



Players

Boris Gelfand



Israel, 41 yo

Elo: 2755

World ranking: 9

Date and place of birth: 24.6.1968, in Minsk (Belarus)

Lives in: Rishon-le-Zion (Israel)

Israel ranking: 1

Best world ranking: 3 (January 1991)

In Biel GMT: winner in 1993 (Interzonal) and 2005. Other results: 3rd (1995, 1997, 2001), 4th (2000)

Two Decades at the Top of Chess

This is not a comeback, since Boris Gelfand never left the chess elite in the last twenty years. However, at the age of 41, the Israeli player has reached a new peak and is experiencing a third wind. He is back in the world Top-10, officially as number 9 (in fact, a virtual number 5, if one takes into account his latest results that have not yet been recorded). He had not been ranked so high since 2006.

Age does not seem to matter for this player who is unanimously appreciated in the field, both for his technical prowess and his personality. In Biel, he will not only be the senior player of the Grandmaster tournament, but also the top ranked and the Festival's most loyal participant. Since his first appearance in 1993, he has come seven times to Biel; it is precisely at this Festival that he earned one of his greatest victories: in 1993, he finished first in the Interzonal Tournament (which, by then, was the only qualifying competition for the world championship), out of 73 participating grandmasters (including Anand and Kramnik). His victory in Biel against Anand is mentioned in his book, *My Most Memorable Games*.

Born in Minsk, Belarus, Boris Gelfand immigrated to Israel in 1998. He settled in Rishon-le-Zion, in the Tel Aviv suburbs. During his long career (his first outstanding success was the USSR junior title in 1985), he has won over 45 tournaments (including Biel in 1993 and 2005), won interzonal tournaments in Manila (1990) and Biel (1993), and took part in numerous tournaments for world championship candidates. In 1994, he won his candidate matches against Michael Adams and Vladimir Kramnik, but lost in the semi-finals against Anatoly Karpov. In 1997, Viswanathan Anand was the only player to beat him in a knock-out style semi-final.

Boris Gelfand is neither satisfied nor tired. In the 2007 World championship played in Mexico City, he tied in second place with Kramnik, behind Anand. In November 2008, he stood out as the leader of the Israeli team at the Dresden Olympiads. With his impressive performance close to 2833 Elo points (third best total score among hundreds of players) and two young grandmasters, Maxim Rodhstein and Michael Roiz, (who are also in Biel this summer) Gelfand and his team earned a silver medal, just behind Armenia, but ahead of the United States, Ukraine, and Russia.

Since early 2009, the former #3 in the world is one of the grandmasters who have made the most progress in the FIDE ranking. As #9 in the world with 2755 Elo points, he earned an additional 22 points in only three months, especially from his team championships in Israel, Austria, and Russia.

Olivier Breisacher

Brigitte Sion (adaptation)



A Real Fighter

Boris Gelfand and world champion Anand are the only players over the age of 40 in the Top-10. Born in Minsk, he learned the solid technique of the Soviet school thanks to his coaches, especially Kapengut. He quickly stood out for his serious approach to the game. He imposed himself as one of the most talented players of his generation when he became Soviet Unions's champion in the 18-year-old category, ahead of Ivanchuk by half a point.

At 20, Boris Gelfand became European champion in the junior category, still ahead of Ivanchuk, and tied with Ivanchuk, Serper, and Lautier (who won the title) in the world championship for juniors.



He was many times candidate to the world title; the Israeli Grand Master remains a fighter who adopts classical but offensive openings, which he improves year after year. He specializes in the Sicilian Najdorf with Black, and theoretically, he is probably one of the authorities along with Kasparov. He knows everything about the exchange variation of the Grünfeld with 8.Rb1; he overcomes brilliantly his opponents' attacks. Gelfand is a superb offensive player and a brilliant calculator, but he can be surprised by unusual scenarios. GM Raymond Keene calls him "a potential victim of the unexpected." But with such experience, can he still be surprised?

Georges Bertola
Brigitte Sion (adaptation)



Alexander Morozevich



Russia, 32 yo
Elo: 2751
World ranking: 10

Date and place of birth: 18.7.1977 in Moscow
Lives in: Moscow
Russia ranking: 3
Best world ranking: 2 (July and October 2008)
In Biel GMT: winner in 2003, 2004, 2006

The King is Back

Alexander Morozevich is the most successful player in the history of the Biel Grandmaster tournament. Anatoly Karpov also won three times in Biel (1990, 1992, and 1996), but by a shorter margin, losing a few more games, and finishing second in his last appearance in 1997 (behind Anand). In Biel, Morozevich has done even better, and can think of a fourth victory that would make him the King in the records.

