

Strife and Folklore
Discovering the Rural Fighting Art of Jogo do Pau

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It didn't truly dawn on me that I was heading to Portugal until I had made it to the airport that day. For an American who has become deeply interested in the study of history and culture it is incredibly important to travel to Europe to re-discover ones origins. When I imagine Europe, I imagine the centuries of history that have brought me to where I stand now. Portugal was the perfect destination for my homecoming to the Mediterranean, as I could celebrate not only the beauty of Iberia but also the fighting spirit of a traditional means of self defense. Jogo do Pau is a rural stick fighting practice that translates literally into "game of the staff". Within the Municipality of Fafe, some thirty minutes outside of Porto, there was much to celebrate as Jogo do Pau is experiencing a renaissance. Twelve schools coming from all corners of the small country arrived in Fafe to exchange, demonstrate and plan for the future of the treasured fighting system that has come close to extinction on several occasions. This was the pivotal moment for The Immersion Labs Foundation to make an expedition to Portugal to collect footage of Jogo do Pau for hopological analysis. I must say, it was an absolute privilege to film and learn the basics of such an old form of justice.

THE JUSTICE OF FAFE

In the surrounding municipality of Fafe there is an age old adage, "The Justice of Fafe", which is often paired with an image or statue of a common man welding a large stick or club, his hand gripping the jacket of another (presumably wealthy) man. If justice is not upheld in the town, the town will surely uphold justice! Historical records show mention of Jogo do Pau as early as the 1800s but the form of self defense is surely much older than that. Men would carry sticks of all sorts such as farming implements or as a means to keep distance between themselves and the angered bulls they managed over, thus in this culture a weapon to deal with a single rival or a gang from another town is always at hand. The melee style of swinging a large chin high staff began to take root not only as a means of staying alive but as a form of bonding and enjoyment for townsfolk. While the "games" and duels that were played can be casual and lighthearted, although always accompanied by shouting and taunting, they were primarily for the purpose of teaching one how to defend against a single attacker and even more commonly, a group of attackers. It is even rumored that the fighting style was used by Lisbon guerrillas to fend off Napoleon's troops in the Peninsular War in the 19th century. Jogo do Pau is deeply woven into the folclórico, the folklore of the Portuguese people. Traditional rural clothing is often donned as participants dance and sing the songs of the past, telling stories of quarrels or romances halted by an interloper resulting in a duel with staves. While these seem as quaint nods to history we later found out the harsh reality of rural life and how necessary it was for a man to possess the ability to wield the stick as it was literally his lifeline. Should he lose the duel the other man would surely be walking off with the loser's lover. The Justice of Fafe solved many

problems that were not to be spoken of afterwards, problems that the government of that time wouldn't care to deal with.

THIS IS JOGO DO PAU

It was earlier in February where ILF CEO and Expedition Leader Mahipal Lunia Sensei and I met with Oscar Cunha and Pedro Silva, two “Jogadores” (players) who we became fast friends with. The two were in California to represent JDP at *Stickmata*, ILF's second seminar that highlighted the myriad forms of stick fighting. Oscar and Pedro showed the wild fury of Jogo do Pau to a crowd of inveterate martial artists when they closed out the *Stickmata* seminar. The duo brought a fierce energy to the floor, energizing the attendees who were near exhaustion from the expansive three day seminar. Oscar and Pedro ended their set with a rambunctious duel that resulted in various broken staves. Witnessing the raw spirit of this art had my mind blown with its sheer power. Before our parting the idea sprang up for The Immersion Labs Foundation to travel to Portugal to take part in the country wide revitalization of JDP. A large demonstration and conference was to be held near Porto later that year unifying the existing schools of the rural art. While I felt a little bit of apprehension to commit to the expedition as we would return from Portugal ten days before my wedding, I couldn't best my excitement to embark on my first adventure to Europe and see more of JDP. Months later we arrived in Porto and were immediately brought to the residence of Oscar's father, Jogo do Pau Mestre Avelino Cunha. His mother, Maria, prepared a traditional filling Portuguese meal as Oscars' sister, Liliana, gave us a tour of their vineyard.

