



**US FENCING**  
COACHES ASSOCIATION

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**National Standards for  
Fencing Coaching Clinics  
Focus Groups  
Results**

February 2022

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## **Introduction**

The USFCA's Professional Development Committee (PDC) is charged with reviewing and promoting fencing coaching clinics. The PDC recognizes that the current standards applied to clinics are not effective enough to truly meet the needs for our coaches' education and certification. In an effort to strengthen our clinic approval process and to better serve our membership the PDC proposes the adoption of National Standards for Fencing Coaching Clinics. The proposed standards were developed and adopted from the National Standards for Sport Coaches.

Two focus groups were formed around the idea of strengthening coaching education and the clinic application process. One group was called *The Standards Focus Group* and the other was called *The Processes Focus Group*. Sixty eight people representing different areas of the country and different positions in fencing were invited to participate in these focus groups. There were forty three positive responses. Thirteen people actively served on the Processes Focus Group and twenty four actively served on the Standards Focus Group.

A round of orientation meetings were held for each group: Four different orientation meeting times were offered to each group for a total of eight meetings. Two weeks later the actual focus group meetings were held. Again, folks were offered a total of nine different focus group meeting times from which to choose; four for the Processes group and five for the Standards. Offering the same meeting at different times provided two advantages: First, it made it more convenient for the participating members which made it more likely that they would show up. Second, multiple meeting times acted to keep the groups small and therefore the quality of each meeting was very good.

The following report summarizes the results from all these focus group meetings. It is divided into two main sections: Results from the Standards Focus Group and Results from the Processes Focus Group.

Based on the results of this project the USFCA has a mandate to make many changes. Some of those changes are already underway. We are organizing task forces to develop a National Coaches Training Program and we are putting together a task force to condense and simplify the National Standards for Coaching Clinics.

Other changes were mandated as well which will guide us as we move forward and improve our website, our clinic processes and our educational standards.

The input and collective wisdom of the participants in these focus groups is greatly appreciated by the USFCA. Thank you to all who gave their input.

## Standards Focus Group Results Report

During the standards focus group meeting, the below five questions were asked and each participant had the opportunity to give their input. Participants' responses were captured in the recorded zoom meetings and through notes taken by the facilitator and the assistant facilitator.

1. In your opinion, what will the fencing community think about these standards?
2. Tell me what impact you think these standards will have on the culture in fencing coaching development?
3. Is there anything you would add or delete to these standards?
4. How do you think the USFCA can best promote these standards?
5. Is there anything else you want to tell me (about the standards or anything else)?

### The Results

Question One: In your opinion, what will the fencing community think about these standards?

The overwhelming majority of the Standards group thought adopting National Standards was a good idea and important to our credibility. Several people remarked that it is something we've needed for a long time. Standards are helpful, a guide post especially for the younger generation of coaches, parents, fencers, club managers/owners, and other organizations. They set a bar for coaching development however, many of the old guard coaches will push back or pooh-pooh these standards. It will take time for the Standards to be embraced by all fencing coaches.

The Standards as they are now are also overwhelming and intimidating. It is difficult for people to follow all of the standards and it could be difficult for the USFCA to enforce all standards. The prevailing advice was to trim down and/or combine any redundancies and to present a much shorter version to the public. It was suggested that the domains be listed and defined with links to the supporting standards for those who want to know more detail.

The six domains are:

1. Set vision, goals, and standards for clinics
2. Engage in and support ethical practices
3. Develop a safesport environment
4. Create a positive and Inclusive Sport Environment
5. Prepare for the clinic
6. Strive for continuous improvement

One participant suggested that the domains be condensed down to five:

1. Management
2. Ethics
3. Content

4. Safety and Welfare
5. Further Development

As the USFCA considers revisions to the proposed standards it should bear in mind that we don't want to turn away potential clinic organizers and presenters with lots of hoops to jump through. We should avoid the perception that we are using lots of nice sounding words just for the sake of using them. Statements that are long-winded and buzz-wordy often are perceived as platitudes or are ignored entirely. Instead, we should foster the perception that we understand what is desired and expected of us, and we are trying to deliver.