In the 33-year history of the Biel tournament (which was held for the first time in 1977), Morozevich already holds three records: nobody else won in each of his participations (2003/16 category, 2004 and 2006/18 category), nobody else defended his title (2003 and 2004), nobody achieved better individual results. Just take a look: 8 points out of 10 in 2003, 7.5 points out of 10 in 2004 and 2006. His global performance is impressive: 30 games, 18 victories, 10 draws, and only 2 losses. Chess magazines went crazy. In 2006, their headlines read, "Stratospheric Morozevich," or, "Morozevich, the Return of the Lion King."



Needless to say, the two-time champion of Russia (1998 and 2007) has only one goal in mind: a fourth victory in Biel. Each time, his opponents are more dangerous in the field, for example Gelfand and Ivanchuk, whom he knows very well after numerous battles over the last years. However, as he says himself, the Biel Festival is one of his favorite competitions, where he feels particularly well, and can play with great confidence.

An unexpected artist for his opponents, 32-year-old Alexander Morozevich knows how to set the chessboard on fire. His peers consider him as one of the most creative and unpredictable players. He is ruthless, he takes risks and can be considered as the king of improvisation, "his philosophy of high-level chess."

Many experts describe it as "creative chaos on the chessboard." This also explains some uneven results and irregular FIDE rankings. Currently #10 in the world, he was #2 less than a year ago. In the world championship cycles, his best result is the 4th place (in 2005 in San Luis, Argentina).

His record speaks for itself. Multiple-time Russia and Europe Team champion (with Tomsk), triple winner of the Olympiads with Russia (1998, 2000, 2002), Team world champion with Russia in 2005: these are only some of his most glorious achievements. One of his first important victories took place in 1994 (9.5 points out of 10 at the Lloyds Open in London). He won in Sarajevo (categories 18 and 19) in 1998, 1999, and again in June 2008. In 2009, he participated in very few tournaments by invitation. It is thus quite an opportunity to see him in Biel. (olb/bs)



Brilliant, Explosive and Unpredictable

There are many ways of defining the style of the genius Alexander Morozevich; experts have agreed on the terms “brilliant, explosive and unpredictable.” His participation in the Biel tournament has always been noticed, especially for the quality and the originality of his games. He ambitions to win, whether with the white or with the black pieces, and he sets himself in a different league, as proven by his victories in 2003, 2004 and 2006.



When he is in shape and confident, the Moscow-born player is irresistible. In 2007, at the Super final of the Russian championship, he managed to win six consecutive matches and eventually beat Grischuk. However, his performance and his Elo points are sometimes uneven. But in the last decade, he has remained in the Top-10, almost without interruptions. His repertoire, which is based on marginal and unusual variations such as the Tchigorine defense, the Albin counter-gambit, or romantic openings, have helped him obtain unexpected victories.

His only real issue is unsuccessful attempt to earn a world title; in 2004, he reached the 4th place in San Luis (Argentina), but in Mexico in 2007, he fell under the 50 percent threshold.

However, GM Anatoly Vaisser states that Morozevich has the best potential to bring the world title back to Russia, since Vladimir Kramnik lost it. “Morozevich is a monster! He is not very stable but I feel that he has the potential of a world champion. If he is well coached, and if he concentrates all his skills towards this sole goal, he may be able to make it.” (gb/bs)



Evgeny Alekseev



Russia, 23 yo
Elo: 2714
World ranking: 24

Date and place of birth: 28.11.1985 in Puschkin
Lives in: St. Petersburg
Russia ranking: 6
Best world ranking: 14 (October 2006)
In Biel GMT: winner in 2008

Defending his Title

He beat all odds at the 41st international Festival. After an incredible finish (three victories in the last four games), Evgeny Alekseev came ahead of the favorite, Magnus Carlsen, by half a point, and tied the Cuban player Leinier Dominguez. In the tie-break between the two Grandmasters, the Russian player showed stronger nerves and imposed his rule in the fifth round, beating Dominguez in blitz (after two draws in rapid games and two other draws in blitz games).

Twelve months later, Evgeny Alekseev is the sole participant returning to the Grandmaster tournament in Biel. He was not a favorite last year, nor is he this time, which means that he will most probably be intimidating, and ready to stand out once again. His steadiness speaks in his favor: for the last two years, he has not left the Top-25 world ranking, and he is only 23 years old.



Obviously, Biel 2008 remains one of the best successes of his young career, after winning the Geneva Open in 2004, becoming Russia's champion in 2006, winning the Moscow Aeroflot Open and finish second in Dortmund, behind Vladimir Kramnik, in 2007.

