

## Central Florida Division Initiative to Recruit Referees and to Improve the Officiating Experience

**Written by:** Jason R. Seachrist, Division Secretary

**Contributions by:** Ken Lauver, Chair; James Campoli, Vice Chair; Kirk Rowley, Treasurer

### With Additional Support of the Following Certified Referees:

Randall LeMaster – F8/E7/S9

Kenneth Drewke – F5/E5

Boyko Krastevitch V – F7/E3

David Holdsworth – F5/E5/S6

Terry Abrahams – F10

Neal Julien – E8

### Referees Needed - Everyone Wants to Play, Few Want to Work

While harsh, the facts support the choice of words. Every sport requires officials and volunteers, and our Division is very short of both. Without officials, we simply have two athletes on a strip arguing over a touch (even in epee).

Despite the FOC listing of 32 referees in the Central Florida Division, the truth is far more severe. Some do not routinely serve as officials, while most are simply no longer active. Two of the individuals do not even live in the Division! Thus, we must redefine the term "active" to accurately reflect the facts. An "active" referee is an individual who routinely offers his or her officiating services, full or part time, for tournaments conducted within the Division boundaries.

In the Orlando area, there are only **three active referees**. Of those three, only our Chair, Ken Lauver routinely offers his services. He is also the only certified referee for saber and epee. On the west coast, the Division has **five to seven active referees** (depending upon what the good reader considers "routine" participation). At best, the Division has **ten active referees for over three hundred registered fencers**. Granted that not all three hundred of those fencers compete, but our Division attracts competitors from all corners of the state. We must also consider that our active officials cannot always serve, and should not be expected to do so.

This ratio is unacceptable and a sad commentary on local support for improving fencing within the Division.

### The Solution - People Must Want to Help, Not Feel Compelled to Help

Our small list of active officials are worked to the bone over the course of a weekend and for very little compensation. Another ENORMOUS problem with officiating in our Division is that our people are often shown great disrespect by athletes, coaches and spectators. These factors contribute to a troubling lack of interest in officiating. Above, the statement was made that without officials, "we simply have two athletes on a strip arguing over a touch". Frequently, we have two athletes on a strip arguing with the referee over a touch, and at times, spectators weigh-in with their opinions. This must stop.

An unfair expectation of our coaches, club owners and tournament organizers, is that they must also be referees. This is often the case, but is still an unfair assumption that alleviates the burden from the shoulders of the general membership. A basic understanding of the rules is the responsibility of each and every person who participates in the sport, including spectators. Another unfortunate belief is that referees must be proficient in all weapons.

Below are suggestions for increasing our number of officials and for making the experience of officiating far more rewarding.

1. **Use certified referees as often as possible.** Often, we rely on accomplished fencers to officiate their pools. If we are to elevate our referees to a higher position of respect, we should not nonchalantly grant official responsibilities to unqualified people. Referees must pass an extensive written exam and be observed for rating increases. The USFA rules require only one level 5 referee to be present at a tournament to accommodate smaller divisions and tournaments. This is understandable, but can cause problems in a Division our size. If an organizer plans to use uncertified referees, it should be stated prior the tournament.
2. **Use referees certified in the weapon they are officiating.** An exceptional foil referee does not necessarily make for even a decent saber referee in regards to application of the rules and ability to follow action. Producing qualified referees should be the goal of each weapon discipline. The saberists need to train saber referees. The epeeists need to train epee referees. The foilists need to train foil referees. In this way, all three disciplines will have officials who specialize in their weapon, and hopefully, the quality of officiating will rise (not to imply it is low, now). Naturally, anyone with the ability and desire to pursue multiple weapons should do so.
3. **Use proper attire to identify qualified referees.** Full time officials should conform, as closely as possible, to the guidelines provided by the FOC. However, part-time referees are typically dressed for competition. It is recommended that badges be created for these individuals, so that other fencers and spectators understand the referee is actually certified.
4. **Referees should be granted free registration to the event of their choice.** This benefit can be applied directly to the referee or transferred to a competitor. Part or full time status should not be a factor. If a competitor also officiates, even just for the event in which they registered, they should be admitted for free. More incentive is needed to attract qualified referees!
5. **Carry that black card!** By the rules, unruly or disrespectful spectators must be given a verbal warning that carries through the event. That can then be followed by a black card. A trained referee (revisit suggestions 1 and 2) will not leisurely issue a black card, so when it happens, the Boutng Committee should accept it with very little to no debate. This practice will put all trouble-makers on notice, and they will either change their behavior or stop attending tournaments in our Division. Once proper respect for the referee is routinely given, the experience of officiating will improve and more interest will be generated.
6. **Officiate with humility, professionalism and a smile!** A referee must not be an ego-maniac, and should be ready to admit a mistake. However, to maintain order and fair play, it must be understood the referee “owns” the strip.

