

THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH QUALITY OFFICIATING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL FENCING; SUGGESTIONS FOR FENCING ORGANIZERS

by

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In order to compete and win at high levels of fencing, a fencer must know and be trained in correct fencing actions. Correct fencing actions are those actions that comply with the rules of fencing and with the current interpretations of the rules of fencing at the highest levels, i.e., international and national levels. **Too often at the local level, fencing organizers do not hire competent fencing officials leading to incorrect interpretations of rules, leading to incorrect actions being perceived as correct, allowing bad fencers to win, and stifling the development of correct fencing.** This cycle of ineptitude is exacerbated by the nature of the fencer mentality. It is in the nature of fencers to be combative and to believe in the rectitude of their actions and beliefs, both in fencing and otherwise. Fencers after all are out to prove the truth of their assertions with the end of a sword. Hence, people at every level of fencing are absolutely sure they know what is right, about almost everything. Unfortunately, many of them are not as right as they would like, and so various inept versions of fencing rectitude are perpetuated. Until, of course, the local fencer goes to a national tournament and loses badly because he or she has learned incorrect actions at the local level.

In order to break the cycle of ineptitude, it is necessary for fencing organizers to hire competent fencing officials. Sometimes, the best fencing officials are fencing. Fencing organizers should not be afraid to ask them to officiate, especially if they have been eliminated from the competition. Allowing incompetent or inexperienced fencing officials to attempt to officiate the better fencers is a disservice to the fencers and to the sport of fencing. In fact, it often results in considerable ill will and unsportsmanlike behavior. Top athletes do not like being cheated. They engage in athletics, in part, to experience competition under fair circumstances. There is little subjective difference between the experience of being cheated and being denied touches due to the ignorance or ineptitude of a fencing official. Being paid and wearing a blue blazer are not proper substitutes for substantive ability. **It is often wise for organizers to allow the fencers in the final rounds of competition to chose the person they want to officiate,** regardless of whether this is a fellow fencer who has been previously eliminated. This minimizes the probability of subsequent complaints.

What is high quality fencing officiating and from whence does it come? The United States Fencing Association (USFA) has a standing committee named the Fencing Officials Committee (FOC). The FOC is composed experienced fencing officials, many of whom hold both national and international fencing official's licenses, who help draft and interpret fencing rules. Fencing rules are promulgated by the international governing body of fencing, Federation International d' Escrime (FIE). **The rules of fencing do not change rapidly; however, the interpretations of the rules change constantly.** The

interpretations of the rules are made by FIE officials. There is then what could be called a "trickle down" of the current interpretations to the fencing community. Obviously, those fencing officials, coaches, and fencers actively involved in international fencing have the best opportunity to discover what is *au current* with respect to fencing officiating. In fact, in the past, when few Americans participated in international fencing, they typically learned about current interpretations by losing bouts due to lack of understanding about what was or was not considered a correct fencing action. In addition, it is no secret that some foreign fencing officials were not beyond cheating for their countrymen, so every conceivable foul would be called against Americans, leading to a type of paranoia on the part of American officials regarding fouls. In order to attempt to combat this, American fencing officials are often encouraged to call every conceivable foul, leading to some ridiculous results, especially at the local level where few fencers need training for international competition. However, that is a subject for another time.

Fencing officials have ratings, just as do fencers. They are rated from 10 to 1, with 1 being the highest rating. Typically, highly rated fencing officials are those who are active in officiating at national fencing events. There they are instructed by fencing officials with international experience. Hence, as a general rule, highly rated fencing officials can be relied upon to understand what is *au current* with respect to fencing officiating. Below are the ten domestic classifications (10, the lowest, through 1, the highest) for fencing officials recognized by the USAF:

- A level 10 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a successful practical exam at a level equivalent to the finals of an E rated competition
- A level 9 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the finals of a D rated competition.
- A level 8 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the finals of a C rated competition.
- A level 7 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the finals of a B rated competition.
- A level 6 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the finals of an A rated competition.
- A level 5 rating requires a passing score on the written exam and a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the round of pools in an Open North American Cup competition. A level 5 rating must be earned before subsequent ratings can be earned.

