MICRO CHESS

GOOD LOOKING, SENSITIVE AND INTELLIGENT

No, not the ever-modest Tony Harrington. . . we're talking about the Conchess range of machines under investigation this month.

Conchess is a relative newcomer to the chess computer market. The first sets went on sale in the UK just in time for the 1982 Christmas shopping spree.

The idea for the machine originated in Germany, though the manufacturing — and the UK marketing — is carried out by a Dublin-based company, Waltham Electronics.

Like so many computer chess ventures, the starting point here was once again an entrepreneur looking for a product to sell for a profit. Peter Gericke, a German marketing man, put together a small team of backers to provide the finance for the initial research and design. They formed a company called Consumenta Computers.

Gericke then hired a German electronics engineer to design a magnetic sensitive board and chassis and asked a Swedish computer engineer and programmer, Ulf Rathsmann, to write the chess program and software.

The Dublin company got into the act through the Irish Development Agency's German office. Gericke was looking for a suitable site to manufacture the machine and the IDA was offering very attractive grants for hi-tech ventures.

According to Brian Reddy, one of the directors at WE, the Irish government provides grants to cover the cost of training the workforce from scratch up to the necessary level of technical proficiency required to manufacture the machine. It also provides up to 35 percent of the operating cost.

Production went fairly smoothly and, according to Conchess design and production manager, Dominic Murphy, the company is now geared to producing 2000 units a week if demand warrants this kind of effort. 'It is almost impossible to anticipate what the level of demand will be. We're at trade shows in Amsterdam and Nuremburg in the next few months and we're doing our best to get the name known. If things go well we could sell 50,000 units in the UK by the end of the year. But we might finish up with half that number,' he told me.

There are three models: the Monarch at £249.00, the Ambassador at £199 and the Escourter at £159.95. All the models have the same program — the difference is in the quality of the chassis. The Monarch is a good-looking wooden board and chassis. The Ambassador has a wood veneer while the Escourter has an aluminium-type chassis and board.

From the start, Conchess decided to have the program load in cartridge fashion in a slot under the board. By separating the program from the firmware and electronics, it has made it possible for updates and improved versions of the program to be added at a later date.

In fact it is possible to plug in two cartridges simultaneously. According to Murphy, the company is currently working on an improved version of the program, to be released in June this year. It also plans to release a second cartridge at around the same time which will give the machine a greater depth of search — and so add to its playing strength.

The US Chess Federation has given the machine a provisional rating of 1720, though the current version of the program did not do too well at the Third European Microcomputer Chess Tournament, in September 1982. It only achieved two-and-a-half points out of seven. (One of its wins there, incidentally, is given in the games section below.)

It plays a reasonable game, though, and it has one feature which all the other machines I've looked at lack — and that is a built in timer for lightning chess. This is absolutely murderous. You have three minutes to play the whole game and when time's up the machine beeps and refuses to play on. There's no appeal. It concentrates the mind wonderfully.

Recent tournaments

Now for some tournament news. In October 1982 Competence (a London computer-chess shop) arranged for three different suppliers' chess computers to be entered in the last four rounds of the North London Autumn Chess Congress, held at the Sir William Collins School. The machines were the Mephisto II, the Conchess Ambassador and Fidelity's Sensory 9.

Four machines of each type were entered to give a useful spread of results. The first two rounds were played in the open and major sections of the tournament and the results look somewhat unhappy for the computers. They played 21 games, lost 15, drew 2 and won 4. But, according to Competence managing director Terry Knight, the games all showed the computers holding their own until the late middle game, and then being gradually outplayed in the ending. (Two of the wins, by the way, were by Conchess, with the Sensory 9 and the Mephisto each scoring one win.)
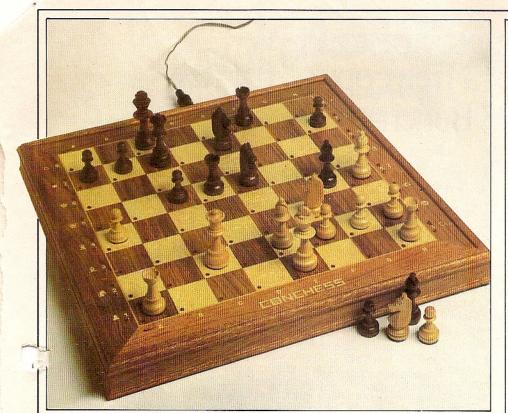
For the final two rounds, the computers played in the minor section only, which had an upper limit of BCF135, or ELO rating of 1680. Of 17 games they scored 7 wins, 6 draws and 4 losses. A BCF official grade gave the three machines a provisional rating on the basis of this tournament. This was a little distorted by the number of losses the machines suffered in the open and major sections of the tournament. The provisional BCF grades are: Conchess 132; Mephisto II 121; and Sensory 9 120

