

BEGINNER FENCERS' GUIDE

Version 2025

For our fencing friends in the Pacific Northwest



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INTRODUCTION

general introduction

This *Beginner Fencers' Guide* was written to help as a starting point as you grow and develop as a fencer or parent of a fencer. It includes information that I hope you find useful as you develop fencing skills, think about obtaining your own equipment, start exploring tournaments, and fall in love with the sport as I have. There are many resources scattered throughout the internet. I tried to put in the most helpful parts of each in this text. I tried to focus on fencing in and around the Pacific Northwest.

My family fences foil and épée, so most of the pictures will be of these two weapons. The pictures mainly include my kids because I am the family photographer. But I wrote this guide to include all three weapons including saber as much as possible.

Many of the kids who started in 2009 with the first version of this guide progressed to be competitive nationally, earned national rankings, and even have competed internationally. Many of them fenced in college and even after graduation. I hope this document helps you grow in this sport.

Fencing is a wonderful sport that allows participation from just about anyone. Fencing has been included in every Olympic games since the first modern Olympics in 1896. The annual USA Fencing championships is always the largest fencing tournament in the world where more than 5,000 fencers gather, to compete for medals, glory, and a chance to make the world teams. It is a sport for little kids under 10 years old and older kids over 80 years old. There is able-bodied and Parafencing (wheelchair fencing). It is great for men and women. There is no one body type or personality required for this sport; the champions use their smarts, physical fitness, and hours of practice to win. There are many open fencing times throughout the week at clubs around the area during which fencers can face a number of opponents in a casual and fun atmosphere, there are local tournaments for kids under 8 years old, and national events for just about everyone.

While I have geared this guide to the young fencer who progresses to national level tournament competition, youth and adult fencers can stop and enjoy fencing at any level in any weapon. There are wonderful fencers in every club who are very

skilled but do not enjoy competition at a level more formal than the open nights at the clubs. There are young fencers in area clubs who have national points (and are nationally ranked). Fencing is a great sport and should be fun. It should also help develop patience, focus, physical fitness, and good sportsmanship.



USA fencing national championships 2019 with 4th place Pacific Northwest Team (fencers from three clubs) and lots of cheering friends in the background.



Toby Veteran World Championships 2022, Zadar, Croatia by FIE photographer.

why sports

Regular fitness is an important part of healthy living. The [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans \(2nd edition\)](#) from 2018 notes that “only a few lifestyle choices have as large an effect on mortality as physical activity. It has been estimated that people who are physically active for approximately 150 minutes a week have a 33 percent lower risk of all-cause mortality than those who are not physically active.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that “Kids 6 years and older need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days of the week.” The American Heart Association recommends “at least 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity” for adults.

about Tobias (Toby) Lee

I started fencing foil with the Lakeside High School (Seattle, WA) fencing club in 1986. From 1991–1994 I was a member of the Harvard varsity fencing team as an épéist, coached by fencing master Branimir Zivkovic. After college I took a 14 year break from fencing as I finished my

medical training and waited for my two older boys to be old enough to join Metro Tacoma Fencing Club. Andrew started fencing when he was 9 years old, Benjamin started fencing at 7 years old, and Christopher started when he was 4 years old.

I am a coach for the club in foil and épée. My primary interest is in our youth

fencers, and I am excited to see all our friends from the Pacific Northwest succeed in this sport. I received my certificate as a Prévôt de Fleuret (foil) with the US Fencing Coaches Association in 2011. This is one certification level below that of Fencing Master. I earned my Fencing Master certification in épée in 2024. I enjoy coaching our youth fencers but am often found at open fencing or



Toby's bronze medal at the 2024 Veteran Fencing World Championships, Duabi, United Arab Emirates.

competing locally whenever I am not on call for my cardiology practice.



Tobias Lee 2020 with picture taken by Christopher Lee.

I returned to competitive fencing in January 2009 and participate in épée, foil, and rarely saber events locally. My highest national rank is 1st in the USA for men's 50–59 year old men's épée (2024–2025 season). I was also 10th in the country in the 50–59 year old group for foil (2021–2022 season). I represented Team USA at the Veteran World Fencing Championships in 2022 in Zadar, Croatia in the 50–59 year old men's épée group where I finished 25th in the individual event and 5th in the team event. I earned a bronze medal at the 2024 Veteran World Fencing Championships in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and was also a member of the US men's épée team that finished

4th. My highest world ranking is 8th in the 50–59 year old men's épée group from the 2024–2025 season. My weapons classifications include an A2025 in épée and B2022 in foil (more about weapons classifications much later). I find fencing terrific for physical fitness, but just as wonderful are the people I have met during my fencing journey. You may be confused as to which is my primary fencing club because I will cheer very loudly for all my Pacific Northwest friends.

my philosophy and pearls of wisdom

I have been studying fencing and youth sports psychology since I was preparing for my Prévôt certification. I have read books, talked to other coaches (some of whom fenced in the Olympics), and most importantly talked to other parents. Here are some important thoughts I wanted to share.

Don't be afraid to lose. The only way to improve in fencing is to try, fail, and try again. One high level fencer told me that his fleches were so good because he would go to practice and do it over and over again. It would not work every time—in fact, it was usually not successful at the beginning—but he tried to do it right every time and got better



Coach and son Andrew & Toby with bronze medal for men's 50-59 year old épée at the Veteran World Championships 2024, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.



A big day for me when I first earned my A rating in épée 32 years from when I started the sport.

every time. Now his fleches are almost unstoppable. After my kids started winning in their age group locally it was time to move up to the next age group, or go to tournaments that were farther away and harder, or go to national events. Fencing is a lifelong pursuit and only improves with practice. Be brave and try new things.

Support effort. I make an effort to talk to my kids about how well they fenced rather than how well they placed. Sure. I love seeing my kids win the big gold medal and stand on the podium for pictures. But I would rather they challenge themselves, fence the best they ever have in their lives, and come in last (or not make the cut in a tough national event which has happened to them) than

to win an easy tournament and fence poorly. A good day is having a chance to fence against the best fencers at a tournament. You might be one of them.

I love to watch you play. Do an online search on this phrase, and there are numerous articles all saying the same thing. Kids are worried about disappointing parents and coaches. They often feel a lot of pressure to perform (which in some instances makes it harder for them to perform their best). A number of articles suggest that the best thing a parent can tell a child is, “I love to watch you play.” It takes the pressure off of doing well. And it is a great, loving, supportive statement. I try to use it generously.

Good practice. A fencing master said, “Practice makes permanent.” So in practice a fencer should work on the precise moves learned in lessons. In practice a fencer should work on the difficult and challenging actions that he is just learning. You will not be successful trying new moves at tournaments without practice first. Being sloppy or big or wild at practice just to beat a friend and teammate limits long-term success. Make practice thoughtful. Try to win at tournaments by getting better at practice. A wise coach said, “You earn the medals at practice; you go to tournaments to collect them.”

Determination and grit. Some beginners seem natural at this sport and have amazing innate talent that takes them to incredible results in a very short time. Other kids struggle with every fencing action and seems to be years behind their peers; they trip on their own feet and cannot seem to win a single bout at a tournament their entire first year. But yet when I think back on how the current group of top rated A fencers in the Pacific Northwest got to

their current success from their humble starts the common theme is determination and grit. There is no good substitute for returning day after day for hard work and practice. Magically it seems (after hundreds of hours of sweat and effort) their clumsy feet become smooth extensions of their body, their blade work becomes effortless and automatic and precise. Because they did not give up whether this sport came naturally to them or not. It took my son Andrew 7 years to earn his A rating in épée. It took my son Benjamin 8 years to earn his A rating in foil. It took me 32 years from when I started fencing to finally early my A in épée. I may be a slow learner, but there is no rush.

Always learning. Fencers in the Pacific Northwest tend to have a very nice tradition of sharing after a bout. I talk to my friends and tell them what I saw was their weakness. They tell me what to improve, too. We all get better. I often ask my kids to talk to other fencers even at Nationals to ask how to improve. Particularly if there is a top fencer we just lost to with lots of experience, I ask my kids to talk to him. I do the same myself when I compete.

SOME AREA CLUBS

Amity Fencing Club (Woodinville, WA) foil and épée. amityfencingclub.com

Kaizen Academy (Redmond, WA) épée. kaizenfencing.com

Metro Tacoma Fencing Club (Tacoma, WA) foil and épée. tacomafencing.com

Northwest Fencing Center (Beaverton, OR) foil and épée. nwfencing.org

Olympic Épée Masters (Redmond, WA) épée. olympicepeemasters.com

Rain City Fencing Center (Bellevue, WA) foil and épée. raincityfencing.com

Salle Auriol Seattle (Seattle, WA) foil, épée, and saber. salleauriol.com

Washington Fencing Academy (Issaquah, WA) saber. washingtonfencing.com



Pacific Northwest Team 4th place at Summer National Championships 2019. Wesley (RCFC), Justin (NWFC), Benjamin (MTEC), and Nathaniel (NWFC).

Most mature and high level fencers are willing to share something. Some are eager to share a lot. It is exceedingly rare that we are turned down or the other fencer is rude.

pacific northwest fencing clubs

The fencers around the Pacific Northwest area are generally very friendly with one another. We frequently see each other at local



Christopher on right fencing foil at Rain City Fencing Center.

tournaments, attend the same fencing camps (and stay at each other's homes for these camps), and cheer for each other at both local and national events. We are fierce competitors with one another on the strip. But afterwards we are still friends.

Our region is filled with passionate, dedicated, and highly skilled coaches who are looking out for helping our young fencers develop good fencing technique but more importantly grow into mature, healthy adults. Parents are very much involved and supportive. Most of the clubs rely on generous volunteers who keep fencing strong in our community.

I have included a list of the Pacific Northwest area clubs. Please go to their club website for additional and specific information about their schedule, coaching staff, weapon specialties, and other additional information.

SAFETY

Fencing is a very safe and fun sport, but with any sport there are inherent risks. Since 1937 there have been seven recorded fatalities in the sport of fencing, all involving elite male athletes as reported

in *Epidemiology of Sports Injuries* 1996. As a result of these catastrophic events, fencing equipment and protective gear have significantly changed to improve the safety of the sport. In contrast, from 1982 through 2002 according to the *National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Report: Twentieth Annual Report* there were 21 fatalities in cheerleading, 22 fatalities in football, and 88 fatalities in basketball.

Even though all the blades have blunted tips, they are all weapons!

There are some basic rules I try to emphasize with all my students and my own kids. No horseplay. Weapons must be pointed down unless facing an opponent who is masked and wearing proper protective clothing. Do not let anyone demonstrate anything with a blade anywhere near you (however good they think they may be) without you first putting on a mask and wearing protective gear. If there is a sound of a broken blade anywhere in the club everyone must stop and the blade must be identified before any fencing resumes. A broken blade can become a sharp and truly dangerous weapon.

THE THREE WEAPONS

foil

Foil is the basic fencing weapon taught to many beginner fencers. I am told that historically it was used to train princes and princesses in how to duel. A point is scored only with the tip of the weapon on the opponent's torso. Mask, arms, and legs are not valid target areas and a hit to these areas stop the action but do not result in a point being awarded. Foil follows the rules of *right of way*



Épée fencing at Salle Auriol Seattle during Western Washington Division Championships in 2019 with Andrew (Kaizen) and Benjamin (MTFC).

successful parry. Basically, if your opponent has started attacking you by extending his arm to your target, you cannot simply stick out your arm faster to hit him first as you would not have the right of way. If you both hit, your opponent who started the attack and has the right of way would still receive the point. There are some more subtle and intricate rules involved in right of way. Feel free to ask a current fencer, a coach, or the referee (after a

which may be the most difficult part of watching a fencing bout.

Right of way are the set of rules that determine who has priority in an attack, and in the case when both fencers land their blade on their opponents, whose touch counts. Right of way applies to foil and saber but not épée.

The first fencer to establish an attack gets the right of way which is usually taken away with a *parry* (a defensive move that touches the attacker's blade and is meant to block the attack) or ends when the attacker stops attacking. The fencer who parries then has the right of way until the *riposte* (attack after a parry) ends or the opponent makes a

bout) if you have questions. The specific rules are posted in the USA Fencing Association website (usafencing.org currently under *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *USA Fencing Rulebook*). In fencing, the right of way often changes



Saber fencing at Salle Auriol Seattle during Western Washington Division Championships in 2019 with men's three weapon champion Benjamin (MTFC) (right).



Lightsaber Photoshopped from youth tournament at Rain City Fencing Center many years ago, but Northwest Fencing Center does offer fun Lightsaber classes.

constantly as the two fencers move back and forth trying to find an opening.

