

DUEL IMPACT

MEDIEVAL COMBAT IN 2015 IS NO HISTORICAL WALK IN THE PARK. INSTEAD IT'S AN ABSURD AND BRUTAL SPORT PLAYED OUT USING GENUINE WEAPONS. MH STEPS INTO THE ARENA WITH THE AMATEUR ATHLETES WHO MELD SUPREME PHYSICALITY AND UNADULTERATED SAVAGERY – FOR FUN. WELCOME TO THE REAL GAME OF THRONES

PHOTOGRAPHY: PATRIK GIARDINO
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It would take a brave man to call Andre Sinou a geek to his face. At 6ft 2in and weighing over 18st, the US Marine reservist cuts an imposing figure in his civvies – let alone now, stood in the red dust of the combat stadium, wielding an axe big enough to split your skull in two.

The men assembled in this horse arena on the outskirts of Albuquerque, New Mexico, may look like

extras from a certain HBO show, but the truth is far from it. When Sinou swings his axe, it will crack his opponent in the chest with rib-shattering force.

This is Medieval Combat and the rules are simple: the winner is the last man standing. Combatants line up in bouts of one-on-one, five-on-five, or the merry carnage of 16 vs 16. They proceed to smash one another with swords and maces, aiming to knock opponents off their feet. This isn't *Dungeons & Dragons*: "It's full contact," says Sinou, captain of US national team the Striking Eagles. "The melees are about brute force and athleticism."

Regulations were brought in by the sport's international governing body to mitigate against the deaths which blackened early contests in Russia, where the events originated less than a decade ago. Stabbing is outlawed; weapons must be blunted. Beyond that, anything goes. The dull-edged swords are still ferocious, as fighters exploit the lack of peripheral vision offered by wraparound helmets to batter adversaries in the back of the head.

Unlike the legendary Arthurian soldiers they emulate, the guys suiting up today are not full-time knights. "These



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people have jobs," explains Sinou. "We have lawyers, students and blue collar workers..." In the finest martial tradition, participants fight for the thrill of it. There are no big cash payouts and competitors shell out up to \$10,000 a year on armour, weapons and travel expenses.

A demanding training regime is crucial to compete at a high level, and fitness can be the difference between glory and hospital. "Your body takes a lot of punishment," says Jaye Brooks, who runs a gym specialising in Medieval Combat. "You have to be physically able to carry the armour and keep up the level of activity needed to take down opponents. If you gas out, you're done."

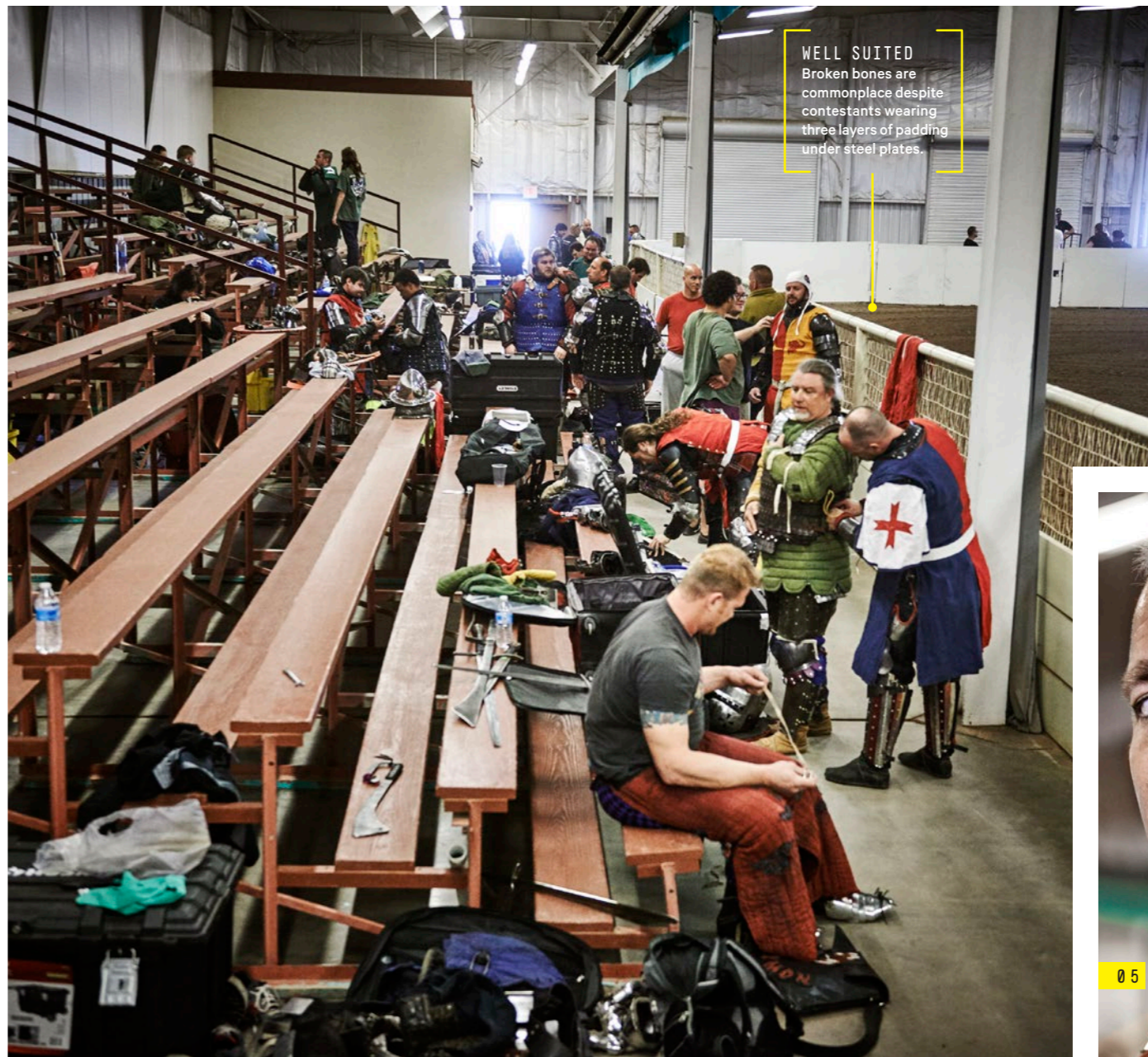
Training combines weights and intervals with technical elements such as muay thai and swordplay from Filipino weapon-based martial art Eskrima.

