

**An excerpt from Jeff Bukantz's book *Closing the Distance: Chasing a Father's Olympic Fencing Legacy*:**

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When I started Forest Hills High School as a sophomore in 1971, I never thought of going out for the fencing team. I wasn't even sure that I wanted to go into competitive fencing at that point. It was like when I was reluctant to get a start in the sport: I was scared to death of trying to follow in Danny Bukantz's giant footsteps.

What I do know is that despite practicing at the best fencing club in New York City, getting lessons from Dad and his superstar friends, and trying to be the world's biggest jock, I didn't once consider joining the high school team.

Well, my junior year all that changed. I was daydreaming during gym class as the teacher, Lenny Messitte, took attendance. Out of nowhere, he started asking for recruits to the fencing team. I didn't consider it for a second. Then he looked at me and blurted out, "Hey, Bukantz! I heard you fence. You better get your fat ass to the tryouts."

That, ladies and gentlemen, was the first defining moment of my fencing career. It wasn't my choice, it wasn't glamorous, but rather public peer pressure from the high school's fencing coach. It wasn't that I was the great offspring of the legendary Danny Bukantz, but rather a "fat ass."

It was the beginning of what would be a humbling experience.

Although I immediately thought I was the greatest thing to happen to fencing since it'd been electrified, I learned in rapid fashion that I was anything but. In fact, I was only the fourth best out of the six-man team that first year. And worse, I was so fat that I could barely fit into my fencing jacket.

And while it was cool to be accepted so easily into the fencing family at such a young age, that acceptance meant nothing once I started competing. Not only would my name *not* instill fear into my opponents, in some cases, it would give them more incentive to stick me senseless.

I had a bull's-eye on my back and a chip on my shoulder.

In fact, this is exactly what happened during a high school match in 1972. I may have been the kin of a fencing legend, but I was also a neophyte, not very good, and a little pudgy. As soon as the fencers from Cardozo High School caught wind of my last name and its connection to Olympic greatness, they set out to destroy me. Which they did. I lost both of my bouts badly that day. And – to boot – it was the first time Dad ever watched me fence competitively.

It was a Friday afternoon at Benjamin Cardozo High School in Queens. For Dad, Friday was always a golf day, a deserved break from his midtown Manhattan dental practice, but he made it to the auditorium just in time for my first competitive bout against Mitch Dorfman, a guy

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half my size, three times as fast, and, quite frankly, ten times better than me. As Dad watched from the stands, Dorfman destroyed me, 5-1. As you can imagine, I felt as low as humanly possible. To make matters worse, the bout's referee, Olympian Marty Lang, made his way over to my end of the strip and said, in clear earshot of Dad, "Bukantz, you couldn't hit the side of a barn!"

How ironic that the meet would be held on the raised stage of the Cardozo auditorium. I was knocked right off the pedestal I envisioned myself on; the fall was that much farther.

My second bout and second loss was against Eric Rosenberg, who actually became one of my best friends later in life. He was the one who eventually told me about the Cardozo fencers and their desire to show up the fat son of Danny Bukantz in his first competitive outing.

Over the next fifteen years, Rosenberg and I traveled around the country and the world competing in fencing tournaments. Between practice and competition, we've probably fenced each other hundreds of times. And – to put it nicely – I avenged this loss in some of the most important bouts of my career.

These early high school competitions were definitely reality checks. True to form, Dad never piled on the pressure. Instead, he advised me in the areas I had to work on and promised to help me improve whenever I wanted. His was a loving style that I now employ with my own son, though I tend to be somewhat critical. Dad was never, *ever*, critical of me.

Sometime during that first competitive season, I fenced in an historic bout.

I was trailing my opponent, 0-4. Quite frankly, I didn't think I could ever come back from a 0-4 deficit. I'd never done it and it seemed like an impossible task. If this guy was good enough to hit me four times in a row without me landing a single touch, how on God's Green Earth could I manage to win this bout?

I evaluated my technique and realized I wasn't keeping my distance. I was too close. I was letting this guy get the better of me. So, going back to the never-fail mantra of Danny Bukantz, I decided to start keeping the distance. I also stayed within my defensive game and scored on five straight ripostes.

I did the seemingly impossible! I came back to win the match 5-4. I was so proud; I couldn't wait to tell Dad when he arrived home from work. He finally walked through the door with his fedora atop his head and *The New York Post* folded under his arm.

"Hey, Dad, listen to this!" I said, swelled with pride. "I was down 0-4 in this bout today, but I came back and beat the guy!"

Without missing a beat, the great Danny Bukantz made his own winning riposte: "Schmuck! How did you let the guy get a 4-0 lead in the first place?!"

I had my work cut out for me. Dad was a living legend, a lovable guy, a four-time Olympian, a four-time individual National Champion, a nine-time team National Champion, the highest rated international referee, and World Maccabiah Champion in 1950.

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I could barely win a high school bout.

Going into it, though, I knew that it would be nearly impossible to duplicate his career, let alone any of his competitive or refereeing accomplishments. But I set my bar high. Every fencer dreams of winning a national championship and competing in the Olympics. But I also dreamed of following in my father’s footsteps. Both dreams went hand in hand; I was taking on a monumental task. I knew that, too.

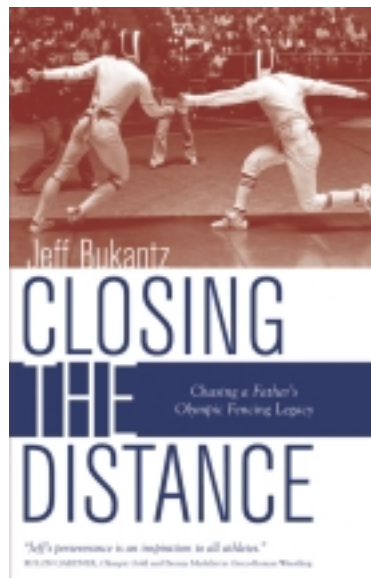
But, while I did so willingly – and while Dad never pushed me (well, maybe a few “nudges”) – I was getting myself into a no-win scenario. Anything less than a national championship or a spot on an Olympic team would render me a failure of sorts. At least that’s how I looked at it. It was a daunting and scary hill to climb.

Dad, being Mr. Perfect, naturally spent his time reassuring me that whatever I accomplished in the fencing world would be great, and that he was just so proud of me for even trying my hand at the sport. I listened, I believed him, and his words took some edge off my worries about following in his footsteps.

But let’s be honest: I spent the next thirty-five years trying.

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**To order your own copy of *Closing the Distance*, please visit  
[www.jeffbukantz.com](http://www.jeffbukantz.com).**



*Closing the Distance: Chasing a Father's Olympic Fencing Legacy*, by Jeff Bukantz  
(Acanthus Publishing, 2006)