

DANIEL GORMALLY

Insanity, passion  
and addiction

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a year inside  
the chess world



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## INTRODUCTION

We're driving back from the South of France, having earlier left Juan les Pins, on the Cote d'Azur. Matthew Wilson is doing the driving.

The motorway ahead is burnished with the midday sun. Heat rising from the asphalt creates a shimmering heat-haze in the distance.

All of a sudden Matt points out a white car out of control just ahead of us. At first it seems to be too far ahead to mean anything, but then the car spins wildly towards the barrier dividing the motorway, before coming back into the road. The black car immediately in front of us has no way of avoiding a collision, and at this moment I was certain we'd crash too. It sounds like a cliché, but time seems to slow down and I feel somewhat disconnected, like this isn't really happening to me but to someone else. Like it's something in a movie.

By some miracle we stop just short of the accident site, completely unscathed. There's debris all around us. Normally at this point I'd be thinking of stopping the car and checking on the people in this horrible crash, but survival instinct has kicked in, so we drive on, shaken.

To be honest if we'd stopped at that moment we'd have done little to help and probably added to the possibility of something going further wrong. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel guilty that we didn't do anything. I'll never know what happened to the people in that crash.

In the immediate aftermath of this accident, which probably happens countless times every single day in roads around Europe and the world, several thoughts are playing through my mind.

Firstly how ridiculous it is that I'm scared of flying when driving is clearly far more dangerous. But most of all, despite the terrifying nature of this incident, is how it made me feel alive.

I can understand why people do extreme sports, why they put their life in danger that way. What it made me realise is what a cocoon I've been living in these last few years. How I've been in this safe little bubble where everything is too easy and too safe and I never get challenged.

So that was one of the points of writing this book. To document my struggle to improve my life, to challenge my fears. To at least try to overcome my fear of flying, which will surely have a knock-on effect and help

me to improve my rating and being able to fly will help me to play more, which in turn should help me to get better. It's a domino effect.

At the same time I want to lift the veil on what it is to be a chess professional. The tournaments; the personalities. The terrible lows; the amazing highs. (well more of the former :D)

Being a chess pro is always an adventure. And that's what life is to me, an adventure.

My thoughts on chess and life in general are, I hope, never boring. For the faint-hearted amongst you, it might be better if you stop reading now.

For everyone else, read on. It'll be a blast, I promise.

Wednesday, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 12.30 PM

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE NARROW PATH OF ADVERSITY

**D. Gormally (2502) — O. Foisor (2396) [B15]**

Villard de lans 2014 (6), 02.07.2014

Here's the deal. I live in Alnwick in England, a sleepy market town in Northumberland situated about 30 miles between Newcastle and Scotland. Picturesque but lacking the excitement of somewhere like London.

Ideally I'd live somewhere more central, in closer contact with other chess players, to make it easier to progress and have someone to study with and bounce off. This whole chess lifestyle is rather lonely otherwise. London these days however is hideously expensive, and like many who grew up in the capital, I'm rather forced out by the growing cost of accomodation there. So for the time being at least, Alnwick it is.

And as most tournaments are in the south, it costs me £100 everytime I want to take a train down to London. That hurts you over the long run.

So when Matthew Wilson suggested jumping in his camper van and driving to a tournament in the French alps, I jumped at the plan. Admittedly when he first proposed this project, Matt had envisaged a lot more people coming along, not just 'the gorm' sitting there droning on about how unfair life is.

#### BEAUTIFUL FRENCH GIRLS

This would illuminate the journey, which was not without its interesting moments. Matt decided to take the A-roads, to avoid the tolls, which would mean taking longer but also meant that we'd get to visit some French towns. Some of them were more interesting than others but in general it's all pretty much the same — sleepy towns, with generic restaurants serving steak and chips.

We stayed on one campsite where I watched Uruguay vs Italy, this being during the World Cup. At one point Luis Suarez took a bite out of one of the Italian defenders, which caused some consternation in the watching crowd.

We were being served by a stunning French girl, resplendent in her tight jockey shorts. Unfortunately at one moment I felt a terrifying pang of jealousy when she kissed the rather elderly owner.

