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Game of Moans

Medieval-combat fighters turn to CrossFit in preparation for brutal battles to come at the world championships in Spain.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Kelli Thompson

His arms were pinned beneath the wooden dowel. Standing behind him, an attacker pulled the dowel tighter against his forearms. Both men struggled to maintain their footing. Then, with a sudden maneuver, the assailant further tightened the dowel and took his target to the ground with a thud.

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Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Anthony Lynch and Chris Wemmer (falling) spar during a Sambo class at FightFit Training Center in San Francisco, Calif., on April 21.

"You guys are chuckin' the shit of each other now," Robert Terlizzi told the two men as he smiled.

He added: "Everything is about making somebody step."

Dmitriy Ryaboy and Jeff Galli continued to take turns putting each other in compromising positions with the help of the wooden implement. Both took turns hitting the ground, as if choreographed, during the Sambo class on April 21 at FitFight Training Center in San Francisco, California.

"These are the moves I've been looking for," Galli excitedly told Ryaboy as he stood up from the most recent takedown.

Still, practicing the Soviet self-defense method with a wooden dowel in shorts, T-shirts and bare feet could never duplicate a battle with 70 lb. of medieval armor and weaponry.

The men who trained with Terlizzi were preparing to take to the grounds of a 558-year-old castle in Belmonte, Spain, less than two weeks later to pummel competitors from 22 other countries with swords, axes, polearms and maces—all to become [International Medieval Combat Federation](#) world champions.

Fight vs. Fit

For 43-year-old Anthony Lynch, this all started when he was 21. That's when he came across the [Society for Creative Anachronism](#).

"I saw a fighting demo of all these guys in armor, and they were just kind of going at each other," he explained.

Six months later, Lynch had assembled his own kit: armor—padding included—and weaponry. He went on to win multiple national tournaments in one-on-one shield and sword fighting. Most members of Team USA—headed to the championship in Spain—are national tournament winners, Lynch noted.

The team comprises more than 50 people—men and women—who fight in battles involving two teams with three, five or 16 per side. The final is commonly referred to as a melee. These men and women come from five [Armored Combat League](#) clubs across the country with names such as Black Swan, The Knights Hall and Desert Demons.

All weapons must be blunted. Still, it's fairly common for fighters to end up with broken bones, head blows that



Joel Schonbrunn

Medieval-combat enthusiasts: perhaps the best example of the “weekend warrior.”

temporarily impair vision, dislocated shoulders and a bevy of bruises.

Lynch, who lives in Northern California and is a member of the Ursus club, has tried many types of training over the years: judo, jiu-jitsu, mixed martial arts, boxing, kung fu. But the one he credits most teaches little of fighting.

“CrossFit is the best,” he said.

Lynch further explained: “It gives you the mind of a chess player and the body of a rugby player.”

“You can be a great fighter, but if you’re gassing out, it’s irrelevant.”

—Anthony Lynch

Through a CrossFit Inc. sponsorship, Lynch began attending classes at NorCal CrossFit Mountain View about a year ago. In that time, he’s made notable progress. He told of his 10-lb. muscle gain, his girlfriend’s appreciation for his biceps and his first national tournament after starting CrossFit, in which he landed a flying knee into a 300-lb. opponent.

“You can’t do that if you’re gassed,” explained Lynch, 6 foot 6 and 240 lb.

He continued: “It’s been a singular, game-changing experience. ... Nothing has been as impactful.”

Most Team USA members know how to fight. But making good decisions is more important, Lynch emphasized.

“The program is more powerful and more successful than any other fitness program I’ve experienced,” he said of CrossFit.

As a medieval combat fighter, if you’re never tired, if you’re making the right decisions and have energy to spare, you are “much more successful than a great sword fighter.”

Lynch went on: “You can be a great fighter, but if you’re gassing out, it’s irrelevant.”

While the average age of most European teams is about 19, Team USA’s average age is about 43, which means it’s important to keep themselves injury-free in a sport that has seen men die during championships.

“We have careers and families, and we want stuff to work afterwards,” said 46-year-old Steven Schroeder.

He added: “CrossFit helped with that.”

Schroeder has also been training at NorCal CrossFit San Jose via a CrossFit sponsorship. He started in August. He credited the training methodology with making him more limber and giving him more control over his body. And that’s a big deal when you’re carrying anywhere from 65 to 100 lb. of armor and weaponry.

“My cardio’s so much better,” Schroeder said.

After eight months, 25-year-old Chris Wemmer said he’s lost 35 lb. training at NorCal CrossFit San Jose. He now weighs 285 lb. at 6 foot 2. CrossFit also sponsored Wemmer.

“Oh, it’s helped immensely,” he said of its application to medieval combat. “My endurance has increased exponentially.”



Joel Schonbrunn

Lose your footing and you lose the fight. Victory goes to the last combatants standing.

He added later via email: "I don't gas out and am able to recover a lot more quickly now from when I began the sport. Lifting, squats, running, jumping, all of it has played into increased mobility, speed and power on the field."

A Storm of Swords

Recreation and re-enactment happens all over the U.S., with tens of thousands of people showing up to watch some events. Take any Renaissance fair, for example.

The sword, specifically, has a mystique about it that has pervaded popular culture for decades.

"It's collectively imprinted on our brains," Lynch explained. "Anything that touches that and explores that, I think, is always an attraction."

When it comes time to fight, he described it as a test of personal resolve and fortitude—amid resounding blows.

"Testing yourself with a group of comrades," Lynch started, then continued, "people feel like they're going back

through time and touching their ancestors, and that's part of the appeal."

He added: "We understand a little bit (about what) crusaders went through, what warriors and champions through history went through in those moments of victory and failure."

The [International Medieval Combat Federation championship](#) takes place at Castillo de Belmonte in Spain from May 1 to 4.



About the Author

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