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Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About The USCF's New Clock Rules, But Were Afraid To Ask

A chess clock is a device for measuring and allocating the time available to each player during a game of chess.

In official tournaments, each player has a limited amount of time to make his or her moves. An important component of a player's overall chess skill is in deciding how to allocate time during a game.

All players are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the available models of clocks and with the USCF's rules for using them.

Various types of chess clocks can be purchased from the USCF, other vendors, or through your local chess club.

Types of Chess Clocks

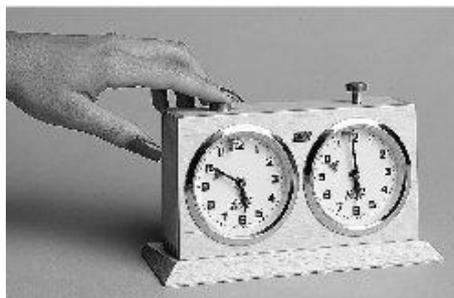
A digital clock (sometimes referred to as an allegro clock) is one that displays the exact number of minutes and seconds available for each player.

When a player runs out of time using a digital clock, the display will read 00:00.



A mechanical clock (sometimes referred to as an analog clock) is one with the traditional clock face and hands. A mechanical clock also has a device called a flag that signals when a player's time has expired.

When a player runs short of time using a mechanical clock, the hands of the clock will begin to raise the player's flag. When time expires, the player's flag falls.



Time Controls and Sudden Death

The term "time control" refers to the amount of time each player has to make some or all moves during a game.

For example: a time control of 40/2 means that each player has two hours to make the first 40 moves. If a player fails to complete the 40th move before time expires, that player is said to lose on time. If both players make their 40th moves with time to spare, the game continues and the players get to keep any time remaining for use during the next time control.

A sudden death time control is one in which the players must make all of their moves before time expires.

For example: a time control of Game/30 means that each player must make all moves in 30 minutes or less. If a player uses more than 30 minutes before the game is decided, that player loses on time.

The different types of time controls can be combined to suit the needs of a particular tournament.

For example: a combined time control of 40/2, Game/30 means that each player has two hours to make the first 40 moves. If both players make their 40th moves with time to spare, they get to keep their remaining time plus they each receive an additional 30 minutes to make all of the rest of their moves.

The "Insufficient Losing Chances" Rule

Tournaments with sudden death time controls have become increasingly popular. One reason for this is that these types of events allow several games to be played in one day.

However, one side effect of sudden death time controls is that a player with a winning position may find that he or she does not have sufficient time remaining to actually win the game. In some extreme cases, the player may lose on time in a grossly winning position.

This situation strikes many players as unfair, because the game ought to be decided by moves made on the board. In response to this situation, the USCF created the insufficient losing chances rule:

14 H1. In a sudden death time control, a player with two minutes or less of remaining time may stop the clock and ask the director to declare the game a draw on the grounds that the player has insufficient losing chances.

The draw shall be awarded if the director believes that a Class C player would have little chance to lose the position against a Master with both having ample time. The exact losing chances of any position cannot be calculated, but a director wishing a more precise standard may consider "little" to mean less than 10 percent.

Note that under the "insufficient losing chances" rule, the players' actual ratings are irrelevant, as is the amount of time remaining on the players' clocks. However, the player making the claim must have two minutes or less remaining — otherwise the game continues.

Also, there is a subtle but distinct difference between insufficient losing chances and actual winning chances. A player may be winning the game but still have significant chances of losing.

Directors have several choices under the insufficient losing chances rule. The director may decide:

1. The claim is clearly correct, and award a draw.
2. The claim is clearly incorrect, and deny the claim and subtract one minute from the claimant's remaining time.
3. The claim is too close to call, and ask the players to resume the game. One, the director places a properly set delay clock on the game making sure the claimant's time is cut in half. The standard procedures for winning, losing or drawing now apply. Two, the director may watch the game with the intent of upholding the claim if the opponent is making no progress. A director who is watching a game after an insufficient losing chances claim may declare the game drawn even if the original claimant's flag falls.
4. The claim is too close to call, and instruct the claimant to make a later re-claim if the opponent is making no progress.

