

The equation to success: experience + preparation = good tournament

Over the last year, I happened to be Chief Arbiter of a few events of a certain magnitude: the European Club Cup 2023 (722 players), the World Youth Championship 2023 (766 players), the Italian Youth Championship 2024 (1361 players) and the European Youth Championship 2024 (1231 players).

In such big events, with many players and big arbiters' teams involved, the Chief Arbiter's role is much different than in a smaller event with a few dozens of players and fewer than ten arbiters.

In small events, the Chief Arbiter has normally many duties including making the pairings, overviewing some boards and assign the colleagues to the remaining boards.

In events with huge numbers, this is not the case, the Chief Arbiters has rather a coordination role of the available resources and his duties are more rarely connected with particular games, albeit I have no problems to intervene on a board if I am there and the players need some assistance.

The significant difference also comes when we speak about the tournament preparation: here the two cases are dramatically unequal.

In a small tournament, we can serenely reduce the preparation to an arbiters' meeting in the playing hall before the start of the tournament but in the case of a big international event this will not work out.

Then, when I am appointed to be the Chief Arbiter of a big event, the more I prepare before the tournament, the less problems I will have.

The first thing I usually do is to communicate with the organisers, at least to establish a communication channel and arrange details about my arrival (which I always wish to be one-two days before the players) and departure.

Then I learn about the tournament regulations: hence, I look for the invitation letter and particular regulations and – why not – I read once more the Laws of Chess and relevant regulations of the body which approved the tournament (FIDE, ECU, a National Federation...).

If I cannot find them, I ask the person who appointed me to inform me where they are: I prefer to find them in the original location, so I know where I can also address others, rather than getting them emailed to me.

As a third thing, I try to figure out how many participants, arbiters and staff will be in the tournament. Here an effective communication with the organisers is crucial as they only know, or know how to estimate, the number of participants.

Having this information before the tournament starts is crucial to me to begin making some ideas about arbiters' assignments and how many people we would normally need.

The list of arbiters including their contacts is the next step.

Sometimes the organisers already have one or sometimes they ask my help to close it, sometimes we confront on how many people are needed: the earlier this dialogue takes place, the earlier we will have a complete arbiters' list, and I will be able to start a preparation.

When an arbiters' list is completed or very advanced, I contact the colleagues. This may happen several weeks before the tournament but my primary goal at this moment is to ensure I can communicate with them and get some basic information: what languages they can speak and when they plan to arrive at the tournament venue. This last piece of information is critical to plan the arbiters' meeting so that everyone could participate.

At this moment I still miss one information that the organisers can provide me: the tournament hall(s) setup. Before I arrive in the tournament venue, I always ask the organisers to provide me a map or a plan of the halls and how the tables will be arranged: doing so I can have a better idea about where I have to place the match arbiters, how to divide the sectors. I prefer to have this map before and not when I land in the tournament hall because if something must be changed, normally this cannot be done when I am there as it would be too late. Doing this in advance allows me to discuss the setup with the organisers and if we find that something can be improved, we still have time without having to destroy some work that was already done.

Disclaimer: this article is not meant to "teach" anything. Many excellent colleagues might have different ways of working and they all are good. I am narrating my experience with the hope this may give you some ideas how to manage your future tournaments or may give you some ideas of what you absolutely do not want to do: either way it will be a contribution.

ARBITERS CORNER

• Text by IA Marco Biagioli

I have now all the information I need to draft an especially important document: the arbiters' instructions.

This is a key moment of the preparation: I try to put in this document every detail on how I would like to have the job done in the tournament.

Sometimes, it is a long document, but I believe it is better to arrive at the arbiters' meeting with all ideas already fixed. Before sending it to the arbiters, I share it with the Deputies and if there are very experienced colleagues in the team, I also try to get their opinions. This review has to involve some local colleague, because he may inform me about some special local arrangements that may be important for our job.

When this document is finalised, I ship it to all the team members and at the same time I set up a WhatsApp group for the arbiters, to use for fast communication during the event (e-mails are often a slow way – especially when the tournament is running). At the same time, I work with the Deputies on how to assign the arbiters and with the person responsible for the Anti-Cheating to agree on the procedures.

As you may see, when I finally land in the tournament venue, I already have a clear picture in my mind and all the colleagues could familiarise themselves with the working system we will use. During all this process, the communication with the organisers and Deputies is very important: they can add some innovative idea that maybe I did not have or have some extra hint. But for this to work out the communication must be open and not just a request for a confirmation.

In general, if you prepared well the tournament and a major problem happens, it will be easier for you to solve it!



It had happened in the past that sometimes I had different opinions with the organisers or my Deputies but in such cases I was trying to figure out if my approach was right: in some cases, I had no problems in changing my position if a better idea was coming from them. The secret for a successful tournament is to work all together, not to "be right."

At the arbiters' meeting we will have to discuss some details and review our procedure but most of the colleagues will already know how we will work, what is left is mostly troubleshooting and details.

One last note I wish to dedicate on how I create the sectors: normally big arbiters' teams comprise experienced colleagues and new arbiters, local arbiters, and foreign ones.

My approach is always to put in each sector one experienced arbiter with a new one, and one local and one foreigner: I try to avoid sectors made only of local arbiters, irrespective of their experience, or only of foreigners; there is always, in fact, some local regulations or habit that we have to take care because when a tournament takes place in a particular Federation, local laws apply and the local players are normally the biggest number. Having an eye of what they can expect from the arbiters is also important.

In my experience, with this good preparation and with the experienced people placed in the critical positions, the tournaments run smoothly. Of course, you can still have some unprecedented issue or serious trouble, and you will have to face it with the main skills we want in a Chief Arbiter: experience, knowledge, and sound judgement.

In general, if you prepared well the tournament and a major problem happens, it will be easier for you to solve it because minor problems are managed properly, and you can fully concentrate on it. And if despite all the preparation we did and experience we have, something catastrophic happens and I do not see any solutions, I still have a secret weapon: I call Takis Nikolopoulos!

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