

The Dark Side Of Chess

by Alexander Baron

Some pastimes, soccer (1) for example, have long and dishonourable histories of violence both on and off the field. Fortunately you're not likely to be stabbed at a chess match or headbutted at a congress. Even distance players seldom receive abusive letters or e-mails from irate opponents, but chess does have a dark side. Here we take a look at cheating, gamesmanship, and occasionally worse.

A Personal Reminiscence

As a junior I was, I admit, often uncharitable towards my vanquished opponents and sometimes less than magnanimous in defeat, but one incident stands out when I was totally innocent. I was playing in an away match for Hayes and getting chomped by a far stronger player when suddenly, after he pulled off a bizarre combination, I found myself two pieces to the good. I remarked to another Hayes player that this bloke was "masticating me", and that I couldn't quite believe what had happened. Although it was thirty years ago I remember this phrase clearly. And I remember my opponent's words too. When I turned back to him he said angrily "If you call me mad again brother, I'll put one on you."

The game was of course over in all but name, and I had no desire to explain and even less to apologise. Indeed, at times like these discretion is the better part of valour. Only on one other occasion as a junior did violence loom at a chess game within my ambit, and unfortunately, I missed the otherwise humorous incident. It was at a congress when a very strong young player named Nick Alexander managed to upset his opponent, who swept the board and pieces to the floor with the words "And that, Mr Alexander, is what I f*****g think of you."

They didn't actually come to blows, fortunately, unlike the most notorious chess player in history, an American crook who committed the ultimate crime.

Claude Bloodgood: The Killer Grob (2)

Claude Frizzell Bloodgood III was a strong chess player; he was also an habitual criminal. On November 1, 1969 he was released from prison after serving a sentence for forgery. On November 19 he beat and strangled his own mother to death, as his accomplice, 18-year-old Michael Quarick, looked on in horror. Quarick helped Bloodgood dispose of the body, which was

found four days later. Bloodgood was not arrested until the end of January; he confessed to the crime, but later tried to blame the younger man. He was sentenced to death on June 19, 1970, and Judge Linwood B. Tabb fixed the date of his execution as November 3, although he was later reprieved. (3).

He died on August 4, 2001 in the Medical Unit at Powhatan Correctional Facility where he was inmate number 99432. In the three decades of his internment he made prodigious use of his time, playing chess against other inmates, and against regular players by post. One of his earlier postal opponents was a Methodist lay preacher from Staffordshire. John Walker, a paraplegic, eventually met Bloodgood in 1999 when he spent his holiday playing chess with him in the prison.

As well as a murderer, Bloodgood was a prolific story teller. He claimed he was born Klaus Bluttgutt in La Paz and that his father was an Abwehr agent. He was, he said, sent to Nazi Germany, and claimed to have played many celebrities including Richard Widmark and James Cagney. (4).

While these claims must be taken with a large grain of salt, there is no doubt that Bloodgood authored three books on gambits, or that in 1996 at the age of 71 he had become the USA's 9th highest ranked player by playing 1700 rated games "against other inmates over the past year". This was said to have highlighted flaws in the USCF grading system. Bloodgood's position was referred to as an aberration. (5). How good was Bloodgood? Obviously not as good as his *aberrational* rating suggests, but he was clearly a very strong player. (6). Sadly though, Bloodgood has been written out of chess history to a large extent. When the book *Correspondence Chess in America* was published in 2000, it made no mention of him, although it appears to cover every other important player from the founding of the Correspondence Chess League of America in 1909.

The following Bloodgood miniature appeared in the British magazine *Chess* as far back as November 1961 in a column entitled *That didn't take long! A page of Brilliant Brevities from our Files*. Said to have been played a few years previously, the opening is described as 'Highly Irregular'!

Bloodgood v Robinson: 1. ♖f3 d5 2. b3 c5 3. e4 dxe4 4. ♗e5 ♖d4 5. ♗b2! ♖xb2? 6. ♗c3 ♗a3? (The magazine suggests ♗xa1.) 7. ♗b5+ ♗d7 8. ♗c4 ♖b4 9. ♗xd7+ ♗xd7 10. a3 and Black resigned.

A Sickening Tale

Bloodgood's opponent John Walker, is not the only English chess player to bear that name. Unfortunately, chess author John Walker did more than write primers for youngsters. In April 2002, the 58-year-old tutor was

sentenced to seven years' imprisonment at Reading Crown Court for indecently assaulting twelve boys and seven girls over a thirteen year period at a Church of England primary school in Oxfordshire. (7). In the *Acknowledgements* of the 1989 edition of his book *Chess Openings for Juniors — Winning from the First Move*, the author writes "Thanks also to the boys of St Andrew's School and Quarry Chess Club who allowed themselves to be used as guinea pigs!" In retrospect, this was obviously a sick joke.