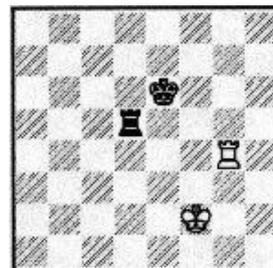
Some examples:

In this example, the weaker side (Black) claims a draw by

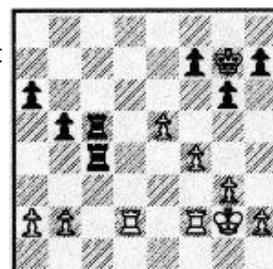


insufficient losing chances. The claim is clearly correct, because a Class C player would draw a Master by keeping his King in the corner. The TD should award the draw.

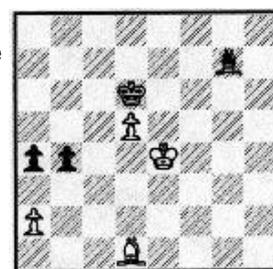
In this example, the material is even and greatly reduced. Either player may claim a draw by insufficient losing chances.



In this example, the stronger side (White) claims a draw because he is up a pawn. However, having an advantageous position is not the same as having insufficient losing chances. A Class C player might still lose to a Master, even in a winning ending, if several pieces are still on the board. The TD should deny the claim and subtract up to one minute from the player's time.



In this example, the situation is unclear. Endings with bishops of opposite colors are often drawn, but they also contain some subtle points. The best course here is for the director may place a properly set delay clock on the game with only half the remaining time of the claimant remaining or the director may watch for no progress or invite a later re-claim.



The Time Delay Feature

Tournament experience with the insufficient losing chances rule has shown that, while somewhat effective, clearly it is not the best solution to situations where a player is low on time in a grossly winning or non-losing position.

An alternate solution is to use a clock with what is known as the time delay feature. The time delay feature allows each player a limited number of seconds on each move before subtracting time from the player's clock.

Some models of digital clocks add the time delay bonus at the end, after the player has completed his move. These clocks are also legal, but players are advised to familiarize themselves with the various types of clocks to avoid misunderstandings during play.

The time delay is not accumulated and does not increase the player's available time over the course of many moves. Instead, these extra seconds are to compensate for the small amount of time used in physically moving the pieces and punching the clock on each move.

If a player who is low on time really has insufficient losing chances, the player ought to be able to make his or her moves very quickly. The time delay feature will allow that player to complete the game without facing an inevitable time forfeit.

When using a clock that has the time delay feature, a player may no longer make claims under the insufficient losing chances rule. Instead, the game ends normally.

For a good explanation of how to set individual models of digital clocks, see [Michael Atkins' page on Using Digital Clocks](#).

The Three Levels of Clocks

The USCF's rules specify three levels of preference for chess clocks:

1. Clocks with time delay are the most preferred type of equipment.
2. Mechanical clocks are the next most preferred clock.
3. Digital clocks without the time delay feature are the least preferred type of equipment.

When players have questions about what type of clock to use for a game, they should resolve the situation by referring to the three levels of clock preferences.

For example: Two players arrive at the board at the same time.

Player A has a digital clock with time delay feature.

Player B has a mechanical clock. Because Player A's clock is more preferred, he gets to use his clock for the game.

The player of the black pieces has his choice of equally preferred equipment. If both players have a digital clock with time delay feature, Black's choice will prevail.

The one exception: A late player (one who arrives after the round has started and his clock is running) may not insist on a substitution, even if he has a more preferred clock, so long as the original equipment meets the minimum tournament standards.

The Default Time Delay Setting

The default time delay for USCF-rated events with sudden death time controls is five seconds per move.

If the time delay feature is used with a combined time control (e.g., 40/2, Game/30), the time delay feature should be turned "ON" from the very first move of the game.

Time controls without sudden death do not require the time delay feature, although there is no harm in using it.

TD Announcements About Clock Rules

In general, tournament organizers and directors are free to modify the standard USCF clock rules to meet the needs of their local events or clubs. However, such changes should be listed in any advance publicity for the tournament and must be announced prior to the start of the first round.

For example: The standard USCF time delay setting for a sudden death time control is five seconds per move. An organizer who wishes to use a different time delay (e.g., zero seconds) is free to do so, but he or she must make an announcement about the change before the first round.

Players may not be penalized for following the standard USCF rules, unless a clear effort has been made to inform everyone about the intended change.

Shortening the Basic Time Control

Some tournaments are run on very tight schedules, and organizers have expressed a concern that the time delay feature may delay the start of subsequent rounds. To accommodate these organizers, USCF has authorized the following option:

5Fa. The tournament director has the right to shorten the basic time control, in minutes, by the time delay used, in seconds. Examples: clocks for Game/60 with 5-second time delay (t/d5) may be set at 55 minutes instead of 60; Game/30 t/d5 may be set at 25 minutes and

still be rated as Game/30. Game/10 with a 3-second time delay (t/d3) may be set starting at 7 minutes through 9 minutes.

