

4th FIDE World Chess Championship for People with Disabilities 2021

Struggle or Strength??? This was the question that came to my mind, while watching the players play their game in the initial rounds of the 4th FIDE World Chess Championship. As the rounds progressed, I realized, though they are physically disabled, they are mentally superabled. With a grand salute to the great players -

4th FIDE World Chess Championship for People with Disabilities was held from 4th to 14th November 2021. It was a 9 round Swiss tournament with a time control of 45 minutes plus 30 seconds increment per move. It was an individual competition with an additional team ranking with winners earning the titles of “World Chess Champion among Disabled 2021” in the individual ranking and “World Chess Team Champion among Disabled 2021” in the team ranking.

The championship was organized by Dresdner Schachfestival e.V. under the auspices of FIDE. The earlier 3 editions of this World Chess Championship were held as over the board event in the year 2013, 2015 and 2017 at Dresden by Dresdner Schachfestival e.V. However due to the current Covid-19 pandemic situation and restrictions, the 4th edition was held online at the hosting internet platform Tornelo.com.

This championship marked a historical milestone. It is the first official Online World Chess Championship where blind chess players had the option to compete without any help. The introduction of blind mode in Tornelo allowed 13 visually impaired participants to make their moves without any assistance (physical or virtual assistance). Tornelo, FIDE, DIS Commission worked hand in hand to make the blind mode a reality. Thus, this tournament brought in much more equity for the visually impaired players. A critical milestone in the history of chess!

Being an online event, this championship attracted high number of participation - 249 players from 44 countries covering 6 continents. Of which 22 were titled players - including 1 GM, 3 IMs, and 13 FMs. We had players from Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, England, Spain, France, Georgia, Germany, Guyana, India, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Malaysia, Mongolia, North Macedonia, Panama, Philippines, Poland, Romania, South Africa, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, United States of America, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. The maximum participation was from India with 24 players followed by Russia 17, Turkey 16, Mongolia 15 and then Poland with 14 players.




On 4th November the event started with the opening ceremony, technical meeting, and a trial round. There after one round was played each day at UTC 12.00. With the final round played on 13th November. The closing ceremony was held on 17 November UTC 12:00.

The winners of the Championship:

1st Position : FM Sargis Sargissyan from Armenia

2nd Position : FM Marcin Molenda from Poland

3rd Position : Jose Maria Saponara Caizzi from Argentina

		
FM Sargis Sargissyan from Armenia	FM Marcin Molenda from Poland	Jose Maria Saponara Caizzi from Argentina

In the 9 round championship, FM Sargis Sargissyan, the sole player from Armenia, emerged as the Champion with 8.5 points.

As the tournament headed towards the last rounds, it was getting more and more fascinating and thrilling. After 8 rounds, even though FM Sargis Sargissyan had a half point lead, the final round was critical as there were 6 other players right behind him with 7 points. With a win in the final round FM Sargis secured the title “World Chess Champion among Disabled 2021”. Both FM Marcin Molenda from Poland and Jose Maria Saponara Caizzi from Argentina secured 8 points each. FM Marcin positioned second for the better tie break.

And the top women:

1st Position : Tatiana Flores Bernholz from Spain

2nd Position : Zuzanna Lukasik from Poland

3rd Position : Solenn Afraoui from France

		
Tatiana Flores Bernholz from Spain	Zuzanna Lukasik from Poland	Solenn Afraoui from France

Both Tatiana Flores Bernholz from Spain and Zuzanna Lukasik from Poland finished with 6.5 points. But Tatiana emerged as the winner in the women category with her better Buchholz in the tie breaker. With 6 points Solenn Afraoui from France bagged the 3rd position.

The final Team standings:

1st Position : Poland with 29.5 points

2nd Position : Russia with 28.5

3rd Position : Cuba with 26

The reigning champion GM Marcin Tazbir could not defend his title even though he was unbeaten till the final round. The 4 draws dragged him down to the 10th position. However, he along with his countrymen - FM Molenda Marcin (Runner-up), IM Stachanczyk Jacek (final ranking 9) and Piekielny Pawel (final ranking 13) bagged the title “World Chess Team Champion among Disabled 2021” for Poland. This is yet another golden feather to Team Poland. In the year 2020, Poland had won the first FIDE Online Olympiad for people with disabilities defeating Russia in the final stage. Also, in the 3rd FIDE World Chess Championship for the disabled 2017 held in Dresden, Poland IBCA 1 won the team title.

I was lucky to be part of the Arbiter team for the 4th FIDE World Chess Championship. This is, by far, the most memorable event for me. In earlier events, I have seen visually impaired players playing chess over the board. But the participants in this event were far more challenged, to the extent that I wouldn't have believed that they could play chess if I hadn't seen them myself. I could feel the struggle many of the participants were having, and the pain it caused inside me watching is beyond words. One player, I'm not using the name, for obvious reasons, cannot even hold the head steady. The player suffers from Cerebral Palsy, having no control even to hold or move things or to sit straight. Another player was bedridden and was playing lying down on the bed. Another person used a mouth-controlled device (like a joystick) to play. Like this, every participant was unique in his or her way. Each player proved the words by **Robert M. Hensel** true *“I don't have a dis-ability, I have a different-ability”*.

I am not writing this to emphasise the challenges faced by the players but rather would like to point out the positive vibes shown by the players. Each player possessed a strong passion for this beautiful game. I could feel that in their eyes. They were not bothered about the game results - win or lose, they just enjoyed chess, they celebrated chess with a sweet smile. It filled a lot of positive energy inside me.

I realized while it could be easy to accept the disability and then live low with it, but it takes a lot of courage and willpower to challenge the challenges and come out as exceptional. I felt honoured to meet these exceptional people. They are not disabled, but indeed specially abled. In my mind, each participant in this tournament is a winner. They possess amazing passion for the game and admirable inner strength.

This article would not be complete without paying homage to yet another warrior - Mehdi Abbasov. It was before round 6, we got to know about the sad demise of Mehdi Abbasov from Azerbaijan. Born in 1945, this 76-year-old chess player took his laptop to the hospital so that he could play the game from the hospital. Unfortunately, he could not make it. His passion for the game is adorable, a true warrior with such a great mindset. Saluting him with all due respect! Sincere condolences to his family, friends, and federation.

Equity and inclusivity were felt at its best in the 4th FIDE World Chess Championship 2021. This event gave players with disabilities a great opportunity to compete in an international event, at the comfort of their home. The 64 squares have so much magic hidden in it - that it attracts the abled and disabled with the same force.