

Dear Dr. Pat Kraft,

We wanted to reach out before NCAA Championships finishes to provide some context before you watch our team in action. While our season has had many positives, thanks to the dedication of our teammates and assistant coaches, we feel we have to address serious concerns regarding our head coach's leadership. After speaking with athletes across both the men's and women's teams, there is a clear, shared frustration with our head coach's leadership. We feel it is important to formally communicate these concerns to ensure the program continues to thrive and uphold the strong reputation it has built over the years.

One of the most pressing concerns we all had is our head coach's repeated absences from important competitions. Having our head coach and only foil weapon coach's presence at meets is absolutely critical, not only because our squad relies on him for tactical coaching but also for team morale, recruitment visibility, and for representation of Penn State as an elite fencing program I know it should be. However, this season, he has missed the Temple Open, a significant preseason meet where freshman and newer returns get their first taste of college fencing and get comfortable fencing as a Nittany Lion. He skipped a meet at UPenn which is a two day meet where we fenced against schools in our region, where all the schools had their full coaching staff. He missed the Duke and UNC meets where we fenced important schools in our region and dominant schools like Notre Dame and we were again left without our head coach's presence and guidance. Our last meet of the season where we needed all the support to push us into regionals he also chose not to attend. Perhaps most concerning, he plans to miss part of the NCAA Championships which we are hosting because he has an exam. Our team needs a coach who is willing to be there for their athletes, to guide them through competitions and ensure they have the resources and support they need to perform at their best. His repeated absence is demoralizing and signals an entire lack of investment in this program's success. Fencers on other teams notice, coaches at other schools notice, and most importantly our teammates notice and this impacts everyone greatly

Another major concern we have is the amount of people who want to leave this program. Our freshman year it was unheard of to even think about transferring yet when Matteo came in, there has been a massive culture shift, because of his actions, or lack thereof, have played a major role in driving athletes away. Three of our freshman recruits have already fully committed to leaving our university after only one season. With many more of our teammates across multiple squads considering transferring. Our locker room talk almost always involves someone sharing their dissatisfaction with the coaching environment and a general feeling of disillusionment with the program. Other teams and coaches have taken notice, and we are already hearing about a growing perception that our program is "falling apart." This perception damages recruiting efforts because of how small the fencing world is. When I was in high school I dreamed of being a Nittany Lion. Now it feels like our program has the same prestige as a division 3 school. This level of turnover athletes should feel inspired, supported, and motivated to grow; not eager to leave.

As I'm sure you know Penn State Fencing has always been one of the top-performing programs in the country, but this season has seen a clear decline in results, particularly in the Foil squad.

Our team has consistently underperformed against schools we should be beating. Schools like UNC, Yale, Ohio State, Boston College, Duke and many others who qualified significantly fewer fencers to NCAAs last year have been beating us, a clear sign of the struggle our team is facing. Beyond that, the foil squad only qualified one fencer for NCAA championships where other squads were successfully able to qualify three or four fencers, which shows our schools decline in results is not representative of a lack of talent but in a failure of our leadership structures. The foil squad is not losing because we lack skilled fencers; they are losing because we are not being coached, managed, or supported effectively by Matteo.

A coach's role extends far beyond just showing up to competitions, which is already a struggle for Matteo, they are responsible for fostering a culture within their team. Unfortunately, our head coach is simply not present in the ways that matter. At practice he spends all of his time on his computer or phone rather than actually engaging with athletes, provisioning technical instruction or actually coaching. In fact when our squad, the foil squad, goes to do footwork we often do it with the sabre squad because he is not able to give us the time. At team dinners when he actually chooses to travel with the team rather than building team morale or engaging with our teammates he sits on his phone with AirPods in completely isolating himself from the group. This is in stark contrast to the fencers and assistant coaches who all put their phones in the middle of the table to promote team unity. During competitions he is absent and uninvolved and fails to provide guidance, often relying on fencers to coach their teammates rather than providing direct instruction. Even during our pre-NCAA's camp he left the camp two days before it finished and came back the following weekend with a tan. While our fencers were working hard he decided supporting them at the training camp was simply not worth his time. A coach who fails to communicate, support, or inspire his team cannot be effective in leading a program to success.

An example of Matteo's inability to foster a positive team culture and maintain professional relationships with his athletes, occurred last year when he removed a scholarship athlete from the roster due to a personal disagreement. Rather than addressing the issue through discussion, he chose to escalate a conflict that, from the team's perspective, was non-existent. Through this, both the men's and women's fencing teams chose to write petitions to advocate for her to remain on the team. With the only people who did not sign the letter doing so out of fear that they would be retaliated against for standing up for what they believe in. In fact, this letter is being written anonymously and collectively because a large portion of fencers fear similar repercussions for speaking out. While we understand nothing can be done to change what happened in the past, the fact that many were afraid to speak out due to concerns about retaliation demonstrates the kind of team run by this head coach. The fact that he prioritized a personal disagreement over the collective wishes of his athletes, coaching staff, and the best interests of the team is deeply concerning. It sets a toxic precedent, one that signals to all of us that anyone who falls out of favor with the head coach, for reasons unrelated to performance, risks being dismissed without recourse. This is not the culture that Penn State Fencing should be fostering.

