



From a Fresh Start To a New Dawn

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To state that the last three months of my life have been the most productive and exhausting that I've ever experienced would be a gross understatement. I could never have expected to be so deeply involved in any single project, and especially one that would try to unify the chess world. Hundreds of phone calls all over the world and well over one thousand e-mails combined with multiple meetings all worked to produce unity in the chess world. My work was interesting, exhilarating, challenging and fun, but there was also annoyance, frustration, anger and despair. On the night of May 5th, 2002, the eve of the chess peace conference in Prague, I could not sleep, as I felt certain that agreement would not be reached. What was the background to the "Fresh Start" proposal? How did it all evolve? And how was a final agreement achieved? I invite you to join me in a personal odyssey that was simply amazing.

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Background

It is no secret that for a very long time professional chess has been in an alarming state of decline. The game may be growing by leaps and bounds on the Internet and in schools, but professional chess has been suffering mightily. That decline stems from the events in 1993 that caused a split in the chess world: the decision by the recognized World Champion Garry Kasparov and his Challenger Nigel Short to break from FIDE, the recognized International Chess Federation, and to play their match outside of FIDE's auspices. FIDE responded by staging its world championship match between Anatoly Karpov and Jan Timman, the two players whom Nigel Short had eliminated in order to



become the Challenger. Having defeated Short, Kasparov played a match against Viswanathan Anand in 1995 under the auspices of a newly founded organization, the Professional Chess Association (PCA). The following year FIDE staged its championship match between its Champion, Anatoly Karpov, and his Challenger, Gata Kamsky; Karpov successfully defended the title that he had won against Timman. At the 1995 FIDE Congress, the General Assembly elected a new President, the relatively unknown Kirsan Iljumzhinov, who ran on a platform undertaking to unite the chess world. He seemed to be an extremely promising choice, enjoying good relations with the recognized Champions, Karpov and Kasparov; better still, he had the deep pockets necessary to induce Kasparov to return to the fold.

In 1997, Iljumzhinov introduced his novel plan of condensing what had been a lengthy three-year or, at times, two-year long world championship cycle into a single four-week event. Approximately one hundred players from zonal and national championship events would join a number of seeded rated players and enter an elimination match competition boasting a five million dollar prize fund! To entice Kasparov and Karpov to accept the new format, both players were invited to join at the semi-final stage. Other players would also enter the tournament at various stages, depending upon their ratings. Certain players would have a bye for the first round or two of matches and receive a seeding into the second or third round. It was a grand design that was enthusiastically endorsed by the vast majority of players, including me.

There were a few hiccups and one major one: Kasparov didn't endorse the new format and he refused to participate. Kasparov's position was a principled one: the elimination matches in the new format were far too short and were unworthy for deciding the world's strongest player and the world championship title. In Kasparov's view, such a format would lead to a completely random Champion.

We mustn't forget that "World Chess Champion" has traditionally been an extremely prestigious title with long historical roots practically unrivaled in any professional sport. Since 1886, deciding the title of World Chess Champion had generally been achieved through lengthy championship matches producing some of the most important chess games ever played. Kasparov strongly objected to a format in which a match of merely two, four or six games would decide a Champion. In his view, such a format



cheapened the title and would make a mockery of the great chess traditions. Kasparov's decision not to participate had another decidedly negative effect on the launch of a new championship format: the defending Champion, Anatoly Karpov, would no longer be seeded into the semi-final; now he would become a direct participant in the final match! This decision met with almost universal derision. The chorus of angst became even louder when an exhausted qualifier, Viswanathan Anand, narrowly lost the final match in a Rapid Chess tiebreaker.

I would like to make a point here about seeding the defending Champion into the championship final match. Historically, this is precisely the tradition of the chess championship. The defending Champion comfortably awaited the emergence of a Challenger. Furthermore, the Champion also received *draw-odds* in the championship match; also, on some occasions if he lost he was entitled to an early rematch. These traditional advantages have been baked into the cake, so to speak. It would be hard to imagine the outrage had Karpov also received draw-odds in his January 1998 final match with Anand. Yet stop and think about the situation for a moment; if Karpov *had* received such an advantage, this would only have been a confirmation of an advantage traditionally granted to the defending Champion. This critical point of draw-odds was to play a vital role in 2002, in the events leading up to Prague.

FIDE's new world championship format evolved into the contest that took place in December 2001 in Moscow and culminated in teenage sensation Ruslan Ponomarev becoming the new FIDE World Champion in January 2002. FIDE's format has now become a one hundred and twenty eight player knockout featuring several rounds of two-game matches with all players beginning in round one. In FIDE's view, such a competition is far more *sporting*, with no players having the advantage of being seeded. This is undoubtedly true, but in the process the prestige of the title of World Chess Champion has been severely damaged. No player has successfully won two of these competitions. FIDE Champions abound. If mathematical statistics are to be believed, the favorite will rarely win such a competition, because of the random nature of the matches. After my original participation in the 1997/98 FIDE championship, I changed my view and now agree with Kasparov that the FIDE format of short match play is *fundamentally flawed* for deciding who is the world's very best *classical* chess player. On two occasions, I have declined to participate in FIDE's championship cycle because of my

disagreement with the format.

