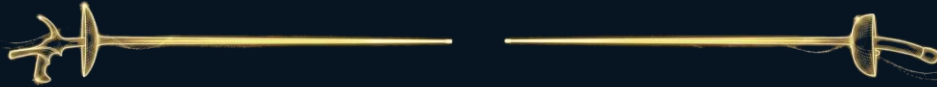


DEREK SNYDER



ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Referee Handbook

for Fencers



How right-of-way is actually called, how to make your actions clearer for the referee, how to use video replay, and how to handle calls you disagree with – without losing the next touch.

Derek Snyder

ELITE FENCING COACHING

dereksnyderfencing.com

A Note from Coach Derek

Every fencer blames the referee at some point. Sometimes the call really was wrong. But far more often, the fencer doesn't understand what the referee is looking for, and the "bad call" was actually a correct application of a rule the fencer didn't know or an interpretation the fencer didn't expect.

This guide teaches you how refereeing actually works. Not the simplified version from your first beginner class – the real version that referees at competitive events are trained to apply. Understanding the referee's perspective will change how you fence, how you train, and how you handle calls you disagree with.

The fencer who understands the referee doesn't get fewer bad calls. They get fewer surprising calls. And that makes all the difference.

– Coach Derek

How Referees Make Calls

The Referee's Job

The referee's job is to apply the rules as written in the FIE (International Fencing Federation) rulebook to the actions they observe on the strip. They are not judging style, effort, or who "deserves" the touch. They are watching for specific criteria and making a determination based on what they see.

In épée, the referee's job is relatively simple: did the light go on? Was the touch on valid target? If both lights go on within 40ms, both score. The machine decides most of the calls; the referee handles timing, cards, and procedural matters.

In foil and saber, the referee's job is much more complex. Both lights may go on, but right-of-way determines who scores. The referee must reconstruct the phrase (the sequence of actions) and apply the priority rules to determine which fencer gets the touch. This is where most confusion and disagreement occurs.

What the Referee Watches

Referees in foil and saber are trained to identify specific elements of each phrase:

The attack: Who initiated forward movement with the arm extending toward the target first? The referee looks for the combination of forward motion and arm extension that constitutes an attack under the rules.

Continuity: Was the attack continuous, or did the fencer hesitate, pull back, or pause? An attack that starts and then pauses loses right-of-way. The opponent can take over with their own attack during that pause.

The parry: Did the defending fencer make contact with the attacking blade and deflect it? A parry must physically move the attacking blade. Waving the blade near the opponent's blade without contact is not a parry.

The riposte: After a successful parry, did the defending fencer riposte immediately? A delayed riposte may lose priority to the attacker's remise (renewed attack).

Point-in-line: Was the arm fully extended with the point on target before the opponent's attack began? Point-in-line has priority, but the arm must be completely straight and the point must be threatening valid target.

The Reconstruction

After each exchange where both lights go on, the referee mentally reconstructs the phrase. They describe what they saw, usually with hand gestures: "Attack from the right — parry — riposte — touch left" or "Attack from the left arrives — touch left." This reconstruction is the referee's explanation of their call. Listen to it. It tells you exactly what the referee saw and why they made the call they did.

If the reconstruction doesn't match what you think happened, the issue is almost always one of two things: either you and the referee saw different things (your perception from the strip is different from theirs from the side), or your understanding of the rules is different from the referee's application.

COACH'S TIP: After a call you disagree with, listen to the referee's reconstruction before reacting. Often, the reconstruction reveals that the referee saw something you didn't feel — a hesitation in your attack, a successful parry you thought missed, or a point-in-line you didn't notice. Understanding the reconstruction is more useful than arguing against it.



Right-of-Way: The Real Rules

What Establishes the Attack

Under the current FIE interpretation, the attack is established by the extension of the arm with the point (in foil) or the blade (in saber) threatening the valid target, combined with continuous forward movement. The key word is "threatening" – the arm doesn't need to be fully extended at the start, but it must be progressively extending toward the target.

The practical implication: if you advance with your arm at your side, you are not attacking – you are preparing. If the opponent attacks during your preparation, they have right-of-way even if you started moving forward first. Forward movement alone is not an attack. The arm must be extending.

What Breaks the Attack

The attack is broken (you lose right-of-way) if you: pull your arm back, even briefly. Hesitate or pause your forward movement. Bend your arm after extending it. Miss the target (your attack ends when it fails to land). The opponent successfully parries your blade.

