

**Failing Better**  
**The Trials of a Veteran Fencer**

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*To Pauline*

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## Preface

Ireland is neither a populous nor a celebrated fencing nation. So to be regarded as one of the better fencers in Ireland is not an especially remarkable achievement. Unless, of course, you believe in your soul that fencing, and épée fencing in particular, is one of the great sports.

I am proud to say that I have drawn my sword for my country against numerous opponents of many nations. We shared one thing: the conviction that we were engaged in the most significant event in the universe at that moment. Men doing what gods used to do: creating their own importance.

Those moments have to be experienced. I have recorded the preparation for and reminisces of those moments in journals spanning a decade and a half. Most entries are a tedious struggle to develop technique or tactics and apply either in the heat of a bout. Behind these lies something important, I think.

This blog is devoted to reflecting on these accumulating experiences to see what, if anything, lies behind. Fencing, like any sport, is not about the transient opponent. I am the only permanent being on the piste. Why do I and so many others readily commit our energies to face the opponent's unfriendly steel blade?

# **Chapter 1**

## **Salle Duffy**

Shirley was right. Richard, Keith, and I were stuck repeating our touches and bouts endlessly. Richard would defeat me (his slow attack inviting my parries which he would deceive); I would beat Keith (either on preparation or a stop-hit to his arm as I stretched his lunge); Keith would beat Richard (with his direct step-lunge attack). This was going nowhere.

Shirley had invited Richard and me that Friday evening to make a case to keep the Salle open. When she asked for our opinions at the tea-break on Wednesday, I took her uncharacteristic uncertainty as a good sign. Maybe all she needed was a reminder of our appreciation of fencing in such a beautiful and convivial place. However, though she was listening politely to Richard, it was obvious to me that she had her mind made up. And, as I listened to Richard going through a list of a dozen decent épéeist he believed he could get to come along, I knew she was right. No fencers, no Salle.

So Salle d'Arme Duffy closed its oak doors for the last time on 15th September 2010, after we left that evening.

Sixteen years before, in the autumn of 1994, I had first entered through those doors. I had persuaded a work colleague to come along and give fencing a go. The introductory offer was 10 nights for IR£30, but it was never about value-for-money for me. I had always wanted to try my hand at fencing and, after drawing up a list of things still left undone at my thirtieth birthday, it was once again in my thoughts. I found a 'Salle' in the yellow pages surprisingly close to my house – a mere 5 minutes by motorbike – and, on phoning, I was invited to attend at the start of the season.

The Salle is straight from my boyhood imagination. It is set behind old iron gates through an overgrown garden with a copse of trees shading and obscuring sight of it from passers-by. Formerly the nineteenth century hall of the Church of St John the Evangelist that dominates St John's Road in Sandymount, it was built in the same style as the church: cut granite stone walls with arched doorway at the front and arched windows. You stepped into a tight foyer with the hall straight through and with a stairway to the right leading up to the latter-added first floor. The hall is of the pleasing dimensions of the golden ratio, its wooden floorboards darkened by many coats of varnish and lit from long fluorescent tubes hanging from chains from the high ceiling. Along the walls, in between the arched windows, is a row of electric boxes with lights and wires. A large mirror hangs over an equally large mahogany sideboard at the far end of the hall. To the right of the mirror hangs a framed picture of a gentleman in old fashioned fencing gear and also a plaque with gold lettering listing names

with space for many more. To the left was a cabinet and some old weapons.



Photo: Salle Duffy, known to generations of fencers simply as "the Salle".

To complete the scene we need populate the room with fencers in white and a single figure on black, fill the air with clashing blades, grunts of effort, the beep of the boxes and the background chatter of those waiting their turn on a piste. Remove the beep of the electric boxes and you could have stepped back into an earlier century. The scene is timeless.

Shirley Duffy is the figure in black. This is her room, Salle Duffy. She is the proprietor of the hall and the maître of all who visits it. She lives in an extension adjoining the rear of the hall.

Shirley took us novices up the top of the hall to explain the different weapons and the rules of engagement of each. I thought at the time that our group numbered about a dozen, with thirty or so regulars practicing in the background. Looking back now, this crowd is impossible in such a small hall...so maybe half those numbers. In any event, my first impression was that there was nothing small about this place, nor the endeavours of those within its walls. Shirley perpetuated this atmosphere of earnest endeavour.

Shirley tried, but she never had the patient temperament demanded of the best teachers. She did not get it when the pupil did not get it and after a few attempts she might let slip a sharp word and beat her blade on the pupil's thigh to encourage greater attention to her instruction. I was to receive many such physical encouragements over the years. There was no harm actual or intended, just an outlet for her impatience which just as abruptly vanished. My companion found her a bit intimidating but I was at home with her manner as it was similar to my mother's.

My companion did not complete his ten introductory lessons. As we all were sitting on the floor stretching, Shirley stood over us and asked each in turn if we had decided to become a member. He answered that this was only his sixth visit and he had not decided yet. "You would know by now", she retorted. She was right. He never returned and going to the Salle was the highlight of my week.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Compromises**

It was a little over three years later when, unusually for me, I had missed a few weeks' practice. I had become the father of a tiny wonderful being. The busyness caused by a baby surprised my good wife and me. Now, a few weeks on, a new pattern was slowly emerging and I made my way back down to the Salle. I entered, apologised for my absence offering as an excuse the arrival of my daughter, but really it was the boast of a proud parent. Instead of the congratulations expected, she riposted: "So were you waiting for her to drive you down?".

The Salle had been a sanctuary for the previous three years. Training was on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and I religiously made two sessions – generally the Wednesday and Friday. Shirley starts the novice in foil fencing, with a French grip to develop proper manipulation of the point between thumb and forefinger. Épée fencing, with a stronger pistol grip, was more popular amongst the more advanced fencers – mostly teenagers from a neighbouring private school. Épée fencing looked altogether more exciting, more the elemental duelling that I had always fancied. I stuck to foil, as was demanded, for the first year. But in the summer before the start of the second year, I invested

in new gear, complete with a pistol-gripped épée. I recall the changing room upstairs at the start of the season and the alarm of the teenagers at my new épée purchased without Shirley's blessing. When I came downstairs, Shirley just shrugged and resigned herself to my future lack of digital dexterity with the point. She would remark many years later that I never took instruction.

I ensured that I was one of the first to arrive, between 7 and 7:15 each Wednesday and Friday. The group warmed up individually, did about 20 minutes of footwork led by Shirley or a senior fencer, and then repaired upstairs again to put on the rest of our fencing gear. Typically, Shirley would direct us in bladework drills for another 20 minutes before we hooked ourselves to the pistes and began bouting. Shirley might call us aside individually for a short lesson up at the top of the room beside the master's den. Every three months or so, it would be a competition night with a single poule and medals for the top three.

There were, of course, competitions outside the Salle, mostly at the universities. I went along to some, much preferring the épée ones. I was uncompetitive in both senses of the word. Since entering the Salle I had resolved that I would enjoy fencing, and not seek success by striving to win. I already felt successful in my professional life and did not want this oasis of fun and relaxation to be tainted with goals and plans and striving. Quite deliberately, fencing was to be about physical activity and enjoyment.

Aside from the regulars, there was always an occasional visitor who showed up and fenced for a term or so. Dublin is a capital city with a large international financial services sector so it was not unusual for a German, French, English or other fencer to join us when in Dublin. A young man from the United Arab Emirates found it difficult to accept a female master. She does not push us physically, he would quietly complain to me, unlike the masters back home who drilled them in lunges and exercises relentlessly. I would beat him in about half our bouts, despite his youth spent in such rigorous training alongside the national team. I did learn from him that the angle the blade is presented is a tell for the part of the wrist that is open, though the target is perhaps not visible. The wrist hit soon became my favourite. Another fellow, a French man in his twenties, did not invest in his own fencing gear after the introductory period but continued to borrow the old buttoned Salle gear. Shirley would ask him loudly as he strode up to shake her hand, an obligatory courtesy on entering the Salle, whether he was coming with his new gear. He would smile and shrug and give Shirley a warm embrace. A Gallic lesson in how to disarm a master.

It was a missed opportunity if I did not get down to the Salle for some unavoidable reason. I was now tolerably fit and my body missed its workout. Equally, I missed the banter in the changing room, keeping up with who is doing well in competitions. I would miss the ring of the bell at nine telling the fencers to come upstairs that tea was brewed, sink into the old arms chairs and chat in the attic space surrounded by pictures and trophies

and other memorabilia of fencers who had done the same since the Salle opened in 1964. After tea, back downstairs for the final few bouts. A fortnight was too long a time between sessions, for both body and mind.

Another two years passed and a second child arrived. Now more difficult compromises needed to be made to keep family and career and other projects all on track. It was a great time in life, with effort richly rewarded in all my undertakings. I began missing evenings, then a week or two. Soon it was easier to stop fencing altogether. Life's other plans frustrated this one.

## **Chapter 3**

### **A Passion Rekindled**

Sorcha, my eldest at eight years of age, said it was a lady asking for me as she handed me the phone. It was Shirley. She was inviting a few fencers back for some private fencing. Apparently, she had closed the Salle a few years earlier when some characters were coming along that she did not warm to. I was invited, Wednesday night from, as usual, 7 pm to 10 pm.

The place was unchanged. So too was Shirley. At first, there was only one other fencer, a young blond beginner. These light sessions suited me fine as, though still trim, I was unfit and my muscles needed practice to remember technique. Then, as the months went on, a few more came along.

Some were Salle fencers from before my time and the teenagers of my time were now men in their twenties. Once a heavy guy came, about thirty years of age. He was clearly a good fencer at one time, with a lightening quick last-minute carte parry and riposte, but his legs were slow. I beat him. He explained what I was doing wrong – the cardinal sin of leg-before-arm when I started my attack. He beat me the next time, which did not make his advice any more welcome. It surprised me how much this exchange annoyed me. Clearly, I am competitive against counselling strangers. More

months passed and now the only regulars were Keith, Richard, and myself.

Shirley was encouraging us to take up coaching. She was President of the Irish Academy of Arms, an organisation founded by her late husband (also a fencing master and well-known as 'the Professor') back in 1952 to promote good coaching in fencing. This interested me. She gave me some instruction, fifteen minutes every now and then, so I could give a basic lesson. I took to reading books on fencing – first history books but then anything I could get my hands on, including the surprisingly detailed and complicated rules of the sport and the driest of fencing manuals. I particularly enjoyed autobiographies of fencers, and then other sports people across all sports (except swimming).

I knew I had to be a better fencer to make a decent coach. I wanted a bit more of an edge, a bit more competitiveness in fencing if only to judge my progress. So the focus was to change from fitness to fencing.

I started entering competitions again in the 2008/09 season. My first outing was a foil competition in early autumn, despite my not doing foil for years. It was an oasis of a day from my usual concerns. I ended up mid-table, a reasonable result but, in watching others, I again realised that épée is my only weapon. I took from the competition the resolution to invest more in fencing – more time and more energy. That resolution did not waiver over the following days despite my sore glutes and jelly-like legs.

The first épée competition was the Irish Open in November 2008. This was a recognised international competition by the sports' governing body (the FIE) from the previous year, albeit at the lowest tier of a [World Cup] Satellite. Richard and Keith told me about it as they were going and what was necessary to enter, as they had been to it and other internationals the previous year. I needed to be entered by our national federation, and I needed my name and country on my back and country logo on my breeches. Nuala of the Irish Fencing Federation obliged with the entry. Pauline, my patient wife, sewed on the patch, WHELAN IRL, ironed on the country colours, and, when I tried the gear on, laughed at its snugness and the earnest grey head sporting it. There was nothing to be done about the head, but it was time to update the gear from 1995, which was now restrictively tight.

The atmosphere at the Irish Open 2008 was nothing like the relaxed informality of the rest of Irish competitions. Queuing at the novel 'weapon control', I became aware that my six-foot-two put me at best at average height. All but one of my épées failed as the armourer told me they were not 'maraging'. It was double-dutch to me, but I had to borrow a second épée from Keith so I could compete. Soon after, I was on a fully metallic piste opposite a younger guy in his national colours, presided over by a formally dressed referee calling out instructions in French. The strangest thing was that I did not know the fencer opposite me and had no idea of what he might do, quite different from my regular bouting with the usual fencers.

I was a recreational fencer amongst real fencers and, inevitably, I was found out. But I relished the individual, isolated struggle against eleven opponents over the course of that long morning. Peaks of adrenaline, recuperation, and then the anticipation of the next bout. It was over too soon! I ranked in the bottom quarter of fencers after the ranking second poule. I did not 'make the cut', so was eliminated as three-quarters of the original fencers fenced head-to-head with the loser eliminated each time until only one survived – the Irish Open Champion of 2008.

I started my fencing diaries in March 2009, so I have no contemporary notes of this competition. However, the FIE website still maintains the complete record of this competition a decade later, so I can embellish my awed impression with some facts. I was the second oldest of the competitors, but probably one of the most inexperienced at this level of competition and the final rank of 40th out of 44 owed more to the latter than the former. I won two of the eleven bouts, both victories in the preliminary poule, so not counting towards the final ranking. The wins were by the narrowest margin, five to four, against Hinz GER and Balfe IRL, but the losses were respectable enough, a 5-4 defeat and 5-3 defeat to Babbi ITA, who won bronze; another 5-4 defeat, three other 5-3 defeats, two 5-2 defeats and three 5-1 defeats, including against Csobo HUN who went home with silver.

Perhaps the result should have discouraged me but, on the contrary, I was enthused. I was now conscious of the wide gap between my jabbing and the swiftness and

lethality of proper swordsmanship. It seems that it is time to learn again...

I went back to the Salle on the Wednesday a committed student. I tried to relearn from Shirley such basic moves as the sixte-take-riposte but, in spite of my new-found enthusiasm, my aptitude for physical instruction was low and progress was, at times, despairing slow for Shirley. I had, thankfully, no inkling of the time and effort it would take to make even the smallest improvement. I was still having a great time while learning hard things and Wednesday evenings became again the highlight of my week. I competed again in February 2009 at an Irish competition, the East of Ireland, and I came 12th out of a field of, I guess, 36 or so.

Shirley was going on an extended holiday to the southern hemisphere and the Salle was to close for a number of weeks. I was the most put-out of the handful of fencers that came along. I decided to go to another fencing club, Salle Dublin, over the holiday period. Salle Dublin was the natural choice as it was run by two fencing masters, David Couper and Fionbarr Farrell, who had both coached in Salle Duffy in earlier years, where I had known and fenced with Fionbarr in the 1990s. They had set up the club in 2005, some four years earlier.

Salle Dublin was also on Wednesday nights in the gym of a private school a mile or two up the road from Salle Dublin. Naturally, it had nothing like the atmosphere of the Salle. However, the ritual of the evening was similar

but without the tea break and now warming up was all done together – skipping, stretching and sundry exercises – and all three weapons were accommodated in the club. Fionbarr took me aside for a ten-minute individual lesson later in the evening where, over the course of the month or so, he corrected some of my favourite moves. My beat-attack was far too slow as I timed the beat to my front foot landing on the advance when I should be timing coinciding with my back foot completing the step and my point then accelerating to the target. He took apart other movements to put them together to be smaller, faster, and more accurate. He spoke of tactics in bouts, suggesting that my attempts at feints were at best too generous and more often suicidal against good fencers. They had us épéeists rehearse actions in pairs, as once we did in the Salle when the numbers were bigger. They outlined exercises to be done at home to practice point control. In short, the month opened by eyes wider to how much there was to learn and understand.

I started the first of my fencing diaries in March 2009. After arriving home after training, I would try to record the sound advice too easily forgotten. “The most reliable way to read your opponent’s mind is to put the idea there. This is the so-called ‘invitation’ – giving him one apparently easy target to hit” opens the diary, followed by lists of exercises and details of how to execute some compound movements.

The diary also records my reflections after the Irish Nationals held at the end of March. It notes that my counter-attacking strategy failed me because I was

retreating out-of-distance, or I was pulling my arm back seeking the opponent's blade. My movements were big and my options small - I was struggling psychologically in each bout - uptight and afraid to do more than one or two things as I believed each point was too valuable to lose. In short, I was doing too much thinking and double-guessing on the piste and not enough fencing. I finished ranked 14th.

I am sure many épéeists reprimand themselves in a similar manner after indifferent performances. I studied others and could see similar hindrances frustrate good fencing. So, alongside fitness, technique and tactics, I had another challenge to overcome to become a good fencer. I had to become inured to the intimidations of martial combat.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Veteran Fencer**

Several weeks before the Nationals I saw a ‘call for veterans’ on the Irish Fencing Federation’s (IFF) website for an event in April in Belfast. The call was for consideration for selection for the All-Ireland Team to compete in the Veteran Home International, an annual team competition with England, Scotland and Wales that had started a couple of years earlier. Meeting the criterion of being over 40 years’ old, I sent off an email for consideration, rather presumptuously I feared.

I got a phone call from Tom Rafter, President of the IFF, shortly after the Nationals: “Was I available?” Apparently, I was observed at the Nationals and, despite that, I was selected. It was a shock. It was momentous. I was so excited that I went out to the back-garden and did a thousand skips with my skipping rope. A little while later I was out again doing another thousand to maintain my calm. Me representing Ireland - All-Ireland at that! I did five thousand skips by the end of the day.

Shirley had just come back from holiday so I went down to the Salle the following Wednesday and blurted out my news almost before we shook hands. She appeared equally shocked. Nobody else showed up so she gave me a good long lesson. I took copious notes of that

lesson later. After practicing wrist touches and sixte-parry ripostes, we moved on to compound attacks – sixte to octave takes (which worked better than sixte to seconde) with riposte to knee. Another attack was feint below wrist to excite an extension of the arm from the opponent then flèche with opposition to chest or mask. These moves, and variations thereon, were to become my favourite attacks as I honed them over the following years. When I wanted to practice ripostes in the low line, Shirley popped around the back to her home and came back with leg protection. It struck me as rather light protection – little more than a sheepskin rug tied around her leg - and, for the first time, I realised that she was no longer invulnerable.

At this early stage I was not yet disciplined in diary keeping so there is no entry recording my first All-Ireland Veteran cap. I remember it well though. I had travelled to Belfast the day before and arrived in early afternoon to catch the foilists in action. It was a tense affair. As with all fencing competitions, the hall was full of fencers and only a handful of spectators. Everything was properly done, as befits an international competition. The pistes were top-notch, the referees were FIE and suited, there was an armourer – Jonathan, head armourer at the Irish Open and known to me from many years ago as a fencer and former captain of the Stormont Fencing Club.

We all dined that evening at a ‘gala dinner’ in the local hotel where most of us were staying. I was a good boy, retiring early. In the morning, I was one of the first outside the locked venue, waiting with John MORRIS

ENG. He had what looked like a life-sized missile with him. This was, he explained, a solid golf travelling case he had purchased at a fraction of the price of a purpose-built fencing bag. It comfortably fitted all his gear and had, he was claiming, better wheels. His sales patter worked. I purchased a similar one before travelling to fence in Edinburgh the following year and can second his praise – it is still in its original condition, decorated now with stickers of countries it has visited since.