Games section

In addition to the Conchess game from the 3rd European Microcomputer Tournament, I have included a game from the North London Congress (my thanks to Competence for providing the scoresheet). According to Richard Parker, who played and beat the Sensory 9, the game was his best for the season. It consists of a fairly even struggle which Parker brings to an abrupt end by a crushing Queen sacrifice.

It provides a nice contrast to the slogging match fought out by the two computers. This game, between Competence and a private entry, White Knight Mk10 (which eventually took the prize for the best amateur entry) had, unfortunately to be adjudicated on move 53 with Competence two pawns up. Whether the computer would have been able to force a win in a Rook and Pawns ending is another story.

	Conchess	White Knight (MK10)
1	e4	e6
2	d4	Nc6
3	Nf3	d5
4	exd5	exd5
5	Qe2+	Be6

The Conchess Ambassador

	R. Parker	Sensory 9
1	e4	e5
2	Nf3	Nc6
3	Bb5	a6
4	Ba4	Nf6
5	O-O	Be7
6	Re1	b5
7	Bb3	O-O
8	c3	d6
9	h3	Na5
10	Bc2	c5
11	d4	Qc7
12	Nbd2	cxd
13	cxd	Be6
14	d5	Bd7
15	Nf1	Rac8
16	Bd3	Nc4
17	b3	Nb6
18	Be3	Qd8
19	Qd2	Nbxd
20	exd	e4
21	Be2	exf
22	Bxf	Bf5
23	Rac1	RxR
24	RxR	Be4
25	BxB	NxB
26	Qd4	Nc5
27	b4	Bf6
28	Qd1	Ne4
29	Rc6	Qa8
30	Qd3	Re8
31	Bd4	Be5
32	Bxe	Rxe5
33	Ne3	Qb7
34	Qd4	Ng5
35	Qa7	Nxh3
36	gxh	Qxc6
37	dxc6	Resigns

6	Qb5	a6	38	Rh5	NxB+
7	Qb3	Na5	39	c3	f4
8	Qa4+	c6	40	h4	f6
9	Bd2	Nc4	41	Rf5	Kg6
10	BxN	dxc4	42	h7	Re1+
11	Ba5	Qf6	43	Kc2	Kxh
12	c3	b5	44	Rxf6	Re2+
13	Qc2	Bf5	45	Kb3	Kg7
14	Qe2+	Be7	46	Rxf	Re5
15	Nd2	Bd3	47	Rc4	c5
16	Qe3	Qg6	48	Ra4	Re6
17	Rg1	Rc8	49	Rc4	Re5
18	O-O-O	Nf6	50	Ka4	Re2
19	Ne5	Qf5	51	a3	Re5
20	g4	Qe6	52	Ka5	Kf6
21	g5	Nd5	53	Kxa	Ke6
22	Qf3	Qf5			
23	NxB	QxQ	Adjudicated a win		
24	NxQ	d3	for White		
25	Rxd3	h6			
26	h6	g6			
27	Kb1	O-O			
28	Ng5	BxN			
29	RxB	Rfe8			
30	Re5	RxR			
31	e5	Re8			
32	Rd4	Rxe			
33	c4	c4			
34	Rxc	Re6			
35	Rh4	Kh7			
36	f4	Re4			
37	Bc3	g5			