

From Diamonds to Rooks

By Monique Benoit

"I'D STAND on my head and play chess if I knew it would further the development of this game," said George Koltanowski, chess master.

He was not kidding, either; George has been carrying on a long love affair with chess, and it is still going strong.

"I was a diamond cutter by profession when I arrived in America broke.

"I could have made \$300 a week cutting diamonds; instead I made \$25 a week teaching chess on the sidewalks in those days."

"Weren't you satisfied to be world champion? Couldn't you have gone on participating in tournaments and make a living in your profession?"

"Nothing makes sense in life, does it?" smiled George.

"I felt I owed so much to chess that I should do something for the game. It became my *raison-d'etre*.

"I wanted to fulfill a mission, promoting and developing chess playing in America, where only a handful of people played the game."

With a shrug the chess master added: "If things were difficult at first, now I am reaping the fruits of 20 years of labor."

A native of Belgium, George was national champion of that country at the age of 17. A few years later he won the World Blindfold Championship.

He was on a demonstration tour in 1939 when the war was declared and found him stranded in Guatemala without any income.

"The American Consul was a chess nut and he arranged for me to get a visa



GEORGE KOLTANOWSKI

so I could come to America.

"This is why I felt so grateful toward the game and decided to make it my profession, with the idea of reaching as many people as possible and getting them to play."

The chess master has reached his goal. He trav-

els all over the United States ten months of the year, directing and organizing tournaments, giving demonstrations, developing stunts and gimmicks to get attention to the game, writing books and performing on television.

"I have a poor memory except when things are as-

sociated with a chessboard.

"Tell me a phone number and I will forget it, but write it on a board and after a glance I'll remember it forward and backward forever."

Some 20 years ago George discovered California on one of his tours, and he and his wife moved to Santa Rosa, then to San Francisco after his daily chess column began to appear in *The Chronicle*.

Since then it has become syndicated, proving the increase in interest for the game he loves so much.

"Is chess a woman's game?"

"It is for everybody. Everyone should learn the game, forget what he has learned and play.

"Until recently few women were good at chess because they had little chance to practice, and this is a game where you can't improve if you don't play often.

"Before woman's emancipation it wasn't proper for her to go out alone, so it wasn't possible for her to go to clubs, cafes or other public places where she could meet other chess players.

"If she learned from her father, brother or husband her practice was limited to occasional games with them. She had no chance to participate in tournaments.

"Now that things have changed, some very good women players have emerged."

"Does your wife play?"

"No," admitted George with a smile. "I made it a point at the beginning that she shouldn't learn. After all, someone has to do the cooking."

Men do have a strange sense of logic, no?