

David Howell Interview, ECF e-Newsletter, January 2018.

What were your 2017 highlights?

2017 was a bit of a roller-coaster for me. With lots of lows among the highs! If I had to choose just one highlight then I would probably mention the Winter Chess Classic in St Louis, not only for the tournament itself (which I won despite being the oldest player in a very strong field of up-and-coming youngsters), but also for my general experience in the city. The way that they promote chess over there is truly inspiring. My performance at the European Championship might also be considered a highlight from 2017, but unfortunately my nerves let me down at the end with the title within grasp. Away from the board, I must say that it was real honour this year to be asked to write for the *Sunday Times*.

You start 2018 on 2682 and 61st in the FIDE rankings and are ranked third in England. What are your targets for this year?

To be honest, I rarely look at my own rating or world ranking nowadays. These things come and go, and in my experience they tend to have little bearing on one's happiness. For example, I managed to cross 2700 again this year, but I still felt I was not playing particularly well and it didn't bring any extra kudos or tournament invitations. If I had to set a target for 2018 then I guess it would be something a bit more subjective, for example to become more consistent and to be a bit more practical with my play.

The England team for this year's Olympiad in Batumi, Georgia will presumably be the same 2600-plus 'famous five' as in Baku two years ago. With an 'ageing' squad, are you concerned that England may struggle at European and Olympiad championships due to a dearth in 2550-plus talent coming through? If so, what ideas do you have that might address the problem?

There are many people who could give a better answer to this question than me. And there's definitely not enough space here to fully express my thoughts! I think the whole chess scene needs to be re-examined in England. We need to incentivise the younger generation of talented players and show them that chess can be a viable profession. There needs to be more support at youth level all the way up to the Olympiad teams. While we may never replicate former glories, it definitely isn't too late to put a proper structure into place to correct years of neglect and complacency.

You last won the British Championship in 2014 (jointly with Jonathan Hawkins) and you reached the playoffs last year. Do you see the national title as 'just another tournament' or is it a special part of your calendar?

Of course the title of 'British Champion' still retains its prestige, and the event has shown some signs of progression in recent years, but these days I just approach it in the same way I would for any tournament.

Writing in the Guardian on England's ninth-place finish in the 2016 Baku Olympiad, Leonard Barden described your time trouble in the final round match against Jorge Cori as a 'chronic habit'. Is this a fair comment?

Without wishing to sound too controversial, I don't pay much attention to Leonard Barden nowadays. He tends to be excessively critical of the top English players without ever offering any constructive advice. Indeed, one of my colleagues was rather upset by one of his recent articles. Alas, chess has changed beyond recognition in the 20-plus years since Leonard last visited a tournament and, despite an obvious reliance on computer evaluations in his articles, I feel that he has not embraced this change.

In a typical year, how many tournaments do you play and how do you motivate yourself if your form is variable?

2017 was probably the most hectic year of my life, both on and off the chessboard, and I ended up playing more than a tournament a month on average. That usually means at least 10-15 long serious games of chess every 30 days, which is a bit too much if one wants to be at one's best throughout the year and especially as I was often busy teaching or writing between tournaments. I will play less in 2018. As for motivation, this is definitely the hardest part of a professional player's life. My solution in the past has been to avoid chess completely for a little while, aiming to come back with a fresh mind, but many of my colleagues would instead advise a strong dose of hard work! In general one's form usually reflects one's happiness, so I just try to keep positive even when things aren't going well.

What practical advice can you give an ordinary club player to improve his or her game (bearing in mind we lesser mortals cannot put in a GM daily eight-hour shift)?

Play, play, play! The best way to improve is simply to play chess (whether that is a weekend tournament, with a friend at a club, or just a few blitz games online). The more you play and the more you analyse those games (yes, even online blitz games), the more you'll discover about your own strengths and the more ready you'll feel for future games. I would also recommend listening to live tournament commentary or flicking through a chess book/magazine as other time-efficient methods for improvement. This keeps things fun and relaxing, while ultimately you will learn a lot.

I think it's a myth that Grandmasters put in eight-hour shifts every day. But we just have a bit more time to do all of the above things!

Outside of chess, what are your interests?

I have always loved football (although I was born and raised a Manchester United fan, I also avidly follow my local team Brighton & Hove Albion). Recently tennis has become a bit of an obsession, and I play as often as possible. I also play the piano (albeit terribly) and I intend to enrol in some dance classes this year. Basically I enjoy anything that keeps the mind or body active!

If you were not a professional chess player, what career path might you have taken?

Having studied literature at university, I have a long-held pipe dream of being an author, perhaps of historical fiction. Unfortunately though, this is another profession (like chess) where there is no guarantee of success. Failing that, I think my most likely career path would have been teaching.