

Art Rosenbaum

Sharpening the Mind

---A Master's Secret

LOVERS OF CHESS, ATT'N: A week from today, under the shade trees and near the wineries, chess wizard George Koltanowski will host his 11th annual Chess Festival in the Sonoma Plaza.

There will be short tournaments, exhibitions, play analysis and the like. The picnic atmosphere is something special, and most attractive to thinkers who find stimulus in open sky moves.

The simultaneous exhibition by masters and experts has a particular inducement. Those who beat the simultaneous player will win a bottle of wine. In ten previous years, they say, no winner has ever brought home an unopened flagon.

Koltanowski, of course, is the chain smoking, raisin eating, stocky and balding master who sat on the stage of the Terrace room at the Fairmont Hotel one Sunday several months ago and established an astounding new world's record for blindfold chess by sweeping through 56 consecutive games in 9½ hours without defeat.

The Chronicle's chess columnist took on players who ranged from tyro to expert, who came from as far as Texas and Pennsylvania. One by one he mowed 'em down, and even those in the audience who did not know chess could sense by the breath-sucking sounds of those who did, when Koltanowski had skillfully trapped an opponent.

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GEORGE KOLTANOWSKI is a barvelous fellow. He has written fifteen chess books in Flemish, French, Spanish and English, and recently released a recording on chess-for-beginners, the first in this country. Koltanowski, 57, was born in Antwerp, Belgium. His was a family of diamond cutters and polishers, and by the time he was 12 he was specializing in repairs, taking diamonds that were broken or had flaws, regirdling and refinishing them with a minimum of loss of stone.

At 14 he learned chess. "Perhaps," he muses, "the precision stone work sharpened my mind."

An early humiliation goaded him into becoming the

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supreme blindfold player. When he was 17, he and a dozen other young chess enthusiasts went to Ghent to observe a tournament. All were fascinated by a blindfold exhibition, the first they had ever seen.



THEY COULD HARDLY WAIT to try blindfold on each other. The other twelve boys were able to negotiate one or two or even three blindfold games simultaneously, without forgetting their boards, but young George, though already a fine across-the-board player and soon to become champion of all Belgium, simply couldn't keep track of a single blindfold game.

He was taunted by his cronies who called him (in Dutch) "de blindspeler," because he was not.

He was determined to master the art. He cut a chess board into four equal cornered sections, and he lettered each square. When he sensed he had committed to memory each one-fourth of a board, and the letter each square represented, he then went to the next quarter, and so on.

Once he had mastered the full board it was easier to think of two boards, five boards, even ten boards. Within a year he was not only the best blindfold player among his friends, but he had played 30 games simultaneously at one sitting.



GEORGE CANNOT EXPLAIN exactly how he sees a board without actually seeing it.

"To me it is not a picture of a square, or squares within a square," he says, "but it is all in my mind. The picture is there but it does not take shape, it is fluid. And this is good, because I cannot permit myself to become flustered.

"In this blindfold tournament at the Fairmont the rules limited the players to ten seconds per move. If there were no time limit I would be there for days while they deliberated. But you see, the ten-second rule was to my advantage, because my opponents of any calibre are not accustomed to such lightning-like decisions.