



Wood Green Stutter

Simon Ansell reports from the opening 4NCL weekend

Divisions One and Two of the new 4NCL season took place at Sunningdale Park on the weekend of 3-4 November 2013.

Division One: Pool A

Wood Green have 20(!) Grandmasters registered in their squad and kicked off with a routine 7-1 demolition of newly-promoted BCM Dragons. On the Sunday they faced e2e4 in what promised to be a similar mismatch – according to Professor Elo’s probability tables, the average rating difference of 269 points would predict a 6.64-1.36 win for the defending champions.

e2e4 hadn’t just turned up for a lesson in statistics, though. The same squad made the Division One Promotion Pool last season and began setting their more illustrious opponents some surprising problems. On board one, Alexei Slavin outplayed David Howell in a main line Grünfeld.



David Howell

A.Slavin-D.Howell e2e4 vs. Wood Green



Grünfeld players are probably used to facing such a monster d-pawn that cuts their position in half, but it’s not to my taste. A few moves earlier, David should really have kept more influence in the centre of the board with ...d5, rather than ...a5 in response to White’s d4-d5 push.

19...f6

It’s hard to offer Black good advice here. The best the computer has is 19...xc3 20 e5 d6 21 g5 d7 22 f6, but this leaves the kingside worryingly bare and it’s unlikely Black will survive the inevitable onslaught.

20 e5 f5 21 fe1 d7 22 h4 h6 23 d2 c4 24 c1 h7 25 h5

White’s attack plays itself.

25...gxh5

25...g5 26 gxg5! was no improvement.

26 c2 g8 27 h4! f8

If the black rook had instead come to f8 to try and hold f5, White has many tempting options, but the most direct is invading on g6 with d3-g3.

28 g3 d7 29 xf5! exf5 30 xf5+ h8 31 e6

Both 31 d7 e7 32 xh5 and 31 xh5 would have won easily. The

text doesn’t spoil anything, but leaving the h-pawn on the board gives Black some vague counterplay.

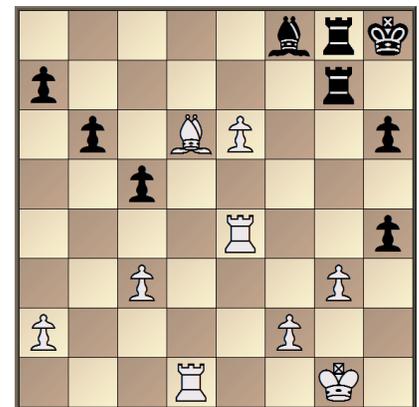
31...h4!

The only chance.

32 e4?

32 d7 hxg3 33 e4 gxf2+ 34 xf2 g2+ 35 f3 still wins, as does 32 e4, excluding the black queen from the game.

32...xd6! 33 xd6 xe4 34 xe4



34...hxg3?

After 34...xd6 35 d6 e8 36 hx4 ge7 White can’t hold the e-pawn and this would have given Black serious drawing chances in the rook endgame. The point is 37 hxh6+ (or 37 e4 g7 with ...f6 to follow) 37...g7.

35 f4?!

Not a bad move, but the obvious 35 e5! would have won on the spot.

35...xd6 36 d6 e7?!

36...g4, preventing f4-f5, at least for the moment, would have required White to find the difficult 37 e3! to win. All of 37...e8 38 f5, 37...g7 38 d7+, and 37...xf4 38 e7 don’t help the defence.

37 f5 f8 38 d7 e8 39 e5?!

39 e7 f7 (or 39...g8 40 f6) 40 d8 wins trivially.

39...f6 40 e7?

40 e5, to either play d8 or double on the seventh rank, depending on Black’s response, or 40 g2, approaching with the king, are both still easily good enough.

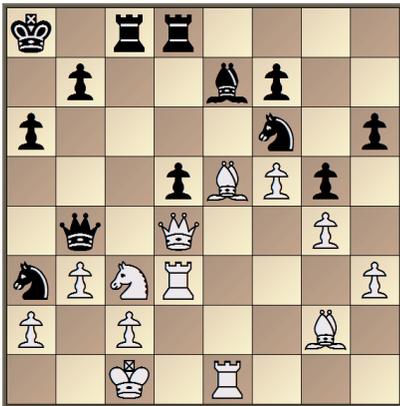
40...g8 41 g2 a6 ½-½

♖he1! would have given White overwhelming threats on the e-file, and 22...♖b4 23 b3 ♖a3+ 24 ♖b2 doesn't give Black any real attacking chances.

