PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SCA FENCING WOMAN: A MANUAL FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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Dedicated to

Mistress Lucia Elena Braganza, Lady Tualaith of Sternfeld and Lord Lucius Ursus.

Without their unfailing interest this project would have fallen by the wayside.

And to

Their Graces Duchess Kateryn Bronwen of Gloucester and Duke Edmund of Hertford

Who asked the question that got this thing started.

With Special Thanks

to

Dame Ursula Mortimer, O.L. for making this work presentable!

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Introduction

Who is Included in Lady/Woman/Female and Gentleman/Man/Male?

If you, in any capacity on any given day, identify as female, then for the purposes of this work and the research that went into it you are female. If you, in any capacity on any given day, identity as male, then for the purposes of this work and the research that went into it you are male. Done.

What About Everyone Else?

I restricted myself to just these two terms because research on sports psychology outside the gender binary does not yet exist. This is, thus, an unfortunate limitation in the writing of this work. It is my hope that a future paper will address research on the neuropsychology of those beyond this binary that will be applicable to martial activities in the SCA.

Can This Apply to Other SCA Martial Activities?

Probably. Psychology is psychology. However, given that I have never spent time on the thrown weapons line, the archery range, or the heavy field (except for that one month in college) I do not know how this information may translate to these disciplines. I welcome readers to try it out and let me know!

And Just Who Am I?

I am a Master's degree holder in psychology, a practicing therapist, a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) which is the highest level of licensure in my state, a Nationally

Certified Counselor (NCC), and a Clinical Certified Trauma Professional level 2 (CCTP-II). Psychology is my job and I have been trained in how to read and interpret the research literature.

How Did This Start?

In 2016, King Edmund and Queen Kateryn gathered the Middle Kingdom Order of Defense and asked them this question: if women make up over 50% of registered fencers in the Midrealm (at that time) why are there fewer and fewer of them the higher up one measures in the award structure? All the usual suspects had been accounted for: moving on to different interests, taking a break to raise small children, injury, etc. and none of them provided an answer. In the Midrealm, as of this writing (early 2022), women comprise 20% of grant level fencers (27 of 135) and 20% of peer-level fencers (5 of 25). This question was referred to me after the meeting. Well, strictly speaking, Master Kai Tseng said to me "So, you know that psychology degree you got?" I was set to find the answer.

So, What is the Answer?

I believe the answer is in how we train our lady fencers. The psychology research literature has indicated that poor coaching is one of the top reasons both women and girls quit their sport. This poor coaching leads to a loss of interest and of passion. Based on surveys and conversations with women in the rapier community, I think we are not taking female psychology into account, and this results in poor coaching. The vast majority of teachers are men, and they teach how they were taught: in a manner that best suits male psychology. The result, I believe, is stagnation and a lack of advancement.

So here is my answer: a guide on how to train lady fencers. This volume does not explain what to teach but *how*. It lays out the differences between men's and women's brains, as well as the place of men and women in society at large (modern as well as SCA) and how these inform everything that we do.

The Uncomfortable Truth

I am going to talk a lot in this piece about what women do to ensure their survival in a world of men. It may seem that I am over-exaggerating the point. I'm not. The research findings are there. The statistics are there, and so are the abuse cases and the murders. Since I began working as a therapist, I have not gone a single week without seeing at least two female clients who are survivors of either intimate partner violence or abuse from a male family member. In a typical week it's a third to half of my female clients, and I do not work in a women's services setting.

The comedian Donald Glover observed in one of his routines, "Why don't women have crazy men stories? And then I realized 'Oh. If you have a crazy boyfriend you gonna die.'"

Reading this point multiple times may make you frustrated or uncomfortable. That's okay. I ask that you sit with that discomfort.

Ladies: think about how the risk informs everything that you do.

Gentlemen: do not, please do not, find the first lady fencer you know and ask her if she really thinks you are that threatening. That's not the point, and it's not her job to absolve you. Think about how the things you do line up on the risk assessment that every woman does of every man. Sit with the discomfort.

Creating a Safe Training Environment

Safety is freedom from the fear of negative consequences. Safety includes asking questions that are not ignored, invalidated, or belittled. Safety includes the freedom to doubt, question, and challenge the teacher. Safety includes being secure in the knowledge you will be free from physical and mental harm.

"But," I can hear someone say, "this is a contact sport. I have to hit my student eventually." Yes, this is correct. But the way you hit her matters. If you take away nothing else, please take away this.

A common method of teaching in rapier is what I have heard male instructors call the "stab; don't die" method and what I call the "whack; you did it wrong" method. The importance in the different semantics will be explained shortly.

In this method, the teacher shows the student a maneuver, such as an attack, parry, or footwork. The student tries it. If the student fails the execution, the teacher stabs the student. Try again. Stab. This repeats until the student executes correctly, and thus does not die.

This is a terrible method for women. I have met a very small number of women who prefer it; however, this number is so small that it is better not to use it unless a woman specifically requests it. What's so terrible about it? The vast majority of lady fencers I have interviewed have expressed with exasperation, "If I didn't get it right the first six times, what makes you think I'll get it right the seventh?"

But there is more to it. The result of this teaching method is particularly easy to spot in newer fencers; the more times she is stabbed, the worse and worse she gets. Why? What happened? She has been punished for trying.

She has been *punished* for *trying*.

Let's bring up those semantics again: "Whack; you did it wrong." This is how the female brain processes this sequence:

1. The teacher explains what to do.
2. She tries her best to execute.
3. She is hit.
    a. That felt awful.
4. She tries again.
5. She is hit.
    a. That felt even worse.
6. Repeat.

Our lady fencer has tried to do as her teacher instructed, and she has been punished for it. Worse, she has been punished physically. I can imagine some readers wondering why that is important. Allow me to break it down further: the male and female brains react to stimuli differently. This is a biological fact. Its causes are the subject of lively debate, but the literature demonstrates it is true. A woman's brain, whether the woman wants it to or not, reacts to this exchange in a very similar way to being struck by an abusive partner. There is little difference to her instincts between "Strike! Why is my dinner cold?!" and "Strike! You didn't parry correctly."

