



Where Amateurs are on a par with the Pros

Freestyle is not everyone's cup of tea, but everyone can take part and win the first prize in the amount of \$7,000 dollar. The worldwide biggest chess tournament in which computer help as well as consultation is permitted starts to its eighth edition. It will be played on the Playchess Server on the two weekends: 11th–13th April 2008 (Main Tournament) and 25th–27th April 2008 (Final). The main tournament, 9 rounds in three days (with 60 min. per player and game, plus 15 sec. per move), is the heat for the top ten, who will meet in the Freestyle final two weeks later. The main sponsor, the PAL Group in Abu Dhabi (UAE), has

provided a \$16,000 dollar prize fund. You find out everything about Freestyle Chess in the following from CCGM Arno Nickel. Join the fun.



German Version

The concept and history of Freestyle Chess

“Freestyle Chess is a competition between humans, who however are allowed, similarly like in correspondence chess, to make use of any technical or human support for selecting their moves. The major difference to correspondence chess exists in the much faster speed of play. From the idea Freestyle Chess is very similar to ‘Advanced Chess’, introduced by Garry Kasparov, in which use of computer however is strongly limited and human help excluded. All these kinds of chess aim for the same purpose: games of high quality.” (From the preamble of the PAL/CSS tournament rules, March 2008)

Maybe it was a piece of luck that in the first Freestyle tournament in 2005 not the favoured Russian GM's asserted themselves, but two chess computer freaks from the US with the legendary handle ZackS. This sensation was worth even Garry Kasparov a column which he put in NewInChess under the futuristic title "Chess 2.0" - so how it is to be explained if grandmasters in spite of computer help lose to amateurs? Kasparov assumed, in fact, like most Freestylers an exception, nevertheless - and this was his real message – the whole story threw a glare on the amazing potential of computer chess.

Many of the favorites in the 1. PAL/CSS Freestyle tournament had done well until the play-off rounds, but versus ZackS they all had their problems. Obviously it was no longer just a question of "tactical control", using the computer for not more as a "blunder check", but a complex system of computer use, which means exploiting all available resources of the hardware and software. This was the real hour of birth of Freestyle Chess, and the slogan of the "Formula 1 in chess" soon circulated.



A paradigm change - overcoming fixed role patterns

While concerning the Advanced Chess, introduced about 1996, it had generally been assumed that the human chessplayers would be in the driver's seat during any battle of chess, the Freestyle Chess signalled a principal change of sign because of the much more massive use of the computer. In the Freestyle one had to enter into a grey area in which it was no longer clear who would be the horse or the rider in the course of a chess game. Depending on the type of position and the situation on the board, ever also according to the specifics of a prepared opening variation the competence could lie sometimes more with the human chessplayer or sometimes more with the computer. Generally speaking, the traditionally fixed roles for human and machine got removed in favour of a centaur-like purpose community in which the roles changed situationally.

Fondness of experimenting, openness and an always self-critical look became asked qualities beside a certain interest in the developments of computer chess. Who instead persisted ideologically strictly, he knows everything basically better than the computer, ran sure as hell into his opponent's knife. And on the other side the same destiny often caught up anyone else who trusted blind the computer, if he came up against a strong centaur; unless an overpowering hardware and software, a good opening book and the favour of the hour came to his aid.

In any case, from the Freestyle's point of view a massive need to catch up signalled itself for the computer-unexperienced chess players in general and the chess pros in particular if they wanted to be furthermore at the height of the time. The typical everyday routine of many chess players in dealing with chess programs, like casually asking their 'friend Fritz' while replaying a game, was not sufficient any more in order to meet the new demands of quality where accuracy ("Chess 2.0") is concerned.

The least difficulties with that had the computer-experienced correspondence chess players, as they were already familiar with the concept of the systematic analytic discourse of human and machine long ago, even though not under the extreme time pressure of Freestyle Chess.

What was only supposed at first, became more and more evident between 2005 and 2007: even high-class chess pros from the circle the top 100 can keep up only in the Freestyle if they are equipped fairly according to computer and dispose of an advanced know-how in dealing with chess programs. Exactly this time and effort avoid, however, most chess pros in spite of the tempting opportunity "to take" en passant a few thousand dollars from the home desk.



The (Chess) Computer - an everlasting spring of human humiliation?

To tell the truth, the computer for many is a red rag, and they also miss no opportunity to point warning how "destructive" its influence would be on chess. Really they sniff the air, not completely wrongfully, but with excessive fatalism that the computer could make them redundant in the long term and bring around their existence. Why still accelerate this disastrous development?

Also Kasparov's initiative for Advanced Chess has not changed in it a lot, The A.C. has remained an unbeloved child in spite of some efforts. Most of such arrangements as the late two games match Anand-Kramnik after the Blitz World Championship in Moscow on 23th November 2007, stand under the motto "fight show" and are accepted by the professionals only as an additional source of income.

