

OCA League Rules: Guidance for Clubs and Captains

(Issued on behalf of the OCA Committee; revised September 2021)

Introduction

Experience suggests that certain OCA League rules and some of the FIDE Laws are not always well understood, and that a measure of guidance on applying them would be helpful to clubs, team captains, and players. Hence this document, produced on behalf of the OCA Committee in accordance with Article 4.1 of the Association's Constitution. It contains information and guidance intended to clarify the interpretation and operation of the League Rules, and especially to help clubs and team captains fulfil their responsibilities to maintain and promote fairness and good practice in applying them. The Committee may amend or add to this guidance as it sees fit in the light of further experience and/or rule changes.

Fair Play

Remembering that the primary purpose of the OCA is to promote chess locally, clubs and captains will also realize that they have a responsibility not merely to obey the rules but also to abide by the spirit of fair play. (See Article 4.1 of the Constitution.) The Association recognizes that no set of rules can cover every eventuality, and clubs and captains are therefore asked to act in accordance with the clear intention and spirit of the rules rather than to seek out and exploit any possible 'loopholes' in the letter of the rules.

The OCA Rules and the Captain's Role

The Association's rules impinge specifically on team captains in two main ways that can from time to time cause difficulty or dispute. The first relates to team selection. The second relates to the fact that, in the absence of arbiters, the captains are expected to take on those aspects of an arbiter's function which circumstances make it practical for them to perform, in cooperation or (where appropriate) individually (see Rule 7.11.7), including resolution of disputes and enforcement of the FIDE Laws of Chess and the Association's rules as required. Captains should therefore familiarize themselves with the FIDE Laws of Chess, as well as with the OCA League Rules, including the *exceptions* to the FIDE Laws which are specified in Rule 7.11 of the League Rules.

Clubs are strongly urged to ensure that up-to-date copies of the FIDE Laws of Chess and the OCA League Rules (as well as this guidance document) are always available at home matches, and team captains are encouraged to keep their own copies of these documents with them at matches for easy reference when required. The OCA League Rules, etc., are readily available from the 'Admin Documents' section of the OCA website. The FIDE Laws of Chess can be found at

<https://handbook.fide.com/chapter/E012018>

Clubs and team captains may also find it helpful to consult an annotated version of the FIDE Laws produced by the Chess Arbiters' Association, which can be found via

<http://chessarbitersassociation.co.uk/html/laws.html>

by clicking first on 'Laws' in the sidebar and then on 'CAA Interpretations'.

Team Selection and Eligibility

The main intention of the rules on ‘starring’ players (2.3) is to ensure fairness in team selection. The further rules on the eligibility of players to play for the different teams within a club (2.4) promote the same intention by (i) trying to ensure that larger clubs with several teams don’t unfairly switch strong players around their teams or play stronger players down in lower teams to obtain an unfair competitive advantage, while (ii) enabling weaker players to help out higher teams by ‘playing up’ without arbitrarily incurring penalties.

In the light of this clear intention, the Association expects that team captains (in complying with League Rule 2.3) will normally ‘star’ the four strongest regular players in their squad unless there is good reason not to. Failure to star higher-rated players who are known to be very likely to play regularly throughout the season (and then playing those unstarred players in lower teams) is one clear example of a way in which a club might seek to manipulate the rules unfairly. Another would be a sudden influx of higher-rated players just before the end of the season for a crucial match or matches.

The Association has no intention of unduly limiting the freedom of clubs and captains. The Committee recognizes that there can be many legitimate exceptions to the norm: for example, in a club with more than one match night, there may be strong players who would find it impossible or inconvenient to play on the night on which the strongest team plays; again, a parent who is a relatively strong player may reasonably choose to play in a lower division team in which his or her child plays; and so forth. And while clubs and captains are reminded of the responsibility of the Committee (made explicit in Article 4.1 of the OCA Constitution) for enforcing discipline where necessary by imposing appropriate sanctions for serious or persistent offences against the rules of the Association or against the spirit of fair play, this need not arise if clubs and captains take care to act in that spirit. *If captains are unsure about whether a decision or practice will be viewed as unfair, they are welcome to approach the Secretary or Chairman of the Association for guidance on the issue.*

In exceptional circumstances matches may be played with a reduced number of boards; typically this arises if players drop out at short notice owing to illness or other pressing reasons. This may occur only if both Captains agree, and they should both inform the League Secretary of the reasons behind the decision. If fewer than four boards remain, a postponement should be sought.

Match Rules

The first point to remember is that all games will be conducted in accordance with the FIDE Laws of Chess *unless otherwise specified* in the OCA League Rules (Rule 7.11). The exceptions, which override the FIDE Laws, are collected together in the subsections of Rule 7.11. Captains should be thoroughly familiar with these exceptions, and should try to ensure that their players are sufficiently aware of them, too.

