

PARENTS' AND COACHES' GUIDE TO SCHOLASTIC CHESS (Updated 9/15/2026)

Welcome to the world of Scholastic Chess! To add to your understanding of how tournaments work, and to answer some of the many questions you undoubtedly are waiting to ask, we ask that you read this Chess Tournament Introduction.

How do you pair players together? We follow the pairing rules developed by the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) on Swiss-System tournaments. The “Swiss” was designed to accommodate many players competing in the same tournament, while still producing a clear winner, even though the winner cannot play against everyone else in the tournament. This is done by matching together players who keep winning, thus reducing the number of players who continue to win. After each round, if all the players with “perfect” scores (those who have won all their games) play each other, and if half these players win their games (while the other half loses), then the number of “perfect” scores at the end of the round will be half as much as it was when the round started. Players who continue to win, therefore, will probably face harder opponents. Players who lose their games will probably face others who are doing the same, and their opponents should get easier.

This is not an elimination tournament— even players who lose their first four games will probably face someone in the fifth round in the same situation. The halving process continues until the last round, when, in theory, only one player has a perfect score.

A player’s score in the tournament shows how she is doing. Each time a player wins, she gets 1 point for that round, while a draw is worth 1/2-point and a loss is 0 points. A player’s score is the total number of points she has at any point in the tournament. Players with the same score face each other as much as possible, beginning with the top scores down to the 0’s, while also avoiding pairing players together who have played each other before.

In the first round, all the players are ranked in rating order. Unrated players are usually placed right after the lowest-rated player, unless the Director assigns an estimated rating to an unrated player. The top half of the tournament, by rating, is then paired against the bottom half, in rating order. The same method follows for the remaining rounds. Players with the same score are grouped together and paired with each other, top half vs. bottom half, in rating order. Sometimes, if there is an odd number of players with the same score, the lowest rated player will usually “drop” to the next score group of players below and play one of the players with less points. If there is an odd number of players in the entire tournament for a particular round, then one player, usually the lowest rated player with the lowest score (a different player each round) will receive a 1-point bye for that round. The halving process continues with this higher half vs. lower half method, **and it is not uncommon for players to face opponents with ratings much higher or lower than their own. Remember, pairings are made by score first, then by rating.**

Occasionally there are so many players that it becomes likely that more than one player will win all the games. In this case, we may “accelerate” pairings, dividing the tournament groups into four quarters, instead of two halves, in the first round. In Round 2, higher-rated players who won may play stronger opponents than usual, while the lower-rated player who won may play higher-rated players who did not win. This is all to try and reduce the number of players who start round 3 with two points, and reducing the possible number of perfect scores at the end.

Adjustments are made in this basic method, so that players avoid playing opponents from the same school. In small score groups near the bottom of the tournament, it may sometimes be necessary to pair players together with different scores, to prevent players from the same school from playing each other. The computer also tries to make adjustments so that players alternate colors, or at least so that they have played two Whites and two Blacks before the fifth round (but this may not always happen). We also try to avoid assigning the same color in three consecutive games to a player. However, we avoid making switches in pairings if there is a large difference in the ratings of the players being switched (except to avoid giving someone 3-in-a-row). The result is, in theory that the top-scoring players will face each other towards the end of the tournament to determine the winner of the tournament.

What if the opponent is not there? At the beginning of the first round, some players, who have already entered the tournament, do not show up and do not provide advance notice (which is an inconsiderate thing to do and which can incur penalties). The Tournament Director will decide if and when to make re-pairings among players without opponents.

How are the scores shown on the wallchart? The wallchart shows a player’s cumulative score (the running total of points she has) after that round. This is a 5-round tournament (6-rounds in the **2-Day Championship Sections**), so the highest possible (perfect) score is 5 points (or 6-0 in the K-3, K-6 and Open Championships). The tiny numbers above a player’s score each round indicate the Player Number on the wallchart of the player’s opponent for that round, and the “W” or “B” shows if he had Black or White.

The team wallcharts show the scores of the highest-scoring players on the team. Any two or more players from a school may compete as a school team, but the three highest scores on the team after a given round produce the school's team score. It doesn't necessarily matter which players on the team won or lost that round, or how many players won their games. Only the scores of the three highest-scoring players are counted for the team after each round.

