



**BOOK REVIEWS**



**CHESSTHEATRE**

Play through and download the games from [ChessCafe.com](#) in the [DGT Game Viewer](#).

**The Complete DGT Product Line**

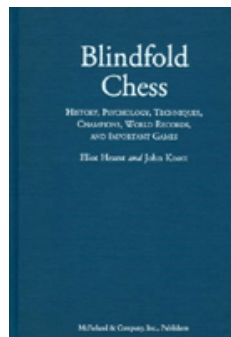


## The Magnum Opus of Blindfold Play

Steve Goldberg

*Blindfold Chess*, by Eliot Hearst and John Knott, 2009 McFarland & Company, Inc., Algebraic Notation, Library Binding, 437pp., \$65.00

The full title of this textbook-like volume is *Blindfold Chess: History, Psychology, Techniques, Champions, World Records, and Important Games*. With its nondescript, solid, hard-cover binding; black and white photos; logical chapter progressions; print style and extensive index; this is not your typical chess book. It screams “Academic Tome.”

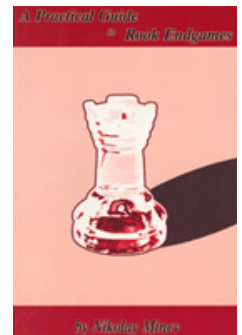


This impression is reinforced by the extensive table of contents:

- Preface and Acknowledgments
- Introduction
- Part I. The History of Blindfold Chess
  - 1. Even Before Philidor
  - 2. François-André Philidor
  - 3. Between Philidor and the Late 1800s
  - 4. The First Part of the Twentieth Century
  - 5. The Last Fifty Years
  - 6. Women and Blindfold Chess
  - 7. Major Recent Tournaments and Matches
- Part II. The Psychology of Blindfold Chess
  - 8. Research on General Chess Skill
  - 9. Psychological Studies and Commentaries on Blindfold Chess
  - 10. The Techniques of Blindfold Champions
  - 11. The Supposed Health Hazards
- Part III. Blindfold Chess Games
  - World Record-Setting Simultaneous Exhibitions
  - Other Significant Games
  - Afterword
  - Appendix A. “World Record” Blindfold Simultaneous Exhibitions Since 1782
  - Appendix B. Proposed Rules for Serious Simultaneous Blindfold Displays
- Bibliography
- Games Index
- Traditional Openings Index
- ECO Openings Index
- Illustrations Index
- General Index

The authors have taken their work very seriously and *Blindfold Chess* represents the culmination of a combined seventy years of research. The depth of their investigation shows in the acknowledgment section, which includes the following prominent names, among many others: Maurice Ashley, Pal Benko, Frederic Friedel, Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, George Koltanowski, Danny Kopec, Glenn Petersen, Hanon Russell, Lothar Schmid, Andrew Soltis and Edward Winter.

Check out the **May Savings** at [ChessCafe.com](#):



[A Practical Guide to Rook Endgames](#)  
by Nikolay Mineev  
**Only \$9.95!**



[The Life & Games of Akiva Rubinstein](#)  
by John Donaldson & Nikolay Mineev  
**Only \$9.95!**



[Fearsome Four Pawns Attack](#)  
by Jerzy Konikowski & Marek Soszynski  
**Only \$9.95!**

The book opens with a review of the early, sketchy history of blindfold chess, as best the authors can piece it together, up to the early 1700s. The primary source for this information is *A History of Chess*, originally published by H.J.R. Murray in 1913.

François-André Philidor (1726-1795) is described as the first chess player to give a simultaneous blindfold exhibition for which sufficient documentation is available. Despite drawing one game and losing the other, the two-game exhibition was described as “absolutely miraculous” and in fact, affidavits were collected from witnesses to verify that the event actually took place as described.

The authors continue in chronological order, discussing the blindfold chess exploits of other nineteenth century masters, including Paulsen, Morphy, Zukertort, Steinitz and others. The next two chapters (four and five) take about eighty-five pages to review twentieth century blindfold chess activity, with the number of simultaneous blindfold games gradually increasing until Najdorf’s astounding forty-five game display in 1947, which still stands as the generally recognized record for simultaneous blindfold chess games.

Authors Eliot Hearst and John Knott avoid presenting just dry facts, however. They have pieced together an interesting and complex history, with a number of amusing anecdotes. For example, it is well known that in most “blindfold” displays, a blindfold is not actually used. More often, the player simply sits with his back to the other players, or in another room entirely.

In 1892, Emanuel Lasker played a single blindfold game at the Brooklyn Chess Club. The game occurred on a “Ladies’ Night” at the club and Lasker was positioned so that he could not see the chessboard, but was directly facing a number of young beauties. The distraction was such that he lost his queen on his ninth move and quickly resigned. As the authors dryly note, “This would have been a good occasion for actually wearing a blindfold.”

The authors consider Alexander Alekhine the greatest blindfold player of all time, with George Koltanowski perhaps the most prolific, giving countless simultaneous exhibitions throughout his life, including a five-game display at age eighty-two.

