Preparing for an Epee Fencing Bout

Kenneth Hall
4/7/2016
ENG 202C - Debra Placky
Introduction
As a new fencer, it is easy to be intimidated by the amount of preparation required before a fencing match. This guide is intended to provide a sequence for beginning fencers to follow to ensure that they prepare their weapon correctly, and put on their safety gear properly. Equipment preparation is taken very seriously by the fencing community, as mistakes may result in at best, an unfair advantage for a fencer (e.g. weapon which scores without enough pressure), and at worst, severe injury to oneself or one’s opponent.

Supplies
A complete set of fencing equipment can be expensive. To help overcome this barrier to entry, many fencing clubs have an armory from which beginning fencers may borrow supplies. This guide will help you become familiar with the function of each piece in a fencer’s bag. Asking for help from an experienced fencer is the best way to learn and prepare for your first bout. Here is a list of supplies fencers need:

- **Epee**
  - Tip
  - Blade shaft
  - Bell guard
  - Socket
- **Athletic Shoes**
- **Fencing Socks**
- **Knickers**
- **Body Cord**
- **Jacket**
- **Chest Plate**
- **Cup (Optional)**
- **Underarm**
- **Glove**
- **Mask**

**Figure 1** Image of Epee fencer in ready position - from Wikimedia
**Weapon Assembly and Testing**

It is the responsibility of fencers to prepare themselves and their equipment before taking to the fencing strip. We present a procedure which you can use to ensure that you are fully prepared when it is time for your first fencing match.

1. **Visually Inspect Your Blade**
   The weapon, or sword, used by epee fencers is called an “Epee”. Many things can be deduced about whether the weapon is in fighting condition by simply observing the blade. You should check that the blade wire is fastened by glue. Ensure that the blade has a tip, bell guard, and socket. Once you are sure that your epee has all of its components, move on to step two.

![Figure 2: Components of an Epee from Wikipedia](image)

2. **Check the tip of your epee with a tip weight**
   Before a fencing bout, it is your responsibility to make sure that your tip will not trigger without sufficient force. This is tested by placing a calibrated tip weight on your weapon tip. You should adjust the tightness of the small tip screw such that the tip does not fully compress when the tip weight is applied. Any weight greater than the tip weight should depress the tip. The purpose of the tip weight is to require a sufficiently forceful hit to score a point. The tip weight is calibrated such that, if no protective gear were employed, a strike of this force would draw blood.
**Note:** If your tip cannot support the tip weight without depressing, you may be given a yellow card in a fencing tournament and required to use a new blade. In addition, this is considered very poor sportsmanship amongst fencers.

3. **Adjust your bell guard**
   Check that your bell guard is wired to the proper body cord socket. This way, if your opponent strikes the bell guard, it will not count as a point. Additionally, ensure that the bell guard is not loose. There are three bolts which hold the bell guard in place, and these can become worn down after extensive use. If your epee has a loose bell guard, replace the bolts.

4. **Bend your blade such that it curves downward**
   Bend your epee such that the blade arcs continuously down towards the floor when extended straight out horizontally. Your blade should not curve upward, and should particularly not have curves in multiple directions at different points in the blade. Congratulations! You have finished checking your blade, and are ready to begin putting on protective gear.

![Épée](image)

**Figure 3** An Epee with the correct slight bend downwards. Image from Cercle d’éscrime.

**Warning:** If your blade curves upwards, or both up and down, there is a much more severe risk that the blade will break. This presents a serious hazard during a fencing bout, as epees often have very sharp, dangerous edges after fracture. If your blade breaks during a bout, the referee will immediately halt the action, and require you to present a new blade before the bout can resume.
Attire
Now that you have prepared your weapon for a bout, it is time to get dressed for the occasion. Fencers are required to wear extensive protective equipment to reduce the risk of injury during combat.

