

Fencing as a Western Martial Art

Other forms of fencing

Classical fencing

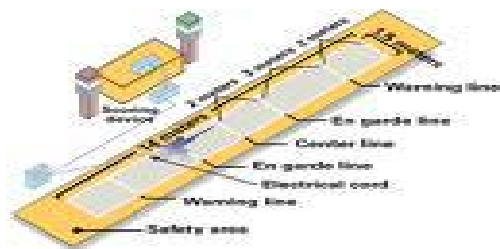


is the term used to describe one particular style of [fencing](#) in which one fences in a martially accurate manner with the weapons used. Emphasis is placed on training as if for a real encounter with sharp blades—with the goal being "to hit and not be hit". There is also a strong aesthetic sensibility concerning ideal technique.

A sense of the "ideal" classical fencer is provided by 19th century fencing Master [Louis Rondelle](#):

"A classical fencer is supposed to be one who observes a fine position, whose attacks are fully developed, whose hits are marvelously accurate, his parries firm and his ripostes executed with precision. One must not forget that this regularity is not possible unless the adversary is a party to it. It is a conventional bout, which consists of parries, attacks, and returns, all rhyming together."

Field of play



The field of play varies widely, but is generally linear. Contests may be conducted indoors or outdoors on a variety of surfaces. The fencing strip may be as narrow as three feet or as wide as 1.5 meters, with lengths varying between 10 and 20 feet (6.1 m).

Methods of judging



Classical fencing is always visually judged by a human jury. The number of judges and the criteria used to award points vary.

Pedagogy

Classical fencing is generally taught slowly, with basic mastery of simple skills demanded before more complex skills are taught. A well-trained classical fencer will have a very diverse repertoire of actions upon which to draw. Some schools explicitly have a conservatory goal, in which the entire system of fencing used by the school is taught in order to pass it down to future generations of fencers. This differs from modern sport fencing, in which emphasis is placed on teaching a relatively small number of the most useful techniques that can be executed efficiently in bouts.

Controversy

Classical fencing does not enjoy easy relations with the world of modern sport fencing. Proponents of each style of fencing accuse the other of various flaws in logic, history, [pedagogy](#), and personality. Classical fencers feel they approach fencing as a serious [martial art](#) with strong ties to actual combat, while maintaining strict rules on style, while most modern fencers approach fencing primarily as a [sport](#), much like [boxing](#) or [karate](#), with the object being to score the most points by any means permitted by the rules.

The styles differ from one another in many ways, including their purposes, goals, strategies, tactics, scoring systems and pedagogy. Each style claims aspects associated with the other—classical fencers sometimes apply sport rules to competitions (particularly as to foil), often based on old versions of FIE rules used prior to the advent of electrical scoring, and modern fencers insist that their style is more results-oriented, realistic and therefore more like actual combat. Additionally, classical fencing has no central authority, and there are several different styles of classical fencing with somewhat incompatible rules and methodologies.

In general, and despite the absence of a central authority to enforce standardized practices, classical fencers contend that the use of modern FIE rules and electronic scoring fundamentally alters virtually every aspect of fencing, including its goals, techniques, and teaching methods. Classical fencers contend that the indispensable goal of fencing is defense—to survive a contest that could be fatal if it were conducted with sharp weapons. Accordingly, classical fencers emphasize the importance of not being touched—to "hit *without* being hit," and contend that the rules and tactics of modern sport fencing undermine this basic principle.

Modern sport fencers contend that it is a mistake for classical fencers to believe their style of fencing is, or was ever intended to be, a more realistic simulation of sword fighting, which is actually the province of [historical fencing](#). They point out that classical fencing of the 19th century was primarily a gentleman's sport activity, described by [Egerton Castle](#) as "a superior sort of pastime" (See [Richard Cohen's](#) *By The Sword*, page xx, and the chapter titled *A Pursuit For Gentlemen*). The classical fencers named above were all famed sport fencers who rarely if ever duelled. The aesthetic sense conveyed by Louis Rondelle's "all rhyming together" quotation became more important than martial reality, and fencing was primarily done in fencing salons in a formalized, even genteel manner. Contemporary observers like Egerton Castle said that "things are done with the foil that would never be attempted in earnest with a sword". Dissatisfaction

with the unsuitability of classical foil for fencing with sharp weapons led to resurgence of the *épée* (Cohen, page 198).

