

Tips for Passing the Moniteur Practical Exam 11-29-18

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The USFCA practical exams can be an important process in the development of a professional fencing coach. The candidate should realize and appreciate that there rarely are other such good opportunities to have professional and experienced coaches scrutinize their lessons and offer feedback. It can be difficult, though, to separate out the idea of criticism from feedback, and egos can be bruised or even crushed if the exam does not go well. Let's all try to avoid that by starting the exam well prepared, and I hope that these tips will help future candidates do just that. (There was also an article in the Spring 2008 edition of *The Swordmaster* with tips from Masters Anthony Gillham and Walter Green on this subject. I'll try not to replicate their advice, but some overlap is inevitable.)

Prior to the exam:

1) If I am giving an exam, I want to be sure that the candidate can be trusted to teach an introductory class or lesson. If a student asks a simple question and the coach can't answer it immediately, professionally, and correctly, then that means the student may lose faith in the ability of the coach. The student (or parent of the student) may even decide to find a different club to fence at where the coaches are more knowledgeable. That's bad of course, so study the academic material, that is, be sure you know your terminology and rules. There is no excuse for not knowing the answers to questions that students may ask in their beginner classes, such as "What is the difference between an attack, a counter-attack, and a riposte?" or "How does right-of-way transfer between fencers in foil?"

For example, which answer would you rather hear your coach give you when asked "What is a riposte?"

a) "It's like when you hit the other guy after, like, blocking them or something."

or

b) "A riposte is an offensive action made after making a parry. It can be simple or compound just like an attack."

Clearly answer b is more comforting to hear. What's worse is when the candidate's answers are closer to the first version, but are said as if they are questions. "It's um, like, when you hit them?" The examiners will pick up on this lack of confidence and knowledge and may dig in with more questions. This creates stress on the candidate who may flounder and perform poorly because of it.

2) Take the time to practice. This is even true for highly successful competitive fencers, because the skills for giving lessons are different and separate from fencing or taking lessons. (I've seen A-rated fencers fail their Moniteur exams because they didn't think they needed to study or practice.) There is no substitute for experience. A good fencer who is learning to coach can develop the skills to pass the Moniteur exam in a matter of months as opposed to years, but it can't be crammed overnight, and a lack of class giving or lesson giving experience will be obvious to the examiners. You should practice giving very simple lessons at first. (Simple direct attack and parry 4 riposte is a good start.) Learn to move fluidly. Focus on the distance, control, and professional feel of the lesson. Over the weeks, gradually add some variety to the lesson such as a disengage or another parry position. Become

confident with the material you are teaching, and the cues, distance, and timing necessary to teach it well. Then move on to other material such as teaching compound attacks. Keep the lessons short and the material in your lessons separate for now, instead of building a long and complicated lesson that tries to cover everything. So for example, one lesson could be about simple attacks and parry ripostes. Another lesson could be about feint attacks, while a third lesson focuses on the student choosing when to make a simple attack or compound attack based on the distance and footwork.

3) Be sure you have the necessary equipment prepared for the exam. This means, at the very least, having a full clean uniform. You do not need a full set of expensive coaching gear for a Moniteur exam, but the addition of a coaching vest is suggested for foil. Saber coaches should also wear a sleeve, and epee coaches should consider a padded leg protector. You will not be allowed to take the exam if you appear wearing improper equipment. A coaching vest over a t-shirt and shorts will not be allowed.

4) Be sure a student or students are available to you for your test. Do not expect one to be provided for you. If the student is not normally someone you work with, be sure to go through a lesson or two first to make sure the student is able to do what is necessary for the exam.

During the exam:

5) Understand that stress and nervousness are natural, and do not let them overwhelm you. Let any students know that they can relax because the examiners are not going to really care about their performance. All the pressure is on the coach taking the exam. Take a deep breath and get to work. Start by saluting your board and our student. Introduce yourselves. Speak confidently and clearly.

6) The first parts of the exam are easy. You'll have to teach a warm-up and a game. Don't spend much time on this. Give a demonstration, describe the activity or skill, tell why it is useful to do, and have the students do it. Make corrections as necessary. Only a few repetitions should be necessary. For instance, if you use jumping jacks as part of a warm-up, have the student do five instead of twenty-five.

