



SKITTLES
ROOM

Seirawan Comes to Kuala Lumpur

by Edwin Lam Choong Wai

On December 06, 2003 grandmaster Yasser Seirawan gave a simultaneous display in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The event attracted throngs of chess enthusiasts from around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. It started at 2:45 p.m. in an air-conditioned hall at The Chess Network, a center for the development of chess, which was set up by Dato' Tan Chin Nam. Dato' Tan is the honorary life President of the Malaysian Chess Federation and an avid chess fan. His other well-publicized passion is horse racing and he owns horses with such names as *Catalan Opening*, *Ruy Lopez*, and *Seirawan!*



From left to right: Yasser Seirawan,
Dato' Tan Chin Nam, and Edwin Lam

Searching for Yasser Seirawan ...

Yasser, who was born on March 24, 1960 in Damascus, Syria, has been one of the most prominent figures in the world of chess for the past two decades. He was most recently ranked 74th of the top 100 players on the FIDE rating list, with an ELO of 2621 points.

As a chess player, Yasser proved his place among the world's elite by twice qualifying for the Candidates' finals. He is also a respected chess author, magazine publisher, and tournament organizer. His brainchild, the Seattle Chess Foundation (SCF) was responsible for organizing the 2000 US Championships, which was almost cancelled because of the loss of a major sponsor. In 2001, the SCF helped organize another major event: the US – China Chess Summit.

Most recently, Yasser added another feather to his cap by initiating the 'Fresh Start' proposal that culminated with the signing of the Prague Unity agreement to unify the chess world championship title. Although he has recently announced his retirement from active tournament chess, Yasser's passion for the game and his sincere heart might perhaps lead him towards even greater goals in the realm of Caissa.

30 – 1 Retirement: No way!

Now, let's get back to the event. GM Seirawan arrived at The Chess Network around 2:20 pm, dressed impeccably in a three-piece suit. Looking every bit the 'Mr. Nice Guy' of chess, he immediately settled himself into the company of the few chess aficionados who had arrived early and began sharing experiences about the game of chess. He spoke openly about such serious topics as the world chess championships, Kramnik, Ponomarev, FIDE and drug testing in chess, all the while shaking hands and greeting young chess enthusiasts who had just arrived with their parents.

Some of his fans traveled from afar just to ask for his autograph. Yet it was soon time to proceed to the main hall where the exhibition was to be held. When Yasser was introduced to the crowd, he was given a rousing round of applause. He introduced himself and gave an opening speech that touched mainly on his professional chess career. After that, Yasser got down to business and played chess.

After the event had begun, a few last-minute entrants brought the number of Yasser's challengers up to 31 players. Almost half of the participants seated in the hall were juniors, most of them within the age group of 10 and 16 years old, with the youngest participant being 8 years of age. There were a few Malaysian FIDE-rated players as well as other regulars in the Malaysian chess scene.

After three and a half hours of play, Yasser emerged with 29 victories and only conceded two draws. The players who managed to split the point with Yasser are two very talented Malaysian juniors, Law Zhe Kang and Anas Nazreen Bakri. Zhe Kang played a King's Indian Defense and was the highest rated player competing against the GM. He played very well throughout the game and although he was a pawn down going into the endgame, he managed to simplify the position to reach a drawn position. This game generated a lot of attention from on-lookers as it was the last one to finish.

Anas, a 12-year-old whiz kid, succeeded in wrangling out of a slightly inferior Q + B vs. Q + B endgame and forced Yasser to give perpetual check. In Malaysia, Anas has been likened to the great Mikhail Tal, because of the way he stares at his opponent. Yet, when he is not disconcertingly staring at you, he looks just like an everyday nice and pleasant boy, even Yasser agreed saying; "This little boy looks so sweet."

Zen Master, please enlighten me ...

Once all the games were completed, the next item on the agenda was a 'Question & Answer' session. Yasser's popularity among chess players in this country is unprecedented. With an amiable personality and friendly smile, Yasser definitely does not parade the kind of ego usually associated with players who have been among one of the best in the world. To start the ball rolling, Yasser spoke fondly about his most memorable game ever – his first board victory against Kasparov in the 1986 Dubai Olympiad. Making it even more unforgettable was the fact that Yasser's win, which was the only decisive game in the match, gave the USA a 2½ – 1½ victory against the Soviets.

