

ECF Online County Championships – a letter to players

Dear County and National competition players,

First and foremost an apology from chess.com through the ECF's Manager of Online Chess for the perfect storm that engulfed our competition last evening. The Online Counties Championship was not the only event to be affected. Chess.com's league matches for their online clubs were also decimated and postponed to a later date. Had there been a better way, it would have been taken. I do not know if the league had more information as to the extent of envisaged server problem and when their decision to abort the round was taken. Your Controller was having to second guess for himself.

Our understanding is that yesterday's chess.com server issue was an organised but essentially unplanned restart/outage which had to be set up at short notice (ie less than an hour before) because of problems on the server which had been building up during the day as a result of an unexpected surge in demand. This surge was not specific to our competition. Very little, or no notice, however was given to users of the platform and our technical contacts were just as in the dark as the rest of us of a pending problem. We are told that had Chess.com waited until a better moment there would likely have been a hard crash/ restart for the relevant servers which would have been a worse outcome for platform users.

Secondly, thank you to those captains and players who made contact with me before start of play and subsequently to alert me to the pending shut-downs. The first report to reach me at about 6:20pm was of a server reboot at 6:30pm coinciding with the start of play, which enabled an immediate decision to be made to extend time by fifteen minutes, delaying the start of play to 6:45 and the default time to 7pm, with a view to ensuring that all games got underway within the competition rules. This was communicated to captains just before the start of play. I have since been informed that other participants were aware of the 6:30pm server shut down from messaging in live chess as early as 6pm, providing an after the event indication that there was not conformity across the country.

As more of you logged in within the space of 5 minutes the reboot message became one of a shut-down at 7pm, prompting a further decision to delay the start of play to 7:10pm which was communicated to captains and arbiters a few minutes after the official start of play and posted on the home page of the LMS, the one media I knew that all players should have been told they could consult during play to keep abreast of their team's results as they were posted.

Many of you were seeking either directly or through your team captains guidance on what to do and what the shut-down meant in respect of affected games. Again, this was issued to team captains. With no sign of servers coming back online, arbiters unable to monitor and some team captains starting to decide on team solutions, no indication that there would not be any further shutdowns I took the decision to abort the round. It was clear to me that there would be no consistency across the competition and extended or further disruption was likely given what had occurred before. Some of you will only have been aware of some of this and some may have been unaware at all of the extent of the issues affecting others and the competition.

I and the ECF Manager of Online Chess have no doubts that the decision taken to abort and for the round to be replayed was in the best interests of the competition, keeping all teams in the round on the same playing field. We are also conscious that teams with non-playing captains were inevitably asking for and receiving more information from teams where captains were

engaged in play. Very few of you have signed up to join the competition Club page on chess.com, so would not have received news of the abort posting there.

The now confirmed rolling restart is the worst type of shut down for our competition, making decision making intended to achieve consistency across the competition almost impossible. This is not unheard of on other platforms either. The England Women's Club event on Lichess suffered from a similar problem, again with a rescheduled round. We were unlucky.

Going forward, your team captains will have an opportunity on Wednesday evening to contribute as to the date for replaying round 1 before the semi-finals on 8th August. Saturday 1st August is looking like the best option were a Saturday to be the preferred. Monday or Wednesday evenings are possible weekday possibilities. We have arbiters to consider too. If you do have a preference as to the timing of the restored round, then do contact your captain so that they can contribute to the process.

One county has elected to appeal the decision to abort in the context of their own match. However, the ruling of the Home Director here will inevitably have consequences across the Competition, so any consensus reached on the rescheduling will of course be subject to that appeal. Your team captains will be notified of the process the Home Director decides upon for submissions to the appeal process.

The fixtures for the remaining rounds will proceed unaltered. So, this Saturday's round of matches will proceed as per the fixture list. You will play a different county team.

The ECF has received an assurance from Chess.com that planned outages for routine maintenance/ patches etc are only done in the small hours and that will continue to be the case. This type of shut down is rare. It can and has occurred on other platforms too. The ECF Online team is looking to explore ways of obtaining pre-match information generally as to pending platform issues, so that we can implement a protocol across all ECF online events. However, this is still reliant on messaging reaching the players.

As I have said before, online chess is not perfect and compromises have to be made. We are all on a learning curve here. In some ways the more problems that are thrown up at the start, the better the Finals Stage will be.

So far with the help of your committed team captains we have worked through issues that have arisen and adapted as necessary. The move to pre-match and in match data entry on the LMS between the preliminary round and round 1 is an example of this, with a view to reducing the administration for matches for captains and giving players more information.

Communication

It is apparent that there is a need for participating players to receive control messages en bloc without the current filter through team captains, both in the immediate run up to the start of play and, where essential, during play.

There are two means available to us to achieve this.

