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## A Conversation with Mig Greengard

by Howard Goldowsky

When Mig Greengard greeted me at the front door of his East Village Manhattan apartment on a late Saturday morning this past July, I thought that I had come face to face with a smiling amalgam of chess pieces. Greengard has the smooth, round head of a pawn, (sporting a buzz cut that gives off a nice sheen), the solid torso of a rook, (weighted, but not too heavy), and the height of a king, standing taller than most people at six foot four inches (1.95 meters). According to his own proclamation on a recent Usenet post, if you ever met him, you would think that he looked a little like a younger version of the Skipper from the T.V. show Gilligan's Island. We spent the late morning to early afternoon talking at Greengard's kitchen table, where we discussed topics ranging from Internet chess and the demise of KasparovChess.com, to why he holds no reservations about criticizing poor performances by any of today's top players. Once Greengard gets going about the chess world, it's difficult for him stop. In fact, I hardly needed to ask any questions. His delivery is fluid, propelled by hand gestures, sarcastic humor, and opinions that constantly keep the listener engaged. After we adjourned to grab a bite to eat, we walked to Washington Square Park to watch the chess hustlers and then to the Chess Forum on Thompson Street in the village to play some blitz. By the time I lost my tenth straight game, (Greengard can trade blitz points with IMs on his good days), it was time to wrap up my extended three-hour tour. As usual, most of what the former TWIC columnist, former KasparovChess.com editor-in-chief, and current ChessBase.com columnist had to say was entertaining, insightful, and controversial. So sit right back, and enjoy a conversation with one of the world's most charismatic and thought provoking chess journalists, Mig Greengard.

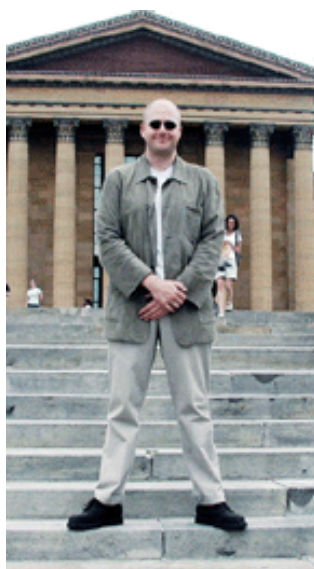
### **Internet Chess and the Demise of KasparovChess.com**

Greengard has been profiled or interviewed four times so far in his journalistic career: Sara Hurst interviewed him for the second edition of her book, *Chess on the Web*, Bill Brock interviewed him in 2000 for the *Illinois Chess Bulletin*, *New In Chess* issue number 4, 2002, profiled him on their Q&A page and About.com interviewed Greengard in one of their live online interviews. It was in this About.com interview where Greengard spoke about his then recently acquired post as editor-in-chief at KasparovChess.com. At that time, October 1999, Greengard was bursting with optimism for KasparovChess, saying such things as, "We will be the best... You wouldn't believe our working capital... Many people with deep pockets think KasparovChess is a winner."

But today, Greengard believes KasparovChess will not last another six months. "[The KasparovChess] business plan was made for an era that was ending just as

we were starting,” he says. It was an ending era of dot-com exuberance, where companies believed that if you built a website using enough money, the customer would come.

KasparovChess was no exception. Even though they had millions of dollars to start with, and their market research estimated that there are about four hundred to six hundred million people in the world who know how to play chess, Greengard explains that there were problems generating revenue. “In Eastern Europe, where the majority of people play chess, there is very little Internet, very few computers, and very few credit cards. You’ve got all these people in Russia and Bulgaria who are asking, ‘Can I use my Star card?’ I’m like, sorry, Visa or MasterCard. We had people sending envelopes filled with Ruble notes to our Moscow office to sign up with the Champions Club. As you can see, there is a huge problem there. We can’t take money from people because the delivery mechanisms aren’t there. So we can push chess where there’s the Internet, which is America and Western Europe, or wait for the Internet as it accumulates in Eastern Europe and Russia. Both are going to happen, but it’s very incremental, and it’s not going to happen overnight.



