


Fall 12-16-2020

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### Recommended Citation

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Escrime Americana: The History of Discrimination in American Fencing from the 1700s-1950

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Honors 4998

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December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## Introduction

Discrimination in American fencing is something of an unspoken truth. Anyone who has been involved in the American fencing community can describe an encounter with discrimination of some kind. Andy Shaw, the head historian of the United States Fencing Association said in a personal interview, that American fencing for a while has wanted to see itself as a “white-only sport”.<sup>1</sup> Racism is not the only type of discrimination that has impacted American fencing, but classism and sexism have had notable influence on the history of the sport as well.

Academic literature on the history of American fencing is sparse and has not sought to analyze inequities. One of the most notable works in its field Gay Kirstine Jacobsen D’Asaro’s master’s thesis, which is a record of the history of the Amateur Fencing League of America, or the AFLA. Her thesis was submitted in May 1983 to the Department of Human Performance at San Jose State university. Her purpose for writing this thesis was “to trace the history of the Amateur Fencers League of America (AFLA) by recording and compiling facts and important events which occurred throughout its history.”<sup>2</sup> While this is something that the field of American fencing history needs, it only reports on facts, rather than point out a broader trend in this history. The purpose of history is to not only document the past but analyze it and learn from it.

To contextualize American fencing within the larger ecosystem of American sports, Steven A. Riess argues that “the idea of social mobility was one of the most important traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Shaw (official head historian of USFA) in discussion with the author, November 2020.

<sup>2</sup> D’Asaro “A History of the Amateur Fencers League of America” 1

American values, and belief in its veracity played some role in encouraging millions of Americans to come to the United States...Americans generally have believed that sports constituted one of the most democratic indigenous institutions since participants were supposedly recruited based on their talent and skill.”<sup>3</sup> While this aspect of social mobility is true in many American sports, such as basketball, football, and even tennis, fencing is one of several sports that has not historically been a proponent of social mobility. If anything, fencing in America, has been a tool to enforce a hierarchy based on class, sex, and race. This enforced hierarchy is parallel to how American society is structured. As of today, the current governing body of American fencing no longer enforces discrimination, but due to previous discriminatory practices, the participation in American fencing has suffered. This begs the question of why. Why was American fencing so discriminatory and why does it have any impact on how American fencing operates today? The answer to that can be found in how similar the methods of discrimination are to those of prominent American institutions, and the motive behind them, by examining the history of American fencing from the 1700’s through 1950.

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<sup>3</sup> Riess "Sport and the American dream." Pg. 295.

## Fencing and Classism

Classism is not a foreign concept to the makeup of American institutions. In fact, this country was founded on the concept of maintaining an order in which those who owned the most property (human or land) had the most power, while those who own less have less power and agency. Classism is discrimination based on socioeconomic status, and according to Berniece Lott, “ideology and material conditions reinforce each other to produce and maintain inequality, affecting every aspect of everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> Lott elaborates on the ramifications of classism in the United States, such that “the rich are supported by a general ideology that equates success with hard work and individual merit. In the United States, we are taught that intelligence and ambition will elevate our socioeconomic position and that class privilege is deserved.”<sup>5</sup> Since this myth that class privilege is a guarantee based on work ethic is integral to the American identity, this allowed much more callousness toward those of lower classes. This callousness comes from the belief that those who are poorer are lazy, unintelligent etc., yielding in the development of privileges for the wealthy, and loading more challenges onto the poor. This section will examine how fencing was used as a tool to maintain a classist hierarchy, by analyzing the intent of 1700’s dueling clubs, the concept and practice of amateurism within fencing, and the exclusionary membership practices that the AFLA used.

In the 1700’s many fencing clubs had opened and were advertised as places where a man can learn the noble art of dueling. These early fencing clubs also taught dancing, which was an activity that was predominantly used by the upper classes in America. According to Ben Miller’s article on American colonial fencing, “to be a graceful and skilled fencer was the ambition of

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<sup>4</sup> Lott "The social psychology of class and classism." 651

