

4NCL Telford - Weekend 2 (by Steve Burke)

After the “Winter Break” from 4NCL action we returned to action - just in time for winter to actually arrive. This untimely freezing weather and Saturday night snowfall forced a late change of our travel plans on Sunday morning as my car refuses to go uphill in these sorts of conditions!



Luckily the snow had gone by the time I got home, and hopefully this will be the last picture of this sort I need to publish this season.

However, I don't think the weather had anything to do with the various team withdrawals from this weekend's Division 4 contests. Whatever the reasons, the many that did play produced more hard fought chess, and will no doubt be back for more next time!

Division 3 South

After four rounds we are getting a better picture of the strength of the teams, and it seems clear that Pool A is stronger than Pool B. The three highest rated teams (Shropshire 1, West is Best 1 and Leeds University Old Boys) are all in Pool A and the average rating of the Pool A teams is 34 points higher than for Pool B.

There is also a much bigger spread between the highest and lowest rated teams in Pool A (168) than in Pool B (114). This suggests that Pool A should be pretty clear-cut, but if you could rely on statistics to predict sporting events, the bookies would all be out of business!

Pool A

West is Best are the clear leaders as the only team with 8 points, and look likely to confirm a Promotion Pool spot at the next weekend. By contrast, favourites Shropshire still have a fight on their hands to match that achievement.

Performance of the weekend for this group was probably by Rhyfelwyr Essyllwg, as the Welsh Warriors beat The Anglian Avengers 4-2 to move into the top half. However, the Anglian Avengers look to have the easiest run in, so their 3 points is a good base for a challenge. Meanwhile the Midland Monarchs' two wins put them in clear second place with 6 points, but with the three highest rated teams left to play, it will be a struggle to stay there.

All-in-all this Pool is not quite working out as expected - at least not yet.

Pool B

I have a feeling that this race for the Promotion Pool is going to be very closely contested, with a likely tie on 7 or even 8 points. Wessex sit top as the only team with 8 points now, but still have to play the other three teams in the top half, so aren't yet guaranteed to get there.

Meanwhile the teams in the chasing pack are all very closely matched. The highest rated team, Surbiton, are unlikely to repeat the two losses they suffered this weekend, and I doubt the second highest, Poisoned Pawns, will be handicapped by defaulting a board in future rounds.

Having said that, congratulations are due to the Fermented Sharks for their giant-killing of Surbiton on Saturday. Though looking at their Sunday match (where the top four all lost) one wonders if the celebrations might have been a little over enthusiastic? Still, having played the top four teams, even on 2 points at present they might still reach the Promotion Pool.

Division 4

The ratings suggest that there are five teams (Iceni 1, The Full Ponty, Barnet Knights 1, West is Best 2 & Sussex Martlets 2) who are just about on a par with the lower teams in Division 3 South. These should be contesting the promotion spots. Then there is a further group of four teams (Shropshire 2, Ashfield-Breadsall 2, Throw in the Tal 1 & Cambridge University 3) who might hope to push their way into that race.

Five of the original 20 teams were missing from this weekend's play, two of them for the second time, but these teams seem unlikely to be involved in the promotion battle. Meanwhile the "big five" and all but Cambridge of the "challengers" are on 4 or more points. Sussex Martlets lead the way as the only team with 8 points, but there's plenty of room for shuffling this pack at the next weekend.

Last time I reported that Cambridge University and Hackney were "punching above their weight" in the top 10, but sadly for them neither was able to maintain that form. This weekend's "overachievers" were Iceni 2 with two excellent "against the odds" wins to move up to fourth place, level on 6 points with their 1st team and The Full Ponty.

For the chasing pack, there's still all to play for, as these four teams will be pitted against each other in Round 5.

Star Game

I didn't spot a clear top choice this time, but eventually chose this game from a dozen or so candidates. It is an interesting side-line of the Benko Gambit, an opening I've played a lot myself, that almost always produces interesting chess.

There are some strategic ideas to consider in the opening and middlegame (with apologies to the players for the liberal sprinkling of ? and ?! annotations). Then there is a great attack, leading to a very nice final position.

Fowler,David (1897) - Majer,Chris E (1939) [A57]
4NCL 3 South pool B Telford, ENG ENG (3.128), 16.01.2016
[Burke,Steven J]

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.Qc2!? This avoids debating one of the various main line positions after 4.cxb5

4...d6 5.e4 Nbd7? Diagram



There appears to be a problem with this move, as it doesn't fit so well with the Gambit Accepted positions that white can still choose.

Black could close the position with 5...b4, but I would prefer the more Benko-like 5...bxc4 6.Bxc4 Nbd7 (or 6...g6) 7.Nc3 g6+/-

6.Bd3+/- White can simply win the pawn here, without any apparent compensation for black, 6.cxb5! Perhaps white didn't fancy the open centre positions that occur after 6...e6 7.dxe6 fxe6 8.Nf3 Bb7 9.Nc3 d5 10.exd5 exd5 11.Bd3+/-

6...g6? Black can now play 6...bxc4! with an extra tempo over doing it on the previous move, achieving a good Benko position.

