

How Olympic fencer Kat Holmes stays sharp

By Tim Nelson | With help from Future Coach and close friend Matt Fleekop, one of the best athletes in fencing keeps moving forward through lockdowns, med school, and the challenges of chasing her dreams.



Matt Fleekop



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When 2020 began, Kat Holmes had her year mapped out. First, she was going to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics and cap her fencing career by competing for gold. She would then jump almost immediately from the podium into the challenges of medical school in New York. But by the time Kat and her teammates “fled” an Olympic qualifier in Hungary to get back home before America’s borders shut down in March, it was clear that the pandemic had other plans.

Her dreams of standing atop the Olympic podium were soon replaced by the reality of standing on MCAT textbooks in her living room so she could get some extra height for deadlifting. Instead of feeling the butterflies before competing on her sport’s biggest stage, Kat was nervous about something very different as she lifted Home Depot buckets filled with bricks, sand, and cement in her second floor apartment: “my biggest fear the whole year was that I was gonna fall through the floor and die.”

Kat did more than just survive those challenging circumstances. She managed to put in consistent work day in and day out, taking advantage of her forced time away from fencing to progress through a workout plan with the help of longtime trainer and current Future coach Matt Fleekop. By pairing their rock-solid relationship with a flexible approach, an unstoppable mindset, and the right set of tools, Kat’s fitness regimen thrived at a time when it would’ve been all too easy to buckle under the pressure.

From fencer to athlete

While the dynamic training duo Matt lovingly refers to as “the swole patrol” may be tight today, he and Kat initially came from two different worlds. When they started working together in Princeton’s weight room in the summer of 2016, Kat was fresh off of fulfilling her dreams of fencing at the Olympics for the first time. After coming back from Rio, she realized that “I was a fencer, but I wasn’t an athlete.” Meanwhile, Matt “had no experience with fencing before coming to Princeton,” but nonetheless threw himself into obsessively studying the sport. Alongside conversations with Kat, he analyzed tons of matches on YouTube, noting the jumps, squats, lunges, and other movements a fencer like Kat relies on to evade and attack her opponent.

Already a believer in the value of mastering the fundamentals, Matt realized that a little bit of focus on increasing the efficiency of these movements could go a long way.

“Fencing is such a technical sport,” Matt says of what he learned. “If you improve your technique a tiny bit, it can be the difference between beating everybody or not even winning a match.”

Improving that technique was a matter of breaking things down to their basics — so basic, in fact, that Kat recalls that she probably didn’t touch a barbell her entire first year of training with Matt. But by establishing that foundation, Kat made progress where it mattered most: on the fencing strip. Not only did she anchor a team that won gold at the 2018 World Championships, but she did it while making a name for herself as one of — if not the — most dominant athletes in

fencing.

“Because of all the work that Matt and I had put in, I’m able to go harder and longer, and I can maintain a level of strength and endurance when I’m out on the strip that a lot of other fencers can’t,” Kat says. “I’m still working on how to best implement that in my fencing, but that’s kind of what I’m known for internationally.”



Two heavy buckets, one flexible strategy

Those results made it easy for Kat to trust Matt’s process as the Olympics neared. But as lockdowns forced workouts to move from Princeton’s gym to Kat’s living room, keeping things moving in the right direction would require new

equipment, an unprecedented level of flexibility, and a better way to communicate.

Because she figured the Olympics would still happen *eventually*, Kat stayed ready, acquiring an ad hoc collection of workout gear during the early days of lockdown. That started with the aforementioned Home Depot buckets, but eventually grew to incorporate a “janky, old school” barbell setup, an old, noisy exercise bike, TRX bands, a pullup bar, and anything else she could get a hold of to add weight or modify movements. Eventually, through some help from Matt and Future, she’d even replace those Home Depot buckets with an actual trap bar

Through every iteration of her home gym, Matt was able to offer updated workout plans that kept things engaging and productive while avoiding simplicity and stagnation. He devised a number of different programs meant to ramp up in intensity over a period of weeks, mixing in new circuits, tempos, and weights to focus on technique, explosiveness, and everything else that would help Kat whenever it was time to fence again.

