The King-Nest


Echec 1.9-BB


CHESS COMPUTERS IN NOVI SAD

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During the great chess Olympiad in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, four chess microcomputers were to be found in an open group of 218 chess-players. Those four non-human players achieved an exceptional tournament performance. In the unique ambiance, with all the stars of the chess firmament and thousands of visitors, the computers distinguished themselves by their fine quality of play.

The Setting

Church bells ring out over Novi Sad ... Try to imagine a sports complex covering 35 acres, because that is the size of the hosting accommodation. There is a number of vast halls, three of which are devoted to chess. One for National Men’s teams, one for National Women’s teams and the third for an Open Group. In the latter were 218 players, competing according to the Swiss system. Amongst this group were 4 computers, each of which also had to go the full nine rounds. Before the event some pessimism was evident, there were, after all, 3 IGMs, 32 IMs and 68 FMs. The Mephisto 68030 and the Final Chess Risc Card succeeded in vanquishing not a few of them, in games of considerable quality. Many of the strong players were Russian, playing in the hope of winning what for them were large prizes between $300 and $1500. They were originally-pleased to find themselves offered a computer to beat, an easy task they thought. But, that was not the way it was to be; often those amiable East Europeans would find themselves struggling for up to 8 hours or more just to finish a game and then lose as well. The Mephisto 68030 and the Risc Card with Ed Schröder’s program, in particular, were often a match for even these strong players. (Risc means Reduced Instruction Set Computer; it is a chip which is particularly suitable for chess programs and the card, developed in Holland, runs at 16 MHz.)

Impressed

Using its fast components the Risc Card can evaluate 4000 positions a second. Considering how much chess knowledge is packed into Schröder’s program, and what a brake it can be on the performance, we note that 4000 positions per second is very fast. This new configuration for the PC, and probably for other home computers in the near future, is a clear addition to our armament. Below, a game is presented played by Ed Schröder’s new program. From the game you may conclude that the computers have been little impressed by their illustrious opponents.
In the West we may find chess computers everyday things, but East Europeans find them something else. They crowded round, in front and even behind the machines. It got so busy we could hardly move, even to escape to heed the call of nature. The call was a flood of questions threatening to swamp me, posed in languages beyond my ken, or at least ones I failed to understand. Nevertheless they persisted with broken English and gesticulation in their attempts, still not always completely successful, to communicate. Yet, we had great fun. There is one story worth to be told. An African spectator became quite angry when I made a move for the computer. He replaced, to the astonishment of the human player at least, the piece, restrained me physically and then proceeded to make a different move. He failed to understand entirely what happens in such competitions. He made it very plain to me that I should clear off, so it was with considerable difficulty that we finally persuaded him that nothing untoward had taken place with the computer’s move. When he finally grasped this he began to grin broadly and, as a gesture of friendship, landed me a clap on the shoulder I was to feel for days.

The Risc Card’s play impressed us greatly, including the chess masters when they carried out the analyses after the event. The Mephisto 68030 impressed by its relentless ability to punish mercilessly the slightest mistakes of its frail and fallible human opponents. The Mephisto Polgar 10 MHz also scored highly and even the Mephisto MM5, at 18 MHz, did well when it worked. It lost badly at one point when a good position was sacrificed by a breakdown that could not be repaired on the spot.

The Tournament Performance Ratings (TPRs) of all the computers are high, and deservedly so. The 68030 with a rating of 2360 was an exception, principally due to the way the Swiss system rewards a little bit of extra luck. Nevertheless it still justly deserved to be the leading computer. Grandmaster Tal, playing a 10-game speed-chess match against the 68030, could only achieve a score of 5-5. Novi Sad was a tiring but enjoyable experience. With all the top players the computers were still a point of discussion. The keen-eyed reader will have spotted that three of the four programs were from the hand of Ed Schröder, a better compliment we can not give this Dutchman. Finally, the TPRs after 9 games for each machine were: Mephisto 68030 - 2360; Final Chess Risc Card - 2277; Mephisto Polgar 10 MHz - 2249; Mephisto MM 5 18 MHz - 2157. These ratings are FIDE standard.

It was with regret that we took our leave of the biggest chess circus ever seen. The computers, of course, knew nothing of this; they were not even aware of what they had seen those machines do.

Final Chess Risc Card - Yusrei Mohamed (ELO 2210)
Novi Sad, 1990


ACM’s PANELLISTS, New York, November 1990.