



COLUMNISTS

*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.

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*...

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

by Lev Alburt and Al Lawrence

Bobby Fischer: Friends don't Pay Retail

In 1981, Robert J. Fischer was living in Pasadena, California, and hadn't played a single game of rated chess in nine years since his widely covered world-championship victory over the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky. The drop-out champ was still widely recognized as the strongest player in the world. Indeed, for years, top players vying for the title on both sides of the old Iron Curtain were candid in their admissions that they had a less than even chances of winning a match against Fischer, should the recluse resurface.

From the perspective of the post-cold-war 21st century, it's easy to underestimate Fischer's appeal and fame during the days before the wall fell. Much like 19th-century, the unofficial world champion Paul Morphy, and for that matter, the archetypal celebrity drop-out 1930s film actress Greta Garbo Fischer only magnified his legend with his version of her “I-vant-to-be-alone” self-imposed isolation. Add to all of this the popular perception that Bobby had been the lone cold-war marshal, a sort of chessboard Wyatt Earp, without the need of brothers or a Doc Holiday, blowing smoke from the long barrel of this six-shooter after ridding the town of Soviet Clansky brothers. We begin to

understand the 70s and 80s Fischermania and can see how his disappearance only piqued the compulsiveness of those who stalked him.

In 1980, all sorts of luminaries wanted to meet with Bobby. Then world champion candidate and political refuge from the USSR Viktor Korchnoi was one of those few who made the long pilgrimage to meet with Bobby successfully. The two apparently got along famously during their get-together. It was only after Viktor, an unabashed lover of the free press, gave an interview about their meeting that Fischer balked, and quite politely. He wrote a letter to Viktor, reminding Korchnoi that they had agreed to keep their meeting private, and asking him to refrain from further press conferences on the topic. GM Lev Alburt saw Bobby's letter as well as Viktor's adamant reply. Against Lev's advice, the author of *Persona Non Grata* sent a reply characteristically prickly in his disagreement, writing in part that if Fischer didn't value the free press, then Bobby and he had nothing in common. Of course, this was the end of the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A steady stream of others, less known and normally less successful in their goal, tried to get close to Bobby those with something to sell, those looking to make a buck as the great man's agent, those wanting a chess lesson from the best of all time, those who simply wanted to hang out with a legend. Dutch millionaire Arnfried Pagel made one of the strangest, most revealing and most successful visits with Bobby and Pagel certainly got more than he bargained for.

Truth in Advertising

Fischer certainly hadn't capitalized on his early 70s fame in a way that is de rigueur these days; the well circulated stories of his refusal to endorse products he didn't consider the very best, regardless of the munificence of the honorarium, are well founded. Leroy Dubeck, USCF president during the period 1970-1973 the years when Fischer was a hot commodity, accepting the key to New York City from Mayor Lindsay, appearing on Johnny Carson, and chatting with president Nixon on the telephone recalls that Fischer's frustrated agent would complain about Bobby's capitalistic-contrarian ethics. When a luxury car manufacturer offered the idea of a television commercial showing him demonstrating the auto's smooth ride by playing chess on the road in a well appointed back seat, Fischer considered it while evidently having himself chauffeured around town in top-dollar cars of different types. Ultimately, he informed his agent that he wouldn't do the gig, not because the money wasn't right, but because he felt a different brand offered a superior ride. When a top soft-drink company offered him a bubbly sum for filming a commercial in which he found the brand's taste to be, like himself, the world's best, he insisted on time to think it over. The flavor flunked his private taste-test comparison.

Perhaps Bobby had spent too much time unearthing the Truth of the Najdorf Poisoned Pawn variation. It was hard to fall out of the truth-searching habit in time to cash in on the celebrity status his research and talent had won him. The concrete analysis regarding which car gave the smoothest backseat ride and what soda tasted best to him was right up his open file even if later, the more

abstract concept of how a repressive government could gain prestige and attention from his cooperation would prove elusive.