While FIDE was evolving its championship format, Kasparov was having difficulties of his own. The PCA organization that he had created for his matches against Short in 1993 and against Anand in 1995 had floundered and collapsed. By the late 1990s Kasparov had given up trying to stage a grand inclusive world championship cycle open to the rank and file grandmasters. Instead, he was content to accept the challenge of his strongest rivals based solely upon rankings on the FIDE rating list. In 1998, Viswanathan Anand and Vladimir Kramnik, the world's two highest rated players after Kasparov, were invited to play a match to determine a Challenger for Kasparov. Anand declined his invitation and was replaced by Alexey Shirov. Shirov defeated Kramnik and expected a million dollar Kasparov v Shirov match to be organized. When a bid for a modest \$600,000 prize fund came from California, Shirov declined, fully expecting that a better prize fund would be forthcoming. It did not come, and Shirov never played Kasparov for his title. This tragic result has caused a bitter dispute to develop between Kasparov and Shirov.

In 2000, Anand, then the world's second highest rated player, was again invited to play a world championship match directly with Kasparov. When this plan collapsed, Kramnik, the third highest rated player, was invited to play Kasparov, despite having lost a qualifying match (against Shirov). By now, though, Shirov had slipped significantly down the rating list. A new company, Brain Games Network (BGN) headed by GM Raymond Keene, organized a match in London between Kasparov and Kramnik. As World Champion, Kasparov held draw-odds but voluntarily relinquished the right to a return match. In an upset, Kramnik defeated Kasparov and became the 14th world champion in the long line of traditional world champions that extend back to Wilhelm Steinitz.

As part of the BGN 2000 contract, both Kasparov and Kramnik had committed themselves to accepting a candidates' qualifier event to determine a Challenger for the winner in the next cycle. I was not privy to these negotiations or how the BGN candidates' qualification system evolved. I am, however, aware of the results: BGN had a limited period to set up its qualifier for the second cycle, the company delayed the announcement of its qualifier, and the period expired. Kasparov was no longer contractually obliged to participate in the BGN qualifier. The lengthy planning that must, we assume, have gone into the BGN qualifier produced a

startling format. The traditional Dortmund tournament decided to host the BGN qualifier, and the event would feature eight players split into two groups of four players, with each group playing a double round robin. The top two finishers in each group would play four-game elimination matches based on FIDE's own elimination format! Just as with FIDE's format, the Dortmund system of short matches was fundamentally flawed. Kasparov was incensed and reacted angrily. He would certainly not play in Dortmund and would thus be out of the cycle to determine who would challenge Kramnik.

I too was shocked by the Dortmund format. I could not understand how chess grandmaster Keene, with his great experience and intimate knowledge of world championship cycles, could have proposed such a silly format. The only possible explanation was financial. The Dortmund event would be economical, quickly producing a Challenger before moving on to a big money world championship match final. I was disappointed that the Dortmund event didn't feature a qualifying stage for rank and file grandmasters such as myself. Unhappily for me, there would be no opportunity to compete in Kramnik's cycle and having voluntarily withdrawn from FIDE's cycle, I had no chance to practice my craft.

Eligibility for the Dortmund/BGN tournament seemed simple: the highest-rated players were invited. But here the troubles began. Kasparov and Anand, the world's top and third ranked players respectively, declined their invitations to Dortmund. Originally, the world's number nine ranked player, Vassily Ivanchuk, accepted an invitation, only to be reminded by FIDE Executives that as a finalist in the 2002 FIDE championship he would be in violation of the contract, which prohibited the final and semi-final players from competing in rival world championships. Ivanchuk withdrew from the Dortmund qualifier. Logic dictates that the Dortmund organizers would continue moving down the ranking list and invite a replacement for Ivanchuk. Instead, they decided to invite a wild-card player and tapped German Champion Christopher Lutz. While I'm sure this was a popular decision among German players, the organizing committee and local sponsors, it is also quite shocking. Seeded into a Candidates field of eight top players competing for the highest title is an extraordinary gift for a player ranked only 40th on the rating list.

I sum up now the situation in early 2002. Vladimir Kramnik, as the 14th World Champion in a historic line of title-holders

extending back to Steinitz, supported the Dortmund Candidates' tournament for producing a Challenger; Garry Kasparov, the world's top-ranked player, refused to participate in either Kramnik's cycle or in FIDE's championship. That FIDE championship had just been won by Ponomariov. FIDE appeared happy to continue its championship and had accelerated the time controls for official FIDE events. Therefore, at least three claims existed as to who was the world's very best player, and the divisions among the claimants were as deep as the seas.

