FT Chess

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Internet speeds sport's growth

The latest technological revolution has provided big online opportunities for players, fans and businesses, writes *Adam Thomson*

Illustration: David Bromley

In early 2014, Christof Sielecki left his job. His company was laying off staff and he thought he would take the chance to do what he had always wanted to: earn a living from chess. Today, the international master from Germany uses the internet to teach students from around the world. He also has a burgeoning YouTube channel with more than 4,000 videos — as well as live weekly broadcasts via Twitch, a social media site.

"Technology is a fantastic thing for chess," he says. "It's allowed lots of people to get into it when they never would have done before. It's a huge boost for the game."

Mr Sielecki's online business neatly illustrates how far chess has come in the past 20 years or so. As recently as a generation ago, chess was largely the preserve of community centres, church halls and newspapers' back pages. Today, it is exposed to a global online audience. Suddenly, it seems, chess is cool — or cooler than it used to be.

In a sign of this growing popularity, Chess.com celebrated the billionth game played on its site last December. As it boasted, "A billion is a big number."

Rakesh Mathur, a banker from India whose user name is helpmewin, won that billionth game on move 16 when his opponent left a knight undefended. Like many amateur players, Mr Mathur learned as a boy by watching his father.

"The game hooked me," he told the Financial Times. "Very soon, my pa and I were so much into it that sometimes we got up late in the night and played."

Now 62, Mr Mathur says: "The internet allows me to play more because I don't have to go searching for 'skilled' partners. My game has also improved, thanks to all those 'netizens'."

Today Chess.com, one of many online sites that offer real-time games as well as study tools, has about 12.8m registered users *(see page 4 for a list of other chess sites)*.

Daniel Rensch, the company's vice-president and an international master, argues that chess has a natural advantage in the online space.

"Unlike other games, such as video games, where shooting or other real life actions are involved, chess is the same online as over the board."

A second advantage is that the web has proved to be the ideal channel for broadcasting top-level chess games. Not so long ago, chess fans trying to follow a world championship match or a top-level event would invariably have had to wait until the following day to read about the most recent game in a newspaper.

These days, they can watch the match or tournament unfold in real time, along with live expert commentary from a master.

John Nunn, an English grandmaster and three-time winner of the World Chess Solving Championship, points out the flip side: that traditional, over-the-board chess played in clubs is far less active than it was 20 years ago.

In the UK, for example, many clubs have either closed or amalgamated. "Online chess means that people don't have to go out on a cold December evening any more," he says.

"But in terms of providing access, things have never been better."

The digital revolution has affected the roughly 1,500-year-old game in other ways. Personal computers and chess-playing software are helping children to become stronger players faster.

"Getting to professional level took more time and commitment before the advent of computers," says Mr Rensch.

"And if you weren't born a hop, skip and a jump away from the Marshall Chess Club [one of the oldest chess clubs in the US] or in the Soviet Union, you had a problem."

The result is the appearance of strong players in countries that never previously enjoyed a chess tradition.

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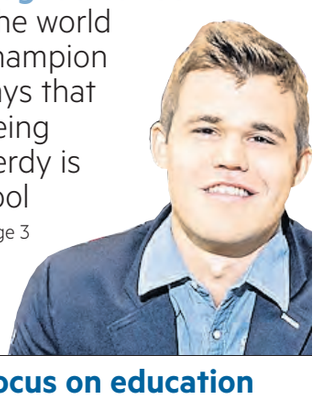

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Competition fraud

Powerful statistical tools can spot sudden improvements in a player's performance, writes *James Crabtree*

Dhruv Kakkar was a strong chess player, but not that strong. During a tournament in New Delhi in May, the 19-year-old beat Pravin Thipsay, one of India's more accomplished grandmasters.

"By the 29th move, I was clearly lost and chose to offer a draw," Mr Thipsay told The Hindu newspaper. "He promptly declined the offer."

Mr Thipsay resigned 58 moves later, badly beaten by a player with a ranking miles below his own. By that point, Mr Thipsay had already complained to the match officials that something was amiss.

Having confronted the younger player, the authorities took little time to uncover the source of his sudden improvement: two mobile phones, one strapped to each calf, connected in turn to a tiny speaker, barely larger than the head of a pin, tucked inside his ear.

Mr Kakkar's was one of the more elaborate schemes to be uncovered. The first phone let him transmit information about his opponent's moves via taps of his foot, which were received by a friend sitting at a chess computer many miles away. The second, linked to the earpiece, allowed the friend to pass on the machine's response.

That said, Mr Thipsay is far from the only player to consider the increasing evil of cheating. In another episode in April, Georgian grandmaster Gaioz Nigalidze was ejected from a tournament in Dubai, having been caught repeatedly heading to the toilet during a match to consult a chess programme on a hidden mobile phone, carefully wrapped up in toilet paper.

A few years earlier, Borislav Ivanov, a Bulgarian journeyman, even became something of a cult figure after attracting suspicion for a mysteriously rapid improvement in form in 2012 — during which time he began to beat a number of much more highly ranked rivals. These suspicions became so intense that other players started refusing to compete in tournaments that Mr Ivanov entered.

He denied cheating, but retired suddenly in October 2013, aged just 26,

Daniel King: 'Small tournaments need to wake up to the risks of cheating'

after a particularly acrimonious event where rivals accused him of wearing unusually large shoes — potentially containing some sort of cheating device — which Mr Ivanov refused to remove.

He then came out of retirement a few months later, only to promptly withdraw from a tournament in Spain following further bad-tempered accusations of concealed devices.

The mysteries surrounding Mr Ivanov's improvement only fed into a wider sense that foul play is on the rise.

"My impression is that there is more cheating going on," says British grandmaster Daniel King. "I don't think there is much doubt about it, and while it is rare at the top level, the small tournaments need to wake up to it."

> 'I think it is unpleasant even to discuss this topic . . . the perception sets in that cheating is everywhere'

The reasons for this are easy enough to explain. Chess has seen little evidence of the problems of doping, in which players use drugs to improve their physical performance, in turn ruining the reputation of sports such as cycling. Instead, the issue is largely technological, prompted by the advent of smartphones fitted with chess computers far more powerful than any human player.