22...♖b4 23 b3 ♖a3+ 24 ♖c1 ♖c8? 25 ♖e1?

25 ♖e5+! ♖a8 26 ♖xf6 ♖xf6 27 ♖xd5 wins something. With the king on b8 here (i.e if White had played 25 ♖xf6 and not inserted the check), Black could play 27...♖b5 with a playable position, but now this fails to 28 ♖b6+, winning the exchange.

25...♖ed8 26 ♖e5+ ♖a8 27 ♖d4



27...♖c4!

A good move, giving White concrete problems to solve.

28 bxc4??

28 ♖xf6 ♖a3+ 29 ♖d1 ♖b2+ 30 ♖e2 is complicated, but not bad for White. The resource 30...♖c5 31 ♖b5! may have been what Keti missed when 31...♖xd4 (31...axb5 32 ♖xb2 wins a piece) 32 ♖xa3 ♖xf6 33 ♖xd5 leads to an endgame where White has an extra pawn and the black knight is entombed on b2. Strangely, my computer only gives White a half-pawn advantage here!

28...dxc4 ½-½

Now Black is winning material, and offered a draw which was accepted. I find this a strange decision, as it would be virtually impossible to lose after something like 29 ♖xd8 ♖xd8 30 ♖xd8+ ♖xd8 31 ♖e3 ♖c5.

So all eight games were drawn and e2e4 pulled off a remarkable result – perhaps the biggest upset in the history of the 4NCL! Congratulations to them, but as the snippets above show it could have been even better. Wood Green were exceptionally lucky to draw this match – only Lawrence Trent came close to winning his game and even he eventually had to defend a worse rook endgame. I don't know if manager Brian Smith uses a 'hairdryer' treatment, à la Sir Alex Ferguson, but it would be no surprise to see some 'squad rotation' from the champions come the next 4NCL weekend. In particular Bogdan Lalic and Jon Speelman took early draws in positions where they had reasonable chances of outplaying their

weaker opponents – decisions they may quickly have been regretting given the course of the match.

Of course, if e2e4 fail to qualify from Pool A for the Promotion Pool, this result will be wiped from the records and Wood Green will be able to play for the Championship with a clean slate – a major flaw in the current system, in my opinion. Indeed it's hard to think of a sensible alternative to the pool system with 16 teams in the top division, but personally I never understood the logic in moving to 16 from the old 12 team all-play-all in the first place.

e2e4 will have different ideas, however, especially considering that they won their Saturday match too. Guildford 2 outrated them by a mere 79 point average, so the 5-3 victory was never likely to be a problem. Peter Sowray demolished Graeme Buckley's queenside in double-quick time.

G.Buckley-P.Sowray

Guildford II vs. e2e4

Grünfeld Defence

1 d4 ♖f6 2 ♖f3 g6 3 c4 ♖g7 4 ♖c3 d5 5 cxd5 ♖xd5 6 ♖d2

I've ventured the Grünfeld myself exactly once in my 25-year chess career. Needing to win with Black against the super-solid Russian GM Igor Naumkin, I noticed that he nearly always played 6 ♖d2 here. A quick bit of research showed me that this line is considered completely harmless, so I was able to easily get a dynamic position with no problems at all and went on to win a nice game.

6...0-0

I played 6...c5. Both moves are perfectly good for Black.

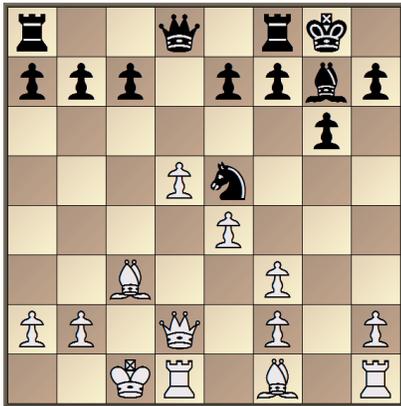


Ketevan Arakhmia-Grant

7 e4 ♖xc3 8 ♙xc3 ♗g4 9 ♚d2 ♙xf3
10 ♗xf3 ♖c6 11 d5

White must play this now as 11 0-0-0 e5! 12 d5 ♗h4! is very pleasant for Black.

