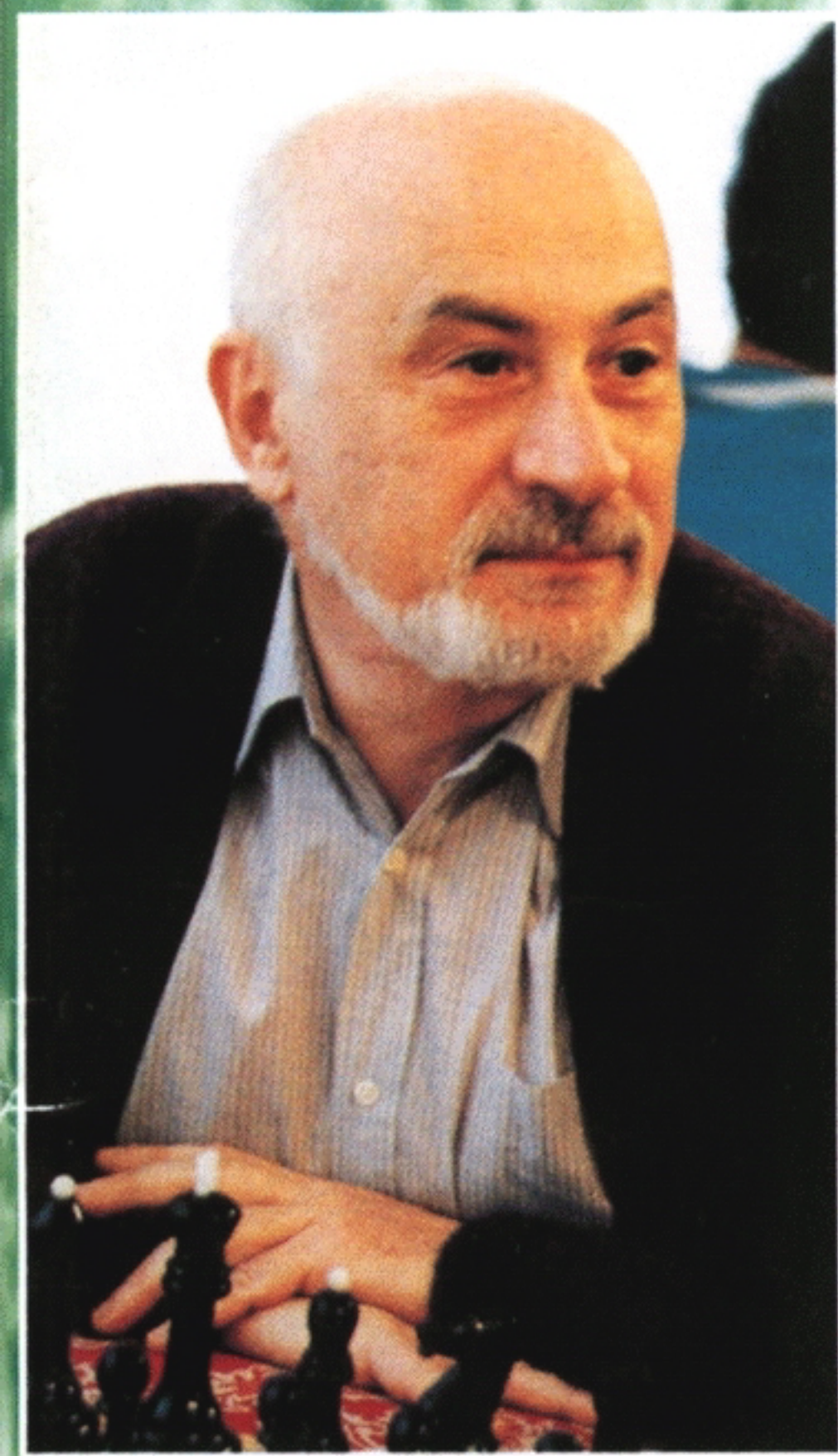


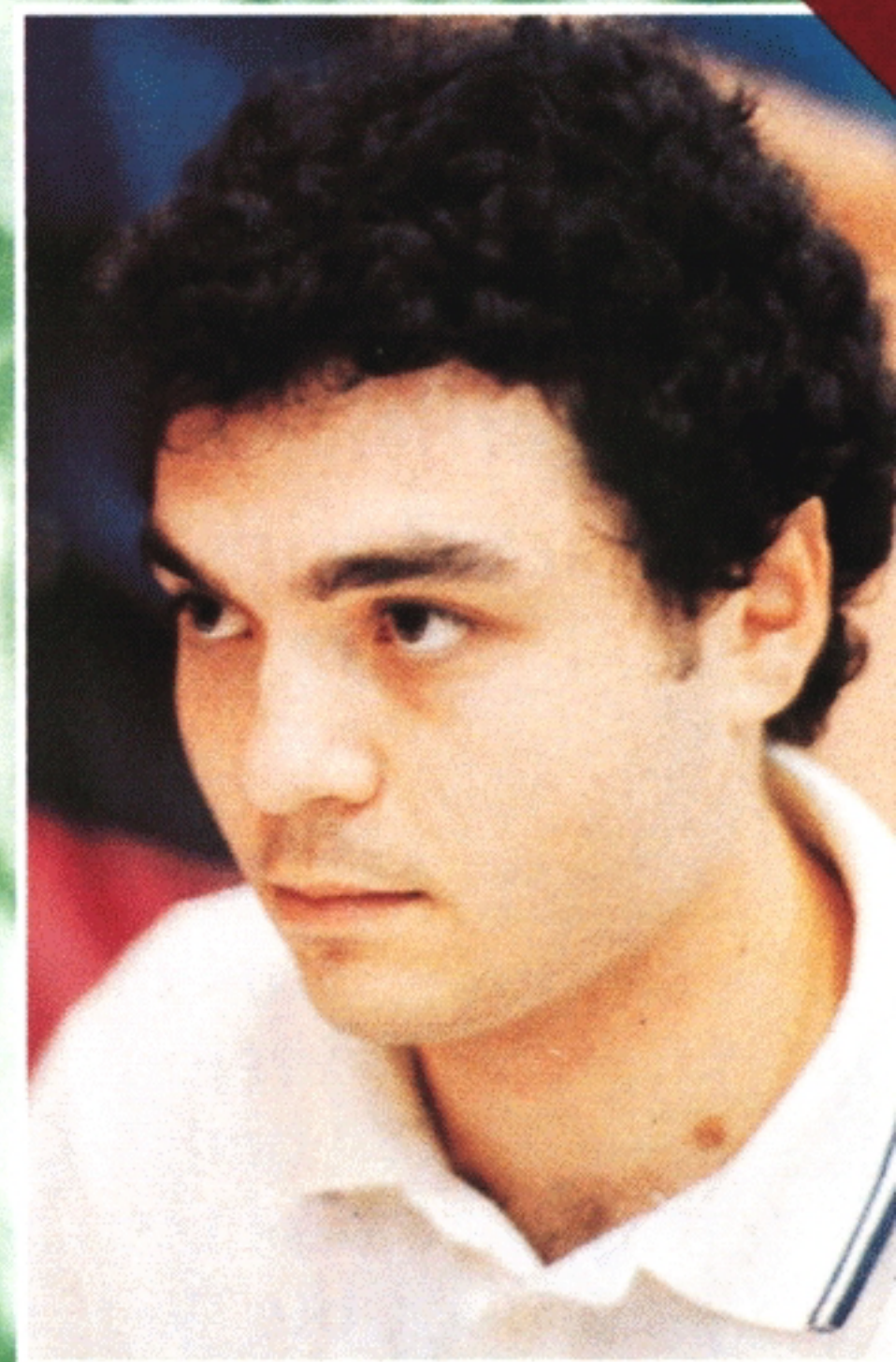
Chess Life

♔ March 1995

