

COVER STORY

weekender.



MAKING THEIR MOVE: Bob Koelle, Arthur Koelle, Kevin Perrin and Patrick Cook in the Ballarat Chess Club meeting room at the Ballarat Library.
Photo: Caleb Cluff

THE OTHER WORLD GAME

As the Ballarat Chess Club celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Begonia Open, the impending visit of a grandmaster is igniting feelings of excitement and renewed readiness for competition, writes Caleb Cluff.

“Could we look into the head of a Chess player, we should see there a whole world of feelings, images, ideas, emotion and passion.” – Alfred Binet.

Imagine a sport that’s played in virtually every country on earth. A game which, in order to achieve any success, requires supreme dedication from childhood. That teaches not only strategy, but such exquisite planning that politicians, professors, soldiers and doctors refer to it as a prerequisite for forming a tactical and critical mind. That requires such intense concentration and application the top level players often die of heart attacks at a young age. That stood for years as a potent metaphor for the struggle between Communism and Capitalism.

It’s chess. And for many years Ballarat has stood as bulwark of world-class chess play. The Ballarat Chess Club was first formed in

1856, re-formed in 1865 and has existed with varying degrees of enthusiasm ever since. Famous names such as Nathan Spielvogel, Arthur Teters, Ernest Greenhalgh and Andy Miitel stand out in a history of local players who have taken on some of the best chess minds in Australia and the world and, if not always defeating them, then holding them to some very honorable draws.

Now they are meeting a grandmaster: Nigel Short, the British chess genius.

The current president of the club is Patrick Cook, who joined as an eighteen-year-old in 1976. He began playing chess at 11, he says, taught by a Croatian schoolmate. He’s a precisely-spoken man, hugely knowledgeable about both the local and international game. He says the history of chess in Ballarat should be more widely known, as it mirrors the changes in the city’s cultural life, with



ARCHIVIST: Ballarat owes its accurate chess records to Nathan Spielvogel, who became secretary in 1893.

spikes in interest in the game locally driven by the migration of people from Europe post-World War II as well as having a

legendary inter-town rivalry with Geelong in the 1920s.

But by the 1960s, he says, the club had become a bit set in its ways. It had been in the same rooms at the Ballarat Mechanics Institute for most of its life, and the departure for Melbourne of its champion player Arthur Teters – a Baltic migrant who “was the epitome of the ‘Old World’ gentleman... he still clicked his heels and bobbed the head on introduction,” according to another member, saw the game languish.

A enthusiastic player named Andy Miitel decided to rejuvenate the Ballarat competition by introducing a new championship, a tournament that could invite stronger, out-of-town players. The first tournament in 1967 was restricted to country players, but it was soon discovered the fear of inviting the “Melbournites” was unfounded. The “Begonia Open” was held on the long weekend of the Begonia Festival because of the time need to conduct the tournament and the fact that other tournaments were held on similar long weekends already, in Shepparton and Canberra.

