

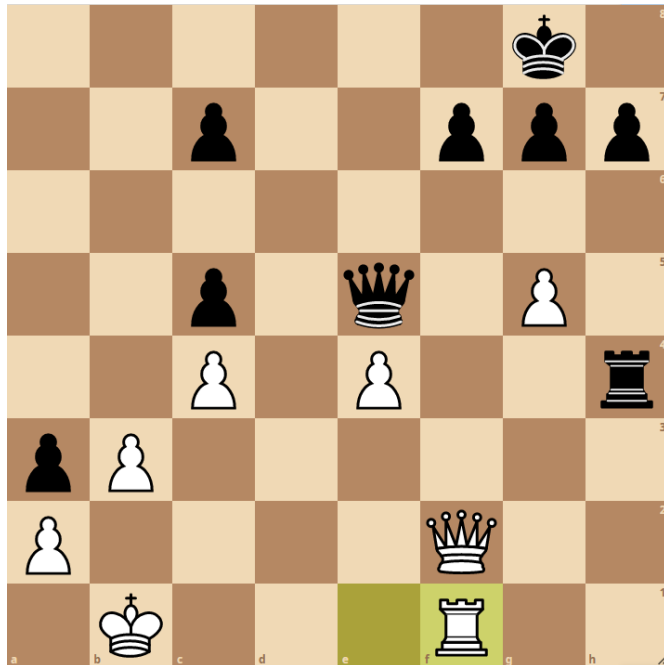
It was the cat's fault... by Patrick Moss

With the pandemic preventing over-the-board play, chess players have been getting their fix online. With the Oxfordshire Chess Association setting up the "Mike Duck Online Tournament" in late 2020, we have now had two tournaments, with Witney having two teams in the first one and three in the second. For me, these events provided the impetus I needed to get back into chess after a few years' absence, and it has been good to catch up – even if only virtually – with old acquaintances from the club. I hope that it has been a similarly useful outlet for other players across Oxfordshire. The matches seem to have been played in an excellent spirit.

So, what have we learned from these tournaments?

1. Just like working from home, **playing from home takes some adjustment**. It may be a lot easier to get up and make a cup of tea, but it is also easier for the cat to walk across the keyboard (well, that's my excuse for bad moves...). You can, however, talk to yourself, sing or yodel as much as you like during the game – all of which tend to be frowned upon in over-the-board chess.
2. **Social interaction is just as unpredictable as in real life**. Sometimes there is a friendly exchange of 'good game' or 'well played', other times all is mysteriously silent. This could well be due to 'settings' – I was halfway through the season before I discovered my lichess settings were not allowing me to receive challenges from other players...
3. It is **great for learning**. With the ability to watch matches live, and even comment on what is going on from the safety of one's armchair (the chat is not visible during the match to those playing), it is an opportunity to learn from others' successes and mistakes. I recommend playing through some of our team's games on lichess and challenging yourself to see what you would have done, without the benefit of the computer engine telling you the answers.
4. We are **missing Witney's strongest players**. With myriad strong players on our books, I would never have expected to find myself playing Board 1 for Witney 1. Most clubs have grades 180+ on their top boards, meaning we have faced quite a battle. I don't know the reason for this absence – perhaps online chess or the 45-minute timings appeal less to stronger players? Either way, I hope everyone is well, but please would any top graded players reading this, step forward for the next tournaments?!
5. A lot of **careful thought goes right out of the window** when those last desperate minutes of the game approach. I have both committed and benefited from some bad mistakes during time pressure. At such moments, there must be someone in Oxfordshire dancing with unexpected joy, whilst elsewhere another person is raging furiously in exactly equal measure!

Finally, I was comprehensively outplayed in the latter stages of a match. Black to move. Playing White, I have just played Rf1, threatening rook and the pawn on f7. But can you see what I missed here? (Image from lichess.org).



[Answer: Black played Rf4! I had only anticipated Qxe4+ but thought that after Kc1 I was still ok. I had overlooked that after Rf4 if QxR then Qb2#].