



START YOUR OWN HIGH SCHOOL CLUB

IN THIS TWO-PART SERIES,

THOSE WHO HAVE DONE IT TELL YOU HOW BY CINDY BENT

Every kid in school knows the stereotypes. The starting quarterback, the head cheerleader, the state wrestling champ, the star...foillist?

Not usually. Fencers are used to being anonymous at school—maybe a little too used to it. But it doesn't have to be that way. Around the country, high school clubs, and even varsity teams, are a reality. In this issue, *American Fencing* talks to some ambitious fencers who have started high school programs in their own back yards to get a few tips on bringing fencing to your school.

Whether you're a student who wants the honor of fencing for your school, a parent looking for activities for your kids, or a coach seeking to expand fencing in your community, if you bring the necessary components to the table, you can get your school into fencing: Coach plus Advisor plus Students plus Parents plus WORK = Club. Those who have started clubs say the other needs—funding, space, equipment, cooperation of your school administration—will eventually fall into place.

Getting Started

The process begins with applying to the school for formal club status. That process may differ from school to school, but in general, schools want to see interest from students and a responsible adult who will advise the club.

Don Stanko and Nicole Barron-Joyce, along with two students—Jordan Ritter-Soronen and Sean Boda, who already fenced with the Columbus Fencers Club (CFC) and wanted to bring their sport to school—started the Upper Arlington (UA) High School Fencing Club in the Columbus, Ohio area in 1998

with no funding in a school district that had barely heard of the sport. By the end of their first season, 1999, the UA women's club won the Ohio State High School Championship foil title and the men took second.

Today, the UA club boasts 30-40 steady members and two more state titles—and enough funding to outfit the club with electric equipment. The recipe, they say, is not magic—just determination, imagination, and cooperation with the school.

When Ritter-Soronen and Boda realized they needed an advisor to get started, they asked Stanko, an Upper Arlington police officer who also fenced. Stanko was soon joined by Barron-Joyce, a fellow CFC fencer and UA parent whose daughters fenced and wanted to join.

The next step was to prove to the school that there was sufficient interest for a club.

"It was quite easy actually," says Stanko. "They submitted a simple request form. They had to prove they had a small number of people interested in starting a club, that they had an adult advisor to help run it, and that they'd follow rules and guidelines put in place by the school."

Almost all schools do require an adult advisor. Some schools may require that the advisor be a school staffer, but many do not. Stanko's club had the added advantage of his title; Stanko is the Community Relations Officer for the City of Upper Arlington, Police Division. The school and the city were both eager to build a good relationship between students and the police department, so Stanko's job did grease many wheels for the club.

But even if you don't have a school board member or a police officer working with you, don't despair. If a school sees that a sufficient number of students are interested and they have an advisor, they should allow the students to form their club.

Jeffrey Salmon and Jennie Dhondt, in fact, had no school connections at all when they started their Long Island program in the mid-'90s. They say not to be afraid to start from scratch. Salmon and Dhondt offered the school a free demonstration of the sport. At that demonstration, which they kept brief and as exciting as possible, they asked students interested in forming a school club to sign their names and telephone numbers.

They then took the list to the school's administration as proof of interest, and without a single student with fencing experience, the Ward-Melville Fencing Club was born. "If you

can provide the parts to be a club and can prove interest, the school is obligated to look at it," says Salmon. "If there is no reasonable reason to not approve the club, they should do it."

Salmon and Stanko also both provided evidence of what fencing offers kids in petitions to their respective school administrations. They pointed out that 70 colleges—and 80 percent of Ivy League colleges—have NCAA fencing programs, and that many offer scholarships for fencing. Each presented a laundry list of the benefits fencing has for kids—that it teach-

practice times and locations. Hold competitions in your high school whenever possible and invite school board members. And after every competition, submit results to your community newspapers, especially the local weeklies. Reporting on results often sparks attention from editors and parents who don't know that fencing in the community exists.

Competitions, with added food and merchandise sales sponsored by local companies, can be fundraising and publicity windfalls.

Publicity is not only your key recruiting tool for new students, but also goes hand in hand with fundraising, says Stanko.

es them focus, athleticism, responsibility and drive, and so on. Most often, proof of student interest, evidence of a worthy activity, and a responsible advisor are all a school requires to start a club.

