The Human Comedy of Chess

A Grandmaster's Chronicles

Hans Ree

Foreword by
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Foreword

The world of chess has always abounded in fascinating characters, intrigues and anecdotes. While the stories of the past have been well covered in the vast literature of the game, those of more recent times have been understandably less well represented. In this respect we should take special note of the work of Hans Ree.

I have followed Ree's writing career since 1971, when he started to write chess columns for a weekly magazine, and I have watched him grow into the mature, skillful journalist he is today. Few are as uniquely qualified. As a grandmaster he understands the ins and outs of top-level chess; as a writer he knows how to explain them. He has the writer's gift of irony and wit, and the reporter's keen eye for detail.

This is a collection of Ree's longer articles, where he takes the time to elaborate and reflect. These articles give the reader an excellent overview of the diverse events of the last decade. Though Ree can be a hard-hitting polemicist, his tone is well considered and his views are nuanced. Ree also takes a few trips into the past, where he compares anecdotes and stories from different sources.

All this makes for excellent reading. I hope the book will give you as much pleasure as it has given me.

Jan Timman
Amsterdam, June 1999

Preface

The year started with an impressive victory by Garry Kasparov in the Hoogovens Tournament in the Dutch seaside resort of Wijk aan Zee. Two months later he won the Linares tournament with the magnificent score of 10½ out of 14, two-and-a-half points ahead of the successive crown princes Vladimir Kramnik and Viswanathan Anand. Then in May he won the tournament in Sarajevo, seemingly without having to exert himself. In top chess today, crown princes come and go, but when push comes to shove, Kasparov keeps on showing, time and again, that he is the king of chess.

Another thing these recent tournaments show is that today's top chess is wild and aggressive. In the 1920s it was feared that the game of chess would die an untimely death, because the technical perfection of the top players was such that they could no longer lose against each other. Since then the technique has improved even more, but the result has not been the reign of the solid draw, but something rather like the headhunting frenzy of axe-wielding savages.

Robert Fischer, who lives in exile in Budapest, makes fun of the coke-bottle glasses the top players have to wear after ruining their eyesight by staring endlessly at computer screens. Fischer thinks the end of chess is near, because studying seems to have become more important than playing; he has in fact invented a new, personal version of chess, FischeRandom, with its own rules. However, he is finding few followers, because most observers agree that today's top chess has more vitality than ever.

The same cannot be said of the international chess organization. In chess politics we are witnessing a veritable parade of scoundrels. Great events, such as the Fischer-Spassky match of 1992 and the 1994 Moscow Olympiad, were financed by shady businessmen whose wealth came from the kind of pyramid schemes that have led to popular uprisings in several countries.

And then, in 1995, the world chess federation got a new leader. FIDE president Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who is also president of Kalmykia, an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation, has been issuing one bizarre decree after another. He is rich, handsome and charming. He is also a ruthless despot who makes short shrift of rules, agreements and the process of law. At this writing, the dates for the FIDE world championship, where Anatoly Karpov has to defend his title, have been changed four times. As to the other world championship, that of Kasparov, a match between him and Anand was announced for next October, after Alexei Shirov, who had gained the right to challenge Kasparov, was ruthlessly dumped. Recent chess politics have been interesting indeed, as in the well-known Chinese curse: "May your children live in interesting times."

While this book devotes considerable attention to the history of chess, it focuses more particularly on chess in the 1990s. It is a pleasure to write about today's chess world. This is especially true of the pieces that appeared previously in *New in Chess*, a Dutch English-language periodical. In a sense, this publication is the school paper of top chess, because all the top players in the world contribute to it regularly. The knowledge that the same people I was writing about were also my magazine readers, gave a feeling of personal involvement and made the writing of the book more exciting. I hope it hasn't influenced my outspokenness.

In addition, this book is based on material that previously appeared in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*; the magazine of the Royal Dutch Chess Federation, *Schakend Nederland*; *Playboy magazine* (the Dutch edition); and the American Web site *The Chess Café* (http://www.chesscafe.com). Much has been changed, and hopefully improved. Where needed, the stories have been updated to reflect a 1999 perspective. Finally I would like to extend my thanks to the following people who assisted in the production of this book: Taylor Kingston, Maureen Peeck, Joan Russell, Joseph Russell and Willem Tissot.

