

Four Irish lads at the 10th “ran an den Turm” chess festival in Blumenthal, Germany

Over the last couple of years, some strong personal connections have developed between the organizers of the famous Bunratty Chess Festival and the team that runs the “ran an den Turm” event in Germany. It all began way back in 2016 when the author of this report went to play at Bunratty for the first time after having played at the “ran an den Turm” tournament the year before. Over the next years, I returned to Bunratty as well as to “ran an den Turm” each year until 2020. In each of these years the contingent on German players I managed to convince to come along to Bunratty steadily grew - at an astonishingly exponential rate in fact. Among those were IA Sandra Schmidt and Rainer Knöchel, both members of the SC Wittstock chess club located to the north of Berlin, who were running the “ran an den Turm” event as a 5-rounds Swiss weekender since 2013. After a modest start with 45 participants for its first edition, the event had steadily grown in size and popularity to over 200 players in the last years. It was originally held at Rainer’s native place of Blumenthal and later relocated to the nearby city of Wittstock when the venue at Blumenthal became too small.

As the event had to be called off due Covid-19 restrictions in previous years, this year saw its 10th edition being held from May 1 to May 4. Differing from its earlier editions when it was an open tournament, Sandra and Rainer had decided to run it as an invitational memorial for Sandra’s partner Gregor Johann, who had tragically died in August last year as the result of a hiking accident - a horrible event which not only shook the Germany chess community but the worldwide chess arbiter community as well. Gregor was one of the most accomplished international arbiters in Germany and tournament director of the German Chess Federation for many years. With 104 participants being smaller in size compared to its previous editions, the event returned to its roots and was held once again in Blumenthal at the same venue where it all started in 2013. Overall, there were 6 sections based on rating with the highest section having a fine assortment of titled players, with 3 GMs, 3 IMs and 3 FMs sharing the section with 9 other players rated 2000 or above. Due to the unique invitational memorial character of the tournament, Sandra and Rainer had decided to make entry free of charge with no prize money. However, thanks to generous sponsorship from several small local businesses, from the municipality and from private individuals, there were still beautiful glass trophies waiting for the top-3 players in all sections. The author of this report had won one of these trophies for himself back in 2015.

Now making a brief return to the strong Irish-German ties between Bunratty and Blumenthal/ Wittstock. After Rainer and Sandra had played at Bunratty two times, they invited the Bunratty organizing team consisting of Paul Carey, Brian Scully, Ted Jennings and Gerry Graham to come over to “ran an den Turm”. In 2021, all four of them made the trip to Germany on what Gerry Graham called a “fact finding” mission in his report. They took the occasion to officially twin both tournaments, an honour that Rainer really took take pride in. Paul and Ted returned in 2023 as well as this year, joined again by Brian and for the first time by Brian’s nephew Michael Scully who is currently living in Germany as part of his studies at the University of Limerick. Beside myself as a player (and Sandra and Rainer as organizers), there were other German players among the participants who had played at Bunratty before, Jannis Lange and Tino Wagner. Tino also played at Galway this year together with his brother Andy, so like me both can be considered to be fully hooked now up on playing chess the Irish way.

The trip started for Paul, Ted and Brian on April 30 with going from Limerick to Dublin by bus, taking the plane to Hamburg and then getting to Wittstock by rental car, with Brian being the designated driver throughout the event. Michael came from Cologne to Hamburg by train where he joined the other three lads. Arriving at their hotel in Wittstock in the evening, they met me and it was a very emotional reunion. We then walked over to another hotel where several other participants, as well as Sandra and Rainer, were already waiting with a nice dinner. Over a good meal and a couple of beers, the evening went by fast and we returned to our hotel at some point late at night. One of the unique aspects of this year’s edition, due to this being a memorial event for Gregor Johann, was the fact that there was a great number of arbiters playing in the event, over 20 of them in fact spread throughout the sections including several IAs and FAs (which also included Ted and Brian). Later on when the tournament was underway, this resulted in several arbiter vs. arbiter pairings, for example Ted playing against Brigitte Große-Honebrink from Germany, one of only a few female IAs in the world. If I overheard it correctly, Brigitte said that she and Ted had worked together before at some other international event which proves that the chess world is a small one.

The next day, Thursday May 1, saw the official start of the event with a simul given by German WIM Lara Schulze. Lara is a prime example of a down-to-earth titled player who enjoys mingling with non-titled ordinary chess players. The simul was great fun for all players, with Lara actually losing two games and drawing a couple of others. Paul, Brian, Ted and Michael did not play in the simul but rather took the opportunity to do some sightseeing in Wittstock and checking out the local restaurants. The main event got underway on Friday May 2 with the first two rounds. The time control was a tight 60 minutes for the first 30 moves and an additional 30 minutes for the rest of the game, with no increment (despite the fact that digital clocks were used at all boards and DGT boards being used at almost all boards throughout all sections). Paul and Ted were playing in the B section, myself in the D section, and Brian and Michael in the E section. Round 3 and 4 were played on Saturday and the final round on Sunday in the morning.

In terms of results, the tournament was a rather mixed bag for us. The full results are available via chess-results.com. As a brief summary, Paul and Brian were in the run for a trophy up until the final round, with Brian being on 3.5 and Paul

at 3.0 points after the first 4 rounds. Unfortunately, Paul lost his last game in a complicated endgame against the eventual winner of the B section and placed 6th out of 22 in the final ranking. Brian held his final opponent to a draw. That got him 4.0 out of 5 in the end with 3 wins and 2 draws and secured him one of the trophies in his section. With all top-3 players being equal on points, it came down to the Buchholz tie-breaker which saw Brian on third place. Congratulations to Brian on this amazing achievement! While he somewhat tried to downplay its significance, I'm quite sure this will forever have a special place in his heart. Ted came last in his section with one draw out of the 5 rounds, myself placed 10th out of 17 with 2.0 out of 5 (with 2 draws out of 4 games and a free point in the first round thanks to a bye due to an unequal players number), and Michael came in at 14th out of 20 with 2.0 points (1 win and 2 draws).

However, in the end it were not really the results that mattered for all of us but the fun to have and the memories to be made. Friday evening saw a Blitz tournament, a Chess960 tournament and a Bughouse tournament running in parallel. The Chess960 tournament (a 7-round Swiss tournament with a time control of 5 min + 3 seconds increment) was run by myself, and the whole Irish contingent joined that event which saw a total of 16 players. It should be noted at this point that I was introduced to Chess960 by the Irish lads at Bunratty, and later ran a Chess960 tournament as part of "ran an den Turm" several times. On Saturday evening, Rainer had arranged for a full-scale buffet and some live music. On Sunday evening, our Irish lads as well as Jannis and myself went to an Italian restaurant at Wittstock where we were later joined by Sandra, IA Hugo Schulz and his wife Ingrid (who is doing the photography work at the event since several years), IA Ralph Alt and a couple of other guys. It was a great conclusion to an event that will live on in our memories for a long time.

As I write this report in the late Monday evening, I received the news that our Irish lads have returned safely at their Limerick homes. Going from Limerick to Germany or from Germany to Bunratty to play in a chess weekend is quite exhausting in terms of trip time, but all of us would agree that it is totally worth it. I've made some of my best chess-related memories while playing fives times at Bunratty, and by now I think it's safe to say the same is true for Paul, Brian and Ted who made it to "ran an den Turm" for several times (and Gerry who was sorely missed this year). And it's not only about making memories but more importantly, it's about making friendships and keeping them alive despite the distance.

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