



“En Garde!”—What Business Negotiators Could Learn from an épée Fencing Champion

Pascal Fournier and Britta Heidemann

Britta Heidemann, born in 1982 in Cologne, is a former German épée fencer. Having won the world championships in 2007, the Olympic gold medal in 2008 in Beijing and the European championships 2009, Heidemann has been the first athlete in épée fencing to complete the so-called Golden Triple of important titles. In February 2018, she announced the end of her sports career. Today, she works as a management and business consultant with special focuses on China, as she speaks Chinese fluently and has also lived in Beijing for a longer time, sports, renewable energies and management.

Being therefore familiar with both literal and figurative repartees, she clarifies parallels and differences of fencing and business talks which both reach further and deeper than might seem obvious at first sight. Of course, feints, unattended attacks, delaying tactics and counterattacks are categories that obviously fit both the sphere of fencing as well as that of business negotiations. But at a second sight, especially with respect to the mental and contentual preparation of purchase talks, transferring repartee experiences from fencing to business negotiations also might turn out to be conclusive at a second consideration—and as an enlightening look from another point of view. The following text is based on an interview Britta Heidemann had with Florian Schupp and Heiko Woehner.

1 Long-Term Preparation

Obviously, any success first and foremost rests on the acquisition and ever continuing perfection of the abilities required in the respective discipline. As Heidemann puts it: “Even the strongest will and determination will not lead far without

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the basic abilities needed”. But: “No one is born a master”. The main way to gain control over the abilities needed therefore is: routine. Procedures, skills and techniques are reliably mastered only if repeated over and over again. For clarification, Heidemann refers to a well-known experience probably everyone has made during school: the recitation of a poem. After just a few rehearsals, the recitation soon faltered because one practised five times instead of a hundred times and only in privacy.

Nonetheless, preparation does not only take place in the training yard, as athletes also tend to do a lot of mental preparation. According to Heidemann, mental preparation in this context is mostly about understanding situations and contexts and improving procedures. This kind of long-term preparation starts long before the real performance or specific competition, as she points out.

As a most elementary basis for mental strength, Heidemann cites two surprisingly obvious factors: eating and sleeping. Especially with respect to these two basic physical needs, people in her opinion usually do not sufficiently take care of themselves, which she defines as a crucial but at the same time rare characteristic of self-responsibility: “Taking time and doing what feels right to do is simple but still requires a certain mettle”.

In the run-up to important events, Heidemann adds, she used to plan for months in advance if necessary by writing down any possibly important aspect that came into her mind and by drawing timelines—all this to create and provide structure. At this point, she introduces another—in her view—highly important element of mental preparation she calls visualization or anticipation, which is, of course: imagining and going through all possible details and facettes of the specific event, including the adversary, over and over again and as concretely as possible. Transferring this from a concrete sports related to a figurative context means: elaborating possible replies or arguments, based on a potential counterpart’s imagined actions and reactions. Heidemann verbatim: “It is important to know precisely whom you are dealing with. And to know more about that person than vice versa”.

According to her, the deeper sense in reflecting “What is the situation, the location, the ambience going to be like? How will it affect me?” is reducing pressure, diminishing nervousness and increasing one’s mental strength. Or, to sum it up, the quintessence and *conditio sine qua non* for a successful performance is: certainty.

2 Step by Step

The complex and differentiated anticipation of an upcoming event not only reduces tensions by providing increasing certainty—it also creates tensions. These, as Heidemann points out, are important elements of addressing the ongoing process, too. According to her, suspense ideally leads to focussing on all the details of the actual challenge. In a second step, this may result in an extended, more profound understanding of the process going on. Subdividing the complexity of the process

as a whole into many smaller and more manageable sections or aspects then can help to avoid a possibly fundamental mistake. In Heidemann’s perspective, the long-term overall objective, so to speak: dreaming about having won and standing on the podium makes people “a little sloppy” about the way and its single steps that might lead there. Heidemann’s recommendation is: “Live up to the moment. Live from one day to the next”. This change in perspective obligatorily causes a fundamental transformation of the goal: instead of aiming at maximal targets like “I want to be Olympic Champion”, Heidemann recommends focussing on the next impending stage as a value itself. “It is much more convenient not to be confronted with a giant mountain, but to deal with the details and the daily working procedures”. It is therefore important to understand: “The way to the overall objective is the sum of all the small and laborious steps—and every one of them can and should be seen as a source of joy and satisfaction”. Such a positive attitude towards work to be done also may appear as an additional key to success, says Heidemann. First because it is helpful for one’s mental health as well as for the seriousness and productivity of the approach to any objective: “It is good for us to have fun with what we are doing”. Second, it reduces the dimensions of a potential failure from an overwhelming defeat to a normal, everyday experience.

