

PRESS RELEASE

BRITISH KNOCK-OUT CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP



John Saunders reports: The 3rd British Knock-Out Championship takes place alongside the London Chess Classic from 1-9 December 2017, featuring most of the leading grandmasters from the UK plus the winner of the 4NCL Open held over the weekend of 3-5 November in Coventry.

The Quarter-Final pairings are:

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| 1 | Nigel Short (2687) | v | Alan Merry (2422) |
| 2 | Gawain Jones (2659) | v | Luke McShane (2649) |
| 3 | Matthew Sadler (2687) | v | Jonathan Rowson (2563) |
| 4 | David Howell (2685) | v | Jonathan Hawkins (2573) |

Players were seeded based on their rating as at 1 November 2017, with Nigel Short placed ahead of Matthew Sadler based on his greater number of games played. In the semi-finals, the winner of match 1 as shown above will be paired with the winner of match 2, while the winner of match 3 will play the winner of match 4.

Nigel Short returns as the reigning British Knock-Out Champion, having defeated Daniel Fernandez, Luke McShane and then David Howell in last year's competition to claim the first prize of £20,000. Most grandmasters start drifting away from the game in their fifties but Nigel shows no sign of slackening the pace of his globe-trotting chess career. In January he played in the Tradewise Gibraltar Masters where he got off to a storming start and defeated the then world number two Fabiano Caruana along the way. Thirsting after further success he proceeded to Bunratty and scored 6/6. Then onto Bangkok and another first place. Later in the year he scored another tournament victory in an open in the Philippines. So, generally, he's in very good shape and we can expect the size of the prize at Olympia to be a powerful motivating force again in December.

The man sent from Coventry (which is better than being sent *to* Coventry, I suppose, though he may feel differently after a close encounter with Nigel Short) is 21-year-old IM Alan Merry who succeeded in scoring 4½/5 in the 4NCL tournament, ahead of five GMs (Williams, Turner, Hebden, Arkell and Arakhamia-Grant) and five other IMs. Merry wasn't paired with any of the GMs but scored an important win in the fourth round against the strong Australian IM Justin Tan, after which a draw against Peter Sowray in the last round was enough to keep him ahead of the pack. Over the past two or three years Merry has shown himself to be a player of considerable talent but a two-game match with the reigning British Knock-Out Champion and former world championship runner-up will be a quantum leap for his chess career. Merry has beaten a few 2500+ GMs at classical chess, and also Gawain Jones in a 4NCL rapidplay a couple of years ago, but this is a step into the unknown for him. His form in 2017 has been promising with a shared first place at the Polar Capital Jersey Open in April as well as the Coventry success.



The other match in the same half of the draw as Short-Merry is Gawain Jones versus Luke McShane. Their classical head-to-head score is +2, =2, -0 in favour of McShane. Gawain Jones will probably be glad not to be in the same part of the draw as David Howell in 2017, who dumped him out of the competition in 2015 via an Armageddon game and then again in 2016 in the classical games. Gawain's year got off to the best possible start with a shared first in the Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee Group B tournament, which booked his passage into the 2018 Group A tournament where his prospective opponents include Carlsen, Caruana, Kramnik, Karjakin... and those are just the competing super-GMs whose names start with a 'k' sound. Gawain had further success in Dubai, sharing first place, but one or two other events saw him fade after good starts. Then came the 2017 British Championship where he tied for first place and won the play-off, triumphing in the final tie against Luke McShane, whom he has been drawn to play here.

So Luke McShane will be out for revenge. Being gainfully employed away from the 64 squares, Luke is less active than most of his peers. Other than the German Bundesliga and a rapid event at King's Place, London, where he shared first, the British Championship was his only major individual tournament of the year. Since then he has played in the European Team Championship which didn't go particularly well for him or any of the English team. So Luke's main concern will be rustiness. Like Gawain, he has

founded at the semi-final stage of both of his previous appearances in this competition, losing to Nick Pert in 2015 and Nigel Short in 2016, in both cases losing out in the rapid games. Let's hope Luke can get back some of the form he showed in early London Classics, not to mention his breathtaking near-perfect performance at the 2015 London Classic Super-rapidplay.



