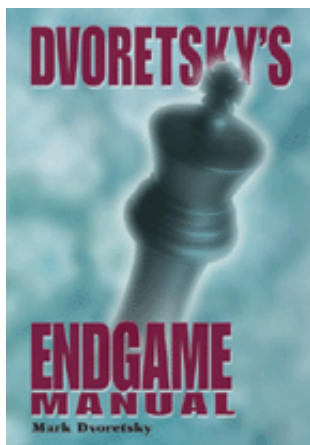


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A Conversation with Paul Hoffman

by Howard Goldowsky

Chess is at the brink of mainstream popularity and who better to bring it over the edge than Paul Hoffman. Years ago, after playing chess religiously as a kid, he escaped the addictions of the game to attend Harvard, and to build a career as one of the premier science journalists of our time. He has been an editor at *Scientific American*, president and editor-in-chief of *Discover* magazine, and president and publisher of Encyclopaedia Britannica. On television, he has hosted science programs for both PBS and the major networks. David Letterman and Oprah have swapped math jokes and high-tech jargon with him on the air. And if the rest of his career isn't impressive enough, this year Hoffman finished his eleventh book, *Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight*. His previous book, *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers*, was an international bestseller.

On January 29, 2000, Hoffman played in his first rated chess tournament after thirty years. Shortly after, with the same passion to educate the layperson as he has had for science and math, Hoffman began to write about chess. He is a class-A player with a combined skill at chess and talent for writing that allows him to publish chess articles in such prestigious publications as the *New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *Time*. (A complete bibliography of Hoffman's chess writing is given following this interview.) This man with a charismatic personality for television, a passion to promote chess, and a deep understanding of our game as well as the technology emerging as humanity's rival to it, starting November 11th, going to be the liaison between ESPN's audience and our chess world. He will be a commentator alongside Yasser Seirawan for all four games of the Kasparov-Fritz3D match at the New York Athletic Club in New York City. We chessplayers, our game, and prospective fans, can't go wrong.

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Paul Hoffman and I met for a few hours recently in the lounge of the Novotel Hotel in Times Square, New York City. We spent the time previewing the upcoming Kasparov-Fritz3D match, and we discussed topics such as Hoffman's role as commentator, and the related issues of computer chess and how to promote chess in America. What follows is an edited version of that conversation.

Howard Goldowsky: Jeff Sonas, an amateur statistician, reports on the ChessBase website that neither a top computer nor a 2700+ GM has won a high-profile man-machine match during the last five years. He claims through his analysis that it is not inevitable that computers will surpass humans in chess strength, and his reasoning is that humans are improving, too. He claims that human improvement is much harder to statistically measure because improving humans play against other improving humans. What are your thoughts on this?

Paul Hoffman: Well, if his point is that it's going to be a long time before computers become better than humans, I disagree. It will be sooner than he thinks. Let's back up for a moment. There are those who mistakenly believe that humans' days against machines are already over. But the Kasparov match against Deep Blue was a complete aberration because the rules were

stacked against him. It didn't resemble any other high level match. By that, I mean if Kasparov plays someone else at the world level he can examine their games, figure out what weaknesses they have, try to steer the games towards positions that they can't handle, and steer the games away from positions they excel at. [In the '97 match] the computer could have examined all the games that he had played, but there were no games that Deep Blue had played that he could examine. Since then, people have been able to look at computer games, and they have been able to see that there are weaknesses that computers have. If you take the queens off the board, if the pawns are locked, if you reduce the sort of tactical dogfight possibilities, then it becomes more of a long range maneuvering game that humans do well in. So preparing for a computer is not unlike how you might prepare for a particular human opponent. You would try to find out what their weaknesses and strengths are, and play accordingly. Humans are holding their own against computers at the moment. But, the number crunching ability of computers will still increase. More importantly, the ability of programmers to build in a way that computers can better evaluate the positions they reach at the end of their analysis has improved. You can already see the machines are doing things they couldn't do just a few years before. Before, they were completely materialistic. They overvalued material and would grab anything even if it would subject them to some horrific attack. They would take the pawn or the piece. Now you see them *giving* material. They can appreciate the initiative more, which is one of the things that is indicative of modern chess, that Kasparov and others have brought to the game.

HG: What do you think of Kasparov's chances this time around?

