

# Comprehensive Rapier Rules Review

September 15, 2017

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## Introduction

In 2016, the Office of the Society Rapier Marshal began a comprehensive review of the rapier rules and all related standards. While the armor requirements for rapier have been changed only once since the beginnings of rapier in the Society, the weapons have evolved substantially. A review was needed to insure that the standards met both the rapier community and Society's current needs and is well positioned for continued evolution. It was time to look at everything with fresh eyes.

As one component of this review, the Society Rapier Marshal formed an independent committee to evaluate the current Rapier Combat Handbook. For the majority of the committee's work, it was comprised of 19 members representing 15 of the 20 kingdoms and including a practicing doctor, a lawyer, peers and non-peers, current kingdom rapier marshals and experienced fighters. The members of the committee were chosen to represent various backgrounds, expertise and geographical diversity to the extent possible from the pool of applicants.

The committee was charged with reviewing all aspects of rapier combat and determining if any changes are required to achieve the stated goal. The committee was tasked to test and evaluate the current armor requirements, review weapon classifications and blade types, create a risk assessment based on the changed weapons types against the unchanged armor standards, and discuss all codified conventions that are being used and can foreseeably be used in the future.

The committee's work served as a significant input to the overall review detailed here. The Society Rapier Marshal would like to extend deep thanks to the members of the committee as well as all the other gentles who contributed their time and effort to this review.

### Evolution of Weapons and Armor in the Society

Rapier combat evolution in the Society has often been the product of the technology and equipment that was available to simulate period rapier combat. This section will serve as a very brief overview of the evolution of weapon availability and armor standards.

When rapier first began in the Society, modern Olympic fencing equipment was the only widely available gear. Modern masks, weapons (foil and epee blades), and armor were commonly used. Combatants could use armor they had constructed, as long as it had approximately the same level of protection as a modern fencing jacket.

In the 1990s, heavier schlaeger blades became more readily available and became the basis for heavy rapier combat. There was some concern that the armor standard was insufficient for these new, heavier blades. Rigid throat protection (i.e. gorgets) became mandatory for use with these weapons. (This requirement represents the only substantial change to the rapier armor standard since SCA rapier combat began.) There was some discussion and debate on whether more armor was needed for puncture resistance, but experimentation demonstrated that additional layers of armor were not required. As a result, the rest of the armor standard was unchanged.

Weapon evolution has also seen other notable developments. Initially, daggers were constructed from rattan, then changed to being made with broken-off foil blades. Later, flexi-daggers became available and were a significant improvement allowing for safer delivery of attacks. Over time, other dagger blades have made flexi-daggers somewhat obsolete, although they are still legal for use.

Due to improved materials and increased interest, heavy rapier blades became available in a variety of lengths, widths, and weights. In addition to the "standard" rapier there has been an increase in the appearance of two-handed weapons on the field. Along with two-handed swords, portions of the community have also devoted time to attempts to engineer a rapier spear with an acceptable risk profile, leading to rule revisions in the past few years to regulate and define such weapons. In 2006, percussive attacks in rapier combat became permissible as a valid attack with the addition of Cut and Thrust combat as an authorizable form.

### Rules Review

The review committee undertook an extensive review of the rapier rules. The changes put forward by the committee were largely clarifying changes, but included one significant recommendation. The committee felt that due to the significant impact on armor requirements, light rapier should be removed from the rules. The committee did not provide any further details or analysis supporting this recommendation.

This Office does not believe it is necessary to re-evaluate the inclusion of light weapons at this time. Rather, light weapons are a component of the risk management issue. The question of the inclusion of light weapons should be examined only to the extent it lowers the overall risk profile. If continuing evaluation shows that to be the case, then this Office will evaluate the removal of light weapons or the need for a different armor standard for light weapons.

A comprehensive rewrite and reformatting of the Rapier Marshal's Handbook is underway to address some of the recommended clarifications.

## Injuries

Injuries in rapier combat can serve as an important measure of the appropriateness of the rapier combat rules. While it is impractical to eliminate all injuries in a physical contact sport, the frequency and type of injuries sustained can serve as an important metric to show where the standards may need strengthening or modification.

