

A Guide for Fencers and Parents

You, Your Kids, The Swords, and Surviving
it all with your Sanity Intact



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1 What is Fencing?

/Fencing/, noun

1: the art or practice of attack and defence with the foil, épée, or sabre

2: deriving from the expression, "The Art of Defence," meaning the art of defending one's self in combat.

In the broadest possible sense, fencing is the art of armed combat involving weapons directly manipulated by hand, rather than shot or thrown.

In other countries it is called variations of *escrimé* or *esgrima* meaning 'skirmish'. Thus the FIE, the global governing body, is the *Federation Internationale d'Escrime*. The French converted fencing into a sport and wrote the early rules. These days the FIE operates out of Geneva, Switzerland, but that's another story.

2 Why do Fencing?

If you're reading this guide, you obviously have some interest already.

Maybe it's the cool weapons that sparked your curiosity, or the distinctive clothes, or the intricate strategy involved. No matter your initial introduction into the world of fencing, the more you learn about it, the more you will want to participate.

Coordination, speed, agility and self-assurance are just a few of the qualities this sport requires of its participants. A fencer needs not only to be quick of body but of mind as well. The intensity of fencing, and the extreme demands it places on one are a natural result of fencing's violent history. And while fencing has morphed from combat to sport, and possessing these skills no longer carries a life or death consequence, they are, however, in large part what make fencing such an exhilarating endeavor.

A successful fencer must be capable of mounting powerful driving attacks or conversely, of making subtle and crafty defences, all within the space of a few seconds. Brawn only, however, will only take you so far in fencing: intellect is paramount. A good fencer must be clever and with unwavering concentration able to conceive and execute calculated moves. Quickly.

The spirit of fair play and honour is an integral part of fencing. A maximum of politeness and consideration is always observed while competing with others. Fencing is as much an attitude as it is a sport and those who participate in fencing find that it can profoundly affect their lives. Physically demanding, mentally challenging, character developing and cool weapons, what more could one ask for?

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3 How Will Fencing Benefit My Child?

The main benefits of fencing align nicely with the benefits of any sports activity.

- First, they are active and doing something, not being passive receptacles for programming beamed out from the TV or dummies in front of a gaming box.
- Fencing helps children get fit – you can't "swordfight" without a good bit of movement!
- Fencing helps children learn to pay attention and to develop their decision-making abilities.
- Because fencing is an individual sport, the fencer is responsible for their success or failure, which becomes a great lesson in responsibility.
- It provides an outlet for getting out aggression in a safe and controlled environment.
- Finally, having fencing on your resume makes your child stand out from others and provides you with another way for them to market themselves.



4 The Flavours of Fencing

Some form of fencing has been around for centuries while fencing is one of only four events to have been contested at every Olympics since the modern Olympic Games started in 1896.

As fencing has moved away from warfare, several offshoots have developed: fencing as art and fencing as sport. In general fencing can be divided into three broad categories:

- Competitive fencing, which distinguishes itself by having a sport or competitive element to it. This is also referred to as Olympic Fencing and is the most common form of fencing.
- Fencing as a Western Martial Art where the goal is to train for and/or reconstruct a theoretical duel. Within this category are Classical and Historical fencing; there is considerable overlap between these especially with regard to 19th century fencing practices. There is also HEMA or Historical European Martial Art which is a recreation of historic sword combat techniques often using plastic armour and can be competitive.
- And finally, there are other forms of fencing such as Stage fencing and re-enactment societies which have little in common besides history with either of the other two. With Stage fencing theatrical fight scenes are choreographed and fencing actions are exaggerated for dramatic effect, visual clarity and safety.

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5 Is it Safe? (We are talking about sword fighting.)

Fencing is one of the safest sports that you can compete in. The most common injuries in fencing reflect those of other sports – ligament and muscle strains account for over half of the injuries.

Even the (US) insurance companies agree! When comparing insurance rates for “Accident Medical Coverage” for sports teams and leagues, the insurance premiums for fencing are the least expensive – cheaper than for volleyball and basketball.

Membership of your country federation (certainly in the UK) may give you insurance cover against personal accident and liability so is always recommended.

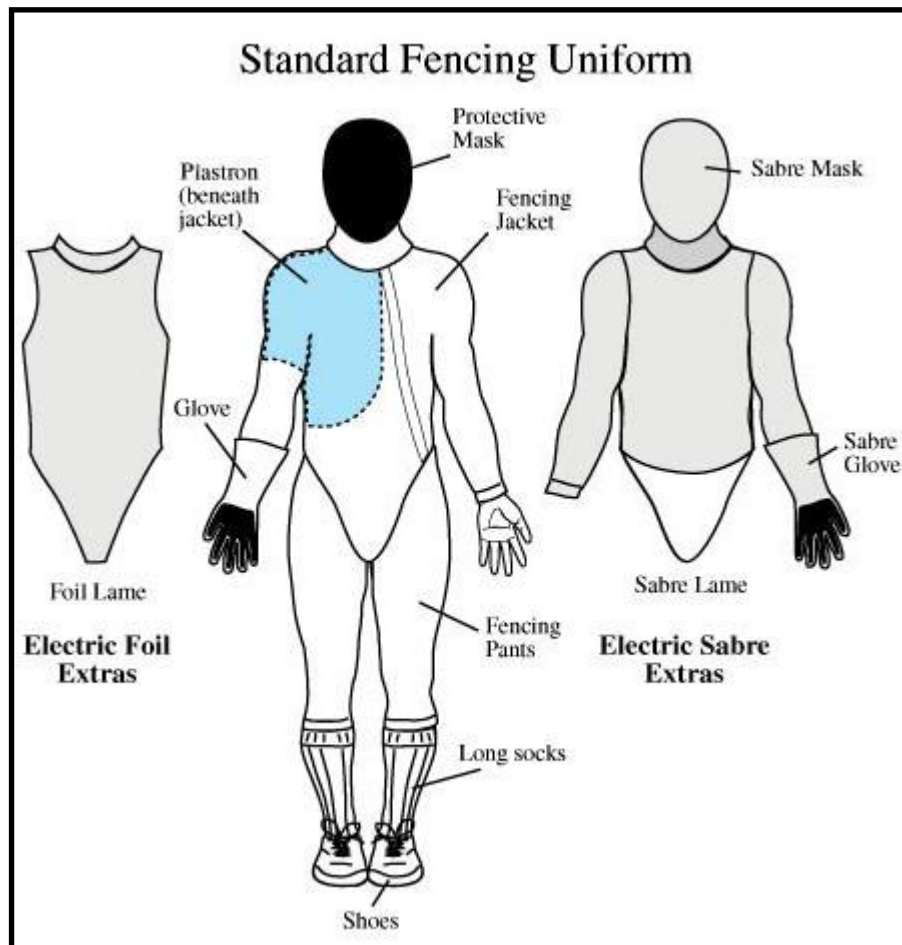


Figure 1 Note that 'pants' are also called knickers in the US and breeches in UK and Europe

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6 Right-of-What? A Glossary of Important Terms

As with any sport, a specific vocabulary is necessary to describe the equipment and explain the movements. The following is a short list of commonly used terms within fencing.

