

Paul Sise  
Fencing Master  
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## Using Your Fencing Classes to Train Assistant Coaches

I remember watching an interview with Paul McCartney years ago where he said "I'd rather have a band than a Rolls-Royce." This makes perfect sense to me, and in fencing, I'd rather have a few good assistant coaches whom I can trust rather than have a Rolls; though an Aston Martin might be tempting. The difficulty is that good assistants don't grow on trees, and unless you are in a strong financial position where you can simply post an ad to hire an experienced coach and pay well, you are probably training up your more advanced fencers or volunteers to take on the role. If so, it can be difficult to find the time to devote to training them, and a lot of their training is done bit by bit through the experience of helping in the classes or by their own trial and error when they give lessons. I of course recommend coaches attend clinics in order to have a focused time devoted to coaching development because of this.

I have found though that there is one particular class format that works quite well for training assistant coaches. Many of us are familiar with using a "train" (as in choo-choo) format in our classes. That's where the students line up, masks on, and the person at front of the line briefly works with the coach and then moves to the back of the line. This works well with smaller groups, as once there are more than, perhaps, six students, it seems that they end up spending too much of the time waiting for their turns. For larger groups this problem can be dealt with by having assistant coaches. You either form a line of students for each coach or one big line and have the fencer at the head of the line go to whichever coach becomes free. There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. If you form a line for each coach, you can have each coach do different material if you wish, but one long train exposes the students to each coach which has its own benefits, and the head coach can more easily track when everyone has had a turn.

I have a very large dry-erase board on wheels at my club. When I'm teaching a group class I might write out the plan for the class such as the stages of the drill progression for everyone to see. I make sure the assistant coaches know how to teach and cue for the drills, and then we take our places. We usually have the students form a long line on a strip and have the coaches ready for them on the nearby strips. Then the first students go to the coaches and they each get a small amount of time with each coach practicing the material in the first stage of the drill before heading to the back of the line. The coach may now yell "Next!" to alert the next student in line to come to him or her. (For younger students you may need a teen or adult at the head of the line to direct students to the coaches when they become free.) Depending on the class and age of students it might be as little as fifteen seconds or up to a minute with the coach. As the class proceeds, as the head coach, I control when we move through each stage of the lesson plan.

Here's a simple example of drill progression in three stages:

- 1) Simple direct attack with student moving forward.
- 2) Parry 4 riposte direct with student moving backward (stop retreating to riposte).
- 3) Put it all together. Simple attack moving forward, parry 4 riposte moving backward.

I pay attention to the line of students and when I notice that every student has had the opportunity to do stage 1 at least twice (or however many times) I'll yell "Move to stage two!" And eventually assuming

there is time, "Move to stage three!" I can also try to hurry the group along if we are behind schedule or slow it down if the students seem to need more repetitions.

Now what makes this format so good for developing assistant coaches?

1) It can be very specific and limited. Just as you might teach a fencer to learn an individual action through blocking out that action and doing many repetitions, this gives the assistant coach the opportunity to do the same in a group class environment. If all the coach needs to worry about is something simple like slowly backing up and cuing for a disengage attack, and can do that with multiple students over a ten minute period, that is focused and high quality practice time for the beginner coach. This allows the assistant coach to develop technical skills and confidence. Even when in our earlier example we move to stage 3 we are now introducing some of the larger tactical concepts with distance and direction without overwhelming the newer coach because each component was just recently practiced and there is still very little true decision making made by the coach. (The coach isn't worrying about developing and controlling a complicated multi-part lesson.)

2) Variations can be slowly introduced in a specific manner. In this example:

- 1) Simple direct attacks.
- 2) Disengage attack with coach attempting to make engagement in 4 (moving from the coaches 6 position to 4 position).
- 3) Disengage attack with coach attempting to make engagement in 6 (moving from the coaches 4 position to 6 position).
- 4) Put it all together. Simple direct attack, or disengage, evading in either direction.

3) Error correction can be specified at the start of the class. Predict the most likely errors that the students will make with the upcoming drill and determine how to correct them. For example, in the upcoming drill; "We expect that students will pull their arms back during the disengage and because of their inexperience we expect that their front foot and knee may not always be pointing forward. Please look out for these two common errors and correct them when you see them."

4) As coaches gain experience they can be given more independence to work with the students. For instance, the plan may be written in a way to give more opportunities for the coaches to decide what to do and how to do it, but still having some framework for everyone to follow:

- 1) Attacks, simple or compound, based on the skill of the individual student.
- 2) Defense, lateral parries and or circular parries, based on the skill of the individual student.
- 3) Attacks and Defense

5) You can design classes based on the needs of the assistant coaches as well as of the students. Perhaps you have a coach who needs practice teaching a particular skill. Is that skill appropriate for the students of this class to learn? It is? Ok, we're in luck! Let's include it in this class. If you have a list of coaching skills to develop (perhaps as part of a mentor-ship or skills required for passing a USFCA certification level), you can base several weeks worth of classes based on that.

6) You can teach complicated lesson formats by breaking them down into stages.

- 1) Coach leads footwork, coach attacks student, student makes parry riposte.
- 2) Coach occasionally parries the riposte and makes counter-riposte, forcing student to respond.

- 3) Student makes invitation, coach attacks, student makes parry riposte.
- 4) Same, but student leads footwork.

or

- 1) Action X,
- 2) Action Y
- 3) Action Z
- 4) Serial: XYZ XYZ XYZ
- 5) Random order. (May need to go more slowly.)

However you go about it, you'll find that using a train format with multiple coaches gets good results for the students and the coaches. It certainly is much more active for the coaches. They must work continuously through the class, in contrast with some other formats where a coach may find him or herself tasked with observing and stepping in to make the occasional error correction while the students are paired up. This format also works very well for the beginner students because it is time with the coach, who is the ideal practice partner with good clean technique, rather than with another beginner as the partner, which can result in, how shall we say, a lower quality and less efficient use of practice time.