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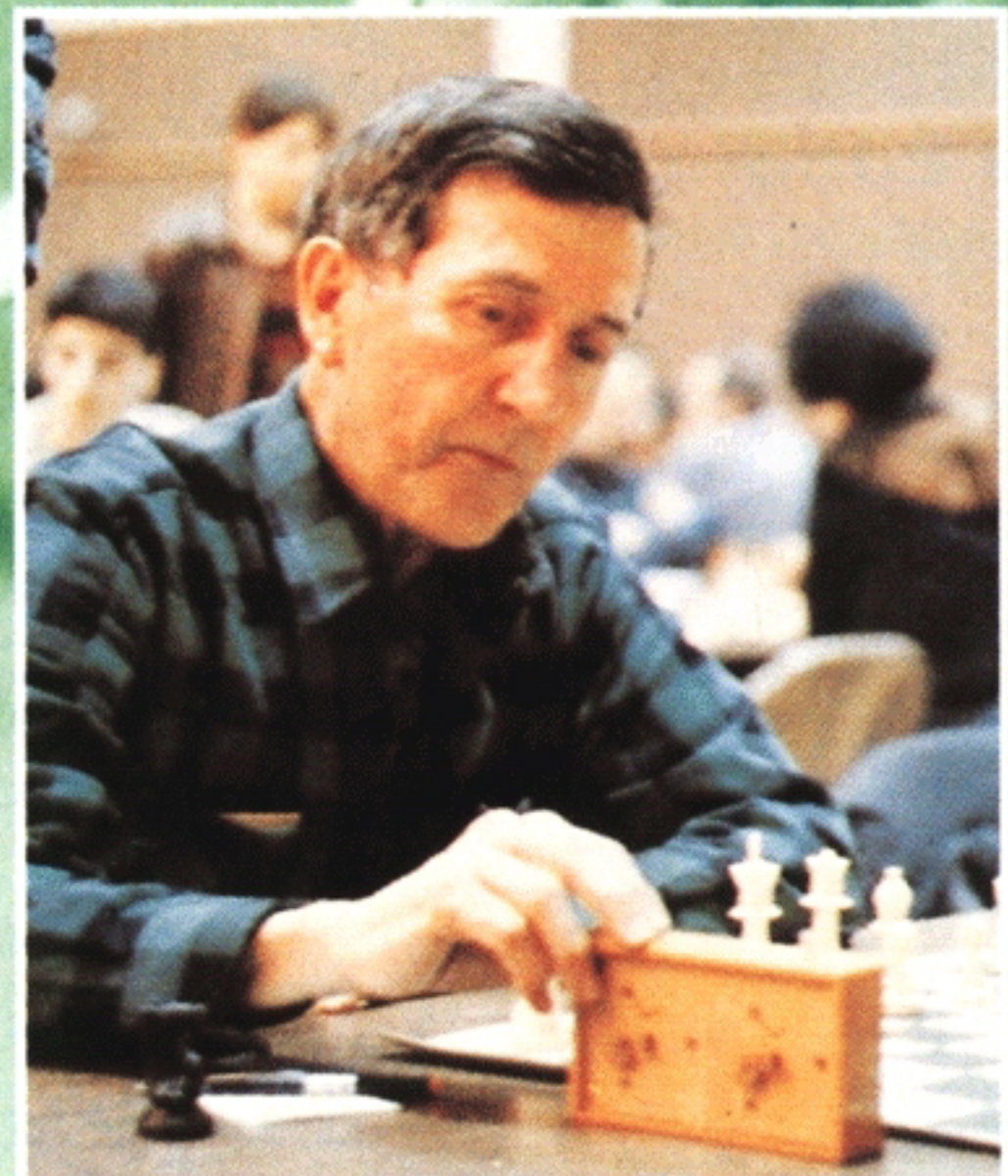
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DEPARTMENTS

