

Old Times in Sacramento

I guess my length of residence qualifies me as an old-timer, I think of myself as this up and comer who still has to prove what he can do. I still feel morally obligated to beat any player who comes to the board without any teeth. When I was a teenager they used to drive me wild, the sunken mouth gave a sepulchral cast to their face; but what was really upsetting was the sibillant sucking sounds they would make between their gums. I am sure they used to take their teeth out before a game as a ploy.

My memories of Sacramento go back to the Edmondson era. He had just left Sacramento to become USCF president when I arrived and in later years my standing as a bona fide Sacramentan gave an entree to his friendship. While still an Air Force Colonel at McClellan, he imbued the club with his conception of chess, that it was a part of ordinary life and not something you did to get away from your surroundings. He kept club activities so varied that there were 70 to over 100 players at the club every Wednesday. Such bustle was not to be seen again until the Fischer boom.

One particular feature of the Edmondson regime that carried over was the team league matches. Ed had structured them so that each team represented an occupation. There was an Aerojet team, a public employees team, and a Sac State team. It was team play that first got me involved. Preceding me to Sacramento from the University of Wisconsin was Ostap "Joe" Bender, who drafted me to play in the Central Valley Team Championship. There I held down second board behind another Air Force officer, Captain John Hudson. Edmondson's and Hudson's ranks and strnegths were inverted. Ed a colonel and A player, Hudson a captain and master.

As a result of this occasional play I was visited in my Sac State office by Steve Markman, who later became an organizing spark plug during the Fischer boom. He wanted me to do or die for the Sac State team in the team league, and I variously did and died for them when time permitted.

Chess at that time was very amateurish. There was no master in the entire area. And playing conditions left something to be desired. The site for the club meetings was the Clunie Clubhouse in McKinley Park. The lighting was a trick to itself. No one was sure when it was worse, during the daytime when too little light filtered in through the tree-shaded windows or at night when too little light came from the chandeliers high atop the ceiling. It gave us a home field advantage in open tournaments.

Sacramento was a sort of colony, which the masters would occasionally visit for the purpose of plundering a little easy prize money. Remember that in the year 1965 there was only one place in America where good chess was played by large numbers and that was New York City.

San Francisco had William Addison, who amazed America by qualifying for the 1964 U. S. championship and losing no worse to Fischer than anyone else. Addison was a curiosity, and he dropped out of chess after a few years more. The southland had grandmaster Kashdan, who maintained his reputation by never playing.

Sacramento was a satrapy to a satrapy in 1968, held in thrall by the Bay Area which still quailed before the might of New York.

That year the Sacramento Valley Championship attracted several ambitious Bay Area players who motored north to take all our prize money. Out of Texas a senior master Ken Smith, then editor of a magazine and the promoter of the eponymous "Smith-Morra Gambit" appeared. He stopped the weekend in Sacramento preparatory to meeting Bobby Fischer, then in the first of his major retirements, in Reno. There Fischer was working on his 60 Memorable Games.

I also happened to be playing, being between girl friends at the time. I worked my way up the pairing chart from round to round and discovered myself paired with Smith in the 4th round. Fortunately, he had White, and I was primed for any gambit he essayed. 1. ... e5 was my surprise move and bring on the Danish Gambit, or the Scotch. I'd butter his scones and eat 'em. So he played 1. c4.

I almost called the tournament director to protest.

I was at the top of my form and soon had the worst of it. But there were no attacking lines, and I kept countering his Q-side pressure until he began to go astray pressing for a win.

r4rk1/lp2ppbp/3q2p/4n3/p2BP/P1P3P1/2QN1P1P/1R3RK1.

19... Qxa3 20. Rxb7 Rfc8 21. Rb5 Nc4 22. e5?!

He thought he was making my bishop bad! This was senior master strategic thinking 30 years ago. He does have to worry about passivity after 22. Bxg7 Kxg7 when the QBP is weak.

