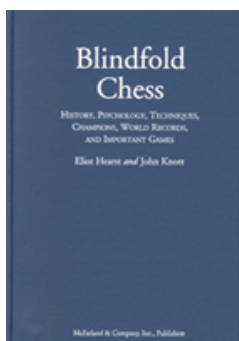




## COLUMNISTS

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Olimpiu G. Urcan



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Olimpiu G. Urcan's in-depth [review](#) of *Blindfold Chess*, by Eliot Hearst and John Knott (McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2009), appeared at [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) on September 23, 2009. In this companion piece, Urcan interviews Eliot Hearst and presents a text of a Blackburne interview that appeared in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* of November 16, 1889, along with three entertaining Blackburne games.

## Interview with Eliot Hearst

Following the publication of *Blindfold Chess* Eliot Hearst built a [website](#) of the same name. We contacted the American author earlier this month and he kindly agreed to be interviewed about the book. We offer the transcript of this email interview below, as well as the text of a Blackburne interview that appeared in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* of November 16, 1889, and three entertaining Blackburne games.

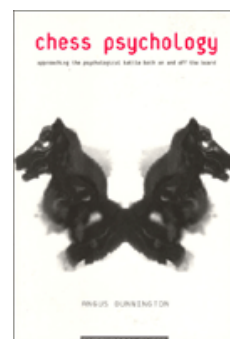
**Olimpiu G. Urcan:** Mr. Hearst, welcome to [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) and congratulations for receiving the USCF Book of the Year Award for *Blindfold Chess*. Let's begin with a question regarding your early exposure to blindfold chess: according to page four of the book (Preface and Acknowledgements) it was noted that your first exposure to actual blindfold chess came as a youngster assisting at USSR-USA 1945 Radio Match at the conclusion of which Reuben Fine played four blindfold games simultaneously with ten seconds per move [the same matter was discussed on page 113]. Do you have any personal insights (from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old boy at the time) that you can share with the readers about this episode?

**Eliot Hearst:** At the time of the USSR-USA radio match I was unacquainted with real topnotch chess events and had only been involved with chess to the extent of subscribing to *Chess Review* and then joining the Marshall Chess Club six months before the radio match (at virtually the same time as Larry Evans, who was the same age I was). At the radio match I was overawed at seeing all the best American players I had read about; thirteen-year-olds are very easily impressed! Fine's blindfold display had no special meaning for me in the midst of all the other exciting happenings I witnessed. I just figured if you were a leading master you could do almost anything in chess. It was only years later that I realized that probably no one else on the American team (or maybe in the world) could have accomplished what Fine did. No one has really tried to repeat his type of performance, and sixty-four years later I am not sure whether any current or past GM could do so.

**OGU:** Did your interest in blindfold chess persist after that? When did you first attempt to play blindfold chess yourself and how did that impact your early chess career?

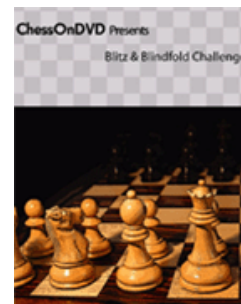
**EH:** I don't think I really developed any particular interest in blindfold chess until I began to study psychology seven years later and learned a great deal about human memory, imagery, and expertise. Then I started to realize and appreciate what a difficult task Fine had achieved. I occasionally played single blindfold games with other friends (both of us not having sight of the board). I recall a tough ("friendly"!?) blindfold battle with Larry Evans, which lasted a few hours. I don't remember who won, but I recall that I had a great deal of trouble getting to sleep

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afterwards (as we mention in our book, insomnia is an initial problem for most blindfold experts, which they eventually learn to handle, in ways described in our book). Blindfold chess had little impact on my chess career, since I quit serious chess about forty years ago to devote myself to psychology and my growing family. At parties I sometimes played a blindfold game or two with friends; I think the most I ever tried was three games, which I was able to handle. Right after I quit serious chess I began to collect information about blindfold chess, not so that I could play it but so that eventually I could write about it from a historical, psychological, and chessical point of view. You can see how long it took for a book to eventually emerge!

**OGU:** The book is structured in three main parts: history, psychology/techniques, and a game collection. During the genesis of the book, did you and Knott have an alternative structure? One would think that with such a lengthy topic, timeline, and wealth of material, that structuring it and the process of selection could be troublesome...

