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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

Understanding the Three Weapons

Foil, Épée & Saber



A clear, complete guide to the three fencing weapons – how they differ, how they're scored, and what makes each one unique.

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A Note from Coach Derek

One of the most common questions I get from new fencing families is: “What’s the difference between the three weapons?” It’s a great question, and the answer matters more than most people realize.

Foil, épée, and saber are not just different equipment – they are fundamentally different sports that share a strip. Each weapon has its own rules, its own strategy, its own rhythm, and its own personality. Understanding these differences helps you appreciate what you’re watching, support your fencer more effectively, and make better decisions about which weapon might be the right fit.

This guide breaks down all three weapons in plain language. No fencing jargon required. By the end, you’ll understand what makes each weapon unique and why fencers love the one they chose.

– Coach Derek

The Big Picture

Fencing has three weapons: foil, épée, and saber. Every competitive fencer specializes in one weapon, though some fence two. At the youth level, many clubs start fencers in foil before allowing them to choose.

The three weapons differ in four fundamental ways: where you can score (valid target area), how you score (thrusting vs. cutting), who gets the point when both fencers hit (right-of-way rules), and the overall style of play (speed, patience, and tactical approach).

Here’s a quick comparison before we dive into the details:

	FOIL	ÉPÉE	SABER
Target Area	Torso only	Entire body	Waist up (including head and arms)
Scoring Method	Thrust (point)	Thrust (point)	Thrust or cut (edge and point)
Right-of-Way	Yes	No	Yes
Double Touches	No – referee decides	Yes – both score	No – referee decides
Weapon Weight	Lightest	Heaviest	Light
Blade Shape	Thin, flexible	Stiffer, triangular	Flat, light
Typical Speed	Medium	Variable	Fastest
Style	Tactical, patient	Strategic, deliberate	Explosive, aggressive
Special Equipment	Metallic lamé vest	None (whole body)	Lamé jacket + conductive mask

Foil

Overview

Foil is where most fencers begin. It's the lightest weapon, with a flexible rectangular blade and a small circular guard. Foil teaches the fundamental principles of fencing: attack, defense, distance, timing, and right-of-way. Many coaches consider it the best weapon for building a technical foundation.

Valid Target

The valid target area in foil is the torso only — the front and back of the trunk, from the shoulders to the groin, not including the arms, legs, or head. A metallic vest called a lamé covers the valid target area. When the fencer's point lands on the lamé, a colored light appears on the scoring machine. When it lands anywhere else (arm, leg, mask), a white "off-target" light appears. Off-target hits stop the action but do not score a point.

Right-of-Way (Priority)

Foil uses right-of-way rules, which means that when both fencers hit at the same time, the referee must decide who had priority. In simple terms: the fencer who started their attack first, or who successfully parried and riposted, gets the point. This is the concept that confuses new spectators the most. Both lights go on, both fencers think they scored, and the referee awards the touch to only one of them. The referee is not deciding who hit first — they're deciding who had the right to attack based on the rules of priority.

What establishes priority: Extending the arm and moving forward with the point threatening the target. The fencer who initiates the attack with a clear arm extension has the right-of-way.

What takes priority away: A successful parry (deflecting the attack with your blade) gives priority to the defender for their riposte (counterattack after the parry).

FOR PARENTS: Don't worry about understanding every right-of-way call. Even experienced fencers disagree with referees regularly. The important thing is knowing that the rules exist, and that the referee's job is to interpret them.

What Foil Looks Like

Foil bouts tend to be tactical and precise. Fencers spend time managing distance, looking for the right moment to attack, and setting up actions with feints and blade work. The best foil fencers are patient, disciplined, and excellent at reading their opponent's intentions.

Because off-target hits stop the action without scoring, foil rewards accuracy. You can't just throw your point at the opponent and hope for the best — you need to hit the lamé.

Who Foil Is For

Foil suits fencers who enjoy problem-solving, are patient enough to wait for the right moment, and appreciate the technical challenge of precise point control. It's an excellent starting weapon and many of the world's top fencers compete in foil.

Épée

Overview

Épée is the heaviest of the three weapons, with a stiffer triangular blade and a large bell-shaped guard that protects the hand. It's the most realistic of the three weapons — historically, épée was designed to simulate an actual duel. The rules are simple: hit anywhere, and if both fencers hit within 40 milliseconds, both score.

Valid Target

The entire body is valid target in épée. Head, hands, feet, arms, legs, torso — everything counts. There is no lamé because there's no need to distinguish valid from invalid target. A touch anywhere on the body scores a point.

This makes épée tactically unique. The hand and forearm are the closest targets, so many épée fencers specialize in attacks to the wrist or hand. But the feet, the knee, and the shoulder are all equally valid targets. This creates a very different game than foil or saber.

No Right-of-Way

Épée has no right-of-way rules. If both fencers hit within the timing window (1/25 of a second), both receive a point. This is called a double touch.

This fundamentally changes the strategy. In foil and saber, you can afford to trade hits because the referee will decide who had priority. In épée, every time you attack, you're also exposing yourself. A reckless attack that lands but also gets you hit results in both fencers scoring — which usually helps the fencer who is behind.

What this means tactically: Épée rewards patience and defensive awareness. You can't just attack and hope the referee gives you the call. You need to hit without being hit.

FOR PARENTS: Épée is the easiest weapon to watch as a spectator because there's no right-of-way to decode. If the light goes on, someone scored. If both lights go on, both scored. No referee interpretation needed for scoring.

