

Sneaky chess champ a puzzle for local club

By NICK SILVESTER

IT was more James Bond than anything you'd expect at Hamilton Chess Club – subterfuge, false identities, fraud and a pretty, young Croatian called “Carmen”.

Local rookie chess players unwittingly played a tournament against Women's Grand Master Lara Stock, who entered undercover as Carmen Lampert.

Further, Lara and father Michael Stock, also a highly-rated Croatian chess player who entered as Matteus Wagner, pretended to be strangers, sitting and eating lunch separately, and did not reveal their ratings, said tournament organiser Scott Humphreys.

Out of 19 competitors, Lara won the tournament and her father was runner-up. They pocketed \$55 in prize money – although their combined entry fee was \$25, so it would seem more of a prank than an attempt to win money.

But because they entered under false names, nobody at Hamilton Chess Club was any the wiser until their photos were posted on the club's website. A chess enthusiast from Auckland recognised them and told Mr Humphreys that the winners were not who



CARMEN OF CHESS: Croatian teenager Lara Stock competing in Hamilton Chess Club's rookie tournament.

Photo: SUPPLIED

they said they were. Mr Humphreys said he was amazed, and sceptical. Why would a player of that calibre go through that, just to play in a rookies' tournament?

However, after some correspondence and detective work of his own, he was convinced that Matteus Wagner and Carmen Lampert were father and daughter Michael and Lara Stock. He also heard that a pair fitting their description had played at a club night in Wellington and halfway through the evening revealed who they were and Lara's grand master status.

Lara is rated 2346, while the Hamilton tournament was for players under 1700. She had won the World Under-10 Championship, the European Under-12 Championship, reached the title of Women's

Grand Master at 15 years old, represented Croatia at the 2006 World Chess Olympiad and has a rating close to New Zealand's highest-rated active players.

“After that I sent an email to everyone at the tournament saying it might be the first and last time that you get to play a grand master,” he said.

“If they (the Stocks) had said who they were, I'm sure we could have come up with a way for them to play, maybe a simultaneous game against a couple of members.”

The scandal spread throughout the chess community in New Zealand and Australia, then worldwide, appearing on major chess websites and igniting debate over ethics – whether it was harmless fun, or cheating.

Richard Dare, who came

third in the tournament, played against Lara but said he didn't suspect anything.

“I didn't really take her seriously, at first. However, soon I realised that there was a certain depth in her style.”

How did he feel about their ruse? “Not good at all. I missed out on more prize money and once Scott Humphreys found out who they were, then I felt deceived as well.” However, Mr Dare did take solace in beating Mr Stock 3-2 in a friendly series of games. “That felt really good.”

Mr Humphreys said he wasn't angry. “I'm just bemused by the whole thing more than anything else.” He has sent the details to the World Chess Federation Oceania Zone president Brian Jones.