

Richard Shorman

Chess

STEINITZ ON PAUL MORPHY

Just prior to his world championship match with Emanuel Lasker in 1894, Wilhelm Steinitz (undefeated since 1862) was interviewed by the *St. Louis Globe*. The reporter's personal observations on Steinitz lend an extra dimension to Steinitz's observations on Morphy.

When it became known, a short time ago, that Lasker had challenged the champion to a contest, it did not seem at all probable that the veteran would accept. He had no new trophies to win. He had not sprung into the arena at any extraordinary youthful age; he was past 30 when he won his first championship game. And the 27 years which had elapsed told heavily on his constitution. His answer was awaited with curious interest.

I paid a visit to Steinitz on the day he had determined to accept. He lives in a modest little house in the outskirts of Upper Montclair, N.J. His surroundings are as simple as his life is quiet.

He passes his day between two rooms, one of which he calls his workshop and the other his writing-room. Both preserve an utter disregard of any sort of order, and amid this bewildering litter of chess boards, scrap books, time clocks, a correspondence strewn pell-mell, and an extensive chess library, he works out his games and problems.

The personality of the man is one of curious interest. I had gone with certain preconceived notions, and when I met him I received one of those shocks with which the prepossession of such notions often brings.

None of his published portraits give a recognizable impression. I had in my mind the large powerful head, which his pictures show, and in some way I had expected to meet a man of massive build. . . .

Physically, Steinitz's proportions are Napoleonic — that is to say, he stands hardly 5 feet high. But his head is one that would interest a craniologist. It rises in something the shape of a flattened dome, high above the ears. Its longitudinal measurement, too, is notable, and his forehead is broad, ample, and inclined to be bulgy over the brows. If the modern chartmakers of the brain are correct, it is such a head as should make history of some sort.

We are told by the former that the centers of reflection, analysis, and thought lie at the front of the skull; the sensory and motor areas at the back. Development in both directions, therefore, indicates a highly organized well-balanced brain — perhaps the brain of a genius.

In any event it is indicative of marked mental powers of some sort, and the higher it stands above the ears, which are the base line of the brain, the greater is apt to be its power.

According to this, Steinitz's brain is one of large capacity for reflection, re-inforced by strong motive power — a combination that is essential if the mind is to be brought to its full working power. A large forehead alone is often simply the type of a dreamer.

Steinitz's manner is an odd mixture of freedom and reserve. His eyes are small, rather deep set, and twinkle brightly. If you ask a rather suggestive question, he regards you with a curious, half suspicious look, and then after a moment's reflection answers rapidly and freely. His talk is interesting, fresh and original. He is by no means a man of one idea. On the contrary, I found his range, alike of interest and information, wide, and his observations on many topics often spicy and unexpected. His sense of humor is entirely German, and a joke is gravely anticipated by: "I give you this anecdote." I failed to detect any of that individual egotism which is so often the characteristic of men who have won a great success in a clearly circumscribed field of activity.

Sitting before this man — perhaps not only the great exponent of chess living, but one who has exercised a greater influence on the game than any man who ever did live — I recalled, not unnaturally, the memory of that extraordinary genius who overran the chess world 30 years or more ago, a memory that still haunts either hemisphere. I said: "What of Morphy?"

"I never knew him. He had come and gone while I was yet a novice. I saw him once in New Orleans, but that was after the eclipse. Beyond question Morphy was a wonderful man. The source of his strength lay, I think, in his memory and his imagination. His memory was prodigious. It seemed as though he knew and could recall every game of note that had ever been played. With this he united singular imaginative powers, and here lay the secret of his then extraordinary feats. He dazzled Europe by playing, blindfold, as many as eight games simultaneously. At that time such a thing had never been heard of, and Morphy was regarded as a wizard.

"Of course, since that time we have had men who can play as many as 14 games blindfold. It is simply a question of being able to hold in the mind a distinct picture of a number of different games as they progress. It is a marvelous faculty, but I do not possess it in any particular degree. I can, of course, play a number of games in that fashion, but I have never cultivated it.

