

Bunfight at the OK Tea Rooms

By Tim Wall

'This is not 'Nam, this is the 4NCL. There are rules.'

Walter Sobchak, *'The Big Lebowski'*

It was the big showdown weekend between the big guns of the Four Nations Chess League. In Telford's Park Inn, (the Crucible Theatre of UK chess, if you will) the mighty 'Guildford Stranglers' took on another heavyweight team, the Chess.com-sponsored Manx 'Liberty Vallance.'

But my tale this month is not about the professional gunslingers of Division 1, but the unsung heroes of Division Three North, grimly slugging it out for promotion up the M6 in the small village of Blackrod, Lancashire (Population: 5,001, the ancient settlement's name derives from the Olde English for 'Dark Clearing').

My team, White Rose 2, was doing battle against squads from 3Cs, Manchester Manticores and Shropshire ('Tha's not from round here, is tha', lads?').

With a significant rating advantage over our main rivals (and a maximum 8 wins out of 8 before the final weekend), it looked like a cake walk, but the cake specially bought in preparation for our hoped-for promotion by team manager Jonathan Arnott nearly ended up being slung in a bunfight as we struggled to draw 3-3 on the Saturday vs 3Cs.

It became clear that, while ratings are important at the top of Division 1 (Guildford's average of 2663 gave them a big edge over Manx's 2574 in the Round 11 top-of-the-table decider) down in Div. 3 other factors come into play – and ratings are not always what they are cracked up to be. For example, my opponent in Round 11 (Kamil Celinski of Manchester Manticores) had a FIDE rating of **1810**, but an ECF grade of 197. Then there is also the factor of who's in form, and (it has to be said) who would have preferred to be in Telford watching the Champions League rather than playing in the park on a Sunday morning.

And yet, all games were tough and hard-fought, and we only just squeezed back into Division 2 with a slender 3.5-2.5 win over Shropshire on Sunday.

'Let them eat cake'

Jonathan (who in his other life has been an MEP for North East England, formerly of UKIP, now an Independent, and is soon to be a happily ex-politician) had a rather tasty cake made up, and we scooped half of it, before sending it down the M6 with White Rose 1 captain Paul Townsend, where it was shared with those players.



Then in Round 11, without Paul Townsend and Chris Dunworth, the remaining six of us were left to battle it out with the Manticores for the honour (and £350 prize) of winning the Division.

Things looked truly grim, however, after a couple of hours' play. Peter Shaw, who went to Blackrod with a maximum 8/8, lost his second game of the weekend – this time with his king horribly caught in a ferocious opening trap – while Jonathan Arnott similarly **had** his own king 'Stuck in the Middle with You' in a surreal Reservoir Dogs/Mr Blonde moment.

Then Pete Gayson (who played some fine chess through the weekend but was unlucky to lose all three games) was unable to make an early piece sac work, leaving us 0-3 down. Yet we managed somehow to pull off an unlikely recovery, with myself, Jean-Luc Weller and the dependable Jim ('Times Crossword') Burnett eventually doing the business to tie the match 3-3. Thus, by a narrow margin (2.5 game points), White Rose 2 finished first in the Division, ahead of Manticores 2. (They later suffered an even more tragic fate, as they learned that in Telford their first team had narrowly been demoted from Division 2, meaning in effect that their 2nd Team will have to play 'Up North' next season too.)

The playing conditions at the Mercure Georgian House Bolton were pleasant enough – even if we could have done without two different wedding parties boogieing through the hotel on the Saturday night, and a swarm of Scottish teenagers on the Sunday (their favourite after-hours occupation seemed to be phoning up random hotel rooms in prank calls at 3am).

One of the nice features of the weekend was meeting up again with my old friend and ex-flatmate Chris Dunworth, the founder of the 4NCL back in the Nineties, and we set out for a hike on the Sunday morning with the intention of climbing one of the nearby fells. Sadly, things in the Lancashire countryside ain't what they used to be, and two hours later, after multiple barbed wire fences and not a few private roads, we gave up on the quest to find a public footpath that led to the hills.

In Telford, meanwhile, Guildford eventually triumphed over Manx 6-2. The match was watched by our team supporters Rupert Jones and Sebaga Gourlay (pictured, below) who enjoyed a different variety of bunfight...

