Barbican Triumph Again!

FM Jonathan Rogers explains their success in the 4NCL Rapidplay

On Saturday 29 September, the fifth 4NCL team rapidplay took place. At least, it was the fifth by my reckoning, though the 4NCL website portrays the event as being the third. The difference is explained thus. The same 4NCL Board set up a team rapidplay event, at the same venue, over a weekend in July 2007 and again in July 2008, but entries on the latter occasion were very low and no event took place in 2009. Then it restarted in 2010, at the same venue but now in October (which was thought to be a better time). Also, in this relaunched version, the team event was over on one day and on the following day an individual rapidplay event took place. Some seem to regard the relaunched event in 2010 as having been the first team event, making the subsequent events in October 2011 and September 2012 the second and third. For me, the event in 2007 is still the first.

Why must the chess world be like this? In any event, Barbican 4NCL won the event in 2012, and this was either their second win in three years or their third win in five attempts, depending on your point of view. It might be observed that the relaunch in 2010 attracted by far the highest number of entries, and the second highest number of entries had been in the inaugural (possibly) event in 2007. So in both cases there were substantial drops in entrants in the immediate years following the new/renewed event. I hope that this will not inspire the idea to relaunch the event again in 2014!

In 2012 there were fourteen teams, of four players each (though each team may nominate up to two reserves). The majority of those who play the team event on the Saturday stay on to try their luck in the individual competition, and this makes financial sense in so far as the entry fee for the team event also covers all individuals in the team who then play the individual event the next day. The main exception tends to be the two Barbican teams, most of whom play the first event only. Perhaps we only function as teams and have lost our individuality; and/or perhaps too many of us have partners. (I don't mean that having a partner robs one of individuality. Perish the thought! But it can be easier to get a pass for the day if one is only "doing it for the team". Teamwork! – what partner could refuse to understand that?)

As with the traditional 4NCL, anyone can make a team from anywhere – it is not restricted to recognised clubs, as are the ECF events. Effectively all one needs is one car driver who can take other nearby players to Milton Keynes by 1pm on a Saturday.

It is an amiable event, with a bookstall, refreshments and free internet access to use between rounds. Just one regret this year, besides the relatively low number of entries altogether, was that there were no female competitors, and (I think) only five juniors. Having got used to the traditional 4NCL events, which require a woman player in each team in the first division, and a woman or junior in each team in the second division, this was disappointing. I think that entrants composed half of women or two-thirds or more of juniors should be incentivised by reduced entry fees.

Some would disagree. There are others who wish rather to see more GMs play both days, which would mean higher entry fees to fund higher prizes. (It would be difficult to fund a sufficiently attractive necessary prize fund from the entries as things presently stand; for the second year running, the 4NCL made a loss from running this event even with a relatively low prize fund.) But I am not so sure why attracting the GMs should be a *priority*. It is not as though anyone expects this event to rival the well established British Rapidplay in Leeds in terms of strength. It is also not inconsistent for the 'traditional' 4NCL to want to encourage GM entry and for the 4NCL rapidplay to be less so concerned. I am less sure that club players (graded, say, under 180) so greatly value the opportunity to play a GM at rapidplay as opposed to a full length game. In rapidplay, the 'interesting experience' can be rather shortlived, and even if one gets a good position the odds are still that the club player will blunder it away.

Besides which, the GM-less field of 2012 was still very competitive and players graded under 160 at both standard and rapid rates of play would tend to struggle. Of the fourteen teams in 2012, one half of them averaged around 200 on rapidplay grades. But it is surely good that the top names do not seem wholly unbeatable. In two of Barbican's five individual game losses – Mark Ferguson (227) against Paul Talsma (203), and myself (217) against John Reid (193) – the victors earned their points perfectly convincingly. In our biggest reverse, the defeat of John Cox (233) by Kevin Williamson (179), our player had become frustrated when playing Black in a staid opening and could have no complaints when he lost from an equal ending.

