

BUILDING A CLUB IN THE 80's:
THE CASE OF THE FRAMINGHAM CHESS CLUB

by Warren Pinches

In his autobiography, Sir Rudolf Bing reviewed his struggles in thirty years of managing New York's Metropolitan Opera: the challenge of maintaining high standards of programming in a cultural institution under siege from politicians and prima donna performers, while barely having enough money to keep the doors open. I was struck by the parallels with running a chess club. Not that chess clubs have (yet) become cultural institutions to rival the Met, but the challenges are nonetheless surprisingly similar.

A chess club might also be compared to a small service-oriented business. The "product" is organization. Most chess clubs do not have a clear understanding of why they exist, or do not communicate that understanding to their members. Club organizers eventually are asked by members, "Why should I join this club? What do I get for my dues?" The answer is: you get an organizing service.

These two analogies illustrate the two principal themes that have guided the Framingham Chess Club from its birth to being one of the largest and most active clubs in the United States: programming and services. Like an opera house or symphony orchestra--or, if you wish to be more modest, the local movie theater--a chess club must offer a continuous variety of stimulating, attractive events. From a more business-oriented angle, the club must constantly try to expand its "product line" by striving to increase the range and quality of services it can offer to its members. These twin themes constantly interact with one another, but represent different perspectives that must be examined in turn.

PROGRAMMING

Many chess clubs simply run the same weeknight tournament over and over--perhaps a four round Swiss starting the first week of every month. This at least has the merit of predictability--members always know when the next tournament starts--but eventually the same players find themselves playing each other in every tournament, sometimes even in the same round. Without programming variety, clubs stagnate. True, a movie house in Boston once ran nothing but a Monty Python movie for four straight years, and survived because of a cult following; however if you aspire to a larger membership base, one must be able to offer some variety.

The Framingham Chess Club, which meets weekly on Tuesday nights, from its inception has continuously varied its programming

throughout its calendar. Tournaments range in length from three to six weeks, including quads, octos, and one, two, and three section Swisses, each time with varying section boundaries, and each time succeeded by a tournament of sharply contrasting format. Often a one-week break is interposed between tournaments, but another, one-week event is always programmed: a speed or Action tournament, a team match against another club, a seminar night, a simul, etc. There is never a night left "open"; there is always something going on at the club. A sense of momentum and excitement is created that is the club's most important asset.

When it is first starting out, a club needs a good role model. In 1983, club co-founder Mark Bond and I canvassed many of the clubs in eastern Massachusetts for programming ideas. The programming of Framingham Chess Club in its first year probably most resembled that of the Billerica Chess Club, which had most impressed us. Some of these ideas worked for us; others were eventually discarded. Even after the first year, when Framingham was already one of the largest clubs in New England, we still listened for good ideas from other New England clubs, and also looked farther afield for models, to the Nassau County Chess Club on Long Island, the Pittsburgh Chess Club, and many others. Clubs should always be open to good ideas from any source.

Weekend tournaments represent a parallel programming effort, serving both as an additional service to club members, and also as a vehicle to promote and advertise the club itself. The Framingham club has held one to three major Grand-Prix weekend tournaments each year. For lack of a good large tournament site these tournaments have always had to be held on a modest scale, but still have been superb advertising for the club, and by attracting most of the top players of the region, have helped establish the public image of the club as one of the principal chess organizations in the region. Frequent sponsorship of unusual or "prestige" events also served this end: Framingham revived and sponsored for four years running the New England Amateur Team Championship, and also occasionally smaller "title" events like the New England Junior Open and New England Women's Championship. Smaller, one-day events do not carry the same advertising value, but are worthwhile in quieter ways: since many weekend players cannot play weeknights (and vice-versa), a club often finds itself developing a virtual second membership group through weekend events.

There is tremendous scope for imagination in club programming. Some of the events that most capture people's interest and go furthest to establish the image of the club may not be tournaments at all. Certainly some of the best-known special events the club put on during the club's early years have been Grandmaster simuls--Dzhindzhichashvili when he was US Champion, Zsuzsa Polgar at age 15 when she was the top-ranked woman in the world, Sammy Reshevsky, 19-year old British Champion Nigel Short, and of course the two most spectacular: former World Champions Boris Spassky and Mikhail Tal. However, even simple but imaginative events can be

hugely successful: in the first year of the club we rented a couple of the best-known movies that involved chess and had a "chess movie" night, an event still remembered by many players.

