

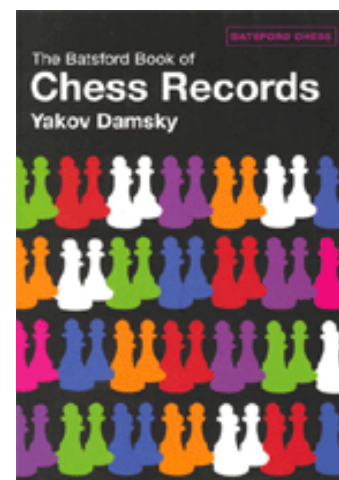
**BOOK
REVIEWS**

Interminable Hodgepodge

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The Batsford Book of Chess Records by Yakov Damsky, 2005
Batsford Ltd., Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback,
303pp., \$25.95.

One of the most useful references in our library is *Chess: The Records* (Guinness Books, 1985), by the late British historian Ken Whyld. It's a carefully researched, highly systematic and minutely detailed compilation of chess statistics and historical data: world title matches, women's and correspondence championships, full Olympiad results, long year-by-year lists of every national champion for every country that ever had one, crosstables of major tournaments, birth/death dates/places for hundreds of chess figures major and minor, plus all manner of bests, worsts, longest, shortest, etc., all painstakingly organized and indexed.



The title of this new book (hereinafter abbreviated *BBCR*) led us to hope that it might be an update of that invaluable work from twenty years ago. The author, a Russian journalist, claims to have been inspired by Whyld's book, but instead has produced something for casual reading, rather than a serious historical reference. It somewhat resembles Irving Chernev's *Wonders and Curiosities of Chess*, Andy Soltis' *Chess Lists*, Alex Dunne's *2010: Chess Oddities*, and even the old newspaper feature *Ripley's Believe or Not*, but probably the most similar recent work is Fox & James' *The Even More*

Complete Chess Addict — except that *BBCR* is neither as useful, organized, accurate nor enjoyable. It's not even really a book of records, in either the archival or superlative sense. What we have here is more like *The Batsford Hodgepodge of Chess Clichés, Irrelevancies, and Misinformation*.

Unlike Whyld, whose book was mainly a collection of lists and tables, Damsky has chosen to write in narrative fashion. This makes *BBCR* an ungainly jumble of loosely related anecdotes and factoids sorted into four main chapters: “Games,” “People,” “Tournaments, Matches and Events,” and a concluding catch-all “Around the Chequered Board.” There is no general index, making the book practically useless as a reference source. If one wants to look up, say, who the youngest and oldest GMs were, or who won the most national championships, or how many games were played at New York 1889, one must guess at the relevant chapter, and browse through an indeterminate number of pages in hopes of chancing upon the answer.

The book does offer some new information we have not seen elsewhere, for example a report on Gagra 1953, a special tournament kept secret until quite recently, in which top Soviet players trained for a team match with the USA. However, on the whole, historical clichés predominate, with such familiar stories as these being recycled:

- Pillsbury and Capablanca winning major international tournaments on their first try.
- Lasker winning at Breslau 1889 because on the resumption of an adjourned game a pawn was omitted from the position.
- Colonel Moreau losing all 26 games at Monte Carlo 1903.
- Sir George Thomas being a strong badminton and tennis player as well as a chess master.
- Over-anthologized games such as Ed. Lasker-Thomas, London, 1911; Botvinnik-Chekov, Moscow 1935; and Marshall-NN, New York, 1940.

- The same opening being played in three games (Geller-Panno, Keres-Najdorf, and Spassky-Pilnik) in the same round of the 1955 Interzonal.
- Various statistics related to World Championships: longest and shortest reigns, longest and shortest matches, most consecutive draws, who has played the most games, etc.
- Longest winning and undefeated streaks.
- The blindfold feats of Philidor, Morphy, Pillsbury, Alekhine, Koltanowski *et al.*

Earlier we mentioned *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Years ago *MAD* magazine ran a parody of Ripley, with astounding oddities like “Mrs. Gladys Crackengill and Mrs. Sadie Glutz both have *two children* and *live in Cleveland!*” Much of *BBCR* reminds us of that, as Damsky dresses up mundane trivialities in overheated prose and punctuation:

- It is noted that at St. Petersburg 1914 and New York 1924, the same players finished 1st-2nd-3rd: Lasker, Capablanca, and Alekhine. Apparently one is supposed to find this mind-boggling. Damsky explains that “divine will is stronger than any mathematical theory.”
- “It was Max Euwe who held the title of ex-World Champion for the longest time — 44 years!” Damsky’s fondness for inappropriate exclamation points becomes quite tedious.
- “The 19-year-old Alexander Khalifman ... once found himself in a phantom-like state ...” — Wow, sounds like General Zod in *Superman II*. “... he became European Junior Champion for a year that had not yet begun!” — That’s it? That’s the “phantom-like state”?? — “... in the penultimate round on 31 December 1985, Alexander made sure of victory ... Throughout the annals of chess, no one else managed anything like that!” — Clearly as amazing as those two women in Cleveland.
- Describing a 1960 simul in Toronto by Canadian NM George Berner, Damsky writes: “[A]fter every trip round all the boards, he would either dance, or read verses in a

variety of languages, or sing operatic arias and folk songs — or else play the mouth organ, or even the shepherd's pipe! A Jack of all trades — enough said!". Much more than enough, actually.

