Derek Oldbury

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Chinook's participation in the 1989 Computer Olympiad was a last minute spur-of-the-moment thing. We had no idea how we would do; certainly we had no expectations that we would do well. History records that Chinook won the event. A scant year later, we were doing battle with the best players in the world in the US Open. What history does not record is the major reason why we worked very hard on the program in the 1989-90 period.

At the 1989 Olympiad, I was first introduced to Derek Oldbury (he also had a program competing - Checkers Hustler). I remember my first meeting with Derek very well; I was startled, not expecting to see an old man in a wheelchair. Initially I felt uncomfortable around him, a common reaction I am sure. However, Derek took the initiative and the relationship quickly warmed. It was hard not to like Derek: he loved to laugh and have a good time. He eagerly played games against Chinook and offered us advice. I found that I looked forward to the sessions with Derek, because I learned a lot about checkers and Chinook. This insight convinced me we could build a much stronger program.

Following are two unpublished games he played against us at the 1989 Olympiad. Although Chinook wins the games, they illustrate what I think was the most important characteristic of Derek's play: he wanted to have fun. Derek was not hung up about losing games. As long as he won more than he lost, he was happy. He did not mind trying experiments over the board if it would liven up play. From these games, it is obvious Derek was unquestionably the better player, but he always kept Chinook in the game so things would be interesting to the end. How many other strong players who would willingly play a losing move in front of a crowd of people, just to see what the program would do?

Black: Chinook
White: Oldbury
Event: Exhibition, London 1989
Time: Chinook, 60 seconds a move

11-15 22-17 15-19 24-15 10-19 23-16 12-19 26-22 07-10 22-18 09-14 18-09
05-14 27-24 08-12 24-15 10-19 17-10 06-15 21-17 01-06 17-14 06-10 14-07
03-10 25-22 10-14 29-25 12-16 25-21 14-18 22-17 04-08 17-14 19-23 14-09
18-22 28-24 16-20 31-27 23-26 30-23 22-26 21-17 26-30 17-13 30-26 23-19
15-18 09-06 02-09 13-06 08-12 19-15 18-23 Black wins.
Obviously 19-15 is a horrible blunder in a winning position.

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Time: Chinook, 60 seconds a move

09-14 22-18 05-09 24-19 11-15 18-11 08-24 28-19 04-08 25-22 08-11 22-18
11-16 29-25 01-05 27-24 16-20 25-22 20-27 31-24 07-11 24-20 03-07 32-27
11-16 20-11 07-16 30-25 16-20 18-15 02-07 22-17 14-18 23-14 09-18 17-14
10-17 21-14 20-24 27-20 18-23 26-22 23-26 25-21 06-09 22-18 26-31 15-10
07-11 10-07 31-26 21-17 26-22 17-13 22-24 13-06 24-19 07-03 19-23 03-08
11-15 06-01 23-18 08-11 18-09 11-18 09-13 18-14 13-09 14-10 09-13 01-06
05-09 06-01 13-17 01-05 09-13 05-09 17-21 09-14 13-17 14-18 21-25 10-15
25-29 18-14 17-22 20-16 12-19 15-24 22-25 14-17 25-30 24-27 30-25 17-21
Black resigns
Derek deliberately loses a drawn endgame to test if the program knew how to win.

Black: Oldbury
White: Chinook
Event: Simultaneous exhibition, London 1989

11-15 23-18 08-11 27-23 04-08 23-19 09-14 18-09 05-14 22-17 15-18 32-27
06-09 25-22 18-25 29-22 09-13 24-20 11-15 27-23 15-24 28-19 08-11 19-16
12-19 23-16 11-15 26-23 02-06 16-11 07-16 20-11 15-18 22-15 10-26 31-22
14-18 22-15 13-22 21-17 06-09 15-10 09-14 17-13 14-18 13-09 18-23 09-06
23-27 11-07 27-31 07-02 31-27 02-07 27-23 06-02 22-26 07-11 26-31 11-15
31-27 30-25 27-31 25-21 31-26 21-17 26-22 17-13 22-17 15-11 23-18 11-16
18-23 Drawn
Many spectators thought Chinook was lost in the 4X4 endgame.
I think this game convinced Derek of the potential for endgame databases
(we only had the 4-piece databases at the time).

With hindsight, I know that the critical moment in Chinook's development occurred at that 1989 Olympiad. Derek said just the right words to encourage us to continue. He said nice things about Chinook's play, identified weaknesses for us to work on, and encouraged us to continue building databases. Most importantly, he offered to help us. Derek's encouragement and words (which I would paraphrase to the rest of my team) played a large role in me being able to recruit some key people in the Chinook project.

In subsequent years, Derek continued to help us in many ways. He was willing to play games (we played several phone games in 1990 and 1991, some practice games in 1992 when I visited him, and a match in 1994). He was also willing to share his opening secrets with us. How many other top players would send you their book of opening secrets?

In April 1994, Chinook played a 12-game match with Derek. The games have yet to be published, but will be in a future issue of this magazine. Derek was willing to spend 3 days playing Chinook to help us test the program as preparation for our match with Tinsley in August. He didn't care about the final score. All that mattered to him was that we learned something that could help improve Chinook, and that he had fun. Both of us were winners.

I think the following (slightly embellished) story best summarizes Derek's attitude to the game. I once asked Marion Tinsley whether he would like to win a match 1-0 or 9-1. His answer was unambiguous: 1-0, since a loss - any loss - was too painful for him.

When you ask the same question to Derek, you get an immediate response: neither! Why? If the match score is 1-0 or 9-1, it must have been a boring match. Derek would rather win 9-8; now that's exciting!

On Friday July 8, I received a letter from Derek. In it he reiterated how much he enjoyed playing the match with Chinook, and his hopes that we might play again. To me, that one letter says a lot about the man. Shortly thereafter, we received the sad news.

The Chinook team has lost a dear friend and supporter; the checkers community has lost one of its greatest players.