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## Out to Lunge

By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

SLASH and burn, that's Nicole Mustilli's style. It has been since her days at Columbia High School in Maplewood.

Pouncing like a tiger. Thrusting.

But these days, the stakes are higher for the 22-year-old Air Force second lieutenant, who with each touch lets out a yell, a reverberating screech -- as much an emotional release as a tactic of intimidation.

At the World Championship of Fencing in Budapest from June 30 to July 2, Ms. Mustilli and her teammates, Chris Becker and Mariel Zagunis of Portland, Ore., and Sada Jacobson of Atlanta, defeated the top-seeded Italian squad to take first place. Never before had an American fencing team captured a gold medal.

In a videotape of the fiery young woman with a cover girl smile, more than her deftness with a saber is on display. Her feet are clad in running shoes instead of the traditional fencer's shoe; she purposefully strides back to her starting position after each point, curly pigtails bouncing and poking out of the back of her mask.

As the American flag was raised above those of Italy and third-place France, the soft-spoken Ms. Mustilli recalled, "All I kept saying was 'Oh my gosh, it's going to be our flag. It's going to be our national anthem. We're not going have to sit through some other national anthem we don't know. It's going be ours, ours!' I was in such shock. It doesn't feel at that moment as wonderful as you think it would feel because you're numb, just totally numb, like in a dream."

As for the United States Fencing Association, it hopes to make these kinds of conquests with the saber more of a reality and less of a dream. "The participation of women in what was until recently considered only a sport for men has developed significantly in the past several years," the association says, "and is proposed to be included in the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece."

At 5 feet 4 and 135 pounds, Ms. Mustilli is about average size for a fencer. To give herself a mental edge, she practices visualization exercises in which she envisions herself defeating her opponent and routinely repeats such affirmations as, "I'm the best; I enjoy winning; I'm ambitious and self-assured."

"Psychology is huge," she said. "Anyone can beat anyone on any day. I think that's what's pretty neat about the sport. All the things that you have to hold inside on a normal basis get to come out on the strip," the four-foot-wide surface on which the sport is played out.

"She has a good spirit for fencing," said Vladimir Lilov of the Lilov Fencing Academy in Montclair, who has been coaching Ms. Mustilli since 1992. "She has the potential to go to the Olympic Games" -- even though for now women's saber isn't an Olympic event.

Considered a more aggressive, hence "masculine," weapon than foil or epee, saber "comes from your cavalry, where you can only hit the person from the waist up," explained Ms. Mustilli's father, Frank Mustilli, president of Allegiance Community Bank in South Orange.

The combative action and lively pace of saber -- in which the target is the body above the hips, including arms and head -- attracted Ms. Mustilli when she began entering national competitions. Previously she had fenced foil -- using a more flexible blade and with the torso only as target -- at Columbia, where she was captain of the fencing team in her senior year. At the University of Notre Dame, stiff foil competition led her to switch to epee -- using a stiffer blade and with the whole body as fair game -- and she was named All-American in her junior and senior years and captain of the university's epee team in 1999.

"Her portfolio is quite extensive," her father said. "She's able to reach out and take a foil or epee move and turn it into a saber move. That plus her passion and fire make her an opponent you definitely have to contend with."

Although Mr. Mustilli was North Atlantic fencing champion in his junior and senior years at Montclair State College and had coached the Caldwell College fencing team, the sport was rarely discussed when she was growing up, recalled his daughter. Her own interest in fencing wasn't piqued until an eighth-grade assignment required her to make a video. The fencing equipment in her family's garage was within easy camera range, and that is when she got the idea that fencing might be a good sport for her to try in high school.

"I don't know what really attracted me to it," she said. "But I know what made me stay with it: After the first week of practice I was beating the starters."

Her involvement in the sport coaxed her father out of fencing retirement, and he became a volunteer coach at Columbia High, which has since become a fencing powerhouse in the state, with an 85-7 record over the last seven years. Ms. Mustilli's sister, Marisa, now a student at St. John's University in New York, also took to the fencing strip. Last year her collegiate record was 52-1.

"In the under-20s, my sister and I pretty much dominated the national scene because there weren't that many women saberists," said Nicole.

Quickly rising in the fencing ranks, thanks in part to daily lessons from their father, the sisters occasionally found themselves competing against each other in tournaments. "We really don't like fencing each other," Nicole Mustilli said. "I don't mind fencing her in terms of 'I'll beat her into the ground.' It's not a big deal. But if I beat her, she gets very, very, very upset and I feel terrible."

