

# Fencing rattled by suspensions and accusations in the run-up to this summer's Paris Olympics

By JERE LONGMAN  
The New York Times

Fencing is a niche but fundamental sport in the Olympics, contested at every Summer Games since 1896. Yet despite its genteel reputation and simple objective — touch an opponent with your blade before being touched — the sport has long been rife with drama and suspicion.

Two months before the Paris Olympics, international saber fencing is engulfed by questions about the integrity of refereeing, accusations of preferential treatment, and concerns among top athletes and coaches that their sport's tangled connections may be helping decide who gets to compete at the Games.

The federation that governs fencing in the United States, USA Fencing, recently suspended two international referees after they acknowledged communicating with each other during an Olympic qualifying tournament in California. It grew so concerned about two other referees that it asked the sport's global governing body to ensure that those two judges were no longer assigned to any matches involving Americans.

And just last week, more than a half-dozen elite fencers demanded harsher punishments and urgent action to protect a sport that they say is "vulnerable to unfair refereeing and match-fixing."

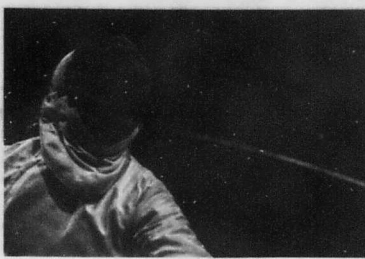
"Part of me feels so foolish for thinking all this time" that the sport was built on honor, integrity and dedication, said Andrew Mackiewicz, 28, a U.S. saber fencer who competed at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021.

"It wasn't," he added. "It was like a mirage." He said he stepped away from the sport in February because of his concerns about unscrupulous refereeing.

## Judgment calls

While fencing relies on electronic timing, it is referees who parse the complicated rules of attack during each match and decide if a point, or touch, is valid. Those rules bring an element of subjectivity to the scoring, and saber fencing, one of the sport's three disciplines along with epee and foil, can be particularly challenging because its athletes lunge explosively at one another and deliver touches nearly simultaneously.

Subjectivity "creates a lot of



Andrew Mackiewicz of the U.S., shown competing in the men's saber competition at the 2020 Summer Olympics on July 24, 2021, in China, Japan, has since stepped away from fencing due to concerns over officiating.

room for corruption," which can be difficult to prove, said Yuri Gelman, a longtime fencing coach at St. John's University in New York who will coach his seventh Olympics at the Paris Games. In an interview, Gelman expressed frustration that little was being done to address saber fencing's problems.

The referees who were suspended last month by USA Fencing, Jacobo Morales and Brandon Romo, have been barred from judging matches in tournaments overseen by the federation for nine months. They denied any manipulation of their conduct began after they appeared to have communicated with each other during a tournament involving a top U.S. saber fencer, Tatiana Nazlymov, 19, at an Olympic qualifying tournament.

USA Fencing had initially sought 10-year bans for both men but ultimately decided on lesser punishments after a disciplinary panel report, reviewed by The New York Times, found "the appearance of impropriety" but no credible evidence to support collusion or other manipulation.

They were not the only referees, though, who had drawn the attention of the U.S. federation. Months earlier, Phil Andrews, the CEO of USA Fencing, had written with alarm to the sport's global governing body, the International Fencing Federation, to express concern that there was "likely to be improper officiating" of bouts involving Nazlymov and another leading U.S. saber fencer, Mitchell Saron.

In its letter, which was sent Dec.

3 and reviewed by the Times, USA Fencing said it was primarily concerned with two referees, Vasil Milenchev of Bulgaria and Yegheniy Dyakonkin of Kazakhstan. Video evidence, the letter said, indicated that calls made by those referees in bouts involving Saron and Nazlymov showed "a likely favoritism" toward them.

As a result, USA Fencing requested that Milenchev and Dyakonkin no longer be assigned to bouts involving any U.S. fencers. Andrews said he understood that the International Fencing Federation responded to the letter with an investigation but was unaware of its outcome.

The international federation did not respond to requests for comment, but both referees continue to judge matches involving U.S. fencers. Attempts to reach Milenchev and Dyakonkin through the international federation were unsuccessful.

In a draft of a second letter dated Dec. 18 and also reviewed by the Times, Andrews informed Nazlymov and Saron that the federation was aware that "potential preferential officiating treatment" was benefiting their performances and warned them that they could be stripped of some points they had accumulated toward Olympic qualification if "strong evidence" of match manipulation emerged.