PH: I think his chances are good. This man knows how these computers work, given his experience and playing them. He came extremely close last time to beating the machine [Deep Junior]. I think he could have. I don't think he had to take a draw in the last game. He was tired, he was fatigued, so he didn't want to risk losing. But it was the kind of position he had many times before, you know, sacking the exchange in the Sicilian, that he knows how to nurse through to a victory. I think the explanation of the draw was psychological. His goal before the game was that he didn't want to lose. It was too much of a crushing embarrassment for him the last time. I think his expectations are higher against Deep Fritz. The fact that it's a shorter match, that it's four games, counts a little bit in his favor because he's not going to experience the same kind of fatigue. He started out so strong last time, and faltered more towards the end. The same thing happened with Kramnik. On the other hand, he'll be wearing 3D glasses and looking at a three-dimensional board. The glasses are great, they're absolutely great, but anything that throws off his normal routine is going to make it more difficult. They're just not the way he's used to playing. More important is his determination to win. He turned forty this year. Chess is conventionally thought of as a young man's game and he wants to prove that it doesn't end at the age of forty. He lost the world championship, he's been dying to get it back, and his opponents [Ponomoriov] have been escaping before he can even play them. He would love to beat Fritz because Kramnik drew with Fritz, so it's another way of showing that he's better than Kramnik. Not only would he be beating Fritz, but he'd be beating a version of it that's much better because the programmers have had many months since the Kramnik match to improve it. He has every incentive to try to crush the machine.

HG: How did you get this job as commentator for ESPN and are you preparing in any special ways?

PH: I think the reason they chose me is because they liked my coverage of the [Deep Junior] match in the *New York Times* and my chess writing in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New Yorker*. They liked that I captured the personalities of chessplayers, the fight, and the tension, and did it for people who don't just know the moves. That was one of the things about the Fischer-Spassky match years ago. It didn't just attract chessplayers, it attracted people who were fascinated by the strange spectacle of guys huddled for hours over this board. And I've done a fair amount of television. Not chess, but I used to be the science essayist for the "News Hour

with Jim Lehrer" and was the host of the PBS "Great Minds of Science." I did stupid math tricks on "David Letterman." And I'm one of the few people to spend an entire show on "Oprah," and I wasn't discussing my dysfunctional childhood!

I am preparing for the ESPN match quite a bit. I've spent time talking to Kasparov over the last year and a half because I wrote both about his rapid match with Karpov in New York and his match with Deep Junior. I also interviewed him when he was in the city signing his book. I'm also speaking to other people in his entourage. I even played against him in a simul in April and had the honor of being the last person to play him before he turned forty--or I should say, I had the honor of being the last person he defeated before he turned 40. I've also watched him do many simultaneous exhibitions, at least three in the last couple of years.

I'm going to try to fill the time not just talking about him, but telling great stories from the history of chess. I want the audience to be jazzed about the game. I can't contribute much to what Yasser Seirawan is going to analyze, and I'll doubt I'll have the chutzpa to suggest a better move for Kasparov, yet alone for the computer, but that's not the point. Sports commentators are not better football players than the people they are commenting on.

HG: How does it make you feel to combine your hobby, which is chess, with your professional life, which is journalism and writing?

PH: I'm really lucky to be able to write for a living and to write about something I'm passionate about, chess. It's great for me. I try to get across not just the joy that I have for the game, but the joy that other chessplayers have. I'm drawn to people who throw themselves into their work, who do whatever they do to excess. I'm fascinated by scientists who spend twenty hours a day in a lab trying to find what one gene does, or athletes who practice all day. Or magicians who work day and night to master a new trick. These are the kind of people I've written about, and chess falls into that category. Certainly, in order to make it on the world stage, in order to be one of the top chessplayers in the world, it's something you've got to devote an awful lot of hours to. In all of my writing I explore the line between brilliance and madness.

HG: To many serious chessplayers, chess is considered a sport because although there is no physical competition, there is struggle, and chess results rely solely on the skills of the players. Would you call chess a sport?

PH: I really don't know what to call it. It's certainly not an athletic contest in the traditional sense, but it has many attributes that are closer to an athletic contest than most other games. Chess is a game of skill, and it is more physical than people think. It takes a toll on the body. There have been studies done of the weight people lose at the top level when they're playing a game that is five or six hours long, and it's equivalent to what a professional football player loses on the field. What's going on? These guys are just sitting there. Their knees may wiggle a lot, they're tense, so it has elements of a sport, but as one high official said of bridge when they were trying to get bridge into the Olympics, "I don't think something you can do while smoking counts as a sport." Whether chess is technically a sport or not, it has many of the elements. Chess is this great mental activity, this great artistic activity, but it's also a fierce battle. It's sport, it's art, it's war, it's all these things. The fact that it can't be boiled down to one thing makes it all the more intriguing to me. It's the complexity of it that's interesting.

