

Blade Masters Tips

Summary of included/attached documents (in alphabetical order):

- Brief Overview of Fencing.doc** A brief overview for parents and students about the basic weapons, terms and rules of fencing.
- Employment Contract.doc** A simple, 1 page Agreement about the relationship and payment arrangements between our instructors and the Club.
- Flyer1.doc** What we distributed/posted on our web site and to the kids (the school put them in their backpacks) to announce our recruitment of students.
- OpenHouseBrochure.doc** This is actually more like the ‘front and back pages’ of the Order form, to hand out at the Open House, including sample Ordering and a few common Questions and Answers
- OrderFormFinal.Doc** THE order form that the parents/students filled in and signed, complete with phone number, email, waiver, and sizes.
- SizeLabels.doc** Just a grid (to be printed on HP Laser jet Tough Paper or equivalent) of [S], [M], etc that was cut and safety-pinned to the equipment at the Open House to uniquely and clearly identify sizes.
- SizesFall02Final.xls** A sample spreadsheet with a row for each student, and their size of Mask, Glove, etc so we could easily tally how much we needed to buy of each size of equipment.
- TableSignsMaskGloveEtc.doc** A bit gratuitous, but the 8x11 signs for “GLOVES” , “MASKS”, “REGISTRATION” that we posted at tables at the Open House to clearly identify what each table was for.

For brochures, handouts, signs, iron-on transfers, and such, I've made extensive use of my word processor (Word) and my inkjet printer!

OVERVIEW

This is the story and documentation of how we started a fencing club for Jr High Students during the Fall of 2002, in a northern suburb of Chicago. I am writing this 7 weeks into our first session. The club is called Blade Masters (www.BladeMasters.org)

We now have 40 students in grades 5 – 8, meeting on Wednesday night in the school gym. Divided roughly by grade, 20 students meet for 90 minutes from 6:30 to 8:00, and the other 20 students from 8:00 to 9:30. Each 90 minute section is run by two instructors. After about 15 minutes of warm ups and stretches, the class is divided into two halves. One half does drills with one instructor for 30 minutes while the other half does practice bouts with the other. At the end of the 30 minutes, the students switch. As a side activity, we have a few adults that are learning saber with a separate instructor, while their kids are learning foil. We only have 3 adults (poor recruiting on my part!) and so that end of it is a small financial loss (or an investment in the future, take your pick!). Especially at the lower age level, this is the maximum Student:Teacher ratio I could recommend. 10

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kids per instructor is a stretch at the young ages, and I would like to hire a ‘monitor’ just to help ‘herd’ the young kids from getting distracted, remind them that fencing is not done in circles, and you do not whack your opponent like a bad remake of an Errol Flynn movie – nothing that a 1yr fencer couldn’t do (or even a parent who was paying attention in the first 10 minutes!), but just that little extra guidance at the younger ages

The instructors are two college graduates who were very active in the local High School fencing club when they were that age. I am lucky that they are great, responsible people. Fortunately, most people are doing it out of their love of the sport, not because of the fast women and cold beers (which I have yet to see at any fencing outing!)

This is a private club, funded out of my own pocket. The school district has been very cooperative, and ‘rental’ of the gym is a paltry \$6/hr. No, I don’t fence much but my two boys wanted to and I thought that starting a club wouldn’t be too much more work than driving 35 minutes each way to the closest class.

We purchased all the equipment that we would need, and rented it back to the students. We set up an account with Santelli and American Fencers Supply, since we would be buying more equipment in a few months than most schools buy in a year. I’m sure that there are other good suppliers, I’m just mentioning who we hooked up with. I can recommend each. AmFence carries basic Leon Paul masks (which I like), and Santelli makes very nice jackets, etc.

We did make them buy their own glove and UAP (under arm protector). We told them that these were ‘personal’ items that needed to be washed every so often and since I was not going to do their laundry, it made sense for them to buy them. It also helped shift some of the financial burden to the students in an innocuous sort of way.

OVERVIEW OF FEES AND COSTS:

Here’s the financial breakdown of what the students (parents) were asked to provide:

Glove & UAP	\$44	purchase (they take with them)
‘Frisbee’ girl’s protectors	\$ 5	purchase (girls only, obviously)
Mask/Foil/Jacket	\$49	8 wk rental (we keep with us)
Instruction fee	\$75	8 wk ‘rental’

The pricing seems to be fine with our socio-economic group. We originally were going to have a 2 hr class for \$99 but backed it down to \$75 for 1.5 hrs to squeeze in two sections per night. So the Order Form has parents writing us a check for \$99 of course fee and most of them didn’t even remember that they deserve a discount because of the reduced hours. In other words, they mentally checked off \$99 for ‘ a night of fencing lessons’, and didn’t keep too much track of 1.5 vs 2.0 hrs. Yes, we refunded the

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difference (well, actually, we held a tournament and applied the overpayment toward that, but more on that later).

