

# WINNING FENCING

by Dr. John Heil

Is there more to winning than being the best, being number one? In each fencing competition there is only one winner, one gold medalist. Does that make everyone else a loser? There are many ways to win. A personal best is a win. So is fencing with the right attitude and showing personal courage in adversity.

Before defeating Olympic champion Giovanna Trillini en route to her bronze medal performance at the 1999 World Championships, Iris Zimmermann thought, "She is my hero. I have watched her fence all this time. Now it's my turn to win." In that instant, Iris committed herself to do what it would take to move her game up a notch. She took on a winning attitude. Though she didn't bring home the gold, she was still a winner, breaking new ground for herself and for American fencing.

Excellence is as much about the way you do things as it is about the results; as much about the journey as about the final destination. There are wins and losses every day in fencing and in life. Learning to fence with a winning attitude will make you a success on and off the strip.

The competitive fire that drives the pursuit of victory is a potent force generating awesome displays of physical excellence and compelling moments of personal courage. What makes a winner is endlessly debated. One idea for which there is widespread agreement is that among equals in physical talent, the mental game makes the difference. As simple as the idea of winning is, how to best harness it as a force remains to be discovered.

Gold medal goals have given athletes direction through tremendous adversity and been the driving force behind sport's greatest moments. When Hall of Fame baseball player Yogi Berra was asked what he thought about

when he was hitting, he replied "You can't think and hit at the same time." The same is true of fencing.

Negative thoughts are a spoiler of success. For example, fear of a bad outcome undermines confidence and focuses the athlete on what not to do, making that very result more likely. When things go wrong frustration and anger often follow. As feelings run amuck, the fencer loses control over emotional intensity and is taken out of the mental game. In either situation the fencer needs to refocus on fencing, on what to do next.

Even how to use positive thoughts of victory to one's best advantage is elusive to the point of paradox. If you are thinking about how nice it would be to win your bout at the instant your opponent attacks, you are disadvantaged because you are trying to think about two things at the same time – fencing and winning. Your attention is divided, split between what to do now (fencing) and how things might feel later (satisfaction of winning). Thoughts of victory while still fencing are premature, causing you to get ahead of yourself, taking you away from what is happening as it happens. To fence your best you need a total focus on what is happening as it hap-

pens; to be focused on now!

When top athletes are asked about their greatest experiences in sport, they describe intense concentration coupled with feelings of control and confidence. Often there is little awareness of anything but the actions as they unfold from moment to moment. Thoughts of winning or losing are notably absent. This mental state is often called the zone, short for the zone of optimal functioning as coined by Russian sport psychologist Yuri Hanin. Of course, this does not just happen. It is the byproduct of intense practice and dedication to excellence, and that begins with how you approach your training.

Much has been said of winning and the mental game. The 10 simple ideas that follow point the way to winning fencing and suggest that winning comes from how you play the game.

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## The Way to Winning Fencing

1. Fence one touch at a time.
2. Set positive, realistic daily goals as steps to your dream goals.
3. Focus on now. When distracted, refocus.
4. Fence technically precise and tactically decisive.
5. Train for intensity. Compete with intensity.
6. Be in your mental game from the first touch to the final touch.
7. Learn from winning and losing and learn to win after losing.
8. Keep the fight in your fencing.
9. Fencing skills are life skills. Practice them on and off the strip.
10. Finish the touch. Finish the bout. Finish the competition.