Money Matters

So you have permission—now what? You need space—and money. Don't expect the school to help much with either. The UA club fences on a balcony in the school auditorium; the Long Island club started in a hallway. But they survive.

Expect funding to be your biggest hurdle, say both Stanko and Salmon. Money may come from your school, but probably not. With other districts on Long Island offering fencing, Salmon was able to convince his district to give him a startup budget to keep up with the "Joneses." Stanko's club is an island in Columbus as far as high school programs go, and he had to start from scratch.

"When we started fencing, we traded off masks between bouts," Stanko says. "In lieu of jackets, they had surplus bullet-proof vests, and I was using a telescoping pointer instead of a foil! It was very makeshift, but we did it."

So where can money come from? Your community, as well as through a little publicity and creativity. Stanko's club was so unique and the kids loved his program so much that the community took notice. The USFA's Columbus Division provided grants for equipment, from both the division's fund and from private pockets of some generous division members.

Publicity is not only your key recruiting tool for new students, but also goes hand in hand with fundraising, says Stanko. Last year, the UA club received a grant from community government—\$5,000 from the UA Youth and Family Council. That grant was a result of positive publicity the club had worked for in the community and school.

You can easily generate publicity in several ways. Ask the school to put notices of every club practice, of tournaments coming up and results after competitions, into the morning announcements to the students. With the school's permission, place posters in halls, in the gym and in bathrooms to advertise

"When we held the Ohio High School Championships, 45 businesses donated food and gift certificates, and we netted around \$500 at the event," says Barron-Joyce. She adds that since the school is a non-profit body, contributions to the club are tax-deductible.

Some schools have restrictions on the numbers of in-school—or even in-community—fundraisers because parents are flooded with clubs seeking money, so your fundraiser reality has to count.

"We've gone through the typical candy sales, car washes, and they just don't pay off," Salmon says. "The kids work too hard for \$200—it gets to the point that you just want to give it to them." He says that the best fundraisers are sales of products with large profit margins, such as pizza kits or cookie dough. Church dinners are another good income source for Salmon's club—local churches offer space for free (or almost free), parents and kids donate time with cooking, and the club holds raffles at the dinner.

The UA club also teaches elementary school kids who pay a small fee to the club for an after-school program. The Ward-Melville club has offered classes in fencing for the district's adult education programs. The adults paid a nominal class fee and rental for the use of the equipment. Ward-Melville's school district is happy with both programs because they offer greater community outreach.

"The sky's the limit if you put some thought into it," says Salmon.

In the next issue of *American Fencing*, we will explore keeping the club active, recruiting, taking steps toward varsity status, and expanding the program beyond your high school.

Cindy Bent is the USFA's media contact and has fenced for 13 years. She also assisted with coaching two high school programs in Pittsburgh. She intends (and we believe her!) to be on the first-place women's foil team at Summer Nationals. Bent lives in Columbus, Ohio.

GOING VARSITY

IN THE SECOND INSTALLATION
OF THIS SERIES ON HIGH SCHOOL FENCING,
THOSE WHO HAVE DONE IT TELL YOU HOW

BY CINDY BENT

You have a high school fencing club going—you've convinced the school that fencing is a safe, worthy activity for kids, you've been working out in the cafeteria or a hallway somewhere for two years, you have a decent budget and great support from your parents—but what your kids really want are those letter jackets. What can you do?

First, know that each school has its own rules about what constitutes a varsity sport and what does not. Some may require that the sport be governed by that state's interscholastic athletic association. All states have interscholastic athletic leagues that, somewhat like the U.S. Olympic Committee, govern the different statewide high school sport programs.

Each state's athletic association has rules governing the addition of new sports to its membership; the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA), for instance, asks that 150 schools participate in the sport, while the bylaws of the California Interscholastic Federation states only that the Federation's council must approve new sports. A link to a listing of national high school sport governing bodies can be found at www.nhsca.com.

But every school can designate a sport as varsity on their own terms. In the Upper Arlington, Ohio, school district, for

instance, there are already 36 varsity sports, though only 22 fall under the auspices of the OHSAA. This leads to the next hurdle to varsity status: funding from already thinly stretched athletic dollars.