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 654

nearly every gentleman.”<sup>6</sup> Some of these colonial fencing instructors have given their sentiments on what fencing should and should not be. Miller mentions the musings of Dr. Benjamin Rush, who would go on to be one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, stated that “fencing calls forth most of the muscles into exercise particularly those which move limbs...it has long been the subject of complaint, that the human species has been degenerating for these several centuries...luxuries of modern invention, have had a large share in weakening the stamina of our constitutions, and thus producing a much more feeble race of man.”<sup>7</sup> Nearly a century before Darwin’s *Origins of Species* was published, there were traces of racial and hierarchal rhetoric in American thought. Rush asserts here that due to technology, people have become weaker, which necessitates regular exercise of fencing in order to maintain muscle groups and the mind. Other American thoughts on fencing include those from Virginia fencing master Edward Blackwell. Blackwell asserts that among the social benefits of fencing, “using a SWORD, are such Accomplishments to a Gentleman, that he is never esteem’d polite and well bred without them.”<sup>8</sup> In this excerpt, Blackwell conflates etiquette and high socioeconomic status with good genetics, hence his use of the phrase ‘well-bred’. The rhetoric of the inherent superiority of the upper-class gentleman to the lower-class laborer lends itself all too conveniently to the framework of American classism, such that some people deserve to be rich and others do not. In similar fashion to Dr. Rush, Blackwell believes that fencing is an important skill to gentleman, otherwise known as men with money and land, as gentlemen are genetically or racially superior to those who are not gentlemen. Beliefs that those who were upper class were inherently superior to those of lower socioeconomic status were always present in American

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<sup>6</sup> Miller “Fencing in Colonial America and the Early Republic: 1620-1800”

<sup>7</sup> Altherr, “Sports in North America: a Documentary History.” 153

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 122

fencing, and Social Darwinism strengthened those views by providing a concrete explanation for a previously unexplainable hierarchy. Miller states in his article that “it must be mentioned that all of these statements are keeping in with the sentiments of how fencing was thought of in Europe.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in the origins of American fencing, in order to make up for a lack of prestige and history that was abundant in European nations, American fencing masters and those who were enthusiastic about the sport created a mythos that fencing was the ultimate gentleman’s game, art, or pursuit of science. Strangely enough, it was never referred to as a sport.

The ideas that those from lower socioeconomic classes were not fit to fence carried over to the membership selection processes of the AFLA. America lacked Europe’s rich fencing history, so in order to manufacture prestige the A.F.L.A. and prominent fencing clubs restricted membership based on class. In terms of how these thoughts affected the development of American fencing in the nineteenth century, “the AFLA and prominent New York City fencing clubs restricted membership to persons from families prominent in aristocratic society.”<sup>10</sup> This meant that less people could fence in the long term because of the presumption that those from a higher-class status are more suited to fencing, keeping in line with the views of their colonial predecessors. This also corroborated the beliefs present in the 1700’s, that those from the upper-class of American society were inherently superior to those who were not well off. In newspaper articles, fencing was also marketed to those with higher socioeconomic statuses. This trend was similar to colonial methods of marketing fencing but was tailored to a more current aristocracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, “Fencing in Colonial America and the Early Republic:1620-1800”

<sup>10</sup> Claire, George B. Kirsch Othello Harris, and Elaine Nolte. *Encyclopedia of ethnicity and sports in the United States*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000.

Finally, the deterrent practices that the AFLA utilized on “professional” fencers was intended to keep them from nominal success in fencing, by emphasizing amateurism. This was a common practice across American sports during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. D’Asaro states that “as the years passed, fencing bouts involving money became infrequent, so that eventually the term professional, as applied to fencing, came to mean one who teaches swordplay to others for a livelihood. These professionals were, and still are, titled master, teacher, or coach. There are no fencers in the United States who are considered professional because they compete for money. This is unique to the sport of fencing.”<sup>11</sup> Based on this premise, the only way that fencers could make a career out of the sport was to become a fencing master, rather than compete for monetary prizes. This was a deterrent for fencers who were not as financially well off and who had no interest in teaching, because prize money would be a way for upward social mobility. D’Asaro then states that “professionals played no active role in the administration or functioning of the AFLA. They were not allowed to become members, hold an office, officiate at competitions, or have any direct influence on the AFLA.”<sup>12</sup> Without having this input from professionals who were not in the same socioeconomic strata as those who could afford the maintenance of an amateur status, the AFLA was more likely to make decisions that would suit the upper-class members rather than tend to the needs of those who were less financially well-off. This decision, while in line with other sports organizations, was fueled by the rhetoric that those of a lower-class status were inferior. Whether this decision was intentional or not, the outcome was one that favored the bourgeoisie over the laborer.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



To summarize, classism played an integral role in the development of American fencing. The dueling culture of the 1700's carried itself handily to the 1880's to create an aristocratic fencing culture. New York City sports clubs were for fencers who sought prize money in the hopes of upward social mobility. All of these practices were intended to keep the wealthy in power, by making them dominant fencers, officials, and administrators in American fencing.