Please take a moment to reflect on that. What a man's brain processes as "*You* hit me; bring it on!" a woman's brain processes as "*I was wrong*. I am punished." Being physically punished by a male teacher is both frightening and a trust violation.

And so, despite what she consciously wants to do, her brain pulls back. Her mind says, "Come on, let's do this!" but her brain, whose primary objective is to keep her safe, says, "No! Are you crazy? Stop doing that, we get hurt if we do that!" This leads, often, to conscious frustration, but also a subconscious increase in fear, and thus the lady fencer progressively does worse and worse until both she and the teacher walk away frustrated.

Self-efficacy, a person's belief in his or her ability to perform a task, can also be damaged in this scenario. (The section "Methods of Learning" covers self-efficacy and learning in more depth.) The scenario above denies the lady fencer's self-efficacy. It "proves" to her that she cannot perform this task. Coupled with the fear it has instilled, this means that when she picks up a sword again, if she picks up a sword again, precedent will have demonstrated she cannot perform. That is not the foundation any fencer deserves in the discipline of fencing, or in any new technique that requires mastery.

With this knowledge in mind, if the teacher wants the student to engage in fencing without fear of being hit, which one must do in order to play this game, the teacher must create a safe environment for his student to learn in. Let's look at that.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Thankfully, this is not difficult to do. There are two key differences that create trust in the learning environment. Simply put, do it in steps that allow the lady fencer to gain confidence in her execution before you stab her:

1) Demonstrate the concept slowly.
2) Have her execute slowly.
3) **If she does it wrong, stop your blade before striking.**

Step 3 is the first key difference. The teacher does not have to strike the student for her to see she did not execute properly. A sword tip an inch from her body communicates that clearly, and, importantly, does not trip the protective fear switch.

4) Keep practicing, adjusting her technique as necessary.
5) Speed up as she improves.
    a. Don't be afraid to slow back down if necessary.
6) Work up towards full speed and announce explicitly when sword contact will begin.

Step 6 is the second key difference. Once the lady fencing student is executing well enough to move towards half-speed, three-quarters, or full speed, it's time for full contact. It's critical that the teacher does not take her by surprise and suddenly strike her because the teacher thinks she is ready. Say explicitly, "Now I'm going to start hitting you." By this point, putting masks on is probably a good idea if you have not already. When I was working on this concept with my own teacher, "Masks on" eventually became synonymous with "Now he's going to hit me."

Ultimately, the teacher and student will notice she is responding with more confidence even if she is struck. Why? Because she was able to practice safely without the fear of physical punishment for trying a new technique. Her trust in her teacher will grow and, as will be repeated in other sections, the teacher/student relationship is of noticeable impact across sport environments.

Communication and Collaboration

Nonverbal Communication

Women are masters of nonverbal communication. Watch a mother interpret her baby's needs based upon the look on its face. Watch a women follow her friend into the bathroom based solely on how the friend walks. Women also learn over the course of their entire lives to carefully observe what men say and how they say it, in order to predict their behavior. The tone, the phrasing, the facial expression, the physical stance, the time and place, all of this is carefully tracked in order to give a woman a better chance of safety and survival.

This is particularly true of trauma survivors. I became a certified trauma therapist in order to better handle the sheer amount of trauma that was already coming through my door as an average therapist. If you read the introduction, you will know that in any given week up to half of my female therapy clients are trauma survivors. Specifically, they are survivors of abuse by men. Trauma does not automatically lead to PTSD, but it does cause physical changes in the brain.

Remember, gentlemen, *it is not about you*. It is not about your hurt feelings at being equated with someone terrible from her past. It is about what you represent. It is about what you are physically capable of doing.

During one of the many classes I have taught on this subject Master Fearghas Buchannon shared a story of how he learned to act differently with his female and male middle school classes. When his behavior was boisterous and filled with arm and body movement, he was engaging to the boys but terrifying to the girls. Fearghas is 6' 5" and was unintentionally physically intimidating.

When Fearghas learned this, he did not take it personally. He did not say, “But the girls should know *I’m* not dangerous.” Cognitively, they probably did. But their protective instincts were not so sure. Instead, he modulated his behavior. For the girls he lowered his volume, sat in a chair and collapsed his shoulders inward. He demonstrated nonthreatening behavior. Thus, he earned the girls’ trust.

Verbal Communication

Now that I have hopefully brought your attention to nonverbal communication, let’s turn our focus to something that is a little easier to teach: verbal communication. What the teacher says out loud can help their student produce good results. The teacher needs to practice three elements: positive communication, mindful phrasing, and a group orientation.

This means to focus on the good, temper the bad, and communicate that the two of you are in this together. This is not to say that a woman cannot tolerate negative feedback. There is simply a difference in the way her brain wants to hear it.

Positive Communication

Positive communication is any kind of communication that elicits a positive response rather than a negative. You can see how this is closely tied to phrasing.

If you are teaching your lady student a new skill draw attention to the aspects she is doing correctly. The parts she is missing are just a matter of refinement. Attention should be given to them, but do not dwell on them.

After a fight, let your student express her opinion and frustrations. Then draw the focus to the positives of both your student and her opponent, particularly if your student lost. If the

opponent won, what did the opponent do right? Perhaps the opponent had a solid structure and that's why your student's play was not successful. Or they just got there first. Or they were just having a good day. Thus, a positive follow up would be to show your student what she can do in that situation the next time or how she can adjust the play she used. This last part is also closely tied to group orientation.

Mindful Phrasing

Note in the above scenario, the student was not told "You screwed up and that's why you lost." Not only is that not always the case, sometimes we just get outgunned by a more powerful opponent, she knows she lost. She does not need her teacher to point it out. "How do you think you did?" is a better comment.

