

STORIES

attempting unsuccessfully to retract a reckless rook sacrifice in the second game.

Immoral and even illegal behaviour has dogged correspondence chess throughout its existence. The so-called 'Dead Man's Defence' – stalling a hopelessly lost position in the sincere hope that the opponent will either die or give up in disgust – is a familiar, contemptible anti-social stratagem. Results can be needlessly delayed by a year or more like this. As an unsporting ploy, it is far more effective than sulking in a tournament hall – the dismal equivalent for hapless over-the-board practitioners. Furthermore, as Internet trolls everywhere know, remoteness renders the incurred opprobrium less physically hazardous. But for real duplicity, there is little to beat soliciting advice. Alexander Khalifman once told that he used to regularly analyse and indeed play the correspondence games of his trainer, Gennady Nesis. He was particularly proud of one brilliancy (alas, I forget which), which he mockingly described as the greatest of Nesis' career. But if asking your future World Champion student to do your work for you may be considered a minor misdemeanor, what about assembling an entire team for the same purpose? Well, if you are rich and vain enough – as the late billionaire Joop van Oosterom was – you can call the tune. The Dutchman might have been a reasonably strong player, but he was nowhere near good enough to carry off the highest honours without others doing the donkey-work on his behalf, particularly after suffering a brain haemorrhage. And as he marched inexorably towards his two World Championship titles, his squad expanded and his own contribution decreased accordingly.

But if industrial-scale chicanery wasn't bad enough, what should have driven a massive stake through the heart of competitive correspondence chess was the advent of computers. When engines have become so ridiculously powerful, 'playing' becomes little more than data-mining. There is nothing wrong with that, of course – Hikaru Nakamura employs the modestly-rated (2156) Kris Littlejohn as his assistant. Undoubtedly Kris is highly adept at research, but what he does most certainly cannot, in any way, be considered as sport (nor, I am sure, would he consider it to be). Hikaru does that. I am still bewildered and traumatised by my stay with correspondence player Gordon Dunlop (nice chap though he is) in Perth a couple of years ago. The sight

and sound of banks of whirring machinery administered from a master control-room upstairs still haunts me. It was mightily impressive in a way, but what, exactly, was the point? So much effort, and not a little expense, for an exercise in futility.

Correspondence tournaments, unsurprisingly, have long been extraordinarily dull bore-fests. You can only win if your opponent blunders, and why should they blunder if everyone is using Stockfish? If there is a case for tampering with the rules – and chess, let us not forget,

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has evolved throughout the ages – it is surely here. For a start, they should revert to the rule that existed for most of the first millennium in awarding the win to the person administering stalemate. Coincidentally, this was compellingly advocated by Cecil Purdy, the first ICCF World Champion, in at least two separate articles in *Chess World*. The change will not save correspondence chess as, although we will witness more decisive results, it probably doesn't make a big enough difference. But it may, nevertheless, prolong its existence and serve as an invaluable trial.

The attentive reader might have observed a small measure of hostility in your columnist towards the dawdling version of chess. This animosity is perhaps rooted in the coercion, by my mother, to play two games against a pen-pal of hers many years ago. In some ways, though, the goals of correspondence were noble – overcoming the tyranny of distance, or as an engaging distraction. Literally hundreds of German soldiers along the Siegfried Line indulged in it – an undoubtedly more worthwhile and pacific pursuit than shooting at others, or being shot at. In the heyday of the pre-silicon era, buccaneering gambit-play was a most attractive aspect, but sadly there is no room for such folly in the 21st century when the engine delivers its cold, harsh verdict. Nostalgia is a wonderful thing, but this type of play no longer serves any purpose. It is time for the die-hards to admit it.

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