- 6** Letters to the Editor
- 8** Letter From Europe by Bjarke Kristensen
- 12** Grandmaster Musings by Anatoly Karpov
- 14** Chess to Enjoy by Andy Soltis
- 16** Larry Evans on Chess by Larry Evans
- 18** Endgame Lab by Pal Benko
- 21** SOLITAIRE CHESS by Bruce Pandolfini
- 22** Exploring the Basics
by Rudy Blumenfeld and Danny Kopec
- 24** Opening Forum by Edmar Mednis
- 26** 65th Square by Robert Byrne
- 28** Beyond the Basics by Maxim Dlugy
- 30** Game of the Month by Michael Rohde
- 32** Check is in the Mail by Alex Dunne
- 35** Key Crackers by David L. Brown
- 61** Tournament Life 491 Events to Play in
- 80** Classifieds Products for Chessplayers
- 81** Check it Out Answers to All Your Questions

FEATURES

- 10** John Varis, 1927-1994
- 36** Enhance '94: FIDE Approved by Leon Haft
- 38** Sagalchik Earns Grandmaster Title
by Gennady Sagalchik
- 40** 1994 Interplay U.S. Championship, Part II
by Ben Finegold
- 45** Gurevich Breaks Jinx, Wins American Open
by Jerry Hanken
- 50** Bobby Fischer at 18: A Personal Recollection
by Jerry Hanken
- 52** Forty Years At The Top: John Curdo
by Larry Eldridge
- 55** 1994 Correspondence Rating List

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PART ONE:

FORTY YEARS AT THE TOP; AN APPRECIATION

by Larry Eldridge

IN OCTOBER 1947, AN EXCITED 15-year-old boy took a bus to Boston to play in his first chess tournament. Little did the young John Curdo realize that he was really embarking on much longer trip — a lifetime journey through the vast realm of Caissa that is still going strong nearly half a century later.

The occasion back then was the Massachusetts Schoolboy Championship, and despite his inexperience Curdo promptly served notice of things to come by beating out 61 rivals to take clear first place.

Now fast-forward to July, 1994, and the same John Curdo is getting ready for another trip to another tournament. He gets up at 5 a.m., is on the road at 6, drives for 1½ hours to Gilford, New Hampshire, grabs a bite to eat, gives a simultaneous exhibition, then zips through a 4-0 sweep of the Lakes Region Chess Club Open.

Just another day at the office for the veteran master who has long since become a legend throughout his native New England and beyond? Well, not exactly, because this one happened to be the 500th tournament victory of a truly remarkable career.

That's right: 500 first places (mostly outright, some shared) in competitions ranging from small one-day tournaments like this one through scores of city, state, and regional championships, all the way up to his four U.S. Senior triumphs.

ALL TIME RECORD

Is this an all-time record? Nobody keeps statistics on such things, but it's a pretty safe assumption it is. For one thing, until the last 20 years or so the opportunities just weren't there for the regular play necessary to reach such a number, so you can pretty much rule out anyone who played most of his chess before the modern era. As for his contemporaries, as Curdo himself puts it, "Who else would be crazy enough to do it?"

Good enough too, one might add, for most of us could play from now to infinity without winning that many tournaments.

Curdo is indeed good enough. Over the years, as the selection of games accompanying this article shows, he has locked horns with — and frequently bested — all

Larry Eldridge is a well-known television personality in Boston.



John Curdo

the top players in the New England area as well as other masters, IMs, and even GMs from around the United States and elsewhere.

Throughout most of his career he has stuck fairly close to home, but in the last decade or so he has been branching out quite a bit more — and with notable success.

SENIOR OPEN SUCCESS

One of the first such trips — and one of his most vivid memories — was his initial venture into the U.S. Senior in 1982. The tournament had only started the year before, and when Curdo saw that the inaugural championship was won by an expert, he got visions of a national title.

"So I go all the way out to Scottsdale, Ariz.," he recalls, "I walk in, and who's there but Larry Evans?"

"I don't know if I was shook up because I saw him or what, but I sat down in the first round, got a winning position, then made three blunders in a row and lost."

The story had a happy ending, though, as Curdo won his next five games, Evans was held to a pair of draws, and they tied for first place.

Since then Curdo has made three more trips to the Senior Open, and has been successful ever time, winning it outright in 1986 and '88, and tying for first place in '87. He also has been playing more frequently these days in events like the U.S. Open, the World Open, and even some international tournaments. Judging from the results, one can't help wondering what might have happened if he had

gone this route earlier. For even at the relatively advanced chess age of 62, he is clearly still a player to be reckoned with at any level.

Just last year, in fact, at the annual Saint Martin International, he knocked off GM Utut Adianto of Indonesia (who was fresh from a first place tie in the New York Open) and obtained good winning chances against GM John Fedorowicz before settling for the draw that clinched a major prize. And in this year's U.S. Open he defeated GM Robert Byrne in 22 moves en route to an 8-4 result.

Despite these increasingly frequent and successful forays, however, Curdo remains best known (to borrow the title of one of his books) for his "Forty Years at the Top" in New England. And so in recognition of his momentous 500th tournament triumph, it seems only appropriate to focus on this aspect as we look back at the highlights of his long and illustrious career.

Growing up during the Depression and World War II, Curdo stumbled into chess when he won a set as a premium for selling seeds door-to-door. Quickly outstripping his playmates, he located the local chess club, but formal instruction was basically non-existent in those days, so he found what books he could in the library and worked things out pretty much on his own.