Hans Ree
Amsterdam, June 1999

Karpov's Revenge

The FIDE congress that was held in November 1995 in Noisy-le-Grand, near Paris, was the strangest congress in the history of the world chess federation. Even stranger than that of Moscow, a year earlier. There, Kasparov, in a spectacular coup, had grabbed power in FIDE, which he had tried to destroy in 1993. Moscow 1994 had seen strife, hate, and bitterness. Noisy-le-grand 1995 was the congress of unity. Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was elected president of FIDE by 95 votes to 3, with 5 abstentions. It was also the convention of naivete. The delegates, like puppets on a string, had voted for someone who was absolutely unknown to them. In later months they did get to know him, and quite a few delegates had regrets. When the congress ended with a boat trip on the Seine, on November 24, the delegates were in high spirits. Many of them had thought for a long time that something dramatic would have to happen to save FIDE. And now something dramatic had indeed happened, and it seemed to have cleared the air. All the same, some of the delegates must have begun to have misgivings once they got home. What was the guy's name again they had made president? And what exactly was the significance of the spectacular turnabout that had taken place before their astonished eyes and which they had so unanimously supported? A year earlier, it had taken a while for the chess community to recover from its surprise at the Campomanes-Kasparov coup at the FIDE congress in Moscow. After a while, however, it had become clear that the then-defeated candidate, Kouatly, and some of the national chess federations, such as the German and the American, were preparing a counter-attack. The United States' stance in particular was very important. Kasparov's PCA (Professional Chess Association) and its sponsor Intel were registered in the U.S. It wouldn't be pleasant for Intel to get embroiled in a conflict with the U.S. Chess Federation. If the latter turned sour on the unholy alliance between Campomanes and Kasparov, it would be more of a threat to the PCA than if any other federation were to do so.

At the 1994 Moscow convention Kasparov had just managed to avert this. The American delegate, Fan Adams, was forced by his

federation at the very last moment to vote for Campomanes in his bid to continue as FIDE president. Adams was furious. He was a wealthy man, who had given a lot of time and money to promote chess in America. After he got home he threw himself into American chess politics in an effort to change the direction of his federation. And in this he succeeded.

The counter-offensive of the anti-Campomanes forces began at a Central Committee meeting on Monday, November 20, 1995. Serious accusations were leveled at Campomanes. At the Moscow congress, he had cast the vote of the Philippine Chess Federation, which he had no right to do. His vote was therefore invalid, as were the many others he had made by proxy for other federations. Then there was a report from the Philippines Government stating that an inquiry was being held into Campomanes' dealings with government money. He was alleged to have received $500,000, of which no record could be found in the FIDE financial administration. Campomanes responded by saying that nobody is guilty until found to be so by a jury. There was also the report of a FIDE commission, the so-called "Verification Commission," which showed that Campomanes had appropriated monies for himself and his crony Makropoulos without permission from anyone at all – except himself. The commission called this "highly improper," and it recommended that the matter be referred to a court in Lausanne, where FIDE had its headquarters, and that all overpayments should be refunded immediately to FIDE.

In the Central Committee, a group of about twenty people who prepare resolutions that later have to be approved by the General Assembly, a motion of "no confidence" was made against Campomanes. Did this motion carry a majority? The official FIDE Minutes say that the vote on the no-confidence motion at the Central Committee meeting was evenly divided 13-13, and that it was consequently rejected. But it is never wise to take FIDE at its word. U.S. delegate E. Steven Doyle had quite a different interpretation: "The motion passed on the first vote by 13-11. The 11 dissenting votes included the president and his team, who in effect cast a vote of confidence in themselves! "Campo" and company should have abstained; discounting their votes, the correct count would have been 13-6. While everyone present stood amazed, "Campo" and his Permanent Secretary Castro Abundo claimed that the vote had actually been defeated. The United States, Germany, France, Spain, and many others walked out in disgust. Campomanes then agreed to a second vote, to be done by roll call. Two abstentions changed to votes supporting him, making the second vote 13-13. To swing this final and critical vote to his advantage, Campo refused to count Fan Adams's vote, stating that he was

not present for the first vote - even though Fan had seconded the motion!... After the second vote the place erupted into shouting and the meeting was adjourned." It is indeed improbable that the official FIDE position reflects the true state of affairs. It is hardly likely that Adams, after months of political struggle, would, in his finest hour, have preferred a coffee break to voting on the motion he himself had seconded. According to the Americans, the motion of no confidence was carried 14 to 13. Anyhow, the question is academic because the motion never reached the General Assembly. Too much happened in the intervening days.

Enter Karpov. Those who had been following, in the previous months, a vitriolic exchange of letters between Campomanes and Karpov in the magazine *New in Chess* knew they were no longer friends. Campomanes had humiliated Karpov in Moscow. Now, in Paris, it became clear that Karpov hadn't let any grass grow under his feet. Only recently he had talked to Jan Timman in Belgrade and spoken very highly of Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. "Il-who?" Timman had thought, not paying attention. That was a rather unwise reaction on Timman's part. Karpov attended the entire Paris congress, and definitely not as a disinterested observer. Far from it: he, Kouatly and Ilyumzhinov, with a couple of administrative aides, had their own room at the convention hall, and considering the results of the meeting they must have worked very effectively there.

On Tuesday, deliberations were held that were designed to lead to Campomanes' resignation. Citing Doyle once more: "By the end of the night Karpov had convinced Campo the time had come to step down." On Wednesday Campomanes announced his resignation. Not only that, he also stated that his successor should be Ilyumzhinov.

