

## Organizing Chess Tournaments

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### Overview

Chess tournaments provide students the opportunity to demonstrate the skills they have learned in chess club while building their confidence. Tournaments motivate and encourage players to expect nothing less than mastery of the subject from themselves. In doing so, players develop their focus and concentration, deal with winning and losing in a safe environment, and experience the dynamics of teamwork. Even if a school's chess club is not intensive, or students do not even have a club to study with, a chess tournament offers great opportunities. Chess tournaments can take place with a variety of time controls and formats, allowing students to play a single game per meeting, many games in a single setting, or on the entire tournament. Tournaments can have one 'Open' section or be divided into divisions. Divisions can be based on students' ability (beginner, intermediate, advanced), by grade level (K-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8) or any variation thereof.

### Tournament Formats

- a. **Swiss:** Perhaps the most common form of chess tournament, the Swiss-style chess tournament offers participants multiple matches in the same event, with the added bonus of producing both a single champion and a minimal number of participants who leave the tournament without experiencing a victory. While organizing the match-ups, or pairings, is most easily done by a computer software package (WinTD, Swiss-Sys), to fully appreciate this approach to competition, it's important that the organizer understand the logic of the system. Players are assigned a ranking; this can be based on a published chess rating or on a ranking system designed by the tournament director. In the first round, the list of players is divided in two, with the top overall seeded player going against the top player from the "bottom half." The second ranked player would compete against the second best player from the bottom half. For example:

Rank	Name	First Round Opponent
1	Jose	Freddy
2	Maria	Sandy
3	Sean	Julia
4	Sally	Kareem
5	Freddy	Jose
6	Sandy	Maria
7	Julia	Sean
8	Kareem	Sally

The logic of this approach is that the tournament should avoid pairing off the two "best" players in the first match, yet not have "blowouts" by pairing off the very top and the very bottom players.

In the second round, the Swiss approach really kicks into gear. At this point players are organized into sub-groups based on their results from the first round. Normally, winners

play against other winners from the first round. People who had draws or ties, play against others with draws or ties. And those who lost play against others who lost. Subsequent rounds are organized similarly; thus by the fourth round, players 3-0 square off and players 0-3 compete. By facing more and more successful competition, the best players are continuously more challenged, and by playing against other players with similar results, the least skilled players get more and more likely to a win game.

- b. **Team Swiss:** The only difference between a Swiss and Team Swiss is that in the Team Swiss the pairings are set such that players do not compete against other players from their own team. Organizers, however, should not use this restriction if by the final round the only undefeated players are from the same team (this often happens in smaller tournaments, so be careful!). Large Swiss Team tournaments are most common at the scholastic level. Swiss Team provides an added benefit: team prizes can be awarded. But given that chess at the scholastic level is a team endeavor, by giving team prizes we promote camaraderie and support of the group. By setting the number of scores to count per team one can easily give both individual and team prizes.
- c. **Round-Robin:** a straight-forward event in which all play all. Sometimes organizers bring together dozens of players and organize them into a handful of "quads." Instead of one large tournament, say for 48 players, the structure is 12 mini-tournaments. This way, there is no clear overall winner; some prefer this system, as it enables (in this example), 12 individuals to earn first-place trophies. Round-Robins, however, may not match players against others of similar ability. A player who goes 0-3 in his or her quad, may, in fact, have been good enough to go 3-0 in another quad.
- d. **Fixed-Roster Team:** This format really fosters a sense of comradeship and support for team. Ideal for after-school challenges, each school picks a set number of competitors. Each player is assigned a Table number with each team's top player at Table 1, the second best player at Table 2, etc. The teams then square off, playing one, or more often, two games against the same opponent. Each player plays both colors, and the director totals the wins to get the team score. Easy to organize, logical, and no computer required.

Organizers can expand the fixed-roster team format to include multiple teams all competing in a single tournament. While somewhat more difficult to organize (meaning, use a software application), the format is really just a blending of the Individual Swiss and the Fixed-Roster Team. Teams face off in Table order. After the first round, winning teams face off against winning teams, and losing teams against losing teams, and so forth.

- e. **Ladder:** Ideal for clubs and intramurals, the ladder tournament is less a tournament and more an on-going team ranking. Names of players are written onto placards (or in chalk, as is often the case), and placed in a rank order with the best player at the top of the list. Players may "challenge" those above them to a head-to-head match, and the winner of the match either retains the higher position, or, if lower ranked, takes over the higher position, with the losing player moving to the lower position on the ladder. Over the course of the school year, with players constantly challenging one another, the

strongest players rise to the top of the ladder. Many coaches set a rule that after the first week of the ladder, each player is limited to a set number of steps up the ladder that can be climbed in a single match; thus, players may only challenge those one or two steps above them. This helps prevent stronger players from getting bored (as they aren't challenged by novices).

