

# NINE

**Questions and Answers about Chess Tournaments  
for Parents of Kids who have Never Been to One  
from the Perspective of an Obsessive, Over-Protective, Pacifist Parent  
(who is now totally caught up in the bloodlust)**

or

**How to Survive in a Sea of Seven Year Old Hustlers  
(while helping your child become one)**

**By John Farago, PS9 Chess  
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### Introduction

Going to a tournament without any sense of what such events are like can feel to a parent like diving into a churning food processor. Most are just not terribly user friendly for people who haven't gone to any before. You don't know what to do but the system expects you to be an expert. It's sort of like joining Actors' Equity: you can't be a member till you've had a job, but you can't get a job until you're a member. Unfortunately, the fear of the unknown keeps many kids from trying tournaments. And I have come to feel that chess, and in their own perverse way tournaments, are the richest context for learning that Max, our twelve-year-old (then six), has ever stumbled into.

When Max first decided he wanted to go to a chess tournament, I was very uncertain. I had lots of questions to ask, and no one to ask them of. These did not go away when we got to our first tournament (a comparatively nurturing unrated K-3 section). I felt that I had been dropped into a cable tv version of something between Romper Room and the classified ads from Soldier of Fortune magazine. The whole thing was presented in a foreign language by people who not only couldn't speak mine but who were unaware that any language other than their own existed. At the end of the day I was seriously considering entering a monastic order. Max, on the other hand, was exhilarated. In hindsight, it turns out there were still more questions I probably should have thought of but didn't because of the combined effects of the chaos and the fear that I was doing permanent injury to a fragile and malleable young psyche.

It can be difficult to remember how tournaments seemed in the time before one ever attended one. So, before I totally lose the memory of the confusion, the turmoil, the brutality, the exhilaration, and the culture shock, I thought I would put my impressions down on paper for anyone who might be interested. These are one person's perspective. Don't blame anyone but me for what is written here. I wrote this originally at the end of a full year of attending tournaments. I revised it from the vantage point of a second year of gradually escalating seriousness on Max's part (and spiraling obsession on mine), leading to rather different orientations toward tournament play for each of us.

John Farago

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### **Q. Should my child play in tournaments?**

It's a good question. There's more than enough competition thrust upon us in the world, from an early enough age. It hardly seems to make sense to drop little kids into the chaotic soup of chess tournaments even before they can read, write or tell time.

Tournaments *are* a pretty rugged setting (especially for the parents). We try to make ours at PS 9 more user friendly than most. But it all boils down to understanding what chess is about. And to trusting your child's instincts.

PS 9's philosophy of chess for children isn't about winning or losing. It's about using the game as an opportunity for child development. In our view, the game is a vehicle that taps the children's own interests and uses them as a way to engage in and encourage all sorts of learning. Some kids don't find chess interesting at all. No one should ever force them to play. Some like playing at home or with friends, but not under tournament conditions. That is as rich a way to play as any other. Some kids, many kids, enjoy playing in tournaments and the opportunities for learning and growth in tournament play are substantial and distinctive..

Playing together provides many children with a way to get to know and play with children older and younger than themselves. Because chess ability isn't closely linked to age, it levels the field, and in doing so it brings kids together, across ages, classes programs, and schools.

Kids play in our tournaments and others from kindergarten on up, in decent numbers. If your son or daughter knows the moves and is interested in playing chess with strangers (and doesn't scream too loudly when he or she loses), there's a tournament out there where his or her level of play will probably fit right in. If he or she wants to play, the odds are it will be fun and will help the child decide whether or not to get more deeply involved with chess.

After all, chess itself is a competition and if your child likes playing chess to start with there is little added edge that comes of playing in tournaments (at least at first). Tournaments provide access to a larger number of fresh faces, all of whom like the game, and the opportunity to get a sense of how well one plays. A lot of learning takes place in and around tournaments. A lot of kids have a lot of fun. And it's not a bad way to connect with your kid on a weekend.

So the real way to answer the question about whether your child should play in a tournament is to ask him or her. Talk it over and give great weight to his or her opinion. If you'd like, talk to a parent who has recently started going or swing by a tournament just to see what it is like.

#### **Q. Aren't tournaments a bit cutthroat for a young child?**

Maybe. It's true that competition can sear the air at chess tournaments. But it's an odd form of objectified competition. Kids get rated objectively, based on actual games in actual tournaments, and the ratings are broadly published and posted. Every kid knows or can know the rating of every other kid in a tournament. The result is that the competition is relatively pure, over the chess board not between kids. With the exception of *very* serious chess players, I've never seen any animosity at a tournament extend beyond the specific game being played. The kids who just played a life-and-death game get up and, astonishingly to me, go running around the room together playing basketball or tag or even another game of chess. They don't seem to connect the game to the particular player. I'm not just talking about my kid, but about all the kids in all the tournaments. Recently I overheard two first graders who were talking between rounds. One boasted to the other, "I can beat you." The other turned to him and said matter of factly, "*Of course* you can, you're way better than me." By making the ratings public and objective the tension seems to get limited to the games themselves, and in the game the tension doesn't usually seem much worse than it is in any other serious chess game. Interestingly, it's precisely the kids who have beaten him at tournaments who Max has wound up feeling closest to in the long haul. The opportunities for learning in tournament play are rather rich. Not only about chess, concentration, focus, patience, and strategizing, but about fairness and interacting with others. And all this takes place in a diversified multi-cultural setting. In addition, for little kids the skills encouraged in tournaments help develop things like penmanship, time-telling, reading, and so on.

