

Chess for All: Why we need to break down 'Grading Apartheid'

Tim Wall (FIDE Master and organiser Northumbria Masters)

I was promoting a local weekend congress on social media the other day when one of my good friends, a club player from the north-east, made a comment that I have heard many times before from participants in UK weekend chess congresses: That the players in the Minor, Intermediate and Major are 'subsidising' the prize money in the Open, as there are considerably more players in the lower sections.

Another good friend, IM Angus Dunnington (he no longer plays competitive chess but is a professional poker player) commented in reply that the "same prizes for each section" system used at the Scarborough Congress and many other UK weekenders (for example, where the winner of the Under 120 gets £500, the same as the winner of the Open) has been instrumental in damaging the prospects for professional players, and that the "one open section for everyone" common in continental Europe, with rating prizes all the way up the tournament from 1400 and 1600 to 1800, 2000 and 2200, and so on, is a much fairer one, and is very popular.

I back Angus's point one hundred per cent, and totally support the idea of one-section congresses. Some of the reasons for this are just simple logic, but others go deeper, about what kind of chess-playing community we want to be in this country.

The basic point of fairness is that grading-limited sections bar anyone higher than the grading limit (e.g. 150 or 120 ECF), while anyone can enter an Open. If you are specifically banning stronger players from entering your event, increasing your chances of winning a prize, you can't then have your cake and eat it by complaining that you are 'subsidising' the higher prize fund in the Open.

How much financial support or opportunities should be given to professional players is a different question, probably too big to tackle in this short space – but the basic idea of rewarding merit and skill is inherent in any chess tournament (otherwise we would give the same prize to the person who scores 0/5 as the one who scores 5/5).

I also feel that separate grading-limited sections mean that a lot of players who could improve by playing against stronger players never do, and so they work against producing a new 1970s-style 'English Chess Explosion', because a lot of players get encouraged to think that they are 'only a Minor player', for example.

Yes, we desperately need to reward and encourage players of all strengths. Grading and performance prizes are integral to this approach, while UK tournaments could also be less 'winner-takes-all', i.e. first prize £500, second prize £250, third prize £125, and more collegiate, with prizes of £400, £300, £200, £100, etc.

But let's look at things from another, wider perspective: What do lots of graded-limited tournaments do to us as a chess community? My view is that they increase the tendency to what I call 'Grading Apartheid' – where chess players of different standards hardly ever play each other, and quite often never analyse games together, socialise or mix in any way. It reinforces the idea of an almost 'Upstairs, Downstairs' British class system, where

expert/professional players look down on club players, and conversely club players feel resentful of the top players.

My feeling is we should take steps to remedy this, by organising a lot more one-section open congresses as they do in Europe (the UK might be Brexiting politically, but I prefer 'It's a Knockout' ('Jeux Sans Frontieres') in chess. This would be one big Open, with lots of grading prizes and performance prizes (how well you do compared to your published grade or rating) all the way up the tournament.

That way, the GM has to come down from his Chessbase-fuelled ivory tower, sit down and play a game with your average club player. Hopefully they can even analyse the game together afterwards over a cup of tea (or pint of beer) and explain the smart tactics and strategic concepts that many of us miss.

Such interaction between club players and expert/professional players will help us all get along better and feel that we are part of the same chess community. More professional players will hopefully appreciate more how much that they depend on club players for tournament prizes, coaching income and book royalties. (Hey, it might even result in more coaching work for our hard-up chess professionals). And vice versa, if club players get to sit down, play with and do post-mortems with a GM, they will appreciate even more the skill and dedication that the top players put into the game.

Put simply: the top and the base of the pyramid need each other, so they should work together.

My own personal experience of playing tournaments in Europe is quite limited, but I do remember very enjoyable, friendly events in Cappelle-la-Grande, France, and Ghent, in Belgium, where you could be playing a club player in one round, and a titled player in the next. And at the end of the tournament, you can even all sit down for a meal together. It's fun, you play in the same hall, you feel part of something big and welcoming.

The discussion I mentioned on social media has got me thinking, and I've decided to make the next congress I'm involved with, Chester-le-Street in County Durham (17-19 August), one big Open for everyone, with grading and performance prizes – all under the philosophy 'Chess for All'. It will be an interesting experience, to see if we can start to change the culture in the UK chess community, and I would invite other people organising chess events to try the same.

I am sure it will be more fun, and who knows: Maybe the buzz we create could help us to attract more sponsorship and create a better future for the club players (and potential grandmasters) of tomorrow.

Don't put the grade in the shade

Adam Raoof, international arbiter and tournament organiser

The traditional UK weekend tournament format – an Open plus several grading limited sections – is very popular. Blackpool had 342 entrants in 2018 and Scarborough attracted 382 in 2017 entries over a weekend. Even a one-day congress like Kings Place attracts 350 players over five sections. This format is not only popular in the UK, I have played in many weekend tournaments in the Netherlands. The Wijk aan Zee tournament in January even has a weekender in which you are placed in a four-player all-play-all group with players of roughly your own rating, and you just play one game a day over three days. And they get 500 players for that event.

Generally the problem with the one-section-fits-all format is that six rounds is just not enough to find an outright winner in a large tournament. Most single section events on the continent are seven to nine rounds and the longer events are also usually FIDE rated. The length of the event is often related to the holiday entitlement of the players from the host country! Looking at things from the point of view of most club players in the UK, my experience is that people want to play opponents in their grading range and if they want a challenge then they can 'play up' a section. And at the monthly Hampstead Congress most of the ambitious juniors do exactly that. Players don't want to spend time and money travelling to a weekend tournament with no prospect of getting some decent games.

From an organiser's point of view I want to get as many people playing in an event as possible, and that means catering for all strengths and ambitions. If you have a sponsor then you have more freedom to experiment with the format. If you don't have a sponsor then you need to get bums on seats to pay the bills. I am probably not the first to suggest that what we need is more sponsorship, at all levels. There is always room for more chess. In the end the market will decide what works for players and what does not.

The club player's perspective

Chris Levy, Hackney Chess Club and title-winning chessboxer

As a (very) average tournament player who has hovered around the 140 mark for a while now, I'd always assumed I'd be better off playing in sections. The only choice I really had was whether to 'play up' if my grade put me towards the top of a minor section. I had, though, always assumed that I'd get nothing out of playing in Opens. However, this year I've committed to an improvement push – and decided to try out the FIDE open at the last London Chess Classic. I lost most of my games, but did get to play a succession of players around 2000. Going over the games afterwards, the types of mistake I make became more apparent (as they are more likely to get punished) – I have a tendency to play well early on, but drift in middle games. However, the experience also highlighted the fact that even with players of this calibre you get opportunities, although they are harder to spot.

Back at my regular level in 2018, I've found my play has improved – I'm less inclined to trust my opponent, knowing that mistakes will come, and I'm also more self-aware of the kind of pitfalls to avoid in my own play. I wouldn't want to always play in Opens – but it is good to have the option, when you really want to test your game. Ultimately, it depends on what gives the most satisfaction – improvement, or winning. 'Forcing' everyone into an Open means average players in the latter camp could miss out on actually winning an event.