Chaos

Chaos has been the only word to describe the situation in professional chess. Since 1993 the simplest way of starting a discussion in any chess club has been simply to ask, "Who is the World Champion?" The impact of this question has had a profoundly negative impact upon sponsors worldwide. Consider, for example, the great Linares 2002 tournament. One has to pity the poor organizers, who made an outstanding effort. Having secured what they felt was a star-studded field, they were surprised when Ruslan Ponomariov, who had accepted his invitation before winning the FIDE world championship, explained that with his new role he had inherited new responsibilities and he had to withdraw. After various undignified threats had been made, the Linares organizers made some compromises, including recognition of the new World Champion, and finally Ponomariov agreed to participate. It is no secret that any World Champion commands an important marketing value and receives a hefty fee for participating in tournaments and exhibitions. With two recognized world champions, Ponomariov and Kramnik, plus Kasparov as the world's most recognized and top-ranked player, organizers have to satisfy the demands of three players, treating each of them as Champion. Conflicts, especially on financial conditions, are inevitable.

Even worse, FIDE has taken a very confrontational approach with major chess organizers stating that, "Those organizers who are not with us are against us" and "We are at war." Which organizers or sponsors in their right mind would want to host an event that will be savaged by conflicting claims? Think about the decision of the poor Dortmund organizers. They want to host a magnificent tournament of great chess stars. Would the Dortmund organizers be a casualty of war? Would FIDE sue them for making claims about staging a world championship cycle? Who would willingly accept such aggravation or even the *possibility* of it? Welcome to

the world of professional chess!

As Kramnik laconically explained in an interview on pages 44-45 of *New In Chess* magazine 2002 #1, when describing the 2001 Moscow FIDE championship clashing with his own exhibition match against Kasparov: *“I didn’t have any special feelings about the clash with the FIDE tournament. Some time ago I reread an interview with Vishy (Anand) after he became FIDE world champion last year, and I understood what he meant when he more or less said that the chess world has been in such disorder for so long already that he has the feeling that everybody is happy with the situation and no one wants to do anything about it. But of course it looks a bit nonsensical to have two such big events at the same time in the same city. Unfortunately for the chess world this is quite normal. That is very scary. It is normal to have scandals and it is normal that FIDE tries to destroy our event. It’s so normal that I didn’t have any strong emotions about it. But of course it means that there is something wrong in the chess world. If there is a way out I don’t know, but at least I am trying to contribute something positive.”*

Such a view is deeply disheartening. In truth the average chess fan and the top players are very upset about the situation in chess but how to resolve the situation?

Fresh Start, A Hope and a Prayer

For a long while I had been thinking deeply about how to resolve the problems in the professional chess world. At Wijk Aan Zee in 2001, I developed a unity plan and began discussing it with a number of colleagues. I spoke briefly with Kramnik, respecting his position as the new Classical World Champion; I considered him as the key person and the one most capable of changing the situation and charting a new course for professional chess. In March 2001, we exchanged e-mails about a new cycle. At that time, Vladimir was deeply involved in the discussions for launching “his” new cycle and was necessarily busy, so our exchanges didn’t reach the necessary conclusions. In Prague, October 2001 during the Eurotel event where Kasparov faced the Czech National Team, I spoke with Garry about unification and asked him if he had a plan. He responded that he wasn’t a magician and couldn’t pull a rabbit out of his hat! Unfortunately, he didn’t pose the same question to me, and when the topic at dinner changed I couldn’t reveal to him what I had in mind. I had to satisfy myself by sharing my “Fresh Start” plan with GM

Genna Sosonko, who was a guest at the event. He was quite thoughtful but was understandably skeptical. He encouraged me to launch my plan and wished me his very best but also warned me that I was sure to raise the ire of one side or another. It wasn't the last time that I would be the butt of jokes as being a dead peace pigeon. I didn't mind.

During the January 2002 US Championships in Seattle, I spoke to some of my colleagues about my plan and got a varied set of responses, ranging from "hopeless" to "great!" The overall sentiment, though, seemed to be, "Just do it!" After all, what would be lost? If the chess world didn't unify in dramatic fashion, and quickly, it would continue its downward spiral, with an increasing exodus from the game by talented players and sponsors.

At the 2002 Wijk Aan Zee tournament, I had a very lengthy meeting with Carsten Hensel, Kramnik's representative and consultant to the Dortmund tournament. Carsten was enthusiastic about a number of ideas that I presented to him but explained that Kramnik was legally *bound* by his contract with BGN and that he had to face the Dortmund winner in a championship match. He advised me to await the outcome of that cycle before launching my plan. During the Wijk Aan Zee tournament, my wife Yvette and I hosted a dinner at our Amsterdam apartment for a few friends, including IM Gert Ligterink. I've known Gert for almost 15 years and have come to respect his opinions very much. He is a superb writer, and his weekly column in the *Volkscrant* newspaper is a Dutch favorite. I bent his ear, and the ears of our other guests for the evening, and he was unequivocal in his support. To paraphrase, "Great plan, Yasser. If anyone can do it, you can. Of course, you have no chance." Gotta love a challenge.