22 ... Nxd2! 23. Qxd2 e6 24. Rb7 Rcb8 25. Rfb1 Rxb7 26. Rxb7 Qf8 27. Qa2 Qc8 28. Rb5 Qc6 29. Rb6 Qe4 30. Qb1?

Black still has winning chances after 30. Rb5 a3 and eventually White must fatally weaken his K-side or permit ... Qd5.

30 ... Qxb1 31. Rxb1 a3 32. c4 a2 33. Ra1 Ra4 33. Bb2 Bf8 34. Kf1 35. Bc5 36. f4 Kg7 37. Ke2 Rxc4 38. Rxa2 Rc2+ 39. Kf3 Rxh2!

Winning two Ps is better than winning the exchange.

40. Ra5? Bb4 0-1.

Drawing two Bay Area masters left me locked in a five way tie for first and able to retain some prize money for the local economy.

If I may be forgiven another historical sally, let's look at a game from the then traditional Sacramento-Davis team championships. These ten board matchups were the hottest rivalry in the valley as Davis, thanks to its university cadre, had virtual parity with Sacramento.

At this time Serge von Oettingen, a Baltic states refugee, had already become a legendary player. He had also influenced much of the Davis contingent so that the Davis opening repertoire bristled with Stonewall formations for Black or White.

In 1968 the match was played in Davis, where I happened to have a girl friend who wanted me to finish early and come home with her. Between moves I would go over to visit her, and she would admonish "Trade more pieces."

Dutch Defense

1. c4 f5 2. Nc3 e6 3. g3 Nf6 4. Bg2 Nc6 5. d3

With the modest intention of getting Q-side play going while Black wastes time occupying the center.

5 ... d5? 6. cd ed 7. Qb3! d4.

On 7 ... Be6 8. Bg5.

8. Nd5 Nxd5 9. Bxd5 Bb4+.

The routine 9. ... Na5? 10. Bf7+ Ke7 11. Bg5 is unhealthy.

10. Kf1! Qe7 11. Nh3 h6.

Perhaps 11. ... Bd6 12. Bg5 is bearable.

12 Nf4 Ne5 13. Be6 g5 14. Bxc8 gf 15. Bxf5 Rf8 16. Qe6!?

Black gets lots of play after 16. Be4 fg 17. hg Ng4.

16. ... Qxe6 17. Bxe6 f3! 18. Bf4 Rf6 19. Bd5 fe+?

Here the stiff resistance is 19 ... Bd6. Then White may get most winning chances from 20. Bxe5 fe+ 21. Kxe2 Be5 22. f4 Bd6 23. Kf3 when the rooks make the opposite colored Bs an edge for White because he has more space.

20. Kxe2 Ng6 21. Bxh6 0-0-0 22. Bg5 Re8+ 23. Be4 Rb6 24. f4 Bd6 23. b3 a5 26. h4 Ne7 27. Kf6 Ng8 29. h5 and won.

The Fischer Boom

As the seventies dawned a set of new players of promise came on the scene. Among them were many locally grown high schoolers. Among these there were cerebral Dave Oppedal, Stewart Katz, the perambulatory player, a lad prone to hairy complications--with what effect you can see to this day, and another scrappy but steadier junior, Mark Holgerson--who played this little bon bon of a game in 1971.

King's Indian Defense

R. Roach-M. Holgerson

1. c4 Nf6 2. Nc3 g6 3. g3 Bg7 4. Bg2 0-0 5. d4 d6 6. e3

A system Botvinnik experimented with in the 50s.

6... Nbd7 7. Nge2 e5 8.0-0 c6 9. b4 Ne8 10. Bb2?

It seems better to go lurching ahead with 10. a4 a5 11. b5.

10 ... Nb6! 11, Qb3 Be6 12. d5 cd 13.cd Bd7.

Black's nice positional maneuver has deprived White of use of d5. The opened QB file has no penetration points so Black can now proceed to build up his K-side attack.

