

The Virus Fails to Stop Chess Fever

(A report on the 2020 NZCF National Interschool Championships)

- By FM Bob Smith

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times, Charles Dickens wrote.

Well, mostly this year it's been the worst of times, thanks to that "tricky virus".

Over the board chess has been a stop-start affair, with many traditional events falling victim to coronavirus.

But on the weekend of 26th and 27th September it was finally "the best of times".

Over 200 children and accompanying adults from across the country descended on Mt Maunganui for the New Zealand Interschool Chess Finals.

Whether the competition would be held at all was only known five days earlier, when the Bay of Plenty moved to level one and Auckland moved to level two.

Without the Auckland teams the Finals would have been only a shadow of their former self and, after some pleading from me, the New Zealand Chess Federation made the brave decision to allow the tournament to go ahead, as long as my wife Viv and I could guarantee to follow the government's coronavirus rules.

That meant holding the primary, intermediate and secondary divisions in different buildings, sanitising, lots of masks, keeping track of the participants, providing three separate analysis rooms and having three dedicated groups of arbiters (secondary – me, the Chief Arbiter; intermediate – Scott Wastney, supported by Nicole Qin; and primary – Viv, with the help of Wayne McDougall and Anton Coppens).

Luckily we had the full support of the host school, Mt Maunganui College, which made five classrooms available, as well as the Main Hall and the Library.

We also had the backing of the country's largest RSA, Mt Maunganui, which provided tables and funded books for the libraries of the winning schools, six lucky spot prize schools and the host school – and also offered a dining discount.

This year's finalists qualified in various ways: winning their regional competition, being selected from regions where coronavirus prevented play, and a few wildcards.

Perennial champions Auckland Grammar were the hot favourites for the Secondary title, especially with Olympiad representative Daniel Gong "on a mission" in his final year in the competition.

The Intermediate and Primary competitions looked more open.

In the event Auckland Grammar justified their favourite tag, Takapuna Normal retained their NZ Intermediate title in a close race, and Pigeon Mountain ran away with the Primary Championship.