**EH:** I don't think we ever thought of using any other structure than the three main parts you mention. The problem was how to select, organize, and place in a logical order the subsections in each of the three. When we had finished a complete draft of the book McFarland Publishers said that we had to cut about 10,000-15,000 words from the book or they would have to charge close to \$100 for it! That created quite a headache, as it was painful to delete some topics and items that we thought well worth including. But now I think the book is better with the deletions: It is not packed with so much detail and that makes it more readable (and considerably less costly) for buyers of chess books, psychologists, computer scientists, and members of the general public interested in some of the greatest feats of human memory ever achieved.

**OGU:** Defining what a "world record" in blindfold chess should be was quite a difficult task. Your book offers extensive reflections based on past experiences as well as a document drafted on this matter. But who has the final say when it comes to acknowledging a world record in this field? National chess organizations, FIDE?

**EH:** We pointed out that the major, if not the only criterion, for deciding on whether someone has set a new world record has always been merely the total number of opponents taken on simultaneously without sight of any of the boards. But Alekhine and Réti argued over whether the percentage of points scored should override the sheer number, in cases where the number of games was almost equal (Alekhine played twenty-eight in Paris in 1925, scoring 83.9%, and a week later Réti played twenty-nine in Sao Paulo, scoring 81%). Each side has a reasonable argument, as we discussed this controversy in our book (it is interesting that the blindfold record meant so much to these world-class regular players). Another factor that certainly ought to be considered is the strength of the opposition. ELO ratings were of course not available for any opponents during the time up to when Najdorf set the generally accepted record of forty-five games in 1947. If someone tried to set a world record now, probably a good number of the opponents would have some established national or FIDE rating, which could enable easier comparisons of supposed world record performances. Many writers have stated that Pillsbury's record of playing twenty-one at Hannover, Germany in 1902 was the greatest simultaneous blindfold achievement of all time, because his opponents came from the tier of masters and experts that were not considered good enough to play in the major regular tournament there, but played in the second-level tournaments. But Pillsbury scored +3, -7, =11 for a winning percentage of only 40.5%. In our book we argue that Alekhine's new world record of twenty-six in New York in 1924 involved extremely strong opposition, and he scored +16, -5, +5, a winning percentage of 71.2%. We personally consider this the greatest achievement in simultaneous blindfold history, but without an objective measure of the strength of each opponent in each of the two exhibitions it is hard to make a final, decisive judgment. One way future researchers

could make progress in evaluating this issue is to use the scores of the games we make available in our book to obtain “subjective” ratings from contemporary masters as to the strength of opponents in various record-setting displays (unfortunately, not all the games scores are available for all such exhibitions, for example, Alekhine’s 1924 display).

We do supply the names of all opponents wherever possible and at places in the book experts familiar with many of the players’ names and records estimated their strengths for us. Still, no definitive answers were possible. Also, some record-setters played much more quickly than others. Should this factor be taken into account in evaluating performance? Please note in that in our Appendix B we propose tentative rules to be followed in serious attempts at blindfold records. We could find very, very few displays in which clear rules were spelled out beforehand. To answer your specific question, I believe FIDE should be the organization to establish clear rules and to decide on whether a new record has been set. The rules of national federations might well vary, making comparisons of various “records” difficult.

**OGU:** Regarding the historical essay of the book (especially the late nineteenth century - early twentieth century section): you mention that one of the things that helped leading players in breaking records at blindfold play was their familiarity with mnemonic techniques. Did you find concrete evidence that players such as Pillsbury or Blackburne actually read materials on mnemonic techniques and conducted research to better their memory and then applied their new skills to increasing the number of boards? Or is it just a reasonable speculation?