épée

Épée fencing involves generally the heaviest of the three blades (though you can buy incredibly light épée weapons), has the entire body as a valid target area, and scores a point when the opponent is hit with the tip of the weapon. There is no right of way. If both fencers hit their opponent within 40 milliseconds of each other then both fencers are awarded a point for this *double touch*. This is the traditional dueling weapon. There are more adult fencers in the United States who fence épée than any other weapon.

saber

Saber is the only weapon that allows scoring with the side of the blade, and thus cutting movements are routinely seen. This weapon is derived from the



Outdoor classes during COVID-19 at Metro Tacoma Fencing Club and Tacoma Metro Parks.



Group beginner lesson led by Benjamin (MTFC).

cavalry where one sat on horseback and cut at the opponent (from the waist and up). Valid target areas are everything above the waist except for the hands and the back of the head. Saber follows the conventions of right of way just like foil (for more information on *right of way* see the earlier foil section). It is generally the fastest of the three weapons. The US women's team won gold, silver, and bronze in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, helping to bring more attention and interest to the sport of fencing.

CLASSES, LESSONS, & OPEN FENCING

classes

All fencing clubs offer a number of classes geared toward the beginner fencer. These classes focus on important basic techniques. This is a terrific way to meet fellow beginner fencers, to be allowed the opportunity to practice with

one another in developing essential skills, and to practice footwork. The best part for someone just starting the sport is that basic equipment is provided. The beginner class is a good balance of fun, sport, and light competition. Check the website of the club nearest you for current schedule and fees.

All our Pacific Northwest fencing clubs offer everything from beginner classes to high-level elite classes (fencers who receive private lessons and compete regularly, often at the national or international levels).

private lessons

Private lessons are essential if you are aiming to be more competitive with your fencing. Having a coach and private lessons require more commitment on your part and will increase the cost of this sport. This may be appropriate for some young fencers depending on interest and maturity. It is very helpful particularly as a fencer starts to think about entering tournaments. Private



Private épée lesson by big brother Andrew (MTFC) for Christopher.



My niece Zoe (SVF) getting a lesson on the beach with a plastic foil (her), foam saber (me), and monster puppet.

lessons will allow a fencer to practice the blade work (both offensive and defensive) that is much more difficult to perfect with other novice fencers who often cannot provide the appropriate cues or counter-moves. The coach will practice more and more complex actions as the fencer progresses. One goal that is difficult to achieve in a group setting but is much more possible with private lessons is to train the fencer to develop quick and automatic actions based on what the opponent does. Each club will handle private lesson scheduling and fees differently.

open fencing

Open fencing is terrific for fencers interested in a more active environment and to get a taste of some friendly competition. Clubs will regularly schedule open fencing times. Anyone who is interested in open fencing just shows up at designated times and fences

as many other people as they can or want to. There is a nominal fee for non-members. It is sort of like an all-you-can-eat buffet. It is good to have some exposure to this environment before entering tournaments. The fencing at open fencing is always with electric equipment. Most fencers own their own equipment though some can be rented or borrowed at the club. I thoroughly enjoy open fencing, but it should not be the only way to practice as it could lead one to ingraining bad habits.



One of many fabulous camps my kids attended at Northwest Fencing Center.



Andrew (MTFC) getting warm-up at Super Youth Circuit (SYC) event at Rain City Fencing Center by me in 2014.

pillars of success

I have found that to be successful in fencing (doing better in tournaments, earning ratings, earning national points, being more confident as an athlete), a fencer needs to have fun. He should also balance private lessons, group classes, open fencing, and competition. The private lesson is great for perfecting technique, refining tactics, and developing strategy. Group classes are helpful to be able to practice the same drills with different partners, to bout with someone else, and to get immediate feedback from a coach. Open fencing is a fun casual way to practice the skills learned. But open fencing is not as high stress as competition so participating in tournaments is how a fencer tracks progress—are you doing better? What do you need to work on? I usually record video of my kids when they go to national level tournaments (and rare regional tournaments as well) in order to review with our coach and to review ourselves. What good habits should we continue to improve?

What bad habits do we need to fix? Also, there are a number of fencing camps offered in our region and beyond. They are a great way to meet motivated fencers and improve a lot in a short time. My kids go to as many camps as possible.

youth development

There is no definite goal or skill level that any one child must achieve in fencing. Just like piano lessons, tennis lessons, or any other practiced pursuit, your final goal can be anything from self fulfillment to Olympic aspirations. Some fencers are happy and have time to pursue fencing as an extracurricular activity only during elementary school and may be satisfied with being an intermediate fencer. Some families want to pursue a sport that a child can continue into adulthood with open fencing at clubs around the country and have time only to develop the advanced intermediate skill set. Other children will not be satisfied until they compete at the elite levels, perhaps in college or at international tournaments.

cost of competitive youth fencing

An important consideration for any sport is cost. Soccer or basketball in the regular league costs about \$100-200 for a 3 month season. Club soccer costs up to \$3,000 for the season. Piano lessons can be over \$3,000 annually.

If you are planning to compete, you will want to make sure that you and your child are prepared for the extra time, effort, dedication, and cost required to be successful.

Private fencing lessons are often an additional charge and are generally \$40-50 for 20-30 minutes one or more times a week. A complete set of equipment for competition at Absolute Fencing (absolutefencinggear.com) can run \$522 for the



Upper left French grip épée. Lower left pistol grip épée. Right picture Leon Paul X-Change mask.

deluxe 10 piece electric foil starter set, \$416 for the deluxe 8 piece electric épée starter set, and \$567 for the deluxe electric 10 piece electric saber starter set as of September 2025. Fancy gear costs more. A USA Fencing competitive membership is required. Tournaments are generally \$35 per event locally but can be \$200 for the first event at the national level (additional events are \$120). And if you compete nationally or internationally the airfare, food, and hotel costs add up quickly.

BASIC PRACTICE EQUIPMENT

basic non-electric equipment

There is basic equipment at the club that is available and adequate for both classes and private lessons. Many fencers as they progress and plan to stick with the sport prefer to buy their own equipment

because of the better fit and comfort of both the protective gear and the weapon. And it is as clean and fresh as you like it.

Generally, a basic club practice set of equipment consists of a mask, jacket, plastron (underarm protector), glove, and non-electric (dry) weapon. There are a number of non-electric sets that are reasonably priced. The jacket and glove that come



Christopher with first fencing lesson in 2009.

with these sets can be used for local and even national tournaments (but not international tournaments). The non-electric weapons are handy for practice at the club. Competition will require electric equipment (described later). Before you buy any equipment, please see the sections *Required Competition Equipment* and *350 newtons, 800 newtons, fie* in this guide.

my experience with my kids' equipment

Kids grow like weeds. While adults may want to invest in fancy-schmancy equipment and protective gear, I started out getting affordable basic gear for my kids with the worry that the uniform will be two sizes too small by the time I get the equipment (usually a couple weeks after ordering online).

What I got my kids when they first started fencing was an FIE-rated (highest level of protection) underarm protector (also known as plastron) which is an extra layer of protection to be worn underneath the club jacket. I figured they could

start out borrowing the club mask, glove, and jacket until they decided they wanted to stick with the sport. A plastron is required for all tournaments. They are less expensive than jackets and can grow as the kids grow since they are sized small, medium, and large. In fact, I have since upgraded the kids' plastrons to the fancier kinds (lighter with top-of-the-line FIE protection) and am using the plastron I got them years ago myself at practice.

I got them a small plastic chest protector for \$25 each. Chest protectors are required for girls and women and are optional for boys and men in competitions. However, since the kids practice on one another during classes and use each other as targets (in paired drills, two fencers will practice together by alternating roles as student and coach) I immediately noticed that my boys no longer feared these drill once they had extra protection. I know a number of men who feel it to be unmanly to fence with a plastic chest protector, but I do not know how I got through fencing in college without one! My three boys have since stopped wearing



Left fencing jacket. Middle plastic chest protector with soft padding. Right plastron (underarm protector).



Épée mask with non-electric bib and armory stamps (passed inspection).

measurements, and other measurements requiring only a tape ruler. Most of the equipment vendor web sites describe how to size the uniforms.

There are two basic types of grips for foil and épée. There is the French grip which is straight without any protrusions that fit between the fingers. It can provide a fencer who holds the grip by the end an extra inch or two of reach (called pommelung

or posting). The French grip is weaker at parrying than the pistol grip particularly if held at the back due to leverage issues.

The other style of grip is the pistol grip which is generally the more popular of the two styles. The pistol grips come in various shapes and has protrusions that fit between fingers for better control and a firmer grip. However, it does not have the reach advantage of the French grip. I recommend that before you go out and choose a complete weapon (often you get a choice in

their plastic chest protectors by their own choice. Starting in the 2018 season the chest protectors used in competition for foil require a soft padding and FIE marking.

Because Benjamin (my middle son) was too small to fit any of the club jackets available when he started fencing at age 7, I got him a basic set including mask, practice jacket, and size 0 (30 inch) practice foil with extra small pistol grip. Sizing for equipment is based on chest measurements, hand measurements, head



Left fencing glove for foil or épée with many armory inspection marks. Right body cord for foil or saber.



Keyon (MTFC) and Benjamin (MTFC) at Salle Auriol Seattle.

handles) or before you go out and upgrade your current handle, ask around and see what people in the club are using; see what fits your hand best both with shape and size.

For saber there is but one type of handle but different brands and materials.

weapon sizes

Blades come in various sizes. Fencers 12 years old and older generally get a standard full-size, size 5 (35 inch) blade. For Youth 8 (Y8) and Youth 10 (Y10) tournaments (fencers 10 years old and under), blades must be size 0 (30 inches) or size 2 (32 inches).

Most Y8 and Y10 fencers use size 2 blades though when Benjamin and Christopher were in the Y8 age group, they preferred the smaller, lighter, and faster size 0 foils despite the very small disadvantage in the shorter length.

When Benjamin was competing in the Youth 12 (Y12) events as a 10 year old where most of his opponents were using size 5 foil blades, Benjamin still preferred the unusual size 3 (33 inch) foil blades that I had to find online for him as it was lighter, faster, and more comfortable for him to control. Christopher competed in the Youth 12 (Y12) and Youth 14 (Y14) events with a size 4 foil blade until he grew. However, I would not recommend an épée shorter than the allowed size for youth as there is no right of way, and épéeists using a short blade are significantly disadvantaged.

I recommend non-electric practice blades for Youth 10 and under to be either size 0 or size 2 because the full size blades are uncomfortably heavy for some of the kids in this younger age group. But check with your coach.

bag

Most people get some sort of bag to carry all their equipment in. If you ever plan to fly with your gear you will need to consider size restrictions that the airlines are imposing now. It is rare for a fencer to be charged extra for their fencing bag, even



Justin (NWFC) and Benjamin (MTFC) fencing at Northwest Fencing Center.



Sam (NWFC) and Andrew (MTFC) at Northwest Fencing Center in a Regional Open Circuit (ROC) event.

when it is oversized. I travel with a soft fencing bag with wheels. Some fencers travel with a hard case for their equipment, but I have never had any issues with the soft weapons bags we use. When I fly to a competition I check in my blades and body cords but carry on just about everything else including my mask, jacket, knickers, lame, and glove—anything I don't want to run around buying or borrowing that I am allowed to bring on the plane I keep with me so I do not show up at an event with just my underwear when my bag gets lost or delayed. USA Fencing recommends describing the checked bag at the airport with fencing gear as containing “sports equipment” rather than “weapons.”

THINKING ABOUT COMPETITION

After taking classes and private lessons it may be time to think about competing in tournaments. Unlike most sports with teams and scheduled games, fencing competitions requires a lot more planning, motivation, and initiative on your part. This is not like joining a soccer team and getting a calendar of weekend games. Competitive fencers turn to the Fencing Results and Events Database (AskFRED; askfred.net then choose *Upcoming Tournaments* then *Browse Tournaments*. Under *All Tournaments* choose *Western Washington Division* or *Oregon* to limit your search) to find out what tournaments are available. As you compete more, you may decide it is time to expand your search to include events a larger region which a number of our youth fencers and their families do.

The flexibility in the fencing schedule is something that my family particularly appreciates. If my kids have a lot of homework, then they do not go to fencing practice. When they have more time, they go more frequently to the club during open hours. When we can go to a local tournament we do. If they have other commitments there is no teammate counting on them so we are not missed. The big tournaments such as the regional and



Sophia (Kaizen) fencing épée.

national competitions are announced far in advance so we can plan and arrange our schedule accordingly.

Speak with your coach to see when it may be time to give a try at more formal competition.

Generally, the competitive members of the club can give you a sense of how you will do at various kinds of tournaments. And finishing last place in your first, second, or even third tournament is not necessarily a bad thing depending on what you learn from the experience. Many of the best fencers



Benjamin (MTC) fencing saber at the Western Washington Championships 2019.

in the area finished last place in their first tournament. I tell every fencer that he should plan to come in last at his first tournament or he is an overachiever.

WHY COMPETE?

