

Questions

Bob Anderson

The force of fencing is forever with him

St. John's was recently gifted with the company of a very interesting fellow named **Bob Anderson**, the Technical Director of the Canadian Fencing Association. Anderson's skills at fencing have taken him into many diverse and interesting situations, including the inside of Darth Vader's costume in two "Star Wars" epics, to safely choreograph the light-saber action sequences. As Technical Director of the CFA, Anderson is a full time employee whose duties include the compilation of coaching manuals in fencing and the development of all technical aspects relating to the sport. He was in St. John's to report to the annual meeting of the Association, and Kathie Millest separated him from a busy schedule long enough for one very engaging conversation.

The Herald: When did your involvement with fencing begin, and for what reasons did you start?

Anderson: Actually, it was more by accident of the war — the last war — than anything else, because I had joined the marines and went to sea during the war. When the war was over I had become very keen on physical fitness and sport, and they thought that I had a certain amount of talent so they sent me to the physical education school where, for some reason, I managed to excel in fencing. In 1948, after the war, they sent me to Great Britain, as assistant national coach to the French Olympic Coach, to develop our national coaching scheme. I sort of got caught up in it and, within my first year, got into the Commonwealth Games in 1950 in Auckland, and I was in teams in the Royal Championships the year after ... and I haven't stopped fencing since!

The Herald: It seems like a sport with very different, specialized skills involved. What kind of training do you have to undergo and what skills make it so distinct?

Anderson: Well, fencing perhaps is no different from the other combat sports. Basically, they develop the same skills. First of all, you have to be very fit to be a good fencer, because you have to move fast. To do that you have to have strong muscles, particularly in the legs. But, having developed the physical skills, you must also develop the mind...which happens probably at the same time, though you can separate the two. So you have the tactical aspect of the sport, which is rather like physical chess; instead of playing it on the board, you play it with an opponent whom you must out-think physically. Then you can add specific skills like speed of reaction, which is very important in a high speed sport like fencing; quickness of eye, the ability to see what's going on and to interpret that; and the ability to think ahead of the opponent.

The Herald: It's certainly not a young sport! The days of chivalry go way back in history. When and where did it originate?

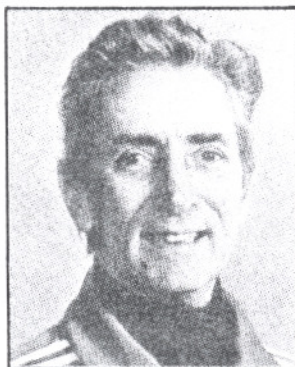
Anderson: Well, fencing didn't originate as such. It evolved out of war-like activities. All of the combat sports are virtually the same — you can trace the history of boxing, judo, fencing away back to war-like activity. And fencing evolved out of the early days when one carried a sword into battle and bludgeoned his opponents to death with enormous great swords. Actually, it was the invention of gunpowder in the 17th century that made the sword obsolete in battle. Then

gentlemen carried them to defend their honour and their beautiful young ladies, and in order for them to survive in a duel they had to go to some practice area, which is called a fencing cell. In the fencing cell they practiced the art of duelling with swords that were blunted, quite obviously, and that's how the practice sword evolved.

So, I suppose the sport of fencing evolved around Europe, particularly in France and Italy — two of the foremost countries of modern fencing. Since the war Eastern Europe has taken over the leading roles in the sport of fencing.

The Herald: Earlier you said that you took part in the Olympics, and from there you went into coaching because you had turned professional, I assume. From the coaching you evolved into a special, unique kind of coach as one of the action sequence co-ordinators in motion pictures. How and when did this come about?

Anderson: Well, it coincided with my first Olympics in 1952 in Helsinki and I had enjoyed a couple of weeks



Bob Anderson (left) was a personal coach to Mark Hamill (right) in many action sequences of the "Star Wars" movies.

in London. In those days, it wasn't highly organized and there was not a lot of money available, so you didn't send a complete team to the Olympic Games. In fencing, you sent a sabre team or foil team, and you went just for the event and came right back afterwards. Well, I was in the sabre team and I had about two weeks to wait in London before being shipped off to Helsinki. It was there that I got a phone call from the studios up in Alstrey saying they needed three expert swordsmen and had heard that I was quite good. They wanted me for a fight sequence. So, naturally, I went along and it was Errol Flynn's *Master of Ballantre*. I met Errol, fenced for ten days on the film, and we got along very well. When I came back from the Olympics he invited me out to Italy to finish the film off. That way, I became a member of 'Equity' and developed into a film stunt man and eventually into a fight scene co-ordinator.

