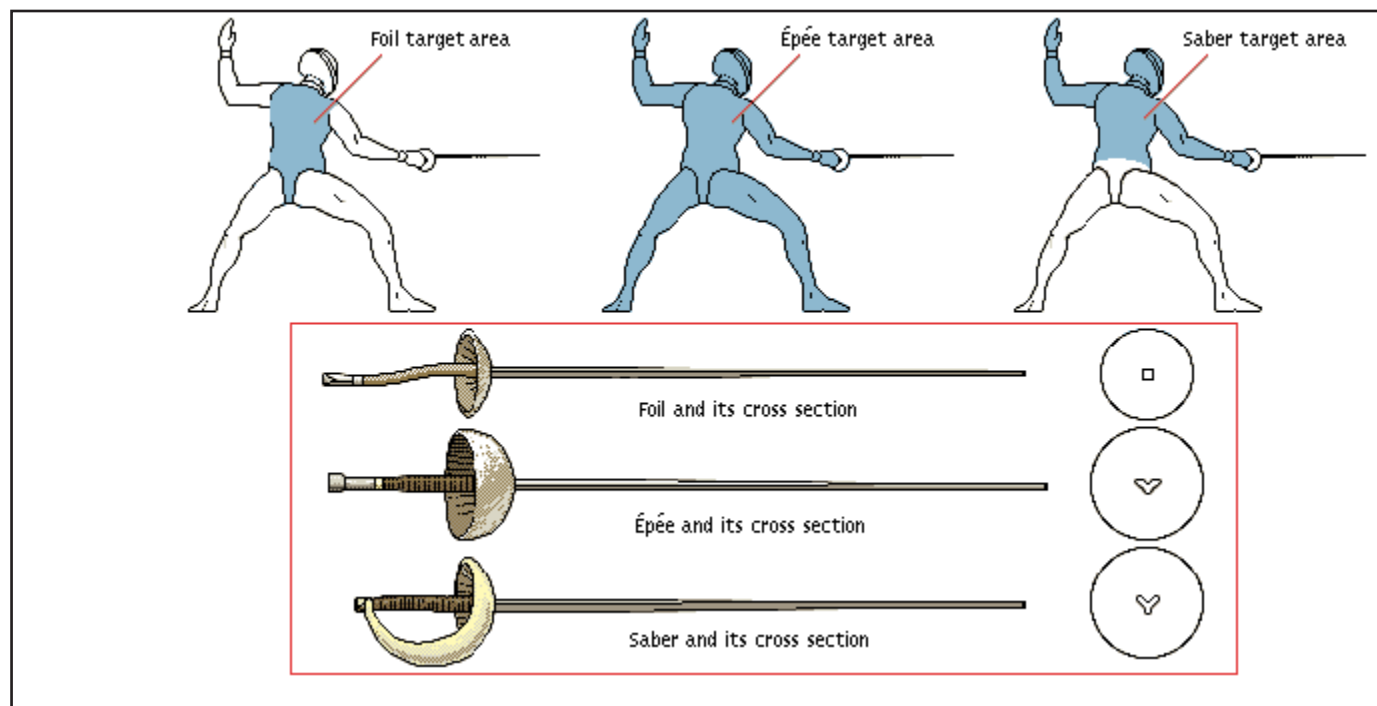


# The Basics of Fencing

Adapted from: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO FENCING 2007 EDITION © 2007 <http://www.fencing.net/>



## Glossary of Terms

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

**Advance** - Taking a step forward (towards one's opponent.)

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

**Balestra** - A short, sharp jump forwards; usually used as a preparation for an attack. Often followed by a lunge.

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

**Breeches** - This is the name given to the short trousers worn to just below the knee. (Also called knickers or fencing pants.)

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

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

**En Garde Position** - taken before fencing commences.

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

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

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

**Fleche** - Explosive, running attack (foil & epee only).

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

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

## Glossary of Terms Continued

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

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

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

**Parry** - Defensive action in which a fencer blocks his opponent’s blade.

**Piste/Strip** - French term for the fencing strip: where the actual fencing action takes place. It is 14 meters long and 1.5 to 2 meters wide. Retreating off the end of the strip with both feet gets a touch against. Going off the side of the strip with one foot halts the fencing action. Going off the side with both feet gets a penalty of the loss of one meter, and if this results in the offender going off the end of the piste, a point is awarded to his opponent. After each touch, fencers begin again at the center of the strip, 4 meters apart, or roughly at a position where their blades can nearly touch when fully extended. Many pistes at fencing tournaments are “grounded” so that if a fencer’s blade makes contact with the floor, the hit won’t register. (Note: most US fencers refer only to the “strip” – piste is rarely used in the US.)