Daring ideas are worth pursuing, even if they don't always work out. An organization known as Chess and Amateur Radio International was founded in the mid-1980s, and inspired us with the idea of playing the first international club match via shortwave radio. The match had been set up between Framingham and Milan, Italy, but due to the loss of our "ham" operator at the last minute, the match was played instead by the Pequoig Chess Club of Athol MA, which had a resident "ham". Similarly, a later hemispheric match via radio scheduled with Brisbane, Australia could not be brought off, and in 1987 a computer-network match against Australia foundered on the network, which never was quite ready for the match.

In 1984 computers were making their first serious inroads into master chess; in particular the famous challenge match of David Levy versus the world's top computer was about to come off. Following the lead of club director Paul McClanahan, who did not shrink from organizing a world-class event, the Framingham club audaciously contacted Omni magazine (the match sponsor) and the programmers of Cray Blitz (then computer world champion) and offered to host the match. Chutzpah is often rewarded: the three finalist sites were Los Angeles, Paris, and Framingham. At the insistence of the Cray Blitz group, Framingham was awarded the match on the grounds that we had shown superior organizing abilities! The club was not quite one year old at the time. Unfortunately, political problems cropped up and the match was temporarily scrubbed, and was later organized by Levy himself in London. An interesting sequel was that the club had just negotiated a simul by Viktor Korchnoi, to catch him on the way home from the New York Open, and there was briefly the prospect that Korchnoi would play Cray Blitz instead, a truly sensational prospect in 1984. Unfortunately again, Korchnoi became ill and cancelled his entire American visit.

A paradoxical but very real reason for the success of the Framingham Chess Club is that we have never been deterred by failure. I suspect that a majority of the nifty ideas we have thought up bombed completely in practice. As Program Director I was almost lynched for holding a "chess variants" night (bughouse, kriegspiel, 3D chess, etc.), and our club members stayed away in droves from time-handicap speed tournaments, although these have been quite popular at other clubs. For years we held lonely vigil at annual club picnics, which were attended principally by ants and dutiful club officers. But if one idea fell through, we were willing to move on to another.

SERVICES

Strong programming makes for great advertising and creates a stimulating atmosphere at the club, but it is the club's basic

services that build the loyalty of its members. Because clubs have (or should have) a heterogeneous membership, a successful club cannot have just one service.

Some clubs just happen: someone rents a room, and people come in, sit down, and play chess. Well, providing a room is a service, but a pretty minimal one. Most clubs organize rated weeknight tournaments; this satisfies the principal need of most of its members--to play. But each group in the club has additional, different needs: novices need more instruction than play; Class C players need lots of games with a little instruction, and Experts train themselves but need high-level competition. A club must recognize its sub-groups, and organize services and program events geared to the needs of these groups. Every few months I would ask our club directors, "What have we done for our Experts lately? What have we done for Class D?" Often we didn't have an answer. Still, there were times at the Framingham club when one might see simultaneously in progress a multi-section weeknight Swiss, a Master-Expert invitational tournament, an unrated novice tournament, coaching by club officers and any leading players not be involved in any of the tournaments, and non-stop speed or bughouse duels going on in the skittles room.

Organizers can see the results of this kind of programming in their membership, for clubs that do not provide a spectrum of services start to lose their under-1500s, or their Experts, or some other constituency. For years I tracked the statistical curve of the ratings in the Framingham club membership database, and have been pleased to see it hold steady: the club has continued to be attractive to players across a broad spectrum.

Businessmen know it is hard enough to attract customers through the door; you can't afford to let them be driven away by negative first impressions. Some clubs when they are first founded decide to "start off slowly", scheduling nothing at first, and trying to figure out what prospective members want. This is a mistake on a par with a retail shop that opens too soon, with virtually no inventory: customers come in, see there is nothing of interest, and leave--for good. On the other hand, people are nervous about attending a new club; they want to "check it out" without actually getting drawn into a game their first time there. Aware of this, when the Framingham Chess Club was born on May 6, 1983, we scheduled a "spectacle" for the first night--a simul by the legendary John Curdo--so that people could come in and just watch. On the second week we launched the series of rated weeknight tournaments that has continued unbroken to the present.

