

100 Years of the County Championship

When Surrey play Yorkshire on the 13th July 2019, the winner will be the 100th Open Champion, thereby closing the first century of the County Championship. It is fitting that the 100th Open final is contested between these representatives of their Unions, as the first final on the 12th December 1908 was played between these self-same Unions, albeit between Middlesex and Yorkshire. Middlesex in their maiden year not only won the Championship of the Southern Counties but went on to win the inaugural English Counties Championship, and so have the accolade of attaining the first Regional/National double.

The continued existence of the County Championship has been questioned by many in recent years, when considering the modern challenges to chess in general that have led to the demise of many chess clubs and some county teams. This article is written to give a brief overview of the County Championship, and to suggest why the competition has ongoing value, so that in another 100 years someone will be writing on the eve of the crowning of the 200th Open champions! This article's emphasis will be on the Open competition but will make reference to the other competitions where points of interest should be highlighted. The ECF website, though, does have a comprehensive table of winners for the seven extant competitions.

Unless one is a chess historian, the notion of inter-union competition for many is best represented by the County Championship. Therefore, it is easy to overlook that inter-union competition began in the 19th Century. In the 1890s (1893 and 1894), two matches were played between the Northern and Southern Counties, simply called North vs. South, in order to determine where chess was stronger. In 1892, due to the success of Hampshire against their southern neighbours and their consequent braggadocio, it was asked, 'Where is chess strongest?' The prevalence of strong clubs in London and the South, due to the migration of strong players there, 'naturally' meant the South had to be stronger.

The North, however, took umbrage at this suggestion, so in the Summer formed a committee to discuss this very issue. It was concluded it was correct to present a challenge to the chess clubs and associations of the South, to determine where in fact chess was the strongest. Unfortunately, the challenge coincided with the formation of the first chess Union - the Southern Counties Chess Union (SCCU) on the 6th September 1892 - so although the 1893 encounter was close (SCCU won 53.5 - 52.5) the 1894 return match was a blowout for the South (64.5-43.5). The two victories for the South were attributed to their better co-ordination and the introduction of the Championship of Southern Counties to assist team selection for the second encounter. Due to other chess matters in 1895, namely the Hastings International Masters Tournament, the prospect of another North vs South match was abandoned. It took some time before the idea of inter-union competition could be revisited (1908) if only because just one Union existed; the SCCU.

The decade following the last North vs South contest saw the institution of two other chess unions, the Midlands Counties Chess Association (now Midlands Counties Chess Union, MCCU) in 1898, and the Northern Counties Chess Union, NCCU in 1899. The existence of three unions meant it was possible for an inter-union contest to be considered, but no action was forthcoming so it seemed that inter-union competition would be consigned to the past. In 1904, after a groundswell of Associations and Unions the British Chess Federation (BCF) was formed, under the aegis of Leonard Rees. It was not a new idea as he had used the two North vs South contests to broach the subject, but it was not enthusiastically embraced.

It is ironic to note that, despite the success of county competition which preceded the Federation's existence, the first BCF Constitution neglected to include it. This was rectified in 1908 when, at the instigation of the SCCU, the BCF formulated a set of rules to determine who was the premier county.

With the champions of three Unions participating, it was initially thought that a league competition would be played, but this was abandoned in favour of a knock-out. This of course was problematic as it meant one Union would have to receive a bye, which was awarded on rotation. Other rules specified that matches shall be played in the winter (October and December) over no less than 12 but no more than 20 boards with 16 being considered the ideal number. Notwithstanding this, some modifications over time and experience (e.g. eligibility criteria) were established and the abandonment of adjudications in favour of quickplay finishes. The rules were well-received and saw the rebirth of inter-union competition.

Below is a summary of the Championship by decade.

1910s

With an inter-union championship in place, competition amongst the counties within each union to qualify for it was fierce. However, once participants were known and despite the best efforts of the MCCU (two final appearances) and NCCU (six) due to its longevity, the period 1908 to 1920 (war years excluded) saw a clean sweep for the SCCU (P8 +8: Kent x1, Surrey x2, Middlesex x5). The period 1908-10 saw Middlesex record the first hat-trick of County Championships.

