

Hold the phone! BT wins again

By Andrew Farthing

The final of the 2009/10 Bennett Cup was played on Wednesday, 23 June 2010.

In the White corner, Robert Mitchell from the Redditch club, this season's form player, who had achieved the notable feat of reaching the final of both the Ball Cup (for those graded under 150) and the Bennett Cup (open to all).

In the Black corner was the reigning champion, Brian Turner from Malvern, whose 100% record in the Cup over the last two years and higher grade made him bookies' favourite for the title.

The game was hosted at the event organiser's home in a transparent stab at fame by association should the final turn into a 21st century version of the Immortal Game. For all time, the history books would record that it was played here...

Enough preamble, let's get into the action:

Robert Mitchell (140) – Brian Turner (185)

[Comments in italics are by the players.]

1. Nf3

"That's an afternoon's preparation wasted," said Brian as he saw this. Having caught wind of the top secret training sessions on the King's Indian Attack involving a number of Redditch players, I was less surprised by Robert's choice.

1... Nf6; 2. g3 c5; 3. Bg2 d5; 4. 0-0 Nc6; 5. d3 e5; 6. e4

So far, a standard King's Indian Attack. This is a good opening for those who want a reliable system which is playable against virtually any Black reply. Brian's approach turns the game into a genuine "King's Indian Defence reversed", a potentially risky approach as White is a tempo up in what is an acceptable defence as Black. The trick in reversed openings tends to be finding the balance between the value to White of the extra tempo and the usefulness to Black of the extra information gained by seeing White's chosen formation.

Unfortunately, since I understand as little about the King's Indian Defence as I do about the Attack, this will not help me to comment sensibly on the moves that follow. Forgive me, dear reader, because I know not what they do.

RM: 6. Bg5 is the current trend, but I prefer this central thrust, an idea of Nigel Davies.

6... Be7

RM: 6...d4 and 6...de are the main line alternatives. Both are considered stronger.

BT: Black is in danger of over-stretch here.

7. e x d5

I was a little surprised to see this. I expected White to keep the central tension and begin a standard push of the f-pawn (e.g. 7. Nh4 and 8. f4). However, it's a matter of taste.

7... N x d5 8. c3 (*RM: ?*)

Keeping a black knight out of d4. This can't be bad, although White is giving Black room to develop very naturally and needs to be careful not to drift into a passive or cramped position.

RM: An error. 8.Re1 first is correct when 8...f6 9.c3 with the idea of d4 is slightly better for white. Note that 9...Be6 would allow 10.d4 as the Bishop isn't protected.

8... Be6; 9. Re1 Qc7; 10. Ng5?!

Understandably motivated by the wish to gain the bishop pair. At the time, I favoured development in the form of 10. Na3, with a choice of useful squares for the knight.

RM: I agree, Qe2 followed by d4 is correct.

BT: Agreed, though Fritz advocates giving up the e-pawn and playing 0-0-0! I was happy after 10 Ng5, but felt that 10 Nbd2 or Na3, heading for c4 would have been another way to exploit my over-stretch.

10... B x g5; 11. B x g5 0-0

RM: The game is now equal.

12. Na3

RM: 12.c4 is not to be ruled out here, but I didn't like giving away the d4 square. However, after 12.c4 Nde7 13.Be7 Ne7 14.Nc3 f6 15.f4 Rad8 16.Qe2 I couldn't assess the position with confidence.

12...Rfe8

After the game, both players indicated that they didn't like their own position at this stage. Robert was concerned about finding a suitable means of gaining space, and Brian wondered whether he had been over-ambitious in his approach. Such mutual dissatisfaction probably means that Black has equalised here.

13. Nc2?!

Passive. 13. Nc4 looks like a more active way to put pressure on Black's position. After 13... f6 14. Bd2 Rad8, it still looks equal to me.

RM: 13.Qe2 is better. The idea behind 13.Nc2 is to play for d4, but Brian prevents this very neatly. While 13.Nc4 is the natural looking move here, I felt that after 13...f6, White's play down the e-file is going nowhere.

13... f6 14. Bd2 Rad8

At this stage, I found myself struggling to see a good plan for White. Queenside expansion looked risky (you have to understand, I am a deeply cautious chess player), but what else is there? After a solid move like 15. Qe2, White's position looks OK, but Black's game seems easier to play (e.g. 15...Qf7).

BT: Yes, black has consolidated his space advantage --- but what to do with it?

15.a3

Deciding on queenside expansion after all. The light squares (especially b3) looked awfully inviting to me at this point, but this may flatter to deceive.

RM: Still pursuing the faulty plan of queenside expansion, followed by d4. 15.Qe2 Bf5 16.Be4 is better but still slightly better for Black.

15... Qd7 16.b4

RM: With the idea of b5, c4, Ne3-d5 but Black's next is very strong, putting an end to all White's play.

16...Nc7 17. Be3!

Played after a long think. Suddenly the game has become very complex. White's pawn on d3 looks doomed, but Black's own queenside pawns could rapidly disappear if Black takes the bait. My silicon friend, Fritz, now suggests that Black can gain a small plus after 17... Q x d3 18. Q x d3 R x d3 19. B x c5 R x c3 20. Ne3, but it's far from clear. Brian's choice in the game came as a complete surprise to me... if anything, I expected the bishop to head in the other direction, to b3.

