

Scottish Fencing

Talent Squad Bulletin 1/08

Introduction

The **Scottish Fencing Talent Squad** (SFTS) became a reality in April this year with funding from **sportscotland** for a Talent Squad Manager (TSM). Having taken up this position, my remit is to assist talented fencers in Scotland in getting into British Teams or in gaining funding at British level such as the World Class Performance Pathway.

This, the first Talent Squad bulletin outlines how I identified the first squad members and sets out how I hope to be able to improve the chances of these athletes.

This is an opportunity for fencers to improve their preparation and an exciting opportunity for me to work with Scotland's most promising competitors.

In this, the first Talent Squad bulletin, I have taken the opportunity to introduce myself, discuss the method of squad selection and outline the ways I hope to be able to help Scotland's finest.

Future bulletins will provide news and updates as well as articles that might be of use to members.

Selection for the squad

Because the Talent Squad is all about fencers with the ambition and talent to represent Great Britain at World level, the British Ranking lists are the obvious source for prospective squad members. The questions and answers below should tell you everything you need to know about the selection method and the thinking behind it.

How was the selection made? The most current British Cadet, Junior and Senior ranking lists were looked at. Scottish fencers living in Scotland in the top 16 of their category, or in the top 32 of a category above (such as a Cadet in the top 32 of the junior ranking) were identified.

Is this a good way of identifying Squad members? No system is perfect but I am keen to use a simple and very objective method. I don't think that reaching the top 16 of the British rankings should be all that difficult for someone with the talent and dedication to make the British team or qualify for Pathway funding. There may be fencers that you know who have not made the squad but are nevertheless impressive on the piste, but if they have what it takes to achieve national success, then it shouldn't be long before they do meet the criteria. It may be that they are not competing in ranking events but are nevertheless talented, but remember that I am only targeting those who are making an effort to achieve success in British fencing.

How often will the squad be updated? The most current ranking lists will be scanned monthly for fencers meeting the criteria. Established squad members who fail to maintain their qualifying standard will not automatically be dropped from the squad. This is reasonable because fencers can go through some bad patches or find it tough when they switch age group. It could also

be due to bad health. Generally, squad membership will not be withdrawn until a whole quarter has passed without fulfilling the criteria, and even then discretion may be invoked.

Introducing the Talent Squad Manager (TSM)

Most of the squad know me from Scottish competitions or international events like the 5-Nations, UK School Games those of you who don't, here's a

I started fencing at school aged 13 or 14 and soon decided that I wanted to fence seriously. In a long career, I represented Great Britain in two Olympics, sixteen World Championships and numerous other International events. I fought for Scotland on many occasions and was proud to win a Commonwealth Gold medal for Scotland in the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. I retired from International fencing shortly after captaining the British Men's Foil Team at the 2001 World Championships.



Don McKenzie

and Junior International, but for little about myself.

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Fencing has allowed me to travel the World, make lots of great friends and keep in good shape and this is one of the reasons that I want to continue to promote the sport. After retiring from competitive fencing I completed a three year diploma in fencing coaching from Budapest. I was educated in Edinburgh and have a degree in Psychology. I am married with a daughter, Lisa who fences for Scotland.

The Talent Squad Programme

What does the Programme entail? There are two initiatives that should make a difference to the squad's preparations; firstly all aspects of the individual's preparations will be looked at to identify areas that really need attention, and an attempt will be made to source a solution. This could mean anything from advice on creating an annual training/competition plan to sourcing a physiotherapist. Secondly, some squad training will be planned for squad members to train at an appropriate level.

What aspects of the athletes preparations will be looked at?

Fencing lessons: does the fencer have a regular coach and are they getting enough time with their coach? Do fencer and coach need advice on progressing training?

Sparring: does the fencer get to fence sparring partners at an appropriate level and often enough? Do they know how to get the most out of sparring practice?

Fitness: does the athlete augment their fencing with an appropriate level of fitness work? Do they understand their training requirements and how to achieve them?

Physiotherapy: Do any of the athletes have problems with injuries that need to be resolved?

Tactics: is the fencer underperforming because of a need to develop tactically?

Do they need ideas for developing tactical awareness.

Sports psychology: is there a sports psychology requirement, and if so, can it be addressed by advice on techniques or is a referral necessary?

