

OBITUARIES

Grandmaster Of Chess, George Koltanowski

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George Koltanowski, the legendary grandmaster of chess who wrote more than 19,000 chess columns for The San Francisco Chronicle with the same ease with which he dispatched countless opponents in a career that spanned 10 decades, died Saturday in a San Francisco hospital after a brief illness. He was 96.

Mr. Koltanowski, a gentleman of the Old World who made the world's most difficult game look easy, enjoyed introducing newcomers and children to chess as much as he enjoyed playing it.

His column, which appeared in The Chronicle every day without interruption for 52 years, was the longest-running daily chess column in history.

"Chess is an international language," he once said. "Everyone in the world can understand it, appreciate it and enjoy it."

Few, however, could understand the game as well as Mr. Koltanowski. He was an international grandmaster, one of only 200 in the world, and the former chess champion of his native Belgium.

He was also the world champion of a form of the game known as blindfold chess, in which the player commits the game to memory and does not look at the board or touch the pieces used by opponents, who play in the normal fashion. Mr. Koltanowski's 1937 feat of playing 34 opponents simultaneously while blindfolded without losing a game has never been equaled.

Known as Kolty to his legions of friends and fans, Mr. Koltanowski not only lived and breathed the game, but also cherished and enhanced it. He wrote chess books, conducted chess tournaments, coached chess players, wore chess neckties, told endless chess stories and turned the lights on and off in his Cathedral Hill apartment with chess-styled switch plates.

He preferred the brand of scotch that came in purple cloth sacks — not because he liked that brand but because the bags could be used later to hold chess pieces.

A native of Antwerp, Mr. Koltanowski learned the game while watching his father play his older brother. He took up the game seriously at the age of 14. Three years later, he was champion of Belgium and soon gave up a fledgling career as a diamond cutter to play full time.

He competed in scores of tournaments in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, holding his own against the top players of the day, including former world champions Alexander Alekhine and Max Euwe, his good friend.

He served a short stint in the Belgian army, where his primary duty, he recalled with a characteristic grin, was the peeling of potatoes. While he peeled away absent-mindedly, he studied chess positions.

"Soldiers were going hungry," he said, "because I was peeling the potatoes into smaller and smaller cubes."



Koltanowski

He even credited the game of chess with saving his life. When the Nazis overran Belgium during World War II and several of his family members perished in the Holocaust, Mr. Koltanowski was on a chess tour of Central America. He was allowed to immigrate to the United States only because a chess-playing consul in Cuba had been amazed by one of Mr. Koltanowski's demonstrations.

He came to New York City, where he met his wife, Leah, on a blind date in 1944. They moved to the Bay Area in 1947.

The following year, he began writing his daily chess column in The Chronicle. It also appeared as a syndicated feature in other papers.

"George Koltanowski was a legendary member of the Chronicle family," said Managing Editor Jerry Roberts. "He was a great chess player, an outstanding journalist, a true gentleman, and he could beat any other newspaper's chess columnist with his eyes closed."

Every day, Mr. Koltanowski would offer readers a chess problem or puzzle and relate the moves of a recently played tournament game, along with his comments on the moves and perhaps an amusing anecdote. His chess maxims were as funny as they were profound.

"Pawns are like buttons," he was fond of saying. "Lose too many and the pants fall down by themselves."

He was assisted in every aspect of his career by Leah Koltanowski for more than 50 years, although she does not play chess and never wanted to learn.

"George is the grandmaster," she said. "If he taught me the game, I'd be just another chess player."

Koltanowski was the former president of the U.S. Chess Federation, which bestowed upon him the title of "Dean of American Chess." He served during the years after the Bobby Fischer boom of 1972, when interest in chess soared to record highs after the mercurial American grandmaster won the world title.

Koltanowski seized the momentum of those heady days to install chess clubs in countless schools, community centers and even at San Quentin Prison.

What could only be described as a twinkle was never far from Mr. Koltanowski's eye, and he was unfailingly gentle and charitable to those whose chess gifts were more modest than his own.

"You'll beat me next time," he would cheerfully tell a vanquished opponent, although when next time came, Mr. Koltanowski invariably won again.

