



SKITTLES  
ROOM

## *From the Archives*

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



## From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online at least once each week, usually on Thursday or Friday. We will update the [ChessCafe](#) home page whenever there has been a "new" item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

---

## The Fischer King: Matchless Bobby or Profile of a Prodigal

by Paul Kollar

Almost half a century ago, in the depths of the Cold War, a genuine phenomenon appeared on the world chess stage: a young boy with a preternatural talent and limitless passion for the complex game of kings. He was a shy and introverted youth who had to face sorrow and familial discord at a painfully early age. His parents, one a Gentile, the other a Jew, divorced well before he could even reach puberty. Rarely seeing his father after that wrenching experience, he was brought up by his mother, a woman of strong character, firm beliefs, and a pronounced stubborn streak. Introduced to chess at home practically by accident, he eventually became a visitor to chess clubs, and frequented the summer chess tables at Central Park. After he began to play more systematically, and benefit from coaching at the hands of sympathetic and kindly elders, some of whom were of candidate master strength or better, the young boy gained prowess steadily, attaining Master status before entering his teens.

Immediately after becoming a teenager, his talent exploded, and he was thrust into the very highest levels of world-class chess soon thereafter. His play was

already remarkably mature and solid. A noted chess player/writer and psychologist said of him, in the *British Chess Magazine*, “People started talking about him as a prodigy. However, he is an unusual kind of wunderkind, as he is remarkably calculating and unchildlike at the board.” Leonard Barden referred to him as a “passionate calculator.” He started winning strong local championships. In his first big grandmaster tournament he defeated a very strong GM who himself had world championship potential, creating a global sensation with a tactical masterpiece that has since been repeatedly published around the world. Also in his first national championship, still as a young boy, he turned in a very creditable performance. Not content, apparently, with a gradual ascent, he came in first in the next national championship, a miraculous feat he would do again and again.

Now the crown prince of world chess, our young genius became the youngest ever to qualify for FIDE’s Interzonal Tournament. By virtue of his adequate score there, in the midst of the world’s best, he then became the world’s youngest grandmaster. Still in his teens, headed for the formidable Candidates Tournament, he was now a contender for the right to challenge World Champion – Mikhail Botvinnik! Few expected, however, that the raw youth could emerge on top from such a titanic, momentous tournament, even he himself, for all his burgeoning talent and confidence. He did, however, again come in ahead of many of the other more experienced and battle-seasoned veterans. As R. G. Wade wrote, “...it seemed only a matter of time before the youngest grandmaster would follow with the sureness of Capablanca on to the world championship throne.”

But it was a matter of much, much more time. There were unexpected setbacks, crushing disappointments, bitter frustrations. There were disputes, arguments, family discords. There were problems with chess authorities, with associates, with friends on whom he had relied. Some episodes resulted in his falling out of favor with his own chess federation. He fell under heavy criticism. He entered recessive periods when it seemed as if his promise would be not only curtailed, but aborted. The rise, once dramatically meteoric, stuttered and stalled melodramatically, not once, but twice.

But genius will out and perhaps a little more easily with the sympathetic help and guidance of a new mentor. Still, the benefits of a new father figure aside, it was almost entirely a classic instance of self-actualization. There had to have been, of necessity, a massive amount of soul-searching and rededication, a heroic psychic regrouping, and an almost inhuman summoning of the energy and will to power needed to surmount these failures and obstacles. There had to ... because surmount them he did! By dint of unimaginably hard work, and formidable will, the young man finally made it through the chess kingdom’s ultimate ascent, and reached the destined summit the chess championship of the world was his at last!

And now irony, on a level with classical Greek tragedy, enters the tale. On the one hand, we witnessed a fantastic final drive for the crown, with our hero triumphing in unbearably tense Candidate Matches with a Soviet Champion, a

former World Champion, and one of the two great hopes for the West, the redoubtable Bent Larsen! And the match of matches with the tremendously strong World Champion himself was drama enough for any true chess fan. After a nervous defeat in the first game, the challenger soon chalked up a number of wins to take an early lead. There was a small crisis when the younger man lost the eleventh game, and the older Champion's followers were momentarily heartened. However, there soon followed, in Barden's words, "a curious run of draws ... with [the challenger] making only token efforts to win with the white pieces..." But then the end came finally for the older man in game 21, when he lost it, the match, and the title that he too had cherished. Our new Champion was duly presented, according to tradition, with the gold medal and laurel wreath of the ultimate chess victor by the acting President of FIDE, and former World Champion, Dr. Max Euwe.

And, the other hand? To be brutally brief in the telling: our fresh, vigorous, new-generation World Champion, with so much promise and a beautiful, universal style, produced little or nothing of enduring value in his first, and last, three year reign. And when it was time to defend his self-defining title for the first time, he lost it in humiliation and bitter controversy. And, naturally enough, he was never quite the same. Finis.