The most common reason fencers lose calls they think they should win is the arm pullback. The fencer starts extending, then briefly pulls the arm back to adjust or add a feint, then extends again. To the fencer, this feels like one continuous attack. To the referee watching from the side, it looks like two separate actions – and the opponent's action during the pullback may have established their own attack.

Simultaneous Actions

When the referee determines that both fencers initiated their attacks at the same time with no distinguishable priority, the call is "simultaneous" and no touch is awarded. In foil, simultaneous actions are relatively rare because the right-of-way rules usually give priority to one fencer. In saber, simultaneous attacks are common because both fencers often launch their march at the same moment.

A simultaneous call is not a "tie goes to nobody." It's the referee's determination that both attacks were initiated at the same time with equal conviction. If you believe you started first, the referee disagrees – from their angle, the start was indistinguishable.

The Counterattack

A counterattack scores in foil only if it arrives clearly one full fencing tempo before the attacker's touch. In saber, the standard is similar. "Clearly before" means the referee can see a visible time gap between the counterattacker's touch landing and the attacker's touch landing. If both arrive at roughly the same time, the attacker wins because they had right-of-way.

This is the call that generates the most frustration among fencers. The counterattacker feels their touch land and believes they scored, but the referee awards the touch to the attacker because the timing gap wasn't clear enough. The lesson: counterattacks must arrive very early to be awarded. If it's close, the attacker wins.



Making Your Actions Referee-Friendly

You can't control how the referee calls the bout. But you can control how clearly your actions communicate what you're doing. Fencers who make their actions visually clear get more favorable calls — not because the referee is biased, but because clear actions are easier to interpret correctly.

Extend the Arm Early and Visibly

The single most effective thing you can do for the referee is extend your arm early in your attack. A visible arm extension is the clearest signal that you are attacking with right-of-way. If your arm extends on the first or second advance, the referee sees a clear attack developing. If your arm extends at the last moment as you lunge, the referee has less time to register your priority.

Keep Forward Movement Continuous

Don't pause during your attack. Any hesitation — even a momentary stutter step — gives the referee reason to question whether your attack is continuous. Smooth, continuous forward movement with progressive arm extension is the clearest attacking action you can present.

Don't Pull the Arm Back

Once your arm begins extending, keep it extending. Pulling it back to add a feint, adjust your aim, or for any other reason resets your attack in the referee's eyes. If you need to feint, feint with the fingers (a disengage or a small blade movement) while keeping the arm extended.

Make Parries Definitive

A clear, sharp parry that visibly deflects the opponent's blade is unmistakable. A small, subtle parry that barely contacts the blade may not be seen. When you parry, make it big enough for the referee to see the blade deflection. This doesn't mean swiping wildly — it means making firm, decisive contact that changes the direction of the opponent's blade.

Riposte Immediately

After the parry, the riposte must be instant. Any delay between the parry and the riposte gives the referee room to interpret the opponent's remise as arriving before your riposte. The shorter the gap between parry contact and riposte extension, the clearer the call in your favor.

KEY CONCEPT: Fence for the referee's eyes, not just for the touch. A touch that lands but isn't called is worth nothing. A touch that is clearly set up with right-of-way, delivered with a visible extension, and preceded by continuous forward movement is almost always awarded. Make the referee's job easy, and the calls go your way.



Cards and Penalties

Yellow Card (Warning)

A yellow card is a warning for a first offense of a minor infraction. No penalty touch is awarded. Common yellow card offenses: arriving late to the strip after being called, turning your back on the opponent, covering valid target with your non-weapon hand, body contact (corps à corps) initiated by you, failure to salute before or after the bout.

Red Card (Penalty Touch)

A red card awards one point to the opponent. Red cards are given for: a second minor offense after a yellow card (the second offense of the same type), or a first offense of a more serious infraction. Repeated corps à corps, refusal to obey the referee, and unsportsmanlike conduct typically receive a red card.

Black Card (Expulsion)

A black card expels the fencer from the tournament. Black cards are extremely rare and reserved for severe misconduct: violent or dangerous behavior, deliberate brutality, doping violations, or repeated refusal to follow the referee's instructions. A black card means the fencer is disqualified from the entire event, not just the current bout.

The Card System in Practice

Yellow and red cards follow a group system. Group 1 offenses (minor, procedural) accumulate separately from Group 2 offenses (cheating, fraudulent actions) and Group 3 offenses (disturbing order). A yellow card for a Group 1 offense and a subsequent Group 1 offense results in a red card. But a yellow card for Group 1 and a first Group 2 offense results in a separate yellow card for Group 2 – they don't stack across groups.

