

## Fencing and Dumbo's Magic Feather

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Dumbo jumps from his platform, the "magic" feather is let go and he continues to fall towards the ground. Timothy Q. Mouse: Dumbo! C'mon, fly! Open those ears! The magic feather was just a gag! You can fly! Honest you can! Please, open them up! Please!

At the last moment, Dumbo opens his ears and soars over the crowd - Timothy Q. Mouse: Wheel! We did it! We did it! Atta boy Dumbo!

You may be familiar with the story: Dumbo is a baby elephant with oversized ears. He uses the "magic feather" to "make" him fly, only to learn that it was just a fake and not magic after all. Still, he flies without the magic feather and become famous for turning his weakness into his strength.

Just as Dumbo used the magic feather as his lucky charm, athletes will use superstitions and lucky charms if they feel that it will help their performance. Some of the most superstitious athletes include Wade Boggs, who would only eat chicken before a game and write the Hebrew word "Chai" (meaning life) in the dirt of the batting box before an at-bat), and Patrick Roy, a NHL goalie who would talk to his goal posts (Murdoch, 2005).

Fencers are no exception to this. Whether it's wearing a lucky shirt, or picking up your mask off the floor a certain way every time you start a new bout, some fencers view superstitions as a necessary part of their routine. What they don't realize is that having too many superstitions or believing too strongly in them can be an extremely controlling habit and create a false dependence on something that has absolutely nothing to do with affecting their performance. Athletes that rely on superstitions look for external reasons why they perform well instead of focusing on how they can control their own game.

An athlete's beliefs are what drives them. How athletes view and feel about themselves can unknowingly affect how they view their reasons for winning and losing. For example, Fencer A may view a loss as a gain in performance because she fenced her best and only lost by a few touches. On the other hand, Fencer B may view a loss as being a failure and nothing more. Another example is Fencer C sees a victory as a result of his hard work, while Fencer D felt his opponent's lack of sleep was the reason for the win.

Attributions are the interpretations on how wins or losses affect continued motivation. In other words, attributions are what we think is responsible for a win or loss. They are in three categories: locus of causality, stability, and locus of control (Murphy, 2005).

Locus of causality is when an athlete perceives a win or loss with either internal (the athlete's responsibility) or external (something other than the athlete's responsibility) reasons. The amount of effort an athlete gives to their performance is something that they control and is classified as an internal locus of causality. Blaming a loss on a dirty and slippery piste is classified as an external locus of causality.

Stability is defined as perceiving the probability that a certain result will happen again. A stable perception is feeling that you are skilled competitor and you can continue to achieve greatness. An unstable thought would be that the reason why you won is because you are lucky, it probably won't happen again, and it happened because of some freaky circumstance. That is, athletes who have unstable viewpoints may leave their performance up to chance and may not take a pro-active approach to their training.

Locus of control is whether or not the athlete perceives that they have control over the outcome. A controllable situation is registering for a tournament before the deadline. An uncontrollable situation is when your sabre blade breaks during a bout.

Which attributions are the best? External, unstable, uncontrollable attributions are often used to prevent feelings of shame, frustration, anger, and other ego-damaging emotions that might deter motivation. Internal, stable and controllable attributions are often used to by athletes who use their losses to make adjustments for future performance, even if it damages their current ego. This is a price they are willing to make because they believe it will payoff in the future. It creates self-motivation despite failure.

Most important about this concept is that attributions are perceptions and not facts. Just as Dumbo learned to believe in himself rather than an inanimate object or meaningless habit, take time to assess your perceptions. When someone congratulates you on a good performance, do you often say, "I just was lucky," or "I had a good referee," or do you take credit for your win, and know that you earned it using your hard-earned skills? Don't try to manage uncontrollable factors.

Look inside yourself for answers because YOU are the one who is fencing YOUR bout!

## References

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