

County Chess, Then and Now.

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Sixty years ago, to the day, on the 28th November 1959, I played my first county match for Notts. I was on board 24, and drew my game, against John Gibson of Lincolnshire. Since then, I have played in at least one county match each year, though it depends a little on what you count, for a total of between 217 and 304, again depending on criteria. Sixty years is not going to be a national record — there are plenty of older players than me around, and I didn't start particularly young. But it may perhaps be a record for Notts; I'll let our historians check that out! As for the number of games, some counties play a lot more than Notts, and even within Notts there are some masochists who play for two of our teams and clock up a lot of games each year. But I would hope that it might well be a record for the Notts first team.

How did I get selected in the first place? Well, in the first round of the county Championship, then played as a seven-round Swiss at one game per month, I was drawn against the long-standing county captain, C. H. Blasdale. We had an epic game; each of us in turn had a won position, frittered it away, got it back, frittered again, over three sessions — no quickplay finish in those days! — until we finally agreed a draw. Shortly thereafter, I received my invitation to play against Lincs. For the past few years, we have been receiving individual e-mails from Neil; in those days, it was pre-printed postcards from Mr Blasdale. Nowadays, we arrange car travel; then, the away matches were reached by train, and the postcards specified which train we had to catch. I was the fourth member of the High School chess team in the side, behind Keith Richardson, Reg Thimann and John Cooper. There were two other juniors in the side, J. M. Will and D. H. Smith of High Pavement, both good players. In my final year at school, Ray Lee, Chris Kent and Gordon Challand were three more NHS players who were picked for the county, and Keith, Reg, John and I were all in the top ten or so boards; so NHS had a pretty useful team! We wanted to play in the League, and would very likely have won it; but they would only let us play in the second division, which would have been a total waste of everyone's time, so we contented ourselves with entering various club championships and beating the local opposition.

Our top players were Keith Richardson, Peter Dodson, Ken Whyld and George Allcock. It's difficult to say, thanks to grade inflation and other problems, exactly how strong the team was compared with today. By the time he left school, Keith was way better than the rest of us, was Midlands champion and was on his way to the national U21 title, similar to Jonah today. After him, we soon dropped down to 5A-5B [168-183 in modern terms], and I suspect that the bottom boards were quite a bit weaker than now. Certainly the team was weaker in 1959 than Leics [who regularly beat us heavily, one year by 21½-2½], and we struggled to beat Derbys and Lincs. But we improved rapidly, partly thanks to the advance of our juniors, and spent many years expecting to win the East Midlands zone, though we never really caught up with Warks and Staffs, apart from isolated successes.

In my early years, home matches were played at the Mechanics Institute, a fine old Victorian building on Trinity Square, built in 1869 [though the institute itself dates back to 1837], not to be confused with its later premises in Birkbeck House [from 1964] and North Sherwood Street [from 2003]. There was a purpose-built chess room, with proper boards and weighted pieces, photographs round the wall, ancient clocks, and all the atmosphere you could ask for. Leics and Lincs had similar city-centre venues; but the writing was on the wall, and within a few years almost all county matches had moved to school or village halls, upstairs rooms in pubs or clubs, and the like

— anywhere cheap! Along with the decline in venues, there has been a reduction in the provided refreshment. At Mechanics, we used to break at half-time for a sit-down meal — ham salad, as I recall — in the Institute's restaurant. In later years we had sandwiches, and more recently the modern coffee and biscuits at the board.

