



## A Fresh Start: A Solution to the World Championship Impasse

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There is certainly no need for me to regurgitate here the problems, groups and players dividing the chess world. To insiders, they are all well known. Instead, I offer a brief sketch of the actors involved, as a prelude to setting out my detailed, concrete proposal for sorting out the current chaos and unpleasantness which have afflicted top-level chess for all too long.



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To begin with, FIDE President Kirsan Iljumzhinov has spent tens of millions of dollars of his own money, molding chess into his vision of what he perceives to be in the best interests of the game. The centerpiece of his reforms has been the scrapping of the cycle comprising the Interzonals, Candidates and Final Match; he has replaced these events with a three-week-long *annual* Knockout tournament, dubbing the winner “world champion”. He considers Classical Chess – three minutes of thinking-time per move – to be too slow, so he has accelerated the time-control towards a Rapid Chess tempo. (FIDE’s recently-announced World Cup will, in fact, be played at Rapid Chess pace, i.e. 25 minutes per player for the whole game with a ten-second bonus awarded for each move made.) Kirsan’s vision is that these changes will make chess more of a sport, bringing in TV cameras, sponsors and eligibility for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Games. (This latter part of the vision includes some form of drug-testing – although fortunately drugs are not an issue plaguing the sport of chess – which is being resisted by a number of players.)

FIDE took the very controversial step (to put it mildly!) of turning its back on the Classical Chess world championship, promoting Rapid Chess instead, although Kirsan supported his vision with his own money. Since implementing these changes in 1997, Kirsan has been the primary – possibly the sole – sponsor of his



vision. Many players have benefited from his largesse and they are grateful – if not necessarily loyal – to him.

The current FIDE world champion is Ruslan Ponomariov, who defeated his compatriot Vassily Ivanchuk in Moscow, January 2002.



Vladimir Kramnik is world champion by virtue of his Brain Games Network match victory over Garry Kasparov in 2000. He is the world champion in, more or less, the traditional line of title-holders going back to Wilhelm Steinitz in 1886. Since defeating Kasparov, Kramnik has not competed in the FIDE Knockout tournaments.

Garry Kasparov is the world's number one ranked player and has been a harsh critic of FIDE's leaders, as well as its Knockout tournament system to determine the official FIDE world champion. Despite fighting against FIDE with great determination, in 2001 Garry participated in a FIDE event and is, as a result, the official FIDE champion for Rapid Chess. (Quite a strange irony...)



The other actor in the drama is Brain Games Network (BGN). This company staged the Kasparov – Kramnik BGN championship match and has an agreement with Vladimir Kramnik to organize his championship matches and a cycle to determine challengers. This contract has a much-mentioned time-limit of five years, but I don't know when exactly the clock started ticking. Recently, BGN announced that Einstein TV had purchased its assets and, specifically, its contract with Kramnik.



With players of the stature of Kramnik and Kasparov boycotting it, FIDE's world championship tournament, a Knockout format, is not publicly perceived as producing the very best player in the world. Kramnik and Kasparov are not the only players who have declined to compete, and the former women's champion, Xie Jun of China, refused to defend her title in the Knockout format used in Moscow. If, as Garry intimates, more and more players refuse to compete in the FIDE championship, the event will become even less attractive to commercial sponsors.

The two very best players by rating, Kasparov and Kramnik, have both offered strong support to the principle of a Classical Chess



world championship. Einstein TV, together with organizers in Dortmund, is soon due to begin a cycle to determine a challenger for Kramnik, but Kasparov is boycotting that particular cycle too. The Dortmund organizers and Einstein TV are no doubt planning to spend a lot of time and money on their new cycle, but the ultimate result of their efforts would merely be to find a rather hollow challenger to Kramnik.

So, while FIDE pursues its vision and Einstein TV applies the terms of its contract with Kramnik, Kasparov, the world's number one rated player, is the odd man out. In such a situation, the whole chess world is the loser. Both FIDE and Einstein TV will have problems finding commercial sponsors for their respective championships.

