



C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

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Paradise Lost

I QUITE ENJOYED myself during the first week of the Kasparov-Kramnik match, when I was present at the Riverside Television Studios to report for my newspaper.

Raymond Keene, one of the technical directors of the match, graciously invited me to the VIP-room, where wine, champagne and nice snacks were lavishly offered by attendants of perfect courtesy. Eric Schiller, the other technical director, enlightened me on the merits of different smart drugs - a burning issue now that chessplayers are threatened with doping checks - and told me that he hadn't blundered since he began using ginkgo biloba.

"Good and friendly men," I thought, while asking the attendant to pass me a full bottle this time, for convenience's sake. "Not perfect men, of course, but who is?"

At the terrace I was looking over the Thames, very quiet at this point in Hammersmith and only being rippled by a few rowers and an abundance of water birds. Nearby was the Hammersmith Bridge, a somewhat quaint but beautiful structure.

Next to me stood Lothar Schmid, head of the Appeals Committee. "This is a very beautiful view," he said. "The game is also quite interesting, but by far not so interesting as this view." And he was right, for ten moves later the first match game was an early draw.

I also made a new acquaintance, my co-columnist Richard Forster, and this was reassuring, for I had always had a feeling that this man couldn't really exist, being so young and already combining so many fields of expertise, but here he was, reporting on the match for the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* after spending mornings in London libraries, looking for old newspapers to provide material for the book on Amos Burn he is working on.

But not all was well in what seemed to be a paradise. To jump ahead a few weeks, we can now read at the website

www.chesscenter.com/wcc2000/r5.html how journalist John

Henderson, at the start of the fifth match game, was expelled from the pressroom under a thinly veiled threat of violence. The scene

was *KC's Picture of the Day* last Thursday on Kasparov's website and the headline for the accompanying article was *Moscow on the Thames* which seemed fitting until I realized that I couldn't recall such a dramatic incident happening during a Moscow World Championship match.

Henderson's expulsion was the culmination of a conflict that had started well before the match. A battle of websites, *braingames.net*, the site of the organizing company, against *chesscenter.com*, home of *The Week in Chess*, which has Henderson as one of its most prominent contributors.

His boss at The London Chess Center is the well-known IM and chess journalist Malcolm Pein, who had originally been hired as technical director of the match, but then walked out with a slamming of doors. Soon after that he got a letter from Braingames Network's solicitors, trying to prevent him from putting up his own website on the match, apparently because it would constitute a conflict of interest. Pein didn't agree, which was understandable because it would be undoing the work of years if TWIC now suddenly failed to supply up-to-date information on the match. None of its regular visitors would understand or accept it.

Pein was declared *persona non grata* at the match and from the first day, Henderson was given to understand that he was forbidden to make contact with his boss from the pressroom, be it by telephone, modem or pigeon. Henderson retaliated by writing teasing articles about the organizers, mainly concentrating on Keene and Schiller ("the Hardy and Hardy of chess") and not shrinking from calling the organizing company "braindeadgames.net".

Apparently his article after the fourth game (all these articles are still on the net) made the organisers explode.

OK, nobody likes to be ridiculed in his own house. But on the other hand, expelling a journalist because his articles don't suit you may be a common occurrence in the big bad world outside, but it seems unprecedented at chess events and a threat to all of us chess reporters. Henderson was also writing on the match for CNN's website and one would expect this formidable organization to make a big noise. Even Saddam Hussein didn't go as far during the Gulf War, expelling the man of mighty CNN. Would Raymond Keene then be able to get away with it?

But all remained quiet for almost a week. The offending article was removed from the site, then reappeared, apparently after intensive consultation with lawyers. Henderson himself had already remarked that lawyers and lawsuits are all over the place in the chess world nowadays, suggesting that soon we will have a lawyer world

champion. And indeed this almost seems likely. Not the computer world champion which we have all dreaded for many years, but a lawyer who manages to serve writs to all his competitors, forbidding them to play chess or even enter the playing hall.

After some period of lawyer-imposed silence, Henderson returned to his reporting, still being banned from the press room however. He became an internet reporter who got his news from the internet and this to me seems symbolic of a claustrophobic loop into which all of us chess reporters are entangled nowadays.

After a week in London, I went back to Amsterdam to report on the match from home. My newspaper is a decent one that doesn't pretend that its reporter is on the spot when in fact he isn't. So, when I was in London, my articles started with "London, Oct. 9" and when I was back it was just "Rotterdam", the city of its main office. But apart from that, would the readers notice the fact that I wasn't present at the match? Hardly. We are very well informed by the internet. In London, I could write articles that were a bit different from what my colleagues could do with their computer-generated information, but no reader would notice this, for the information gathered on the spot is just different from what one gets on the internet, not necessarily more interesting.

We are well served by the internet. Everyone gets it on a plate. I am thankful for it and at the same time it depresses me. It's too easy. Everybody can do it now, acting as a chess reporter. Even if you hardly know the rules of chess you can appear to be a shrewd chess analyst by copying the analyses on the net, which often are scanty, but always good enough for a newspaper, and sometimes of top quality. A highly developed skill of the past, chess reporting, has become almost obsolete, just as the samurai's sword-fighting skill became obsolete when effective handguns were introduced.

