NATO Chess Championships 2026 – Jurmala, Latvia, Oct 2026

By Dave Tucker

The 36th NATO chess championship was hosted by Latvia and held in the seaside resort of Jurmala on 11th to 17th October. The venue was the Baltic Beach Hotel and Spa which had excellent facilities. Eighteen nations entered teams giving a total of 136 entrants and making this the largest ever tournament in the series. Sweden and Albania being present for the first time.

The format continued to be a 7 round Swiss where the top scoring player becomes NATO champion. In addition, team places are determined by aggregating the top 4 scores out of the 6 players per team. The players in the national teams should all be active members of the armed forces or civilians in the defence ministry of their nation. A further 9 teams were present composed of officials, veterans and lifetime members (more than 8 appearances) and these all competed under the NATO flag. There were 19 players in the field with FIDE titles with 1 GM, 1 WGM, 3 IM etc. Ages of those competing ranged from 20 years to 93 years. The oldest player was again General Steffers representing the Netherlands.

The UK team was selected after the Armed Forces Championship at Shrivenham held in April. Several of the top players were required for active duty and unfortunately had to be replaced with lower rated substitutes. We did not expect to match our 5th place last year in Poland and that proved to be the case. The UK squad included veterans and life members such as myself.



The UK Team

The town of Jurmala lies approximately 25km west of the capital Riga. It was favoured for many years as a summer getaway for high-ranking Russian officials when they controlled the country. It has a long white sandy beach and a main street full of pleasant shops. There are also many mansion-sized houses, the older ones constructed in wood and of varying condition with some newer very expensive looking properties among them. In October most of these houses appeared to be unoccupied. Our players were happy to discover that the cost of food and drinks was much cheaper in the town compared to the hotel.

There was a cultural visit to Riga during the week. Most of our players had booked two nights in a Riga hotel anyway but this was part of the programme. Riga is a very vibrant city with a number of tourist attractions. Our team visited the Riga Chess Club and played against some of the locals. It is in a couple of rooms off a pub and is overlooked by a portrait of Mikhail Tal, the magician of Riga. There is also a statue of that great world champion in the city.



Mikhail Tal Statue

Coming to the tournament, it was run very smoothly by the hosts. The playing conditions were very good, and almost all of the boards were connected to the internet. As far as I am aware there were no incidents or disputes throughout. The opening ceremony was a bit low key compared to some others we have experienced but was short.



The playing venue, adorned with flags from each of the participating nations

The final evening was taken up by a gala dinner. There was a band with a singer present and folk dancers for entertainment. The hosts had decided to combine this with the prizegiving. In my opinion this was not ideal because usually the prizes are awarded prior to the dinner. This led to a long wait between courses and since we were placed towards the back, difficulty in seeing who was getting the gongs. Still a minor issue given a very enjoyable event. The prize for top veteran went to UK player Dave Onley, our many-time top army champion, who is now a train driver, who received a liquid filled amphora as his trophy. The nature of the filling was not disclosed.



Dave Onley receiving his prize for top Veteran from IMCC Chairman Col Slawomir Kedzierski

This visit to Latvia was a first for me. It was an enjoyable experience. Italy agreed to host the 37th edition next year at La Spezia in October 2027.

The UK team was sponsored this year by Forces Mutual and The Chess Trust. We are very grateful to their support in enabling us to provide this opportunity to our players. In addition, the UKAFCA still receives support from IBM.

Forces Mutual

THE CHESS TRUST

The results:

Individual

1. Vahap Sanal (GM) 7 NATO Champion

2.Laura Unuk (IM) 6 Slovenia

3. Robert Stein (FM) 5.5 on tie break from 5 others

Team

1. Turkey 23.5 points

2. Germany 20

3. Sweden 19 on tie break from Latvia

Blitz

1. Mark Timmermans (Netherlands) 7.5/9 on tie break from 2 others

UK Scores

UK Team 15 points 12th place.

Dan Wells 4.5, Glen Parker 4, Mike Fielding 3.5, Thomas Mason 3, Lee Lavender 2.5, Steve Valentine 2

Other UK

Dave Onley 4, Dave Tucker 3.5, Dave Ross 3, Chris Lamming 3, Ben Woolf 2.5, Chas Chapman 1, Steve O'Neill 0.5

NATO Round 1

White: Marko Sauer (Veteran) Germany 2054

Black: Lee Lavender UK 1772



Opening: Caro Kann

As usual the first round of this swiss event saw the top half of the draw playing the lower half. Army Corporal Lee Lavender faced a much higher rated opponent and with the black pieces which looked a tough test. In this game he plays aggressively and upsets his very experienced opponent.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nf6 5.Ng3

This retreat does not promise any advantage. 5.Nxf6 is more popular because it disturbs black's pawn structure. 5…exf6 seems to be the fashion rather than 5…gxf6 although both are quite playable

5…h5!? 6.Bc4

It might have been better to play 6.h4 here considering what ensues

6…h4 7.N3e2 h3!?



