



Do come down and enjoy the living chess in Trafalgar Square at ChessFest on Sunday July 13th! There will also be free simul, coaching, the beat-the-master tent and sets to use galore.

given his first opportunity in a all-play-all tournament recently at Lawrence Cooper's Wood Green event at Stafford and did extremely well, scoring 3/9 for a 2340 performance. More on page 53.

Unfair Play

As we know from politics, any legislation, however well intentioned, sometimes has unexpected consequences, even negative consequences. We also know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ever since the Olympiad in 2022 at Chennai, FIDE events have had the joy sucked out of them to varying degrees by the activities and policies of the Fair Play Commission. FIDE understandably felt it had to act after a few high-profile scandals and made the now – with hindsight – clearly terrible decision to devolve the implementation of fair play measures into a new Commission with sweeping powers, over and above those of the arbiters.

Ironically, it all has the whiff of Soviet times, in that, to draw a rough parallel, jobbing policeman became subservient and were ruled by a new more secretive group (KGB/FSB) of policemen with absolute power.

So it came to pass in FIDE that the Arbiters Commission and the arbiters themselves found that a smaller number of their erstwhile colleagues (and friends; relationships of decades' standing have been fractured) now ruled over them with more and more sweeping powers, employed in the name of preventing cheating.

There's hardly been any instances of cheating in FIDE events, although nobody denies the need for professionally implemented anti-cheating measures. There is general agreement about delaying transmission of moves nowadays, but things have got completely out of hand. This is largely due to the laissez-faire attitude of those in

the upper echelons of the governing body, including the President and Managing Director.

Let me give you a fairly recent example from the 2022 Olympiad at Chennai. There was a separate corridor outside the playing hall separated by two sets of double doors with excellent soundproofing, where players and captains could get coffee and the toilets were located.

The area was patrolled by arbiters and Fair Play operatives, and rightly so. I was getting a coffee during one of England's games, when I met my old chum GM Ivan Sokolov. We hadn't seen each other for years, so we had a chat. Up bounds the (then) chairman of the Fair Play Commission Yuri Garrett, someone for whom I've come to develop almost unlimited contempt for over the last few years and whose recent downfall – see below – I can only take the greatest delight in.

"You can't talk here!" he said. My initial reaction was that he was joking, but when I realised he was serious, I told him to get lost. Given that captains cannot open their mouths in the playing hall nowadays and have been reduced to the role of waiters, the idea that we might be cheating by consorting in an outside corridor is absurd, but not for Yuri. What followed was comedic, yet somehow sinister at the same time. We were literally in each other's faces.

"I'll take your name and report you to the chief arbiter," he said. "I think you know my name Yuri," I replied. "We've known each other for about 20 years." I think my subsequent words were unprintable and he slinked off.

A few days later, I was watching the closing stages of the match between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azeri board one Shakhriyar Mamedyarov had been frustrated in his game and had remained in his chair after it, staring into space as strong players do when they're trying to figure out what the

hell went wrong. At this point an Indian teenager turned up working for the Fair Play team and started trying to manhandle him from his chair and out of the playing hall. I was so outraged I said to the little whippersnapper, "This is one of the strongest players in the world and you will treat him with the respect he deserves. Now clear off!"

Since August 2022 at Chennai things have got a lot worse. Fair Play rules have become both more restrictive and more invasive. At the Budapest Olympiad even federation presidents struggled to get into the playing hall. The arbiters too have become progressively more fed up with their Fair Play colleagues. As I said above, relationships have soured. Tournament organisers have balked at the extra cost of engaging the extra Fair Play personnel, and players have become more and more upset.

This year alone, the FIDE Council has received letters of complaint from the a self-styled "rebel group" of arbiters. That includes multiple arbiters who have been Chief Arbiter of at least five world championship matches between them, Chief Arbiters of several Olympiads, and our own Alex Holowczak.

In addition, a group of 13 established organisers of FIDE tournaments have written saying they are now discouraged from organising tournaments due to the extra cost and aggravation. The Mitropa European group of countries has also written to express their concern, and the cacophony has grown to such an extent that the players and captains' petition I was going to organise, hardly seems worth it, given the volume of criticism that has been levelled at this Commission and its antics.

What really needs to happen is that the Fair Play Commission needs to be merged with the Arbiters Commission, and some common sense needs to prevail in the implementation of anti-cheating measures. That's just a start, I have a lot of sympathy for the views expressed by the anonymous arbiter from the World Senior Teams at Prague – see below. The Fair Play Commission should be a separate body that will concentrate mainly on the technological threats we face in the battle against cheaters. Let the arbiters run the show, like they used to, and still do at every event that isn't a FIDE event.

FIDE's reaction, which was really that of the President, who I had lobbied in person on this matter, has so far not been encouraging. The Chairman of the Fair Play Commission, Yuri Garrett, has been removed, but as far as I can tell the functions of the organisation remain intact. It remains for the FIDE Council which meets on March the 21st to take further action, which in my opinion should include the dissolution of this disastrous Commission. Recent events, including an open revolt from players and captains at the World Senior Teams in Prague, demonstrate the sorry state of affairs, where again players weren't allowed to remain in the tournament hall after finishing their games, which is most unpopular.

The following letter was sent by IM Nigel Povah to the FIDE Council following ridiculous goings on:

Dear Mr Dvorkovich and FIDE colleagues,

I'm writing to highlight the widespread concerns about the Fair Play regulations, that were expressed by many of the captains and players at the World Senior Team Chess Championships, which have just concluded in Prague.