Allegations of cheating predate the era of pocket-sized computers, and in some ways form part of the psychology of chess itself. Accusing an opponent of deception can be seen as gamesmanship, as when Veselin Topalov of Bulgaria claimed Russia's Vladimir Kramnik had consulted a computer during their 2006 world championship match, allegations Mr Kramnik has always denied.

And Garry Kasparov even accused the computer Deep Blue — or rather its human handlers — of cheating in their match in 1997, which Mr Kasparov lost, so becoming the first champion to be defeated by a machine under tournament conditions.

In this way, the very intensity of chess can lead to suspicions of cheating, while lurid discoveries of hidden devices of the sort found on Mr Kakkar draw great attention to the problem. But this, argues former world champion Viswanathan Anand, may give rise to a damaging and false sense that chess suffers a problem akin to cycling.

"It is getting cheaper and easier to cheat, that is true, because of computers," Mr Anand says. "But I think it is unpleasant even to discuss this topic, because the perception sets in that cheating is everywhere, simply by us talking about it. My impression is that this is something people worry about, but which isn't happening that much."

Even so, tournament organisers are taking precautions. Electronic devices are generally banned for players and audiences, and high-level matches often take place behind glass walls to stop any communication with spectators.

On the board, brazen cheats are fairly easy to unmask, by virtue of their implausible improvements in play. Yet even those who are more subtle now face formidable defences, in the form of sophisticated statistical tools that analyse matches to detect unexpected variations in ability.

"The point is, you might get away with it once or twice," Mr King says.

"But if your results suddenly deviate from the mean, people will start asking questions.

"So we hope that will keep things well under control."

FT Chess

Politics divides loyal followers

World governing body
The re-election of Fide's president has not stopped calls for reform, writes *James Crabtree*

Garry Kasparov ought to have had it all sewn up. As one of his sport's all-time greats, his campaign to become president of the World Chess Federation (Fide) brought superstar glamour and pledges to combat corruption and inject fresh funds into grassroots chess.

Yet when the results were released in August last year he was not even close. Incumbent president Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a Russian politician best known outside chess circles for his firm belief in extraterrestrials, won 110 of the Fide votes to Mr Kasparov's 61.

The campaign was acrimonious, with both sides throwing accusations of bribery and skulduggery. Mr Kasparov's post-election analysis continued in the same vein, blaming defeat on his opponent's mastery of "the Fide machinery" while citing unspecified interference from the Kremlin.

Others faulted his campaigning style. "He has great difficulties suffering mediocrity," said one grandmaster, who asked not to be named. "He can pretend to be interested in people for a while but they bore him, and that shows."

Nonetheless, it is hard to understand Mr Kasparov's defeat without first delving into the curious politics of global chess, over which Mr Ilyumzhinov has presided since 1995. Much as in the governance of football, Fide's elections give equal voting rights to every national federation. Mr Ilyumzhinov, much like Sepp Blatter, Fifa president, has held power by capitalising on that system.

Broadly speaking, Mr Ilyumzhinov has been able to gather support from the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe — including many of the world's most important chess-playing nations — plus smaller, emerging economies in Africa and Latin America. Mr Ilyumzhinov's critics, meanwhile, are found most often in wealthier Europe and North America, which boast many tournaments and supporters but are too few in number to swing elections.

Fide President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov
Aziz Karimov/ Getty Images

'Money trickles down, but who knows how much of it actually goes into the grassroots'

Opponents of this system accuse Fide of opaque governance and a general lack of professionalism. British grandmaster Nigel Short, an ally of Mr Kasparov, suggests chess suffers from a corruption problem more broadly: "The system is byzantine," Mr Short says. "It is no secret that funds are misused."

In May, prosecutors in Bulgaria launched a probe into allegations of financial irregularities at the country's chess federation. The Bulgarian Chess Federation has denied wrongdoing.

In a statement, Fide said it does not believe there are problems of corruption internally and that its accounts are published and audited "in much more detail than most other sporting bodies". It does not comment on problems in national federations, but any that break its official code of ethics can be referred to an internal ethics commission.

The sport's record of broadening its audience has also been mixed. Particular controversy focused on a 2012 deal between Mr Ilyumzhinov and Andrew Paulson, a US media entrepreneur. The arrangement was meant to lead to lucrative sponsorship deals and glitzy tournaments, with television contracts.

In 2013, Mr Paulson told the FT he expected to transform the game into an exciting and lucrative spectator sport. "If you can persuade millions to watch golf, chess is going to be an easy sell," he said. Yet Mr Paulson's deal was widely criticised and ultimately seemed to deliver little in the way of new money. His efforts to navigate the world of chess politics were similarly fraught, and in 2014 he left it entirely, selling his stake in the marketing company he had created to an ally of Mr Ilyumzhinov.

However, Fide has its supporters as it backs smaller chess-playing countries and hands out funds to help them develop the sport. And as in any political system, it helps that Mr Ilyumzhinov is a natural politician. "It is all very feudal," says British grandmaster Daniel King. "Money trickles down, although who knows how much of it actually goes down into the legendary grassroots.