There are a number of reasons to compete. Entering a tournament offers a fencer the opportunity to put into practice what has been learned during lessons. Your coach wants you to

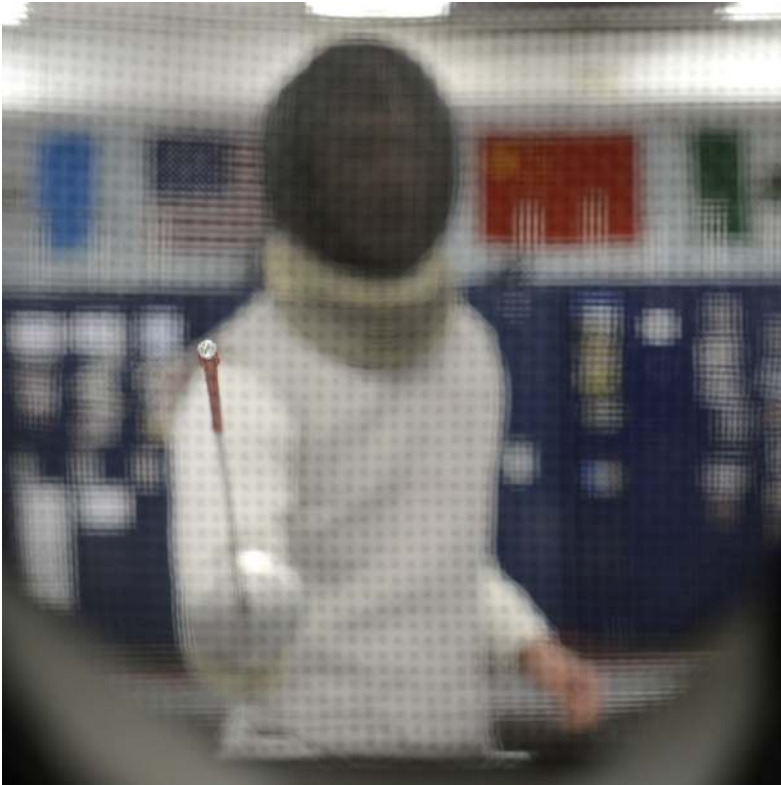
get a successful parry-riposte. Your class partner is told to let you lunge and hit. When you are at a tournament, everyone there wants to do everything he knows to not let you score. Local competition is where you will find other passionate fencers in the area. The fencing community overall is very friendly. And when it comes down to it, fencing is an Olympic sport.

For our youth fencers, practice at our youth class once a week will allow typically only a few bouts with other fencers as time allows. In a tournament

there is an opportunity to fence against 4–6 other fencers in the pools and then progresses to the direct elimination round (where one continues to fence until there is a loss) in a formal tournament setting. That may mean fencing more different and new fencers in the space of a few hours than one may get in an entire month in our beginning youth classes! It is good experience. The referees at most youth events are very

patient and supportive.

There are both youth tournaments and adult (senior) tournaments. As an adult, I find that competition gives me a reason to stay fit, an opportunity to fence against highly skilled opponents, and a great sense of satisfaction when I perform well. I enjoy the mental battle and the focus that a tournament requires. It also helps me feel young.



Staring through a mask with the opponent's foil tip in focus.

REQUIRED COMPETITION EQUIPMENT

When you get serious and want to enter tournaments you will need electric equipment to connect to the scoring machine. For foil competitions you will need at least two electric foils (there is additional wiring and a spring tip found on an electric weapon that is absent with less expensive dry or non-electric weapons), two body cords, an electric vest (lamé) so your opponent's hits on your valid target can register on the machine, a specific foil mask with an electric bib, and two mask cords. For épée competitions at least two electric épées and two body cords are necessary though no lamé is required since the entire body is a valid target. Foil and saber masks are not allowed in épée competitions as the conductive surface can ground out the opponent's blade and prevent a hit from registering. Finally,

saber fencers need a specialized conductive mask, conductive glove (or glove covering) with an 800 Newton rating, lamé (that is different from the foil lamé), body cords (for the mask and lamé), and at least two electric weapons.

Electric equipment may be rented or borrowed at some tournaments for youth fencers depending on availability. There is generally no electric rental equipment available for senior (adult) tournaments.

Most of the youth foil and épée tournaments in the Seattle-Tacoma area are hosted by Rain City Fencing Center (RCFC; raincityfencing.com) in Bellevue (they usually have electric foil equipment available to rent) or Salle Auriol Seattle

(SAS; salleauriol.com). Both also have a store. Northwest Fencing Center (NWFC; nwfencing.org) in Beaverton, Oregon, hosts youth foil and épée tournaments frequently as well. They also sell gear.

The saber events in Seattle are held regularly at Salle Auriol Seattle (SAS; salleauriol.com). In the Portland and Beaverton areas the youth saber events are held by both Oregon Fencing Alliance (OFA; oregonfencing.org) as well as PDX fencing (pdxfencing.com).

An underarm protector (plastron) is required for everyone. For girls and women a chest protector is required, for boys and men it is optional. Any plastic chest protector used for foil must have approved padding with an FIE mark. An athletic cup is not required but is a good idea for boys since the opponent may not have very good blade control! Knickers are required in addition to long socks, a mask, jacket, and glove. When you get

electric equipment you will probably need to carry around a basic repair kit. My suggestion for a basic repair kit is found at the end of this guide. A complete tournament checklist is included at the end of this guide as well.

350 newtons, 800 newtons, FIE

When looking into protective equipment there are various levels of protection you can purchase: club, 350N (Newtons), 800N, and FIE labeled.

A Newton is a unit of measurement (technically the force it takes to accelerate a kilogram mass one meter per second per second or said another way a bit less than a quarter pound of force). A 350 Newton jacket is supposed to stop a force of about 80 pounds.

Usually, club rated gear is adequate for practice, particularly in kids who are not the strongest of fencers. Club gear is not specifically rated. Beginning competition gear is often rated 350 Newtons in strength. The next step up is an 800

Newton uniform (jacket, knickers, plastron) which is supposed to stop a force of about 200 pounds. The Federation Internationale d'Esclime (FIE) which is the world body that organizes fencing has a higher standard than USA Fencing as they regulate equipment used by international competitors and Olympic athletes who can attack much more powerfully than our 7 year old youth fencers. FIE labeled equipment is the ultimate in price (expensive) and performance.

For weapons, FIE maraging blades are of higher quality than standard blades and usually cost significantly more. They are generally longer-lasting. They often come with tips that are of higher quality as well. Weapons can carry the FIE label (required in international competition) and as expected are the most expensive to buy. Less expensive weapons may have a slightly higher failure rate than more expensive weapons often due to wiring or tip problems. However, with good care, any weapon can be more than adequate for



Left Pacific Northwest Team 4th place at Summer National Championships 2019 with Wesley (RCFC), Justin (NWFC), Nathaniel (NWFC), and Benjamin (MFC). Right Wesley, Benjamin, and Justin at Northwest Fencing Center camp.



Christopher (MTFC) on bottom fencing foil at Rain City Fencing Center at a local youth tournament.

buy the most protection I can my myself and my kids. My kids started out wearing club jackets for practice. When they started competing in the youth tournaments locally I got them 350N jackets for additional protection. During practice and at tournaments I ask them to wear their 800N plastron—they can grow and still use the plastron for a number of years. After they were competing for an entire season I did buy them an FIE rated 1600N Leon Paul mask for the best head protection I could find. Finally, when my oldest sons outgrew their 350N jackets and they were competing at national tournaments I got them 800N FIE jackets from Allstar. As the kids grow bigger and fence more aggressively, their opponents do hit faster and harder so I appreciate the additional protection their current jackets provide. And while FIE equipment is more expensive, I justify it to my wife that it is still cheaper than an emergency room copayment.

I find that for the more expensive FIE gear, the order I have bought upgrades include: plastron (least expensive of the options, can fit the longest

club and tournament use. Many of our more experienced fencers are able to buy basic inexpensive parts and put together their entire weapon at a reasonable price.

For local and national tournaments, club-level equipment is generally adequate and allowed. Please read the equipment requirements before going to a tournament as the rules do occasionally change. I tend to



Yes, this move is allowed. Christopher (MTFC) ducking and counter-attacking on right to score a point at Rain City Fencing Center.

with a growing child, and can be sold without a lot of hassle), Leon Paul X-Change mask (which is a 1600 Newton FIE rated level of protection and offers a lot of flexibility in terms of being able to use it for foil or épée by purchasing the correct bib, interchangeable bibs so if you are worried a foil or saber bib will not pass conductivity testing at a higher level tournament you can bring an extra X-Change bib rather than bringing two or more masks, and padding that can be washed or easily replaced; the biggest issue with this mask is the high cost), FIE jacket (the kids outgrow jackets faster than I like), FIE knickers (generally last

not great, it is a better long term investment to get the 350 Newton rated equipment. Also, in Canada, their national tournaments such as the Canada Cup follow strict FIE rules, so the safer equipment rules apply.

When finally competing internationally, the FIE rules apply so you will need 1600 Newton FIE rated masks, 800 Newton FIE rated protective clothing, and FIE approved blades.

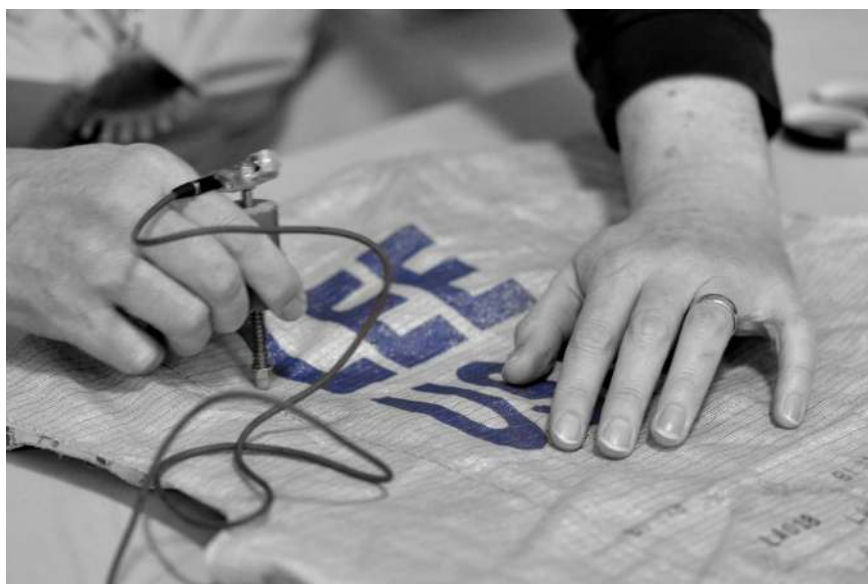
WHERE TO BUY

locally

A number of clubs in our region including Rain City Fencing Center (RCFC), Salle Auriol Seattle (SAS), and Northwest Fencing Center (NWFC) carry a selection of beginner gear that is reasonably priced as well as some high end FIE labeled equipment. Make sure to call before you go to check that they have what you are looking for.

on-line

Most fencers end up getting most of their fencing equipment online.



My foil lamé being inspected prior to a Regional Open Circuit (ROC) event.

longer than jackets), and finally FIE blades (these high quality blades break much less frequently in general than standard blades).

Canada has rules more strict governing safety than the United States, even in local tournaments. So for our fencers going to a local youth event in Canada, 350 Newton equipment is required. If you are shopping for equipment and the cost between club rated gear and 350 Newton gear is



Épée tip, spring, and tip screws.

I will share some of my frequented stores, but there are many others available that are equally good. I have tried to stick with a limited number of stores and brands so my equipment has interchangeable parts, my lamé size fits my jacket which fits me, and I don't have to remeasure myself every time I make an order. I have not had any problems with ordering from either of my favorite two stores. Every experienced fencer has his or her favorite which balances durability, quality, and price. Just ask around.

I shop at the Fencing Post (thefencingpost.com) as they have a good section of less expensive and also high end products. They can embroider names on fencing jackets which looks cool (mostly for épée fencers as foil and saber fencers wear a lamé that covers their jacket). And their service is great. Once I bought a batch of wired blades from them with a high failure rate, and they fixed all the defective ones without any hassle. My club often will try to do big orders together to save on shipping.

My favorite high-end supplier is Leon Paul (leonpaulusa.com) which is expensive but makes equipment of excellent quality, performance, and durability. Their X-Change masks are excellent and have the advantage of removable bibs so a foil or saber bib that fails inspection at high level events just requires replacing the bib rather than the entire mask; I can change out my bib for foil or épée depending on the event. It is a very comfortable and breathable mask. While it is true that having the best equipment does not make the best fencer, please do not tell my wife I ever said this. Many fencers who have been competing seriously seem to prefer this mask. Ordering from the Leon Paul United Kingdom site can sometimes be more cost effective even with international



Benjamin (MTFC) on right at Northwest Fencing Center.

shipping depending on the exchange rate. My club will also sometimes try to coordinate a large order together to save on shipping.

