

Guide to Scholastic Chess Tournaments

- Written by Pattie Zinski, Chess Coach, Saint Michael School, Wheaton, IL

Contents

I. Pre-Tournament Planning

- A. Readiness
- B. Choosing the Right Tournament
- C. Registration Details and USCF Registration
- D. Packing the Tournament Bag

II. Tournament Day

- A. Check-In
- B. “Skittles” Area or Team Room; Activity Between Rounds
- C. Pairings
- D. Basic Scholastic Chess Tournament Rules
- E. Time Controls and Chess Clocks
- F. Chess Notation
- G. Byes
- H. Eating for Good Chess
- I. Chess Etiquette
- J. Reporting and Viewing Results
- K. Awards, Tiebreaks, and Final Results

III. Why Chess?

I. Pre-Tournament Planning

A. Readiness

When is a child ready to play in a chess tournament? There is both a technical and an emotional side to chess readiness. First, the child must know how all the pieces move. The child must understand how to win, or, in other words, that the game is over when the king is placed in checkmate. A chess game can also end in a draw, such as when the king is not currently in check but cannot move without placing himself into check. Tournament players need to understand some basic rules, such as “Touch Move/Touch Take” (if you touch a piece, you must move it or capture it). Most tournaments require players to use a chess clock. Older players, generally those in fourth grade and up, also may need to know how to take notation.

Once a player understands the basic rules of tournament chess, the parent or coach should evaluate the child’s emotional readiness. Is the child willing to accept victory or defeat graciously? No crying, no whining, and, especially, no gloating! Is the child able to sit quietly through a chess match without talking to his or her opponent? Does the child enjoy the game, having fun regardless of wins or losses? Chess is a game, and should be fun. Is the child able to persevere through four or five games of chess in one day without losing patience and wanting to go home? Win or lose, the child should stay through all of the scheduled rounds of the tournament.

Chess is about learning. Although kids enjoy winning, the best players know you learn more from your losses than from your wins. The only way to improve is to be willing to play stronger players and, sometimes, lose. You might ask your player, “If you played basketball against your baby brother, would you win? Would you get any better at basketball?” Chess is about constantly

challenging yourself and improving. One of the best things about chess is that players can continue to learn and improve their game, no matter how old they are or how well they play. Hopefully, through chess, a child can develop a love for learning that will extend to every aspect of his life.

In his book, *The Art of Learning*, child chess prodigy Josh Waitzkin, who became the subject of the book and movie “Searching for Bobby Fischer,” writes:

We need to put ourselves out there, give it our all, and reap the lesson, win or lose. The fact of the matter is that there will be nothing learned from any challenge in which we don’t try our hardest. Growth comes at the point of resistance. We learn by pushing ourselves and finding what really lies at the outer reaches of our abilities (p. 42).

Are the parents ready? Most scholastic tournaments consume an entire day, for kids as well as parents. Many parents bring reading material, work, or a laptop. Some parents agree to watch a child who is not their own, or split time at the tournament with another family. Chess tournaments provide an opportunity for parents to bond not only with their own child, but with other parents. While their children duel across checkered squares, parents become friends. Just as the kids learn to support each other through hard fought wins and difficult losses, parents form emotional bonds, sharing each other’s joys and disappointments. A chess tournament can be an emotionally draining experience for parents, as well as children. Losing may bring tears. While this can be heart-wrenching for parents, keeping the focus on small measurable achievements can help the child feel successful about their tournament experience even when he is not awarded a trophy at days end. Celebrate milestones, such as upsetting a higher rated player, gaining rating points, crossing a ratings milestone such as 1000, winning against an opening that the child has struggled against, or even playing a long hard-fought game. By emphasizing the positives, parents can help children see the value in improving, not just winning. (This topic is explored in more detail in our section called “How to Be a Good Chess Parent.”)

B. Choosing the Right Tournament

What tournament is best? If the child is emotionally and technically ready to play in a tournament, the next step is choosing an appropriate tournament.

