

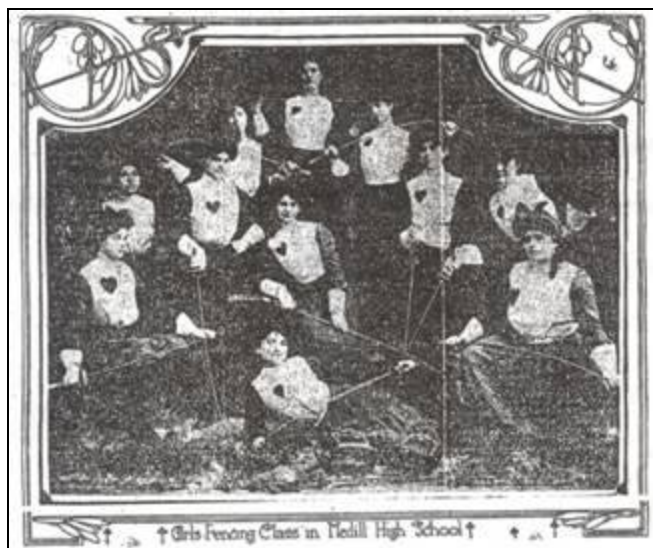
## Fencing: A Long-time Illinois Sport

By [ROBERT PRUTER](#)

The Illinois High School Association has for many years "recognized" fencing in Illinois high schools, but there have never been enough participating schools to justify IHSA sponsorship. At most throughout the sport's history in Illinois only about 15 schools in any one year have fielded teams, and usually the number of schools was less than half that number. The IHSA requires a minimum of 15 percent of the more than 700 member schools to offer a sport before it establishes a statewide tournament.

While fencing had been a part of many Eastern secondary schools programs from before World War I, the sport did not begin gain supporters in the Chicago public schools until the early 1920s. Fencing had been for decades found in the nation's military academies, partly because of the legacy of the sport as part of a proper officer's training and partly because it was considered valuable for instilling a martial spirit.

Fencing had been tried in a number of Illinois high schools in the first decades of the twentieth century, but there was never enough interest to generate interscholastic competition. As early as 1903, Medill High was offering fencing classes to its female students, a novelty enough for the Chicago Tribune to feature the girls fencing class with a write-up and a large photo of the girls in their fencing outfits wielding foils. The sport failed to catch on with the other schools at this time and the Medill experiment soon ended.



Medill fencing class 1903, *Chicago Tribune*, 29 March 1903

By the early 1920s in Chicago there were a number of fencing tournaments sponsored by the Amateur Fencers' League of America (AFLA) clubs, Turner halls, and the University of Chicago. These competitions provided high school-age students, both boys and girls, their first opportunity to participate in the sport. Lake View High initiated fencing for girls in the 1920s, when it began a fencing class for them in 1921. It was soon evident that fencing was growing both as a class activity and a sport, and a few teachers in the schools finally got together and persuaded the Chicago Public High School League to sponsor its first fencing tournament in 1924.

### Chicago Public High School Meet

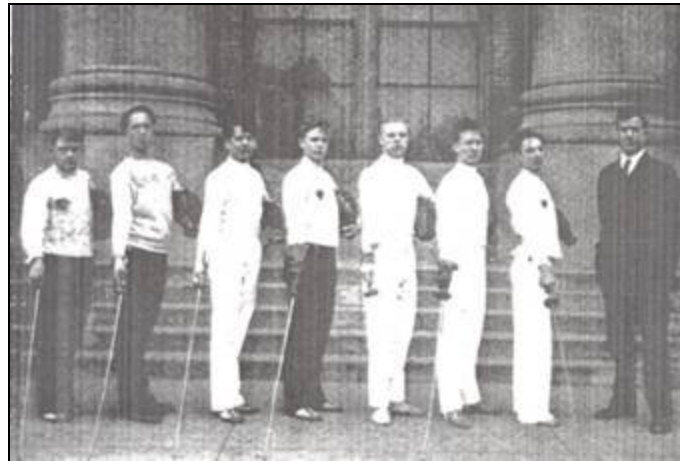
Seven schools sent boys teams to the first Chicago high school meet in late May of 1924, which was won by Senn High, under the coaching of August H. Pritzlaff. The league usually conducted the fencing meet on the same day and in the same tournament the league held for its gymnastics championships. Under Pritzlaff, Senn sustained itself as a fencing power throughout the 1920s, producing many of the captains and top fencers for the Big Ten fencing teams. By 1928, Senn graduates had won four out of five previous individual Big Ten championships. Fencing was not just a part of the extracurriculum at Senn; the school conducted a daily credit-earning class in the sport.

