

The Schachbundesliga – An Interview with Mr. Ulrich Geilmann (04/2017)

*The Schachbundesliga is to Chess as the NBA is to Basketball or the Indian Premier League is to Cricket. Known for the regular participation of the biggest names in world chess, the Schachbundesliga has a rich history and has grown into an avidly followed league. Players right from Spassky to Caruana have, at some point or the other, graced this fabulous event, which brings together a fine mix of the elite and the rising stars of the chess world. In our bid to decipher the ‘behind-the-scenes’ story of this marquee event, we reached out to the Vice President of the Schachbundesliga – **Mr. Ulrich Geilmann**. Ulrich provides in-depth information on how the league came into being and its top notch execution, while also providing important pointers for nations wishing to have a world-class league of their own.*

Mr. Ulrich Geilmann, the Vice President of the Schachbundesliga.

Shubham Kumthekar: Hello Ulrich, thanks for agreeing for this interview. Could you please introduce yourself to our readers and how did you get involved with the Schachbundesliga?

Ulrich Geilmann: Hello, you’re welcome. I am pleased that the Schachbundesliga now attracts attention outside Germany as well.

My name is Ulrich Geilmann. I am 53 years old and the Vice President of probably the strongest chess league in the world – the Schachbundesliga. Together with my colleagues Markus Schäfer (President), Detlef Wickert (Treasurer) and Jürgen Kohlstädt (Tournament Director), I organize all matters related to the association. We do this voluntarily and understand ourselves as providers for our members.

How did the initial seasons go by?

The Schachbundesliga is an association and was founded in 2007 as a union of the clubs then playing first league. Before that, the league was organized by the German Chess Federation (DSB).

Above all, the far-sighted idea of our founding-fathers was to manage the league beside the DSB, to become more professional and thus perhaps to improve the marketing opportunities for the first-league clubs as well. After discussions, the DSB was largely consensual and we fixed all that in a basic-contract.

The DSB is still represented in our committees and we have voting rights at the DSB. There is a joint commission also. This mainly makes sense because the business of the Schachbundesliga and DSB is intertwined with four regionally divided 2nd leagues.

Overall, this design has proven itself. We work well together, weighing the interests of all members equally.

Former World Champion Vishy Anand has long been associated with Baden Baden – unarguably the strongest team in Schachbundesliga over the years. (Picture Courtesy: Lennart Ootes via Leuven GCT)

How has Bundesliga evolved over the years?

From the start, we have worked with our members to improve tournament standards and to be attractive to chess fans.

A big step forward was the compulsory transmission of games on an internet-platform. Here, we were certainly the pioneers in international comparison.

With the renovation of our homepage, which mainly benefits from the work of our two editors Marc Lang and Georgios Souleidis, our external presentation has certainly improved even further.

As a result, the Schachbundesliga has become professional and more interesting from year to year.

The third round of Schachbundesliga 2016/17 in progress at the Fraunhofer Institute in Bremen, Germany. (Picture courtesy: Chess24 Twitter)

With so many teams and players participating, effective coordination plays a very important part. How do you manage to ensure the same?

The coordinating work of the Schachbundesliga is unthinkable without the commitment of our member-associations. They are the ones who assemble the teams and ensure quality. This means an enormous organizational and financial expenditure. That should be emphasized. Beyond the sporting competition, we all move on the same line and, believe it or not, even in the same direction!

Also, the self-administration works well because the board of the Schachbundesliga is team-orientated and cooperates without conflicts.

Bundesliga has witnessed the participation of the top-most players on a regular basis. How do you ensure that the organisation of the event remains of the highest standard?

The central element is the tournament-regulation, which defines the framework of conditions. Everything is regulated, from the quality of the chess-boards, the tables and chairs, through to the excellence of the tournament hall. Somehow, typical German!

How and when did Frauen-Bundesliga come into being? Can you tell us more about the event?

The Frauenbundesliga (woman's league) was created under the umbrella of the DSB and is still being organized there. But some top female players play successfully in the Schachbundesliga as well.

At the end of this season, there will be a joint event in Berlin. I am really looking forward to that. In preparation, we have started to report about the Frauenbundesliga on our homepage since a couple of weeks. So, if you ask me, it's more than likely that there will be more cooperation between the Schachbundesliga and Frauenbundesliga in future.

OSG Baden-Baden – The defending Frauenbundesliga champions. (Picture Courtesy: de.chessbase.com)

What level of influence have these string of wonderful league tournaments had on the Chess scene in Germany?

Our main goal is the promotion of chess as a sport. The Schachbundesliga sees itself as a central building block. In this respect, we give an exemplary orientation and publicly effective presentation of our competitions.

That's why, we are a role-model for the whole chess sport in Germany. An important part is fair play and playing without doping. Naturally, we also condemn all forms of manipulation, in particular the use of forbidden technical tools.

With up-to-date marketing and the use of modern media, we want to create an attractive presentation for our member-associations, in order to open up marketing opportunities as well. The aim is the promotion of a positive and radiating image of chess.

Therefore we support the DSB in its sporting, social, inclusive and educational policy aims. We therefore expressly welcome the establishment and expansion of a competent and sustainable work for youth players by our members.

Whether we are actually successful at all levels is a question that can be discussed. This applies, in particular, to all questions related to marketing. However, I also believe that we are on the right path as a whole.

While many of the top chess nations have leagues of their own, there are others, India for instance, which lack one. What are the most important pointers for such nations to get a league structure going?

Good question. The financial and organizational conditions will vary from nation to nation. Certainly, we had an advantage in the sense that the Schachbundesliga already had the basic structure in place which made our start that much easier. Also, I believe that our approaches can not be transferred without reservation. However, our structure of self-administration as well as the quality standards of our tournament-regulations are good examples (of what can be imbibed by other leagues and nations).

Which Bundesliga seasons, according to you, have been the most memorable?

I have been the team-chef for over 10 years, and I have enjoyed this very much. In doing so, the encounters with the top-players of the world made lasting impressions. Countless friendships have developed.

If you ask me regarding the outstanding sporting-results, I foremost think of the last season. After many years of domination by Baden-Baden, the SG Solingen team managed to win the championship. This made the 2015/16 event extremely interesting.

The current defending champions SG Solingen ended Baden Baden's decade-long dominance by winning the 2015/16 season of the Bundesliga. (Picture courtesy: Guido Giotta via SG Solingen)

Going forward, what are the plans regarding Bundesliga? How do you plan to make it even better?

The Schachbundesliga is still open to new developments and wants to adapt to recent changes and needs for our members as well as the interested public. Chess has become an internet sport. We will have to take greater care of that in future. However, we should get better at marketing, because ultimately, *money decides quality*.