1. USCF Rated versus Non-Rated. The United States Chess Federation (“USCF”) is a nonprofit corporation that promotes chess throughout the country. The USCF has developed a rating system that evaluates chess performance for players in USCF-sanctioned tournaments. Once a child has played in a USCF-rated tournament, he will receive a USCF rating that may be tracked at the USCF website (uschess.org). The rating will go up when the child wins and go down when he loses. The rating will go up more when the child beats a player rated higher than himself and go down more when he loses to a player rated lower. A rating difference of 200 points means that the higher rated player is predicted to win three out of four matches against the lower rated player – not a slam dunk for the stronger player, and certainly reason for the weaker player to fight hard and remain hopeful. Kids, parents and coaches may become obsessed with ratings. Everyone has good days and bad days, especially children, so it is best not to place too much emphasis on rating gains or losses resulting from a single event. Perspective is key. Encourage a child to see chess progress as reflected through the rating over a period of months or even years. One of the benefits of playing rated tournaments is that players can track personal progress by checking their ratings graph on the USCF website. This graph charts rating changes throughout a person’s chess playing history. A downside of playing rated tournaments is that they tend to be more expensive because the USCF uses part of the entry fee to assist in the costs of maintaining the rating system.

Unrated tournaments afford players the opportunity to play chess without affecting their rating. Because unrated tournaments tend to attract less experienced players, they are a gentle introduction to the world of tournament chess. More experienced players may sometimes want to play an unrated tournament to try out a new opening or tactic without risking losing rating points.

Some tournaments and clubs employ rating systems different from the one maintained by the USCF. These “local” ratings are usually generated by the software used to run tournaments or manage clubs, and may be used in non-USCF-rated tournament pairings or to maintain club rankings.

2. Open versus Rating-Limited Sections. Chess players should consider whether to play in open style tournaments or those divided into sections according to ratings. Open tournaments group together all players of a particular level, such as Kindergarten through 2. grade, regardless of rating. This gives every entrant an opportunity to take a shot at the best grade-level players. For top players, it may mean that they will compete against some players who may be far below their ability level. For weaker players, it may mean that they will compete against players with significantly more experience and/or ability. Tournaments that group players according to ratings afford the opportunity for players of all levels to win a prize. With less disparity in ratings, the brackets tend to be more competitive. Each player can compete at a level appropriate to their ability and experience. The top players may not win as many games as they would in an open style tournament, but their chess will benefit from the superior level of competition.

The trick is finding the appropriate fit, where the player feels challenged but not overwhelmed by the level of competition. A key element is assessing the maturity of the player and his willingness to take on challenges. A less mature player may feel discouraged after playing and losing several rounds in an open style tournament, while a more mature player may be able to see

the value in competing against stronger players. This is particularly true if the player notates his games and can analyze the notated game with a chess coach, teacher or parent with a higher level of chess knowledge.

C. Registration Details and USCF Registration

How do I find a tournament? To find a chess tournament, players may check the Kansas City Chess Foundation website (chesschallenge.us) for a listing of upcoming tournaments in the Kansas City metro area, or the USCF-website (uschess.org) for national events. Typically, these sites provide key information about the tournament, such as how the brackets are structured, what prizes are offered, what the time controls are, how to register, and in some cases, a list of early registrants. If the event is a USCF rated tournament, the player will need to have a current USCF membership. For kids, annual memberships start at \$16. For a little more, members can receive USCF's excellent Chess Life magazine and other benefits. See (<https://secure2.uschess.org/webstore/member.php?mode.x=15&mode.y=13>). All memberships include continually updated online ratings and playing histories. It is important to keep track of your 8-digit USCF ID number and your membership's expiration date.

D. Packing the Tournament Bag

What do I need at a tournament? On the eve of the tournament, players should pack a bag with items they will need for the event. Healthy snacks and drinks are always a good idea, as well as some money to buy lunch. Players are expected to bring their own sets and boards for open tournaments. Even when sets and boards are provided, as in most scholastic events, children may wish to bring their own for post-game analysis or playing with their friends. Players should set their chess clock for the appropriate time control and pack extra batteries in case their batteries run low. Players should bring their chess notation book and pencil. Players may wish to bring a ball (usually for outdoors only), deck of cards or board game to play between chess rounds.

