

"CHOOSE YER WEAPON, LADDIE!"

(or: Dude, where's my foil?)

A guide to beginner competition in the United States Fencing Association (USFA)

By

Sam Signorelli

homfencing@hotmail.com

Last updated: April 22, 2022

(Feel free to print and distribute this guide to any and all fencers in need of the information. Suggestions for improvements always welcome!)

Welcome to the world of official USFA competition. This package is designed to allow you to navigate through your first tournament without looking like a total newbie (and, to paraphrase George C. Scott in "Patton," make someone ELSE look like a total newbie).

Fencing starts at various times depending on the weapon scheduled, but the first event of the day usually begins after the close of check-in at (typically 9:00 am, but it might be later in some cases). Check-in for each individual event generally opens 30 to 60 minutes before the scheduled close for that event, depending on the anticipated size of the event. It is the *fencer's* responsibility to be present and checked in by that time and to have any necessary safety/weapons checks performed, such as the mask, body cord and/or lame check. It's usually a good idea to arrive at the event by the opening of check-in at the latest so you can check in, stretch and warm up. In addition, this allows you time to do emergency field repairs if, for example, the collar on your sabre lame fails the conductivity test and you have to spend your planned warm-up time feverishly sewing lame material on the collar so it'll pass, as I can well attest!

A note on tournament length. Coaches ALWAYS get the question of "when is this over?" from parents...sometimes from fencers!

There is no way of telling how long your event will last. If it's fairly small, well run, with no equipment issues, it'll certainly end sooner than one with lots of people, poorly organized, and equipment issued galore (especially if there's no armorer present).

The only definite is that you'll be fencing until you get knocked out. In a tourney where the top 80% go up to Direct Elimination, if you don't make the cut, you're done. If you DO make the cut (or everyone goes to DE), you'll be fencing until you lose....might be your first one, or you might be hot and last until the finals.

So when you decide to go to a tournament...block out the entire day.

Some important things to remember:

1) Membership in the USFA is mandatory. If you haven't already joined, you can do so at the event. You can sign up on line at <https://www.usafencing.org>. (Click on “membership” and then the “Join USA Fencing” graphic). Many tournaments also have a paper copy of the membership form you can fill out at your first tourney...just remember to keep the receipt to show at future tourneys until your membership card arrives! The fees vary depending on the type, but most will pick a simple competitive membership. Fees are payable to the USFA. If you have already joined, you **MUST** bring proof of your membership and present it to the bout committee when you sign in for an event. This can be either your membership card or a receipt from the bout committee if you joined at a prior event and your card hasn't arrived yet (a common occurrence), so it's a good idea to leave the proof in a your wallet or a baggie in your equipment bag. You can also find the membership on line at <https://member.usafencing.org/search/members> by scrolling down to the “find a member” section and inputting your name, then show it to the bout table when you find yourself.

Scholastic events (for middle and high schoolers) will also require a school ID.

Keep in mind that anything that makes the job of the bout committee easier and faster is **ALWAYS** appreciated.

2) Event entry fees vary from division to division, both for individual and team events, so check with experienced fencers in your area for those fees. Be advised that some events such as club sponsored fund-raising events and large national events run directly under USFA's auspices (such as North American Cup events) charge higher entry fees. If you plan to attend any of these larger events, be **VERY** aware of the application deadline. North American Cups are very strict; if your application is not in the hands of the entry clerk by the specified deadline, you'll pay triple fees just to get in the door...and NACs charge a per event fee in **addition** to the overall registration fee.

IMPORTANT NOTE: some divisional events **MUST** be made via check **ONLY**, CASH AND/OR CREDIT CARDS WILL PROBABLY NOT BE ACCEPTED IN THOSE DIVISIONS THAT REQUIRE A CHECK PAYMENT.

Please also note that entry fees and USFA membership fees may be required to be on separate checks. However, multiple event entry fees may be allowed on one check (i.e. \$20.00 to fence in both an epee and foil event on the same day). Note: The USFA national office will accept credit card payments for national event entry fees and memberships.

3) Some divisions may charge a small cash set-up/tear down fee in addition to the entry fee.

In order to compete in USFA competitions, you must have the following equipment:

One good site that recently went live is <http://clubweapon.com> Some good info there (although the foil chest plate rules are outdated as of this writing...I've advised them to correct it)

Or, you can read the list below!

1) regulation fencing jacket with crotch strap (for all three weapons. The old-style sabre jacket that stopped at the waist is no longer allowed)

2) 1 regulation underarm protector.

3) 1 fencing glove for your weapon hand (some people wear an additional glove on their off-hand, just in case it drifts forward during actual fencing, but this is not required). The cuff must extend at least halfway up the forearm and be sewn into the glove. Since the arm is part of the target area in sabre, those fencers may have an additional partial lame glove called manchette that fits over the fencing glove up to the bony protuberance of the wrist. Note for sabre fencers: Even though the back of the hand is no longer target, there must still be a finger loop to secure the manchette in place. This is to prevent the possibility of a fencer pulling the manchette up and taking away target from the wrist area.

