



## COLUMNISTS

*Hoisting the Hippopotamus*

Lev Alburt &  
Al Lawrence



## Bright Spots in the Dark and Stormy Knight

Current events interrupt our history of the chess champions this month. Two official “national” Tournaments recently beamed some sunshine on the dreary winter of discontent and decline suffered by the official organization for US chess players—the United States Chess Federation. The US Amateur Team Championship and the National Open are examples of long-standing, dependable USCF successes that came through again this year.

We should also note the two new breaks in the cloud-cover that speed from Seattle like a caffeine rush—the new US Championship sponsorship and the USA versus China match.

Besides the Mocha Metropolis, what these last two upticks have in common is GM Yasser Seirawan, Erik Anderson and Scott Oki of the Seattle Chess Foundation (SCF).

### China-USA

The USA-China match finished on March 18, and took place at the Harbor Club on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of the Norton Building in Seattle. These SCF people know how to put on a show. It was a four-round event with 10 of a pool of 13 players competing for each side each round. The US narrowly won the first round (5½-4½), drew the second and fourth rounds, but lost the third round big (3½-6½). So the Chinese won 21-19. They won 11 games while the US won 9. Twenty games were drawn. The US lost ground at the bottom, where young stars were battling it out.

The Chinese are getting serious about chess. Think of the effect as results like this one popularize the game more widely among China's 1.3 billion population!



*GM Yasser Seirawan (left) with USCF President Tim Redman in the Hilton lounge at the US Amateur Team. We hope Tim's buying—Yaz has landed the only big sponsorships USCF now enjoys.*

### **Two USCF national flagships**

What do the National Open and the US Team have in common? Both have enjoyed a relatively permanent venue—the Team in northern New Jersey (for a few years now at the Parsippany Hilton) and the National Open in Las Vegas. Competitive amateur players, like other humans, want to return to familiar places where they've had fun. The well-remembered is particularly attractive when concentration on other tasks is required. But in addition to dependable home bases, both events are recreated each year by two separate groups of long-serving and dedicated volunteers, who make the events a true chess festival. Fun and serious chess competition co-exist.

“Chess volunteer” is a phrase that's launched a thousand shouts. Many think of the word as meaning someone who takes no money for a task. (A USCF Executive Board member is a “volunteer,” while a hired tournament official is “paid staff.”) Actually, the primary definition of a volunteer is someone who performs a service of his own free will. The army, when seeking volunteers, doesn't cut off the meager pay of the brave bravo who bucks the old soldiers' advice by stepping forward. In the same way, many tournament staffers, like Chief TD Bill Snead of the National Open, are paid some relative pittance (compared to their normal professional salaries) for their around-the-clock on-site services. They still qualify as volunteers on our scoresheet. And of course, some of the regulars of both the Team East and the National Open fully qualify as *unpaid* volunteers.

The US Amateur Team and the National Open attract the panoply of

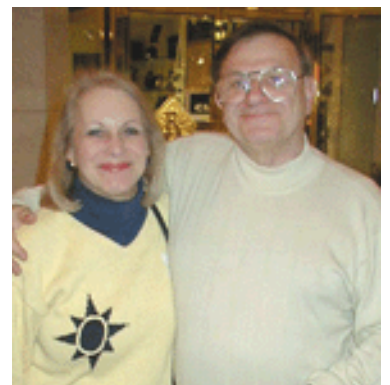
who's who in USCF. (Those who don't play show up to talk to those who do.) Thus the tournaments give us a chance to catch up with their activities and share some photos of the names behind the goings-on, as well as some of their thoughts on USCF.

Under the heading "Catastrophes, controversies and contretemps," we give a summary of the most chewed-on of recent organizational bones in a box at the bottom of this column, like those fine-print insurance-policy "dismemberment" clauses you may not want to read. On some issues, we were able to give you outside resources to view primary data. All USCF issues impinging on the national politics of the organization spin at light-speed velocity. We're reminded of Henry Kissinger's famous pronouncement: "Politics in academe (substitute 'USCF') are so acrimonious because the stakes are so *small*." The future of chess, of course, is important. But there are no salaries or stock options at stake for our elected governors. Not even free aspirin. USCF is a 501(c)4 tax-exempt organization. (It doesn't pay taxes, but donations to it can't normally be written off.)