My worst fears of being the weak-link in the All-Ireland Veteran Men's Épée team and being trounced were unfounded, thankfully. Only half of my relief came from my individual performance, the other half coming unfortunately, from the weakness of the Irish team. We fell behind early in each of the three matches, so there was no mounting tension over which team would eventually triumph. The only thing at stake was pride in one's own performance. I fenced okay, but not great. I could do better I knew.

I increasingly enjoyed the morning as it worn on, not least because of the growing realisation that I would not be unmasked as an imposter. I watched the action closely. I chatted with the other fencers, including Malcolm FARE ENG, then the long-time editor of the Sword magazine. He expressed surprise at my Salle Duffy Irlande tracksuit as he had believed the club had closed decades before. Overall, the event confirmed that it was more enjoyable to play with others of my own age.



The Badge of an All-Ireland Veteran Fencer

The diary records my closing thoughts for the 2008/09 season. In order, it says that I begun to understand fencing, that I got fit, and I hugely enjoyed doing both. It reminds me that I got a basic coaching certificate, I learned the extensive rules of fencing and read many books, updated all my equipment and, on the piste, “almost learned patience”. The best three moments, all experienced towards the end of the season, rejoices in the feeling of a fit body, with strength and speed when “seconds seemed to last forever”.

## Chapter 5

### Making the Cut

My career, to date a source of personal growth and satisfaction, had reached a point where my efforts were not valued by the changed management culture. I decided to redirect part of my energy from work to fencing, where the rewards appeared ample.

I did a two-day training camp organised by the IFF at the start of the 2009/10, with the renowned Romanian coach Octavian Zidaru. I learned to flèche better. With the help of this I reached the quarter-finals of the Intermediates, my first competition of the season, but was knocked out 14-15 by Richard. Both the flèche and my mental approach could be improved.

I had considerable pain in my knees for several days after the competition, a pain I had experienced to a lesser degree after training sessions the previous year. It was a bit debilitating as I had to swing my legs around and sway to my feet to get out of the car, a process helped with an old-man grunt. Pauline encouraged me to go to a physiotherapist, who diagnosed a common issue amongst fencers, 'patello-femoral pain syndrome', and fitted by shoes with custom orthotics. This removed the pressure my flat feet were putting on my knees during stepping and lunging, allowing me to train

and compete without a recurrence. I never walk, let alone train, without them to this day.

I happened upon Johan Harmenberg's short book, *Épée 2.0*, and devoured it on a work trip to Edinburgh, perched comfortably in a window-seat with a view of the castle. You win by one hit. Attacking only gives the illusion of control. The book reinforced my nascent speculations on tactics and strategy and took them to a whole new level - Olympic gold level. Admittedly, I could not always understand what he was saying, but the bits I could struck me as profoundly true, crystallising on the page my vague thoughts, and all the rest promised to be the blueprint of my future success. I did up my list of four "Olympic touches", the prerequisites needed, opponent's actions I found problematic dealing with, and what I should practice more. This informed my practice over the following weeks.

It was time again for the Irish Open, the annual opportunity for domestic épéeist to test themselves against committed international fencers. This year the adrenaline rush was much greater; my observations of the action more detailed. I witnessed some beautiful fencing that day, moves executed that I could never hope to perform. I had the pleasure to fence with Joaquim VIDEIRA POR, then ranked 22nd in the world. It was like sharing the piste with a big cat, his silky feline movements broken by a surprise pounce as he lunged to hit. I got two hits to his five - my flèche when he was not awake at the start and then a lucky double.

I realised that the difference between a good and a bad performance on a day often comes down to one or two crucial hits gained or conceded. I had two crucial touches go my way, so it was an excellent day. I made the cut and got through to the direct elimination stage, where now the bouts stretched to 15 hits or, if sooner, nine minutes of fencing. I went out at the first round. But I left nothing on the piste – I gave it my all, holding my opponent Vassilis GEORGIADIS GRE level to 7-7, from where he opened a gap to finish the victor at 15-10. This result was an improvement for me because the same man made short work of me at the poule stage, despatching me 5-1. Overall I finished 25<sup>th</sup> out of 39 competitors, and my official world ranking climbed to 542<sup>nd</sup> from the previous year's 621<sup>st</sup>.

I left the hall with both prosaic and poetic remembrances from that day. Prosaically, the last opponent whipped the nail off my big-toe with a foot-hit, and over the following years I have struggled to contain a fungal infection in the nail-bed. Poetically, I had the impression that time slowed down when fencing the same bout. I was completely focussed, seeing every detail of my opponent's movements, my mind detached from my body and any consciousness of myself as it determined the optimum next move of the body. I later attempted to capture the feeling in a short poem, but despite my best efforts it is not poetic enough to survive the harsh environment outside my diary. Nonetheless, despite finding no words adequate to describe it, I knew it to be a significant experience.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Ambition**

My next competition, in January 2010, was my first time to the Northern Ireland Open. It was a long dark day as I arose at 4 am to drive up alone. I had car problems both on the way there and back later in the evening. At the venue my tenseness and nervousness came back but I managed a not disappointing 15th ranking. It was my expectation to get a bye to last thirty-two and then win the first direct elimination to make the last sixteen. There were a dozen or so fencers on the national circuit better than me (indeed at least half of them are still active today and now joined by others). It would take a big improvement in how I fenced to break-through to the quarter finals of a top-ranked competition.

Later that month, I captained the Salle 2 team in the Duffy Memorial Team Competition, an annual international competition in honour of Shirley's late husband hosted by Trinity College Dublin that has been running for about a quarter-century. "Fencing is only about three things: distance, timing, and accuracy", Shirley remarked as I came of the piste, "and the most important of those is character, which binds them altogether to dictate the bout." I took that to be praise, as I believed I fenced well on the day. Our team (of Eoin and Piers and me) went out in the quarter-finals to the

Salle 1 team (of Yves, Conor, and Richard), who went on to win the competition.

I needed to do more than practice once a week to improve my level. I asked Fionbarr if he would take me for a one-hour private lesson each week, and was delighted when he agreed. So each Wednesday afternoon from February 2010 he gave me a generous hour lesson, improving my technique and explaining tactics. It was the right blend between talk of tactics and physical instruction, so I could survive the one-to-two hour lesson and still go fencing that evening. My body was not used to taking instruction so, like Shirley before him, he had a task to get me to repeat consistently even the simplest moves. It worked as my slow pace of learning was just within (at times testingly close to) the limit of Fionbarr's patience. Wednesday afternoon's with Fionbarr were to become a regular part of my training for the next two-to-three years. I took notes after each lesson.



Photo: Maître Fionbarr Farrell and sweaty me, c. 2012.

The results in the final two competitions of the season – the East of Ireland and the Nationals – were poor, me ranking 17th and 18th respectively. Worse I was knocked out by fencers that had not made my list of the dozen fencers that I needed to improve to beat. In both, I went into the direct elimination the higher seed. At the Easts I messed up against Rory Greenan because I was trying to plan each hit, seeking the certain winning tactic on the piste. This approach mostly leads to a certain loss as all chances for hits that spontaneously arise are ignored. One must seize the opportunities that arise on the piste and not in one's head. This was the lesson I took from this close defeat.

The loss at the Nationals upset me so much that I stopped updating my diary until August. I was seeded 6th after the poule stage, having avenged myself on Rory and others. I got on the piste but, try as I might, I

could not get a comfortable lead on the novice. It was 9-11 to me at the second break, but I was upset with the way I was fencing and went out to the final phase frustrated and confused. The guy was taller than me, held his sword-arm high and could step well – a difficult opponent to attack directly, which is what I was repeatedly doing. However, I knew I beat myself: my annoyance at the way I was fencing was such that I felt I deserved to lose. You have to be on your own side - two swords against you on the piste is too many.

I went back to the Salle with a tactical problem to solve. How to overcome, in attack, the taller guy with high sword arm pointed down on target. I worked out a technique with Shirley, Eoin and Eamon. On the opponent's step forward, I lunge in a high octave, sweeping his blade off target with opposition. The key part of the action is its timing - my hit lands just when his front foot lands (a step-tempo). Not long after that evening's lesson was put to good use...

The Veteran Four Nations was towards the end of April in Edinburgh. It was a bit of a scramble to get the Men's Épée team together between an injury, illness, and a volcanic ash cloud potentially grounding flights. But the last-minute team Ireland fenced well, and while we did not win, we were tantalising close to a victory over Wales, and were in closer contention to Scotland than previously. I scored 40 and conceded 45 hits overall, so still a bit off the standard but an encouraging improvement from the previous year. Brian McMIKEN SCO, a six-foot-five guy on the Scottish team, who gave me big problems in Belfast, now only narrowly defeated

me (5-4), as my new tactic honed after the Nationals was put to good use – I had confidence in my tactic, allowing me to focus on its timing.

I was the épée team captain and anchor. “For me, it was a great weekend, epitomised by the nail-biting final match of the event – Wales-Ireland Men’s Épée”, wrote Mike McEwan in the May 2010 Issue of the *Newsletter of British Veterans Fencing*, “I’m sure the Welsh and Irish will remember the detailed sequence of hits, and my apologies that I didn’t catch all of it. All I remember is hearing it was 39-38 with not a lot of time on the clock, then equalised with somewhere between 10 and 20 seconds on the clock, then going from there to a 42-40 victory for Wales. Epic stuff!” Mike is right – I remember those three minutes.

Pembroke Fencing Club, set up in Dublin in 2001, hosted the first of its series of Summer Open Leagues that summer. Some 32 fencers of several clubs and of either sex, fenced together over six weeks followed by a direct elimination event. This is the first time I met and fenced Geoffrey Corcoran, Duncan Salter, Olga Velma and some others – fencers still active and now more dedicated to the sport than me. I thoroughly enjoyed this event, missing only one week as I was delivering a lecture that evening. The simple act of recording and circulating the accumulating results gave significant to each hit. The score sheet shows that I fenced 59 bouts to 5 over the five weeks I attended, winning 52, drawing 1, and losing 6 with an overall average score of 5-2 to me. I won the direct elimination competition, overcoming Colm Flynn in the final. “I like

to win," records my diary, "it means you get to fence more on the day."

This was my first victory, my first gold. It was a valuable addition to two medals I got for podium places in those earlier internal competitions in the Salle. To help my collection grow over the coming season, I built a wooden piste and kept fit over the summer break.

The South of Ireland competition is held at the end of August in Cork, which officially marked the end of the 2009/2010 season. Up at 5:30 am, I drove down through a beautiful brightening morning. These whole days away from quotidian life are special. I allowed the beauty of the countryside to seep in as I travelled south, thinking of fencing and other, less important, things. The venue was neatly laid out in pistes, with a muted but excited crowd of young fencers. I fenced fine, knocked out in the quarter-finals by Eoin, and took away a few important lessons.

So at season end, I was ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the Irish rankings and 542<sup>nd</sup> in the world rankings. There was room for significant improvement in these measures, I reckoned.

## Chapter 7

### Changing Rooms

‘A couple of weeks later the Salle closed. There was no event to mark the occasion, with Shirley characteristically resisting even a meal out to thank her for the previous season. My fencing life would now be independent of the Salle, although the experience would be somewhat diminished removed from such a convivial place.



Photo: Gates closed of Salle Duffy.

On Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2010, I reminded myself not to turn off the N11 towards Sandymount and Salle Duffy but to continue on to the private school where Fionbarr and David hosted Salle Dublin. I paid the annual subscription to my new club on arrival.

## Chapter 8

# The Tao

If my fencing life were a movie it would now show a montage of clips: me practicing, me competing, me failing, me failing better. It would show me slowly and arduously metamorphize into a fencing champion, ready to prove myself in a grand finale. Life, thankfully, is richer than that cliché: there is no grand finale in life.

I made the quarter finals, again, at the Intermediates in October. Another IFF training day, this time with Tristan 'swordboy' Paris, who gave me excellent advice and built up my confidence. A vision of the sort of fencer I wanted to be had been developing over the previous months – overall cool, calm, unflappable but competitive and a good sport. My technique would be a counter-attacker, with an open mind, but a good accurate point sniping at the wrist to encourage proper distance. Fionbarr's lessons continued. Another IFF training day with Tristan, who causally remarked that my accurate wrist hit – a particular strength - was a long-term weakness as it is detrimental to my overall fencing development. A whole new world of possibilities and tactics were opening up...

The Irish Open in December was dispiriting. There was only one poule and I suffered 5 defeats and no victories. Mercifully, I avoided the distinction of ranking last. My

second diary opens giving this setback just half a sentence. Time again to learn.

Aladar Kogler observed book, *With Detachment...Effortlessly...One touch at a time*, that the ideal state of mind is "To practice our sport with detachment as to the result of the bout or the match, to fence freely, relaxed, not stressed out, enjoying the process of fencing itself, the challenge, the improvement, the fun." Practice is not done to get you somewhere better – practice and improvement is what it is all about. If learning and training is not what you like then the pursuit is not for you.

Footwork can push and pull the opponent up and down the piste. A sudden movement within fencing measure can provoke his attack at a time and in a line of your choosing. There is a grace that comes from the economy of movements, when you gain time on an opponent – leaving him still reacting to your last threat when you are executing your masterstroke. All this is honed in practice, often in solitary practice.

Winning is not what this exercise is about. It is desirable, of course, that others perceive your excellence. It is important to achieve it against those equally devoted to attaining it. This is competition day, when all else is forgotten and fencing becomes the only thing in our lives for a few hours. On this stage, with all its attendant pressures, the right character can demonstrate that winning grace in just certain critical times when the psychology of the bout hangs on a hit or two. You feel it in yourself and, with lesser pleasure, in

your opponent when he creates that perfect moment, deceiving yours. The medal is at most a memento of the day you achieve that, its significance depending on the commitment of the other participants to achieving that harmony. That vitality at the time, and its later recollection in tranquillity, is a key reason why I fence, and certainly why I am prepared to travel internationally to spend a few minutes on the piste.

Of course, there are degrees of feeling this harmony, and every training session typically has some paler versions. It can be very frustrating when it is entirely absent. The feeling of inhabiting the moment evolves with the skill of the fencer. Novices can occasionally glimpse it, when executing cleanly a move learned with the master or when a simple plan comes together and a hit lands where the mind's eye foresaw it would. Intermediates feel it a bit longer, when the entire focus is on a hit and the body responds as if no mind. More advanced fencers must more routinely achieve the mind-body fusion, but now with effortless movement, slow smoothly to fast to slow to lunge, while all the time anticipating and deceiving an equally wily adversary. It is at these times that living is felt most intensely.

Sports books speak of 'being in the zone' and the state of mind is described in fencers' autobiographies such as Peter Westbook's *Harnessing Anger: the Inner Discipline of Athletic Performance* or Sherraine MacKay's breezier, *Running with Swords*. Tim Morehouse's, *American Fencer*, tells of a time when it completely deserted him and "suddenly the feeling of being unable to do anything right took over" (p. 240). Typically, it is

not all or nothing – as I said, there are degrees of this feeling. However, these books do tell how to gain it. Some Zen and Bushido texts, such as, Miyamoto Musaski's *The Book of Five Rings* attempt to tell how to achieve the right mental state. After all, their swordplay was in a life-and-death situation. Their teaching, for swordsmanship and for life is like the mindfulness or nothingness, detached from the result, advised my Aladar Kogler.



Photo: Maître David Cooper and me, c. 2012.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Positive Mental Attitude**

I made some amends for my dismal performance at the Irish Open by reaching the quarter-final in Northern Irish Open in January, knocked out by Andrew Fenwick. Andrew is a much better fencer but he had a little difficulty overcoming my counter-attacking approach. I made him work for every point.

The East of Ireland in February was won by Arthur Lanigan-O'Keefe, a pentathlete. The pentathletes were a significant addition to the fencing scene over the previous year or so. I had met Arthur, Eanna, Tal, Miriam and Tom at the training days and the occasional competition. They brought a different mentality to the game. They wanted to win, period. All had a neat guard and decent footwork, so never conceded easy touches. They did not experiment endlessly with different hits. They had the discipline in practice to make Bruce Lee afraid: "I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times". They were about 20 years of age and fitter than fencers. Eanna told me at one of the training days that he, Tal and Arthur were training 25 hours a week, with more on fencing than some of the other sports.

The mindset they brought was that of the professional sportsperson, and they had developed from scarce resources a small team with Lindsay Weedon, the High Performance Coach, and a handful of sports coaches, one for each sport. They had already committed themselves to the goal of qualifying for the Olympics in London. Their first priority in life was to improve their performance, and they would do what was necessary. I was fortunate to see, first hand, their transition into Olympians and subsequently medal contenders in the Olympics over the following years. On many Wednesdays they would be taking lessons with Tristan in the same hall in UCD that Fionbarr was giving me lessons.

Arthur won, and I went out 10<sup>th</sup> in the Easts defeated by an unorthodox left-hand pommeller in a close bout. I analysed and chatted with Fionbarr later about the loss, and believe that I can alter my tactics so it will not happen again.

A good fencer is a smelly fencer. The gear cannot be put in a dryer, so it is difficult to dry over the autumn and winter months in Ireland. It is washed only when necessary or, for some individuals, extremely necessary. In these wealthier times, I ordered a new set of gear for competitions and it arrived in time for the Team Nationals at the University of Limerick. The new gear was a perfect fit, considerably lighter than my (now) practice gear, and claimed also to wick sweat fast from the body. I have used this gear only at competitions up to this day – so it must have seen action

about four score times since but remains my 'new' gear.

We put together a Salle Duffy team for the Team Nationals – Richard, Keith, Piers, and me. Richard and I travelled down in my car, on a beautiful spring day. I felt good as I warmed up. I was to learn a bit about team fencing in the first match of the competition, when we all allowed an inferior team to keep a small lead into the final bout, when nerves and luck can play a big role. We deservedly lost because none of us took responsibility for the outcome on the piste. After this frustrating start, the day went better and we ended up with bronze, easily overturning the team that inflicted our first defeat in the play-off for third. I excused myself in the semi-final as on the opposing team with Arthur were Andrew and Stephen, two UCD fencers I regularly coached at lunchtime on Fridays over the previous semester. Anyway, we came away with a memento of the day, although my diary entry brings it back to mind better.

The Individual Nationals were a week later in Maynooth. I fenced well but went out in the L16 to Matthew Tracey, who perhaps I should have fared better against. The list of entries that day would not look out of place today, six years later, as many fencers then are still competing. However, the list today would have quite a few other good fencers too as entry to men's épée competitions have doubled over the years. Andrew Fenwick became the National Champion that year.

I demonstrated myself the equal of the best in the British Isles at the more advanced ages when I scored 39 and conceded 41 at the Veteran Home International later that month in Wrexham, Wales. I had shown another step improvement over the year and proved, this year again, the best performer on the All-Ireland team, as befits its captain. I was pleased with my progress but sought greater consistency – fear of failure on the piste was still contributing to failure.

I was now ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in Irish rankings, 7<sup>th</sup> excluding the fencers who could be selected for the Northern Irish team. It was an ambition that I would be selected for the Irish B Team that participates in the ‘Quadrangular’, against B teams of the other home nations. This year the event was in Scotland, just before a major competition, but despite my ranking, the selectors chose Colm Flynn (ranked 5<sup>th</sup>), Rory Greenan (=10<sup>th</sup>), Jamie Simpson (13<sup>th</sup>) and Andrew Carol (16<sup>th</sup>), who I coached. I was angry when I heard and hoped that being overlooked would put the iron in my soul to up my game.

