

# How to Autocrat a Tournament

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Taking on the role of Autocrat for an event can be one of the most frustrating adventures you can imagine, but it can also be one of the most rewarding and satisfying experiences as well. It is my favorite way to give back to this organization that has given me so much; the society and company of like-minded people.

This handout is meant to give you access to information useful when organizing an event. It will not give you all the information necessary for you to be successful. How successful you will be is entirely dependent on how diligent you are in asking questions, finding answers and following through on the details.

If you are thinking about volunteering to autocrat an event, here are some things to consider (and be realistic here):

- Will your life (work, friends and family) allow you enough time to do a good job?
- Are you willing to commit several months, possibly up to a year, to one project?
- Do you have the temperament to work with all the people that you will interact with?
- How is your health over a stretch of 6+ months?
- How adaptable are you when plans go awry?
- How do you act/feel/behave under stress?

The event autocrat is the "buck stops here" person. There is a lot riding on the abilities of the autocrat. In some cases, it can be a branch's financial viability. It is a tough responsibility and something you shouldn't take on without a great deal of careful thought and support from your family and friends.

## Getting Started

A current SCA Membership is required to autocrat an event. An autocrat is considered to be an officer of the sponsoring branch (technically, a deputy of the seneschal). Officers are required by Corpora to hold memberships. As an officer, your membership provides you with additional insurance under the "officer and director" liability policy. An explanation of this policy can be found in the Seneschal's handbook (<http://www.sca.org/docs/seneschals-hb.pdf>).

It is a really good idea to read all the Corporate, kingdom and branch level documentation ("customary") related to running events. The An Tir Autocrat's website has a host of useful links for your convenience. The more familiar you are with the rules, requirements, and deadlines associated with an event, the more successful, and less stressed you will be.

Know who is in charge and who you have to answer to at the branch level. Understand your authority and limitations of your authority as regards the event.

Get all the help and advice you can find.

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## **Types of events**

In general, events fall into two basic categories: indoor and outdoor. In An Tir, indoor events tend to be during the "feast season" which is roughly October through April. Outdoor events tend to be during the "tourney season" which is roughly May through September, and often revolve around martial activities. The type of event you put together will depend on your interests, the needs of your branch and to some degree its financial abilities.

## **Types of tournaments**

Tournaments come in many shapes and sizes and don't always involve heavy armored combat, although in the SCA, that is by far the most common kind and the focus of today's class. Other tournament-oriented events can be focused on:

- Rapier combat
- Armored archery combat
- Target archery
- Equestrian activities
- War band tournament or "Tournament of Armies"

## **Stages of organizing events**

Event organization falls roughly into the following stages:

1. Putting together a budget and submitting the event bid.
2. You're approved! Pre-event paperwork.
3. Contracting services for the event.
4. On the job training at the event.
5. Post event tasks

Once you decide on the type of event and tournament you want to put together, your next step is to come up with an event proposal including a budget. For many people, putting this together can be one of the hardest tasks in this entire process. If you can skate on previous year's event proposals with some minor adjustments, try and take advantage of the research that has already been done. If you're creating a new event or if your event venue has never been used before by your group, you'll have some research to do.

## **Coming up with a budget**

**SITE:** Your first job will be to find a site. Allow yourself plenty of time to search for the perfect site for your event. Start by checking with every fairground in your local area. Large outdoor sites are marginally easier to find in my opinion, unless you happen to live in a well-populated metro area. Publicly owned sites are easier to call on because they are generally in the phone book. Check with Federal, State, County and City entities. Check the yellow pages for camps, especially Boy Scout camps. Private property is usually found through the "friend of a friend" method, though if you have any suggestions please feel free to let your local branch know.

If you find a site that is outside your branch's borders, it's a commonly accepted courtesy to request use of the site from the neighboring branch. Technically, they can't tell you no if its public property, but incurring their ill will may complicate your job and you'll lose attendance to boot.

**DATE:** The whole site and date thing go hand and hand and can be a bit of a dance. Sites will only be available on certain days, and available weekends on the Kingdom Calendar may not coincide. Date conflicts are worked out with Kingdom Calendar

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and the other branches in your area. Make sure to check previous year's calendars in order to avoid "traditional" weekend dates of older events.

**AMENITIES:** Certain basic needs must be met in order for your event to be successful. We've all been to events where the portable toilets weren't cleaned often enough. What do you remember about that event? What did you talk about afterwards?

