

Top Four Pull Away in the 4NCL

The 4NCL returned in mid-January to its now regular venue of Hinckley Island. Lest any reader has formed an image of an inspirational idyll surrounded by water, the reality is that the 'island' is one surrounded by roads, the A5 and the M69. Thankfully that rarely prevents plenty of exciting and even creative chess taking place in the Barcelo hotel.

Rounds 3 and 4 saw the big three – defending champions Guildford, regular winners Wood Green, and rising challengers Cheddleton – begin to pull away from the rest of the teams. Indeed, Cheddleton and Guildford I now sit comfortably at the head of Pool A, with Wood Green I and a certain Guildford II leading the way in Pool B. Whether it is right that a second team can play such a pivotal role has long been a debatable issue in the 4NCL (it wouldn't be allowed in many leagues, e.g. the German Bundesliga), but one can rest assured that Guildford II vs. Wood Green I will be the clash of the fifth round. Will there be a non-grandmaster in sight?

Guildford I disposed 6½-1½ of Blackthorne Russia, who were missing our regular correspondent Simon Ansell, before taking out Barbican II 6-2. Any team which can field Nigel Short on board 3 and Mark Hebden on 5 must be pretty strong, and both scored 2/2, but even Guildford aren't immune to the odd upset, with Gawain Jones making an uncharacteristic blunder against Danny Gormally, while Dagne Ciuksyte was outplayed by England team-mate Kanwal

Bhatia. Romain Edouard, however, scored a couple of powerful victories, of which the following was particularly impressive.

R. Edouard-A. Hunt

Guildford I vs.

Blackthorne Russia

King's Indian Defence

1 d4 ♟f6 2 c4 g6 3 f3 ♟g7 4 e4 d6 5 ♟c3 0-0 6 ♟e3 ♟c6 7 ♟ge2 a6 8 ♖d2 ♜b8 9 ♜c1?

First played by Averbakh, it took a long time for this approach to catch on. However, it is now popular at grandmaster level and arguably the critical test of the Panno set-up. 9...♟d7 10 ♟d1



10...e6

The Woodbridge teacher and dangerous IM counters White's flexible approach with some flexibility of his own. Black has also been known to try:

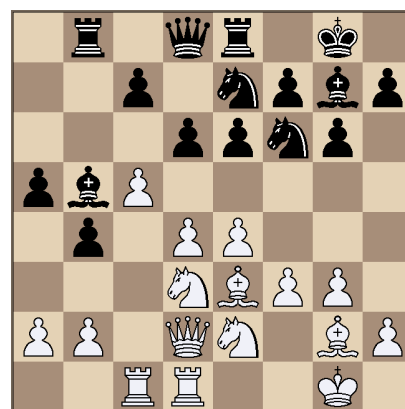
a) 10...e5?! looks natural, but White is in time to unravel his strangely placed pieces and take over: 11 d5 ♟e7 12 ♟f2 ♟e8 13 g3 c5 14 b4 b6 15 ♟g2 f5 16 0-0 ♟f6 17 ♜b1 was pleasantly better for the first player in Rowson-Arakhmiam Grant, British Championship, Scarborough 2004 – see the September 2004 *CHESS*.

b) 10...b5 11 c5 reveals one of White's main ideas, but after 11...♜e8!? 12 ♟f2 (12 d5 ♟e5 13 c6?! isn't so effective: 13...♟c8 14 ♟f4 e6 sees Black breaking to take over the centre) 12...dxc5 13 ♜xc5 e5 14 d5 ♟e7 15 ♟d3 c6 Black enjoyed decent counterplay in Caruana-Jones, European Championship, Plovdiv 2012.

11 ♟f2 b5 12 c5 ♜e8 13 ♟d3 b4

Seizing space like this fails to give Black enough counterplay, but perhaps he's already worse in any case. Indeed, the 13...e5 14 d5 ♟d4 of Zaja-Armanda, Sibenik 2009, also looks in White's favour after, say, 15 ♟b4.

14 g3 a5 15 ♟g2 ♟e7 16 0-0 ♟b5 17 ♜fd1



White's early manoeuvres were time-consuming, but his position now presents a model of harmony and Hunt is unable to find a good plan.

