



SKITTLES
ROOM



Draw?

by Mark Dvoretsky

There are many different sports for which the time has come to find new ways to increase its popularity, or attractiveness to the spectators. For example, tennis introduced the tie-breaker, and worked out the present-day system of tournaments and ratings. And a very short time ago, both volleyball and table tennis changed their scoring systems.

For chess, the problem is quite acute, since our game certainly does not occupy the place it deserves. How is this situation to be corrected?

A few attempts have been made already. The knockout-championship, for instance, I think is a very good idea. It could be improved (the "double knockout", and extending the final matches); but the idea itself is a good one. Shortening the time controls, however, is the exact opposite. Yes, the games have started to end a bit quicker - but the press and TV pay them no more attention. Meanwhile, the shortcomings of this innovation have been all too obvious: the quality of the games has fallen sharply, and not just because of the increase in gross blunders, but also because it has become practically impossible to find deep and interesting ideas over the board - ever! This is a blow to all who love chess, the majority of whom follow the games, not "live", but rather through the literature and print media. Sport is, after all, just one facet of chess. Another facet is skill, which also attracts great numbers of people; and they should not be made to suffer.

The split in the chess world initiated by Garry Kasparov

has been a great loss to chess. The return to an orderly and well-regulated World Championship system, for a single title, is one of our first and foremost tasks. At present, I do not believe it is being resolved very convincingly.

An important goal of our work should be the enlarging of our social base: that is, increasing the number of people who know how to play chess, by teaching the game in school. It is our most sacred duty to propagandize chess, to find outlets in print and on TV, as well as new possibilities on the Internet. New problems are appearing as well: controlling computers, and chess-doping. Now, whereas controlling doping in chess is a minor question, having no substantive importance whatsoever, and important only in the context of getting chess included in the Olympics, "computer cheating" is a real danger, posing a well-founded threat to great numbers of chessplayers. In my opinion, the absolutely twisted influence of contemporary openings preparation on chess deserves a special article of its own (the appearance of such radical proposals as "Fischerrandom chess" is hardly accidental).

As we can see, there are a great many unsolved problems, of which we have indicated only a few. Since there's no sense talking about them all at once, I would like to spend some time here on one question, which has come to occupy center stage of late - the problem of quick draws.

It's not uncommon for chess lovers who come to watch the games after work - a couple of hours after the round begins - not even to find the players on the stage. Match spectators take this sort of thing especially hard. For instance, in the recent short match between Kramnik and Kasparov in Moscow, out of four games at the classical time-control, three ended in quick draws (not

prearranged draws, of course - it's just one more sad consequence of contemporary openings preparation at the very highest level). Wouldn't you say the visitors had a right to consider themselves duped, and to complain about the time wasted, not to mention the money they'd spent on tickets?

Similar, or even worse episodes are known to occur at tournaments. In the final, decisive round of the 2003 US Championship, a large crowd of spectators gathered - children, journalists and TV crews among them. And what happened? Literally within minutes of the start of play, three out of four pairs of leaders took draws! There is no need to explain what impression this left upon the crowd, among them the event's sponsors; the moral loss to chess (which must inevitably be followed by material loss as well) was obvious.

Attempts at battling the quick draw have of course been undertaken. It was once suggested, for example, that we could score draws differently: stalemate, or the so-called "dead draw" - where one side has king and minor piece vs. bare king - would be scored higher than the usual draw (although lower, of course, than a win). It's not clear how much dynamism such a rule would have added; but it would certainly have caused major changes in the theory of the endgame. Would it be worth it?

A less radical idea was to forbid any agreed draws before move 30. Such attempts have, as a rule, not had their desired effect. Luis Rentero, the organizer of the Linares tournaments, offered the participants additional sums of money (something like three, or maybe even five thousand dollars) to accept such responsibilities, and many players agreed wholeheartedly. But in one round, there suddenly appeared three premature draws. The enraged Rentero sent the players involved a letter,

ordering them to pay a fine amounting to the return of the money they had received for agreeing to abide by the 30-move rule. Then one of the participants got upset in turn, there was much arm-waving; another set about explaining to the referees that the final position really didn't leave anything to play for... The only player who acted honorably was Artur Yusupov: he simply went to Rentero to return his money. Of course, Rentero wouldn't take it - that wasn't the point. But it's amusing that even after signing special contracts, the chessplayers considered Rentero's fines to be a violation of their sacred rights!

Of course a draw is, without question, a completely legitimate outcome for a chess game; that is why I dislike the idea of awarding three points for a win. Such a calculation might seriously affect the outcome of tournaments; draws should not be punished. In addition, the three-point system really wouldn't change anything - meaning it would be useless - in matches or knockout-style events. And this says nothing about the other consequences of such a decision, such as the increasing likelihood of pre-agreements and "plots". By the way, a considerably less stringent version of the same idea was once employed - that of giving preference, in the event of a tie score, to the player with the most wins. This was eventually rejected as being unfair and ineffective.

And nonetheless, I believe there is a way of getting to the root of the problem, and without doing damage to the essence of chess. I got the idea from a recent conversation with GM Genna Sosonko. He asked the question, "And why should chessplayers have the right to agree to a draw at any given moment? No other form of sport allows it." In fact, nowhere else can a draw be set by agreement of the participants; all other sportsmen are required to play their games out to a finish. Imagine a football match, in which the players, having agreed to

a draw, simply don't show up for the second half?! Or imagine two boxers, who decide that they cannot overcome each other, being equally strong. Well, why suffer? Let's shake hands, and go home!