Some contemporary proponents of classical fencing readily acknowledge that a foil or sabre bout, inasmuch as it is governed by artificial right-of-way ("ROW") rules, is not intended to realistically simulate a duel. Nonetheless, martial reality influences both classical and modern fencing, although expressed in incompatible ways. ROW rules determine who should be penalized if a double touch occurs based on which fencer first initiated a valid attack. Classical foil, for example, requires a fully-extended arm for an action to be considered a valid attack that gains priority, and the arm must be extended before forward motion of the legs begins. Modern sport fencing only requires that the weapon arm be *extending* (rather than fully extended), and the offensive action with the arm is often made at the same time as leg motion. This disagreement leads to conflicts when practitioners of one style are judged under rules of the other.

Electronic scoring apparatus also formalizes the time period that determines if two hits are considered simultaneous, rather than use a human judge's perspective as in classical fencing (and in FIE fencing prior to the introduction of electronic scoring). The FIE currently defines the minimum time between valid touches to be 350 milliseconds for foil, 40 milliseconds for *épée*, and 120 milliseconds for sabre. Touches made by both fencers within that interval are recognized by the scoring machine and are judged according to ROW rules (in foil and sabre), or considered a double touch for both fencers (*épée*). Touches that land following a preceding touch by the opponent outside that time interval are "locked out" and do not register on the machine at all. In one sense this is not so different from classical fencing—the same process is followed for a simultaneous touch in both styles; however, the method for determining if two touches were simultaneous is quite different. The current lockout times were reduced from longer times in 2005, with some controversy, as described in the article on [sabre](#). Classical fencers contend that these rules, which can only be implemented with the use of electronic scoring, encourage participants to be more aggressive and less concerned about defense than they would be under the classical approach.

Electrical scoring also records lighter touches, and touches to less-visible areas such as the back and flank, than would typically be recognized as valid or witnessed by human judges in a classical bout. Though such touches may be considered valid in some classical schools (and in the case of light touches to the chest, may even be considered "elegant"), they often go unobserved. Furthermore, the use of electronic scoring allows tactics such as the "flick"—a rapid, whip-like strike that triggers the electronic scoring machine, and thus earns a point, but would not constitute a fatal touch in a duel and is therefore not considered to be a legitimate tactic in the classical tradition.

Modern sport fencers contend that because duels were often fought to "first blood," and thus lethality not always a requirement, that the flick is a valid tactic since it would easily draw blood. The flick is controversial even within modern sport fencing, and did not emerge as a tactic until the 1990s. Rules were adjusted in the early 2000s to reduce its use, and it is only a factor in modern foil. Modern sport fencers also contend that electronic scoring is more realistic because

it records potentially lethal touches to hard-to-see target areas that would have drawn blood from a sharp blade, yet are under-reported by the visual judging used in classical fencing.

Also, classical schools generally treat the foil as a training tool, used to cultivate a beginner's fundamental skills before learning other weapons, besides as an end in itself. In contrast, it is not uncommon in modern sport fencing for beginners to start in a sabre or épée and never use foil as the common basic training tool. There are exceptions in both camps. For example, Roger Crosnier, the British National Fencing coach, in his book *Fencing with the Foil* (Barnes, 1951), states, "I am among those who firmly believe that the technique of foil paves the way for excellence at épée or sabre.", and this philosophy still holds in many sport schools. Likewise, starting all beginners in foil is not universal in classic fencing schools, now or in the 19th century. For example, students frequently started in sabre in Hungarian and Italian fencing schools. Nonetheless, in general terms these are differences between classical and modern sport fencing training methods.

Finally, many classical schools require proper form for a hit to be considered valid—a requirement that causes disagreement when modern fencers compete in classical tournaments. They contend that such a requirement never existed on the dueling ground, where a fencer would bleed even if hit with an attack made with improper form. These disagreements are fundamental to the different styles and do not appear to be reconcilable.

In light of these fundamental differences, classical and contemporary sport fencing have evolved into different pursuits, despite using similar equipment. While FIE-style participants greatly outnumber classical fencers, classical fencing has developed a substantial core of fencers and schools. Despite this, it is unlikely that contemporary classical fencing will ever have more than a minor influence on FIE-style sport fencing. Classical fencing has a large enough base that seeks to retain a classical approach, so it is also unlikely that modern fencing will have much effect upon classical fencing.

Classical fencing also has an uneasy relationship with [historical fencing](#). Historical fencing includes use of older weapon types such as rapier and smallsword as well as contemporary weapons, and can include grappling (wrestling), use of the unarmed hand, and other techniques prohibited in both sport and classical fencing, but frequently used when the sword was part of personal defense. Some historical fencing advocates consider classical fencing to be no more realistic than FIE-style fencing, and that both are sport activities using unrealistic weapons with techniques and conventions that were not typically used with sharp weapons in actual combat.

Competitive fencing

There are numerous inter-related forms of competitive fencing in practice, all of which approach the activity as a [sport](#), with varying degrees of connectedness to its historic past.

