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Fencing for life - Daniel Nevot's mastery made him a beloved teacher

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He was a freedom fighter with the French resistance during World War II. He crossed Africa, fought in the deserts of Chad and Libya. He helped to liberate Paris from the Nazis. He lived in Madagascar, the Congo, and Senegal. And, Daniel Nevot was a fencing master and an expert in judo and swimming.

"He was Forrest Gump, but in French," his daughter Pat Johnson says.

When he retired, Mr. Nevot left France for Dallas to teach fencing. During more than two decades, Mr. Nevot coached hundreds of Dallas fencers, several of whom competed on the U.S. Olympic team, he and his students say. He was one of the most beloved fencing teachers in the Southwest.

In turn, he became an American citizen and made Dallas his home, embracing the city and the country that welcomed him.

Last month, the Fencing Institute of Texas, La Reunion Fencing Club and the Alliance Française honored Mr. Nevot's dedication in a ceremony. After a 10-year hiatus, the fencing master, now 85 and living in Utah, returned to Dallas to meet former students and share the incredible story of his life.

His frame may be small and his face is wrinkled, but Mr. Nevot's voice is still strong. When he talks about his travels, the Frenchman leans forward in his black slacks and elegant checkered jacket. He gesticulates. His voice rises.

"I was in the desert between Chad and Libya," he recounts. He takes out a pen and draws a map of Africa. "We fought with the Italians, then joined the 8th British Army commanded by General Montgomery. Then we fought for Tunisia, and then joined the Americans in Morocco."

Mr. Nevot was instrumental in winning the Battle of Kufra in Libya - the first victory for the Free French Forces and a turning point for the Allies in Africa. For his efforts in taking the Kufra fort, in 1999 Mr. Nevot received the Legion of Honor, the highest French military decoration.

After returning from Africa, he took part in the Normandy invasion and fought alongside the army of Gen. George Patton. Mr. Nevot received 13 other decorations for heroism, including a medal for his part in the Normandy attack.

The Frenchman's military career gave birth to the passion that brought him to Dallas. After the war, he studied fencing and physical education at a French military academy and went on to teach "the art of fencing," as he calls it, in Europe and Africa.

"Fencing gave me everything," Mr. Nevot says in his excellent, though accented English.

"Even today, it still gives me the feeling of being young, it develops my intelligence and my spirit."

It was fencing combined with an obsession with the American West and cowboys that brought Mr. Nevot to Dallas.

In Africa, Mr. Nevot would often screen westerns for his fellow soldiers. He loved actors John Wayne, Errol Flynn and Clint Eastwood, to name just a few, and the Wild West culture they portrayed. In 1964, he was recruited by the original Dallas Fencers Club; its members were desperately in need of a fencing master.

The day he arrived, Mr. Nevot was driven straight from the ship in Houston to the training gym in Dallas, where he

gave some 20 fencing lessons even before checking into a hotel room.

For 22 years, Mr. Nevot taught fencing with the same dedication at St. Mark's School in Dallas, as well as schools, clubs and recreation centers in Fort Worth and surrounding communities. He led St. Mark's Outward Bound program and, once his English improved, gave occasional French history lectures. His students remember Monsieur Nevot as someone who represented the best of the old generation who taught values in addition to technical skills.

"Nevot was a true teacher. He shaped the people he taught," said George Stone, current president of the Fencing Institute of Texas. "He saw the characteristics of a person and was able to build their self-esteem. He was very dedicated to the students in this area.

"He had this incredible, quiet, but strong dignity," Mr. Stone adds.

His students remember Mr. Nevot walking around with a French-English dictionary, and communicating in gestures or in French (the official language of fencing).

Mr. Nevot quickly learned English by watching westerns on television and attending classes at Southern Methodist University. Eventually, he became a U.S. citizen. He flew the U.S. flag in front of his house, and his car bore the sticker "America, love it or leave it."

With his wife, who arrived in Dallas six months after he did, Mr. Nevot often went two-stepping at the Longhorn Bar.

After more than two decades of teaching, he retired for a second time and moved to Utah to live with his daughter. But fencing continues to keep him young in body and spirit. He works out on a rowing machine, goes mountain biking, and runs several miles each day.

And he still teaches fencing. He's hoping to take some of his current students to the Junior Olympics - and, who knows, even beyond that.

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Caption: PHOTO(S): 1. (BRANDON THIBODEAUX/Staff Photographer) Friends, family and peers gathered to celebrate the life of French fencing master Daniel Nevot at the University of Texas-Dallas on Oct. 15. 2. Mr. Nevot in Chad, in 1948.

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