

New Englander

Chess Club Update – Christmas 2020

Chairman's Chatter

Despite many clichés to this effect, 2020 has been a year without precedent in our lifetime. The stark statistics of the pandemic are a sad reminder of its medical impact and containment restrictions have had inevitable social and economic side-effects. I do hope that you avoided the worst and are able to fashion an enjoyable Christmas, even in a limited sense.

It has not all been bad news. After all, we have been banned from visiting Whittlesey! Joking aside, we have been fortunate that throughout the lockdown, our passion for chess has provided an interesting pastime and a reason for maintaining and extending our circle of (online) friends. The weekly tournaments have been very successful for keeping in touch and league matches have brought us up against new opponents across the region. Many thanks to Paul Spencer for spearheading our Internet presence.

Just as the Christmas newsletter is a sure sign of the coming festive season, I hope you are well advanced with your plans to keep up other Yuletide traditions. This year's list is actually fairly normal – staying cosy and warm during the dark evenings, feasting on rich and wholesome food, quaffing sufficient of your favourite tippie to need a reminder to drink responsibly... We still have many channels of entertainment and through modern technology, we can see and chat to remote family and friends more easily than ever before. With the right attitude, there will still be much to enjoy.

So, let's sit back and leaf through the television schedule. No *Great Escape* this year, we can tune into – Wait a minute! - that sounds like chess! Netflix has been airing the series *The Queen's Gambit* and has scored a major hit with an unlikely subject. Often seen as an elitist activity, the backdrop of professional chess has been a rating sensation reaching the top of the rankings in 63 countries. Wow!

Based on Walter Trevis's novel, the plot is set in the '60's and follows the playing career of a fictional, young hopeful, Beth Harmon, as she takes on the world's best. Is it a drama about the personal conflicts of the lead character, a period fashion show, an exposé of life in the tough environment of top-level sport or an analysis bonanza for the serious player? With Kasparov as a technical consultant, it should at least pass muster as the latter. Newspaper and magazine articles are appearing about the quality of the play and I thought it might be an idea to highlight a few passages to look out for if you watch the series.

Seeing the opening moves **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bg5** set in 1966, my reaction was "far too modern. The Rossolimo Variation rose to prominence after 2000

when computers started to resolve the tactics of Open Sicilians." However, the model game being used was Stein v Matanovic, Yerevan 1965! There are other problems. At one point apparently, Beth, leaving the board for a comfort break, returns 18 moves later in the basis game and another where an adjacent board follows a famous brilliancy but a missing pawn means White continues with his queen en prise. So many games and positions have to be selected that it is excessive to expect perfection. I should know. The task is very similar to compiling material for the newsletter and masterclasses.

There are long games but here is a tactical episode.

G Kasparov v L Van Wely Wijk aan Zee, 2000

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Be3 e6 7 f3 b5 8 g4 h6 Only the later stages of this game appear on the screen. The English Attack is definitely too modern! **9 Qd2 Nbd7 10 0-0-0 Bb7 11 h4 b4 12 Na4 d5 13 Bh3 g5 14 Bg2 gxh4 15 Rxh4 dxe4 16 g5 Nd5 17 Rxe4 hxg5 18 Bxg5 Qa5 19 f4 Rh2 20 Nxe6** This may look routine due to the simple threat **20 ... Qxa4 21 Nc7#** but alternatives are no better e.g. **20 ... Be7 21 Ng7+ Kf8 22 Bxe7+ Nxe7 23 Rxe7 Rxc2 (23 ... Kxe7 24 Qd6 mating) 24 Qxd7 Rxc7 25 Re5** and the black queen has no squares. **20 ... fxe6 21 Rxe6+ Kf7** Now what?



22 Qd3 Bg7

Did you spot **22 ... Kxe6 23 Bxd5+ Bxd5 24 Qg6+ Nf6 25 Qxf6 Kd7 26 Rxd5+ Qxd5 27 Nb6?**

23 Qf5+ Kg8 24 Rxd5 Qxa4 25 Re7 1-0

Merry Chessmas!

Paul Hanks