

## “It’s chess, Jim, but not as we know it” Spock

On Saturday February 7<sup>th</sup> I visited the Royal Grammar Junior School to watch the EPSCA local area inter-school competition for Under – 11 and Under – 9 teams of children. EPSCA stands for English Primary Schools Chess Association. There were 10 teams entered in the U11 and 8 in the U9, but when I left after the first round Red Rose of Chester-le-Street had not appeared. The deficiency was repaired in what I thought of as a rather clever way – teams were of 5 players plus a reserve; normally the reserves played each other, but with an odd number of teams the reserves themselves formed a spare team!

The Under-11 teams were:

1. RGS A
2. RGS B
3. RGS C
4. RGS D
5. Kings
6. St.Monica’s
7. Red Rose
8. NPS A
9. NPS B
10. St Teresa’s

The Under-9 teams were:

1. RGS A
2. RGS B
3. RGS C
4. Red Rose
5. NPS
6. Kings
7. St Teresa’s A
8. St.Teresa’s B

St Monica’s is from Cumbria, and NPS is the Newcastle Preparatory School. Each of the schools brought their own team coach and had their own prep room provided for last minute instruction. Charlie Storey is the coach for Kings and Paul Bielby does the same for the hordes of RGS teams. I have a feeling that most of what the coaches were telling their charges simply evaporated when play started.

Paul Bielby was the overall organiser and Lara Barnes and Alex MacFarlane were the official controllers and arbiters.

The time limit was 35 minutes per player per game, clocks being provided for all. However, when I was watching the clocks were totally superfluous and were employed sporadically – say about one move in five. Indeed the round seemed to be complete in about 20 minutes. So do juniors play much more slowly elsewhere in the country? I don’t believe it.

I was trying to compare my own junior memories with the experience these youngsters were getting. Some children were really too small for the board; they had to stand up to move a Rook to the 8<sup>th</sup> rank. As light relief I can report that a player has recently complained about being crippled by the small chairs at the Jesmond club into which his 6 foot frame had to fit!

At that age of these children I was still wearing short trousers! Most of the juniors were wearing school uniform which I thought was a good sign. There wasn’t the support for chess for children of that age in my day. It was different as a teenager; there was a flourishing Glasgow School’s League and an annual congress at Easter lasting several days – but no clocks. And no girls – definitely no girls. A most unsuitable hobby. Someone was needed for domestic duties!

Was the chess any good? It was too quick for me to tell, but I was amused to hear a controller say she (well that identifies her!) was not allowed to say whether a position was mate or not. I wasn't sure myself – it depended on which direction the pawns were going, and at that stage I wasn't convinced anyone knew. However it was all amicably agreed.

Finally three cheers for the organiser, the controllers, the teachers, the coaches and the parents for their voluntary commitment and support.