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Running a Swiss System Tournament

Most people will have heard of the Swiss System without necessarily fully understanding what it entails. It was originally devised for chess tournaments, where there would be a range of abilities and far too many players for everyone to play in a league. The system aims to give all players the same number of games and to pit players of similar ability against one another. By and large, it works, though there is an element of chance involved in the initial draw and there will inevitably be the occasional mismatch.

Essentially, the process is that at the end of each round, an abbreviated league table is drawn up and the fixtures for the next round are set by pairing the top two players, then players 3 and 4 and so on down the table, with the proviso that no two players play each other more than once. Later, we'll look at how this is done in practice.

Three Points or Two ?

Three points for a win is almost universally accepted in soccer these days but should you use it for Swiss system ? Many do but is a win and a defeat really better than two draws ? The corollary of three points for a win is that the player with two draws is further down the table and, consequently, gets an easier game in the next round. It's worth pointing out here that, in chess, for which Swiss System was devised, the scoring system is that two draws are equal to a win.

I'm firmly in the two point camp but, if you go for three, be aware of the consequences of that decision.

A Look at the Process

Let's have a look at how the system works. Let's suppose that there are eight players playing four rounds of Swiss. (In reality, eight players is too small a field for four rounds but this is just for illustration.) In the first round, there's a free draw and the results of those games are

Alan 0-4 Becky

Colin 2-1 Dave

Emma 1-1 Frank

Gail 1-4 Harry

Alan	0			
Becky	2			
Colin	2			
Dave	0			
Emma	1			
Frank	1			
Gail	0			
Harry	2			

Note that you don't need a full league table. You just need the points at the end of each round. Some organisers use goal difference as a tie break. Personally, I think that's a mistake as, not only does it add time to the process of producing the next round's fixtures, it increases the chances of your best two players meeting in Round 2, whereas what you would prefer is a climax in Round 4. There are no guarantees but why make an unwanted outcome more likely?

The Round 2 fixtures are compiled by working down the list, starting by taking the players on two points, then one, then zero.

Here are the Round 2 fixtures, with their outcomes.

Becky 1-1 Colin

Harry 2-0 Emma

Frank 1-2 Alan

Dave 3-2 Gail

Alan	0	2		
Becky	2	3		
Colin	2	3		
Dave	0	2		
Emma	1	1		
Frank	1	1		
Gail	0	0		
Harry	2	4		

Round 3

Harry 0-1 Becky

Colin 0-2 Alan

Dave 1-1 Emma

Frank 2-3 Gail

Alan	0	2	4	
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Becky	2	3	5	
Colin	2	3	3	
Dave	0	2	3	
Emma	1	1	2	
Frank	1	1	1	
Gail	0	0	2	
Harry	2	4	4	

A bit of juggling is necessary now. Becky should play Alan but she's already played him. Harry is next on the list – she's already played him too ! The top player on three points is Colin – she played him in Round 2 ! Dave is next on the list.

The next fixture is between the two players on four points, leaving Colin, Emma, Frank and Gail. Frank has already played Emma and Gail, so Colin is the only viable option, leaving the two girls to contest the fourth fixture.

Round 4

Becky 1-1 Dave

Alan 2-0 Harry

Colin 1-0 Frank

Emma 0-2 Gail

Alan	0	2	4	6
Becky	2	3	5	6
Colin	2	3	3	5
Dave	0	2	3	4
Emma	1	1	2	2
Frank	1	1	1	1
Gail	0	0	2	4
Harry	2	4	4	4

I've deliberately manipulated the results to some extent in order to illustrate various points and, more often than not, one player will win all four games and you'll have a clear winner. However, as with any league based system, there is always the chance that two or more players will be tied on points at the top of the table. How you resolve this will depend on the time you have available. I'm not in favour of reverting to goal difference, as a big win over a weak opponent could give a player a fortuitous advantage. (I'm also strongly against encouraging players to blow beginners out of the water, just in case they need the goal difference – I'd much rather they built a safe lead and then switched to "coaching" mode to help the beginner improve his game.)

Ideally, a play-off is the solution but, if time does not permit, other options would include a shortened period of play – effectively "extra time" - or shots. Just have a plan to cover all the possibilities.

Odd Numbers

The problem of odd numbers is typically resolved with a bye which is far from satisfactory. Because each round is normally played over two sessions, we do have an opportunity to do something much better. Suppose the player who has the bye in round one gets two games in round two ? One in each session of round two ? Here's how it works.

The same players turn up at another competition – except for Harry, who has Covid and is self-isolating.

Round 1 – drawn at random

Alan bye

Becky 1-0 Colin

Dave 1-2 Emma

Frank 2-2 Gail

Alan	0*			
Becky	2			
Colin	0			
Dave	0			
Emma	2			
Frank	1			
Gail	1			

We go through the same process as before except Alan appears in it twice and is top of the “zeroes”, on the grounds that no points from no games is better than no points from one. Alan needs to be placed in as neutral position as possible to minimise the advantage or disadvantage of the bye.

It might be better to see this as a ranked list – B E F G A A C D

Round 2

Becky 1-0 Emma

Frank 1-2 Alan*

Gail 1-2 Alan

Colin 0-0 Dave

**Frank has already played Gail, so he skips to the next player in the list, Alan.*

Alan	0*	4		
Becky	2	4		

Colin	0	1		
Dave	0	1		
Emma	2	2		
Frank	1	1		
Gail	1	1		

Round 3

Alan 2-1 Becky

Emma 2-0 Colin

Dave 5-0 Frank

Gail is left with the bye

Alan	0*	4	6	
Becky	2	4	4	
Colin	0	1	1	
Dave	0	1	3	
Emma	2	2	4	
Frank	1	1	1	
Gail	1	1	1*	

Again, it's easier to see what's happening from a ranked list. Gail is ranked at the top of those on one point and has two places in the list.

A B E D G G C F

Alan 2-1 Emma

Becky 0-3 Gail

Dave 0-6 Gail

Colin 3-4 Frank

Alan has played Becky, so he plays the next player on the list, Emma.

Becky should play Dave, but that would leave Gail with a game against Frank, whom she has already played. Becky therefore plays the next player on the list, Gail.

Alan	0*	4	6	8
Becky	2	4	4	4
Colin	0	1	1	1
Dave	0	1	3	3
Emma	2	2	4	4
Frank	1	1	1	3
Gail	1	1	1*	5

At the end of the competition, each player has had four games and had a fair day's play.

Odd Numbers of Rounds with an Odd Number of Players

Most competitions have four rounds of Swiss but I was once asked how I would deal with an odd number of players in three or five rounds of Swiss. I concluded that it's the bottom player who would benefit from extra practice so I would give him two games in the final round and count his better result in the final table.

Try it Yourself

Hopefully, I've shown how a Swiss System tournament can be run efficiently from a single sheet of A4, rather than the mounds of paperwork and down time I've seen in competitions I've played in. Next time you run a tournament, give it a go and keep your entrants until the end of the day's play, rather than seeing them drift off home at lunch time !!