

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The historical development of fencing in the Czech lands up to 1948: Institutionalisation, clubs, personalities, and the international context

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Abstract

Background: Fencing represents a traditional component of European physical culture, yet its development in the Czech lands has not been comprehensively examined within broader social and institutional contexts. Previous research has tended to focus on individual personalities or specific periods, while the long-term continuity between military tradition, associational life, and modern sport has remained outside systematic analysis. **Objective:** The aim of this study is to analyse the development of fencing in the Czech lands from the Middle Ages to the second half of the twentieth century, with emphasis on processes of institutionalisation, professionalisation of instruction, and transformations of organisational structures within changing social and political contexts. **Methods:** The study is based on a historical-analytical approach drawing on archival documents, period press, club and federation materials, and scholarly literature. Methods of source analysis and comparative analysis were applied to interpret the development of fencing in relation to broader trends in the institutionalisation of sport in Central Europe. **Results:** The findings show that fencing gradually transformed from a combat skill associated with military and aristocratic environments into a modern sport with stable club and federation structures. A key role was played by clubs and associations, particularly the Czech Fencing Club Riegel, as well as the Association of Fencing Masters founded in 1928, which contributed to the unification of professional standards of instruction. Development was significantly influenced by political disruptions in 1939 and 1948; nevertheless, continuity of professional tradition was preserved. **Conclusions:** The development of fencing in the Czech lands illustrates how a sporting discipline was able to maintain professional continuity despite repeated institutional disruptions. The study shows that the development of fencing in the Czech lands was shaped by the interaction of civic associations, specialised clubs, and professional fencing masters, while international contacts played an important role in its institutionalisation and long-term continuity.

Keywords: fencing, sports history, Czech lands, Sokol, Czech Fencing Club Riegel, fencing federations, Olympic Games, institutionalisation of sport

Introduction

Fencing represents one of the oldest and culturally most significant forms of physical culture in Europe. Its historical development is closely linked to transformations in military art, social structure, and the evolution of intellectual and cultural elites. In the Czech lands, fencing for centuries existed at the intersection of practical combat skills, socially prestigious courtly disciplines, and later institutionalised sporting activities. Although fencing played an important role in the formation of modern sporting culture, it long remained at the margins of Czech sports historiography (Kössl et al., 2004).

Scholarly attention has traditionally focused primarily on mass physical education movements, especially Sokol, workers' physical education, and school physical education, while fencing has been addressed only marginally—most often through jubilee publications, club chronicles, or biographical studies of individual figures. Systematic

treatment of the institutional and social development of fencing in the Czech lands remained relatively scarce until recently, despite the fact that fencing was a discipline with a strong international dimension and long-term continuity (Štumbauer et al., 2015).

The aim of this study is to provide a chronologically structured overview of the development of fencing in the Czech lands from its early forms to its institutional consolidation during the twentieth century. The text focuses primarily on the process of institutionalisation, the emergence and activities of fencing clubs, the formation of federative structures, and their connections to the broader environment of physical education and sport. Special attention is paid to the role of the Sokol movement, the professionalisation of instruction through fencing masters, and the international context in which Czech and Czechoslovak fencing developed (Waic et al., 1996).

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The study deliberately omits a detailed analysis of the development of weapons, technical rules, and teaching methodologies, which have already been addressed in specialised literature. Instead, it concentrates on the institutional, social, and cultural dimensions of fencing, allowing the discipline to be viewed as an integral part of the modernisation processes of physical culture in the Czech lands.

Methods

The present study is conceived as a historical-analytical work examining the development of fencing in the Czech lands within broader social, institutional, and cultural contexts. It draws on sports historiography, emphasising chronological analysis and interpretation of institutional and personnel changes.

The research is based on the analysis of archival documents, period press, federation materials, and scholarly literature, including both primary and secondary sources. Digital databases also enabled access to regional and less available publications.

A historical-critical approach was applied to assess the evidential value, context, and potential subjectivity of sources. The collected data were further examined through comparative analysis, situating developments in Czech fencing within the wider European and Olympic context.

The study employs synthesis to integrate findings from diverse sources into a coherent interpretation, combining chronological analysis with thematic structuring. The focus lies primarily on institutional and personnel aspects rather than on the technical evolution of weapons or rules.

This methodological approach provides an analytically grounded framework for interpreting the development of fencing within the broader history of sport and physical culture.

