

A PARENT'S GUIDE – THIS IS WHAT YOUR CHILD HAS LET YOU IN FOR...!

So your child has started to do some fencing. This short guide takes you through the **basics of fencing**, explains **how fencing is organised** on a local and national level and **how your child can progress** with the Grade scheme and in competitions.

Is It Safe For Him/Her To Go Fencing? The answer is a definite **'Yes!'** The sport has an excellent safety record and is probably the safest of non-contact combat sports. Every active sport can lead to strains and sprains (though these should be at a minimum if everyone warms up properly) but apart from the odd bruise it is extremely unusual for any other injury to occur. It is probably because the sport has the *potential* to be dangerous that we take such good care to ensure that accidents do not happen. Everyone in the room, known as a "Fencing Salle", **must** behave sensibly. Every parent and fencer is required to sign our club Code of Conduct, which specifically sets out the standards of safety and behaviour expected. Every one of our fencers learns the first rule of fencing right from the start: **SAFETY!**

How Did The Sport Get To Where It Is Today? Fencing developed from sword fighting, but as you would expect we make moves and actions in the sport that you would never do if the swords were sharp. Training for battle and for duelling with real swords took place with practice weapons and was led by fencing masters. It was natural for combatants to test their skill against each other in non-lethal situations and so the sport of fencing was born. Fencing was one of the original sports of the modern Olympics and has been there ever since. A few of the rules have been changed over the last 10 years or so to take into account modern technology. This has made the sport more understandable to the non-fencing spectator, but the basic idea of scoring hits on your opponent and not being hit yourself has remained the same.

Why Is There More Than One Type Of Weapon? There are three weapons used in the modern Olympic sport of fencing and they each developed from different traditions. All three weapons share many common features, such as the way the fencer stands and the fencing strip, or **Piste**, on which the fencing takes place.

The Foil This is the weapon with which most people in Britain start to fence. The foil is the lightest of the weapons and is a 'Point' weapon; which means that you can only score a hit with the end of the foil. It also means that you can't score a hit with the side of the foil. Hacking and bashing like Peter Pan and Captain Hook is not only a waste of time and energy that can lead to injury (see the section above about behaving sensibly) but also won't score hits. The foil has only ever been a sporting weapon, derived from the days when gentlemen carried lightweight swords more as a fashion and status statement than with any aggressive intent. When fencing became an essential skill for young gentlemen there were no masks to protect the face. This explains why there are some parts of the body that are 'off-target'. Hence the target at foil is the trunk of the body, not including the head, arms and legs. The target follows the line of the groin at the front and finishes just below the waist at the back. You may also imagine that any hit with a real sword to the trunk was likely to cause serious if not fatal injury, so it was good practice to aim for that area.

Imagine a duel in the Eighteenth Century. If your opponent attacks you and you don't attempt to defend yourself, you would have been hurt. The convention in foil fencing, therefore, is that if your opponent **starts to attack** you then you must stop the attack in some way before you have the right to try to hit them. Hence, Foil is described as a "**Conventional Weapon**" (ie it is used according to certain conventions or rules). *Attacking* means straightening your sword arm towards your opponent whilst threatening their target with the point of your foil. The normal way of stopping the attack is to **Parry** the blade, that is to deflect it to one side, even momentarily, away from your target area. This gives you the right to try to hit your opponent, called a **Riposte**. The right to attack thus passes from fencer to fencer during a bout according to the moves they make. You have to train the reaction to defend yourself first before trying to get a hit yourself. Beginners find this a challenge at first, because the natural instinct is to attack back the instant you feel

yourself being attacked! So they have to learn 'controlled patience' and to use their brains as well as their instinctive reactions. When fencing in competition, and serious training, you are wired up to electric apparatus. This shows a coloured light when a hit on the scoring part of the body is made and a white light when anything else is hit.

The Epee This is also a 'Point' weapon, this time developed from the days of duelling with rapiers. It is the combat weapon and the target is the whole body. There is no rule of priority as there is in foil fencing. Almost all Epee is fenced using electric apparatus to illuminate coloured lights. The recording equipment shows only one light if you hit slightly before your opponent, but if both hits are within a very short time then both players score a hit and both lights light up.

The Sabre The Sabre is a **Cutting Weapon** which means that this time you can score with the edge of the sword (budding Peter Pans and Captains Hooks take note!). You can score with the point as well but it doesn't happen very often. The weapon developed from the cavalry sabre and this explains why the area you try to hit is the body above the waist. (It would be a bit silly to try to cut at the horse when the soldier has got the other sabre). It is also a **Conventional Weapon**, like the foil, meaning that if you are being attacked you have to **Parry** first before you can **Riposte**.

OK, Now I Know What Is Going On, How Is It Organised? Local fencing is organised around schools and clubs, such as Radcliffe Sword Club. The adult section takes young people from age 16 and the Junior Section takes children from age 10. This is where we learn to fence, train and, hopefully, have fun. Quite a lot of people simply enjoy recreational fencing, learning and practising with friends. The sport, however, is a competitive one and a large part of the enjoyment is competing against other people because fencers can truly measure their progress in this way. This is where the wider organisations come in at County and Regional level. Radcliffe Sword Club is part of the **Notts and Derbys Fencing Union**, which itself is part of the **East Midlands Region England Fencing** comprising Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The Regions and the Counties have independent but connected structures. The committees exist to organise competitions to find Regional and County champions, run training courses and select teams for representative competitions – areas which are generally beyond the scope of any one club to organise. All of these are done at both Youth and Adult level.