Probably there was nothing to it, probably just a friendly kiss. But my old insecurity reared it's head and I felt rather sombre for the rest of evening, reflecting on this moment. How could an old codger like this attract girls, and I can't? What's wrong with me?

Why should such things matter to me? Partly because I'm insecure, and partly because I suffer from social anxiety, like a lot of chess players. I lack the tools to be demonstrative in social situations, perhaps because of a crippling shyness.

Chess players tend to be introverts rather than extroverts. There are some exceptions, like Kasparov (an obvious extrovert) but in general what is attractive about chess to us introverted-types is the ability to express yourself. To an introvert who keeps everything bottled up, such an expression of creative ability can be very attractive.

There were some other places we stopped at as we meandered down which were fairly dull. One place I'll always remember because it looked very attractive when we first approached, probably due to the numerous flags that adorned the entrance to the town.

Beware. A lot of flags doesn't make an interesting town. In fact it may have been a trick. It had just one restaurant, a fairly snooty one serving some pretty bland food. I had an argument with Matt when he complained that the place didn't have a vegan menu. A lover's tiff, if you will.

In any case we were soon headed to the Alps again. There was just one hitch, a rather large one, when we broke down on a fairly busy roundabout near Aix Les Bains.

I wouldn't recommend breaking down on a roundabout in France, as you can expect to be honked at rather a lot by some pretty irate French people. Even more, I wouldn't recommend putting a chess grandmaster, who had never driven before, into the driving seat while you try to push the van off the road.

It was probably when Matt shouted "stop!" that I realised he expected me to somehow stop the van from inevitably landing in a rather large ditch. I didn't, as I had no idea where the brake was. Fortunately we weren't half way up a mountain at this point, which we had been twenty minutes earlier,



as it could have turned ugly for me if we had been. Falling into a ditch is one thing, but plummeting two hundred feet in a rusty old van might be beyond even my powers of recovery.

For some reason Matt had been fooled into thinking I was a driver myself, as I had been going on rather casually during our journey about how I'd be driving with this person, or this person, and he assumed I meant I was doing some of this driving. So quite understandably, he expected me to be able to operate a handbrake. Easy mistake to make.

#### VILLARD DE LANS

The van was out of action for the foreseeable future so we were given a rental car. We eventually made the final stretch to Villard De Lans, which meant climbing up some rather formidable looking mountains. You get a breathtaking view of the surrounding valley, of Grenoble, then you leave this world behind and enter the Vecours national park, where you are sheltered from the towering peaks by a narrow gorge that cleaves its way through the surrounding countryside.

And after some driving you finally come to Villard, a typical Alps town flanked either side by some extremely picturesque mountains. A little jewel set into the landscape, beautiful, but not too busy, not over-run with tourists like Chamonix would be for example.

A scattering of restaurants, of bars. I was given my own apartment, but the television didn't seem to work, and even worse there was no internet in the flat. As if that wasn't bad enough, during the first night a storm blew out the lights.

Chess players simply can't handle not having internet, which may have explained why the tournament was not overflowing with titled players. We spend all our time online, whether it be Facebook or Twitter (with the very occasional visit to chess sites like Chessbase.)

The tournament started well enough for me with easy wins in the first two rounds.

However things went rather badly wrong in round three — despite trying rather hard I was unable to defeat a 1900 player with the Black pieces.

A few things felt wrong in that game. For one thing, it was a morning round, which I absolutely hate. Secondly, I was playing a junior, so he was probably under-rated. But still, 1900? You can't beat someone 600 points lower rated?

In France however people are more self-confident, they have less of a fear factor. Against 1900 English players I win everytime (or used to!) because they have too much respect, but that's not true of the French; it's a different culture. They have much more self-belief.

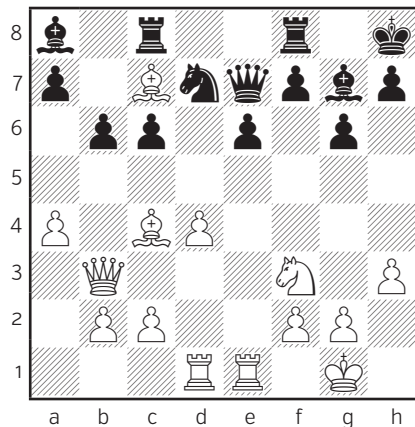
I was struggling by the time I faced experienced chess professional Ovidiu Foisor in round six.

