

BEATING MR. TURNER

SEPTEMBER 18, 2006

JEFFREY B. MATTHEWS

Every Tuesday, one of us would lose to Mr. Turner. Tuesday evenings at 7, the Scarsdale Chess Club met in an underutilized common room at the firehouse of the New York suburban village of my childhood. So each week, our parents would drop us off at the club and we would take turns challenging Mr. Turner to yet another game. Mr. Turner was a senior club member about whom we knew very little except that he was retired, he smoked a pipe, and week after week he never seemed to mind letting the guys from the high school chess team have another crack at him. He was a short bespectacled fellow with thinning grey hair. Most of the club members wore jeans and an open-shirt. Mr. Turner always wore a proper coat and tie. He was probably around 70 years old, though I suppose he could have been anywhere from 60 to 85 – we were teenagers, and he was one of those old guys. Mr. Turner was a mystery to us not because he was particularly mysterious but because we never talked much to him. He seemed nice enough, soft-spoken and a little stodgy. But I don't think we ever asked what he did before he retired, or about his family, or what he did when he wasn't playing chess. It's not that we were lacking in social graces. It was just chess etiquette. No talking allowed while games were in progress, and when they were finished, we got picked up right away because it was a school night. So all we really knew about Mr. Turner was that none of us could beat him.

I had started playing seriously a few years earlier. My childhood friend David Galef introduced me to chess in junior high, and by freshman year we had become obsessed; between classes, at lunch, after school. We were on the high school chess team. David played second board; I played

fifth. We would play against other high schools in the greater New York area, and we played in tournaments at the local Y or occasionally at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan. On a typical Saturday, David and I might take the Amtrak to Grand Central and head down to Greenwich Village to play the chess bums. The scene in Washington Square Park back then was right out of “Searching for Bobby Fischer”, the 1993 film about chess prodigy Josh Waitzkin. Beggars, hippies, assorted weirdos, and rows of outdoor chess tables. If you weren’t careful, you could lose a lot of money in a hurry, either in a game or to a pickpocket. If it was raining, we hung out at the Marshall Chess Club, a real dive frequented by a spectrum of colorful characters from chess hustlers to masters.

We were definitely obsessed. We carried rollup boards, pieces, and a chess clock wherever we went. Between classes we would sneak games of “blitz”. We studied all the openings, read about chess strategy, and did the puzzles in the newspaper. We pored over the legendary games of grandmasters past. Not that we ever reached particularly high levels of achievement, but we did become reasonably good amateurs. Still, none of us could beat Mr. Turner. And it drove us crazy. Chess can have that effect on you. It is no accident that many of the greatest chess players in history were driven mad by the game.

The origins of chess are obscure. The earliest unequivocal documentation dates to 7th century Persia. The Persian game was called Chaturanga, from the Sanskrit word for *army*. Yet Sanskrit descriptions suggest that Chaturanga was brought to Persia from India, probably Punjab around 550 A.D. But Indian writings about their game (which was called Chatrang) don’t appear until the 12th century. It’s also uncertain whether the Punjabi version was imported from, or exported to, China.

Chatrang bears more than a passing resemblance to the Chinese Xiang-qi and to the Japanese Shogi. Adding to the confusion, there is even archaeological evidence for an Egyptian chess-like board game based on artifacts unearthed from the 3rd century B.C tomb of Queen Nefertari.

We know the most about Chaturanga. Like modern chess, the Persian game used a board with 8x8 squares. Each player had 16 pieces : 1 *Shah* (the King), 1 *Franzen* (the General), 2 Elephants, 2 Horses, 2 Chariots called *Rox* and 8 *Payadag* which were foot soldiers. The English words *chess* and *checkmate* derive from the Persian word for King (*Shah*). *Checkmate* is from *Shah mat*, meaning either the king is dead or the king is ambushed. Over medieval times, the elephants morphed into bishops, the horses became knights, and the *payadag* became pawns. The chariots of the Indo-Persian game came to be depicted as castles probably because of a mistranslation of the Persian *Rox*, meaning chariot, into the Italian word *rocca* meaning tower. This became rook in English, and it's why castles are able to move on a chessboard, something that always struck me as odd. But the most curious aspect of the evolution of chess was the transformation of the General into the Queen. Originally, the General, like the King, was a weak piece that could only move a single square at a time. At some point after the Arabs introduced chess into Spain, the General not only turned into a woman but also became the most versatile and powerful piece on the chessboard. Around the time of the coronation of Isabella of Castile in 1475, the piece that flanked the king started to be depicted as a female queen in her honor. As Queen Isabella became the most powerful woman in Europe, in parallel, the rules of chess evolved to allow the chess Queen to roam as freely across the board as Isabella could roam across the continent. As an interesting historical aside, in her childhood Isabella of Castile was known as *l'enfant de Castile*. Legend has it that "*l'enfant de Castile*" was

