



SKITTLES ROOM

The Chess Cafe

E-mail List:

Each week, as a free service to more than a thousand of our friends, we send out a brief e-mail message: *This Week at The Chess Cafe*. To receive this *free* weekly update, send us your e-mail address. You can remove your name whenever you wish and we *do not* make the list available to anyone else.

[Yes, include me on the e-mail list!](#)

Excerpt:

New York 1936: The First Modern United State Chess Championship

by John Hilbert

The following excerpt is taken from *New York 1936: The First Modern United States Chess Championship*, by John Hilbert and Peter Lahde [Chapter 1, "The Mystery of Chess": An Historical Introduction to New York 1936," pp. 9-12]. A full review of the book by Taylor Kingston appears this week at [The Chess Café](#) Book Review page. All material, including the photographs, are copyright protected, © 2000 John S. Hilbert and Peter P. Lahde; All Rights Reserved.

"The book reconstructs the history of the first modern United States chess championship tournament, played in New York 1936. It includes 116 of the 120 chess games played in the finals, as well as collected games from the preliminary events, a history of the tournament's development, and information about each contestant, as well as additional games. This is the first full length treatment this important United States chess event has received."—Books in Print

"Twentieth century businessmen, from whom the committee was largely drawn, were in effect being asked to work with what they must have come to believe was an antiquated system of personal challenges and negotiations more useful for mediaeval battles of honor than for determining a national chess champion in present day America ..."

By the fall of 1933, over ten years had passed since the title of United States chess champion had been at stake. Then, as reported in the pages of the September - October 1933 issue of the *American Chess Bulletin*, a challenger stepped forward to seek Marshall's crown. "Devotees the country over," wrote the *Bulletin*, "will be glad to learn that well directed efforts are being made to bring about a match for the United States championship, which has not been played for since Frank J. Marshall defeated Edward Lasker in 1923 and successfully defended the title acquired by him in his match with Jackson W. Showalter in 1909. This time Isaac Kashdan is the one who is willing to enter the arena and fight it out with America's veteran international master."

Kashdan had written Marshall on October 11, 1933, challenging him to the match. He noted that "there has been frequent discussion in the last two years regarding a match for the American chess championship, which you have held so long and so honorably." Kashdan's remark was particularly politic, for as we have seen, while Marshall's reign had no doubt been honorable in that he had done nothing to overtly disgrace the national chess community, his failure to play more than one

match in defense of his title in the previous twenty-three years could hardly be considered the reign of an active champion.

Of note too was another remark Kashdan made in the same letter challenging Marshall. "I wish now to lay my challenge before you and request you to state under what conditions you would play me for the title. You will realize that times have changed considerably since the last championship match and that the terms set at that time are no real precedent for a present encounter."

Kashdan's reference was to the purse expected to be made available for play. In 1923, Marshall and Edward Lasker had contested their match for a \$5,000 prize fund. Times were good. Individuals and clubs were willing to come up with such a princely sum, by then-current chess standards, in order to witness Marshall's first title defense.

Kashdan's challenge to Marshall was made in light of match conditions established in 1927. Those conditions had a history of their own, one intertwined with organized chess. On December 22, 1926, the National Chess Federation (NCF) of the United States of America had been formed. By the July - August 1927 issue of the *Bulletin*, a list of twenty points comprising the "New United States Championship Match Conditions" could be presented to the readership. According to the introduction to those points, Leonard B. Meyer and Dr. N. L. Lederer, acting on behalf of the NCF, and "after due consideration with Frank J. Marshall, titleholder since 1909," had drawn up a set of conditions "which will govern future matches for the professional championship of the United States to be held henceforth under the auspices of the federation."

