

OCA League Rules: Guidance for Clubs and Captains

(issued on behalf of the OCA Committee: version approved by AGM on 23 September 2010)

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 carry out the arbiter's role *as far as is feasible* during matches (see Rule 7.11.6), 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 'OCA documents' section of the website. The FIDE Laws of Chess can be found at

<http://www.fide.com/FIDE/handbook/LawsOfChess.pdf>

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 at

<http://chessarbiters.co.uk/Documents/Laws and Comments 2009.pdf>

Team Selection and Eligibility

The main intention of the rules on ‘starring’ players (2.3-4) is to ensure fairness in team selection. The further rules on the eligibility of players to play for the different teams within a club (2.5-8) 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 graded 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 graded players just before the end of the season for a crucial match or matches. The Association also deprecates artificial manipulation of the board order.

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 (now 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.*

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) 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 (e.g., in claiming a draw in accordance with the 'two minute rule'). 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) 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 12.6 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 7.11.6, 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 carry out that role at matches "as far as is feasible". (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.

(i) Draw claims by players with less than two minutes of time remaining

It is widely agreed that the most difficult area for arbiters to handle is that of draw claims under the so-called 'two minute rule'. If, in a tournament controlled by an arbiter, a player with less than two minutes remaining on the clock claims a draw on the basis of Article 10.2 of the FIDE Laws, the arbiter has to decide very quickly whether (i) to reject the claim and award the opponent an extra two minutes, (ii) to accept the claim and declare the game drawn, or (iii) to postpone a decision till later in the game or after flag fall. Quite apart from the fact that one or both captains may still be

playing their own games, it seems unreasonable to impose that kind of burden on captains in the OCA League. Besides, even if both captains were available to observe, they might not agree on an immediate decision, and that would create an intolerably disruptive situation at a crucial point in the match. Therefore it does not seem feasible to regard the team captains as *de facto* arbiters charged with applying Article 10.2 of the FIDE Laws.

Instead, we should continue to follow, as far as is feasible, the procedure laid down for Quickplay finishes in games where no arbiter is available. *Appendix D* of the FIDE Laws, which covers this topic, says:

“Where games are played as in Article 10 [*i.e.*, with a quickplay finish], a player may claim a draw when he has less than two minutes left on his clock and before his flag falls. This concludes the game.

He may claim on the basis

- a. that his opponent cannot win by normal means, and/or
- b. that his opponent has been making no effort to win by normal means.

In (a) the player must write down the final position and his opponent verifies it.

In (b) the player must write down the final position and submit an up-to-date scoresheet. The opponent shall verify both the scoresheet and the final position.

The claim shall be referred to an arbiter whose decision shall be final.”

In the OCA League, partly because it is so desirable to reach a match result on the night, the team captains have a genuine arbiter-like role to play in cooperatively seeking an agreed determination of the result in these cases. *Only if it is impossible for the captains to reach agreement is it necessary to take the matter further.*

Much of the guidance for arbiters on quickplay finishes to be found on the Chess Arbiters' Association website (see <http://chessarbiters.co.uk/QP.aspx>, especially paragraphs 1, 5-6, and 8-9), helpfully applies to the situation envisaged here. The specific advice for captains given below relies heavily on what is said there; it also incorporates the suggestions made by International Arbiter Alex McFarlane in comments on an earlier draft. But before coming to that specific advice, some general points.

First, the point of allowing claims under the ‘two minute rule’ is that a draw is deemed the appropriate result if it is practically certain from the position reached and the standard of play demonstrated by the player claiming the draw in the immediately preceding play that he or she would draw (or win) the game except for running out of time.

Secondly, the better the understanding players in the Oxfordshire League have of this rule, the less likely it is that frivolous or otherwise unreasonable claims will be made, and the lower the probability of contention and dispute. It is therefore recommended that clubs and captains should do what they can to promote better understanding of this rule.

Thirdly, the chief difficulty for arbiters, captains, and players alike lies in interpreting the phrase ‘by normal means’.

Fourthly, the onus of proof is firmly on the player claiming the draw. If there is reasonable doubt, the claim should be rejected.

