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Chess Champion Uses Remarkable "Think-Tank"

SUPER-SUAVE George Koltanowski, the Walking Brain, keeps in training these days to defend his world championship in one of the most stimulating and exhausting of all sports—one with invisible opponents and combining the slashing attacks of tennis, the end runs and line bucks of football, the feints and thrusts of dueling, battlefield strategy and just plain cunning.

Something new? One the contrary, the game is among the oldest on record—ancient by at least nine centuries—but with a greater world following today than golf! Chess, of course.

More specifically, in the case of Kolty, as the ex-Belgian is known, it's blindfold chess. Which is chess in its most rugged form, demanding titanic memory and endurance. Actually, the player is not blindfolded but keeps his back turned on opponents while a teller calls out the moves.

After holding the championship for the last 14 years, the Walking Brain is ready for challengers at any time. And interest in chess is on the upswing—perhaps because the Korean conflict and the present world crisis have whetted the competitive spirit.

No one knows for sure. The only certainty is that sooner or later a scramble is coming for the crown which Koltanowski won in 1937 in Edinburgh, Scotland, by playing 34 blindfold games simultaneously for 13½ hours, winning 24 and drawing 10, a world mark recognized by the *Federation Internationaile des Eches,* the supreme authority.

Such magnitude of memory is difficult to comprehend. Since a chessboard holds 32 chessmen on its 64 squares, competition with 34 persons

simultaneously means that the blindfold player must keep track of 1,088 battle pieces—and must be able to call plays reasonably fast if he hopes to survive without ankle-length whiskers. But some mathematical genius really shoved chess into an astronomical realm by setting the number of possible plays during the first four moves at 318,979,654,000 for each board.

Even so, Kolty isn't worried, for he is in training, isn't he, for his as yet unchosen challenger? "And ver' rigid training, too," he assures you. "Ver' rigid!" His ver' rigid routine: munching cheese wafers at all hours, bucking impossible travel schedules, operating his own chess club in San Francisco, writing a daily chess column for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and often going with only three or four hours sleep a night. In addition, he is authoring his fourth book on chess and he officiates at chess conferences throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Koltanowski's uncanny memory for the position of chessmen dates from the time his father taught him the game in Antwerp, Belgium, when he was 14 years old—32 years ago. When he became too good for *vader,* his dad used to conceal the chessboard and make his son announce the moves. Even that failed to help the old gentleman. The neighbors gawked. Papa quit playing.

Then, when young Koltanowski moved into the national tournaments, he won the Belgian championship each of the six times he competed. Later, on a tour of Switzerland, he really dumbfounded the chess world by playing 10 games blindfolded for 26 hours to win an average of 94 per cent.

The largest number of games he ever played simultaneously was 222, and he had to stop at that only because he ran out of people.

Recognized for his sharpness in this "game of philosophers," Kolty mingled with many brilliant players in his tours of Europe: Mikhail Botvinnik, present world champion in over-the-board play, Dr. Max Euwe, Salo Flohr, J. R. Capablanca and Dr. Alexander Alekhins, master of masters, from whom Kolty himself was later to wrest the blindfold championship. Kolty was intrigued.

He became a complete convert to chess when introduced at the Cafe de la Regence in Paris—a cafe with an old-world atmosphere that had attracted chess-playing Napoleon and, sooner or later, nearly all the famous chess masters on earth. For hours Kolty would watch the players there—young and old men who acted like wary diplomats, nodding and smiling through their spirals of smoke while their hearts were squeezed with anxiety.

Koltanowski decided on the spot to devote his life to the science of the chessboard; and, just ahead of World War II and invasion, he left his homeland for America—the luckiest chess move, he says, of his life.

Becoming a naturalized citizen of the United States, the ex-Belgian practiced his bread-and-butter profession of gem cutting in New York, but accepted occasional engagements for blindfold chess exhibitions.

It was there that he met a pretty New York girl whom he very soon married. Moving with her to California, he chucked diamond work altogether and went in solely for the

still more glittering career of professional chess.

Chess was invented so long ago—sometime in or before the 11th century — that authorities differ on its origin; but in the course of history it has made its persistent way through China, India, Persia, Egypt and many other lands, bringing romance, intrigue, bloodshed and perhaps even the fall of kingdoms.

Today, figured on a world-wide scale, this intellectual sport with its military moves is amazingly popular, Russia alone claiming more than a million registered players. The game requires sharp concentration and a good memory.

Kolty's remarkable memory makes many psychiatrists long to examine him. He obliges them.

Once, called to Stanford University, he supposed he would be asked to demonstrate his "knight's tour"—his ability to recall a whole blackboard of numbers after looking at them for only two minutes. Instead, a roomful of scientists pounced on him and kept him working for hours on their own mental tests. Finally they let him go, shaking their heads in wonder.

At the Winter Veterans Administration Hospital, managed by Dr. Karl A. Menninger in Topeka, they were especially interested in Kolty's ability to forget as well as remember. Believing that a good "forgettery" would help ex-servicemen banish the remembered horrors of war, they examined him with this in view. Koltanowski only wishes he had some formula for such a worthy cause, but his mind is a mystery even to himself.

Kolty explains that his memory is principally an auditory one rather than of the visual sort. In other words, he remembers best the things that he hears, though his ability at visual memory is far from feeble. He likens his mind to a wire recorder.

"During a game of chess I do not get the mental picture of chessboards, but I seem to hear a playback of mos' moves that have gone before, making me *feel* the positions, no? When the game is finish', all the plays are wiped away, automatic, just like sound is erased from a wire-recording machine. Ver' peculiar. I cannot explain more perfec'."

During his few off hours, Kolty deliberately tries to keep his mind cleared of chess. In fact, one of his few arguments arose when his wife installed checkered linoleum on the kitchen floor. Until he ripped it up, all he could see was an acre of chessboard.

But George Koltanowski has his Achilles' heel, too. It's that forgettery; for unless he deliberately sets his mind on remembering—hah! With a sigh of resignation, his wife admits that, like other husbands, he may carry a letter in his pocket for days before thinking to mail it. And not even the seven languages in his vocabulary prevent him from forgetting at least some of her needed items at the corner grocery. Especially if company's coming to dinner.

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