By the late 1920s, the Chicago Public High School League was conducting two boys meets, a team championship meet, followed a week later by an individual championship meet, the latter held in conjunction with the gymnastics meet. Competition was usually held at one of the member high schools. Joining Senn in winning championships were such schools as Lindblom, Roosevelt, and Hyde Park. The sport tended to attract immigrant boys from such countries as Italy

and Hungary, but also boys of a Jewish background, and most Chicago schools that had notable success in fencing had sizable Jewish-American populations. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, about ten schools were participating in the annual city meets.



Senn champions of the Chicago Public High School League, 1925



Lindblom state fencing champions 1929

## Girls Fencing

A couple of Chicago schools also fielded girls fencing teams, notably Lake View, which began a team in 1925. The school was in the forefront in establishing military sports in its extracurriculum. It formed the girls team with the idea competing against other schools, but apparently could not find another school to compete against. Another school, Lindblom, formed its first girls fencing club in 1928, but at that time all interscholastic contests had been barred for girls, and the two schools could not compete against each other.

Another school that fielded a fencing team in the late 1920s, was Immaculata, a North Side all-girls Catholic high school. A photo of the team appeared in the December 15, 1929 edition of the Chicago Tribune, which reported that the girls fencing team was appearing in the school's annual Christmas festival.

Some members of these high school fencing teams found competition outside their schools in Amateur Athletic Federation fencing tournaments, and were proudly written up on in their high school yearbooks. For example, the Lindblom high yearbook reported that one of its fencing team members, Rose Szidak, took first place in the "high school division" of the AAF meet in 1931.

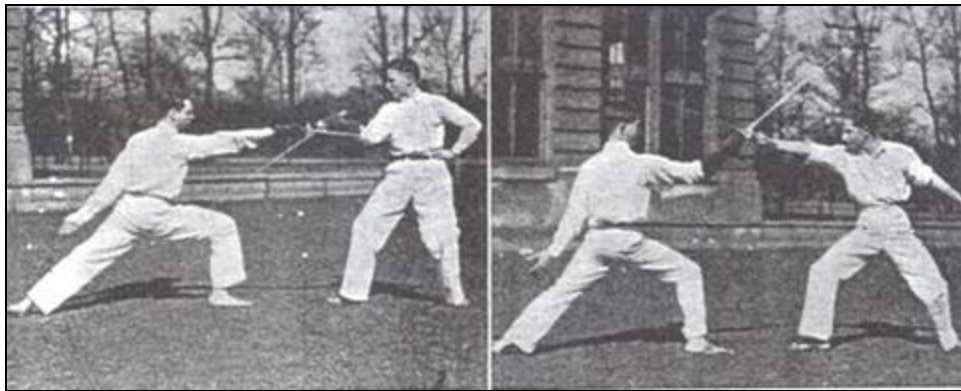


Lake View fencing team, 1931

## Outside Competition

Chicago high school boys besides competing in the Chicago Public High School meet were also were competing in a number of outside competitions. One of them was the Cook County Meet, which drew a few suburban schools, notably Morton High of Cicero, and was begun in 1925. The meet was sponsored by the Foil Club of Chicago. Some Chicago high schools competed in dual meets with prep schools in the Midwest, such as St. John's Military Academy, in Delevan, Wisconsin.

The first state tournament for Illinois high school fencers was sponsored by the Illinois division of the Amateur Fencers' League of America, beginning in 1926. Each team comprised of three men. Most of the competitors came from Chicago schools, but Morton High in Cicero often participated. Competition was held in foils only. In most years, the state championship meet was conducted in Bartlett Gymnasium at the University of Chicago. The winning team was awarded the Kraft Cup, symbolic of the state championship. Generally the Chicago schools' champion was the winner of the state title, the sport being so negligible outside the city.