## Fencing and Sexism

Women have had to break the glass ceiling in fencing many times throughout the history of American fencing. Historically, men have placed restrictions on how long women could fence, whether they could have an AFLA membership, what weapon they could fence, and even what they could wear when they fenced.<sup>13</sup> The point of men in fencing imposing these restrictions on women was to mirror and maintain the hierarchy of the United States, such that women were subservient and inferior to men. This section will outline where the direct reasoning for the disenfranchisement of women in fencing came from, and how women were restricted from fencing to the same capacity as men.

The formation of the AFLA in the 1890's was preceded by the Victorian era. Therefore, many of the ideas that were prominent during that era helped form the basis for legislature and governance in the AFLA. According to Jennifer Hargreaves, "the Victorians maximized cultural differences between the sexes and used biological explanations to justify them. This is the essence of biological reductionism."<sup>14</sup> Through biological reductionism, men in power were able to make many claims about the biological parameters of women and regulate them only to certain kinds of sports. Herbert Spencer in 1861 "argued that sexual differences could be best understood by assuming a somewhat earlier arrest of individual evolution in women than in men, causing women to be unsuited for important social and political activities." He did this by "applying Darwinian concepts to social sciences."<sup>15</sup> Soon, doctors began to put these ideas into

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<sup>13</sup> D'Asaro "The History of the Amateur Fencers League of America"

<sup>14</sup> Hargreaves, Jennifer. *Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sport*. Routledge, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

practice. According to Hargreaves, “doctors legitimated popular ideas about the inherent sickness of middle-class women by diagnosing them as constitutionally weak.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, the real reason behind the supposed weakness of women of this era was that “sufficient numbers of middle-class women followed the dictates of fashion and wore restricting clothes, ate little and took no exercise, so that, not surprisingly, they would often faint, become ill, behave submissively, thus confirming the medical stereotype of the ‘delicate female’”<sup>17</sup>. What Hargreaves is arguing here, is that women were characterized as weak, based on the expectations put on them to look a certain way to be considered beautiful, which caused them to be physically weak and ill. Hargreaves explains that not all exercise was banned for women, rather “the theory of constitutional overstrain was not used as an argument against all types of exercise for women—during the nineteenth century increasing numbers of physicians took the view that gentle forms of physical exercise, if taken in reasonable amounts, would aid women’s health and ability to bear healthy children.”<sup>18</sup> Not only did this inherent otherness apply to women in fencing, but to women in other sports, and even those who did not participate in sports. Doctors played a significant role in perpetuating the framework that men were dominant over women, by providing “scientific” reasoning for female inferiority. This framework would go on to shape the treatment of women within the AFLA.

There was blatant restriction on women’s participation in fencing during the early years of the AFLA. According to D’Asaro, “there were women active in fencing but they were only allowed to be associate members of the AFLA... that women members were not given the full

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

privileges of men.”<sup>19</sup> In her dissertation, D’Asaro asserts that due to women’s suffrage, “women’s participation in athletics became more socially approved and in the 1920’s, women received increasing acceptance in the sport world.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the ostensible progress seen in women’s sport in terms of legislation, rampant sexism pervaded other practices and customs for women in American fencing, such as the rhetoric of biological determinism for women.

