Fancy a sport where you get to put your opponents to the sword? Actually, it's a lot safer than it looks.

BY KENNY TAN

FORGET soccer. When it comes to getting a mental workout as well as a physical one, young people such as 19-year-old Rachel Lam are picking up the sword.

When the first-year Singapore Management University (SMU) economics undergraduate puts aside her lecture notes and textbooks in the evenings, she lunges and thrusts at her opponents with her trusty epee – that Zorro-esque weapon characterised by a triangular cross-section with a large, round guard to protect the wrist.

"I got hooked after I first signed up for a fencing clinic," said Miss Lam, who took up the sport in August last year.

Mr Adrian Lee, president of Fencing Singapore, said there are now about 500 fencers under the purview of its 14 affiliates with youths comprising about 75 per cent of the total, not including clubs in schools that come under the Ministry of Education (MOE).

This is a jump from roughly 350 fencers about four years ago.

Local clubs such as Z-Fencing and Fencing Masters are seeing an increase in youth membership as well – 70 and 20 per cent respectively – from 2002.

Some, like 22-year-old Shaun-Paul Lopez, have been inspired by fantasy genres, which have a following among youth audiences.

The multimedia technology diploma holder, who is studying for a sports science degree from the University of Western Australia, credits his love for fencing to his interest in swords, mediaeval knights and the influence of the blockbuster Lord Of The Rings movie trilogy.

He said: "I see fencing as a sport that requires the fencer to think many steps ahead of his opponent – like a chess player."

Fencing Singapore's Mr Lee said: "That we got one gold and two bronzes in the last SEA games probably helped to promote the sport, too."

Since fencing was recognised as a CCA sport last year by the MOE's Co-curricular Activities Branch, more clubs in schools and institutions such as ITE (Baldest) and Ngee Ann Polytechnic have fuelled the interest.

Plus, there are the competitions.

Z-Fencing's director, Ms Teo Ah Heok, said: "There are now more competitions such as the Under-20s, Cadets (for those below 18), Under-17s and Minime (Under 14s) for young fencers to hone their skills at the national level.

Coaches are quick to point out that the sport is non-violent – contrary to its swashbuckling image in the movies.

Mr Jeffery Lopez, resident coach of Fencing Masters, said: "Fencing is definitely safer. It's even more tedious than what people see in the movies. It is a very disciplined sport that requires hard work and focus on the fundamentals."

He speaks from over 34 years of fencing experience.

Despite the rigorous training, youth fencers are undaunted.

"I do intend to stick with fencing for the rest of my university years," said Miss Lam, "maybe even for the rest of my life."

The writer, 21, is a first-year economics student at the Singapore Management University.

PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

SWASH AND BUCKLE: Forget the flashy moves in the movies. Fencing is really a very disciplined, even tedious, sport. If you don't believe it, Mr Lopez and Miss Lam will help you see the, uh, point.

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