

**GUIDELINES ON SAFETY IN FENCING FOR FENCERS, COACHES,  
REFEREES, CLUBS AND COMPETITION ORGANISERS**

These Guidelines for all age groups are issued by British Fencing to ensure that Fencing remains one of the safest sports.

Almost all serious fencing injuries are caused by broken blades, so please pay particular attention to section 2(h).

The BFA now specifies certain minimum safety standards for fencing clothing in terms of the European CEN standards.

These standards apply to all BFA fencing with steel weapons, at competitions and everywhere else that fencing is taking place.

The standards are shown in a chart at the end of these Safety Guidelines.

**Fencers** should apply these Guidelines to themselves and to anyone with whom they are fencing. If your opponent's blade is soft, for example, you are the one that may suffer if it breaks.

**Children.**

Children under the age of ten should fence with weapon blades of size 0 and children under the age of 14 should normally fence with weapon blades of size 3 or less, such as they would be required to use in competitions for their age. This will enhance their safety, comfort and enjoyment of our sport.

The BFA has a policy on child protection – see BFA website for details.

**Coaches/instructors** have a special responsibility for safety during training and should especially study section 3 + appendix 1. They should also give very careful consideration to the circumstances in which they are prepared to instruct pupils who are not wearing full protective clothing.

**Referees** are the guardians of safety in competitions. They have the authority to prevent the use of unsafe equipment and to penalise dangerous play. It is in the best interests of the fencers and the sport that they should always do so.

These Guidelines have been drawn up in accordance with contemporary Rules for Competitions. In the event of these rules changing and laying down more rigorous safety requirements, the requirements of the rules will naturally override the Guidelines. The latest version refers to fencing with foam and plastic weapons as well as steel ones.

Accidents and injuries are rare in fencing. If everyone were to follow these guidelines all the time, they would be even more rare.

Keith Smith  
President  
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## **2. Accident Prevention - Fencers' Responsibility:**

Fencers are responsible for ensuring that their personal equipment is in a safe condition, and in particular that it conforms to the following requirements:-

**a) Masks:** Fencers must wear masks of appropriate size conforming to the minimum safety standard of CEN 1 (350N – see chart on last page).

No attempt should be made to repair the steel mesh of a mask; if the mask is weak or damaged, it should be thrown away.

Masks should be checked for the following defects:

- i) Weakness due to rusting.
  - ii) Softness, holes or excessive deformation from the original shape.
  - iii) The bib not properly attached or curling up.
  - iv) Gaps at the side or under the chin.
  - v) Poor means of retention on the head, making the mask liable to come off.
- Every fencer must wear a mask back-strap. Referees should apply to those fencers without back-straps the penalty for appearing on the piste with equipment that does not conform with the Rules for Competitions. A back-strap consists of elastic at least 35 mm wide, secured to the mask side mesh at each end, passing UNDER any mask spring piece at the back, and tensioned to keep the mask firmly in place. It must stay fastened and tensioned during fencing.
- vi) In the case of transparent masks, make sure that the transparent visor is in good condition with no evidence of any crazing or cracking and safely secured to its retaining frame. The same CEN 1 minimum safety standards apply to transparent masks as to conventional masks.

### **b) Jackets & Breeches:**

- i) Jackets should be of the correct length and correctly fitting, and fastened on the opposite side to the sword arm, or at the back.
- ii) There should be a minimum of 10cms (4 inches) overlap between breeches and jacket when fencer is on guard.
- iii) On no account should clothing be used which is damaged, shows visible tears, or has been corroded or weakened by excessive use.
- iv) Jackets must comply with the minimum safety standard of CEN 1 (350N – see chart on last page).
- v) Breeches must comply with the minimum safety standard of CEN 1 (350N – see chart on last page). Breeches should be closed below the knee.
- vi) Please note that if both fencers are using non-electric foil blades or, at all three weapons size 3 or smaller blades, breeches may be replaced by strong full-length trousers or tracksuit trousers, provided all openings/pockets are zipped/ sewn/taped closed – see chart on last page. Note also that some competition organisers may specify different or additional clothing regulations for participating fencers.
- vii) The strength of some protective clothing (eg., in particular that made of Kevlar) may be reduced if the Wash & Care instructions are not followed.

