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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Fencing Glossary

For Parents & New Fencers



A complete A-Z reference for understanding the language, rhythm, and strategy of fencing.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Welcome. If you're new to fencing, the first time you walk into a tournament can feel like landing in a foreign country. The referees speak French. The parents shout phrases you don't recognize. Lights flash. Machines beep. Someone yells "halt!" and you have no idea what just happened.

I built this glossary so you don't have to figure it all out on the sidelines. After 20 years of coaching and competing at the highest levels of the sport, I've learned that the parents who feel most confident at tournaments are the ones who speak the language. Once you understand the terms, you understand the strategy. Once you understand the strategy, you can actually enjoy watching your fencer compete.

Read it cover to cover, or keep it on your phone and look up terms as you hear them. You don't need to memorize all of this – but the more you absorb, the more fencing will start to make sense.

– Coach Derek

How to Use This Glossary

This guide is organized alphabetically. Each entry includes the term, a clear definition, and, where helpful, examples or context.

If you're brand new, start with the Quick Reference List at the end. Those are the 30 terms you'll hear most often. Master those first, then come back for the rest.



A

Advance

A forward footwork movement where the front foot moves first and the back foot follows. Used to close distance and pressure an opponent while maintaining balance.

Appel

A sharp stamp of the front foot used to draw a reaction from the opponent or to emphasize preparation. Can be used as a feint, rhythm break, or to provoke a parry.

Attack

An offensive action initiated by extending the weapon toward valid target while moving forward. In foil and saber, the attack establishes "right-of-way" (priority).

Example: A foil fencer extends their arm and lunges toward the opponent's chest.

Attack in Preparation

An action made against an opponent who is moving forward but has not yet established a proper attack. The referee may award priority to the fencer who attacks during the opponent's preparation.

B

Balestra

A small jumping advance, often used immediately before a lunge to disrupt the opponent's timing or close distance explosively.

Beat Attack

An attack that begins by striking or tapping the opponent's blade to move it out of the way before continuing the offensive action.

Purpose: Disrupts blade position, opens a line for attack, establishes control.

Bind

A blade-taking action where one fencer controls the opponent's blade and transports it from one line to another using leverage.

Blade Work

Any action involving interaction between the two blades — beats, parries, binds, engagements, presses, and disengages. Strong blade work is a hallmark of advanced fencers.

Body Cord

The electrical wire that connects the fencer's weapon to the scoring machine. Runs inside the fencing jacket from the weapon hand to the back, then plugs into a reel at the end of the strip.

Bout

An individual fencing match between two competitors.

Pool bouts: First to 5 touches, 3-minute time limit.

DE bouts: First to 15 touches, three 3-minute periods.

Break the Distance

Changing the distance between fencers, usually by retreating to avoid being hit or to force the opponent to reset.

C

Call

The referee's interpretation and ruling of a fencing action.

Example: "Attack from the left, touch. Point left."

Club

A fencing school or training facility where athletes practice, take private lessons, and prepare for competitions.

Compound Attack

An attack using one or more feints before the actual hit. Designed to draw a parry or reaction, then deceive around it to score.

Corps-à-Corps

Physical body contact between fencers. Incidental contact is generally allowed; dangerous or deliberate contact may be penalized.

Pronounced: "Core-ah-core"

Counterattack

An offensive action made into an opponent's attack.

In foil/saber: Usually does NOT have priority and will lose to a correctly executed attack.

In épée: Both fencers can score simultaneously, so counterattacks are far more common.

Counter-Riposte

An attack made after parrying the opponent's riposte. The fourth action in a defensive exchange: attack → parry → riposte → counter-riposte.

Cut-Over (Coupé)

An attack that passes the blade over the opponent's tip to change lines and avoid blade contact.

D

Direct Elimination (DE)

The knockout portion of a tournament. Single elimination — lose once and you're out. Typically fenced to 15 touches with three 3-minute periods.

Common rounds: Table of 64, Table of 32, Table of 16, Quarterfinals, Semifinals, Finals.

Disengage

Moving the blade around the opponent's blade to attack a new line. Often used to deceive a parry.

Distance

The space between two fencers. One of the most important tactical factors in fencing.

Long Distance: Neither fencer can hit without moving forward.

Middle Distance: One or both can attack with footwork.

Short Distance: Immediate scoring actions are possible.

Double Touch

In épée, when both fencers score within the timing window. Both receive a point. Not possible in foil or saber.

E

En Garde

The ready position from which fencing begins. The referee commands: "En garde," "Ready?" then "Fence!"

