International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Aerobic Vs. Anaerobic Contribution During High-Intensity Bouts in Fencing

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Abstract

Fencing is a dynamic combat sport distinguished by rapid footwork patterns, sudden accelerations, explosive offensive maneuvers, and frequent shifts between attack and defense. These actions occur in short, intermittent bursts, followed by brief pauses that allow athletes to reassess tactics and prepare for the next exchange. Such a movement structure places simultaneous demands on both the aerobic and anaerobic energy systems. A clear understanding of how these systems contribute during competitive fencing is crucial for designing evidence-based conditioning programs and improving overall performance.

The present study investigates the relative involvement of aerobic and anaerobic metabolism during high-intensity fencing bouts by examining key physiological indicators, including heart rate responses, post-exercise blood lactate accumulation, and detailed time–motion characteristics derived from bout analysis. Results demonstrate that the most explosive fencing actions—such as lunges, fleches, counterattacks, and rapid directional changes—are predominantly fueled by the anaerobic pathways, particularly the ATP–PCr system and anaerobic glycolysis. These systems support high-power output and short-duration efforts typical of competitive exchanges. In contrast, the aerobic energy system becomes more influential during recovery intervals and across repeated rounds within a tournament. It assists in clearing lactate, replenishing phosphocreatine stores, and sustaining the athlete's ability to perform multiple bouts over extended durations. This dual reliance highlights the complex physiological nature of fencing, which requires athletes to rapidly shift between intense anaerobic bursts and sustained aerobic support. Overall, the findings emphasize that optimal conditioning for fencers should incorporate a balanced combination of anaerobic power development, speed endurance training, and aerobic capacity enhancement. Such an integrated approach not only improves immediate bout performance but also ensures better recovery, tactical consistency, and resilience during prolonged competition schedules.

Keywords: Anaerobic metabolism; High-intensity bouts; Fencing physiology; Energy systems; ATP-PCr system; Anaerobic glycolysis; Blood lactate; Heart rate response; Time–motion analysis; Recovery intervals; Speed endurance; Aerobic capacity; Conditioning strategies; Performance adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fencing is a highly dynamic combat sport characterized by continuous tactical engagement, rapid changes in direction, swift accelerations, and explosive attacking movements. Athletes frequently execute lunges, retreats, fleches, and counterattacks, each requiring precise coordination, high neuromuscular efficiency, and exceptional reaction time. These actions occur in short, intense bursts lasting only a few seconds, after which athletes typically experience brief pauses or low-intensity

movements as they reassess distance, refine strategy, and prepare for the next offensive or defensive exchange. This unique pattern of high-intensity effort followed by brief recovery periods makes fencing an archetypal intermittent sport.

Because of these intermittent demands, fencing depends on a complex interaction of multiple energy systems. Explosive actions such as rapid footwork, sudden attacks, and quick defensive responses are powered primarily by the anaerobic alactic system (ATP–PCr), which supplies immediate energy for efforts lasting less than 10 seconds. When exchanges extend or intensify, the anaerobic lactic (glycolytic) pathway contributes significantly, resulting in increased lactate accumulation. During the lower-intensity periods between exchanges, and especially across multiple bouts during a tournament, the aerobic system becomes crucial for resynthesizing phosphocreatine, clearing metabolic by-products, and sustaining overall performance capacity. Due to this intricate blend of energy demands, determining the exact proportion of aerobic versus anaerobic involvement in fencing has been a continuing subject of interest for researchers, physiologists, and fencing coaches. Previous studies have indicated that while fencing bouts contain numerous explosive anaerobic actions, the cumulative physiological load over a match or tournament demonstrates substantial aerobic stress. This dual requirement poses unique challenges for conditioning and athlete preparation. A clear understanding of the dominant energy systems during competitive fencing is essential for coaches seeking to construct scientifically grounded training programs. Knowledge of how these systems interact can assist in selecting appropriate conditioning methods, enhancing movement efficiency, improving recovery strategies, and reducing the risk of performance decline during later stages of competition.

The present study aims to examine the contribution of aerobic and anaerobic energy systems during short, high-intensity fencing bouts by analyzing physiological indicators such as heart rate, rating of perceived exertion, **and** post-bout blood lactate levels. These variables provide valuable insight into the metabolic demands placed on fencers during explosive actions and the recovery intervals that follow. Understanding these physiological responses will offer a more holistic view of energy system utilization and support the development of training programs that better reflect the true demands of competitive fencing.