**Plastron** - Also sometimes called an underarm pro-

jector; this is worn under your jacket on your sword arm and gives extra protection to the most commonly hit part of your target area. The seams on a plastron are made so that they do not line up with the seams on a jacket for added safety.

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

**Recover** - The return to the en garde position after lunging.

**Remise** - Attacking again immediately after the opponent’s parry of an initial attack.

**Riposte** - Defender’s offensive action immediately after parrying their opponent’s attack.

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

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

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

## Getting Started: Basic Skills and Gear

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

**Patience:** This is something that you (the parent) need more of than the kids! Fencing is an obscure sport; there are lots of basic techniques to learn that aren’t as natural to us as

throwing or kicking balls, so there is a large learning curve. Have patience with the process of learning and everything will eventually click.

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

- Jacket
- Mask
- Glove
- Practice weapon (foil, sabre or épée).

## Getting Started Continued

Many clubs will lend you equipment when you are just starting and doing a beginner course. Once you've completed the course, and are hooked, you will be encouraged to buy your own equipment. There are two options as a beginner, the first is to buy individual items one at a time until you have a full set and the second solution is to buy a "starter kit." These fencing starter kits have all the "basic needs" items pre-assembled and sold as a bundle; Fencing.Net has several different starter kits available. ([http://shop.fencing.net/Fencing\\_Starter\\_Kits\\_s/2.htm](http://shop.fencing.net/Fencing_Starter_Kits_s/2.htm))

## Overview of Basic Skills:

Fencing is a multi-faceted discipline giving the fencer a workout that requires strength, cardiovascular endurance and mental skills. This is achieved by executing the three essential skills of fencing:

**Blade Work:** This is perhaps the most difficult of the essential skills to master. It permits a skilled fencer to deceive his opponent and reach the target area despite attempts of an opponent to defend themselves. The fencer needs to be strong enough to execute parries and beats of the blade against their opponent's but also need the fine motor coordination and dexterity to move their point quickly around attempted parries.

**Footwork:** The "cardio" component. This is the most physically demanding of the skills, is the one which permits a fencer to move into appropriate positions and distances and allow him to effectively utilize blade work to touch the opponent's target area and allow him to get away from an opponent's attack.

**Tactics:** The "mental" component. This is often the hardest to learn of the skills. Fencers will spend most of their competitive careers focused on learning and executing the nuances of fencing strategy and tactics. Tactics consist of the plans and counter plans utilized by fencers to coordinate use of blade work and footwork against the fencing style of opponents.

## Basic Equipment: A Little More Detail

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

**Jacket:** The fencing jacket is to help protect the fencer. It's important to select a fencing jacket that is well made and that will provide adequate protection.

**Mask:** The mask is also for protection so be sure to choose a mask that has sufficient interior padding, does not press on the top of the head or chin, and fits comfortably.

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

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

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

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

## **Overview of the Three Weapons**

Foil...epee...sabre, what's really the difference? Each weapon has its own distinct "character" and resulting pace of action. For example, the sabre is the fastest and most aggressive, epee is the slowest and requires the most patience while foil is in between and attracts fencers who like to employ both aggression and patience. If you (or your child) are going to participate in this sport, you need to understand the different nature of the weapons, their characteristics, how they're used and how a fencer can win with each weapon. And, of course, a little trivia never hurt anyone. Though many recreational fencers compete in multiple weapons, Olympic level fencers concentrate on one weapon for their competitive careers.

### **Foil – The Court Sword**

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

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

#### **To score points with the foil:**

The fencer must land the tip of the blade on a valid target: along the torso from shoulders to groin in the front and to the waist in the back. The arms,

neck, head and legs are considered off-target. Off-target hits will temporarily halt the fencing action, but does not result any points being awarded.

The concept of on-target and off-target evolved from the theory of 18th-century fencing masters, who taught their pupils to only attack the vital areas of the body (i.e. the torso). While the head is also a vital area of the body, attacks to the face were considered rude and therefore discouraged. You have to remember, fencing prides itself on being a chivalrous sport.