I decided not to take Carsten's advice, and following the conclusion of the Wijk Aan Zee event I wrote my "A Fresh Start" article (Readers may find it in the [ChessCafe.com](http://www.chesscafe.com) Archives: <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/freshstart.pdf>). It was a lengthy, detailed proposal, and needed to be drafted with extreme care and absolute clarity. A key part of the plan was the creation of the Chess Commissioners' Office and I had three persons in mind: Erik Anderson from Seattle, representing the United States, Dato Tan Chin Nam of Kuala Lumpur, representing Asia, and Bessel Kok of Prague, representing Europe. In due course I approached them individually and they all agreed that their names could be mentioned and that they would serve as Commissioners should

unity be achieved. I was very grateful to them for giving me much detailed feedback on the draft plan.

On February 22nd Yvette and I joined GM Jan Timman and Bessel Kok for dinner in Amsterdam. The “Fresh Start”, as I had decided to call it, was very much the topic of conversation. Jan was very thoughtful about the proposal and pronounced it good. We spent the whole night at GM Hein Donner’s favorite hangout, the De Kring Club, discussing the initiative. Bessel agreed to my proposed role for him as a Chess Commissioner and on February 26th “A Fresh Start” was published on ChessCafe.com. I also prepared a slightly longer version for the Club Kasparov website, as I was simultaneously responding to an article by Kasparov. I sent a third version of my article, an executive summary proposal, to FIDE’s headquarters and to all the Federations in my e-mail address list, as well as various other interested parties. Then I waited.

It was the shortest wait of my life. Within 24 hours I had received 196 responses, a funny number as it was exactly the same number of players that I had recommended for inclusion in the Swiss system world qualification tournament that would launch the proposed cycle. Yvette and I joked that I had received an e-mail for each participant.

At this moment, I have to interrupt my narrative to explain an important point. Although I don’t know the exact date when it happened, I became aware that BGN had sold its chess assets, and specifically its contract with World Champion Vladimir Kramnik, to Einstein TV, a UK-based multi-media content company that broadcasts over a pan-European cable system and by satellite. I had never heard of Einstein TV and was anxious to learn about it. Once more, I didn’t have to wait long. On March 1st, Vladimir Kramnik had a press conference in London, introducing Einstein TV’s CEO Steve Timmins to the chess world. We had a new partner in unifying the chess world. Keene was out.

Despite what I considered perfect timing for launching “A Fresh Start”, some chess journalists were far less enthusiastic, and not only about the timing. My article appeared during the 2002 Linares event, and the wordsmiths were busy covering the tournament. I had asked John Henderson, writer for *The Scotsman* newspaper and *The Week In Chess* (TWIC) reports, to provide a copy of “A Fresh Start” to Ruslan Ponomarev. John told me of Ruslan’s reaction, “It’s very long.” Hmm. That was a bit deflating

but hey, if unity in the chess world was a simple problem, I could write a simple answer.

I was also deeply anxious for a reaction from Kasparov and asked Miguel Greengard, also known as Mig, to tell me what Garry thought of “A Fresh Start”. Mig wasn’t as forthcoming as hoped: “Garry’s focusing on the tournament but he didn’t toss your proposal away.” A particularly funny moment came courtesy of Mark Crowther, the editor of TWIC website. While other websites had published “A Fresh Start” quickly, TWIC had not. When I asked Mark why, he explained that my proposal had “a zero chance.” Oh great, I thought, an editor with attitude!

In late February a well-known writer in the UK commented thus on “A Fresh Start”: “I don’t think there is a cat’s chance in hell of it coming to pass.”

But things continued to move forward. On March 5th, Bessel Kok, on behalf of the proposed Chess Commissioners, issued a press release inviting the parties to Prague to hold a meeting on how to unify the chess world. This was a catalyst for really heating things up. Folks turned serious and began thinking about a peace conference for the first time in many a long year.

Party Positions

I’ve given the background history on how the chess world landed up in its current situation, but it would also be helpful to understand fully the position of each of the parties. That will underscore the uphill battle that was being faced.

FIDE’s public position was clear: we are the official international federation composed of national federations, recognized by the International Olympic Committee and other sporting bodies. We have our championships, which are fair and sporting; we have our Champions; any other claims are illegitimate and are none of our concern. We have no reason to compromise; we are happy continuing our work on behalf of chess. Privately, though, FIDE officials were most anxious to end the divisions in chess. Without the participation of the very best players, Kasparov and Kramnik, in the FIDE cycles, sponsors had not stepped up to the plate to help Kirsan Iljumzhinov support the FIDE championship.

Kramnik’s position was that he was contractually committed to defending his title against the winner of the Dortmund

tournament. He would welcome a plan to achieve unity, provided that such a plan respected his rights as the Classical Chess World Champion and all the attendant advantages that such status offered.