### National Open

The National Open, which took place at the Riviera Casino in Las Vegas, March 9-12, attracted 857 players. At the National Open a player of any rating can play in the open section, with the GMs, where first prize is \$8,000. If he's under 2000, he can choose to play in the separate reserve section and shoot for the top prize of \$4,000. There's a separate booster section option for those under 1600 with a prize of \$2,000. There's even a separate unrated section. Altogether, the players vie for \$55,000 in cash prizes.

But money is just one dimension. Chief Organizer Fred Gruenberg is known as "the man who put the fun back into chess." Back in the early 1980s, Fred, a successful businessman from Chicago, came to the USCF with the idea of restarting the old National Open in Las Vegas. Old-timers will remember what we call the "*Chess Life* swimsuit edition." Back in the 1960s, once a year the covers of *CL* used to picture showgirls posing around a casino swimming pool, with the flimsy excuse of displaying a marquee for the National Open. Good reading. (Photo: *Fred and Donna Gruenberg at the Riviera in Las Vegas* )



Fred convinced USCF to reinvent the National Open as a first-class event to draw the biggest names and crowds. Over the years he's continually demanded the best conditions for the players. On one famous occasion, when a previous hotel didn't come through with a free

buffet it had promised players, Fred demanded and got 10,000 fresh donuts wheeled in on carts at the start of a morning round! The National Open quickly became a flagship event of USCF, and the sparkle of Las Vegas didn't hurt the draw. Anatoly Karpov, Mikhail Tal, David Bronstein, Sammy Reshevsky, Victor Korchnoi, Judith Polgar and many others have played or provided lectures or simuls. Those signing up in the open section in this Swiss event have the chance at the unforgettable experience of playing a legend, one-on-one.



The tournament has become a true chess festival. Chicago's Al Losoff has taken over the organizer's position, but Gruenberg, still the financial backer, is chairman of the boards. The main, three-day event is sandwiched by the National Open Blitz championship and chess camps before the main attraction and the Game-10 championship after it. Players get a free show ticket, free pickup at the airport, the opportunities to attend lectures and simuls. Daily raffles give away prizes—one of them a roundtrip airplane ticket and free hotel room for

next year's National Open. *(Photo: Yvette Seirawan Nagel was one of the top-ranked in the reserve section. Husband Yaz sat the tournament out, but gave simuls.)*

This year the Chinese team, sent to play the US in Seattle, appeared first in Las Vegas. The Women's World Champion Xie Jun, who gave a simul. Even without playing in the event, Jun won \$2,000—at a casino poker game she didn't understand. It seems the house paid 10% of the pot to all participants when one of the players was dealt a certain hand. Jun was a lucky recipient when another



player indeed drew the magic cards. (Note to Chinese IRS: we don't know how much Jun lost back, and after all, isn't this merely a cultural exchange?) During the first round, when the crowd saw the many 2600 ratings next to Chinese names, some wondered whether the numbers would hold up. By the last round, when many of the top boards hosted a Chinese player, the question had been answered. In fact Zhang Zhong, the Chinese team's fourth-rated player (2657), tied for first with Armenian Vladimir Akopian (2734).

The two scored 5.5 out of 6 and split \$12,000. *(Photo: Chinese Team fourth-board Zhang Zhong tied for*



*first with Armenian super-GM Vladimir Akopian.)*



The competition at the top was fierce. There were GMs many boards deep and it was hard to keep a perfect score for very long. Third through eleventh place, with 5 points: Jiangchuan Ye (2721), Alexander Baburian (2676), Ildar Ibragimov (2665), Alexander Ivanov (2659), Alex Yermolinsky (2655), Dmitry Gurevich (2647), Hao Yin (2625), Alexander Stripunsky (2601), Hua Ni (2584). Ilya Smirin (2789) was top ranked going in, but managed only a tie for 11<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> with 4½ points. (*Photo: National Open's top-rated GM Ilya Smirin on the Chinese: "They have great concentration."*)

### **Big news from Eric Schiller**

Eric Schiller played in the event. He's been very involved with the BrainGames.net, which organized the recent Kramnik-Kasparov match. Eric was one of the arbiters, and he has been helping to draft documents for upcoming events. He passed along some information about BGN's plans, and they're interesting. BGN intends a match among the top chess computers. The winning computer will play a match against Kramnik in October. The winner of this showdown, human or computer, will get two-thirds of a projected two million dollars, while the loser will take home a third.

