Swashbuckling siblings: Harvard fencers Emily Cross ’08 and her brother, Sam Cross ’07, look on as two teammates spar. Opposite: Head coach Peter Brand wields a foil alongside Enoch Woodhouse ’07 on a fencing strip.
Wild on the Strip

To see her on the fencing strip is to witness an almost terrifying release of aggression. With lightning speed, a blur of lungs, parries, and thrusts springs from a disciplined wild animal. The shocking assault is both physical and emotional, an intimidating, escalating onslaught that climaxes with an ear-piercing shriek from behind the mask as Emily Cross drops to her knees and strikes. Touché. In his 30-year coaching career, Peter Brand, Harvard’s head coach, has never seen anything like Cross’s intensity. “Emily has it—one of those things you can’t coach,” he says. “It comes down to character. Of all the men and women I’ve had, I don’t recall anybody like Emily.”

The long annals of Harvard fencing, which stretch back to the nineteenth century, don’t include anyone like Emily, either: last March, she became the first undergraduate to win a world fencing title, taking the gold medal in foil at the World Junior Championships (for athletes under age 20), in Linz, Austria, beating an Italian opponent by one point in the final. This came only a week after she captured the NCAA foil title at Rice University in Houston, making Cross Harvard’s first female national fencing champion. And that was only her freshman year.

There is a saying—“It isn’t the size of the weapon, but the ferocity of the attacker.” The five-foot, five-inch, Cross’s success isn’t simply a question of athleticism; plenty of fencers may be more athletic than she. “My main strength is my intensity in competition,” she says. “That’s a big part of how I’m able to power past someone. On a good day I get to this place where I don’t have to think anymore, and everything just clicks; I can see my opponent’s plans easily. I’m probably better offensively than defensively: when I get into a bind and don’t know what to do, my answer is usually to attack. If you push someone back down the strip [the fencing strip is 14 meters long and 2 meters wide], you not only have them on the defensive, but it’s distracting—they start thinking, ‘I can’t go back any farther.’”

Cross’s personal achievements capped an historic year for Harvard’s fencing squads. The women won their first Ivy League championship since the league began women’s competition in 1981-82. The men shared (with Columbia) their first Ivy title since 1977. The Crimson finished sixth in the season-ending NCAA tournament (more than 30 of the nation’s 46 fencing programs participated), and Brand was named outstanding coach of the year by the U.S. Fencing Coaches Association.

Harvard’s men traveled an especially long route to the summit of the Ancient Eight. Before Brand arrived in 1999, they were doormats, finishing last among the five Ivy men’s fencing colleges (Dartmouth and Brown have not fielded Ivy teams, although Brown will enter the league this year; only women fence for Cornell) from 1993 to 1998 and going a demoralizing 1-23 in dual meets during those years. Harvard remained in the Ivy cellar during Brand’s first three years, too, but as his recruits matured, the program turned a corner in 2002-03 when Harvard broke even at 2-2, then repeated that result the following year before last spring’s championship season. Last year, the Crimson women didn’t just win their big matches, but trounced the strongest opponents, humbling Columbia (19-8) and Penn (20-7) on the road to their first title.

The men’s and women’s squads practice together and fence each other, because the rosters are small (14 women, 13 men), and in a dual meet, a team can field only three combatants in each of the competitive weapons—saber, foil, and épée. (Women began competing in épée in 1993 and saber in 1999.) “They care about each other,” says Brand, who coaches both squads. “They get together socially, they go out to dinner. Fencing is an individual sport, but it becomes a team event. Close-

ness and team spirit were the reasons we won last year. On paper, we might not have had the strongest squad, but during a match we were making a lot of noise, showing that we were 100 percent behind that person. We intimidated our opponents—they were terrified of us!”

Teamwork, yes, but it was the individ-

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arrived in Cambridge and launched his “five-year plan.” The athletic department backed him in hiring two assistant coaches, Guogang Wen, who had coached Chinese national and Olympic teams in foil, and a newly arrived Egyptian, Gamal Mahmoud, in épée. The sport has become so specialized that Brand, “a saber guy,” needs experts in the other weapons at his side. A coach like Wen provides huge leverage in recruiting someone like Cross, who had been on U.S. national teams since age 13, won the World Cadet (under 17 years of age) Championship at 16, and was the top recruit in the country as a senior at the Brearley School in New York City. “You can go to recruits and say, ‘We have everything you need at Harvard,’” Brand explains. “You can be a world-class fencer here.”

World junior foil champion Emily Cross, wearing full regalia in the fencing room at Malkin Athletic Center

It’s based on feeling—he’ll grab your hand and show you how it works.”

Another magnet that drew Cross to Harvard was her brother, Sam Cross ’07, an excellent foil fencer himself who competes for the men’s team. The Cross siblings grew up in New York City, which has long been a nationally recognized hub of the sport. Its Manhattan location is a major reason for the durable excellence of Columbia (hardly an athletic powerhouse) in fencing, and nearby colleges St. John’s, Rutgers, and New York University all have strong programs.

The Cross siblings are the children of Liz, a Korean-American high-school placement counselor, and Fred, a research professor in cell genetics at Rockefeller University, who fenced at Swarthmore. He still fences, and introduced his children to the sport at the Metropolis Fencing Club, and later at the Fencer’s Club in Manhattan, where the family still fences. Emily began at age 9. “It was a good father-daughter activity,” she recalls. “Every Saturday afternoon, my Dad and I would go to the club, have a lesson, and fence each other.” (She continues to study with her first teacher, Ukrainian Mikhail Petin, at the club, and notes that the language barrier with Wen is nothing new.) She entered her first national tournament at 11, and at 14, in Nîmes, France, as part of the U.S. Senior World Championship team, she lost to an Olympic gold medalist “who had been fencing longer than I had been alive.”

Sam Cross tried fencing, then went on to chess, judo, and tennis before returning to the strip. Since then, he has made rapid progress. “When he got here, Sam was a very average fencer,” says Brand. “But I saw in him a tremendous worker. He’s become a major contributor to our team, and is now beating some of the top fencers in the country. Sam’s the most improved fencer on either the men’s or women’s squads since I’ve been here.”

Sam’s teammates include junior All-American Tim Hagamen, who won a bronze medal in saber at the NCAAs last year, and All-Americans Julian Rose ’06 (épée), Benjamin Ungar ’08 (épée) and David Jakus ’06 (saber).

Emily has some strong comrades of her own, including senior foil artists and All-Americans Chloe Stinetorf and Anne Austin, who return as co-captains. “They are tough as nails, kibbutzniks,” says a laughing Brand. “They will not take any crap from anybody. The best captains I’ve had, hands down.” Two more returning All-Americans are Carolyn Wright ’08 (saber) and Jasmine McGlade ’06 (épée). With this kind of depth and strength, Crimson fencers have a good chance to renew their dual Ivy titles, and perhaps finish even higher in this year’s national tournament. (Harvard will host the NCAA Regionals in March.) And come 2008, at the somewhat bigger event in Beijing, Emily Cross might well find herself on a podium, wearing an Olympic medal.

~Craig Lambert