Tie-breakers seem to play an integral part of Alekseev's career. Before winning in Biel last year, he also went to a tie-break to earn his Russian national title in 2006, against Dmitry Jakovenko. But there is an end to all series. In December 2008, result changed sides. Although he was leading in the final of the Russian championship after eight rounds, the Petersburg-born player collapsed on the last day; he lost with the white against Svidler, and again in the triple tie-breaker against Svidler and Jakovenko.

Evgeny Alekseev will compete for the second time in the Grandmaster tournament at the Biel Festival which he knows well, since he often participated in the Master Open (and finished second in 2005). Concurrently, "Jenya" (his nickname in Petersburg) has recently joined the Grand Prix tournaments of the FIDE.

His career was carefully thought through. A mathematics fan since his early childhood, he started playing chess at the age of 5, and could already spend hours in front of a chessboard. As a schoolboy, he joined a well-performing chess school, and got his first personal coach at the age of 9. In 2001, at 16, he finished second in the Petersburg championship, won his first closed tournament in Israel, missed by a hair the title of Junior world champion. All he needed was to become grandmaster and turn professional. Mission accomplished. (olb/bs)



Technical and Tactical Efficiency

Evgeny Alekseev is an essentially positional player who has an excellent technique and a solid repertoire. His style is a little bit dry, but it is efficient to stop haphazard tactical adventures or gain microscopic advantage. He remains placid before the chessboard, cold-blooded in any situation, and remarkably tenacious.

Last summer in Biel, the favorite, Magnus Carlsen, hammered at him; this “winning attitude” cost Carlsen the first place. Evgeny Alekseev’s victory was not random. He won the Super Final of the 2006 Russian Championship, the 2007 Aeroflot Open in Moscow, and remained undefeated in a category XX tournament in Dortmund in 2007 (behind Kramnik, along with Anand and Leko). These are definite achievements from a great champion.



Alekseev was trained in Petersburg, a city that favors chess and in which many champions lived (Botvinnik, Spassky, Kortchnoi, Khalifman for example). Just like last year, Alekseev is not the favorite, but he is an outsider that can spoil the party; he must absolutely outdo himself if he wants to receive regular invitations to great tournaments. (gb/bs)



Maxime Vachier-Lagrave



France, 18 yo
Elo: 2703
World ranking: 29

Date and place of birth: 21.10.1990 in Nogent-sur-Marne
Lives in: Nogent-sur-Marne
France ranking: 2
Best world ranking: 24 (October 2008)
In Biel GMT: -

A Semi-Professional who aims High

He has not yet decided whether to give priority to mathematics or to chess. But must he? To this day, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave is able to pursue both his studies and his career with disconcerting easiness. He still has one year to go before getting his bachelor's degree, and then he will have to make a decision: continue with a masters and a doctorate degree, or devote his time to chess, with the goal of joining the world's top 10 players.

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave started early, at age 5. His father, a computer scientist, and his mother, a teacher, quickly noticed his passion for calculus, reasoning, and numbers. At age of 5, he learned to read by himself, and started school a year early. His father taught him the fundamentals of chess, and then made him join a club. The little genius loved it, and was immediately successful among the boys under the age of 8.



He has gone a long way since then. He is #2 in France, #3 world junior, and #29 in the FIDE ranking (he was #24 in October 2008). Maxime Vachier-Lagrave will certainly find enough motivation to try out the world of chess at full speed. Along the years, chess amateurs have learned to know this prodigy from Nogent-sur-Marne (10 km east of Paris) who is a contemporary of Carlsen and Karjakin (the two best junior players of the moment). He finished second in the world championship under 14 (2003) and under 16 (2005); a few months later, he became the 8th youngest grandmaster in history, at age 14 and 4 months. His ascent was predictable; he simultaneously pursued brilliant studies in mathematics and a successful chess career efficiently coached by the grandmaster Arnaud Hauchard.

Switzerland was good to him. Shortly before his 16th birthday, in 2006, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave won the Young Masters in Lausanne, the main tournament for juniors of the world. In the summer 2007, he became France's champion by beating in a tie-break the favorite, Vladislav Tkachiev, who had just been crowned European champion. Maxime earned his laurels at age 16 and 10 months, the second youngest French champion in history (he was three months older than Etienne Bacrot). His two victories in the Paris championship are also worth mentioning.

