



What Is Fencing?

Fencing, the art of swordsmanship, has been practiced for centuries. First, it was to train for deadly combat—the duel. Now it is for Olympic gold. Through fencing you can acquire the reflexes of a boxer, the legs of a high-jumper and the concentration of a tournament chess player. The sport develops agility, strength, speed and cunning. And because of the speed of its action, fencing is considered the fastest martial sport. But, most importantly, it's fun!

The sport of fencing is fast and athletic, a far cry from the choreographed bouts you see on film or on the stage. Instead of swinging from a chandelier or leaping from balconies, you will see two fencers performing an intense dance on a six-foot-by-40-foot strip. The movement is so fast the touches are scored electrically—more like Star Wars than Errol Flynn.

What is the Point?

The modern sport of fencing has three different events: foil, epee and saber. Each has a slightly different history, target area and rules. Foil and saber were developed more as training weapons, while epee is a descendant of weapons used in duels. Just as you would imagine, the goal in all three weapons is to hit the opponent on the valid target without being hit.

Although the motions of fencing are complex and the variations endless, the actions of a bout fall into several basic categories. Either fencer may initiate an offensive action and force the opponent to defend. The fencer first beginning an offensive action is called the attacker. Movement that blocks an attack is referred to as a *parry*, and the return action after the parry is referred to as a riposte. The fencer attacking into an opponent who has begun to attack has executed what is referred to as a *counterattack*.

As in other sports, fencers have different personalities. Some prefer initiating offensive actions while others prefer to wait and respond to the opponent's initiative. The cleverest fencers learn to draw their opponents into traps, fooling the opponent into thinking that he or she is vulnerable and drawing a predictable response which can then be exploited.

Similar to boxing, success in fencing depends largely on a fencer's ability to manipulate distance. The fencer needs to stay far enough away to avoid being hit, while at the same time get close enough to hit when the opponent is least prepared to defend. Much of the movement on the strip is done to set up the proper distance and timing for the final hit. Although the blade work seems complex to the newcomer, the goal is simple. The preparatory blade work is an attempt to get the opponent to respond—opening up a part of the target area that can be hit. For example, the attacker *feints* (pretends to be attacking) towards one part of the target. When the opponent tries to parry this attack, the attacker deceives the parry and hits on another part of the target.

The Weapons

Foil, épée and sabre are the three weapons used in the sport of fencing. While it is not unusual for fencers to compete in all three events, they generally choose to develop their skills in one weapon. Until recently, women were permitted to compete only in foil, but now the USFA & FIE offer national competitions for women in épée and sabre. Women's épée was added to the World Championships in 1989 and was held for the first time at the Olympic Games in 1996.

Foil and épée are point-thrusting weapons. Sabre is a point-thrusting as well as a cutting weapon. The target areas differ for the three weapons, though all three are scored electrically.

FOIL



The foil, the modern version of the court sword, has a flexible, rectangular blade (approximately 35 inches in length) and weighs about a pound. Points (touches) are scored with the spring-loaded tip of the blade and must land on the torso of the body—from the shoulders to the groin, front and back, not including arms, neck, head, and legs—to be counted.

Scoring

The fencer's valid target area is covered with a metallic cloth vest called a lamé that enables a valid touch to register on the scoring machine. When an opponent's tip hits the vest, the tip depresses and completes an electrical circuit.

The fencer wears a body cord inside his uniform, which connects the foil to a reel wire, connected to the scoring machine. A small, spring-loaded tip is attached to the point of the foil and is connected to a wire inside the blade. This sets off a light and buzzer on the scoring machine on the side of the one who hit. A colored light—either green or red—signifies that the valid target (the metallic vest) was hit; a white light signifies that the hit landed outside the target area. When a light comes on, the Referee halts the bout to determine if either fencer has scored a point. No point is awarded for an off-target hit.



If colored lights go on for both fencers, the Referee must decide who gets the point, based on right of way. The attacker has the right of way until the other fencer blocks (parries) the attack. The defender then gains the right of way by making a return thrust (riposte).

