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ELITE FENCING COACHING

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The Parent's Guide to Rating, Points & Seeding



How the USA Fencing ranking system works, which tournaments earn points, how seeding affects your bracket, and how to plan a competitive season strategically.

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A Note from Coach Derek

Every fencing parent eventually asks the same question: "How does the rating system work?" Usually after their fencer loses to a lower-rated opponent, or wins a tournament and their rating doesn't seem to change, or they're trying to figure out which tournaments to attend to improve their national standing.

The rating and ranking system in USA Fencing is not intuitive. It uses letter ratings (E through A), national points, regional points, and seeding algorithms that interact in ways that confuse even experienced fencing families. This guide breaks it all down in plain language.

Understanding the system won't make your fencer fence better. But it will help you make smarter decisions about which tournaments to attend, what goals are realistic, and how to plan a season that maximizes your fencer's competitive development.

— Coach Derek

The Two Systems: Ratings vs. Rankings

USA Fencing uses two separate systems to evaluate competitive performance. They measure different things, and understanding the distinction is essential.

Letter Ratings (E, D, C, B, A)

Letter ratings measure achievement at specific tournaments. They are earned by finishing in the top positions at events of a certain size and level. Once earned, a letter rating is permanent for the year it's earned and downgrades gradually over time if not renewed.

The scale runs from U (unrated) through E, D, C, B, to A (the highest). Each letter also carries a two-digit year code indicating when it was earned – for example, "C25" means a C rating earned in the 2024–25 season. Ratings from the current year are the strongest. Older ratings still count but carry less weight in seeding.

How ratings are earned: Ratings are awarded based on the size and composition of the event. A local tournament with 16 fencers might award an E rating to the winner. A large regional with 100+ fencers and multiple rated fencers in the field can award ratings up to B or even A. The key factors are the number of competitors, the ratings of the competitors in the event, and how far you advance in the bracket.

Rating floors: Each event has a maximum rating it can award, based on the strength of the field. A small local with mostly unrated fencers can only award E ratings. A large regional with A- and B-rated fencers can award higher ratings. National events (NACs, JOs, Summer Nationals) can award the highest ratings.

National Points (Ranking Points)

National points are accumulated over the season based on results at designated national-level events. They determine your fencer's national ranking in their age group and weapon. Unlike letter ratings (which are thresholds you cross), points are cumulative – the more events you attend and the better you finish, the more points you accumulate.

National points determine seeding at national events and are the primary way to measure where your fencer stands relative to other fencers in their age group across the country.

KEY CONCEPT: Letter ratings measure peak achievement (your best result). National points measure sustained performance across a season. A fencer with a high rating but few points had one great result. A fencer with many points but a moderate rating has been consistently competitive all season. Both matter, but they tell different stories.



How Letter Ratings Work

The Rating Levels

U (Unrated) – Every fencer starts here. No competitive results yet.

E – Entry-level competitive rating. Earned by finishing in the top positions at small local or regional events. An E rating signals that the fencer has competed and achieved a baseline level of success.

D – Intermediate competitive rating. Earned at larger events or by beating D-rated and above opponents. A D rating indicates solid regional competitiveness.

C – Advanced competitive rating. Earned at significant regional or national events. A C-rated fencer is competitive at the state and regional level and beginning to compete nationally.

B – High-level competitive rating. Earned at large national-caliber events by finishing near the top. A B-rated fencer is nationally competitive.

A – The highest rating. Earned by finishing at the top of major national events. A-rated fencers are among the best in the country in their weapon.

How Ratings Are Calculated

The exact formula for rating awards is based on the strength of the field at each event. USA Fencing uses a system that considers the number of fencers, the distribution of ratings in the event, and where you finish in the bracket. The tournament software (usually Fencing Time) calculates this automatically.

In practical terms, here's what you need to know: to earn a higher rating, you generally need to beat fencers who already hold that rating or finish in the top percentage of a large enough field. Beating three D-rated fencers in DEs at a regional event might earn you a D rating. Finishing in the top 8 at a NAC might earn you a C or B.