If you have a sabre glove with the conductive cuff built-in, the manchette is not required.

ALL gloves used for sabre must be FIE gloves. There are still some non-FIE combo gloves out there, but they are not allowed for use.

ADDITIONAL NOTE FOR ALL WEAPONS: There must be no holes, tears, or broken seams anywhere on the gloves. Any hole that is not a design feature (such as the ventilation holes along the fingers of some gloves) will cause the glove to not pass. You can sew a hole shut or glue/sew a patch over it. So long as there's no loose material that could catch a blade, it would be a good repair. It does NOT matter if the hole is tiny or where it is on the glove...if it goes completely through a layer of material, it does not pass. The same goes for loose flaps – particularly in the thumb area. This does NOT apply to the hole for the body cord, however. There is a move in FIE to remove the cord slot – and in fact, most makers have already removed it – but at this writing (August 12, 2019), the cord slot is still allowed for USA Fencing events.

Holes that would be covered by the grip will probably pass, so long as they aren't too large or project beyond the body of the grip. Best to get those holes closed to be sure.

4) 1 pair fencing pants. Baseball pants **are not** acceptable as they are a) not high enough to pass the 10 cm rule (meaning the bottom of the jacket **must** overlap the top of the pants by at least 10 cm -- 4 inches -- when en garde) and b) many baseball pants are made with material that will rip easily, and therefore not afford the protection fencing knickers do. In a pinch, white marching band pants (the kind that are one piece, going over the shoulder, may do. They're designed for use with short-waisted uniform tops) can be converted to be used as knickers. My first pair when I got back into the sport were done that way. Because marching band uniforms are designed to last several seasons of heavy use, they're fairly strong. Sweat pants are NOT acceptable (they're too loose and may catch the point...which could result in a broken blade and a following injury); whatever pants you wear must fit close enough to the body to prevent your opponent's point from catching the material. **If in**

doubt, ask the bout table or officers in the division prior to the tournament, as they are the final authority. Shorts are NOT allowed under any circumstances.

5) 1 pair socks. Solid-colored socks are permissible (witness my infamous purple ones!), but regardless of color, they must cover the entire shin so no exposed skin is showing. Although this is probably the least enforced rule anywhere at the local level, for the sake of your skin, follow it; any padding is better than none. But please don't wear anything like a neon yellow...burning out the eyes of your competitors isn't very sporting.

6) 1 pair shoes. Fencing must be done in tennis or other sport shoes. Street shoes and sandals are not allowed.

7) If you're a man, a cup is optional. If you're a woman, breast protectors are mandatory. They can be the "hubcap" kind (they look like metal or plastic yarmulkes that slip into pockets inside the jacket) or what I like to call the "Joan of Arc," (and which others call "Barbie Boobs") which is a plastic breastplate that fits under the jacket and covers the upper half of the torso (VERY nice for those shots to the sternum).. There are flat versions for men as well, but they are not required for men...HOWEVER, if they ARE used, they MUST be worn underneath the underarm protector...NOT between the jacket and the lame. (The rule actually states "against the skin," but let's be reasonable here)

NOTE FOR FOIL FENCERS: A new FIE rule adopted by USFA requires a foam covering on top of the chest plate for foil. This does NOT apply for epee or sabre fencers...only for foil.

See https://www.usafencing.org/news_article/show/922236 for USFA's statement clarifying this rule. Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyAcSBkq8Mg> for a vid from me on proper wear.

8) 1 fencing mask, appropriate for the weapon (i.e. no electric sabre masks for epee or foil, and no foil or epee masks for electric sabre). VERY IMPORTANT! The mask MUST have a sewn in bib or have another system that attaches the bib without leaving a hole a blade could get through (currently, the Leon Paul X-Change mask is the only one that meets that exception) and be able to withstand the 12kg safety punch test. Masks with snap-in bibs are NOT acceptable. Some masks sold are designed for beginners during lessons, but are not built to withstand the rigors of actual competition, let alone the punch test. If you buy your own mask, make sure it will pass the punch and bib tests. Be warned: Even if it's fresh from the box and is rated as an FIE mask (meaning it meets the minimum requirements to be used at the highest levels, i.e. World Cup events), it can still fail the punch test before it's ever used in competition (I've seen it happen). On the other hand, I've seen some masks that have clearly seen better days pass with flying colors. There must be no denting in the mesh that could catch a point, or loose trim that could do the same (same reason as on loose clothing items). Any lame bib for foil must not have an open pocket that can catch a point (typically this will be at the top seam on an epee mask that has been converted). The edge of the bib on an epee mask that has been converted to foil may be no bigger than 3mm tall.

NOTE FOR FOIL FENCERS: You will need a mask with lame over the bib as target and a mask cord. You might consider getting a Leon Paul X-Change mask, which allows the appropriate bibs

to be swapped out. It's expensive, but worth it if you'll be doing both foil and epee.

