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USA Fencing DEIB Pulse Survey

Referees, Coaches, Officials



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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly - *a letter from Shannon, Emma-Tei and Annamaria*

The goal of this report was to provide an unbiased review of the results of the first ever DEIB PULSE Survey for Referees, Coaches and Officials. Our hope is to establish transparency across peers and larger membership. It is important to recognize that fencing has formed many unique experiences for our members, and while these results do not represent the views of all referees, coaches and officials, they reveal the nuanced thoughts and perceptions that currently exist in our sport. The results of this survey capture both, positive and negative viewpoints from within the organization. We recognize that there are many areas of opportunity and DEIB is a continuous journey that we are committed to embarking on with your continued support.



Defining DEIB

Diversity - Opening the doors to everyone and their differences

Equity - Meeting people where they are, and providing necessary resources for them to succeed

Inclusion - Creating environments where everyone's thoughts, ideas, and perspectives are valued

Belonging - Ensuring everyone feels seen, heard, valued, supported and welcomed as their authentic self



Referee Leadership Perception

The Good:

On these, referees overwhelmingly agreed with the statements.

- **88%** of referees agreed that DEIB was important to them as an individual
- **75%** of referees agreed that they were aware of and understand the procedures for reporting incidents of discrimination and/or bias in the workplace
- **69%** of referees agreed that referee leadership demonstrates a commitment to meeting the needs of referees with disabilities



Referee Leadership Perception

The Bad:

On these, referees were split or neutral on the statements.

- "Referee Leadership takes active measures to create a diverse pool of new referees"
- "Referees of different backgrounds are encouraged to apply for specialized positions, such as those involved in referee leadership."
- "Referees of different backgrounds are treated fairly in the internal promotion process"
- "Referees of different ages are valued equally by this organization."

There is a common theme that diversity and discrimination remain problematic within refereeing, and there is room for improvement.

The Ugly:

On these, referees tended to disagree with the statements.

- "The Referee Leadership treats all referees fairly."
- "The Referee Leadership has done a good job providing educational programs that promote diversity, equity and inclusion in our workplace."
- "There is a career development path for all referees in this organization."

These are major areas for improvement within refereeing.



USA Fencing Leadership Perception

The Good:

On these, professional members of USA Fencing overwhelmingly agreed with the statements.

- **83%** of professional members agreed that DEIB was important to them as an individual
- **80%** of professional members agreed that they felt safe at USA Fencing events
- **6%** of professional members agreed that all USA Fencing members in leadership should have training in DEIB
- **72%** of professional members agreed that they could show up as their authentic self at USA Fencing events
- **73%** of professional members agreed that they were aware of and understand the procedures for reporting incidents of discrimination and/or bias that occur under USA Fencing Leadership.



USA Fencing Leadership Perception

The Bad:

On these, professional members were split or neutral on the statements.

- "USA Fencing members of different backgrounds are encouraged to apply for specialized positions. For example, Board, coaches, and other leadership positions"
- "Applicants of different backgrounds are treated fairly in the internal promotion and hiring process."
- "USA Fencing members of different ages are valued equally by this organization."
- "The USA Fencing Leadership provides an environment for the free and open expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs."

There is a common theme that diversity and discrimination remain problematic within refereeing, and there is room for improvement.

The Ugly:

On these, professional members tended to disagree with the statements.

- "USA Fencing Leadership treats all of its members fairly."
- "I believe the USA Fencing Leadership will take appropriate action in response to incidents of discrimination and/or bias."
- "USA Fencing Leadership takes active measures to create a diverse pool of new members."
- "There is a career development path for all professional members in USA Fencing."

These are major areas for improvement within USA Fencing.

Key Themes from the DEIB Pulse Survey

Key Theme	Representative Quotes	Reasons for Dissatisfaction
The meaning of Diversity	<p>“First, define the term because DEIB goes beyond basic race and gender to the total constituencies, including recreational fencers and clubs who are being displaced with hyper focus on youth and national teams.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ While not the intention of this survey, perception exist that we are only considering race when discussing diversity
Lack of Trust	<p>“The perception- whether right or wrong- is that the leadership's public statements about DEI do not comport with the actions.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ “No one will read this” was a common sentiment expressed by respondents▪ Additional steps need to be taken to rebuild trust in leadership
Barriers to Access	<p>“The cost of entry to events is too high. This creates a barrier to many individuals who do not have the financial means to compete regionally and/or nationally.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Respondents highlighted the significant up-front costs to becoming a referee that may contribute to the lack of diversity in the cadre
Diversity vs Excellence	<p>““I wouldn't push "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" because I feel like conservatives I know hear that and go "Yep they're either just virtue signaling or just targeting black people." And that stops half of your potential referee pool immediately.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Some respondents expressed concern that focusing on DEIB will come at the expense of “excellence”▪ Others express concerns that there is too much emphasis on “elite athletes” and are angered by the loss of Div II and Div III events



Key Themes from the DEIB Pulse Survey

Key Theme	Representative Quotes	Reasons for Dissatisfaction
Age	<p>“Minimum age criteria for referees is a recent improvement.”</p> <p>“Give more age categories so fencers don't have to wait to become a veteran before fencing again.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Respondents believe older referees are being “pushed out”▪ While some praise the decision to no longer allow minors to referee, others express concern that this has slowed the development of referees
Disability	<p>“Provide more support and recruitment for people with disabilities. The Para-fencing program should be stronger, but it is not a high priority for the BoD”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Respondents expressed concerns that disability access is not a priority for USA Fencing or the referees commission
Gender	<p>“Support women by actually doing something about harassment and abuse in our sport. Abusers face minimal to no consequences for their actions.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Gender based harassment and violence in fencing is a significant concern among respondents
Race	<p>“Club leaders, coaches, and referee instructors should encourage people of Color to become referees. The attendees at our local ref clinics are almost all white, even though our local fencers are much more diverse.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Respondents believe USA Fencing does not reflect the diversity present in society broadly.▪ Respondents feel there should be intentional action to increase representation at all levels.



