

# TO THE *PAIN* →

BY SCOTT STRICKLIN

PHOTOS BY AMY RIPTON AUTHOR PHOTO BY PAUL LOVEKING

TEAMS OF WARRIORS IN MEDIEVAL ARMOR GATHER IN FRANCE  
TO TRY TO INJURE EACH OTHER WITH AXES AND MACES.

**W**e grappled, spinning and hacking at each other, until we both ended up slamming against the fence. In a flash, the Belarusian was gone and I felt the weight of another opponent on my back.

Against the fence and immobile, I leaned into the barrier and threw one arm around a post to keep from being borne to the ground. The dead weight of at least 200 lb. on my back threatened to bring me down, but I was secure for the moment.

This situation is what we call “deep water”—when escape is impossible and defense is diminished to a

reliance on armor and stubborn determination. Some fighters find themselves under the tender care of two, three or more pitiless enemies, each using weapons to tee off with impunity.

You can watch a bit of deep water [here](#).

For me, this unfriendly treatment began almost immediately as a stocky Belarusian leaned over and started throwing mighty sword blows into my thighs. I didn't see any friends nearby and just hoped that my disadvantage was going to remain merely two against one.



Many times in the months leading up to the moment I had wondered what it would be like in this situation, knowing that it's where the worst injuries tend to occur. When those blows started falling and my thick leg armor took the damage without failing, I was suddenly filled with relief and, surprisingly, joy. A man I'd never met before was pounding on me with a sword with all his strength, and I started laughing. Loudly. I couldn't help myself.

I laughed right in his face.

### → STRIKES, PUNCHES, KICKS ←

For a software engineer from Virginia, it was a long road from never having swung a steel sword to getting pummeled against a fence in Southern France by two Belarusians.

It was 2009 when the captains of four national teams—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Poland—got together and unified their rule sets into a single international tournament called Battle of the Nations. It was to be a full-contact combat sport using historically accurate 13th-to-17th-century armor and weapons.

*FOR A SOFTWARE ENGINEER FROM VIRGINIA, IT WAS A LONG ROAD TO GETTING PUMMELED AGAINST A FENCE IN SOUTHERN FRANCE BY TWO BELARUSIANS.*

Those weapons mean just about everything from the ankles to the top of the head needs to be encased in steel or leather reinforced with steel splints. Beneath this heavy gear is a layer of padded cloth to distribute the force of blows. Over the armor is worn the uniform of the fighter's home country, displayed in a historical or heraldic style.

Although the tournament has taken place for only the last four years, it has grown into an event that includes as many as 23 nations—from Russia and Australia to Israel and Quebec, which is actually part of Canada. It has become the Olympics of armored combat. Most teams are relatively small, barely meeting the eight-member minimum to compete. Others, like the United States and Russia, bring a full team of 50 fighters.



Beneath the steel armor and chain mail is a layer of padded cloth, which comes in handy when being struck by a six-foot-long sword.

In 2010, the distant tournament caught the attention of some fighters in the United States, and a small group of them decided to form a team, though they didn't have any experience with the European style of battle. The first year the U.S. participated in Battle of the Nations was 2012. As enthusiastic newcomers, Team USA had a valiant showing but fell well short of victory. Still, wiser and more determined from the experience, the team came home with an intense desire to form a larger, more powerful team to

threaten the Russians, who have won every tournament so far.

Most of the fighting in the tournament is done in groups, with a team from one nation pitted against a team from another nation. The goal is to throw, strike or slam everyone on the opposing team to the ground, or to force them to submit through sheer physical violence. Valid weapons include steel swords, axes and maces—all dull, of course.

Some weapons are as long as 6 feet and hit with a degree of force that can shatter wooden shields or punch a hole in steel armor. There are a few locations on the body that are forbidden, such as the throat and groin, the back of the knee and the base of the skull. And for the sake of safety, thrusting is not allowed. Otherwise, almost anything goes.