And if *she* says "I screwed up," that's a great opening to show off what a wonderful teacher you are! It naturally leads you to say "More specifically, what did you see? What do you think happened?" That's group orientation right there.

Between "your opponent outgunned you" or "your opponent caught you napping," go with the first one. It's a subtle difference, but at least you are acknowledging that your student tried. The second one is negative and assumes your student lost focus. It's possible your student was trying very hard and just didn't see it coming or was expecting a different response.

And if she did actually lose focus, turn that into a group problem: "What can we do about it?" Or "Let's take a look at this next practice."

Group Orientation

Women are incredibly group oriented. Collaboration and shared experiences are essential for women to succeed. What does this mean in a solitary sport like fencing? It means a male student and teacher may go do their thing all day and discuss over dinner. Women, however, want to know you're taking a part in their learning at events as well as at practice. That's the collaborative part.

In practical terms, watch some of her fights. Not all day or all practice, necessarily, but watch her in her tourney fights or wander over to her pick-ups and stand where she can see you. I have observed that most lady fencers want their teacher or romantic partner to support them by watching.

Methods of Learning

Everyone learns a little differently. We all observed this in school, and fencers have likely observed this in their own learning. The method, analogy, or demonstration that works for one learner just does not click in the same way for another. The trouble for teachers within the SCA is that most are not trained in pedagogy. Likewise, most students within the SCA cannot specifically identity their learning style.

The result is that many teachers of fencing more or less wing it: they explain the way it was explained to them. They show what works for them. There is nothing wrong with this as a starting approach, but it can be ineffective if the skill being taught is not useful for the learner being instructed. Physical differences and natural proclivities can both influence whether a specific skill or maneuver is useful for a specific fencer. I, for example, do not have the knees to do proper Fabris. I would be in trouble if my teacher insisted that I do so and would have quit years ago. Any good fencer can say, "Here is what I do." But a good *teacher* can say "Here is what I think *you* can do."

A teacher in the SCA does not have to have all the answers. None of us is certified to teach fencing like your physics teacher was certified to teach physics. Thus, a good teacher in the SCA is as much a mentor and guide as a source of information, and that means acknowledging when to point the student to someone else who can teach that technique better. For example, the "whack, don't die" method" addressed in *Creating a Safe Training Environment* simulates an actual fight, but it is ineffective for most women because it creates an unsafe learning environment.

Observational Learning

Another method of learning is observational learning. There are three functions of observational learning:

1. Observing to learn a skill.
2. Observing to learn strategy.
3. Observing to improve performance.

According to the sports psychology research literature, both recreational and professional athletes use observational learning in the above order in terms of frequency. Observational learning is most often used to "learn a skill," followed to "to learn a strategy," and "improve performance" the least often. Some research has pointed to men using the performance function more often than women, while others have found no difference.

Watching others has long been recognized as one of the most powerful means of learning. Children constantly mimic what they observe adults doing. A toddler with her ball pop pusher "mows" the driveway while daddy mows the lawn. A young child pretends to put muffins in a toy oven. If any gentleman reader has ever wondered why every woman, even the ones who do not have or do not like children, seems to know how to hold an infant in her arms or balance a baby on her hip, it's observational learning. It's also how a 4-year-old somehow knows how to turn on the TV and watch cartoons. A 4-year-old living in a home with no TV is not going to know how to perform that task.

Watching another and then replicating the behavior generally produces faster results than trial and error without context. The fencing community had this problem in trying to interpret wood cuts before the associated explanatory text was translated. We got a lot of things wrong.

Learning a skill through observational learning—commonly called "watch and learn"—comes in two parts: learning the skill and performing the skill. These are broken down into four stages:

a) Learning the skill
    1. Watching
    2. Encoding/remembering
b) Performing the skill
    1. Replication
    2. Motivation

Let us look at these stages more in depth. Let's say it is day one and a fresh new fencer is learning to perform a lunge. First comes watching another perform the skill: the lunge. Second comes remembering/encoding that lunge. The teacher may tell the fencer to visualize what she saw, make an analogy to previous experience, or verbally repeat the main points[1]. Third comes replicating the lunge. Our new fencer executes a good lunge—hooray! The fourth stage is motivation. The student needs the motivation to attend to, remember, and then practice the action.

[1] Such as remembering to move the "sword, body, and then foot."

This motivation can be external ("Yeah! Do that again!") or internal ("I did the thing!") but it must be strong enough to drive the individual to reproduce the action over and over again. Motivation can be killed through failure to improve or to consistently reproduce the action. It can also be killed by a poor learning environment. Creating a proper, safe learning environment is discussed more in Section 2.

Observational learning can serve both a cognitive and motivational function in sports. The student can respond both with "I watch it; I learn it," as outlined above, and "I watch it; I want to/can do it!" A lot of psychological research has been dedicated to the cognitive "watch it, learn it" aspect of observational learning, but we will start with the motivational function before moving to the cognitive. Not only does watching others motivate a fencer to learn more and get better, it can also help that fencer cope with issues of fear and anxiety, self-confidence, and self-efficacy[2], all of which positively affects the fencer's physical performance.

Anxiety is one of the two most common mental health challenges faced by adults in the United States today (the other is depression.) Even for those who do not cope daily with anxiety, who hasn't had stage fright or been nervous about a tourney at least once? Observing others can help combat anxiety and fear which, in turn, helps in the growth of self-confidence and self-efficacy. If that more experienced fencer over there gets anxious before tourneys, then I don't need to be embarrassed about being anxious either, do I? Accepting that anxiety exists and that it will be worked through can and does positively affect an athlete's performance.

Most research has been dedicated to the cognitive half of observational learning more than the motivational aspect. This bias likely came about because earlier research found that

[2] Self-confidence is one's belief in one's own personal worth. Self-efficacy is one's belief in one's ability to perform a specific task.

athletes of both genders utilize the cognitive aspect more often. Athletes watch to learn more often than they watch and think "If she can do it, so can I!" Motivation, however, is certainly a component of observational learning and is one of the common motivators for women and girls to become active in a sport in the first place. Simone Biles has, for example, inspired a new generation of girls, especially African American girls, to try gymnastics.

