

CBA Quick Start Guide: Refereeing for USA Fencing and MN Tournaments

Guide written by Anna Schliep, CBA and Blake HS Fencing Coach, R2 -Epee Referee.

Materials in this guide are current as of 8/12/2026—please check USA Fencing for any updates.

Who should learn to referee?

Anyone can learn to referee. It can be a great way to support the local fencing community. There is a shortage of referees in all sports. Referees are often clubmates, parents, coaches or anyone interested in refereeing. Refereeing can seem intimidating—and it can be but it can be broken down in steps and levels. We have our youngest athletes start with Enguard, Ready, Fence, and Halt---from there you can build.

Requirements to Referee at Sanctioned Local Events

- Must be a USA Fencing Member with at least Access Level Membership.
- Must add +check to your membership
 - Complete Safesport (required if over 18)
 - Complete Background Check.
- Take and pass the written referee exam. The exam has 4 parts. When you pay for the exam you have 48 hours to take it as many times as you need to pass.
 - General rules
 - Weapon specific exam (epee, saber, foil).
 - There is a separate exam for para-fencing.
- Complete a referee seminar (in person or on Zoom—helpful to do beforehand).
- Sign the referee contract in your USA Fencing Referee Profile
- Practice refereeing –practice at the club, unsanctioned events, and sanctioned events. Get feedback from rated referees and coaches. This is important but doesn't hold you back from taking the exams. At CBA you can come to the end of classes and practice refereeing. Please ask the coach before jumping in and preferably ask them a day or two before so they can plan for you to practice.
 - Epee- Coach Paul or Anna – Wednesday is the best day to practice
 - Saber- Coach Sam
 - Foil: Coach Tyler or Erik
- Get observed and get a rating. This is important if you want to progress beyond local refereeing. I recommend working on epee and one other weapon (saber is a Minnesota/regional need). Referees that are comfortable with two weapons are more desirable for hiring long term.
- Know and follow the [Referee Code of Ethics](#).

Getting Your USA Fencing Membership and +CheckEd

You will need a [USA Fencing Membership](#) of at least Access level and the +checked add on in order to referee. This will also prompt you to create a USA Fencing account where you will be able to view your referee profile. You will need to have Good to Go (GTG) status. To be good-to-go you need to complete your background check, safesport, and referee contract.

To see your referee profile: Select members in the top bar of your USA Fencing account. Then either search for your name or select “My profile” to see your referee profile.

Below is an example of what you might see for a beginning referee that has complete a seminar, and taken and passed their online test.

USA Ratings			
	RATING		AWARDED
Foil	P		1/25/2026
Epee	P		1/25/2026
Saber	P		1/25/2026

FIE Ratings			
	RATING		AWARDED
Foil			
Epee			
Saber			

Exam Report							
EXAM DATE	COURSE	TEST	TYPE	PASS?	RATING EARNED	EXAMINER	REPORTED
1/26/2026	Referee Exam	General	Online	Yes			1/25/2026
1/26/2026	Referee Exam	Saber	Online	Yes			1/25/2026
1/25/2026	Referee Exam	Epee	Online	Yes			1/25/2026
1/25/2026	Referee Exam	Foil	Online	Yes			1/25/2026

From here you can see what requirements you still need to complete, and you will be able to view your exam results, see what seminars you have attended, event you have reffed will populate and if you have been observed you will see your ratings.

Tournament organizers will check referee ratings and that they have completed the exams before hiring.

How to Find Referee Seminar

Referee seminars are held by certified referee instructors. These are national level referees with many years of experience at all levels of fencing. For the fastest start to being able to get paid to referee you can take one of the online seminars. Seminar registration is done in the Camps and Clinics section of <https://www.askfred.net/clinics>. See the example below of a search for referee clinics. You will need to create an askFred account to register (you will have an option to link it to your USA Fencing account).

****CBA Coaches will facilitate coordinating with a certified referee examiner to do an online seminar if 4+ people plan to attend. Many instructors may offer an online option even if they don't show it—don't be afraid to ask!

The screenshot shows the AskFred website interface. The top navigation bar includes 'TOURNAMENTS', 'CAMPS & CLINICS', 'RESULTS', and 'BOUT COMMITTEE'. The left sidebar has links for 'Tournaments', 'Results', 'Camps & Clinics', and 'Bout Committee'. The main content area is titled 'Upcoming Camps & Clinics' and contains a search filter section. In the filter section, the 'Referee Clinic' dropdown is highlighted with a yellow circle. Below the filters, a list of upcoming events is displayed, including 'Referee Seminar with Justin Meehan', 'Elite USA Fencing Referee Clinic', 'Referee Certification Clinic w/ Ryan Delap', 'Referee Seminar with Charles Astudillo', 'Referee Seminar with FIE Referee Chris Cheney', 'Referee Development Clinic with CRI Abbas Fadel', 'USA Fencing Referee Clinic with 3-Time Olympic Referee Medhat ElBakry - Sept 6', 'Referee Clinic With Ryan Delap - Sponsored by GA Division Hosted by Sigma Fencing Academy', and 'Referee Certification Clinic at Omaha Fencing Club'. A yellow star icon is visible on the left side of the page.