In my opinion, the format for determining the world champion in both of the cycles is wrong. FIDE's Knockout tournament has unfortunately shown itself to be what its critics have suggested, i.e. a lottery, whereas the Dortmund organizers have announced that they would be using the same FIDE format of accelerated matches to pick a challenger. Why a bad idea for determining the world champion should be duplicated by a rival set-up is beyond my understanding. In any case, without the participation of Kasparov both cycles would have to be regarded as something of a sham.

With players dividing themselves into different camps, such as those supporting FIDE's cycle and not playing in Dortmund (the world's third highest rated player, Viswanathan Anand, for instance, will not be there), it seems that the divisions in the chess world have crystallized even more. Eventually, sponsors (including Iljumzhinov) will run out of patience, and matters will be worse than ever. Such a chaotic situation cannot be allowed to drag on. A practical solution must be found that is fair to all parties concerned and offers stability for the future.

### **A Solution**

In reading the solution I put forward below, please bear in mind that all parties will have to show a spirit of goodwill and compromise. Otherwise, *any* solution will fail. Neither is the solution one that is cast in concrete. Rather it is intended to serve as the basis for a negotiated final agreement among all the parties involved, who may well want to discuss possible improvements on particular details.

At the moment FIDE has no involvement in the Classical Chess world championship. There are, though, plenty of commercial sponsors willing to support a return to the traditional world championship cycle if it is sanctioned by FIDE and supported by all the players.

Furthermore, I think that FIDE should run its Knockout and World Cup events at the Rapid Chess time-control, and have official world champions also for Knockout/Rapid Chess. To be clear, this means that FIDE would recognize more than one line of world champion: Those from the traditional world championship and a new line of Knockout world champions. In fact, I also think it would be a good idea for FIDE to sanction officially a third line of world champions: In Blitz/Five-Minute Chess. With three lines of world champions, FIDE would be offering a wonderful range of opportunities to players and would find itself on a sound financial footing. This would be particularly true if all the world's best players agreed to participate in all three championships. Let the free market and public opinion then decide the relative value of the three time-control formats!

But the biggest problem for the time being, of course, is how to resolve the current chaos in the Classical Chess world championship. Read on...

### **A Brand-new Cycle**

In my view, the Classical Chess world championship can once again become the crown jewel in the chess world. I advocate a return to the Swiss Open cycle that FIDE devised in 1990 and 1993, to be followed by the traditional Candidates' match system. To find the very best player, the cycle needs to be open to everyone throughout the world, i.e. the best players from the various national federations and their zones. A Swiss open tournament is the ideal format for accommodating such a large group of players.

The first stage of the Classical Chess world championship should be the national championships, or what have traditionally been called the FIDE zonal championships.

The zonal winners/qualifiers, along with a number of players seeded by rating, then play in one very large Swiss tournament, comprising a grand total of 196 players (the 128 top men players, the 64 top women and four players selected by the host organizers). There are 13 rounds of play.

The five players who finish top join three seeded players for the next stage, i.e. the Candidates' matches (quarter-finals).

(In addition, the five women who finish highest in the Swiss tournament join three seeded female players in the Candidates' competition for women.)

### **Candidates' Matches – Quarter-finals**

For the first stage of the Candidates' series (i.e. the quarter-finals: Matches A, B, C and D), the five players who have qualified from the Swiss tournament are joined by three top players, Ponomariov, Kramnik and Kasparov, who are seeded into this phase. As recognized world champions, Ponomariov and Kramnik are allocated to matches (i.e. matches A and B respectively) which preclude them from facing each other until the final match. Lots are drawn to decide whether Kasparov is placed in match C or match D.

The exact-line up of the four quarter-final matches is decided by drawing lots at the Closing Ceremony of the Swiss qualifying tournament.

