SEAGAARD CHESSREVIEWS
Interviews

Last name: Golubev
First name: Mikhail
Born: 30-05-1970
Title: International Grandmaster
Nationality: Ukraine
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Interview:
This interview was made because the author wrote two well received books, but also because he was very active at the Internet since 1998. The "interview" you read here is done via e-mail: Seagaard ChessReviews mailed the author the questions and the answers given is the words by the author himself.
Soren Sogaard, 16/3 2003

Q First, thanks for taking your time answering these questions. First I am curious about what you are doing for a living? Are you a professional chess-player?
A I was only a professional chess-player for several years in the mid-1990s. But what I am doing for a living now is still related to the above mentioned brain game. In the past, I tried to do different things in life, now I'm trying to do different things in chess. The trend is nice.

Q I always wondered if it is really possible to live as a professional chess-player if you are not in the top-20 in the world.
A At the level of an average GM (let's say ELO 2500) everything depends on the support you get at regional level. If you are such a player and live, for example, in the Ukraine, which is a country with more than 40 GM's and almost no professional competitions, your basic choice is to move to another country - or otherwise you have to find something else to do. There is a huge difference between being, say for instance, a Dutch or a Russian player even if your ELO is the same. It is not as unfair as it looks: International chess doesn't need thousands of professional players. It is up to the country or region to decide if they will invest money to support their local chess heroes. And it is up to the player to move somewhere else (if he has the possibility) or to stay in his home country.
Basically, I prefer to be "pro-Western on the East" rather than to be "pro-Eastern on the West". This is not a motto, but a choice for at least a long period of my life. Once I told a good friend, who moved to a country which is much richer than the Ukraine, that after his move the average level [of civilisation] was decreased in both the Ukraine and his new country. And I was even forgiven for that! Speaking more seriously, I am happy that my chess activity is not limited to just playing.

Q I know you have written at least two books, can you tell the reader a little more about your books and how you work on them?
A Yes, I have written two books: "Easy Guide to the Dragon" (Published by Everyman/Gambit in 1999), and "The Sicilian Sozin" (Published by Gambit in 2001). These are books on openings that I have played for 20 years. How I work... Usually I work hard, so if I also dislike doing something, I am unable to work at all. But when you like what you do then, obviously, you are not too tired too much.

Q I observed that some authors write 4-5 chess books every year. Do you think it is possible to write "good" chess books if you have to write that many every year?

A The way I work on opening books - absolutely not. But I would be the last to say that anyone else can't write five good books in a year. By the way, I would be happy to know what do you exactly mean by "good books"? My own opinion is that books are not something that should be standardised (like yoghurt in the supermarket). I think that if a book can make at least one person happy, even if it is only the author, it can already be called a good book.
If this sounds silly, I will give you an example. In 1994, I played in a tournament with a young Morozevich. He told me that he wrote "a book" on the Tschigorin Defence, but only for himself (later, he quickly reached 2700, not without the participation of Tschigorin.) What do you think, could it be a good book he wrote? And now the opposite example. I never had too high an opinion of Nimzowitsch's book "My System", but since people say it is good, I thought I am just stupid. I bought it as a gift for my friend, a Western chess amateur who wanted to improve his play. The book was in his native language with a perfect cover. He disliked the book completely, and never finished reading it although it is now six or seven years ago. So for him this book was bad. It is all subjective. Objectively, the best book is what is good for a lot of people. Then you could say that the best book certainly is about the alphabet and if you are speaking about chess, the chess rules. Maybe I am able to make five in a year?
After expressing my radical views, I will add that I consider the situation with chess books (in English) as very good. There are great publishers, such as Gambit, with whom I had the luck to co-operate and great reviewers such as Seagaard ChessReviews - a site I visit often. Chess books in Russian are less encouraging - in the last 3-4 years I only bought one, which was Kramnik's games collection.

Q Are you writing any new books or maybe involved in chess software?
A No, I am not writing a book at the moment. As far as I remember I have never worked on chess software on a professional basis ;-) This may be one of the few jobs that I haven't had in the chess world. The most normal job I had in my life was in 1987-88, when I worked in the Odessa chess club as arbiter of correspondence chess tournaments. I then ruled at least two hundred tournaments of low categories.

Q Let's talk a little about the Internet. I know that you have been on the Internet since 1998 when you launched the website "Ukrainian Chess Online". Can you tell the reader a little more about the site and your plans for the future?
A My plan is to develop the site into something more sensible ;-) At the moment the site looks like a personal project - even more than it was a few years ago when I tried to create something like an "All-Ukrainian chess portal". I write a lot for others, and I simply need a place where nobody will be able to change the headers for my articles (even, or especially, if the headers are bad). So thanks to my site, I hope to live longer. Of course, I am happy to publish materials written by others and I can edit these materials a bit. In the future I maybe will try to create a permanent team to work on a serious content project (which means: The site will be updated daily).

