

Veterans lead the charge

Fencing is a sport where success comes with maturity and, writes ANGELA BENSTED, it has a healthy dose of fun too.

Jenny Bonney-Millett, a slight woman with long brown hair coiled into a bun, jogs around the Yeronga Sports Centre before stopping to stretch.

She stands on one leg, holding a ledge for support, and swings her free leg in an arc across her body; side to side in a hip stretch any ballerina would envy. She's not here to dance though. At 56, Jenny is the oldest competitor in the Queensland Fencing Association's open women's foil competition.

Fencing is "a classical, very beautiful sport to watch," Jenny says. "It's a dancing sport. It has a lot of history, a lot of tradition."

Jenny picked up her first weapon at university and scoffs at the suggestion she might retire soon.

Her biography glitters with medals, including silver from the Veteran World Championships (50+) in Debrecen, Hungary in 2014.

"There are people competing overseas in their 80s and 90s and a lot of them beat the hell out of me," she

says laughing. "They're so neat and quick. They can see you coming a mile off."

The spread of ages bouncing around the Yeronga hall on the hot April day proves fencing attracts both the young and young-at-heart.

World rankings suggest it's a sport where success comes with maturity rather than fading with age.

The world's top fencers are in their 30s and in the Queensland event it's Jenny Bonney-Millett who takes home the gold, not her teenaged opponents.

Watching from the sidelines is Michael O'Brien, a past Queensland and national champion whose own Olympic dreams shattered in the 1950s.

In the post-WWII years Mike owned tennis courts in Brisbane and earned a few bob giving lessons.

He fenced for fun, starting the Gay Blades club and improving his game by fencing European post-war immigrants.

He eventually earned a place on the Australian Olympic fencing team.

Mike set sail for the 1952 Helsinki

games but when his ship stopped over in Malta he received a telegram stating the money earned from coaching tennis tainted his amateur status, making him ineligible to fence for Australia. After missing out on the Olympics, Mike remained in London and trained with "fencing royalty", returning in 1959 as Australia's first fencing Master at Arms.

He coached many Australian champions, including the nation's most successful Olympian Greg Benko, who placed sixth in foil at the 1976 Montreal Games.

Today, the 89-year-old still gives lessons in the back courtyard of his Kenmore home, where Australian fencing history is displayed in dozens of photos and framed news clippings hanging on the walls.

Like Jenny, he has no plan to stop. "People want to retire today at 70," he says. "That's disgusting."

Although he does regret he never made much money out of the sport, musing "I should have been a plumber."

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Jenny Bonney-Millett

Did you know?

- Fencing is one of only four sports contested at every modern-era Olympics. (The others are athletics, swimming and artistic gymnastics.)
- Four-time Olympic fencer Ivan Lund carried the Australian flag at the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony in 1964
- Fencing suits are white because at one time touching was recorded with ink-dipped cotton secured to the tip of the weapon



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