

Ask the "Head" Coach

Contributed by Beth Athanas, MS
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"I always get really nervous before a tournament. I'm concerned about fencing people I've never fenced before. What do I do?"

Think back to your last tournament. You were probably standing in the venue, looking around at all of the new faces. Remember when the pool was called, and you and the rest of the fencers in the pool are at the strip waiting for the referee to arrive? I can recall how I felt at that moment. My heart would be racing and my chest would feel tight.

Why did my body react this way? Emotional reactions can create physiological responses. A physical response to immediate stress is called flight-or-fight syndrome. The body anticipates an impending struggle and as a defense mechanism, it increases blood flow to vital organs to prepare for survival. The heart beats faster and adrenaline shoots through your arteries. You may get sweaty palms, butterflies in the stomach, rapid heartbeat, or the urgency to use the bathroom.

These responses that you get from facing a brand new opponent are a normal part of fencing. In practice, it's usually not upsetting if you lose to someone you've never fenced before. In competition, however, fencing a new opponent is extremely common and losing to them has much more of an impact than in practice. Fencing anyone requires plenty of adjustment, patience, and focus, while maintaining your sense of timing and distance.

New styles, funky forms, and changing tempos can create a range of emotional and physical reactions both before and during the bout. You may experience self-doubt and lack confidence in your abilities to adjust to a new fencer. Luckily, it is completely normal for anyone to feel this way, no matter how long you have been fencing. It is a way that your body is telling you that it is ready for battle. Being nervous isn't a sign of being a bad fencer; it's a way of saying that you care about the result of the bout.

Turn fencing someone new from an obstacle to a valuable challenge. Follow the C.P.T steps through your training, and you can face new competitors with greater ease.

Control what you can. Going to practice as often as you can, working as hard as you can, and staying physically fit are all things you can control. Focus on your game by fortifying your weaknesses and using your strengths. You can't control the rating of your opponent. You can challenge them by giving it your all.

Plan for the tournament by being prepared in every way that you can be. Work hard in practice by training with your coach and teammates. Fence various types of people, ranging from beginners to elite competitors. Know the terminology, rules, and equipment. Watch other fencers as they warm-up, or even fence them as your own warm-up, to get a feel for their style and experience level. Get enough sleep the night before and eat breakfast that morning. Stay hydrated. These are all things that will enable you to be ready for competition.

Trust yourself!! You have rigorously trained to compete. There is no more training you can do up to the start of the tournament. Competition is no place for perfecting new moves. This is the time to apply what you know. Trusting that you can perform the skills necessary to succeed no matter who you face is a big part of developing confidence and gaining success. Know that you are able to bounce back from mistakes, fight for every touch, and don't stop fencing until the referee says, "Halt!"

If you are nervous about fencing someone new at a tournament, remember that this is a natural part of fencing. It will happen again and again, so learning to deal with it in a constructive manner will be advantageous to your game. Keep in mind the steps of C.P.T. and you will be ready to face anyone.