17...♟d7 18 b3 ♟c6 19 h3 dxc5

White would have enjoyed a free hand to gradually expand on the kingside after 19...d5!? 20 e5 f6 21 f4 f5, but perhaps this was the lesser evil.

20 ♟xc5 ♟xc5 21 ♜xc5 ♟xe2?

DIV 1A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	GP	Pts
1 Cheddleton 1	**			7-1	5-3	6-2		6½-1½	24½	8
2 Guildford 1		**	5½-2½		6-2	6-2	6½-1½		24	8
3 Grantham Sharks 1		2½-5½	**			4½-3½	5-3	6-2	18	6
4 Oxford 1	1-7			**	4½-3½		2½-5½	6-2	14	4
5 Wood Green HK 2	3-5	2-6		3½-4½	**			6-2	14½	2
6 Barbican 4NCL 2	2-6	2-6	3½-4½			**	5½-2½		13	2
7 Blackthorne Russia		1½-6½	3-5	5½-2½		2½-5½	**		12½	2
8 Kings Head 1	1½-6½		2-6	2-6	2-6			**	7½	0

DIV 1B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	GP	Pts
1 Wood Green HK 1	**			8-0	6-2	5½-2½	6½-1½		26	8
2 Guildford 2		**	6-2			4½-3½	7-0	6½-1½	24	8
3 Barbican 4NCL 1		2-6	**		4½-3½		6-2	5½-2½	18	6
4 e2e4.org.uk 1	0-8			**	2½-5½	5½-2½		4½-3½	12½	4
5 White Rose 1	2-6		3½-4½	5½-2½	**	3½-4½			14½	2
6 3Cs 1	2½-5½	3½-4½		2½-5½	4½-3½	**			13	2
7 Cambridge University 1	1½-6½	0-7	2-6				**	5½-2½	9	2
8 Grantham Sharks 2		1½-6½	2½-5½	3½-4½			2½-5½	**	10	0

A serious misjudgement. 21...♙f8 22 ♖c2 ♗g7 23 ♖dc1 ♗d7 24 f4 looks pretty nice for White, but much better this for Black than grabbing a pawn.

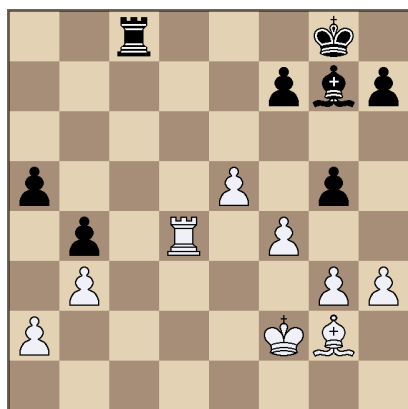
22 ♗xe2 ♜xd4 23 ♗c4 e5 24 f4 ♗e7 25 ♙xd4 exd4 26 e5

Black is a pawn up, but White will win it back and continues to dominate the board. That may sound obvious, but Edouard had to correctly assess this position back on the 19th move.

26...♗ed8 27 ♗xc7 ♗e6

There was nothing better than this plan of trading queens, hoping that the opposite-coloured bishops would offer some drawing chances.

28 ♙xd4 ♗xc4 29 ♖cxc4 g5 30 ♙f2 ♙xd4 31 ♙xd4 ♖c8



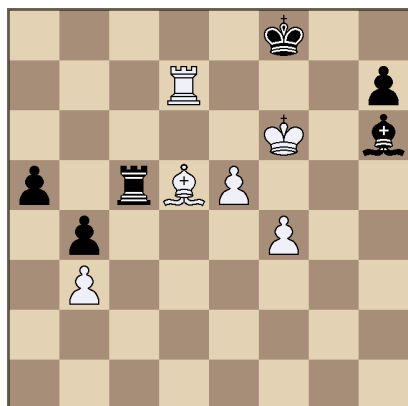
32 ♙f1!

Further fine judgement from Edouard. Black will regain his pawn, but only while White improves his coordination. Moreover, never forget that opposite-coloured don't spell an easy draw when other pieces are present, but rather their presence favours the attacking side.