[\(back to top\)](#)

II. Tournament Day

A. Check-In

What should I do first? Players should check in with the registration desk or check the master list, if posted, to be sure they are registered and their details are posted correctly, such as section, school affiliation, grade, and USCF number. Do not be surprised if the posted rating differs significantly from the most current online rating. Tournaments typically use the most recent rating published by the USCF, which may be a month or two old.

B. "Skittles" Area or Team Room; Activity Between Rounds

Where do I stay all day? Most tournaments have a designated area where parents and players may hang out between chess rounds. In chess lingo, this is called the "Skittles" area. Coaches also may arrange to reserve a room for their team, often at a price. When they arrive at the tournament, players should find their team or, if they are not with a school team, stake out an area in the Skittles room to be their base for the day. It is a good idea to arrive at the tournament 30 to 45 minutes before the first round to get settled.

Many players and coaches find that playing chess for fun or blitz games between rounds is not a good idea. Younger players may get caught up in the fast and silly nature of blitz, and play less carefully during their tournament rounds. More experienced players may find that the nonstop calculation of chess moves in tournament and "just for fun" games may cause them to perform less optimally during their competitive rounds.

If time permits after the game is over, players may wish to briefly analyze the critical moments of their game; it is a great way to learn! Players may then wish to take a break from chess between rounds. Physical activity is a great outlet; it gets the blood pumping and energizes the player. A bouncy ball to use for wall ball (outside only, please!) or a Frisbee or football are perfect. Playing outside can also ease the pain of a loss and build friendships. Even a walk around the block can do the trick. Parents and coaches should monitor the kids to be sure they do not get too drained from physical exercise, their play is appropriate to the given space, and they understand when to return to the playing area or their team room for the next round. On rainy or cold tournament days, a deck of cards may offer a spirited diversion from chess calculations.

C. Pairings

How do I find an opponent? Pairing sheets are typically posted on the wall near the tournament playing room a few minutes before the start of the round. Players should check and write down (in their notation book if they have one) their board number, their color (black or white), and their opponent's name and rating.

Pairing sheets are commonly issued in two forms: alphabetical by player (which make it easiest to find your name) and by board number. Here's an example of a few names from a typical alphabetical pairing sheet:

Adeline, Addy (AGS)..... B4	Potter, Harry (4, 2.0, HWS, 1300)
Bell, Tinker (NNL).....W2	Granger, Hermione (3, 0.0, HWS, 1555)
Bird, Tweety (ACME).....W1	Weasley, Ron (1, 0.0, HWS, 1800)

Taking Tweety Bird as an example: “W1” means he is playing White on Board 1. His opponent is Ron Weasley. The information in the parenthetical after Weasley’s name tells you he is player #1 on the list of participants (usually posted separately, with players listed sequentially by rating, but sometimes simply in the sequence they registered), has a score in this tournament of 0.0 (meaning he’s won no games thus far), is from a school whose abbreviation is HWS, and has a rating of 1800 (usually the USCF rating, although possibly a “local” rating).

Many tournaments post pairings by board number, with players playing White on the left, and those playing Black on the right. It may take a moment to find your name, and pairing sheets in this format may not contain the additional information contained in the parentheticals in the example above.

When the player sits down at the designated board, they should check that the name of their opponent matches the name posted on the pairing sheet.

Most scholastic tournaments are organized according to the Swiss System, where players are matched each round according to the number of wins they have. Pairings are created by computer software (usually “WinTD” or “Swiss Sys”) that, whenever possible, follows a few basic rules:

- 1) Every player plays every round;
- 2) No two players play each other more than once;
- 3) Teammates do not play each other, unless necessary;
- 4) Each pairing matches players having the same number of wins in this tournament;
- 5) Each player plays an equal number of games as black and white.

In a rated tournament, players are seeded according to their rating, and are ranked from highest rated to lowest rated in each bracket. The normal pairing system matches the highest rated player in the top half of the bracket against the highest rated player from the second half of the bracket. Then the second highest player in the top half of the bracket plays the second highest player in the second half of the bracket and so on until all players are paired. (For example, in a 20-person section, #1 would play #11, #2 would play #12, and so on.) After the first round, the pairing system proceeds in the same manner but players are first grouped by their number of wins, and then by their ratings. In other words, players having one win will be grouped together and seeded according to rating, highest to lowest. The highest rated player in the top half of the bracket with one win will play the highest rated player with one win from the second half of the same bracket. If there is an uneven number of players in a particular group, such as 11 players with one win, the lowest rated player with one win will be paired against the highest rated player of the next win/loss group, either 0.5 wins if there were draws in the first round, or 0 wins if there were no draws in the first round.

