



## **A Beginner's Guide to Their First Tournament**

### **Suggested Timeline & Helpful Hints**

#### **Introduction**

After your first few fencing classes, you will want to compete in a fencing tournament. There are a wide variety of tournaments in the local fencing area (the "Division"). They vary in size, strength and restrictions on who can enter. Some local tournaments are restricted by classification. Some are restricted by gender or age group.

Your first tournament should be age or classification restricted. Many areas have "novice" or beginner tournaments for those fencers who have not been fencing very long, or have yet to earn their first classification. Tournaments require an entry fee somewhere between \$10-30 depending on the club and region.

In all cases, your coach is the best reference to determine when you are ready to compete. Some people are mentally ready for competition much sooner than others, so if this guide is for your child, make sure that it's also something they want to do.

What follows is a brief guide to a first tournament as well as a timeline for things you should have for tournament preparation. When in doubt, ask your coach and keep notes of what works for you.

#### **Things to do well in advance of the tournament date:**

##### **USFA Membership**

If you haven't already, sign up for a membership with the United States Fencing Association (USFA). This allows you to compete in USFA sanctioned events as well as some other benefits like a subscription to American Fencing, the official magazine of the USFA.

Note: If you're reading this guide online, the registration form can be downloaded [here](#).



## **Required Equipment**

You don't want to wait until the last minute to get your gear for your competition. If you need to buy parts of your uniform or weapons, you should get them early enough to possibly make any exchanges or returns.

Fencers must have the following gear to compete:

Mask (an electric mask is necessary for sabre)

Fencing Jacket

Fencing Pants (also called knickers; baseball pants and the like are NOT legal)

Underarm protector

Chest Guard (required for women)

Glove (an electric glove or regular glove and an additional electric cuff is necessary for sabre)

Socks (Soccer socks are usually the correct length)

2x Weapons

2x Bodycords (2x mask cords are necessary for sabre)

For foil and sabre, the respective lame (electric scoring jacket) is necessary.

You can find this gear in part or in whole online at <http://shop.fencing.net>

## **Register for your event**

Be aware of registration deadlines for your tournament. Some tournaments may require you to preregister for the event. For North American Cups, Junior Olympics, and Summer Nationals, the deadline for registration is more than a month before the tournament. Most local USFA sanctioned events are having their registration managed by an online system called AskFRED. Sign up for events in your section at <http://www.askfred.net/>.

## **The week before**

### **Sleep**

Most people will suggest that you get a good night's rest the evening before your competitions. This is often not within your control, however. Between delayed travel plans and nervous jitters keeping you up the night before, the smarter route would be to stay well rested for the week before you fence.



## **Practice**

Take the week to practice bouting. Don't worry about trying to master any new techniques (you won't in a week). Focus on correctly executing what you already know how to do in bout situations.

Also, warm up for practice in the same routine every time you're about to fence. If you perform this same warm up at the event, it should help you to feel more comfortable. A significant part of sports psychology directs athletes to recreate their training environment. A consistent warm up goes a long way towards that goal.

Practice conservatively! Hurting yourself trying to win bouts in practice the week before your event isn't worth it. *Practice* at practice; fence at the tournament.

While fencing electrically, make sure you also practice hooking up to the strip on your own. This is an invaluable skill for any fencer who plans on competing regularly.

## **The night before**

### **Eat**

Carb-loading the night before an event is a fairly common practice. You want to make sure your body will have the energy it needs to perform all the athletic activities the next day. Try to avoid foods that you know you personally don't handle well, or have a better than average chance of causing food poisoning. Pasta dinner > Sketchy sea-food

### **Drink**

Water. Plenty of water. Pre-hydrating will help you make it through the following day. Avoid diuretics such as coffee and sodas.

### **Test / Prep Your Gear**

Take a few minutes to check all of the gear you need for competition. For foil, this means testing weight (if you have a foil weight and test box) and checking the tape on the ends of the foils. For epee, this means testing weight and shims and adjusting the tip so that it will pass the on strip tests. For all three weapons, test the body cords to make sure that they work.

(If you don't have testing equipment at home, leave plenty of time on your last day of practice before the tournament to do the testing at the club.)



## **Pack**

Go over your bag to ensure you'll have everything you need to compete the next day. This includes your gear, but also things that you personally will need such as pain medication, braces, snacks, relaxing music, favorite stuffed animal, etc. You don't want to be rattled the morning of your competition because you can't find those lucky socks your friend gave you.

