



Swords

Eric Anderson

It was one of the last warm Sunday afternoons of the fall in Bagley Nature Center, as two combatants two square off over their prospective daggers, awaiting the signal to strike.

A ring of spectators sit around them.

“Go!” shouts a voice from the perimeter, and the combatants drop to their weapons, swiping at one another in a flurry.

The game being played now is called “Dagger Circle”. The objective is to strike your opponent before they can do the same to you. Hits to limbs render them useless, and fighters continue until they’ve lost both arms or been struck in the torso.

The wounds may be make-believe, the blades just pvc under foam and colored Duct tape, but the fun is very real according to the members of UMD’s Sword Tag club.

“I always liked playing with toy swords and light sabers as a kid, and I guess I still do,” Antony Ferguson, freshman at UMD, said.

Ferguson says he plans to start studying musical theatre next semester. He’s just one of the wide array of students who have found a place among this band of weekend warriors.

In addition to the duel circle, Sword Tag offers an array of different game modes. This includes classics, like capture the flag, as well as innovative games, like “Cornucopia”, a spinoff of the Hunger Games in which contestants are paired off and fight to be the last team standing.

The club’s president, Megan Sheppard, says that playing dagger circle gives players a chance to rest between larger games, as they sit and enjoy the fall weather while it lasts.

“We’re signed-up to use the [Ward Wells] Fieldhouse, but it’s been so nice out lately that we’d much rather be out here,” says Sheppard. She dons both a smile and an “N7” hat, well-suited to her name.

“Some people do call me ‘Sheppard’ because of that,” she said, referring to the “Mass Effect” game series, “But most people here call me Mom.”

She’s met with a resounding of “mom”s from the nearby group, in a fashion that mimics the seagulls from “Finding Nemo”.

Although the fighting makes up most of the club’s activities, Sheppard says that it’s only half of the fun. On “build days” the club will carpool to Menard’s and craft stores for materials and then sit in the Wedge outside of Solon Campus Center handcrafting their own unique weapons.

“I think we were out there building for seven hours last time,” Sheppard said.

UMD sophomore Chuck Hartman, a communications major, has already finished his own sword and shield, and is still working on a matching trident for the set.

“I haven’t missed a meeting yet,” Hartman said over the clashes and chants coming from the duel circle.

Having transferred from St. Cloud State University, he says that the club has been a fun way to meet new friends since moving to Duluth this year.

“It can get rough sometimes, but there’s no animosity,” says Hartman. “We’re all just out here to have fun.”

Jesse Sonnier, a Sword Tag member since the first meeting in the fall of 2014, says that it’s come a long way from its humble origins.

“It’s definitely grown a lot since then,” Sonnier, a major in both mechanical and industrial engineering, and the club’s only fifth-year senior, said.

“You used to be lucky if four or five people showed up, but even then we’d still run around fighting each other,” Sonnier says. “Now it’s a lot more structured, but still just as fun.”

At this outing, 18 members are present, sporting a variety of handmade items, from halberds to handshields. The club’s email list, through which members receive event schedules and updates, consists of more than 300 students.

According to Sheppard, future plans for the Sword Tag include non-combative activities such as movie nights and group meals. On the combative side, future tournaments with prizes for winners. The grand prize, she says, will be a specially crafted “guild sword”.

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