



CHESS BARBS

by Jude Acers, US Senior Master

War In Moscow 1974: Korchnoi and Karpov have it out; notes on Fischer and the world chess championship.

In past years I have done my level best to indicate to Berkeley Barb readers that chess players are delightful but a little crazy as well. The world's leading masters must develop a state of temporary insanity in order to play well and, indeed, to remain playing at all. You must be willing to kill your grandmother and her pet dog, forsake friends, ignore all professional reason to lead a long chess career. The creative rewards of trying to play chess well are very great. Nevertheless to attempt to make a living as a world chess championship contender is not pleasant and virtually destroyed such players as Carl Schlechter and, likely, Bobby Fischer as well.

Besides the physical needs of a player there must be nothing else left unattended to. You must keep abreast of the chess openings in the last one thousand games published by The Chessplayer of England. You must know those games cold if you are a world title contender. That takes care of your spare weekends right there Daddy-O.

Another consideration is the social scene of a top chess grandmaster. Absolutely required is a dynamite lady to put up with a meteoric temper tantrum maniacal chess hydra. The New York Times chess editor (and world chess grandmaster) Robert Byrne makes no bones about his interpretation of all Fischer's problems -- he has not taken any one of the numerous willing ladies in his fan club out to the dunes. There is no regular team worker, confidant. It is strictly Freudian analysis by Byrne and I happen to believe every word of it.

You can tell me until you are blue in the face that were Fischer to be involved with a woman, raise a family, etc., that Fischer would be ineffective as a world champion tomorrow morning. "Remember what happened to Samson when he got a haircut?" -- the evidence indicates otherwise, believe me. Fischer is ineffective as a chessplayer, requiring miracles of cooperation from his opponents and the chess organizers to even get to play at all. By any normal application of world chess federation rules he would be forfeited before breakfast.

Now the buck has stopped, the boom has dropped. No flexibility is provided in the coming world chess championship. Fischer will have to play on time or lose. He will have to be on the scene by June 1, 1975 or lose. He will have to flatly agree to a city and final money contract in writing. And it will have to be done by February at the latest. Time flies and all the evidence indicates that Bobby Fischer isn't going to play at all, just package the world title and send it back to the Soviet Union where, in all fairness, it probably belongs.

Fischer is well-liked by ladies, period. He towers in neat suits, angel complexion and has a positively unique physical ambulation -- you must notice this gentleman, ladies. No choice. He doesn't phone back later, though. Instead he gets on the plane and zooms. It's lonely but Fischer likes it that way. It works often. But, as you know, it could be costly if Spassky isn't a nice guy, if the president of the world chess federation doesn't cheat and allow you a couple of extra days to come to your senses. That could be the last time, I don't know.

Before discussing Fischer's future further just an arrogant little reminder that one full year before Fischer's world title bid in Iceland predicted exactly the score Fischer won by (12-1/2 - 8-1/2) and further said Fischer would never be able to finish the match if the rules were enforced. Right again. He lost the world title several times but thanks to Spassky's kindness it didn't matter.

My predictions this time? Karpov beats Fischer 6-5 or 6-4 at best in 35 games if the match goes all the way. Otherwise Karpov wins by forfeit. There is no way, repeat, no way that Bobby Fischer has a chance to beat Karpov in a fair match. Recent quote from Karpov: "Every regulation of the world federation will be enforced when I play Fischer. He will not be allowed any choice at all. I will see to that." It would be a ten million dollar match with television allowed if Fischer would only come to his senses. Fischer would also lose it. So what? Who in the hell cares? If you must go that's the way to go. Fischer deserves every cent of it.

What exactly does Fischer want? The answer is that Fischer wants to be sure, damn sure, that he doesn't play chess in a world championship match next year. Bent Larsen calls it "Fischer's non-chess maneuver" to avoid ever playing for the world title again. It is not because of any fear of losing (Fischer has been crushed before) that Fischer avoids play. It is the booking his body into one city, one hotel, four or even five months during a world title match. For Fischer paranoia strikes deep. There is no way, repeat, no way that Fischer could show up for every game, during every day of a world title match for months. Fischer will find a way to lose by forfeit.

Thus when Fischer asked the World Chess Federation for an endless match, no limit to the games until one player won 10 games outright he was guaranteeing that his opponent would win such a match. It simply meant that Fischer is out of it for good. F.I.D.E. It's not stupid, believe me.

The World Chess Federation figures there is some chance to get Fischer to play a few of the allotted thirty-five games in the coming title match. They also believe there is virtually no chance to get Fischer to play the fifty or even seventy games it would take in the unlikely event that he could defeat Karpov the way he wished. Can you imagine Fischer beating Karpov ten times in fifty games? Can you imagine Fischer showing up on time for all fifty games? Now you're beginning to get the picture of the simply unbelievable pressure both the World Chess Federation and Fischer are faced with

Consider the record. Against three of the top five players in the world Karpov has lost exactly two games in thirty eight times at bat by the time of this writing. Karpov is unbelievably hot right now. The man has positively to learn how to lose again. I know many players throughout the world that would like to have his problem?