Research has found, however, that for the active athlete, the closer the perceived similarities between the individual and the model they are observing, the greater the model's influence on behavior. Given the low number of female fencers of high achievement in our game, this potential motivator is lacking.

Finding similarities between the individual's struggles and the model's is a key factor in gaining motivation from observation. But, again, given the low number of high-achievement female fencers, it is more difficult for a lady fencer than a gentleman fencer to have an in-depth conversation with a model of the same gender and discover she struggled to master the same concept.

While this is a hindrance, all fencers, both male and female, can help. For those who are *being* observed—the teachers, teammates, more experienced fencers—do not be afraid to admit your struggles. It is almost taboo in athletics to let on how nervous you get, how many pushups you did for this, or how long it took you to master a technique. There is no reason for this other than posturing[3]; to make others think you are bigger, badder, and stronger because you don't struggle like they do. This creates a false picture for the learner.

[3] Which men are socialized to do more so than women; so, gentlemen, this is a worthwhile challenge for you.

Imagine the benefit to those watching and learning if you *did* admit your struggles. It took this Master of Defense *how long* to learn that? This war commander *still* gets anxious before melees? This does not mean you need to shout your struggles from the rooftops; however, admitting to your struggles will help others build their own confidence and efficacy. This is why fans are encouraged when they learn how many times their favorite author was rejected by publishers or how many record labels turned down a successful musician. These individuals are successful and they make it look natural, but they worked hard for that.

To summarize, active athletes use observational learning more for its cognitive function than its motivational function. Athletes will watch to gain information about learning and performing skills, strategies, and how to optimize their performance. Research has shown that observing as a way to learn how to cope with mental states is not typically promoted by coaches and instructors. However, it is actually beneficial for coping with anxiety or getting over tough situations. In this case, however, the observing takes place through discussion between the beginner and the accomplished athlete. Thus, as has been said before, be open about your struggles.

The third aspect of observational learning is self-observation. The formal psychological term is "enactive mastery experiences." This means that the information a person has about their ability to execute a particular behavior comes from the results of past attempts—from precedent. If a fencer has tried a specific technique, such as a basic "cover the opponent's sword and lunge," and been stabbed 80% of the time, precedent shows her trying this again will result in "death."

With those odds, we can expect the fencer will be unwilling to try that technique again in a fight because precedent says it will fail. The fencer's brain will instinctively resist doing a

thing that has been proven to have a negative result—even if the fencer consciously really, really wants to do it. This conflict typically results in a failed attempt, which then reinforces the precedent of failure.

If, on the other hand, the fencer is successful even 50% of the time, precedent demonstrates this is a good idea. When this is the case, self-efficacy is strengthened. If most attempts fail, self-efficacy is weakened.

Learning Styles

As mentioned above, everyone learns differently and many people have difficulty identifying their personal learning style. Before we look at sex-based differences in learning style, we will examine learning style from a sport psychology standpoint and review the different kinds of learning preferences that are not specifically sex-influenced.

First, let's define what is meant by "learning style" in this context. *Learning style* is a person's unique approach to learning as influenced by

- cognitive strengths and weaknesses;
- personal preferences for auditory, visual, or kinesthetic/tactile learning;
- and personality factors.

These will be further defined in the next section.

The best way to learn an athletic skill like fencing is to incorporate all of the above. However, once a teacher and student identify which the student prefers, that mode can be

emphasized. For example, more verbal instruction for auditory-preference learners, more visual demonstrations for visual learners, and more slow, step-by-step practice for kinesthetic learners.

This being said, research has shown that in order to be competent in a sport, kinesthetic practice must be incorporated. This means no amount of drilling, watching, or hearing will fully prepare an individual for a live fight. Everything that is learned needs to be incorporated into the context in which it's going to be used. This helps the fencer build a decision tree, or mental map of options in a live fight.

In broad terms, there are three types of learning or skill acquisition: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic/tactile.

The auditory learner says, "Explain it to me."

The visual learner says, "Show it to me."

The kinesthetic/tactile learner says, "Let me try it[4]."

Let's further explore these with an illustrative example: I have never learned to play the piano. If I want to master a basic song, I can listen to the song and then play it back (auditory), I can read the sheet music (visual) or I can bang on the keys until it sounds like the identified song (kinesthetic). If I employ just one of these types of learning, I will be sitting at the piano for a longer time than if I, say, listen and mimic, or read and play.

At this point readers are invited to reflect on their own learning preferences. How do you best learn a new fencing technique? Do you like to have it explained to you first? Do you like to see it done? Do you like to use trial-and-error (re: kinesthetic) until it works? You may be

[4] A strict kinesthetic approach can also be termed "trial-and-error."

reflecting that most often your school teachers explained, showed, and then made you do it. They used a multi-sensory mode of teaching, the purpose of which is to encompass as many of the learning types as possible.

Once a fencer's preference for skill acquisition has been identified, the next item to tackle is that fencer's cognitive strengths and weaknesses. Simply put, how does this person's brain best take in new learning? Research suggests that some athletes prefer less information at a time (one to three new things in a session) and a slower rate of change (the rate at which one learns new material), and a more conservative approach to learning new things. This athlete may become overwhelmed if required to process and understand a large amount of information at one time—what is referred to as the "fire hose" approach because it's like being hit with a fire hose as opposed to drinking from a glass. What is intended to be an exciting glimpse into all of the future options throughout the fight quickly becomes way too much information for any one person to absorb.

Most athletes of both sexes prefer to learn one to three new things in a lesson. Anything more than that is difficult to retain and incorporate. The rate at which they master these things and feel confident in moving to the next skill varies by fencer and by skill. Some want to reach competence or mastery before moving on. Others want the next lesson once they have the basic idea down. A teacher must evaluate both the amount of information the fencer can best absorb at a time and their preferred rate of change against an appropriate pace of advancement for this student.