#### **Q. Does it matter what tournament my kid starts with?**

Not all tournaments are alike. Some tournaments are designed to be especially inviting for kids who haven't played before. Tournaments that describe themselves as "unrated" or "novice" tournaments may not rate their games and generally only permit players with no rating or a low one. These are more or less practice tournaments. They make a good start. Quads are somewhat easier to understand and may be the best place to start.

#### **Q. What is a quad?**

There's a huge amount of jargon in chess. Quads are tournaments in which the players are put into groups of four. In three rounds, each player plays each of the other three in his or her group. In the end, the person who has the most wins in each group of four wins a trophy. These are a nice way to start out and are easier to follow than Swiss (also, they tend to be shorter).

### **Q. What is Swiss?**

Almost everything that's not organized as quads is organized according to a fiendish approach called the Swiss System. The Swiss brought us Cuckoo clocks, funny-looking overalls that stop at the knee, yodeling, fine watches, and anonymous bank accounts. Somehow, it makes sense to me that they invented the Swiss System.

In this approach, the players are listed in rank order (by rating), the list is split in two, and the top person in the top half plays the top person in the bottom half. And so on down. It means that strong players play comparatively weak players, presumably beating the heck out of them most of the time. After the first round (in which most of the inexperienced players probably get trounced), groups are set up based on number of games won, and within each group the division in half and pairing between strong and weak takes place. So, in any given round one can expect to see two players who have won an equal number of games playing each other, one of whom is theoretically rather stronger than the other.

The idea is that this way strong players don't knock each other out of the running until the final rounds and all the players wind up competing with opponents roughly similar to themselves after the first round or two. It works very well, but has devilish side effects, not the least of which has to do with the brutality of more or less assuring that comparatively low-rated or new players will lose their first game.

### **Q. What are ratings?**

Swiss system pairings are great in terms of yielding relative fairness and accuracy of final results, but along the way they generate some pretty strange pairs and some real roller-coaster experiences for the players, none of whom really understand why they are facing the kid they're up against. The important thing to keep in mind if your child is new to tournaments and is playing in Swiss, is that the first couple of rounds are probable losses, but that means that the latter rounds will probably be pretty evenly balanced. It's important not to lose heart at an early lost round, for this reason. On the other hand, early wins lead to increasingly stiff competition. Oddly, for a player who is not among the very strongest in the tournament, an early loss is probably likelier to lead to a mid-range trophy than an early win (because the subsequent rounds for an early loser will be against players who are probably less strong and therefore easier to beat; people who win in the early rounds wind up facing stiffer competition and battling for the very top awards; if they miss these they can wind up not getting anything). Most importantly, Swiss means that even relatively weak players can go home having won one of their last two games (and it's the last games that most imprint on the kids' feelings about the tournament as a whole).

Kids get rated by the US Chess Federation (USCF) when they play in rated tournaments (which is every tournament except those called "novice" or "unrated"). The results of every game are sent in to the USCF computers, which then assess the comparative strengths of the players and rate them against each other. A statistical model is used to do this. The assumption is that ratings begin at 0 and go up without any theoretical ceiling. The best player in the US currently is rated over 2,750 (and, by the way, is in his early 20's). The assumption is that two players of equal rating should draw or split their games 50/50. A player rated 400 points higher than her opponent is assumed to be able to win just about all of their games. Based on these assumptions, all tournament games

get rated and every two months the new ratings are published.

What you really want to know is what is a good rating for a kid your child's age. In general, kids start in as low as 200 or so and often move up to 600 or 700 by the time they've played 20 games or so, depending on the competition and their own strength; some youngsters hover around 400 for years, enjoying themselves all the while. From then on it can go anywhere. As a benchmark, the top 50 kids 8 years old and under (in this country) have ratings of roughly 1060 and above. Strong high school players are around 1700. Plenty of adults have ratings around 1200; serious adults tend to be in the 1600-2000 range, and above 2000 takes you into the very serious adult category. I figure my own rating is about 250 on a good day with the wind filling my sails.

### **Q. How long does it take for my child to get a rating?**

In theory, no time at all. In practice, it can take what seems to be an eternity. Max first started playing heavily in rated tournaments in early December. The first rating that was published for him was in the rating book that came out on April 1. Here's how it works. To be rated, a child has to be a member of USCF and has to have played in at least one rated tournament that has reported its results to the USCF. Each of these is a bit more complex than it sounds. Reporting tournament results, especially manually, is time consuming paperwork of a sort that Tournament Directors often hate. Weeks and months can pass before a tournament's results are turned in. So even though your child has played in a rated tournament, USCF may not hear about it for a long time (a couple of prominent scholastic tournament directors have taken as long as a year to turn in their results; usually it's just a matter of weeks or days). What is more, if your child joins USCF as part of a tournament, the membership application doesn't go in until that tournament's results are submitted. So, if the results of that tournament are delayed then even those tournaments that get their results in earlier will not generate a rating until the membership form is received.