On occasion, he offered readers the chance to play him directly. In 1960, in an exhibition at the Fairmont Hotel sponsored by The Chronicle that lasted the better part of a day, he set a world's record by playing 56 opponents consecutively while blindfolded. He did not lose a single game.

He also played exhibitions against hundreds of players at once. At such events, his primary goal — more than winning — was to infect newcomers with a love of the game. Nothing gratified him more than hearing that a casual player had become inspired by one of his exhibitions, taken up the game in earnest and developed into an expert or a master.

Mr. Koltanowski, a short, stocky man who was partial to suspenders, good food and Belgian chocolate, spoke eight languages and could tell funny chess stories in each one. He played chess in prisons, in schools,

on playgrounds, by mail, on ocean liners, by telegram, over the phone and against princes and potentates.

In a famous 1952 game in San Francisco, movie legend and chess expert Humphrey Bogart succumbed to a withering attack from the blindfolded grandmaster.

Among his countless chess feats, Mr. Koltanowski was well-known for performing the Knight's Tour. Random bits of information such as names and phone numbers would be supplied by audience members and written in the 64 squares of a giant chessboard. In seconds, Mr. Koltanowski would commit the entire hodgepodge to memory. Then, while blindfolded, he would call out the intricate path required for a chess knight to make its series of L-shaped hops around the board — by recalling the scraps of information in order.

"I don't know how he does it," Leah Koltanowski once said. "He can't even remember to bring home a loaf of bread from the supermarket."

Koltanowski did not really know how he did it, either. He often compared his memory to a gramophone record — coining the explanation long before the days of LPs and CDs.

"You see, I have a gramophone up here," he would say, tapping a finger to his forehead. "I record everything I hear. I repeat the moves to myself, and they come back to me, like in football. An instant replay."

In the 1960s, Mr. Koltanowski was the host of "Koltanowski on Chess," a series of half-hour television broadcasts about chess produced by KQED that aired on public television across the country, the first such program of its kind.

Mr. Koltanowski was never far from a chessboard. He brought one to the hospital shortly before his death and, while bedridden and attached to various medical devices, easily defeated his physical therapist with a nasty little knight fork.

"I got wiped out," said the thera-

Here are the moves of George Koltanowski's famous game against movie great Humphrey Bogart, which was played March 6, 1952, in San Francisco.

White: George Koltanowski (blindfolded), Black: Humphrey Bogart

French Defense

White	Black				
		11. BxB	QxB	22. QR-K1	R-K4
1. P-K4	P-K3	12. P-KB4	P-QB4	23. RxP	RxR
2. P-Q4	P-Q4	13. QN-B3	N-B4!	24. QxRK4	B-B3
3. PxP	PxP	14. Q-Q2	N-K5	25. Q-K3	R-K2
4. B-Q3	N-KB3	15. Q-B1	QR-B1	26. Q-N3	R-K1
5. N-K2	B-KN5	16. PxP	QxPch	27. P-B6	P-KN3
6. 0-0	B-Q3	17. N2-Q4	NxN	28. Q-R4	P-KR4
7. P-KB3	B-K3	18. NxN	QR-B2	29. R-K1	RxRch
8. B-KB4	0-0	19. P-B5	B-Q2	30. QxR	Q-Q3
9. QN-Q2	N-QB3	20. BxN	PxB	31. NxB	QxN
10. P-B3	N-K2	21. Q-B4	KR-K1	32. Q-K7	Q-B1
				33. P-KR3	Q-B3
				34. P-QN4	QxPB6
				35. Q-K8ch	K-R2
				36. QxPch	K-R3
				37. Q-K7	Q-B8ch
				38. K-B2	Q-B5ch
				39. K-K2	Q-QB5ch
				40. K-B3	K-N4?
				41. P-B7ch	
				Black resigns	

pist, shaking his head. "Never seen anything like it."

"You'll get me next time," Mr. Koltanowski replied.

He is survived by his wife of 54 years, Leah, and by nieces Rachelle Knapp and Caroline Fainberg of

New York City, Esta Werner of Tamarac, Fla., and Pauline Frankel of San Diego, and nephews Joseph Frankel of El Cajon (San Diego County) and Sam Frankel of San Diego. Plans for a memorial service in San Francisco are pending.