Mestre Avelino is retired but shows no sign of it. He works tirelessly in his vineyards or on his cultural projects within his village or in the greater municipality of Fafe. Until midnight we took part in a major aspect of Jogo do Pau: eating, drinking and talking together. Stories were told over glasses of vinho verde, fresh wine that has only fermented for a few months resulting in a low alcohol content and a fizzy texture. Oscar would often say throughout the night “This is Jogo do Pau!” It is this communal art of eating that cements relationships after playing a few jogos/games. By the end of the night we were fully updated on the lifestyle of the Jogador and were already feeling fully immersed in JDP without even holding a staff. The following day we began our filming with the entire Cepães school at their local church, a place where they would come and practice for decades. The entire school donned the standard uniform of a jogador, clad in white dress shirts, dress shoes and black pants. It was like a scene out of history with the ancient church serving as a backdrop to the training and players as young as about ten years old swinging a staff in the Roda do Meio (the middle wheel game). Seeing all of this was a reassurance of the future of JDP. The school ran through their routines as a national news station filmed them and interviewed Oscar, Pedro and the two Mestres Avelino and Carlos. Apparently the news station became more interested in the story when they found out about the two Americanos who came out to film the rare art of JDP, so much so that they interviewed Lunia Sensei on The Immersion Labs' mission to preserve and foster this age old fighting style.

TRAINING WITH MESTRE

During our time in the areas of Fafe and Cepães we witnessed the creation of the of the staves used in practice. These are often created from the trunk of a lódão tree (*Celtis australis*) and shaped into a strong yet extremely flexible weapon. Maintained with olive oil after each training session, the sticks are often cut to chin height to create the perfect length for long range stick fencing. Mestre Avelino had a garage full of these staves, some passed down to him by his father. Descending from a line of JDP players Mestre was the only child amongst his ten other siblings who took up the staff. He began training Jogo do Pau at the age of twelve and learned from many different teachers in the Fafe area as his own Grandfather refused to teach him. For some in the JDP culture, dueling or even practicing with ones son or father is seen as a taboo as one does not want to foster aggression within the family.

Amidst filming with the Cepães school we had chances to practice the art ourselves with Oscar and Pedro, getting in depth review of the basic elements of JDP. Expedition Leader and inveterate martial artist Mahipal Lunia even got an opportunity in the busy schedule for one on one training with Mestre Avelino himself. Mestre inculcated the movements with the staff to Lunia Sensei in a free flowing “conversation” with the weapon. The training went largely unhampered by the language barrier between the two of them as Mestre taught from afternoon until the sun began to set the basics of the art. The instruction is given instinctually as Mestre swung at Lunia Sensei calling for him to respond as he taught blocks and hand placement on the staff. The training took place on a small concrete lot attached to the church, a place that many if not all of the jogadores in the area grew up receiving the same lesson from the same Mestre. This was truly an honor for us!

THE IBERIAN CONNECTION

More schools began to arrive from all corners of the country in the following two days before the big Jogo do Pau demo. As they warmed up for an evening demonstration of the various schools we caught a glimpse of the many shades of Jogo do Pau. The different clans of JDP offered the full timeline of the fighting art’s evolution into modernity; from more traditional games being played, with jogadores dressed in the classic folclórico bucolic garb to theatrical stick fighting presentations in which JDP’s Celt-Iberian past was on display, to fully padded and protected sparring matches, all forms were seen. Two of the schools consisted entirely of teenagers as JDP is making a comeback as an extracurricular activity in public schools. Somewhere in the middle of this spectrum falls the Cepães school led by Mestre’s Avelino and Carlos. The entire school dresses in a polished uniform of a white dress shirt and black slacks, bringing a gentlemanly element to what many would consider a wild art form. The fierce nature of Jogo do Pau is alive and well with the Cepães school, whose hard hits are unguarded by any form of padding and whose battle shouts and loud provocations can be heard all throughout the church yard that they practice in.

Amongst the twelve schools in attendance there was a foreign element, an extension of the Cepães school consisting of eleven men from all places, Sweden. It was the similarity between JDP and the Iberian Longsword, the Montante, that drew the first members to Portugal to learn from the Cepães school. The use of the Montante has become popular in the HEMA community and has seen a surge in the growth of practitioners. Even during our first dinner, Mestre Avelino produced from his shed a Montante that was gifted to him by his Swedish students. He roared at us as we ate our dinner, thrusting the huge weapon at us in a demonstration of how similar the wide sweeping movements are to that of the staff (hampered of course by us being in a small dining room). Several of the Swedish members shared their thoughts on how learning JDP brought life to their Montante practice which was studied from various old texts and in many ways lacked context. The group games of JDP translate near seamlessly to the scenarios of the Montante; both weapons were utilized mainly as crowd control or to handle large groups of attackers. What are known as “games/jogos” with the staff are just scenarios in which the one jogador must defend himself against groups as large as ten. In some cases he is completely surrounded (Roda do Meio), in some cases he has two men flanking him (Um a bater dois) and there are games designed for confrontations in the tight alleyways of the town (Jogo de Quelhas), along with one on one dueling (Contra Jogo). Within the realm of the Montante the scenarios are called “plays” and often feature the same tactics of sweeping movements of the blade, covering ones front and back with one swing as a form of crowd control.

