

Is playing chess a financial sacrifice?

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I am fortunate to belong to a couple of theatre clubs where occasionally I land a couple of stalls tickets for a major West End production for a fiver each. There is no better feeling than quietly sitting next to someone at the English National Opera who has paid £110 for the same view as my fiver (to be fair going to the opera should not cost more than a tenner). I am fortunate to be able to afford the tenner for two and I am fortunate enough to be able to afford a little bit north of a tenner for an occasional cinema ticket. And until my beloved Leyton Orient were relegated to the National League (think of the football level as a 65 ECF grade) I was lucky enough to afford a season ticket working out at around a tenner a game (which in the season we were relegated out of the Football league should have actually been paid to me). Interestingly, what I paid for 23 home games that season cost the same as a ticket to Glastonbury, but my season ticket did not include a yurt and organic food drizzled with Nicaraguan olive oil. Fancy a pint and burger in any medium size UK town? Expect to pay anything from a tenner to a score (Wetherspoons excepted, but the term 'burger' takes on a whole new meaning when it is born and breaded in a Spoons kitchen).

Which brings us to the 64-square question of how much it costs to play recreational chess. Like the ECF Director of Junior Chess Alex Holowczak, I am a qualified cricket umpire and so have some insight into the costs of playing that game. Most clubs charge around £50-£100 a season membership plus £10 a game to cover the tea and umpires' fees. The kit does not come cheap, and there are travel costs so the annual outlay can be quite hefty. A five-a-side football game in a local sports centre or 11-a-side in a park will set you back a tenner once you have paid to get there and back. So when you do the maths, playing recreational chess (league games, tournaments and some friendly or social games) you will pay pay around £50 a year subs to a club and from £20 to £40 membership of the ECF (you can pay more or less to the ECF ie Platinum or most junior categories, but I'm going by the majority of members' classifications. Yes, there are Board Fees which in the case of most leagues is included in the clubs' subscriptions to those leagues. So, for example, if you play 10 London Chess League games

for Hackney Chess Club your subscription to the club is £55 per year so the cost is £5.50 per game and the price of the subs also includes some lecture evenings and weekly free blitz nights. Never mind London prices, where else are you going to get a night's live entertainment for that kind of money?

Two years ago the London Chess League (LCL) was given notice to leave Golden Lane Community Centre, where for around a quarter of a century the league had been paying £60 per night, three nights a week. Bearing in mind that the venue was situated next to the Barbican in Zone 1, this was a ludicrously low amount of money, as we were soon to learn. I am on the League Committee and along with Brian Smith, secretary of the League, we went looking for a new venue. We were quoted anything from £500 to £1400 (including VAT) per night. With these much bigger venues we were able to fit the three nights into one but paying £500 a week instead of £180 is a big jump. In the end we went with Citadines Apartment Hotel in Holborn, a perfect location and although some nights are a squeeze, the large breakout lounge for analysis and the price including tea, coffee and biscuits have made the evening more of an event. A hike in board fees does not go down well with some member clubs so the committee is looking at possibly moving out of central London.

Chess players who think we are paying too much need to take a step back and look at how lucky we are. The real costs of running chess are hidden beneath a mountain of goodwill from an army of volunteers who, along with Pawns, make up the real soul of chess. Take Brian Smith, who arrives at Citadines around 5.30pm on a match night, and with the tables and chairs already laid out as part of the hire cost, he and other volunteers then set up 100-plus boards, clocks and scoresheets. After the evening finishes at around 10.20pm and the last players head off for a pint, Brian spends a further hour clearing the room, packing the equipment into a cupboard and leaving the premises around 11.20 to get home well after midnight. For this nine-hour shift, including travel, Brian is not paid. And it is no surprise to learn that Brian is by no means the only chess administrator who puts in hundreds of such hours a year at no cost. If Brian was paid a minimum wage, the League would need to find around £3,000 a season extra. Multiply that by the hundreds of other volunteer organisers and you reach a savings cost that reflects just how much recreational chess is reliant on these people.