So we had to buy enough Foils, Masks, and Jackets for 40 kids. Because we had 2 back-to-back sessions of 20 kids (instead of one, 40 kid session), we did get 'double use' out of the Foils (one size fits all), and some double use of the Masks and Jackets. From the included Excel spreadsheet [SizesFall02Final.xls], I needed 21 masks and 25 jackets, and 20 foils. In reality, I bought about 25 foils (all dry, by the way), and about 3-4 extra masks and jackets. And regardless of what they signed up for at the Open House, I had to buy 3 extra "Adult Small" Jackets because that pile was empty which meant that that size was being 'sold out' in each class. My total expense for starting the Club is about \$8,000 (including Instructors' fees, Insurance, etc.). A significant part of that was 'fronting' the money for the gloves and UAP that the students bought (40 x \$44). After the first 8 wk session, the Club will be 'in the red' by about \$2,000 and should turn a small profit by the end of the next 8-wk session. Then equipment will start to break, replacements will be needed, etc. And even MORE so when we get to electric!

ADVERTISING FLYERS TO KIDS

Since this was a new club, we had no idea what sizes to order, and what interest we would have, so we held an Open House. We made up a flyer [Flyer1.doc] which the local Jr HS very kindly distributed to all the kids' back packs, and made daily announcements for in the week preceding the Open House. There are some details that are not relevant to you, but lest they confuse, I will elaborate briefly: Stevenson is the local High School, Daniel Wright is the Jr HS (5th-8th grade, about 800 students), and we had to wait for the School Board to approve us before we could even have the Open House (which really made scheduling tight for the rest of the year), and Sprague is the K-2 school in our District whose 'multi-purpose' room we would be using (though we ended up moving to the gym next door because it was bigger and no one usually uses it).

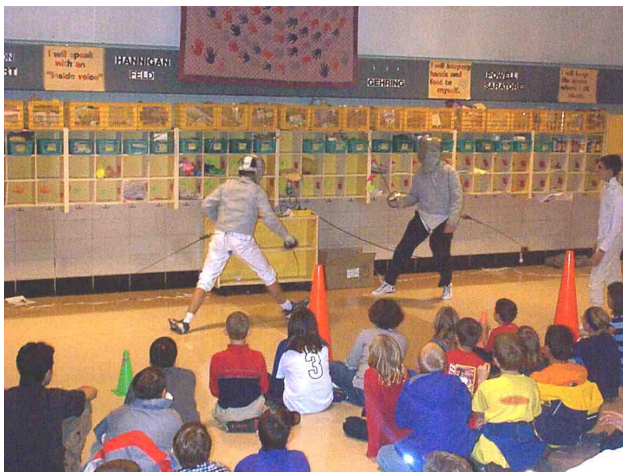
OPEN HOUSE

To get sizes for UAPs, Gloves, Masks, and Jackets, I ordered at least two of each size, got bins from Wal-mart, and set up 'stations' in the cafeteria ('multi-purpose room') where the Open House was being held. It turned out to be very key that I was this paranoid and well organized. I believed that the fact that we looked like we 'had our act together' from the beginning contributed greatly to the support and confidence that we got from all involved.



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So without boring you with all the forms that I made (and I am obsessive about this), I had a table for each of the above 4 items, plus one for women's protectors, and one for Registration.



To further identify what was going on, I got PVC pipe from Home Depot, cut it to about 3' length, mounted/taped it vertically to the tables, and put 8x11 signs on the top for "Jackets", "Gloves", "Registration", etc [TableSignsMaskGloveEtc.doc]. The bottom of the pole is visible on the last picture above. Believe me, in a crowded room, it helped. And, it made us look a lot more organized, even though it was our very first time.

We also had a live fencing demonstration (see picture) which helped attract students. These were volunteers from the Stevenson HS, where we got a lot of support and guidance.

We made a nice 'Order Form' out of this called [OrderFormFinal.Doc] which is part of this submission. This Order Form is very important to the smooth operation of starting the club with this many people. And remember, Jr HS kids don't drive themselves or carry their own checkbook, so 40 students showing up means 80+ people with parent(s). The Order Form includes place for sizing, email, legal disclaimer, etc. We even made a brochure out of the Order Form to hand out at the Open House to further help explain/simplify the process. The document [OpenHouseBrochure.doc] is the 'back side' of the Order Form, and includes a few Q/A, and samples of how to fill out the 'front side' of the form.

