

CHESS IN PRISONS

and why it matters



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Author of:

Chess Behind Bars

Chess Crusader – confessions of an amateur chess player

This is an open document. I have no editor, no contract with a publisher and I will make not a single penny. I am wholly responsible for the content, including any mistakes or omissions. It is a **free resource** and the intention is to share with the world the benefits of chess in prisons, as shown by the testimony of the prisoners themselves. It is a good news story.

Please feel free to share this but please do credit me as the author.

I am very happy to receive feedback: carl.portman@hotmail.co.uk

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If you are a minister, member of HMPPS, prison governor, prison staff, member of the public, CEO of a company or a prisoner reading this, you have power at *your level*. You can influence and create change. You can be a force for good and I ask that you pro-actively support chess in prisons. As you will see, it shines a light in a dark place.

Being behind bars is not a bar to chess.

Cover Image Art designed by a prisoner (anonymous)

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Introduction

I have been taking chess into prisons for ten years, and I like to think of it as the longest tour in history!

I have witnessed the extraordinary effects and benefits that the game has on prisoners, and therefore the prison system and wider society. Not only have I seen it, but I have received hundreds, nay thousands of letters from prisoners telling me about their love of the game and how it has benefited them in prison, and indeed how it will when they are released.

What you have before you is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I present this work under general headings, then introduce themes from prisoners' letters under those headings. It isn't a perfect science, and the reader might have done things differently, but my point is to capture the relevant detail.

For obvious reasons, unless otherwise stated I will not reveal names or personal details of prisoners and staff as a matter of security. Therefore, I might simply put a letter of their first name and the name of the prison. I include the name of the prison because I hope if someone from that establishment reads this, they might develop chess further within their walls.

Where I write ANON, this does not necessarily mean that the letter was written to me anonymously but that it may have been written a while ago and I did not capture the name – perhaps if the person asked me not to. It might also mean that I chose not to give a name or prison for security or data protection reasons. It is the content, not the name that matters.

The letters are all genuine. They were written by inmates who took the time (and expense) to tell me what chess means for them. I should also say that it isn't just about what is in this document, but what is missing. During my many prison visits to date I am approached by prisoners who cannot read or write and I am told that they too would have written to me if they could, to tell me their good news stories.

I work with prisons in England, as the manager of chess in prisons for the English Chess Federation, and also in my own private capacity as a chess author and newspaper correspondent. What I write here does not necessarily reflect anyone else's views and I write in no official capacity but my own. What you will read here is echoed around the world. I know people from just about every continent who could share their own prison success stories where people push pawns, not drugs. This then, is truly a global phenomenon.

It requires nurturing and support. Please do come aboard.

Part One – About Chess (especially in prisons)

Chess has been with us for around 1500 years, and it is remarkable to consider that a game so ancient is still changing lives in the 21st Century.

It is believed to have been founded in India around 500 AD and it spread across Arabia and to Europe, then further west changing only a little in the rules (laws) and the shapes of the pieces, but it remained essentially a game between two people on an intellectual level. Millions of people play the game around the world. It is a truly universal language.

One of the many attractive aspects about chess is that it does not discriminate. There are no barriers to age, gender, background, race or (dis)ability. We can all play it, and indeed we do so in schools, homes, prisons, workplaces, and tournaments online and across real boards.

It is my experience that a great number of people think that one has to be clever to play chess. This simply isn't true. I am a council-estate kid who went to secondary school and was fortunate to find the game at 12 years of age. If I can play it and become a county champion, then anyone can.

Chess is inexpensive and portable – the perfect game for prisons. Yet chess is so much more than a game, pushing strange little pieces around 64 squares. It truly is a metaphor for life as we shall see. The educational value of chess must never be underestimated as it actually covers much of the educational spectrum. For example:

English: People can learn to read chess books and magazines.

Mathematics: Chess has an alpha-numeric system, and this is great for learning numbers and calculation.

History: The game is 1500 years old, and the story of its global spread is enduring.

Geography: Place a map of the world on a wall and pinpoint India, (Persia) the middle East, Europe and the Americas to learn geographically how chess spread.

Art: Chess and art are synonymous, and many prisoners have produced excellent works of chess art and craft, including making chess tables in woodwork shops.

Religion: Chess has a colourful history regarding religion, especially from the Muslim world.

And of course, the skills and disciplines learned on a chess board can be instantly transferred to life outside of the prison. No certificate is required. Such skills include planning, reasoned decision making, sportsmanship, social interaction, responsibility for decisions and learning how to deal with defeat and victory.

Of incalculable importance is the benefit to mental health.

Chess truly is a friend for life.

Part Two – Background data and wider comment

Let me share some numbers, as taken from the Ministry of Justice, which governs England and Wales. The details were taken from their web site in January 2024.

Cost of crime: £58.9 billion (2015/16)

Prison population: 87,448 as at January 2024

Staff in post: 19,850 for March 2023 (to look after almost 88 thousand inmates)

Reoffending rates: 25.4% as at October 2021

Self-inflicted deaths (suicide): 92 for 2022/23

Literacy rate: 61% of assessed prisoners have literacy rate at less than an 11-year-old

Average Annual cost per prisoner: £42,670

Cost per prisoner per year: The overall average annual costs for keeping an individual in a prison is £42,670, which is taken from the latest published Prison Unit Cost statistics, for 2019-20. The average cost for a week would therefore be calculated as £818.

