



ECF Chess visit to HMP Wandsworth

Monday 5th and Tuesday 6th August 2019

World Online Prison Chess Championships



ECF Rep, Carl Portman (second left) with the team on day 2.

In May 2019, I received a letter from Sherriff Thomas Dart from the Cook County Department of corrections in Chicago. The letter invited the English Chess Federation to be involved in the International online Word Chess prison Championships, to be held in August.

This was an incredible opportunity and if it were to happen – and England take up a place it would be a first ever for this country. The occasion was so big that I wanted it to be a collaboration with Chess in Schools and Communities who also work with prisons, and we quickly reached agreement. Malcolm Pein and Peter Sullivan were onside immediately.

This is one of those rare occasions where I don't need to write and repeat what occurred when I can refer the reader to a perfectly accurate and interesting blog from Andrew Smith, who was a facilitator for the second day. If you go to his blog site you'll get the picture. The link is given below.

<https://www.chess.com/blog/ThePawnSlayer/the-first-prison-world-championships-in-wandsworth-prison>

I would though, wish to add this. First of all, the event was a huge success. The prisoners were part of a world first and that can never be taken away from them. The experience was rewarding, interesting and super productive. The team ethic and camaraderie between prisoners, facilitators and the prison staff were second to none. I also want to make a special mention for Peter Sullivan.

I have been working with chess in prisons for 5 years now. I cover all prisons in England – in theory – but still have a way to go to have even visited half of them. Peter 'specializes' In HMP Wandsworth and has his own unique relationship with the establishment, even being a key holder. I witnessed a relationship between him and the prisoners that I have never seen before. He (quite rightly) treated them as human beings and they did the same to him.

There were no barriers and everyone just wanted to play chess. Peter could be kind and encouraging but also know exactly when to tell them to 'shut up' when we needed quiet. The reaction was swift and respectful – prisoners did indeed shut up. His tireless efforts to bat away all of the red tape, security and technological issues are not to be underestimated.

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Peter is ably assisted by the very experienced and knowledgeable John Illingworth who is equally an asset to the chess in prisons initiative and he has a background that enables him to work with prisoners for the greater good.

Malcolm Pein attended for the first day (he had to go to Liverpool prison for the second!) and he immediately struck up a great team bond with England's strong board one player, and they had their own special brand of chess fun in their own 64 squared world. It was brilliant to behold for the rest of us. Malcolm just eased into the session and although is 'Mr Chess' in the UK we were all equals on the day. It was just fun, it's that simple.

Whilst it might be true that we never won a match, the experience was absolutely priceless and it was music to my ears to hear staff say comments like *'This is the first time I have seen him smile in long time, he never smiles'*, or *'Watching them work together was absolutely amazing'*. There was no Braggadocio and no insults. Indeed, everyone was desperate for a win against one of the teams. Personally, I said that if we beat the Russians, I would get the keys and ensure that all of the team were released that day (everyone knew it was just a joke) and that seemed to spur the lads on, but alas it wasn't to be. You cannot play billiards online but chess is the perfect game to do so.

My own personal view is that their opening into middlegame was not too bad at all, but they started to go awry in the middle to endgame, which is of course a very difficult phase of the game.

After the event there was meant to be a Skype consultation with Anatoly Karpov, but for one reason or another that never came about but I would have asked him why he supports prisons chess himself. Maybe next time.



When I first visited a prison in 2014 there seemed to be barely any chess players. Today, chess is on the rise, it is getting onto the prison agenda and being embraced not just by governors, but government. The benefits are clear for anyone to see. When prisoners are playing chess the problems of the world dissolve, the 64 squares come alive and nothing else matters from the opening volley to the end of the battle. Time becomes their toy.

Well done to the English Chess Federation, Chess in Schools and Communities, Sheriff Dart, Mikhail Korenman, Mark Robertson, and all staff and prisoners involved with the event in England and indeed around the world. This showed that there can be a coming together not just on a prison wing, not just in one prison but indeed around the world. Through the magic of technology (thank you to the brilliant team at Chess.com) and the indefatigability of some truly dedicated people the global prison estate came together. It can do so again. Chess makes this happen. Here's to the next time. Any support will be welcome.

Carl Portman

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