

# beating Russia at its own game?

A championship player  
discusses Bobby Fischer and the  
fine and fun points of chess



By Kenneth Rogoff, 19, Rochester, New York

Sometime this month you may hear about an important contest taking place in Reykjavik, Iceland. It will last about seven weeks, involve \$125,000 in prize money, and will pit two of the world's most powerful nations against each other. If all goes as scheduled, Bobby Fischer, twenty-nine, of the United States, will play Boris Spassky, thirty-five, of the Soviet Union, for the world chess championship in what could become the most publicized sporting event since the Ali-Frazier prizefight in 1971.

During the past few years, chess has had a remarkable surge of popularity in the United States. The number of tournament players has increased fivefold, club membership has doubled, and it's estimated that more than two million chess sets are being sold annually.

It's difficult to explain why this sport has become so popular—without doubt Bobby Fischer's renown has been largely responsible—but hopefully, with all the recent publicity, many of the old myths about the game will be dispelled.

For some reason or other, people have always liked to stereotype chess players. They usually imagine two old men hunched over a chessboard in a darkened room filled with cobwebs. One player has been waiting for the other to move for the past five years, but unbeknownst to him, his opponent has been dead for three of them!

Other misconceptions include the notion that chess is a "royal" game, open to "intellectuals only." Perhaps this concept dates back to the fourteenth century when chess was played primarily in the palaces

of Europe, or arose from the fact that the game itself involves pieces with names like king, queen, bishop and knight (all with varying degrees of "power"). Whatever the reason, anyone from prince to pauper can play, and far more important to the player than a brilliant mathematical mind is the ability to concentrate over long periods of time.

A lot of people, in fact, would probably be very surprised to watch an actual tournament in progress. The participants are neither old, infirm nor especially intellectual. Despite a QUIET PLEASE sign, the room is usually noisy, and so many players are young that there really is no such thing as a "child prodigy" in chess.

Youth, ironically, is a tremendous advantage. One of the common misconceptions about chess is that the longer you play, the better you'll get. This simply is not true. For one thing, you can never learn as much as there is to know about chess: although the aim of the game always remains the same (to capture or "checkmate" your opponent's king), the number of possible moves and combinations of moves is infinite. For another, the methods of attack and defense are continually evolving or being changed, and as soon as you learn one system, you find out it's been replaced by another.

That's why younger players sometimes have more practical current information at their command than older, more experienced masters who haven't been able to keep up with the latest developments.

They also have the advantage of good health on their side. You need plenty of stamina to get through an often long and difficult tournament and many chess players (myself included) do a lot of exercising before a match—tennis, jogging, basketball. Fischer goes horseback riding and Spassky swims one hundred laps a day.

It may seem natural to most people that an American should be pitted against a Russian for the world championship title in chess—after all, aren't we supposed to be the two biggest and best countries at everything?—but actually up until now, the United States has had few players qualified to compete. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, boasts more than five million tournament players (to our 25,000) and for twenty-five years not only the world champion but the challenger has been Russian.

Ice hockey, however, is rapidly taking over as the national sport in the Soviet Union, and with the increasing popularity of chess in our own country—as well as the emergence of players like Bobby Fischer—we may yet beat Russia at its own game.

One deciding point will be the coming competition in Iceland. To win, our man will have to score twelve and a half points in his twenty-four game match (each game counts a point; a draw, half a point) against Spassky, the current world champion. Bobby, however, is supremely confident he can win, and—in a game in which self-assurance and intuition play a much larger part than you would imagine

—I sure wouldn't want to be the one to bet against him. I first met Bobby when he was sitting in on the U.S. Junior Championship games in New York. He was highly enthusiastic about the matches and used to analyze the moves afterward with us. I still feel, though, that I know more about him from reading his chess games than talking to him personally. He's a chess "purist," wants to find the perfect move in every position, and believes it can be done.

Spassky, however, will be a hard man to beat. Russian players train very seriously. They get lots of exercise—walking, running—and sometimes are even sent to a resort for a couple of weeks to get in the best possible physical condition. So you can be sure Spassky will be in top form when he sits down to play the championship match.

You may not want to become another Bobby Fischer—or Boris Spassky, for that matter—but if you're interested in taking up chess, there are several ways you can go about it. It usually takes only half an hour to learn the basic moves (bishops move diagonally; rooks, horizontally or vertically . . .) and you can get a friend or parent to show them to you. I learned my first chess from a book when I was twelve—*Chess Strategy*, by Edward Lasker (Dover paperback, \$2.50)—which, incidentally, gives an excellent background in the theory of the game. The next two years I put in a tremendous amount of work—playing several hours a day, reading about sixty or seventy books on chess, and entering some eight to ten tournaments a year (about fifty-five games in all).

Another good way to learn is to join a club. Most cities (and many schools) have chess clubs, and they provide a fine opportunity to meet a variety of players.

You might also want to enter a few weekend tournaments. This could mean a bit of traveling—even as far as Europe eventually for some of the more important matches—but traveling is half the fun, and some people don't even go to play!

When I first started to compete, I economized by not eating at all. I had read in a Sherlock Holmes book that food distracted blood away from your brain, and that you could concentrate better without eating. That worked out all right for the two- and three-day tournaments, but when they began stretching into several weeks, I had to devise another strategy.

Less easy is finding a way to keep up with chess once you start going to college. Studies can take up a lot of your time, and you start developing other interests too . . . politics, tennis, ecology, books. Besides I'm not sure I'd want to spend the rest of my life playing chess, anyway. It isn't the real world.

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