### *SCA Rapier Injuries*

The review committee conducted an extensive review of the reported injuries from rapier combat. However their review was necessarily limited by the available data; the reporting of injuries is not always consistent. For example, while an increasing trend of injuries was noted in 2014-2016, this may be due to improved reporting rather than an increase in actual injuries. Additionally, the data shows the number of injuries but without a better grasp on the number of rapier fighters participating, it is impossible to say that the *rate* of injuries is increasing or decreasing. If the number of engagements or participating fighters doubles, one would expect the raw number of injuries to double absent other factors.

The committee examined the injury data by area, weapon type, activity, injury type, etc. The committee reached several conclusions regarding the injury data:

1. For meaningful analysis, higher quality reporting of injuries is required.
2. Head and hand injuries are an area of concern.
3. High impact/calibration is frequently stated as a causative factor.
4. War/melee injuries occur more than tourney injuries, although many fractures occur during practice.

### *Literature Review*

As part of its work, the review committee reviewed existing literature relevant to the types of injuries likely in rapier combat. The committee reviewed approximately 50 scientific papers, abstracts, and books available via the internet, including such sites as the National Institute of Health's PubMed, Google Scholar, and general searches. The committee also examined documentation from SCA Kingdom Rapier Marshals regarding rapier injuries.

While there were no articles in the literature on SCA rapier injuries, there were articles on modern fencing, kendo, and western martial arts injuries. Other areas of research included concussion injuries and stab wound injuries. Crushing injuries to the hand and to the vertebrae were not researched, as these injuries are not a high risk when likelihood and severity are considered.

### Common Fencing Injuries in the Scientific Literature

Of the reviews of fencing injuries the scientific literature, the majority of injuries reported in modern fencing were of sprains and strains, heat exhaustion, broken ribs, and broken fingers. Some of the literature did discuss the possibility of a tragic loss of life; however, none discussed specifics and only spoke of the abstract possibility. The majority of the medical literature on fencing injuries reviewed discussed how to possibly minimized sprains and strains and how to return the fighter back to the field quickly.

### Concussions

The review on concussion scientific papers and articles showed that the articles did not discuss SCA rapier combat specifically nor fencing in general. Of note, there are non-peer reviewed online articles on "weeklywarfare.net" by Gawin Kappler, who went into depth in the topic and cited peer-reviewed literature. Gawin's articles suggested that SCA single rapier shots, using Master Llywd's data (discussed later) as a reference, were routinely not causing concussions, without any outside factors. Outside factors could include more rotational forces and previous injury history. Excessive shots and non-single weapons were not evaluated as part of Gawin's review. Gawin's review and article suggested that jumping/falling into a shot, punching (putting one's mass behind a shot) and kinetic linking (which appears to be swinging the sword baseball bat style) will be the likely causes for concussions.

The review of concussion articles did discuss the lack to self-reporting when it came to concussions, which is of interest to the SCA. In particular, the 2014 book by the National Research Council's Committee on Sports-Related Concussions in Youth which stated in the executive summary:

"Despite increased knowledge and a growing recognition in recent years that concussions involve some level of injury to the brain and therefore need to be diagnosed promptly and managed appropriately, there is still a culture among athletes and military personnel that resists the self-reporting of concussions and compliance with appropriate concussion management plans."(emphasis added.)

What was not conclusive in the scientific review was how to reduce concussions. The scientific articles, including the Sports Related Concussions in Youth did not give definitive answers in how to reduce concussions, other than "don't get hit in the head." Per the literature review, not even the NFL can make a concussion-proof helmet at this time, and several articles agreed that there was not enough evidence to support the prevention of concussion by helmets or headwear.

### Penetration Injuries

The scientific literature review of penetration injuries once again did not discuss SCA rapier combat injuries and, as previously stated, modern fencing penetration injuries discussed in the scientific literature was primarily abstract at

best. However, in part due to the relatively large number of annual fatal stabbings in the United Kingdom, a number of U.K. and Irish labs have been doing research on sharp blades and skin penetration.

Dr. Annaidh's collaborative team wrote an article in the American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology: Official Publication of the National Association of Medical Examiners and had developed a formula to calculate the minimum force needed for a blade or implement to penetrate bare skin in a stabbing incident and showed that a sharp blade only needs about 10 to 20 newtons (or 2.2 to 4.4 pounds).

