



# GETTING MEDIEVAL

**By JESSICA WOLF • STATE PRESS MAGAZINE**

*A gentle breeze wafted through the morning, lifting the brightly-colored standards into the air. Like giant brushstrokes against the canvas of a cloudless blue sky, brilliant purples, golds, blues and greens of the flags' material fluttered and fell while soldiers clustered on the tree-lined battlefield, their armor and weapons making an ominous metallic rustling as they walked.*

*A large cluster of knights, sunlight glinting off their pointed, silver helmets surrounded the king as he prepared to lead them into battle. Every now and then a cheer would rise from the group of soldiers as they lifted swords and rapiers, shields and bows in to the air.*

*Drums beat in the distance until battle lines were finally drawn. With a giant war cry, hundreds of fighters attacked from both ends of the field, meeting in the middle for hand-to-hand combat, thrusting and parrying against opponents, masses of bodies, arms, helmets and weapons flailing in the melee.*

*Mortally wounded men fell to the ground, then rolled quickly to the side and out of the battle lines, where they soon rose to cheer on their still-living comrades.*

*They rose because their death-wounds could not be seen nor felt. They rose because their war weapons were made of padded and taped rattan, not steel. The sharp edges of their swords were indicated by a stripe of red tape, not a razor-sharp blade.*

*They rose because it was Saturday Feb. 13, 1999 — not 1499, as the warriors' appearance would have you believe.*

*They are members of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) and they were having a war.*

**Battlechasers**

Nearly 5,000 members of this international historical re-enactment society gathered at Schnepf Farms, about 40 miles southeast of Tempe in Queen Creek. This was the site of the 15th annual Estrella Wars, six days of medieval revelry that ran from Feb. 9-15 and culminated in two days of organized battles over the weekend.

They came to camp out and to dress in their favorite clothing of medieval time periods. Some settled in encampments for the entire five nights and six days, others came out only for the weekend or just the day. They came to learn dancing, attend court, show off their calligraphy, weaponry, elaborate costumes and homemade mead and beer.

But mostly they came to fight. On Saturday and Sunday they fought a series of battles with different objectives, the winner of each receiving war points toward their total, which would determine the winner of this year's war. There will be anywhere from 500 to 1,500 combatants in any given confrontation.

The first day of fighting began with three open-field battles, fought to the last man standing.

Rules have been created to protect the fighters. Participants must pass weapons and armor inspections in order to fight, and they must attend fighting practices before the war.

Knights ranged from fighters fully arrayed in shiny metal suits to those with only the minimum required protective devices, such as a helmet, neck and cervical vertebrae protection, and some kind of leather or metal armor over the knees, elbows, kidneys, hands and groin.

Just like in ancient feudal battles, the modern-day knights wear the colors of their household or barony into battle, carrying favors, hand-sewn or woven designs granted them for the day's battle by their lady or baroness,

on their belts. Most SCA members learn how to make their own armor and costumes, as constantly buying all the garb can be very expensive.

Fighters also must know what is a mortal wound and accept the "points of honor" outlined in the society's rules of battle. They are trained to know what is a "good" blow, one that is strong enough to "kill" or seriously wound someone. If a fighter is wounded in the arm or leg, he can stay and fight but cannot use the wounded part. If he is struck to the head or chest, he must concede to their opponent by falling to the ground and then getting out of the way.

Members of SCA take themselves seriously, but not too seriously. A royal lady, elaborately arrayed in a coronet and courtly gown, lifted her long skirt to step over a mound of dirt, revealing her Nike sneakers underneath. Her ladies-in-waiting trailed behind her in courtly gowns, wearing sunglasses and carrying bottles of Evian or cans of Pepsi. Knights trudged to the battlefield carrying their shields fitted on to their arms with hockey gloves. Scotsman in kilts prepared for battle while their ladies photographed or videotaped them.

They are what they claim to be: Anachronisms, things that are out of place in history. They create medieval scenarios while their contemporary vehicles are parked a few feet away. They cook on propane stoves and camp in vinyl, zippered tents. They have portable showers on site and rows of port-a-potties. But every morning for a week at war and at many other events throughout the year, they get up and pretend to be lords and ladies of their favorite time in history.

They are not actors; they do not get paid to dress up and entertain passers-by like those a few miles down the road at the Arizona Renaissance Festival. They are card-carrying, due-paying members of a highly organized educational historical society.

**Rebuilding Camelot**

The SCA started 33 years ago in Berkeley, Calif. A group of teachers and historians got together and held a little themed party. Everyone dressed as though they were members of King Arthur's court.

