

Exclusive Interview with GM Nigel Short MBE

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Nigel Short is an elite English chess Grandmaster earning the title at the age of 19. He is often regarded as the strongest English player of the 20th century as he was ranked third in the world, from January 1988 – July 1989 and in 1993, he challenged Garry Kasparov for the World Chess Championship in London. In October 2011, he gave a 34 board simultaneous chess display against Shropshire chess players winning every game except for two, which were drawn.

Just before the event, I interviewed Nigel exclusively for Defence FOCUS magazine – the in-house journal of the Ministry of

Defence, read by soldiers, sailors, airmen and civilians across the world.

Hello Nigel, thanks for taking the time to talk to me today. You've been busy lately. Why are you doing a tour of the UK giving simultaneous exhibitions?

Obviously for one thing it pays, but more than that there's often a big gap in terms of contact between club players and the professionals. Very often they don't even see them. With what I am doing you get that contact. It's not like that in most other sports; you watch your football team - for example Arsenal on TV. You only ever see them on a bus! This is a way of closing the gulf.

You are playing again in the London Chess Classic this year. Have you any surprises up your sleeve?

I have played twice and finished last on both occasions. But it's a hell of a strong event and brilliantly organised in my opinion. However I am going to focus more on my chess preparation before the tournament. You won't see anything radically different but I want to get myself sharper for the event to do better. I am happy to talk about this more after the game rather than before! (Laughs)

I understand that and amateur chess players admire your willingness to talk about your games almost immediately afterwards, win lose or draw. How do you treat triumph and disaster just the same?

Like Rudyard Kipling! I cannot say that it does not hurt but I am at a different phase in my career now. I have experienced successes and I have had a lot of upsets and if you stop caring then you should give up. You get more philosophical.

But it's great that you share your games in this way, so please continue to do so.

I will. I mean, it's a contractual obligation in the London Chess Classic to speak about the game but I don't mind even when I have lost

because I like to see the enthusiasm of the chess fans. I mean they don't get enough of a spectacle most of the time.

So you really do appreciate what you are giving back to people?

Well, yes and I think that chess is not promoted properly. It can be done much better. Take today; it's a chess exhibition and a very important one for the Shropshire chess community. It is also very well promoted which is important. People will remember this event in Shropshire just as they did the Polugayevsky simul.

A question from a reader of DF. Looking back on your world title match with Kasparov in 1993, is there anything you think you should have done differently in terms of preparation?

I didn't have enough openings with black against 1.e4. I needed more variety in the openings but gave more thought to the 'none opening' preparation. This match was not decided on opening preparation anyway. There was one game where I got hit over the head with a sledgehammer but it's a long match. I gave away loads of points by being under time pressure and failing to press home advantages.

You consider 1992 and the defeat of Anatoly Karpov to be your greatest achievement. What are your aspirations in terms of chess nowadays?

I am enjoying my chess at the moment and I like winning tournaments. To have come first or equal first in four tournaments this year is great and I had a brilliant result in Gibraltar. The only reason I didn't win that tournament was because Ivanchuk was on steroids (Carl – Nigel did not mean this literally!) and he is a genius. When he is on that form there is absolutely no stopping the guy.

Do I want to be world champion? Well, if I was interested in that I would play in the European Individual Championship which is financially an incredibly bad thing to do. I don't. I don't think I am going to win the world championship and I am therefore not going to spend two weeks in some part of Europe just to enrich some organisers. No it is basically not for me at this point in my career. I do have some strange ideas. I would like to win tournaments in as many different countries as possible. This is a recent ambition of mine actually. I have won tournaments in 23 different countries.

Some of my readers play chess in submarines, deserts and jungles. Where's the weirdest place you have ever played chess?

Well I can tell you that I have never played in any of those places you just mentioned! The weirdest place? Mmmm, Galapagos Islands, where I have given a simul against the giant tortoises there!! (Laughs)

If you weren't a chess player what would you do for a living?

I would probably be a lawyer like my brother.

You have always liked your music...what are you listening to at the moment?

I'm an oldie you know. I listen to people like Neil Young, is that really embarrassing to admit that? I was listening to him this morning, I think it was 'angry world', yes that's it. That song won a grammy!

In your opinion can chess be considered a sport?

Yes. It is in most countries yet not in the UK.

But what aspect makes it a sport?

It is competition and anyway it's a mental sport and in the category of mental boxing. When I played Kasparov I got myself terribly fit and it makes a big difference.

They say that chess is the oldest war game. When you are playing do you ever think of chess in military terms?

Not really but that was one of the attractions to me initially because I used to do a lot of war gaming. There are similarities there that appeal to me.

Turning that around a little what aspect of chess do you think a soldier could bring into their every day work?

Well, the sort of conflicts you have nowadays are very often asymmetric and you don't have that in chess but planning and anticipation of your opponent's moves.

Give a message to all children who want to take up chess. Why should they?

Because it's FUN! Not because it's a good career move, it isn't. Not because of anything else, it is just a very enjoyable game.

You never lost the appetite for it then?

Well, sometimes it has waned a little but I am really enjoying my chess at the moment.

What is the most gratifying aspect of what you do?

(After some thought) It's talking to people who get pleasure from my games. I appreciate that the most. I am well aware that there are a huge number of people out there who enjoy the fact that I play chess.

So you are well aware that countless hours are put 'into you' in terms of people around the globe following New in Chess, Chessbase and the London Chess Classic as well as on the Internet constantly looking to see how you are doing.

Absolutely – yes!

Finally Nigel, are you aware that the services have a Combined Chess Association and is there anything you would like to say to them?

Yes I am and I would like to play them sometime. Why not? I don't care where. The Falklands? I am ready. (Laughs). I am not sure about Helmand Province though (laughs louder).

I'll have a word! Thank you again for your time.

(See Nigel Short live in London at the London Chess Classic from 3-12 December. Visit www.londonchessclassic.com/ for details)