Once the ratings and membership forms get to USCF, they tend to get into the system swiftly. But they come out more slowly. *School Mates* (the kids' chess magazine that you get with USCF membership) comes out every other month, at the same time the ratings come out. The mailing label on the magazine cover has a ton of indecipherable material on it, including your child's current rating; there is a key to sorting through the label information inside the magazine (if you figure out how to use it on your first issue of the magazine, you are entitled to go to work for NASA). Since the rating books come out at the same time, the label should have the rating that is current as of the cover date of the magazine. If you want a more frequent check of what's happening, *Chess Life*, the adult magazine, comes out monthly, and in the alternate months the label of that magazine gives an updated rating. It costs about \$15/year to subscribe to Chess Life if you are already a scholastic member. Call the USCF for information.

The point is that three things delay getting an initial rating: delays in membership application, delays in tournament reports, and the printing time lag of the rating books. You can control the first by joining USCF before your child plays in a tournament. That will probably cost an extra \$10, though, since you can't take advantage of the free membership offered by some tournaments. However you join, if you haven't gotten a membership card within a month after you paid your money (or registered in a tournament that was going to send in your application), check with USCF to see if they believe you exist. Don't believe anyone who tells you that USCF is slow. They aren't. In the past year I have heard of instances in which forms got lost, but USCF was never backed up more than two weeks on new memberships. The other two sources of delay are in the laps of the gods.

### **Q How do I find out my child's rating?**

The simplest way is to figure it out from the magazine label. Tournament Directors rely on the published compilations known as rating books. Rating books come out on December 1, February 1, April 1, June 1, August 1, and October 1. The printing deadlines are roughly one month earlier, so reports for December need to be in by the end of October, for April, by the end of February, and so on. This means that games played in mid-to-late-October have to be processed extremely swiftly if they are to appear in the December book; most will probably be in February. Games from November should be in February, from December in February or April, from January in April, from February in April or June, and so on. Things turn around most swiftly in the peak tournament season, December-April. The Nationals use the April ratings for their pairings.

A final note if you're trying to keep up You can subscribe to the rating books for \$30/year (either in hard copy or, for slightly more, on computer disks). Call the USCF. Most tournaments that are rated get complete detailed rating results back from USCF. These include listings of each player, their rating before the tournament, and their rating after the tournament. Tournament Directors often post these at their next tournament. Or you can order copies of these result summaries from USCF directly (they cost a couple of dollars for one or \$5 for the last several). If you want to order a set, they are called cross-tables, and you need to call the USCF to do this (800-388-KING).

### **Q. How do I find out about tournaments?**

Joining the United States Chess Federation (actually, having your kid do so) costs \$10 and gets your kid a magazine every two months that includes listings of tournaments all over the country. For more information on joining USCF, call 1-800-388-KING.

### **Q. Does it cost money to attend a tournament?**

Yes. Anywhere from \$10 to \$25 or a bit more. But you get to spend a Saturday or Sunday being befuddled by chess terms and worrying that your child is having his or her psyche irreparably scarred, and your kid may win a trophy that will eventually be carefully displayed underneath the bed in his or her well organized room. Worth every penny!

### **Q. When do tournaments happen How long are they What do I do?**

Most weekends from October through May there's one or more tournaments taking place. They last anywhere from four or five hours to two days. In general, you bring your kid and then hang around until it's over. Most people bring work or something to read. Some people make believe they are getting work or reading done. Don't believe it, though, they're just showing off. The atmosphere makes it hard to do anything other than worry about how your kid is doing, pace, find food and a working toilet (toilets are always broken at chess tournaments). Bring a towel, a sponge, a mouthpiece, a squirt bottle and a pail of water; practice pacing and muttering, "He could've been a contender." Scowl, look intimidatingly at other parents and at small children; watch old Burgess Meredith films.

If you can't put a whole day into doing this, see if other parents you know are going to the tournament and could keep an eye on your kid. If you do have the time, it's a powerful way to connect with your kid, especially if you have even a rudimentary knowledge of chess (my level of play still confuses which piece is the Rook and which is the Knight). And most school-based tournaments have some sort of recreation available between rounds.

### **Q. Do we need to bring anything?**

Most tournaments ask that you bring a chess set and a chess clock (if you have one). Some tournaments strongly encourage transcription but almost all provide forms for transcription if kids don't have their own. You can probably get by without bringing anything, but you'll feel a

bit out of place.

A standard plastic chess set and a roll-up vinyl board are a good investment (roughly \$15 from the USCF for members; 1-800-388-KING). An even better (though somewhat more costly) approach is one of the extra heavily weighted sets that are less likely to be knocked around the board in youthful enthusiasm. The USCF sells these for roughly \$30.

Sooner or later, if your kid really gets into chess you will need a clock, and a transcription pad. And your kid will want a chess bag.

### **Q. A clock?**

Yup. Tournament games are usually played with a 'time control.' There are many different time controls possible, but they all utilize linked pairs of clocks that keep track of how much time each player is using. Such a linked pair of clocks is called a chess clock. There are many clocks available, all of them hideously expensive for what they provide. It seems like you should be able to make one from two travel clocks, a twig, a couple of rubber bands, and a wad of used chewing gum, for a total outlay of seven or eight dollars, but in practice the best price I've seen is \$40 or so. They range from \$40 to over \$100. The USCF is a good source, and, for members, their prices tend to be lower than anyone else's. Again, cost shouldn't deter you; players who don't have clocks get by one way or another.

