

Proposal from the Sofia Rule commission

Summary

The Sofia Rule commission submits the following recommendations for the ECU General Assembly:

- that draw offers before move 40 should be forbidden in all ECU competitions
- that senior events should be excluded from this regulation
- that ECU should review the qualifying system for the FIDE World Cup

Background

At the extraordinary ECU General Assembly, held in Aix-les-Bains, France on March 29, 2011, the ECU Board proposed to introduce the Sofia Rule in the ECU competitions.

The discussions concluded with the General Assembly stating that it was in favour of introducing the Sofia Rule and the ambition should be to start using it in ECU competitions from January 1, 2012. But before making a formal decision to introduce it, there was a need for a more detailed proposal considering the consequences of such a change.

A three man commission was therefore set up to submit a recommendation towards the General Assembly in Greece in November. This commission was appointed by the ECU President and consisted of two federation delegates, Anil Surender and Lars-Henrik Bech Hansen, and one representative from the ACP, Laurent Fressinet.

Way of working

The commission has held two Skype meetings. The first meeting was to set the scope of the investigation and agree on the way forward. The second meeting was to conclude on the recommendation presented in this document.

Between the meetings, the commission members have looked into several aspects related to the Sofia Rule, including discussions with organisers and a survey towards the players.

Discussion

Overall, people were in favour of introducing the Sofia Rule, or at least some variant of it. However the general perception was that it was more suited towards top-level tournaments or official championships. This is quite representative of the current view and for the Sofia Rule to become more accepted it requires a significant shift in mentality. The general recommendation should therefore be to introduce it as broadly as possible within the ECU structure.

One problem that was highlighted from both organisers and players was about imposing a strict Sofia Rule, not allowing draw offers at all during the game. This would require the tournaments to have arbiters or advisors of grandmaster level to be able to grant draws in dead drawn positions. The players also felt this was too much to demand and the general consensus was that prohibiting draw offers before a certain number of moves was the preferred way forward.

We have in our recommendation chosen to forbid draws before 40 moves since this represents a logical point in the game, in most cases coinciding with the first time control. Choosing 40 moves removes the need for grandmaster advisors since hardly any games will be subject to dead draws

before this point. 30 moves was also discussed, but we felt this was too early in the game and would subtract too much from the game value.

When looking at the ECU tournaments and where to introduce the Sofia Rule we have, as earlier stated, tried to adopt the broad approach. The only exception was the senior events which we felt should be excluded from the Sofia Rule, allowing the players to take rest days if needed (although we realise that many players would never dream of doing that!). Many of the senior events also include an aspect of vacation and/or social activities that other championship tournaments do not.

The main point of interest for this rule was of course the Individual European Championship. Although our final recommendation states that the Sofia Rule should be introduced in this tournament, it was not an easy decision to reach. One reason was that many of the participants, amateurs as well as grandmasters, cover their own expenses and under those conditions it might feel unfair to them not to be able to make a quick draw. In case of the amateurs players to simply be able to enjoy a day off during a vacation, while the grandmasters are robbed of one aspect of the game while playing for their livelihood.

But the major drawback is that the European Championship acts as a qualifying tournament for the FIDE World Cup. With so many lucrative spots available, draws among the top boards are quite frequent. Imposing the Sofia Rule under these circumstances, when both players have so much to gain from a quick draw, is far from optimal and also increases the risk of pre-arranged draws. We have decided not to include any specific penalty for this behaviour in our recommendation, but still feel it is necessary to highlight this potential drawback when introducing the Sofia Rule in this competition.

Since there is such an apparent conflict between the players' needs (gaining a quick draw) and the game of chess (avoiding quick draws), the commission has decided to step outside its scope and also issue a recommendation that the qualifying system for the FIDE World Cup is reviewed, as an outcome of introducing the Sofia Rule. We feel this is necessary to ensure a consistent and fair treatment of the players.

Conclusion

Based on the conclusions reached above, the commission makes the following recommendations for the ECU General Assembly:

- that draw offers before move 40 should be forbidden in all ECU competitions
- that senior events should be excluded from this regulation
- that ECU should review the qualifying system for the FIDE World Cup

Sweden, Denmark and France, June 1, 2011

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