

History of Fencing

Ancient Times

The history of fencing begins in ancient Egypt in roughly 1200 B.C. Its popularity has sustained it over thousands of years, keeping it as a part of the Olympics to this day. Although it is not a major sport in the US, it does have a strong following, and its fans are passionate.

Fencing was also a popular sport in ancient Greece and Rome, with the Greeks and Romans participating in *lundi*, or fencing schools. However, the fencing that we know today more likely comes from rapier fencing, originating in Spain in the fifteenth century, which involved more thrusting than the fencing done by the ancient Egyptians. Narvaez and Thibault headed up the Spanish school of fencing, yet their style was complicated and hard to follow. Italians Agrippa (inventor of fencing positions *prime*, *seconde*, *terce* and *quatre*) and Capo Ferro developed their own school of fencing, which gathered a large following and contributed many fencing moves that are used today.

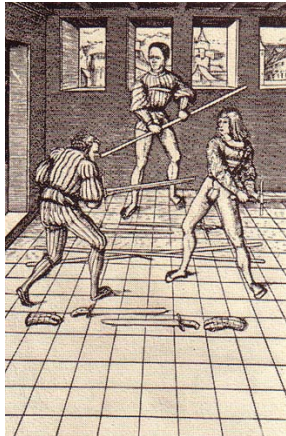
Renaissance

Fencing teachers and schools can be found in European historical records dating back at least to the 12th century. In later times some of these teachers were paid by rich nobles to produce books about their fighting systems, called treatises.

The earliest known surviving treatise on fencing stored at the [Royal Armouries Museum](#) in [Leeds, England](#), dates from around 1300 AD and is from [Germany](#). It is written in [medieval Latin](#) and [Middle High German](#) and deals with an advanced system of using the [sword](#) and [buckler](#) (small [shield](#)) together. From 1400 AD onwards there are an increasing number of fencing treatises surviving from across Europe, with the majority from the 15th century coming from Germany and [Italy](#). In this period these arts were largely seen as '[knightly](#)' and for the nobility - hence most of these treatises deal with the knightly weapons, such as [rondel dagger](#), [longsword](#), [spear](#), [pollaxe](#) and armoured fighting mounted and on foot. Some treatises do cover the weapons more usually used by the common classes

however, such as [großes Messer](#) and sword and buckler. [Wrestling](#), both with and without weapons, is also featured heavily in the early fencing treatises

By the sixteenth century, with the widespread adoption of the [printing press](#) and the increase in the urban population, together with other social changes, the number of fencing treatises being produced increased dramatically. Fencing schools had been forbidden in some European cities (particularly in England and [France](#)) during the medieval period, though court records show that such schools were kept illegally. After around 1500 it seems to have become more socially and legally acceptable to carry swords openly in most parts of Europe, and the increasing fortunes of the middle classes meant that more men were aspiring to carry swords, learn fencing and be seen as gentlemen.



By the middle of the 16th century many European cities contained great numbers of fencing schools, often clustered together, such as in [London](#) in 'Hanging Sword Lane'. Italian fencing masters were particularly popular in the 16th century and they went abroad and set up schools in many foreign cities. The Italian styles of fencing at this time, bringing concepts of science to the art, were seen as revolutionary and new, and they appealed to the new [Renaissance](#) mindset.

In 16th century Germany compendia of older *Fechtbücher* techniques were produced, some of them printed, notably by [Paulus Hector Mair](#) (in the 1540s) and by [Joachim Meyer](#) (in the 1570s), based on the teachings of the 14th century [Liechtenauer](#) tradition. In the 16th century German fencing developed sportive tendencies. Eventually the newer Italian attitude to fencing grew in popularity in Germany as well as elsewhere.

Today there are many groups around the world recreating the old fencing systems, using the surviving treatises. Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) are growing fast, bringing in people from many backgrounds, including those who have taken part in modern sport fencing and Asian martial arts.

