

For *TheArticle* (March 30<sup>th</sup>)

## Glittering Prizes (for Oxford)

by Grandmaster Raymond Keene OBE

The annual contest between the teams of Oxford and Cambridge Universities is the oldest surviving fixture in the chess world. Often described as The Boat Race of the Brain, this clash was founded in the 1870's, and the first encounter was actually attended by those chess Titans of the day, Wilhelm Steinitz, Johannes Zukertort and, of course, the man who had put English chess emphatically on the global map, Howard Staunton.

Staunton had soared to prominence in 1843, when he travelled to Paris to challenge Pierre Saint Amant, the heir of the great Philidor and hereditary wielder of the proverbial chess sceptre. Staunton annihilated the incumbent, in a match which bore every hallmark of being a forerunner of modern world championship contests. Staunton was immediately hailed as "The Champion" by his proud compatriots, who could now claim that our traditional foe had not just been defeated militarily in 1815 at Waterloo (in 1843 The Duke of Wellington still had another eight years to live) but that English Brainpower was also superior to our Gallic rivals. Staunton could rightly say with Julius Caesar, when he subdued Gaul, *veni, vidi, vici!*

Yet, for some reason, the English have since remained extraordinarily reticent about Staunton, permitting the Austrian Steinitz to claim to have been the first official world champion, when the rights of Staunton and Morphy, to name but two, surely deserve precedence. Strangely, Staunton is more revered for the use of his name in describing the standard tournament chess pieces than for his prowess over the board.

It was no accident, of course, that Staunton attended the inaugural Varsity match. Apart from his chess skills, Staunton was a noted Shakespearean scholar and had also produced a weighty and well researched tome on education in England. Staunton's attraction to a new venture, which combined chess and the halls of academe, is, therefore, easy to understand.

Coincidentally, a further injustice hangs over the annual match, not just the perennial failure by chess chroniclers to grant Staunton his full recognition as world champion. This is the ongoing omission by Oxford University (who now narrowly trail Cambridge by just one match victory in the overall series) to award Half Blues to their chess playing representatives. These have included such luminaries as Grandmasters John Nunn, Jon Speelman and David Norwood, to mention but a few.

In contrast, Cambridge have awarded the prestigious Half Blues to their squad for many decades. Hence, Jonathan Mestel, Michael Stean, Bill Hartston and the author of this article, can all pronounce themselves grateful for the recognition bestowed by our Alma Mater.

Meanwhile, the players from Oxford still suffer from the fact that the sporting powers that be in the city of lost causes are more impressed by the "plash of the oars" (Henry James) than by the wave of the brain. I trust that this infelicity will soon be consigned to those other lost causes for which Oxford is notorious.

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This year, rather than display their hard won half blue ties, Cambridge turned up sporting smart light blue, specially designed Cambridge chess club neckwear. Sadly their sartorial team- building morale booster failed to exert any positive result, and the light blue boat of the brain once again sank with almost all hands.

I am indebted to match organiser Stephen Meyler of the RAC (ably supported by Henry McWatters, Henry Mutkin and Rob Matthews) for the following comments on this year's Boat Race of the Brain:

*The 142nd Varsity Match was held on Saturday 2 March at the Royal Automobile Club, London, its traditional home since 1978.*

*Oxford started as favourites with a significant rating advantage and duly ran out winners 5-3. This win closes the gap to just 1 point with Cambridge holding the advantage with 60 wins to Oxford's 59 and 23 games drawn. Oxford have now won 6 of the last 8 matches, Cambridge securing a draw in 2023.*

*On the day Oxford swept the prizes winning both the Best Game and Brilliancy. GM's Ray Keene, Jon Speelman and Matthew Sadler formed the panel and awarded Best Game to Oxford Captain Tom O'Gorman for his win on Board 1 over Cambridge Captain Koby Kalavanaan. The Brilliancy was judged to be played by Oxford Board 3, Ashvin Sivakumar, in his win over Jan Petr. The other decisive games were a win for Oxford's Daniel Gallagher on Board 4 and the solitary Cambridge win by Cameron Goh, Board 7.*

