

The Chess Champions

Stormy Genius From N.Y....

By George Koltanowski

AS A YOUNGSTER, I remember watching an Easter Week procession at Les Halles, Belgium. A group of marchers, dressed in friars' garb, walked through the streets, each carrying a wooden cross over his shoulder. It was a form of penance. What impressed me most was that they moved two steps forward, then one step back.

Chess aficionados, watching the progress of Bobby Fischer, find a parallel. His march to the top of the chess world has been constantly stopped and set back by his own actions.

Forward Steps

Robert James Fischer was born in Chicago in 1943. His father was a physicist and his mother a registered nurse. His parents were divorced when he was a baby, and his sister and he were brought up by his mother, a talented woman who spoke six languages and took an active interest in world affairs.

The Fischer family moved from Chicago to California to Arizona before settling down in Brooklyn.

Bobby was introduced to chess by his sister when she was 11 and he was 6. They both learned how to play on their own. Bobby's genius for the game was evident almost from the start. He started playing at the Brooklyn Chess Club and quickly established himself as a Wunderkind.

At 14, he won the U.S. Junior Championship, the U.S. Open and the U.S. Championship. Since then, he has won this latter tournament whenever he played in it.

Bobby's presence in the chess world has been a stormy one. He has fought with the press, denigrated the play of other great masters past and present, accused the Russians of cheating by ganging up on their opposition. He has been enraged by the comparatively petty cash rewards that ace chess players, especially Bobby Fischer, have received.

He has sometimes refused to play at all without a starter's fee. Grandmaster Hans Kmoch, an Austrian who emigrated to the U.S., remarked sadly: "Finally the U.S. produces its greatest chess genius — and he turns out to be a stubborn boy."

What has never been explained are the steps backward Fischer has made by avoiding playing the finals of Candidates' matches. (These are the matches that lead up to the World Championship.) He qualified easily and could have had a crack at the world title years ago. Was it fear? Fear of what? Bobby has been proclaiming for years that he is the world's best player.

Great Memory

He probably is. When he is moving forward, he tramples over everybody. Virtually nothing matters to him except chess. He reads everything there is to be read about the game, studies it, absorbs or discards what he has read. His opening skill is unique, and his retentive memory for all the games he has played is absolutely fantastic.

The only possible criticism

one might make on his play is that his endings are not always perfect. Yet no one will continue battling so fiercely and so long as Bobby in positions that look hopelessly drawn. Often he wins these. Some masters have said that he is lucky. Nonsense! As the great German Grandmaster Siegbert Tarrasch has said: "The good player is always lucky."

What happened recently to make Bobby take virtually all his steps forward on his way to establishing that he is the "real" champion of the world?

Much of the credit must go to a man who decided to make it his business to see that Fischer's path was smoothed. Bobby has always made specific demands: Lighting must be so good that no shadows of the pieces fall on the board. Quiet must prevail. He has to be paid and paid well by chess standards. When his terms were not met, he usually did not play.

Lieutenant Colonel Edmund Edmondson (USAF, ret.), business manager of the U.S. Chess Federation, placed himself at Fischer's side. He saw to it that the young genius got his Coke, his orangeade, his milk, his sandwich — often before Bobby knew he wanted it.

He looked over playing sites months before a match in order to be sure they met Bobby's exacting standards. He sought out the quietest and most comfortable hotel rooms. (Fischer tends to work all night on chess positions, going to sleep about 6 a.m.) It was Edmondson who made the transportation arrangements and who dickered on financial terms.

Four-Month Trip

In 1970, Edmondson spent four months with Fischer as the latter slashed through the barriers between him and World Champion Boris Spassky. In Vancouver, B.C., he waxed Mark Taimanov 6-0; in Denver, against Bert Larsen, it was again 6-0. Finally, in Buenos Aires, the last barrier, former World Champion Tigran Petrosian, fell 6½-2½.

But relations with Fischer tend to be short-lived. He severed himself from Edmondson and threatened to ditch the World Championship if he did not get more money. Because of the furor over this, and the uncertainty it engendered, Belgrade, high bidder for the match, backed off and Reykjavik was chosen.



AP Wirephoto

BORIS SPASSKY BEFORE ICELAND

And the Russian Who CAN Fight If...