The “agent” who worked with Bobby on these matters is a bit of a story of his own. After Bobby won the world championship, the agent asked Fischer for permission to act in his name to line up some endorsements. The fellow would collect a standard percentage, which would be his first paycheck as Bobby’s longtime free attorney. The Champ agreed, after pointing out symbolically that he wasn’t about to “promote underwear.” Despite Bobby’s persnickety reception of proposals, his attorney did quickly put together several very significant deals that met with Championship approval including one for approximately a million dollars and one for about \$600,000. The treasure-ship had apparently docked for the two of them. The lawyer prepared the contracts for signature, but one final problem separated him from their mutual retirement in luxury. The day Bobby was scheduled to come into the man’s New York City’s office to sign the papers was the same, infamous day that Bobby dropped out of chess and the public eye for nearly two decades disappearing, to later be spotted in Pasadena, California. The lucrative contract offers were good for a limited time, of course. We can only imagine the attorney’s wry despondency when he had to tear up the papers.

Down but not out near Beverly Hills

It’s also true that Bobby wasn’t the most successful conservator of his winnings. Between the World Wide Church of God and his own lack of investment acumen and motivation, Bobby didn’t retain his then record 1972 winnings for very long. In fact, Fischer and big money just didn’t seem destined for each other. Two decades later in 1992, after collecting their million-dollar payoffs from Yugoslav pyramid-schemer-banker Jezdimir Vasiljevic, Fischer and friend Boris Spassky were again flush. Bobby’s take alone was more than three million US. Spassky (who admitted blowing his 1972 winnings, what was then in the Soviet Union a vast fortune, in the following two years) immediately deposited his new riches in a Swiss bank. But Bobby liked Vasiljevic; the American legend re-deposited his winner’s share in the organizer’s own Jugoskandic Bank. Of course, this same bank soon went bust, and Vasiljevic fled to Israel, where he was apprehended absconding with an amount approximately equal to Bobby’s loot.

With thousands of others standing in the withdrawal line, of course, Fischer simply lost out. We’ll see that it wasn’t the first time Bobby’s “benefactors” went to jail.

Yet in 1981 in Pasadena, Fischer preferred to live frugally anyway and he did have occasional “clients” who paid very well for the privilege of a lesson or just a conversation, sometimes simply over the telephone. An old friend who was close to Fischer in this period of the 70s and 80s said that Bobby got \$1,000 to \$1,500 for a brief telephone consultation.

Co-author Lawrence recalls that in the 80s, the US Chess Federation had brief contact with Fischer through his new intermediary, the Indian-American

woman New York City chess player and teacher Shirnaz Mistry-Kennedy a wonderful maiden name for one doing undercover work. In this case, the proposed rates were much higher \$10,000 for about 10 minutes. Bobby may have reasoned that the USCF owed him and had a lot to gain commercially. USCF couldn't afford the toll, but did send Bobby once again, through the "safeguard" of his intermediary a desktop computer, and arranged for some chess software and some other materials to be sent.

At any rate, Bobby had a source of income that met his immediate needs. What was his major expense? Checking out would-be clients, which under the circumstances, was an entirely reasonable priority.

Meanwhile, big plans in little Bergen

Enter Arnfried Pagel, a handsome and well educated, fortyish German expatriate who in the early 80s enjoyed the high life in the Netherlands, in the small town of Bergen aan Zee. By the way, Bergen was the same town in which the 1975 Fide Congress failed to approve Fischer's non-negotiable demand that the champion retain his title if a match was tied at nine wins each. Pagel was wealthy ostensibly as a result of his construction company, but there were widespread rumors of his less orthodox, and less legal, pursuits. Pagel was a chess fan, and he was above all else an eccentric, and one who cultivated and prided himself on his eccentricity. He loved to create publicity stunts. Although the Dutch press frequently ridiculed him, he was of the opinion that even the worst publicity was great.

"Uncle" Arnfried sponsored a Bergen chess team, KoningsClub, in the popular Dutch league that attracted hundreds of clubs. He envied the famous championship teams that featured Jan Timman and other top GMs, like the team from Volmac, sponsored by Joop Van Oosterom, now organizer of the famous Melody Amber blitz tournaments held in Monaco. But Pagel's team was down in one of the very bottom divisions. Pagel, however, had faith in the power of money and began to recruit outstanding professional players. He sought GM Lev Alburt's advice, who told him, for instance, that the Brazilian "grandmaster" Pagel thought he had hired was only an expert-strength player. Lev and the Brazilian led their teammates, most of them the equivalent of USCF 900 to 1500 players, to the sectional championship that season. The team moved up a division. Eventually, after following Lev's advice and adding Dmitry Gurevich, Sergey Kudrin and Yasser Seirawan to KoningsClub Bergen's roster, Pagel got his team to the very top. Like any good entrepreneur, however, he wanted more. In fact, he sought the ultimate coup for his club and himself, a publicity stunt like no other imaginable in chess. He wanted Robert J. Fischer, who was 5,500 miles away and thoroughly investigating all who would approach.

