

# Mind games: How football stars are fuelling chess boom

Haaland and Salah headline crossover trend boosting chess's modern cultural appeal

● Erling Haaland invests in chess tour

● Mohamed Salah plays daily blitz chess

● Top players embrace game's strategy

● New global chess tour launched

AFP | London

Erling Haaland and Mohamed Salah are among the Premier League stars "addicted" to chess, helping to spark a surge in the game's popularity among younger people.

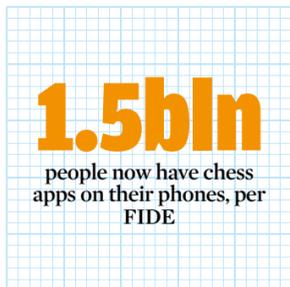
Manchester City striker Haaland is so fascinated by the game that he recently invested in a ground-breaking new chess tour to capitalise on the increased profile bestowed by its celebrity players.

As well as Haaland, Liverpool forward Salah and England team-mates Harry Kane, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Anthony Gordon are all avid chess players.

Salah is obsessed by playing the faster 'blitz' version of chess using an anonymous online profile.

"I'm addicted to chess. Every day, literally every day," the Egyptian said.

Arsenal midfielders Martin



Odegaard and Eberechi Eze are both keen players, with the latter winning an amateur tournament in 2025.

Chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen, a five-time world champion, is a huge football fan and the Norwegian's love for both games has played a role in the surprise crossover.

Alexander-Arnold often plays chess with his brothers and once levelled-up to face Carlsen, who defeated the Real Madrid defender in a 17-move rout that lasted just five minutes.

AC Milan winger Christian Pulisic has the queen chess piece tattooed on his arm in tribute to his grandfather, who taught him the game as a child.

France World Cup winner Antoine Griezmann and Real Madrid's Dani Carvajal are also aficionados.

On the surface, the contemplative, cerebral nature of chess is a stark contrast to the physicality and aggression of football.

But dig deeper and there are more similarities than you would expect.



Erling Haaland reacts during a match (file photo)

"Chess is an incredible game. It sharpens your mind, and there are clear similarities to football," Haaland said.

"You have to think quickly, trust your instincts, and think several moves ahead. Strategy and planning are everything."

'It's remarkably similar'

Backed by the International Chess Federation (FIDE), the new tour will feature four tournaments each year in different cities, with a world champion crowned across three disciplines -- fast classic, rapid and blitz.

Each season will have a minimum prize pool of £2 million (\$2.7 million).

"Seeing a world-class athlete like Erling Haaland join the Total World Chess Championship Tour is a powerful signal of the global attention and cultural relevance that chess enjoys today," FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich said.

Chess has its roots in seventh century India.

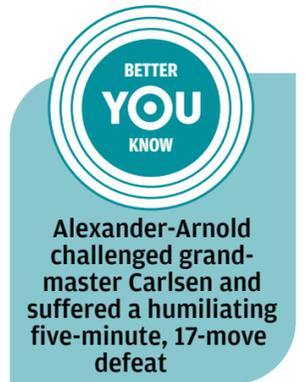
But those humble origins are a far cry from the technology fast-tracking the chess boom, with online apps taking over

from the traditional board as the game's most common battleground.

Online play rocketed during the Covid-19 pandemic and, according to FIDE, at least 1.5 billion people now have a chess app on their phone.

Netflix series "The Queen's Gambit" and the impact of celebrity influencers, including footballers, have all contributed to the boom transforming the previously staid image of chess.

The strategy involved in chess also appeals to football managers looking for a mental edge in



their tactical battles on the pitch.

Quoted in the book 'Pep Confidential', Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola said: "You have no idea how similar the two things are."

Avid Real Madrid fan Carlsen sees his game through the same lens as former Barcelona coach Guardiola: "In chess and football, the important thing is to control the middle. If you control the middle, you control the pitch or the board," he said. "In terms of space, it's remarkably similar."

But will the satisfaction of a successful checkmate ever replace the thrill of scoring a winning goal for chess-fixated footballers?