I stretched the season on again after the ranked competitions ended and Salle Dublin closed for the summer. I fenced in the Carrickfergus Castle competition in Northern Ireland, driving up with my now regular fencing passenger, Rory Greenan. This time Ido Ajzenstadt joined us on the journey, a member of the Israeli National team then resident in Dublin. Ido won, I came 3rd and Rory came 9<sup>th</sup>. I won all my bouts before being knocked out 15-11 by a fencer from London.

It was a long but most enjoyable day (leaving at 5:50 am and returning at 7:30 pm) with fencing stories from Ido amusing us on the way back. The stories were prompted by one of the English characters at the competition, Paul of Northampton, who shouted out “Positive Mental Attitude!” occasionally as he took the on-guard line, presumably when his mental attitude was less than positive.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Pembroke League was won by Ido, who was to dominate the Irish scene for as long as he stayed and competed, taking over the role played previously by Yves Carnec. In fact, a few weeks after that he placed 12th place in the Senior European Championships. He claimed when leaving Ireland in 2017 that he achieved the best fencing results in his career here, listing alongside his performance in the European’s, 1st place in the Irish Open in 2013, 1st place in Maccabi Games (again) in 2013 for Israel and 3rd place for Ireland in 2017.

I made a discovery that summer as I studied my results over the season. I tend to fence well in the bouts to 5 but considerably less well to 15. In particular, there was a noticeable fall off in my fencing in the last three minutes of the bouts to 15. Clearly, I was lacking positive mental attitude when the pressure was on. I resolved to fence one-hit-at-a-time over the coming season, independent of the score and the event.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Resolution Year**

The 2012 Olympics were in London, and I was delighted to secure two tickets to the Men's Épée and Women's Sabre event up the quarter-finals stage during the summer of 2011. The excitement of the event had descended to the small fencing scene in Ireland with three pentathletes committed to giving their all for qualification and Ido announcing that, after his placing in the European's, he was being funded by Israel to try for Olympic qualification. I wanted to do my bit in a modest supporting role – to be a competitive, focussed, sparring partner. I gave the upcoming 2011/2012 season the caption the 'Resolution Year', because there was much to resolve.

I fenced well in the Souths but was knocked out in a close bout again by Richard Adams, who had knocked me out of the Easts earlier. Still, I learned what tactics will work, so for sure now, that he would not do that again. Rory had travelled down with me, and I came back with a car full, including Keith. Keith fenced much sharper in the competition than he has the previous year – his step-lunge was punchier so it was difficult to step out-of-distance in time. He told that he was doing strength and conditioning in the gym over the summer

and, later that evening, forwarded me blog entries from “S&C Guy”, who advised fencers on what gym work to do. I joined a gym and got a work-out programme of one-hour. I found my resolution to win strengthening with every session. I was not going to let anyone overcome me after putting myself through these at times painful sessions. Amongst its more tangible benefits, it noticeably shaped my body.

After the Souths, I was told that I missed selection for the Ireland senior team for the Five Nations by the narrowest of margins - I was the first reserve. This stoked my ambition more. I wanted not just to make the team but to make sure that I would fence well when on it.

I ended in the quarter-finals of the Intermediates, again. I fenced okay but came up with a four-point plan to improve my training regime. Fionbarr’s fourth session of a dozen lessons started. I was now occasionally making it to UCD to fence, as well as Salle Dublin, and going to the gym on Friday lunchtime instead of coaching. I reflected more on my performances, including my performances in training. I did another training day with Octavian Zidaru with the Irish squad and some others at the end of October.

As always, the big competition was the Irish Open (Dublin Satellite) in early December. There was 60 expected this year, with more than a dozen Italians. I was getting an odd adrenaline rush as I thought about it a couple of days in advance. I studied my fencing diary

and tried to approach the day with a nonchalant, one-point-at-a-time, open mentality.

I fenced nonchalantly, and I fenced well. I did not make the cut, ending 50<sup>th</sup> out of the 57 competitors, with two victories and eight defeats. “I am a fencer” is the single-line entry in my diary. Sometimes you just get a tough poule and even fencing at the top of your game is not enough. I lost a few bouts 4-5 including one to Radoslaw ZAWROTNIAK POL, then ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in the world and heading for another Olympics, and Mihalis JEFREMENKO LAT then 195<sup>th</sup> in the world. Fionbarr agreed that I was coming on.

The pentathletes put on a new competition, the New Year’s Épée, in early January, with the initial one taking place in Eanna Bailey’s place. It was an excellent venue with plenty of fencing, as all places were fenced for. I ended 7<sup>th</sup>sandwiched between Richard Adams, defeating me 15-14 for 6<sup>th</sup> and Colm, defeated by me 15-14. Arthur beat Ido for the number one slot, showing just how far the pentathletes had come so fast.



Photo: New Year's Épée 2012. From left to right: Rory Greenan, Me, Lindsay Weedon (now Berne), Paris Cai, Miriam Cashman, Duncan Salter, Ido Ajzenstadt, Richard Adams, Kate Coleman, Conor Hillick, Tom O'Brien, Jack Savage, Michael Ryan, Arthur Lanigan O'Keefe, Natalya (Tal) Coyle, Conor Ledingham, Colm Flynn, AN Other.

The Northern Ireland Open was in Belfast the following week. If I had not already committed to giving Rory a lift, I might well have pulled from it. My knees and elbow of my sword-arm were sore and stiff after training on Wednesday, and my head was tired from marking exams to a tight deadline. Thanks to Rory, I was up at 5:15 a.m., left home at 5:45, collected him at 6:00 with his welcome cup of coffee, and arrived just in time for registration at 8:30.

I won all five bouts in the first poule. I fenced only to win the bout – pentathlon-style – and I was perfectly comfortable winning by one hit. I dropped only one bout in the second poule, beating even good fencers by

a wide margin. I ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> overall going into the direct elimination phase. I got a bye to L16. I faced a French-Canadian of my years and promptly regressed to the old nervous Shane, giving hope to him and trouble to me, before overcoming him 15-10. Next up was Duncan Salter but I had a clear plan and executed it, helped with a lead from the start, to finish 15-8 or so.

So my first medal secured in an 'A'- ranked competition, with the semi-final helping determine its colour. I met Colm in the semis who took a commanding lead of 6-1 or so in the first period. He was beating me despite by nonchalant fencing mentality. I came out for the second period with the same approach as as the first, trying to fence neatly and controlled. He changed what he was doing, now showboating a little, with larger movements and dominant attitude. Slowly I gained some points. I felt a change in him, as it suddenly struck him that I was back in contention, and I could feel his nervousness prompting ill-timed attacks. I remained nonchalant. I won 15-10. The final was against Fergal Martin, which I lost 13-15, but was closing fast towards the end. I was in the zone, and enjoyed the bout. I was too tired to both worry and fence and, this time, I just fenced. In fact, I was fencing like this all day long - with commitment and free from the fear of failure. I was remarkably open to what was happening in the moment. The effort was enormous, though. It drained every ounce of my reserves and I was running on empty for the week after.

Dublin Épée was early this year. Cathal, my 11 year-old son, came with me as the girls were busy. He whiled away the day reading and watching the action in

Trinity's freezing new sports hall. With an uneasy mixture of nervousness and nonchalance I progressed to the semi-final where I met Richard Adams once again. This time the result went my way – I beat him 15-5 – to go on to the final with Arthur. I fenced as well as I could in the final but Arthur controlled the bout and beat me 15-9. Another very welcome silver, and lots of ranking points.

The East of Ireland were in mid-February and, as usual, it was the strongest tournament in the calendar after the Irish Open. There was just one poule, where I fenced poorly, winning two and losing three in tight bouts. I was ranked 16th out of 30. I worked to get my focus so I was mentally prepared when called for the first elimination bout against Matthew Tracy. I beat him 15-13 by being focused. Then I beat Richard Adams 15-6. I went against Paris CAI CYP in a tense and very close encounter with both of us fully committed. I pipped him. I lost 15-9 to Ido in the semi-final. A bronze memento and another leap up the Irish rankings in this Olympic year.

I was not altogether candid when I wrote earlier that I placed myself in a supporting role to others' higher ambitions at the start of the season. Every boy is allowed to aim high, but older men do not bore others with their boyishness. I had, for some reason, cut out and sellotaped into my diary the qualification regulations for the Olympics during the previous summer. The Olympics were, of course, out of the question. But it was no longer impossible to get to the European Zonal, a competition for the few remaining

Olympic places amongst European nations that have not qualified fencers based on world rankings. I was now ranked 4th of all Irish fencers (including Northern Ireland) and it was a mathematical possibility for me to be ranked number 1 after the Nationals, when the selection of the single Irish fencer to go to the Zonal would be made. This actuary would make the most of those odds.

## Chapter 11

### My Olympics

There was five weeks to go to that Nationals. I was trying to keep up the standard of fencing I had recently achieved within the available free time. Fionbarr began his fifth series of a dozen hour-plus lessons. David Couper was giving me ten-minute confidence boosting lessons on Wednesday evenings.

The Nationals were on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> March. I awoke a stiff 48 year-old, as I trained too hard the previous Wednesday trying to work out my nervousness. I collected Rory and we made it to the venue at Maynooth in plenty of time. There were 33 Irish épéeists, including all the better ones with the single exception of Andrew. There was just one poule, through which I progressed undefeated, comfortably beating Fergal 5-0 who bested me to gold in the Northern Ireland Open. I was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, behind Benedict for the direct elimination phase.

I won my first d.e. 15-2 against a clubmate, achieving excellent focus. Next was a northern Irish youth, Jamie Price, who fenced tidily and got an early lead on me. At the second break I was in trouble with him leading 13-10, but I had developed a simple plan. My attacks were leading to doubles, so I began pressing and provoking

him and when he extended, executing a simple sixte-take and riposte. 14-14. A double and then, thank the gods, a single light to me with 30 seconds remaining. I drew Mark Loughnane in the quarter-finals who took an early lead, 6-3, and 12-10 at the second break. Throughout I was composed and working out his unusual timing – his under-wrist hit or flèche with arm drawing back at start of move. In the final period I came out and won it 15-12, with no recall of what I did.

There were just four left – Benedict, Arthur, David Burnside, and myself. I drew David and he beat me well, 15-6, as my tactics were naïve. He is a better fencer but I could have made him work harder for the victory on the day. Still I was delighted coming away with ‘shameful’ bronze as Aisling (my youngest) joked when I got home, quoting the Simpsons.

Now, at the end of the season, I was the ranked second of all Irish épéeists, behind the new National Champion Benedict Chambers. Two days after the Nationals, it was announced that Benedict was selected for the European Zonal Olympic Qualification in Bratislava on 21/22 April to represent Ireland in Men’s Épée. I tried not to hope that he would catch the flu or suffer some other minor illness that would prevent him from competing.

In fact, and in tune with reality, I was to be in the Leeds Royal Armoury that same weekend in the Four Nation Veteran Team event. Stephan Munn, Rory Greenan (who had just turned 40) and I were to renew the struggle against other older fencers in the British Isles.

The pentathletes, meanwhile, were to be in Russia that weekend competing in World Cup #4, attempting to get the ranking points for qualification of the Olympics starting 98 days later.

I was now holding my own, in the veteran class. All-Ireland men's épée beat Scotland (45-31), but lost to England (45-26) and Wales (45-34). Rory struggled as his static style suited older fencers. Overall I was even across my bouts – 3W, 3D, 3L, and my indicator was positive (I scored two more hits than I conceded). The venue was very special and, as always, it is relaxing and enjoyable socialising with other veteran fencers.

Sport was taken more seriously elsewhere that weekend. Some 28 épéeist competed in Bratislava for four Olympic spots. My international ranking of 584 was higher than six of the competitors, which surprised me given my disappointing result in the Irish Open. Benedict had a tough time of it, losing all in the single poule and not making the cut. His closest bout was a 4-5 loss to Bartosz PIASECKI NOR, who went on to qualify and then to win silver at the Olympics.

In Russia, Arthur had to pull out of the competition after straining his hamstring in, as pentathletes say, 'the fence'. Eanna got to his first World Cup final and finished 14<sup>th</sup>. If memory serves me well, he won the equestrian in the final. Tal qualified for the Olympics, but Arthur and Eanna missed out. But wait! A Polish pentathlete failed a drug test close to the Olympics and was disqualified with his place going to the next in line, Arthur. So their high ambitions, clever preparation and

total commitment was rewarded for two. Tal and Arthur were two of the 66 athletes that formed Team Ireland in London 2012.

There was one more competition before taking my seat, next to Cathal, to watch the fencing at the Olympics. Back in February, I was invited to be part of the Irish Veteran Team at the European Veteran Team Championship to be held in Kalmar, Sweden in mid-May. The team ended up being Benedict (who lives in Sweden), Michael Ryan, a former double-Olympian (in 1964 and 1968) and Larry Gough, a fencing master based in Germany. The constraints on the team for that competition was that each member had to be over 40 years of age and the sum of the three ages of those fencing must be at least 150 years. It ended up that the young Benedict and I stayed on the piste with Michael and Larry (both in their sixties) alternating.



Photo: Team Ireland, European Veteran Team Championship 2012, Sweden. From Left to Right: Me, Michael Ryan, Benedict Chambers, Larry Gough.

I took one last circuit of the gym with my training programme in early May. These solitary times gave me the determination to push myself harder on the piste. They clear my mind. Maintaining the plank shows the long length of a bout. Ten minutes on the rower recreates that time in the last period when the body is wanting to push less hard but cannot be allowed. Body and mind, the gym must take some credit for my improved performance on the piste over the last months.

That visit to the gym proved to be my last training session before Kalmar, as I came down with a cold and considered it best not train for ten days. The long day of travel before the competition gave me a break and quiet time. I reflected on the previous months. Each success since January buoyed me up. I had wanted to make the senior Irish team but achieved more than could be hoped. But the whole training regime was too much for my lifestyle as parent and professor: I could not maintain this commitment of time and energy to fencing for long. Anyway, fencing had been good to me and my ambitions were more than fulfilled. This European Team Veterans would serve as my olympics.

The whole event was superbly organised. The national flags decorating the venue, the teams with their coaches and physios and matching tracksuits (except us), and the earnestness of it all. We beat Belgium twice but lost to Italy, Finland, France and Poland. I fenced okay but lost about five bouts 4-5 in extra time (two to Italy in extra time, one to Poland and maybe two to Belgium). So I was not outclassed but never got that flow where

the key touches come my way. The Irish team achieved an Irish victory by ending higher than team GBR in the final rankings. We finished the day of fencing ranked 12th out of the 15 countries, ahead of Great Britain, Belgium, and Denmark.

I made the very most of the experience. I went back to the venue the next day too to watch the team foil (although Ireland had only a men's épée team). I witnessed Gregory, formerly of Cuba and now of Italy, contesting every touch, arguing over every point using every rule in the rulebook, even though he was outclassing his opponents. These veteran victories could hardly compare with his past achievements. But this is the present and the present is all that matters. Common to all in that hall that day was the belief that winning matters, though few were as vocal as Gregory. This is, of course, what gives a competition its value.

I went over with Cathal to the 2012 Olympic Games in London in August. What a spectacle! The fencers led out with dramatic music, their names heralded as they took to the lighted pistes. After saluting their opponent they went on-guard in the best shape of their lives – their outward appearance of neat haircut and new fencing whites revealing just an infinitesimal degree of their inward preparedness. Best in their nation for several years, now they had upgraded their skills to challenge for the title of Olympic Champion.

Tal and Arthur competed in the modern pentathlon in the final days of the Olympics. Nobody else in Ireland, and many other nations, were prepared to sacrifice as

much as they were: nobody else valued the honour as much. Their efforts were rewarded, with their relentless training and preparation over the years allowing them to draw on every fibre of their being to compete against equally determined athletes. Tal came 9<sup>th</sup> and Arthur came 25<sup>th</sup>. The experience was to motivate the two of them to commit to another cycle of four-years training for Rio, and now another four-year cycle for Tokyo.

While it all looked elegant and beautiful in London, I witnessed some of the less than elegant daily toil when the payback was anything but certain. The 'less than elegant' observation is particularly acute in Katie Taylor's case, the gold medal boxer and darling of the nation who trained in a dingy hut at the harbour in Bray, running down to the local pub to use their facilities when nature called. The facilities that I enjoyed for my recreational efforts were a league better than that. Sport, like life, can be less than fair. It is humbling to see how much others can achieve with so little.



Photo: Arthur Lanigan-O'Keefe at London 2012. His fencing coach, Marek, is equally jubilant in the background.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Senior Five Nations**

I took a months' break from fencing after the European Veterans, as I fought the cold and caught up with the rest of my life. The summer league started at the end of June and once again I picked up my épée and my diary to learn again. I had not got the balance right between passiveness and aggressiveness and wanted to work on this prior to the Senior Five Nations. I do won the league again, I came 4th (averaging 70% wins with an overall average score of 5-3), and 5<sup>th</sup> in the d.e. phase, so still getting the specially designed t-shirt for a podium place. I was to build a complete collection of these t-shirts over the summers of the league.

It was a quiet summer on campus and the gym was closed for refurbishment. I called into UCD's Elite Athlete Academy during one of the long days in July. I was hoping to be able to attend a lecture or two on the psychological aspects of competing. Just one touch at a key moment during a day could transform the outcome. Ann O'Hanlon was helpful and suggested, as that was not available, that the S&C guys could help me do up an exercise regime. They did one up, with subsequent

updates after one and two months. I used the regime two or three times a week over the summer as it did not require a gym.

My attention was now focussed on 5<sup>th</sup> November, a dozen weeks away, when the Senior Five Nations was scheduled in Dublin. I had kept myself in good shape over the summer. Doug had opened a fencing club, Fence Fit, and I also started going there with the kids on Sunday morning from August to October. I enjoyed these relaxed outings, seeing my kids try a sport that gives me such pleasure. Driving through Sunday morning's deserted streets to the venue in the heart of old Dublin, smells of horse and burnt hops, and the sun entering the large warehouse where the pistes were set-up. These outings were a time-out from the frenetic pace of life, when time could just fill itself.

It was competition time again and first up was the Souths. So down and back in the day. The fencing was a struggle as all my old bad ways were back – the nervousness, feeling vulnerable to the attack, prompting me to initiate direct attacks at less than opportune times. The overall feeling was just wanting to win and not to fence. I finished 12th. My national ranking was unaltered. The selection rules at that time suggested that I now automatically qualified for Ireland's 5 Nation Team, but the wording was ambiguous: "the number 1 and 2 in the Irish rankings in possession of an Irish passport will usually be automatically selected". Benedict was ranked 1st, Ido (ISR) was ranked second and I was ranked 3rd. If selection was done by rankings and all made

themselves available then the team would be Benedict, me, Colm, and Arthur. Selection was confirmed by the end of September and the team was me, Colm, Rory, and my old salle-mate, Richard.