"I had a great teacher," he likes to say now. "Me!"

BARNSTORMING

The year after winning the state schoolboy title, Curdo made his mark in a much bigger way, defeating one of New England's top players, Harlow Daly, and going on to win the Massachusetts State Championship. That triumph got him national notice — and a chance to join the Log Cabin Chess Club of West Orange, N.J., a famous organization of the time that played matches with the Marshall, Manhattan, and other strong clubs in the New York area, and also barnstormed across the country.

In the summer of 1948, still only 16, he toured with the club by automobile to cities all across the United States — through Chicago to San Francisco and Los Angeles, then back home through Phoenix, Houston, New Orleans, and elsewhere. It was quite a thrill as well and a chance to play a lot of high-level chess, though not too successfully.

"That first year we pretty much got banged around," he recalls. "But the next

year we took another trip, and that time we did very well. We had a much stronger team than — players like Herman Hess, Weaver Adams, Edgar McCormick. Even Larry Evans, who was in Texas for the U.S. Open, joined us for a couple of matches there."

So as a teenager Curdo was already playing in the "big leagues" of that day — though not doing much in terms of the record he was destined to achieve. Tournaments were few and far between back then, with more emphasis on club activity, league matches, and postal chess, though he did manage to pick up one more title — the 1949 state championship — before military service beckoned.

Curdo spent most of his 2½-year Army stint in England, where he played very little serious chess — partly because he was "otherwise engaged," so to speak, courting the young Scottish woman who was to become his wife. After his discharge he and Julia settled Northwest of Boston and raised three children before their marriage eventually became "a casualty of chess."

Thus while Curdo has now been a full-time professional chessplayer for several years now, his earlier career was woven in around a full life in the "real world" complete with a house in the suburbs, a family, a regular job — the whole bit.

All these things slowed down his development, and he spent most of the 1950s regaining his pre-Army form, battling the likes of Daly and Weaver Adams for state and regional supremacy, and not even gaining his own master rating until 1957 — even though by then he had already won the first of his seven New England championships and the first three of what would become an incredible 17 Massachusetts state titles.

W: Weaver Adams

B: John Curdo

New England Championship

Portsmouth, N.H., September 6, 1948

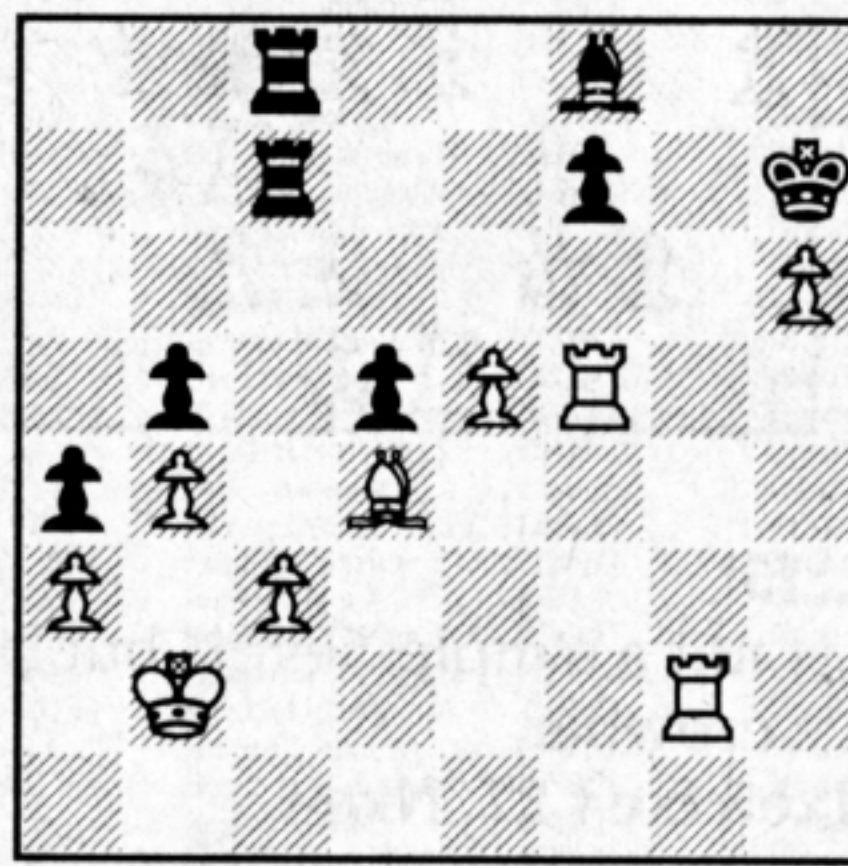
B12 CARO-KANN DEFENSE

Advance Variation

Weaver Adams was the perennial kingpin of New England chess in this era, and a national force as well. Indeed, at the time of this game he was the reigning U.S. Open Champion — but the 16-year-old Curdo gave the veteran master all he could handle in what turned out to be the only time they ever crossed swords. The game came in the last round and was for all the marbles: a draw would clinch the championship for Adams, while a victory would give Curdo not only a tie for first place but the title on tiebreaks. Despite playing Black, the youngster got the upper hand, but Adams hung in there and eventually his experience began to

tell. By the end it was Adams who had the winning chances, but perhaps empathizing with the young foe who had fought so well — and to whom he must have realized the torch would soon be passed — he settled for the half point. He was, as Curdo puts it, "a gentle man."