In sports, the most important person, instance and authority right after the athlete him- or herself for developing both main aspects treated so far—craft skills and mental strength—is the coach. Heidemann firmly points out that “working with an unapt coach can suppress up to 50% of one’s abilities”. To clarify this, she refers to her own experience: during her career, one of her coaches tried to implement a rather “ascetic” working method, which did not work for her, as she “always needed a certain easiness”. Simply feeling misunderstood by the coach almost obligatorily leads to the first hit against you. On the other hand, in a good relationship between athlete and coach, the latter is often the first person to refer to. While athletes therefore mostly don’t see any problems in having an expert to their side, an instance providing experience and advice, in business especially young male employees tend to feel offended when given advice how to enter negotiations. Contrary to this—in her perception wrong—attitude, Heidemann stresses that even if one really has a clear and successful strategy for a negotiation, it “can never be wrong to have this approach confirmed and reflected by an expert”.

3 Reality Test

While all previous considerations concern mainly a long-term approach, the crucial moment remains the one when all the preparations have to stand the test of reality. The real competition, the concrete confrontation with the opponent, according to Heidemann requires a very different kind of last-moment preparation. Her recommendation is: “I believe in the power of rituals”. For her, these last preparation rituals were quite simple: “First: warm-up, then, one hour before entering the fight, changing the T-shirt, last consultations with the coach, turning off the mobile phone”.

Mentally, these rather external procedures were accompanied by a phase of concentration—rather on one’s own strength than on the opponent’s. To her, this appeared to be more appropriate, Heidemann says, because from the beginning of the repartee, she would rather set the pace than react. On stage, there is a considerable risk of getting on a wrong track and inflating the opponent which is a rather defensive approach. In the preparation for the Olympic Games 2012, she remembers, the German team almost lost against a rather bad British team only because they were repeatedly said to be strong. Heidemann instead preferred focussing on one question: how to set the next hit. This does not necessarily imply an exclusively offensive strategy: “You can enter a competition either way, offensively or defensively—but never without reflection”. In another moment of the interview, she puts it this way: “One has to know **WHAT** he or she wants to do—and **HOW** he or she wants to do it”.

In the confrontation with the opponent, yet another aspect could come up: the opponent’s personality and the question of sympathy or antipathy for him or her. In this concern, Heidemann distinguishes three constellations:

The other person is completely unknown. This situation, as Heidemann says, is probably the easiest one, as it contains no additional personal or psychological baggage. The confrontation takes place in an emotionally neutral setup.

There is a positive attitude towards the opponent, be he or she familiar or intuitively sympathetic. In Heidemann’s view, this is definitely a more difficult constellation, as the emotional distance needed becomes harder to achieve. On the other hand, the general tuning of the confrontation is rather positive.

The adversary is a person you know – and dislike. This in Heidemann’s perspective is the most difficult constellation. From the very beginning, it contains a strong preoccupation. Fencing with an unsympathetic person therefore requires a very disciplined work on the mindset to obtain a maximum of inner distance.

Heidemann’s recommendations for this third set-up: “Take one step back—and take a deep breath: it’s about business now”. Or, if preoccupations are too strong, she suggests charging a third person with the negotiations as another solution. The main objective according to her is to avoid entering a contest on a basis of antipathy.

Another important aspect in the concrete situation of competition is a profound and realistic self-assessment. As Heidemann points out, a major obstacle to success is ignoring that badmouthing someone else does not improve one’s own capacities. Blaming only hazard, fortune, other instances or persons for a negative outcome thus indicate a lack of self-responsibility. In a great roundup, Heidemann criticizes rejecting responsibility, the incapability of a reasonable time management and missing tenaciousness as major reasons for failure. On the other side, the minimal requirement for any success in her perspective is intrinsic motivation. “Man forges his own destiny”, she quotes a famous saying.

Adult people not willing to meet a certain expectation, to “do something particular” simply should try something else, Heidemann concludes. Enviousness in her view is mainly a result of one’s own “non-performance”.

At this point, she introduces an only seemingly secondary but in fact crucial difference between a sports duel and purchase talks. While fencing is a public event on stage, with an attentive audience, business talks tend to take place behind closed doors. The presence of a public, in her view, is always an asset looking at the outcome of a process. “People tend to work more accurately if the results become public. That is human nature”. For herself, Heidemann claims she has always loved to be on stage—which gave her the opportunity “to show everyone I’m the best”. When processes remain hidden and secret and potentially without consequences, people by nature tend to drag their feet.

Being on stage also implies an extensive elimination of distractions. Major competitions take place on an illuminated piste in a dimmed environment, Heidemann points out, which makes it much easier to concentrate. Therefore, it is the smaller events that demand more effort against deflection. During her career, Heidemann says, she regularly had duels interrupted if small talk held 20 m from stage restrained her concentration.

