

## TIME LIMITS 1970-2025 - A CHRONOLOGY

Nottinghamshire must be county champions when it comes to tinkering with the League Rules. We can be the only Association with a dedicated meeting for that purpose – and I'm sure the consequence is a local version of Parkinson's Law:

“Rule Revisions expand to fill available time at the Rules Revision Meeting”.

Actually I plead guilty to being a serial offender in proposing changes, along with What's-his-name (Gambit) and You-know-who (Ashfield). I'm sure we're all on the Lord High Executioners little list...

Some rules are more hacked about than other. Favourites include the eligibility rule (currently C4) and until recently the rules for out-county players and teams. But way out on its own for litigation is the vexed matter of time limits. What follows is a not entirely serious, and shamelessly partisan (I have VIEWS on time limits) look at the rule over the past half century.

**1.** In 1970 the time limit was 30 moves in 75 minutes, and then 6 moves per 15 minutes. Matches started at 7.15, with a minimum 2½ hour playing session. That year the use of clocks was made compulsory in Division 1 (proposer Ian Graham, passed 12-3), and extended to Division 2 a year later.

**2.** The obvious problem with the time limit is that players can sit on a position for the win or draw on adjudication. Here's an exasperated Dr.G M J Lewis writing up the Executive Committee Minutes from 20th April 1971:

“Discussion of the league rules started on the controversial issue of the minimum number of moves to be played in matches. A veritable torrent of verbal diarrhoea broke forth from certain quarters, the eventual outcome of which was a proposal by Mr.Gillam that the Committee recommend to the AGM that the starting time of matches be changed from 7.15pm to 7.00pm. This was carried by 9 votes to 8, after the secretary had tried in vain to get a word in edgeways to point out that this change would not of itself have the desired effect of increasing the number of moves played, since either captain was still completely free to stipulate 2½ hours of play. Presumably the aforementioned affliction of the tongue had given way to mental constipation”

Yes I know – there's you and a roomful of gibbering idiots. We've all been to meetings like that. So everybody had a good laugh when they were read out at the next meeting? Well not quite. “The minutes were read by Mr. Cooper in the absence of Dr. Lewis” and “Mr. Gillam requested that future minutes be strictly restricted to a record of facts only”. Tut, Tut. And as for the recommended 7.00pm start time? There is no mention of it even being discussed at the AGM.

**3.** In 1973 there was a fundamental re-write of the league rules, spread over two meetings, including the establishment of the LMC and Rules Revision Meeting (RRM). A couple of modest changes were agreed. “Paul Kemp proposed an amendment the effect of which would make the minimum playing time in first division matches three hours instead of two and a half.” And “In a discussion on whether clocks should be mandatory in third division matches a compromise proposal from Mr. Todd was accepted. This reads “In the third and subsequent divisions either team may provide clocks and insist

on their use. If insufficient clocks are provided for all boards the team captain of the team providing the clocks may nominate the board on which that clock is used.”

**4.** In 1975 a youthful Neil Graham recklessly proposed “In the first Division the time limit will be 30 moves in the first 75 minutes. When black has completed his 30th move the players will stop the clocks whereupon both clocks will be set back 15 minutes. All further moves in that game shall be completed in the time remaining on each clock (This rule to operate for a trial period of one year only)”

But in 1975 the idea of blitz finishes in the league was way ahead of its time – visionary even. The minutes do not even record the voting - so it got slaughtered.

**5.** In 1973 the issue of using clocks below Division 2 was rather fudged. In 1978 RRM bit the bullet and extended compulsory use of clocks to Division 3 from September 1979 (a year and a half hence) and again in 1980 to Division 4.

**6.** It was the Sutton Secretary (Neil Graham? Steve Burke?) who proposed the obvious solution to too few moves being played – a faster time limit. 42 moves in 90 minutes and 35 moves in 75 minutes sailed through.

**7.** The second attempt to get a blitz finish was proposed by Nomads in 1986: “(The time limits shall be as now) except that in the second division where the rules for one trial season will be that after blacks 35th move, both clocks will be set back 10 minutes and the game completed in the time remaining”

This is all rather timid, and why Division 2 and 10 minutes instead of 15? John Swain proposed an amendment to give LMC the power to terminate the trial at Christmas, presumably on fear of all the old codgers suffering coronaries from the stress of it all. Anyway RRM wasn’t having it – both amendment and proposal were defeated.