So I went to Wal-mart. There I would eventually buy a LOT of tubs and storage containers. For the Open House, I labeled EVERY piece of equipment with a size tag (see the blue square on the mask in the top picture?). So in big letters was "S" or "M", etc, and on the jackets "JS" for Junior Small vs "AS" for Adult Small to avoid confusion in ordering. And do not expect any less than confusion and mistakes because people just make mistakes. Safety pins and printed paper were on every item being tried on. Then I had two volunteers per station to determine the appropriate size of that item for the kids. One volunteer was a fencer who knew what was a good fit, the other was any old

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volunteer who could keep the kids in line and put the stuff back in the bin and not walk away. Yes, we had over 14 volunteers at our Open House. And I had a grid of who was staffing what table, making sure that one of them was knowledgeable about the sizing. No, I'm not boring you with that grid.

I did also buy 'HP Laser jet Tough Paper' to print the sizes on (those blue squares mentioned above), and made a grid in Word called [SizeLabels.doc] which was then safety-pinned to each item. These sizes were then written on the Order Form and handed in at the Registration station. The manufacturer labels on the equipment are small, hard to find, and not always consistent (eg, Leon Paul masks just have a color coded dot on the top, not a S,M,L – and what they call XS the distributor calls C(hild), so we attached our own, unambiguous size labels)

We required full payment to register the kids. It's amazing how many people will want to pro-rate their fee or such. "We'll be out of town one Wed, can I get \$10 off, or have the instructors give Susie a make-up class?". NO! Like ALL other sports or activities you sign up for at the 'Y' or the park district, you show up at the assigned times or you lose out. You will go nuts if you do anything but take full payment for standard classes. Per the Order Form, we did not offer refunds within 3 days of the start of class, and we stuck to it. One Mom's daughter changed her mind the night of the first class, but it was too late. We had already filled the class, and had to be firm.

We also handed out a "Brief Overview of Fencing" document [Brief Overview of Fencing.doc] which was educational to the parents.

INSTRUCTORS and INSURANCE

Our employment contract with our coaches is [Employment Contract.doc]. They are 1099 'contractors' (not W-2 employees). We bought liability insurance for each of them through ESIX, from the USFA web site for about \$125 per instructor for a year. We pay them \$2/student/hr. So for each 90 minute class of 20 students, they get paid $\$2 \times 1.5 \times 20 = \60 , and in our case we have back-to-back 90 minute sessions, so they get \$120 for the 3hr classes (plus the 15-20 minute setup and take down time). I cut them a check after the 2nd week of class, and again after the 5th week of class.

We also got 1 Million dollars of Insurance from the USFA, for about \$300/yr.

We are using the book Fencing: Steps to Success as our guide. It's about \$15, available on Amazon.com

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LOGISTICAL ORGANIZATION

Physically storing and organizing all this equipment is a task unto itself. I made a spreadsheet to keep track of our Inventory, which may be useful so I include it. [SizesFall02Final.xls]. This document helped me track what I had, vs what I needed and had to order.



Bins and mats: I went to Wal-mart and bought 4 of the really big, blue tubs pictured above. They are the 45 gallon wheeled tubs made by Sterilite. We need at least 2 of them just for the masks, another one just for the jackets, and the 4th one for floor tape, extra masks, and the like. They are about \$17 per tub and worth it. We also bought cylindrical equipment bags from Santelli (about \$30 each) to hold the foils. Each bag holds about 12 weapons.

Not shown here is one of the best time saving / organizational things I stumbled upon. Cloth 'mats' to dump the jackets on. We have about 30 different jackets in sizes Junior Small, Jr Med, Jr Large, and then Adult Small, Adult Med, Adult Large. This could be a zoo at the end of every class. But I went to Wal-mart (or any fabric store) and got inexpensive cloth in size of about 3' by 15'. One in Blue and one in Red. The Blue for the Jr size jackets, the Red for the Adult sizes. Then I took a permanent marker and a yard stick and divided each mat into 3 sections (for S | M | L) and labeled the sections as such. The kids are now required to put their jacket back in the appropriate color-coded mat, and the right size section. They are also supposed to zip up the back and lay their jacket face-down, spread-eagle in the appropriate pile (you know, 'neatly').

Then (here's the really good part), at the end of class, you just roll up the mat like a giant Hostess Ho-Ho (or a camping bedroll if you don't eat junk food), and then they get dropped right into the big blue tubs! To set up at the beginning of class, we just grab the 'bundle', dump it on the floor, unroll it, and then slide it to wherever we want it. The bottom of the mats get dirty, not the jackets!

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I also made a big sign (8 x 11) for each tub that holds masks since we pretty much put all the Small masks in one tub and the Medium masks in another tub, so the students should know which tub is for which mask, making it easier to fetch at the beginning of each class.

So all of our supplies for 40 kids fits in 4 tubs and 2 cylinder bags, which we then store on the Stage in the school. Nice, neat, sealed, clean.