Rating Expiration and Renewal

Ratings carry a year code (e.g., D25). A current-year rating is the strongest. A rating from the previous year is still valid but slightly weaker for seeding purposes. Ratings from two or more years ago may downgrade. The practical implication: you need to continue competing and earning results to maintain your rating strength. A fencer who earned a C rating three years ago but hasn't competed since will be seeded lower than a fencer with a fresh C rating.



How National Points Work

Which Events Award Points

National points are earned at specific events designated by USA Fencing. The primary point-earning events are:

NACs (North American Cups) – The major national circuit events held throughout the season at various locations across the country. These award the most points and attract the strongest fields.

JOs (Junior Olympics) – The national championship for junior and cadet age groups. High point values, highly competitive fields.

Summer Nationals – The end-of-season national championship open to all age groups. The most prestigious domestic event with the highest point awards.

SYCs (Super Youth Circuits) and RYCs (Regional Youth Circuits) – Regional events that award points on a smaller scale. These are important for building a point total, especially for younger fencers who may not travel to every NAC.

ROCs (Regional Open Circuits) – Regional events for older age categories.

Local tournaments typically do not award national points. They can award letter ratings, but they don't contribute to the national ranking.

How Points Are Calculated

Points are awarded based on your finishing position at the event relative to the size and strength of the field. Higher finishes earn more points. Larger, stronger fields award more points overall. The exact formula varies by event type, but the principle is consistent: the better you finish at a bigger event, the more points you earn.

Your national ranking is based on the sum of your best results across the season. Not every result counts equally – USA Fencing typically uses your top results from designated events to calculate your ranking. This means attending more events gives you more opportunities to post strong results, but a fencer who attends fewer events and finishes near the top can still rank highly.

The Rolling Points List

USA Fencing publishes rolling points lists that update after each designated event. You can check your fencer's current point total and national ranking on the USA Fencing website. The points list is weapon-specific and age-group-specific (e.g., Y12 Men's Foil, Cadet Women's Épée).

COACH'S TIP: Bookmark the USA Fencing points standings page for your fencer's event. Check it after each NAC or SYC to see where they stand. This helps you plan the rest of the season – if they're close to a qualification threshold or a seeding milestone, it may be worth attending an additional event.



How Seeding Works

What Seeding Means

Seeding is the process of placing fencers into the tournament bracket based on their strength. The strongest fencers are placed at the top of the bracket and separated from each other in the early rounds. This ensures that the best fencers don't face each other until the later rounds, and it rewards fencers who have earned strong ratings and point totals throughout the season.

How Seeding Is Determined

At most USA Fencing events, seeding uses a combination of national points and letter ratings. The general priority is: national points first (for nationally ranked fencers), then letter rating and year, then regional points, then random for unrated fencers. The exact seeding algorithm varies by event, but the principle is consistent: fencers with stronger competitive records are seeded higher.

Why Seeding Matters

Your seed determines who you face in pools and where you land in the DE bracket. A high seed means easier early-round opponents and a longer path before facing other top fencers. A low seed means you might face a top fencer in your first DE bout.

Seeding also affects pool composition. Pool assignments are designed so that the highest-seeded fencers are distributed evenly across pools. If you're the 1 seed, you won't be in the same pool as the 2 seed. But if you're unrated, you might end up in a pool with two or three rated fencers.

Practical example: At a tournament with 64 fencers, the 1 seed is placed at the top of the bracket and the 2 seed at the bottom. They can't meet until the final. The 3 and 4 seeds are placed so they can't meet the 1 or 2 seed until the semifinals. And so on. If your fencer is the 48 seed, they'll likely face a top-16 seed in their first or second DE bout.

Pool Seeding vs. DE Seeding

Pools are seeded so that the strongest fencers are spread across different pools. After pools, the DE bracket is seeded based on a combination of the original seed and the pool results (indicator, victories, touches scored). A fencer who was seeded 30th but dominated their pool might be re-seeded higher for DEs. A fencer who was seeded 5th but lost multiple pool bouts might drop.



Planning a Competitive Season

Setting Realistic Season Goals

Use the rating and points systems to set concrete, measurable season goals. Instead of "have a good season," set goals like: "Earn a D rating by the end of the season." "Finish in the top 32 at a NAC." "Accumulate enough points to be seeded in the top half at Summer Nationals." These goals are specific, tied to the systems described above, and give you clear benchmarks to track progress.

