



KOLTANOWSKI PLAYING BLINDFOLD MATCH
Back to board, he keeps a half dozen or more games in mind

By JAMES BENET

George Koltanowski has one of the world's most extraordinary memories. It enables him, for example, to repeat a list of 64 telephone numbers after studying it for a couple of minutes, or to recall the order of a deck of cards after looking through it once. It has enabled him to become the world's blindfold chess champion.

In fact, his memory now is almost entirely a chess memory. He doesn't know whether he could still do the trick with cards. "Well, maybe." But that was a stunt of his youth, before he became an international chess master. And he is just as likely as any other husband to forget something on his wife's grocery list.

WHAT'S ON THE BOARD

"That's not altogether accidental," he says. "I don't want her to order me around too much." But if she wrote each item on the square of a chessboard, then, he admits, he would be hard pressed for an excuse. He never forgets what is on the board, until he wants to.

And so he can sit with his back to half a dozen opponents and their boards, concentrating on each game in turn, listening to be told their moves and calling out his own, and usually beat them all. He even thinks that, when he is in tournament form, he is a better chess player blindfold than over the board.

"The fantasy—the imagination—is more free, more easy," he says, and shrugs. "I don't know."

Yet he has had his great successes in international tournaments, winning in Antwerp in 1935 over Flohr and Thomas, tying for first with Flohr in Barcelona the year before, and tying with Lillenthal and Tartakower in another tournament earlier that year. Six times he won the championship of Belgium, his native country, the first time at 18.

KING OF THE BLINDFOLDED

Still, over the board he isn't always first. "I often used to beat the leaders and lose to the weak players," he says, with another shrug. But at blindfold chess he is the king.

In 1940 Koltanowski settled in the United States, after several visits here between tours of Latin America, and he has now become a citizen. It was in that year he had one of his toughest games—against a schoolgirl.

It was in Milwaukee, where he had undertaken to teach chess to school children at the playgrounds. For four days he would instruct a certain playground, and on the following day give a blindfold exhibition with four of the new pupils, before moving on to another playground the following week.

He won all the games. "I had to," he says. "Because I had promised to give a bicycle to anyone who even

got a draw with me. And where was I going to get a bicycle? I would have had to sell my only suit."

But one day in July he attempted to play a simple trap, called the Scholar's Mate by chessplayers, against 13-year-old Willeen McHenry at the Columbia Playground. She blocked it like a master in the most effective manner, gaining the advantage, and the struggle went on, with Koltanowski "hot and cold all over," until, finally, on the 52d move, the girl blundered and lost.

He had been playing for the bicycle blindfold, too, of course.

One of Koltanowski's pure memory feats which he still performs is a special "knight's tour" of the chessboard. The knight moves on the board in chess, as beginners know to their frequent sorrow, with an erratic twist.

It is a pretty demonstration of skill for a player to be able to move this piece on an empty board so that it touches each of the 64 squares once, but none more than once. When Koltanowski makes this tour, however, he allows the spectators to write something on each square of the board—a phone number, a name, a word or what they like—and, after studying the board for two minutes, turns his back on it to call out the moves and simultaneously announce what is written on each square as the knight touches it.

PSYCHOLOGISTS' ATTENTION

His memory has naturally invited the attention of psychologists and psychiatrists, and a couple of years ago, when he was giving an exhibition in Topeka, Kan., the specialists of the Menninger Clinic there gave him "a million tests."

But they had little to say about his memory, he reports. They were chiefly interested in his ability to forget.

In mental disease, extraordinary memory is sometimes shown, for instance by paranoiacs with persecution delusions, who are able to recall every phrase and detail of an interview years before. But such memories can't be forgotten.

Koltanowski can forget past blindfold games easily, or retain them as long as he wishes, and the doctors would like to know how he does it.

Most people learn with surprise that his memory is not visual, but aural. "Like a phonograph record that I can play back whenever I want." When he is playing a blindfold game he never sees the board in his mind, but is able to repeat to himself at will the moves that have been played so far. "I do feel links between the squares, though."

And some people are simply not impressed. At an exhibition in Zurich a girl once demanded her money back. "He's not blind," she said. "He just winked at me." Nowadays Koltanowski has as-

sumed the role of a "chess missionary." "It's a good game," he says, "and it deserves to be popular. But no one has ever really tried to make it so in this country." In Europe and Latin America matters are different; the game is widely played and has great prestige.

In Russia it is practically a national sport. In England nearly every village has its chess club. "Not that they are necessarily good players, though. When I was visiting one British school to play a blindfold exhibition, the headmaster asked me: 'Do you mind if the pieces are small?' Well, you know, if I am playing blindfolded . . ."

Anyone can learn to play, Koltanowski says, by simply getting a player to show him how, and a great thing about the game is that it is as enjoyable for the beginner as for the master. But beginners are shy, he recognizes.

CHRONICLE FESTIVAL

"I ask them to be sure to come to play me at The Chronicle Chess Festival on December 4, when I will try to break the endurance record for the most games in a day, and they say they aren't good enough. But once they have played in such an exhibition, they are changed. Then they are chess players."

Besides being enjoyable, chess is good mental exercise, he says. Koltanowski's friend Dr. Karl Menninger recommends it because it "washes the mind." And then you meet such interesting people, too. "Well, I will tell you about one, but this time it is not for a recommendation, you understand."

In his tour of Latin America Koltanowski stopped in Guatemala, where he was commanded by telegram to appear before the country's dictator at that time, General Ubico. Ubico said he had wanted a look at the famous chess player, but that he himself didn't play chess any more because he beat everyone. Now, he said, he played Chinese checkers.

Koltanowski offered to play a game of chess, but Ubico declined. "No," he said, "there's nothing I can do to you."

Subsequently he offered Koltanowski the job of teaching chess to the officers at the military academy.

"Naturally I accepted," Koltanowski says. "But I went to Havana instead."

Koltanowski smiles blandly. "Everywhere you go you can find friends if you play chess."



KOLTANOWSKI'S MOVE—A STUDY IN CONCENTRATION
"A game of chess washes the mind"