

4NCL Telford - Weekend 3 (by Steve Burke)

Winter is still upon us, with freezing weather again for the third weekend, but luckily (for once) the snow remained further north and south and didn't cause any problems. Hopefully that will deprive you of any more snow-scape photos this season.

Although I did hear that it's statistically more likely to snow at Easter than Christmas. So maybe the card manufacturers are leading us all up the wrong path!

This being the middle weekend of the season, Division 3 in particular is reaching its first critical stage when the Promotion and Relegation Pools will be decided, and there were interesting developments, though leaving much still to be decided.

Looking at exceptional team performances, after a good effort themselves to draw with Wessex on Saturday, Surbiton were again the victims of the weekend's biggest giant-killing, this time losing 4.5 – 1.5 to CSC Rhinos, 171 points below them on average rating.

In Div 4 there were also rating upsets as West is Best beat Barnet Knights (rated 139 higher) on Saturday, but were then overturned themselves by Sussex Martlets (rated 140 lower) on Sunday!

Division 3 South

Moving towards the conclusion of the first pool stage, this was a very important weekend for all the teams involved in the race for the Promotion Pool - or to avoid the Relegation Pool, depending on their aspirations!

Pool A

West is Best continued their almost perfect progress with two more wins. So they reach 12 points, and clearly qualify as favourites into the Promotion Pool.

The Midland Monarchs missed out on their first chance to qualify, losing to Shropshire. However, they recovered on Sunday (beating Rhyfelwyr Essyllwg, who had a disappointing weekend and cannot now qualify) to qualify with 8 points.

Congratulations to both these teams, who intriguingly play each other in Round 7. So they will effectively be starting their Promotion Pool campaigns a day before the rest!

The other two places will be decided in the final round of Pool A games, after the Rookies and Anglian Avengers both had good weekends to move up into contention. They play each other in Round 7, where the Rookies need a win to qualify, while a draw will be enough for the Anglians.

Shropshire followed up their important Saturday win with a draw against the Rookies on Sunday, which by my calculation leaves them needing to score 1.5 game points in their last match against Leeds UOB to ensure qualification.

If the Rookies win 3.5 – 2.5 against the Anglian Avengers, and Shropshire lose 5 – 1, there will be a three way tie on 7 points and 20.5 game points. Then maybe someone might get some photos of the organisers scratching their heads on Saturday night, as they try to sort out first Board Count, then Board Elimination, and I guess conceivably end up looking for a three sided coin as a last resort!!

Pool B

As I forecast last time, this race for the Promotion Pool is going right down to the wire, with potentially five teams finishing in a tie for third on 7 points. Cue more photos of the organisers, etc...

Wessex remains in top spot with 10 points after drawing both matches to clinch qualification. While my team, Ashfield-Breadsall, picked up a win and a hard-fought draw against Wessex (unusually with six drawn games – two, including my own, going well into the second time control a pawn down in endings) to ensure qualification too. Top spot will be decided in Round 7 when both our matches may, or may not, count towards the Promotion Pool scores.

There were mixed fortunes for most teams in the chasing pack, except for Fermented Sharks, who won both games to move up to 6 points and resurrect their chances. They face CSC Rhinos next time, who also have 6 points. So a win for either would guarantee them a place in the Promotion Pool.

The other team on 6 points is Warwickshire Select and a win for them would also guarantee qualification. However they have a tough match against Wessex.

If two of the above don't reach the magic 8 points, then Surbiton and the Poisoned Pawns come into the picture as they can reach 7 points.

The Poisoned Pawns have the tougher task, facing Ashfield-Breadsall, and also suffering the effects of defaulted boards in the previous rounds, which leaves them probably struggling on game points in any tie break. While, on paper, Surbiton have the easier task against MK Phoenix, if they can reverse their recent run of results.

It should all make for a very exciting Saturday round at the March weekend!

Division 4

This weekend wasn't so decisive for this division, given the Swiss system in use here, but that didn't stop Sussex Martlets 2 and The Full Ponty picking up a couple of wins each and moving to 12 and 10 points respectively. That gives them some breathing space in the race for promotion places.

Behind them most of the teams picked up a couple of points and there are now three teams on 8 points, Icen 1, Shropshire 2 and Icen 2, who continue to punch well above their rating weight. Further back on 7 points are West is Best 2, Throw in the Tal 1 and Cambridge University 3.

Of course we are inly just past the half-way stage, so almost anything might happen, but it's hard to look much beyond these eight teams for promotion contenders.

Star Game

It wasn't so easy to choose a game this time. There were several games that would have been nice wins, but then the "winner" blew it and even ended up losing sometimes. There were also many hard fought games with errors traded back and forth, and two or three giant-killings, but nothing that stood out for me.

In the end I decided on the following game from the Midland Monarchs 3.5 – 2.5 win over Rhyfelwyr Essyllwg, which qualified the former for the Promotion Pool and eliminated the Welsh team. If this game had gone the other way, as it could easily have done, the situation would be very different.