Besides the clichés and trivialities, there are many factual errors. A few examples:

- Damsky puts the McDonnell – de La Bourdonnais match in 1839 rather than 1834, and misspells the Irishman's name.
- Discussing a rule requiring that draws be replayed at London 1883, Damsky says of Samuel Rosenthal that "in place of a normal batch of 13 games he had to play 33!" Actually a "normal batch" at that event was 26 games, and Rosenthal played a total of 45. Another player there, Berthold Englisch, is identified as "Engels."
- Alekhine's apocryphal "five queens game" is presented as fact.
- Ortvin Sarapu is said to have won the New Zealand Championship 16 times. It was actually 20 times.
- It's hard to be more Austrian than being born in Austria's capital, yet Vienna natives Schlechter and Spielmann are identified as German.
- A set of ten games between Lasker and Janowski in 1909 is said to have been a World Championship match. It is common knowledge that it was only an exhibition. The mistake is embarrassingly repeated over and over, as Damsky bases various "records" on this, such as shortest world title match, who played the most title matches, shortest interval between matches, etc.
- Damsky writes "There are also some record [*sic*] instances of a player collecting championship titles from different countries. First in line was the Englishman Henry Ernest Atkins ... [who won] the tournament at Amsterdam in 1899, thereby becoming the first foreign Champion of the Netherlands." Actually Atkins was not "first in line" to win the Netherlands Chess Federation Tournament: 19 years earlier another Englishman, Henry

Bird, won at Gouda 1880.

- Damsky goes on to compound the above error: “After that [Atkins] ‘got to grips’ with his own compatriots, winning the British Championship nine times between 1900 and 1925.” Actually Atkins won it ten times in that period. And he first “got to grips” well before Amsterdam 1900, winning the British title in 1895 and 1897. Damsky could have avoided both this and the previous error by checking the book he professed to admire, Whyld’s *Chess: The Records*.
- Damsky writes “Pillsbury was to play in 12 more tournaments [after Hastings 1895] but never again (!) won first prize.” We hate to ruin a “good story” with facts, but actually Pillsbury played in 13 more tournaments after Hastings and won clear first at Buffalo 1901, 3½ points ahead of the field.
- Continuing with Pillsbury: “He shared first and second at Vienna 1898 and again at Munich 1900, but lost both playoff matches — the first against Tarrasch, the second against Schlechter.” — Eh? Munich 1900 was a 3-way tie between Pillsbury, Schlechter and Maroczy. In the playoff, Maroczy withdrew after losing one game. Pillsbury and Schlechter continued, and tied again +1 –1 =2, thus sharing 1st and 2nd prizes.
- Damsky speaks of “grave illnesses by which the brilliant careers of Carlos Torre, Aron Nimzowitsch and Enrique Mecking were interrupted for a long period — in effect for good. Subsequently these players could only observe the chess scene without taking part in the battle.” True for Torre and Mecking, but including Nimzowitsch with them makes little sense. He played in three tournaments and two matches in 1934, thus staying active to within a few months of his death in March 1935.
- In perhaps the most ludicrous howler, Damsky reports as fact a 1922 chess-and-billiards match between Capablanca and “King of Billiards” Erich Hagenlocher (or “Hagenlohen” as he spells it). Damsky goes so far as to describe the trophy: a chess knight atop a cue ball, the whole carved from white jade. Yet it has been known for

years that this story is a hoax, a joke concocted by the German columnist Hans Klüver in December 1950 and retracted in January 1951. The chess game, supposedly won by Capa giving rook odds, was actually played by Leopold Hoffer in 1880. See Winter's *Chess Explorations*, pages 179-182, for a full discussion.

So, as a factual reference, *BBCR* is thoroughly inadequate. For casual pleasure reading it also disappoints. Perhaps Damsky's prose read better in its original Russian, but in English it comes across as over-excited, even juvenile. Its accessibility is not helped by the many references to unfamiliar Russian literature — reading things like “And we all know what Ilya Muromets used to say!” most Western readers can only shrug.

The translation, by John Sugden, seems competent enough overall, but a few malapropisms turn up. We are told “anomalies are quite usual,” which is rather like saying “midgets are quite tall.” Lasker's *Die Philosophie des Unvollendbar* is weirdly translated as *The Philosophy of the Interminable*.

Perhaps that is Damsky's own philosophy. We have rarely seen a book that seemed so interminable, going on so long with so little point — reading it was almost like a punishment. We can recommend *The Batsford Book of Chess Records* only to readers unversed in chess history who are easily impressed and enjoy being misinformed.

[Order](#) *The Batsford Book of Chess Records*
by Yakov Damsky



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