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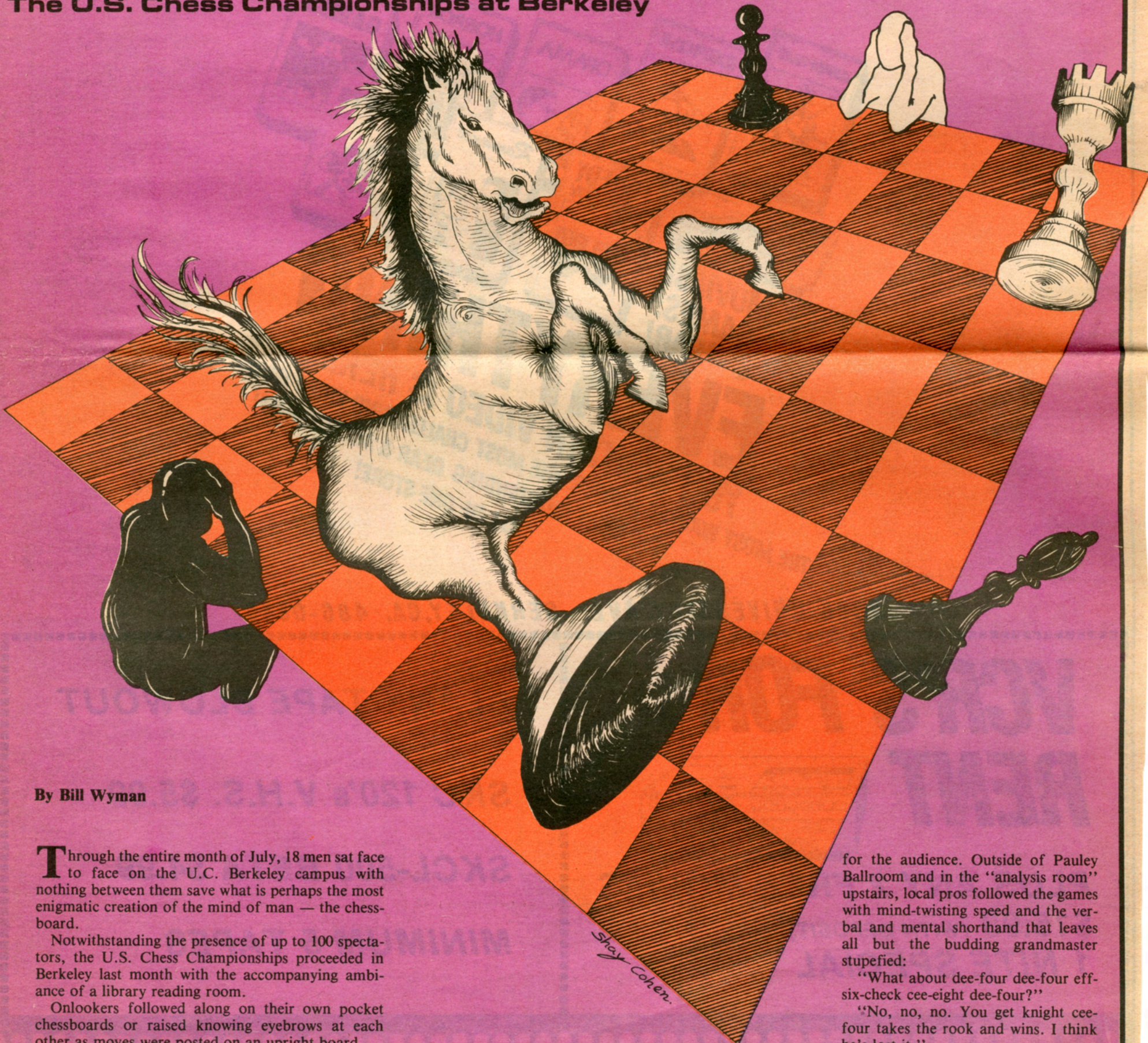
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INSIDE

CHESS MEN

The U.S. Chess Championships at Berkeley



By Bill Wyman

Through the entire month of July, 18 men sat face to face on the U.C. Berkeley campus with nothing between them save what is perhaps the most enigmatic creation of the mind of man — the chessboard.

Notwithstanding the presence of up to 100 spectators, the U.S. Chess Championships proceeded in Berkeley last month with the accompanying ambience of a library reading room.

Onlookers followed along on their own pocket chessboards or raised knowing eyebrows at each other as moves were posted on an upright board

for the audience. Outside of Pauley Ballroom and in the "analysis room" upstairs, local pros followed the games with mind-twisting speed and the verbal and mental shorthand that leaves all but the budding grandmaster stupefied:

"What about dee-four dee-four eff-six-check cee-eight dee-four?"

"No, no, no. You get knight cee-four takes the rook and wins. I think he's lost it."

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Chess Men

Quiet the main room remained, but the silent mental gymnastics of the players was taking its toll. Defending champion (and Berkeley local) Walter Browne, under extraordinary time pressure that required making eight moves in about 35 seconds, looked as if excessive Mach forces were working upon his body. On the other hand, Oaklander (and international master) Nick deFirmian sat a few seats away, relaxed and with something approaching a half-smile on his face.

