

Text by: Alexander Sokolski

Refereeing school competitions



The program „Chess in School” is becoming increasingly popular in many countries all over the world and Europe. Poland is one of those countries where the program is developing rapidly – the number of kids playing chess at school is very high.

In this article, I will present different aspects of organizing and refereeing large chess competitions. Those types of competitions are held in Poland every year at the final national level (in some years more than 1000 kids have participated), provincial level (sometimes more than a few hundred participants), and in many regions, towns and schools, where there is a smaller number of players, but the tournament has similar characteristics.

Chess competitions are challenging for the arbiter and organizer for several reasons. There are usually no large financial prizes and the pressure that comes with them. The difficulty however is connected to the presence of many players (also parents, teachers) who are taking part in such a “serious” event for the first time and need to get used to the new situation.

Planning for such an event needs to start very early. The presence of an experienced arbiter is important already at the stage of preparing the regulation. The registration guidelines need to be very precise and simple to understand for everyone. We also want to avoid accepting individual registrations. We should prepare appropriate forms (e.g. an Excel sheet) for school registrations beforehand. When planning the announcement, we also need to take into account the division into groups (e.g. by age or by grade), remember about relevant auxiliary scoring and team classifications.

It is also worth noting that if the number of participants is large, then the typical 7 rounds in an one-day event might be not enough to determine the winner (e.g. for over 128 players in a group). This kind of situation should be anticipated and certain provisions like play-offs should be included in the regulations.

The playing venue is an important factor of every tournament, in particular for a large one. It has to be large enough (e.g. a sports hall), with a separated area for supporters (stands). The setup of the playing area needs to be consulted beforehand with the technical staff of the hall. Each group must have a clearly designated area so that the players will not get confused when looking for their chess boards. It is also crucial to have sufficient boards to hang pairings and announcements etc. For a smooth running of the event, it is also important to ensure clear marking – visible signs at the beginning of the rows and large table numbers. Thanks to this we can avoid players taking wrong seats and also shorten (or increase, if the organization is not good) the time for all participants to find their chess boards by a few minutes per round. This can save a great amount of time during the entire tournament!

It is absolutely necessary to hold a briefing the entire arbiters team. Due to a mass character of the competition, the number of arbiters is very high (1 arbiter for approx. 20-30 players). Obviously not all arbiters will be experienced – in particular with kids. Also, not all will know the latest regulations. As chief arbiter I need to explain the most important organizational aspects, remind the most important chess rules, e.g. explain what an incorrect move is and what is not and pay special attention to common refereeing errors.

The task of the chief arbiter is also to ensure quick and smooth pairings. Very often I perform all pairings myself. Sometimes help from 1-2 pairings arbiters might be necessary, especially when the number of groups is high. It is mandatory to be proficient in the software used. During such a mass event it might be necessary to perform actions such as: adding a new participant after the first round, removing a player, changing data/rating of a player, sorting the start list, reinstating a previously withdrawn player, manual change of pairings (e.g. due to a player's mistake), correcting a wrongly entered score from the previous round etc.

Before the first round the arbiter should remind all participants about the most important rules at the tournament. This message should not be long – in order to keep the attention of the players it should not be more than a few critical sentences. It is important that the players will not be afraid to call the arbiter and file a complaint (it is not necessary to name it a complaint) and don't leave their chess boards before reporting the result of the game. Unreported games results are usually the most common reason for delays at school competitions. The primary responsibility of match arbiters is to collect all results from their sector – besides fair and understandable verdicts at the chess board.

The work of the chief arbiter does not end with the completion of the last game. Depending on the regulations, play-offs might be required (e.g. several players have finished with maximum points). Finally, only after the chief arbiter approves the standings, they are being passed to the organizer to quickly prepare the diplomas and the distribution of prizes. One also needs to be ready to quickly calculate the team classification, if the regulations provide so. Previously prepared excel sheets might be helpful, however everything needs to be thoroughly checked and tested beforehand. Those operations should not take long – a few or several minutes at most – as the entire hall is eagerly waiting for the closing ceremony.



I hope that I managed to present the most important challenges facing an arbiter at a school competition. Those types of events are undoubtedly very challenging – due to a high number of participants and groups, varying sport level, presence of unexperienced players, short duration of the competition and the high pressure of running the event quickly and smoothly. I am sure that school competitions are very important for our discipline, even if they don't present a high sport level. The increasing popularity of the chess game is largely attributed to school communities. Therefore, let's not be afraid to take initiatives at the school, local, regional or higher level. Let's do it professionally so the competition will be a joint celebration of chess!

Text by:
Alexander Sokolski,
member of the ECU
Arbiters Council