Another British player went one better. Writing in his autobiographical *Secrets Of Grandmaster Chess*, John Nunn reports that "...Brian Eley achieved notoriety by absconding while on police bail relating to an investigation into paedophile activities. The upshot was that he became the only British Chess Champion to date to appear on the television programme *Crimewatch*. At the time of writing his whereabouts are still a complete mystery."

The Dark Sides Of Two Great Champions

For my money, Alexander Alekhine was the greatest player who ever lived. Away from the chess board, Alekhine's most dangerous opponent was the bottle, and he showed great strength of character to overcome his addiction (8) to regain the world title from Max Euwe, but during the Second World War, he put his name to a disgraceful series of articles in which he espoused the superiority of *Aryan* chess over *Jewish* chess. Notwithstanding his later protestations of innocence, Alekhine's collaboration with the Nazis appears to have been not entirely pragmatic.

As part of their world mission, the Nazis airbrushed Jewish chess achievements out of the picture. The fact that so many of the chess greats have been, and continue to be, Jewish, is neither here nor there. In January 1942, the *British Chess Magazine* reported that:

The "New Order" in Germany is busy on chess literature. The outstanding text-book in the German language is Dufresne's *Lehrbuch des Schachspiels*, which has held the field for some sixty years. From 1901 to 1937 it was periodically revised, and brought up to date by J. Mieses, and so remained a thoroughly modern work.

As its popularity could not be gainsaid, it had to be "aryanized," and a new revision was entrusted to a 100 per cent Aryan master.

It will hardly be credited that the names of "non-Aryan" players have been omitted from the historical section, including Kolisch, Zukertort, Steinitz, Lasker, Rubinstein, etc. Not only that, all their most brilliant games which adorned earlier editions have been eradicated, although a few of their

games were allowed to remain - those they lost! This is on a par with the maintenance of "Aryan" superiority in chess by the simple expedient of excluding non-Aryan competition.

There is only one word for it — lunacy. "Whom the gods wish to destroy...."

While Alekhine didn't edit the *Lehrbuch* for the Nazis, there is no doubt that he did author the series of anti-Semitic articles which bear his name. (9). In May 1942, the *British Chess Magazine* reported that Alekhine had played against 75 German officers in a simultaneous exhibition: "The result is not given. Who cares?"

If one can excuse Alekhine's anti-Semitism as pragmatism, the only excuse Fischer has is insanity. The fact that Fischer is himself a Jew has not prevented him from espousing a fully blown anti-Semitic ideology. His madness has gone one step further with his condoning of the September 11 atrocities against his homeland. (10). Leaving that aside, Fischer has never been the most likeable of men. Hailed by many in his prime and still as the greatest player of all time, Fischer will be remembered not simply for wresting the crown from the Soviets but for the manner in which he did it.

At the height of the Cold War, Fischer's boorish behaviour was in such stark contrast to that of the gentlemanly Boris Spassky that many people actually rooted for the Russian. Spassky, himself one of the all-time greats - in the romantic tradition - endured Fischer's demands about the conditions of the Iceland match with infinite patience and near saintly equanimity. After winning the match, Fischer went on TV with Bob Hope, and, we all thought, hoped, that we would see a new Fischer. (11). Alas, after winning the title and briefly showing the world a new public face, Fischer disappeared from the chess and indeed the world scene, eschewing fame and fortune for a hermit-like existence, and re-emerging only to be branded a war criminal - for playing chess! (12). Although he won the rematch with Spassky, the Fischer story was to all intents and purposes over. (13).

And So To Humble Cheating

Cheating at chess may well be as old as the game itself. In his 1561 treatise, no less a luminary than Ruy Lopez advised his students to "place your opponent with the sun in his eyes if you play by day, and with the candle at his right side if you play by night."

This was a trick that was probably well known to Spanish players, the same

advice was given by Lucena! (14).

Cheating also comes in many flavours. One way, often with a financial motive in mind, is to misrepresent one's grade. When chess congresses were held at Kensington there were two documented instances of players who had wilfully misrepresented their grades in order to enter weaker tournaments — and claim the prize money. And there was one player in the London area who went one better by fixing games, i.e. *losing* lots of games to weaker players at club level to keep his grade down for the big events. Although I cannot name this player (for legal reasons!) he is well-known, and this sad affair is well-documented. After an investigation, he was banned from playing in the UK.