Of course, new people are dropping in to the club all the time. Ideally, a club officer or member can buttonhole the person, explain the club to them, offer them a game, and generally try to make them feel at home, but most importantly without putting any pressure on them to join. This sort of contact is not always possible, and can actually scare off some skittish "prospects". Giving such people something else to do is crucial. The

Framingham club has always laid out extensive literature tables, with flyers, schedules, newsletters, game bulletins, club policies, membership forms, tournament announcements, and for the novice, USCF flyers on tournaments, notation, ratings, etc. Commonly the club has stacks of about thirty different flyers available. (Photocopying is a major budget item.) Indeed, the literature tables have often started to encroach on playing space. However, if newcomers do nothing but pick up flyers and run, at least through the flyers we have put our case across. Never have we held an "open house", because every week has to be an open house.

The image one gets upon entering some small chess clubs is the rural cliché of a couple of old geezers playing checkers on a barrel-top on somebody's porch. This image does not induce newcomers to stay. A chess club should be one of the leading cultural institutions of a community. Tired organizers may look around their dingy club quarters and at their mongrelized equipment and re-read that last sentence incredulously, but it should certainly be the goal to which clubs aspire. I have seen many players come into the Framingham club for the first time, astonished to see a large function room filled with row upon row of tournament games. Many of these people didn't imagine that weeknight clubs could be like that. Several clubs in New England have reached that level, but they are still in the minority.

For perusal by newcomers and also for the information of its members, the club also keeps extensive bulletin boards with numerous news clippings, USCF press releases, FIDE rating lists, etc. Indeed, sometimes members who cannot spare the entire evening for chess will sometimes detour many miles out of their way to drop by the club for a few minutes, to catch up on recent gossip and pick up the latest bulletins. When we saw this starting to happen, we knew the club was a success.

Other distractions can be useful. For years the club put problems up on demo boards before each round (positions from master games, not composed problems which do not interest tournament players) which usually attracted crowds of players. The ulterior motive was that it kept players away from the pairing TD. The demo boards also made wonderful shields behind which the TD could cower after posting the pairings.

Another tool that has become useful to club organizers is not much older than the Framingham club itself: the personal computer. The club database was computerized as early as the first year, and this database has grown tremendously in sophistication through the years, currently containing about 20 data fields on members. It is now paralleled by an extensive database for promotional mailings. Having complete tournament registration data on members in the database is a godsend when, as usually happens, 40 members show up to register at 7:29 for a tournament scheduled to start at 7:30. However, the greatest impact of computers in chess clubs is felt in publications.

During its first year, the Framingham club published a club magazine called The Pawn Storm. A monthly, it had news stories, game scores, columns on openings, endings, postal chess, a problem contest, and even a collection of tasteless chess limericks. At about 25 typewritten pages each month, it was a heroic effort comparable in scale to the publication of Chess Horizons itself. After eight issues it died of exhaustion, but not before Roman Dzindzichshvili called it the best club publication in the world, and Sammy Reshevsky compared it to his Los Angeles club magazine of the 1930s--which had had seven GMs on the staff. (Of course, the fact that we were paying these gentlemen to give simulms at our club may have influenced their opinions.) After a while, the club settled down to a more functional two-to-four page monthly newsletter, first produced on an electronic memory typewriter, and then on a computer. The fact that our tournaments did not start routinely in the first week of the month, as they do in many clubs, forced us to do frequent mailings--a necessity that became a great asset. The biggest cause of attrition from clubs is that members lose contact. We were in members' mailboxes every month.

The advent of desktop publishing made all the club flyers and newsletters easier and more professional-looking. It also opened up other possibilities. For the past two years the club has published weekly game bulletins, with 10-20 games from the previous week. By typewriter this task would be virtually impossible. Using chess database software (which proofs the game score's playability as well) coupled with desktop publishing it became a manageable task, and the club has published over 100 issues during the last two years. Experts could pick up reams of game scores to prepare for their rivals, and Class E players could see their games in print. I know of no other club in the world that offered this service. A luxury? Of course--but it is such details that fix the impression of the club in people's minds.

