

From naught to sixty in a few weeks

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This month's interview is with two chess players whom you will not recognise. Both aged 25, they represent a very large cohort of enthusiasts who play online and who are not members of the ECF. Jake and James are professionals in Law and IT and have taken up chess during lockdown. They approached Hackney Chess Club last month asking about social over-the-board chess opportunities.

Lockdown has been extremely challenging for many ECF members. Aside from the risk of catching the virus and its effect on people over the age of 60 (so a lot of active chess players) missing out on the social aspect of the game is an issue. But online chess has enabled the show to go on and with excellent coaching available (often at no cost) people taking up chess can get to a low club standard quickly.

Jake and James represent the future and while we have a thriving junior chess scene and an excellent online facility, I think this is the time to make a concerted effort to attract the 18-30 cohort to club chess. Such a campaign does not need money (especially if we use social media as the conduit). So I'd be pleased to hear from anyone out there who would like to be involved in such a campaign. This comment from James is particularly telling: *I think chess needs to try and reinvent itself to become more accessible.*

### **Jake and James, how old are you and what do you do in work or studies?**

Jake: I'm 25 and currently a trainee solicitor.

James: I'm 25 and I work in IT as a Cloud Engineer.

### **When did you first get started with chess?**

Jake: I played a bit of chess at school when I was about 10 years old. After that, I don't think I played again until a few years ago when I was on holiday and there happened to be a chess set where I was staying.

James: I learnt the rules and basic game play as a child and played very occasionally growing up. Two months ago, I started playing more regularly (several times a week) after making an account with chess.com. I've now made an effort to learn a few basic openings and I'm starting to play more strategically. Maintaining the edge over Jake is a key motivator to keep me playing regularly.

### **Have you ever played any competitive over-the-board games?**

Jake: Never.

James: Only if the annual game of Christmas Monopoly counts.

**There are currently around 20 million people registered on chess.com with around a million a day playing. How much have you been playing online?**

Jake: I played my first online game on chess.com about six weeks ago and have been playing most days since. It's been a great lockdown pastime.

**Has your online grading increased the more you have played?**

Jake: Chess.com starts you off at 1200 so I quickly dropped well below that. I wasted a lot of time playing blitz when I didn't know what I was doing. I now only really play Rapid and daily and my ratings are improving.

James: Definitely. The more I've played the less I tend to lose pieces early in the game. I get myself into better positions after learning some simple openings and my rating has increased as a result.

**Do you prefer standard, rapid or blitz games?**

Jake: Rapid is my favourite time control. In my experience, you can't really lose on time because of the extra 10 seconds per move, but the time constraint ultimately prevents the game dragging on.

James: I prefer rapid. I get enough time to think through the position without being too rushed, but the timing keeps things moving.

**As well as playing, have you been watching tournaments with commentary and some online coaching videos**

Jake: I've watched some YouTube videos, but I've found learning from books more helpful (in particular, Vincent Moret's *My First Chess Opening Repertoire for White* and *My First Chess Opening Repertoire for Black*).

James: So far, I've found the coaching videos I've come across to be really useful and interesting. Every now and then when I have time I'll try and pick up a new aspect to the game through YouTube or the chess.com tutorials. I've briefly had a look at some tournament games and they're intriguing to watch despite much of the gameplay going over my head.

**How do you think chess is perceived in the UK? Do you have friends who are interested in the game?**

Jake: I have a few friends who play chess occasionally. My sense is that quite a lot of people enjoy playing the odd game, but are perhaps put off playing more often because of the time and attention required.

**How 'cool' do you think chess is?**

Jake: It scores low, for sure.

James: Not particularly cool.

**Would you consider playing competitive over-the-board chess with a club and playing in individual tournaments?**

Jake: If I were to reach a decent level, maybe. At the moment, I'm quite content playing casually.

James: Yes I would. A weekly beer and blitz evening at a local club caught my eye. It would be fun to play face to face occasionally – all my games so far have been online. I would want to improve more before taking on a tournament.

**Any ideas on encouraging the next generation of players?**

Jake: I've been playing online because of lockdown measures and the convenience of having an endless supply of opponents you can play whenever it suits you. However, I'm looking forward to playing more over-the-board chess as lockdown measures ease off, as it's actually a great social activity. More chess sets in pubs and cafés might help attract more players.

James: I'm unaware of the demographics of the chess playing population but to me it is perceived to be a game for the older generation, similarly to sports like golf and cricket. I think chess needs to try and reinvent itself to become more accessible. The complex strategy of the game makes chess what it is but is also a significant barrier to entry for new players. Introducing alternative formats of the game using the success of T20 cricket as model could be a way to spark people's interest.