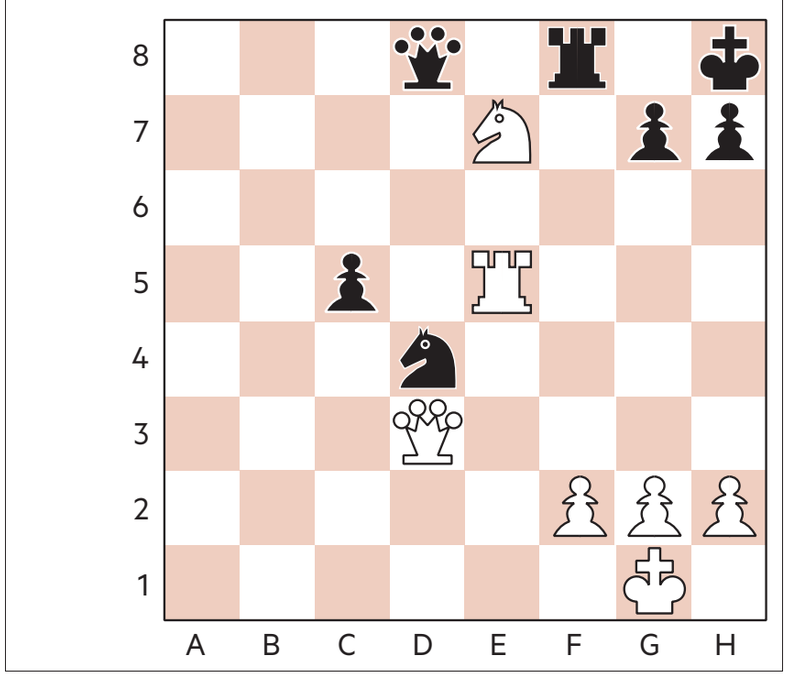
"But Ilyumzhinov is . . . charming. And if you discount the alien weirdness stories, people like him."

Even so, calls to reform the game's governance continue. Former world champion Viswanathan Anand says the obvious answer is to junk the present structure and replace it with one that favours the major powers: "The system we have is crazy. In cricket, it is clear the big countries like England, India and Australia should be running the thing."

Mr Anand says giving nations such as Russia or India the same sway as minnows like Gabon diverts the attentions of administrators, while getting in the way of sensible attempts at commercial development and professionalisation.

"The bigger powers should have more say," he adds. "Sadly, the chances of this happening are virtually zero, because no one in the current set-up wants it to happen. So we are probably stuck with the system we have."

Checkmates you should know 1: Anastasia's mate
1. Qxh7 +, Kxh7 2. Rh5++
(+ equals check, ++ checkmate, x takes)



Chessbase Software company in cloud move

If there is one thing that has revolutionised the chess world, it is computers. And if there is one software company that has done more than any other to change the way chess players prepare for tournaments, it is Chessbase.

The Hamburg-based company, founded in 1986, is by far the biggest name in chess software. It sells chess-playing programs, instructional videos and runs Playchess.com, an internet site for playing live games online.

But its Chessbase program is its flagship product and is found on practically every computer of anyone who takes the game seriously.

With a database of about 8m previously played games, the oldest of which dates back to the 15th century, Chessbase allows players to explore specific openings and study variations.

The system, akin to a vast computerised library, can be easily customised. It also has powerful chess "engines", software that helps players to analyse existing positions and come up with theoretical novelties they can unleash on future opponents.

Chessbase is largely credited with having democratised chess as it gives anyone who has a laptop and a couple of hundred spare euros instant access to practically every top-level game ever played. The company has annual sales in the high single-digit millions of euros. It does not disclose full earnings, but Matthias Wüllenweber, one of the founders and chief executive, says it is "highly profitable . . . we are satisfied".

It did not start out that way, he recalls. The original idea to compile a computer-based database came when he was a physics student and keen amateur chess player on a year's exchange in Edinburgh. Joining the university chess team, he discovered early on that he disliked writing out games and opening lines by hand.

"It was so tedious," he says. "Laptops were just starting to come out and I remember thinking that I would look up where to buy a chess database program when I got back to Germany." He could not find any, however. "In those days, if you couldn't find what you were looking for, you wrote the code yourself. So I did," he says.

Formed with Frederic Friedel, a German journalist with a passion for chess, the business consisted initially of Mr Wüllenweber modifying Atari computers so they could run his software. "I used to lie on my bed soldering modules," he says. "I programmed some chips, produced a board and plugged it into the expansion slot that Ataris came with. Then I would send them off to Frederic, who did the commercial side."

Like so many businesses facing disruption from the shift to digital, the company is about to change its business model. For years, it has sold its software on discs or via internet downloads. But the speed with which opening theory is changing in top-flight chess is forcing it to become a subscription, cloud-based service.

"In some ways, we are like Microsoft, in that we have a well-rehearsed business model and some fantastic cash cows, but we have to change everything," says Mr Wüllenweber.

Strangely, perhaps, he says the immediate effect of rooting out software piracy is less beneficial than one would imagine. "We always liked piracy because people grew to love our software in countries where we would never have sold a single copy anyway. As for the rest, we found that people got jobs at some point, maybe got a bug in the pirated version and thought, 'what the heck, I'll just buy the original'."

He says the main advantages of being online only are speed and the ability to cater to individual customers. Games databases can be updated almost instantly.

In future, Chessbase will also be able to track the games of registered users, their preferred repertoires and their playing styles. "We will be able to send them notifications of similar games being played in real time," says Mr Wüllenweber.

He adds that an enhanced Chessbase will analyse individuals' weaknesses and send them messages suggesting that they concentrate on specific aspects of their game, such as deficiencies in the defence of their king's position or poor placement of their bishops.

But what is to stop people creating an open source rival to Chessbase? Mr Wüllenweber responds with a question of his own. "Why can Microsoft Office exist and earn billions when there are so many excellent open source alternatives . . . I think only a commercial structure can provide the continuous dedication and support that a complex application needs."

The official launch of the new-look Chessbase will probably take place near Christmas and Mr Wüllenweber is quietly optimistic. "We are very pleased that we are an old company with an established business model and that we have managed to make such a radical break."

Matthias Wüllenweber

Adam Thomson

Search is on for sponsors with deep pockets

Corporate support

Despite a huge following, big backers are staying away, reports *Adam Palin*

Chess and golf may appear to share little in common — to begin with, their playing environments could hardly be more different. There is also the fact that professional golf commands 24-hour television coverage worldwide and events and player sponsorships are estimated to be at least $1.65bn a year.

Chess fans, by comparison, would be hard pressed to find any coverage of important competitions on TV.

But despite this, the two games both appeal to the middle classes. Research by pollsters YouGov in 2012 found, for example, that 21 per cent of US households with annual incomes of more than $120,000 are home to regular chess players. Four-fifths of all US players are graduates. And figures from the National Golf Foundation and the US Census Department for the same year found 67 per cent of golfers are graduates with an average income of $95,000.

