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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

How to Watch Competitive Fencing



*A guide for fencers and parents on understanding what you're seeing at tournaments and on video –
so you can learn from every bout you watch, not just the ones you fence.*

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A Note from Coach Derek

Fencing is one of the fastest sports in the world. A complete exchange – from first movement to touch – can happen in less than a second. For spectators and even for fencers watching from the sideline, it can look like a blur of metal and movement where the lights go on and someone scores for reasons that aren't clear.

But fencing is not random. Every exchange has a structure, a logic, and a tactical story. Once you learn to see that structure, watching fencing becomes one of the most effective ways to improve your own game – and one of the most enjoyable ways to experience the sport.

This guide teaches you how to watch fencing with a trained eye, whether you're at a tournament, watching YouTube, or studying your own footage.

– Coach Derek

What to Watch: The Basics

The Scoring Machine

In every electric fencing bout, a scoring machine sits at the end of the strip and registers touches. In foil, a colored light means the touch landed on valid target (the torso). A white light means the touch landed off-target (arm, leg, mask). In épée, both colored lights mean both fencers hit within 40 milliseconds of each other (double touch). In saber, both lights may go on, but the referee determines priority.

Watch the lights, but don't rely on them alone. The lights tell you who hit. The referee tells you who scores. In foil and saber, both lights often go on, and the referee's right-of-way call determines which fencer gets the point.

The Referee's Signals

After each exchange, the referee uses hand signals to reconstruct the phrase and award the touch. The referee points to the fencer who attacked, shows the parry with a blade-blocking gesture, and extends their arm toward the fencer who scores. Learning these signals is like learning the language of fencing — once you understand them, every bout becomes a conversation you can follow.

The most important signal: the referee extends one arm toward the fencer who scores. If they extend both arms, it's either a double touch (épée) or a simultaneous action (foil/saber, no touch awarded). If they cross their arms or shake their head, no touch is awarded.

The Score and the Clock

Pool bouts are first to 5 touches in 3 minutes. Direct elimination bouts are first to 15 touches in three 3-minute periods with 1-minute breaks between periods. If the DE is tied after regulation, there's a priority minute. Watch the score in the context of the clock — a fencer winning 12-9 with 30 seconds left is in a very different situation than one winning 12-9 with a full period remaining.



What to Watch: Intermediate

The Distance Game

Before the blades ever make contact, watch the distance between the two fencers. Are they close (inside lunge range) or far (outside lunge range)? Who is controlling the distance – who is advancing and who is retreating? The fencer who controls the distance usually controls the bout. A fencer who keeps getting pushed to the end of the strip is losing the distance battle, regardless of the score.

The Preparation

Most touches are not scored from a standing start. They're set up by preparation – the footwork, blade movement, and tactical maneuvering that happens before the actual attack. Watch for the 2–3 advances before the lunge, the beat on the blade before the extension, or the feint that draws the opponent's parry. The preparation is where the tactical thinking happens. The final touch is just the execution.

The Rhythm

Every bout has a rhythm – a pace at which actions happen. Some bouts are fast, with both fencers attacking constantly. Others are slow, with long stretches of distance management punctuated by explosive exchanges. Watch how the rhythm changes during the bout. A fencer who can change the rhythm (speed up when the opponent is comfortable, slow down when the opponent is rushing) has a significant tactical advantage.

The Adjustment

Watch how fencers adjust during the bout. Does a fencer who gets scored on the same way twice change their approach? Does the winning fencer vary their attack or keep using the same action? The ability to adjust mid-bout is one of the clearest indicators of tactical intelligence. A fencer who adjusts after 2–3 touches is thinking. A fencer who keeps doing the same thing despite being scored on is not.

COACH'S TIP: Pick one element to focus on per bout. Don't try to watch everything at once. Watch one bout focusing only on footwork. Watch the next focusing only on blade preparation. Watch the next focusing only on who adjusts and who doesn't. Building your observation skill one layer at a time is more effective than trying to see everything simultaneously.



What to Watch: Advanced

Second Intention

At the advanced level, many touches are scored with second intention — the fencer deliberately makes an action they expect to fail in order to set up the follow-up action that actually scores. Watch for attacks that seem too shallow or too slow. If a top fencer lunges and "misses," they may not have missed at all — they may have been drawing the opponent's response. The real action is the next one.

Second intention is difficult to see in real time because it looks like a failed action followed by a recovery. In slow motion, the setup becomes clear: the first action was bait, and the scoring action was the response to the opponent's reaction to that bait.