Fencing in the Czech Lands until the end of the 18th century

The origins of fencing in the Czech lands are inseparably linked to the development of European military culture and changes in methods of combat during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. For centuries, fencing was perceived primarily as a practical combat skill essential for members of the nobility, professional soldiers, and urban strata involved in city defence (Anglo, 2000). In this period, fencing cannot be described as a sport in the modern sense, but rather as a complex system of combat techniques with strong social and cultural dimensions.

In medieval Czech lands, fencing was firmly embedded in knightly culture and the education of noble youth. Weapons training formed part of a broader set of skills shaping the ideal of a warrior and courtly gentleman. Sources indicate that fencing was cultivated both at noble courts and within urban communities, where it was closely connected with guild structures and municipal defence (Jaquet et al., 2016). Tournaments and knightly games played an important representational and social role.

From the sixteenth century onward, gradual professionalisation of fencing instruction can be observed. Fencing

masters settled in cities, offering systematic training and establishing the first more stable fencing schools. These masters often operated across multiple regions and were connected to a European network of fencing schools, particularly of Italian and German provenance (Cohen, 2002). Prague became an important centre of fencing activity, hosting masters of international reputation.

Early modern fencing culture in the Czech lands was also strongly influenced by military reforms of the Habsburg monarchy. Fencing became an integral part of officer training and military education, contributing to its institutionalisation within state structures. Military academies and regimental schools became key sites for the transmission of fencing knowledge and techniques, with instruction increasingly standardised (Hils, 1985). This process led to partial separation of fencing from its purely knightly context and its closer alignment with modern forms of physical exercise.

Alongside the military environment, fencing also occupied an important position within urban bourgeois society. Urban fencing associations and brotherhoods contributed to its spread and reinforced its perception as an expression of cultivation, self-control, and physical fitness (Gaugler, 1998). These aspects played a significant role in the gradual transformation of fencing from a combat technique into a regulated form of physical exercise.

During the eighteenth century, further shifts occurred in the social significance of fencing. The decline of duelling as a legitimate means of conflict resolution and transformations in warfare led to fencing increasingly being presented as an educational discipline with aesthetic and health benefits. The first attempts to conceptualise fencing systematically as physical education appeared during this period, representing a precursor to its later sporting institutionalisation (Vigarello, 2002).

From a long-term perspective, the period up to the end of the eighteenth century represents a key stage in which the basic institutional, professional, and cultural prerequisites for modern sport fencing were established. The tradition of fencing masters, connections to the military and urban environments, and gradual standardisation of instruction created a solid foundation upon which fencing could build and transform into an organised sporting discipline in the nineteenth century (Štumbauer, 2014; Tuček, 1940).

Fencing and physical education movements: Sokol and organised fencing up to 1918

The development of fencing in the Czech lands at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took place within broader transformations in physical education, associational culture, and the gradual institutionalisation of sport. Fencing occupied an intermediate position between traditional martial practice, social refinement, and an emerging modern sport. Its form and institutional framework were shaped both by national physical education movements and by the rise of specialised fencing clubs focused on professional instruction and competition (Jungmann, 1940; Strouhal, 2025).

The Sokol movement, the dominant physical education organisation in the Czech lands, understood physical exercise as a means of moral, civic, and national education. Although fencing never became a mass Sokol discipline, it was appreciated for cultivating discipline, coordination, self-control, and aesthetic expression—qualities consistent with the Sokol ideal of harmonious physical and moral development. In Sokol publications, fencing appeared mainly in ceremonial and representational contexts rather than as a regular training activity (Tyrš, 1873; Waic et al., 1996).

Alongside Sokol, organised sport fencing developed through specialised clubs that built on earlier bourgeois and military fencing salles. These clubs differed in their voluntary structure, systematic training, internal regulations, and focus on competition. They organised lessons, internal bouts, and public tournaments, while seeking international contacts. This corresponded to a broader European trend in which fencing became a regulated sporting discipline with standardised rules and formats (Čapek, 2012; Cohen, 2002; Gaugler, 1998).

One of the key pre-war institutions was the Czech Fencing Club Riegel, founded in Prague in 1902. Archival photographs and records show that its members trained around 1903 in fencing salles in Jilská Street under the French master Alphonse Feraud. By introducing elements of the French school and emphasising technical precision, Feraud significantly contributed to the professionalisation of instruction in the Czech environment (Čapek, 2012; “Sbírka tělesné výchovy a sportu – šerm”, 2025; Prokop, 2002).