Several participants expressed concern that these standards could backfire on us. We were repeatedly cautioned to make sure we adopted only standards that were enforceable. The Professional Development Committee will be tasked to ensure the standards are met through the application and evaluation process. It was suggested that in person evaluations conducted by a member of the PDC be added to the clinic process as a way to ensure the standards are being met.

One of the biggest problems the USFCA faces is that many in the fencing community do not respect or see any value in our certifications. They are not required by anyone and no buy-in from the fencing community at large. There was concern that implementing standards would be putting the cart before the horse. The development of a clear and transparent path to certification with supporting online courses should be the first step to gaining the respect and buy-in from the fencing community. Further, the public needs to know about the NSSC and NCACE accreditation before they will care about USFCA National Clinic Standards

“It isn't enough for an organization to promulgate standards. It isn't even enough for the organization to enforce its standards. The standards both have to be meaningful and those who follow them (the presenters) and those who rely on them (the participants) must have reason to believe in them. That may be best accomplished by having the standards themselves assessed and blessed by an outside agency [such as NCACE].”

As one fencing parent on the focus group said, “standards and accreditation matters”.

**Question Two: Tell me what impact you think these standards will have on the culture in fencing coaching development?**

A majority of participants agreed that we need a cultural reset in fencing. Overall the participants felt that these Standards would have a long term positive effect on the fencing culture. Implementing these standards is an opportunity to build a great culture in our fencing community. The coaches who are set in their ways will poo-poo these standards but they will benefit the young and upcoming coach in the long run.

From a practical point of view and in light of so many safesport issues the USFCA must adopt standards and expect coaches to live up to those standards. This time in the evolution of sport culture is an

opportunity for the USFCA to take a leadership role in moving the fencing coaches into the twenty-first century. Implementing these standards is also an opportunity to align with USOPC and USCCE.

Expecting clinicians and presenters to implement and practice these standards will definitely have a positive effect on fencing culture. They will have a broader ripple than just coaching. The positive changes will not come instantly but over time standards can affect behaviors and beliefs. However, if the only thing the USFCA does is teach “fencing” we will be left behind and we cheat our members with a substandard product.

The USFCA should bear in mind that these standards will only be effective in moving the fencing culture forward if people follow the standards. Make sure they are enforceable.

The current wave of scandals among our fencing coaches is, in part, because the fencing community historically hires and imports coaches from other cultures who do not adapt well to the American culture. Standards would be a guide post for many of these coaches and help them adapt.

Discussion around the second question again brought out the fact that USFCA certifications don't have any real meaning. We are lacking the educational foundation and we need to develop a clear path to certification and a series of courses required for certification.

### Question Three: Is there anything you would add or delete to these standards?

Only a few of the participants delved into the details of the proposed Standards enough to have specific suggestions. The majority felt the proposed standards are overwhelming and the USFCA needs to reduce/condense the document and make it less intimidating. As suggested in the first go around of questions, we need to create a document with the main headings and link to the details as well as consolidate the contents.

#### **Specific Suggestions**

- Develop examples to show or explain how the standards are used in planning, developing, and approving a coaching clinic.
- The learning objectives required in the clinic syllabus should be linked to the standards and examples provided.
- Mental and physical health are very important parts of the standards. Knowledge of anatomy and physiology is important. Fencing needs to be a healthy sport, unlike in American Football.
- Mental health of coaches important standard
- Standard 9 was mentioned because it directs the host organizer and presenter to develop a positive, safe, and enjoyable learning environment for beginning coaches.
- Standard 6 “Strive for Continual Improvement” was mentioned because it has the potential to positively impact the fencing culture

#### **Specific Suggestions for Para Fencing Coaches**

- Coaches should have in-depth knowledge of all aspects of their athletes' disability, physical limitations and mental toughness.

- Understanding the three categories (A, B or C) and the possible positioning attainable by their student. This is the equivalent of able bodied footwork.
- Coaches should be thoroughly familiar with the fencing frame set up and safety precautions. They should also be knowledgeable of the fencing wheelchair requirement specifications.
- Coaches would benefit by fencing experienced ParaFencers and studying as many World Cup and Paralympic events as possible.

## Question Four: How do you think the USFCA can best promote these standards?

This question generated a lot of ideas. Participants repeatedly said that the USFCA needs to make a big deal out of these standards and sell it to the fencing community. Target diversity and expand USFCA outreach.