Early modern period

Strictly, the [European dueling sword](#) is a [basket](#) and cage [hilted](#) weapon specifically used in [duels](#) from the late 17th to the 19th century. It developed through several forms of the [rapier](#) to the [smallsword](#) — reflecting the changes from a cutting style of swordplay to a thrusting style ('foining'). This was a result of increasing specialization in their use on the dueling field, and the social stigma attached to carrying and using swords too obviously adapted to the actual "work" of warfare. The smallsword, and the last version of

the rapier, were made possible only by [metallurgical](#) advances in the seventeenth century as high [toughness steels](#) became more readily available. ^{[[citation needed](#)]}.

In [England](#), it was not uncommon for fencing masters to take on other fencing masters in a fight, often to the death, often with intervals for medical staff to dress wounds. Such spectacles were generally held in [beargardens](#), particularly in the [Southwark](#) neighborhood near [London](#).^[2]



The [foil](#) was invented in [France](#) as a training technique in the middle of the 18th century; it provided practice of fast and elegant thrust fencing with a smaller and safer weapon than an actual dueling sword. Fencers blunted its point by wrapping a foil around the blade or fastening a knob on the point ("blossom", [French fleuret](#)). In addition to practice, some fencers took away the protection and used the sharp foil for duels. [German](#) students took up that practice and developed the [Pariser](#) ("Parisian") thrusting small sword for the *Stoßmensur* ("thrusting mensur"). After the dress sword was abolished, the *Pariser* became the only weapon for thrust fencing in German colleges and universities.



"Pariser" small sword, derived from the French [foil](#)

Since thrust fencing with a sharply pointed blade of any kind is quite dangerous, many students died from (especially) pierced [lungs](#) (*Lungenfuchser*). However, a counter movement had already started in Göttingen in the 1750s, with the invention of the *Göttinger Hieber*, a predecessor of the modern *Korbschläger*, a new weapon for cut fencing. In the following years, the *Glockenschläger* was invented in Eastern Germany universities, also for cut fencing.

1800 to 1918

Thrust fencing (using the *Pariser*), and cut fencing (using *Korbschläger* or *Glockenschläger*), existed in parallel in Germany during the first decades of the 19th century, according to local preferences. Thrust fencing was especially popular in [Jena](#), [Erlangen](#), [Würzburg](#) and [Ingolstadt/Landshut](#), two towns where the predecessors of [Munich University](#) were located. The last thrust *Mensur* is recorded to have taken place in Würzburg in 1860.

Until the first half of the 19th century all types of academic fencing can be seen as [duels](#), since all fencing with sharp weapons was about honour. No combat with sharp blades took place without a formal insult. For duels involving non-students, e.g. military officers, the *academic sabre* became usual, apparently being derived from the military [sabre](#). It was then a heavy weapon with a curved blade and a [hilt](#) similar to the *Korbschläger*.



The term "Classical Fencing" is a relatively new invention, retroactively applied to select periods and methods. As it is understood today, [classical fencing](#) derives most directly from the 19th and early-20th century national fencing schools, especially in [Italy](#) and [France](#), although other pre-[World War II](#) styles such as [Russian](#) and [Hungarian](#) are also considered classical. Masters and legendary fencing figures such as [Giuseppe Radaelli](#), Louis Rondelle, Masaniello Parise, the Greco brothers, [Aldo Nadi](#) and his rival Lucien Gaudin are today considered typical practitioners of this period.

Fencing was one of the disciplines at the very first [Olympics Games](#) in the [summer of 1896](#). *Épée* and *Sabre* events have been held at every Summer Olympics; foil events have been held at every Summer Olympics except 1908.

Scoring was done by means of four judges who determined whether a touch had been made. Two side judges stood behind and to the side of each fencer, and watched for hits made by that fencer on the opponent's target. A director followed the fencing from a point

several feet away from the centre of the action. At the end of each action, after calling "Halt!", the director would describe the action, and then poll the judges in turn. If the judges differed, or abstained, the director could overrule them.

