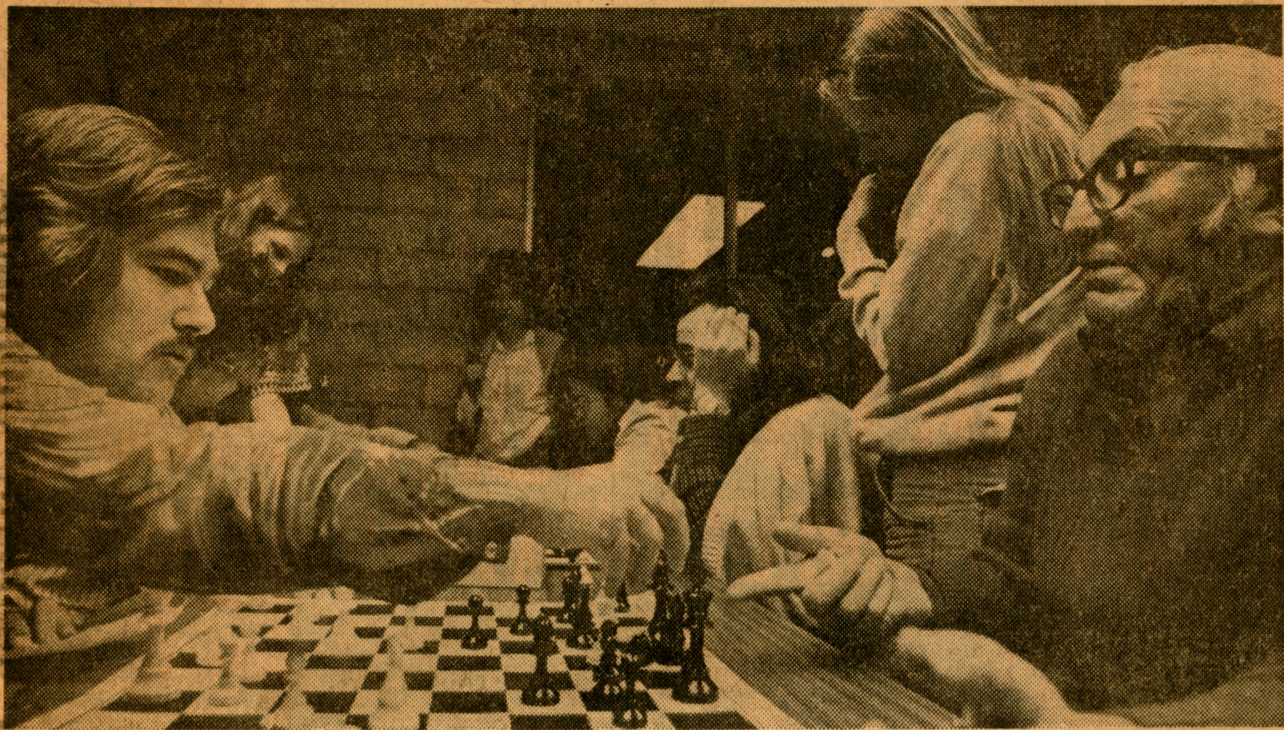


Lone Pine Small Talk: 'Bf8+... Kc7... Nd6+'



The New York Times/David Strick

Grandmasters Walter Browne of the United States, left, and Herman Pilnik of Czechoslovakia analyzing a game that Mr. Browne had just won at Lone Pine, Calif., as others in the room play and ponder.

By JON NORDHEIMER

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LONE PINE, Calif., April 17—The last time anyone held a regular sporting event in Lone Pine the participants were a bull and a bear chained together in a pit, cheered in their fight to the death by the roughneck miners and ranchers who formed this community at the turn of the century.

Things have mellowed at Lone Pine, on the east slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, since the 20th Century delivered a few harsh blows to the residents of the Owens Valley.

First, the gold and silver petered out in the rocky crags of the Sierras, forcing fabled mines like the Cerro Gordo to close.

And then the city of Los Angeles, 225 miles to the south, sent clandestine agents to buy water rights in the Owens Valley, and rammed an aqueduct all the way to the Sierras to drain off the east slope water, driving out the farmers and ranchers whose lands went dry, and earning the reputation as the "thirsty thief of the West."

Outsiders Familiar

The glory days of Lone Pine seemed long gone until a stranger named Louis D. Statham moved to town several years ago and founded what has become one of the top half-dozen or so American chess tournaments.