Study Materials for Referee Exam/Practical

You do not need to take the exam before the seminar...the seminar is designed to help you on the exam. You will need to complete the exam before being observed for the practical.

TAKE THE ONLINE EXAM

- Read the [Rulebook](#). Since the job of the referee is to ensure a fair bout, you have to know the rules. Even if you decide not to become a referee, this step will make you a better fencer so you can advocate for yourself in case a referee misapplies a rule.
 - Learn current rule interpretation by watching videos.
 - Work with a current rated referee to get feedback. Don't take feedback from just anyone....fencers have a lot of lore about the "rules" know what's what by asking an actual ref or looking up the citation.
- Download and read the [referee study guide](#)—the study guide is a tool to pass the online exam. You should still read the rules and know current interpretations, or you will have a hard time actually refereeing. Often it is best to print this out and keep it handy as a reference.

- [Penalty chart](#)—the penalty chart is a tool to help remember common penalties. It is not all inclusive or consider the nuance of every situation. New referees may want to keep a copy close by.
- The [athlete handbook](#) is typically USA Fencing's most up-to-date document for communication of rules and requirements to athletes. This is important for you to know what athletes expect and are expected to do.
- Find referee videos online--- caveat: if its old some of the details may not be current (ie. P cards or noncombativity for epee) but that's still ok. Some great referee resources
 - [The Fencing Referee](#)—28 modules (a few are out dated but the concepts for managing a strip are still good and I recommend them any way)
 - Foil: <https://actions.quarte-riposte.com/> or <https://www.quarte-riposte.com/foil-priority-rules-of-thumb-with-examples/>
 - [Cyrus of Chaos \(all weapons\)](#) <https://www.youtube.com/@CyrusofChaos/featured>

Practical Exams: These are done in-person at a tournament. A Certified Referee Examiner must observe you referee. Typically, you would arrange exams by 1. Asking the person that gave you the seminar 2. Contacting a local/regional examiner about tournaments where they would be able to give an exam 3. Asking your coach for support finding an examiner.

Minnesota does not have a referee examiner. Wisconsin has several examiners and local tournaments at Ataba Fencing Club and in Chicago area are often places where you can get observed. Regional events are another option for getting observed but these can be overwhelming if you are brand new.

Our goal at CBA is to have several people practice and get ready to take their practicals so we can coordinate support to help you travel as a group to be observed. You can also arrange on your own timeline.

One great place to supplement your practice is watching bouts online and observing referees in action. CBA regularly plays fencing videos on the TVs which gives good opportunities to watch alongside coaches and athletes. You can also view the USA Fencing Referee Development YouTube Page below, these videos are served as a learning purpose with examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/@USAFencingRefereeDevelopment/videos>

Referee Ratings

New referees should prioritize completing their exam, practicing, and getting observed. After your have been observed you will continue practicing or get hired for local events such as MN Highschool league, or local MN Division events. Most new referees will get a L2 or an L1 depending on what the referee is able to observe at the event and your experience level. All referees must pass a practical examination given by a Referee Examiner. Referees must demonstrate proficiency at a certain level to earn a rating. Demonstrated proficiency means showing **consistency over time in the following skills:**

- Make the calls appropriate for the rated level of fencing (as listed below).
- Knowledge and utilization of correct procedures, terminology and hand gestures.
- Apply penalties correctly and appropriately.
- Maintain composure on the strip.
- Demonstrate control of the strip.

- Comport oneself well, and maintain a professional image both on and off the strip.
- Interact with competitors in a professional manner.
- Interact appropriately with coaches and spectators.
- Demonstrate an ability to handle pressure situations; i.e. make the same calls consistently, no matter the bout situation (same call at 14-14 as at 1-1), bout level (pools, first round of DE, or Finals), or quantity/quality of spectators.

The domestic ratings are listed below, with N1 being the most proficient rating. Ratings require demonstrated proficiency at the following levels or their equivalent:

- P – Passed the appropriate exams and seminar for that weapon
- L2 – Beginning referee working at local level events
- L1 – Referee with demonstrated competency to work higher level local events
- R2 – Referee with demonstrated competency to work at regional level events
- R1 – Referee with demonstrated competency to work higher levels at regional events
- N2 – Referee with demonstrated competency to work national Level events
- N1 – Referee with demonstrated competency to work highest level national events

Note: R1 rated referees are eligible for selection to referee at national events, depending on tournament needs.