TOURNAMENTS

USA Fencing membership

A fencer will need to sign up for a membership with USA Fencing (usafencing.org) to participate in any class and to participate in tournaments. Memberships are good from August 1 through July 31 the next year. At least a non-competitive USA fencing membership is required for all fencers in order for their club to be compliant with liability insurance rules. Fencing in the United States is governed by USA Fencing. The USA

Fencing website has information such as the *Athlete's Handbook*, *Parent's Guide*, and the *USA Fencing Rulebook*. The *USA Fencing Rulebook* lists all the rules of the sport, all the penalties, and all the nitty gritty.

tournament age qualifications

Age-restricted competitions are based on the age of the fencer on January 1 of the season in question. This allows the tournament event coordinators to list age eligibility by birth year. Because the fencing season



Christopher (MTFC) on right at Northwest Fencing Center.

extends from August 1 through July 31 the next year it is possible to have a 9 year old fence in an 8 and under tournament after January 1 of the season.

The standard youth age brackets for tournaments (the tournament directors generally list the birth years that qualify for any event) include the following: 8 years old and under also known as Youth-8 or Y8 (local tournaments only), 10 years old and under also known as Y10 (local and national), Y12 (local and national), Y14 (local and national), Cadets under 17 (U17) (local, national, and international), and Junior under 20 (U20) (local, national, and international). Fencers 13 years old and older (Y14 kids) are allowed to participate in Cadet, Junior, and Senior (13 years old and older) events. Veteran fencers are 40 years old or over and clumped into 10 year age groups: ages 40–49 (Vet 40), 50–59 years (Vet 50), 60–69 years (Vet 60), and 70-79 years old (Vet 70).



Christopher (MTFC) having a great Super Youth Circuit (SYC) weekend in 2019 at Northwest Fencing Center.



Benjamin (MTFC) fencing foil at a tournament at Salle Auriol Seattle.

A youth fencer may compete in an event one age group older than his or her actual category. Thus a Y8 fencer can compete in a Y10 event. One exception is that a youth fencer may also compete in an age category one group higher than the group in which he currently holds national points for that weapon. So a Y10 foil fencer who competes up to the Y12 group and earns national points (certain events only such as the Super Youth Circuit or North American Cup events which will be discussed later) can compete in Y14 foil events. More on national points later as well. Finally, the senior event category, which is what most events are, includes those who are 13 years old or

older on January 1 of the competitive fencing season.

local tournament schedule & results

Upcoming local tournaments are listed in the Fencing Results and Events Database (AskFRED; askfred.net) website. Go to *Upcoming Tournaments* then *Browse Tournaments*. You can limit your choices by choosing a zip code and radius. (I use 200 miles from 98624). In

my searches I include Washington and Oregon events. If you want, you can select *Weapon*, *Gender*, and *Age Group*, to fit what you are looking for more specifically.

You can see where and when the future events are, how many people are signed up for any particular event, weapons classifications for each fencer signed up, the possible rating of the tournament,



Wesley (RCFC, Seattle University) attacking Benjamin (MTFC, Vassar) in foil at Salle Auriol



Fencing tournaments in the United States traditionally award gold, silver, and two tied for third places. We do not usually fence off for the third place finish.

any specific rules or format for the tournament, and other information about each posted event. Regional and national tournament information is *not* posted on AskFRED but rather on the USA Fencing website (usafencing.org then *Events* then *Register Online*). Results may be posted or stored at the Fencing Time website (fencingtimelive.com).

Visitors are always welcome without charge. You can go to cheer on your friends or just to check things out.



Austin (RCFC, Duke) fencing Benjamin (MTFC, Vassar) at a tournament in 2015 at Rain City Fencing Center years before they went off to college.

Some major tournaments in the Pacific Northwest for all three weapons in the senior (13 years old and older) age group include the Leon Auriol Open in September, the Battle in Seattle in January, the Regional Open Circuit (ROC) event in April at Northwest Fencing Center previously known as Cinco de Mayo, and the Rain City Open in May. The Western Washington Division website is wwdfencing.org. The Oregon Division website is www.usfa-or.org.

Local tournament results are also posted in the AskFRED website. You can see your own fencing tournament record. You can also look up other fencers by name to see their tournament history.

A neat website that came online in 2020 is Fencing Tracker (fencingtracker.com) which has nice statistics for each fencer. This website is run by “enthusiasts who are passionate about fencing, computer science, and data.”

general tournament format

After registration at a tournament, fencers are divided up into pools where everyone fences everyone else to 5 points or 3-minutes, whichever comes first. Often pools sizes are between 5-7 fencers each depending on the number of fencers entered in the tournament. Fencers are divided into their pools by their weapon classification (more on this later) where those with similar ratings are divided into separate pools as much as possible. This way the best fencers (the “A” rated fencers) don’t hurt each others’



Andrew (MTFC) Western Washington épée champion 2016.

chances to get to the finals during this early sorting stage of the competition.

There is a ranking (seeding) done immediately after pools are over which is based on the percentage of bouts won. If there are ties in the percentage of victories then the fencers are ranked based on their *indicators* (touches scored against opponents minus touches received) during the pools; initial weapon classification has no impact on this seeding which is based solely on performance during the pools. If two fencers have the same indicator, then the tie breaker is how many points the fencers scored on their opponents total during the pool round. If these are still tied

then the two (or more fencers) are tied going into the next round. The seeding after pools determines the pairings for the direct elimination round next. There are some tournaments in which only a certain percentage of fencers advance to the next round, and this is established before the tournament starts.

In the next round which is direct elimination (DE's), the top ranked fencer after the pools round fences against the lowest ranked fencer in the bracket. Fencer ranked second fences the second-to-last fencer. As you can see, it is important to do well in the pools so as to fence against easier opponents. If you rank near the bottom of the seeding after pools (if you had a bad day) you will be essentially fed to the wolves and offered up to the top fencer as a near-guaranteed victory for her. The prior performance in pools has no impact on tournament success at this point. You can start your direct elimination round seeded last after the pool round, beat the fencer seeded first after the pools, and work your way to a gold medal! But that is unlikely.... Direct elimination bouts (Y12, Y14, Cadet, Junior, and Senior events) are up to 15 points with three 3-minute periods and a 1-minute break between each period. For saber, the break occurs when one fencer reaches 8 points because the pace of saber is so fast that the clock is not used. Y10 and Veteran fencers compete in the direct elimination round up to 10 points with two 3-minute periods. The break for Y10 fencers occur when one fencer reaches 5 points. It is direct elimination at this stage so the victor continues on in the tournament, and the losing fencer is out.

Generally, the fencers who are eliminated in the semi-final round are tied for third place. There is usually no fence-off for 3rd place by convention.

direct elimination breaks

The fencer is expected to stay on the strip and remain connected to the electric scoring device during the 1-minute breaks in the direct elimination rounds. The fencer may have water and coaching. However, only one “coach”—which may be a coach, parent, teammate, or friend—may approach a fencer on the strip during the one minute break according to the rules.

If there is no coach available and you find yourself as the strip coach (the coach giving advice during the break), the best general advice is to provide support and encouragement. Perhaps a drink and a towel would be helpful. Whether a fencer is doing



Benjamin (MTC) Western Washington foil and three weapon champion 2019.

well or not, encourage her to relax and notice what is going on during the time before the break. Ask her what her strategy is going into the next encounter. Have her think a little during the break so that she is ready with a plan when the fencing resumes. Even if the opponent is clearly a better or more experienced fencer, have the fencer you are coaching try to get one point at a time. I have an entire section in this guide titled *Strip Coaching Advice*.

priority

If two fencers are tied at the end of either the pool bout or the end of a direct elimination round in foil or épée then there is an additional minute of fencing that starts after determining *priority*. For this one minute of additional fencing in overtime, it is sudden death so the first fencer who scores wins the bout. Priority is randomly decided by a flip of a coin or by the scoring machine before the minute of fencing starts. Whichever fencer has priority by chance is the winner of the bout at the end of that minute if no points have been scored by either fencer. This rule does not apply to saber since the clock is not used in this weapon.

non-combativity (unwillingness to fence)

Apparently one year when the head of the international Olympic committee was watching an épée bout of world class athletes who were so evenly match and equally skilled at defense that neither wanted to risk attacking so they both bounced on the fencing strip for way too long, the non-combativity rule was born. It only applies to direct elimination bouts. And while it applies to all three weapons it really only is seen in épée and less often in foil.



Most of the US Olympic fencers are such wonderful role models and generous with the younger fencers. Christopher (MTFC), Race (London 2012, Rio 2016, Tokyo 2021) and Gabey (MTFC).

These are the exact words from the Rulebook:

There is unwillingness to fight when there is one minute of fencing without a hit or without a hit scored off the target.

What happens next is that there are a number of penalties awarded for each occurrence with P-cards (passivity cards) given to both fencers. Currently the penalties are given in the following order: P-yellow, P-red, then P-black. P-red cards award a point each fencer. A P-black card eliminates the fencer with the lower score, but if both fencers have the same score then the fencer with the *initial higher seeding in the competition* wins the bout.

Basically, the best way to avoid this situation is to fence to win. As Coach Damien Lehfeldt wrote, “I’ve watched more than 300 bouts now and taken

notes on each in painstaking detail from 2019 [to] the present [for his fencing master thesis]. And I can tell you that one of the absolute worst strategies you can bring to the piste is fencing not to lose (as opposed to fencing to win).”

example of a tournament

Just to walk you through an example tournament and help explain why seeding is important, let me give you a made-up tournament of 9 fencers. If you are not preparing for your first tournament yet I would recommend you skip this section until you are. We will call the participants Fencer 1, 2, 3, and so on so we do not have to remember names. We will also give them each a national rank in the order of their names though this could be classification, too. So fencer 1 is number 1 in the country and is first seed before the tournament. When dividing up say small pools of 3 fencers (which would not happen in a tournament of 9 fencers as there would be one monster pool of 9 fencers—generally pools are no smaller than 5 fencers unless there are fewer than 5 total fencers in the entire event), the top fencers are separated from each other. Fencer 1 is in Pool 1. Fencer 2 is in Pool 2. Fencer 3 is in Pool 3. They are the best and are not made to fence each other initially. Now fencer 4 does not go in Pool 1 because the Fencer 1 is protected as much as possible. Fencer 4 is seeded number 4 and gets assigned to Pool 3. Fencer 5 is in Pool 2. And Fencer 6 is in Pool 1. Wow. Isn’t it great to be number 1? The second strongest fencer in your pool (after yourself) is ranked number 6 in this example. As an aside, Junior men’s épée at the North American Cup (NAC) events can often have more than 300 fencers competing. Pools are typically of 7 fencers resulting in 43 pools. The number 1 fencer goes

against number 86 as the nearest competition! Awesome! Back to our imaginary tournament. The rest of the fencers are distributed in our example so the final pools look like this: Pool 1 has Fencers 1,



Soren (Olympian Athens 2004, London 2012) against Andrew (MTFC) at the January North American Cup (NAC) event in 2018. Soren won 5-2 in this pool bout.

6, 7; Pool 2 has Fencers 2, 5, 8; Pool 3 has fencers 3, 4, 9. If things go as expected, Fencer 1 dominates his pools and is seeded number 1 again after the pools and before the direct eliminations. Pool 2 is harder as Fencer 2 is not quite as good as Fencer 1 and has to fence against Fencer 5 who is better than Fencer 6. Fencer 2 comes out second place after the pools (comparing percentage of victories in the pools then indicators—number of points scored by the fencer minus the number of points scored by the opponents). The direct elimination table is formed from the seeding after the pools. Because there are nine fencers, the

fencers find themselves in a table of 16. But there is no fencer number 16 so the match-up of 1 versus 16 means that fencer 1 gets a bye to the next round. In fact, Fencers 1-7 all get a bye into the

table of 8. Fencer 8 and Fencer 9 need to fence each other to see who advances to the table of 8 (top 8 or quarter finals). All the other fencers got a first round bye and have a free pass; they cannot finish worse than 8th place. So again, it is great to do well in the pools as the worse fencers have to fight to make it to the next round. Let's say Fencer 8 beats Fencer 9 as expected. In the table of 8, Fencer 1 goes against Fencer 8, Fencer 2 goes against Fencer 7, Fencer 3 goes against Fencer 6, and Fencer 4 goes against Fencer 5. Again there is a reward for being the top seed and most protected. If Fencer 1 suddenly forgets how to fence and Fencer 8 beats him, then Fencer 1 is

eliminated. Fencer 8 advances to the table of 4 (top 4 or semi-finals) sort of taking over the number 1 position. Since Fencer 1 does not make it to the table of 4 he finishes 5th place. He is the best of the losers from the table of 8 where the top 4 advance. Since Fencer 8 made it to the table of 4, he will finish the tournament 1st place if he wins, 2nd place if he makes it to the finals by beating Fencer 4 who would be his next opponent, or is tied for 3rd if he loses the next elimination round. Fencer 8 has just had a great day!



