



COLUMNISTS

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

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One Member, One Dope?

--The old USCF voting system goes out with a whimper while drug testing comes in with a bang--

At the 2001 US Open, August 4-12, about 300 players, from near beginners to world-famous grandmasters, spent evenings testing each other's playing skill on the ground floor of the Sheraton in Framingham, Massachusetts, a small city 45 minutes in traffic west of Boston. During the daytime hours of the final weekend, in windowless basement rooms, about 100 USCF delegates—representatives elected by their states' USCF membership who constitute, as a body, the organization's highest authority—tested each other's patience in meetings that were notable for their nearly unrelenting if demure downbeat.

The one convention topic that brought “the native hue of resolution” to delegates' cheeks was the idea of the World Chess Federation (FIDE) to test chess players for drug use—what the International Olympic Committee refers to as “anti-doping.” Another subject, the principle of “One Member, One Vote”—for fifteen years one of the most rancorous, recurring and resisted ideas in US Chess governance—passed into law quietly amid an annual convention crowd more threatened by urinalysis than universal suffrage.

The US Chess Federation has been the single governing body of chess in the United States since 1939 and has ever since been both crucial and criticized. Lean times and flush have marked its history. The Fischer boom and bust of 1972-75—when Bobby brought in members by the tens of thousands with his blitz to the world championship and then, despite his pledge to be the most active champ ever, failed to play another rated game of chess—is just one example. USCF has always been basically democratic in principle, but this year marked the completion of its journey from proxies to proletariat.

Democracy is the line that starts on the left

At least one longtime delegate from California who flew to the convention and stayed at his own expense (as all delegates do) walked from the meeting room late Sunday afternoon with tears quietly threatening to break over his lower eyelids. “Doesn't this depress you?” he asked. By its nature, the sausage-making process

of all legislative rancor and compromise is not for the faint of stomach. The USCF convention charts the organization's general course for the next 12 months—and sometimes for even longer. After all, democracy is the line that starts on the left, and year after year, every delegate gets his chance to cue up at either the pro or con microphone to speak. The USCF president, with the help of a volunteer parliamentarian, wields a well balanced gavel. And just in case the delegates don't find a point of procedure fair, the chair can be overturned. [Photo: *Why is Tim Redman all smiles? USCF president for the past year, he ended his term after chairing the meetings in Framingham. His administration was the first since 1996 to show even a small financial surplus, although some policies, like increased rates for tournament ads, were controversial.*]



Losing altitude, USCF recruits a new flight crew

The general malaise of the meeting, which in some other years has been considerably more energized, may have simply been the dénouement of an apparently policy-changing election. One downer is the financial nosedive that has seen USCF plummet from a high-cruising airliner that had gained altitude for 15 consecutive years, to a sputtering bi-plane struggling with the weighty cargo of about \$700,000 of long-term debt, and general revenues that have now shrunk for six years in row. Meanwhile, USCF's all-important adult members have bailed out at an alarming rate, numbering now just 26,000—down from 33,000 in 1995, a loss of more than 21%.

A nation of chess telecommuters?

The causes for why adults continue to find USCF's skies unfriendly are open to conjecture. The years after the mid-1990s presented brand-new challenges. Certainly, internet chess, many forms of which don't require USCF membership, has provided an alternative to club play. Traditionally, official clubs have been USCF's lifeblood. But now, when a player can in a few clicks gain instant in-home access to opponents of all strengths throughout the world, he can scratch his chess itch without driving across town. At least in part, we've become a nation of chess telecommuters. No matter how social our instincts, it's hard to leave the well broken-in easy chair and refrigerated slices of yesterday's pizza—not to mention the kids and spouse in the next room and the chocolate Lab at our feet.

One has to wonder, of course, if some of USCF's recent policies toward its own clubs—eliminating their commissions on

memberships and raising fees for tournament announcements—haven't hastened the defection to point-and-click chess. By the way, the new board members have already returned TLA policies to the more traditional norms, reducing their cost.

High points and low hurdles

In fairness, we must explain that this year's modest financial surplus was the first "in-the-black" posting since 1996 and extremely close to the overage budgeted by the Board and delegates back in August of 2000. So the current office professionals hit the mark financially. The question is why the hurdle wasn't set higher by the volunteer policy makers. With USCF cash as scarce as delegate-unanimity and operations creaking under the strain of mandatory monthly loan payments, why didn't the board budget for a six-figure surplus to ease the strain? Whatever the answer, it's needed in redux. For the 2001-2002 budget once again calls for an extremely modest surplus. To many of the fiscally savvy, including outgoing VP of finance Jim Pechac, this goal clearly seems like a mistake. Of course, the budget is only a plan, and the new board, who inherits the budgeting, may decide that a larger figure needs to be put back by May, the end of USCF's 2002 fiscal year.

