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Tournament formats review

Introduction

There has been increasing criticism of some of the formats used this year particularly the snake format which in 2009 was used in 20 out of 27 Northern club events (excluding Regional events and winter events). In 2008 it was 15 out of 25.

No format suits all requirements but some clubs are running snakes because they have limited knowledge and experience of the formats available.

The following points aim to highlight possible advantages and disadvantages of various formats and to form the basis for further discussions.

They do not explain how to run a tournament , anyone wanting advice on that should ask me.

All formats are easy to run with a small amount of experience if a non playing organiser is available but we rarely have that luxury. A computer can simplify the paperwork for most formats.

The comments are from my point of view , some points such as a fixed lunch break or the length of the days play will be seen as advantages by some players and disadvantages by others.

Reasons for holding tournaments

some of the following are mutually exclusive

- To find the best team
- Opportunity for teams to test themselves in pressure situations
- Opportunity for teams to practice together without pressure
- Opportunity for novices to try the sport more seriously
- An advertisement for the sport (passers by , newspaper reports etc)
- For teams to enjoy themselves

Points players may consider important (apart from the above)

again some of the following are mutually exclusive

- A full days play (particularly where long distance travelling involved)
- The option to leave when there is no possibility of winning (important where other commitments such as families are involved)
- Many players prefer playing different teams throughout the day , some formats make it quite likely for games to be repeated.
- Prizes and / or trophies.
- The chance to come back from losing the first round.

Brief descriptions of formats

Formats can be considered as 2 stage (eg league & knockout) or 1 stage (eg snake or swiss).

2 Stage Formats - Stage 1 - Leagues , Barrage or Snake

The only aim of Stage 1 is to sort the teams into different levels of competition for Stage 2 (eg Main and Plate).

- In Leagues of 4 each team plays each of the other teams , frequently a league of 6 will be needed in which case the teams in that league play 3 opponents from a pre defined order of play.
- A 3 round snake (or possibly 4 rounds for singles) is not significantly different.

Byes in leagues or snake are usually given as a 13-7 win or an average score but an average of only 2 games can be unfair and the teams having a bye have already had the disadvantage of only playing 2 games so I recommend the 13-7 win

- In a Barrage the first round is the same as a league but in the second round the two winners play each other as do the two losers.
After 2 rounds there will be 1 team on 2 wins and they go through to the main , the team on 0 wins go to the plate. The 2 teams on 1 win play each other with the winner going to the main and the loser to the plate.

The main advantage of a barrage is that teams cannot influence results in favour of other teams whereas in a league a team having won 2 games easily may not try too hard in the third round to favour friends.

There are also no byes to consider.

In my opinion that is very much outweighed by the following disadvantages;

- Approximately equal numbers go into the main and the plate (there are only 2 sections in stage 2) , if there are 24 teams this will give 12 in each stage 2 section which will mean 4 byes in the first round of each.
- Half of the teams only play 2 games in stage 1 and then have a very long wait for their next game.
- It is quite likely that the 2 teams that play a third round game will have already played each other.

2 Stage Formats - Stage 2

Straight Knockout , Rolling Knockout , Modified Rolling Knockout (Pre drawn Swiss)

A **straight knockout** is the simplest concept and has the following advantages

- There is no argument about the winner of the tournament
- There is a clearly defined final to decide the winner
- Each game is a pressure game

This format has not been favoured in our area for some time due to the following disadvantages

- The large amount of travelling involved leads to players wanting a full days play.
- Also because of the travelling involved there is a lot of car sharing which can be awkward if 1 player in the car is knocked out 2 to 3 hours before another.
- The final is often not supported and the tournament can end with only 2 teams and the organiser left.

The **rolling knockout** format described in the EPA organisers manual removes the straight knockout disadvantages without affecting the first two of the advantages.

However any team losing their 1st game in the knockout cannot finish in the top half which removes a lot of the competitive element from the additional games.

The **modified rolling knockout** format (also known as a pre drawn Swiss) means that teams who lose their 1st knockout game can still finish as high as 3rd.

This improves the competitive element but the logic of who plays who and who finishes in what position seems to cause some confusion.

General 2 Stage event comments

2 Stage formats are not suitable for less than 12 teams

All 2 Stage formats need a break between Stage 1 and Stage 2 while Stage 2 is organised and someone has to do that organising which can be awkward if the organiser is playing and is the last to finish the stage 1 games.

The organiser needs to either seed the stage 2 draw to reward teams doing well in stage 1 or do a random draw (which method is being used should be announced before the start of play).

It is common to play the same team in each stage which a lot of teams don't like and can also mean a team has a bye in each stage.

The different levels of competition for Stage 2 allow the less successful teams to compete to win their section which can be an advantage for novices. However it is debatable whether rewarding teams who finish say 17th is a good idea.

I have been at tournaments where the runner up in the consolage (18th) received trophies and prizes but 3rd in the main received nothing which I would not recommend. The organisers need to be sure what they are aiming to reward.