Salle Dublin reopened in early September and I began again my weekly lessons with Fionbarr in mid-September. I competed in the Intermediates at in the end of September, coming 2nd to my clubmate Geoffrey Corcoran. I was a little annoyed at myself for changing tactics when I was leading 9-6, allowing him to come back and defeat me 15-13. I was, contradictorily, also pleased that Geoffrey won his first competition. He was particularly dedicated to fencing, and I felt he could become one of the best fencers Ireland ever produced. Geoffrey ended the calendar year 2012 as the number one ranked Irish épéeist, keeping me at number 2 because of this result. He was to remain at the number one slot for a few years but his game never raised consistently to the level that his efforts and dedication could have taken him – the young man required direction with regular coaching and international training camps.

However, by any standards – and certainly by mine – the run of three silvers and two bronzes in the last six ranked competitions was satisfactory. I had earned my slot on the national team. I trained hard over the next five weeks so I was as prepared as I could be for the Home International.

It was just like any other fencing day. I was methodically going through my warm up routine at

7:30 am in the fencing hall. True the hall looked better equipped than the usual competition and, with 120 or so fencers plus referees and other officials, there was a greater bustle too. I took to the piste with Colm but I had not settled my nerves.

Colm did not start me against England, our first opponents. I was so frustrated that it killed by nervousness. All I wanted to do was fence. He sent me on in the second last bout when England had a commanding lead. I was against Henderson and there was nothing I could do – he beat me 5-4 and England went on to win 45-35. I was not taken off again, and fenced as well as was within me – 1-2 to Bradley NI, 2-3 to Burnside NI and 2-5 to Fenwick NI, with the match finishing Ire 23-45 NI; 0-0 Davidson SCO; 4-5 Tannock SCO and 3-4 Liston SCO with an overall 31-45 victory to Scotland; 2-5 Gregory WAL, 5-6 Thomas WAL, 1-5 Edwards WAL, with a 20-45 victory to WAL. Overall I scored 24 hits and conceded 40, a 3-5 average, in line with the overall team average.

Excerpts from my diary: “I felt a Whelan-style develop – pressing, good movement, counter-attacking but with an odd well-timed direct attack. Also good sniping skills and an active unrelenting point”. If I was half my age I could take that 3-5 average and hone my style so that within a year or two it became a 4-5 average and then, in another year or two, a 5-5 average. But that time in life has passed, and nor do I wish it back to redo in this manner. I had witnessed something of what was demanded through Eanna’s, Arthur’s, and Tal’s devotion to sport and I knew that I could not balance

my self-esteem on the tip of my épée. I am satisfied that my energies were directed close to optimally at each stage in life.

Colm was a great captain, leaving nothing on the piste himself and telling us that Ireland were never in contention for so long in the matches in previous years, despite the discouraging final score-line. He told us that Ireland had never won a men's épée match in this tournament for the five years he had been involved. In fact, it took to 2017 for Ireland's men's épée team to win a match – a 44-45 victory over Wales.

There was a dinner celebration that evening and afterwards the initiation rite for us new members of the national squad. Ireland's rite, eating a rather large raw potato washed down with Guinness, was thankfully more civilised than the red-hand of Ulster of our northern colleagues – slapping a bare back until the red imprint of the hand remains visible.

## Chapter 13

### The Next Generation

A wiser man would have taken a break of a month or two from fencing after the Five Nations. I was convinced at the time that, though obviously tired, I was on the verge of bedding down the Whelan-style. Also the main competitions of the season were coming up.

I did a Federation training day in Doug's before the Irish Open in early December, struggling through the day. The Irish Open would have been great if I got rather than conceded one of the total 43 touches given and received that day. But I just missed the cut, conceding 4-5 to Tom O'Brien, who I normally could defeat up to this point.

And so to another series of lessons from Fionbarr, Salle training, and more competitions on the national circuit, which now were coming up far too fast compared to previous seasons. I could not maintain my podium finishes, but was fencing sort-of-okay. I diagnosed myself of being a bit burnt out – limited ideas when fencing, trying just a few moves repeatedly and not enjoying it very much. It was also Ireland's turn to host the Veteran Four Nations, which I played a major role in organising, introducing a medal ceremony became a regular feature of this friendly competition from 2015.

For the 2013/2014 season, I resolved to find, at the elementary level, the Zen “nothingness” on the piste, that total focus in the moment so that the self – and all those self-doubts – disappear. This season I would resist the *6 Fatal Temptations of Swordsmen*, identified a few centuries earlier by the samuri Yagyū Munenori in his work, *The Killing Sword*:

1. the conscious desire for victory
2. the desire to resort to technical cunning
3. the desire to display one's skills
4. the desire to play an offensive role
5. the desire to play a passive role; and
6. the desire to rid oneself of any of the above.

I travelled to the Souths in August with my car full, and by getting close to the right mental state, came 3<sup>rd</sup>. At the end of September, Salle Dublin came 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Team Nationals in Galway, comprising Geoffrey, Scott and me, soundly beaten by the new champions, the senior pentathletes of Arthur, Eanna and Conor. In November, I made the cut at the Irish Open.

However, the significance of this fencing season came from an unexpected source. Sorcha, my eldest, was in transition year during 2013/14 and she said that she would prefer to take up fencing competitively rather than continue with her Saturday horse-riding. Her riding instructor had changed, there were now fewer of the regulars and, perhaps, she saw fencing as more social. She had been coming to Doug's on those Sunday mornings and had done a taster day with Pentathlon Ireland, so she knew what she was getting into.

For her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday at the end of November, she was gifted a French grip épée, D'Artagnan fencing shoes, and my old gear. She joined Salle Dublin, and came to Doug's on Sunday and the occasional Friday night to Modern Pentathlon Centre (MPC). Despite a gentle disposition, she was naturally competitive and the light blade-work and movement with the French grip entirely suited her. She made rapid progress.

Her first competition was the New Year's Épée where she nearly medalled amongst the many youths. She went on the competition circuit – the Team Duffy (with a Trinity team), the Easts, Dublin Épée, etc. She really enjoyed the test – the stress, the joy, the heartache, and the camaraderie. She was exposed to the interesting characters in the game, from Yves well-meant old-style coaching, "You are shit, you should take up ballet", to the pentathletes rejoicing in their bodies. She saw how different people react to the two imposters of triumph and defeat. This introduction to adulthood is more wholesome than the made-up-skimpy-clad Wesley disco, which we sometimes passed going training. She was showing considerable improvement with each competition.



Photo: Sorcha practicing her flèche with Dr Colm Flynn

She excelled at the Dublin Épée, her competitiveness surprising me. At the season's end, she fenced in the Cadet Nationals, where she got through to the quarter-finals. She got the first touch but then conceded 8 without answer to trail 8-1. She crawled her way back, slowly and methodically, to parity at 13-13 and then victory. However nerve-racking it is fencing, it is far worse to be a father at the side of the piste. I have observed this in myself and in many fencer fathers – Philip, Peter, Yves. But the father's delight is equally magnified – I was more delighted for Sorcha's bronze than any of my own. I knew that she put in the work and knew what a boost that would be to her.

Sorcha also fenced in the seniors later that afternoon, but she did not really care anymore. Still, she was only narrowly bested her in the d.e. 15-14 by Laura, a good fencer. In fact, a fortnight later at the Belfast Open, Sorcha reversed that score to come 3<sup>rd</sup> and failed to

make the final by the narrowest of margins (knocked out 14-15 by the Clodagh, the Trinity Captain). After a year of fencing, and a half-year of competing, Sorcha now presented a challenge to those more experienced.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Celtic Champion**

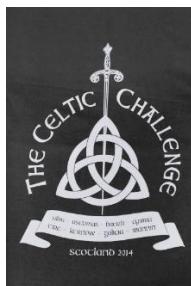
I turned 50 years old in February 2014. It was not altogether a time of rejoicing as we were going through the stress of moving house, without an offer yet on our current one despite it being on the market for several months, and former business partners needing their arms twisted to honour a written agreement. Fencing was always a refuge from this sort of thing.

I had not asked Fionbarr for a new session of lessons at the start of the season, but I asked in January. He had got used to free Wednesday afternoon's and so was reluctant. We had, perhaps, got as much from one another as could be asked.

I captained the All-Ireland Men's Épée team at the Veteran Home International in Edinburgh, and fenced brilliantly. We beat Wales 42-45, lost to Scotland 29-45 and England 36-45. I was thinking that maybe I had my mojo back and I committed to going to the Celtic Challenge at the end of July, also hosted in Edinburgh this year. That meant fencing through the summer, but the summer was always more relaxed in work than the fencing season proper. I asked Colm, now a fencing coach, to give me an hour lesson weekly over nine weeks of the summer. He obliged and this got me

analysing my actions properly again. His more physical approach to the lesson added something new.

Sorcha and I did the Pembroke Summer League. She won the women's and I won the men's. I misfired in the direct elimination phase, going out to a beginner the evening before I was travelling to Edinburgh for the Celtic Challenge. I was now about to go up against real fencers, and had paid several hundred euros for the privilege. The diary exhorts me to deadly active patience, to find the fluid movement of my point to the target.



Duncan had come of age and joined the Irish Veteran squad in Edinburgh for the Home International earlier and now the Celtic Challenge. He, a single man, devotes his considerable energies to fencing and to fitness, by cycling upwards of 25 miles a day and running regularly. He fences several nights a week and travels to a competition every other weekend, in Ireland or the UK. He was roughly my equal at this stage but was clearly going to eclipse me soon given his commitment to the cause. We shared a room for both events when in Edinburgh, and when we subsequently travelled

together. When we awoke in the morning, while still lying in our beds, I would recite loudly:

*“Men of Erin! Men of Erin!  
Grasp the battle-axe and spear!  
Chase these northern wolves before you like a herd of  
frightened deer!”*

Mum had awoken her teenage children with this version of Brian Boru's address to his army before the battle of Clontarf. She was briefly by my side sharing the joke as I got up to don my fencing gear.



Photo: Celtic Challenge 2014, Edinburgh, Scotland. Xose Piñeiro, GALICIA (finished 3rd) and me chatting.

I beat all in my poule of six, making me 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 29 going into the direction elimination phase. I got a bye to L16 but warmed-up body and mind before my first d.e. The first opponent was Mike McMilken, a tall fencer attacking in a high octave line, whom I had fenced

previously on the Scottish Veteran team. Shirley and others had coached me on how to best this style one evening several years ago in Salle Duffy. I was confident in my tactics and my ability to execute them, but still only just pipped him 9-10 in the golden minute against priority. Next I beat Duncan McFadyn SCO, a leftie with great movement, in an even closer battle: 9-8 in the golden minute against priority and after three doubles. I beat Mike McEwan SCO 10-8 in the semi-final and then beat Alastair Urquhart SCO, another left-hander 10-8 in the final. I won. I won without losing a bout the whole day long.

I am a Celtic Champion.

## **Chapter 15**

### **Veteran World Championship**

In previous times, I might have channelled the optimism and energy of success from being a Celtic Champion into a training regime for further improvement over the coming season. However, my commitment to fencing was already at its maximum, given all the other constraints in my life. I hoped, instead, that my successful mindset might ensure that I could now fence always at my best, unconstrained by doubts and double-guessing. I decided to go to the FIE Veteran World Championship in Hungary at the end of October. I had just gone 50 years old, so would have the not inconsiderable advantage of being one of the younger men. Accordingly, I decided to extend the weekly lessons with Colm to the end of October.

Ido and Geoffrey pulled from the Souths, so I travelled alone in the car, enjoying sunny Ireland. I fenced well in the Souths, ending 5<sup>th</sup> overall, losing the d.e to Paul Fitzpatrick 14-15 despite having a good lead at one stage. That was uncharacteristic in a day of nice neat fencing. I dropped Sorcha to the bus in the centre of Dublin early the next day and she travelled south with Suzie. Sorcha came 6<sup>th</sup>.

Geoffrey went to the Junior World Championship in September, performing the best of the five strong Irish épéeists, ranking 138<sup>th</sup> of the 210.

I finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Intermediates in mid-October. I beat Yves in the Leinster League a few days before going to the Veteran World Championships at the end of October. He was on the French veteran team in my age category, and was frustrated and upset that he could perform so poorly to lose to me despite all his preparation. I had tightened up my game: my tactics of 70% counter/30% direct or in-preparation was ensuring that I was no longer conceding soft touches. I was in great shape and fencing the best I had been for a couple of years. My final lesson with Colm before leaving for Hungary was unusually perfect – I was quick, accurate, focussed, and I could tidily perform any action he wanted.

After delivering my lectures on Friday, I drove to the airport to arrive at Budapest later that evening. A delay with my missile luggage meant that I could only watch as my intended train pulled out of the station and had to wait on the cold and deserted platform until midnight to catch the end-of-shift slow train. I was freezing and was grateful when the train, warm with beer breath, eventually came. The locals, the railway workers, and I chugged through the darkness, transferred to a bus, left a few workers home, came to another dark station, where the remainder of us traipsed across the dark tracks to a dark train before lights and cold engine noisily starts. At about 3 am in the morning I arrive at the Sport Hotel in Debrecen

where my partner in arms, Grant Anderton, is asleep in the small twin room. I get into my bed without switching on the lights.

Early next morning I am skipping in my coordination, stretching, warming up with Grant on the piste. My point is in my fingers and everything feels good and tight. I am not called for the first bout in the poule, enabling me to form a judgement of the standard. A SUI guy and I fence, but he wins. I fenced fine, with good long point-work, and felt I could do better as auto-corrections were switched on. Next a left-handed SVK guy. I won, but unsure of score – maybe 5-4. I studied a AUS chap, who was clearly the best in the poule, with movements commanding the distance and decisive blade work when engaged. Up against SWE next and, in total focus, I won 5-4. Pretty sure I'll make the cut now. But I fancy my chances against the CZE guy with poor footwork – his advance was obvious and the steps were too big. Yes, 1-0 to me with a simple long lunge, closing the line, timed to hit when his front foot landed. Now, 2-0 with the same deep lunge to shoulder. Now 3-0. Why is he doing the same thing? Just close it out now – double, double, so 5-2. Now, finally the AUS guy. It went 3-3, all single lights. But he was working me out and his movement was causing me problems. 4-3 to him, and he widens distance. I allow the time run down to ten seconds and then try a compound attack. He scores and it ends 5-3.

I was seeded 33<sup>rd</sup> out of the 83 and get a bye through to L64. I get a Hungarian. He gets the first hit and then the second. Time to fence. I have little recollection from

then until it was 9-9 and normal time had run out. He got the hit in extra time against priority. So out, ranked 38<sup>th</sup> out of the 83. Grant was knocked out at this stage too.

Yves, for France, had scrapped through his first d.e. by one hit. He intercepted me going to the shower-room, requesting that I stay in gear and spar with him to warm him up for his coming bouts. Yves is a physical fencer, and since we both knew how each other fenced, we both moved and fenced freely – me releasing the adrenaline still in my system and him preparing his mind by allowing his body free reign. A referee offered his services and a few spectators looked on bemused. I thoroughly enjoyed it – achieving a memorable harmony between body and mind. Yves made the L32, then went on easily to the L16. I could feel his mentality change before he fenced the next opponent, a UKR guy – he was not as focussed as previously, as if troubled by thoughts. I understood why when he took to the piste against UKR. The guy was in your head as well as on front of you on the piste – relentlessly pressing, giving no time or space – and it seemed he could counter any attack, even compound, or hit directly if you did not attack when he squeezed the distance. Yves lost, and ended with a final ranking of 10<sup>th</sup> in the world.



Photo: FIE Veteran World Championship 2014, Debrecen, Hungary. Grant Anderton and myself representing Ireland in Men's Épée 'A'.

Fencers became spectators when they were knocked out. So as the competition went on the crowds around the pistes grew larger. At the quarter-finals, one could only see the action on tip-toe, and the knowledgeable throng would tense at critical points and hum in appreciation at a good touch. Yves's UKR guy, Sokolov, retained his Veteran 'A' World Champion title. My AUS friend, Cartillier, came 2<sup>nd</sup>, and the HUN opponent who knocked me out, Thuranszky, came 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Grant and I had a relaxed meal that evening back at the spartan Sport Hotel, where, on asking him about his fluent Hungarian, I learned of his Olympic ambitions in his younger days. He left in the middle of the night for his flight back to Spain, interrupting his drive home to catching a local competition where he made the

podium. I left later that Sunday morning, feeling competitive on the world stage in the veteran category – a world class veteran fencer.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Coming of Age, TNG**

The Irish Open was a month after the Veteran World Championship, at the end of November. In the seeding poule I won 5 out of the six, losing only to John WRIGHT CAN, who went on to become the overall winner that day. I started the second poule poorly, losing the first two. I took myself to the toilet to have a few private words to refocus. I won the next two against a Swiss and British fencer, lost on priority to an Italian, and then beat a Bulgarian. I was seeded 30<sup>th</sup> out of the 55 for the d.e. phase.

I drew the Italian who beat me 5-2 in the poule. I could recall his favourite hit. I took an early lead, but my timing got sloppy in the second period and he came back to 9-11. I refocused and maintained the lead in the final period. Next d.e. was against BAKER AUS, who was the Irish National Champion of 2013. It was a cagey and tight affair but he got a lead of 2 going into the last 10 seconds. I tried compound flèche attacks but lost two more points and conceded at 11-7 with a couple of seconds left. All day I was fencing largely counter-attacking but never lapsed into passiveness. My world ranking improved to 442<sup>nd</sup> after this showing.

Sorcha did well too, finishing 15<sup>th</sup> of the 31 in a tough competition.

I drove up to the Northern Ireland Open together with Sorcha and Susie. It was the usual, up at 5:30 am and arriving back at 7 pm or so. I hugely enjoyed the day and the demands it places on body and mind, but there is a cost to pay the following week. I also made the quarter-finals. Sorcha came 5th, just failing to get the last point in the quarter-finals despite several attempts. Sorcha is beginning to fare better than her father.



Photo: Northern Ireland Open 2015. My flèche helps me overcome Stephen Brown in L16. Picture courtesy of Stephen's father.

Sorcha got bronze at Easts while I was knocked out by lower seeded Paddy in close match in L32. In Dublin

Épée, Sorcha reached quarter-finals, knocked out by Kate Coleman-Lenihan, while lower seeded Paddy knocked me out in L16 in another close affair.

Larry Gough, who I fenced with in Sweden a few years earlier, was prominent in German fencing circles where he was a German fencing master and coached many youths. Now on the Board of the IFF, he organised a few training camps where he took over German National fencers and coaches to improve local standards. I took part in all these training weekends, and Sorcha took part in most. Larry was another character in fencing with a lifelong commitment to the cause but fell foul of the powers-that-were in Ireland back in the 1960s and 1970s. He tells his story well in the Gough Papers. I very much enjoyed Larry's company and was shocked to get an e-mail from him in December 2016 which, on opening, was from his widow. Rest in peace Larry.

Once again I can see with hindsight that I should have taken a break from fencing after the Irish Open. I was struggling to keep up lessons with Colm, sometimes having to cancel and finally stopped them completely in early March. Fencing has enriched my life, and now Sorcha's, but sometimes it is too demanding at the end of a long week. It is not the fencing, of course, it is the week following the competition that I am sometimes unequal to. I should have trained and not competed over the early months of 2015.

