

# 2023 Israel Open Championship – Akko, Israel

21-29/01/2024

**By: IA Alon Shulman – Chief Arbiter**

I was honored to be appointed as Chief Arbiter of the Israel Championship for the third time in a row.

First time was **Zefad 2021**, then **Arad 2022**, and this year, in the northern city of **Akko**.

This year's event was unique due to the tensions in the south and in the north of the country, following the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack.

The first little setback was the fact that the event was postponed a bit from the end of 2023 to January 2024 due to the volatile situation.

There were discussions whether to hold the event or wait for the skies to clear. The decision was made to go ahead, and no less than 132 players registering. **An all time record.**

As can be seen from previous events, the championships are organized in locations far from the center, in municipalities which don't usually get to host too many national sports events.

Those municipalities are enjoying special budgets and are more inclined to cooperate with us.

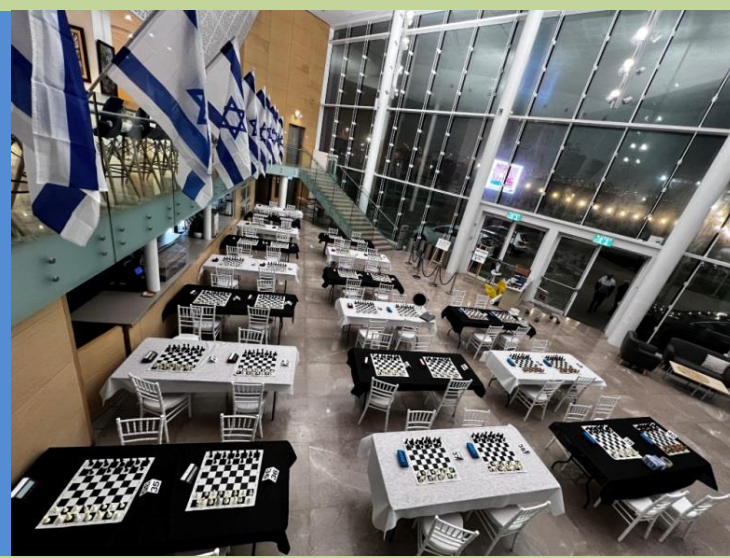
Akko proved to be even better than expected. The municipality personnel from the Mayor **Mr. Shimon Lankri** all the way to his managers, did well above the call of duty to accommodate us.

We played in the new shiny **Akko Auditorium**, completed in 2021.









(photos: Alon Shulman)

The 132 players encompassed the Israeli entire society microcosm: Children, youth, adults, girls, women, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Religious Jews, Arabs, Arab Women, Druze, Druze Women. All playing together.



(photo: Alon Shulman)

**Lina Kaadan**, who is a Muslim lady, playing **Yossef Hershkovits** who is a Religious Jew, while **Milan Halabi** who is a Druze girl, watching the game.



In addition, Akko has a fine train and bus services.

The city of 50,000 inhabitants is known internationally by the name **Acre** or by its old name **Ptolemais**. **Akko** is the Hebrew name while in Arabic it is called **Akka**.

This Mediterranean port town has been a settlement for more than 5000 years. The port is one of the oldest in the world. It is mentioned in the Bible. The Greeks claim **Hercules** was there and he named the place Ákē (Ἄκη in Greek) meaning "cure" because he found curative herbs there. The Crusaders were there in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century and so was Napoleon in 1799.

Old Akko is a UNESCO Heritage Site.







(photos: Alon Shulman)



If exploring the charms of Old Akko makes you hungry, Akko has the finest answers.







(photos: Alon Shulman)

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In this article I wish to share my experience as CA. Not so much from the arbiter's point of view but more from the organizational point of view. Challenges which we faced and how they were dealt with. Running such an event entails many major and minor issues which require fore planning and resolving.

I strive to be approachable for the players and make event management effective, transparent, flexible, and always keep in mind that we are all here to play.

## **1. WhattsApp**

The first technical act, which started before the tournament, was to establish **2 WhattsApp groups**. One for the **players** and the other for the **organizers / arbiters**.