1 Stage Formats - Snake , Swiss , Modified Swiss

In each of these 3 formats teams know how many games they are going to play and there is no need for a fixed lunch break.

The **Snake** format is one of the easiest to run for a playing organiser because there is not much needs doing during the tournament. The tournament can be run over whatever number of the rounds the organiser decides and there are no limitations on number of teams.

However the major drawback of the snake is that teams can win the tournament due to a lucky draw. This becomes more likely the higher the number of teams in the tournament particularly if there is a wide spread of standard / experience. There is also no final.

I would only recommend the Snake format where the tournament is mainly for practice with not a large emphasis on finding a winner (eg winter league). The snake is also useful if there are less than 12 teams taking part.

It is possible to modify the Snake format in order to find the best team by playing either 4 or 5 rounds then a semi final and final or just a final for the top 2 or 4 teams.

I have seen this used several times but it has not been popular.

The basis for the **Swiss** format is that after every round teams play teams on the same number of wins (or as near as possible). The main advantage of this format is that luck of the draw is not relevant. The top 2 teams on the day can play each other in the last round but this is not guaranteed. The main disadvantage of the Swiss format is that all games in each round have to be finished before the order of play for the next round is known. This can considerably lengthen the days play and involve enforced breaks between games (some players may like that of course).

All teams have the opportunity to do well but if they are not having a good day they move down the rankings and play other teams not doing too well. This can be an advantage for novice teams who in the snake format could play top teams in each round.

The **Modified Swiss** is an attempt to retain the Swiss advantages but to remove the need for a round to be completely finished before the next round can start.

This is done by having the first two rounds played as a random draw. After that the order of play is decided based on teams results from 2 rounds earlier (i.e the ranking after round 1 decides the round 3 draw , the ranking after round 2 decides the round 4 draw etc).

A team can have a lucky or unlucky draw in the first 2 rounds but after that winning teams will move up the ranking so in the later rounds teams at the top will play other teams at the top.

It is impossible to win the tournament due to a lucky draw but the main drawback is that, as with the Swiss, although the top 2 teams on the day can play each other in the last round, this is not guaranteed.

Another advantage of the Swiss or modified Swiss is that byes are not a major factor in affecting teams positions. After the first 2 rounds a team near the bottom of the ranking list is given the bye (if there is one).

Since I devised the modified swiss format it's perhaps not surprising that I favour it but it seemed to get general approval when we tried it last year.

Although not currently set up in such a way it should be possible for Swiss or modified Swiss events to allow teams to arrive late or leave early without affecting other teams. There doesn't seem to be much pressure from teams wanting this option.

At the moment a teams opponents (after round 2) are worked out as follows ;

Team 1 in the rankings plays Team 2 unless they have already played in which case they play the first team in the rankings that they haven't already played.

It would also be possible to set it up so that Team 1 played Team 3 , Team 2 played Team 4 etc. This might improve the chance of having a final between two top teams who haven't already played but it still wouldn't guarantee a final so is probably an unnecessary complication.

Other miscellaneous formats

The **melee** is useful for events where some players only want to play for part of the time. Since the draw for teams is redone for each round there is no problem with players arriving late or leaving early. Melees can be competitive but there is a large amount of luck of the draw both with partners and opponents so they are really not suitable for competitions. They can be ideal for allowing novices to try the sport.

The **straight knockout** has the advantages that all games are pressure games and there is a clearly defined winner.

Since players will not travel knowing they could be going home after 1 game this format will only work if there are subsidiary tournaments for teams who are knocked out.

The easiest subsidiary format is that as teams are knocked out they put their names down and when there are 4 teams they play a straight knockout between the 4 with the winner receiving a prize such as wine so these are sometimes known as bottle tournaments (there would probably be an additional small entry fee). Teams can continue playing in these mini tournaments as long as they wish (the organiser may want to stop them when the main tournament is approaching the final).

The **Round Robin** is seen as the fairest format particularly where it is not just the winning position that is important. It is unlikely to be used for anything other than club tournaments with 8 teams or less and the regional qualifiers which are played over more than 1 day.

Even with playing every other team luck of the draw can still be important particularly at the end of the tournament when some teams may not be as concerned with winning.

Other Comments

- The rules of Petanque allow for the possibility of timed games. The attraction is that the tournament is not affected by games going on much longer than normal. I have played in tournaments with this format and I strongly advise against it. There is too much likelihood of gamesmanship from the team that is in front.
- The rules also allow for games in leagues / qualifying heats to be played to 11 instead of 13. I have not come across this and it doesn't seem a major benefit.
- Although not mentioned in the rules, tournaments could be run with each game having a fixed number of ends. This was brought in for Bowls and seems to be accepted. One specific use of this idea is a 3 end play off for teams whose results cannot be split at the end of stage 1 of a 2 stage event.

Conclusion

It is up to the organising club what format they want to use at a club event.

Perhaps the use of a variety of formats would reduce the current criticisms and would give a better idea of which advantages / disadvantages Northern players consider important.

I recommend that if possible the organisers should put their intended format on the entry form.

The preferred format for Regional events will be decided by the regional committee.