

New Jersey's Jon Edwards wins the 32nd ICCF World Correspondence Chess Championship

Jon Edwards of Pennington New Jersey becomes just the third American (behind Hans Berliner and Victor Palciauskis) and the first American in 38 years to win the World Correspondence Chess Championship. He also becomes just the 14th American to become a Correspondence Chess Grandmaster. Jon tells his recent story.

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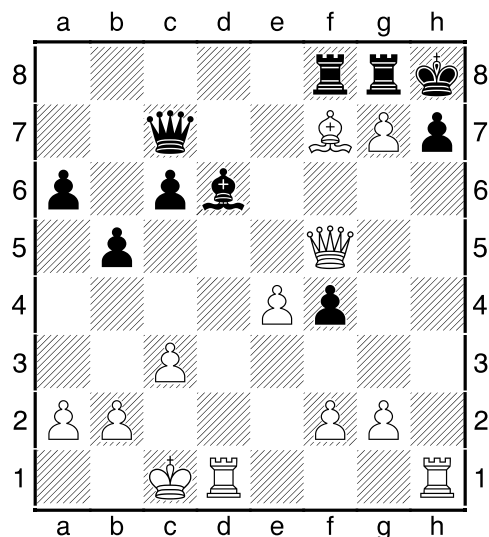
10 million game databases and Neural Net Chess Engines are placing correspondence chess under stress, and yet a small number of correspondence players continue to find ways to win. Correspondence chess was so much easier, and arguably much more fun, just a decade ago, when engines and other chess tools were much less sophisticated.

Correspondence wins like this were possible:

Edwards, J (2430) – Merel, R (2095) [B42]

10th US Correspondence Championship, 1993–1997

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 a6 5.Bd3 Nc6 6.Nxc6 dxc6 7.Nd2 e5 8.Nc4 Ne7 9.Be3 Ng6 10.Nb6 Rb8 11.Nxc8 Rxc8 12.Qg4 Bb4+ 13.c3 0-0 14.0-0-0 Bd6 15.h4 Kh8 16.h5 Nf4 17.Bc4 b5 18.Bxf4 Qc7 19.Qf5 exf4 20.h6 Rg8 21.Bxf7 Rcf8 22.hxg7+ 1-0



It's mate in four moves with 22.hxg7 Rxg7 23.Rxh7+ Rxh7 24.Qf6+ Rg7 25.Rh1#

Today, certainly in the strongest tournaments, all players have access to high-performance computing and neural net engines. Wins are much harder to achieve not just because computers are now very strong, but also because players have sensibly culled all sub-optimal openings from their repertoires and because they have access to a full range of cutting edge chess tools.

Correspondence wins have become rare, but they remain possible. The International Chess Federation (ICCF) maintains a Game Archive at iccf.com. Its databases are available to all members, and membership is free. The ICCF databases are the most important to elite players and to OTB GMs who follow the trends and discoveries of correspondence players. Additions are added monthly, and every posted win deserves careful attention by OTB and correspondence players alike.

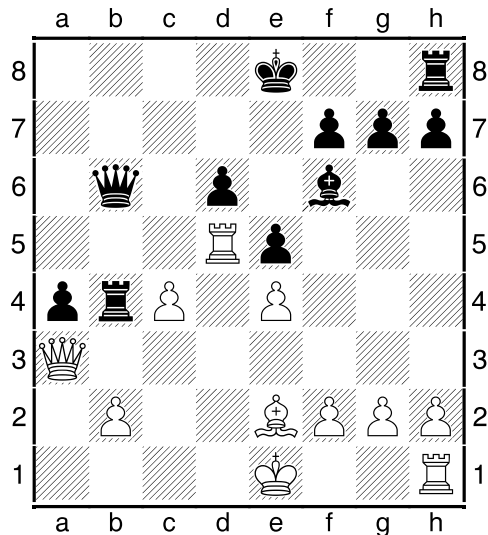
To win at the highest levels, the first step is to avoid playing lines that do not stand up to careful scrutiny. Winning with Black is now highly unlikely and so risky variations, long-favored lines perhaps that we still play over-the-board, should be avoided. With white, the key is to steer the game towards positions that minimize the power of the machine by permitting maneuvering at length within fixed structures.

I review two such games below. Both wins are against very strong correspondence GMs, and both involve opening novelties that even the neural net engines still simply do not see.