But big sister has not always come out on top. In 1997, recalls Nicole, "Marisa beat me in the under-19 nationals; I beat her at the Junior Olympics, but she wound up winning the Junior Olympics because it was double elimination."

Marisa said of Nicole: "She's very motivated; she's very strong, dedicated. She loves fencing, she loves practicing. I think that's the reason why she does so well."

Ms. Mustilli enrolled in Notre Dame's ROTC program in her freshman year as an engineering student and stuck with it, even when she changed her major to science-business and lost her scholarship as a result. "I've always been fascinated with the military," she said.

Commissioned as a second lieutenant the day before her college graduation in 1999, she was accepted into the Air Force's World Class Athlete program, which pays high-level competitive athletes while allowing them to train full time for up to two years before the Olympics. The program also reimburses expenses for coaching and equipment and for travel and lodging for competitions.

During the year of training before this year's World Fencing Championship, Ms. Mustilli was required to report for office duty at McGuire Air Force Base in Wrightstown only about a dozen times.

Ms. Mustilli got assigned to the Mildenhall Royal Air Force base near Cambridge, England. She expects to leave for a three-year tour of duty on Sept. 15. Although she has not yet been given the particulars of her assignment, her specialty is the services field, supervising the provision of lodging, fitness and food for base visitors.

To stay in competitive form, she will continue to fence, but at her own expense and on her own time. While teaching this summer at the Penn State fencing camp, Mr. Lilov has been scrambling to find her a world-class coach in Great Britain.

Like any good saberist, who must strategize three to four moves ahead, Ms. Mustilli has a long-range plan in mind. She would like to work her way up to Air Force captain, yet hopes to rejoin the World Class Athlete program. (The Air Force allows athletes to participate in the program two times.) If accepted, she'd like to return to South Orange in 2002, to train full time for the Summer Games in Athens, birthplace of the Olympics, in 2004.

"I'm definitely going to be competing for as long as I can," she said.

#### Where to Learn How to Parry and Thrust

The history of fencing in New Jersey goes back to the 1950's when Italian immigrants introduced the sport to Newark, according to Frank Mustilli, a fencing coach at Columbia High School in Maplewood.

"Today New Jersey has the largest section of high school fencers in the U.S.," Mr. Mustilli said, with 34 high schools participating.

"Any person can be trained to be a fencer. Fencing is physical chess. Not speed but controlled accuracy is the attribute of a good fencer."

Augustine B. de la Llave, director of the En Garde! Fencing Club in West Orange, said: "Ten is a good age to start. That's when children physically start to mature and mentally they can grasp the concepts."

At En Garde! 40 percent of the fencers are age 10 to 17, another 40 percent are 35 to 70, and the rest are between those ages, he said.

Besides exercise and recreation, what's the appeal of the sport? Lisa Campi, a coach at Salle Santelli New Jersey, a fencing club that meets at the Santelli fencing equipment headquarters in Englewood, said, "There's nothing like hitting someone without getting arrested; it's therapy."

Here are some of the places where fencers of all ages and levels meet to compete. They all offer lessons in foil, epee and saber.

Bushido Fencing Center, 118 Broadway, Hillsdale; (201) 666-3550. Group lessons, age 9 and older; also offers yoga exercises for fencers.

En Garde! Fencing Club, 12 Old Indian Road; (973) 736-2446. Private lessons, 10 and older.

Fencing Academy of South Jersey, 12 Colonial Square Shopping Center, Route 130 South and Church Road, Cinnaminson; (609) 786-7416. Private and group lessons, 5 and older.

Lilov Fencing Academy, Youth Consultation Services Building, 1 Sutherland Road, Montclair; (973) 984-0373. Private and group lessons, 8 and older.

Salle d'Armes Pongo, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken; (888) 927-6687. Private and group lessons, 12 and older.

Salle Santelli New Jersey, 465 South Dean Street, Englewood; (201) 871-3946. Private and group lessons in the three weapons, 8 and older.

Westfield Fencing Club, All Saints Church, 559 Park Avenue, Scotch Plains, (908) 789-9696. Private and group lessons, 10 and older.

Photo: Nicole Mustille in her family's house in South Orange, wears her World Championship of Fencing gold medal. (Don Standing for The New York Times)