This was the birth of an organization that is now so huge that the SCA has divided the earth into 13 different kingdoms with an elaborate system of rank, honors and awards for its members. They call it the SCA "Knowne World."

The focus of the group is to research and re-create time periods before the 1600's with an emphasis on Western European culture, music and dress. Members are expected to conform to the feudal laws of rank, chivalry and honor.

Members pick a new name to be known by at SCA events. They research the name and create a persona, not necessarily taking on the characteristics of an actual person, but creating a person who could have lived in their chosen time period.

The SCA has more than 20,000 registered, due-paying members, but anyone is welcome to participate in or watch any sponsored event. There are SCA members across the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Great Britain, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Scotland, Ireland and Spain.

Geographic locations are divided into kingdoms, ruled by a king and queen. Within each kingdom are baronies, ruled by a baron and baroness. Barons are chosen by the group they represent, usually by vote, but the sovereign must gain his or her throne through armed combat.

People take the SCA ranking system seriously. Last weekend, men bowed and ladies curtsied when a royal walked their way. Royals could be easily spotted by their coronet — a crown of gold or silver, pointed and bejeweled as befitting the wearer's rank in the society.

Towns, kingdoms and baronies are given their own names in the society. For example, San Francisco is known by the SCA as "Principality of the Mists."

At this year's Estrella Wars, King Douglas of The Kingdom of Atenveldt (which includes Arizona, parts of Utah and California) welcomed knights and royalty from the Kingdoms of Calontir (Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Arkansas), Outlands, (New Mexico, Colorado, parts of Wyoming, and Texas), Artemesia (Idaho, Colorado, most of Utah, Montana, and parts of Wyoming), Caid (Southern California, Las Vegas, Hawaii and New Zealand) and sundry other fighters from other kingdoms to split into two teams and put their medieval fighting skills to the test.

**The art of war**

After the open-field battles Saturday morning King Douglas (Doug Norton of Yuma) crossed the field to discuss strategy with his knights for the upcoming bridge battle.

During the bridge battle the rules were a little bit different, as wave after wave of soldiers pushed against each other, with no running and very close fighting. Every now and then the "marshals," or battle officiators, would stop the fight to remove the "dead" then allow the melee to carry on. The side who held 60 percent of the hay-bale lined area designated as a "bridge" were deemed the winners of this particular confrontation.

"Water bearers" walked amongst the soldiers all weekend carrying jugs of gatorade and orange slices to keep the fighters hydrated. (The bumps and bruises the SCA fighters get in battle were less dangerous than the threat of dehydration.)

All members are considered lords and ladies. There are no serfs, peasants or slaves in the SCA, but those who are deemed royalty are lightheartedly treated as such by the minor nobility.

Soldiers dropped to their knees, murmuring "your Highness" as the king passed, always followed by his standard-bearer, his blue flag decorated with a yellow sun waving constantly over his gold-crowned head.

An SCA king "rules" for only six months; the job entails a lot of travel and no small amount of expense. After one term as king or queen, a person can assume the rank of count or countess. After two "reigns" on the throne, he/she is deemed duke or duchess and remains in high standing within the SCA hierarchy.

Barons are chosen for two-year terms and are supported by a staff to keep the club functioning. They hold court for their baronies, host tournaments and give awards to dedicated members. They also lead their troops into battle.

Baron Philip of Mons Tonitrus (Phillip Patton of Sierra Vista) watched from above as his "subjects" descended into the pit-battle, the highlight of Sunday's fighting. Groups of knights passed by, their banners flying and armor clinking, as they marched into a giant pit that had been dug to the left of the open battlefield. Soldiers slammed against walls of dirt as they parried swords with members of the opposing army.

"I have a

back," explained Baron Philip. "Otherwise I would be out there fighting, too."

He went on to explain his SCA persona. He is a Scotsman and former sea captain who cannot fight because of his wooden leg. His son has taken over as captain of his ship, and was fighting in the battle below. In real-life he is a former preschool owner who lives quietly in Sierra Vista with his R.N. wife and dreams of buying his own Cessna someday.

Standing beside him was his daughter-in-law and one of his "Baroness" ladies-in-waiting, "Lady Gwen" (Jeni Patton), a Welshwoman from the 1300's trying to learn the Scottish ways of her seafaring husband.

"I was sent to court by my parents to find a good husband, because I was a sort-of tomboy," she said, explaining her persona and that she is still in the process of researching and creating it. In real life she teaches computer science at Cochise Community College, and is really married to Patton's son, another SCA member.

"Lady Gwen," like many other SCA women, fought beside her husband in the heavy-suit battles the day before. She showed the "favors" she wore strapped to the belt of her gown.

