

The allure of fencing dates back to 1190 BC. It has entertained kings and queens and to this day sells out an Italian stadium. It is considered a highly competitive sport of physical chess that has changed over hundreds of years from deadly combat to a split-second scoring game. The tip of a fencer's sword is said to be the second fastest object in a sport, only to be bested by the marksman's bullet. Sometimes, the touch of the blade electronically registers within 1/25th of a second, with fencers doing intricate footwork while attacking and parrying, deceiving and defending.

This ancient sport of precision and timing is kept alive in El Paso thanks to the guidance and commitment of Bill and Marietta Towry, a couple whose dual passion continues to benefit each other and students and refuses to allow them to become spectators in their golden years.

Marietta was first introduced to the sport by her father, an accomplished fencer and instructor. Initially, she was not interested, but then the competitive excitement of fencing caught hold and she was swept up in it. Marietta claims that she was a "daddy's girl" in a male-dominated sport, and initially, women fenced in skirts.

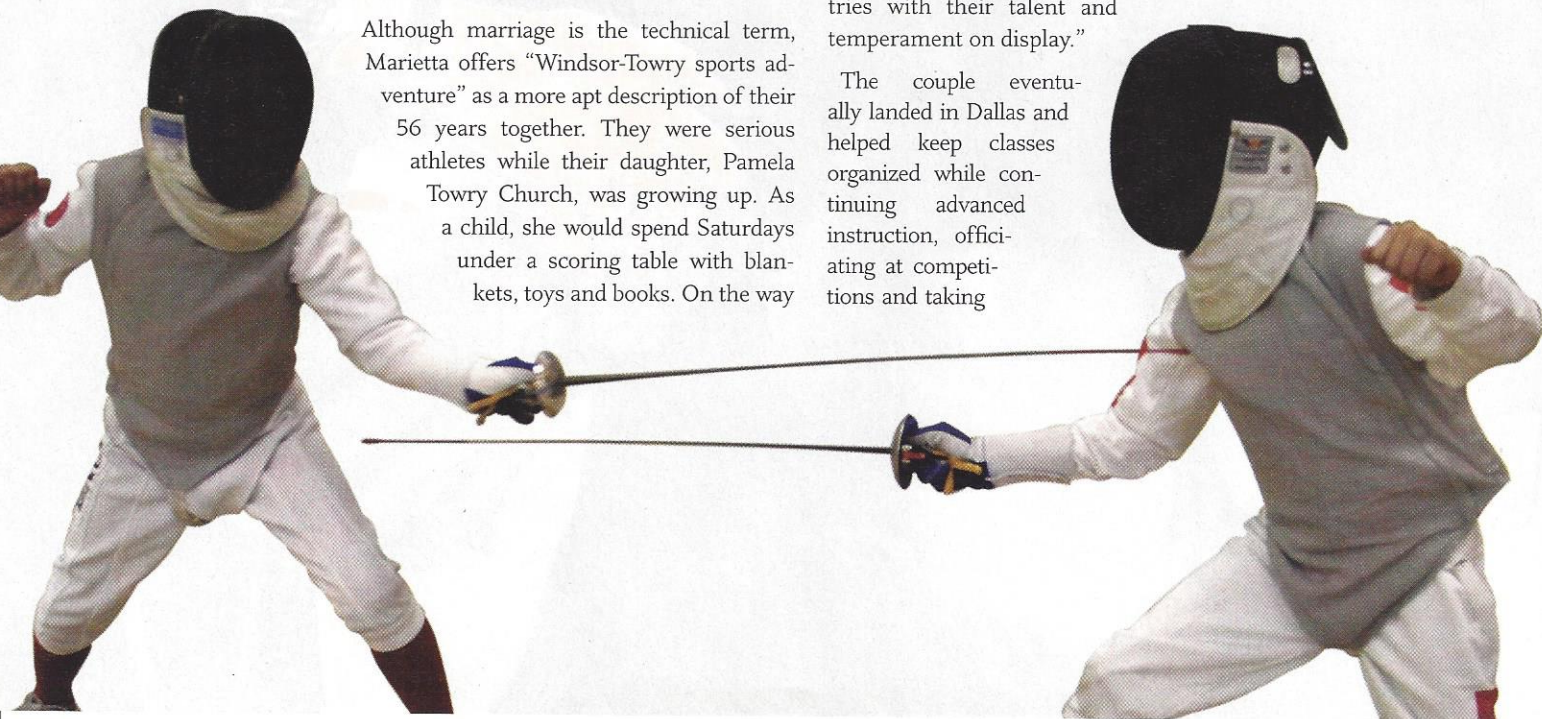
In 1948, Bill, fresh from the Army and new to college life, began to take fencing lessons from Marietta's father. It was an exciting time for the pair of "sword-crossed lovers." The two young fencers fell in love with the sport and with each other and were married in October of 1951.