Dutch treats and South African Krugerands

Pagel turned again to Alburt, who got in contact with Bobby through Fischer's old friend and West Coast chess master James Buff, by now a friend of Lev's as well. Buff explained that Fischer was in terrific form, that he had been annihilating GM Peter Biyasis at blitz, and that Bobby kept up on everything in

chess. Buff wanted to help his old friend.

For a while the intermediaries Alburt and Buff made and relayed substantial offers and replies. Pagel offered \$100,000 for a meeting and Fischer's joining the Koenig Club. For some reason, Fischer was fixated on being paid in South African Gold Krugers. Talk of his playing a computer followed. Despite numerous telegraph messages and phone calls between Alburt and Buff, progress was slow. Characteristically, Fischer wanted more.

Then suddenly, Fischer wrote in his own hand to Pagel that they step from behind their representatives and correspond directly. Uncle Arnfried thus knew that Fischer wanted to speed up the process. On Lev's advice, Pagel made an uncomplicated offer to begin with. Pagel told Bobby that the Dutchman would come to Pasadena and pay him \$50,000 just for a brief meeting of several hours. If other, bigger things worked out, there would be much more money to come.

In 1981 Pagel flew to meet Los Angeles to meet Bobby. Afterwards, he would visit Alburt and Koningsclub Bergen's other top team members in Lone Pine, California, a little town unknown except as the site of the lavish chess generosity of Louis Statham.

Until his death, Statham brought a series of world-class events to the sleepy western town, bringing in GMs from all over the world to Lone Pine, where tanned, cowboy hat- and boot-wearing locals and the pasty chess players regarded each with mutual curiosity.

Friends don't let Friends Cheat

Fischer is, of course, the consummate outsider. Pagel, a man who knew how to play to an audience and who, despite enjoying the good life, loved to be seen as a character himself, adopted the status of fellow outsider. Quickly the two men bonded. What was to be a brief meeting of two to three hours; turned into a three-day chess carouse. Instead of the multi-star restaurants normal for Pagel, they two hung out in the anonymous all-night diners and coffee shops that Fischer preferred. In these, his risk of being recognized and accosted was reduced. The new friends talked about Bobby's well known and, for most, repulsive world view, and they played blitz. Pagel later boasted that he won some games, but his entourage privately contradicted the improbable claim. In fact, these traveling assistants even pointed out that Pagel tried to cheat, but Bobby wouldn't let him. It was clear to all that the two men genuinely liked each other.

Affection aside, Pagel was not one to pay the piper without getting Polaroids. Unknown to Bobby, who had of course stipulated that no pictures be taken, Pagel had hired a private investigator to follow the two around, secretly snapping shots, many showing the pair's moments together. Later Pagel showed the photos to Lev Alburt, who was struck by the range of emotions exhibited by a bearded Bobby. Lev sympathized with Fischer's predicament during this deception. The pictures revealed the chess-savvy champion showing a child-

like acceptance of Uncle Arnfried. Indeed, some photos showed the two arm-in-arm. Other shots showed Bobby growing suspicious of a possible photographer. One print even revealed Fischer, hands-in-front-of-his-face, recoiling in horror at having a camera pointed at him at close range. The purloined photos showed Pagel at all times enjoying himself. Whether or not these photos were ever published, we don't know. Their location and current ownership are also unknown. (Can any **ChessCafe** readers help with this mystery?)

