

'All-Stars' of Chess Draw a Crowd of 40

By Steve Rubenstein

Eighteen nervous men sat quietly in Berkeley yesterday and pushed 288 small pieces of wood.

It was so quiet you could hear clocks ticking and coffee percolating. The coffee gurgled, along with a few stomachs.

The occasion was the opening day at the U.S. chess championship. The 18 men, all chess masters, will spend the next three weeks playing a game a day against each other inside Pauley Ballroom at the University of California.

This is the first year the prestigious tournament is being held in the Bay Area. Despite that — and the fact that only \$3 was charged to see the best players in the country in what is billed as the "World Series of Chess" — only 40 spectators showed up.

"If you play chess, it's very exciting," said tournament director Mike Goodall. "If you don't, it's like watching paint dry."

The players sat at tables, stared, blew cigaret smoke, sipped coffee, paced, crossed and uncrossed their legs and twirled their fingers through their hair. Every few minutes, a player picked up a piece and gave it a new home a few inches away. This made his opponent stare harder.

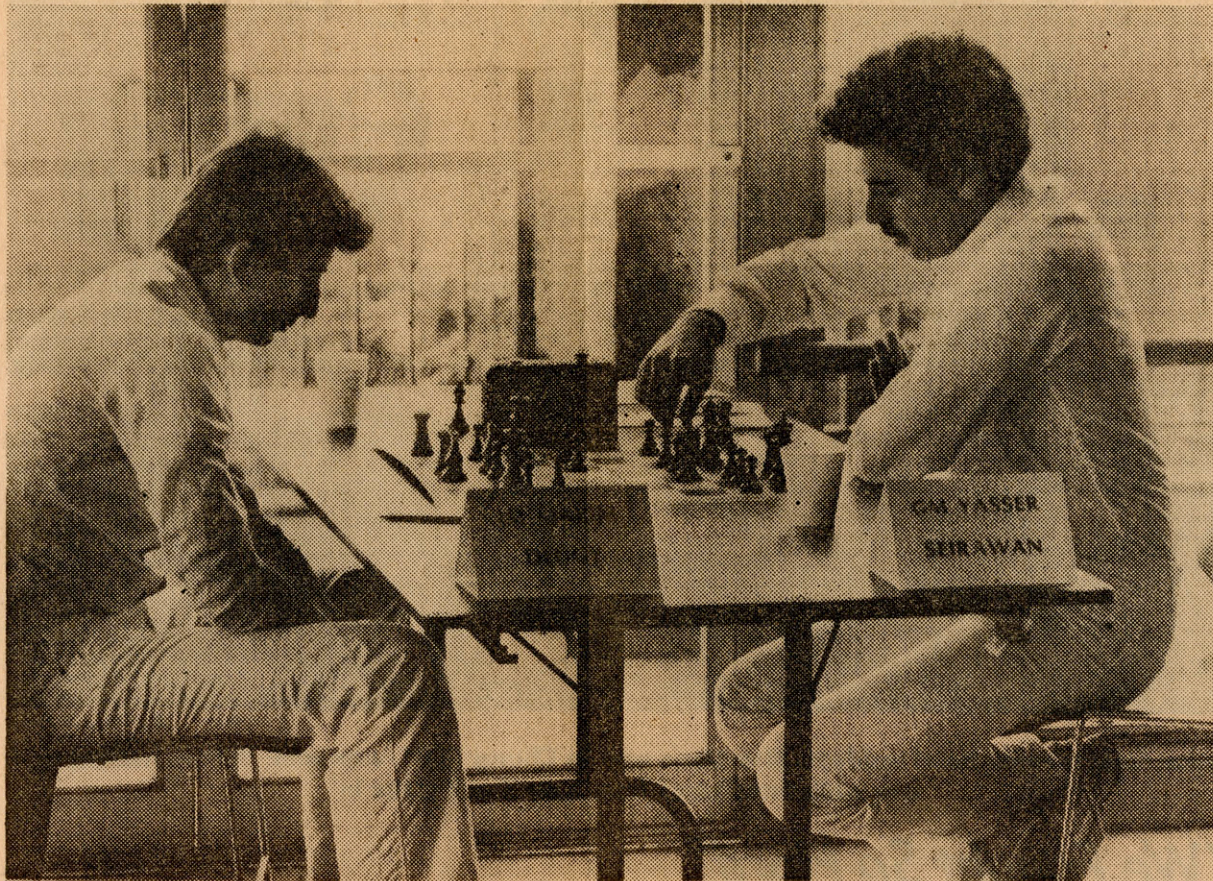
The silence in the hall would have done credit to a mortuary. A spectator could not only watch the paint dry, he could also listen to it.

In the audience, chess fans stared at the nine intricately choreographed miniature ballets that were taking place in front of them.

"This is thrilling," said Babak Darab, a math student, as he followed one game on a miniature chessboard he held in his lap. "I'm trying to guess the next move. It's an intellectual adventure."

Upstairs, in another room, other spectators sat before a giant chess diagram and argued long and loud over the merits of the moves.

"Something's happening, something's happening," said chess master Elliott Winslow, who was receiv-



By Jerry Telfer

Chess masters Maxim Dlugy and Yasser Seirawan met in first-round play at UC Berkeley

ing the latest moves from the tournament hall over a walkie-talkie. He moved a piece on the large diagram, setting off a noisy debate among the fans.

"He's playing the A3 system against the Queen's Indian Defense, and after B6, then the knight moves to C3 and black moves HERE and white moves HERE," Winslow said, manipulating the large pieces. Everyone nodded.

"Why can't he take the pawn on the B7 square?" asked a spectator.

For an answer, Winslow looked about five moves in the future. He speedily tossed the pieces, demonstrating what would happen.

"Oh," said the spectator. "I see. It would have been stupid."

Meanwhile, the players paced through the tournament hall, occasionally muttering to themselves. One of the pacing players was Nick

deFirmian of Berkeley.

"I think I'm a little better off than my opponent," he said. "I have two bishops, and he has a bishop and a knight. Theoretically, that's

an advantage. But that's theoretically.

"Actually, everything is very obscure right now."

Another pacer was Yasser Seir-

awan of Seattle. He was smiling.

"My opponent played slightly inaccurately," he said. "He moved his queen to B3. Perhaps he will follow that up with another mistake. I hope to give him that opportunity."

By early evening, three of the nine games had ended in draws. The tournament resumes today at 1 p.m. with the second round.

At the end of all 17 rounds, the top three finishers win the right to play in an international tournament to select a challenger for the world championship, which is now held by Anatoly Karpov of the Soviet Union.

"We have plenty of tickets available," said director Goodall, staring glumly at the empty seats. "There's no problem getting a ticket. This isn't the All-Star Game."