



Tradewise Gibraltar Chess Festival 2017

Monday 23 January - Thursday 2 February 2017

Round 1 Report: *Tuesday 24 January 2017 - by John Saunders (@JohnChess)*

Sharks versus Minnows

As always, round one of a big open consists of pairings between sharks and minnows, and this wouldn't be an unreasonable piscatorial analogy for the first round of the Tradewise Gibraltar Masters, held at the Caleta Hotel on 24 January 2017.

However, these things are relative. Such is the stratospheric strength of this tournament that many of the players that I have just unkindly characterised as minnows probably now have grounds to sue me. They might better be described as piranhas. A lot smaller than sharks, perhaps, but with rows of tiny, razor-sharp teeth. Even the players rated 300 or 400 points below the elite players can hardly be described as amateurs, with a number of holders of the grandmaster title, and significant national titles amongst them.

A case in point: former world championship runner-up Boris Gelfand, 48, rated 2721, found himself paired with Robert Bellin, 64, rated 2353. That's almost a 400 point difference, but those in the know would still consider this quite a tough pairing for the Israeli star. In 1979 Robert won the British Championship title at a time when British chess was growing very strong and he had a very considerable career as a tournament professional and book author from that time forward. Anno domini has caught up with his rating but he's still a formidable opponent for anyone on a good day. Sometimes it is better to judge an opponent on the basis of their peak rating than the current one in order to get a true idea of their strength. I'm sure Gelfand would have done so and treated his opponent with the utmost respect. He got somewhat the worst of the game and a tactical draw offer on move 31 secured him a half point in a position that appeared to favour Bellin, albeit not by much.

THE SHARK THAT GOT AWAY

That was the only draw on the top 15 boards, and all nine games on higher boards went in favour of the higher rated player. There was another draw on board 16, though it looked for much of the game that a greater surprise was on the cards. Nigel Short, recently arrived from a trip to Iran, was Black against Peter Lombaers, a 2314-rated FM from the Netherlands. The 25-year-old Dutchman, unlike Bellin, has no 'previous' and one might have expected the 1993 world championship runner-up to clean up, but he wasn't on his usual sharp Gibraltar form. I won't quote the vocabulary he used to describe his own play on Facebook, but can reveal that he was extremely critical of his own play. His game fell apart, going from 'lost', via 'dead lost', to something approaching 'completely and utterly, irredeemably lost'. But, then, when a sub-1800 rated player could probably have been relied upon to supply the coup de grace, suddenly Lombaers produced an inexplicably awful move to allow Short to save himself and achieve a draw. One has to feel for Lombaers, who stumbled on the brink of a stunning victory against a famous player. I took a photo of him just after his blunder, head in hands staring at the piece he had played to the wrong square and obviously asking himself the question, 'why on earth did I play Rb4?' Of course, we have all done it but that won't be much consolation.

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P.Lombaers (2314) - N.Short (2675)



Now it is almost harder to find a move that doesn't win than one that does. **44.Rb4** 44.c5 is the logical continuation but White was worried by the mirage of 44...Ra4, so doubly protects against the possibility. And yet, had he played it, the computer shows it is an empty threat, e.g. 45.Rb1! Rxh4+ 46.Kg3 Ra4 47.c6 when, despite the apparently exposed position of the white king, Black actually has nothing and the joint passed pawns on the sixth rank win automatically. **44...Qe1** Forking the rook on b4 and the pawn on h4. This time the threat to the h-pawn does matter. **45.Qd4 Qxb4 46.Qxa7 Qxd6+ 47.g3** White has succeeded in keeping the game going but his chances of winning have evaporated. **47...Qd2+ 48.Kh3 Kg7 49.Qa1+ Kg8 50.Qf1 Qc2 51.g4 hxg4+ 52.fxg4 Qc3+ 53.Kg2 Qc2+ 54.Kf3 f5 55.Qe2 fxg4+ 56.Kf2 Qc3 57.Qxg4 Qd2+ 58.Kf1 Qc1+ 59.Ke2 Qc2+ 60.Ke3 Qc3+ 61.Kf2 Qd2+ 62.Kg3 Qc3+ 63.Kg2 Qc2+ 64.Kh3 Qd3+ 65.Qg3 Qxc4 66.Qxg6+ Kh8 67.Qh6+ ½-½**

Vassily Ivanchuk had a hard fight for his first-round point. Rated exactly 400 points above Petra Papp of Hungary, he reached a level endgame of bishop and four versus bishop and four, but had just enough wiggle room to play on and gradually secure a positional plus, which he turned into a pawn plus and eventually a win, though it did mean he was very late in getting to the gala dinner.

One game swung through 180 degrees. Yu Yangyi, the eighth seed from China, seemed to be struggling against Bjarke Sahl but an injudicious pawn push by the Danish player saw the game gradually turn around and Yu Yangyi managed to win.

Further down the field there were three major upsets, with grandmasters losing to humbler opposition. Abhijeet Gupta was the 2008 world junior champion but he was bested by 49-year-old Frank Buchenau from Germany, who kept his nerve to exploit an endgame advantage. Grigoriy Oparin, though only 19, is a rising star of Russian chess but he was outplayed by a 32-year-old Spanish FIDE master from Beniaján in Murcia, Emilio Miguel Sanchez Jerez. Israeli grandmaster Victor Mikhalevski, making his fourth visit to the Tradewise Gibraltar tournament was the third grandmaster to lower his colours against much lower rated opposition, defeated by Sebastian Finsterwalder, aged 35, from Germany.

Otherwise it was mostly 'business as usual' with the super-GMs dealing briskly with the lower rated opposition, though some of these sported the GM title themselves. Veselin Topalov is making his second appearance in Gibraltar and was paired against GM Thomas Paehtz of Germany, the father of Elisabeth Paehtz who used to be one of the live commentary team and has returned this year to play in the tournament. Despite his low rating, Thomas might have represented a tough first-round hurdle for the former world champion but for an early oversight which led to swift calamity.

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V.Topalov (2739) - T.Paehtz (2365)

1.d4 e6 2.Nf3 f5 3.Bf4 It is curious how this sort of line was once considered to be stodgy club player fare but is now being embraced by aggressive super-GMs. **3...Nf6 4.e3 b6 5.Be2 Bb7 6.0-0 Be7 7.c4 Ne4 8.Nfd2 Nxd2 9.Nxd2 0-0 10.Bf3 d5 11.cxd5 exd5 12.Rc1 c6 13.Qa4 b5 14.Qb3**



14...Nd7?? Black's pawn centre looks impregnable but a tactical shot blows it wide open. **15.Bxd5+! cxd5**
16.Rc7! 16.Rc7 Black can't do anything about a tactic to win back a piece and secure a two-pawn advantage, e.g. 16...Rb8 17.Rxb7 Rxb7 18.Qxd5+ and recaptures on b7. **1-0**

A selection of photos of round one can be downloaded from my Flickr account at <https://flic.kr/s/aHskT6pEzb>

Video footage and interviews from today's round are available to embed from our [YouTube Channel](#).

Report Ends

Official website: www.gibchess.com

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