**c) Plastrons:** A simple under-jacket or T-shirt is not sufficient – plastrons must be worn. For minimum safety standards for plastrons see chart on last page.

**d) Socks** should always be covered by the bottom of the breeches, so that no bare skin is showing.

**e) Shoes:** Shoes should have a sole that grips the floor, and should be replaced if the soles are worn.

**f) Women's Breast Protectors:** It is compulsory for women to wear breast protectors and it is recommended that girls wear breast protectors at least from the age of ten or from the onset of puberty if earlier.

**g) Gloves:** The gauntlet should be long enough and firm enough to cover approximately half the forearm and remain over the sleeve of the jacket whilst fencing. Gloves should not have any opening other than the one for the body wire; they should be inspected regularly for any holes and tears.

#### **h) Weapons- Blades:**

**a) Broken Blades.** Penetration by a broken blade is almost the only cause of serious fencing injuries. One of the most important accident prevention measures is, therefore, to reduce the possibility of a blade breaking during a bout. There are four ways of doing this:

- i) Never use a blade that shows signs of 'softness' (see b) Weapons checking i) below) or is badly bent or kinked.
- ii) Consider using a blade made out of a special steel, such as maraging steel, which on average will last longer than a blade of conventional steel.
- iii) Never fence against anyone who is using a blade that shows signs of 'softness'.
- iv) Referees should eliminate dangerous play by firmly applying the rules.

**b) Weapons checking.** Weapons should be regularly checked to ensure they are in a safe usable condition.

**i)** Blades should be observed and tested to see whether any portion is "soft", that is to say whether any portion of the blade bends more than the rest. "Softness" indicates a dangerous weakness that may lead to a break. A 'soft' portion is indicated when a blade bends into an irregular or uneven curve. A new blade should be tested by placing the point on the floor, depressing the top about six inches and checking that it curves evenly.

If blades are 'soft' or severely bent, they should not be used.

**ii)** If blades develop sharp edges or splinters, these should be rounded with an emery cloth; they should never be filed or ground.

**iii)** Sabre blade points should not have become sharp by continual scraping on the piste. The end of the blade must be folded over onto itself or fashioned in one piece to form a button which, viewed end on, must have a square or rectangular section of 4 mm. minimum.

**iv)** The point of a non-electric foil or épée (including a dummy electric foil blade) must be covered with a commercially produced plastic button or an integrated button.

**j) Weapons - Guards:** Continuous use of a weapon can leave very sharp edges round the guard circumference, which can produce quite severe cuts on the opponent's knee, leg or hand. Such guards should not be used. Guards which are dented constituting a blade trapping hazard should not be used.

**k) FIE Weapon Requirements:** The FIE has laid down equipment standards which fencers must observe in order to compete in the Olympic Games, in World Championships and in all 'A' grade/ World Cup-events.

**l) When fencing with foam or plastic weapons.**

- i) For all fencing with foam or plastic weapons a plastic facemask specifically designed for this purpose or a regulation fencing mask should always be worn.
- ii) other than the above, for fencing with foam weapons there are no clothing recommendations.
- iii) For fencing with plastic weapons a long sleeved top should be worn and the legs should be covered at least down to knee level.

**3. Accident Prevention During Lessons:**

a) During lessons – both individual and class – when steel weapons are being used:-

i) The instructor should normally wear full protective clothing, the pupil should normally at a minimum wear the full protective clothing required for those fencing non-electric foil (see chart at the end of these Safety Guidelines).

ii) In the case of pupils aged 18 or older (and, for pupils under the age of 18, with written parental/guardian consent), if the instructor considers that particular circumstances justify less than full protective clothing (see a) above) being worn, they should draw pupils' attention to any accident or injury that could result because full protective clothing is not worn.

iii) Furthermore, the following items should always be worn.