Advance/Retire Taking a step forward (towards one's opponent) or back away from

Attack Offensive movement, or series of movements by which a fencer tries to score a point. In foil and sabre, the fencer who attacks first acquires the "right-of-way." In order to execute an attack properly (i.e. one that the referee will acknowledge), the fencer's hand must be clearly extending towards their opponent's valid target in a threatening manner.

Balestra A short, sharp jump forwards, usually with a slap of the front foot as a means of distraction; usually used as a preparation for an attack. Often followed by a lunge.

Beat Sharp tap on the opponent's blade to initiate an attack or provoke a reaction.

Breeches This is the name given to the short trousers worn to just below the knee. (In the US also called knickers or fencing pants.)

Disengage Evasive action in which the fencer avoids the opponent's attempt to contact their blade.

Engagement Contact between the fencers' blades - often as the prelude to an attack.

En Garde Position taken before fencing commences. A stance ready for attack or defence.

Épée French for sword. Descendent of the dueling sword. It is the heaviest of the three fencing weapons and has a stiff, V-shaped blade, and a large bell guard for protecting the hand from hits.

Feint A false attack intended to get a defensive reaction from the opposing fencer, thus creating the opportunity for a genuine attack. ("feint-disengage attack"). In epee, fencers also use the feint to goad their opponent into attacking them.

Foil Descendent of the court sword. The foil was used for training in the duel and featured a blunted (or foiled) tip.

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Fleche Explosive, running attack (foil and épée only).

Flunge Action unique to sabre - a combination of a lunge and a fleche.
Evolved recently after sabre rules were modified in 1992 to prohibit running attacks.

Guard Part of the weapon between the blade and handle; protects the hand, also known as: 'bell-guard' or 'shell'."

Lamé Pronounced La-may (not lame). This is the conductive over jacket that is used for electric scoring in both Foil and Sabre.

Lunge Most common attacking footwork technique, in which the fencer launches themselves at their opponent by pushing off from their back leg.

Opposition As in "thrust with opposition" and means to simultaneously deflect the opponent's point with one's guard while making an attack of one's own. Commonly used in épée to avoid a double touch.

Parry Defensive action in which a fencer deflects his opponent's blade away from his target

Piste A French term where the actual fencing action takes place. It is 14 metres long and 1.5 to 2 metres wide. Retreating off the end of the piste with both feet gets a touch against. Going off the side of the piste with one foot halts the fencing action. Going off the side with both feet gets a penalty of the loss of one metre, and if this results in the offender going off the end of the piste, a point is awarded to his opponent.

After each touch, fencers begin again at the center of the piste, 4 metres apart, or roughly at a position where their blades can nearly touch when fully extended. Many pistes at fencing tournaments are "grounded" so that if a fencer's blade contacts the floor, the hit won't register. (Note: US fencers refer to the piste as the strip.)

Plastron Also sometimes called an underarm protector or half jacket; this is worn under the jacket on the sword arm and gives extra protection to the most commonly hit part of the target area. The seams on a plastron are made so that they do not line up with the seams on a jacket for added safety.

Point-in-Line Action in which the fencer, who is generally out of attacking range, points their weapon at their opponent with their arm fully extended. A fencer who establishes a point-in-line has right-of way, and their opponent cannot attack until they remove the blade from line by executing a beat, envelopement, bind, etc..

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Recover The return to the en garde position after lunging.

Remise Attacking again immediately after the opponent's parry of the initial attack.

Riposte Defender's offensive action immediately after parrying their opponent's attack.

Sabre The sabre is a light and fast weapon. The blade is V-shaped, or Y-shaped and not as stiff as the epee. The sabre uses both cuts and thrusts to score points.

Second Intention A tactic, in which a fencer executes a convincing, yet false, action in hopes of drawing a true, committed reaction from their opponent.

Stop Hit, Stop Cut A counter-action made at the moment of an opponent's hesitation, feint, or poorly executed attack. To be awarded the point, the fencer attempting a stop hit must clearly catch their opponent's tempo. Hence, if their Stop Hit is not "in time," the referee may award the touch to their attacker. A stop cut is specifically for sabre.

Strip See "Piste" above

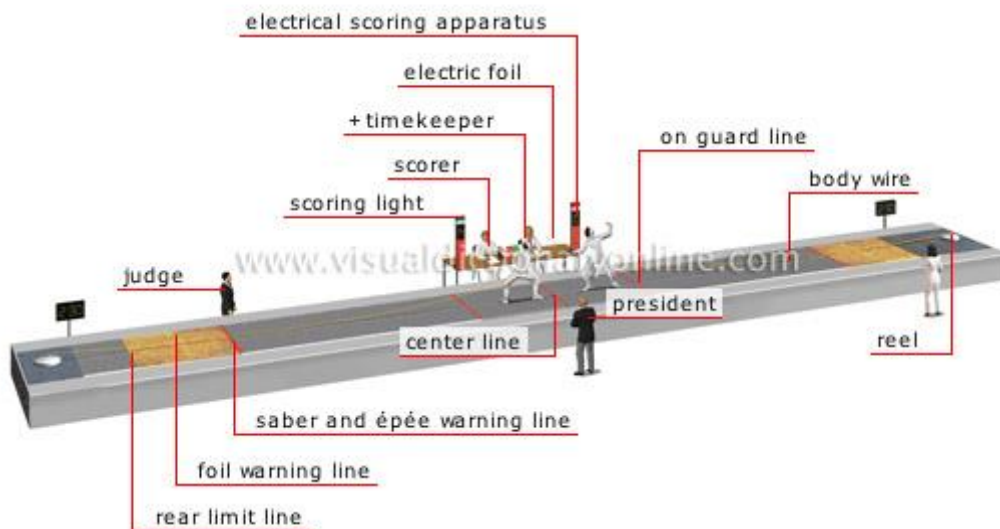


Figure 2 The President is now called the Referee. Judges are only used under special circumstances

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7 Overview of the Three Weapons

Foil...epee...sabre, what's the difference?

Each weapon has its own distinct “character” and resulting pace of action. The sabre is the fastest and most aggressive, epee is the slowest and requires the most patience while foil is in between and attracts fencers who like to employ both aggression and patience. If you (or your child) are going to participate in this sport, you need to understand the different nature of the weapons, their characteristics, how they're used and how a fencer can win with each weapon. And, of course, a little trivia never hurt anyone.

Though many recreational fencers compete in multiple weapons, successful fencers concentrate on one weapon for their competitive careers.



7.1 Foil – The Court Sword

The foil used by fencers today is the modern version of the original practice weapon used by nobility to train for duels.

