



Basics of Competition

Object of the Bout

The object of a fencing bout (“game”) is to effectively score 15 points (in direct elimination play) or five points (in preliminary pool play) before your opponent, or have a higher score than your opponent when the time limit expires. Points are received by making a touch in the opponent’s target area. Direct elimination matches consist of three three-minute periods with a one-minute break between each in epee and foil. In saber, each the first period lasts for eight touches and the second period ends when the first fencer scores 15 points.

Penalties

Penalties are divided into four categories.

Category One

All Category One penalties are interdependent. Upon the first occurrence of an offense during a bout, the fencer is warned and receives a yellow card. Committing any additional offense during the bout will result in the offender receiving a red card and the opponent receiving a penalty touch.

Category Two

All Category Two penalties are also interdependent. A fencer is given a red card upon first and any subsequent infraction during a bout.

Both Category One and Two infractions result in the annulment of a touch made by the offending fencer while committing the offense.

Category Three

Category Three penalties may be assessed for infractions against safety or the order of the competition. Such infractions can result in penalty touches (red card) or expulsion (black card) from the competition.

Category Four

The Category Four penalties involve unsportsmanlike conduct, using fraudulently modified equipment, collusion or brutality. The infractions result in automatic expulsion (black card) from the competition.

A complete listing of infraction and penalties is found in the USFA Rulebook.

Right-Of-Way



The right-of-way rule was established to eliminate apparently simultaneous attacks between two fencers. This rule is only applied to foil and saber and the difference is important only when both the red and green lights go on at the same time. When this happens, the winner of the point is the one who the referee determines held the right-of-way at the time the lights went on. The most basic, and important, precept of the right-of-way is that the fencer who started the attack first will receive the point if they hit the valid target area. Naturally, the fencer who is being attacked must defend himself or herself with a parry, or somehow cause their opponent to miss in order to take over right-of-way and score a point. A fencer who hesitates for too long while advancing on their opponent gives up right-of-way to their opponent. The referee may determine that the two fencers truly attacked each other simultaneously. The simultaneous attack results in no points being awarded, and the fencers are ordered back en garde by the referee to continue fencing.

In saber, the fencer who starts to attack first is given priority should his opponent counter-attack. However, saber referees are much less forgiving of hesitation by an attacker. It is common to see a saber fencer execute a stop cut against their opponent's forearm during such a moment of hesitation, winning right-of-way and the point.

Epee does not use the right-of-way in keeping with its dueling origin. He who first gains touch earns the point, or if both fencers hit within 1/25th of a second both earn a point.

Following the Action

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. Whenever a hit is made, the referee will stop the bout, describe the action, and decide whether to award a touch. Fencers seek to maintain a safe distance from each other – that is out of the range of the opponent'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 of their opponent.



When a fencer lands a hit, the referee stops the bout and – on foil and saber – determines who was the attacker, if their opponent successfully defended themselves, and which fencer should be awarded a touch, if any.

While it may be difficult to follow the referee's calls (not helped by the fact that the officiating is performed in French!) the referee always clearing raises their hand and on the side of the fencer for whom they have awarded a point. Watching these hand signals can make it easier for newcomers to follow the momentum of a fencing bout without understanding all of the intricacies of the rules.