

Hackettstown's Eric Gurnowski wins national fencing title

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Hackettstown's Eric Gurnowski, an Ohio State University freshman, took first place in the U-20 Junior Men's epee during the U.S. Fencing Association's Junior Olympics last month in New Mexico.

It always pays to listen carefully when the master speaks.

That's what Hackettstown resident Eric Gurnowski has been doing, and it's paid off handsomely.

"From Day One we developed a great rapport," said Yakov Danilenko. **"He trusted my expertise 110 percent. I developed a fencing style exclusively for him. He had the courage to trust me when I told him it would work. And it worked just fine."**

It's difficult to argue with that. Gurnowski, an Ohio State University freshman who trains at Danilenko's Medeo Fencing Club in Bridgewater, took first place in the age Under-20 Junior Men's epee during the U.S. Fencing Association's Junior Olympics competition Feb. 13-16.

Seeded just 41st among 203 competitors after struggling during pool qualifying, Gurnowski sliced and diced his way through the direct-elimination table to claim the gold medal in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Amazing willpower, concentration and determination," said Maestro Danilenko regarding Gurnowski's formula for success in the Junior Olympics.

"It was a matter of staying focused the whole time," said Gurnowski via phone from Columbus, Ohio last week. "That's the key thing, and being patient and playing every move."

Especially a little maneuver called the counter-attack four, which his OSU coach, Alexander Smirden, encouraged him to utilize in the U-20 championship final against Corwin Duncan. Gurnowski defeated Duncan 15-9, avenging two previous setbacks to the Washington, D.C. fencer.

"My new coach (Smirden) told me one solid move would beat him -- one thing I'd been missing," said Gurnowski, referring to the counter-attack four. "If I learned that, I could beat him."

Gurnowski had represented the New Jersey Division while qualifying for the Junior Olympics and posted a 4-2 record, including a tough loss to an Ohio State teammate who scored four touches (points) in the last minute of the match, with the deciding touch coming in overtime.

But he was at his peak in Albuquerque.

"Eric is a great person and a very talented fencer," said Danilenko. "He has a lot of good qualities which are helping him become a champion. There is something about Eric which elevates him above many other good fencers. He is very smart. He fences as if he is playing chess. In my opinion this is the best quality a fencer can have."

Gurnowski, who only began fencing as a Hackettstown High freshman to keep busy during the winter, became the sixth HHS fencer to capture a state championship when won epee honors a year ago.

He also was a finalist in the Division 1 USFA North American Cup. That division includes A-rated "senior" fencers, ages 14 and up, who usually have many more years of training and competitive experience going for them. In 2007 he won a Junior National championship.

"Fencing has provided me with opportunities I never would have had otherwise, like traveling to Europe," said Gurnowski, who's studying criminology at Ohio State. "It also helped me get into the college of my choice."

Attending OSU -- one of the country's largest schools -- on a partial scholarship, Gurnowski is an alternate on a Buckeyes' squad which was seeking its second straight NCAA national championship last weekend. Ohio State entered the tournament at Penn State rated fourth in the country but the host school came away with the title while the Buckeyes were third.

His sister, Elyse, is a junior starter on Ohio State's women's team, which also was ranked No. 4 prior to the NCAA tourney.

"At first it was a bit intimidating being at such a large school," said Gurnowski, "but now I really like it here. I love it, actually."