It all evolved as fencing for exercise - based on speed and skill began to emerge – (as opposed to the ability to cut someone in combat). As this practice became more popular, a longer, lighter weapon was developed. The weapon's extended length forced opponents to fight at a distance with quick but controlled lunges, attacking the enemy with the point of the sword, replacing rudimentary hacking techniques.

Under Louis XIV in France, a change in fashion led to a new kind of sword, a shorter sword. (Apparently the long sword clashed with the brocaded jackets, breeches and silk stockings.) The court sword, as it was known, turned out to be an excellent weapon for fencing because it was both lighter and stronger, so it could be used for defense as well as offense. As a result, the modern one-handed fencing technique developed, with the left hand and arm used primarily for balance.

To score points with the foil, the fencer must land the tip of the blade on a valid target: along the torso from shoulders to groin in the front and to the waist in the back. The arms, neck, head and legs are considered off-target. Off-target hits will temporarily halt the fencing action, but does not result in any points being awarded. The concept of on-target and off-target evolved from the theory of 18th-century fencing masters, who taught their pupils to only attack the vital areas of the body (i.e. the torso). While the head is also a vital area of the body, attacks to the face were considered rude and therefore discouraged.

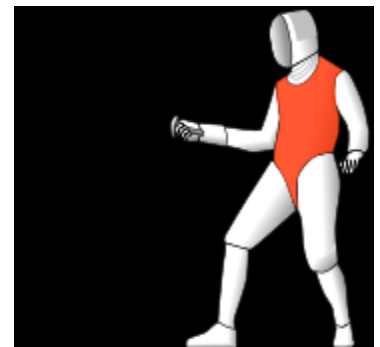


Figure 3 The Foil Target

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Because the foil was a training sword, it was important for the rules of foil to reflect the logic of combat. For newcomers to foil fencing, one of the most challenging concepts to grasp is the rule of right-of-way. Basically, the right-of-way rule states that the fencer who started to attack first will receive the point if they hit a valid target, and that their opponent is obligated to defend themselves. (In other words, you don't get points by committing suicide and running onto your opponent's blade once they have established the start of their attack.)

However, if a fencer hesitates for too long while advancing on their opponent, they give up right-of-way to their opponent. A touch scored against an opponent who hesitated too long is called an attack in preparation or a stop-hit, depending on the circumstances.

Although some foil fencers still employ the classical technique of parries and thrusts, the flexible nature of the foil blade permits the modern foil fencer to attack an opponent from seemingly impossible angles. Competitors can execute "marching attacks" where they move down the fencing strip towards their opponent, looking to flick the point of their blade at back or flank of their opponent. Because parrying (blocking) these attacks can be very difficult, the modern game of foil has evolved into a complicated and exciting game of multiple feints, ducking and sudden, explosive attacks, making it a lot of fun to watch.

7.2 Epee – (Almost) Anything Goes

While a special version of the court sword, the foil, was developed for practice, another type of sword, the colichemarde, was created for dueling. The blade had a triangular cross-section, with slightly concave sides to reduce weight without reducing strength and the forte (the strong part) was grooved to allow the blood to drain away (and to make it easier to remove the sword from the body!). The colichemarde evolved into the modern epee.

As the epee (pronounced "EPP-pay") evolved, the idea was to develop epee fencing in a manner that reproduced as closely as possible the conditions of an actual duel to first blood. As a result, in epee the entire body is considered a valid target and there is no "right-of-way" rule: anything goes (almost).

Epee fencers score a point by hitting their opponent first. If the fencers hit each other within 1/25th of a second, both receive a point - this is commonly referred to as a double touch. Initially epee fencers worked to be first to the best of five but over time it became the best of nine (now 15?) wins the bout.

The lack of right-of-way combined with a full-body target naturally makes epee a game of careful strategy and patience - wild, rash attacks are quickly punished with solid counter-attacks. So, rather than attacking outright, epeeists often spend several minutes probing their opponent's defenses and maneuvering for distance before risking an attack.



Figure 4The Epee Taret

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7.3 Sabre – The Need for Speed

The sabre is the modern version of the slashing cavalry sword and was introduced into Europe in the late 18th century as an adaptation of the Turkish scimitar, used by the Hungarian cavalry. It was quite popular (it was very effective) and was adopted by several European armies. In fact, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the cavalry of all nations practiced sabre fencing and fighting.

Initially heavy and curved, the present day weapon is extremely light and straight. To simulate a cavalry rider on a horse, the target area is the entire body above the waist, excluding the hands. In addition, sabre employs rules of right-of-way, which are very similar to foil, but with some subtle differences. Like foil, the fencer who starts to attack first is given priority should his opponent counter-attack. However, sabre referees are much less forgiving of hesitation by an attacker. It is common to see a sabre fencer execute a stop cut against their opponent's forearm during such a moment of hesitation, winning right-of-way and the point.

Another major distinction of the sabre is that sabre fencers can score with the edge of their blade as well as their point although modern electric sabre means any touch will count even with the side of the blade.

The sabre fencer's uniform features an electrically wired metallic lamé, which fully covers their valid target area. Because the head is valid target area, the fencer's mask is also electrically wired. One significant departure from foil is that off-target hits do not register on the scoring machine, and therefore do not halt the fencing action.

If epee is the weapon of patient, defensive strategy, then sabre is its polar opposite.

In sabre, the rules of right-of-way strongly favour the fencer who attacks first, and a mere graze by the blade against the lamé registers a touch with the scoring machine.

As a result, sabre is a fast, aggressive game; with fencers rushing their opponent from the moment their referee gives the instruction to fence.

As fending off the attack of a skilled opponent is nearly impossible, sabre fencers very rarely purposely take the defensive. However, when forced to do so, they often go all-out using spectacular tactical maneuvers.



Figure 5 The Sabre Target

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8 Getting Started: Finding Classes

There are several ways to locate a fencing school. To find a fencing club close to you, use the Search tool at BritishFencing.com under the clubs section.

Using a search engine you should be able to find a local fencing class. Many schools also offer fencing classes as part of the continuing education curriculum.

Although each fencing program sets their own rates, classes typically cost on average £90 for a 6-8 week session; prices and duration will vary by region and by the level of expertise of the coaches. And, many classes require a country level Fencing Membership to participate.

Once you've located a site to begin your fencing training, choosing a good teacher is key. You want your child's (or your) first instructional experience to be positive. Since many fencing teachers have had no training in fencing theory, technique or even the art of teaching itself, it is vital to choose a teacher from among those who have been properly trained and examined. Remember, competing is not the same thing as teaching; a teacher's competitive record is not a substitute for sound instructive training. Don't be embarrassed to ask to see some credentials; you are entrusting your child with this person.

Observe the instructor's pupils as they take their lessons to see whether the students are being instructed on proper guard and lunging positions. Is the teacher patient? Is the teacher employing safe techniques? See if the students are having fun and enjoying the process.

Speak to parents who have children taking classes from the fencing coach. Do they feel that their children are learning and having fun? Do their kids look forward to fencing class? Does the coach provide regular feedback to the parents?

