

Match Secretary's report to the AGM (25/5/2000)

Summer Lightning

We started off, as usual, with the Summer Lightning tournament, which this year had 11 teams. It was won by Keynsham with 120 points out of a possible 144, just short of their 1997 record of 122½.

League Divisional winners

The League itself was a little smaller than in the previous season, and I scheduled it to start a week later as it had been advancing by a day each year for the last few years. I am now working on the principle that each club should be able to have two meetings between the Bank Holiday and the start of the League, which means the start date will normally be on a Tuesday two weeks after Bank Holiday Monday.

Division 1 turned out to be a battle between Clifton A and Horfield A, which was decided when Horfield had a surprise loss to Grendel B. In the end Clifton won by just that one match, with 27 points against Horfield's 25.

Bath B won Division 2 by a large margin, and they get promotion to the first division along with Hanham. The other winners were Downend C in Division 3, University A in Division 4, and Clifton D in Division 5.

Knockout winners

Downend managed to knock out one of the favourites in the Cup by beating Clifton, but were trounced 7½/½ by a very strong Bath team. Bath went on to beat Keynsham convincingly in the semifinals, but lost by a narrow margin to Horfield who therefore make up for losing the League trophy by winning the Cup. The Minor Cup was won by South Bristol who beat Hanham in the final.

Alan Ashby

The Alan Ashby competition once again inspired some players to play a huge number of games, and Downend's Mike Brannan took a lead early on and managed to hold it. He eventually won with 21½ from 32 games, ahead of Roger Hardy who had 20 out of 34.

The unofficial competition to see who has improved the most this year was won by Phillip Lawson of Hanham, going up from 40 to 74. The best performance among the top players was Paul Griffiths of Bath, who improved from 170 to 198 in his League games.

Statistics

2326 games were played, a decrease of about 300 on last year. This is due to the fact that division 1, 3 and 4 were smaller than last year. 68 players left the League, excluding students, and there was a net loss of 27 players taking part in at least one game. The number of players who had ten or more games to their credit was down from 272 to 248, a drop of about 10%.

Grading thresholds for next season will be slightly lower in the top two divisions. This probably does not reflect a weakening of the League so much as the fact that University A had to play in the fourth division this year.

Defaults

Defaults were about the same in total as last year, with a total of 116 from 378 matches. As there were fewer matches we would have expected defaults to be lower. Two teams which had the biggest problems last year, University and Grendel, have made big improvements in their performance. University A managed to pass the entire season without defaulting a game, which shows that it can be done with careful management. However, other clubs have stepped in to fill the gap, and the worst offenders have been Bath and Clifton, with 16 each. I have also been disturbed by the number of teams postponing matches this year, often without asking me or even bothering to inform me. The low point of the season has to be the match between Bath A and Grendel B where Bath postponed the match three times, and eventually played it in the middle of May, more than seven months after its scheduled date. Postponements should only be made in cases of bad weather, or when several players fall ill at the last minute and cannot be replaced. It seems to me that a number of teams have been postponing matches simply because they cannot get their normal team out, and this is unfair both to the opposition and to those teams that do follow the rules. Captains who find themselves asked to postpone a match should not do so unless there are genuine reasons. They should ask for advice when possible and keep me informed at all times. A good guideline is to ask yourself whether it would be acceptable in the Football League. You do not get Liverpool phoning up Man United the day before a match and agreeing to play it some other time, and you do not see them turning up for a match with only nine players.

New QP finish rule

Now for the new rule that was introduced last year regarding Quickplay Finishes. This has been quite popular, especially among Division One and Two players, and seems to be the best balance we have found for this very contentious issue. For the record, there were 58 individual games played with Quickplay finishes - about 2 or 3% of all games played. Team captains should make sure of putting a Q by the names of players using this rule, so as to make sure we can accurately monitor their popularity. The old rule, where captains can agree the mode of play for the whole match, seems to have been virtually abandoned.

Tables by email

A key innovation this season has been the use of email in conducting League business. I currently send League tables by email to seven clubs, and this not only saves the League money and removes postal delays, but also saves me time in printing and posting all those sheets of paper. As a reward those clubs that receive their tables by email have sent them twice monthly. I hope more clubs will subscribe to this scheme next year.

Some captains have asked whether they can send results in by email. This has the advantage of being faster and cheaper but for the moment I prefer to stick to the paper based method. It is easier for me to read the results of a pile of paper sheets than having multiple windows open on my screen, and also the sheets are signed by both captains which helps to avoid disputes. But things like adjournment results, letters and notification of mistakes in the League tables can be sent by email and are then much less likely to be drowned under a sea of papers in my in tray.

Results sheets

While on the subject of results, I have compiled statistics on the delays between playing matches and sending in the results and they do not make good reading. Last year the average delay was 8.9 days. This year the average time has increased by a day to over ten days. The worst offenders have been Nailsea C - 22 days - and Grendel A - 20 days. 24 teams - half the League - have averaged under a week, allowing for time in my in-tray, so there is no excuse for the others to be so late. The easiest thing is to slip it in the post on the way home from the match. Delay simply makes the League tables out of date and denies team members the knowledge of how they are performing.

Prediction of teams next year

For next year I believe that two clubs are looking to drop a team and one has hopes of entering an extra team. In the absence of further information I anticipate that we will probably have 45 teams next year, and due to promotion and relegation obligations this may result in an uneven shape of the divisions. The only cure is to get more players so that clubs can enter additional teams, and this really is almost entirely in the hands of club organisers. We had a turnover equivalent to about 1½ players per team, which gives some idea of the amount of work we need to do in order just to stay still. This year the Junior League has been increasing its numbers and the South Gloucestershire Primary Schools League has been extremely successful, with over 160 players at its congress two weeks ago. So there is a lot of interest in chess in the area. It is up to clubs to determine how they can capture this enthusiasm in order to build up the League for future years. In this respect the club which has done most to boost itself is Grendel, with its established tournament circuit which has been hitting record figures this year. Also Bath, Thornbury and South Bristol have been showing good growth, so these could be clubs which will capture the League's attention in seasons to come.

Jerry Humphreys