

OCTOBER 19, 2001

Weekend

They Love the
**Knight
Life**

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Sean "Dominus" Richey at Pennsic, a yearly Society for Creative Anachronism gathering in Pennsylvania. Photo by John Heller for The Washington Post.



About 12,000 participants battled it out at Pennsic in August.

Battlefield *of*



Dennis McCarthy, also known as Brutilus.

Sean Richey is Dominus. Proconsul and imperator of Rome, veteran of 19 years on the fields of battle, Dominus leads six legions of elite Roman infantry composing the most feared fighting group in Dagorhir Aratari and the largest single shield unit in the Kingdom of Atlantia.

Dominus is known for his prowess with a sword, his strategic acumen and the absolute loyalty he inspires—and demands—from his fellow citizens and soldiers. He's a man without fear, in full possession of his *dignitas*, willing to fight the good fight and die an honorable death for the glory of an empire that fell nearly 2,000 years ago.

Delusions of grandeur? Split personality? Community theater?

None of the above. It's all part of belonging to Dagorhir (pronounced dagger-here), a medieval sport fighting organization that allows men and women 15 years and older a chance to shed their 21st century selves and don their armor, hoist their shields and have at it with various combinations of padded swords, spears, poleaxes, battleaxes, arrows, javelins and even foam boulders. Richey's 30-person unit, Rome, is the largest within Dagorhir Aratari, the group's Washington area chapter, but it's hardly the only squadron of note: At any given month's Dagorhir battle, one is also likely to find units composed of barbarians, knights, mercenaries, palace guards or some kind of slippery combination thereof.

Dagorhir fighting, which takes place mostly in parks or campgrounds, is equal parts reality and imagination. The entire operation runs on the honor system: Take a hit to the arm, you drop whatever's in that hand and put the arm behind your back. A hit to the leg, drop to one knee and fight that way. A solid hit to the torso, and you're a goner, but not before you fulfill your responsibility to the sport by "dying a good death," loudly and dramatically expiring for the benefit of your victorious opponent. Fighting scenarios vary from month to month and include battles in the woods, castle sieges, bridge defenses and even, thanks to watercraft outlines made of plastic tubing and a complex set of rules, simulated naval encounters.



Richey wasn't always Dominus of Rome. Once upon a time, Richey (who spends weekdays as a Department of Justice program specialist) was simply a fantasy-soaked teenager with time on his hands and an itch he couldn't quite scratch. "When I was 15 and 16 I was reading 'Lord of the Rings,' lots of King Arthur books, living and breathing the stuff," he says. "My friends and I would have stick fights, pretending to be these characters. We went through high school with bloody knuckles."

Tramping through Huntley Meadows Park in Alexandria one Saturday in 1982, Richey and his friends stumbled across an early version of Dagorhir: a swirl of armored knights running through the woods, shouting out challenges and curses as

they played an elaborate all-day version of Capture the Flag. Richey didn't know exactly what he was looking at, but he knew what he thought.

"I was in heaven," Richey says.

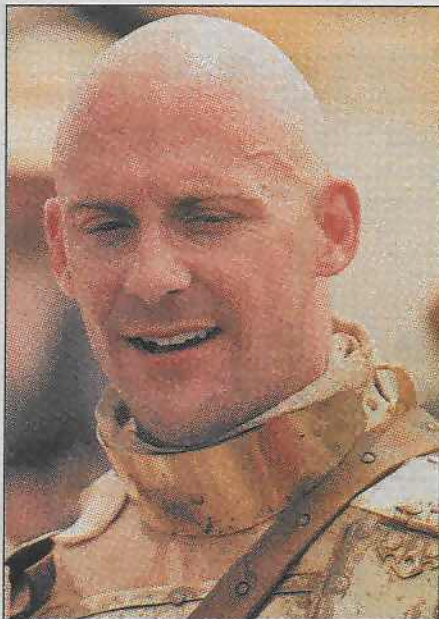
From that afternoon forward, it was an unbroken and nearly straight line to Dominus. "After you read enough fantasy, you run out of good books and you realize that what you're reading is very much history anyway," says Richey, 36, of Falls Church. "I'd always had a certain love for Roman stuff, the glory and honor, but also the decadence and debauchery. I tended to romanticize the whole thing, but the Romans also had an amazing tactical side—their infantry was the best in the world, hard-core, dedicated, focused."

