

Good Coaches Make Good Fencers

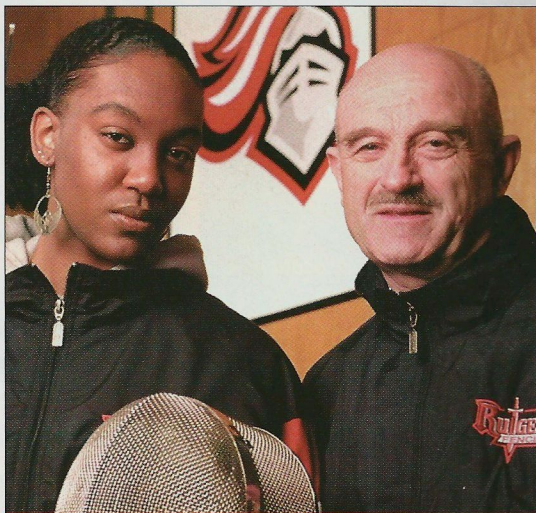
ONCE FORCED TO WALK AWAY FROM COACHING, YEFIM LITVAN CAME TO THE U.S. AND TURNED RUTGERS INTO A FENCING POWERHOUSE.

As a young man in Khrushchev's Soviet Union, Yefim Litvan spent four hours each day practicing lunges, parries, and ripostes. Talented enough as a teenager to compete nationally in saber, he eventually became the head coach of the Select Ukrainian Fencing Team. But his career came to an abrupt halt in 1979 when Soviet officials forced him to step down after he dared to apply for a visa to leave the country.

A decade passed—Litvan spent much of it working as a masseur—before Gorbachev lifted travel restrictions, finally allowing Litvan and his family to emigrate to the U.S.

"Getting out had always been a dream; I had visited cousins in Czechoslovakia in 1979 and couldn't believe what a better life they had," says Litvan, who returned to coaching part-

time at the University of Pennsylvania, then Rutgers. Nine years after coming to the Banks, Litvan can look back at a string of significant accomplishments: nine straight NCAA fencing championship competitions, ranking among the



LITVAN COACHED NCAA CHAMP ALEXIS JEMAL (DC'03).

top 10 in 7 of those years, and the pride of mentoring 50 NCAA tournament qualifiers, 15 of whom achieved all-

American status. His most recent thrill: coaching Alexis Jemal (DC'03), the 2003 NCAA champion in saber and a potential Olympian.

If a coach in a more high-profile sport at Rutgers had achieved what Litvan has, his or her bust would sit outside the RAC. "What makes Yefim different from other coaches is his creativity, energy, and competitiveness," says Cliff Bayer, a former University of Pennsylvania fencer who went

to the 1996 and 2000 Olympics under Litvan's tutelage. "In fencing, the element of surprise in outwitting your opponent is crucial. His influence in those areas helped me bring my own game forward."

At a typical Rutgers practice, Litvan, 63, gives individual lessons to the fencing team members—12 men and 12 women. "It is like the piano in the sense you cannot achieve a high level without coaching,"

says Litvan, mentor to six national champions. "I teach tactical skills, but the mental aspect of fencing—anticipating an opponent by studying their strengths and weaknesses and knowing your own—is just as important."

Jemal says that's part of what she's learned from Litvan. "Saber is so fast that you must have a plan," she says. "Yefim can demonstrate strategies that will set off a chain of reactions. We talked about when it was best to strike or hold, and about body language. Sometimes an opponent will tip her hat by tensing up. Other times the angle of a blade may give away a move."

One of Litvan's goals since he became a full-time Rutgers coach in 2000 is to make sure that fencing—one of the original sports in the modern Olympics—receives the recognition he believes it deserves. "When you win a national championship in any sport, it is a testament to hard work," says Litvan, a veteran of 10,000 matches. "At Rutgers, we are frustrated that more people aren't paying attention, and we are working to change that." —B.G. O