

## Common Misconceptions About Scholastic Chess

***Misconception:*** Parents often think their child is not good enough to play in tournaments, or "Tournaments are just for the kids that are really good"

**Fact:** There is no minimum skill level required (well, they do have to know how the pieces move and the rules, like checkmate!). This is probably the most common misconception about scholastic chess. The two main things a child does need to play in tournaments are 1) Enough maturity/good behavior to play by themselves, keep relatively quiet, and follow the rules, and 2) Enough stamina to last through at least four G/30 rounds (Game in 30 minutes, which last up to 1 hour), or at least four hours; most tournaments are that long because the US Chess Federation requires four rounds (not necessarily in one event, but lifetime!) to get a rating. Most children have this stamina by the time they are age seven, but some students of even ages five or six play in tournaments regularly. Think of Scholastic Chess [Tournaments](#) as "Little League Chess for Kids" - Chess Tournaments are for kids who like chess - Your kids!! Look at it another way; tournament organizers are not dumb - they want as many kids as possible to play, so why would they orient the tournament toward good players only? That is why so many prizes are given out to players who have never played before - "unrated" or rated below a certain level. At my last couple of tournaments, some prizes (especially unrated) were not given out because not enough unrated players attended - *anyone* would have won if they had just played! For example at the 2004 Greater Philadelphia Chess Championship there were three trophies for the top three kids in grades K-1 and only two stayed around to the end to get their trophies - anyone K-1 who played would have won even if they had lost all their games!

***Misconception:*** Parents think their child will go to a tournament, lose in the first round, be eliminated, and go home disconsolate.

**Fact:** No one is eliminated from swiss-style tournaments, which are how almost all [USCF](#) scholastic tournaments are held. In a five round tournament everyone plays five games, unless they purposely need to skip a round or leave early. In swiss tournaments you are always paired with someone who is doing as well as you are. So if your child loses his first two games, he plays someone else who lost their first two games. This misconception also leads parents to sometimes believe that the entry fee is too high for possibly only one game! Moreover, almost all large scholastic tournaments have one or more prizes (usually trophies) in each section for "Unrated" players. This means that some players in each section who have never played before (or at least not until very recently) will win a prize, even if more experienced players do better. These unrated prizes obviously are to encourage new players and to ensure that everyone playing has a decent chance at a prize, even if they are relatively inexperienced.

***Misconception:*** You have to pre-register (register before the day of the tournament) to play in a tournament.

**Fact:** While pre-registration is required in many other activities, most entries for smaller tournaments are made during a registration period just prior to play on the day of the tournament. The exceptions are the bigger tournaments, like local, state, and national championships or big Adam's Mark Hotel tournaments, where there are so many entries that it would be impractical to sign everyone up in a short period, so incentives are given to encourage participants to pre-register. I do encourage parents to pre-register their students for my tournaments so that we have a better chance of starting the first round on time. I offer a discount

over the "site" price for registration received by me at least one week in advance. The [PA Scholastic State Championships](#), held in the late winter, now has a 3-tiered advance entry period with the normal entry (between \$22 and \$31) at least 3 weeks in advance, \$10 more the next two weeks, and \$20 more the final week or at the tournament to encourage advance entry. The [Greater Philadelphia Scholastic Chess Championship](#) is now also so big that advance entry is strongly urged. But [DVGP](#) tournaments and most others still have signup early on the day of play.

**Misconception:** You have to play all the rounds in a tournament in order to participate (this is a very common misconception, and was a surprise to me).

**Fact:** Of course, no one forces you to play all the rounds; sometimes there is a higher priority activity that might take you away for a couple of hours. The correct actions if a player must leave are: 1) Notify the tournament director as soon as you know when the player must leave (hopefully, you know this leaving time before the tournament even begins) and then remind him again when the player leaves. 2) Notify the tournament director when you are coming back and let him know when you are back. By performing these actions, you ensure that the player will not be paired against someone when he is not there, thus losing a forfeit. Hardly anyone likes to receive a forfeit win; they came to play. If you do leave without notifying the tournament director, he will pair you and someone who came to play will not be able to; that is why leaving without notifying the director is not only against US Chess Federation rules, but it is rude, and the organizing committee is allowed to fine you a small amount before you can enter another tournament of theirs. Of course, if you DO play all the rounds, the odds of winning a better prize are greater!

