

Are Forbidden Pairings – Now Forbidden ?

The Swiss system entered our lives in order to avoid a situation of unpractical number of rounds compared to the Round Robin System. The Swiss pairings concept is actually not that new. It actually started back in 1895 in Zürich (hence the name Swiss System). The Swiss System was adopted by the chess world some time later with the first Chess Olympiad using it only in 1976. I remember the good old days in the early 1980's where we would conduct the pairings using cards.

When we started using computers and software, life became much easier. I remember a youth event I played in Saint Germain, France in 1983. French Organizers were using a computer to do the pairings. For us back then it was equivalent to science fiction. I remember the organizer was Patrick Gonneau, and even today, 41 years later, I view it as one of the best organized events I ever witnessed. Super organization with keen eye for details. For example, following a resumed games session (back then we still had that with the secret move) one of the mornings, they brought in the playing hall television and video to entertain us with a James Bond movie so we won't get bored. They also put all our names and pictures on cardboard slips and placed them on a huge billboard in accordance with each round standings.

When PC's massively entered our neck of the woods in the 1990's and pairings software came in place – our lives have become so much easier. You upload the results, click on the software and in a second you have the next round pairings, all million games, clear and simple. One second instead of sometimes an hour. The pairings software predominantly has all the algorithms in place "knowing" all the pairings regulations and priorities.

However, the Chief Arbiter may elect to intervene with the program and one of those interventions is an order called Forbidden Pairings.

A forbidden pairings order prevents specific player/s from being paired against other specific player/s. The forbidden pairings order supersedes the original algorithms of the software "forcing" it to alter the pairings in case those "forbidden" opponents are to be originally paired together.

There are various reasons for forbidden pairings. Most common are requests of family members not to be paired against each other. As CA I would often receive requests to conduct forbidden pairings and even if I had understanding and sympathy – I would always categorically refuse. I treat the pairings of Swiss Manager like an objective strong tool – not to be changed. It also avoids complications and potential distrust by participants. No Alterations – No Problems.

Another reason can be an intervention to pair a player with an opponent required for a norm. However, there is another sinister reason why Forbidden Pairings be requested and that is a political reason. A member of federation A refusing to be paired against any player member of federation B due to political reasons. It is unfortunate that we, the global society, still did not reach the Promised Land where every player can freely play any other player free of fear from sanctions/retaliations. Chess should be a level playing field open and free for all. Tournament organizers are, in many cases, in a tight spot when players from 2 or more federations with issues towards each other, wish to participate. For many decades The Forbidden Pairings had provided a solution to the obstacle. Not a perfect solution, far from it, but a way to allow everyone to participate. However, The Fide Qualification Committee had recently dealt a severe blow to the whole practice of Forbidden Pairings. I was recently assigned a case by my federation where in an international event this year, virtually all norm requests were denied because the CA had put in place a Forbidden Pairings order.

The Forbidden Pairings was in that case due to political reasons, but the QC, for several years have been rejecting any norm application derived from any event in which ANY Forbidden Pairings intervention was put in place. Even if the norm applicants were not involved in the matter. The CA in that event, unfortunately, was unaware of that. He was oblivious of the calamity this seemingly innocent Forbidden Pairings intervention would have on the tournament.

During the recent 2024 Budapest Olympiad. The last round in the women section paired Israel vs. Iran. Everyone knew that Iran will not even show up but if the pairings would have been changed it would have invalidated all Olympiad norms. So, unlike Olympiads in the past, the original pairing was left unchanged. Iran did not show up and Israel had won 4-0 by default.

Therefore, due to all the skirmishes and seemingly unclarities, I had decided to dedicate this article to shed light on the matter and alert organizers, pairing officers and players from the horrendous effect of any Forbidden Pairings order in norm bearing events, which has the catastrophic potential to destroy the tournament.

It should be noted that Forbidden Pairings do not disqualify tournaments – only norm applications.

I wish also to clarify that I do not have any qualms towards the QC. It is imperative to safeguard the integrity of pairings and norms. I would also humbly suggest that the respective norm regulations be rephrased and if Forbidden Pairings are outlawed, to state it clearly. The apparent crackdown in outlawing of Forbidden Pairings are expected now to be putting organizers in a quandary, how to currently address Forbidden Pairings requests ?

The motto of Gens Una Sumus shall again be challenged and only time will tell the outcome.