Ovidiu has been a dedicated professional for many years, taking his family around to tournaments. His wife is a strong player, and his daughters also play.

I first encountered Ovidiu in a tournament in Capelle la Grande, in north-east France near Dunkirk.

That tournament is a bit depressing as they invite a scary amount of good players. You're on a bus and you're there with about 50 eastern European players, all who have a higher rating than you.

I prefer tournaments like Villard, where you can be a big fish in a little pond.



19. ♖g3 ♘f6 20. ♙a6!? ♖cd8 A typical situation for a tournament game. White has the advantage, but Black, whilst holding a passive position, is also quite solid. It's not easy to break it down.

One of the problems that amateur players have, I feel, is finding the right plan in middlegame situations. Here I had the same problem. I felt around this point that my chances were great, that I should break through in a few moves with accurate play, but how to strengthen my position?

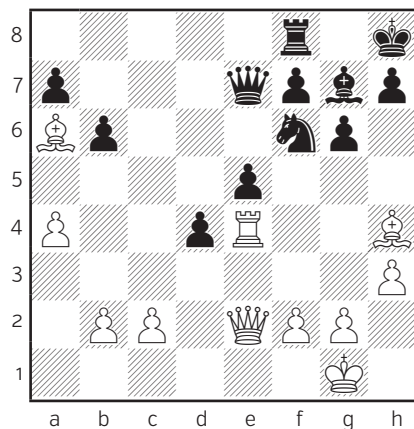
**21. ♕h4?** The wrong plan. I aim both of my bishops away from the center, and get punished for it. When I played my bishop to a6, I intended to follow up with 21.c4! but then I lost my nerve. What if my bishop was to become stranded on a6? Could he somehow trap it with his knight? It all seemed very risky. So what happens so often in these situations occurred again; you forego a plan you spent some time on, with a hastily put together variation. I played 21. ♕h4 without bothering to check the details. 21... ♖d7 was what worried me. But then comes 22.c5! bxc5 23. ♖a3! And White holds some important positional trumps.

**21...c5** The move I had been preventing for most of the game finally comes, freeing the black position. Sloppily I assumed that he couldn't play it here either, but I had miscalculated.

**22. ♖a3** An admission that something's gone wrong, I go for an optimistic pawn sac. [22.dxc5 had been my original intention. By now however I realised that 22... ♖xd1! (the compliant 22... ♖xc5? 23. ♖xd8 ♖xd8 24. ♖e5 was what I had "hoped for") 23. ♖xd1 ♖xc5 would completely equalise the game for Black. When you play too quickly, like I had done when I played 21. ♕h4, you can miss important details like the fact that he can interpose exchanging on d1 before recapturing on c5, but really this is very simple stuff.

**22... ♕xf3! 23. ♖xf3 ♖xd4 24. ♖xd4 cxd4 25. ♖e4** I'm playing on the fact that the knight on f6 is pinned for the moment, but really it's not quite enough.

**25...e5 26. ♖e1 26. ♖e2?**



26...♖c7! 27.♜xe5 ♘g4 and it's curtains. I thought about punting this anyway, as I wasn't quite sure if he'd find ...♖c7, but you can't rely on your opponent playing bad moves.

26...h6 27.♖c6 ♗d7 28.♖f3 ♘d5 29.♙g3 ♘b4 30.♙b5 ♖f5?! 31.♖b3 I continue in punting mode. He was getting short of time so I get tempted to trap his knight! [31.♖xf5 gxf5 32.♙xe5 and all I saw was that he had a big d-pawn. 32...♘xc2 33.♙xg7+ ♙xg7 34.♜c1 ♘b4 35.♜c4! ♜d8 36.♜xb4 d3 and White will have to give the bishop to stop the d-pawn, after which the game is going to be a draw. But I should have at least seen this variation. The fact that I didn't was again an indication of sloppy calculation.

