



—Wide World.

By ROBERT O'BRIEN

TO many non-chess players, the game appears to be an obscure and tedious pastime of eccentrics. To the 15,000,000 Americans who do play, it is the most ingenious device ever conceived for engaging the human intelligence. As played by the grandmasters, who hold the royal rank in international chess, a game is like full-scale war. Survival demands nerve, courage, determination, stamina, and iron control. As its long-drawn silences and ponderings drag on, tension builds to excruciating levels. Clearly, it's no game for the timid.

"Grandmasters in tournament play," says *Chess Review* editor Jack Straley Battelle, "are like sharks. For the most part, they sniff cautiously at one another. But when they sense a weakness, they strike and kill."

The intensity of the struggle may explain in part why, in all the world, a mere sixty-odd players bear the title of grandmaster. More than half of the sixty are natives of the Soviet Union and other Iron Curtain countries, where chess is a national pastime. Only nine are Americans, but one of these plays with the magic fire of genius. He is Robert James ("Bobby") Fischer of Brooklyn, the most exciting and controversial American chess personality in the last century.

Fischer, a six-foot-two, moodily handsome, outrageously outspoken young

BOBBY FISCHER

Best in Chess?

man of twenty, freely admits that he is the best chess player in the world. He may be right. Last January I saw him win the U.S. championship for the fifth time. Experienced observers believe he will restore the world's championship to the United States for the first time since 1862. Already he looms as a qualified opponent for the current world champion, fifty-two-year-old Mikhail Botvinnik of the Soviet Union.

Five years ago, when Fischer was a coltish youngster in corduroys and sneakers, he won every U.S. national title in sight without losing a game. Chess fans wondered if he could possibly be as good as he looked. At the time, players of awesome power and skill across the Atlantic were waiting impatiently to put the American *wunderkind* in his place. But since 1958 Bobby has met Europe's greatest, and emerged with ever-increasing stature.

Actually, Fischer is probably better known and more widely appreciated abroad than at home. In Russia, where as many as 700,000 take part in amateur tournaments, he is easily as popular as pianist Van Cliburn. Yet despite this, last summer, at the very summit of international chess, Fischer lost out on his best chance to date for world dominance. After finishing fourth behind three Russians at the Candidates' Tournament at Curacao, Fischer publicly accused Communist players of collusion. By agreeing in advance to throw draws, or games, to each other after a few perfunctory moves, Soviet players, Fischer said, manipulate their scores, and make it impossible for a non-Communist to break through to victory unless he wins almost every game he plays.

Although it cannot be proved, and is denied by the Russians, tournament records seem to substantiate Fischer's charge. There were eight players: five Russians, two Americans, and one Yugoslav. At the halfway mark at Curacao, where each player played twenty-seven games, the four leading Soviet masters had drawn every game they played against one another; three of them drew every time they met during the whole tournament. The points the Russian players thus amassed became an insurmountable obstacle to the others, particularly after they had fallen behind with one or two losses.

It wasn't the first time the possibility of such collusion had occurred to a non-Communist. American and English players have been muttering about it for the last ten years. But Fischer had the nerve to drop the bomb. Furthermore, he added, he had had enough of these rigged affairs; never again would he play in a Candidates' Tournament, which, given the complicated machinery of international chess, determines the challenger for the world's championship.

His charges, reprinted in Dutch, German, Spanish, Swedish, Icelandic, and, in somewhat garbled form, Russian, created a sensation in the chess world. The *Fédération Internationale des Echecs*, governing body of world chess, swears that Fischer's bold accusations had nothing to do with it, but a few months later FIDE's rules committee voted certain changes in tournament regulations designed to make it impractical, if not useless, for players to throw draws.

Bobby Fischer grew up in Brooklyn. His parents were divorced when he was two. To support Bobby and his eight-year-old sister, Joan, their mother became a registered nurse. Today she is remarried and lives in England. Joan and her husband live in California. Fischer lives alone in the same four-room, walk-up flat that they once shared. He lives on a modest income from his winnings in tournament play, and from occasional articles for chess magazines.

Fischer's dedication to chess began the day he was six and his sister bought him a \$1 chess set. From that moment, he never really lived for anything else. He read every chess book in the Brooklyn Public Library. A chessboard with pieces in place stood beside his bed. (It still does). On weekends, while schoolmates played football or went to the movies, Fischer took on all comers at the Brooklyn Chess Club.