![Attire](image)

**Figure 4** A male and female fencer fully outfitted for a bout. Image from “The Fencing Fashionista” - [http://fencingfashion.blogspot.com](http://fencingfashion.blogspot.com)

1. **Put on appropriate underclothes**
   While most of the fencer’s outfit must meet certain standards, the most discretion is available in the selection of underclothes. You will need to wear undergarments and a shirt, at a minimum. Some fencers also elect to wear shorts, but be aware that you will be required to wear knickers on top of shorts, which many people find uncomfortable. Most women find it comfortable to select a sports bra.

   *Note:* The target area in epee fencing is the entire body. As a result, many men choose to wear a cup for further protection.

2. **Put on your knickers**
   These are fencing pants. They should be long enough to reach below the knee, with suspenders that can be comfortably adjusted at the shoulders and behind the back.
3. **Pull socks above knee level**
   Fencing socks must be long, extending up to the knees. After putting on both knickers and socks, no skin should be showing anywhere on your legs. It is the responsibility of the referee to check for skin showing on the fencers legs or torso before starting a bout. It does not matter whether your socks are tucked under your knickers, or vice versa, as long as you are fully covered.

4. **Tightly tie shoes**
   Fencing shoes must have laces. You will want shoes with good traction that are comfortable and durable. Cleats are not allowed, and would not be helpful anyway. Most fencers eventually buy shoes specifically for use for the sport, although most sneakers and running shoes are acceptable for beginners.

5. **Put on your underarm**
   Fencers stand with one side facing their opponent to minimize the exposure of their target area. As a result, it is much more common to be hit on your forward facing side. An underarm is a small sleeve-like garment which helps to provide extra protection for this exposed region.

   ![Figure 5](Image)

   **Figure 5**  A right-handed fencing underarm. Image from Wikimedia.

6. **Put on chest plate (women)**
   Women tend to be more sensitive than men in the chest region. Therefore, women commonly wear a smooth, hard plate to protect their breasts. This piece can be applied above or beneath the underarm, according to the woman’s preference.
7. Secure body cord
One of the most challenging things for new fencers is figuring out how to manage their body cord. This cord must be worn in the sleeve of the fencing jacket. It attaches to the epee near the wrist, runs up the fencer’s arm to the shoulder, then down the back where it attaches to the scoring system tether.

![Figure 6](image.png)

**Figure 6** Body cords in action. Image adapted from Wikipedia.

8. Put on jacket
This is one of the most important pieces of equipment that a fencer has. Most fencing jackets are made from polycarbonate and kevlar materials. They are strong enough to protect against stabbings by knives, which is important if they must protect the fencer from an opponent’s shattered blade during an accident. The jacket should cover the torso completely, and is fastened by a zipper on the backward side of the jacket, as well as a clip at the crotch.

9. Put on glove
While the epee bell guard offers significant protection against strikes to the hand and wrist, any part of the hand is a valid target area in this form of fencing. Therefore, it must be protected with a glove.
**Warning:** It is important that the jacket sleeve be tucked inside the glove, to prevent the opponent’s blade from entering the crevice and contacting skin beneath the jacket.

10. **Put on and fasten your mask**

The last piece of equipment which should be added is the mask. This will protect your face and eyes. Therefore, it is very important that the mask fit properly. The neck pad on the mask should be untucked, and should not suppress the jacket collar from protecting your neck. It is customary not to put on your mask until both fencers have tested their weapons, shook hands, and saluted. The mask should be adjusted using the band in the back to fit snugly under your chin.

**Final Thoughts**

Your first bout will be intimidating no matter how much advice you receive. It is our hope that after reading this guide, you will feel more confident in your ability to prepare yourself for a safe and sportsmanlike competition. Review this guide as often as you need, perhaps referring to it the first several times that you “gear up”, as fencers like to say. This guide is not totally comprehensive, and if equipment malfunctions or something just doesn’t seem right, ask a more experienced fencer for help before the problem becomes more serious. Most of all, put your new skills to use and enjoy your introduction into the exciting world of fencing!