

THE PROPER DEVELOPMENT OF A SELECTION POLICY
FOR NEW SOUTH WALES FENCING

1. I have been briefed directly by the Association to provide some guidance in the formulation of a selection policy¹ to be employed by those charged with the responsibility of selecting the NSW teams to compete in the Australian Championships.
2. I am not a fencer. I am not even an expert in the sport. I am nothing more than a lover of all sports who tunes into and enjoys the premier fencing events at Olympic Games and World Championships when those events are given television exposure.
3. For the purposes of assisting the Association I have watched a number of films of World Championships, read and consulted widely and like all curious people with a computer I have downloaded a mass of fencing related material.
4. That said I remain an outside interested novice to this great and ancient sport. That is perhaps why what I have to say may be of interest, as my main purpose in carrying out that research was to discover whether fencing is sui generis, whether fencing is so different, so highly idiosyncratic that the overall approach taken to selection by numberless other bodies in a great many other sports in hundreds of countries around the world for more than 100 years, should somehow not apply to fencing, at least to some degree.
5. So, I express my first conclusion: fencing is not such a sport that requires a radical departure from common sense selection policies and from that, much follows.

¹ I have said “selection policy” rather than a specific set of rules because in my mind the overall process must involve two stages with the second, a rule making stage following logically from the first.

6. Firstly, it would be most unwise to ignore the accumulated wisdom and experience to be found in the Australian Sports Commission's guide to selection principles entitled "Getting it right: Guidelines for Selection".²
7. Before setting out a number of what are in my view fundamentally important guidelines for NSW Fencing *in the current situation*, my first suggestion to all concerned is to wipe the slate clean and carefully read "Getting it right". It will repay the effort. (See especially pages 18-29).³
8. Before coming to the overall form or structure of the policy itself it may be of assistance if I set out a number of important considerations, which if accepted, will enable a sound policy to take shape.

General Principles First

9. An appeal to common sense and quiet reason results in a number of incontrovertible conclusions which, if heeded, tend to solve whatever problems beset the Association.
 - (i) The defined objective must be to select the best team of fencers to represent NSW at the Australian Fencing Championships. A commonplace conclusion perhaps, but from it so much follows.
 - (ii) Whatever methods are employed achieve that objective they must be:
 - specifically designed to achieve *that* objective;
 - fair to all competing athletes;
 - consistent (in the sense that they allow the competitors to properly prepare from way out)
 - transparent;

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- put into effect by selectors who are deeply knowledgeable in the sport, not personally involved, objective and who are dedicated only to the achievement of the defined goal of selecting the best team.
- (iii) There *must* be a body of selectors to implement whatever policy is chosen. I will not waste any time discussing the extraordinary suggestion that there should be no selectors.
- (iv) The selectors must be chosen by the Executive, not elected. For the reasons suggested by members they should not be personal or private coaches.
- (v) It should not be the function of a selection policy *designed to pick the best team*, to have half an eye on the future, on “potential” or on development considerations. These are matters which are the province of the executive of the Association which must formulate other ways of developing the sport and individual and team fencers. If a young fencer “catches the eye” of the selectors that is not enough, he or she is selected only if among the best four at the time the team is picked. “Encouragement” is not the role of the selectors and is a consideration to be examined in the Executive Room not the Selector’s Room.
- (vi) The corollary of this principle must hold good. If an “older fencer” (depending on one’s viewpoint) is one of the best four fencers at the time the team is to be selected, then so be it: he or she must be selected, all other requirements being satisfied. So, age should not be a nemesis just as youth and potential should not be an accelerant. Once the overall objective of selecting the best team is born in mind then once again the problem ceases to exist.
- (vii) Age may not be altogether irrelevant. If for example two fencers are of equal ability by the lights of all operating criteria, the selectors should have the discretion to select the younger fencer but I stress all other things being equal.
- (viii) The development of those principles should not in any way be a response to a perceived past injustice, a personal contretemps, a difference of opinion, a case of less than proper tact or diplomacy or an annual set of personal

circumstances which are perhaps unlikely to occur again. In such a case the result will be to place on the books a selection rule with an inbuilt bias rendering it entirely unsuitable for promotion as a policy intended to satisfy the criteria I have set out above. When such irrelevant considerations are permitted to intrude into the rule making process the result will be an unhappy one – a cranky rule sitting uncomfortably with its more rational neighbours long after the grievance which prompted the rule, has been forgotten.

