

Immortal Fischer Simultaneous Exhibition, The Road, Chapter 8

The old master talked about returning to small California towns for tournaments. His dreams were quieter now. He could not "stand the getting up for tournaments" anymore. He saw that his wife and children could not survive on the money that his chess genius would find. He was already a legend with an even score against an international master. He was a world famous problemist. But now time is precious, and life was making wine in the cellar of his mammoth two-story house in Berkeley. Life was watching his ever-growing varmints play Cowboys and Indians.

He was sitting in Harrington's bar as he had for two thousand days in the later afternoons. His friend, Guthrie McClain is talking about The California Chess Reporter. McClain mentions that he is four issues behind but that he would catch up this week. The old master believes it. McClain has been pumping out the oldest state chess magazine for 22 straight years now. Would the old master contribute some problems and an article on classical tournament games in a hurry? Yes, because he could be depended upon to help always.

The old master bailed the junior chess champion of the world out of jail when he was arrested for no reason whatsoever in Berkeley. Yes, there the master stood while pleading the case, hands outstretched in the manner of Jesus Christ, appearing as a "friend of the court" in an immaculate suit while totally bombed. Measure his eloquence, craftiness by the record: the junior chess champion of the world was released and the other 18 equally innocent people with him remained in jail throughout the night. Oh, yes, the old master had never even met the defendant before!

The master "loaned" that weird Acers kid fifty dollars so that he could make "just one more Swiss system tournament in Sacramento" before quitting such events forever. He invented jobs for Acers whiz-flash-super-pop-popper-kid to do, so that the kid wouldn't starve to death in the Swiss American nightmare Hotel before being stabbed to death by heroin addicts and pummeled in the head by your routine local mugger-individual. At the Berkeley International Masters' Tournament, the bottled wine was from the old master's cellar, the wonderful stories and incredible analysis

from his mind. After these things he quietly returns to his advertising business while the other masters travel throughout the world. They are so vain, always at the right place and the right time. "My time is past, Jude," he recalls without bitterness. Who in the hell is this man?

He does not take himself seriously though he now is paid several hundred dollars by local colleges for a single exhibition. He is a romanticist, insane optimist and has only won murderous attacking chess masterpieces against full-time professional chessplayers like Bobby Fischer, George Koltanowski, John Grefe, William Addison and the Acers Kid. He has been officially rated in the top 100 United States players for many years. Now he just corresponds with Mikhail Botvinnik about their book on Fischer. He loves to argue any subject for the spirit of struggle alone. He is devil's advocate, sophist and businessman in six feet of thin, distinguished features that are topped by a beard and foreign sports car, silver of course. Amazingly he is finding that his games have been analyzed and published throughout the world. One British journalist wrote me recently, "Who the hell is he?" My reply was, "He is a true genius. That is all I can say." But who is he?

We are back to 1964 to find out. Do you see that chess referee standing on the chair with his right index finger pointed toward the heavens in pontifical fashion? That is the obstinate, brilliant, sneaky, crafty, cigar-smoking pride and joy of San Francisco, Mr. Kurt Bendit! What is Mr. Bendit doing atop that chair before a tremendous crowd in the Mechanics' Institute chess rooms, the oldest chess club in North America?

Mr. Bendit is lecturing us sternly on what will befall any of us if we so much as touch a chess piece when it is not our turn to move against Robert James Fischer. We will be smote from the earth, banished forever. But worst of all we will feel the wrath of the mighty Bendit at the next Friday evening rapid transit tournament when we are kicked silently, quickly (beneath the table, so it is legal and accidental, of course) and defeated, sent home to our parents with a stern warning to mind our manners next time. If that is not enough, coffee can materialize out of thin air and drip down our shirts while we have ten seconds to make eleven moves in a critical city chess championship final round game. Ash trays can be overturned into our laps. And if that is not enough, Mr. Bendit is world famous for his small black penalty book, which he shows to visiting chess personalities with great pride. Every indiscretion is covered in the book, although Mr. Bendit admits, "Acers and Fischer have caused a few revisions." For example: "Mr. Acers, you did not show due respect as I entered the Mechanics' Institute chess room by bowing courteously. Two demerits. This means that you must mow my lawn and clean one of my apartments, for which I wish to pay you in advance in view of the fact that you are a brilliant

chessplayer, outstanding gentleman and starving."