**Misconception:** Tournaments will provide a board and set for every participant.

**Fact:** Very few tournaments provide [equipment](#) (except for scoresheets)! So at least bring a set, board, and pencil. A standard set has a "Staunton Design," which is the one used for most sets sold today. The standard size set has a 3¾" King and is weighted, but such a set is not required. Very small unweighted sets can be hard to handle and easy to knock over. Most players use plastic sets; they are much cheaper than comparably sized wood sets. If you have a clock, bring that, too; if you don't have a clock, you might consider purchasing one. Today the standard clock is a digital clock, which can be set with the standard "time delay" feature (where you get an extra five seconds thinking time for each move over and above your total time), are more accurate, are easier to read, and probably even more fun! However, digital clocks are more expensive; you can also purchase an older, analog chess clock. If you don't have a clock and your opponent doesn't either, you can try to borrow one. If that fails, you may start your game without a clock, but the tournament director reserves the right to give you one during the game so that he can ensure that the next round starts on time. By the way, if you purchase a standard rollup board and have a choice of colors, choose a color that is easy on the eyes, such as green. Finally, most participants purchase their own scorebooks, which bind together scoresheets for about 50 games. These are inexpensive, and help keep one's game records together for easy retrieval.

**Misconception:** Younger students shouldn't or can't play in clubs or tournaments with adults.

**Fact:** Many students play regularly in with adults, and sometimes beat them! There are quite a few scholastic tournaments that don't allow adults, but most tournaments are "Open" tournaments, in which anyone can play, and many students enter and compete against adults.

Chess has no height or strength aspects, so the competition between adults and experienced younger students is often very close. Of course, tournaments that cater to adults usually have slower time limits and expect "appropriate" tournament behavior from younger participants (such as no talking when any serious games are in progress), but that doesn't stop many of them from playing if they can behave properly!

**Misconception:** Most tournaments are restricted as to where you live, or your age.

**Fact:** If a tournament is called "The Main Line Scholastic Chess Championship", then the only restriction is that it is scholastic; that is, it is restricted to grade 12 and below. If the name of the tournament is the Philadelphia Championship, that doesn't mean that you have to live in Philadelphia to play! It is open to anyone who lives anywhere, just as the US Open chess tournament is. Almost no tournaments require any "qualification". Some major championships, such as state championships, may restrict who can hold the title of champion (it may go to the highest scoring state resident), but still everyone can play. If someone from out of state takes first place, they will usually get the 1st place trophy, but they will not get the title. However, for smaller tournaments like the Main Line Scholastic Chess Championship, there is no formal title, and the winners just take home their trophies!

**Misconception:** You have to have a rating to play in a tournament.

**Fact:** The United States Chess Federation requires *membership* to play in their rated tournaments, but membership is always available as part of registration - you don't have to join "beforehand". But everyone starts their first tournament as "unrated" - it is impossible to get a USCF rating before playing in a tournament! (Well, there are ways to get estimated ratings, but that is rare and not really relevant). You get rated once you play four games - and those four games are lifetime, not necessarily in one tournament. So if your first tournament is only 3 games, once you play one more game at any time, you get a rating. And although if you win or lose all your games your rating may not be that accurate, it will still be published at the USCF website. So to play in a tournament if you have never played before, just show up during the registration time, join USCF (and possibly the [PA State Chess Federation](#), \$5) and pay the tournament entry fee, and then play - anyone can do this!

**Misconception:** A player who has not played in a long time loses their rating.

**Fact:** The United States Chess Federation does not lower or eliminate your rating if your membership expires. So they have a slogan "Once rated, always rated." Since USCF changed their computerization in ~1991, it is possible that if you last played before that, your rating may not be in their computer, but even a pre-1991 rating is still good. I have looked up ratings from 20 years ago or more in my *Chess Life* magazine library.

**Misconception:** Tournaments are serious places to play; players should start by playing in clubs.

**Fact:** In the Philadelphia area, this is just the opposite! Except for scholastic-only [clubs](#), most chess clubs are fairly quiet places with lots of adult players. But scholastic tournaments, especially non-championship ones, are full of kids eating pizza and hoagies and having a good time - it is even pretty noisy in the skittles room, where kids go to eat and play while they are waiting for everyone else to finish so the next round can start! When my son was seven, I took him to such an event and he had a ball - at the end he said "That was fun - when is the next one?" I said "There is one almost every week - would you like to start learning more about chess so you can do better?" and he responded "Nah! I just want to go back and have some more

fun!" Moral of the story: Except for scholastic-only clubs, the normal order is to take them to scholastic tournaments and only then if they are interested, join a local (all-age) chess club. Have a question or concern about scholastic chess? [E-mail PA Scholastic Chess Coordinator Dan Heisman](#)

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