

Report by Roger Emerson of Guildford

The European Chess Union's Online Chess Club Cup was held on 27-31 March 2021 and attracted 90 teams. Bundesliga champions Baden-Baden, headed by Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, were top seeds, and there were also strong teams from Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and almost every European Union Country. Three 4NCL teams (Guildford 4NCL, Wood Green and Wood Green Monarchs) represented England, while Celtic Tigers flew the flag for Wales. Further 4NCL representation was evidenced by CSU Bucharest, built around the nucleus of Manx Liberty's top players, while Keith Arkell was part of a French team. For Guildford, Nigel Povah and I had secured the services of Mickey Adams, David Howell, Luke McShane, Gawain Maroroa Jones and Ivan Cheparinov, making us fourth seeds overall.

The playing schedule was unremitting from the start, with four or five matches every day, at a rate of 15 minutes plus 5 second increments. We came through the qualifying rounds comfortably but, after a good first day, Wood Green fell away on the second against tougher opposition; so they, Monarchs and Tigers were all eliminated. There were a minor few upsets against seedings, but Baden-Baden just managed to avoid the biggest upset of all by just qualifying in second place in group A.

In the next stage, seedings were based on performance at the group stage, which meant that our group included two other group winners plus Baden-Baden. We lost early on to the Russian 3rd seeds after Gawain Jones lost a 100-move marathon against Esipenko, but we beat Baden-Baden easily. Further wins had us qualifying for the finals with a round to spare. Meanwhile, following defeat to us, Baden-Baden imploded and were eliminated

So far so good! But that tough play-off group, involving a number of very long games, clearly took its toll. We looked, on paper, to have a relatively easy first day of the final, including matches against three of the four lowest seeded teams, but that proved a mirage as we only picked up two points from a possible 8. We managed to bounce back a bit on the last day, with a win against the remaining top seed Novy Bor, but the damage had been done the day before. Meanwhile Jorden Van Foreest followed up his Wijk-an-Zee success by leading Clichy to second place, while the young Deisizau team from South Germany (sponsored by Baden-Baden's Grenke company) came a surprise clear first, thanks in part to a 2700+ performance by 23 year old Matthias Bluebaum on top board.

The organising team, led ably by Jirina Prokopova, had clearly put in a great deal of work to ensure that the event ran smoothly, including providing captains with a comprehensive guide and arranging a short practice tournament so that all players could get used to the Tornelo platform and to the computer, zoom and webcam requirements to ensure fair play. This definitely paid off, with no reported suspicions of cheating and with problems dealt with clearly, calmly and efficiently. My thanks and congratulations to Jirina, to her deputies (including Alex Holowczak) and indeed to the whole organising team.

Now, finally, for a few comments on the games! Mark Crowther's The Week In Chess has a detailed report on the tournament, with links to download all the games and a number of illustrative games (<https://theweekinchess.com/chessnews/events/european-online-chess-club-cup-2021>), or you can download them all from Chess-Results.com (<https://chess-results.com/tnr550240.aspx?lan=1&art=0&fed=CZE&turdet=YES&flag=30>)

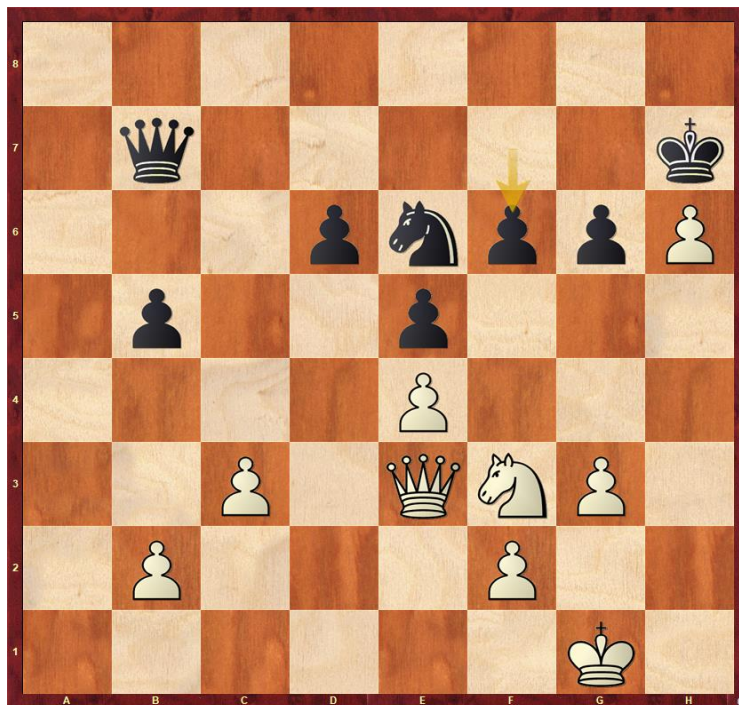
A few memorable games for me:

Against Tomashevsky, Mickey slowly built up winning pressure on the queenside



26....Rc8 27 Nf4 Rc5 28 Qe2 a4 29 Rc1 Ne4 30 Rc2 a3 31 b3 Ncd2+ 32 Kc1 Rxc2 33 Nxc2 Qf6 34 Nd3 Nxb3+ 35 axb3 a2 36 Rd1 Qc3 and White resigned.