To be fair, I am no statistician and there are always stories behind the numbers. Empirical data in terms of numbers showing the direct link between chess and reduced recidivism is very hard to find, this much is true. There is some data emanating from Brazil and Spain, where much good work is going on, but I have chiefly been involved with chess inside prisons, whilst people are ‘doing their time’ rather than when people are released, thus I have done no meaningful work on that aspect of it. **The real data for me comes in the form of words and chess testimony (Chesstimony) from the letters and statements I have received from prisoners.**

My journey began in March 2014 when I approached the English Chess Federation volunteering to fill the vacancy as Manager of Chess in Prisons. The remit sounded easy ‘to foster interest in chess in prisons’ but in practice it was a hard slog to get going. I wanted results to match my enthusiasm. Who should I speak to? Ministers? The Department of Justice? Prison Governors? Prisoners themselves? Well, all of the above as it happens.

I wondered how I could reach over 80,000 prisoners to bring chess to their door. I was (and still am apparently) just one man. The epiphany came to me one day when I realised that there was a prison newspaper ‘*Inside Time*’ and I wrote to them asking if I could write a chess column. They accepted and as the chess correspondent I am now able to potentially reach all prisoners both here in the UK and those British men and women incarcerated abroad.

I write a monthly article giving a chess puzzle and a prize – and I receive countless letters as a result. I know that my chess page is the first that many inmates turn to in order to get their chess fix. That makes me very happy!

Why did I choose to do this work? After all, I have never been a prisoner myself, but then not every midwife has had a baby, have they? Quite simply, I want to give something back to the community, and prison is very much a forgotten community. Make no mistake, I am actually a hard-liner who believes that if you do the crime, you do the time, but as a taxpayer and a compassionate person, I wanted to try to make a difference somehow.

After all, each prisoner is costing you and me – the taxpayer – up to £43,000 a year. The vast majority of people in prison will re-emerge into society, some in a matter of weeks. Too many are returning, and the cycle of crime remains unbroken. There are too many wasted lives. All I see on TV is ministers and officials talking about building more prisons. This is treating the symptoms, not the disease. How do we prevent people from going to prison in the first place? How do we help prisoners upon their release? Society clearly has a part to play, but it is not in the scope of this paper to offer solutions for that.

I soon learned back in 2014 that although chess was played in some prisons there were very few chess clubs and little support for the game. Too many officials saw chess as a waste of time, just a game. They could not (or would not) provide the resources to run a chess in prisons programme, even on a trial basis. Whilst I completely understood their view I saw this as an opportunity to turn ignorance (in the nicest sense) into enlightenment and it was my main motivator early on.

I wrote to various Secretaries of State, but they kept changing every few months and every time that I managed to get a minister onside, they left in yet another government reshuffle. There was no stability. Indeed, there was even a prison ban on books when I started – can you imagine that? The very resource that could pull prisoners out of the swamp was banned. It looked and felt like a 1950's Soviet Union mindset out there.

Governments have failed. In 2016 they promised to build 10,000 new places but in 2018 they announced that 6,500 would not be built. In 2020 under a spending review they promised to build 18,000 places but only 5,200 have materialized as at June 2023. Our prisons are overcrowded, and unsafe in general. Too many prisoners are locked up for 22 hours a day or more and staffing levels are at a dangerous low. In my view the situation is dire. Where is the plan? Where is the strategy to sort this mess out?

In chess terms things have improved significantly. People have been busy and seeds have been planted. The English Chess Federation, Chess in Schools and Communities and several outstanding individuals around the country have mustered - and committed much time, energy and money into fostering chess in prisons.

There are some very canny governors out there who see the sense in at least trialing chess. Many members of staff, from prison officers to librarians, and others whose titles I just don't know, make chess happen in their workplaces and they are the unsung heroes. They are the 'agents of change' and therefore the people to thank.

Let me finish by mentioning the prisoners themselves. In the decade that I have been visiting our jails, meeting hundreds of prisoners and playing/coaching/talking about chess there have been no significant incidents. I have always been treated with respect. Not only this,

but the chess environment means that they treat each other, and prison staff with respect. Where inmates might ordinarily – and literally – be at one another’s throats, when everyone is in the chess room, they come together as one. It is a beautiful thing to witness.

Chess is one of the most powerful tools to introduce into a prison setting. It’s not only a win-win. It is a *huge* win-win.

Part Three – Prisoner testimony (The bulk of and essence of this document)

The information that follows must never be hidden away. It must be shared freely and widely and used to foster and develop chess in every prison, not as a ‘nice to have’ but as an integrated educational tool supporting purposeful activity – which when it happens should be recorded by the prison inspectorate on any audit.

As I said earlier 61% of the adult prison population taking assessments had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old. Whilst that is a damning statistic not on prison, but society, this is an opportunity to improve the situation.

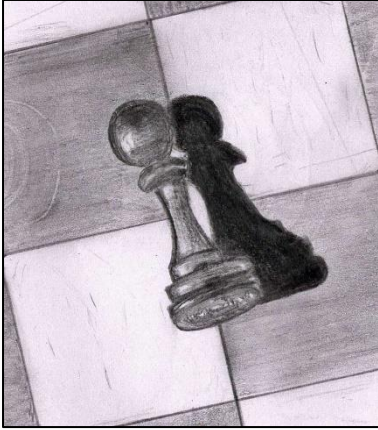
Good news is here. Two charities have been awarded £1.8 million of government funding (our funding!) to pilot new reading and writing programmes over two years - getting more offenders into class and boosting their chances of securing work or training once through the prison gates. The Shannon Trust is using the funding to recruit full-time staff to roll out prisoner-to-prisoner reading programmes across nine prisons, building on the support offered by existing volunteers to prisoners with little or no reading ability. The National Literacy Trust will run monthly events at six prisons for more advanced readers, including reading groups and creative writing sessions, to build confidence, raise aspirations and encourage participants to share their stories.