- The instructor should always wear: A mask; a fencing jacket and plastron or a teaching jacket and plastron combined, a glove.
- The pupil should always wear: A mask and glove.

b) When foam or plastic weapons are being used:-

- i) the pupil should always comply with para.2.1) i-iii) above.
- ii) For plastic weapons only, when giving individual lessons the coach should wear a mask as in 2.1) i) above.

c) The instructor should ensure that:

- i) The venue is adequate for the activity.
- ii) The venue has an adequate first aid kit.
- iii) The class does not exceed recommended numbers for the available space and the available number of instructors.
- iv) All fencers are aware of emergency evacuation procedures.
- v) All fencers have been given a thorough briefing on good safety practices in fencing and been made aware of these BFA Safety Guidelines.
- vi) All fencers have been advised of the correct use of the equipment and the potential dangers of mishandling it. (FOR FURTHER DETAILS SEE APPENDIX 1).

- vii) If there are any fencers in the class who have health problems (e.g. asthma, diabetes) which may cause difficulties during training, the instructor should be fully aware of the best way of dealing with this.
- viii) In normal circumstances a class should not be left unattended.

#### **4. Accident Prevention in Clubs and at Competitions:**

- a) Club officers, instructors and competition organisers have responsibility for ensuring that the accident prevention precautions in respect of premises are observed. They should also ensure as far as practicable that individual fencers observe their own accident prevention responsibilities, and that the rules to prevent accidents during lessons are observed.
- b) Non-fencers should not normally use the fencing area as a thoroughfare; if this is unavoidable they must take particular care when crossing an area on which fencing is taking place.
- c) Piste-laying  
Due consideration should be given to: the age group; the weapon; the standard of fencing; and a safe position for the referee and for spectators.  
The following distances are recommended for competitions:-
  - i) between the edges of adjacent pistes on the side where unattended boxes are placed: not less than 1 metre.
  - ii) between the edges of adjacent pistes on the side used for refereeing: 2.5 metres. If the distance is less, the referee should wear some form of protection, such as a mask or goggles.
  - iii) between any person (e.g. scorers, box operators, spectators) and the edge of the piste: 1.25 metres.
  - iv) total distance between the rear line of two pistes placed end-on: not less than 2 metres.
  - v) Around 1.5 metres run back beyond each rear line. This area should remain unobstructed by a wall, chairs, cables, fencing equipment or by anything else which might trip up or obstruct a fencer passing over the back line.
- d) Competition organisers should ask referees as far as practicable to ensure that these Guidelines are observed, in particular those concerning personal equipment, including a check that proper plastrons are worn, and the recommendation concerning spectators and officials. Checks on competitors' personal equipment, especially blades and masks (using a mask tester - except on stainless steel (ie., FIE) masks, on which they should not be used), are strongly recommended.

#### **5. Premises:**

The following requirements relate to the premises used by fencers and to the fencing area:

- a) The fencing area should be such that fencers performing all normal fencing movements, however fast, are not in danger of slipping.

- b) Around 1.5 metres run back beyond each rear line. This area should remain unobstructed by a wall, chairs, cables, fencing equipment, or by anything else which might trip up or obstruct a fencer passing over the back line.
- c) Spectators should not be allowed so near the sides of the piste that there is a risk of collision with a fencer who fleches off the piste nor any risk that they may be struck by a weapon, due for instance to a wide parry. Furthermore, spectators should never interfere with the safe positioning of the fight officials.
- d) Cables on the ground should be arranged so that they present a low risk of tripping to fencers and/or spectators.

