



Exploring Sports

An interview with a fencer

INTRO

My name's Sophie Troiano, I'm 20 years old and currently a student, I've been fencing for the last 12 years now, training competitively for about the last eight, I'm coached by Jema Rogerkoski who's the British national and Olympic coach and also Tomat Koleki at university.

NUTRITION

Nutrition's important in fencing in order to optimise performance. You've got to have your body in the best condition possible in order to compete optimally; you have to supply it with all its calorific requirements.

The main principles of fencing are endurance speed, agility and well explosiveness really. Diet is very important for this so, you have to eat a diet high in carbohydrates, complex carbohydrates, and high protein, particularly after training it's important to rebuild possibly damaged muscle.

As an amateur myself no-one specifically tells me what I can and cannot eat however we are given guidelines by nutritionists especially when we go to training courses and they try and help us make the correct food choices.

In terms of implementing my diet into everyday eating habits it is not that straightforward being a student. You have to try and eat well at breakfast, particularly; you start with a good mixture of cereals, bread and try and take a relatively high intake of protein such as chicken and fish.

Training is usually in the afternoons for me personally so I try and eat maybe a banana or a sandwich about an hour before training. In terms of competition, the night before is very important in terms of eating a large amount of complex carbs such as pasta, rice and in terms of the morning of the competition again eating something with a mixture of complex and simple carbohydrates such as honey on toast, cereal, fruit, this kind of thing.

Foods to avoid are things which are high in fat and low in carbohydrate or other nutritional value, things such as cakes, chocolate obviously you can eat these in moderation but they shouldn't form a large part of your diet.

It's important on a competition day to eat consistently throughout the day to keep energy levels up. In terms of eating before training, as long as you eat 20 minutes to an hour before you intend on commencing that's what's really important.... and often drinking sugary lucozade drinks throughout training can be beneficial. Not only for hydration but to ensure that your blood sugar levels are kept high enough in order to allow you to perform optimally. Dehydration can lead to a very poor performance so keeping optimally hydrated throughout the day as well as during training and competition is very important. Often carrying a large bottle of water with you is the best way to ensure you drink throughout the day

COACHING & PERFORMANCE

The roles a fencing coach takes on are primarily tactical and technical as well as somewhat motivational. They are ultimately the person you see on an almost daily basis to expand your repertoire and enable you to achieve the skills you need in order to win in competition. They also have an important role in terms of emotional support, helping you to deal with other things that are going on in your life as well as your fencing.

At an amateur level the role of a coach is mainly to help you to improve your repertoire and the number of skills that you can perform. At a more professional level it's more about taking these skills and learning when to implement them and improve your timing and ultimately to help in winning the competition.

The qualities which are most important in a coach are firstly, them having the skills and ability to teach you as a person the skills you'll need to be able to win in competition, also the fact that they understand you and can help you.... and see fencing only as part of your life, especially at an amateur level and balance other things such as studies and work commitments with fencing commitments.

MOTIVATION

I first got into fencing because my dad used to do it and he was on the British team. When I was younger it was just one of many sports that I did, others included tennis, netball and other team sports at school. However, success at fencing and enjoying the atmosphere at the club and the training element of it as well as competition meant that I took my fencing more seriously and did less of other sports that I also did enjoy.

Fencing is a very time-consuming sport in terms both of training and competing. I tend to train five to six days a week and generally compete most weekends. It's also time-consuming in terms of travelling to competitions, especially during the international season. Although it's very time-consuming success both in competition and during training, just little steps that you make in your development, are very important as a motivating factor in terms of making all these sacrifices on your time worthwhile.

Obviously success in competition is a major motivating factor however there are other things which motivate me personally, knowing that at the end of the season I'll qualify for the world championships and having the opportunity to compete at a high level for your country internationally is really highly motivating. Especially seeing other countries where maybe they train more and have more resources to put towards training, seeing the level at which they compete is also highly motivational. Additionally London having got the games for 2012 is also another major motivating factor, although next year I intend to train a bit less seeing as I've just finished my season as a junior and will now be competing in the senior arena which is much more difficult... and finishing my degree. After I do graduate I intend to put a lot more time to training ultimately up to the Olympic Games.

I've gained a lot out of fencing in terms of life experience. I've visited a lot of countries, which I otherwise wouldn't have been to. The last world championships were in South Korea, which was absolutely amazing. I've also travelled to Cuba and all around Europe, and these are all places I wouldn't otherwise have seen had I not been competing for the British team. In terms of what I've got out of the sport materially, I receive about £3000 of funding annually to put towards training and other costs such as physiotherapy and sports massage and equipment as well, although I am sponsored and therefore equipment costs are far less of an issue.

Fencing is inherently quite a costly sport. Firstly you have to buy all your equipment as well as maintain it and travelling and competing in competitions can be very expensive. Obviously it is more expensive for the professional, however, they receive much more funding and therefore actually meeting the cost is relatively easier. Even professional fencers in Britain don't get paid to train full time. The best fencers in our country get paid about £20,000 a year which isn't really enough to live off especially in London and so many of the top fencers in this country also have part-time jobs. In other countries on the continent where fencing is a much bigger sport and there's a lot more money in the sport, there you do get athletes who do train full time and as a result it can seem quite an un-level playing field when you compete in the international arena.

Having just finished my years as a junior fencer which is under 20, I'm now competing in the senior arena which is a much more difficult playing field. Next year I'm doing finals at university and as a result will probably be training and competing less. However, once I graduate I intend to dedicate a lot more of my time to fencing with the ultimate goal of qualifying for 2012.