Of particular importance by the time of Kashdan's 1933 challenge was Condition Number Eight, which stated that "the champion will not be compelled to defend his title for a purse below five thousand dollars (\$5,000), in addition to which sum the traveling expenses both ways of both players, as well as their living expenses during the progress of the match, must also be provided for." The \$5,000 prize fund, according to Condition Number Twelve, had to be either deposited with a stakeholder or guaranteed in writing "by clubs or other responsible parties" no later than two months before play was to begin. No doubt of less concern to Marshall at the time he was consulted, but of great significance later, was the final provision, Condition Twenty: "These rules shall also apply, with appropriate modifications, to other championships played under the auspices of the National Chess Federation of the USA"

In all likelihood Condition Number Twenty was originally intended to be used for purposes of the NCF title offered, for the first time, later in 1927 at Kalamazoo, when Norman T. Whitaker won a small event over a very young Samuel Reshevsky. In 1928 Abraham Kupchik, who would later play at New York 1936, won the organization's title. But the general nature of Condition Number Twenty, applying as it did to "other championships," such as tournaments rather than matches, and notably other championships played "with appropriate modifications," such as a vastly reduced prize fund, would eventually open the way for organized chess to bypass the nation's aging champion.

And while those Conditions might eventually allow the NCF to sidestep Marshall and his claim to the national title, for the moment the \$5,000 purse requirement of Condition Number Eight provided Marshall with significant protection as long as the NCF was unwilling to precipitate a showdown. The protection the \$5,000

purse afforded Marshall was due in large measure to the nation's reduced economic circumstances.

Kashdan was challenging Marshall in 1933, seven years and a Great Depression after the NCF match conditions had been formulated. Raising \$5,000 from chess players and clubs in 1933 was a much more formidable task than it had been in 1923, and the difficulty of the task was one Kashdan recognized, at least implicitly, in his October 11, 1933, letter.

Marshall quickly responded, telling Kashdan that he would seek the advice of Marshall Chess Club members and then inform him of a date for possible discussion. The champion wrote that "my opinion is that it would prove a very interesting match and something the chess world has been looking forward to, and I shall be very glad to play if the proper arrangements can be made."

As it turned out, the *Bulletin* could report in the same issue that "a preliminary meeting took place at the Marshall Chess Club at which Harold M. Phillips, president of the Intercollegiate Chess League presided, with the result that a tentative agreement was reached to the effect that an effort would be made to raise a purse of \$5,000. If all goes well, the match will be begun early in April [1934]." Time would prove the optimism of arranging such a match at any time, for such a purse, let alone by April 1934, as suggested in the September - October 1933 *Bulletin*, to be severely misplaced.

If the realistic chances of holding such a match for such a purse were small, one encouraging fact for all those who wished to see actual championship chess played was that by November 1933 the *Bulletin* could also report that preliminary discussions had led to Marshall and Kashdan agreeing to play "under the jurisdiction and in accordance with the Rules of the National Chess Federation of the United States of America," should the funds be raised. While the authority thus tentatively confirmed for the NCF to control the rules of the match remained in the short term, obviously, contingent on such a match taking place, that the champion and his most impressive challenger had already agreed that having the NCF rules apply clearly gave the organization some leverage, and indeed legitimacy, in terms of asserting itself in future championship matters. This assumption of authority would later turn out to be a crucial factor once negotiations between Marshall and Kashdan had broken down.

A committee had yet to be formed to handle the match particulars as well as the financing. No doubt beyond the 1927 match conditions Marshall had been consulted about by the NCF six years earlier, it was the willingness of the NCF to lend its organizational network to raising funds that led both Marshall and Kashdan to quickly agree to play by those rules. And regardless of what was on paper, to a great extent, the NCF was in fact Maurice S. Kuhns, its president, with assistance offered by the likes of Edward Lasker, its secretary, Horace E. McFarland, assistant secretary, as well as Harold M. Phillips and Hermann Helms. What was taking place was in large measure a unification of mid-western and east coast organizers and prominent club members. And whether Marshall and Kashdan were aware of it or not, the power of individuals, whether champions or challengers, to decide matters concerning the national championship title, was slipping through their fingers.