As alluded to above, grades were treated differently in the early days. For a start, few players took them seriously. Captains were expected to play teams in order of strength, which was only loosely associated with order of grade. Grades were a bit of froth on your results, some sort of reflexion on how well you had played over the preceding two years. There was much discussion about how accurate they might be. Published grades were on a somewhat weird scale: 1A was best, followed by 1B, then 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, and so on. Initially, only grades down to 6A [160-167] were published, but later 6B and 7A made it to official lists; when I became Notts grader in 1962-63, I was quite surprised to find that the grader had a much longer list, firstly in which the actual numbers we know and love were given, and secondly which went down to 12A [64-71], and beyond. Each grade corresponded to a range of 8 numeric points, so 1A corresponded to 240-247; in those days, only Penrose was regularly in 1A, and there was some speculation about what might happen if he improved to 0B, 0A, and then ...? Some people couldn't have coped with negative grades! Luckily, or otherwise, they scrapped the system and went over to pure numbers, as today, before anyone got to 264, or even 248 [roughly, Elo 2584]. Grades down to 3A [208+] were the 'National List', typically around 40 players; below that was the province of the 'Union' graders, who collated the results from county graders in, for example, the Midlands, and liaised with other unions and the national grader for the rather few cross-union games. You had to play 30 games against graded players in two years to get a published grade, and then, as above, only if you were at least 6A or 7A, so most players had no idea what their grade was; as grader, I eventually published my entire list in the NCA Yearbook, to the general astonishment of those who were 8A, or whatever.

Juniors were particularly hard done by; very few played enough games against adults, and those who did found that their published grade was 18+ months out of date, by which time most had improved out of all recognition. The adults who found themselves on the receiving end of these lowly-rated opponents were none too pleased either; there was much discussion about what to do, eventually leading to the modern 'junior premium' by which juniors are artificially up-rated. In the interests of symmetry, there perhaps ought to be a senior premium, so that older players get better treatment?

The statisticians resisted for a long time the idea that actual numbers should be published. They had a point; just one game in which you perhaps blunder and lose from a won position lowers your grade by $3\frac{1}{3}$ points, or nearly half a grade. Over 30 games, you're almost bound to have some disasters of that sort, and hollow triumphs where it's your opponent who loses unexpectedly. These things average out, so your grade of 6A, or whatever, is likely to be reasonably reliable, but the actual number, such as 165, should come with a 'health warning' of, say, ± 5 , and certainly should not be relied on as being 'better than' 164. Elo ratings are even more silly from this point of view! But we are where we are, and numbers rule.

Games in 1959, and for many years afterwards, were not normally played 'to a finish'. County matches had 4-hour sessions, and unfinished games were adjudicated. NCA League matches were also adjudicated; some leagues had adjournments, with all the paraphernalia of sealed moves and perhaps having to travel across the county to play a handful of moves to complete the game — or, on the other hand, a second adjournment for a particularly long game. For county matches, there was no way players were going to travel perhaps 50+ miles to play an extra session, so adjudications were inevitable. We didn't have the technology for an incrementing system, and the idea of a quickplay finish seemed absurd — a game might go on for over 100 moves, how could you play the last 60+ in, say, 15 minutes, and there is a train to catch ... Of course, adjudications

aren't satisfactory either; especially not when the adjudicator is less than diligent [though my own experience is that almost all adjudicators did a conscientious and professional job], or even worse failed to deliver a verdict. There are three or four of my own county games where I was never told what the result was, and I have had to guess [or ask the computer!].

Attitudes to county chess have changed, it seems to me. Actually, it would be interesting to hear from some of our players, especially the younger ones, whether they have the same pride in playing for the county that I had. There was something about receiving a postcard '*You have been selected to play to play for Nottinghamshire ...*', different from the county captains running their fingers down a list ordered by grade and asking who is available. In 1959, there was only the one county team, so you really did feel privileged to be in it, and virtually all of the strongest players played regularly. Today, almost anyone who wants to play will find a niche in one of the county teams; indeed, if there are reasonable numbers of players without a team, we simply enter a new team. Perhaps too there are more counter-attractions today. On the other hand, the proportion of local club players who play for the county is not that different over the eras, so perhaps there ought still to be the same kudos.