A somewhat older individual, he is not much below master strength. I had the dubious pleasure of playing and losing to him three times, and although I had him in some trouble in one of our games, it was obvious to me — and to everybody else — that he had no business playing in Major Tournaments. (15). As he (or rather his wife!) is independently wealthy, his motives were more likely psychological and extremely seedy than financial.

Unladylike Behaviour

Although there are today some extremely strong women and girl players around, and women are not at a physical disadvantage — as for example with boxing — it remains a truism that chess is very much a male-dominated pastime and that at all levels women are in the minority. There has been much controversy in recent years over postal and e-mail players using computers to analyse or even to play their games. While it is not always possible to tell man from machine, one would expect even at chess to be able to tell men from women. Sadly, this is not always the case.

In the late 1980s, Cambridge graduate, county player and former junior correspondence champion Nick Down said he believed ladies' chess to be far weaker than men's. He set about proving it by playing under the pseudonym Leigh Strange. His scam was quite sophisticated, involved two co-conspirators, and a first prize of £15, which like the (over-the-board) villain alluded to above, rules out a financial motive. The scam came to light when one of his friends was heard boasting about it. Mrs Jean Rogers, British Ladies' Correspondence Chess Champion 1976 & 1978, wrote in the quarterly journal of the British Correspondence Chess Association that after winning the 1985-6 championship as Leigh Strange, Down put himself forward for the Ladies' Postal Olympiad and started to play before he was *defrocked*. (16).

The tournament controller, Keith Escott, said: "In postal chess you

have to rely on trust". (17).

Down was banned from playing postal chess for two years. The real loser was the woman who should have won the tournament concerned. Down won all but one of his games, losing to Doreen Helbig, who came half a point ahead of Lynn Spencer; because Down's games were allowed to stand, Helbig was awarded the title, and Spencer lost out.

Scandalous as Down's scam may have been, it was dwarfed by the Peruvian player who masqueraded as a national team of eight! (18).

Acceptable Cheating?

Murder and sex changes aside, there is one form of chess cheating that is often regarded as bona fide, that of fixing the result in advance. When I played at Hastings in 1997-8 I saw one score sheet which finished at move 2, and one year at the Mind Sports I watched John Nunn, no less, and his opponent play the following game in one of the chess tournaments: 1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♗b5 "Draw?" — And that was that.

The phenomenon of the "grandmaster draw" is well known, and agreeing an early or even a premature draw is a practice most players can have some sympathy with. Consider the following not entirely hypothetical situation. (19). In the fifth and final round of a Swiss tournament you and your opponent are joint tournament leaders with 4 points out of 4. He offers you a draw. If you accept you are guaranteed joint 1st and 2nd; if you refuse, and lose, you are relegated to minor placings. Is it really dishonest to agree a draw in short order? Or if you are playing in a match, and your half point means the difference between your team winning and losing the match, or perhaps even being relegated in the league?

Obviously one has to judge every individual case on its merits, or lack of them! Grandmaster draws are so common that people seldom bat an eyelid, but there is at least one case on record where a tournament committee took an entirely different view.

At the second Luton Congress, the late Tony Miles — who was then Junior World Champion — was leading the Open with 5/5. In the last round he was paired against Stewart Reuben, who was half a point behind; the field was on 4. Miles needed a draw to secure the £200 first prize plus the trophy. The two men agreed a draw without a move being played, and duly pocketed their ill-gotten gains, but after the prizes were awarded, the committee had second thoughts and asked Miles to return £80 of his prize money and Reuben the whole of his £70.

The official tournament report reads: "This incident effected by a

talented player and, (up to the 9th Feb.) respected controller, was almost infectiously copied in the Major where Smith (5/5) and Lobo (5/5) managed four trembling moves before the thought of record prize money for a sub-170 tournament got the better of them and a draw was agreed". (20).

Reuben replied to the report of this incident in *Chess* with a scathing letter in which he said he had told the controllers in advance that he intended to offer Miles a draw before their game, (i.e. without a move being played, which was the whole trouble).

"Had we submitted a score-sheet reading 1.P-K4 draw agreed, it would have been a lie. Our game is a very widely played one — with no errors by either side! It is just that this may be the first time there has been absolutely no hypocrisy."

He went on to point out that with the difference in their grades he could expect to score 1/6 against Miles, perhaps one out of 20 with black. He picked up £70 for a draw, good odds. He also complained about inaccurate pairings, and said he should have played Miles in the 5th round. (21).

One can sympathise with Reuben (though not with Miles!); the attack on his integrity as a controller was most uncharitable. Just for the record, he went on not only to control many further tournaments but to edit the BCF newsletter.

