

ARA Event Observer Report

Observer Name:

Alex Wang

Observer State of Residence:

California

Event Name:

ARA Invitational 2025 (<https://www.nariichi.org/ara-invitational-2025>)

Event Location:

Executive Hotel Le Soleil New York

Event Date:

Jan 18-20, 2025

Number of Participants:

64

Event Schedule Summary: *(Days played, number of rounds, finalist rounds, time per round, etc.)*

3 days, 6 hanchan each day (played in sets of 2-hanchan with each pairing), 70+0 time, with 90-minute scheduled slots for each hanchan, starting at 9:30 AM each day, with a roughly 90-minute lunch break after the first two hanchan each day, ending around 8:00 PM.

No finalist rounds or cutoffs.

The format was a set point scramble, with points being earned based on cumulative point placements after 2-hanchan sets (4-3-1-0 for 1st to 4th place). Tiebreakers for set points were determined based on overall raw score.

Names of Officials/Judges:

Organizer: David Bresnick

Head Judge: Robert Carmosino

Judges: Erik Karhan, Edward Zeng, Kristy Chang

Volunteers: Ann Kwan, Claire Pozniak, Laura King, Andres Hernandez, Greg Chin, Sheng Dong, Maya Way, Netty Yee, Chris Yoritzo

Communication to Players: *(How were announcements, standings, pairings etc. communicated to players during the event?)*

Randomized pairings were made via Pacific Mahjong League's approved website system, and predetermined before the event to ensure that no repeat players were matched together across different sets.

Set pairings were available on the website throughout the tournament. Seating was determined at each table using the prescribed WRC Traditional Draw method (12p+winds).

Standings were made available via a spreadsheet posted in the ARA Invitational discord channel, and also made available at the venue room via projected display.

Announcements and communication was done verbally on site with no amplification, which was sufficient for the room the tournament was held in.

Prizes:

The top 16 players were awarded seats to the WRC 2025 Tokyo tournament as well as medals, with M-league memorabilia pins being given to other participants in the tournament,

Catering:

No catering was provided outside of bottled water, and some hot drinks in the hotel lobby, though there were many food options to choose from within walking distance and ample time to eat lunch.

Tournament Atmosphere:

The general atmosphere was competitive and serious, as this was an invitational tournament with mostly all experienced tournament players. All of the games were played on auto-tables, the games were played at an above-average level.

While the venue room itself was small for the player capacity, the mood was mostly respectful and quiet during rounds.

Positive Feedback:

Comments were received regarding the tournament being well-organized, with rounds largely starting on schedule and starting promptly. The lunch break was also greatly appreciated.

In addition, a comment was received regarding several players on the last day that were not in contention for the top cut still playing respectfully and with good sportsmanship, which should be commended.

Positive comments were received regarding the level of play in the tournament, with a desire to play in similarly competitive invitational tournaments in the future, even if not for WRC seats.

Several positive comments were provided on set play in general, and with the spread of set points assigned to different placements (4-3-1-0). It was a new dynamic of competitive play that felt fresh to some players that had not experienced this as much previously.

Some appreciative comments were received regarding the photography work and documentation throughout the tournament.

Judging was generally handled quickly and professionally. It was appreciated that they were proactive about adding time when calls were made, as there is often additional pressure against disrupting a game for a judge call in timed formats.

Complaints and Issues:

Auto Table Shuffling:

Comments from over 10 people were received regarding clumping and poor shuffling being observed in starting hands as well as draws, specifically on the Alban auto tables. While a couple reports could be coincidence, there seemed to be more than enough irregularities with the walls being observed throughout the tournament to be noted as a significant issue.

In the future, it is recommended that organizers encourage players to shuffle the tiles briefly before pushing tiles into the auto table to alleviate this issue.

Format:

Some players felt there could be improvements in pairings for this style of set play format. While the set play in general was an interesting and well-received format for tournament play, it was thought that some form of Swiss pairing, late cut, or triple elimination, would have improved the quality of competitive play.

Particularly, it would be ideal to not be matched with players that had different tournament conditions as the tournament progressed. Those who advocated these ideas felt they would rather play duplicate players throughout the course of a tournament if dictated by standing/progress, than force unique pairings throughout the tournament. Set play is best utilized when everyone on the table is playing for the same thing.

For example, if not everyone at a table could realistically make the top cut, then player intent becomes very mixed, or player commitment levels could become drastically different. For players without a chance to make the top cut, this is unengaging because they could only really serve as roadblocks or gatekeepers for those still vying for the top. And for those still with a chance, they are playing against players that do not have to weigh similar risks or stakes when playing their games.

Several complaints were made regarding the tiebreaker used for the set play format. Using raw scores to break ties did not make sense in a set format, where you are often playing for very different conditions, and not prioritizing overall score within your set. For a more consistent top ranking, using average placement, or other placement-based tiebreakers would be far preferable to scores for tiebreaks.

One criticism regarding set play as a tournament format in general is that it didn't allow players to play against enough different people.

Sportsmanship and Player Issues:

Comments were received that could be done from organizers and judges to discourage negative attitudes and disruptive behavior, especially for an invitational tournament where the standard of play and respect is held higher.

