

The Telegraph

World Chess Championship organisers employ anti-spying tactics, but will rigorously applied vigilance reach other sports?

JIM WHITE



26 NOVEMBER 2018 • 6:05PM



Magnus Carlsen (left) takes on Fabiano Caruana CREDIT: AP

In 2013, during a chess competition in Cork, Gabriel Mirza suspected his 16-year-old opponent was cheating. So, during a break in play, the former secretary of the Irish chess federation followed the youngster into the gents' toilets.

When the lad went into one of the cubicles, Mirza battered the door down and found him consulting a chess programme on his smart phone. However, as a move, Mirza's was not exactly checkmate. While his opponent received a four-month ban for cheating, Mirza was evicted from international competition for 10 months for violent conduct.

[As the World Chess Championship reaches its climax in London this week](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2018/11/11/woody-harrelson-unlikely-star-turn-chess-stakes-claim-spectator/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2018/11/11/woody-harrelson-unlikely-star-turn-chess-stakes-claim-spectator/>), there has not yet been any need for aggressive vigilante behaviour in the lavatories. Largely because this is the first international sporting event to employ an anti-spying agency to look out for wrong doing.

Pinkerton, an organisation largely involved in protecting corporations from industrial espionage, has been casting its eye over proceedings in Holborn throughout the past fortnight. It has fitted sophisticated surveillance technology, it scans competitors for hidden devices, it even has a polygraph machine in place should there be any need for arbitration following an accusation of cheating.

This is like putting MI5 in charge of football's Video Assistant Referee, or getting the CIA to supervise rugby's Television Match Official: there is no messing about in chess.

But, then, for as long as the game has been around, players have cheated. As well as his inability to read a tide chart, King Canute is recalled for having had a nobleman put to death after accusing him of making a false move during a game. Though what has turbo-charged deviousness is the advance in technology.



Carlsen and Caruana are currently contesting the world title CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

That lad in Ireland was by no means unique. Borislav Ivanov in 2013, Wesley Vermeulen in 2014, Sergey Aslanov in 2016. The list of those who have been caught popping to the loo for help from their phone is substantial.

And that is without mentioning the blind Norwegian champion Stein Bjornsen. Because of his disability, he was allowed to use an earpiece during matches. It was meant to be connected to a device recording his moves but on two occasions, in 2016 and 2018, turned out to be bluetoothed up to a helper giving him tips.

According to Pinkerton's United Kingdom director Rory Lamrock, this is not to suggest the Norwegian champion Magnus Carlsen and his American challenger Fabiano Caruana, currently embroiled in the London title fight, have any history of such behaviour.

"It is more to do with the organisers protecting the integrity of their competition," he says. "Actually, the two competitors have been very cooperative in our screening processes. They recognise this can only be good for their game."

It is not just electronic interventions that Pinkerton is alert to, either. Every day at the Championship, it has had a couple of undercover operatives mingling with the crowd listening for old-school vocal interventions. When it comes to cheating at chess, the Coughing Major apparently remains a role model.

"We haven't heard anything suspicious so far," says Lamrock, a man who could spot a dodgy sneeze at 50 paces. "But we are alert to them."

It makes you wonder if the chess authority's rigorously applied vigilance might find its way into other sports. Might it not be a good idea to have a Pinkerton operative in the crowd ready to spring out when a jockey slips from his saddle in sight of the winning post, or when a centre-forward tumbles theatrically without any contact from a defender, or when an international fly-half leans into an opponent with his shoulder? And there can be no argument that we could do with one during any televised FA Cup tie in which a sizeable substitute goalkeeper decides to have a mid-match bite out of a pastie.