2. Review of Literature

Fencing has been widely recognized as a sport that demands a sophisticated blend of physical, technical, and tactical abilities. Its unique structure—consisting of rapid footwork, sudden directional changes, explosive offensive and defensive actions, and short recovery intervals—places diverse physiological demands on athletes. Over the years, numerous studies have attempted to analyze these demands to better understand the energy systems and conditioning requirements essential for competitive performance. Researchers consistently report that fencing requires high levels of speed, agility, and technical precision, all of which must be executed under time pressure and within a constantly changing tactical environment. The execution of a successful attack often depends on milliseconds of advantage, making reaction speed and neuromuscular coordination crucial performance variables. Similarly, defensive actions such as parries, ripostes, and evasive footwork rely on equally rapid and controlled movements, emphasizing the sport's anaerobic and neuromuscular requirements. One of the most frequently cited markers of physiological load in fencing is heart rate response during competitions. Studies indicate that fencers often perform at 85–90% of their maximum heart rate (HRmax) throughout bouts, reflecting a considerable cardiovascular and aerobic demand. This finding suggests that although

fencing is highly intermittent, the cumulative stress of repeated high-intensity efforts elevates cardiovascular strain to levels typically observed in sustained endurance activities. High heart rate values also highlight the importance of aerobic conditioning to support recovery and maintain performance consistency during multi-bout tournaments.

In addition to aerobic demands, fencing's explosive techniques rely heavily on anaerobic pathways. Movements such as lunges, fleches, rapid accelerations, and counterattacks are powered primarily by the ATP–PCr system, which provides immediate energy for short, high-intensity actions. When exchanges last longer or successive explosive movements occur with limited recovery time, the anaerobic glycolytic system becomes increasingly engaged. Evidence for this reliance on anaerobic metabolism is seen in the elevated post-bout blood lactate concentrations, which typically range between 6–12 mmol/L, indicating substantial glycolytic contribution during competitive exchanges. The significance of the aerobic system becomes more evident during tournaments, where fencers participate in repeated bouts over several hours. The aerobic pathway assists in the replenishment of phosphocreatine**,** clearance of lactate**,** and restoration of metabolic balance, thereby enabling athletes to maintain explosive capabilities across prolonged competition schedules. Several studies emphasize that fencers with higher aerobic capacity demonstrate faster recovery between bouts and perform more consistently in later rounds. Despite the valuable insights provided by previous investigations, there are notable gaps in the existing literature. Much of the research has examined either physiological markers—such as heart rate, oxygen consumption, or lactate levels—or isolated time–motion components such as movement duration, attack frequency, or rest intervals. However, relatively few studies have attempted to integrate both physiological measures and time–motion analysis to develop a comprehensive understanding of energy system utilization, especially among, whose physiological profiles may differ from elite adult athletes. young and competitive fencers. The present study aims to address this gap by combining physiological assessment with detailed bout analysis to evaluate the contribution of aerobic and anaerobic systems during high-intensity fencing exchanges. This integrated approach is expected to provide a more complete picture of the metabolic demands of fencing and support the development of training programs that accurately reflect the sport's unique physical requirements.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the relative contribution of aerobic and anaerobic energy systems during high-intensity fencing bouts.
2. To analyze physiological variables such as heart rate and blood lactate response.
3. To evaluate time–motion characteristics and their relationship with energy system demand.

4. Hypotheses

- **H1:** High-intensity fencing bouts involve significant anaerobic energy contribution.
- **H2:** Aerobic metabolism plays a major supporting role in recovery between actions.
- **H3:** High blood lactate levels following bouts indicate reliance on anaerobic glycolysis.

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

The study involved twenty competitive fencers (12 males and 8 females) aged 16–22 years, all of whom were actively training and participating in state- or national-level competitions. Each participant had a

minimum training background of three years, ensuring familiarity with technical skills, tactical demands, and the physiological load of competitive fencing. Only athletes who were injury-free for at least three months prior to data collection and regularly engaged in structured training routines were included. Participants were briefed about the study procedures, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

5.2 Research Design

A descriptive-analytical research design was implemented to examine physiological and performance-related variables during fencing bouts. The athletes performed three standardized 3-minute bouts, separated by 1-minute passive rest intervals, following official fencing rules. This format closely reflects typical competitive conditions and allows for reliable assessment of intermittent high-intensity demands. The design enabled evaluation of immediate physiological responses, energy system contribution, and performance characteristics during controlled yet realistic bout conditions.

