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PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Mental Reset

Toolkit



Practical, in-the-moment techniques for composure between touches, after bad calls, during momentum swings, and in the pressure situations that decide bouts.

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A Note from Coach Derek

The Mental Game for Fencers guide in this series covers the big picture: mindset, confidence, focus, and emotional regulation over the course of a season. This toolkit is different. This is your emergency kit.

These are the specific techniques you use in the 10 seconds between touches. The 60 seconds after a bad call. The 3 minutes when the bout is slipping away. The moment your legs feel heavy and your brain is screaming that you're going to lose.

You don't need to read this guide cover to cover. Find the 2-3 techniques that work for you, practice them until they're automatic, and deploy them when you need them. This is not theory. This is a toolbox. Grab the right tool for the situation.

— Coach Derek

The 10-Second Reset

This is your most important tool. The 10-second reset is what you do between every single touch – whether you scored or got scored on, whether the call was right or wrong, whether you're winning or losing. It's the same every time, and that consistency is what makes it powerful.

The Sequence

Step 1: Turn away from the opponent. Face the back of your strip or look at the ground. Don't stare at the scoring machine. Don't look at the referee. Don't look at your parent in the stands. Turn away.

Step 2: Take one deep breath. Inhale through the nose for 3 seconds. Exhale through the mouth for 4 seconds. One breath. That's it. The exhale being longer than the inhale activates your parasympathetic nervous system – the system that calms you down.

Step 3: Say your focus word silently. The one word you chose before the tournament. Patient. Sharp. Calm. Present. Whatever it is, say it once in your head.

Step 4: Turn back to face the opponent. Get in en garde. Eyes forward. You are now in the present moment, ready for the next touch.

The entire sequence takes 8–10 seconds. It works because it breaks the emotional chain between the last touch and the next one. Without the reset, the last touch bleeds into the next one – frustration from a bad call becomes a reckless attack, excitement from a great touch becomes carelessness. The reset is the firewall between touches.

COACH'S TIP: Practice the 10-second reset in every practice bout. Not just tournaments. If you only use it in competition, it won't be automatic when you need it. Do it between every touch in practice until it's as natural as saluting. By the time you're at a tournament, it should feel like breathing.



Situational Tools

The 10-second reset is your default. The tools below are for specific situations that require a stronger intervention.

After a Bad Referee Call

Bad calls happen. They happen to everyone, at every level, in every weapon. The call is final. You cannot change it. The only thing you can control is whether the bad call costs you one touch or two – the call itself and the next touch you give away because you're still angry about the call.

The Tool – The Redirect: When you feel the surge of anger or injustice after a bad call, redirect the energy. Don't suppress it – redirect it. Say to yourself: "That's one touch. I'm not giving them another one." Channel the frustration into determination for the next touch, not into an argument with the referee or a wild, emotional attack.

Physical component: squeeze your non-weapon hand into a fist for 2 seconds, then release. The squeeze-and-release gives the anger a physical outlet and the release signals your body to let go. Then proceed to your normal 10-second reset.

What not to do: shake your head, throw your hands up, stare at the referee, mutter under your breath, look at your parent for validation, or stomp back to the en garde line. Every one of these actions keeps you in the emotional response instead of moving past it. The referee notices. The opponent notices. And your focus is now on the last touch instead of the next one.

When You're Down Big

You're losing 1-4 in a pool bout, or 5-10 in a DE. Your brain is doing math: "I need to score 4 in a row" or "I need to win 10 of the next 15 exchanges." This math is the enemy. It overwhelms you with the size of the deficit and paralyzes your ability to fence the next touch.

The Tool – Shrink the World: Deliberately narrow your focus to one touch. Not the score, not the deficit, not the math. One touch. Say to yourself: "I don't need to win the bout right now. I need to win this touch." Score that touch. Then do it again. And again.

This works because comebacks don't happen all at once. They happen one touch at a time. And the psychological shift from "I need to come back from 1-4" to "I need to score this one touch" is enormous. One touch is manageable. A 4-touch comeback feels impossible. But they're the same thing – just framed differently.

Physical component: before the next "Fence," bounce lightly on your toes twice. This resets your body posture from defeated (heavy, flat-footed, slumped) to ready (light, engaged, upright). Your body position affects your mental state.

When You're Up Big and Tightening

You're winning 4-1 in a pool bout, or 12-8 in a DE. And suddenly your fencing changes. You become cautious. You stop attacking. You start protecting the lead instead of building it. The opponent senses the shift and gets aggressive. The lead starts shrinking. This is called "fencing not to lose" instead of "fencing to win," and it's one of the most common collapses in competition.

The Tool – The Commitment Reset: Say to yourself: "Same plan. Same intensity. Finish the job." Then deliberately execute your most aggressive, committed action on the next touch. Not a reckless action – your best, most confident attack. The physical commitment breaks the cautious pattern and reminds your body what winning fencing feels like.

The key insight: you built the lead by fencing a certain way. The lead is evidence that your approach is working. Changing your approach because you're ahead is abandoning the strategy that got you there. Keep doing what works until the bout is over.

When Your Body Feels Heavy

Third period of a long DE. Your legs are tired. Your reactions are slower. You feel like you're moving through mud. This is partly physical fatigue, but it's also partly mental – your brain is telling your body to conserve energy because it's detecting effort. You can override this signal, at least partially.

