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BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL, GREAT AND SMALL

Who was the genius who discovered that an army marched better when in unison than when allowing the fastest hoplites to outpace those burdened down with heavy impediments? Could it be an early genius such as Xenophon, marching back his Ten Thousand through the wilds of Asia Minor? Or did the principle of a disciplined march in serried ranks come in as late as Alexander the Great?

Whoever invented, perfected or even orchestrated that way of proceeding physically, on the ground, in difficult terrain, had an immense edge on the undisciplined, the boastful, the indomitable individualists. Our best witness are the Romans who would march as though by clockwork.

It is not too far-fetched to apply the discipline of marching in an orderly way along a parallel front to what we see happening in computer chess nowadays. Not too long ago, the world was, it seemed, a contentious place in which only the hardest of hardware, marching ahead of all the rest, stood a chance of achievement. Such, we now think, would have been a throwback to prideful, Homeric times: the race would be to the swift, and to precious few among them only.

By all the signs we can read at the start of the academic year which will carry us into the late summer of 1996, the race is not to the swift, or not so exclusively. The battle is to the strong indeed, but those strong players differ widely in brawn, far more widely than they vary among themselves in sheer speed or brute-force features.

To unmix our metaphors: from what we can discern, we now see that the great and the small, the mighty workstations and the clever vest-pocket engines, march in parallel, presenting a united front, irresistibly and harmoniously progressing against silicon-only arrogance. All events scheduled for this academic year project the image of a formidable army marching in disciplined unison against its human opponents, with a remarkable unanimity: we, the machines, are united, we are disciplined and we have harmonized any discrepancies that might distract us from showing that we are your betters.

Three varieties of event are on the books which will hint at the march of our mechanical masters, if such should indeed materialize. Let us take them in turn. We are expectant of many a meeting between computers, human beings excluded except as humble operators. First and foremost among these chip-chip events will be the WMCC in Paderborn. More interesting to readers of this Journal will be those mixed occasions – call them SiC, Silicon against Carbon – where chippies and hippies stand on an equal footing; thus, three key words will have to identify them, say Harvard, AEGON, and to be topped off by Kasparov.

Finally, ahead of us, excitingly, there is a conference on Advances in Computer Chess. Your Editors take a pleasantly congratulatory position on this: any eighth edition of a triennial book marks its 21st birthday, the traditional coming of age. Thus, by analogy, one of this year's events will constitute the true adulthood of computer chess – hurray for its majority!

It will not have escaped our readers's attention that, taking them for all in all, we have noticed a parallel disciplined march from the slow and humble to the bright, brash and bold: whatever their physical strength, they now seem united; whether great or small, it would be brazen to describe this season's engines as anything but bright and beautiful.

Bob Herschberg
Jaap van den Herik

Our former Editorial Assistant, Mrs. José Cornips, no longer is employed by this Journal. As of September 1, 1995 her duties, much as they have been appreciated, have been taken over by Johanna Hellemons.

There has been a major revision in the telephone-number allocation system in The Netherlands. For the Journal Editorial offices, the change consists in inserting the digit 3 after the Maastricht area code (43) and before the subscriber's number, e.g., +31 43 3883477 or +31 43 3883525; the same digit 3 is also prefixed to our fax number, which now reads +31 43 3252392. Switch-over time is expected to be considerable, about half a year either way.

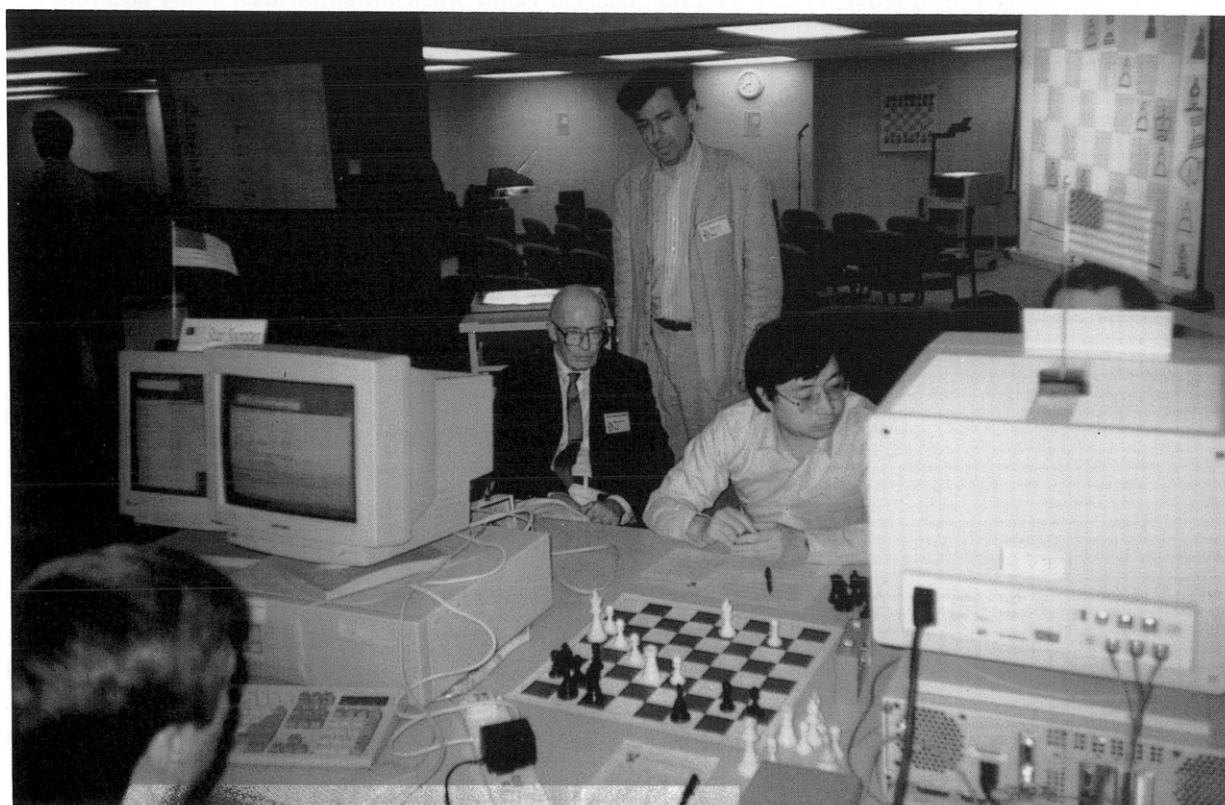


Photo by Jaap van den Herik

ROBERT BYRNE (SITTING), WATCHING THE FIRST-ROUND GAME DEEP BLUE vs. *SOCRATES, Hong Kong, May 25, 1995.