

Feedback: Fencing

Rhys Ingram is based at Lee Valley Athletics Centre, where his Strength and Conditioning (S&C) expertise is centred mainly on fencing.

British No 2 Foil Fencer Laurence Halsted trains extensively with Rhys – and with the Olympics just around the corner, he is taking no chances.

Rhys:

You currently work for the English Institute of Sport (EIS). Who are they and what is their role?

They are an organisation that brings together a range of highly qualified and experienced sport science and sport medicine professionals to aid elite British athletes training in the UK – as 'the team behind the team'. They employ experts in physiology, biomechanics, sports psychology, performance nutrition and physiotherapy, along with sports doctors, strength and conditioning coaches, performance analysts and talent ID scientists. The role of this host of experts is to answer performance questions and deliver around 4000 hours of sport science and medicine to around 1500 athletes a week across the country! The EIS identify what sport science and medicine they require, and Olympic and Paralympic athletes access this through their lottery funding. In addition, the EIS works with a number of English and professional sports, such as football, rugby and cricket.

What is your role within the EIS?

I supply strength and conditioning support for fencing, and multisport athletes – which include female footballers, squash players and a disability swimmer. As the main part of my role, fencing takes up the majority of my time, with the other sports accounting for the rest. I am based at the EIS High Performance Centre at the Lee Valley Athletics Centre in London but also travel to other venues that the EIS work out of, in and around London.

For those who don't know the sport very well, how would you describe fencing?

It's a high-speed, intermittent sword fight, broken into three 3-minute rounds. There are three types of sword, each very different. The swords differ in weight and size, which means tactics and movement patterns are distinctly different.

Do you think that a background in fencing is needed to be a successful S&C coach?

Not necessarily. I had no previous experience of fencing before getting involved with the British Fencing National Academy in 2010. I think that every S&C coach should

be able to analyse the movement patterns and physiological demands of a sport and apply appropriate training strategies. Sometimes it is a good thing not to be previously involved in the sport as you have no preconceptions and can approach training in a new way.

How did you get into Strength and Conditioning?

I've always been interested in sport but my first experience of formal S&C wasn't until university, when our rugby team received S&C coaching. In the second year of my studies I started an S&C internship for the university. After this I wanted to learn more and decided to enrol on the MSc Strength and Conditioning course at Middlesex. Whilst completing my MSc, I spent time working at the British Fencing National Academy and



A day in the life of S&C coach Rhys Ingram

- 08.00–09.00 Arrive at Lee Valley. Have a workout and prepare for the athletes to arrive.
- 09.00–09.30 Athletes arrive and I supervise the athletes*.
- 09.30–10.00 Plyometrics session**.
- 10.00–14.00 Whilst the athletes attend technical coaching, sparring, physio (if required) and lunch, I meet with the physio, doctor, performance analyst and/or fencing coaches to discuss individual athletes' needs, plan future sessions or work with some of my multisport athletes.
- 14.00 – 15.30 Weights or conditioning session.
- 15.30 – 17.00 Recovery (includes stretching, ice baths, massage).

*A typical warm-up involves a series of dynamic stretches for ankles, hips and back; activation exercises for the relevant muscles; several full-range compound movements such as squats, lunges, basic jumps and proprioceptive drills; finishing with footwork drills, building up the speed.

**A plyometric session is dependent on the experience level of the athlete, but will typically follow a logical progression of low-level to higher-intensity jumping exercises, bilateral to unilateral drills and will always focus on the quality of movement over volume of training.

Laurence

You are currently 27 years old. How long have you been fencing?

20 years.

How did you get into the sport?

Both my parents had fenced. I began in fencing camps for kids, which my mum used to run.

Did you play any other sports when you were growing up?

Yes, I played every sport going. I enjoyed rugby the most and played right up until I went to university.

Do you think that playing other sports has helped you be successful within fencing?

Definitely. I'm convinced it is the reason I have had so few injuries in my career. It has helped with general athleticism, robustness and coordination, for sure.

How long have you been doing structured S&C?

Since I went full time, which was 6 years ago.

Do you think S&C is a valuable part of your training?

Without a doubt, I am stronger and faster because of it. I think it is essential for all sports these days.

How often do you train?

I train 5 days a week from 9am–5pm. It's not as bad as it sounds, though. We have long warm-ups, lunch, naps and recovery time. With the Olympics just around the corner, I want to be training as effectively as possible – that's why I only took two days off over Christmas. It's a very exciting year.

Follow Laurence on Twitter: @LaurenceHalsted



Bedford Blues RFC. It was after this that I began work at Hartpury College, where I headed up the women's rugby, golf and modern pentathlon academies. My progression to the EIS happened in 2011 and I am thoroughly enjoying my role here.

What is your training philosophy?

My primary training focus for all athletes follows a very simple structure: movement quality, injury prevention and providing the correct training stimulus dependent on the demands of the sport and time of year.

How often do the athletes take part in S&C sessions and how do you structure their programme?

Due to there being no true off-season in fencing, periodisation in its purest form can be difficult. On average, the athletes will have two to three weight room sessions,

two to three-conditioning sessions and two plyometric sessions per week. Each session will last no longer than 90 minutes. Intensity and volume of training is always manipulated in line with the competition schedule and is dictated by the needs of the athlete.

What is your favourite exercise and why?

It has to be the front squat. It is hard to come across a pretty back squat, but with a front squat you maintain an upright torso, increase depth and provide a similar stimulus to the back squat.

What are the most common mistakes made by your athletes in and out of the weights room?

In the gym, I'd say it's failing to understand that not every session has to be fatiguing. Some low-intensity sessions can be just as productive. Outside the gym it has to be the quality of recovery. Athletes constantly feel the need to be active and don't seem to grasp the importance of rest.

Have we got a chance of a medal in fencing at this year's Olympics?

Our best chance is the men's foil team. They're ranked 10th, but they won the test event at the ExCel Centre, and some of the best nations were present. Medals in the other events will be a real challenge – although we do have some great development fencers that may cause an upset on their day, especially with the event being in London.

Who has influenced you the most in your career so far?

I'm constantly reading and researching other coaches' work. The likes of Charles Francis, Mel Siff, Eric Cressey and Carl Valle influence what I do, along with some great British coaches like Jeremy Moody, Nick Grantham and my colleagues in the EIS.

What advice would you give anyone trying to get into the strength and conditioning industry?

✓ Be willing to put in the voluntary hours and clock up the miles.

✓ Keep in mind that exposure and networking are essential.

✓ Be aware that UKSCA accreditation is becoming increasingly important.

✓ Last – but definitely not least – you need the ability to coach and communicate with athletes. Make it fun, come up with novel methods of getting your message across and create a great training environment!

Why does fencing have such a low profile when compared to other sports?

Fencing has been perceived as a predominantly private school sport, with a tradition of limited participation and exposure. However, this is changing and there are now plenty of fencing clubs around the country doing a great job with younger athletes. The lack of exposure may also be due to the speed involved; and the sometimes complicated rules which make it hard to follow for the casual sports fan.

The Centre's website is at:
www.visitlee valley.org.uk/en/content/cms/outdoors/

Interview by Perry Stewart MSc, ASCC, CSCS