



2nd December 2015

ACTION-PACKED SEMI-FINALS IN THE BRITISH KNOCKOUT CHAMPIONSHIP AS HOWELL AND PERT QUALIFY FOR GRAND FINAL

The second day of the British Knockout Championship, which saw the four remaining players battle it out for the two spots in the event's final, could hardly have produced more excitement than it did. Both match-ups, Howell-Jones and McShane-Pert, went into play-offs, and at the end of the day it was Howell and Pert who won the all-important games to qualify for the final!



Gawain Jones - David Howell

In the match between England's two most promising players, Howell and Jones, Howell took the lead when he won a very convincing game in the morning. However, Jones was able to fight back in the afternoon as he outplayed Howell to level the score. In hindsight, Howell should probably have taken the exchange with 14...Bxa1 in this game, as he was eventually punished for his overly passive play.



Luke McShane - Nicholas Pert

In the match-up between Nicholas Pert and Luke McShane, the latter was the clear favourite, but Pert had showed the previous day that he was determined to fully take advantage of his last-minute invitation to the event (as a replacement for Nigel Short). The day started perfectly for him, as McShane blundered an important pawn right out of the opening. At this point, many people expected Pert to win the game, but McShane defended extremely well and eventually managed to hold the draw in an opposite coloured bishop ending where he was two pawns down. In the second game, Pert managed to quite comfortably hold the draw with the black pieces, thus also taking this encounter into extra-time.



Maxime Vachier-Lagrave following the games at the Hilton London Olympia Hotel

Both play-off matches had the spectators, both those at the Hilton Hotel and those in front of their computers, on the edge of their seats as we got to witness some nerve-wracking action.

Nick Pert was without any doubt the hero of the tie-breaks, as he surprisingly eliminated McShane with a clear 2-0 victory. The first game, where he yet again played an early g5 as Black, is especially worth replaying. Although McShane ended up losing the game on time, Pert was close to winning in the final position anyway. In the second game however, McShane reached a winning advantage, but Pert defended tenaciously and ended up even deciding the game in his favour. This meant that from stepping in as a last-minute replacement, Pert made it to first finalist of the British Knockout Championship, all the while securing a minimum prize of £10,000. A very impressive performance!

The play-off between Howell and Jones on the other hand was an incredibly close affair, as it went all the way to the nerve-wracking Armageddon decider. In the first game, Howell was pushing, but had to settle for a draw after misplaying the position when he ran short of time (yet again!). In the return game, it was Jones who was clearly better and Howell only survived by the skin of his teeth. Had Jones played 38.c5 (instead of 38.Qe7), he would probably have taken both the game and the match. However, as things stood, everything was going to be decided in the Armageddon game. Howell won the toss and chose to play with the black pieces. This proved to be a good decision, as he always seemed in control of the game and not only held the necessary draw, but convincingly outplayed Jones to advance to the final.



The beginning of the crucial tie-break games

To round up the first two days of this brand new event, it is probably fair to say the tournament has been a resounding success. Not only did everyone seem to enjoy this new and exciting event, but the players also treated us to some excellent and thrilling chess. Nick Pert is surely the man of the hour so far, having come all the way from replacement player to finalist, and it will be very interesting to see if he can keep up the momentum when he faces Howell in the 6-match final. The scene is definitely set for yet more great chess action, so make sure you don't miss out when the first game of the grand final starts at 4.30pm on Friday!

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