

Chess Tournament Guide for Parents

This is a very complete but long introduction to tournament chess for parents. If you would like to access quickly something, the quick guide below might be useful.

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Introduction

Congratulations! Your child knows the rules of chess and is confident enough to enter a tournament. This will be the first tournament for many of the players, and each tournament is a learning experience for everyone. This guide is designed to answer the most common questions and prepare parents for the tournament.

Parents should expect to console their children when they lose and encourage good sportsmanship regardless of the results. Children play chess best when they are not surging with adrenaline (or sugar) and when they know that their primary aim is to play their best, not necessarily to win. The ultimate winners of every event are the players who do not get too low after a defeat, or too high after a win.

What is a Swiss-System tournament?

Most chess tournaments are known as "Swiss-System" events. This means that players are paired against others with similar scores. The pairing system is quite complicated and leaves the director almost no room for discretion. At the U.S. Chess Center and at tournaments we direct, we use a computer program that does the pairings for us. Although experienced directors will review the pairings for accuracy (even the best program has a few glitches), the director never arbitrarily makes changes in the pairings the computer assigns.

In short, the Swiss System operates by ordering the players by rating, and pairing the top player with the player just under the halfway mark. The second player is paired against the next player under the opponent of the top player, and so forth.

Players earn one point for winning, a half point for drawing. In each round after the first round, the players compete with others who have the same number of points. If there are an odd number of players in a score group, the lowest ranked player in the group is paired against the top available player in the next group down. Players never compete against the same opponent twice in a tournament, and efforts are made to alternate the color of the pieces the player uses each round.

Nobody is eliminated in a Swiss System tournament. All players are expected to compete all of the way through the tournament. It is bad for the tournament to have players withdraw (quit).

Byes

A player with a bye in a particular round does not play that round. There are two types of byes. When a tournament has an odd number of players, the bottom player does not play one round. Instead, that player is awarded a “full-point bye,” meaning that the player receives a point, as if he or she won a game. A player receiving a full-point bye will see “please wait” written across from his name on the pairing sheet. No player receives more than one bye per tournament. Sometimes, the player receiving the bye will be paired against someone else, who either is not enrolled in the tournament or is enrolled in a different section that also has an odd number of players. In a rated tournament, the game will count for ratings, but the players both receive a point for the tournament.

In a rated tournament, a player competing in his or her first tournament will not receive a bye, except in very unusual circumstances. This is because a player will not earn a publishable rating until he or she has played four games, and we want players to earn ratings as fast as possible.

Players unable to be at the tournament for a certain round may request a “half-point bye.” This second type of bye awards a player the same score as would a draw. In most tournaments, half-point byes must be requested before the player begins to play in the event and are not available for the final round. They are most often taken in the first round, when a player cannot get to the tournament by the time it begins.

Withdrawing

We strongly discourage withdrawing from tournaments. Players who leave because they lose are missing some of the greatest benefits of the game. Learning to come back after a defeat is very important in much more than just chess. However, if an emergency arises and a player must leave, it is crucial to inform the tournament director that the player will not attend the next round. It is unfair to the others in the tournament to leave without telling the director, as it means that at least one other player will not get to play a game.

The Awards Ceremony

Similarly, we think that all players should remain for the awards ceremony. In most scholastic events (all that we conduct), every competitor will receive some sort of recognition, regardless of score. Those who win the top prizes, naturally, feel better knowing that their efforts are recognized by others.

Tiebreaks

In most tournaments, a pre-determined number of top prizes (usually trophies) are awarded at the end. In a four-round tournament (which is most common), there will always be ties. When two or more players have won all of their games, we will have a blitz chess play-off, in which the co-champions play one game of five-minute chess to determine who wins which trophy. When the tied players did not win all of their games, we use a tiebreak system that determines the strength of the players' competition by counting the number of points the opponents earned. (Ratings are irrelevant to tiebreaks.) We acknowledge that this system, like every other, is not completely "fair," but we have to break the ties somehow and this is the method used in nearly all chess tournaments.

Ratings and the USCF

Many of the chess tournaments we sponsor, and most tournaments elsewhere, are sanctioned by the [U.S. Chess Federation \(USCF\)](#). Nearly always, membership in the USCF is required in order to participate. Despite the similarity of names, there is no connection between the USCF and the U.S. Chess Center.