11...♗e5 12 0-0-0



12...c5!?

I'm not sure this is objectively the best

move, but it pays off spectacularly. Black intends to ram the b-pawn down White's throat and now threatens to take on f3. If 12...♗xf3?? immediately, then 13 ♗f4 and the knight is trapped. Instead, 12...c6, challenging the white centre, looks normal.

13 ♙e2 ♗c7 14 h4?!

Anyone that's faced the Sicilian Dragon a few times will know how dangerous it is to leave the fianchettoed dark-squared bishop on the board. I don't know why Graeme rejected 14 f4! ♗d7 15 ♙xg7 ♗xg7 16 h4 when it looks to me like White's attack is more likely to get there first.

14...b5 15 ♗c2?!

Perhaps lacking his sense of danger. 15 ♙a5 is suggested by my computer and holds up the black attack for a while, but looks a bit artificial to me. A sensible and solid alternative was 15 f4 again, when 15...♗c4 16 ♙xc4 ♙xc3 17 ♗xc3 ♗xf4+ 18 ♗d2 ♗xd2+ 19 ♗xd2 bxc4 20 ♙c3 leads to a rook endgame where only White

can be better.

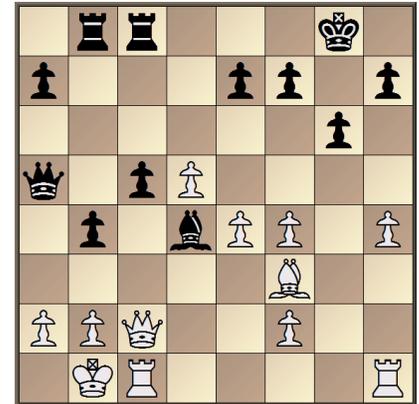
15...♗ab8

The immediate 15...b4 was also good.

16 ♙b1 b4 17 ♙d4

Very risky, but 17 ♙d2 c4 doesn't look too appealing either.

17...♗fc8 18 ♖c1 ♗a5 19 f4 ♗f3 20 ♙xf3 ♙xd4



21 ♗d3?

Attempting to stop ...c4, but this allows a devastating tactical shot. Redirecting the bishop with 21 ♙e2! would have achieved the same thing while keeping everything protected. Black can take a pawn with 21...♙xf2, but 22 h5 will give White more than enough counterplay.

21...♙xb2! 22 ♖c4

After 22 ♙xb2 c4! 23 ♖xc4 ♖xc4 24 ♗xc4 ♗a3+ 25 ♙c2 (if 25 ♙b1 or 25 ♙a1 then 25...b3 is curtains) 25...♗xf3 the white position is falling apart.

22...♙c3 23 e5 ♗a3 0-1

Mate is inevitable.

If e2e4 are unable to maintain their excellent start, Wood Green's nearest challengers in Pool A are likely to be the solid Barbican team. They started with two wins in close matches, over Cambridge and Cheddleton. David Moskovic came close to an IM norm playing for Cambridge last season, but has his work cut out for a repeat performance after the following round one disaster.

M.Turner-D.Moskovic

Barbican vs. Cambridge

c3 Sicilian

1 e4 c5 2 c3 ♗f6 3 e5 ♗d5 4 g3

A favourite of the Lithuanian GM Eduardas Rozentalis. Not the most fashionable or even the most testing choice, but Matthew Turner has never really played highly theoretical lines.

4...♗c6 5 ♙g2 e6 6 ♗f3 d6 7 exd6 ♙xd6 8 0-0 0-0 9 d4 cxd4 10 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 11 ♗xd4 ♙d7?!

11...♗c7! is the normal move here. The game might continue 12 ♗d2 ♙d7 13 ♗e4 ♙e5 14 ♗d3 ♙c6 which is roughly equal,



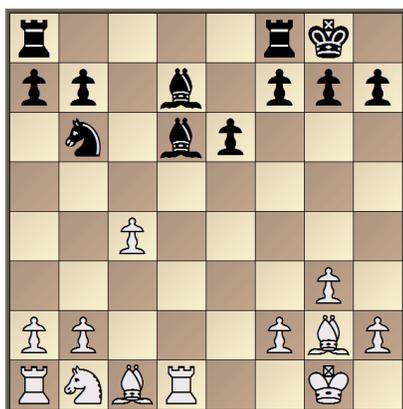
Matthew Turner

as in Morozevich-Svidler, Sochi 2005.

