

London Calling

London Chess League Secretary John Sargent writes about setting up an online league.

As the scale of the pandemic became known, it became obvious to the London Chess League that over-the-board chess would not be able to be resumed in 2020.

When we had a meeting where we had to push our bookings at the Citadines for another time, we decided to look into launching an online league. I hadn't been able to organise the Central London Chess Congress, so I transferred my energy into looking at creating an online event for the LCL.

A big objective for us was to try and recreate the conditions players would expect in a tournament. Online tournaments to-date relied on players showing up on-the-night and challenging another player anonymously on a large-scale chess platform. This was the driving force behind us being an early adopter of Tornelo:

- Players play from a league 'lobby' and can see all the other pairings
- Players play each other using their real names and can view their teammate's games live
- An arbiter is also present to assist players and help handle on-the-night queries

We also asked captains to exchange team sheets (with reserves) a couple of days in advance of each match, so each pair of opponents can prepare for each other. In some cases, exchanging team sheets has facilitated quite a few over-the-board reunions online ahead of matches.

Finally, we were also making a point of having a professional broadcast of each week's games (this has been an iterative effort, but I have been enjoying the challenge). You can see the broadcast on match nights at <https://www.twitch.tv/jorosar>

All of these things combined to produce an experience that's a lot closer to what people are used to. We can't pretend to be replicating over-the-board chess, but we want to get as close to it as possible. It has also been reassuring that FIDE Olympiads and Hastings have also used Tornelo.

The challenges have been around cost and time. Set-up and admin costs are a lot trickier when we don't ask players to find each other and start their own games - we essentially have to 'pair' every player on the platform, but the flipside is that we have one place and lobby for players to congregate in. There's even a group Zoom call that people can join and socialise in before their games, which also doubles up as a way to have a chat with the arbiter and troubleshoot any problems before their games start.

Aside from the cost of a live arbiter, the biggest commitment is time:

- Emailing captains of each pairing to ask them for team sheets
- Publishing pairings and putting opponents together on the platform in advance
- Arranging for a live broadcast each match night and loading all the PGNs (both static and live) to comment on.

The time commitment has enabled a more personable environment. For example, the pairings emails could all be blindly automated, but I enter into at least 2-3 conversations a week with captains about how their matches went and hearing valuable feedback from them and players. This has added to the community feel of the league.

The cost to teams is £25 for the season, which in short means the League made a loss in its first season (although a sponsor to make up the shortfall). I think it was a worthwhile experiment, and to encourage more participation and not put up barriers to entry, Season 2's cost to teams will also remain the same. We are also now welcoming any UK-based chess team to join the league and we are hopeful that the coming season, beginning on 3/3/21 will have more teams participating. We are preparing additional divisions to meet this demand.

As with all online tournaments, Fair Play has been an issue. Playing under real names and having individual players sign up individually agreeing to our Fair Play Guidelines (new for Season 2) has been a real bonus. There have certainly been a few instances of suspected Fair Play violations but the percentage of these has been impressively low compared to what we have seen in other tournaments.

Unlike some of the mainstream chess platforms, Tornado operates with additional information available to the arbiter, allowing us to actively look at and analyse games after the end of each match night. This means that instead of a black box either banning or allowing play, we have the full spectrum of information available to support a decision. This, combined with our games all being submitted to Professor Ken Regan for analysis as well, puts us in a strong position - where we are not only able to make good decisions, but can explain why they have been made.

While it would be unwise to talk about specific numbers and cases, there has been a lot of positive feedback so far, and even cases where a player has used assistance, can be used to strengthen our ability to analyse further games in the future. In short, the system is great, and is getting even better. The overall outcome is that players and captains are more confident and comfortable playing in the league environment, which is of course crucial to its continued success and growth.

Season 2 is going to be a big undertaking, especially with a bigger turnout, but we also welcome this challenge. While we are in lockdown and over-the-board chess is not possible, it's more important now than ever to provide a place for people of all abilities to play, and to remove as many barriers to entry as possible and welcome them.

You can register your team for Season 2 of the London Online Chess League now, at <https://bit.ly/locls2-teamform> - we are accepting applications until Friday, 26 of February, and the first match night is the 3rd of March. See you there!