These ideas of constitutional overstrain, and biological determinism were front and center during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in American fencing. Many sources from this era laud fencing for being the balance of being active but not too straining for women. According to an article on the Boston Fencing Club, “while fencing is active, excellent exercise, it is not violent, requires no special amount of muscle and straining, and is, therefore, admirably adapted to women.”<sup>21</sup> An 1885 article from *The Weekly Wisconsin* states the “Professor Hartl of the Vienna Conservatorium was to show the advantages of fencing for young girls...fencing is not exhausting or ungraceful, it promotes circulation, invigorates the weakly”<sup>22</sup>. According to a letter written by Charles Tatham to the editor of the *New York Times*, there was a stigma surrounding allowing women to fence at clubs during the turn of the century. While the prevailing morals of the Victorian era dictated that women should exercise to an extent, practicing for a competition was unseemly. For context, this letter was written as a response to a female reporter doing a piece on women fencing at the Fencer’s Club in New York. Tatham deemed the coverage an

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<sup>19</sup> D’Asaro “History of the Amateur Fencers League of America” pg. 32

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> “Article Two—No Title” *The New York Times* 28 December 1880.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

“invasion of its privacy” and that the journal made “many inaccurate and absurd statements regarding ladies who use that club for exercise on certain days of the week.”<sup>23</sup>

Another form of restriction for women was not allowing women to fence saber or epee, only allowing them to fence foil. In the 1965 AFLA rulebook, women were only allowed to fence foil, whereas men could fence all three weapons, foil, saber, and epee. According to a New York Times article on the first national women’s saber competition, “for years, traditionalists in American fencing’s governing body...regarded the idea of women fencing with sabers as loony and even sacrilegious.”<sup>24</sup> Others claimed that these weapons were too dangerous, stating that “a woman could be seriously wounded by a saber”<sup>25</sup> despite wearing protective gear and using a non-lethal weapon.

Another tool to control women in fencing was forcing them to wear skirts and demonizing them when they wore pants. In a trite article written by Paul Gallico in 1935, he rambles on about why women should not wear pants. Gallico claims to come from a position of authority, but upon analysis of his rhetoric, the authority is suspect. His comments on women wearing pants for sports are as follows:

“I don’t know why the little ladies WILL continue to try to imitate men in their actions or their dress, in whatever sport they are playing, instead of developing a style that will go with their strange figures. Won’t you girls ever realize that you aren’t built like men, and that you CAN’T wear the same things WE do and look right?”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tatham, “Charles Tatham to the Editor of the New York Times.” 1894

<sup>24</sup> Pitt, “In Fencing, a New Day for Women.” 1988. Pg. 49

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Gallico, “Pants are for Guys.” 1935

Not only does he infantilize women, but he also alienates them, calling their bodies strange. In another excerpt from that article, he even asserts that only men can wear pants because their legs are the right shape. The following picture is of Mrs. Stuveyant Fish, who was a prominent figure in the fencing community during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



While she is wearing a skirt in this photo, in an article published by the *New York World* in 1937, “Mrs. Fish’s trousers were of black corduroy, while silvery-haired Mrs. Vorhees wore black satin knee breeches. (Skirts went out two years ago; they got in the way of lunging.”<sup>27</sup> While at this point in time women were no longer forced to wear skirts as they had gone out of

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<sup>27</sup> Joyce, “Jabs and Thrusts in Vogue as Society Turns to Fencing.” 1937, pg. 4

vogue, there is still commentary to be made on the impracticality of the breeches. Satin tends to snag easily, which is a counterintuitive choice for a piece of fencing gear. Plus, satin is a light fabric, and is ineffective against a potential hit from an opponent. The reason why breeches for women were made out of satin at this time was because women were only allowed to fence foil, where the target area is exclusively the torso. Therefore, manufacturers were able to justify using satin as a fabric for fencing equipment, as satin breeches could be marketed as a glamorous piece to wear while fencing, which would appeal to the tastes of upper-class women interested in fencing.

In addition to restricting women's activity in fencing, their bodies and clothes were also subject to scrutiny and sexualization. At the turn of the century, articles written on female fencers sexualized them heavily, even though it served no utility to the article. For instance, a 1902 article from the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* says that "in the young girl fencing develops just those muscles that tend to make her lithe and supple, and keep her from growing stout before she enters upon the full maturity of adulthood."<sup>28</sup> In addition to sexualizing minors, this excerpt also demonizes the possibility of women being fat. An article from 1894 describes a female fencing instructor as such:

"Miss Pomeroy is a large, magnificently formed girl, tall and splendidly proportioned; and although slightly inclined to grow heavy, five years' devotion to the foils has preserved the natural grace and outline of her figure, as well as agility of movement."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Fencing for Exercise." *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* 1902 pg. 8

<sup>29</sup> "Society Women Who Fence." 1894

Rather than introduce Miss Pomeroy by stating her accomplishments and history with the fencing club, this article opts to expound upon her figure, how fencing helps to maintain it, and that she might get fat in the future. The reason behind the article's sexualization of Miss Pomeroy is to not only attract lustful men to the sport of fencing, but women who want to stay in shape. By stating how fencing has preserved Miss Pomeroy's figure, this article incentivizes women to take up fencing in order to preserve their figures as well.