Q I noticed that you also worked for Kasparov.com and the electronic chess newsletter ChessToday. I read that Kasparov Chess was/are in trouble – are you still working for this website?
A How can I work there if the site doesn't exist anymore ;-) KC was launched shortly after the Kasparov vs. the World Internet game, one of the most successful Kasparov events. I worked for KC in 2000 as regional editor and reported on Ukrainian chess news, etc. I delivered many different kinds of articles. Some were successful. I still consider a long interview with GM Eingorn as a very good attempt. Before the interview, unpleasant things took place - Eingorn was unfairly disallowed from participating in the FIDE World Championship. He was then awarded the FIDE President's nomination for the next year, maybe also because this KC interview made the whole thing public?

Apart from writing, during my work for KC I also organised dozens of matches of Odessa School teams against teams from other countries within the KC's Internet World School Championship. There were 18 schools from Odessa participating and we had no technical problems, because we played from an Internet Cafe. Only once did the provider go down, and we moved to another Cafe in about 20 minutes, and continued the match after a short pause. The children were happy to play, and it still makes me sad that KC was unable to organise the second school's championship. All KC's regional editors were dismissed at the end of 2000.
I certainly worked just for KC and not for Kasparov himself, and tried to do my best. Nevertheless, it is unpleasant for me that, being now involved in chess journalism even more than in the past (I act as a chess observer of the leading Ukrainian sport newspaper), I am simply forced to criticise Kasparov more often than I would prefer. His Wall Street Journal article, where Kasparov basically proposed military attack against Baghdad, Tehran, Damascus, Riyad was an absolute shock for me. Perhaps, in the eyes of some in the USA, the man represents both Russian-speaking people and chess-players. I believe that such articles could additionally encourage some to enter an unjustified war with consequences that we all can, or rather cannot imagine... Possibly, the Kasparov article was not mentioned in the main chess media before it was cited in the German magazine Rochade Europa, issue 2/2003.
Still, working for KC was an interesting experience, and there were great ideas. Who knows if the site would still be around? Maybe Israeli schoolboys would now play online vs. Saudi Arabian, and after some more years we would finally have a better world?

Q What about Chess Today? Are you still working for this daily magazine, and do you think it has a future?
A Yes, I have been working for Chess Today (CT - http://www.chesstoday.net/) since Autumn 2001. CT had a past, it has a present and it of course will have a future. The newsletter is not free, but at the Yahoo Groups site you can see that there now are more than 600 subscribers. CT has already published more than 850 issues. The chief editor, founder and owner of the newsletter is GM Alexander Baburin, who now lives in Ireland.
The system is as follows – every day one of the regular writers (GM Baburin, GM Sherbakov, IM Barsky, IM Notkin, IM Vlassov or myself) prepares an issue which consists of chess news (tournament news being, basically, the main subject) and, also necessarily, a commented game (the latter is our main speciality). In the majority of the issues there are also quiz positions. Subscribers receive all mentioned content in a PDF file, and commented games + quiz is also included in CBV and PGN files (Therefore, every Chess Today issue is an email message with three attached files: PDF, CBV, PGN).
Apart from the basic materials, CT very often provides additional articles: special tournament reports, additional CBV games, guest articles, book reviews, interviews, etc. CT is trying to cover all important internet chess news. Readers often send questions, and Alexander publishes their letters and his answers. Readers' games can be commented. Having so many Russian-speaking guys, it is vital for Chess Today that the editors are native English-speaking chess-players. Ralph Marconi and Graham Brown work on CT issues much more often than others, since there are six writers and only two editors.
Interestingly, many members of the CT team rarely see or even have never seen each other in real life. For example Alex Baburin and I have met each other only twice: in Switzerland in 1993 and in Germany in 1999. Nevertheless, we all co-operate well, it is like a virtual family. I hope that the family can only "expand" – in fact, I joined the Chess Today team after almost one year of its existence, in the beginning there were three writers: Baburin, Sherbakov and Barsky. So, I had enough time to consider (as a reader) the Chess Today project and its possible future.
Of course, the hardest thing on the Internet is to get people to pay for content, because at some point there were many great free content sites. KC was the first example, and the impression was that it would exist forever. But with the current development of the Internet, I think the climate is

rather appropriate for the CT concept. People can see that the publication is independent (which allows us to be if not absolutely objective, then at least honest), and that we simply work a lot to provide systematised, exclusive and professional daily coverage of the chess life. The quality of CT is already quite good, we are getting closer to the monthly magazines in this sense, and we still deliver issues daily.

Q Ponomariov has a page at the “Ukrainian Chess Online”. Do you think that it is a normal development that his results in the last couple of month weren’t the best? After all he is still a very young player.

A First a few words about "Ruslan Ponomariov’s Page". Being a part of my web site, it was launched in 1998. It was an amateurish project in the beginning, I just wanted to help a young player whom I knew since 1995. I never imagined that in 3-4 years it would become the site of the FIDE World Champion! Ponomariov’s Page is certainly one of my most productive ideas. For some years it helped organisers to get in contact with Ruslan and invite him to play in their tournaments. Ruslan contributed actively, and commented many of his best games for the web page. When the Korchnoi-Ponomariov match took place in Donetsk in January-2001, chess-sector.odessa.ua was the main match site and it probably was the first time I had more than 1000 visitors per day.

