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Slashing her way to the top

A Midlife diversion has thrust Swedesboro resident Jane Eyre, 56, into the upper ranks of international fencers.

Swedesboro's Jane Eyre hones competitive edge on sabre

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Ed Hille / Staff Photographer

With her son and only child starting college, Jane Eyre was looking - as so many do - for ways to enliven her evenings and fill the empty nest. In a community night-school catalog, two courses caught her interest: tai chi and fencing.

An artist and athlete, Eyre was seeking to engage both mind and body. In her mid-40s, she also was itching for a way to express a newfound sense of self-confidence.

Eyre signed up for fencing and within just a few sessions knew she had found her passion.

"I felt at home with it," she recalls. "I enjoyed the challenge of participating in a combat sport."

So much so that she set a bold goal: to compete someday in an international event.

That was 13 years ago. Today, Eyre, 56, of Swedesboro, Gloucester County, is the best female fencer over 50 in the United States and one of the best in the world.

Over the last decade, she has won 22 gold medals in United States Fencing Association national tournaments. She has been ranked No. 1 in the United States in veteran women's sabre fencing, her forte, for the last five years. In every national event in which she has competed in the last three years, she has captured gold.

Internationally in her class, competing against a field of 25 to 30 elite athletes, she won gold in 2005 at the World Veteran Fencing Championship of the Federation Internationale d'Esime; in 2006 and 2008, she won bronze medals.

Later this month, she will depart for Croatia to vie again for the world title.

"Losing is not the end of the world," Eyre says, "but once you've won, nothing else feels as good."

Foremost among her admirers is her son, Josh Tartaglione, 31, a medical student in New York City.

"When I was growing up, she always told me I could do whatever I put my mind to. She taught me to believe in myself and my ability," he says. "She's a wonderful example."



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Of the three fencing disciplines - foil, épée, and sabre - sabre is the fastest and most athletic, Eyre says. The sabre is a cutting weapon once used by the cavalry, and sabre fencers can score points by touching any part of the body above the waist, including the head and arms.

Sabre bouts are fought in short, intense bursts. It's akin to boxing, and just as demanding - "a lot harder than it looks," Eyre says. More visceral than cerebral, sabre fencing is ideal for athletes with abundant fast-twitch muscle and a penchant for instinctive action.

"It's very intuitive and not as strategic as foil and épée," says Eyre. "It's more appealing to ADD types, people who want something to happen quick. In sabre, you win fast and lose fast."

Bouts are won by the first fencer to score five points, earned by electrically registered "touches," and can sometimes be decided in less than a minute.

Eyre trains three hours a day, three days a week, at the Fencing Academy of South Jersey in Cherry Hill under the tutelage of owner Andy Ma, fencing coach at the University of Pennsylvania, who has seen the sport surge in

popularity. (More than 40 high schools in New Jersey now have teams, Ma says.)

"She's very athletic and has very good technique," Ma says. "She trains hard and regularly, which is why she wins consistently. Mentally, she's very strong. Because she has many years of experience, when she's behind an opponent, she can still pull back to win the bout."

Eyre calls fencing "physical chess." It's all about "taking control on the strip," managing the tempo, range, and reach of your opponent.

"It's challenging on all levels - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual," Eyre says. In that respect, fencing is similar to other martial arts and requires the same focus and discipline - the cultivation of which Eyre deems "exciting."

"Basically, somebody is chasing you with a stick and trying to hit you. For me, knowing how to elude and attack is empowering."

Eyre grew up on the family poultry farm in Swedesboro, a tomboy, riding horses, running in the woods. At Kingsway Regional High School, she played basketball, field hockey, and tennis and was voted best female athlete.

But Eyre (who acquired the surname of Charlotte Bronte's heroine from a husband from whom she is divorced), also had an artistic bent. As a girl, she practiced ballet, which has aided her fencing footwork. She studied painting and illustration at Moore College of Art and Glassboro State College (now Rowan University). Today, she teaches art and illustrates children's books, even as she gives private fencing lessons and coaches the girls' fencing team at Moorestown Friends School.

During her years as a wife and mother in Medford, Eyre stayed in shape by jogging. But she has hung up her running shoes. The conditioning provided by fencing, especially the muscle-toning effect of constant lunging on the thighs and buttocks, is evident in her 5-foot-8, 145-pound figure, shapely for a woman of any age, spectacular for one in her sixth decade.

"I'm in the best shape of my life," Eyre says happily.

The psychological benefits of her midlife pursuit are equally pronounced. As a young athlete, Eyre often became "twisted up inside" with anxiety that affected her performance. Through decades of practicing daily meditation, she has learned how to clear her mind of vexatious thoughts.

"Now that I'm older, I'm able to enjoy competition and finally able to realize my potential. I don't worry so much about the outcome. As an artist, I know I have to let go and allow it to happen. In fencing, the less I think and plan, the better I do."

Although fencing is a sport of aggression, Eyre has found that demonizing her opponents is counterproductive. "The more I respect my opponent, the more I succeed," she says. "Anger doesn't work for me. When I'm irritated with an opponent, my body becomes weak. So I've learned to cultivate good feelings. When I'm feeling happy and grateful, everything's lined up and I fence from a position of strength."

Cherry Hill psychiatrist Mary Ann Ager, who produces children's books about attention deficit disorder that Eyre illustrates, says of her friend and business partner: "When I watch Jane fence, she is so elegant and respectful of each opponent. Each match is a meditation."

"I love the fact she often competes just so the younger women can earn a ranking. She consistently strives to do things right, to do well and to do good, always quietly and humbly. She's a key person in developing our kids, especially girls who hope to excel in fencing so they can gain entree to a top college."

What sustains Eyre's ambition and enthusiasm is the belief that she's unfinished. "I know many people my age who have just stopped. They think their lives are over. It's so sad," Eyre says. "I intend to keep growing and expanding." If fate decrees, she'll fence from a wheelchair someday, Eyre vows, and paint with a brush between her teeth.

"Don't be afraid to try new things, to stretch, to go beyond your comfort level," she advises. "Find your passion, whatever it is, and don't stop looking for it, because it's never too late."

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