

Open Letter to Mr. Phil Andrews



A recent letter from Mr. Phil Andrews, the CEO of USFA, caught Fair Fencing Organization's (FFO) attention.

FFO is a nonprofit organization for all fencing participants, including fencers, coaches, referees, club owners, and parents. FFO has provided multifaceted resources to its members starting from the very beginning of its incorporation.

FFO has observed that young and inexperienced referees have been verbally abused, that referees work long hours with honorarium below minimum wage, that referees lack the financial support to be further trained and to grow. FFO is the first and only organization that launched a million-dollar fundraising campaign in which a substantial portion of the proceeds will be used to provide referee training, education, scholarship, to promote a better market honorarium for all referees, and to encourage more fencing participants to become referees. As a strong supporter for referees, on behalf of its members many of whom are referees too, FFO would like to respond to Mr. Andrews's recent letter to USFA officials.

Before we express FFO's official position on this matter, let's take a brief look at what has transpired as substantiated by evidences and multiple witnesses. Here is the story behind the attorney's letter that agitated Mr. Andrews.

In a recent tournament, after a bout was finished, a strip referee who is not a native Chinese speaker overheard a mother soliloquizing in Chinese "Lao tian bu gong ping". Literally translation is "the old heavens aren't fair", an expression in Chinese that luck is not with someone. The strip referee gave the mother a level 1 black card. Then a man in his thirties came to scene, dressed casually unlike other referees in suits. Without identifying himself as a referee or an official, this man started to dislodge this mother from the venue. The mother, a non-English speaker, pointed to her backpack and tried to explain in her broken English that she would leave after picking up her backpack that contained her passport, her lady's belongings (as she was during her menstrual period), and her purse with a couple thousand dollars cash (she recently came to the U.S. and had no U.S. credit card).

This man rudely blocked her from going to her backpack. In doing so, he used his elbow to hit this mother's left breast, causing excruciating pain. Her son, a shy and non-confrontational high school kid who was sitting on the strip, saw his mother's pain, stood up, went toward his mother, extended his arm between his mother and this rude man, and said to this man in English "please don't touch my mom" and to his mother in Chinese "Mom, please leave."

Then this man abused his authority and issued a level 2 black card against the boy, claiming that the boy touched him. He continued to drive the mother out of the venue and escalated the penalty to level 2 black card against the mother too. Even after the mother left the venue, when she was trying to organize her belongings and find her pain killer, this man told the mother that she must leave the entire convention center. He called the convention center's security guard to effectuate his demand. During the entire incident, this man never identified himself as a referee or an official.

FFO assisted the mother to seek legal advice from a lawyer. After learning the facts, reviewing the evidences, and interviewing key witnesses, the lawyer wrote the letter at issue to the offender. So, this attorney's letter is not about an official's authority or normal execution of duty. It is about assault and battery, it's about intentional infliction of emotional distress, it's about discrimination against a protected class....

Mr. Andrews, either you were not able to comprehend the attorney's letter, or you intentionally misled your fellow USFA officials. In your divisive letter, you depicted fencing parents as some vicious enemies going after USFA officials. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, this humble mother expressed her gratitude to USFA and instructed her lawyers to suspend all legal actions as soon as her son was allowed to compete again, even though she endured pain and suffering entitling her to legal restitution.

Mr. Andrews, you should have known that your imprudent letter has the appearance of inciting confrontation between referees and fencing parents, many of whom are parents of both fencers and referees.

As a watchdog organization for the fencing sport, FFO strives to promote fairness, transparency, and safety of the sport for all participants. We strictly prohibit our members from verbally or physically abusing any other participants, whether the victim is a fencer, parent, coach, referee, other official or a spectator. Meanwhile, we do not tolerate anyone who bullies, discriminates, or otherwise violates our members' legal rights, irrespective of the malfeasant's official position or social status. To protect all fencing participants, since its inception last year, FFO has been building a coalition of lawyers and law firms in every state where USFA sanctioned tournaments are held.

We are adamant that everyone should respect fencing officials in their performance of duty. However, no one is above the law, not any USFA official nor its CEO. The status of USFA official is not a license to abuse authority, to bully other participants, to commit assault and battery, to inflict emotional distress, to discriminate against any person.

It is an honor and privilege for USFA officials to serve the members of USFA. However, such privilege does not afford USFA officials any right to threaten or attack any member's legal right. We were shocked that the CEO of a national governing body called the exercise of a victim's inherent rights to counsel and to seek legal restitution as a "legal harassment".

Mr. Andrews, your statement is by itself a manifestation of bullying. Disseminating such a letter while the matter is being appealed and further investigated is not only unprofessional but also highly inappropriate. We could not think of any reason for you to so act other than trying to influence the outcome of the ongoing appeal, to threaten retaliation against anyone who dares to seek legal protection in the future, to encourage the toxic culture of abusing official power to achieve personal satisfaction, and to divide between fencing parents, the financial backbone of this sport, and the referees, the pillar of fencing competitions.

Mr. Andrews, neither FFO nor parents, coaches, referees nor any fencing participant is the cause of USFA's current problems. We did not cause USFA's financial deficiency, despite the historical increase of our participation in competitions and membership, in addition to your unprecedented increase in membership fees; we didn't cause clubs to withdraw from USFA due to the unaffordable cost associated with USFA membership; we didn't cause coaches' and club owners' inability to obtain insurance; we didn't cause USOPC's concerns and inquiries over USFA; we didn't cause the tension between USFA officials and other fencing participants; we didn't cause multiple lawsuits against USFA. All these happened under your watch.

Mr. Andrews, your hollow threat is counterproductive. You know that you will need an army of lawyers that you don't have to fight USFA members as a group. Even if you had such a resource, why should you fight against the very members you are supposed to serve?

Mr. Andrews, neither does your placebo of liability insurance work. You know it perfectly that USFA's insurance doesn't cover any intentional or reckless torts, not even torts resulted from negligence. You know it perfectly that USFA's insurance doesn't cover assault and battery, a highly specialized subcategory that is often offered to bouncers of night clubs. No member will upfront additional cost so that you can purchase such an insurance to cover a few bullies. You are the CEO of a sport's association, not the owner of a sport bar. Most USFA officials are law abiding citizens who are in no need of such an insurance. Any initiative to increase insurance coverage for those who would commit assault and battery will not raise your popularity but only result in another lawsuit, possibly by a huge class.

Mr. Andrews, despite your inexperience in fencing sports, you were given a great opportunity to serve and lead USFA. Please remember that USFA is a membership organization! Please remember that you are not the owner of this organization! Please remember that you are hired to serve USFA members collectively! So, please be humble, conduct yourself prudently, tame your arrogance, stop fighting against the very members you are hired to serve, and start listening. Continuing oppression on members will only bring division, confrontation, and endless litigation.

Mr. Andrews, an award from a journal is a nice decoration on the wall. But it doesn't automatically mean great leadership. To lead requires many great qualities and actions, among which is to serve with authenticity. After all, no mature man should ever have the hallucination of being the smartest person who can outsmart forty thousand members.

We will conclude our open letter with a quote from Harvard Business Review:

"Becoming a great leader is a journey of continuous learning and growth. It's a process — one that thrives on embracing challenges, seeking feedback, fostering connections, and cultivating understanding..... Leaders aren't born with superhuman capabilities. Rather, they tend to have intentionally put themselves in situations where they have to learn, adapt, and grow — a crucible for developing the tenacity and fortitude to motivate and guide others."

Fair Fencing Organization
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