

# DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

## The Fencer's Goal-Setting Guide



*How to set goals that actually improve your fencing – the difference between outcome, tactical, and process goals, and how to use all three to build a season, a tournament, and a practice.*

Derek Snyder

ELITE FENCING COACHING

[dereksnyderfencing.com](http://dereksnyderfencing.com)

# A Note from Coach Derek

*Every fencer has goals. Most of them are bad. Not because they're too ambitious or not ambitious enough – because they're vague, uncontrollable, or disconnected from the work required to achieve them.*

*"I want to get better" is not a goal. "I want to win Nationals" is a goal you can't control. "I want to improve my parry 4 riposte success rate from 30% to 50% by the end of the season by practicing it 50 times per session" – that's a goal that will actually change your fencing.*

*This guide teaches you how to set goals that drive improvement, track progress, and connect your daily practice to your competitive ambitions. It's the system that makes the Fencer's Journal (doc 26 in this series) work.*

*– Coach Derek*

# The Three Types of Goals

## Outcome Goals

Outcome goals are about results: win the tournament, make the top 8, earn a D rating, qualify for Summer Nationals. They are the destination — where you want to end up. Outcome goals are important because they give you direction and motivation. But they have a critical limitation: you cannot fully control them. You can't control who else shows up, how the bracket falls, what the referee calls, or whether your opponent has the best day of their life.

Outcome goals are useful for season planning and long-term motivation. They answer the question: what do I want to achieve?

**Examples:** Finish in the top 16 at the next NAC. Earn a C rating this season. Win 4 out of 6 pool bouts at the next tournament. Make the top 8 at JOs.

## Tactical Goals

Tactical goals are about the specific technical and tactical actions you want to execute. They focus on how you fence, not on the result. Tactical goals are partially controllable — you can't guarantee they'll work, but you can guarantee that you'll try them. They bridge the gap between what you want (outcome) and what you do (process).

Tactical goals are useful for tournaments and individual bouts. They answer the question: what do I want to do on the strip?

**Examples:** Extend my arm before lunging on every attack. Use at least two different attacks in every bout. Parry-riposte at least 3 times per DE. Maintain center-strip position — don't get pushed to the end.

## Process Goals

Process goals are about the mental habits and routines that support your performance. They are fully controllable — they depend entirely on your effort and discipline, not on the opponent or the result. Process goals are the foundation of everything else because they determine the quality of your focus, composure, and effort.

Process goals are useful for every practice, every tournament, and every bout. They answer the question: how do I want to show up?

**Examples:** Reset between every touch using my 10-second routine. Breathe before every "Fence." Stay calm for 5 seconds after every bad call before reacting. Write in my journal after every practice.

**KEY CONCEPT:** Your process goal is the most important of the three. It's the only one you fully control, and it's the one that makes the other two possible. A fencer who consistently executes their process goal will achieve their tactical goals more often, which will lead to achieving their outcome goals over time.



# How to Set Good Goals

## The SMART Framework for Fencing

Good goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This framework isn't new, but applying it to fencing specifically makes it powerful.

**Specific:** "Get better at defense" is vague. "Improve my parry 6 riposte" is specific. "Improve my parry 6 riposte to the flank against direct attacks from the outside line" is even more specific. The more specific the goal, the easier it is to train and measure.

**Measurable:** You need to know whether you've achieved the goal. "Fence better" can't be measured. "Land 3 or more parry-ripostes per DE bout" can be measured. "Win at least 60% of my pool bouts this season" can be measured. Use numbers whenever possible.

**Achievable:** The goal should be challenging but realistic. If you're currently an E-rated fencer, "win Summer Nationals" is not achievable this season. "Earn a D rating" might be. "Finish in the top half at a regional" is likely achievable. Set goals that stretch you without being fantasy.

**Relevant:** The goal should address something that actually matters for your development. If your biggest weakness is footwork but you set a goal about bladework, you're working on the wrong thing. Ask your coach what the most important area for improvement is and set goals there.

**Time-bound:** Every goal needs a deadline. "Improve my lunge" is forever. "Improve my lunge depth by 4 inches by March 1st" has a deadline. Season goals have the season as a deadline. Tournament goals have the tournament. Practice goals have the practice session.

## The Right Number of Goals

Too few goals and you lack direction. Too many goals and you can't focus. Here's the structure that works:

**For the season:** 1 outcome goal, 2-3 tactical goals, 1 process goal. Write them down and review them monthly.

**For each tournament:** 1 outcome goal, 2 tactical goals, 1 process goal. Write them in your journal the night before.

**For each practice:** 1-2 tactical goals only. These should connect to your season goals. Write them in your journal after practice.

**For each bout:** 1 tactical focus and your process goal. Keep it simple — you can't think about 5 things while fencing.



# Goal Setting by Time Frame

## Season Goals

Set these at the beginning of the competitive season (typically September or October). Revisit them at the midpoint (January) and adjust if needed. Season goals give your entire training year a direction.