A WhattsApp group is probably the best way to communicate information online especially to a large group of people, while allowing them to ask questions and for us to answer.

An Organizers / Arbiters WhattsApp group is required to discuss technical matters that are of no significance for the players.

You only need to make sure not to mix messages between those 2 groups.

## **2. The Starting Rank**

I had to make a decision – according to which rating do I set the initial ranking list and prizes? The Fide rating or the Israeli rating ?

My initial thought was to use the Fide rating but upon closer observation I realized that I have a problem. This is an open championship. We have our top players but on the bottom half of the list we have many unrated players who do not have Fide rating at all. 24 players did not have Fide rating while only 10 did not have Israeli rating because it was their first tournament.

That meant that I have a player with Israeli rating of 1649, another player with Israeli rating of 1237 and 10 players with Israeli rating of zero.

**All of them have Fide rating of zero.** If you consider only Fide rating all those 24 players are of equal strength **but they are not.**

I did not want to distort the pairings and did not want to mix ratings so decided that all would be done according to the Israeli rating.

The 10 players without any rating were ranked according to their registration date. They were all beginners, playing their first tournament. Their position on the list didn't matter.

## **3. Maximizing participation**

The more strategical issue was how do you attract as many players as possible during those current exceptional times.



We adopted a flexible approach.

#### **4. Bye Day**

The first decision made and set in the regulations, was to allow each player to elect taking a one time “day off” (during rounds 1-7) and receiving half a point. We called it a **Bye Day**.

We decided to limit the Bye option to until round 7, not to have an effect on the final standings if to be taken on rounds 8-9.

I also informed concerned players that if they need a second “Bye Day” there is no problem. They will not get any points for that second Bye Day but are welcome to ask for it, as long as they do it before the end of the previous round, so they are not paired.

That approach was beneficial because initially reluctant players were persuaded to play the event and all players got peace of mind.

Some Players took that Bye Day and some even took 2 Bye Days.

#### **5. One Hour Tolerance**

Players were allowed a generous 1 hour tolerance. We knew that most players would be commuting back and forth daily, so this 1 hour “cushion” could come in handy.

#### **6. The Holy Saturday**

Israel is a predominantly Jewish State. Jews practice their Jewish religion all over the spectrum, from the Ultra Secular, to the Ultra Orthodox.

There are around 15 million Jews in the world, which means there are 15 million ways to practice Judaism.



For Jews, who are observing the Holy Saturday, playing in an event where the Friday as well as Saturday rounds start at 15:00 would be a problem. If they are not residing within a walking distance from the playing hall – this kills the deal.



The Holy Saturday starts a bit before sunset on a Friday and concludes a bit after sunset on a Saturday, lasting around 25 hours.

So, in order to accommodate players who are observing the Holy Saturday, the Friday round would start (for everyone) at 10:00 A.M. while the Saturday round would start (for everyone) at 18:30.

That schedule was devised to allow players enough time to get back home Friday before sunset, and allow them time to leave their homes for the game on Saturday, after sunset.

We wanted to strike balance between not playing on Saturday and keeping reasonable playing hours.

## **7. Punctuality**

I like the rounds to be starting “on the dot”. Most players arrive on time so the punctuality practice has the support of the vast majority of players.

2 minutes before starting the round, I would take the microphone, greet the players, announce the daily messages, and start the round.

When players know all games start on time – they are more likely to be on time.

The notion of having all clocks start on time is also imperative for the games to be completed on time so we could do and publish the pairings as soon as possible.

Of course if there are major unexpected events, I would be flexible. One day the train carrying many players was stuck, or there were unexpected roadblocks – a short delay was allowed for those affected.

## **8. Cellphones**

Cellphones are one of the most sensitive hot potatoes in the world of chess. Laws of Chess allow some flexibility in allowing cellphones inside the playing venue:

**11.3.2.1 However, the regulations of an event may allow such devices to be stored in a player’s bag, provided the device is completely switched off. This bag must be placed as agreed with the arbiter. Both players are forbidden to use this bag without permission of the arbiter.**





For me, as a matter of principle, **I do not allow** players to enter cellphones to the playing venue **at all**.

