

Legitimate Teachers in the WMA Community: Advice on How to Spot Bad European Budo

by Tommaso Leoni and Steven Reich © 2006

In recent years, the Western Martial Arts world has grown steadily in terms of quality and quantity, and while a decade ago it was rare to find individual enthusiasts within the same region, it is now common for a majority of us to operate within a thriving local community. Furthermore, the Internet and the many pan-organizational events have made it possible for us to become a closely-knit, interactive circle of people linked by a strong common passion.

Also, new schools are springing up both nationally and internationally--a positive sign that what we do is here to stay and that there is a fertile cultural ground for our beloved disciplines.

Naturally, every group has to have a leader, and every satellite community tends to congeal around a figurehead--be it a teacher or an enabler--e.g. someone with a space available for practice.

While our friends in the Asian Martial Arts community have more rigorous and official guidelines about who can legitimately call himself a teacher, we in the WMA world do not have that luxury yet. Some argue (and we've argued so before) that it may be too early for this, since we are barely scratching the surface as far as mastering the contents of the period texts from which we study. However, we still have to keep an eye out for good quality instruction and for honest representation of who we are and what we do.

Also, if we are ever to gain visibility and earn a solid reputation with the outside world, we have the duty to represent our arts professionally (even for the amateurs among us) and maturely. This means that we should embrace high standards for ourselves and the people with whom we associate: standards that have to do with how honestly we represent ourselves, how careful and precise we are in the way we collect and present information, how safely we run our sessions as well as how sensibly we operate within the community.

And within each group, the good example has to come from the instructors.

Different categories of instructors

As we see it, the teachers currently operating in the WMA community can be divided into the following main categories:

1. Professional, accredited Masters at Arms with demonstrable and official credentials. These are the ones who took the time to pass all the boards and to follow the rules (which often entail at least sweat and tears, if not blood) to achieve the top rank in their discipline. These Masters represent the height of professionalism and intellectual honesty, so they will never claim that their credentials extend to any system before 1800. But if what you are studying is a point weapon or a Classical system, the instruction you get from these masters is as good as you can obtain. In any case, and regardless of the system, these Masters' superior command of fencing pedagogy gives them a substantial edge in most disciplines.
2. Professional instructors with demonstrable teaching experience. These may not possess actual Master-at-Arms certificates, but they can be excellent and talented instructors. Their

decision to leave the "real world" and pursue their passion--with the attached financial risks--is alone proof of a tremendous amount of devotion for the arts.

3. Experienced amateur researchers specializing in one or more authors or systems. These instructors usually teach out of sheer love for the authors or systems they research, which they sometimes understand at least on a par with the best professional teachers in the community. On the downside, the limited time at their disposal and their limited exposure to Classical pedagogy makes their journey as teachers a bit more trial-and-error.
4. Amateur group-leaders with natural teaching and fencing ability. These are what make the WMA community so strong: individuals who sacrifice their learning time in order to facilitate learning in others; individuals who read the books and then share every word they get out of them with their group; individuals who do a lot of hard work without worrying about the glory of recognition within the community.

In general, professional instructors charge for their lessons (as well they should), while amateur researchers and teachers do not. A common exception is when researchers are invited to teach out-of-town weekend seminars, or when amateur teachers have to cover the expenses for the space they provide.

The Bad European Budo Checklist

Human nature being what it is, especially when coupled with the powerful allure of the sword and the desire for recognition, it may happen to run into people who are less than honest about their credentials or whose actual skills are far below what they believe and advertise. You may also bump into some who think that lack of safety is somehow positive evidence that they train "for real."

Regardless of the rank or lack of rank of your prospective teacher, certain standards of skills and honesty should apply to anyone who offers to teach you. An amateur researcher claiming expertise in a style that he has never even read about is just as guilty as an individual claiming a Master's certificate that he does not have.

So, we have put together a checklist, loosely adapted from a similar one in Asian martial arts called the Bad Budo Checklist that can help you evaluate your prospective instructor. The checklist is mostly designed to spot dishonesty, personality-cults, lack of real knowledge and lack of safety. The more of these points you can check off about your prospective instructor, the more likely it is that he may be someone who should be best avoided. In our opinion, if your prospective instructor displays more than five of these traits, you should do an about-face and run as fast as you can.