Kasparov's position was that he was the world's highest ranked player, had won the past ten consecutive Classical Chess tournaments in which he had competed and had therefore more than earned the right to a *direct rematch* with Kramnik, whom he considered the only World Champion. Furthermore, Kasparov considered that any "world championship" that did not include him was hollow. Recently, Kasparov has admitted (at his website) that the break-away for the 1993 London match with Short was "...the biggest blunder of my life." Kasparov was anxious to repair the fissures in the chess world but couldn't see how it could be done.

How to reconcile such reasonable yet entirely incompatible positions? The answer was simple: firstly, to get all the parties actually to *think* about the possibility of chess unity and to get them all *together* for a meeting. I have a great belief in the magic of meetings. When folks begin to talk and positions are laid out, we all instinctively reach out for consensus and compromise. We needed to have a very good meeting indeed!

E-Mail Overload & Plenty of Support

Arguably the most rewarding part of this whole unity project was the enormous outpouring of e-mail messages that I received. "A Fresh Start" had struck a very sympathetic chord with the chess public and their response was overwhelming. I received well over 1,000 e-mails from grandmaster colleagues, club players, federation Presidents and chess fans. A clear pattern emerged in many of them: a warm welcome for my proposal, followed by a prediction of which party would make a deal impossible. Those suggestions were wonderfully incompatible. There was no consensus on who, if anyone, had the most to gain from my proposal, which I saw as a very positive sign in favor of the neutrality of "A Fresh Start". Sometimes I would receive a message saying that Party X came out best, but shortly afterwards messages would come claiming that Parties Y or Z would derive the most benefit. Then again, an e-mail would tell me that Party X would never agree to the "Fresh Start"; not long afterwards I would get messages saying that Parties Y or Z would be the stumbling block. With failure all but assured in many people's

eyes, the blame game was a close race, with Kasparov garnering the largest number of votes.

A common remark, even among so-called experts, was that although my proposals were fair the protagonists' egos would always make an agreement impossible. The pundits would prove to be very wrong, but, overall, the welcome extended to "A Fresh Start" was overwhelmingly positive. Nearly everyone realized that trying to bring all the various parties together was a worthwhile goal. An isolated exception was, quite expectedly, a rabidly anti-FIDE writer/propagandist in the US, who wrote a particularly silly article aimed at torpedoing the chances of "A Fresh Start." His attempt had zero impact.

One of the most interesting exchanges I had was with the statistician Jeff Sonas. He asked if I would be interested in a statistical analysis of world championship cycles. I certainly was and encouraged him in his work. He published a remarkable article analyzing over 13,000 possible formats. Not surprisingly, his analysis showed that the FIDE championship format was one of the poorest ways of running a cycle. I was flattered when his analysis showed that the cycle proposed in "A Fresh Start" was one of the very best! I encourage all chess fans to read his article: <http://www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=260>

The "Fresh Start" proposals had several motivations: to present a unity plan that was *inclusive* yet fair to everyone; to propose a new office of Chess Commissioners to insure the success of the cycle and to chart a clear path for *future* cycles. The first cycle would be a one-off circumstance, with things settling down for the second and third cycles. Finally, with unity achieved it would open up the possibility of two other lines of world championships, Rapid and Blitz chess.

Fresh Start: Quick Death

Following the press release issued by Bessel Kok in early March, Vladimir Kramnik telephoned Bessel to explain his worries about the proposed meeting in Prague. The Eurotel Trophy tournament invitation had coupled with it an opportunity to participate in a Players' Workshop to discuss such items as the future of chess and the effect of the Internet. Participation in the Workshop was entirely voluntary. Kramnik was concerned that such a Workshop was being taken over by a discussion regarding chess unity. Kramnik explained to Bessel that he was bound by contractual

obligations to Einstein TV and that he couldn't accept a situation, which might lead to a violation of the terms of his contract. In short, Kramnik could not participate in such a Workshop. In turn, Bessel worried that the Eurotel sponsors would not be happy if a major meeting on chess unity upstaged a fantastic tournament. On March 10th I spoke with Bessel, and he explained why he felt it was necessary to cancel the meeting that he had proposed a week earlier. There would be no peace conference. I glumly e-mailed the proposed Chess Commissioners and informed them that the meeting had been canceled and I released them from their commitment to serve. Without a meeting there would be no unity agreement.

Einstein TV CEO, Steve Timmins to the Rescue

Once more, chess caught a very lucky break, in the new figure of Steve Timmins, the CEO of Einstein TV. Following his March 1st press conference I had contacted Steve, and after a polite exchange of messages he surprised me by agreeing to meet in Seattle as his company was conducting business with Real Networks, whose headquarters are a few blocks from my condominium. In the meantime, I flew from Amsterdam to Seattle and onwards to Palm Springs for the underwriters' retreat of America's Foundation For Chess (AFFC), formerly known as the Seattle Chess Foundation. Sun and fun, interspersed with discussions on how to bring chess forward in America, were the order of the day, for that brief time. I was grateful that my colleagues Joel Benjamin, Larry Christiansen and Anna Hahn were able to join the retreat.