The quarter-final matches are for the best of ten games. In their respective matches, Ponomariov and Kramnik are granted draw-odds. (In other words, in case of a 5-5 score after ten games, they qualify for the semi-finals. If either is eliminated in his quarter-final match, his victor has draw-odds in the semi-final match.) The other six players in the quarter-finals (i.e. Kasparov and the five who have qualified from the Swiss tournament) have no draw-odds status. If either Kasparov's match or the match between two qualifiers from the Swiss tournament is tied 5-5, the tie-break (see below) is employed. Such tie-breaks are played on a separate day, which would normally be the day of the Closing Ceremony.

To summarize, the quarter-finals take place as follows:

- *Match A*: Ponomariov (with draw-odds) versus a qualifier from the Swiss tournament
- *Match B*: Kramnik (with draw-odds) versus a qualifier from the Swiss tournament
- Lots are drawn to decide whether Kasparov is placed in match C or match D. Let's assume he goes into match C. That gives:
- *Match C*: Kasparov versus a qualifier from the Swiss

- tournament (no draw-odds for either player)
- *Match D*: Between two qualifiers from the Swiss tournament (no draw-odds for either player).

(The Candidates' series for women functions similarly, with five women from the Swiss tournament joined, for the quarter-finals, by three seeded players. Two of the seeded players are the FIDE world champion Zhu Chen and the former world champion Zsuzsa Polgar. Both of them have draw-odds status and cannot face each other until the final. The third woman to be seeded is Xie Jun. As in the case of Kasparov (see above), lots are drawn to decide whether Xie Jun is placed in match C or match D.)

### **Tie-breaks in the Quarter-finals**

If a score of 5-5 is reached, the following sequence of contests is played until a winner emerges: a) four games of Rapid Chess (25 minutes per player, plus a ten-second bonus per move); b) two games at 15 minutes per player, plus a ten-second bonus per move; c) sudden-death 15-minute games, plus a ten-second bonus per move (the first to win a game wins the match).

### **Candidates' Matches - Semi-finals**

The four winners of the quarter-final matches play the semi-finals. Both semi-finals are matches for the best of 14 games and take place as follows:

- *First semi-final*: The winner of match A plays the winner of match C
- *Second semi-final*: The winner of match B plays the winner of match D.

The winners of matches A and B have draw-odds in these semi-final matches.

(The same system applies to the women's semi-final matches.)

### **Final**

The final, played between the winners of the two semi-final matches, is for the best of 20 games, and the winner is proclaimed undisputed chess champion of the world.

### **Tie-breaks in the World Championship Final**

If a score of 10-10 is reached, the following sequence of contests is played until a winner emerges: a) Two further games of

Classical Chess; b) If the players are still level, two games of sudden death Classical Chess (i.e. if a player wins game 23 the match is over); c) If the players are still level, 4 games of Rapid Chess (25 minutes per player, plus a ten-second bonus per move); d) Two games at 15 minutes per player, plus a ten-second bonus per move; e) sudden-death 15-minute games, plus a ten-second bonus per move (the first to win a game wins the match).

(The same tie-break procedure applies with respect to the women's world championship final match, which is also played for the best of 20 games.)

### **Classical Chess Time-control**

The time-control for all phases of the Classical Chess cycle from the Swiss qualifying tournament onwards is 40 moves per player in two hours, followed by 20 moves in one hour, followed by 30 minutes per player for the rest of the game. Games are thus always completed in a single session, lasting a maximum of seven hours.

### **Calendar**

This Classical Chess world championship is based on a two-year cycle. In practical terms it is perfectly possible, this year already, for the cycle described here to be played as far as the quarter-finals, with the semi-finals and the final taking place in 2003.

Although my proposal above relates, in particular, to resolving the difficulties inherent in the current situation, i.e. the various conflicting claims of a number of players, the system also functions, with just minor modifications, for the subsequent cycles. This, of course, is essential in any plan, so that even-handedness and stability are ensured.