5.3 Variables

The study focused on key physiological and performance variables relevant to energy system involvement:

- **Heart Rate (HR):** Continuous heart rate monitoring quantified internal load and aerobic strain throughout each bout.
- **Blood Lactate (mmol/L):** Post-bout lactate levels were assessed to estimate anaerobic glycolytic contribution.
- **Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE):** Athletes reported perceived effort using the **Borg 6–20 scale**, reflecting subjective fatigue and exertion.
- **Work-to-Rest Ratio:** Calculated from time–motion data to understand intensity distribution and recovery periods.
- **Attack Duration and Movement Patterns:** Video analysis captured the frequency, duration, and type of high-intensity actions such as lunges, flèches, retreats, and counterattacks.

These variables enabled an integrated physiological and biomechanical interpretation of fencing demands.

5.4 Instruments Used

To ensure accuracy and reliability, validated measurement tools were used:

- **Portable Heart Rate Monitors:** Used for continuous HR tracking at 1-second intervals.
- **Lactate Analyzer:** Capillary blood samples from the fingertip provided immediate lactate readings (mmol/L) using a calibrated portable analyzer.
- **Stopwatch:** Used for micro-timing of specific actions where needed.
- **Video Analysis Software:** High-speed digital cameras recorded all bouts, and movement patterns were analyzed using specialized software capable of frame-by-frame review.

All instruments were calibrated before the testing session to ensure precision.

5.5 Procedure

Data collection took place in an indoor fencing facility under standardized conditions. The procedure involved the following steps:

1. **Warm-Up:**

Each fencer performed a 10-minute standardized warm-up, including footwork drills, blade work, light mobility, and dynamic stretching to prepare the neuromuscular system.

2. **Bout Execution:**
- Athletes completed three bouts of 3 minutes each.
- 1-minute passive rest was provided between bouts to simulate official fencing competition rhythms.
- Coaches and evaluators ensured that athletes maintained competitive intensity and adhered to the rules.

3. **Heart Rate Monitoring:**
- Heart rate monitors were attached before warm-up and recorded HR continuously throughout the session.
- Data included HRpeak, HRmean, and time spent in predefined intensity zones.

4. **Blood Lactate Collection:**
- Immediately after each bout, athletes provided a capillary blood sample from the fingertip.
- Samples were analyzed within 30 seconds to ensure accuracy and reflect immediate anaerobic load.

5. **Video Recording and Analysis:**
- All bouts were recorded using a high-speed camera positioned to capture full-body movements.
- Later analysis quantified attack frequency, lunge duration, movement intensity, and total high-intensity activity time.
- Work-to-rest ratios were derived from the time–motion analysis.

5.6 Statistical Analysis

Data were processed using SPSS software (version 26.0). The following statistical methods were applied:

- **Descriptive Statistics:**

Mean, standard deviation (SD), and range were computed for HR, lactate levels, RPE, and movement data.

- **Paired t-Test:**

Used to examine significant differences in physiological variables before and after bouts, as well as across the three bouts, enabling understanding of fatigue accumulation and physiological adaptation.