My meeting with Steve Timmins was scheduled for March 15th and after realizing that he was in town visiting Real Networks I also arranged a luncheon on March 16th with, in addition, Larry Jacobson, the Chief Operating Officer for Real Networks. Larry enjoys chess and has helped support the AFFC. I was grateful that he was able to change his schedule on such short notice.

On March 15th, Steve Timmins, his colleague and I had dinner at the Kitchen Palace, my favorite Seattle restaurant. Steve turned out to be a wonderful chap and, fortunately for me, a great listener. Poor Steve had to withstand quite a data download and I spoke for hours. Steve was very complementary of my efforts and urged me to continue despite having just had the unity meeting canceled. He promised to work with Kramnik to support a unity effort. Because Steve didn't know too much about the chess

world, I urged him to hire Malcolm Pein as an advisor in the negotiations ahead. He accepted my advice, and Malcolm proved to be an invaluable helper for Steve in the ensuing process.

Completely reinvigorated by Steve's support, I redoubled my efforts and felt the time was ripe to contact Garry Kasparov. Would he prove right the armchair defeatists and block a unity effort?

The Boss: Garry Kasparov

There is no question that for the past 20 years Garry Kasparov has been the most dominant chess player in the world. His achievements over the board have been simply staggering. He has earned the moniker "The Boss" for his extraordinary achievements. He has also been the lightning rod for controversy. Garry has a volatile personality combined with very strongly held beliefs in doing what he perceives as in the best interests of chess. Once he is certain that he has charted the right course, wild horses can't stop him from his commitment. As Mig explained in a recent article on Kasparov Chess Online, Garry has a binary view: you're a supporter or you're not. Negative or positive, Garry doesn't tolerate fence-sitters. He doesn't easily agree to compromises.

My history with Garry is a long one. We first met in the 1980 Olympiad in Malta. Our personalities mesh well, and we have shared a lot of good times together. We've experienced a deep friendship, and at times I've felt a kinship with Garry, to the depths of brotherhood. On the other hand, we've had our share of conflicts, and they have been especially hard ones. I too am quite headstrong and when I'm sure I'm right, well, I don't compromise easily either.

Garry took the first step, and it was a courageous one. He made a public statement on his website that supported "A Fresh Start", inviting discussions for achieving chess unity. I felt very proud of him.

We were soon having telephone conversations and e-mail messages with one another. Garry was very open and honest in our exchanges, and we quickly established strong common ground. Garry was happy with the "Fresh Start" format for the first, second and third cycles. He wasn't particularly pleased about the draw-odds that he would have to concede in the semi-final match for the first cycle but in the greater interests of chess unity

he was prepared to compromise.

Garry and I found ourselves in deep discussions about the time controls (he had a very intriguing idea for handling time trouble in the third time controls), staging the cycles, the responsibilities of the Commissioners, Grandmaster input, commercialization and so on. Garry felt that any decisions such as time controls, length of matches, schedules of play, a world qualification format and the utilization of the rating lists to seed players needed proper vetting by a Grandmaster Steering Committee. Garry's primary interest was in creating the proper structure – post agreement – for the commercialization of chess. We agreed that for chess to have a future it *must* stand on its own feet and not rely solely upon patrons of the game. On the key issue of the first cycle, we had reached agreement: the winner of the Dortmund tournament would enjoy a seeded place into the quarter-final matches, joining three seeded players (Kramnik, Ponomarev and Kasparov). A world qualifier would determine the other four places for the quarter-final matches. Kasparov wasn't certain that a Swiss tournament was the right format for this qualifier, but he didn't have an alternative suggestion. This decision would be left to the Grandmaster Steering Committee. By the time of my birthday party, on March 24th, Garry was fully on board with the "Fresh Start". We had exhausted his concerns and things were moving swimmingly.

Einstein TV & Vladimir Kramnik

What was extremely helpful to me in winning Garry's trust was that I was having regular communications with Kramnik's representative, Carsten Hensel, and the Einstein TV CEO Steve Timmins. Steve had accepted Malcolm Pein as a chess advisor and our exchanges were also open and honest ones. Folks were prepared to make compromises. Our next step was to arrange a meeting between Carsten, Steve, Malcolm and me. Strangely enough, the calendar was rather crowded, Easter was upon us and we all had family obligations. April 5th would feature a press conference launching the Dortmund Candidates' tournament. We needed to meet soon. It turned out that the only available date that suited everyone's schedule was April 10th and we prepared a meeting at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam.

Negotiations with Kramnik's side weren't so easy; his agent Carsten Hensel represented him, while Einstein TV held a contract to stage his matches. Thus, it would be necessary to confirm with

both Steve and Carsten that we were on common ground and forge ahead. The problem was that both Steve and Carsten are incredibly busy persons. At any moment it seemed that Steve might be jetting around the world. Furthermore, Steve had come to rely upon Malcolm for his input, and Malcolm in a single month would be in Rio de Janeiro, London and South Africa! Coordinating communications could best be done through e-mails and here Carsten was at a decided disadvantage, as he is a native German speaker and e-mails were conducted in English only. Points would have to be clarified, and the need for a joint meeting was obviously vital.