Chess also attracts an estimated 600m regular players worldwide — seven times more than golf, HSBC says — but the sport has nonetheless struggled to attract corporate partners.

"Hundreds of millions play it, the imagery of chess is everywhere, but because games aren't on the television, it's under the radar," says Malcolm Pein, British international master and director of the London Chess Classic tournament. Two of the leading sponsors of professional chess in the 1990s, Intel and IBM, long ago ended their support.

Large corporate sponsors are few and far between, with Socar, the state-owned oil company of Azerbaijan — which sponsored the recent 2015 World Chess Cup in Baku, with prize money totalling $1.6m — a notable exception. Tata Steel, one of the world's largest steelmakers, hosts its own international tournament in the Netherlands each year.

Pressure on marketing budgets rose during the financial crisis and chess was not exempt from the corporate squeeze.

BNP Paribas, the France-based bank, has been an official partner of the French national chess federation since 2006, for example, but has confirmed it will not be renewing its sponsorship beyond 2016. The company said the decision was taken as chess has not achieved anticipated levels of growth.

Sytske Seyffert, director of public affairs in Europe for Tata Steel, says that although the company's chess competition — which includes grandmaster and amateurs — aims to promote brand awareness, it is more fundamentally part of the group's corporate social responsibility programme.

"Chess has been shown to be one of the most influential ways to improve problem-solving [skills] and concentration," says Payal Jain, managing director of strategic analytics at Barclaycard, which sponsors the game in schools through its Yes2Chess initiative.

Since the credit card arm of Barclays bank launched the programme in eight countries, including Germany and the UK, in 2014, more than 60,000 children, aged seven to 11, have participated.

Malcolm Pein: The difficulty in attracting sponsors has been getting chess matches on TV

Like Barclays, the sponsor of a separate initiative to develop chess at a young age, UK-based property developer Delancey cites the importance of the game in developing skills for study and work.

Chief executive Jamie Ritblat says the group's decision to support the UK Schools Chess Challenge since 2011 was "anything but" commercial in nature. "One of the main things that appeals to me is the fact that chess is a game that can be played and enjoyed by all on a level playing field."

Although sponsorship of school initiatives cultivates future players and supporters, the professional game remains in a "relatively impoverished state" in the absence of big corporate sponsors or public funding, says Mr Pein.

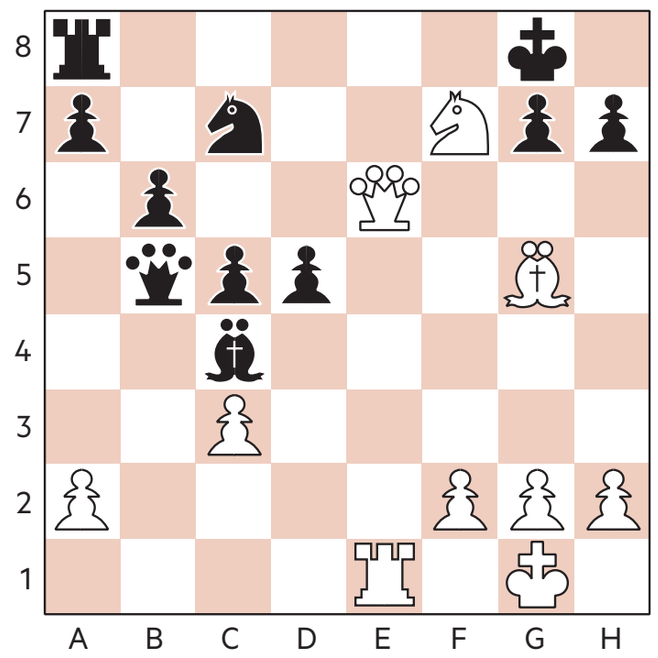
He adds: "The fundamental difficulty in attracting sponsors has been getting chess matches on TV, but the presentation has really changed over the past 10 years."

Online audiences are already large and in a recent tournament, Mr Pein says his matches attracted a total of 160,000 different viewers via a live streaming service.

Audiences watching live broadcasts today have the benefit of advanced graphics that simplify explanations of what is happening. One important feature, say chess fans, is that viewers are shown possible moves and their impact on the balance of a match, highlighting where players can make masterstrokes or blunders.

Efforts to make chess more accessible to the uninitiated could also help change the value proposition for would-be sponsors, says Mr Pein. "In tennis or golf, say, it is hard for sponsors to get recognised . . . One of the joys of chess for them is that it's such a green field."

Checkmates you should know 2: A smothered or Philidor's mate
1. Nh6 +, Kh8 (if Kf8, then 2. Qf7 ++) 2. Qg8 +, Rxg8 3. Nf7 ++
(N = Knight, K = king, R = rook, pawns denoted by column they are in)



Internet helps to speed up sport's growth around the world

Continued from page 1

During most of the 20th century, the mighty Soviet chess school dominated the game, churning out a string of world champions. It also owned the gold medal at the Chess Olympiad, a team event held every two years, winning 18 of the 20 competitions held between 1952 and 1990.

Even with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia continued to dominate the event for another 12 years, winning every Olympiad until 2002.

But last year, and in a sign of the changing times, China won for the first time. Hou Yifan is currently the world's number one-rated female player.

More generally, Dr Nunn says that computer-assisted training has raised standards, particularly in the opening phase of the game, when knowledge of variations and sub-variations is critical.

"Players are better prepared than ever before," he says. "Nobody is analysing by hand any more."

But while software has helped make players stronger, it has also produced the biggest threat to the game's existence. With the strongest programs now considerably more advanced than the best humans, the temptation to cheat has proved irresistible for some. Fide, the world chess authority, has introduced rule changes that prohibit players from having mobile phones "on their person" in the playing venue. Yet Frederic Friedel, a journalist and co-founder of software company ChessBase, is sceptical. Contemplating a time in the future when in-body microprocessors might pass from science fiction to reality, he says: "What a pity — it was such a beautiful game."

