

FAQ about Freestyle Chess

(FAQ = Frequently Asked Questions)

(1) What is Freestyle Chess?

According to the preamble of the official PAL/CSS Tournament Rules, Freestyle Chess is "a competition between humans, who however are allowed, similarly like in correspondence chess, to make use of any technical or human support for selecting their moves. The major difference to correspondence chess exists in the much faster speed of play. From the idea Freestyle Chess is very similar to 'Advanced Chess', introduced by Garry Kasparov, in which use of computer however is strongly limited and human help excluded. All these kinds of chess aim for the same purpose: games of high quality. Because of practical reasons, Freestyle Chess usually is played on the internet."

The first big Freestyle Tournament with a number of well-known International titleholders among the participants was held in May/June 2005 on the ChessBase server. The rate of play in the main tournament was 45 min. per game + 5 sec. per move. In the play-offs it was 60 min. + 15 sec., what became from now on the standard of the PAL/CSS Freestyle tournaments. In difference to this, tried the 7th PAL/CSS Freestyle Tournament a rate of play of 90 min. + 30 sec. what likewise found many advocates who above all expect a strengthening of the human factor by this.

(2) Is actually "anything" allowed in Freestyle Chess?

No, provided that one understands by "anything" also unsporty behaviour to get an advantage towards competitors. The PAL/CSS Freestyle Tournament Rules contain important definitions to guarantee a fair course of action and to exile unfair behaviour from the tournament events. The fact that a player can consult with others and therefore effectively disposes about a team, means just as the boundless access to computer support so much freedom how one cannot find at any other chess events with comparable time of reflection. Practically spoken, "anything goes" in Freestyle chess, except from unfair behaviour and as far as the tournament organisation and the server software admit. (With 'server' the ChessBase server www.playchess.com is meant in the following in each case.)

(3) Which technical equipment does one need for Freestyle Chess?

The minimum equipment is an internet connection to the chess server and the chess software to take part in the tournament, i.e. to send and receive moves, to take up information and to be present in the tournament room. Usually all this will be operated by one PC, which therefore could be named your "Internet PC".

Theoretically spoken, you can use this PC also for interactive chess analysis by means of multi-tasking to load up further programs e.g. for database search and opening books. But be careful not to overload your PC system by starting too many applications at the same time. Also be careful not to close your internet connection or the game window by mistake. Moreover you have to be up-to-date what's going on in your internet game, whether a new move has come in, how much time has been spent, whether the internet connection is stable etc.

Most of the Freestyle chess players are using more than one PC for all these tasks. The interactive chess analysis is running on a second PC and sometimes even on a third or fourth etc., while it's not the number of PC's, which is decisive, but their power. That's why multi-processor systems and also engine versions that have been developed for such systems are favoured by Freestylers. Powerful chess engines with 6- or at least 5-men-tablebases (for endings) are just as important as a an efficient hardware.

(4) Can I not simply let play the computer?

The experiences of the first six PAL/CSS Freestyle Tournaments have shown that under certain conditions pure engine play can be rather successful, in particular, if the opponent is taken by surprise and if it is a top engine running on an optimally configured high-end computer system. Nevertheless, the pure engines mostly could not stand their ground in the Freestyle Finals, and sometimes they got outclassed by well prepared opponents.

The combination "man/machine" has turned out all together stronger in comparison to pure engines. Since automatic engine play has technically been abolished beginning with the 7th PAL/CSS Freestyle Tournament, each player has to execute his moves by hand, what indeed also could benefit the player, as he has better control of the engine, especially, regarding the time usage. On the other side the computer players now have to take care of avoiding a "mouseslip".

(5) What is a "centaur" and how does one play as a centaur?

The name „centaur“ marks the combination „man/machine“ and with it also the prevailing form of Freestyle play. Borrows from the Greek mythology, it has become the general upper concept for all forms of computer-assisted human chess play. In addition, nevertheless, on the chess server the centaur concept has a special technical function: If a player announces himself under the menu "play mode" as a "centaur" (what is only possible in the rooms intended for it, those in which computers are permitted), he can load an engine ('kibitz') of his choice in the game window to let analyze the topical position. However, he can give here no moves for the analysis, because it concerns the running game. In other words: As long as the game is running, no interactive analysis with the 'kibitz' engine is possible. Many Freestylers use this automatically running engine primarily for control and as a security for the case that they come once under time pressure and have to make moves in few seconds. The principal interactive analysis mostly takes place on one or several other PC's.