The following list shouldn't be considered comprehensive, but should cover the basics

**Must haves:**

Toilets  
Parking  
Flatish camping area

**Ought to haves:**

Potable water  
Garbage disposal  
Driving on the lawn  
Handicapped access

**Nice to haves:**

Showers or bathing facilities  
Pets  
Fires  
RV parking  
Shade

**OTHER EXPENSES:** There are a host of other things that must be paid for. They include:

- Copying - waiver forms, site handouts, newcomer handouts
- Insurance rider if required by the site
- Equestrian insurance rider
- Advertising in the kingdom newsletter
- Baronial fundraisers (for instance, a food fundraiser)

Generally, I will budget for "miscellaneous" expenses that always seem to come up. The amount I budget for depends on the projected event attendance, but usually no less than \$20. This doesn't mean that I have to use all of that, just that it's available if I need to. This will cover things like phone calls, extra pens for gate, caution tape for marking off "out of bounds" areas on the site and the like.

### **Putting it all together - The Proposal**

As you assemble the information for your presentation, keep in mind the following:

- You are probably presenting your event bid in a business meeting. People might be tired, cranky, hungry or all three. Don't take it personally.
- The more information you present, the longer the discussion. This seems to be an unwritten law of some sort. You might have a better experience if you keep the proposal limited to the facts and provide additional information as a supplement or in response to questions.

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- People have short attention spans. Keep it brief.

Once you have an idea of what your major expenses will be you'll be able to put together the budget for your event proposal. Bid requirements can vary from branch to branch. You should always check with your seneschal for specific event proposal requirements. Ideally, they will have written guidelines or bid proposal samples for you to review.

Regardless of the specifics, it's probably safe to assume that some or all of the items on this list are expected.

- Summary of event theme or type.

Write a paragraph or so about the theme or type of event you plan to hold. Include information on time, place or event you are recreating, if applicable. Include feast information and any other special activities you have planned.

- Autocrat contact info

Include your full modern name, home address, phone number(s) and email. You may also include your SCA name and titles. Including your SCA membership number and expiration date is a good idea as well.

- Staff information

Information on staff could just be a list of the staff that you anticipate you will need. If you have already talked to people, list their names and, optionally, their contact information.

- Site information and amenities

Include the name and postal address of the site. Describe the amenities and, optionally, give a brief description of how you plan to lay out the event.. .

- Proposed Dates

Include both a preferred date and one or two alternates in case of conflicts.

- Budget

At a minimum your budget should include event expenses, fee schedule, and a breakeven point.

Your breakeven point is the minimum number of people that must attend in order to cover the expenses of the event. If you have a fee structure that differs for adults, families and children, then base your breakeven on the number of member adults needed to pay for the event. Don't stress on this too much. It's an educated guess. What your branch will be looking at is if the minimum number of attendees can be reasonably expected to show and is within reasonable limits for the type of event. If your breakeven point is too high, you should really go back over your budget and figure out what you can cut.

### **Double check your work**

Before submitting your bid, it would be a good idea to connect with experienced autocrats, branch officers or, if your branch is a barony, your Baron/ess. This is so they can look over your bid and spot any serious flaws and coincidentally, so you can ask for their assistance. Autocrats are not the staff. They head the staff and you should be considering who you want to cover the major area of responsibilities because YOU can't do it all. We'll discuss this further in the next section.

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### **You're approved! Pre-event tasks**

Once your bid and budget are approved, it's time to get on the kingdom calendar. If you want to reserve your date before you have all the site details nailed down, you will need to mail a "Date Reservation" form to the Kingdom Calendar deputy. The form is on the kingdom website or your branch seneschal should have a copy.

The only required form that needs to be filed with the kingdom is the "Event Information Form". This is the form that makes your event an "official" SCA event. It also needs to go to Kingdom Calendar. The EIF must be received by the 28th of the month that is TWO months ahead of your event. For instance, for an event in August, Calendar needs to have the forms by June 28th.

Other things that need to be done:

- Reserve your site. Make sure to get a confirmation number if possible.
- Schedule a site walk through.
- Reserve your site amenities, this includes portable toilets and garbage at a minimum
- Decide what activities you want to include in your event including classes, competitions and demonstrations.
- Send in your event copy to your kingdom newsletter. In An Tir, the deadline for the Crier is the same day as the deadline for the event and date forms. Instructions for submitting copy to the Crier are included in every Crier edition.
- Publicize your event online and in local newsletters. Send your copy to your branch chronicler and to the all the chroniclers in the surrounding area.
- Get enough copies of gate sign in sheets to cover your expected attendance and then some. Official forms can be found on the SCA website.
  - Adult Waivers
  - Member sign in
  - Minor Waivers
  - Minor medical forms.