In Brooklyn's Erasmus High, without trying too hard, he won top grades in mathematics, Spanish, and biology. But he was always restless, and in his junior year he quietly dropped out of school. By then, as the youngest player ever to win the national junior championship, he was already famous. Awed chess critics called him "the Corduroy Killer." Admiring high school students

formed Bobby Fischer chess clubs. FIDE made him an international master. He received invitations to play at Hastings, England, and Mar del Plata, Argentina, chess capitals of the Western world.

However good his chess game, Fischer was otherwise considered an *enfant terrible*. He would have no truck with reporters or their prying questions. He wanted to be taken seriously as a great chess master, not as a boy wonder. He cared so much about chess that when he lost he would go off by himself and cry. One reporter grumbled, "There's only one way to handle him. Put him on a leash and say, 'Play chess.'"

The less critical pointed out that this shy, sensitive, rootless youngster, without benefit of a father's love and guidance, had had to survive in the tough kid-jungle of the Brooklyn streets. Many an American has risen from a similar environment to fame and glory through athletics, the theatre, the arts, politics, and business. Fischer was achieving them through chess—and was understandably proud.

Grandmasters usually learn chess in childhood, establish international reputations in their teens, play at peak strength in their twenties and thirties, and fade from the heights in their forties. Fischer is right on schedule. And he regards the middle-aged World Champion Botvinnik as far "over the hill."

Fischer met the Russian for the first and only official time last year at the International Team Tournament at Varna, Bulgaria. Botvinnik played first board for the USSR, Fischer first board for the United States. They clashed dramatically in the final round, before a crowd that jammed the main floor and galleries of the playing room.

Fischer's over-the-board manners are above reproach. At the same time, he goes about the game with the chilling detachment of an executioner. He spoke only three words to Botvinnik. When they were introduced, he said, "Fischer." When they sat down to play, and nearly bumped heads, he said, "Sorry."

Fischer played brilliantly and, as late as the forty-third move, appeared headed for certain victory. But Botvinnik, defending grimly, took advantage of a slip by Fischer and forced the game to a draw. Fischer then spoke for the third time. "Draw," he conceded, and the strongly partisan crowd burst into cheers for Botvinnik.

The Russian said later that it was one of the most exciting moments of his career. Not long ago, I asked Fischer what had happened. "We had to play at 9 A.M. I had to get up at

eight. I'd been playing every day. I was especially tired that morning. I made a crazy blunder."

If he can, Fischer sleeps until noon or later. In an important match in 1961 he was declared loser by default because the twelfth game was scheduled for 11 A.M. on a Sunday. Fischer refused to play. "It's ridiculous," he said. "I cannot play my best at that time of day."

CHESSES has always been more than a game to Fischer; it has been a passion, an obsession. He has few diversions: late-night movies, German food, hi-fi records of Viennese music. He has become a smart, even elegant, dresser. Unlike some of the other U.S. grandmasters, he never plays in shirtsleeves. He does not care much for girls. They are, as a rule, ridiculous chess players, he thinks.

Other players call Fischer a "loner." He seldom joins their parties or night-life excursions. During a tournament Fischer gets eight to twelve hours' sleep a night, eats by himself, doesn't smoke, and buries himself in chess books and magazines. One chess analyst attributes Fischer's phenomenal play to a vast "book knowledge" of the game. "Fischer has total recall of literally thousands of opening variations. His opponent may drag the game out for fifty or sixty moves, but Bobby usually has it won in the first twenty."

During tournament play, most players occasionally break the tension between moves by walking around smok-

ing, laughing, whispering. Not Fischer. He speaks to no one, never smiles, and complains to officials about spectators who disturb him.

The outstanding quality of Fischer's style is that he plays all out to win, always. Most critics regard this as a weakness, the mark of a gambler. They attribute his disappointing showing in Curacao, where he lost his first two games, to this compulsion to "go for broke." It leads him, they say, to lose games that he might have drawn, if he hadn't chosen to push stubbornly for a long-shot win. But Fischer plays his heart out in every game, and fights to the last pawn. "I play honestly and I play to win," he told me. "If I lose, I take my medicine."

Critics and scholars of chess say that some players are better in the opening; some are strongest in the middle game; still others are at their best in delicate end-game play. But at a European tournament last year, Fischer exploited a weak move by one Russian opponent in the opening, crushed a second Russian in the middle game, and outplayed a third in the end game.

"It is clear," commented a Soviet observer, "that the former infant prodigy merits being called 'the complete chess player.'"