What Épée Looks Like

Épée bouts often have a different rhythm than foil or saber. There's more distance between the fencers, longer pauses, and more cautious probing. The best épée fencers are master strategists who use distance, timing, and traps to draw their opponent into making a mistake.

But épée can also be explosive. When one fencer finds an opening, the action can be sudden and decisive. The contrast between long, patient setups and quick, precise attacks is what makes épée compelling to watch.

Who Épée Is For

Épée suits fencers who are strategic, patient, and comfortable making their own tactical decisions without relying on referee calls. It rewards strong defense, precise timing, and the ability to stay calm in long, drawn-out bouts. Many fencers who switch from foil to épée appreciate the simplicity of the rules and the emphasis on hitting without being hit.

Saber

Overview

Saber is the fastest and most explosive of the three weapons. Unlike foil and épée, which score with the point only, saber can score with both the point and the edge of the blade — meaning fencers can cut and slash as well as thrust. This creates a dramatically different style of play.

Valid Target

The valid target area in saber is everything above the waist, including the head, arms, and hands. A conductive lamé jacket covers the torso and arms, and a special conductive mask bib covers the head. Below the waist is off-target — hits to the legs or feet stop the action but don't score.

Right-of-Way (Priority)

Like foil, saber uses right-of-way rules. The same basic principle applies: the fencer who initiates the attack has priority, and a successful parry transfers priority to the defender for the riposte.

However, because saber fencers can score with the edge of the blade (not just the point), the attacks are much faster and more explosive. Saber right-of-way decisions happen in fractions of a second, and the referee has to make very quick judgments.

FOR PARENTS: Saber bouts move fast. It's normal to miss what happened on a given touch. Watch the referee's hand signals after the action stops — they'll indicate which fencer gets the point.

What Saber Looks Like

Saber bouts are explosive and athletic. Fencers cover ground quickly, often launching themselves forward with aggressive attacks. The flèche (a running attack) is banned in saber, but the forward charge to the center of the strip is a defining feature of the weapon.

Most saber touches happen in the first few seconds after the referee says "Fence!" Both fencers launch forward, and the touch is scored almost immediately. This creates a very different viewing experience than foil or épée — saber is more like a sprint, while the other weapons are more like chess.

Between the explosive opening actions, saber fencers also use feints, counterattacks, and defensive footwork. The best saber fencers combine explosive speed with tactical intelligence.

Who Saber Is For

Saber suits fencers who are aggressive, athletic, explosive, and comfortable making split-second decisions. It rewards speed, confidence, and the willingness to commit fully to an action. Fencers who thrive on intensity and fast-paced competition tend to love saber.

Choosing a Weapon

If your fencer is just starting out, the choice of weapon is one of the most important decisions in their fencing career. Here are some guidelines, though every fencer's path is different.

Start with What Your Club Offers

Many clubs specialize in one or two weapons. If your club has excellent foil coaches, start with foil. A good coach in the “wrong” weapon is infinitely more valuable than no coach in the “right” weapon. The fundamentals — footwork, distance, timing, blade control — transfer across all three weapons.

Let Your Fencer's Personality Guide the Choice

Patient and analytical? Foil or épée might be a good fit.

Strategic and independent? Épée rewards fencers who like to figure things out on their own.

Explosive and aggressive? Saber channels that energy beautifully.

Technical and detail-oriented? Foil demands precision and rewards practice.

That said, don't lock in a weapon too early. Many successful fencers tried one weapon, switched to another, and found their home. It's not unusual for a fencer to start in foil, try épée at 13 or 14, and discover it's a much better fit.

Consider the Competitive Landscape

In the United States, foil and épée tend to have the largest number of competitors at the youth level, which means more opportunities but also more competition. Saber has a smaller field but an extremely dedicated community. The college recruiting landscape also varies by weapon — some schools have stronger programs in certain weapons. If college fencing is a goal, research which weapons your target schools recruit.

COACH'S TIP: The best weapon for your fencer is the one they love enough to practice 4–5 days a week for years. Passion matters more than body type, personality tests, or competitive strategy. Let them try, let them explore, and let them choose.

How to Watch Each Weapon

Once you understand the differences between the three weapons, watching fencing becomes much more enjoyable. Here's what to focus on for each weapon.

Watching Foil

- Watch for the arm extension – the fencer who extends first is establishing the attack.
- Watch the referee's hand signals after each touch to see who gets priority.
- Pay attention to bladework – parries, beats, and disengages create the tactical chess match.
- Notice off-target lights (white) – they tell you the fencer's point was accurate but hit the wrong area.

Watching Épée

- Watch the distance – épée fencers manage space very carefully.
- Watch for attacks to the hand and wrist – the closest target is often the first one attacked.
- Notice double touches – both lights going on means both fencers scored.
- Look for traps – épée fencers often deliberately create openings to lure the opponent into attacking.

Watching Saber

- Watch the opening charge – both fencers sprint to the center when the referee says "Fence."
- Don't blink – saber touches happen very fast, often in the first 2–3 seconds.
- Watch for counterattacks – the defensive fencer trying to hit before the attack arrives.
- Notice the athletic footwork – saber has the most dynamic movement of all three weapons.



Final Coach's Note

Every weapon is beautiful in its own way. Foil is elegant and precise. Épée is strategic and honest. Saber is explosive and electrifying. None of them is "better" than the others – they're different sports with different strengths.

The best thing you can do as a parent or new fencer is watch all three, ask questions, and stay curious. The more you understand, the more you'll enjoy what you're seeing. And the more you enjoy it, the more your fencer will enjoy sharing it with you.

Welcome to the sport. It's a good one.

– Coach Derek