For some, once it is time to learn the next concept, the focus is entirely on this one concept. For example, once this fencer picks up a dagger it is all dagger, all practice. Others prefer to move into the new concept at a slower pace. This may look like practicing the dagger

for part of practice and then returning to single sword, or practicing last week's lesson and incorporating this week's.

It is thus the teacher's responsibility to evaluate how much information their learner can tolerate in one sitting. In terms of teaching only one to three concepts at a time, this depends on how challenging the information is to the learner. Some days it may be just one new concept. Others it may be three. Sometimes each piece must be taught separately before then being combined, and other times the pieces can all be presented in the same day. Likewise, competence may take one session or it may take months. All athletes plateau from time to time.

Here is an example: New Fencer One overextends when she lunges and sticks her butt out. She is struggling not to do these things so that she can achieve a mechanically safe lunge. This will be the one thing she practices today because trying to 1) not over extend, 2) not stick her butt out, 3) move the sword first, 4) then her body, 5) and *then* her foot—without overextending or sticking her butt out—is just too many things all at once.

New Fencer Two overextends sometimes but overall has a mechanically safe lunge. While she practices safe lunges, she is also taught how to cover her opponent's sword before lunging so she does not get a sword in her face.

How much information to give a fencer in one lesson and how quickly to progress through the lessons is only one part of the teaching puzzle. Each student is an individual and thus has differing levels of commitment, tolerance, and interest. In terms of athletic learning, the factors that appear to be the most important include:

- Learning comfort
- Effort level

- Frustration tolerance
- Ability to change
- Commitment to that change
- Compliance with what is being taught

These factors have wide-ranging effects, from fencers' satisfaction with their skills to their training habits. An individual fencer's intrinsic motivation, commitment to fencing, competitive interest, ability to activate[5], and will to win all affect the level of determination. These attributes, in turn, reflect an individual fencer's level of motivation and investment in the sport of historical fencing and ability to apply training to a real-time fight.

There is no right or wrong answer to this!

SCA fencing is a hobby. There are no academic scholarships, contracts, or trading deals involved. Every fencer puts in as much or as little into this sport as they want and as life allows. It is the teacher's responsibility to help the student identify their level of motivation and investment and then *respect* and work within those parameters. Perhaps one student just wants to know enough to have fun at events. Another may have dreams of becoming a Master of Defense. Some may not know. Some may change over time.

[5] Activation, in an athletic context, is the mental and physical energy deliberately devoted to preparing a planned response to an anticipated situation or stimuli. For example: being mentally prepared for your opponent to lunge and mentally knowing how you will respond to that lunge and assuming a physical posture that will allow you to respond and counter.

These desires can also wax and wane due to both external and internal factors. There is little to be done about external factors such as taking a new job, being in school, or having children to supervise. Sometimes real life does and should take precedent.

The internal factors that can affect motivation and investment are listed above: learning comfort, effort level, frustration tolerance, etc. Each individual's "gauge" for each of these factors is of a different length. Even committed students who put consistent effort may lose motivation if their frustration gauges are maxed out too many times. A previously motivated fencer may begin to withdraw. This is something the teacher should address. Why is this fencer's interest waning? The teacher can help the student identify the cause and help to address it before the fencer leaves the sport.

Influence of Sex on Learning Styles

Men's and women's brains are different. They respond to stimuli in difference ways, and they process, encode, and retrieve information in different ways. Now that we've reviewed learning styles in general, we will examine some sex-specific factors that influence learning preferences and learning style.

Statistically significant differences have been found in several of the learning factors we listed above either in favor of women or men. Because this is about lady fencers, we will address the findings in terms of female athletes' reported strengths and weaknesses.

Trial-and-Experience Learning

Female athletes appear to use this learning method less often than men. Without putting too fine a point on it–many women hate this method. In a fencing context, this is the "Whack,

don't die" method discussed in Section 2. That section illustrates why this method of learning is detrimental to lady fencers.

Positive Feedback

Female athletes tend to prefer more frequent positive feedback as opposed to negative. For example, "Try again" is positive whereas "You did it wrong" is negative. Reminders that she is doing well, as long as the teacher believes this to be true and can confirm it with evidence, are also positive feedback.

Real-time Application Feedback

Female athletes often prefer to understand the effect of what they are learning in a real-time, real-life situations rather than the underlying foundation of a theory or strategy. Put another way, a lady fencer may be less inclined to understand why physics says this works (i.e. it happens because of torque) and prefer knowing the outcome in real time (i.e. do this and then this happens). Female athletes thrive when they receive a thorough explanation about how to execute the new skill. This is frequently preferred over the "trial and experience" method.

Frustration Tolerance and Patience

Female athletes appear to have a lower tolerance for frustration when *specifically* not meeting their ends. This means a female student may become frustrated faster than a male student if she "just isn't getting" the thing she is trying to learn. On the flip side, women tend to be more patient. In a mixed-sex sport environment, this frustration may be fueled by expectations to prove she's just as good as the men.

Faith in One's Abilities

Female athletes are more prone to doubt their abilities, whereas male athletes are more likely to exaggerate. Consequently, female athletes have also been observed to take fewer risks when testing new skills and are more cautious when putting these new skills to the test. An event is a good time to practice new skills, and a teacher can encourage the lady fencer to rate the success of her event based upon how many times she executed her new skill. I will have more to say about that in Section 7 where I discuss redefining victory conditions.

Making Changes

While female athletes do tend to be more willing to change, they are, at the same time, also more prone to question their own capacity to do so. In application, a lady fencer may have more difficulty in letting go of a technique or fighting system that has worked well enough so far, even in favor of a better one, because of her doubts of her capacity to accomplish the change.

