

Frequently Asked Questions About the Club

March 2006

I know how to play chess, but I'm not quite ready for tournament play. Would I be able to play casual, unrated games at your Club?

Definitely. You're welcome to visit us any Tuesday evening. The tournament doesn't start until 7:30, but the door is usually open by 6:15 for the weekly group class preceding it. Some members choose to by-pass the instruction, however, in favor of hanging out in the main playing room to "warm up" with some casual speed-chess, or to study, or to just discuss certain aspects of the game. So if you arrive early, your chances of getting a casual game with one of them are good. And occasionally you'll find a member who is not playing in the event, and will welcome some casual chess.

During tournament play, you might enjoy visiting the various games in progress and perhaps second-guessing the players (to yourself, of course) on their choice of moves. Participants often take a brief break from their own games to check out others, so you'll never be considered intruding. And who knows --- as you begin to realize that your choices are as good as theirs, you might try tournament play, yourself!

As games finish through the evening, people will move to the room next door to go over their games and watch others as they do the same. Some players, especially those who finished early, will be looking for a casual game to round off their evening, so there's another opportunity for you.

Why does there seem to be a great emphasis on tournament play at the Club?

By playing in the tournament, you focus your efforts on playing your best and improving your play. Almost everyone goes over their game with their opponent when they finish. This is a very important aspect of club play because:

- By doing this you learn from each other. You will discover that what you thought your opponent was thinking is often not what he really was thinking. This will change the way you think about your moves.
- Each week affords you the opportunity to make a new chess friend and meet others. Chess while certainly an individual competition can also be a very social activity.
- Higher rated players will often offer advice or you can ask for their opinion for critical points in your game. There is usually no shortage of advice from the many players going over their games or watching others as they go over theirs.

I think I might want to join the Club. Anything I need to know beforehand?

- Play is "USCF-rated," so you would have to join the USCF (United States Chess Federation) to participate. The USCF offers a number of membership types, too numerous to list here. To join the USCF you should be prepared to pay \$45, but it may be less.
- Club membership is \$30 a year for adults. If you are joining the USCF for the first time and joining the Club as well, we have an introductory offer that waves the entry fee for the first two months of play, saving you more than the Club membership fee! You can read more about this introductory offer on our web site.
- The Club opens at about 6:10, and we do our final match-making for that evening at 7:20, so the earlier you arrive, the more time we will have to discuss getting started and to familiarize you with the Club.
- The weekly group lesson starts about 6:15. You are welcome to audit the class in progress.

Do I need to bring my own equipment?

USCF guidelines require that we use only standard boards and pieces, so if you have a set, we recommend you bring it. Most players enjoy using their own equipment, but we do have several sets reserved for people to use while they're here. On the first Tuesday of each month we usually have a chess vendor on site, from whom you can buy a new set. We also might have a few sets on hand that we will sell at cost.

I'm not a USCF member yet. Can I sign up at the Club and start playing?

Yes, you can join the USCF at the Club and get started playing right away. If you come to the Club to join the USCF, we will offer you a special membership deal for the Club. You can read about this in more detail elsewhere on our site.

We recommend that people get that first game under their belt right away. On most Tuesdays we can get you started with a rated game. Finding you a game on the *last* Tuesday of the month might be more difficult, but stop by anyway, get your membership taken care of, and get any additional questions answered.

I've been playing chess on the internet. How is club play different?

Many people come to play at our Club after playing on the internet for some time, as they find internet play unfulfilling in many ways. Some of their observations on club play are:

- Play seems very slow, resulting in longer games; they're used to moving more quickly. (This puts them at a disadvantage though they usually do not understand or believe this.)
- Club competition is tougher. (What makes their opponents "tougher" is that they're taking more time to ponder their moves, thereby raising the quality of their play over that of internet opponents.)
- They are losing many games quickly, and feel like "this kind of chess" is not for them. (They often change their mind, though, once they become aware of what speedy internet play has done to their game.)

These players usually don't stay to go over their games, as do most of the new people and the rest of the Club players. That's unfortunate, because:

- They are missing out on the social aspect of playing at the Club, and of forming new friendships with people with whom they have at least one strong interest in common. They are missing out on one of the fastest ways to improve their game: by going over it with their opponent or a more highly rated player.
- By doing this, you learn. You will discover that what you thought your opponent was planning is often not what he/she really was planning. This will change the way you think about your moves, and it will boost your confidence as you realize your opponent didn't "see" all that you credited him/her with seeing.
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- Higher-rated players will often offer advice, or you can ask for their opinion on critical points in your game. There is usually no shortage of advice from the many players going over their games or watching others as they go over theirs.

Please visit the link on our web site "About the Club" for insight about the benefits of club play and playing at our Club, in particular.

What advice would you give people who are about to play their first rated game?

We can boil it down to three pieces of advice:

- Play the board, not the person.
 - The person across from you might be an 8-year-old, or someone who looks too old to even think clearly, but the 8-year-old might be the State 3rd Grade Champion, and the doddering old man might be the professional chess instructor whose private lessons have made the 8-year-old what she is today.
 - On the other hand, both the younger and older person may have just started playing a few months ago.

All you should be concerned with is making the best possible response you can to your opponent's every move.

- Forget about the game clock. Don't worry about losing on time until you have only about 10 minutes left.

The #1 problem newcomers have, especially if they play on the internet, is not taking the time to find the absolute best move, every move. Points to consider:

- Unless you are already a very strong player, it is likely that you will lose most of your games because you've rushed your moves. There is a simple test to know if you are not taking enough time: If your opponent's last move shows you that yours was a mistake, then you moved way too fast. Clearly, you didn't consider your opponent's options thoroughly enough.
- Be prepared to lose your first 10-15 games.