### **Draw-odds**

As regards the present situation, my proposal provides for the recognized world champions, Ponomarev and Kramnik (as well as Chen and Polgar), to be treated with respect and on an equal footing. The justification for giving them draw-odds should be clear. Otherwise, in this first cycle they would be no better off than Kasparov (or Jun), and I believe that that would be unfair to the recognized world champions. Nonetheless, there is an advantage too for Kasparov (and Jun): Being seeded direct into the Candidates' stage (quarter-finals).

From the second cycle onwards, only the defending champion is seeded into the quarter-finals, to join the seven players who have

qualified from that cycle's Swiss tournament. The defending champion has draw-odds in the quarter-finals and the semi-finals. A player who wins a quarter-final match despite having conceded draw-odds "inherits" the advantage of draw-odds in the subsequent semi-final match. It seems to me quite proper that a player who overcomes draw-odds should be rewarded in this way.

From the third cycle onwards, there are no draw-odds for any player. Indeed, the only advantage of any kind accorded to any player is to the defending champion, who is seeded into the quarter-finals.

In no cycle are there ever draw-odds in the final.

Contrary to the current system (and, indeed, contrary to anything I think the chess world has ever seen), my proposal ensures that the few advantages accorded to any player are reasonable and proportionate, and are given for objective reasons. The in-built advantages (much criticized!) which world champions have enjoyed in the past - a seeded place into the final and draw-odds in that final - are removed, fairly but swiftly.

There is a widespread recognition of the need to change a system which has had the champion sitting back and waiting for a challenger to fight through to a title match. Indeed, in 2000 there was no qualifying cycle at all, and both the champion (Kasparov) and the challenger (Kramnik) were seeded straight into the final. I believe that according draw-odds in certain properly-defined instances (i.e. during the transitional phase of the proposed new system, and never in any final) is an infinitely fairer way forward.

### **Tie-breaks**

Tie-break provisions are naturally required for the quarter-finals, semi-finals and finals.

My proposal includes two sequences of tie-breaks, one for the quarter-finals and semi-finals and the other for the final. The difference between them is that because so much is at stake in the final there should be a small number of additional Classical Chess games to try to break a 10-10 tie in the final. Only if the two players were still level would there be recourse to faster games, in the sequence I have listed above.

Incidentally, it will be noted that, in the case of the first cycle, any tie-breaks required would be solely in the quarter-finals and the

final (given that in the semi-finals the players qualifying from matches A and B have draw-odds.)

### **Einstein TV**

In the format I am proposing it has to be borne in mind that Kramnik is currently under contract to Einstein TV. Assuming he wishes to accept the above solution, in a spirit of fair play and compromise, Einstein TV's agreement will also have to be sought. In this connection, a possible solution when launching the first cycle (2002-2003) is for Einstein TV to have the organizational rights to Kramnik's quarter-final match and, if he wins, to his semi-final match too. Moreover, regardless of which two players reach the final in that first cycle, Einstein TV has the rights to stage it. From the second cycle onwards, Einstein TV has to bid to stage events, on an equal footing with all other potential sponsors. A final agreement on the details can certainly be achieved if common sense and fair play prevail.

### **Funding**

A key issue is money. In the proposed format, the following *minimum* prize-funds would appear both fair and realistic:

- *National tournaments/zonal championships*: Prize-funds fixed by the respective host organizations
- *Swiss qualifying tournament*: \$250,000
- *Quarter-finals (four matches)*: \$240,000 (\$60,000 per match)
- *Semi-finals (two matches)*: \$300,000 (\$150,000 per match)
- *Final (one match)*: \$1,000,000.

(For the quarter-finals, semi-finals and finals of the women's cycle, 50% of these sums might well prove appropriate.)

It needs to be stressed that the figures indicated above are to be regarded as minimums. Commercial sponsors would bid in free competition with each other, and in many cases the final sum might well be considerably higher.