32...♖c2+ 33 ♙f3 gxf4 34 gxf4 ♖xa2 35 ♙c4 ♖h2 36 ♖d7 ♖xh3+ 37 ♙g4

37 ♙e4! would have been even more precise, keeping the black rook out of play: 37...h5 (or 37...♖c3 38 ♙xf7+ ♙f8 39 ♙c4 ♖xc4+ 40 bxc4 b3 41 ♖b7 a4 42 c5 when only White's pawns are running) 38 ♖xf7 ♙f8 39 e6 and the e-pawn will cost Black his bishop.

37...♖c3 38 ♙xf7+ ♙f8 39 ♙d5 ♖c5 40 ♙f5 ♙h6 41 ♙f6



It may be an endgame, but that doesn't mean that one can't attack.

41...♙e8 42 ♖d6 ♖c8 43 e6! ♙xf4 44 ♙c6+ 1-0

Cheddleton's average rating of 2426 was somewhat lower than Guildford's 2568 and Wood Green's 2487, but they are a combative team, as could be expected from one containing the likes of Keith Arkell, Jonathan Hawkins and Elizabeth Paehtz. Moreover, they were more than strong enough for King's Head, who were brushed aside 6½-1½, and Wood Green II, who were a little weaker than one might have expected and went down 5-3. Exploiting the unfortunate demise of Jutes of Kent, Cheddleton have picked up Simon Williams and, as so often, the Ginger GM's games entertained.

S.Williams-S.Spivack Cheddleton vs. King's Head Nimzo-Larsen Attack

1 b3 e5 2 ♙b2 ♜c6 3 e3 ♜f6 4 ♙b5 ♙d6 5 g4!?

Typical Williams, countering Black's 21st century set-up with another modern idea and a move which is arguably Simon's favourite pawn advance. Instead, the futuristic main line runs 5 ♜a3 ♜a5, while here 5...e4 6 ♜e2 ♙e5 7 ♗c1 ♗e7 8 ♙xc6 dxc6 9 ♜c4 ♙xb2 10 ♗xb2 ♙e6 11 ♜g3 0-0-0 12 ♗a3 ♗xa3 13 ♜xa3 ♖d6 14 f3 ♖hd8 15 0-0-0 gave White an edge which he eventually and instructively converted in Nakamura-Jones, London (rapid) 2013.

5...a6

This feels sensible, since an exchange on c6 would develop Black's dormant bishop. Williams prefers to undertake something of a whacky fianchetto.

6 ♙f1 ♙e7

This feels very sensible, although so too does 6...h6 7 ♙g2 ♙e7 8 d3 d5, as in Victor-Oral, Ortigueira 2005, where 9 h3 ♙e6 10 ♜e2 ♗d7 11 ♜d2 0-0-0 12 a3 left White with a Grob or reversed Hippo set-up and Black rather comfortably placed.

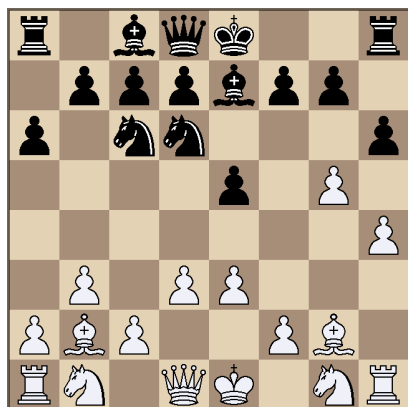
7 g5 ♙e4 8 h4

White has been provoked, but Black too can fight on the kingside.

8...h6!? 9 d3 ♙d6 10 ♙g2!



Simon Williams, playing in typically creative and route-one fashion.



10...hxg5?!

It's always risky to grab pawns against Williams. Moreover, there was nothing wrong with the sensible 10...d5 followed by ...d5.

11 hxg5 ♖xh1 12 ♙xh1 ♙xg5 13 ♖h5 ♙h6 14 ♘c3 ♘b5

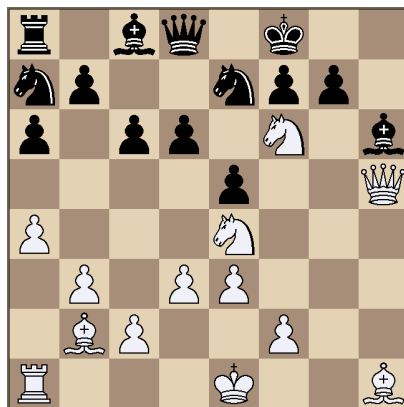
By placing his knight on d6, rather than c5, the strong Middlesex amateur has got into a bit of pickle. Spivack elects to have the knight sulk on a7 instead, but even

14...♖g5 15 ♖h2 would have left White with good compensation, as shown by the possible continuation 15...f6 16 O-O-O ♖f7 17 ♘d5 ♙d8 18 f4!.

