

Somerset drew 8-8 with Cornwall in the Division 1 WECU County Championship match at Exminster, on Saturday 30th November. After an underdog victory of almost David and Goliath proportions against Devon in the previous Division 1 match, Somerset were unable to win a match in which we held a slight grading advantage on the majority of boards.

The match got off to the best possible start from my perspective: first I won the toss (Somerset were white on odd numbered boards); then I was fortunate to win my game on Board 15 within half an hour. My opponent played some fairly standard French Defence moves, albeit in an incorrect order, and a lack of kingside development proved fatal as I was able to find a checkmate after twelve moves.

The next game to finish was a much higher quality affair, the Board 1 encounter between Somerset's Jack Rudd (currently resident in Devon) and Cornwall's Mark Hassall (currently a member of Taunton Chess Club). Jack produced a brilliant double-rook sacrifice on the f-file to force mate; although Mark seemed critical of his own performance, he can console himself with the knowledge that he was beaten by International Master playing at (or close to) his fluent best!

Peter Chaplin agreed a draw fairly quickly on Board 2 with the black pieces. Arguably the most striking feature of that game was that, due to the gloriously unseasonal sunshine, Peter was playing in flip-flops at the end of November!

Cornwall pulled a victory back on Board 12. Mark Baker's problems began when his opponent advanced strong central pawns to the fifth rank, and his opponent exploited the space this created expertly; suddenly both his knights became very active, his dark-squared bishop found a probing diagonal, and his queen and rooks were powerful on semi-open files. Mark conceded the exchange and briefly created some counterplay but his opponent first won more material, and soon after, the game.

Chris Strong got a steady draw on Board 16. The game advanced into an endgame quickly, with Chris having a bishop and pawn to his opponent's rook. Both players seemed to spend more time contemplating the ending than the middle game, but in the end a draw was the correct result.

On Board 3 Dave Littlejohns scored a resounding victory. The Taunton Club's website is not always flattering about Dave's playing style, but this was a dynamic performance and a deserved win. He seemed to be in the ascendancy throughout, with his queen and rooks powerful on the half-open d and f-files.

On Board 10 Gerry Jepps was defeated after falling foul of a knight forking his queen and rook.

Darren Freeman gave an accomplished performance to win on Board 13. He enticed his opponent's king away from cover, before applying pressure to a pinned knight. It was particularly pleasing to see Darren do well after his nightmare defeat against Devon last month!

Neville Senior needed to defend stoutly at times during what was quite an open game on Board 14, but held on to draw.

Chris Purry eventually drew a sharp, fluctuating game on Board 6. I think at one stage there were a choice of minor pieces en prise for both players!

Adrian Champion did well to draw on Board 11. Adrian's queen had to be extremely dynamic, as his opponent had two rooks and an extra pawn; in the end Adrian's threats of perpetual check prevented his opponent from progressing.

Jim Fewkes won an open encounter on Board 9. Jim had to weather significant queenside pressure from his opponent's rooks, before eventually breaking through with his queen and powerful central pawns.

Mike Richardt drew on Board 4 in unusual circumstances, shortly after I had distracted Mike to ask for his assistance with a First Aid issue. Mike had an extra pawn, but with opposing bishops a draw was always the most likely result. That left three games to finish, with Somerset holding an 8-5 advantage.

Many Somerset players may not have yet encountered Barry Morris, a new member of the Bath club. He seemed to hold the initiative on Board 5, applying pressure towards the black king down open a and c-files. I'm not quite sure how the game slipped away from Barry in the end, and it's possible that he ultimately lost on time.

David Painter-Kooiman had a strong position on Board 8, after winning a knight early on with a neat bishop skewer; however his opponent was able to get a pawn in compensation, whilst also weakening David's remaining kingside pawn structure. Although David seemed to be ahead throughout the middle game, in the endgame his opponent's superior pawns became increasingly influential and David had to give the piece back. The damage was done, and Cornwall eventually won to keep the match alive.

In the final game to finish Andrew Footner was certainly unlucky to lose on time on Board 7. One Cornwall player remarked to me afterwards that Andrew probably would have had a strong case to claim a draw in the position, as it was difficult to see his opponent making progress in the endgame. Andrew had seemed to be ahead in the middle game, with control of the e-file and an active dark-squared bishop.

Overall this was a frustrating result. Not only were Somerset the higher graded side, but we were ahead throughout until the completion of the final game. Cornwall deserve tremendous credit though, they have a stronger side than last season and have already recorded a noteworthy victory over Hampshire. We are still well placed for the resumption of our Division 1 season, against Gloucestershire in February. Thanks again to everybody who played.