

Eric Sollee

Eric Sollee (8 September 1926 – 30 June 2008) was an American fencer and revered fencing coach. He is best known today for introducing the “New Fencing Paradigm” that helped transform epee fencing by showing how to neutralize an opponent’s superior technique and classical training. He developed Olympians, including World and Olympic Champion Johan Harmenberg. At MIT he developed previously untrained fencers into national contenders at the college level. For 40 years he coached at the Carroll Institute for the Blind. He coached at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard University, and the Carroll Center for the blind, where he developed innovative methods to bring out the maximum potential in each student, developing proprioception, orientation, and mobility.

Eric was an Army boxer in Korea when he was attracted to fencing. He brought to fencing some of the insights he had learned by watching Asian martial arts at a Japanese internment center in the Philippines, where he was interned with his parents as an enemy alien. On his return to the United States, he attended Harvard University, where he captained the fencing team and became an All-American. Then he became a fencing coach.

While coaching at MIT, Eric scrawled on a barroom napkin the “Three Conjectures” which were to change a following generation:

1. Is it possible for the fencer with the lower technical ability to decide the technical level of a bout?
2. Can the fencer with the shorter fencing distance control the distance in a bout?
3. Is it possible to force your opponent into your own area of greatest strength?

The answers to all three questions was an emphatic “Yes.”

After retiring as MIT coach, Eric continued to coach at Harvard and at the Carroll Center for the Blind. Even after he endured a stroke, Eric continued to teach fencing aided by a support cane for balance. Despite his disability, he never gave up. Eric died in 2008 at the age of 82.

One of his blind students writes,

“He inspiring all he touched to seek their own level of excellence. He was a breath of fresh air, a mentor, a person admired and respected for all that he did. Eric didn’t just teach fencing. He was gifted with the ability to make one feel that they mattered and contributed as much to society as the next.

I feel my orientation in space was immensely enhanced by Eric’s class and teaching style. He also brought back my competitive spirit and love for sports participation, something I had let go of as I began to lose my vision.”

And world and Olympic epee champion Johan Harmenberg dedicates his books to Eric Sollee.