

High Elite Fencing: Are We On The Same Page?



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The FIS top priority, I dare say its fundamental mission, is to win Olympic medals, *i.e.*, to manage and support competitive fencing at its highest level. CONI's [National Italian Olympic Committee] financial support--the largest FIS income item--is calibrated by two parameters: total number of members and prestigious international results. Since the former is meager, the financial survival of our federation is conditioned by the international success of our elite athletes.

In our [Italian] system the recruiting and formation of all fencers, and even more so of the top fencers, is a task of the fencing clubs around the country. The national federation culls the most promising fencers and through national training camps and international competitions nurtures their improvement, refines and completes their technical and tactical evolution. If we exclude the figure of the CT [technical expert in charge of a national weapon program] who because of his role and the salary he is paid by the federation should be *super partes* and work exclusively for and with the national teams, all other technicians (coaches, trainers, etc.) used by the federation are employed part time by the federation, "borrowed" from the clubs where they operate full time.

I question if, prestige and publicity aside, the priorities of the clubs are still in harmony with those of the FIS. It seems to me that today the priorities of our federation and of the affiliated clubs are starting to diverge.

One of the fundamental reasons is money. The limited financial resources of the FIS don't allow to properly repaying those who with abnegation and sacrifice produce high level athletes at the club level. The allocation of resources toward the base is ever more meager, the federal contribution to the clubs and their teachers or trainers is paltry. I don't think I am too far off if I say that FIS contributions cover between 5 and 15% of the expenses of a club. Ditto for what Maestri receiving a bonus for their work from the federation. I think that incentives which used to recognize those who produced high level results are losing steam and effectiveness, consequently the interest on the part of clubs and coaches to form/raise champions is going down. Add the tendency to select elite athletes [members of the national teams] more by relation than merit, then we deprive the maestri also of the moral satisfaction which in the absence of economical considerations is essential for the continuation of their work toward the production of elite fencers.

On the other hand to form elite accomplished athletes is very expensive. A club must have maestri of great competence and pay them accordingly. A club coaching staff must include, in addition to maestri di scherma, at least physical conditioning trainers with specific competence. The internal organization of the club must then include a full time office manager to take care of the administrative load typical of such club. One must go to tournaments all over the place and it becomes ever more taxing given the enormous number of tournaments, official and not, the continuous increase in costs (travel, hotel, and food). Often the clubs must be closed on Friday because weekend events absorb the coaches.

Once a fencer reaches a certain high level he starts looking around to see

how to best monetize his activity which is becoming a job for him. The best athletes become part of various military corps and if they are unlucky that their own maestro is not "liked" at the national level, they often fall prey of luring promises by clubs, famous coaches or CT who put themselves in the conflicting position to be working for a NGO and are also managers of private clubs. Consequently, often the elite athlete, already formed, leaves his original maestro and club, sometime without even saying goodbye to the person who with sacrifice, abnegation, and passion taught him how to fence and brought him to that level.

Because of all this, many clubs today are not very interested in "high level fencing" and make a conscious choice to develop other activities which are just as gratifying, pay more (and cost less) which allow them to survive without too many hassles.

And there is also the satisfaction to see that your commitment to a young person who will never be a champion but who thanks to the sport improves his motor and mental skills (self control, motivation, learning a methodology, etc.). This is just as good if not better than the narcissistic pleasure of having brought a kid to the national team level, often a prima donna with a mentality deformed into an exasperated egocentricity.

If this is a correct analysis, if the difficulties of the clubs and the lost love for the high level competitive programs are real, then one should ask what will happen tomorrow if/when we will have a crisis in terms of results as is the case in many other sports [in Italy].

This is why more and more there is a need to have a clear sport policy which together with the unquestionable success in organizing competitions and our presence in the international arena can match the needs of the federation with those of the clubs and their maestri/technicians.

I think this is an important challenge which will depend on the trust all members have in our federation and at the same time on the continuous international success of Italian fencing.

Maestro Alberto Coltorti

A brief explanation for those not familiar with Italian fencing

Historically CONI, i.e., the Italian central government, has been the primary source of funds to the national sport federations: the more international medals, the more money to the successful federation. Fencing in Italy is by far the most winning sport of all, leaving every other sport in the dust, both historically and presently.

The FIS used to distribute these funds to the clubs and to the successful Maestri who had produced these results. Hence in the past clubs and the federation were in tune concerning their goals for elite fencing. Today, a large portion of the funds received from CONI is reserved for the top elite national program while much less money goes to the clubs and the maestri who produce the elite fencers.

Furthermore, CONI's budget has been cut and the fat years are over. To maintain the financial contributions essential to the federation's survival and to keep the cuts in the budget to a minimum the need for ever increasing results with lesser money creates a divergence between the federation and the clubs/maestri.

Note also that in Italy clubs are in general employers of maestri and very few maestri own their own clubs. This is a consequence of the old Olympic ideal when athletes had to be non-professionals while coaches were considered professionals. Therefore, coaches could not own a club nor be represented at the federal level or be officers in the federation (an association of amateurs) because the coaches were professionals. It is only recently that coaches could be officers of the federation. The most illustrious example is Maestro Giorgio Scarso who is at his second turn as FIS President.

Financial incentives from the federation are much more important today. Until few years ago the majority of maestri came from the military world. They were armed forces petty officers in active service with the possibility to be a maestro as a second career. The military school that used to prepare and form these maestri does not exist anymore. The "civilian" maestri of today either have a full time job outside fencing and coach fencing "part time" or some maestri exercise this profession on a full time basis. This number of full time "civilian" maestri is still small but growing. For them the economic aspect of their career is more important so it is logical that they have different priorities from the federation.



Alberto Coltorti is the President of the [Accademia della Scherma](#), an independent association of Italian fencing maestri.

A former saber fencer (four time gold medal—team—in Italian senior national championships and gold medal—individual—in Italian college championships), he became Maestro di Scherma in 1987. He is the product of the Neapolitan saber school of Maestri Gherardo Fumo and Vittorio Bassetti. He continued his coaching apprenticeship under Maestro Piero Chicca, for strategy and tactics, and Maestro Ryszard Zub, for technique and teaching.

He collaborates with the FIS since 1988 and participated as saber coach for the Italian squad at the 1996 Olympics and 1995, 1997, 1998, and 1999 Senior World Championships.

As Maestro di Scherma, *his Olympic medalists pupils* are: Massimo Cavaliere (bronze, team, Seoul 1988) and Raffaello Caserta (bronze, team, Atlanta 1996); *his Senior World Championships medalists* are: Raffaello Caserta (1993, silver team; 1995, gold team) and Daniela Colaiacono (1999, gold team); *plus numerous medalists* in senior European and junior and cadet world championships.

In recent years he has collaborated with the FIE to promote and spread saber fencing in countries without a long fencing tradition.

He has been teaching aspiring fencing instructors how to coach for the past 15 years at regional, national, and international level. He is a member of the examining commission of the [Accademia Nazionale della Scherma](#) in Naples, Italy.

Translation and explanation by Gram

Image: "La maschera", by Gian Luca Godani