To summarize, sexism has had deep roots in fencing, because of how legislators and those in power saw it fit to implement it. The AFLA thought it was necessary to restrict how women fenced, by subjecting them to fence to less time, less points, and in less weapons than men. Women were also scrutinized and restricted to wearing skirts made of impractical material that was counterproductive for movement. Finally, women were sexualized and critiqued for their bodies whenever they fenced.



## Fencing and Racism

Racism is as integral to the development of American fencing, as it is integral to the development of America itself. What is unique about racism, as stated earlier by Andy Shaw, is that it has historically tried to market itself as a white only sport. While this practice could be compared to how fencing was intended to be a gentleman's (upper-class) sport, legislators were much more aggressive, but still a tad subtle when it came to upholding the image of fencing as a white sport. What is important about this section is that racism in American fencing operates similarly to class and sex discrimination. It is also important to recognize how classism and racism are connected in America, and how this connection was exploited by the AFLA.

According to Howard Winant's article on the history of the sociology of race in America, "in the United States, it was seen as "natural" that the black South and Native American peoples were subdued by "more advanced" white races."<sup>30</sup> Winant adds that the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling of 1896, and the Dawes act of 1887 helped with this idea of "civilizing" non-white people. Even though the Dawes act permitted outright ethnic cleansing, and Plessy v. Ferguson approved the continuation of segregation, these acts of blatant racism had to be legally legitimized. Despite having dominance in American institutions, white people felt the need to keep up the thin veneer of American equality and justice, by giving these acts and rulings legal legitimacy. This visage of legal legitimacy is exactly how racism has operated in American fencing, and AFLA operations. They could not be loudly racist, rather quietly racist under the mirage of protocols and legislature.

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<sup>30</sup> Winant, "The Dark Side of the Force: One Hundred Years of the Sociology of Race" pg. 536

So how exactly was the AFLA able to use legality as a means to restrict membership? According to American fencing historian Andy Shaw's article, *A Colorless "League": Crossing the Color Barrier*, "to become a member of the 'league', a man (women could not join) had to be proposed and seconded by another... The league was populated by the 'right people' in New York societies." While there are not many documents on racism in America fencing prior to 1940, one can determine how racial prejudice occurred based on how black people were treated when they tried to apply to New York City athletic clubs in the late 1800's. In order to get a sense of the kind of "right people" that were only allowed into these athletic clubs and by extension fencing clubs. It is important to understand what these clubs were like. In the case of the New York Athletic Club, or NYAC (which coincidentally also had a robust fencing program) the architecture was intended to be elaborate and luxurious, with "a rifle range, an indoor swimming pool, gymnasium, bowling alley, and billiards tables, along with commodious dining and drinking facilities." Then in 1888, "the NYAC acquired land outside the city, where it built a boathouse, an outdoor running track, and tennis courts. Membership in the NYAC became a tangible sign that a man had arrived at a high level of New York society."<sup>31</sup> According to Willis and Rettan's article in the *Journal of Sport History*, titled *Social Stratification in New York City Athletic Clubs 1865-1915*, "the membership policies of the elite athletic clubs, that is, clubs were formed not primarily to get people in, but rather to keep people out." Their reasoning for doing this was because athletic clubs wanted to make sure that they only had societal elites that could be placed "in the social hierarchy"<sup>32</sup> of said athletic club.

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<sup>31</sup> Davies, "Sports in American Life: A History." 2016

<sup>32</sup> Willis, J., and R. Wettan. "Social Stratification In New York City Athletic Clubs, 1865-1915."