Playing with a clock is one of the ways that tournament play is different from most friendly games between kids but it adds an aura of importance to it all and helps kids develop mental coordination and pacing skills that are useful beyond chess. It also helps them to tell time the old-fashioned way (using a clock with hands instead of a digital readout).

### **Q. Transcription pads?**

Players are strongly encouraged to write down every move of the game. This helps avoid disputes and it gives them a way to analyze the game afterwards. It also makes them think a bit more about their moves. I like it because it has helped Max's handwriting and his concentration, and there's a message in here that writing is a useful tool not just a chore they make you do in class.

Transcription pads come in all sorts of forms. Among the best are like steno pads. They let kids keep all their games together, chronologically. Other kids like individual carbonless forms that make two copies automatically.

Transcribing a game, using a clock, and moving the pieces turns out to be a coordination effort a bit more demanding than walking and chewing gum at the same time but substantially less challenging than getting Sonic the Hedgehog through the Spring Yard Zone. It takes practice, it fosters concentration and focus. It's nice.

### **Q. Chess bags?**

Yup again. This is when you know you're kid's really been hooked. All these little hustlers show up at tournaments toting nylon bags that cost \$60 and look an awful lot like something you'd carry an heirloom pool cue or sawed-off shotgun in. They hold a chess set, a roll-up board, and a clock (you can cram a transcription pad and pen in too). They are totally unnecessary and probably cost about two bucks to manufacture, but be prepared to feel intimidated by the kids who have them when yours doesn't. A paper or plastic bag is fine, but sooner or later your kid will probably want a fancy. At least it's better than craving a new brand of \$70 sneakers before the

old ones wear out. And lots of kids don't have a chess bag even after years of play.

### **Q. What is the Chess Team?**

At PS 9, anyone who wants to play. Chess is fundamentally not a team sport, but some tournaments give out team awards in addition to individual ones. In general, they take the scores of the four best-scoring kids from a school and add them up for the team score. As many kids as want to can register; the four best are determined on the basis of their actual performance. Relatively few schools have enough players to field even four players at most tournaments.

### **Q. Trophies?**

For my kid at least, trophies were more vital than air, food, or water. Most tournaments give out trophies to winners. A couple also give out books (a practice that Max used to view as just a bit better than getting underwear for his birthday). Some give out a hearty handshake. The best tournaments from a parent's perspective (we have to live with the disappointment after the event) all have lots of trophies, so that almost half of the kids get something for their effort.

The most astonishing thing is how much the kids care about these pieces of plastic, chipboard, construction-grade marble, and tin waiting to become landfill. If your kid, like mine, is obsessed by these things, pay attention to the sorts of things that get prizes at the tournaments you consider going to, in order to minimize disappointment. If they gave a trophy to every kid who played (which some kindergarten tournaments actually do) the kids would still feel every bit as proud about having won one as they do when there's only a couple for the whole tournament.

### **Q. What do you get trophies for How do you keep score?**

In general, winning. Each game won counts as 1 point. Each game lost as 0. Each draw is 1/2. If the other player doesn't show up you get a win. If you don't show up you get a loss. If you arrange beforehand you can sometimes skip a round and get a 'bye' for which you get 1/2 point. If you are paired against someone who has arranged for a 'bye' you still get a win. So you add up your points and the person with the most points wins. There is no special credit for playing well but losing (it's more or less like life in this regard).

Trophies go to the top players. Some tournaments are broken out into 'sections,' and players only play others within their section. Sections can be broken out by age or by rating. Generally, you can play up but not down, which means that you can play in a more advanced section than you seem to qualify for, but not in a less advanced one. Prizes are awarded within each section. Sometimes they are also awarded within a section for achievement within a certain rating range (best under 1000, for instance, or best Unrated — unrated players are in a category by themselves, since no one knows their actual rating; they don't compete for any of the other Best Under ... awards), or Best within an age range. If you are eligible for two prizes you either are given the higher of the two or allowed to choose. Generally in school tournaments you can't get two different individual awards for one performance.

In general in scholastic tournaments kids whose final score is more than half of their games have a decent shot at getting a trophy.

### **Q. These are long days, do they feed you?**

In most cases, you're on your own. Some places have soda machines. Most places have food within a reasonable distance. PS 9 has breakfast and lunch available at modest prices (to raise money for the team). Some tournaments are over in time for a late lunch. Most have an extra pause between noontime rounds so that everyone gets at least a few minutes to run off and get a

bite to eat (if your kid doesn't use all his time for the round before lunch you can wind up with enough time for a power lunch at The Regency, which conveniently is around the corner from one school that hosts monthly tournaments). But expect to have to forage for yourself and your kid from the delis and pizza places in the area.

### **Q. Rounds?**

Tournaments range from 3 to 6 rounds in length. Each round can take anywhere from an hour to five hours, depending on the time controls. Someone's kid will pretty much always take the full amount of time available, which will hold everyone up because the new pairings can't go up until the last round's results are all in. But playing slowly is a sign that the kids are thinking about what they are doing (or colluding to drive their parents nuts). Usually it takes 15-30 minutes to generate pairings from results. If everyone is done early, some tournaments, but not all, will post the next round's pairings early. This is a nice thing when it happens. Ask.. Pairings should be posted both alphabetically and in board order in multiple locations to avoid crowding; often they're not.