1920s

The onset of the second decade of the Championship (1921-30) saw the changing of the guard. Having participated in each and every final since its inception, 1921 was the first time the SCCU's representative failed to make the final; Sussex, the surprise winners of the Championship of Southern Counties, fell to Yorkshire at the semi-final stage, and Yorkshire went on to defeat Warwickshire. Thus, Yorkshire at their second time of asking were successful in lifting the trophy.

Another thing of note in 1921 was that it was the first year the BCF awarded a trophy to the competition winner – the Lowenthal Trophy. The story of the trophy is an interesting one - initially it was awarded to the St. Georges Club Champion as a legacy of Lowenthal, who was a prominent member of the club. Sometime in the late nineteenth / early twentieth century, the club became defunct and the trophy's whereabouts was unknown. In 1921 R.H.S Stevenson (Kent) came across the trophy by accident in a breaker's yard and purchased it for a low sum thereby saving it from the melting pot. He presented it to the BCF, who decided it was worthy of being issued to the premier county. The awarding of a trophy was not new as in 1908 after the competition's inauguration G.W. Hughes had suggested a bespoke design, however nothing came of it.

This period also saw a fierce rivalry emerge between NCCU and SCCU as six of the ten finals were contested between these unions. The honours were even, as both unions won the title five times. The MCCU were acknowledged to be the weaker of the three unions, relying on the rotation of the bye to qualify for the final. In fact, the first over the board victory for any MCCU representative did not occur until the beginning of the competition's third decade (1931 Warwickshire defeat Lancashire on board count!).

1930s

The Championship's third decade (1931-38) was also incomplete, as once again war prevented the Championship from being contested (1939-40). Of the eight finals played, the SCCU reasserted their superiority, winning the title five times as opposed to NCCU's three. It is interesting to note that the respective winners for each Union were Middlesex and Lancashire. This decade established a long rivalry between the two, as shown by the fact that the two counties have lifted the title more times than other counties, as well as having played each more times (14). Middlesex also establish a new record, as they appear in four consecutive finals (1934-37), winning three of them. Also to be noted during the early 1930s was the first appearance of a combined team – Northumberland and Durham. Due to the inherent strength of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the NCCU trialled the idea of a combined team and it worked, as for the first time 1932 saw a representative other than the two traditional Northern powerhouses in the final. Unfortunately, the trial was abandoned and the status quo resumed until 1951, when Cheshire were able to make it to the final stages for the first time since 1910. A major rule change was introduced in 1931 – county eligibility. It had been noted that, on occasion, double defaults appeared on team sheets because a player had inadvertently accepted an invitation from both sides! The rule ensured that individuals could only play for one county in a cycle.

1940s

Due to the Second World War, the Championships during the 1940s were again interrupted (1946-50). The SCCU once again edged the NCCU, winning the title 3-2 (or to put it another way, Middlesex 3 – Lancashire 2!) This period was a notable one for the SCCU, as traditionally either Kent, Middlesex or Surrey invariably represented them. 1948 saw the emergence of a new SCCU finalist, Hampshire. They, like Sussex some two decades earlier, had exceeded expectation and won the SCCU Championship. Unlike Sussex however, Hampshire were successful in the semi-final, but were unable to take on the might of Lancashire (Lancashire won). The resumption of the Championship also afforded a rule change. Since 1908 the inter-union matches had been played in the winter, at the commencement of a new cycle. Now they were to be played in the late Spring / early Summer, at the end of a cycle.

1950s

The 1950s was to be a pivotal period for the Championship, as it saw a number of rule changes, in part due to new constituent members of the BCF and saw the MCCU lift the title for the first time.

1951 was a year of upsets, as the traditional representatives of the NCCU and SCCU were usurped. In the NCCU, Cheshire won through to the Championship, thereby surpassing all expectations. It was the same in the SCCU, with Devon beating Middlesex in the SCCU championship final to likewise proceed to the inter-union stage. With the traditional protagonists eliminated, the way was paved for a new name on the title, and the MCCU (through its representative Oxfordshire) won with Oxfordshire 8.5 – Cheshire 3.5. The MCCU had finally broken their duck (P14 +1 -13). This victory was a breakthrough, as Oxfordshire were to repeat the feat the following year with their defeat of a regular participant - Middlesex (Oxfordshire win 6.5-3.5).

