

USA Fencing: BOD consideration- Heather Shankwiler

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Why are you running to be a USA Fencing BOD member?

A voice for the rest of us in the fencing community. I am not a fencer, however, I am a parent of an active saber fencer (13 years and counting), equipment room organizer, tournament and bout committee volunteer, high school parent team sponsor, board member of fencing organizations (OnGuard High School Fencing League and WFencing) and an advocate for those who want to learn and understand more. I believe that committee and board members must include the voices of those who are not present for the betterment and longevity of the sport, not just the immediate participants. My passion is the need to continue to build youth sports, keeping fencing accessible financially and geographically, and continuing to build awareness and a pipeline of current and future fencers. As a fencing parent, I have seen firsthand what fencing can mean for personal, academic and athletic development; all sports provide benefits, but fencing is much more.

An advocate and a parent – for every fencer. My perspective is as a community and parent advocate: bring fencing not just to those that can afford it, but to those that may not and cannot afford the higher levels of competition. I see an opportunity to share what our sport has to offer, to dispel the myth of the “only elite” stigma. We need to reach those who could not only enjoy but also how fencing benefits both the fencer and the fencer’s family: building skills for time management, executive function, learning how to work for improvement, driving both mental and physical resilience.

What do you envision as the top three priorities for USA Fencing and why?

Number 1: Build opportunities – for fencers, for families and for our community: We need to build opportunities to find the sport and continue regardless of skill level. This needs to include **more local, easily accessible and affordable tournaments in ALL regions** (even if this means returning to more local single-weapon sanctioned tournaments). Fencing should be accessible locally, within easily drivable areas, building frequent gatherings and the community around it. Not everyone can – or should – go to a NAC; but everyone should always be able to find an opportunity to fence and compete easily.

Number 2: Build a better awareness of what fencing IS for the long-term health of the sport. We need to learn how to talk about fencing as a sport for those non-traditional athletes, those with ADHD or other challenges, younger, older and maybe returning (or starting!) as adults. We need to leave the “you can get a scholarship” pitch behind, sharing more that fencing brings mental and physical sharpness, individual accountability, athleticism, sportsmanship as well as resiliency for those that might not have considered a sport at all.

Number 3: Refocus our community on the love of the sport. There has been quite a fever-pitch of angst and hurt across the globe for many reasons. **Fencing should be the safe haven** where politics and positions are left on the sidelines. We can – and must - return to the appreciation and love of the sport.

My son is graduating from public school (North Atlanta High School), my husband is a professor, and I work in technology; we are not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but we work with what we have. Seeing **how we have been able to make it work** makes it that much more important for me to help those who would have dismissed this sport outright: too expensive, too hard, too rich, too elite. The benefits of this sport are not only Ivy League scholarships and Olympic medals but those of individual accountability and responsibility: not everyone wins, you benefit from your own effort and work, you win or lose, but you are always expected to show honor, respect and sportsmanship.