Anyway, I did compete, including in the Nationals at the end of March where I knocked out Tom in L32, to be knocked out in my turn by Philip Slater, who went on to

become the National Champion of 2015. These were the Nationals where Sorcha came into her own. With the pentathletes competing elsewhere, she came 3rd in Senior Women's Épée, and 2<sup>nd</sup> to Charlotte Slater in the Junior Nationals. What progress she had made over the year from 3<sup>rd</sup> in Cadet Nationals! In fact, I reckoned from her standing in the National Rankings that she was in a good position to be selected for the Senior National Team for the Five Nations.

I solemnly resolved to my diary to take a year off competitive fencing, as it was too much to maintain on top of my necessary obligations. I could not envisage half-doing it. The year off was to start after the Veteran Home International in Cardiff. I passed the captaincy to Duncan Salter, as I judged him now the better fencer.

We travelled to Cardiff by private jet, courtesy of a team member, were collected on the runway on arrival by a couple of black Mercedes and driven directly to the venue to watch the foilists and sabreurs in action. I recited Mum's exhortation on waking the next morning before our matches. I appreciated how special the day was. We beat Wales and Scotland to get silver, which was commemorated in a medal. Afterwards, Duncan and I strolled around Cardiff, got an earthy gourmet pub lunch and leisurely made our way to the airport. This weekend made me reconsider my solemn resolution.

My diary entry in August, before the start of the season, makes a compromise. It says that I will fence one-hit-at-a-time, one competition at a time, with no ambition greater than participation. My resolution was adjusted

now to fence, but without the ambition to win, just to inhabit each of those special moments on the piste. Fence for fun.

Sorcha went to the Souths, but I did not. She came 6th and shortly afterwards – although it seemed like an age – she was selected for the National Team. Wow! She was just seventeen, in her leaving certificate year. Her 18th birthday present came early, in time for the Five Nation event, comprising her own gear, with name on back and country colours, and two maraging épées. She fenced very well at the event in Northern Ireland, and came back on Sunday evening on a high – very much in contrast with the attack on nerves on the eve of heading up on Friday. Her initiation to the national team was also to eat a raw potato, but being just underage, it was washed down with tomato ketchup mixed into a glass of milk.

## **Chapter 17**

### **A New Year's Resolution**

The diaries continue with the results of competition after competition, with occasional reflections and insights. Entries now treat women's épée as much as the men's. I struggle to contain the ambition of winning and reserve energy for the coming week but occasionally I fail – bronze at Dublin Épée 2016 and silver at the Intermediates 2016. I made the cut in the Dublin Satellite in 2016, knocked out 14-15 by Yves, and again in 2017, knocked out 13-15 by Philip, once again the National Champion. I thoroughly enjoy the fencing, the day out, and the camaraderie.

Sorcha's successes continue. She became Ireland's Student Champion in her first year at university and she is again on the National Team. Cathal was introduced to fencing during his transition year but his earlier success at Taekwondo, where he competed for Ireland at the Junior Europeans in both sparring and team patterns, limited his exposure to fencing. Aisling, my youngest, has started fencing a few months now. Hopefully, she will get some of the joy that Sorcha and I get from it.

There was a couple of training camps in 2017 organised by Radu, a former Cadet World Champion now resident

in Ireland. He brings insights – simple and true - and demonstrates excellent in movement and technique. I train in his club over the summers when Salle Dublin is closed, and see it as the future of épée excellence in Ireland, gathering most of the decent épéeist for demanding evenings of technical exercises and free play. There is much to learn from him. But the cost is now too high to keep up at this level. Fencing is part of my life, a valuable part of my life, but it has its place. I need to keep the increasingly limited energy for life's other valuable facets.

Perhaps there is no good time to give up competitive fencing, but there are least bad times. Failing better requires the commitment to learn and improve. I no longer can give fencing that commitment. The last Dublin Satellite was my tenth consecutive one, and in that competition alone I have fenced more than a hundred bouts against opponents from a couple of dozen countries. This coming spring I hope to be on the All-Ireland Veteran Team to complete a decade on the team. To continue competitive fencing after the end of this season will introduce the frustrations of beginning to fail worse. So I shall make the Veteran Home International in Scotland my last stand. I will not be missed: Dawid is coming of age the following year, and Paddy the year after that.



Photo: All-Ireland Team, Veteran Home International, Durham 2016 [Silver Medalists]. From L-R: Stephan Munn, Duncan Salter, Mayor of Durham, me.

The question posed at the outset of these reminiscences was: what of importance lies behind these fencing experiences? Part of the answer is fencing gives an unmediated experience of living that demands everything of body and mind, occasionally creating special moments of awareness or harmony or both. In writing this blog, I came to realise, as the individual moments added up over a decade and more, that fencing is also as much about like-minded people who share a dedication to our sport: it is about the common struggle to be better.

Shirley used to tell the younger fencers in the Salle that, when they won the competition and were presented with the trophy, they were to make a short speech to

thank their fellow competitors and the competition organisers. This blog has not been short – but Shirley always said I never heeded her – but is intended to give thanks for so many pleasurable evenings, days and weekends, to my fellow competitors, the competition organisers and, most of all, to my coaches over the years who helped me fail better – Shirley (OLY), Fionbarr (OLY), David, and Colm. My energies in the years ahead are perhaps better employed in following their example.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Shadows**

The last chapter was penned in December 2017, chronicling events up to that time. Much of the intervening eight years proved challenging off piste. The family struggled but came through. There are now four more fencing journals bulging with facts and fragmented thoughts that need to be threaded into a narrative. Though fencing was tangential to the exacting drama of these years, the task might help in gaining retrospective.

I was true to my promise in the last chapter, more or less. I did stop competing regularly. I also coached a little and trained as a coach. Fencing became a diversion from life, not one of its purposes.

The 2017/2018 season tapered off with Sorcha and I skipping the Northern Ireland Open, the Easts, and some other high-ranking competitions. Despite this, I was fortunate to be selected for the Veterans 4 Nations held in April in Glasgow. The Nationals, the last competition of the domestic season, were to be held the weekend before. I had not trained much after the Team

Duffy in January, so I entered it as a preparation for the veteran home international.

I fenced the Nationals one hit at a time. I won all my bouts in the single poule, so seeded 2<sup>nd</sup> out of the 41. I finished 9<sup>th</sup>, eliminated 6-5 by Jamie SIMPSON in the priority minute of the d.e. Despite the inevitable what-ifs after such a close encounter, I was feeling fine for the next weekend. Jamie went on to get bronze and Arthur LANNIGAN O'KEEFE became men's National Champion that year.

Sorcha had kept up her lessons with Colm, but was doing little other training. She also entered the Nationals and, showing her class, was seeded 3<sup>rd</sup> after the poule and went on to get Bronze. Tal COYLE becoming women's National Champion.



Photo: Podium of Irish Nationals 2018. Natalya COYLE (Champion), Kate COLEMAN, Anna-Lise MION (Bronze) and Sorcha (Bronze).

The diary entry for the Veterans 4 Nations is just the results sellotaped in. Frankly, I cannot recall anything of what happened on the piste. The results impress me now. The team of Stephan, Duncan and I overcame the strong host team 45-39, lost by a narrow margin to England 43-45 and were beaten by Wales 39-45. The combination of this result with those of the previous few years show that All-Ireland's Men's Épée Ireland is now a contender.

I mentioned in-passing that I competed in the Team Duffy earlier in the season. This was a social event when I teamed up with my old friends, Piers, Keith and Richard to fence under our original club name, Salle Duffy. Despite the rest of them not having opened their fencing bag since their last Duffy Memorial Competition (and that probably was not the previous year's either), we had fun and finished ranked a credible 7<sup>th</sup> out of 22. Such is the lasting benefit of sound basics and the longevity of fencing skills. Shirley attended and I suppose the team came together to meet her again almost as much as to fence.

I dropped Shirley back to her Salle at the end of the day. I mentioned my fencing blog and, fulfilling her request, dropped a printed copy to her the following week. That was our last time together. Shirley died before the end of the year. The death notice in the *Irish Times* tersely stated:

“DUFFY, Shirley (née Armstrong) December 21, 2018. Beloved wife of the late Patrick (Paddy)

Duffy. In the expert and loving care of Roscommon University Hospital."

The announcement of the Olympic Federation of Ireland was almost equally brief:

"The Olympic Federation of Ireland was sad to learn of the passing of Shirley Armstrong Duffy. A competitor in the foil discipline, she represented Ireland at two world fencing championships – 1965 in Paris and 1971 in Vienna. Along with Maeve Kyle, Shirley Armstrong Duffy was one of only two women selected for Ireland to go to the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. May she rest in peace."

When fencing steam (i.e., non-electric), Shirley demanded that we acknowledge a touch with the conventional shout of "touché!". Keith remarked on her passing that she was "a great lady who touched more people more deeply than she will ever know."

Touché!



Photo: Shirley Armstrong Duffy, 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1930 – 21<sup>st</sup> Dec. 2018.  
Rest in Peace.

## Chapter 19

### Denstone

The last week in July 2018 was scorching hot and the heat intensified in the ‘drill hall’ into a stifling atmosphere. Here, dressed in a heavy leather coaching jacket, mask and glove, I was with a dozen other candidates deepening our coaching skills. We were preparing to present for examination at the end of the week to have our competence certified by the British Academy of Fencing (BAF). Helping us were fencing masters: Professors Northam, Vincent, and others.

We practiced, ate, practiced, ate, practiced, and slept for the five days before the exam on Saturday. The facilities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century public school were what could be expected by the future leaders of the British Empire. We boarded like them, dined in their officer-like canteen, and sauntered around the cricket fields in the balmy evenings before retiring for the night. There was nothing here to remind one of the fall of the empire.



Photo: Denstone College, England.

I had a perception that the group of us were characters in Wu Ch'eng-En's tale *Monkey*. We were hauling our own limitations with us on our journey and struggling with them as much as the challenges posed by the world. Bettsy supportive when so let-down herself; Mike embracing a far larger world than my requirement for security allows me; Mark, a detached student of people so easy-going he places few demands on himself. Each of us seemed to caricature ourselves over the airless days by the manner we set about the task. The intensity of this image is doubtless heightened by my poor sleep from restless legs due to salt-depletion.

I learned a lot that week. In both fencing and life, one cannot observe directly the intention of the other. It is inferred from close observation and rarely verifiable. Is the intention behind the extension of the sword arm an attack, a preparation of an attack, a feint, something else or nothing at all?

Fencing action and terminology is built on the shaky notion of intention. Not only is there first and second intentions but layer-on-layer of intentions can be built up in analysing fencing phrases. No wonder there is often little consensus on what is happening on the piste. Consider, for example, what is meant by the Italian term *finta in tempo*. In BAF terminology this describes "a compound stop-hit or stop-cut, usually made against the attempted use of counter-time" (which, in turn, is an action made against an opponent's stop thrust or stop-cut). To execute *finta in tempo* one must allow the opponent feint an attack and then feint a stop- hit into

it and when the opponent then attempts, say, a parry-riposte or stop-hit with opposition, deceive the action to stop-hit. In this exchange, one must successfully anticipates all the earlier intentions to deliver the hit. I never went into such complications as a fencer. Perhaps my most complicated planned hit is a time-hit in counter-time which, despite its name, this is simple blade action (i.e., provoke an extension of the blade by the opponent in a particular line and then deflect his blade when delivering my stop-hit).



Photo: The dining hall in Denstone College

The pressure was building through the week, as we hastened to complete our preparations for the examination. Learning was slow in the mind-numbing caldron of still heat and growing fatigue. The quiet young Swiss coach gave voice to us all when her temper frayed on Wednesday evening, shouting her frustration at her pupil.

Saturday was upon us. After breakfast we presented ourselves at the drill hall to randomly select three slips of paper face-down. Behind the desk our three independent examiners sat sternly. Whelan got class lesson 8 (out of a possible 15), and after the 10 minute warm-up individual lesson, was to give compulsory individual lesson 6 (out of 10) and special individual lesson 2 (out of 15). We were allowed another hall to practice in while we waited to be called back to face the examiners.

My class lesson required me to:

*“Introduce the concept of **phrasing** and teach a **direct** and an **indirect first counter-riposte**. Note: the first counter-riposte should be directed to a variety of target areas.”*

Okay done. At least that bit is over. Bettsy, who was herself discouraged from taking the exam, selflessly helped me prepare. The compulsory individual lesson:

*“Give your pupil the following simple **ripostes** and simple **second counter-ripostes**:*

- **parry counter-sixte** - riposte **direct to arm** -  
**parry sixte** - riposte - **disengage to arm in opposition**
- **parry counter-quarte** - riposte **direct to arm** -  
**parry sixte** - riposte - **disengage to arm in opposition**

*Note: first stationary and then using the following footwork:*

- **parry (remain stationary)** - riposte - **parry (with a step back)** - riposte
- **parry (remain stationary)** - riposte (with a lunge)  
- staying on the lunge to parry and to riposte”

When called, Bettsy came in with me as my pupil. She became so nervous in front of the examination committee that she was slow in taking instructions. After warning her, which did not help settle her nerves. the chairman impatiently replaced her with another. That is all I remember, but I did get through the rest of the exam being judged "adequate".

I was amongst the 7 candidates who passed of the 13 on the course. True, I originally expected to grade for level 3 but, on realising the high standard on the first day of the course, reset my hope for level 2. I ended the week delighted to be judged adequate at this level. Peter from Hong Kong and I drove to Manchester Airport together afterwards. He is a ridiculously happy chap, his happiness completely indifferent to not making level 3.

This immersion in coaching for a complete week makes me sceptical of much described in fencing manuals. Épée is as fast as it is simple. Teaching complicated movements is the coach's vanity and detrimental to a fencer.

Bettsy and I have kept in contact over the years. She is now a Master of Arms, recognised by the FIE. What strikes me now with hindsight is that she was coaching me through the week while I was trying to impress demonstrating complicated but impractical things.

## Chapter 20

### Fencing Diversion, Part I

It had been my intention to introduce Aisling, my youngest, to sabre fencing come transition year in school. Sabre's quick feet movements and rehearsed attacks might make the most of her talents developed over the years she was a competitive Irish dancer. It would also have the not inconsiderable advantage of ensuring Sorcha and Aisling were not in direct competition. The picture was that the three of us would go together to Salle Dublin, a club with a supportive atmosphere and excellent coaching in all weapons.

However, it did not seem possible to get good at women's sabre as the pool of fencers is so shallow in Ireland. Épée is much more popular and Brian Boru Fencing Club in the Modern Pentathlon Centre offered quality épée sparing in that attractive spirit of earnest endeavour. Sorcha and I were going to join for this reason and so this was to be Aisling's club too.

Aisling was not a total novice at fencing. Over the previous year she had run into teenage problems, as too many do in these times. She was isolated from her previous friend group and she was suffering. To divert

her occasionally, I gave an odd lesson in épée through spring and summer of 2018 at the local sports centre. Like her sister, she showed interest and talent. Now, with all the time afforded by transition year, she would hopefully find fencing diverting, or at least distracting, from all that shit.

So the Modern Pentathlon Centre (MPC) was our weekly go to from autumn 2018. In addition, Sorcha continued her weekly lessons with Colm and I gave Aisling lessons.

The first competition of the season was the Souths in September and we travelled down in the Rav4. Sorcha ensured it was a positive experience for Aisling, introducing her to her fencing friends. Sorcha fenced very well, knocked out in L8 by Inga, a very good Latvian fencer from our new club. Aisling woke from a tension-induced passivity to fence much better in the second poule but inevitably went out in the first d.e. I made some notes to help coach both of them.

October brought no less than three competitions. Both girls showed much improvement in the Wests. Sorcha fenced with excellent control of distance to reach the L8 again. Aisling was now less passive and won her first d.e. by repeating the same counter-attack to defeat the left-hander. Next, the Intermediates where Sorcha won all 12 of her poule bouts with command of the distance, scoring from either deep lunges using all her length or step-back counter-attacking when she pressurised her opponent to attack. She ended up third with her honed tactics and had every reason to be pleased with herself.

Aisling was moving now and occasionally attacking, but still somewhat too passive. Another diverting day and more ideas to help improve performance. The last competition of the month was the Irish Open, a satellite for the guys but not yet one for the girls. Sorcha continued with the same style, now also adding a flèche if the opponent did not attack when she forced the distance. She got to the L8 again, knocked out by Inga. Her match in the L16 was excellent, where she held her nerve to keep a small lead against another good fencer to win 15-14. She was delighted again with her performance. Aisling was getting invaluable experience both directly and from watching others. Worryingly though, she lacked energy.

I alternated supporting the girls to watching the men's satellite. This is the first one I have missed in a decade, and I had to fight my desire to be in the fray.

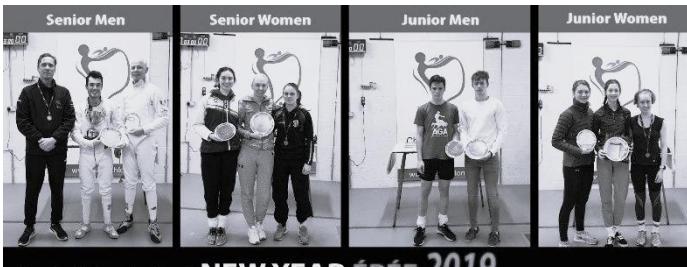
The Team Nationals was never a fixed part of the calendar and, in fact, did not take place for many years. Duncan, one of the doers in Irish fencing, ensured that Brian Boru (that is, he) host these orphan competitions when the competition calendar was sparse. So the Team Nationals were held in November in the Modern Pentathlon Centre, both WE and ME on the same day. The two girls were on a team with Sive and Karma, with Karma and Aisling rotating as substitute. They came 3<sup>rd</sup>, unobserved as I was also fencing for fun. Sorcha prefers team competitions and Aisling enjoyed it, remarking that touches seem far more important in team competitions.



Photo: Brian Boru B-Team, Bronze Medalists, Irish Team Nationals 2018/2019. Sive, Sorcha, Aisling and Karma.

The final competition of 2018 was again at MPC, the Winter Blade. Sorcha had exams the following week so she gave it a miss. The format was mixed, which always makes it a more relaxed affair. Aisling fenced better than ever, with an active point but she maintained the distance half a step too long. Megan and Aisling displayed great promise in their match, enjoyed by those watching, and she came away with her first individual medal, a bronze. I also fenced, and also won bronze.

The New Year Épée was a few weeks later, in early January and again a mixed competition at the MPC. All three of us went to a fun fencing day, as there is no ranking points attached to this event. We had fun and, not unrelated, fenced well. Aisling came first in the female Juniors, Sorcha came second in the women seniors, and I came second in the men's. I was enjoying this more relaxed take on competition fencing with no thoughts of the outcome intruding. I was fencing well.



## Pentathlon Ireland NEW YEAR ÉPÉE 2019

Competition winners - New Year's Open - 5th January 2019 - Pentathlon Ireland.