Setting Up for Success

So far in this chapter we have looked at ways fencers learn. Now we are going to look at how to take all of this understanding and use it to set the lady fencer up for success in her fencing passes. This information applies both to her teacher and any more experienced fencer who wants to help her advance.

For the teacher, teaching a female fencer a new lesson can be broken down into four easy steps:

1. Explain what today's lesson will be.
2. Demonstrate the skill.
3. Execute the skill slowly.
4. Execute the skill faster.

When she practices what she has learned with you. fight just above her level. Make your fights tough enough that she has to work for her victories. but that they are obtainable. This *does not* mean fight worse. It does not help her if you do things no fencer would do in a real fight just so she can win. Instead, fight *bigger*, such as making a larger disengage than you ordinarily would so she can develop her eye to seeing disengages, or waiting a tempo before lunging so she can learn to see when she is under threat.

If she is not properly executing what she has learned, do not be afraid to slow the fight back down. Help her build the appropriate muscle memory rather than just waiting, fight after fight, for her to get it right. She will eventually quit in frustration if you do that.

It is important for the teacher or more experienced fighter to fight at or just above the student's level. She learns nothing if she gets her butt kicked just because her teacher and opponent is a better fighter. The teacher also proves nothing except that winning is more important to him (or her) than being a good teacher or advancing the sport through the growth of its members. In other words, that person is a jerk. Word gets around about this sort of person, and it's a difficult reputation to shake. Don't be that guy.

The message a student receives from a teacher who insists on winning every bout is "You will lose no matter what you do." And when that happens, why fight? Very few women will continue to do so. They have better things to do with their time then be someone else's punching

bag. One of the most common responses I have heard is, “If I’m going to die no matter what I do I might as well bring a rubber band gun and shoot him. Or just not fight at all.”

Instead, limit the techniques and maneuvers used in sparring to things she has seen before. If you do not know, ask what she is working on. This is simple pedagogy. Doing so allows her to practice what she already knows and continues to learn. This expands her decision tree. Remember, the brand new fighter does not have a decision tree, she has a decision twig. And that decision twig needs to be nurtured so it can grow into a mighty decision tree.

Put another way, fencing is often described as a dance, and dances are learned by learning step one; then steps one and two; and then steps one, two, and three; and so on. Thus, when she is putting a new lesson into practice with you, her teacher, do not attack her with new things she has not seen before. This comes later as the decision tree is fleshed out. For example, once a student has learned how to parry to the inside line, she can then learn how to parry to the outside line. Throwing something new into the mix to see how she responds is for the advanced student, and again, it should be incorporated into her current lessons with the objective of expanding that decision tree.

If you are a fellow fighter, whether at practice or at an event, and not her teacher, you can also help by asking “What are you working on? Would you like me to try to set that up for you or do you just want to fight?” If she just wants to fight, go ahead. But. If you are a vastly better fighter, and this is not a tournament setting, I would encourage you to be honorable and fight closer to her level, perhaps use this as an opportunity to refine your basics or practice something *you* are working on. Again, she learns nothing if the advanced fencer kicks her butt and the

advanced fencer gains a reputation for being more interested in winning than engaging with the fencing community.

How to Ask to Share Your Knowledge.

We have all been there. That moment when we see a thing going wrong and just know we can help, and we say, "Want me to tell you what you're doing wrong?"

Strike that from the vocabulary.

It's rude. She probably doesn't give a damn about your opinion. She might be done with learning for today and just wants to fight. "Then why not just tell me she doesn't want to hear it?" Because if you are a man, and most mid- to high-level fencers are men, she has been socialized to let you talk. All girls in this society are covertly raised to let men talk and politely listen, whether they give a damn or no. So, it does not matter if she is interested in what you have to say or not. She will still say yes.

Instead, for fighters of all genders, try something like, "Do you want me to tell you what I'm seeing or do you just want to keep fighting?" It's respectful, communicates you are interested in her development, and demonstrates that she gets to decide whether she listens to you or not and that you will respect that. "But she really needs to fix this thing!" If it is a matter of skill, and she has said no, and you are *that* concerned, talk to her teacher or one of her practice mates. If it is a matter of body mechanics safety, raise that concern politely: "May I ask you a body mechanics question? I'm concerned about X."

How Women's Brains Do Not Compartmentalize

Mark Gungor, a pastor, has a video you can find on YouTube called "Men's and Women's Brains" (citation in the bibliography section has a URL). I enjoy this video because it describes with humor one of the major sex differences:

"Men's brains are made up of little boxes, and we have a box for everything," he says, "…and the rule is the boxes don't touch."

Without repeating the whole routine, this translates, neuropsychologically, to an ability to compartmentalize to a high degree. This suggests for our purposes that male fencers have a box labeled "Work," and one labeled "Finances," and one labeled "Mother," and one labeled "Fencing." And these topics *do not touch*. Once he leaves work, the "Work" box is closed and placed on the shelf[6]. When he gets to fencing practice or an event, the "Fencing" box is opened.

On the other hand, Gungor points out, "Women's brains are made up of a big ball of wire. And everything is connected to everything."

This means that women are, in fact, terrible at compartmentalizing. If you have ever had an argument with a woman and wondered what on earth that time with the car has to do with the present dispute, then you have had a glimpse into the perpetual interconnection that is a woman's brain. Of course, it does not mean women *cannot* compartmentalize. It is just a skill that requires more work to develop.

However, this does mean that everything is, in fact, interrelated and everything can affect everything else. So, yes, a bad day at work can negatively affect a fencing practice. Even just a busy day can have a negative mental or physical effect on fencing. I continued to fence through

[6] Personal and situational variances, of course, apply.

my graduate studies, but my progress was incremental. My brain was so full of psychology that it was difficult to make room for other learning.

For example, one time at practice during this period I was asked, "What is prima?" and I responded with "It's…um…this position?" A teammate then said, "Quick, Gwynn! What's the criteria for Schizophrenia?" I rattled that off in no time.

