



GUIDE TO A SUCCESSFUL CHESS CLUB

A US CHESS PUBLICATION | PREPARED BY THE US CHESS CLUBS COMMITTEE

This publication shows how to organize and manage a club, no matter the size or geographic location. It presents a pathway for starting a club, it will help a struggling club, and it will improve a currently healthy club.

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Introduction

This *Guide to a Successful Chess Club* is written for anyone who organizes and manages a club, no matter the size or geographical location. It is assumed that the club is open to all (for information on running a scholastic chess club, click here for [A Guide to Scholastic Chess](#)). If you are new to chess and need a glossary for many of the terms used in this document, [click here](#).

A chess club is the center of organized chess. Clubs provide players an opportunity to play casually, socialize, and participate in tournaments (both rated and unrated).

This *Guide* will:

- Present a pathway to starting a club;
- Help a struggling club;
- Improve a currently healthy club.

It is designed to be a living document that grows as chess, ideas, and technology evolve. Please share your [successful ideas with us](#) so that others may benefit from your experience.

Successful club organizers will certainly need some technical knowledge and energy, but don't make the mistake of thinking that you need to have expert chess knowledge. Desire and determination will take you far down the path to success.

Chapter 1: What Is a Chess Club?

Clubs and players

A chess club is a social, informational, instructional, or competitive meeting place where people come together through chess. A club can offer a wide variety of activities, including instruction, rated games, simuls, lectures, and recreational play. Every member is important to the success of the club, and the chess club cannot exist without active participation from both the organizers and players.

Clubs and larger organizations

The local chess club is an important link between the player and other organizations, such as state affiliates and our national chess organization, the [US Chess Federation](#) (US Chess). A club introduces members to the fun and benefits of playing chess and can provide exposure to the wider world of competitive chess.

To learn how to become an affiliate and about the numerous advantages of being affiliated with US Chess, please [see Chapter 3](#).

Should you start a chess club?

Yes! It's not at all necessary for you to be a skilled player or to have prior experience as a Tournament Director. The US Chess Clubs Committee is preparing a mentorship program and other support systems to give help chess club directors. If you have any questions or need help, please contact our US Chess staff liaison to the Clubs Committee, Dan Lucas at dlucas@uschess.org

Chapter 2: Getting Ready to Start a Chess Club

First decide how formal or informal you want the club to be. It can be a “meet-up” style location or have a fixed, dedicated presence. Either way, the business of how to start and operate a successful club is the same. Before proceeding, some questions to ask yourself are:

- Who is your target?
- What will you offer?
- Where will you meet?
- When will you meet?
- How will you lead?

You don't need to have all the answers to get started; just acting is the most important first step. Further, the answers will likely change as the club develops and grows. Planning is important, but so is flexibility and openness to change and growth. Above all, the highest priority for your club should be to make sure members are having fun.

Who is your target?

When establishing the club, define your target player: beginners, experienced, students, or seniors? The time and place of your meetings will affect who can attend. While it is important that the club cater to a core audience, efforts should be made to make the club accessible to all with an interest in the game.

What will you offer?

Identify the needs and demands of your community and begin building around that. Surveys, in-person discussions, and email solicitations are all practical ways to accomplish this.

Create a tentative schedule of events to get your community accustomed to consistency and to plan for future events. Most clubs prefer to offer a variety of activities such as tournaments, instruction, simuls, and casual play. Experimenting with these events and soliciting ongoing feedback in the early months will allow you and your members to determine what works best at your club and facilitate long-term planning.

Your reason for starting a chess club and why people will want to join it are very important; this rationale will guide every other action. Everyone has different reasons for coming to a chess club. It is essential to understand this, and it is a key to successfully converting them to regular attendees.

Where will you meet?

Finding a location will need to be one of your initial actions as only then can you implement the other steps. Schools, libraries, churches, or recreation centers sometimes have free or inexpensive space available. Private business such as restaurants, bookstores, and coffee shops are often glad to help, especially if you plan to meet during a slow day or time for them. Ideally, the space will be free of other distractions and will be available to you long term. Keep your eyes and ears open and use your imagination. Rental fees and available hours must be considered, and free locations sometimes have restrictions on how your club is financed.

