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An Italian's odyssey into the Filipino Martial arts

INTERVIEW BY PERRY GIL S. MALLARI FIGHT TIMES EDITOR

Rollo engages an opponent in an outdoor sparring match. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

IT'S been said that *arnis, escrima* and *kali* collectively known as Filipino Martial arts (FMA) are more appreciated abroad than in their country of origin.

But in the last three decades, military organizations around the world began to recognize the tactical value of Filipino weapons systems particularly knife fighting skills. In an interview with *FIGHT Times*, Italian FMA practitioner and military operator Andrea Rollo tells how his exposure to the Filipino fighting arts served him well in and out of the battlefield and the growth of *arnis, escrima* and *kali* in Italy.

FIGHT Times: *Can you tell us a brief account of your martial arts career particularly your involvement with FMA?*

Andrea Rollo: I took an interest in fighting sports at an early age, boxing and kickboxing in my home town from the age of 14.

After the Military Academy course to become an Officer in the Italian Army, I started practicing submission wrestling, *muay thai*, and FMA. Once in Rome for my first job appointment, I met two Filipino masters from Mindanao, Aurtenciano Junior and Jorge Miranda, heirs of their own family martial arts known as Kali Istukada Miranda System. It was created by their father, Aurtenciano Miranda Senior, who was a Colonel of the Philippine Army. So fascinated by their system, I decided to quit other sports and focus all my effort on FMA, which I felt I excelled at more naturally. In a few years, I was fully immersed in this exciting martial art, competing many tournaments and practicing 2-3 hours of *kali-arnis-eskrima* a day, every day, along with physical training and conditioning.

To perfect my techniques, I usually recorded my lessons in order to see

Andrea Rollo

them again once at home.

I won my first Italian title in 2007. That victory allowed me to join the Italian National Team to compete in the WAO Kali Sport World Cup in Manila in 2008, where I won the gold medal. I won two other gold medals in 2011 during the WAO World Championship in Manila. Up to now, I have won three World Gold Medals in three different weight categories. Now I am the current European Global Stick and Blade Alliance (GSBA) Champion, thanks to my placing first in Barcelona, Spain last July 2013.

FT: *Can you tell us of the Italians' attitude and perception toward the FMA?*

AR: As a young martial art compared to the more popular karate, taekwondo, and judo the Filipino way of fighting is becoming more popular all over the Italian Peninsula *[Editor's note: Though the FMA came to Europe much later compared to other mainstream martial arts, it is way older than karate, taekwondo and judo, which are essentially martial sports]*. In particular, soldiers, police personnel, bodyguards and security guards are attracted by the applicability of the FMA techniques in self-defense situations.

Furthermore, many martial artists coming from other styles of combat and experts in hand-to-hand fighting are approaching the FMA, which are the most specialized in the use of weaponry.

From a sports point of view, Italian fighters are more and more interested in armed competitions and the number of FMA tournaments organized during a year in Italy is dramatically increasing.

In conclusion, Italy is a prosperous field of growth for FMA and Italian practitioners are keen to discover them.

FT: *Italy has a unique swordsmanship tradition; did you manage to find the commonality between Italian fencing and FMA?*

AR: Sure, the FMA have been influenced by the western fencing, especially Spanish and Italian, during the period of the Spanish colonization.

In the 16th century, fencing was not a sport, but a complete system of fighting, which embraced weapons, disarms and bare handed techniques. Indeed, the word "fencing" in Italian language is "*scherma*" (similar to *eskrima*), which root is the same of the verb "*schermare*" that means "to protect" or "to defend".

The influence of western fencing on FMA is particularly evident in the Filipino techniques dictionary, which contains many Italian and Spanish words and in the geometrical schemes of teaching, angles of attack and blows trajectories, which are a peculiarity of European fencing, as demonstrated by ancient manuscripts on this topic.

Moreover, Italian martial arts tradition includes various systems of stick-fencing or *scherma di bastone,* which techniques are very similar to those of FMA.

FT: *You are a military operator deployed in a conflict area; can you tell us how did your FMA training serve you in the tactical aspect?*

AR: Training in FMA improve and integrate the self-defense training which is an important aspect of the preparation that each soldier receives before being deployed to conflict areas.

Moreover, typical values of a soldier's life, such as discipline, honor,spirit of self-sacrifice, and respect are enhanced through martial arts training.

In particular, determination and willpower are mutualpersonality characteristics developed by both martial arts and military training which help me to face with serenity stressing situations during long periods far from home.

FT: *What are your future plans for FMA in Italy?*

AR: I am doing my best to promote the FMA in my own country.

I wrote many articles about the Filipino martial culture on Italian newspapers and specialist magazines and I support the Miranda brothers teaching the Kali Istukada Miranda System in Rome and around Italy.

My current project, still on going, is a cultural and historical website about the fighting arts of the Philippines Islands called *www.kalifilippino.it*

It contains several pictures and accurate descriptions of about 100 Filipino weapons, the history of the FMA development in the Philippines, articles related to the martial folklore of the Philippines Archipelago and the animistic – Christian – Muslim mix of the Filipino warriors' beliefs, online videos of FMA documentaries and much more.

In the near future it will likely turn into the first online point of reference for practitioners, fighters, and researchers of FMA in Italy.

Countering knife attacks

BY JAMES MENDOZA CONTRIBUTOR

THE desire for practical knowledge on how to defend and survive against a knife attack or similar bladed weapons is one of the main reasons why people seek martial arts training. Though various martial arts techniques differ in dealing with this deadly scenario, their principles agree at certain points.