Such is chess. Hidden behind the mask of concentration that is each player's face are the years — in some cases decades — of work that resulted in their participation here. There is on the one hand Robert Byrne, 20 years a grandmaster and chess columnist for the *New York Times*, who played in his first U.S. championship in 1959. On the other is 18-year-old Maxim Dlugy, a Russian-born international grandmaster playing in his first championship.

(Of the 18 participants, in fact, seven are Eastern bloc emigres or defectors — a number indicative of the Soviet Union's dominance of world chess.)

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Then there is Berkeley's Browne, first-place-winner in six of the last 10 championships and generally considered the most successful U.S. player since Bobby Fischer.

At this level, chess becomes less a matter of moves on the chessboard and more a meeting of the minds. While any calculation of all the moves possible on a 64-square board becomes mind-sizzling after the second or third move from any given situation, advances in the analytical literature of chess have grown by leaps and bounds over the last few decades.

"You have to understand that there are more titles on chess than on any other single subject in the Dewey Decimal system," says tournament director K. Michael Goodall, a 45-ish Berkeleyan who has been involved in promoting and organizing chess events for the past 20 years. He acknowledges that the analysis of different chess positions has reached a high point. "Still," he says, "when the players are at this level, they have to not only be familiar with the book moves, but make improvements."

"We know the moves," laughs Maxim Dlugy, who at 18 is the youngest player in the tournament. "It's familiar."

Unlike some of his competitors, Dlugy didn't have time for extensive preparation, what with having graduated from high school in June and being a contestant in the U.S. Junior Championship the week before this one started.

"I have a trainer in New York and we worked over things," he says. "I showed him where I felt uncomfortable and we worked on it. I didn't have time to go over the games of the other players, but that's another thing you do."

Armed with the rigors of such analysis, modern players will concede games on the basis of a bad position or the loss of a pawn; at other times, two players will agree to a draw 20 moves into a game when both see the match will

be going nowhere. Upstairs, at the Student Union Building, analysts refer onlookers to games played two, five or 10 years previously in Pasadena, Spain or Yugoslavia. Full appreciation of chess at this level is reserved for those with the time and stamina to fully acquaint themselves with the literature.

Still, even an amateur can follow the moves and appreciate the high drama of some matches. On a recent Monday, for example, an impending time deadline had Walter Browne on the ropes. His face contorted, he rubbed his forehead and cheeks obsessively, and seemed on the verge of tearing out his hair — all because opponent Larry Christiansen was a pawn up and seemed determined to trade pieces wherever possible.

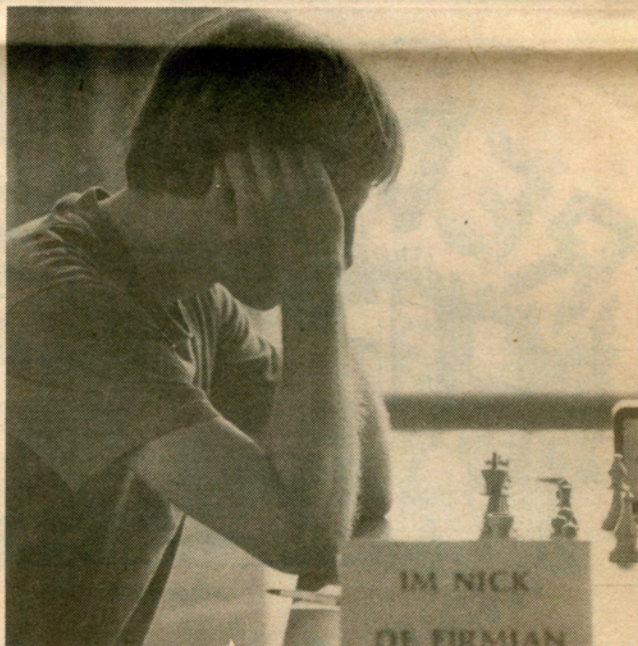
(Tournament rules require the first 40 moves to be made in a two and one-half hour period. Twin time clocks sit to the side of each board. One player's clock runs until he moves and switches it off with a loud tap, simultaneously stopping his clock and starting his opponent's.)

The attention of the entire room centered on Browne and Christiansen as Nick deFirmian and Yasser Sierawan ("the only high-ranking chess player to be awarded the Bachelor of the Month title by *Cosmopolitan*," says the program) continued their match nearby with seemingly far less emotion.

Suddenly a Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! echoed through the ballroom as Sierawan and deFirmian rushed through their time limit, slapping the clock, their hands a blur over the board. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Just as suddenly, it was done: Sierawan proffered his hand, there was a quick handshake, and the game was over. DeFirmian smiled, and without missing a beat the two fell to analyzing the game together.

There was a momentary delay for spectators, until an assistant displayed the moves for us. What at first looked like an unfavorable trade for deFirmian — a rook for a knight — was actually a trap that would result in a devastating knight fork. Yaz, as Sierawan is called by the



Times photo/Lisa Osta

The U.S. Chess Championships

analysts, had no choice but to give up.