31...a5! 31...♘xc2?? should be avoided — 32.♙d3!+-

32.c3 dxc3 33.bxc3 ♘d3 34.♙xd3 ♖xd3 35.♜d1 ♗e2 36.♜d7 ♙g8 37.♜d6 ♜c8 38.♜xg6 ♖c4 Rather boringly forcing the exchange of queens, even at the expense of a pawn, dulled all my remaining hopes of winning this game. After the game my opponent suggested that he could have played for the win here with 38...♖e1+ 39.♙h2 ♜xc3 but I was ready for this — 40.♖d5! and the game is completely up for grabs. 40...♜c5! 41.♖d8+ ♙h7 42.♜g4 ♜c1 43.♙h4 is all a bit of a mess, but at least I can still harbour hopes of winning the game.

39.♜xb6 ♖xb3 40.♜xb3 ♜c4 41.♜b5 ♜xa4 42.♙xe5 ♙xe5 43.♜xe5 ♜c4 44.♜xa5 ♜xc3 Despite Black's fractured pawn structure this ending is a draw. I pushed for many more moves, but never came close to pushing him over the edge.

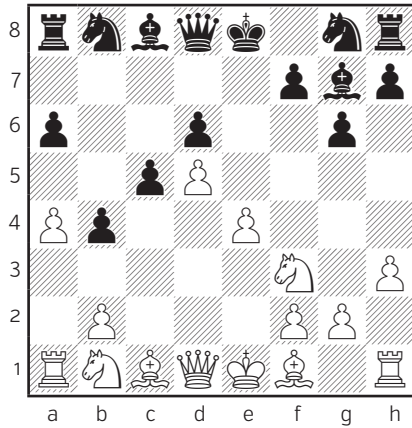
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#### D. Gormally (2502) — S. Foisor (2260) [A43]

Villard de lans 2014

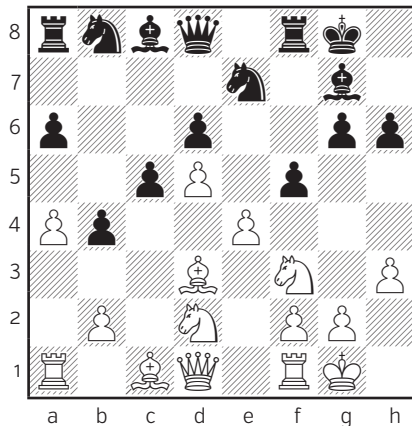
Despite this setback I still had hopes of a strong finish. In round eight I was to face the daughter of Ovidiu, Sabrina Foisor.

1.d4 e6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 d6 4.♘c3 g6 5.♘f3 exd5 6.cxd5 ♙g7 7.e4 a6 8.h3 b5 9.a4 b4 10.♘b1



10...  $\text{Nf6}$  10...  $\text{Nf6}$ ! seemed to make more sense. 11.  $\text{Bd3}$   $\text{c4}$ !? 12.  $\text{Bxc4}$   $\text{Nxe4}$  13.  $\text{O-O}$   $\text{O-O}$  14.  $\text{Ke1}$   $\text{Nc5}$  15.  $\text{Kxb4}$   $\text{a5}$  16.  $\text{Ka3}$   $\text{Nba6}$  with active play for the pawn. That's the drawback of playing  $\text{a4}$  so early on in the Benoni — you create a potential source of counterplay for Black on the queenside.

11.  $\text{Bd3}$   $\text{O-O}$  12.  $\text{O-O}$   $\text{h6}$  13.  $\text{Nbd2}$   $\text{f5}$ ?



This is aggressive but probably only serves to weaken the kingside in the long-run.

14.  $\text{Nc4}$   $\text{fxe4}$  15.  $\text{Bxe4}$   $\text{Nd7}$ !?

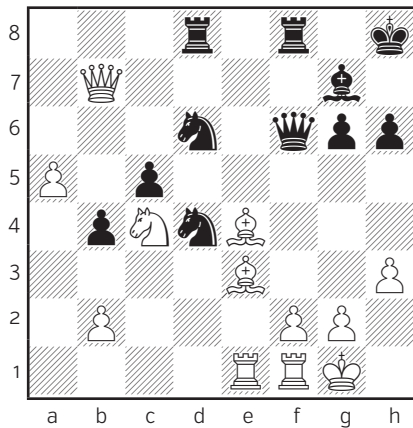
Of course this gives a pawn, but the alternatives weren't great either. To her credit she was aware of the problems in the position so was trying to defend actively. 15...  $\text{Bf5}$  16.  $\text{Ke1}$  just looks clearly better for White. I'm already eyeing up the weakened  $\text{e6}$  square.