misappropriated into cockney slang as The Elephant and Castle, which became a district of London as well as a popular name for English pubs.

Through the Middle Ages and into modern times, chess became hugely popular among royalty and commoners alike, especially after the Church determined it was not sacrilegious. Over the centuries, chess has transcended all other games and has worked its way into many aspects of Western culture. Chess has become a metaphor for war, and for any poetic struggle or complicated strategic situation. Chess as a motif was used by Victorian novelists Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë, and most notably Lewis Carroll in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. Typically, chess imagery was used to represent the female protagonist entrapped by the rigid rules of male-dominated society. In film, chess has been used to particular effect by Ingmar Bergman. In *The Seventh Seal*, Max von Sydow plays a disillusioned knight returning from the Crusades to find his homeland ravaged by the Plague. He meets the hooded personification of Death and, in the hope of buying time to perform one last good deed, he challenges Death to a game of chess. Bergman's dramatic depiction of the chess game with Death is one of the most memorable images in the history of cinema. As such, it has become the subject of endless parody. In the German film *Du Duve*, instead of chess, Death plays badminton. In Woody Allen's short play *Death Knocks*, a young couple stalls Death by challenging him to a game of gin rummy. Most recently, in *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (the sequel to *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* which I'm sure you've all seen), the slacker protagonists triumph over Death first by winning a game of Battleship and then, in a rematch, in a game of Twister.

Chess has been a traditional favorite of generals and many historical figures. Napoleon used to play in Paris at the Café de la Régence. Napoleon

was described as “an impulsive, atrocious player with bad manners.” If you’re Napoleon, and you have the French army, you can get away with it. Otherwise the rules for chess etiquette are quite strict. Benjamin Franklin wrote about the rules of behavior when he was ambassador to France. He regularly skipped diplomatic evenings at the Paris opera in favor of chess games at the Café de la Régence. In 1779, Franklin advised, “If your adversary is long in playing you ought not to hurry him or express any uneasiness at his delay. You should not sing, nor whistle, nor look at your watch, nor take up a book to read, nor make a tapping with your feet on the floor, or with your fingers on the table, nor do anything that may disturb his attention...” These impolite distractions can affect the concentration of your opponent. But even grandmasters have been known to engage in this behavior if it might turn a match to their advantage. In a 1972 meeting between Brazilian grandmaster Henrique Mecking and Russian grandmaster Tigran Petrosian, Mecking twice complained to the judges that Petrosian was kicking the table, shaking the board, stirring his coffee too vigorously, and breathing too loudly. When his formal protest was denied, Mecking started making noises of his own in the next game. Petrosian famously responded by turning off his hearing aid. Basic etiquette aside, odd behavior among chess players is pretty typical, and there are some great stories about strange habits and bad tempers of the grandmasters. For example, the great Aaron Nimzovich, while waiting for his opponent to move, would often stand on his head in a corner. And once after a particularly emotional defeat, it was reported that Nimzovich knocked the pieces over, and jumped up and down on the table, shouting “Why must I lose to this idiot?” at the top of his lungs.

