

Takes on a Plane

I raised the point in my editorial in October about the hidden cohort of chess players who prefer to play online than over the board and want to share some more thoughts with the ECF membership.

It is easy to get carried away by stats and these threads make interesting reading:

<https://www.chess.com/article/view/how-many-chess-players-are-there-in-the-world>

<https://www.chess.com/forum/view/community/how-many-people-are-actually-active-on-chess-com>

Even one per cent of the chess.com claim of around 20m members could mean 200,000 English or UK folks out there at a very conservative guess (one percent of 20 million). But of course this is all speculation and should not be taken literally.

What we do know is that there a lot of casual chess players out there who enjoy a game in a range of different settings. I use public transport a lot and have been conducting a range of unscientific case studies that would not stand up to academic scrutiny but I hope will cheer the souls of ECF members. I carry a pocket set around and any public space serves as my laboratory. Here are four case studies.

Case Study 1: 253 bus, Euston to Hackney (Used to play, maybe come back to play again)

There I was minding my own business and playing a chess24.com blitz game on my smartphone when a man who looked to be around 50 years old sat down next to me. I saw him peering over and being the sort of person who always wants to attract new members to ECF I resigned the game and started a conversation. He told me he used to be a club player in Bristol and reached a grading peak of around 100 in the 1990s and had not played any kind of competitive chess since then. He added that with the Internet he had recently been playing online but kept losing so he did not want to go back. He lives in London so I directed him to the London League website where all the clubs are listed, and I also told him about the ECF Supporter

membership.

Case Study 2: (Can't play, time waster) Train from London to York in the summer. I had a table seat and was about to start some work on my laptop when three youngish guys got on and started streaming the Ashes live, which was a better prospect than work. When the Ashes stream faded into a tunnel I asked if any of them fancied a game of chess. Only one of them knew how to play and once we started it transpired that he didn't, although going by his interpretation of the laws I would have won a few games that I have lost.

Case study 3:

McDonald's, Westfield Stratford (Nice to meet you)

I refuse to go to the ubiquitous Pret, Starbucks, Costa £3 watered down stuff when McDonald's make a perfectly good cup of coffee for £1.30. So there I am sitting in the huge open dining area in Westfield and playing through an endgame I had lost a few days earlier on my pocket set. A guy approached me and told me he loves chess, used to play to a good standard and is keen to get back into it.

Unfortunately for Hackney Chess Club I could not entice him with a cup of coffee to join because he lives in France.

Case Study 4:

easyJet Tel Aviv to London flight (Takes on a Plane).

This is by some distance the most extraordinary chess meeting of my life. Wandering to the back of the plane to use the toilet I saw an ultra Orthodox Jewish family across six seats (three on each side). And one of the young men had a chess set laid out on his little table. I asked him if he wanted a game, his brother moved to my seat and what came next falls into a category of 'a truly great couple of hours'. The boy was 15; he learned how to play from a book in the library (the ultra orthodox community do not use the Internet). He had played against some friends in his community but he said no one was able to get near him. And to be fair, he was a naturally good player and found some excellent resources during the games we played. His father pointed out that the lifestyle of the ultra orthodox community where young men study many hours a day gives them an aptitude for processing information and so it was with this young man. In one of the games I asked him to explain his thinking behind each move and

he clearly understood the concept of threats and the basics of tactics.

There is a big world out there of chess players of all levels, a world where grades, success and failure don't exist and where two strangers can enjoy each other's company kibitzing. So next time you are on a journey or having a coffee, take out your pocket set and see what happens.