Krav maga way

Dindo de Jesus, regional director for Asia of International Krav Maga Federation, said knife attacks are fast, requiring only small movements, and brutal.

De Jesus said there are two common knife attacks: an overhand stab that starts high and continues to a downward thrust; and an underhand stab that starts low then upwards, which he said is the more dangerous of the two.

According to him, less common methods yet still as dangerous are straight stabs that are mostly employed in a knife fight, slashing attacks, and other unorthodox methods.

One advice useful against these attacks is to never attempt to catch the stabbing hand. "One doesn't need to disarm the knife for disarming is very technical and very hard to do," De Jesus said. "The objective is to create distance from your attacker. If the attacker lunges again, use regular front kicks or defensive forward kicks for defense."

Once an attack is launched, he said practitioners of *krav maga*, a self-defense system from Israel, employ the "360-degree defense", a forearm block accompanied by a series of punches, and a kick to the groin. A variation wherein the forearm is used to block inward is used against straight stabs and slashes.

FMA approach

Filipino martial arts (FMA) maestro and scribe Celestino Macachor said that one should determine the precursors of an attack and be aware of one's surroundings, especially in areas with high crime incidents. "Run if you can, I suggest all serious self-defense advocates spend a bigger percentage of their training in cardio workout than senseless drills."

FMA practitioners are known for their skilful use of sticks, knives, swords, staves, and expedient weapons.

But if a fight is unavoidable he also eschews the thought of attempting disarming techniques and counsels to protect the center mass at all times. "Statistics prove that most knife wounds are concentrated on the center mass of the human anatomy," he said, adding that one could protect himself by tucking in his arms.

For trained individuals, he warned that even gross motor skills break down in such a scenario and one should limit his repertoire of techniques. He said to focus on jamming the elbows rather than attempt grabbing the weapon hand. "Elbows travel at a very narrow radius and easier to neutralize."

Meeting violence with violence is essential in surviving a deadly assault, according to Macachor, adding that the real focus should not be on the weapon, but on the individual holding it. "Like your assailant who wants to take away your life, you retaliate with a real intent in killing the attacker."

Eskrima de Abaniko chief instructor Clifford Rosaroso (left) demonstrates a close-quarter combat technique. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Close-quarter combat

Clifford Rosaroso, founder of FMA system Eskrima de Abaniko and who has held various security jobs, said that a person threatened by a knife should always consider surviving than engaging. If engagement is unavoidable, however, he said *gulang*, or dirty tactics, should come into play.

When being attacked, he said that one should use distractions to disrupt the focus of the assailant. If there is any, a long weapon such as a piece of lumber can be utilized to keep distance and can be used as a weapon.

"Target the nearest fatal area like the head," Rosaroso said when one decides to counter attack, adding that one can be a difficult target through constant movement.

If one is armed and engaged in an actual knife fight, Rosaroso also advocates the use of body movement, but with a slight difference: getting out of the angle of attack and closing in on the attacker instead of creating distance. "Defense through offense. Control and do not be controlled," he said, echoing a popular adage known among FMA practitioners and close quarters combat advocates.

Rosaroso counselled against wasted movements, saying that one should attack with every opportunity. He also counselled against a defensive mindset where the defender is waiting for the assailant to attack before taking action. "Don't follow his rhythm; make him dance to your tune."

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»technique box

In the following photos, Punong Lakan Garitony Nicolas, the founder of Modern Arnis Mano-Mano Filipino Martial Arts demonstrates how to use the *arnis* stick to apply a choke.

Nicolas (left) executes a vertical block against his attacker's backhand horizontal strike.

Nicolas grabs the attacker's right wrist and withdraws his cane to the right side.

Nicolas strikes the attacker's neck using the *punyo* or butt of the stick.

Nicolas bends the attacker's right arm behind him and drives the *punyo* of his stick to his opponent's throat.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROMEO SOLATORIO

USING THE STICK TO APPLY A CHOKE

BY PERRY GIL S. MALLARI FIGHT TIMES EDITOR

BESIDES being an impact weapon, the *escrima* stick can be also used to apply chokes. In most systems of *escrima, arnis* and *kali*, the shaft and the butt of the stick are employed to execute locks, throws and chokes with the latter considered the most lethal.

Using the stick to apply pressure on the neck area is deadly and justifiable only in situations wherein there is an imminent grave threat to your life. An excerpt from *Clinical Forensic Medicine: A Physician's Guide* by Margaret M. Stark, tells of the dangers of applying pressure on the neck: "Pressure on and around the neck is well known to be potentially lethal action. Death can be caused following compression of the neck by any one of four mechanisms or by combination of two or more of them —airway obstruction by direct compression of the larynx or trachea, occlusion of the veins in the neck (however, the large reserve capacity of the venous system makes it unlikely that rapid death would result even if complete occlusion was achieved), compression or occlusion of the carotid arteries (occlusion of the carotid circulation for a period of 4 minutes or more may result in brain damage), the fourth mechanism by which death can occur during pressure to the neck results from stimulation of the vagus nerve by direct pressure in its course down the neck or as a result of stimulation of the carotid sinus. Vagal stimulation results in bradycardia (slowing of heartbeat) which may progress to asystole (a state of zero cardiac electrical activity) or, in some cases, immediate asystole."