Lone Pine is an unlikely location for the largest assembly of grandmasters of chess outside of the chess Olympics to gather, but that is what is taking place this week and next in this town of 1,600 at the base of Mount Whitney, tallest peak in the contiguous United States.

The townspeople have more or less accepted the chess players. Outsiders and tourists are familiar by now, especially the fancy dudes and snow bunnies from Los Angeles, on their way to the ski slopes at Mammoth Lakes, who pause for gasoline or coffee at the four blocks of commercial development that line Highway 395.

But they still blink hard and swallow at breakfast time in the Sportsman Cafe when in the next booth some chess masters reconstruct the exciting highlights of a previous day's play.

"Yanofsky moves Bf8 check and Csom counters Kc7," says a bearded man to his companions over the clink of empty coffee cups, "and then Yanofsky goes with Kc4 and is faced with Nd6 check."

International chess competition came to Lone Pine when Louis Statham, a wealthy inventor and medical instrument manufacturer, moved into the splendid isolation of Inyo County and could not find among the locals anyone to match his caliber of play.

So he began importing



Dennis Waterman of U.S. considers his next move.



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some of the world's best players to Lone Pine in the annual competition that now bears his name, putting up the \$12,000 in purses and paying out of his own pocket for the travel and expenses of the 43 men and one woman competing this year from 13 countries.

Mr. Statham's enthusiasm for the game now costs him about \$65,000 a year. In addition, he spent another \$300,000 this year for the construction of an adequate building in which to hold the chess matches, the tourney having outgrown Lone Pine's largest existing building, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall, where the four previous tourneys were held. The new facility has been donated to the town as a social-governmental center, doubling the number of elevators in Inyo County to two.

The tournament began Sunday with all the informal ambience of a church bingo party or a P.T.A. supper. The players, in casual dress for the most part, seated themselves in metal folding chairs that scraped and clattered on the vinyl tile floor.

They bent over long tables with inexpensive chess boards taped to the formica surfaces. And quickly, one play got under way, they slipped into a trance-like concentration.

In all, 22 grandmasters are playing in this year's Statham tournament, the largest number to play together in the United States and a rare collection even for the capitals of Europe. There are also 10 international masters, who are next in ranking, and 12 masters, the lowest rating of the players invited to compete here.

There would have been still more experts if the Soviet Union, with one-third of the world's 95 active grandmasters, had not ignored the invitation to send players. The feeling here is that the snub was a Soviet reaction to the United States Chess Federation's endorsement of changes in championship match regulations that had been sought by Bobby Fischer who relinquished his title as world chess champion early this month to Anatoly Karpov of Russia when he refused to play under established rules.

Most of the players this week sided with the decision of the Federation Internationale des Echecs not to bow to Mr. Fischer's demand for a rule change that would, in essence, give the champion an advantage—a big one, according to many, a small one, according to Mr. Fischer.

"Everyone I know is fed up with Fischer's antics," remarked Larry Evans, one of the four American grandmasters in the tournament. "I think the rule changes he asked for are unfair, and just show that he dreads the thought of losing."

Isaac Kashdan, the tournament director, who is himself an inactive grandmaster, said there was some support among the American players for Mr. Fischer because his brooding, unpredictable mannerisms had caught the public's fancy and made professional chess a lucrative career for the first time in the game's long history.

The pursé for the aborted match in Manila between Mr. Fischer and his Russian challenger was \$5-million, an indication of how worldwide interest in chess has grown since the American won the world title in Iceland three years ago for a purse of \$250,000.

"Some players feel Fischer is so valuable to chess in terms of improved purses that they take the position of 'my Bobby right or wrong,'" said Mr. Kashdan. "But in this case everyone's sense of justice has been violated by his demands."

Prize money in most of the important nonchampionship play in the chess world is still humble compared to what is showered on noncerebral games with the top purse of \$4,000 going to the winner here. Still, it is far more than what was available in past years, particularly for Americans, who still must tour Europe for prize money if they want to make a living out of the game.

Players like Walter Browne, the intense and handsome current American champion from Berkeley, can now earn more than \$30,000 a year if they supplement their prize money with income from writing or teaching, Mr. Kashdan explained.

But obviously there is more than money at stake when chess peers sit down to play. In the chess world, unlike the real world, victories and defeats are total, and if the matchups are not as savage as bulls and bears chained in combat, the competition contains one of civilization's highest forms of controlled aggression.