Most importantly, use your intuition to determine whether you (or your child) and the teacher will be compatible. You may have located an excellent teacher with exceptional teaching skills, but if the personalities don't mesh, it's not a good fit.

9 Getting Started: Basic Skills and Gear

Attitude: Fencing is often called the sport of kings, a gentlemanly sport. Not only because of its obvious history with nobility but also because it is steeped with the tradition of royalty, respect and civility. Politeness on and off the piste is integral to the sport. In fact rudeness can earn a fencer a black card (more on that later) and removal from a tournament.

Patience: This is something that you (the parent) needs more of than the kids! Fencing is a relatively obscure sport; there are lots of basic techniques to learn that aren't as natural to us as throwing or kicking balls, so there is a steep learning curve. Have patience with the process of learning and everything will eventually click.

There are three components to fencing. Footwork, to control distance and launch attacks, bladework to avoid the opponent's defences and make a touch while also defending yourself, and brain power. The latter is the reason fencing is often called chess at high speed. It's

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about tactics and timing. Looking for, and making, opportunities to make a touch, ideally without being touched. And coordinating brain with feet and hands...

Basic Gear: Besides a good attitude and a dose of patience, there are several things a fencer needs to actually fence. While equipping oneself for a competition is a little more involved than this, to get started one just needs:

Jacket

Mask

Glove

Chest protector (for women, optional for men but commonly used in epee)

Practice weapon (foil, sabre or epee).



Many clubs will lend you equipment when you are just starting and doing a beginner course.

Once you've completed the course, and are hooked, you will be encouraged to buy your own equipment.

There are two options as a beginner, the first is to buy individual items one at a time until you have a full set and the second solution is to buy a "starter kit." These fencing starter kits have all the "basic needs" items pre-assembled and sold as a bundle – ask your club coach about kit before you purchase anything.

Be very wary of buying cheap off the internet as the safety regulations are complex, change relatively frequently and there is a lot of old kit about.

10 Basic Equipment: A Little more Detail

You have the list of equipment needed, but now what? Before you actually buy anything or start using your new equipment, it's a good idea to have a basic understanding of the capability and purpose of each.

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Mask: The mask is for protection so be sure to choose a mask that has sufficient interior padding, does not press on the top of the head or chin, and fits comfortably. Sabre masks may not be used for foil or epee. Foil masks have a lamé 'bib', but not for children under 13. Yes, the regulations are complicated!

Jacket: The fencing jacket is to help protect the fencer. It's important to select a fencing jacket that is well made and that will provide adequate protection. They come in left or right handed front zips or back zip which are ambidextrous and are made with special safety material rated in Newtons (resistance to penetration).

Breeches/knickers/pants: (depending on country) Despite their origin in 17th century fashion they are the most practical clothing for fencing as they give a freedom of movement not available from trousers. Also made from Newton rated material

Glove: Although you can buy non-electric gloves it is almost always worth buying a glove with a Velcro cuff that can be used for electric fencing. The Velcro cuff allows you to easily connect the bodywire from under your sleeve to an electric weapon. These are sized either as small, medium or large, or in individual glove sizes. Going for gloves that are individually sized will usually get you a better fit and 'feel' of the weapon.

Chest protection: Everyone must wear a plastron (more Newtons) and females must wear chest guards when practising or competing. Chest guards for males are optional but recommended.

Foil: The foil is designed for thrusting. The blade is very thin, with a blunted (or foiled) tip. Foil blades are flexible enough to bend upon striking an opponent in order to prevent injuries.

Sabre: The sabre weighs about the same as a foil (500g) is designed primarily for cutting. It differs from the other modern fencing swords, the épée and foil, in that it is possible to score with the edge of the blade. For the other two weapons, valid touches are only scored using the point of the blade.

Épée: French for "sword," this weapon is similar to a foil, but has a stiffer, V-shaped blade, has a larger bell guard, and is heavier about 750g). Épée is the only weapon in which the entire body is the valid target area and in which there are no rules of "right of way".

Besides the basics, there exists a whole host of other pieces and parts which fencing equipment suppliers can provide for you. These consist of everything from spare blades and parts, different types and sizes of grip, to replace broken gear to component upgrades, premium uniforms, and tools to help you test and fix your own gear.

11 Note: Blade Sizes – 5, 3, 2, 0, What?

Most fencers use what is called a "Size 5" blade. This is the standard adult size for those aged 13 and over.

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Fencers under 13 years old need to use a Size 2 (Europe and US) or 3 (UK and other places) blade. The size 5 blade is approximately 89cm (35 inches) long, where the size 2 is approx. 81cm (32") and Size 3 is approx. 84cm (33" long.)

The Size 0" blade is for children aged under 10 and it is 76cm long (30"). Most fencing equipment suppliers should let you choose your blade size, or have special products set aside for youth fencers.

12 Types of handle or grip

There are two main types. The original long handled French with a pommel, and the pistol grip (illustrated).

The French grip is a one size fits all and the weighty pommel balances the weapon so it is less tiring to hold for youngsters or weaker hands and commonly used for initial training. It is, however, easy to hold incorrectly.



The pistol grip is hard to hold incorrectly but the forward weight can make it hard work for younger fencers. However, the pistol grip enables moves and positions that are difficult with a French grip and it is used by 99% of competitive foil fencers.

Epeeists also use both types of grip although the French version is a little broader. There is also a technique called 'pommelling' where the fencer holds the pommel thus giving a longer reach but it needs a strong forearm and wrist.

Sabres have an entirely different grip as the hitting action is entirely different.

For advice about your first fencing foil, epee, or sabre, ask your coach or armourer.

13 Competing

This is quite a long one and it is suggested you come back to this section later when you need it but do look at the role of the referee.