12 c4 ♖b6

The only move that doesn't lose a piece.

13 ♗xb6 ♜xb6 14 ♜d1



14...♜xc4??

14...♜e5! 15 c5 ♜a4! 16 ♜e1 ♜d7 17 ♜xb7 ♜ad8 18 c6 ♜b8 might actually be okay for Black, but I doubt if it's enough to make 11...♜d7 catch on. Instead 14...♜e7 also doesn't lose a piece, but 15 ♜xb7 ♜ab8 16 ♜a6 should be better for White.

15 ♜f1 ♜ac8

15...♜a4 16 ♜d4 b5 (or 16...♜ac8 17 ♜c3, as in the game) 17 ♜xc4 ♜c5 18 ♜g4 bxc4 19 ♜xc4 wins a piece too.

16 ♜c3! 1-0

One of Black's bishops will fall.

Division One: Pool B

Last season's runners-up, Guildford, are favourites in Pool B. Their squad has been strengthened by the addition of Gawain Jones and the young Dutch Grandmaster Robin van Kampen. Gawain was held by

Ameet Ghasi on Saturday as Guildford thrashed Warwickshire Select 7-1, but I liked the finish to his round two game against Chris Dorrington of Barbican II.

G.Jones-C.Dorrington

Guildford vs. Barbican II

Nimzo-Indian Defence

1 d4 ♜f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♜c3 ♜b4 4 ♗c2 d5 5 cxd5 exd5 6 ♜g5 h6 7 ♜h4 ♜bd7

Not the most popular move but it seems to be playable, if slightly passive. Of the alternatives, 7...c5 is the most common and has been regularly discussed at the top level, including in the 1993 Kasparov-Short match.

8 e3 0-0 9 ♜d3 c5



10 dxc5

Gawain chooses a simple plan of playing against the isolated queen's pawn. The text does justify Black's knight being on d7 though, so I wonder if simple development with 10 ♜ge2 or 10 ♜f3 might objectively be stronger, when it could be argued that Black would prefer his knight on c6.

10...♜xc5 11 ♜ge2 ♜e6 12 0-0 ♜c8 13 ♜ad1 ♗e7 14 ♜h7+ ♗h8 15 ♜f5



15...g5

Loosening, but the pin was annoying.

16 ♜g3 ♜ce4 17 ♜xe4 ♜xe4 18 ♜e5+ f6 19 ♜d4 a6 20 f3 ♜xc3 21 ♜xc3 ♜g7

Without doing anything in particular, Gawain has secured a slight advantage. The



Gawain Jones



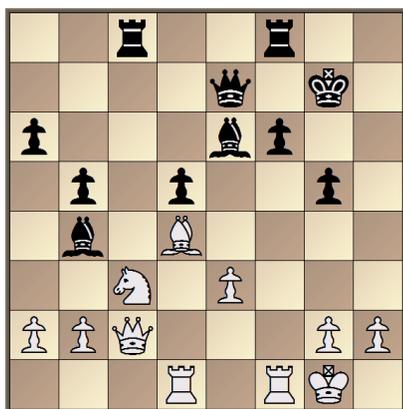
Peter Wells

d4-bishop is the best piece on the board and should it be exchanged, Black risks falling into an unpleasant bad bishop vs. good knight position. Gawain now begins to probe Black's slight kingside weaknesses.

22 f4! b5

Black is devoid of active plans and this move is as good as any.

23 fxg5 hxg5



24 ♖f5!?

An interesting decision that has the desired effect. 24 ♖f2, transferring the queen to the kingside and possibly hinting at h2-h4, was a natural alternative.

24...♗h6?!

Black should have taken the bait: 24...♗xf5 25 ♖xf5 ♗xc3 26 ♖xg5+ ♗h7 27 ♖h5+ when it's not clear to me that White has any more than a draw.

25 ♖f2 ♗xc3?!

