

# CHESS BARBS

by Jude Acers (US senior master)  
THE HOLLOW MEN

Reflections on the 1973-74 Chess Championship of the United States and Its New Titleholder, Mr. John Grefe of Berkeley, Calif.

MUNCIE, INDIANA, Sept. 28, 1973: ... Swish, swish, swish... 4...1...5 goes the phone dial. Dial on...8...4...3...2...8.

"Hello."

"Am I speaking to the chess champion of the United States of America?"

"One of them."

"I got your number from Steve Cross."

"Nobody has my number," says John Grefe. And John Grefe, who never laughs, laughs... And we both float through a solid hour on long-distance "telephonic communication" (Thank you, Mr. Erlichmann.), because we both know that we have survived the last six years as professional chess players in America together in separate ways.

And suddenly the crazed chess columnist of the BERKELEY BARB who furiously screamed that someone named Tarjan, someone named Grefe deserved immediate financial support from the U.S. Chess Federation and a dozen international tournament invitations N O W does not seem so unreasonable anymore. The simple truth is that Jude Acers knows better than any living American master exactly who the prospective members of the world chess championship team are, which players are certain grandmasters. And so, Acers tells Grefe again that the International Grandmaster title is certain to go to Tarjan, Grefe, Vukcevic and four other players.

Jude Acers does not tell John Grefe that he has become one of the hollow men. There is too much delight, sweetness, excitement and recollection for that.

A Berkeley, California player has won the United States Rosenwald Tournament, the chess championship of the nation. And for everyone this is a madhouse, a carnival celebration. There will be time enough later...

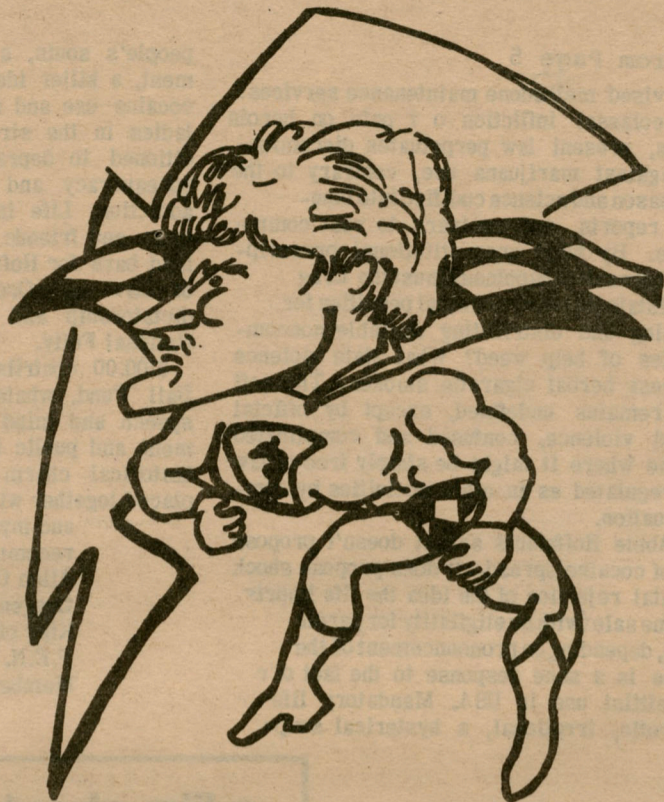
El Paso, Texas was where five international grandmasters had to play against John Grefe in the first week of September. He lost only one game (to Kavalek), scored eight wins (one more than Kavalek) and drew only three to score an incredible 9-1/2 - 2-1/2, thus winning the U.S. title on tiebreak over Lubomir Kavalek. In third place was Browne at 8-1/2, 4th Tarjan 7-1/2, with Benko, Evans, Karklins and Mednis also-rans.

It was the most unusual and hotly contested chess tournament in U.S. history, and an absolutely unknown U.S. master won it. How? It was the most stunning surprise in the history of the United States Chess Championship. How on earth did it happen?!

Just ask Guthrie G. McClain, Editor of the California Chess Reporter (and the man who Mrs. Regina Fischer asked to take care of 12-year-old Bobby Fischer during the U.S. Junior Chess Championship in San Francisco in 1958 and the man who loaned his car to William Addison, Gilbert Ramirez and Bobby Fischer so the trio could blast the U.S. Open in Cleveland) how John Grefe won the national title.

Silver haired, super gentleman McClain will lean back in his creaky-creak-creak swivel chair on Kearny Street, clasp his hands together in pious pontifical reflection, and reply, "He is a strong master, and we in Northern California have known this fact for some time..." Or something. Anything but that he, McClain, is the only living person KNOWN to have slipped both Jude Acers and John Grefe a fee for notes to games published in his magazine while both were hanging by a thread from starvation as chess bums.

While Edmondson, U.S. Chess Federation director laughed, uncaring... Edmondson will have the last laugh. GREFE AND ACERS ARE HOLLOW MEN. Cackle, cackle. Edmondson chuckles. McClain, somehow cares. We do not know why. "I want to help," he told me back in 1969.



Mary Lasher, the woman who knows John Grefe better than anyone alive, told me once, "He is the only master in Berkeley who believes you are a good player, have promise." I was not surprised. Hollow men must know each other, recognize each other's intelligence, enthusiasm, insanity and, above all, cultivate the chief characteristic of all hollow people -- the ability to be tenacious, or in a word: survive while all others perish. Mary Lasher was wrong. Kaplan also is a hollow man. So indeed is Fritzingler, the torcher scorcher sneakeroo.