61% of the adult prison population taking assessments had literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old.

This all takes time of course, whereas we can place chess sets and boards in every prison -today.

Please note, that the letters are necessarily abridged. Prisoners have been remarkably frank with me, and that takes some guts. I thank each and every one who has ever written to me and promoted chess in their

prison. I answer letters personally when I can, as they are the fuel that continues to drive me to working ever harder with this challenge. My work has been, and always will be for them. I do not go into prison to change lives. I go in to give prisoners the opportunity to change their lives and chess is the tool to kick-start that process. As with anything in life people can take it or they can leave it. Can chess really help? Well, you can judge for yourself by reading the following testimony.



MENTAL HEALTH

'Chess has helped me find like-minded people in prison and to make friends. It is also a great pastime and good for mental well-being. I suffer from depression, anxiety and paranoia so chess helps alleviate these symptoms by keeping my mind active and it gives me something to look forward to every day. Chess also helps me to take pause and think things through when I am frustrated or provoked.'

P (HMP Stocken)

'Chess has the power to save lives and help us rebuild ours. Our opening may have been troublesome but our middlegame is changing the tide. The endgame is yet to come, and the odds of victory are in our favour.'

S (HMP Stafford)

'In such a mind-numbing environment, chess is an important mechanism for keeping the mind active as well as being a pleasurable pastime to boot.'

'With chess, for people with autism, it is possible to see sequences. You have to recognise that you cannot see all possible outcomes.'

ANON

'With brutal honesty, chess probably kept me from suicide.'

J (HMP Littlehey)

'Playing chess will give you a reason to come out of your cell and socialize with your fellow players, plus it is good for your mental health as it makes you concentrate.'

G (HMP Stafford)

'I am a relative newcomer to chess. Having Asperger's Syndrome, I love the clear, precise logic of the game. I am having some fun with this. Being autistic also I have a lot of trouble understanding and experiencing emotions. When I study the board, its positions and the strategy underlying it all – when it clicks into place – it is like the board lights up. It is an amazing sensation.'

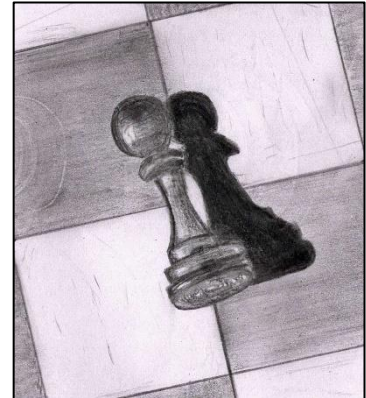
A (HMP Lancaster Farms)

'I am in prison on lockdown in a room no bigger than a shepherd's hut with a total stranger. I have no contact with family or friends and my mental health suffers greatly. If only I had a chess set to occupy my time. It's a game I love to play on my own and with others.'

M (HMP Hill)

COGNITIVE IMPROVEMENT

Chess has helped me develop patience, critical thinking skills, understand my mistakes and learn from them. Prison educational programmes are not designed to teach these skills. They are box-ticking exercises. Chess is dynamic, action-packed and innovative. Creativity and uniqueness is encouraged, not stifled. Learning how to remain calm under pressure is a vital skill.'



S HMP Stafford

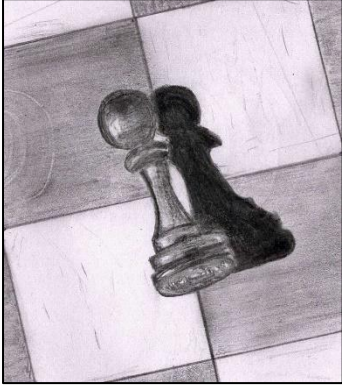
'Chess stimulates my brain in a different way from other activities. For me, chess teaches many disciplines such as patience, awareness of danger, decision making and humility. Chess has formed a social setting around me and has inspired and encouraged more individuals to participate. I think that chess has improved the function of my brain and in turn changed the way I think, and solve problems. It is part of a coping strategy that reinforces my brain and promotes positive behaviour.'

N (HMP The Verne)

'Chess keeps me sane in an insane place.'

ANON

'With brutal honesty. Chess probably kept me from suicide.'



IMPROVED BEHAVIOUR

'Chess, when taken seriously as I do, makes you face your fears and doubts head on. What are you gonna do when the three-move checkmate don't (sic) work any more? Are you a quitter? Do you respond to those inner (manly) tears by persevering with the game, and be rewarded? It's all here, you will grow and find out what you are really made of.'

B

'I have witnessed first-hand many truly inspirational changes that a healthy thriving chess fever can bring into the lives of so many inmates. What is amazing is the ignorance (myself included) so many of us have surrounding what chess can do for an individual and for a society.'

Nothing pleases me more than to see a spice head (someone who takes spice as a drug – Carl) ditching his pipe because he is planning his next attack or defense at the board. It's a truly wonderful experience. Communication barriers fade away and soon it is time for bang-up and the player dozes off to sleep playing different scenarios in his mind, planning his next checkmate.