Such is the story of the 10<sup>th</sup> Chess Champion of the World – Boris Vasilievich Spassky.

Readers who are even vaguely familiar with the career of the American World Champion, Robert J. Fischer, are entirely welcome to note the many uncanny coincidences in his and Spassky's biographies and chess careers. I personally believe that they are as eerie as only life itself can provide. It's incredible, to this mind at least, that all the foregoing applied equally to Bobby Fischer, right down to the world championship key game numbers. Their karmic collision in Reykjavik, despite being several times nearly thwarted, half a hair away from never happening at all, was arguably predestined. In any event, the two are now and forever locked together in history and legend, like Hector and Achilles. Nevertheless, the readily apparent symmetry of their early paths, trajectories, and personas is easily shattered.

Unlike Bobby Fischer, who defeated him to become the 11<sup>th</sup> Champion, Boris Spassky successfully bored through not one, but two Candidate Match series, defeating Tal, Keres, Geller (twice), Korchnoi and Larsen. Unlike Bobby Fischer, Spassky played as challenger in not one, but two world championship matches, each time against Tigran Petrosian, who was, in those years, virtually impossible to beat. Unlike Fischer, Boris did play chess as title-holder, as did every other world champion except Fischer. And while, as stated above somewhat unfairly, for dramatic effect, he rarely brought off magnificent results as champion, he did go undefeated at the Siegen Olympics in 1970, beating Fischer in a much watched, portentous battle. It should be noted that Spassky also, before all the above accomplishments, came in first in three Soviet Championships, which were considerably more lengthy and difficult than any U. S. Championship. Incredibly, Spassky also won the 41<sup>st</sup> Soviet

Championship in 1973, after losing his title to Fischer, and returning home very wounded to a severely cold, hostile reception.

The parallels completely break down when we enter the realm of personality, character, and deportment. Unlike Fischer, Spassky is, as Euwe noted, “Highly cultured with interests in all fields of human knowledge, a man of impeccable comportment, great modesty ... one of the favorites of all chessplayers.” Unlike Fischer, Spassky is, as Robert Byrne observed, a gentleman. Barden notes that from one such as Byrne, this is a supreme compliment. Unlike Fischer, who apparently read, aside from chess material, only comic books, girlie magazines, and extremist pamphlets, Spassky was familiar with Dostoyevsky and Solzhenitsyn. And unlike Fischer, Boris is an absolute charmer, witty, polite, and sensitive to the feelings of others.

I met, and played, Spassky in 1984 at a “simul” exhibition, and can personally attest to the truth of much of the above. In contrast, it is rather difficult to find many who have both encountered Fischer, for any length of time, and are ready to say the same of him. It is, sadly, altogether too easy, in fact effortless, to find legions of people, not just chess players, who have every reason to say, and have done so, a host of contrary things about the man. For example, and please believe me that I do not do this out of spite or rancor, from the earliest days of Fischer’s career to this very day, he has been labeled: brash, arrogant, selfish, self-centered, boorish, loutish, cruel, unreasonable, difficult, impossible, inconsiderate, ungrateful, petty, petulant, sulking, crass, insensitive, irrational, contentious, argumentative, aggravating, insulting, crazy, wicked, and mad. I would tend to agree.

He has hurt and abandoned those who have helped him, those who have admired him, and those who have loved him. He has rejected calls from his friends, his community of fellow chess players and from his country to do what was right or fitting. He has displayed a McCarthyite, “commie”-bashing, jingoistic political stance while inexplicably avoiding military service, despite having been a 1A-draft candidate, attaining a very convenient rejection from his local draft board. His erstwhile cold war patriotism was later much diluted by his defying, and spitting upon, State Department edicts. He skulked away from the first challenge he had for the, not his, world title, and was happy to let the world think he was victimized. He cloaked his fearful evasion with an over-elaborate pretense of remaining steadfast and principled, a favorite trick of his, and gulled many thanklessly loyal supporters into making tortured and quasi-moral excuses for him. Yet before this pathetic farce, he played not one single game, not one, as champion. What cabal or KGB conspiracy was responsible for this craven non-performance?

*When I win, I'll put my title on the line every year, maybe even twice. I'll give players a chance to beat me. – R.J.F.*

And then there’s the matter of his very vocal, very strenuous anti-Semitism. His now notorious, shrill, obscenity-filled 1999 interviews in the Philippines and in Hungary, broadcast on the Internet, shocked millions. Many are aware, though,

that these rancid outbursts of his go a long way back, first worming their way into daylight in a *Harper's* magazine article featuring an interview with the adolescent Fischer published almost forty years ago. And from whence does this hatred originate? How can it be there at all, given his blood and bone? It's like watching a man saw off his own leg, and then set it ablaze. Fischer is the child of a Jewish mother; he has (had?) a tremendous veneration for Wilhelm Steinitz, the first official World Champion, who was Jewish; one of his earliest good friends was Bernard Zukerman, a Jew. And so on.

