

The Tournament Configuration Task Force was charged by the USFA Board of directors to consider various ways to better organize our national tournaments. As a first step, the Task Force considered the purposes our tournaments serve.

STATEMENT OF TOURNAMENT PURPOSES

- Develop fencers at all levels by providing opportunities for
 - Skill development
 - Gauging progress
 - Improving competitive endurance
 - Functioning in a competitive environment
- Provide experiences to enhance the development of top fencers by providing a high volume of strong bouts
- Provide mechanisms for team selection
- Determine champions
- Provide a mechanism for meaningful rankings
- Enhance the sport through
 - Retaining members
 - Developing referees and other volunteers
 - Setting the standard for all tournaments
- Be financially stable
- Create and drive “the fencing economy”
- Provide opportunities for camaraderie and fun

In the course of its deliberations, The Task Force realized that any changes will have to be made over time, and that significant changes are best made at the start of a quad.

With this in mind, we have considered a number of possible scenarios to meet the purposes, scenarios that address a variety of circumstances that confront the USFA. And realizing that there are various constituencies that have a significant interest in how our tournaments are organized, and that there has been a great deal of informal discussion about changes that might be made, the Task Force is asking for your help in reviewing these scenarios over the next few weeks.

To do so, please go to the USFA website, where you will find a link to copies of the scenarios, as well as to the Task Force mailbox: taskforce@usfencing.org. In reacting to these ideas, please tell us not only what you would like to see improved or changed

(we know that some of these ideas are likely to provoke spirited commentary!), but more importantly, what you suggest as improvements to the ideas we have put forward.

Please include as part of your review the perspective(s) your comments reflect (fencer, coach, parent, volunteer, vendor, etc), and whether you would be willing to discuss your ideas with a member of the Task Force.

SEND YOUR COMMENTS TO taskforce@usfencing.org BY AUGUST 1, 2006.

We will collect and consolidate all reviews in anticipation of a meeting later this summer. Our plan is to construct a draft plan, with sample schedules and budgets, for further review and comment.

We have also included for your consideration initial thinking about a numeric rating system. The Task Force has noted shortcomings in our current approach, and puts forward these thoughts in hopes that you will comment on them as well.

Thank you for your continued interest in our sport, and in advance for your thoughts about how best to structure our tournaments in the future.

SINGLE WEAPON NACs

The (team) points events will be reorganized into single-weapon weekends. There will be 2 such events for each of the three weapons. These NACs can be run in three days. Other events will be gathered into multi-weapon 4-day NACs. Junior Olympics and Summer Nationals will retain their current formats unchanged.

Sample Tournament Schedules

Saturday: Men's Senior Women's Veteran/Cadet

Sunday: Men's Veteran/Cadet Women's Junior

Monday: Men's Junior Women's Senior

The days in the above schedule can be shuffled to satisfy any chosen criteria including keeping adjacent age-groups primarily on adjacent days, putting rest days between a given pair of adjacent age groups, rotating which gender/age-group is placed on a weekday, etc. Having three day events also allows for more complete use of holiday schedules to minimize work/school conflicts.

Analysis

Planning a calendar can get very difficult under this proposal. Either the points NACs are held at the same time or they are spread out somewhat. In the former case we have conflicts with equipment, tournament personnel, national office staff time, and vendor availability. In the latter case we can take less advantage of holiday weekends, are likely to end up with back-to-back weekends, which causes many of the same conflicts as the previous case, although technically possible, and will have different weapons with very different peaking cycles. The differing cycles could potentially be a positive effect if different weapons have different requirements or desirable constraints with relation to the international calendar.

This format also can pose difficulties in years with an early Senior World Championships event, as there isn't a 6-weapon April NAC that can be converted to Division I Nationals for that year.

