

How to Fence Better and Still Have Fun

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The following is an outline for discussion related to topics on the mental aspects of fencing. Additional information on this topic may be found in:

Heil, J. & Zealand, C. (2001). Psychological Skills Training Manual. United States Fencing Association Technical Report (No. 2001-10). Colorado Springs, CO: United States Olympic Training Center.

1. Who You Are Influences How You Fence

Complete the following sentence, then see page 7 for discussion:

When I have an important decision to make I usually _____.

Aldo Nadi, reportedly the greatest fencer of the 20th century, said that after five minutes on the fencing strip he knew all there was to know about a person. Who you are as a person tends to show through during fencing more so during the early stages of ones fencing career. People who are thoughtful and considerate will fence in a thoughtful and considerate manner. People who are aggressive by nature will fence in an aggressive manner. Passive thinkers will fence passively and analyze every action. Impulsive people tend to rush their fencing. Whatever your style you will need to adapt to the demands of the fencing strip. Passive people need to learn to attack. Impulsive people need to learn patience and plan their actions.

No matter how successful you are in adapting your personality style to the demands of the strip, with mismanaged stress your natural tendencies will snap you back like a rubber band. Skilled opponents know this and will push you to the limits. As frustration increases so does adrenaline. Fine motor actions needed for point control disappear. Fluid motion is not possible. Fencing actions become wider and faster. Psychological meltdown is imminent.

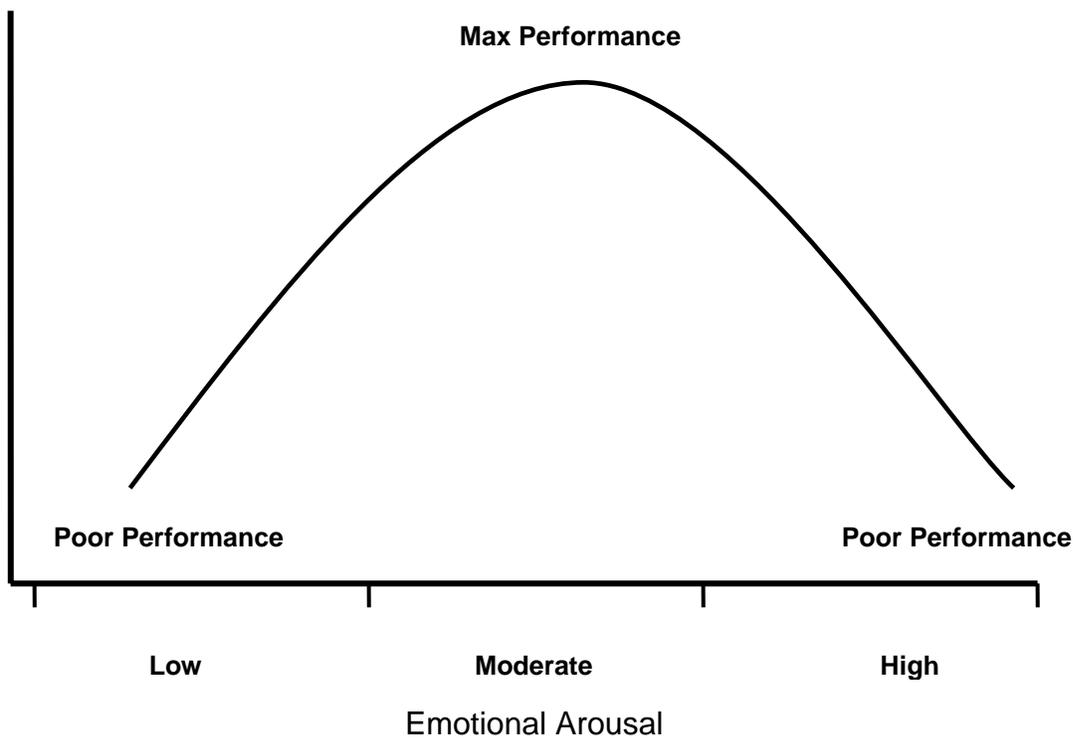
2. Eliminate Fear of Failure

What do you think about the fencer who has temper tantrums when they loose a touch or bout? Are they having fun? Are they successful overall?

For these fencers, frustration and anger take over. What fuels their feelings? They have expectations that are not being met. Their heads are filled with "shoulds" about their performance and when expectations are not met they become frustrated and angry about fear of failure. They tell themselves to "try harder" and as a result feel they *should* then succeed. If they try harder without a plan or tool to manage frustration they most likely will not succeed. So begins the downward spiral.

How you handle failure and defeat during first three years of your fencing career will determine your fencing future. By placing unrealistic expectations on yourself and having a “winning is everything” approach you will not be happy. Developing a successful fencing game takes years (some estimate it to be three to five years). Not many people can sustain efforts in the face of “failure” year after year.