Unfortunately, back at the Scarsdale Chess Club, we couldn’t get away with these tactics against Mr. Turner. But subtle means of psych-out

were not off limits. Besides, even proper Mr. Turner did a little of this himself. At a difficult point of a complex middle game, the old guy would typically make his move and while you were trying to figure out what the heck he was up to, he would lean back, turn his chair to the side, and light his pipe. This was the signal that, whether you knew it or not, you were cooked. There was no way to concentrate after he lit the pipe. You were dead. We decided to psychologically counterattack. We started by wearing tee-shirts with funny slogans, sometimes vulgar. No luck. Sipping a Coca-Cola through a Crazy-straw seemed like a good idea, but was not particularly effective. My favorite was when David pre-empted the pipe-smoking routine by reaching into his backpack for a can of cold Heinz Baked Beans. While Mr. Turner pondered his move, David slowly and methodically took one of those hand-crank can openers, worked it slowly and methodically around the periphery of the container, and then, slowly and methodically, ate them, spoon after spoonful, with gratuitous slurping thrown in for our lip-biting amusement. He still lost.

It was around this time, the early 1970s, when the world witnessed the greatest psych-out in chess, perhaps in all sports history. In a game notorious for the eccentricity of its players, the 1972 match between the US Champion Bobby Fischer and the reigning world chess champion Boris Spassky of the Soviet Union stands alone. Authors David Edmonds and Jon Eidenow revisited the extraordinary events surrounding this match in their recent book *Bobby Fischer Goes to War*. This was the first time since 1948 that a world championship involved a non-Soviet player, and the first time ever for an American. Boris Spassky was the product of a national sports system used by Moscow's propaganda machine to symbolize Soviet superiority over the capitalist West. The reclusive Bobby Fischer was notorious for bizarre and antisocial behavior, but against the backdrop of

the cold war, he became an American cover-boy, appearing on *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Despite his rather unlikable personality, Bobby Fischer's public appeal was strong, perhaps foreshadowing our society's tendency to glorify "bad boys" like John McEnroe. Fischer imposed all sorts of idiosyncratic demands for the championship. Negotiations dragged on for months. The only site that proved acceptable to both camps was Reykjavik in Iceland, and conditions were specified down to minute details concerning the size of the hall, the lighting, the positioning of reporters, the chairs, and so on. Even then, it was still far from clear whether the match would ever take place. At the last minute, Fischer refused to go to the airport to catch his plane. The scheduled start had to be pushed back, throwing the normally calm Spassky into a rage. A second plane was arranged. This time, Fischer arrived at Kennedy Airport on time, but when he encountered a pack of reporters, he fled and went home. By this time, the match between these superpower surrogates had escalated to such geopolitical significance that Henry Kissinger had to personally intervene to cajole Fischer to get to Reykjavik. He finally made it, but he still didn't show up in the tournament hall at the proper time. Spassky sat and waited. Eventually, the referee instructed him to make his first move even though the seat of his opponent was still empty. He moved, and Fischer's clock ticked away for a full seven minutes before he entered the room. Fischer proceeded to lose the first game blundering badly by capturing a so-called poisoned pawn on move 29. They started the second game without incident, but suddenly Fischer refused to play on unless the TV cameras were removed. The organizers agreed but declined Fischer's demand to reset the clock to zero. He forfeited the game. Now down 2-0, Fischer started to play for real. He won game 3, drew game 4, and won game 5. But it was in game 6 where Spassky started to unravel.

Fischer, playing White, shocked Spassky and, indeed, the whole chess world by opening with pawn-to-Queen 4. While the significance of this may be lost on non-enthusiasts, it sent Spassky over the edge. Bobby Fischer had never opened with the Queen pawn in his whole tournament career. Understand that to prepare for an extended match, especially a world championship, Spassky and his coaches would have spent months poring over all of Fischer's previous games. Fischer was known for his complete mastery of King's pawn openings, and Spassky was the world's greatest player of Queen pawn openings. With the championship now even at 2-2, Fischer launched the Queen's Gambit against Spassky, an opening that Fischer had never used and one that Spassky had never lost. This is as "in your face" as chess gets. Fischer won game 6 with such brilliance that at its conclusion, the spectators burst into spontaneous applause. Even Spassky joined in, being the gentleman he was and still a good sport. But Spassky now trailed 3-2, and the psychological pressure on him was overwhelming. He became increasingly paranoid. At one point, Spassky convinced himself that Fischer and the CIA were trying to exert mind control over him and he insisted that the KGB test the refreshments for poison, sweep the room for listening devices, and X-ray the chairs for hidden transmitters. Two bugs were in fact found, but these were not the electronic variety. They were bug-bugs; two dead flies in the overhead lights. Spassky played on but his spirit was broken. He became overly cautious, and game after game ended in draws. Finally, after an adjournment on Game 21, Spassky telephoned in his final resignation. Thus, for the first and still the only time, an American player was crowned world chess champion.

