

A Fencing Student Leaves His Teacher

Monday, 08 June 2009

The All-American Fencing Academy Sends Its First Fencer to Division I NCAA Fencing

On Friday, June 5, 2009, Fayetteville's fencing coach watched a high school senior who has not only been his student, but one of his closest friends and trustworthy assistant coach walk across the stage at Weaver Auditorium at Methodist University and graduate as salutatorian from Reid Ross Classical High School.

He will also become the All-American Fencing Academy's first fencer to fence on a Division I NCAA team. Eight years ago, Gerhard Guevarra returned to Fayetteville as the director of Pine Forest Recreation Center and started the Cumberland County Fencing Club. A few months later, a young student named Paul Hovey decided to begin a new an unknown hobby and sport.

At 9 years old and in fourth grade, Paul Hovey was one of Gerhard's first and youngest students. Paul started to learn foil as all of Gerhard's students did, but quickly decided to learn and fence epee, Gerhard's least strongest weapon to coach.

"If I had to think back eight years ago, all I can recall was a young boy who enjoyed learning to fence and always seemed to have fun with it," says Coach Gerhard.

Paul Hovey stayed with it for eight years, continuing to fence with Coach Gerhard as the fencing club progressed from the Cumberland County Fencing Club at Pine Forest Recreation Center, to the All-American Fencing Club at Albritton Junior High School on Fort Bragg, to its final location and moniker—the All-American Fencing Academy in Downtown Fayetteville.

Before Coach Gerhard knew it, Paul was in high school and not only fencing, but taking an active role in coaching younger students and managing the club. He had progressed so much as a fencer the coach could no longer consistently defeat him in fencing bouts.

"He had been with me for so long, Paul not only knew how I ran the school, but knew what directions it should go. I could have asked for a better business partner and fencer."

Paul essentially helped build the club from its small beginnings to one of North Carolina's strongest schools of fencing. Paul will now not only attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but become Gerhard's first student to fence Division I NCAA fencing.

"He will be joining my alma mater and be fencing under the same coach and guidance I fenced under. It feels like everything has come full circle."

Paul's departure to college and from the All-American Fencing Academy falls at a time when the Academy takes an even broader leap forward as it hires a new beginner's foil and sabre coach to augment its current program.

Reminiscing the Past

On a Saturday evening as head coach Gerhard and Paul were doing maintenance to the fencing school and could be overheard like two veterans talking about where the program came from.

You can hear mentions of equipment being improvised. Great students. Interesting students. Students that made them laugh. Competitions. Practical jokes. Old coaches. Moves to new facilities. And dreams that have come true.

"I guess eight years had to come to an end sometime," said Paul.

Coach Gerhard took a moment to sit down with Paul to find out what exactly those eight years were like, starting with a question that Gerhard knew the answer to too well, but asked anyway—why Paul started fencing what attracted him to it.

"Every kid sees sword fighting in movies. I mean, who hasn't run around with sticks pretending to be pirates or Jedi. When I learned there was an actual sport for sword fighting, I immediately wanted to try it."

Little did Paul know that it was more than just sword fighting. The discipline in fencing was akin to that of any sport. Before he knew, it Paul was fully engrossed in the sport and was beginning to build a name for himself in North Carolina.

"The years just kind of flew by. First I was just hanging out with friends, then I actually wanted to fence, then came the realization that I could and wanted to do this in college."

Paul progressed from a beginner fencer, competing at North Carolina local tournaments, to regional competitions, then to National tournaments.

“My first tournament was miserable. It was a team tournament and I was paired with two college students. One girl had the flu and one had been fencing for one month. I didn’t score a single touch the whole day.”

“My first National tournament was mind blowing. All my tournaments before included about 15-25 fencers, suddenly I was up against 150 fencers. It was scary but exhilarating; it was the most fun I’ve ever had in fencing.”

“I’ve had hundreds of bouts, but a few stand out. Notably, a bout I had with Barry Gobble from our rival club at Raleigh. It was at Fayetteville’s second annual Harry Rulnick Open. Barry was a tall left-handed fencer and I was the complete opposite. We tied the score at match point and we both made a mistake of thinking we both scored. We both paused and looked away for a brief second before realizing no touches were awarded and we charged at each other again. I lost 14-15.”

Paul also noted when he finally felt like he pushed his fencing level up another level. At a tournament in Durham, Paul remembers a “defining point”. He was considerably down in a direct elimination round and remembers everything becoming very clear and being very calm about earning every single touch. “That’s when I began winning and felt like I was actually an experienced fencer.”

However, Paul’s time with the All-American Fencing Academy hasn’t always been just a fencer. He eventually began assistant coaching the team and working as an assistant manager at the fencing academy.

“Gerhard (I’m probably the only one there that calls him Gerhard) was my first boss and my favorite. I feel like he’s been a father to me and watching me grow into an athlete. As a coach, he has always been open to my suggestions and I feel we have given the All-American Fencing Academy an incredible personality.”

Being part of the team has been a large part of Paul’s fencing career, but he has also been an assistant coach for part of the time.

“Aaron Keefe and Esteban Muniz were my best friends. Training, fencing and travelling together made it better. Looking back at students I’ve worked with, Stephanie Mahaney has been my favorite. Stephanie was a foil fencer, so we didn’t interact much, but when she started working with epee I began a mentor for her. Working with Stephanie has been one of the most rewarding parts of my job.”

“Leaving the All-American Fencing Academy to fence with a new team, coach, and facility feels daunting. I’ve been with Gerhard for 8 years and together we built the All-American Fencing Academy. I can tell you every fencer we’ve had.”

“Now I’ll be training under Gerhard’s old coach, Dr. Ron C. Miller, with a team of new fencers. It feels like I’m new to fencing again, it’s scary, but I can’t wait to start.”

“I am looking forward to the intensive training I’m going to get. Long drills, sore muscles, and painful lessons. There is something sadistically rewarding about working hard like that.”

There are constantly new fencers joining the All-American Fencing Academy every month. Paul was able to give some advice to people who have never fenced and for the new fencers, young and old.

“Fencing is great for you and rewarding. It’s one of the most fun sports out there. No matter how difficult it is in the beginning and how many losses you take, don’t give up. Everyone hits this wall where they just feel like no matter what they do or how hard they try, it’s useless but if you can get past that wall…then you know what fencing is all about.”