



USCF Chess rules: What happens when a flag has fallen, or clock says zero

Under standard US Chess over-the-board rules, a clock showing 0:00 means the player’s “flag” is down—but that alone does not automatically end the game. A player must call attention to it and make a valid time-forfeit claim; spectators and the TD may not initiate the claim.^[1] ^[2]

Basic procedure

If you notice your opponent’s flag has fallen:

1. Stop both clocks.
2. Clearly state that you are claiming a win on time.
3. If your opponent agrees, the game is over.
4. If they dispute it, summon the TD and leave the position, clock, and scoresheets untouched as evidence.

The claimant must still have time remaining. A player whose own flag is down cannot win on time during that time control.^[3] ^[1]

Result after a valid claim

Situation when the flag is claimed	Result
Opponent’s flag is down; claimant’s is still up; claimant has mating material	Claimant wins on time
Opponent’s flag is down, but claimant lacks material capable of ever checkmating	Draw
Both flags are down in the final/sudden-death control, with no earlier valid claim	Draw
Claimant’s own flag is already down	Claim fails; they cannot claim a win on time
Checkmate was legally completed before the flag fell	Checkmate wins; no time claim succeeds

The key material rule is **possibility of mate**, not whether the claimant has a forced mate from the current position. For example, king plus a lone bishop (or king plus a lone knight) cannot win a time-forfeit claim because checkmate is impossible with that material alone. A pawn counts as mating material because it could promote.^[1] ^[3]

“Clock says zero” nuances

- A digital clock’s zero display is normally the practical indication of a fallen flag. But under US Chess rules, it is considered down for purposes of enforcement when **one of the players points it out**. If neither player claims it and play continues, play generally continues.
- A TD should not walk over and announce, “Black’s flag fell—White wins.” The right to invoke the flag belongs to the players, not spectators, coaches, parents, or the TD. ^[2] ^[1]
- Do not “repair” your scoresheet after a flag is pointed out. Once the flag fall is raised, neither player may add or correct earlier missing moves. ^[1]
- Do not rely on the **move counter** on a digital clock to establish that a player failed to complete a required move quota in a multi-control game. US Chess treats scoresheets—not clock move counters—as the relevant evidence, since clocks can be set or pressed incorrectly. ^[2]

Checkmate and stalemate

A legal checkmating move ends the game immediately when the move is made; the player does **not** need to press the clock first. Thus, if you place a legal mating move while you still have time and your flag drops immediately afterward, you have won by checkmate.

Conversely, if your flag falls first and then you make a mating move, your opponent can claim the time forfeit. If the order cannot be determined, US Chess guidance generally favors the checkmate. Stalemate likewise ends the game immediately. ^[3]

Practical player rule

In a time scramble: **make your move, press the clock, then immediately look at both displays**. If your opponent is at zero, stop the clock and say, “I claim a win on time.” Do not wait, keep playing, alter the scoresheet, or let someone else make the claim for you.



What if both flags have fallen or both times show zero

If **both flags are down**—both players’ clocks show zero—then neither player can claim a win on time, because a valid claim had to be made while the claimant’s own flag was still up. It does **not** matter if a digital clock records which side hit zero first; once both flags are down, that information cannot be used to award a time-forfeit win. ^[11]

Sudden-death control

For a **sudden-death** time control—such as G/60, G/90, or G/45 d5—the result is a **draw** if either player points out that both flags are down before checkmate has occurred. ^[12] ^[11]

Example: In G/60, White sees Black at 0:00 and reaches for the clock to claim, but White’s clock reaches 0:00 before White actually stops the clocks. Now both are zero: **draw**, not a White win on time.

Multi-control time control

For a **non-sudden-death** control, such as 40/90 followed by SD/30, both flags being down during the *40-move/90-minute* first period does **not** automatically draw the game.

- Neither player has a valid time-forfeit claim if both exceeded the control.
- The game **continues** while the TD determines the correct clock settings and whether each player completed the required number of moves.
- Scoresheets are the core evidence for whether a player completed the specified number of moves; the digital clock's move counter alone is not conclusive. ^[13] ^[11]

So, in a 40/90 control, if both clocks hit zero before the 40th move, the appropriate answer is generally: **stop the clocks and call the TD**—not “agree to a draw” and not “whoever flagged first loses.”

Exceptions: game already ended

A completed legal **checkmate** has priority. The game ends immediately when the mating move is made; the player does not have to press the clock. Thus, even if both displays later show zero, checkmate wins if it was legally delivered before the double-flag situation was noticed. ^[14] ^[15]

Likewise, a legal stalemate or another valid game-ending result takes effect when it occurs; clocks do not retroactively undo it.

Practical TD/player shorthand

Clock situation	Sudden death	Non-sudden death / move-control period
Opponent at zero; your flag still up; valid claim	Win on time, subject to mating-material rules	Win on time only if opponent missed the required move count, subject to the scoresheet/material requirements
Both clocks at zero	Draw	No time-forfeit claim; game continues under TD direction
Checkmate was completed first	Checkmate wins	Checkmate wins

The useful on-board habit is: if you see the opponent's flag down, **stop the clocks immediately and state the claim**. If you wait long enough for your own flag to fall too, in sudden death you have converted a potential win into a draw. ^[11]

✱✱

1. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-2026.pdf>

2. <https://new.uschess.org/news/just-rules-flag-falls-part-1>

3. <https://new.uschess.org/news/just-rules-flag-falls-part-ii>

4. <https://www.logicalchess.com/info/reference/clockfaq.html>

5. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chp-1-8-24-20.pdf>

6. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chapters-1-2-10-11-9-1-20.pdf>
7. <https://uschess.org/index.php/Official-Rules/>
8. <https://www.chesshost.app/blog/chess-clock-rules/>
9. <https://chesstimerdigital.com/blog/what-happens-when-a-chess-clock-runs-out-rules-explained/>
10. <http://www.wachusettchess.org/Rules.php>
11. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chapters-1-2-9-10-11-8-23-21.pdf>
12. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chp-1-8-21-20.pdf>
13. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chapters-1-2-10-11-8-24-20.pdf>
14. https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/scholregs_2025-26-v-1.0a.pdf
15. https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-scholastic-regulations-2022-2023a_8-6-2022.pdf
16. <https://forum.uschess.org/t/move-counter-or-not/14226>
17. <https://forum.uschess.org/t/do-you-drop-players-who-fail-to-appear-for-the-remainder-of-the-tournament-pairing/54345>
18. <https://forum.uschess.org/t/flag-fall-comment-by-spectator-with-17-seconds-remaining/2856>
19. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chp-1-8-24-20.pdf>
20. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chapters-1-2-10-11-9-1-20.pdf>
21. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-2026.pdf>
22. <https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/us-chess-rule-book-online-only-edition-chapter-10-9-1-20.pdf>
23. https://new.uschess.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2021_k-12-program.pdf
24. <https://forum.uschess.org/t/chess-clocks-should-freeze-or-bellows-on-flag-fall/5695>
25. <https://forum.uschess.org/t/is-g-90-inc-30-a-sudden-death-time-control/20593>