Asked, whether fencing was something of an “art”, Heidemann agrees, referring to terms like “art of fencing” or “swordsmanship”. They indicate certain ability, a competence—an “art” in the same sense as, e.g. a surgeon’s work might be considered as “art”. In business negotiations, Heidemann concedes, there might be highly skilled and developed techniques, too. In exceptional cases, negotiations might also appear as an “art”. There are people negotiating on a highly skilled “premier league level”, and however, others tend to deliver a rather mediocre performance.

During the interview, Heidemann repeatedly mentions “innovation” and “recovery breaks”. Asked for specification, she answers: “coaches change, rules change, new forms of competition are established, take place in other locations”. To meet these ever altering external conditions, she strongly recommends mental preparedness for change. This again includes permanent readiness to work hard on improvement, e.g. trying new movement patterns and making them applicable for competition. In order to obtain this sort of mental flexibility, she sometimes fundamentally changed her entire training procedures or even suspended training for up to two weeks. Working hard on one’s skills may lead to a very good or even superior performance—but at this point, Heidemann says, one eventually starts to miss points simply out of laziness or sheer convenience. If the work on personal improvement stops here, sooner or later losing becomes inevitable. Staying concentrated, focussed on accuracy even in a state of mastery therefore helps avoiding the crisis that is always pending. For clarification, Heidemann refers to a break in German tennis player Angelique Kerber’s career. Shortly after winning the All England Championships in Wimbledon 2018, Kerber faced a low. Heidemann points out that this was something “completely normal”—presuming that Kerber, as a reaction to the low, certainly changed substantial parts within her training procedures. At best, problems are recognized before they turn into a substantial crisis or even profound grief. “You don’t really need a period of gloomy mood if you are actively and constantly reflecting your situation”. She also is familiar with “the crash to the ground” from her own experience, Heidemann says, qualifying that notion by adding that “this crisis was absolutely unnecessary”.

4 Fencing Technique

Two aspects are essential in *épée* fencing: measure, in the sense of the Latin root *mensura*, describing the spatial distance between the opponents, and a good intuition for the right moment to attack. To set a hit requires the perfect distance, the ideal *mensura* towards the opponent: the adversary being too close results in a restricted mobility, while too much distance means that the adversary is simply out of reach. In addition, according to Heidemann, a good sense for timing, catching the opponent within an unattended change of movement might be a way to hit an adversary with a rather simple step. For herself, she claims she usually did not fence in a technically complicated manner. Nonetheless, in the decisive moment, everything has to be perfectly harmonized, up to the specific position of the hand and the way the thrust is executed.

All this requires the ability to bide one's time—for a thrust in fencing, for an argument or an approach about a certain issue in a business negotiation. But this also demands the courage to take a decision and make the appropriate step. A lack of this courage to take the initiative inevitably would be punished—while even the strongest determination not always and necessarily leads to the intended results, as Heidemann has experienced herself: “In the Olympic finals in London 2012, I lost by Sudden Death—but: after an own attack! I have not defensively awaited a simple hit. Therefore, I don't have to reproach myself for not trying”.

The importance of the first hit in a duel, as she points out, is very much up to one's individual perspective. Nonetheless, marking the first point might shift the entire competition in favour of the weaker fencer. Therefore, as Heidemann points out, it is virtually insane to carelessly give away points in the beginning of a duel while fighting just the harder towards its end. Still, she concedes, this behaviour is comprehensible as it roots in human psychology and nature. While the first hit is rather a matter of interpretation, the last hit in a repartee is of much greater importance.

Awaiting or preparing the last hit in a repartee often induces thoughts like “Hopefully, I will be able to carry this across the finishing line”. Finishing is always a difficult thing, Heidemann admits, adding that this problem arises only shortly before the end of a duel. Until this moment it is quite easy to perform 80% of a task—but really sealing the deal is what Heidemann calls “the fine art”.

Finally, after a defeat there is certainly a lot to learn from analysing one's own mistakes and the adversary's assets. But, Heidemann insists, victories need to be analysed as well. As she says, it seems to be human nature to focus on what has gone wrong. If things have gone well, on the other hand, this seems to cause such a feeling of relief that no further consideration is taken. Heidemann stresses: there is even most to learn from success.

On the contrary, in her opinion, it is “clever to recapitulate not only the mere event, but the entire day and the day before, asking precisely: Have I been kind towards the partner or rather not? What has gone well? This may be a great asset”.

Everything mentioned so far applies to the individual fencer as well as to the individual negotiator. But there are more aspects which can be notably relevant beyond fencing.

