

EJCOA Nationals: Building England's Next Generation of Chess Players

At a school hall in Nottingham from 3rd to 5th July 2026, something far more complex than competition unfolded. Here, children were not just playing chess; they were learning how to think, recover, and grow. Around them, a quiet network of parents, coaches, arbiters, and organisers was shaping the future of the game.



EJCOA Nationals 2026

A moment no one sees, but everyone feels

Before every game, a child sits down, adjusts the pieces, and glances up. Somewhere across the hall, a parent stands - not too close, not too far. A look is exchanged. A quiet reassurance passes without words. Then the arbiter announces the start of play. The players shake hands, the clocks begin, and the child is on their own. At the **EJCOA National Youth Finals**, this moment captures the real purpose of the event. It is not just about competing; it is about learning how to think independently, responsibly, and with courage.

Rebuilding a pathway, not just a tournament

For CM Rob Willmoth, EJCOA Chairman, the vision was clear from the beginning. It was strongly supported by EJCOA Vice-Chairman Jake Hung and many of England's leading coaches.

Junior chess in England needed more than scattered tournaments. It needed structure, a pathway that connected learning, coaching, and competition in a meaningful way.

And so, this championship was designed not as a standalone event, but as part of a system:

- FIDE-rated long-format games
- Embedded coaching throughout the event
- Post-game analysis sessions
- Simultaneous exhibitions against experienced players
- Structured progression toward national and international competition

This is what makes the difference. Here, a tournament is not the end of preparation. It is part of the learning itself.

How players arrive and what is at stake

For many parents walking into this hall with their children for the first time, the pathway to this stage may not be immediately clear. Players reach the EJCOA National Youth Finals either by qualifying as Top Boy or Top Girl at one of the EJCOA zonal events held between January and May, or through the rating route by consistently improving their ratings in competitive tournaments.

This event is the next step, and the stakes are real. The top two boys and top two girls in each age category, from Under-8 to Under-20, will go on to represent England at the European Youth Chess Championship later this year.

Nottingham: a city quietly building a chess ecosystem

None of this is possible without infrastructure.

Ed Jones, representing Nottinghamshire's chess community, has seen the event grow over several years, not only in scale but also in ambition.

Behind the scenes:

- planning begins months in advance
- volunteers coordinate logistics and schedules
- venues are prepared to host hundreds of players simultaneously

What emerges is not just organisation, but reliability, so that parents trust the environment, children adapt quickly, and coaches can work effectively.

The venue itself, Nottingham High School, becomes more than a space. It becomes part of the system.

The quiet authority of arbiters

In a hall of this scale, with hundreds of games running simultaneously, one question becomes critical: How do you ensure fairness?

The answer lies with IA Alan Atkinson and his team of arbiters, who manage a FIDE-rated event designed for players still learning the discipline of formal tournament chess.

Their role is complex:

- enforcing international rules
- guiding young players unfamiliar with tournament procedures
- managing time controls and disputes
- balancing strict adherence with understanding

What makes it difficult is not the rules themselves, but their application in an environment where children are still developing confidence.

When arbiters do their job well, no one notices. But without them, nothing works.

After the game ends, the real work begins

Most games end when the clocks stop. Here, something else begins. Players return to the game analysis rooms with coaches, replaying positions move by move, examining decisions, and understanding where the game shifted.

Poornima Nagesh (parent of Akshata and Skandavel) observed this closely, and what struck her was not just the structure, but the commitment behind it.

While the children had already gone through long, demanding rounds, the coaches showed a different kind of endurance, moving continuously from one player to another - analysing games, answering questions, guiding discussions, and managing lectures, often without pause, before going on to organise simultaneous exhibitions, giving players the chance to practise against stronger opponents.

For IM Andrew Martin, an experienced coach, this is where development happens.

It is not about telling a child what they did wrong. It is about helping them understand why.

Every child learns differently. Every mistake has context. And confidence, he believes, is built not by avoiding failure, but by learning how to process it.

Alongside him, figures such as

- FM Tim Wall (ECF Junior Development Director)
- IM Lorin D'Costa (Founder, She Plays to Win)
- CM Rob Willmoth (EJCOA Chairman)
- IM Ravikumar

lead lectures and analysis sessions, turning individual games into shared learning experiences.

Changing who sees themselves at the board

While EJCOA builds structure around junior chess, *She Plays To Win (SPTW)*, led by Lorin D'Costa, addresses a different but equally important question: who feels that chess is a place for them?