Dr Sarah Hainsworth, whose research into two main areas, forces involved in stabbing and characterizing tool marks in injury and dismemberment, published an article in 2008 that discussed how lethal stabbings were and how only 20mm (0.7 inches) penetration into a human being caused a 41% likelihood of lung puncture and 60% change of chance of liver or femoral artery rupture. Dr. Hainsworth also discussed how "...The force needed to penetrate skin with sharp knives is relatively low. Once the skin has been penetrated, the force required to enter muscle and underlying fat is even lower."

Dr. G. Nolan, who also works in Dr. Hainsworth's lab, also concluded that If someone is wearing a t-shirt, a knife needs an additional 8 newtons (1.7 pounds) to penetrate skin, while a t-shirt and jacket needs 21 newtons (4.7 pounds).

Using the data from Annaidh, Hainsworth, and Nolan, the total amount force needed to kill a human being with a sharp blade and wearing a jacket (which could be equivalent to a period doublet), is approximately between 2.2 to 9.2 pounds. Baron Llywd's testing data shows the average is approximately 20 pounds. Even the lightest of blows through were at 5 pounds which would, per the penetration data and a sharp blade, punch through bare skin.

### Risk Analysis

The review committee undertook an extensive risk review regarding SCA rapier injuries. Their work is summarized here.

Risk management is a formal professional discipline. It helps to define and rank different sources of risk that may be encountered so that attention can be focused on the most likely or severe risks and efforts can be made toward mitigation when required.

Multiple risk scoring strategies were reviewed from various non-SCA sources including NASA and police work. They were extremely similar. Nomenclature from these sources was merged and made more SCA-specific to produce the risk definitions below. Risks are scored on their severity (or impact or consequence) and their likelihood.

The terminology is focused the level of injury. Other possible terms for severity from the examples are "impact" and "consequence".

- Negligible - injury that does not cause any retirement from the field or require first aid
- Minor - injury resulting in even momentary retirement from the field and/or requires first aid
- Moderate - injury resulting in retirement from the field lasting more than 1 month and/or requiring professional medical intervention
- Major -injury resulting in retirement from the field lasting more than 6 months and/or requiring hospitalization or surgical medical intervention
- Catastrophic -injury resulting in permanent retirement from the field (including death) and/or loss of use of any limb or organ.

Likelihood can be categorized in a similar manner.

- Frequent- may happen once per event
- Likely - may happen once per month in a Kingdom
- Possible - may happen once per year in a Kingdom
- Unlikely - may happen once per year in the Society
- Rare - may happen once per 10 or more years in the Society

The included chart is a common form for presenting and understanding risks and their scores. This will interact with the testing and armor discussion



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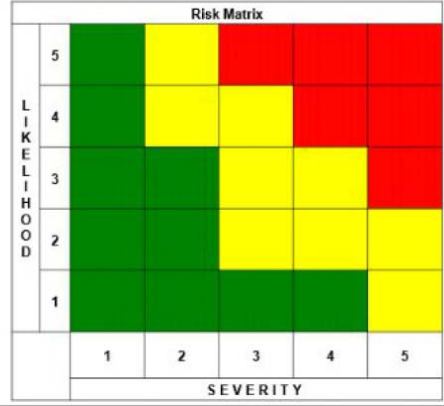
## Proposed SCA Rapier Risk Nomenclature

**Likelihood Descriptions**

- 1 - Rare – may happen once per 10 or more years in the Society
- 2 - Unlikely – may happen once per year in the Society
- 3 - Possible – may happen once per year in a Kingdom
- 4 - Likely – may happen once per month in a Kingdom
- 5 - Frequent – may happen once per event

**Example Risk**  
Heat Exhaustion

- Likelihood = Likely (4)
- Severity = Minor (2)
- L/S = 4/2



**Severity Descriptions**

- 1-Negligible - injury that does not cause any retirement from the field or require first aid
- 2-Minor - injury resulting in even momentary retirement from the field and/or requires first aid
- 3-Moderate - injury resulting in retirement from the field lasting more than 1 month and/or requiring professional medical intervention
- 4-Major - injury resulting in retirement from the field lasting more than 6 months and/or requiring hospitalization or surgical medical intervention
- 5-Catastrophic - injury resulting in permanent retirement from the field (including death) and/or loss of use of any limb or organ.

v 0.3. Master Llyrd Aldrdd. 8/19/16

The next step in the risk management process is to brainstorm and produce a list of potential risks. These risks then gets scored and evaluated. Finally the risks with the highest combined scores will need to have mitigation strategies proposed, selected, and implemented. These potential risks have been analyzed with SCA rapier and fencing injury records and ranked using the Risk Matrix below.