The Tactical Wheel in Action

At high-level bouts, you can watch the tactical wheel spinning. One fencer attacks with direct actions (simple attacks). The other fencer starts parrying successfully (parry-riposte). The first fencer switches to compound attacks (feint-disengage). The second fencer starts counterattacking. The first fencer goes back to simple attacks, which now work because the opponent is counterattacking instead of parrying. Watch for these cycles — they're the strategic layer that sits on top of the individual actions.

Referee Influence

At the competitive level, referees have tendencies. Some call the attack aggressively (favoring the fencer who moves forward first). Some favor the parry-riposte. Some are generous with counterattack timing. Top fencers adapt their style to the referee. Watch for a fencer who changes their tactical approach after a few touches — they may be adjusting to the referee's interpretation, not just to the opponent.

Emotional and Physical Tells

Watch body language. A fencer who slumps after a touch against, who shakes their head, or who argues with the referee is broadcasting frustration. A fencer who walks calmly back to the line, takes a breath, and resets is composed. At the elite level, you can often predict who will win a close bout by watching who manages their emotions better in the first period.

Physical tells include: a fencer who bounces less as the bout progresses (fatiguing), a fencer whose lunge gets shorter (tired legs), or a fencer who starts rushing their attacks (anxiety about the score). These subtle changes reveal what's happening below the surface.



Watching by Weapon

Watching Foil

Focus on: the arm extension during the approach (who establishes the attack), the quality of the parry (does it actually contact the blade?), and the immediacy of the riposte. In foil, the referee's call after simultaneous lights is the key moment – listen to the reconstruction to understand why the call was made. Foil bouts at the top level are tactical chess matches disguised as fast-paced action.

Watching Épée

Focus on: distance management (who controls the space between fencers), hand attacks (touches to the wrist and forearm), and whether fencers are scoring cleanly or creating double touches. Épée bouts can have long stretches of apparent inaction – both fencers at distance, making tiny adjustments. This is not boring; this is the highest-level tactical fencing. Both fencers are searching for a millimeter of advantage.

Watching Saber

Focus on: the march (who accelerates first and who arrives at the right distance), the simultaneous attack call (did one fencer truly start first?), and the parry-riposte versus the direct attack pattern. Saber is the fastest weapon and the hardest to follow in real time. Watch the first movement of each exchange – who commits to the attack and who prepares to defend. The first half-second determines the outcome.



Where to Watch

At Tournaments

Live fencing at tournaments is the best way to develop your watching skills. You can see the full strip, hear the referee's calls, and feel the atmosphere. Watch bouts at a higher level than your fencer currently competes — if your fencer is in Y12, watch the Cadet or Junior bouts. The footwork will be faster, the tactics more sophisticated, and the lessons more transferable.

On YouTube and Streaming

FIE (International Fencing Federation) streams most major international events on YouTube. USA Fencing streams domestic events on their platforms. Search for specific weapons and events: "FIE Foil Grand Prix final" or "NCAA fencing championship saber." The advantage of video is that you can pause, rewind, and watch at half speed — tools that make it much easier to see the tactical details.

Recommended viewing: FIE Grand Prix and World Cup events for international-level fencing. NCAA championships for American collegiate fencing. Olympic fencing for the highest-stakes bouts. Watch full bouts, not just highlight clips — the tactical evolution over 15 touches is where the real learning happens.

With Your Fencer

Watch bouts together with your fencer. Pause after key touches and ask them what they saw. "What did the fencer on the right do to set up that touch?" "Why did the referee give the touch to the left?" "What would you do differently in that situation?" This turns passive viewing into active learning and builds the tactical awareness that transfers directly to your fencer's own bouts.

COACH'S TIP: Watch one full bout per week with the sound off. No commentary, no crowd noise. Just the two fencers and your observations. Write down what you see. Then watch it again with sound to see if the commentary matches your analysis. This is one of the most effective ways to develop a trained fencing eye.



Final Coach's Note

Fencing is a spectator sport hiding in plain sight. The speed makes it look inaccessible, but once you know what to look for, it becomes one of the most compelling sports to watch — a real-time chess match played at the speed of thought.

Every bout you watch is an opportunity to learn something. How did that fencer set up the winning touch? Why did the other fencer fall behind? What would you have done differently? These questions, asked consistently, build the tactical intelligence that separates good fencers from great ones.

Watch more fencing. Watch it deliberately. And bring what you see back to the strip.

— Coach Derek