

What to Expect at a Fencing Tournament

Many of you may be interested in knowing how a fencing tournament works and what is involved. Here is a brief summary:

You should plan to arrive at the tournament at least a half-hour before the close of the registration period. This will give you a chance to set down gear, get loose, and check out your equipment. For a tournament, you are advised to bring two weapons and two body cords. I also recommend investing in a test kit, so you can pre-check your weapons.

At registration you pay the tournament fee and fill out any necessary paperwork. You will also have to pay a fee to join USFA if you are not already a member – so if you are a member, remember to provide your USFA Member ID number. When prompted, usually at registration, your mask will need to be checked. This is done with a small hand held device that ensures the proper amount of resistance to penetration. Masks are usually “stamped” with some indicator, showing they have been checked and passed. (You can always tell fencers who fence a lot of tournaments, by the number of stamps on their masks.) With the mask stamped “OK”, you are ready to suit up.

Please Note: Masks are not the only safety equipment that will be checked.

At larger tournaments, and ones with National implications (SYCs, NACs, Div Qualifiers, JO, etc.) body cords, lames, gauntlets (saber) and cowls (saber) may also be “pre-checked” for conductivity and “dead” spots.

At all tournaments, fencers may be asked to prove that they are wearing plastrons (underarm protectors), and women may be asked to prove they are wearing plastic breast protectors. Knee-length socks (white in color) may also be required.

Some fencers like to “warm up” by fencing some practice bouts, before a match begins. Plan to arrive extra early if you need a little extra time to warm up.

In each category, fencers are divided into “pools” of between 4 and 10 fencers. Once the pool is set, each fencer in the pool will fence every other fencer in the pool.

Before each pool bout, the fencers’ weapons are checked with weights and a gap tool to determine suitability. (The Gap tool is only used for Epee’s). This tends to slow the process down, but guarantees no unfair advantages. If a weapon fails to pass inspection, a yellow card is issued, and the fencer must exchange the weapon for a suitable replacement. Make sure you have at least two usable weapons (I recommend three), and two/three body cords for any given tournament.

Each bout in the pool is a 5-touch bout, with a fencer awarded a V (victory) if they win the bout or a D (defeat) if they do not. There is also a numeric score attached, indicating the number of touches the fencer scored. So a V5 would indicate that the fencer scored 5 touches and won, while a D3 indicates a loss but 3 touches awarded. The bout is also timed (3 minutes), so a fencer may not reach 5 touches before time expires. If the bout “times out” and the score is not tied, the fencer with the most touches is awarded the

victory and the number of touches (for example V3) and the loser of the bout will receive the defeat and number of touches, for example, D2.

If a bout is tied at the time limit, a coin toss will determine the fencer who has “priority.” When a fencer has priority, he/she will win the bout unless their opponent scores an additional touch in the next minute. That is, the fencer who loses the coin toss will have one additional minute to score a touch. If the fencer fails to score a touch, or if the fencer who has priority scores a touch first, the fencer with priority is declared the winner and is awarded a V and the number of touches scored.

In the pools, fencers typically do not sign the score sheet until all pool bouts are completed. Before signing, make sure the fencer double-checks the form. Sometimes referees make mistakes and record the points to the wrong fencer. Make sure you agree with the form before signing. Once signed, the score will stand, even if it is wrong.

After all fencers in all the pools have fenced each other, the fencers are ranked against all other fencers to determine a “seeding” to the next phase, the Direct Elimination (DE) matches. Seeding is determined by looking at several indices: victory percentage (number of victories divided by total number of bouts), the indicator - touches scored minus touches received, and total touches scored. The indices for all the fencers are calculated, and the fencers are arranged into a bracket, by this determined seeding. There may be a number of “byes” awarded if there are not enough fencers in the pool to create a “power of 2” bracket (e.g. 8, 16, 32, 64, etc.). For example, if there are 7 fencers in the pool, there will be a single bye awarded to the top seed – to make 8 “fencers”. If there are 13 fencers in the pool, 3 byes will be awarded the top three seeds – making 16 fencers. Number of fencers plus number of “byes” equals the number of bracket slots.

It should be noted that in National events, and possibly some others, not all fencers proceed from the pool into the DE bracket. Only the top 80% of fencers will go on to the DE round. So, if there are 30 fencers, only the top 24 will go on to the DE round.

A DE (Direct Elimination) match is slightly different. There are three possible formats:

1). Youth Format – Y10 & Y12 (usually). The DE match is won by winning a best of three 5-point, 3-minute bouts. So in the DE round a fencer must win two 5-point bouts to proceed. There is a rest period between bouts of about 1 minute. If any of the 5-point bouts time out, the “priority” system described above is used.

2). Normal Format: The DE match is a “first to 15” match, where the first fencer to record 15 touches is determined to be the winner. This is done in 3 three minute rounds with 1-minute rest periods between each round. If a fencer has not reached 15 touches by the end of the third round, the fencer with the most touches is awarded the match. If the fencers are tied at the end of the three rounds, they will use the “priority” system described above.

3). Veteran Format: The DE match is a “first to 10” match, where the first fencer to record 10 touches is determined to be the winner. This is done in 2 three minute rounds with 1-minute rest periods between the rounds. If a fencer has not reached 10 touches by the end of the second round, the fencer with the most touches is awarded the match. If the fencers are tied at the end of the two rounds, they will use the “priority” system described above.

The DE matches continue until the bracket is filled and the winner is declared. The final four fencers receive medals: one gold, one silver, and two bronze. Occasionally, “participant” medals are awarded to Youth fencers who did not place first, second or third. Sometimes, in combined events (Y10/Y12/Y14, M/F, etc.) awards may be given for the top finisher in each category. For example, in a Y10/Y12/Y14 combined event, after the top three medals are awarded, there may be a medal for the top Y10, Y12, and Y14 finisher. There may also be a “fence off” for third place, particularly in qualifying events where the top three fencers will qualify.