Category	Injury	Reported in SCA &/or fencing injury literature	Likelihood	Severity	Risk rank Green Yellow Red
Bruising	Skin	Y	5	1	Green
	Under nails	Y	2	2	Green
Fractures	fingers	Y	3	3	Yellow
	arm or leg bones	N	1	3	Green
	clavicle	N	1	3	Green
	wrist/knee	N	1	3	Green
	vertebrae	N	1	3	Green
	nose	N	1	3	Green
	ribs	Y	2	3	Yellow
Wounds	Puncture –Torso	Y	2	4	Yellow
	Puncture –Limbs	Y	2	4	Yellow
	Cuts	Y	2	2	Green
		Y	2	2	

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	Split/separated nail	Y			Green
Soft tissue injury	Sprains	Y	4	3	Yellow
	Strains	Y	4	3	Yellow
	dislocations	N	1	3	Green
	crushed trachea	Y	2	4	Yellow
Heat related conditions	Heat stroke	Y	4	3	Yellow
	Heat exhaustion	Y	4	3	Yellow
	Sunstroke	Y	4	3	Yellow
Head Injury	Concussion	Y	3	5	Red
	Eye injury	N	1	3	Green

The current rapier rules take steps to mitigate all Red category risks, and some Yellow category risks. Some risks cannot be effectively managed by the rules (such as a sprain).

Based on the assessment above, the Office believes that the rules are properly addressing the Red and Yellow category risks that have been identified and are within the scope of the rules to manage.

### Weapons and Armor

Rapier armor is designed to reduce the risk of certain specific types of injuries, specifically:

- Puncture injuries to vital areas due to a broken blade or untipped blade (by the use of puncture-resistant material)
- Impact injuries to sensitive areas (the face, throat, etc.) (by the use of rigid protection in masks, gorgets, etc.)
- Lacerations to less critical areas of the body (by the use of abrasion-resistant material)

Rapier armor is not generally designed to reduce the risk to certain other types of injuries such as bruising and minor impact injuries, although it may provide some protection incidentally. All protective equipment comes with a trade-off, and the most relevant one in rapier combat is the risk of heat injury. For example, the risk of puncture injuries could be greatly reduced by adding more armor, but the resulting increase in heat-related injuries (heat stroke, etc.) would likely create more injuries rather than fewer overall.

The issue is one of risk management and the selection of an armor standard that has the best chance to minimize the overall number and severity of injuries.

#### *Weapon Profiles and Cross Sections*

At the start of rapier combat in the Society, modern foil and epee blades were the only weapons available. Given that these weapons tended to break frequently, had a small cross-section, and were sometimes sharp after breaking, there was appropriate concern about a penetration injury and the armor standard was set accordingly.

With the decline of foil and epee and the prevalence of heavy rapier blades, questions have been raised as to whether the original armor standard is still appropriate. Heavy rapier blades usually have a bigger cross-sectional area, and they break very rarely. When they do break, it is often near the hilt, and is nearly always a flat, clean break. A much more common situation is for the tip to come off during a bout creating the risk that a combatant will be hit with the untipped blade. Early testing showed that an untipped heavy rapier (with a flattened tip) required about 25% more energy to penetrate an armor sample. However this data was generated in the earliest days of home experimentation in the SCA, and these experiments should be repeated under more controlled conditions before any action is taken. It is worth noting that one of the early reduced armor experiments concluded that a flat "button" should be permanently attached to the end of all blades in order to increase the cross-section should a tip come off, thus mitigating some of the increased risk of reduced armor.

Recently, weapon profiles have begun changing again. New heavy rapier blades from certain manufacturers are tapering out to a thinner cross-section near the tip than more traditional blades. The cross-sectional area of these

blades begins to suggest the size and shape of a foil or epee as much as the diamond- or oval-shaped area usually associated with heavy rapier blades. Due to the thinner taper, one would intuitively expect these blades to be more prone to breakage in that area. These blades are only just starting to come into use as of this review in the fall of 2017 and it is too early to reach any conclusions, except to serve as a reminder that as weapons have changed in the past, they will continue to do so in the future. The distinction between a heavy rapier and a foil or epee in the rules is not well-defined and relies to a degree on the manufacturer's identification. At what point does a heavy rapier have the same penetration risk as a foil? It will likely be important to expand the criteria for allowed blades to include a cross-sectional area or other similar parameter to better differentiate what constitutes a heavy rapier blade.

