

JIM MURRAY



Chess and Cobwebs

I knew the bubble would burst. I mean the one about Los Angeles being the sports capital of the world.

It went up in smoke this week when they staged the national championship chess matches and they didn't have enough people there to start a good fight. I have seen bigger crowds in a station wagon. I don't know why, either. Watching a chess match has all the pulsating excitement of watching a pitcher warm up—or a hair fall.

Damon Runyon once dismissed a yacht race as "an event that has all the thrills of watching grass grow." If he felt that way about a yacht race, I wish he could have seen a chess match. It's like watching grass not grow.

It is said that chess is played by people whose hearts couldn't stand the wild excitement of checkers any more. There have been guys who waited so long to move that when they looked up, they found their opponent gone and when they inquired after him were told, "Oh, him. He passed away years ago."

There have been times when you couldn't even tell if one of the players was deceased. Cobwebs also slow down play.

Create, Solve Own Problems

It is undoubtedly the oldest game in the world. And the most fascinating to participants. There are few games where your performance depends solely on yourself and you both create and then solve your own problems. In cards, for example, the hand you are dealt determines your play to a large extent although I have known guys in my time who could take the suspense out of this even if you cut the cards.

The U.S. championship was contested here between a beardless boy, Bobby Fischer, 18, of Brooklyn, and a bald oldster, Samuel Reshevsky, of New York. They were to play eight matches here as part of a series of 16 for the national title. I caught the act in the ballroom of the Beverly Hilton and a more relaxing evening I never spent. They were playing at a breakneck pace, too. Sometimes there were as many as three moves in an hour.

But if I thought the pace was leisurely, the hep spectators did not. Most of them carried miniature chess boards with them and as each player made his move, the spectators would quickly match the move on their own boards and then rush into the other room to analyze and argue. It was a kind of Instant Hot Stove League.

Few spectators watched the players. They watched the play. It is as if a World Series crowd sat with its back to the field watching an electric scoreboard in the rear of the stadium. Once, after a particularly long wait, I was nodding and nearly asleep when suddenly Reshevsky's arm shot out and he made a quick decisive move, then bounded to his feet with a look of triumph. Half the crowd immediately rushed to its feet and poured to the back of the room where the kibitzers stood behind a curtain.

Just Like a Long Drive

"What happened?" I asked my friend, Hy Rogosin, a city schools psychologist. He looked at me for a moment as though gauging my capacity to grasp a complex intellectual problem. "Think of it as Reshevsky having just hit a long drive to left field and Fischer running after it to catch it," he said kindly.

After that, the game got easier for me. Even when the contestants made a move and promptly marked it down in a little notebook, I kept a mental image of Drysdale firing a brushback pitch at Robinson and then, as it was on its way to the plate, marking it carefully in a notebook, "slider inside." I pictured Robinson falling away from the plate and, from a sitting position, marking the incident in HIS notebook "beanball."

At one point Bobby Fischer, with the impatience of youth, bounded to his feet and began to pace. I nodded my head wisely. This, I dug. This is the guy who jingles his keys when you're lining up a putt, coughs on your backswing and hits first even when you're away. If it was a prize fight, the crowd would have begun to boo and stamp. Or at least yell "Lead with your Rook, you bum ya." Rogosin was of the opinion the cathedral silence was uncalled for. "Don't get the idea it takes brains to play chess," he warned. "The inmates of an insane asylum once beat a team from Cambridge." "I know the joke," I told him. "'We're not stupid. Just crazy.'"

Never on Sunday—Morning

The tournament even ended in a rhubarb. All even after 11 matches, the contestants were asked to show at 11 a.m. Sunday morning for the 12th. Bobby Fischer refused to show up and the match was forfeited to Reshevsky, who hurriedly flew back to New York, happy to be 1 up. But Fischer wasn't buying.

"It's not going to work!" he shouted. "They arranged this match for my discomfort and so that woman, Mrs. Gregor Piatigorsky, just because she put up the money for the matches, would have time to get dressed for a concert after the match. We should all get up early so she could go and hear her husband play the cello! She thinks I'm going to get up early and play that bum sport Reshevsky to accommodate her.

"The whole thing is too ridiculous. I like chess. But I don't like chess players. Reshevsky? I don't speak to him. He's a bad sportsman. He plays very dull chess. Till he's cornered. Then he's like a cornered rat. How can you face this at breakfast?"