When will you meet?

The answer to this apparently simple question will have a major effect on the success of your club. Clubs that cater to primarily scholastic and collegiate members might find that an afternoon or after-classes meeting time is the most convenient, but many who have jobs will not be able to attend until the evening.

Don't forget to consider your potential members' other activities and transportation issues. In a location where cars are the primary transportation, rush hours will be problematical. In regions with public transportation, make sure you understand those schedules. For these reasons, two hours should be the minimum session time, and up to five hours (or more) will be needed if you're aspiring to offer rated chess tournaments. Pragmatism is key.

How will you lead?

Be friendly. Treat your club members as you would guests in your home. Greet them, introduce them, and make them feel welcome. Providing excellent customer service will be the most important part of your success. Be responsive to inquiries to show potential and current members that you are serious and engaged.

While the overhead costs need not be very expensive, you still must plan ahead for future event rentals and to have the equipment and supplies needed.

Now that you've answered these questions, you're ready to start your club. It will be work, but it will be worth it!

Chapter 3: How to Become a US Chess Affiliate

Starting a US Chess affiliate

Becoming a US Chess affiliate should be one of your club's initial steps. The fee is modest, the paperwork minimal, and the benefits numerous. [Click here for the application.](#)

Here is the procedure and the information that you will need to provide:

1. Select your membership type; most commonly this will be "Regular US Chess Club Affiliation";
2. Choose "New" in the details box;
3. Give your affiliate's name, address, and your contact information and click on the button accepting the affiliate responsibilities;
4. Click "Add this item to your shopping cart," then pay for the affiliate membership.

Advantages of being an affiliate

Becoming a US Chess Affiliate offers many benefits to help your club grow and succeed including:

- A monthly subscription to *Chess Life* and the bi-monthly *Chess Life Kids*;
- Commissions on some memberships you sell through your affiliate;
- Access to online rating supplements.

As an Affiliate you can:

- Submit your tournament reports for rating;
- Run US Chess rated tournaments which may include certain US Chess National Championships that are bid out to third party organizers;
- Run [Junior Tournament Program \(JTP\)](#) events for players in grade 3 or below (US Chess membership not required; scholastic affiliates owned by an accredited K-12 educational program can also run in-school K-12 JTP events for their students in grade 12 and below);
- Participate in our [Membership Appreciation Program \(MAP\)](#) to win prizes;
- Purchase email address lists to send blasts to notify US Chess members of your events;
- Purchase mailing labels to notify members of your events via postal mail;
- Purchase tournament life announcements (TLAs) to advertise your events in *Chess Life* and/or *Chess Life Kids*;
- Utilize the US Chess online TLA program to advertise your [tournaments on the US Chess website](#) for free;
- Advertise your tournaments with a display ad in *Chess Life* at discounted rates.

Chapter 4: Getting Off to a Good Start

The first few meetings

Everyone is nervous at the start of a journey and your new members are apt to be as well. Be as friendly and relaxed as you can and try to be flexible about your plans; your program should adapt to the needs of the people who actually show up.

Remember these important tips:

- Information is king: Provide a sign-up list. State clearly that the email and phone numbers will only be used for chess information. Make sure you assemble a database of contact information so that you can provide a regular communications campaign with club participants.
- Find out what chess activities interest your community the most.
- Play friendly chess games in the first meeting; only bring up rated games later. Use this initial meeting to learn about the people attending and why they are there.
- Welcome all players—especially newcomers and guests.
- Be open and transparent regarding costs and all money issues such as tournament entry fees and the cost of US Chess membership.
- Include your name, email, and phone number on all handouts and business cards.
- Above all: Treat everyone with dignity and respect!