For Kane, his true love remains football, leaving chess as the perfect way to relax.

"I use chess to switch off," he said. "It's such a mental game. You have to focus on every moment."

## Undav rescues Germany late in Ghana friendly

AFP | Stuttgart

Last-gasp Deniz Undav goal saved Germany's blushes in an unconvincing 2-1 win over Ghana in a friendly in Stuttgart on Monday.

Germany dominated possession and field position against the visitors but needed a Kai Havertz penalty to break through just before half-time.

A counter-attacking Abdul Fatawu goal drew the visitors level and the lifeless match looked on track for a draw until Stuttgart striker Undav's 88th-minute effort put Germany back in front.

The home fans chanted Undav's name until the striker was brought on at half-time. The former Brighton forward told ARD: "It was crazy to hear how the fans stood behind me," adding "it was a perfect evening. Got the win, scored a goal -- top."

"We were completely in control in the first-half, but we have to make more out of our chances," Undav said.

Despite a seventh win in a row, it was an inconsistent performance from Julian Nagelsmann's men against an out-of-form Ghana side.

"We didn't play in position. There was a lot of 'freestyle' play again, like against Switzerland,



Germany's forward #13 Deniz Undav (L) celebrates scoring his team's second goal with teammates

which left us very vulnerable to counter-attacks," Nagelsmann said.

Former Arsenal player Thomas Partey lined up in midfield for Ghana, making his second international start since telling a London court he would plead not guilty to two new charges of rape, with a trial set to take place in November.

Before the game, Nagelsmann seemed unfazed despite Germany's leaky defence in Friday's 4-3 win over Switzerland on Friday, telling reporters "a clean sheet is nice, but above all we

need to be winning."

The hosts had Ghana pinned back for much of the opening half, with the visitors handing Germany the initiative with misplaced passes and failed clearances.

Involved in all four of Germany's goals against Switzerland, Florian Wirtz went close with a dipping free-kick after six minutes, hitting the outside of the post.

Nick Woltemade set Wirtz up for what seemed to be Germany's opener just after the half-hour mark, but the Newcastle

forward was narrowly offside in the build-up.

In first-half stoppage time, VAR showed Jonas Adjetey handled an Angelo Stiller shot, allowing Havertz to convert from the spot.

Bayern Munich starlet Lenhart Karl came on at half-time and almost set up Germany's second minutes later with a deft chip which Woltemade headed against the crossbar.

With 20 minutes left, Ghana broke through on the counter to punish the hosts for their wastefulness, Derrick Koehn threading a ball for Fatawu to tap home.

Undav had little impact until the dying stages when he collected a Leroy Sane pass and prodded the winner into the top corner.



**We didn't play in position. There was a lot of 'freestyle' play again, like against Switzerland, which left us very vulnerable to counter-attacks**

JULIAN NAGELSMANN

## 'Iran will be at World Cup' and play in US, FIFA's Infantino says

AFP | Antalya

FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday that Iran "will be at the World Cup" and will play their group matches in the United States as scheduled, despite the Middle East war.

"Iran will be at the World Cup," Infantino said at half-time of Iran's friendly against Costa Rica in Turkey.

"That's why we're here. We're delighted because they're a very, very strong team, I'm very happy."

"I've seen the team, I've spoken to the players and the coach, so everything is fine," added Infantino, whose attendance at yesterday's game was unannounced.

Infantino went on to stress that Iran's "matches will be played where they are supposed to be, according to the draw".

The World Cup, being hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada, starts on June 11.



Gianni Infantino

Iran are set to play their first Group G game against New Zealand in Los Angeles on June 15. They are then scheduled to play Belgium in Los Angeles on June 21 and Egypt in Seattle on June 27.

Iran's participation had been thrown into doubt by the war with the US and Israel that broke out on February 28.

The Iranian football federation said earlier this month it was "negotiating" with FIFA to relocate the country's World Cup matches from the United States to Mexico.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum also said that her country is prepared to host Iran's first-round matches at the tournament if needed.