



SKITTLES ROOM

From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, **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.

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As the chess world focuses intently on the great tournaments and matches, such as those that have taken place at Tilburg, Reggio Emilia and the battles for the world title, one figure, that of the arbiter, has begun to take on increasing significance. From the legendary tournaments of New York 1924 and New York 1927, where Norbert Lederer and Géza Maróczy were the respective arbiters, through the last world championship matches, the role of the chess arbiter has evolved into one which requires the wisdom of Solomon and the diplomacy of Kissinger.

During a recent visit to the Netherlands, we had the great pleasure of being the house guest of Geurt Gijssen (pronounced Hurt Hyshin). Although this tall Dutchman has been the chief arbiter for many well known and powerful tournaments, he is probably best known as being the chief arbiter for the 1987 and 1990 world championship matches. Gijssen is a man of impeccable integrity and modest to a fault. The very fact that Kasparov and Karpov have easily agreed to his being the arbiter for these two matches speaks for itself.

In the summer of 1991, at the chess school in Madrid which Kasparov helped to found, Gijssen was asked to lecture on the role of the arbiter in international chess today. As you read this, keep in mind it was designed to be presented verbally. We have also broken the lecture into two parts; it was initially given in one sitting.

The Role of the Arbiter - Part 1

Geurt Gijssen

It happens to me fairly often that people act rather surprised when I tell them that I am a chess arbiter. An arbiter on the soccer field, on the tennis court, in judo, in boxing, everyone can understand that, but chess, no, they would never have thought of that. There isn't any fighting in chess, then what is to arbitrate? Apart from the fact that I once witnessed two chess players start pummeling each other after their game, an arbiter is absolutely essential during a chess tournament or match, which is something I hope to prove in the course of this lecture.

What, then, is the actual task of a chess arbiter? Must he see to it that all the pieces are moved across the board in the correct way? Must he prevent the players from kicking each other under the table? Must he make sure that the players are not prompted? And I can think of several other questions in a similar vein.

But let's have a look what the Laws of Chess, the official rules of the world chess federation, the FIDE, have to say about it. In the Preface to the Laws of Chess the arbiter is already mentioned. I quote: The laws assume the arbiters have the necessary competence, sound judgment and absolute objectivity. Too detailed a rule might private the arbiter of his freedom of judgment and thus prevent him from finding the solution to a problem dictated by fairness, logic and – very important – special factors.

As you can see, a fair number of demands are made on the arbiter. The task of the arbiter is also described in the Laws of Chess itself. Article 16 says the following on the subject:

An arbiter should be designated to control the competition. His duties are:

- To see that the laws are strictly observed.
- To supervise the progress of the competition, to establish that the prescribed time-limit has not been exceeded by the players, to arrange the order of resumption of play of adjourned games, to see that the arrangements in Article 13 are observed (to see that the information on the envelope is correct), to keep the sealed-move envelope until the resumption of the adjourned game, etc.
- To enforce the decisions he may make in disputes that have arisen during the course of the competition.
- To act in the best interest of the competition to ensure that a good playing environment is maintained and that the players are not disturbed by each other or by the audience.
- To impose penalties on the players for any fault or infraction of the Laws.

At this point I could end my lecture, since I have told you what the role of the

arbiter should be. I believe, however, that there is more to be said about the role of the arbiter. In doing so I shall draw, to large extent, on my own experiences at a number of chess tournaments and matches.

There is just one more thing I should like to say with regard to the Laws of Chess I have just quoted. These Laws of Chess assume an ideal situation, specifically a situation in which there is only one game being played at the same time. They do not take in consideration, for example, that during a tournament the arbiter sometimes has to keep an eye on quite a number of games at the same time.

The situation during a World Championship match is, of course, ideal; no less than three arbiters simultaneously keep an eye on one game. And even in this situation something can happen that has not been foreseen. I agree, then, with the compilers of the Laws of Chess that a too detailed description of what is and what is not allowed might bring the arbiter to get into difficulties.

The qualifications which an arbiter needs are so neatly described in the Laws of Chess. Nevertheless, I think that there are a number of other characteristics which a good arbiter should have; these are closely related to the role of the arbiter. Of course he must be an expert in his job. It goes without saying that he must know the rules of the game extremely well. But he should also know what is going on in the game itself at any given time.

Let me give you an example. During the second game of the match between Kasparov and Karpov in New York [1990], Kasparov, at a certain point, sacrificed a piece on the square h6. It was a very spectacular move and caused quite a commotion in the audience. Before Kasparov had actually played the move, I already had my finger on the "Silence" button, knowing what a commotion would be caused if Kasparov played this particular move.

A second requirement – in a way related to expertise – is that the arbiter must be alert. He must be able to respond to every situation. I have already given the example of the audience that may react too enthusiastically but sometimes situations arise between the players themselves which need to be responded to immediately. And these are often exactly those situations which are not described in the Laws of Chess. A player loses a game during a tournament, for example, and is unable to get over it. In some instances this can lead to confrontations, loud discussions in the playing hall and often accusations slung at the player's opponent. The best thing the arbiter can do, in a case like this, is to remove the players concerned from the playing hall, using as much tact as possible and asking them to analyze their game elsewhere.

As I have just briefly indicated, an arbiter should be tactful (diplomatic). He should always try to put himself in the position of both the loser and the winner. Often, in a situation of conflict, he is forced to make a decision which one of the players regards as being taken against him. In many cases it is then very important that the decision be announced in such a way that neither player gets the feeling that he is losing face. Perhaps this is the most important quality that

an arbiter should have.

