

Chess for the Common People

Tim Wall

*"She came from Chile, she had a thirst for knowledge,
She sang chess songs at St Martin's College,
That's where I ... caught her eye.
She told me that FIDE was loaded,
I said, 'In that case, I'll have a vodka cocktail.'"*

('Common People', Pulp)

Without a doubt, this month's top chess event was the British Rapidplay in Ilkley, West Yorkshire. It was situated in a slightly crumbling hotel just off T' Moors (Baht 'at), fondly described by one wall-kicking visiting Grandmaster as like the one from *The Shining*...

Just kidding.

It was of course the World Championship at The College, in central London, between Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana. The setting was epic, chess was now officially "cool," according to Magnus... and the games were drawn (at least, the Classical games were. They had the fun playoff only two days after I visited).

The lucky few with tickets (at 70 quid a pop, or if you're a blagging ECF blogger – free, minus your soul) could gain admittance to the... slightly crumbling Victorian Gothic Horror building, [a place once immortalised by Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker](#) and a Greek student who (allegedly) later married Yanis Varoufakis, the radical, Harley Davidson-riding finance minister.

Once past the KGB (sorry, walkie-talkie-toting security guards) outside, inside everything was dark and dimly lit. The immediate impression was that I had in fact stumbled into a cross between Dracula's Castle and a Ginger GM fancy dress/chess party in a London crypt. I half expected to see "Jarvis [heart]

Danae” carved into one of the columns, or at least in the Gents, but alas it was not to be.

Wandering around the gloomy Hogwarts corridors (followed by an army of young security people eager to check my colour-coded armband every few steps), I wondered what would be in each room.

Kama Sutra, Judit Polgar and Jon Speelman

In one, there were overpriced T-shirts with the infamous World Chess “Kama Sutra” logo, and in some others were people playing skittles chess. Then there was a small commentary room with space for 20 spectators – it was actually cool to be up close to the presenters, Judit Polgar and Anna Rudolf (“Holy Stalker Alert, Batman!”).

I had half-hoped that in one of the rooms I would bump into [Juga de Prima](#), the famous Chilean chanteuse and chess enthusiast whose hit song “[Oh, Capablanca](#)” had made her the darling of the chess community, and resulted in her being interviewed all over the London media during the match. But alas, my would-be autograph-hunting was in vain...

The auditorium itself was again quite small (with maybe room for 120-150 people, sitting not-so-comfortably on wooden benches). In front of us were other (largely empty) wooden benches, marked with ‘VIP’ labels and being guarded jealously by more security people.

Magnus and Fabi were behind a one-way glass partition, which was soundproofed (for about 99.9% of the time, I’m told). At the start of the game, they were completely obscured by photographers, so we had the surreal experience of watching them for 10 minutes on overhead TV screens, even though we were just a few metres away.

After the initial flurry of Sicilian Sveshnikov moves (I was lucky enough to go on the day of Game 12), the pace slowed – and the spectators were kicked out (you could go in for only half an hour at a time officially, but it was in fact easy to sneak back in, despite the security.)

I found the Press Room, filled with about 50 chess journalists (and, for some bizarre reason, veteran World Championship organiser Stewart Reuben). It was well equipped, just again small. There were about 30 workspaces, 35 chairs, a hot water boiler, teabags, Nescafe and some Rich Tea-like biscuits. (Journalists always want to know about the refreshments – you have no idea how long Magnus’s endgames will go on for.)

Not having a regular workspace or chair, like the people who were working (very hard, I have to say) there every day, instead I perched on a small sofa next to John Saunders, a fellow former British Chess Magazine editor, and we watched the game on a TV screen, while checking engine analysis and Twitter feeds on our mobile phones (just like I had been doing, far more comfortably, at home in Newcastle).

When I had been watching Games 1 to 11 from home, I had enjoyed watching the Super GM commentary by Chess24 and other teams, even if I felt it was above the level it really needed to be for ordinary chess players (apparently Norwegian TV was the one media that seemed to get the level right for the “chess player on the street,” if reports are to be believed. But full marks also to The Guardian for running very accessible live updates on its website.) Yet now I was at the venue, it seemed silly to plug into a computer. I wanted to talk to people, observe and soak up the atmosphere.