*Mig in Philadelphia*

“You might as well say that a lot of people are really into skipping rope. A lot of people skip rope! [Greengard bangs his fist on the table.] Hundreds of millions of people skip rope! How do we go out and make money off this rope-skipping phenomenon? Unless you can come up with a good business plan – and I’ve seen a lot of bad business plans – a good chess business plan has to begin with being extremely cheap. You can make a business out of it [online chess], and people have, people do: ICC online, London Chess and Bridge, TWIC. They just drive people to the shop. ChessCafe.com also holds its own I hear. You can’t hire thirty people and expect chess to pay for it. Hire two, eh, maybe you’ve got something. If you can put something together as attractive as KasparovChess with three people, low salaries, freelancers working from home, no offices, no overhead...make a go of it.”

Speaking of the word ‘go’, the GO computer company was founded in 1987, offering the world a few years later its first and only product: a hardcover-book sized computer that performed the same basic functions as today’s popular palm-pilot. Using a stylist along with handwriting recognition, the GO computer kept an address book, a to-do list, a calendar, and could second as the world’s first portable electronic book. By the early 1990s however, the company was dead. Based on today’s popularity of hand-held computers, the interest was probably there fifteen years ago for such devices, but in the late 1980s the full technology wasn’t. The same thing is happening with KasparovChess. The interest is there for chess, but Internet chess technology must advance farther before it becomes something special. “The difference between a webcam of two chessplayers and a still photo of two chessplayers is nothing,” says Greengard. “Why in God’s name do people watch live chess games? If anyone can come up with a rational explanation for that I’d love to hear it. I do it myself, but I’ve never come up with a convincing [reason], except for the tension. It’s the whole reason anybody

watches anything live...that tension, that buildup, that release, that finality of knowing who wins...Making live broadcasts, audio or visual streaming media, is definitely the future, or the imperfect present [of chess]. This is something that we've tried, it works, and it's very popular, but to get it pulled off will take a lot of resources. Trying to get some turnaround is not easy. Nobody is going to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars unless you can make hundreds of thousands of dollars. Braingames tried it, they did it, and they didn't make any money at it...when people write the epitaph of KasparovChess, they will say the same thing. They were there for years, they made a pretty big impact, they produced some nice stuff, but...the health of the Internet world was going down just as KasparovChess was going up, and they didn't realize that until it was too late. I don't think it was bad technology or bad content, or anything specific to the business, it was more a question of: goddamn we spent a huge amount of money we didn't need to spend. As far as the future of internet coverage: There will be more, *it can get better*, but it's not going to be a revolution, and *it's going to be slow and based on the general growth of the Internet*.

"You can't expect chess to be the next Victoria's Secret fashion show. You're not going to hear people say, 'Hey, I can hear Danny King live! Cool! I'm there man! Here's my twenty bucks! It's not going to happen.'"

### **Chess Books and Chess Writing**

After college Greengard taught English in Mexico, (where he began to get serious about chess), and he then lived in Argentina from 1993 to mid 1999. While living in Argentina he ran a small technical consulting company (later doing Y2k compliance for the Argentine subsidiaries of American companies), and began writing for TWIC. Greengard was never paid for his TWIC articles, and he wrote them, "because I enjoy it, and because I enjoy the contact with the global chess community of fans and players." Before leaving Argentina he sold his company and moved to Israel within the span of a few months to become editor-in-chief of KasparovChess.com. He lived in Israel for seven months (July, 1999 to January, 2000) during the design of the site, and then he moved to New York City as KasparovChess was launched in February, 2000. He was laid off twenty-six months later in May, 2002. Greengard likes New York, (perhaps because three top modeling agencies rent out units in his building for their models, including two stunning beauties who live right down his hall), and he currently pays for this New York City cost of living by doing technical (and some marketing) consulting for a company in Silicon Valley. Besides writing his Mig On Chess column for ChessBase, Greengard currently has two other non-chess related writing projects: one fiction book, and one nonfiction book. The subject matter of both are secret. Greengard also does a bit of chess related web work incognito ("Just to help out," he says). He also still works with Kasparov on a few projects, including an interactive chess book. The two businessmen are also working together on a new venture that Greengard flew to Moscow for in the beginning of August. It's a lot of fingers poking into a lot of pies, but most of his income comes from his consulting, and in the post-KasparovChess era of Greengard's life, chess is mostly a hobby, making a few extra dollars for him on the side.

