

# EN GARDE!

## New Zealand Fencing Championships

ON November 16, and for four days thereafter, about forty agile men and women, clad in white canvas, with contraptions resembling wire meat-safes on their heads, will be doing their best to hit one another with the long thin strips of steel which they hold in their hands. They will also spend a great deal of time discussing, in a curious jargon, part English, part French, and part Italian, whether the strips of steel have succeeded in reaching the mark.

They will be fencers, and the occasion will be the second annual championship meeting of the New Zealand Amateur Fencing Association, which will be held in Wellington from November 16 to November 21, inclusive. It will be a Centennial sports fixture, and fencing clubs from all over the country will be sending their best blades to take part in the individual men's and women's teams' matches. Had it not been for the war, the entry list would certainly have been larger, and Australia might also have sent a contingent; but war or no war, it is hoped that the tournament will be at least as successful as that in Christchurch last year, when competitive fencing in New Zealand was first put on a national basis.

### Back to the Past

Members of the public who visit the tournament will be welcomed. Unless they know something about fencing they may also be slightly perplexed. For modern swordsmanship is a complicated pastime as well as a very vigorous exercise. With much justification its adherents claim that it is also the most ancient, most historic, and most romantic of all athletic sports. Cricketers may make much of their Hobbs or their Bradman, but can they, ask the fencers, produce anyone as glamorous as d'Artagnan or Cyrano de Bergerac? And long before the chasing of a muddy ball had started to become a national habit, the science of the sword had a literature all its own. A deadly literature it was, too.

### Gunpowder Produced Fencing

Gunpowder, which eventually turned the military sword into a useless ornament, produced, by a strange paradox, the art of swordsmanship. So long as knights were encased in heavy armour, they merely hacked and hewed at one another, with none of the intricate sword-play that characterised later duelling. It was not until the invention of gunpowder made armour obsolete that we find the beginnings of a system of defence with the sword itself. And so on to the hey-day of duelling, in the reigns of Louis XIII. and Louis XIV., when personal honour was so touchy that it was an occasion for a challenge and crossed rapiers if a man so much as disliked the tilt of your hat.

Now, with high explosive supreme and men and machines going back into armour, fencing has become purely a pastime of peace, and single combat and duelling "with the buttons off" is now almost as dead as the old fire-eating

gallants who made it their hobby. The average modern fencer may not realise it, but his sport is a striking testimony, in the fact that it is now no more than a sport, to the truth that man is slowly conquering his own warlike instincts.

But the traditions of the past remain in spite of the buttons on the foils, the masks on the faces, and the peaceful intentions of the opponents; and they are what make fencing such a fascinating and intricate pastime — and to the uninitiated onlooker, a rather perplexing spectacle. Those traditions are to be found in the elaborate courtesies of the fencing match, the jargon of "lunge," "parry," "riposte," "remise," and so on, and in almost every movement and posture of the fencers. Each twist of the wrist, each flash of the foil, has a history behind it. Once, some duellist's very life depended on just that little deflection of the opposing blade; and he probably wrote it down for others to follow. That curious stance of coming on guard, for instance—a kind of standing-up squat on the haunches which so intrigues the newcomer—took 275 years of trial and error and bloodshed before it was perfected.

### The Seconds

And those seconds, who stand at each of the four corners of the fencing "piste" and stop the bout so frequently to argue about whether A. really hit B. on the target, or whether B. had "the right of attack"—there was a time when their function was far from being purely conversational. They went to see fair play; to make sure, perhaps, that A. wasn't wearing a chain-mail shirt under his doublet, or that B. hadn't put poison on his rapier tip. And sometimes they weren't merely content with watching. They got into the fight too, and were killed along with the principals.

Now it is different; and the judging of fencing matches by the seconds and the umpire is almost as important and intricate as the fighting of them. Fencing is the art of debate with the sword, and in all debating there are rules and formalities to observe.

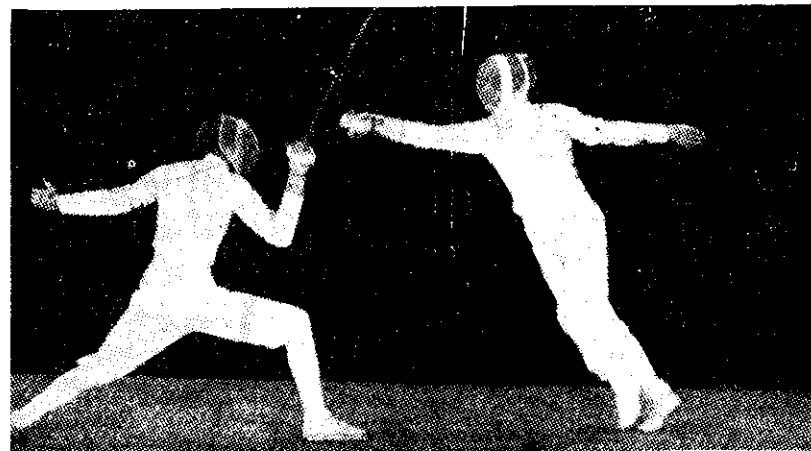
### With Three Weapons

In the coming championship matches in Wellington, there will be fighting with three weapons — foil, épée and sabre. Each has a style all its own, and a code of rules to govern its use, such rules having been laid down by the world controlling body for fencing, the Fédération Internationale d'Escrime. Now that fencing in New Zealand is controlled by a national association all championship matches must be conducted strictly on the same lines as the tournaments at the Olympic Games, where fencing has long been an important feature. There must be regulation of weapons, a panel of judges, and a Court of Honour to decide any ticklish disputes. For the sword is still "your onlie gentlemanlike weapon."

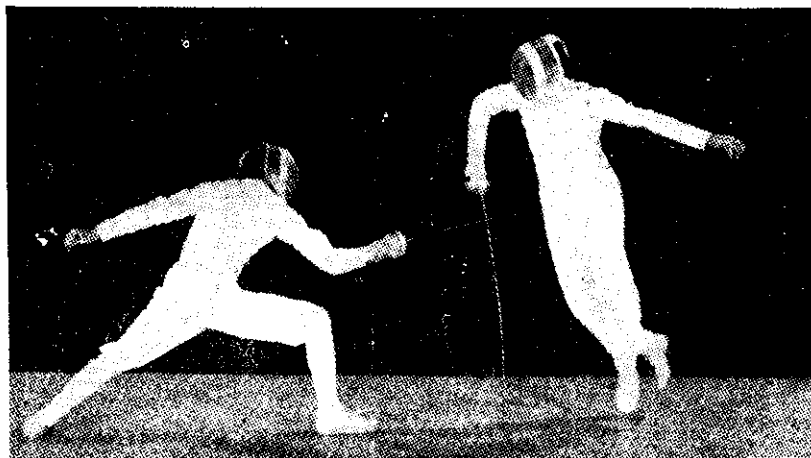
A talk on fencing and the New Zealand Championships, by Gordon Mirams, M.A., will be given from 2YA on Friday, November 17, at 7.30 p.m.



EPEE FENCING: The fencer on the left parries an attack



Foiled in this, the fencer on the right tries a running attack, called a *flèche*, but is parried again



Above: From the left comes a riposte which is parried; but right's new attack misses (below) and he is touched on the chest

