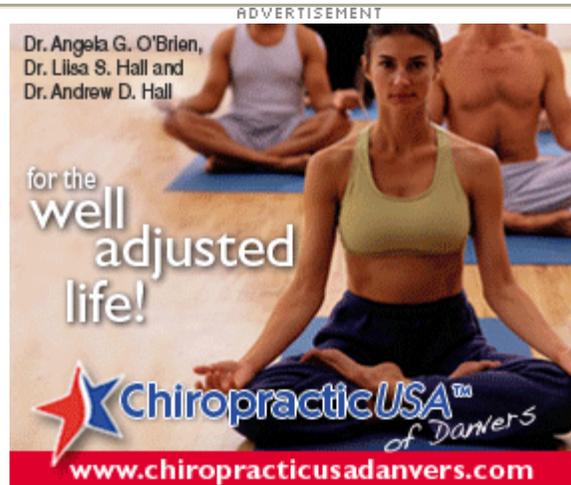


Olympic fencer Molly Sliney shares story of struggle and triumph



By Sally Kerans/Special to the Danvers Herald
GateHouse News Service

NEW! Thu Sep 27, 2007, 02:07 PM EDT

Danvers -

Olympic fencer Molly Sliney spent the day at Highlands School last Friday, and while her sword is what caught students' attention, her powerful story is what they took home. The athlete, coach and motivational speaker shared not only her fencing expertise, but also her struggle with dyslexia, telling students she is proof that anyone can set goals and achieve them if they learn to believe in themselves.

Fencing is like chess in motion, Sliney said as she instructed classes in the gymnasium in the basic stance and movements a fencer uses. She taught students to advance, retreat, lunge, and recover, and challenged them in a game. She told them the brain is the biggest muscle in your body, that there are three things you can do with your hands — touch, pull away, or go around.

At the end of the day, Sliney armed Assistant Principal Edju Gasinowski and student Tommy Templeton with fencing gear, including screened face masks, padded jackets, sword, and the basic rules. First one to score five touches on their opponent within the allotted time prevails. Templeton won.

"It was hot inside that mask," said the victorious fifth-grader.
"It was hard," Gasinowski said.

Sliney's many accomplishments in her sport are impressive: She was the youngest person ever to qualify for the Junior World Competition at age 13, three years after her first lesson. In addition to her two Olympic berths, in 1988 and 1992, she also earned a Gold medal in the U.S. Pan American Women's Fall Competitions twice, in 1991 and 1987. She was a four-time NCAA team champion and was also named University of Notre Dame's Female Athlete of the Decade during her college career there in the 1980s. Fencing competition took her to Switzerland, France, Russia, Hungary, and Cuba — and, of course, Seoul in 1988 and Barcelona in 1992.

And yet, the two-time member of the U.S. Olympic Fencing team points to something else as her proudest accomplishment: her degree from Notre Dame.

Not bad for a kid who couldn't read until the age of 9.

Every Olympian has a story of how they reached the Olympic stadium, said Sliney. Hers began as a fourth-grader struggling and failing to learn to read and feeling her self-esteem crumbling.

The crowd was silent as she related the story of the fourth grade spelling bee. She had studied her spelling words every night for the week leading up to the class contest. Her teacher gave her “the easiest word on the list” to spell. Sliney got it wrong. Some of her classmates laughed. She returned to her seat, frustrated and stung by their taunts of “dumb” and “stupid.”

“Boys and girls, when people say things about you,” Sliney said, “you have two choices. You can ignore them or you can believe them. That day, in fourth grade, I made the wrong choice. I decided to believe that I was dumb and stupid.”

For students to hear from an Olympian that she made a wrong choice was perhaps as instructive as Sliney’s explanation of dyslexia, her “silent disability.” She described it as a wall between the letters on a page. She drew a backwards B on the blackboard, and a backwards C. She explained how dyslexia feels — like static on a radio, as signals in her eyes and ears get crossed in the brain.

She explained that self-esteem is how you feel about yourself, and said that her struggles with reading made her feel bad about herself.

When her family invited a younger sibling’s teacher to dinner, Sliney discovered her passion. The teacher mentioned her hobby and offered to show Molly and her four siblings some of the equipment she had. Soon, they were sparring in the driveway. She was matched up with her older brother and won.

“And it felt good,” she said.

Her father took her to see a Joe Pechinsky, a Peabody firefighter who only learned about fencing because his niece asked him if he could teach her the sport. He went to the library and read every fencing book on the shelves — another powerful lesson to the young girl for whom books represented struggle and frustration.

He gave Molly fencing lessons and more, including the first book she ever read on her own: “Little Women.”

“He just reaches in, turns on a light, and amazing things happen,” Sliney said of her coach. Pechinsky started and remains affiliated with the Tanner City Fencing Club. The little girl who could barely look him in the eye on first meeting would become his fifth Olympian.

After three years of lessons, Sliney went in to Cambridge and qualified for the Junior World competition.

But she failed to qualify the next two years in a row. She decided to quit. After two months, she missed it. Her dad had said if she wanted to return to it, to let him know. She went to him and informed him of her choice to return. Not so fast, he said. How do I know you really want it?

She wrote down what it meant to her, and found that she’d written that she knew that she could achieve.

That was enough for her father to drive her back to Joe.

Soon after, Sliney decided she wanted to attend college. She told her special education teacher about her aspiration.

“You’ll have to get better grades,” she was told.

Just as she'd come to approach her sport one bout at a time, she tackled the "how" of her college dream one assignment at a time.

Every goal is like a ladder and has to be reached one rung at a time, she said, and the foundation is believing in yourself; focus on what you can do, not what you can't, she said.

Sliney said she learned to talk to herself as though she was talking to her best friend.

"I'm my best friend," she said.

She won a full fencing scholarship to Notre Dame. There, she was teamed up with a professor who taught her to say her ideas out loud before trying to write them down, a major step forward in dealing with her dyslexia.

Sliney's visit made an impression. Second-graders Kito and Dylan said the sport looked hard but that they'd like to try it some day. As for setting and achieving goals, some students shared theirs. Francesca Napolitano's goal is to do better in math this year and to be an actress in the future. Ana Vaka hopes to play in the Women's National Basketball Association some day. Sliney's advice: pick your sport (or activity) and do the very best you can.

"Read. Study. Do your homework, show up, and ask for help," Sliney told the students.

"My biggest accomplishment is to believe in myself, to set goals, and achieve them," she said. "And it's something every one of you can do."

Sally Kerans is a member of the Highlands School PAC, a former reporter for the Danvers Herald, and a former state representative for Danvers.