I did the rounds of the internet sites and one of my rest stations was the *Internet Chess Club*. I was there on a good day. Peter Svidler was the moderator of the discussions, Nigel Short was around as were many other strong grandmasters. And then came in Zurab Azmaiparashvili. He is a member of the Soviet School that tells us that the match between Kasparov and Kramnik has been fixed, from the first move to the last. He had already said so months ago, strangely enough on Kasparov's own *kasparov.com*, and he repeated it now on the ICC.

His point of view is widely shared by Russian chessplayers. Personally I think this is absolute nonsense and I have many arguments to support my view, but I won't elaborate now.

Anyway, Svidler said: "Come off it, Zurab, this match is not fixed."

But Azmai did not relent: "It is already completely without interest now."

Hear, hear, this is the man who at the end of 1995 made a big rating jump because of an 18-round Macedonian ghost-tournament which nobody ever saw and which probably was never played at all. "You need a thief to catch one" you might think, but I think differently.

But as I said, this conspiracy view is widely spread among Russians and doing the rounds I saw that it has also contaminated Alexander Khalifman's excellent website *gmchess.com*. There is a columnist, Valery Segal, and one of his columns is entitled *Kasparov Anti-Chess*. What I would call chess at its finest Segal calls anti-chess, so let's see why.

Last year Alexander Khalifman won the Las Vegas championship and no one would ever claim that he cheated, writes Segal. This is true. No one claimed this and no one ever will, unless in 65 years time another chess writer of the mental make-up of Segal appears on the scene.

Segal goes on: "On the other hand, the recent agreement between Kasparov and Kramnik immediately created rumors, suspicions and general skepticism. These suspicions do not seem to be unusual even to supporters of a match system of the World Championship, at least not to the intelligent ones."

Segal then explains how "the intelligent ones" might well think that there is something wrong with this match.

And then a startling dive into chess history. Also in the past, maybe everything was not what it seemed to be. "For example, if we think about the Alekhine-Euwe matches, many questions arise. Why would anyone sponsor the matches between Alekhine and a not very strong challenger?"

One gasps for breath. Alekhine-Euwe a fixed match? Having regained consciousness one realizes that Segal's last question is an easy one. All the money came from the Netherlands, where people were quite eager to see Euwe play for the World Championship, even in the event that he was not a very strong challenger.

But he was. I have seen it written so often lately. Euwe was supposedly not a worthy challenger for Alekhine in 1935 and when Alekhine regained his title in 1937, it was all as expected. It was not.

May I remind Mr. Segal and other detractors of Euwe of a few facts? Euwe had played a match against Alekhine in 1926/27 over ten games and lost with a one-point difference. In the meantime he had become stronger and Alekhine had not.

The results of Euwe in strong tournaments during the period 1934-1937 were as follows: Leningrad 1934. Sixth place. Admittedly, this was bad. It has happened to others when they first visited the Soviet Union.

Zürich 1934. 1. Alekhine 13, 2/3 Euwe, Flohr 12, ahead of Bogoljubow, Lasker, Bernstein and Nimzowitsch.

Hastings 1934/1935. First Euwe with Flohr and Thomas, ahead of Capablanca, Botvinnik and Lilienthal.

Then came the World Championship match over 30 games, won by Euwe with the score 15½-14½. One wonders if the people who like to pound on Euwe, to deprecate the match system, really think that "a not very strong challenger" would be able to hold himself nowadays against Kasparov in a 30-game match.

Let's go on. Amsterdam 1936. Euwe and Fine shared first, ahead of Alekhine.

Nottingham 1936. Botvinnik and Capablanca shared first place; a half-point behind were Euwe, Fine and Reshevsky, then (another half-point behind) came Alekhine.

Zandvoort 1936. Alekhine did not take part. 1. Fine 2. Euwe, followed by Keres, Tartakower and Bogoljubow.

Germany 1937, double round-robin of four players: Euwe, Alekhine, Bogoljubow, Sämisch. 1. Euwe 2. Alekhine.

Then came the return match that Alekhine won.

Note that in the three tournaments between their two matches in which Euwe and Alekhine both played, Euwe was always ahead of Alekhine. Was he really such a weakie that Segal should wonder how on earth a sponsor could be found for his matches, and then go on speculating about foul play? I think it is a bloody shame.

But at the end of his article Segal seems to swallow his words. No, Euwe was an honorable man, he writes. Maybe even Kasparov and Kramnik are honorable men. Segal has his doubts, but won't express them for the moment. No, he says, it's just the system of the champion choosing his challenger that has provoked him to his speculations about foul play, it's nothing personal.

But the deed has been done. In his frantic efforts to blacken the Kasparov-Kramnik match, Segal has felt the need to throw mud on the Alekhine-Euwe matches, which until now had been untouched by conspiracy theories.

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