The Tool – The Activation Burst: During the next break (between periods, or during a halt), do 5 fast, explosive bounces on your toes. Quick, sharp, light bounces. This sends a signal to your nervous system that you're still in explosive mode, not conservation mode. Follow with 2 fast arm extensions. Then say your focus word. You won't feel fresh, but you'll feel sharper than you did 10 seconds ago. In a close bout, that margin matters.

When You're Overthinking

You're standing at the en garde line and your brain is running through every option: "Should I attack or defend? Should I feint or go direct? What if they counterattack? What if they parry? What if..." This analysis paralysis leads to hesitation, and hesitation loses touches in every weapon.

The Tool – The Decision Lock: Before "Fence," pick one action. Not two options. Not a decision tree. One action. "On Fence, I will advance twice and attack direct to 4." Period. No backup plan. No what-ifs. Commit to the action before the command and execute it without hesitation. If it doesn't work, you'll pick a different action next time. But for this one touch, the decision is made.

This works because a committed, slightly wrong action beats a hesitant, perfectly planned action almost every time. Speed of decision is more valuable than quality of decision in the 0.5 seconds of a fencing exchange.

When the Opponent Is in Your Head

You've fenced this person before and lost. Or they're higher-rated. Or they look intimidating. Or they scored the first 3 touches and now you believe they're unbeatable. The opponent is no longer just a fencer – they've become a story in your head about how this bout is going to go.

The Tool – The Name Erase: Stop thinking about who they are. Erase their name, their rating, their reputation, and your history with them. Replace it with a simple observation: "This is a fencer who does X." Not "This is the kid who beat me 15-5 last time" – "This is a fencer who attacks with a marching attack to the head." You've gone from an emotional relationship with the opponent to a tactical observation. The observation is useful. The story is not.

Physical component: during the salute, make deliberate eye contact. Not aggressive staring – calm, steady eye contact. This signals to your brain (and to the opponent) that you are present, composed, and not intimidated. Then look away and begin your 10-second reset. The opponent is now just the person on the other end of the strip.

After Getting Hit with the Same Action Repeatedly

The opponent has scored with the same attack three times. You know it's coming. But knowing doesn't help because you keep reacting the same way. You're stuck in a pattern.

The Tool – The Pattern Break: Change one physical thing about your en garde before the next touch. Move your front foot 6 inches closer. Or 6 inches farther. Or change your hand position – hold it slightly higher or lower. The specific change matters less than the fact that you changed something. A physical change creates a different starting point, which disrupts the pattern. You'll react differently because your body is in a different position, and that's often enough to break the cycle.



Building Your Personal Toolkit

Choose Your Tools

You don't need all of these. You need 2–3 that resonate with you and that you've practiced enough to use under pressure. Read through the tools above and pick the ones that address your most common problems. If you tend to get angry at calls, the Redirect is your tool. If you tend to tighten up with a lead, the Commitment Reset is your tool. If you overthink, the Decision Lock is your tool.

Practice in Low-Stakes Settings

Use your chosen tools in practice bouts, club tournaments, and scrimmages. The more you use them in low-pressure situations, the more automatic they become in high-pressure situations. A tool you've never practiced is not a tool — it's an idea. Ideas don't help you at 13–13 in a DE. Practiced tools do.

Write Them Down

In your fencer's journal, write down your 2–3 tools and the situations where you use each one. Before a tournament, review them. After a tournament, note which ones you used and whether they helped. This creates accountability and reinforces the habit.

Talk to Your Coach

Share your toolkit with your coach. When your coach sees you spiraling during a bout, they can cue your reset: "Breathe" or "One touch" or "Commit." These cues are more effective when your coach knows which specific tool they're triggering.

COACH'S TIP: The fencers who handle pressure best are not the ones who feel no pressure. They're the ones who have practiced what to do when the pressure arrives. Pressure is not the enemy. Being unprepared for pressure is the enemy. These tools are your preparation.



Quick Reference Card

Cut this out or screenshot it. Keep it in your fencing bag.

DEFAULT: The 10-Second Reset – turn away, one breath (3 in, 4 out), focus word, turn back, en garde.

BAD CALL: The Redirect – squeeze fist 2 sec, release, "That's one touch, not giving them another." Reset.

DOWN BIG: Shrink the World – "I need this one touch." Bounce twice on toes. One touch at a time.

UP BIG & TIGHTENING: Commitment Reset – "Same plan, same intensity, finish the job." Execute your best action.

BODY HEAVY: Activation Burst – 5 sharp toe bounces, 2 fast extensions, focus word.

OVERTHINKING: Decision Lock – pick one action before "Fence." Commit. No backup plan.

INTIMIDATED: Name Erase – erase the story. "This is a fencer who does X." Calm eye contact on salute.

STUCK IN A PATTERN: Pattern Break – change one physical thing about your en garde. Different position = different response.



Final Coach's Note

The mental game is not separate from the physical game. It is the physical game. Your legs don't get heavy because your muscles failed – they get heavy because your brain decided you were losing. Your attacks don't become hesitant because your technique degraded – they become hesitant because your confidence wavered. The mental tools in this kit work because they address the real source of the problem.

Pick your tools. Practice them. Trust them. And when the pressure comes – and it will come – you'll have something to reach for instead of just hoping the feeling goes away.

The feeling doesn't go away. But you can learn to fence through it.

– Coach Derek