14. Rac1 h5 15. a4 h4 16. a5 Nc8 17. f4 hg 18. hg ef 19. ef Ne7 20. Ne4 Nf5 21. Bxg7 Kxg7 22. Kf2?

A weakness of too many players is their fixation on attacks against the king. Probably 22. Rc2 intending to increase the pressure Q-side is the most promising procedure. White's K gets caught because he wants to use the KR file.

22 ... Nh6!

Now 23. Nd4 is a must, but White is fixated on the KR file, which makes him come to grief.

23. Rh1 Ng4+ 24. Kf3 f5! 25. Qc3+ Nef6 26. Ng5?

He could go back to play in the center after 26. Nxf6 and have equality. "Equality, hah! I spit on equality," he announces.

26 ... Rc8 27. Qd4 Rh8 28. Rxh8 Qxh8 29. Rh1? Qe8! 30. Rh7+ Kg8 31. Rf7 Rc4! 32. Qg1 Qe4+! 0-1.

Never spit on equality.

By 1975 we were acquiring master strength players, most notably Mark Buckley and James MacFarland. Organizing hit a peak of activity in 1973. That year Markman organized SMACO, which

sounded like a boxing promotion, but brought chess to the suburbs. Katz did boxing promotions. There were clubs in the north area and at most of the high schools, Sac State, and Davis besides the stalwart Sacramento Chess Club, which ultimately moved from its Clunie Clubhouse venue at the end of the decade.

I gave chess instruction classes from which one ardent new fan emerged to organize the San Juan Chess League with high school teams from Hiram Johnson and Sacramento High as well as El Camino, Rio Americano, and North Highlands.

I was more active too. The Fischer boom had persuaded the Bee to start a chess column, and I needed some decent results to establish credentials with the local chess community, for whom I had previously been a geeky professor with incredible luck.

There arose a bitter rivalry. Tom Dorsch had taken over the chess column for the Davis Enterprise from Gene Lee. So the first round of the Davis Championship in 1972 became a bragging rights contest between Dorsch and I. I sprang some prepared analysis I had been holding for four years. But four years is a long time, and I forgot the line. Dorsch was doomed, however, because I soon reached a position in which there were two ways he could win. "I don't know what to choose?" he mused. So he chose a third way, which lost.

I would like to say that, emboldened by my brush with death, I went on to win the championship in good style. Instead I went on to lose three games in a row and legendary Serge von Oettingen won the championship.

In 1972-3 I got on an undefeated streak. Although I was not winning tournaments, I did produce this amusing version of the old vacuum cleaner attack--which sucks the Black king to his doom.

Nimzoindian Defense

R. Fauber-M. Holgerson

1. d4

Instead of my customary 1. c4 that I play when I prepare for a game.

1 ... Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4?!

I love to play this for Black so, when I have White, I play the line that scares me the most.

4. a3 (More modern is 4. f3) Bxc3+ 5. cb c5 6. f3 Nc6

6... d5 is much less taxing, but in the wake of the Fischer-Spassky match everyone tried to get into variations like the Hubner formation of the famous 5th game.

7. e4 d6 8. Nge2 e5 9. d5 Na5.

Keeping centralized with 9... Ne7 is better, but White has a good game from 10. h4. Now we play tag with the QBP. Black finally wins it but has to resign right after.

10. Bg5 b6 11. Ng3 h6 12. Be3 0-0 13. Bd3 Ba6 14. Qe2 Nh7.

More to the point is 14... Bc8 and Bd7 hoping to get in Ba4 or at least tie White's pieces to defending that square.

15. 0-0 f6 16. f4 ef.

White has more to think about after 16 ... Qe8 17. a4 Bc8.

17. Bxf4 Ng5 18. Nf5 Nf7.

Writing about one of his crushes, Mikhail Tal remarked, "One gets such attacking positions about once a year." In a year Tal

played more chess in a year than I ever played in a decade, so this position looked specially juicy to me. Here the crush is 19. Qg4! g5 20. Qh5 Kh7 21. e5 Bxc4 22. Nxb6+.

A cynic might remark here that "Fauber gets a good position so rarely that he is reluctant to have the game end."

