. Eventually, though, I learn to stay with a group of teammates and fight together.

I discover I don't have to be that good. Just being with a group of people makes all of us tougher to kill. At least most of the time. In one assault, however, a single opponent takes out three of my teammates and me. I fight several battles, all of which seems much longer than two minutes. And each time, I die as soon as one of our opponents penetrates the group. Then, laying on the ground, I experience my own version of medieval grave robbing: An opponent "borrows" my shield, but he is nice enough to return it after the battle.

My inexperience is not the only thing that marks me as a newcomer. I am one of the few participants not wearing medieval garb. Most of the members dress in pre-gunpowder era clothing. The minimum garb is sweatpants, a T-shirt, and a tunic. Most of the garb is red, white, or drab earth tones. Armor is optional. The members vary in just how authentic they make their outfits. Scott Bair, aka Camber, has made 10 costumes. He also put together a suit of full armor, including self-made chain mail and a helm. Camber's chain mail shirt, which took him almost 13 months to make, has over 30,000 links, weighs 30 pounds, and cost about $300.

"I have always loved medieval history and costuming," says Camber. "I never saw a sport like this until my second year here. I dived right in. I love it even though I'm not good at it. There are a lot of people who can own me."

Each medieval fighter is armed with homemade weapons. The group gets together weekly to make swords, javelins, and other battle tools. All have a 3/8-inch fiberglass core covered with strips of foam and cloth. The foam is usually of the blue camping mat variety. Shields are simply plywood covered with the same foam and cloth. The newly-made weapons are then tried out in the next day of battle.

Many members take on a character and dress the part. Some take on the role and dress of Romans, Celts, or knights. These characters wear simple tunics with clean-cut lines. Both in and out of battle, these characters follow a code of honor and display chivalry. Other students adopt the role of fantasy horde characters such as elves, goblins, trolls, ogres, orcs, dwarves, gnomes, and yetis. They wear drab-colored outfits with rags hanging off them. Horde characters will stab their opponents in the back and often chant loudly in other languages. "Horde characters are stupid, evil, smelly, whack-your-Momma-for-a-nickel characters," Xipher says.

Some club members even go so far as to create a background story for their characters. "My best friend plays an elf and I play a goblin, and we pretend that we're sisters," Dulin says. "Our father was a goblin and our mother was an elf, and they adopted one of each race. They raised us both as elves, and when we came to Tir Asleen together, I realized I'm a goblin."

It is now after 10 p.m. The group of fighters has grown smaller, but the battles continue. The darkness adds an eerie feeling to the fighting. The soft library lights reflect off swinging battle-axes and the bits of white in some of the tunics. Shadowy figures seem to materialize out of the blackness, swinging their weapons. On many Tuesday nights, the fighting lasts well past midnight.

The battles are a chance to relax with friends and escape from the normal stresses of college life. When they're fighting, the club members seem to scarcely notice as the hours pass. Five-plus hours of medieval fighting just slips by. "There is nothing I enjoy more," says Chad Becker, aka Falkor. "You look forward all week to fight night because all the stress just disappears for four hours with your friends."

And with that, Falkor picks up his sword and turns to rejoin his teammates for another battle. He fades into the darkness as he walks away. Moments later, I hear the dull whumps of foam striking foam.