### **Fees**

For FIDE to survive and be able to promote the development of chess at all levels throughout the world, it needs to earn money as the body that sanctions the format described above. As I believe the old flat 20% tax is too great, I propose that from the above prize-funds 20% should be deducted, but on a reapportioned basis: 10% should go to FIDE, 5% should go to a Professional Players'

Health and Benefits fund, and 5% should be allocated to a support fund for the world championship and the women's world championship (i.e. to provide emergency resources in case an organizer sustains a budgetary shortfall).

### **An Important New Office**

So far, so good, but more is required. Even if all the parties involved find acceptable the above format, prizes, percentages, etc., a critical issue still has to be addressed head-on if we are to ensure that the new system runs smoothly.

In his article, *Topics That Must be Discussed*, published on the Club Kasparov website, Garry presents the seeds of this missing solution. He mentions other sports: *"In all sports there are professional unions defending the rights of the sportsmen and regulating the rules of the competitions. The sponsors of football, basketball or hockey are as powerful and influential as Iljumzhinov, but they have to consider the professional unions' demands."*

Actually, Garry is only partly right. Yes, unions do exist. Yes, they have certain balancing powers against the owners of the professional teams. But not all athletes belong to any of the unions in their particular discipline. Players sometimes go on strike, but not all players honor the strike, and some cross the picket lines. However, there is a much more powerful balancing force than a labor union: The office of Commissioner.

Chess is not the only sport to have had problems over the years. Nearly a century ago the Chicago White Sox baseball team was accused of collectively throwing the World Series (the baseball championship) and was dubbed "the Black Sox" for its efforts. With the integrity of baseball in peril, the owners turned to an unimpeachable individual, Judge Landis, to rescue their sport in the face of public discontent. The office of "Baseball Commissioner" was created. The Commissioner handles a whole range of matters. Firstly, he acts as a buffer between owners and the players' unions, striving whenever necessary to find a compromise between the two sides. Secondly, the Commissioner's powers are absolute. Both the owners and the players must abide by his rulings. The Commissioner is seen as an objective, neutral office that exists to promote fairness and what is good for the sport over the more narrow interests of the owners and players. The Commissioner's Office is such a vital one that in the United States all four major sports (American Football,

Basketball, Baseball and Ice Hockey) now have one.

There is a lesson in this for us. Although major league sports also have league offices and league presidents, they also feel a need for a Commissioner's Office. Similarly, it would be both possible and desirable for the chess world to have not only an International Federation but also a Commissioner's Office.

Given the global nature of our sport and our cultural differences, it would, in fact, make sense to have an Office comprising three chess Commissioners. (They would elect one of their number to be Chairman, on a rotating basis.) In recognition of the leading chess zones, the Commissioners should ideally come from three continents, Europe, Asia and America, and I would nominate Bessel Kok (Europe), Dato Tan Chin Nam (Asia) and Erik Anderson (America). All three men have outstanding reputations for integrity and for dedication to chess.

The three Commissioners will jointly oversee the regulations for the Classical Chess world championship cycle, the bidding procedures, the awarding of the prize monies, the distribution of the above-mentioned percentages of the prize-fund, etc. Any points of contention will be communicated in writing by organizers and players to the Commissioners, whose decision is final.

As the Commissioners' Office will be very important, the Commissioners should be changed every five years. During their period in office they will have to undertake not to stand for an elected FIDE post.

The Commissioners will select a reserve Commissioner in case one of them wants to sponsor a particular stage of the world championship cycle and therefore has to step aside temporarily until that specific event is over.

At the end of their five-year term, the Commissioners put forward a short-list of five individuals to replace them. Through an electronic ballot, all over-the-board Grandmasters, men and women, are invited to select three of the five nominees representing different zones. The FIDE General Assembly either ratifies the Grandmasters' choice or, if it prefers, calls for an alternative slate (i.e. with at least one change compared to the first proposal). The new Commissioners are determined by a second vote and are then deemed elected.

