

**Carl Portman**  
**ECF Manager of Chess in Prisons**  
**A report for 2021-22**

It is very easy in life to accentuate the negatives in any given situation. It takes no imagination, and very little effort. However, even in difficult times, there are always opportunities to shine a light in the darkness.

Whilst it is a fact that the Covid-19 Pandemic in all its manifestations has prevented me for differing reasons from visiting a single prison this year, the wheel has not stopped turning and I want to give a brief report on what has happened with direct regard to me, the ECF and chess in prisons.

I should caveat this by stating that I am also the chess columnist for Inside Time, the prison newspaper. This is something I do independently of the ECF. It is a platform where I can best promote chess, because the newspaper has a distribution of some 60,000 but the opportunity for some 83,000 prisoners to see it is possible. Naturally, I mention the ECF occasionally, and people know who to contact to get their chess fix!

It is from this column that I receive my many letters, which form the invaluable feedback that helps me to 'feel the temperature' of chess in prisons and decide what approach I might take. Inmates write to me on any manner of chess related (and other!) subjects, from telling me how chess is played in their prison, to their thoughts on the game. I receive requests for magazines, books and chess equipment. If I can fulfil such requests I do, and I try to write personally to every prisoner who asks me a question. I send chess magazines each month, (thanks to the Chess Shop in London for those) and I write to prisons to encourage them to play. I am busy writing about prisons chess every month at least and often, more frequently.

Covid has been a significant impediment to progress. Much of the work I did with prisons in setting up clubs came to a sudden halt. Prisoners were (even more) isolated locked up for up to 23 hours a day, and many prisons are still at levels where chess visits are not allowed. I have not been able to visit personally for safety or prison policy reasons, but that will change, I am sure. Just as things were looking up and I was receiving requests to visit, the dreaded Omicron variant came along, and here we are again with confusion and fear putting visits 'on hold' again.

This year though, I was involved in a very significant, global event. I was contacted by none other than the FIDE Head Office. They have set up a 'Chess for Freedom' project, which promotes chess in prisons around the world. They had heard about my work and wanted me to speak at their inaugural online conference on 11<sup>th</sup> May, which I did. To be on the same bill as Anatoly Karpov and FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich was a thrill, and there were many influential online viewers including Nigel Short, Malcolm Pein and dignitaries from around the world, so this was a most wonderful 'shop window' for prisons chess.

For me, this showed how far prisons chess had come in the world, and it is now an item for rehabilitation agendas everywhere. It made me very happy.

My presentation went very well, and I received a very nice letter from FIDE's Managing Director Dana Reizniece-Ozola, which I show at the end of in this report.

That was the merry month of May.

Then I was looking forward to becoming involved with the online World Prison Chess Championships which many people have read about. The Chess in Schools and Communities Charity were the drivers here, developing and managing teams from HMP Wandsworth and HMP Hollesley Bay. Their Co-ordinator, Peter Sullivan deserves huge credit for his work which he clearly loves, and the prisoners are lucky to have him in the London area. I do want to see more involvement with prisons in the midlands and the north but to do that requires people and resources. Not easy, but infinitely doable.

It is public knowledge (via my Twitter postings!) that sadly, my wife was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer and a lot of my focus has been (and remains) looking after her. Travelling away to prisons, was not feasible and I could not risk bringing Covid home – as Susan's immune system was shot to bits. I just could not find a way to be involved in the online championships but great kudos to Malcolm and his team.

Chess in prisons is not a role that should be 'done' by either the ECF or CSC or indeed anyone else. There must be a collaborative and targeted approach and to use a rather hackneyed cliché it truly is a journey, not a destination. The prison estate is large, and transient. For obvious reasons there are many hurdles to jump to get into a prison (unless you are a criminal of course!) and it can take weeks and months to do even the simplest of things that we would do in a trice in any other environment. Sometimes the ECF 'does' and sometimes the ECF 'enables' with prisons chess, it is as simple as that. This all requires time and resources which inevitably means...money!

Like most of the ECF positions, mine is a voluntary role which I have occupied since March 2014. I do not take it for granted and I fully expect that someone else might like to take my place, after all it has been almost eight years and we have come a long way since then. I have no problem at all with this, but until then and as long as prisoners write to me with requests such as *'could you help a sad, alone prisoner a little help with the gift of a chess set'* (sic) then I know there is still work to do. I shall continue to promote chess in prisons at any opportunity.

I do hope that 2022 allows more freedom to visit prisons once again. I have the energy and passion for the challenges and I love most of all to meet inmates to talk, coach and play chess with them. Nothing is certain in these times, and we must see how the situation develops. It is always an honour to promote chess to those who clearly need something in their lives to aid them in their situation.

What about you? Wherever you are in England, you can write to your local prison and offer to visit and just play some chess. It won't be easy to get a 'yes' from governors but you might just be surprised. No one person (me) can do everything, but I know that everyone (you) out there can do something. You can make a massive difference.

Carl



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Dear Mr. Portman,

On behalf of FIDE, let me thank you for your participation in the Chess for Freedom project. FIDE has received overwhelmingly positive feedback on this workshop, and you being the guest of honor in the event has greatly contributed to such a high assessment.

We sincerely thank you for your time and your kind agreement to share your personal experience with everyone. We deeply believe that very practical examples such as yours are also inspirational and could motivate expanding the existing and launching new chess in prisons initiatives. We already see new chess training initiatives emerging in different countries motivated by the expertise and personal stories shared during our Chess for Freedom Online Conference and the Demonstration match stream.

A project is doomed to success if people like you are committed to what they do, make the best efforts to achieve success, take part in it. The sincere intentions, the delicacy, the energy and expertise you brought in made the Chess for Freedom Online Conference memorable, useful and special.

With gratitude,



Dana Reizniece-Ozola  
FIDE Managing Director  
Deputy Chair of Management Board