A NEW CHAPTER

At sunset the twelve schools assembled and began their parade to an amphitheater in the town square of Fafe. Navigating the city streets, which were already riled up due to a victory in a state soccer match, the marching jogadores caught the attention of the town garnering a sense of pride for this tradition. The parade made a stop at the city hall where the Mayor presented the head of each school with an award, commemoration for their upkeep of tradition. Expedition Leader Lunia Sensei also received an award for his dedication to the preservation of the art. It was truly a proud moment for Portugal as a near extinct cultural practice was blooming yet again.

Soon after the schools demonstrated Jogo do Pau for the audience of fair-goers at the amphitheater, some of whom have not seen JDP before. All shades of the game were witnessed: the two schools consisting of teenagers demonstrated the art as a means of attaining athleticism, several schools brought theatric elements to their games and many schools wore traditional mens garb harking back to the 1800’s. There was the modern rendition, where the participants wore protective gear and bashed each other with padded staves and there were traditional styles focused on one on one dueling where we even witnessed hidden spear point blades in the staves. While all displays of JDP were celebrated it was the Cepães school and its Swedish offshoot that demonstrated the fiercest JDP, breathing life into the art with each taunting shout at whoever was in the middle of the circle. In a shining moment during the set of the Cepães schools demo Oscar stepped into the roda and blew the circle of attackers wide open with a fearsome display of staff

work. It became clear why his father Mestre Avelino referred to him as “a terror!” The bar has been set high for JDP due his efforts and that of the Cepães school.

Over the course of five days Jogo do Pau had truly sunken its way into our hearts as we immersed ourselves in the culture, food and fighting style of rural Portugal. A highlight for me was to get a better feel for wielding the staff, building upon some previous experience from Oscar and Pedro’s visit back in February. During that time we were introduced to all the group games and I was able to learn the movements of the Roda do Meio. While I was filming in Portugal I was taking careful note of the movements to refresh myself and I gratefully accepted any short lesson I could partake in during breaks in filming when spontaneous bouts would strike up amongst the various schools. Our stay in Portugal was short and our days long but I knew I had to take part in at least one roda for my time there to feel complete. On our last day Mestre Avelino led a training session with the various schools. Towards the end of the session he began to lead the Swedish school through the roda and he encouraged me to put the cameras down and join. I moved both of the cameras to the side and out of sticks way and let them roll as I stepped into the circle. The game was completely exhilarating and a major cardio gauntlet as I fought my way out, a truly unforgettable experience that left me craving more training. Needless to say, this won’t be my last roda! Touching down in London on our way home both my Sensei and I took note of the difference we felt outside of the un-hurried municipality of Fafe. We could both feel the insignificance of time amongst the rushing British travelers and we had both agreed that the effect Jogo do Pau had on us was something to be cherished as we had managed to travel through time with the simple yet furious game of the staff.

A MISSION IN PIONEERING & PRESERVATION

The Immersion Labs Foundation was founded in 2017 with a mission to pioneer martial arts education and cultural preservation. What started as an act to hold a small seminar blossomed into a collaboration of epic proportions. Mahipal Lunia Sensei and his small Aiki Ju Jutsu dojo (of which I am a part of) in Mountain View California launched a series of global events hosting martial art masters from the around the world. Beginning with a three day exploration of edged combat arts, *Legacy of the Blade* was ILFs maiden voyage into game changing martial art events, bringing some of the most dedicated and skilled martial artists together to teach and explore under one roof. Following soon after *Legacy of the Blade* was *Stickmata*, an examination of stick fighting arts from locales such as Barbados, Italy, Japan and of course Portugal. However these *ILF Beacon* events aren’t the only endeavors made by The Immersion Labs; *ILF Laser Focus* events are smaller and more frequent mini-labs that explore a single art in detail, offering a contrast to the big labs that are held annually.

The Immersion Labs also carries forth the torch of hopology, the study of human combat behavior and performance, a field that was dormant for nearly thirty years. Traveling off the beaten path to locales such as Portugal, The Philippines and Barbados, ILF has been striving to document and archive at risk and unknown martial arts on *ILF Spotlight Expeditions* in order to spread awareness and preserve martial systems for academic study. Armed with 4K cameras ILF

has now archived eleven distinct martial art systems from several countries such as Trinidadian Kalinda, Italian Cielo e Meraviglia Knife Fencing, Filipino Tapado and Jogo do Pau just to name a few. These archived arts can be held for future generations of martial artists far and wide, ensuring that these systems remain alive and thriving!

Follow The Immersion Labs on Facebook to keep up to date with past and present projects at <https://www.facebook.com/TheImmersionLabs/>. On the horizon for ILF is *Born of Blood*, a three day exploration of the arts of the Pacific Rim and Oceania in San Jose, California on February 21st-23rd 2020, be sure to visit <https://www.theimmersionlabs.com> for more info on this historical event!