A disrupting move. How should white respond? 8.g3?! looks dubious after 8…b5 9.Bd3 Qd5 white has an uncomfortable position or if here 9.Bb3 c5. The best reply appears to be 8.Nxh3

8.gxh3?! b5 9.Bb3?!

Played to prevent 9…Qd5 but 9.Bd3 is safer

9…Bb7

Finally developing a piece and looking to dominate the long white diagonal

10.c4 bxc4 11.Bxc4 e6 12.Qb3 Qb6 13.Be3 Nbd2 14.f3

White has a problem to develop his kingside pieces. This move blocks the long diagonal but still leaves the king's knight and rook immobile

14…Nd5 15.Bf2 c5 16.O-O-O Rc8 17.Kb1 Rb8?

17…Be7 was better

18.dxc5?!

Either 18.Qxb6 or 18.Nc3 were playable with only a small advantage to black

18…Qxb3 19.Bxb3 Nxc5 20.Bg3 Rc8 21.Bc4 a6 22.Bxd5 Bxd5 23.Nc3 Bb7



White, a pawn ahead, is still crippled by the weakness on the long diagonal

24.h4 Be7 25.Nge2 Bxf3 26.Rhf1 Bh5

Black is much better having captured the f pawn and now with the two bishops and prospects to exploit the weak h pawns

27.Rd2 Bf6(?)

No harm done but black missed 27…Bxh4 or first 27…Bg6+ and then Bxh4

28.Rf4 Bg6+ 29.Ka1 Nd3?!

29…O-O would bring the king's rook into play

30.Ra4 Rc6

Looks obvious but the computer suggests 30…Ne5 31.Rxa6 Nc4

31.Ne4 Bxb2+

A brave move but white is now close to equality

32.Rxb2 Nxb2 33.Kxb2 Rh5 34.N2c3 Rb6+ 35.Kc1 Bxe4 36.Rxe4 Rc5 37.Kc2 Rbc6 38.Re3 f6

The advance of the central passed pawns will give black winning chances

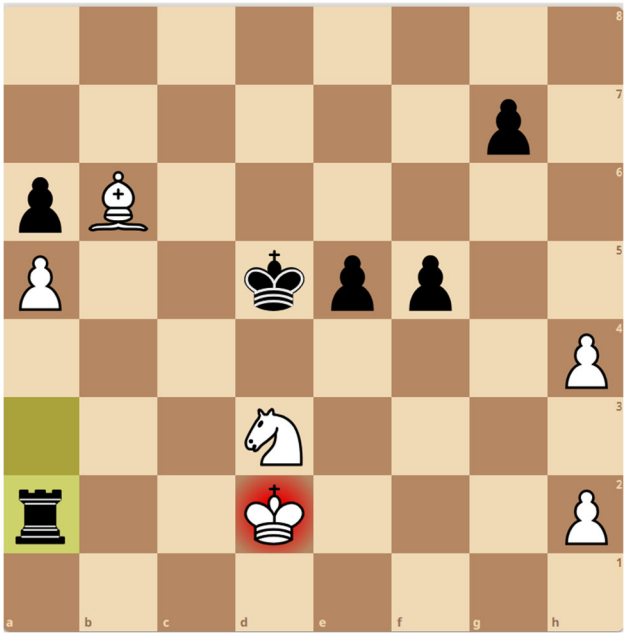
39.Kd2 e5 40.Rd3 Kf7 41.Bf2 Rc4 42.a3?

Hard to see the point of this move

42…Ke6 43.Nd5? Rc2+

The a pawn, having moved, is not en prise but the advance of the f pawn looms large.

44.Ke3 Rd6 45.Nb4 Rxd3+ 46.Nxd3 Rc3 47.a4 f5 48.Kd2 Ra3 49.Bb6 Kd5 50.a5 Ra2+



White has done well to preserve his a-pawn. He might now be playing on the increment because his next move is a blunder. 51.Kc3 Rxh2 52.Nb4+ would pick up the black pawn on a6 and give a faint hope of a result

51.Ke3? f4+ 52.Nxf4+ exf4+ 53.Kxf4 Rxh2 54.Kg5 Ke6 55.h5 Rg2+ 56.Kf4 Kf7 57.Kf5 Kg8 58.Bd4 Kh7 59.Bc3 Kh6 0-1

NATO Round 2

White: Glen Parker 1962 UK

Black: Stephan Hansen 2138 Denmark

Opening: French Defence

This game from round 2 was the first morning round and started at 08.30am. It doesn't appeal to all players who have just taken their breakfast. Mr Hansen is well beaten here by our former RAF champion but made a good overall score of 4.5 in the tournament.