Recent developments, and especially Ruslan’s play in Linares, is clearly not something that makes me happy... Shortly after Ruslan won the FIDE World Championship, a serious conflict in his team took place - the sponsors (who helped Ruslan for two-three years) versus the coach (in whose family Ruslan lived for eight years). I couldn’t follow everything that happened because there is some 600 km between Odessa where I live, and the Donetsk Region where Ruslan lives. Ruslan stayed with the coach and relations with the sponsors were broken.

Then came Prague, where Ruslan was not present, then Junior’s 30.000 $ computer match offer to Ruslan (which he declined) followed by the 500.000 $ offer to Kasparov supported by FIDE (despite earlier Ilymzhinov’s promise to organise the match between a computer and the FIDE Champion).

Ruslan invited me to act as his trainer at the Russia vs. The World match. His main coach, Mikhail Ponomariov was also there and all interested parties were present. The conflict between the Ponomariovs and FIDE was already in the air. It was a chance to organise a discussion between Seirawan and Ruslan at the closing banquette, but incredible things happened - Ruslan was not invited! In the hotel Metropol we saw Viktor Lvovich Korchnoi who went to the banquette. Korchnoi almost couldn’t believe us when we told him that the organisers didn’t invite Ruslan. Korchnoi showed Ruslan what the ticket to the Kremlin banquette looks like. (Now I understand that what happened was just normal for FIDE. People, who work there, are acting as Russian businessman in the worst meaning of the term.)

Ruslan’s coach, Mikhail Nikitovich, suddenly died a few weeks after the Russia vs. the World event. After such a blow, Ruslan remained almost alone - he has had no real support even in the Ukraine during the last months. Using Ruslan’s recent words, the Ukrainian Federation was happy to resolve problems with FIDE "by any prize". Only a few people first of all GM Komarov, have really helped Ruslan recently. I didn’t see Ruslan after Moscow, despite of course the fact that we spoke several times by phone.

I must say, I am deeply worried about everything that has happened in the chess world recently. I can understand that Ruslan is simply not able to play normally. FIDE wants Kasparov and no one else to be world champion, here I agree with what Kramnik said. And I don’t see what can stop them. I don’t expect to see a normal match in Buenos-Aires or elsewhere. I hope Ruslan can get his prize money and also survive psychologically. He is potentially able to beat Kasparov, but I start to think that the result is not the most important issue here.

I can also add that I really liked Seirawan’s initial unity plan, but the way things developed convinced me that having Ilymzhniov as President, and Kasparov as world number one, no real unity is achievable. Sooner or later Kasparov will leave the chess scene. Then others will easily

agree on a world championship, and on the creation of a democratic grandmaster's organisation (which we of course badly need).

Q What are your general opinions about Chess on the Net? Is it better now than a few years ago? And what about playing chess on the net?
A My general opinion about Chess on the Net is that we should make efforts to preserve some chess outside the Net. Still, despite some symptoms, I am not an internet maniac and the internet for me is just a good way to work with information. And to contact colleagues - there are several hundred correspondents, as my address book suggests. I rarely play online.
In 2000, I played two games in the KC's Human vs. Machine online event and lost both games against Junior and Fritz. But it happened after one of the longest breaks in my serious playing career. Possibly, if there will be interesting tournaments from a professional viewpoint (Odessa Internet Championship?), then I will participate again.

Q At the end can you tell us about your best results, and maybe a little about your plans for the future?
A I have shared first place in open tournaments quite a few times. The most significant for me were the Ukrainian Open Championship-1996, and The Swiss Open Championship-1999, in both I was first by Buchholz. I have been sole winner in three international tournaments, the first was the Karvina Open 1992 (I started there with 7/7) and in 2002 I won, surprisingly, a small tournament in Bucharest and also the Open in Bethune (France).
In 2000/01 I won all five games that I played for a team Stuttgarter Schachfreunde, including wins against GMs Krasenkow (2700 then) and Schmaltz. It helped my team and me to enter The 1st Bundesliga and for two years I faced strong opponents. I can be proud, e.g. with the draw against Shirov and the wins against Khenkin and Piket, but the majority of them crushed me (e.g. Grischuk, Kasimdzhanov, Kir. Georgiev in the Bundesliga and Svidler in German Cup). Still, it is not too catastrophic a result for the correspondent of the Ukrainian sport newspaper.
My plan is to reach ELO 2570 that I once had in 1995 - maybe inflation of ratings will help? To be serious, in 1996 I had the chance to play a training match against Ponomariov, participate in a training session with Podgaets and Karpov and to play a tournament game against Korchnoi. This all helped me, as I believe, to become a more useful citizen. Now I am not always able to remember my current ELO, and I am much happier.

Q Thanks for taking the time to answer our questions, hope to see you in Denmark playing in a tournament.

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