**8.** Doug Sandford (Nomads Secretary) had a second go the following year at accelerating play.

“In the fourth and any lower division, the time limit shall be 35 moves in 1 hour, clocks shall to be retarded  $\frac{1}{4}$  hour and 11 moves shall be made in the remaining time. Adjudication procedures should then be adopted for any unfinished game”

Why 11 moves? Not that it matters – the proposal was lost 10-7

But note also the requirement to turn the clocks back 15 minutes. At the same meeting it emerged there was considerable variation in practice about whether clocks should be turned back after reaching the first time control. Andrew Walker (LMC Chairman) announced that LMC had given this weighty matter some consideration and indeed had reached a decision, and this would be announced to an anxious and expectant world before the start of next season. So was the resolution a pre-emption of the (presumably inevitable) decision to turn the clocks back?

**9.** The 1988 RRM featured a couple of proposals from Mansfield. It was Jonathan Tait in who found the magic formulation to get blitz finishes into the rules – make it optional. “This was a compromise motion which gave players a choice, and would also reduce the number of adjudications”

“Players shall be given a choice before the start of each game whether adjudication or play to a blitz finish in any uncompleted game. Adjudication to take preference if the players do not agree to blitz

Proposed time limits:

For adjudication 42 moves in 1½ hours

For blitz-finishes 35 moves in 1¼ hours + 15 minute blitz

After lengthy debate about the implications for grading, noise(!), and increased disputes the proposal was “carried overwhelmingly”. So this was an idea whose time had finally come. Well OK it likely meant two time limits in operation in any match, but who can object if both players wanted blitz?

Chris Cantrill proposed the time limit should be 42 moves in 1½ hours in all divisions, which would have the effect of making a standard 3 hour playing session. This was lost, due largely to the consequence of juniors in lower divisions playing an extra half-hour.

**10.** Two years on and the protagonists of blitz finishes wanted more. So Allan Richmond put forward the following:

(5) On Boards 1-3 in Division and Boards 1 & 2 in other divisions a blitz finish will be played if either player opts for it

(6) A team captain can only nominate three boards on which a player can insist on adjudication

(7) In cases where one player has opted for adjudication that player will be charged double the normal rate for an unsuccessful claim. Players opting for blitz will be charged 50p.

If I may offer some fraternal criticism this is all rather convoluted and incompetently drafted - why not come right out with it and just go for blitz across the board? The minutes record that “after long discussion about the merits or otherwise of blitz finishes against adjudication, including warnings about losing older players who object to quick-play finishes, it was decided to drop rule changes 5-7”. So the meeting rambled, as meetings do, and never actually discussed the merits (if any) of the proposed changes.

However an amendment proposed by Steve Burke

“If one player opts for a blitz finish and his opponent for adjudication the type of finish will be decided by the toss of a coin”

squeaked through 16-15 (and 17-14 on a recount). Of course it is ridiculous to toss for time limit so next year there was a proposal to reverse it, which was defeated 16-11.

**11.** In 1991 a proposal from Allan Richmond that

“Any player with a legitimate medical or other reason can apply to the League Management Committee to be exempt from playing blitz finishes”

passed unanimously.

That meeting also revisited the minimum playing session, with a proposal from J Carter that it should be three hours across the board. This was unanimously agreed to for Division 2, but an amendment to play three hours in all but the bottom two divisions was lost 14-12

**12.** In 1994 there were two proposals from Drag Sudar

- extending the minimum playing session to three hours (third attempt) and
- compulsory blitz finishes.

Since 1990 the league had been restructured (and shrunk) from four divisions of around 16 teams to five divisions of around 9 teams. There was a consensus that three hour sessions should be extended to Divisions 3, but not to Division 5. There was a vote on Division 4 won 14-10 for three hours. No doubt the extended session then helped the compulsory blitz finish pass 12-10.

The losers cried foul, claiming that votes of officers should not count on league rule matters. A proposal to that effect was lost 12-11 at the AGM. I'm surprised it nearly passed – most officers could obtain accreditation as club delegates, and it wouldn't have made the slightest difference.

**13.** But there are problems with blitz finishes. So, for completeness, it should be noted that those clever chaps on the FIDE Rules Commission came up with the two-minute rule, automatically incorporated into the league rules. But this is not really a satisfactory solution. Nobody understands it let alone uses it, and the Federation spawned a veritable encyclopaedia of guidance to arbiters on how to apply it.

**14.** There are no limits to human ingenuity so it was bound to happen. I speak of course of the invention of the digital (electronic) chess clock. But there are Luddites everywhere, who point out (correctly) that nobody knows how to start, stop or program the damned things, let alone add two minutes to opponent's time for an illegal move. But these objections are tiresome details in the great sweep of history, and inevitable world domination by the digital clock. However the Luddite Tendency passed the following daft additions in 1999:

- (1) Notification must be given with league entries "whether the club proposes to use electronic clocks, and if so for which team"

Because playing with digital clocks is obviously sneaky gamesmanship, for which prior warning should be given.