"People have invited me to write a [chess] book," he says, "but I don't want to write a book because I don't have the time, and I want to write something good. People have offered to release a compilation of my columns that I'd re-edit and put into a chess yearbook or something...but I'd rather have them free and available on the web...I don't feel like I need to scramble for every last buck and

sell my rights to stuff. If I write a book I want it to be something original, something that I put a lot of energy and love into, and something that is valued at least by me. I wouldn't be able to do that right now because I have other things that I'm working on."



*Interviewing Kasparov*

When he talks about the chess book publishers that have approached him, this is what he has to say: "They just want you to crank something out. They figure this guy is probably popular as a writer, selling at least a certain number of copies if he wrote it...anything from 'Learn to Play', or 'Review the Year', just because they want either my name and/or my style on it. No. If I do it, *I'm* going to do it, and I'll come to you with it, and not have you come to me. It might be crap, but it will be *my* crap.

"It's a marketing game. You can see how it can happen...you have people like Keene... Schiller...they know a lot about chess, and who knows, maybe they write a decent book every now and then, but who would know? When you're cranking out that many that quickly, who's going to sift through them all to find one that's decent? Keene wrote some good books...his book on Staunton, and he did a great book on Nimzowitsch...then he went into cranking it out. The same thing with Reinfeld. Reinfeld wrote some really nice books, then he began to crank all this stuff. It was one of these British GMs who said that he had written more books than he read [laughs]. You get all these UK GMs, they get their titles, never crack 2500 practically, and then settle down with a nice business because they're English speakers writing for the largest market. So seven or eight of them make a living writing these things...it's kind of scary...it's certainly nothing of any lasting value. So much of it is crap or repackaged database dumps. Who knows, maybe they're very good writers. Maybe I'm missing something. But when you look through them, it's just the lack of content...you can't produce something good that quickly. But I don't begrudge anyone a living. Every once in a while something good comes out and you're like, Hey!, this is a nice book. But you kind of have to shake yourself, because you're prepared for it to suck. Yermolinsky's book [*The Road to Chess Improvement*] was good...Rowson [*The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*] is a good writer."

Is it any surprise that Greengard's favorite book of all time is over fifty years old? "Go get the Botvinnik book: *Championship Chess, 1941*." He takes it off his shelf and carefully hands it to me. "You're not going to get better analysis than that from anybody," he says. "Has chess advanced somehow so that these annotations are no longer valid? Especially if you're under 2200. Botvinnik put sweat and tears into this. The fact that he came up with a logical process with analysis and explanation is worth one hundred times more than the fact that there may have been a flaw, that there happens to be a mate in six [somewhere]. It's not hurting you unless you happen to walk into that exact prepared line which is never going to happen. From a practical standpoint, it's much better to have well explained logically concluded analysis that's somewhat flawed than it is to have something that's been gone over ten times by John Nunn on the computer, that doesn't have any flaws in it, but may be uninspired and uninteresting. Go to a

used bookstore, get a nice collection of annotated games, and go crazy. Buy Vukovic's, *The Art of Attack*, which people will say is horribly flawed with all these errors in the combinations...who cares. Again, what's the value to you as a chessplayer? It's [the book] making you think, you working through the stuff. It's not that you're memorizing it. You have to think. So anything that will get you to think and work on your tactics, that's the value."

### **Chess Ability and The Importance of Tactics**

When Greengard was in Israel working for KasparovChess, he was constantly exposed to strong Grandmasters picking his chess game apart. He recalled the experience for me: "I'm a master class player; we used to have blitz tournaments, and I used to take a game off of them every once in a while. It was an event, but it happened. On the other hand, every once in a while they would just blow me off the board in a way that I would just know something is wrong. [Some things] I did not even see, [it was like] a different planet."

At times, grandmasters such as Boris Alterman would come up from behind and begin commenting on his online blitz games. "He'd stand behind me and just call out a few moves. It was like having your brain turbo-charged. It was just a weird experience. I'm good enough to where after he'd say it I'd look at what he said, and be like, wow, yea, hey! Nuts! It showed to me that that talent gap does exist. There is a large talent factor in chess."

