

Thoughts on Running Junior OTB Tournaments at the Current Time

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These are some thoughts on the practicalities of organising OTB junior tournaments in current times, which seem to me one of the areas of chess with the clearest legal route to OTB events. These are based on the experience running an OTB U11 tournament in Oxford on the 24th October - for those interested my more detailed tournament protocols can be found via <https://forms.gle/QdA76Z5S64KntGrv7> . These are all also personal views and not the 'official' line of any body.

Of course, given the announcement about a national lockdown starting from 5th November, the next actual month or so seems impossible - so this should be read as thoughts about running events on restrictions similar to tier 1/tier 2.

Legality

The category that junior tournaments can sit under is that of 'supervised activities provided for children', which is one of the exemptions to the rules on gatherings in all tiers. Junior chess is not legally a sport, but it definitely provides an organised and structured activity for children.

Inevitably there have to be breaks between rounds, but I think it good to keep them as short as possible; a 45 minute break with children playing playground football throughout stretches the definition of 'supervised activity'. In our case, we summoned players to the next round as soon as any intra-round cleaning had been done and the draw had been made.

Numbers and Group Sizes

Once you put a junior tournament into the 'supervised activities for children' box, the government guidance on out-of-school activities

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protective-measures-for-holiday-or-after-school-clubs-and-other-out-of-school-settings-for-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/protective-measures-for-out-of-school-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

suggests that groups should not be larger than 15. It wasn't clear to me whether this was a legal requirement (I didn't see it looking at the primary legislation, but I'm not a lawyer and could easily have missed it) or simply a 'good practice' advice.

However, working with this number the simplest practical approach appears to be to have no sections bigger than 15 - for example, if necessary split the event into smaller Swisses or run it as all-play-alls.

Morality and Parental Support

Different families have different attitudes about the activities they are willing to participate in at the current time.

Personally, I do not see junior chess as intrinsically more Covid-risky than (say) indoor dance classes, indoor football training, group music lessons or swimming, and I feel that if parents are happy with their children doing these (as most parents are) then they should be happy with their children playing OTB chess.

However, it did seem that there is a sentiment among some (both parents and junior organisers) that OTB chess should not be happening at this time.

Venues and risk assessments

Venues are always key but even more so at current times, and so early communication with prospective venues is necessary to establish their attitude. Some schools have made outside bookings essentially impossible; in my case I was fortunate that the school was supportive of continuing their outside bookings for various children's activities.

If a venue is willing to hire rooms for dance classes etc, then they may well be willing to hire for chess.

The ECF has a template risk assessment for OTB chess but in my opinion this is geared more towards adults playing in chess clubs and is missing some crucial parts for junior tournaments. So in my case, while consulting the ECF one to ensure I wasn't missing anything, I wrote my own one tailored to the venue.

Most specifically, those who attend junior tournaments will know that often space for waiting parents is essential but also rather cramped.

It is scientifically clear by now that, compared to their parents, younger (pre-teen) juniors are both less at risk from Covid and less effective at transmitting it. So, in my opinion the largest risk aspect in organising a junior tournament is in the ability to keep the parents separate: i.e. ensure there is enough space for them to wait while remaining socially distanced.

Here I was fortunate in that I was able to use a large secondary school building with eleven classrooms, so I could scatter parents among the classrooms while keeping them distant. However, this approach might not work for venues like a community hall.

In general, for pre-teen juniors this aspect (how to ensure the social separation of different adults) seems to me where the greatest covid risk lies, and needs to have corresponding priority in the risk assessment.

Playing Conditions

I think the ideals here are fairly obvious – separate boards by 2 metres, and generally maximise social distancing between the players. We were in secondary school classrooms, and so were using rectangular tables, and had three boards per classroom. The original plan was to play length-wise on the tables rather than across; we realised that the youngest players would then be unable to reach the pieces, and so adapted this to a diagonal format which maximised distance consistent with being able to reach the pieces.

The other policy we did, which I think is both easy to enforce and has a large effect, is ensure that both players sanitise their hands at the start and end of every game - there was one bottle of sanitiser placed by each board. 'White sanitise their hands – Black sanitise their hands – start White's clock.'

Time-frames

The rules are constantly changing in unpredictable ways. I therefore feel one needs a 'pop-up' attitude to an event - rather than planning a date months and months in advance, one needs to have an idea of the structure (venue, rough plan and risk assessment and approximate date), and then be ready once a window appears to go public and advertise on a few weeks notice.

Level of Events

To me the one clear no-no OTB for the foreseeable future are the sort of large junior events such as the LJCC, Gigafinals or the EPSCA county jamborees - the numbers involved are too big.

The windows of opportunity, where I think events could be run, seem to be smaller local events (provided one can get sufficient parents to enter their child) - but also small elite events, which would give some of the strongest and most active UK juniors the chance to play in an environment with no danger of Stockfish lurking in the background.

I remember as a junior playing in a slow-play all-play-all which consisted of the top six players of an age group in a hotel for a weekend; I don't see a reason why broadly similar events couldn't take place now.

Waivers and Legal Liability

Life is not risk-free, and certainly at these times there is no risk-free way to organise a tournament. In any case, no-one will insure you against risks to do with covid. I required parents to sign a waiver, but in the end the reason for organising a tournament is because you regard it as the right thing to do.

Profitability

I would have been happy to break even but in the end ran a small loss. There can be no 'pile-em high' model at the moment; in my case I regard it as a donation on behalf of those who ran events for me when I was myself a junior player.