

Scottish Fencing

Talent Squad Bulletin 3/08

Introduction

Since the previous bulletin, we have had two well-attended training camps for the Talent Squad and UK School Games team members. Well done to everyone for a good atmosphere and for working hard. Talent Squad members had a chance at the second camp to consult with June Lumsden, a physiotherapist who has a lot of experience with fencers, and June gave a talk on the importance of core stability. June also identified a common problem with fencer's lack of upper spine mobility, and showed us all some exercises to improve matters - I hope you have all been practising!

Many Talent Squad members were in action at this year's UK School Games and I was delighted to be part of a team that showed tremendous spirit. Much has been written elsewhere about this most successful UK Schools Games for Scotland so far, and I will simply record my team - fencers, officials, coaches and supporters - for a great demonstration of what hard work, good organisation, gutsy fencing can achieve. Next year's UK School Games will be an under 18 event which will be available for qualification hard work can produce.



Success at the UK School Games

Next year's UK School Games means that the same fencers Let's see what another year of

Congratulations are also appropriate following the announcement of the GB Team for the European Junior Championships in Amsterdam, to Lisa McKenzie (Women's Foil), Chris Harding (Men's Epee) and Natasha Thomson (Women's Foil - reserve).

Squad members' results of note

Some more good results achieved by the Squad...

August 2008 - UK School Games

Women's Foil; 1st **Natasha**, 8th **Ruth**.

Men's Foil; 3rd= **Jamie**, 7th **Callum**.

Women's Epee; 3rd= **Emma**, 8th **Amy**.

Men's Epee; 7th **Scott**.

Men's Sabre; 1st **Matt**, 6th **Michael**.

Women's Foil Teams; 1st Scotland (**Natasha**, **Mhairi**, **Ruth** and Georgia).

Men's Foil Teams; 1st Scotland (**Callum**, **Jamie**, Casey and Alex).

Women's Epee Teams; 1st Scotland (**Ali**, **Amy**, **Emma** and Lucy).

... continued over

September 2008 - Essex Open

Women's Foil; 6th **Lisa**.

Men's Foil; 6th **Jamie**.

September 2008 - Bristol Open

Men's Foil; 2nd **Jamie**.

September 2008 - Manchester Cadet International

Women's Foil; 2nd **Ruth**.

Men's Foil; 2nd **Callum**.

Women's Epee; 3rd= **Ali**, 5th **Emma**.

Men's Sabre; 6th **Matt**.

October 2008 - British Cadet Championships

Men's Foil; 1st **Callum**.

Women's Epee; 3rd= **Emma**, 8th **Amy**.

Men's Sabre; 8th **Matt**.

October 2008 - British Junior Championships

Women's Foil; 5th **Lisa**, 7th **Natasha**.

Men's Foil; 5th **Jamie**.

October 2008 - Ponte de Sor (Junior 'A' grade)

Women's Epee; 6th **Emma**, 16th **Amy**.

To report squad successes I scan the Scottish Fencing and British Fencing websites, however it's entirely possible that I might miss a good result - feel free to keep me informed and ensure you get a mention. Space and time conspire to deny me from providing a comprehensive result reporting service and so I limit reports to a blunt top 4 in Scotland, last 8 over the border and last 16 abroad.

Squad update

Congratulations to **Jamie Fitzgerald** who has been accepted onto the World Class Performance Pathway and so leaves the Talent Squad. Welcome to **Casey Avril**, who joins us from October.



Lisa McKenzie
Mhairi De St Croix
Natasha Thomson
Ruth Clarke



Callum O'Donnell
Casey Avril



Ali Evans
Amy Duffus
Emma Byatt
Kirsty Thomson



Chris Harding
Jamie Firth
Scott Chalmers



Harriet Stillely



Matt D'Agostino
Michael Clarke
Neil McGibbon

Tactics

By tactics we mean the purposeful use of your resources (skills and attributes) to defeat an opponent, taking account of their resources, and this can allow you to defeat someone ranked higher than yourself.

