

Richard Shorman

Chess

PAUL MORPHY, AMERICA'S FIRST CHESS HERO

By C. J. S. Purdy

On June 22, 1837 was born Paul Charles Morphy in New Orleans, La. His great-grandfather was an Irishman, one Captain Michael Murphy. Originally an officer in the Queen's Royal Guard, he went Spanish and ultimately turned into Don Miguel Morphy, United States Consul at Malaga. His Irish-Spanish son, Don Diego Morphy, crossed the Atlantic and settled in New Orleans. On his mother's side, Morphy was French.

Paul learned the moves at 10, coached by his uncle, Ernest Morphy, "the chess king of New Orleans." When not quite 13, he played two off-hand games with the Hungarian master, Lowenthal. Morphy won one and drew the other!

At 20 he was called to the Bar. He could then speak four languages fluently, was a good mathematician and could recite nearly the whole civil code of Louisiana from memory. In the same year, 1857, he won the first American championship (knock-out) tournament, defeating Louis Paulsen in the final, 5-1 and two draws.

At 21 he visited Europe and proved himself the world's strongest chess player:

Morphy won a match from Lowenthal in London, 9-3 and two draws. Lowenthal had won the British Chess Association tournament at Manchester the previous year and won the same event soon after this match at Birmingham, ahead of Saunton.

Morphy defeated the Rev. John Owen at pawn and move, 5-0 plus two draws. Owen was a match for Saunton at these odds.

In Paris he defeated Daniel Harrwitz, 5-2 and two draws. Morphy lost only the first two games. Then he beat Adolf Anderssen, 7-2 and two draws, losing the first game and drawing the second before starting on his winning streak.

The best record obtained against him in Europe was that of Barnes, the English master, who played most of the games with Morphy soon after his arrival. The final result, all in off-hand play, was Morphy, 19 wins, Barnes, 7 wins and one draw. In off-hand play with Bird, Morphy's record was 11½-1½.

Saunton, after promising him a match, declined to play, thus considerably embittering the young American, who had come to Europe mainly for that purpose.

Back in America, Morphy announced his intention of never playing any of his countrymen at less than knight odds! Soon afterward, he beat James Thompson at these odds, losing the first three games, then winning five of the next six and drawing the other. This achievement has been called "one of the greatest feats of chess skill ever performed."

At the age of 22, Morphy offered to give the odds of pawn and move to any player in the world. Receiving no response, he declared his career as a chess player closed. Morphy still played a little chess privately and gave a blindfold exhibition in Havana in 1862, but in 1869 he abandoned playing entirely.

Some years later he became a victim of melancholia and lived the last 15 years of his life as a recluse. He died at 47.

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Whatever caused Morphy's derangement, it was not chess. He was never inordinately devoted to the game, and his doctors were unanimous in advising him to return to it.

The seeds of melancholia were already in Morphy's supersensitive nature. Being a member of a wealthy family, he never needed to earn a penny. This freedom from struggle left him free to brood on what troubles he had and magnify them and finally to conjure up entirely imaginary ones.

He was always taciturn and uncommunicative, even in youth, and this anti-social tendency drove him further and further into himself.

Having proved himself the greatest chess player in the world, he revolted against a world which, very naturally, insisted on regarding him simply as "the great chess player."

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Morphy was certainly the most remarkable chess genius that ever lived. Unlike modern American marvels, whose powers were already developed before they visited Europe by practice with dozens of master-strength players in their own country, Morphy lived when the standard of play in the United States was still very "new world." Yet, in this untutored chess domain he arose in his might, a chess Alexander, who was almost certainly the world's greatest player before he had played a single game on the other side of the Atlantic.

His performances in Europe, where he would frequently start off with several losses and then score an overwhelming victory, seem to show an almost super-human capacity to rise to any height that was demanded of him. When he returned to America, Morphy told a friend, "I played poorly, rashly; none of my opponents should have done as well as they did against me."

The truth of this statement is almost self-evident, since no player can produce his very best until he is full extended. The inference is that, if he could return today, Morphy would thoroughly master existing chess theory, just as he did in his own day.

Morphy was strong in all departments of the game. His endgame play was not impeccable, like Capablanca's, but it was scientific. His combinative ability has been equalled, perhaps by Anderssen in his own day, but it has probably never been surpassed.

His chief superiority over his contemporaries, however, lay in the opening and early middlegame. Reti declares that he was "the first position player." He was, at any rate, the first player to grasp fully the pre-eminent importance of rapid development in the open game.

This assessment quite upsets the popular notions about Morphy. The Parisian amateurs who watched him in action professed that Morphy was "not brilliant like La Bourdonnais, but 'solid,' close, and analytical!" In Morphy's day, the science of chess — on which individual chess art must be founded — was a secret, known intuitively in some degree by a few geniuses. Today much of it is an open book, or rather books. Books, books, and more books!

What manner of man was Morphy? Philip Sergeant in "Morphy Gleanings" contrasts him with Professor Anderssen, "massive in figure, with an honest voice, a sweet smile . . . excitable. Opposite him was Morphy, 'this boy of 21, five foot four inches in height, of slim figure and face like a young girl in her teens,' impassive, with eyes fixed steadfastly on the board, looking up, and then without exultation, only when he saw a win."

The Rev. G. A. MacDonnell wrote, "His brow was remarkably fine and massive, broad as well as lofty. His eyes were dark, neither prominent nor deeply set, but very luminous, and, better still, very pleasant in expression. His smile was delightful; it seemed to kindle up the brain-fuel that fed his eyes with light, and it made them shoot forth most brilliant rays."

Bird called him "the most undemonstrative young man I ever met."

HAYWARD CHESS FESTIVAL

USCF Certified Tournament Director Jerry Rogers will conduct the Hayward Chess Festival at the San Lorenzo Park Community Center, 1970 Via Buena Vista, Aug. 27-28. Cash prizes, QuadraChess sets and free USCF dues will be awarded according to section and number of players. Entry fee for the four round Swiss event is \$10 for USCF sections, \$5 for non-rated beginner (and under 16) section and \$3 for Quadra-Chess competition, if mailed to Hayward Chess Club, 19541 Times Ave., Hayward, Calif. 94541. Round one starts at 10 a.m., Aug. 27. Phone Jerry Rogers, 276-5754, 6-10 p.m. weekdays for further information.