So is it an untouchable rule that allows the participants to *agree* to a draw at any moment? Why not require chessplayers to play out every game to a conclusion, thereby simply eliminating the short-circuiting of the struggle via agreed-upon draws! We would eliminate (and punish - by all means, up to and including scoring a loss) any agreement between the players during a game, on this or any other grounds - just as in other forms of sport. The game could end in a draw by stalemate, three-fold repetition, insufficient mating material, or the 50-move rule - but not by agreement.

What are the usual circumstances that lead to early draws (and I'm not talking here about "pre-arranged" games)? Sometimes, in roughly equal positions, where in fact already there hardly exists any chance to outplay the opponent. But more often, other situations arise.

For example, a player hasn't gained any advantage out of the opening; he is disappointed, and therefore declines to pursue the struggle any further. Sometimes it happens that both players underestimate their position and overestimate the impending dangers; occasionally, they will not risk further battle, because of looming time-pressure, or because they are already short of time. Weaker players, having obtained a good position out of the opening, will sometimes exploit the circumstance by offering a draw; and also the reverse, where the experienced fighter offers the draw, because he is rightly worried about his own position. Or, say, the player is tired, and has no stomach for a long fight. And finally, not infrequently, the player's tournament standing makes him satisfied to draw.

There's no point in berating chessplayers for these kinds of draws: they are acting in accordance with the rules as they stand and generally accepted ethical standards. We don't need to scold them for it - we need to change the norm. Although draws by agreement in the above-cited cases seem completely normal and usual to us, chessplayers would not be poorer, but richer, more than likely, if such cases were excluded by the rules.

Of course, if all the games are to be played out, then the demands upon the psychological and physical preparedness of chessplayers will rise considerably. This will mean a sharp increase in sporting preparation (of course, in this case, not at the cost of the creative). Yes, somebody will indeed suffer because of this, especially in the early days; it will take some getting used to. But we are not necessarily talking about just players of the older generation - Korchnoi's example shows us that this is not necessarily a matter of age, but of energy, and a willingness to fight.

Besides, I am absolutely convinced that, if the game has to be continued even in equal positions, a certain percentage of those games will turn out decisively. No one is completely invulnerable; there is almost always a possibility of outplaying the opponent (uncounted examples exist, even at the very highest levels). The equal position is not necessarily always drawn!

Yes, there are some situations in which further play becomes pointless, from a creative standpoint - there will be chessplayers who, in "playing out the game", will be forced to make obvious and pointless moves. But I, for one, don't see any great problem in this. So what, if the players have to spend a little more time at the board - they will soon finish their "required program". We could also make an additional rule, allowing a draw to be offered in a dead-drawn position - not directly, however, but through the arbiter. If the

arbiter agrees that the position is, in fact, dead-drawn, then he would pass the offer on to the opponent, who would have the right to accept or to reject it. And if the arbiter considers the position still playable (the corresponding instructions would have to be worked out and adopted ahead of time, and made applicable to all), then the offer would never even reach the second player. Of course, it's not good in principle for the outcome to depend on a second opinion; but in this case, the possible arbiters' errors would not be dangerous, and could hardly be said to affect the outcome (unlike, say, an illegal goal scored against you, or a wrongly called penalty).

I believe an essential prerequisite for the adoption of my proposed new rule must be a time-control with the addition of thinking time. Otherwise, in drawn positions, this would sanction mindless movement of pieces, with the aim of "flag-dropping"; and the harm that this would do to chess would be greater than the benefit to be derived from the liquidation of short draws. So the first thing that must be done, once my new idea is adopted, is to test it in tournaments with electronic clocks and a qualified group of referees. Of course, the experiment will reveal a few weaknesses, which will require modification of the rules. And only then could the new rules be more widely employed.

I understand that my proposal is quite radical, and cuts across centuries of tradition. In such cases, new ideas almost unavoidably encounter a negative reaction. Nevertheless, it would be curious to hear not emotional, but realistic reactions. If my suggestion seems nevertheless an attractive one, then we shall have to work out all of the technical details of its introduction and the instruction therein, seek ways of making it suitable for mass consumption - such as in children's events, etc.

Would this rule eliminate prearranged draws? Of course not; but I am absolutely convinced that it will reduce their number. Chessplayers often make such agreements, not beforehand, but during the game; all such opportunities will be eliminated under the new rule. Not to mention the fact, that just arranging a draw will become considerably more difficult.

"Pre-agreed-upon" draws, although formally illegal under the rules, do not earn the moral condemnation of chessplayers today; in fact, they are considered normal. This is because they differ very little from agreed-upon draws in the early stage of the game, which the rules do allow. "Conspiracies" are condemned, even though cheats do exist in our little world - in fact, we know some of them very well. Disqualification for "conspiracy" happens very seldom - the fact of conspiracy remains very hard to prove - but a working consensus of opinion has hardened long since against it.

But if we were to accept and implement the new rules requiring all games to be played to a finish on a wide scale, then agreeing to a draw before the game will gradually become, in the minds of chessplayers, not merely breaking the rules, but also an ethical transgression, almost as bad as a conspiracy. For the great majority of chessplayers are civilized folk; they will start to avoid the prearranged draw.



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