

The road to grandmastery

OCCASIONALLY one reads in a newspaper or magazine about some New Zealand youngster, not yet even a master, whose professed chess ambition is "to become a Grandmaster". When I left for Europe eight years ago, at the age of 15, with that same dream in mind I had no conception of the task before me. This week, if readers will excuse the indulgence, I wish to write something of the high spots, and the frustrations, before I fulfilled this quest to become New Zealand's first Grandmaster by winning a recent tournament in Holland. Perhaps (if it doesn't put them off altogether!) it may forewarn the next optimistic Kiwi who sets off for Europe with only a chess column for secure income.

The first trip to Europe, or, more precisely, England, was taken on the initiative of officials of the Wainuiomata Pencarrow Chess Club with the assistance of many local organisations. After playing in the 1975 World Junior Championship in Yugoslavia, I was to go on to spend a few weeks on the UK weekend circuit. The weeks stretched into months and it was there that the decision to become a professional player was taken. After returning home and tying for first place in the New Zealand Championship, it was off to England again to try to eke out a living. These days New Zealanders appear frequently to try their hand on the circuit for a few months. To do it for a living, especially then, you were judged a fanatic, a masochist, or both.

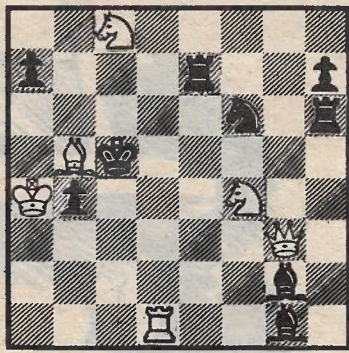
It was a tough, wonderfully un-lucrative training ground, but it did prepare me for my first big break. Under a new regulation, the winner of the 1977 Asian Junior Championship in Baguio City, the Philippines, was to automatically become an International Master. A title acts like a diploma or degree, and in most international tournaments a master would get accommodation paid, and perhaps a small fee. Scratching up the fare (and here I must thank the National Bank of New Zealand), I made it to Baguio, albeit three days late (though by jumbo jet, not a donkey as reported in one paper!). I won the title, and spent the next year on the Asian Masters circuit, and watching the 1978 World Championship Match between Karpov and Korchnoi, also held in Baguio.

At the end of 1978 came the Fide (World Chess Federation) legislation which made the obtaining of the Grandmaster title considerably more difficult than previously. Two or three world-class performances (calculated on a statistical basis according to ratings) were needed to gain the title. By 1979 I was occasionally winning internationals and in New York 1980 came a breakthrough, when I obtained a first Grandmaster result. But then followed two rather frustrating years, with a series of near misses.

Fortunately, by now it was possible to make a reasonable living, especially if one supplemented tournaments with West German professional league chess and writing. Still, however, it seemed difficult to break into the really top events. A Catch 22 situation: to be a GM you had to play in top events; to play in top events you had to be a GM!

On the close-knit European circuit, these top invitations circulate either by personal contacts or from unofficial reciprocal agreement between federations. As New Zealand hosts international competitions only rarely, most of these invitations pass us by. After much thought I asked England if I could represent them in official competition. It was a difficult decision after representing New Zealand in three Olympiads, but, in retrospect, a necessary one. Soon after, I received two invitations to Soviet tournaments. If one can survive these ordeals with self-confidence intact, they are marvellous experience. Playing these brilliant Soviet Grandmasters made a great impression on me, and played a sizable role in the final Grandmaster results I obtained this year in West Germany and Holland. It now remains for Fide to finally confirm the title in the October congress in Manila.

There are many dedicated organisers, enthusiasts and top players working in the New Zealand scene, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their help, and the support they give to chess in general. Next week's column will have some actual chess, don't worry; meanwhile here is a two-mover to keep you busy.



White to play and force mate in two moves; solution next week.

MURRAY CHANDLER

ALGEBRAIC NOTATION

The algebraic notation in this chess column is that used almost exclusively in Europe and in many countries elsewhere. Each square has one designation only. The vertical files are labelled a to h from White's left. In horizontal rank the squares are labelled 1 to 8 from White's end. Normal symbols are used, except that pawns as such are not mentioned; just the arrival square is given for a non-capturing pawn move.