

The Evolution of KAOS (Kick Ass Oberlin Sword)

by *Hannah Lindner-Finlay*

Carl Friedman stepped closer to me and spoke in a confidential tone. “Charm City bought Michael rapper swords for graduation. He doesn’t know yet, so keep it quiet.” I grinned. Carl suggested that Michael (his son) and I start a rapper team at Oberlin College. I nodded and grinned some more. My inner twelve year old squealed with joy.

A moment later, Michael approached. We exchanged the initial “so you’re going to Oberlin too” comments and joked about continuing the Pinewoods-Oberlin connection. Almost immediately, Michael mentioned Jonah Sidman, another Campers’ Week kid, who was already at Oberlin. Michael explained that Jonah was a member of the Contra Club and had gathered several rapper recruits from there. We schemed briefly about teaching rapper and morris in the fall, then spiraled off to catch other friends in the bustle of the New England Folk Festival (NEFFA) activity.

Three months after our NEFFA encounter, Michael, Jonah and I reunited at Campers’ Week. Over the course of the week we developed a plan of action. Michael had danced with Charm City Rapper for several years, and I had been an active member of Maple Leaf Morris. We both danced a little bit of everything, so we could support each other as we taught the dance forms we knew best. We decided to start with a rapper team, because rapper draws immediate attention. Morris, at least among the younger generation, tends to be an acquired taste. After generating interest for rapper, we hoped to goad our members into morris dancing as well.



Top: One of the fast moving circles; bottom (left to right): Emma Schneider, Michael Friedman, David Casserly, Hannah Lindner-Finlay, Sarah Rosenthal, fiddler Jonah Sidman. Photos courtesy Hannah Lindner-Finlay; used with permission.

We arrived in Oberlin full of enthusiasm, only to realize that Michael’s swords would not appear for another three weeks. Making and shipping swords took much longer than we anticipated. The extra time proved useful, because we had a chance to settle in and introduce ourselves to some of the future team members at a contra dance before the initial meeting. Upon the swords’ arrival, the team developed a steady practice routine. Michael wrote a dance that we used as practice sequence. We started with stepping, reviewed figures, and then learned new figures for the dance each day. Michael placed emphasis on drilling to create muscle memory. This approach worked remarkably well, but demanded patience. It takes time for rapper to become snappy.

Creating a team required more than just drilling and patience. The girls on the team started having one-on-one tea dates. These tea dates evolved into group get togethers. We daubed ourselves “the Morris girls” and spent hours giggling over pints of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream on the weekends. Eventually the boys joined the festivities. Developing relationships became essential for trusting each other while dancing. The time spent together outside of practice enhanced our comfort with dancing close together while brandishing swords. Practices became riddled with laughter and friendly banter, a highlight of everyone’s week.

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In November, we decided to perform at the monthly contra dance. Because the contra club leaders were part of the team, it was easy to slip our performance in at the break. On my morris team at home, dancing out was a big deal. Often “who got to dance” equated to notions of “who was the best dancer.” Michael took a completely different approach to dancing out. Performing became an issue of each person having an equal chance to dance. This approach has become central to the sense of community on our team.

Our first performance was eventful. At one point Emma and I swept a sword under Ed, catching his legs and spinning him into an unplanned backwards roll. Ed made a magnificent recovery to a loud applause. After the dance, several folks approached us with praise for the brilliant move. Although flattered, we had to admit it was not planned. At our second performance in December, we made less entertaining mistakes. Michael shouted above the music, “It is not as easy as it looks!” Once again, the audience proved forgiving. It was great to feel the support of the larger dance community and to hear new people voicing an interest in the team.

In late November I started teaching morris. Although we rarely had a full set or a live musician, the team bumbled along valiantly. One well-remembered practice, we sang, “I wish I had a brain” as we danced to Step and Fetch Her. The dance ended in a pile of giggling bodies in the grass. A fun, low pressure event, weekly morris provided another important space for community building that carried over to rapper practice.

After winter break, both the rapper and the morris team took several weeks to regenerate the muscle memory for our dances. Michael reviewed our first dance and then began to teach a new one he had written. As spring approached, Michael, Emma and I marched into the woods and gathered sticks for morris dancing. At the Dandelion Romp, Oberlin’s student-run dance weekend, we performed our first stick dance, along with two rapper sets. These performances were videotaped and posted on YouTube. Making these videos available allowed us to share our performance with family and also increased our visibility among dance leaders from the East Coast.