There were actually lots of famous chess people in the Press Room, from Daniel King to Jon Speelman (he was intravenously hooked up to Sesse, the Norwegian supercomputer, desperate not to miss any of its analysis). The atmosphere was about as nervous and tense as it was for the players. One piece of light relief for me was the appearance of IM Bill Hartston, the famous presenter of the [BBC’s Master Game](#) programme – and nowadays a regular TV commentator not on chess, but on Gogglebox.

As the assembled chess journalists clucked away over their Sesse analysis variations, Bill told me a funny story about another darkened room. On the Master Game, it was one guy’s job to dress up in a black leotard and move the pieces on a demo board – this was before computers, Chessbase or the internet. It turned out that Bill had to also do commentary for a German TV version of the programme. His German wasn’t great, and the leotard-clad demo board operator (who didn’t know much about chess) was actually a

German language professor. “He should have done the presenting, and I should have moved the pieces,” Bill said, with the hint of a nostalgic smile.

VIP vodka cocktails and Russian oligarchs

Returning to the sofa, it turned out my seat was not entirely safe – it was on a timeshare with Stewart Reuben, so I went for a wander to see if I could enter the Inner Sanctum, the VIP Area. According to the WorldChess.com website, the VIP Golden Tickets were going for an eye-watering £600 each, so I didn’t really expect to blag my way in – but I thought I’d try.

At that point, inevitably, the KGB appeared. Since my armband was green, and not made of pure-spun gold, I was denied entry.

Later I did see various people stumbling out of the VIP area, however, apparently after imbibing several drinks. There were some Grandmasters, but I was also surprised to see Malola Prasath, a vaguely FIDE-connected junior organiser from County Durham, who emerged from the VIP area with a sheepish grin on his face.

I quizzed them: ‘Were there free vodka cocktails there?’ Check.

‘Russian oligarchs and their beautiful companions?’ Check.

‘Dancing girls?’ ‘Nope, I didn’t see any, not even any mermaids.’

Mmm. I was suspicious. And unfortunately, stone cold sober.

Missing Halley’s Comet

Negotiating my way past yet more security people, I made my way back to the Press Room, thinking I might at least get a cup of tea and a Ginger Nut.

Just as I arrived, the whole room burst into uproar, and most of the journalists ran past me into the corridor, giving the security people a fit.

It turned out that Magnus had just offered a draw – when Sesse said he was clearly better. Magnus offering a draw? That never happens. It was as if I had missed Halley’s Comet because I had popped out from the Hubble telescope for five minutes to get a pint of milk.

The football question

We soon all crowded into the darkened Auditorium, now kitted out for the [Game 12 press conference](#), moderated by Daniel King.

Various chessy questions were asked – the “big guns” chess websites were invited to ask questions first. “Why hadn’t Magnus played on when Sesse said he was winning?” When a lip-curling Magnus said he was happy to get into the rapid playoffs and “didn’t care” what the computer said, I could have cheered – of course, to play such a nerve-wracking game and be relieved to survive your last Black, that was a completely human reaction.

Eventually I got to ask my question. Feeling a bit like the reporter from “Horse and Hound” from the Julia Roberts’ film “Notting Hill,” I said: “Tim Wall, ECF Newsletter. Magnus, will you risk playing football on the rest day tomorrow?”

Thankfully, Magnus didn’t scoff or scowl at the thought of another black eye, after the first one caused by (accidentally, one hopes) headbutting a Norwegian journalist. He just said, “Maybe – why not?”

Now I don’t know whether the game of football took place the next day. But I’d like to think that it did, and it helped Magnus relax and prepare mentally for the Rapid Playoffs the day after that.

After travelling back to Newcastle, two days later I was sitting in another darkened room with several of my clubmates at Forest Hall Chess Club, watching the Rapidplay Playoffs. We’d borrowed a projector and turned a table on its side to create a makeshift screen. It wasn’t that much different from being in the room with Magnus and Fabi. We could have a pint and listen

to the commentary, and we got to hear the players' reactions after Magnus's sweeping victory at the press conference.

As Magnus said, he doesn't listen to advice – and yet he won the trophy. Who knows – maybe he listened to the suggestion to play a bit of football, while Fabi was hunched over a computer preparing his openings. I'd like to think so. Permit me that delusion, at least...