7.b3? I think white should still take the pawn. For example, 7.cxb5 Bg7 8.Nc3 a6 9.a4+/-

7...Bg7= Here 7...bxc4!? comes with a tactical trap, 8.Bxc4? Nxe4 9.Qxe4? Bg7 10.Ne2 Bxa1 11.Nbc3 Ne5-/+

Black is fine after 7...bxc4!? 8.bxc4 Bg7=

8.Bb2 0-0?! White is ready to take on b5 again, so 8...bxc4 9.Bxc4 0-0=

9.Nf3?!= Black gets some compensation for the pawn after 9.cxb5! a6 10.a4 axb5 11.Bxb5 Ba6 12.Na3+/- but I never enjoyed playing these positions as black when a white piece gets to sit on b5.

9...bxc4 10.Bxc4 Diagram



10...Ng4?! Black seems to be a tempo short of making this work well.

Therefore it's probably better to create immediate pressure with 10...Nb6. If white saves the bishop with 11.Bd3 it no longer presses on the c4-g8 diagonal, so then black can play 11...Nh5 12.Bxg7 Kxg7 13.0-0 e5= (or 13...e6=)

Otherwise black keeps the option to exchange it later, e.g. 10...Nb6 11.Nbd2 a5 12.0-0 a4 13.Rfe1 Nxc4 14.Nxc4 axb3 15.axb3 Bd7=

11.Bxg7 Kxg7 12.0-0 Nge5 13.Nbd2 Diagram



13...Qb6?! This allows white to play his attack with tempo gaining moves. 13...Nxf3+!
 14.Nxf3 Rb8 keeps things more balanced.

14.Nxe5! Nxe5 15.f4 Nd7 16.Qc3+ f6 Diagram



17.Nf3+/= White might continue pressing forward with 17.e5!? dxe5 18.Rae1 Ba6
 (18...exf4?? 19.Rxe7+ Rf7 (19...Kh8 20.Ne4 Ne5 21.d6+-) 20.Rxf7+ Kxf7 21.Re1 Ne5 22.d6+
 Kg7 23.Rxe5 fxe5 24.Qxe5+ with mate to follow) 19.Bxa6 Qxa6 20.Nc4+/=

17...a5 18.e5!? In view of black's improvement below, objectively white should probably try
 18.Ng5!? Re8? (18...Kh8 19.e5 dxe5 20.fxe5 fxg5 21.Rxf8+ Nxf8 22.e6+ Kg8 23.Rf1 Nxe6
 24.Qf3 Qd8 (24...Nf4?? 25.d6+ Kg7 26.Qxa8+-) 25.dxe6+/=) 19.Ne6+ Kh8 20.g4 Ba6 21.g5+/-

18...Qb4! 19.Qe3 Diagram



19...Ba6?+/- Black is fighting for counterplay on the queenside to distract white from his attack and this doesn't quite achieve that.

A more direct attempt would be 19...a4!? when a likely follow up might be 20.exd6 exd6 21.Qe7+ Rf7 22.Qxd6 axb3 23.axb3 Rxa1 24.Rxa1 Nb6~/= Here black is a pawn down, but has good compensation.

20.Rac1 Bxc4 21.Rxc4!+/- Positionally 21.bxc4! would solidify the white centre, and Komodo prefers this, but we would have been denied the coming storm!

21...Qb6?? After this, white's attack crashes through with hammer blows!

Black needed to play 21...Qb7! when black seems to be holding his position together, e.g. 22.exd6 exd6 23.Re4 Qxd5 24.Qe2 Rf7 25.Rd1 Qc6 26.Re6 Ra6 27.Qc4 Qb7 28.Rexd6 Rxd6 29.Rxd6 Re7+/=

22.e6! White has a big advantage after 22.exf6+ exf6 23.Re4+/- but white plays for mate!

22...Nb8 Diagram



If black could now play f5, he might survive, but white closes that door in the nick of time.

23.f5!! Rh8 24.Ng5! Na6+- If the knight is taken, white has mate in eight, 24...fxg5 25.Qc3+ Kg8 (25...Kh6 26.Rf3 g4 27.Rxg4 c4+ 28.Kh1 Kh5 29.Qc1 h6 30.Rh4+ Kxh4 31.Qf4+ Kh5 32.Rh3#) 26.f6 h5 (26...Na6 27.f7+ Kf8 28.Qxh8#) 27.f7+ Kh7 28.Qxh8+ Kxh8 29.f8Q+ Kh7 30.Rf7#

25.Nf7 Diagram



25...h6+- Trying to close the kingside doesn't work either, 25...g5 26.Nxg5! (White also has 26.h4 h6 27.Qf3+-) 26...Rag8 (26...fxg5 27.Qxg5+ Kf8 28.Qh5 Kg7 29.Qf7+ Kh6 30.Rh4+ Kg5 31.Qxe7#) 27.Nf7 Kf8 28.Nxh8 Ke8 29.Nf7+-

26.fxg6 Qb7 27.Rf5 Nb4 28.Rh4 Nc2 29.Qh3 Nd4 30.Rxh6 Diagram



30...Qb4+- [30...Nxf5 31.Rh7+ Rxh7 32.Qxh7+ Kf8 33.Qh8#; 30...Rhg8 31.Rh7+ Kf8 32.Rh8 Nxf5 33.Rxg8+ Kxg8 34.Qh8#]

31.Rh7+ Black had managed to set a last trap... 31.Rfh5?? Qe1#

31...Kxg6 32.Qh5# Diagram



A very picturesque final position, as the black king is escorted to the guillotine by all four of white's remaining pieces!

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