

2018 4 Nations Chess League Report- 'West Is Best'

'West Is Best' are a squad of players drawn from Wales and the South West whom until this season had as their primary focuses promotion to the Third Division and retaining the place in the Second Division, and total enjoyment of each other's company. The former, though not the latter, changed when the stalwart captain of the South Wales Dragons indicated that he would be content to hand over the reigns, and after discussions, we merged with the Dragons, to create a squad with four teams, one in each Division. This report will briefly (not that I have ever spoken briefly in my life) outline the progress of the season.

West Is Best 1- First Division

The coveted Division One status was always going to be a challenge to preserve. In a league that is largely professional, we held true to the principle of amateur players, and were always going to be in a fight for survival. The concern was magnified by uncertainty of selection as until the opening weekend, it was never going to be clear which players would be prepared to move into the new amalgamated side.

Fortunately, the fears were allayed by a magnificent opening weekend, with victory over the highly rated Alba. Jack Rudd and John Cooper overcame grading deficits of over 100 points to defeat IM Greet and FM Shreeves respectively, while wins and draws elsewhere ensured a 5-3 victory. This was the start of an incredible season for Cooper, who scored 5.5/11, primarily on board 2, against 9 titled players including 3 Grandmasters.

The form continued on the second day as the Firsts were narrowly pipped by Wood Green HK, in a team completely formed of titled players. The season continued in a similar fashion, getting crucial wins against Alba and Cambridge to ensure that 4 points were carried through the relegation pool. Going into the final weekend, it was believed that two wins would be needed to secure safety, and the Firsts exceeded that with three wins out of three, including taking out a 3Cs team headed by Stephen Gordon. For aficionados of imbalanced positions, check out Katarzyna Toma's game against Adam Ashton, as she escorted a passed pawn into the end zone with two knights and a rook against a queen. A fantastic season, in which the team morale never dipped, and five wins out of eleven, against exceedingly strong opposition was appropriate reward.

A final shout out in this division for Steven Jones who debuted for us this season and had an auspicious start, finishing second in the Individual 4NCL Rapidplay in October 2017. His status as an honorary Welshman was confirmed as he proceeded to blitz through opposition, rising from the Seconds to the Firsts and ending the season playing at board 4 in Division One. Hopefully next season in our colours will see him tip the 2300 mark and gain the FM title.

West is Best 2- Second Division

The seconds were, essentially, a hybrid of the team that had gained promotion from Division 4 the previous year (a big step up) and those with previous experience of Division One and Two. This, together with the unknown quantity of two teams from the northern leagues made it the hardest set of fixtures to predict but a glance at the team grades on the opening weekend showed a serious discrepancy, with us very much the underdogs.

In spite of this, a narrow loss to North East England, whose lowest graded player was only out-graded by our highest suggested that the talents of our players could yet shine through and this was

vindicated by a strong victory over Guildford 3 on Sunday with Will Taylor taking 2/2 from the opening weekend. Like John Cooper, Will went on to score consistently throughout the season, providing a bulwark on the middle boards.

The record of a win and a loss per weekend matched that of the Firsts and, like them, the Seconds entered the relegation pool with 4 points although the final weekend had the potential for more pitfalls than that of the top division. The turning point was on the Saturday, in a match that was a must win, we came dangerously close to losing, being 4-3 down with one to play. Cometh the hour, cometh the lady, and Tihana Ivekovic, who has been unbelievably consistent when playing for us in the past, refused to back down in a rook and 2 versus rook and one ending, pushing away until her opponent lost his way and gave up the point. If Tihana had not been so resilient and skilled, then this report would have a very different tone as was proved when a strong win on Sunday left us needing to match the results of one of King's Head or KJCA Kings. Despite losing to the perennially under-rated Sussex Marlets, Warwickshire held out to win their final two games and beat the former 4.5-3.5 ensuring that we held on to our Division Two place by the skin of our teeth.

Many thanks to Doug and Alex for their sterling efforts in guiding these two teams this year. More on them later!

Finally, a shout out should go to Suzy Cooke, who made the effort to come down from Scotland on one of the weekends when we were stretched to the limit and put in a fantastic performance for the team. While every effort is crucial, the rules on juniors and females in the top two divisions mean that getting a like for like replacement can be difficult, and her efforts were much appreciated.

West is Best 3- Third Division

In a pre-season review, Doug, Alex and I all agreed that this was likely to be the biggest challenge, although we agreed that if we could field our best, or close to our best team, then we should have good survival chances. Unfortunately, this did not happen and a combination of unavailability and the need to draft players to the second team meant that at no point did we field our strongest line-up and were frequently out-graded by in excess of a hundred points; who knew that rating points meant anything?!

The signs were present from the first weekend when we could only amass 1.5 game points out of 12, and in the first half of the season only managed a solitary drawn match against The Rookies. A bad situation became worse as for the fourth weekend we were so short of players that we ended up defaulting our fourth team, with those players moving into the thirds. Despite their valiant efforts, we went into the final weekend with one match point and even three wins would potentially not be enough.

The final weekend team put in a fantastic effort, doubling in those three matches the points that had been obtained in the previous nine matches, but two draws weren't enough, and relegation was confirmed. Thanks to Andy Gregory and Matthew Davies who never failed to turn out for us and fought hard, often against players rated far higher than they.

Were I a modern day football manager I would try to find suitable excuses for relegation, but I think I can do no better than echo Brian Clough when asked why Nottingham Forest were relegated in 1993: "We weren't good enough". It really was that simple, and the challenge now turns to trying again to climb the slippery pole of Fourth Division promotion next season.

West Is Best 4- Fourth Division

There were success stories all over the season, but while the fourth team ended in fifteenth (not helped by having to withdraw from one weekend), their performances over the season demonstrated some fantastic efforts when hugely out-graded, with some brilliances from debutant Jake Hurley and strong performances from the adults in the team, in particular Jonathan Melsom, and the youngsters like Hugo Fowler, Caspian Fowler, Merlin Davies, Sam Parry, and Hiya Ray. This was emphasised by three wins in the final weekend to shoot up the table and end up only four points off the top five. A truly remarkable achievement by a team that overcame many odds and never stopped fighting. It will be great to see how they kick on next year.

Finally, on a personal note, this will be my last season at the helm of this organisation. Two long standing members, Douglas Spencer and Alex Bullen have kindly agreed to take over next year.

Over eleven seasons, and thirteen years, I have been fortunate to work with 67 players, all of whom have given their absolute best in service of this team. The role of skippering them has been made easier by their willingness to compromise and turn up often when other, far more important, events are going on in their lives. From the very outset, the core of the squad has been adamant that team unity would be the primary goal, and many friendships have been formed as a result of our endeavours. These friendships have meant that our successes have been sweeter, and our losses easier to deal with, and for everyone's part in this, I will be eternally thankful. I have no doubt that the new management team will take this ethos forward, and if anyone wants to be a part of it, don't hesitate to get in touch with Doug or Alex.

Ciao

Matthew