

A Parent's Guide to Scholastic Chess Tournaments

Welcome to Scholastic chess! Designed for kids in grades Kindergarten through High School, Scholastic chess tournaments offer an excellent opportunity to strengthen and challenge their skills through beginner, individual, and team competitions. Kids play other kids based on age and/or skill level in local schools and chess facilities in tournaments that can last anywhere from a half-day (beginners) through several days (national championships). Before your child starts, make sure that you have plenty of space on the bookshelf! It won't be long before your child amasses a respectable number of trophies, medals, and ribbons.

This guide is intended to help parents of new players, or of those competing in tournaments for the very first time, understand competitive chess and know what to expect. We'll discuss a readiness checklist, US Chess Federation (USCF) ratings, tournament structures, and logistical details and expectations.

Readiness to Play

How do you know when your child is ready to play in a first tournament? If your child is learning from a school or private coach, ask that person first, as he or she would be most familiar with your child's understanding of the game. Generally, a player should know what the pieces are, how they move, and how to play simple games, including how to check and checkmate, and when they should call a draw. Ideally, your child is also learning how to write down the moves, so that a parent or coach can recreate each game played for review. More experienced students will use clocks, and while beginners may not be required to play with them, they should at least be familiar with their use and purpose in case their opponents opt to use one.

USCF Ratings

One measurement of the strength of a chess player is by his or her USCF rating, a system that scores and tracks the win/loss/draw record of each player against rated opponents in USCF-rated tournaments. The ratings start with 100 for a player who has continually lost every match, and extend to well above 2000 for highly advanced players and those who have earned the title of Master and beyond. Most elementary school students will have ratings between 150 and 1000, many middle school students have reached ratings of 1600, and high school students and adults can range up to the low 2000s and beyond.

Tournaments may be either rated or unrated, and each rated tournament will usually have multiple rated sections and an unrated section. The US Chess Federation is a national organization that sponsors certain tournaments and records and tracks rated tournament results for each of its member players. Scholastic players pay a minimal annual fee (from \$17 to \$28, based on age and level of membership) to join, and in return they receive the right to play in USCF-rated tournaments. Please see www.uschess.org for more information. Each player receives a USCF number that is used for registering for rated tournaments and for tracking a player's progress. Check under the Players/Ratings for the Player/Rating Lookup option and enter either the USCF Member number or the player's last name, first name to look at their rated tournament and ratings history.

In rated tournaments, players have a choice of sections in which to enroll. The type and number of rated sections is determined by the Tournament Director. Examples of sections are Under 600, Under 1000, Under 1600, and Open or Champion. If a scholastic player has a rating of 490, he most likely will play in the Under 600 section where the top rated player has a score of no more than 599. If a player is near the ceiling of a section or wants the opportunity to play more experienced opponents, then he may register in the next higher section; in this example, that would be the Under 1000 section. Tournament rules typically dictate that a player may not "play up" more than one

section; i.e., a 490 player can play up in the Under 1000 section, but is ineligible to play in the under 1600 section. An Open section includes players of all rating levels, though it is designed for the most experienced players. A Champion section is often reserved for the very top ratings tier, and usually found in adult rated tournaments.

Rated tournaments typically offer unrated sections for those who have joined USCF but not yet earned a rating by playing in their first tournament. Unrated players in an unrated section do not receive a rating from the tournament. Unrated players who compete in a rated section, however, receive their first rating after the tournament, based on their match results.

So how are ratings earned and improved? By playing in as many rated tournaments as possible, thereby increasing skill and experience! Each game's results affect the players' ratings, with points added for defeating a higher-rated player or subtracted for losing to a lower-rated player. Winning a game against a lower-rated player may or may not increase a rating, depending on the discrepancy between the two players' ratings. Similarly, losing to a much higher-rated player may not much lower a rating, either. The effect of a draw depends on the strength of the opponent's rating. The USCF system looks at the wins, draws, and losses, and playing strengths of every opponent in that tournament to determine the adjustment to each person's rating. It is an intricate system, though there are tools like USCF's ratings estimator that can help with the guess work. A player's best option simply may be to wait for the tournament results to be entered into the USCF system, and then look up the new rating on the USCF website.

An unrated tournament is one in which the results are not recorded in the USCF ratings system. Players are matched up against one another by grade level or section (ex. K-3, Kindergarten through 3rd grade) or other determination. The tournaments tend to be oriented for beginners or for experienced players who want to try new openings or strategies without the risk of potentially lowering their USCF rating. Many Scholastic tournaments are unrated to encourage greater participation at a lower individual cost, like Georgia's autumn Grade Level Tournament (play only others in the same grade) and the team Regional and State tournaments in the late winter and early spring.