TOUR CARD

In order to fence in "Elite" NACs one must earn a "tour card" for the designated season. Such a card can be earned by achieving any of a number of standards:

- Being on the Senior NRPS at the conclusion of the previous year
- Being ranked in the top 16 of the Junior NRPS at the conclusion of the previous year (option: before/after the standings are pared for aged-out fencers)
- Being ranked in the top 8 of the Cadet NRPS at the conclusion of the previous year (same options)
- Placing top 8 in a Division IA at Summer Nationals in previous season
- Placing top 4 in a Division II NAC or at Summer Nationals in current or previous season (option: October NAC result only good for current season)
- Senior Sectional Champion for previous year
- Foreign fencers entered by their NGB (limit of X fencers so entered per country)
- For epee only, X fencers entered by US Modern Pentathlon
- (option) Place top 8 in "Satellite NAC" (senior equivalent of SYC) in current or previous season

Division I NACs are replaced/renamed Elite NACs. Division IA NACs (option: limited to C and above fencers) are added to the schedule.

This proposal increases the significance of the Division IA National Championships, limits the size of Elite NACs, thereby concentrating the strength and shortening the length of the days, creates an additional level beyond Division II for those high-level senior fencers who are not at the level required to be competitive in Division I, and, with the options of "satellite" NACs opens the possibility of greater regionalization.

Satellite NACs: These are intended to be a means of qualification for those not otherwise eligible for Elite NACs. Available options include restricting entry to those not on the senior NRPS and limiting the minimum classification of participating fencers (suggestion: C and above only). These events could either be administered by the national office, as current NACs are, or by LOCs selected in much the way the SYC organizers are chosen currently. The idea would be to have three such events placed with wide geographic distribution (East Coast, Central, and West Coast) in each the beginning and middle of the season.

Sample Calendar:

August	
September	Satellite NACs
October	Satellite NACs; 2/3/Y14 NAC

November	Junior/Cadet NAC
December	Elite/Vet NAC
January	Elite/Junior NAC
February	JO's; Satellite NACs
March	2/3/Vet NAC
April	Elite/Youth NAC
May	Sectional Championships
June	
July	Summer Nationals

Analysis

Most of the schedule, as proposed, is very similar to the current national schedule. It offers similar opportunities and requires similar demands on the current infrastructure as what we current have in place. Division I NACs, renamed Elite NACs, will be smaller and will have natural limitations on their future growth. With this smaller size, but still containing the strongest fencers, the concentration of strength of these events will increase, especially in the first round(s).

Added to the schedule are "satellite" NACs. These function as qualifier events to Elite NACs, as well as provide competitive opportunities to those fencers that are too highly-classified to continue participating at the Division II level, but are not (or are not-yet) at the level where they can be competitive in Elite competitions. These events could be run as a new type of NAC (or new events at existing NACs), or, more easily, run independently of the national office in much the way SYC events are currently organized. The LOCs would be selected in an analogous process and the distribution of events between wide swathes of the country would be handled similarly.

This proposal has a minimal affect on NO operations or on the size of non-Elite NACs. It adds a layer of competition immediately below the elite level and should have beneficial impact on the importance of Division IA events, Sectional Championships, and the new super-regional satellite competitions. It also creates a level of record-keeping and bureaucracy to be managed by the national office.

TOUR CARD FOR RECREATIONAL FENCERS

As a variation on the Tour Card scenario proposed above, a Tour Card system could be established for those fencers who compete in Division II and Division III events. Fencers would earn a tour card, which would entitle them to fence at a NAC and Summer Nationals, by fencing in some number of designated tournaments. Such tournaments could be established by building on the circuit approach that is in place in some sections, and/or on the regional approach that is in place for Youth fencers. A point system could also be established, to be used in seeding at national tournaments.

Analysis

The Tour Card for recreational fencers could, in its initial implementation, decrease the number of fencers who compete at NACs—on the other hand, it would most likely increase the number of fencers who compete at the tournaments which would help them to earn a card. This, in turn would be likely to offer financial benefits to those who hold the tournaments—divisions or sections, or clubs, if that were to be the way this plan were organized. Perhaps most important, it is likely that more competitive opportunities would be available for recreational fencers

If a point system were established the seeding of national tournaments would also be improved.

A system would have to be put in place to ensure that USFA standards were met at each of the designated tournaments.

ELITE EVENTS

National competition can and should be limited to only the truly elite competitors. The USFA should organize and administer a number of competitions at more local, regional, and super-regional levels to effectively build a pyramid allowing for appropriate competition for all.

The only national competitions throughout the year in this proposal are at the senior, junior, and cadet levels, and are all focused primarily on the selection of our national teams for the World Championships. Summer Nationals will continue to exist in its current form and will return to the original intent of being a national fencing convention.