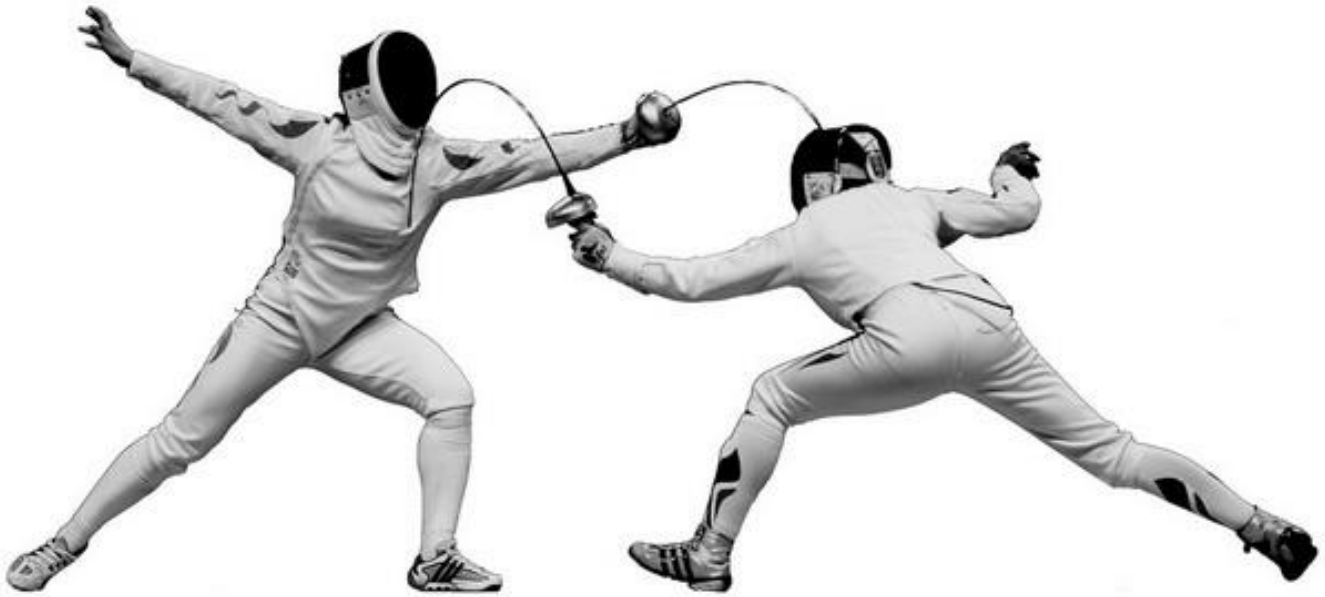
After you've been fencing for some time you may be ready to hit the piste and compete. There are a wide variety of tournaments in the local fencing area (the "Region or Division"). They vary in size, strength and restrictions on who can enter. Some local tournaments are restricted by classification (more on that below). Some tournaments may only be for one of the three (foil, epee, sabre) weapons, and may be restricted by gender or age group.

Your child's first tournaments should be age or classification restricted. Many areas have "novice" or beginner tournaments for those fencers who have not been fencing very long, or have yet to earn their first classification. Note that most tournaments require an entry

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fee somewhere between £30 and £60 or higher depending on the club, region and level. In the UK the Leon Paul Junior Series is a popular junior competition with monthly competitions held all over the country. While some clubs hold renowned events that earn youth ranking points.

In all cases, your child's coach is the best reference to determine when your child is ready to compete. Some children are physically and mentally ready for competition much sooner than others, so make sure that it's also something they want to do.



13.1 The Competition Season

The competitive season for UK Fencing runs from September through July. Each local fencing organisation ("Country", "Region" or "County") runs a tournaments of various skill levels. These culminate into qualifying events for the Junior Olympics (held in February) and the Summer National Championships (usually held in July) while there are also Cadet (under 17) and Junior (under 22) competition series.

From 2024 a new series of ranking competitions was introduced in the UK for less experienced fencers (see below).

Most fencers focus on competing at the county and region levels before spending the extra time and money to go to the larger national competitions. In the summer you'll also find a host of fencing camps where your kids can meet new friends and learn from coaches in other parts of the country.

It's important to keep the fun of fencing in mind during the competitive season. With so many clubs running tournaments, it's easy to load up on tournaments and that can lead to overtraining and frustration when your competitor hits the wall. It's perfectly normal to take a week or two off here or there, especially after a big competition or series of tournaments.

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To find competitions go to the national website, eg British Fencing, to find their event diary.

13.2 Equipment Required for competitions

You have the skills, the attitude and the desire, but before you can step up to the piste, you will need:

- A clean jacket in good condition (for national tournaments, the jacket or lame must display the last name of the fencer and their country code).
- A mask free from rips, tears, holes, or dents.
- A glove also free from holes
- Fencing breeches (or pants/knickers) (sweat pants, warm-up pants, jeans are not acceptable). The jacket must overlap the fencing pants by 10 cm.
- An plastron (underarm protector).
- Males are required to wear a protective cup supporter in some countries
- Women are required to wear a hard chest protector with a special soft cover at higher level competitions (to avoid bounce hits).
- Tall socks that overlap with the bottom of the breeches ideally padded at the front.
- Shoes. (They do not have to be specifically fencing shoes, but an athletic shoe with a rounded heel such as squash, volleyball, or badminton shoes.)
- At least two bodywires.
- At least two working weapons.
- For foil and sabre: a lame in working order (the metal vest that goes over the fabric jacket) and a mask wire for ages 13+
- For sabre: a metallic over-glove (sometimes this is built into the regular glove).
- For sabre: at least two working mask wires.
- Small toolkit to tighten weapon handles, replace springs, screws and tape on foils

13.3 Blades are not for Life

The constant bending of metal weakens it; metal fatigue, so don't scold your child when they break their £50 foil after a few competitions. Especially the cheaper blades in the hands of fencers who are still learning the proper techniques and distance for fencing.

Many higher level fencers buy extremely expensive, stiffer blades, because they give better point control but they still fence poorly with bad distance control and these break even more easily. You are only meant to 'touch' your opponent not run them through!

When a blade breaks, you can replace just the blade – you don't need to purchase a complete new weapon.

13.4 Fencing Classifications: Age & Ratings

When entering a tournament, you'll have to know your fencer's classification, ensuring they are competing within a fair a playing field. The first distinction is age: Youth, Cadet, Junior and Senior. There are three Youth categories for fencers that are under 10, under 12, and under

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14 years of age. Cadets are fencers who are 16 years old or younger at the start of the fencing season. Juniors are fencers who are 19 years old or younger at the start of fencing season. (check this)

For the United States Fencing Association purposes, it's not your age as much as the year you were born. For example, for a fencer who turns 20 on January 1, can fence the entire year as a Junior because they were born after the start of the fencing season. But a fencer whose birthday is December 31 would be bumped up to the Senior level.

In order to compete in a Senior Open (or "Open") event, the fencer must be at least 13. The ratings system in the US is similar to that of the "belts" in karate, but instead of belts, fencing uses letters. The highest calibre fencer is an "A", the next a "B" and so on until you reach "E." An un-rated fencer (i.e., beginner) would be classified as a "U" for un-rated.

Your letter is also distinguished by the year in which you achieved your rating. For example, if you earned your "B" in 2006 then your rating would be "B06."

The newer your rating is, the higher your rank, so that a "B06" would be ranked higher than a "B01." Once a fencer earns a rating they keep it for 4 seasons, and then drops one letter.

A similar system was introduced in the UK in 2023.

13.5 Different Tournaments

As mentioned there are several different types of tournaments distinguished by who can enter, which weapons can be used and what can be earned, they include:

Epee, Foil or Sabre tournaments only allow fencers using the specific weapon,

Open (sometimes called "Mixed Open") tournaments allow men, women and fencers at any rating to compete.

Team and Mixed Team events work like a relay race and with similar tactics such as putting your best fencer last to catch up for weaker ones.

Aged tournaments require that a fencer can only fence in the age group they belong to such as Senior, Junior, Cadet, Youth, etc.

Ratings restricted tournaments necessitate a specific rating to enter the competition.