**Van Kemenade, Rudy (1967) - Serbanescu, Diana-Maria (2032) [E81]
4NCL 3 South pool A Telford, ENG ENG (6.58), 14.02.2016
[Burke, Steven J]**

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.f3 0-0 6.Be3 c6!? Diagram

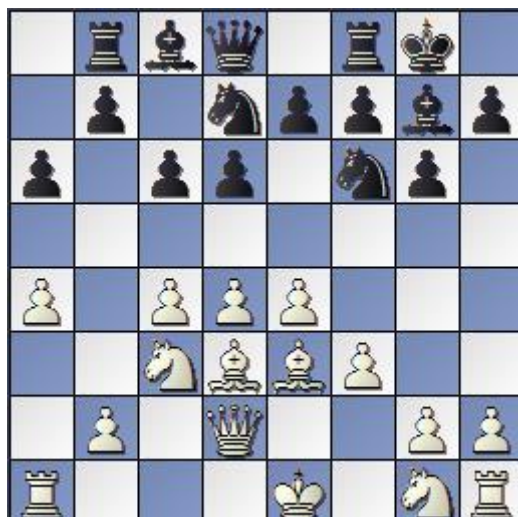


I've played both sides of the Samisch variation many times (having a massive plus score with white) but this flexible defence is one line that I've only faced twice.

7.Qd2 a6 8.a4 I'd probably play 8.Bd3 b5 9.Nge2 but taking time out to prevent the immediate advance of the b-pawn also makes sense.

8...Nbd7 Black could try to take advantage of white's last move with 8...a5 9.Bd3 Na6 10.Nge2 Nb4

9.Bd3 Rb8?!+/= Diagram

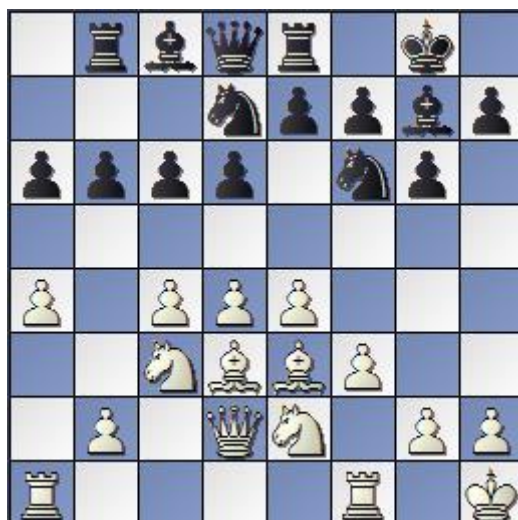


Although there are a handful of games with this in my database, I can't find any by titled players, and I have to admit that I don't understand it as black still cannot play b5. Black has had more success with 9...e5

10.Nge2 Re8?! Another mysterious rook move! The rook isn't needed to support the thrust 10...e5 and would usually be more useful on the f-file. Perhaps best would be the immediate 10...b6, before white prevents it by playing a5, with a view to playing c5.

11.0-0+/- White continues naturally, but he could take time out to take advantage of black's play with 11.a5!

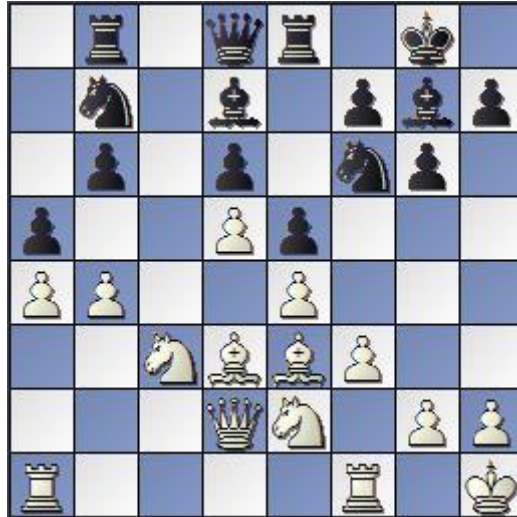
11...b6 12.Kh1 Diagram



12...e5?!+/- This doesn't really fit with black's previous play on the queenside. I think black should head for a Maroczy Bind/Hedgehog type of position here with 12...c5 13.-- (13.d5?! Ne5) with the idea 13...cxd4 14.Nxd4 Ne5 15.Be2 Bb7+/- Another idea is to keep the flexible approach rolling with 12...e6!?

13.d5! cxd5 14.cxd5 Nc5 15.Bc2 Bd7?!+/- As black is not playing for a kingside attack, it would probably be better to try to bring this bishop actively into the game with 15...a5 16.Nb5 Ba6 although white is still doing very well.