### **A Personal Note from the Division Chair**

#### **Referee – 6 Foil / 5 Epee / 9 Saber**

I am totally behind most of the thoughts presented above. If we continue to harass the referees, they will no longer wish to referee. If you really want to see bad refereeing, let's see what you get when we return to the days of self refereeing! The only idea that I'm not totally behind is the statement that we only use certified referees for every event. Jim Lane did a fantastic job inviting, and compensating, the largest collection of referees seen since sectionals and the event went very well. However the financial burdens of such a commitment may be overwhelming for the smaller events. **I am heartily encouraging the smaller clubs to institute smaller one day events so that we can get a larger number of events on the calendar!** Please remember that organizers must receive validation from your Central Florida Division office for an event to be certified as an official USFA event. In no way can an event submit new fencer classification increases if the event isn't approved.

If your event is planning to use only the minimum required one level 5, or higher, referee PLEASE note this in your event notice! If we choose to attend such an event, we will know what to expect and shouldn't give the casual referee or the organizer grief!

### **A Personal Note from the Division Vice Chair**

#### **Referee – 9 Foil**

*Transcribed by Secretary*

I spoke with Jim Campoli, our Vice Chair, and he stressed the need for qualified referees. He strongly recommended organizing a “referee” tournament where we could test and observe new referees as well those wanting to increase their ratings.

He also liked the idea of further compensating referees by allowing them to fence an event free of charge.

In regards to a referee's authority, Jim said that officials must learn "to put their foot down". Anyone can be black-carded, "including family", for unruly and unacceptable behavior.

### **A Personal Note from the Division Treasurer**

#### **Referee – 9 Foil**

We could list horror stories about what we have seen in our fencing lives. Yes, we need more directors. No question.

Yes, we need more support from the bout committee to settle down coaches and spectators that become difficult. People figure out ways around authority. Just go to the bout table and say, "My fencer is getting shafted by that evil mean director that doesn't know anything." They get upset, pull you and the coach wins. We need the officials to stand behind us when we rule.

No, we don't need to legislate how we run our events. If the event is run badly, trust me, people won't come back year after year. In a perfect world, we could afford to ship in directors. Of course, we would have to pay \$150 first weapon ... maybe more.

Does it matter if I have a tie on or certain color pants...no. I wear my blazer and I know what I'm doing. Do I get it right every time...nobody does. I try.

When I use "I"... I am saying any director.

Finally, we have rules. Give the cards as required and it all works out.

**I sincerely believe EDUCATION of the spectators will solve any problems we might have.** If a person gets too many Black cards they just can't play anymore.

We love this crazy sport and the people in it. Don't let a few bad ones spoil the game.

### **A Personal Note from the Division Secretary**

#### **Referee – 8 Foil**

I understand why 99% of the membership avoids the job like the plague. This year's Bankuti Challenge was a great tournament, and despite the caps (a good idea), was even larger than last year. I wanted to share a few experiences at Bankuti, which prompted this article and the initiation of the Division's drive to register more officials.

After a Y10 foil bout, in which I directed, the defeated fencer and her father approached me. The young girl asked if there was somewhere she could leave comments, because she did not like one of my point-of-fact calls. I politely explained that directing was a difficult job, and that referees had to rely on their eyes and ears, not robots and machines, to tell them what happened. If she gets a "bad call", deal with it and go on. I finished the discussion by telling her that if she believes she can improve the quality of officiating, then she should become a referee when she's older.

In the D/Under, I was directing a bout that was 12-2. On a particular call, the young woman, who was winning, disagreed with an application of a rule, but did not pursue her challenge. At the end of the bout, I told the victor, that when she is that far ahead in a DE, and presumably going to win, she should pick her battles more wisely. FYI ... she and her coach were incorrect in their interpretation of the rule.

In the D/Under Epee event, a young woman lost a touch as she tried to crouch (or perhaps fall). She then tried to convince me to annul the touch by telling me that her knee touched the strip during the "fall". While I'm sure it was true (not calling her a liar), the problem is that she performed the

exact maneuver earlier in the bout and not only recovered perfectly, but won the touch. One is left to wonder if she would have said anything on the second attempt had she won the touch.

Finally, during another Y10 DE, the final touch of the third encounter would determine the victor. Before the command "Fence!", one of the coaches jumped onto the strip, waving his finger in the young boys face and yelling at him. The boy lost the touch ... one light.

Is this the direction of our sport? Are we teaching our youngest fencers to lose poorly, to nit-pick their way to a win, to cheat? Above all else, fencing is fun ... win or lose. I understand that when someone drives a couple of hours to a tournament and pays \$30 for an event, they want every opportunity to win. However, if winning is at the cost of civility and good sportsmanship, it really isn't worth it.

I don't want to conclude this on a negative note. On several occasions, parents and fencers shook my hand and said "Thank you. Good job," even if they lost the bout. The majority of us are honest athletes with good sportsmanship. We want to win, but also simply want to have a good time with friends and fellow fencers.