A. FIDE Laws of Chess: exceptions in the OCA

The exceptions specified in 7.11.1-5 refer to Laws which, however suitable for FIDE events, are excessively rigid or otherwise regarded as inappropriate for the OCA League. Although their rationale and meaning are for the most part self-explanatory, some comments on certain of the exceptions may be helpful.

(i) Mobile phones.

Rule 7.11.2 reflects the fact that the FIDE rules on mobile phones have widely been recognized at local league level as imposing a somewhat draconian penalty in an environment in which cheating is highly unlikely and players play primarily for enjoyment. Clearly, however, if during a league match a player is caught using a mobile phone or other electronic means of communication to cheat (e.g. by accessing programs such as Fritz or Rybka, or phoning third parties for advice) that player's opponent will immediately be awarded a win, and the episode and circumstances reported to the Committee, who will consider whether any further action is required.

(ii) Recording of moves

Although the FIDE Laws (Article 8.1.1) require that algebraic notation be used, the Association believes it would be unreasonable to insist on this for players in the OCA League who have been using descriptive notation throughout their chessplaying lives. Rule 7.11.3 permits English descriptive notation (and only this notation) to be used as an alternative. As a corollary of this, English descriptive notation (notwithstanding Appendix C of the FIDE Laws) may also be used to provide evidence in cases where normally the scoresheet of a player is used for that purpose. For the avoidance of doubt, when the Rule speaks of "a recognized form of algebraic notation", the intention is to indicate that algebraic notation in languages other than English is acceptable.

(iii) Recording draw offers

The Association also takes the view that in the OCA League it is not necessary to follow FIDE (*Laws of Chess*, Article 8.1.5) in requiring players to record draw offers on the scoresheet. Hence Rule 7.11.4. The intention of this exception is not, however, to discourage the sensible practice of recording a draw offer with the standard annotation '(=)'. Players who are unfamiliar with the rule or who regard the practice as pointless might care to reflect not only that the practice records an action which may mark a very significant moment in a game, but also that it provides vital supporting evidence in the event of a claim that the opponent has contravened Article 11.5 of the FIDE Laws (which forbids distracting or annoying the opponent) by unreasonable or unduly repeated offers of a draw.

B. Applying the Laws

The potential difficulties for captains arise in connection with the provisions of Rule 7.11.7, which notes that in the absence of a duly authorized arbiter for the event (something in general presupposed by the FIDE Laws) (i) certain articles of the Laws cannot be followed to the strict letter in the League, and (ii) the Association expects the team captains "to take on those aspects of an arbiter's function which circumstances make it practical for them to perform, in cooperation or (where appropriate) individually".

(There are clearly limits to what is feasible, and common sense suggests that there will be cases where the captain's role in this regard is best informally delegated to another suitable person who is present and available.)

The Association believes that with a measure of good sense and good will, most situations that arise can be amicably and quietly settled on the spot, but there are certain kinds of difficulty on which more needs to be said.

Irregularities requiring the cancellation of a game

Article 7 of the FIDE Laws details what is to be done in the case of certain irregularities. Of these, one requires comment. Article 7.2.1 states that “If during a game it is found that the initial position of the pieces was incorrect, the game shall be cancelled and a new game shall be played.”

This does not apply if the irregularity is merely that the board is misplaced, with the only consequence being that the game has begun with the two kings on squares of their own colour. In that case, the game should simply be transferred to a correctly oriented board (in accordance with Article 7.2.2). However, if the consequence of the misplaced board is that, for example, the white king begins the game on the square to the left of the white queen, the game is to be cancelled and replayed.

If Article 7.2.1 requires the game to be cancelled, and there is insufficient time for a new game to be completed on the same evening, the players should arrange to replay the game at a mutually agreed venue within five weeks of the match, failing which the game will be deemed to have been double-defaulted. In considering whether there is “insufficient time” for a new game, captains and players may use their discretion in deciding whether a shorter time limit should be used but should bear in mind that players must have at least 60 minutes each (including the increment) for a standard-play game of 60 moves.

C. Miscellaneous Reminders

(i) The FIDE Laws (Article 8.1.2) forbid writing moves down in advance (with certain very specific exceptions—see Article 9.2–3), and if this happens the player’s attention should be drawn to it but no further action taken, save in the face of persistent infraction, in which case the Committee’s attention should be drawn to the matter.

(ii) Under the OCA’s time limits for the League, by Article 8.4 of the FIDE Laws, a player who has less than five minutes left on the clock is no longer required to write down the moves. This does *not* mean that the opponent, still having five minutes or more left, is allowed to stop writing down the moves.

