

Northern Counties vs. Southern Counties Contests

On the 5th September 2020 as a result of the ECF's new venture the Online Counties Competition a match of 'unprecedented' proportion is to take a place, an online Northern Counties vs. Southern Counties Contest. The match will involve all five Unions split of course along a North/South divide, namely North (MCCU, NCCU and Oxfordshire) and South (Chiltern League, EACU, SCCU and WECU). Note Oxfordshire initially played in MCCA (Midland Counties Chess Association now MCCU) competition so have been assigned to the North if only to balance the number of counties on each side. It could be said that having introduced an online county championship the next 'natural' step for the ECF is to conduct a match combining the relative strengths of the North and South. The ECF is to be congratulated for holding an online county championship followed by a North vs. South Contest but is the latter really 'unprecedented'? For those who are not really interested in or aware of chess history the notion of such a match being 'unprecedented' may indeed be correct, however, some chess historians know better!

"...no challenge had been received from the North to play a match this season [1894-95]. It was probable that challenge would be received from the North to play a match on their ground in 1896."

The above is an extract from the SCCU 1895 AGM when the Council express disappointment that a third North vs. South match had not taken place. The previous two years had seen two successful encounters and since expected to be an annual event a third instalment, again to be hosted by the North, was anticipated but it never got off the ground.

The failure to play a third instalment begs a number of questions such as, 'Why was a North vs. South match played in first place?', 'What were the results of the two matches?' but more importantly Why was a third match never played either in 1895 or since?' In short why has it taken 126 years for a third match, if virtually, to take place? These questions can be answered but space is short to be able to give a detailed account of one let alone two North vs. South encounters or what happened since 1895 which provides some historical context to the much delayed third instalment but here we go!

The 1891-92 cycle saw Hampshire (established 1890) a relatively new Chess Association bloody the nose of Sussex (1882) a long-standing Chess Association. Coupled with their defeats of Kent (1889) and Surrey (1883) they of course exercise bragging rights. One was claiming to be the strongest county in England and most certainly outside of York and Lancaster. The Northern counties took umbrage at such a brazen claim so during the summer form a committee of key Associations, Clubs and players and invested I.M. Brown with an important task. This was to issue a challenge to their prominent Southern equivalents, to engage in a Northern Counties vs. Counties match to be played somewhere in the Midlands (Birmingham, Leamington, or Leicester). Part of the Northern challenge was to stipulate which counties (15) they considered North thus the rest (24) were 'naturally' the South; Herefordshire, and Shropshire, however, may beg to differ!

Brown duly accepted this responsibility travelled to London and on 3rd September 1892 issued said challenge at a meeting convened by L.P. Rees. The timing of the challenge was unfortunate as the meeting Brown travelled to was none other than a discussion of Southern Associations, Clubs, and individuals about the desirability of a Southern Chess Union. The intention of the body was to govern chess affairs of the burgeoning clubs and associations in the South. The Northern challenge hastened the institution of the SCCU as it was a given an immediate task to galvanise Southern troops to meet a threat from the Northern hordes. Suffice to say, in the words of Barney Stinson, "Challenge accepted!" Since the North

had stipulated which 15 counties were to be considered 'Northern' the next few months were spent discussing the arrangements. These included, player eligibility, date, start time, time control, etc. On 28th January 1893, the scene was set for 212 players to take part in a titanic battle at the Great Western Hotel, Birmingham. The match commenced at 1:15pm and at the end of 4½ hours of play along with some adjudications by Blackburne the result was a close win to the South 53½ to 52½ which was both celebrated and commiserated in equal measure at the post-match dinner.

Now many chess historians are familiar with the 1893 match but very few discuss the events after. The 1893 match was such a resounding success it was readily agreed that a return match would follow to be hosted by the South in London. The match could be acceded to as all in the chess and non-chess playing world thought it only right that after such a close match another contest be held. If the timing of the first challenge was bad, the consent to a second was even worse for the North. After the 1893 encounter the SCCU Match Committee stated they needed a better way of discerning player strength rather than opinion. It must be noted the ECF's grading system was not in place until 1950's, furthermore chess was not a populist pursuit as it is now! Consequently, the SCCU instituted the South of England Championship to aid their decision-making. By the time second North vs. South contest took place (7th April 1894) the South were better able to determine their line-up as the group stages of their maiden competition had been completed. Conversely, the North still used labour intensive methods to determine their line up with a continued bias towards areas in Lancashire and Yorkshire and by its ongoing use were still unable to reach the remotest chess playing outpost in their area so miss out on identifying other potentially stronger players.