The Herald: Your most recent involvement with action sequence choreography has been the "Star Wars" films. Though you didn't work in the first "Star Wars" movie, you did contribute to "The Empire Strikes Back" and "Revenge of the Jedi". What's the story on that?

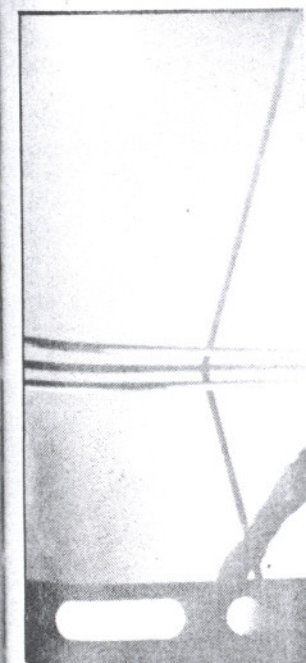
Anderson: I wasn't involved. I was working on another happens quite often — two same time, both wanting sw at the time but my partner, reographer on the first *Star* the job to do the second one and asked if I was available because there's a very long quence in there, and you actor to this sort of thing ... Darth Vader, because the ou heavy, the vision is very rest do it with Mark Hamill (Lu posed, with no protective cl to double Darth Vader, whi only a mask, body and clothi it. I spent about seven mont and practicing, building up tl filming it. And I just got *Revenge of the Jedi*, which

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Anderson: I wasn't involved in the first one because I was working on another film at the time, which happens quite often — two projects come up at the same time, both wanting swordsmen. Well, I was busy at the time but my partner, Peter Diamond, the choreographer on the first *Star Wars* movie was offered the job to do the second one as well. So he called me and asked if I was available to double as Darth Vader because there's a very long and dangerous fight sequence in there, and you don't normally expose an actor to this sort of thing ... particularly the one with Darth Vader, because the outfit is very restrictive, very heavy, the vision is very restricted too, and you have to do it with Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker) who is exposed, with no protective clothing. Thus, they decided to double Darth Vader, which was easy because it's only a mask, body and clothing. That's how I came into it. I spent about seven months on that film, rehearsing and practicing, building up the fight sequence and then filming it. And I just got back in April from doing *Revenge of the Jedi*, which was equally interesting.

The Herald: That's great! Besides the fact that you perform the laser duel, did you also coach Mark Hamill himself?

Anderson: Yes, I was mostly involved in the rehearsal stage. He and I were working together to get these sequences absolutely correct. In that sense, I was coaching him. His coach, in many ways, was also Peter Diamond, an excellent swordsman and fight arranger. He was working with the film and Mark long before they actually started shooting. I know for a fact that Mark spent about three months preparing for the role, with weight training, a certain amount of other martial arts training and certainly some swordplay. He's quite a gymnast and an athlete as well. So it's a continuing thing, where we all work together towards the end product. My coaching part was involved mostly around the actual filming of the sequences.

The Herald: What are some of the difficulties you encounter in coaching actors for a role, as opposed to coaching real athletes?

Anderson: Well, safety is important so I think I'll start with that. In modern fencing you've got protective clothing and a mask, so the chances of getting hurt are

