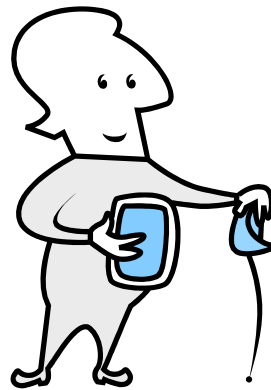




A Parent's Guide to Fencing and the WFC Universe



This document is intended to provide parents old and new with a little background information on both the sport of fencing, and also on Westdale Fencing Club, and the people who run it. It has been put together by some of our parents, with some help from the coaching staff. If there is any additional information you would like to see, or if you have any suggestions on how it can be improved, please contact info@westdalefencing.com.

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A: THE CLUB

i) Club history

Westdale Fencing Club (WFC) was founded in December 2001 by Steve Howell and Ranil Sonnadara in an effort to fill the dearth of non-varsity fencing opportunities available in the Hamilton area. Steve left Hamilton in 2003, at which time Ranil took over the running and management of the club. WFC has grown into a thriving community club which is highly active at all levels of the sport. In October 2006, WFC filed articles of incorporation, and is now operating as Westdale Fencing Club Inc. At the time of writing, WFC has 55 active fencers, ranging in age from 8 to... well, over 50. We have a very wide (some might say insane) catchment area, with fencers travelling from Port Hope, Rochester, Buffalo, Guelph, Toronto, Cambridge, Burlington, Dundas, Edmonton and even Hamilton to train. Whilst many of our fencers are relative newcomers to the sport, we also count several National Squad members and a former World Champion in our ranks! In September 2009, Westdale Fencing Club (partnering with Excelsior Fencing Club in Kitchenor) was awarded status as a Regional Community Development Centre by the Ontario Fencing Association. The Regional Community Development Centres are a series of well established, highly experienced fencing clubs in various regions of Ontario, selected for the RCDC program for their records of excellence in the delivery of grass roots programs, and their capacity for growth in the future. These centres are recognized as offering quality programming based on healthy child development and the principles of Long Term Athlete Development. RCDCs serve as a hub for clubs, coaches, and community members to get training, share ideas and acquire new skills and expertise. on the basis of the strength of our programs and the commitment we have to development of all levels of the sport.

ii) Club staff

WFC is fortunate to have coaches and staff with high levels of expertise in many areas of the sport. At the time of writing, our Head Coach, Ranil Sonnadara, is President of the Ontario Fencing Association, and sits on the Canadian Fencing Federation's Coaching Education and Long Term Athlete Development Committees. Ranil is also a Director of the Coaching Association of Canada. He holds numerous qualifications as Coach, Coach Educator and Referee, and is an NCCP Certified Master Evaluator and Master Learning Facilitator for fencing in Canada. By day, Ranil is a researcher in the [Expert Performance Laboratory](#) at the University of Toronto, with academic appointments in the Department of Surgery and the Faculty of Physical Education and Health at the University of Toronto. Ranil is also an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Kinesiology at McMaster University. Other coaches include Sandra Dulac (Sabre, Foil, Intro and Youth) and Daniel Banks (Foil, Competitive and Recreational), Amy Lillico, Mike Ciancone and Logan

Fitzpatrick. Supporting our coaches and athletes are an excellent Administrative Assistant (Lisa Ciancone) and Treasurer (Terri Fitzpatrick), and all of our more experienced fencers and parents.

The club also has an excellent group of health practitioners who offer performance enhancing and injury management services to our athletes. We currently have a resident Massage Therapist (Jennifer Owens) who visits the club once a week, Physiotherapist (Jarek Krawczyk), Registered Nurse (Skye Hobden) and Dietician (Nicole Springle). Parents are welcome to make use of their services, although priority for treatment will always go to coaches athletes who are about to compete - contact the practitioners directly for appointments (details are on [the website](#)).

All of our coaches and staff (except the health practitioners) are volunteers who put innumerable unpaid hours into the club. For more details on the people that help keep the club running, please visit [the website](#).

iii) Memberships and rates

WFC currently offers two different [youth programs](#) (suitable for those aged 7 - 12), and [four programs open to those over 11](#). The fees charged, and services offered vary by program – please see the “about our programs” section of the [club website](#) for more information on the programs offered and fees charged.

Younger fencers start off in our “Youth” program, which runs on Saturday mornings. If they are interested in competing, when they are ready, they will be invited to move into the “Youth Competitive” program, which places a high emphasis on developing the basic physical literacy skills which will be needed for later success in any sport. From here, fencers have the option of switching into our ‘senior’ programs when their coach feels they are ready.

