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**NWAFC, USFA introducing sport of fencing in a pilot
high school program
5 NWA high schools to participate**

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS—Five high schools plan to participate in a pilot program introducing the sport of fencing. The program will be operated by the Bentonville-based Northwest Arkansas Fencing Center.

Bentonville High School, Haas Hall Academy (both campuses), Arkansas Arts Academy, Northwest Arkansas Classical Academy, and Providence Academy have initially agreed to participate.

The United States Fencing Association (USFA) is offering the pilot program that includes two clinics (one in the fall, one in the spring) during the 2015-2016 school year with the idea of generating interest and excitement for the sport. The participating schools that have enough interested students will then develop intramural teams who will compete in tournaments and eventually an inaugural championship during the 2016-2017 school year.

High school fencing is popular in the northeastern United States, but is not a sanctioned sport in many other states, including Arkansas. Each state has different criteria for sanctioning a school sport and what the lettering requirements for that sport would be.

“If you can letter in high school, that’s more attractive for a kid to participate,” said Rick Kirk, co-founder of NWA Fencing Center.

NWAFC Co-founder and NWA Fencing Foundation Executive Director Laura Kirk initially approached the USFA about the potential of a high school program two years ago and they asked her to be part of the new pilot program. The idea is for the USFA then to partner with fencing clubs in other areas to offer similar pilot programs, she said.

“We would be offering support at the club/intramural level and the USFA would recognize it,” Laura Kirk said. “Our hope is to have it sanctioned in three to five years.”

Fencing is a sport known as “physical chess” for its intense and strategic nature. Fencing is growing in colleges across the country and it provides students an excellent path to college through scholarships. The NWA Fencing Center has an estimated 71 percent rate of preferred placement for scholarships with its fencers who have graduated.

About the NWA Fencing Center

Both the NWAFF and NWAFC work to create an environment that is about honor, respect and learning, executive director Laura Kirk said. The center offers a study room where students can do their homework and study after school before lessons and the foundation has a minimum grade-point average required for its students to participate.

“It can be used as a path to college,” Kirk said of fencing. “There are better chances to get fencing scholarships than (other sports). We’re trying to create life-changing opportunities for young people.”

The fencing program helps build self-esteem, self-discipline, and improves focus and concentration—all attributes that translate into other aspects of the student’s life, Kirk said.

The organizations have served more than 1,000 children ages 6 to 18. This includes children while they are residing at the NWA Children’s Shelter, children participating in Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and children qualified for school free lunch programs. The center also serves young adults, usually between the ages of 23 to 35 (although many college students also participate). Coaches and students from the center have been involved with the Olympics, NCAA competition and other national and international competitions. Just this year two NWAFC fencers begin their collegiate fencing careers.

About the NWA Fencing Foundation

NWAFC partners with Northwest Arkansas Fencing Foundation to provide a complete community fencing program. The Northwest Arkansas Fencing Foundation is a 501(c)3 Corporation committed to offering life changing opportunities to under-served and at-risk youth in the areas of higher education, college scholarships, nutrition education and obesity prevention, through the sport of fencing. NWAFC is a member of the United States Fencing Association (Oklahoma Division).

The money raised through the foundation makes it possible for students of all socio-economic backgrounds to participate in fencing. Full annual funding for the average fencing student is \$1,000. NWAFF was founded in 2010 and opened its existing facility on 14th Street in Bentonville in October 2011.