Prior to the second contest there was an air of belligerency from the North who thought they would overturn the close result of the previous encounter. The North got a rude awakening as any hopes they had of victory were dashed the South scoring a thumping victory (64½ to 43½). The North claimed that the absence of prominent players from Liverpool and Manchester hampered their chances but the fact that individuals such as Brown remained in London in the match's aftermath to discuss the formation of a Northern Union is testimony to the greater organisation and co-ordination of the South due to the existence of the SCCU and their internal competition. It would be another three years before the next Union formed MCCA (1897) and it would not be until the end of the century when the remaining counties form Brown's desired NCCU (1899).

Apart from the fact that the Northern players who remained in London recognised the process of selecting a Northern team is best left to a body other than a committee there is additional reason why a third instalment did not take place. Due to the numerous International Masters Tournaments that were being organised to be held in England which would 'naturally' divide the interest and purse of the chess public it was thought impolitic to attempt another. The SCCU competition ran in parallel with these tournaments so from their perspective a third encounter was entirely reasonable. Consequently, encounters that would include the entirety of Southern Counties would take a while to occur. During this time, the British Chess Federation had formed (1904) and instituted the Counties Championship Contest (1908) which allowed representatives from each Union to play each other but the collective unity of a Union was rare and in the case of the SCCU non-existent. Certainly, the NCCU were known to play collectively as on occasion they vied against the Scottish Chess Association and contests between the NCCU and MCCU also took place. It must be noted though that the coronation of Edward VII (1902) and the opening of the National Chess Centre (1939) were two occasions when it was mooted that the North should engage with the South.

It was a disappointment that a third instalment did not take place in 1895 but to be fair after 1899, with the exception of the aforementioned occasions, the prospects of a North vs. South contest was not realistic due to the existence of three Unions. However, the post-Second World period saw a revival of a kind. In 1947 the SCCU participate in their first inter-Union match since 1894 when playing the MCCU to celebrate their Golden Anniversary. They go on to play the MCCU again in 1957 when celebrating their Diamond Jubilee. Whereas the first was 'golden' the SCCU winning handsomely (37.5-24.5), the second was less so. The influenza outbreak hampered the SCCU who turn up to the 60 a-side match 29 players short thus a number of MCCU players switched to SCCU so that a competitive game could take place! Over and above the influenza outbreak the enthusiasm from SCCU affiliates was not great. It would seem therefore that inter-Union matches would be consigned to the past however enter the WECU (1957). This new Union had recently split from SCCU and were interested in playing a different format of county chess, inter-Union. They are instrumental in instituting the inter-Union competition which runs from 1962 for approximately a decade. This competition sees all Unions enter teams however, although the intention is to recapture the glory of the North vs. South contests the reality failed to live up to it. The excessive cost and logistical difficulties mean that in the 1970's the tournament is dissolved.

The final record of any inter-Union contest of note is the MCCU Centenary match in 1997 which comes about as the SCCU is motivated to resume inter-Union matches. The 1980's and 1990's sees the Union play numerous matches in the South of England against the likes of the Civil Service and Thames Valley League. Even the Union's centenary (1992) is celebrated with a Kent (SCCU Champions) vs. Rest of SCCU match. However, trying to go beyond their confines was nigh impossible much to the frustration of the Union Match Captain (R.C.N. Lee-Anderson). It proved difficulty to engage other Unions as the then BCF had lost interest in overseeing an inter-Union competition. The only match he is truly happy with is the MCCU centenary match (MCCU win 16-14) but even this proved difficulty because the SCCU's zeal was not matched by the MCCU even though it is 'their' centenary and the scale of match doesn't even equal that of the inter-Union matches of the 1960's let alone the North vs. South matches of the 19th Century!

This short record of inter-Union competition shows that the forthcoming online match between combined counties of the North and South is not new but it has evolved so that it takes advantage of the modern technology available that makes arranging matches of this sort easier. In fact, you could argue the match is a modern equivalent of the 'new' telephony technology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that allowed cable and telephone matches to take place. If the will of Brown and Rees were kept alive, encounters of this kind would have been more regular rather than sporadic. The vision of the Controller coupled with respective Captains energy seem to replicate the same levels of energy and drive that saw Brown and Rees successfully hold two matches involving as many of England's counties as possible. It is hoped that unlike the first two encounters each county is represented. Now that it is known a match of this magnitude is due to take place the remaining questions are, 'Who will have bragging rights? Will the North soothe their long hurt ego by winning their first ever encounter? Or will the South continue to assert their superiority over their Northern brethren? Equally will the delayed third encounter be the first of many more to come?' Time will tell!

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