

Chess



BATTLE OF THE LEGENDS

Kasparov comes out of retirement to demolish Short

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Exclusive interviews with Michael Adams & Vishy Anand



Daniel King reports from behind the scenes of Across the Board



Peter Murphy on his latest novel featuring a certain B.H.Wood

Chess

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Across the Board

Daniel King reflects on the third series of Dominic Lawson's chess-themed interviews

"It's a slightly bonkers idea, yet it works", so said *The Spectator's* radio critic about the third series of *Across The Board*, broadcast at the beginning of May on BBC Radio 4. For those of you who haven't previously caught these programmes, Dominic Lawson conducts an interview over a game of chess, using the game to uncover aspects of his subject's personality and drawing comparisons between chess and their field of expertise.

The idea for the programme came about when Dominic was interviewed by John Humphrys on the *Today* programme for a feature on chess in 2013, and they played a quick game while chatting (Humphrys was thrashed). The head of Radio 4 liked the interview so much that a series was commissioned, produced by David Edmonds, who usually makes programmes on politics and philosophy, but is also a keen chessplayer and observer of the game. He is the co-author of *Bobby Fischer Goes To War*, the inside story of the Fischer-Spassky match.

The line up for *Across the Board*, series III was arguably the most stellar so far. The six-time snooker world champion, Steve Davis; Antony Beevor, World War II historian; Rex Sinquefeld, billionaire chess philanthropist; Piers Morgan, former newspaper editor, journalist and TV presenter; and Garry Kasparov. All have a connection to chess – some more obvious than others.

We shouldn't forget the interviewer's chess credentials. Dominic Lawson is President of the English Chess Federation, and definitely no idle figurehead. He has had a long association and passion for the game going back to his days playing in junior tournaments as a contemporary of the Nunn, Speelman and Mestel generation. Nigel Short received great practical assistance from Lawson in the early nineties in his quest to become world champion; *The Inner Game* is an excellent account of the 1993 world championship final.

Dominic currently writes a chess column for *Standpoint* magazine in which he displays a deep knowledge of the chess world. He also plays regular club chess. Looking at his games in this series, I would put his rating at around 2200 (ECF 200) – and that is perhaps a slight drawback: apart from the serious chessplayers, he has been able to dispose of most of his interviewees with ease.

Of the non-serious chessplayers in series III, **Steve Davis** gave Dominic the best game.



Steve Davis was funny, self-deprecating and offered insight into the highest echelons of sport.

Steve is himself a former president of the British Chess Federation, and has played chess since he was taught by his father at the age of five. He plays regularly online. A few years' ago he co-authored a beginners' chess book with David Norwood and picked up a few ideas from him – including the Modern Defence.

D.Lawson-S.Davis London (rapid) 2015



This was the position after 15 moves. Steve's position is a bit cramped, but I've seen worse from the Modern (played by Grandmaster Norwood, for a start).

Dominic now lashed out with...

16 g4

....and accompanied the move with a searching question. A devilish piece of gamesmanship that our President has honed over the three series. If Steve had now played 16...c5 and put the bishop on the long diagonal, then it could have been a tense contest. But the bold pawn thrust was enough

to send the snooker player into a panic.

16...f6 17 ♘c4

One of several good moves.

17...♗h8 18 exf6 exf6

19 ♘xh6 ♘xh6 20 ♖xf6

And the game was effectively over, though Steve hung on for another 20 moves.

Steve Davis was friendly, funny and didn't take himself

too seriously. Dominic mentioned his nickname of 'Interesting': "There's no smoke without fire in the boring department [...] there was Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins and 'Whirlwind' White, and there was me in the corner of the bar, 'no nickname' Davis, and when *Spitting Image* gave me a nickname and a personality all rolled into one – I was delighted."

He also showed great insight into the sport of snooker and his own career: "Slowly I've learned to live with failure."

As the game turned against him, Steve observed: "You are sitting taller in your chair – and that happens around the snooker table, you can see someone becoming dominant."

I could quote the whole of the interview – interesting? No, fascinating.

All the games in the interviews were played with a time control of thirty minutes for both players and the conversation ran freely throughout. On average the games (and conversations) lasted around 45 minutes, but for the broadcast this had to be edited down to around 12 minutes – agonisingly short, considering the rich content of all the interviews. After that, I recorded my voice-over with comments on the games.

Antony Beevor was no match for Dominic on the chessboard, but was an excellent conversationalist, drawing parallels between chess and war strategy. Army generals liked to see themselves as chess grandmasters on the battlefield, "but the truth is often rather far away from that. The real question is how they view their opponent [...] if you put yourself in your opponent's shoes, the chances are you are not going to read them properly."