For this report those ideas have been divided into four categories; Ideas on framing a marketing campaign; Specific campaign ideas; Marketing Embedded in the Clinic Processes; and Other promotional ideas.

### **Ideas on framing a marketing campaign**

There were a couple of suggestions for slogans but mostly suggestions for how the USFCA might frame its marketing campaign. For example, the USFA needs to somehow let the public know that with the adoption of standards we are a more modern organization. Any publicity campaign should include the endorsements from successful coaches, other coaching organizations as well as USA Fencing. Also, we should market fencing coaching as a career path.

The USFCA needs to demonstrate in its marketing material that these standards benefit fencing coaches, fencing programs, and the fencers. We need to use data to support the adoption of these Standards - what other organizations are successful with the NSSC standards? Look for data available from USCCE on the effectiveness of the National Standards for Sport Coaches.

There was also a suggestion that we play off the old Coaches College logo with a six pointed star - each point representing one of the standard domains (Safety and Ethics, Teachers are knowledgeable, etc.) and create a t-shirt promoting the standards (6 pointed star?) Some sort of visual illustration needs to be developed for psychological/marketing purposes and to act as an anchor for the core standards. This has more appeal than a simple list of bullet points.

Specific slogans:

- "Coaching for the Future"
- "USFCA is getting a facelift"
- "This is not your parents fencing"

### **Specific Campaign Ideas**

- Swordmaster article
- Hold a series of zoom orientation meetings (town halls) to present the standards to the public. People don't know they need to know the soft skills (Create a positive and inclusive sport environment, strive for continuous improvement, etc.)
- Promote USFCA certification to college and university athletic directors
- Directly market clinics and standards to fencing clubs
- Promote standards to presenters - this is going to help you do a better job at clinics
- Promote to students - this is going to help you learn more about coaching
- Utilize consumer reviews and show off past clinics.
- The USFCA should have a regular presence at National events. This could include the following
  - A big banner present at all National events
  - Coaches lounge at NACs with coffee
  - Hold a series of face-to-face orientation meetings at NACs
  - Meet and greet events at NACs
  - At national events have an open testing time – make a major push to get people to pass moniteur – cut the price in half – discount it to get more people to do it.

### **Marketing embedded in the clinic processes**

- Include a statement in the clinic application that says, "I (organizer/presenter) reaffirm the six core USFCA Clinic Standards", followed by a signature line \_\_\_\_\_ .
- The market will reward or punish clinic organizers/presenters for running good or bad clinics.
- Give clear specific examples of standards on the clinic hosting webpage.
- PDC approval process is a good way to promote standards and feedback forms help to keep clinic leaders to standards
- USFCA logo should be on all clinic syllabi and marketing materials
- The clinic feedback forms mostly reflect these standards (which is good). Occasional refinement of the feedback forms will be appropriate.
- Add these questions to the host evaluation form:
  - Did you as the host benefit from having the clinic sanctioned?
  - Was having it sanctioned worth it to you? Why?
  -

### **Other**

- Charge the regional VPs to be more active and promote the standards in their region
- Make training and certification easily accessible. We need to pay special attention to coaches in fencing deserts.
- Training and certification need to be affordable to be accessible.
- Canada has 3 women's coaches taken under wing – USFCA needs to do more of this and is trying. Maybe get Wfencing to help.
- Organize website better - it's difficult to find things
- Leverage the fact that the US Visa relies on our expertise
- USA Fencing needs to help us make a big deal out of these standards.

- It is easier to sell fencing programs when coaches are certified. We must insist on professionalism and cultivate pride in our coaches and certifications.

### Question Five: Is there anything else you want the USFCA to know (about the standards or anything else)?

A common response was that the USFCA needs to have clear and transparent pathways toward certification. This was repeated throughout the focus group meetings. Courses need to be offered specifically for each level of certification. These courses need to cover subjects such as ethics, risk management, fencing terminology, training principles, developmental and psychological learning, etc.

It was brought up that we have a National Training Program (NTP) that could be revised to meet the proposed standards. The NTP allows for differences in teaching styles but clearly outlines a path to certification.

Also, it was suggested that we clearly define the different types of clinics. Right now USFCA clinics are all over the map and there is no clearly defined path to certification through our clinics.