15 ♘d5 d6 16 a4 ♘ba7 17 ♘e2 ♘e7

Spivack's play has certainly been extremely principled. Now one might expect White to push his f-pawn in a bid to open lines for his dark-squared bishop, but Williams prefers not to exchange and throws his knight even further into the fray.

18 ♘f6+!? ♙f8 19 ♘g3 c6 20 ♘ge4



20...♘d5?

Williams excels in those chaotic, unusual positions where most find themselves rather groping about in the dark. Indeed, Spivack overlooks a tactic, rather than grab hold of the kingside and mount a fairly sturdy defence with 20...♘f5 21 ♘g4 g6 22 ♖h2 ♙g7.

21 ♘d5 cxd5 22 ♘xd6!

Oh dear. The knight is taboo due to ♙a3.

22...♙e6 23 ♘xb7 ♖b6 24 ♘c5

White is not only a pawn up, but Black's position is in tatters. Just compare the difference between the two sides' minor pieces.

24...♖c8 25 ♘xe6+ fxe6 26 a5! ♖b4+ 27 ♙d1 ♙g8 28 ♖xe5 ♙g4+ 29 ♙d2 ♘b5 30 ♖a4

Black has tried to thrash, but by now might have thrown in the towel rather than overlook a further blow.

30...♖h3? 31 ♖h4

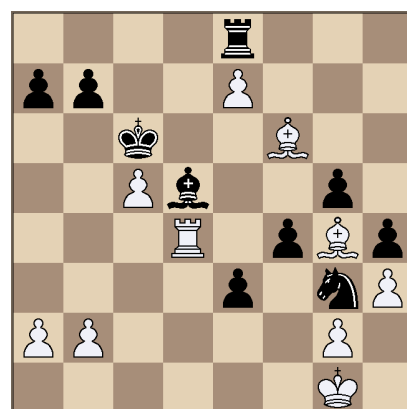
Even more clinical would have been 31 ♙g2, but in any case Black is doomed.

31...♖h4 32 ♖xe6+ ♙f8 33 ♖xc8+ ♙e7 34 ♖b7+ ♙f8 35 ♖b8+ ♙e7 36 ♖e5+ 1-0

Over in Pool B, Wood Green were headed up by Cardiff University student David Howell, with captain Andrew Greet also able to draw on the services of his Quality Chess colleagues, Jacob Aagaard and John Shaw. The result: a perfect 8-0 against e2e4 and a comprehensive 6-2 demolition of White Rose. The author of that recent labour of love, *The King's Gambit*, was involved in two wild games, having to fight with a queen and two pawns against three pieces to eventually overcome Tomer Eden before saving a tricky looking endgame the next day.

J.Shaw-M.P.Townsend

Wood Green vs. White Rose



After many adventures in this extremely unbalanced game, Shaw has just blundered (with 41 ♖c4-d4), and allowed a nasty blow.

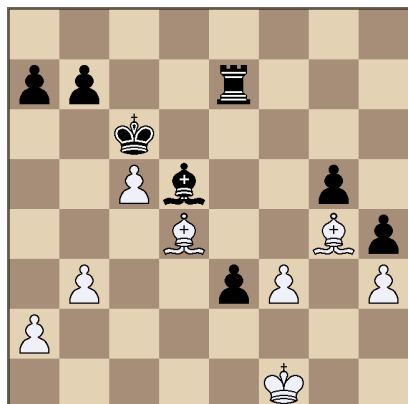


White Rose captain Paul Townsend came extremely close to defeating GM John Shaw.

41...f3!

A neat, little interference tactic. White is forced to give up the exchange to halt the black pawns.