The attached email, which I sent to Mr Dvorkovich on 25 February was shared with the other players (including captains), who numbered over 500 in total, coming from 28 different Federations. I was only able to get access to some of those present, because we were playing in two different tournament halls and players from the 50+ tournament hall were not allowed access to the 65+ tournament hall, and vice versa. However, there was a Captains' WhatsApp group and many of the captains expressed their support for the content of my email through that channel.

I think I can say with some confidence that the vast majority of players present agreed with my comments and although many were willing to sign the letter to show their support, some made it clear that they were not able to speak on behalf of their federations. However, such was the strength of feeling, I would be astonished if most, if not all, federations would not concur with the views of their players.

I hope the attached email clearly sets out what I was concerned about, but since writing this, I was alerted to two alarming examples of the post-game Fair Play checks, that seem to be totally out of proportion with what is required. The first case was reported to me first hand by IM Mehrshad Sharif, who told me that after a 15-move draw, he and his opponent were selected for random checking and taken to a room, where they were both thoroughly searched and this lasted about 30 minutes! Given the result of the game, suspicions of cheating would surely have been low and whilst random searches are generally a reasonable idea, the duration and nature of this sounds excessive.

The second case, which I only heard about second-hand, sounds to have been far worse. A woman player had won her first four games and was searched after her game by two female Fair Play staff and was in effect 'strip searched', and I was told that she and her team mates were very upset by this. Hopefully they will report this themselves, but the point is that some of these Fair Play guidelines are just going too far, and they are spoiling the nature of what has always been a highly enjoyable and friendly series of chess events.

I would also like to ask, has there ever been any examples of anyone caught cheating in Seniors' chess, because I'm not aware of anyone having done so? I do appreciate that FIDE naturally wish to prevent/discourage cheating, but these preventative measures are penalising the vast majority of honest chess players. Perhaps FIDE should look to introduce much harsher penalties for anyone caught cheating and should publish and disgrace those individuals. Anyway, I do think that Senior chess players should be treated with a great deal more dignity and respect than is evident with these

very harsh Fair Play regulations.

Finally, I hope that FIDE will give some serious thought to this matter, as I don't think things should continue as they are.

Nigel Povah, IM and England Chess Federation Seniors Manager

One arbiter at Prague added:

"It looks like the whole world – except for a few fools in FIDE's leadership – understands that the World Senior Championship isn't a top-tier event like the World Championship title matches or the Olympiad. It's primarily a social gathering where old players meet up with long-lost friends. Banning hearing aids – without which many are completely deaf [Ed. – This happened in the 2024 event.] – kicking them out of the playing hall as soon as they finish their games, or suspecting them of assembling a computer in the toilet (which is the official explanation from the Fair Play commission for why you can't have a SIM card hidden in your wallet so as not to lose it) immediately turns them against the organisers.

"We tried to be somewhat accommodating, but some Fair Play arbiters reported us to Mr. Garrett, who then ordered them to tighten the checks even more. That led to long queues forming at the entrance, which the seniors certainly didn't appreciate. Moreover, they found pocket searches and wallet inspections undignified and humiliating. And that's how the letter from England captain came about.

"One of the Fair Play arbiters said that while the experience helped him get to the Olympiad, he never wants to do this job again. They don't have thick enough skin to voluntarily spend ten days as a 'useful idiot' hated by all sides – players, organisers, actual arbiters, and even their own supervisor in the end.

"Everyone agrees the entire Fair Play commission should be abolished immediately, its members should apologise to the chess community for ruining their beloved pastime (no wonder no one wants to host FIDE events anymore), and its leadership should be



Alex Holowczak is one of many senior arbiters unhappy with the Fair Play Commission.



Yuri Garrett was a big fan of highly professional anti-cheating devices (as pictured), but is no longer in charge of the Fair Play Commission.

publicly punished – exclusion from the chess community and a subsequent public execution would be the bare minimum. The only debate is whether the highest official should bear personal responsibility as well."

I can only add that it's high time for change, but nobody needs to die!

Correspondence Mysteries

Readers of a certain age may recall the name Leigh Strange, the 1986 English Women's Correspondence Champion. Strange was later identified as Nick Down, who won the British Junior Correspondence Championship the same year. That led to a two-year ban for Down and the Women's title being awarded to Doreen Helbig, who had finished second.

There has recently been speculation that there may be a new Leigh Strange, or at least the conduct of the Welsh player Rhys Jones in the 2022-24 British Correspondence Championship (fittingly named as the Penrose Memorial Championship) was rather strange. Jones overstepped the time limit in three games – as early as move 7, move 8 and move 7. He then carried on playing his other 12 games, drawing all of them.

Unsurprisingly this did not prove popular with his fellow competitors, but seemingly there was nothing that Tournament Director Gordon Anderson could do. Of course, in the interest of fairness, Jones should have withdrawn from the tournament straight after his losses. Unfortunately, in this age of extremely strong engines, all the other games were drawn, meaning that the three players gifted a point by Jones shared the British title.

Complaints were raised and the identity of the seemingly enigmatic Jones queried. The Welsh Correspondence Chess Federation (WCCF) and the ICCF appeared convinced that Jones was a genuine player and that the result should stand, although despite requests he has never provided any verifiable documents to prove his identity. Dissatisfied