Engagement

When one fencer intentionally places their blade in contact with the opponent's blade. Used to feel pressure, set up attacks, and control the weapon.

Envelopment

A circular blade-taking action where one fencer captures the opponent's blade and moves it through a circular path to a different line.

Épée

One of the three fencing weapons. Entire body is valid target, no right-of-way, double touches count, and it's the heaviest weapon. Patient, tactical, and rewarding for fencers with strong defense.

Épéist

A fencer who specializes in épée.

F

Feint

A false attack designed to draw a parry or reaction, so the real attack can land in a different line.

Fence!

The referee's command to begin fencing. Always preceded by "En garde" and "Ready?"

Flèche

An explosive running attack with rapid acceleration and forward crossing of the feet. Common in épée and foil. Not permitted in saber.

Pronounced: "flesh"

Foil

One of the three fencing weapons. Right-of-way applies, valid target is torso only, and it's the lightest weapon. Rewards patience, point control, and tactical planning.

Foilst

A fencer who specializes in foil.

G

Glove

Protective equipment worn on the weapon hand. Required in all sanctioned competitions.

Golden Minute

A sudden-death period when a DE bout is tied at the end of regulation. The referee randomly assigns priority – if no one scores in the minute, the priority fencer wins.

Guard

The metal bell-shaped portion of the weapon that protects the hand.

H

Halt

The referee's command to stop fencing.

Reasons: Touch scored, safety concern, fencer leaves the strip, or equipment problem.

High Line

The upper target areas relative to blade position. In foil/épée: chest and shoulders. In saber: head and upper arms.

I

Indicator

A pool-round statistic: touches scored minus touches received. Used to break ties in seeding.

In-Fighting

Fencing actions performed at extremely close distance, often after attacks bring fencers together.

Invitational

A tournament organized by a club, school, or organization. Often smaller and less formal than sanctioned events.

J

Judging Distance

The distance at which a fencer can realistically score with a single attack. Elite fencers constantly evaluate this throughout a bout.

K

Knockout Round

Another term for the Direct Elimination (DE) round.

L

Lamé

The metallic conductive jacket used in foil and saber to register touches on valid target.

Foil: Covers torso only.

Saber: Covers torso, arms, and mask.

Pronounced: "lah-MAY"

Line

The path or target area of an attack: high, low, inside, or outside. A fencer can "close the line" by positioning their blade to block a particular path.

Low Line

The lower target areas relative to blade position. In épée: legs, feet, and lower torso.

Lunge

The most common attacking footwork action. Front foot extends, rear leg pushes explosively, weapon arm extends. Designed to maximize reach.

M

Mal-Parry

An unsuccessful parry that fails to properly deflect the attack. Usually results in a touch for the attacker.

Mask

Protective headgear worn during fencing. Must remain on until the referee ends the bout. Tested for puncture resistance at 350N (general) or 1600N (international).

Match

Another term for a bout.

N

NAC (North American Cup)

A major national-level tournament sanctioned by USA Fencing, held multiple times per year across the country. Points earned at NACs contribute to national rankings.

O

Off Target

In foil only. A touch landing outside valid target (arm, leg, head). Action stops but no point awarded.

On Guard

English translation of "En Garde" – the ready position.

Opposition

Attacking while closing the opponent's line with the blade, preventing a counter-hit.

P

Parry

A defensive blade action that deflects an opponent's attack.

Parry 4 (Quarte): Protects inside high line.

Parry 6 (Sixte): Protects outside high line.

Parry 7 (Septime): Protects inside low line.

Parry 8 (Octave): Protects outside low line.

Plastron

The underarm protector worn beneath the fencing jacket. Required safety equipment providing additional puncture resistance.

Point Control

The ability to direct the tip of the weapon accurately to the target. Essential in foil and épée.

Pommel

The counterweight at the back of the weapon handle. On a French grip, can be unscrewed to balance the weapon.

Pool

The preliminary round-robin group of a tournament. 5–7 fencers each fence one another in 5-touch, 3-minute bouts. Results determine seeding for DEs.

Pressure

A controlled push against the opponent's blade to test their reaction and set up the next action.

Priority (Right-of-Way)

The system in foil and saber that determines who scores when both lights appear. The fencer who initiates a properly executed attack first has priority.

Prise de Fer

French for "taking the blade." Includes binds, croisés, and envelopments. Used to control the opponent's weapon before attacking.

R

Redoublement

A renewed attack with a new blade action after the initial attack misses or is parried.