The reason is that if you allow players to enter their cellphones, even in a bag, even if they are switched off – There would still might be accusations – **“He took the phone to the toilet, he looked at the phone, the phone rang, the phone made a sound”**, etc.

And of course there is always that phone which makes a sound and you run around trying to locate where did the sound come from.

I could live happily without that potential problem.

So, we enabled all players to deposit their cellphones at the entrance and collect them upon departing the playing venue.

It also gave peace of mind to the parents of our young players, knowing their cellphones are safely stored, and the child can call them after the game.

## **9. Forbidden Pairings**

Amongst the participants there where some players who were next of kin. There were brothers, brother and sister as well as parents and children.

There were requests to me, to do what is called “forbidden pairings” in the Swiss Manager Pairings Program, so those next of kin players would not be paired against each other.

This request is a known issue and I fully understand it. I also know that in some tournaments it is done.

However, I would not accommodate this request as a matter of principle.

Any player, who is registering to a tournament with his next of kin, needs to take into consideration that he might be paired against him/her.

If you allow forbidden pairings, where does it end? Don’t pair me against my brother, against my son. And what about cousins? second cousins? step grandmother? half step sister?

It would never end and once you had created a precedent you are expected to continue. **“You allowed forbidden pairings for them so why not for us ?”** is the sentence you would hear for the rest of your life.

In addition, those forbidden pairings might distort a natural forced pairing. 2 sisters are leading with 5/5 each. They won’t be paired?



One mother had both her sons playing. She requested me do the forbidden pairings for them not to play each other. I politely declined and explained to her the reasons.

“Listen” I told her. “There are 132 players. The probability for them being paired is slim,  $9/131$ , it’s like 7% and also the older brother is much stronger than the younger brother, don’t worry”

And of course, next round they were paired. I suggested to her to buy a lottery ticket – Hope she did.

## **10. Collecting results**

Collecting results can be a tricky business. Many things can go wrong in the chain of reporting from the board to the Swiss-Manager:

- The player can announce the wrong result;
- Player may write the wrong result;
- Arbiter might misunderstand;
- Arbiter might understand but write an incorrect result;
- Pairing officer may fill the results incorrectly.

In order to attempt and avoid mistakes, we operated 3 safety nets:

**First safety net** - setting all scoresheets in order. You can have a designated arbiter or the pairing officer to do it.

Then while working in pairs, one reads the result from the scoresheets, while the other checks the result paper. If the results conflict or any other problem, you have time to investigate.

**Second safety net** - you do the same process with the pairing officer, cross-checking the score paper with the results already uploaded to Swiss-Manager.

**Third safety net** - Instructing players to check their results on chess-results.com, and alert us immediately if there is a mistake.

The results were uploaded periodically online (not all at the end of the round) to facilitate that third safety net.

The result of all those security measures was that in the total of around 550 games we had only one mistake which was spotted and corrected during the safety nets cross-check process.



When we did the pairings we would first review them, see if all looks fine, before they were published.

After pairings were published, pairing officer would announce it on the Players whatsapp Group and even add a chess-results link for their convenience.

## **11. The Tournament**

No less than 9 G.M's and 10 I.M's competed for the prizes and the prestigious title of Israel Champion.

The tournament was hard fought. Before the last round there were 3 leaders: **GM Ilya Smirin** and **I.M's Eitan Rozen** and **Yeshaayahu Tzidkiya**, each with 6.5 out of 8.

9 Players were trailing the leaders with 6 points each.

The last round was peaceful with the leaders avoiding taking risks.

**At the end it was proven once again that veteran soldiers never die. G.M Ilya Smirin, from the Ashdod Chess Club, who celebrated his 56<sup>th</sup> birthday at the first round of the tournament, edged his rivals to win the championship with the best tie-break.**

**Smirin, who immigrated to Israel from Belarus in 1992, clinched his 4<sup>th</sup> title as Israel Champion.**

**Silver medal** went to 18 year old **I.M Eitan Rozen**. The young talent had a great tournament, starting with 5.5/6 and then cruising with 3 draws.