Then, in December or January, a candidates tournament of 24 is planned. This initial group will winnow itself down to four or five finalists, to which Kasparov and possibly Anand will be added. Perhaps six months or so after the finalist emerges, the match with Kramnik will take place. Schiller said that BGN's new CEO is committed to such a program. As a matter of fact, the company intends a number of world championships of different board games, including checkers.

Asked about the K-K match, Schiller said that Kasparov began to do poorly after it became clear that Kramnik's preparation was superior. For Kramnik's part, he adopted defenses he knew would leave him with inferior but tenable positions. His surprise was the size of the plus Kasparov achieved against Kramnik's openings. But Kramnik had done his preparation well, down to the endgames, and was able to hold on as Black.

Eric, who works with a number of school programs, feels that chess in the US is booming everywhere except within USCF.

### **The Warrens sell book business**

Helen and Jim Warren visited the National Open, where they met their son, an engineer who lives in Tucson. The Warrens are longtime chess organizers and donors. Recently, the two sold their American Postal Chess Tournament mail-order book inventory, retiring from this part of their long-time chess business. Jim is reclaiming the room in their Chicago suburban home for his own 4,000-book library. They continue to look after the correspondence chess games. Helen is a USCF Executive Board member who, by virtue of being in the top three vote-getters in the last election, will stay on for two more years even after the new elections this August. She says straightforwardly that the recent decision to increase TLA fees will be corrected, and that there are four proposals being discussed by a special affiliate committee. Additionally, she's in favor of reinstating the small commission affiliates used to receive from USCF for sending in memberships. *(Photo: Helen Warren. "The TLA mistake will be corrected," Helen said.)*



### **The Amateur Team East—no cash, just fun**

The USATE was held for the 31<sup>st</sup> year this February 17-19, Presidents' Day Weekend.

Despite the fact that general tournament attendance is down significantly across the country, the Team drew 896 players and 215 four-player teams (some with an alternate fifth player) to the Parsippany, New Jersey, Hilton. These chess foursomes came from all over the country, despite the existence of regional spin-offs of the event in the West, Midwest and South. Actually, before the mid 1990s, the tournament was *the* Amateur Team championship. About 1970, Denis Barry originally persuaded USCF Executive Director Ed Edmondson to take a chance on the event. Then, when Barry became USCF president, he created simultaneous regional versions of the team granddaddy, as well as of the Amateur Championship, a non-team event. The other versions of the Team haven't been as successful as their progenitor.

At a time when other organizers are offering big prizes to draw players, often unsuccessfully, this year's Team drew its near-thousand crowd, including GMs Yasser Seirawan, Roman Dzindzichashvili, Joel Benjamin, Alexander Ivanov and Michael Rohde, as well as dozens of other top players with its usual offering—*no* cash, just fun. Sure, the trophies are magnificent. But when was the last time you saw a world-candidate play for a trophy?



Players come because their friends insist. It's a reunion of old pals and playful adversaries, and the only real chess celebration of its kind we have in the US. Playing in it offers a unique chance to pull for someone other than yourself, to have teammates rooting for you. Team members play shoulder to shoulder. It's a strange treat to be able to celebrate a group victory when you've fallen on your own chess sword. Even if you don't play, just being at the Team is to be in the locus of US chess for a weekend. *(Photo: Chess Life Editor Peter Kurzdorfer, a National Master, played second board for Team USCF.)*

The wild card at the Team that makes it all work is the ceiling of 2199 placed on a gang's average rating. A team can come in with two top GMs. "Chess.Net" made use of Yasser and Dzindzi on boards one and two, but then needed much lower players on three and four. At the other extreme, you can put together a team of four hovering around the 2200 threshold. This year's second place team, S.L.A.M. (acronymous for the last names of members NM Steve Stoyko, NM John McCarthy, NM Ed Allen, and Peter Larocco) put three 2200s and an A-player in the lineup—and finished 5.5 out of 6. In the last round, they beat 75% *Pure Shahade* (Greg, Mike, and Jennifer Shahade and Neil Dorosin)—a senior master, two 2200s and a C-player. *(Photo: Michael Khodarkovsky was coaching students at the Team. He said Kasparov.com has cut back, closing its offices in NY. Michael is now concentrating on his teaching.)*