The USCF stresses that shortening the basic time control is an option and should be announced in advance. The default rule is not to shorten the basic time control.

Q&A About the USCF's Clock Rules

Q: My opponent and I are using a mechanical clock. My opponent makes a claim of insufficient losing chances. What do I do?

A: A claim of insufficient losing chances is to be interpreted as a draw offer. If you agree with the claim, the game is drawn. If you disagree, the TD will decide whether the opponent has a valid claim.

In addition to the options described under the section "The 'Insufficient Losing Chances' Rule", the director may, at his discretion, replace the mechanical clock with a digital clock with time delay feature.

If the TD chooses this option, the claimant gets half of his remaining time, up to but not exceeding one minute. The opponent's time is not adjusted. The default time delay of five seconds is used, and the game proceeds to a finish under the time delay rules. Either player may win, lose, or draw the game, and the game is over by normal means.

Q: My opponent insists that we use his digital clock with time delay feature. The time control is 30/90, 30/30, with no sudden death. I have a mechanical clock. Who is right?

A: For sudden death time controls or combined time controls, the order of preference is:

1. Digital clocks with time delay feature.
2. Mechanical clocks.
3. Digital clocks without time delay feature.

For time controls without a sudden death component, types 1 and 2 are considered equally preferable. In your specific case, because the time control does not have a sudden death component, the player with the Black pieces decides.

Q: My game started with a mechanical clock, but around move 20 my opponent wanted to switch to a digital clock with a time delay feature. Can he force me to change clocks?

A: The short answer is NO. For a game with a combined time control, e.g., 50 moves in two hours followed by sudden death in 30 minutes, the preferred procedure is to use a digital clock with time delay set at five seconds from the beginning of the game.

However, if the game started with a mechanical clock, it should remain, except in the case of an insufficient losing chances claim where the TD wishes to make a substitution. Similarly, a player does not have the right to force a TD who is evaluating an insufficient losing chances claim to substitute a digital clock with time delay. The decision whether to substitute belongs to the TD, not the player.

Q: In a tournament game, I had K+R+P versus my opponent's K+N. As I was hurrying to make my moves, my flag fell. Do I lose the game? Should I have made an insufficient losing chances claim?

A: The same rule applies in all situations: if your flag falls and your opponent does not have mating material, the game is drawn.

In the situation you describe, you could have made a successful insufficient losing chances claim (if you were using a mechanical clock — remember, the insufficient losing chances option does not apply with digital clocks with time delay). However, because an insufficient losing chances claim is to be interpreted as a draw offer anyway, you did the right thing by playing on.

Q: My opponent's digital clock has a signaling device that shows the number of moves that have been made. Is this legal?

A: Clocks with signaling devices and move counters ARE legal. However, because of the possibility of error, players are advised not to place too high a reliance on them during play.

Players must still keep score if they wish to make claims about whether the time control has been reached. The information provided by the clock cannot be used as the only evidence in a time control claim.

Q: My opponent made an insufficient losing chances claim (we were using a mechanical clock). The TD said it was a close call, and watched the game for no progress. After a few moves, I made a silly blunder and lost my Queen. Before the TD could make his ruling, my opponent said he was withdrawing his claim. Is that legal?

A: An insufficient losing chances claim can be interpreted as an extended draw offer. The TD has two options if the situation is too close to call. He may watch for no progress or temporarily deny the claim and invite either player to make a re-claim if the situation changes. Or, the TD might place a properly set delay clock on the game; however, that was not the case here.

The usual interpretation is, if the TD invites a re-claim, the offer is off the table, so to speak. If the TD is watching for a lack of progress, the offer is live for however long it takes the TD to resolve the claim.

The TD can declare the game drawn at any time while he is watching for a lack of progress (even if the claimant's flag falls).

The TD should resolve the claim as soon as the situation changes sufficiently to clearly show either the player does or does not have insufficient losing chances.

When your opponent made his insufficient losing chances claim, he was announcing that he was willing to accept a draw (if he could get one). Once you dropped your Queen, it became clear that your opponent had no losing chances, and the TD should have declared the game a draw.

Note: If your opponent had dropped his Queen, the TD would then have been able to deny his claim.

Remember: Be careful what you claim!

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