Another point in the organization's favor is that its number of school-age members continues each year to break new records—kids now make up well over half of USCF membership. But the great majority of these kids don't stick with the organization. Finding the key to their retention is the Holy Grail of USCF's crusades.

This year's election, in which the heretofore "opposition" party (although there aren't real parties, only campaign alliances), captured all four open positions to join another like-spirited comrade who retained a seat on the seven-member board. Their group victory was so lopsided as to leave little doubt of majority wishes. The newly elected four are John McCrary (VP on the previous executive board and now president), Steve Shutt (vice president), Frank Camaratta (vice president for finance) and Frank Brady (of Bobby-Fischer biography fame). They join Helen Warren, Doris Barry and Bob Smith, whose terms continue for another two years.



Newly elected USCF president John McCrary begins with a working board majority swept into office as a group. A psychologist, his background will come in handy in the USCF's hotseat.



New VP for Finance has experience as both a former USCF VP and Treasurer during more financially successful years for the organization.

50-year repetition but no draws

Over the decades, the delegates' meetings have shown remarkably little turnover. Aging contemporaries now sit making the same old political moves against each other, like two lifelong over-the-board opponents playing out an often repeated opening, without ever conceding a draw. On Sunday—the second and final day of the actual meeting, Jerry Hanken, a longtime delegate and former board member, came to the microphone to announce that he was wearing black in memory of his revered 12-day US Open format



(Framingham used the more recent 9-day format, containing the entire three-ring circus of events within one workweek and two sandwiching weekends). Was the Open format on the meeting agenda? No, but it was an ancient wound from lost battles, a “sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,” so the wizened jousting pulled up his hauberk to reveal the scar. And so it went, new fights blending in with old slights. [Photo: *Jerry Hanken as USCF delegate, in more colorful dress.*]

One member, one dope

The new system of USCF universal suffrage is known as “OMOV,” or “One Member, One Vote.” The adoption of direct representation has for years been stalled in counterarguments that the enlarged constituency would be grossly uninformed—the same argument our country's founding fathers successfully made in favor of the Electoral College. (But let's take one election fallout at a time!) This year, in the vocabulary and context of the debate over drug testing in chess, the argument could be dubbed “One member, one dope.”

Another traditional counterpoint to OMOV is the claim that with such a large group of voters, only candidates who are either rich enough to afford huge mailings or who already enjoy widespread name recognition will be successful. Again, one must admit those possibilities. But the movement toward direct elections on all levels seems worldwide.

Beginning with the next election in 2003, all USCF members in an adult (*Chess-life* receiving) category, may cast votes directly for the USCF executive board. This method replaces the representative system in which about 540 voters, elected by members within each state, chose the board. The previous system was itself a reform that took place in 1999. Under years of pressure to enact a more directly democratic system, the USCF governors had passed what was known as “SOMOV.” (The “S” is for “state”). Before 1999, members of the state associations selected their voting representatives according to their will.

Tempest in a test tube—coffee jitters or genius?

Should chess competitors have to take drug tests, as many professional athletes, and even many corporate employees are required to do? Many chess players are libertarian in spirit. In fact, your co-authors don’t mind that label at all. GM Joel Benjamin—current US Champion and co-champion of the 2001 US Open—made the point that drugs don’t help humans play better chess. Dr. Stephen Press, Vice President of the FIDE Medical Commission and Director-General of the FIDE Commission Secretariat, came to the USCF convention to address the delegates on this subject. He told another story. Press said there were drugs that could indeed artificially enhance a human’s ability to focus on a mental problem, and that even coffee is such a substance. [Photo: *Dr. Stephen Press, VP of FIDE’s Medical Commission—would FIDE replace USCF if the US Federation rejected “anti-doping” regulations?*]



Press explained that substances were banned if they met two requirements—they artificially helped human performance relevant to the competition and they were deleterious to the health of the competitors. So how does this relate to coffee? It’s all in the blood levels. A two-hundred-pound male player could probably drink seven cups of coffee, Press said, and pass java-judgment, while a petite female competitor who drank much less would likely flunk.

But the presentation then strayed into some strong-arm tactics. Press told the delegates that FIDE has spent millions of dollars to get chess accepted into the International Olympics, and if USCF took a

hard stand in opposition, FIDE could decide to replace a national federation with a more pliable group from the same country.