At grassroots level, participation among girls remains low. The issue is not ability; it is opportunity, visibility, and long-term engagement. SPTW's growth, from a handful of players to thousands, shows what can happen when young players are given inclusive spaces, role models, and a community that helps confidence grow early.

What the children are learning

The impact of that visibility is clearest when listening to the children themselves. Their words reveal not pressure, but perspective: a growing understanding that chess is about courage, patience, recovery, and the discipline to keep improving.

Anvikkashri Prabhakaran, who achieved a perfect tournament score, speaks less about winning and more about courage: making decisions without fear, playing boldly, and enjoying the process. *Harrison Condron*, reflecting on longer time controls, describes a different kind of growth: thinking more deeply, managing stronger opponents, and learning to sustain concentration over time.

Others return to the steady habits behind improvement. *Aneeksha Sohal* speaks of puzzles, practice, and returning after losses. *Shrisha Tarihalkar* sees a loss not as an endpoint, but as an analysis waiting to happen. *Dyuthi Sri Gampa* reflects on blunders as part of growth. *Diah Patel* recognises where preparation, endgames, and planning can be strengthened, while *Dushyanth Gan Nalabothula* describes a measured path built on consistent practice, minimal comparison, and steady progress.

For some, the message is about balance. *Ishan Sai Kuchibotla* focuses on repetition, using puzzles to build pattern recognition and form the foundation of improvement. *Charlotte Oudet* trusts her own playing style. *Samyuktha Vijayendra* balances chess with cricket, showing that ambition does not have to come at the cost of joy. *Sameera Kodukula* balances school and chess while pushing towards elite levels.

Yvon Van Neervan captures one of the clearest lessons of the weekend: losses are inevitable, but staying positive and having the right people around you makes it easier to come back stronger.

The same themes appear in different forms. For *Siyao Ou and Siyuan Ou* - the twin sisters, chess is both individual and shared: a way to build resilience, stay motivated after losses, and balance school with competitive demands. Their presence highlights something deeper: even in an individual game, growth is rarely experienced alone.

The youngest players often say it most simply. *Sarah Cawdery* describes chess as fun, but also as something that makes you think. *Riva Oliveira* expresses the happiness of achievement without complication. *Shivani Kasinadhuni and Sarvani Kasinadhuni* speak of mistakes not as failures, but as learning points to return to and understand. *Vaishnavi Pasumarthi* describes her first experience as difficult but manageable, still finding enjoyment in the challenge and beauty of the game. Even *Sultan Sharkhanov*, after winning every game, keeps one thing constant: chess, for him, is still fun.

What parents learn from the sidelines

For parents, the challenge is not technical. It is emotional: how to support ambition without turning chess into pressure.

Ashish Praharaj (parent of Arish) reflects on a journey that began casually and now requires structure, commitment, and travel, but remains grounded in one principle: winning is okay, and losing is cool. *Jane Cordon* returns to something more fundamental: Harrison loves the game, and that love must be protected. *John Cawdery* (parent of Mary and Sarah), a former junior player himself, draws from his own chess past and insists that children must enjoy the journey, not repeat the pressure he once felt.

Several parents point to the need for patience. *Ranjeet Sohal* (parent of Aneeksha) sees results as markers in a much longer process. *Raghav Krishna* (parent of Akshay and Aahna) cautions against focusing too early on ratings, favouring passion first. *Madhyaar Sharkhanov* (parent of Sultan) admits that parents often feel more pressure than their children, while *Yogesh Pai* (parent of Tejas) reminds himself that losing is part of the process.

Motivation after difficult games is another shared concern. *Nakul Mukerjee* (parent of Shreenitya and Om) says the hardest part is helping children stay motivated after losses, and reflects that while children are learning, parents are learning too. *Dipal Patel* (parent of Diah) highlights something often overlooked: supporting a child in both wins and losses is not just about creating better players, but stronger individuals. *Yuliaty Tiju* (parent of Yvon Van Neervan) echoes that chess builds discipline far beyond the board, while also highlighting the financial challenges associated with international progression. Her point is an important reminder: talent may begin at the board, but opportunity is shaped by the support systems around it.

As the event closes, the hall empties quietly. Boards are cleared. Clocks are packed away. Children leave, carrying more than results. They carry understanding. **And perhaps, something more lasting: the ability to think independently.**

Credits: This article was put together by Soumya Gorrepati for the English Junior Coaches and Organisers Association (EJCOA)