

STRIP COACHING

Tobias Lee, MD, FACC

Metro Tacoma Fencing Club Coach
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Metro Tacoma Fencing Club
Western Washington Division
Tacoma, Washington
www.tacomafencing.com
tobylee.com/fencing



introduction

As you become a fencing parent and help your child at a tournament, here are some thoughts and suggestions to help you have fun, keep it fun for the kids, and make fencing a great experience. I also happen to have some tips as you serve as coach.

i love to watch you play

Do an online search on this phrase, and there are numerous articles all saying the same thing. Kids are worried about disappointing parents and coaches. They often feel a lot of pressure to perform (which in some instances makes it harder for them to perform their best). A number of articles suggest that the best thing a parent can tell a child is, “I love to watch you play.” It takes the pressure off of doing well. And it is a great, loving, supportive statement.

support effort

I would rather my kids challenge themselves, fence the best they ever have in their lives, and come in last (or not make the cut in a tough national event which has happened to them) than to win an easy tournament and fence poorly. If your child fenced his heart out, that is a great start.

the long game

If your child enjoys a sport (any sport) it is more fun to go to practice. More correct practice makes them better. More practice brings about better results. Better results results in nice shiny medals. Shiny medals are fun. But it all starts with



enjoying the sport. One parent of a very successful 13 year old that Benjamin fenced (and lost to by a lot) years ago when he was 10 years old at a national tournament suggested that he “practice and grow.” That was at first annoying and not specific advice but absolutely correct. Benjamin has continued to fence and continued to grow and continued to become better.

coaching

If you are not a fencer you can still help your child when you do not have a coach stripside with you. Sometimes you may go to a tournament and no coach is planning to go. Sometimes you go to a big event and the coach is running around helping everyone a little bit. But the coach cannot be with your child the entire time. You can help, too.

be a parent first

Please refer to the first few points. Have fun. Help your kids have fun and learn. This is what I find the best about this sport. Very few of our kids will go to the Olympics. But they can all learn and grow. Fencing is good exercise (good for their health), good for problem solving (good for their brains), teaches the value of hard work and practice (good for their careers), and good for sportsmanship.

Some kids win by just getting over their fears and compete for the first time. Some kids win when they finally lose a bout and do not cry. Some kids win when they beat an opponent and are gracious winners rather than pure jerks. Some kids win by getting a medal for the first time. Find whatever small victories and celebrate them.

who got the point?

So sometimes you are not sure who got the point. In foil there may be lights for both fencers but this whole right of way thing make is challenging

sometimes for a non-referee and the reason why there are times when a fencer, coach, or parent may disagree with the call. The best way to tell if your fencer got the point is when the referee raises her hand on the side of your fencer and the score goes up by one. For épée it is a lot easier since a light for your fencer generally means a point (though the opponent may also get a point also in cases of a double touch.)

do the same or do something different

Is your child attacking her opponent and getting points over and over again? Clap, cheer, scream, and yell, “Do it again!” Is your child attacking and losing points over and over again? Clap, cheer, scream, and yell, “Good try! That didn’t work. Try something else!” Even more specific is if a child is attacking and losing perhaps they should defend. Or if a child is defending and losing they should try to attack. These basic mental switches may be helpful to flip at when your child tries something that is not working over and over again while thinking, “If I do it one more time it will work.” You can be there to suggest that it did not work five times and will probably not work on the sixth try. And even if it does work they got one point for an action and the opponent got five. But be realistic. A shy young fencer will not become a monster and charge his opponent because you suggest it.

treat it like a puzzle

Fencing is a puzzle to solve. There is something called the short tactical wheel. It goes like this. One should try a simple attack. The action that beats a



simple attack is a parry riposte (defend and score on the opponent). The action that is supposed to win over a parry riposte is a compound (more complex) attack. The textbook response to a compound attack is a counter attack (if the opponent is getting too crazy and complex just stick out the blade and have them run into it while they are in the middle of their fancy moves). The response to a counter attack is a simple attack. It is sort of like rock, paper, scissors, and one more thing.