**EH:** Once you get beyond ten or fifteen games all record-setters set up memory schemes to keep the different games separate and distinctive. This was usually done by pre-planning a sequence of openings to play on each successive board number. We give many examples in our book. In this sense “mnemonic techniques” were widespread. Our main references to memory systems apply to such feats as Pillsbury’s, who could memorize fairly long lists of difficult words, or name missing cards in a deck when told the ones present in a portion of the pack. All this while in the midst of playing a full-length blindfold chess exhibition! Pillsbury was apparently the only record-holder to try and achieve such amazing non-chess memory feats. It is very likely that when Pillsbury essentially stopped giving blindfold displays from 1894-98 he studied various mnemonic techniques, some used in ancient times by speakers who had no way to write out their remarks beforehand. Learning these techniques undoubtedly helped him perform the non-chess memory feats just mentioned and probably were useful in keeping different boards separate in his blindfold displays. In our book we mention books on “how to develop an exceptional memory” using such techniques (to memorize shopping lists, people’s names, etc.). Tales of non-chess memory feats that various players like Blackburne reported were mostly mentioned in their own personal reports, not subjected to public view and corroboration like Pillsbury’s. So their validity is harder to accept. When psychologists have tested the memories of master chessplayers, the results have quite consistently shown that they outperform non-chessplayers only on memory tasks involving chess-related material. Their memory scores on standard, non-chess-related tests are no better than non-chessplayers [see an entry on our website that describes [Alekhine’s memory performance](#) on non-chess material, as studied by the famous Swiss psychologist, Edouard Claparede. Alekhine did no better than an average person. However, he was terrific in remembering chess positions he could view for only fifteen seconds, some of them apparently completely random positions]. Koltanowski often performed the Knight’s Tour (moving a knight from a particular starting square named by the audience and never returning to the same square twice while moving it to the other sixty-three squares) after his blindfold displays. This is easy to do as far as the details of the Knight’s Tour are concerned, but he also had members of the audience write names and phone numbers on various squares beforehand and he would call these items off as he moved the knight from square to

square, of course with the board not being visible to him. We do not know what mnemonic techniques he used in accomplishing this feat or how long he could study the item-filled board before he started. Quite a feat, though.

**OGU:** What do you think of the late nineteenth century - early twentieth century paradox regarding blindfold chess: while masses of people were amazed by such displays, they also had deeply pre-conceived notions about the ways in which practicing blindfold chess damaged someone's brain. The misfortunes of chess players were then used to justify the opinion that chess in general (and blindfold chess in particular) was detrimental to someone's health and success in leading a normal life. To some extent, such views are still held today.

**EH:** We have a section of the book devoted to possible "health hazards" caused by playing blindfold chess. There we investigated in detail the relatively early deaths and possible mental illnesses of the five most commonly mentioned examples of the supposed injurious effects of playing blindfold displays: de la Bourdonnais, Kieseritzky, Morphy, Zukertort, and Pillsbury. We concluded that in each case having played blindfold chess had little or nothing to do with their early deaths or mental states. The only effect of blindfold chess that is widely reported by champions is the insomnia that they suffer after their displays, especially when they begin giving serious exhibitions. Usually they find ways to conquer this problem (Koltanowski admitted that he sometimes deliberately got drunk right after an exhibition, for example). To be noted is the fact that the two most recent world-record-holders, Koltanowski and Najdorf, lived to be ninety-six and eighty-seven years old respectively, and they maintained their basic enthusiasm and keen cognitive powers almost to the end of their lives. It is true that Capablanca and Kasparov were concerned that blindfold play might drive them mad and they tended to avoid such play. Kasparov is the only one of the world's great players who has refused to play in the annual round-robin Amber blindfold tourneys, for that reason. This is a surprise because he would have to play only one blindfold game at a time and he certainly could handle that. Even in regular tournament games he often stared at the ceiling while analyzing, which is something like playing blindfold! Whether serious regular chess affects your health and normality is a question that I will leave for our readers to decide. I know of no evidence that this is the case. Incidentally, Capablanca died at the same age (fifty-three) as Alekhine, the former avoiding blindfold play and the latter playing it often. Obviously other factors were involved in their relatively early deaths.

**OGU:** Do you consider Alexander Alekhine the best blindfold player of all time? If so, why? Also, who do you consider to be the five best blindfold players?