He cited the Ardennes (the Battle of the Bulge) in World War II when US army generals failed to appreciate that Hitler might not be acting in a logical way. The idea of flinging

two panzer divisions against a tiny sector of the American front hadn't occurred to them at all. Even when evidence came that this was happening, it was dismissed as it didn't fit in with their preconceptions.

Rex Sinquefeld has thrown millions of dollars into supporting chess in the United States, setting up a chess centre and scholastic programme in St Louis, and annual sponsorship of the US Championship. This game was played online and one sensed that Sinquefeld was set for an interview, but not for a game of chess. He played quickly and casually, as though it was a blitz game, and made a couple of big blunders.

Dominic quizzed him on rumours that he was attempting to persuade Fabiano Caruana to switch from the Italian to the American chess team. "In sport in general you try to lure the great players to your team [...] I can't comment on any specific conversations I've had with anyone."

That is not what I call a denial. He has already been instrumental in bringing Wesley So into the USA team from the Philippines – so watch this space.

Rupert Murdoch once said of **Piers Morgan** that his balls were bigger than his brain. A man with a giant ego and a thick skin, he relished the conflict of the game and the banter with Dominic, and engaged in sledging while winking and smiling at us through the studio glass. It's a pity he couldn't play as well as he talked.

The game began 1 e4 e5 2 ♖f3 g6 3 ♗xe5, and it was downhill from there. What was fascinating was how Piers' play matched his personality: he appeared completely unconcerned by reverses and played with such self-belief that for a moment one could almost imagine he would fight back from his hopeless position.

D.Lawson-P.Morgan London (rapid) 2015



Piers now bashed out 31...♞xf2+ and cried "Checkmate!" – then gave a howl and jumped from his seat as Dominic swiped his queen. "I thought I had you!"

Lawson: "Is this the greatest setback of your career?"

Morgan: "It's not a good moment, but the one thing I've always been able to do is bounce back from horrific moments like this and



Piers Morgan relished the struggle with Dominic - the sledging started before the first move was made.

surprise people, and I will be back to beat you."

And when the barrel-chested Morgan strode out of the studio, utterly undiminished by the drubbing, you believed him.

Lawson: "Do you feel there is something in your personality that needs conflict?"

Kasparov: "I feel comfortable playing chess and that means I am not alien to the concept of psychological warfare."

For serious chessplayers the game with **Garry Kasparov** was the most interesting. The interview took place at the London Chess Classic in December 2014 when the former world champion was on a flying visit through the capital. The conversation ranged from Garry's upbringing, his chess career and of course his current political involvement ("Russia is far from being a stable state. If I have to pick up a challenge, I will not be shy about it").

Garry might have retired from professional chess in 2005, but you know exactly what you are going to get with him. Dominic remarked on his intimidating presence at the board. "This is my nature. I take it seriously."

And a serious game did, indeed, develop on the board.

D.Lawson-G.Kasparov London (rapid) 2014



Dominic's opening was too modest. Garry seized the centre and is now beginning a pawn storm on the kingside. But here is where the game gets interesting. Sensing that it was 'now or never', Dominic broke out:

18 e5 ♗xe5 19 ♗e4

At this moment I could see Garry tense up. He hunched over the board, his answers became more terse and he began shaking his twisted feet underneath the table. Moving the rook, 19...♞xc6 allows 20 ♗xg5 and White's pieces are breaking free – watch out for ♞h5. So Garry decided

to ditch the exchange:

19...♗7g6 20 ♗xd6 ♞xd6.

Objectively, Black still stands better – White is too cramped – but care is needed.

21 ♗g2 g4 22 ♗e4 f3 23 ♗c2.

And now for a highly unpleasant manoeuvre. **23...♗f7**



24 ♗e1

Instead, 24 ♗c1, preventing ...♗g5, would have been more resilient, but even so 24...♞e7 followed by ...♗d6 would still leave Black in command.

At this moment, Garry's whole body relaxed – and without looking at the board I knew that the game was as good as over.

24...♗g5 25 ♗c1 ♗xe4 26 ♗xe4 e5 27 ♞e1 ♗f5 28 ♗d2 ♞c6 29 ♞b1 ♞a8 30 ♗f1 ♗f8 31 ♗g1 ♗d7 32 ♗d1 ♗xe4 33 ♞xe4 ♞xe4 34 dxe4 ♗f6 35 ♗e1 a4 36 b4 ♗e8 37 bxc5 bxc5 38 ♞b1 ♗d6 0-1

As one might expect, Garry's technique was perfect: he manoeuvred his pieces to their best squares before recapturing the rook, and at the end a crucial second pawn is about to fall.

All the interviews for *Across The Board* are available on the BBC iPlayer, and from there you'll find a link to the complete games.