3. Moderate Your Emotional Arousal Levels



Finding the balance between feeling overly-energized and overly-relaxed is the key to mental training. Your optimum level of arousal may shift from right to left depending on your personality and coping style. This is further influenced by your level of training and physical fitness. The well trained (physically and mentally) athlete who is faced with critical performance situations is better able to tolerate increasing arousal levels and may even draw extra energy from the pressure of competition.

One way to view arousal is to think in terms of tire pressure. Many people approach a performance situation with over inflated tires. You must relieve some of the tire pressure by activities such as relaxation, self-talk, imagery, calm diaphragmatic breathing, or easy stretching. If your tires are under inflated you must increase the pressure by running in place, fast breathing to increase heart rate, imagery to view yourself in the heat of competition, or listen to energizing music. One technique is to rapidly squeeze the grip of your weapon between the thumb and forefinger as if pumping up a tire. Stop when you feel the optimum

level of pressure (arousal) has been achieved. Use your middle finger to press on the grip to relieve pressure if too much has been added. Use this technique during a bout to add or relieve pressure as necessary.

3. Establish Your Goals

The quickest way to become frustrated with fencing is to not set goals. If you have no goals for your fencing game you will not progress.

Fencers often fall into the “I must win to be successful” way of setting goals. The problem with this thinking is that you might fence the best bout of your life and still lose. Goals need to be linked to performance, but the performance must be within your control. The outcome of a bout is determined by not only your fencing but that of your opponent also. You have no control over how your opponent fences. You do have control over your game provided you understand the necessary components.

Fencing is made up of four skill sets:

1. Physical condition
2. Mental preparation
3. Technical skills
4. Tactical sense

How do you set goals?

Progress must be made in each of these skill sets for fencing to improve. Therefore, each skill set needs its own goal program. Recognize that these skill sets are inextricably bound to one another. It is no good to set goals for improved lunging ability if you have poor leg strength. If your tactical thinking is far in advance of your technical skill “your brain will be writing checks that your body can’t possibly honor”. Goals for each area must be challenging but not unrealistic.

Goals must have a language that relates to measurable progress. For example, let’s say you set a goal to achieve a national ranking. The first question must be; “How do I measure my progress?” You either have a national ranking or you don’t. It would probably be better to view this as an achievement outcome and not as a measurable goal. On the other hand, you might have a goal of winning the next bout. How would you measure progress toward that goal? Goals need to be easily linked to performance. Long-term goals must be broken down into measurable steps. To achieve a national ranking you must first qualify for the Nationals by finishing in the top 25% at a division qualifying tournament. To achieve that goal you must outscore the majority of your opponents. To do this you must win bouts which means you must give more touches than you receive. An appropriate interim goal then might be to improve your indicators over the course of a competitive season and be successful in

DE bouts. To do this you must track your indicators for each pool and DE bout you fence. To further break down the goal setting process you might say that for your indicators to improve you need to improve your ability to carry out successful attacks, parry riposte, develop a better sense of distance, be able to get that elusive final touch when the bout goes 4-4, etc.

Goal setting means record keeping. You must have a written record of your performance if you are to see progress. There is an axiom in performance improvement that says, "If you don't measure it, it won't change". Therefore, keeping a small notebook in your fencing bag and recording the outcome of all of your tournament bouts is the only way to see change.

4. Develop a Tool Box of Stress Management Skills

The pyramid of escalating anxiety provides a model for understanding the need to master mental skills training in order to progress up the performance pyramid. The example below shows that anxiety tends to increase as you move up the pyramid. The level labels are used as examples. You should decide on your own labels to identify progressively increasing levels of anxiety that inhibit and erode performance.



Each level needs to be mastered before moving on. For example, if you cannot control anxiety during friendly practice bouts you are not likely to perform well when bouts in a club tournament. This is not to say that you should strive to eliminate anxiety. Recalling the arousal model above, you need to find your optimum level of arousal for peak performance.

Typically, the skills applied to manage the mental game involve: Relaxation/Activation; Concentration; Self-Talk; Imagery; Performance Routines.

Relaxation is designed to slow the heart rate and reduce the effects of adrenaline. Simple breathing techniques can reduce tension enough to allow for further muscle relaxation. Taking slow and deliberate breaths using the diaphragm instead of chest and shoulder muscles promotes relaxation. Listening to quiet music or thinking about some non-competitive event can focus your attention away from anxiety provoking images related to the competition. One fencer I have witnessed did crossword puzzles between his pool bouts.

Concentration issues are one of the most difficult and essential skills to master in mental skills training. No matter how well thought out your game plan, during the stress of competition the most common reaction is to experience “vapor lock” in your thinking. All of a sudden, your mind goes blank. Concentration training requires practice if you are going to be able to implement your game plan based on what your opponent is doing. Concentration does not mean looking at some minute aspect of your opponent's actions (e.g., watching the blade movements). Concentration allows you to develop a more comprehensive picture of your opponent. Exercise practice involves focusing on internal sensations and external stimuli while at the same time being able to avoid distractions of noise and unwanted visual cues. Concentration skills allow you to have better peripheral vision which makes you better able to respond to your opponent's style and recognize patterns in their game.