A lot of times I will ask the person I am strip coaching what is happening and what is working or not working. Except at the high levels (A or B rated fencers) telling someone to try a specific action is often not helpful unless you are their coach and know what they can do successfully. But if the fencer can identify what part of the tactical wheel they are getting stuck on, they can often think of some solution (the next step) around their problem. If your fencer says that they can’t attack and score a point against an awesome defensive fencer, then perhaps the answer is to also defend and make the opponent do a less awesome move.

one minute break

In the direct elimination bout there is the one minute break to get some water, wipe off some sweat, and get coaching from one person (the coach or parent). I often tell a joke to relax my fencer which I learned from Coach Aaron Page. You can ask your fencer what is working and not working. If they have no idea you can tell them what you see such as, “You are getting most of your points when you attack. So maybe you want to attack more.” Or maybe, “You are getting most of your points when you defend.” Or, “Your opponent is getting most of his points when he attacks so you probably don’t want to keep trying to defend and may need to attack him back.” Or whatever may be. The gentle suggestion is to try something that is working some more and avoid things that are not working. Keep it simple. If the fencer just needs a break and catch her breath that is what you need to let her do.

food and water

Your main job during a tournament for a young fencer is to make sure they show up to the right place to fence, have drink and snacks, and have their equipment working. For older fencers they should figure it out themselves but do appreciate a full water bottle, snacks at hand when they want, and you taking the weapon for repairs (or fixing it yourself) so they don't have to worry about it.

don't criticize the referees

Unless you have taken a referee course and have done a lot of refereeing, I would discourage criticizing the referee on the strip or to your child after. You are always welcome to ask about particular calls particularly if it was contentious. And if done nicely the referees are generally happy to share their knowledge of the rules. And sometimes they are wrong because they are human. But when I referee (and I know I sometimes make a mistake) I will tell a pushy fencer, "I actually don't care who wins. I'm just calling what I see." And I really don't care who wins. Unless you are annoying. Then I hope you don't win so you will be eliminated and go home. But I won't cheat or make calls against you because you are annoying. But I am happy to give you a penalty card for being annoying. You don't want to get cards because you are annoying.

Even after the bout and even if the referee is a complete beginner and has no clue, I would still avoid criticizing the calls to the kids. A fencer should pay attention and adapt. If all beat attacks are called as parries then perhaps the fencer should stop doing beat attacks. Even more advanced, try to get the opponent to do the beat attacks that the referee doesn't see properly! And my solution to a "bad referee" is to suggest a different action to the fencer that yields a single light or avoiding those situations that the fencer gets "calls against her."

video

We video on our phones the bouts that our kids fence at nationals or against particularly challenging opponents regionally. We do it because I do love to watch our kids fence. We show our coach the video after a tournament to work on making private lesson

plans. The US national team has a vast library of fencers from other countries to study.

enjoy the moment

Even if you do not do any coaching but just bring water, a towel, and a smile during the break, that is okay. If you do not want to video take your kids and just enjoy the moment, that is okay. Enjoy these moments with your kids. You are doing a lot just by giving them the opportunity to try this sport. And if you do not have fun neither will they.

take fencing classes yourself

One wonderfully supportive fencing mom—I'll call her "Young"—took some fencing lessons with me after her kids got to be super awesome youth fencers. After one drill, she took off her mask and exclaimed, "This is a lot harder than it looks!" If you have time try some fencing yourself through a class or maybe private lessons. You are never too old to learn, to exercise, and to be a role model for your kids. You can enjoy a shared experience. And it can help you appreciate all the hard work you kids are putting in.

take refereeing classes

If you are super motivated you can learn the rules by taking the referee seminar and practical. It can help you as you guide your child through this sport. And it can also help you understand the sport better.

more information

More information can be found at www.tacomafencing.com and with my Beginner Fencer's Guide when you go to the "Programs" tab.



Andrew (épée fencer) on right strip coaching Benjamin (fencing foil) at a national event. It is okay! Benjamin just needs water, love, and support.