"Athletic directors simply don't want to grow their programs too large," says Jon Moss, a veteran high school fencer himself who not only has helped high school programs in New Jersey and New Hampshire but also sees things from the administrative perspective, as a teacher and former high school principal at Spalding High School in New Hampshire.

Moss says that schools seem most reluctant to convert clubs to varsity teams because they are almost always required to directly fund that program with budgets they simply don't have.

The first step, say those who have taken clubs to varsity level, is to continue to push the message that you have a strong, continuous program at your school.



The Ward Melville High School fencing club on Long Island in New York went varsity after four years of establishing their club. Jeff Salmon, co-founder of the club, says that first establishing fencing as a solid sports program is a must. You might be afraid that if you make practice too hard for the kids they will leave—but in the long run, say coaches, the opposite is true. Plus, if fencing is not treated as the real athletic endeavor that it is, it won't deserve varsity status in anyone's eyes.

"Understand that it is recreational, but incorporate athletics into it that kids are used to doing in other sports; you want both the kids, and other people walking past practice, to respect it," says Salmon. "Make it difficult, and make them proud. They love to hate it."

Salmon also suggests winding up your season if at all possible with a USFA national junior, cadet or Division II/III competition as an incentive for the end of the year's work.

"Once they go to something national," says Salmon, "they're hooked. They're coming back."

"While I have them, I have them for 200 percent," agrees Morris Hills, N.J., coach Barbara Lynch. Lynch, also a member of the N.J. State Interscholastic Athletic Association's committee on fencing, and a veteran high school fencing coach for more than a decade. "Be flexible—if you tell them that they can't be in jazz band and fencing, they will leave. But when they're in my gym, I work their butts off, or they don't take it seriously."

Building strong practices builds loyalty from kids and parents. Make sure, say coaches, that parents are involved so they can see first-hand the benefits their kids get from the sport. From there, persistence with the school board is the key.

"You've got to have parental involvement—a coach can't knock on the door and do this work," says Salmon. "You have to get the parents to go to the school board and say, again and again, 'What about a team?' They can be especially vigilant about getting benefits for their kids."

Don't be discouraged if the school says no the first time... or the second, or third, or fourth. More and more education will almost always be necessary. Invite administrators to local tournaments repeatedly.

Push the fact that fencing is a non-problem sport, says Lynch. "We have no sportsmanship issues, and schools love the fact that we're easy to deal with. Show that fencing's a model sport for both sexes, and you can even fence as a coed team."

At the same time, make sure you can answer another question you might not expect from athletic directors, says Moss.

"Suppose you're a football, basketball or hockey school—and fencing's season is November to March—the athletic director is going to ask, 'Are they going to take people from varsity football or basketball?' No, this addresses different athletes, those who have no niche now," says Moss. "You really have to push that piece."

"Find out from the youngest varsity program in your school what turned the corner," suggests Lynch. "How did they

do it? And then keep on it."

But that's only the beginning. Convincing schools to add to already overburdened programs, Moss says, means you need to answer some hard questions for the administration.

"One, if I'm an administrator, I'm going to ask you, OK, fine, you've got the kids, now tell me, what happens if you decide to quit?" says Moss. Schools consider varsity sport a huge part of their identity and the status is not awarded lightly. Showing a strong base of support in your local fencing community, and a willingness on the part of alumni to come back and teach your club, will help show the long-term viability of the program.

Resources are available to train additional coaches. The U.S. Fencing Coaches College and the U.S. Fencing Coaches Association, for instance, give great introductory and intermediate coaching classes and provide certification—another important requirement for attaining varsity status. Check out the links at www.usfencing.org for more information.

"The fact that fencing programs come with ready-made coaches is huge for athletic directors," says Lynch.

Money is always a huge factor. Moss says that the school can choose to designate a sport as "unfunded varsity." Students have to pay a fee, fund their club as they have been doing through fundraisers, and they get the use of the school's bus. If the school is unwilling to try this approach, find out if there are other districts in the area who do have unfunded varsity, and educate the board about them.

