

Fencing Essentials

1 **F**encing originated in the techniques of swordsmanship used in dueling. During the Renaissance, the vigorous Italian style of fencing, based on the use of the rapier,* predominated in Europe. The épée (ay-PAY), or small sword, was invented in France during the eighteenth century, giving rise to a more formal, restrained style of fencing. The rules of modern fencing are for the most part derived from the French style, and many of the sport’s technical terms are French words.

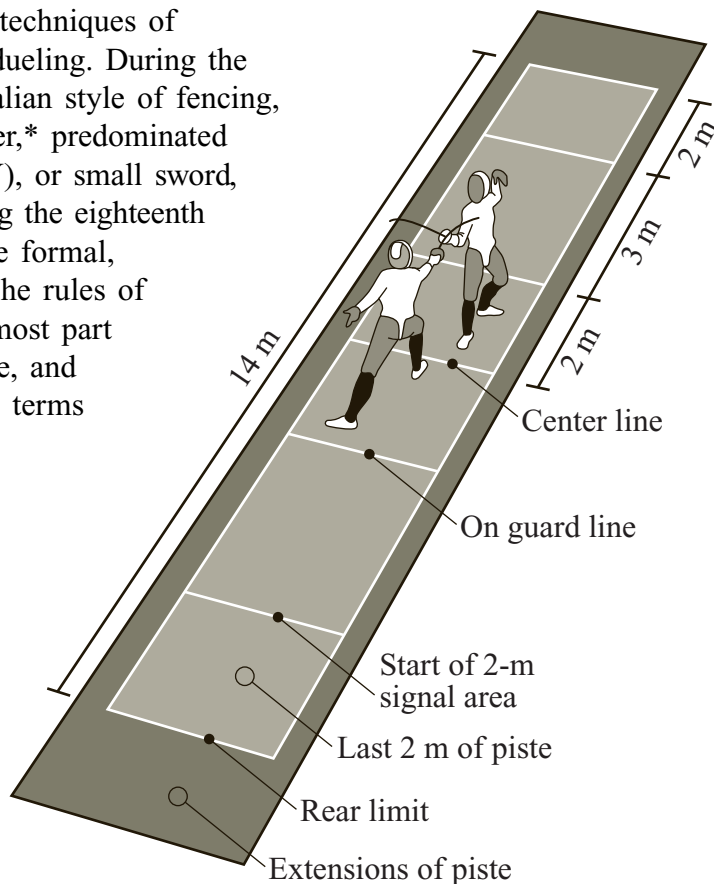
2 There are three forms of fencing, defined by the type of weapon used: foil, épée, or saber.

Officials

3 Bouts are judged by a referee who applies the right-of-way rules and awards touches.

4 The referee is assisted by two ground judges; when nonelectric weapons are used, there are four ground judges.

5 The referee has the authority to halt a bout if the play of the competitors is dangerous or contrary to the rules, or if one of the competitors is disarmed or leaves the piste.



Point to point

Fencers combat each other on a narrow strip called the “piste.”

* rapier — a long, slender sword used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

The piste (peest)

- 6 The field of play is known as the piste. It measures 14 m (46 ft) in length and 1.5 to 2 m (5 to 6½ ft) in width. It may be made of various materials, such as cork, rubber, or plastic. In competitions where electrical apparatus is used to detect hits, a metallic mesh covers the piste.

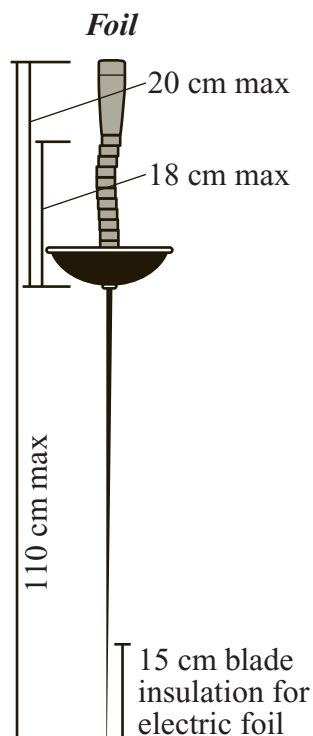
Players

Forms of Competition

- 7 Two opponents are involved in a “bout.” In individual competitions, the result of a competition is the aggregate of the bouts.
- 8 In team competitions, the aggregate of the bouts fought between the fencers of two different teams is called a “match.” The winner of a team competition is decided on an aggregate of the matches.
- 9 Competitions are distinguished by weapons; by the competitors’ sex, age, or occupation (e.g., military, students); and by whether they are for individuals or for teams.
- 10 Competitions are said to be by “direct elimination” when the competitors are eliminated as soon as they have received their first defeat, or after their second, if the rules specify a system “with repêchage (reh-peh-SHAHJ).” A pool is the meeting of several competitors (or of all the competitors), each of whom fences all the others in order to establish a rank.