Until 1954, unions were awarded a bye on rotation. However, in this year, a new constituent member joined the BCF - the Welsh Chess Union (WCU). With a fourth participant the bye could be dispensed with. The rules for the semi-final draw were amended so that each Union had the opportunity to play each other on rotation. The participation of Welsh counties was not entirely successful, as they were consistently trounced in semi-final (for example Middlesex's 15-1 win over East Glamorgan in 1956 was

the largest ever margin of victory). Due to the poor results of the WCU in 1956, the SCCU's Western Counties were dissatisfied and agitated for their own Association. They felt that the SCCU, with its more numerous participants, were deserving of another place in the County Championships and recognised that the SCCU's Montague Jones Trophy was as strong, if not stronger, than both the MCCU and WCU. This was not a new idea, as they felt this way in 1921, but the SCCU were in the process of rebuilding after the war and could not accede to their demands. 1956, however, was a different situation and the Western Counties agreed to form their own union – West of England Chess Union (WECU) – and secede from the SCCU. The SCCU support their application to become a constituent member of the BCF.

With a fifth entrant the rules had to be amended once again. From 1958 there would be an additional round, additional entrants from the unions and reintroduction of the bye which was awarded in perpetuity to NCCU. For the first time non-champions would be permitted to enter, and the composition of the competition was MCCUx2, NCCUx1, SCCUx2, WCUx1, WECUx1. The NCCU was dissatisfied with the bye, preferring to have a second representative, and the bye was abandoned. The participation of two counties from a Union meant the prospect of an all-union final was a possibility and this proved to be the case in 1960 when Lancashire defeated Yorkshire 10.5-9.5. This all-union encounter was the first of seven between these two, the most ever played. All told 26 all-union encounters have been played since 1958 – NCCUx9, SCCUx17. This decade's seminal match sees the NCCU take the title twice, MCCUx3 and SCCUx5 - a poor decade for the NCCU and a successful one for the MCCU. A statistical quirk is that until 1957, Middlesex had won the County Championship as many times (19) as all the other counties combined! Essex's victory in 1958 sees the others take the lead (one they have not relinquished). With Middlesex being so successful, they more than most were conscious of the distances travelled to matches. So, at the end of the decade the question was raised whether intermediate venues should be a matter of course for all stages and not just the quarter-final. Since intermediate venues could only be used in quarter-finals, they were rarely if ever used. Middlesex's proposal was accepted by the SCCU and put forward to BCF Council but was rejected and it was felt that the travel grant more than compensated for the distances travelled. The issue was one that never went away and was finally accepted for 1962.

1960s

The 1960s was the decade the NCCU were finally able to let loose. Having played second fiddle to the SCCU since the competition's inception, this decade saw the NCCU gain unprecedented success. This included three all-union finals (1966-68) and Lancashire setting two new records, appearing in five consecutive finals (1966-70) and winning four titles in a row (1966-69). Although the NCCU were all conquering, the MCCU and SCCU both had a look in. The MCCU were able to follow-up on their victories in the 1950s with Warwickshire taking the title twice. Despite what was to happen for the latter part of the 1960s, Middlesex once again secured a hat-trick of victories (1963-65), and Cambridgeshire emerged as a new force, as demonstrated by defeating the all-conquering Lancashire in 1970 (Cambridgeshire win 9-7). The rules had to be amended again when the WCU withdrew to become the Welsh Chess Federation, and from then onwards all unions received two nominations.

The decade also saw the introduction of a new but short-lived inter-union competition (inter-union competition had been a staple on the BCF calendar since 1908). The championship was not on the scale of the North vs South contests of the 19th Century, as those contests were 'genuine' inter-union matches pitting the combined strength of the North against the South. The counties championships were really a variant of county matches played within a union. The WECU proposed that a genuine inter-union

competition be played. The other unions were lukewarm to the idea, but one was played for the period 1962-1972.

