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UNFORGETTABLE CHESS OLYMPIAD

Baku has hosted the best ever World Chess Olympiad. It's not just words, but the opinion of numerous guests. The competition that brought together representatives of 183 countries struck everyone by its scale and scope. And Azerbaijan once again proved that it is ready to successfully organize and host the most prestigious tournaments on the world calendar. Everything was thought out to the smallest detail - from the opening ceremony and sports component to the closing ceremony, which will be remembered by all its participants.

The Baku Olympiad rediscovered Azerbaijan for the





entire chess world. After all, by its significance it is not inferior to the Summer Games. So in early September, all the leading grandmasters of the planet came together in Baku not only to identify the strongest teams, but also to plunge into the unforgettable atmosphere of the chess festival. By tradition, every great tournament begins with an opening ceremony, and it was unforgettable. The audience at the National Gymnastics Arena witnessed a brilliant show that reflected the history of chess in Azerbaijan and the traditions of this ancient game. The compositions and decorations followed one another, and the guests received impressions before the starting tour of the Olympiad.

Also, the organizers reconstructed the history of chess at the opening ceremony thanks to modern technology. There were a variety of improvisations on the theme of chess to the music of famous Azerbaijani composers Gara Garayev and Fikrat Amirov. In addition, a video projection was presented under the name of "Old as the world", which reflected the ancient Azerbaijani art of carpet-weaving.

Throughout the Olympiad, Baku turned into a real chess city. Across the Seafront Boulevard and the city

center, one could see boards with bulky pieces on the pavement, which were moved by children, their parents and numerous guests of the city. And one of these chess battles unfolded right in front of the Maiden Tower. In short, Azerbaijan experienced a real chess boom in various forms.

A special exhibition organized in the Crystal Hall, where you could see exhibits of the Chess Museum of the Russian Chess Federation, also turned out very interesting. It presented sets of Indian chaturang, Iranian





shatranj, chess made of walrus fangs from the Isle of Lewis, medieval ivory figures of Charles the Great, Bury-at chess of nomads and more. The exhibition attracted no less attention than the games of the Olympiad itself: it was frequented by many famous grandmasters, including world champion Hou Yifan, ordinary chess fans and parents with children. For the latter, by the way, a wonderful recreational area was organized, where children could play to their heart's content and try biscuits baked in the form of various figures if they were hungry.

The high-level organization of the Olympiad received a lively response among the guests, including

FIDE President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. "As head of the International Federation, I have visited eleven Olympiads, and I can safely say that the tournament in Baku is the best. In preparation for the competition, the FIDE team, the National Federation of Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as well as the government of Azerbaijan worked harmoniously. I am very pleased that President Ilham Aliyev personally took part in the opening ceremony and made the first move at the Olympiad. When the head of state attends such an event, it is a great campaign for chess in Azerbaijan and around the world," Ilyumzhinov said.



In terms of logistics and accommodation for guests, everything was thought out to detail. Participants in the competition appreciated the beauty of Baku, strolling along the boulevard, and many rediscovered the capital of Azerbaijan. For example, the Dutch team leader Anish Giri admitted that during the World Cup last year, he loved the boulevard as a fan of strolls. And in the course of the Olympiad, he visited the Seaside Park several times to get some fresh air, especially as the location of the arena was quite suitable – the Crystal Hall has become, in fact, part of the boulevard.

Certainly, the Crystal Hall gave the tournament a

special charm. There are several examples from foreign experience when the arena or sportsmen's place of residence are away from the center, and participants almost do not see the beauty of the city. However, the tournament in Baku was distinguished by the fact that it took place in the heart of the city, and participants' hotels were within walking distance from major attractions. Here parallels are being drawn with last year's Chess World Cup, which took place in the Fairmont hotel, i.e. opposite to the Flame Towers - the modern face of Baku. Well, the Crystal Hall is perfectly familiar to many from the Eurovision Song Contest and European Games.



For many leading foreign grandmasters Azerbaijan is associated with this intellectual game, because in recent years, Grand Prix stages of FIDE have been held here while the Vugar Hashimov Memorial in Shamkir is one of the most important tournaments on the world calendar. Last year, Baku hosted the World Cup won by Sergey Karjakin, who then won the Candidates Tournament and became a contender for the world crown. It is currently owned by Magnus Carlsen, who is not giving up his throne yet.

