

Saved! Queen of Knaphill rescues the Chess Challenge

Sarah Hegarty will be the new head of the Delancey UK Schools Chess Challenge, after the future of the world's largest chess tournament was put in doubt following an onslaught by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Advertisements will be going out shortly to the 1,500 schools in the Chess Challenge, and up to 50,000 children will enjoy their chess battles in the Spring Term, winning badges, gold spots and mascots such as Cheepy, Chirpy, Squirrel and Penguin. The best players will go on to the area Megafinals, progressing thereafter to the national Gigafinals and, perhaps even the terrifying Terafinal with its £2,000 top prize!

Sarah has a long history in the Chess Challenge. Brought up in a run-down area of Woking, Surrey, she went to a state school, Knaphill Primary. However, her talent for chess was soon recognised, and after only three weeks she was able to expertly set up the pieces. Sarah won the Under 7 girls section of the Challenge in its first year and wrote up to Blue Peter. She was invited onto the program, and a recording of the event shows her being introduced to none other than World Chess Champion Gary Kasparov!

Sarah went on to greater successes, twice becoming Top Girl player in the Terafinal and then winning the Women's National title as well as representing her country at the World Olympics. We can be proud of the fact that Sarah reached such a high standard at chess, as well as achieving a degree in law and practicing for a year, before returning to her first love, chess playing, chess teaching – and now the headship of the UK Chess Challenge.

For my own part, I am pleased with my success in running the Chess Challenge for 21 years and consider it to be a good time to pass it on.

People have been puzzled – why should I have picked a quarrel with HMRC? Fundamentally, I was not prepared to work with an organisation that was so incompetent, so inefficient and so exploitative, unless they made an effort to improve. HMRC was of the opinion that (a) they could not change (b) they did not need to change and (c) they were certainly not going to accept any advice from a mere member of the public such as I.

Given the difference in fire-power and HMRC, the result was predictable. However, the game is not over yet, and I will decamp to the idyllic pastures of www.surreyhundreds.com

In conclusion, I thank my staunch sponsors, first British Land, initially under the leadership of Sir John Ritblat and later, after British Land ended their sponsorship in 2010, Delancey, the property investment company, headed by Jamie Ritblat, son of Sir John, who now has an advisory role in the firm.

And of course, a million thanks to the long serving and long suffering workers at the Chess Challenge and all the thousands of children who have repaid me so well with their successes.

“The Universe is never complete: it is always in the making”

Mike Basman, October, 2016