## **Rest**

Even if you can't sleep, lying in bed staring at the ceiling is better than staying up watching television. Get as much sleep as you can, and be sure to set an alarm with plenty of time to get up, get ready, and get to the event on time to check-in. Don't cut it close! If you miss check-in, you won't be fencing that day so take traffic and the like into account when planning what time to wake up.

## **The morning of**

### **Eat & drink**

This is something that's unique to individuals. If you don't ever eat breakfast, now is probably not the time to snag the Grand Slam breakfast combo at Denny's. Most people prefer to eat light, but not eating anything at all is generally ill-advised. If nerves leave you unable to eat solid food, you might consider a bottle of water with a packet of sugar and lemon squeezed in. This will at least provide you with some additional hydration and nutrients and keep your blood-sugar up through the early parts of the day.

### **Check in**

Don't be late! Checking in with the registration table should be the first thing you do in almost every tournament situation. Some tournaments will also require that you check your mask and bodycords with the armory. Foil will also require you check your lame. Sabre will require you to check your mask cords and electric glove in addition to all the equipment mentioned above.



## **Warm up**

Before the tournament starts, you want to warm up. This would be the time you follow the warm up routine that you've been following every day at practice leading up to the event. After warming up and stretching, some fencers prefer to bout a few other fencers to ease into the competition.

The best way to prepare for the tournament is to bout with someone you don't know or have rarely, if ever, fenced before. Most experienced fencers have the most trouble with their first bout in the tournament. Fencing strangers during your warm up time eliminates the awkwardness of having to fence someone new once the event actually begins.

Editor's Note: Keep records of the warm up routines that work best for you. Some people fence best after fencing a hard warm up bout, while others do best simply working on executing some simple actions correctly to set their hand. Experiment over several tournaments to find the best solution for you.

## **During pools**

### **Getting started**

An announcement should be made informing participants that pools have been posted. This is the beginning of the first round in a standard competition. Fencers are spread out into fairly even groups, each group being assigned its own strip. Check the sheet to see which strip your group is assigned to and hurry to that location to meet the referee. The referee officiating your pool will be checking to see that your gear has passed inspection, and that you are at the strip and ready to fence.

### **Know how to hook up to the strip**

Newer fencers sometime have trouble with this step. Every fencer should have the ability to hook up to the strip by themselves, including children. Fencing is an individual sport, and winning and losing falls solely onto the shoulders of the competitor. Your coach may be around to offer quick tips, and your family and friends may be there to cheer and support you, but from the moment you begin hooking up on the strip, you're on your own to decide the outcome of the bout.

Take advantage of this time hooking yourself up to the strip to focus on this mindset. When you're done hooking yourself up, you should know that you are ready to begin the bout.



## **Know when you're fencing**

Every fencer in the pool will fence every other fencer in the pool to 5 touches or to 3 minutes of fencing time. The referee will be calling fencers to the strip either by name or by an assigned number. It is better for everyone involved if you know when you're going to be called to the strip before the referee has to come looking for you. Be aware of the order of bouts and be ready to hook up to the strip when the bout before yours is finished.

## **When you're not fencing**

In addition to staying aware of when you should be fencing, there are a couple of other things to do when it is not your turn to fence in the pool.

Scout the other fencers in the pool. Take notice of important elements of their fencing. Don't just watch it, study it. Some common things to look for include an opponent's favorite attack, their favorite parry, where on the strip they score most of their touches, and how other fencers prepared the actions that worked against them.

This is all information that you would do well to record in a fencing journal. Besides this scouting information about opponents, you can document how your bout went with them and how it related back to your scouting info. You can also track elements about yourself: your bout scores, your favorite touches, what you thought worked well, and what you feel you most need to improve on for your next event. A fencing journal from your tournament experience is an invaluable tool to take back to practice.

## **After a bout**

As soon as the referee ends the bout, check your foil or epee with the weight and/or shims before unhooking from the scoring system. Just because your weapon passed inspection at the beginning of this bout doesn't mean that it will pass at your next bout. Do a quick weight and shims test so that you know that your favorite weapon is working. If it doesn't pass, unhook and figure out if you have the time to fix it before your next bout or if you need to go with your secondary weapon to start the next bout.