He is, I think, intelligent enough to discern that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a forgery, a device concocted by the Czar's secret police, if he'd only read a real book, our high IQ, high school dropout champ. Alekhine has been bashed about for over half a century for the infamous *Pariser Zeitung* anti-Semitic articles, but at least there's a very real chance that he was blackmailed, or more likely physically coerced into signing or writing them. Who or what is prompting Fischer? The absurdity of all this, the almost tangible surrealism surrounding this man is, finally, stupefying. Even if I was twice the writer I wish I were, words would inevitably fail me. Yasser Seirawan says, "Bobby's a real nice man." Peter Leko, who has been in contact with Fischer quite recently, tells us that Bobby "is a lot more relaxed person than many of us suppose." Now that's a relief.

The popular web site, *The Week in Chess* (TWIC) ran a quick poll recently asking readers to vote for their favorite player of the millennium, or past century. Boris Spassky, the player with the most complete, rounded, eclectic style of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps the classiest, most elegant advertisement for chess since Capablanca, came in 19<sup>th</sup>. Fischer came in first, slightly ahead of Kasparov, a one-time fan of his. This result significantly disturbed at least two people: Kasparov, and myself. Kasparov, always competitive, was, as is his wont, delightfully irked, tweaked even, by falling into 2<sup>nd</sup> place. He actually found time to retort: he reminded all concerned that the vote was for the favorite player, not the strongest, and he thereby remained completely in character as a self-serving grandmaster of innuendo. In contrast, I was aghast at the result for quite different reasons.

I was stupidly shocked to see another vote that, since it quite ignored character, endorsed "pure" winning, sheer massed points, and a supine bow to quantity. I suspected the mass of votes were not inspired by the undeniable high quality of his games, or even in appreciation of the limpid, simple yet sharp style. I don't know, either, that the tally reflected a still-grateful recognition of the massive inspiration that Fischer incidentally provided to thousands to take up, or return to, chess. I feared, rather, that success at any cost was again being applauded, worshipped, and that nice guys may indeed finish last, or at least way back. Those who insist that only super-arrogant, insufferable egotists triumph in the real world overlook the beloved Mikhail Tal for one, the calm and assured Boris Spassky for another. Does anyone think Paul Keres was a conceited, churlish oaf? Is Smyslov an abrasive, abusive whiner?

Yet, I admit to a kind of envy at the apparent ability of the Fischer fans to,

(what is the buzzword?), to compartmentalize, to separate the “relevant” from the “mere” moral issues, to focus on the chess. If I and like-minded readers can do this Zen-like trick, and see only the chess, then yes, Fischer wins. In fact, he wins even if the operative criterion was sheer playing strength and performance, Kasparov’s implication notwithstanding. The plain fact is: Bobby Fischer was the strongest, the best chess player ever. He has had no equal, although he was not that much greater than his confreres, certainly not as much as his more unrealistic camp followers and sycophants maintain.

The Reykjavik match appeared to be a crushing rout to the superficial observer, but Spassky would have done a lot better if he hadn’t unavoidably been drawn into the tedious circus that the untrammelled Fischer arranged for us all. The patented antics and histrionics that streamed forth nonstop from the unstable, uncontrollable pretender were severely detrimental to Spassky’s nerves and composure, and his play suffered badly for it. This is not to mention the peripheral but crushing pressure on Spassky of finding himself in the unsought role of defender of the whole Soviet state, not merely a sports title. Fischer, in contrast, was representing, as always, himself alone. It was not fair, but Spassky the gentleman, the ideal sportsman, did not complain, much less throw “hissy” fits and lock himself in his room like a teenage girl.

Hector and Achilles: one the perfect nobleman, aristocratic, virtuous, and lordly the other awesomely powerful, lethal, sulking in his tent, cursed by the gods with a fatal flaw.

Ironically, if Fischer had behaved impeccably at Reykjavik, his overall superior skill would have carried him through anyway; such was the level of his play. And if Fischer, three years later, gave FIDE, or even Karpov, the right to decide all the match issues, and behaved as graciously as any perfect host, he would have won that match as well. He was inhumanly great. He was indisputably the best chess player of all time. But this is very difficult for some of us to see and admit unless we turn off all peripheral vision, and suspend all moral judgments until ... when?