All NACs under this proposal will be limited to 32 (or 48) athletes. Selection will be done similarly to World Cup selection with ranking by the cut-off deadline used to select between interested participants.

Sample Calendar:

August	
September	Senior/Cadet NAC
October	Senior World Championships; (option: Senior Qualifiers)
November	Junior/Cadet NAC
December	Senior NAC
January	Senior/Junior NAC
February	Junior Olympics (Cadet/Junior Teams finalized)
March	Senior NAC
April	Cadet/Junior World Championships
May	Sectional Championships
June	
July	Summer Nationals

This proposal segregates the elite, national-level, competitors away from the recreational, local, or regional-level fencers. NACs with this format are primarily focused on international team selection and justifiably involve only those fencers that are conceivably in contention for such a slot. This results in very high level events where every bout is one that must be contested.

With such limited fields for the NACs it becomes more important to ensure that the levels below that of elite competitor are well established and provide opportunities for proper development, competition, and ranking of the near-elite. There must be a way to rank those not in the upper echelon such that if less than a full field of 32 points-holders desire to compete in a given event that there is a mechanism for selection of the athletes to complete the field. Similarly there must be a method for athletes not

currently on the points standings to gain admission and earn their way into such a ranking.

In order for this to work there must be ranking systems below that of the top national fencers. There must be a national ranking system that takes into account local, regional, and super-regional events, a set of regional ranking systems, which are considered independently, or there must be a set regional qualification structure.

Certain designated events can be used as qualifiers to grant non-points-holders eligibility for selection for national tournaments. This can be done at Summer Nationals, directly at Regional Championships held in May, or with some combination of the two. It would additionally be possible to add "qualifier" events to the calendar run around the country with the idea being that athletes can choose any qualifier that's conveniently located. Athletes which achieve a "qualification standard" would then be eligible for selection to the NACs as "unseeded" entries following all points holders that express an interest by the deadline.

Qualifiers would consist of those that achieve top-8 at Division IA National Championships (tier 1 qualifier), followed by those that achieve a top-8 finish at a Sectional Championships or a Senior Qualifier (tier II qualifier). This gives significance to the IA National Championships, as it becomes a means of qualifying to the next level for the top performers, while still offering multiple other opportunities for qualification on other dates.

Analysis

National events become truly elite affairs, and are restrictive for those fencers who are about to make significant strides in their competitive abilities. Strong consideration must be given to ensuring that additional levels of competition are built out at the local and regional level for all areas of the country. The fields are significantly reduced in size, which greatly shortens the amount of time required, as well as allowing for considerable flexibility with formats or with adding additional training opportunities, including team events, if desired. With small fields the NACs are focused affairs that can be conducted in significantly smaller venues with greatly reduced staffing levels and expenses.

While the expenses are dramatically reduced, so are the revenue opportunities, likely to an even greater extent. Fixed costs, such as transportation of strips, weigh more heavily with the massively reduced numbers. This proposal also all but wipes out the opportunity for fencing equipment vendors to interact with the vast majority of their clientele other than at Summer Nationals. With only a limited number of elite competitors it is unlikely that it would be worthwhile for any vendor to attend a NAC, which, in turn, can pose difficulties for the elite fencers in the event that they have

problems requiring the immediate purchase of new equipment. This would also, presumably, have a severe negative impact on the "fencing economy."

CENTRAL LOCATION

The USFA should buy a building in which to host all national tournaments. This would completely eliminate freight costs for tournament equipment, and would allow for considerable easing in budgeting for both the USFA and tournament participants. The location should be selected with a view towards minimizing the overall costs of travel for participants.

Having a set location can lead to economies from on-going relationships with local companies, specifically hotels in the area of the competition center. Rather than negotiating rates for each national event as a one-time occurrence, the USFA would have the bargaining power of being able to select a host for dozens of weekends over the course of several years.

Additionally regular competitors would quickly be able to learn what to expect in the local area – what amenities are available, how best to travel to/from the airport, local restaurants, etc.