**EH:** I think everyone who has seriously studied blindfold play thinks Alekhine outshines all others. Koltanowski said so very specifically in his writings and when I visited the Amber tourney in Nice last year the masters I spoke to invariably named him as the best ever. At Nice I discussed blindfold chess and its history with GM Vlastimil Hort, who stated that he has given more blindfold displays of six to sixteen boards, from his youth to the present day, than anyone else in Europe; he is now sixty-five years old. When asked who was the greatest blindfold player of all time it took him less than a millisecond to answer: "Alekhine, of course!" Unlike other blindfold players, Alekhine took no quick draws and played almost every game to a decisive finish. He made very few errors and some of his games were so good that he included them in collections of his best games. When I studied all the games in our book, I thought Alekhine played many finer blindfold games than anyone else. My votes would go to Alekhine, Najdorf, Pillsbury, Réti, and Fine as the best five blindfold players of all time. We would be very interested in the views of readers on these choices. Votes can be sent to our [website](#) and after a few months I will tabulate the results and publish interesting

comments from readers about their choices.

**OGU:** Based on your knowledge in the field, are we going to see further scientific studies connecting psychology and chess study? Are there any psychologists who plan to conduct systematic chess-related studies?

**EH:** Psychologists have performed many studies relating chess (blindfold and otherwise) to cognitive and behavioral skills. Some psychologists of the recent past have even stated that chess is to the study of cognitive science as the fruit fly (*drosophila*) was to genetics, both extremely important in furthering understanding of the respective scientific fields. There are a good number of contemporary psychologists who publish research on the psychology of regular and blindfold chess. I hate to name names off the top of my head because I will certainly leave someone important out, but here are a few: Fernand Gobet, Periti Saariluoma, Christopher Chabris, Neil Charness, and K. Anders Ericsson. I hope those omitted will forgive me and write me a (friendly) note about their omission so that I can list them on our website.

**OGU:** How do you see the future of blindfold chess? Is the large blindfold chess exhibition a fading art?

**EH:** Only eight players have played twenty or more games simultaneously since 1954 and no one has played more than twenty-eight (see p. 116 ff of our book for details). However, the Amber tournaments have stimulated interest in blindfold play, which has led to a good number of players taking on as many as ten or twelve opponents at once. Young GMs like Hikaru Nakamura and Magnus Carlsen have given recent blindfold simulums. The German master Marc Lang recently played fifteen at once and intends to break the German record of twenty-two by playing at least twenty-three later this year. Woman's GM Jennifer Shahade wrote me last week that she is arranging for a blindfold display of at least five boards by a leading woman GM as part of the upcoming U.S. Women's Championship (it is interesting that neither I nor Edward Winter could so far discover any serious, well-regulated display by a woman. This may be the first such case! If anyone knows of a previous one, let us know). So I think, quite to the contrary of your question's implication, blindfold simulums are on the rise. Many writers and players have said that this is the most spectacular form of chess. However, I don't think today's players (or their opponents) will want to expose themselves to the rigors of a thirty-plus games display, which could take much more than twelve hours, especially when there are easier ways to make a living in chess now. And the attention spans of people today are probably not as great as when the greatest exhibitions of the past were held. I think there will be a good number of displays of ten or twelve boards, which can be completed in a reasonable amount of time and spectators will certainly enjoy them. As a final note the annual Amber blindfold tournaments attract the very best players in the world and are observed on computer sites by many, many chess fans. Whatever the format of blindfold events, they will continue to be of great interest to the chess public.

**OGU:** Many thanks for this brief interview, Mr. Hearst.

**EH:** Thank you and all the best to [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) readers.

Here is the text of a Blackburne interview that appeared in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* of November 16, 1889. The editor of the chess column was Robert J. Buckley and it seems most likely that he was the one who interviewed the English master.

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## THE CHESS CHAMPION IN BIRMINGHAM

### MR. BLACKBURNE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME

No chess player of ancient or modern times, of whatever country, or whether amateur or professional, has ever attracted one tithe of the popular admiration which falls to the share of Mr. J.H. Blackburne. This is partly due to his exceptional ability as a blindfold player, in which department of the game he is admittedly without a rival. But his popularity is also due to his position as the chosen representative of English chess in the great international combats which from time to time take place in the principal capitals of Europe. During these great contests, the reports of Blackburne's doings are perused with almost breathless interest by British amateurs at home and abroad, and his brilliant terminations are dashed to the uttermost ends of the earth. Mr. Blackburne exhibited his skill as a blind-fold player at the Midland Institute, under the auspices of the Birmingham [Chess] Club last week. As Mr. Blackburne has always something to say of interest to chess players, our representative had an interview with him. After some preliminary remarks, having reference *[sic]* to his first visit to our town twenty-five years ago, the champion was asked: -

"How does the strength of our present players compare with those you met during your earlier visits?"