Yes, the employment factor had to be considered as well. It seemed that Sir Kurt Bendit could find all sorts of interesting jobs for starving chess masters. It was necessary to display world class just to do the dishes! Janitorial work for Mr. Bendit was regarded as the highest accolade by the entire chess community of the city. Once Jude Acers had offered to work for free just to meet the noble Bendit on home ground, but Mr. Bendit imposed a "two-week and three-day penalty" for even suggesting that he work for nothing at the Bendit estates. For this penalty ("six and one-half demerits") Mr. Acers was forced to accept punishment due him. The punishment? Double wages from the great Bendit over the strenuous objections of Mr. Acers. Mr. Bendit often reminds us that his favorite film is "Catch 22."

It is a fact that all nine USCF rated chessmasters in our city have been lured to Bendit servitude at one time or another. International master William Addison was even given an apartment after he drew twice with Bobby Fischer in two US championship games. To have residence on the Bendit estate was the equivalent of the Nobel Prize to all of the young chess professionals and was the talk of our city for years. Tournament officials were also given tasks. The teenage chess organizer Michael Goodall labored for Bendit in delight. Yes, the man on top of the chair was above us all; our lovable, cantankerous leader!

Mr. Bendit is reminding us not to be nervous or afraid of our distinguished adversary Mr. Robert James Fischer, this evening. He reminds us that Fischer has only become the youngest international grandmaster in chess history, won the last US Championship with an absolutely unbelievable perfect eleven wins, no losses, no draws score.

"Just play Mr. Fischer as you would any opponent who is going to win the chess championship of the world while eating breakfast," he has confided to us earlier. Oh. Now we understand exactly how to go forth. Relax!

Mr. Fischer just stands there. He does not look afraid of us at all. Fischer is traveling across the nation on his 1964 (one and only) chess tour to promote chess. He has written a sensational article, refusing to play in the world chess championship tournaments, which could easily be fixed by Soviet finalists if they were so minded. Fischer doesn't trust anybody! This is fortunate for thousands of chessplayers who get to see and even play the Brooklyn bomber forty or fifty at a time. Everybody is either stunned or smiling as the great Fischer exhibition is about to begin.

One person who is not smiling is little David. See that little kid in the corner with glasses and peculiarly zig-zag moving

hands? That is Davy Blohm, a chess master who is hovering two inches above his chess scoresheets, listening to the Bendit rules and making careful notes. Nobody every pulls off anything on this teeny-bopper chessplayer. He is getting ready right now.

This is the same David Blohm who became famous by playing on a queen down against international grandmaster Larry Evans and missing a draw! Then Blohm fought Evans on two queens down for eight hours and kept an angry mob of tournament players waiting all that time. Yes, David Blohm does not give up easily. His chessplay is steady, businesslike and he terrifies opponents by enforcing every little rule.

There are so many dynamite Blohm stories that it is definitely a problem to select one that captures his competitive spirit, personality, and makes people mad at him as well. Blohm would want it no other way! My favorite Blohm episode is the one Mechanics' Institute chess oldies recall in a city championship tourney, the Blohm-Henry Gross encounter. The game was adjourned after fifty moves and five hours of struggle in a clearly winning position for Mr. Gross, a San Francisco attorney and a rated master for twenty-five years. Mr. Gross lives miles outside the city and hoped Mr. Blohm would surrender the game rather than put his next move in a sealed envelope and resume the game tomorrow.

David thought long and hard on the sealed move and wrote it on the card carefully, hiding his pencil and paper behind one outstretched hand. Mr. Gross sat there, amazed. Checkmate or loss of a truckload of material could not be prevented by Blohm. Was he really going to force Gross to make the long trip back into the city to conclude the game?

The answer was "yes" of course. After more than an hour of travel and parking his auto, Mr. Gross arrived the next morning, intending to mash Blohm with blitz moves. But there was no David Blohm, just the chess pieces and chess clock. The envelope was opened and Mr. Gross had gotten out of bed to read, "I give up, Mr. Gross! Signed, David Blohm."

That's Blohm. We later learned years afterward the reasoning behind the Blohm shift. A chessmaster did not resign in the Capablanca Memorial International Tourney in a hopelessly lost position. Nobody could believe it when he sealed his move in Cuba's greatest chess event. Overnight his opponent died! Thus the loser was able to win by forfeit the next morning. I intend to try it myself sometime.

