

Adult beginners - the lockdown winners?

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Anecdote 1: A few weeks ago I sent the screenshot below to my friend Anthony Samuels. He is 65 years old and has never played any kind of competitive chess. I asked him to suggest a move for Black and the reason for choosing it. He said he would move the Knight to d7 and then bring the Rook to a8. Irrespective of how good that move is (I played it and won the game) I was extremely surprised that a beginner with no experience of competitive chess would consider such a tactic.



Anecdote 2

René Butler, who runs PR company Consumer King, (<https://consumerking.co.uk/>) is captain of Harborough Cuatro in the 4NCL and Market Harborough third team in OTB chess. In this article for the Harborough Mail he describes how Jon Redding who is new to competitive chess, won the team's match against Cornwall Killers in the online 4NCL: <https://www.harboroughmail.co.uk/sport/other-sport/why-netflix-drama-has-seen-boom-interest-market-harborough-chess-club-3053204>

Says René: “The stunning combination I referred to in the newspaper article was a Rook sacrifice. In long play, most players would have worked out the value of sacrificing the Rook but with three minutes to go it's not so easy, I've seen top players overlook such moves. It took courage from Jon when you consider promotion depended on him getting the combination right. I wasn't surprised he succeeded. His calculation skills are sharp.”

Jon's chess journey mirrors thousands of millennials who are either coming back or taking up chess because of the lockdown-Beth combo. It's one thing for John Lewis to say that sales of chess sets are up 150 percent, it's another for a post-beginner to beat a 1700 opponent with the clock ticking.

Jon, who runs an IT services company (octopus-computers.com) is 32, and a chance meeting with René at a networking event before Covid-19 was the catalyst for him to get back into chess. He says: “I played for my primary school up the age of ten and didn’t play for around 15 years, and even then when I restarted it was only the occasional casual game. When René invited me to have a few games over a coffee I realised how much I enjoyed it and started to play for Market Harborough third team. At the same time my grade on chess.com mainly through blitz games was steadily rising to around 1250. But what really matters to me is how much I love the game, I am totally hooked and I want to improve.”

Anecdote 3

Over the period March to December 2020 when cafes were open I had individual over the board with people who had contacted Hackney Chess Club. Most had taught themselves online, none had played any chess since primary school.

One guy beat me 1.5-0.5, another got a draw against me and although the remainder of the games were pretty straightforward wins for me, it was clear that these people had enough grasp of the basics to give me (1700) a decent game. Three of these players are now regulars in our online teams.

One of the top chess promoters on the recreational circuit Adam Raoof points out: “With the success of *The Queen’s Gambit* I suspect that I will see a huge increase in the number of adults wanting to play in their first tournament. In my Golders Green tournaments (<http://goldersgreenschess.blogspot.com/>) I suspect that they will start off in one of the two bottom sections, and make their way up the ladder, depending on how they improve.

“One thing that’s very important to remember is that adult beginners and post beginners are very different from junior competitors; some adult beginners have never played in a tournament before. Whereas, many of the juniors - even though on paper they are beginners - have played in *many tournaments* between schools and competitive matches and are quite experienced in the etiquette of the chess world. So, I will probably have to adjust my offerings again based on the influx of new entries in the post-Covid market.

“The other thing to note is that juniors are brought by parents to a day’s six-round-rapid play and occasionally these parents would play as well. But of course, as some of the juniors are strong, they were beating up the adults! So I set up a low grading section for these parents which I expect will be very popular post lockdown.”

Many beginners will stay at post-beginner level for a variety of reasons. But is the ECF missing a trick if it doesn’t give opportunities for adult beginners to develop. There is a huge difference in playing a holiday game on Ibiza beach after a night’s clubbing and turning out for a club or tournament with all the responsibilities that go with it as Jon Redding’s tactic against the clock demonstrated.

So how can we harness this interest in chess from adults? Says René Butler: “There needs to be a PR push for top players aged 20-45, we should exploit the momentum of *The Queen’s Gambit*. I think English chess needs more characters, sub-brands if you will. Take Simon Williams (<https://gingergm.com/>) he is captivating! People are interested in

people. We don't want interest to drop off and the chess boom will be nothing more than a fad."

Among the influx of beginner-level adults there may be a Jamie Vardy or Ian Wright who were discovered playing amateur football and became Premier League legends. The ECF should nurture and encourage anyone who wants to play chess in a casual or competitive environment. So instead of walking into a hall hosting weekend conferences and finding a high percentage of participants who are white men over 50, we should also see people of all ages, backgrounds and levels. You never know, you may see the occasional giant killing as when post beginner Maris Salumets got a draw with a grading difference of around 100 in the old money.

http://www.4ncl.co.uk/replay/div2d_1516.htm