## **6. Mains Operated Equipment:**

- a) Mains operated equipment, that requires an earth, should not be used unless it is correctly earthed using a plug with an earth pin and connected to mains supply via a R.C.D.
- b) Mains cables must not be placed on top of or under the conductive pistes, or in any other situation where they could be subject to rubbing or pressure.
- c) Cases of apparatus should only be opened when disconnected from the supply.
- d) A fuse should not be replaced before a qualified electrician or other competent person has found and rectified the fault that caused the fuse to blow.
- e) Electrical equipment should be used only if it is made by a reputable manufacturer and it should not be modified except by the manufacturer or with his permission.
- f) All mains equipment, including mains leads, should be tested by a qualified electrician or other person qualified to conduct such testing at least yearly.
- g) All current regulations regarding the use of mains powered equipment, where it is accessible to the public, must be observed

## **7. Legal Responsibility:**

- a) A fencer is generally deemed at Law to accept the ordinary risks involved in fencing.
- b) Examples of ordinary risks that a fencer is deemed to accept are accidents arising from breakage of blades, or from normal bodily contact with an opponent, arising in the normal course of a bout. However, a fencer may possibly be legally liable if he injures an opponent by an action that is illegal under the Rules of fencing or is recklessly violent.
- c) All fencers are strongly recommended to obtain insurance cover by joining the British Fencing Association. This cover is provided automatically among the benefits of membership.
- d) Fencers should avoid any risk of legal liability by fencing within the Rules and ensuring that their equipment is safe.
- e) The British Fencing Rules for Competitions make it clear that each fencer is responsible for the safety of his own equipment and that the organisers and referees are not responsible. Organisers of competitions will normally wish to include a clause on entry forms, pool sheets and brochures advertising competitions seeking to exclude liability. A suggested form of words is as follows:  
"Each fencer is personally responsible for making sure that his or her clothing and equipment conform to the FIE and British Fencing rules and are in good condition.

Neither British Fencing nor the organisers of the competition, nor any official or referee involved in the competition is responsible for these matters, or for any accident, loss or damage to persons or property however caused".

- f) The degree of liability that may fall on organisers and referees is unclear. In any event, they should take care to ensure so far as is reasonably possible that the Rules governing safety of equipment and conduct are properly enforced.
- g) When fencers under the age of 18 are entering a competition, the entry form should contain provision for it to be signed not only by the competitor but also by a parent or guardian consenting to the fencer taking part in the competition.
- h) The BFA has an indemnity policy against legal liability. The insurers have agreed that all BFA registered competitions fall within this policy.

## **8. Accident Reporting:**

a) British Fencing has a responsibility to keep safety standards under constant review and to improve them when ever possible. One of the most important ways of doing this is by reviewing all accidents which are serious enough to cause a fencer to abandon a competition or to take no further part in a club session or a fencing course; or which prevent an official from continuing his duties or compel a spectator to leave the premises. A person with first hand knowledge of such a fencing accident is therefore asked to complete a British Fencing Accident Report and send it to the BFA Secretary as soon after the accident as possible (see appendix to these guidelines for Accident Report form).

b) Additionally it is now an insurance requirement that every club maintains an incident book in which accidents and injuries are recorded.

## **9: First Aid Facilities**

a) Club and competition premises should have at least a basic first aid box available and a named person responsible for making sure it is accessible and re-stocked as necessary. It is recommended that all clubs and event organisers keep a first aid guidebook with the box e.g., Practical First Aid by the British Red Cross, Dorling Kindersley, or Emergency First Aid for Sport, the National Coaching Foundation. [They give a useful list of contents for the box].

b) Event organisers using sports centres should be aware of the first aid facilities available and make sure that they are accessible.

Although injuries requiring a qualified first aider are unusual, it is good practice at large competitions to have one available. The event organiser should always check qualifications and liability insurance cover.

### **c) Intervention**

1. The official responsible for any fencing activity should ensure that immediate use of a telephone is available in the event of a significant injury. Remember that the 999 ambulance service will give ongoing advice over the phone if necessary.
2. A doctor has an ethical duty to intervene and do their best. If more than one doctor or para-medic is present, the most appropriately qualified one should obviously take charge.
3. A first-aider appointed for this purpose also has a duty to assist.

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4. In the UK, members of the public are not under a legal duty to intervene in an emergency, however, in the absence of anyone qualified, if they do their best, (as judged by the action of the average person in the street), they are extremely unlikely to get into any trouble. So the average club member should have no concerns about helping a fellow fencer following an injury. Anyone assisting with an injury should act according to their own level of expertise
5. Coaches may have a duty of care to intervene, (in the absence of anyone qualified), although this is not clear at the time of writing. Again it is extremely unlikely that a successful claim could be made against them as long as they do not act in a reckless manner.



