

## **Sheffield Steel**

Mark Rivlin interviews GM Gawain Jones

A GM since 2007, Gawain Jones is the UK's number four player with a Standard Play grading of 2670 (69th in the world among active players). In May 2019 he peaked at 2702 after two silver medals at the world team championship in Kazakhstan and a 7/9 joint winner of the prestigious Reykjavik Open. Gawain recently enjoyed an amazing December by winning the European Online Blitz Championship and ten days later the Caplin British Online Blitz. The author of five chess books (<https://gawainjones.co.uk/publications/>) Gawain lives in Sheffield with his wife WIM Sue Maroroa and their daughter Samaria.

**You had two great blitz tournament wins in December. A lot of club players enjoy blitz, so please tell us about keeping up to speed at the top GM level.**

I played a lot of online blitz and bullet (1-minute chess) as a teenager. In the last few years I've played a lot less, concentrating on classical chess instead. With no 'otb' tournaments possible I started playing more online again, and even looking at some tricky openings for speed chess. With practice I managed to start moving quicker again!

**How do you manage the clock in GM blitz games?**

Staying up on time is key. When I was younger I could play well when both sides were down to seconds, but I simply can't move the mouse fast enough anymore! The clock is an important consideration in all forms of chess, but in blitz it's vital. If you can succeed in having more time and not blundering you will be very difficult to beat.

**For obvious reasons, you have not played much chess in the last year. Tell us about your lockdown experience.**

Lockdown has been tough for a lot of people but we've been very lucky. We adopted our dog right at the start of it, so we always had company. Then of course our daughter was born in June. It's a shame that I've not been able to play any over-the-board chess, but it's been a hidden blessing, as I've been able to spend lots of time with Samaria.

Regarding chess, I've been busy writing a two volume work for Quality Chess: Coffeehouse Repertoire 1.e4, and I'm currently working on a King's Indian repertoire on Chessable. I'm keeping busy!

**When lockdown ends, what are your short and long-term ambitions over the board.**

It'll be so good to actually sit at a chess board again. I'm really missing the atmosphere. This will be my longest ever break from playing, so I'd just like to get used to the feeling again. I don't believe I've peaked yet, so it would be nice to get back over 2700.

**With a huge spike in online live chess have you been approached to do commentary and if so, do you enjoy it?**

I've done some commentating in the past, and my last session was actually in Italian. I enjoy it, I've just been very busy with other projects recently.

**Your Banter Blitz sessions are excellent, perfectly pitched for club players. Are you ever surprised by the strength of some of the players you have encountered in BB?**

Thanks! Most people seem very knowledgeable in the chat, and it's unsurprising that I'm given a lot of good battles. I think a lot of people get nervous as the time runs low, otherwise my score might be quite embarrassing!

**Your wife Sue is originally from New Zealand. How much time do you spend there and tell us about the country's chess scene?**

We try to come back about once a year. As in much of the world the chess scene is run by enthusiastic amateurs. I've always been made to feel very welcome. Unfortunately there aren't enough tournaments to be a professional, and New Zealand being so remote makes it hard to travel. That being said, they are one of the few countries running tournaments and hosting chess club nights at the moment.

**How difficult is it to make a career out of chess?**

It probably depends how you define it. I think it's difficult if you want to primarily play, but if you're happy to coach and write too then it's possible. There are starting to be professional chess streamers too, so who knows!

**What are your thoughts on the longer-term future of English chess? Are the ECF doing the right things? What could we do better?**

I'm really hoping that a player will emerge soon that can challenge to get into the English Olympiad team. Hopefully projects such as Chess in Schools will bring many talented juniors into the game. I became really interested in chess after watching the Kasparov - Short World Championship match. I discovered it was possible to be a professional player and from then onwards that's what I wanted. To keep young players involved I think we need more tournaments here with strong players. That way they are able to see chess as more than just a hobby. Unfortunately most of the current events are unattractive to professional players, who might not even make a profit from the tournament, even if they win it. If tournament organisers want to give away more prize money in the novice section than the open then of course it's their right, but I don't think it will encourage juniors to see chess as a possible profession.

It's difficult in this Covid-19 era, but I think the ECF will need to try and tap into the current boom surrounding online chess. If we are able to get some of the beginners to move to 'otb' chess, then I think the future is much rosier.

**How can good club players become stronger? And how did you break that 2700 barrier?**

Play as much as you can, and analyse the games afterwards without peeking at an engine. It's even better if you can analyse it with someone. Once you've written your thoughts you can check with the engine to see what went wrong. That way it's easier to discover the cause of the mistake. Did you misevaluate something or miss it entirely? Were your moves based on correct calculation? Seeing simply that you blundered one move that changed the evaluation from +.6 to -1.8 isn't at all helpful in improving your game.

I did a few things to improve my rating. I probably did all the usual things: learned a couple of new openings, worked hard on some middlegame and endgame studies. I also worked on my psychology to keep me focused and objective.

**Please give us a link and short description of your most memorable game in any format.**

To choose a memorable game is always difficult. One that I was proud of at the time was my game with Klaus Bischoff. This was from the European Union tournament in Liverpool in 2006 where I got my first GM norm. I felt this was the first time I'd beaten a GM on my own merits, rather than by my opponent overpressing or blundering.

(Link here <https://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessgame?gid=1428427>)

**Away from the board you and Sue both play rugby. Which clubs do you play for and how good are you both? And for ECF members who are also football fans, are you an Owl, Blade or another team? And do you have any other hobbies?**

We've both taken a break since Samaria was born. I was playing for the Sheffield Vulcans, a really friendly and inclusive team, while Sue played for Sheffield Ladies. I can't really say how good we are, but on the pitch our competitive sides take over!

We live in Hillsborough so it has to be the Owls, although I support Middlesbrough from when I was young. Regarding other hobbies we used to play a lot of other board games too, but for some reason haven't had much spare time in the past eight months.