### **Q. Time controls?**

One thing that makes tournaments different from most chess games that kids play is that there are limits on how long a game can take. Usually. Time controls are the answer to the dreams of every parent who has ever stood around interminably waiting for someone else's five year old troll to stop languorously staring at another kid's shoelaces for minutes on end after every other game in the room has long since ended.

The simplest time control is some number of minutes for an entire game/per player (known as sudden death; in chess suddenness can be very slow). Thus, each player might have a total of 30 minutes (or two hours, or something in between) for all of their moves. Another form gives a set period of time/player for a set number of moves (*e.g.* 25 moves in 30 minutes, written 25/30; always moves/minutes). Once the tournaments start to get serious, the time controls get tiered (for example, an hour for the first 25 moves, then another hour to finish the game). You set the clock so that it hits the hour when your time is up (which usually lets a red flag drop). You each have a linked clock with an on/off button attached to it, and as soon as you make your move you hit your button, which stops your clock and starts your opponent's. When she moves she hits her button, stopping her clock and starting yours. If your time runs out, you lose. Thus, if you have thirty minutes for the first 25 moves, you set the clock to, say, 5:30. The first player in a game whose flag drops at 6:00 before they make 25 moves loses. If a player makes 25 moves before the time runs out, the clock gets re-set to add the next time control. In kids' games, very few end because they run out of time. Many tournaments for smaller kids don't even require the use of a clock and time controls become very informal (*e.g.* sooner or later a tournament director will start hovering around the last table in the room letting the kids know they better finish soon).

Remember, it's always the amount of time per player. The game can take up to twice as long as the time control (two players, each with a time control). Some game almost always does. The result is long gaps between rounds (unless your kid is the slow one). Still, long games are a sign that the kids are getting serious, and it is astonishing how long their attention span can be once they get into the game. Yet another reason to hate the kids whose games run long when your kid popped out of the playing room having lost in less time than he takes to go to the bathroom.

### **Q. Pairings, what are pairings?**

In a Swiss System tournament, the results of each round are tabulated and then new games are set up. The list of games is called the pairings. As described above, in Swiss tournaments kids are

paired based on how many games they've won. Within groups of similar won/loss records, strong get pitted against weak (based on rating; unrated at the bottom). The first tables (the boards with the lowest numbers) are for the kids with the strongest won/loss record, beginning with the game with the kid with the highest rating in the group; then on down the line. So the board number gives you an approximate sense of how well your kid is doing (and how strong her opponent is). If your kid is at the first table in a Swiss tournament, she either is the strongest player at that point in the tournament or is staring into the eyes of the strongest player at the tournament. Good luck.

Tournament Directors, AKA God, try to make it so that kids from the same school don't play each other, and so that kids play Black and White an even number of times. Sometimes it doesn't work out. There is an absolute rule that no one can be required to play the same color four times in a row. In the last couple of rounds I've seen children from the same school play each other (heck, I've seen *siblings* play each other). With the outcome of the tournament at stake, it wouldn't be fair to the other children to do it any other way.

Pairings are usually posted after a long wait in a narrow corridor, at a height that is too high for kids to see and in a type size that is too small for middle-aged grownups to read from more than six inches away. Other statistics usually get posted in a similar location as soon as they are available (won/loss records, team standings, great volumes of statistics in totally indecipherable computer-generated arrays). As soon as the pairings go up everyone rushes up to them; adults elbowing small children out of the way in an effort to find out what indignities the Swiss system has inflicted on their own kid this time around.

When the pairings go up you run over to the wall, trample any annoying children who get between you and the sheets, and look for the following information: your kid's name or ID number (tournaments assign ID numbers to kids, usually in rating order, so #1 is the highest rated, on down), the board number she's playing at (be careful, it's easy to mix up the ID # and Board # columns), whether she's playing Black or White, and the name and ID# of the kid she's playing against. Then, if your short term memory is better than mine, you tell your kid which board number to go to and what color pieces she's playing. Often, the kids' ratings will be listed on the pairings as well; then you have to decide whether your kid will respond better to this news if she hears it from you rather than from the other kid (who, if it's a big number, probably has it tattooed across his forehead). Later on you can go back and check the various statistics that are posted to find out how old the other kid is, what school he's from, what his rating is, who else he's played and how he's done against them, what his favorite color is, where he gets his hair cut, and so on.

In general, the pairing sheets also often serve as places to report results. Ideally, the two players who have just finished a game walk over to the pairing sheets together and jointly post the results. More frequently, the winner runs to the sheet and triumphantly places a 1 next to her name and a 0 next to her opponent's. The loser shuffles out to his parents or the soda machine kicking younger children and small animals along the way, steering clear of the pairings lists entirely. Sometimes results are turned in by having the kids raise their hands for a TD who checks to be sure it's a real checkmate and then posts the results himself (this is mostly applicable to tournaments with very inexperienced players). Kids should be sure they know how to post results in the particular tournament they are playing in before they start. It makes life less frenetic.