13.6 What to Expect at a Tournament

Before going to the tournament, make sure that you are prepared. Fencing tournaments can be all-day affairs, often with no food vendors (or only fast food) available. Have a full English breakfast (some have a big meal the evening before) to give it time to be digested to top up your blood sugar. Pack a snack bag with all of the good stuff you and your kids will need to keep their energy up all day – cereal bars, chocolate, peanuts, bananas/other fruit. Don't weigh them down with tons of sandwiches. Fencing on a full stomach will slow you down.

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Make sure to have a water bottle and, if you use them, a sports drink. Remember to bring yourself a snack too – we don't want grumpy parents watching fencing!

There is also a lot of down time in tournaments especially between pools and DE. The kids should have something to do that isn't going to interfere with other fencing bouts that are going on. Activity books, puzzles, art supplies are all good ideas. (You'll want a good book or the latest set of sudoku puzzles or your mobile) but they must also keep ready to fence.

Clothes – Bring a change of clothes for after your child is done fencing for the day and also a towel as well as one or two extra t-shirts, just in case they need to change into a dry shirt halfway through the competition.

Before setting out for the tournament, have a print out of the directions, check Google street view of the destination for parking and have contact numbers for the tournament hosts or other parents at your club that are going. It's often a good idea to stay overnight near events.

Also be aware of the check in time. Once check in closes anyone who has not checked in will be scratched from the competition. Ideally aim to arrive at least 30 – 45 minutes before to familiarise with the venue layout, change and warm up.

13.7 The Competition Officials

The Directoire Technique (DT)

In higher level competitions this is an individual or team who determines the fencing schedule, deals with discipline, complaints and includes the main organizer.

The DT Operator

Runs the system either manually or, more often, on a laptop, which seeds and schedules the fencers and referees and records the scores both of which are either printed and posted on the wall or, increasingly, available online. Results are also sent to one of the fencing authorities who manage the rankings. In lower level competitions this role is often combined with the main DT role. Where there are several age groups and/or multiple-weapons the DT Operator can be running several competitions simultaneously and this makes it a high pressure role.

The Referee

This is probably the toughest job in fencing and referees are under a lot of pressure, probably as much as the DT Operator.

Referees are responsible for visually checking that equipment complies with the safety rules especially the wearing of plastrons, point spring weight testing (500g for foil 750g for epee), point travel for epee, the correct fitting and use of mask straps, gloves, zips, laces, bend in the blades and lames.

They are in charge of all behaviour on and around the piste. This includes fencers, coaches, parents and the public. Unsportsmanlike behaviour such as fencing with unnecessary

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violence, intimidation or bullying of fencers or referees are likely to attract warnings and if it continues, even a black card. (Meaning you are expelled from the venue).

They also decide who scores the points and records them on the score sheet!

You cannot argue with a referee! You can ask for an explanation of a disputed point but, in the end, what the Referee says, goes. If you suspect bias or lack of competence, take it up with the DT.

Refereeing is one of the more controversial areas as standards can vary. There are nine levels of referee qualification, the rules are often open to interpretation and 'fads' or styles of fencing get unofficially applied. Sometimes the fencer has to weigh up the referee as much as his opponent.

However, with scores going up to 10 or 15 hits the better fencer often becomes apparent and the odd poor decision doesn't make a great deal of difference. Unless the bout goes to sword point, where the final hit decides the winner. Bite your tongue, accept defeat gracefully celebrate the winner and comfort the loser. There's always another competition on another day.

Referees use a set pattern of hand signals (see Appendix 2) and phrases to start and stop the bout and explain how the points are awarded. The phrases can be On Guard, Ready, Fence and Halt, or En garde, Pret, Allez and 'alt, which are the French equivalent. Similarly off target can be called 'invalid'.

The Armourer

Many do not recognize the armourer as an official but their safety role makes them so. One of their tasks is to design, or advise, on the layout and set up of the pistes and scoring equipment in accordance with FIE rules, which focus on safety. There is also an element of presentation, ie what it looks like, to the spectator and, sometimes, for broadcast. The fact that they often put the kit in place and ensure it keeps working throughout the tournament, replacing and often repairing as required, tends to mark them down as techy backroom boys (and girls), but this is just another part of their skill set.

At major tournaments they will run Weapon Control which pre-checks all equipment for safety rules and technical compliance. This avoids faults delaying the competition and mitigating safety risks, such as split seams, loosely or wrongly attached badges, mask faults, gloves with holes, faulty and illegal weapons. Blades must be on an 'homologated' (approved) list. Their remit also covers compliance with official country markings and allowed advertising. Approved kit is tagged or stamped and Referees ensure these tags are seen before fencing commences on the piste.

Some high level competitions have video replay facilities and wireless networking of scoring kit feeding in to the DT Operators as well as wireless scoring kit on the piste. While these are often installed by specialists they are, to all intents, armourers.

When time permits they also provide a repair service. Generally fencers should ensure that they arrive with tested, working kit and spares (see preparation below) with armourers dealing

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only with emergencies. However, parents and young fencers often struggle with the technical side, especially in the early days, and considerate organisers will ensure a repair service is available if at all possible.

Training courses have fallen by the wayside since Covid leading to the creation of the britishfencingarmourers.com website. Also fencing.net which is more US oriented and with a different focus.

Away from tournaments Armourers are also found in clubs to take care of the kit. Fencing kit literally takes a beating and fencers, and parents, are encouraged to learn basic maintenance methods. There is much information available on the internet but britishfencingarmourers.com is probably the best resource available.

If your club does not have an armourer the site has a list of those who offer an independent repair service and there is the related Ask An Armourer Facebook page.

13.8 Tournament Format and Fencing Bouts

The formats can vary, but in general the following format is observed:

The entire field of fencers who have entered a tournament are divided into groups, called "pools or poules" (The spelling doesn't matter). DT balances pools as fairly as possible so that all the pools, in theory, are about the same level of difficulty, with some variation, and you are not all from the same club.

Pool size usually varies between five and seven fencers per pool, depending on the size of the entry. Each competitor fences a bout against all of the other members of the pool. The bouts last a maximum of three minutes (five minutes for 13+). This is the start-and-stop time, not continuous time, or until one fencer scores five points.

During a bout, if time runs out, the score stands as it is unless the score is tied when the referee will flip a coin or otherwise randomly select one fencer to have "priority." One minute of overtime is added to the clock and the fencers fence one minute of "sudden-death". If one fencer scores a point, he or she wins the bout. If time elapses, and no point has been scored, the fencer with priority, as randomly determined at the beginning of the one minute, is given the victory.

Once all of the bouts in the pool have been completed, the referee counts up the number of victories each fencer has earned, the total number of points each fencer has scored in all of the bouts and the number of points that were scored against each fencer. The difference between hits scored and hits received determines their 'indicator'.

Or they just return the sheet to DT Operator for the computer to work out.

