

Building a Competitive Fencer's Club

Commitment and Profits · Mauro Hamza

Salle Mauro has operated successfully for eight years, producing generation after generation of competitive fencers in all three weapons. In this article we'll share a few things we've done to develop a competitive club.

First, our coaches have a great deal of personal involvement with students. We look upon ourselves as friends and mentors, our involvement following them through years of formative development.

Competing at high levels requires a higher degree of time and financial investment for the fencer and puts pressure on the coaches to ensure the continued success and participation of the student. Most fencers/parents aren't ready for the commitment required for highly competitive fencing and this must be slowly and carefully developed over the years.

But the way we have structured Salle Mauro from day one built expectations of our members and people seeking out our club that our mission is a serious one—to train competitive fencers. Profit takes a back seat to this mission.

So as our fencers bring home medals from competitions, parents and children who are seeking to compete seriously in sport are the ones who come to us—and the cycle continues.

Club Floor Plan/Strip Layout

At Salle Mauro, experience has taught us that certain space considerations help increase training focus and organization. First, there should be a separate space for parents away from fencing area. The separating

fencers are competing to ensure serious practice.

We have competition strips and many smaller practice strips—16 in all. In a perfect world we'd employ only maximum-sized FIE competition strips, but as it stands we often have space difficulties during peak fencing hours. The practice strips ensure that during time of high membership load, very few people are forced to stand around waiting for strips.

Equipment

The purchase of competitive equipment is encouraged as soon as the fencers begin serious bouts. The substantial initial equipment investment helps ensure finicky students "stick" with the sport long enough to get into the routine. Make sure you have club affiliation material on hand, like t-shirts and patches that help create a sense of team spirit and unity.

Organization/Routine

Coaches take an active role in organizing and managing every aspect of practice. Initially, this is quite time consuming. However, after establishing a routine, our advanced students help oversee activities thereby freeing us up to focus on personal lessons.

Personal lessons should be emphasized as early as possible. They



A feeling of family is part of the glue that holds any club together. Parents and students of Salle Mauro at National Championships in 2005.

should be clearly marked and communicated to parents. Not only can parents and visitors be distracting to students, but separating them helps the kids to mentally separate themselves from a more comfortable home environment to the competitive fencing arena where they must rely only on themselves.

Fencers need enough space to be organized by weapon and skill level and assigned certain designated areas in which to work. During free fencing time, our coaches give lessons near to the strips on which their

provide a solid foundation for future development and are a key factor in future success. This takes lots of time and resources. Salle Mauro has seven coaches, three of them full-time professionals. The medal count for Salle Mauro keeps going up—mainly due to the quality of our coaches and the dedication of our fencers.

Membership

Salle Mauro's membership structure is built around the competitive mission. Fencers join an escalating series of programs—beginner, intermediate, Competitive, silver, and finally gold elite. Gold elite membership is by invitation of the coaches only. Membership in the top groups becomes an aspiration, a goal to work towards.

Lessons are built into the program fees. Fees go up as the fencer progresses to the next group, but only because the number of sessions and lessons included go up as well. We feel charging for individual lessons does not build team spirit.

If you put people into a program, they feel much more like they belong to something. Everyone else in program has a goal to achieve, and this unites them. This leads not only to stronger results but also very strong membership retention numbers. Group unity is a great recruitment tool, too. Everyone wants to put their kids in successful programs with a good family environment, and that's what we're doing.

Community

We think of our club as a community and try to get everyone involved and feeling like they are part of the club's success. A community-based club operates more smoothly and provides an invaluable source of resources and word-of-mouth advertising.

Speaking of word of mouth, this is our strongest recruitment tool. When kids bring home medals from Junior Olympics and National competitions, we make sure the

experienced fencers a sense of fulfillment and pride.

We are proud to have such committed athletes and parents. Without them, we could not have achieved the results we did.

The club has a sizeable number of youth and adult recreational and fitness-motivated

fencers, but it is perhaps best known nationally for its competitive programs.

The club is frankly not a huge money maker. For example, we recently resigned our lease. We wanted to move to bigger facility which would cost much more money, but we didn't have the revenue. We decided to stay two more years. It took several years, starting in 1995, for the club to become large enough to support itself.

This is because we do not have growth and profit as the main goal, though the club does make enough money to survive on its own, without outside input. To run the club as a money maker, in my mind, have to sacrifice coaching. That said, our next step in the growth of the club will be to seek private sponsors, to reduce the cost of travel, training and competition for our members.

Salle Mauro members have been winning and placing in events ranging from local youth club tournaments on up through regional, national, and even elite World Cup competitions. Two of our members recently made the 2006 Junior and Cadet World Championships team (Benjamin Parkins and Neely Brandfield-Harvey); Rebecca Rea was named a first alternate. Our club feels justifiably proud of the accomplishments of our fencers and look forward to continued success at all levels in 2006. ★

Group unity is a great recruitment tool



Salle Mauro Saber Coach Oliver Diaz and his student David Filteau at the 2005 Summer Nationals; David took 6th place in his event.

news gets put into their school newspapers, and this brings members. We have never advertised Salle Mauro.

Communication

Communication is key. Make sure your members stay informed and you understand their needs and concerns.

Results of fencers should be well documented within the club so that everyone can share in the clubs success. At Salle Mauro, we post the results on our walls and send out an email newsletter detailing their success about every two weeks. This gives new fencers aspirations and