USA Fencing Update

USA fencing announced that beginning with the 2023-2024 national tournament season and beyond, it will give preference when selecting host cities to states with more inclusive laws - states without laws that harm members of the LGBTQ+ community and women's health.

It is important to note that this will not be the only criteria factored into site selection decisions.

Additional factors include:

square footage requirements | costs to USA Fencing | geographic diversity | summer national rotations | contracts currently in place | city interest/ability in hosting

[Read USA Fencing's announcement here](#)

Survey Commentary on Locations of National Events

Comments:

- "I am particularly concerned about hosting national events in states that are hostile to the participation of transgender youth in sports."
- "Do not schedule or sanction ANY events in states where pregnant people do not have safe options for care."
- "Do not schedule OR sanction events in states that do not support the same published inclusion that USA Fencing supports across all areas related to DEIB."
- "Holding National events in states that do not value DEIB (by passing laws that discriminate) seems inconsistent with USA Fencing's proclaimed values and certainly sends a (wrong) message to our members that are impacted by those laws."
- "Please stop choosing events in states that go against human right like Texas and Arizona."
- "Taking more time to choose locations for National tournaments that are not in states that are openly hostile to uterus-having people or LGBTQIA+ people. This year is especially bad and I wouldn't feel safe in many of the places chosen."
- "Consider running national level tournaments only in states with DEIB protective policies and practices."

USA Fencing Update

USA Fencing released updated guidance on its Transgender policy, which is aimed to make the sport of fencing more inclusive of transgender and non-binary individuals.

USA Fencing will not discriminate on the basis of gender identity, regardless of sex assigned at birth, or any other form of gender expression for participation in any division. As such, athletes will be permitted to participate in USA Fencing sanctioned events in a manner consistent with their gender identity/ expression, regardless of the gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth in accordance with the guidelines presented in the policy.

[Read USA Fencing's announcement here](#)

Survey Commentary on Transgender and Non-Binary Athlete Policy

Comments:

- "I am particularly concerned about hosting national events in states that are hostile to the participation of transgender youth in sports."
- "I have noticed tremendous animosity toward transgender athletes, particularly those identifying as women."
- "The strictly gendered spaces within USA fencing makes the space unwelcome to non-binary and trans athletes. Additionally, USA fencing encourages an environment of elitism that only serves to diminish and demean community fencing."
- "Publish and adhere to a clear policy on inclusion for LGBTQ+ members, particularly for transgender and non-binary members (I was told a policy was coming soon...12 months ago...still nothing)."
- "As a transgender athlete, and coach, I have never felt supported by or included by this sport or my community. I cannot be my authentic self when competing, or coaching. Fencing is an absolute passion of mine, and feeling like there's no place for me during my transition or after is...heartbreaking, world shattering, one of the worst feelings I've had to deal with in my young adult life. Besides the crippling gender dysphoria that is."



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Update from the Authors

SafeSport is a key reason for dissatisfaction in this survey.

Additional commentary will come as part of the complete report released in 2023.

Survey Commentary on SafeSport

Comments:

- "I would also like a more concerted effort to promote women's safety in the cadre "verbal, physical, sexual harassment/assault are still far too common in this sport. We need a clear support system of women in the cadre.
- "SafeSport isn't enough, we need a 0-tolerance policy for sexual assault and harassment, that USA Fencing is clearly not committed to based on the inclusion of Alen Hadzic on the 2021 Olympic team."
- "Safe sport, though well intentioned, is a farce and the senior leadership of Fencing sit by and just hand wave. I have had friends who have been sexually assaulted at fencing tournaments, reported it to safe sport 3 times, with supporting witnesses, and had safe sport do nothing. Worse, senior leadership says that you just have to accept it and push forward."
- "No one expects anything to be done in response to a report, so they don't bother reporting. There's a hell of a lot of trust that leadership needs to rebuild among the cadre, especially with respect to racial/gender/sexual minorities. If USA Fencing were serious about this, referees with histories of sexual harassment wouldn't be hired. Some newcomers to leadership give me hope but the leadership writ large has been out of touch for a while now."
- "Anyone who has violated safesport policies should not be eligible for leadership or mentorship roles."



About the Authors

Shannon Jolly

Joined USA Fencing in May 2022 as the Senior Manager for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging. In this role, Shannon leads USA Fencing's DEIB initiatives and work closely with the DEIB committee to ensure the organization promotes a safe environment for everyone to enjoy the sport of fencing.



Emma-Tei Kyono

Serves as the Chair of the RC DEIB Taskforce. Emma has refereed at the regional, national and collegiate levels. Outside of Fencing, she is a consultant and has done work in Nonprofit, DEIB, and Public Sector strategy.



Annamaria McGill Lu

Earned her Masters in industrial organizational psychology, focusing on aspects of the field such as organizational development, diversity, teamwork, and motivation. She serves on the RC DEIB Taskforce. Outside of fencing, she is a research assistant for a nonprofit and a fencing coach.





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