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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Fencer's Warm-Up

& Cool-Down Protocol



Pre-practice, pre-competition, and recovery routines designed specifically for fencing – activate the right muscles, prepare the right movements, and protect the body that does the work.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Most fencers warm up wrong. They jog a lap, do a few arm circles, bounce into a lunge stretch, and call it done. Then they wonder why their first pool bout feels stiff, their footwork is sluggish, and their hamstring is tight by the third DE.

A good warm-up is not a formality. It's a performance tool. It prepares your muscles, joints, and nervous system for the specific demands of fencing — explosive lunges, fast direction changes, sustained en garde position, and the fine motor control of blade work. A good cool-down is not optional either. It's what allows you to train again tomorrow without the accumulated stiffness and soreness that degrades performance over time.

This guide gives you three complete protocols: one for practice, one for competition, and one for recovery. Use them consistently and you'll feel the difference within a week.

— Coach Derek

Why Fencers Need a Specific Warm-Up

Fencing places unique demands on the body that a generic warm-up doesn't address. The en garde position loads the quads and glutes asymmetrically — the front leg bears more weight and bends deeper than the back leg. The lunge is an explosive, single-leg movement that stresses the hip flexors, hamstrings, and groin. Retreating requires rapid backward acceleration that loads the calves and Achilles tendons. And the weapon arm performs thousands of small, precise movements that require warm, mobile shoulders, elbows, and wrists.

A fencing-specific warm-up activates these exact muscle groups and movement patterns before you need them at full intensity. Skipping the warm-up doesn't just increase injury risk — it reduces performance. Cold muscles are slower, less powerful, and less coordinated than warm ones. Your first bout should not be your warm-up.

KEY CONCEPT: A warm-up has three phases: raise (increase heart rate and body temperature), activate (turn on the specific muscles you'll use), and potentiate (rehearse the movement patterns at increasing intensity). Skipping any phase means you're not fully prepared.



Protocol 1: The Pre-Practice Warm-Up (15 Minutes)

Use this before every practice session. It's thorough enough to prepare you for full-intensity training but efficient enough that it doesn't eat into your practice time.

Phase 1: Raise (3 Minutes)

The goal is to increase your heart rate and body temperature. Light jogging, jumping jacks, or skipping are all fine. The key word is light – you should be slightly warm and breathing a little faster, not winded.

- Light jog or brisk walk: 1 minute
- Jumping jacks: 30 seconds
- High knees in place: 30 seconds
- Butt kicks in place: 30 seconds
- Lateral shuffle (both directions): 30 seconds total

Phase 2: Dynamic Stretching (5 Minutes)

Dynamic stretches move the joints through their full range of motion while the muscles are active. Never hold a static stretch before fencing – static stretching before explosive activity can temporarily reduce power output. Save static stretches for the cool-down.

- Leg swings, front to back: 10 each leg (hold a wall or fence for balance)
- Leg swings, side to side: 10 each leg
- Walking lunges: 10 each leg (step forward into a lunge, alternate legs)
- Walking knee hugs: 10 each leg (pull knee to chest while walking)
- Walking quad pulls: 10 each leg (pull heel to glute while walking)
- Hip circles: 10 each direction, each leg (stand on one foot, circle the other knee)
- Arm circles: 10 forward, 10 backward (full range, not tiny circles)
- Torso rotations: 10 each direction (arms out, twist at the waist)
- Wrist circles: 10 each direction, each wrist
- Neck rolls: 5 each direction (slow and controlled)

Phase 3: Fencing-Specific Activation (5 Minutes)

These movements rehearse the exact patterns you'll use in practice, starting at low intensity and building to medium intensity.

- En garde position hold: 20 seconds (check your stance – knees bent, weight centered, shoulders relaxed)
- Slow advances: 10 (focus on perfect form, front foot slides, back foot follows)
- Slow retreats: 10 (same focus on form)
- Advance-retreat combinations: 10 (advance twice, retreat once, repeat)

- Slow lunges: 5 (extend arm, lunge at half speed, recover forward, recover backward)
- Medium-speed lunges: 5 (increase speed to about 70%)
- Advance-lunge: 5 (connect the footwork to the lunge)
- Blade work: 20 extensions with weapon in hand (straight arm extension, focus on point control)
- Finger exercises: 20 disengages or blade manipulations (wake up the fingers)

Phase 4: Potentiation (2 Minutes)

Two minutes of high-intensity, short-burst movements that prime your nervous system for explosive action.