Hyde Park 1931 team members demonstrating fencing moves

Fencing in the Chicago Public High School League probably reached the apex of its popularity in 1938, when twelve schools competed in the league meet. Austin at this time had one of the most formidable teams in the history of the city tournament. Sophomore Bernie Fishman of Austin was the individual champion; he repeated as champion in 1939. By 1942, the number of schools participating was down to nine, and by 1945, the number of schools was down to four. The 1947 and 1948 meets featured only two schools, Lane Tech and Senn. In 1949, Austin after a six-year absence joined Lane and Senn in the competition. Albert J. Paulson who coached Austin before the war, left for the service in 1941, and Austin abolished its team in 1942. Paulson came back to Austin after the war and resurrected the sport for the 1949 season. Crane Tech reentered fencing competition in 1950, but did not rejoin in 1951, leaving just Austin, Senn, and Lane competing against each other for the remainder of the decade. By 1961, only Senn and Austin competed for the city title, the last sponsored by the Chicago Public League.

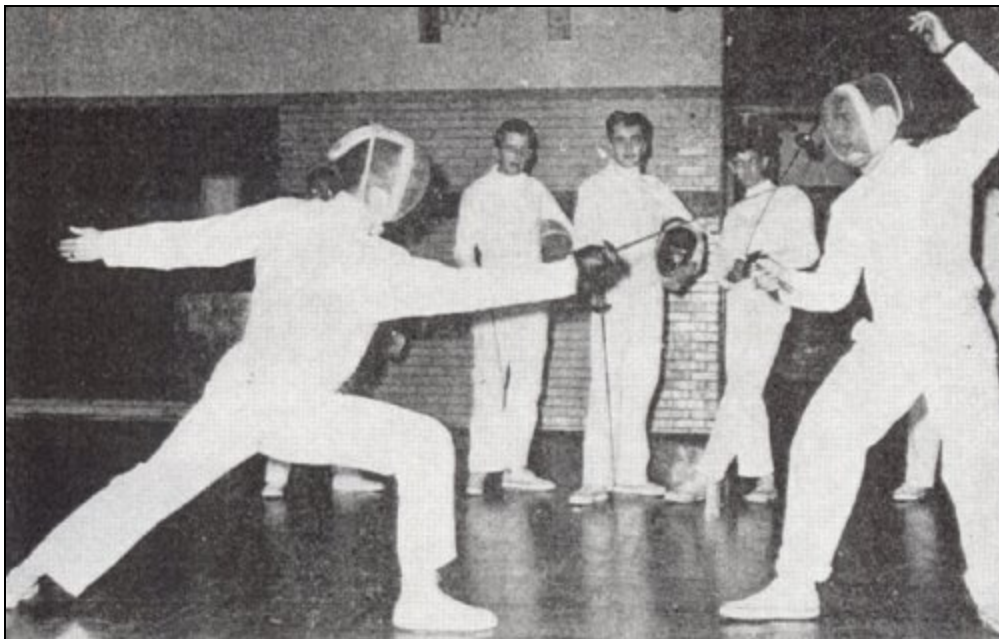


Austin, 1939

Meanwhile, by the mid-1950s, when state tournament was on its last legs, its fortunes sinking as the sport was sinking in the Chicago schools. Only Austin and Senn were fielding teams in Chicago, and downstate Urbana High had a team. The last year of the tournament, 1957, featured only teams from Austin and Senn. Near the end of Senn's sponsorship of fencing, it produced notables, city champion Steve Ramis and his younger brother Harold Ramis, many years away from his film comedy career.

### University of Illinois Tournament

The University of Illinois, which had one of the premier fencing programs in the country, introduced a new state tournament in 1958. The meet was designed to provide a state title competition for Illinois high schools, following the demise of the state meet sponsored by the Illinois Division of the Amateur Fencers' League of America. The Illinois meet was usually held in the men's old gym, generally in the second week of March. The meet drew from a handful of schools in the Chicago area and a handful from downstate. There were a sufficient number of schools by the 1970s to form two local conferences in the Chicago area.



Austin, 1961

Two of the most intriguing programs were that of Marshall, which took four state titles during 1963-69, belying the notion that an all-black school would be a fencing power: and 1967 state champion Pleasant Plains, a small school downstate that among its limited sport offerings included fencing. Other downstate schools that participated at various times in this tournament were University (Champaign), New Berlin, Champaign, and Glenwood (Chatham). Upstate, such Chicago schools as Foreman, Austin, and Senn participated in the early years of the tournament. Chicago suburban teams that participated included Maine West, Maine South, Niles East, Niles West, and New Trier East. Catholic schools in the tournament included St. Mel, Notre Dame, St. Patrick, and Gordon Tech.



