

Welcome back to Fawlty Chess Towers, we've missed you

By Tim Wall

"Don't mention the mobile phone default war. I mentioned it once, but I think I got away with it. It's all forgotten now, and let's hear no more about it. So it's one Rausis omelette, a scrambled Sniper, two fried FitBit watches and a D'Costa frappe coffee." (John Cleese, Arbiter-at-Large, 2019 British Championships)

It's summertime, and that can only mean one thing; it's time to head to the seaside, get out your bucket, spade and Chessbase, and enter the British Championships. The 106th British, just concluded in Torquay, was for me – as I guess for a lot of people – a real roller coaster with a random mix of positive and not-so-positive emotions.

Unless you're Mickey Adams or Jovanka Houska (congratulations on your 7th and 9th British titles, respectively, your Royal Highnesses!) there were snakes as well as ladders on and off the board at the magnificent English Riviera International Centre, or as the Devon locals affectionately call it: ERIC.

In my case, there were more snakes than on a Samuel L Jackson plane to LA. Hello, embarrassing blunders. Goodbye, rating points. Oh, and an Airbnb landlady from hell, who would have given Basil Fawlty a decent run for his money as the worst hotelier in Torquay.

For other players, the losses and the pain came from unexpected directions. Lorin D'Costa, the well-liked IM and recent Olympiad coach to the England Women's team, fell foul of the rules (and the prevailing mood in professional chess after the scandalous Igors Rausis cheating affair) when his opponent, 'Sniper' FM Charlie Storey, alerted the arbiters that D'Costa was walking out of the playing hall with a knapsack on his back that might contain a mobile phone. When it was confirmed that Lorin was buying a coffee with a (switched-off) electronic device in his bag, he was duly defaulted, as prescribed under FIDE rules. D'Costa and Storey then headed, metaphorical handbags in hand, to their favourite arenas for online post-mortems, the English Chess Forum and Facebook, to air their versions of the incident, and D'Costa sadly withdrew from the tournament. Monty Python are presumably planning a Batley Townswomen's Guild re-enactment of the affair next year to rival

their classic, 'The Battle of Pearl Harbour'.

I should add, mobile phone default aside, that Charlie performed well in the tournament, and delighted the fans of his swashbuckling style as he picked up a long-overdue second IM norm.

Elsewhere, the tragi-comedy was on the chessboard itself. The creative GM Daniel Fernandez deployed a dubious 'Dukes of Hazzard' opening as White against IM Richard Palliser in Round 8 that was just a little bit more than the law will allow. After just 4 bizarre moves (1 f4 d6 2 b3?! e5 3 fxe5?! dxe5 4 g3?! h5!) he was virtually lost. (Kids, do not try this at home...)

But whether the week went well or badly for the participants, the British lived up to its deserved reputation as the flagship event of the national chess calendar. Yes, there was much fine chess on display from the leading (and up-and-coming) players, not to mention from 85-year-old James Sherwin, of 'Fischer's 60 Memorable Games' fame, who was the co-winner of the Rapidplay Championship with Andrew Lewis.

But more than that, the British was (as always) memorable for the social side of things. This might seem like an empty platitude, but I can assure you it is not. While we are all caught up in our own personal struggles during a tournament such as the British, and we never see the whole picture as individual players, there were a number of social highlights that are the superglue holding English chess together as a community.

GM Danny Gormally and IM Adam Hunt were outstanding as commentators, and the innovation of streaming live on Twitch.TV and Chess.com live from Torquay brought the thrills and spills of the Championships to a much wider audience than in previous years. The social programme, organised by local Devon chess enthusiasts, also added to the experience, with tourist excursions, quizzes and other events to divert and entertain the players and their families over the nine days.

Two other happenings typified the unofficial side of the British, beyond the control of any arbiter or ECF official. An unlicensed chess-boxing match on the ERIC front lawn between IM Adam Taylor and Kim Shek, a London restaurateur and dad to England junior Daniel Shek, attracted a large crowd of cheering junior players, and an evening of crazy blitz 'n' beers after the last round involving Ginger GM Simon Williams and

friends went on until the wee hours.

In these gatherings, we meet up with new and old friends, exchange ideas, gossip and heartfelt emotions, and make memories that last for many years to come. All chess life is there in the 'after hours' activities at the British, and long may this continue.

For me, I had a special reason to be thankful that I was at this year's British in Torquay, my first there in over 20 years. It gave me a reason to be half an hour from Newton Abbot, where Sarah Wylie, a college-era sweetheart of mine from Newcastle in the 1990s, now lives.

Sarah, along with her best friend Grace Foo, were among the close-knit group of friends who formed the Newcastle University Chess Society, and we had some of the best times in life from those days, with evenings in the pub watching Newcastle United, quizzes at the Chillingham Arms (later the famous venue for the Northumbria Masters) and fabulous dinners of Malaysian Chinese cuisine at Grace's flat. (Another of the group, Stefan Hartmann, holds the unique distinction that his only internationally rated game was a win in the 1996 Northumbria Masters over future British Champion Gawain Jones. OK, so Gawain was only nine at the time!) Nowadays we are a little more far-flung, with Grace running a successful chess in schools project in St. Louis, the home of the famous US chess centre, and we mostly keep in touch by social media.

The day after our marathon post-British blitz session, I blearily headed for Newton Abbot in some trepidation. Would Sarah and I be able to reconnect, a full 25 years after we had last seen each other? In the event, I needn't have worried. During a delightful afternoon of tea, conversation and stories with Sarah and her brilliant husband, James, the years fell away as we recalled times in Newcastle and caught up on some of the momentous personal events from the last quarter century. Hopefully, we will not leave it too long before we are able to get the "Newcastle chess band" back together again.

Of course, I came away a more than a little emotional and even a little smitten again, in true Doctor Zhivago-nostalgia style. One thing Sarah said particularly stuck with me: That chess had brought our group of chess friends a lot of happiness and led to so many interesting things in life. With half a tear in my eye, waving goodbye at Newton Abbot railway

station, I had to agree.

Even more than the British in Torquay, meeting with Sarah underlined for me that it is the journey we take in chess that is important, along with the lifelong friends we make along the way.