All new ‘senior’ (11+) fencers start off in one of our ‘Intro’ programs. On completion of this program, they can choose to move our ‘Recreational’ program, or retake the ‘Intro’ program with a view to fast-tracking into one of our more competitive programs when they are ready. Some fencers are not keen on competing, and may stay in our recreational program. Fencers who are keen to start competing have the opportunity to join our ‘Competitive’ program when they are ready – please talk to the coaches if this is of interest. For fencers who wish to further improve their competitive skills, there are also ‘Pre-Elite’ and ‘Elite’ programs which are strictly by invitation only.

In addition to regular program fees, you will need to purchase a seasonal membership in the club, which goes towards covering our administration costs, a membership with the [Ontario Fencing Association](#), and a license from the [Canadian Fencing Federation](#). The total cost of membership and license fees varies depending on the kind of tournaments in which you wish to participate. If you are confused about what category of membership you need to buy, just ask one of the coaching staff or other parents.

B: THE SPORT

iv) General information

Fencing is a sport practiced by both beginners and Olympians. It can be taken up at any time in one's life. Although many fencers begin as children, there are many active participants who come to the sport later in life – fencing is one of the rare sports which allows people, for the most part, to compete in a relatively even arena regardless of age, gender and body type. For more detailed background information on the sport, please click [here](#).

You can find a lot of information about all aspects of the sport on the [Fencing.net](#) or [The Fencing Forum](#) discussion groups. Even if you don't ask questions you can learn a lot from reading the postings (though please take any information posted here for what it's worth – there is a lot of misinformation here too!). The club also runs a [forum](#) and a [facebook group](#) and these can be great places to find out information about upcoming tournaments or just about things happening at or around the club.

C. EQUIPMENT

v) What does a fencer wear?

At first this seems like a confusion of zippers, buckles and straps. As a basic uniform, every fencer wears, from the inside, out:

- A **sous plastron** (a short underarm protector that has one sleeve and is strapped around the body).
- Girls must wear **chest protectors** inside their jackets, although any fencer can opt for a chest protector (an apron shaped plastic shield that is worn high on the chest). Boys may wear a male chest protector against the skin, but it must not be worn over a t-shirt as it can reduce the sensitivity of the scoring equipment.
- A **jacket**, which can do up in the front on an angle or in the back. It is common for fencers to need assistance getting dressed, especially with the back zip jackets. Most jackets have a 'cuisard' strap that protects the groin area, and which must be stepped through to put the jacket on.
- A **glove**, right or left handed that fits fairly snugly. Only one glove is typically worn, on the sword arm.
- A **mask**. Masks are sized and your coach will help determine the best size for you. The mask should not feel loose, and should never be able to spin or slide off on its own.
- Clean, dry **running shoes** with a good grip. Please do not bring wet footwear into the gym as doing so makes the floors very dangerous.
- **Socks** are required.

- **Jogging pants** (or fencing pants). These should have a high enough waist that when the jacket is done up, no skin is visible at the join. They should also be long enough to cover all skin up until the sock-line. Please do not wear lycra, or pants with holes or zippers on the legs (tearaways are also unacceptable). Please note that whilst it is fine to wear shorts for warm up games and footwork, under no circumstances will anybody be allowed to participate in sparring or fencing unless they are wearing long pants.

In addition, for tournaments, every fencer needs:

- two weapons
- two body wires
- a lamé jacket (for foil and sabre).

See below for further details.

Types of weapons and grips

There are three types of weapons used in modern sport fencing: Foil, Epee, and Sabre. Weapons should not be thought of as a progression. Rather, over time, fencers will show strengths or preferences for certain aspects of the sport which will mean that they might be better suited to one weapon than another – each has a very different ‘personality’. Coaches are often the best judge of which weapon is best for individual fencers. It is not uncommon to train and compete in more than one weapon, though typically more focus will be given to one weapon over others.

At WFC, all new fencers start in Foil, as the coaching staff feel that it lays the best general foundation, and encourages the development of control and accuracy which sometimes get lost if fencers start in other weapons. That said, not all coaches feel the same way, and there are other clubs which allow new fencers to start with Sabre or Epee.

There are two main classes of grip on Foils and Epees – a “french” grip, which is shaped like a long cylinder, and an “orthopaedic” or “pistol” grip (there is only one popular style of grip for sabres). At WFC, we strongly encourage our new fencers to use french grip handles to start, as the coaching staff feel that starting with a french grip helps to train the fine motor control needed for success later in the sport. Fencers may change to a pistol grip as they progress as many people find that the design facilitates more advanced techniques. But there are still several international level fencers using french grips – both have their strengths and weaknesses, and it comes down to personal preference. Coaches are always willing to provide advice about choosing weapons and grips.

vi) **Purchasing equipment**

One of the most commonly asked questions is “**When should I invest in fencing equipment?**” The club has sufficient quantities of basic equipment for those enrolled in our intro and recreational programs. Over time, we encourage parents to begin to purchase equipment for their children as priority for equipment always goes to newer members. Fencers in our competitive programs are required to have their own equipment.