7) The footwork section is next, which is also easy. You'll be given a footwork action, such as a lunge and recovery, to teach. Define the skill. Give a physical demonstration and have the candidate mimic you. This works well, and avoids the issue of the candidate talking more than doing. Once you are both moving, you can verbally point out important things to know about the technique and when and why it can be done. Then pair up and put the skill into some sort of footwork exercise, that allows for the students to practice making the action at the correct distance and time.

8) Corrections can and should be made here and in the individual lesson. Point out errors in technique, distance, and timing. Show how the error can be corrected, and then move on. If there are multiple problems to fix, start with the gross motor ones and work your way through the errors to the smaller ones. For example, fix errors in posture and foot placement in the on-guard position before moving on to correcting a small problem with the blade position. If an error is repeated, you may remind the student to fix it, but remember that the exam board will not expect you to permanently fix the student's error in the exam lesson. We just want to know that you see the error and know how to correct it.

9) After the footwork is the individual lesson. This should take about 15 minutes at the most if it goes well. You'll be asked to describe the weapon being tested, how to hold it, the target area, and the lines of offense and defense. Then you'll be given a theme for the lesson. The lesson should have two skills that have a tactical relationship, such as Attack and Parry-Riposte. You may ask for a few moments to

confer with your student before starting if necessary. Then salute the board and the student and begin the lesson. Put the student in the on-guard position and make corrections as necessary. Try to teach as you normally would at your club instead of trying to put on a show for the board. Give the student a brief warm-up (some thrusts, some lunges, a little footwork, etc.) and then introduce the material of the lesson. Remember to go slowly, start simply, and build the complexity gradually. Allow the student just a few repetitions of each action. Do it without footwork, then add slow and simple footwork. Eventually you will introduce the second part of the lesson. So, if you started with attacks, you'll now be introducing parries. Be sure to explain the tactical relationship between the two components of the lesson. Develop the lesson to fluidly include both parts, and add some variation. Remember that there are more than one type of simple attack, that attacks can be done with and without blade contact, to use multiple lines, and a couple of different parries. If it is a saber or epee lesson, remember to include touches to all of the target areas. Attacks can be made with advances, lunges, advance lunges, and fleches. It doesn't take long to include this variety so long as the lesson stays within the given theme. Be sure your epee lessons look like epee lessons instead of foil lessons using epees. Be sure your saber lessons use saber footwork. At the end of the lesson you will have to give a verbal conclusion to the lesson. Talk about the key points of the lesson, what the actions were, why they are done the way you practiced them, why they would be used, etc.

10) Always stay in control of the lesson and always make sure that the student is doing what you are asking be done. Be sure that you too, are doing what you are saying that you are doing. If you are telling the student to make an attack to your arm (in saber or epee) but you yourself are coming forward and extending your arm (even if you aren't really trying to hit the student), then your student is actually making a counterattack. Another things that trips up people is the difference between feint attacks and disengages. Be sure to know the difference!

11) If you get into trouble don't panic. The examiners may ask you a question and even hint how to fix the problem. Even if you can't, the problem may only cost you a couple points on the exam, and you can still pass if everything else is going well enough. (The scoresheet is very forgiving for minor errors.) If the lesson isn't going well overall though, and you don't understand what to do, please ask the board. The lesson may be able to be salvaged, but if not, you'll have a valuable learning experience and get some feedback later at the end of the exam that will guide you to improving.

12) The board will then thank and dismiss your student and you can start the oral exam. This takes about ten minutes. You could be asked just about any aspect of fencing, including rules, terminology classification, tactics, techniques, risk management, armoring, physical training, refereeing, or some detail about the lesson you just gave. Give thorough answers when possible, and if you don't know, just let the examiners know that rather than wasting time pretending that you do. The candidates may want to get an idea of how you think about fencing, rather than simple rote knowledge. A question such as "Can you tell me about distance in epee fencing?" is very open ended, so take that as an invitation to say as much as you can about the topic. Note that examiners may have their own favorite topics to ask about. If you know ahead of time that one of your examiners is a high level referee, you'd be a fool not to prepare for a refereeing question or two.

When it is all done, thank the examiners for their time. You'll be sent away for a few minutes for the scores to be tallied and the examiners to prepare their feedback. When you are called back, take whatever news they give you as professionally as you can. Obviously passing is wonderful news, but there may still be criticisms. Though many people do well, very few exams are done flawlessly. Be sure not to argue. Ask questions of course, but arguing isn't going to get you anywhere. If you did fail, take the time to ask as many questions as you can so that you can return better prepared for the next time.