- 3 explosive advance-lunges at full speed
- 3 explosive retreats (as fast as possible, 2-3 steps)
- 3 direction changes (advance-advance-retreat at full speed)
- 2 full-speed marching attacks (4 advances + lunge)
- Shake out your legs, roll your shoulders, take 3 deep breaths. Ready.

COACH'S TIP: The potentiation phase is what most fencers skip, and it's the most important. Your first explosive action in practice should not be the first explosive action your body has done that day. Those 2 minutes of full-speed movement bridge the gap between "warmed up" and "ready to perform."



Protocol 2: The Pre-Competition Warm-Up (20–25 Minutes)

Competition warm-up is longer and more deliberate than practice warm-up because the stakes are higher and you may have traveled, slept in a hotel, and been sitting in a car or airplane. Your body needs more preparation. Start this warm-up 30–40 minutes before your first pool bout.

Phase 1: Raise (4 Minutes)

Slightly longer than the practice version to account for the cold start and travel stiffness.

- Light jog or brisk walk around the venue: 2 minutes
- Jumping jacks: 30 seconds
- High knees: 30 seconds
- Lateral shuffle: 30 seconds each direction

Phase 2: Dynamic Stretching (6 Minutes)

Same exercises as the practice protocol, but add extra attention to any area that feels stiff from travel or sleeping in a different bed.

- Leg swings, front to back: 12 each leg
- Leg swings, side to side: 12 each leg
- Walking lunges: 12 each leg
- Walking knee hugs: 10 each leg
- Walking quad pulls: 10 each leg
- Hip circles: 12 each direction, each leg
- Arm circles: 12 forward, 12 backward
- Torso rotations: 12 each direction
- Wrist circles: 12 each direction
- Ankle circles: 10 each direction, each ankle (often overlooked, critical for lunging)

Phase 3: Fencing-Specific Activation (8 Minutes)

Longer than the practice version. Include a partner if available for the final portion.

- En garde position hold: 30 seconds
- Slow advances: 15
- Slow retreats: 15
- Advance-retreat combinations: 15
- Slow lunges: 8 (focus on depth and recovery)
- Medium lunges: 8

- Advance-lunge: 8
- Blade work with weapon: 30 extensions
- Finger exercises: 30 disengages
- With a partner (if available): 2 minutes of controlled footwork exchanges at medium speed — advance when they retreat, retreat when they advance
- With a partner: 2 minutes of light parry-riposte exchanges — no scoring, just rhythm and blade contact

Phase 4: Potentiation (3 Minutes)

- 5 explosive advance-lunges at full speed
- 5 explosive retreats
- 5 direction changes at full speed
- 3 full-speed marching attacks
- 2 full-speed parry-riposte sequences with a partner
- Shake out, roll shoulders, 5 deep breaths
- Say your focus word. Visualize your first-touch action. Walk to the strip.

Between Bouts

You don't need the full warm-up between bouts, but you can't go from sitting in a chair for 30 minutes to fencing at full intensity. Between bouts, do a 2–3 minute mini warm-up:

- Light footwork: 30 seconds of advances and retreats
- 5 medium-speed lunges
- 3 explosive lunges
- 10 arm extensions with the weapon
- Shake out, deep breath, focus word. Go.

COACH'S TIP: At big tournaments, find your warm-up space early. Hallways, lobbies, and open areas fill up fast. Claim a spot near your strip assignment and use it consistently throughout the day. Having a consistent warm-up routine in a consistent space creates a sense of familiarity that calms nerves.



Protocol 3: The Cool-Down & Recovery (10–15 Minutes)

The cool-down is where static stretching belongs. After fencing, your muscles are warm and pliable – this is the ideal time to improve flexibility and begin recovery. A good cool-down reduces next-day soreness, maintains range of motion, and signals to your nervous system that the intense work is done.

Phase 1: Walk Down (2 Minutes)

Light walking to bring the heart rate down gradually. Don't sit down immediately after intense fencing – keep moving for a couple of minutes.