Yasser accepted questions on a variety of issues, although they mainly centered on the issue of chess development and training. One question revolved around the effectiveness of computer programs in helping to improve a player's capabilities. Yasser replied in the affirmative and noted two significant advantages of using chess programs: you have an opponent who is willing to play with you 24 hours a day and secondly, computers are beneficial simply because of its perfect memory. Yasser noted that in his younger days, he found it very difficult to find an opponent for practice and he also encountered problems

in obtaining books, bulletins and other chess materials. With the introduction of computer programs and databases, he said that the younger generation of chess players would not need to encounter all these problems.

To another question about his repertoire of openings, Yasser answered that he has played virtually everything at one time or another in his career. Speaking admirably of Petrosian's style of play, Yasser confirmed his own preference for the Caro-Kann and Nimzo-Indian defenses when playing Black. As White, Yasser recalled that he has played 1.e4, 1.d4, 1.c4 and 1.Nf3 throughout his career.

"Today, I am primarily a 1.d4 player and it is preferable because it helps me to avoid a huge amount of theory. I would even say that 1.d4 is the best form of opening!" asserted Seirawan. "I really admire those who play 1.e4 aggressively all the way. But, it takes such a huge load of work and I really don't have that much time and energy to make such effort," he added.

Another very interesting question concerned a player's quest to be as original and creative as possible. Yasser emphasized the need to master the standard and routine areas of the game first, before striving to be creative in ones approach to the game. He gave the example of Tigran Petrosian who, according to Yasser, was an extremely original player that created his own unique positions, which he could call his own. Such originality, Yasser said, only arises after a player has already mastered all the basics of the game.

Drug testing for chess players was another issue discussed by Yasser. His strong opposition to the practice was obvious, judging from his enthusiasm and passion with which he discussed this subject. Yasser thinks that there is little common sense in the implementation of drug testing on chess players. Rationally speaking, Yasser said, chess players should be reluctant to use drugs at anytime as drugs destroy the brain, and we need our brains to play chess. In fact, Yasser added that in his more than two decade long career, he hasn't come across a single drug that can make him a better player.

Yasser also spoke at length about chess as a mind sport and made the comparison between the physical and mental capabilities of the human race. "This is the limit, we can't go any further physically, but mentally it is limitless. And, scientist's tell us that we are currently only using 5% of our brains," said Yasser. Elaborating further, he pointed out that if we want to use more than 5% of our brains, we need to stress and challenge it in order to strengthen it further. In between the many questions from the participants, I managed to sneak in two of my own questions.

Edwin Lam: *Chess made its debut as a demonstration sport at the Sydney Olympics three years ago. Two years ago, chess also became a demonstration sport at the Kuala Lumpur South East Asian (SEA) Games. And, as I am speaking to you now, chess has debuted as a medal sport at the Vietnam SEA Games. How early would you foresee chess making its debut as a medal sport in the Olympics?*

Yasser Seirawan: By introducing chess as a sport in the summer Olympics, we are doing a great disservice to the game. Chess is not an athletic sport. Chess is something for the mind, something that Stephen Hawking can participate in. It is a mind sport, just like Bridge, Go and Backgammon. So, if we were to introduce chess into the Olympics, we are doing a great disservice to the game. One side of the problem is the fact that chess players need a quiet and calm environment to play their games, and this means that the whole environment of the Olympics may not meet the needs of the players. On the other hand, athletes will also complain about chess' inclusion into the Olympics. It is probably not

acceptable for them to have to train hours on end just in order to excel in their event, and then to have to share the same prestige with a mind sport person.

EL: As an author, you have won over many fans worldwide that are eagerly waiting for the release of your next book. Have you ever considered writing an autobiography of your chess career and games?

YS: No, I do not have any such intention at the moment.