Matt also made sure his workouts pushed Kat mentally, introducing competitive elements like maximizing the number of circuits she could endure in 15 minutes, or seeing how fast she could complete five rounds. During her involuntary exile from the fencing strip, tapping into the competitive fire and constant quest for progress that he’d grown to admire in Kat over the years was a useful way to meet the challenge of lifting under lockdown.

“Kat is super driven. Whether she loves it or hates it, she’s going to do the workout, and I think we did a decent job of keeping things fresh,” Matt says of that period. “It was all about ‘how can we keep pushing Kat forward and make sure we continue to challenge her from a mental standpoint when it can be kind of easy to clock out?’”

Swapping spreadsheets for smarter communication

Monitoring Kat’s at-home training was initially a process of exchanging spreadsheets, but neither she nor Matt enjoyed manually entering data which they’d then have to translate into actionable next steps. Matt’s introduction of Future to their routine in mid-2020 proved key to streamlining their planning and calibrating their efforts, both within individual workouts and over the course of an entire Olympic cycle.

Kat noted that she sends Matt “lots of videos” of her training, letting him offer instantaneous feedback between sets to keep her technique dialed in — a far cry from watching fencing videos on YouTube. Coupled with visual evidence and integrations like heart rate data, Matt has access to more empirical, contextualized info about Kat’s response to the day’s exercise.

That often serves as the pretext to start conversations where Kat can “be super honest with Matt” about how she’s feeling. Not only does that help keep her insane work ethic from occasionally working against her, but it lets the two explore adjustments to recovery, nutrition, and sleep that can lead to further progress.

“I think especially with the watch, being able to track my heart rate is really important, not just to say ‘we’re hitting those goals,’ but so [Matt] can see when I’m really tired or my heart rate is spiking,” Kat says. “Because we know each other so well, he can be like ‘are you doing okay?’ or ‘did you just push it really hard?’ In a lot of ways, it enables us to take it to that next level because we have all those additional metrics.”

Kat readily admits that Matt’s tailored training plans were “the scaffolding of my life” during lockdown. But his ability to use Future to tailor workouts to any set of conditions has arguably been just as crucial since she’s resumed her whirlwind schedule of training camps and competitions — all while enrolled in med school. No matter if she has access to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs or just some floor space and some bands, all it takes is a quick video or message about whatever equipment’s at her disposal and Matt can get her moving.

And whether she needs to squeeze something quick into a travel day or access a few different workouts to kill time and stay sane while quarantining in a Russian hotel room, Kat knows that Matt has a way to mix things up and move her forward regardless of the circumstances.

“She can send me a message that says ‘bodyweight only’ or ‘I’m going to this place next,’ and it’s not a major back and forth,” Matt says of the coordination process. “It’s good for busy schedules. We can communicate efficiently but also really effectively, which is huge.”



Two lifters who lift each other

Don't let that example of in-app communication fool you into thinking that Matt and Kat's conversations start and end with weights and reps. Kat admires that Matt "trains the person, not just the athlete," and values him both as a coach who leads by example and a friend whose willingness to listen has kept her in the right headspace during difficult moments.

"I remember one time I was in Qatar, and I had a horrible competition," she recalls. "I texted him, like 'I'm struggling. I feel burnt out. I don't know what to do.' And he responded right away. He was like 'I've been there. I know other athletes who've been there. We'll get through this.'"

For Matt, it's more than just Kat's "mindset, work ethic, and ability," that stand out: it's the way she combines an inner drive to improve with an unwavering belief in the process, even in situations that might frustrate other athletes.

"A lot of athletes don't like to be coached," Matt observes. "But Kat is willing to go from squatting 185 pounds back down to 95 pounds to work on form and technique. Sometimes as humans that can be a hit to our ego... but Kat's humble enough to do that."

Eyes (and mind) on the prize

All of those qualities flow from Kat's determination to do absolutely everything she can to succeed in a sport where the line between winning and losing is quite literally razor-thin. Training and growing as an athlete with the help of someone in whom she can place unwavering trust not only grants her a physical edge over opponents, but a mental one.