Now, some specific guidelines:

1 It is good practice, and may save a lot of time and trouble for everyone (including captains) if, before claiming a draw in this way, a player has first (while having less than two minutes left) offered the opponent a draw.

2 Players claiming a draw should make clear the grounds on which the claim is made. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the *only* legitimate grounds under the rules are (a) that the opponent cannot win by normal means, and/or (b) that the opponent has been making no effort to win by normal means. It is not permitted, for example, to claim merely on the grounds that the position would be drawn with best play or that the position is a theoretical draw.

3 Possible reasons for awarding a draw claimed on the grounds that (a) the opponent cannot win the game by normal means include the following:

(i) that the position of the player making the claim is manifestly superior *and* the opponent has no realistic way to create counterplay that might give winning chances;

(ii) that the position is beyond a shadow of a doubt drawn, e.g., that in an ending of bishop and wrong rook's pawn against king, the defending player's king is controlling the queening square;

(iii) that the player claiming the draw in a position of equality or inferiority in material has clearly demonstrated full knowledge of how to draw the position;

(iv) that enough moves have been played to establish that the opponent of the player claiming the draw is making no progress.

Possible reasons for awarding a draw claimed on the grounds that (b) the opponent has been making no effort to win by normal means include the following:

(i) that the opponent has shown no sign of trying to win on the board but has merely been shuffling pieces around, without making progress, in an effort to win on time;

(ii) that the opponent, since refusing a draw offer from the player with less than two minutes left despite having a manifestly inferior position, has shown no sign of creating counterplay.

4 Examining this sample list of possible reasons which give weight to a draw claim made under the 'two minute rule', it is obvious that some of them, including all of the possible reasons for a type-(b) claim, have to be substantiated by an up-to-date scoresheet or other incontrovertible evidence. This has two important implications for players. First, whereas in a tournament situation with an arbiter present it may make sense to claim as soon as one is below two minutes, so that there is time (if the arbiter postpones a decision and allows the game to continue) to demonstrate over the board that the opponent can make no progress, in a League match without an arbiter we are envisaging a situation in which the draw claim terminates play. Hence, any evidence (apart from the position itself) that the claimant may need to substantiate the draw claim has to exist already in the moves played up to that point; this is likely to require not making the claim prematurely but continuing to make moves until one is well into one's last minute. Secondly, a player who may need to claim a draw under this rule should bear the possibility in mind when deciding whether or not to stop recording the moves when down below five minutes (as permitted by Article 8.4 of the FIDE Laws), since to stop recording may make it more difficult or even impossible to establish a claim. However, in the light of Article 8.5, it seems reasonable, in the context of a League match, for another person to record the moves for a player no longer required to do so; but in this case neither these moves nor the number made should be visible to the player until after the game to avoid accusations of giving advice.

5 In trying to agree a result, captains may take some account of the strength of the player claiming the draw. Broadly speaking, the weaker the player claiming, the higher the standard of proof required for a type-(a) claim. They may also take account of the verbal justification a claimant gives in support of the claim, as well as any reasoned rebuttal by the opponent.

6 If neither the team captains nor the players involved can agree a result, the procedure described in Appendix D of the FIDE Laws (quoted above) should be followed, except that the details (verified by both players) and the claim, together with a brief explanation of the grounds on which it was originally made, and any other relevant evidence (from both sides), such as the score and available eyewitness should be submitted to the League Secretary. A reconstructed scoresheet may be used provided both players agree to its accuracy. Even without agreement, a partial scoresheet (e.g. one with only the White moves) may assist in the decision-making process.

The Committee will then arrange for the evidence to be considered impartially and a decision to be taken, which shall be final.

(ii) 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 7.1a 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 played.”

(i) 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 7.1b). 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.

(iii) If Article 7.1a 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 for a standard-play game.

C. Miscellaneous Reminders

(i) The FIDE Laws forbid writing moves down in advance (with certain very specific exceptions—see Article 8.1), 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 the Committee’s attention should be drawn to the matter.

(ii) 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(b) 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 stopping his clock and starting the opponent’s clock.” Failing to follow this ‘Move, Offer, Clock’ rule is apt to fall foul of Article 12.6 which forbids distracting the opponent.