There had been only one other instance in which it could be claimed that an American was the world's best chess player. Paul Morphy, the son

of a well-to-do New Orleans family who was born in 1837, is often compared to Bobby Fischer. In fact, despite centuries of dominance of the sport by Europeans and Russians, the debate over who was the greatest chess player of all time boils down to two Americans: Paul Morphy or Bobby Fischer. Morphy was entirely self taught and became recognized as a prodigy when at age 12 he beat a Hungarian master who was passing through New Orleans on an American tour. In 1857, Morphy finished law school at LSU but was too young to take the bar exam. Having lots of free time, he accepted an invitation to the first American Chess Congress in New York City. He easily won the American championship with 14 wins and three draws. In the final round, he beat American master Louis Paulsen, and it was said that Paulsen was such a slow player that he drove Morphy to tears.

Morphy was then invited to England where he quickly defeated all the leading English masters, with the exception of the reigning champion Howard Staunton, who never played him. In chess circles, Howard Staunton is famous for two things: first, the chess pieces we use in modern play are shaped in the so-called Staunton style. Second, Staunton is remembered as the greatest chicken of all time for refusing to face Paul Morphy. Staunton repeatedly promised to play him, but again and again manufactured last minute excuses and wriggled out on various pretexts. As criticism of his avoidance behavior grew, Staunton launched a covert newspaper campaign to make it seem like it was Morphy who was the one who refused to play. Finally, in the winter of 1858, with much fanfare, a match was arranged. However, at the last minute Staunton claimed that Morphy couldn't guarantee the match stakes, and he cancelled. It became clear that Staunton never intended to come to the table, so Morphy left England for Paris and the Café de la Régence. It was during this time that

he played the most famous and beautiful game in chess history, a game that came to be known as the Opera House Massacre. Morphy loved music and was invited to the Paris opera by two rich nobles. After the performance, the Duke of Brunswick and Count Isouard challenged Morphy to a game, two-against-one, and out of deference to his hosts he could not refuse. The game lasted only 17 moves and was made immortal by a final combination in which Morphy sacrificed his Queen, a rook, both knights, and a bishop, using his only two remaining pieces, a rook and a bishop, for the final checkmate. For the next year, Morphy dazzled the European public with his revolutionary tactics and his ability to play blindfolded against up to eight opponents. He returned to England as a celebrity in 1859 and was even invited for a private audience with Queen Victoria. It was no longer considered reasonable for him to play chess without giving his opponent an advantage. In one match, Morphy took on 5 English masters playing as a team. Morphy won two games, drew two, and lost one. No player since has duplicated the extraordinary feat of playing against multiple close rivals. It was generally agreed that Morphy had no equal.

But 1859 was not the year of a world chess championship, and Morphy was urged by his family to return in America. He was still only 22. Upon his return, the press hailed him as a hero, and was fêted by the American aristocracy, including Oliver Wendell Holmes. Morphy then issued a challenge that he would take on any player in the world for any amount of money and give the advantage of a pawn and an extra move. Finding no takers, he declared himself retired. He abandoned the game completely, which he now considered not worthy of a gentleman. Comfortable on his family fortune, he never practiced law, and upon the outbreak of the Civil War, he fled to Paris to avoid military service. He still

refused to play chess, and after the war, he returned to New Orleans. In his last years, he became increasingly withdrawn and suffered paranoid delusions. Prior to his death from pneumonia at age 47, Morphy could be found wandering the streets talking to his imaginary persecutors.