One important feature is that the time control (using digital clocks) is incremental; one starts with 10 minutes but gains 10 seconds per move. This may sound like a cross between blitz and rapidplay, but my

*Barbican's star player,
FM Matt Piper*

experience is that it is much closer to the latter (and indeed the games are accepted for rapidplay grading). It is certainly very hard to blitz someone who gets an extra ten seconds per move (some moves may be obviously forced), and if the weaker player does manage to get a winning position, he has (in my view) a better chance of converting it. Generally this time control discourages unduly risky play from a balanced position, at least if the position allows for a conservative alternative. Another feature of the time control is that there seem to be virtually no end of game disputes, and I think that this contributes to the amiability of the event.

As for the competition itself, Barbican 4NCL started as top seeds by some distance. Second seeds were RSJ (Alan Merry, Ian Snape, Paul Talsma and Andrew Mayhew). They were the only ones to put Barbican in trouble in round four, after Talsma's good win over Ferguson had given them a 2-0 lead. However, Barbican survived the tie when Matt Piper won on board one against one of the five juniors, Alan Merry, and John Cox won one of those 'good but apparently unwinnable' positions against Ian Snape. This felt like the pivotal point of the tournament and when we played our next nearest pursuers, Sons of Anarchy (defending champions from 2011), Barbican ran out 4-0 winners.

This effectively left the rest of the field fighting for second place, which RSJ took by beating Kings Head in a close match in the last round. Kings Head still finished third because Sons of Anarchy finished the day by very nearly losing 4-0 (instead they lost 3-1) to Barbican 4NCL's second team as well. The prize for the best team averaging under 175 was won deservedly by Leighton Buzzard, who spent much of the day near the top boards.

One might have assumed that, with IM Mark Ferguson on board four, Barbican's key winning ingredient would be strength in depth. But in fact, both in 2010 and in 2012, it was all about Matthew Piper winning virtually every game convincingly, and John Cox also winning most of his games in whatever way seems to work. Their team mates on boards three and four just make respectable plus scores of their own. Matt's true *piece de resistance* had been in 2010 (the first, or arguably third, team rapidplay event) when he made 8.5/9 against opposition that included GMs William Watson, Gawain Jones and Tony Kosten. This 270-odd performance was of course a bit special. Nowadays he is just graded 245 (!) at rapidplay. But he bears it well, and slightly exceeded that level in 2012. They might have to ban him from playing too, as well as increase the prize fund, if they really want to attract GMs to the 4NCL rapidplay.

Matt's secret, it seems, is to play blitz games online shortly before an event. This both trains his tactical eye, and (more importantly, I think) helps to heighten his sense of the need for co-ordination. Both traits were in evidence when he beat the two players who, the following day, took the top places in the individual competition:
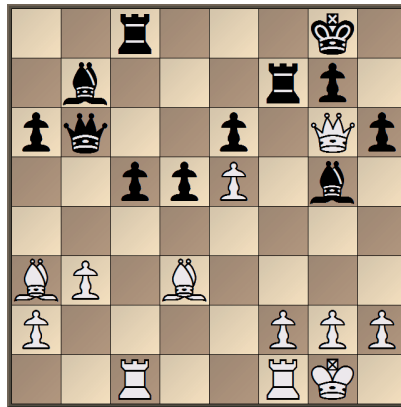
27 ♕h7+ ♔f8 28 ♕h8+ ♔e7 29 ♕xc8! ♗xc8 30 ♗xc5+ ♕xc5 31 ♖xc5 ♗d7 32 ♗xa6 and 1-0 some 23 moves later.

Round six, but Matt is still very alert. They say it is wrong to analyse a rapid game, so you will find instead merely some superficial observations:

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 ♗b4+ 4 ♗d2 ♕e7 5 g3 ♘c6 6 ♗g2 ♗xd2+ 7 ♘bxd2 d6 8 0-0 a5 9 e4 e5 10 d5 ♘b8 11 ♘e1 h5!?