Equipment

- 11 The three types of weapons are called the foil, épée, and saber. The blades of all three are made of tempered steel, the blunted end forming the “button.” A variety of handles exist, including the Italian grip, which has a crossbar and is used with a wrist strap, and the French grip, which is slightly curved and has a pommel (or knob) at the end.
- 12 As it is light and flexible, the foil is used by most beginners. The épée is similar to the foil, but it has a larger hand guard and is heavier and more rigid. The design of the saber is based on that of the cavalryman’s weapon, and it requires a cut-and-thrust technique based on military swordplay.
- 13 A fencer wears a protective face mask made of fine wire mesh, and a jacket, over which the plastron, a metallic chest protector, is worn. Women wear breast protectors made of metal or other rigid material. The sword hand is protected by a glove. The jacket, which must be white or a pale color, overlaps breeches or trousers. These are buttoned or fastened below the knee or at the ankle, respectively.



14 Electrical weapons are used in formal competitions to increase the accuracy of scoring. The weapons are wired. When the weapon blade's button makes contact with the opponent's metallic plastron, electricity is conducted to a body wire. The hit registers on an electrical scoring apparatus: when a touch is scored, a light flashes on a screen on the sidelines. The referee awards touches accordingly.

15 Because fencing is a potentially hazardous sport, participants have to accept responsibility for safety, both for themselves and for others. Weapons and protective clothing must meet prescribed safety standards. Before competitions, clothing and weapons are checked. As well as checking for safety, officers ensure that electrical components such as the body wire will register touches accurately.

How to play

16 Fencing tactics depend on fundamental stances and movements; defensive and attacking motions stem from the basic "on-guard" position, in which the knees are flexed, the rear arm crooked upwards, and the sword arm partly extended towards the opponent. The "lunge," the basic attacking action, is executed by stabbing at the target with the sword arm and thrusting forward on the front leg.

17 A defensive movement of the blade intended to block an attack is called a "parry." There are eight main parries in foil and épée fencing, each one designed to protect a different part of the body against attack. In saber fencing, there are just five parries. (The parries bear the names of the Old French words meaning "first" to "eighth"—*prime, seconde, tierce, quarte, quinte, sixte, septime, and octave*). The return thrust made immediately after a parry is known as a "riposte." The "counter-riposte" is an offensive action made by the fencer who has parried the riposte.

How to win

18 Points are scored by touching valid parts of the opponent's body with the blade. In foil fencing, only the touches to the torso count, whereas in épée fencing the entire body is valid. In saber fencing, only touches above the hips count—but the edge of the sword may be used as well.

19 When nonelectric weapons are used, thrusts with the point must reach their target clearly and distinctly in order to be counted.

. . .

Key rules

- 20 • The competitors fence in their own ways and at their own risk with the one condition that they must observe the fundamental rules of fencing.
- 21 • All bouts or matches must preserve the character of a courteous and frank encounter. All irregular actions (such as collisions, disorderly fencing, falls, irregular movements on the piste, hits achieved with undue violence, hits made while falling) are strictly forbidden.

- 22 • Before the beginning of the bout the two fencers perform a fencing salute to their opponent, to the spectators, and to the referee. The fencing salute is performed by lifting the weapon guard up to the chin. (If one of the two fencers does not comply with this rule, he receives a red card.) When the final hit has been scored, the bout is not ended until the two fencers have saluted each other, the audience, and the referee.
- 23 • At foil it is forbidden, during the course of fencing, to advance the shoulder of the non-sword arm in front of the shoulder of the sword arm.
- 24 • The fencer, whether on or off the piste, must keep his mask on until the referee calls halt.
- 25 • Bodily contact between the competitors (known as *corps à corps*) is forbidden, even without brutality or violence.
- 26 • It is forbidden to turn one's back to one's opponent during the bout.