Anger management benefits are awesome! Rarely in the early games even with the most volatile inmates have I witnessed the pieces scattered across the landing. After five minutes huffing, puffing and fist-clenching even the angriest man realises he cannot take his anger out on his opponent. His ego is in turmoil trying to blame his error on someone else. Slowly, acceptance creeps in and he has to own his mistakes. His brain cannot allow him to resolve it with fists, it doesn't compute. His mind rapidly debates his options and there is only one solution – he has to play again, more determined, more focussed that he won't make that same mistake again. Inevitably, he will make another error (or I will) yet this time the pieces don't get thrown as far and the learning curve has begun. Control of emotional, angry outbursts has begun.

Over the days, weeks and months these chaps become the most focussed, calm, collected skilled players I have competed with. You cannot buy this experience and of course, the bemused look on the officer's face is priceless when ten of the most unmanageable men in the prison are sat in silence, heads down, planning one, two, three, four or five moves ahead. These are just a few reasons why chess should be introduced in all prisons.

I (HMP Coathup)

'Chess is not a game of chance. One of the key elements of the game that I love is that it is a tremendous leveller because no matter how good anyone claims they are the game will always knock them back down to earth.'

ANON

'Chess has also learned (sic) me don't take things at face value as things might not be as they first seem.'

S (HMP North Sea Comp)

'Chess has helped me to think before I act with the touch and move rule.'

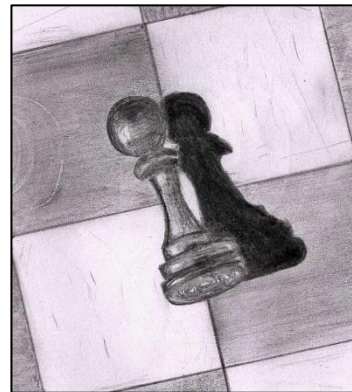
D (HMP North Sea Comp)

'I lost badly today. I thought I had him, but I over extended. He got a break, and basically took the game. It feels good to shake his hand afterwards even if I do want to pull my own hair out. I always smile and show respect.'

R (HMP Stoke Heath)

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

'I love to play. When I was starting out in prison many moons ago it was the only thing that I could interact with other prisoners. It helped me fit in to a certain extent and it really helps take your mind off other things. I would love to start a chess club in Armley prison as a chess club would benefit other inmates and it could only be a good thing for people's mental health to get them talking to each other and it passes the time better than anything.'



C (HMP Armley)

'Nothing pleases me more than sitting at a chessboard with a small crowd of people around commenting on the game, even when they are helping my opponent. I love the atmosphere and the buzz.'

B

The new chess box caused quite a stir as the locals peered inside at the treasure (the chess pieces - Carl) and within two minutes, the barber challenged me to a game. I explained that we only had ten minutes to bang-up and he said cockily 'I won't need that long' so I had to accept. A small but eager crowd gathered and they were on edge for every second, awaiting some magical strike of something that never came. The barber didn't manage his ten-minute victory. Then bang up was announced and I packed this new treasure under my arm and reached my cell. I felt that warm glow.'

I (HMP Coathup)

'I experience a lot of social anxiety, and although I am a rather approachable and friendly person, I struggle with making solid relationships and trusting people. It is even harder for

me to break through these barriers in prison. However, chess is proving over and over to be an amazing ice-breaker and has been one of the few highlights during my stay here. Through playing chess I have been able to up my mood, make new acquaintances, distract my mind from worrying and instead put it to use in an activity that helps me hone my mental and strategical skills. I have even been able to 'mentor' a few other players as I have proven to be one of the highest skilled players on the wing.'

S (HMP Nottingham)

'Chess has brought me quite literally out of my cell. I used to keep to myself but now I play chess with people of all colours and backgrounds who I would otherwise have avoided like the plague.'

I am 38 now and in those years I took a lot of drugs. I drank a lot and used to abuse both my mind and body. Since ending up in jail, I struggled to cope with stress and traumatic situations. I suffered a bit of a break-down due to a combination of treatment course I was on and I felt anxious, nervous and paranoid so I shut myself away and stayed on my own locked in my cell, not having any friends or talking to any other prisoners. But over Christmas, the wing staff brought in a chess set for us and I asked someone if they wanted to play. We started playing quietly and I won a game, and then another. All of a sudden a few other lads came over to watch, and it was winner stays on. I found that we had something in common – chess.

ANON

I have now played guys in chess that I thought I did not like or get along with and after either winning or losing we would shake hands and compliment the other. I have made a few new mates because of chess and we call ourselves 'the chess club.'

ANON

'I was at HMP Maidstone, which is a foreign national's prison which means a lot of different languages were spoken there. Often, people didn't know a word of each other's language but would have a game every time they were out of the cells. It was great. People became friends without even saying a single word – except for checkmate!'

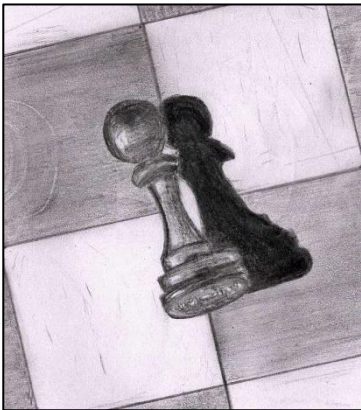
ANON

'I set my chessboard up with the white pieces, inviting 'bait' and then sit patiently like a fisherman. It can be surprising who plonks down opposite – a gym nut, a foreigner with no English or someone who looks like a reject from the raggy dolls but turns out to have a Master's degree in electrical engineering. None of these I would have spoken to without chess attracting these moths to the flame and serving as an ice-breaker.'