16. ♖xd6 ♘f6 17. ♘xc8 ♖xc8 18. ♙d3! using a tactical trick to retain my extra pawn.

18... ♖d6 hardly what she intended. 18...c4 runs into a neat trick — 19. d6! cxd3 20. dxe7 ♖xe7 21. ♖xd3±; 18... ♘fxd5 19. ♙xa6 is close to winning.

19. ♖e2 a5 20. ♘e5 ♘fxd5 21. ♘c4 ♖f6? Black really doesn't get enough play for the pawn after this, which given I hold the advantage of the two bishops, isn't very surprising.

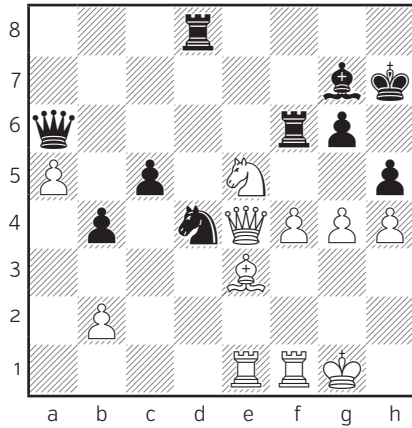
22. ♘xa5 ♙h8 23. ♘c4 ♖ce8 24. ♖e4 ♘c7 25. ♙e3 ♘f5 26. ♖b7 ♘e6 27. a5 ♖d8 28. ♙e4 ♘ed4 29. ♖ae1 ♘d6



30. ♖d5? Having played well until this point, I produce a very sloppy move when the win was just over the horizon. Unfortunately I was very unprofessional here. I was aware that France vs Germany, a potential World Cup quarter-final cracker, was just about to start and so I was playing too fast, trying to get the game over with so I could get down the pub. Rather justly I was punished for underestimating my opponent. 30. ♘xd6 ♖xd6 31. ♖b6 should be easily good enough for the win.

30... ♘xe4 31. ♖xe4 ♖a6! She plays this phase of the game very well. Although objectively Black is still worse here, she's at least gained the opportunity to make active moves and create threats. I now started to become very annoyed with myself for not taking more care, and nearly lost the plot completely.

32. ♘e5 ♙h7 33. f4 ♖f6! 34. h4 rather wild, but I didn't see anything else. 34...h5 35. g4!



I felt extremely uncomfortable about weakening my king like this, but I didn't see anything else. Just to think what was running through my mind — a few moves ago I had a very comfortable edge with the two bishops and an extra pawn; now I have to try punting wild moves like g4 to win the game. At least I was focused on the game again now — having got distracted, I would have to win it all over again...

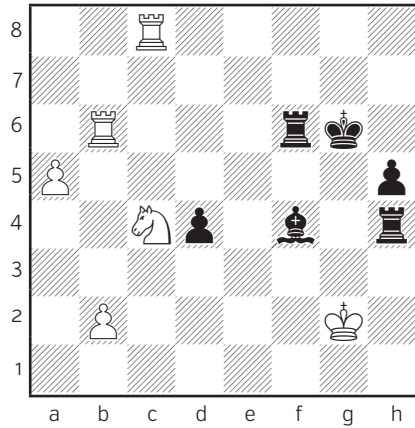
**35...** ♔a8 I didn't see this coming at all. 35...hxg4! Looked much more testing. 36.h5 ♘f3+ 37.♖xf3 gxf3 38.♙f2! leads to a promising attack for White, but ♙f2 is quite a cool move and I'm far from convinced I would have found this over the board during the game...

**36.** ♔xa8?! 36.♙xd4! ♕xe4 37.♖xe4 cxd4 38.g5 ♖a6 39.♖a1 with a plus in the endgame, although it's far from over. 39...b3!

**36...** ♖xa8 37.gxh5 gxh5 38.♙xd4 cxd4 39.♘c4 b3! excellent play, she doesn't give me the chance to stabilise the knight.