1970s

The 1970s of course was a watershed moment for chess, as the world watched the contest between Fischer and Spassky avidly, leading to a boom in chess in the Western World. The Championship likewise benefitted from the interest. County matches within a Union were usually played by one team, albeit over a great number of boards. However, by the onset of the decade some Unions had changed their structures and had second teams playing. Over and above the internal restructuring when considering the Championship, there was also some dissatisfaction among some counties who recognised that they just could not compete against the traditional titans of the NCCU, SCCU and (on occasion) the MCCU. The result was that many felt a new competition should be introduced and after some debate the Minor Counties competition was instituted. The competition was accessible to the second teams of strong counties and the first teams of weak counties. The notion of the Minor introduced debate (which continues to this day) as to what constitutes a 'minor' team. The introduction of this new competition also saw a rule change to the number of boards – an increase in matches from 16 to 20.

The Championship saw a new force emerge in the form of Cambridgeshire, who participated in five consecutive finals (1969-74); a new rivalry (Essex vs Cambridgeshire) who between them contested three consecutive finals (1970-72, the first time three consecutive finals were contested by same teams); and the first ever walkover in a final when, in 1972, Cambridgeshire scratched. The emergence of Cambridgeshire served as a counterpoint to the demise of Lancashire, in part as their boundaries were redrawn and two new entities were formed in their historical environs – Greater Manchester and Merseyside. It would take some time for them to recover, but once they did, their appearance in the 1975 final began a sequence of eight consecutive final appearances (1975-82 (+2 -6)). The 1970s was a dominant decade for the SCCU, as they won eight of the finals, the other two going to the NCCU. The dominance of the SCCU was cemented at the end of the decade by the awakening of a sleeping giant - Middlesex. Their appearance in 1979 was their first since 1969 and their first victory since 1965. It is sad to note that the neither MCCU nor WECU teams were able to make it to the final.

1980s

The 1980s saw the ongoing dominance of the SCCU, sweeping all before them and winning in total eight titles, with the other two split between MCCU and NCCU. The decade sees all bar one Open finals having at least one SCCU representative (usually Kent or Middlesex). However, this hegemony was broken when Hertfordshire represented the SCCU against Greater Manchester in 1990 – see below. The sole final not to have SCCU representation was 1982 Lancashire vs. Yorkshire the sole exception.

The decade also saw changes to the Championship. The first is to the Minor - having been introduced in 1972, it was decided that from 1982 it would be separated into two genuine competitions – Minor and Second Team competitions. The stats show that from its institution, the sole time that a weak county's first team participated and won was 1981, when the title was won by Buckinghamshire, ironically the last time the competition was played in its original format. The dominance of second teams suggested that the competition should be split into two independent competitions - however, how to define a 'minor' county was still unclear.

The second was in 1983 - the creation of a new Union, the East Anglian Chess Union. The Eastern counties of the SCCU were dissatisfied with the set-up of the SCCU, so at the prompting of Cambridgeshire created their own union, seceding from the SCCU. Despite some concern from other Unions that it was an attempt by the SCCU to gain another entrant into the Open, the counties concerned were content to participate in the Minor, recognising they could not compete against the SCCU.

The final change was in 1987, when the competition was extended with the Introduction of the Third Team Championship. The ongoing boom in chess had seen Unions enlarge their competitions to include third teams. It was therefore felt that the National Stage should reflect what was happening on the ground. The introduction of the Third Team competition saw the BCF oversee four competitions, and the National Stage staggered, with finals being arranged by the counties concerned.

It would be wrong not to acknowledge the success of Greater Manchester (GM) in this decade. Although not an historical county, GM lifted the title for the first time on behalf of the MCCU. The 1974 Local Government Act saw the redrawing of county boundaries and Lancashire was one of the counties that was altered. Whereas the West Midlands agreed to revert to their natural boundaries for chess purposes, GM wanted to be recognised as an independent unit, and split from Lancashire, affiliating to the MCCU. Greater Manchester won its first Championship in 1990.