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 Bf5 4. Bd3 Bxd3 5. Qxd3 Qa5+ 6. Nd2 Qa6 7. Qe3 e6 8. Ne2 Ne7 9. g4 Nd7 10. f4 c5 11. dxc5 Nc6 12. Nb3 Qc4! 13. Bd2 Nxc5 14. Nbd4 Nxd4 15. Nxd4 Ne4 16. b3 Qc7 17. 0-0-0 Bc5 18. Kb2 Rc8 19. c3 0-0 20. g5 Qb6 21. Rc1 Rc7 22. Rc2 Rfc8 23. Rhc1 a5 24. Be1 a4?! 25. b4 Bf8 26. a3 Rc4 27. Nf5 Qc6 28. Ng3 Nxc3? 29. hxg3 Re4 30. Qd3 Kh8 31. Bf2 Qc4 32. Qxc4 Rxc4 33. Bd4 h6? 34. gxh6 gxh6 35. g4 Kh7 36. Rh2 Kg6 37. Rch1 R4c6 38. Rh5! b5 39. g5! Kh7 40. gxh6 R8c7 41. Rg1 Rc8 42. Rg4 R6c7 43. Rh3 Rc6 44. Bf2 Rc4! 45. Bd4 R4c6 46. Rg2 R6c7 47. Bf2 Rc4! 48. Bd4 R4c6 49. Rh5 R6c7 50. f5 exf5 51. Rxf5, draw.



Final Position

W: John Curdo

B: Harlow Daly

Boston Metropolitan League

Boston, Nov. 13, 1948

C11 FRENCH DEFENSE

Two decades later Harlow Daly would become New England's legendary "Grand Old Man of Chess," playing at expert or master strength into his 80s. Even Curdo in his heyday had trouble with Daly the octogenarian. But back at a time when Daly was still at or near his peak, the teenage Curdo seemed to have his number. He beat him earlier in the year to win his first state championship and he prevailed again in this game — a special treat since it came just the day before his 17th birthday.

1. d4?!

Played only because I knew that Harlow would reply 1. ... e6, preparing his favorite Dutch Defense.

1. ... e6 2. e4 d5 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. e5 Nfd7 5. Nf3 c5 6. dxc5 Nc6 7. Bf4 Bxc5

7. ... Nxc5 is an excellent alternative.

8. Bd3 Nb4

Not 8. ... 0-0, when the classic attack 9. Bxh7+ is strong.

9. 0-0 Nxd3 10. Qxd3 h6

Castling is still dubious; 10. ... 0-0 11. Ng5 g6 12. Rad1.

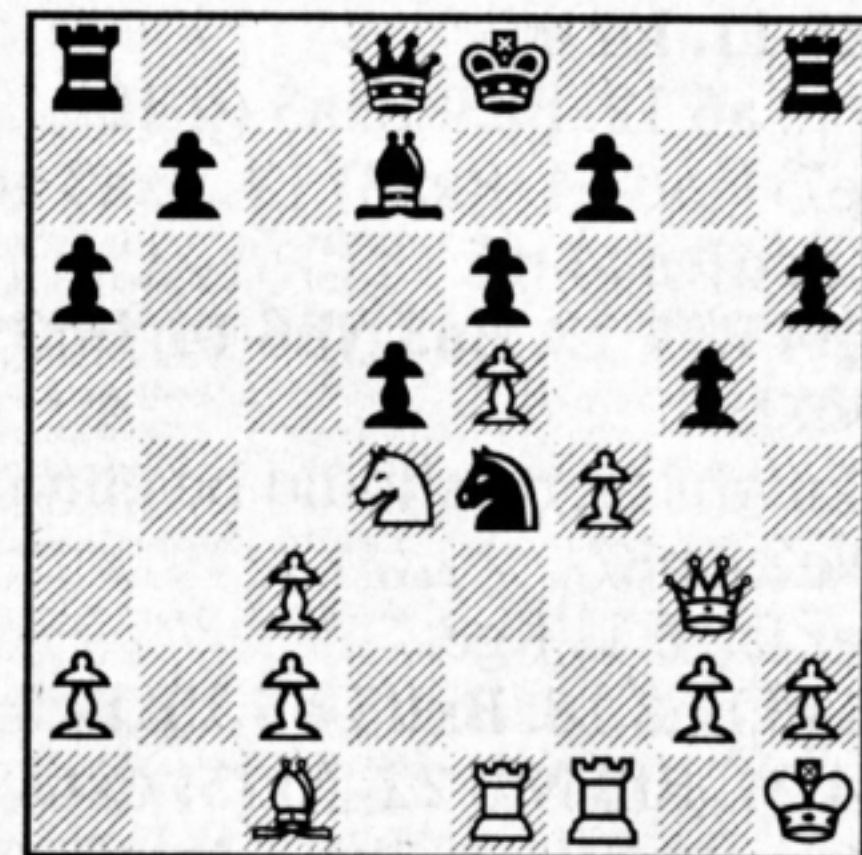
11. Kh1! a6

Black still hesitates to castle because the idea g2-g4-g5.

12. Rae1 Bb4 13. Nd4 Nc5 14. Qg3 g5?!

Less weakening is 14. ... g6.