1.e4 e6 2.Nf3 d5

2…c5 converting to a sicilian defence may be preferable but not to a French defence enthusiast

3.e5 Bd7 4.a3 a6

4…c5 would equalise immediately. White now tries to obstruct the advance of the c pawn

5.b4 Bb5

Looking to exchange his "bad" bishop but white doesn't oblige

6.d3 f6

It might have been better to play 6…Ne7 then Nf5 etc

7.Be2 Nd7?!

7…fxe5 was better

8.c4

8. d4 looks better

8…dxc4 9.dxc4 Bc6 10.exf6?!

10.O-O and white is better

10…Qxf6 11.Ra2 Ne7?!

Simply 11…Ne5 would be equal

12.Bg5 Qf7?

The queen had to move somewhere but this is the worst choice. Neither of 12…Qf5 or 12…Qg6 looks attractive because the queen is exposed but they only leave white with a small advantage

13.Rd2 Ng6

Not 13…O-O-O? 14.Ne5

14.O-O h6?



White has a big advantage due to black's misplaced pieces and his weak e pawn. Relatively best would have been 14…Be7 15.Bxe7 Qxe7 16.Nd4 with white on top. The move played weakens the defence of the knight on g6 and turns out badly.

15.Be3 Bd6 16.Nd4 Nb8?

Looking to prevent getting doubled c pawns after the bishop is captured on c6. 16…Nf6 was marginally better

17.Bh5 Ke7?

Losing on the spot however 17…O-O 18.Qg4 Kh7 19.c5 followed by Nxe6 is crushing

18.Nxc6+ bxc6 19.Qc2 1-0

White has a choice of winning ideas here. This simply nets the knight on g6 after 19…Kf6 20. Nc3 etc

NATO Round 6

White: Dan Wells (UK) 2040

Black: Finn Pedersen (DEN) 2266

Opening: Caro Kann

In this game our leading Ministry of Defence civilian player, Dan Wells crosses swords with the strong Danish player Finn Pedersen who is an FM and also a former NATO champion.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 Bf5 4.Nf3 e6 5.Be2

This is the Nigel Short variation, thought to be the sharpest try against the Caro Kann

5…c5 6.O-O Nc6 7.c3

Several other moves have been tried here all leading to complicated struggles. Black appears to have a comfortable advance French defence position where his bishop is not blocked in.

7…cxd4 8.Nxd4 Nxd4 9.cxd4 Ne7 10.Qb3

One might have expected 10.Nc3 or 10.Be3 here

10…Qd7 11.Nc3 Nc6 12.Be3 Be7 13.g4!?



White embarks on a kingside pawn storm aiming for a swift f4 and then f5

13…Bg6 14.f4 f6

14…f5 might have been safer

15. f5!

The black king is still in the centre and if the e pawn captures on f5 the defence is removed from the pawn at d5

15…Bf7 16. Nxd5?!



This unexpected capture turns the game in white's favour. Fortune favours the bold!. At first sight it looks dubious but it sets problems for black. If 16…Qxd5 17.Bc4 Qe4 18.Rf4 Nxd4 19.Rxe4 Nxb3 20.axb3 favours white. The computer suggests 16…exd5 17.e6 Bxe6 18.fxe6 Qxe6 19.Bf3 Rd8 as better for black but white has quite a lot of compensation with active pieces and the two bishops. Black is clearly knocked off balance and meets this move with a losing blunder.

16…Bd8? 17.fxe6

A good move although 17.Nf4! is even better. It allows 17…Nxd4 but then 18.Bad4 Qxd4+ 19.Kg2 Qxe4+? 20.Bf3 wins

17…Bxe6 18.Bc4 Bxg4?

18…Na5 was relatively best

19.exf6 Bh3 20.Rf4?!

Better 20.f7+

20…Bxf6 21.Nxf6+ gxf6 22.Re4+ Kd8 23.Bf2 Na5 24.Qb4?

This is an error that lets black back into the game. 24.Qf3 was better

24…Nxc4 25.Qxc4 Rc8 26.Qb3 Rc6?

This loses. 26…Bf5 was required

27.Rae1 f5 28.Re7?

Gives black a lifeline. 28.Bh4+ Kc8 29.Re7 was winning

28…Rg6+ 29.Bg3 Qxd4+??

Maybe a time pressure blunder. 29…Qc6 eyeing g2 would continue the game but now the black king is doomed

30.Kh1 f5 31.Qxb7 Qd6 32.Qa8+ Bc8 33.Bh4 Rf6 34.Bxf6 1-0