

Labor Day Weekend

Chess Champs Pit Brains In Berkeley's Games

By JIM HOFFMAN

The room is a bizarre landscape, often smoke-filled, where long rows of opponents are paired off in symbolic mortal combat. No one is running, kicking, dribbling, or throwing anything. Each player is sitting still, concentrating on the battlefield directly in front of him, trying to outwit his adversary.

There are no cheers, even when the best players compete. No one is selling hot dogs or announcing a play-by-play narration. Usually, there isn't even any talking. Just the *click-rap-tap-snap* of chess pieces being moved and taken. *Click-rap-tap-snap*, multiplied a hundred times, like a geiger counter that somehow measures mental activity.

Most people think of chess as a game. To think of it as the world's foremost sedentary sport might be jarring to some people's ideas about chess — and about sports.

Tournament chess is quite as taxing as any sport you can name, though. It requires pure, intense mental effort that takes a physical

toll. Alertness, creativity, and attention to detail must be sustained for five hours at a time, twice a day. There is no time to relax. Every move counts. A tiny miscalculation — even touching the wrong piece by accident — can lead to loss of the game. People get nervous. Games are lost through the "choke factor." Even a seasoned veteran of living room chess can fall victim to fear and trembling as he listens to the clock tick away his precious time and considers that a mistake on any given move may spell defeat.

It is more than a matter of mere pride. In any sizeable tournament, the winners take home hundreds or thousands of dollars in prize money.

On Labor Day Weekend, big money chess comes to Berkeley. From Aug. 31 to Sept. 2, the Claremont Hotel will host a six round tourney whose \$6500 expected prize fund has already attracted some of the big names in West Coast chess.

Perhaps the most famous entrant so far is Berkeley Grandmaster Walter Browne, who recently won

the United States Championship. Browne is favored to take the top prize of \$1000, but not without some stiff competition from local masters.

All told, the tournament offers 28 cash prizes, and some of the winners will not even be very good at chess. This is because the prizes are divided into seven categories ranging from "Open" (the strongest players) to "Unrated" (players who have not played in enough tournaments to have an official "rating").

The tourney is the result of months of effort by Alan Benson, a local chess organizer whose base of operations is the Gambit book and game store on Telegraph Avenue. It is Berkeley's first big money chess event since a much smaller YMCA-sponsored tournament in February, 1974. Even though the current U.S. champion and last year's co-champion are Berkeley residents, high-paying tournament activity is a rarity in Berkeley, and in the Bay Area generally.

Benson may change that, though. If the Labor Day tournament draws

enough players (the \$6500 prize fund is based on a hoped-for 320 entries), Benson says he will organize four tournaments a year.

Entry fee for the Labor Day event is \$25. There is a \$5.00 late fee for people who enter after Aug. 20, but Benson said he would waive the fee for *Daily Cal* readers who file at the Telegraph Ave. store before Saturday.

Benson, who describes chess as his life's work, has given up active chess in order to be an organizer, but he has considerable talent for the game. He has played as many as ten simultaneous games blindfolded, losing only two.

Like most successful chess players, Benson started young. Like many of the greatest, he was something of a prodigy. At age 15, he beat International Grandmaster Pal Benko in only 11 moves in a speed game. He can still recall the game from memory. (See box)

Benson, who has also taught chess to beginners, said there are two ways to prepare for a tournament. One

RUY LOPEZ

White:

Black:

Alan Benson

Pal Benko

- | | |
|----------------|-------|
| 1. P-K4 | P-K4 |
| 2. N-KB3 | N-QB3 |
| 3. B-N5 | P-KB4 |
| 4. N-B3 | PxP |
| 5. NxP | P-Q4 |
| 6. N-B3 | P-K5 |
| 7. N-Q4 | Q-N4 |
| 8. NxN | QxNP |
| 9. Q-R5 ch | P-N3 |
| 10. Q-K5 ch | K-B2 |
| 11. N-Q8 mate! | |

way is to go a week without chess just prior to the tourney. Former world champion Mikhail Botvinnick advocated this method. Most people, however, prepare until the last minute, going over the latest opening lines and systems. Walter Browne tends to be a crammer, Benson said.