"The present players are incomparably stronger. This result is no doubt owing to the large number of excellent treatises on the science of the game now available, amongst which one of the best is undoubtedly that of Mr. W. Cook, of the Birmingham Club, whose 'Synopsis of the chess openings' has attained, as you are aware, quite a world-wide fame."

"What effect does the present practice of book-study produce on your performances?"

"To make them much longer and infinitely more arduous to myself. Formerly, in the old unscientific times, I more frequently caught my opponents napping in the openings, after which a win became comparatively easy, but at the present day amateurs will frequently play moves which the scientific analysis of centuries has demonstrated to be the best possible, until a very advanced stage of the game, and I have to wait until the ... [illegible] knowledge has expended itself before attempting ...n [illegible] by superior strategy. This is why so many games are drawn by mutual consent as the reports say, ... [illegible] to the lateness of the hour."

"Do you find the efforts of playing blindfold eight, twelve, or fifteen games fatiguing?"

"Fatiguing, certainly, but not exhausting. Five or six hours close attention to anything is tiring enough; the only disagreeable result is extreme wakefulness, owing, no doubt, to brain excitement. I cannot sleep after a blindfold performance until six or eight hours have elapsed."

"Do you find simultaneous play over the board very wearisome?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, I rather enjoy it. Simultaneous play I regard merely as fun, and I always play 'larkishly,' *[sic]* except with the strongest players. This is why it so frequently happens that the worst players win. A long evening's play tries *[sic]* me physically, because you see I am rather tall. Gunsberg and Steinitz, being short men, find this kind of play much less laborious, because during their peripatetic performances their eyes come within reasonable distance of the board, while I have to stoop for every move. If you will calculate on thirty games, each containing on an average thirty-five moves, you will find that I have to stoop over eleven hundred times, which alone would be a fair evening's work. Then again, at a simultaneous exhibition, the players frequently provide their own boards and pieces, the result being that no two are alike in size or pattern. This was my recent experience in a mining district; one board would be 40 inches across, with pieces of corresponding magnitude, while the next would cover about one-tenth of

that area, with the pieces huddled up in apparent confusion. Other boards and men were home made, and I was constantly puzzled to distinguish the pieces, and was frequently compelled to ascertain their names from the player, who was also the manufacturer.”

“I do not quite understand how it happens that bad players sometimes win when good players lose.”

“That statement relates to simultaneous performances only, when the weaker players open so badly that I am apt to think anything will do, and esteeming their skill thus lightly give little attention to their game, and so lose, while the players who open scientifically and discover symptoms of skill of course need my best attention – and get it. But I do not care in the least who wins in the concurrent games over the board. The blindfold games, on the contrary, I endeavour to win, because my opponents are invariably selected from the strongest amateurs of the district, and any win they may secure is naturally ascribed to their skill, whereas people are only amused at the victories of book players, who occasionally obtain a ‘snap’ win in the concurrent over the board games.”

“What are your recent experiences in America?”

“I was not particularly comfortable while there. The chess amateurs are hearty and hospitable, but a worse place than New York for a great chess tournament could hardly be found. The incessant rush and roar of the elevated railway trains, which thunder along every two minutes, distract the attention and upset the nerves of the average chess player.”

“Do you find chess advancing at all?”

“Certainly, and with immense rapidity. Why, during the last five years, the various chess works published must number many hundreds, many of them very large and formidable compendiums of analysis. I scarcely ever travel without hearing chess conversations. Only last Thursday, while travelling from Banbury to Dudley, a fellow passenger told me all about the coming Blackburne performances at the latter place, invited me to witness them, asked if I played, and promised to use his influence to accommodate me with a board!”

“How was our faculty for blindfold play first discovered?”