When it comes to top-flight contests, Magnus Carlsen, the reigning world champion, is less pessimistic. He points out that there have not been any cases of cheating at the very highest level and stresses that he does not think it will become a problem.

"For that, we must be thankful to the inflated egos of the best players," he told the FT. "They think that they can win in an honest way, so they don't resort to cheating." Even so, he admits that the possibility exists. "It is a lot about trust," he says. "With the security measures that we have, it is entirely possible to cheat at the highest level."

With the game gaining greater global exposure thanks to the internet, some aficionados are increasingly optimistic that it may one day be played as part of the Olympic Games. (Chess missed out on a shortlist of sports that will be included in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics but it may be played as a part of later games, fans hope.)

Malcolm Pein, a British international master and an active figure in the UK chess scene, points out that more than 100 nations (although not the UK) now recognise the game as a sport, as does the International Olympic Committee. Together, those two facts are a fitting testament to the evolution of an ancient game in the 21st century.

Young Champ who is happy to be viewed as a nerd

Interview Aged just 24, Magnus Carlsen is seen as a boost to the game's image, says *Adam Thomson*

Game changer: chess champion Magnus Carlsen — Oli Scarff/Getty Images

Things do not get off to the best start when I walk into the Hotel Bristol in Oslo to meet Magnus Carlsen. The chess world champion, and the highest-rated human ever to have played the game, is distracted and turns his gaze to his smartphone.

"Is this a favourite place of yours?" I ask, looking around only to realise that the hotel's 1920s-era decor, with chandeliers, statuettes and leather sofas, could hardly be more out of step with Carlsen's mottled jeans and black cotton jacket. "No," he says.

Earlier that day, I had noticed that he describes himself on his Facebook page simply as "Athlete". Is that really how he sees being a chess player?

"I think that is the best way to describe it. The way I prepare for tournaments, the way I conduct myself during tournaments, it is very much the same way athletes prepare and also the ultimate goal is to win," he says.

He has strict sleep and dietary regimes during tournaments, as well as plenty of sport, which he loves.

"When I feel well, I play better and I last the games better," he says, warming a little to the conversation.

"Lasting the games" is something he has turned into a trademark. Celebrated for his exquisite strategic play, he is also known for never giving up. Instead, he tries to eke out tiny advantages from positions other humans — and computers — would consider dead draws. The dogged, fighting spirit turns many of Carlsen's games into mental and physical marathons.

Astonishingly, he often turns these seemingly lifeless positions into grinding victories. "It does set me apart a bit from others that I manage to find resources in these apparently barren positions," he says. "I think that is due in part to chess strength, that I can see more opportunities. But it is also about looking for them even if there is not much there."

That grim determination has served him well. At 13, the Norwegian became one of the youngest-ever grandmasters and at 19 he hit the top of the world rankings. Last November, he beat India's Viswanathan Anand to retain the world crown he first won in 2013.

It has also made him very rich. Beyond the money for prizes and appearances, Carlsen has sponsorship deals galore. He has even modelled for G-Star RAW, the Dutch urban clothing company that makes the black cotton jacket he is wearing.

As in boxing, chess world champions have to defend their crown against a contender who has first had to climb a long ladder to earn the right to challenge. Carlsen, as world champion, is the biggest beneficiary of the system. Yet he is determined to change it.

Between mouthfuls of cold roast beef from the hotel buffet, he says: "The overriding factor in all of this is that we need a system that is fair and the system we have right now is simply not fair. The world champion has far too many privileges."

This sounds magnanimous but the idea has few supporters. One objection is crowning a world champion from, say, an annual knockout tournament would devalue the title, making it easier for rank outsiders to win. A second is that such a tournament would kill match-play, in which two players battle it out over a series of games in a mental duel that is often fascinating and thrilling.

Carlsen is unconcerned. Tournaments also bring drama, he says — not least the World Chess Cup (part of the qualifying cycle that will help decide his final opponent in the defence of his title next year), which was under way in Baku while I interviewed him.

"You would still have very exciting matches. You would have tie breaks in every round, which people love," he insists. "I am aware of all the sporting and commercial advantages that the current system gives me, but I think this is the time to change."

Carlsen is seen by many as a blessing for a game that has long been associated with, well, nerds. Has he helped to make chess just a little cooler? "I don't really like the idea of cool being the opposite of nerdy," he says. "Something can be nerdy but still cool. I think in general being nerdy is a good thing."

But would he call himself a nerd? "I'm sort of a bigger chess nerd than some of the other players of my age. I probably know more obscure chess history and stuff like that, and probably read more, just because I like it — not because I think it gives me any competitive advantage necessarily. There are young players today who cannot even name all the world champions."

He talks as if, at just 24, he were already a veteran. "Studying the history of the game and also reading any chess magazine and chess books I can get my hands on, is important for me. I have the impression some of the young players today don't really do that any more." He adds: "There are certainly young players who work harder than I do at chess but I think , in terms of chess culture, I still belong a little bit to the older generation rather than the new one."

Despite his youth, Carlsen does seem to come from a different generation. Even today he relies less on computer analysis than the other top players. "Until I was 12, I practically didn't use computers at all — just books and a chess set. I think that helped me develop an understanding, a feeling for the game."

He says that he has recently been replaying some of his old games. "I can see that I had a bit of a feeling for where the pieces should go even then. That's not so easy to get just with the help of a computer. I can see some of the young players, almost the very best ones, they don't have that positional feeling for where to put the pieces as much."

> 'Until I was 12, I practically didn't use computers at all, just books and a chess set'

Now that he considers himself an "older" player, the obvious question is whether Carlsen feels he has reached his maximum powers. In May last year, he achieved a rating of 2,882, the highest of any human in history. Yet recently, he finished eighth in the Norway Chess Tournament and second in the high-profile Sinquefield Cup.

"I am not sure that I am improving but I am learning and that is the key bit," he says. "I feel I am not a young player any more . . . and now yes, it's harder because I feel that I am learning all the time but sometimes the results don't show that. And sometimes, because you are learning, because you know more, you take fewer chances — and that may be a bad thing."

