

THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAYER IN A SCHOOL CHESS TOURNAMENT IS THE ONE WHO SCORES LEAST!

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A personal anecdote

It is the qualifying tournament for Chess-Four (Schack4an) in Lund, a town in the southern part of Sweden. Six hundred ten year old children are waiting expectantly for the results to be announced and the prize giving to get under way. As tournament director and master of ceremonies I can almost hear the silence that has spread throughout the playing hall. I begin from the bottom of the list with the school that finished last in the tournament.

”In place 25 with one hundred and eighty six points, we have (name of school)!”

What happens now is magic. The children of that school class erupt in joyous exultation. Notwithstanding being at the bottom of the list they feel like winners. They have after all accumulated a grand total of one hundred and eighty six points.

As the children come towards me to receive their medals I get a sense of déjà vu and recall one of my own first tournaments at the tender age of seven. Back then the child who finished last was awarded a consolation prize of nine oranges each of which symbolized nine zero points for all the games not won but lost. Despite receiving nine oranges I could see how crest-fallen and embarrassed that child felt. There is a huge difference between feeling like a winner and feeling like a loser. That was the last time I ever saw that child play in a chess tournament!

These two situations symbolize the importance of retaining a perspective that emphasizes what chess can do for schools, rather than what schools can do for chess. Chess in Schools Sweden calls it “The-outside-and-in-perspective”. Bearing this in mind we endeavor to find formulae for competitions that make it possible for children to enjoy chess tournaments regardless of their skills and regardless of what place they might attain in a tournament.

The Chess-Four concept

Of the various projects Chess in Schools Sweden is responsible for the Chess-Four concept is still flourishing after 35 years.

Chess-Four started as far back as 1979. It was a small project in a district of Sweden. Since then it has grown over the years reaching nationwide status by 2006. Chess-Four is a national tournament for children in the fourth class of Swedish primary schools competing by class. Today 22 000 ten year olds are taught to play chess every year. This is mainly done on an idealist basis and in collaboration with schools. Competent chess instructors volunteer to teach children to play chess for one hour, and as an inducement offer children the possibility to participate in what we like to call the largest chess tournament in the world.

Each year we meet almost one fourth of the entire population of ten year olds. In the actual tournament itself we have more than 12 000 ten year olds participating. Even though class pupils play individual tournaments the individual points are accumulated as points for the class, and the class competes as an entity with other classes.

With this concept we foster a climate of inclusivity engendering a spirit of one for all and all for one. Each child should know and feel that their own unique contribution, however small it might be, is a decisive factor in the total number of points accumulated by the class as a whole. The class who wins a tournament will celebrate together. The class who may not have reached their desired goals can bear their disappointment collectively and no individual child will feel like a loser. ¹

The-outside-and-in-perspective in a school chess tournament

Chess in Schools Sweden has developed a concept for school chess tournaments based largely on the experience accumulated over the years within the Chess-Four projects. The most important reform as opposed to traditional chess tournaments is that we use the 3-2-1 system for scoring game points.

The 3-2-1 system means that in a game a win scores 3 points, a draw 2 points and a loss 1 point. This scoring system is no less fair than the traditional scoring system but offers some distinct positive spin-offs.

¹ Please read more about Chess-Four (Schack4an) on <http://cis.fide.com/en/reports/131-sweden-schack4an-never-forget-anna>

1. David Bronstein was one of the pioneers for the 3-2-1 point system says, “no children want to come home and say that they received zero points” and the psychological benefit for every participant in a tournament to be able to score points is huge. They can feel closer to the top than they actually are (which can motivate them to train harder) and at prize giving can avoid being mocked with consolatory oranges for getting zero points.
2. Another even more important element is that children are awarded points according to their level of participation in tournaments within a class. Let us say that you have a tournament running throughout term in a class. The child who puts in a lot of effort and plays a lot of games will always be rewarded with points, irrespective of the results of these games. In this way a child can through hard work and dedication accumulate points to equal the scores of more skillful players who win more often but play less often.
3. It is easy to arrange a competitive combination of playing and training, for example game score points can be added to points scored for solving chess problems.
4. In Chess-Four the point system makes every child important, because even if they lose their games they still contribute to the success of the class. The result is calculated by putting together all the points the children in the class earn (for the sake of equitability a coefficient is employed that adjusts the differences between classes of different sizes).² If a pupil does not participate the pupil scores no points for the class, but if he or she is persuaded to play the pupil will score at least one point per round, which can make all the difference for the class reaching a higher placement. Many pedagogues associated with the Chess-Four projects have noticed that more skillful players will spontaneously encourage and coach less skillful players in their class. This interdependency fosters a spirit of co-operation and helpfulness as each player is vital to the success of the whole class. The 3-2-1 system is the motivating factor behind this.

² Can bigger classes accumulate more points than smaller classes in Chess-Four? In order to counteract anomalies and unbalanced allocation of points to classes of different sizes Chess-Four has devised a system for a fair and equitable allocation of class points which facilitates comparability between classes. The class that registers with Chess-Four reports the number of pupils in that class. A percentage is calculated based on the number of pupils from that class who actually turn up at the tournament. After each round we multiply the points that the class has won with a coefficient based on how big the class is and the percentage of actual participants from that class. This makes it possible for classes of different sizes to compete on equal terms.

Apart from the 3-2-1 system Chess in Schools Sweden uses other methods to ensure that all the children can enjoy a positive experience while participating in chess tournaments. Tournaments are arranged with fun-filled side events and the focus is not solely on competition. All participants receive a medal. At the same time it is of course a serious tournament. The best classes have practiced a lot, and many of the pupils are good chess players. However to have the best chance of reaching the top each class must endeavor to get the whole class participating.

Finally, it is time to reveal the secret why the class that came in last place in Lund exulted.

Chess-Four consists of three levels, a town qualifier, a district qualifier and lastly the national final. In a town qualifier the classes participating need to reach a certain sum of points to go through to the next level, and not a specific placement. This sum of points can be reached if the majority of the children in a class participate (mostly tournaments are held outside of school time), as the losers also contribute with points. Class pupils are motivated to strive together towards a common goal rather than divisively compete with each other. In the tournament in Lund the sum needed to reach next level was 160 points, and as the children realized that they had qualified, they exulted.

Summary

In this article some of the experiences of Chess in Schools Sweden are presented. We have identified the importance of retaining a perspective that emphasizes what chess can do for schools, rather than what schools can do for chess. Bearing that in mind we endeavor to find formulae for competitions that make it possible for children to enjoy chess tournaments regardless of their skills and regardless of what place they might attain in a tournament. The system we recommend for scoring game points is the 3-2-1 system.