"That's becoming more and more common around the country," says Moss. "They try the sport for a period of time, and if it's a solid program, they will start funding it."

It's not impossible to overcome these problems. The N.J. State Interscholastic Athletic Association added five new high school fencing teams last year alone and expanded from three to four districts.

But fencing has been a part of high school culture in states like New Jersey and New York for at least half a century, and other varsity teams are just around the corner to point to as examples. New Jersey clubs don't face the one hurdle that may be simply impossible for others, in the short term, to overcome: If there is no one to compete against in your area, there will be no varsity status for your club.

"That's the biggest question you have to answer for your administration," says Moss. "Who is your competition? Do you have to go all the way to Cincinnati from Columbus to find anyone to fence against? If you can show them, OK, we've got 14 clubs around and seven kids who qualified for Junior Olympics, that's a start."

Consider that becoming a varsity sport is not necessarily the best option, either.

"Examine your goals, and your kids' goals—do they want the varsity letter, (and) want to represent their school? Do they want to become expert fencers? Or have fun in the winter season?" says Lynch.

Because, say Lynch, and Moss, and everyone who has tangled with state athletic associations, along with that varsity letter jacket most often comes a closet full of regulations, including restrictions on season length, practice length, travel, coach certification, budgets, fundraising, and on.

“At a high school level, in a club, you’re thinking about your kids all the time, and the school or the state athletic association is not. They’re thinking about football,” Moss says. For example, varsity status may mean that students may not be permitted to compete in season in anything other than official high school competitions—meaning, no Junior Olympics.

Or they may be limited to an extremely brief fencing season, with out-of-season practices causing a student to lose eligibility—untenable for a competitive fencer, or even one who enjoys recreational fencing year-round.

Still, high school varsity fencing can be a fantastic experience. “I love the excitement of it,” Salmon says. “When we got the varsity program we had to start cutting kids, we got so many, especially girls.

“When it’s a varsity program, you get varsity-quality athletes trying out for it. To go varsity legitimizes fencing as a sport in the school. To me, that’s a big issue.”

While state regulations prevented kids from practicing on

his varsity team year-round, Salmon says, they are free to go to outside clubs as often as they want. For Salmon, the struggle for varsity has been worth the benefits; his school has doubled the team’s budget, provides transportation and uniforms—and the energy surrounding the team increases every season.

So, examine your goals in starting to work with young people in fencing. Do you just want to coach during the fencing season? Do you want to build a fencing empire, introduce the sport to as many people as possible? Is your aim to make money and recruit for your competitive club? Do you have potential help from other fencers and clubs in the area?

High school varsity may not be the be-all, end-all for you or your competitive club, or may not even be possible right away. There may only be one high school within your geographic reach—but there will almost certainly be at least a handful of public, private, and parochial schools in your town. Another goal to consider is simply to start an after school program for younger kids—and then another, and then another.

Next issue: Create your fencing league.

Cindy Bent is the USFA’s media contact and has fenced for 13 years. She also assisted with coaching two high school programs.

Statement of Ownership, Management & Circulation

Date: October 1, 2002
 Title of Publication: American Fencing
 Frequency of Issue: Quarterly
 Location of Known Office of Publication: One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, El Paso County, Colorado, 80909-5774
 Location of Headquarters: One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO 80909-5774
 Publisher: United States Fencing Association, One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO 80909-5774
 Editor: Meg Galipault, USFA, One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO 80909-5774
 Owner: United States Fencing Association, One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO 80909-5774
 Known Bondholders, Mortgages, Etc.: None

	Average Copies Each Issue Last 12 months	Actual Copies Published Last Issue
Total Number Copies Printed	11,419	14,250
Paid Circulation	-0-	-0-
Paid Mail Subscriptions	11,236	14,011
Total Paid Circulation	11,236	14,011
Free Distribution/Mail	30	30
Free Distribution/Not Mail	59	95
Total Free Distribution	89	125
Total Distribution	11,325	14,136
Copies Not Distributed	94	114
Return from News Agents	-0-	-0-
Total	11,419	14,250
Percent Paid	99%	99%

DUEL IN THE DESERT
 L A S V E G A S

The Flamingo Hotel & Casino
January 3-5, 2003

www.duelinthedesert.com