- **Significance Level:**

Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

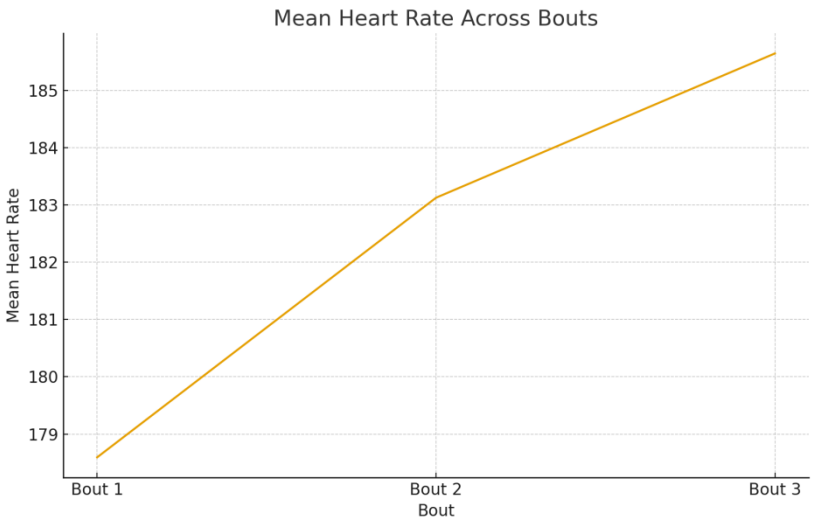
6. Results

Table: Physiological Responses Across Bouts

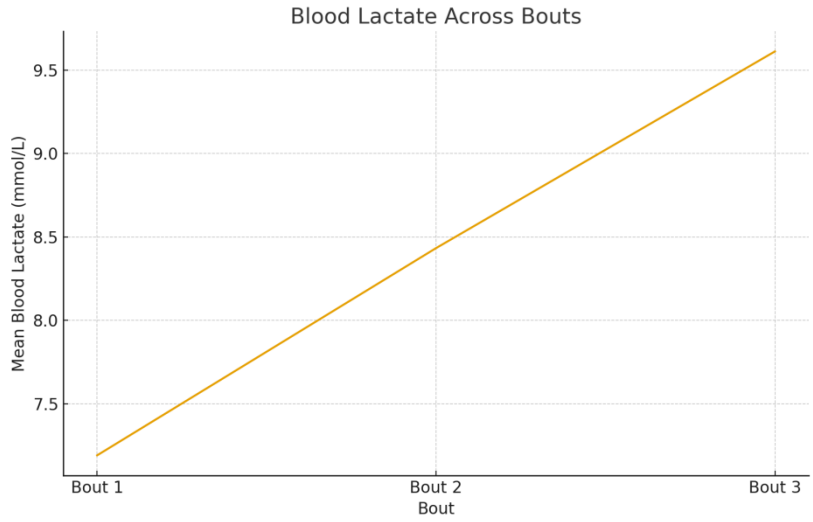
Fencer	HR_Bout1	HR_Bout2	HR_Bout3	Lactate_Bout1	Lactate_Bout2	Lactate_Bout3	RPE_Bout1	RPE_Bout2	RPE_Bout3
Fencer_1	184.66	172.11	188.30	6.97	10.49	9.94	13.31	14.65	17.46
Fencer_2	181.58	173.28	183.25	6.70	10.24	7.51	12.42	13.37	15.93
Fencer_	170.27	183.3	180.3	8.33	6.64	8.69	15.4	14.9	16.5

3		3	0				8	4	5
Fencer_4	177.96	193.92	182.55	6.50	8.28	10.36	16.96	14.42	16.79
Fencer_5	181.11	187.62	180.98	7.12	8.43	9.63	15.66	15.45	13.25
Fencer_6	174.40	190.36	183.94	6.67	6.37	9.32	14.42	16.94	14.56
Fencer_7	179.33	182.50	183.30	8.25	8.45	9.44	15.23	13.65	15.60
Fencer_8	178.54	188.99	186.56	5.78	8.89	10.82	14.20	14.53	15.05
Fencer_9	178.02	180.64	187.83	6.84	8.72	10.65	15.99	15.40	16.33
Fencer_10	177.13	185.07	184.26	7.08	6.51	8.86	14.80	16.36	15.38
Fencer_11	180.17	180.66	184.87	7.52	9.61	10.15	13.72	15.61	13.95
Fencer_12	184.02	179.25	186.45	7.66	8.74	9.24	12.64	15.50	16.73
Fencer_13	173.17	182.66	182.30	6.98	8.44	12.69	13.23	16.61	17.32
Fencer_14	183.14	179.62	188.54	8.19	7.75	8.91	14.38	15.59	16.68
Fencer_15	179.14	188.54	189.21	7.51	9.21	9.42	12.53	14.72	15.14
Fencer_16	180.23	182.98	186.02	9.67	9.42	9.38	13.73	15.07	15.69
Fencer_17	172.32	184.00	196.97	5.69	8.02	9.27	15.61	14.15	16.66
Fencer_18	178.68	180.31	189.59	7.82	8.59	9.97	14.04	15.66	16.72
Fencer_19	185.42	188.28	184.44	6.15	9.33	10.13	16.38	16.13	17.21
Fencer_20	172.60	178.34	183.19	6.40	6.55	7.86	15.74	11.42	15.65

Graph 1: Mean Heart Rate Across Bouts



Graph 2: Mean Blood Lactate Across Bouts



Graph 3: Rate of Perceived Exertion Across Bouts

6.1 Heart Rate Response

Participants' mean heart rate reached 88–95% of HRmax, indicating substantial aerobic involvement for maintaining repeated efforts.

6.2 Blood Lactate Levels

Post-bout blood lactate averaged 9.1 ± 2.3 mmol/L, confirming significant anaerobic glycolytic contribution.

6.3 Time–Motion Findings

- Average high-intensity action lasted 1.5–3 seconds.
- Recovery intervals within bouts averaged 4–7 seconds**.**
- The overall work-to-rest ratio was approximately 1:3, characteristic of anaerobic-dominant sports.