What if several players are tied at the end with the same score? Ties for cash prizes are split. For non-cash (indivisible) prizes, the tiebreak systems used are:

1. Players who have won all five games (or all six games in the six-round sections) will play a special speed playoff for First Place
2. Otherwise, the computer adds up the scores of each tied player's opponents (a half-point is counted for any rounds that the opponent did not play), and disregards the least-significant (usually the lowest scoring) opponent (the Modified Median System). The player with the highest total has played opponents with the best scores in the tournament— in theory, the hardest opponents. If the players are still tied, the low scoring opponents are also counted in the total (Solkoff Tiebreaks). For players who are still tied,
3. The computer adds each player's score to her score from the previous round (the Cumulative System). Thus, if a player won her first two games, lost her third, won her fourth and drew her last game, her score in the tournament would show a 1 point after round 1, 2 points after round 2, still 2 points after round 3 (she lost), 3 points after round 4, and 3½ points after round 5. Her Cumulative Tiebreaks would be $1 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 3.5 = 11.5$. To break ties among players with the same Cumulative Tiebreaks, the computer repeats this process, but it now adds up all the Cumulative Tiebreaks of the opponents of each tied player (the Cumulative Tiebreakers of the Cumulative Tiebreakers, or CTBCTB). The Cumulative System rewards players who win earlier when the opponents are easier, and who then usually face harder opponents.

NOTE: If computers are NOT available to calculate tiebreaks, then Modified Median, and then Solkoff Tiebreaks will be used first to break ties for players with 4.5 points (or 5.5 points in the 6-round sections). If still tied, and for all players with 4 or less (5 or less in 6-round sections), cumulative, then CTBCTB Tiebreaks, will be used. Cumulative tiebreaks, and then Modified Median tiebreaks, are used to break ties among tied **teams** (only perfect score ties are broken by a playoff).

What is the time limit on the game? In the 1-Day sections, each player has 30 minutes for the entire game plus ***a 5-second delay*** each move. **The Open, K-6 and K-3 Championship Sections** play Game/60 minutes with ***10-second delay*** (G/60, ***d10***). Unless the game has already ended, the first player to use up all her time usually loses. A digital clock will be used for each game if either player has one. If neither player has a clock, they should start without one, and the Tournament Director will try to assign a clock to a game later on, splitting the elapsed time, if necessary.

Is it necessary to write down the moves? All experienced tournament players are required to keep score of the game. Inexperienced players are not required to keep score, but they should, otherwise they won't be able to learn from their mistakes by going over their games afterwards. However, ***if a player is keeping score and her opponent is not, the opponent will lose 5 minutes off her clock*** as a penalty in the One-Day sections. At least 10 minutes are deducted with possible additional penalties in the other sections. If either player has less than five minutes remaining, neither player is required to keep score anymore. After any deductions, the opponent must still have at least 5 minutes remaining for the game. This rewards players who are taking the time during the game and making an effort to keep score, if their opponent is not doing so. **Exception:** In games where either player is in grade 1/below, scorekeeping is not required, with no penalty. **All players lose chess games, but good players use their score sheets to play over their games, to find out where they might improve for next time. Players may not use their electronic scoresheets** (exceptions due to accessibility issues must be requested before the tournament and documentation may be required).

Can I watch the games? Only players with games in progress and Tournament Directors are allowed in the tournament rooms (no spectators). The top games may be broadcast on our DGT Boards. **NO ONE IS ALLOWED ON PRIVATE SCHOOL PROPERTY OUTSIDE THE DESIGNATED TOURNAMENT AND WAITING AREAS!**

How do I find out about other tournaments? Membership in the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) is required to participate in the tournament. The magazines published by the USCF, *Chess Life* and *Chess Life Kids*, will provide information about other tournaments. **There are MANY different USCF-rated tournaments**, both scholastic and open, for you to play in! Many are designed just for players with certain ratings (Under 1600, for example). Want more information? The USCF website is www.uschess.org. **Remember, the best way to get better is by playing better players!**