1990s

The 1990s is a decade which saw the chess landscape change again. There was the exponential increase in weekend tournaments, especially Rapidplay, and the emergence of the 4 Nations Chess League (4NCL, 1993). However, these new competitions coexisted with the Championship. Although the chess landscape may have changed, the Open Championship still saw the ongoing dominance of the SCCU, as again all but one Open final had at least one SCCU representative. 1992 was the sole exception, when Staffordshire (MCCU) played Hampshire (WECU). The pre-eminence of the SCCU, especially the strength of Kent, in this decade saw the Union lift seven titles. The MCCU, through Leicestershire and Staffordshire, won two with Yorkshire taking the title once on behalf of the NCCU. Although the EACU had come into existence they still had no participant in the Open, preferring instead to compete in the Minor.

The 1970s chess boom continued into this decade, with the revision and expansion of competitions. In 1992 the teams were rebranded so that First Team became the Open, Second Team became U175 and Third Team became U150. These three, along with the Minor, saw a fifth competition added - the U130, which was renamed U125 the following year. Once again, the Unions had restructured and added another level of competition which was to be replicated at the National Stage. This was repeated in 1996 when the U100 competition was added. All told, the BCF now oversee six competitions, and the pressure of finding a suitable venue is beginning to be a concern. After the Second World War and up until 1972, the BCF issued a travel allowance to alleviate cost of travel. It was felt that the use of intermediate venues meant the travel grant was unnecessary, so was abolished. With the increased number of competitions there was dissatisfaction in some quarters that if they had multiple teams attending the final, these matches should be staggered. And so, in 1996, the Clarendon Suite, Birmingham held the first finals day.

The discussion of what constitutes a Minor County was put into sharp relief when Middlesex won the Minor title in 1994. All would acknowledge that Middlesex were one of the strongest counties in the country and their record in the County Championship would make mockery of allowing Middlesex to say they were a Minor team. However, after the highs of the 1980s, Middlesex hit a slump as they had in the

1970s. The rules stated that a team who had not participated in the Open in the previous five cycles (including the current cycle) were allowed to participate in the Minor. Since Middlesex last participated in the Open in 1989, they were clear to enter, where they comprehensively defeated Surrey (10.5-5.5) in the final. This result led to discussion as to how to define 'minor' and by the end of the decade it was decided that a team average grade of 180 should apply.

2000s

It must be noted that this decade saw the County Championship endure its share of struggles. The success of the 4NCL saw it expand and this, coupled with the plethora of rapidplay tournaments, meant the number of weekends available to play county chess were diminishing. The former seemed to pit club against county, whilst the latter appealed to avarice! The 4NCL had a dramatic effect on those participating in the County Championship - strong players were attracted to this competition as it went from strength to strength, so that the relative strength of Open teams at the National Stage declined. Prior to and since this decade, teams averaged 195+, but the 2000s sees this drop to 190+ with the 2008 Lancashire vs. Middlesex Open final being the weakest in competition's history. Despite the challenges of 4NCL, Union Controllers were expedient and continued to be so by ensuring county fixtures did not clash and allowing strong players to represent both their clubs and counties. This consideration seems to have had a negative impact on county matches, especially at the National stage, as players appear to prefer representing their club rather than their county. One of the charms of the 4NCL was the fact that it, unlike the County Championship at that time, was FIDE-rated. Discussions as to whether the Championship should follow suit were had, and FIDE-rating was rejected. Despite these challenges, the County Championship continued even if not as strong as before.

With two decades of unprecedented SCCU success, the new millennium saw a rebalancing of it. Although the SCCU did not have as many Open finalists as before they were still able to take more titles than any other Union (SCCUx5 NCCUx3 MCCUx2).

Over and above the possibility of FIDE-rating county matches, there was a significant change to the competition - the grading boundaries. U175 became U180; U150 – U160; U125 – U140; U100 – U120. The bands were narrowed to 20 points rather than the previous 25. Debate is ongoing as to whether they should be reverted. It is interesting to note that the Minor remained unchanged. A seventh competition was added to the roll with a new U100 competition.

2010s

And so, to the final decade of the Championship which sees the 100th Champion crowned. Despite questions around the format, the Championship continues to exist and in fact has seen a resurgence in the average strength of the Open finalists. The teams have returned to the pre-2000 average of 195+. It will remain to be seen if teams will consistently field 200+. The question of whether the Championship should be FIDE-rated is certainly moot for the Open (the only FIDE rated section today), it remains to be seen whether this will extend downwards to the Minor (or even to all competitions).