Score box at a North American Cup (NAC) event with final results of a team tournament and 10 seconds remaining.

HOW TO WATCH FENCING

who got the point?

There is a scoring machine used in tournaments that have two colored lights (typically green and red) as well as white lights. In all weapons the machine will light up colored on the side of the fencer who landed their blade on their opponent's valid target. In all weapons it is possible for multiple lights to turn on during the course of fencing.

Depending on the weapon, the lights may be adequate to help you understand who scored the point. If there is a single colored light on when the referee yells "halt" then the fencer who is on the side of the light is awarded a point unless there are penalties and the point is annulled. Another clue to determine who got the point is to watch the referee. The referee will use hand signals to recreate the last actions in order to explain the winner of the point. The quick and easy way to tell who received the point is to watch the referee raise his hand up at the very end of the set of hand signals. The point is awarded to the side that the hand is raised by the referee. You can also check the score on the machine to see who got the point.

For foil and saber there are the rules of *right of way* which I will review from an earlier section to help with the scoring.

Right of way are the set of rules that determine who has priority in an attack, and in the case when both fencers land their blade on their opponents, whose touch counts. If both fencers successfully land their blade on their opponent's valid target and two colored lights are seen on the scoring machine, then the fencer with the right of way is awarded the point. The first fencer to establish an attack gets the right of way which is usually taken away with a *parry* (a defensive move that touches the attacker's blade and is meant to block the attack) or ends when the attacker stops attacking. The fencer who parries then has the right of way until the *riposte* (attack after a parry) ends or the opponent makes a successful parry. There are more subtle and intricate rules involved in right of way. The specific rules are posted in the USA Fencing website (usafencing.org currently under *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *USA Fencing Rulebook*).

In foil and saber there may be two colored lights, and it is the referee's observation of the fencing action and the right of way that determines who receives the point. In foil there is also an *off target* white light that is lit when a fencer hits the

opponent in an area that is not the torso (hits in a non-valid target area on the opponent's body or hits the floor) and no points can be earned by that fencer. If there is a colored light by one foil fencer and an off target light by the other foil fencer the referee will need to determine who has right of way to decide which light counts.

There is no off target in saber and épée. In saber, hitting the opponent in an area that is off target does not result in the scoring machine lighting up with any light and does not stop the action. Épée is the simplest to watch. Unless a fencer hits the floor, a light on for your fencer is a point awarded.

If both fencers hit their opponent within 40 milliseconds of each other then both fencers are awarded a point for this *double touch*.

STRIP COACHING

introduction

As you become a fencing parent and help your child at a tournament, here are some thoughts and suggestions to help you have fun, keep it fun for the kids, and make fencing a great experience. I also happen to have some tips as you serve as occasional substitute coach.



These pictures from a North American Cup (NAC) National event in 2017 truly speak volumes to me about the type of people whom we consider our friends and the type of young adults we are raising together in this sport in the Pacific Northwest. Matthew on the left (Kaisen, Ohio State) was just eliminated by Andrew in fencing whites (MTFC, Harvard) in a national event in the previous round. The elimination round they fought was fierce, and Andrew happened to come out ahead on this day. In the next round Matthew is seen during the break giving coaching advice to Andrew to help his friend against the next opponent. And later in the same event Kaiden (NWFC, Ohio State) sees that Andrew is still in the event and steps in during a break to offer some advice as well. These three young men are all top "A" rated fencers and were fencing on their division 1 college teams. But I am more proud of all three of them for the people they have become than anything they have won in fencing.



Coach Dana (MTFC), Andrew (MTFC), and me in Copenhagen at the Cadet European Cup in 2015 representing Team USA.

i love to watch you play

Do an online search on this phrase, and there are numerous articles all saying the same thing. Kids are worried about disappointing parents and coaches. They often feel a lot of pressure to perform (which in some instances makes it harder for them to perform their best). A number of articles suggest that the best thing a parent can tell a child is, “I love to watch you play.” It takes the pressure off of doing well. And it is a great, loving, supportive statement.

support effort

I would rather my kids challenge themselves, fence the best they ever have in their lives, and come in last (or not make the cut in a tough national event which has happened to them) than to win an easy tournament and fence

poorly. If your child fenced his heart out, that is a great start.

the long game

If your child enjoys a sport (any sport) it is more fun to go to practice. More correct practice makes them better. More practice brings about better results. Better results bring about nice shiny medals. Shiny medals are fun. But it all starts with enjoying the sport. One parent of a very successful 13 year old that

Benjamin fenced (and lost to by a lot) years ago when he was 10 years old at a national tournament suggested that he “practice and grow.” That was at first annoying and not specific advice but absolutely correct. Benjamin has continued to fence and continued to grow and continued to become better.



Benjamin (MTFC) looking over his competition prior to his event in Bratislava at the Cadet European Cup in 2018 representing Team USA.



Benjamin (MTFC) and Coach Chung (MTFC) in the foreground during the coaching break in table of 16 at the December Division 1 (open) North American Cup (NAC) in 2017 with Gerek (Olympian, Beijing 2008, London 2012, Rio 2016, Tokyo 2021) and Miles (Olympian, London 2012, Rio 2016) in the background checking out the competition of fencers who would advance to the quarter finals. Unfortunately, Benjamin lost and did not get to fence an Olympian.

coaching

If you are not a fencer you can still help your child when you do not have a coach stripside with you. Sometimes you may go to a tournament and no coach is planning to go. Sometimes you go to a big event and the coach is running around helping everyone a little bit. But the coach cannot be with your child the entire time. You can help, too.

be a parent first

Please refer to the first few points. Have fun. Help your kids have fun and learn. This is what I find the best about this sport. Very few of our kids will go to the Olympics. But they can all learn and grow. Fencing is good exercise (good for their health), good for problem solving (good for their brains), teaches the value of hard work and practice

(good for their careers), and good for sportsmanship.

Some kids win by just getting over their fears and compete for the first time. Some kids win when they lose a bout and do not cry. Some kids win when they beat an opponent and are gracious winners rather than pure jerks. Some kids win by getting a medal for the first time. Find whatever small victories and celebrate them.

who got the point?

So sometimes you are not sure who got the point. In foil or saber there may be lights for both fencers but this whole right of way thing makes it challenging sometimes for a non-referee and the reason why there are times when a fencer, coach, or parent may disagree with the call. The best way to tell if your fencer got the point is when the referee raises her hand on the side of your fencer

and the score goes up by one. For épée it is a lot easier since a light for your fencer generally means a point (though the opponent may also get a point also in cases of a double touch.)

do the same or do something different

Is your child attacking her opponent and getting points over and over again? Clap, cheer, scream, and yell, “Do it again!” Is your child attacking and losing points over and over again? Clap, cheer, scream, and yell, “Good try! That didn’t work. Try something else!” Even more specific is if a child is attacking and losing perhaps he should defend. Or if a child is defending and losing he should try to attack. These basic mental switches may be helpful to flip when your child tries something that is not working over and over again while thinking, “If I do it one more time it will work.” You can be there to suggest that it did not work five times and will probably not work on the sixth try. And even if it does work they got one point for an action and the opponent got five. But be realistic. A shy young fencer will not become a monster and charge his opponent because you suggest it.

treat it like a puzzle

Fencing is a puzzle to solve. There is something called the short tactical wheel. It goes like this. One should try a simple attack. The action that

beats a simple attack is a parry riposte (defend and score on the opponent). The action that is supposed to win over a parry riposte is a compound (more complex) attack. The textbook response to a compound attack is a counter attack (if the opponent is getting too crazy and complex just stick out the blade and have them run into it while they are in the middle of their fancy moves). The response to a counter attack is a simple attack. It is sort of like rock, paper, scissors, and one more thing.

A lot of times I will ask the person I am strip coaching what is happening and what is working or not working. Except at the high levels (A or B rated fencers) telling someone to try a specific action is often not helpful unless you are their coach and know what they can do successfully. But if the fencer can identify what part of the tactical wheel they are getting stuck on, they can often think of some solution (the next step) around their problem. If your fencer says that they can’t attack and score a point against an awesome defensive fencer, then perhaps the answer is to also defend and make the opponent do a less awesome move.

one minute break

In the direct elimination bout there is the one minute break to get some water, wipe off some





Zoe (MTFC, Vassar) refereeing at the Battle in Seattle 2016 at Rain City Fencing Center.

sweat, and get coaching from one person (the coach, parent, or friend). I often tell a joke to relax a young fencer which I learned from Coach Aaron Page. You can ask your fencer what is working and not working. If they have no idea you can tell them what you see such as, “You are getting most of your points when you attack. So maybe you want to attack more.” Or maybe, “You are getting most of your points when you defend.” Or, “Your opponent is getting most of his points when he attacks so you probably don’t want to keep trying to defend and may need to attack him back.” Or whatever may be. The gentle suggestion is to try something that is working some more and avoid things that are not working. Keep it simple. If the fencer just needs a break and catch her breath that is what you need to let her do.

food and water

Your main job during a tournament for a young fencer is to make sure they show up to the right

place to fence, have drink and snacks, and have their equipment working. For older fencers they should figure it out themselves but do appreciate a full water bottle, snacks at hand when they want, and you taking the weapon for repairs (or fixing it yourself) so they don’t have to worry about it.

don’t criticize the referees

Unless you have taken a referee course and have done a lot of refereeing, I would discourage criticizing the referee on the strip or to your child after. You are always welcome to ask about particular calls particularly if it was contentious. And if done nicely the referees are generally happy to share their knowledge of the rules. And sometimes they are wrong because they are human. But when I referee (and I know I sometimes make a mistake) I will tell a pushy fencer, “I actually don’t care who wins. I’m just calling what I see.” And I really don’t care who wins. Unless you are



Lee kids in 2014 at Rain City Fencing Center.

annoying. Then I hope you don't win so you will be eliminated and go home. But I won't cheat or make calls against you because you are annoying. But I am happy to give you a penalty card for being extra annoying. You don't want to get penalized or black carded (and removed from the event) because you are super annoying (disrupting the bout) despite warnings.

Even after the bout and even if the referee is a complete beginner and has no clue, I would still avoid criticizing the calls to the kids. A fencer should

pay attention and adapt. If all beat attacks are called as parries then perhaps the fencer should stop doing beat attacks. Even more advanced, try to get the opponent to do the beat attacks that the referee doesn't see properly! And my solution to a "bad referee" is to suggest a different action to the fencer that yields a single light or avoiding those situations that the fencer gets "calls against her."

video

We record video on our phones when our kids fence at nationals or against particularly challenging opponents regionally. We do it because I do love to watch our kids fence. We show our coach the video after a tournament to work on making private lesson plans. The US national team reportedly has a vast library of fencers from other countries to study.

enjoy the moment

Even if you do not do any coaching but just bring water, a towel, and a smile during the break, that is okay. If you do not want to video take your kids and just enjoy the moment, that is okay. Enjoy these moments with your kids. You are doing a lot



Lee kids in 2020 at Metro Tacoma Fencing Club.

just by giving them the opportunity to try this awesome sport. And if you do not have fun neither will they.

take fencing classes yourself

One wonderfully supportive fencing mom—I'll call her "Young"—took some fencing lessons with me after her kids got to be super awesome youth fencers. After one drill, she took off her mask and exclaimed, "This is a lot harder than it looks!" If you have time try some fencing yourself through a class or maybe private lessons. You are never too old to learn, to exercise, and to be a role model for your kids. You can enjoy a shared experience. And it can help you appreciate all the hard work you kids are putting in.

take refereeing classes

If you are super motivated you can learn the rules by taking the referee seminar and practical. It can help you as you guide your child through this sport. And it can also help you understand the sport better.



Christopher warming up with Andrew before in-house tournament.

ADVANCED TOURNAMENTS

general

Generally, you will want to take part in a number of more casual and less intense local events before jumping into the more serious competitions. The reason for this is that there is little to be learned by paying a large registration fee, losing every bout in your pools by a large margin, being seeded near the bottom of the group after the pools, and then being quickly eliminated by one of the best fencers in your first direct elimination round. One generally learns the most by fencing against people who are slightly better than you (so you can work on getting better yourself with the challenge) and slightly worse than you (so you can practice and perfect the skills you have learned).

There are many events available regionally and nationally that are listed in the USA Fencing website (usafencing.org then *events*). There are the Regional Youth Circuit (RYC) and the Super Youth Circuit (SYC). There are a number of North

American Cup (NAC) events for both youth and adult fencers.

