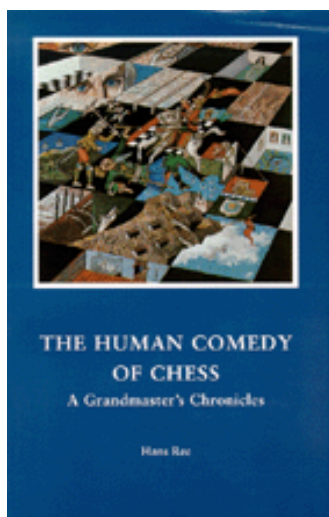




C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Volatile Karpov in the FIDE Elections

Anatoly Karpov is a great chessplayer and a personality wrought of iron, but hardly a model of reliability. Remember the Russian championship of 2004. The organisers had proudly announced that Kasparov, Kramnik and Karpov would take part. Then Kramnik cancelled his participation because of his illness, which we now know to be quite serious.

But Kasparov and Karpov were still there and the day before the first round they jointly gave a press conference at the Moscow Hotel Rossya, which by the way has now been demolished to the universal regret of moderate budget tourists.

Nothing that Karpov said at that press conference had prepared the public for the shock they were in for the next day. Karpov had left Moscow because of business obligations and wouldn't play in the championship after all.

A few weeks ago Karpov showed his easy-going volatility again. Last year he had been the most outspoken critic of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov and his team. He had mentioned Zurab Azmaiparashvili's fight with the Spanish police at the Calvia Olympiad, suggesting that this kind of physical violence was characteristic for the present leadership of FIDE. And here is a quote from Karpov as recent as January 2006: "I think everybody connected with chess understands that if we allow chess to continue for another four years in its present terrible state, it will simply disappear from the face of the earth."

Out with Ilyumzhinov and his cronies, or chess will die, that was Karpov's clear message. He also said that he completely agreed with Bessel Kok, the Dutch/ Belgian businessman who is

running against Ilyumzhinov for the presidency of FIDE, and that he supported him.

But something must have happened that made him change his mind, for recently in an interview with the Russian radio station Echo of Moscow, Karpov said: "Well, I personally think that Ilyumzhinov's chances for success are close to 100% today. The major reason is that Bessel Kok only looks at chess from the point of view of the professional player." Of course, Karpov went on, Ilyumzhinov would have to listen to the professionals also, but he had shown already much progress in this respect by his efforts to organise a match between Kramnik and Topalov.

This was truly a stab in the back from the man who had declared his total agreement with Bessel Kok. Who would want to vote for a man whose chances to win were supposed to be almost nil? Kok's election team tried to do some damage control by means of an interview with Karpov on their campaign website. Karpov admitted that it had been a bit premature to estimate Ilyumzhinov's chances as close to 100%, but this must have been small comfort for Kok. It is clear that Karpov sees his future connected with the people who quite recently were supposed to make chess disappear from the face of the earth.

For the first time since 1982, when Florencio Campones became head of FIDE, we see a serious fight for the presidency. Both Campomanes and Ilyumzhinov have met rival candidates, but in the past it was enough for them to raise a finger and the opposition would fold their hands, hoping to be rewarded with a position in the winning team. Now there is a real campaign going on.

A journalist in general should take a detached attitude and not be involved in campaigns. On the other hand I cannot not hide the fact that I agree with the views of the Karpov of 2005, though I would formulate them a bit less brutally than he did.

Recently Nigel Freeman, who is the candidate for FIDE Treasurer on the Ilyumzhinov team, complained that many

journalists describe the competition between the two teams in terms of black and white, good and evil. In a way he is right; the manichean view is primitive. Certainly all FIDE officials cannot be crooks. There must be some decent guys among them. But as a

collective the FIDE Board deserves John Nunn's verdict in his latest book *Grandmaster Chess Move by Move*: "The general impression is of bullying and incompetence in equal measure."

In contrast, Bessel Kok is an extremely able organiser and during the almost 20 years that I know him I have never heard him tell a lie.

But does he have a chance? When he announced his candidacy I thought his case was doomed, because the forces of bullying appeared far too strong. But now I am not so sure. He has managed an intelligent campaign that has built up slowly, insuring that almost every day small successes can be reported: statements of support from players, sponsors, national federations and other organisations. Almost 40 federations have pledged their support. The Ilyumzhinov team claims to

have 60 votes by now, which might be true or not. Never trust a high FIDE official and after shaking hands with him, be sure to count your fingers.

One unlikely supporter of Ilyumzhinov is the chess federation of Israel. Why would Israel, of all countries, support a FIDE team that had a World Championship organised in Tripoli, where their players could not take part? Surely the answer must be found in the influence of Israel Gelfer, a long-time high FIDE official. Understandably the decision evoked much criticism inside the Israeli chess federation. Apparently the opposition managed to schedule a second meeting with the aim of reviewing the case, but what the outcome of that meeting was I do not know.

For a while it appeared to me as if everyone in the chess world whom I find sympathetic and reliable was supporting Kok, but

this turned out to be not quite true. Veselin Topalov, a fine gentleman, recently declared: "I deeply respect the present head of the World Chess Federation

Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. I think that his contribution to chess is enormous and I hope that this time he will win again."

Ilyumzhinov certainly improved his chances by his announcement of the match between Kramnik and Topalov, to be played from September this year in Elista. After years of muddling at last there is the long hoped-for unification of the two World Championships, or at least the promise of it.

On his website Kok posed some questions: was the prize money of a million dollars already transferred to FIDE's bank account and would the match also be played if Kok wins the election?

Especially the second question may not be answered. Undoubtedly it is in Ilyumzhinov's interest to suggest that the fate of the match is linked to his own fortunes, but if he would say so openly he would be open to the accusation that he is abusing the World Championship for an election stunt.

In the privacy of the ballot box the delegates will remember their commitments. But will they be faithful to them? A last-minute promise or threat may influence the faint-hearted. It has happened before. And then there is Stalin's famous dictum: it's not so important who votes, it's important who counts the votes.

We do not know what the result will be of the FIDE elections at the Olympiad in Turin, but whatever happens I am sure that Karpov was too pessimistic when only a few months ago he predicted that chess would disappear from the face of the earth if Ilyumzhionov won.

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