*Board 8 saw a Kings Gambit played by Arushi Ramaiya, Cambridge, against Imogen Camp, some 200 Elo stronger. The match commentator, Matthew Sadler, predicted a draw after a lot of bloodshed..... he was right.*

*For the first time the commentary was broadcast live on chess.com and lichess.org as well as Matthew's channel Silicon Road.*

All prizes were presented at the Gala Dinner, the premier annual event of the annual UK chess calendar, where the sainted editor of The Article, Daniel Johnson, was guest of honour. We now look forward to next year's plash of mental oars, when the cynosure of all eyes will be the question of whether Oxford can tie the match series in 2025?

Further match report, games and photos are available via John Saunders Varsity Match website <https://www.saund.co.uk/britbase/pgn/202403vars-viewer.html>

My days representing Cambridge date from the Cretaceous period, when I scored 3½/4. I had believed this to encapsulate the record top board score, but it was smashed by the Oxford top board this year, who now has 4/4, and additionally won this year's best game prize, an art work by Barry Martin featuring Garry Kasparov.

My favourite game, from my personal wins against Oxford, is the following. My opponent was the formidable Andrew Whiteley, former European junior champion, who had recently

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come top of the British contingent in the Hastings Premier, going on later to come second in the British championship and qualify as an International Master.

**Raymond Keene vs. Andrew Whiteley**

Cambridge vs. Oxford (1969), London

**1. c4 c6 2. Nf3 d5 3. d4 Nf6**

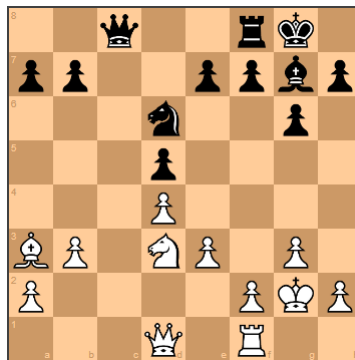
Andrew was an enthusiastic devotee of the Slav defence to the Queen's gambit. In an earlier game I had tried to overwhelm him with violence, trying Bronstein's: 4. Nc3 e6 5. Bg5 dxc4 6. e4 b5 7. e5 h6 8. Bh4 g5 9. exf6 gxh4 and now 10. Ne5. However, Andrew weathered the storm and clung on for a draw. I therefore decided to vary with something much less forcing.

**4. Nbd2 Bf5 5. g3 g6 6. Bg2 Bg7 7. O-O O-O 8. b3 Nbd7 9. Bb2 Ne4**



White's next is, indeed, very unforcing. More aggressive is 10. Nh4 as in Portisch v Pachman, Moscow 1967, brilliantly won by White.

**10. Rc1 Ndf6 11. Nxe4 Bxe4 12. Ne1 Bxg2 13. Kxg2 Rc8 14. Nd3 Ne4 15. e3 Nd6 16. cxd5 cxd5 17. Rxc8 Qxc8 18. Ba3**



Black's next is careless, overlooking a cunning ploy.

**18... Qd7?**

Here Black has a last chance to equalise with 18... Nf5 19. Qe2 Qd7 20. Rc1 Rc8 21. Ne5 Bxe5 22. Rxc8+ Qxc8. Black might have feared to play 18... Nf5 because of 19. g4 Nh4+ 20. Kg3 when 20... g5 is forced, but there is nothing to worry about because 21. Bxe7 fails to ...Qc7+

**19. Bxd6 Qxd6 20. Qc2 e5**

There is no choice. Otherwise White follows with Rc1, dominates the only open file and penetrates Black's camp with Qc7.