9) 1 foil lame (or sabre if that's what you're fencing. There is no lame for epee), and manchette (for sabre) unless you use a combination glove. Be sure you don't bring one with dead spots (see above comment re checking in early).

10) 2 (at least) working body cords (at least 2 mask cords as well, for sabre and foil), present AT THE STRIP (not in your bag across the gym). A note on body cords. The bayonet type cords do not have a retaining clip to hold the cord in place; the cord has a small round flange that twists into the socket to secure the cord. Two-prong cords have either a built-in spring loaded retaining clip (Uhlmann/Allstar type) or a separate plastic clip attached to the socket (Prieur type). These retaining clips (or some other security device) must be present when you hook up. The Uhlmann/Allstar-type can *sometimes* be used with a Prieur type socket because the spring-loaded clip hooks over the socket. The Prieur type clip is attached to the socket and goes over the head of the body cord. These clips have a habit of coming off the weapon, and you cannot use one of them on a Uhlmann/Allstar type socket because the designs are a little different and the retaining clip won't fit on the socket. If you use the Prieur type, make sure you have extra retaining clips. The lack of a retaining clip is a penalty, however ANY retaining system is acceptable...tape, rubber band, paperclip, etc...so long as nothing projects past the edge of the guard.

Epee cords must also be secured, and have much the same differences, except that the Uhlmann/Allstar epee sockets have a clip built into the socket. The Prieur types are the same type design as their foil sockets.

PLEASE remove all control marks (typically tape or tie wraps) before presenting mask or body cords at control (if they're being checked). Some refs/armorers are color blind and may not be able to discern the different color used for control.

11) 2 (at least) working weapons, present AT THE STRIP (not in your bag across the gym). Remember: It is YOUR responsibility that the weapons and cords be in working order when you arrive at the strip, so check them out before the competition. Be further warned: weapons and cords have a habit of failing at the worst time, i.e. when you're on a scoring binge in D.E. Really throws the momentum off if you have to change a cord several times, not to mention the penalty points you can get.

A note on weapon lengths. For USFA competition a Youth 10 (Y10) fencer (based on birth year. See <https://www.usafencing.org/age-classification-eligibility>) MUST use either a #0 or #2 length blade in all three weapons. A fencer in Y12 or older may use a #5 length blades if desired (but it's not required at that age....I had a teammate who used #2 foils until his Jr year of high school because he was sooooo tiny!). Also, a Y10 fencer competing in a Y12 event may use a #5 blade if desired. The link above is also good for determining other categories you might be able to compete in. Long hair must be tucked under the mask or into the lame/jacket, as it cannot cover the lame in sabre or foil. I will assume you've had some experience with the electric gear at your salle, but there are some procedures - such as the weight test - that most people don't normally do during friendly bouts and you need to be aware of them so you don't get unnecessary penalty cards due to lack of knowledge.

Competition format

The usual format you'll see at local competition is "pools, then DE." Here's how it works:

Assume there are 28 fencers in the field (doesn't matter what weapon, the format's the same). There will be 4 pool of 7 fencers each. You will fence everyone in your pool once in 5-touch bouts. You will not be fencing people in the other pools during the pool round.

For purposes of this example, assume it's a really small turnout -- 7 people total, all in one pool. Here's the way the pool sheet looks at the end of the pool round:

<u>Fen #</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>TS</u>	<u>TR</u>	<u>Ind</u>	<u>Place</u>
1	Lt. Sulu	--	V	V	V	V	V	V	6	0	30	10	+20	1
2	Cmdr. Spock	3	--	3	2	V	V	3	2	5	21	24	-3	6
3	Capt. Kirk	0	V	--	1	V	V	3	3	3	19	22	-3	5
4	Lt. Worf	3	V	V	--	4	V	V	4	2	27	17	+10	2
5	Seven of Nine	3	4	4	V	--	V	V	3	3	26	22	+4	3
6	Ens. Expendable	0	0	0	0	0	--	2	6	0	2	30	-28	7
7	YOU	1	V	V	4	3	V	--	3	3	23	23	0	4

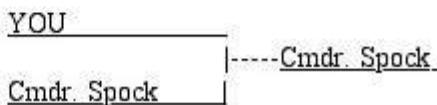
Since Sulu fenced on TV (Classic "Trek," episode "The Naked Time" for those interested), he kicked some serious butt, beat everyone in the pool and had 6 victories. Lt. Worf had 4 victories and is in 2nd place. Seven of Nine, Capt. Kirk and YOU all had 3 victories, which makes the indicators ((Ind) the difference between touches scored (TS) and received (TR)) the determining factor for placement. Seven of Nine scored 26 touches and was scored on 22 times. Her indicator is +4. YOU recorded 23 touches and received the same, so your indicator is 0. Capt. Kirk scored 19 times, but was hit 22 times, thus making his indicator a -3 (He was probably checking out the girls watching the competition....you know how Kirk gets..."Spock, here are 5 broken communicators...put one together that works. I'm gonna go seduce the High Priestess..."). The higher indicator is the higher placement, so Seven of Nine is in 3rd place, YOU 4th and Capt. Kirk 5th. If indicators had been tied, whoever scored more would get the higher placement. (If there is an absolute tie in indicators, touches scored and touches received, the bout committee flips a coin or some other random selection process) Going on, Cmdr. Spock is starting Pon-Farr and is not paying attention, so he only gets two wins and takes 6th place. Finally -- as befits someone in Starfleet Security -- Ens. Expendable gets killed (just like being on a landing party, huh? Kirk, Spock. Dr, McCoy, and someone in a red shirt who's NOT Scotty beam down...you KNOW who ain't making it past the opening credits) and takes 7th place with no wins at all.