RM: With my play stifled, I decided to complicate and try to get my bishop pair working. Unfortunately, Brian wasn't having any of it!

17... Bg4!?

Black wants to drive the White queen to d2 so that the d-pawn will be pinned.

RM: Taking on d3 is the strongest response by Black.

BT: 17...Bg4 is too clever and as pointed out Qb1 would have been a good response.

18. Qd2 (RM: ?)

18. Qb1!? is an interesting alternative.

RM: 18.Qd2 is a big mistake. 18.Qb1 would now be equal, however I didn't consider following this move up with bxc5!

18... c4

By now, my head was starting to ache as I tried to work out what was going on. My gut feeling was that Black was better, but I wasn't sure how best he should proceed. Brian had his first long think of the game before playing 18...c4, so I suspect that I wasn't alone. The diligent annotator would now produce detailed variations to support a conclusion at this point. However, I've always believed that there is much more satisfaction to be had from working things for yourself, and this is an ideal position on which to practise your skills. Enjoy!

19.d4 Bh3

Black wants to exchange White's best piece.

BT: There is the possibility of a good knight v bad bishop position even if Black has to play ...e4.

20.B x h3 (RM: ?!)

RM: Already getting short of time I didn't consider the obvious 20.Bh1=

BT: If Bh1 then I was going to play ...Bf5 having cut the white bishop off from f1.

20...Q x h3 21.Qe2 b5

RM: Black is now winning.

22.Qf1?!

I'm not sure about this move. It suits Black fine to move the queen to an active square like f5, whereas the White queen was already quite well-placed on e2. Perhaps now was the time to return to the Queenside pawns and play 22. a4!? After 22...a6, it's far from clear that Black is significantly better, whereas now I believe the tide definitely turns in his favour.

22... Qf5 23.Qg2!

A tricky move and an excellent practical choice. White needs to stir things up, and this gives Black a chance to go wrong. If now 23...Qxc2?, 24. Qxc6 Qxc3 25. Rac1! looks better for White if anything.

23... Nd5! 24. Rec1 (RM: ?!)

RM: The wrong Rook, but I was still looking at playing a4 someday. Dream on!

BT: If 24. Rac1 I was intending to play 24...Qd3.

24...e x d4?!

My silicon friend suggests that 24...Re6! is stronger, protecting the knight on c6. After 25. Bd2 exd4 26. cxd4, Black looks much better.

BT: Yes indeed 24...Re6 is better, keeping up the pressure. As played, Black releases the tension too early.

RM: 24...Qd7 is also very strong.

25. B x d4?!

25. N x d4!? N x d4; 26. B x d4 may have been preferable.

25... Re2 26.Ne3 N x e3 27.B x e3 Ne5

At this tense moment in this game, I'm ashamed to report that my phone rang. Not loudly enough to disturb the players, I hope, but it dragged me away from the game to answer it. By the time I returned from discussing the finer points of the proposed changes in the rules for the County Championships (yes, my life really is that exciting), the players had shaken hands and were deep into the post mortem! Here's what I missed...

28. Qb7?

White is definitely losing now. 28. B x a7 would avoid the possibility noted after the next move and allow White to keep fighting, albeit worse.

RM: I had seven moves to make to the time control. Hence the erratic moves now played. After 28.Ba7 Nf3 check, I didn't like my Queen being boxed in.

BT: I had the general illusion that the bishop had to stay on e3 to stopRdd2, and that I was winning comfortably. Hence I failed even to look for the knockout blow on the next move and was actually quite pleased with my next. Lessons to be learnt again --- even in my sixties!

28...Ng4?

28...Rxe3! wins at once. If 29. fxe3, 29...Nf3+ forces White to give up his queen or be mated. I have to give credit to my silicon friend for this one. Naturally, I'm confident that I would have spotted it in an instant if I hadn't had to go and answer the phone (*ahem!*).

29. Rd1

White is back in the game now, but it's still fiendishly complicated.

29... Rd3; 30. Qb8+?

30. Bc5! Ne5 31. Rxd3 Qxd3 32. Bd4 is a much tougher nut to crack. Black may have an edge, and his pieces look more menacing, but I can't see a breakthrough.

RM: Haste to make the time control.

30... Kf7; 31. Q x a7+ Kg6; 32. Qa8??

Under pressure, White makes the fatal error.

32... N x e3; 33. Qe8+ Kh6

White lost on time (0-1)

The Black king has found shelter, and the only way for White to avoid mate from 34... Qxf2+ 35. Kh1 Qg2# (if 34. Rf1 Qf3) is to give up his queen for the knight on e3.

RM: At this point my flag fell with two more moves to make. Therefore, my final move was to shake the hand of my opponent and congratulate him on his tournament victory. Congratulations Brian!

A fascinating battle, which did credit to both players. Congratulations to Brian on retaining the Cup and commiserations to Robert, who performed exceptionally well throughout.

BT: Yes indeed, well played Robert.

As always, my thanks to everyone who took part in the event and helped to make it such an enjoyable experience. Here's to next year!