Most experts agree on an even more striking aspect of Fischer's genius: his best years are ahead of him. Says Grandmaster Alexander Kotov, spokesman of Soviet chess: "His future possibilities are limitless."



"Gordon, look at us twenty-five years ago."

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Sweet, Spontaneous Humanity

AMERICA has always been a great country for bizarre social theories. Take, for instance, the doctrine called Social Darwinism. Supposedly based on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Social Darwinism holds that human life is one great tooth-and-claw struggle in which only the fittest survive. Ever since this doctrine spread across America in the late nineteenth century, a large percentage of our adult population has gone about muttering with a certain grim satisfaction: "Every man for himself. It's a law of nature. Good guys finish last."

Fortunately, not all Americans are Social Darwinists, as witness the case of Burt Steingrubby. Until early last year, Mr. Steingrubby was manager of a 700-family housing project in St. Louis. Then the local housing authority made a shocking discovery. Mr. Steingrubby, it seems, had been digging into his own pocket to help out families who could pay only part of their rent. Though no money was missing, and it was shown that Mr. Steingrubby had not charged the tenants interest, he found himself in very hot water. Under questioning, the forty-three-year-old father of five acknowledged that he had aided about 1,000 project families.

"Nobody else would help these people," he said. "It wasn't a case of trying to be a hero. These people needed temporary help. . . . Had they been forced to move out, new slums would have been created."

Some of the tenants had not repaid

him. But, Mr. Steingrubby said, "I don't consider it as money lost. It's charity, helping these people. Over the long period, I don't consider I'm out." His wife, he added, agreed with him: "She's a charitable person."

The housing authority forthwith made Mr. Steingrubby resign his \$600-a-month job, though the agency's director conceded that Steingrubby is a good man: "He got into this difficulty simply out of the bigness of his heart." Mr. Steingrubby eventually found a factory job paying half his former salary. "I have no regrets," he told a reporter. "I would do the same thing over again."

Another staunch anti-Social Darwinist is Douglas Johnson of Los Angeles, California. In the summer of 1961, Mr. Johnson, in the middle of a Los Angeles street, found a canvas sack containing \$240,000 in small bills. He promptly called the FBI, which returned the money to the company from whose armored truck it had fallen to the street. After some hesitation, the company gave Mr. Johnson a \$10,000 reward.

But the publicity brought unexpected results. Mr. Johnson, a Negro who made a marginal living as a hauler of refuse, received letters and phone calls from



all over the country denouncing him for returning the money: "You dummy! Get a rope and hang yourself" . . . "You aren't fit to live" . . . "You made it and chickened out" . . . "You're a disgrace to the colored people, an Uncle Tom, a white folks' nigger" . . . "You should be horsewhipped and run out of town." His sons were taunted and beaten at school, and one of them was stopped in the street by a man who handed him a knife and said: "Here, use it on your dumb dad."

Eventually, news of the Johnsons' plight got out, and suddenly public sentiment changed. Now encouraging letters poured in, some of them addressed simply to "Honest Man, Los Angeles, California." Both neighbors and strangers began dropping in to say sheepishly that they had at first thought Johnson a fool, but that the force of his example had made them change their minds.

When President Kennedy heard of the family's ordeal, he wrote to Johnson: "I want to extend my personal commendation for your unflinching honesty. . . . I have read news reports of the incident, and regret the unfortunate few who have since harassed you and your family."

But what if lightning should strike twice? After his ordeal, would Mr. Johnson take a more "realistic" view of things? The question was answered recently when a firm sent Mr. Johnson a money order for \$90,036, instead of the \$36 he had arranged for. He promptly returned the order, saying, "I could sure use that money, but not enough to get it the wrong way."

Meanwhile, another outbreak of altruism was reported from nearby San Diego. About a year ago, a private plane from San Diego was forced down near El Rosario, a fishing village in Mexico. While the villagers were extending them what hospitality they could, the passengers, among them Dr. Dale Hoyt, took note of the town's desperate need for medical facilities. Ever since, a group of forty-five San Diego doctors, nurses, and volunteers—nicknamed the Flying Samaritans—has been flying down to El Rosario every other week to give the villagers medical aid.

The situation recalls E. E. Cummings's lines about our "sweet spontaneous earth" being forever pinched, poked, and buffeted by scientists and philosophers: But, says Cummings, ". . . Thou answerest/ them only with/ spring. . . ." Similarly, humanity, forever measured, manipulated, and despaired of by its critics, answers them only with the Burt Steingrubys, the Douglas Johnsons, and the Flying Samaritans.

—HALLOWELL BOWSER