J (HMP Littlehey)

'Chess is open to everyone. On our wing, there are groups of Vietnamese, Albanian and Romanians who do not speak English, but can engage by playing chess and we have regular games, despite language barriers.'

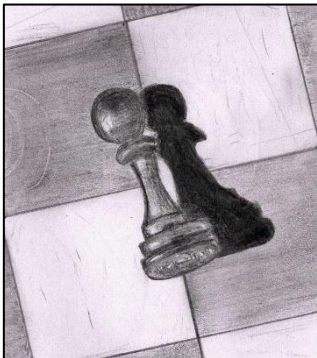
S (HMP Hewell)



FAMILY CONNECTIONS

'I have recently learned how to play chess whilst being on remand at Parc prison. I have now managed to make myself a magnetic board and it has changed my relationship with my eldest son. I phone him every few nights and we play over the phone. He plays on a travel set, and me over my board. This is an interest that has allowed me to bond with my son in a way I never thought possible. I have looked in our library, but we have no chess books which I find hard to believe.'

S (HMP Park)



RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIONS

'Chess is one of my coping mechanisms in prison. When I play, I forget where I am. It has helped me understand the consequences of my actions and helped me focus on creating a better life for myself when I get released. I believe that chess is much better for improving a person's behaviour than any program in prison.'

S (HMP Stafford)

'Chess has taught me to think ahead and not make rash decisions.'

K (HMP Isle Of Man)

'I am a god-fearing man and I believe that chess is a game that teaches you how to plan ahead, to look before you leap and to learn from your mistakes.'

T (HMP High Down)

POSITIVE USE OF TIME

'As you may be aware, we have just started a weekly chess club here and we would like to nominate you as our patron supporter which will involve the occasional visit.'

P (HMP Littlehey)

'I am a chess nut! Chess has given me an escape from the harsh realities of an IPP sentence for nearly all of my fifteen years in prison.'

B

'Even though my freedom has been gone for so long I have something (in chess) that no-one can ever take from me. It is only when I study, and when I play that I feel free.'

B

'I have been at His Majesty's pleasure for four months now, and since day one my passion for chess has been coming back to me. Chess was one of the ideas I had after the prison door had closed behind me, and it turns out that there are many more who shared the same interest. I must mention that the thing that had the greatest impact on reinventing my chess journey was your book 'Chess Behind Bars.' Whilst reading it, I suddenly felt that I was not alone. For a moment I forgot that in a' dire life situation and could focus on something that was not only pleasurable but also challenging.'

S (HMP Nottingham)

'I am an American, far from home but during my short stay in this desolate place, I have discovered the joy of chess.'

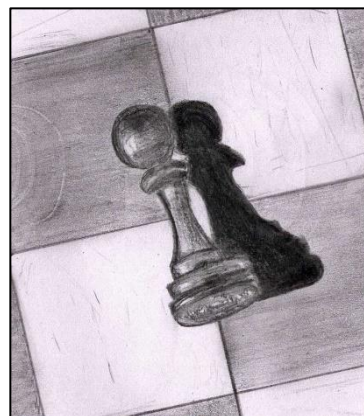
ANON

'I am a chess fanatic. I can't play in a long time (sic) as no-one has a board. We don't get out more than half an hour a day so there is zero chance of me playing. I miss it so much.'

M (HMP Wormwood Scrubs)

I eat, breathe and sleep chess. Unfortunately, most chess players in prisons are passing through with short sentences, but they find a zeal for chess which distracts them from other temptations such as drugs.'

J (HMP Edinburgh)





CREATIVITY

'I am on a four and a half month recall and as I write this I am waiting for our cardboard and toothpaste chess set to dry. I have been requesting a set for weeks but there are none available. I would have made one with matchsticks and glue yet even they are unavailable to buy. My padmate is Imran who has his roots on the borders of Pakistan, and tonight he is making cardboard kings and queens.'

I (HMP Altcourse)

'Due to the isolated existence of a great many of us in prison, the algebraic notation is perfect to play via the window when neither player can even see each other, and spectators act as referees as they follow us on their boards.'

M (HMP Full Sutton)

'I did once spend two years carving a chess-set out of matches.'

'One reality of prison life is that in some prisons even getting hold of a chess board and pieces can be difficult. I have played on two sets that have been hand-made with papier mâché and tin foil, and a set made out of craft matchsticks, which was particularly impressive.'

ANON

'I am currently in the process of creating my own chessboard and pieces out of matchsticks, as chess is only available in the library, which can only be visited once a week.'

R (HMP Guys Marsh)

'I've got a paper set (board drawn on the back of a couple of prison menu sheets, and the pieces are just slips of paper with the colours and names written on them) from a period in segregation at another jail last year. It's not 'quite' the Solzhenitsyn gulag. We play it shouting down the landing. Many is the time I have played one fella, whilst one or two, still learning are following in their cells listening to us shout out the moves and play our games on the boards.'

S (HMP Gartree)

'I did once spend two years carving a set out of matches.'

P (HMP Watton)

'I made myself a board out of half inch packing cardboard, and the pieces from milk bottle top bases. These are plastic with matches through their centres with appropriate shapes glued to them, made of cardboard and painted black and white.'

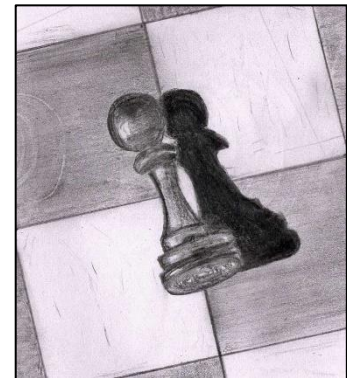
J (HMP Rye Hill)

'I am currently in segregation, and the way we play down here is different to how people play on the wings as you are not allowed a chessboard in your cell here and you are not allowed to mix with other prisoners. So, what we do down here is make our own boards out of paper and make our chess pieces out of toilet roll and we play by shouting out of the doors or windows. I love it, it's got to be done!'