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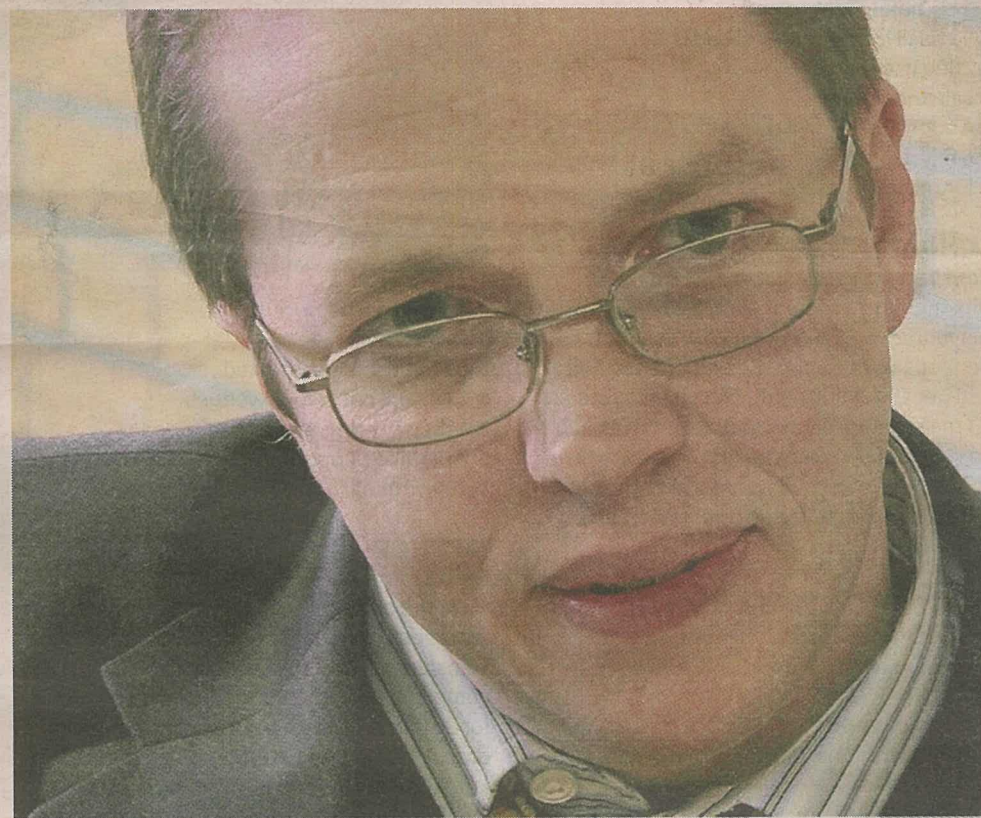
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RIVALRY: A chess match at the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute in 1925 between Geelong and Ballarat. Photo: State Library of Victoria.

INAUGURAL BEGONIA CUP: Won by Ernest Greenhalgh in 1967, the cup has been donated back to the Ballarat Chess Club. Photo: Ballarat Chess Club.

VISITING GRANDMASTER: Nigel Short MBE will be playing in this year's Begonia Open.



Over its 50 years the Begonia Tournament has been held in the George Hotel, Trades Hall, School of Mines, Mechanics' Institute and various schools. Since 1973 the competition has been an 'Open Chess' tournament, with all entrants playing each other, allowing the weaker players to attempt taking on the strong, whether they are local champions like Kevin Perrin and Arthur Koelle, or international players of the stature of Pal Benko and Tony Miles, both former chess grandmasters.

There's a strong tradition of players returning to the tournament over many years. Patrick Cook says Doug Hamilton, the triple Australian champion, will be attending this year's competition.

"He played in 1969 and was joint-winner: he's played quite a few times; I've played him myself a few years ago and got a draw, which I was thrilled by. He's represented Australia in international chess Olympiads and played against some of the best in the world."

But the biggest name in this year's Bendigo Open is Nigel Short. The fifty-year-old has been to the Open before, but 2016

“The game of chess is a battle of ideas. No less.”

Grandmaster Yasser Seirawan

will be his first time competing. A child prodigy, Short has won three British Chess Championships, as well as being a candidate for the World Championship. He's won tournaments across the world, from Europe to Africa to Oceania, and has played the great Russian masters Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov.

Short will be coming to the Ballarat Chess Club in the Ballarat Library rooms next Thursday evening, giving a simultaneous exhibition match against all the members of the club. Patrick Cook says he is easily the strongest player ever to come to the city.

"He was, at his peak, the number two chess player in the world. In the 1993 World Championship match against Kasparov, most people gave him no chance whatsoever. But it was a very exciting match; in a

couple of games he threw every move at Kasparov. He's a great tactical player, he'll sacrifice pieces to get a quick, direct attack on the king and go for checkmate."

Confirming that chess truly is a world game, the current World Champion is Norwegian; the world number two is Russian; the previous world champion was from India. Cook says the internet has been a great boost to the popularity of the game, allowing people to play whenever and whomever they like. Still, he regards it as much a physical encounter as mental.

"I don't think there's any substitute for playing face-to-face. It can be very stressful. Even though it's played in silence, it's very much a battle between two people. The great players tend to die of heart attacks."

The Begonia Open will commence at Ballarat Clarendon College on the 12th March and go through to March 14th. A book on its history will be available from the Ballarat Chess Club.