Edwards, Jon (2506) - Cruzado Duenas, Carlos (2594)
2015 USA Invitational

The Grandmaster Repertoire series coverage on the Sveshnikov by Katronias recommends this line as satisfactory for Black:

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e5 6. Ndb5 d6 7. Bg5 a6 8. Na3 b5 9. Nd5 Be7 10. Bxf6 Bxf6 11. c4 b4 12. Nc2 a5 13. Qf3 Be6 14. Rd1 a4 15. Be2 b3 16. axb3 Rb8 17. b4 Bxd5 18. Rxd5 Nxb4 19. Nxb4 Rxb4 20. Qa3 Qb6



Here, Kotronias recommends only

21. O-O?! O-O 22. Rb5 Rxb5 23. cxb5 Qd4 24. b3 Qxe4 25. Bf3 Qd3 26. Qxa4 d5 27. Rd1 Qc2 28. Rxd5 Rd8 29. Rxd8+ Bxd8

The engines like this line because white is up a pawn, but humans quickly recognize that, at the end of this line, Black can effortlessly achieve a blockade on the dark squares. Of course, the extra pawn is meaningless. This particular drawing technique is useful to know, on both sides. Black is happy to employ it. White needs to avoid it.

Correspondence players review such literature thoroughly primarily to identify any mistakes in the published analysis. Sure enough, my opponent played into this line.

At move 21, I uncorked a powerful novelty with

21. Rb5! Rxb5 22. cxb5 Qa5+ 23. Kf1!

Although 21.Rb5 is technically the novelty, this king move should get the credit. The idea is actually quite simple. Don't trade the rooks. Exchange off the queens! That will leave us in a rook and bishop of opposite color endgame in which White can patiently and effectively press forward.

The conclusion is simple: there's still room for humanity, if we are willing to work hard to overcome the raw power of the machine. A human-computer hybrid is stronger than the machine alone, at least for the moment.

23...O-O 24. g3 Qd2 25. Qxa4 Qxb2 26. Qc4 Bd8 27. Kg2 Bb6 28. Rc1 Qa3 29. Rc3 Qc5 30. Rf3 g6 31. g4 Qxc4 32. Bxc4 Kg7 33. Bd5 f6 34. Kf1 Rc8 35. Bc6 Rh8 36. Ra3 Bc5 37. Ra6 Rb8 38. f3 f5 39. gxf5 gxf5 40. Ke2 Kf6 41. Kd3 f4 42. Kc4 Ke7 43. Bd5 Rc8 44. Kb3 Rb8 45. Ka4 Bb6 46. h4 h5 47. Kb4 Kd8 48. Ka5 48. Ra2 Rc8 49. Bc6 Bc5+ 50. Kc4 Kc7 51. Rg2 Kb6 52. Kd5 Rd8 53. Rg7 Rb8 54. Ke6 Rd8 55. Rg5 Rh8 56. Rg6 Rd8 57. Ke7 Rh8 58. Kf7 Rh7+ 59. Kf6 Ra7 60. Rg8Bf2 61. Kg5 Re7 62. Rb8+ Ka7 63. Ra8+ Kb6 64. Ra2 Bg3 65. Ra6+ Kc5 66. Kxh5 Rh7+ 67. Kg6 Rxh4 68. Bd7 Rh2 69. Rc6+ Kd4 70. Rxd6+ Ke3 71. Bg4 Be1 72. Rd1 Ba5 73. Kf5 Rb2 74. Kxe5 Rxb5+ 75. Rd5 Bc3+ 76. Ke6 Rb8 77. e5 1-0

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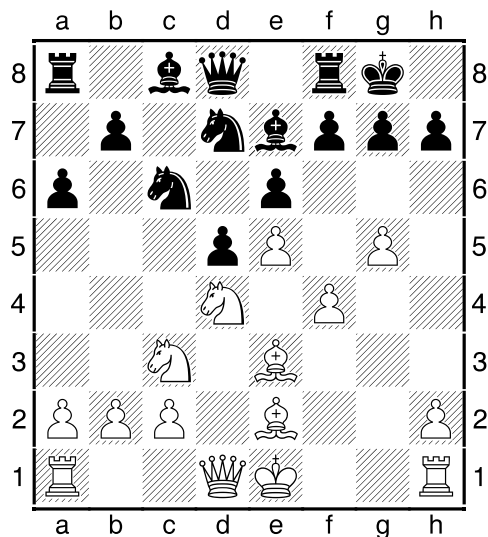
Just before I played in the World Final, I was invited to take part in the prestigious Spanish Master, which pits the best Spanish players against various national champions. That's how I got paired against Evgeny Lobanov, then the reigning Russian Correspondence Champion.

As was easy to predict before the game even started, the game reached this known position.