For some parents the first purchase will be a complete starter kit (prices range from \$109.00 US plus s&h ([Absolute Fencing](#)) and taxes all the way up to \$329.95 US plus taxes, ([Leon Paul](#)) at the time of writing). Many parents prefer to purchase equipment piecemeal (a couple of items at a time). Coaches and more experienced parents are always happy to offer advice about equipment purchases, including in which order equipment should be purchased for your child, and which suppliers might be good options for your child. To help with this, we have put together a [Shopping Guide](#).

As mentioned above, additional equipment is required for tournaments. Competition foil kits include a lamé jacket (a conductive vest that is used by the scoring apparatus), two body wires (also used by the scoring apparatus) and two or more electric foils (which have a button at the end that registers hits scored. Duplicate wires and weapons are required for competitions so that in case of breakages or equipment failure, the tournament is not held up, and fencers are typically not allowed to compete without them. Even if you don't think your child is or will be interested in competing, you should still invest in some basic equipment as after the first year, newer fencers will have priority usage of club equipment. Club equipment is only intended to give new fencers a chance to try out the sport before investing in equipment.

“**Where to buy?**” is another question most parents ask. There are no permanent “stores” to buy fencing equipment in Canada, so unless you want to travel, you have two routes. Local vendors will often have a display of their wares at tournaments available for purchase. The advantage to this is that your child can try on the pieces and you are ensured of a good fit. The disadvantage is that local vendors only offer a limited range of equipment, and since their focus is, for the most part, on providing affordable equipment, the quality is not always what you might want. The other route for purchasing equipment is to do so online. The club website has [links](#) to several suppliers with whom we have successfully dealt in the past who collectively offer the full spectrum of equipment. If you are ordering on-line talk to other parents or fencers for opinions on the equipment they have purchased. You may also be able to try other fencers' equipment to check for sizing as it is not always consistent across vendors. Another possibility for equipment is that other parents might have old equipment for resale – please check [the forums](#) for details.

One word of caution: fencing is one place where short term economy does not always pay off, and it is wise to remember that the safety equipment you are purchasing is the only thing standing between your child and a ‘sword’ (albeit a blunt one). This is especially true for masks.

D: TOURNAMENTS

viii. Scoring apparatus

Modern foil competitions use an electric scoring system - a low voltage current is run from the scoring box through a wire on a pulley, to the body wire and into the weapon. Points are scored when the fencer makes contact with his or her weapon to the lame (target) of the opponent with enough force to depress the button on the end (500 grams of pressure).

ix. Watching a bout

There is a strict and somewhat complicated set of rules which governs who can score a point at any moment in a fencing bout, and the interpretation of these rules can vary between referees. Hence, watching a bout is often confusing! Relying on the scoring box for which fencer's light appears first is not the most accurate way to know if you child has scored on his or her opponent or not – rather, after a touch, you should listen to the judge's explanation of what happened, and watch their hands to see to whom they have awarded the point (if one gets awarded at all). If you are unsure as to what is occurring in the scoring, please ask a coach after the fencing bout. Note that you should never interrupt or disturb a judge to ask questions during a bout.

x. When to start competing

Often, parents are not sure when their fencer is ready to begin participating in tournaments. There will be some fencers who never compete, but this is not the norm. By participating in tournaments, fencers get a chance to put their lessons into practice, and it's a great way to meet other fencers and parents. Competing in tournaments also teaches valuable life skills such as perseverance, patience, and how to handle both losing and winning. Tournaments are also a great way for fencers to monitor their progress. Most importantly, for most fencers, competing is a lot of fun and is a great motivator!

There are many different formats and levels of competition, and not all competitions are appropriate for all fencers. In Ontario, we typically see YCC or youth events, OCC events, which are also developmental tournaments, and 'Open' events, which tend to be at a higher level than the others. There are also Youth Circuit and other tournaments that are held in the US.

For youth tournaments, fencers are typically divided into age categories. For instance U11 could mean competitors under eleven at the time of the tournament may enter. Be careful to check the categories though because there are many different interpretations of what U11 actually means (you'd be surprised!). Sometimes, especially in the younger categories, boys and girls fence each other. As they progress they usually fence in categories divided by gender. Often, the coaching staff will suggest tournaments that might be appropriate for your fencer, but if you see something and are curious, please feel free to ask about it.