But, he says, he is enjoying chess as much as ever. "It's hard to keep it completely out of my mind," he says. And with that, he explains why he seemed so distracted when we met. He was using his phone to follow the World Cup games. "I am not only a chess player, I am a chess fan and a chess nerd," he says. "I want to follow everything that happens."

Britain needs to rise to global challenge

OPINION

Nigel Short

The 1972 World Championship Match in Reykjavik was a watershed moment. Venerable, esoteric chess suddenly reached its apogee of global prominence when American genius Bobby Fischer challenged the supposed embodiment of Soviet communism, Boris Spassky, and prevailed. Never mind that Fischer was already showing signs of mental instability, or that the rebellious Spassky was anything but a model representative of the totalitarian dystopia. For Cold War propaganda purposes, good had won over evil.

Arguably, Britain benefited more from the ensuing boom than any other country. A vibrant publishing industry, a thriving tournament circuit, and the odd incentive from financier Jim Slater, sowed the seeds of the UK's advancement to number two chess nation behind the USSR in little over a decade. My first tournament in 1973, as a seven year old in Liverpool, had an impressive 2,000-plus junior participants (including twins, Angela and Maria Eagle, who would later make their mark in Labour politics). A couple of years later, a student from the University of Sheffield, Tony Miles, became Britain's first grandmaster and he would be joined by several others — often, although by no means exclusively, Oxbridge graduates.

Alas, the archaic structure of the British Chess Federation has never evolved to reflect this changed status. And, while the International Olympic Committee and most governments recognise chess as a sport, the UK does not, thus starving the game of public funds. By the 1990s, signs of malaise were evident in the contraction of tournaments. Grandmaster John Nunn ominously predicted "the decline of British chess" in a much derided article. Sadly, his grim vision, that we would be surpassed by the likes of France, proved prescient. The scorn heaped on his conclusions was woefully misplaced.

Podium finishes are a distant memory for the current international team, although England still has a ranking among the top dozen nations. More worrying is the lack of youth, a direct consequence of the hazardous nature of chess professionalism in the UK. Britain's number one, Michael Adams, is in his mid-40s, whereas your writer (ranked third nationally) is the oldest player in the world top 100. On the plus side, David Howell (24) has risen on excellent results, but others are needed.

At the junior level, there are a few fine initiatives, including the Yes2Chess International Challenge and the Delancey UK Schools Chess Challenge, which both attract tens of thousands of eager participants. The Tradewise Gibraltar Chess Festival, the London Chess Classic, and the latest newcomer, the PokerStars Isle of Man International Chess Tournament are, in very different ways, top-class events.

> The UK government does not recognise chess as a sport, so starving it of funds

Two factors have made the chess world a much more competitive place in the past few decades. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union spawned 15 new states — many with a strong chess tradition — and success in the international arena has become a matter of pride and honour. The federation of Armenia, which has earned a remarkable three gold medals at the biennial Chess Olympiad, is headed by Serzh Sargsyan, the country's president. It would be hard to imagine David Cameron in a similar role. Likewise, its chess opponent Azerbaijan has a formidable team.

Of far greater significance, however, is the growth of chess in new markets. The rise of India and China has mirrored their increasing economic clout. Chess in India, the game's birthplace, was the preserve of a section of the middle class. This changed the moment the brilliant Viswanathan Anand, who would later win five world championships, began making headlines.

The advance of China has been even more startling. In Maoist times, chess was almost unknown, being eclipsed by *xiangqi*, China's own ancient board game. Losing to a Chinese person seemed so preposterous to westerners that when, in Buenos Aires 1978, Dutch grandmaster Jan Hein Donner was routed by Liu Wenzhe, it caused a minor sensation. Thirty-eight years later, a new generation of young, talented Chinese players took the gold medals at the Olympiad in Tromso, Norway — an incomparably greater achievement — without eyebrows being raised. It can surely only be a short time before one of them wins the world championship.

Africa remains the undeveloped continent, but there are signs that this is changing thanks to charitable initiatives such as the Kasparov Chess Foundation Africa. Kenya has quadrupled its federation membership, schools programmes have begun in South Africa, Tanzania and elsewhere, and official tournaments are springing up.

The game's world governing body, Fide, has numerous problems, not least a fast-deteriorating balance sheet, but the future for chess itself is bright.

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Chequered board can improve children's lives

Thinking skills: chess 'equally challenges the minds of girls and boys' — Dreamstime

Education Supporters say the game teaches logical thinking and concentration, says *John Thornhill*

Many claims are made for the benefits of teaching chess to children, but they are probably best summed up by the slogan of the US Chess Federation: "Chess Makes Kids Smart".

As teachers and parents battle with the distractions of electronic games, social media and attention deficit disorder among younger generations, the supporters of chess education argue that it is a great way for children to learn about fair competition, mental discipline, planning and perseverance.

In a much-cited paper, Peter Dauvergne, a Canadian academic and chess master, argued: "Chess is an especially effective teaching tool. It can equally challenge the minds of girls and boys, gifted and average, athletic and non-athletic, rich and poor. It can teach children the importance of planning and the consequences of decisions. "It can further teach how to concentrate, how to win and lose gracefully, how to think logically and efficiently, and how to make tough and abstract decisions."

There have been many studies attempting to quantify the benefits of teaching chess to children but the validity of their conclusions has — in some cases — been weakened by narrow sample sizes and confirmation biases. Some educationalists remain unconvinced as to why scarce resources should be devoted to teaching chess as opposed to playing a musical instrument, painting, or studying a foreign language. Is it not the case the kinds of kids who excel at chess are naturally academic anyway?

Malcolm Pein, the chief executive of a chess education charity, has experience of teaching chess to underprivileged, often immigrant, children in state schools in London's Tower Hamlets. He is so convinced of its broader educational benefits that in 2010 he founded Chess in Schools and Communities to promote the cause. "The results were astonishing. I realised that chess has the power to improve children's lives dramatically," he says.