Tournament Structure

Most commonly, tournaments are a full day affair (usually Saturday, sometimes Sunday) with five matches scheduled from mid-morning (beginning around 10 am) through late afternoon (ending around 5 pm), with awards immediately following the last round. Some unrated beginner tournaments only last several hours on a Saturday afternoon and have no set times for each round to start. Instead, players are matched up for a new game immediately following a completed match. These beginner tournaments are usually more informal and low-key to help new players build confidence and have fun while they learn to test their fledgling skills against other new players.

Georgia tournaments (as well as chess camps and chess clubs) can be found by going to the *Calendar* tab on the www.georgiachess.org website and scrolling from month to month. Major tournaments are highlighted on the main page or under the *Scholastic Chess* tab. By clicking on a particular tournament, players can find everything they need about it: location, number of matches, the length of matches, sections, and cost to participate.

Most scholastic tournaments are in the Greater Atlanta area and limited to one day. The length of each round is designated as G/(number), where (number) is often 30 or 45. The number indicates the minutes each person has to play a particular round. A G/30, for example, means that each person has 30 minutes to play or that the entire game must be completed within an hour. Most scholastic games are completed before reaching the time limits, but sometimes one person uses up his time before the other (this is where clocks come in handy!) and loses a game due to time. G/1 means that each side has one hour to play (or two hours total) and a G/2 indicates a game that can run a total of four hours.

Many Scholastic tournaments schedule five rounds with 30 minutes between matches. A typical G/30 tournament may be scheduled with rounds at 10 am, 11:30 am, 1 pm, 2:30 pm, and 4 pm, with the awards ceremony immediately following the last round. Players should arrive by 9:30 am to check their registrations and first round assignments and expect to be done around 5:30 pm.

What if your child cannot play all rounds? Many chess kids also play sports which may have games scheduled on the same day as a tournament. Here is how your child can do both activities: chess players are allowed to take one or two “byes” per tournament. A “bye” means that he has a legal absence from a round and will not be penalized for not playing. Instead, he may receive a ½ point, the same as a draw. Byes, however, need to be requested when registering for a tournament. If, during a tournament, a player decides not to play a round, then he takes a loss for that game. The only downside to taking a bye is that a strong player may not be able to amass the highest number of points necessary to win a top trophy. Still, it’s a nice way to be able to fit in other activities during a long chess day.

Logistical Details

Checking your player’s registration upon arrival to a tournament is always recommended to ensure that he or she has been placed in the correct section. Verify that your player’s name has been spelled correctly, that he is playing in a rated or unrated section (applicable only in a rated tournament), and that he is placed in the correct section. Note to parents of pre-K players: enroll your children in Kindergarten sections, as there is not a separate pre-K category.

Depending upon the size of the tournament and host site, there will be at least two areas in use. A small tournament will have a waiting area for players, their parents, and food vendors to use before and after rounds. A second, often closed-in, area will host the players during their rounds. In a school, the waiting area may be the school’s cafeteria and the playing area the gymnasium. In a hotel, the playing area will be a large ballroom and the waiting areas are the hallways or small rooms outside the ballrooms. In huge tournaments on the national level, team rooms staffed by coaches will reserve these smaller hotel meeting rooms where players are coached between rounds (and their just completed games reviewed) and family members can relax or work while the players are in their matches. In these larger tournaments, the youngest players (Kindergarten and first graders in a K-1 section) may have their own smaller room where they can be more closely supervised and the parents can wait directly outside their doors.

Just before each round begins, the Tournament Director (TD) or assistants will post the matches by section. For example, a wall will identify K-3, K-5, Middle School, and High School sections. Two columns marked Black and White will list the players by board number and which color they will be playing that round. Most often, a player will alternate between playing the black and white sides of the board, although sometimes he will be assigned to play the same side of the board twice in a row, if the round logistics require it.

Sometimes a player will have a notation like “Please Wait” next to his name. This means that there is an odd number of players in the section and that someone will not have a game in that round. Typically, it is the lowest rated player in the section who is required to sit “out” – another reason for your child to practice and play a lot of tournaments to improve their rating! The player who needs to wait for the next round, however, does receive one point for the missed game. The result is the same as if the player had won the round, which is rather a nice consolation prize! If your child is asked to “please wait,” have him or her remain in the tournament room. Often, after the tournament has started, the Tournament Director will pair unmatched players for an unofficial game for fun and practice, so that no one has to truly miss an opportunity to play a round of chess.

Once inside the playing room, the tournament volunteers will help the players find their boards, if they need the assistance. Boards are set up on long tables in rows by playing section. As the

tournament progresses, players with the best scores (most wins) move “up” to higher boards to compete against other similarly scored players, and those with lower scores will move “down” to lower boards to play against others with similar scores. At the largest tournaments, take a peek inside the playing rooms before a round begins; you’ll be impressed by the sight of row upon row of so many kids sitting across from each other at the chess boards!