After you have unhooked, write down your bout notes into your fencing journal and start to mentally prepare for your next bout.



## **Between Pools & Direct Elimination Rounds (DE's)**

### **Check your bout scores**

Check the scores on your score sheet against the ones you've kept in your journal just to make sure everything has been recorded correctly. Don't stress the math too hard for the calculation of your touches scored, indicator, and the like. The committee entering the pool results are more interested in the actual bout scores than they are in the referee's math.

### **Shake the referee's hand**

This is an important habit to start building at your first event. No matter what, no matter who, shake the referee's hand and thank them for their time. Refereeing fencing is mostly a thankless job. Establishing yourself as mature and professional early can go a long way in building your reputation as a fencer.

### **Rest**

Try to conserve energy between pools and the direct elimination round. Sit down whenever possible. Snack if you need it, especially if it has been a long time since you ate and as always, try to stay hydrated.

Now would be a good time to go to the restroom.

Besides this, wait for the other fencers to finish their pool round, relax, stay calm and mentally prepare yourself for the next round.

### **Check seeding & tableaux**

An announcement will be made once all the pools have finished, and the bout committee has tabulated the results. Fencers will be seeded by their pool results from the best to worst finish. This seeding will be used to place fencers into brackets. In a complete bracket of 64, for example: Fencer(1) will fence Fencer(64), while Fencer(2) will fence Fencer(63), and so on.

Check that your scores from your pool have been totaled correctly, and then make your way to the strip that the bracket says your bout will be fenced on. Report to the referee there just like you did for pools.



## **During DE's**

Fencing direct elimination bouts (DE's) should be done somewhat differently than your pool bouts. The first difference is that DE's are fenced to 15 touches instead of 5. There are also 3 periods to each bout. In sabre, the first period ends when one fencer scores 8 touches. In foil and epee, a period ends when 3 minutes of fencing time has elapsed. Between periods, 1 minute rest is given to the fencers. During this time, a fencer must stay on the strip, but a coach may come and talk to them and bring them water if they need it.

Because of the difference in format, the strategy and progression of the bout also differs. Five touch bouts can often be won with 1 or 2 tricks, while a 15 touch bout really tests the consistent skill of the competitors.

To this end, the best advice for your first DE is this: if it's working, keep doing it; if it's not working, do something else. Try to take your time between actions, make sure you have a plan for each touch, and focus on executing that touch and nothing else. It's extremely hard to focus on fencing if you're too busy thinking about winning and losing, so only worry yourself with the touch you're currently fencing for.

## **After your DE bout**

Winning a DE bout is often one of the first goals of beginning competitive fencers. Don't be discouraged if you did not win yours in your first tournament. It's far from impossible though, so, if you did manage to accomplish this, congratulations!

Either way, sign your score sheet after making sure it correctly indicates the score of the bout and which fencer won. Be sure to shake the referee's hand and thank them, as before in pools. Be sure to record the results of your bout in your fencing journal, along with any thoughts about the bout.

If you won your bout, take the score sheet to the bout committee table. They might hand you a new slip to return to the referee. You will then fence another opponent. This process continues until only one fencer remains. Once you have lost a DE bout, your first tournament might be complete, but your experience isn't over yet.

Too many fencers make the mistake of packing up and going home as soon as they are eliminated. You're missing out on watching all the fencers that are still competing and winning. It costs only your time to watch the rest of the tournament and learn what the winners are doing.





## **After the competition is complete**

Be sure to stretch! You want to be able to return to practice as quickly as possible without being too sore from the competition.

Check your fencing bag again to make sure you've gathered all your fencing belongings.

If possible, thank the tournament organizer for hosting the event.

## **Conclusion**

It's important to keep the fun of fencing in mind during the competitive season. With so many clubs running tournaments, it's easy to load up on tournaments and that can lead to over training and frustration when you hit "the wall". It's perfectly normal to take a week or two off here or there, especially after a big competition or series of tournaments.

The competitive season for US Fencing runs from September through July. Each local fencing organization (called a "division") runs a series of tournaments of various skill levels. These culminate into two qualifying events for the Junior Olympics (held in February) and the Summer National Championships (held at the beginning of July).

Most fencers focus on competing at the division and region levels before spending the extra time and money to go to the larger national competitions. In the summer you'll also find a host of fencing camps where your kids can meet new friends and learn from coaches in other parts of the country.

Have fun and good luck fencing!



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