Apart from the fact the player can use another chess program in the background on his internet PC, just depending on how powerful his PC or computer system is. Technically seen exists the possibility to let indicate this additional program likewise constantly on the screen surface, so that one must not toggle constantly between different screen views. Whether this makes sense, must everybody decide for himself. Who has only one PC at his disposal, will hardly be able to proceed in a different way.

(6) Is there something like typical Freestyle know-how?

Yes. It concerns basically a knowledge of experience which comes from Freestyle practise and refers to how one handles with the single resources and components - human, computer, Internet, programs, chess knowledge, tournament situation, opponent, game situation - and how one co-ordinates all of them. As Freestyle chess is still a young discipline, this knowledge has very individual character, and also the conditions and motivations are individually very different. Outlines a collective knowledge of experience became clear in the tournament reports of the Freestyle players and in some Freestyle articles. The huge number of components points out the fact that here we have a wide field that offers a lot of possibilities for creativity.

(7) How does one become a good Freestyle chess player?

Success in Freestyle chess can come about in rather different ways. It can be reached by teamwork or individually, it can be achieved by a strong hardware or software, by chess skills and knowledge, by good competition tactics, by a tiny bit luck or - more probably - by the sum of all these factors. "Many ways lead to Rome." As the know-how strategies for success are also marked very individually. Rather can be said that deficits surely look success-diminishing in several areas. Thus a strong chess player who is weakly equipped according to computer and is inexperienced in dealing with the engines, has no chance of

a top rank. Vice versa the situation looks a little more favourable for the pure computer player who disposes of a highly competitive system and a good opening book (based on a statistically evaluated games database), but is a relatively weak chess player himself. With some luck he can land rather in the prize ranks than his "antipode". However, the optimum is of course a well-functioning team which is able to cover all important areas.

Experience has shown that such teams in the long run play a little bit more successfully than Freestyle singles. It is experience, preparation and regular work in many areas, in the computer area and in the chess area, which mark the way to a good Freestyle chess player.

(8) What do I do if I lose the connection with the server?

Click in the menu "extras" on "reconnect" and wait whether the connection is automatically restored what is mostly the case. Then in your notation window the word "reconnect" is inserted. Sometimes one finds out only by this information that there has been an interruption at all; since your client software will try as a rule also without your order to restore the connection if it was interrupted.

If you note an interruption of your online game, and if after two to three minutes the connection is not restored, this can have different causes. Thus you can have lost, perhaps, the connection with the internet and not only to the chess server. If this is the case, try at first without closing the game window or the main window to the chess server, restoring the internet connection of your computer.

Should the chess server for any reason have crashed what now and then happens in times of the rush because of an overload, a new start of your chess program or your client software (playchess.com) will be necessary.

In this case, after rebooting and successful login and after you have entered the tournament room, please read in the chat how you should further behave; whether, e.g., your game can be continued (this is possible as a rule) or whether it must start new (which can happen in very few cases).

The tournament leader will immediately inform you in the chat and give you his instructions. After reconnecting, do not forget to announce yourself once more in the menu "edit" under "play mode" as a "centaur" if you want to continue to play as a centaur. Should you not be sure once whether you are still connected with the chess server, click in the menu "tools" on "ping server". After that you should receive information in the chat window about your connection with the server, by the way, also about the present quality of this connection. The fact, however, that your or your opponent's chess clock is running in the game window, is no proof that you are actually connected with the server. After interruptions it often can be seen that the clocks have been corrected by the server.

(9) What do I do if my opponent is not on-line any more?

At first you should wait. Press by no means the "claim win on disconnect..." button which could lead to an immediate abort of your game by the chess server. At Freestyle tournaments it is left exclusively to the tournament leader to abort games and to decide on the result after the state of affairs. You can press the button "ping opponent" to receive information whether your opponent is currently connected with the chess server. If this is not the case, and if your opponent is not yet re-connected after at the latest five minutes since the interruption, please inform personally the tournament leader. Wait then whether the game will be taken up again (this can possibly happen by technical help of the tournament leader) or which decision falls by the tournament leader.

(10) How do I communicate with the tournament leader?