"... Am I afraid of Fischer? As Grandmaster Viktor Korchnoi put it, I am more afraid of myself. Dr. Emanuel Lasker, when he was World Champion, correctly said that man is responsible for his work and not for its results... I must say I feel rather good about a match with Fischer. The very thought of such an interesting competition is creatively inspiring."

—Boris Spassky in a Leningrad lecture in the fall of 1972

BORIS SPASSKY was born in Leningrad 35 years ago. During World War II, he was evacuated to a children's home in the Kirov region. There he learned chess so well that in 1947 he won the prize for the best-played game in the Russian Junior Championship.

At 18, he won the World Junior Championship, came in third in the USSR Championship and represented Russia in the Interzonal in London. Ten years later, Spassky battled the reigning World Champion, Tigran Petrosian, for the title but lost. But in 1968, he succeeded in knocking off Petrosian, winning six games, losing four and drawing 13.

Spassky has contributed to the opening theory in the following line of the King's Indian: 1.P-Q4, N-KB3; 2.P-QB4, P-KN3; 3.N-KB3, B-N2; 4.P-KN3, O-O; 5.N-B3, N-N3; 6.B-N2, P-Q3; 7.O-O, B-B4.

Since giving the Leningrad lecture quoted above, Spassky has seen his star lose some of its brilliance. In Gothenburg, Sweden, he came in third behind Sweden's Ulf Andersson and Czechoslova-

kia's Vlastimil Hort. In Vancouver, he tied for first place with Hans Ree of Holland in a "Swiss" event. (In this, players who have earned equal numbers of points in the match play each other.)

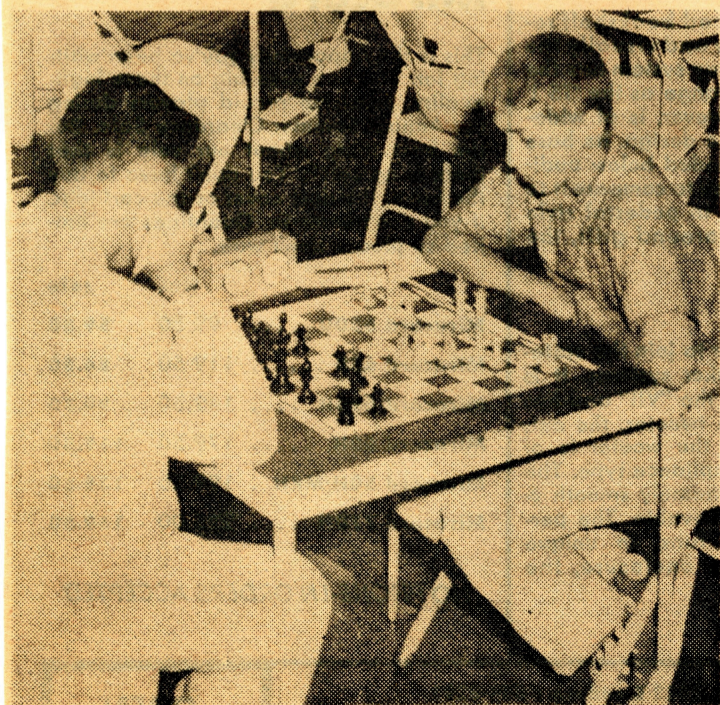
In a second Swiss, with 224 participants in Toronto, Spassky came in third behind the U.S.'s Pal Benko and Robert Byrne.

It is unfair to judge from Swiss events. But in the recent Alekhine Memorial tournament in Moscow, Spassky tied with former World Champion Mikhael Tal — for SIXTH and SEVENTH place. After this sad showing, we can ask if Spassky is slipping. If so, of course, his chances against Fischer are nil.

The poor showing of Spassky is very difficult to explain. As World Champion, the spotlight has been on him. Yet this fact doesn't seem to drive him to his best efforts. Critics are beginning to say that he doesn't have a prayer against Fischer.

Personally, I don't think it is all that simple. Fischer may well win, but he will forget at his own peril that Spassky CAN fight and that he plays a deep and calculating game when he wants to. There's no question he will want to when he comes up against the American whiz.

Not only his own self-esteem but that of his entire, chess-conscious nation, will rise or fall on the results of Reykjavik. It can be fairly said that he has a great deal more to lose than Fischer has to win.



FISCHER (RIGHT) IN SAN FRANCISCO, 1957