

Dec. 7-'83

Keeping infirmities in check



Tom Van Dyke — Extra

At 72, Boris Siff of Campbell is the nation's second-highest-rated chess player over 70

Pursuing chess was master's right move

By Tom Philp
Staff Writer

Hours after playing some of the best tournament chess of his life, Boris Siff collapsed at a Chinese restaurant the night of Nov. 26.

By the next morning, after a trip to Valley Medical Center, the 72-year-old Campbell man, with a little cognac to settle his nerves, was back at the chessboard. He went on to defeat two more of the Bay Area's finest chess players to win the Lockheed Employee Recreational Association's

annual chess tournament.

Word of Siff's feat quickly reached headquarters of the United States Chess Federation in New York, which had sanctioned the tournament. Federation officials say Siff's victory likely will put him among the top quarter of 1 percent of all ranked players in the nation, earning him the title of senior master.

Only one other player over 70 — Sammy Reshevsky of New York — has a higher ranking than Siff.

"There are very few people that old who play tournament chess at all,"

said Randall Hough, technical director of the chess federation. "To have results like this, it's really extraordinary."

Siff completed the three-day tournament with an untarnished six-win effort, a remarkable record even for a young, healthy champion. He is suffering from leukemia and is recovering from the open heart surgery he underwent six months ago. "It's really unheard of," Hough said.

"Don't give the idea that chess is an intellectual game," Siff said over some more cognac in his modest

Campbell home. "It's more a game of passion than intellect."

Siff's approach to chess is identical to his philosophy of life. It's a philosophy would make the likes of Vince Lombardi cringe. Although Siff seems most adept at winning, he says that's not what counts.

"I love to win, but I'm very choosy," he said. "I don't want to win by any tricks. I love chess for its beauty."

Siff loves chess with the passion that consumes all great chess champi-

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Senior master devotes a piece of his life to chess

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ons. He fell in love with chess when he was 7, when his Russian emigrant father introduced him to the game.

Chess soon became "an escape from a world I couldn't function in," Siff said. "It was hard for me to function in the social world."

He grew up in the Bronx, and for two years went to one of the best private high schools in New York, the Dalton School. He entered the close circle of New York's chess fanatics.

The names of the chess greats of the 1930s and '40s were never household words, the Donald MacMurray's and the Arnold Denker's. They all knew of Siff.

In 1933, Denker, a national champion in the 1940s, wrote about Siff:

"He had a very enterprising style and was very original in his approach to the solution of opening problems. In this respect, I am inclined to believe that he was far ahead of the times. . . . I have

always felt that with a few years of tournament experience, Siff would have contributed a great deal to the theory of openings."

Denker, who is now 69, was ranked third best in his age group. He is now the fourth best — Siff has taken his place.

While Denker ruled the U.S.

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— *Boris Siff,*
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chess world in the 1940s, Siff faded. He played in tournaments now and then, confirming his potential but never achieving it.

He earned a living as a machinist. "I was never a good machin-

ist," he laughs. "I was interested in problems, but I was interested in permanent solutions, rather than getting the product out."

Between the Bronx and Campbell, Siff has lived in Boston, Miami, Dallas, St. Petersburg, San Francisco and San Jose. He never married, but has had two "long-term" girlfriends. He retired in 1976.

Siff's roommate now is Hadji, an 18-year-old Burmese cat that doesn't like to be petted on the back. Hadji has two sharp teeth that protrude like fangs, and huge menacing claws.

The walls of Siff's home are bare white and yellow. His wobbly kitchen table is surrounded by three tattered chairs. His living room isn't much more luxurious, with a lawn chair and a card table with a lamp affixed to it. On the table sits a chessboard.

As a machinist, Siff made enough money to get by. But money and Siff have never mixed well. For 18 years, Siff used to make and then lose hundreds of

dollars at the card rooms.

"I was never good at making money," he said. "I was a very bad player. I'm grateful to Len for getting me out of that."

Len is Leonard Sprinkles, a San Jose attorney who two years ago aspired to improve his chess game. He heard about Siff from friends and asked him for lessons. The two quickly became friends.

"He's kind of the mentor of the local chess players," Sprinkles said. "His energy is unbelievable. He has the energy of somebody 30 to 40 years younger."

Siff's energy is an enigma. Six years ago he suffered a heart attack. Now, with his leukemia, Siff quickly develops an oxygen shortage when he gets excited or walks around too much.

Even for healthy old-timers, tournament chess usually is too much.

"Typically people peak in their early to mid-30s," Hough said. "Tournament chess, believe it or not, is very grueling. At top-level

competition, a chess player will lose several pounds during one five-hour game. He'll just sweat it away."

Chess has all the elements of boxing, Siff says. The blows, instead of to the body, are to the mind. "An opponent can come up with a strong move and then shrug it off and come back with a stronger move. I do enjoy a good chess fight."

Siff's strategy is to develop an idea during the match, a series of maneuvers that hopefully will confuse his opponent.

"I believe an idea has vitality. An idea will triumph over a guy who plays routinely. When you play something different, it puts as much pressure on the other guy as it does yourself."

Now that Siff is at the top of his game, he doesn't plan to slow down. He is looking forward to future tournaments, although they may endanger his ranking.

Next time, however, he may go easy on the Chinese food.

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