His charity now helps teach chess to 25,000 children in 302 state schools around the UK. The aim is to teach 30 hours of chess in the six years of primary schooling, amounting to 0.45 per cent of classroom time. "I think that is quite a good use of time," Mr Pein says.

He argues that gender, age, and formal educational achievement are largely immaterial in chess. But it is important to teach chess to everyone rather than leaving it up to a self-selecting group of children just to turn up. "If you run a chess club in a mixed school, 30 boys and two girls will turn up. But when you teach chess in the classroom, it just becomes a fun subject."

One of the countries with the most developed mandatory chess education programmes is Armenia. This former Soviet republic of 3m has a long and distinguished association with the game. One of Armenia's national heroes is Tigran Petrosian, the fearsome former world champion and the master of hedgehog-like defence.

Armenia introduced mandatory chess education for students in 2011. Children are taught chess two hours a week for two years. But the chess culture spreads far beyond the classroom, with weekly chess magazines and television programmes aimed at children.

Serzh Sargsyan, the country's president and also head of the Armenia's Chess Federation, sees chess not just as an educational benefit but as a means of developing a sense of national identity. "We don't want people to know Armenia just for the earthquake and the genocide. We would rather it was famous for its chess," he has said.

Today, Armenia has one of the largest number of grandmasters per capita in the world, including Levon Aronian, the seventh-highest ranked player.

On a visit to Armenia last year, Magnus Carlsen, the reigning world champion, praised the education programme. "I think Armenia's experience of teaching chess in schools is a great example for the whole world," he said.

Other countries, such as the US, Mexico, Norway and Brazil have also been experimenting with extensive chess education programmes. Earlier this year, the Spanish parliament achieved rare unanimity in passing a non-binding resolution urging the government to make chess part of the curriculum in the country's schools. Parliamentarians cited a study, conducted by the universities of Girona and Lleida, on the educational benefits of chess. The report concluded that children who played the game recorded higher maths and reading scores. One Basque politician described the move as a "strategic investment in the future".

One legendary chess player who makes a persuasive case for the broader benefits of playing the game is Garry Kasparov in his book *How Life Imitates Chess*, a guide to "mastering the strategic and emotional skills to navigate life's toughest challenges".

However, when the former world champion plunged into Russian politics he found real life can often resemble poker more than chess. In chess, both sides start more or less equal (in practice at grandmaster level white wins 29 per cent of the time compared with 18 per cent for black). The rules are clear and the game is an exercise in logic, judgment and intuition. In poker, cards are dealt at random, bluff is as important as strategy and there is no predicting what the other players will do.

"Lies and hypocrisy do not survive for long on the chessboard," the German world champion Emanuel Lasker once observed. If only the real world were as straightforward.

Game, net and match Websites for would-be players proliferate

Computer programmers were quick to exploit the potential of the emerging worldwide web, launching the first chess server as long ago as 1992.

Now entrepreneurs are developing sites that are more commercial and visually appealing as they start to take more notice.

For instance, Mark Levitt, a South African internet entrepreneur now in the San Francisco's Bay Area, is adding gaming bells and whistles to his ChessCube site to make the online game more appealing to teenagers reared on electronic rewards, and perhaps with reason. Mark Jordan, spokesman for the English Chess Federation, says: "Given the choice between a draughty church hall or playing on the internet, lots of people choose to stay home."

But in contrast, Adam Raoof of Chess England, who organises tournaments in London, says he has seen record numbers at live events. Kings Place, in London's King's Cross, hosted its third annual tournament in July and more than 260 players competed for £2,200 of prizes.

Some websites worth visiting

Chesstempo.com
This helps players to improve their game and is popular with connoisseurs because of its tactical training tools.

With a database of more than 2m games, it allows you to play against other users, and can be used in many languages, including German, Greek, Spanish and English. Subscription is needed for more sophisticated features.

Chessgames.com
Chessgames.com is a well-established online community site that is free to use, but charges premium members for its advanced features. More than 200,000 members are signed up. The site is great for watching and commenting on games in progress and it has a lively online café. Features include correspondence matches, a database of more than 700,000 games and, for advanced players, the chance to join global teams to play online against grandmasters.

Chessbomb.com
This is an English-language site that lets you watch games online with live computer analysis. It also offers events news and results.

ChessBase.com
The online arm of ChessBase was founded in 1986. It is a slick shopfront for selling the company's database of historic games and its tutorials (*see company profile, page 2*). It also offers other services including chess news, while its sister site, Playchess.com, broadcasts live tournaments and says it is used by 20,000 online players every day.

All to play for: a game on ChessBase.com

The site also offers one-minute, five-minute and 15-minute games and the chance to watch live games played by others.

Chess.com
With 12.8m members, Chess.com, is ranked the most-visited chess site by Alexa.com, a web analytics company. Based in California it was launched in 2007 and is a "freemium" site: the main features are free, but members pay for advertisement-free access and increased use. Unlimited access costs $99 a year. You can learn, play with other members or against a computer. You can also watch videos, study openings and take part in online tournaments, on PCs or mobile devices.

Chessdom.com
Chessdom.com is a busy multilingual site that is largely focused on news. It details upcoming tournaments and provides a comprehensive results service.

Ross Tieman

Film-makers take cue from great game

Cinema

The thriller genre and chess make a perfect match, writes *Adam Jezard*

Checkmates: Humphrey Bogart and his wife Lauren Bacall — Archive Photos/Getty Images

Chess and thriller movies have much in common: duplicitous moves, complex plots and strong, often domineering, women, among them.

Each has a cast of supporting characters whose next moves are hard to judge, while just how well screen heroes and villains play the game is still a mark of how intellectually superior and ruthless their characters are.

The reason that the thriller and the game go so well together may perhaps be helped by the fact that many genre film-makers and writers love the game.

One real-life proponent of featuring the game in his films was tough-guy actor Humphrey Bogart. According to various websites, including Chess.com, Bogart was "an excellent player" who as a youngster honed his tough-guy act and his chess skills by hustling nickels and dimes from other players in New York's parks and on Coney Island.