One must qualify in regional or divisional tournaments to compete in the Summer National Championships or in the Junior Olympic Fencing Championships. The USA Fencing website also lists the way one qualifies for the US Olympic fencing team (all done through national points).



Christopher (MTFC) on right fencing at a local mixed gender youth event at Rain City Fencing Center.

In addition to the usual equipment requirements found in local tournaments, the fencer's name must be displayed on the fencer's back (on the lamé in foil or saber; on the jacket in épée) or on the back leg of the knickers (fine in all three weapons) at North American Cup (NAC) national events. Names are not required at local and regional events.

Stenciling of names needs to be done according to fencing specifications and does limit the resale value of the uniform. Stenciling can be done at the time of purchase online (in which case the uniform is non-refundable), at the NAC venue or with Marx Enterprises (marxentpdx.com).

The standard and overwhelming majority of fencers who put their names on their uniform have their names on their jacket or lamé. For those who are planning to compete internationally, the requirement is name and country code on the back of the uniform or lamé. The USA logo on the knickers is highly encouraged or required. Putting

the name on the knickers somewhat labels a fencer as a "beginner."

For those who compete at the US national level where names are required, it can be more cost effective to have the name on the knickers (because lamés can develop dead spots that do not pass equipment check so you have to buy a new lamé more frequently than you would buy new knickers).

Names on the knickers are also great for pictures (see

Christopher's picture to the left).

regional youth circuit

For youth fencers who have participated in local events and placed reasonably well you may want to consider the Regional Youth Circuit (RYC) events which is the next more intense level of competition. It is only slightly more expensive. The competition is slightly more intense. The events are conducted as they would be at a national level competition (though at a smaller scale). Your equipment will be checked and marked for legality. These events are often run in the same gender, weapon, and age categories as found at the national events. You need to sign up for the RYC events on the USA Fencing website.

The RYC events offer youth fencers an opportunity to participate in national style tournaments within their own geographic area. They do not offer national points so you cannot get a national rank even if you win. There are regional points a fencer can earn which are used to help qualify for the Summer National Championships, and the top

performers of the season win a USA Fencing Regional Youth patch.

The *Athlete's Handbook* from USA Fencing gives all the details for the Regional Youth Circuit (RYC) events.

If you are this stage in your fencing you will start looking at events in both Washington State and in Oregon as we are both in the same fencing “region” (region 1). Upcoming local tournaments are listed in the Fencing Results and Events Database (ASKFRED; askfred.net) website. Go to *Upcoming Tournaments* then *Browse Tournaments*. You can limit your choices by choosing a zip code and radius. (I use 200 miles from 98624). In my searches I include Washington and Oregon events. If you want, you can select *Weapon*, *Gender*, and *Age Group*, to fit what you are looking for more specifically.

super youth circuit

The Super Youth Circuit (SYC) events are the next higher level of competition after the RYC events for Y10, Y12, and Y14 fencers. The entry fees are often slightly higher than in the RYC events. You need to sign up for the SYC events on the USA Fencing website. Generally, fencers who attend these events are serious. Many of the competitors are nationally ranked. Most fencers fly to these events which do award national points to those who finish in the top 40% of the group (if there are at least 6 fencers in an event)—fencers with national points have a national rank.

For those youth fencers who finish in the top 40% of the competition group they not only earn national points but also qualify to compete at the USA Summer Nationals championships in the summer.



Benjamin (mtfc) on right scoring in close combat from behind the back at Salle Auriol Seattle.

The *Athlete Handbook* from USA Fencing gives all the details for the Superior Youth Circuit (SYC) events. Go to usafencing.org then choose *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *Athlete Handbook*.

north american cup & summer nationals

There are two main North American Cup (NAC) events that pertain specifically to the youth fencer—there is one in March and one in July. The July event is called a National Championship for the Y10, Y12, and Y14 groups.



Andrew (MTFC) facing us at Junior Olympics 2016 scoring a double touch in épée. Both green and red lights are lit reflecting that both fencers hit.

Almost all the fencers who attend these events must fly. These events require large amounts of space so there are only a few cities that can host them. To be sensitive to the cost of such a large event, the locations are chosen to be during the off season for conventions—Texas or Arizona in the summer, for example. Generally the top fencers go to these events. Names are required on uniforms. Everyone is friendly but very serious. I spoke with the nationally ranked, number one, Y12 épée fencer at the NAC in April 2011; he not only knew all the rules of fencing, had memorized the classification table, and knew his competition, but he also had a higher classification (rating) than I had at 12 years old! If the event includes Division 1 (you have to have a classification of C or above) then you can expect to find some of the future members of the US Olympic fencing team competing at these events.

To find out more about the NAC events and to register you will need to go to the USA Fencing website (usafencing.org) then *Events*. You cannot register for a NAC on AskFRED.

Qualifying for the Y10, Y12, and Y14 Summer National Championships (which is part of the July Summer Nationals and July NAC) requires having national points, placing well in the Regional Youth Circuit (RYC) events, or for Y14 doing well in the divisional qualifier. The Summer Nationals events in Y10, Y12, and Y14 are considered a National Championship so the winner can rightly call herself “National Champion.”

All the NAC events for youth award national points to those who do well enough which is the top 40% of the field up to a maximum of 64th place.

The *Athlete Handbook* from USA Fencing gives all the details for the NAC events and how points are awarded. Go to usafencing.org then *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *Athlete Handbook*.

junior olympics

The Junior Olympics (JO) event is held once a year in the winter. Those who are over 13 years old and qualify may participate. Fencers with Cadet or Junior national points automatically qualify for their respective event. There currently are currently two qualification pathways locally though they change regularly (Regional Junior and Cadet Circuit points or JO qualifiers). You have to do well enough in the Regional Junior and Cadet Circuit (RJCC) series or do well enough at the JO qualifiers to participate in the Junior Olympics.

Junior Olympics is the national championships for the Cadet under 17 (U17) and Junior under 20 (U20) age groups and helps determine the US

team members representing us for the Cadet and Junior World Fencing Championships.

The *Athlete Handbook* from the USA Fencing gives all the details for the Junior Olympics. Go to usafencing.org then *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *Athlete Handbook*.

adult north american cup events

For adults, generally the Normal American Cup (NAC) events do not require any specific qualification. If you qualify to compete in Division I event you do not need this guide as you know everything I have tried to share. Division I requires a fencer's classification (rating) to be A, B, or C. Division II requires a classification of C or under. Division III is D and under.

For Summer Nationals there is a qualifying pathway found in the *Athlete Handbook* of the USA Fencing website. Go to usafencing.org then *For*

Athletes then *Rules & Compliance* then *Athlete Handbook*.

national points

Earning national points will allow a fencer to be ranked nationally. In some tournaments such as the Super Youth Circuit (SYC), Regional Junior and Cadet Circuit (RJCC) and North American Cup (NAC) events having a national rank will put the fencer at the top of the seeding before the tournament starts—much in the same way as having a classification (more details about classifications later). Youth national points are used to help a fencer determine his or her relative strength compared with other youth fencers in the country. For the older fencers, the national points are used to determine who is a member of the teams representing the United States internationally.



Benjamin (MTFC) and Coach Gregory (NWFC) taking a brake from physical chess (a nickname for fencing) and playing chess-chess in 2015. During their fencing careers both have earned senior (division 1) points. Gregory has competed in World Cup events representing the United States and is an awesome fencer and great guy.

Practically, I find that the major benefit for national points in the youth group is that a strong youth fencer with national points in the age category one higher than his current age group can fence essentially two age groups up (which is otherwise not allowed) to get better practice against older kids and continue to improve.

The youth national points are based on the best performance at the Super Youth Circuit events and at the March and July North American Cup (NAC) events. They are “rolling points” and are updated after every event that awards points (SYC and NAC

events) and also expire about a year from the event. Youth national ranking is reported by weapon and age category. While it is interesting in reading the rules to know what events are used to calculate national ranking, it is easiest to just check online to see if you are on the points list and what position you hold. Of course, if you have not fenced at a SYC or NAC event as a youth you will not have any points.

Initial event seeding at tournaments is dependent on the tournament you attend. Local and regional tournaments generally seed fencers based on

RATINGS CLASSIFICATION DISTRIBUTION

*USA Fencing membership, entire USA
4 April 2011 (total 19,050 fencers)*

Rating	A	B	C	D	E	No rating
Saber	161	222	325	387	753	17202
Percent	0.8%	1.2%	1.7%	2.0%	3.9%	90.4%
%tile	99.2%	98.0%	96.3%	94.3%	90.4%	
Epee	539	597	726	711	1009	15468
Percent	2.8%	3.1%	3.8%	3.7%	5.3%	81.2%
%tile	97.2%	94.1%	90.3%	86.6%	81.3%	
Foil	267	364	591	747	1163	15918
Percent	1.4%	1.9%	3.1%	3.9%	6.1%	83.7%
%tile	98.6%	96.7%	93.6%	89.7%	83.7%	

For this analysis from raw USA Fencing data, the percent and percentile rank relies on the denominator of 19,050 fencers (all competitive fencers) as I cannot identify which fencer competed in which weapon.

There were 5,284 (27.5%) fencers who have ratings in one weapon, 1,104 (5.8%) fencers who have ratings in two weapons, and 501 (2.6%) fencers who have ratings in all three weapons.

Due to COVID-19 the membership numbers are about half of what they were before the pandemic so I did not perform an updated analysis though these general trends have been consistent over time.



Two “A” rated épée fencers at practice. Andrew (MTFC) and Benjamin (MTFC).

CLASSIFICATIONS

general classification information

Fencers who compete in tournaments can earn a classification from “A” through “E” based on the level of the tournament and the individual fencer’s performance for that particular weapon. This is similar to the different color belts in karate. An “A” rating is the most difficult to achieve.

Olympic fencers are all “A”

classification alone (without regard to the national rank with letter classifications then year earned used). North American Cup (NAC) and Super Youth Circuit (SYC) events favor national ranking followed by classification so an unrated fencer with national points will be seeded ahead of the fencers with even an “A” classification (other than in veteran categories). Seeding is also done by national rank then classification for Junior Olympics and the Summer National Championships.

The national points list is posted online on the USA Fencing website (usafencing.org) under *For Athletes* then *Point Standings*. At the NAC and SYC events, the youth national points are awarded to the top 40% of fencers so long as there are at least 6 fencers. Detailed information and the rules for youth national points is found at the USA Fencing website (Go to usafencing.org then *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *Athlete Handbook*).

rated but additionally have national points (see the earlier section on *national points*). Ratings are designated by letter and year earned such as “A2025” if the fencer earned an “A” in 2025. Higher rated fencers are generally tougher competition and have certainly had more success in competition. Fencers without a rating for a particular weapon are unrated “U.” If one earns a classification it cannot go down unless it is not renewed (re-earned) within 4 years; then it drops down one level.

Youth and Cadet competitions do not award “D” or “E” ratings unless the level of the tournament is at least a C1 level event. It is thus virtually impossible for a Y10 or Y12 fencer to earn a rating locally and can really only do so at a Super Youth Circuit (SYC) or a North American Cup (NAC) event. Any Y10 or Y12 fencer with a rating is very tough. The USA Fencing Classification Reference Chart obtained from the *Athlete’s Handbook* is attached to the end of this document for reference.



My oral examination for my Prévôt certification administered by Master Peter Burchard and Master Rob Handelman in 2011 which was perhaps the most challenging testing experience I have ever had in my life.

While the fencer's rating can certainly give one an idea of relative strength (or prior success), its main importance in tournaments is that it is used to separate fencers of similar strength for pools. Thus a large open tournament will frequently have pools, each of which have fencers with all different ratings.

In order to have the easiest chance for success in a tournament, it is best to go into a tournament as the highest seeded fencer (the fencer with the highest classification which in 2025 would be an A2025). That is because the fencers are distributed in pools with the best fencers separated so they do not meet in the early stages of the competition. The best fencer and the second-best fencer will not be put in the same pool. In essence, the best fencers are protected from each other. So both the best and second best fencers are expected to win all their pool bouts. It is better to look around your

pool competition and see that you are the fencer with the highest classification (you are likely to win all your bouts) rather than the fencer with the lowest classification (you are expected to lose all your bouts). The direct elimination (DE) round is set up based on the percentage of victories for each fencer during the pool round so having the pools "stacked" in your favor is why having a high classification in fencing is preferred.

I did an analysis of the classification distribution of fencers with membership in the US Fencing Association as of April 4, 2011 found on pages 44 that has been relatively consistent over time.

FENCING MULTIPLE WEAPONS

I have had some fencers who have asked me about fencing multiple weapons knowing that I do and my kids do. My answer is that it depends on why you are doing this.

If a fencer loves the sport and wants to fence at every opportunity for joy, exercise, and recreation then this may be a fun way to keep active. But just as one would not be expected to be outstanding by dabbling at baseball, basketball, and volleyball (even though they all involve balls), one should not expect to be outstanding by dabbling in foil, épée, and saber.