One rule of competition in this particular sport is team qualification for individual competition. This implies that first the team has to qualify for a championship. Only then, the individual fencer can compete.

Transposed into business terms, that would mean that first a team had to set up a major negotiation or sourcing. Only thereafter, further progress might depend on the one individual negotiator who is to finalize the negotiations. This does not obligatorily mean that the purchaser permanently has to be the same individual. After the basic arrangements set by a team, specific aspects of the negotiations can very arguably be delegated to the one team member who is actually the most savvy and proficient expert in the area or branch in question.

After that, the only decisive aspect remaining is: stamina. Fight until the last second has run out, see London semi-finals. Remember: there is no guarantee you make the last hit—but you can fight until the last second and try to make it.

Another potentially helpful parallel: in *épée* fencing, the strike area is the entire body. Hence, there are no restrictions, everything is permitted. And no matter where or how it is placed on any part of the opponent’s body: any hit counts, including the ones made by pure coincidence.

5 The Secret of My Success

Taking all previous illustrations and findings together, what purchasers can learn from *épée* fencer Britta Heidemann is the following:

Repetition

Repetition is a key element to success. Create rituals and follow the ever same schedule when you compete.

Analysis

Sit back and analyse first.

Feedback

Feedback is important. Any critical remark—especially coming from an experienced side—can be helpful.

Change

Prepare for change as it always may occur. Remain flexible, adapt to it if it occurs.

Exposure

Expose yourself to a situation and train.

Self-reflection: Sometimes it helps to take a look into the mirror, in a real mirror.

Balance

Listen to the needs of your body and mind. Take self-responsibility.

6 Extra by Florian Schupp

With a certain time lag to the interview, I had the chance to get a live introduction to fencing by Britta Heidemann.

She gave me her fencing vest for the training and the following repartee. Of course, I felt very proud to wear her vest. Then Britta introduced me to the fencing position. While I was using a training épée, Britta always uses her personal épée. The feeling behind the fencing mask was good, I did not sense any fear. But after getting into position, Britta demonstrated with a completely unexpected and especially irresistible “action” (as she usually calls any move) of her arm that she is an Olympic Champion. In a fraction of a second, I was hit!

Britta is not much taller than I am, but her mental presence and irresistibility was enormous and multiplied in the moment of action and her thrust. Britta noticed I was trying to reflect the situation—and in the very same moment, I received the next hit. I did not realize that about 150 spectators were present and watching us. I totally forgot about them and tried to gather my thoughts and at the same time concentrate on Britta and what she was doing. Obviously: Too many things at once.

Britta then asked me if I would like to learn how to attack as well as to defend myself. She introduced me to the first level of defence: Parade, riposte. I tried it and hit her for the first time.

One more time, same sequence, same result—check! Then Britta asked me to attack once more. This time, things went quite different: With a little, hardly visible evasive movement, she dodged my attack, set the parade—and I was hit again. While demonstrating, Britta explained to the spectators what she was doing. Still, in the decisive moment of action, her entire moves and presence did not show the slightest sign of distraction. She was absolutely present and focussed, and her entire concentration culminated in the point of her épée.

I realized: You have to be quick and extremely well on your feet and in harmony with your body and your mind. Physically, I felt good, while mentally, I tried to analyse and plan the fencing action at the same time. Of course, I did not have any routine at all. Nonetheless, I started to understand what Britta meant when she was talking about routine in our interview. More and more, I literally *lived* the text that you have just read. I was no longer a spectator, like the 150 others in the room. On a very humble level: I was fencing.

We thank Britta Heidemann for sharing deep insights of her way of fencing and for introducing us to her art.



Pascal Fournier was born in 1970. He concluded his studies of German literature, political and musical sciences in Freiburg i.Br. with a dissertation on the cultural phenomenon of “diabolical virtuosity”. In 1998, he started working as a radio journalist. Today, he is mainly employed as editor and host of daily political radio broadcasts at the German public radio (ARD). Furthermore, he was sent as a correspondent to several international political events in Brussels, Geneva, Basle and Berlin.



Britta Heidemann has been one of the most successful fencing athletes within the last decade: Olympic Champion 2008, World Champion, European Champion, three Olympic medals and eleven medals at World Championships. After having received a diploma in Regional Sciences of China, she works as a consultant and accompanies business or political delegations to China. As a freelancer, she speaks about topics such as “success” and “motivation” and is author of “Erfolg ist eine Frage der Haltung” (“Success is a Matter of Attitude”) and “Willkommen im Reich der Gegensätze” taking readers on a journey to China. She also offers fencing workshops for company groups. She supports projects for children, represents Athletes in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and is Ambassador “Sports for Development” for the Federal Ministry for Development.