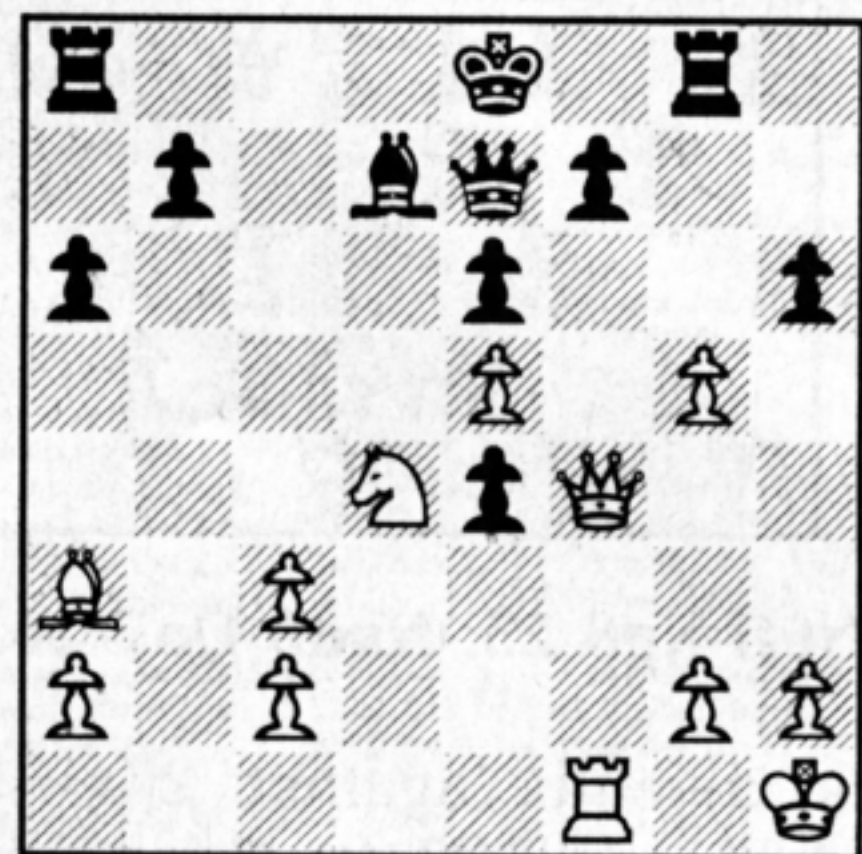
15. Bc1 Bd7 16. f4 Bxc3 17. bxc3 Ne4



18. Rxe4! dxe4 19. fxe5 Rg8

This loses. Also bad was 19. ... Qe7 20. gxh6, when 20. ... 0-0-0 is met by 21. Bg5. Probably best was 19. ... Qb6, but White's position is better after 20. gxh6 or 20. g6.

20. Qf4 Qe7 21. Ba3!



21. ... hxg5

If 21. ... Qxg5, then 22. Qxf7+ Kd8 23. Be7+! wins.

22. Qf2 Qxa3 23. Qxf7+ Kd8 24. Qxg8+ Be8 25. Nxe6+ Kd7

The only move.

26. Rd1+ Kc6 27. Rd6+, Black resigns.

The finish might be 27. ... Kb5 28. Nd4+ Ka5 29. Nb3+ Kb5 30. Qd5+ Ka4 31. Qa5 mate.

W: John Curdo

B: Saul Wachs

Interstate Team Match

Philadelphia, September 24, 1949

C17 FRENCH DEFENSE

With tournaments few and far between, club chess was "where it was at" in the 1940s, and top players got a large percentage of their competition in league play and other matches. Curdo's victory in the 1948 Massachusetts State Championship won him a coveted spot on the famous Log Cabin Chess Club team in New Jersey. This game against another young hotshot of the day, Saul Wachs,

took place in a match between the Log Cabin CC and Philadelphia's mercantile CC — two of the strongest chess clubs in the nation at the time.

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e5 c5 5. a3 Ba5 6. b4 cxb4?!

Supposedly better in this variation is 6. ... cxd4.

7. Nb5 Nc6 8. axb4 Bxb4+ 9. c3 Be7 10. Qg4 Kf8 11. h4 h5

If 11. ... a6 12. Ba3! Bxa3 (if 12. ... axb5? 13. Bxe7+ and 14. Rxa8) 13. Rxa3 and the knight settles at d6.

12. Qf4 Bd7 13. Ba3 Nh6 14. Bd3 a6 15. Nd6 Qc7?!

The knight on d6 should be eliminated.

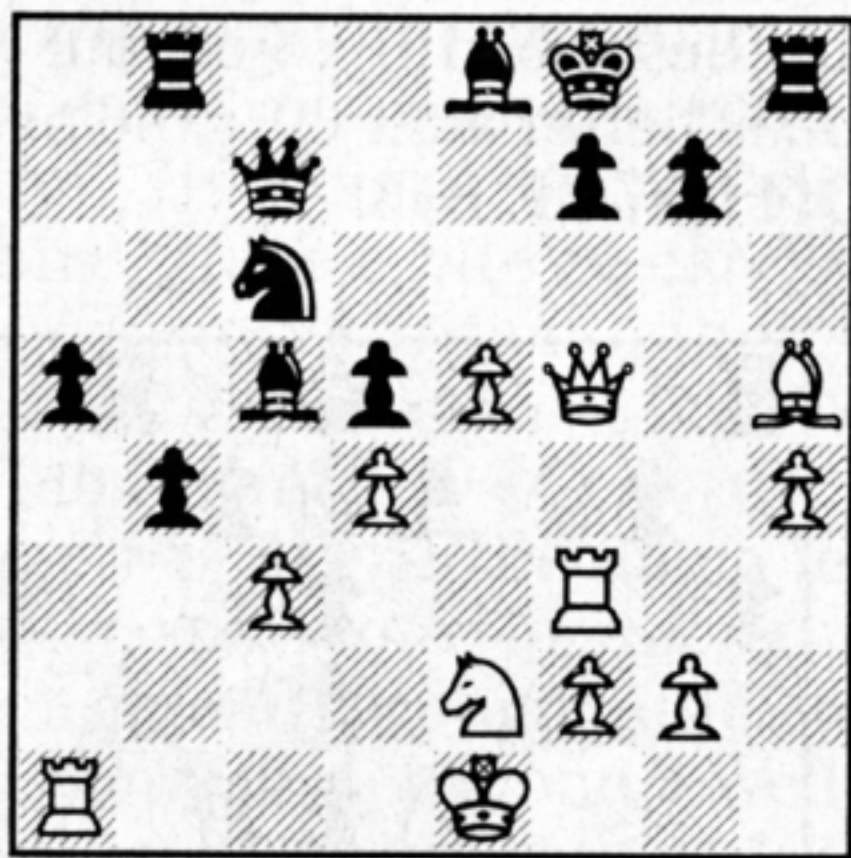
16. Ne2 Rb8?