Riegel became both a training venue and a social centre. It organised public assaults and competitions, helping to popularise fencing and establish a competitive culture crucial for later national organisation (Prokop, 2002; “Stanovy ČsŠS 1914”, 1914). Among its most prominent members was Vilém Ladislav Jan Goppold von Lobsdorf, who won two bronze medals in sabre at the 1908 London Olympic Games, becoming one of the first Czech Olympic medallists in fencing and enhancing the international prestige of Czech fencing (Olympedia, 2025; Prokop, 2002; Štumbauer et al., 2015).

In addition to the Czech Fencing Club Riegel as the central institution of organised fencing, it is also important to mention key personalities associated with its foundation and early development. The club was founded by Dominik Riegel, who played a crucial role in establishing a stable organisational and training base for fencing in Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century. His contribution was not limited to organisational activity but also included support for the professionalisation of fencing instruction and the cultivation of a competitive environment.

Alongside Vilém Ladislav Jan Goppold von Lobsdorf, other members of the successful Czechoslovak team at the 1908 Olympic Games in London should also be noted, particularly Jaroslav Tuček, who later contributed to the theoretical reflection of fencing through his publications (Tuček, 1940). These figures illustrate that the development of Czech fencing was not shaped by isolated individuals, but by a broader network of organisers, competitors, and educators.

Before 1918, fencing in the Czech lands thus developed in a pluralistic environment where Sokol, club-based, and military forms coexisted and interacted, shaping fencing as a physical, social, and sporting practice (Čapek, 2012; Waic et al., 1996).

The importance of Prague as a centre of fencing activity is also documented in contemporary and later historiographical works, which capture the continuity of fencing traditions and personalities in the urban environment (Tuček, 1927).

Czechoslovak fencing in the interwar period: Organisation, clubs, personalities, and the international context

The establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 created new political and institutional conditions for sport, which was seen not only as a means of physical improvement but also as a tool of international representation (Kössl et al., 2004). Fencing built upon pre-war club traditions and prominent personalities while seeking integration into a modern sporting system aligned with European standards.

Institutionalisation reflected a broader trend toward centralised sports governance. The Czechoslovak Fencing Federation gradually became the umbrella body for club and representative fencing, organising national championships, providing methodological guidance, and coordinating international relations. This reflected broader efforts to professionalise sports administration across disciplines (Guttmann, 2002; Kössl et al., 2004; Štumbauer, 2016).

Clubs remained the core of fencing life. The Czech Fencing Club Riegel in Prague preserved its leading position as a centre of instruction and organisation and produced many national representatives (Gaugler, 1998; Kössl et al., 2004; Strouhal, 2025). Fencing also developed regionally, particularly in Brno and Plzeň, contributing to a gradual decentralisation of the sport.

Internationally, Czechoslovak fencing was visible through regular Olympic participation. The 1920 Antwerp Games marked the first Olympic appearance of the new state. Although medals were not secured, participation symbolised continuity with pre-war traditions and international relevance (Jungmann, 1940). An important milestone for Czechoslovak fencing was the World Fencing Championships held in Piešťany in 1938. This was the only time such a major international fencing event took place in Czechoslovakia. The organisation of the championships confirmed the growing international prestige of domestic fencing and its institutional maturity in the late interwar period. Later Olympic Games in 1928, 1932, and 1936 confirmed a stable presence among strong European competitors (Guttmann, 2002; Olympedia, 2025; “Svazové oběžníky 1924–1942, oběžník 09/1936”, 1936).

The interwar generation built upon the symbolic legacy of Vilém Ladislav Jan Goppold von Lobsdorf. Successes were achieved mainly in team events and domestic championships, helping maintain performance standards. The gradual institutionalisation of women's fencing also reflected broader European emancipation trends (Cohen, 2002; “Věstník sokolský: List České Obce Sokolské”, 1905; Vincenc, 2000; Waic,

2014). A particularly illustrative example of this development is provided by the World Fencing Championships held in Piešťany in 1938, where Marie Šedivá and Carmen Slabochová achieved first and second place respectively in the individual foil competition. Their success not only confirmed the competitive level of Czechoslovak women's fencing but also represented a significant milestone in the process of emancipation within the sport (Čapek, 2012; Cohen, 2002).

