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In Chess, Masters Again Fight Machines

By DYLAN LOEB McCLAIN

It has been eight years since Garry Kasparov, then the world chess champion, lost a match to the computer Deep Blue.

In the wake of Deep Blue's victory, it would not have been surprising if elite players stopped competing against computers. After all, if the world's best player could not beat a computer, how could lesser ones? The possibility, even probability, of losing - and perhaps losing badly - to a machine could have particularly discouraged grandmasters, who are known to have egos that match their abilities and who sometimes have difficulty accepting defeat.

But, rather than being the final word in the battle of man vs. machine, the Kasparov-Deep Blue match spurred the competition. More grandmasters are taking up the challenge posed by computers.

Today, at the ABC studios in Times Square, Rustam Kasimdzhanov of Uzbekistan, who is reigning champion of the World Chess Federation and ranked 32nd in the world, will play a one-game match against a chess program developed by Accoona Corporation. Accoona is a Web-based search engine and its chess program is part of a tool bar that searches the Web and personal computers.

Also today, Michael Adams, a British player ranked No. 6, will begin a six-game match against Hydra, a super chess computer developed by the Pal Group in the United Arab Emirates. The match is to take place at the Wembley Conference Center in London.

Then, in early July, Jaan Ehlvest, an Estonian who once ranked in the world Top 10 but is now 103rd, will play a four-game match against a program called Zappa. That match is to be at Estonian House, 243 East 34th Street, in Manhattan.

There are financial rewards for the human competitors, but they say that is not their primary motive.

As reigning champion of the World Chess Federation, Mr. Kasimdzhanov was paid to play in a number of big-purse tournaments over the last year. For the match against the computer, he said he would receive a five-figure sum but insisted that he was playing to promote chess and that he was interested in the challenge as a sportsman.

Mr. Ehlvest, who is being paid \$500 and could earn an additional \$1,500 if he wins or \$750 if he ties, said that he also wanted to promote chess and that the timing of the match was convenient.

Mr. Adams, like Mr. Kasimdzhanov, also regularly plays in tournaments in which he is paid to play. In his computer match, he has the most at stake. For each game he wins he will receive \$25,000, and a draw is worth \$10,000. Mr. Adams could come away with \$150,000, if he wins all six games, or

nothing, if he loses them all. Mr. Adams said he hoped "to show that it is possible to play against Hydra, and that it has weaknesses that can be exploited."

These are not the first matches between men and machines since Mr. Kasparov faced Deep Blue in 1997.

In 2002, Vladimir Kramnik, who beat Mr. Kasparov in 2000 to become world champion, played an eight-game match against a program called Deep Fritz. It ended in a tie.

In 2003, Mr. Kasparov, still ranked No. 1, played matches against the computer programs Deep Junior and X3D Fritz. Both ended in ties. Also in 2003, Evgeny Bareev, ranked No. 12, drew a match against a commercial program called Hiarc.

The task before the men in the current matches is daunting. Computers are becoming faster and programmers keep improving their programs.

Last October in Bilbao, Spain, three grandmasters - Vasselin Topalov of Bulgaria, now the world's No. 2 player, Ruslan Ponomarev of Russia, No. 19, and Sergey Karjakin of Ukraine, No. 63, who became the youngest grandmaster in history three years ago at 12 - played a tournament against three computers, Hydra, Deep Junior and Fritz 8, a commercially available program. The final scores: Hydra and Fritz, 3.5 out of 4; Mr. Topalov and Deep Junior, 1.5; Mr. Ponomarev and Mr. Karjakin, 1.

So why are the grandmasters tilting at windmills? After all, the world's fastest runners and horses stopped racing cars years ago.

All of the participants in the current matches admit that the odds are against them.

Mr. Kasimdzhanov will face particular difficulties. Although Mr. Adams and Mr. Ehlvest will play under normal tournament conditions, which allow about three hours per player per game, Mr. Kasimdzhanov and the Accoona tool bar will have 60 minutes per player per game with 10 seconds added after each move. Experts and players agree that the faster pace favors computers, which calculate hundreds of millions of moves a second, and undercuts the human advantage of strategic planning.

Still, the grandmasters say they think they have a chance.

Mr. Adams said he appreciated how difficult it would be to play Hydra: "Kasparov is a stronger player than I am. And Hydra is stronger than Deep Blue. If I lose the match, it is not going to bother me that much." But he added, "Unless I completely lose it, it shouldn't be six-nil."

Mr. Ehlvest expects to do well. "I think that I can make four draws," he said. "I don't believe that I will lose all four games."

Mr. Kasimdzhanov also expressed optimism. "The difference between the playing strength of a human being and a computer," he said, "is not as serious as the difference between a person running against a car."

Whatever the prospects, he said it was important to compete against the computers: "Sports are not about reaching a result. Sport is about developing your inner qualities."