HG: The common argument is that faster time controls generate more excitement, hopefully engaging spectators by eliminating the boring time between moves. However, to fully explain the subtleties, strategy, and beauty of the game to the casual chess fan, *more* time between moves might be what commentators like you and Seirawan need to promote chess. What is your

opinion about this?



Garry Kasparov and Paul Hoffman

PH: I agree. Besides, the speeding up of time controls is just going to destroy the game in terms of the quality... I think the people who run these chess associations, who make these decisions, have no idea how the real world works, and they think it's a quick fix for getting chess to be a mass sport and on television. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with the presentation of the game. It has to do with getting these people [strong chessplayers] out there as personalities, and getting the struggle across. Kasparov has done it so well. Not only is he the world's greatest player in the history of the game, he's also the best spokesperson, and the most passionate person for promoting the game. I mean, the guy did a Super Bowl commercial. He's out there. Look at his successor as world champion. Has Vladimir Kramnik even set foot in the United States? I don't know if he has. He certainly hasn't played or done anything public. He's not somebody who's out there promoting the game. If these are the kind of people who get to the highest levels in our sport and they don't feel any obligation to go out there and promote it, nothing we do is going to get a large audience. The thing about chess is, because it's such a tense struggle, because it's such an unforgiving game, you can sit there for six hours, and for three hours you can be building up your position, pressing your attack, and one momentary lapse of concentration can throw away the game. You can't blame it on the bad bounce of the ball. Even if your opponent makes the greatest combination since 1882, you could have prevented that by doing something different on the move before. It's hard on the ego. The tension brings out strong personalities. It brings out people saying nasty things about their opponents. This should be played up. This is what makes it interesting.

Some of the people who run these chess associations and chess magazines tone down that stuff. You hear officials of the USCF describe one of our most talented youngsters as a nice, well-rounded kid who is not as chess-centric as his Russian counterparts--as if being "nice" and "well-rounded" is going to get chess more attention. The funny thing is that those who know this kid have fantastic stories to tell about him in which he is usually not so nice. They should show chess with all its warts, show it with all its bravado and passion. Don't try to sanitize it and think that the speeding up of the game is the answer. Let's not pretend either that we are ever going to have a sport that is as popular as football or baseball. Let's just try to get more people to appreciate the game before we have grandiose dreams.

We also need to keep in mind that our own house, the USCF, is not in order. The organization had been teetering for some time on the brink of financial disaster. The magazine *Chess Life*, which reads in large part like a series of unedited press releases, has now become a pamphlet, hopefully only temporarily. There are great chess journalists out there, like Mig Greengard,

who could be brought in to edit the magazine. I hope the new USCF management, which seems a lot wiser than the last one, does not continue the tradition of mediocre journalism at their flagship publication. They should recognize that if they can't do a good job promoting the game to their own membership, they're certainly not going to succeed in promoting it to a larger audience.

We also need to give our strongest players opportunities to play regularly against each other, so that they'll get even stronger and be able to compete with the world's best. If our players can succeed at the highest level, that too will draw more fans to the game. I admire, for example, the work that Greg Shahade and John Fernandez have done to create a weekly all-masters tournament in New York [see www.newyorkmasters.com].

HG: What else can be done to improve the current promotional situation?

PH: You need professionals running these [chess] organizations. You don't need some minor despot running the World Chess Federation. You need people who are businessmen, people who know how to talk to corporations and get corporate sponsorship. Here you have an innovative company like X3D that is staging this whole match and putting it on. They recognize the power of chess to draw people to their products. If we have more people like the executives at X3D, chess would become more popular.

Chessplayers and the people who run these [chess] associations are their own worst enemies. They're not recognizing the growing popularity that is out there. You have Chess in the Schools programs. There are women in [chess] now. You have people like Jennifer Shahade who is a wonderful role model. Here is this charismatic, attractive woman, who's witty, who's clever, who is out there, going to schools, talking to kids, and girls can see there's a place for them in the sport. When I ran *Discover* magazine we had an article once by a very eminent female astronomer, the person who's responsible for the discovery of dark matter, and she was very busy and initially not very cooperative with a writer who basically wanted quite a bit of her time. She just didn't want to give him her time. Finally, she reluctantly consented. Then the article came out and she got a couple of dozen letters from parents writing that their girls were interested in astronomy – ten-year-old, eleven-year-old girls – and that this article suddenly made them realize that they could do it as a professional. [The astronomer] called me up and apologized to me that she hadn't been more cooperative because she realized how important it was to have role models. And I look at people like Jennifer Shahade and Irina Krush that are going out there into schools, and Maurice Ashley who has done tremendous things in Harlem, and this is really important.

HG: On November 11th you're going to have the opportunity to introduce chess on ESPN to a bunch of potentially new fans. Do you feel an obligation to focus on anything in particular?

