

The grandeur of the Grandmaster

THERE WAS a wave of discontent from top international players last year after Fide, the World Chess Federation, raised the qualifications for obtaining Grandmaster norms.

Worried by the deflation of what was supposed to be the "supreme accolade", Fide

upped the GM norm from a 2550 Elo performance rating to 2600. A player gains a norm in a tournament by achieving a particular score against a particular average strength of opposition, worked out statistically by the international Elo rating system. Two or three norms,

covering 25 games, are needed to gain the title.

To an International Master, such as myself, aspiring to become a Grandmaster, Fide's decision was stunning. The goal of 2600 plus appears almost unobtainable — only 10 players, including Korchnoi and Kar-

pov, managed to sustain such a rating in 1978. However two tournaments this year in the USA, in which two young Americans managed a norm apiece, have proved the new standards are not actually impossible. Although I have been one of those chasing the title who have suffered I now feel Fide's change may have some basis after all.

There was no doubt that there had been a deflation of the GM title. Whereas in the past only a handful of players held the title, the sheer num-

ber of international opportunities available nowadays enabled 20 players to receive the award in 1978 alone.

Under the new rules I doubt if anybody, apart from perhaps young Soviet star Garri Kasparov and an American, will win the honour of a GM title this year — and it is indeed a title worth having once more.

I recently went on a one-month tour of America to play in the Marshall International in New York and the Lone Pine tournament in California.

In New York, young American IM Michael Rohde scraped in for what is probably the first GM norm under the new regulations. In Lone Pine, 19-year-old Yasser Seirawan had a brilliant streak to score 5½/9 and was the only person in the 73-player field to get a GM norm, apart from the winners who were all Grandmasters anyway.

Hunting for a norm at Lone Pine, I was pleased with my half-marks result against assorted IMs and GMs, but it still seemed woefully short of a 2600-plus performance.

In round one I played GM Larry Christiansen (USA), Elo rating 2475, and drew; round two, GM Pal Benko (USA), 2495, drew; round three, GM Dragutin Rajkovic (Yugoslavia), 2460, won; round 4, IM Mark Disen (USA), 2460, lost; round five, GM Stanimir Mikolic, 2440, won; round six, IM Yehuda Gruenfeld (Israel), 2430, lost; round seven, IM Hans Ree (Holland), 2480, lost; round eight, IM Edward Formanek (USA), 2410, drew; round nine, IM Salvador Matera (USA), 2415, won.

This gave me 4½/9 against a field with an average rating of 2451. Unfortunately, for the purposes of calculating norms, my own modest grade of 2380 is added to the pool. This gives an overall average grade of 2444.5, meaning I played a category 8 field (category 8 is between 2426 and 2450).

In a category 8 tournament a player must score 53 per cent for an IM norm and 74 per cent for a new GM norm. My 4½/9 therefore just missed by a fraction the IM norm (confound it!) and of course was well short of the 6.66 (in practical terms it is rounded up to 7) points out of nine required for a Grandmaster norm. But seven out of nine! Such a score against such opposition would be difficult for Karpov I reckon!

Here is my win over Yugoslav Grandmaster Rajkovic from round three. He wasn't too happy when I beat him, but was all smiles when I defeated his countryman Nicolic in round five as well!

SICILIAN DEFENCE

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1. e4 c5

2. c3!

I use this off-beat alternative frequently as a way of avoiding major theoretical battles in the Sicilian defence.

- 2. ... Nf6
- 3. e5 Nd5
- 4. d4 cxd4
- 5. Nf3 Nc6
- 6. cxd4 d6
- 7. Bc4 Nb6
- 8. Bb5 dxe5!

This is the defence the top Russians are currently using against 2.c3, leading to a drawn position. However Rajkovic was using some time in thought and my guess that he didn't know the line very well proved correct.

- 9. Nxe5 Bd7
- 10. Nc3 e6
- 11. Qg4 Nxe5
- 12. dxe5 Bxb5
- 13. Nxb5 a6!

An inaccuracy. Correct is 13... Qd7! 14.Nc3 Qd3 15.Bd2 Nc4 16.0-0-0 when Svesnikov-Tal, USSR Championship 1978, continued 16... Rc8 17.Bf4! Qg6 18.Qxg6 hxg6 19.Kb1 Na3 ch! 20.Ka1 Nc2 ch 21.Kb1 Na3 ch with a draw by perpetual check.

The subtle difference between that example and the present game is that here Black's Queen is not on the useful defensive square d7 — allowing me a small combination.

- 14. Nd6 chl Bxd6
- 15. exd6 0-0
- 16. Bf4!

If Black's Queen were on d7 this could be met by, among other things, 16... e5 17. Qxd7 Nxd7.

- 16. ... Qf6
- 17. 0-0 Qg6

If 17... e5 then 18. Bd2! intending the skewer 18... Qxd6 19. Bb4. And if 17... Qxb2 then 18. Rab1 Qd4 19. Rfd1 and an incidental disadvantage of 13... a6?! — the weakness on b6 — is shown up.

- 18. Qe2 Nd5
- 19. Bg3 Rad8
- 20. Rfe1 Rd7
- 21. Rad1 h6

So White has achieved his objective of a fairly safe, cramping pawn on d6. The problem is how to break through.

- 22. Rd4 Rc8
- 23. Rc4 Re8
- 24. Qd2 Kh7
- 25. h3 Nf6
- 26. Be5!

This achieves nothing. Fortunately my opponent was in time trouble now, and I was able to rectify the error.

- 26. ... Red8
- 27. Bg3 (I)

Not 27. Bxf6 Qxf6 28. Rd4 e5, which eliminates White's pride and joy, the passed d-pawn.

- 27. ... Ne8
- 28. Rd4 Qf5
- 29. Bh4

Energetic play is needed because of White's time-wasting a few moves before. Rajkovic doesn't want to weaken himself with 29... g5, but the obvious

move meets a surprising riposte.

- 29. ... 16
- 30. g4! Qc5
- 31. Rxe6

The point — White snaps up the e-pawn, closes his eyes and hopes Black can't do the same with his d-pawn because if 31... Nxd6 32. Qd3 ch Kh8 33. Bg3 or 31... Rxd6 32. Qd3 ch Kh8 33. Rxe8 ch! winning. Unfortunately in the second line after 32... f5!! I have nothing better than a draw, e.g. 33. Rdxd6 Rxd6 34. Qxf5 ch Qxf5 35. gxf5 Rxe6 36. fxe6

g5! and Black's king will catch the e-pawn.

Fortunately Rajkovic, pressed for time, misses this and the advanced d-pawn nets a piece.

- 31. ... Kg8?
- 32. Bg3 Kf7
- 33. Qe3 Nxd6
- 34. Rexd6 Rxd6
- 35. Rxd6 Resigns

Black cannot play 35... Rxd6 as his Queen is hanging on c5.

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