### **Q. Are there any special stupid tournament rules?**

Several, and if your kid isn't aware of them they can snooker him. Touch move is the most

universal. If you touch a piece, you have to move it if you legally can. If you touch an opponent's piece, you have to take it if you legally can. If you run out of time on your clock, you lose. If you don't take transcription but your opponent does, many tournaments will, at the transcriber's request, either take time off your clock or add time to the other player's. At some tournaments clocks are required, at others they are required if either player wants one, at still others they are only used if both players agree. Check with the Tournament Director (TD) before getting into an argument. Some tournaments insist that the clock go in a particular place. If you put yourself into an illegal position (on the board, not as a matter of posture), some tournaments impose a time penalty for doing so.

The tournament director is the ultimate authority in any given tournament. If anything starts to go wrong, your child should try to get a tournament director to resolve the problem. The kid should stop the clock and raise his or her hand, or stop the clock and get up and get the TD (depending on the rules of the tournament; if they don't tell you which to do, ask before the tournament begins). The TDs, in general, became tournament directors because of their chess prowess, not their interpersonal skills or their charming way with children. There are exceptions.

### **Q. Can I watch?**

In chess, as in life, they usually don't let you watch the stuff you most want to see. The kids are in a big room that generally has little way to look into it. Learn to enjoy pacing, or pretend to read (make sure you turn a page once in a while). It drives the other parents nuts to see someone with so much confidence (or so little competitive zeal projected onto their kids). You can look pretty foolish standing on tiptoe, contorted into a pretzel, peering through a 4" square fogged-out Plexiglas window trying to get a glimpse of your child's board without having him see that you're looking. Eventually you either stop doing this or develop a high tolerance for looking foolish. If you have seen the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer* you will understand why this rule exists. Remember, the film's (mostly) non-fiction.

### **Q. Do lessons help?**

Yes. Chess is not just a game. It is a culture. You can learn the game (somewhat more slowly and with a lesser degree of interest) from books or computers. The culture comes only from people who know the game. Kids who get very serious about the game all take lessons of some sort.

Lessons come in various flavors. What's available depends on where you live and how much money you are willing to allocate to the enterprise. Rates run from as low as \$10 an hour to over \$100. Teachers vary in both chess level and teaching ability. In New York City the range is mind-boggling. Max has had lessons from a number of the best players in the world, as well as from some of the most talented teachers I have ever tumbled across. Perhaps when he grows up he'll thank us.

### **Q. What do I do if I get obsessed with my child's rating?**

Consult a psychiatrist.

Alternatively, go with the flow, get into it. Here is everything my own obsession has been able to glean about how the system works:

Until a player has been in twenty rated games, his or her rating is provisional and is calculated in a special way designed to yield a quick but probably inaccurate rating. After that the technique slows down and the results are more stable and more accurate.

Provisional ratings from the first 20 games are based on averaging the adjusted rating of your kid's opponents in the rated games he has played to date. The adjustment is pretty straightforward: add 400 points to the rating of a kid he beats, subtract 400 points from a kid he loses to, and don't adjust the rating of a kid he draws with. Add these adjusted ratings up and divide by the number of games and you have the provisional rating as of that point in time. Adjusted ratings are reported like this: 700/12, which means a provisional rating of 700 against a total of 12 games played.

Beginning with the twenty-first rated game, the way it goes is very roughly as follows: Ratings are done by tournament, not by game. When you know the tournament results, calculate for each game the difference in the ratings of your kid and her opponent. Multiply that difference by .0013. If your kid has the lower rating, subtract the number you just got from .5000 (to a minimum of 0); if your kid has the higher rating, add it to .5000 (to a maximum of 1). Then take each of these and add them up for all the games in the tournament. Take that number and subtract it from your kid's results from the tournament (wins count as 1 point each, draws as 1/2). Take the resulting number, which may be positive or negative, and multiply it by 32. Then add that result to your kid's prior rating. That's her new rating. Easy, no USCF has a flyer that gives a bit more detail and some examples; you have to call them to request it. There's an easy approximation (and they're all approximations, since the actual calculation is based on updated USCF ratings at the time the results are submitted): Each win against an equally rated player is worth 16 rating points; each loss against an equally rated opponent costs 16 rating points. If the ratings of your child's opponent are higher than his add 4 more points for each 100 points of difference for each win, subtract 4 points from the 16 for each loss (so that wins against stronger opponents are worth more than 16 points, while losses hurt less than 16 points). If your kid has the higher rating, subtract 4 points from the 16 for each 100 point difference for each win, and add 4 points to the 16 for each 100 point difference for each loss (so wins are worth less than 16 points and losses hurt more).

Here's the sense behind this: people with equal ratings are supposed, on average, to draw. So if you draw with someone with the same rating you have, it should leave your rating even. That means that on average, you should subtract 1/2 game from every game you play with someone of dead even ability with you (doing so will average out to no change if you average out to a draw in each game, which adds the 1/2 point back; winning brings you ahead, losing drops you down). If the player is 400 points or so better than you, then he should win every time, so it shouldn't hurt you to lose to him. So you don't subtract anything for playing such a player. On the other hand, if he is 400 points lower than you, you should win every time, so you shouldn't benefit from winning. Which means that you subtract a whole game for every game you play with someone ranked that much lower. And then you do the same thing proportionately in between 400 above and 400 below. So, beating someone you should always lose to adds 32 points to your rating. Losing to someone you should always beat subtracts 32 points. Beating someone you should draw with adds 16 points, and so on.