But the final version of the letter, sent to the athletes a day later and reviewed after this article was published, did not include the threat of punishment. It said the federation had "no reason at this time to believe that you are

personally responsible, or even aware of these actions being taken by others to favor your international performance." Still, the letter added, "We write to formally put you on notice that we are aware of this alleged manipulation of the sport."

Nazlymov and Saron have since been named to the U.S. team for the Paris Olympics. By March, USA Fencing announced it seemed to have eased. Saron acknowledged through a spokesperson that on March 6 he had received a text message, which was reviewed by the Times, from a federation official saying that he was not a cause for concern.

And preliminary results from an independent investigation into match manipulation in saber fencing found "no evidence that individual U.S. fencers were actively involved in manipulating their own bouts," the federation said in late April.

Nazlymov did not respond to a request for comment. But her mother, Zheng Wang, wrote in an email that "Tatiana is absolutely innocent and the cheating/match-fixing accusation is ridiculous."

## A web of connections

The latest flashpoint came in early January, when Nazlymov was involved in the match at the North American Cup in San Jose, California.

According to a USA Fencing disciplinary panel, with the score 12-10, Romo began to seek input from Morales before awarding points to either fencer, and Morales acknowledged responding via hand gestures. Such communication is a violation of fencing's rules.

Howard Jacobs, a California lawyer who represented Morales, the more experienced referee, said his client was simply affirming calls that the less-experienced Romo was to make, and that no decisions were changed because of their communications. According to the report, Romo said he was seeking only confirmation of his intended calls.

A video posted online that showed Morales signaling also showed Nazlymov's coach sitting near and talking to Morales at some point during the match. Neither referee disputed the video, USA Fencing said.

According to testimony at a hearing, the coach, Filkar Valiyev, asked Morales who Romo was and

another question unrelated to the bout, but the two did not discuss any calls, Jacobs said. Nazlymov narrowly won the match, 15-14.

Andrews said that there was "no evidence" that Tatiana herself is at fault in the refereeing dispute.

Nazlymov is a member of one of fencing's most prominent families. Her grandfather, Vladimir Nazlymov, won twice Olympic gold medals in the team saber competition for the former Soviet Union, and her father, Vitali Nazlymov, is a former NCAA individual champion.

Her coach, Valiyev, is a two-time Olympic saber fencer from Azerbaijan, but he also exemplifies the complicated relationships that exist in elite fencing. In addition to serving as Tatiana Nazlymov's primary coach, he works at the Nazlymov family's fencing academy in Maryland and as an international referee at the Olympic level.

Wang said in an email that her daughter had been unfairly accused in the team saber competition of "doctored" video posted in January by Andrew Fischl, a U.S. coach and former elite saber fencer.

Fischl, who regularly posts fencing videos, said he obtained two pieces of raw video from the January match and zoomed in on the bout but did not change the order of any action, distort any occurrence or make any accusations. "I just showed what happened and was like, this is weird and inappropriate," Fischl said.

Valiyev has not been accused of any impropriety and said in an email that he had never tried to manipulate matches. But he has come under scrutiny in other videos posted online for possible conflicts of interest by coaching and refereeing at the same competition, and by refereeing several U.S. Uzbek fencers while Vladimir Nazlymov was coaching Uzbekistan's national team or individual Uzbek athletes.

Valiyev, responding by email with Vitali Nazlymov, said that he behaved according to the rules. But the two coaches acknowledged that "fencing is a small world and conflicts exist everywhere."

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# Cavan Sullivan, 14, surpasses Freddy Adu's MLS record contract ahead of move to Manchester City

By TOM BOGERT  
The Atlantic

The first time the Philadelphia Union started talking seriously about signing Cavan Sullivan to a professional deal was two years ago. The extremely talented academy standout was already turning heads at 12-years-old.

He wasn't just catching attention around the academy scene or with the U.S. youth national team — he was getting noticed by some of the biggest clubs in Europe, including Manchester City, Borussia Dortmund and Real Madrid.

This past winter, decision was made as those big clubs were flexing their financial muscle to try to lure Sullivan to Europe, skipping a professional deal with his boyhood club. Months of tense discussions ended in an ideal outcome for all parties, with Sullivan inking the most lucrative homegrown deal in MLS history to begin his professional club with the Union.

That deal was made official on Thursday. "This is a historic day for the Philadelphia Union. It is not often, in any sport, you get to sign a generational talent," head coach Jim Curtin told the media.

Sullivan joined the Union academy at age 10. His oldest brother, Quinn, who also came through the club's academy, is currently in the Union's first team.

"The Union means almost everything to me. It's my club," Sullivan said. "Watching Quinn in the first team — being at the club since I was a little kid. This is my home."

