

Don't Quote Me, But . . .

BY BILLY ROSE

♚ I TALK a pretty good game of chess. A lot of years ago I could even play one. At least that's my story.

Except for foot-racing and wife-beating, chess is the oldest known sport. The knights of old were so daffy about it they'd sometimes bet a finger or toe on a game. At the East Side coffeehouse where I learned how to play, the stake was usually a cup of tea in a glass. I could have memorized the Five-Foot Shelf in the hours I spent learning how to think five moves ahead. I never won many games—in this particular coffeehouse the chair-warmers thought ten moves ahead.

Yesterday afternoon the telephone in my office kept ringing like crazy. The twentieth time it rang I hollered into the mouthpiece, "No spik Engleesh." I got my hat and skedaddled via the back elevator.

On Sixth Avenue a friendly breeze was blowing kisses at the pretty gals. I ducked into a side street, fished half a dozen pennies out of my pocket and started pitching them at a crack. Only fair. I remembered back a hundred years ago when I could come within an inch of the line, ten times out of ten. By this time the telephone had stopped ringing in my head.

I ambled over toward Broadway. Near 50th Street, I saw a sign on a second-floor store window over a garage—"Budnick's Chess Club." I walked up. Like my coffeehouse on the East Side, it featured a low ceiling and a set of high foreheads. The air was foggy with the tobacco smoke which generally goes with masculine brainwork.

At a couple of long tables, half a dozen housemen were taking on all comers. If you lost a game, it cost you a quarter. If you won, you paid nothing.

Budnick came over and introduced himself. "It's about time," he said, in a Lower Slobbovian accent. "Hays tells me you play."

"What Hays?" I asked.

"Arthur Garfield Hays, your lawyer. He comes quite often. So does David Stern, the newspaper publisher, and when he's in town, Harry Warner, the movie fellow."

I decided to stay. If these Joseph McGeniuses could step away from their empires and sit around Budnick's for a couple of hours, I figured it wouldn't do my popcorn machines any harm if I did likewise. Besides, if I could remember some of the gambits out of the old Morphy book, I might beat the house out of twenty-five cents.

Over in a corner one of the pros was available. I dropped down in the chair opposite him.

"Want to move first?" he said, lighting a brown-paper cigarette.

"Anything you say," I answered.

"Take the whites and move," he shrugged. "It's your quarter."

I tried a fancy opening—tournament stuff out of the book. Around the fourth move I got the feeling the pro didn't recognize the gambit. He moved his men quickly, almost carelessly—and chess is a game where players have been known to wear out a two-pants suit between moves.

The first five minutes I thought I was doing fine. I knocked off two of his pawns and a bishop. Suddenly, as if from left field, his queen came into play. Protected by a knight, the lady dusted off the pawn to the left of my king. "Check and mate," said the little pro. "Want to try another?"

I tried six others. It was like Mortimer Snerd arguing relativity with Einstein. By game No. 7, I was so shattered that I fell into the old trap—the Fool's Mate in four moves.

I got up from the table feeling pretty low. "Not my day, Capablanca," I sighed.

"That's five games you owe for," said the pro.

"Seven," I told him.

He took out a pencil stub and a little pad. He put down 25 and under it a 7. He multiplied and got \$1.25.

"You're cheating yourself," I pointed out.

He tried again and got \$2.25. He did a lot of crossing out. Then he put down 25 seven times and added. This time it came out right—\$1.75.

I took out a five-dollar bill. He frowned and went back to the paper. He wrote down \$5.00 and put \$1.75 under it with a big minus sign. The answer came out \$4.85.

He looked up wistfully and said, "I don't think that's right. Haven't you got the even change?"

I laid the five on the chessboard where I had been humiliated. "Keep it," I told him. "I feel a lot better now."



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