Bogie once played Samuel Reshevsky, a US grandmaster, to a draw in a simultaneous set of matches. And legend has it that it was the star himself who insisted that Rick Blaine, the world-weary bar owner in the 1942 classic *Casablanca*, should be a chess fan, playing games against crooked police chief Claude Rains and by mail in the course of the film (the first time we see Rick he is puzzling over a chessboard).

Cult film-maker Stanley Kubrick, another native of New York, would say in later interviews that, like Bogart, he had been a young chess hustler. His 1956 thriller *The Killing* features a scene in a chess club, where would-be robber Sterling Hayden overhears the manager calling someone a "patzer" — slang for being a poor chess player.

Bogart has another tough-guy link to chess via his portrayal of private eye Philip Marlow in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Raymond Chandler's "shop-soiled Sir Galahad", as the writer called his hero, also enjoyed solving chess problems in the original stories. In the 1978 remake, Robert Mitchum's Marlowe is even seen playing out moves on a miniature board while on stake-out.

Chandler, in turn, was friendly with James Bond creator Ian Fleming. Whether the two played chess together is not recorded, but the 1963 version of the latter's *From Russia With Love* transforms the evil Spectre organisation's chief planner into a grand chess master, who in the opening scenes hastens an opponent's demise on the chequered board so he can hurry to super-baddie Blofeld's ship, there to plan an embarrassing end for 007. Intriguingly, stills from the new James Bond film, *Spectre*, feature star Daniel Craig looking menacingly over a chessboard.

By the 1960s, chess in thrillers had moved from being the game of choice for the world's cleverest villains to being a means of seduction.

Director Norman Jewison's acclaimed *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) features a chess scene in which the sexual tension between actors Faye Dunaway and Steve McQueen, cast respectively as an insurance investigator and a criminal mastermind, fairly fizzles as they try to outwit one another. The Dunaway character uses her skimpy outfit to distract the normally enigmatic McQueen, who clumsily castles while trying to keep his mind on the game, as composer Michel Legrand's sensual score sends the viewers' senses reeling.

"Do you play?" he asks her. "Try me," is her devastating reply, as they try to entrap each other physically, emotionally, legally and on the chessboard.

Other thrillers from the era using a chess motif include *Deadlier Than The Male*, a 1967 update of the Bulldog Drummond thrillers of the 1920s and 30s. This has the archetypal British hero (played by Richard Johnson) outwitting the villains in a finale that involves a giant mechanical chess set which he uses first as a hiding place, then as a means to crush the chief villain to death.

Bogie's former director and friend John Huston's 1973 British thriller *The Mackintosh Man* has convict Paul Newman and a Soviet spy Slade (Ian Bannen) playing matches while they wait for the gang that broke them out of jail to help them escape from the UK.

Newman's character, Rearden, is revealed to be an undercover agent trying to capture the prison-breaking gang, and a game of cat-and-mouse ensues.

"I have a pretty good idea of how your mind works from our chess games," Slade tells Rearden, as he tries to use his knowledge of his opponent's playing habits to gambit his way to freedom.

There are films in other genres that have used chess imagery well, notably Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) — in which some fans say wayward computer Hal cheats — and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001).

In science fiction, *Star Wars* (1977; now known as *Episode VI: A New Hope*) has giant Wookie Chewbacca becoming angry when he loses a computer game that has chess-like pieces to mini-bot R2-D2 ("Let the Wookie win," simpers C-3PO), while 1960s series *Star Trek* boasts three-dimensional chess (invented in the 19th century).

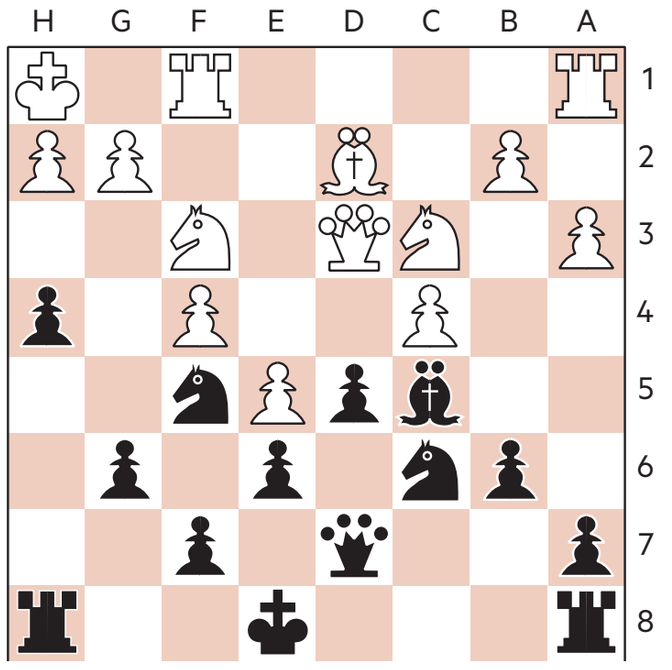
In 1971's post-apocalypse zombie film *The Omega Man*, Charlton Heston's character, who thinks he is the last human alive, plays chess with a bust of Caesar to assuage his loneliness as the creatures outside his fortress howl for his blood.

The thriller, however, seems a more natural home for the game, where the coldly calculating nature of the genre's characters and plots more convincingly mirrors the grand dramas of life, death and cunning planning that are played out on the chequered board.

Chess and thrillers, it seems, go together just like tea and sparkling cyanide.

Checkmates you should know 3: Mate involving bishop, sometimes attributed to Russian player Mark Taimanov

1...Ng3 + 2. hxg3 hg+ 3. Nh2 Rxh2++ (... denotes it is black's move).



Checkmates you should know 4: The double bishop sacrifice mate

1. Bxh7 + Kxh7, 2. Qh5 + Kg8, 3. Bxg7 Kxg7 4. Qg4+ Kh7 (if Kf6 then Qg5 ++), 5.Rf3 and black is powerless to stop white's next move of Rh3++ without catastrophic loss of material