EPEE



The épée (pronounced ep-pay), the descendant of weapons used in duels, is similar in length to the foil, but has a heavier (27 ounces), stiff, triangular blade (approximately one yard in length) and large guard to protect the hand from being touched. It weighs slightly more than a pound and a half. Points may be made with the spring-loaded tip of the blade. The entire body, from the tip of the toes to the top of the head, is valid target.

Scoring

The blade is wired with a spring-loaded tip at the end that completes an electrical circuit when it is depressed beyond a pressure of 750 grams. This causes the colored bulb on the scoring machine to light. Because the entire body is a valid target area, the épée fencer's uniform does not include a lamé. Off-target hits do not register on the machine.



Touches are registered electrically—the tip of the blade depresses and completes an electrical circuit, triggering a colored light on the machine for the one who hit. The fencer who hits first gets a point and if both fencers hit with $1/25^{\text{th}}$ of a second, both score a point.

Sabre



The sabre is the modern version of the slashing cavalry sword, and is similar in length and weight to the foil. The major difference is that the sabre is a thrusting weapon as well as a cutting weapon (use of the blade). Touches are scored with cuts as well as the tip of the blade. All cuts or thrusts must land from the bend of the hips up—like a cavalry soldier mounted on a horse.

Just as in foil, there are two colored scoring lights on the machine that register when the valid target is hit; off-target hits do not register on the machine.

Scoring

The fencer's valid target area is covered with a metallic cloth jacket, called a lame. The mask is also electrically conductive and is connected to the metallic jacket. Mere contact (like a blade just sliding along the jacket) is not enough to register a touch. The colored light signifies that the valid target (the jacket or mask) was hit. Hits made outside the target area are not registered. Anytime a light comes on, the Referee halts the bout and awards, if appropriate, a point.



The actions in sabre differ from those in foil and epee because of the cutting motions. The game appears much faster with more running actions. Watch one fencer and look for *stop hits*, cuts that are counterattacks made to stop the attacker.

Competitions and Bouts

Object

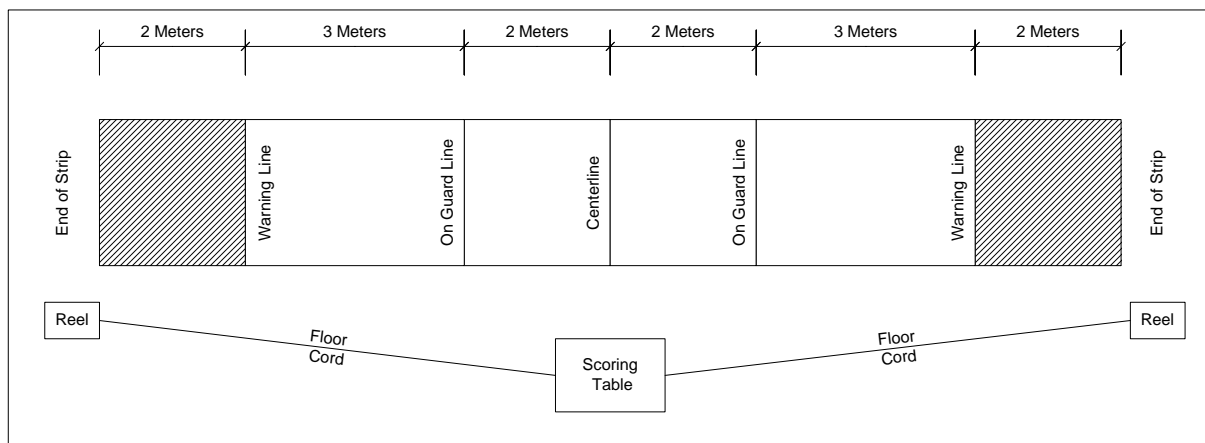
The main object of a fencing bout (what an individual "game" is called) is to effectively score 15 points (in direct elimination play) or five points (in preliminary pool play) on your opponent before he scores that number on you.