Last year's champion, 21 year old **G.M Ido Gorshtein**, had a bumpy ride starting with 4 wins, but 2 losses. However, he won his last 3 games and got the **bronze medal**.

Silver and bronze medalists are from the Kfar-Saba Chess Club.

20 year old **I.M Yeshaayahu Tzidkiya**, from Elizur Petah Tiqua club, was pushed to 4<sup>th</sup> place having only half a point less in the buchholtz tie-break.

An interesting fact is that the age of the winner is more or less the combined age of the 3 youngsters who followed him.

**Kudos to Ilia**





(R-L) **Reem Sherman** (vs. **Eitan Rozen**), Champion  
G.M. **Ilia Smirin**, G.M. **Evgeny Postny**, G.M. **Tal Baron**



(R-L) **Eliran Shilon Rahav**, **Noga Orian**, **Orel Ribstein**



**F.M. Mark Ljubarov**



**I.M. Yair Parkhov**



**Evelina Khairova**



The **Halabi** sisters **Tia** and **Aya**, supporting **Milan** who is playing.





F.M. **Mark Ljubarov** (L.) surprised G.M. **Ori Kobo** to win their match on round 3.



Still champion G.M. **Ido Gorshtein** (L.) suffers a setback with the white pieces losing to I.M. **Guy Levin**.



Last game of round 2. **Kafar Iliaguev** (L.) displays fine technique to beat **Alexander Dvorzhitsky**.



The Khir brothers **Yussef** (bottom left) and **Amin** (upper right) from the Druze village of Pekiin.



**Julia Kluchik** (L.) and 18 year old **Reem Sherman** (top). At the bottom left **Noga Orian** and G.M. **Ori Kobo**. Bottom right is 9 year old **Israel Cohen**.





(photos: Alon Shulman)

## Opening and Closing Ceremonies

Many people don't like ceremonies. They don't like boring speeches in the opening ceremony and don't like closing ceremonies because they want to go home.

Noting that fact we can only commend the fine attendance for both ceremonies with opening ceremony viewed by around 700 spectators.

It is of great importance that ceremonies are in high attendance. In the opening ceremony, we were honored to host Israel Cabinet Member **Mr. Zeev Elkin**. Mr. Elkin is a solid chess player and great supporter of chess in Israel. Another guest of honor was Akko Mayor **Mr. Shimon Lankri**.

Together with ICF Chairperson **Dr. Zvika Barkai**, and General Manager **Gil Borochovski**, all were instrumental in securing the funding for the event as well as a prize fund of around 23,000 euro with first prize of around 4,500 euro. Prize for best female player was 1,000 euro.



Opening Ceremony (photos: Dorit & Gadi Ritvo)





Israel Cabinet Member **Mr. Zeev Elkin** is making the ceremonial first move on board 1 prior to starting the games. On his left is ICF Chairperson **Dr. Zvika Barkai** and Akko Mayor **Mr. Shimon Lankri**. On the board, Israel national team member G.M **Evgeny Postny** scored the point against **David Moshenberg**. (photo: Dorit & Gadi Ritvo)



(photo: Alon Shulman)



The Closing Ceremony. (L)  
The 3 winners (Top):  
Champion **Ilya Smirin** at the center.  
Silver medal winner **Eitan Rozen** (R)  
Bronze medal winner **Ido Gorshtein** (L).  
(photo: Dorit & Gadi Ritvo)



## 12. Epilogue

In spite of the special circumstances surrounding the event it was a huge success. The combination of the great playing conditions with all teaming up together – contributed to the success of the event.

We had a great team of arbiters who were supportive and friendly to each other.

We also thank Tournament director **Mrs. Olga Volkov** who did a great job.

The thanks and tributes from players, coaches and parents on the players WhatsApp group towards the organization was heartwarming.



Arbiters team: {L-R}: F.A. **Natalia Vovinkina**, F.A. **Andrei Gurbanov**, F.A. **Shaul Weinstein** (DCA, Pairing Officer and Liveboards), I.A. **Alon Shulman** (CA) N.A. **Olga Volkov** (Tournament Director), F.A. **Emily Levin**, F.A. **Mark Flaum**. (photo: Mark Livshits)