



C O L U M N I S T S

*The Kibitzer*

Tim Harding

## It's One Small Step for a Pawn...

The International Correspondence Chess Federation (ICCF) held its annual Congress last month in Florida. Traditionally, there is an outing for delegates and their families when the business is all done. This year ICCF could hardly have chosen a more appropriate venue for its outing than the Kennedy Space Center, about an hour's drive from the Congress venue, Daytona Beach.

NASA's Visitor Center both looks back at some of Man's greatest technological achievements of the 20th century and forward to its plans for exploring the solar system in this century. I spent this exciting day in the company of Ralph Marconi and Franklin Campbell, two of ICCF's key men in North America. (By the way, they both have their websites hosted at [www.correspondencechess.com](http://www.correspondencechess.com).)

If you are planning a visit to the Kennedy Center yourself, I can tell you that the best place to take lunch is the Apollo/ Saturn V Center. This is a vast hangar that houses a complete museum to NASA's missions to the Moon which took place around 30 years ago now. There are restaurants and various small exhibits but the central area is taken up by a complete Saturn V three-stage rocket. This massive machine is not a model; it would have taken astronauts to the Moon if the Apollo program had not been curtailed.

The last thing you should do before leaving this part of the Kennedy Space Center is to go the movie theater where they show the presentation "Loss of Contact" about the first Moon landing, in July 1969. There you find out just how close the landing came to disaster, but as we all know now, it turned out OK.

ICCF too, as it approaches its 50th jubilee year in 2001, has to look forward to the challenge of new technology, but without forgetting its past achievements and of course making sure to build on them.

Over the sound system, I thought I could hear Neil Armstrong say

"It's one small step for a pawn, one giant leap for ICCF..."

Of course, Neil must have been referring to some of the key decisions that we delegates had just taken in Daytona Beach over the previous days.

For those of you who don't know, ICCF is the worldwide governing body (recognised by FIDE) for correspondence chess (CC), which basically is chess played against distant opponents with time limits measured in days rather than hours, minutes and seconds. Traditionally the term "correspondence chess" has been virtually synonymous with postal chess, but with a certain amount of telegraph, fax or telephone chess also played.

In recent years, however, email play has become very popular and is rapidly overtaking postal chess, especially for international CC. Sometime next year, ICCF hopes to be able to announce a free-entry jubilee email tournament in which the first prize would be a place in a Correspondence Chess World Championship Final. This would undoubtedly be a good move, attracting to ICCF many players who currently only play in the free email chess clubs like IECC and IECG because ICCF's normal events have entry fees.

Back in August 1996, my *Kibitzer* article dealt with what I called The Two Worlds Of Correspondence Chess and you might like to re-read it (in [The Chess Café Archives](#)) for an overview of what CC is about.

Now, after the Florida Congress and our visit to NASA, is a good time to see what has been accomplished in the intervening four years and what opportunities are opening up for chess players in the future.

I wrote in 1996 that "The growth of the Internet has benefitted chess and chess players in numerous ways: newsgroups, information sites on the Web like **The Chess Café** and The Week In Chess, databases of chess games, and servers where real-time chess can be played against distant opponents".

So nothing much has changed? Maybe not in outline, but the experience now is much richer and more user-friendly than four years ago. More important still, what was available then to relatively few people (outside North America anyway) is now a global phenomenon. Even in the poorest countries of the world, the Internet is available at least to some of the middle classes: academics, people working in government and for multinational companies.

In many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin-America, the postal service was never that great (at least from the point of view of postal chess players) and in recent years has sometimes been close to impossible. Email and the Web open up the prospect of cheap and almost instant worldwide communications. It may not yet be the reality for the majority of people outside Europe and North America and the richer countries on other continents, but the growth is exponential and even poorer neighbours are being helped.

For example, Argentinian chess players (with some help from ICCF's development funds) have in recent months purchased and donated a state-of-the-art personal computer for the use of the Cuban correspondence chess organisation, FECAP, and had it shipped to Cuba. Carlos Cranbourne, the energetic chairman of the Latin-American CC body CADAP (ICCF's zone 2) told the Congress how the hardest thing in dealing with the Cuban embassy in Buenos Aires was overcoming the bureaucracy and ensuring that the computer went to the right place for the use of the right people. Now a precedent has been created, it will probably be easier in future to send computers (if people will donate them) for the use of Cuban players in cities other than Havana. Certainly many corporations in the First and Second Worlds are holding large stocks of decommissioned or obsolescent computers which are worth little to them but could be of use to chess players in the Third World, do why not follow the example of CADAP?