But, by the time of my birthday Steve had indicated his willingness, subject to legal review of the existing contracts, to accept that the Dortmund winner would be seeded into the Candidates' matches, and to run a new all-encompassing cycle as prescribed by the "Fresh Start" proposals.

With such headway made, it was now time to contact FIDE and gauge its position.

FIDE

Up to this point I had sent the FIDE Secretariat (Emmanuel Omuku) my "Fresh Start" proposals, as well as a number of e-mails to keep him informed of events. In Prague, Emmanuel would reveal that he had been holding his breath. He was understandably skeptical that the players could reach an agreement, but hoped for a positive outcome with FIDE receiving a firm proposal from the players. FIDE had been disheartened by the news that the Prague meeting had been called off, but they were also pleased when I confirmed to him that I was still continuing my efforts.

Back to my birthday party, in Amsterdam. GM Jan Timman joined the festivities, and I informed him that Garry had agreed to "A Fresh Start", that Steve had shown a willingness to include the Dortmund winner as part of a greater cycle and that all the proposed Commissioners were fully on board with such a compromise. I needed Jan's help in two directions. First, we had to convince Bessel that a peace conference in Prague was in everyone's best interests, and secondly, as a member of FIDE's Player Council, Jan had to open a line of communication with Emmanuel to ascertain FIDE's position. Jan was extremely helpful in performing these tasks, and I would like to thank him

most warmly for his positive, upbeat attitude. At times when I felt low, he was always good for a quick pick-me-up.

Still, the issue of how to approach FIDE vexed me greatly. I had communicated with USCF President John McCrary, and he and the USCF Policy Board had taken a very strong supportive stand behind “A Fresh Start”. Intuitively I felt that it wouldn’t have been appropriate to use his offices to approach FIDE; the lines of communication needed to be shorter. It would be necessary to bite the bullet and approach Kirsan Iljumzhinov directly. How to do it? I needed an ally and someone who could speak Russian. Too, would *my* words have the desired impact? Would the FIDE President believe that so much support for unity had been garnered? The more I thought about it, the clearer the answer became: Garry would have to meet with Kirsan and tell him directly using his own words that he was serious about chess unity. I called Garry.

You’re Kidding, Right?

My first call to Garry asking him to meet with Kirsan went exactly as expected. “You’re kidding, right?” Garry asked. “Yasser, let’s get this very clear: I am *not* going to meet with Kirsan.” “But Garry,” I protested, “Kirsan is angry with me. I wrote an open letter called “Enough is Enough” and I slammed the guy. He doesn’t want to talk to me. He needs to *hear* it from you!” “But Yasser, whatever you said in English, trust me, I said ten times worse *in Russian!*” And so the conversation went. For a very long time. In the end, Garry softened but didn’t budge. He would need to speak with his people as this was a very big step for him, and I was asking a lot.

Amongst the people that Garry respects a great deal is Dr. William Wirth of Switzerland. I know Dr. Wirth well, having first met him in 1982 during the Lucerne Olympiad. I have a great respect for Dr. Wirth and implored Garry to seek his advice. I was sure that Dr. Wirth would support Garry making an effort to reach out to FIDE. Garry worried that a meeting would be seen as a sign of weakness and thought long and hard. After a few more phone calls, Garry had reached a decision. His people had backed him and told him to go to the meeting.

On March 27th Garry phoned to inform me that he would meet with Kirsan. It was a very funny call. Garry was traveling on a train, and whenever the train went through a tunnel we would get

disconnected. Somehow we managed to run through a number of outstanding issues. He sternly informed me that this would be the shortest meeting of his life! That he would present the “Fresh Start” proposals, with the concession that the Dortmund winner be seeded into the first cycle, tell Kirsan that he supported it and leave. Again, Garry was very strong with me. He insisted that I had to write down a very clear set of guidelines for him and tell him directly what should be discussed and avoided. Garry and I also discussed the setting for the meeting. “We can’t just meet in a restaurant! If people see us together, rumors will run wild!” Garry explained to me that he would think of something. We both understood that this was a crucial meeting for the unity effort. If the meeting went wrong, the whole plan for unity would collapse. Neither of us wanted to leave anything to chance.

Garry soon called me back. He had spoken with his mother, Clara and she had suggested Garry’s friend, Andrei Makarov, as a go-between. They could meet in his law offices on “neutral territory” as Makarov has good relations with Kirsan. Makarov was a big help in the process and readily agreed to host a meeting in his offices. The meeting took place in Moscow on Saturday, March 30th with just a few security guards patrolling an empty building. Garry wondered how the group must have appeared and steeled himself for a tense meeting. Garry presented the “Fresh Start” proposals to Kirsan and explained them to him. He elaborated the critical point that with this proposal FIDE would be *licensing* the championships to a new professional management group. That instead of having to pay for everything, FIDE would *receive* money for a change. Kirsan was on his way to Dubai to make the ceremonial opening move in the FIDE Rapid Chess Grand Prix and promised to consider the proposals. Garry told me that Andrei had been a good choice to help with this tough meeting and that we would have to wait.