In the end, the delegates passed two motions. One stated that USCF looked with disfavor on drug-testing in chess and urged FIDE to use such testing only if it is necessary to get chess into the Olympics. The other motion directed USCF's FIDE representatives to work against drug-testing in chess. The sausage was ground in a democratic and pragmatic way.

LMA—"Lots of Money for the Asking"?

From the early 70s into the 80s, USCF sold about 10,000 life memberships without setting aside a penny to recognize and subsidize this commitment. Then, when its sales program took off, some of the profits were used to pay off the mortgage on USCF's New Windsor office building. More income from sales was put away in a special investment account. This account, plus the value of the building, became the Life Member Asset (LMA) fund. In the mid-1990s, its value reached above two million dollars. It never amounted to the true, actuarially determined value of the commitment to 10,000 life members, but it was a good beginning and it was growing. A special committee was formed, appointed annually by the delegates—making the LMA's "watchdogs" independent of the Executive Board. The money was a long time coming, and most wanted it invested and conserved.

But with years of losing money, and a lot of it, from 1997 to 2000, USCF has survived largely by borrowing from the LMA fund—which remains an asset on USCF's own books, even though the LMA Committee stands as a firewall between USCF operations and the cash. Just recently, USCF's bank called in the outstanding loan of more than \$300,000, denying further credit. So the LMA lent even more money, enough to pay off the loan.

Former USCF Treasurer (twice) Tony Cottell showed up in Framingham, after missing a number of annual conventions, to support his motion on the agenda to remove the LMA fund from USCF's coffers altogether, putting it in a separate charitable organization, with a separate board of directors, to be comprised of former presidents and treasurers. The idea had considerable support until Cottell offered a substitution to his own motion that would simply ban further borrowing from the LMA fund. At least some of the supporters of the original idea were surprised and disappointed. The second idea would leave USCF without any financial support system at a time when it has little cash flow and no other certain source of credit. Support for the former treasurer's initiative collapsed. The remaining LMA money stays on USCF's balance sheet. As usual, the delegates named the independent committee to watchdog the fund.



Before & after: Tony Cottell (l.) returns tanned, rested & ready. Tony (r.) reacts after his motion to separate LMA assets from USCF's balance sheet is rejected by fellow delegates.



Peter Kurzdorfer, *Chess Life* editor Kurzdorfer gave his annual report to the delegates, who liked his characteristic cards-on-the-table approach.



Some delegates remain upbeat: Beatrice Marinello, organizer of the 2001 US Chessathon, with US Chess Trust president Frank Niro.

The World Chess Hall of Fame

Excalibur Electronics president Shane Samole made a video presentation describing the World Chess Hall of Fame & Sidney Samole Museum. Its October 4-6 grand opening is a universally anticipated shot-in-the-arm for chess in the United States. The Museum's opening will itself be history-making. It kicks off with a dinner at which the first five world hall of famers—Morphy, Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca and Fischer—will be officially inducted, along with the US' 31st, GM Lubosh Kavalek. Three-time US champion Yasser Seirwan, GM Maurice Ashley and popular author Bruce Pandolfini will be just a few of the greats on hand. Private tours of the Hall for those attending the induction dinner and a golf tournament follow the next day. Then on Saturday, October 6, Miami's mayor will cut the ribbon while the Florida Renaissance Historical Society acts out a game between hall of famers, while other greats give a simul under the Hall's 45-foot rook tower.



The World Chess Hall of Fame, a striking landmark visible from the Florida Turnpike. The Grand Opening is October 4-6.

For information on the event, Email the World Chess Hall of Fame's Executive Director, your *Hoist* co-author, Al Lawrence, at ChessMuseum@aol.com.

The real US Open winners

The play upstairs? Four shared top honors with 7.5 out of 9. GM Joel Benjamin, who broke Bobby Fischer's record by becoming a master at only 13 and went on to win all three scholastic titles—National Elementary (1976), National Junior High (1978) and National High School (1980-81)—, was one of the four. Benjamin won the US Junior Championship in 1980 and 1982, and the US Open in 1985, the same year he graduated from Yale with a degree in history. He earned the grandmaster title in 1986 and won the US Championship 1987, 1997 and 2001. He was IBM's consultant during Deep Blue's successful rematch with Garry Kasparov in 1997.



GM Alex Wojtkiewicz (Poland), IM Fabian Doettling (Germany) and GM Alex Stripunsky finished with Benjamin with 7½. A group of 23 players, including in their ranks GM John “Rocky” Fedorowicz, tied with 7 points. [Photo: John

Fedorowicz and IWM Jennifer Shahade (she scored 6 points) relax after a round. NM Mark Pinto, who scored 5½, stands in the backround.]

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