Olympic fencing (or simply "fencing") refers to the fencing seen in most competitions, including the [Olympic Games](#) and the [World Cup](#). Competitions are conducted according to rules laid down by the [Fédération Internationale d'Esgrime](#) (FIE), the international [governing body](#). These rules evolved from a set of conventions developed in [Europe](#) between mid 17th and

early 20th century with the specific purpose of regulating competitive activity. The three weapons used in Olympic fencing are [foil](#), [épée](#), and [sabre](#). In competition, the validity of touches is determined by the electronic scoring apparatus, so as to minimize human error and bias in refereeing.

Wheelchair fencing, also known as [jousting](#), an original [Paralympic](#) sport, was developed in post-World War II England. Minor modifications to the FIE rules allow [disabled](#) fencers to fence all three weapons. The most apparent change is that each fencer sits in a wheelchair fastened to a frame. Footwork is replaced by [torso](#) or arm movement, depending on the fencer's disability. The proximity of the two fencers tends to increase the pace of bouts, which require considerable skill. The weapons are identical to those used in Olympic fencing.

Other variants include *one-hit épée* (one of the five events which constitute [modern pentathlon](#)) and the various types of competitive fencing, whose rules are similar but not identical to the FIE rules. One example of this is the [American Fencing League](#) (distinct from the [United States Fencing Association](#)): the format of competitions is different, there is no electronic scoring, and the priority rules are interpreted in a different way. In a number of countries, the accepted practice at school and university level deviates slightly from the FIE format.

Historical fencing



This circa 1900 painting illustrates a typical *mensur* bout in [Heidelberg, Germany](#). The combatants begin the mensur from a static position, either in the "*verhängte Auslage*" (hanging guard) or in the "*steile Auslage*" (steep ward), with their swords high in the air. While neck, arms and torso are protected with thickly padded leather gear and, more recently [mail](#) shirts, the head typically remains uncovered except for the "*Paukbrille*", metal [goggles](#) to protect the eyes and nose. Different sets of rules

Historical fencing is a type of [historical martial arts reconstruction](#) based on surviving texts and traditions. Predictably, historical fencers study an extremely wide array of weapons from different regions and periods. They may work with [bucklers](#), [daggers](#), [polearms](#), [navajas](#), bludgeoning weapons, etc. One main preoccupation of historical fencers is with weapons of realistic weight, which demand a different way of manipulating them from what is the norm in modern Fencing. For example, light weapons can be manipulated through the use of the fingers (more flexibility), but more realistically-weighted weapons must be controlled more through the wrist and elbow. This difference is great and can lead to drastic changes even in the carriage of the body and footwork in combat. There is considerable overlap between classical and historical fencing, especially with regard to 19th-century fencing practices.

(Comments) regulating the Mensur in different cities may admit additional protective gear for lower face, ears, or existing scars. Finally, there are several other forms of fencing which have little in common besides history with either of the other two classifications.

Academic fencing



or *mensur*, is a German student tradition that has become mostly extinct but is still sometimes practiced in [Germany](#), [Switzerland](#) and [Austria](#) as well as in [Flanders](#) and [Latvia](#). The combat, which uses a cutting weapon known as the *schläger*, uses sharpened blades and takes place between members of [student corporations](#) - "[Studentenverbindungen](#)" - in accordance with a strictly delineated set of conventions. It uses special protective gear that leaves most of the head and face, excluding the eyes, unprotected.

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(The special goggles are called *Paukbrille*.) The ultimate goal is to develop personal character, therefore there is no winner or loser and flinching is not allowed. Acquiring a proper cut on the face with the sharp blade, called a *Schmiss* ([German](#) for "smite"), was considered a visible sign of manly courage and status as "*Akademiker*", or member of the professional upper class. However, tales of cuts being intentionally manipulated by sewing in horsehairs or rubbing wounds with vinegar or salt have been discredited as popular myths since the 1880s.

Stage fencing



seeks to achieve maximum [theatrical](#) impact in representing a wide range of styles, including both modern and historical forms of fencing. Theatrical fight scenes are [choreographed](#) by a Fight Director, and fencing actions are amended so that an audience with no understanding of the minutiae of fencing techniques can follow the narrative of the action, both physical and dramatic.

Recreational role-playing fencing

Recreational role-playing often incorporates fencing in the context of historical or [fantasy](#) themes in the [Society for Creative Anachronism](#) or [live-action role-playing games](#). Technique and scoring systems vary widely from one group to the next, as do the weapons. Depending on local conventions, participants may use modern sport fencing weapons, period weapons, or weapons invented specifically for the purpose, such as [boffers](#).