

Paul Sise
Fencing Master
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Peer Accountability in the Fencing Room

One of our responsibilities as coaches is to keep learning. We usually talk about how we need to keep learning because the sport itself, including how rules are interpreted, can change over time. But as you know there is more to fencing than the techniques and tactics, and we should be learning from adjacent fields such as sports psychology, physiology, and business. As a club owner I'm also a businessman, which means that I've had to learn things like sales and marketing my brand, effective pricing, how to work with customers, etc. These are the things that I do in the background that the fencers don't take much notice of, but they are important regardless. My goals are simple. I want people to come into the club and stay in the club, week after week, month after month, and year after year. To reach that goal I have to provide the opportunity for them all to have positive and rewarding experiences that make their contribution of time and effort worth-while. I also have to do all this without burning myself out or letting the middle-schoolers drive me nuts.

Sigh. Here I am again surrounded by about twenty kids all around the age of twelve. One of the other coaches is in the corner busy with armoring if I need help, and there are some parents watching, so at least I know if the kids decide to mutiny that there will be some adult witnesses to my embarrassing demise. ("Local Fencing Coach Trampled to Death by Twenty Children, news at 11.") Never fear though, after an extended session of tiring warm-up games, I think I've worn them out enough to keep them from bouncing off the walls and ceiling. We do our footwork, get on our uniforms, and line up for the formal part of the class where they'll be given some sort of action or tactic to practice. I make it very clear how it is to be done, and what key points I would be looking for as the coach, such as being sure to maintain your balance and posture or keeping the actions small and efficient. "Form groups of three." I say. They respond asking "Three? Why three?" Normally they get asked to pair up.

They form their groups of three. Maybe there is one group that is just a pair depending on how many students we have. I tell them that they will be in groups of three, that two people will do the paired drill, and the third will be the coach, quality control inspector, or accountability buddy. They are to rotate roles every eight or ten actions. The job of the third person is to keep both fencers motivated and doing their very best, keeping in mind the key points that I mentioned earlier. If any group needs help they can call me over at any time, but they must do the drill until I have inspected their work and say that they passed an exam where I observe them. They can only ask to be observed when all three agree that they can do it well. Perhaps the group that does the best on their exam will be rewarded with the opportunity to fence electric the rest of the class, or maybe even receive a gift card for an ice cream cone from down the street. Boom! We now have a well-behaved (ish) class that prioritizes quality practice.

This is an example of how to use Peer Accountability in the fencing room, and it doesn't have to be with middle-schoolers. This works even better with teens and adults. I had been doing this and other similar things for years, off and on at least, but more recently have learned more about this as a concept in the business world. Peer Accountability is a method of managing business teams and can even be part of a business' overall operating culture. This helps, so they say, to create a culture of free and open communication, trust, and high morale.

There are two other ways I have been using this concept with some success. The second has been during wall-target drills. I initially started doing this when the number of students exceeded the number of wall targets. "Pair up and head to a wall-target." I'd say. They take turns using the wall-target (thrusts, lunges, etc.) but the person not fencing would act as coach. "Do ten thrusts and ten lunges. The coach's job is to count the actions aloud to make sure that they get done and to make sure that they are done well. Only count the good ones. Don't count bad actions. Then change roles." Having them count aloud is important because it keeps the non-fencing chit-chat to a minimum and helps me know that they are staying on task.

The third way is to have the students demonstrate a warm up against a fencing dummy. This is done far more rarely, maybe only two or three times a season, in part to help the coach gauge the progress of the student's technique, but it has some other benefits that we'll see as well. This is best done with a free-standing dummy, but could be done with a wall-target. Have the class sit in a line where they can all see the dummy. The coach comes on guard and uses the dummy to warm up starting with simple thrusts or cuts and progresses through other actions like lunges, advance-lunges, parry-ripostes, counter-attacks, etc. All the while the coach is trying to maintain perfect technique and balance. This only takes a minute or two. Then the coach asks the group "How did I do? What should I try to improve upon? Did I do anything particularly well?" Usually the group will be hesitant to criticize, so you could offer the thought that perhaps you could improve on your flexibility or with trying to stay relaxed. The group likely agrees. "Next!" you say, and you point to the student sitting at the end of the line. They all take turns. After each person is done with their warm-up the group is given the opportunity to make comments. If no one volunteers the coach will ask a couple of students for their thoughts. The only real rule is that the comments need to be respectful and supportive, even when pointing out errors. Perhaps you as the coach have feedback. I like to point out to the group that experience matters and that newer fencers aren't judged by the same standards that are used for more experienced fencers. "Just try your best." This works really well, actually. Everyone does their best at the dummy because they don't want to be embarrassed, or conversely the better fencers get to show off. Everyone watches with a critical eye and learns to notice details. It also seems that praise from the peers is even more impactful than praise from the coach and can be very beneficial to the students. One student who's first language was not English said "He do very good. He, um, respectful of working." I couldn't have said it better myself.