

Coach's Comment

It is not often in Canada that coaching development opportunities are presented at fencing competitions, however, at the 2009 Eastern Canadian Championships a proactive step was taken to offer just such an opportunity. The newly formed Fencing Coaches of Canada (FCC), offered a coaching presentation open to all fencing coaches that shared some insight and observations on athlete development. The presentation took place on the Saturday evening, at the host hotel in Repentigny Québec, and was well attended by many coaches from various provinces. The evening's presentation was followed by a meet & greet for social exchange, and included a selection of wine and catered snacks, which provided for a positive, relaxed and enlightening evening for all present.

Sabre coaches Ildemaro Sanchez and Jean-Marie Banos delivered the body of the presentation, in both French and English, with the focus being on an analysis of fencing video from the 2008 Beijing Olympics. This provided the foundation upon which the theme of the evening was based and from which discussion ensued. The basic concept presented was that fencing results are a consequence of fencing actions that are well executed. Working back from this concept, Coach Sanchez presented his methodology, that in order for fencing actions to be well executed, there must be an understanding of the key performance factors that collectively contribute to an action resulting in success. He outlined the six key factors, explaining each one individually, but also outlined the critical interdependence that each factor plays upon another. Ultimately, he pointed out that at the highest international levels of fencing, all athletes are extremely capable of utilizing the six factors effectively, but one factor specifically, held importance when executing successful fencing actions. Top fencers are all adept at technical/coordination skills, managing and controlling distance, timing, rhythm, and all have the ability to execute those actions with authority. However the ability of a fencer to logically "choose an action" based on their finely tuned assessment, analysis and problem-solving skills within a bout, is really the key to executing quality actions that result in success. Therefore, at the highest levels the key performance factor is the ability of the fencer to logically "choose the action".

The difficulty for most coaches and athletes is to take a concept such as this and figure out how this translates into day-to-day life in the fencing salle. For the top fencers in Canada, and the people who coach them, this means that if they expect to be competitive internationally, they need to become skilled at logically choosing their actions. This means developing a fencing literacy of the key performance factors, understanding how the methodology works, making decisions within the bout based on those factors, and honing their skills of analysis of the opponent. At this international level (*in LTAD equate this with Competing to Win and Living to Win*), coach Sanchez pointed out that the technical coordination of a movement is not necessarily the most important factor. It is possible for an athlete to perform a fencing action technically correct, but be slightly off in one of the other performance factors like distance, timing or rhythm. Therefore the action is correct, but it is not executed well, and therefore it is not successful. Conversely, a fencer may not execute an action with perfect technical coordination, but if

the other performance factors are all well respected and the action is the logically correct choice, the consequence is that it is executed well and is therefore successful.

Now it may sound confusing to coaches and athletes to hear that perfect technical coordination is not necessarily the most important factor leading to a well-performed action. It is all too common for coaches to spend inordinate amounts of time working on technical skills (*what and how you do a technical skill*) as opposed to tactical application of actions (*when you execute the action*). Perfect technical skills do not necessarily translate into success on the piste if the fencer has no idea “when” to do it. This was the point in the presentation when National epee coach Gabor Salamon spoke up to remind us all that the message is not that coaches shouldn’t work on technical skills, but rather to remember that while technical skills are important, there are other key performance factors that need to be respected.

For fencing coaches working with athletes in the developmental streams, which is the majority of coaches in Canada, it is important to maintain a balance in the development of your athlete. The base message from the National level coaches is that first you develop the athlete, then you develop the fencer with basic skills, then you advance the fencer with fencing literacy and a full well-rounded understanding of the key performance factors, so that they can progress to the higher levels. It is important for coaches to recognize that fencers need knowledge and skills that are portable as they move from one level to another, from one program to another (*e.g. provincial to national*), and from one coach to another coach in their evolution and development. If we as a fencing community of coaches want to see our top Canadian fencers succeed at the higher international levels then we have a responsibility to train them to perform quality fencing. The final message, which is most important to reinforce for both coaches and athletes is simple; results are a consequence of actions well done.

My thanks to the FCC and the National coaches for their time and energy to put together this presentation, and for sharing their knowledge and experience in fencing for the betterment of our sport.

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