

# 490 of the nation's best compete in chess tournament

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LOS ANGELES — Their expressions ranged from intense to agonized, from inscrutable to wild-eyed panic. They chewed their nails, chain smoked, pulled their hair, wrung their hands and tapped their toes.

The huge ballroom was absolutely silent except for the steady ticking of time clocks, but some of those present wore headphones or earplugs anyway to shut out unwanted sound. One man had red plastic swizzle sticks stuffed into his ears, which nobody seemed to notice.

Most seemed frozen to their chairs, hunched over their chess boards for two, four, six hours at a stretch.

Others were up and down constantly, pacing vacant-eyed around their chairs, looking either drained by the tension or ready to explode.

That went on for three days at a Los Angeles hotel where 490 chess players from around the nation gathered for a tournament staged by the Chess Set Educational Trust of Hollywood.

Minutes ticked into hours, day slid into night and, when the sunny weekend was over, about 100 people — ranging from a handful of international superstars to dozens of aspiring newcomers — had won prizes ranging from

\$11.16 to \$1,250. The players included a 10-year-old boy and an 83-year-old blind man.

Except for the professional, of course, money was not the reason these people came. What looks like pure physical and mental torture to most people is, to them, a barrel of fun.

"I love chess because it's so fair," said Gwen Rabinowitz, 38, a stage producer, as she paced the corridor, waiting for her opponent to move. "In life, you do good, you're honest and moral, and your dog gets run over. In chess if you're better, you win. That's fair."

As Rabinowitz departed, Walter Browne came churning down the corridor, looking dazed, apparently rushing toward the bathroom at the other end of the corridor.

He was, he declared, disgusted with the organization of this tournament. The bathrooms were too far away from the chess sets and he was having to expend valuable energy to get there. He was also angry about the lighting and, worse, the fact that spectators were not cordoned off. They pushed against his chair, they breathed down his neck and they even touched him while he was plotting his strategy.

"In international affairs, you don't have this kind of thing," he

muttered, rushing on. Browne, 32, of Berkeley, was one of four international grand masters at the tournament. Others were Larry Christensen, 24, of Modesto, Peter Biyiasas of San Francisco and James Tarjan of Berkeley.

On his way back from the bathroom, en route to devastating an opponent, Browne declared that none of it really mattered, though. He would win, he announced, because he was the best chess player in America, if not in the world.

Browne is widely acknowledged as the prima donna of American chess. Most other top players wait to be asked before they declare themselves the best.

Outside the tournament hall, director Ben Nethercot, 30, a mild, soft-spoken man, was faced with two outraged chess players. One accused the other of moving a piece, then trying to take his move back. The accused insisted he still had a finger on the piece, a signal that he was still pondering the move.

Nethercot ruled that one finger was not enough.

"You can't pick up a piece with one finger," Nethercot reasoned. "Therefore, you've got to leave the piece where you put it."

The pair stormed back inside and tried to destroy each other on the board. The game was still

under way three hours later.

Later, Nethercot was faced with a dispute between a smoker and a non-smoker. The smoker insisted that his game would be destroyed if he couldn't light up. The non-smoker insisted his concentration was disrupted by smoke.

Nethercot allowed the smoker to light up during his moves. The non-smoker was outraged.

And, on the last day of the tournament, a giant-sized player with a giant-sized board was paired with a small man who wanted to play on a small board. They argued softly between themselves until the tournament had begun. The little man would not give in.

Suddenly, the big man shouted a furious obscenity at the little man.

Around 200 chess players sitting nearby barely looked up from their boards as they all hissed in unison, "Shhhhhhh."

Nethercot rushed in, disqualified the large-sized set, soothed the offended sensibilities of the little man, and the game proceeded.

(The big man, viciously slamming down the runt-sized pieces, eventually won.)

Such were the few traumatic moments of the weekend. By and large it was a peaceful affair, although it possessed, for chess



**Baraka Shabazz**

*Ponders next chess move*

players, all the drama of any other sporting event.

One game lasted nine hours, until there were only two kings and a pawn shuffling around the board. About 100 players, finished with their own games, stood in rapt attention until the player with the pawn suddenly offered to settle for a draw.

Hours later, bickering chess players were still analyzing the game among themselves, many insisting that the game most assuredly could have been won by the player with the pawn.

And, throughout the tournament, just as Walter Browne had complained, spectators packed themselves around the table seating the top-rated players. There was such a wedge of bodies that the superstars could get no air, and could hardly get out of their chairs.

Furiously, Browne fanned himself, but nobody took the hint. He ended up sharing first prize with Christensen, and masters Nick Defirmis and Jack Peters. Each won \$1,250.

"It's not enough. It's absurd," declared Browne at the tournament's end. "Here we are in inflationary times, getting paid less and less.

"It's not easy, making a living at chess, Jack Peters does it on about \$8,000 a year," he said, mainly teaching classes. "But it doesn't matter, I love chess; I live as well as I want to."

Among the lower-rated players, at a table where no spectators were bothering to watch, Steve Stiles was getting soundly trounced as he sipped on a beer. He was the only chess player at the tournament who drank while he played.

"The only problem is that I can never find anybody to drink with afterwards," he said. "These chess nuts don't drink, even if they have the money, which most of them don't."