Although marriage is the technical term, Marietta offers "Windsor-Towry sports adventure" as a more apt description of their 56 years together. They were serious athletes while their daughter, Pamela Towry Church, was growing up. As a child, she would spend Saturdays under a scoring table with blankets, toys and books. On the way

home, while her parents were debriefing the days events, she would raise her head from the back seat and sleepily inquire if they were going to talk about fencing all night. "They *are* fencing," she says.

While still a young married couple, they moved from El Paso to Oklahoma City and then to Wichita Falls in Texas, where they created fencing classes at the local YMCA. From the late-1950s through the 1960s, Bill and Marietta established themselves as elite fencers, and in 1968, both Bill and Marietta were in the U.S. top 25 at the XIX Olympic Team Trials. Fencing is one of only four sports found in every one of the Olympic Games, and although neither Towry has officially competed, they have attended and assisted at several Olympics over the years. "It is Broadway, with all the razzle dazzle," says Marietta. "Great excitement, tension, anticipation of all these different countries with their talent and temperament on display."

The couple eventually landed in Dallas and helped keep classes organized while continuing advanced instruction, officiating at competitions and taking







on more responsibilities as coaches. In 1972, Marietta became the first woman referee at the Modern Pentathlon World Championships. Then, after 27 productive years at the Dallas Fencers Club, they came home again to El Paso.

In 1986, they started up their sport in Central El Paso with six students and a desire to introduce fencing to new enthusiasts. Twenty years later, they have evolved into the El Paso Fencing Center, which emphasizes competitive fencing (Texas Excalibur) and UTEP's recreational sports team (Texas Steel). "I have immense pride for them," says their daughter, Pamela. "They have homegrown fencing at a grassroots level. They are not 'New York chic,' where big fencing clubs are, yet they turn out fencers that compete as the best with the best."

At the brightly lit El Paso Fencing Center, fencers slide across the floor, arms extended, in warm-up drills. Youth fencer Casey Blough has just finished a lesson with Bill and has his elbow slung on Bill's shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie and ease. "It is a rush to work with Bill," he says with obvious respect for his 80-year-old coach. "It is like talking with blade work, picking up off of what's different." Casey says he enjoys fencing as an individual sport that is analytical; it helps him forget about everything once on the mat and has assisted him in controlling his anger.

The Baker family decided fencing looked like fun after watching their children fence, and they decided to join. "It offers an opportunity for us to interact with them," says father, Mark Baker. When his son was younger, he had seizures that affected his lower body motor control, and he believes fencing has been the best physical therapy for him. "He has improved spectacularly," he says.

Former student Noah Alpern still drops in on the Towrys to catch up and bring flowers. Noah, now a successful businessman in Austin training for his first marathon, qualified for the 2000 U.S. Olympic Trials under the tutelage of the Towrys. "Bill is a heck of a guy and has always had a lot of energy. They have been there for me from the start. They are great people who are by no means easy on you when

training. All my success in fencing is due to Bill and Marietta. They have taught me that if I am willing to train and work hard enough, I can achieve anything I set my mind to," he says.

Fencing allowed Noah to travel around the United States and to different countries— a perk that is par for the course in competitive fencing. "Fencing broadens your world," Marietta says. "You meet so many people, and you know people in other countries. I tell my students that when you walk into a club, you never meet a stranger. There is always somebody to fence."

After almost 60 years together, Bill and Marietta Towry are definitely not strangers to each other. There is affection in the way Bill calmly lays a hand on Marietta's arm when she turns to him to discuss a student. "Did you see the way he lost his temper?" she says of a youth she had reprimanded during class. "Yes," says Bill, "yet it shows me that he wants to win." She nods in affirmation, knowing that the student's outburst was unacceptable but, with time, controllable. "We work well together," he says. "We do not have to compromise because it is our common interest. The two of us together make a good coach."

So who would win in a fencing match between the two? "We don't do that," Marietta says firmly. "But if we did," she adds with a laugh, "I would out-think him even though he may try brute force." "Don't believe her," he replies. Their playful banter belies their age, bringing a youthful spark to the eyes of two so young at heart. 