Annual membership dues for players vary by age but range from \$17 to \$49. The USCF publishes two magazines, *Chess Life*, a monthly magazine geared towards adult players, and *Chess Life for Kids*, a magazine for elementary school students. Membership in the USCF may be purchased at any time through the U.S. Chess Center.

The USCF developed, and is constantly modifying, a [sophisticated rating system](#) for its members. By playing in tournaments, players earn a rating, which rises each time a player wins, and falls each time a player loses. The rating of the opponent is the major component of the formula. Children place great value in their ratings, a fact we at the U.S. Chess Center find mildly disturbing. Players sometimes play considerably below their capability when they notice that their opponent's rating is much higher or lower than their own. As a result, we make every effort to reduce the significance of a player's rating.

Contrary to the belief held by some, a chess rating has no relationship to the child's value as a human being. Although the USCF now keeps ratings up to date, ratings for children are notoriously inaccurate as indicators of results (the primary value of ratings for adults) and will remain inaccurate until the children's ratings are based primarily on results played with adults.

The U.S. Chess Federation also has several web pages that are related to [USCF Rated Chess Events](#), Allowable Time Controls, USCF Lifetime Titles, and An Introduction to USCF Rated Tournaments.

How do I learn about tournaments? Tournaments rated by the USCF are usually advertised in the Tournament Life Announcement section of *Chess Life*. Most tournaments geared towards young people are also advertised in the back of *Chess Life for Kids*. Tournaments held in the local area are usually found on the How do I read the Tournament Life Announcements (TLAs)? (TLAs)

The codes used to save space in the Announcements (TLAs) can be quite confusing. Please use this as a reference:

#-SS: Swiss System. The number that precedes "-SS" tells you how many rounds (games) each player will play.

#-RR: Round Robin. A round-robin tournament means each player in a section will play every other player in that section.

TC: Time Control. How much time each player has to avoid being forfeited. "**G/30**" (also known as action chess) means each player has 30 minutes for the game, so an entire game will last one hour or less; this is the most common time control for scholastic events. "**40/2**" means that a player must make 40 moves in the first two hours, and then the player receives more time to make additional moves.

Reg: Registration. Players who have not pre-registered must come during the hours specified to sign up for the tournament.

Rds: Tells you what time the games will start.

EF: Entry Fee.

\$\$: Prizes (G, under prizes, means Guaranteed, as opposed to b/#, which means based on a certain number of entries.)

NS NC W: No Smoking, Computers may not play, Wheelchair accessible.

Ent: Advanced registration should be sent to the person listed.

Registration

Some tournaments offer a reduction in price for players who register in advance. It is in the interest both of the organizer and the players to register early, as long lines form of players who have waited until the last minute to sign up. Normally, once a player has paid an entry fee, the player need only show up at the time the first round is scheduled. If the tournament is free,

players must come at the registration time to let the organizer know that they intend to play and should be paired with an opponent.

The Tournament Director

The Tournament Director (TD) makes the pairings each round and settles any sort of dispute that arises during a game. TDs rule on claims of time forfeiture and claims of draws. TDs have the authority to punish bad behavior or other rules violations by adding or subtracting time from a player, or by forfeiting a game.

Parents

In general, parents and coaches are required to stay out of the room where the children are playing. They can serve several useful functions, however. Tournaments last a long time, and parents can be very helpful by providing food for their children. Although many kids can plan a “power lunch” and choose foods that will allow them to play their best, others need guidance in this area, lest they eat nothing but candy and soda. Parents offer encouragement and consolation between rounds, and some provide help analyzing the games their kids played. Most tournaments at the U.S. Chess Center feature a master who helps the kids learn from their games, but most tournaments elsewhere do not. Children are not well served by having parents argue about such things as pairings or rulings of the TD. Such arguments delay the entire tournament, which goes on long enough as it is. A four-round tournament with a G/30 time control will last more than five hours, sometimes as long as 6½ hours, including registration, a lunch break and the awards ceremony. Usually the advertisements for a tournament will give some indication of when the event is expected to end.

Open Events

We encourage people who want to improve to play against the strongest competition available. Players learn much more by losing than by winning. Some kids very much enjoy the feelings of equality that are found playing against adults in open tournaments. An open tournament, unlike a scholastic event, is open to anyone, and ordinarily most of the players are adults. Some tournaments, such as a Rated Beginners Open, have more kids than adults competing, but the adults rarely have much tournament experience. Those tournaments are frequently divided into sections, so that younger kids do not play with adults unless they ask to play in the older section.