Supplies

Some items that you will need for the club include:

- **Chess boards and sets:** You'll need plenty of [chess boards and sets](#). Make sure you get standard tournament equipment; this will save you time and money when you start your own tournaments.
- **Score sheets:** Many club players like to keep a record of games, even casual ones. You can make your own scoresheets. [US Chess Sales](#) sells both preprinted and carbonless scoresheets.
- **Clocks:** There are a wide variety of [clocks and manufacturers](#). Be aware that most tournaments now have a time control with a delay or increment, so make sure you purchase digital clocks with these features.
- **Tournament supplies:** You'll probably run tournaments of some sort, and this will involve wall charts, pairing sheets, scoresheets, and so forth. [US Chess Sales sells a TD kit](#) which includes some of these items. Chess software can automate pairings, wall charts, pairing sheets, and other printing requirements, so investing in tournament software like [SwissSys](#) or [WinTD](#) is an excellent long-term strategy. You can purchase either for less than \$100, and as you grow you will have the technology ready to scale.

- **Additional Supplies:** A few inexpensive [beginners' books](#) will provide new members with a way to study and learn between club meetings. A [demonstration board](#) is indispensable for holding group lectures.

Publicity

Throughout your club's existence, publicity will be an important consideration. For a club to be popular and well attended, people must know about it and ongoing activities. Strategies include:

- **Flyers:** Software you probably already have such as Microsoft Word include templates you can use to create a striking flyer. Distribute your flyers in local libraries, senior centers, and recreation halls or other venues your target audience may frequent.
- **Website:** A club website is an important way to help people learn about your activities and to archive club information. Pick a website name that is easy to remember.
- **Social Media:** An active social media presence is key to communicating to the masses, so wherever possible, try to maximize impact with this relatively inexpensive means of communication. It is generally a good idea to have a club Facebook page and a communications tool such as Constant Contact.
- **Magazines:** Club information can be included with your TLAs in *Chess Life* and *Chess Life Kids*.

Organizational structure

Some clubs depend on one or two people to do everything, but this is generally an unfair and ineffective distribution of work. Try your best to enlist members to help. The following suggested titles cover the minimal functions for club officers, though two or more are sometimes performed by one person, especially during the startup phase (and duties can of course be mixed and shared):

- **President:** This position oversees the club's functioning, resolves disputes, and is ready to take over for any other officer who is absent or negligent.
- **Treasurer:** This position collects dues, pays bills, and keeps financial records. Often, this position also keeps the club roster, which includes phone numbers, email addresses, and membership status.
- **Activity/Tournament Director:** This position plans and oversees events and makes sure they run smoothly.
- **Secretary:** This position records the official proceedings of the club, including tournament results and corresponds with other organizations. This person can also act as social media promoter.

Chapter 5: Keeping the Club Going

Building a base

Creating a regular schedule of events and meetings will create predictability for your members, which will translate into attendance. Here are some ways to establish good communications in the beginning stages.

Club newsletter

This simple tool can be a key to your club's success. In its simplest form, your newsletter or bulletin is a listing of upcoming events—a chess calendar for your members. You may want to include items such as chess news and weekend tournaments in the area. Report on recent events—everything from tournament details to club members' results.

The next step toward a great club newsletter is at the center of all chess journalism: games. It often works well to have members select their own games for inclusion; if possible have them include brief annotations. By annotating games, players will improve their chess as they try to explain their thinking.

Include stories about chess history or the local scene, news from around the country and the world, problems and puzzles, photos and cartoons, or anything else your imagination and energy might suggest. The [Chess Journalists of America](#) can be a good resource to learn about what works.

Make sure that all members and potential members get a copy. Putting copies on a table might not be enough as some people may be absent that night. Emailing the newsletter is the best and cheapest way to distribute.

Make players feel welcome

Chess clubs succeed when they have a warm, friendly atmosphere. Your members and all visitors should feel at home at the club.

Chapter 6: The Established Club - Building on Your Base

Once a club has been established, the main task is to keep it alive and active. This chapter will outline some proven methods to accomplish this.