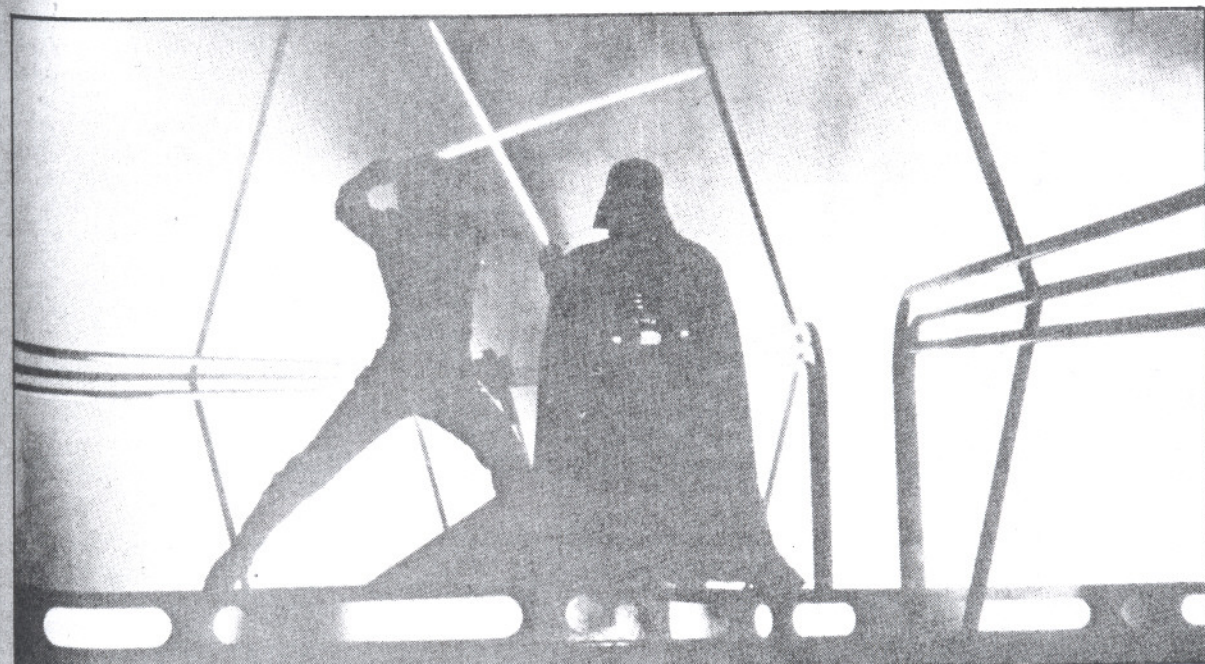
very slim. However, in the film industry where you can't wear a mask, the chances of injury are great and you've got to know what you're doing. If you double for somebody like Darth Vader, or some baddie, and are fencing with a star you can never allow a fault, or a mistake, that could hurt that person. The stunt men that are involved in fight sequences are very well trained in their art, and are trained in avoiding a 'hurt' situation. It can look authentic and dangerous, but it shouldn't be. If you make a punch you pull that punch. You have to train yourself in the art of making it look good when it's not really as dangerous as it may seem. The Darth Vader bit was dangerous because of the restricted vision. Half the time I had no idea where Mark Hamill was! If the film made it look relatively easy, it was because we had rehearsed the sequence so many times it just had to be right.

The athlete is entirely different, in attitude, from the actor. Coaching an athlete builds up to one end product, like competing in a competition. So if I'm coaching you for fencing, then you're my girl in that competition and the object is to win. But, if you're an actress, you know you're going to win — or lose — at the end. So we approach the coaching process in a different way. In the film industry we try to make it look dangerous, aesthetically appealing, and to fit in with the director's ideas. The props, the set, and all those things must be taken into account. But from the athletic point of view, from actual fencing competition, we lean more upon developing the technical skills in true combat situations, and things like that.

The Herald: The Darth Vader character is one enormous form on the screen. When you were in that suit how on earth did you fill it out?

Anderson: Darth was quite large — 6 foot 7 inches to be exact. Obviously, I had to be built up quite a bit to fit the bill. I'm quite small compared to David Prowse (who wore the 'Vader' costume the rest of the time)! I had to wear Turkish lifts, which made it even more dangerous for me. My mask and helmet were built up with about three inches of padding inside, and I wore American football shoulders to make me bigger. In actual fact, when I get all that gear on you couldn't tell the difference between me or Prowse!

The Herald: Thank you!



The fight sequence between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker was rehearsed meticulously, since much

of the time Anderson could not even see where Hamill was standing!