Consider Fischer three years ago in his greatest hour. The Brooklyn wizard went through four of the top ten players in the world and lost exactly five games in forty two times at bat!

So you see, by any standard it's going to be fifty games before Fischer's desired match comes to an end even if both players lose more often than expected.

I do not for a moment believe that Fischer, badly out of practice, would be so foolish as to experiment with wild variations as he did in his early games with Boris Spassky. Fischer is a very shrewd customer. He is going to be holding on to that draw, neighbors. There is not going to be a hint of blood, complications or risk from Fischer unless he is very sure what is going on. He is going to play himself back into form with draws. But he will lose it. And it would be by forfeit or a four month long match which would not be pleasant at all.

This is my objective analysis. Now for my unobjective analysis. I hope Fischer has the greatest comeback of all time, get his ten million dollars and retires. And meets a hundred nice ladies ... And makes me a millionaire touring chess professional in the process!

The attention of the entire chess world has been fastened on Moscow where war is raging unabated between Karpov (age 24) and old man Victore (Korch-the-Torch) Korchnoi (age 48). Yes, for three months now they have been going at it hammer and tongs, and it is now a personal feud, meaning that things are back to normal in world chess. The winner becomes world champion automatically if Fischer forfeits next year.

Victor Korchnoi, quiet gentleman who has the greatest first prize record in chess history, (25 first prizes in top tourneys) would seem to be past his time, but someone has forgotten to tell Korch that he's old, that chess is supposedly a young man's game. In truth as long as a first rate grandmaster like Michael Botvinnik or Emmanuel Lasker is dying to play chess, takes care of health, gets eight hours sleep before master games there isn't going to be anybody in the world tough enough to defeat a sixty year old man. Look at the records. In their sixties both Botvinnik and Lasker actually went undefeated in the toughest tournaments in the world. I recall one unbelievable team tournament in which Botvinnik beat five of the world's top ten rated grandmasters in ten days, scoring first prize on board one against the best at age sixty!

Do you seriously believe that Fischer will be a Class C player in the year 2004? You will push out your king's pawn two squares and offer Fischer a draw on the first move of play, praying to the almighty God that he takes it. Nobody will be safe from Fischer when he is seventy years old in my opinion. He will be operating with sixty-two years of day in, day out knight-bishop-pawn power carefully worked out in his closet. You're going to have to have an awful lot of ammunition to take care of that old man -- even if he comes out of retirement after forty years of non-play. Think about it! The possibilities of Fischer-watching stagger the imagination, do they not?

The sudden, terrifying resurgence of Victor Korchnoi to the top three of world chess ratings is explained simply. He married a very nice lady named Bella two years ago, gave up smoking and world record drinking and went on a solid physical exercise program. The results are something to behold. Korchnoi is not messing around. He eliminated two famous opponents: Mecking, "the notorious heavy" of Brazil, and Tigran "the python" Petrosian in world record time. Petrosian wound up in the hospital with nervous exhaustion after a really tragic argument and match with Korchnoi.

Even though now losing to Karpov with but five games to go, Korchnoi has clearly forced Karpov to endure the full race to get his world chess title chance. The match may in fact have never ended if a no-limit to the games provision was allowed. They stop at twenty-four and who ever is ahead wins. It's going to go right down to the wire and both sides get sick every now and then to save their strength to kill each other in the stretch coming up this week. (Korchnoi is sick today as I write this.)

In order to set the stage for what is going on in Moscow I wish to print the true facts of the tremendous Petrosian-Korchnoi match earlier this year, a match that shot Korchnoi into the top three players in the world. Though the real story has been suppressed by all U.S.S.R. media sources, there were so many Yugoslavian and German witnesses that we now know that a verbal war rather than chess ended the contest!

Korchnoi played beautifully to achieve three wins, one loss, and one draw in the first five games against Tigran Petrosian in Odessa, April 12-24, 1974. Just after the fourth game Tigran Petrosian went to the match committee and requested in writing that Victor Korchnoi be asked not to move his leg up and down beneath the table so much! It was just a Korchnoi nervous habit and did not seem to disturb anything really. No noise or offence intended probably. But Petrosian mentioned that Korchnoi had actually kicked him beneath the table while reaching out to make a move. Surely it was an accident....

Korchnoi knew absolutely nothing of Petrosian's complaint throughout the night, and it was only upon arriving for the fifth game that he was shocked by the formal request to quit moving his leg in a kicking motion beneath the table! Korchnoi was furious but did not say anything to his opponent, beginning to make moves against Petrosian in the fifth game.