In addition to this there are a series of arcane calculations that lead to 'life titles,' a representation of the highest level a player has ever achieved in sustained tournament play. These are indicated by letter (A through e: A = roughly 1900, a = 1800, B=1700, b=1600, down to e=1000; there are even funkier letters for titles at 2000 and above). The USCF reports these as well (usually on the mailing label of your magazine subscription, so the mail carrier can share in your delight at your child's accomplishment), together with a

number that indicates how many points your child has banked toward the next level (you need 10 to get there). It all starts at 1000, so it isn't likely to be an immediate concern, but you can request a sheet that explains life titles in greater detail and accuracy from USCF as well.

All of this would be pretty precise if ratings were current and if they were static. But they squirm around. And they are far from current. USCF modifies the ratings dynamically as each new tournament gets added. They only update their published ratings every two months, and when they publish ratings it takes about a month to print the book, so the April ratings (which arrive around April 1), for example, have all the results tabulated by the end of February. And then there are no new ratings published until June 1.

It gets worse. The published ratings can only include the ratings that were submitted to USCF and various TD's can take a very long time getting their results in to USCF. Sometimes up to a year. So the published rating may not be current even as of the cutoff date because some tournaments your kid played in may not be reported as yet. As a result of all this, estimating ratings is about as precise an enterprise as Groundhog Day. It's an okay way to kill time at a tournament, but recognize that engaging in this sort of thing is somewhere between fidgeting and unfettered pathology.

When you get really good at this you can start worrying about whether USCF's ratings are accurate. To do this effectively you need to hire a staff of auditors and set them to work more or less full-time. Or you can just give in and accept whatever comes your way; there's not much in between.

### **Q. Can I figure out my kid's pairing before it gets posted?**

You can try. It's another good way to feel as though you are doing something useful while sweating bullets about whether some bully is pummeling your kid behind the closed doors of the playing room. The pairing rules in Swiss are pretty straightforward, complicated only by groupings with an odd number of players, draws, trying to avoid having kids from the same school play each other, and trying to keep relatively even balance between the number of times a kid draws black and the number of times she draws white.

Remember that, starting with the group with the highest score, each group is split in two and paired from the top down. If a group has an odd number of players, the top person in the next group plays as the bottom player in the higher group. This is, generally speaking, not great news for the person they are playing against, who is probably expecting a relatively weak opponent, only to find themselves playing someone who is probably only 1/2 game down and who has a very high rating.

Anyway, remember about not pairing people from the same school, and balancing black and white. It's challenging enough that you can use up at least half an hour of fretting time on it. And you'll probably still get it wrong.

### **What do they do to break ties**

Shoot the lower rated player.

Actually, lots of things. The most common is to add up the players' scores cumulatively by round. If you win your first game, lose your second, and win your third, your score after one round is 1, after two rounds is still 1, and after three rounds grows to 2. The cumulative

score is  $1+1+2$ , or 4. This gives an edge to early wins. Which is to say it gives an edge to those with high ratings or those who beat those with high ratings. It more or less breaks ties based on the past performance of the players in the tournament. And it's easy to calculate.

Another tie break system, and often more than one is necessary to break all the ties since the first tie break may still leave some kids lumped together, totals the final scores of all the people each kid has played. This is a way of saying that, all other things being equal, the person who played stronger opponents is the stronger of two people with the same score. It makes intuitive sense, but it's a bit harder to calculate. It's interesting to notice that this tie-break rule, when combined with the Swiss pairing rules, give an edge to the dark horse player since the weaker players are generally playing up (*i.e.* against a tougher opponent) and the stronger players are playing down. As a result, if a weak and a strong player have the same number of wins, it is likely that the weaker player will have had the tougher opponents and therefore the better tie break score under the second method of counting..

There are several other tie-break methods, and most tournaments run at least three, which they announce as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, but from here on out they lose me, so you're on your own. If you care about this you can ask the TD which one(s) they are using and how they are calculated. Then you can try to use the posted tie-break results from the last round, together with the emerging results from the current round, to calculate your kid's or team's tie-breaks in the current round. There is almost no chance that you will get this even approximately correct, but it can take a lot of time and seem like an interesting puzzle when you are desperately bored or anxious.

**Q. Any more tips?** Sure. Start out with a relatively supportive tournament. Move up after a couple (or after your child has won a trophy or two). From there on you can go anywhere, depending on what is available.

Get to know other chess parents. They're informative and helpful and a pretty nice group of people. Don't turn your back on them, though. You never know.

### **Q. Why is chess so multi-cultural?**

Well, first of all, it's not originally a European game, having started in the mid-East or Asia, and having a very long and continuous history on at least several continents. It seems to draw on skills that are not the predominant ones valued in Eurocentric cultures — skills like visual memory, spatial manipulation, pattern recognition — intelligences that are acknowledged but not central to Western notions of academic success. It's inexpensive to play, and very portable. It doesn't require language, so people who can't otherwise communicate can play chess with each other. When my kid goes to tournaments it is almost always the case that there will be tremendous diversity; the more serious the tournament the more true this is. Chess ability is not linked to status or wealth, age or color. It is startlingly similar to what one imagines the world could be like; and startlingly dissimilar to the way the world actually is. There's probably more to it than this (and there are certainly examples of narrow-mindedness within the chess culture), but it's a start.

