

The **Edinburgh and Lothians League** was, and continues to be, centred on Edinburgh but also taking in the surrounding areas such as Wester Hailes, Pentland Hills and Musselburgh. In the period 1989-1993 that I recall, Edinburgh University had a strong 1st team in Division 1 who usually contested first place with Edinburgh Chess Club and “Wandering Dragons”. Scotland had also recently seen two players achieve GM status – McNab and Motwani - though I do not think they played in the Lothian League. IM Mark Orr certainly played on at least some occasions. The **University 2nd team**, however, was a less talented and more robust affair; I had the pleasure of playing for this team for four years including two as captain, and have picked out some personal highlights below...

In order to play, you first needed to be selected.... Selection Policy for away matches was greatly influenced by car ownership rather than playing ability. Typically, one of the better off members of the squad would have a car, whereas the rest of us commoners relied on a combination of bikes and buses. Access to a car meant almost certain selection so long as the individual was prepared to cram the vehicle with fellow team members, eager to avoid paying £1 (aka a pint) bus fare to Corstophine or Balerno. On one memorable occasion, the whole team attempted to get into a tiny Fiat 126 but the larger members of the team were ultimately ejected and forced to take the bus. Fortunately, the car’s owner upgraded to a Volvo, meaning we could once again all fit into a single car. University teams’ reputation for unreliability was probably deserved to some extent, but in our defence it was often due to erratic public transport and it was not uncommon for players to endure a 5 mile+ walk back home after a late match in the wind, rain and dark – all in the name of chess !

Once selected, you needed somewhere to play... Home Venue for University 2 was usually an attic room in “The Pleasance” University Centre – causing some of the less fit members of other teams to grumble at the amount of stairs to climb each time they needed the loo. It was also not uncommon for choral practice or martial arts to be taking place in the room below, leading to some unusual noises and shouts from downstairs during matches, causing either smirking or annoyance depending on one’s sense of humour. Occasionally, due to room non-availability, we needed to find an alternative home venue. The undoubted highlight in this respect was when I somehow persuaded the opposition (Bank of Scotland, I believe) and League Secretary to accept a room in one of our team’s rented flat as the playing location for an end-of-season league decider. The only room big enough to play was the lounge-kitchen, and even then we had to borrow numerous chairs and tables. Board 6 were reduced to sitting on a fold-out beach chair and a bar stool. To make matters worse, the flat was shared with several other flatmates, who needed to be persuaded or bribed to stay out of their own home for the duration of the evening, in order that the match be undisturbed. At least one resident

was unable to accept this and insisted on making regular, noisy cups of tea. To add to the improbable drama, if we won the match we would be promoted. It was therefore with agony as I watched our Board 6 miss a mate in two to clinch the game and league (perhaps it was revenge for the improvised seating we had given him...) and then merrily fritter away his advantage to lose. However, some desperate draws and a couple of favourable adjournments ultimately gave us the match and promotion.

To keep on top of your game, you need to practise... Our favourite venue for “practising” (though I do not recall much – or indeed any - theory being discussed) was “The Arches” in South Clerk street – a compact but friendly pub that accepted the irritation of chess players playing noisy games of blitz, suicide chess and ‘swap chess’ in its window in return for the vast amount of drink that we were able to consume. With Scottish licensing hours later than those south of the border, we often played until 2am, when beer-stained pieces needed to be retrieved from the floor and packed away. Here, I also played my first game for money, when challenged aggressively to ‘play for a pound’ by a bloke waving a crumpled Scottish pound note. In view of possible retribution, I cravenly steered the match to an ‘honourable’ draw and no money (or blows) needed to be exchanged... Afterwards, the nearby Baker’s was already preparing that day’s food, so a flour-covered baker would sell us Scotch pies from the back of the shop as we straggled home.

My personal record in the Lothian League was 16.5 from 25 games, usually playing somewhere between 1400-1700 grade, but far outweighed by the fun and social aspects that playing for University 2 brought with it. This is the link to the current Chess Edinburgh site <http://www.chessedinburgh.co.uk/> and it just remains for me to wish all players in it, both past and present, all the very best...