Now, I can hear a few men saying to themselves "Wait. So a woman's entire practice could go badly because of…just about anything?" Basically, yes. The potential is there. Her brain is so interconnected that she perpetually has multiple "boxes" open all at the same time. And she manages to keep track of them all.

Again, this is not to say that women cannot learn to compartmentalize, or that men cannot learn to generalize. I have actually gotten pretty good at leaving work at work. It just does not come as naturally. It is likely a lady fencer will need a longer focusing routine than a man will. As an example, my local practice once began every session with a "bear pit[7]." Specifically, an "A-game bear pit." A-game means "Bring the best you've got."

The men at practice enjoyed this because it got them focused and into "fighting mood." I hated it and never participated because it did not get me focused and into "fighting mood." I just got my butt kicked and felt terrible. I found I cannot go "0 to 60" like they can. I take longer to reach my "top speed" or A-game, as do most women.

And here we introduce the adrenaline curve.

[7] In a bear pit, everyone lines up and the first two combatants fight. The winner stays in and the next person approaches to fight. The winner stays in and the next person in line approaches, and so on.

The Adrenaline Curve and What it Means for Tournaments

The Adrenaline Curve

This is a brief but very important section of this work. I first learned about this phenomenon in Duchess Elina Beckenham's (Tobi Beck) book The Armored Rose. My research for this project only confirmed what she wrote.

Men and women have distinctly different adrenaline curves. A man's adrenaline will typically climb, spike, and descend to normal in about 15-20 minutes. A woman's curve will climb for about 20 minutes and then stay there. It could be up to 30 more minutes or even an hour, depending on situational and personality factors. The exception is that if there is an immediate threat[8], both the male and female curves will spike significantly faster and stay there until the threat is neutralized.

This is my favorite illustrative example to use with my therapy clients: have you ever witnessed or been in an argument between a man and a woman? They separate in anger. After a certain amount of time (about 20 minutes or so on average) he has cooled down. Maybe he seeks her out to give her a hug or an apology. Except she's still angry.

"How can she still be angry?" he wonders, baffled. While on the other hand she is seething, "Why isn't he still angry?!"

Simple answer: his adrenaline has dropped and hers has not.

[8] This includes both physical and "perceived" threats which are not psychically dangerous but are mentally or emotionally troubling or disturbing.

To bring this back to fencing, recall above the "A-game bear pit" and how much I disliked it. I wrote I hated this method because I cannot go "0 to 60" like the men can and that it takes longer for me to reach my "top speed."

The men used a short period of high intensity to raise their adrenaline. To stay with the car metaphor, I could have participated in the bear pit with my gas pedal on the floor, but my car can only accelerate so fast[9]. In practical terms, I got my butt kicked because they were at a higher level of performance sooner than I was. I will get to my top speed but, personally, it takes about 20 minutes. And a woman's adrenaline curve spikes after about 20 minutes. What a surprise, eh?

What This Means for Tournaments

I have not done an extensive survey of female fencers' pre-tournament warm up routines. This is in part because most female fencers do not appear to have one that really works well for them. I am hoping this is partially because they do not know the secret of the adrenaline curve.

My teacher and I began an experiment. We started each practice in one-on-one fights. For 20 minutes. Over the course of that 20 minutes, my teacher fought just above my level of performance[10] and incrementally increased the level of difficulty as we went. The result was, typically, after 20 minutes I was physically warmed up and mentally focused.

However, somewhat to my surprise based on how the female curve spikes and stays there, I did not get to ride this high idly. The high was quickly lost. Perhaps I should say the "peak performance" was quickly lost. My theory about why is the interconnectedness of the female brain.

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[9] I frequently joke that I am small and only have two cylinders to work with anyway.
[10] Performance, not skill, because believe you me I never fight at my top level of skill at the start.

I suspect the adrenaline was still pumping, but my mental focus went down a different wire. Recall that Gungor describes a woman's brain as a ball of interconnected wire. Maybe it's something like this "Fencing—fencing teammates—there's my teammate—talk to her—How you been?—chat, chat, chat—oh, it's been 10 minutes, time to fence…" and given that women do not compartmentalize as well as men, I suspect part of my brain was still on that conversation.

More recently my teacher and I moved from "How long until she is warmed up and dialed in?" to "How to we keep her dialed in?" This applies to tournaments in particular. I imagine this will vary from fencer to fencer, but it appears to me that I need to do a "maintenance" fight about every five minutes.

Roughly every five minutes, I find a fencer who I think can give me a good fight. Maybe I specifically tell them, "I need some maintenance passes. Come keep me warm." The benefit is that my opponent knows exactly what I am looking for. Many times I get a response of "Good, so do I." These fights are not all-out-win-the-thing, but they keep the body warm and the mind focused.

If ladies reading this try incorporating these practices into their fencing, please let me know how it turns out. I would love to have data rather just my singular anecdote.

Measures of Success and Redefining Victory Conditions

External vs Internal Measures

As a sport we tend to measure success in one way: winning tournaments. Winning tourneys is numerically very hard, and reaching the semifinals of a large tourney only marginally less so. Take a look at the numbers. Let's say the reader goes to a small event and there are only nine other fencers in the tournament. That's a small pool, maybe there's a chance!

There *is* a chance, but it is still not a very good one. Let's say all of the fencers are at the exact same skill level. That is a 1 in 10 chance of ultimate victory. That's 10%. In a larger tourney, say 40 fencers, even if they are still all of the exact same level of skill that's a 2.5% chance of any one fencer winning the tournament. 60 fencers? 1.6%. Given that fencers are *not* all at the same level of skill, that further reduces the odds of winning for anyone except the limited number of top fencers at any event.

Bearing that in mind, winning tournaments is a terrible measure of success. It is an external measure that does not take into account any of the qualities involved in being a fencer, and instead only compares one fighter to other fighters, who are all at differing levels of skill and at different points in their learning.