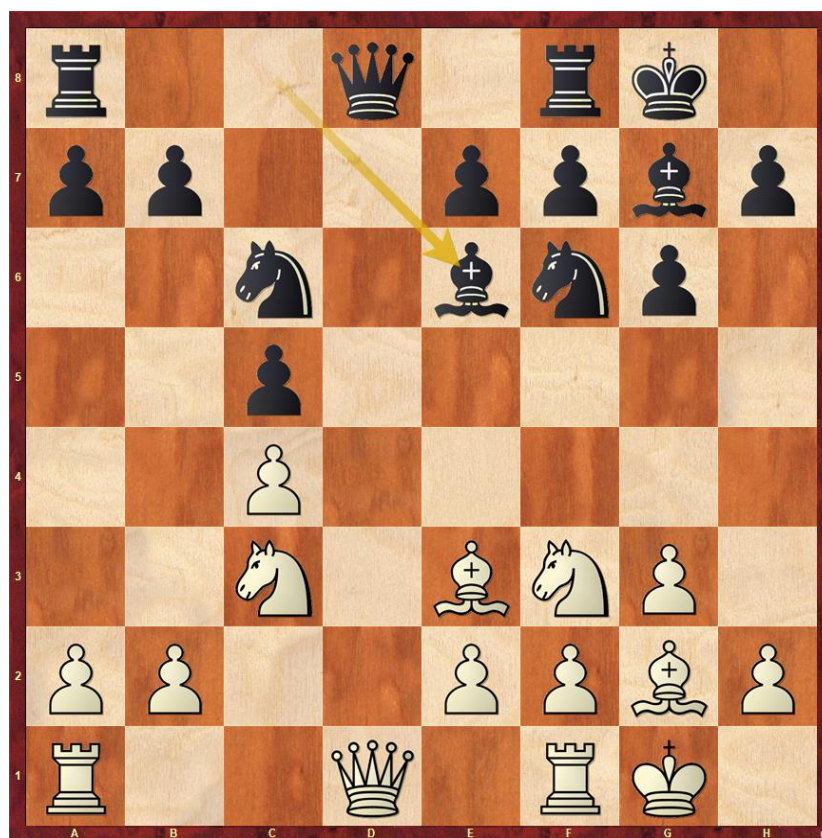
Luke nursed a small advantage against Kamsky through to victory, starting with a fine manoeuvre



46 Nh2! Ng5 47 Ng4 Qe7 48 f4! Nf7 (48...exf4 49 gxf4 Nxe4? 50 Qxe4! Qxe4 51 Nf6+) 49 Qf3 Nxh6 50 Qh1! Qg7 51 Qh4 g5 52 fxg5 fxg5 53 Qh5 Qg6 54 Qxh6+ Qxh6 55 Nxh6 Kxh6 56 Kf2 with a winning endgame. White will play b4 followed by c4, and his outside passed pawn will win the game. So after a few more moves Kamsky resigned.

David played very solidly and beat some highly rated opponents, but just about all his wins were long-drawn out affairs where, with both sides pretty much down to 5 second increments, David's relative strengths came to the fore. This earned him the overall bronze medal for board 2, after Vidit and Matlakov – a fine performance!

Ivan proved very efficient at beating up opponents on board 4 and was instrumental in ensuring us a relatively painless qualification for the final, but for swashbuckling attacks I have to turn to Gawain's games, none more so than his game against Timofeev. Gawain eventually lost this in 101 moves, after Timofeev had beaten off Gawain's sacrificial attack by giving up his queen for two minor pieces. Gawain was a rook down at the time! If only Gawain had found the star move, it could have been the game of the tournament. Here is the symmetrical position after Black's 9th move:



10 Bxc5 Qa5 11 Be3 Bxc4 12 Nd2 Be6 13 h3 Qh5 14 g4 Bxg4!? 15 hxg4 Nxg4 16 Bf4?! (16 Nf3 Be5 17 Re1 Nxe3 18 fxe3 Bg3 with dangerous threats, although Stockfish thinks White can hold) Be5 17 Qa4 Rad8 18 Nf3 Rd4! 19 Nxd4 Bxf4 20 Rfd1 (desperately making room for his king to escape) and now Gawain played 20....Ne3 21 fxe3 Bxe3+ 22 Kf1 Nxd4 23 Qxd4! (a great practical choice, stopping Black's attack altogether, and Timofeev won after another 70 moves!

Going back to the position after 20 Rfd1, can you find Black's winning move?

At the time I thought 20....Bg3 was strong (as indeed 20....Be3 may be). White can't take the bishop, otherwise he gets mated, and 21 Nf3 is met by 21....Bxf2+ 22 Kf1 Bc5 23 Rd3 Nb4. That certainly looks good, but there's something even better! 20....b5!! White can take the pawn in three different ways, but all of them lose: 21 Ncxb5 Qh2+ 22 Kf1 Qh4 23 Kg1 Bh2+ 24 Kh1 Nxf2# or 21 Ndxb5 Qh2+ 22 Kf1 Ne3+ 23 fxe3 Bxe3, again with mate to follow. Finally 21 Qxb5 Qh2+ 22 Kf1 Nxd4 23 Rxd4 Nf3+! 24 fxe3 Bxe3 25 Ke1 Qxg2 26 Kd1 Bxd4 is winning. Stockfish thinks that relatively best is 21 Qc2, but then 21....Qh4 still creates a winning attack, the nicest variation being 22 Ne4 Nxd4 23 Rxd4 Bh2+ 24 Kf1 Qxf2+!! 25 Nxf2 Ne3+ 26 Kd2 Nxd4 and after all that Black is three pawns up!

Despite that eventual loss, Gawain got a silver medal for his board 4 performance, beaten only by Esipenko – so congratulations to Gawain! In fact, all of our players were 6th or higher in overall board ratings. My thanks to them all!