PH: We have seventeen hours to fill so we'll be focusing on a million different things. I think it's the complexity of the game that interests me, and just getting across the excitement, the tension of it, the dedication that Kasparov has had to the game in order to get to where he is. You have to admire the amount that he has put into it, and the amount these programmers have put into it, and the fact that the machine and the man approach the game completely differently. I think that is fascinating. One reason why AI researchers got involved in chess very early on was because you can measure chess skill. There is a rating system. You can compare computers against human beings, you can assign them a rating, and it's easy to see if the computer gets better if its rating goes up. The idea was to mimic how people approach the game. Of course we now know they do it completely differently. So I think that's fascinating, the way of the two approaches: human creativity and intuition vs. brute calculating. So I want to get that across.

Kasparov is fascinating to watch. He's an emotional individual. You can read his face. You can read his body language. He takes off his jacket when the position is getting tough. He takes off his watch. His eyebrows go up when he looks at the ceiling. I want to get across all these things and to get people excited about the game.

HG: Has any of the research you've done outside of chess helped you to think about chess or the people who play it, differently?

PH: Mathematics is very similar. On the one hand, at first blush, mathematics looks like a discipline based on calculation. Yet to make great leaps forward in mathematics and come up with new theories, requires the same kind of intuitive leaps that happen with someone who advances chess strategy.

HG: Do you want to say anything about your chess book? How far along is it? Are you excited about it? How long have you been working on it?

PH: I'm very excited about it. Again, it meshes what I do, which is write books, with a field I just love. For the last three years while I've been writing about chess seriously in places like the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, and *Harvard Magazine*, I've met a lot of people in the chess world, and have had the opportunity to spend considerable time with a few of them. That's what I need to do as a profile writer. To do a good profile, it's not just coming in and interviewing someone for an hour, it's going to watch them again and again. That's what I did with Jennifer Shahade. I watched her play an exhibition match in an art gallery. I watched her play in the US Championship. I watched her teach girls in New York. I talked to her about her preparation. I spent time with members of her family. By the way, my hotel room at the 2003 US Championship was right next to her brother's room. Greg was also playing, and I got a sense of what his chess preparation was like because at 4:00 am I could hear the "Simpsons" blasting from his room and Greg laughing loudly.

All this is grist for the book. So in a sense you can say I've been working on it for awhile. But I'm really in the early stages. This is an ambitious project because I write books about areas that seem to be obscure or esoteric and I try to write them for a large audience. I try to write them in an engaging way because I focus on the personalities. I was very lucky that my first biography, *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers*, was an international bestseller. It won a major award and is now out in more than fifteen languages. In that book I try to capture the beauty of mathematics, the beauty that professional mathematicians see in it. And that's what I want to do with chess. I want to capture the aesthetic aspect of it, the passion of it, the addictive nature of it, the history of it.

HG: In a sense you're almost writing a profile of yourself.

PH: Not quite. It's going to be framed a little bit by my own experiences, but it's by no means a biography or a memoir or anything like that. The fact that I was active in chess as a kid and that I re-entered that world as an adult, means I can't write myself out of the book. It's a world that I'm part of in a small way. I think that seeing some of that world through my eyes as an amateur can make it more accessible to a larger group of people. My real goal is to capture the world of chess at its highest level, not the level I play at. But the tension that characterizes tournament chess happens at all levels. Last weekend I played in the U2000 section of a tournament in Catskill, NY. I was tied for first going into the fifth and final round. Whoever won our game would come in clear first and take home \$600. I was on the White side of a French Defense and was pressing my opponent for most of the game, but I was nervous because in the past I've often let my concentration lapse and botched things. Here I won the exchange and later gave it back to go into a clearly winning, two-pawn-up endgame. My opponent's king was in the

middle of the board, and suddenly he leaped up, thrust his first into the air, and claimed a draw by stalemate. I was dumbfounded: his king had two moves. He had had a complete hallucination. It would have been a stalemate if my pawns were moving in the same directions as his. I forced myself to stare at the position for a few seconds to confirm that it wasn't I who was having the hallucination.

HG: Why did you get back into chess after a thirty-year hiatus?

PH: I discovered the Internet Chess Club on my lunch break at Britannica, and I was hooked all over again and then had to play face to face. I don't think I'm as obsessive about the game as I was when I was a kid, but my wife may have a different view. Of course, she doesn't know what I used to be like.

Paul Hoffman can be reached via email at hoffmanp@aol.com (remove "no junk" to use). He is looking for colorful stories or personal anecdotes from amateurs to grandmasters who want to share their stressful, wacky, or interesting chess experiences with him.

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