What happens if your child’s opponent does not show up for the round? Your child will be required to wait for the other player according to the time requirement of that round. For example, in a G/30 round, each player has thirty minutes to play his game. If your child’s opponent does not show within thirty minutes, then your child wins the game by default and receives one point. If, however, the opponent appears fifteen minutes after the game has started, then he has only fifteen minutes to play and win, while your child still has all of this thirty minute allotment.

With very few exceptions, parents are not allowed to observe match play. Just before a round begins, non-players will be asked to leave. Parents, however, can ensure that their children find their boards and, at the larger tournaments, help them fill out the paper at each board that identifies the players and their results. During the match, players are encouraged to use a chess notebook to write down the game’s moves for their parent or coach to review afterwards. If a child has a question during the match, has to use the restroom, or has finished a game, he must raise his hand to alert a tournament official. This individual can resolve problems at the board, excuse or escort the child to the restroom, and verify the game results, which are taken by either the official or the players to the scorekeepers. At this point, both players leave the tournament room and return to the waiting area for the matches for the next round to begin.

After the last round, results are tabulated and players, parents, and coaches are invited to the awards ceremony, often held in the tournament room. Trophies are awarded to individuals and/or teams (depending upon the tournament format) by section. The number of trophies awarded generally correlates to the size of the tournament, and larger tournaments often give participation ribbons to all players (especially to those in the youngest grades) in their last round. In a five round tournament, players with a score of 3.5 or higher can expect a trophy, though those with a score of 3.0 may also win a place trophy or a plus score trophy. A plus score means that a player (or team) has won more games than lost. The nice thing about chess tournaments is that kids who continue to participate will eventually acquire a lot of hardware! Not only does a chess player accumulate more trophies and ribbons than his or her sports counterpart, but the trophies are typically a lot larger! Just take a look at the trophy display on the awards tables at the next tournament.

Expectations

So what can you expect from a tournament and how should you, as a parent, prepare? First and foremost, the practical stuff: make sure that your child has a good night’s sleep the night before and a healthy breakfast the morning of the tournament. Before each round, the restroom should be visited, too, although a bathroom break is allowed during a match when a player raises his hand. Second, bring plenty of water and healthy foods for your child to have between rounds. Like any sport, a player needs to keep hydrated and energetic to bring out peak performance. Finally, have your child bring a chess notebook to record the moves of each game (can be purchased at tournaments with a mobile “chess store” set up at a table in the parent area) and two sharpened pencils, a roll-up or travel chess board for practice between rounds, books or small toys for diversion when not otherwise practicing, a ball or football for tossing around outdoors, and money for extra snacks that the facility will be selling.

Do the parents need to stay at the tournament all day? A lot depends upon the age and experience of your chess player. Middle and high school students don’t require constant parental supervision, and while the Tournament Directors would prefer that a few parents remain to ensure good behavior and timeliness of the players, these kids are pretty self-sufficient. Ideally, at least one parent or coach is there at any one time during the tournament to help with any problems or emergencies that

may arise and to ensure that the kids are well-behaved. If your chess players are elementary school-aged, at least one parent for every three or four kids should be there throughout the tournament. Parents of a school team often coordinate “shifts,” but don’t leave kids this age on their own. The youngest players (pre-K through first grade) should have their parents at the tournament all day. Siblings are welcome and oftentimes become future players!

The best option, and one that the Tournament Directors would love for all parents to consider, is to volunteer to help run the tournament. A large cadre of volunteers is needed and many positions, such as scorekeeping, do not require a knowledge of chess. Parents with basic chess knowledge can volunteer as Assistant Tournament Directors and help in the tournament room during the matches. Volunteering can be great fun; most parents enjoy working with the kids and learning how a scholastic tournament is successfully run. And the kids like having their parents “in charge.” (There’s usually another payoff: free lunch and snacks for the volunteers!) If you’re interested, contact the Tournament Director. Guaranteed, they will be glad to hear from you!

One last expectation to address: how do you help your player if he becomes despondent and teary-eyed when he loses a game? Just like any sport, it’s especially difficult for the youngest, least experienced players and, as parents, we do our best to comfort and encourage them to try again. Review their game, if they’ve written it down, and practice an opening or tactic that they could have better played. The kids may not want to hear it at the time, but the more they play, the better they’ll get, so getting back on the horse (or in this case, the knight ☺) is the best advice. The next victory will be that much sweeter.

Our best advice

Have fun! Practice with friends, family, school team chums, and any number of on-line chess sites. And, of course, come to the Scholastic tournaments, where both kids and their parents will find a warm, friendly environment and new friends that they otherwise would not have made.

See you soon at a Scholastic chess tournament near you!