K (HMP Frankland)

ACHIEVEMENT/EDUCATION

'My dream is to become a FIDE Chess Master and I sometimes devote two to three hours per day studying the endgame or best game collections. For me, the day has counted for something if I have studied. However, I am a long way off my dream. I fear that some of the things I am learning now, age 42 I should have been learning when I was younger but chess has given me a dream where I never had one before. Chess has given me a purpose in this pitiful excuse of a life I've got. I am like you Carl, trying to spread the chess gospel wherever I go. The game has improved my self-esteem. It teaches you temerity, patience and humility. It also teaches self-control and you need a clear head.'



B

'Wow, this month's puzzle frustrated me for what seemed like ages with the position set up on my board in my cell for about 48 hours. Every so often, I would turn the board around and examine alternative moves and I thought I must have the wrong position. Finally, at 7.15am on Sunday morning, the day breaking on a very windy Cambridgeshire, I finally spotted it.'

ANON

'This game has also inspired me to go to the library to read, to try to gain knowledge and endeavour to improve.'

D (HMP Onley)

'Chess provides a personal sense of development, self-progression and positive growth. The satisfaction of trying to solve your monthly puzzles provides a regular highlight to break the monotony.'

P (HMP Bure)

'Chess has helped me to learn how to count, especially when promoting a pawn.'

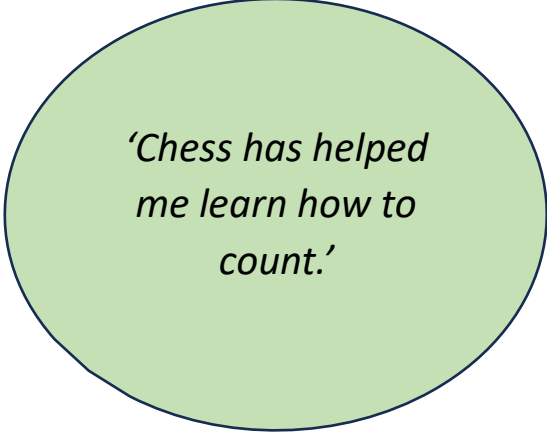
A (HMP North Sea Comp)

'Decent chess players in prison tend to command a certain degree of respect and are looked up to by other prisoners.'

ANON

'I simply can't describe the feeling when you know your opponent has played his best, given you no quarter and is infinitely better than you, but you triumph in the face of adversity.'

A (HMP Bedford)



*'Chess has helped
me learn how to
count.'*



LEAVING PRISON

'I am being released next month. It has been a long four years, but chess has helped me through. Going forward, I will definitely be looking for a chess club and I hope I can find a good chess-life balance. Thank you for all the advice and support you have given me over the years.'

C (HMP Stafford)

'I am a member of a (prison) chess club and I enjoy helping other prisoners improve their chess. Now more people want to play and it involves exercising the brain and having the satisfaction of crushing the opponent! It becomes very competitive, but prisoners learn patience and strategy. These are skills for later in life when released.'

J (HMP Oakwood)

'I will join a club when I am out. Hopefully I can get an online coach and I would love to go to a tournament some day.'

B

'Playing chess in prison will help my confidence when I am released. Confident to interact with others and to solve problems such as bill payments, job applications etc.'

P (HMP Stocken)

'I've got nineteen years left and I want to use my time so that I can compete (at chess) at a decent level when I get out.'

ANON

'For me, everything you need to apply in a chess game, you can apply to life. It involves strategy, forward thinking, planning, caution and much more. What other game, course or craft could teach so many life skills at one time? I have seen the most troublesome prisoners take up chess and completely change their attitude to daily life.'

Chess is a means of self-improvement. The fundamentals of chess, taught well and alongside real life scenarios, can really encourage prisoners to apply the skills to their real life upon release. Whether it is thinking before acting (not on impulse) planning work or money, or thinking more carefully about important decisions. The list is endless.'

T (HMP Rye Hill)

'Chess provided moments of solace and distraction from the noise of the wing. It helped me to think with clarity and make composed decisions which became increasingly important as I progressed through my sentence.'

C (HMP Stafford)

'I myself will be looking for a club when I eventually leave this god forsaken place.'

D (HMP Onley)

'Chess will help me upon release as I will continue to think analytically about new situations.'

P (HMP Bure)

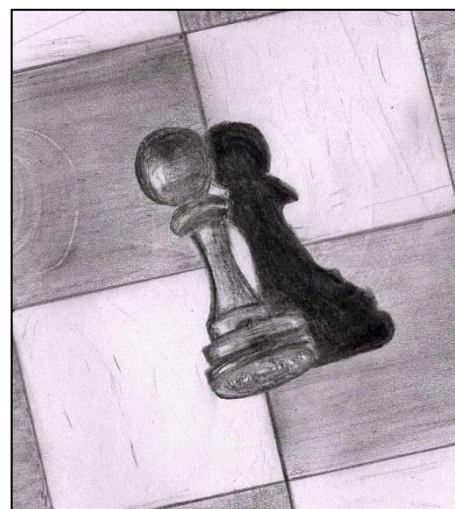
'I was finally persuaded to learn the game whilst behind bars in September and I have been hooked ever since. I am definitely going to improve my game and join my local chess club upon my release later this year.'