Cuba, the land of Capablanca, is a country with a great chess tradition and it

has many correspondence chess players who have been frustrated by bad postal conditions due to political embargoes and economic difficulties. In other countries (the Philippines for example, and some of the former Soviet Asian republics), traditional correspondence chess (i.e. postal chess) is virtually unknown, even though the game of chess itself may be fairly popular.

In other countries, internal postal events might be possible but international mail is frustratingly slow. The Internet opens up the possibility of people in all such countries participating in global events. A few years ago the Irish team even found it impossible to play by post or even fax with Guatemala, in the 12th correspondence chess olympiad, but now we are playing them by email in the 14th olympiad, just seven years later. The moves travel as fast as messages from someone in another Irish town.

However, the main purpose of this article is to reveal my view of the future of correspondence chess and Internet chess, and to show how ICCF rule changes (for the better) made in Daytona should prove effective. Towards the end of the article, I will look a bit further into the future with the help of my crystal ball...

One of the main hopes ICCF has had in recent years is to attract "over-the-board" players to try email chess, and it has had a few notable successes, such as GM Peter Leko. However, players have not yet been attracted to CC in large numbers.

One of the obstacles, undoubtedly, has been the intensive time commitment involved in playing an email tournament of (often) ten games, starting simultaneously at a time limit of 10 moves in 40 days. This is one of the issues ICCF addressed in Daytona.

Although the longest email games may take a year to complete, the majority are over in a few months (if not weeks or days). In the early stages of the tournament the pressure on one's leisure time is intense, especially if you have to do openings research on several games at once. In postal tournaments, this work is spread out over a longer period with usually only two or three games requiring attention at the same time.

ICCF has now moved to reduce this pressure by extending the time limit to sixty days (instead of 40) for each 10 moves. The original email time limit (copied by IECG and other organisations) only gives an extra day per move compared with postal and for many people that just is not enough. The 60 days for 10 move limits will apply to all tournaments in which ICCF titles can be earned, but it is still possible to organise faster (or slower) tournaments for other purposes.

A second obstacle to attracting new players to correspondence chess has definitely been the "second time control" or "life", which meant that a player who exceeds the time limit once gets a new count and only loses the game on time if they overstep a second time. This has been the rule for international postal events for many years and was carried forward into email rules, but starting with next year's new tournaments, ICCF has done away with this bad rule.

It was always hard to explain to someone used to over-the-board chess (or live web server chess) that the first time control was only a warning. ICCF Deputy President (Rules) used (or abused) baseball terminology to compare the traditional rule "two strikes and you're out" with the familiar OTB rule "one strike and you're out". The "two strikes" principle has been retained for postal events, because there can be postal vagaries beyond a player's control, but I won't be surprised if the next rule change in four years time does away with the second "strike" there too.

That is, if there is any postal chess in four years time, I hear someone say. Well, I think, there will certainly be less postal chess in the mid-decade, but I don't think it will die out that quickly. Nol van't Riet, one of ICCF's most senior officials (now retired), has predicted that by 2010 there will be no postal chess any more, but I heard some people in Daytona say he is wrong. Actually, I don't think he is wrong, but 2010 is still ten years away and in 2004/5 I think there will still be a good deal of postal chess being played, but mostly within one country or between neighbouring countries, and mostly only by elderly people or people unwilling to use new technologies for religious or some other strange reasons. In most countries, the cost of electronic transmission will be so much lower than using the post, that it won't make sense to buy stamps even if the opponent lives only 100 kilometers away.

By 2010 the postal service as we know it probably won't exist in most countries. There will be no more letters and postcards, just a service for sending physical objects and documents that cannot (for weight or legal or security reasons) be transmitted electronically. So anyone who wants to play correspondence chess will have to use email, or whatever will replace email, such as web servers and the electronic house, connected via satellite and cable to everyone else's electronic house. Long before 2010, the "critical mass" of players of a sufficiently wide range of strengths and geographic disparity (and the organisers willing to give time to support them) will dissipate, just as it took a few years after email chess began (in the early 1990s with CompuServe etc.) before the adoption of the Internet was big enough (around 1997-98) to really get IECG, IECC and ICCF email chess growing fast.

