

## **Morgantown Chess Club**

### **President's Report 2005/06**

Earlier this week, I sat down to make some notes on Morgantown Chess Club's first year of existence. What started out as a modest summary of our activities, quickly developed into a rather elaborate personal account on the birth and first year of our chess club, and what I think needs to happen as the Club enters its toddler years - so please bear with me if this gets a little long-winded ....

About one year ago – November 17, 2005 – four chess players gathered here at First Christian Church to form a chess club. About five years had passed since the last incarnation of a WVU chess club had folded after primus motor Jason Rihel graduated and moved out of the area. The four brave souls on this cold November night were: Martin Harper, Shih-Houng Young, Jason Young, and myself. We all felt very strongly that Morgantown provided a sound basis for an active club.

I had known Martin for a while, and we had played some enjoyable pool-side chess over summer 2005. We had loosely discussed the idea of starting a chess club in Morgantown, but neither of us had any connections to other local players. Then, in September 2005, during the first round of last season's Pittsburgh Chess League, I finally met Shih-Houng and his son Jason. When I look back at this encounter I cannot help feel that it was rather symptomatic that it took place in Pittsburgh! There had not been a rated tournament in Morgantown for half a decade, and if you were serious about improving your chess, participating in Pittsburgh tournaments was one of the few opportunities left within reasonable driving distance from Morgantown.

It is fair to say that Jason and Shih-Houng had been some of the most active tournament players in West Virginia from about year 2000 onwards. They both agreed to work towards creating a Morgantown Chess Club, and with their many connections to other local chess players, this quickly started to take form. The first thing we did was set up a mailing list, which soon grew from a handful to a dozen names. However, we were still some steps removed from becoming a 'real club'. It seemed the biggest obstacle was finding a regular meeting place for the club.

Then on October 20 two important things happened: (1) our club website was launched and we had a link posted at the WVCA website. In these days, where information is never more than a Google search away, the importance of having a web appearance cannot be overestimated and I know for a fact that several of you first found your way here from our website. The very first person to call me about the club was Mike Felton, who had found us via the before mentioned link from the State Chess Association website

(2) The other thing that happened October 20th was that Martin and I visited Rev. Rick Howard at this church. Women supposedly make the world go around, and in this case it was Martin's wife Trudy who had asked the pastor about hosting a chess club! We owe an immense debt of gratitude to our hosts here at First Christian Church, who is letting us use their nice facilities for free. It is one of the main reasons that we have been able to successfully grow our club over the past year. The small donations that we have offered the church (\$100 this year) do not stand measure with their hospitality.

With a nice meeting site secured, our next challenge became to recruit more members – recall that there were only four of us when we initially met. For the first couple of regular club nights between five and seven people showed up, but then for our Holiday Special we hit two digits with a dozen players! Since then our attendance numbers became relatively steady. Rarely will we have a turnout of less than ten, and our rolling monthly average has since been stable between 9 and 14. We had a small dip in turnout over the summer months (to be expected), but attendance is up and rising again since early August.

The Club approaches its one-year anniversary with 19 current members - eight of them are juniors (aged 19 and under). At any given time, this being no exception, we have about a handful of prospective members that visit us regularly. We are very sensitive about not pushing new members into joining until they know that MCC is right for them. I think we should set ourselves a goal of growing to about 30 members over the next year – this seems very realistic to me.

To achieve this goal we must continue to offer a good variety of activities of interest to players of all playing strengths. This is where your input is valuable: is there anything you would like to see happen at the Club? It is my understanding that many chess clubs have folded in the past, because they did nothing but offer a chance to play skittles games. That is why our offers include monthly chess lectures (believe we had 7 or 8 of these), simuls, team matches, skittles play as well as rated tournaments. We will continue refining all of these activities and hopefully diversify even more by bringing in other types of activities.

While I am the subject of club life in general, let me grab the opportunity to emphasize one other important prerequisite for club growth: a friendly and open atmosphere where new players feel immediately welcome. I think we are already doing quite well in this department, and I am proud of the great group of people we have gathered. It is my observation that noone is left sitting in a corner without an opponent at our club meetings. A chess club only truly “works” if there is an environment where stronger players willingly share their chess knowledge with weaker ones. That means not only playing but also analyzing with the less experienced members. At the end of the day, we may compete over the board, but every member - beginner to advanced - shares the common goal of wanting to improve our game – we want to understand more.

