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Quick Coaching Tip - Language and Goals Used in the First Lesson or Class

One of the requirements for earning Prevot and Master certification is to be able to give lessons where the student takes some responsibility for leading the footwork and initiating the blade actions. This is to better replicate what a successful fencer would be doing during a bout. How many times though have you asked your students to lead the footwork and they respond by acting as if it is more difficult and stressful? That's because you probably introduced student led footwork too late in their training. We can help reduce the stress they feel by laying a foundation as early as possible in their training that includes student-led footwork and student-initiated bladework. But, how can we expect complete beginners to be able to be the leaders? The ones in control? Do it in a way that they enjoy being in control. They can understand and appreciate the advantages of being in control from the beginning and can find it fun and rewarding.

For example, to teach an attack in foil the coach says: "You are a hunter. Slowly push the opponent backwards toward the edge of the cliff (the end of the strip). When your tip feels like it can reach the opponent's chest, it strikes!" Contrast that with instruction using bland technical language which often has the student think about his or her own actions, ie. what the arms and legs are doing, such as "One fencer advances while the other retreats. The advancing fencer attacks when the retreating fencer stops."

For defending, we could say "Pull the opponent toward you. Set your trap (make them miss, for instance), and then take delight in punishing them by scoring your own touch!" Contrast that with "One fencer advances while the other retreats. The retreating fencer stops footwork, sees the attack, and then retreats to make the attack fall short. Then the defending fencer makes his or her own attack."

In a way, each version leads to the fencers doing the same actions, but they tend to do them in very different ways because the goal oriented instruction includes more information than the technical version does. Exciting tactical instruction leads to more natural movement and more confidence. Most importantly, I believe, is that the new students have more fun, which means they are more likely to return which is incredibly important for any club offering a "try one class" option for beginners. Setting up a drill with technical instruction can produce satisfactory results but it seems to lead to stiffer, more inhibited actions, especially if they are trying very hard to do it correctly. Students sometimes seem to be stuck on what they themselves are doing, and the interplay between the two partners becomes secondary. This stiffness is often simply accepted as the norm for beginners and we assume that with experience the new fencers will improve.

Let's analyze this set of instructions: "You are a hunter slowly pushing the opponent backwards toward the edge of the cliff (the end of the strip). When your tip feels like it can reach the opponent's chest, it strikes like lighting!" What does the coach communicate to the students?

You are a hunter - This adds a psychological element that tells the fencer that he or she is dominant over the opponent. The hunter can simultaneously be fearless and confident but also observant, careful, and cautious.

Slowly - prevents them from rushing but allows for acceleration later.

pushing - moving in a forward direction is implied and easily understood. It gives a sense that there is a relationship between the fencer and the opponent. Your actions have influence over the opponent. There is some sense of power and control over the situation here too.

Edge of the cliff - an easy to understand analogy...going off the back edge of the strip is bad. The opponent will try to avoid this, and both fencers know this.

When your tip feels like it can - this puts the mind of the fencer into their tip. They are aware of their tip, the tip's location, the distance between the tip and the target, and whether or not the opponent's blade is in the way.

reach the opponent's chest, - The main goal is to create the touch.

it strikes like lightning! - Lightning may be the best analogue of a fencing attack found in nature. Lightning can be described as fast, powerful, terrifying, and unstoppable. The tip flies to the target with vigor and enthusiasm! If it doesn't it probably won't work very well.

Likewise we can look at the instructions to "Pull the opponent toward you. Set your trap (make them miss or parry them, for instance), and then take delight in punishing them as you score your touch!" This has many similar qualities to those found in the first set of instructions. Not only do the fencers understand what to do (back up, make the attack fail, and then score your touch) but there is a sense of excitement and emotion woven in. The students in the class will better understand the concept of an invitation as a preparation because it is introduced as a trap, and a trap is something they will understand. From the very beginning the fencers will know the fun of fencing, because they will be doing more than just fencing actions, they will be doing fencing actions in a context and with an understood purpose.

Going back to where I started, the students who learn with this approach, and are consistently taught in this manner, will be more comfortable leading the footwork and initiating blade actions later on in more advanced individual lessons because that's already how they think fencing should be done. That's what they know, and have known, from their beginning on day one, and they like it that way.

If you were to teach a beginner class and had about an hour and a half you could do something like this:

Students get their gear. They are led in a group warm-up. They learn some footwork such as on-guard, advances, retreats, and lunges. If you have wall-targets they learn how to hold a foil and make thrusts, lunges, and advance-lunges hitting the targets. At this point, the real class begins and they are paired up. They practice the attacks against each other instead of the wall targets. Then the coach says "Fencers to my left, you are the hunters..." and they practice hunting down and scoring touches on their prey. Next "But the fencers on my right learn and adapt. Pull the opponent toward you and set a trap. Make them miss and then you strike!" (Show them how to do a get-away-go or a parry and riposte as you see fit or just see how they solve the problem themselves.) The coach then tells them to reverse roles and they continue to practice. Finally, the roles are removed. Either fencer may attack and either fencer may defend with a trap. Oh, look, now they're fencing!