At present, there are several Internet servers where you can play blitz or rapid chess "live" against distant opponents (or in some cases computer programs), for example the Internet Chess Club (where non-masters have to pay) and the new World Chess Network which is still free. There are also some Internet sites where you can play correspondence chess without having to use email: the website software stores the games and handles the interaction between opponents. The best known of these are [www.itsyourturn.com](http://www.itsyourturn.com) and Stan's NetChess (at <http://stansco.com/netchess/>).

The distinction we see now between email chess and "live" server chess is going to alter in future. The terms "over-the-board chess" (OTB) or "cross-board" chess will be replaced by something like "live chess" or "real-time" chess because opponents will meet each other physically less and less. Big team events like the Four Nations Chess League and the Bundesliga

would probably continue to be run on the present basis (there will always be a place for some events which emphasise the social side of chess) but many other events could be run via Internet servers with each team present at its own centre and an impartial observer or two to see fair play.

At present, "live" blitz chess is attracting more players than CC because it appeals to the demand for instant response in young players, and it offers good training in quick reactions for players whose principal chess activity is over-the-board play. For a while, it is quite addictive but after a time this form of chess can come to seem rather pointless.

Correspondence play, on the other hand, helps to improve your understanding of chess and your knowledge of chess openings, because you have a few days for each move and can consult reference books and databases. In live server blitz you are just relying on your memory and instinct, and you will rarely play a game that is worth preserving.

Nowadays some people are put off the idea of trying email chess because they fear their opponents will just be using a computer. Of course it won't help to improve your chess if you just use a computer to generate your moves, but that is ultimately self-defeating: your opponent may have the same program as you, but running on faster hardware, so all your moves will be anticipated and occasionally the opponent will find a strong tactical idea that your computer misses. Undoubtedly the use of computers by many players is reducing the level of blunders in CC but master players are still strategically superior to computers, especially at correspondence chess time limits. Also, although the computer's "horizon" is further away than it used to be, it is still possible for human chess players to catch them out in tactical mistakes in many types of complicated position. In the future, it may be possible that computers themselves will be programmed not to help humans with their correspondence game analysis!

For chess players who are accustomed to using email a lot in their personal and business lives, email correspondence chess is straightforward. There is even a wide range of software available where you can store the games on computer, choose your move with a mouse click and then have the message to the opponent generated automatically. This helps to get around differences in notation between players in different countries.

For some people, however, email is still perhaps not simple enough. However, it is a major task to program a web server for correspondence chess that would be sophisticated enough to handle all the situations covered by ICCF rules, and still allowing (if necessary) the intervention of a human tournament director. Nevertheless, I expect ICCF to solve this problem within the next five years, and possibly much sooner than that.

You will still be clicking a mouse to make your moves, at first. In the more distant future you will probably be speaking your moves to the computer or (better still) making them on a real three-dimensional chess set which automatically transmits the move to the chess server when you are ready.

Within five or ten years, too, we may start to see major chess events between FIDE masters and grandmasters played "live" on the Internet. Of course there

have already been a couple of experiments of this kind, usually involving computer programs too. They ran into some problems, because of time-zones and software/transmission problems, but no doubt in the future such events will be easier to arrange. We are beginning to see the emergence of chess as a spectator sport via the Internet. The Kasparov-Kramnik match coverage shows that it is possible to deliver webcam pictures of the players in action, a view of the board and clock times updated "live" and real-time analytical audio commentary by grandmasters who can be heard by the global audience but not by the players. There are still technical glitches but when most people have high-speed Internet connections then today's coverage will look like stone age television.

Recent FIDE proposals to commercialise chess do not have widespread acceptance among players or national federations, many of whom are sceptical of the real motivation and financial probity of some of the individuals making the proposals. The present fragmentation of "over-the-board" chess organisation, with a "world championship" match currently being played outside the auspices of a world body that commands less and less respect, could eventually lead to the creation of some new world chess body. (Fortunately, in the correspondence chess sphere, ICCF commands almost universal acceptance among players and national bodies, and does not have any whiff of corruption about it.)

When it is easier for a player to get a game with an opponent in another continent (just by logging on in the comfort of his home) than travelling on a cold wet night to an underheated chess club in his own city, the bonds that link players to their local and national organisations are bound to loosen. Many players ask why they should pay to belong to an organisation when they can get a game free on the Net. This applies both to "over-the-board" and "correspondence" chess. Traditional income sources (membership and entry fees) for chess organising bodies are in decline; can commercial sponsorship and patronage fill this gap?

What will ultimately take the place of national organisations is not yet clear. Many players still like to compete in team competitions and represent their club, region or country; rule-making and title-awarding bodies will still be needed. Players won't want the timetabling of events to fall into anarchy.