Choosing Which Tournaments to Attend

Not all tournaments are equal for development and ranking purposes. Here's a framework for choosing:

Local tournaments: Low cost, low travel, good for earning E and D ratings, building confidence, and getting competition reps. No national points. Attend regularly, especially for newer competitors.

SYCs/RyCs/ROCs: Regional events that award some national points and can award ratings up to B or C depending on the field. Moderate cost and travel. These are the bread and butter of a competitive season for developing fencers.

NACs: National circuit events with the strongest fields and the most points. Higher cost (travel, hotels, entry fees). Attend 2-4 per season if budget and schedule allow. These are where national rankings are built.

JOs and Summer Nationals: Season-culminating championships. Attend if your fencer is competitive at the national level or if the experience of a national championship would be valuable for development.

The Cost-Benefit Calculation

Attending more events generally helps your ranking (more chances to earn points), but the costs add up quickly. A typical NAC weekend costs \$500-\$1,500 or more when you factor in entry fees, travel, hotel, and meals. Families need to weigh the ranking benefit against the financial reality.

A practical approach: attend local events regularly (low cost, high rep volume). Attend 3-5 regional events per season (moderate cost, good point opportunities). Attend 2-3 NACs per season if nationally competitive (higher cost, highest point opportunities). Save JOs or Summer Nationals for when your fencer is realistically competitive at that level or when the experience justifies the investment.

When to Prioritize Development Over Results

Early in a fencer's competitive career, development matters more than results. A fencer who attends 15 tournaments and goes 2-10 in pools at every one is getting valuable experience even if their rating doesn't improve. The points and ratings will come as the skills develop. Don't chase ratings at the expense of training. A fencer who skips practice to attend a tournament every weekend is optimizing for the wrong thing.

COACH'S TIP: The best competitive season plan balances three things: enough competition to build ranking and experience, enough training to continue developing skills, and enough rest to avoid burnout. For most developing fencers, that means competing 1-2 times per month during the season, training 3-4 times per week, and taking breaks during school exam periods and holidays.



Frequently Asked Questions

My fencer won the tournament but didn't get a rating. Why?

The tournament may have been too small or the field too weak to award the next rating level. Rating awards depend on the number and strength of the competitors, not just winning. A tournament with 8 unrated fencers may not be able to award any rating at all.

My fencer beat a B-rated fencer but didn't get a B rating. Why?

Beating a single rated fencer doesn't automatically earn you that rating. The rating formula considers the entire field and your overall finishing position, not just individual wins. Beating a B-rated fencer in pools but finishing 25th overall won't earn a B rating.

Do ratings transfer between weapons?

No. Ratings are weapon-specific. A C rating in foil has no effect on your épée rating. If your fencer switches weapons, they start at U (unrated) in the new weapon.

How do age groups affect ratings and points?

Ratings are not age-specific — a D rating earned in a Y10 event is the same D rating as one earned in a Division I event. However, national points and rankings are tracked by age group and weapon. Your fencer's national ranking in Y12 Foil is separate from their ranking in Y14 Foil.

Can my fencer lose their rating?

Ratings don't disappear from poor results, but they do age. A rating from the current season is stronger for seeding purposes than one from two seasons ago. To maintain seeding strength, your fencer needs to continue earning competitive results.

What's more important for seeding: rating or points?

At national events, points typically take priority for seeding. At regional and local events, letter ratings are often the primary seeding factor. The safest approach is to build both: earn the highest rating you can and accumulate points through consistent competition.

Where can I check my fencer's rating and points?

Log into your fencer's USA Fencing account at usafencing.org. The profile page shows current ratings by weapon and current point standings. You can also search the national points standings by event, age group, and weapon.



Final Coach's Note

The rating and ranking system is a tool, not a scoreboard. It exists to organize competitions fairly and to give fencers measurable benchmarks. It should inform your season planning, not drive it.

I've seen families become so focused on chasing a specific rating that they forget why their fencer started fencing in the first place. The rating will come when the skills are there. Focus on development, enjoy the competition, and let the results follow the training.

The letters and numbers on your fencer's profile are a record of where they've been. The training they do today determines where they're going.

— Coach Derek