DRY vs WET:

Ok, so 'Dry' is without electric, so why can't 'wet' be with electric?

In any event, we are starting out with dry Foil only. It's very expensive otherwise. And time consuming. The students barely know how to hold a foil properly, they do not need to be distracted by the lamé s , lights, hook-up, etc.

WET TOURNAMENT:

In our case, we scheduled a tournament with another club, and we arranged to have one or two electric strips, the other 3 or 4 being dry. Everyone will get to fence at least once on the single elimination round on the electric strip, more if they keep winning.

So then we went out and bought about 8 lamé and a half dozen electric foils, and this became part of the excitement of the Tournament – you got to fence electric! The cost of this electronic equipment is not included in the \$8,000 cost outlay above. We're charging about a \$5-\$10 rental fee/surcharge on top of the Tournament entry fee the help defray the cost of the equipment.. We need to recoup the expense for electric better. A lame' and foil are roughly \$100 (more in adult lame sizes), and \$10/rental doesn't go very far. But after a 2nd or 3rd session of 30-40 kids, we can siphon some of the 'profit' from that toward the purchase of electric equipment.

What we should do (per the USFA suggestion!) is to get some sponsors to defray the cost and pad the coiffeurs for more electronic equipment. Like offer the local Sport Mart to get their name on the flyer and program for (I dunno), \$50? Or more? Or the local eatery. Hey, these are upscale, trendy consumers, another \$50 to the Corner Bakery & Café and you've just bought a lame with that blank space at the bottom of your program.

I'm a little bit of a hard-nose about registration. Require registration and money up front. Otherwise you don't get your name in the program. Amazing what people will do to see their name in print. We charge \$10 or \$15 for the Tournament, and another \$5 - \$10 surcharge for equipment rental. Actually, the other club is organizing this first meet, and I think they're being too kind. Our kids pay \$15 for a 5-game chess tournament at our school, so \$25-\$30 to pay for 1-on-1 referees and equipment isn't that much to ask. Ok, so the top kids do get trophies for chess. That's still a lot cheaper than the labor expense of fencing.

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Email and Website

I think that our web site is a key part of our image, and success. It's pretty cheap (about \$30-\$45 per year total), and fairly easy to maintain. www.DirectNic.com will register your Domain Name for only \$15/year. This 'reserves' your name so that no one else can use it. Ours is BladeMaster.Org Then, you need to rent space on someone's server to 'host' your web site. Again, DirectNic offered the best deal we could find: \$15/yr for 2 Gb of data transfer. That 2GB is a little technical, but here's a brief explanation. Every time someone views a page on the web, the contents of that page are transferred to your PC and then displayed. If the page is pure text, the size (in KiloBytes, MegaBytes or GigaBytes) is miniscule. If you put lots of high resolution pictures on the page, it starts to add up. Suffice it to say that most clubs will not need more than the 2GB that comes with the \$15/yr subscription. So for your 'web budget', you can get buy with only \$30-\$45 per year, including reserving your name (an annual \$15 expense) and hosting your site (\$15, maybe \$30 per year).

Now, you will still have to create and maintain your site. We use Microsoft Front Page 2000. It takes a bit to learn it, though most high school kids will sell themselves for \$5 to \$10/hr to do this stuff. I do it myself because I work with computers, and it's cool to update your site regularly. I put the pictures on a separate, sub-page because 1) the main page loads faster if it doesn't have pictures to transmit, and 2) if the person viewing it doesn't care about the pictures, why waste part of my 2Gb transfer allowance or their time?

I think a website is critical. Or at least extremely helpful. I would advocate getting a copy of FrontPage (or equivalent) and a HS kid to 1) set it up for you initially and 2) get you trained in the basics. THEN you can just updated pages without much knowledge of what you're doing. It's not much different that Word or WordPerfect (once it's set up for you) to replace the text on "What's upcoming" or "From last week...". And FrontPage has a [Publish to Web] button that then transfers these web pages from your PC to your web site. It's a small investment, but you get very well organized, don't have to repeat things to everyone ("Just look it up on our web site!"), and it's cool.

I also do weekly emails to everyone. I happen to use Microsoft Outlook. I copied everyone's email address into the CC: line for my first email, and for every email thereafter, I just Copy/Paste those 40 email addresses from the prior email into the CC: line of my new one. So even if I just type a few sentences recapping what we did last week, or what's upcoming next week, or reminding them about an upcoming tournament, it takes a few minutes and I have just contacted 40 students in one fell swoop. After the first week, it's fast, easy, and is a great way to keep people thinking of you. It keeps them involved. It makes them think that you care about fencing and their kids – which you do.

Questions? Contact me at Henry@BladeMasters.org