Looking further into the future, I can foresee human colonies on planets, or space stations. (An Imax film that you can see at the Kennedy Space Center is about life on the "first city in space", a few decades from now.) With the great distances and time-lags that will then be involved, it would not really be possible to play live speed chess with an opponent on (say) Mars, but to play correspondence chess with an opponent elsewhere in the solar system should not present any serious problem.

Looking further ahead still, it is possible that chess will evolve under these technological pressures into a different game, just as mediaeval/Arabic chess evolved into modern chess in the Renaissance (from around the late 15th century). The stimulus then was the greater mobility in society and the spread of printing which helped to communicate the new rules (double pawn move, castling, more powerful queen and bishop) around the civilised world in a

few decades.

If you read the Iain Banks science-fiction novel, *The Player Of Games*, you will see that he predicts that the games we play today will ultimately fall into disuse as too simple and one-dimensional. Moreover, putting the issue of drugs in sport into perspective, the humanoid citizens of his galactic civilisation called the "Culture" have glands which can synthesise to order whatever chemicals are advantageous - no need for pills or injections.

If we restrict ourselves to the 21st century, however, I do expect chess to continue to be popular for a good many decades yet. The game satisfies competitive urges, provides an intellectual challenge (with some aesthetic satisfaction also) and the Internet facilitates competition between opponents who may have no language in common. The challenge to ICCF and the other chess organisations today is to satisfy this demand.

It is not easy to find games that fit into the context of a "think-piece" like this, but I have decided to include (without giving very deep notes) one example of high-level correspondence chess which very few readers are likely to have seen before. (It has not appeared in my magazine *Chess Mail* yet.)

It is a game won by the current correspondence chess world champion, Tõnu Õim of Estonia. A book about him was published last year in Estonia and Mr Õim kindly sent me a copy, which I was given in Daytona. (The title is *Sajandi Parim Kirimaletaja Tõnu Õim*, by Taivo Kastan, ISBN 9985-9011-5-0). As well as his better-known games from his victories in two world championship finals and the high-level Axelson memorial, the book also includes several little known postal games from early in his career.

Also, included as a loose-leaf insert was the following game which must have been finished too late to include in the main book.

***Simon Webb - Tõnu Õim* Hans Werner von Massow Memorial corr,  
1996-99 Gruenfeld Defence [D85]**

**1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 g6 3 Nc3 d5 4 cxd5 Nxd5 5 e4 Nxc3 6 bxc3 Bg7 7 Nf3 c5 8 Rb1**

English correspondence grandmaster Simon Webb likes to follow main lines played the top over-the-board grandmasters, believing in their judgment and the depth of their preparation. Tõnu Õim does not object to discussing this critical line.

**8...0-0 9 Be2 cxd4 10 cxd4 Qa5+ 11 Bd2**

White sacrifices the a-pawn; the less critical alternative is 11 Qd2 with an early queen exchange, but not necessarily a drawish position.

**11...Qxa2 12 0-0 Bg4 13 Bg5**

The main alternative here is 13 Be3.

**13...Qe6!**

The mark of approval is from Õim himself. Usually 13...h6 is considered to

be the main reply.

### 14 d5

In his book *Understanding the Gruenfeld*, Jonathan Rowson writes of this position: "Although Black has some tactical resources to hold the position together, it really does seem that he is teetering on the brink."

### 14...Qxe4 15 Qd2

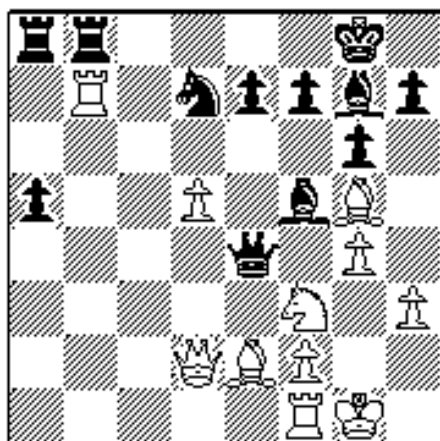
Rowson cites 15 Rxb7 Be6 16 Rb5 (16 dxe6? Qxb7) 16...Bf5 17 Nd2 Qe5 18 Nc4 Qc7 19 d6 exd6 20 Nxd6 as analysis by Azmaiparashvili. Rowson comments "Black's position resembles a minefield" but maybe Õim has discovered something here too.