These sets of numbers are used to determine the "seeding" of fencers into the Direct Elimination (DE) table (also referred to as the bracket or tableau). Fencers with the highest percentage of victories are seeded highest. It is important to note that it is the percentage of victories are used, not the actual number of victories. The win-loss percentage is calculated by dividing the number of victories earned by a fencer, by the number of bouts he or she fenced.

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If fencers are tied, based on their percentage of victories, the tie is broken based on the "indicators". A more positive number means a higher seed.

If fencers are tied on percentage of victories and on indicators, the tie is broken by whomever has the highest number of points scored. If there is still a tie after this point, the fencers are considered tied for that placing.

Once the seeding has been completed, and the DT Operator or committee has arranged the fencers on the DE table, the next round of fencing will commence.

DE bout lasts for three x three-minute periods (3 x five minutes for 13+) with a one-minute break in between the first and second periods. If one fencer reaches 15 points, that is the end of the bout.

Sometimes bouts end because time has elapsed, but more often they expire because the score has reached 15 points. If all three periods expire, and the score is tied, then the same priority procedure takes place as was described above.

In a standard DE table, if a fencer has lost, they are "out" of the competition. If they win, they advance to the next round of DE bouts, until eventually a winner is reached through this process of elimination. ie you need to win it to stay in it.

If eliminated early, it's proper etiquette to stay around and cheer on fellow club members. Watching the bouts later on in the event is also one of the best ways to learn. Encourage your child to change clothes and come back out to watch their friends. (And give them the time and space they need to get over the loss first.)

13.9 Being a Spectator: How to Follow (and enjoy) the Action

To the uninitiated, watching fencing can be difficult and downright frustrating. Winners and losers are not always that obvious. But if you are a beginning fencer (or a parent to one), watching fencing bouts is one of the best things you can do to help familiarise yourself with the sport. And while it may take awhile to truly understand and appreciate all the complexities of modern fencing, there are some basic concepts that will help you along the way.

The action: What to look for

Epee fencers tend to fence defensively, so look for subtle tactics and deeper strategy.

Foil tends to feature a rich array of tactics, mobility, and long complex attacks. Look for a balance of aggression and defence.

Sabre tends to be a fast and simple game, where athleticism and aggressiveness are key. Because it is a cutting weapon, defensive options are often limited. Look for simpler tactics, and lots of movement.

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13.10 Scoring

All bouts are scored electronically with a referee or director watching and all weapons are scored the same way: 5 touch, 3 or 4-minute pool bouts, 15 touch, 3-minute by 3 period s for D.E. bouts

Epee

Pretty simple, when their light goes on, they've scored.

Foil and Sabre

Which fencer actually gets the touch is determined by the right-of-way rule so that a fencer can only score when he/she has the right-of-way. In foil, there are white lights that indicate an "off target" or "invalid" hit. An off target hit stops the action, but no point is scored. Sort of like going out of bounds.

Remember that for foil and sabre the scoring box is an aid to the referee, **it does not determine who gets the point**, not even if one light comes on a split second before the other. It depends entirely on the referee's interpretation or 'phrasing' of the action in respect of the Right of Way. The hand signals should explain his or her reasoning

13.11 Penalties – The Card system

The penalties handed out are the same for all weapons:

- Yellow card = Warning. No points are awarded but a fencer can't score a touch if he or she gets a yellow card while they are scoring. Any subsequent penalty results in a red card. An example of a yellow card offence would be coming to the piste with a weapon that fails inspection.

- Red card = A point is awarded to the offended party. Also, a second yellow card action in the same bout results in a red card.

An example of a red card offence would be dangerous, violent or vindictive action; blow with guard or pommel. A more common example is the fencer who comes to the piste and whose first two foils fail inspection – they have to get a third foil and they start the bout down 0-1.

- Black card = The worst offence. If a fencer receives a black card he/she is kicked out of the tournament.

An example of a black card offence would be insulting a referee, or throwing a fencing weapon or mask down on the piste.

NOTE: ANYONE including members of the public, can be black carded. This results in a report to the country federation, an investigation and can result in being banned from competitions for a period of time or permanently.

14 Some Almost Final Words

While there are benefits in terms of having something unusual and conversation provoking to put on a resume, the true benefits of fencing go much, much deeper.

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By learning fencing, a child learns self discipline, respect for others, independence and the importance of honesty and fair play. Such skills are transferable to any endeavor and help to create a well rounded and active person.

While most sports only reward speed or power, fencing lets you choose whether you are going to win by using your speed, or using your guile – which allows the parents to teach their children a thing or two while our children do the same to us.

15 You will be back...

Fencing is a life-long sport that welcomes duelists of all ages. You can learn it when you're young, or when you're young at heart. Where life forces fencers to take a break many return later in life for the benefits of fitness, socialising and stress relief!

Like riding a bike, or learning to swim, you will never forget and never regret being a fencer.



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Appendix 1 Competition Checklist

Fencing tournaments require a lot of planning on the part of the organisers, fencers, and the parents. Take the extra time to double and triple check that you have all of the tournament necessities before you go to the venue. There's nothing more unnerving to a fencer than having to scramble to find the plastron that was left hanging in the laundry room.

While you may have your own additions, this makes a good checklist for the essentials.