Most young fencers have a 'default' style - the way they tend to fence all their bouts, hoping that if they try hard enough, they will defeat their opponent. When it's not working, the outcome is depressingly inevitable. This is a pity because all opponents are puzzles to be solved, and even awesome fencers can be surprisingly beatable when appropriate tactics are applied. Even very good tacticians tend to have a default style that suits their personality and physiology, and they may try to impose this first, but change to another strategy if they need to. In competitions you will come across a wide variety of opponents. There are fencers that always fence the same way, and although some of them may be predictable and easy to beat, you will meet those that, although limited to a few moves, do them very well and are very successful. Unless your normal game works well against their style, you have to change strategy, but even if you do come up with the right answer, you are not guaranteed success. This is because your opponent has had so much practice at what they do, and considerable experience of dealing with typical responses (you have been observant and knowledgeable, but insufficiently capable - see below). They know their limited game very well and there is little that you can do that they haven't seen before. Then there are fencers that have a default style that they will always try to impose first, only changing style if that doesn't work. Finally (and quite rare) there are fencers who are very flexible and will try to employ a strategy designed to cope

with their opponents from the start. They will begin the bout by testing their opponents with 'reconnaissance' moves to inform their tactical decisions., and they might even have started planning a chance to see their opponent in previous matches. What kind of fencer are you? There is no best about our sport is that there is room for many styles and important that your game is at



What kind of fencer are you?

words, be aware of all the responses opponents typically come up with, and practise dealing with them over and over again. Most of us probably fall into the second category - we have a default style that is our first option, but we can switch (or at least modify) if we have to - hopefully in time to avert a defeat.

So what does the young fencer need to do to become a good tactician, and thus increase their potential out of all recognition? In simple terms, he or she needs to be observant and sensitive to their opponents, knowledgeable to be able to devise appropriate strategies and capable of putting these strategies into practice. Being observant means being able to recognise and categorize your opponent. Do they tend to attack or defend? Do they counter-attack fast preparations? Do they prefer to fence at long or short distance? Do they create opportunities or simply wait for their opponents to make errors? Are they out of condition to the extent that you could tire them out before finishing them off? You get answers to questions like these by watching your opponents and by testing them out - particularly at the start of a bout. All of this takes practice and you can do this at club and at competitions. Start by describing fencers to yourself and you will find yourself noticing things about your opponents that you might use against them. Try spending the first minute

least fairly 'complete'. In other

of a bout making false actions and storing any information gained for later in the bout. What sort of information can you use? It's good to be able to describe your opponent's general style (e.g. permanently pressing, maneuvering-defensive etc.), their choice of stroke and target, their condition, their psychological disposition (can you make them lose concentration or even upset them?) and any physiological factors (e.g. very tall).

As you become good at deciding what your opponent brings to the piste, you must also develop the knowledge to devise strategies that fit. It's easy for example to notice that your opponent is much larger and taller than you are but not everyone knows that it's good to impose a mobile game on someone with much more mass and a higher centre of gravity. Appropriate strategies is a huge subject and beyond the scope of this article, but this sort of knowledge comes with experience, by trial and error, by talking with your coach and team-mates and especially by exploring tactics in themed bouts. As you develop as a fencer, you should be building your knowledge base. Remember that there will usually be more than one answer to a problem, and in particular you need to decide if your answer will be to selectively encourage your opponent's style or hinder it- for example, if someone favours beat attacks, you can present your blade just when you are ready, to encourage their beat-attack when you are at the right distance to parry their predictable action, or, you may choose to fence in 'absence of blade' to avoid giving your opponent the opportunity for their favourite move.

Observation and knowledge are of little use if you are not capable of pulling off the required tactic. There is no point in knowing when to attempt a mobile game if you are not fit enough to sustain it. There is no use in recognising that your opponent always finishes in the low-line if you don't have the technique to successfully parry in octave, septime or seconde, and riposte. Good tactical fencers prepare well for any situation that they are likely to find themselves in. Unless you have explored 'the line' in themed bouts you won't be able to employ this tactic when you are being rushed.

In summary, how do you develop into a tactically sound fencer? Here are a few bullet points to help:

- Start watching other fencers and describe to yourself their styles and techniques
- Build up a knowledge base from personal experience and discussions with coaches and fencers
- Explore tactics in themed bouts at club
- It takes a long time to master tactical flexibility - persevere
- Try to spend the first minute or so in bouts getting a feel for your opponent and carrying out 'reconnaissance' moves
- When you lose a hit/bout, try to remain calm and make a constructive analysis of what happened (if it's in a competition, do it quickly and then forget the loss and concentrate on the next hit/bout)

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