

Paul Sise
Fencing Master
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Quick Coaching Tip – The Show Must Go On!

I attended a friend's senior piano performance recital when I was in college. One of the pieces was a challenging arrangement by Chopin that I didn't recognize. As an audience member with a limited understanding of what I was listening to, I thought he did a marvelous job. It turns out though that he made a massive mistake that enabled him to display his genius. The person sitting next to me asked "Did you notice his mistake?" I said that I hadn't. Apparently, for about twenty seconds the pianist had been improvising. He seemed to have either forgotten a transition or hit a wrong note, and then improvised until he could seamlessly bring it back to the music as it was written. You'd only know that this happened if you knew the piece well, and I and I imagine many others in the audience were blissfully unaware anything went wrong. After the recital the student's professor commented that although it would have been better not to have committed the error, he commended the student on how he so professionally covered it up! This was far, far better than making the mistake, stopping, apologizing to the audience which then informs them that you'd made a mistake, and then trying to start all over again.

I just recently taught a coaching clinic where we discussed this very issue with our epee group. Imagine that you are fencing in a competition and your riposte misses. You say to the opponent "Hold on a second, I meant to hit you with that. Can I try again until I get it right?" It just doesn't work that way. If we are trying to replicate the bout situation in our lessons we shouldn't do that either. After an error is made, the fencer and coach should do something in the next tempo to keep the lesson flowing smoothly, whether it is to find a different way to make the touch, or simply retreating to safe distance, continuing with the footwork, and then setting up the desired action again. The coach also has the option to make an attempt to hit when the student makes an error to replicate what the opponent would be doing. This keeps the student alert and the lesson realistic.

So why is it that so many fencing coaches stop their lessons when there is a mistake? I think that they feel a stronger need to correct the error at the moment it happens than they feel the need to keep the lesson moving. In an epee lesson the student hits the hand several times and then misses. The coach stops, thinks "I have to correct the error!!!" But what does the coach say to the student? "Um, you missed. Can you try, like, not missing next time?" The student accepts this wisdom from the coach and tries not to miss next time. Wow, how helpful! First, the student knows that they missed. The coach didn't need to inform the student that. Secondly, the advice never addressed a cause for missing, likely because the student really didn't make an identifiable error other than missing. I say this because the student had already been hitting consistently, so we can assume that distance, timing, and point control were all reasonably acceptable. As such, the coach should have just continued with the flow of the lesson and most likely the student would have returned to successfully hitting the target.

Contrast this with a situation where the student is consistently missing. In this case the coach should be doing two things. The first is to give the student several tries to self-correct. Obviously the student knows that there is something wrong and will be trying to improve. Maybe a little practice is all that is necessary. Secondly, the coach should be carefully observing and looking for a cause of the error. Perhaps the student is trying to aim from the shoulder instead of the fingers. Perhaps the student is moving body first and punching rather than smoothly extending. The coach can guide the student toward success without having to stop the flow of the lesson. If that doesn't work, then yes, take a moment to pause and give a physical demonstration of how to do the action. See that the student mimics correctly, and then return to the lesson. Keep the lesson moving. The show must go on!