- Slow walk: 2 minutes (around the venue, the hallway, or in place)

Phase 2: Static Stretching (8–10 Minutes)

Hold each stretch for 30–45 seconds. Breathe slowly and deeply during each stretch. Never bounce. The stretch should feel like a gentle pull, not pain. Focus on the muscle groups that fencing loads most heavily.

Lower Body (where fencing hits hardest):

- Standing quad stretch: 30–45 seconds each leg (pull heel to glute, keep knees together)
- Standing hamstring stretch: 30–45 seconds each leg (place heel on a low surface, hinge forward at the hips)
- Hip flexor stretch: 30–45 seconds each side (lunge position, back knee on the ground, push hips forward gently)
- Calf stretch: 30 seconds each leg (wall push, back leg straight, heel on the ground)
- Groin/adductor stretch: 30–45 seconds (wide stance, shift weight to one side, feel the stretch on the inner thigh of the straight leg)
- Glute stretch: 30 seconds each side (figure-4 stretch: ankle on opposite knee, sit back)
- IT band stretch: 30 seconds each side (cross one leg behind the other, lean away)

Upper Body:

- Shoulder cross-body stretch: 20–30 seconds each arm (pull arm across chest)
- Tricep stretch: 20–30 seconds each arm (elbow overhead, hand behind back)
- Forearm and wrist stretch: 20 seconds each (extend arm, pull fingers back gently; then pull fingers down)
- Chest doorway stretch: 20–30 seconds (forearm on a doorframe or wall, lean forward)
- Neck side stretch: 15 seconds each side (tilt ear toward shoulder, gentle hand pressure)

Phase 3: Recovery Habits

Stretching is step one. Full recovery includes hydration, nutrition, and rest.

- Drink 16–24 ounces of water within 30 minutes of finishing
- Eat a recovery snack with protein and carbohydrates within 45 minutes (chocolate milk, protein bar, turkey sandwich, yogurt with fruit)
- If anything feels sore or tight beyond normal muscle fatigue, ice for 10–15 minutes
- Foam roll major muscle groups for 5 minutes if a roller is available (quads, hamstrings, calves, glutes, IT band)
- Get 8+ hours of sleep — sleep is the most powerful recovery tool available



Common Warm-Up Mistakes

Static Stretching Before Fencing

Holding a stretch for 30+ seconds before explosive activity temporarily reduces muscle power and reaction speed. Static stretching is for after fencing, not before. Before fencing, use dynamic stretches (controlled movement through the range of motion).

Warming Up Too Intensely

The warm-up should prepare you, not tire you. If you're breathing hard and your legs are fatigued after the warm-up, you did too much. Save your energy for the bouts. The warm-up should feel like you're "turning on" your body, not depleting it.

Skipping the Warm-Up When Running Late

If you arrive late and your event is starting soon, don't skip the warm-up entirely. Do a compressed 5-minute version: 1 minute of light jogging, 2 minutes of dynamic stretching (leg swings, walking lunges, arm circles), and 2 minutes of fencing-specific movement (advances, retreats, a few lunges). Five minutes is better than zero minutes.

Not Warming Up Between Bouts

If there's a long gap between bouts (30+ minutes), your body cools down. Your muscles tighten. Your reaction time slows. Always do the 2-3 minute mini warm-up before stepping back on the strip, even if you warmed up thoroughly at the start of the day.

Skipping the Cool-Down

Fencers who skip the cool-down consistently accumulate stiffness, lose flexibility over time, and are more prone to overuse injuries. The 10 minutes of stretching after practice is an investment in tomorrow's performance. Skip it often enough and it catches up with you.



Final Coach's Note

The warm-up and cool-down are the bookends of every training session and every competition day. They're not glamorous. Nobody watches highlight reels of a fencer doing leg swings. But the fencer who warms up properly fences better in the first period, stays sharper in the third period, and recovers faster for the next day.

Make these protocols a habit. Do them the same way every time until they're automatic. The consistency of the routine is part of its value – it signals to your body and mind that it's time to perform. That signal becomes more powerful the more you use it.

Take care of the body that does the work. It's the only one you've got.

– Coach Derek