"But Morphy was unquestionably a great chess player, one of the greatest that ever lived. A very foolish controversy has arisen as to whether or not he was the greatest. That no one can tell. What he could do now, were he living, no one can say. There is only this to be said: that in the past 25 years chess has undergone a wonderful development, and the feats with which Morphy astonished the world are simply impossible now. I mean that to such an almost mathematical exactness has the game been reduced in late years that to yield a pawn is to lose the game. So that were Morphy to come back and give away pawns, knights, bishops, and all sorts of things, as he once did, any well-trained player could defeat him.

"Morphy was a master of 'mating' moves. Perhaps I cannot give you a better idea of the later developments of chess than to say that modern play aims to reduce the game to so exact an analysis from the very start as Morphy had reduced its closing stages.

"Another notable faculty of Morphy's was his capacity for judging men. In his great games he always lost at the start. It was after he had learned his opponent's style of play that he began to win. And from this I infer that he played at this opponent rather than at the board."

"But," I said, "is not that true of all chess players?"

I was interested in Steinitz's reply.

"No," he retorted with emphasis. "I never do. My entire attention is concentrated upon the board. Of my opponent I am oblivious. For all that I know or note, he might as well be an abstraction or an automaton."

"Then you mean to say that a game with you is very much like the clash of two carefully planned battles?"

"Very much."

"How early," I asked, "did you begin to manifest your interest in chess? Do you come of a chess-playing family, as Mendelssohn did of a musical one?"

"Not at all. None of my family understood the game until, I think, I taught my brother. I was about 12 years old when a young man, a friend, began to teach me. I remember we cut the figures out of paper and drew a chess board with a lead pencil. Later we carved a chess set for ourselves.

"I remember well my first encounter. A friend of mine, older than myself, was in the habit of going each evening to the cafe and playing with a doctor, a local expert. One evening, my friend being absent, I offered to supply his place. The doctor smiled, for I was only a youngster, but consented. He gave me a heavy advantage, a knight and bishop.

"The first game he won. I took the second. She we proceeded, the advantage each time I won being reduced. Soon I was winning with only a pawn or so, and finally I beat him on even ground, much to his chagrin.

"I was born at Prague. At the university I developed into a good player. Finally I began to play exhibition games occasionally in the cafes, which are very different from anything in this country: a sort of public resort, where people assemble of an evening. I imitated some of Morphy's feats and acquired a considerable local reputation."

"I believe Tarrasch declared not long ago that while Morphy and Zukertort were men of high talent, you were to be regarded as a sort of incarnate genius of chess. Do you so regard it?" I asked.

"No, not at all," Steinitz declared, with a smile and a shrug. "As a matter of fact, the positive difference between fine chess players is not great. It is a narrow line. Indeed, is it not so in life? — the margin of success is a fine one. One man fails, another

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succeeds. There is no appreciable difference between them. What is the secret?" "Well, then," I continued, "what is the secret of chess? You ought to know. Can it be hit off in a sentence?"

"Hardly. It might be described as a just balance of mind; besides that, power of analysis, imagination, oh, many things. There is this to be said. All great thinkers have more or less been great chess players. Buckle, the great English historian, was perhaps as fine a chess player as England ever knew, although he never played in public. So were Voltaire and Diderot in France, and Frederick the Great in Germany. Bolli, Moltke, and Bismarck were fine players, although Emperor William could give them pawns, and beat them.

"Curiously enough, Napoleon could not play at all; he did not understand the game and was very much chagrined at his inability. The fact might go to form the idea that great conquerors are madmen; that they have not well balanced minds.

"Chess may be described as mental athletics; it is the gymnasium of the mind. I believe that the mind can be trained as easily and perfectly as the body, and I know of no better exercise than chess."

From "The British Chess Magazine," Sept. 1894, pp. 364-67).