Inhuman treatment

ONCE UPON a time chess was played exclusively between human beings. But no longer, it seems. Turning up for a simultaneous exhibition at the Waverley club in Melbourne recently, I was startled by the futuristic appearance of one of my 20-odd opponents. Was it human? A distant relative of E.T. perhaps? No, as it turned out it was the latest word in chess computers — the Novag Chess Robot Adversary.

This incredible automaton goes one step further than the ordinary sensory computers. As well as automatically sensing its opponent's move, the award-winning device will reply unassisted with its mechanical arm. It can capture pieces, set up the men for a new game, castle and promote pawns. Just in case it ever gets near a world championship match, it has also been equipped with an "emotions button". Checkmate this robot and it puts Marvin the paranoid android to shame, sweeping pieces off the board and cursing in Cobol.

Cautiously staying out of reach of the arm, I managed to defeat the Novag robot fairly comfortably. As could be expected, however, it played a sensible game. Although artificial intelligence machines have yet to make any impact at international tournament standard, most can give the average home player a stimulating encounter. In financial terms it's the most exciting development for chess since Bobby Fischer. Novag, a Hong Kong-based firm, claim to have sold more than 300,000 of their smaller models in West Germany alone.

Fortunately some of the manufacturers' proceeds are channelled back into human chess. One of the reasons for the Novag robot's appearance at Waverley was that the makers were the sponsors of the 1983 Commonwealth Championship, held in Australia. New Zealand sent three participants to this inaugural competition, Vernon Small, Ortvin Sarapu and Paul Garbett. English Grandmaster Ray Keene and I also participated, but in the end it was two young Australians, Ian Rogers and Greg Hjorth, who came out on top.

Fuller results next week, but meanwhile here are a few interesting positions that occurred in the championship. If you own a chess computer it might be interesting to see if it can find what the players found (or in one case missed!).
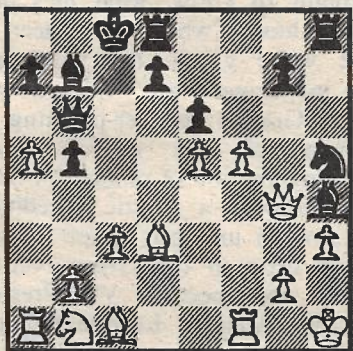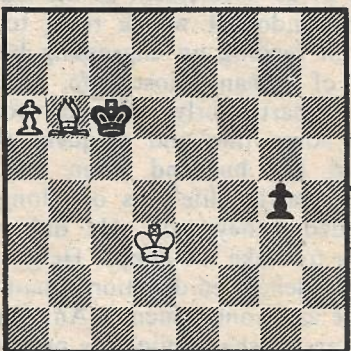

Black to move

Broomes-Khan. Black won a brilliancy prize with the combination 18 ... Ng3 ch! 19.Q×g3 B×g3 20.a×b6 R×h3 ch 21.Kg1 Rdh8! 22.g×h3 R×h3 23. Resigns. Although a rook and a knight up, with queens off, White is powerless to prevent mate.
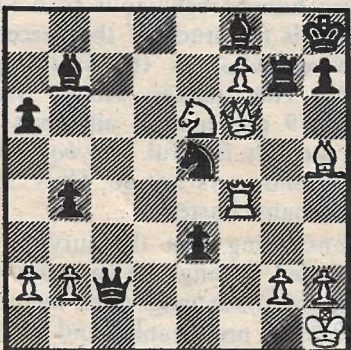

White to move

Solomon-Jordan. This straightforward but neat queen sacrifice combination is the sort of thing computers find easily. 1.Q×g7 ch! Resigns, as 1 ... B×g7 2.f8=Q ch B×f8 3.R×f8 is mate.

White to move

Rogers-Small. Rogers played for 15 hours trying to make progress in an endgame, but when he finally got a won game was too fatigued to exploit it. Here 1.Ba5 (actually 135.Ba5) wins immediately, as Black's king cannot get in front of the rook's pawn. Instead he played 1.Bf2 and Black drew by ... Kc7, followed by ... Kb8. Once the king gets in front of the rook's pawn White can only stalemate if he tries to queen his pawn. This situation, where one side has bishop and pawn against king but still cannot win, is one of the curious quirks of chess worth knowing — it occurred twice in Melbourne.
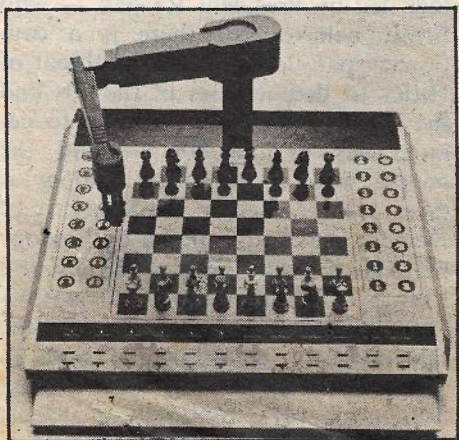
MURRAY CHANDLER

The Novag robot: well-armed.