Another interesting story involves Miguel Najdorf. Born Moshe Najdorf in Poland, he was stranded in South America when Hitler invaded Poland during the 1939 Chess Olympiad. His wife, daughter, and other close relatives remained in Poland, however. In the years during and after the war, Najdorf sought a way to let family and friends know he was still alive and well, and to induce them to contact him. He considered that a record-setting simultaneous blindfold exhibition might garner enough media attention to accomplish this goal, and this was apparently his primary (or sole) motivation. “Once these reasons disappeared,” Hearst and Knott state, “he stopped that form of play.” Sadly, his family perished in the Holocaust.

The authors take their readers up to the present time, including the highly popular Amber tournament, combining rapid and blindfold play. However, as Hans Ree pointed out in *New In Chess* magazine 2009/2, the authors apparently overlooked a series of annual five-board blindfold exhibitions that were held in Amsterdam from 1988 to 1999, with the exception of 1997, that featured players such as Timman, Korchnoi, Anand, Karpov, and Shirov to name just a few.

The next section of the book is titled “The Psychology of Blindfold Chess” and reviews numerous studies on general chessplaying ability, as well as various opinions regarding how simultaneous blindfold players accomplish their feats. Many past and present players report their

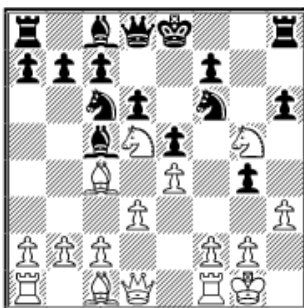
experiences during blindfold play. There's even a chapter devoted to debunking the myth that playing blindfold chess is harmful to one's health, although it seems true that many players suffer from insomnia, sometimes for days, following a simultaneous blindfold display.

The final portion of the book consists of a compilation of 444 blindfold games, dating back to several of Philidor's games from 1783, up to selected games from recent Amber tournaments. Nearly all of these games are presented with annotations.

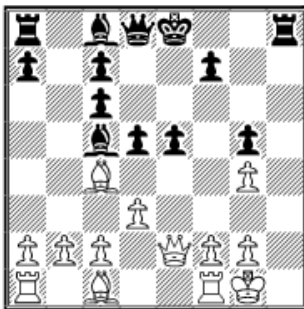
The book concludes with several helpful indices, including a chronological sequence of world record simultaneous blindfold exhibitions noting who gave the exhibition, where and when it took place, and the final score and winning percentage. Where available, the authors also have included what percentage of games were completed in fewer than sixteen moves (to identify what some may consider "sham" exhibitions), and the length of time the exhibition took.

Here is one game that I found entertaining, not for the overall quality of play, but for some of the tactical opportunities it presented, as well as for who was playing. The game is from 1917 in Warsaw, and the blindfold player is Akiva Rubinstein, playing black. Selected notes are from the player with the white pieces.

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.Nc3 d6 6.h3?!** This gives Black a target for a bayonet attack down the g-file. Better was 6.d3. **6... h6 7.d3 g5 8.Nd5 g4 9.Ng5?!**



The idea being that if 9...hxg5, then 10.Bxg5 would give White an excellent game. **9...Nxd5 10.exd5 hxg5 11.dxc6 bxc6 12.hxg4 d5 13. Qe2?!**



The idea being that if 13...dxc4, then 14.Qxe5+ attacks both the c5-bishop and the rook at h8. **13...Qf6 14.Bb3 Qh6 15.Qxe5+ Be6 16.Qxh8+ Qxh8 17.Bxg5 Kd7 18.c3 Rg8 19.Be3 Bxg4 20.Bd1 Bh3 21.g3 Rxg3+ 22.fxg3 Bxe3+ 23.Rf2 Qg7 24.Bg4+** The young player was delighted to be able to call out "check" to Rubinstein. **24...Qxg4 0-1**

So who was White? It was six-year-old Sammy Reshevsky.

I played single games of blindfold chess as a teenager, but found them more entertaining for the shock value as seen on the faces of spectators than for the quality of the games themselves. Most reasonably

accomplished chess players will similarly not be overly impressed that a person can play an entire game without sight of the board. Nevertheless, I certainly am impressed at the ability to play multiple blindfold games at once, and I enjoyed learning more about the history of this topic and how players described (or peripherally described) how they accomplished such feats.

My only criticism about *Blindfold Chess* is that I would have liked to see something along the lines of “The Top Ten Blindfold Games Ever Played.” Naturally, this would be a very subjective set of choices, but the authors are well qualified to make such decisions.

It’s not often that a chess book comes along that doesn’t more or less cover the same ground as countless books before it, but this is such a book. The authors combine intellectual curiosity, scientific investigation, and a love of chess to produce what truly can be called the magnum opus of blindfold chess.

---

 [TOP OF PAGE](#) [HOME](#) [COLUMNS](#) [LINKS](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [ABOUT THE CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)  
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)  
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

© 2009 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.  
"ChessCafe.com ®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.