Tournament directors (“TDs”) sometimes employ an accelerated pairing system to match stronger players against each other earlier in the tournament. As with normal pairings, the players are seeded according to rating, from highest to lowest. In an accelerated system, the rating list is divided into quarters, with the top seed in the top quartile playing the top seed in the second quartile, and the top seed in the third quartile playing the top seed in the fourth quartile, and so on down the list until all players are paired. In the second round, players who lost in the top half of the bracket compete against players who won in the bottom half of the bracket, while winners play winners in the top half of the bracket and losers play losers in the bottom half of the bracket. . Thereafter, players in each score group are split into quartiles and paired, top quartile with second quartile, third quartile with fourth quartile. The accelerated system results in fewer perfect scores and less reliance on tiebreaks to order the top players than the regular pairing system. . (See “Awards, Tie Breaks and Final Results” below.)

D. Basic Scholastic Chess Tournament Rules

What rules should I know? Tournament players should understand the following basic rules:

1. **Touch/Move, Touch Take.** If you touch a piece with intent to move it, you must move it. This does not mean if you reach across the board and inadvertently knock over your king with your sleeve, you must move it. If you grab a piece with your fingers, the intent is clear that you mean to move it, and you must. Once you place a piece on a square and let go of it, the move

is final and may not be changed. If a piece is not centered on a square, you may say “adjust” and center the piece on the square. If you touch your opponent’s piece and you can legally capture it, you must capture it.

2. **Illegal Moves.** An illegal move occurs when a player moves in a manner inconsistent with the rules of chess, such as when a player moves a pawn backwards, or moves into check. The most common illegal moves involve checks. For example, a player may not castle through check, and if a player is in check, he must either capture the checking piece, block the check or move out of check. Any other move is an illegal move. Touch move rules apply here as well; if there is a legal move to be made with the illegally moved piece, then it must be made. Castling is considered a king move. Thus, a player who commits an illegal move by attempting to castle through check must make a legal move with his king if possible. Similarly, if the player has made a move and removed his hand from the piece, he cannot change his mind and instead move another piece. The second move would be illegal. When an illegal move has been made, the opposing player should pause the clock and raise his hand to consult with a tournament official. If the player is new to the game, the TD will likely explain why the move is illegal. Sometimes a player making an illegal move will lose time off of his clock as a consequence of the illegal move.

3. **No Talking or Distracting Behavior.** Chess is a game of concentration, and all players deserve the opportunity to think quietly. Players may not discuss their game with their opponents, their parents or their coaches while the game is in progress. Most scholastic tournaments require parents and coaches to leave the playing area once the round is set to begin. Players may not engage in annoying behaviors designed to distract their opponents, such as tapping their pencils or making noises. Badgering one’s opponent with comments such as “Hurry Up” or “Move” is not allowed. Any player who feels his opponent is badgering or distracting him should pause his clock and raise his hand to bring the behavior to the attention of a tournament official. The official will likely warn the player to cease the annoying behavior or comments. The official may also impose a time penalty or, in extreme cases, cause the perpetrator to forfeit the round.

4. **Disputes.** If a question or problem arises during the game, players should pause the clock and raise their hands to consult a tournament official. Do not try to resolve disputes directly with your opponent. While TDs are not perfect, they will do their best to understand and fairly resolve disputes. Accurate notation sheets can greatly aid a TD in making a fair determination. Do not move the pieces from the disputed position or reset the board until the TD has ruled. Young players need lots of reminding not to argue with their opponent or – worse still – accept their opponent’s interpretation of the rules. A player has the right to ask to speak to another TD or the chief TD if he does not understand or agree with the ruling of a TD.

5. **Draw Offers.** When offering a draw to an opponent, a player must first make his move and offer the draw on his own time, that is, before he starts his opponent’s clock. The game is over once both players agree to the draw.