### **Putting together an event staff**

The first place you should look to for members of your staff is the branch officers. It can be argued that part of their job is to make sure that the duties of Constable, Marshal, Herald, Lists, Chiurgeon, Water bearer and Exchequer are covered for your event. If your branch doesn't have officers in these positions, you'll need to find someone to take responsibilities for these areas. In addition to the above-mentioned offices, it's also a good idea to have a merchant liaison, and you may choose to have some one in charge of children, archery and equestrian activities if you plan to include them in your event.

I'll tell you something I learned the hard way. Events don't need to be all things to all people. And frankly, if you pack them too full of stuff to do, you won't get enough volunteers to help with on-site activities.

You can have one person fulfill several jobs, but be careful that they don't get overloaded. Some folks have difficulty in pacing themselves. If you have some very helpful individual that takes on many duties, you may find yourself in a pinch if they have an attack of "life".

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Another important job is something I call a "nasty-crat". This is the person who is in charge of checking the portable toilets for paper and ick factor, emptying garbage cans and doing any number of nasty things that come up when you're on site. I call my usual "nasty-crat" - husband. If you don't have one of those, find someone who really owes you.

### **Getting down to the wire**

- Reconfirm all of your reservations
- Check in with your staff to make sure they are finding some volunteers to help them out.
- Contact the "stuff" steward (chamberlain) for your group. Make arrangements to pick up things from storage. Write your site handout.
- Make event tokens, if you want them.
- Talk to your list person and find out how they want to set up the field to accommodate your tournament.

### **At the event**

When I was first learning the skill of autocratting, the most difficult part of the process was the on-site work. I came into the job with a strong sense of organization and I handled the pre-event paperwork with ease. I knew what to expect and I was in complete control of that aspect. The biggest challenge I faced was letting go of that need to control everything when it came to the event weekend.

There comes a time in the days just before the event that you realize you've done everything you can to prepare. Anything that hasn't been done by now, isn't going to get done. It will be obvious that those things are necessary for the event to be successful. This is time to begin making the mind set shift from pro-active to reactive. Practice deep breathing. No, really. It will help.

When you get to the event, the traits that you should channel are flexibility and quick decision-making. Events are really controlled chaos. Your job is to give a framework for the participants to play in, but when you introduce a couple hundred people on site, that's a lot of variables. Fortunately, we are a society built on the ideal of chivalry and honor. For the most part, people will live up to those ideas. For those that don't, well, that's why you have a constable.

### **Getting set up**

Plan to arrive on site early enough to get your personal camp site set up. You'll feel a lot better if that is taken care of. Make arrangements for your family to be taken care of and someone to look after you as well—make sure you get fed, sit down occasionally, have time to go the restroom, etc.

It would be a good idea to arrange some people to help you with site set up. You should have picked up everything you need from storage and purchased those items that you don't have. You will need to set up your gate area, the tournament area, merchant area and roads if you're going to use them. You should be on site to meet your portal toilet and garbage vendors to show them where to put their items. If you don't have enough people to set everything up – take care of the basics, like gate, and simply wait until enough people have arrived. Don't kill yourself getting pavilions up, etc, because that way lays exhaustion and injury.

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## **On Site**

At some point, you just need to let everything take its course. My best advice is to let your staff do their job.

- Remain flexible and open to suggestion.
- Remain calm. Don't let yourself get too riled up over changes to your plans.
- Take care of yourself: Eat and drink lots of water.
- Put on sunscreen. Stay in the shade if possible.
- Sit.
- Have your Exchequer or a warranted deputy take care of the money.
- Turn things over to a trusted staff member, and get a good night's sleep.
- If there is a court, you'll be asked if you have announcements.
- The wake-up call herald will want to know what time you want the call to go out and what you want said.

## **Winding down**

- Make sure that you have enough help with site clean up. Remember our motto: "Always leave a site cleaner than we found it."
- Politely go around (or have someone else do it) and remind people of the site closing time if it doesn't look like they are moving.

## **Post Event Tasks**

- Call your vendors to make sure they picked up their stuff as soon as you can after the event.
- Put together your list of lost and found items and publicize it.
- Write your closing report.

Be sure to include a description of any problems that occurred and what you did to resolve it. You should ask for and receive reports from all your staff members covering their areas of concern.

- Make sure all of your receipts for event related purchases get turned in.
- Check with the Exchequer and get closing numbers.