Coaches will always work with both fencers and parents so that everybody

is prepared for any tournaments you might enter. It is important to understand that whilst fencing is a 'combat' sport, winning is not always the main goal - rather fencers are encouraged to try for a personal best score, to work on achieving a number of points, or even just to use the competition to put into practice new skills. At all developmental levels of competition, our coaches take the philosophy that learning is much more important than winning.

Tournament entrance fees are usually around \$20 - \$30 for each event. It is often possible to fence in more than one age category, although this is not always possible due to scheduling conflicts. For example, a twelve-year-old fencer may choose to fence in the U13 and U15 categories. Some tournament organisers offer a discount for fencers who are competing in multiple events (e.g. \$20 for the first, and \$10 or \$15 for any additional), though this is not always the case. Pre-registration is usually done on-line. Registrants will need a CFF (Canadian Fencing Federation) membership, which can be purchased on the CFF website.

WFC usually hosts at least one foil tournament each season. These tournaments are a great place to start - the familiar setting and friendly atmosphere helps ease first-time jitters.

Generally speaking, we encourage fencers to try at least one tournament during a season. Many fencers, especially those in the more competitive programs, will compete several times a month.

For some images from previous tournaments see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/westdale/sets/>, or visit <http://www.westdalefencing.com/photos/>.

xi. How do tournaments work?

As mentioned above, there are many different types of tournaments, and many different formats (called formulae) which each can use. Generally speaking, most tournaments are divided into 2 sections: poules and direct eliminations (DEs)

Most tournaments start with either one or two rounds of poules. Essentially, the entire entry list is rank ordered, or 'seeded' based on past performance at tournaments - someone who has done very well at a number of similar events will have a high seed (a low number), and newer fencers will have a higher number (or lower seed). You can (very) loosely think of the seed you start with as a predictor of where you might be expected to place (though it's not always a very accurate predictor!). Then, the whole field is split, using this seeding, into a number of 'poules', or subsets of fencers, constructed so that each should have roughly an even number of strong, medium, and weak fencers. Every fencer will then fence each other fencer within his or her poule in bouts which are scored to 5 points, with a time limit of 3 minutes per bout. After this round, fencers receive a revised

ranking depending upon their wins vs. losses and the number of points they scored and received. What happens next varies according to the formula used. In most local tournaments, every fencer is then promoted to the next round. However in some events, especially at higher levels of the sport, only a certain number of fencers (around 80%) get promoted to the next round, with the bottom 20% being eliminated at this stage. The next round could be another round of poules, but most typically, the competition moves into the direct elimination phase at this point.

At the start of the DE phase, the revised rankings after poules is used to create an 'elimination tableau' which is how bouts from this point forward are calculated. In this tableau, the strongest fencer (#1) will fence the weakest fencer (say #32), the next strongest (#2) will fence the next weakest fencer (#31) and so on. In some competitions, where there are a lot of entrants, the strongest fencers will receive a 'bye' which means that they are automatically promoted to the next round, whilst weaker fencers will have to fight for spots. Usually, DE bouts are scored to 15 points, with a 1 minute break taken every 3 minutes of fencing. If a fencer wins his or her DE bout, then he or she will be promoted into the next round. If they lose, then they will be eliminated from the competition.

To recap then, tournaments usually have 2 phases. The first is the poules phase, in which a fencer will typically have 5 or 6 bouts to 5 points. After this, there will be a bit of a break, and then the competition will typically move into the DE phase, which consists of bouts to 15 points. If a fencer wins, then they will get promoted to the next round. If they lose, they will be eliminated from the competition.

It is worth mentioning at this point that tournaments can sometimes be all day affairs. Whilst organizers typically post 'close of registration' times (i.e. the time by which you must have checked in to confirm you are taking place in the event), the time you actually start fencing can range from 5 minutes after the close of registration to 3 hours after. Organizers do their best to ensure that tournaments run on time, and some events can be over quite quickly, but you should typically expect to spend at least 4 hours at an event, and sometimes more.