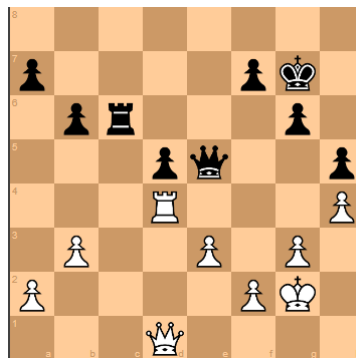
**21. dxe5 Bxe5 22. Rd1 Rd8 23. Nxe5 Qxe5 24. Rd4 Kg7 25.Qd3**

Already White could reach the thematic endgame which is always likely to be the outcome, with 25. Qd2 Rc8 26. Rxd5 Rc2 27. Qxc2 Qxd5+ 28. e4 Qe5 29. Kf3 etc.

**25...Rd6**

Or 25... Rd7 26. b4 f5 (a weakening Black would prefer to avoid) 27. Qc3 Kf7 28. a4 Rc7 29. Qb3 Rd7 30. Qd3 with ongoing advantage. I was well aware of the game Unzicker v Petrosian, Varna Olympiad 1962, where the coming world champion squeezed out a win against the German Grandmaster's isolated queen's pawn.

**26. Qb5 b6 27. Qa6 Rd7 28. Qd3 Rd6 29. h4 h5 30. Qd1 Rc6**



Faced with the threat of e4, Black elects to go for active counter play.

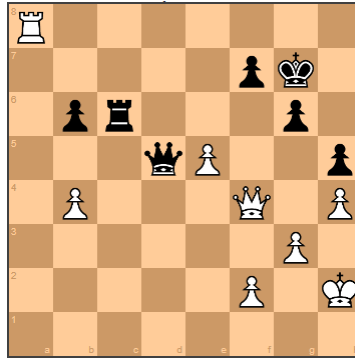
**31. Rxd5 Qe4+ 32. Qf3 Qc2 33. e4 Rf6 34. Qe3 Qxa2 35. e5**

Another method is 35. Rd7 Qc2 36. Rxa7 Qc5 37. Qd2 Qe5 38. Ra4 Rd6 39. Qf4

**35... Re6 36. Rd7 Qc2 37. Rxa7 Qc6+ 38. Kh2 Qd5 39. Qf4Rc6 40. b4 Kg8 41. Ra8+ Kg7 42. Ra3**

Faster is 42. b5 Re6 43. Ra7 Rxe5 44. Rxf7+ Qxf7 45. Qxe5+ Kh7 46. Qe3 with an almost certain win in the endgame.

**42... Kg8 43. Ra8+ Kg7** Black resigns 1-0



Here the game was suspended and adjudicated by Bob Wade and Harry Golombek, one an International Master, the other Grandmaster Emeritus and both OBE's. Nowadays a faster play finish would decide. I was at first looking at attack by means of 44. e6 Rxe6 45. Qb8 but after 45... Kf6 Black can run into the centre with his King and probably survive. Best is the preliminary 44. b5 when after 44...Re6 45. Ra7 Rxe5 46. Rxf7+ Qxf7 47. Qxe5+ Kh7 48. Qe3 reaches the familiar Queen and pawn endgame, where White has an extra pawn, safer King and prospects of manoeuvring his King towards the Black weakness on b6. After 44. b5 , if Black grabs the decoy pawn with 44... Qxb5 then White wins at once with: 45. e6!! This powerful thrust now holds the key to victory, but only after Black's Queen has been deflected to b5; there must follow, 45... Rxe6 46. Qb8 Kf6 47. Qh8+ Kf5. Here, White can proceed with 48. Qd8!! (now possible after the black Queen has been lured away from its sturdy defensive post on d5) 48... Re5 49. Ra7 when Black has several options, most notably, 49... Qc5, ...Qc6, or ...Ke5; none of which offers any respite, beyond timing and mechanism of demise.

Ray's 206th book, "[Chess in the Year of the King](#)", written in collaboration with Adam Black, and his 207th, "[Napoleon and Goethe: The Touchstone of Genius](#)" (which discusses their relationship with chess) are available from Amazon and Blackwells.