Downsides to this proposal include significant capital costs, commitment to a given building, which may not be appropriate for all national events in the future, and the relatively low utilization of such a structure as the USFA typically only runs 37 national tournament days each year. While this could be somewhat expanded by inclusion of SYC or similar events, the building would sit idle the vast majority of the time. One way to minimize idle time would be to rent the facility to other organizations when it was not in use for USFA events, or to a successful fencing club. Doing so would help to offset the maintenance costs that are associated with building ownership.

Additionally the lack of a rotation around the country removes the ability of local areas to get excited about a near-by event and the added stimulus to the local fencing scene that such entails. Having a fixed location also creates an inequity in costs for athletes from various regions of the country as fencers from the surrounding area have considerably cheaper and easier access to national events.

TEAM TOURNAMENTS

In order to better prepare our athletes for international team competitions, additional team competitions should be included in the national schedule. These opportunities should begin at the Cadet level, continue with Junior competitions, and include specific opportunities for those on the Senior point standings. At Cadet and Junior tournaments for each weapon up to six teams would be constituted of fencers currently on the National Rolling Points Standings who are in attendance at the tournament.

Because team competitions are particularly audience-friendly, adding these events to our schedules would also enhance our ability to attract spectators and potential sponsors.

Sample Tournament Schedules

Junior Olympics: Add Cadet and Junior team competitions.

NACs: Add team competitions to at least one NAC being held for Cadets and Juniors

Analysis

Teams could be constituted randomly or according to other specifications, for example as shown in the list below.

TEAM	MEMBERS' POSITIONS ON THE NRPS
A	1, 12, 13, 24
B	2, 11, 14, 23
C	3, 10, 15, 22
D	4, 9, 16, 21
E	5, 8, 17, 20
F	6, 7, 18, 19

The teams could be held constant through the year, or reconstituted for each tournament. While holding the teams constant would have certain training advantages, it could pose difficulties when one or more members of the team were unable to attend a particular tournament. These details would need to be established well in advance of the start of the season to ensure planning time for those who plan to participate.

By limiting the number of teams that participate at each tournament, it would be possible to schedule the competitions to enhance the timing of the finals, an advantage in terms of spectator attendance and media coverage.

Adding competitions to existing tournaments poses significant problems for timing and resource allocation. Adding days to the tournament, while theoretically possible, presents nearly insurmountable staffing problems. Alternatively, to accommodate

scheduling of teams the qualification paths for the Cadet and Junior competitions, including the Junior Olympics, could, for example, be limited to those who have earned a rating of at least a D, or who have otherwise qualified.

RECONFIGURE SUMMER NATIONALS

Rather than continue to hold all national championships, plus Youth 10 and Youth 12 competitions during one ten-day period in the early summer, split the event into two distinct tournament. Most likely these would be held at the same venue, to avoid the costs associated with transporting and setting up our equipment. Two separate sets of volunteers would be called upon to serve at the separate events.

One tournament would be held for the “point events”:

Division I, including Division I team

Junior, including Junior team

Cadet, including Cadet team

Veterans 50

Veterans 60

Wheelchair

All others would be held as a second, separate tournament:

Division IA

Division II

Division III

Veterans 40

Youth 14

Youth 12

Youth 10

Team

Analysis

The size of the Summer National tournament has grown significantly over the past decade, with over 3,600 competitors entered in 2006. As the numbers grow, so do the infrastructure and volunteer requirements. By splitting the tournament into two segments, it is likely that the space needs will be decreased, thus decreasing venue costs. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers for the entire length of the current SN tournament. By having shorter tournaments, most likely with the need for fewer volunteers, this situation should be eased, and costs would be decreased as well.

Some fencers who wish to compete in events that are being held at separate tournaments would be able to do so without difficulty—and many of the overlap situations that occur under the current system could simply not occur. Schedules could be set so that the Cadet events were near the end of the “point” tournament, and Youth 14 events near the beginning of the other tournament.

A further advantage would be the opportunity to implement one of the early plans associated with the Summer Nationals concept—that of a “convention” during which workshops, meetings, and other activities associated with our sport could be held. Such activities might take place on a day or two between the two tournaments.

Numeric Rating/Ranking Systems

This proposal will discuss a several different possible means of using a numeric rating or ranking system.