In addition, Seirawan spoke at length about the beginnings of his friendship with Viktor Korchnoi: “It was 1980 and I was playing in the Wijk ann Zee tournament. In the first round, I was up against Korchnoi. Yes, the twice-world chess championship finalist! Viktor played an opening that I knew inside out. And, well, not unexpectedly, I won the game. After the game, I looked at Korchnoi and asked him if he would like to take a look at the game. With great reluctance, he agreed. We analyzed and analyzed. At one point, Viktor broke out and said, “I should have played this move instead of that...” To which, I said, “Nope...” and followed it up moving the chess pieces quickly around the board, ‘bang, bang, bang, bang’, and Viktor loses. This whole process went about again, and again, and again. The next round, I am up against Jan Timman. Another world-class player but I crushed him too. At the end of the tournament, I finished with 10 points out of 13, without a single defeat. At the end of the tournament, Viktor was so impressed with me that he asked me to become his second in his upcoming world championship battle against Karpov.”

The Q & A session ended with Yasser giving autographs and presenting each participant of the simultaneous exhibition with souvenir chessboards.

Food, beer, laughter and history

Later on I brought up the 1.e4 vs. 1.d4 debate again. Echoing Yasser’s sentiments, I said; “Although I am primarily a 1.e4 player, these days I am having such a huge problem dealing with Sicilian players that I am switching to some anti-Sicilian lines.”

When we were seated in the restaurant, I continued, “I was browsing through Karpov’s collection of his best games in Russian from the late 70s to the early 80s and I just marvel at the ease and clarity with which he handled the White side of the Sicilian. He just puts all his pieces on the right squares, fixes Black’s pawns and then went cherry picking afterwards. Everything was so simple. However, look at how the Black side is playing the Sicilian nowadays and you will see that everything is not so simple anymore.”

After some thought, Yasser replied; “Precisely, take the Sveshnikov for example. Fischer would disapprove of it completely because it gives the Black player a doubled-pawn as well as a weak central d5-square. Yet, look at the Sveshnikov now. People are saying it is playable based on the counter-play created by the two Bishops and the central pawns.”

Besides that, Yasser and I also talked about one of the most debatable issues in chess – quicker time controls to appeal to television viewers. I put forward GM Grischuk’s views, given in an interview in *New in Chess* in 2001, that “...The only way to make progress in chess is by attracting television. Without television, chess is a second-rate sport.” Grischuk’s views underlined the division in the chess world of two opposing camps. One group strongly supports the need to quicken the time control, arguing that it is the only way to attract television viewers. While the other group opposes it on the grounds that quicker time control jeopardizes the quality of the game.

EL: The viewer interests' generated by the recently concluded ESPN broadcast of the Kasparov – X3D Fritz match that was played with classical time control, seems to have defeated the myth that long time controls will bore television viewers. In your opinion, do you think we should repeat such experiments in a human vs. human match played over long time controls?

YS: Yes, why not.

A few moments later, Yasser's wife, Yvette, and other family members had arrived at the restaurant. Dato' Tan, the host, arrived a little later, and immediately asked for a chess set and board and got into a game with Yasser's father-in-law. At one point in the conversation, while everyone was enjoying the Chinese prawn delicacy that had been served on the table, I took the initiative to ask Yasser: "With the current uncertainties surrounding the Prague Unity agreement, are you currently working on an alternative proposal?"

Instead of choking on his prawn, Yasser calmly collected his thoughts before answering: "Yes, I am currently working on a totally new model to unify the chess world. As there are so many constituencies – the top 10 players, the top 50 players, the top 100 players, the rest of the chess players around the world, the sponsors, etc – with different interests, it is important to take into consideration all their interests in formulating this new model. I will be announcing the new model in 2004 and with all the debate and input from various parties; I hope to be able to see it running by the end of 2004."

While I would have loved to have Yasser reveal a little bit more of his new model, I understood his need to keep the details confidential at the moment. Well, to lighten things up a little, I half-jokingly said to Yvette that perhaps Yasser is aiming to be recorded in history as the modern-day Botvinnik. Everyone, including Yasser had a good chuckle, as it was Botvinnik who came up with the unique formula to determine the world's strongest chess player in 1946. Still, you just never know, one year down the road and we might just see Seirawan's name being permanently entrenched in the history of chess for playing the most important role ever in unifying a deeply divided chess world.



About the Author

Edwin Lam is a seasoned player in his home country of Malaysia. He is a correspondent for *Chess Asia*, a Philippine-based chess magazine. His articles have also appeared at one time or another in *Chess Kids*, a Melbourne-based quarterly periodical ran by David Cordover, as well as at the website www.gmchess.com.

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