

EXPLORE: THE RULES

In a nutshell – it's complicated! Fencers can (and do) fence for years without knowing all the rules and the rules change, so you have to make an effort to learn and keep up to date. So if you've arrived at this page we are pretty impressed with your dedication already!

There are some rules that are common to all weapons, and some that are weapon specific. If you are reading this, chances are that you know the basic difference between the three weapons (foil, epee and sabre) and hopefully you have started fencing at least one of these.

Stuff that's common to all three weapons:

So, there are rules around the size of the piste, the position of the lines, penalties when you do something wrong the structure of a competition (poules, direct eliminations) and so on.

Then there is stuff that is weapon specific – rules about the different equipment, target area, interpretation of moves. Epee is often seen as the easiest weapon to understand what is happening – you have to hit your opponent before they hit you to score, and if you both hit each other at the same time it's a point each. Except if you break a rule and do something that makes the hit invalid – eg you parry (fencing word for block) the blade with your back arm, you are off the piste when you scored the hit (note that your opponent can still score a valid hit on you if they are still one foot on the piste), you turned your back, you physically body checked your opponent (a special word for this in fencing – corps a corps), and more.

As foil and sabre are 'right of way' weapons this means that the person who attacks first has right of way and the opponent must make them miss (block/parry, step out the way so they 'fall short') before they gain right of way and can try to score a hit. This means that even when you see two coloured lights come up on the box, only one fencer will score a point. Sometimes fencers will go precisely together and if both coloured lights come up, no points will be awarded.

When you are just starting out watching fencing it can be a bit difficult to work out who started the attack first. Even when you are fencing in a match you can also be convinced that you started first, not everyone watching would agree! This is why in competition it's the referee's job to interpret the rules about what is an attack (it's not just who moves first!).

Referees are super important people in fencing, they will have studied, trained (often for years) and achieved qualifications so they are best placed to decide whether hits can be awarded. They are also human as well so mistakes can happen especially when top class athletes are moving incredibly quickly! This is partly why in top competitions we now have video replay.

In fencing we have penalty cards which are given yellow – minor warning, first occasion. Two yellows = a red! red – major warning, your opponent will be given a point and any hit you scored won't count ('annulled') black card – it's game over, you really don't want this! You will be out of the competition, any result or ranking points you gained will be removed and in some cases you will face an automatic ban.

Whilst black cards aren't that common there are a few things that you might not realise can get you a black card.

1. Refusing to salute your opponent at the end of a fight. In a competition, at the end of a fight you should return to your

starting line (the 'on guard' line) and salute your opponent. Before you get a black card the referee will normally remind you to do this but if you don't do as you are asked...

2. Throwing your kit in an emotional state. We've all been there, it's not much fun losing. But even if you are lucky enough to be able to afford to replace your damaged kit (that's got to be a reason not to throw kit right?), it's super dangerous to throw kit around (or 'accidentally let it fall out your hand at speed/ <insert all the other excuses here>')

3. Arguing with and/or abusing officials. And this one applies to coaches and spectators (so yes, your parents can get black carded too!). If you are lucky the official/referee will probably give you a warning if you are starting to cross a line, but our advice is don't go there!!

Importantly though it's not really ever OK to start yelling at/ arguing with the referee in fencing. You can politely ask for clarification of a decision and if you think they have misapplied a rule you can appeal to DT. However, do remember appeals to DT should be on fact, not opinion and you are unlikely to win an appeal (there are some rules around using video refereeing but if you are reading this you will probably be a few years away from needing to know how this works!)

The rules of fencing are set by the World Governing Body of Fencing (**the FIE**) and almost every year the rule books will be updated with minor changes. There are a set of books which make up the rules:

Organisational – the rules around organising and running an FIE competition

Material – the rules around the equipment

Publicity Code- the rules around sponsorship logos, national patches etc

Technical – the rules around the technical aspects of fencing (this one is definitely the one that you would want to take a look at first!)

British Fencing adopt pretty much all of the FIE technical rules

– this is so that when our fencers travel abroad and fence internationally they are competing in the same sport!

Where we differ:

1. Equipment – as FIE level competition is the highest international competition they require the highest standard of protective equipment (this can be considerably more expensive) and equipment that might be particularly adapted to prevent cheating. There are also rules about names, countries and patches that you need on your equipment, which isn't required for domestic level competition.
2. Competition format – the FIE competition format is in part designed to rapidly reduce a large pool of fencers down to a winner, it isn't designed to help fencers develop and improve. So in the UK we allow competition organisers to offer a variety of formats to suit the needs of their fencers. There are some format limitations for ranking competitions (these are competitions where you can earn points for National Rankings).

If this is all sounding a bit complicated don't worry. You will be taught the rules by your fencing coach and there are some great videos on YouTube where you can see examples of rules being correctly applied. If you aren't learning to fence yourself (maybe one of your family members has just started) then the best advice when watching is to sit back, leave the decisions to the referees/coaches and just try to enjoy it for what it is – people having fun with swords!