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

However, if a fencer hesitates for too long while advancing on their opponent, they give up right-of-way to their opponent. A touch scored against an opponent who hesitated too long is called an attack in preparation or a stop-hit, depending on the circumstances. Although some foil fencers still employ the classical technique of parries and thrusts, the flexible nature of the foil blade permits the modern foil fencer to attack an opponent from seemingly impossible angles.

Competitors can execute "marching attacks" where they move down the fencing strip towards their opponent, looking to flick the point of their blade at back or flank of their opponent. Because parrying (blocking) these attacks can be very difficult, the modern game of foil has evolved into a complicated and exciting game of multiple feints, ducking and sudden, explosive attacks, making it a lot of fun to watch.

### **Epee – (Almost) Anything Goes**

While a special version of the court sword, the foil, was developed for practice, another

type of sword, the colichemarde, was created for dueling. The blade had a triangular cross-section, with slightly concave sides to reduce weight without reducing strength and the forte was grooved to allow the blood to drain away (and to make it easier to remove the sword from the body!). The colichemarde evolved into the modern epee. As the epee (pronounced “EPP-pay”) evolved, the idea was to develop epee fencing in a manner that reproduced as closely as possible the conditions of an actual duel to first blood. As a result, in epee the entire body is considered a valid target and there is no “right-of-way” rule: anything goes (almost).

**Epee fencers score a point** by hitting their opponent first. If the fencers hit each other within 1/25th of a second, both receive a point - this is commonly referred to as a double touch. Initially epee fencers worked to be first to the best of five but over time it became the best of nine wins the bout. The lack of right-of-way combined with a full-body target naturally makes epee a game of careful strategy and patience - wild, rash attacks are quickly punished with solid counter-attacks. So, rather than attacking outright, epeeists often spend several minutes probing their opponent’s defenses and maneuvering for distance before risking an attack. Others may choose to stay on the defensive throughout the entire bout. As an epee watcher you also need to have patience.

### **Sabre – Slash and Dash**

The sabre is the modern version of the slashing cavalry sword and was introduced into Europe in the late 18th century as an adaptation of the Turkish scimitar, used by the Hungarian cavalry. It was quite popular (it was very effective) and was adopted by several European armies. In fact, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the cavalry of all nations practiced sabre fencing and fighting. Initially heavy and curved, the present day weapon is extremely light and straight. To simulate a cavalry rider on a horse, the target area is the entire body above the waist, excluding the hands. In addition, sabre employs rules of right-of-way, which are very similar to foil, but with some

subtle differences. Like foil, the fencer who starts to attack first is given priority should his opponent counter-attack. However, sabre referees are much less forgiving of hesitation by an attacker. It is common to see a sabre fencer execute a stop cut against their opponent’s forearm during such a moment of hesitation, winning right-of-way and the point. Another major distinction of the sabre is that **sabre fencers can score with the edge of their blade as well as their point.**

The sabre fencer’s uniform features an electrically wired metallic lamé, which fully covers their valid target area. Because the head is valid target area, the fencer’s mask is also electrically wired. One significant departure from foil is that off-target hits do not register on the scoring machine, and therefore do not halt the fencing action. Sabre fencing is also the first of the three weapons to feature a wireless scoring system.

If epee is the weapon of patient, defensive strategy, then sabre is its polar opposite. In sabre, the rules of right-of-way strongly favor the fencer who attacks first, and a mere graze by the blade against the lamé registers a touch with the scoring machine. As a result, sabre is a fast, aggressive game; with fencers rushing their opponent from the moment their referee gives the instruction to fence. As fending off the attack of a skilled opponent is nearly impossible, sabre fencers very rarely purposely take the defensive. However, when forced to do so, they often go all-out using spectacular tactical combinations in which victory or defeat is determined by the slightest of margins.

## **Distinctions Among Weapons in Play:**

### **Epee:**

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

### **Foil:**

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

**Sabre:**

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

**The scoring:****Epee:**

When their light goes off, they've scored.

**Foil and Sabre:**

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

## Fencer Ratings

The ratings system in fencing is similar to that of the "belts" in karate, but instead of belts, fencing uses letters. The highest caliber fencer would be an "A", the next a "B" and so on until you reach "E." An un-rated fencer (i.e., beginner) would be classified as a "U" for un-rated. Your letter is also distinguished by the year in which you achieved your rating. For example, if you earned your "B" in 2006 then your rating would be "B06." The newer your rating is, the higher your rank, so that a "B06" would be ranked higher than a "B01." Once a fencer earns a rating they keep it for 4 seasons, and then drops one letter.