Professional instruction was strengthened through the Association of Fencing Masters, which unified standards, supported training, and safeguarded professional interests. Masters played a key role in transmitting expertise across military, school, and club environments (Čapek, 2012; Jungmann, 1940; Prokop, 2002; Strouhal, 2025).

Overall, the interwar period was one of consolidation. Stable organisational structures, an expanding club network, and sustained international contacts established fencing as a recognised component of Czechoslovak sporting culture and laid foundations for post-war development (Guttmann, 2002; Kössl et al., 2004; Štumbauer, 2016).

The development of fencing in the Czech lands can be more precisely understood when situated within the broader European and Olympic context. In comparison with leading fencing nations such as France, Italy, and Hungary, Czech and later Czechoslovak fencing followed a similar trajectory of institutionalisation, characterised by the transition from traditional fencing salles to club-based structures and national federations (Cohen, 2002; Gaugler, 1998). However, unlike these countries, where fencing had strong state or military backing and long-standing elite traditions, Czech fencing developed within a more fragmented environment shaped by civic associations and voluntary clubs.

In the Olympic context, Czechoslovak fencing maintained continuity with pre-war traditions but faced strong competition from dominant European schools. While countries such as Italy and Hungary regularly achieved medal success, Czechoslovak fencers were more successful in maintaining stable participation rather than consistently reaching podium positions (Guttmann, 2002; Olympedia, 2025). This reflects structural differences in training systems, institutional support, and the scale of the sport.

At the same time, Czech fencing was not isolated but actively engaged in international exchange. Contacts with French and Italian masters, as well as participation in international competitions, contributed to the transfer of technical knowledge and gradual alignment with European standards (Čapek, 2012; Cohen, 2002). From a comparative perspective, Czech fencing can thus be characterised as a smaller but well-integrated component of the European fencing landscape.

The Association of Fencing Masters and the professionalisation of fencing instruction

A distinctive yet still insufficiently explored chapter of Czech and Czechoslovak sports historiography concerns the emergence and activities of the Association of Fencing Masters. Its formation was closely connected with changes in the social status of fencing instructors and with rising demands for professional, methodological, and pedagogical

standards in modern sport. The founding of the Association in 1928 can be seen as the culmination of long-term efforts toward the professional emancipation of fencing masters, who gradually became a specific component of the sporting system during the interwar period (Jungmann, 1940; Klika, 1940; Strouhal, 2025).

Fencing masters in the Czech lands had a long tradition dating back to the early modern period, when they worked mainly within urban structures, the military, and private fencing salles. Their work was long based on personal reputation and craft tradition rather than formally defined standards (Čapek, 2012; Gaugler, 1998). Although their role evolved during the nineteenth century alongside the growth of bourgeois society and physical education associations, conditions for systematic professional organisation emerged only in the twentieth century (Jungmann, 1940; Kössl et al., 2004).

The Association unified qualification requirements, defined professional standards, and strengthened the social standing of masters within organised sport. It responded to the growing institutionalisation and sport specialisation of fencing and its integration into international competition (Pavelka, 1940; Strouhal, 2025). Professionalisation thus extended beyond technique to include pedagogical, organisational, and ethical aspects.

A key task of the Association was the regulation of fencing instruction across civilian clubs, physical education organisations, and the military, with emphasis on systematic training and pedagogical competence. The Association also organised professional meetings, seminars, and qualification examinations, helping to standardise teaching methods (Kössl et al., 2004; Pavelka, 1940).

Internationally, the Association maintained contact with leading European schools, especially French and Italian traditions, which shaped technique and methodology. These links enabled the transfer of modern instructional approaches and gradual harmonisation of standards in European fencing (Čapek, 2012; Cohen, 2002; Gaugler, 1998).

During the interwar period, professionalisation also meant increasing specialisation. Masters often focused on a single weapon and worked long-term with particular clubs, creating stable training systems and supporting talented fencers. This period marks the early emergence of modern long-term coaching, later crucial for post-war Czechoslovak fencing (Jungmann, 1940; Strouhal, 2025).

The Association's activities were interrupted by the Second World War, yet the institutional and personal continuity it created strongly influenced post-war fencing. Interwar professionalisation thus formed an essential foundation for later developments in Czech and Czechoslovak fencing (Jungmann, 1940; Pavelka, 1940; Strouhal, 2025).