In the other half of the draw, Matthew Sadler and Jonathan Rowson are now considered semi-detached grandmasters as both have other responsibilities in life. But Jonathan is arguably more semi-detached than Matthew. I checked my database and couldn't find a game played by Jonathan since the same event last year, in which he lost to Gawain Jones in the first match (as he also did in 2015). Jonathan will probably be relieved not to face Gawain a third time, and yet Matthew Sadler is not the sort of player you want to meet when you haven't played for a year. They have met just once before at classical chess, at the 1998 British Championship, with Matthew winning. They had one win apiece in high-profile rapidplay encounters at the 2013 London Classic.

Matthew Sadler shared first at the Limburg Open in June, and then again at a tournament in Haarlem later the same month, but otherwise he too seems to have been chess free. He's making his debut in the British Knock-Out Championship this year but you can bet he will be fully ready to go. He's not someone to neglect his prep however inactive he may seem to be so Jonathan will need to be on his best form.

The final first round match-up is between Jonathan Hawkins and David Howell. Their classical head-to-head score (based on games discoverable on databases) is +2, =3, -1 in favour of Howell. The two have had contrasting fortunes in this event previously. David has contested two finals, beating Nick Pert in 2015 but being edged out by Nigel Short in 2016, but Jonathan hasn't yet passed beyond the first stage, losing an Armageddon game to Nick Pert in 2015 and a rapid play-off against Luke McShane in 2016. Jonathan doesn't travel widely and he hasn't been particularly active as a player during 2017, with the 4NCL and the British Championship being the only major events he has taken part in.

By contrast, David Howell's year has taken in several of the major open events worldwide, from Gibraltar through the European and British Championships to the FIDE World Cup and the Chess.com Isle of Man Masters. One of his best results of the year

came when he won the all-play-all Saint Louis Winter Classic in March, heading a field of mainly 2600+ US stars. In Gibraltar he was a point behind the winning score, losing only to Topalov.

He had an excellent run of six straight wins in the middle of the

European Championship and was well placed for a medal before losing to Matlakov in the penultimate round. He tied first at the British Championship but lost out in the play-offs. He was eliminated from the FIDE World Cup at the first hurdle by the young Norwegian player Aryan Tari. That was closely followed by the Isle of Man Masters where he wasn't at his best, and then the European Team Championship where the English side were all slightly off their game.



Format and Schedule: The quarter-finals and semi-finals consist of two games at standard play (90 mins plus 30 seconds per move throughout) with a rapid play-off of two games (10 mins plus 2 seconds per move throughout) if necessary. If that is insufficient to break the tie, an Armageddon game follows (6 mins v 4 mins with 2 seconds per move from move 61). The quarter-finals take place (two games on the same day) at the Hilton London Olympia Hotel, London W14 8NL on Friday 1 December. The semi-finals switch venue to the East Hall of the Olympia Conference Centre and take place, together with any necessary tie-breaks, on Saturday 2 December and Sunday 3 December. The final is over four games (and four rapid games if necessary) and takes place in the East Hall from Monday 4 to Saturday 9 December.

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About Chess in Schools and Communities

Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC) is a UK charity whose mission is to improve children's educational outcomes and social development by introducing them to the game of chess. Founded in 2009, CSC now teaches in over 300 schools and supports 500 more nationwide.

CSC also organises a world-class tournament, the London Chess Classic, and Yes2Chess, an international tournament for schools.

For more information visit: Chessinschools.co.uk.

About the London Chess Classic

The London Chess Classic is the flagship annual event of Chess in Schools and Communities. As the UK's largest chess tournament and the concluding leg of the Grand Chess Tour, an international circuit of high-profile chess events inspired by the legendary Garry Kasparov, the event brings with it enormous prestige in the chess community.

Alongside this competition amongst the world's best players, Chess in Schools and Communities runs a range of amateur and age-grade competitions for 1,000s of children from the charity initiative nationwide.

For more information visit: Londonchessclassic.com.