DEATH OF A FENCER

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ABSTRACT

The first fatal accident to a fencer in the United Kingdom is described. Several factors contributed to the accident but there appears to be no simple way of preventing a recurrence, but some additional precautions are discussed.

THE ACCIDENT

The accident took place during a regular club practice session at a leading London club, which also houses the Headquarters of the Amateur Fencing Association. Both fencers were experienced and were members of the National Modern Pentathlon Squad. They were fencing épée and the injured fencer was wearing full regulation protective clothing with the exception (irrelevant to this accident) of wearing track suit trousers instead of fencing breeches. The protective clothing was in good condition and was not pierced at any point. The fencing moves that led to the accident were entirely within the rules of the sport. The injured fencer attacked with a fleche (a running attack, not unlike a sprint start), which his opponent met with a counter attack. The defender’s point struck the attacker’s sternal notch, the blade bent to the maximum, snapped about 10 cms behind the point and whipped out straight, lifting the lower edge of the mask and passing above the collar of the jacket. It continued through the neck, transfixing the trachea and the left common carotid artery before emerging from the left side of the neck and finally glancing off the left shoulder above the acromion (see Figure). The defender, without initially being aware of what had happened, instinctively withdrew his sword. Even though a surgeon happened to be present, it proved impossible to control the haemorrhage because blood continued to flow down the track of the wound from the carotid into the trachea and the soft tissues of the neck. Death from haemorrhage took place within some ten to fifteen minutes.

An inquest was held at the Fulham Coroner’s Court, which the author attended. The verdict was “Death by Misadventure”.

DISCUSSION

The circumstances which led to this fatality, the first in the history of British fencing were not particularly remarkable, and the general reaction among fencers, who tend to regard broken blade injuries as an occupational hazard of the sport, was surprise that such an accident hadn’t happened before rather than alarm at such a tragedy occurring. Nevertheless, it is obviously important to see whether, as a result of this accident, anything can be done to reduce the risk of a recurrence. The contributory factors are now considered in isolation.

The breaking of the blade

Virtually all fencers use their blades until they break, either in competition or in training. Broken blades are
common and a top class fencer would not be surprised to break three or four blades during a weekend's competition. The point at which the blade broke and the configuration of the broken end were quite typical, the blade presenting a flat cross-section 4.2 mm x 3 mm at the site of the break. It is true that this particular blade had been ground to reduce weight and stiffness, a fairly common practice and one which has now been made illegal, but with or without grinding, blades will continue to break in exactly this way, as long as steel is used in their manufacture, without any safety device. Two methods are being tested whereby the blade can be parted from the handle when the pressure down the blade approaches breaking point, but these have not yet been perfected. Other materials have been used experimentally, including fibreglass, carbon fibre and steel wound spirally around a central fibre core. It has been maintained that these materials alter the nature of the sport unacceptably, but it is probably true that in the long run, a development along these lines is the only way in which fatalities of this kind will become a thing of the past. A broken blade is the one common denominator in all recent fatalities and serious injuries (Clery, 1983).

Protective clothing

Regulations concerning the materials, dimensions and adjustment of all protective clothing are laid down by the International body of the sport, the Federation Internationale d’Escrime. These regulations specify that the collar of the jacket should cover the neck to a distance of 16 cms above the clavicles. There are, at present, no minimum dimensions for the bib of the mask, but there is a general requirement for clothing to give the maximum protection compatible with the necessary freedom of movement. In this accident these regulations were fulfilled, and the gap between the two was only found by the precise way in which the blade struck, bent and broke. One possible contributory factor was that the edge of the bib of the mask, which was of foreign manufacture, had, with use, curled inwards, a characteristic of this particular make, thus reducing the overlap of the bib and collar. It has been suggested that a stiffening in the edge of the bib to prevent this happening would give better protection.

Considerable thought has been given both before and after the accident to improving protection against broken blade injuries. It is understandable that sportsmen will not want to sacrifice lightness and flexibility for the sake of safety unless it becomes obligatory for the sport as a whole, but it is useless to expect top level fencers (the ones most likely to be injured) to wear more cumbersome protective clothing unless they can be sure that their opponents will be equally constrained. Such regulations and the need to find a balance between safety and the demands of the sport must be a matter for the regulating body. Although it is the opinion of the manufacturers that the protection offered by current equipment is greatly superior to what used to be available, there is also no doubt that new materials and designs could increase protection still further, if the sport wished to make use of them.