Dlugy said he was happy about his place thus far, noting that he had only to remain in the top three to place in the Interzonals.

That 1984 is an Interzonal Year, in fact, is one reason the U.S. Chess Championships are worth watching. The top three finishers advance to one of three world zonal tourneys.

The interzonals produce 16 players who battle it out among themselves for the chance to take on current world champion Anatoly Karpov. While no American has come close to taking the world championship since Fischer in 1972, it is worth noting that many top players in this tournament were born in Russia.

"Chess is a very important part of the Russian culture," says director Mike Goodall. "It's like baseball is here. It's played everywhere — it's a subject in school. Just as here everyone's heard of Willie Mays, in Russia everybody knows Boris Spassky (the world champion defeated by Fischer and still a major force)."

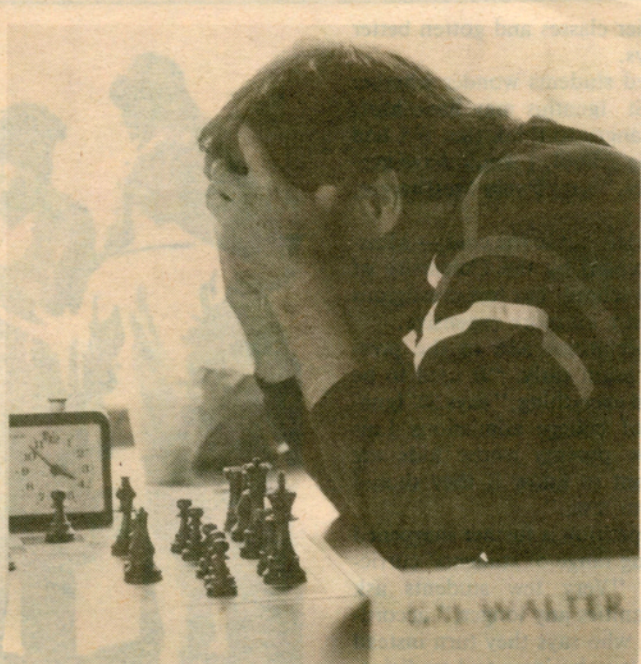
It was of course Bobby Fischer who gave the popularity of chess a huge boost after his marathon defeat of Spassky in Iceland in 1972. Fischer, who has not appeared on the chess circuit for a decade, is considered to be the most important and best American player since Paul Morphy, another erratic genius who spent his post-chess playing years as a recluse.

Now, says Goodall, the Bay Area, with the highest concentration of chess masters in the country, is a great place to be a player. "For anyone willing to travel at most 40 or 50 miles, you can play in a chess tournament about every two weeks," he says. (The Berkeley Chess Club meets every Friday evening at the downtown YMCA.)

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After the tournament games, some players adjourn to a meeting room for analysis and some armchair quarterbacking, chess-style. As the afternoons go on, the room slowly becomes packed with champions, would-be masters and speed chess freaks, moving pieces and slapping time clocks with wild abandon. At one table, contestant and *Los Angeles Times* columnist John Peters pored over a board with defending champion Roman Dzindzichasvili, a chain-smoking, sideburned bear of a grandmaster known affectionately as "Gingy" in deference to his near unpronounceable surname.

In contrast to the on-going analyses upstairs, the masters among themselves do not so much talk chess as motion it. In this informal, relaxed atmosphere, a player might merely gesture casually at a knight. Across the board, his partner might nod, motion to a bishop, a pawn and a queen in quick succession, "Hm!" suddenly, and then his hands will blur as he demonstrates a sequence.



Times photo/Lisa Osta

Similarly, chess masters do not hold pieces as much as caress them. During tournament games, to touch a piece means you will move it. Behind the scenes, offstage as it were, players restlessly handle the pieces, constantly adjusting their positions on squares. They communicate with a glance, a raised eyebrow, a gesture, in rather the same way Miles Davis onstage might "speak" to the members of one of his legendary quartets.

Here, again, chess takes leave of its moorings and floats off into a mental netherworld, where players move comfortably in junctures with the minds of the great players of the past — learning from their mistakes, benefitting from their triumphs.

At the same time, however, there is that part of the chess player's mind that is reminiscent of the *idiot savant*. There are stories of the masters who could play 10, 25, even 93 games simultaneously — blindfolded! There is Fischer, who didn't like girls or Jews. There is Alkechine, who was either the victim of or a participant in Nazi propoganda during the 1940s. And there was Capablanca, the Cuban great who, in an apocryphal story, was said to have challenged God to a game of chess, starting a pawn down.

As I asked the different players what their attraction to chess was, however, they responded with nothing so romantic. To most grandmasters, chess is a job, a profession, albeit one they derive an important satisfaction from. Even 18-year-old Dlugy says, "Once you get good at something, there's no point in wasting it."

DeFirmian, on the other hand, likes the game for its competition, the challenge of going up against "a friend, an enemy, whatever."

"You find out a lot about the way you think," he says. "If you find yourself rushing things, you see you're impatient, that you want to win quickly."

Does he find that, as with many other great players, chess becomes almost an overwhelming metaphor for living?

"Well, Spassky always said, 'Chess is life.'" ■