The winning team, *Zen and the Art of Bisguier* finished with a perfect 6-0. Actually, the popular GM, a fixture at the event, played second board below SM Ron Burnett. Expert Serio Almeida was third board. Noah Belcher was their friend on the end. The four will now have a cyberchess play-off with the other four regional winners for the overall title. But to those at the mega-Team, *Zen* is already the guru. *(Photo: Ron Burnett (meditating?), with help from GM Art Bisguier, led Zen to a US Team East victory.)*

By the way, **The Chess Cafe** team did well. Initially ranked 12<sup>th</sup> of

the 215 teams, Steve Winer, Chris Chase, Hanon Russell and Taylor Kingston scored 5 points and finished eighth.

### **Names, costumes and general silliness**

The organizers of the Team East are not just tournament directors but impresarios. They give away dozens and dozens of prizes, some made up on the spot. If you have a ponytail, you could win a prize. If your chess bag matches the carpet, you could win a prize. But the big nonplaying awards are Best Name and Best Costume. This year *Harry Patzer and the Poison Pawn* (this last morsel was concocted at the Bad Bishop Bakery, of course) took both, with a tongue-in-cheek dramatic presentation that got an audience reaction off the normal scale and left no doubt about victory.



*Harry Patzer and the Poison Pawn parody  
the famous children's writer.*

### **More serious news and events**

USCF President Redman announced to the crowd that USCF was about \$75,000 in the black for the year. The news was welcome, and 2001 would be a big turnaround year for the organization if the numbers hold up until the end of May.

Steve Doyle, normally the man who emcees the circus, was in the hospital, having endured a chest-opening heart procedure. By the end of the tournament, we heard that Steve was doing remarkably well. Al Lawrence has since spoken to him and he seems completely his exuberant self. Although it was a bit eerie not seeing Steve at the podium, the regular crew of Joe Ippolito, Hal Sprechman, Roger Inglis, Justin Kohler, Walter Heerschap, Judy Heerschap, Sophia Rohde (GM Michael's wife), Carol Jarecki, Mike Somers and Ira Lee Riddle made it all unfold as usual.





But terrible news developed right at the tournament. Executive Director George DeFeis, playing fourth board for Team USCF and representing the organization, evidently took an evening ride for some food and was involved in a

three-car accident on the main thoroughfare outside the hotel. He had to be taken to the nearest ICU, suffering from a serious head injury. By this time, we have some better news. George is home and feeling much better, able to consult with his staff by telephone. Jeff Loomis, USCF CFO, took over for George on board 4 and is also standing in for him at the office for a while. *(Photo: Executive Director George DeFeis (foreground) suffered head injuries in a three-car accident in front of the hotel. He is now home recovering. CFO Jeff Loomis (background) took over George's duties, which included playing fourth Board for Team USCF.)*

- **Catastrophes, controversies and contretemps**

People complain about everything, of course. USCF is crucially important to chess and chess players in this country. The more important something is, the greater the criticism. Since its formation in 1939 with a total membership of 1,000, we're sure USCF hasn't experienced a single lull in the perfect storm of reproach. But, by anyone's standards, during the last half-dozen years or so, the organization has experienced some unusual setbacks. The USCF professional staffers in New Windsor, New York, work very hard at their jobs and care about making things better. The issues below have little to do with anything they decide. These are conundrums for top-management.

- **Financial catastrophes**—Since 1997, USCF has lost something in the seven-figure range. The annual deficits are known, although complicated by “operational” and “combined” figures (in other words, excluding or including investments meant to offset the obligation of 10,000 or so life memberships USCF has sold), but the accumulated losses are not totaled. (Perhaps the US government should look into dispensing with reporting the national debt; we may all feel better.) USCF often posts its latest quarterly operational financial report on its website ([www.uschess.org](http://www.uschess.org)), but hasn't issued the combined

financial numbers for a while.

