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PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Between-Seasons Training Plan



How to structure your off-season, build toward peak performance, and use periodization to arrive at your most important tournaments in the best shape of your season.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Most fencers train the same way year-round: go to practice, fence bouts, go to tournaments, repeat. There's no off-season plan, no build-up toward peak events, and no recovery period. The result is a flat performance curve — the fencer is always at about the same level, sometimes a little better, sometimes a little worse, but never dramatically improving.

The best fencers in the world don't train like this. They use periodization — a structured plan that varies training intensity, volume, and focus throughout the year to peak at the right moments and recover at the right moments. This isn't just for Olympic athletes. Any competitive fencer can benefit from thinking about their season in phases rather than as one continuous block.

This guide gives you a framework for planning your training year. It covers the off-season, the pre-season, the competitive season, and the peak phase. Use it to build a training calendar that makes all the other guides in this series work together.

— Coach Derek

The Four Phases of a Fencing Season

The USA Fencing competitive season roughly runs from September through July, with Summer Nationals as the culminating event. Regional seasons may vary. This framework uses that general calendar but can be adapted to any schedule.

Phase 1: Off-Season (July–August)

Duration: 4–8 weeks after your last major event of the season.

The off-season is for physical and mental recovery, addressing weaknesses, and building the athletic foundation for the next season. This is not the time to fence at full intensity. It's the time to rest, rebuild, and prepare.

Physical Focus: General athletic conditioning. Strength training (see The Fencer's Conditioning Foundation, doc 10), flexibility work (see the Flexibility & Mobility Guide, doc 29), and cardiovascular fitness. This is the time to address physical weaknesses and imbalances that accumulated during the season. If your hip flexors are tight, this is when you fix them. If your core is weak, this is when you build it.

Technical Focus: Fundamental technique work without competitive pressure. Rebuild basic footwork mechanics. Refine blade work at slow speed. Fix bad habits that crept in during the competitive season. Work with your coach on 1–2 specific technical improvements that you've identified through video analysis and goal review.

Mental Focus: Rest. Reflect on the season. Review your journal. Set preliminary goals for next season. Do other activities — play other sports, spend time with friends, read. The mental break is as important as the physical one. Fencers who train at full intensity year-round burn out.

Competition: Zero or minimal. Local fun tournaments are fine if the fencer wants to, but there should be no pressure to compete during the off-season. Some fencers benefit from attending a summer camp for skill development in a low-pressure environment.

Volume: 2–3 sessions per week total (mix of conditioning and light fencing). Intensity: low to moderate. This is the lowest-volume phase of the year.

COACH'S TIP: The off-season is when your fencer does other physical activities — swimming, basketball, soccer, rock climbing, dance. Cross-training builds general athleticism, prevents overuse injuries, and keeps the fencer fresh. The worst thing you can do in the off-season is fence five days a week at full intensity. That's not dedication. That's a recipe for burnout.



Phase 2: Pre-Season (September–October)

Duration: 4–6 weeks before the first significant competition of the season.

The pre-season ramps up training volume and intensity, reintroduces competitive fencing, and begins to integrate the technical improvements from the off-season into bout situations.

Physical Focus: Transition from general conditioning to fencing-specific conditioning (see Sport-Specific Conditioning, doc 12). Footwork drills at increasing speed. Lunge depth and recovery speed training. Maintain the strength and flexibility gains from the off-season while adding explosive power work — plyometrics, sprint starts, direction-change drills.

Technical Focus: Integrate the technical improvements from the off-season into full-speed fencing. Practice bouts with specific tactical goals. Weapon-specific drills from the foil, épée, or saber guides (docs 14–23). Begin working on tactical patterns and bout management.

Mental Focus: Set formal season goals (see the Goal-Setting Guide, doc 31). Establish your focus word. Practice your 10-second reset routine (see the Mental Reset Toolkit, doc 27). Begin the fencer's journal habit.

Competition: 1–2 local or regional events. These are warm-up competitions – opportunities to test your off-season improvements in a competitive setting with low stakes. Focus on process goals, not results.

Volume: 3–4 sessions per week. Intensity: moderate, building to high by the end of the phase.



Phase 3: Competitive Season (November–May)

Duration: the bulk of the season, approximately 6–7 months.

The competitive season is the longest phase and the most variable. Training intensity fluctuates based on the competition schedule – higher before and after events, slightly lower during heavy competition weeks.

Physical Focus: Maintain the conditioning base from pre-season. Continue sport-specific conditioning 1–2 times per week. Don't try to build significant new strength or flexibility during the heavy competition phase – maintain what you've built. The body needs its energy for competing and recovering, not for building new capacity.

Technical Focus: Balance training between maintaining fundamentals, developing tactical versatility, and preparing for specific opponents and upcoming events. Private lessons and group practice should emphasize the tactical goals from your season plan. Use video analysis (doc 24) after tournaments to identify areas for improvement between events.

Mental Focus: Execute your process goals consistently. Use the journal after every practice and tournament. Review goals monthly. Practice the mental reset tools. The competitive season tests your mental game more than any other phase – managing the emotional ups and downs of results, ratings, and rankings requires the composure skills you've been building.