The grandmasters Greengard faced in Israel were of a different caliber than those in Argentina. "I played a lot of Grandmasters in Argentina, but there your Grandmasters are 2500, probably closer to 2400 really, and they're over-rated because they're in a small pool. I've taken four or five tournament games off of guys like Zarnicki...they've got the Grandmaster title, but when they go to Europe and play in these big opens, they don't do that well."

I asked Greengard about tactics contributing towards chess ability. "Tactics are it. People under 2000 shouldn't study anything else. You need to work on the ability to count and calculate." One book that helped Greengard get better when he was first starting out was Chernev's *Logical Chess, Move by Move*. "A book that moved me up a level. It was clear that no matter how much Chernev tried to break down every move, at the end of the day some guy made a mistake, the other guy punished it, and the only way that happens is tactically. That's what chess is. Chess is tactics."

It was in his first few years in Argentina when Greengard went from Class B to strong master. "When I went to Argentina...I was immersed with strong players all the time, and that's how I got better. I would never have discovered any of this innate potential that I have without being in that environment. Mostly it was the atmosphere. There were just a lot of strong players around at all hours. They were analyzing, kibitzing, blitzing, up to GM level, and you could always find a game or a group of people to hang out with. They would be going over problems, or analyzing games, and it just became an immersion thing for me because when I was there I didn't know anybody. I didn't know a soul, so I spent a huge amount of time at this chess club [club Argentino, where Najdorf played]. I spent a lot of time there, and had access to literature there."

Greengard didn't sit home and study much. "Being able to go and hang out in a chess club with a lot of strong players is amazing. You can sit and putz around

going over books, and that's great, it's certainly better than nothing, but nothing is better than immediate feedback. That's why playing [strong players] is better than anything else. Playing is the harshest form of feedback because it's the other person's ideas directly against yours. Why do you make a move? Because you think it's the best move on the board. When somebody else shows you that it's not, well then you've learned something there – very quickly.”

### **Chess In the United States**

“In the United States, they see [chess] as just another game. They could be playing checkers, or cards – or chess. Fair enough, it is just another game to a certain extent, but in chess you have this wealth of literature, this history, this tradition, this study, and it's more scalable than any other common boardgame...it's something where you can be [rated] 1000, you can be 2000, or you can be 2851 (the highest ELO of all time), and most people don't realize that.”

Kids tend to treat chess as a great thing to do when they're young, but it's typically the first extracurricular activity they drop when they get older. Greengard classifies this problem of retaining young chessplayers as a simple question: “Do you start at the top, or do you start at the bottom? If you receive a million dollar donation from some dead insane person, what do you do with it? Donate it to, God forbid, to the U.S.C.F. -- we're going to have a big brunch – woohoo! God knows what they would do with it, although in general I've heard good things about this new guy [Niro] they have in charge. Anyway, what do you do with that money? Do you put it into scholastics, or do you put it into the U.S. championship? Top or bottom? Where do you start with that money? You have two very good arguments.” If you start at the bottom you get more kids, you get more players, and as Greengard says, “you have a better chance of discovering the next Fischer.” If you put up a \$100,000 first prize for the U.S. championship, there would be more press coverage, and chess would get more respect. “Money talks in the news...but even with the Seattle Chess Foundation [now America's Foundation for Chess], first prize is still not as much as you get for growing the biggest pumpkin in Vermont.”

Greengard finds it interesting that chess is an accepted metaphor in the United States to depict something intellectual, something smart, but chess does not go beyond this image as something more. “I just yesterday got a thing from a credit card company that said something like ‘Smart Move!’, or whatever it was...the symbolism of chess is everywhere, it's very positive...when they want to show that Sylvester Stallone is not just some beefy muscle-bound guy, they have him playing chess...it's a good thing, but it's such a funny thing that there's also that contradiction that it's also not taken seriously. It's something that's taken so seriously as a display of intellect, but it's not something that's taken seriously as a game or as a competition. That's unique to North America I think...that sort of attitude, the geekiness of it.

When I asked Greengard about the Samford fellowship he asked me to name some recent winners, and I was stumped; so he answered for me. “Greg Shahade and Dean Ippolito are two recent Samford winners, neither of them are grandmasters. Josh Waitzkin [another Samford winner], not a grandmaster – they're giving out the GM title in boxes of Fruit Loops now – and again it's not an insult to discredit them, but if the idea behind the Samford was to produce world class chessplayers, then it hasn't worked.” Greengard conceded that Joel

Benjamin, an early Samford winner, is the only exception.