The arbiter should also be modest. He should keep in mind at all times that he is there to serve in the interest of the players and the organizers. They, the players, are what it's all about. He, the arbiter, should be inconspicuous. He should do his work and that should be the end of it. The best tournaments are probably those at the end of which people ask who the arbiter actually was. This implies that there were no difficulties or problems and that the arbiter did not step into the foreground at all.

Another very important point is that the arbiter must be discreet. A great deal is frequently going on behind the scenes during a tournament or match. For example, there may be feuds between certain players, or there may be certain problems between the organizers and one or more players. In all such cases I feel that it is absolutely forbidden to pass on any information about the problem to any one at all. In many cases, certainly if he appears in this function regularly, the arbiter takes on the role of a kind of confidant. It would be, of course, a shameful business if he were to betray this confidence. He must be in good shape. Alcohol and smoking are forbidden during a tournament or match. And the World Champion is my witness that this arbiter is in good shape. The point is that, according to my opinion, it is forbidden for an arbiter to make mistakes, since in the case of an arbiter's mistake the players suffer.

There are a number of interesting marks in the FIDE handbook with regard to the arbiter, and then particularly the international arbiter, which I should not like to withhold from you. They concern the requirements which an arbiter must fulfill in order to be considered for the appointment of international arbiter of FIDE.

- Thorough knowledge of the Laws of Chess and the FIDE Regulations for chess competitions.
- Absolute objectivity, demonstrated at all times during his activity as an arbiter.
- Sufficient knowledge of at least one official FIDE language. (The official FIDE languages are English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Arab, Russian and Chinese)
- Experience as chief or deputy arbiter in at least four important chess competitions.

It is my opinion that the requirements which I have formulated and the requirements which the FIDE demands an arbiter to fulfill, complement each other perfectly, in so far they are not the same.

I should like to continue by taking a closer look at the title of my discourse: What is the role of the arbiter? Very frequently the arbiter is the contact between the organizers and the players. In practice it usually occurs that an event is organized once per year by the organizers, while the arbiter – at least this is the situation in which I find myself – mediates in tournaments all year round and in doing so, of course, gains a great deal of experience in certain

matters. As a result of this, the arbiter is usually extremely well-informed about the wishes of the players. As you may know, Bobby Fischer – the man who became World Champion in 1972, but didn't defend his title in 1975 – had a great many demands with which the organizers had to comply if they wanted him to play in their tournament. I remember clearly that, at the time, the demands were considered excessive, even a little bizarre, but today they are completely accepted. Fischer had very definite ideas about the intensity of the lights, the distance from the audience, the board, the pieces, et cetera.

At that time it was also customary for the arbiter to arrive on the day the lots were drawn. Nowadays, the arbiter is called in at a much earlier stage and a great many items are discussed with him. I shall mention a few of the arbiter's duties. He checks the playing hall and discusses the placement and size of the playing tables with the organizers (you will undoubtedly remember the world championship of 1987 in Seville, for which the organizers had a magnificent table made which, unfortunately, was obviously much too broad for the challenger, Karpov. Karpov demanded that the table be made 16 cm. smaller, a demand with which the organizers did not wish to comply, at first, but finally I could convince them that they had to change the table.

The arbiter checks the chairs (about which there are also fine stories doing the round: Kasparov, who let 20 chairs pass for his inspection in Seville without finding one that he thought suitable. The problem was that Kasparov actually wanted a very simple chair, one that was apparently too simple in the eyes of the organizers. The number of chairs that were rejected, incidentally, is slightly exaggerated).

The arbiter checks the board and the pieces that will be used, paying special attention to the relationship between the board and the pieces. He also tests the chess clocks. In Seville I had access to seven chess clocks, tested them all, and discovered that there were enormous differences between them, even between clocks of the same make. Since then I always ask the organizers of the tournaments at which I am arbiter if I may have the clocks that are to be used several days before the first game. Then I let these clocks run for hours in my room. Sometimes I have twenty clocks at the same time, like in Lyon at the World Championship match, during which a different clock was used for each game.

One of the things that still surprises me is the fact that the players are apparently extremely wary of electric clocks or clocks which run on batteries. I believe that these are far more accurate. The argument that the battery might be empty without anyone knowing, seems invalid to me. But perhaps in a while we will be playing the Fischer clock, a brilliant invention by the American, to which I will gladly return at a later stage if anyone is interested.

The arbiter tests the lighting; the lighting is beginning to play an increasingly important role, particularly at important matches. Not only is it important to the players, it is also important to a number of other people who are professionally involved at such a match. I think, here, of the photographers and TV crews,

who have become a fixture at any important tournament. The organizer, too, who is usually also the sponsor, has every interest in having optimal lighting. After all, in this way he gets the best coverage for his advertisements. I shall return to the relationship between the media, the sponsors and the players at a later stage in this lecture.

The arbiter checks the distance between the audience and the players. It might surprise you to know that most players greatly appreciate the presence of the audience. They seem to be inspired by it, in some way or another.

The arbiter checks that there are toilets nearby. For instance, during the World Cup tournament in Barcelona, the distance between the playing hall and the toilets was so great that the organizers placed chemical toilets in the vicinity of the playing hall; the same thing happened during the World Championship match in Lyon.

The arbiter arranges a separate room for the smokers who, since January 1, 1990, are no longer allowed to smoke in the playing hall itself. He discusses the size of the scoresheets and the envelopes for adjourned games with the organizers; in short, a great many, very practical things.

Items which are quite often overlooked are the tournament doctor and the medical insurance. It may be interesting to mention, by the way, that during the SWIFT tournament in Brussels, the organizers even appointed a tournament dentist, probably unique in the history of chess.

[End Part One]

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