

**You have played for England many times. Was Astana the best England team performance you have been involved in?**

Yes, without any doubt. Our fifth place at the Olympiad in Batumi last year was an excellent result, but winning the silver medals in Astana is something special. I do think the result in Batumi gave us some extra confidence in Astana.

I hope we can enjoy more successes in future team events, but there's no silver bullet. These team tournaments are very competitive, and a lot can hinge on a half point here and there.

**The game against Iran got off to a bad start. The chess community was justifiably full of praise for your Wood Green colleague Jon Speelman who stepped in for Gawain Jones who was unwell (especially as Jon was also not feeling well). The 3-1 scoreline with wins for yourself, Mickey Adams and David Howell was a great result. How important was that match for team spirit which eventually led to the second place finish?**

Iran has a handful of really promising young players, so that match was never going to be an easy one, even with a healthy team.

I think it's fair to say that none of us were feeling our best. For example, I was struggling with jetlag for most of the tournament. There's no doubt that beating Iran in difficult circumstances gave us a boost. But frankly, almost all of the matches were tight. Holding Russia to a 2-2 draw was a huge relief too. Even Egypt didn't give us an easy ride. I defended a passive endgame, and we squeaked through that match 2.5-1.5, thanks to wins from Gawain and David.

**You came away from Astana with a highly impressive 6/9 individual Gold Medal on Board 2. How special was that individual performance for you?**

It means a lot to me, particularly so, because it's a while since I had a really strong performance while representing England. I found that very frustrating, so I was glad to put those demons to rest in some style.

**The ubiquitous caption attached to you as being 'the best amateur in the world' still crops up from time to time. How would you define your chess status following your Board two performance in Astana?**

It's a funny label. I love chess, but unfortunately I'm not able to play more than a handful of tournaments per year, or to study the game in a professional fashion. But when I do play, I feel very motivated. This year I will try hard to get my rating back above the 2700 mark.

**I always enjoy watching GMs playing for Wood Green in the London Chess League and it is to your collective credit that you make time to analyse**

**games with your opponents at the venue. How much do you enjoy league games and how difficult is it to play against lower graded players who have everything to gain?**

I like playing in the London League. Not knowing who my opponent will be, I often find myself facing a surprise in the opening, and thinking on my own from an early stage. I usually learn something by looking up the lines after the game. Facing a lower graded player doesn't bother me at all. If someone scores an upset, good for them! Of course, I try hard to win for the sake of the team.

**Most ECF members reading this are club players of varying levels. We lead busy lives at home and work and don't have too much time to study opening, middle and end-game theory. What advice would you give lower to mid-graded club players to improve their game without having to put in hundreds of hours on the training pitch.**

Here's my best tip: get a good night's sleep before playing chess. Napping counts as preparation too! I don't always practice what I preach... but I never regret it when I do. Chess-wise, club players should prioritise tactics and endgames. By the way, endgames are full of tactics. A famous example: Topalov-Shirov, Linares 1998. 47...Bh3!!

**Will you be playing at the British this year and what are your chess plans for the rest of 2019?**

I'm not yet sure about the British. I have enjoyed playing the last couple of years, but the prizes in the Championship look to be significantly lower this year. The last few months of the year could be quite busy. The FIDE World Cup, the new FIDE Grand Swiss tournament, the European Team Championships in Batumi and the London Chess Classic are all in the calendar. I hope I can find a way to juggle them all!