One method would be an ELO-based system, such as that proposed by George Masin close to a decade ago. This is the type of system used by national and international chess federations to give a rating to every player. Comparing the relative ratings of two players will give an indication of the expected outcome between the two. These ratings can then be used to restrict tournaments, seed tournaments, measure progress, etc.

Another method would extend what we currently use for the National Rolling Points Standings (NRPS), and is similar to the points systems used by the FIE and many other fencing NGBs. Such a system could be implemented either as part of an NRPS or structured as smaller regional/divisional RPS, which can be used for qualification criteria to national events.

The former system has been fully documented elsewhere so I won't cover the mechanics of how the system works here. The latter can be implemented in any of a number of different ways, some of which will be covered later in this document.

Once a points system has been established it can then be used for determining participation in national tournaments. Today's Division II and III events can be converted to allow only fencers with ratings below a given threshold or between two thresholds. Division I events (or elite events) can be open to a given size field with priority going to those with the highest ratings as of the cut-off date, much the way selection to World Cups is currently handled. This instantly allows for the USFA to fix the current problem of ever-upwardly-spiraling tournament size, while still allowing for differences in the classification system across different weapons.

Events can even be organized such that adjacent levels of competition will be held at the same venue but with the classification system and classification of the athletes dictating in which event each may participate. There could, for example, be a Div I/Elite competition where all fencers with a numeric classification equivalent to a current C are eligible, but where the top N fencers (whether that's 32, 64, 80, 128, etc.) are in the "Elite" event and those below that level are in the Div I event. This allows for

fencers too-highly classified for the Div II/III events, but not at the level where they can routinely be selected to the “elite” events to still participate nationally and have the opportunity to earn classification points. It also can simplify planning as fencers “on the bubble” can know that they will be fencing without having to wait until the final entrants list is posted.

Dealing now with the idea of assigning points from events other than current Division I NACs, there are two main ways of handling points assignments. The first method is to assign a given tournament a classification and then award points from a pre-specified chart based on that classification. The second is to create a strength factor formula that can then be applied to all tournaments and used as an adjustment (multiplicative) factor to a set points list. Rather than trying to have tournaments replace the equivalent tournament in the following season it would undoubtedly be easier to just have points from every tournament last for exactly 12 (or 24) months from the date earned.

In the first case the USFA can start with the current tournament classification chart and effectively determine an equivalency for each level of tournament. A “B2” tournament, for example, would award points as per a “B2” chart, an “E1” tournament would use an “E1” chart, etc. The exact points scales for each level would need to be worked out to reflect typical tournament performance and competition frequency. Because of the involved nature of such a further determination, even sample points scales will be deferred until future discussion in the event that this branch of this proposal receives further consideration.

An example formula for the Strength Factor could be:

$$\frac{(N/10 + \text{top}8 * 7 + \text{top}16 * 6 + \text{top}32 * 5 + \text{top}64 * 4 + \text{J}16 * 3 + \text{top}100 * 2 + \text{top}1000 + \text{top}5000/2)}{100}$$

Where:

N == Number of entries

Top8 == Number of fencers ranked 1-8 in the US

Top16 == Number of fencers ranked 9-16 in the US

Top32 == Number of fencers ranked 17-32 in the US

Top64 == Number of fencers ranked 33-64 in the US

J16 == Number of fencers ranked 1-16 in the Junior US

Top100 == Number of fencers ranked 65-100 in the US

Top1000 == Number of fencers ranked 101-1000 in the US

Top5000 == Number of fencers ranked 1001-5000 in the US

This is an exact equivalent of the current World Cup Strength Factor except that the standings used are US standings instead of FIE standings and the addition of the Top1000 and Top5000 levels to reflect the increased size of the prospective competitor pool. As with the World Cup formula it is anticipated that a cap of 2.000 would be implemented. While variable depending on weapon (there are considerably more people with classifications, especially at the upper levels, in epee than sabre), the Top1000 level is roughly equivalent to C and better fencers, while Top5000 is equivalent to fencers with a classification of any type. While it may be desirable to adjust these numbers to more accurately reflect those aims, this is mostly irrelevant as eventually all active competitors will end up with ranked scores that can fit into this system.