Now the tournament can go several ways. 1) It could be by pools, which means the pool results are the finals results for the tournament, (if it's only one pool of fencers. 2) The pool results could be used to calculate a Direct Elimination table with everyone going to DE, or 3) (and the usual format for larger tournaments) the pool results are used to calculate a DE table with only the top 80% of the overall field going to DE. (80% of 7 is 5.6. Since the percentages are rounded up, 6 of the pool go to DE and Ens. Expendable would be through for the day). For this example, everyone goes to DE.

Here's what the DE chart looks like after the pool round. Table A is the first one posted and shows the seedings and pairings going into DE. The rest of the chart shows the end results of the tournament.



Table E (3rd & 4th)



As you can see, every touch counts; one touch can make the difference between a relatively easy DE path and the path of doom. Do not give away touches, not even to make someone else feel good if they haven't scored all day. It will hurt your seedings in the long run. Win and you keep going. Lose and you go home (unless you're in the round of 4, in which case you might be fencing for third place).

Length of fencing periods in pool and direct elimination

Pool bouts are one 3 minute long period, regardless of age division. DE bouts for all divisions (except for Y10 and Veterans) are 3 periods of 3 minutes each, with a one minute break in between, to a total of 15 points or the expiration of time. Time is only counted when fencing is occurring. After the director calls "halt," time stops running and does not begin again until the director calls "fence." The one minute break between DE periods, however, is real-time. In sabre DE bouts there is a one minute break for coaching once a fencer reaches 8 touches...which doesn't take long in sabre!

For the Y10 and Veteran (40 years and older) fencers, DE bouts are a single bout to 10 points, with a minute break either at 5 points (in sabre), or if the first 3 minutes if time expires.

If time expires (pool bout or the last period of a DE, regardless of format), whoever is ahead is the winner, regardless of the actual score.

If the score is tied at the end of regulation, one of the fencers will be chosen at random (coin toss, drawing straws, random selection by the computer in the box, etc). Whoever is chosen now has “priority.” The bout will continue for 1 minute of fencing time. If that minute expires and there is no further score, whoever had priority is the winner. If a touch is scored, that person is the winner, regardless of who had priority. Doubles do not count in epee in this case.

Team format

Team competitions are fun, but the format is slightly different. Each team consists of three members (sometimes including a 4th as an alternate). Teams fence each other in a three part relay for a total of 9 bouts, so each team member fences each member of the opposing team...somewhat like individual pool bouts. The period lengths are the same...it's the scoring that's different. Team matches end with the first team to score 45 touches. Here's an example:

The NorCal Foil Bunnies are fencing the War Dogs (don't laugh...I've seen teams with BOTH of those names). After the 1st bout the Foil Bunnies are ahead 5-3. The next bout (and all successive bouts) end when the next higher multiplier of 5 is reached. In this case, the Foil Bunnies only need to score 5 touches to win the next bout (raising their score to 10), but the War Dogs must score 7.

Coming from way behind happens often. In my first sectional tournament, I scored 11 times to my last opponent's 3 to even the score at 40 in an epee team match. My old teammate, Freewind (yes...that's his real name), who was in the anchor slot, finished it off and we won the match. Of course, there were 17 teams and our match was between the bottom 2 to see who got to get pasted by the #1 team...we got slaughtered (duh).

At the 2017 World Championships, France was down 40-27 to Germany going into the final bout in mens team sabre (round of 16 match)...but France pulled off a massive 18 to 4 run and won it 45-44 (I imagine there was a lot of “Ach, mein GOTT!” going on in the German box during that time!”).

Vid is at <https://www.facebook.com/sam.signorelli/posts/10213803305775735>

Most team competitions are a straight DE format. Every so often there are pools, but it's only happened once to me. There are several different formats for the bout committee to choose from. In team play, as in individual, it's always important to remember the words of Yogi Berra...it ain't over 'til it's over!

Finding events to go to

Now that you're ready to go to an event....how do you FIND them?

There are 2 general ways, depending on the level of event (keep in mind that this is written primarily for events in the US and Canada, so if you're out of North America, this may not help).

The first method is to find events at the divisional level, the most common ones most fencers will attend.