42 gxf3 ♖e2+ 43 ♔f1 ♜xd4 44 ♙xd4 ♜xe7 45 b3



45...e2+

This restricts the white king, but does also tie down Black's rook, so we should check too the alternatives:

a) 45...♙b5 46 ♙e2 ♙e6 47 ♙xe3 ♙xg4 48 fxg4 ♙b4 attempts to generate a passed pawn on the queenside, but White has sufficient counterplay after 49 ♙d3, and if 49...♙e5 (49...♙xe3+ 50 ♙xe3 a5 51 ♙e4 ♙a3 52 ♙f5 resolves to a draw) 50 ♙d4.

b) 45...♙e6!? (simplifying Black's task and a move underpinned by the point 46 ♙f6? ♙f7) 46 ♙e2 ♙xg4 47 fxg4 ♙d5 48 ♙xe3 ♙e6 has similar aims and may be enough to win: for example, 49 ♙d3 (49 ♙f3 ♙e5 50 ♙f2 is an attempt to avoid what follows, but Black can gradually edge forward, such as with 50...a6 51 ♙e3 a5 52 ♙f2 ♙c6 53 ♙e3 ♙b5 when he appears to be just in time in a line like 54 ♙d4 ♙e1! 55 ♙e3 ♙h1 56 ♙g2 ♙a1 57 a4+ ♙b4 58 ♙xg5 ♙xb3 59 ♙xh4 ♙xa4 60 ♙f6 ♙c4 61 h4 ♙xc5 62 ♙g3 ♙d5) 49...♙a6 50 ♙xg5 ♙xa2 51 ♙xh4 ♙h2 52 ♙e7 ♙xh3+ 53 ♙c2 ♙e3 54 ♙f6 ♙xc5 55 g5 ♙g3 when Black equalises the pawn score and may be able to gradually engineer a breakthrough on the queenside.

46 ♙e1 ♙e6

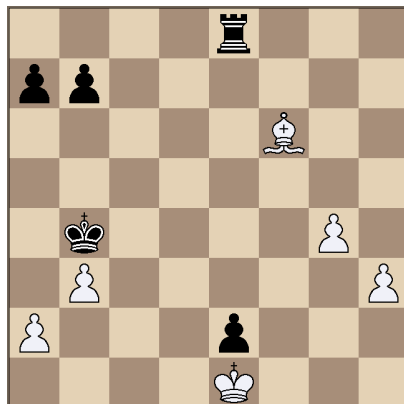
After this White's dark-squared bishop becomes quite useful. Instead, 46...♙b5 47 ♙f6 ♙f7 48 ♙xg5 ♙xf3 49 ♙xh4 ♙xg4 50 hxg4 ♙f4 51 ♙xe2 ♙xg4 52 ♙f2 ♙g6 would still have retained good winning chances.

47 ♙f6 ♙e8 48 ♙xg5 ♙xg4 49 fxg4 ♙xc5 50 ♙xh4 ♙b4?

White's king fends off its opposite number after 50...♙d4 51 ♙d2 when again it looks like it will be a draw, such as after 51...♙e3 52 ♙f2 e1♙+ 53 ♙xe1 ♙xh3 54 ♙f2+ ♙e4 55 ♙xa7. However, as indicated by John Shaw on the Quality Chess website, here 51...♙e4! is a surprisingly useful move. After, say, 52 ♙g3 a6 53 g5 ♙e3! 54 ♙f2

e1♙+ 55 ♙xe1 ♙xh3 Black retains definite winning chances.

51 ♙f6!



An excellent location for the bishop, assisting its own pawns while covering the queening square on a1.

51...♙e4 52 g5 ♙h4 53 g6 ♙xh3 54 g7 ♙g3 55 ♙xe2 ♙a3 56 ♙f2 ♙g6 57 ♙e3 ♙xa2 58 ♙e4 ♙xb3 59 ♙f5 ♙xg7 60 ♙xg7

At first one might think that Black still has some chances to win, but the reality is that White's king is close enough.

60...b5 61 ♙e4 a5 62 ♙d5

The Scottish Grandmaster chooses a clean path to force the draw. 62 ♙d3 would also have done the trick in view of 62...a4 63 ♙f6 b4 64 ♙e7! a3 65 ♙d6 a2 66 ♙e5 ♙a3 67 ♙d2 b3 68 ♙c1 (Shaw).

