

A Championship Effort

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Since retiring from competitive fencing I have turned my fencing energies toward coaching juniors. I expected that this experience would require teaching fencing skills, strategy, and motivation. But I had not anticipated that it would be hard for students to understand what it took to be good at a sport. I had been an athlete for so long that this stuff was just part of me. Over the years I have been struggling to find the words to explain to my students what I think learning fencing, and for that matter any sport, is all about. Here it is.

I hope that you love fencing.

Please, please, please, do it because you enjoy it. There are so many sports and other activities out there to pursue. Do yourself, your coaches and your families a favor, pick activities that you really love. I've never met a parent that doesn't want that for their children. Also, I've never felt bad losing a student to another passion. I only feel bad losing a student to fear, lethargy or lack of commitment to anything. In addition, if you look around almost all the greatest athletes are the ones who simply love playing their sports.

I expect that you will try as hard as you can to master the skills.

For kids, this is often the hardest. Although it seems simple, it's really a complex idea. It requires that you appreciate several key concepts of sport. One is "it's not as easy as it looks". Each and every one of us is guilty of this one. Somehow, in the human experience, we think if you can do it, I can. The second concept is "mastery is in the details." Getting good is as simple as learning to master the skills. However, no matter how many times I say this most students don't practice their lunges, extensions, disengages, footwork and other fencing skills. I wish I could come up with other ways to say it, but the bottom line is learning requires more practice than you can imagine.

Develop an appreciation for how hard it is to master your sport.

Mastery is difficult. In fencing you have to master a million skills, put them together in some orderly fashion, develop strategies for different opponents, and learn to do this under pressure. Then you have to start over at every new level of competition. Getting good is hard. Truly knowing this also means that when you do succeed you will enjoy it more. If you ever listen to athletes on TV you notice that the best athletes have a sense of humility about competition. They know that every time they go out there anything can happen. This respect for competition comes usually after losing and getting up and trying again. And when these athletes succeed, you can sense the appreciation even the awe of their performance. On the other hand are those athletes who get frustrated and quit. In my estimation, many of these never appreciated how hard it is to get good. They act defeated and as if they have a lack of self-confidence. They say things like, "I should be farther than I am," and "I can't believe how bad I am." When I hear this I don't hear a lack of confidence, I hear overconfidence. In most cases the reality is you're right where you should be!

Clearly decide where fencing fits in your life and go for it.

This means figure out how important this is to you now, balancing your other interests and responsibilities. This requires looking at the time available, your level of interest and your goals. I primarily see the function of goals as helping you determine how much work you're going to do. Once this is done, now get down to work! Establishing priorities helps you get what you want and also helps you to enjoy the journey.

Become coachable.

This is easy for some and almost impossible for others. It requires the belief that you need something, that the other person can offer it, and a willingness to diligently try to master what they have to offer. It seems to me that most fall down in the first category. For many different reasons people have trouble opening themselves up to advice. Be it fear, embarrassment, bad experiences in other learning environments (like school) or overconfidence, opening up to advice and new ideas is hard. Also, know that if you're going to be great, you have to learn to become coachable. At the same time, I don't think being coachable means being blindly following the leader. You have to learn to be discriminating. At times, I am certain that you will have to reject some advice -- and it might not feel easy to do.

Learn to make an honest and rigorous self-evaluation.

This means giving full weight to both the positive and the negative aspects of your game, your training program, and your competitive demeanor. If you don't appreciate your strengths, two things might happen. One, you'll get depressed and discouraged. And two, even more dangerous, you might throw away what you do best. Another trap here is that

sometimes what seems to be a weakness is really a strength. For example, if your best move is your counterattack -- it may not mean that it's time to start over. It may only mean that you need to figure out a better way to set up your counterattack. On the other hand, it's also important to be able to look at your weaknesses openly and honestly. If you don't you're doomed. Saying after every loss "I choked" isn't going to get you anywhere.

Learn to reach out for what you need.

- Think big. Many people have a closed view of where to get help. The coach, the coach the coach. You, not the coach is at the center of your fencing. This is your activity and the coach as well as the rest of the world is full of tools that will help. Please try and stay and touch with the fact that fencing is yours and where you go with it is up to you.

- Other life. Part of thinking big, means knowing that what is going on in your whole life can impact on your fencing. For me, those people in my life that support and value me for things other than fencing -- have been crucial to my athletic success. They helped to keep fencing in balance and to never seem to important. Also, in many cases, the stuff that keeps us from getting good at fencing has to do with problems outside the sport. When I went to the Olympics I met many athletes, who were not problem free, but had overcome personal problems in order to get there.

- Keep your ears open. If you listened carefully, everything that you need to know to become an Olympic athlete was said on television by the athletes during the recent Atlanta Olympic Games.

- Be creative. When you read biographies of athletes, you see that each had a unique road to the top. Many times they chose unusual and creative paths based on their own personalities and experiences.

I expect that you will practice good sportspersonship.

This is not easy, and I have carefully chosen the word practice. It also means that if you fail, you apologize immediately. Still, I'm not sure that I say this enough to my students -- it does really mean a great deal to me. One of the hardest parts of being a good sport in a one on one sport is appreciating your opponent's efforts. It's easy to be miserable, but it truly is important for you to say to your opponent, congratulations on your performance, today you were the better fencer. And the fact is, it's true!

I expect that you will try to try to win until the last touch.

All you can do is try. And as easy as that sounds, it is almost impossible. Almost all athletic contests are over before the end. Most times one of the athletes has conceded by the end. It's so hard -- yet so simple -- try and win this touch, then after that try and win the next one.

I want to finish by saying that often fencers and their parents ask me if I think that they can make an Olympic team. This question is unanswerable, especially in a sport that has so many paths to success. However, what is almost always easy to say is "I believe that it will be a valuable experience for you to pursue a goal of making the Olympic team." Because, doing so means having to pursue mastering all of the goals that I just mentioned, and these can help you in any pursuit that you choose. Also notice that this same process goes for pursuing much less lofty goals. If you succeed at most or even some of these goals, you will take something away from the sport that will be invaluable throughout your life. Also, I, as the coach will be completely, totally, and absolutely satisfied, even if you lose 5-0.