

DATEBOOK

Section E

7.28.2005



Photos by MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

Sergio Fernandez, above, is among the 50 chess-playing regulars who call a piece of Market Street home. For him, chess provides an escape. **Cedric Hampton**, below, ponders his next move.

Chess may be the glue that binds the players on Market, but their bond goes much deeper

By **Daniel King**
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It's 5:30 p.m. Thursday, and all is chaos around the 50 chess-playing regulars who huddle around the Market Street tables. They come here daily for the game's limitless possibilities, the satisfying touch of the weighted pieces and the spectacle of deep focus amid sirens, shouts, horns and downtown laughter in San Francisco. These are the jobless and the homeless. The bankers, lawyers, bartenders and BART operators. A collective passion brings them here from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

"At first, it was just the four of us," says Maximus King, one of the original players. They first appeared in 1984, when no one else had been using the checkered stone slabs. "But then the tourists got involved, so it expanded,"

he says.

In 1994, they moved across Fifth Street to the southwest corner, when the street vendors began arriving. Since then, the group has braved all kinds of parades, scuffles and weather, bringing out tents when it rains.

King, 42, learned the game at age 4, and in 1977, he moved to San Francisco from Las Vegas. He is now a "superpowerful" chess player — the best there is, he claims.

He's talented, that's for sure: He moves the pieces quickly, with laser-beam precision.

King relies on a wheelchair these days, but he doesn't discuss the reasons. "Let's just drop it. That's got nothing to do with chess."

Retreating now from conversation, he concentrates on resetting the

► **CHESS:** Page E3



From famous to homeless, everyone plays

► CHESS

From Page E1

chessboard and shooing the pigeons. King is a rugged man with a mischievous smile, obvious charm and scruffy cheek stubble, tinged red and brown. He can talk up a storm, and moments later, he does, sounding off about the latest films.

"I've made a lot of friends here," he says, including Thai Joe, a talented player who insists on that nickname. Joe's patchy backpocket and whiskery beard give him an easygoing look, but he's a giant at chess.

"This is my relaxation," he says. Joe moved here from Bangkok in 1981, and his family soon moved to Montreal to start a Thai restaurant. He learned chess — and English — at these tables, and he shows up daily. At night, he cleans a local bar and works on his novel. "That's why I come here, to get story ideas," he says.

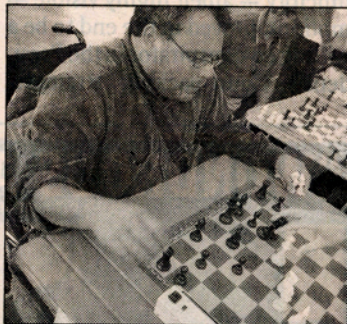
Joe counts many friends here, including Gene Glynn, third-base coach for the San Francisco Giants.

"Joe and all those guys are very strong," Glynn says, standing over a chessboard at the Giants' clubhouse, shortly before Friday's victory against the Florida Marlins.

"Chess clears my mind," says Glynn, 49. He squints at the board, weighs his options and sizes up his opponent, an intently focused, half-naked right fielder named Mark Tucker.

"Tuck and I play at least once a day," Glynn says. "Many of the guys play: Ray Durham, (Yorvit) Torrealba, Barry Bonds. They've all stopped by the Market Street tables." But only to watch, he says.

Glynn, who discovered the game as a kid in Minnesota, first joined the Market Street crew last summer.



MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

Maximus King runs his own chess table on Market Street.

proaching him is Sergio Fernandez, 48, a biotechnologist. He moved to San Francisco from Santiago, Chile, in 1993 and plays chess every day with an artful, emphatic drilling motion of the arm.

"I used to be a cyclist," he says. "But I've gained a lot of weight. It's made me depressed, and chess is an escape mechanism."

Fernandez enjoys showing off his knowledge of science at the tables, specifically the latest news about proposed vaccines against Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other neurodegenerative diseases. (His father suffers from dementia.) But he finds few chess players familiar with the terms. "My friends here aren't into it," he says.

Dancing in the background, as usual, is a button-nosed chess player named Wharf Rat, who just celebrated his 35th birthday. He's not affiliated with the Wharf Rats, a

nonprofit group of music-loving hippies who provide support to alcohol-free concertgoers.

"We provide strength, hope and fellowship," says Lynn Kravitz, the organization's West Coast coordinator, by telephone from Oakland. She says she doesn't know "this chess-playing Wharf Rat," but he, too, provides comfort to passers-by.

"I try to get people off the streets," he says. "I'm a street mayor. I make sure people step up and get a career."

His name seems appropriate when you consider the lyrics to the Grateful Dead's "Wharf Rat":

*Old man down, way down
down, down by the docks of the
city . . .*

*Got up and wandered, wandered
downtown, nowhere to go
but just to hang around.*

"That's about right," Wharf Rat says. "I was born in San Francisco on a boat, and I was raised by Filipinos. My dad's a drag queen." His sister, he says, ran away years ago.

In 1984, Wharf Rat joined the Army and moved from M-16s to M-203s to M-60s at Fort Ord in Monterey. But three years later, after he suffered iodine poisoning, he received an honorable discharge. That's when he picked up chess.

"It's a good escape," he says. "I make sure everyone feels safe here."

E-mail Daniel King at dking@sfchronicle.com.

"At first, I didn't tell anybody. It came out by accident," he says, because Joe and the players were talking baseball. "One of the guys just had the year wrong about the (2002) World Series, so I said, 'Well, I think that was '02.'" And soon, he revealed his professional identity. After several weeks, he gave them complimentary tickets to the stadium.

"To me," Glynn says, "playing with those guys on Market is a good measuring stick." It teaches him forethought and board awareness, he says.

After defeating Tucker, just barely, Glynn dabs his forehead and heads to the field.

Meanwhile, a family of French tourists ogles at Joe's moves on Market Street. They're visiting from Lyon, exploring San Francisco by foot.

"It teaches me strategy," says Valérie Simonin, a 13-year-old in an elegant red dress. Her father, Nicolas, is wearing a fanny pack and drawing on a cigarette.

They're standing next to David now — first name only, David insists — whose chess abilities are as strong as his monologues about God. "These are God's tables!" he trumpets.

That's apparently why David keeps four Bibles next to his chessboard. He lifts each one and kisses it loudly. "I'll kiss God anytime I please," he says.

David first came to the tables seven years ago, and soon began spouting off about the latest "political nonsense," he says. Now he talks religion.

"I do not allow blasphemers at these tables!" he says, tilting his head to the right, adjusting his iPod and lunging for the peanut-butter crackers, which sit between his tall Starbucks coffee and paperback copy of "Armageddon." "If you hate the Bible," David says, "God will chase you from these tables."

David now shares that thought with another man, and suddenly a younger player — or perhaps player — slides to David's table and offers him peaches. David kindly says no.

"But they're fresh!" the young man says. "My grandma cut them today."

Still, no thanks.

David, one soon learns, is blind in his right eye. It happened a few years back, when he was shot twice in the face.

"They walked up to my window (at a streetlight in Oakland), and I could hear the silencer," he says.

David's lips curl up: "I could hear them laughing," he says.

Before long, another man walks over and offers David another cup of coffee. "It's like a hub for us," says the self-appointed caretaker, Richard Samaniego. Samaniego, 42, first came to the tables in 1990, after moving up from Fresno. But this weekend, he'll move back. "My daughter lives there," he says, "but these tables are a home. It's a magnet."

Samaniego is an articulate, gap-toothed, seductive man with a wrinkled face. He's short a few bucks.

"I've been addicted," he says. "I need to start a new page." Ap-