



People play chess on a giant chess board at Hyde Park in Sydney. —AFP photos



A photo shows the web page of Chess.com showing more than 46 million members with 7.5 million matches played today and over 156,000 people online.

Queen's Gambit accepted: Hit show sparks chess frenzy

Hit miniseries “The Queen’s Gambit” has led to a surge of interest in chess, with one popular website registering millions of new players and academies reporting unprecedented demand. Netflix said the show, which follows the turbulent career of a fictional female child prodigy in the 1950s and 1960s, has become its most-watched ever and is currently the number-one ranked program in 63 countries. Gaming site Chess.com said the series had prompted a wave of interest—already piqued by the pandemic and top-flight chess players appearing on the Twitch gaming platform—with new daily registrations up 400 percent. “Since the release of ‘The Queen’s Gambit’ we have seen roughly 2.5 million new members join,” the website’s Nick Barton told AFP. “Nearly each day of November we’ve set a new company record for the most members joining.”

Worldwide, Google reported searches for “chess” are at their highest level in 14 years. It is just the latest burst of popularity for a game that is believed to have originated in India in the seventh century and was played—and occasionally banned—by medieval European kings, before be-

coming more established in the late 1800s. In modern times, chess had a resurgence during the Cold War. That period forms the backdrop for “The Queen’s Gambit”, and the story of a youthful American taking on a wily Soviet grandmaster is inspiring another generation of players. “There has been a massive surge in adults interested,” according to chess master and Sydney Academy of Chess director Brett Tindall, who called it “unprecedented”. Tindall told AFP he has fielded calls from 40–50 adults looking for lessons in the last few weeks, and when carrying academy-branded kit he reports being stopped in the street and asked his opinion about the series.

More women playing

On school visits, normally ambivalent teachers have gone out of their way to approach him, and some students are tuning in too—even though the series features heavy alcohol and drug abuse. “I was at a school this morning, and few kids were talking about it, and I was like: ‘guys, I don’t think you’re really meant to be watching this show,’” he said. Chess.com’s Barton said the show’s focus on female lead Beth Harmon—played by Anya Taylor-

Joy—had prompted more women to register than usual. They were now also spending more time on the site than men. “These shows really help to increase the curiosity value and newcomers are attracted to the game,” Vijay Deshpande, secretary of the All India Chess Federation, told AFP.

“We have a lot of good chess players in the country and the number has grown during the lockdown. Young people are hooked to technology and they were attracted to online chess.” Grandmaster and former US champion Jennifer Shahade has said she “loved” the show and had been inundated with people asking her for lessons or tips. “I’m honestly just blown away by all the positive attention chess is getting right now. People get us in a way they haven’t before,” she said on a recent podcast. “Chess is something people need right now—the introspection, the delightful escape into a smaller world of 64 squares,” she said. According to Tindall, the interest goes beyond just the game.

The series’ opulent settings, Cold War kitsch and period chess equipment seem to have captured people’s imagination. “We sell lots of different types of (chess) clocks. I have a lot of older style clocks

and recently people want to get the clocks from the show... I’m not joking,” said Tindall. “A while ago, we were just trying to clear them out. They aren’t really used in competitions any more. We use digital ones.” Most chess commentators have given the show high marks for authenticity—perhaps unsurprising, given Russian grandmaster Garry Kasparov and US chess author Bruce Pandolfini were consultants. “It’s the best thing I’ve seen about chess,” said French grandmaster Anthony Wirig during an online event about the show.

The “Queen’s Gambit” of the title refers to a popular opening that offers a white pawn as a barbed lure to black, which can accept or decline. Australian grandmaster Ian Rogers said the lead character Beth Harmon resembles US prodigy Bobby Fischer, who also faced a formidable Soviet opponent. Fischer’s politically tinged matches against the USSR’s Boris Spassky were watched on television by millions. “However Harmon’s struggles with pills and alcohol are all her own,” Rogers told the Sydney Morning Herald. “Nowadays Harmon would be banned by WADA’s drug testers long before she reached the top.” —AFP

Virus hogs centre stage as Greece’s theatres wait in the wings

“Obviously very few will survive,” says actor Yiannis Yiaramazidis, staring at the empty stage of the small theatre where he works in downtown Athens. With small theatres and cinemas closed, concert halls dark, and tours and premieres cancelled because of coronavirus restrictions, Greece’s live entertainment scene, already weakened by a decade-long economic crisis, is walking a tightrope. Yiaramazidis, 36, is particularly worried about new regulations brought on by the pandemic such as one allowing producers to not pay actors for rehearsals. He is no stranger to job insecurity, as his income from acting was already not enough to make ends meet before the pandemic, and he always supplemented it with part-time work.

“This will now become the new standard,” says Yiaramazidis after rehearsing his part in a play based on a Franz Kafka novel under the direction of Savvas Stroumpos. The troupe hopes to be able to return

to the stage in March, but the only way to achieve this goal is to rehearse one by one—a “very weird” situation, says Yiaramazidis as he gathers his things to make way for the next actor. The system is preferable to rehearsal by video link, says Stroumpos, who has also modified some scenes that required close contact between the actors.

His Attis theatre can accommodate an audience of only a couple of dozen people, so the new restrictions are a heavy burden. While the performing arts are suffering across Europe and beyond, they are especially hard hit in Greece, with its economy dominated by micro-businesses. The live entertainment scene is one of myriad mini-theatres like the Attis and small independent concert halls. Many may have to bow out for good. “The majority of our members are struggling to survive, either because they have not received any state aid, or because this is too little anyway,” Kostas Stavropoulos, secretary of the Panhellenic Music Association, told AFP.

‘No plan for art’

A regular pay cheque is a rarity for Greece’s performers, who have been underpaid and often without insurance for decades because of the country’s grinding financial crisis. Without a regulated labor framework since the country’s series of EU bailouts—three between 2008 and 2015 — many artists were left in limbo when the coronavirus pandemic broke out, invisible to the state and ineligible



Photo shows Director Savvas Stroumpos. —AFP

for financial aid. “The situation is deteriorating day by day and things will be worse when the confinement ends,” Stavropoulos says. After the first lockdown, hundreds of venues were wiped out and those that were able to reopen did so under precarious working conditions. Culture Minister Lina Mendoni told parliament that it was impossible for some artists to get state aid as many work in the “shadow economy”. —AFP