“There is no viable career path for chessplayers in the U.S. I don’t blame Shahade or Ippolito at all. The smart kid goes to college and gets a degree so he can have a career. You’ve either got to have the supertalent to break out and make money early – Fischer, Kamsky – or the love and dedication to grind out a living. With no Fischer boom to inspire that irrational fascination, U.S. chess has dried up in creating GMs.

“We haven’t put an American from birth into the top 100 since Yasser Seirawan (actually born in Syria, I know, but chess born in the U.S.A.). Or maybe Nick deFirmian edged in there for a bit...but this is another generation. These are people who learned how to play in 1972 [laughs]. That should be a little worrying. Take a look at our Olympiad team...I’m surprised they’re not propping up a dead Sammy Reshevsky on board one...look at these guys. I’m not criticizing them – it’s exactly the opposite – it shows these guys are great. You’ve got Christiansen, Benjamin, Seirawan, in there slugging it out. The youngest among them is mid-thirties. This is not chess culture. This is chess immigration.”

One way Greengard thinks it’s possible to develop a chess culture in the United States is to begin a chess league if it can get sponsorship. It might grow along with chess in general – not in the short run, but perhaps in the long run – ten, fifteen years down the line. “All these trading firms, big consulting firms, and banking firms [in NYC], they all have chess teams. There are chess leagues in the United States, but they exist at this corporate level...and they’re just very exclusive. To get that to branch out a bit to get professional players involved and things like that – to get an income stream to make it a viable career path...” Greengard trails off here as though he’s wandered into something not likely to happen any time soon. “[This] goes back to Morphy here in the States. Chess playing is not a respectable profession. That’s because chess playing here is not a sport. In Europe it’s a sport. It’s in the sports pages in Holland; it’s in the sports pages in Germany. The Internet makes chess available to [Americans] in some way, but even with the internet chess does not knock on your door. There’s not enough money behind it. KasparovChess was the closest thing to that. We had enough money to put banner ads out, we had enough money to *come to you*, where you’re surfing the *New York Times*, or where you’re surfing on Yahoo, and say [Greengard knocks his knuckle on the table mimicking a knock on the door] ‘Hey! Chess! Chess here! Interested? We could do that.’”

### **Chess as A Sport**

Only if professional chess players respect chess for the sport that it is, will it gain acceptance as one. Greengard believes that one way professional players can show this respect is by not being wimps about competition, and by not expecting chess to owe them money. He was quite serious about this topic, and it shows in his comments.

“Khalifman became the spokesperson for the equality movement that came about when he won the FIDE championship. He became the representative for this sort of anti-elite school of thought, that somehow everyone in the top fifty or so was evenly matched. A lot of people bought into that for a while.”

But according to Greengard, a more competitive attitude has recently taken its place. Greengard gives the example of Topolov. “He burst into the top ten by

moving to Spain and living on crackers and in trains, and playing in every open tournament he could get his hands on, *killing* everybody until his rating came up...he got invited to some top tournaments in '95, '96, and then kicked everyone's ass. Beats Kasparov, beats Anand, beats heads in playing the Benoni, and everyone's like, 'What the hell's going on?'"

Greengard strongly emphasized that players like Khalifman, Dreev, and others like them suffer because they are Russian. "With some guys, Khalifman for example, or Bareev, or Dreev...these guys made it to Wjik An Zee, they made it to Dortmund, or Sarejevo, or the tournaments that used to exist (like Tilburg), and they finished sixth. They didn't bomb out. They didn't get killed. Their ratings really didn't drop, but they didn't get invited back because they took another Russian who's an up-and-comer, or they took a younger guy, whatever...It's a meritocracy. It's a very competitive one, it's a tough one...well, you've got to win, you've got to win the goddamn tournament. Now Bareev won Wjik an Zee, and he'll be back next year. He'll get his invitations. Now here he is with a very good showing in Dortmund.

"There are a few exceptions that I would call Dutch affirmative action...Loek Van Wely could be 2700 or 2600, and he's always going to be at Wjik an Zee. So you do have some regional advantages. To be Russian doesn't help."