As Dagorhir's charter called for fighters from eras spanning the "fall of Rome to the Battle of Hastings," Richey chose the former, creating a small unit called "the Guild." At first the fighting was enough, Richey says, "but we got bored really quickly. Nobody wants to be the fall of anything. We'd sit around and say 'Someday when we have 25 guys we'll be the Roman Empire.' Five years later, we had 25 guys, so I guess we had to do it."

Off came the black metal and leather and on went the red, gold and purple regalia of imperial Rome; out went just showing up to swing a sword and in went a system of five-man legions, complete with commanders, subcommanders and common soldiers. Richey also created a code of loyalty and behavior, assigned proper Latin titles and arrived

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Dreams



Sean "Dominus" Richey: "I'd always had a certain love for Roman stuff."

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unannounced with his retooled Romans at a major Dagorhir camp-out in 1987, all of them marching in single file, shouting "Ave Rome" and fighting with tight-knit tactics lifted wholesale out of Roman military history.

Dominus, finally in full swing.

Dagorhir, a national nonprofit organization with chapters (or "realms") in 17 states, began in 1977 as the brainchild of Brian Wiese, an actor and J.R.R. Tolkien enthusiast from Rockville, who first had the idea as a 19-year-old living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and performing in an off-Broadway play titled "Hagar's Children."

"I grew up in the woods, playing in the woods," says Wiese, interviewed by phone from his home in Arizona, where he works as a graphic artist. "I loved the solitude, the way it fed my imagination. And there I am in New York City, missing woods and green space, reading 'Lord of the Rings' in this dark urban setting, and asking my roommate—who also loved the novels—'How could I play this book?' I imagined eight friends, making our way through the woods, carefully looking for something, like a wolf pack, hearing horns in the distance and not knowing what lay ahead."

Imagination is as far as the idea went until "Hagar's Children" ended and Wiese returned to the Washington area, where he talked the idea through with his girlfriend (now Mary Wiese), who was a major Tolkien fan herself. A few phone calls and one 20-page prospectus later, Dagorhir ("Battle Lords" in Tolkien's own invented language) began to take shape.

The first battles, however, were less than encouraging: "One guy showed up with a gun," Wiese says, and there also seemed to be a few too many high school kids looking for adults willing to provide free beer. Things finally turned around when Wiese began a more focused publicity blitz, placing advertisements calling for "elves, Saxons, hobbits, and Celts" on WGTB, a Georgetown campus radio station, and decorating area gaming stores and movie theaters with a poster reading "Wargamers and Fantasy Fans Get Out of the House and Into the Fields and Woods with the Dagorhir Outdoor Battle-

games!" "For whatever reason, the right kind of people began to show up after that," Wiese says, "and we had the confidence then to go into the greater world."

Dagorhir as it exists in 2001 is only one arm of an extensive body of opportunities locally and nationally to indulge one's taste for all things medieval, including live-action fantasy role playing, stricter historical reenactment, courtly pomp and politics and, of course, battles—the bigger and busier the better. Dagorhir caters to those who want their swordplay uncluttered by rigorous requirements of historical accuracy, while for the sticklers, there's a group called Markland, centered on the 1066 Battle of Hastings, requiring (and allowing) more realistic medieval armor and truer fighting scenarios. On the far end of the reality scale, there's Darkon, essentially a stand-up version of Dungeons and Dragons, where the spells of wizards can trump the swords of soldiers, and where staying in character—even, sometimes, far away from the field of battle—is the highest priority.