Competition: 1–2 events per month. Mix of local, regional (SYCs/RYPs), and national (NACs) events based on your season plan and budget. Don't over-compete – training quality drops when every weekend is a tournament. Leave enough unstructured weekends for recovery and training.

Volume: 3–5 sessions per week. Intensity: high, with recovery periods around competitions.

Managing the Competition Calendar

Not every week during the competitive season is the same. Build a monthly rhythm:

Week 1 (post-tournament): Review the tournament (video analysis, journal notes). Identify 1–2 specific things to work on. Train at moderate intensity.

Week 2: Address the specific areas from the review. Full-intensity training. Focus on tactical development.

Week 3 (pre-tournament): Sharpen competition skills. Practice bout-management scenarios. Light conditioning. Review the tournament plan and goals.

Week 4 (competition week): Light training early in the week. No hard conditioning within 48 hours of the event. Focus on mental preparation and the competition-day routine.



Phase 4: Peak Phase (2–4 Weeks Before Major Events)

Duration: 2–4 weeks before your most important event (JOs, Summer Nationals, or your target event).

The peak phase is about arriving at the big event in the best possible condition — physically sharp, technically confident, and mentally focused. This means reducing training volume while maintaining intensity, eliminating new technical changes, and fine-tuning the skills you already have.

Physical Focus: Reduce conditioning volume by 30–50%. Keep training sharp and explosive but shorter. No heavy strength work in the final 2 weeks. Prioritize sleep, nutrition, and recovery. The body needs to be fresh, not fatigued, for peak performance.

Technical Focus: No new techniques. Sharpen your best actions. Practice your most reliable attacks, your most successful defenses, and your go-to tactical patterns. This is about confidence-building through repetition of what works, not learning new skills.

Mental Focus: Visualization (5–10 minutes daily). Review your season goals and how this event fits into them. Practice the competition-day routine. Establish your focus word. Review scouting notes on likely opponents. Build confidence by reviewing your best results and strongest moments from the season.

Competition: No competitions in the final 2 weeks before the peak event (unless a light local event for sharpening). Save your energy and focus for the target event.

Volume: 3–4 sessions per week, shorter duration. Intensity: high but brief — quality over quantity.

KEY CONCEPT: Peaking is about subtraction, not addition. You cannot build significant new skills in 2 weeks. What you can do is remove fatigue, eliminate distractions, and sharpen the skills you already have. The fencer who arrives rested, confident, and focused outperforms the fencer who crammed extra training into the final week and arrived exhausted.



Putting It All Together: A Sample Season Calendar

Here's a sample season structure for a competitive youth fencer. Adjust dates and events to your specific situation.

July–August (Off-Season): Rest, recover, cross-train. 2–3 sessions/week. General conditioning and fundamental technique. No competitive pressure. Set preliminary goals for next season.

September–October (Pre-Season): Ramp up training. 3–4 sessions/week. Fencing-specific conditioning. Set formal season goals. 1–2 local warm-up events.

November–December (Early Season): Full competitive mode. 3–5 sessions/week. Regional events and possibly a NAC. Establish competition rhythm. Begin accumulating points and building toward ratings.

January–March (Mid-Season): Peak competition density. NACs, SYCs, regional championships. Maintain conditioning. Use video analysis after each event. Midpoint goal review and adjustment in January. This is the grind — the phase where mental toughness and training consistency matter most.

April–May (Late Season): Final push for qualification and seeding. Targeted events for points. Begin tapering training volume if JOs or Nationals are in June/July. Maintain sharpness without overtraining.

June–July (Peak Phase + Championship): 2–4 week taper before the target championship. Reduce volume, maintain intensity, prioritize rest and mental preparation. Compete at your peak event. Then transition back to the off-season.



Common Periodization Mistakes

Training at the Same Intensity Year-Round

This is the most common mistake. Without variation, the body and mind plateau. You need periods of high intensity (competitive season) and low intensity (off-season) to continue improving. Constant high intensity leads to overtraining, injury, and burnout. Constant low intensity leads to stagnation.

Skipping the Off-Season

Fencers and parents who are focused on rankings often skip the off-season to attend summer events. A short break of 2–4 weeks is non-negotiable for long-term development. The physical and mental recovery that happens during the off-season pays dividends in the next competitive season.

Peaking Too Early or Too Often

You can't be at peak performance for 7 months straight. If you try to peak for every event, you'll peak for none. Choose 1–2 target events and plan your peak phase around those. Other events during the season are important, but they're building blocks, not peak events.

Cramming Before Big Events

Adding extra training sessions in the final week before a major event does more harm than good. The fitness you need for the championship was built over the previous months. The final week is for sharpening and resting, not for last-minute conditioning.



Final Coach's Note

A season plan doesn't need to be complicated. It needs to answer three questions: when will I push hard, when will I back off, and what am I building toward? If you can answer those questions and organize your training calendar around them, you're ahead of 90% of competitive fencers.

The guides in this series – conditioning, footwork, bladework, tactics, mental game, video analysis, goal-setting, warm-up and cool-down, flexibility – are all tools. This guide is the blueprint that tells you when to use each tool. Use the off-season for conditioning and fundamentals. Use the pre-season for integration. Use the competitive season for tactical development and competition. Use the peak phase for sharpening.

Plan the season. Work the plan. Adjust when life demands it. And trust that the process, followed consistently, produces results.

– Coach Derek