East Midlands Region is part of **England Fencing**, the National Governing Body of fencing in England. Beyond this level fencing's supra-national governing body is **British Fencing**. For those who may have known something about fencing in the past the name was only changed from The Amateur Fencing Association in 1996. This body organises national championships, picks teams for the World Championships and Olympics and registers a series of individual competitions throughout the country. British Fencing devolves much of the governance of the sport to the Home Nations; England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Now I Know Who Does What. So How Does This Effect My Child's Progress in Fencing?

Badges For a lot of children their progress in many areas of life is measured by badges and certificates and fencing is no exception. There is a 9-stage grade system at each weapon which starts at a basic level and by the time it gets to Grade 9 is quite involved! The coaches will teach these grades and your child will be examined on the theory and practical aspects of the sport. There is no compulsion to go in for these grade exams but our experience is that most youngsters have a go at them, and we make sure they are ready to pass when they enter. There is no charge for being examined but there is a charge for the certificate and the badge. These badges are great for instilling confidence to help with the real business of fencing, being able to put your knowledge into practice and beat an opponent! A fencer training regularly can ordinarily achieve two grades a year.

If your child is going to fence anywhere other than at Radcliffe Sword Club Junior Section then it will either be in a team match against another school or club or at an individual competition.

There are lots of these organised by different people. Inter-club matches are great fun and are organised on an ad-hoc basis. Most coaches at clubs are volunteers and have other commitments and those who are professional or semi-professional have to work hard most evenings. **The help of parents is very much needed to assist at such club events. No one needs to be nervous about their lack of knowledge of fencing because the coaches look after the “technical” bits.** More formally organised are individual competitions where the winners receive medals. These are held at County and Regional level. In addition there are a series of junior events round the country sponsored by Leon Paul Equipment, who are the major manufacturers of fencing equipment in the UK. The series is called The Leon Paul Junior Series (LPJS for short). The age groups are described below but in all cases age is determined by being under the relevant age on 1st January of the year in question.

County Events With a beginners' event, an intermediate event and an age group event there are a number which children can enter. Age group events are split into four groups; Under-12, Under-14, Under-16 and Under-18, except that there are no Under-12 events at Epee and Sabre. The fencing “season” follows roughly the academic year (**Radcliffe Sword Club Junior Section meets Mondays during term time**) and to qualify for a specific age group you have to be under that age on 1st January in the middle of the season. Fencing in and winning or doing well in county events is a great introduction to competition.

Regional (East Midlands) Events The East Midlands organises 3 junior events during each season and again these are split into the 4 even-numbered age groups. The fencer who does best over the 3 competitions becomes the East Midlands Champion at that age group and weapon. All of this sounds very high powered but we can assure you that it isn't. Fencers are a friendly bunch (when not fencing each other!) and no one should feel intimidated by their lack of knowledge. If you turn up anywhere and say “Help, I don't know what to do!” you will find half a dozen people keen and willing to give you a helping hand. One of the 3 competitions is designated to be what is called “The BYC Qualifier”. BYC is the British Youth Championships. This is contested by the top fencers from each Region in the country (at least 3 per Region) over one weekend.

Leon Paul Junior Series Leon Paul Equipment is a major manufacturer of fencing equipment in the UK (though there are other suppliers) and they co-ordinate a series of independently organised junior competitions. The age groups for the LPJS are the odd years ie, Under-9, 11, 13, 15 & 17. There are between 5 and 8 events spread between Edinburgh and Plymouth depending on which weapon you fence. Under 9s get medals for the events but there is no national ranking. This is in line with the idea of keeping competitive pressure under control for the younger age group. From the Under-11 age group upward the fencer who scores the most points in their top few events wins the series for the year. The year for the LPJS runs from January to December. Two events are held in the East Midlands - in February (Nottingham) and in September (Leicester).

Radcliffe Sword Club Junior Section encourages all its members to enter competitions at the appropriate level and age group when we (and they) feel they are ready. The club coaches accompany our fencers to competitions to encourage and support them. We routinely send out newsletters and flyers to inform you of competitions and venues. No member is ever forced to compete if they do not wish to.

And Where Can It Go From There? We know that not everyone would be as bitten by the fencing bug as we have been. In fencing, there is no quick pay-off and considerable application and effort is needed to become a competent fencer. Your child may decide to try fencing out as one of a number of sports that he or she is investigating. Apart from the course fees and club subscriptions, there is no charge for equipment. If your child takes to fencing then there are lots of opportunities for the keen fencer. These can include representing the East Midlands at Cadet (Under 17) level and at Senior level, competing in the national circuit of open competitions and as far as representing England and Great Britain at Junior or Senior level. And then of course there's

London 2012! Well, we can all dream, can't we? Although there has been a remarkable growth in the popularity of the sport in the past five years fencing is a sport with a small but dedicated following and is likely to remain so. Perhaps that explains why the community of fencers is a very friendly one.

The club also seeks sponsorship to ensure that we can continue to provide the necessary equipment for all young people who wish to learn this exciting sport. Please contact the secretary if you are able to help us in this way.