J (HMP Winchester)

REVELATIONS

On playing chess: *'I found a wonderful warmth come over me, and slowly a huge smile spread over my face. To begin with they (other inmates) take an interest and ask about the 'horse' and then the king and queen and so on. As they learn to play they can't hide their joy and smiles as they phone their loved ones, excited not only that they can now play chess, but that they beat the teacher. They want more! Trust and respect for each other grows and their nates feel the vibe. The chess infection has begun.'*

I (HMP Coathup)



'The sum of all evil would be greatly diminished if the race of men could sit quietly in their rooms whilst playing chess.'

ANON

I was placed in a hospital wing in Strangeways and placed on 24-hour watch. I was placed with one of the Samaritan listeners and he noticed me looking at a chessboard and he set a game up between us. I automatically responded and a game ensued. Thus, chess was literally a lifesaver and I have no idea whether I would have come out of the state I was in without it.

ANON

I cannot remember playing until I arrived in prison where I arrogantly assumed that given my public-school education, I would immediately be prison champion. Suffice to say my first game was an abject humiliation.'

R (HMP Swaleside)

'Every month, like a little child, I count the days waiting impatiently for my Christmas to arrive – for Santa to bring the brand-new issue of Inside Time Newspaper with a new puzzle from Carl! Today I got it and it was great as usual, so thank you, but the excitement is all over now as the puzzle is solved and the waiting starts all over again.'

Z (HMP Stocken)

'During my short time in this desolate place far away from anyone I know or love, I have discovered the joy of chess.'

J (HMP Elmley)

'He noticed my interest and he showed me how the pieces move. In his words "chess never leaves you: once you start you can never truly leave.'

J (HMP Elmley)

'We are not players, we are practitioners of the art of chess.'

J (HMP Edinburgh)

'Chess helped me cope during the first few weeks.'

J (HMP Preston)

'Chess is like life itself; you never stop learning.'

A HMP (Stoke Heath)

'I learned to play when I was about nine or ten. I used to imagine that the chess board was like a big battlefield and the pieces represented my cavalry knights and infantry pawns etc.'

K (HMP Parc)



PRISON OFFICERS AND STAFF

'We had a senior prison officer who was truly dedicated to improving our well-being. Officers of this caliber still exist however their support network is feeble. prisons are understaffed but with just a little work, it could thrive.'

I (HMP Altcourse)

'My sell to the Prime Minister – chess is literally saving lives in our prisons. It encourages decent, sociable behaviour and conduct. It is calming and time passes easily, which also makes lives easier for prison staff. Prisons should be well stocked with chess sets and clocks, and chess clubs encouraged.'

ANON

*'Chess is like
life itself – you
never stop
learning.'*

EXCEPTS FROM LETTERS FROM TWO PRISONERS (JOE AND WILLIAM)

From Joe

'I really loved chess as a kid, but as I got into my teen years I was more interested in things like partying and women and selling/taking drugs. It wasn't until I came to prison aged 25 that I got back into chess. For me, at first it was an escape from the toxic prison environment and all of the demons that I was fighting internally. I was at peace when I was focusing on the board. I was still involved in my fair share of mischief in prison but the more I would play, the more I would slow down and think things through. At night I would consider the wrong moves that I had made at the board, then at the same time without realizing it I would start to consider the wrong moves I had made on that day and even the wrong moves I had made in the past, of which there are many.

Then, as I began to study chess more, plan my moves and think ahead I started to apply the same thinking to my sentence. I decided I wanted to educate myself so I applied for A level English and my results come through soon. I am really proud that I have seen something through from start to finish because I have never done that before. A level maths is starting this October! Chess inspired me.

Chess also inspired me to look at my behaviour objectively without judgement. I have been in therapy for almost a year now facing up to some very difficult things. Throughout this time, chess has been like an old friend I can always fall back on when I need to take my mind off prison. I love the competition, the banter with other players and I of course love winning games. Chess has taught me humility both in victory and defeat. I have seen chess help people struggling with addiction, and people with conditions such as ADHD and autism.

Thanks for all the work you do to promote chess in prisons Carl, it means so much to us locked away inside.'

Joe

From 'William Roscoe' (not his real name)

'The days of hanging are long gone, and history shows that this had no effect on the number of crimes committed. The feeling is that prisoners should be punished whilst on the inside but the truth is that the sentence itself is the ultimate punishment.

Chess in prisons is a good news story.

Unfortunately, people are capable of doing terrible things when their minds are ravaged by alcohol or drug addiction. Chess can help to heal such minds, lifting the fog of drugs and showing them a clear and brighter path, with hope for the future and a new way forward.

The public tend to think of prisons in a physical sense, as an institution with walls and bars yet there are also prisons of the mind, and it is through chess that such prisoners of the mind can be set free.

In very dark times chess can shine a candle in a room, and in times of deep depression it can lighten the heaviest of loads and make life bearable once again. It can lift even the heaviest of hearts and inspire the imagination as never before. In many countries, even prisoners on death-row choose to play chess and if it can take your mind off getting executed, then I am sure it can take your mind off a lesser sentence.

Chess makes no judgement of a character or their personality and you are never alone with chess. The game changes time itself and will change you for the better. Patience is a mighty weapon and this can be found in every person on earth, though it is 'dormant' in many. Chess can alter your life. Everyone is seeking happiness and fulfilment and with chess these are given free. The more you put into something the more you will get out of it. Chess gave this to me.