- (ix) The new selection policy, if there is to be one, should be developed and formulated without emotion and it should be free from undue animation, animosity, agendas and agitation. *All* fencers and lovers of the sport of fencing are concerned.
- (x) Fencing is a sport with a rich history of chivalry, ethics and gentlemanly conduct. These qualities no doubt lie at the heart of the highly successful development programs in some NSW schools. These qualities should be closely linked with a selection policy by the two fold approach of:
- eligibility requirements for selection; and
 - a player or team contract.⁴
- (xi) Once again, agreement upon the goal of selecting the best team must in my opinion lead to the introduction of an *extenuating circumstances* provision in the selection policy. A fencer who has not been able to bring his or her points ranking to a sufficiently high level to achieve selection should, for the reasons set out in the Australian Sports Commission publication, “Getting it Right”⁵ to be able to press a claim to be selected in the best available team through a special process designed to enable him or her to do so. I examine that mechanism in the section of this advice following the Ranking System.

Level One Conclusions

10. All of those considerations in my view, are essential elements in any selection policy. They must in a properly expressed manner be included as specific provision in the

⁴ See the discussion of these subjects in “Getting it right” at pages 27-28.

⁵ See the footnote above.

selection policy. It is not yet time for that policy to be formulated with greater precision. It is important in my opinion for that to be accomplished by a knowledgeable executive applying, if thought fit, those precepts to the sport of fencing.

11. In order to assist the executive further I now wish to descend from what are clearly considerations of critical importance to a greater level of particularity for the sport of fencing. That of course brings one to the ranking system.

The Ranking System

12. Conclusion

- (i) A ranking system is here to stay in fencing and in my opinion it should (subject to what follows), be incorporated within the selection rules, however it must not be allowed to thwart the overall purpose of selecting the best NSW team with the best possible chance of winning the event for which the team is selected. It should not be possible for example for a fencer to accumulate points in any ranking system simply because he or she has turned up to compete, without outstanding success, at events all over New South Wales and in some cases overseas and to see that fencer selected by dint of those what may be called “mere attendance” points, in preference to a fencer who is clearly of greater ability. There must be a mechanism which ensures that ability, not dogged endurance however commendable, is the criterion for selection. This is one of the essential reasons for an overhaul of the rankings system.
- (ii) I turn now to the element of success in events. A fencer should not be able to force his or her way into the State team by simply picking up the low hanging fruit. Points in a ranking system which contributes to State Selection should be *valued* by a system which contains an inbuilt recognition of the number and quality of the opponents at the particular event. There should be no back road to selection.

Recommendation (1)

The ranking system should be overhauled to ensure that it is directly conducive to picking the best possible State team with the best possible chance of winning the National Championship. The system should not reward the journeyman with State selection however commendable his or her dedication. There are other more appropriate ways to do that. The French ranking system (Bauer) is worthy of examination.

Recommendation (2)

In order to pick the best possible team the selectors must be given a mechanism to bring in the champion or well credentialled fencer who is short of points in the ranking system for legitimate (properly defined in advance), reasons.

Recommendation (3)

Such a mechanism may take one or other of two forms. It may take the form of selection trials open to all or it may be a trial or “fence off” between the 4th ranking fencer and the extenuating circumstances contended for the 4th position on the team.

I favour the idea of a fence off for the final position provided (and this is a critical and indispensable qualification) that the points system of rankings is radically overhauled to bring it into conformity with the exclusive object of the selection process. The selectors should be given the power based upon their entertainment of a specified set of beliefs concerning a fencer who has been prevented for legitimate reasons from accumulating enough points in the ranking system, to invite that fencer to compete for the 4th position and if more than one fencer meets the criteria, say two, there will be a three way fence off.