CHALLENGES

It is easy to give luxuries short shrift when the task of keeping a club going at all is so formidable. Many clubs are stillborn for lack of a site. Several prominent cities in New England have no chess club because no viable playing site can be found in the entire city. The founder and first President of the Framingham Chess Club, Mark Bond, in 1983 surveyed literally hundreds of sites within a 30-mile radius, and found only one that met our minimal criteria. Many clubs close permanently if they lose their meeting site. Accordingly, good relations and frequent communication with the playing site management are perhaps the top priorities of any club.

However, a club is more than just a room. If the club has capable officers, and strong programming and services, it should be able to surmount even substantial crises. Since its founding, the Framingham club has had rent increases totalling 500%, and has weathered this with only a 50% increase in dues. The Boylston

Chess Club of Boston, forced out of its 60-year home earlier this year, survives against all expectations despite tremendously increased rent. Often clubs have had to compensate for increased rent by scheduling more events, just to increase revenue. The brutal necessity of meeting overhead can thus often force a club to improve its programming.

There is an occupational disease among chess club organizers. After a while they seem to become fixated on MONEY. Chess clubs can never get enough of it, or keep what they have. The higher the club's overhead, the more severe the syndrome. In December 1985 Chess Life ran an article concluding the "Year of the Chess Club" with profiles of three clubs: the Marshall of New York, the Mechanics Institute of San Francisco, and the Framingham Chess Club. For us, this was flattering company indeed. The articles on the other two clubs stressed tradition and history. In the article on the Framingham club, I was quoted five times, and every time I was talking about MONEY.

The Framingham club, like most others, depends entirely on volunteer effort. Not only do officers not get paid, they generally wind up making "donations" to cover emergency deficits. Why the insatiable need for money? Most obviously, there is the inexorable rent deadline. But also, a club that has no money has no programming ability. Clubs cannot schedule tournaments, large or small, without being certain that they can pay the prize fund. Special events that might lose money are impossible. Some of my most painful moments as Program Director in Framingham were having to say no to great projects because there wasn't any money to cover a possible loss. For example, negotiations for simuls with Bent Larsen, Ljubomir Ljubojevic, and Lajos Portisch all fell through because I wasn't sure we could cover a loss. My negotiations with Portisch broke down with us only \$100 apart. In early 1989 we were offered a Karpov simul, and we thought there was an excellent shot at break-even--but we couldn't be sure. Actually, we have been reluctant even to hold simuls featuring American GMs, because players want "exotic" simuls, and would rather play a minor East European GM to the American Champion. I would prefer to support the top American players, but unfortunately we are "more broke" than they are--truly a sad commentary. Similarly, most of our Grand-Prix tournaments have been exercises in nail-biting among all the officers, some of whom were pledged personally to make good any loss. Although the excellent work of current Treasurer Bill McAllister this year has built the club its largest cushion ever, because of our rent the Framingham club may never completely escape a hand-to-mouth existence. Clubs that are in the incredibly enviable position of having a free site should not relax and charge low dues. They should still be working hard at accumulating MONEY.

Sometimes even more difficult than money is volunteers. Actually, this may be less of a problem in very active clubs than in stagnant ones, for activity creates an atmosphere of excitement that energizes people into helping. Still, many members are

hesitant to say yes, paradoxically because they are afraid to say no. If they say yes once, they may not be able to say no the second, third, or fourth time they are asked. In the long run, they fear, they could wind up a broken-down wretch like their club officers.

It is accordingly necessary to divide jobs up into bite-sized chunks, and be explicit that if members volunteer to do one job, they will still be free to refuse others (although they will probably be asked). Failing that, one must sometimes resort to threats. Periodically I have had to announce the cancellation of some non-essential service for lack of volunteers, in order to get volunteers to come forward and do it. Sometimes I got interesting programming feedback: for example, in mid-1987 I announced the cancellation of all weekend tournaments in the second half of the year--and discovered to my chagrin that no one cared. (Weekend tournaments were restarted later when interest revived.) In early 1988 I published a four-page list of jobs I wasn't going to do anymore. This brought forth a burst of new talent, persons who in fact assumed most of the work of running the club during 1988. However, I could never bring myself to use my most draconian threat: I never dared threaten to stop offering coffee at the club.

As the decade ends, a new cadre of officers has come to lead the club, as long-time officers Tom Zuppa and myself have moved on to other responsibilities in life, and current President Jack Martin makes plans to leave the region. I have every confidence that the Framingham Chess Club will achieve successes in the 1990s under this new leadership that will make the past six years merely prologue.