- f. ***Elimination:*** An elimination tournament, akin to the NCAA basketball tournament, is in my opinion a flawed way to approach organizing a chess event. While the purpose of the NCAAs is to crown a single champion, with half the teams playing but one game, the scholastic chess tournament has the aim of providing students with the opportunity to think, interact, and have fun. If half of the students lose their first game and go home, their interest in on-going chess study wanes quickly.

## **Time Control**

Many view chess as a game of significant deliberation and study, a game of patience. While some scholastic tournament games can be scheduled to last up to four hours, other games can be over in a handful of minutes, or less. Tournament directors can ensure that games finish in a timely fashion by setting a time control. Most scholastic tournaments are "game 30," a.k.a. "G/30," meaning each player has 30 minutes to make his or her moves, for a total of up to 60 minutes to complete the game. Set time limit is known as "Sudden Death".

Blitz tournaments, shorter games that give each side five minutes, thus referred to as "G/5," are extremely exciting. Within the blink of an eye, the game might be over. Even so, these matches are less popular for tournament play for they offer participants little opportunity for deep thought.

Chess tournament players use special chess clocks to keep track of time. Using the same hand that one has just moved a piece with, the player presses a button on the clock which simultaneously stops the countdown for his or her clock and starts the countdown for his or her opponent. Coaches should train students to be familiar with chess clocks. But for beginners they're often an unnecessary expense (though they can be wonderful novelties); most students will play quickly enough that there is no need to use clocks to finish in a timely manner.

## **Materials**

Those organizing a chess tournament should have the following materials:

- **Tournament Site:** School cafeterias are often perfect locations for chess events. Tables are already in place; classrooms are often readily available for students to "retire to" after finishing each round of competition. Also, consider using a local library.
- **Tables, Table Number Labels, and Chairs:** Computer systems assign players to sit at particular tables for each round of games; numbering the tables in advance avoids many headaches. If playing in a cafeteria, the organizer can simply label each playing

area with a number. If organizing an event that requires table rental, try to use eight foot rectangular tables that comfortably accommodate three chess sets, or six players.

- **Chess Sets:** You should have at least enough chess sets for every participant to compete simultaneously. Additional chess sets should be provided for players to use for "skittles" (chess lingo for unofficial practice games played between official games), which give participants something to do, keeping them productively occupied during their down-time.
- **Score Sheets:** Students should be encouraged to notate, or write down, the moves that take place during their games. Notating games has the dual benefit of slowing players down--helping them think more critically about each move--and providing a record of the moves, which both helps resolve disputes and provides material to study and review after the game.
- **Chess Clocks:** Tournament directors should have clocks available. They help bring parity to the time in play and are useful in tournament games that are lagging.
- **Computer & Peripherals:** A computer, a software program, printer, ink cartridge (bring backup), and paper are critical for large tournaments.
- **Name Tags, T-shirts for Tournament Director (TD) and Players, etc:** Providing some way of clearly identifying staff (both for the student players and the parents and coaches) helps participants quickly identify those who can resolve disputes.
- **Prizes:** Trophies, plaques, medals, chess sets, t-shirts, and books all make excellent prizes. Depending on the budget, giving all participants some type of memento from the tournament often helps bring about high levels of participation and retention of players. Further, as prizes are brought back to the host schools, a culture of chess is promoted.
- **United States Chess Federation Rulebook:** This is good to have on hand in order to solve disputes. Often, heated arguments are quickly resolved by having the parties read for themselves the rules of the game.



## **Appendix A: Chess Tournament Rubric**

### **Beginner Players:**

Must be able to do the following:

- Properly move all of the chess pieces
- Understand pawn promotion
- Understand rules for "advanced" moves: Castling and *en passant* capture
- Understand Check and the ways to get out of check (move, block, capture)
- Understand Checkmate
- Understand the "touch-move" rule
- Understand the relative value of the pieces (Q=9, R=5, B=3, Kn=3, P=1)
- Have a sense of how to checkmate with a King and Queen

### **Intermediate Players:**

Should also (but not required):

- Have experience playing in chess tournaments
- Be able to mate with a King and Queen
- Be able to mate with a King and Rook
- Know how to achieve and stop "Scholar's Mate" (the "four-move mate")
- Be able to solve "mate-in-one" chess puzzles

### **Advanced Players:**

Should also (but not required):

- Have experience playing and winning in chess tournaments
- Have a basic understanding of chess strategy including opening play
- Have a basic understanding of chess tactics including pins, forks, skewers
- Have a sense of how to mate with a King and 2 Bishops
- Know how to record the moves of a chess game
- Know how to play with a chess clock

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Chess Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

	Player Name (Last, First)	Grade	Ability (Beginner/Advanced)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			