

The cut and thrust

Personnel Today's intrepid hacks recently found that looking silly in a mask and flailing a rubber sword makes for a great team bonding day. Helen Williams reports.

of office life

Do you know your feint from your foil, or your parry from your epee? This is just some of the terminology of the Olympic sport of fencing, which, as the *Personnel Today* team found out, is a lot more complicated than Johnny Depp makes it look in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Full of confidence, we headed off to a London gym for a two-hour fencing lesson, courtesy of Red Letter Days. Half-an-hour in, we all looked hot and slightly ridiculous in our masks and plastic body armour. Our friendly instructor Nick Payne, a former British number one in the sport, took us through the basics.

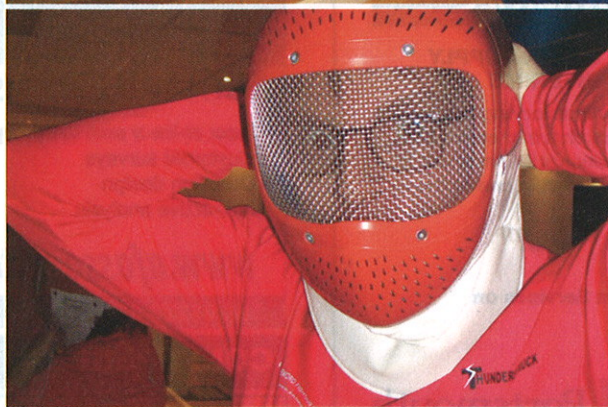
He believes fencing makes a particularly good corporate bonding activity. "It offers both a physical and mental challenge, and requires balance and co-ordination rather than just strength," he says.

"As such it's a great leveller, as all sexes, ages, and of course degrees of corporate seniority can take part together. Those who are usually meek and mild in the office can prove to be great fencers because they might be better at analysis – an important element of the sport."

In the interest of basic common sense, we were only allowed to wield bendy beginners' rubber foils, rather than the razor-sharp real thing, which made a peculiar buzzing noise every time they made contact with a sweaty colleague.

Picturing ourselves as the next Errol Flynn or Luke Skywalker, we kicked off with a safety briefing and warm-up, followed by an introduction to the essential footwork.

Having equipped us with foils and masks, Payne took us through a few basic techniques. Within an hour we had entirely failed to master the lunge (self-explanatory), parry (attempting to block the attack),



From the top... Elaine takes the lunge; Rob gets his kit on; the team (left to right) Linda Kimberley, Elaine Potter, Rob Moss, Helen Williams, Guy Logan with instructor Nick Payne.

RED LETTER DAYS GOES MOBILE

Red Letter Days has launched mobile corporate events, taking experiences direct to corporate clients across the UK.

Red Letter Rewards, the company's corporate division, offers two options: either a taster event giving companies the opportunity to sample a number of experiences onsite at specialist venues, from beauty treatments to sushi making; or it can bring a selection of full experiences to company offices, venues and even homes. This is aimed at meeting increased demand for incentive and motivational activities, while minimising cost and time wasted on travel.

riposte (responding with your own lunge), and feint (moving your own foil out of the way of an attack and, theoretically, making contact with your opponent – much harder than Payne made it look).

Then it was into pairs for duelling and fighting games, before we put all we had learned into practice with a battle against an opposing team. The chance to try some real swashbuckling was great fun, and really brought out the competitive journalistic spirit in all of us, although sadly this enthusiasm had little effect on our technique.

Finally, we were given a demonstration of the three different swords used in fencing – a real foil, epee and particularly lethal-looking sabre, all used quite differently within the rules of fencing, and all far too dangerous to give to unco-ordinated hacks. We felt like Zorro though, even if we didn't have quite the same panache, and that was enough for us.

@ Red Letter Days
→ www.redletterdays.co.uk

@ Teambuilding: All together now
→ personneltoday.com/46143.article

@ Choosing the right teambuilding event for your team
→ personneltoday.com/42271.article

WHAT THE PERSONNEL TODAY TEAM MADE OF THEIR SWASHBUCKLING SESSION

■ "It's a terrific activity, and a great leveller. Because it's a very niche sport, it's pretty

unlikely that anyone on a team has done it or even knows much about it, so everyone starts from the same level. What's more the masks can make it difficult to recognise each other, so you can effectively attack your colleagues without them really knowing who it is. It was also great to see the extent to which people abandoned the instruction of the trainer in favour of

some childish reckless swashbuckling more akin to kids' TV classic *Dogtanian*.

■ Rob Moss, web editor
■ "This was a fun way to pretend to be in a film. The actual fights were definitely the best part – it's a good thing the foils were rubber!" Elaine Potter, picture researcher

■ "What a great way to spend an afternoon. I'm not quite up to the standard of

Geena Davis – Morgan in *Cutthroat Island* – but who cares, it was fun."

Linda Kimberley, events administrator

■ "The childhood fantasy of hacking away at other people with real swords usually remains unfulfilled, so this was great fun. I've yet to see research that links declining engagement levels in the workplace with the lack of real-life sword fighting



experience, but I'm sure it's only a matter of time." Guy Logan, reporter