He gets stronger and steadier, and intimidating in difficult and tactical situations. The Paris resident has stood out in numerous national championships in teams. In June 2009, he was instrumental in obtaining the national title at Evry Grand Roque. He will try to remain on this ascending track at the Biel International Festival.
(olb/bs)



An Explosive Cocktail

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave is the best French talent since Etienne Bacrot. However, in 2008, he was still hesitant to turn professional, in spite of this 2700+ Elo points and his obvious potential. His first successes were very encouraging: French champion in 2007 and numerous team victories

He remained evasive and mysterious about his future. "I think I will stop studying after I get my B.A. It is a reasonable choice to maintain a kind of balance, and keep all options open." Nevertheless, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave is a fighter who excels in taking the initiative; he likes positions on the edge, particularly those that result from the Grünfeld defense or the Sicilian. One should also note that he is extraordinarily quick in calculating variations and has an acute tactical sense. This explosive cocktail of skills allowed him to beat Vladislav Tkachiev and take over his crown in 2007.



Maxime does not want to stop there. "I want to go as far as possible." A world title? "Yes, of course, but it will be very hard. There is not secret, even if I compete with the best players. It is going to be a long haul." Biel 2009 seems to be just a stage, but an important one. (gb/bs)



Vassily Ivanchuk



Ukraine, 40 yo

Elo: 2703

World ranking: 30

Date and place of birth: 18.03.1969 in Berezhany

Lives in: Lvov

Ukraine ranking: 4

Best world ranking: 2 (October 2007)

In Biel GMT: winner in 1989, 14th (Interzonal 1993, 73 players)

A Life for Chess, a Boundless Passion

In the summer 1989, a young Grand Master arrived in Biel with a flattering reputation. He was only 20, came from Ukraine, and had just climbed to the 3rd place in the world rankings, behind Gary Kasparov and Anatoly Karpov. At his first participation in the Festival, he did not have a brilliant start; but he got his act together, scored five wins and two ties in the last 7 rounds (out of 14) and won the gold medal ahead of the favorite, Lev Polugajevski. His first stay in the Seeland region was very successful. His second one, in 1993, less so, since he finished 14th (out of 73 players) in the interzonal tournament of the world championship, which only qualified the first ten players.



Sixteen years after his last participation, and twenty after his first Biel success, the Lvov-based player (in Western Ukraine, 70 km from the Polish border) is returning to the Biel International Chess Festival. His career is impressive and his record outstanding, with numerous tournament victories, a European champion title (2004) and a 2nd place in the FIDE world championship in 2002 (after losing in the final against his compatriot Ruslan Ponomariov). Like Viktor Kortchnoi in the past, "Chuky," as he is nicknamed among other Grand Masters, is one of the best players who have never earned the title of world champion.

His other achievements are impressive, among others, triple winner of the Linares tournament (1989 and 1995 ahead of Karpov, 1991 ahead of Kasparov), winner at Wijk aan Zee (1996), Mexico, Havana, Foros and Montreal (2007), Sofia and at the Tal Memorial in Moscow (2008, ahead of Morozevich and Gelfand, two of his rivals in Biel). Add three gold medals in the Olympiads with the Ukraine (the most recent one in 2004), a title of blitz world champion (2007). Last month, he won his latest tournament in Bazna (Rumania), ahead of Gelfand, Radjabov, Shirov, and Kamsky.

It is hard to imagine a long period of time without chess for Vassily Ivanchuk, one of the Grand Masters who plays the most tournaments across the world without taking a breath; he juggles classical competitions, rapid games, and team championships, which can explain his uneven FIDE ranking. In October 2007, he had 2787 Elo points, and peaked at the #2 place in the world, his best performance ever. In January 2009, he was still number 3 (with 779 Elo points), before going downhill, losing 30 Elo points in six months, and falling to the 30th place in July 2009.

It would not be right to focus on numbers with a classy artist such as Vassily Ivanchuk, who is capable of playing every possible overture. First, his virtual ranking (including his latest results) actually places him at the 16th position (2714 Elo points); second, he shone last February and shared the first place with Alexander Grischuk in Linares; finally, he is an authentic phenomenon, who can hardly be controlled when he is in full confidence. This man does not do half-measures. He is definitely one of the candidates to the title in Biel. (olb/bs)



An Alien Capable of Everything

A die-hard fan of chess, Vassily Ivanchuk knows everything, plays everything, and is capable of everything. His matches draw many amateurs, who are often dumbfounded by his rich repertoire and his original victories. However, it is hard to decrypt his game. GM Nigel Short, former finalist in the world championship, said the following a few years ago: “There are only two players in the world whose game I cannot understand: Alexander Morozevich and Vassily Ivanchuk. When I watch their matches, I cannot guess more than one move out of five.”



