Timur’s Party, by Larry Smith

On Saturday, May 16, my friend Craig Anderson and I went to a chess fete for Timur Gareyev organized by Jennifer Vallens. As many of you know, Jennifer is a self-described "chess mom" (of Evan Vallens, featured on the cover of this month's “Chess Life”) and entrepreneur who has become a friend and advisor/helper to Timur. She hosted a chess party at a community center in Westlake Village, California, replete with a catered lunch, a raffle, and a 5-board simultaneous blitz blindfold exhibition. I’d estimate that about 50-60 people showed up for a chance to meet Timur and possibly play against him in the simul or in an off-hand game or two.

Jennifer introduced Craig and me to Timur when we got there. Timur is a very friendly guy, utterly without pretense. He does not appear to suffer from the burden of feeling compelled to act seriously, but lives in the moment and acts directly from the heart. I complimented him on his nerve in playing a Sicilian Wing Gambit vs Kamsky at the recent US Championship, and he shrugged it off as if to say, “why wouldn’t one do that?”

People were just beginning to arrive, so he said, "let's go play some chess!" As we were setting up the pieces for a blitz game, he started asking me random questions. I'm not sure now exactly what he asked, but it was along the lines of "Who would win in a fight, Tal or Carlsen?" I don’t know if he was just being silly or meant "in a match," but I figured he was just fooling around the way that players often do when playing chess for fun.

Anyway, we got in one blitz game before he was squired away to meet other people and announce the plans for the afternoon. He was clearly operating at half-throttle, but it was a fun game. At the end, I was down the exchange in a losing endgame, but with my 20 seconds left to Timur’s two (with no increment), he grandly said, “I claim a draw!” Fair enough!

Lunch was very good, a taco bar with made-to-order tacos and burritos. People grabbed a plateful of food and then mingled, talking with old friends or meeting new ones. Those who couldn’t do without constantly playing chess managed to work in a few blitz games before the main event, and those who were still hungry after lunch were able to partake from a wide selection of desserts.

Then we all gathered in the main hall for a chess lecture. On an exhibition board, Timur started to go over a game in the 1 e4 c5 2 d4 cxd4 3 c3 Sicilian. Looking at me, and remembering my comment about his game with Kamsky, Timur said "This is not quite a Wing Gambit, but the Morra Gambit." I "corrected" him and said, "It's a **Smith**-Morra Gambit!" Unfortunately, we never got to learn any secrets of the Smith-Morra, as the lecture was cut short in order to get the main event underway.

Timur then gave his blindfold exhibition. It was formatted as a blitz event in that each player was given 10 seconds to respond, and Timur himself took no more than 10 seconds per move. The five boards were arranged in a row, and Timur sat on a chair about eight feet away from Board 3 (the middle board) wearing a blindfold. Timur had White on each board, and he started calling out the moves: “Board 1, 1 Nf3. Board 2, 1 e4. Board 3, 1 d4. Board 4, 1 c4. Board 5, 1 Nf3.”

After he finished his first pass, he came back around and said “Board 1.” His opponent called out his move, Timur gave his response, and then he paused briefly, gathered himself, and announced, “Board 2,” and so on. He was ably assisted by Quinn Creger, who made Timur's moves for him as well as verified that each opponent’s move announcement was correct.

I watched about the first 6 or 8 moves, but it was hard to see the positions on the boards. I did try to follow the moves blindfolded myself for awhile, but it was too much work! It was more relaxing to repair to the patio to engage in some blitz games and trash talk.

After Timur had completed the exhibition (going 4-1, losing only to Master Kevin Davidson), there was a raffle for prizes for those who had donated to the cause. The long list of prizes included books, a chess clock, home-made wine donated by Jennifer’s husband Jeff, and the top prize, a chess lesson with Timur himself.

Timur is a very expansive, big-hearted person. As an example, Jay Stallings, who promotes academic chess in the Southern California area, showed up at the event a bit down in the mouth. His annual Master-Junior Simul was taking place the next day (Sunday, May 17), and one of the four masters (Tatev Abrahamyan) unfortunately had had to cancel due to illness. He was left without a qualified master for the fourth captain’s spot (the first three being Melik Khachiyan, John Daniel Bryant, and Levon Altounian). Jay approached Timur and somewhat sheepishly started explaining his predicament. But before Jay could even finish his explanation, Timur offered to shake hands and said, "Let's do it!" Not a bad substitute, and it is worth noting I think that Timur and his team of juniors won that event the next day.

Finally, at the end of the day, after the party had officially ended, the crowd was thinning out, and I was just about to do the same. Above the tumult of final conversations and moving chairs, Timur could be heard saying to the crowd, "let's play some chess!" His enthusiasm for chess, and for life in general, is inspiring.

All in all, a very entertaining chess event. Many thanks to Jennifer Vallens for staging this party!

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