

All you need to know about Fencing

What is Fencing?

Modern fencing has retained the basic goal of duelling; hitting an opponent with your sword without getting hit yourself. Contemporary fencers, however, use lightweight, blunted swords to play a game of passionate, exhilarating physical chess. One of the original modern Olympic sports, fencing provides a vigorous workout, rewards mental agility over sheer strength & power, & is one of the safest sports. In fact, you're more likely to be injured jogging or playing golf.

Sabre

Descended from the duelling sabres of the late 19th century, which were in turn descended from naval & cavalry swords, sabres have a knuckle guard. Hits can be scored with either the point or the edge of the blade anywhere above the opponent's waist. Sabre technique emphasises speed, feints, & strong offence. While the speed of sabre often makes fights difficult to follow, if you focus on who starts an action (who has "right of way"), the lively exchanges will soon begin to make sense.

Épée

Similar to the duelling swords of the 19th century, the épée has a stiff triangular blade, & a large guard to protect the hand & the wrist. Hits are scored with point anywhere on the opponent's body. Unlike foil & sabre, there are no rules of right of way to determine which actions have precedence. The first fencer to hit wins, if the fencers hit at the same time, both score a hit. Épée technique emphasises timing, point control, & good counter-attacking.

Foil

Descended from the 18th century smallsword, the foil has a thin, flexible blade with a square cross-section & a small guard. Hits are scored with the point only on the torso of the opponent. With the smallest target area of the three weapons, precision & strong defence are crucial. As with sabre hits are awarded according to which competitor has the "right of way" when the hit is made.

How points are scored: Sabre

The target area is from the bend of the hips (both front & back) to the top of the head, simulating the cavalry rider on a horse. The sabre fencer's equipment includes a metallic jacket (lamé or electric jacket), which covers the target area to register a valid hit on the scoring machine. The mask is different from foil & épée, with a metallic covering since the head is valid target area.



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Just as in foil, there are two scoring lights on the machine; one shows a green light when a fencer is hit & one shows a red light when the opponent is hit. Off-target lights do not register on the machine.

Épée

The entire body is the valid target area. 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 coloured bulb on the scoring machine to light. Because the entire body is valid target area, the épée fencers equipment does not include a lamé. Off-target hits do not register on the machine.

Foil

The valid target area in foil is the torso, from the shoulders to the groin, front & back. It does not include the arms, neck, head, & legs. The foil fencers equipment includes a metallic vest (lamé) which covers the valid target area so that a valid hit will register on the scoring machine. A small, spring-loaded tip is attached to the point of the foil & is connected to a wire inside the blade. The fencers wears a body wire inside his jacket which connects the foil to a spool wire, connected to the scoring machine. There are two scoring lights on the machine, one shows a green light when a fencer is hit, & the other shows a red light when the opponent is hit. A hit landing outside the valid target area (that which is not covered by the lamé jacket) is indicated by a white light. These "off target" lights do not count in the scoring, but they do stop the fencing action temporarily.

The Fencing Piste

Fencers compete on a piste, 14 metres long, 2 metres wide. After each hit is scored the fencers stand in the centre of the piste 4 metres apart behind on-guard lines. Fencing begins when the referee calls "fence" & stops when he calls "halt".

Etiquette

Fences salute their opponent, the referee, & the audience at the beginning & end of each fight; they shake their opponent's hand at the end of the fight.

Protective Equipment One of the reasons fencing has such a low injury rate is the gear fencers wear. Fencers wear breeches to at least the knee, with long socks covering the rest of the leg. An underarm protector is covered by a long-sleeved jacket; women also wear breastplates. The sword hand is gloved, with a long cuff to prevent blades from catching in the sleeve. Foil & sabre fencers also wear lamés, made of conductive material, covering the valid target area. A wire mesh mask protects the head; since the head is valid target in sabre, sabre masks are also made of conductive material.



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The Referee

Each fight has its own referee who starts & stops the action, interprets the exchanges, & maintains order. The fencers may consult with the referee & ask for an explanation of a decision, but may not question a referee's interpretation of an action.

Occasionally, the referee must exercise his or her authority to award penalties against a fencer (or coach) for violating the rules. A yellow card is issued as a warning for a first-time or minor offence, such as arriving on the piste with malfunctioning equipment.

A red card, which automatically awards a hit to the opponent, is awarded for a repeat of a yellow card offence or for a more serious offence, including refusing to salute. A black card, for the most serious transgressions, is used only rarely & means the offender is disqualified.

Scoring

Confused by the flashing lights? A red or green light means that a hit has landed on a valid target area. The light on the side of the fencers who scored the hit lights up & the referee then awards the hit. When both red & green lights flash, the referee decides who had the right of way in foil & sabre & awards the hit accordingly. (In épée, both fencers can score at the same time.) A white light can be an off-target hit in foil (no hit awarded) or a fault in foil or sabre.

Right-of-Way

One of the most difficult concepts to visualise in foil & 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 offence & defence, made by the referee. The difference is important only when both the red & green lights go on at the same time in foil & sabre. When this happens, the winner of the hit is the fencer who the referee determines was on the offence at the time the lights went on. Épée does not use the right-of-way in keeping with its duelling origin - the fencer who hits first scores; if both fencers hit within 1/25th of a second, both score a hit.