Floating above all these groups like a largely benevolent Big Brother of all things medieval is the Society for Creative Anachronism, a nonprofit living history group devoted to the study of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Formed in 1968, the SCA's global reach includes more than 25,000 members and extends to 50 states, Canada, Europe, Australia and parts of Asia, all of it split into "kingdoms," complete with kings and queens, tournaments, feasts and educational activities, everything nicely spiced with a dose of courtly political intrigue.

The SCA sponsors its own battles with much more demanding (and expensive) rules, including the wearing of full body armor and the use of rattan "swords" with a minimum of padding on their blunt ends. An SCA fight, then, is to a Dagorhir battle as baseball is to softball; the same game, essentially, but with a much greater possibility of bad bruising. Dagorhir units such as Rome may also participate in several SCA fights each year, paying dues for the privilege, whether or not the unit actively participates in the political structure of SCA.

Perhaps the best advantage of participating in the SCA, though, is the chance for Dagorhir units to attend Pennsic, the yearly gathering of SCA members at Cooper's Lake Campground in northwestern Pennsylvania, where battles resemble Hollywood epics and include 2,500 fighters per side, all dressed in full armor. Pennsic, in Richey's phrase, is also "a medieval Woodstock," a Renaissance festival on steroids, requiring all 12,000 attendees, spectators or participants, to pay a \$70-\$100 registration fee and to stay in costume (and more or less in character) for two solid weeks each August.

An SCA battle at Pennsic is the apex of the medieval sport fighting world. If Dominus and his Romans cut an imposing figure at Dagorhir, they pretend to no such status at Pennsic, where even finding the other members of your legion in a mob of 4,000 fighters spread across a field 400 yards square can sometimes be a daunting task. But what the conflict lacks in intimacy, it makes up for in pomp. SCA royalty view the battle from ramparts surrounding the carnage, descending to give favor to their fighters in victory and defeat, while at the heart of the battle 500 combatants might be pressed into a space the size of a subway platform, all swinging, hacking, thrusting and

dying their good deaths.

"It's a circus, is the best way I can put it," Richey says. "It's a freak show. And I'm happy to admit I'm one of the freaks."

David Vierling, or Graymael, is the once-and-future leader of Dagorhir Aratari, president of the group again after a stint in the early '80s. Like Richey, Vierling was an early convert of Wiese's, and has been a regular participant ever since. Unlike Richey, however, Vierling is a role-player first and a fighter second.

"I don't consider this to be primarily a sport, though a lot of people do," Vierling says. "At least not a competitive sport, where winning is the most important thing. I'm more interested in the opportunity to act as a character. I like arriving at a battle and hearing someone I've fought against forever yell at me, 'Graymael, you old Sodomite! You still alive after all these years?'"

At 38, Vierling, of Silver Spring, also appreciates the chance to relieve a little everyday stress. "I like an activity where I can get out and compete really hard, then high-five my opponents, and then I can party with them," he says. "It's a physical and emotional release. I can go out and shed that real-world persona and I can become a hero out of a book."

If you spend time around any of the serious Dagorhir fighters, you'll see this phenomenon again and again, lines blurring around the "real" person and the character. "When you learn to depend on each other during times of danger, even simulated danger," Richey says, "you begin to think of a person not as Bran-

don but as Tiberius, not as Eric but as Harn. You'll be at a party with a lot of non-Dagorhir people and someone will walk in and we'll all shout, 'Tobias!' and his friends will look at him and say 'What?'"