The practical advice: know the basic rules of conduct. Salute before and after. Don't turn your back. Don't cover target. Don't delay. Don't argue. These simple habits prevent the vast majority of cards.



Video Replay

When Video Replay Is Available

Video replay is available at most major USA Fencing events starting at a certain point in the DE tableau (typically the table of 64, 32, or 16, depending on the event). Replay is not available during pool bouts or early DE rounds at most events. Check the tournament rules to know when replay becomes available.

How to Request Video Replay

If you disagree with a call and video replay is available, you may request a review. The process: immediately after the call (before the next "Fence"), approach the referee calmly and say: "I would like to request video replay." The referee will review the footage on a monitor, sometimes with the fencer present, and either confirm or overturn the call.

The Appeal System

Each fencer typically gets a limited number of replay appeals per bout (usually 1–2 unsuccessful appeals). If you appeal and the call is overturned in your favor, you don't lose an appeal. If the call stands after review, you lose one appeal. When your appeals are exhausted, you cannot request further reviews.

When to use your appeal: Save it for a call that significantly affects the bout — a touch that would change a close score or a call in the final touches of a close DE. Don't burn your appeal on the first touch of the bout unless you're certain the call was wrong.

When not to appeal: Don't appeal timing calls in foil or saber (who started first). Video replay often doesn't change these because the timing differences are so small. Appeal calls where the physical action is clear on video: whether the parry made contact, whether the arm was extended, whether the point arrived on target.

COACH'S TIP: Talk to your coach about when to appeal. In many tournaments, the coach can advise you from the side. A quick glance at your coach before appealing can help you decide whether the call is worth challenging. Your coach has a different angle and may have seen something you didn't.



Handling Disagreements with the Referee

What You Can Do

You can ask the referee to explain their call. "Can you explain the phrase?" is a respectful, appropriate question. The referee should then reconstruct the action and explain their reasoning. You can request video replay when available. You can raise your hand and say "I disagree" before the call is finalized, which signals to the referee that you have a concern.

What You Cannot Do

You cannot argue with the referee after the call is finalized. You cannot yell, gesture angrily, throw your mask, slam your weapon on the ground, or make comments about the referee's competence. These behaviors will earn you cards, cost you points, and damage your composure for the rest of the bout. The referee's decision, once made, is final (unless overturned by video replay).

The Tactical Response to a Bad Call

After a call you disagree with, the best tactical response is: use your 10-second reset (see the Mental Reset Toolkit, doc 27). Accept that the touch is gone. Then adjust your fencing to make the next call unmistakable. If the referee didn't see your attack as having priority, extend your arm earlier on the next touch. If the referee didn't see your parry, make it bigger. Don't argue — adapt.

This is the advanced move that most fencers never learn: instead of fighting the referee, fence in a way that eliminates ambiguity. If every call could go either way, the referee's interpretation matters a lot. If your actions are so clear that there's only one possible call, the referee's tendencies become irrelevant.



Becoming a Better-Refereed Fencer

Watch Bouts as a Referee

The single best way to understand refereeing is to practice calling bouts yourself. Watch a bout (in person or on video) and try to call every touch before the actual referee does. You'll quickly learn how difficult the job is, why certain calls are ambiguous, and what makes an action clear versus unclear.

Take a Referee Clinic

USA Fencing offers referee certification clinics. Even if you never plan to referee, attending one teaches you the rules at a level of detail that will directly improve your fencing. Understanding the rules from the referee's perspective gives you a tactical advantage that most fencers never develop.

Study the FIE Rules

The FIE rules of competition are available online. The sections on right-of-way (foil and saber) and the definitions of attack, parry, riposte, and counterattack are essential reading for any competitive fencer. You don't need to memorize the entire rulebook, but understanding the key definitions will prevent most of the confusion and frustration that fencers experience with refereeing.



Final Coach's Note

The referee is not your enemy. They're a participant in the bout, just like you and your opponent. Their job is to apply the rules fairly. Your job is to fence clearly enough that the rules work in your favor.

Every great fencer I've coached has eventually learned this lesson: you don't win by arguing with the referee. You win by making your actions so clear, so decisive, and so technically correct that the call is obvious. That's a higher standard than just hitting the other person – but it's the standard that wins at the competitive level.

Understand the rules. Respect the referee. Fence clearly. And when a bad call happens – because it will – reset, adapt, and win the next touch.

– Coach Derek