"This is the fourth war that I've fought in," she said. She now gets to sew a fourth flower on her sash bearing her Baroness' standard.

She said fighting in the battles creates a "road-rage type" of adrenaline.

"It's really fun because you can go out there and really pound on people and then get together and party with them later," she said, laughing beneath her delicate headdress.

She explained that people often wear a silver or wooden goblet or cup hanging from a leather strap attached to their belts so that when they pass through other encampments they can join in when offered a drink of water or spirits.

At the wars, people from the same barony or "household" usually get together and create a little mini-court, with a common eating area, and use their tents for sleeping quarters. Some build elaborate temporary castles or medieval tents and bring along intricate, period furniture, like high-backed wooden chairs with engraved coats of arms.

But of course there also are plenty of plain three-man tents and lawn chairs.

"Some of us are definitely 'early-Coleman,'" Baron Philip said, laughing.

But it is all in good fun, and the emphasis is always on education and learning. The ultimate goal is to make things as authentically as possible. Members often will visit local schools in their areas when students study the middle ages. Most everyone at an SCA event is to some degree an expert in an area of history. Students, doctors, lawyers, businessmen and simple history buffs, they research everything, choosing their own areas of personal interest.

SCA members also focus on practicing courtly graces



**Left: No, they're not the Knights who Say "Nee," and they're not looking for a shrubbery. They're members of the Society for Creative Anachronism, and they want war.**  
**Above: The two opposing armies line up for the battle of the bridge during the Estrella Wars.**  
**Below: SCA members pride themselves on recreating authentic medieval garb, such as helmets and armor.**

and are encouraged to act out their persona during all the events.

"It is really fun when you can get people to act and speak as if they were really of this time period," Baron Philip said.

His barony is hosting a tournament to choose the next king of Atenveldt in Sierra Vista the second weekend in March.

Lady Gwen was quick to point out that the tournament winner does not necessarily have to be a man.

"We choose a sovereign, and then he or she chooses a consort," she said.

## Ye olde campfire tales

Events at the Estrella War were not limited to intense battles. There was archery and costume competitions, bardic songwriting, and calligraphy and craft completions. Points are awarded for each event, which determines the winner.

Saturday night was grand court, where 10 of the 13 SCA kings were present to celebrate, honor fighters and talk about how the competition was going so far.

But late at night, around the campfires, it's storytelling time, and

fire.

Duarte said the group tends to become like a large extended family. She started by going to meetings with friends.

"It's a lot of fun," she said. "But you have to take it for what it is."

Nearby, two soldiers in freshly-polished full-metal armor practice blocking sword thrusts for an upcoming battle. Watching them, Duarte added, "Some people get way too into it."

She admits that it can be addictive though.

"William will fight until he pretty much passes out," she said, laughing afterwards.

Battles went on for hours Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes there will be a "resurrection" battle, when dead soldiers can check in with the marshal after they have been killed. They get re-hydrated and go back into the fight.

Also on hand at the Estrella Wars was "merchants' row," where families and attendees could shop for weapons, crafts, authentic clothing, or sit down and eat together.

Members progress in standing in the SCA community, using their personal interests and skills to help teach each other. They are rewarded with titles such as "knight," "pelican" or "laurel," indicating levels of service within the organization. The Chivalry is composed of the knights who help teach fighting skills and weaponry and armory making. The Order of the Laurel is awarded to members who excel at crafts or skills and have made substantial contributions in medieval research for the club. The Order of the Pelican is given to those who dedicate themselves to serving the baronies by making sure all the proper rules are followed and all the paperwork gets done.

Heraldry is a big part of the SCA. Members can take the time to research and develop their own personal coat of arms and present it to the head office in Berkeley. It is then checked out for historical authenticity and to make sure no one else is already using the symbol.

It's a serious process, but not without humor. One coat of arms displays two lyres (a wooden medieval musical instrument) above a pair of red pants. Lyre, lyre, pants on fire — get it?

All in all, the SCA is a light-hearted

This year they were only able to come out and observe the festivities and cheer their friends on. They were too busy planning their own big event: their wedding is next weekend.

They've been together since that first night by the camp-



# lifestyles

## The Society for Creative Anachronism

The Barony of Twin Moons (encompassing the East Valley) meets every Thursday from 7:30-10:30 p.m. for fighter practice at Shawnee Park in Chandler (Alma School & Mesquite, just south of Warner).

A baronial court is held the last Thursday of every month. Contact the seneschal, Lord Thor the Indecisive (Jamie Bradford) at 821-4995 for more information.

The next tournament, hosted by Baron Philip of Mons Tonitrus, will be held the second weekend in March in Sierra Vista.