

Keep calm... and checkmate 'em on the beaches

Tim Wall

“We shall checkmate them on the beaches, we shall blitz them on the landing grounds, we shall play county matches in the fields and casual chess in the streets. We shall play 4NCL league matches in the hills. We shall never surrender.” – *Winston S. Churchill, Warmington-on-Sea Chess Club (ECF Grade 126)*

Sometimes it feels like our ancient way of chess life in this country is under constant threat: that the Luftwaffe of internet chess, the doodlebugs of demographic decline and the fifth column of Playstation addiction are conspiring to create an English Chess Implosion.

‘Don’t panic!’

Yet we must screw up our courage and as “Dad’s Army” so eloquently put it, “Don’t Panic!” Instead go from our jobs at the bank, the butcher’s and the call centre, pick up our weapons of choice – a plastic set, rollup board, DGT clock & Nimzowitsch’s ‘My System’ (“What’s that, Grandad?”) – and go fight the good fight.

Yes, it does sometimes feel like we are a “Dad’s (or even Grandad’s) Army” chess nation, with our (still excellent) top players relative oldies compared to the massed hordes of teenage GMs from just about everywhere else in the world. We sometimes convince ourselves that there’s nothing to be done; that we are destined to gradually decline as a chess power until we’re seen as merely an isolated “Little Britain” island nation skulking sulkily off the coast of Europe. (Wait, that’s a bit close to real-life Brexit... scrub that analogy!)

But you know what? We’ve actually been here before. In the 1950s and ’60s, English chess seemed like it was going nowhere fast in post-war shades of black, white and sepia, with the annual Hastings Congress Pantomime the only vague reminder of the “Good Old Days” of [@Howard Staunton](#) (in his pre-Twitter phase) and coffee-house chess ‘n’ cigars at Simpson’s in the Strand (before it was used as Nigel Short’s favourite spot for selfies with Arkady Dvorkovich, of course).

What created the English Chess Explosion?

It's often said that the English Chess Explosion of the 1970s and '80s was all about Fischer-Spassky in '72, and there's some truth to that. But it was actually more about a new breed of organisers who took advantage of that boom. They tried new formats, found new sponsors and created opportunities that got young players excited and motivated.

These days we often forget those "Home Guard" heroes – Leonard Barden, manager of the National Junior Squad (and world-record-breaking chess correspondent of [The Guardian](#) and [The Evening Standard](#) since 1956!) and National Junior Coach Bob Wade. Together they created a junior powerhouse that challenged the might of the Soviet Union. There were innovative organisers such as Stewart Reuben (who organised the Lloyds Bank, the British and a couple of World Championships to boot) and Gerry Walsh, who brought the World Student Olympiad and other international events to Teesside in the '70s. (By the way, Gerry also organised my first junior tournament, the Cleveland Schools Team Championship, in Redcar in 1978. I was hooked!)

We don't just need to pay tribute to their sterling efforts, however. We need to learn (or relearn) the lessons from that time and apply them anew today. Those pioneering forms of chess, such as the then-revolutionary weekend Swisses and accompanying Cutty Sark Grand Prix, allowing players to play a whole tournament in two and a half days, toughened up a host of street fighter players, from Tony Miles, Dave Rumens and Mark Hebden to Nigel Short and Julian Hodgson, plus many others.

Carlsen-Caruana 'Fan Zones'

As we are about to host the [Carlsen-Caruana World Championship match in London](#) (November 9-28), it seems that now is a brilliant time to reach out and recruit new (and returning) people into chess. Without abandoning our traditional forms of the game, such as leagues, weekend tournaments and county matches, we also need to reach out beyond our existing clubs and find a new audience, through social chess in cafes, pubs and libraries.

One example that clubs could be inspired by is what Simon Williams (aka the 'Ginger GM') is doing during the World Championship – holding a ["chess festival" of online commentary \(with a live audience\) and blitz in a London pub](#).

Taking a leaf out of Simon's book, clubs around the country could organise a fun evening down their local, streaming live commentary on a large-screen TV or projector screen, and attracting newcomers with a (World Cup football-style) Fan Zone.

Some of these new formats are already catching on. The ECF's inaugural [UK Blitz Championships](#), with their successful regional qualifiers in September attracted 350+ players, and the national finals on December 1 are a clear sign of the potential: A lot can be achieved if we don't panic, but just give it a go.

Online team matches

Another initiative I would personally like to see explored is the possibility of team matches on the Internet. The idea would be that each team gathers at their home venue and plays the other team (also gathered at their home venue) via an online playing server such as Chess.com or Chess24. An independent invigilator/arbitrator (it could be simply someone from a nearby club) watches to make sure there's no funny business or engines being consulted – and hey, presto! You've got a long-distance match without travelling or needing to book an often-costly neutral venue.

It's not really reinventing the wheel, as this kind of match was played back in the day by my dad's generation: They staged telephone, radio and even Telex matches. The difference is that now it could take place in more-or-less real time and be well within the capability of any club with a decent internet connection. Playing this kind of online match would preserve the social element of team chess that is lost when people play on the Internet from home – and even mean there might be time for that odd pint after the game, instead of rushing straight home on a school/work night.

Who knows? The social side of the game could even persuade players to abandon their comfy armchair and home broadband and join (or rejoin) a club.

The club I play for, Forest Hall in the Northumberland League, is going to give it a whirl in an online "friendly" match with Darlington, a club 50 miles away. The Darlo crew even have DGT boards and are planning to put the games live on their website.

So, why not investigate this for yourselves? I'd be fascinated to hear the feedback from around the country. Maybe this could be just one of the new formats that will help us create the English Chess Explosion 2.0.