Forget the noise of blaring stereo systems that ring out their tuneless soulless boom, boom boom, and ignore the plastic gangster at his window shouting and letting everyone know what he has done. Play chess. It is intoxicating and like meditation you lose contact with your surroundings forgetting any hunger and cold and even ignoring tiredness. This beautiful game is beautiful and magical.

In the quietness of their cells many prisoners come to regret the moves they made on the outside to their sorrow but chess has taken people from purgatory to paradise and in prison ahs changed their thinking and behaviour and improved their social skills. We remember to think before we move not to move then think, for on the chessboard you will surely be found out.

We need more chess in prisons. We need more action from the top and less talk. Doing something is a quantum leap from talking about it. Redemption can be found through chess. It really can influence the behaviour of criminals in a positive way and helps with communication skills, permitting prisoners to develop their social skills through the language of chess and their new friendships formed through playing the game.'

William

Part Four – Real life example. Team England



In 2022 I (Carl) volunteered to manage a team of chess players at HMP Hewell and enter them into the International World online prison chess championships as one of the England teams. My partner in this venture was Nigel Towers, the English Chess Federation Director of home chess. We only had a few weeks to select and coach a team.

We were informed that some of the prisoners interested in playing were difficult to manage but it has always been the case that in the arena of chess, there are seldom any problems and prisoners of all backgrounds, ethnicity etc just come together to play. They keep their personal issues or grievances to the wing.

In brief this is how we went from (supposed) zero's to hero's in a few weeks. We certainly had challenges – the main one being that some prisoners were only held for a short time and although they might be good players they would be released before the day of the competition.

Therefore we had to try to select people that would still be in custody at the time of the event and of course those who were good enough at chess to compete with some of the international teams, including the Philippines, India, Germany, the USA and more.

What we needed from the prisoners was a commitment. They had to realise that not everyone would be selected, that chess is a meritocracy but that we would do our best to prepare them for the finals. They needed to be self-disciplined, committed to the group and to me and Nigel. If they could do that, we were good to go. We were very open with them saying that anyone who could not do this could leave the group immediately – they were free to go.

None did.

How do you bring a group of prisoners together, some of whom do not know one another, some from different countries, speaking different languages? We had men from England, Albania, Somalia and Romania.

Well that is where chess comes in. Since it is played worldwide and is a standardised game it is therefore a universal language which anyone could understand.

Prisoners had textbooks (In English and Romanian!) homework sheets, and face to face sessions when Nigel and I visited. They were trusted to go online (supervised) and learn how to use the chess.com platform, where the finals would be played.

To a man, each player met every commitment. They attended every session, they did their homework, they worked together to improve. They worked with staff to make the best of their time, and it was a revelation.

The main team was selected and the others volunteered to support them. This noble commitment was rewarded when we learned that we were able to change players so that everyone in the squad would get at least one game. Everyone played and they even drew with Germany, which was wonderful. They all had tee-shirts with a specially designed logo along with books and certificates.

A few weeks later Nigel and I returned to HMP Hewell with the BBC and you can see a short video about that and chess in prisons in general here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hereford-worcester-65889955>

The players told us that they felt a great sense of self-worth and self-esteem, that they had developed a discipline in preparing for something, individually and working together and of course there was also the great sense of achievement, understanding that with hard work, results would come.

This in my view is what prisons should be doing. Yes, you can lock an inmate up for 23 hours a day and deprive them of education and mental stimulation (deliberately or otherwise) but don't be surprised that upon release, that society has within its numbers bitter, angry and frustrated individuals.



The point of this simple logo is that chess can give prisoners a hand up in life.

Part Five – Why chess in prisons?

Let me recap...

Chess is for everyone

Regardless of age, gender, race, intellectual capacity, ability or background, anyone can play. It is inclusive and it is a meritocracy. If you are 9 or 90, you can play!

Chess is a social game

It helps people to make new friends and it builds relationships. Often, inmates who would never spend time together will happily sit and play chess.

Chess reaches across the educational spectrum

Chess incorporates aspects of English, mathematics, art, history, religion, geography and sport.

Chess improves memory and concentration

Chess helps people to assess a situation and to use logic for personal growth.

Chess demands responsibility for actions

There is no one else to blame. Once we have made our move on the chessboard (as in life) then we don't take it back. It means that we have to think before we act and that once we act, we alone are responsible and accountable for the consequences, good and bad. We must learn to be magnanimous in both victory and defeat.

Chess is an excellent (productive) use of time

Time is a prisoners' toy. It is something they have in abundance. Maximising the use of that time in a positive way is a good thing to do and chess delivers positively in this area.

Chess can be played anywhere

Especially in a prison cell. Chess is inexpensive, and a simple set and board can accompany a prisoner anywhere. It is education in cell time.

Chess requires discipline

Chess is after all a war game and without planning and preparation the odds of failure are greatly increased. Strategy and tactics are fundamental to improvement. It requires precision and concentration and is a test for us as individuals.

Resources

Chess Behind Bars written by Carl Portman

Chess Crusader – Confessions of an amateur chess player written by Carl Portman

The Grass Arena written by John Healy

Chess for Freedom Programme – FIDE <https://chessforfreedom.fide.com/>

Chess in Schools and Communities <https://www.chessinschools.co.uk/>

English Chess Federation <https://www.englishchess.org.uk/>



**Show me the prison, show me the jail,
Show me the prisoner whose life has gone stale.
And I'll show you young man, so many reasons why,
There but for fortune go you or I**

Phil Ochs There but for fortune.