<https://askfred.net> will bring up a list of events coming up within a few weeks. Using the search bars at the top, you can change the parameters to events in a specific division, weapon, age range, gender, certain miles from your home zip code, etc.

After you have selected an event, you can register for it on line if you have an AskFred account set up. In some cases, you can even pay your entry fee through AF. Most listing will have a map the venue location, as well as an email contact for the organizers, if needed. The information section may have notations re entry fees, event start times, etc.

For regional and national events, you need to go through USFA at <https://member.usafencing.org/search/tournaments>. The screen is similar to AskFred's. Note that USFA's system requires an entirely different registration than AskFred's

Equipment check, hooking up & getting down to business

My video on weapons control and how to get through it smoothly...without angering the folks behind you! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc0wL3rJmiU>

Equipment checks vary from event to event. Some events only check the mask and gloves (which, to my mind, is by far the most important one), while larger regional or national events check the mask, body cords, lames, and even the weapons themselves. 90% of the time in local competition, it's just the mask and gloves. Note that foil chest plates will start being checked now.

For sabre gloves, if the FIE label inside is bunching up, do NOT cut it out...glue or sew it down. If it's removed, the armorer cannot verify it IS an FIE glove.

The mask is tested by way of a spring loaded punch. The probe's diameter is slightly larger than the width of the mask mesh. It is placed perpendicular to the mask surface and depressed all the way down. If the probe does not punch through the mask, it passes. If the probe punches through the mask anywhere -- it doesn't matter if it's on the backside behind your ear -- it fails and cannot be used again in competition because the failure indicates the mesh is starting to get weak. In many cases, the mask is usually confiscated, or the word "FAILED" is written across the bib with a big ink pen. If you think this is overly severe, ask any fencer who's been around awhile about what happened to a Russian World and 1980 Olympic champion named Vladimir Smirnov in 1982...you'll appreciate the mask test then. The Reader's Digest version: during the World Championships, his opponent's broken blade punched through the mask and through his eye. He died 9 days later. Rather quickly thereafter, stronger equipment was mandated...the mask had to withstand 12kg of pressure instead of the 7kg mandatory at the time, and the way was paved for the inclusions of Kevlar and other ballistic fabrics in the uniforms and maraging steel in blades.

NOTE: A broken or missing wire **anywhere** on the mask is an automatic failure...as is a broken frame or mask tongue...no arguments. It should be noted that this type of accident is *extremely* rare. Bruises, other soft tissue injuries and the occasional repetitive stress-type injury are more the norm. Statistically speaking, fencing is safer than golf (for all that we're hitting each other with three feet of steel!). Please keep in mind that an armorer's first job is safety, so if your mask fails the punch, don't blame the guy who might've just saved you from injury. I sell fencing gear for a living, but when I run mask check, I take the vendor hat off and put the armorer hat on, so if I fail your mask, understand that I'm not doing so to generate a new mask sale.

When you present your gear to control, please do the following (it makes it a LOT easier for the armory staff if they're checking in hundreds of people):

- 1) Ensure the back strap on your mask is present and attached, and also that it is in solid contact with the back of your head when the mask is on.
- 2) Unwind the body cords (if being tested) to make it easier for the armorer to do the test.
- 3) Remove all control marks BEFORE getting to the control station. This is because national events tend to use a tape dispenser to mark cords, and the refs don't want to see a chewed up tape mark from three tourneys ago that happens to be the same color as the current mark..
- 4) Remove your lame from any hanger it happens to be on and zip it closed.
- 5) Make sure your glove does not have any wear holes, rips, tears in the fabric, broken seams, or loose portions. Get them sewn/glued down or get a new glove.

Lastly....try not to be the only person coming through control...unless you want to be the focus of attention. Armorers will often team up to make fun of ANYthing to break the monotony of checking fencer after fencer (trust me...we'll be on you like white on rice!) Best to get buried in with a ton of other people...anonymity of the herd and all that...

Notes on Armory

There will be times when you need to do a repair in the field – a hole in a glove, for example. Best to have an understanding of what can go wrong and how to fix it.

Go to my web page, www.homfencing.com and hit the “instructional videos” tab. Or just go to <http://www.homfencing.com/instructional-videos.html>

Hooking up

It sounds like such a simple thing...hook up to the strip. But there are a few things to know.

1) Fencers are called to the strip in a particular order, depending on how many are in the pool. For each bout, the first called fencer hooks up to the director's right, unless that fencer is a left-hander, in which case he'll hook up to the director's left. If it's two lefties, it won't matter; 1st called to the director's right. The reason for this is so the director can see the chest area of the competitors...the most likely area for touches to arrive. It also allows the director to more easily see covering actions or grabbing of the blade.

2) The alligator clip on your body cord (for foil/sabre) must be attached to your lame at the back on the **weapon side**. This is to ensure it cannot be removed by the non-weapon hand during the bout (thus interrupting the circuit and rendering any touch landed by your opponent an off target). Most people clip it right next to the center line on the back. There is no such clip for epee.