### 15...a5 16 Rxb7 Nd7

Instead of the line 16...f6 17 Be3 given by Rowson, citing GM Sakaev.

### 17 h3 Bf5 18 g4 Rfb8!

Õim's idea; he says his position is now equal. (*See Diagram*)



### 19 Rxb8+ Rxb8 20 Bd1

If 20 gxf5 then 20...Rb2 wins back the bishop and Black's pawns are better.

### 20...Bxg4! 21 hxg4 a4

This position seems hard to evaluate. White temporarily has an extra piece but his d-pawn and g-pawn are weak, and the passed a-pawn looks threatening. Webb decides to eliminate it and play for a draw.

### 22 Bxe7?!

22 Nh2 would seem to be the move if White wants to try for a win. I don't know what Õim intended now, maybe 22...a3 (or 22...Rb2). Your computer may tell you White is better in these positions but these two correspondence grandmasters, with many hours to analyse, could well have found a strong continuation for Black that is not evident to casual inspection.

### 22...Qxe7 23 Bxa4 Rb2 24 Qe3 Qd6

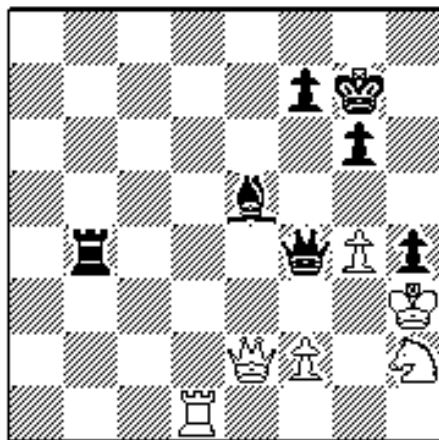
With an edge to Black says Õim: his king and pawns are safer, his forces better coordinated. White's decision at move 22 now seems clearly mistaken.

### 25 Bxd7 Qxd7 26 Qe4 Bc3 27 Nh2 Rb4 28 Qe2 Qxd5 29 Rd1 Qe5 30 Rd8+ Kg7 31 Re8 Qc5 32 Re3 Bd4 33 Rd3 h5!

Now Black is winning says Õim. The white king's defences are peeled away.

### 34 Kg2 h4 35 Rd2 Qg5 36 Kh3 Qf4 37 Rd1 Be5 0-1 (*See Diagram*)





White resigned here in view of 38 Rh1 Rb3+ 39 Kg2 h3+ 40 Kg1 Rg3+!! 41 fxg3 Bd4+.

Quite a futuristic game!

Footnote re Cenek Kottnauer

As a footnote to last month's *Kibitzer*, I received a very interesting letter from Leonard Barden about Cenek Kottnauer. For those of you who don't know, Leonard is the doyen of English chess correspondents, as well as being a former

British Champion, and he knew Cenek much better than I did.

He corrects me on a couple of minor details, including London geography. Apparently it was the north end of Hyde Park, not Holland Park, where the Kottnauers used to hunt for wild mushrooms.

More importantly, Leonard explains that "Cenek was an international standard water polo player. That's what occupied him in the 1930s."

Leonard says that most people, certainly at the time, would consider that Amsterdam 1950 and Budapest 1952 were elite events, so Cenek was still getting invitations to top events until he left for England. "Basically organisers invited either Kottnauer or Pachman until Kottnauer left the CSSR".

Barden says that he is a bit hazy now about the Prague intrigues but is sure that Cenek "did not just emigrate but fled fearing political persecution and arrest. While he was in Lucerne 1952-53 (where I too played) Danielle was smuggled out of Prague (I believe in the boot of a diplomatic car) to join him." The reason was that "Cenek worked in the sports ministry and was caught up in the aftermath of the 1948 Slansky show trials. He believed that some chessplayers, notably Opocensky, were after his job.

"In later years, Cenek coached future GMs Hodgson, W. Watson, Conquest and Kumaran for several years each... When I was BCF junior squad manager, I used to award a couple of games with Cenek as a special prize for the best talents. Thus he was the first IM to play Short one to one... He also gave a little coaching to Teresa Needham and McShane, so his ratio of GM and IM pupils was far higher than any other English trainer. Yet he was never officially recognised as a BCF coach."

Finally, with regard to the Master v Listeners game, Barden recalls that "The move 30...Bxc3? was made during a week HG was away and a substitute, whose name escapes me, made the fatal capture. For years afterwards, Golombek grumbled about what had happened and complained that his defensive masterpiece had been ruined".

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