“Paulssen [*sic*] was giving blindfold performances in Manchester, and I thought I would try. This was in 1861. I first played one game only, then two, and succeeding very fairly, a friend introduced me to the Athenaeum Club, where I played three, one of which I am glad to see in Saturday’s *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*. I had quite lost the game, which I much wished to have for my coming work called ‘Blackburne’s Blindfold Brilliances.’ Very soon after the three game performance I tried ten, then fifteen. I offered to play Dr. Zukertort a match of ten simultaneous games, neither player to see the board, but he did not accept the challenge. I have played Steinitz one game *sans voir*. This I won.”

“Do you find any unfair play when thirty games or so are going on concurrently?”

“Never, [a] little consultation with lookers on I do not object to. As a rule, it rather assists me. Sometimes, indeed, a player will shift the piece to better examine the position, and will not replace them correctly, but I do this for him when next I come round. A most amusing incident took place during my last visit to the Birmingham St. George’s, when in one game I obtained a great attack and won very easily. But on going over the game I found that I had somehow made two moves to my opponent’s one, with most disastrous results for him, as you may suppose.”

“Have you occasionally met with amateurs who have devoted too much time to chess?”



“If you mean players who neglect their life’s business for a mere amusement, I answer, unfortunately may; and I think these gentlemen should give up the game, which is too absorbing for their strength of mind, or” – and here the champion chuckled – “they should be relegated to an asylum for incurable chessomaniacs.”

With which piece of profound wisdom the great chess master relapsed into a brilliant silence.

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Here are three entertaining Blackburne games:

**Joseph Henry Blackburne – J. Fish**

Blindfold Simultaneous at Eight Boards

Manchester, 9 November 1878

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Bc5 5.Be3 Qf6 6.c3 Nge7 7.Bc4 0–0 8.0–0 d6 9.f4 Be6 10.Bb5 a6 11.Ba4 b5 12.Bc2 Bc4 13.Rf3 Nxd4 14.cxd4 Bb6 15.b3 Be6 16.f5 Bd7 17.Nc3 Bc6 18.Rg3 h6 19.Kh1 Kh8 20.Qh5 Ng8 21.Ne2 d5 22.e5 Qd8 23.f6 g6**



**24.Bxh6 Nxf6 25.exf6 gxf6 26.Bg7+ Kg8 27.Rg5 1-0** [Source: *Land and Water*, November 23, 1878]

**Joseph Henry Blackburne – Stiebel**

Blindfold Simultaneous at Eight Boards

London, Mouflet’s Hotel, 25 January 1879

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Bd3 0–0 7.0–0 Bxc3 8.bxc3 Ne4 9.c4 Bg4 10.cxd5 Qxd5 11.c4 Qc6 12.Qc2 Bxf3 13.gxf3 Nf6 14.d5 Qd6 15.Kh1 Nbd7 16.Rg1 Ne5 17.Bb2 Nxf3**



**18.Bxh7+ Kh8 19.Rg3 Rae8 20.Rxf3 Nxh7 21.Rg1 Nf6** White mates in four moves [Source: *Land and Water*, February 15, 1879].

**Joseph Henry Blackburne – Brown**

Blindfold Simultaneous at Seven Boards

Croydon, 22 April 1879



1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.b4 Bxb4 5.c3 Bc5 6.0-0 d6 7.d4 exd4 8.cxd4 Bb6 9.Nc3 Na5 10.Bd3 Ne7 11.d5 0-0 12.Bb2 Ng6 13.Ne2 Qe8 14.Qd2 Ne5 15.Nxe5 dxe5 16.Bc3 Qa4 17.Bxe5 Nc4 18.Bxc4 Qxc4 19.Ng3 f6 20.Rac1 Qb5 21.Bc3 Qe8 22.Kh1 Bg4 23.h3 Bh5 24.f4 Rd8



25.e5 fxe5 26.fxe5 Bf7 27.e6 Bxe6 28.Qg5 1-0 [Source: *Land and Water*, April 26, 1879].

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**Postscript** The author wishes to thank Joost van Winsen (The Netherlands) for help with the rare Blackburne items featured in the present column.

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### [Order](#) *Blindfold Chess*

by Eliot Hearst and John Knott

Readers who order before 11:59 p.m. EST, Sunday can save 15% off the cover price of *Blindfold Chess*, just enter the coupon code “blind15” (without the quotes) at checkout to receive *Blindfold Chess* at the incredibly low price of \$55.25. This offer is good while supply lasts and expires September 28.

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