There were some instances of fencing clubs allowing black people to fence during the first half of the twentieth century. However, they were not always allowed to remain open and faced heavy scrutiny from others within the American fencing community. For instance, “Santelli’s was the only club that had black people. Now of course, black people were in Alec Hern’s club in the 1930’s. He had black people in his club, but they were ridiculed the club was harassed until they closed.”<sup>33</sup> Among the harassment, Hern’s club was named “The Abyssinian School of Fencing” a pejorative derived from Abyssinia, which is now known as Ethiopia. Alec Hern coincidentally, also coached Violet Barker, who was the first African-American member of the AFLA. Barker got her membership not out of approval but out of skill. She won a WPA citywide championship and her prize was an AFLA membership. The AFLA saw this as a threat to their institution, so “some weeks later, she showed up for an AFLA sponsored tournament at the New York Fencers Club and was met at the door by an AFLA representative. He proceeded to rip up her membership card and sent her away. Violet went home and was never seen in fencing circles again.”<sup>34</sup> Shaw elaborates on Hern’s response, stating that he “threatened a lawsuit against the league” and began the suit, but had to drop it because “Violet refused to testify.”<sup>35</sup> While Hern’s and Barker’s tenacity is something that is worth mentioning, it also highlights the overwhelming permissiveness the AFLA had for racism during the 1930’s and prior. This racial discrimination persisted well past the 1890’s and 1930’s, well into the 1940’s, when “a request from the Amateur Fencer’s League of America that Columbia University’s two Negro fencers be kept from the A.F.L.A competition”<sup>36</sup> As a response, Columbia withdrew from

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<sup>33</sup> Andy Shaw, “In Discussion with the Author” 2020

<sup>34</sup> Shaw, “A Colorless League: Crossing the Color Barrier” 2005. Pg 3

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times* “Columbia Rejects Negro Fencing Ban” pg. 47

the league's competition season, because they were unwilling to exclude any one member of their team for the sake of entering a competition. This action on part of Columbia University is bold, especially considering this was prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Miguel de Capriles, the then-president of the AFLA had an interesting response to Columbia's protest. He stated that "we have never had Negro members in New York, but we have some in Philadelphia and Chicago. We can't sacrifice our 350 New York members in the interest of a few. Columbia had a good point in withdrawing its team."<sup>37</sup> This response provides insight into the reasoning behind the maintenance of institutional racism in the AFLA. When he claimed that New York has never had any black members, it sweeps the existence of Violet Barker under the rug, while also absolving the AFLA of any responsibility of deliberately excluding black people. Another key point is that he views the presence of black people as a threat and accommodating them as a sacrifice for the current members. This line of thinking is on a par with the view that black people were inherently lesser than white people, which was also demonstrated in previous historical events, such as slavery, Plessy v. Ferguson, the 3/5ths compromise, Jim Crow laws, among several others. Finally, De Capriles refuses to assign any responsibility to the AFLA and deems it a favorable action on part of Columbia University to separate themselves from the AFLA, so long as they have black team members.

To summarize, the means by which systemic racism was implemented in American institutions was also utilized in AFLA. Both American institutions and the AFLA used the law to create massive hurdles for black people to jump through in order to have access to the same resources as white people, if not outright banning them from said resources. What is interesting is that American fencing was intent on upholding the image of a white-only sport, such that it

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

implemented strict membership guidelines and was harsh when it came to enforcing it on black people.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, American fencing is arguably one of the most American sports because it shares the all-American traditions of using legality and the importance of hierarchy to justify discrimination. Regarding classism, the AFLA felt the need to manufacture a culture of aristocracy in order to make up for the lack of history, compared to their European counterparts. It started as marketing fencing as a gentleman's sport in the 1700's, and led to discriminatory membership practices and the prohibition of professionalism by the AFLA. In terms of sexism, the basis for it was rooted in biological determinism, which created a narrative that women were inherently weaker than men. This led to women being forced to wear skirts while they fenced, given less membership privileges than their male counterparts, and being barred from fencing saber and epee, as well as not being allowed to fence as long as men. Finally, racism's methodology of using legality to justify discrimination led to black people not only being barred from fencing in tournaments, but from fencing clubs as well.

While sexism, racism, and classism are not enforced by the USFA, the effects of the AFLA's discrimination are long-term. Fencing has garnered a status of being a niche sport, which requires a lot of expensive equipment. Those who cannot afford this equipment, or the club and USFA membership fees, or the costs of travelling to non-local events have significant barriers to entry. Women only make up about a third of the USFA membership demographic, and the turnout for women's saber and women's epee events at NAC's are sorely lacking. Finally, while there are growing numbers of black fencers, they still experience racism from people within the fencing community.

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