As May Day approached, I cajoled our team into rising early for the traditional festivities. Emma and I created a maypole out of tubes from the hardware store, shredded fabric and a large embroidery ring. Although it did not represent the height of natural beauty, the nine of us who gathered that morning wove the maypole with pride. Our groggy but cheerful crew also bounced about to some morris tunes, performed a spontaneous rapper dance, and finished the morning’s activities off with Sellenger’s Round. All in all, it was a lovely makeshift May Day.

Over the summer, our team lost its rhythm. A week before school started, five of our team members were at Pinewoods, so we tried to throw a dance together. The attempt proved futile. After several disasters, our dance devolved into an improvisational rapper-waltz with garland poles. Michael voiced frustration, worrying that we would spend first semester trying to remember everything we had learned several times before. We realized that people who had only been dancing for a year often lost their muscle memory over long breaks.

Our first two months of school, the rapper team mostly reviewed the two dances we already knew, working hard to remember and perfect them. We also spent time switching positions and learning the many parts of the dances. While this helped us to understand the dance more completely, it took time away from learning new dances. Mid semester, we discovered we had been invited to the Half Moon Sword Ale in New York City in February. Excited for a big trip to dance with some of the best teams around, we bought fresh energy to practice and we started working through a new dance in collaboration with Michael.

When we came back to school we danced almost every day for two weeks. By the end of the two weeks, we felt confident, though certainly nervous. Performing for a community of rapper dancers at the Half Moon Sword Ale proved exhilarating. These people appreciated the new moves that we threw into our dances, giving the appropriate oohs and ahhs, which fed our energy as we danced. We were particularly tickled to hear the older generation of dancers getting excited about our tricks. Beyond performing, it was exciting to introduce my team members to the larger culture of

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folk dancing. Interacting with other teams and learning from them was definitely a highlight of the weekend. In the weeks following the ale, our conversations were littered with memories of people and events. Occasionally we would recall a particularly exciting move we had seen and test it out during practice. These new bursts of creativity promise more fun in the future.

Although going to the ale was wonderful in many ways, it was also very taxing. Our team came back to school and every one of us fell sick within the week. We scrambled to recover our health and our homework in the days that followed. After a few weeks of recovery, we banded together again, this time with new recruits. Our team is now preparing for a performance in the Oberlin Circus. We are excited to be contributing to our own community and the larger folk scene these days.



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Some Words of Advice for Those Starting Morris or Rapper at College

- Order swords in advance. It takes a long time for them to arrive.
- Drill. Drill. Drill. Muscle memory is really the best way to learn things. It will not be boring to go over the same things if you keep pushing yourselves to do it better.
- Think about getting institutional support from the college. KAOS became a college club and bought a second set of swords so that the team can continue after Michael and his swords graduate.
- Think about teaching a class or having a separate beginners team. Michael and I teach a beginner class which feeds into the official team so we do not spend team time regenerating the same skills over and over again.
- Dance out! Having performances helps to keep practices motivated and morale high. People get excited when they see rapper. Many of the folks who joined the team this year were hooked by our performances at monthly contra dances.
- Teaching can be really difficult. Be patient with yourself and ask for help. It took me a year to really become comfortable explaining and demonstrating morris in front of a group. Talking to adults who teach dance is very helpful. It is also reassuring to speak with other students who were organizing. If you want to chat, you can always call me!
- Spend time with your teammates outside of practice. Dancing is all about community, but you have to work to build one.
- Find out if anyone from the town dances and use them as resources. Jeremy Morrison was a wonderful addition/support for our team this year.

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- Tony Barrant has an extensive online archive of ritual dance videos. I often use these videos to plan practices.
- Talk to Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, CDSS's youth projects intern. I just met him last week at the Dandelion Romp and he is full of enthusiasm and excited to help people like you!

Special thanks to the members of KAOS: Michael Friedman, Emma Schneider, Sarah Rosenthal, Dave Casserly, Jonah Sidman, Edward Underhill, Rosemary Bateman, Emma Bishop, Erica Bishop, Shoshana Silverman and Jeremy Morrison.

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