There is a certain way to reduce grandmaster draws. Writing in the *British Chess Magazine*, Basman points out that, rightly, that if this sort of fixing happened in soccer there would be hell to pay. The way around it, he suggests, is for a draw to count as only a third of a point. (22). Ingenious as this suggestion is, it is most doubtful if it will ever be taken up.

What A Combination!

The Oxford Companion to Chess has a small entry entitled *spurious games* which is self-explanatory. One of the games given here is Adams-Torre, New Orleans, 1921, which contains some fascinating tactics based on the classic weakness of the back rank. Pachman gives this game in his book *Modern Chess Tactics*. Sadly, it isn't all it appears! Even Alekhine was not averse to being economical with the truth. In his collection *My Best Games of Chess 1908-1923*, he gives the famous "five queens variation", which he says was played in Moscow in 1915. There is no doubt the game was played, but not quite the way he suggested.

And Just Plain Rudeness

from your brother's eye...

In October 1973, pensioner Stanley Lorley reminisced in *Chess* on the debate about women in the Royal Game, and more. In the good old days, he said, no player would have dreamt of calling weaker players *rabbits* (alluding to a previous correspondent). Chess was then played by gentlemen. As a spectator at Islington recently, he was shocked to see "so called competitors dressed like *tramps*" and women walking around unescorted like *harlots*.

The following month, W. Heidenfeld - the previous correspondent in question - put Mr Lorley in his place. He could not but wonder he said at the mentality of a "true *gentleman*" who objected to weak players being referred to as rabbits yet had no hesitation in branding women harlots just because they walked around without an escort.

And there I must leave you.

Notes and References

- (1) A gentlemen's game played by hooligans!
- (2) *The Killer Grob* is the title of a book by chess author and International Master Mike Basman; the Grob was one of Bloodgood's pet openings.
- (3) Bloodgood's crime was reported in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* of June 20, 1970.
- (4) *Unorthodox Openings Newsletter*, Issue No. 4, August 2001 (which I found online) is dedicated to the then recently deceased Bloodgood. It contains a number of claims about him including that the murder victim was his stepmother. A whole mythology has grown up around Bloodgood, much of it apparently invented by the man himself.
- (5) *British Chess Magazine*, Volume 116, No. 7, July 1996, page 384.
- (6) According to the aforementioned *Unorthodox Openings Newsletter*, Bloodgood's early career included winning the Virginia Open in 1957 and 1958 and four consecutive victories in the Norfolk Open. He was Norfolk Chess Club Champion 1957-9 and 61.
- (7) *Seven-year sentence for sex abuse teacher*, by Adam Jankiewicz, published in *The Independent*, April 6, 2002, page 10.
- (8) In his biography of the great champion, Grandmaster Alexander Kotov says Alekhine inherited a "pathological addiction" to alcohol from his parents.
- (9) The recently deceased Ken Whyld published a pamphlet called *Alekhine — Nazi Articles*, which makes this point.
- (10) To be fair, at least one chess player - American Sam Sloan - has claimed that Fischer's comments on September 11 have been misrepresented.
- (11) Sadly, I am old enough to write about this first hand!
- (12) His 1992 rematch with Spassky in Serbia was a breach of UN sanctions!

(13) It might be diplomatic to say something positive about Fischer. According to *Chess*, Volume 40, Nos. 721-725. May/June 1975, page 239, he was said to have shown great concern over a childhood friend, Raymond Weinstein, who had been confined in a mental institution. Weinstein had just been arrested for the murder of an 83 year old man in the nursing home where he resided "the first known homicide committed by a chess master in the annals of the game".

(14) *A History of Chess*, by H.J.R. Murray, published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, (1913), page 814.

(15) Generally for players rated Under 160BCF.

(16) *Correspondence Chess*, January 1988, No. 97, page 10.

(17) *Unladylike chess 'queen' plays joker's defence*, by Robin Young, published in the *Times*, July 13, 1987, page 1.

(18) *Unladylike chess 'queen'...*, (ibid.).

(19) This is from personal experience in a tournament at Central YMCA, London, although sadly I wasn't one of the protagonists.

(20) *It Happened at Luton*, published in *Chess*, Volume 40, Nos. 715-18, February/March 1975, page 130 (unnumbered).

(21) *Chess*, Volume 40, April 1975, Nos. 719-720, page 195.

(22) *The Case for Three-one*, by Mike Basman, published in the *British Chess Magazine*, March 2001, Volume 121, No. 3, pages 158-60.