(iii) Too many players are unfamiliar with the prescribed way to offer a draw. Article 9.1.2.1 of the FIDE Laws says that “A player wishing to offer a draw shall do so after having made a move on the chessboard and before pressing his clock.” Failing to follow this ‘Move, Offer, Clock’ rule is apt to fall foul of Article 11.5 which forbids distracting the opponent.

Appendix: Guidance for OTB Play during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The OCA, like many chess associations, has been asked by its constituent clubs for guidance on appropriate COVID mitigation. This appendix provides that guidance, so far as it is possible, and explains the rationale behind it.

Unlike the rules for OCA competitions, which can only be modified by the AGM or an EGM, the guidance given here can be modified by the Committee quickly in response to changes in

the pandemic situation and in government guidelines.

Much of what follows is derived from the guidance provided by the Leamington League and especially by the Surrey County Chess Association; indeed much of the text is taken from the latter's "COVID-19 Plan for OTB Restart". For this we thank them, and also Mike Truran and his team at the ECF for providing the relevant documents. The original for the Leamington League can be found at <http://www.leamingtonchessleague.org.uk/>.

Rationale

As a general guiding principle, the OCA Committee is minded not to impose unnecessary conditions on clubs for OTB OCA chess competitions beyond those required by UK law.

The Committee is aware that there are parties who have strong views on, for example, the desirability or otherwise of mask wearing. It is not possible to satisfy all parties on this and other matters of COVID mitigation. The Committee believes that it should nevertheless continue to point out government Coronavirus guidance (which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>) and, in alignment with it, to give its own advice and recommendations in the light of the nature of the OCA's competitions.

The Committee believes that *each individual* should responsibly consider and decide how to respond to that guidance, taking account of the safety of others as well as their own. No one is forced to play chess in our competitions; individuals do so at their own risk. They are free to choose whether to participate or not, in accordance with their personal judgement of risk.

Guidance and Recommendations

1. Some chess clubs may have specific local COVID mitigation steps, possibly imposed upon them or agreed with the venue owners as part of the terms of use of their venue, or alternatively as agreed between the members of the club. Therefore, in fairness to visiting teams, and to provide prospective opponents with the information to make a personal judgement about whether to play in matches at the venue, *all clubs are to inform the OCA Secretary and Webmaster what COVID mitigation requirements are in force at their home venue(s), and to keep those Officers informed of any change to those requirements. They are also to inform these officers if **no** such requirements are in force at the club's venue(s).* (These requirements will be published on the OCA website.)

2. The OCA recommends that each club completes a risk assessment for playing at their venue during the COVID pandemic. The ECF has provided a skeleton document linked from <https://www.englishchess.org.uk/ecf-covid-19-helpful-articles/>.

3. Clubs and captains are recommended to provide appropriate advice to their players based on the prevailing government guidelines. [This advice will naturally be updated as the government guidelines change.] Currently (26 September 2021), this advice includes:

- getting double-vaccinated;
- making a responsible choice about the wearing of a face covering when in crowded settings or prolonged proximity to others;
- a recommendation to wear a face covering when travelling in a private vehicle with people you do not usually meet; and

- not participating if exhibiting COVID symptoms, having received a recent positive COVID test result, or being required to self-isolate.

4. **NB.** If players have to drop out at short notice owing to COVID symptoms, a positive COVID test result, or a requirement to self-isolate, and replacements cannot be found, the Committee expects the captains to agree to play on a reduced number of boards, though never fewer than four, in accordance with the provisions set out above in the section, ‘Team Selection and Eligibility’ in the body of this document, to reflect the current practice of allowing such reductions in exceptional circumstances. Disagreements between the captains should be referred to the League Secretary, who will bear this guidance in mind when deciding whether unplayed boards should be defaulted or annulled.

5. Miscellaneous points regarding particular matches:

- Away team captains are recommended to inform their players in advance of any COVID mitigation steps in force at the playing venue.
- Home team captains are expected to remind visiting teams of any such requirements on the latter’s arrival before the match starts.
- Before and during the match the OCA recommends that:
 - if possible there is just one board per table;
 - hand sanitiser is provided, and the locations where it can be found are made clear;
 - captains and their helpers sanitise their hands prior to setting up boards and clocks;
 - players sanitise their hands prior to starting their game/touching the pieces;
 - players desist from the traditional handshakes at the beginning and the end of the game;
 - in the absence of handshakes, players clearly state “I resign” or “I accept your offer of a draw” rather than relying on a gesture that may be misinterpreted;
 - team captains disperse crowds around boards during the match; and
 - clubs do not provide refreshments.