The rebalancing of the SCCU continues into the decade where the rivalry between the SCCU stalwarts (Kent, Middlesex and Surrey) at the outset of it has been replaced by the War of the Roses towards the end of it. The most notable success of the decade is Yorkshire finally able to record a hat-trick of Open titles, thereby joining the likes of Cambridgeshire, Kent, Lancashire and Middlesex. The current strength

of Yorkshire means that they are on course for challenging Lancashire's record of consecutive final appearances; their match against Surrey is their sixth consecutive appearance. Will they be able to reach the final in the next three years? What does the 100th final hold in store?

The decade has seen a decline in the number of entrants to the Open and a significant increase in the Minor, which has in turn had an adverse effect on the U180. If the County Championship is to return to the heady days of the 1980s (and to a certain extent the 1990s) then there has to be a rebalancing of these three competitions. Perhaps the combining of Open and Minor, where the Preliminary stage (April) is used to determine which teams play in the Open and the Minor, or the champions of MCCU, NCCU and SCCU receiving a bye into the quarter-final, so avoiding the repechage. The losing teams of Preliminary having option of dropping into U180. Alternatively, should the competition revert to pre-1958 and be the sole preserve of the champions? EACU tend not to participate and the WECU only sporadically, so it would not be a stretch. The problem of course is what to do with the second placed team in the NCCU and SCCU? Both would be considered too strong for the Minor and would have their noses put out of joint if they were unable to participate. There is no easy solution, as there is still no satisfactory definition of 'minor' county. Minor county seems to be shorthand for counties whose first teams are unable to win the Open but would like to win some silverware. Statistics show that some of these so-called 'minor' counties can and do field respectable teams in their regional competition but are not prepared to put these players to the test against other Open teams from other unions. The statistics show that a county being able to consistently field a team averaging 195+ should do well; it would be better to be 200+ but 195+ is respectable enough.

Before bringing this article to an end it must be noted that the EACU through Suffolk (2009 and 2010) and Norfolk (2011 and 2012) finally participated in the Open, but this was short-lived as none progressed beyond the quarter-final. The WECU (Somerset) last participated in 2013. It would appear that the Open continues to be the preserve of the NCCU and SCCU, with occasional interruptions from the MCCU.

2020 will see the commencement of the second century of the County Championship. The first century of the Open National Stage saw 20 of the 29 historical counties in addition to Greater Manchester participate. It is hoped that despite the challenges to chess generally in today's fast-moving society, let alone to the longer format of County chess in particular, as many will participate again. Technology may have its part to play.

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Open Champions by County

County	First Win	Last Win	Total	County	First Win	Last Win	Total
Middlesex	1908	2012	29	Warwickshire	1957	1962	3
Lancashire	1922	2018	22	Greater Manchester***	1990	2005	3
Kent	1912	2003	13	Oxfordshire**	1951	1952	2
Yorkshire	1921	2016	8	Staffordshire	1992	1992	1
Surrey	1911	2013	7	Leicestershire	1994	1994	1
Cambridgeshire*	1970	2001	6	Sub-total to 2018			99
Essex	1958	2006	4	No Contest	1915-19		5
				No Contest	1939-45		7
				Sub-total to 2018			12
				Total to 2018			111

Open Champions by Union

Union	First Win	Last Win	Total
SCCU	1908	2013	59
NCCU	1921	2018	30
MCCU**	1951	1994	10
EACU*	None	None	0
WECU	None	None	0
Sub Total to 2018			99
No Contest	1915-19		5
No Contest	1939-45		7
Sub Total to 2018			12
Total to 2018			111

Notes:

*Cambridgeshire affiliated to EACU from 2004-05 but previously affiliated to SCCU. Their 6 National Titles resulted when affiliated to SCCU so are subsumed accordingly.

**Oxfordshire is currently affiliated to Chiltern League/WECU but has been affiliated to at various times MCCU and SCCU. Their 2 National Titles resulted when affiliated to MCCU so are subsumed accordingly.

*** Greater Manchester formed when Manchester Chess Federation split from Lancashire (NCCU) and join MCCU. Their 2 National Titles have been subsumed accordingly to MCCU.