I am certain that if three such highly-respected figures as Bessel Kok, Dato Tan Chin Nam and Erik Anderson agreed to serve for the coming five years, within the framework of the overall solution proposed here, the divisions in the chess world would be healed. What an opportunity!

The present package of proposals necessitates the involvement of all the parties in a spirit of compromise. FIDE is asked to sanction a world championship cycle that is administered by an entirely new, independent Commissioners' Office. The players are asked to embrace a brand-new cycle, putting aside all the old claims, which chess fans have so often found confusing and even undignified, about who is, or was, the "correct" world champion at any given moment. The players would also be asked to undertake to compete in other FIDE-sanctioned events, thus raising not only their own profile but also the standing of organized chess as a whole. Einstein TV is asked to accept the new procedure in exchange for having firm organizational rights to the first final, whoever the players are, as well as to Kramnik's match or matches prior to the final.

In fact, though, my own view is that agreement on additional matters will be needed. In exchange for FIDE's sanctioning of the cycle proposed by me here, the players and other parties should pledge themselves to a Goodwill Pact, to be drawn up by the Commissioners' Office. This Pact would specifically state that the players agree to participate in FIDE's other championship events and to play for their national teams in the chess Olympiads (providing that the national federations secure proper funding for their teams).

In the interests of the public standing and dignity of chess, and to help attract sponsorship, I advocate that the Goodwill Pact should also cover such matters as respecting the rights of players and organizers, a proper dress code (but no FIDE uniforms, please!), responsibilities vis-à-vis the media, a commitment to attending the Opening and Closing Ceremonies whenever possible and, more generally, the need for players to act as ambassadors for the game. The Pact would also specify that players and organizers should refrain from using harsh, inflammatory language about one another. It would also specify that every effort will be made to schedule events to avoid clashes. The players and organizers of the various stages of the Classical Chess cycle would be called upon to agree to this Goodwill Pact and recognize the authority of

the Commissioners.

In American sports it happens quite often that team-owners and players are fined by the Commissioners' Office. The proposed Commissioners' Office in the chess world would be able to issue rebukes and, if necessary, impose financial penalties on organizers and players. All revenue generated would go direct to the Players' Health and Benefit Fund (which would be overseen by trustees appointed by the Commissioners' Office). The costs of the chess Commissioners' Office would be borne out of the 5% emergency reserve fund that would also support the staging of the cycles.

The Commissioners' Office would be an important innovation. Naturally, the exact balance of its responsibilities and powers should be discussed by all the parties involved in the initial agreement, as well as being subject to periodic review thereafter.

### **Conclusion**

With FIDE sanctioning a stable, fair Classical Chess world championship, contested by all the leading players and administered by an independent Commissioners' Office, there is every reason to believe that commercial sponsors will enthusiastically support the new cycle. With the world's best players also competing in the Knockout/Rapid championship, that too is an event which can grow in stature and attract commercial sponsors. With the proper framework decided upon, sponsors will also be drawn to the idea of a Blitz championship.

So, that is my peacemaker's contribution to resolving the longstanding afflictions in the chess world. If the parties involved agree that the framework package of solutions that I have outlined above is an equitable, realistic basis for a final detailed agreement, a meeting needs to bring together FIDE officials, players, representatives of Einstein TV and the proposed Commissioners. And the sooner the better!

I am also submitting my proposal directly to all the parties concerned. For my part, I shall be very glad to receive comments on my proposal. Please send them to me at [yasser@seanet.com](mailto:yasser@seanet.com), although I'm afraid I can't promise a personal reply in every case. I am the first to acknowledge that there are likely to be details that can be adjusted, but I hope you will agree that I have set out a fair, practical way of resolving the current impasse. In fact, I am convinced that each and every one of the parties has much to gain from the fresh start that I am proposing. And the biggest winners

of all will be chess itself and the game's millions of devotees throughout the world.

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