xii. Penalties

Penalties are scored against fencers who break a number of rules, either deliberately or more commonly, accidentally. Penalties can be divided into 3 categories. Yellow cards are the most minor offenses (things like accidentally covering target, having weapons which don't work and so on). Red cards, which give the opponent a free touch, are issued for more serious offenses such as deliberately hitting another fencer too hard, or if a yellow card has already been issued. The most serious offenses are Black cards, which mean automatic disqualification from a tournament. Black cards are generally only issued in cases of deliberate cheating, or if fencers or spectators are overly argumentative, either with each other, or with the referee. Yes, we did say 'spectators' – both fencers and spectators are subject to the rules, and both can be removed from the venue if their

behaviour warrants it. Yellow card penalties are not that uncommon, and whilst they can be upsetting for less experienced fencers, they should really be thought of as a learning experience. If fencers do not understand why they are given a penalty card, it is very important that they ask the referee (nicely) for an explanation, so they can avoid making the same mistake again and incurring a red card. If in doubt, again, please ask one of the coaching staff.

xiii. Where can you find information about tournaments

Tournament information can be found in many different locations and can be overwhelming if looking at a website that lists all tournaments throughout the U.S. and Canada. To make it easier for the WFC fencers, the Westdale Fencing Club website and forums are a great place to find information on upcoming tournaments. Coaches and fencers post the tournaments that would be most beneficial to the WFC fencers along with other information such as flight information, hotel information, and any other current logistics a fencer and/or parent might need. The Ontario Fencing Association website (<http://www.fencing.on.ca>) is also a great resource to utilize for tournament information, although the information on this site tends to be a little out of date. You can also talk to other parents and fencers about upcoming tournaments they might be going to.

If you are unsure at any time as to whether your child should be participating in a particular tournament, please talk with your child's coach before sending in any fees for a tournament.

E: PARENT'S ROLE

xiv. Please make sure your children have adequate supervision

For the safety and protection of all concerned, parents of under-aged fencers need to be present at all practices and tournaments unless specific arrangements for supervision have been made with other parents. We are fortunate to have a great team of coaches who are very good at what they do, but it's important to remember that their role is to teach fencing, and they have neither the time nor the expertise to also act as surrogate parents.

xv. Volunteer

Everyone at Westdale Fencing Club is a volunteer. Any volunteer-based organization welcomes the skills and talents of their members, and WFC is no different. Whilst you may not feel prepared or able to take on an official duty there are many small jobs that keep a club going. These include:

- Laundry (keeping the jackets clean)
- Mending or sewing
- Repairing foils or equipment
- Help with canteen at tournaments
- Tidying up the church / equipment
- Donating nutritious, non-perishable snacks or drinks

Helping at tournaments
Acting as supervisors
Assistance with advertising and promotion

Please be generous with your time. All of these jobs need doing on an ongoing basis. If a few people donate an hour or two of their time each month, the jobs are very manageable.

xvi. Be supportive at tournaments

An often misunderstood aspect of fencing is the role of the parent at tournaments. Fencing is a highly regulated sport with many protocols, expectations and rules. As parents we are not likely to know all these rules and regulations. We may see them as niceties, but they are not. We must never lose sight of the fact that this is a combat sport with the capacity to harm people. Most of the rules are in place to protect the fencers and the judges. While it would be impossible to list all the rules relating to the behaviour of those off the piste (that's you and me) here are a few things we are NOT allowed to do:

- a) we can not speak to judges while they are judging (even if they make mistakes or are being unfair)
- b) we cannot tell our fencer what to do
- c) we cannot yell or be disruptive
- d) we cannot try to intimidate other fencers or parents

What can we do:

- a) make sure fencers are where they are supposed to be when they are supposed to be there
- b) be supportive and encouraging (cheering is entirely appropriate!)
- c) have nutritious snacks and drinks/water available in between bouts
- d) maintain a positive outlook even if they are losing
- e) ask your coach to explain something you didn't understand, when they are free, not during the bout
- f) keep you fencer close by his/her teammates to show Club support
- g) take pictures to share on the Club Web page
- h) provide follow up support to the coaches, reinforcing and reminding fencers where required
- i) know when to be 'around' and when to give your fencer a little bit of space

xvii. What does home life have to do with fencing?

Fencing, like any activity, needs parental support and commitment. This means different things to different families, but it is vital that fencers feel supported in what they do. It is also very important that fencers maintain a happy balance between training, competition, school, friends, and all the other things that are important during this phase of their life. At the same time, it's important to recognize, especially in the more competitive programs that just as the coaches make a commitment to the fencers, fencers are making a commitment to their training, and to the club / coaches.

Parents need to make themselves available as fencers move into a higher level of competition and the athlete may have to work to stay ahead at school.

All fencers can benefit from a healthy diet. As stamina and muscle strength become more important, fencers will need to learn when to eat carbohydrates or proteins, when to drink, and how to look after themselves.

The most important role of the fencing parent is to be supportive of their own athlete's interests and performance, looking for signs of fatigue and encouraging them as they move forward.

Fencing can and should be a lifelong sport.