

Online Olympiad Report

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At very short notice FIDE decided to replace the cancelled over the board Olympiad scheduled for August in Moscow with an online version hosted on chess.com. In all, 163 teams competed and it was a major logistical feat to complete an event which lasted over a month. The governing body should be congratulated.

In the end, technical difficulties somewhat marred the final, but I think this is a formula which will be replicated in future, particularly as Belarus has been unable to fulfil its commitments for 2022 and FIDE are looking for an alternative sponsor and venue.

In view of the freezing of ECF budgets I had to seek private sponsorship to enable us to field a competitive team at zero cost to the ECF. My thanks to all the individuals who donated, as well as the Chess Trust and the John Robinson Youth Trust who both provided funds so that the juniors in the team could receive grandmaster coaching. This was provided by the head of the accelerator Peter Wells as well as members of the England team.

The format of the event was different from the standard Olympiad where there are separate open and women's teams in squads of five of which four play each match. This format required squads of 12 comprising four open players, four female players and four juniors, two male two female. In each match, teams fielded two open players, two female players and two juniors.

Our squad was at full strength: GM Michael Adams GM Luke McShane GM Gawain Jones GM David Howell, IM/WGM Jovanka Houska , IM/WGM Harriet Hunt, IM/WGM Dagne Ciuksyte, WGM Katarzyna Toma, FM Akshaya Kalaiyalahan, IM Matthew Wadsworth, FM Jonah Willow and Nadia Jaufarally.

This format made life tougher for England than normal, although I'm delighted to say we managed to strengthen our women's team with the inclusion of Dr Harriet Hunt. England has been a declining force in junior chess for over a decade and this meant that if we qualified for the second stage of the competition, we would be considerably outrated in several matches on the two junior boards.

It was also the case that some of our players had little experience in playing online. Indeed it wasn't much more than a month ago when I was humbled by Mickey Adams in 15 moves in what was his first venture at playing with a computer and a mouse .

Seedings were based on the Gaprindashvili scores at the previous Olympiad which combine scores in Open and Women's Olympiads. Although the Open team had a tremendous result at Batumi in 2018, finishing fifth, our Women's team was 29th so we were seeded 17th and put into a qualifying group with Hungary.

We got through our qualifying group relatively comfortably, winning eight matches and losing to Hungary after defeats on both junior boards cancelled out an excellent win with black from David Howell.

The draw was unkind to us in our next pool as we faced Armenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia Turkey and Russia! with only the top three progressing. A good start against Turkey was followed by a disaster against Croatia and a 1-5 defeat including 0/2 on the top boards. Harriet Hunt scored the only win. Day 2 was similar, two wins and a drubbing at the hands of Russia. Going into the third and final day we still had a chance to qualify, but we had to score two victories in matches against Armenia Romania and Bulgaria.

The day started well with a victory over Armenia (Jovanka Houska's fantastic win over Elena Danielian is below). After Akshaya miraculously survived her opponent's sacrificial attack and cleaned up efficiently, our margin of victory could have been even better, but David Howell was unable to win what had been a brilliant positional game against Gabriel Sargissian. The next match was a 'must win' against Romania, but two winning positions turned to losses in 30 seconds, online chess is fickle, and we were eliminated.

Overall, I was pleased not only that the English chess community came together to support the team, but also that a large amount of coaching for female and junior players was part of their tournament experience.

My concern as International Director remains much the same as it has been since I took up the post. We have under-invested in our juniors for such a long time that the pipeline of talent has not come through yet. We need to start rectifying this and ensuring our juniors and best players in their early 20s have the support and the opportunities to challenge their peers. The Accelerator programme funded by the Chess Trust is an excellent start, but more needs to be done.

FIDE should be congratulated for devising and successfully running such an event which must have been an enormous logistical challenge, taking place across time zones and in countries with poor internet access. It was great to see Alex Holowczak appointed as the Chief Arbiter. I cannot recall an English arbiter being given an equivalent honour, but maybe my memory does not go back far enough.

White Danielian, E.
Black Houska, J.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. Nf3 Be7 5. Bf4 O-O 6. e3 Nbd7 7. c5 Ne4 8. Nxe4 dxe4 9. Ne5 Nxe5 10. Bxe5 Bf6 11. Bg3 Re8 12. Bc4 Bd7 13. Qc2 Bc6 14. O-O a5 15. Rad1 Qd7 16. b3 g6 17. f3 exf3 18. gxf3 b6 19. Be2 Red8 20. Rc1 b5 21. Rcd1 Qe7 22. Qc3 b4 23. Qb2 Bh4 24. Bc4 Bd5 25. Rc1 a4 26. Qf2 Bxg3 27. Qxg3 axb3 28. axb3 Ra3 29. Rf2 Bxc4 30. Rxc4 Rxb3 31. Qf4 Ra8 32. Kg2 Rb1 33. e4 Raa1 34. Kh3 Kg7 35. c6 f6 36. Rc5 h5 37. e5 f5 38. Rg2 Rg1 39. Rb5 g5 40. Qe3 g4+ 41. fxc4 hxc4+ 42. Kg3 Rgf1 43. Rf2 Rg1+ 44. Rg2 Ra3 45. Qxa3 Rxc2+ 46. Kxg2 bxa3 47. Ra5 Qb4 48. Ra7 Qb2+ 49. Kg3 a2 0-1