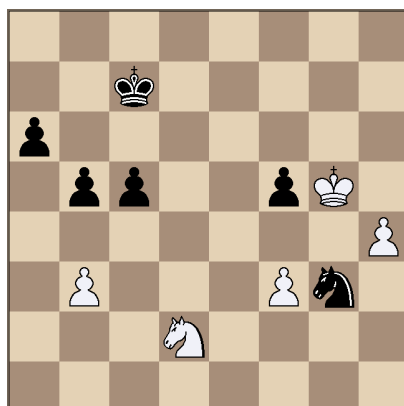
62...a4 63 ♙c5 b4 64 ♙b5 a3 65 ♙f6 a2 66 ♙a1 ♙a3 67 ♙c4 b3 ½-½

The pawns most certainly aren't going anywhere after 68 ♙c3.

As mentioned, Wood Green's main challengers for the top spot in Pool B are Guildford II, who scored a fine 6-2 victory against a slightly below par Barbican I before overcoming Grantham Sharks II 6½-1½. The former match saw Yang-Fan Zhou rather butcher Matthew Turner on top board, while Mark Ferguson missed a study-like win.

M.Ferguson-D.Smerdon

Barbican vs. Guildford II



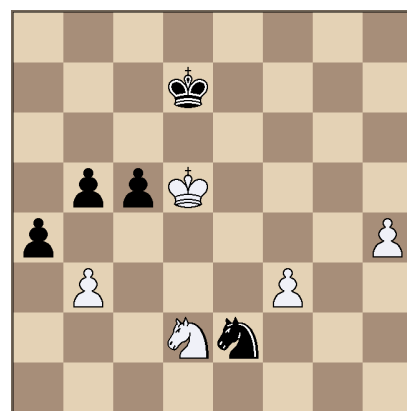
41 ♙f4?

Mistakes on move 41 are almost as common as on the notorious move 40, as, indeed, we've already seen in these pages. Now the Australian Grandmaster is able to save himself, which he wouldn't have been able to after 41 h5! ♙xh5 (the white knight also halts Black's pawns after 41...c4 42 bxc4 ♙xh5 43 ♙xh5 b4 44 f4 a5 45 ♙g5 a4 46 ♙xf5 b3 47 ♙e6 b2 48 ♙b1) 42 ♙xh5 ♙d6 43 ♙g5 ♙e5 44 f4+ ♙e6. There's little doubt that Ferguson got to this point in his calculations and couldn't find a win, but one exists: 45 b4!! when Black finds his pawns stymied and White's f-pawn set to queen after 45...cxb4 46 ♙b3 or 45...c4 46 ♙b1.

41...♙e2+ 42 ♙xf5 ♙d7 43 ♙e5

Black's king is also just in time after both 43 h5 ♙e7 44 h6 ♙f7 and 43 ♙g6 ♙e6 44 h5 ♙f4+ 45 ♙g5 ♙xh5 46 ♙xh5 ♙f5.

43...a5 44 ♙d5 a4!



The simplest way to draw.

45 bxa4 bxa4 46 ♙c4 ♙e7 47 ♙xc5 ♙g1 48 f4 ♙e2 ½-½

The merger of Sambuca Sharks and Grantham-based Pandora's Box has created quite a strong team, and Grantham Sharks I find themselves lying third in Pool A after victories over Barbican II and Blackthorne Russia. Further down King's Head look doomed, while both Barbican II and Blackthorne will need a minor miracle to avoid landing up in the Relegation Pool (the fate awaiting four teams; the top four sides qualify for the Promotion Pool). Oxford are by no means safe, but should be buoyed by their fine, lengthy victory over Wood Green II.

The main shock in Pool B has been the struggles of White Rose, a team who generally grace the European Club Cup every October. In January the Yorkshiremen found themselves up against Lancastrian opposition in the shape of 3Cs who just edged the match, with MGS schoolboy Andrew Horton the sole winner. However, the very next day the Oldham-based team discovered that a mauling can but inspire a team, as they went down 5½-2½ to a rejuvenated e2e4. No doubt the February 4NCL weekend will lead to further twists and equally unbalanced results – a full report in our April issue.