It takes time and effort to get into competitive shape. Some important points to consider:

- People, who play regularly, especially those who play in tournaments, learn to reduce the number of blunders they make.
- Chess is a game of pattern recognition. The more you play, the more patterns you learn to recognize.
- There are lots of factors that go into how you play, one of which is fatigue.
 - It's not easy to grind out a solution to a tough chess problem after a full work day.
 - You may not be used to pondering your next move at length, or waiting patiently while your opponent spends 10 to 15 minutes on his/her move several consecutive times.
 - You may not be used to concentrating for several hours in a row.
 - You may discover that you need to eat something to keep your blood sugar high enough to get you through the game.

The chess lessons seem to cater to more advanced players. Are there any plans to offer classes for newer players?

The classes are actually geared for players under 1500, which is the middle of the rating range. Most of the people who attend the classes regularly are in the lowermost third of the Club, which includes people who have no rating yet. Even if most of the material is over your head, you will generally come away with some valuable knowledge.

If I do enter a tournament without a rating, how am I paired up?

The rules for pairings dictate that unrated players shall not be paired against other unrated players unless absolutely necessary. Basically, as an unrated player in a Swiss-style event, which is the protocol we follow, an unrated player will, with some exceptions, play the lowest rated player available. It is the nature of the pairing system that if you win a game, you will generally play a tougher opponent next time. If you lose a game, you will generally play an easier opponent the following week. This tends to zero you in on playing someone at your own current level of ability.

Once I've decided to play at the Club, can I join the tournament in progress or do I have to wait until the start of the next one?

You can join the monthly tournament in progress any week except the last one. There is no good reason to wait until the start of a new one. Do not be concerned with "messing things up." The way we arrange matches takes into account players joining after the start of the tournament.

Does the tournament have any safeguards in place so that I don't run up against a really good player?

Yes. The tournament is divided into "sections." A section is a collection of players whose playing strength are similar. This ensures that you will be matched only with players who are, theoretically, fairly close to you in ability.

How do I know which section to sign up for?

Unless you feel you are a very strong player we highly recommend that you start in the lowest section. Here are some important points:

- As an "unrated" player, the rules on how we match you are designed to pit you against players of similar strength. The first 25 rated games you play are used to determine what your playing strength is, which is calculated by a special formula.
- Based on much experience watching new players go through this process, we recommend that for your first 15 games or so, you don't aspire to play tougher opponents.
- It takes time to become used to tournament play, so you are at a bit of a disadvantage compared to others who have been playing at the Club longer than you.
- Your rating will adjust more accurately to where it should be if you have more wins than losses.
- Once you've completed the provisional period, it will be much harder to move your rating up than it will be to have it go down.

I have never played over-the-board serious chess, and have no idea what my rating is. I am in the USCF, but have no rating. I'm in the 1200-1400 level in blitz on-line, but play so infrequently that it is not yet consistent, and this is after less than 10 games, and I am guessing, very unofficial. Is it possible to get a rating by playing at the Club?

All our regular events are rated events. By playing in them you will get a rating. Ratings are calculated by the "provisional rating" formula until you play 25 games, and then by the normal system for games after that.

"Do rated players view playing unrated players as a waste of their time?"

It depends on a few things. Most players want a competitive game. Many of our players are making a considerable effort to play regularly on Tuesday evenings at the Club. If you choose to play in the sections with the more advanced players, and you yourself are not at that level of play, the chances are your opponent will be disappointed and wonder what you think you are doing. If you play in the lowest section, the chances are your opponent is going to be more concerned about how good you are. Unless you have extensive chess experience, we recommend that everyone ease into rated play by entering the lowest section.

I see that your monthly events revolve around playing each week. My job requires a lot of travel and I have two little kids, so I'm thinking, if I can get there twice a month, I'll be doing OK. Is it possible to just show up and find someone to play?

Almost everybody participates in the monthly event. A few people who may not be playing that month might stop by to watch for a while, but your best shot at a casual game will be with players who remain around after they've reviewed their games with their opponents.

Please see the next question and answer for more thoughts about this topic.

I am interested in joining, but I already know that I will not be able to attend every week. Would Club members consider this disruptive in any way?

Many players have trouble making it every week in a given month (tournament). We encourage them to play anyway, for the following reasons:

- There is no real disruption to the flow of the event when people take a "bye," because:
 - In any given week there may be as many as 15 people who are planning on not playing that night.
 - We use a computer to pair, so we just tell it who's not playing that week, and it arranges the matches accordingly.
 - People don't really care whom they are playing; they just want a good game.
 - Pairing is done by what is called the Swiss System, in which there's no elimination; you play someone in the same point pool as you, so it could be one of 10 or so people you would be paired with.
- It costs \$30 a year to join the Club, and you get \$5 off each event, which is always the equivalent of one round. Thus, if we assume for the moment all months are 4 weeks, you are only paying for 3 nights. So, if you miss two nights you've paid an average of \$7.50 a game instead of the \$5 a game if you had made all four rounds. If that extra \$2.50 you are kind of wasting doesn't bother you, you have the benefit of knowing that you effectively have a reserved spot to play any Tuesday that month that you can make it.

Employment and other commitments make it difficult for some of us to play on the same day, week in and week out. But if you look at it with the "reserved" point of view, as we do, you will probably manage to get in at least two games a month, all when it is convenient for you to play.