

The Cheater Hunter

Mark Rivlin interviews Andy Howie

Andy Howie is FIDE international arbiter and organizer, executive director of Chess Scotland and a Secretary/Delegate of the European Chess Union. He is at the heart of the battle against online and OTB cheating. In August 2020 he said on the English Chess Forum: "I can't speak for other federations, but Scotland takes online cheating in organized tournaments very, very seriously. Anyone caught and proven to be cheating faces up to a 5 year ban depending on age."

You are a well-known and respected International Arbiter with a very impressive portfolio of tournaments, leagues and congresses. Tell us about your chess background and how you became an arbiter.

Not sure about respected, infamous would probably be the adjective used by players up here in Scotland as I have a habit of arbiting in sandals and shorts even in the middle of winter!

I started playing when I was seven, my dad taught me how to play. I won a few tournaments in Germany (I was brought up there as my father was in the armed services and we were based out there). I played with friends and work colleagues through the years and was a lot better than them so tried my luck in a local tournament and fell in love with it completely. I became an arbiter because a friend of mine was wronged in a tournament and I didn't know the rules well enough to argue. I swore I would never be in that position again, took the arbiters course and the rest, as they say, is history.

What are the keys skills required for being an arbiter?

Patience is key. You are often dealing with very frustrated players who are not always going to like what you have to say. Common sense is another great attribute. And as the players I have been dealing with in the Online British Championship well tell you, a sense of humour goes a long, long way.

I'm old enough to remember the magnificent 1967 Scotland football team that beat England 3-2 at Wembley (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSfA7xxBM3w>) Will there be any eyebrows raised that as Chess Scotland Executive Director you are doing an interview with the ECF?!

I am not quite that old, but not too far from it! I don't think it will come as a great surprise to them as they know I have been working with the ECF in the last

year. We have built stronger relationships between the ECF and Chess Scotland and long may that continue!

Tell us about young Scottish players to watch out for in the coming years.

Freddy Gordon, aged nine, is a phenomenal talent. We played him in the U16 team for the Celtic nations at the start of December to give him a bit of a challenge. He played three games on board two and three on board one and scored a perfect 6/6. He is probably the most exciting talent we have had in Scotland for a long time. Magnus [Carlsen] is just keeping the chair warm for him.

On your Lichess handle Wellfan your intro line includes the phrase *the scourge of players that cheat!* With an enforced proliferation of online chess, cheating has become part of the game's lexicon. How much of a problem is cheating, both over-the-board and online?

I put that up to scare the juniors I was arbiting for over the summer and to hopefully make them think twice! It is harder to cheat over the board as arbiters are now wise to the 'hows' and 'whys'. Online it is simpler as there is no arbiter watching over you. As you are alone, the temptation is there. It is certainly more of an issue in online than OTB but we are making big strides into making online clean and it is not uncommon now for a tournament to have no-one cheating in it.

If I am being honest, the biggest problems are perception and false accusations by players. There is a perception that there is a lot of cheating going on and whilst I would agree that used to be the case, with what Fair Play Arbiters and the platforms have been doing, the number of people cheating has been going down as they know they are going to be caught.

False accusations by players can range from a general concern to what we would term a manifestly unsound accusation. It dismays me that there are so-called titled 'experts' out there who are happy to spout their unsubstantiated accusations all over social media and even in live broadcasts, not realising the damage it can potentially do to the person being targeted. I am grateful there are remedies for this when we are faced with it at a tournament.

For club players who are not aware of the anti-cheating software available to arbiters, please explain how these programmes work.

We generally use the FIDE approved system developed by Dr Ken Regan. It takes the games of a tournament as an input and compares the moves the player makes against computer engines we are interested in (usually Stockfish and Komodo). That will produce an initial scan and will give us three variables. Move Match (how often the player matches the computer), Average Scaled Difference (when a non first choice move is made, what the average difference is between it

and the computer move) and ROI. ROI is a scale that gives an indication of fairness. Normal play will be between 40 and 60, 60-65 is still normal but suspicious, 65-70 is take notice and 70-plus is an indication of potential cheating. Please note it is only an indication. We would then send the games off to Dr Regan for a Full Scan to be performed which will determine if the person has been cheating,

What are the difficulties in getting the balance right between catching the cheats and falsely accusing the innocent?

The system is actually set up to measure fair play not cheating. Someone cheating is an outlier. Due to this it is biased towards letting a cheat go. We would rather that a cheat gets away with it than someone is falsely accused which is why we always use two sets of evidence before we remove a player from a tournament. If there is only one then the person is allowed to continue. For most events there are three sources and you are looking two out of the three. The sources are normally Fide software, Provider and a strong and trusted GM

What is FIDE's approach to tackle cheating?

FIDE have made it their priority to reduce cheating in chess. It was one of the promises the current president made. They are taking it very seriously and have been supportive of most of our needs. It has certainly been a big change on the previous regime that unfortunately only ever gave it lip service.

Are anti-cheating measures employed by the ECF, Chess Scotland, the UKCC and the 4NCL consistent with the FIDE approach?

At this moment Chess Scotland measures are probably somewhat tougher than other UK-based chess organisations. We have taken it very seriously and this has been borne out with the very low numbers we have had cheating in our tournaments. The players know if they cheat in a tournament in Scotland they are going to get a lengthy ban. That said, I have been closely involved in setting up the ECF and 4NCL policies, and the policies of other organisations such as UKCC are closely aligned with the ECF and 4NCL policies as well. So I think that even allowing for some local differences the various policies are proportionate and strike a reasonable balance between catching those who cheat and wrongly accusing the innocent. Yes, we have consistency between our collective ideals and FIDE.

As a club player lurking between 1600-1700 I regularly lose and sometimes win. Putting three-minute online skittles to one side, I have never thought an opponent has cheated to win against me because I know there are many weaknesses in my game. What are the telltale signs players of my ability may have cause to think their opponent has cheated?

The honest truth, and this is something I cannot emphasise enough – with a single game you are never going to know. Despite what anyone tries to tell you, without physical evidence from cameras, you will not ever be able to tell if someone is cheating from a single game. This is the same for OTB and online and the reason is that everyone is capable of a perfect game. Anyone who comes to you and says a person has been cheating in a game should be ignored – they do not know what they are talking about. Without physical evidence, detection takes several games as you need a minimum number of moves to make it statistically significant. Normally by Round Three of a tournament we know who to watch for.

Over-the-board cheating is also not isolated. With powerful engines do we really have irrefutable measures to stop players 'visiting the bathroom' and as I call it, trying to beat the cistern?

We most certainly do. At the Candidates Tournament 2020-21 the players' toilets had 12 cubicles. I had to go round them and check them multiple times per round. To get to the toilets, the player had to go through an airport-style metal scanner. I also have means to detect electronically and by using metal detectors. Someone trying to beat the cistern is going to be caught and flushed out very quickly.

We know that footballers, managers and referees occasionally air a difference of opinion. In your experience how do chess players of all levels view arbiters?

Most of the players I deal with are very polite and respectful. Whether this is because I am a six-foot, 20-stone ex-rugby player is not a coincidence.