Better is 16. ... Kg8.

17. Bg6 Be8 18. Bxh5 b5 19. Bc5 a5 20. Rh3 b4 21. Rf3 Nf5 22. Nxf5! exf5

If 22. ... Rxh5 23. Nxe7 Nxe7 24. Bd6 wins, or if 22. ... Bxc5 23. Nxg7! Kxg7 24. Rg3+ Kf8 25. Qf6! Rxh5 26. Nf4, winning.

23. Qxf5 Bxc5



24. Nf4! Kg8 25. Nxd5 Qa7 26. dxc5 Rh6

Black defends against 27. Nf6+. If instead 26. ... g6? 27. Bxg6 fxc6 28. Qf8+ Kh7 29. Nf6 is mate.

27. cxb4!? Nd4 28. Qg5 Nxf3+ 29. Bxf3 a4 30. c6! Kh8 31. c7

White's pawns are tremendous, as is his time pressure.

31. ... Ra8 32. Qe7

The threats are 33. c8=Q! and 33. Qf8+ Kh7 34. Be4+, the remainder of the game was played move-on-move.

32. ... Qd4 33. Rd1 Qc4 34. Qc5 Qxc5 35. bxc5 Rc8 36. Bg4 Re6 37. Bxe6 fxe6 38. Nb6 Rxc7 39. Rd8 Re7 40. Nc8, Black resigns.

W: James Bolton

B: John Curdo

New England Championship,
Providence, RI, September 2, 1956
C54 GIUOCO PIANO

This game against the strong Connecticut master James Bolton is one of Curdo's favorites from his early period — for a couple of reasons. One is the pleasing finish; the other is that it was a key victory in his march to his first New England title.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5

5. 0-0 d6 6. c3 0-0?! 7. a4 a5 8. Qb3?!

Putting the queen out of play — 8. Bg5 gives White a plus.

8. ... Qe7 9. Bg5 h6 10. Bxf6 Qxf6 11. Nbd2 Ne7! 12. Rad1 Ng6 13. Rfe1 Nf4

Intending 14. ... Qg6 15. Nh4 (Black wins a pawn after 15. g3 Nh3+.) 15. ... Qg4 16. g3 Nh3+ picking off a pawn.

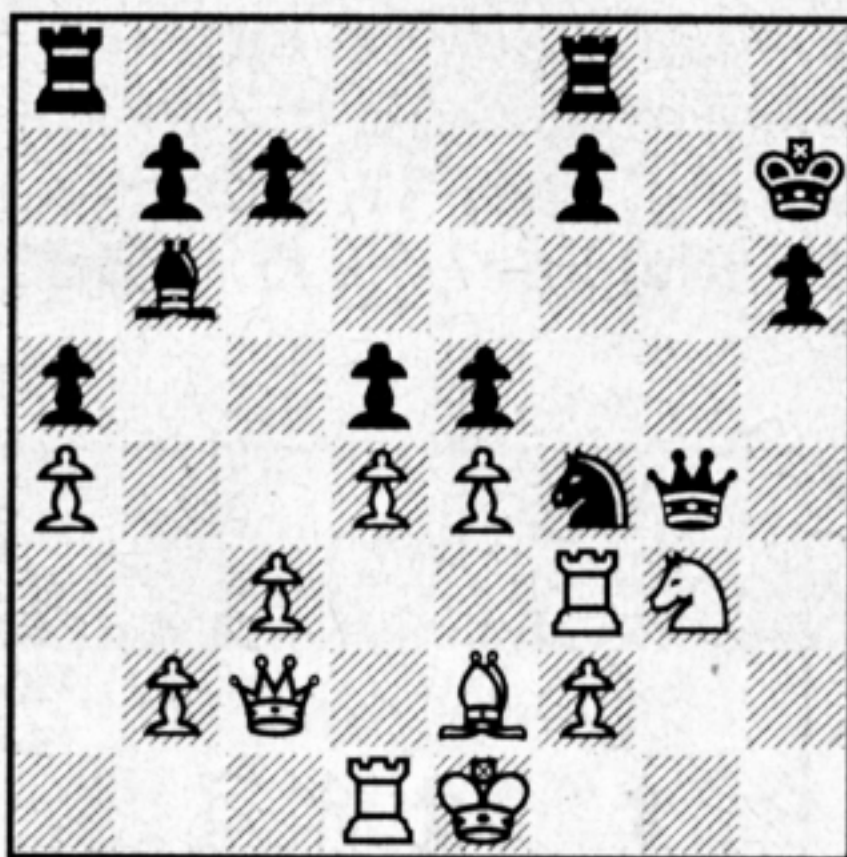
14. d4!? Bb6

White gets too much play after 14. ... exd4 15. cxd4 Bxd4 16. Nxd4 Qxd4 17. Nf3.

15. Re3 g5 16. h3 Kh7 17. Nf1 Bxh3 18. gxh3 Nxh3+ 19. Kg2 g4 20. Ng3

The knight is pinned against 20. ... Qxf2+ and mate next.

20. ... Nf4+ 21. Kf1 gxf3 22. Rxf3 Qg6 23. Ke1 Qg4 24. Be2 d5 25. Qc2



25. ... f5!

This is not a simple "lever" but rather a massive crowbar.

26. dxe5 fxe4 27. Nxe4

His only chance for counterplay because of 27. Re3 Ng2+ and 27. Kf1 (or Kd2) 27. ... Nxe2!.