The title of world champion was once won by a native of Baku and alumnus of the Azerbaijani chess school, Garry Kasparov. And sooner or later, the crown can once again return to Azerbaijan, which is making every effort to further develop and popularize the sport. The organization of prestigious tournaments of the highest level here can also serve this lofty goal, while the World Chess Olympiad is the pinnacle of team competitions.

Guests talked about the competition only in superior tones without hiding their delight. The head of the European Chess Union (ECU), Zurab Azmaiparashvili, spoke especially warmly about Baku-2016. "This is the thirteenth Olympiad in my career. I participated in these

competitions in different capacities - as a player, as vice-president of FIDE, a representative of the Georgian Chess Federation, and now I'm at the Olympiad as head of the ECU for the first time. It's nice that the contest was held in Baku, on home soil. I don't perceive Azerbaijan differently - I have many friends here, this is where I experienced many happy moments. For example, in 2009 the national team of Azerbaijan, of which I was the captain, won the European Team Championship for the first time in its history. It's nice that state attention to chess and the successes of Azerbaijani chess players led to the fact that the Olympiad is now taking place here. By its scale, it is the third sporting event in the world. I had no doubt that the competition would be held at the highest level. They said here that this Olympiad was one of the best, but I would say that the Baku tournament was definitely the best in history. The organization of the Olympiad really has surpassed all expectations. We are preparing to adopt the experience of Azerbaijan in terms of the organization of the Olympiad 2018 in Batumi. And although it will be very difficult to repeat the level of the competition in Baku, I'm happy that Azerbaijan hosted a great chess forum on such a large scale," Azmaiparashvili said.

By the way, the decision to hold the Olympiad in Baku was made at the 2012 Congress of the International Chess Federation in Istanbul. It, so to speak, suggested itself, given the profound chess traditions of our country and the results shown by the national team. This ancient game has a special status in Azerbaijan: chess is included in the school curriculum, and there are more than seventy specialized chess schools that produce young talents. And when you consider that a state program was once adopted for the development of this sport, it is obvious that the holding of the Olympiad in Baku was only a matter of time.





In the course of the competition, Azerbaijan witnessed a real rain of chess stars: the winner of the world crown Magnus Carlsen, the contender for it Sergey Karjakin, former world champions Veselin Topalov and Vladimir Kramnik, world champion Hou Yifan – it is just a partial list of grandmasters of the first magnitude that played in Baku. It is interesting that among them was Latvia's Minister of Finance Dana Reizniece-Ozola, who has led the national team of her country for many years. Ironically, in Baku she beat Hou Yifan, and the result was immediately recognized as sensational by many experts.

The Olympiad turned out to be interesting not only for its sports component. It saw a number of interesting moments that were not directly related to the game, but were important in the context of the FIDE regulations. The Anti-Cheating Committee of FIDE worked as part of the competition, and the entrances and exits at the Crystal Hall were strictly divided into zones. Some were used by the chess players, others by representatives of the media, third ones were provided for spectators and fourth ones for visitors to the chess exhibition.

If we talk about the sports results, the competition proved to be successful for the US men's team that won the gold. Moreover, the United States last won the highest award of the Olympiad forty years ago, so the success was doubly welcome. Ukraine won the silver, and the bronze went to Russia. Among the women, the Chinese team, led by world champion Hou Yifan, turned out to be beyond comparison. Polish chess players finished second, while Ukraine ranked third.

The closing ceremony was no less memorable, as the winners of the competition, in addition to medals, received a special gift in the form of the kalagayi and national hats. And it only added to the symbolism of the Olympiad in Baku, which according to many guests was the best in history.

Of course, for Azerbaijan the brilliant organization of

such a tournament is another important milestone in its further development. The whole chess world, which will remember the competition with great gratitude to the organizers, recognized the country anew. After all, colossal work was carried out indeed. Therefore, there is no doubt that the Olympiad in Baku is inscribed in the history of world chess and Azerbaijan in golden letters. ♠