And now let me turn to a quick summary of club activities over the past 11 months. I already mentioned our monthly chess improvement lectures, so I will focus mostly on the tournaments we have run:

- We started out in December 2005 with the MCC Inaugural tournament (G/60), which had eight players and was won by Shih-Houng Young with 3.5/4 ahead of Jens Madsen. This was an out-of-the-woodworks type event to kick off our new club, so one success criterion was being able to find players and run the event in the first place!
- March Madness had 10 players and was won by Jens Madsen with the maximum score of 4 points. Shih-Houng Young took second place. The Madness consisted in this event taking place with relatively fast time controls (G/45) over two nights.
- Dave Iorio also achieved a perfect 4-0 score to win the Almost Summer tournament ahead of Shih-Houng Young and Mike Felton. This tournament had 8 participants. Based on a widespread sentiment that the G/60 time controls used in our Inaugural event was too fast, we tried a G/75 time control (identical to our weekend events).
- Summer Grand Prix (G/20 thematic tournaments). Summer is traditionally a slow period, so we decided to run a series of separate little tournaments. That meant noone had to commit to playing chess on a lot of dates. We had between six and ten participants in each of these four mini-tournaments. Jason Young won three events and took clear first in the overall GP standings.
- Finally, our first Club Championship concluded earlier this week. There were 12 players in this five-round tournament. The first place was shared by Shih-Houng Young and Jens Madsen, who become our first club champions. Congratulations!

In addition to these tournaments, we also ran a couple of unrated training tournaments in the winter and spring. The idea was to provide tournament experience to some of our new members without them having to join the USCF. This is possibly something we should consider repeating in the near future, as we have a new crop of incoming members in a similar situation

In our first year of existence, we have been mixing up time controls, but have stuck to the format of one section with the Swiss pairing system. While I am in favor of continuing to run a mix of quick and slow time controls, I think our experiments with different slow time controls – we have tried G/60, G/75 and G/90 - should reach a conclusion where we settle on a standard slow time control. I am not sure what this should be – the new board should make this decision!

As regards the tournament formats, we will start to experiment with other formats than the Swiss one. Our current chess demographics is such that we have few players of intermediate strength (rated 1400-1700). This might obviously change as people improve and/or we get new members, but in the meantime the difference in playing strength between top and bottom half is relatively big when we have just one tournament section. The answer to this problem may lie in our next tournament - the "First Anniversary Quads". Quads are little four-player sections played using a round-robin format. As people are seeded into these sections by rating, this will give more balanced sections with more close games.

Another key activity is weekend tournaments. This Saturday we are hosting the Mountaineer Open, which will be our third such event this year. We have had players from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Kentucky attending our events this year – there are still 46 States to go! The tournaments were:

- Morgantown Spring Open in March, which had 16 players in one section and was won by Ben Good from Hinton (near Beckley). A lot of oldtimers from the WV chess scene surfaced for this event, which had the feeling of a reunion!
- Two months later we were at it again for the Morgantown May Day tournament, which had 27 players split about evenly into two sections. Tom Magar (Pittsburgh) and Don Griffith (St. Albans) shared first in the Opens section, while Ben Cowley from Clarksburg won the Reserve section (U1800).

These weekend tournaments bring tough competition to town, and so is a chance for our members to prove themselves. I personally consider them among the highlights of our activity calendar, and hope that we can gradually grow these tournaments in size. In particular, the Mountaineer Open should be turned into our premier annual event, possibly by bringing in sponsorships in return for general publicity and naming rights. We may have to look for an alternative schedule for this event though, as there are several problems with hosting a big tournament here in October. For instance, the WVU football season makes it difficult to plan ahead until the schedule is released.

We will run a similar number of weekend tournaments in 2007 as we did this year. The first ones are already planned for March-10 and May-5. Also, at the recent Business meeting of the WVCA, Morgantown was chosen as the host for the WV State Championship 2007. Please mark your calendars already now for Labor Day weekend of next year. The last time this event took place in Morgantown was 20 years ago (1987).

I should also mention the scholastic chess scene in Monongalia County, which we are eager to support. Several of our members have become involved in running after-school chess programs. Obviously, many of our junior members started out in such scholastic clubs. The Club can help by organizing scholastic tournaments. We took an early stab at this between Christmas and New Years 2005, and plan to organize one or two such events before next summer.

On two occasions (in March and September), we have met with our good friends from the Washington CC. These were great events from a social standpoint, so let us hope this tradition continues next year. Perhaps we could wish for slightly better scores though! We have had discussions with other regional clubs on similar team matches, so don't be surprised if another challenge surfaces.

While on the subject of team chess, we were well represented at the 2006 Western Pennsylvania open team championships, by a team consisting of Jason and Shih-Houng Young, Mike Felton, and Jim Eakins. They came third out of nine teams. Finally, we have entered a Morgantown team in the Pittsburgh Chess League, which is one of the most traditional team tournaments in the nation (in its 47<sup>th</sup> season!). Here we are seeded into the top division, which has 8 teams. We are seeded 6<sup>th</sup> but after two rounds we are in 4<sup>th</sup> place after beating the 3<sup>rd</sup> seeds and narrowly losing against the 2<sup>nd</sup> seeded team.

I have come to the end of this report, but before I wrap up let me say that the long term stability and health of our organization would benefit from more volunteers to help with various chess activities. In particular we need more tournament directors, but we also could use a press contact as well as individuals to pursue corporate sponsorships. The more shoulders that help carry a load, the better. It has been an exciting year, but I am convinced the best is yet to come. Thanks for your attention!