You're not going to believe what happened next and at the worst possible moment. Petrosian, while shifting in the chair to adjust his hearing aid, kicked Victor Korchnoi accidentally! As match officials looked on with complete horror and silence. Everybody knew the match could explode any second.

Korchnoi, now thoroughly in flames, sat there for a second and found what has to be one of the truly great one-liner punch outs of all times ... "Mister Petrosian, please look for your match chances above the chess table rather than below it." That's the real story, how a great match really ended -- never reported by the wire services.

Petrosian exploded, refused to continue the fifth game, resigned the match forthwith. It was sweet triumph for stoic, endure-everything Korchnoi who should have been world champion many years ago. His life time score against Fischer is even -- 2 wins, 2 draws, 2 losses. I will make no secret to my readers that my favorite chess grandmasters are Tal, Gligorich and Korchnoi. Even today I believe Korchnoi would beat Fischer in a fair match.

I feel that we should not leave the subject of Victor Korchnoi without reciting the most famous episode about him. As a young grandmaster Korchnoi had been severely criticized by the Soviet sport ministry for excessive drinking, smoking and women chasing. It was a national scandal. Korchnoi was forgiven because of his good nature and, far more important, because of his ferocious killing ability in the strongest chess tournaments in the world. (He won the Soviet national title three times.)

However Korchnoi was given a penalty work assignment -- he was sent to Siberia, literally -- to play in a minor masters' tournament. He was made to promise to properly condition himself throughout the chess tournament and not to play drunk out of his mind. All of this was to be under the supervision of the Russian master and chess trainer Osnos. But, alas, Osnos could not make the journey at the last moment. He had to content himself with seeing his young protege off at the Leningrad train station....

A month later Osnos received the electrifying score table -- twenty year old Korchnoi had crushed eleven straight masters to win the Siberian tournament! However there was no bill of expenses from the Siberian hotel and no comment from tournament officials about any abnormal behavior by the grandmaster. Osnos could not believe how wonderful it was. No bad news, only good news, no bills!

Many years later it was discovered by Osnos at a convention of Russian chess officials what had actually taken place. Korchnoi had arrived at the Siberian train station with a suitcase full of cigarettes, no extra clothes. He had discovered that the hotel where he was supposed to take lodging was some distance from the women and the town bar. His solution was simple. He never checked in; he virtually lived in the bar twelve straight days, grew his first beard, chain smoked, drank one bottle of vodka after another and murdered everybody in the chess tournament being held in the town hall across the street. That was the beginning of the Korchnoi legend. Korchnoi had given free chess lessons and exhibitions to stop bad conduct reports from ever getting out of Siberia. See, Korchnoi believes in total planning!

Korchnoi has been denied a world title match for many years simply because only three such chances occur in a twelve year period. The best tournaments often do not qualify a player for a world title match. In 1962 Fisher complained that the world championship should be placed on the line once a year. Korchnoi, too, bitterly resented the dearth of available world title shots which gave so few opportunities to play for the title. No matter how strong a player might be in Russia, only a few of the players are allowed to leave for the world zonal every four years.

Korchnoi's style is simple. Analyze every variation after every move. Complicate. Befuddle. Crush. Fear no evil because you are the meanest, well, you get the idea.

Moscow 1974 rages out of control now. During game 19, November 4-5, Karpov made a serious mistake in etiquette. He was leading by a precious three whole games against Korchnoi with only 6 games to go. He should have been serving lunch, coffee, and amenities to Korchnoi. He should have sent his personal limousine to fetch Korchnoi to the games. He should have been absolutely proper. Instead he stared into Korchnoi's face while he was deep in thought.

Korchnoi keeps a thermos of tea prepared by Bella near the board. He watches this thermos to be certain that nobody puts anything into it as he believes that Spassk probably was drugged in Iceland. (Honest!)

As Korchnoi looked up to check on his thermos bottle he noticed Karpov's eyes blazing away as if to hypnotize him! He called the referee over (Alberic O'Kelley of Belgium) and asked that Karpov be instructed to quit staring into his eyes! O'Kelley agreed with Korchnoi and made the request.

Now furious Karpov asked that the Korchnoi thermos bottle be moved off stage! And so on, so on. At this hour war is on in Moscow because Korchnoi defeated Karpov by angrily continuing a very drawish endgame until the equally angry Karpov made a very simple error, allowing a Korchnoi pawn to race towards promotion after two agonizing days of struggle. What a match! Karpov still heavily favored as we go to press, but if it goes to 3-2 ... maybe ... maybe.

The decided games of the world challengers match will be presented here next week. I cannot urge readers too strongly to review the games. Here indeed are the great players who are the real McCoy. More in coming weeks ... First player to win five games wins or leader in score wins after 24 games.