Apart from novice tourneys, the SCA commonly uses no differentiation for age, level, or weapon. In a sport where the external factors, meaning other people, are so wildly variable, the best measure of success is internal. Although it may sound trite, the best person to compare a fencer to is that fencer her or himself. Internal measures are more accurate and more psychologically beneficial. Why? Because they measure improvement.

Here is a recommendation for the student fencer approaching a tourney: Before the event day, set goals for yourself. Identify what you have been working on and focus on that. Events are when we get to fight people we do not regularly see. Capitalize on that by putting your lessons to the test.

Here are some samples of internal measures of success for event day:

- Did I start outside of measure?
- Did I keep that one line closed?
- Did I parry and transfer to my buckler like I've been practicing?
- Did I see the openings more often?
- Did I learn something new?

If you believe you executed your goal even 50% of the time, that's a good day! If not, that gives you data to work with for next practice.

Motivation, Support, and Confidence

The psychological literature has demonstrated that an athlete's relationship with his or her peers and coaches are an important predictor of motivation. Being social creatures, humans look to each other for support and feedback, and these in turn effect motivation. Whether an athlete participates in a same-sex or mixed-sex sport has a noticeable and different effect on the kind of social support the athlete seeks and receives, from whom, the sources of competence information used, and the levels of perceived competence that athlete feels.

Before we continue further, let's define what those terms.

Social support: feeling loved or cared about and that others are on hand to help should a problem arise.

Perceived competence: how good do I think I am?

Competence information: what I use to measure how good I am, such as internal and external measure of success.

Social Support

Social support is vital for helping an athlete cope with stress, lower feelings of burnout, increase enjoyment of the sport, and enhance physical activity and performance level. Simply put, if you like who you play with, you are more likely to enjoy yourself, which also equates to less stress, lower risk of burnout, and a desire to get more passes with more people. It's important to understand that the types and sources of this support differ for men and women.

For example, women are more likely to look for and receive emotional support than men. They are also more focused on emotion-focused coping strategies whereas men are problem-focused in their coping strategies. Here is one way that might look:

Lady Fencer: I fought terribly today.

Her Lady Fencer Friend: I'm so sorry. Tell me about it.

Gentlemen Fencer: I fought terribly today.

His Gentlemen Fencer Friend: Grab a sword. Let's figure it out.

Neither is better or worse than the other; just more fitting to that sex's innate psychology. Men, particularly when it is someone they care about, want to fix the problem right away. Women, on the other hand, sometimes just want to vent first. So, ladies, if a male fencer in your life wants to help you fix the problem, it probably means he cares about you. However, this can put a male/female teacher-student pair at odds. It is important for both to acknowledge this difference and work within it. Perhaps the lady fencer can tell her teacher "I just want to vent first," or her gentleman teacher can ask "Do you want to tell me about...?" and then ask "Do you want to work on it now or wait until next practice?"

In the wider sports arena, when operating in a mixed-sex environment female athletes are more prone to seek and receive support from their peers, whereas male athletes are more prone to seek and receive support from their significant others. The unacceptability of men showing this vulnerability outside of a romantic relationship is a subject for a different work.

Perceived Competence and Competence Information

Perceived Competence is "How good do I think I am?" The better a person believes they are at a sport, the more enjoyment and satisfaction they receive from doing it. People seldom continue an activity they think they are terrible at, or at the least do not engage in it as much as others.

There is a troubling trend among lady fencers wherein they push themselves, or allow themselves to be pushed, to the edges of the list. There are as many factors contributing to this as there are lady fencers, but two are particularly prominent.

The first is that women are socialized to help. Women are socialized to pick up the slack and take care of the thing before it becomes an issue. Women are socialized to sacrifice. That is

why a woman may put down her swords to take care of the things that need doing, be it set up lists, marshal, run a tourney, or do anything that needs to be managed.

The second is women who cannot quite give up fencing but also have a low level of perceived competence without the necessary support to build it up. They do not think they are very good, but cannot quite keep themselves away. And so they move themselves to the edges of the list. They marshal, they run tourneys, they list manage…they are there but "can't fight because..." In this way they avoid disappointment and frustration without anyone challenging them to fight more passes.

In many cases, these women are not aware of these forces affecting them. In others, they will not admit they are avoiding the list because of frustration, because then the one who asked will try to fix it, and they are tired of every fencer thinking they have the magic answer when it never helps. What a loss to the community, and what a loss for this woman who has a warrior's heart.

What can we as individuals and as a community do? One answer is for her teacher to create a safe learning environment (see Section 2). The other is to increase her levels of perceived competence by knowing the sources that lead to it. These sources are the "competence information" defined earlier. Individuals use a broad variety of sources of information to gauge their perceived competence, and these sources, of course, differ by gender.

Men tend towards external measures for this information—statistics, win-loss ratios, speed or ease of learning compared to others—whereas women tend towards self-comparisons and feedback from coaches and peers. Given our sport is dominated by men, it is unsurprising these external, peer-comparison measures are the dominant model used and consequently lead to more women having less confidence about their abilities.

Thus, if you are a person who trains, or trains alongside, lady fencers, support them in utilizing the sources of information that work best for building their perceived competence. What did she do well? Where has she improved? Even if you defeat her, still tell her what she did well.

Some individuals benefit from keeping a fencing journal. This journal records the lessons they learn from practice to practice, as well as their triumphs—good days, good passes, and victories. That way the fencer can look back, see the progress they have made over the months, and remind themselves that they do have good days. No one needs to be reminded they had a bad day.

Concluding Remarks

This subject has become my second passion and dream within the SCA. It is my dream for my home kingdom, the Midrealm, to become the premier place for lady fencers, and for everyone who has learned, advanced, and gained from this work to carry this information into other kingdoms. I long for the day when the grant and peerage level awards match the authorization numbers.

The fencing community, at least in the Midrealm, has come a long way even since I started my research. I see no reason it cannot continue to grow in the next decade and the decade after.

We are the Dream, all of us, and we build the Dream.

In service to that Dream,

Master Gwynn

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