For minor issues or rulings, players should be encouraged to self-regulate and try to resolve their issues within the table before resorting to a calling for a judge.

Several complaints were received regarding rules lawyering, nitpicking, and angle-shooting during the tournament, and that abuse of judge-calling should be penalized with warnings or other infractions. It is this observer's opinion that sportsmanlike players should prioritize trying to maintain the game state themselves, rather than try to catch people on their mishaps for some kind of competitive advantage.

Several specific complaints were made against the player [redacted]:

During their games, this player frequently interrupted play by calling for a judge loudly, lodging a complaint of being unable to hear a "Tsumo" or other calls, even though they were audible to other

players on the table. It was thought that this behavior was intentional and disruptive, potentially as an attempt to secure an unfair advantage, or to needlessly create a tense atmosphere or to undermine the concentration and performance of other players.

Furthermore, though this player demanded a lot from other players, they did not seem to follow some basic table etiquette themselves.

Specifically, this included:

- Taking excessive time to organize their hand, delaying the game
- Not moving their wall in for other players to access
- Touching the wall then deciding to make a call

While [redacted] is a skilled and experienced player, their unsportsmanlike conduct and inconsistent standards made it difficult to play with them. It was thought from several players that this type of “rules lawyering” or “angle shooting” should be strongly discouraged in competition mahjong by future organizers. There is a concern that such behavior could hinder the growth of Riichi Mahjong in the US if it became more widespread, and would harm our reputation if this type of behavior were to represent the country.

Several specific complaints were made against the player [redacted]:

In several games throughout the tournament, this player was very defensive, lacked self-awareness and generally exhibited an uncooperative attitude at their tables. This player caused negative experiences at their tables by being demanding as well as being disruptive with loud but frivolous and even hypocritical judge calls.

While this player fell ill on day 2, perhaps causing some of the stress that contributed towards their poor attitude, they proceeded to delay their tables without grace, exerting a negative attitude and generally making their tables uncomfortable with their behavior, which continued into the next day. In one specific instance, this player loudly chastised another player for checking their notebook for score differentials, when this player had missed the TO announcement which allowed this.

In another instance, one player requested that this player play more quickly as their actions were repeatedly on the slow side. They then demanded the player call a judge if they wanted them to play faster, which they were forced to do. This felt especially combative and disrespectful for something that could be resolved at the table itself, or with a little additional effort from the player themselves.

It is recommended that a player be encouraged to drop from a tournament if they are truly feeling ill, especially if there is risk of something being contagious. In this case, some players reported similar nausea and unwellness on the days following the tournament.

Judging:

Loudly calling a judge should be strongly discouraged, either during or after a game, as it is disruptive not only for your table but for all of the tables in the room. A raised hand, or trying to flag down a judge silently should be sufficient, and judges should be generous with giving bonus time to reduce the need to try to press for a quicker response with a loud verbal call.

There were cases where there were minor delays when tables needed busting sticks when a player went negative- in these cases, time should be given back to the table if they needed to take the time to wait for a judge to retrieve or provide the sticks required to continue play.

Some comments were received regarding judge calls being too lenient, when compared to the standard at WRC that finalists may see.

Venue:

Some complaints were received regarding the crowdedness of the room, especially regarding poor ventilation as the day progressed, which had a negative effect on concentration.

A complaint was made regarding venue bathrooms being slow to replace paper or other amenities, causing delays.

A complaint arose regarding the chairs provided, especially with respect to the height of some of the auto tables, causing minor discomfort and poor ergonomic positions.

General:

A complaint was made regarding the incorrect Top 16 being announced and awarded- this was unprofessional and unacceptable for this type of tournament.

A complaint was made regarding the score entry software when settling table results not checking that the scores sum up properly (feature request).

A comment was received regarding the notebooks being a little awkward to use in practice, and that something like Post-It notes may have worked better for score tracking within a set.

Observer Personal Summary:

Overall, the event was run very smoothly and well-scheduled. Communication was clear throughout the tournament, and there was great effort to start each round promptly. The location was very convenient to get to, and had many options to explore around as well.

It was fun and challenging to play in this more competitive tournament, and I'm glad to see the level of players across the country rise with every year. The logistics of a full auto-table tournament of this size are not simple, and the organizers and volunteers all did a great job putting things together.

As this tournament would determine the representatives that were sent to a tournament with global reach, standards were held much higher than the average tournament. It would be good to see additional education regarding expected decorum, such as table etiquette and body language, when playing competition mahjong on a world stage, since there are many different subcultures of play across the country, and not everyone playing competitively has the same notion of what is considered respectful or not at a table.

Personally, I was a little surprised that not all players were able to score their own hands. While this may be fine in open tournaments, I think it would be a little strange to be unable to do so on the WRC stage. I encourage all players looking to play mahjong competitively to work towards being able to recite their score quickly after wins, and to be able to check others' hand scores.

Finally, it was good to see positive responses to the set play format from players newer to the format, and I'm glad the organizers were willing to try something new, even if there is still room for improvement.