6. **Losing on Time.** A player loses on time if his clock shows no time remaining and the opposing player – only the opposing player—notices and claims a win on time. The opponent must also have sufficient material remaining to create a checkmate. (If the opponent does not, the outcome is a draw.) If both players run out of time before either player has called it, the game is ruled a draw.

7. **Comings and Goings.** Inform the tournament director – if possible, before the event—if the player is going to arrive late for a round or miss a round entirely. Many tournaments have forms or special requirements for such situations.

8. **Draws.** A chess game can end in three possible outcomes: a win, a loss, or a draw. Players should understand the following types of draws so that they can recognize drawn positions when they arise on the board.

a. **Stalemate.** A stalemate occurs when the player who is on move is not presently in check, but cannot make a legal move with any piece, pawn or king without placing himself into check. Because moving into check is an illegal move, the player cannot make a legal move and the game is a stalemate.

b. **Insufficient Mating Material.** A king cannot be checkmated by a solo king, or by a king and knight, or by a king and bishop. These pieces are considered insufficient mating material and the game is a draw.

c. **Draw by Three-Fold Repetition.** If during the course of the game, all of the pieces are arranged in exactly the same position three times, either player may claim a draw by three fold repetition. If the opposing player disagrees, the tournament director should be summoned and the claim proven by replaying the game from the notation sheet. Where the players do not agree, and there is no notation sheet, the draw claim cannot be proven, and the players must play on.

d. **50 Moves Without Progress.** A player who is on move may claim a draw when each player has made 50 moves without capturing a piece or moving a pawn. Once again, an accurate notation sheet may need to be consulted to prove this claim if the players do not agree.

e. **Insufficient Losing Chances.** A player who has a clearly won or drawn position but is low on time (less than five minutes) can request a draw based on insufficient losing chances. This is frequently a difficult calculation requiring a tournament director.

f. **Both Players “Flag.”** If both players run out of time on their clocks before either player notices or calls out, the game is a draw.

g. **Draw By Agreement.** At any time during the match, either player may offer a draw. The proper way to do this is to make your move, say “I offer a draw,” then punch the time clock. The opposing player then either accepts or declines the offer.

E. Time Controls and Chess Clocks

Do I need a clock? Many scholastic tournaments require players to bring a chess clock to time their moves. Chess clocks afford each player the same amount of time to complete their part of the game. For example, a tournament with a posted time control of “G/30” allows each player 30 minutes on their clock, so that the maximum amount of time for a game is one hour. Some clocks also have a delay feature. In this case, no time comes off the player’s clock until the time of the delay, typically 5 seconds, has passed. Usually when a clock with a delay feature is used, the time control is adjusted downward by five minutes, so that a G/30 tournament requires players to set their clocks either as G/30 with no delay, or G/25 with a 5 second delay. If both players have a

clock, black chooses which clock to use. If only one of the clocks has a delay feature, the one with delay should be used. If a player is late for a round, the opposing player may start his clock when the TD announces it is time for the round to begin. When using a clock, the player first moves his piece, then pushes his clock with the same hand that moved the piece, stopping his clock and starting his opponent's. If neither player owns a clock, the tournament director may, at his discretion, either forfeit both players for the round or, more commonly, allow the players to compete and place a clock on their game as the round draws close to the end of the time limit. In the latter case, the clock is then set equally for both players, often with five or ten minutes apiece.

F. Chess Notation

Why notate? As scholastic players gain familiarity with the game, they should learn to take chess notation, in which they record the moves made in their chess games. Notation enables a player to replay their game and thus learn from it. It is also a record that can be shown to a tournament official to help resolve a dispute with an opponent during the round. A player's ability to make certain claims, such as Draw by Three-Fold Repetition (where the pieces have been in exactly the same position three times during the match), may depend on accurate notation. Learning chess notation also allows a player to read chess books and understand positions.