This move gives White a stable advantage – just compare the quality of the two bishops. Perhaps seeking complications with 25...f5 was the best practical chance.

26 bxc3 ♖c6 27 ♖df1 ♗c8 28 ♖b3 ♖d8

The black position is full of holes and Gawain now opens another front on the queenside.

29 a4! bxa4 30 ♖xa4 ♖e6

If 30...♗d7 31 ♖a1! with c3-c4 to follow, and the pressure on the f6-pawn will be too much.

31 ♖f3 ♖f7 32 ♖h3+ ♗g7 33 ♖f5 ♗g6

White to play and win!

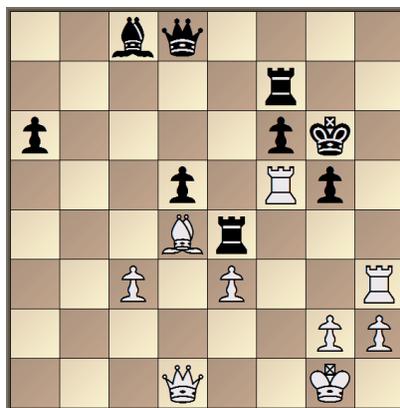
34 ♖d1!

A very pretty finish, and the only clear way to victory! Other moves are

answered by 34...♖e4.

34...♖e4

34...♗xf5 35 ♖f3+ ♗g6 36 ♖h5+ ♗f5 37 ♖f3+ ♗e4 38 ♖f2 will be mate in three.

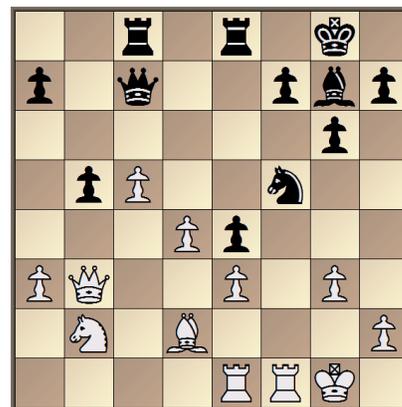


35 ♖xg5+! fxg5 36 ♖h5+ 1-0

Jutes of Kent, fresh from their European Club Cup adventures in Israel, were convincing winners over Wood Green II on Saturday; but a typical Sunday team hang-over may have affected the team in round two, when they were lucky not to be white-washed by White Rose, who have started the season strongly after their excellent third place finish last season.

H.Gretarsson-P.Wells

Jutes vs. White Rose



24...♗xg3!

24...♗xd4!? was an interesting alternative.

25 hxg3 ♖xg3+ 26 ♗h1 ♖h3+

Here Peter took the draw by perpetual check, but the surprising 26...♖e6! gives winning chances. To stop the crude threat of ...g5 and ...♖h6 mate, White has to play 27 ♖e2 (both 27 ♖d1 ♖h3+ 28 ♗g1 ♖xc5! 29 dxc5 ♖e5 with mate to follow, and 27 d5 ♖e5 don't help), after which 27...♗xd4! 28 ♖g2 ♖h3+ 29 ♗g1 ♖xc5 leaves Black with four pawns for the piece and a continuing attack. My thanks to Guildford captain Roger Emerson for pointing out this neat opportunity.

27 ♗g1 ♖g3+ 28 ♗h1 ♖h3+ ½-½

Elsewhere in Pool B, there were a couple of minor surprises. Warwickshire Select defeated my own team Blackthorne Russia. Blackthorne were disappointing last year, and our poor form seems to have continued into the new season. We were weakened by the absence of Harriet Hunt, who unfortunately had to withdraw at short notice due to illness; but on the other hand Warwickshire were also inconvenienced – my prospective opponent, Li Wu, was also unable to play Sunday's game and I found myself facing their reserve player Andrew Baruch, who was forced to travel at short notice on the morning of the game. Likewise, newly-promoted South Wales Dragons scored a good win over the higher-rated Wood Green second team, with James Cobb defeating Andrew Greet on top board and Megan Owens winning despite a 200-point deficit on board 8.

With the exception of Guildford, this half of the draw seems to be wide open and all of the teams will harbour ambitions of qualifying for the Championship Pool.

Rounds three and four will take place on 13-14 January at Staverton Park. See you there!