

Is the sporting world putting money before fairness?

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As the 2016 [World Snooker Championship](#) gets underway, the 32 entrants will compete for the most sought-after prize in the game. But not all of them will have gone through the same struggle to be there.

The top 16 [players](#), defined by the highest money earners over the past two years, get automatic qualification to the televised stages of the

tournament, held at the Crucible in Sheffield. The current world champion also receives a direct entry. The remaining places are decided by a qualifying competition involving players ranked 17-144 in the world, any other living world champions and selected players from emerging countries.

Once the 32 players reach the Crucible, a player needs to win five matches to become the world champion. But those not in the top 16 will have had to win an additional [three matches](#) before this point. [Is this fair](#) ? Why do half the players in the final stages of the tournament have to compete against another 100 or so players to play at the Crucible, when the top 16 get automatic entry? Why not just allow the top 32 ranked players to enter the final rounds, or make every player have to qualify?

Darts has a similar system where there is a qualification competition but the top 32 ranked players get [automatic entry](#) to the final stages. If you are one of the top 32 players in darts, you are good enough to gain entry to the final rounds of the world championship, but only the top 16 in snooker are given the same courtesy.



Unfair advantage? Credit: Agência Brasil/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

The World Snooker Championship isn't the only sporting tournament whose fairness [can be questioned](#). For example, Lancaster City football club would have to win 13 matches to win the FA Cup, whereas Manchester United would only have to win six matches. This is because the top clubs only enter the competition in the third round, whereas other clubs enter at [earlier stages](#).

The football World Cup has a complex set of [qualification rules](#) that ensure that there are representatives from each continent in the finals. But this means there will inevitably be countries that do not get a place in the finals that arguably deserve to because of their greater abilities.

Other sports have even more extreme rules. The America's Cup (sailing)

and the World Chess Championship have a system where the current champion [automatically qualifies](#) for the final.

Once the players have been decided for a tournament, there is the thorny question of seeding and who plays whom? Many tournaments place or "seed" the top ranked players in different halves of the draw. This is so that the best players will only meet in the latter stages of the competition, with the top two seeds only being able to meet each other in the final.

Some tournaments go a stage further – the football World Cup is a [prime example](#). Once you reach the finals there are group matches then the knock-out stages. Top teams are seeded into different groups but the exact method of assigning teams to groups is quite complicated – watch the first 45 seconds of this video for some idea of the complexities.

Deciding on a structure

Why are these sports tournaments structured the way they are? It might be to determine the best competitor. It could be to provide an opportunity for an outsider to have their 15 minutes of fame. It might be to provide a good experience for the spectators.

A more cynical view – but probably more accurate – is that it's about maximising revenue both from paying spectators and television rights. If the top 32 players in snooker automatically qualified for the [world championship](#), there would be no qualification phase and the revenue opportunities that it brings would be lost.

It must be incredibly frustrating for a player if you miss out on the world finals because you are not ranked highly enough, when in another sport you would have automatically qualified. If you look at the various sports, from football to golf to tennis, there is little commonality as to how the teams or players that make it to the finals are decided.

The governing body of each sport has undoubtedly spent a great deal of time deciding how best to run their flagship event. But it raises the question of whether there is one best way to decide on the finalists? A way that maximises revenue and spectator enjoyment and yet leaves the participants feeling that they have been treated fairly.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Is the sporting world putting money before fairness? (2016, April 19) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-sporting-world-money-fairness.html>

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