Another problem that has really stuck out is his lack of involvement at the North American Cups (NACs). At an NAC in Atlantic City earlier this season when one of our fencers made it onto the finals stage for his semi final bout, everyone from Penn State came to watch, even people who

were currently fencing and alumni ran over to help support him, both Renata and Balazs were there along with both Adam Kashzubowski and Wes Glon but our current head coach, Matteo, was watching and coaching one of his former students from his old private fencing club. This actually led to Neil's dad and former alumni, Serge Lillov to call him out asking what he was doing there as he noticed Matteo was neither coaching, recruiting, or really representing the University positively. This speaks to how poorly our school is being represented. At this same NAC, there was also a college fair which nearly included every other college team, our competitors, came to represent their school and recruit US fencers but Matteo chose that Penn State not send a representative. If the head coach is promising to bring in great athletes then there should be recruitments at these NAC as this is how most of us got recruitments from previous head coaches. It is so upsetting for us to see our school reputation go down the drain with many other coaches and alums coming up to us and asking what is happening with our team. Numerous teammates continued going to NACs and were yet to see Matteo in the venue for most of the event and even coached them. Not only is this absence from the coach having a negative impact on their result, but it is also a missed opportunity for recruiting, which is absolutely critical for our team's growth and presence.

To further emphasize our concerns, we'd like to highlight some statements and struggles from our teammates who have personally experienced the effects of our head coach's lack of leadership.

*A sophomore men's foil fencer was bullied by Matteo. He is a top in the world yet he was called lazy and Matteo even told him "you can't even win Asian Championships which are so easy". The fencer then felt so guilty about his bronze medal and texted in the groupchat "I am sorry for my result".*

*A senior men's fencer found out his cousin had committed suicide the a few days before the meet. He was willing to push on and fence at the meet, but was having a lot of difficulty keeping his mind on fencing. Matteo came and questioned him about why this fencer's performance was subpar and when told the reason why responded, "how is this my problem" and walked away.*

*A junior men's fencer after taking a video of teammates sitting in an unsafe condition in an overcrowded van on the way to the Temple Open, and posting it in our group chat was told to delete his message by Matteo and reprimanded for making the team look bad.*

*A sophomore women's fencer whose brother was an alumni of the program and who recently passed away from cancer, was brought to tears because of comments Matteo made. While we were discussing repainting the gym Matteo asked us to remove the pictures on the walls saying "we don't need these dead people watching over us", knowing her brother was included in the pictures removed.*

*A senior men's fencer was asked to share his opinion on changes which needed to be made to the team and in return was ignored and insulted via text message after respectfully making suggestions.*

*A junior men's fencer drove himself to support the team at our regional championship and paid for his own accommodation, and was ignored by our coach. Matteo walked past him to say hi to other fencers without acknowledging him. It was only when our former head coach spoke to him did Matteo feel the need to acknowledge his student, making him feel unseen and disrespected.*

*A freshman women's fencer was assured she would qualify to NCAA championships after our regional championship by Matteo, he even announced to the whole team that she had qualified causing her to cry, however he was incorrect and she did not qualify. One might think this was an honest mistake but he did the exact same thing to a sophomore women's fencer the previous year.*

*A freshman men's fencer was cursed at during practice and called stupid for a mistake he made during a practice bout. "Can you take a parry? Are you stupid?" was the direct quote from Matteo.*

*A freshman men's fencer for the first three months of school went to classes with a backpack that has "LIU Fencing" on it, given to him by his national team teammates after not receiving one from Penn State. Because Matteo was not able to put a gear request in in a timely fashion.*

*A senior women's foil fencer needed to get surgery to fix her achilles and instead of supporting her through this rough process he was convincing her to not proceed with it, which would have only injured her more.*

Our goal in writing this letter is not to complain but to protect and strengthen the legacy of Penn State Fencing. This program has a long history of excellence, and we want to ensure that continues long after we graduate. However, it is deeply troubling to see the program deteriorate due to ineffective leadership. If these issues are not addressed, the program's trajectory will continue downward, damaging recruitment, team morale, and overall competitiveness. We urge you to take these concerns seriously and work toward a solution that will restore Penn State Fencing's reputation as a dominant force in collegiate fencing. We appreciate your time in reading this and would be happy to discuss these concerns further. Thank you for your dedication to Penn State Athletics; we trust that you share our commitment to keeping this program strong.

The Penn State Men's and Women's Fencing Teams