The Ukrainian champion is a phenomenon who is feared by his peers. He has won almost everything but he misses key moments. King Garry Kasparov introduced him as his heir long ago; he had everything to become world champion. He got close to the world title in 2002 in the final of the FIDE cycle against his young compatriot Ruslan Ponomarev. Everybody pictured him at the top; but while Ponomarev bent, Ivanchuk collapsed.

Last year, he was second in the world ranking; his performance in Sofia at 2977 Elo was that of an alien; and then he went downhill. In Biel, everything is possible for him “There is a belief among the best players that it is a desperate situation to compete against Ivanchuk when he is in his best shape,” said, like many others, Nigel Short. (gb/bs)



Fabiano Caruana



Italy, 16 yo

Elo: 2670

World ranking: 59

Date and place of birth: 30.07.1992 in Miami (USA)

Lives in: Budapest (HUN)

Italy ranking: 1

Best world ranking: 59 (July 2009)

In Biel GMT: -

A Prodigy Among Prodigies

Has the world of chess found one of its new absolute stars? Time will tell, but Fabiano Caruana seems to have all the cards in his hands to accomplish a prodigious record. At almost 17 (his birthday is July 30, the day of the last round in Biel), he reminds of the Norwegian Magnus Carlsen (18 years old, current #3 in the world), although in a different style and personality. This is his first participation in a tournament in Switzerland.

Fabiano Caruana skipped steps and rushed his ascent like a meteorite. His world standing peaked at 2219 Elo points in January 2005 (at age 13!), 2409 in 2006, 2492 in 2007, 2598 in 2008 and 2670 since July 2009—currently his best performance, which places him at the 59th place in the FIDE ranking and 5th junior player in the world.



Born in Miami to an American father (Lou) and an Italian mother (Santina), Fabiano and his family settled four years later in New York. He took his baby steps in chess at age 5 in a local Brooklyn school, a few feet away from the old house of the former world champion Bobby Fischer. His first well-known coaches are Bruce Pandolfini (who inspired the film “Looking for Bobby Fischer”) and the GM Miron Sher.

In January 2001, the U.S. television network CBS aired a story about 8-year-old Fabiano, who was about to become the youngest U.S. Grand Master, and was already the best in the country under the age of 11. In May 2003, he became the youngest American able to beat a GM (Aleksander Wojtkiewicz); the New York Times ran an article about this champion who collects trophies among American and Pan-American school kids, “sometimes receiving trophies taller than he is!”

When he turned 12, the Caruana family settled in Spain, and soon after in Budapest, convinced that Fabiano would make bigger progress in Europe. At the closed tournament in Budapest, he achieved his third GM norm, became a Grand Master at the age of 14 years, 11 months, and 20 days. Simultaneously, he became the youngest Grand Master in the history of the United States and Italy, two countries of which he is a citizen. However, since the age of 13, Fabiano Caruana has decided to compete solely for Italy.

Fabiano Caruana has recently triumphed in the prestigious tournament in Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands. Like Magnus Carlsen before him, the Italian player first won the group C (in 2008), then the B (in 2009). In 2010, he will be honored to compete in group A, along with the best Grand Masters in the world. He can also pride himself of his two titles as Italian Champion (2007 and 2008).

In Biel, he will be accompanied by his father, Lou, and his coach, the Hungarian GM Alexander Chernin. He will compete in the toughest closed competition in his career so far. (olb/bs)



The Dazzling Progress of a Prodigy

Fabiano Caruana is the new prodigy of Western chess. His goal is clear: he aims for the top title; although his record of achievements is still sparse, he tells us how he entered the world of chess:

“I was born in the United States where I learned to play chess in school when I was 5 years old. I progressed very quickly. At the age of 12, I decided to devote my life to chess, with the help of my family. We decided to settle in Spain, because it is too difficult to pursue a professional career as a chess player in the U.S. We also thought about Italy, but finding a coach was difficult. I took classes with the IM Boris Zlotnik and the GM Ubilava; my Elo went over 2500. In 2007, we settled in Hungary (we also thought of Russia, says his father, but we did not know the language.) With the help of the GM Chernin, I quickly met the three norms to become Grand Master.”



His style? “I consider myself a positional player. In general, I don’t like complicated moves that lead to an irrational game, as opposed to players like Judit Polgar, for example. I am good at calculating, but I don’t think of myself as an essentially tactical player,” says Fabiano Caruana.

He seems to be right. He climbs the rankings as quickly and easily as another great prodigy, Magnus Carlsen. With his 2896 Elo performance at the Russian team championship last April, Fabiano Caruana is a dangerous outsider in the category 19 tournament in Biel. (gb/bs)