**How does one earn a rating?**

Through tournaments: there is a matrix that the USFA publishes that describes what ratings can be earned at each tournament. The matrix is based off of the number of fencers in a tournament, the ratings of the fencers in the tournament and the finishes of the fencers in the tournament. To read more about the USFA ratings matrix, go to: (<http://www.fencing.net/forums/thread7493.html>).

What's important to remember about ratings is that they are just that, a rating. They don't always tell the whole story. You may see "C" rated fencers that can consistently beat "B" fencers, but take a long

time to earn a higher rating because of how classifications are awarded at tournaments. Unfortunately a lot of fencers get hung up on their "rating" when they should be enjoying the process of learning to fence and fence better.

## What to Expect at a Tournament

Before going to the tournament, make sure that you are prepared. Fencing tournaments can be all-day affairs, often with no food vendors (or only fast food) available. Pack a snack bag with all of the good stuff to keep energy up all day – things like bagels, granola bars, fruit. Make sure to have a water bottle and if you use it, some of the preferred sports drink. There is also a lot of down time in tournaments.

**Being a Spectator:**

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

**Scoring:**

All bouts are scored electronically with a referee or director watching and all weapons are scored the same way: 5 touch, 4-minute pool bouts, 15 touch, 3-minute period D.E. bouts (U12 and Veterans are exceptions.)

**Penalties:**

The penalties handed out are the same for all weapons:

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

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

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

**Black card** = The worst offense. If a fencer receives a black card he/she is kicked out of the tournament. An example of a black card offense would be insulting a referee, or throwing a fencing weapon or mask down on the strip.

For a complete listing of offenses and their corresponding penalties go to [http://shop.fencing.net/product\\_p/fdn-81999.htm](http://shop.fencing.net/product_p/fdn-81999.htm) and download a copy of the rule book

## **Tournament Format and Fencing Bouts**

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

The entire field of fencers who have entered a tournament are divided into groups, called “pools.” The bout committee (the organizers of the tournament) balances pools as fairly as possible so that the first pool and the last pool, in theory, should be about the same level of difficulty, with some variation. Pool size varies between five and seven fencers per pool, depending on the size of the field. Each competitor fences a bout against all of the other members of the pool. The bouts last a maximum of three minutes (start-and-stop time, not continuous time), or until one fencer scores five points.

During a bout, if time runs out, and the score is tied, the referee will flip a coin or otherwise randomly select one fencer to have “priority.” One minute of overtime is added to the clock and the fencers fence one minute of “sudden-death” overtime. If one fencer scores a point, he or she wins the bout. If time elapses, and no point has been scored, the fencer with priority, as randomly determined at the beginning of the one minute, is given the victory. Once all of the bouts in the pool have been completed, the referee counts up all of scores. The referee lists the number of victories each fencer has earned, the number of points each fencer has

scored in all of his or her bouts combined, the number of points that were scored against each fencer in all of his or her bouts combined and then the referee determines the differential between points scored by and against each fencer (referred to as their indicator). These sets of numbers are used to determine the “seeding” of fencers into the Direct Elimination (DE) table (also referred to as the bracket or tableau). Fencers with the highest percentage of victories are seeded highest. It is important to note that it is the percentage of victories are used, not the actual number of victories. The win-loss percentage is calculated by dividing the number of victories earned by a fencer, divided by the number of bouts he or she fenced. If fencers are tied, based on their percentage of victories, the tie is broken based on the “indicators” or differential between the number of touches scored and touches received for each fencer. A more positive number means a higher seed.

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

Once the seeding has been completed, and the bout committee has arranged the fencers on the DE table, the next round of fencing will commence. DE bout lasts for three three-minute periods with a one-minute break in between the first and second periods. If one fencer reaches 15 points, that is the end of the bout. Sometimes bouts end because time has elapsed, but more often they expire because the score has reached 15 points. If all three periods expire, and the score is tied, then the same overtime procedure takes place as was described above. In a standard DE table, if a fencer has lost, they are “out” of the competition. If they win, they advance to the next round of DE bouts, until eventually a winner is reached through this process of elimination.

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