Referee

The official who runs the bout, enforces rules, awards touches, and ensures safety. In foil/saber, determines right-of-way.

Remise

An immediate replacement attack after the original misses or is parried, without withdrawing the arm.

Reprise

A renewed attack after returning to en garde. Distinct from remise (which happens without recovering).

Retreat

A backward footwork movement. Back foot moves first, front foot follows. Used to create distance.

Riposte

The offensive action immediately after a successful parry. In foil/saber, a proper riposte usually gains priority.

Right-of-Way

See "Priority." A foundational concept in foil and saber.

S

Saber

One of the three weapons. Right-of-way applies, touches score with edge or point, and it's the fastest weapon. Valid target: everything above the waist except hands.

Sabreur

A fencer who specializes in saber.

Salute

The traditional gesture of respect performed before and after a bout. Directed toward the opponent, referee, and spectators.

Seed

A competitor's ranking entering elimination rounds. Higher seeds face lower seeds.

Simple Attack

A single direct offensive action with no feint. Examples: straight thrust, disengage.

Simultaneous

In foil/saber, when neither fencer clearly establishes priority. No touch awarded; fencers reset.

Stop-Hit (Stop-Thrust)

A counterattack into the opponent's preparation or attack. Must arrive a full tempo before the attack (foil/saber) or simply first (épée).

Strip (Piste)

The fencing area. 14 meters long by 1.5–2 meters wide. Leaving the strip may result in penalties.

Pronounced: "peest"

SYC (Super Youth Circuit)

A regional-level youth tournament series sanctioned by USA Fencing. Often the first major competitive step for junior fencers.

T

Tempo

The rhythm and timing of fencing actions. Elite fencers manipulate tempo to create scoring opportunities.

Touch

A scoring hit. The objective of fencing is to land touches on valid target while avoiding being touched.

Touché

French for "touched." Traditional acknowledgment of being scored upon.

Tournament

A fencing competition consisting of pools and/or direct eliminations.

U

Unwillingness to Fence

A rule for when both competitors intentionally avoid engagement. May result in penalties or clock advancement.

V

Valid Target

The area where touches may legally score.

Foil: Torso only.

Saber: Everything above the waist except hands.

Épée: The entire body.

V/M Ratio

Victories divided by matches fenced in pools. Primary tiebreaker for seeding.

W

Weapon Check

Equipment inspection for safety and competition compliance. Required at sanctioned tournaments.

White Light

In foil only. Indicates an off-target touch. No point awarded, but action stops.

Y

Yellow Card

Official warning from the referee. No point awarded. A second yellow card becomes a red card.

Red Card

A penalty touch awarded to the opponent. Issued for repeated infractions or serious misconduct.

Black Card

Expulsion from the competition. Issued for unsportsmanlike conduct, dangerous behavior, or extreme violations.

Z

Zone

An area of tactical control or preferred distance where a fencer is most comfortable scoring.

Quick Reference

30 Terms You'll Hear at Every Tournament

Master these first – you'll be able to follow nearly every conversation at a fencing tournament.

<p>THE BASICS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Pool <input type="checkbox"/> DE (Direct Elimination) <input type="checkbox"/> Seed <input type="checkbox"/> Strip / Piste <input type="checkbox"/> Bout <input type="checkbox"/> Touch 	<p>REFEREE COMMANDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> En Garde <input type="checkbox"/> Fence! <input type="checkbox"/> Halt
<p>ACTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Attack <input type="checkbox"/> Parry <input type="checkbox"/> Riposte <input type="checkbox"/> Counterattack <input type="checkbox"/> Advance <input type="checkbox"/> Retreat <input type="checkbox"/> Lunge 	<p>SCORING & RULES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Priority / Right-of-Way <input type="checkbox"/> Simultaneous <input type="checkbox"/> Off Target <input type="checkbox"/> Distance <input type="checkbox"/> Corps-à-Corps
<p>PENALTIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Yellow Card <input type="checkbox"/> Red Card <input type="checkbox"/> Black Card 	<p>EQUIPMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Lamé <input type="checkbox"/> Body Cord <input type="checkbox"/> Plastron <input type="checkbox"/> Mask <input type="checkbox"/> Foil / Épée / Saber <input type="checkbox"/> Referee

A Closing Thought

Learning the language of fencing is the first step toward enjoying the sport. The second step is patience – even people who've been around it for decades are still learning new nuances.

What matters most is showing up, supporting your fencer, and slowly building your understanding. Every tournament you attend, you'll pick up a little more. Welcome to fencing.

– Coach Derek