**40.** ♖e7 ♙h8 41.♖c7 ♙h6 42.f5 ♖g8+ 42...d3! worried me a great deal. The important thing is not to allow White a chance to consolidate. 43.♗d7! ♖g8+ 44.♙h2 ♖c8 45.♘e5! d2 46.♘g6+ wins for White, but calculating all these moves over the board was a real headache.

**43.** ♙h1 ♖g4 44.♖f3 ♙f4 45.♖c8+ ♙h7 46.♖xb3 ♖f7 47.f6 ♖xf6 48.♖b7+ ♙g6 49.♖b6! ♖xh4+ 50.♙g2



**50...♖g4+?** Forcing the White king into a better position, this is possibly the decisive mistake. **50...♗xb6!** **51.axb6 ♖f5** **52.b7 ♗h2+** **53.♖g1 ♕g3** **54.b8♗ ♕xb8** **55.♗xb8 ♖c2** and given the disparate nature of White's remaining forces, and the dangerous remaining passed pawns that Black has, a draw must be the most likely outcome.

**51.♖f3!** **♕d6+** **52.♖e2 ♗g2+** **53.♖d3 ♗g3+** **54.♖c2?** I must have hallucinated here. I'm sure I saw the correct move, **54.♖e4 ♗g4+** **55.♖d5 ♗g5+** but perhaps missed that here I could simply take the pawn **56.♖xd4+**

**54...d3+** **55.♖c3 ♕f4** **56.♗g8+ ♖f5** **57.♗b5+ ♖e4** **58.♗e8+ ♖f3** **59.♗xh5 d2** **60.♗d5** Fortunately this is still good for White. The Black d-pawn is fairly easily controlled whilst the passed a and b pawns should prove decisive.

**60...♗c6** **61.b3 ♗g1** **62.♗ed8 ♖c1+** **63.♖b4 ♖e2** **64.♗xd2+** Only the length of the game can explain why I didn't play **64.♗xd2!** Although there was nothing wrong with what I played — White is winning by force.

**64...♕xd2+** **65.♗xd2+ ♖f3** **66.♗e5+ ♖e3** **67.♗xc6 ♖xd2** **68.♖b5 ♖c3** **69.b4 ♗h1** **70.a6 ♗h5+** **71.♖b6 ♖c4** **72.a7 ♗h8** **73.b5 ♗g8** **74.♖a6 ♖c5** **75.♗b8 ♗g6+** **76.♖a5 ♗g1** **77.♗a6+ 1-0**

I might have been a bit patronising telling her after the game that she played well, but I felt the standard of the game had been quite high. It felt like a genuine fight. That's the interesting thing about chess, ratings aren't set in stone.

You can play 2400 players who put up very little resistance, then the next day you can play a 2200 player and have the fight of your life.

In a sense this reminded me of some of my better games of the past — I think lately I had pigeon-holed myself a theoretical player who needs to land a big shot early in the game.



But this was being hard on myself and in fact when playing through some of my older games recently, I was struck by how often I had ground people down in endings, coming up with clever ideas to break their resistance. Truth be told I'm really just a grinder.

After the game I trudged to the local bar only to discover France had already lost to Germany, who everyone knows by now were the eventual winners of the whole competition. Given the Germans humiliated Brazil 7-1 in the semi-finals, a narrow loss for France was hardly a terrible result.

I had managed to see one of France's previous matches against Nigeria, which was a slightly surreal experience.

Surreal because watching France play football in France is completely different to what you would expect to find watching England playing football in England.

In an English bar during a world cup match if England are playing, the atmosphere would be completely humming. The bar would literally shake in fevered anticipation if England even got close to the opposition goal; but in France they are much more laid-back, and if they score, then all you hear is a smattering of polite applause and a more gentle and refined sense of appreciation.

In the last round I was paired with the top seed, Fabien Libiswezki.

A lovely bloke, Fabien. Plays everywhere. When he's not playing he's chatting up French girls on facebook. He asked me about playing in the British league, as like most chess pros he's keen to play everywhere and experience different countries and cultures. However I explained to him that it wasn't easy to get into playing the 4ncl, so the delights of the Holiday Inn hotel at Birmingham Airport were closed to him for the time being.

