

In order to change, I had to remind myself that winning and losing were not tied to my self-worth as a person. I had to learn to calm down and not let the anger build. I learned how to prevent the temper tantrums. I worked at it, and I finally believed that regardless of my fencing results, I would still be wonderful, special, loved human being.

SHARON MONPLAISIR "En garde!" That's not exactly what you want to hear if you're on the wrong end of Sharon Monplaisir's sword. The lightning speed of her wrist action is enough to stop Zorro in his tracks. And this masked woman stays cool, calm and collected as she zeroes in on her opponent's weaknesses. Generally, people know I'm crazy and that I'm the type of competitor to go out and beat anybody - even my mother,' says the 35-year-old, who is a force to be reckoned with, using either a foil (a light, flexible sword) or an epee (which is heavy and rigid).

Fencing was the perfect diversion for a self-described wild child looking for something out of the ordinary to do in The Bronx. "I was really hooked on the speed and the tactics," says Monplaisir, who got up bright and early for 6 a.m. fencing classes at Theodore Roosevelt High School. "I like the movement. I just love the way it feels."

As a child whose stomach growled on many a day and who as an athlete had to whip competitors with a borrowed right-handed weapon when she couldn't afford a lefty, Monplaisir has learned to make do. Competing in a sport that requires tens of thousands of dollars has meant giving up a fencing scholarship that didn't stretch far enough, juggling jobs and even hitchhiking cross-country in those early days. But nothing has stood in the way of success for the 1988 national champion who is preparing for her fourth trip to the Olympics.

"You just stay very focused and try to do your best," says Monplaisir, who was also a four-time NCAA All-American fencer and helped the U.S. team capture the gold at the 1987 and 1991 Pan American Games. Each time she walks through the Olympic village, she experiences "the most natural high you can get." But the best part, says the personal trainer and occasional model, is getting involved in charitable activities that help others. Touche!

Sharon Monplaisir (Fencing)

Fencing; three-time Olympian; two-time gold medalist in the Pan American Games



Fencing got me out of the South Bronx. It was my lifeline.

I knew I didn't want to go home to a dark, cold place with the ceiling falling down. It was no way to live. No heat, hot water, or electricity. I knew I didn't want to become pregnant or a drug addict. My biggest challenge was making sure I didn't live there for the rest of my life.

I was a shy kid, super, super skinny with big glasses. I was picked on because we had no money and I had only one dress. When I was sixteen, I saw a sign that hung on the women's locker room door: "If anyone is interested in fencing, come and try out." It seemed like a way to do something besides going from home to school.

The people on the team were nice to me. They supported each other. I liked the coach. I could talk to him about anything. Whether you won or lost, he still loved you. He became the father figure that I didn't have. I met the right people who showed me the right things at the right time. That changed my life.

Later in life, through fencing, something turned on in me and I started developing, becoming more of a joker. I started laughing. I was a quiet, unhappy kid and eventually, I got released. I've ended up OK.

I grew up very, very poor. All around me was violence and danger. I felt like an outsider most of my childhood. I was also so very uncomfortable with my tall, skinny body. When I started fencing as a teenager, a whole new world opened up for me. I met many wonderful and kind people. I became strong and graceful. I felt special. I found my talents. I learned to keep working toward my dreams. And my dreams were coming true.

But just as I learned to love being an athlete I also began to fear losing it all. The self-confidence I was gaining would all disappear when the fear and rage would take over. Not only was I afraid of losing the fencing competition, I was afraid of losing the respect I had earned and my newfound identity as a powerful athlete. If I were losing a bout, I would have temper tantrums. I would throw off my fencing mask. I would scream. I would hurl my glove across the floor. I sometimes even cursed at the officials.

I received a scholarship to college. I got to travel around the world. I became a champion. My life improved dramatically. I had earned tremendous respect. I was a celebrity. Now I had even more to lose. I was always afraid of ending up starving or homeless. In my mind, if I were not winning at fencing I would lose everything I had achieved.

So the uncontrollable anger after losing a match or tournament continued. My unruly behavior only occurred when I was competing. I had very little patience for making mistakes, and a fencer definitely needs patience. I didn't really like how the anger made me look and feel. It gave me a tight feeling in my throat. It made it hard for me to breathe. I was embarrassed about my anger, but I couldn't help it.

I never thought that I could change until my boyfriend, a fellow competitor, said something to me. He told me that my behavior was childish and a total waste of energy. He said that my actions were giving people the wrong opinion of me. It was as if I woke up one day and realized how destructive my anger really was. My love for him and my desire to have his respect caused me to try to work on controlling my anger.