The 60% Good-guy Rebate

At the end of the bargained-for meeting of a few hours, Fischer and Pagel sat down to settle up. Arnfried opened up his ever-present briefcase, always stocked with cash, reaching in to retrieve, one after the other, five paper-banded bundles; each containing 100 hundred-dollar bills. The agreed-upon \$50,000 was on the table. Bobby looked at the cash, looked at Uncle Arnfried, clapped him on the shoulder, and smiled. Witnesses reported he said words to the effect of, "You're a good guy. I like you. Twenty thousand will do it." Bobby nudged three of the stacks back toward Pagel, who quietly placed the \$30,000 back in his case. Bobby spent, at no charge, the extra two days with his new friend, roaming the streets and 24-hour cafes of Pasadena. In fact, Pagel said that he could have spent more time with Bobby, but that the Dutchman tired of their meetings.

Is this friendly generosity from the demanding capitalist who nearly drove the Reykjavik organizers and the US Chess establishment mad with anxiety during the 1972 match hard to understand? Boris Spassky admires and respects Bobby, and remains his friend to this day. He probably understands Fischer on more levels as well if not better than anyone else in the world. When told the story of Fischer and Pagel, Spassky's reaction was that Bobby's behavior was not surprising at all to those who really knew him. In fact, Spassky said, "It is a typical Bobby!" If he likes someone, he will carry out his commitment for far less than his going rate. If he doesn't like someone, he won't cooperate for even ten times the amount.

Headlines in Holland

Back home in Bergen, Pagel arranged a press release claiming that Bobby Fischer had joined his club, commenting that Koenig Club Bergen's Team had no need of Bobby's great skills at the moment, but at some key match in the future, Fischer may well play. The impact? The major Dutch newspapers ran headlines. Typical was this banner:

FISCHER JOINS KONINGSCLUB BERGEN!

The articles normally included an accompanying interview with Uncle Arnfried, eccentric and attention-getting as always. Pagel not only got a friendly discount from Fischer but got his publicity stunt, free of charge.

It's Denouement all over the Place

Fellow **ChessCafe** columnist Hans Ree remembers hearing of Pagel's continuing adventures, which weren't as successful or nearly as much fun.

Dutch authorities looking into financial improprieties pursued Uncle Arnfried. Unable to prove these charges, they nevertheless managed to convict him of illegal gun possession, for which he received what is a long sentence for that crime in Holland one year. Because Pagel had already done this much time awaiting trial, he was released. He left Holland, living for a while in Oostende, Belgium. A few years later, he was convicted in England of drug smuggling. Evidently, the illegal substances were hidden within building materials, shipped back and forth from the continent to Britain. Presumably, the unusual round-trips made by Pagel's construction supplies aroused the suspicion of British investigators. We don't know how Pagel would judge their publicity value, but the reports chronicled a sad end. According to the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool*, this time Uncle Arnfried received a stiff, double-digit sentence. He was rumored to have died while in jail.

Bergen no longer has a championship chess team. The Koningsclub team played on for no fees for a season after Pagel's Dutch imprisonment. Then its boards reverted to local, lower-rated players; then the team disbanded.

Of course Bobby never really played for Koningsclub or anyone else, until his controversial 1992 "championship" reprise with Boris Spassky in Sveti Stefan, Montenegro, and Belgrade, Yugoslavia. On March 9 of this year, Bobby was 57, two years older than Lasker when the wizened champ amazed the chess world by handling the youngsters at New York 1924.

Fisher's prejudices remained entrenched, and he remained capriciously hard to meet. In 1992, ChessBaseUSA president Don Maddox was asked to send Bobby his firm's software, the world-standard for chess research. Shernaz Mistry-Kennedy once again served as intermediary. When she told Maddox that Bobby wanted to know Don's religion, "I told her 'Texan'," Maddox said, recalling the incident. The former *Chess Life* editor may have known that the truth would please Fischer, but on principle refused to capitulate to such asininity. At Fischer's invitation, Maddox made a special trip to Los Angeles during the 1992 US Open to help Bobby learn how to use ChessBase. But Bobby learned that Maddox had used the "K" words, mentioning both Karpov and Kasparov in ads for the software, and even that the now chess entrepreneur formerly headed up the "enemy's" magazine. "The Ghost of Fischer," as some of the participating GMs referred to his haunting presence at the event, failed to materialize.

Perhaps that was the last opportunity Fischer had to stand up a date, at least in the US. Since his 1992 rematch, Bobby has lived abroad, fugitive from indictment from the US government, from whom it's doubtful he'll be offered a friendly discount.

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