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Lessons from Pop Culture

Coaches are essentially teachers. We teach physical skills and make them long-lasting through repetition. Likewise, when we teach concepts, we want the student to understand and remember them. To do that well, the student should have some interest in the topic and a way of engaging with the material. Ideally the student will also associate a positive emotion with the material too, which helps the new idea form connections with other things the student already knows, understands, and feels.

As coaches we have learned that an effective way of teaching both skills and ideas is through analogy. For example, saying to the student "Launch yourself forward as if you are trying to jump onto a speedboat pulling away from a dock." might be a good way of expressing the effort and immediacy needed to make a good fleche. This works so long as 1) The student knows what a speedboat and dock are and 2) The student has some imagination or visualization skills.

Analogies as well as references to situations or stories that teach us lessons (like parables) or references to characters that exhibit desirable qualities are arguably better though at helping us to teach concepts rather than motor skills. A few paragraphs of lecture or discussion can be distilled down to a short phrase that is easily remembered and that phrase can be later used to remind the student of the lesson. But where can we go to find the best source material to help us teach by way of easily accessible, relatable, and memorable characters or situations? Why, tv and movies of course!

Here are some of my favorites that I've actually been using at my club for many years:

Star Wars, *Return of the Jedi* - We can learn two things from one pivotal scene in the movie. Han, Chewie, Luke, Leia, and the droids approach the forest moon of Endor in the stolen Imperial shuttle *Tydirium*. They request the deactivation of the deflector shield and transmit a clearance code. Luke is worried because he senses that Darth Vader is on the nearby command ship. Han tells Chewbacca "Keep your distance though Chewie, but don't look like you're trying to keep your distance." Chewie responds with a howl and Han replies "I don't know. Fly casual." - This is great advice ("Fly casual.") In fencing terms, it could mean to avoid telegraphing, to hide your intentions, to avoid setting off any red flags for your opponent, and make them feel as if they aren't in danger until it is too late.

Of course, Vader did sense Luke's presence on the shuttle and things didn't quite go as planned later on. This can illustrate that sometimes the opponent, perhaps a more experienced and better fencer, may be wise to your intentions and has set a trap for you based on your preparation. Here's a clip of the scene on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpOf47U9a5s>

In Star Trek, *The Wrath of Kahn*, Kirk and the others are underground in the Genesis cave. Kirk talks about how he beat the Kobayashi Maru by "changing the conditions of the test." He also says "I don't like to lose." and later he says how he "doesn't believe in a no-win scenario." Fencers too shouldn't like to lose and should always believe, as he later says, that "there are always possibilities" for success. Here's a clip of the scene on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j08kI7-T7Vo>

The Simpsons, the Max Power episode, Homer tells Bart and Lisa that there are three ways to do things, "the right way, the wrong way, and the Max Power way." Bart asks "Isn't that the wrong way?" and Homer answers "Yeah, but faster." Many fencers often fence the Max Power way as a response to the opponent scoring a couple of touches, believing that their choice of action is correct, but that they just need to go faster and harder. Unfortunately this just feeds the opponent more touches. Yelling "Max Power" too your fencer on the strip can be a particularly efficient and effective way of telling the student to slow down and change things up. Here's a clip of the scene on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7P0JM3h7IQk>

The Princess Bride, the battle of wits ("They were both poisoned.") A clever trick ("What in the world can that be?!") is no match for a well prepared plan, understanding your opponent, building up an immunity to iocane powder, and preparation. We also learn from this that the rewards of our effort may come years later, so long as we are persistent. It also helps to set the terms of the duel, ie, try to control the distance and fence proactively rather than just react to everything the opponent does and hope that yours strengths will be enough to ensure a win. Here's a clip of the scene on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMz7JBRbmNo>

The A Team's John "Hannibal" Smith, James Bond, and The Man with No Name - Be cool and don't crack under pressure. Don't react to false threats. If the opponent goes "Boo!" you say "Whatever." Fencers that are highly reactive can be easily manipulated by their opponents and are easy prey to feint attacks. Fencers that have their nerves under control tend to be much harder to beat. If you can control your nerves better than your opponent can, when the opponent finally twitches you'll be there ready and able to take advantage of it. Learn how to engage your opponent with a strong body, mind, nerves, and heart and you may be beaten from time to time by a better opponent, but you'll always make him or her earn it. Perhaps the best example of this is from the masterpiece "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly." Here's a clip of the final scene on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJCSNII2PIs>

Just like how the student needed to know what a speedboat was, references to pop culture need to be recognizable in order to be most effective. I'm expecting that most of you reading this will be familiar with the movies I've referenced because as coaches you'd be old enough to have grown up with them, but when working with younger children it can be harder for us as older adults to make generation appropriate references. In some cases such as with "The Princess Bride," if the student hasn't seen the movie we have the advantage because we can assign the viewing of the movie as homework. We can legitimately tell younger students (at least ages twelve and up) "Every fencer should see this movie. Go watch it with your parents." It seems, at least in my club, that a lot of the kids have parents who are introducing them to Star Wars, Star Trek, etc. and these references are still

holding up, at least for now. So, build up your immunity to iocane, stay cool like Bond, fly casual, don't Max Power, and remember that there are always possibilities.

What I'd like to see in the next *The Swordmaster* is a sequel to this article written by one of our younger members who is in his or her early 20's or even teens. (Or maybe Paul Geraci can compile a list of suggestions sent to him by members.) What examples would you use that would be more appropriate for your generation and for kids these days?