Sullivan has excelled at

every level of youth soccer, already breaking into the Union's second team to get his first steps in professional soccer.

"Everybody knows, he is probably the best of the Manchester talent on the globe," sporting director Ernst Tanner said. "It was important we could keep him with us."

This deal was far from a foregone conclusion. In fact, as recently as two months ago, it seemed certain Sullivan would skip Philly and head directly to Europe on his 16th birthday, as he has a German passport which allows him to leave before turning 18.

"That's what we tried to avoid," Tanner said.

The Union knew about the global interest in Sullivan. Manchester City eventually won out, as first reported by The Athletic. In conjunction with this homegrown deal, Sullivan will join Manchester City after he turns 18.

The Union's press release made no mention of Manchester City, which has not released anything publicly, either. Tanner declined to comment when asked. Sources reiterate that the deal for Sullivan to join City after he turns 18 is signed and done.

Sullivan has now signed the most lucrative deal for a 14-year-old in MLS history, with the average compensation surpassing the previous record held by Freddy Adu, who first signed for D.C. United in 2003. Adu's deal was worth around \$500,000 per season. Sullivan's average is slightly above that over the length of the contract, according to sources briefed on the deal who weren't

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CAVAN SULLIVAN  
14-year-old soccer player signed by the Philadelphia Union

authorized to speak publicly about it. The deal escalates in value every year, with the work starts now. Sullivan said, "I have a lot to do. My main goal is to win MLS Cup."

The MLS Players Association will release salary data twice in 2024 and Sullivan's number for this season will be revealed then. Homegrown deals are "more or less standardized" through the league office, Tanner said, hence the drawn out negotiations. The league office needs to sign off on any deal. The Union wasn't initially negotiating with Sullivan's camp, but also the league office.

Sullivan's deal will be around five times a normal homegrown contract. For comparison, NYCFC signed academy standout Benito Estrada to a homegrown deal when he was 14 in 2022. Last season, per the MLSPA, his deal was worth \$111,597. New York Red Bulls academy standout Benito Estrada also signed his first deal when he was 14. Last season, when he was 17, his deal paid \$109,444.

Those two are on the higher end of recent homegrown deals, but the unprecedented talent and the competition from European clubs

put Sullivan on strong footing to maximize this deal.

Now, with his future settled, Sullivan is focused on making history.

"To be honest, nothing has really happened yet, the work starts now," Sullivan said. "I have a lot to do. My main goal is to win MLS Cup."

If he were to make his first team debut before July 29, he would become the youngest player ever to debut among the top North American professional sports leagues (MLB, MLS, NBA, NFL, NHL, NWFL, WNBA), per the Elias Sports Bureau. The previous youngest player to accomplish these feats was Adu, who made his MLS debut at 14 years and 306 days old on April 3, 2004 for D.C. United.

"We'll not afraid to put Cavan on the field at any time when he's ready," Curtin said. "He'll get on the field on merit, first and foremost, but I'll say it publicly: (His debut) is a lot closer than people may realize."

Tanner is well renowned for his work in youth development throughout a decorated career in Germany, then Austria, before coming to America. He also doesn't traffic in hyperbole, so when he makes an assessment of a player, people listen.

"I'd say Cavan, in my eyes, is a top three youth talent. I've seen in my 30-year career," Tanner said.

A ton of stars have crossed those eyes over that 30-year career. Prior to the Union, Tanner's previous role was building out the FC Salzburg academy. The club either produced or acquired at a

young age the likes of Erling Haaland, Konrad Laimer and Dominik Szoboszlai, a player Tanner compared Sullivan to.

Szoboszlai was an exceptional young talent that Salzburg brought in from the academy, saying the deal was done when the player was 14, like Sullivan.

Like Salzburg in Austria, Philly has become the gold standard for youth development in the United States. Since Tanner took over, the club has produced and transferred the likes of Brenden Aaronson, Paxton Aaronson and Mark McKenzie to Europe. Academy graduate Austin Trusty ended up in the Premier League. Current first teamers Jack McGlynn and Quinn Sullivan are destined for Europe, too.

"We have a track record," academy director, Tom Scheer said. "We have a history of developing players, within our academy and the first team, then transitioning them on to bigger clubs in the global game. We have a proven concept that families and players can truly believe in."

From ownership through the academy, with key figures like Tanner, Scheer, Curtin and second team head coach Marlon Lohman, the Union stands on their business. "We're a club that wants to be the gold standard of youth development," Curtin said. "We want every kid in the United States to say they want to play for the Philadelphia Union someday because we will put you on the field. We will not buy anyone to replace you. We have young players in this country."