Is near-perfect chess worth this sacrifice? If we were to learn, nightmarishly, that Beethoven was an arsonist, or an abuser of children, would his string quartets still thrill and lift us? It’s a bit of a dilemma. What can we legitimately excuse for the sake of art? Fischer has not, of course, physically hurt anyone. But he has, in my opinion, been guilty of chronic, execrable bad behavior for forty plus years. He has, by repeated, continual assaults on common standards of decency and social decorum, approached, if not reached, the level of the sociopath. His actions immediately before the match at Reykjavik and during the first three games should have resulted in a permanent censure, or at least a day or two in the stocks.

Those who persist in regarding this sorry, tragic episode as the “Match of the Century”, or worse yet, as a validation of the American Way, are too focused, and should remove, at long last, their tunnel-vision spectacles, and red, white, and blue blinders. For that matter, the match would not have taken place at all

without the temperance of Euwe, and the unparalleled grace of Spassky, who could have gone home as Champion after game two. The late, great 20<sup>th</sup> century has Capablanca v Alekhine, or the first Botvinnik v Tal matches to be proud of. At least they were fair, and mercifully apolitical – And hysteria-free. Those who persist in casting their vote for Fischer as their favorite player should widen their perspective as well. Is Fischer really worth, per the dictionary, “your special favor and regard?” Is he actually “one that is trusted, indulged or preferred above all others?” Should we give him that much slack?

Jean Cocteau once said that if his house, which was filled with fine art, with masterpieces, were to catch fire, and he had to flee from it for his life, but could save either the irreplaceable art works, or his cat ... he would unhesitatingly opt for saving his pet. He chose life. By the way, Cocteau was heavily overindulged by his mother after he lost his father a suicide. Art, no matter how grand, no matter how magnificent, is, after all, a pale copy. If you are polled for your vote for strongest player ever, then chose Fischer if you will; Kasparov’s jealous jibe notwithstanding. But please remember what the world’s chess community has had to pay for those “memorable” games. Remember that the artist himself was in no way as beautiful as even his least worthy creations. Recall what a favorite should be an ideal.

It is not easy to find a worthy book on Boris Spassky, or to find articles under his name. Books on Bobby Fischer number in the dozens and dozens. The sinner is more marketable than the saint. Some Fischer books are even by him. There is almost an obligation for a serious player to own and study *My 60 Memorable Games*. Larry Evans may have “ghosted” it, but the moves and analyses are Fischer’s. As fate would have it, the last chess book that fell into my hands in the last millennium was, of course, another volume on our Mr. Fischer. Titled *The Unknown Bobby Fischer*, it’s a collection of games, articles, interviews, anecdotes, reminiscences, photos, and miscellany by John Donaldson and Eric Tangborn. It is expressly for the inveterate Fischer fan that is, evidently, always ready for more leavings from the ex-champion. The rare photos of Fischer, taken before he became terrible, are, as they portray a seemingly nice, innocent kid, rather wistful. It’s amazing what one can become nostalgic over.

Donaldson has already shown an affinity and high aptitude for research with his two-volume opus on the great, taciturn perfectionist Akiba Rubinstein (*Uncrowned King* and *The Later Years*, with Nikolay Minev.) Rubinstein, who should have been world champion, is most deserving of the authors’ tireless efforts, and our close attention. In contrast, because of my persistent antipathy toward Fischer, a position I hope and insist is objective; I could not warm to this unsolicited book. The authors’ choice of title obviously hearkens back to Hooper and Brandreth’s *The Unknown Capablanca*, and hints at a promise of disclosure, of enlightening facts and “secret” games that will serve to make the Fischer puzzle more comprehensible and accessible. Perhaps the mystery of the fantastically beautiful blossoms can be broken by examining the roots.

The authors point especially to their efforts toward dissecting his formative

years, wherein he “went from a struggling Class B player to U.S. Champion in the space of two and a half years.” That’s half the lure, of course, to struggling Class X players the world over. See how he did it, then go, and do likewise. Needless to add, this promise to explain the phenomenon is not kept anywhere in this potpourri. No one knows how he did it, not even Fischer himself. As he said, “I just got good.” And no one knows why he is what he is. With such remarkable parallels in their first twenty or thirty years, still no one can say why Fischer is Fischer, and Spassky is Spassky – No one.

The unknown remains, probably forever inexplicable, regardless of how many yellowed game scores, cracked newspaper clippings, and curled and faded old photos are uncovered. My appreciation, even awe at his chess talent aside, the nicest thing I can say about Bobby Fischer is that he’s a genuine enigma. Or maybe we all know quite enough about him already. Words fail me, but I’ll give it one more shot.

Fischer sacrificed virtually everything most of us “weakies” (to use his term) value, respect, and cherish, for the sake of an artful, often beautiful board game, for the ambivalent privilege of being its greatest master. He even sacrificed his mother, Regina, to become the King of Chess. Anything is permissible if it wins ... sac the queen ... the king’s the thing ... isn’t it, Father? Wherever you are, isn’t it?



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2004 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.