This strength formula does not take into account international rankings or international fencers at all. Then again, the current classification system doesn't either. It should be possible to extend such a formula to add additional information, although that won't be covered in this initial proposal. Other additions that might be considered include additional terms for extending the influence of junior rankings, etc.

Sample Calendar:

This proposal doesn't have a particularly strong impact or effect on calendar structure. The current calendar would work well (with the Div I/Elite modification discussed above), as would most other potential calendar structures.

Analysis

Both the ELO system and the points system would restructure how we currently assign classifications. This could either be viewed as an extension of the current national points system or as a replacement for the letter classification system and remain subordinate to the current system of national points standings. Mathematically both are more complicated than the current letter-based classifications. The ELO system requires involved calculations for every fencer after every competition, which, based on personal experience in the tournament chess environment, few athletes will fully understand. The event points system is considerably more accessible to most people. Additionally most fencers have some exposure to such a system, whether because of awareness of the current national points system, various regional/sectional points standings, or through following World Cup standings. Fewer fencers pay attention to, or understand, how the current strength factor formulae for world cups work, but many have at least seen the concept in that context.

In either case, with the ever-increasing prevalence of personal computers and growing connectedness to the internet, such systems are becoming more and more feasible than ever before. Where 10 years ago it might have been unreasonable to expect the results of every local competition to be submitted to a centralized processing system for rating calculations and tracking, this is now extremely possible. A significant number of even local tournament venues have internet connections and the majority of events are now being run with the help of computer software for tournament organization. With only a delay of a day or two these results can be transmitted to the national database.

With this national database in place it will become considerably easier for individual fencers to monitor and track their results, will provide hundreds of more eyeballs examining data for possible errors, can all but eliminate the need to the National Office to handle classification change reports and process new membership cards, and should lead to more streamlined processes at all levels.

Numeric systems offer several benefits compared to our current classification system. With greatly increased granularity of ranking we have many fewer seeding ties. Fencers can track smaller improvements in their results rather than waiting potentially over multiple seasons before making the next letter jump. Especially with the strength factor and ELO sub-proposals, the true weight of a competition is more accurately reflected in the ratings impact – no longer will fencers look for “easy” A1 competitions or get stuck unable to earn more than a very low-level classification for a decent result at a particularly top-heavy event.

The obvious downsides to all of the various sub-proposals here are increased complexity and added overhead. Especially with the ELO system many fencers will not be willing to calculate changes in their own ranking score. The USFA would have to set up an internet-accessible results reporting system. The mechanics of how this should be done – whether using an existing system such as askFRED or an entirely new system custom-designed for the purpose – will be left for future discussions.

One ameliorating factor about the increased overhead is how such a system would shift that burden. Currently the National Office – already chronically overworked by every report – has to certify results and manually enter all classification changes into the membership database. With a system where all results must be electronically submitted, this burden is shifted from the few Office staff-members to the hundreds of tournament organizers and division officers around the country. While the amount of work has increased, the number of hands available to do the work has increased considerably more (“Many hands make light work”). Especially given that much of this

work is already being done at the local level as nearly every division and many clubs currently post all tournament results on the web, this can almost be dismissed as a disadvantage of the proposal.

This proposal has such a high branching factor of possible methods of implementation that it isn't feasible to attempt to exhaustively discuss the possibilities in a position paper of this length. Rather than attempt to do so further, after now having just peripherally touched on some of the possibilities, those options will be left to a future date. If this proposal merits further discussion a half-dozen or more papers could easily be written just discussing the most-likely directions that the USFA might be interested in exploring.

Summary of benefits/disadvantages and future discussion stubs

Benefits:

- Significantly increased granularity of rankings, resulting in fewer seeding ties
- Numerous new possibilities for structuring national-event entries
- Hundreds of eyeballs for error detection/reporting
- Shifts workload from National Office to local level
- More levels of progress for developing athletes
- Removes possibility of single "fluke" event dominating classification level for 4-8 years
- Level of a given tournament can more accurately reflect the difficulty of the event

Disadvantages:

- Increased complexity
- Additional workload
- Requires national reporting and ranking system

Future Discussion:

- Elo vs. Rolling Points
- National reporting system architecture
- Potential points systems
 - Strength Factor
 - Classified tournaments (equivalent to current structure)
 - Points tables for each level
- Qualification levels for various national tournaments