The standard form used for recording chess moves is called "Algebraic Notation." In this system, each square on the chess board is identified by a coordinate consisting of both a letter and a number. The letters run across the horizontal portion of the board from A to H, read left to right for white, and the numbers run vertically from 1 to 8 with 1 representing the back rank for white's pieces. Each move is written according to the piece making the move and the square where the piece lands. For example, if white's Queen moves one space up the board, the move would be written Qd2. Each piece is identified by its first letter, except for the Knight, which is identified as N to avoid confusion with the King (K). Pawn moves are identified only by the square the pawn lands on. For example, a standard opening pawn move for white would be written as e4. Checks are identified as a +, checkmate as a # or ++, captures as an x, castling king-side as 0-0 and queenside as 0-0-0.

Most scholastic tournaments require players in grades four and above to take notation. If the player does not know how to take notation, the tournament director may allow the game to be played but may assess the non-notating player a time penalty, typically 5 minutes for every 30 minutes of time allowed for the game. If the player knows how to notate but chooses not to, the tournament director may, at his discretion, impose the severe penalty of affording the player only 5 minutes on his clock to complete his entire game. This should serve as a cautionary tale: be prepared to notate. Neither player is required to notate once their game clock gets down to five minutes remaining.

A player may borrow, on his own time, his opponent's notation book during the round to correct an error in notation. Players may also compare notation after the conclusion of the round to correct any mistakes. This kind of consultation should take place outside of the tournament room to avoid distracting players involved in active games.

G. Byes

What if I need to miss a round? There are two kinds of "byes": Requested and Assigned. A player may request a bye for a given round if he knows in advance that he will be unavailable to play that round. Most tournaments provide for a half point for a requested bye, except when requested for the last round of the tournament, in which case a bye counts as a loss. Assigned byes may occur when there are an uneven number of players in a section. In this case, because the player is available to play but the tournament is unable to provide an opponent, the player usually receives a full point as if he has played the round and won. Most often, the lowest rated player with the fewest wins is assigned the bye.

On the pairing sheet, the assigned bye is usually indicated with the words "Please Wait" or "See tournament director." The player then finds a tournament official to let him know that the pairing sheet indicated "please wait" or "see TD" after his name. The official will usually look to see if all of the paired players have shown up for their games. If there is an absent player, the player with the assigned bye will often fill in. Sometimes, the tournament official will pair together players from different sections with assigned byes. When this happens, the game counts for rating points for both players. In the tournament standings, however, the game usually only counts for the player from the higher-rated section, not for the player from the lower-rated section, who gets a point in the tournament as if he had played and won, even if he loses to the higher rated player. Tournament directors have lots of discretion in these situations. Often, the TD cannot find a game for the player with the assigned bye, and he is credited with a win for the tournament without actually playing a game.

H. Eating for Good Chess

What should I eat during a chess tournament? Some parents may be surprised by how hungry their kids get during chess tournaments. It's sometimes said that kids can burn as much energy playing chess as they do playing sports. Other parents find that their child has no desire to eat all day as tournament stress wreaks havoc on their child's stomach. Whether or not they feel hungry, chess players burn a lot of energy during a tournament and they require nourishment. Developing healthy eating habits is another valuable life lesson chess can teach kids.

Scan the skittles room after any scholastic chess tournament and you will see a floor awash with candy wrappers, empty chip bags, and pop cans. Sadly, junk food is often all that is available for purchase at scholastic events. Preparing for a grueling day or weekend of chess requires planning, including planning for healthy eating. Experts recommend a healthy balance of high protein

and high carbohydrate foods for optimal performance. Carbohydrates provide glucose to energize the brain and body, while protein improves brain connections and helps to maintain focus. (See Mike Klein's "The Grandmaster Diet," Chess Life, December, 2008, p. 20.)

Timing is also important. Most coaches recommend that kids eat something before each round, rather than a large mid-day meal. Eating at least 30 minutes before a round allows time for digestion. At game time, it's best for the blood to be flowing to the brain, not the stomach! Optimal meals are relatively small, so as not to induce a state of sleepiness. Peanut butter, meat or chicken, cheese and nuts are good options, as are whole wheat breads, fruits or vegetables, and yogurt. A lunch box packed for a day of chess might include a ham or chicken and cheese sandwich or a Caesar salad with chicken, and some combination of bananas, apples, nuts or trail mix, carrot sticks, beef jerky, or yogurt.