For a typical tournament, Alex Holowczak has a lot to do before he gives the 'start White's clock' signal: Find a suitable venue; book the venue and pay for it; arrange for enough other staff to be present; set the entry form (paper based/online), market the tournament (email previous entries, website); register each section for rating with FIDE if necessary; collect the data (including chasing up missing data; check payment has been received, and chase up non-payers). Then there are the things a tournament organiser does on the day and again, after everyone has gone home, Alex and his team submit the tournament for ECF grading and FIDE rating as well as clearing up the venue. And for all of this work he charges a fee that might buy him and his team a burger, chips and beer. He says: "I usually charge around £50 for junior tournaments. For bigger tournaments I can charge more because they can afford to pay more. Tournament fees often do not cover costs. I think too much is done for too little in chess – players should always remember how lucky they are that so many volunteers are willing to give up their time to facilitate the participants' enjoyment of the game."

Robert Willmoth runs tournaments and coaching for juniors in London. His problem is getting his members and players to become ECF members. A full-time professional coach, for his Barnet Knights collective coaching nights and tournament Robert charges £12 for two hours and hires extra staff to work with him. He says: "To run a rapidplay, I have two unpleasant choices, either pay a fee to the ECF for grading my event or ensure everyone is a member." So parents and guardians who, for whatever reason, are recalcitrant at best, or refusing at worst to pay a relatively modest sum for membership to a national association need to think this through more carefully and then pay the membership charge for their son or daughter.

Tim Partridge of Witney Chess Club helps with the club's Annual Congress, rapidplay and simultaneous evening, getting ready and clearing up. He also promotes the club in a local primary school running sessions and preparing the children for the Delancy Challenge. He says: "During league season I spend around seven hours a week making sure that everything is ready and going smoothly for the 30-plus members." Again, this work is done as a volunteer.

From a player's perspective, David Gilbert is a typical ECF member and club player. At DHSS Chess Club he pays £5 per year subscription (this fee was reduced from £10 when membership fees replaced game fees). Says David: "I've played 24 League games this season, that's 21p a

game, and there's free tea, coffee and biscuits. The club at DHSS has wooden boards and sets and play with digital clocks, I doubt you'll find better value anywhere. At Sidcup I pay £50 a year. The club has an active group of social players and it's often more relaxed than playing League matches. The club invested in six DGT 2010s and new silicon boards last season. I played eight League matches and five county games for Kent. Which is £3.85 a game. But I've also played 30-plus ungraded friendly games. It's good value for me because of the club's proximity."

David is also a regular on the tournament circuit paying between £25 and £40 an event. He says: "I think I get good value because I love chess. And when asked how he rates playing chess against other leisure pursuits his answer is a smothered mate: "There are other leisure pursuits?" Chris Gribben of Hackney Chess Club believes chess provides value for money: "I am paying around £6 a game for each London League match and around £40 for tournaments, including the London Chess Classic. For me, chess is a very good value leisure activity."

At the ECF Finance Committee Meeting in April there was this motion: *That increases in ECF membership fees for the 2019/20 season should be limited at maximum to a rise in line with CPI inflation rate, and preferably to no increase.* The motion was defeated after a robust and healthy debate. Of course there are going to be unwaged people who struggle to meet rising costs. Many clubs have a reduced fee for unwaged people and at Hackney we sometimes waive the £10 fee. But in a leisure market facing huge competition with cheaper online options (see how cinemas are going lower on pricing because of Netflix) we need to understand that providing live over-the-board chess at a fair price demands a reasonable financial commitment from players. Win, lose or draw, it's a night out; you are interacting with other people, you are having a great time, you are participating in a live event. If you want cheap chess you can get it for nothing online; you can play for free on chess.com, chess24.com, lichess.org among others. You can watch live commentary from GMs on tournaments free of charge, you can analyse your games with programming beasts and there is a treasure trove of free vides on YouTube to help you improve all aspects of your game. And for around a fiver a game average, you can play live blitz, rapidplay and standard play chess throughout the year.

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