"I put my guys through a 25-minute HIIT workout four times a week, and they do strength training the other days," says Brooks. "These guys have jobs, so using Tabata methods maximises effort in a tight window." To gain an edge over their opponents, many are now turning to CrossFit, attracted by its combined focus on strength and endurance. Bouts may be short – typically no more than five minutes – but when you're wearing 40kg of stainless steel and coming under attack from every angle, this is functional fitness at its most visceral. Though fatalities may be a thing of the past, genuine injury is guaranteed, with broken fingers and shattered teeth among the most common.

Simon Rohrich is a regular on the US all-star squad. He will be the last man

standing three times this weekend, and his team – the Desert Demons from Arizona – will eventually fight their way to victory in the headline five-on-five competition. But for now, he lies flat on his back in the New Mexican dirt, his face stained with blood after being clobbered so hard on the back of the head that he bit through his bottom lip. He doesn't take it personally, though. "There's no malice," he says. "We're all beating the tar out of each other with real weapons, but there's nothing holding you back from spreading chaos and destruction, because the people here signed up for the privilege. This is a competition."

There's nothing fake about the bloodied, broken bodies; nothing nerdy about the size and power of the warriors. As Sinou asserts, "If people want to run around with foam weapons and call themselves wizards, I have no problem with that. But that is not what we do."



WELL SUITED
Broken bones are commonplace despite contestants wearing three layers of padding under steel plates.



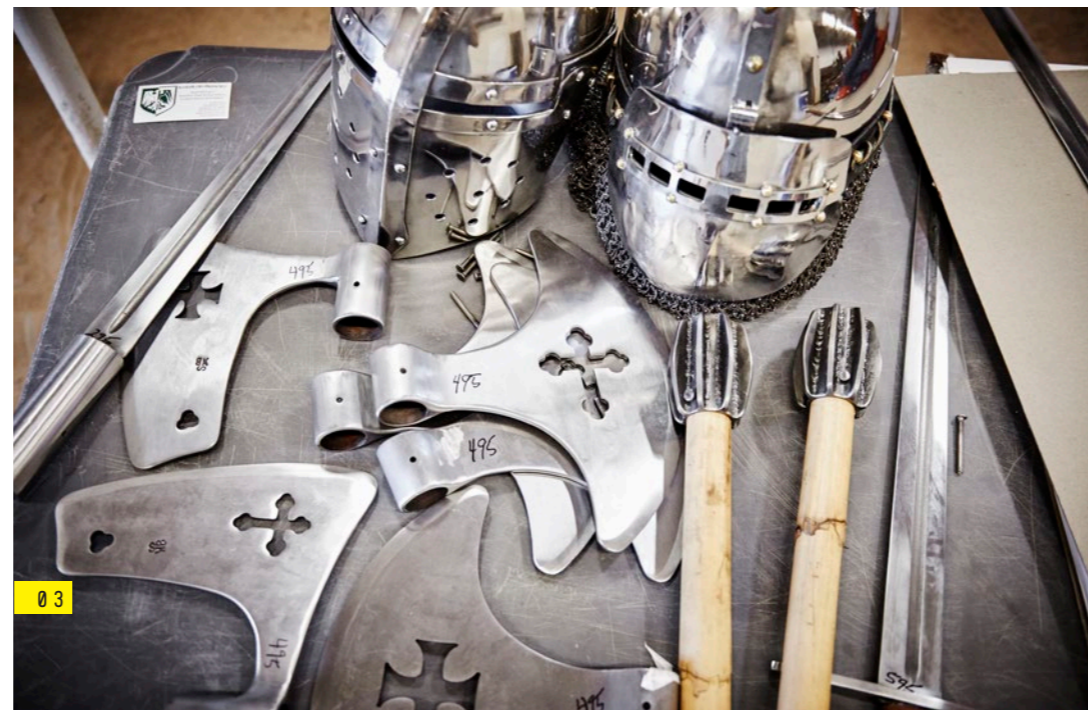
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TRIAL BY COMBAT

DON YOUR ARMOUR, CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON AND PREPARE YOUR MIND FOR WAR

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DESERT STORM
Part-time knights make the pilgrimage to New Mexico from all over the US.