David Blohm is determined to beat Fischer, a player everyone already knew had serious claims to being the best ever to push wood. Blohm was so inspired that he had even ignored bridge, at which he also had a master's title. Blohm is one of 34 people who will play Fischer this evening.

It is a fact that Blohm is a very good person and a good chessplayer, but a little eccentric to boot. What is going to happen when these two monster-ego-creature-people clash tonight? ("Don't worry!" says Paul Vayssie of the San Francisco Fire Department, a club member.) There is a crowd building already on all sides of of little David's chair. The betting is heavy on the bay and the mare. And the game has not even begun.

Ten blocks away, Leo Harrington is tending bar at his family's restaurant and chessplaying haunt. He reads in the Chronicle that Fischer is here to challenge the city and calls out to the old master to quit skittles. "Get outta that chair and go play Bobby Fischer right now!" Of course, Bob Harrington does not know that it is really unfair for a strong master to play in a simultaneous chess exhibition, as Bobby Fischer has to worry about 33 other games and has very little time to consider each move. The old master, knowing this, is not interested, but plans to go over to watch the mighty Bobby mow his opponents down sometime in the late hours of the exhibition. He tells Harrington, "No deal, but thanks."

Leo Harrington is getting restless. He knows that the opportunity of a lifetime is vanishing within an hour. Harrington wants to see the blood flow between the two great attacking players! He goads the master nervously before making the big push. First he makes the odds tilt in Fischer's favor by plying several glasses of distilled refreshment into the body of the old master, who now begins to sway slightly. Then Bob Harrington lowers the boom. "If you will play Fischer, I will pay for it and bet you cold cash you don't even draw. And I will go with you to take your money as fast as possible." The old master fuzzily pulled his body out of the chair. He considered it carefully.

"Mr. Harrington, you have just lost your wallet. I am going to take your cash without a solitary droplet of conscience. You will rue this day. Oh, you shall rue this day!" He said, tilting slightly.

It was the most sensational event of California chess history in the making as the Harrington family rushed to the entrance a car containing Harrington and the old master. He would have been dragged to the Fischer performance, if necessary.

Bendit was climbing down from the chair after his speech. He tried to think of anything more that needed to be done before Bobby Fischer began to crucify 34 opponents. Bendit knew that "at least 25 were dead before the games started" and looked around desperately, hoping a few more players would step out of the crowd and play Fischer, wear him down. Six tough opponents were hardly enough for this great player.

Bendit could not believe his eyes when Robert E. Burger fumbled for a chair and was sitting down to play! Burgermeister,

the fifteen-year veteran of 60 California team matches, tournaments and maybe a hundred thousand skittle chess games. The man who as an amateur was rated twenty-fourth in the nation was going to play Fischer. People were stunned and Harrington was joyously sealing off all last-minute Burger walks by waving dollar bills in the air to pay the club charge. At the same time, he placed himself squarely behind Burger's chair, so as to be able to take all of Burger's money as quickly as humanly possible at game's end. A classic game was only minutes away. There would be no tie on that board! "I wasn't going to let Burger out of my sight, even to go to the men's washroom." Leo Harrington recalled with pride many years later.

Fischer was not warned about Burger. Bobby waited patiently with a big smile on his face as he saw the Bendit statue climb back on top of the chair to have some tables realigned and allow more spectators to squeeze in the room. In the crowd a Russian chessmaster named Vladimir Pafnutieff was shaking his head in disbelief and ecstasy. "Going to be a hell of a thing, hell of a thing. Great exhibition, just super!" And people nodded in agreement on all sides of him.

Blohm against Fischer was an explosive situation that was the sort every club exhibition organizer could only dream of. But to have Burger playing Fischer was like cooking a steak on top of a can of nitroglycerine.

"Jude, at one point we absolutely could not get any more people in the doorway. Can you imagine that?" Bendit recalled in 1970. The word had spread fast and club members in the library downstairs were heading out pronto when it came that Burger was in the lineup.

What more could be asked? The answer is that attorney Charles Bagby, famous blindfold chess expert, Mechanics' trustee, master player and veteran of dozens of great competitions in the 1930's all along the California coast, had arrived. Not only present but in the same room with his deadly antagonist and prankster, the living legend, Vitaley Radaiken! Radaiken is known as chess "king of the park", in our city, a title that he has really earned. No words can really describe Radaiken. He tells you about winning a two-hundred-player tournament in New York City and three other tournaments. You don't believe the sly one. Then you discover that it is all absolutely true!