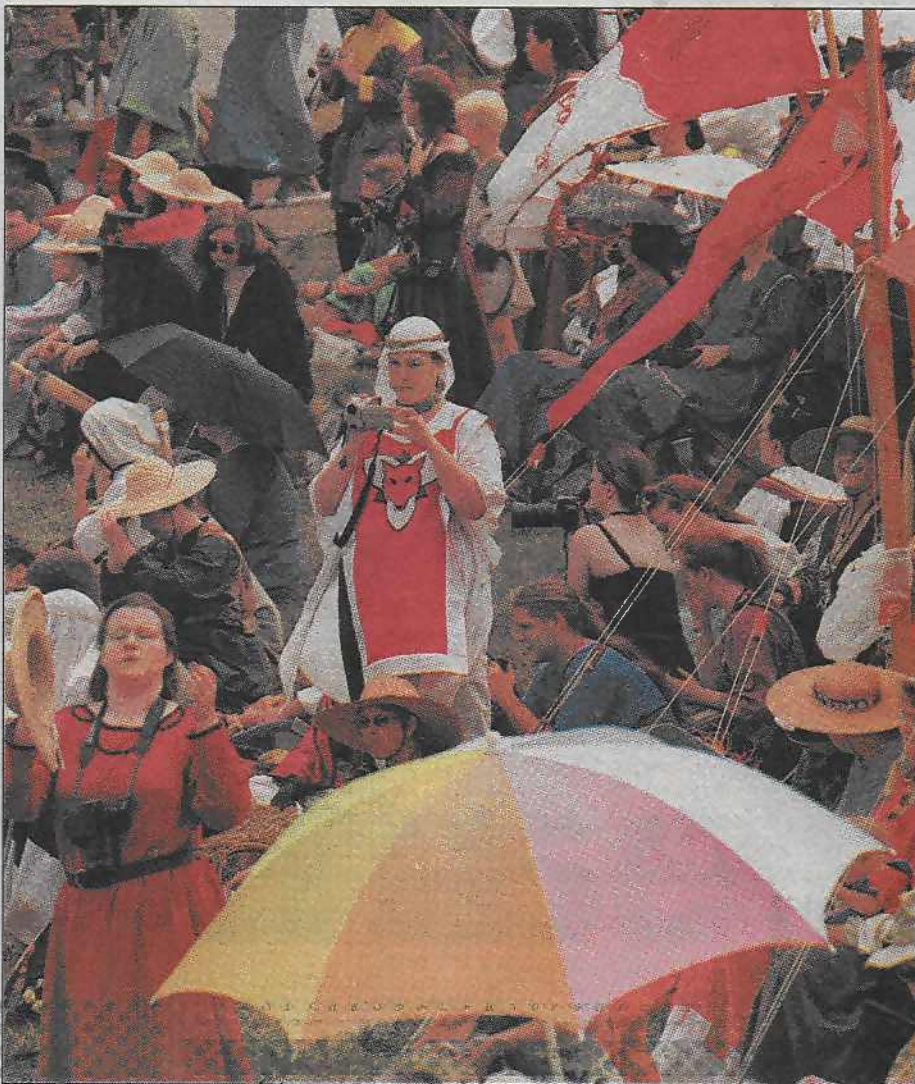
Indeed, it can be easy to forget that Richey was ever anyone except Dominus. And those who remember Richey's first moment of battlefield fame tell a story that demonstrates the possibility that the concept behind "Dominus" existed before the name itself, or Richey's new Roman legions, ever did.

"I'll tell you about the first time I ever met Sean Richey," Wiese says. "He was this skinny, longhaired kid who showed up at his first official Dagorhir battle as, of all things, an elf. When he found out he was going to be fighting with Orcs, this *new kid*, his first time out, stepped out into the middle of the circle and made a speech, about how 'Orcs are my sworn enemies, Orcs have slain members of my family,' and then he called out one of the Orcs for hand-to-hand combat. He lost, of course—he didn't have any training or experience in real sport fighting at the time—but from that point on I knew exactly who he was."

SWORD PLAY

The following Web sites include contact information and event schedules for local and national organizations involved in medieval sport fighting, role playing and historical reenactment. Each organization has its own specific set of rules governing sport fighting equipment and tactics—newcomers are welcome, but need to be familiar with these guidelines before participating.

SOCIETY FOR CREATIVE ANACHRONISM — www.sca.org
DAGORHIR ARATARI — www.dagorhir.org
MARKLAND — www.markland.org
DARKON — www.darkon.org



Pennsic has been described as "a medieval Woodstock."