Edwards, J (2528) – Lobanov, E (2512) [B84]

Spanish Masters, 2018

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be3 e6 7.Be2 Be7 8.f4 0-0 9.g4 d5 10.e5 Nfd7 11.g5 Nc6



Here too, I prepared the novelty well before the play started. Computers and humans have long rejected 12.Bd3!! because 12...Qb6 13.Na4 Qa5+ 14.c3 Nxd4 15.Bxd4 b5 traps the knight. Happily, in that line, White has 16.Bxh7+ winning by force!

The lines are beautiful but once again, the computer failed to find 12.Bd3 and confirmed the accuracy of the line only when forced to evaluate the position after 14.c3 and then, only at very high depth.

The engine's inability to find Bd3 is very interesting. Players who simply make the move that the computer recommends will not find Bd3, a move that I liked well before the game started. Strong correspondence players all come to understand the need for iterative use of engines, testing even rejected lines at lines at critical points, all part of the human-computer interaction required to succeed at the highest levels in correspondence chess. There's still a role for humanity here!

12.Bd3 Qb6 13.Na4 Qa5+ 14.c3

It was now clear to Lobanov that he could not survive after 14...Nxd4 and so, he had to find another path forward. He quickly learned, however, that the alternatives also fare poorly.

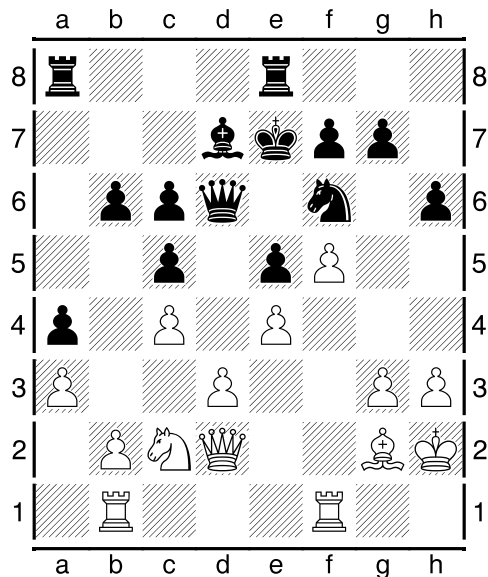
14...Ncxe5 15.fxe5 Nxe5 16.Bc2 Nc4 17.Bf2 Bd7 18.b4 Qd8 19.Nc5 Bxg5 20.Qf3 Bc8 21.Rg1 g6 22.Bb3 e5 23.Nc2 Nd2 24.Qxd5 Nxb3 25.Qxd8 Rxd8 26.Nxb3 Bf4 27.Bg3 Bh6 28.Bh4 Rd3 29.Rg3 Rxb3 30.Bxg3 Bf5 31.Na3 Rc8 32.c4 Bg4 33.c5 e4 34.Nc4 f5 35.Bd6 f4 36.Ne5 Bh3 37.a4 Bg7 38.Nd2 g5 39.Ndc4 Ra8 40.Rd1 Bf6 41.Nb6 Re8 42.Nbd7 Kg7 43.b5 axb5 44.axb5 e3 45.c6 bxc6 46.b6 Bxd7 47.Nxd7 Bc3+ 48.Ke2 f3+ 49.Kxf3 e2 50.Rg1 e1Q 51.Rxe1 Bxe1 52.b7 Kf7 53.b8Q Rxb8 54.Nxb8 Ke6 55.Ba3 c5 56.Bxc51-0

This game was annotated in the New in Chess Yearbook 129 by Edwin l'Ami, whose extensive notes were complementary but contained a few errors. It turns out that it's challenging to annotate others' correspondence games.

The 32nd World Final coincided with the emergence of neural net engines. The result was a huge number of draws. The exceptions involved one player's withdrawal, a purposeful loss to aid a countryman's chances, sub-optimal opening choices by one player, and one notational error. Within this environment, I worked very hard to defeat Sergey Osipov, one of the Russians in the field. The game went 119 moves.

In that game, I opened with the Vienna Glek (1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.g3) in order to avoid exchanges and to aim for a fixed pawn structure with long-term maneuvering.

Here is just one snapshot in this patient game:



White's threat of advancing with b2-b4 has forced black to play 29...a4, the end of an important phase. The

next step, which now took 38 moves, is to force black to advance the b6-pawn to b5. Note that Black has no meaningful counterplay anywhere on the board and must simply try to parry or delay white's ideas. I emphasize again that the computer cannot fashion or assess this plan. Throughout this sequence, the engine's many candidate moves all had the same evaluation from low to high depth. I performed the runs, on every move taking five days or more, but actual implementation here is human, and frankly so too was Osipov's amazing defense.

12 years of effort, 14-hour days, but when victory finally came in, I was busy teaching chess. It was hours before I could begin to enjoy a truly satisfying feeling, which happily has not yet let up.