

## Getting Mentally Ready for Olympic Fencing

Contributed by Dr. John Heil, DA, LCP, FAPA  
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The Olympic Games pose such a formidable psychological challenge that the mental game is often the pivotal point between success and failure, determining who takes home the medals. For the top fencers, the Olympics are the most demanding of competitions, while for the underdog they present a unique opportunity. Sometimes the best fencer wins, sometimes not. The burden of high expectation and long suffered anticipation can take even the best out of their game. As long awaited as the Games may be, they unfold at a dizzying pace. Of the World Championship events, the Olympics is both the smallest (in size of the field) and fastest (in number of bouts to the gold medal contest). That is, it has the shortest path to victory, and thus the best opportunity to capitalize on a mistake or surprise. As a consequence, the Olympics are made for upsets. Many of those talented enough to qualify for the Games can take home a medal if they are wise enough to prepare well and fortunate enough to have a break or two go their way.

The question is how to prepare. This begins with putting the dual headed monster of anticipation and expectation in perspective. The solution here is simple, at least in concept. Anticipate what is likely to happen, create a plan, and expect to stick to the plan no matter what the stress or distraction. There is no more fundamental lesson in sport psychology than to focus on what needs to be done and to set aside thoughts of the outcome. This is an ancient lesson, codified centuries ago in the training of the Zen warrior, that remains fully relevant to today's Olympic athletes. Because of the short path to victory, the ability to recover quickly from mistakes and to capitalize on surprise is critical. With everyone in the venue, from the organizers to the referees to the security guards operating at the peak of stress, accidents are bound to happen. The final common consequence of great expectations and a rapidly unfolding event is intensity. All event training needs to be situation specific, that is, the training needs to match the event. There is no intensity in the world of sport like the Olympic Games — and the wise fencer will be creative in bringing intensity to training. This does require a delicate balance, trading volume for intensity as the games approach.

If there a formula for success it most certainly begins with fencing ability. Experience is critical as well, but only if experience is used wisely. Many of the best lessons are the most painful ones. Unless processed effectively and converted into a workable lesson, the past can be as much of a hindrance as a help. Also critical to success are mastering expectation, managing intensity and the readiness to capitalize on surprise.

To summarize, the math of Olympic success is:

ABILITY + EXPERIENCE — ANTICIPATION/EXPECTATION +/- SURPRISE

Understanding the unique challenges of the Olympic Games will enable the would-be champion to prevail, even as this gives the fencer in the middle of the pack, the opportunity to step out of the shadows and snatch a victory.

Often the bout will come down to a single touch — what then? Ponder this listing of 15 ways to win the 14-14- bout prepared as part of the US Fencing Team Game Project.

Starting with the fundamentals: Seize the initiative. Make the touch happen on your action.

Fencing smart: The last touch of the bout is when fencers have the most information about their opponent's game on that day. Use this information to your advantage.

Implementing the fundamentals: Get down on your legs and pick an action you are comfortable doing under pressure.

Actively lead the tempo and footwork. Then make it happen.

Leaving it all there: Fence with everything you have. It doesn't matter if you collapse afterward, like a warrior dying in ritual combat.

A metaphor for action: "Like playing poker, Put your best hand together and go with it." Prepare to act without looking back.

Taking the metaphor another step: Sometimes you need to "Kick the table over!" by seeking the creative solution, one that draws from the uniqueness of the situation and capitalizes on the element of surprise.

Coming from behind: Maintain your momentum. Do not try to reinvent yourself in the critical moment. Trust what got you there to begin with.

Being caught when ahead: It is a whole new bout. All you need is that one touch. A win is a win.

Studying your opponent: Be ready to capitalize on your opponent's mistakes or rashness.

Risking losing in order to win: Come to terms with the possibility of defeat. Accept the risks inherent in taking action, knowing that the risk of inaction is greater.

Keeping perspective: If you lose the touch learn from it; If you win the touch learn from it.

Weighing an ounce of prevention: The best way to assure victory is to avoid letting the bout get to 14-14. When you have a lead, maintain your intensity, and fight to the finish. If at all possible don't let the bout get to the point where it is in the hands of the official, of your opponent, or of luck.

Fencing the overtime minute: Never expect time to elapse if you have priority. Look for the touch. Don't allow yourself to be passive or reactive.

Getting the mind-set: Fence with a light heart and an iron will, and what comes next will take care of itself.

Facing the greater challenge: Stare with confidence into the faces of success and failure. Let it bring out the best in you.

Keeping it simple: Calculated Choice + Decisive Execution = Best Result

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