Create levels of clinics and require a minimum amount of hours (or weeks) of study before allowing them to test for certification . Three to four weeks of study should be required. This would make the certification pathway clear and transparent.

There are financial barriers and accessibility barriers to coaches that the USFCA needs to address. Scholarships to clinics and discounted membership in exchange for “X” were suggested. We need to serve coaches who work in fencing deserts.

Several people mentioned the benefits of a mentorship program especially targeting women.

The below (submitted by Walter Green) explains how we can ensure that standards are met (at a minimum by first time clinic presenters) or are being attempted to be met.

- Safety and Ethics - At the minimum, the presenters are Safesport certified.
- Knowledge - Presenters are usually Prevots or Masters. Up to Date? This is harder. A requirement for continuing education hours?
- Communication skills - Generally, if a coach is successful it is largely because of having good communication skills, whether verbal or physical, both of which are taught at developmental clinics...so if a USFCA coach was trained via USFCA clinics, there is a likelihood that this is already being addressed systematically, though not specifically for clinic presenters.
- Planning - syllabus is reviewed by the PDC

- Friendliness etc- is generally dealt with after the fact via reviews. I imagine that the PDC could have discussions with a potential clinic presenter prior to a clinic if the presenter in question has a reputation for being unpleasant, and may have the option to deny approval to presenters with poor reviews.
- Inclusive and welcoming - A simple statement that all are welcome- race, sex, orientation, physical ability etc. Although it is rare if ever that people are turned away from attending clinics based on discrimination, perhaps some people haven't enrolled in clinics because they felt, rightly or wrongly, that they weren't welcomed, so it is good that the USFCA is currently actively encouraging all to attend.

## Processes Focus Group Results Report

The Processes Group were assigned to evaluate the clinic application and evaluation processes on their own before the actual focus group meetings. During the Processes' Focus Group meeting, the below five questions were asked and each participant had the opportunity to give their input. Participants' responses were captured in the recorded zoom meetings, through notes taken by the facilitator and a few participants to the extra time to send in detailed email responses.

1. Tell me about your experience finding the clinic processes, finding forms and filling out the forms.
2. In your opinion, are the clinic application requirements (particularly the syllabus) enough for the Professional Development Committee to judge the quality of the clinic?
3. In your opinion, is gaining USFCA clinic approval worth the trouble?
4. Do you have a suggestion to strengthen or change the process?
5. Is there anything else you want to tell me? (related to the processes or not)

### The Results

Question One: Tell me about your experience finding the clinic processes, finding forms and filling out the forms.

Some people said the clinic application process was fairly easy and some said it was a bit confusing and a little difficult to find the forms. During the PFG orientations the participants were shown where the clinic hosting page and all the related forms were on the USFCA website. A little orientation went a long way in helping people understand the process. Subsequent suggestions included creating an orientation video for potential clinic hosts and to create a bullet point step by step on how to host a clinic or clinic checklist. Keep it simple.

Another suggestion was create a bid package PDF modeled after USA Fencing's tournament bid packet.

There were several complaints about the length of the clinic hosting page. It is too wordy and needs to be simplified with a step by step explanation on the clinic hosting process. The description of the types of clinics is confusing and in reverse order. Certification clinics should be first and professional development second. It was suggested that the USFCA organize and offer certification clinics and individual clubs and coaches offer professional development clinics.

One participant suggested that the Clinic Hosting materials only be available only to members and all clinic info and forms be located in one place.

There should be a big button on the clinic hosting page that says "SUBMIT CLINIC HERE".

The links “Coaches Education” and “Coaches Clinic” under the Education tab are redundant. Change the name to “Online Coaches Courses” or something else.

It's not easy to find the “list of clinics”. There should be a link to the list on the main page. The list of clinics do not show the location or the weapons. The dates of the clinics are chunky. The registration links are not clickable on many clinics. A distinction between virtual and face-to-face clinics should be clear on the website.

One participant commented that it seemed like USFCA clinics were a bunch of coaches promoting themselves instead of promoting coaching development.

### **The Clinic Application**

- The instructions and links on the application page are not very clear.
- Not being able to “save” the application and come back to it later is inconvenient
- Several items on the application don't align for online clinics
  - It is unclear what the address is supposed to be. Is it the address of the hosting organization or the host themselves? What is the address for online clinics?
  - A virtual course does not align with a USFCA region or USA Fencing Division
  - The application does not allow you to indicate how a continuing clinic is scheduled.