- A level 4 rating requires a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the Direct Elimination round of 64 of an Open North American Cup competition.
- A level 3 rating requires a demonstrated proficiency at a level equivalent to the Direct Elimination round of 16 of an Open North American Cup competition.
- A level 2 rating requires a demonstrated proficiency in the finals of an Open North American Cup competition.
- A level 1 rating requires a demonstrated proficiency at any level of an Open North American Cup competition.

Of course, the politics of local fencing often result in certain categories of persons being used as fencing officials, regrettably sometimes even when more experienced people are available. More often than not, this is not in the best interests of the sport. **It is important for local fencers and officials to see and learn from the actions of the better fencers and fencing officials in the final rounds of direct elimination bouts.** Here are some of the typical categories of officials to be wary of:

The Good Ol' Volunteer: This person has been involved with helping organize the sport for years. He or she seems to know all about the sport, and is always willing to help out with directing. In truth, this person is usually not accomplished as a fencer or as a fencing official outside his or her own club. His or her officiating may appear to be cheating to a visitor who actually understands the sport, as it is practiced nationally.

The Long-time Local Coach: This person has been coaching locally for eons, but does not participate in or officiate at international or national competitions. He or she understands the basics of the sport, but does not keep up with current rules or current interpretations. Nevertheless, he or she is sure about everything, even if directly contrary to national standards.

The Foreign Coach: This person has moved into the local area from some exotic foreign place, and operates a local club. His or her assured demeanor seems to overlay authentic fencing knowledge. He or she may even have some exotic and difficult to verify qualifications from that small foreign place way back when. Beware. This person typically knows text book fencing from way back when, but has no clue as to how things are done here and now, but nobody can tell because the calls are incomprehensible and devoid of proper hand signals.

The Highest Low-Rated Local Official: This person has less than a 6 rating, but he or she is the highest rated of the local referees. This person went to the Summer Nationals or another training event and took the official refereeing seminar, passed the written test, and even demonstrated some proficiency on the practical examination. Yet, this person does not compete successfully or officiate on a regular basis at national events. This person loves the power of deciding fencing touches and handing out cards for fouls. He or she is often more concerned with fouls than with making correct

substantive calls. This person lacks the experience to officiate the best fencers, and he or she will cause ill will with inept and pompous rulings.

The Newly Minted Low-Rated Official: This person has recently received a referee rating but lacks the experience to make correct calls in high level bouts. Nevertheless, assured and self-important at having a referee rating, he or she will spend considerable time and effort on collateral matters, such as, checking for inspection marks, illegal switches, and issuing cards for minor matters, such as, sock violations. A difference between this official and The Highest Low-Rated Local Official is he or she will hesitate and stumble over calls with many "abstentions" or "not sure" calls, while the former will just go ahead and make bad calls, believe they are correct, and card anybody who disagrees. It is often said that allowing novice referees to officiate bouts between advanced fencers is good referee training. If the fencers do not mind, this is probably true. It is not true where the fencers do not expressly consent. The place for such training is in practice, preferably with an experienced referee looking over the shoulder of the novice and giving constructive criticism.

The Exception: Of course, there are exceptions to everything. There are competent and conscientious persons involved with fencing on all levels who do make an effort to understand the rules and current interpretations and who do considerable fencing officiating at local and regional levels. Fencing organizers will know the truth of their abilities by whether top fencers willingly choose them to officiate final bouts.

The Progressive: It is difficult to avoid falling into one or more of the above categories, but it does not necessarily have to be permanent. Hard work, willingness to accept constructive criticism from more experienced officials, and willingness to go to national events as a participant and official are necessary to move on up. Yet, top fencing officials are as rare as top fencers; there are not many around. If improvement remains elusive, one must simply accept one's position in the fencing hierarchy and willingly give way to the more experienced official for those last few direct elimination rounds.

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