

Coaching Fencers with Learning Disabilities

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There are few challenges more rewarding than teaching those who have difficulty learning. The challenge is compounded in group class situations because each student has particular strengths and needs. The coach is thus required to adopt a flexible teaching style which attempts to meet the needs of each student in the group without appearing to cater to the needs of any student in particular. The keys here are using a variety of communication skills and infinite patience.

Most of what is described here is applicable to any student with whom you may work; learning disabled or not. Whether coaching an individual or group, the first thing to do when taking up the task of teaching a new fencing student (or students) is to identify each individual's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. With youths, asking the parents for general information is often helpful. Ask questions like "Does your child have any problems with balance or coordination?" and "How long can he concentrate on a particular task?" and "Does he learn best from what he sees or hears, or does he have to do things physically to learn?" Sometimes the students themselves, especially teens and adults, will know the answers to these questions. If you can't get satisfactory answers from asking, then you will have to learn for yourself through careful observation.

You may be lucky. Some students with whom you may work may know quite well what their learning requirements are and will be able to help you help them. Perhaps a student simply can't learn from what she hears, but can pick things up quite readily from visual observation and physical practice. A student like this, though having a learning disability, shouldn't pose much of a problem to you as a coach, but you will still need to remember that she may not remember well the vocabulary you teach unless she writes it down or you give her printed material to study.

More difficult challenges await you if the student has a combination of learning issues. Perhaps he is very intelligent and learns well from reading, but from his ears and hands nothing seems to sink in. To complicate matters, he has issues with balance, coordination, and telling the difference between left and right. Weeks and months may pass, and you will still be telling this student that since he is right handed that his right foot should be facing forward. He will respond "Oh, yes, I knew that." He will fix the problem, but the next time he comes on guard, there's only a 50-50 shot that he has the correct foot forward. This will frustrate him as much as it will frustrate you, so keep cool, be patient, and gently mention to him to correct his feet.

While teaching a group class remind yourself to be repetitive with the information and vary your methods of communication. Say it, do it, say it differently, show it differently, and again verbally review what you said and did. If possible, have the students take notes or give them a handout on the material. Once the students are practicing the skill, be especially careful that you not only make corrections, but you make the corrections repetitively and in a variety of ways. It isn't that the students necessarily take a long time to learn anything, but that some students in the group will learn it from you saying it one way, and others will learn it from seeing it demonstrated, while others will simply have to discover how it works on their own through trial and error. Again, patience is necessary, and perhaps a little more time devoted to each skill than you would normally allot.

One student with whom we worked posed a particularly difficult problem to solve. The boy was about thirteen or fourteen years old but was small for his age. He had issues with both physical coordination and depth perception. He couldn't tell left from right, and had little body self-awareness, ie, he couldn't tell you where his arms and legs were without looking at them first. He had relatively little difficulty learning academically, but physically as you can imagine he was a nightmare to have in

the class. He was a safety risk for both himself and his practice partners. With his physical issues and lack of distance sense, he would often hit excessively hard, hack, or even run into the others. It was predicted that this boy would continue to be a safety risk even after several weeks or months of practice.

There were four options: 1) Have him spend more time doing footwork and restrict his use of the blade until he shows that he has developed enough skill to wield one properly, if ever. 2) Have him pair up with the coach only. This had two benefits. Firstly, that the other students would be spared his occasionally painful touches, and secondly that he would improve more quickly. 3) Maintain a perspective that he is no different than anyone else and should be treated equally, with the assumption that he will improve at his own pace. 4) Have him removed from the fencing club for safety issues. It seemed that option 3 would not work. We were tempted to go with option 4, but we didn't do that either. We believed that this student would benefit greatly from the fencing class, and it would be worth the extra effort to keep him in the class. In the end, we decided to go with option 2, where the coach would be the only one to face him when he was using a blade. This worked fairly well and he did show progress over time.

Hyperactivity, impulsiveness and the inability to focus are traits of ADHD and ADD (both technically classified as health disorders) which are found in about three to five percent of the population. They are often found in children with a diagnosed learning disability such as dyslexia. The ability to deal effectively with these disorders is a requirement for any coach in any sport. One key to working with kids with ADD or ADHD is constantly keeping them engaged in activities. Try to pair them up with partners who are not easily distracted and keep close watch on them. An assistant (parent, teacher or assistant coach) may be necessary to keep them on task. Usually, once the student with ADD or ADHD is occupied with an interesting and stimulating task, such as hitting someone with a sword, he can keep his focus long enough to make progress. Try to predict and prevent distractions which would interrupt this progress. An example of a distracting element would be people entering the room. A sign saying "Private class in progress" can help. Do not allow individuals to stop for water breaks at their leisure, but rather have group water breaks. Minimizing distraction and periods of down-time are important for maintaining class-time efficiency.

Sometimes a student's issues are destined to instigate discipline problems. We taught a small group day-camp this summer. One student, age thirteen, displayed a variety of characteristics, such as inability to focus, distractibility and difficulty accepting direction from an adult. He also had an arrested psychological development. Physically he was thirteen, he was intelligent and could communicate like a young adult when he focused, but generally he acted very immaturely. He would become easily frustrated when the coaches tried to make corrections to his technique. This was very difficult to manage. The other fencers were not impressed by his antics and usually would try to ignore him when he was acting out. One thing that was interesting was that even when he acted as if he wasn't listening he actually was. He'd be off to the side, apparently not paying attention, but later when we would ask questions he would be the first to jump up and give the correct answer. While group lessons with this student were challenging, individualized instruction provided the opportunity he needed to focus and improve.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to date has been when a student says "This is hard for me to do." Does the student mean that it is difficult because he is a beginner, because the action is genuinely difficult, or that the student's particular learning disorder makes the action unusually difficult for him? Knowing the difference is important for several reasons. First, identifying the reason for the difficulty will be useful in helping the student learn the action. Secondly, there is the matter of treating the student with respect and dignity. You simply cannot say "No, this is easy...do it!" because that will only make matters worse. Thirdly, there is the matter of minimizing your own stress levels. Coaching is difficult enough without having the added stress of dealing with the confusion associated with the particular needs of high maintenance individuals. Again, the easiest way to learn exactly what a

student needs to learn the action to ask him. You could say “I’m trying to teach you X which accomplishes goal Y. How can we make this easier for you to learn?” Notice that I didn’t say “How can I make this easier...” but rather “How can WE. . .” If one of the student’s school teachers or counselors is available, a quick consultation with him or her may also lend insight.

As you know, being a fencing coach is more than simply teaching fencing. We all should be striving to improve our general coaching and communication skills. The experience of coaching students with learning disabilities is as beneficial to us as the fencing experience is for them. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our students provides a tool to bringing out their greatest potential. It is more difficult, yes, but well worth it. Almost anyone can learn and participate in fencing, and you may be surprised at how, with time and patience, you may indeed forget that you are working with people with learning disabilities.