And what lies ahead for a professional who makes his living totally through professional chess-play in America? For Jude Acers, King of the shopping center chess exhibition circuit? For John Grefe, "Untitled" international grandmaster prospect, who holds the chess championship of a huge country, some 200,000,000 people, the wealthiest nation in the world? Yes, what about the idealistic, prodding Jude Acers, who feels that the disgusting \$1,750 won by Grefe should have been AT LEAST \$25,000, considering that the PUBLISHED NET of the U.S. Chess Federation was \$225,000 (Thank you, Bobby Fischer!) in the past year?

This, despite the fact that chess terribly needs publicity, like a huge \$100,000 prize tournament, whereas the U.S. Chess Federation puts aside \$100,000 earmarked for "re-location".

What happens to Grefe, who

years ago came to borrow my demonstration chessboard (to give cheaply priced, survival chess lessons at the Berkeley Central YMCA), while I was spending my last days at the blood-curdling fleabag Swiss American Hotel in San Francisco before going on my second chess tour, which was destined to change my life from bad to good, and who is absolutely one of the few chess masters I speak with in lament at all times possible?

The answer is very simple, America, and you asked for it. The game is over. Edmondson wins. We are doing things his way from now on or not at all. Okay?

No more Jude Acers criticism of Edmondson will be published here or anywhere else, because such criticism, even if well founded, is pointless, useless, dead weight, or as grandmaster Evans has often been quoted, "beating a dead horse."

The welfare of other chess professionals who are indifferent, scornful of Acers does not matter to Acers anymore. Nor really does the welfare of chessplayers who think Acers is the greatest, the dandy, the greatest of them all concern Acers. Jude Acers has learned how the game is played: brutally, ruthlessly. He has learned that in America it is every man for himself, period.

Chess is a jungle in America for the performer-artist (Acers) or for the pure artist (Grefe). And now children, here is the motto forced upon John Grefe and yours

truly: "Hustle that buck and to hell with anything else." That and that alone will be the consideration of these men.

If you think John Grefe is going to play in a Swiss system tournament in America without a fee and all expenses paid, you are out of your ever-loving mind! No dough no show. You could have had him for free yesterday, America. Ha, ha, ha! Fools!

Sure you thought that bearded, quiet Grefe was just another hippie chess bum in all those weekend tournaments, didn't you? You laughed when Kim Commons (a good semi-hollow master seeking full hollowness status and certain I.M., at least, from Los Angeles) won the international qualifier ahead of Grefe this year. Sure you thought Grefe would be just like all the other suckers, playing for peanuts and dying like Steinitz, whose wife and daughter went before him, much improverished.

Well, think, again, Baby Blue! Grefe is no dumb bunny. He is a true hollow man... Grefe is never going to follow up his idea of unionizing chess masters for higher purses, living expenses for the full-time professionals in this country. That is all gone now. Grefe is going to do what is necessary for Grefe's survival, and he is going to do it now. More power to him! It's every man for himself in our land, and if this has a hollow sound, that's tough, America.

Forget, dear reader, that a goodly portion of grandmasters candidate John Grefe's chess work is done away from the tournament hall. Forget that Grefe should be given at least \$10,000 living expenses to study chess and be on instant call for all international team events and tournaments. Forget that John Grefe, who has spent thousands of hours on chess research, won or placed in hundreds of U.S. tournaments, might like never to hustle the buck, but raise a family instead, love a woman like John Doe instead.

Oh no, John Grefe, get off thy pants bottom and hustle the buck. Research means nothing. No matter that eight of the world's top twelve players keep notebooks and do in-depth preparation for the few international tourneys they engage in. No matter that Fischer never plays in stupid, irrelevant American tournaments. Hustle that buck, big John! Stash the cash! Have a bash!

Like gypsies, we roam the land. No matter that a U.S. world chess championship team of egomanics like Acers, Soltis, Browne, Grefe, Defontis, Tarjan, Commons, Chellstrop could be four or, at most, six years away. (Two or three tries with the same crazy squad is the idea.) No matter that the gang must be assembled months in advance, must train, must avoid the Swiss system death syndrome, must have money to live on when studying.

Hustle that buck, be nice to Mr. Edmondson, get on the plane 24 hours before the world team championship and believe in prayer.

Remember that Executive USCF Director Ed Edmondson is the only real thing in American professional chess. He makes mistakes, but he is professional. He plodded, prodded, pushed, kicked Fischer to the World Chess Championship. He saved the U.S. Chess Federation from massive corruption, rigged rating classifications (the late, great Harkness dropped Addison's rating 150 units overnight!!) And stupidity. He may rig your rating, but he TELLS you about it FIRST. Okay?

At least now we know the game. Edmondson is honest, if occasionally mistaken. He recently told yours truly, "I realize chess in the U.S. cannot survive with only one superstar, Jude. We are trying now to ensure that other young masters get exposure and publicity through tournaments that will qualify them to international title events or at least get them internationally listed. We need several chess superstars in the U.S." Okay?

Well, ... it's the only game in town. Edmondson is, despite lemons, the only organizer now or ever that means anything to my generation. And we are ... the hollow men.