Why compete only for the 4th position in this way? To encourage all fencers to put their faith in the revamped points ranking system and not display the consistent quality revealed by a revamped system.

Teamwork

13. At the seminar conducted by the Association there were one or two opinions expressed suggesting that there was no special element of teamwork required to be considered in the selection of a four person team. What was suggested was a kind of slot machine selection process which maintained the existence of an invariable rule that a good individual sportsman is necessarily and always a good team performer. That is not the experience of life, other sports or I venture to say fencing. My researches and enquiries have led to conclude that the contrary is true. A team's fencing event can be lost because a fencer has not fenced conservatively to protect a lead at the instruction of the team coach. Temperament mercurial or volatile can damage or inhibit the performance of a team. Not uncommonly a star is not selfless. I heard nothing at the seminar to cause me to think otherwise but it is not my call. As I emphasised earlier I am not a fencing expert.

Recommendation

The Executive of the Association is the body to decide whether the element of "teammanship" should be an element in the selection process. The Executive will no doubt do so using its own knowledge, expertise and experience and having canvassed reasonable views from fencers and members. Having done so it will then, I suggest, apply that criterion not in multiples of single instances through the rankings system but once only when the *team* is selected. As is said, the devil will be in the detail of the drafting though it will not be unduly difficult once the decision is made. If the Executive considers that teamwork and the ability to work as and in a team is valuable and is important to winning fencing then it should act accordingly.

Remaining matters

14. There are two. Firstly the forum recently conducted. I was not retained by the Association for the purposes of translating into writing whatever was said at the forum. It was my duty to listen and consider with extreme care what was said and I have done so. Many members were not present. Many of those who were present did not express views although all had the opportunity to do so. Members were obviously deeply interested in the process and clearly loved their sport. But no clear rational proposal was put forward and no consensus was reached on an outcome.

Nevertheless the discussion was highly informative and of great utility. But a well thought out selection policy does not emerge from the repeated expression of strongly held views in a loud voice, it must be carefully and soberly considered and it is not the exclusive domain of a small minority. I was saddened to see that issues which should be quietly thought through led to hard words between members. That is not the spirit of fencing. The forum was not intended to be a straw poll or simply a chance to express criticism. It was intended to allow the views of every member to be considered.

15. Finally, I wish to provide some guidance to the Association upon the meaning and use of a word used many times during the forum, the word “objective”. I would not wish to see the Association wasting too much time chasing a phantom.
16. There will always and inevitably be a stage in any selection process when a selector has to make what I will describe as a value judgment, one that will not be made in the same way by every other person 100% of the time. Nevertheless that decision can be an objective one but an objective one that can only be made by a human being, all of whom are different and react and value differently. The safeguards commonly employed to ensure that decisions are taken as “definitively” as possible are:
 - (i) a stipulation that the decision is an objective one. That immediately introduces the notion of reasonableness and how a third party would look at the matter.
 - (ii) the matters which *have* to be taken into account by the decision maker are stipulated with as much clarity as possible.
 - (iii) the opinion to be formed or the conclusion to be drawn is entrusted to the best qualified people who meet pre-defined characteristics.
 - (iv) if the criteria operate unsatisfactorily, change them.

But, what can never be changed is the fact that at one or more stages of the process we have to *trust* the judgment of another human being, ring fenced in the way I have suggested.

17. Let me come full circle to the rankings system itself. If it is to become the lynchpin of the selection process who decides how many points Mr Fairweather should receive for a win at Albury on a wet weekend when the best stayed at home to watch the Bledisloe Cup is their lounge rooms? A human being who will in all likelihood have different shades of opinion than another and so on it goes. Trust the good people describe the qualities they must have, give them tight, clear and predictable guidelines and get on with the profound enjoyment of sport.
18. I advise accordingly.

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