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BE HERE, BE THERE, BE FAIR



Do you remember how all this started?

We were in March 2020, the pandemic was starting to hit the world; European borders were suddenly closed in a way that many of us did never experienced before; the World Senior Championship in Prague was unexpectedly cut after round 7; candidates interrupted after just half the tournament; many countries imposed restrictions to public gatherings; internal movements and any sport or social activity got stuck.

In this scenario we all started asking ourselves what Chess' future was and when would we have started to play World or European Championships again, or even regular tournaments or international opens.

After a couple of months, we started to think that we could move online and play remotely since the technology we needed for that was already available.

The first large scale experiment was the pioneer Sitges Online Chess Tournament, shortly followed by Online Nations Cup. I personally took part in these events, seeing how online Chess was birthing and what its main problem was: possible cheating.

One of the first reaction I clearly remember was: online Chess is hopeless since the opportunities to cheat are too many and the possibility to fight it fewer.

But as in any crisis happens, the strength of the need is able to make what years of endless discussions don't: tournament to tournament, championship by championship we acquired more and more experience; we learned more and more about possible cheating and how to fight it; we wrote protocols and regulations; we got some basic concepts and ideas; we increased our knowledge; we established Hybrid Chess, thanks to the ECU's proactive role in developing new formulas.

Now that more than one year has passed, we can reverse the point upside down and from the point of view of a ECU Hybrid Qualification Deputy Chief Arbiter I start wondering: speaking about cheating, are we sure that online Chess, to certain conditions, aren't even safer than over the board Chess?

Let's clarify some points: to any person who is aware of some cheating basics, no tournament is safe, and no tournament is dangerous. It always depends on what measures are implemented, who implements them and how trained and experienced they are. Hence, stating that online Chess is less safe and OTB Chess is safer without considering the environment, in general, is trivial.

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But we can make some comparison among similar level tournaments and standards of protection. From May 24th until May 30th, the European Hybrid Qualification event to the World Cup 2021 took place: we can probably consider it as the same level of a continental Championship (even if it isn't) and wonder if it would have been safer or not over the board.

The current measures applied in this Hybrid Qualification event are the following: players can only play from officially designated venues; where they are under control of minimum two arbiters (and an extra one is required every ten additional players); they are scanned before entering the hall; they can't leave it if they aren't escorted by an arbiter; the games are checked; the equipment is double checked at the beginning and at the end of the games; the venues are under surveillance of remote arbiters; individual camera; screenshares and video recording are in use and games are checked by FIDE anti-cheating tools and platform owned anti-cheating algorithm.

In some venues, we could enumerate more arbiters than players and in general, the players/arbiters rate is far much higher than in any OTB tournament where also remote arbiters do not exist. In my opinion, this puts the safety standard of a well organised Hybrid event on the same level (if not higher) than a regular event.

Of course, this doesn't mean OTB event are necessarily less safe or safer, nor that one specific measure is crucial or that we just need to increase the personnel to have safer tournaments.

What we really learned after one year of online chess is that we could make online events safe, or at least far safer than the first ones deeply rethinking our approach to anti-cheating, moving from the common idea one metal scanner was the solution to any possible cheating issue and realising there are many ways to cheat and any of them has a different solution to be fought.

This experience, even if we may all conclude online Chess is hopeless at the end, shall suggest us that this time is not to be wasted but it will be the right way to start rebuilding our anti-cheating system from its basis so that, when we will start play big events over the board again, we will have acquired enough knowledge to say our overall protection deeply increased from what it was in February 2020.

ECU ARBITERS COUNCIL

ECU Arbiters Council monthly prepares the Arbiters corner articles for the ECU Monthly Magazine.

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