To accurately gauge the risk of penetration it will be necessary to investigate more thoroughly the cross-section of weapons where they are likely to break as well as the striking surface area of untipped weapons. This investigation will need to look not only at rapier blades but dagger blades as well.

### *Impact Analysis of SCA Rapier Blows*

While work had been done in the past to examine and compare the protective qualities of armor, the armor is only one part of the equation. It is also important to know how hard the combatant is being struck. Only recently has work been done to assess the force of blows delivered in rapier combat, thanks to the hard work of Master Llwyd Aldrydd and others. Master Llwyd was a member of the review committee and the data collected to date was documented and reviewed by the committee.

Master Llwyd has gathered data from across the Society (to the extent practical) on the force of delivered blows with a variety of weapon types. The summary of this data is shown below.

Weapon	Data Points	Average Force	Standard Deviation
Heavy rapier	408	22	7.72
Heavy rapier – hard blow	198	36	11.3
Two hander, used one-handed	189	23	8.44
Two hander, used with two hands	207	28	10.36
Two hander, “harpoon” shot	171	28	10.42
Alchem spear, fixed hand position	183	31	12.38
Alchem spear, sliding hands	177	36	15.61
Alchem spear, controlled combat	276	38	15.93

It should be noted that the data collected only comes from a very small sample of the overall rapier fighter population. The practical limits of the real world also create limitations in the data; Master Llwyd resides in the Kingdom of Atlantia, and the sampled blows tend to have more substantial representation from the Eastern United States and

less data from western rapier fighters. The data is an excellent starting point, but more data would be needed before any sound conclusions can be reached on the force of blows to be expected.

Nevertheless it is a promising step. Using this methodology, it may be possible to reach a conclusion on how hard of a hit rapier armor should be expected to stop to prevent a penetration injury. Combining this with drop-tester experimentation and more data on weapon cross-sections, it may be possible to develop an armor standard tuned to prevent the identified injuries while being as light as possible to minimize heat injuries.

### *Armor Standards – Next Steps*

The armor standard is an issue of risk management – to select an armor standard that has the best chance to minimize the overall number and severity of injuries. As discussed above, evaluating the risk of a particular event requires examining both the likelihood of an event and the severity of the consequences of the event should it occur. Evaluating overall risk requires examining the risks of the individual events. Armor may reduce the severity of an injury but largely acts by reducing the likelihood of the injury occurring.

This Office believes that more work is needed before a change to the penetration resistance armor standard can be made. The risk of penetration is impacted by three things – how hard we hit, what we hit with, and the armor on the target being hit. Efforts to date have already attempted to address how hard we hit, and the resistance of the armor worn. Work is still needed to survey the cross-sectional area of modern rapier blades, and to determine how to appropriately test the penetration of an armor sample with something simulating a human body behind it. With all three components addressed, efforts can begin to link the science behind the impact of delivered blows and the drop tester. If the results are robust, repeatable and defensible, they can then lead to a change in the standard for penetration resistant material.

There are other changes to the armor standard that can be considered that do not require such extensive data gathering. Proposals have been made to change the protection requirements for the back of the head from penetration resistant material to abrasion resistant material. The proposals argue that combatants should not be receiving blows in to the back of the head as a general matter and the benefits from a decrease in heat injuries would far outweigh the potentially increased risk. This type of change cannot be readily evaluated by experimental data, and would be better supported by a more traditional SCA experimental proposal involving a field trial.

### Conclusions

Based on the information considered in this review, the Office of the Society Rapier Marshal has reached several conclusions. These conclusions are explained here, drawing on the information presented above.

**1. The content of the SCA Rapier Combat Handbook, including all rules and armor standards, are meeting the needs of the Society and the rapier community.** The rules are positioned for continuing evolution, although some improvements may be possible specifically where weapon and armor standards meet. This conclusion is based on the work of the review committee as well as the content of this review overall.

**2. The armor standard as it exists today does not need to be increased.** This conclusion is based on the injury data reviewed by the review committee as well as the literature review. The SCA's years of practical experience show that rapier armor is minimizing the types of injuries it is designed to prevent. There are some areas of concern which are in the process of being addressed already (see below).

**3. While the armor standard does not need to be increased, it may be possible to reduce it and still keep risk to acceptable levels.** Weapons have evolved and may represent less risk of penetration. This risk may further be reduced by improved tipping standards. As a result, it may be possible to "lighten" armor, reducing heat injuries will still preventing penetration injuries. However more information is needed before this can be safely done. SCA experimental programs often take the approach of "Let's try it and see if anyone gets hurt" and if they don't, it must be safe. However the risk analysis shows that potentially severe risks associated with a reduction in armor. As such, field experiments in a customary SCA experimental program are not appropriate for this type of data-gathering. The work on force levels of delivered blows may provide a critical element for a comprehensive look at the level of resistance needed for armor given the blows a combatant is expected to receive. Overall, more work is needed before a reduction in penetration resistant armor can be considered. (See "Next Steps" below.)

Separately from this work, this Office will consider sanctioning an experiment reducing the back-of-the-head protection to abrasion resistant to assess the risk and potential benefits associated with such a change.

**4. There are some areas of concern around head injuries and hand injuries in cut-and-thrust rapier.** This conclusion is based on the SCA injury data. Steps have already been taken to address these issues. These areas should be monitored to determine if the steps taken are sufficient.

**5. In order to mitigate all types of injuries, the SCA rapier community should maintain a focus on keeping calibrations standards from rising and lowering them to the extent practical.** Most types of injury risks escalate with rising calibration standards, so the benefits of keeping calibration to a reasonably low standard has substantial benefits, particularly with regard to concussion injuries.

**6. As blades continue to evolve, it may be necessary to define acceptable parameters for the cross-sectional area of a weapon and better differentiate light and heavy rapiers in the rules.** This is particularly true if the armor standard is modified based on assumptions about the weapon in question. Work examining the cross-sectional area of weapons is needed and should be sponsored by the Society Rapier Marshal's Office.

**7. Meaningful learning from injury data is limited by the quality of injury reporting.** The Society should take all reasonable steps to improve the quality of injury reporting data.

### Next Steps

Based on the results of this review, the Office of the Society Rapier Marshal will:

**Continue to focus on improved injury reporting** – This Office believes that injury reporting has improved over the years. However, meaningful analysis of injury data is only as good as the reporting it is based on. This Office recommends the Society Marshal establish a uniform reporting format and guidelines that can be used to gather information across all the martial disciplines. It is understood that the vast majority of SCA members are not medically trained and the reporting will continue to be very high level and only as reliable as the information that is provided. Further, regulation on the protection of medical information may also limit the amount of information the SCA may be able to collect while avoiding an increased regulatory burden.

**Continue to maintain a focus calibration standards** – A rise in the overall calibration standard, either from within the rules or just by the force of culture, will lead to increased injury risk, and potentially require increases in armor to mitigate this risk. It is therefore important to maintain a reasonable and consistent calibration standard.

**Establish a path forward for evaluating changes to the penetration-resistant armor standard** – There have been several proposals to reduce the armor standard in the past. This Office will establish a path forward specifying the work needed before a reduction to the armor standard can be considered. It is hoped that those interested will then understand the work needed to reach that result, and will apply their efforts towards producing the necessary data and evidence. The Office will not consider any proposals or experiments for reduced armor that do not address the criteria for data and evidence that have been identified.

**Establish an experiment to evaluate reduced back-of-the-head protection** – The Office will work with interested Kingdoms to establish an experiment to reduce the back-of-the-head protection to abrasion-resistant material. Once that experiment is complete, the Office will consider appropriate rule changes accordingly.

**Consider more specificity in weapon standards** – As weapons continue to evolve, it will soon be necessary to know when a rapier is a rapier. This Office will evaluate more specificity around the definition of acceptable weapons. This may include cross-sectional area or other parameters.

### Acknowledgements

This review would not be possible without the hard work, knowledge, and experience of many gentles throughout the Society and the rapier community. The Society Rapier Marshal would like to express thanks to them for their hard work and dedication to the Society and their fellow rapier fighters.

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