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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Parent's Guide to Choosing a Fencing Club



*What to look for, what to ask, what to avoid, and how to find the right training environment
for your fencer's development and long-term success.*

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A Note from Coach Derek

Choosing a fencing club is one of the most consequential decisions a fencing family makes. The right club accelerates development, builds a love for the sport, and creates a training environment where your fencer thrives. The wrong club can stall progress, create bad habits that take years to fix, and – worst of all – kill the fencer's enthusiasm for a sport they might have loved for a lifetime.

This guide is not about finding the "best" club. There is no single best club. It's about finding the right fit for your fencer – the club whose coaching philosophy, competitive track record, training structure, and culture match what your fencer needs at this point in their development.

Whether you're choosing your first club, considering switching clubs, or evaluating whether your current club is still the right fit, this guide gives you the framework to make an informed decision.

– Coach Derek

What Makes a Good Fencing Club

Coaching Quality

The coaches are the club. Facilities, equipment, and location all matter, but coaching quality determines whether your fencer improves. A great coach in a modest facility will develop your fencer faster than a mediocre coach in a beautiful one.

What to look for: Coaches with competitive fencing experience themselves (ideally at the national or international level). Coaches who hold certifications from USA Fencing or recognized international coaching programs. Coaches who can explain their coaching philosophy clearly – not just "we teach fencing" but a specific approach to how they develop fencers. Coaches who actively coach at tournaments, not just at the club. Coaches who continue their own education through clinics, certifications, and coaching conferences.

What to ask: "What is your coaching background and competitive experience?" "What certifications do you hold?" "What is your coaching philosophy for developing young fencers?" "How do you structure skill progression from beginner to competitive?" "Do you attend tournaments with your students?"

Training Structure

A well-run club has structured classes organized by skill level and age, with clear progression pathways. Beginners should not be mixed in with advanced competitive fencers during regular training. Group classes should have a reasonable student-to-coach ratio (ideally no more than 8–10 students per coach for weapon work, though larger groups for footwork and conditioning are fine).

What to look for: Separate beginner, intermediate, and advanced classes. A clear system for moving fencers from one level to the next. Regular group classes supplemented by the availability of private lessons. A practice schedule that includes structured drills, footwork training, and bouting time – not just free fencing for the entire class. A written curriculum or training plan, even if informal.

What to ask: "What does a typical beginner class look like?" "How do you decide when a fencer is ready to move to the next level?" "What is the ratio of structured training to free fencing in your classes?" "Are private lessons available, and how are they structured?" "How many students per coach in a group class?"

Competitive Track Record

A club's competitive results tell you whether their training translates to tournament success. This doesn't mean every club needs to produce national champions — but a club that regularly sends fencers to competitions and whose students improve their results over time is doing something right.

What to look for: Students who compete regularly at local and regional events. Some students who compete at national events (NACs, JOs, Summer Nationals). Results that show improvement over time — fencers who started at the club and progressed through the competitive ranks. A culture that values competition as part of development, not as the only measure of success.

What to ask: "How many of your students compete in tournaments?" "At what levels do your students typically compete?" "Can you share examples of student development paths — where they started and where they are now?" "How do you prepare students for their first tournament?"

Club Culture and Environment

Culture is harder to measure than coaching credentials, but it's just as important. A positive club culture values effort, sportsmanship, and growth. A toxic club culture values winning at all costs, creates cliques, tolerates bullying, or pressures young fencers beyond what's appropriate.

What to look for: Fencers who are respectful to each other, to coaches, and to opponents. Coaches who are encouraging without being soft — they push fencers while maintaining a supportive environment. Parents who are positive and involved without being overbearing. A club that celebrates effort and improvement, not just results. Older fencers who help younger ones. A welcoming atmosphere for new families.

What to ask: "Can we observe a class before signing up?" "How do you handle conflicts between students?" "What is your policy on sportsmanship?" "Do your older students mentor newer fencers?"

COACH'S TIP: Observe a class before committing. Watch how the coach interacts with students who are struggling, not just the ones who are succeeding. A coach who is patient and constructive with a struggling student is a coach who will develop your fencer well. A coach who ignores the struggling student to focus on the star is telling you who they prioritize.



Practical Considerations

Location and Schedule

The best club in the world doesn't help your fencer if it's 90 minutes away and practice is at 4 PM on a school day. Be realistic about logistics. Fencing development requires consistent attendance — 2–3 practices per week is the minimum for competitive development. If the commute makes that unsustainable, a closer club with solid coaching is a better choice than a distant club with elite coaching that your fencer can only attend once a week.

Consider: Drive time from home and school. Practice schedule relative to your fencer's school and homework load. Whether practice times allow for a reasonable dinner and bedtime. Whether multiple practices per week are logistically feasible long-term. Whether the club has weekend options or open fencing times for extra training.

Cost

Fencing is not an inexpensive sport. Club dues, equipment, private lessons, tournament fees, and travel add up. Be clear about the full cost before committing.

What to ask: "What are monthly dues, and what do they include?" "Are there registration or annual fees?" "What is the cost of private lessons?" "What equipment is provided for beginners, and when will we need to purchase our own?" "Do you offer any financial aid, scholarships, or sibling discounts?" "What are the typical tournament costs (entry fees, travel) for a competitive fencer at your club?"

A rough guide for budgeting: monthly club dues typically range from \$100 to \$300 depending on the region and the club's level. Beginner equipment sets run \$150–\$400. Competitive-level equipment sets run \$500–\$1,500. Private lessons typically range from \$50–\$180 per session. Tournament entry fees range from \$20–\$50 for local events to \$100+ for national events, plus travel.