Self-Talk is something that people engage in thousands of times a day. Statements range from harsh and unforgiving to non-judgmental and supportive. There is little question that performance is adversely affected by harsh and unforgiving self-talk (e.g., “I never get it right”, “I always lose to this opponent”, “I can never figure out how to win”). Negative self-statements seem to be a natural reaction to mistakes (“Oh, that was stupid”) and performance below our expectations (“I'll never get this right”). The concept of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” is related to negative self-talk where your belief that you will not succeed actually leads you to failure. At the first sign of negative statements you should take control by saying “STOP” and begin to reframe your thinking. Instead of thinking “How will I ever beat this opponent”, change the self-talk to “OK, if I just stay calm and be patient, I will see an opportunity for a touch. If I can get one touch then I can get another”. One of the best Larsen cartoons shows two elderly ladies cowering inside at their front door, while through the window can be seen a huge monstrous bug on the front porch. One lady says to the other, “Yes dear I realize that it is a huge incredibly monstrous and hideously ugly bug, but perhaps it is a huge incredibly monstrous and hideously ugly bug that needs help”. Changing and reframing negative statements into positive self-talk can often produce a dialogue to work through problems.

Imagery involves visualization of positive outcomes. To see in your mind's eye successful performance can influence the outcome. Jack Nicklaus, for example, has said that he always tried to imagine the shot before he actually hit it. He not only imagined the feel of the shot, but actually pictured the flight of the ball. Gustav Weder, the great Swiss bobsled driver, used visualization to help him win the gold medal in the two-man event at Lillehammer. A year before the games he took more than 40 pictures of the race course showing every curve and straight. He laid out the entire course, photo by photo, on his living room floor. Each day, he sat on the floor in front of the photos for an hour and mentally rehearsed every turn. A sense of mastery over performance skills can be developed by using this "inner theater" in your mind. Imagine yourself facing a known opponent and watch their attacks unfold in slow motion. See your response and rehearse it over and over until it becomes automatic. Another way to develop imagery is to watch fencing DVD's. Analyze the actions as you watch in slow motion. Develop a theater in your mind to display these images over and over as you see the touch land.

Performance Routines involve preparation for competition. Careful planning allows your mind to relax and avoid having to deal with the minutia associated with preparation. Check all equipment the day before a tournament. Review your goals and establish positive self-talk for improving confidence. Be familiar with your equipment bag and make sure you can find everything, even in the dark. Do not add new equipment routines (new bag, new gear storage system) for at least two weeks before a tournament. Establish your plan for nutrition during the tournament. Use food that you are familiar with and have used before. You may need to plan for breakfast and start fencing at 8am, or plan for lunch and start fencing at noon. Establish sameness in your equipment. All weapons should be exactly the same. Many people have favorites in their weapon inventory (I know one fencer who actually names them). What happens if your favorite breaks during competition? Now you must use a weapon with less confidence.

Plan for periods of inactivity between bouts, and between pools and DE's. Keeping muscles warm for periods of up to two hours may be necessary. Pace yourself so that you will be at peak performance levels throughout the day. Be mindful of the need to increase arousal or decrease anxiety between bouts.

Those who are successful with mental skills training recognize that fencing is a learning process. Just as one does not become angry with children who make mistakes when learning to read, successful beginning fencers do not punish themselves with critical self statements when they lose a bout. They do not view an opponent as someone who is going to "beat" them with unfamiliar moves and make them appear foolish. Instead, they view the bout as a series of obstacles to overcome. Each touch is a puzzle to be solved. Instead of saying to themselves "I can *beat* this person", they say things like; "this opponent is an obstacle for me to overcome", and "the only touch that matters is the next one, so I need to solve the puzzle and make the next touch".

Fencing is a game that requires commitment. You will find that progress will be in direct proportion to the time invested. This investment must include physical as well as mental training. Remember, it was Yogi Berra who said "fencing is 50% physical and 90% mental".

Sentence Completion from page 1:

The sentence completion on page 1 can reflect a style of decision making that often influences fencing. Typically, there are two categories of response. One category suggests a cautious approach to making decisions where the sentence is completed with: When I have an important decision to make I usually “think about it”, or “consider all aspects”, or “weigh the possibilities”, etc. The other category tends to reflect a more action oriented style where the sentence is completed with: When I have an important decision to make I usually “make it”. One style is not *better* than the other. They simply reflect different approaches to the same problem. Taken to their extremes, one would reflect a style where the individual is crippled by indecision as the result of obsessive rumination over every conceivable outcome. The other would reflect the haphazard impulsivity of acting on every whim and irrelevant stimuli.