Players should stay hydrated, because dehydration can lead to low blood pressure, headaches, lack of concentration, and fatigue. Water is probably the best source of hydration, and is usually readily available at chess tournaments. In some tournaments, water is the only drink allowed on the playing floor. Sports drinks may be high in glucose, which can lead to a sugar high and then low. Fruit juice during the tournament can boost carbs and provide extra energy, but be wary of juices that are high in natural sugars. Vitamin enriched waters might also be helpful, particularly if they are low in sugar and high in B vitamins, which can be depleted during times of stress.

Perhaps the best reason to pack a nutritious array of food offerings for your chess player is to show him that he is supported and loved in his efforts. Knowing that he is providing his brain with the right balance of nutrients may be just the confidence boost he needs to sail through a day of competition. By eating right, he knows that he is giving himself the best chance for success--another great life lesson learned through chess.

I. Chess Etiquette

What behavior is expected? Manners matter, in chess and in life. Players should shake hands before and after the match. The same hand that moves the piece should push the button on the chess clock. If the set is provided by the tournament organizer, both players should set up the pieces for the next round at the conclusion of their match. When castling, players are expected to move the king first, then the rook, using the same hand. When promoting a pawn, the player should move the pawn to the last rank, state which piece he would like it to become (usually a queen), then remove the pawn from the board and replace it with the promoted piece. A player may pause the clock to ask the TD for assistance in finding an extra queen if necessary. When placing an opponent's king in check, the player is not required to say check, but if he does announce checks, he should do so quietly. When a checkmate is imminent and unavoidable, the losing player may not stall indefinitely to delay the inevitable. Good sportsmanship means making your move, even if it leads to a loss. We address a number of common situations involving sportsmanship and etiquette in a separate section below.

J. Reporting and Viewing Results

What happens when the game ends? At the end of the round, after resetting the board, the players should go together to the scorekeeper's table and record their result. Speak clearly and be sure the scorekeeper has understood completely who the players are, who was black and who was white, which board number the game was played on, who won and who lost or that it was a draw. Some tournaments require players to report results by completing a card left on their board and handing it to a tournament official, or writing results on a wall chart at the end of the round. Players should listen carefully to the announcements made before the first round to learn how to report their results.

Results are generally posted between rounds in one of two forms, commonly referred to as Cross Tables and Wall Charts.

Here's an example of a few lines from a Cross Table:

XYZ Tournament		Cross Table, Page 1					
No.	Name (Team)	Rate	1	2	3	4	Score
1.	Weasley, Ron (1, HWS).....	1800	W5	W2	W6	W8	4.0
2.	Bell, Tinker (2, NNL).....	1600	W3	L1	W9	W7	3.0
3.	Granger, Hermione (3, HWS).....	1555	L2	L8	-B-	W6	2.0

In this example, the players are listed by their “Score,” a number corresponding to their wins in the tournament thus far. “Rate” is their rating. Under each numbered column are the results of the player’s games, with “W” and “L” indicating a win or a loss. Weasley won his first game against player #5. Bell lost her second game against player #1. Granger received a bye in her third round (gaining one point). And so on.

A Wall Chart contains similar information, but in a different display. Players may be sequenced according to their scores or by their player number. Here’s an example:

Name/State ID	Group/Team	Rate	Rnd 1	Rnd 2	Rnd 3	Rnd 4

1. WEASLEY, Ron		1800	B 5	W 2	B 6	B 9
15275843	HWS		1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0

2. BELL, Tinker		1600	W 3	B 1	B 7	W 8
12576851	NNL		1.0	1.0	2.0	3.0

3. GRANGER, Hermione		1555	B 2	W 9	BYE	W 6
17685746	HWS		0.0	0.0	1.0	2.0

Here, USCF ID numbers are displayed beneath each player’s name, and game results are displayed differently and include the color played by each player. “W” here means “White” rather than “Win,” and “B” is “Black.” Underneath those designations is the running score for each player. In Round 1, for example, Weasley played Black against player #5. The “1.0” under that game means Weasley was the winner. Weasley also won his second game, playing White against player #2, and his running score therefore changed to 2.0. Granger lost her first two games (playing Black against player #2 and White against player #9), ending each round with a score of 0.0, but had a bye in the third round, gaining one point. She then won Round 4 playing White against player #6 and gaining another point.