## **APPENDIX 1**

### **CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE RUNNING OF CLASSES**

In addition to section 3 of the Safety Guidelines:

1. Never allow fencers to begin or continue fencing if their clothing or weapon is inappropriate, deficient, incorrectly worn, broken, damaged, weakened by excessive use or otherwise unsafe (see these Safety Guidelines). Remember, it is the coach's responsibility that fencers are always safely attired and equipped.
2. All fencers must, when they are not fencing or practising, carry their weapons either by the pommel with the points towards the floor or by gripping the point, with the weapon hanging down vertically.
3. All fencers must have been taught not to put on their masks using both hands while holding a weapon – they should put the mask on first.
4. NEVER give the instruction to begin fencing without checking that all fencers are wearing their masks correctly. Specifically, all fencers must have been told to stop fencing immediately if a blade breaks or a point or button falls off.
5. The instructor must identify unsafe practices, even if those involved are not under his control. The law recognises that all instructors have a duty of care to ensure that all those who take part in fencing do so without endangering themselves or others.

#### **ADDITIONALLY THE FOLLOWING APPLY SPECIFICALLY FOR CHILDREN'S CLASSES**

- 7 Generally no more than twelve children per coach should fence at any one time (a larger number may be appropriate depending on the age, experience etcetera of the pupils); if the ratio in the group is higher than this, the group should be split into relays for fencing activity (larger numbers can take part together in footwork and games without weapons). In the case of groups of young children fewer than twelve may be an appropriate maximum.
- 8 Never allow fencers to act irresponsibly with equipment.
- 9 Always make your fencers aware of the potential hazards of mishandling their ~~foil~~ weapon. They must agree to use their ~~foils~~ weapons responsibly before being allowed to take part in the class.
- 10 Ensure all masks are fitted correctly before allowing your fencers to start fencing, and make sure that they know not to remove them before being instructed to do so by you. (reminder: For all fencing with foam or plastic weapons a plastic facemask specifically designed for this purpose or regulation fencing mask should always be worn).
- 11 With children aged under 8 ensure that any regulations applicable to this age group are complied with.
- 12 All instructors must be registered with their UK Home Country association or the BAF to ensure they appear on the British Fencing Association central register of coaches.

### CHART OF BFA CLOTHING RULES FOR FENCING

The following minimum safety standards came into force on January 1, 2006:-

**A) Those fencing with size 3 or smaller blades, electric or non-electric, all 3 weapons (both fencers) AND those fencing with non-electric foil blades (both fencers)\***

	<i>Jackets</i>	<i>Plastrons</i>	<i>Trousers/breeches</i>	<i>Masks</i>
Either	CEN 1 350 Newtons	CEN 1 350 Newtons	Trousers with openings/pockets zipped/sewn/taped closed, or fencing breeches - <u>not</u> shorts	CEN1 (350N.bib)#
or	350 Newton + integrated 350 Newtons plastron		As above	CEN 1 (350.bib)#
or	CEN 2 800 Newtons	NA	as above	CEN 1 (350.bib)#

**B) FIE official competitions (A-grades and Satellites, World Championships)**

	CEN 2	CEN 2	CEN 2	CEN 2
	800 Newtons	800 Newtons	800 Newtons	(1600N.bib)#

**C) All other fencing, all weapons**

	<i>Jackets</i>	<i>Plastrons</i>	<i>Breeches/trousers</i>	<i>Masks</i>
	CEN1	CEN2	CEN1	CEN1
	350 Newtons	800 Newtons	350 Newtons	(350N. bib)#

'Non-electric foil blades' does not mean dummy electric foil blades fitted with a button. To qualify for this level of clothing standard, both fencers must be using the traditional lightweight non-electric foil blade as, for example, used universally before the invention of electric foil

#All masks must be fitted with safety back straps.

NOTE: For fencing with foam or plastic weapons see para. 2.1) of the Guidelines.