Czech and Czechoslovak fencing during the Second World War and after 1945

The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 represented a fundamental discontinuity in the development of Czech and Czechoslovak fencing. The occupation of the Czech lands and the collapse of democratic Czechoslovakia brought severe restrictions on organised sport,

whose structures were gradually subordinated to the repressive policies of the occupying authorities. Sports associations underwent forced reorganisation, their activities were monitored, and many were suspended altogether. Numerous clubs were dissolved or compelled to interrupt their activities, functioning only in limited or unofficial forms. These developments formed part of the broader suppression of civil society and physical education movements during the Nazi occupation (Grexa & Strachová, 2011; Kössl et al., 2004).

Despite these conditions, fencing retained a degree of continuity, mainly due to strong club traditions and personal ties between fencers and fencing masters. Training often continued in private spaces or within restricted activities tolerated by the authorities. Because fencing had long been connected with military and academic environments, at least a basic level of professional instruction could be maintained. This informal continuity later proved crucial for the post-war restoration of organised fencing (Grexa & Strachová, 2011; Jungmann, 1940).

After 1945, sporting life revived rapidly. Fencing clubs built upon interwar traditions and restored their activities as soon as possible. The Czechoslovak Fencing Federation was re-established as the central authority, coordinating competitions, methodological leadership, and international representation. The post-war years were marked by strong enthusiasm and efforts to return Czechoslovak fencing to the international scene, including the Olympic Games (Grexa & Strachová, 2011; Strouhal, 2025).

At the same time, the political context was changing. After February 1948, physical education and sport were fundamentally reorganised within a centralised state system subordinated to the communist regime. Fencing was incorporated into a unified structure controlled by state authorities, which meant the loss of traditional associational autonomy and restrictions on club self-governance. Historic clubs were transformed or integrated into new physical education units linked to factories, schools, or security forces, altering established forms of organisation and activity (Kössl et al., 2004; Waic, 2015).

Despite these interventions, fencing preserved continuity of professional leadership through fencing masters who embodied long-standing expertise. Although their roles changed, they continued to train new generations. This continuity helped maintain the technical and methodological standards of Czechoslovak fencing even under strong political control (Strouhal, 2025; Vincenc, 2000).

In the long term, the wartime and immediate post-war experience significantly shaped the later development of Czech and Czechoslovak fencing. Institutional and personal continuity rooted in the interwar period enabled the discipline to survive adverse conditions and formed an important basis for its further adaptation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Conclusions

The study has offered a chronologically structured interpretation of the development of fencing in the Czech lands, emphasising its institutional, social, and cultural dimensions. By situating fencing within broader processes shaping physical culture, modern sport, and associational life, it has been possible to highlight both the long-term continuity of fencing tradition and the key discontinuities caused by political and institutional change.

From its origins in military culture and urban life, fencing in the Czech lands developed foundations that enabled its transformation into a regulated sporting activity. Traditions of fencing masters, links with the military, and the existence of urban fencing salles formed an important cultural base that proved crucial for later modernisation.

The nineteenth century marked the transition of fencing into an organised physical education and sporting discipline. The rise of bourgeois society, associational life, and modern physical education fostered the creation of clubs, stable organisational structures, and regular competitions. Czech fencing remained open to foreign influences, particularly French, German, and Italian traditions, which significantly shaped its technical and organisational development.

Although fencing never became a mass discipline within the Sokol movement, its symbolic and educational role there was notable. At the same time, specialised clubs formed the backbone of organised fencing, above all the Czech Fencing Club Riegel, which played a key role in shaping competitive culture, professionalising instruction, and integrating Czech fencing into the international environment. Its status as one of the founding members of the Fédération Internationale d'Escrime further illustrates the prominent international standing of Czech fencing before the First World War.

The interwar period represented a phase of consolidation, characterised by the development of national organisational structures, an expanding club network, and the institutionalisation of professional instruction through the Association of Fencing Masters. These processes strengthened the long-term stability and performance level of Czechoslovak fencing. Despite the severe disruption caused by the Second World War and the later centralisation of sport after 1948, fencing preserved a degree of professional continuity, largely thanks to the enduring role of fencing masters.

In the long-term perspective, the history of fencing in the Czech lands illustrates how a sporting discipline could repeatedly adapt to changing social and political conditions while maintaining continuity of professional knowledge and institutional tradition. Fencing thus represents a specific but significant component of Czech physical culture and provides valuable insight into broader processes of sport institutionalisation, professionalisation, and the relationship between sport and society.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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