By chat or if necessary by e-mail. If you want to inform the tournament leader by chat, this should be done absolutely personally, that is you send your message only to him, while you click his name as recipient. (You find his name, for example, in the player's list or in the chat window.) If instead of this your message goes "to all", it can be that the tournament leader does not perceive it at all, because he cannot incessantly read the chat and pick out what concerns to him. Besides, your message will not really be of interest "to all".

If you cannot reach the tournament leader in the chat, for example because you are not connected with the chess server, send him an e-mail. This is likewise recommended if it concerns a very important message and for some reasons you have received no answer on your communication in the chat. In particular, in case of a reasonable withdrawal from the tournament one should also send an e-mail, just like it is written in the PAL/CSS Tournament Rules. Then the tournament leader can pass on, for example, your communication verbatim to the organizers.

(11) How to use the "chat" of the chess server?

Some players understandably do not like being disturbed by the chat during their games, which is why they simply try to ignore it. On the other hand, if your game is finished, you should throw at least every now and then a look in the chat, because it may contain important news for you personally or for the tournament participants all together.

General news on the part of the tournament leader are marked in blue colour, personal messages in green, while the messages of the remaining chat participants are recognizable in yellow. By the way, you can also filter the general chat, so that only messages of higher ranked players are shown. (This function is preferred especially during live-broadcasts if somebody does not like to be "killed" by the huge number of messages, often unfortunately very unqualified ones.) Another possibility of the individual chat configuration consists in selecting for which "canals" your chat window should be open.

(12) Must I stay on-line all the time during a tournament?

The tournament rules provides that you are present in the tournament room not later than 5 minutes before the round starts. Otherwise it may happen that the round begins without you because the server would be unable to generate a pairing for you or to start your game. In this case neither a new paring nor a new start of your game is planned, but you would lose by forfeit.

Pay attention, hence, to the fact that you are possibly present in the tournament room some minutes before the called term and have finished all servicing work on your internet PC. Thus it would be no good idea to reboot your PC seven minutes before the round begins, because this could backfire easily, apart from the stress to which you expose yourself needlessly.

At the start of the tournament it is even necessary, that you are present in the tournament room half an hour earlier in order to sign up for the tournament. Once you have received the confirmation from the tournament leader, you can temporarily leave the tournament room and the server.

(13) Is it allowed to take back a move?

No. According to the FIDE Laws of Chess, you are not allowed to take back a valid move. In PAL/CSS Freestyle tournaments the FIDE rules are valid until something else is expressly determined. Indeed, the playchess.com server contains the possibility in some rooms, that you offer to your opponent a "take back". However, this is only for friendly games and training sessions and not for official tournaments. In the Freestyle tournament room the button for a "take back" is not available.

(14) Where and when do I find out the standings and the pairings?

During a Freestyle tournament by Swiss system, as it is usual with the main tournaments, you get to know the new pairings at the beginning of the round and then your game gets started automatically. In the main window you can see the pairings of the other participants when you click on "games". Under "info" you find the table generated by the chess server. This table, however, will only be updated by the server, when the new round gets started.

Thus, the server table hangs always a little behind and contains some data generated by the server software which have no meaning for the Freestyle chess, e.g. the ratings that come from other competitions (blitz, human tournament games, computer games). In few cases the server table can also contain data which might be corrected later by the tournament leader; it has no official validity.

Beyond that the tournament leader regularly reports in the chat the latest standings after each round. Here you get to know, on which rank you are momentarily and how many players belong to a certain group of points. This current table informs roughly about the remaining chances of each player. After completion of one tournament day or the tournament altogether you find the official tournament table on the CSS-website <http://www.computerschach.de>

In a round-robin tournament like the Freestyle Final with 10 participants all pairings are drawn lots before the tournament begins. The table will be updated frequently, what can be done easily because of the small number of participants.

(15) How are the pairings drawn lots in Swiss System tournaments?

All pairings in PAL/CSS Freestyle Tournaments by Swiss System are drawn lots by the server software. There are as a rule no pairings "by hand". In a round-robin tournament like the Freestyle Final the pairings arise from the order of the start numbers which corresponds to the rankings in the main tournament.

(16) Is there a fair sharing of colours?