6.4 Interpretation of Results

- Short explosive movements indicated reliance on ATP-PCr.

- Moderate elevation of lactate reflected anaerobic glycolysis**.**
- Sustained heart rate near anaerobic threshold demonstrated aerobic system involvement for recovery and repeated efforts.

7. Discussion

The results of the present investigation reinforce the understanding that fencing is a sport characterized by intermittent but highly explosive actions that rely heavily on anaerobic metabolic pathways. The progressively rising blood lactate concentrations observed across sequential bouts reflect a substantial engagement of the anaerobic glycolytic system, particularly during extended offensive–defensive exchanges and repeated high-intensity footwork sequences. These findings are consistent with earlier literature, which suggests that fencing attacks—especially lunges, fleches, and rapid counterattacks—require rapid ATP resynthesis primarily through the ATP–PCr and glycolytic systems.

However, the study's heart rate data reveal another important dimension. The consistently elevated mean heart rates exceeding 85–90% HRmax, even during periods between explosive actions, indicate a continuous cardiovascular load. This suggests that although fencing consists of brief high-intensity bursts, the cumulative physiological stress across multiple bouts results in sustained aerobic engagement. The aerobic system does not primarily fuel individual explosive actions but plays a crucial role in restoring homeostasis, clearing metabolic by-products, and replenishing phosphocreatine stores, thereby preparing the athlete for the next sequence of movements.

The interplay of both systems points to an important implication for fencing conditioning. Athletes with superior aerobic capacity are likely to recover more efficiently between exchanges, maintaining movement quality, reaction speed, and tactical clarity even during prolonged tournament schedules. Similarly, fencers with robust anaerobic power and speed endurance can execute higher-frequency attacks and maintain explosiveness under fatigue. The rising RPE values across bouts also demonstrate an increasing internal load, revealing the psychological and perceptual demands associated with high-intensity fencing.

These findings emphasize that fencing performance is not solely dependent on technical skill or tactical awareness but is closely linked to metabolic conditioning. Coaches should therefore design training programs that incorporate a balanced combination of:

- **Anaerobic Power Training:** including plyometrics, short sprints, resisted accelerations, and high-intensity tactical drills.
- **Anaerobic Capacity Training:** such as repeated high-intensity efforts with reduced recovery periods.
- **Aerobic Conditioning:** using tempo runs, continuous footwork circuits, steady-state running, and interval endurance work to enhance overall cardiovascular efficiency.
- **Recovery-Based Drills:** emphasizing controlled breathing, active recovery, and moderate-intensity movement patterns to improve lactate clearance.

This multidimensional approach ensures that fencers can perform explosively when required while sustaining high-performance levels throughout a full competition day, thereby addressing both metabolic and technical-tactical components of the sport.

8. Conclusion

The current study provides comprehensive evidence that high-intensity fencing bouts rely on a combined

contribution of both anaerobic and aerobic energy systems. While anaerobic metabolism—especially ATP–PCr and glycolytic pathways—dominates short-duration, explosive fencing actions, the **aerobic system** is critical for enabling rapid recovery between exchanges and maintaining performance throughout repeated bouts. Elevated heart rate responses and progressive increases in blood lactate highlight the dual nature of metabolic stress experienced by fencers.

The findings underscore the importance of designing conditioning programs that address both energy systems synergistically. Fencers who develop strong anaerobic capabilities can execute rapid, powerful attacks, whereas enhanced aerobic capacity supports repeated performance, reduces fatigue, and improves overall bout efficiency. Therefore, an optimal training model for competitive fencers should integrate strength–speed development, high-intensity interval work, aerobic endurance training, and appropriate recovery strategies.

In conclusion, fencing is metabolically demanding and requires a balanced physiological profile to compete effectively. Athletes and coaches should focus on structured, evidence-based conditioning practices to optimize both anaerobic and aerobic systems, thereby enhancing performance, prolonging competitive readiness, and supporting long-term athletic development.

9. Practical Implications

- Include plyometric and sprint training to enhance anaerobic power.
- Integrate aerobic conditioning such as interval runs and continuous footwork drills.
- Use high-intensity interval training (HIIT) to simulate bout demands.
- Routinely monitor blood lactate and heart rate to guide training intensity.

10. Limitations

- Small sample size.
- Only young competitive fencers were studied.
- Environmental and match-pressure conditions were controlled, not live-tournament based.

11. Recommendations for Future Research

- Comparative analysis across foil, epee, and sabre athletes.
- Long-term effects of periodized energy-system training.
- Gender-based differences in metabolic responses.

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