**Step 1:** Assess where you are now. What is your current rating? What is your current national ranking? What were your results last season? What does your coach identify as your biggest strengths and weaknesses?

**Step 2:** Set your outcome goal based on a realistic improvement from where you are. If you finished in the top 32 at NACs last season, top 16 is a reasonable stretch goal. If you're unrated, earning an E or D by season's end is realistic.

**Step 3:** Set tactical goals that address the specific skills you need to achieve the outcome. If your coach says your footwork is holding you back, a tactical goal might be: "Maintain proper en garde depth throughout every bout" or "Attack from the correct distance at least 80% of the time."

**Step 4:** Set one process goal that you'll commit to all season. This is your anchor. "Reset between every touch" or "Write in my journal after every practice" or "Warm up properly before every competition." Pick one. Do it every time.

## Tournament Goals

Set these the night before each tournament as part of your pre-tournament routine (see the Tournament Day Checklist, doc 03). Tournament goals are more specific than season goals because you know the specific competition context.

Your tournament outcome goal should be result-oriented but realistic: "Win at least 3 pool bouts." "Make it past the first DE round." "Finish in the top half." Your tactical goals should be the 1-2 specific things you've been working on in practice that you want to execute in competition. Your process goal stays the same all season.

## Practice Goals

Set these before each practice, even informally. Practice goals should connect directly to your season or tournament tactical goals. If your season tactical goal is "attack from the correct distance," today's practice goal might be: "Focus on distance judgment during every bouting exchange." Write it down. Train it deliberately. Note in your journal whether you improved.

**COACH'S TIP:** Share your goals with your coach. When I know a student's season goals, I can tailor every lesson to support those goals. When I don't know their goals, I'm guessing about what matters most to them. The best coaching relationships are built on shared goals and open communication about progress.



# Tracking and Adjusting Goals

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## How to Track Progress

Use your Fencer's Journal (doc 26). After each practice, note whether you worked on your tactical goals. After each tournament, review whether you achieved your outcome, tactical, and process goals. After each month, review your Monthly Review template and assess overall progress toward season goals.

Tracking is not about perfection. You won't achieve every goal at every tournament. The purpose of tracking is to see trends. Are your tactical goals improving over time? Is your process goal becoming more consistent? Are your tournament results trending in the right direction? Trends matter more than individual data points.

## When to Adjust Goals

Adjust goals at the season midpoint (January) or after any significant change in circumstances. If you've already achieved your season outcome goal by December, set a new one. If an injury sidelined you for a month, adjust the timeline. If your tactical goals aren't improving despite consistent work, talk to your coach about whether you're working on the right things.

Never adjust goals downward in the middle of a tournament. If you set a goal of making the top 8 and you're having a rough day, don't lower the goal mid-event. Fence every bout with the same commitment regardless of how the results are going. Adjustments happen between tournaments, not during them.

## Goal Reviews with Your Coach

Schedule a formal goal review with your coach at least twice per season: once at the beginning (to set goals together) and once at the midpoint (to assess and adjust). Bring your journal. Show your coach the data. Discuss what's working, what isn't, and what to prioritize for the second half of the season. This conversation is one of the most valuable things you can do for your development.



# Common Goal-Setting Mistakes

## Setting Only Outcome Goals

"Win the tournament" is an outcome goal with no tactical or process support. If you don't know how you're going to win (tactical goals) or what mental habits will keep you on track (process goals), the outcome goal is just a wish. Always pair outcome goals with tactical and process goals.

## Setting Too Many Goals

A fencer with 10 goals has no goals. They can't focus on 10 things simultaneously. The fencer with 1 outcome goal, 2 tactical goals, and 1 process goal can hold all of them in mind and train them deliberately. Simplicity creates focus.

## Setting Vague Goals

"Get better at footwork" is not a goal. "Increase lunge depth by 4 inches, measured monthly" is a goal. "Be more aggressive" is not a goal. "Initiate the attack in at least 60% of exchanges" is a goal. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

## Never Reviewing Goals

Setting goals in September and never looking at them again until May is pointless. Goals only work if you review them regularly, track progress, and adjust when needed. The monthly review in your journal is where this happens.

## Comparing Goals to Other Fencers

Your goals should be based on your own development, not on what other fencers are doing. If your training partner earned a C rating and you haven't, that doesn't mean your goals are wrong. Everyone develops at a different pace. Compare yourself to your past self, not to other fencers.



## Final Coach's Note

*Goals are the bridge between where you are and where you want to be. But the bridge only works if you walk across it — one practice, one tournament, one touch at a time. Setting goals is the easy part. Doing the daily work to achieve them is where the real growth happens.*

*Start with one process goal. Just one. Commit to it for the entire season. If you do nothing else from this guide, that single commitment will improve your fencing more than any number of ambitious outcome goals.*

*Write your goals down. Review them regularly. Share them with your coach. And remember: the goal is not to be perfect. The goal is to be better than you were yesterday. That's enough. That's always enough.*

*— Coach Derek*