

7/8/92



BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Chess games in progress near the cable car turntable at the intersection of Market and Powell streets in San Francisco

Market Street Chess a Serious Business

Some of the players have gathered for years for the games near cable car turntable

By Karen Kaplan
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In a hushed circle on litter-strewn pavement, surrounded by street preachers and musicians, a group of Market Street intellectuals engage in their daily fix.

Here, beside one of San Francisco's busiest intersections, they come to play chess.

Dressed in everything from jeans and T-shirts to expensive polo sweaters, the players meet on the brick sidewalk near the Powell Street cable car turntable. They set up their boards on the low granite benches and on drooping card tables, using milk crates for chairs.

Marvin Boykins, a San Francisco warehouse worker, first visited the chess powwow in 1979 when he was president of the City College of San Francisco Chess Club. Now in his mid-30s, Boykins is one of the masters on the block. He plays

there four or five times a week, for five or six hours at a time.

"Most people think of games as nothing more than trivial pursuits," he said. "Chess is much more than that."

With undivided attention, Boykins slides his pieces around the board, gracefully capturing his opponent's rook, knight and queen. The expressiveness of his hands in motion clearly conveys his train of thought.

"If you know chess well, it's just like a language, a symbolic experience," he said.

Some games are played for fun, others for a dollar or two. On a really good day, Boykins can walk away with \$50 in winnings, he said.

Jim, who would not give his last name, is another of the local masters. He will play only for money. After six months of mostly \$2 games, he says, he has lost only 50 cents.

"It's much more interesting playing for money," he said. "I get bored if I'm not playing for money."

Jim, 42, became a chess regular six years ago after seeing a man play for money at a nearby farmer's market. "I thought to myself, 'Hey, I'm probably better than this guy,' so I came down here and got into business," he said. "I like being my own boss."

Not all who visit the chess mecca come to play. For every two players, there are usually 10 who watch and consider the next moves.

"Chess is a very interesting game," said Ron Henderson, a tour bus driver who watches the games on his day off. "It resembles life in terms of the decisions one can make, in terms of the things one can do."

Jeff Zwiebel, a Stanford economics professor, was lured into a

five-minute game with Jim as he passed the plaza on his way to a meeting. The competition was tougher than Zwiebel expected — he lost.

"I had a few extra minutes, so I decided to play," he said. "I was a tournament player in high school. I used to beat guys like that."

John Mendicino, a purchasing agent from Pittsburgh, Pa., drops by every time he visits San Francisco, even though he does not have the slightest idea how to play. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I just come to watch. There's nothing like this in Pittsburgh."