The one big exception to this all is the distressingly small number of girls and women playing. Among scholastic players the gender-based rivalries at the chessboard are pretty much identical to the way they work out in the classroom. At higher levels there seems to continue to be a substantial amount of tacit, and at times explicit, discrimination against women players. There is some effort to move beyond this but there's plenty of room for still

greater efforts. Encouraging girls to play is one essential element.

### **Q. What are the Nationals Can my child go?**

The Nationals are just that, the national championship competition. Surprisingly, anyone can attend who can get there; there's no qualifying contest or minimum rating. The same is true for the State and City championships. They tend to be quite an experience, sort of like a roller-coaster ride punctuated by junk food infusions. Talk to the parents of kids who've gone, to get a feel for whether this is something you want to do. One thing is pretty clear: it's not just any old family vacation. I've come to believe that there is something very special about taking a trip to go someplace where the agenda is dominated by Max's interests rather than ours. It's great for him, and it helps us understand more clearly why he gets bored on trips where the agenda is dominated by our interests. Bring lots of books.

### **Q. Anything else I can read?**

*The Scholastic Tournament Book*; any of the books by Bruce Pandolfini, especially *Checkmates* and its predecessor *Chessercizes* (which are series of chess puzzles that at least start out by being accessible to novices). There are a bunch of picture books and very basic kids' books by publishers who do a lot of the sort of wonky kids publishing (Usborne, for example), all of which seem like fine introductions if they work for your kid. There is a book called *Chess for Children, Step by Step* which I like a lot (by William Lombardy and Bette Marshall). There is a much more advanced book by Pelts and Alburt (*Comprehensive Chess Course*) that costs a small fortune but is a very serious programmatic approach to learning the game thoroughly. Finding chess books can be a challenge; USCF sells almost everything via mail-order (mildly discounted for members). The USCF will also have a toehold in the City, with a small bookstore that has just opened at the Manhattan Chess Club (353 W. 46th St.; 333-5888). There's a chess store on Thompson Street in the village (it's called the Village Chess Shop). Some big tournaments have vendors selling books or supplies. Some large bookstores have a small selection in their games section (Astor Books is pretty good near Astor Place; I've had less success with Shakespeare and still less at the various kids' bookstores). The Barnes & Noble on Broadway and 83rd Street in New York has the best assortment I've seen in a place that also sells books to normal human beings. The serious chess literature comes out of the woodwork at some of the larger adult tournaments, where they sell books to people with translucent flesh whose idea of a snappy punch line is, "42 . . . Bxh+7!"

Computer software also provides a good learning tool. Battle Chess is a weak computer chess game, but has animated graphics and sounds that most kids really like (some of which may strike you as sexist or slightly violent). It has a CD-ROM version that includes an excellent tutorial/introduction. The Chessmaster series run on all sorts of video games and computers and are a great way for kids to practice. Adult (and more costly) programs become serious learning tools, including Fritz 2, Chessbase (a database program linked to an associated game-playing program called KnightStalker), Bookup (another type of database program that also has affiliated tutorial software). Maurice Ashley's CD and Chess Mentor are also interesting programs. I have not kept up on entry level software and books. Go slowly and talk to people who know what they're talking about (which is to say, not me).

Among novels, *Queen's Gambit* is a fascinating book about a fictional chess prodigy. Rent (or read) *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, which is about Josh Waitzkin, a real-life chess prodigy of recent vintage, with a cast of characters that includes many of the people you may come across in scholastic chess.

Max has been at it for five years now, and things have taken on a less frenzied veneer. I can actually do the crossword puzzle at tournaments and foresee a day when he'll get himself to and from chess events without a parent in tow. He plays less frequently and takes fewer lessons. His average game length is now between four and six hours, and his strength is probably around that of a reasonably strong adult duffer. I alternate between worrying whether he's working hard enough and worrying that he'll suddenly become so attentive to chess that he'll forget to study real things like Algebra or Biology. At a certain point (often referred to as Middle School) the schoolwork becomes more challenging and the amount of effort it takes a player rated 1500 or so to get better at chess becomes very time-consuming. Plus, the great academic side benefits of chess for other subjects diminish. You wind up studying stuff that's just more chess-specific and developing skills that are less generic. Parents start to worry that their seemingly normal chess player will sprout thick-lensed horn-rimmed glasses and sport a pocket protector while shunning normal human contacts. These things, however, don't seem to be the norm. Chess playing kids, even very serious ones, most frequently ease up on the compulsiveness and add on other interests. Max tells me that he figures he'll always play chess, even though he is pretty laid back about the game at the moment. Other kids who remain more deeply involved as they hit junior high and high school also seem to put it in perspective and develop other interests and a healthy connection to school subjects. I suspect it all ends where it began: ask the youngster what makes sense to him or to her. They tend to have a pretty good handle on what they want to do, and the value of chess is more or less directly linked to the degree to which they are motivated by it.