On April 3rd, a second meeting was held between Garry and Kirsan, again at Andrei Makarov’s offices. Garry was stunned with the outcome of the meeting. I paraphrase his reflections. “This time the meeting went very well. The atmosphere was very calm, business-like. Kirsan said he was very glad to have a discussion and to talk about chess unity. He liked the “Fresh Start” proposals and he said that he would support them and ask the General Assembly to sanction a new Classical Chess world championship. He wanted more information about Mr. Bessel Kok. He had several conditions: That the new cycle be as inclusive as possible; that the title be sanctioned by FIDE, that in

return the players would agree to work with FIDE on its initiatives and participate in FIDE events such as the Rapid Chess Grand Prix, Olympiads, Knockout championships, etc. Kirsan's last condition - and it elicited a round of laughter - was that he wouldn't get stuck with the bill for a new cycle! Garry quickly reassured him that FIDE would receive a sanctioning fee and money would flow *into* FIDE's coffers."

I was elated by the news. It was perfect! The best response that I could possibly have hoped for had come to pass.

Garry too was very happy. For nearly 15 years he has been fighting to bring a professional management group to the chess world and to involve *commercial sponsors*. He had done extraordinary things with the PCA, but now with FIDE willing to accept a new partner, it would be possible not only to put a new Classical World Championship cycle on firm financial footing but it would also be possible to work on reinvigorating the FIDE Rapid Chess Grand Prix and a new Blitz Championship. It was a triumphant moment.

Neither of us understood why such a tough first meeting, before Dubai, should be so shortly followed by a great meeting after Dubai. We would find out why in the coming days and weeks.

In the meantime, Garry delighted me with a new FIDE initiative: Kirsan wanted to know if Garry would support a FIDE "Chess Oscar Night." Kirsan's idea was to have a special night once a year in Lausanne, Switzerland, site of FIDE's headquarters. Modeled on the lines of the "Oscar" awards, such a night would be a chance to award the chess world with such accolades as best player, organizer, newspaper writer, magazine columnist, book author and of course all the various FIDE Champions. A fantastic idea! "Wow!" I shouted to Garry. "This has to be the best FIDE idea for the last twenty years! It's great! Call Kirsan immediately and tell him we absolutely have to encourage this idea. It really is nice."

"But Yasser, it's two o'clock in the morning in Moscow."

For both of us this conversation was very much a breakthrough. Not only was FIDE taking an entirely new and welcome position it was now considering an initiative that would work to *uplift* the whole chess world. It seemed to me that my very great fears about FIDE's reactions had gone out the window. I was ecstatic.

New Worries

On April 2nd I received a draft of the press release for the Dortmund tournament. I was worried, as the press release contained no mention of the fact that Dortmund might be part of a larger cycle. Steve told me not to worry, that our planned meeting at Schiphol Airport would sort things out and that another press conference could be arranged if agreement was reached. I went back to work on resurrecting the Prague Peace Conference.

Meanwhile, Hanon Russell of ChessCafe.com was asking for an updated article on how things stood with “A Fresh Start”. I had written several drafts, but things seemed to be happening on a daily basis and it was never the right time to finalize such a follow-up article.

On April 5th, the Dortmund organizers held a press conference, releasing the names of all the participants, the regulations of play, etc. There was no mention of the possibility that Dortmund could be part of a larger cycle. I fretted but was reassured that agreement could be reached.

By April 9th, the lobbying effort had paid off, as Bessel had agreed again to host a peace conference. He asked that as far as possible we should all try to be as supportive to the Eurotel sponsor and express our gratitude in interviews. Bessel had one new demand and it was a very serious one: *a complete news blackout*. He was now confident that a Prague meeting would garner a tangible result and he wanted to avoid any upset of the fragile balance through leaks to the press. When I informed Hanon that I couldn't update my article, I got a polite growl.

I also started contacting Xie Jun and Zsuzsa Polgar, as it was high time to get the women's cycle confirmed. My optimism that the “Fresh Start” proposals would come to fruition was now considerable. Wednesday, April 10th would be the big day, when I would meet with the parties on the Kramnik side: Steve Timmins, Carsten Hensel and Malcolm Pein. My confidence was understandable; FIDE, Kasparov and the proposed Commissioners were all fully on board and had agreed to make the Dortmund tournament part of a larger cycle, while Steve had also indicated his willingness to support this unity plan. In fact, though, the “Fresh Start” proposals were just about to run into huge difficulties, with the grave risk that unity in the chess world would

slip through our fingers.

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