### **The Syllabus**

- You can hardly see the link to the syllabus example.
- Keep the syllabus simple - too many details may scare people away - it might turn people off.
- The PDC needs to create a syllabus template for clinics that are offering certification.
- The syllabus template should be a fillable PDF.
- Old school coaches may have a hard time with the syllabus - offer training to help people learn how to develop a syllabus.

### **The Host Evaluation process**

Most participants felt the Host Evaluation process was fine. The USFCA may want to flush out more data such as the clinic proposal process, advertising, communication prior and after, responsiveness of PDC and CAB, and get a sense of how these events are being budgeted. How much does it cost to run a clinic? How much revenue is generated? Is this model of clinic sustainable?

### **The Participant Evaluation process**

The evaluation process was generally considered highly valuable, but there were a couple of suggestions to strengthen the evaluations:

- Some suggested using a scale of 1-5 instead of the “agree” scale.
- There was a suggestion that the USFCA develop a follow-up evaluation process which more accurately measures learning. Currently the evaluation form measures learning and satisfaction at a very basic level called, Level 1

evaluation. The USFCA should consider follow up or long term evaluations to get a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of clinics.

**Question Two: In your opinion, are the clinic application requirements (particularly the syllabus) enough for the Professional Development Committee to judge the quality of the clinic?**

General consensus was that the application process gives the USFCA a good idea of what is planned for at a clinic. This question did not generate as much conversation and comment as others. Generally the participants were comfortable with the syllabus and the PDC's ability to judge the quality of a clinic.

**Question Three: In your opinion, is gaining USFCA clinic approval worth the trouble?**

The vetting process is worth it because the clinics are peer reviewed by a national professional organization. The PR USFCA can provide is worth it. The approval process by an independent national organization supports modern fencing and eliminates the "good ole boy" system. The clinic approval process creates parity for coaching development.

The evaluation processes also make it worth going through the USFCA processes because they will help with future assessments and support growth and learning.

There were a few participants who felt the process had no value. Not only were there too many hoops to jump through but there are too many problems with the structure of clinics to begin with. The USFCA needs to be the "go to" place with a set of educational courses and a clear path to certification. The USFCA needs to create courses and create an army of teachers. Many topics can be offered online. Require a set number of courses and hours of study before allowing a candidate to take a certifying test. One participant questioned how much can you learn in a weekend clinic and then apply it to the practical exam that you take at the end of the weekend? Learning specialists know that "cramming" does not result in retention.

The USFCA was advised to "Burn it down - start over" and "Be the Phoenix Rising"

**Question Four: Do you have a suggestion to strengthen or change the process?**

The USFCA needs to be more active on social media and utilize it more effectively to promote coaching clinics.

Member fees vs non-member fees for clinics got quite a lot of comments. They seem “really strange”. USFCA members should receive a discount instead of tacking on extra fees for non members. Adding 25% to the non member fee is a surtax. The industry standard for accounting and billing software is not surtaxes, but deductions from the regular retail price.

Pricing for clinics is random and should be standardized.

USFCA should be in charge of registration for all clinics. This would create more consistency and easier to track data. The USFCA needs to be the primary payment and registration gateway for these events. This will get people onto the website, into the system, and we can capture their membership to get the discount immediates.

It's not clear if clinics are foil, epee, saber.

USFCA should take a portion of the clinic fees.

USFCA should create levels of clinics, just like USA Fencing has levels of tournaments and hire a Clinic Coordinator.

Question Five: Is there anything else you want to tell me? (related to the processes or not)

- Develop a P.E. teachers' fencing teacher training course and offer it online
- The USFCA needs a person who specializes in clinics - A Clinic Coordinator.
- The membership metrics and profiles are “AWESOME”, but most members don't have their state or club listed. We need to get our membership database updated/corrected.
- It is not obvious how to edit your profile. Make it easier.
- Master, Prevot, etc. titles are not capitalized on the membership list - should they be?
- “Y'all have come a LONG way in the last two years. Glad to see people involved and the organization evolve. This work is important.”
- Change the names of your certifications. No one knows what a moniteur or prevot is. The public does not understand these terms.