In Swiss System tournaments with 9 rounds it's a matter of chance whether somebody more often has White or Black. In general a relation of 5:4 or 4:5 can be expected. As the tournament leader has no influence on the used server software it, nevertheless, cannot be guaranteed, that all players will have a relation of 4:4 after 8 rounds, so that sporadic injustices cannot be completely excluded from the start.

(17) Are there tiebreaks?

No. The order of rank among the participants with the same score is determined by "progressive score"; if also this should be same, an additional points system will be applied by the tournament leader. The so ascertained order of rank is authoritative for the awarding of qualification places, but not for the distribution of money-prizes which are split among the players with an equal score.

The experiences with Freestyle playoffs have shown that these are too costly and it can be very difficult according to the number of the participants to find an one satisfactory as well as fair procedure. Reduction of reflection time, as usual with tiebreaks in classical tournament chess, does not suit to Freestyle chess on account of then to dominant computer influence.

(18) Is there a Freestyle ranking list and Freestyle Elo rating?

The games of the PAL/CSS Freestyle tournaments are evaluated continuously for Elo rating. Who has played at least 15 rated games (while points by forfeit of course not count) will be listed in the official PAL/CSS Freestyle Elo List with a provisional Freestyle rating. If a player has 30 rated games, he holds a "fixed" rating, what practically means a number that is relatively stable and less influenced by statistical deviations than a number which is based on less games.

This list has still temporary character, nevertheless it can deliver later once the basis for tournament invitations and start numbers in tournaments. The Freestyle Elo rating is not indicated on the chess server which instead indicates its own ratings that, however, have no meaning for the Freestyle chess.

(19) Must I announce myself with my real name?

With the registration to the tournament and towards the tournament leader (only on inquiry) you must give your name and your e-mail address, while your nickname is freely chosen by you. There is no obligation to come out towards the players. Please consider, nevertheless, that for the community of the Freestyle players and for others it is more personally and can be more pleasant if they know with whom they deal with. Many players add personal information about themselves on the server or reveal their identity by their internet 'handle'.

(20) Is a withdrawal from the tournament allowed?

It is expected that all participants try hard to play through the tournament up to the end. Silent or unwarranted resignations are booked with sanctions. A silent or unwarranted resignation of the running tournament rightly counts as unsporty.

In any case, such a resignation affects the following pairings and possibly other players' scores. So please, only take part in the tournament if you, regardless of your chances, are sure you want to play the tournament to an end.

If you think, you have to withdraw from the tournament for unforeseen and really urgent reasons, please contact the tournament leader in the chat and at the same time send him an e-mail with detailed information about your withdrawal:

Martin.Fischer@chessbase.com

The organizer reserves himself the right to exclude a participant, who offends roughly against this rule, from future participation or to require an additional deposit money in case he wants to sign up for a future tournament. Such a deposit money would be paid back only in case of an outright participation.

(21) Where do I find Freestyle game databases and tournament reports?

On the CSS website (<http://www.computerschach.de>), in the archive of the ChessBase website (<http://www.chessbase.com>) as well as in various internet forums and on the private homepages which you can discover by searching machines.

(22) Who or what stands behind the initials PAL und CSS?

The PAL Group of Companies, main sponsor of Freestyle Chess, has its seat in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates). PAL Computer Systems pursues since 2003 the Hydra project which is a parallel chess hardware with 64 FPGA. The "chess monster" from UAE is a more modern and more powerful system in comparison to the legendary DeepBlue computer of IBM.

The supreme initiator of PAL's chess engagement is a famous Freestyle chess player himself and well-known under his nickname "Zorchamp". He has taken part with big success in several Freestyle tournaments and became the 2nd Freestyle Champion in 2006. As he said, he expects Freestyle Chess facing a great future comparable to the Formula 1 in motorsports.

The main task of the sponsoring is to introduce and promote this very young chess discipline. In the Freestyle area PAL is represented officially by the Berlin correspondence chess grandmaster and chess publisher Arno Nickel, Internet name: "Ciron". Contact: freestyle-nl@web.de

CSS is the abbreviation of the famous Hamburg magazine "Computerschach und Spiele" which had been published as a print magazine for two decades, before it was converted into an on-line magazine in 2005. Publisher since the first hour is Dieter Steinwender who now and then is kibitzing in the Freestyle tournaments, but mostly supporting the tournament management and organisation. Chess server name "Stoneturner". Contact: redaktion@computerschach.de