1. Does he claim absolute and equal mastery of multiple weapons, systems and related subjects? And do his claims of mastery change, especially when challenged?
2. Does the art he teaches have an unusual name, which he justifies by saying that what he practices is rare, pure and unique?
3. Does he frequently claim that what he teaches or practices is "the one, true way"?
4. If he claims an official Master's or instructor's title, does it come from a nonofficial source, a source with whom he may have a conflict of interest, or from bodies of which he was creator/co-creator?
5. Does he bestow official-sounding, community-wide titles or certificates in spite of having no official authority to do so? (This of course excludes Scholar's titles or any such internal ranks aimed at showing progress within one's own school.)

6. Is he silent or vague about the identity of his master(s)?
7. Has he ever claimed that his master(s) cannot be produced because they are ostensibly itinerant hermits or--even more conveniently--dead itinerant hermits? Does he not have believable documentation that his master existed--photographs, letters and the like?
8. Does he place his personal experience above the historical texts, making disparaging remarks about the texts and those who study them?
9. Does he claim to know historical texts of which he then demonstrates little or no knowledge? Does he claim to know texts that are only available in a language he does not understand?
10. Does he express himself vaguely and imprecisely, using terms in a non-consistent way and frequently misspelling names of Masters and techniques?
11. Does his following or audience consist mostly of his own acolytes? Is he generally unwilling to appear in venues other than his own, be it in person or on the Internet?
12. Does he promote a personality-cult centered on himself within his school or circle? The following five points on how to spot personality-cults in a leader are from the SOS Dallas web page:
 1. Authoritarian approach and intolerance of questioning or criticism; lies about and insults opponents
 2. Leader shows anxiety about the world, speaking of threats and conspiracies against the group
 3. Leader regularly accuses dissatisfied members who leave of having something wrong with them, having personality disorders or being transgressors or deserters
 4. Ex members have similar stories of abuse and ill-treatment by the leader
 5. The leader is always right and group members never feel they can be good enough
13. Does he have a controversial reputation with other schools or groups?
14. Does he frequently dismiss most other schools as being impure, sporty or eccentric and is he frequently the initiator of ad-hominem attacks against other schools or individuals?
15. Does he claim many "enemies" within the community, somehow posing as the innocent victim of all of them?
16. Does he claim to have fought duels or full-intent bouts with sharp swords?
17. Does he tolerate or, God forbid, promote injuries in his training sessions?
18. Does he display or advocate a brazenly gung-ho attitude towards swordsmanship, overusing expressions like "survival," "real life" or "the street"?
19. Does his website feature poses that make no martial sense but that look impressive to the uninitiated? Does his website contain photographs or video clips of his martial performance that would be considered sub-par by any reasonable standard?
20. Does he claim in-depth knowledge of Asian martial arts, in which he also cannot demonstrate credentials? Do these Asian martial arts also have unusual-sounding names?

This list is our personal opinion derived from our limited experience, and it is of course not modeled after any particular individual in the community.

Good European Budo

So, any teacher who presents several opposite traits than the ones listed above would be a definite go. For instance, you know you have a good prospective teacher when:

1. He represents who he is and how he learned swordsmanship in an open and intellectually-honest way.

2. He does not claim credentials unless these are objective and official, thereby not cheapening those earned by true Masters.
3. He gladly admits his limitations with every system and weapon, especially with those in which he does not specialize.
4. If he is a certified Master at Arms, he does not dogmatically extend his authority to weapons and systems (like longsword) that no longer have a living tradition.
5. He does not claim to know period texts with which he has little or no experience.
6. He expresses himself accurately and carefully and shows a mature observance of the correct terminology and spelling.
7. He associates and gladly cooperates with groups other than his own.
8. He is well liked in the community and shows joy in what he does.
9. He holds sensible and temperate views about the role of swordsmanship, both historically and--especially--today.
10. He acknowledges that the serious and martial aspect of swordsmanship must coexist with reasonable safety precautions, and that we don't live in a fantasy world out of Conan the Barbarian.
11. The skills he displays are consistent with or higher than the level of experience he claims to have.

Again, this is our personal opinion derived mostly from analyzing the characteristics of the instructors whom we trust and admire.

In conclusion, remember that no teacher is perfect, and that the path of teaching is just as arduous as that of learning. So be generous with your instructor, don't expect the impossible from him and be ready to forgive the few mistakes he is bound to make.