Each member of my family has a primary weapon and will occasionally fence a second weapon if it is convenient for our schedule just for fun (or for warm-up). I fence épée, compete in épée, get my lessons in épée, dream of épée, and sleep with my

épées. Andrew loves épée, too. Benjamin and Christopher love foil. If there is an épée event without a corresponding foil event then all of us might compete in épée that day. If there is a foil event that does not conflict with an épée event then we might all compete in foil together that day. I would rather fence foil than not fence at all. And only rarely when there is something like a Western Washington Division, 3-weapon prize we may put on some saber gear. But we all really focus on one weapon. Our hours of practice with our primary pointy weapon (both foil and épée are point weapons where you can score only by touching your opponent with the point of the blade) including fine tuning our distance, footwork, blade work, and strategy help carry over

to our secondary “for fun” weapon which we never practice.

When the kids are in the Y10 and Y12 age categories, registering them as many fencing events as possible made sense to me (even if it was in a different weapon) because their opportunities for fencing are so limited—Y10 and Y12 kids can only fence youth events which locally sometimes has only a few fencers participating and are held infrequently (often once a month). But once a fencer turns 13 years old then he can fence Y14, cadet, junior, and senior events with multiple opportunities every month (including week nights) so he can focus and become expert in his primary weapon. After a fencer ages out of the youth, cadet, and junior age categories, there are again fewer opportunities to compete so we participate



My dog Layla (MTFC) not sure if she wants to practice foil, épée, or saber today. Or just fetch a tennis ball.



Shims to test the travel of épée tips.

in more events that are not our primary weapon, particularly when our rating excludes us from a lot of the local opportunities (there are events that only allow fencers who are unrated, E and under, D and under, or C and under).

A lot of coaches are not enthusiastic about fencers training in multiple weapons simultaneously as it dilutes the time one spends becoming expert in one discipline. A coach will often be much more invested in a fencer who is focused on being excellent in one weapon than a fencer who does soccer, baseball, foil, épée, and saber.

At the Summer National Championships for Vet50 men's foil (which I competed in because I happened to be free that day between events) I lost to Rafael Suarez (Venezuelan Olympian, Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000) 1-10 in the quarter finals and asked him after the bout if he had any tips for me. He looked at me and said, "You are an épée fencer? Totally different sport." Each weapon is truly a totally different sport at the higher levels.

FENCING AND COLLEGE

Fencing is a terrific lifelong sport that instills great values and habits such as hard work, physical fitness, self-reflection,

learning from mistakes, perseverance, and sportsmanship. Fencing is something that can add to the college application process similar to students who do well at science competitions, do amazing volunteer work, are accomplished musicians, or have other notable activities. But unless you are at the top of the national Junior or Senior points list, the chance of being a recruited athlete is generally not very high. It is worthwhile contacting college fencing coaches if there is an interest in fencing during college, particularly if one is competitive. There are rules on when and how one is allowed to contact a college fencing coach as well as registering which can be found at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA; www.ncaa.org) website.

I tell most families that fencing scholarships are generally uncommon. Most colleges spend their athletic money on football and basketball which are profitable (unlike fencing). If I were to invest all the money I have spent so far on fencing (expenses for classes, private lessons, camps, equipment, flights, and hotels) I would have lots of college tuition, but our lives would be much less



Coach Christophe (NWFC) giving Benjamin (MTFC) a private lesson in 2013 after a youth tournament. This is one of my favorite fencing pictures as I love the dedication of both fencers. Everyone else has gone home after an already long day.

rich. The lessons learned through fencing and the experiences we have shared together are priceless.

SUCCESSFUL FENCING PARENT

I find that one of the most rewarding things I have come across is to see fencers who enjoy the sport enough during their teen years that they continue to fence in college and beyond. Some never take a break. Some fencers return after a long break like I did.

COACHING CREDENTIALS

Coaches are required by USA Fencing to pass a background check and complete SafeSport training to recognize, reduce, and respond to misconduct in sport. Information about the coaches are updated on the website for their current club.

Most coaches in our area are members of the United States Fencing Coaches Association (USFCA; usfca.org). The various levels of certification in the USFCA include Fencing Master who are at the highest level of certification and are qualified to teach all levels of fencers as well as fencing coaches. Prévôt are at the next level of expertise focused more on training all levels of fencers to compete rather than training other

coaches. Moniteur are members of this professional coaching organization focused on beginner and intermediate fencers, and Assistant Moniteurs are qualified to assist all levels of professional coaches. Fencing Masters, Prévôt, and Moniteurs are required to pass a rigorous written, practical, and oral examination to receive their credentials.

WEB LINKS & RESOURCES

pacific northwest fencing clubs

Amity Fencing Club (Woodinville, WA) foil and épée. amityfencingclub.com

Kaizen Academy (Redmond, WA) épée. kaizenfencing.com

Metro Tacoma Fencing Club (Tacoma, WA) foil and épée. tacomafencing.com

Northwest Fencing Center (Beaverton, OR) foil and épée. nwfencing.org

Olympic Épée Masters (Redmond, WA) épée. olympicepeemasters.com

Oregon Fencing Alliance (Portland, OR) saber. oregonfencing.org





My kit for the Veteran World Fencing Championships 2022 which I purchased with a small Leon Paul TeamUSA discount includes Leon Paul FIE X-Change mask with USA colors, Leon Paul FIE Apex jacket and knickers, Uhlmann FIE plastron, Leon Paul fencing socks, Nike Air Zoom fencer shoes, Negrini 800N FIE glove, Leon Paul Fusion Pro FIE épée blades, Leon Paul épée handle, and Schermasport pommel. The bag is a Leon Paul TeamUSA bag.

PDX Fencing (Beaverton, OR) saber.
pdxfencing.com

Rain City Fencing Center (Bellevue, WA) foil
and épée. raincityfencing.com

Salle Auriol Seattle (Seattle, WA) foil, épée, and
saber. salleauriol.com

Washington Fencing Academy (Issaquah, WA)
saber. washingtonfencing.com

fencing resources

AskFRED (askfred.net) Fencing tournaments and
results. Register here for local events.

Fencing Time Live (fencingtimelive.com)

USA Fencing (usafencing.org) Official organization
overseeing fencing in the United States with rules,
national tournament information, other
equipment vendors, and membership information.

some equipment vendors

Absolute Fencing Gear (absolutefencinggear.com)
sponsor of USA Fencing, a wide range of available
equipment.

Alliance Fencing (alliancefencingequipment.com)
sells my favorite Negrini glove.

Fencing Post (thefencingpost.com) a wide range of
available equipment, knowledgeable owner Saul
Mendoza (Bolivian Olympian, Los Angeles 1984).

Leon Paul UK (leonpaul.com) high end
equipment I would describe as my favorite, often
better pricing through UK than from US
depending on the exchange rate.



Tobias Lee at Veteran Fencing World Championships
2022, Zadar, Croatia. Photo by FIE photographer.

Leon Paul USA (leonpaulusa.com) high end equipment I would describe as my favorite. The US representative Cindy Sirico and her family are super helpful, friendly, and knowledgeable.

Zivkovic Fencing Equipment (zivkovic.com) some fencers like their distinctive handle shapes. This is the company owned and founded by my late college fencing coach.

ADDITIONAL READING

Fencing: A Practical Guide for Training Young Athletes. Handelman and Louie 2010. Pattinado Publishing. This is a text focused on saber fencing. Order at sfyouthfencing.com.

Fencing Foil: A Practical Guide for Coaches, Parents, and Young Athletes. Handelman and Louie 2014. Pattinado Publishing. Just like the title reads, it is a foil book. Order at sfyouthfencing.com.

The Care and Feeding of All Things Fencing. Michael Mergens 2008. This text helps you fix and maintain all your fencing gear.

DISCLOSURES

I receive no payment or sponsorship from any club, organization, or equipment vendor noted in this guide. I am a volunteer coach at Metro Tacoma Fencing Club (MTFC) which is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization.



Tobias Lee, Prévôt in foil 2020 picture by Christopher.

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I hope you share this guide with everyone you know to encourage more interest in fencing. I give my permission for this document to be freely distributed provided that no changes be made and that the document be distributed in its entirety. If you shared a picture with me that was used but not credited, please reach out and I would love to acknowledge your photo. All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my wife, Yukiko, for her patience with me as I put together version after version of this guide to help our youth fencers develop when I am not running off to fencing practice. As I watch our young fencers excel in the local competitions I feel the need to continue encouraging and expanding the opportunities available to them and others.

I want to thank my children Andrew, Benjamin, and Christopher for all the time and effort they put into this terrific sport. I hope you enjoy fencing far into the future and are rewarded for your hard work with continued success in fencing and everything else you may pursue.



Toby and Yukiko FIE credentials, Zadar Croatia 2022



Toby and Yukiko selfie, Zadar Croatia 2022

I want to thank my fellow coaches (past and present) at Metro Tacoma Fencing Club (MTFC) and in the Pacific Northwest without whom we would not have such a wonderfully vibrant, growing, successful, and fun community. It truly does take a village to train a young fencer.

And finally, I want to thank all the young fencers and parents who choose to spend so much time and energy fencing with our family. We have become friends which may be the best part of this entire journey. We truly share a common set of goals. I hope that the experience you have had so far at helps encourage lifelong physical fitness, hard work, focus, determination, and confidence.

Have fun fencing! And please feel free to let me know if I left out anything important that would help others enjoy this terrific sport.

Tobias (Toby) Lee

GLOSSARY OF FENCING TERMS

The purpose of this glossary is to describe in English some common fencing terms for a beginner fencer or a non-fencer. This is not meant to be comprehensive or precise. If you want the strict definition for these terms please refer to the USA Fencing *Rulebook* found at usafencing.org then choose the *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* then *USA Fencing Rulebook*.

advance: forward movement by moving the front foot towards the opponent then the back foot. Often the advance is the footwork part of an attack.

attack: extension of the weapon arm with the weapon threatening the opponent's valid target. Often combined with forward footwork. The first fencer to establish a proper attack in foil and saber has the *right of way*. See further the *Three Weapons* in the main text and then the *foil* section. A retreating fencer or a fencer who is twisting/ducking is not attacking.



Andrew (MTFC) left scoring on his opponent in épée at the July Summer National Championships in 2017 with a brave toe touch to win a pool bout when it was *la belle* (the beautiful point) — tied at sudden death with the next point winning.

attack into preparation: an attack on an opponent while the opponent is getting ready or not performing a correctly executed attack. For example, if the opponent makes a number of feints with advances but is not truly extending the arm (has a bent arm) then this incorrectly performed attack (preparation) is subject to this type of attack in preparation.

balestra: forward movement by jumping forward and landing with both feet.

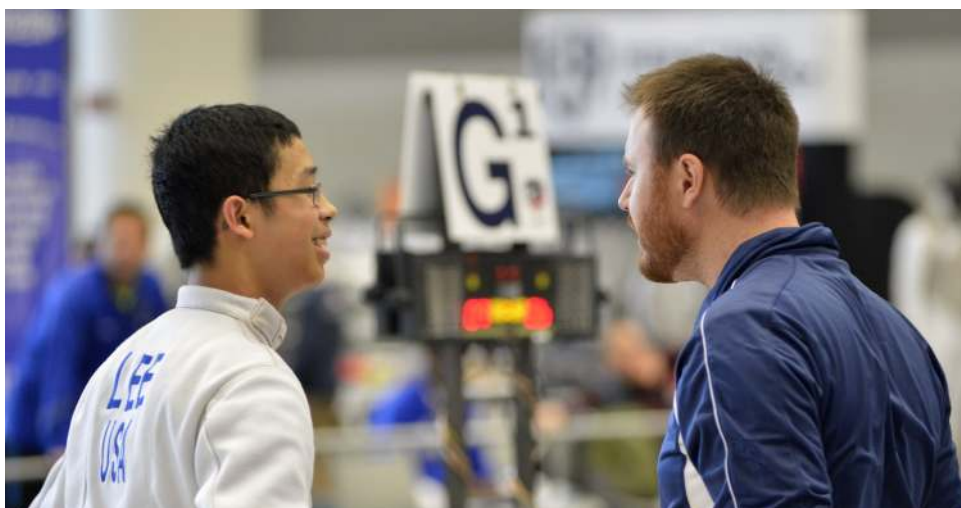
beat attack: a preparation for an attack by forcefully contacting the opponent's blade. This can bring about a number of responses from the opponent that you can take advantage of and establishes right of way.

compound attack: a complex attack performed with more than one feint such as a 1-2 (two half-circle feints) or a *doublé* (two circular disengages).

corps-a-corps: contact with the opponents body with one's own. This will stop the action in all weapons.

counter attack: an attack made into an opponent's properly executed attack so the counter attacking fencer does not have right of way in foil and saber. If both fencers land their weapon on their opponent's valid target, the fencer performing attack in foil and saber gets awarded the point and the fencer with the counter attack will not. If your opponent attacks you in foil or saber and you just stick out your blade to hit him but he still

hits you, your opponent who has the right of way will get the point. If you are doing a counter attack you hope your opponent misses completely. In épée there is no right of way so counter attacks are a very common tactic; in the case of épée, hitting your opponent will get you a point regardless of whether it is an attack or counter attack.