3) The floor reels can run as high as \$500.00 per unit. Under NO circumstances should you let the plug go if you're more than a foot or two away from the reel. The force of the plug slamming into the reel housing after being retracted at high speed for 30 feet can seriously damage the reel...and I guarantee that EVERY experienced fencer will look directly at you if you do this, even accidentally. Some divisions have in-house rules about this that allow for penalty cards -- or even monetary penalties -- if such an action is deemed deliberate. ALWAYS either hand the plug to the next fencer or walk it all the way back to the reel.

4) The clip on the plug that goes over your body cord is there to keep the reel cable from coming apart from your body cord and slamming back into the reel housing. Make sure you use it, if it's there and will stay on in the first place.

5) In sabre and foil there is an additional cord that goes from a tab on the back of the lame to the mask to allow the box to register hits to the head area (neck in foil). There is no specific place on the mask to clip it to, but most people clip it to the mask frame near their ear on the off-weapon side, to the lame near the cheek on the same side, or to the frame right above the top of the head. This cable has a habit of coming off during the action, so check to make sure it's there after particularly energetic exchanges.

On foil masks with lame bib, there is a tab on the underside of the bib to attach the clip to (on the off-hand side). The other side of the mask cord clips to a tab or pocket on the back of the neck area on the lame.

The weight & lame/bell guard test

After you have hooked up to the scoring reels, you will present your weapon to the director for the weight and/or shim test (this applies only to foil and epee; there is no weight test for sabre). A weight will be placed over the tip while it is held vertically (500 grams for foil, 750 grams for epee). The spring in the tip must lift the appropriate weight. This is indicated by the scoring box. When the weight is placed on the weapon, the appropriate side of the scoring box will light up. If the light turns off and stays off, the weapon passes. If it stays on, the weapon fails and may not be used for that bout. This also gets you a yellow penalty card (which will be discussed later). This is why you have to bring at least 2 working weapons to the strip. In foil, once the weight test is done for both sides, you can touch each other's lames to make sure touches will register and then get ready to do combat. In epee there is an additional two part shim test. There must be at least 1.5 mm between the bottom

of the tip and the top of the barrel, and at least 1 mm distance of travel in the point before the light goes off. The space shim (1.5mm) is simply placed in the tip. If it can be inserted, it's good. The travel shim (0.5mm) is likewise inserted into the tip, then the point itself is depressed. If the light goes on, it fails. If the light stays off, you're good to go. After then, the director will look to ensure the point has both screws in place (if it has screws) and that a retaining clip is on the body cord socket in the guard. Missing screws or retaining clip is a yellow card offense.

Please hold the weapon low enough for a short ref to easily reach the tip.

There is no lame test in epee. Instead, each fencer in turn will touch his tip to his opponent's bell guard and push to depress his point. If the light stays off, the circuit is properly grounded and no hits on the guard will register. If a light goes on, something's wrong, usually either the guard's not properly grounded or there's some rust on the guard, which would insulate the ground. In higher level competitions (like North American Cups) the strips are a series of linked aluminum plates, which also grounds out any floor hits in foil and epee.

In sabre you can test by simple touching your opponent's lame or mask with your blade; no pressure is necessary. Most people touch the mask.

Proper etiquette (salutes & decorum on the piste)

After you have hooked up, been tested by the director and tested lames/bell guards, you'll return to your on guard line, salute your opponent, the director, and the audience, put your mask on, come on guard and wait for the command to fence. Stay still when the director asks if you're ready; they hate a bouncy fencer and will get testy if they have to wait for you to settle down.

Safety note: Learn to put your mask on with your non-weapon hand only. People who use both hands to put on the mask tend to send their points flying all over the place, usually towards someone's face. Use your unarmed hand and keep the weapon point down toward the ground. It's easy...just put your chin in first and pull the mask back over your face. it has the added advantage of pulling long hair back away from your face...if, unlike myself, you HAVE hair! Additionally, the mask must have the safety strap running across the back. The proper place for this strap when the mask is on is across the back of your head...NOT across the mask tongue! If it's over the mask tongue, it can't do it's job...helping to keep the mask on your head.

VERY IMPORTANT: When the director ask if you are ready - by asking "Fencers ready?" (Or some variation thereof) "Etes vous prêts?" ("Are you ready" in French) or in some other fashion, you MUST respond verbally if you are not ready to go, and loudly enough so the director can hear you over the other noises in the area. If you say nothing, that is deemed as an affirmative response and the director may start the fencing before you're actually ready. If you get scored on in that situation, it's your own fault for not letting the director know.