- a) Firstly, looking at the home page of the ECF LMS. You are already looking at the fixtures page during play for your team's results.
- b) Secondly, looking at for news posts from the ECF Online English County Championship Club. You need to have requested access to this Club to be a member.

Players were encouraged to join this club as well as your ECF County Club but the take up so far has been poor. This can easily be remedied. Simply go to the page and make your join request.

These are simple things all players can do to ensure that control messages reach them. If we become aware of a widespread server problem in the future resulting in disconnects, you will have that information available to you.

Messages were posted on both these media on Saturday.

One of the areas I am looking at is use of **Game Chat between players in a game**. This so far has been viewed as a possible means of distraction and best avoided. However, as Saturday has shown a means to communicate with your opponent in game might have benefits. I am open minded. Let your team captain know what you think and they can report back to me on Wednesday evening.

So far, communication with your team captains has been excellent. I have run many competitions and this has had the most involvement from your captains and I think to the better for the competition. They have been involved in the process from very early on. Without them, we would not have had a competition at all.

Let's make it easier for them too, particularly those who are playing. You all can and should play your part in this.

Switching Platforms

This is not practical during matches. Online chess operates in a controlled environment. Our arbiters need to be able to monitor play. Players need to be familiar with the processes for the platform on which they play (there are still some getting to grips with chess.com procedures, including the odd titled player). Communication channels need to be specific to the platform in use. The disconnection procedure (for server failure) is specific to the platform. Disconnections within this category may take different forms. Post-match reports suggest that Saturday's shut down affected players differently, so when do you switch ? As with much of online chess, what seems a simple solution often is not and with hidden consequences.

An example of this is **resumptions after disconnections**. **The rule (which was not universally followed by those unaware of the control team messages) is that there should be a new game**. Many of you would, but for the rule, naturally think to resume where you left off by repeating moves played. Yes, you can do this, but you run the risk of your play attracting the attention of the anti-cheating software when out of the first few moves of the opening. Secondly it is not a fair resumption. One player will have had the benefit of what in other circumstances would be described as an open sealed move. Any built up time advantage would be lost. A new game is the simplest, fairest and safest way of proceeding for the Chess.com platform.

One of the areas I need to consider generally is **when that resumption should be**, particularly where a server issue arises towards the end of the playing session and in a competition that includes junior players of all ages. Again, do feedback on this to your team captains.

The common thread so far to our learning about online chess is the simpler the better.

Result submission

For those games that were played and concluded as a normal game of chess, this was patchy on Saturday. Please do send a chess.com message to your match arbiter whatever your result. Help your teammates who are still playing to know what the state of the match is.

Remember your arbiter has more than one match to look after and they do not know who your are. So do cite the **match reference and board number** before starting any message.

Please do send a chess.com message as this will reach your match arbiter directly. The matchday mailbox is intended as an emergency backup.

Practice with your team captain and teammates. You are members of your ECF County Club on chess.com. It is a good means to communicate directly to your captain and team mates outside of matches.

ECF Rating

I am delighted that some of you were able to play a game of chess on Saturday, albeit with interruptions and a late finish. Players will have been doing so under different conditions. Some using the disconnection procedure, others not. Some aware of the control directives, others not. Some playing friendlies, some playing match chess. I know there are permutations on all of these.

Where both players consider that they played in good faith and completed by natural chess means a game of chess under tournament conditions, those games will be submitted for ECF standard rating where the game URL or pgn is supplied. By natural chess means I mean a game that was concluded by checkmate, stalemate or by reference to the position on the board (draws on levelish terms, resignations in lost position) not as a result of a control directive, whether by abandonment or compromise.

You should submit your games for rating to your team captain with the game URL (or pgn) who will then liaise with the opposing captain to establish a consensus. Where there is consensus the game will be rated. In the event of an issue between players as to the nature of the game played, we will look at these separately.

And finally...

Hopefully, this letter will go some way to explaining what happened on Saturday and why events unfolded as this did in circumstances beyond our control. This was an exceptional occurrence. Yes, shutdowns can and do occur, but very rarely to the extent we suffered on Saturday. There are steps we can all take to improve match days and to be able to communicate effectively.

Your team captains have put in a awful lot of work to get this competition off the ground among many competing demands on their time and to make sure you have a team to play in. It has been a welcome one for many counties particularly those unable to compete in the traditional over-the-board championships. In that, the competition has achieved its objective in reaching out to the wider chess community.

The National challenges that run alongside the matches are proving popular particularly among those who miss out on selection. This and the number of you who still had the presence of

mind and intent to play a game of chess on Saturday despite the problems has shown to me that there is a desire for a longer version of online chess.

This is your competition and I hope you all will be back in action on Saturday, supporting your team captains and county chess too.

Best wishes,

Mark Murrell

ECF Controller, Counties Championships.

15th June 2020.