Club tournaments

Many clubs find that regular tournaments form the backbone of their activities. The typical structure is one round a week for a specified time (often one month) and then a new tournament immediately follows. Recently, one-night “Quick Chess” tournaments have been growing in popularity. (The time controls in a Quick Chess tournament are 10 minutes through 29 minutes per player. Sudden Death rules are used in Quick Chess events except score keeping is not required.) These events are easy to run and are fun for everybody. You will have to experiment to find the best format for your players.

Weekend-long tournaments

This is the next step for a chess club. These one-to-three days events require more planning, but most of your concerns will be similar to those you encounter in planning a club tournament. For club events, you can be flexible; for example, you can determine your prizes after you see how many have entered. For these longer events you should either guarantee the prizes (the ideal approach) or offer a realistic estimate of prizes based on the number of entries expected.

You should plan six months to a year before the event. The first step is to check with a [US Chess regional clearinghouse](#) and your [state affiliate’s website](#). Try to avoid competing with other events so that you can maximize attendance. Once you have determined and reserved a tournament site, publicity is another major issue. Publicity is much more important for weekend tournaments, especially via a TLA.

The tournament director (TD)

If your event is to be sanctioned and rated by the US Chess (rated events are the most popular), your TD must be certified. This will also create a sense of professionalism within the club.

The first level of certification is “Club Director.” The candidate simply signs a form stating that he or she has read the [US Chess Federation’s Official Rules of Chess](#) and understands the rules and promises to uphold them as fairly as possible.

Obtaining the first level of certification can be done by [submitting this form](#). Higher levels of certification require experience and test-taking. More information on this [can be found here](#).

Registration

A smooth registration process is essential to a successful tournament, whether club or open. One way to help speed up registration is to provide advanced and online registrations. As in all other things, planning and teamwork are important.

Advanced registrations are helpful as you can handle them as you have time. ***It is the tournament organizer's responsibility to verify all US Chess ID numbers, expiration dates and ratings.*** Players will usually provide accurate information, but you still must check to eliminate possible problems. Fundamentally, you want to obtain a player's name, address, phone number, and email address.

You can check a player's [US Chess membership online](#) or via a downloadable database which integrates right into your chess tournament software. You can also print the current *Ratings Supplement*, available from the [member's only section of the US Chess website](#). Players don't necessarily have to show you their US Chess membership card but it can speed up registration. Direct arriving players who registered early to check the wall chart to find possible problems early and help you get started on time.

TD's checklist

This checklist will help you enjoy a smooth tournament. Experienced TDs arrive at the tournament site with a case that includes the following items:

- The [US Chess Federation's Official Rules of Chess](#), latest edition;
- Laptop with functional chess software and the newest rating supplement database;
- Printer to print standings, pairings, etc.;
- US Chess and State affiliate membership application forms;
- Scoresheets;
- Pens/pencils/markers;
- Blue tape (for posting that does not damage the wallpaper);
- Cash for making change;
- Chess clocks;
- Boards and pieces;
- Board numbers;
- Extra paper;
- Clearly worded announcements for cellphone policy and other tournament specific rules and guidelines—ideally this can be laminated and reused;
- Copies of the tournament's ad (for round times, prizes, etc.);
- Fliers for your next event;
- Trophies if needed.

And don't forget!

Here are some other ideas for club events: monthly [simuls](#), one-round-a-week marathons, blitz/quick/bughouse evening events, special guest lectures, and [puzzle solving competitions](#).

Congratulations on your new club!

You now have the necessary guidance to start or improve a chess club. The goal should always be to promote chess and the power of chess to positively impact the lives of others; keep in mind the US Chess mission statement: Empower people, enrich lives, and enhance communities through chess.

Whether you consider chess a social /recreational activity, a competitive sport, or a tool that enhances critical thinking and social/emotional skills, the club is a vital part of providing a space for people to gather and participate in chess. You have an important role, you have the resources to begin, and the US Chess Clubs Committee is here to help. [We look forward to seeing your club listed here!](#)

The US Chess Clubs Committee has created this Guide by updating the 1998 Guide to a Successful Chess Club booklet. We gratefully acknowledge similar past efforts. Thank you to the US Chess board members, volunteers, and staff that contributed their time, talent, experience, and wisdom.

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