Andrew (MTFC) and Coach Dana (MTFC) at a North American Cup (NAC).

counter riposte: a parry performed after the opponent's parry and to take the right of way from the opponent's riposte.

direct elimination (DE): the part of the tournament in which the winner advances and the loser is out. Please see the section under *Tournaments* and *General Tournament Format* in the main text.

disengage: moving the blade around the opponent's blade generally to prepare for an attack and to get around the opponent's defenses.

feint: an action to fake out the opponent. Usually a false attack followed by a real attack after the opponent is fooled and opens up a target.

fleche: an attack where one launches and runs past the opponent generally performed as a surprise. This is common in épée, less common but allowed in foil, and not allowed in saber as it involves crossing the feet forward which is against saber rules (and results in a penalty).

flunge: in saber, crossing of the feet going forward is not allowed (and results in a penalty card) so the saber flunge is a half lunge and half fleche with

some hopping stuff and...you have to see it to understand.

lamé: the metallic vest used in foil or saber to connect to the scoring equipment which defines the target area.

lunge: often used as a part of the attack to quickly close the distance. The lunge is started with a push and straightening of the back leg. The front leg lands bent and the weapon arm is extended. The back arm is also extended for balance.

opposition: please see *prises de Fer*.

parry: a defensive move performed with the blade to block the opponent's blade. In foil and saber a parry will result in gaining the right of way.

plastron: also known as underarm protector which has seams at different locations than the fencing jacket to serve as an additional layer of protection.

point-in-line: a move that when properly executed has the right of way over all other actions in foil and saber. You have to establish a point-in-line prior to the opponent making an attack with your weapon continuously threatening your opponent's valid target and your arm and weapon completely

straight. You can move forward or backward. You can only derobe (disengage) when your opponent tries to beat/parry your blade which is what it takes to take over the right of way from a point-in-line. It is really hard to do. I have correctly performed only a handful of successful point-in-line points in tournaments ever.

pool: The first round of a tournament where fencers are grouped together to establish who is best for seeding in the direct elimination round. Please see the section under *Tournaments* and *General Tournament Format* in the main text.

prises de Fer: binding of the blade or forceful pressure on the opponent's blade to push your blade through to the opponent.

preparation: one of a number of actions to start an attack. A preparation is not an attack but can be a feint, beat, or something else to start the threat. If your opponent sees you are not performing a properly executed attack you are subject to an attack into preparation.

red card: There are a number of penalties that a fencer may be subject to which may result in a red card which gives their opponent a point. For all the rules that you can receive a red card please see the *USA Fencing Rulebook*.

remise: a renewed attack after the initial attack fails or is parried. If you attack in foil or saber and the opponent parries then you no longer have the right of way; however, if you still go and hit your opponent who does not riposte and you are successful with your remise you will still be awarded the point.

retreat: going away from the opponent. Performed with the back foot moving first and then the front foot coming back (so you don't trip over yourself).

right of way: For foil and saber the rules which dictate who has the point when both fencers land their blades on their opponents. There is no right of way in épée. Please see the section *How to Watch Fencing* and then *Who Got the Point?* in the main text.

riposte: an immediate attack after a parry. The hope is the parry gets you the right of way and the riposte gets you the point!

simultaneous: both fencers starting a correctly executed attack at the same time. No points are awarded except for épée where a double touch results in both fencers getting a point.

yellow card: There are a number of penalties that a fencer may be subject to which may result in a yellow card such as a weapon failing initial inspection. No points are awarded for yellow cards. It is purely a warning. But fencers cannot get a second yellow card, and further penalties are at least a red card. For all the rules that you can receive a yellow card please see the *USA Fencing Rulebook*.



Locker decorations seen with bout between Coach Chung (MTFC) and Benjamin (MTFC).

USA FENCING CLASSIFICATION CHART

Please Note: Cadet and youth events do not use the E1 or D1 classifications except at a North American Cup. This means that those events are “NR” until they achieve a C1 level or higher.

EVENT RATING	MINIMUM NBR COMPETITORS	RATED FENCERS REQUIRED	RATED FENCERS MUST FINISH	CLASSIFICATIONS AWARDED
GROUP E1	6	None	N/A	1 → E
GROUP D1 Changed per BOD	15	4 E's (or higher)	2 E's (or higher) In top 8	1 → D 2-4 → E
GROUP C1	15	2 C's & 2 D's & 2 E's (or	2 C's & 2 D's (or higher) In top 8	1 → C 2-4 → D 5-8 → E
GROUP C2	25	4 D's & 4 E's (or	4 D's (or higher) In top 8	1 → C 2-4 → D 5-8 → E
GROUP C3	63	24 D's & 12 E's (or higher)	4 D's in top 8 & 4 E's (or higher) In top 12	1-4 → C 5-8 → D 9-16 → E
GROUP B1	15	2 B's & 2 C's & 2 D's (or higher)	2 B's & C's (or higher) In top 8	1 → B 2-4 → C 5-6 → D 7-8 → E
GROUP B2	25	2 B's & 2 C's & 2 D's (or higher)	2 B's & C's (or higher) In top 8	1 → B 2-4 → C 5-8 → D 9-12 → E
GROUP B3	63	24 C's & 12 D's (or higher)	4 C's In top 8 & 4 D's (or higher) In top 12	1-4 → B 5-8 → C 9-16 → D 17-32 → E
GROUP A1 Changed per BOD 7/07	15	2 A's & 2 B's & 2 C's	2 A's & 2 B's (or higher) In top 8	1 → A 2 → B 3-4 → C 5-6 → D 7-8 → E
GROUP A2	25	2 A's & 2 B's & 2 C's	2 A's & 2 B's (or higher) In top 8	1 → A 2-4 → B 5-8 → C 9-10 → D 11-12 → E
GROUP A3	63	24 B's & 12 C's (or higher)	4 B's in top 8 & 4 C's (or higher) In top 12	1-4 → A 5-8 → B 9-16 → C 17-24 → D 25-32 → E
GROUP A4	63	12 A's & 12 B's & 12 C's (or higher)	4 A's In top 8 & 4 B's (or higher) In top 12	1-8 → A 9-16 → B 17-24 → C 25-32 → D 33-48 → E

Local tournaments must use at least one rated referee in order to issue ratings. Division I NAC and National Championships are always Group A4 events.

Division IA NAC & National Championships are always at least Group A3 events.

TOURNAMENT CHECKLIST

PUT YOUR NAME AND CITY ON ALL YOUR EQUIPMENT AND FENCING BAG.

protective gear

- LAMÉ*** (for foil and saber) rolled in fencing jacket and not folded
- JACKET** (no holes, must close in back or opposite weapon arm)
- UNDERARM PROTECTOR** (also known as plastron)
- PLASTIC CHEST/BREAST PROTECTOR** (mandatory for women, optional in men, requires FIE mark in foil)
- MASK*** (must pass 12K punch test) -- choose correct mask/bib combination for event and remember padding
- GLOVE*** (no holes. Must cover approximately half your forearm)
- FENCING SHOES**
- LONG SOCKS** (must reach bottom of your knickers)
- KNICKERS** (no holes, must close in back or opposite weapon arm, must be overlapped by jacket by at least four inches)
- PROTECTIVE CUP** for men (optional, but unless you never want children I do not know why you would skip)

weapons

- WEAPONS** minimum two working weapons (ideally 3-4 weapons)
- BODY CORDS*** minimum two working body cords
- MASK CORDS*** (for foil and sabre) minimum two working mask cords

pre-competition check

- Foils must pass 500 gram weight test** and have tip tape in place
- Epées must pass 750 gram weight test** and shims test and have all tip screws in place
- IDENTIFICATION** bring for Super Youth Circuit and National Tournaments such as a birth certificate or passport in addition to USA Fencing membership card

other supplies

- TEAM WARM-UPS** including jacket and warm up pants required for podium pictures at NAC events
- FENCING NOTEBOOK or POOL SHEET** to take notes on opponents, things to work on
- TOOL KIT** (screwdrivers for tip and pommel, spare screws, springs, Allen wrench)
- TEST BOX** and weight and shims (usually found at the tournament venue) for foil and épée
- FENCING BAG** and extra bag to hold wet clothing
- WATER BOTTLE** or other drink
- SNACK** possibly electrolyte gels
- TOWEL**
- HAT and VEST** to stay warm in case of a cold venue
- ZIPLOCK BAGS** for broken weapon parts
- POWER** for cell phone
- CLOTHES** for after the tournament

* Required at equipment check at major tournaments. **Carry on for flights.**

FENCER REPAIR & ARMORY KIT CHECKLIST

foil and épée (travel kit)

- jeweler's screwdriver (for the tip screws)
- small pliers
- scissors to cut tip tape or strip wires
- screwdriver flat head 1/4 inch
- wrench approximately 6 inches or smaller
- inside hex wrench (6 mm) or outside hex wrench (6 mm) to tighten handle nut
- test box
- test weight (may be combination) 500 grams for foil and 750 grams for épée
- extra hex nut to hold handle (inside or outside)
- Ziplock bags to hold parts

épée specific (travel kit)

- shims
- extra tip screws specific to brand used on weapons
- extra épée contact springs (small one fitting on tip) specific to brand used on weapons
- extra épée pressure springs (large stiff one holding up weight) specific to brand used on weapons
- extra tip specific to brand used on weapons

foil specific (travel kit)

- tip tape (rules state length of insulating material should measure 15 cm)
- dollar bill to help measure tip tape length (length of dollar bill 15.59 cm)
- extra tip specific to brand used on weapon
- extra foil pressure springs specific to brand used
- extra tip screws specific to brand used on weapon

optional extras (travel)

- rubber bands (I put rubber bands on a handle for a weapon that is passing for competition)
- Sharpie permanent marker (to put name on gear)
- sewing kit
- thin screwdriver to tighten certain French grip pommels (Schermasport)
- washer for handle nut

home kit or north american cup

- isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol 70-95% for Q tips and barrel cleaning (may be alcohol pads)
- magnetic dish or small magnet to keep pieces in place
- reading glasses
- sandpaper 300 grit to clear varnish off blade wires after stripping off insulation.
- spaghetti tubing
- super glue for popped wires
- Q tips to clean barrels

really fancy home armory

- bending bar or giant wrench to kant blade
- bolt cutter or hacksaw to cut tang for pistol grips
- chain to bend weapon while gluing wire
- die (6 mm) and holder for tang threads
- hot glue for some layered parts like gloves
- soldering iron to repair wire alligator clips
- vise to hold down weapons to work on
- volt meter to test wires and lames

Notes: weapons may have British (Leon Paul), German (Allstar, Uhlmann, FWF), and French (least popular of the styles) tips which are not compatible with one another. Extra tip, springs, and screws should match the weapons a fencer has. Contributions by John Comes (Kaizen), Paul Fly (SAS), and Rachel Peterson (Kaizen).

TOURNAMENT 2025-2026 PLANNING

RECREATIONAL FENCERS

Having fun, getting exercise, learning a cool sport, stabbing your friends, keeping it low key.

Opportunities include classes, open fencing at the club, in-house tournaments, local unrated tournaments, and local E and

INTERMEDIATE FENCERS

Having fun, getting exercise, improving a cool sport, stabbing your friends, being more competitive.

Opportunities include classes, open fencing at the club, in-house tournaments, unrated tournaments, E and under tournaments, D and under tournaments, C and under tournaments.

COMPETITIVE FENCERS

Having fun, awesome exercise, mastering a cool sport, stabbing your friends and people you don't know, looking beyond the local area (regionals, nationals, and international).

Opportunities include classes, open fencing at the club, in-house tournaments, all local tournaments including open events, regional tournaments, national tournaments, and international tournaments. For young fencers who love the sport there is fencing in college.

Tournaments to look for include:

Youth: Regional Youth Circuit (RYC) and Super Youth Circuit (SYC), Regional Junior and Cadet Circuit (RJCC) and Super Junior and Cadet Circuit (SJCC) events. North American Cup (NAC) national events.

Senior (13 years old and older): Regional Open Circuit (ROC) and North American Cup (NAC) events.

SUMMER NATIONALS 2026

Held in Portland, Oregon from June 27 through July 6! Check out the qualifying pathways and try to go either as a fencer or a spectator. Qualifying pathways are outlined in the [USA Fencing Website](#) under *For Athletes* then *Rules & Compliance* and finally *Athlete Handbook*. Talk to your coach and plan your season!