

Battle of Chess Giants

Bobby 'Wrecks Them Spiritually'

Larry Evans, three-times U.S. champion, sums up Bobby Fischer's career as he comes up to the world title match next week against Russia's Boris Spassky.

By Larry Evans

In 1970 Fischer was lured out of his self-imposed exile by a major new chess event: Russia vs. The World on ten boards. After initially declining an invitation to play top board for the World, Fischer relented. A list of 23 conditions, ranging from a ban on photographers to the intensity of stage lighting, was negotiated to his satisfaction.

Complications arose, however, when he arrived in Belgrade. Bent Larsen of Denmark threatened to withdraw unless he played top board instead. To everyone's surprise, Fischer consented to step down to second board. He led the world to a near-upset over the Russians by smashing Petrosian 3 to 1 (2 wins, 2 draws).

From then on each success became another milestone in the growing legend, inspiring the N.Y. Times to speak of the strange malady called "Fischer-fear." "There is some strange magnetic influence in Bobby," the Soviet grandmaster Yuriy Averbakh told the Times. "His opponents (are) spiritually wrecked after the first couple of games."

Fischer plays hard at everything. He exhibits the same ferocious will to win in bowling, tennis and ping-pong.

In the mid-sixties he joined the Church of God, a fundamentalist California-based sect that observes the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Fischer neither travels nor plays chess during this period. He disappears into his room for 24 hours of solitary meditation. He reads the Bible and Playboy. He does not smoke, he does not eat pork, and he drinks only an occasional glass of beer or wine with meals.



"AROUND THE WORLD I'm better known than Joe Namath. In America I'm nobody," he once said bitterly, irked at the penny-ante status of chess in his own country. All that is changing now and he is learning the price of fame.

In Buenos Aires his Final Candidates' match with Petrosian received banner headlines and his smallest idiosyncrasy was chronicled in the press. Fischer was besieged by photographers in his hotel lobby and they followed him into the street. Maddened by these paparazzi, he lunged for a camera but missed, then kicked a reporter twice in the leg. "I shouldn't have kicked him," he mused later. "You can't go around kicking people."

One of his friends said: "Fischer's a little more mellow nowadays; but the more you give in to him, the worse he gets. He believes he is a great artist regardless of the status of chess in the eyes of the world. And he wants to be treated as such."

According to another friend, "All Bobby needs is to get married — that will straighten him out."

Fischer has been deep in training at Grossinger's resort in the Catskills, where he rises in the afternoon for a vigorous physical workout to build up stamina for the match. All night long he studies Spassky's games, to the accompaniment of a rock radio station.



CHESS IS A WAY OF LIFE, a tight world of 64 squares, an unreal fascination. Fischer studies the game with monastic devotion. Seldom without a chess book in his hand, and always accompanied by a pocket chess set, he lives in hotels and moves from tournament to tournament in the way surfers follow the surf.

The chess master must have courage and a killer instinct as well as stamina. When asked on TV about his greatest pleasure in chess, Fischer was brutally frank: "Crushing the other guy's ego." As a youngster he once blurted, "I like to see 'em squirm."