You might think that the actual game has not changed over the years; but there too there have been some subtle changes, mostly improvements I suppose. For example, in 1959 there was no laid-down protocol for offering a draw; you offered a draw, at any time, and the opponent said yea or nay or ignored you completely. It was a matter of etiquette not to annoy the opponent, but some players could be quite obnoxious. Similarly, there are much clearer protocols these days for what to do about repetitions, promotions, touch-move and so on, which players now are expected to know and to observe. A change which didn't affect me but did some players was the ending of the practice [recommended by some highly-regarded coaches] of writing down your move before playing it — and, in most cases, of covering up the move, and perhaps scribbling it out and writing down another and even another. We're much more polite these days; I don't recall shaking hands at the start of the game until quite recently, perhaps the influence of junior coaching, and would not have dreamed of wishing my opponent '*Good luck!*'. I still don't quite know what that's about! Is the implication that he'll need to be lucky to avoid an ignominious defeat? If only

You'd think that after all these years, there would be a wealth of funny or tragic stories to tell about happenings in all those matches. Sorry. I have just a few, and those not so exciting. In one of my first matches, I watched a Notts player being beaten easily by a Warks player who had smashed open the K-side and played Rg8 with check. The only move was Kh1 which led to a quick mate. But the ingenious Notts player played Bg2, from b7. It didn't save him, as there was still a quick mate; but the move was illegal as there was a pawn on d5. But neither player noticed, and I knew enough not to interfere! The first time I met David Levens was in a county match where he was then playing for Leics. When we came back from the usual tea break, he found himself in bad time trouble, as either he had failed to stop his clock or else it had accidentally been restarted. He was very cross, but no-one took any notice. The game was drawn, but my scorebook notes laconically that I ought to have won. There was a county match against Derbys where both players were in desperate time trouble, and the Notts player had a white-squared bishop which his opponent was trying to swap off. So the opposing bishop came to the square diagonally next to our bishop, which therefore moved along the other diagonal, where it was again opposed, moved again, opposed, moved, opposed, ..., with about a dozen moves banged out instantly. When the dust settled, with the time control safely reached, it was seen that both bishops were now on black squares, along with the two original black-squared bishops. There was no hope of sorting out what had actually happened, so they agreed a draw. Notts once came within a move or two of reaching the national open final; but, sadly, the Notts player left his queen *en prise* in an easily won position in the last game to finish. I once claimed a draw by repetition when very short of time; but my opponent simply ignored the claim, there was no arbiter, and the captains were out of the room. I

didn't dare to let my flag fall, as I wasn't absolutely certain of the repetition [and the rules were different then!], so I moved, and my opponent avoided the fourth time around. Luckily, it was drawn on adjudication anyway. There must be more stories; but I've forgotten them.

One of the pleasures of playing for the county is meeting old friends. There are still players around who I first knew several decades ago, and there's usually a chance to catch up, to find out what happened to X, or to recall mutual friends. 4NCL is even better than county matches for this! I can only hope that chess is still being played over-the-board in another sixty years, that some of the young players of today will be able to reminisce, and perhaps even that some will remember an old codger who played for Notts. I hope to continue for a few years yet, but realistically if I'm still in the Notts first team a decade from now it will surely indicate something wrong with the state of Notts chess! Thank you for reading.

Statistical supplement:

A. N. Walker's playing record, county matches 1959-2019:

Opponents	P	W	D	L	Notes
Leicestershire	47	15	20	12	
Lincolnshire	37	19	15	3	[Plus a win by default]
Derbyshire	33	14	15	4	
Warwickshire	23	6	8	9	
Northamptonshire	16	10	5	1	
Staffordshire	16	2	9	5	
Huntingdonshire	8	5	3	0	
Greater Manchester	8	2	1	5	
Worcestershire	5	3	1	1	
<i>Others</i>	24	4	14	6	Note 1
Total	217	80	91	46	
4NCL	39	15	19	5	Note 2
Total OTB	256	95	109	51	
Correspondence	48	18	23	7	Note 3
Total	304	113	132	58	

Note 1: East Glamorgan, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Devon x3, Essex x3, Gloucestershire x4, Hampshire x2, Lancashire x4, Norfolk, Suffolk and Yorkshire x3.

Note 2: From 2003-10, we did not enter a team into the Open/Minor Counties Championship, but instead entered a team called 'Nottinghamshire' into the 4NCL.

Note 3: Games played for Nottinghamshire in the national Ward-Higgs [division 1], Sinclair Trophy [division 2] and Midlands county championship.