Weapon strikes, punches, kicks, grappling and full-speed charges are the tools of the trade. Strikes to the head and





As in CrossFit, there is kinship among combatants.

face are not only allowed but preferred. All the better to knock an opponent off balance or to convince him that surrender is better than permanent injury. In the team fights, there is no counting hits like fencing. If an opponent is standing, he's fair game, and fighters attack as fast and as hard as they can until victory is obtained. The armor usually does a good job of protecting the wearer. Still, injuries are unsurprisingly common.

For Robert Roach, 2012 Team USA member, his first experience with Battle of the Nations was a shocking vision of what lay ahead.

"We had seen three guys get carried off on backboards already, and shuttled off into the three ambulances they had on rotation. The fight just before ours finished, and they moved one of the ambulances to the entrance. The fourth guy they pulled off wasn't moving. At all. They were rushing to shove him in the ambulance so they could get it out of the way for us to take the field. You know those

gladiator movies, where they plunge the hook into the dead guy to pull him off the arena? Yeah, that's what it felt like," he recounts.

### → KINETIC ENERGY AND RAGE ←

There have been armored stick-fighting leagues in the U.S. for many years, but this particular style of combat, with steel weapons and a level of brutality beyond anything we've experienced in North America, presents a unique combination of challenges.

While wearing 50 lb. of armor, a fighter might at one moment be in a desperate wrestling match, trying to keep his feet. The next, he might need to sprint across the battlefield to keep his buddy from getting chopped in the back of the head by a giant axe. The fence around the field becomes a kind of death trap as three or four fighters might gang up on a loner, beating on him with all the

weapons and fury at their disposal. Chaos and confusion reign as historically accurate helmets restrict both vision and breathing.

I watched the 2012 tournament online, waking up early in the morning to catch the live feed coming out of Poland. It was then I decided to start training so I'd have a shot at getting on Team USA the next year. We are all amateurs, and because the Armored Combat League—which sprang up to support this new sport in the United States—has existed for less than a year, each fighter is more or less on his own. There are no organized training programs, only far-flung fight clubs scattered here and there, doing the best they can with whatever and whoever is at hand. With a sedentary job and a busy schedule, I knew a lifestyle change was necessary, and that there would be more than a few sacrifices down the road.

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In February I attended the final qualifying tournament for Team USA, and a week later they released the names of everyone who made the cut. The news was good. In May I flew to France with my brothers in arms to represent the United States and take the field against fighters from all over the world. I was assigned to the section of the team that would be participating in what they called the "mass combats"; that is, 21 fighters of one nation against 21 fighters of another.

Our first bout against the veteran Belarusian team was a stinging loss followed by two days of frustration to ponder our mistakes before getting another chance. Our captain called it snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. When we finally faced the Belarusians again, Team USA came armed with an arsenal of kinetic energy and rage. We were a coiled spring that unleashed a blast of violence that tore the Belarusian line to shreds. This victory tied the best-of-three match and earned us a third bout to decide the winner.





What the Belarusian team lacked in size against the massive fighters of the American team it made up for in experience. Its adjustment to our onslaught was well constructed. In the third bout, it concentrated its strength on our right side and stalled for time on our left. The play was slow to develop, but one by one, Americans were falling. Sensing our right was getting thin, the whole Belarusian line advanced. Suddenly a fighter bounded through our line, and he and I were toe-to-toe.

I can hardly remember the sequence of events that led me to being held against the fence by the two Belarusians. It all happened too fast. What I do remember with perfect clarity is the sound of that sword against my leg armor and the elation of suffering such violence but being immune to its effects.

After a few seconds, one of the Belarusians give me a last frustrated look before walking off, perhaps seeking better opportunities or maybe just someone who would give a more satisfying reaction to his expression of violence. Left with just the one fighter clinging to my back, I decided enough was enough. I couldn't get free, so at least I could take us both out.

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I reached back and grabbed his shoulder. Turning toward the fence and throwing my head down toward my left foot, I threw the Belarusian across and over my back. We both fell into the dirt and onto a pile of bodies—Belarusians and Americans who had already been knocked out of the fight. Someone grunted something at me in a language I didn't understand as we tried to disentangle ourselves.