To be a woman does. "People go to see Judit Polgar because she's a celebrity. She's a woman in a sport of men. She's quite strong, but even if she falls to number forty or something, people will go see her before they will go to see number thirty-nine, whoever the hell he is. Maybe he's one of these guys who's a strong, competent, professional player, and that's the sad thing...But chess is a sport! There's a very objective measure of success in chess. It's called a rating. It's called an ELO. It's called winning tournaments.

"It's a free market. I say this to Alexander Khalifman, and I say this to everybody else who complains they're not getting enough money. Who owes them? Does anyone owe them money? If you're good, you can make a living for yourself." Greengard also sensed Khalifman's type of attitude from the Americans who got annoyed when all the ex-Soviets came over to their country. "Hey, play better," was his answer to the Americans. "What else are you going to do? It's a sport. There's no affirmative action program for native born Americans."

### **The Top Players and Their Work Ethic**

"[All the top players] work with trainers now. That's the Kasparov revolution. What Fischer did on his own, Garry Kasparov brought an entourage in to do. When one player does something and wins, every player has to imitate it. There's nobody in the top twenty that doesn't work regularly with a trainer." I mentioned that this seems similar to other professional sports. Greengard agreed. "Exactly. You have a strength coach, a this coach, a that coach, etc, year round. Fischer was different. When asked why he didn't have a trainer, he replied, 'Why do I want to give chess lessons?'" We both laughed. It was quintessential Fischer. "Nowadays, even he would need a trainer to compete," Greengard concluded.

So I asked what today's trainer brings to the table. "Usually they're friends. What they bring to the table is usually work ethic, loyalty, and deep theoretical knowledge. Loyalty is the number one thing. They want to make sure that no one is going to go out and sell their secrets. But this isn't the concern except for

maybe the very elite.

“Yuri Dokhoian [Garry Kasparov’s trainer] is a maniac. As much as Garry works, Yuri is equally insane. He’ll do the all nighter cranking the stuff out, nose to the grindstone. It’s self-sacrifice. You know the other guy is the star...It’s just like cycling. There’s a guy Roberto Eras, who’s a Spaniard on Lance Armstrong’s cycling team in the Tour de France. His job is to make sure Lance Armstrong wins. Roberto Eras is a very good cyclist, but his job is to lead the way and let the star draft, then to pull out of the way and let Lance Armstrong win.”

Eventually the conversation turned to how these top players can afford their trainers. Greengard says that top players get potentially more money from exhibitions and simuls than they do from tournament prizes. When playing in tournaments, the top players “have to go a few days early to play in some simuls...some do and some don’t. The top ten players might make a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year from appearance fees and tournament winnings, and beyond that they make more from simuls and writing books and magazine articles and doing annotations. The thing is the scale drops dramatically. There’s this huge drop. The top twenty probably do OK.

“It’s not something like basketball, where when they finish the game they’re like, ‘Well that was tough, but hey, we’re all millionaires.’ [The basketball players are] not fighting for dinner. They’re not fighting for rent. You’re not taking food out of the other guy’s mouth when you win in most professional sports. That’s not really true when you’re sitting there at the World Open. Hey, if you win that [last round] game you’ve got rent money for the next few months. If you draw, you have rent money for that month. If you lose it, you’ve got squat and a bus ticket home. That’s not true in most professional sports...that’s why chess is kind of semi-professional. They’re very competitive, and they’re not as friendly as you might think.”

### **Advanced Chess and Shuffle Chess**

Greengard wanted to speak his mind about Advanced Chess. “What I like about it is that while they’re making all these moves and everything, you can follow along. They’re making these moves on the computer, and then they turn around and make them on the board. What you’re getting is a look into their brain. You’re looking into the brain of a top player, and that’s fantastic...they’re producing logs of the games – dozens of pages – and I think that’s fascinating.” Greengard has a beef against Kramnik however, because Kramnik insisted that all his logs be deleted after he beat Anand this year in Leon. “I thought that was the most amateurish, cheap, boneheaded thing to do. It’s the only interest in this whole thing. It’s not like the games are interesting. The games to me are very boring because they’re so antiseptic. Exciting chess is about errors... That’s the sad truth about it. At the end of the day there are no exciting combinations unless somebody made a mistake at some point. When you remove the tactics – basically all the tactics are happening on the screens, on the side in the notes; look what would happen if he played this, wow!, or this, boom!, or this [Greengard makes an explosion sound] bckkk! That’s great, that’s exciting, but the games are boring from a fan’s perspective. So the only thing interesting about advanced chess is the logs, and he [Kramnik] insisted they be deleted. And I’m so angry about this.”