"In life and in fencing, there's a subtle dichotomy between knowing you can win and believing you can win, because believing has that component of emotional salience," Kat asserts. "I think that all of the work and everything that Matt and I put in goes a long way towards that transition from knowing to believing."

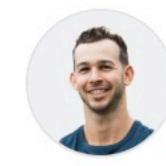
While the team's performance at Tokyo may have registered as a disappointment, Kat knows she still has more to give to fencing. After weighing the decision with help from Matt and her fencing coach, she's decided that the sacrifices that come with balancing med school courses, workouts, and international competition are a worthy price to pay if it means she won't have to end her fencing career wondering what could have been.

At times over the next two years, that'll mean working out first thing in the morning and spending the rest of the day studying, all before jetting off to fence on the other side of the world. But it also means there will be days like her and Matt's first in-person workout since Covid hit, which Matt described as "one of my favorite workouts" of the past two years. Days where Matt pushes Kat to new heights, and she pushes him right back — all while having way more of a good time than you'd expect.

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From lifting buckets to smiling through the sweat, the working relationship between Kat and Matt may seem to shatter the idea of what it's like to train for the Olympics. But Kat sees it much more simply than that.

“He's like my buddy. I mean, I love that.”



Matt Fleekop

Lifestyle

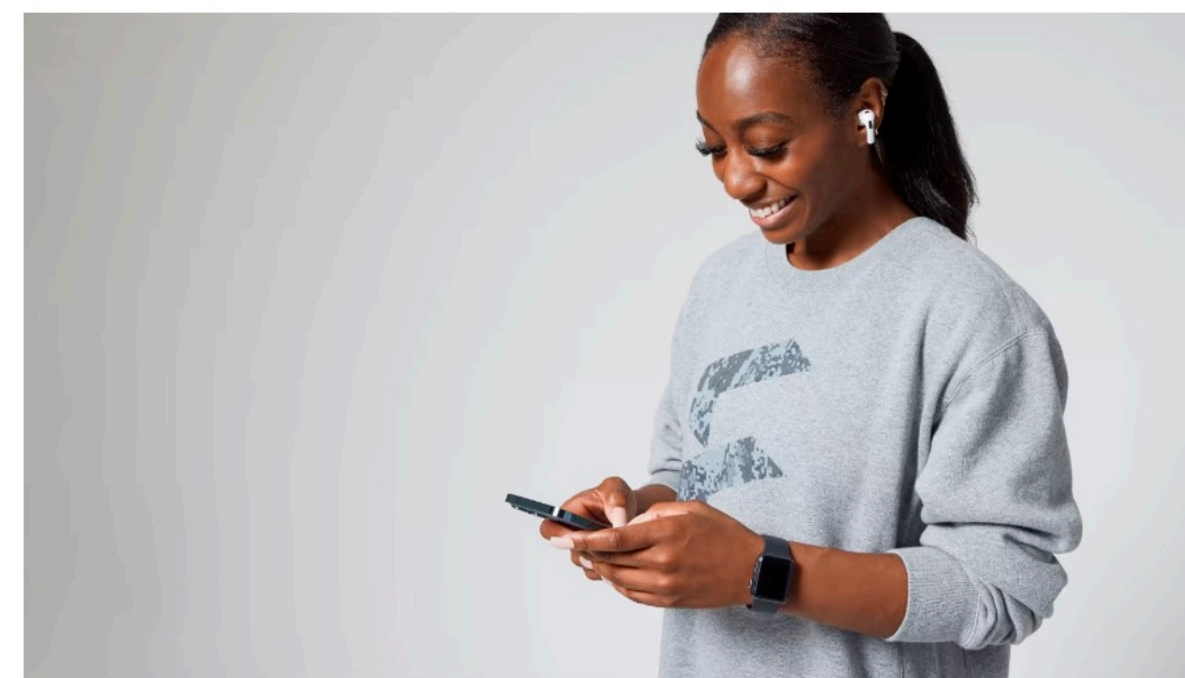
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