Senior Men: 1st Tom O'Brien (Pent. Irl), 2nd Shane Whelan (Arden Bally), 3rd Paddy Brennan (Arden Bally)

Senior Women: 1st Inga Gorceva (Arden Bally), 2nd Sorcha Mellon-Whelan (Arden Bally), 3rd Alisha Mullen (Pent. Irl)

Junior Men: 1st Tim O'Brien (Pent. Irl), 2nd Henry Seebach (Pent. Irl), 3rd Simon Barrett (Pent. Irl)

Junior Women: 1st Aisling Mellon-Whelan (Arden Bally), 2nd Hanna D'aughton (UCC), 3rd Grace Culhane (Munster Bally)

OVERALL CHAMPION: Tom O'Brien (Pent. Irl)



Poster: With thanks to Pentathlon Ireland

## Chapter 21

### Fencing Diversion, Part II

Shirley passed away in December. She had no funeral, instead donating her body to science. Several generations of Salle Duffy fencers had a meal in her honour in January. Richard, Keith, Conor and I agreed that evening to enter a team in the coming Duffy Memorial Competition. We were the last generation through the Salle and we would show we could fence. We did fence well, ranked first after the poule stage but were knocked out in L8 by Brian Boru Romania, who went on to win.



Photo: Salle Duffy team in Duffy Memorial Team Épée Competition 2019. Me, Keith, Conor, and Richard.

Aisling dropped in to watch with a few of her Irish-speaking friends and said she would like to fence in the women's next day. She was not in a good place but I reckoned fencing would be better than other ways of spending the day. So, we were in Trinity early on the Sunday to find a team needing another member. Ideally a team close to Aisling's standard, so certainly not a German or other team competing to win. I approached an English team of three offering a neat novice who moves well as a substitute. They tested her before they agreed. She joined the team of Abby, Marg and Caitlin.

And so, inauspiciously, began one of the most nerve-racking days of my fencing life. Her team progressed, even though I quietly rooted for their exit. The tension intensified with each progression. They eventually reached the final where they met a team comprising some of the best fencers in Ireland, and all fenced in Brian Boru. They knew the limitation of Aisling's technique and would capitalise on it if she was substituted on. Aisling had been fencing well up to this point, being neat and moving well, getting doubles, an odd single and not conceding too many points. To my dismay, her team kept her on during the final. She conceded points, but slowly and ensured time ran out before the deficit was irretrievable. Her teammates, despite their friendly and unassuming demeanour, were very strong fencers. They won 45-44.



Photo: Winning Team of Duffy Memorial Team Épée Competition 2019. From L-R: Aisling, Abby, Marg, Caitlin.

Aisling and I took a break from competitive fencing for three months. We trained a little before the Nationals in April.

Sorcha's season was getting better with each competition, but the competitions were coming too fast to allow training. She went with Sean and Antonio to Derry for the Northern Ireland Open, where she was a little disappointed with her L8 finish. However, she made up for it the following weekend at the Easts with bronze, supported by Aisling and me. She was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>/31 after the poules, with the second poule being a 'shark' one (that is, highest ranking of poule one). She now has a very distinctive style of intimating the opponent into attacking from the distance she set – often keeping the opponent at the back of the piste – or attacking into a lapse of concentration. However, the more internationally experienced Inga could deal with it, knocking out Sorcha in the L4.



Photo: Medalists at East of Ireland 2019. Isobelle, Inga, Alisha, and Sorcha.

Dublin Épée, again in February, brought another bronze, where she was now supported by Matthew too. Sorcha got another bronze at the Student Individual in Maynooth the following month.



Photo: Medalists at Dublin Épée 2019. Isobelle, Camille, Alisha, and Sorcha.

Sorcha and Aisling got good news. Sorcha was selected for the Ireland's 5 Nations Student Team, with the event to be held in Cork in July. Aisling was selected for Team Ireland at the Youth 5 Nations also to be held in Ireland – Maynooth at the end of June. There was also to be a Youth Irish Open in May, where she could contest in the oldest section, the U17 Cadet. I was glad I did not put my name forward for the Veteran Home International, to be held this year in Cardiff.

The next competition was the National Championship at the end of April, marking the end of the domestic fencing season. We all got back to lessons and sparring to prepare ourselves, motivated more now the girls' season was to be extended. I decided to enter the Nationals.

The Nationals were on the Saturday for the girls at the local Loreta Dalkey Hall. I warmed them up with my routine pre-tournament lesson. Sorcha fenced detached, focussed but not tense. This mental attitude allowed her to perform to her abilities over the season and added to her enjoyment of the competitions. She was not upset when a point did not go her way but simply learned and refocused. She was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> after the single poule, having lost one bout by the closest of margins. Aisling fenced well too, with a good guard, lively point, and movement. She was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> after the poule and ready to do herself justice in the d.e.

After a brief lesson, Aisling took on Fiona. She played it excellent tactically, raising her guard to prevent Fiona's hit to the arm. It went the distance, finishing 12-8 to Fiona. So Aisling finished her first season ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in Nationals and 20<sup>th</sup> for the season as a whole. A solid start and now a neat fencer.

Sorcha's first d.e. was against a young tall pentathlete who had made things difficult for her in the past. But she led from the start to win in a straightforward manner. So into L8 were she met an old nemesis. Sorcha's placement of the blade and quick retreat ensured that her opponent's favourite move of step-in-with blade preparation did not work well. Sorcha was holding her French grip lightly so if a taking of the blade was attempted, she simply rotated it free as she stepped back to get the stop-hit. She was very focussed. It ended 15-13 against Sorcha but it could have gone either way. After 10 minutes, she was happy about her performance. This was Sorcha's 6<sup>th</sup> season and she ended it ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the Nationals and 6<sup>th</sup> in the national rankings.

Sorcha and Aisling expressed interest in doing a training camp over the summer.

The men's Nationals were on the Sunday, with the lowest turnout in over a decade with just 25 of us. I fenced with little pressure from the outcome. I simply wanted to fence well to show I had been trained properly by Shirley and others of a previous generation. I won just 2 of the 5 bouts in the sole poule but knew I was fencing fine and learning on the piste. I won my first d.e. without interfering nerves. Now I got 2<sup>nd</sup> seed Paddy. I had a couple of victories over him including the New Year Épée in January so I knew, and perhaps more importantly, he knew that I could pose a threat. So I was active but did not attack as he is a better counter-attacker than attacker. He got a lead of 2 or 3 and was content to let passivity calls take us to the last minute where I got priority (these were the old passivity rules). I let the clock tick down until 20 seconds left. I started

my kamikaze attacks – flèche with high octave take. He countered to extend the lead. I tried again and again, varying takes to beats to flèches to arm to draw level at 1.5 second remaining. He then attempted something similar but I lunged at legs forcing my blade through. I pipped him.

Pauline has come down just before the bout started so she witnessed it. This was the first competition of mine that she attended over the years and I cannot say that her presence had no impact on my performance.

So L8 and I got Rory, a fencer based in Edinburgh who I never fenced before. This is unusual in Ireland and makes the match far more interesting, I got a lead of 2 very early and then, while active and seemingly aggressive, I limited myself to stop-hits. He saw this and began preparing his attacks by pushing distance while attempting parry-ripostes on my attack. I executed some feints deep to his chest, disengage to shoulder or, if he did not go for the parry, a broken-time attack. It went almost the entire 9 minutes. 14-13 to me and then a double to end the tension. I was knackered and delighted.

I got Dawid in L4. He knew my strategy and he had one of his own. He worked me relentlessly in the first period, attacking occasionally with flèches, and we went to the minute break at 7-5 to him, and all mine were doubles. I knew I was beat, in both senses of the word. Either I matched his footwork or he would use it to get into distance for his flèche. I could no longer do that so I tried to attack. He then won easily.

This defeat did not dampen my spirits. Now, finished for the day and the season and maybe ever, I could not

conceal my relief and joy. I showed I had been well-schooled in the basics of fencing.



Photo: Medalist's in Men's Épée, Irish National Championship 2019. From l-R: Me (wearing my Salle Duffy tracksuit), Dawid, Tom, Benedict. All but the new national champion are veterans.

I was dropped from the Elite Panel of Fencing Ireland at the end of this season, so no longer allowed to represent Ireland at FIE Senior World Cups or Grand Prix. I was 55 years of age.

Aisling fenced in the Youth Irish Open for Cadets (U17). There was just six entered, three boys and three girls so it was a combined competition. Aisling won all in the poule unique, conceding no more than 3 in any bout. She defeated her first opponent in the d.e., a girl with promise but needing more hours of practice. The final was against a tall guy with a long lunge and flèche, but he attacked without much preparation. The young man got an early lead of 2 or 3 and there followed a lot of doubles. Aisling was working out the distance and timing and then started getting singles, so it ended 15-

10 to her. Nothing much was asked of Aisling during the morning. Opponents were too static and could only execute one or two moves. It was not like the senior training and competing she did all year. She got a trophy engraved *Youth Irish Open 2019 Winner*.

Sorcha told me at the start of June that she is taking a break from fencing. Some of the enjoyment is gone and her real life is now particularly busy: she has landed an internship over the summer and in the first semester of final year would be busy finding herself a trainee solicitor position with a law firm.

Aisling and I started training twice a week now in the MPC before the Youth 5 Nations at the end of June. There was a new coach for the pentathletes for Olympic year 2020, Andrei Fedotov, a world-renowned fencing coach and former fencer. Tal was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> and Arthur ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world in April 2019, so they were medal contenders. Sive was also training hard, and there were some other possible Olympians. There was a great purposeful energy in training.

Fencing Ireland organised a superb Youth 5 Nations competition, with Team Ireland – Isobel, Isabelle, Saoirse and Aisling – staying over the weekend in the university accommodation with all meals provided. There was an individual competition on Saturday with the team one on Sunday.

The standard was high. It was a different class to the domestic scene. The individual competition helped get them up to the pace, and the team fared bettered than could be predicted from the individual results. They finished 4<sup>th</sup> on two victories.

The student 4 Nations was in Cork two weeks later. The individual competition warmed Sorcha up (it was won by England's and the Duffy anchor Caitlin), and, as team Captain, she would have been pleased by Ireland's showing with a close 44-45 loss to Scotland and a respectable 37-45 loss to England. This gave them 3<sup>rd</sup>, as Wales and Northern Ireland did not show.



Photo: WE Student Team Ireland 2019, Kirsten Siig, Dearbhaile, Sorcha [Alisha Missing].

To bring our season to a close in preparation for the next, there was a 4-day fencing camp in Hunterhouse College, Belfast, in mid-August. Mike Westgate was the coach so it was a pleasant affair. The two girls did it, with me participating in the afternoons only. I watched and learned from Mike in the way he organised the training. It would be good to be a coach but there is a lot to learn to be a good coach.

## Chapter 22

### Cancer and Covid

In autumn 2019 Sorcha was in final year at university and applying for jobs as a trainee solicitor. She was still hoping to be selected for the senior team for the Senior 5 Nations in November and so still training. Aisling was beginning her second season. This season I trained less, coached more, and participated in just one competition.

Duncan organised the Irish National Team Championships in MPC, with WE on 8<sup>th</sup> September. The number of teams participating was small but the standard high. Sorcha captained and the girls got silver, fencing very well up to the final. They enjoy team competitions more were every point matters.



Photo: Silver Medal Team at the Irish National Team Championships 2019/2020. Aisling, Isabelle, Sorcha.

The next competition was the Souths on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup>, so I drove them and Annalise down through heavy rain, leaving at 6:50 a.m. The girls were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> after the two poules. In L16, Aisling got Martha. Martha got a lead of 2 but Aisling tightened up, giving no openings, and pulled away to win 15-10. Sorcha won hers easily but I saw she lost concentration during the mid-section. In L8, Annalise knocked Aisling and Fiona overcame Sorcha's lead of 9-4. Sorcha strangely did not mind much and told me in the evening that it was a good day's fencing because everyone was pleasant. We came back to a hot dinner and a relaxing evening through torrential rain.

A few days later, Sorcha got the news that she was not selected. Though disappointed, this allowed her take the break from fencing that she wanted and, as I could see, needed with all the other pressures of final year. So it was just Aisling on the circuit.

At this stage, I stopped training and I started giving individual lessons to anyone who wanted during club nights. The previous August, I had a worrying episode that encouraged me to have tests done. After an evening of hard sparring, I noticed a bloodstain on the armchair I was sitting in. My underwear was blood-soaked. In the morning, my stool was black and surrounded by red blood. I presented myself at A&E, having made peace with life on the car trip in. My worry was not shared by the attending medic who discharged me with the advice to see my doctor. Anyway, through September I had undergone several tests and on 30<sup>th</sup> September was told I had neuroendocrine tumours in my small bowel – a slow growing cancer.

I remember the brief conversations I had with the different consultants – Ross McNicholas who diagnosed it, David Fennelly the cancer specialist who lined up the surgeon, Seán Martin, to operate. Each was perplexed that it could be caught as there should be no symptoms at this early stage. They politely listened as I told them my three symptoms: red flushes after eating or drinking beer at night, fatigue after exertion due to low iron in blood, and now the recent bleeding. Seán put it bluntly: those have nothing to do with it. Sometimes you just get lucky. I was very lucky. Anyway, Seán agreed to operate on the Monday after the lecturing term finished, so we set 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2019 as the date for the ileocolic resection.

The next competition was the Intermediates in early October. Aisling was showing more consistency, ranked 4<sup>th</sup> after the poule having lost just one. She overcame the young but stylish Megan in L16 but then met Emilia. Through she fenced controlled, Emilia unsurprisingly knocked her out.

The following weekend we were in Galway where she was contesting the Wests. Annalise called at 6:50 a.m. and off we set, to arrive at a hall that was colder than outside. A good relaxed 10 minute warm-up lesson and Aisling again fenced neatly, not giving away any easy touches. She was developing consistency. In each poule she was up 3 and down 2, so ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of the small field of 13. She beat Lucy in L16 without ever being in trouble and got Andreea in L8. The start was close, going hit-for-hit to 6-6. Then Aisling got her counter-attack going and repeated the same hit to win comfortably 15-9. She won her first medal on the senior circuit. Alisha, who she got in the semifinal, ensured

that it would be a bronze. This match gave me much to work on with Aisling over the coming weeks.



Photo: Medalists at West of Ireland, October 2019. From l-R: Kate, Alisha, Isabelle, Aisling.

The Irish Open was the last weekend in October, with the men's épée an FIE Satellite. We headed out early as I was helping with weapon control. The venue, used for several years now, befits an international with an huge bright and airy hall and several giant screens streaming the results. This, we thought, was the Olympic Year so world ranking points were even more precious. Several European nations entered their best with 8 of the world's top 100 amongst the 77 entrants. It was difficult just to stand and watch, but I was rewarded by displays of wonderful fencing, not least the Tristan Tulen v Lukas Bellman in L8.

Aisling and I learned that day. There was one poule and Aisling lost one – her first bout to Fiona. She was ranked 8<sup>th</sup> of the 25. She was fencing well. A straightforward victory in L32 to meet her friend Isabelle. Aisling was consistent and tidy and got into a commanding lead of

14-10 at the break. I thought it over, Aisling thought it over, but Isabelle knew it was not. She came back after the break doing something different and got a few hits in a row. I was as slow to catch on as Aisling. I could offer no advice as I had switched off in the later part of the match. Isabelle won. We learned sport's perennial lesson: the cost of complacency in competition.

The next competition was the Northern Ireland, held earlier than normal on 8<sup>th</sup> December. It was a busy time for the family. The weekend before Cathal was the overall winner of the Senior Irish Open in Taekwondo held at DCU, I went in to hospital on the Monday for the operation and got out on Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>. Lenka from the club kindly gave Aisling a lift to the Northern Ireland Open on Sunday. Many of the more highly ranked fencers did not enter and, in fact, Aisling was seeded 2<sup>nd</sup>, behind Fiona at the outset. Aisling won all in her first poule, so now seeded 1<sup>st</sup>, but lost 3 and won 2 in the second poule. This is no bad thing, I shared with her on the phone, as you go into the d.e. mindful of your own fallibility and the joylessness of losing.

She was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> out of the 12 going into the d.e.'s. She got a bye to L8 so her first d.e. was for a medal. She beat the Trinity fencer Sabina 15-9, with all the support for her opponent. Next Zoe, another Trinity fencer, and Aisling won 15-10. The final was against another Trinity fencer, Angie. Lenka made a video of this on her phone and later shared it with me. I was glad to know the result before watching it. It was close all the way, with tension building. It was 14-13 to Aisling. A double! Aisling won by the narrowest of margins.



Photo: Medallists at Northern Ireland Open Dec 2019. From L-R: Fiona, Zoe, Angie, and Aisling.

The season went on. The New Year Épée was a month later. Aisling fenced well fine but came home without a metallic souvenir. John Boucher-Hayes called in when the competition was on-going and remarked that Aisling was well-trained with good style. I knew John from Salle Duffy days when he occasionally dropped in to observe and once or twice gave me a lesson, the last one on binds and envelopments. John was part of the golden generation of Salle fencers and fenced for Ireland in three consecutive Olympics 1964, 1968, and 1972, in a total of 10 events including individual and team foil, épée and sabre. I was delighted with the praise. Later that month, I did a coaching training day in Belfast with Mike with about other 10 coaches and 8 students.

Early February and it was the East of Ireland in UCD. Ais fenced fine at the poule stage, ranking 5<sup>th</sup> out of 29. She

got through her first d.e. comfortably to meet Fiona in the L16. Aisling was, and is to this day, apprehensive when facing Fiona. Fiona knows more than a few tricks and never, ever, gives in. Fiona got a 8-4 lead but Aisling had now picked up the pace and I could see that her compound attacks and reprises were wearing Fiona down. Aisling eventually won 13-12 and was delighted with herself. Next, the Greek fencer from Trinity whom she pipped at the Northern Ireland Open. Aisling adopted her sister's style. She was significantly taller so used her reach advantage to put pressure on by shortening the distance and either a direct attack to thigh or, if her opponent attacked, a stop-hit. The tactic worked and she won 15-6. She was delighted but relaxed too much and was not mentally ready for Virginie in the semi-final - Virginie got an early lead and it was clear that Aisling did not know what to do. Nonetheless, a good day's work and another bronze and plenty of ranking points.

A fortnight later and she was in Trinity fencing in the Dublin Épée. Cathal came in with us because he was competing in the intervarsities at Taekwondo on another floor. Aisling showed what she could do again, and again her run was eventually ended by a veteran fencer, this time Annalise in the semi-finals. Another bronze and the reminder that she must deepen her repertoire and tactical nuance before the veterans will let her pass. Cathal came home with three medals from his day in Trinity.

Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> March had us up in Sullivan School Upper in Belfast to contest the Belfast Open. There were only 7 in ME and I was bored so I decided to make it 8. The previous Wednesday I was in hospital again, this time

for the removal of two impacted wisdom teeth, the procedure brought forward from the original April date after a cancellation. They had been uncomfortable for several months but I had to postpone the removal until after the bowel section. The teeth were out leaving two sore craters and me determined to do something other than be operated upon.

There were only 11 in WE. Ais was ranked 4<sup>th</sup> after the poules so bye to L8 where she faced Fiona. Normal time ended with score 7-7, priority to Fiona. Then Aisling won with a hit to the thigh – a hit that had kept her in contention in the match. She got Annalise in L4, who won 13-10. Aisling was fencing well but was getting too engrossed in point work and falling into the same slow cadence set by opponents. Another bronze, but the ranking points did not count. Even before the Nationals, Aisling results this season must make her a shoo-in for the senior National Team.