16.b4! Nb7 17.Bd3 a5 Diagram



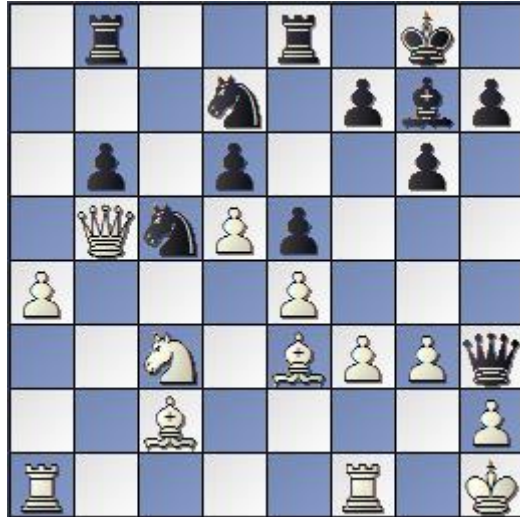
18.Nb5?!+/- This is the high point for the white advantage in the game. Komodo gives the following lines to keep that big plus 18.bxa5! bxa5 (18...Nxa5 19.Rab1 Bc8 20.Nb5 Bf8 21.Nec3+/-) 19.Nb5 Nc5 (19...Bf8 20.Rfc1 Bxb5 21.Bxb5 Nd7 22.Rab1+/-) 20.Nxd6 Nb3 21.Qa2 Nxa1 22.Nxe8 Nxe8 23.Rxa1+/-

18...axb4 19.Qxb4 Nc5 20.Bc2?!+/= The bishop remains more active after 20.Bc4! Bf8 21.Rfb1 Ra8 22.Qd2 Nh5 23.g4 Nf6 24.Ng3+/- and white is better right across the board, but still has to find some way to make progress.

20...Bxb5 21.Qxb5 Nfd7 22.Nc3 Qh4!? Having set up a fairly solid blockade on the queenside, black aims for some activity on the opposite flank. This might be a touch optimistic and objectively better could be activating the king's bishop with 22...Bf6 23.Rfb1 Bg5+/=

23.g3+/- Komodo suggests this is as good as anything else, but it does create some space in front of the king. So I would prefer the equally good 23.Bf2+/-

23...Qh3 Diagram



24.Bd1?= Somewhat surprisingly, this regrouping of the bishop is a major turning point. Withdrawing the queen is much more effective, 24.Qe2! Bh6 25.Bg1 Now black is running short of sensible moves, e.g. 25...Nb7 (25...Rec8 26.Nb5 Bf8 27.Na7 Re8 28.Nc6+/-; 25...Bf8 26.Nb5 Red8 27.Na7 Ra8 28.Nc6 Re8+/-) 26.Nb5 Rec8 27.Rfb1 Ra8 28.Na3 Na5 29.Bxb6 Nxb6 30.Rxb6 Qd7+/-

24...f5! 25.Be2?! [25.Ra3 f4 26.gxf4 Bh6 27.Qe2 exf4 28.Bd4=]

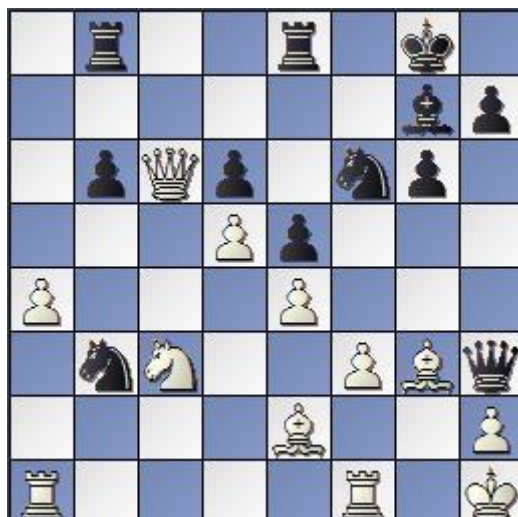
25...f4! Diagram



Black seizes the initiative on the kingside.

26.Bf2 fxe3 27.Bxe3 Nf6 28.Qc6??-/+ Perhaps not sensing the change in the wind, white sees an opportunity to finally infiltrate the black position. It was time to look to the defence of the kingside, e.g. 28.Rg1 Nh5 29.Nd1 Nf4 30.Nf2 Qh5 31.Ra3=

28...Nb3! Diagram



29.Qxd6?+ In for a penny... Suddenly white is in serious trouble, and probably losing, even with the best defence 29.Ra3 Nd4 30.Qc4 (The threat is 30.-- Nxe2 31.Nxe2 Qxf1+) 30...Nc2 31.Rg1 Nxa3 32.Qb3 b5 33.axb5 Nxb5 34.Nxb5 Nh5-+

29...Nh5!! Much better than taking the exchange with 29...Nxa1! 30.Rxa1 before playing 30...Nh5 when white has 31.Rg1-/+

30.Bf2 Nf4 31.Rg1 Nxa1 Black picks up a whole rook and now just needs to avoid some blunder to secure the point.

32.Rg3 Qc8 33.Qb4 Nc2 34.Qb2 Nxe2 35.Nxe2 Qc4 36.Nc3 Qf1+ 37.Bg1 Nd4 38.d6 Red8 39.Qa2+ Kh8 40.Qd5 Nxf3-+ Still a rook down, and the time control reached, white allows a pretty mate to finish the game.

41.Rxf3 Qxf3#

0-1 Diagram