Planning: does the athlete have a coherent annual plan that integrates with their overall plans?

Nutrition: does the athlete understand their nutritional needs and know what they should be eating and drinking before, during and after competition or a training session?

I intend to write something about each of these aspects of your preparations in these bulletins, starting with a piece about Fencing lessons in this bulletin, This list may not be exhaustive.

When will the squad meet? One of the big challenges will be to identify days that are suitable for everyone. The different weapons and age groups often compete on different weekends, and when they are not, there are exams and holidays to take into account. However, the calendar will be examined to find suitable dates. There will be a training event on the weekend of 23rd and 24th August - just before the UK School Games (mark your diaries now!).

Will there be a cost? There is no cost to being a member of the Talent Squad but there may be times when a need is identified and has to be paid for; for example if a fencer needs a service that cannot be supplied by Scottish Fencing, the Talent Squad Manager, sportscotland or the NHS such as the services of a sports podiatrist. There is no budget at present to pay for squad training so there may be times when squad members will be asked for a contribution.

The Fencing Lesson

The fencing lesson, where the coach works directly with a single fencer, is an essential component in the fencer's preparations, and allows the coach to pass on his or her skills and knowledge in the most direct way, whilst allowing the individual's talents to be fully expressed. It is necessary for an aspiring fencer to have regular and frequent access to a coach so that the skills required for success are developed as part of a structured plan.

Types of lessons - there are different types of lessons, which are appropriate in various circumstances. In the early preparation phase of the season, your coach will probably be exploring new strokes, improving technique and correcting any faults that are the residue of the previous season. You will also be developing your 'plasticity of response'. Later on, the lessons will bring everything together in a coherent tactical structure, often at competition pace. The coach may also perform short check-up lessons to ensure correct technique and general understanding. Another important type of lesson is the 'warm-up' lesson before competition. The aim of this is to prepare the fencer for imminent bouts by engaging the vital factors such as accuracy, rhythm, timing, distance and of course, the competitor's confidence.

How long and how often? Opinion differs as to the optimum length of a typical development lesson (i.e. the lessons you regularly get at club as opposed to competition warm-ups), but certainly they should be of at least 20 minutes for a serious competitor, and perhaps as long as an hour. The duration is often dictated by the coach's workload. Developmental lessons concentrating on new techniques early in the year will generally take longer than the intense and explosive lessons that characterise the period shortly before your main competitive phase. Typically lessons start with an 'opening phase' to get the fencer to the point where they can tackle the theme of the lesson, and finish with a 'wind-



A fencing lesson

down phase' to relax the pupil.

Given that the opening might take around 5 minutes, and the wind down another 2 minutes, you can see that a 10 minute lesson would only yield 3 minutes exploring the main theme, whereas a lesson twice as long more than quadruples the time spent on development. Fencers should aim for a minimum of 2 lessons a week, and this is less than most of the fencers you will come across in international competitions are getting. When I trained with the Bonn Olympic fencing Club in the '80s I learned that the serious fencers there, regularly got two 20 minute lessons *each day*. Ziemek Wojciechowski, former Polish fencing star and now coaching the British Men's foil squad wrote 'Top fencers should receive 3-5 individual lessons a week of at least 35-45 mins duration'.

Your responsibility in a lesson. The fencer's responsibility does not end with turning up and following instructions. Maximum benefit will be gained by playing an active and creative role in the lesson. Many fencers think that the lesson is a 'one-way street' where the coach passes knowledge onto the attentive pupil, but much more can be achieved when the fencer contributes from their personal experiences. In an interview in 1976, Russian World and Olympic Sabre Champion Viktor Sidiak said '...Nearly everyone in the world learns things in a lesson and then tries to put them into practice during competition, but this is not my way. I discover things in a competition and then use the lesson to work out how to get them absolutely right'. Many fencers spend lots of time in lessons exploring techniques and tactics but simply resort to their comfort zone style with it's limited moves immediately after, without trying to incorporate the ideas that they have invested so much training time in! I have often thought that the phrase 'taking a lesson' misleads the fencer into thinking that they do not need to be 'pro-active' in their own development.

Conclusion. So, make sure that you are having regular and frequent lessons with your coach, get involved in the lesson and persevere with the theme. It's important that there is a direct relationship between your lessons, freeplay and competition bouts, and this is largely up to you – so get cracking!

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