Fencing movement

The style of fencing at all levels, but particularly at top level, has changed very considerably over the last few decades, with greater emphasis on physical fitness, speed and opportunism, rather than on the niceties of finger play and blade work. In particular, the counter attack and simultaneous attack in which fencers are approaching each other at their maximum speed, are an integral part of modern fencing, and the dangers of a broken blade in these circumstances are obvious. It was not for nothing that the counter attack in duelling days was known as the “coup des deux veuves”. It has been suggested that the counter attack should be made illegal and indeed, a procedure for reducing the number of simultaneous attacks at sabre has successfully been introduced. It is however, unlikely that such a rule introduced in foil or épée would do anything to reduce the risks materially. It would certainly be a rule that would be difficult to enforce.

First Aid

It would have been difficult to devise circumstances for an accident where better medical help was available, but the accident still proved fatal despite the immediate presence of a consultant surgeon, the fairly prompt arrival of an ambulance and the proximity of a teaching hospital only a few hundred yards from the site of the accident, and it is clearly unrealistic to expect that skilled first aid could hope to avert a fatal outcome in injuries of this kind.

THE FUTURE

Despite this tragedy fencing remains a sport with a very good safety record, particularly at levels below the top. Recent accidents indicate strongly that national and international fencers are at the greatest risk. Although an element of risk is inherent in any sport, it is clearly the responsibility of the governing body of that sport to see that that risk is kept as low as possible. The Amateur Fencing Association has approved guidelines to improve safety standards, but it has to be said that it is unlikely that the recommendations of the report if carried out, would have prevented the present accident. Until the present, no system existed for the notification and investigation of accidents, although the guidelines propose that such a scheme should be introduced. This accident has shown that a fatality can still occur even when a fencer is properly protected in all important respects in accordance with regulations and is fencing according to the rules of the sport. Further accidents
will probably continue to occur as there is no simple solution to the problems posed by this case. Nevertheless the attention of all involved with the sport, particularly the governing bodies, is now focussed on safety as never before, and there is clearly the will to attempt to find a solution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author wishes to acknowledge permission to publish given by the family of the fatally injured fencer, and the assistance given by Mr. Raymond Paul, Professor Bowen and other members of the Amateur Fencing Association in the preparation of this Report.

REFERENCE

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
Strasbourg, 13 February, 1984
COMMITTEE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT
Recommendations set out with reference to the European ‘Sport for All’ Charter
Secretariat Memorandum prepared by the Directorate of Education, Culture and Sport

Article I
“Every individual shall have the right to participate in sport.”

Article II
Sport shall be encouraged as an important factor in human development and appropriate support shall be made available out of public funds.

Article III
Sport, being an aspect of socio-cultural development, shall be related at local, regional and national levels to other areas of policy-making and planning such as education, health, social service, town and country planning, conservation, the arts and leisure services.
   a. Education
   b. Health, social service
   c. Town and country planning
   d. Conservation (cf also Article VII)
   e. Arts and leisure services
   f. Work and sport

Article IV
Each government shall foster permanent and effective co-operation between public authorities and voluntary organisations and shall encourage the establishment of national machinery for the development and co-ordination of sport for all.

Article V
Methods shall be sought to safeguard sport and sportsmen from exploitation for political, commercial or financial gain, and from practices that are abusive and debasing, including the unfair use of drugs.

Article VI
Since the scale of participation in sport is dependent, among other things, on the extent, the variety and the accessibility of facilities, the overall planning of facilities shall be accepted as a matter for public authorities, shall take account of local, regional and national requirements, and shall incorporate measures designed to ensure full use of both new and existing facilities.

Article VII
Measures, including legislation where appropriate, shall be introduced to ensure access to open country and water for the purpose of recreation.

Article VIII
In any programme of sports development, the need for qualified personnel at all levels of administrative and technical management, leadership and coaching shall be recognised.