I ran into Fabien in the local inn where I had gone to watch the football. A typical Alpine wooden chalet, you could go outside to sip a pint of Erdinger on the balcony and watch the sunset. Staffed by a rather grumpy looking barman who's communication seemed limited to the occasional monosyllabic grunt, I also found Fabien at the bar and he offered me a draw as this would ensure him outright first in the tournament.

I declined, even though I had the Black pieces and he comfortably out-rated me. However this draw offer had a clever psychological effect of undermining my confidence, and I quickly reverted to type, offering him a wet draw just a few moves into the game.

I excused this cowardly decision to myself (and anyone who would care to listen) by explaining how I was actually skint at the time, and I wanted to lock in a prize. Losing would take me to that awful place that every

professional chess player wants to avoid, going away from a tournament that you have put a lot of effort into without even a shekel to show for it.

That's the peril of being a chess player. The money isn't great, and you are often confronted by these situations where the temptation to take the easy way out can be overwhelming.

I often wonder if I'd be better off playing under these "Sofia rules" where I'd be forced to fight. The reality is that I struggle to find that fighting spirit in myself — the ability to just say what the heck, and go into the game without any fear of losing.

#### HOLIDAY EXTENDED

Once the tournament had finished, thoughts turned to the van and whether it had been fixed yet. It hadn't. But the insurance company were kind enough to cover our hotel until it was, and we were free to go anywhere in France we liked.

I wanted to go to Mont Blanc but given my fear of heights perhaps this wasn't the best idea. Instead we went to Juan Les Pins, near Cannes.

Walking along the seafront in the french riviera I thought perhaps it's not that bad being a chess pro after all. I could have been stuck in a depressing office in Slough instead of soaking in the sun in this genteel paradise watching some bootylicious bodies walk by in their bikinis.

There's a prodigious amount of bars and restaurants arrayed along the sea-front. I stepped into one and enquired if there was a table. I was confronted by a somewhat pretentious-looking waiter, donning a fashionable set of dark glasses despite this being the indoor section. He told me they were completely busy, despite the fact that there seemed to be plenty of empty tables.

Reserved on a weekday afternoon? Admittedly he was probably mindful of the fact that the sight of a grossly overweight Grandmaster slobbering down his food in the middle of the afternoon, with his builder's bum poking out from beneath the deckchair, might put off the kind of instagram beautiful clientele that could otherwise be expected to frequent the place.

Most of the restaurants were more welcoming. In some of them you could even eat al-fresco on the beach. Some of the waiters were a bit camp, which made me wonder if Cannes was a hotbed of gay activity. Which suited me and Matt quite well, as we seemed to be progressing down that path in any case.

All the waiters had the same standard line to break the ice, “where are you from?” One night we dined on the beach, facing out into the bay. The waiter serving our table, resplendent in his tight denim shorts, was so camp he wouldn’t have been out of place in the next series of Glee.

Staring out into the bay, with the glistening sea and the fading sun in the distance creating a perfect panorama, I wondered if this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

## BRITTANY BUT NOT THE BRITISH

**T. Dekker (1940) — D. Gormally (2502) [E20]**

Plancoet op 11th Plancoet (3.2), 29.07.2014

Every summer for the last twenty odd years has followed the usual pattern. In late-July I usually play in the British Chess Championships which are often held at a seaside resort, like Torquay or Scarborough. Hardly Cannes, more like Cannes-lite, with fish and chips and beer-swilling pit-bull owners with recently lapsed Absos.

These events don’t so much resemble serious chess tournaments as glorified holiday camps, where you meet up with your old friends and play a bit of pitch-and-putt on the seafront. All the time increasing your ever-increasing waistline with some serious drinking sessions after the games, while desperately trying to avoid getting into fights with the Neanderthal-looking locals. (Quite what Kasparov would make of this lack of professionalism, with his dismissive line about “chess tourists”, I shudder to think.) Perhaps this leisurely approach might explain why I’ve never been British Champion. I lack the single-mindedness of players who have dominated the British over the years, like Jonathan Rowson or David Howell.

While those players are a cut above me in terms of class, it’s not like they’ve won every year. Often the British has been won by a player not expected to beforehand; I think deep down that I’m probably stronger than a lot of these “single winners” but as of yet I’m still to translate this belief into something more concrete.

Players like David, and Gawain Jones, who have dominated the British in recent years also have something I seem to lack — they have this self-belief.