

The Bakersfield Californian

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At 73, this fierce fencer a gray blade

HERB BENHAM THE CALIFORNIAN



PHOTO COURTESY OF LUCAS DOBRZANSKI

Lucas Dobrzanski is serious about fencing.

Lucas Dobrzanski is funny unless you're standing opposite him when he has a sabre in his hand and he is dead set on sending you home to your mama.

Dobrzanski is a fencer. He's also a 73-year-old father (Lara, Robert, Eva), grandfather (Beck, Claire, Jack, Will, Nick, Pierce, Alexandra and Anthony), husband (Anna), son to

his 91-year-old mother (Anna). He's also a Davis-trained chemical engineer, a Bakersfield resident since 1974 and head of the Kern Athletic Fencing Society. Dobrzanski was born in Poland in 1943. His father was killed by the Nazis, his mother escaped and moved the family to Buenos Aires, home to a large Polish community. "I was in high school in Argentina when I fell in love with fencing for the first time," Dobrzanski said.

The Dobrzanskis moved to Los Angeles, where he joined the Army Reserves, attended LA City College, met his future wife, started a Polish club and learned fencing from a dashing French captain in the foreign legion.

After attending Davis for graduate school, where he founded the fencing club, Dobrzanski graduated and got busy with children, family and career, the stone-cold killers of all fun and extracurricular activities.

He quit fencing for 35 years, moved to Bakersfield and worked for Golden Bear refinery. Thirteen years ago — at age 60 — Dobrzanski took up fencing again. He has competed in three veteran world championships in Varna, Bulgaria, Debrecen, Hungary and Stralsund, Germany, where he finished 15th.

Three weeks ago in Germany, Dobrzanski faced a German fencer in the first round. "I looked at my opponent, and because my father was executed by the Nazis during World War II, the words from the movie 'The Princess Bride' crossed my mind. "Instead of saying, 'My name is Inigo Montoya,' I said in my mind: 'My name is Lucas Dobrzanski, you killed my father; prepare to die.'"

The German had no chance. Dobrzanski beat him 5-1.

Fencing, which is about 75 percent footwork, has three categories — foil, epee and sabre.

Dobrzanski does sabre which is fast. The target is anything above the waist other than the hand and requires the fencer to be able to move as fast backward as he does forward.

Fencing is physical chess, opening and closing distance, getting in and getting out and tempting opponents to move forward so they can be tagged.

The local fencing club is located above the Women's Club on 18th Street. The program teaches more than 50 kids how to fence and then brings in tutors to help them with their studies.

"Fencing provides physical activity, structure and improves health," Dobrzanski said. "If the kids keep up with their school work, it's free.

"I had a grandmother who lives in Oildale tell me that without fencing her grandson would have been buried in video games and never gone outside."

Kids also learn sportsmanship.

"It's a gentleman's sport," Dobrzanski said. "You shake hands, salute your opponent and if you lose, you can't throw your foil; otherwise you are disqualified.

Dobrzanski trains by fencing two to three days a week, doing aerobics, strength and stretching exercises and competing in fencing tournaments a couple of times a month. "I want to keep going as long as I can," he said. "There is a 92-year-old fencer from San Diego."

The competitions are a blast and he has made friends from Bulgaria, Belgium and Italy. "I get a kick out of being on the podium and having them say, 'Lucas Dobrzanski from Bakersfield, California.'"

This weekend Dobrzanski is competing in an open tournament in Long Beach. Most likely, he will be the oldest person there, facing fencers as young as 17.

Don't underestimate the dashing silver-haired fencing maestro from Bakersfield via Poland and Argentina. If so, prepare to lose.