By January 1934 the *American Chess Bulletin*, which also happened to be the official organ of the NCF, thus giving that organization space in the most

respected chess journal in the nation, could report that the committee seeking to raise the \$5,000 match purse was "busily at work," but not yet ready to make a report. The NCF added that "subscriptions in any amount, large or small, are earnestly solicited from all who believe that this match should take place without further delay." Potential subscribers were asked to send their donations to committee chair Harold Phillips at 2 Lafayette Street in New York City, or S. W. Addleman, 1313 West Congress Street, another committee member, in Chicago. To add urgency to its request, the NCF noted that "if the amount stipulated by the present title holder as necessary cannot be raised now, there is grave danger that the match will be postponed indefinitely." Marshall's demand for a \$5,000 purse was already worrying the men scrambling to come up with the money. The same report concluded that it was much hoped that the match could be "staged as one of the outstanding chess events of 1934." The initial optimism reported a few months earlier that the match might take place by April 1934 had already given way to the more general hope the match could take place anytime during the year.

Matters were becoming more complex. The NCF, while allowing that actual play of the match might be delayed, in February 1934 reiterated that funding for the event was nevertheless subject to its April 1, 1934, deadline. The NCF encouraged its chapters to contact assistant secretary McFarland with "comments and criticisms" concerning the proposed match, and further extended the invitation for such response to "all chess clubs, groups, circles and individual players not at present affiliated with the Federation." Unlike previously proposed matches against Marshall, talk of which had invariably and quickly disappeared once negotiations had broken down, airing such replies would later give the NCF the opportunity to keep alive discussion of matters about the match and the future of the national title regardless of whether either, or both, of the match principals would have preferred the matter simply to go away. If the NCF's ability to coordinate funding efforts had been an incentive for both Marshall and Kashdan to agree to its jurisdiction over the match, a side effect of the NCF's presence was that a national forum was created for discussion of championship matters, whether favorable to the current champion and his challenger or not.

Chicago members of the Committee on Arrangements and Funds for the proposed match, as it was called, were actively pursuing officials of the Century of Progress Exposition, also in Chicago, to see if the match could be held in conjunction with the Fair, possibly in July. But by March 1934 an interesting development was reported by the *Bulletin*. A report from the committee was not expected to be ready even in time for the next issue of the journal, but "suggestions touching on the subject of a National Tournament each year to award the U.S. Championship are being received, but consideration will naturally have to be deferred until it is determined that action can be taken this year on the challenge which Mr. Kashdan has issued for a match with Mr. Marshall, the present title holder."

Thus, the invitation for "comments and criticisms" issued the month before by the NCF had already borne fruit to the extent that the matter of alternatives to the present, semi-private match system to decide the title were being suggested. More forceful, however, was the statement in the same March 1934 issue of the *Bulletin* that "after this proposed match is disposed of, either by being held in the near future or abandoned as impracticable under the stress of present economic conditions, it will then be in order for *organized* chess to decide what changes are desirable and practicable" (emphasis in the original).

That "organized" chess, meaning the NCF, and in reality meaning its most vocal and influential members, would step in concerning the possibility of a future championship tournament, *regardless* of whether Marshall and Kashdan held their match, clearly was a new stage in the metamorphosis of the shifting control of title matters from individuals to a collective will, or at least what appeared to be a collective will. Obviously many among the officers and committee members of the NCF were becoming fed up with the delays and frustrations in handling championship match matters. Twentieth century businessmen, from whom the committee was largely drawn, were in effect being asked to work with what they must have come to believe was an antiquated system of personal challenges and negotiations more useful for mediaeval battles of honor than for determining a national chess champion in present day America. And their patience would not go on forever...



[\[The Chess Cafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Reviews\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Studies\]](#) [\[The Ninth File\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About The Chess Cafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2000 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.