For us, the bout was over. We sat up and watched the rest of the match. Three of my teammates remained, pinned against the fence by eight Belarusians, much like I had been a moment before. Tough bastards, the Americans

just stood there and took it. But the writing was on the wall. The referees called an end to the match, and we picked our sweaty, dust-covered bodies out of the dirt.

## →+ BROTHERS IN ARMS +←

Home to four days of hard fighting, our grassy field near the Mediterranean had been turned into a sand pit. Everyone moved in a cloud of dust as we walked forward in a ragged line to face the Russians. The world champions had been trouncing everyone all week, including Team USA. Our left flank hit first and in the scrum a Russian fighter came spiraling into our line, unbalanced and out of control. He hit the dirt and didn't move. One down, 20 to go.

Suddenly, inexperience and enthusiasm took hold of our team. Bob Dionisio, Commander of the Eastern Division of the U.S., on the left, charged into three Russians, who immediately shoved him into the rail and started dropping 6-foot axes onto his head and shoulders. The sudden urgency of a friend in danger rippled through our line and we surged forward. Our formation disintegrated instantly, with the left and middle blasting into the Russians while our right remained tethered to the nearby fence. It was an open brawl, with pairs of fighters striking and grappling all over the place.

Discipline went out the window. Two of my fellow flankers must have seen an opportunity; they tore through the middle of the sandy battlefield to parts unknown. A Russian fighter turned to strike one of them in the back of the head as he passed, and I sprinted toward him. Luck was with me and I made contact just as the Russian completed his turn. I hit him in the back of the head with my steel shield and the guard of my falchion simultaneously. Weight and momentum sent him tumbling forward into the dirt. Fully expecting that someone was about to do the same to me, I swiveled my head from side to side, scanning for attackers while I backpedaled.

Our right was still tied up against the fence in a group wrestling match. I saw a lot of undefended American backs. I put my own back to them, turning to face the center of the field. I intercepted a young, strong, svelte Russian by interposing myself and bracing for the impact. He decided to turn it into a boxing match. Good. He was bigger than me and a friend quickly joined him. Had they chosen to grapple, I might have been thrown to the ground and out of the fight quickly.



Face-off: Medieval style.





The armor is historically accurate and essential for survival when a giant man is raining sword blows onto your head.

*I FELT MY HEAD GET KNOCKED AROUND BY SWORD BLOWS AND FAST JABS TO THE FACE FROM THE RUSSIAN.*

I felt my head get knocked around by sword blows and fast jabs to the face from the Russian's punch-shield as his friend peeled off to find other targets. He definitely had an advantage in reach, so I spent some time taking damage, hoping one of my teammates would break free and give me a hand. My jaw ached, but the weight of my helmet absorbed most of the impacts.

We traded blows for about 20 seconds before a big axe came over my shoulder and hit the Russian's shield. Finally, a few teammates had emerged from the scrum on the fence and joined my little fight. We were winning locally, but the rest of the field did not look good. Exhausted and

full of adrenaline, I stumbled after my sparring partner. I made the mistake of breaking formation, and the Russian pulled me right into two of his comrades. A swift leg sweep finally sent me into the dirt. I sat up, mouth full of French sand, and watched the last of our team get surrounded and assaulted by packs of Russian fighters.

Our opponents had fought with great skill and energy. Although we lost to them, we could be proud of our performance. And we were. It was only our second time at Battle of the Nations, and no one had given the Russians such a hard fight. We are fast learners, and the battlefield—with all its brutality and swift violence—is an earnest teacher.

I rose and shook some of the dust from my surcoat. My sparring partner emerged from a crowd of fighters and headed straight for me. We embraced as brothers and I couldn't help but smile.

The adrenaline of the fight turned into elation at having survived and joy for the bond of fellowship with a brother in arms. ♦



#### ✦ ABOUT THE AUTHOR ✦

*Scott Stricklin is a software engineer living in Fairfax, Va. He's always had a passion for history and physical challenges, so armored combat feels like a natural extension of that. His lovely wife, Amy, generously consents to his participation in violent hobbies on condition that he wear really good armor. Stricklin started CrossFit in April 2011.*