The talk then switched to Shuffle Chess. “I like Fischer Random chess as a

diversion, but people pushing that as an improvement drives me insane. Chess is a combination of three phases of the game: opening, middlegame, endgame. Fischer Random is basically removing one, and saying it's better. How can you remove a phase of the game to create something that is larger, that is better? Basically you're saying I don't like openings. That's fine, but that's you. You can't say that you're improving chess by amputating a big chunk of it. The proponents of Fischer Random want a perpetual middlegame, because that's what it is. It's a fun thing you can do with chess pieces. It uses the same rules, but at the end of the day it's less than the whole. Almost by definition it is. I understand the concern about openings, but that's been going on for a hundred years."

### Greengard on Writing About Chess

"I'm at odds with several players, or they consider me at odds with them," Greengard says. "You have a lot of chess players who are very white and black, Garry being one of them. It's a Soviet personality trait: distrust. If you say anything critical, that means you're against me. There's no valid criticism. It's disloyal."

I asked Greengard if this made writing about the top players tough. "It suddenly made it harder to write about people I knew. When I [started] writing, I was just some guy writing in Argentina...it was writing *for*, and *by* the fan." This was most evident when Greengard criticized Leko and Gelfand in his earliest *Mig On Chess* articles. "My point at the time was that they both draw a huge number of games in very few moves, and fans hate that. That's just my opinion as a person writing from the perspective of a fan. I don't owe anything to anybody. Why do I owe them a living? I want to see what I want to see. In chess its such an incestuous little world that they take everything personally...and all of a sudden you have chess players [asking] who the hell's this Greengard guy? Look, if Pete Sampras has a

lousy tournament, people are going to criticize him...Chess writing has always been by Grandmasters for Grandmasters, about Grandmasters. They all write about each other so they tread very lightly. The guy you criticize today is going to be writing about you tomorrow.

"How many writers are there that aren't professional chess players? Most of them are Grandmasters. The huge majority who write for these magazines are IMs and GMs, and again, they don't want to step into the crossfire. They don't want to criticize because they have something to lose. There is no professional journalism in chess. What [top players] *should* want is rigorous criticism, objectivity, and openness, but that doesn't exist. It's something that can't exist. It's too small a world perhaps. You can't write about it without being directly in it.



*At the 2000  
World Chess Championship Match  
in London*

"My articles were read by some of the players because I talked about them – in a

new way. It became a big thing. For me it became a pleasant shock to find out that people (like Peter Svidler and others) were printing out my articles at chess tournaments and handing them out...because they thought they were funny...because I was dissing people, I was making fun of people...and this was new. A lot of them are threatened by it, but the ones that have a sense of humor took to it. Maybe at it's best, it's a little criticism that can introduce more people to the game. I still get email from people who say, 'I love your articles, I forwarded this to a friend of mine, he doesn't even play chess.' That's cool, but also the game could use some professionalization." And that professionalization comes with professional criticism.

"My articles may have been more entertaining, and they were certainly goofier when I was living in Argentina, [when] I didn't know any of these people. But on the other hand I wasn't giving much quality insider information. I was just writing for my own entertainment...it certainly wasn't great insight...now I can pick up the phone and talk to Garry Kasparov or talk to Vishy Anand, and get some [insider] information that the readers very much like. That's a different form of being entertaining. If I start criticizing everyone madcap, well, I'm not going to get that access, they're not going to answer my calls. So, there's a fine line in chess because it's so small. In baseball they [the players] understand. If you don't go to that press conference you get fined, and there's a system, an objectivity about it. If you've just played a crappy game, you have to go out there and talk about your crappy game. Where as in chess, with someone like Vladimir Kramnik the world champion, without any trace of irony when asked at a press conference in Moscow why he hasn't spoken to the press very much lately, he said, [Greengard puts on his deep Kramnik imitation voice] 'Some people published a bunch of stuff that was very critical, so now I just talk to a few journalists that I know...'

"What!," exclaims Greengard. "That's a staggering thing to say."

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