The bitterness and jousting between Radaiken and Bagby have lasted three decades and is therefore referred to as "The Thirty Year War." It began when teenager Radaiken angered Mr. Bagby and members by banging his bishops down too loudly and labeling all chessplayers over 30 as "over the hill patzers" in a loud voice before several aged Mechanics' Institute members. In a wild scene, Mr. Radaiken and Mr. Bagby chased each other all about the room with teenage chess monster Radaiken throwing an occasional rook in Mr. Bagby's direction with intention to unsettle his pursuer. Together they crashed into a

water fountain and put it out of commission. Several members say that the whole thing had to be taken off the wall, while Radaiken holds that they just "put a small dent in it, no more than a foot wide." Mr. Bagby ejected the screaming Radaiken from the club facilities and used his great prestige and influence to keep Radaiken from the premises. But secretly everyone believes Mr. Bagby likes him to liven up the place by returning to the Mechanics' Institute chess room again only to be ejected for some always justified reason later!

For the entire chess club the whole business is of course sheer dynamite. The club is split right down the middle as to what to do about the great Radaiken. This evening he is sneaking in, royally dressed, like a prince among peons, with one of his curvaceous, head-turning ladies, just in time to catch the main event.

Mr. Radaiken informs an inquiring reporter that he is a foreign master and always has a few words for his many admirers at the club. "Notice," he tells us, "I always arrive at the proper moment, just to catch the very cream, the succulent aroma, the essence of the evening festivities." The wording is superb, that of a god. Radaiken glows with poetry, delight, and mentions that he is seriously considering purchasing a new water cooler for "the unsavory dented one over there." Whatever happened, it is good to see them both alive and beaming eloquence tonight!

Vitale Radaiken is in truth a strong amateur player, despite his critics' claims to the contrary. He should be. He has quietly played as much serious Swiss competition throughout the country as anyone living in California. But it would be too much to hope that Radaiken would deign to play Robert Fischer this evening.

Radaiken smiles, holding his fans spellbound, while looking around to be certain Mr. Bagby is on the other side of the room. Then Radaiken says loudly, "There is no question that the man from Brooklyn is an outstanding player and sportsman. I believe that he could quite possibly, with care, achieve a draw with a player of my championship calibre this evening. Yes, I believe Mr. Fischer could draw! There is no question in mind that what is called for on this outstanding occasion is a free pass to our distinguished guest and visitor to our fair city. However, when Mr. Fischer returns to our fair city, I shall grant no quarter."

At this moment one of his young fans rushes up and asks the great Radaiken for an autograph, which Mr. Radaiken understands is only natural. He signs neatly just above Bobby Fischer's name on the paper. God, how we loved every moment! The little boy murmurs something about Radaiken having taught many children how to play chess in the park.

"Oh, 'twas nothing, 'twas nothing," said Radaiken in a

graceful bow, while his lady friend is smiling and clutching at his arm to make certain he does not escape. There is only one Radaiken and she knows it! Thirty seconds to go...

The exhibition is ready. It explodes in a flash on cameras, applause as Robert Fischer sweeps around 34 chess sets and plays pawn to K4 on every board, loping like a kangaroo in his classic manner. Fischer is tall, thin and dangerous, and all his opponents bury their heads in their hands and hunch over the boards. The little boy that has the autographed scoresheets says to his mother, "See, mommy. I saw his move in every game before he played it!"

Boom-Boom-Boom moves flash from Bobby Fischer's hands. He has been on the road two full months. Nothing is going to come up that he has not seen a thousand times before.

Bobby Fischer is going into the "Two Knights' Fritz Defense Variation" wherever possible. It is a risky variation which Fischer never uses in grandmaster tournaments or match play. But he has been successful with the line all across Canada and Mexico. Tonight his hour to abandon the variation forever has come. Slowly the mind of Robert Burger is clearing from the effect of Harrington spirits. Burger sits calmly and remembers it all now. He had busted the variation with a college friend many years ago. Death waited.

Fischer never knew who his opponent was, that he was going into a storm of attack against a player rated twenty-fourth in the nation. Fischer could not know that Burger had spent ten years playing clocked games with both sides of the variation.

Bobby Fischer made his thirteenth turn around the tables, looked quietly at Burger's last move and resigned. His queen was lost in 13 moves. It was a one-in-a-million game. You will never see it again in one thousand years.