A few small stumbling blocks were yet to be removed from the path of this new leader. Vice-President Gobash (United Arab Emirates) said he would take over the duties of FIDE President until the new elections in 1996. The prospect did not exactly please the delegates, and worked in favor of the man pulled out of the hat by Karpov, Kouatly and Campomanes himself. Ilyumzhinov was president of Kalmykia, an "autonomous republic within the Russian Federation." Described as immensely wealthy, a friend of both Karpov and Kasparov, he seemed to be the right man to bring about the desired alliance between the PCA and FIDE. Many a delegate must have thought that it was nice of Campomanes to appoint a successor who could fill FIDE's coffers rather than empty them. As so often in the past, FIDE was again balancing on the edge of illegality. A prospective FIDE President must, according to the regulations, have the support of his own national federation. In this case

that was the Russian Federation. No Kalmykian Chess Federation, if it exists at all, is a member of FIDE. The Russian delegate, Zelenkov, read a letter from his Chairman, Makarov, which made it clear that Ilyumzhinov definitely did not have the required support. Quite the reverse was true, in fact: Makarov expressed violent opposition to the proposed appointment, which in his view was illegal. Ilyumzhinov, for his part, produced a newspaper clipping with an interview with President Yeltsin. It was about something entirely different, the 1998 Olympiad, but no matter, it made a bigger impression than Makarov's letter. This was followed by the familiar FIDE spectacle: lawyers, always on hand in tricky situations, explaining that this was an exceptional case and that the regulations didn't apply.

And finally, on Friday, the Day of Atonement, came the apotheosis. It was either a heartwarming, or else a disgusting sight – according to one's taste – to see former enemies falling like brothers into one another's arms. Karpov and Kouatly, the victors, gave speeches in which they heaped extravagant praise on Campomanes. Kouatly spoke highly of Campo's ability to preserve unity in FIDE. And indeed, never had FIDE been as united as at the resignation of Campomanes. Karpov proposed a "vote of total confidence in Campomanes," which was carried unanimously by the Assembly. Like his predecessors, Campomanes was appointed honorary president. But a new function was also created for him, "Chairman of the Board," though nobody quite knew what this was. Campomanes received a standing ovation. All the members of his presidential team were re-elected. Kouatly himself was promoted to Deputy President.

With all the trepidations and stress of the Assembly nobody had thought to raise the issues of either the Financial Report or the improper financial practices, despite the earlier fuss there had been about them. A few months later, Ilyumzhinov was to issue a press release stating that everything was fine and the case closed. This was to be the style of the new chess world ruler: government not by consultation, but by press release.

At the time, Campomanes' position remained unclear. Most reporters thought he was forced to step down at the congress. He himself had a different story. He let it be known that he'd already decided on the plane to Paris that he was going to resign because he had been unable to effectuate a reconciliation agreement between the PCA and FIDE. Campomanes had made the best of a bad job by graciously resigning, but he seemed not yet finished as a political player. His entire team was still in function. He himself was appointed "Chairman of the Board." He said

he planned to leave definitively in 1996. Words with a familiar ring because he said the same in 1990 and 1994. In fact he did not resign in 1996, but was to stay on, happily fading as a well-rewarded dignitary in the shadow of Ilyumzhinov.

Amid all this uncertainty one thing was clear. The undisputed winner at this congress was FIDE World Champion Anatoly Karpov, who had been quietly at work behind the scenes since his humiliation at the hands of Campomanes in 1994. His favorite was now President of FIDE. The demands of Kasparov and the PCA, which were unacceptable to him, had now been officially rejected by the FIDE general assembly. If a unification match between the PCA and FIDE were ever to be held, Kasparov, in case of a draw, would not have the automatic advantage of the world champion. The general assembly also threw out the notion that FIDE should relinquish jurisdiction over the world championship. Someone from Montreal announced at the convention that a purse of a million dollars would be guaranteed for the Karpov-Kamsky match, but that if FIDE was united the prize money could go up to $1,700,000, thereby making the FIDE match $350,000 more important than Kasparov-Anand. A couple of weeks later it was announced that this amount had indeed been offered. And as if that were not enough, FIDE's interim ratings of November showed Karpov to be 3½ points ahead of Kasparov.

The men from Montreal later turned out to be impostors and Kasparov was soon to regain his first place on the rating list, but we didn't know that at the time. This was Karpov's finest hour. Ilyumzhinov was heralded as a friend of both Karpov and Kasparov. His friendship with Karpov was unquestionable, they were hand in glove at the convention, but any affection there might have been between Ilyumzhinov and Kasparov soon cooled. Kasparov was quoted in a Dutch newspaper as saying: "It is typical of FIDE's ineptitude that they've elected someone like Ilyumzhinov as President. It makes no difference to us, it won't make us alter our course at the PCA." Kasparov had a point. But very few people sympathized with him. His spectacular coup in Moscow in 1994 had been parried by an equally spectacular counter-coup of his opponents Kouatly and Karpov. And his denigrating opinion of Ilyumzhinov was again an example of how swiftly friendships and alliances can fade at the top of the modern chess establishment. In 1994, at the Russian championship and at the Olympiad, Kasparov and Ilyumzhinov had still been on very good terms.