

SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

The Right-of-Way of Ethics

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Most weekends, I stand on a fencing strip with a weapon in my hand. My focus narrows on my next action, factoring in distance and timing. The beeping scoring machines, clashing blades, and cheers from neighboring strips fade into the background.

Occasionally, however, I trade my weapon for a referee remote.

The strip looks the same, but my perspective changes. Instead of concentrating on my actions, I'm responsible for judging everyone else's.

This responsibility was tested during a local tournament.

The score was tied, 14-14. One touch would decide the bout–who advanced and who went home.

Both fencers launched forward. Their blades met, separated, and two lights flashed on the scoring machine, signaling two landed touches.

The bout stopped.

Both athletes turned toward me.

In foil fencing, that doesn't mean both fencers earn a point. When two lights appear, the referee must determine who had "right-of-way," or priority, in the action. Sometimes, it comes down to a slight graze of blade or hesitation in footwork.

At that instant, I knew what I had seen. One attack had begun slightly earlier, indicating that the point, and the win, belonged to that fencer.

There was just one problem. Normally, referees avoid officiating their own teammates, but this was a small tournament with limited officials. So, it ended up that the right-side fencer was my teammate, and watching not far away was my coach.

Before I spoke, my coach yelled, "Atta girl–you won!"

The comment was casual, but it shifted the atmosphere on the strip. Suddenly, an expectation had formed.

My teammate looked toward me expectantly, while the other fencer waited in silence. For a moment, I froze. I knew what I believed had happened, but I also knew what people around me expected me to do. Agreeing would have been easier, ending the bout without disagreement or tension. Yet, across the strip stood someone who had no connection to me whatsoever–only the expectation that the referee would be fair.

I took a deep breath and delivered my call. "Touch left."

The reaction was immediate. My teammate's expression fell. My coach questioned the call. The discomfort I had anticipated suddenly became real.

The fencers saluted and stepped off the strip, but I continued thinking about that decision long after the tournament ended. Although the reaction around me was uncomfortable, I never regretted the call itself.

Before refereeing, I thought ethics was about knowing the rules and applying them. That bout taught me that ethical decisions become most difficult when competing values pull you in different directions. On one side was loyalty to my teammate and coach. On the other was fairness to a fencer who trusted me to judge the action honestly.

In foil, right-of-way determines who earns the touch when both lights appear. That day, I faced a different kind of right-of-way question: which value deserved priority? Loyalty would have been easier, but fairness was the responsibility I accepted the moment I picked up the referee remote.