Medallists at Belfast Open, March 2000. From L-R: Virginie, Anna Lise, Camile, Aisling. This was the last competition before Covid Lockdown

My day was quite the opposite of boring. The guys decided to do a poule unique and then another one, so everyone would fence everyone else twice before the

d.e. section. I was fencing fine. I was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> after the poules and won my first d.e., helped by being ruthlessly focussed from the start. I lost to Duncan 15-14 in L4, who went on to win his first competition. Everyone had a good day and I caught up with Ron, David, and other friends.



Photo: Medallists at Belfast Open, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2000. From L-R: Alaister, Colm, Duncan, me. This was the last competition before Covid Lockdown.

The world changed the following week. On Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> March, Emelia and Aisling were chatting excitedly in the back of the car on the way to training at the MPC speculating that school would be closing the following day. Sive and Arthur were training that night and I congratulated them on their performance in the recent pentathlon world cups.

On Friday all schools and colleges were closed to slow the spread of Covid for, what we naively thought, might be a fortnight.

## **Chapter 23**

### **A Pause**

Everything stopped. Our plans and our planning stopped. Our physical space shrunk to our houses and, for us lucky ones, our gardens. The news of the world came in through our screens telling of rising Covid cases and deaths, disparate national responses, and the uncertainty of the future.

The new world of restricted outings made us appreciate what we earlier took for granted. The fencing community had given life-enhancing activity, camaraderie, and test of competition days.

But you can have too much of a good thing. This is always a hectic time of year, with just a couple of months to end of semester and exams. The pause from everything but work and essentials was a good thing for my family. We were all working in our rooms - I started back on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020- but after that we had free time and rest. We slept longer and remembered our dreams.

There was to be no fencing competition in Ireland before October 2021 – a hiatus of 19 months. Training was on and off over the interim, reacting to the ebb and flow of the virus. The 2020 Olympics were postponed, going ahead in the summer 2021 but with only a TV audience.

## **Chapter 24**

### **Practice**

The first lockdown lasted 15 weeks, ending in late June. In that time, I had given Aisling more than 40 hours of lessons in our back garden, with less to Cathal and Sorcha. I used some of my spare time to prepare a course of lessons, combining what I thought was best from lessons I had taken over the years with Fionbarr, David, Colm, and others, from the BAF course material, from books, and even a little from coaching videos. I wrote the lessons up concisely to give me a template to improve them over time. All the basic techniques were covered.

Fencing restarted in Brian Boru on 6<sup>th</sup> July. Aisling and I went each week for the Monday and Wednesday sessions. I noticed that Aisling could not put into practice much of the techniques she learned over the lockdown as the good fencers would quickly punish her. Technique was only the beginning. This slow coach was seeing a disconnect between the taught theory and actual practice. And fencing technique is nothing if not practical.



Photo: Training at the MPC on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the week BBFC reopened after 1<sup>st</sup> Covid lockdown.

Aisling started taking lessons with Andrei, the world-class pentathlon coach. Aleksander Lesun, the gold medal winner at Rio was one of his students. He is an excellent coach in manner as well as the material. What is teaches is practical: the movement, distance and speed in the lesson is close to that of two good fencers. He pushes the student the full length of the piste or vice versa, practicing the same move repeatedly and then repeatedly.

The weeks and months went by and we drifted into the 2020/2021 academic year. We were all still working from home. Sorcha had graduated from university and was studying for her law exams with a part-time job in O'Brien's, so still very little free time. Cathal was most affected by Covid, entering his second year of university but missing all the fun of attending. Aisling's year would end with the Leaving Certificate exam. Pauline and I were lecturing on-line, and our research was going well. There was a quiet hum to the daily routine.

There was another lockdown in November prohibiting sport except, in this Olympic year, elite sportspeople. Fortunately, the pentathletes seeking Olympic

qualification needed a few good fencers to spar against and, by our good fortune, classed Aisling as elite. Of course, all distance and other protocols were in place. The upshot is that we trained more and harder – generally three times a week between sparring and lessons. This enriched the weekly routine, where life remained simple with the mental work and physical training complementing one another. There seemed time enough to do things right.

I always tried to fence my best when sparring with Arthur, Tal, Eanna, and Sive. I was part of something important, albeit an incidental part. This dedicated group facilitated us all to up our game with their high performance making the persuasive case for better fencing infrastructure, both coaching and the MPC fencing hall. I had heard tales of the buzz in Salle Duffy in its golden era when they had fencers at the six consecutive Olympic games from 1948 to 1972. Fencers showed up early morning before work to spar with those selected for the games. It must have felt like this.



Photo: MPC unknown date. Sorcha practice hitting (centre), Tal fencing me (left piste), Isobel fencing Mike? (right piste) and Annalise stretching in background.

Fencing Ireland and Northern Ireland Fencing put up on-line courses to keep those not allowed to train still connected. There were refereeing exams, some zoom talks on épée tactics, and a very worthwhile short course on sports psychology. I realised from the break-out chatrooms in the psychology course that a fencer's emotional investment in competition - fear of humiliation, performance anxiety, frustration, joy, relief - is similar irrespective of the level of the fencer or the competition. This might help account for the popularity of sports as spectator events, as the spectator partly shares the roller-coaster ride of emotions with the athlete.

Another six months passed. By the end of April, the proximity of exams demanded full focus. I was the only one of the three of us doing a bit of fencing over the summer months.

## Chapter 25

# Tokyo 20201

Summer 2021 and time to spectate at another Olympics. I had done my preparations and could now lift the TV remote control with feelings similar (albeit dimmer) to the participants.

Lines of Kipling's poem *If* came to mind over that summer.

Arthur qualified for his third Olympics. He pushed his body far too hard and it bit back with an autoimmune disorder. On 10<sup>th</sup> June he announced on Instagram that he is unable to compete at the Olympics. "You never see this kind of scenario coming as an athlete. I have it 100% for the last 5yrs ..."

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on".*

Despite all her efforts and all her improvement over all the years, Sive did not qualify. She wrote on Instagram on 19<sup>th</sup> June: "I'm heartbroken at not achieving my lifelong dream. I am disappointed in my results but my

biggest regret this year is that I wasn't kinder to myself."

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
...Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools...*

So only Tal was going.

Day 1 of 2 is fencing which is a key determinant in sorting out the medal contenders. Tal got off to an excellent start, 23V 12D to be ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>. The early morning swim went fine on Day 2, so Tal now ranked 4<sup>th</sup> after two events. Next up the equestrian – her specialism and the sport that originally took her into pentathlon.



Photo: Tal at Tokyo Olympics.

"This is not how I wanted to end things at all...Hopefully in the future I can look back and be happy.... No, I am really happy... It is not all tears [smiling and pointing at the tears flowing down her face]. Generally, it is really good and I have been so lucky. I have had an amazing

career. I have got to stand on podiums and got to go to three games."

Extract from Tal's interview with RTE immediately after her last event at her last Olympics.

*If you can meet with triumph and disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same...*

I do not volunteer to take Kipling's *If* test. I structured my career, and as much as my life as I could, so it never came down to one high-stakes gamble. Clearly, I do not want to become an Olympian.

Arthur, Sive, and Tal stopped competing. Each is starting another phase in their life.

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings...*

## **Chapter 26**

### **A Break**

With hindsight, the summer of 2021 marked a watershed for my family and fencing too.

Competitions restarted in Ireland in October 2021. By that time, our lives had pulled us in other directions. Sorcha was busy putting a career together: she was working as a trainee solicitor, was studying and, in this autumn, moved out to an apartment with Matthew. She did a bit of boxing for fitness, competing at a annual amateur event for students in the Law Society. Aisling faced her own challenges with the transition to university. Opportunities opened for me in research and work, including a book deal, which I seized.

Life provided other challenges and opportunities that pushed out fencing. But back in the summer of 2021, Aisling and I were reaching our peaks. After her Leaving Certificate, Aisling and her fencing friend Isabelle went on a week's training camp at the end of July at the Sergei Bobrovi Spordikool in Estonia. Some pentathletes were using this as the final camp before going to Japan for the Olympics in early August. In a break during the camp, they watched Estonian Women's épée team win

Olympic gold alongside a young fencer at the camp who turned out to be the daughter of one of the team.

Aisling was keen for even more fencing on her return. So she and I also went to Belfast for 3 days of the Hunterhouse College training camp in August. I coached more than I fenced, having indicated to Mike and Gerard that I would like to be examined for the Level 3 coaching award. I was delighted to be told on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> that I passed before driving home. A month later my coaching card came through: *Prévôt d'Épée*.

Aisling made a half-hearted attempt in January 2022 to train and compete. We went to the MPC twice before doing to the Northern Ireland Open in Derry on January Sunday 30<sup>th</sup>. Aisling was rusty and nervous. In the first poule she was 1V4D with all the defeats 4-5. In second poule, she fenced with a much better sense of distance with long attacks and, when parried, dealt with the riposte with a stop-hit while closing the line in carte. So 4V2D and beginning to fence like she could.

She drew Fiona in the first direct elimination. She won but fenced inconsistently. She was down 0-3, up 6-3, and then would let Fiona come back within 1 or 2 throughout the remainder of the match. It ended 15-13. Next was Isobel who also had been training throughout Covid and, in fact, went to Japan with Tal as a sparring partner. Both girls are tall, fit, and move well with good technique. It ended 15-12 to Isobel, with Aisling not really able to deal with her flèche. Isobel went on to win, taking Aisling's title won before Covid stopped competitions.

Seven weeks later, with no practice in the meantime, I drove Aisling and Isabelle down to Cork for the Souths on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> March. It was a pleasant, relaxed competition with another L8 for Aisling and also for Isabelle.

Fencing stopped almost completely for us until January 2024. Work, life, and death took its place. For the girls it was a complete cessation for a couple of years. My body needed to do a little fencing or the muscles in my left thigh twitched and pained, a pain that went up to my lower back. I fenced too infrequently to stop the symptoms completely. I also competed twice. I fenced in the Duffy in January 2023 on the winning Brian Boru team and we fenced again together in March together as Team Ireland in the Home 4 Nations Veterans, where we ended up on the opposite end of the final ranking.



Photo: March 2023 Long term fencing friends all in same club. From L-R: Paddy, me, Duncan, Dawid.

## **Chapter 27**

### **Grand Veteran**

Fast forward to January 2024. I am still recovering from burn-out, but the worst is behind me. I was hoping to retire from academia on my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in February. I let the Head of School know of my intention but I was postponing my formal 3-month notice until UCD got back with a decision on my promotion application made nine months earlier. I was still busy enough but nothing like how I drove myself over the previous few years. My thoughts once again returned to matters fencing.

2024 was another Olympic year. I restart my fencing diary in January 2024, making the first entry since April 2022. It sets out my ambition of competing in the World Veteran Championship in Dubai in October 2024 where I would now compete as a Grand Veteran (over 60 years category).

There was much to do. My last individual competitions were pre-Covid and even back then I was doing only an odd one. I continued doing team competitions, as they are more about fun and the day less physically demanding.

I needed to regain my fencing skill, my mental attitude, and become a lot fitter to do myself and Ireland justice

at the grand veteran level. My diary tracks what I want from each training session and reviews how I performed. I was not ready for individual competitions, but I could be on a decent team if substituted out more as the day wore on.

The diary skips over key events, indicating to me now that I was not as recovered from burn-out as I thought back then. The Duffy Memorial Team Épée gets one sentence a month afterwards. I fenced again on the Brian Boru Team, despite not being close to my best. We reached the final against the House of Buzzi, an Italian family team. Lorenzo Buzzi beat me 5-0 in the opening bout and the Italian elite international was worth every point. Paddy, Dawid, and Duncan needed to fence implausibly well against a team of this level. It was a see-saw match with dramatic score swings. My friends produced the implausible performance and eventually triumphed to defend our title.

Brian Boru Fencing Club	TS	Score	Score	TS	House of Buzzi
WHELAN Shane	0	0	5	5	BUZZI Lorenzo
BRENNAN Paddy	7	7	10	5	BUZZI Francesco
KULKA Dawid	0	7	15	5	BATTISTA BUZZI Giovanni
SALTER Duncan	13	20	18	3	BUZZI Andrea
KULKA Dawid	5	25	24	6	BUZZI Lorenzo
BRENNAN Paddy	2	27	30	6	BATTISTA BUZZI Giovanni
KULKA Dawid	8	35	32	2	BUZZI Francesco
SALTER Duncan	5	40	34	2	BATTISTA BUZZI Giovanni
BRENNAN Paddy	5	45	37	3	BUZZI Lorenzo



Photo: Brian Boru Team, Winners Prof. Patrick Duffy Memorial Men's Team Épée 2023 & 2024.



Photo: Medalist in Duffy 2024. Gold: Brian Boru, Silver: House of Buzzi, Bronzes: BSG Stahl Nordhausen & Dublin University 3.

Sorcha also came out of fencing hibernation to compete on Sunday in the Maître Shirley Armstrong Duffy Women's Team Épée. Two Leipzig women needed a third to make a team, so she fenced on Team Leipzig and held her own to win silver with them.

A few days after my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got the news that I was once again selected for the Veteran 4 Nations, to be held in Edinburgh in April. This event, and veteran fencing generally, has grown from when I got involved in its early days on these islands. Irish fencers are not internationally competitive at senior level but are at veteran level. I suspect that there are three reasons for this, certainly all are true in my case.

- Fiona and her early efforts to put together an Irish team for the veteran home international kept many aging fencers competitively involved for many years longer.
- The veteran community is good fun.
- The level of senior competitions in Ireland is not so high as to discourage veteran fencers to use them as good preparation for veteran internationals.

Fencing Ireland were slow to get involved initially, pointing out that veteran was all-Ireland and so not their mandate. This has all changed and now Fencing Ireland has expanded to include an active Veterans Committee with Fiona as a key member. Reflecting all these changes, the symbol of the Irish veteran fencer is now changed.



The new symbol of an Irish Veteran Fencing

Anyway, I would need to train conscientiously for the April event. I decided to double-up and put my name forward for the Ireland Grand Veteran Team at the European Veteran Team Championship, to be held in May in Belgium. Again, I was selected.

So, more training as I tried to get back my form. However, my other life was somewhat busier than anticipated and constrained training opportunities.

Sorcha competed again in the Easts in March. She won all in the poules to be ranked No. 1 going into the d.e.'s. She eventually ended up 5<sup>th</sup>, knocked out by Uliana. I refereed all day (to gain FI Level 2 Referee) so saw little for her fencing. Even refereeing was stressing me at this point as I was tired by the weekends. Sorcha also fenced again in the Nationals, losing only one in the poule, 4-5. I refereed but made sure I was free when she fenced her d.e. She finished 10<sup>th</sup>, knocked out by Claire, a veteran. She also needed rest at the weekends from her long hours in the office, confiding that she much preferred when the event was on Sunday allowing a day's respite.

Ireland ME Team ended up last in Edinburgh. I fenced okay, so played my part in the result.

In Belgium, the ME Grand Veteran team gave a decent account of Ireland at the European's, thanks to Stephan. Our first and last match of the day was against Sweden, whose anchor was Jan Tivenius, the reigning World and European Grand Veteran Champion. We lost 40-44 and 36-43, with my inditors -2 and +6. Jan trounced me 10-2 in our first encounter but the margin fell to 5-3 when we fenced again. I was learning his unconventional footwork, but he was still a better fencer. We had other loses - 26-36 to GBR, 32-45 to Switzerland but we beat the Czech Republic by a whisker to end up 10<sup>th</sup> out of the 12 teams. I fenced okay but below what I hoped of myself. Fencing is a privilege and, at this level, a special privilege. I was too tired to make the most of it. Of course, I enjoyed the day, and the following day as a spectator, and the whole thing. But my recall does not have the adrenaline sharpness of my previous outings at this level.



Photo: Ireland Grand Veteran ME Team, European Veteran Team Championship 2024. From L-R: Pat, Stephan, me.



Results of ME Grand Veteran at the European Veteran Team Championship 2024.

I came back from Ciney exhausted. I stuck the results in my diary with no observations. I took a break from fencing for 10 weeks.

In the last week of May I was informed that I was promoted to Professor. I gave in my formal notice. The waiting was over. I could get back my energy to devote it to important things like fencing after retirement day, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2024.

## Chapter 28

### Reforged

*The old that is strong does not wither,  
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.  
From ashes a fire shall be woken,  
A light from the shadows shall spring;  
Renewed shall be the blade that was broken,  
The crownless again shall be king.*

Lord of the Rings, JRR Tolkein

Sorcha got tickets for fencing at the Olympics in Paris 2024. Sorcha, Aisling and I had a pleasant short holiday in a city given over to the games. We sat high up in the Grand Palais looking down on the piste and its fencers. The movement of the fencers was very elegant. The familiar emotions of joy and disappointment magnified by the occasion. It was special, ordinary special.

Ten years earlier when I was preparing for the Veteran World Championships in Hungary, I watched videos of fencing at this level. Accidentally, I also clicked into the grand veteran category. The elegance was gone at this age, so the matches looked like a parody of the sport I love. I promised myself then that I would not outlive the little grace that me and my flat feet brought to the piste.

My plans evolved over the summer. I would not do the World Grand Veteran Championship: I would do a complete fencing season in Ireland. This was more ambitious, as it meant doing the Irish Open, an FIE Senior Satellite again, which was at the same time as the World Veteran in October. This plan better suited my aim to reforge my body through a regime of gym work and fencing. It would take more than a couple of months post-retirement to get back to form so I would not get value going to Doha.

I had never completed a full season in Ireland over all my years fencing. The national circuit, as Fencing Ireland called it, comprises of six competitions. Performance in these competitions largely determines the top ranked fencers in Ireland, as only the best six results count and all other competitions attract much lower ranking points. The national circuit was to begin with the South of Ireland Open in early September 2024, the Irish Open in October, the Northern Ireland Open in January 2025, the West of Ireland Open in February, the East of Ireland Open in March until ending with the Irish National Championships in April. There was a few other individual and team competitions.

Over the 10 months following retirement, I competed in 12 individual and 4 team competitions, including the complete national circuit. Sorcha, Aisling and even Cathal joined in part of the season. We had a challenging, exhausting, wonderfully satisfying time. The season was built on the simple hit: hits got or conceded building to bouts won or lost, building to

national and international rankings. I will not spoil the ending when I tell you that I briefly snook back into the top 10 in both the Irish rankings and World rankings of Irish male épéeists. Both Sorcha and Aisling ended the season with a higher ranking than their father, despite considerably fewer outings. In fact, after the Irish Open in October 2025, Aisling went to No. 1 in the Irish rankings.

The season is not about those public boasts – who cares? - but about the private moments. I collected many very special moments over the dramatic year.