Equipment Policy

Good clubs lend equipment to beginners during the introductory period so families don't have to invest before they know the fencer will stick with the sport. This is a sign that the club is focused on growing the sport, not on extracting money from new families.

What to ask: "Do you provide loaner equipment for beginners?" "How long can beginners use loaner gear?" "Do you have a pro shop or a relationship with equipment vendors?" "Do you sell used equipment from other families?" "When should we plan to buy our own equipment?"

Weapon Offerings

Some clubs specialize in one weapon (foil, épée, or saber). Others offer all three. If your fencer hasn't chosen a weapon yet, a club that offers all three gives them the chance to try each before committing. If your fencer already has a weapon preference, look for a club with strong coaching in that specific weapon.

What to ask: "Which weapons do you offer?" "Do all weapons have dedicated, experienced coaches?" "If my fencer wants to try a different weapon later, can they switch?" "Which weapon is your club's strongest?"



Red Flags

Not every club is a good fit, and some clubs have problems that go beyond fit. Watch for these warning signs.

Coaching Red Flags

The coach yells at students, uses shame or humiliation as motivation, or creates a fear-based training environment. The coach plays favorites – some students get attention and encouragement while others are ignored. The coach cannot explain their teaching approach or gets defensive when asked about their qualifications. The coach discourages students from taking private lessons with anyone else or from attending camps or clinics outside the club. The coach has no competitive fencing background and no coaching certifications.

Business Red Flags

The club requires long-term contracts with no trial period. There is no option to observe a class before enrolling. The club pressures you to buy expensive equipment immediately (before the fencer has committed to the sport). Pricing is not transparent – you can't get a clear answer on costs. The club charges penalties for attending other clubs' events or switching clubs.

Culture Red Flags

Bullying or aggressive behavior between students that coaches don't address. A culture where winning is the only thing celebrated and losing is treated as failure. Parents who are aggressively coaching from the sidelines while the actual coach says nothing. Cliques among families that make new members feel excluded. A club that discourages students from fencing at other clubs or attending open tournaments.

Safety Red Flags

Equipment is visibly damaged or poorly maintained. Masks have dented meshes or torn bibs. The facility has unsafe conditions (exposed wires, slippery floors, inadequate space between strips). The club does not require proper safety gear during bouts. Coaches do not have current SafeSport certification. There is no visible first aid kit or emergency plan.

KEY CONCEPT: Trust your instincts. If something feels off during your visit – the coach seems dismissive, the environment feels tense, the other parents seem unhappy – listen to that feeling. You are choosing a community that your family will be part of for years. The fit matters.



Evaluating Your Current Club

If your fencer is already at a club, periodically evaluate whether it's still the right fit. What worked for a beginner may not work for an intermediate or advanced fencer. Growth sometimes requires change.

Signs It's Time to Consider Switching

Your fencer has stopped improving despite consistent attendance. The coaching does not match your fencer's current developmental needs (e.g., the club is great for beginners but doesn't have advanced coaching). Your fencer is unhappy, anxious, or dreading practice regularly. The club's competitive environment has become toxic. Your fencer has outgrown the club's competitive program and needs stronger training partners. The coaching approach that worked at the beginner level is not adapting as your fencer advances.

Signs Your Club Is Still the Right Fit

Your fencer is still improving, even if slowly. The coach is actively adjusting their approach as your fencer develops. Your fencer enjoys practice more often than they dread it. The club provides appropriate competitive opportunities. You feel welcome and respected as a fencing family. The coaches are honest with you about your fencer's progress, including areas that need work.

How to Handle a Club Switch

If you decide to switch, handle it professionally. Give your current club reasonable notice. Thank the coaches for their contribution to your fencer's development. Don't badmouth the old club to the new one. Fencing communities are small, and burning bridges serves no one. Your fencer will likely fence against students from their old club — make sure the transition is clean enough that those interactions remain respectful and sportsmanlike.



The Club Visit Checklist

When you visit a prospective club, bring this checklist and take notes.

- ❑ Observe at least one full class at the level your fencer would join
- ❑ Watch how the coach interacts with students who are struggling
- ❑ Note the student-to-coach ratio during group classes
- ❑ Ask about the coach's background, certifications, and philosophy
- ❑ Ask about class structure, progression, and schedule
- ❑ Ask about costs: dues, lessons, equipment, tournaments
- ❑ Ask about loaner equipment for beginners
- ❑ Ask about the club's competitive track record
- ❑ Ask about weapon offerings and which weapons are strongest
- ❑ Observe the overall atmosphere: is it positive, welcoming, energetic?
- ❑ Talk to 1–2 current families if possible — ask about their experience
- ❑ Check that safety equipment and the facility are in good condition
- ❑ Confirm coaches have current SafeSport certification
- ❑ Ask about trial classes or introductory programs before committing
- ❑ Trust your gut: does this feel like the right environment for your fencer?



Final Coach's Note

The right club doesn't just teach your fencer how to fence. It teaches them discipline, resilience, sportsmanship, and the love of a craft. It gives them a community of coaches and peers who push them to be better. It becomes a second home.

Take your time with this decision. Visit multiple clubs if possible. Ask hard questions. Observe carefully. And prioritize coaching quality and culture above everything else. Facilities can be upgraded. Equipment can be replaced. A great coach and a positive training environment are irreplaceable.

Your fencer deserves a club that invests in them as a person, not just as a competitor. Find that club.

— Coach Derek