When the director is satisfied that everyone's ready to go (it may only be a second long of a wait), the command to fence will be given by the director saying "Fence," "Begin," "Allez," ("Go" in

French) or some variation thereof. Once fencing begins, don't stop until you hear your director call the halt. Even if you KNOW you hit your opponent, that doesn't mean the light went off, and it's a sure way to get hit yourself. If you need to, you can remove your mask to wipe sweat out of your eyes, scratch your nose, etc. only AFTER the director has halted the action. In salle during most informal encounters between friends there's a lot of talking, jibing, and "smack talk" between the fencers as they go at each other. You can't do that in official competition. Nor can you crook a finger in a "bring it on" gesture. This is defined as taunting, and it's a cardable offense. If you see a potentially dangerous situation - i.e. a weapon with a very sharp bend beyond a normal curve, an untied shoelace, a broken blade, some doofus walking across the strip right behind your opponent, etc. -- you cannot just stop fencing and call halt yourself. Back up a few steps, raise your non-weapon hand and stomp your rear foot a bit to get the director's attention. He'll stop the bout and you can have the problem taken care of.

Penalties - what's gonna get you nailed

This is a goodie. The penalty chart is located at homfencing.com. Scroll down the front page until you see the button marked "USFA Penalty Chart."

Many of the infractions are self-explanatory. A yellow card stays with you for the entire bout, so if you have yellow card because a weapon failed the weight test, it stays with you until the bout is over. Earning a second yellow card for any reason, such as turning your back, equals a red card, with is a point against you. It is entirely possible to lose a bout on penalties alone.

Some examples of card offenses are: turning your back, covering target, touching your weapon or body cord with your non-weapon hand after the command to fence, throwing/swinging your equipment or otherwise displaying anger that might get someone hurt, unhooking and/or stepping off the strip without asking the director first (during a bout); stepping off the strip with one foot during fencing (except during a fleche), fleche or crossing of the feet during a forward motion (in sabre only), etc.

Going off the side of the strip with one foot is a warning, and will stop the fencing. Going off the very end with both feet is an automatic point against you. Being off is defined as the foot crossing the vertical plane of the boundary of the strip, so if you're doing epee and you've got one foot off the end, your opponent goes for your front foot and you pull it out of the way, it's gonna be a point against you if that foot crosses the plane of the end of the strip.

If you need to leave the venue for a bathroom break, make sure the director knows about it. If you get called to the strip several times and aren't present, you'll lose the bout. Most directors will let this slide if they know you're in the bathroom.

On the other hand, if, before you get knocked out of the tournament, you leave the venue to go home, back to work, or just because you're pissed off at something, you MUST advise the bout committee that you're leaving and why. Failure to do so can result in the dreaded black card, which may affect you at future competitions. The black card's a nasty one. Avoid it at all costs. There are several

ramifications to earning a black card. 1) It gets reported to the National office. A fencer can be banned for a time if deemed necessary. 2) It doesn't matter if you've just taken 2nd place, earned your "A" rating, and qualify to compete at the National Championships...get a black card and you don't get jack. No medal, no rating, no qualifying status. All you'll get are the words "Fencer Excluded" where your name should be on the results sheet.

Covering target/turning back on opponent (one word: DON'T)

Turning your back is self-explanatory. It's a safety issue, since you don't want the back of your head exposed. Covering target is a bit more complicated but it boils down to this: if your non-weapon arm is covering your lame in foil (or your non-weapon hand in sabre) in any way during an exchange of action, it's a penalty. Don't do it; keep that arm back and out of the way.

Addressing the director

Only the fencers have the right to address the director in reference to an action, although most directors at the local level will answer a question from a coach. If you need to ask a question, especially if you think you did a parry-riposte and the director says your opponent did a beat-attack, don't yell at the director; be polite about it. My general rule of thumb is to ask once and let it go if it doesn't go my way. For example: Me - "That wasn't a parry-riposte, Sir?" Director - "No. Your opponent landed mal parre, then your riposte landed." After that, I let it go because arguing never changes the call. Keep in mind, if you're relatively inexperienced, that the director and fencer will see different things on the same action. Also, in many cases the directors have been directing far longer than you've been fencing, so they know what they're talking about. For good or ill, that person is the director, and he or she is the boss. If you don't like a call, shake it off and get back to fencing.

Also keep in mind this: if the director states the action as "The attack is from my right, parry riposte from my left," it cannot be argued because the director's saying he saw a specific action. If the director says, however, "The attack is from my right, and I think it was a parry riposte from my left," you have the right to argue it if you think it was yours, because he wasn't sure. Don't do it too often.

You cannot argue a statement of fact. You CAN argue a misapplication of the rules, but you'd better know them yourself before you start questioning your director.

Asking for time & score/sandbagging

Now we get to the fun subject of time management in a bout. If you're ahead even by one touch in a bout - pool or DE - and time runs out, you win, period. The director will not offer time remaining in the period or score unless one of the fencers asks (the FENCER must ask...not the coach, not the parents).

Knowing the score is good, but knowing the time remaining is better.

By the same token, if you're behind by one point in the 1st or 2nd period of DE and there are two seconds left in the period, don't fleche on the command to fence; any experienced opponent will expect it and you'll probably find yourself two points down instead of one. Run the time out. It's safer that way.