There was a tremendous "Ohhh" from the crowd, a look of utter disbelief on the face of Bob Harrington, jolted backward in shock as Fischer pushed his king over onto the table, smiled, shook Burger's hand and moved swiftly to the remaining unlucky opponents.

Burger did not get up from the chair. He simply extended his hand over his shoulder and began snapping his fingers. Victory was sweet.

"Your wallet, please, Mr. Harrington. Your wallet, please!"

To his eternal credit, Harrington paid their wager, before numerous witnesses, with the comment, "I would gladly lose one hundred times to see such a game again!"

One by one Fischer began to zero in on his opponents. There were no more surprises as David Blohm hung in there grimly, hour after hour, while people all around him were dying like flies. "Be sure to get him to autograph everything you can when you resign. Maybe it will tire out his arm or something," one doomed player whispered to his neighbor, who was being boiled alive.



Blohm now resorted to cunning. He set a devilish one-move trap. Fischer came up and overlooked the "cheapo" for one second and made a move that would definitely lose the game. Then Fischer corrected his mistake instantly and ...hysteria!

David Blohm screamed, "Touch-move...Touch-move!...Touch-move!" and Fischer just shrugged his shoulders and resigned the game rather than argue the point.

A debate lasted for years as to whether Kurt Bendit had really said that Fischer had to move exactly the piece he touched in all 34 games. Bendit himself told me that he never intended that Fischer's move ever be complete until he had made his move on the next board! "He could change his mind all he wanted until he moved in the next game, and I would have so ruled!" said Mr. Bendit.

But quicker than Mr. Bendit could say "Nineteen demerits to David Blohm," David had joined Burger in defeating Fischer. Very few others survived even the first three hours of play. It was just another routine killer night for Bobby Fischer.

Many hours later, a memorable conversation occurred when Henry Gross took Fischer to a Chinatown restaurant for a late night snack.

"Bobby, we were really surprised when you lost your queen against Robert Burger," Mr. Gross chuckled with delight.

"Lost my queen? No I was just going to lose on attack, that's all," Fischer commented with a smile.

Gross smiled and shook his head with a grin, "No, Bobby, the queen was lost."

Whereupon Fischer, still smiling pleasantly, whipped out his leather pocket chess set, which he just happens to have on his person 24 hours a day. He likewise whipped through the moves of the Burger game from memory.

Then Fischer's eyebrows shot up. "Sure enough! Good player. Must be the sneaky type!" said the future chess champion of the world.

Well if Fischer thinks the Burgermeister is crafty, just wait until next time when the great Radaiken does battle. Mr. Radaiken once moved a knight like a bishop and forked his opponent's king and queen during a time of intense time pressure in the final money round of a US Chess Federation tournament! His opponent, a US master slapped his forehead and exclaimed, "My God, where did that knight come from?" It was the world debut of the famous "Radaiken knight." The master resigned and Radaiken grabbed all the first prize money, the first prize trophy and was "about 70 miles down the highway" when the shocked master and tournament officials discovered what had taken place...

And it was all perfectly legal! When a player is checkmated or resigns, the game is over. No appeal of the moves is ever allowed. You have to catch the Radaiken move when it actually happens.

Editors of The California Chess Reporter were so amazed at the Radaiken Knight maneuver that they ran the diagram of the critical position with a huge question mark on the cover. When shown the diagram with his sneaky attack, Radaiken smiled joyously, clasped his hands together and said, "See, I keep telling you, Jude. You can't trust anybody anymore!"

"But Radaiken, really, how can a Knight move like a Bishop? How on earth did you get away with it?"

"I don't know myself. I didn't notice the key move myself until the game was over. Then I figured they would hang me if I told them about it. So I decided to get out of there as fast as possible with, ahhhh, a slight delay to pick up my first prize money, my first prize trophy, speak to the distinguished members of the local press and offer a charming lady a ride to our fair city," said Radaiken with his wonderful smile and four classic Radaiken winks.

"Seriously, Jude, be alert when you play! You never know when the Radaiken Knight shall strike again. I have strong reason to believe it has already claimed many victims and much ransom," Radaiken reminds me as we part (3 winks).

Finally, have I told you about the James Tarjan-team-match-musical chair-shuffle-John Grefe -anti-Acers-chair maneuver? It is legal, too, but...

Bobby Fischer has not returned to San Francisco. When he does, he must be alert. Radaiken is waiting! But I am not worried. Bendit is watching!