Rank	Fencer	Club	Points	Souths	Wests	Irish Open	NI Open	East	Nationals	1st NNC Ran	2nd NNC Ran
1	Jonathan Burnside	Foyle Fencing	587	119	87	15	119	87	119	56	0
2	Liam Zone	DUFC	399	152	19	28	36	119	36	28	20
3	Duncan Salter (GBR)	Brian Boru FC	388	19	152	0	59	36	59	41	41
4	Andrew Chirko	UCD	374	36	119	15	36	59	87	37	28
5	Dawid Kulka	Brian Boru FC	301	87	19	28	59	36	19	72	17
6	Geoffrey Corcoran	QUB	275	0	0	0	87	152	19	17	0
7	Tom O'Brien	Ambush Fencing Club	243	87	36	28	19	0	0	56	17
8	Paul-Ryan Begley	DUFC	238	59	87	15	19	36	19	18	17
9	David Pokker (ROU)	Rebel Fencing	227	36	59	28	36	59	0	9	6
10	Shane Whelan	Salle Dublin	197	36	19	28	19	59	36	9	5
11	Eoghan Ó Hanluain Fay	DUFC	191	0	59	0	0	36	59	28	9
12	Peter Galligan		175	59	0	52	19	0	36	9	0
13	Xavier Litt (FRA)	Ravenwood	174	19	59	15	36	0	0	28	17
14	Giacomo Patrick Pietrobelli	Scherma Giardino Milano	172	0	0	0	0	0	152	20	0
15	Robert Cherry		163	59	36	15	0	0	19	17	17
16	Colm Casserly	UCD	161	36	36	15	19	19	36	9	9
17	Stephen Grogan	DUFC	154	36	36	0	10	19	36	17	6
18	David Rosca	DUFC	136	0	36	0	10	36	19	18	17
19	Daniel Karas	Brian Boru	128	0	36	0	0	19	36	28	9
20	Dmytro Balagura (UKR)	Ravenwood FC	127	0	36	0	0	36	0	28	27

Irish Male Épée Rankings on the Eve of the Irish Open in October 2025.

Rank	Fencer	Club	Points	Souths						Ireland						Int NMC Ra		2nd NMC Ra	
				West	Irish Open	NI Open	East	Nationals	Int NMC Ra	2nd NMC Ra									
1	Andreea Catalina (ROU)		339	87	0	0	0	119	36	56	41								
2	Megan Xu-Ran Piao	En Garde FC	282	36	36	28	36	59	87	17	0								
3	Ullana Lysych	Ambush Fencing Club	246	36	59	0	36	59	0	28	28								
4	Aisling Mellon-Whelan	Brian Boru FC	227	0	87	0	87	0	19	17	17								
5	Anna Lise Mlon	Brian Boru FC	186	59	0	15	0	36	59	17	0								
6	Nicole Rosca	Ambush Fencing Club	181	10	10	15	59	19	36	37	15								
7	Alisha Mullen	Ambush Fencing Club	99	0	0	28	0	0	0	41	30								
8	Claire Murray	Stormont	95	19	0	28	19	10	10	9	0								
9	Sorcha Mellon-Whelan	Brian Boru FC / Salle Dublin	94	19	0	28	0	19	19	9	0								
10	Émer Rowe	En Garde FC	87	19	0	0	19	10	19	11	9								
10	Veronique Kocken (NED)	sv Scaramouche	87	0	0	0	0	87	0	0	0								
12	Sophie Galligan	En Garde FC	85	10	0	0	19	19	10	18	9								
13	Martha Moore	Pembroke	79	0	36	0	0	10	19	9	5								
14	Olga Nova (CAN)	UCD	60	0	0	0	0	19	0	41	0								
15	Alison Metzger	UCC	58	10	19	0	10	10	0	9	0								
16	Aleksandra Grigorjan (LTU)	Brian Boru	54	0	0	0	0	19	0	18	17								
17	Erin Bradbury (GBR)	QUB	53	0	0	0	10	19	10	9	5								
18	Ulrike Kocken (NED)	sv Scaramouche	47	0	0	0	0	19	0	28	0								
19	Yolène Hoult (FRA)	Rebel Fencing	46	10	0	0	0	36	0	0	0								
20	Mollie Brown (GBR)	QUB	45	0	0	0	19	0	0	17	9								

## Irish Female Épée Rankings on the Eve of the Irish Open in October 2025.

My body is re forged, but it remains an old one ..."not new and not renewable but man". My thoughts ten years earlier, I now realise, were not about grand veteran fencing but about the consequences of aging. Elegance in sport is one its casualties.

## Chapter 29

### Start of Final Season

The Souths, the opening competition of the 2024/25 season, showed that fencing in Ireland had shrugged off the Covid years and was now stronger than ever. Women's épée was on that Saturday, so I drove Sorcha down and we had the day together. She started where she left off: winning all in both poules and made L8, knocked out 13-15 by Uliana. She was pleased and motivated to train again regularly. I refereed all day, including the final.

Dawid drove down on Sunday, with a car full of veteran fencers with me the oldest. This was my first individual competition since the Belfast Open prior to Covid and I was surprised by both the number and quality of the field. Of the 39 competitors, at least 30 had allowed fencing to become an important part of life. I fenced as best I could but only achieved a ranking of 29<sup>th</sup> after the combined poules. An easy d.e. allowed me gain good focus to fence the 4<sup>th</sup> seed, Xavier. My focus allowed me to learn well on piste and I beat him 15-13. I was too chuffed to get in the right mindset for the L16 bout against Paul. He went into a lead of 2-0, fenced defensively and had me chasing him the rest of the bout.

I lost 15-12 and finished 16<sup>th</sup>. My diary repeats the line “the first hits are crucial” several times.

There was a good vibe in the hall of honest effort and relaxed chatting as we all took a break from all the others things in our lives. Either fencer could win the d.e. from the last L32 to the final – there were no fencers a league better. Half the national team went out in L32 and many former team members. By days end, the final rankings looked almost random.

This was to be how the season developed. Yes, some were better fencers but that did not mean that they would always win. Tactics, attitude, and luck all played their part on the day.

I started going to the gym again and now upped my training regime as I counted the weeks down to the Irish Open. I fenced regularly, 2 to 3 times a week outside competitions. I bought new gear. I did not, though, take lessons.

I did three minor competitions in preparation for the Irish Open – the Leinster League Team Épée, the Derry Open, and the Intermediates. The team of Dawid, Duncan and me easily won the team competition and I did my part. The long drive and early start (up at 4:40 am and back at 8:50 pm) did not help my concentration at the Derry Open on 5<sup>th</sup> October. I finished L16 after a poor showing in the poules. The following weekend at the Intermediates, I finished L8 out of 46 and was pleased with how I fenced. The weekend after was the Irish Open, the highlight of the fencing calendar.

I was exhausted on the Monday morning when I wrote in my diary: "What a Saturday! What a Sunday! It is now Monday but the import of the last weekend will linger a long time." The Irish Open awakened the same intense desire to perform at my best as it always did. This year the stakes were higher. For the first time, Women's Épée was also classed as an FIE Satellite World Cup. Sorcha was to fence on Sunday in her first competition attracting an official international ranking.

Sorcha arrived early and nervous on the Sunday morning. Then, suddenly, it started. It took her a few bouts before she started to fence. In the last bout of the non-ranking poule she defeated LARSEN DEN 5-2. This changed her mindset and she went into the ranking poule a completely different fencer. She started by defeating DE WIJN NED (then ranked 234 in World) by the narrowest of margins. Lost 4-5 in extra time to SIMIC RSA (world rank 109), suffered a couple of 5-3 defeats to a FIN and ITA, a 5-1 loss to a young SWE and, then in the last bout defeated POTTER GBR 5-3. She got 2 victories and a respectable indicator of -6 (scoring 21 and conceding 27 hits) to make the cut.



Photo: Sorcha scoring a hit in Irish Open 2024 against LEUNG HKG. She lost 4-5. They finished the day ranked next to each other.

She was the only Irish women épéeist to make the cut. She came up against GRABOVSKYTE LTU in the d.e. (then ranked 200 in World) to lose 15-6. She finished 53<sup>rd</sup> out of 71 and, the next day, was ranked 534<sup>th</sup> in the world.

Both Sorcha and Aisling had also come out the day before to the National Indoor Arena to see their old man fence. He gave a good account of himself. I won two in the non-ranking poule (against USA and ESP), won one and lost one by the narrowest of margins in the ranking poule to Yeung HKG and SIPAVICIUS LTU in the ranking poule. I did not make the cut. I finished 64<sup>th</sup> out of 75 and a couple of days later was given my lowest world ranking of 662<sup>nd</sup>.

I gave it my all. I was delighted with my performance and my tactics.

Fencing that weekend was far, far, better than being a spectator at the Olympics. On Saturday, the communion between my body and mind was complete. I moved and thought like a much younger Shane - or it seemed so to me. Sunday brought the no less challenging demands placed on a father who knew a bit of the world and had to watch his daughter negotiate it by herself. It was *déjà vu* with the feelings I had when I watched Sorcha fence at her first Nationals when she came away with bronze in the cadets. Now, a decade later, she faced warriors of women committed to the sword, who rejected the softer life that playing on their beauty would have allowed.

I took a fortnight break before resuming training. I was satisfied with the first phase of my fitness-to-fence project. My body was complaining with aches and a swollen wrist after sessions, so I reduced my fencing to just once a week and went infrequently to the gym. I missed a few minor competitions and the Duffy team competition due to travel plans, so it was not until the end of January that I competed again. The break was good: there was a considerably more demanding schedule planned for phase two in first half of 2025.

## **Chapter 30**

### **Second Tier**

Aisling had also restarted fencing a few months earlier and had joined Duncan and me on the long trip to the Derry Open in October, where she came away with bronze. She accompanied me again to Derry for the more important Northern Ireland Open. We drove up the evening before through the winds and snow of Storm Éowyn, described in Wikipedia as “a record-breaking extratropical cyclone”. The Premier Inn was our resting place before our efforts on the Saturday.

Just 29 made it for the ME and 11 for WE, but that included almost all the good fencers. Once again, I did as well as I could, knocked out by Duncan to finish 14<sup>th</sup>. Aisling fenced composed. Her dominant stance, with blade above opponents, and control of distance, made her wins look easy, including the semi-final and final. She won the Northern Ireland Open for the second time. We arrived home at 9:15 pm, having stopped for a burger and chips at a service station outside Belfast with the other Brian Boru fencers. Jonathan’s handmade trophy went on the mantelpiece.



Photo: Medalist at the Northern Ireland Open 2025. From L-R: Megan, Uliana, Nicole, Aisling.

The Northern Ireland Open was the first of five weekends in a row taken up with fencing matters. I completed a coaching course aimed at class teaching run by Fencing Ireland over the four days of the first two weekends in February. I also completed an FIE-approved anti-doping course for coaches. These were preparations to coach after I stopped competitive fencing at the end of the season.

On 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> I was in Galway at the Wests. I fenced very well in the poules to be seeded 3<sup>rd</sup> out of the 46 competitors but lost my first d.e. 14-15 to end ranked 18<sup>th</sup>. It happens and lessons are relearned. I had a pleasant and informative early return with Dawid who had also lost his first d.e. after excellent results in the poules. Duncan went on to win his first competition on the Senior National Circuit.

I drove down with Aisling and Duncan on Sunday, with Aisling competing and us two refereeing. Aisling fenced well and won in a straightforward manner up to the

final. The final was a tense and very well fought match by both fencers, but Aisling came through to hold her lead and beat Uliana 11-9.

A few days later I got an email from Fencing Ireland telling me I was selected for team Ireland at the Veteran Four Nations in Wales in April. In fact, I was ME team captain. This would be interesting as the team was Duncan, and the new blood of Meng and Paul. Would my 13<sup>th</sup> time be lucky?



Another weekend and another fencing hall. This time it was Maynooth University and the occasion was the Club Team Nationals, with boys on Saturday and girls on Sunday. Two of the dozen ME teams were from Brian Boru, with me on the second team. It was a pleasant experience fencing alongside long-term sparring partners for the first time. Our team of Adelchi, Colm and Cian were seeded 3<sup>rd</sup> after winning both poule matches. However, we drew Brian Boru 1 in our first d.e. and were comprehensively outclassed by Duncan, Andrew, Joseph, and Daniel. We finished 5<sup>th</sup> and Brian Boru 1 went on the final against Ambush.

Ambush was a club in name only – it was set-up a few months earlier by Tom, but it had no training hall and comprised a small group of fencers that he gave individual lessons to. The Ambush team was Tom, a young pentathlete that did very well in the Irish Open, and a British international who won the Commonwealths two years earlier. It was a team put together with the sole purpose to win this competition and thereby qualify for the European Club Team Championship in Germany later in the year. Ambush won but did not send a team to the European event.

The women's Brian Boru team was Megan, Annalise, Sorcha, and Aisling. They made it to the final to meet with the Ambush team. Ambush won 44-43 in a very tense affair that I took no pleasure in watching. The girls shrugged off the loss, having enjoyed the day's fencing up to the final.

I upset myself when refereeing during the day. To avoid confrontation, I allowed far too much latitude when I should have taken firm action against what I perceived as poor behaviour by a member of the Ambush team and Tom on the sideline.

Three weeks later it was Dublin Épée in Trinity. All three of us underperformed. Not to worry, the following weekend was the Easts at UCD with its higher-ranking points. Aisling was in Cambridge getting excited about her future career, so only Sorcha took to the piste on Saturday. She fenced fine but met a young Dutch girl who knocked her out in L16 so she finished 13<sup>th</sup> out of 29. We lingered on to watch Megan and Isobel fence each other in the L8 in a wonderful show of fencing skill. We left with the impression that

fencing has improved a lot in Ireland over the last few years.

I fenced my season's best on Sunday. My poule results were mediocre, seeded 22<sup>nd</sup> out of the 43 participants but my attitude was good. Bye to L32 where I met Bowen Su. I had fenced him once before at Brian Boru where I surprised him by beating him 5-1. He asked my age and complimented me on my prowess on piste. I played a controlled defensive game which, coupled with a dose of luck, allowed me to win 15-12. Next Duncan, and having got an early lead of 2, I again played defensively with my arm pulled back to avoid his windmill takes and when he stepped into distance got a single or double on his arm. Another win, 15-12. On to the L8 where I met a blast from the past, Richards Adams. I got a decent lead but lost it when he pressed the distance and, despite Aisling telling me, I was too slow to move from defensive to offensive actions.

I realised with certainty after this competition that I am not in the top-tier of fencers in Ireland even at my best. My level of fencing – amongst all the ups and downs of each competition so far this season – would not make me a contender for a spot on the Irish senior team. I suspected this as early as the first competition and was more convinced after the Irish Open. But such an important conclusion requires more evidence. Now, it was confirmed in my mind. Oddly, my dominant emotion was relief....'with great power comes great responsibility'. I witnessed the dedication of the top fencers over the season: even leaving aside their arguably greater skillset, their efforts to improve outdid mine.

## Chapter 31

### Season's End

I did a little coaching, including an evening's coaching at UCD, as I pondered my role for the following seasons.

There was a veteran training day at the Pentathlete Centre run by Colm attended by no fewer than 30 of us, including Andrei. This was a preparation for 4 Nations Veteran in Cardiff the following weekend.

England first. We won, 45-40. This was our first victory over them for the first time at this competition since it began. New member Paul played a blinder with Duncan and me in solid support. We did not fare so well against the others, but all had a good day and good evening banquet as we got to know each other. We ended third and got a precious medal.



Photo: Team Ireland at the Veteran 4 Nations, Cardiff, April 2025. From L-R: Duncan, Paul, Meng, and me.

The last competition of the circuit, the Nationals, was a fortnight later. The girls were on the Saturday, and fenced solidly in the single poule to both be up 3 and down one. They went into the d.e.s with a seed of 7<sup>th</sup> for Sorcha and 3<sup>rd</sup> for Aisling out of the 14. Sorcha drew Erin and in a good and close encounter to come out on top 15-13 using distance and timing. Ais got Fiona, but overcame her trepidation to win with a comfortable scoreline in the end. So both into L8. Both were both knocked out at this stage as they fenced below their capabilities due to poor focus. If they were disappointed, it was not obvious. No matter, they will have plenty of other competition days if they want. We watched the semis and final, again impressed with the quality of fencing and enjoying the good mood in the hall. Megan overcame Anna Lise in the final to win her first senior competition and become in National Champion 2025.

On the Sunday morning, when driving out to the hall again, I felt weary of fencing and wished the event and the season over. Fencing has taken up ten of the last 14 weekends since we came back from India in January. However, the feeling dissipated on arrival when Meng gave me a lovely present of a coaching blade in a presentation box. Thanks Meng!

There was an entry of 43, and many familiar faces of fencers over the years. Geoffrey had come back for the Easts, which he won, and was here again with a large contingent from Northern Ireland. I started with shaky close victories over two relative newbie fencers, but was settled in mind by the end of the poule: 3V and 2D but poor indicators. I was seeded 22<sup>nd</sup>. I won my first d.e. 15-3 and felt good in my focus and movement. Next

was fellow veteran team member Paul over from England. He had beat me in the poule 5-2 as I attacked and he demonstrated his formidable defences. I had a plan. So longer distance, sniping above and below the wrist where he could not take my blade. I got an early lead of 2 and switched to mostly defending. It was knocking but I won 15-12. So on to the L16. Even at this stage there was surprise early departures – Geoffrey, Paul, Meng, Gerard, Dawid – following the pattern of all competitions this season.

I had a plan to keep scoring low, with passivity my friend, against my next opponent, Eoghan. It was close to 5-5 but I lost 15-11. My plan was not allowed to work by a mistaken application of a rule by the referee – mixing up passivity and non-combativity. I am to blame as I knew he was applying the rule wrong but I was so fatigued I could not think clearly enough to want to do the right thing, which was to get the DT. I was too tired and passive to take ownership of my fate.

Aisling and I stayed to the end. It was highly entertaining, with wonderful matches including the 15-13 final.

The 2024/25 season in Ireland is officially ended.

## **Chapter 32**

### **The Moment Collector**

Team Whelan was in Belfast for 9 a.m. the day before Father's Day in June 2025. Cathal joined the three of us for his first fencing competition, the Westgate Team Challenge in Queen's University. This was the second time it was held but the first for us. It was competitive in a celebratory atmosphere.

Cathal was not half-bad, performing solidly and not making it easy for the experienced fencers he faced. Some martial arts skills are transferrable. We all fenced and had a good time. We ended the day joint third with Trinity (Liam, David and Dmytro) having got the better of a very good team of Jonathan, Megan and Scott in the d.e.s.

This father arrived back in the evening relaxed and happy, with a bronze present. Another special moment with my kids collected.



Photo: Team Whelan. Bronze at the Westgate Team Challenge, Belfast, 2025.



Photo: Team Whelan with Mike Westgate, Belfast, June 2025.

I will put it with all the other wonderful moments collected over all the years in my two decades of fencing. Of course, there were other moments – the missed moments, the moments of silly tactics and slow apprehension. These were also needed to show that I was pressing against my limitations. I could not have done better and am more than content with my few wins.

It is a game. What is important is only how we play.

Fencing enabled me to find the intensity in the moment when moments are downplayed in other aspects of my life. Constancy is key in family life. My career was built on multi-year accumulations of low-intensity moments – the degree, the professional qualification, the PhD, the reports and papers – introspections attempting to find and elucidate some small truth. Family life and career require cultivation of such attributes as persistency, consistency, resilience, perseverance: each moment must be dimmed to help achieve an ultimate, hopefully life-affirming, illumination at the end.

My fencing adventure started when I went to Salle Duffy on my motorbike in the autumn of 1994. I'll obviously continue to fence for pleasure, and maybe coach, but will give up exacting competing.

I am back on a motorbike again. I will let my new bike take me off on another adventure.