Marshall, 1973



Marshall, 1973

During the 1970s, there were about 12 to 14 Illinois schools a year competing in fencing. Dave Littell, who competed for Park Ridge (Maine South) (1968-1971) and was a United States Olympian in 1988, pointed out that competitively, "The level of fencing was quite high" at the Illinois state championship tournament, noting that three future Olympians competed in the tournament, naming besides himself—Tim Glass (Niles Notre Dame, 1970-1973), who was named to the 1980 Olympics team but was not able to compete in epee because of the boycott; and Mike McCahey (Winnetka New Trier East, 1970-1973), who competed in foil in the 1984 Olympics. The state also produced two-time World Team competitor, Ed Kaihatsu (Park Ridge Maine South, 1975-1978). "As there wasn't much fencing in the Midwest—all of the good fencing in those days was on the east and west coast—having that much success was an impressive record," noted Littell.

Littell pointed that a lot of the top fencers in the northern suburbs got much of their training from Allen January, a top national fencer from New York in the 1950s, who instructed fencing classes at the Leaning Tower YMCA in Niles. Two notable coaches Littell mentioned were Father Lawrence Calhoun of Niles (Notre Dame) who started the first Junior US

Fencing Championships; and his own coach, Karen Kenyon, who at that time “took a lot of heat” because of her gender. In 1970 she moved to Des Plaines (Maine West) and started the program there.

Contributing to the decline of fencing in Illinois was that the sport in the late 1960s entered into a high tech era using electronic scoring, in which cords are connected to weapons and lames (vests) to record with a light the touches each athlete makes with his sword. Related Fernando Delgado of the United States Fencing Association to the *Chicago Tribune*, “A lot of schools didn’t have the resources to purchase the equipment, so they dropped the programs.” There were other issues that contributed to the decline. For example, Niles (Notre Dame), which won state titles in 1973 and 1974, was forced to terminate its ten-year program in the mid-1970s when an eye injury to one of the school’s fencers resulted in the school’s insurance company threatening to drop its coverage unless fencing was eliminated.

Gordon Tech ended fencing in 1990, when it could not find a coach. The school’s former coach, Peter Morrison, lamented to a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1995, “It’s always tough to find a coach, but you can take any PE teacher and give them a crash course and keep a program going. The sport did not receive a great deal of support from administrators and athletic directors. They’d rather spend their money on sports that have a professional connection like basketball and football.”

As a result of the overall decline of fencing programs in Illinois the University of Illinois state tournament went in decline in the late 1970s, and was gone by 1980. Marshall and no other city school participated in the last years of the tournament, and only a handful of Chicago area schools had fencing teams, notably New Trier East, New Trier West, and Gordon Tech, Maine South, and Maine West.

## Midwest School Fencing Championships

In 1981, the Great Lakes High School Fencing Conference was formed to promote fencing in schools throughout the Midwest. There were only a handful of charter member schools—namely Winnetka (New Trier), Catholic Memorial (Waukesha, WI), Culver Academies (Culver, IN), Des Plaines (Maine West), and Chicago (Gordon Tech). The organization each February would conduct the Midwest School Fencing Championships, which was hosted by member schools on a rotating basis. Each high school could enter team with up to four entrants per weapon. Weapons are foil, epee, and saber. Individuals from schools not represented by a team may enter as independents, up to a limit of four per weapon. Individual, club, and high school team trophies were awarded.

The inaugural Midwest championship in 1981 had three Illinois members—Winnetka (New Trier), Chicago (Gordon Tech), and Des Plaines (Maine West). Only a handful of schools outside of Illinois ever became members. Reflecting the advent of girls into interscholastic sports since the early 1970s, the Great Lakes Conference has always offered both boys and girls competition. Early in the boys competition Gordon Tech and Maine West won most of the titles, but since 1991 New Trier has won 16 titles, Culver Military Academy 5, and Stevenson, 2. In the girls competition, Maine West won the first 6 titles, but since 1987, Catholic Memorial of Waukesha, Wisconsin, has won 11 titles; New Trier 10 titles, and Stevenson 2 titles.

In 2013, there were eight Illinois members of the Great Lakes Conference—two original members, Winnetka (New Trier) and Des Plaines (Maine West), plus Lincolnshire (Stevenson), Homewood (Homewood-Flossmoor), Woodstock (Marian Central Catholic), Chicago Heights (Marian Catholic), Deerfield, and Chicago (University). Members outside of Illinois numbered only three—Grand Rapids Catholic Central in Michigan, Culver Academies in Indiana, and Catholic Memorial in Waukesha, Wisconsin.

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