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HEAVY METAL
Strength training is necessary simply to wear the mandatory steel body plates.

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TRADE TOOLS
Blades may be dulled, but swords can weigh up to 3.5kg: enough to cause real damage.

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BREAK-NECK
Blows to the head are actively encouraged – the chainmail is not just for show.

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BATTLE PLAN
Marine Corps officer Andre Sinou uses military strategies to out-perform his foes.

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INTO THE ARENA
A solo combatant psyches himself up for the bloody combat only moments away.



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CLOSE ENCOUNTER
THE EAR-SPLITTING CRASH OF STEEL ON STEEL RINGS OUT AS KNIGHTS ENGAGE IN VIOLENT SKIRMISHES

MAN TO MAN
The two remaining warriors size each other up at the death of the five-on-five competition.

SORRY SIGHT
Visor windows are only an inch thick, leaving zero peripheral vision.



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FATAL FLOOR
Fights are won by knocking opponents off their feet or beating them into submission.

KNIGHT'S WATCH
Felled teammates look on to see which combatant will be the last man standing.



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01 DOWN AND OUT
When weapons fail to floor an opponent, tripping and kicking are also permitted.

02 MARTIAL ORDERS
Medieval Combat training takes its cues from muay thai, judo, boxing and MMA.

03 HEAD SHOT
A knight prepares to deliver a brutal knockout blow with his steel shield.

04 CLASH OF TITANS
Carefully planned tactics can descend into chaos in the midst of a melee.



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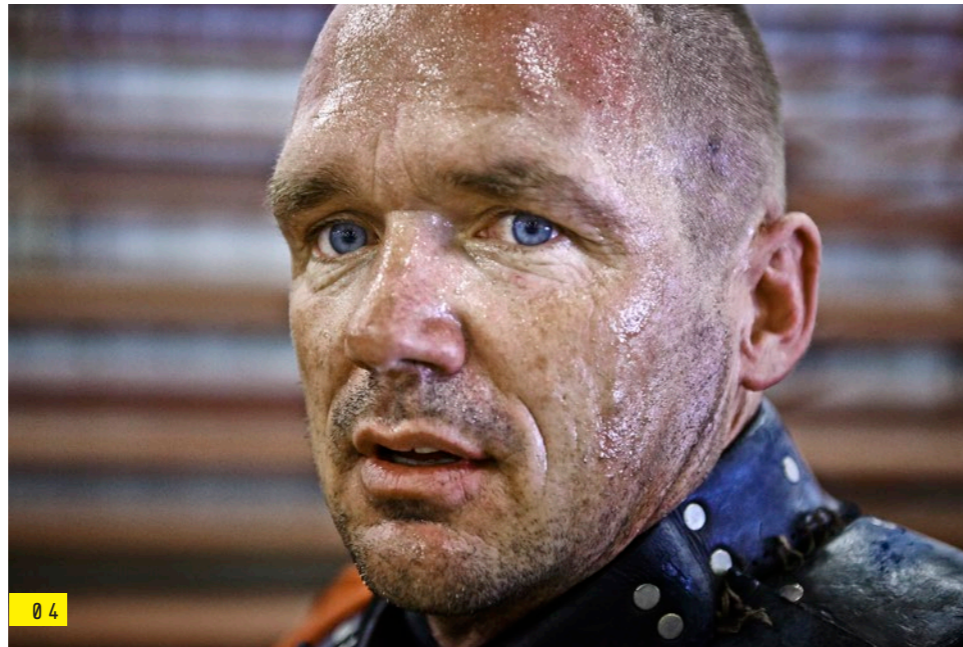
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IN THE AFTERMATH

WITH THEIR BODIES BRUISED AND ARMOUR TATTERED, THE CHAMPIONS RECOVER AS DUST SETTLES OVER THE ARENA



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BUILT TO LAST
Dave "The Mangler" Olsen is also an NYC construction worker.

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SWORDMASTER
Jaye Brooks runs the Knights Hall combat gym, New Hampshire.

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SPECIAL FORCES
Regis Dufour, a sword specialist, competed in the World Champs.

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RIOT ACT
Off duty, police officer Mark Elrick is pretty handy with an axe.

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TRUE CHAMPION
Entrepreneur Simon Rohrich's team emerged victorious.

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ELITE UNIT
William Woodbury of the Striking Eagles runs a tech company.

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SON OF ANARCHY
Away from the action, Jaye Brooks' son Catlin works for a local newspaper. 📰



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