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Art of samurai still lures students

Discipline, self-control are hallmarks

By Charles Runnells

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Samurai swordsmanship isn't a particularly practical martial art.

You can't hide a katana sword in your car's glove box, for example. And most people won't tuck one under their belts for a Friday night out.

Still, there's always been a mystique and sheer coolness about the samurai sword.

That's why movies like "Kill Bill" and "The Last Samurai" still slay at the box office, and it's why students like Brian Postema are taking a samurai class through Cape Coral's Four Freedoms Park.

"There's clearly no practical use at all," admitted Postema, 36, of Cape Coral. "I just like the idea of keeping the art alive."

Four Freedoms Park started offering the weekly class Sept. 16.

The students don't use real metal swords. Instead, they practice with wooden bokken swords and avoid physical contact.

Instructor Hilmar Fuchs, 56, has studied martial arts since 1965, and he relishes passing the ancient Japanese art down to younger generations.

"This is not new," Fuchs said. "This is very old stuff."

Of course, like most martial arts, there's much more involved than simple attack and parry. The art of the samurai includes a philosophy and a moral discipline. In other words, samurai learn to only draw their swords when they absolutely have to.

"We try to keep the spirit of the art," Fuchs said. "It's not just how to draw a sword. There's much more behind it."

Students, for example, must maintain precise control over their bokken. If they slip up, they could accidentally whack another student.

"You have to execute your technique really strongly and powerfully, and you also have to have control of the technique," Fuchs said. "So you save a life instead of taking a life."

Todd Hetfield, 15, of Cape Coral signed up for the class in September. "I've always been interested in Japanese culture, and this is another aspect of that."

Some of the techniques turned out to be more difficult than he expected, Hetfield said. "But it's fun. It's enjoyable."

Postema has taken karate and ninjitsu classes in the past, and he thought he'd give samurai swordsmanship a try.

Besides, samurai classes are hard to come by. Not many martial arts studios offer sword classes — at least, not until you reach more advanced levels.

- What: Art of the Samurai classes
- When: 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Thursdays. The next block of four classes starts Dec. 2
- Where: Four Freedoms Park, 4818 Tarpon Court, Cape Coral
- Cost: Four classes cost \$48 for Cape residents, \$53 for non-residents
- Info: 574-0804

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"It's rare," Postema said.

Once you start mastering the techniques, they become smooth and almost like a dance.

The art isn't practical for self-defense, he said, but it's fulfilling in its own right.

"If you do the techniques properly, you can kind of flow into the next movement," Postema said. "It's a beautiful art."

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