- **Adult membership decline**—Totals have fallen from about 33,000 in 1995 to fewer than 27,000 in the beginning of 2001—a drop approaching 20% in the core group that is of critical economic importance to USCF. It's true that kids' memberships are up high enough—nearly 48,000 and now much more than half of all USCF membership—to create an all-time record total USCF membership of 90,367 as of March 31. But many argue that USCF loses money with each Scholastic membership, the fastest-growing segment. US Chess Trust Board member Pete Nixon has done interested parties a great service (and a voluntary one) by compiling USCF membership statistics all the way back to 1952! You can find these in an easy-on-the-eye format at <http://members.home.net/nixonpc/uscfmem2.htm> on the web.
- **Falling tournament attendance**—Some organizers of open tournaments around the country are reporting a 10-15% decline in the number of players showing up for traditional events. Scholastic tournaments seem to be thriving.
- **Lack of corporate sponsorship**—Other than the six-figure sponsorships that Yasser Seirawan recently brought to USCF, it's been more than five years since a meaningful sponsorship has been arranged—or even continued.
- **Tournament Life Announcements**—These notices, printed in *Chess Life*, are the official, national “bulletin board” for USCF events. Recently, USCF management proclaimed that these pages, which look to untutored eyes like a long series of classified ads, were unsightly and turned off potential sponsors. (Past years saw major sponsorship and TLAs coexist, but the “times change” argument is widespread in USCF circles these days.) So USCF began a campaign to reduce the announcements, including increasing the fees to tournament organizers. But organizers saw the little ads as an important means of fulfilling USCF's central mission, popularizing chess. (Additionally, organizers have always paid fees for rating each individual game of their events.) A considerable

brouhaha resulted. Modifications and miscommunications led to further dissatisfaction. The problem remains on the agenda.

- **Computerization controversies**—USCF HQ is computerized, but experts (computer mavens, not 2000 players) say it could be much more time- and cost-efficient. Current executive board members report that about \$150,000 was spent on a systems upgrade sometime between 1997 and 1999, but that nothing of any value was accomplished.
- **Rating system changes**—In the wake of all these bellyflops, USCF modified its rating system. (Changes had been decided on and waiting in line for years, but never accomplished.) Rating deflation is a widely complained about phenomenon within USCF. Some experts, however, such as Ratings Committee Chair Kenneth Sloan, explain that there are pockets of deflation, not endemic devaluation. But one of the things some mean by “deflation” is the decline of ratings as players get older. Many reasonably theorize that deflation discourages some players, particularly the middle-aged, from returning to tournament play. In Skinnerian terms, the shock of the wall charts redefining players in lower-ranked categories is negative reinforcement. Of course accuracy, as well as promotional value, is important to the rating system. (Unless it has changed its approach, USCF calculates professional “invitational ratings”—for the US Championship and Olympiad, for example—using a blend of peak and average USCF ratings and even FIDE numbers.)

There’s a bit of a “black box” effect. The new, general rating system is more difficult to explain than the old one. In fact, what must have been intended as a fanfare article in *Chess Life* proclaimed that the new calculations were hard to understand. For those who follow the technical side of these matters, the new version uses a floating “K.” (This is not a buoyant and healthy breakfast cereal.) The base number used to compute a player’s gain or loss after a result is variable. Its value now depends on the player’s pre-result rating, the number of rounds in the tournament, and whether or not he’s played 50 games previous to the new result. If you’re inclined, see the October *Chess Life* for all the math. Early returns seem to indicate that some

lower rated players gain points more quickly for a good result, but higher ranked amateurs gain much more slowly, even when they turn in a career-topping effort.

Result—pockets of dissatisfaction. George John offers a website that does the new rating calculations. You can crunch the numbers at [www.texaschess.org/perfrate.html](http://www.texaschess.org/perfrate.html).

- **Catalog service contretemps**—USCF mail-order customers have been getting “back-order” and “discontinued” notices instead of many of the books they’ve ordered. It’s intentional. With the Board of Directors’ knowledge, management has drastically reduced its book and equipment business as a way to scale back expenses. Some point out that in the past, these services were the most profitable of USCF’s activities. The proceeds were used to fund chess activities. Now some argue that USCF can no longer cost-effectively run this arm. (See the “times change” argument, above.) Whichever side one’s on, everyone we asked agreed that this one’s a Rubicon not to be crossed whimsically. Rowing back would be hard, and the paddle may cost more than USCF could afford.

Please Email suggestions for future columns and other comments to [AlForChess@aol.com](mailto:AlForChess@aol.com). We enjoy your comments and learn from your criticism.

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