Requesting hand/lame/floor judges

If you feel your opponent is covering target or his lame is not working (you nail him right in the center of the chest and the off-target light comes on), ask the director if you could have a hand or lame judge or test the lame. Re the covering concern, he'll pick two people who will each watch one fencer for covering. In epee you may request a foot judge if your opponent likes to go for your foot and you're not fencing on a grounded strip. Same in sabre if your opponent is crossing forward.

Problems with your tip

If you keep hitting your opponent and the light just ain't going off, you are either not hitting with sufficient pressure to trigger the light (remember the weight test), are hitting plaque' (flat) and not depressing the tip, are hitting later than 40 milliseconds after your opponent hits you (in epee), or the tip has gone bad (usually because the contact spring has screwed itself deeper into the point and is not making contact).

You may ask the director if you can test the tip by touching your opponent - like during the original lame test - or you may present the blade to the director for him to test. Be advised: if you think the tip itself has gone bad, you **MUST** ask the director to test it for you. If it turns out the tip's bad, you may get a break, because it may invalidate any touch you received in the action where your tip failed. Testing it yourself is not a valid test as far as the refs are concerned.

Even though there's no tip test in sabre, there is a nagging problem that may cost points. Most scoring boxes for sabre are set to they can tell the difference between a direct hit and a whip-over (where contact between the blades is made, but the attacking blade bends around the parry and still hits the target). In some rare cases, the direct hit spends such a short amount of time in contact with the conductive surface, the box thinks it's a whip-over and the hit does not register. It's happened to me and my opponents many times, usually to my benefit, since my counter-attacks usually register (that's how slow I am). Even if you hear and feel the contact, if the director says nothing, do not stop fencing. The rule is, in all three weapons, **if the box doesn't light up, there is no hit.**

Injury time-outs

If you are injured on the strip (ankle pops, hit in the crotch, or otherwise actually hurt) you can ask for an injury time out of 10 minutes. If you're going to do it, though make sure you're actually hurt or can fake it real well. Asking for an injury time out because you're tired will get you a penalty card, not a rest! Don't try and fake it too often, though; the experienced directors will spot a fake a mile

away.

Ratings, ratings, how do I get them ratings?

One thing that fencers are always concerned about is the potential for new ratings to be passed out at a tournament. Not all tournaments pass out ratings; a restricted event, such as a Youth 10 foil, awards no ratings. In most open competitions, however, the ratings awarded depend on how many fencers are in the overall field, the number of rated fencers in the overall field, and the number of specific ratings of fencers in the top 8 or 12 (depending on how large the event it). Here's the classification chart. <http://askfred.net/Info/eventClass.php> Note that many divisions tie for third place in all events except for qualifying tournaments for large sectional or national events, and some club sponsored events also fence off for third. If a tie for third is passed out, everyone who tied for third gets whatever rating third place earned.

Avoid this cliché like the plague

It doesn't matter how good you are in your own salle...you might be undefeated in two years of in-house competitions against a club full of people, but it means nothing when you hit the strip against people you've never faced before. There's always someone better, so don't fall into the "Karate Kid Syndrome." Beginning fencers do NOT romp through a field of experienced competitors and win events. A bout or two maybe; everyone gets lucky now and again. But don't get bummed out if you get hammered by an "A" rated fencer, or even an unrated one with competitive USFA experience. It happens to everyone, and it's part of the learning experience.

Lastly, included here is a list of things to remember when fencing I've come up with over the last too-many years. Keep 'em in mind.

Good luck & see ya on the piste!

SAM SIGNORELLI'S 21 RULES AND TRUISMS OF FENCING

21. Respect your opponent's skills...even if you don't particularly like him.

20. When arguing a call with the director, be polite and respectful; don't be an ass about it.

19. If a particular trick doesn't work the first couple of times, f'Pete's sake, try something different!

18. There's nothing wrong with beating your opponent 5-0 in the pool round.

17. In epee, check your tip screws after each bout.

16. In foil, ensure your tip is still there after each halt of action.

15. Don't be nasty to the people in your pool...you'll most likely have one of them in the DE round.

14. If things aren't going your way, don't get so upset that you lose your self-control & discipline; pissed off people make mistakes.

13. Show support for your salle mates when they're fencing and you're not. Just one "Go get 'im!" can make all the difference in the world.

12. Just as there's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole, there are no friends on the piste.

11. Don't stop until the director calls "halt!"

10. Don't cheat or accuse others of doing so just so you can get another point, particularly when you're far ahead or vastly superior in skill to your opponent. You demean yourself and the sport when you do so.

9. Retreat, don't just run away...there's a difference.

8. Finish the attack!

7. You may be big, tall and strong, but remember that power means nothing without control.

6. *Be gracious when you lose...more importantly, be gracious when you win.*

5. Don't look at the %\$#@& box!!

4. *Don't let yourself get psyched out by a higher rated opponent...you never know when you're going to be hot.*

3. Have fun...not many people can stab a total stranger with a long knife and get rewarded for it!

2. *Never give up - even if you're down 14-0.*

1. Never underestimate ANYONE!!