

Secondary School Team Chess in England

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1. The past

I started playing chess when I was in the fourth form (now called year 10) at Maidenhead Grammar School. I joined an enthusiastic group of players and my first experiences of playing team chess were for the school second team. My memory is of lots of fixtures against all sorts of schools in East Berkshire including other grammar schools, independent schools and comprehensive schools.

Travelling to away league matches was often interesting. There was no teacher in charge of chess so we went by public transport, often on circuitous routes by bus to Windsor or train to Reading. We would then normally get a lift home from parents. When we became successful in the Sunday Times National School Chess Tournament the Headmaster would take us to distant away matches (such as Whitgift, Croydon and Dulwich College) in the recently acquired school minibus.

I think this pattern was repeated up and down the country, with most counties having their own inter-school competition. In the 1970s over 750 teams entered the Sunday Times National Tournament every year, peaking with almost 1000 in 1973. Most of the entries were secondary school first teams and chess was highly popular at many secondary schools

But over the following decades numbers have fallen dramatically. In 2005 only 93 teams entered the National School Chess Championships. What is more secondary school chess leagues closed in many counties. Those still running only had two or three entries, and many match results were very one sided. The only vibrant secondary school chess league was that in Surrey.

Various causes have been thought to have contributed to the demise in secondary school chess matches, including:

- 1) The rise of computer and other electronic games;
- 2) The greater pressure on pupils to succeed in exams;
- 3) The pressure on schools to achieve academically;
- 4) The replacement of most grammar schools with comprehensives;
- 5) State school teachers being less willing to give time to extracurricular activities;
- 6) Child protection policies making it much more difficult to arrange away matches;
- 7) The rise in primary school chess having put teenagers off chess and
- 8) Too many matches were very one sided – which neither team enjoys

The list, of course, can be extended. I think that all these have contributed to the decline in secondary school chess. However, diagnosing the cause is not important - finding a way forward is the vital task.

2. The present

By 2010 only Surrey had the traditional county secondary school league with an active open section. A few counties (Oxon, Sussex, Suffolk) ran U14/U13/U12 inter-school tournaments but failed in their attempts to run an open (U19) schools event. Birmingham still had a schools league, whilst they only had two teams in their top division it did have more in lower divisions.

Without having a local secondary school league to play in, some schools who were keen to play chess had to look elsewhere. The National Schools tournament had increased in size from the nadir of 2005, and by 2010 had about 150 entries. Birmingham Schools continued to annually host 2 one day rapidplay events, though entries here had also fallen to low numbers. The Millfield International weekend tournament in October attracts a select group of elite schools and the U18/U16/U14/U12 tournaments held at Pontins in early July has a similar entry. For prep schools there are also weekend National Preparatory Schools Tournaments run by Aldro School. Some secondary schools found that the only way to get matches was to play in the local adult league.

But most secondary schools just stopped playing chess matches, even though they might still have a chess club.

Here and there local initiatives provide chess for schools: Cumbria had a termly Wednesday afternoon event that a few schools enter, the Bournemouth Mayor hosted an annual event to which two local secondary schools regularly entered. Birmingham also ran an afternoon 5 minute chess event which attracted half a dozen local schools.

It was in this context that I agreed to become ECF Manager of Secondary school chess in early 2012. Others were already undertaking local initiatives – in Spring 2012 Sussex Junior Chess restarted their Open section for secondary schools, which two schools entered and they played one match. In autumn 2012 Barnet Junior Chess extended their successful primary school league, played in a central venue, to also include a secondary school event to which five teams from four schools entered.

3. Learning from Cricket

As has been described above, Secondary school chess has been rapidly shrinking in England. With the exception of the National Schools Championship (which itself has also seen a dramatic fall in secondary school entries) there were very few secondary school fixtures outside Surrey in 2010.

Whilst the Briant Poulter (Surrey Schools) league, which now has 6 divisions and 35 teams from 14 schools, shows how secondary school chess might have developed in other counties it is not a model that can now be emulated. Instead we must seek to arrange chess events that more secondary schools wish to take part in.

There are three forms of cricket: First class cricket (test matches and county fixtures); One day games and Twenty20 cricket. It is the quicker forms that are most popular with most players and spectators. Most inter-school cricket is based on the Twenty20 version.

Similarly we have three forms of chess: Long play, rapidplay and blitz. I think that most secondary school leagues, when they existed, just used long play. In the past few years the Surrey Schools (Briant Poulter) league has introduced the use of rapidplay in its lowest two divisions. In those fixtures players now play two rapidplay games rather than one long play game. Many of the local initiatives referred to in Section 2 are blitz events (though chess clocks are only used in some of the games).

As ECF Manager of Secondary School chess I have started three initiatives to encourage more secondary school chess:

- an ECF secondary school chess newsletter
- one day tournaments
- afternoon chess tournaments.

In both tournaments teams play a Swiss tournament rather than the traditional inter-school fixture. One day events can have five rounds when played at 25 mins each whilst afternoon events can have four rounds when played at 12 mins each. Also, as the afternoon event is entry level I have also found that many of the inexperienced players prefer not to use chess clocks.

Feedback from the schools who have taken parts has shown both types of events to be popular. The reasons for their popularity include:

1. There is a buzz from being in a large event, and seeing lots of other chess players.
2. Multiple games mean that most players, and teams, win at least one game (A reason for using a Swiss approach rather than Jamboree pairings)
3. Schools have some matches against teams of a similar ability to themselves
4. Players get lots of games, most of which are not too one sided.
5. Teams still play as teams, and so can easily watch each others games
6. Schools meet lots of other schools, school chess organisers also have a chance to mix and chat
7. The events have a relaxed atmosphere
8. One day rapidplay events are graded
9. Schools only need to do the administration for travel once, not for every fixture. In some schools this is quite onerous (parental permission, safety assessments etc).

I'm pleased to report that some schools have already shown interested in hosting such events in the future. Therefore I expect to see in 2013 more such events and more schools running chess teams. Hopefully in due course this will lead to more schools wanting to take part in the National Schools Championships.