Besides, the new world champion and his predecessor (as well as his first challenger) during interviews said some new things which should allow to prick up the ears each. Both agreed that the two drawn games showed a very high level which they could not have reached without computer help because of the numerous sources of error. According to Anand it is even quite difficult to find moves in rapid chess which still improve the play of the computers. Self-critically he found out that one of his prepared variations (against the 'Berlin Wall', C67), which he came to play in this match, is good only against people without computer help, while otherwise it is rather harmless. Kramnik emphasised that the Advanced Chess is an excellent demonstration for the spectators to win insight into the thinking of grandmasters. Here they could pursue live how a grandmaster works with the analysis engines to find his moves. All that sounds quite clearly to Kasparov's "Chess 2.0" what cannot surprise, because the technical development of the past ten years demands its tribute also of the best chess players of the world.

If one asks, why no chess magazine and chess site has done to itself the trouble to comment the aforesaid games and to research with which chess programs Anand and Kramnik on which hardware have analysed, this cannot be explained only by lacking press release from the organizers, although this was, unfortunately, also the case.

Obviously many would not like at all to look in such events more exactly, because they could never understand so properly the value of Advanced Chess or - speaking in terms of depth psychology - because they see computer chess since Kasparov's defeat against Deep Blue as an everlasting spring of human humiliations.



Ways to success

Back to the Freestyle. The cardinal question soon was not any more whether a chess pro or an amateur becomes a 'Freestyle Champion', but whether any grandmaster succeeds even in qualifying for the finale. And to top it all the experienced chess centaurs (half a human, half a machine) became it rotten when for the first time a main tournament was won by a "pure" engine (which means an automatically playing engine) on a high-end computer system. That was the hour of Vvarkey. Did it once and for all indicate human's loss of his leading intellectual role in chess? However, the following finals have shown that is not by far yet so. Well prepared players got over and over again to expel the pure engines in her barriers and to exploit their weaknesses right from the opening. (By the way, since the 7th Freestyle tournament was abolished the possibility to let play an engine automatically. All moves have to be entered manually.)

After seven exciting Freestyle tournaments with several hundred participants all together (the single record lay with 150) has appeared that the most successful Freestylers mostly operated in a team which was very well equipped according to computer (hardware, software, know-how) and in which every now and then one IM (sporadically also a GM) had a leading function. The solo players who combined all or some of these advantages on themselves formed an exception, as far as it concerns the win of the crown; nevertheless, they often came to the prize ranks what probably explains itself also by the fact that only a minority of Freestylers play in a team, because building a team signifies an even bigger preparatory expenditure and needs a special coordination.

Here the overview of all Freestyle Champions with an allocation of the qualities distinguishing them:

1. ZackS (S. Zackery, a.o., USA)
 2. Zorchamp (Zorchamp, UAE)
 3. Rajlich (V. Rajlich, a.o., Hungary)
 4. Xakru (J. Dufek, a.o., Czechia)
 5. Flying Saucers (D. Nielsen, Denmark)
 6. Rajlich (V. Rajlich, a.o., Hungary)
 7. Ibermax (A. Williams, a.o., England)
- Teams: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7
 - FIDE IM or GM: 3, 4, 6
 - Experiences in correspondence chess: 2, 4, 5
 - Strong hardware: all
 - Good opening books: all
 - Advanced engine knowhow: all

The most successful Freestyle Champion is the Rybka programmer and IM Vasik Rajlich who succeeded up to now as the only one to win the title twice, while he got support from an efficient team with GM Michal Krassenkow and IM Iweta Rajlich (former Radziewicz).

While since 2006 one or two quick dual-core PC's belonged to the standard equipment of most Freestylers recently an advance of quad-core PC's seems on account of the favorable price trend to set a new standard. A few participants had also 8-, 16-, 32- or even more processor machines at their disposal, what always has been accompanied by interesting discussions about their efficiency. It is clear that such advantages do not automatically lead to success if not also other components come along, and here the prepared opening books of the participants counted more and more.

After the Rybka UCI engine experienced a flower phase as the most successful analysis engine, a chase of many other top programs appeared in outlines during the last months. To mention only six of the best known ones, there are the newest versions of Fritz, Hiarcs, Junior, Shredder, Toga and Zappa. Also here, with the use of the analysis engines, a certain change of familiar structures may happen, and it might become rather exciting to watch this in the first Freestyle formula 1 of 2008.

It is already to be found in former articles (in the ChessBase archive and at computerschach.de) which techniques of play are asked in Freestyle and what one should better avoid, for example, such a simple thing like a mouse slip ...



Freestyle is great fun!

Nevertheless, for all that one should not forget. It is not only about the success. Everybody who has experienced, for example, once the thrill of speed in an incredibly fast car knows which 'kick' such an experience can signify - in any case, it is a unique border experience. Just it is with the Freestyle - it can be a fantastic feeling to dispose of a strong analysis motor and to try out with it your own favorite variations against other, likewise well equipped opponents and maybe even to defeat a substantially stronger chess player. And it might be also very instructive anyway if this does not succeed ...

Accept the challenge to compete against experts of Advanced Chess, correspondence chess and computer chess. Seize the unique opportunity to meet international titleholders to whom you can offer significant resistance with some know-how and a skilful opening preparation. Was it not always your dream to play against a Grandmaster on the same level? In Freestyle Chess you have - with some luck or a good run - the rare chance to be successful.

For all further information, schedule and registration see: