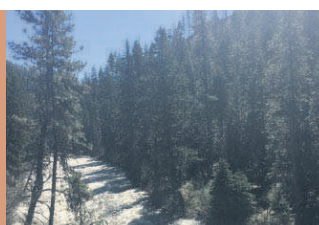




Explore Arches
National
Park/4C



Robot finds
'monster' in
Loch Ness/9C



Hike the
North
Fork/10C



In this Jan. 29 photo, Chris Barrilleaux, 27, left, fences with his coach, Sam Aldridge, at the Salem Fencing Club in Salem.

Anna Reed/Statesman-Journal via AP

EN GARDE ON WHEELS

Wheelchair fencing a joy to man with cerebral palsy

By ANNA REED
Statesman Journal

Chris Barrilleaux leaves his home once a week. Every Friday night, the 27-year-old has a half-hour fencing lesson. His mother, Julie Miller, prepares him for the outing. It takes her nearly 20 minutes to put on his leg braces, tennis shoes and protective fencing jacket. His wheelchair is lifted into the back of their van for the half-hour drive from their Aurora home to the Salem Fencing Club.

Barrilleaux lives with cerebral palsy. The neurological disorder causes limited muscle coordination and involuntary movements. He was born with the condition, though it was likely worsened after surviving meningitis as an infant. Because of the limited muscle control, he cannot speak or control the volume of the sounds he makes.

He is dependent on a wheelchair and the help of his mother for everything he does. Everything except fencing.

The sport allows Barrilleaux to compete one-on-one. Both fencers sit in wheelchairs a sword's length apart. The short bursts of swordwork let his muscles have breaks between movements. And because fencing is just as much about the mental challenge as the physical, Barrilleaux is able to use his quick thinking to act and react to his opponent's moves.

Modern-day fencing is the evolution of centuries-old sword dueling and sword military training. Because duelers would fight to first blood, they



In this Feb. 12 photo, Chris Barrilleaux looks back to his mom and their two dogs, Dually and Truck, at their home in Aurora. Barrilleaux, with cerebral palsy, is dependent on his mom and a wheelchair for everything he does, except fencing.

Anna Reed/Statesman-Journal via AP

traditionally wore white so the red could easily be seen. The white uniform has lasted into today's bloodless version. Fencing became an organized sport in the 14th century, and was first added to the 1896 Olympic games in Athens.

There are three standard weapons in modern fencing. The foil is the lightest sword and was originally used as a training tool. Its target area is the body; no arms, legs, or head.

The epee was originally used for traditional duels. The target

area is the entire body.

The sabre was used in the military as a cavalry weapon, so the target area was anywhere above the waist. Unlike foil and epee, points in sabre can be earned with a touch from the entire length of the blade, not just the tip.

"I know that it's given him a lot of confidence of just getting out and being able to do stuff. So that way it's really been huge."

— Julie Miller, Chris Barrilleaux's mother

All three weapons are wielded today in Olympic and Paralympic fencing, in which there is almost no distinction between able-bodied and wheelchair fencing.

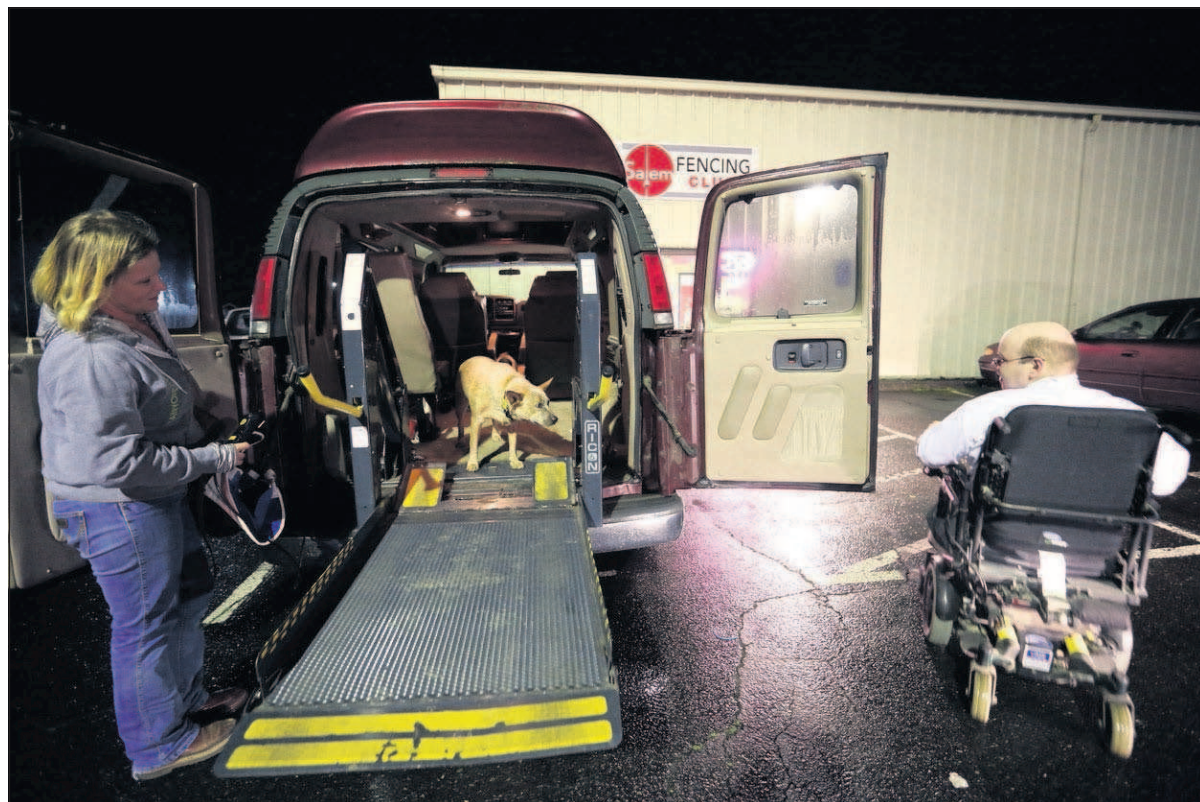
"Essentially there is no difference, apart from the wheelchair fencers can't move up and down the strip," said Samuel Aldridge, Barrilleaux's coach at the Salem Fencing Club.

"If there is one fundamental difference, it's that wheelchair fencing is about three times faster than standard fencing, because you don't have all the preliminary moving back and forth before the sword work can happen."

Because of the speed of the blades, fencing is just as much a physical sport as it is a mental one. Decisions about how to attack and to react must be made in split seconds. As in chess, competitors must always think several moves ahead to stay in the match.

Barrilleaux's hand moves slowly over his laptop, one finger finding each key. He is able to control his left hand enough to type a few letters a minute.

He spends most of his time writing stories. His long-form fantasy tales revolve around pirates, knights and other sword-bearing characters. A couple of years ago, he and his mother saw a bit on the local television news



In this Jan. 29 photo, Chris Barrilleaux gets a final look at his dog, Dually, before his mom, Julie Miller, closes the back of their van and he heads inside the Salem Fencing Club for his weekly sabre lesson in Salem.

Anna Reed/Statesman-Journal via AP

See FENCING/9C