N2 and N1 ratings will be awarded during the annual Referees' Commission meeting.

Regional event bid packages will require at least a R1 level head referee.

Appendix A: Initial Costs of Becoming a Referee

It is important to be aware of initial costs to becoming a referee so you are not surprised and you can plan for how many tournaments you may want to referee in a season to meet your needs. People ref for different reason—personal satisfaction, volunteering, as a job. All of these are valid and may change over time.

USA Fencing Membership (Access Level) (renew annually)	\$34
=CheckED (renew annually)	\$30
Referee Exam	\$25
Referee Seminar (typically 4 hours)	Varies by examiner typically \$50-90
Observation	-varies- travel to tournament
Clothing (locally-business casual, expect to wear a blazer...regionally/nationally blue blazer+ gray pants/skirt)	If needed
TOTAL	\$134+

Local organizers may pay by day, by #of events, or by hour. Referees typically make \$20 hour or more with advanced ratings. Some events pay daily rates, Some events may also offer travel reimbursement (mileage, gas, hotel if overnight, flight). You can referee as much or as little as you want depending on your ability to reach out and ask if referees are needed.

Appendix B: Referee Dress

You want to dress with authority and confidence. You should be dressed better than the average spectator. Referees like to show some personality—fun ties, necklaces, pins are great ways to show your personality. If you are ever unsure—ask the organizer if they have specific requirements for their officials.

You don't always have to buy something new—this is a great place to get thrifty, vintage, or get a hand-me-down

Unsanctioned	Sanctioned Local	Regional	National	Shoes
Ask the organizer- possibly event/organization tee, business casual etc..	Business casual. Blazer/nice sweater recommended.	Business casual- blazer and dress pants/shirt –often you will see some ref personality here—plaid, fun color suit sets..etc.	Official Dress- navy blue blazer, gray pants/skirt	Wear shoes you can stand in and move up/down the strip in for the whole day. Refereeing is mentally and physically exhausting if you do a full day or multiple days. Compression socks/stockings may also help!

Job Aid: Checklist for New Epee Referees

- At a sanctioned event I know when to recuse myself rather than referee a teammate, coach, close friend/relative.
- I can read and fill out a pool sheet.
- I can read and fill out a DE slip.
- I can check in fencers at the strip.
 - Check inspection marks
 - Check hair conforms to safety standard
 - Check socks are tall enough/overlap with knickers
 - Check plastron/chest protector
 - Make sure fences have 2 weapons and 2 body cords within reach.
 - Scan for safety (open gloves, unzipped jackets, holes etc..)
- I know what the boundaries of the strip are.
- Stripside equipment check
 - Test weights
 - Test shims
 - Ask fencers to test guards
 - Advanced: trouble shout issues with sword/cord.
- I can do the hand signals and speak loudly and clearly for Enguard, Ready, Fence, Halt, and Touch, Double Touch.
- I can keep score using a phone app such as Riposte
- I know the rules for what to do when time runs out
 - In a pool
 - In a DE
 - When the score is tied
- I know the current rules for when to apply p-cards
- I know how to respond to a request to check a blade or other technical check.
- I can keep the strip area clear of spectators/coaches.
- I know when to call a floor/wall –off target touch
- I know how to check if the strip is not grounded and ask for help (if needed)
- I have cards ready on my phone or physically when for yellow/red/black card.
- I have the scoresheet, and writing utensil
- I know who to ask for help – (your head referee or bout committee)
- At the end of the bout ask fencers to return to enguard lines, salute, then shake or tap.
 - I know when to give cards if a fencer refuses to salute
- I have the penalty chart nearby so I can reference it –if needed

Job Aid: Checklist for Experienced Epee Referees

- I know when to move a fencer back 1 meter after crossing a lateral boundary.
- I know when to award or not award touches when one fencer crosses the lateral boundary.
- I know how to handle situations where fencers pass (such as during the fleche)
- I am comfortable following the actions during infighting –and do not call halt prematurely.
- I know when to card body contact
- I know when to address and manage fencer, coach, or spectator comments or actions that are disruptive.
- I watch for fencers using the back hand to parry
- I regularly participate in Referee training at regional/national events.
- I participate regularly in monthly USA Fencing Referee calls.
- I am regularly watching current videos to ensure I am refereeing to current interpretation of rules.
- I have created developmental goals for myself to improve my refereeing.