The parallels between Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer are striking and tragic. Both were American prodigies in a game dominated by Europeans, both rose like meteors, and upon reaching their zenith, disappeared and descended into madness. After Bobby Fischer's victory in Iceland, he refused to defend his title, which he eventually defaulted several years later to the next rising Soviet star Anatoly Karpov. Fischer vanished from the public eye, resurfacing briefly from time to time for an oddball interview, often characterized by anti-American ravings or anti-Semitic Holocaust denial despite the fact that he was half-Jewish himself. He was arrested in California on suspicion of robbery, but the charges were dropped. In 1992, Fischer was lured out of retirement for a rematch against Spassky in the former Yugoslavia. This was in strict violation of a United Nations economic embargo. He won and took home a purse of over \$3 million, but in so doing became a fugitive from the US government. He lived in exile in the Far East for a number of years, coming to attention again just after 9/11 when during an interview on Philippines radio, he hailed the attacks as well-deserved, the fault of Israel and the Jews. After 2001, Fischer was thought to be living in Budapest. In 2004, he was arrested in Japan for possession of a false US passport. He was deported, but was taken in by a sympathetic government of Iceland, where he currently resides as permanent alien.

So back to Mr. Turner. How could I possibly beat him, and how would I stay sane? I wasn't going to beat him by psych-out, and I wasn't

going to beat him with standard chess tactics. I had to find a trap, perhaps some obscure opening that he was unfamiliar with. I had recently learned a particularly nasty variation of the Two Knight's Defense, one that Paul Morphy particularly liked. It goes by the colorful name of the Fried Liver Attack and involves an unexpected knight sacrifice by White out of what looks like an otherwise docile early position. It's actually unsound and a master should be able to beat it, but it's still popular because most players do not know how unless they have studied it. So I sprung the Fried Liver Attack on Mr. Turner. Unfortunately, he already knew it, played the move that extricates Black, and soon dispatched me. But I did take some consolation, however, that he neglected to light his pipe.

I was on the right track, but I needed a more obscure opening. I went back to the books. I discovered another one that was also used to great success by Morphy. This one had fallen out of favor in modern play, so maybe Mr. Turner would be unfamiliar with it. It starts as a classic king's pawn opening known as the Italian Game or Gioco Piano (literally translated, a "quiet game"). In 1824, a Colonel Evans invented a variation of the Gioco Piano in which White sacrifices not one but two pawns for an early positional advantage. This sacrifice became known as the Evans Gambit. Nowadays the Evans Gambit is rarely used because if Black knows the proper lines and gives back one of the pawns, it backfires for White. However, if Black holds tenaciously to the extra pawns, White develops a wide-open attack that may be impossible to defend. I studied and studied the Evans Gambit. I tried it out on David. At first, I beat him with it (something I usually couldn't do because he was the far better player). After David went back and studied the opening himself, he easily regained the upper hand the next time we played. But his initial unfamiliarity with the Evans Gambit gave me an advantage. I couldn't wait to spring it on Mr.

Turner. Unfortunately, at the next club meeting, I drew Black. I needed to be White to play the Gambit. Finally, one Tuesday, I got my chance as White: I opened Pawn to King 4. He responded: Pawn to King 4. Knight to King bishop 3. He played Knight to Queen bishop 3. So far so good. Bishop to bishop 4. For the Giocco Piano, he had to play Bishop to bishop 4. And he did. Now was my chance: Pawn to Queen Knight 4! He sat in silence. He was not expecting this. "Hmmm. Evans Gambit?" So he knew the opening. He continued to think. And think. He was clearly taking too long: he had never played it! My heart raced. Mr. Turner finally moved: an inferior choice that led to trouble for Black. I knew what to do, and over the next few moves, he made several minor errors. I had the edge for the first time ever. I could almost taste it. But it was not to be. Mr. Turner was exceptionally strong at the middle-game, and as the game progressed, he was able to recover. I lost the early advantage and ultimately had to settle for a draw. I never came close to beating him again. But in the end, I had uncovered a weakness, and I considered my drawn game with Mr. Turner a great moral victory.

That was the pinnacle of my short chess career. Soon thereafter, I began to lose interest in the game. High school graduation was still more than a year off, but I needed to get serious about college. Besides, there were girls out there. And I got my driver's license. I haven't played much since.