A competition starts with the "elimination pool" system. The fencers are divided into groups (*pools*) of six or seven fencers; all of the competitors in a pool fence each other. Each pairing is called a *bout*. The bout begins with Referee saying: "On Guard, Ready? Fence!" A bout lasts for three minutes of actual fencing time or until one fencer scores five touches. Based on the results from the pools, the top eighty percent advance into a direct elimination ladder (similar to a tennis tournament). How the fencers are placed in the draw (seeding) is based on the pool results. In the elimination format, bouts are longer since the losing fencer will be eliminated. The elimination bout lasts for three, three-minute periods, or until one fencer scores 15 touches.

The Playing Ground (Strip)

The playing area for fencing bouts is the *strip*, 14 meters long (about 46 feet) and 1.5 meters wide (about 6.5 feet). Fencers must be on the strip to score touches. The strip is grounded so that if the weapon hits the strip, no touch is registered. There are warning areas at each end of the strip. If a fencer goes off the end of the warning area with both feet, the opponent is given a point, even if there is no actual hit. Think of going off the end of the strip as falling off a cliff. If a fencer goes off the side of the strip with both feet, the opponent advances one meter.

The diagram below shows the strip layout and the appropriate markings.



Watching a Competition

As a newcomer to fencing, your first "friend" will be the scoring lights. Touches are determined in all three weapons by an electrical scoring device, and hits are indicated with scoring lights. When a fencer scores a hit, the light on his/her side will go on. Hits on the invalid target (foil only) will be indicated with white lights, and hits on the valid target are indicated with red and green lights. A Referee starts the action, which continues until a light goes on (indicating a hit) or a rule violation has occurred. The Referee will call halt at this time, interpret the preceding actions, award touches (if appropriate) and start the bout again after returning the fencers to the center of the strip if a touch is awarded.

How to Follow the Action

For those new to fencing, it is difficult to follow the lightning speed of the fencers' actions. To become more comfortable in watching a fencing bout, focus on one fencer. The fencer being attacked defends himself by use of a parry, a motion used to deflect the opponent's blade, after which the defender can make a riposte, an answering attack. Thus, the two adversaries keep changing between offense and defense. Whenever a hit is made, the referee will stop the bout,

describe the actions, and decide whether or not to award a touch.

Fencers seek to maintain a safe distance from each other, that is, out of range of the other's attack. Then, one will try to break this distance to gain the advantage for an attack. At times, a fencer will make a false attack to gauge the types of reactions by the opponent that can be deceived in the real attack.

As you become accustomed to the speed of the game, the tactics and strategies become more apparent, and you will gain a better understanding for the finesse and fascination of fencing!

Right-Of-Way

One of the most difficult concepts to visualize in foil and sabre fencing is the rule of right-of-way. This rule was established to eliminate apparently simultaneous attacks by two fencers.

In essence, right-of-way is the differentiation of offense and defense, made by the referee. The difference is important only when both the red and green lights go on at the same time in foil and sabre. When this happens, the winner of the point is the one who the referee determined was on offense at the time the lights went on.

Épée does not use the right-of-way in keeping with its dueling origin—he who first gains the touch earns the point. Or, if both fencers hit within 1/25th of a second of each other, both earn a point. However, it is equally important to have a sound defense for épée, since the entire body must be protected from a touch.

Safety

Fencing is one of the safest sports. Its safety record reflects the quality of equipment and the rules that control the manner of competition. For instance, the mask must meet international requirements for strength of the wire and covering of all vulnerable parts of the head. Uniforms are made of ballistic nylon, or Kevlar, the same material used in bulletproof vests. Manufacturers rate uniforms for their level of protection.

The USFA

The United States Fencing Association (USFA) is the National Governing Body for the sport of fencing in the United States. It is a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee and the Federation Internationale d'Esgrime (FIE), the international fencing federation. The USFA establishes the rules for all sanctioned events, selects members of international teams, certifies officials and promotes the sport in the United States.

The USFA web site (www.usfencing.org) has PDF versions of entry forms as well as Division (generally a state or group of states) and local club information. It is a good place to start in learning about the sport.