27. ... Ng2+ 28. Kf1

Exquisite would be 28. Kd2 dxe4 29. Rf7+ Rxf7 30. Bxg4 Rxf2+ 31. Be2 Be3 mate!

28. ... dxe4 29. Rf7+

Another nice one is 29. Rxf8 Ne3+ 30. fxe3 Rxf8+ 31. Ke1 Qg3+ 32. Kd2 Bxe3 mate.

29. ... Rxf7 30. Bxg4 Ne3,+ White resigns.

A pure "family fork" that includes the entire family.

W: Edmar Mednis

B: John Curdo

New England Open,
Hartford, Conn., September 6, 1964
C80 RUY LOPEZ, Open Variation

In his book, "Forty Years at the Top," Curdo calls this fine victory against grandmaster-to-be Edmar Mednis a high point in his career. "It was played in the fourth round, and gave me a 4-0 lead," he writes. "But the satisfaction ended there. I lost my last three games and found my car broken into and burglarized, adding insult to injury. Edmar showed his class by winning his last three games and the tournament."

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. 0-0 Nxe4 6. d4 b5 7. Bb3 d5 8. Nxe5 Nxe4 6. d4 b5 7. Bb3 d5 8. Nxe5

Usual is 8. dxe5. Mednis says he has played the text with success. In later years, I adopted it for its surprise value.

8. ... Nxe5 9. dxe5 Be6

This is now considered inferior to 9. ... Bb7 or 9. ... c6.

10. c3 Be7 11. Be3 0-0 12. f3 Nc5 13. Bc2 f6 14. exf6 Rxf6 15. g4?!

This pawn advance, followed by the next one, requires great courage in the face of Black's superior development; 15. Bd4 Rh6 (with the idea of 16. ... Bd6) 16. Be3 Rf6 17. Bd4 would be a logical draw, but Mednis wants none of that.

15. ... Bf7!

This threatens the "defensive" 16. ... Bg6, and thus induces White to rush his pawn storm.

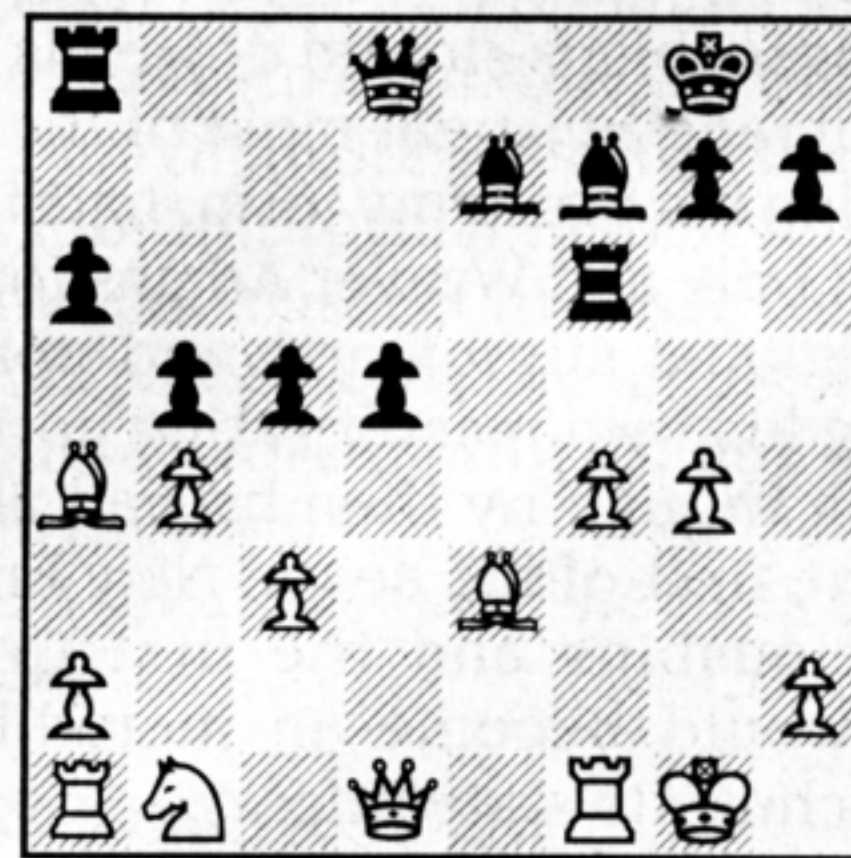
16. b4 Na4! 17. f4

To answer 17. ... Bg6 with 18. f5. Winning a pawn by 17. Bxa4 bxa4 18. Qxa4 allows Black a counterattack by 18. ... Re6 19. Bd4 (19. Bf4 d4!) 19. ... Bd6 (with the idea of 20. ... Qh4 or 20. ... Rh6).

17. ... c5

White's pawn front is menacing, so Black must try to open the center. This should be easy because White's development has not progressed since move 11!

18. Bxa4



Suddenly White goes on the defensive. He hopes to keep the center closed after 18. ... bxa4 19. bxc5.

18. ... d4! 19. g5 Re6 20. Bf2 bxa4 21. bxc5 Bxc5 22. cxd4 Rd6 23. Nc3

His first real developing move in his last 12!

23. ... Rxd4

Tactically sound and complicated, because White is getting short of time.

24. Qg4 Qb6 25. Rab1 Rb4 26. Rxb4 Qxb4 27. Qf3 Re8 28. Qc6

Mednis has about a minute for his next 12 moves!

28. ... Bxf2+ 29. Rxf2 Re3 30. Qc8+? Be8 31. Re2 Rxe2 32. Nxe2 Qe1+, White resigns.

Part Two will appear
in the May issue.