- (2) "Where electronic clocks are proposed for use, either player may provide an analogue clock and insist on its use"

Because – you never know – the digital clock might be an unexploded bomb...or telepathically sending the best move to the home player...or something

- (3) "Where an electronic clock is used, the required time periods must be set at the beginning of the match, so that no further adjustment of the clocks is required"

Because there is never any harm in stating the blindingly obvious.

**15.** LMC had a long look at the medical exemption in October 2005, and they were not happy bunnies. There had been 11 exemptions granted since the introduction of the rule – 4 for medical reasons, 6 for being “old”, with one unknown. Previous LMC’s had been too generous in granting exemptions. There were players with exemptions who seemed to be playing blitz finishes in other leagues. Derby & District League had a number of disabled players and had never had any problems with blitz finishes. The decision was to refer the matter to RRM, which presumably decided to abolish the rule (The RRM Minutes for 2006 and 2007 are missing. The rule was not in the 2007/08 league rules)

**16.** The first attempt to introduce incremental time limits in 2013 was a fiasco starring yours truly. Incremental time limits to be played by mutual agreement, with two alternatives on offer.

80 minutes + 10 seconds was lost 8-2 on fears of matches going beyond 10.30pm and – can you believe it – players defending an inferior position losing out from the loss of the two minute rule.

35 moves in 75 minutes then 10 minutes + 10 seconds per move was withdrawn on discovering this could not be programmed. (memo to self – do your homework)

Perhaps more importantly the meeting agreed to buy a set of digitals for County matches, and to award digital clocks as prizes for division winners in the league.

**17.** Recent years have seen a flurry of changes.

In 2016 the proposal from Steve Burke to abolish the intermediate time control - All moves in 90 minutes (75 minutes in Div 5) – passed by 1 vote. The traditional attempt to reverse this the following year failed and, equally traditionally, by a larger margin than the original vote.

In retrospect all moves in 90 minutes was an important step towards incremental time limits. The Federation finally got around to recommending them as best practice, so in 2017 Simon Scott proposed 75 minutes plus 10 seconds. This was inevitably amended to “by mutual agreement” and then passed comfortably.

In 2018 this was tweaked to 80 minutes plus 10 seconds (approved 10-7), and there were two proposals to push the boundary. Making incremental time limits compulsory in Division 1 proposed by me failed, but replacing “by mutual agreement” with “home team to nominate” again proposed by Simon Scott passed. The meeting also approved not awarding clocks as prizes for division winners, most clubs now having at least one full match set of digitals.

**18.** Summary

The past half century has seen the following changes:

(i) The use of clocks has become compulsory – Division 1 (1970) , Division 2 (1971), Division 3 (1979), Division 4 (1980), Division 5 (?)

(ii) The minimum playing session has increased from 2½ to 3 hours (except in Division 5) – Division 1 (1973) , Division 2 (1991) , Divisions 3 & 4 (1994)

(iii) Adjudication were first reduced by introducing faster time limits (1979) and then replaced by blitz finishes – by mutual agreement (1988), Coin toss (1990), Coin toss with medical exemptions (1991) , compulsory with medical exemptions, (1994), and finally just compulsory (2006)

(iv) Increments are now replacing blitz finishes – by mutual agreement of team captains (2017) , home team to nominate (2018).

This is not the end of the saga. Increments will surely be made compulsory in due course.

And are increments the end of the story, or will they develop problems like blitz finishes?

I wouldn't bet against it...

Robert Richmond, September 2019

**19.** In the summer of 2021, after suspension due to Covid, the LMC noted that some clubs might have issues with restricted opening times at their venues and suggested a temporary change allowing the home team to choose between 65' + 10" increments or 75' for the whole game for the 2021-22 season. This temporary time control continued in the 2022-23 season, with the intention of the league reverting in 2023-24 to the time limit stated in the league rules.

However, in May 2023, the RRM voted 15 to 2 to update the league rule:-

- (i) Some clubs were still experiencing time restrictions at their venues.
- (ii) Some clubs had gained several new members who - having only played chess online previously - were used to quicker time controls.
- (iii) Some clubs preferred the extra analysis and social time after the match.

**20.** At the 2024 RRM in May 2024, a proposal to remove the option of 75' for all the game was passed without any opposition, so now all matches are 65' + 10" increments from move 1.

Robert wondered if increments would develop problems. It appears to work fine most of the time but occasionally players still manage to lose on time; should we change to 60' + 15" increments?

Some players have become experts at repeatedly allowing their clock to run down to just 2 seconds left before moving; great entertainment for neutrals, but quite stressful for their team mates.

Dragoljub Sudar, January 2025