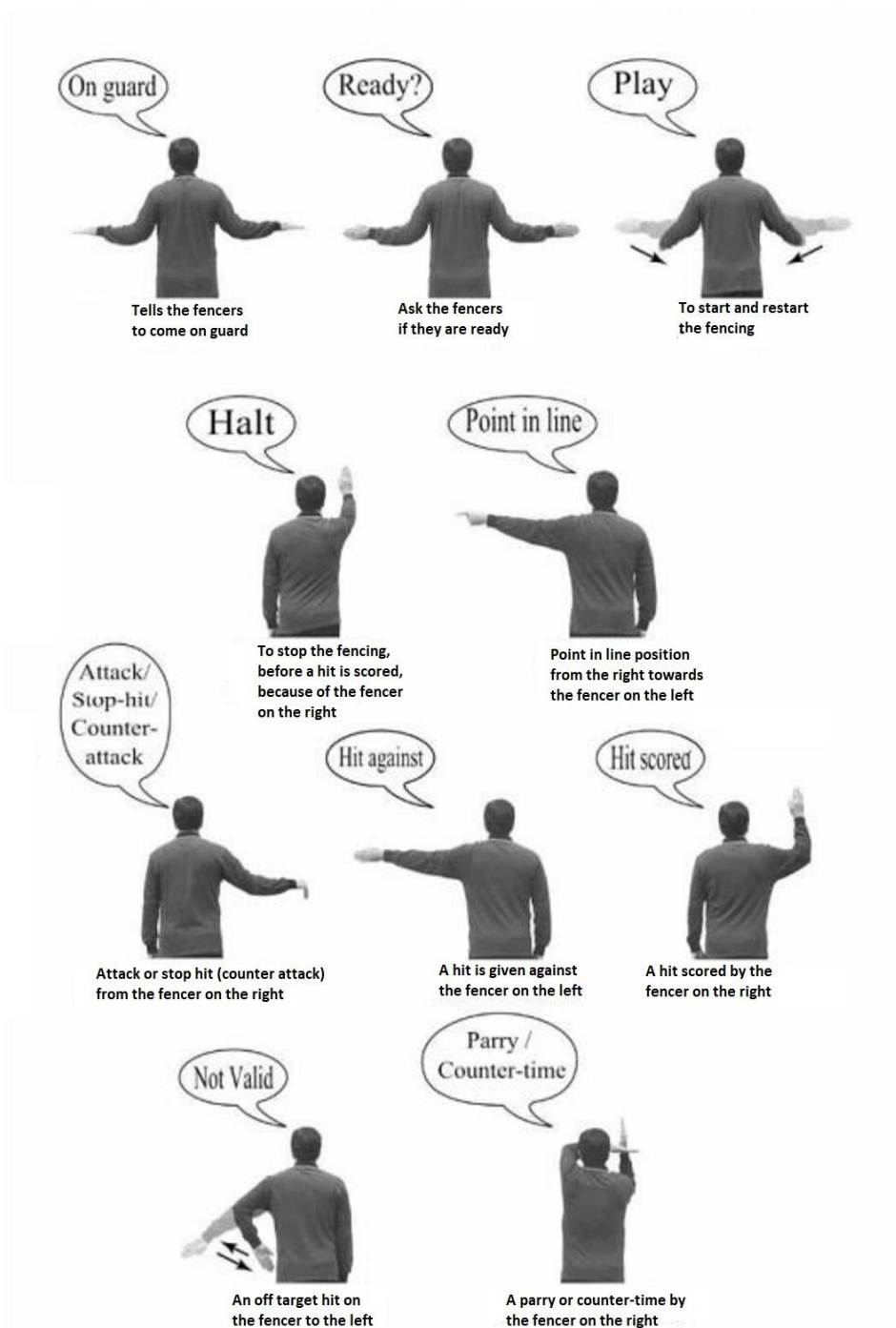
- Register and pay well in advance to ensure a space
- BFA Membership Usually Compete level is required. Check the conditions of entry
- Accommodation, route, parking
- Confirm Check in time (it can change!)
- Shoes
- Socks
- Wickaway t-shirt or two
- 350N or 800N Fencing Breeches (Check entry conditions)
- 350N or 800N Fencing Jacket
- 350N or 800N Plastron (800N required for 13 year olds+)
- Chest Protector (Women / Men optional but recommended)
- Groin / Pelvic protector - optional
- Glove and spare for big competitions
- Lamé (for foil and sabre)
- 350N Mask (13+ foil masks must have lamé bib and mask wire)
- 2 or 3 working weapons
- 2 working body wires (and mask wires for saber or foil for 13+)
- Towel
- Extra layer if the venue is air conditioned. Fencers need to stay warm, parents don't want to be cold
- Change of clothes for post-fencing
- Water bottle/s
- Snacks for between rounds
- Money for lunch or snacks (or a tournament t-shirt if they look good)
- Journal or notebook
- Book or activity for between rounds (mobiles these days!)
- Portable or folding chair (camp chair)

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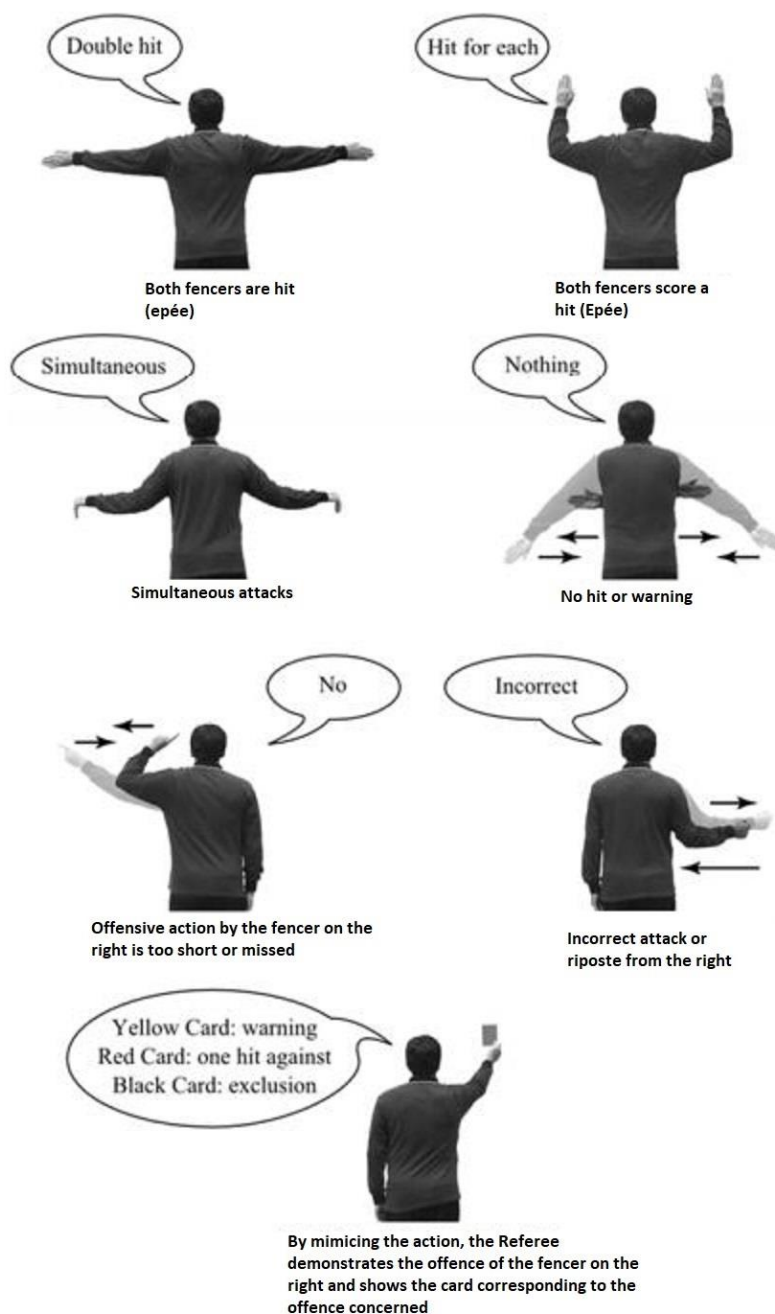
Appendix 2 Referee Hand Signals

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The Referee must use the following **signals**:



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Notes:

1. The referee analyses the fencing and announces his decisions by means of the signals and words above
2. In following the fencing phrase the Referee uses the following words without making the signals: "Riposte!", "Counter-riposte!", "Remise!", "Reprise!", "Redouble!".
3. The fencers may politely ask the Referee for a more complete analysis of the fencing phrase.
4. Each signal must last 1-2 seconds, be expressive and correctly made. Above they refer to the fencer on the Referee's right.