K. Awards, Tiebreaks, and Final Results

How do I find out final results? Once the last round has concluded, the tournament officials will determine the final standings and post the results. Next comes the moment all the kids have been waiting for – the awards ceremony. In most scholastic tournaments, the prizes are trophies. Often, there will be several players who share the same score. In this case, the computer will decide how to order the players for purposes of handing out the trophies in accordance with elaborate tie-breaking computations. The tie-break systems were developed with the idea of determining the strength of the opposition faced by each player. If two players with the same record in the tournament tie according to the first tiebreak computation, then the computer will look to the second tiebreak calculation, and so forth, until the players can be ordered to determine trophy places.

A player’s Solkoff score is the sum of his opponents’ wins in the particular tournament. Like the Solkoff, the Modified Median scoring system adds up all of the wins attained by a player’s opponents, then drops the “least meaningful score.” If a player has a plus score, such as five wins out of seven rounds, the least meaningful score will be the lowest number of wins achieved by his opponents. If a player has an even number of wins and losses, the highest and the lowest scores of his opponents are both dropped from the calculation. If a player has a minus score, such as two wins out of seven rounds, then the least meaningful score to be dropped will be the highest number of wins achieved by any of his opponents. A player’s Cumulative score is the total of that player’s wins after each round. Thus, a player who did not lose until round 5 of a 5 round tournament will have a Cumulative score of 1+2+3+4+4=14.

Typically, the Modified Median is the preferred method of tiebreak and thus, the first one employed to differentiate players within a score group, such as all players with 5.5 wins in a 7- round event. Where players within a score group have the same Modified Median score, then the Solkoff is applied to determine standings. When players within the same score group tie on both their Modified Median and Solkoff scores, they are ranked according to their Cumulative score. (For more on tiebreaks, see Tom

Doan, [“Those #@!\\$%&# Tie Breakers: An Explanation.”](#) There's also a good explanation at http://vtchess.info/Results/Tie_break_rules.htm.

Like it or not, tiebreaks are a necessary evil for chess players. The tiebreak system aims to figure out who played the toughest schedule among players who have the same number of wins for that tournament. Generally, players who lose during early rounds of the tournament will have worse tiebreak scores than players who do not lose until the late rounds. As in so many things in life, players need to focus on what they can control – how they play their games, not where the computer will place them in the final standings based on tiebreaks.

Most directors of USCF-rated tournaments report results to the USCF promptly, often the day the tournament ends. The results, and players' new ratings, are then available immediately on the USCF website. The final tournament results posted on the USCF website do not reflect the tie-break systems employed, so the posted sequence of players may differ from the tie-break order announced at the event.

[\(back to top\)](#)

III. Why Chess?

With so many activities offered to kids, ranging from club sports to scouts to music and arts programs, *why choose chess?* Researchers have studied linkages between chess and academic performance in children, and we summarize the research in our section above called “The Value of Chess.” The results are amazing! Chess has been demonstrated to:

- Raise IQ and exam scores;
- Improve mathematical, language and reading skills;
- Strengthen a child's memory;
- Boost spatial and numerical skills; and
- Develop problem-solving skills.

School systems around the world recognize the value of chess in developing young minds, leading many school districts to incorporate chess into their standard curriculum. In the United States, New York pioneered this trend with the development of the Chess in the Schools program. Other cities, including Detroit, Philadelphia, Miami, Portland, Oregon and Brownsville, Texas have followed New York's lead, investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into scholastic chess programs. Their efforts have been repaid with higher test scores, fewer disciplinary problems, and a more engaged student body.

Aside from the academic benefits, chess builds character. Players learn to win and lose graciously. When a player loses a round, very often he will have to jump right into the next round, learning resilience. Chess builds friendships both within and outside of the student's school community. Chess players learn the value of hard work, because even the most naturally gifted chess player can find a tournament that will challenge him and encourage further study. There is always a new level to work towards, a reason to study. Boys and girls are both welcome to compete in scholastic tournaments offered to children ranging in age from kindergarteners through high schoolers. Talented players may even earn chess scholarships to college. Go anywhere in the world, set up a chess board and wait. Soon you will have made a new friend. Chess is a game you can love for a lifetime.