

## Should is a Dirty Word - Ask the "Head" Coach

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Dear "Head" Coach -

"I'm a high-rated fencer, but in competition I get too relaxed when I fence people I think I should beat. They'll get ahead and I have to scramble to make a comeback. It's embarrassing and I shouldn't let it happen. What should I do?"

Answer:

Sometimes it's not your day and it's theirs. Remember when you beat that B for the first time? Well, now you're on the other side of the plate and it doesn't feel so good. Karma can suck at times.

First off, be happy that you are competing against people who are getting better. This provides you with wonderful training opportunities. Challenges that we learn from aren't always from fencing experienced and highly skilled opponents. It includes learning to deal with spontaneous reactions, strange distances, unexpected tactics, and simple mistakes.

However, you would rather not initially lose to beginners because you are interested in getting better; not letting other novice fencers beat you. There are some things to keep in mind in order to overcome a touch deficit and also prevent from getting behind to begin with.

- Respect. No matter who you fence, you must respect your opponent. This means fencing cleanly, executing proper actions, and taking the distance seriously (as the old Army saying goes, "If the enemy is in range, so are you."). Also, maintaining focus on your game ("Keep moving your feet"), instead of your ego ("I can't lose to this guy! How did he get 13 touches already? I hope my coach isn't watching!"). Respecting your opponent shows good sportsmanship. Remember, you are a representative of your club, and a role model for other teammates. You want your opponent to lose to you, not hate you for disrespecting them.

- "Should" is a dirty word. A lot of fencers predetermine the result of a bout because they think they should beat someone. The fact is that the bout hasn't happened yet, and either fencer is equally allowed to win the bout. You have to actually get the touches in order to win. If the bout was already won before you even fenced it, then why fence in the first place?! Instead of saying that you should beat your opponent, say that you are going to fence them without any expectations and fence your hardest anyway.

- Fence the ENTIRE bout. Maintain a competitive mindset from very first touch to the very last touch. Fence tough from beginning to end. Many fencers make the mistake of being too relaxed at the start of the bout, and start to fall behind. Other fencers may stop fencing once they reach 4 or 14 touches (what I call "set-touch syndrome") and just expect the last touch to arrive. At this point, the losing opponent is often fencing their hardest not to lose, and this can create a dangerous situation for the fencer who is ahead. Fight for every single touch no matter what the score is.

- Fence tough. Always expect an opponent to make a comeback. It is common for fencers to get ahead and become comfortable with the lead. They may relax too much and their opponent may be fencing with a lot of energy to catch up the score. If you're ahead in the bout, keep your energy up, so you can stay on your game. This gives the opponent a different kind of opening; an opportunity to lengthen the bout and get more chances to get more touches.

If (and when) you do get behind, remember these tips and they can help you get back into the bout. It is easy to get upset at yourself for fencing poorly and making stupid mistakes. It is also easy to fence without ego by respecting your opponent, having no expectations, and fence tough from start to finish. What's more is that these tips can help you stay ahead in a bout against a tough opponent.

Do you have a question for the "Head" Coach? Please submit it to [airathanas@fencing.net](mailto:airathanas@fencing.net). All submissions will remain confidential and anonymous.