This method had serious limitations, though it was universally used. As described in an article in the London newspaper, *The Daily Courier*, on June 25, 1896: "Every one who has watched a bout with the foils knows that the task of judging the hits is with a pair of amateurs difficult enough, and with a well-matched pair of maîtres d'escrime well-nigh impossible." There also were problems with bias: well-known fencers were often given the benefit of mistakes (so-called "reputation touches"), and in some cases there was outright cheating. Aldo Nadi complained about this in his autobiography *The Living Sword* in regard to his famous match with Lucien Gaudin.

The *Daily Courier* article is an early description of a new invention, the electrical scoring machine, that would revolutionize fencing.

1918 to present

[Dueling](#) went into sharp decline after [World War I](#). After [World War II](#), dueling went out of use in [Europe](#) except for very rare exceptions. Training for duels, once fashionable for males of [aristocratic](#) backgrounds (although fencing masters such as Hope suggest that many people had only taken one or two lessons, and thus considering themselves trained), all but disappeared, along with the classes themselves. Fencing continued as a sport, with tournaments and championships. However, the need to actually prepare for a duel with "sharps" vanished, changing both training and technique.

Starting with [épée](#) in the 1930s, side judges were replaced by an electrical scoring apparatus, with an audible tone and a red or green light indicating when a touch landed. [Foil](#) was electrified in the 1950s, [sabre](#) in the 1980s. The scoring box reduced the bias in judging, and permitted more accurate scoring of faster actions, lighter touches, and more touches to the back and flank than were possible with human judges.

Forms of fencing

Contemporary fencing is divided in three broad categories:

- Competitive fencing
- Fencing as a [Western martial art](#)
- Other forms of fencing

Competitive fencing



Russian Igor Tourchine and American Weston Kelsey fence in the second round of the Men's Individual Épée event in the [2004 Summer Olympics](#) at the Helliniko Fencing Hall on [August 17, 2004](#).

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. The youngest wheelchair fencing champion in the history of the sport, is named George Kenneth Robinson IV, also known as Kenny. He was in third grade when he won and originally hails from England.

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.

Competition formats

Fencing Tournament. (Note the grounded conductive strips on the floor.)

Fencing tournaments are varied in their format, and there are both individual and team competitions. A tournament may comprise all three weapons, both individual and team, or it may be very specific, such as an *Épée Challenge*, with individual épée only. And, as in many sports, men and women compete separately in high-level tournaments. Mixed-gender tournaments are commonplace at lower-level events, especially those held by individual fencing clubs. There are two types of event, individual and team. An individual event consists of two parts: the pools, and the direct eliminations.

In the pools, fencers are divided into groups, and every fencer in a pool will have the chance to fence every other fencer once. There are typically seven fencers in a pool. If the number of fencers competing is not a multiple of seven, then there will usually be several pools of six or eight. After the pools are finished, the fencers are given a ranking, or "seed," compared to all other fencers in the tournament, based primarily on the percent of bouts they won, then based secondarily on the difference between the touches they scored and the touches they received. Once the seeds have been determined, the direct elimination round starts. Fencers are sorted in a table of some power of 2 (16, 32, 64, etc.) based on how many people are competing. Due to the fact that it is highly unlikely for the number of fencers to be exactly a power of two, the fencers with the best results in the pools are given byes or the bottom seeded fencers are eliminated. The winner carries on in the tournament, and loser is eliminated. Typically no one has to fence for third place (the exception is if the tournament is a qualifying tournament with limited slots for continuation). Instead, two bronze medals are given to the losers of the semi-final round.

Team competition involves teams of three fencers. A fourth fencer can be allowed on the team as an alternate, but as soon as the fourth has been subbed in, they cannot substitute again. The modern team competition is similar to the pool round of the individual competition. The fencers from opposing teams will each fence each other once, making for a total of nine matches. Matches between teams are three minutes long, or to 5 points, and the points then carry onto the next bout, thus making it a forty-five touch bout fought by six fencers. Unlike individual tournaments, team tournaments almost always fence for bronze.