19. Qh5 Kh7?

On the better 19 ... Ne5 20. Bxe5 fe 21. Rf3 or 21. Qg4 still wins. This lets me Hoover the blighter.

20. e5 Bxc4 21. Qg6+ Kxg6 22. Ne7+ Kh5 23. Bg6+ 1-0.

Looking back on the chess of the Fischer boom there is a rough and readiness that one would not expect to find these days with half million game chess libraries on disks, openings updates by modem, and home chess training with master strength computer programs.

I could say that we weren't so dependent on opening analysis back then like you youngsters are today. That's what the old timers of my youth used to tell us. Actually in the old days opening analysis played a larger role than it does today. Today there are the few players who have combed the databases religiously and the vast majority who just play. Everything is so freely available that success in the opening is the result of hard work.

Back then we had our tricks, our secret publications that we read and no one else did. Dorsch took Russian magazines to provide him with fresh tricks. I had my own sources. Everyone had their private analysis to spring.

Then, as now, it was not enough to win the opening. You also have to play well in the end too. Finally in my 37th year I played a good game of chess. My master opponent was also playing a good game so we reached this equal position:

Thornally-Fauber: 1rb1r1k1/p1b1qplp/2pnnp1/B1Pp4/cPp2N/1NQ1P1P1/PR3P1P/2R2BK1

23. ... Ng5 24. Rxb1 Nh3+

Now 25. Kh1 g5 seizes the initiative.

25. Bxh3 Bxh3 26. Nd2.

He does not win control of the file now by 26. Bxc7 Qxc7 27. Na5 Rxb2 28. Rxb2 Rb8! 29. Rxb8 Qxb8 30 Nxc6?? Qb5.

26 ... Rxb2 27. Rxb2 Rb8 28. Rxb8 Bxb8 29. Qb3 Qe8 30. Qb7 Kg7 31. Ng2 Qc8 32. Qxc8 Bxc8 33. Ne1 Kf8 34. Kg2 Ng8 35. h3 Ke8 36.g4 f5 37. gf Bxf5! 38. Nc2 Kd7 39. Nb4 Bc7 40. Bxc7 Kxc7 41. Nb3 Bd7 42. Kg3 h6.

I offered a draw, which he took as an insult. I could shut everything down by 42. ... g5. Fortunately, I played a little inexactly. After 20 some years I could tell you that this is Lasker chess, slyly tempting the opponent to overreach himself. But no. This was time pressure (50 in 2).

43. Na5 Nf6?!! 44. Kf4! Nh7.

If 44 ... Ne8 45. h4 does not win. This, however, has a trap. White has a winning advantage on the Q-side after this move, but he is lost.

45. Ke5 Ng5!

The magic square!

46. Na6+ Kc8 47. h4 Nf3+ 48. Kd6 Nxf4 49. Nxc6 Nf5+!
This is the prize winning tempo gainer.
50. Kxd5 Bxc6+ 51. Kxc6 h5 52. Kd5.
If 52. d5 h4 53. d6 h3 54. d7+ Kd8 55. Nc7 Ng7 wins.
52 ... h4 53. Kxe4 h3 54. Kf3 g5! 55. Nb4 g4+ 56. Kxg4 h2 57.
Kxf5 h1/Q 58. f4?? Qb1+ 0-1.

How Times Change

It is a long way looking back from where we are to an age when up-to-date opening analysis meant getting the revision of MCO that came out every six years. We didn't have chess clocks in those days. The blitz we played was move on move with much shouting, singing, pounding the table and waving hands back and forth across the board. We did have time for was a couple of good long thinks, however rugged the rest of our chess might be. There was no worry about using up the whole sudden death time limit and finding nothing.

There were no computers threatening chess before the advent of the microprocessor. Until the 1980s computer chess programs were jokes. Now, seeing the moves that simple computation generates, we have to ask if what we are doing at the board is really thinking. The more so when there is a premium on speed rather than depth of conception.

The computer has made chess more trivial. It is still a challenging sport, but it is no longer an art.