

Fencing 101: Basics Of Competition

The Objective of Fencing

The goal of a fencing bout (that's what an individual “game” is called) is to score 15 points (in direct elimination play) or five points (in preliminary pool play) before your opponent can do the same or time expires. Each time a fencer scores a touch, they receive a point.

Points are received by making a touch in the opponent's target area. Direct elimination matches in epee and foil consist of three three-minute periods with a one-minute break between each. In saber, the first period lasts for eight touches, and the second period ends when the first fencer scores 15 points.

Following the Action

The fencer being attacked defends by use of a "parry" — a motion used to deflect the opponent's blade, after which the defender can make a "riposte," or 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, they try to stay 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 — in foil and saber — determines who was the attacker, whether their opponent successfully defended themselves, and which fencer should be awarded a touch, if any.

The referee always clearly raises their hand 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 every rule.

Right-Of-Way

One of the trickier rules to learn in fencing is "right-of-way." But, like the other rules of fencing, you'll start to understand it more as you practice with your coach and teammates.

Right-of-way is a rule in fencing designed to determine who gets the point when both fencers hit at the same time. Important note: this rule is applied only in foil and saber fencing, not in epee. So what happens when both the red and green lights on the scoring box light up simultaneously? The referee steps in to decide who had the right-of-way, essentially determining who "owns" the attack.

Why Do We Need It?

The right-of-way rule exists to eliminate confusion when two fencers attack each other at the same time. Without this rule, bouts could turn into chaotic free-for-alls, lacking the finesse and skill that make fencing such an art form.

The Basics

In its simplest form, the right-of-way rule states that the fencer who initiates the attack first gets priority and will win the point if they successfully hit

the valid target area. Sounds simple, right? But, here's where things get interesting.

Defense and Taking Over Right-of-Way

If you're on the receiving end of an attack, you have options! You can either defend yourself with a "parry," which is a defensive move that blocks your opponent's weapon, or make your opponent miss their attack. Successfully doing so allows you to "take over" the right-of-way and make your own attack to score a point.

Hesitation Is Your Enemy

In fencing, hesitation could cost you. If a fencer hesitates too long while advancing, they give up the right-of-way to their opponent. Referees are particularly strict about this in saber bouts, where you might see a fencer execute a "stop cut" against an opponent who hesitates, thereby winning both the right-of-way and the point.

Exception in Epee

Epee fencing doesn't use the right-of-way rule. Rooted in its dueling origin, epee matches are straightforward when it comes to scoring: the fencer who hits first gets the point. If both fencers hit within 1/25th of a second of each other, both earn a point.