I imagine that not many would consider this move, but it looks well-timed when played after 11 ♘e1, because White has to consider how to meet the position threat of ...h4. Nor is it so very risky since White has no bishop to put on g5. As we are about to see, Black is still happy in principle to castle kingside.

12 h4

Natural, but this means that if White proceeds to play f2-f4, which would be a normal or even the main plan in such a position, he will now have a big hole on g4. With this advance being less attractive, White drifts over the next ten moves.

12...0-0 13 ♘d3 ♘a6 14 ♕e2 c6 15 f3 ♗d7 16 ♕e3 cxd5 17 exd5 b5 18 b3 bxc4 19 bxc4 ♗f5 20 ♘e4 ♗xe4 21 fxe4 ♘g4 22 ♕d2 ♕a7+ 23 ♘f2 ♕e3 24 ♕xe3 ♘xe3 25 ♖fc1 ♖fc8 26 ♖c3
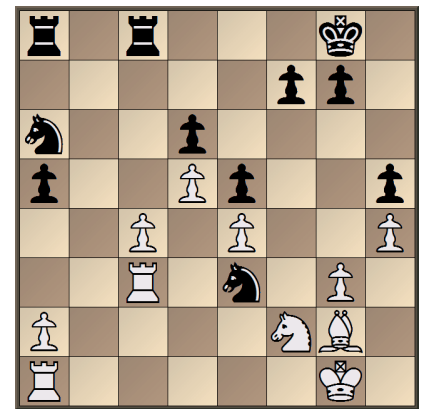
26...♘xg2!

I like this move a lot. It enables a rook to come to the b-file next move and keep control. True, 26...♘xc4 would win a pawn, since 27 ♗f1 ♘b6 keeps the extra pawn, and I rather imagine that many players would, pressed to decide, opt to take the pawn. One would have time to see that after 28 ♖xc8+ ♘xc8 29 ♗a6 ♖xa6 30 ♖c1 White would infiltrate with his rook and cause technical complications, but Black can play 30...♘e7 and slowly unravel (...♔f8, ...g6, ...♘g8-f6).

But this is just how good positions are lost at rapidplay. White can improve after 27 ♗f1 ♘b6 with 28 ♖c6!. Suddenly a number of black pieces look vulnerable and after 28...♖xc6 29 dxc6 White would be ready to play ♖b1-b7. It seems that there would then be no easy way for Black to challenge him on the b-file, and in fact trying to doing so seems to be a very bad idea: for example, 29...♘c7 30 ♖b1 ♖b8 actually leaves Black paralysed and White has time to play 31 ♘d1-e3 and then to c4 or d5. In fact White's position might win itself. Then the players would shake hands and White might offer the observation that perhaps he was a bit lucky that 28 ♖c6 turned out to be so good.

Nor did Matt take the time to find that exact sequence. It didn't feel right to cash in his advantage just yet, when winning the pawn would involve some retreat and not all his pieces are developed. The real trick is to make such self-denying decisions as 26...♘xg2 *quickly*! I think that this is where the online blitz training pays off.

27 ♔xg2 ♖ab8 28 ♔f3 ♖b4 29 ♖ac1 ♘c5

Black now has a very sure grip on the position and Piper calls the tune for the rest of the game.

30 ♖3c2 g6 31 g4 hxg4+ 32 ♔xg4 ♔g7 33 h5 ♖h8 34 hxg6 fxg6 35 ♔g3 ♖f8 36 ♖h1 ♖f4 37 ♖h4 g5 38 ♖xf4 exf4+ 39 ♔f3 ♖a4 40 ♔e2 ♖a3 41 ♔f1 ♖f3 42 ♔g2 ♖e3 43 ♖b2 ♘xe4 44 ♘xe4 ♖xe4 45 ♖b6 ♖xc4 46 ♖xd6 g4 47 ♖c6 ♖d4 48 d6 ♔f7 49 ♖a6 ♔e6 50 ♖xa5 ♖xd6 51 ♖g5 ♖d2+ 52 ♔g1 g3 53 a4 ♖a2 54 a5 ♔f6 0-1