

Connecting Blindfold Play to the Chess Mainstream

An examination of one of chess' most fascinating sidelines

By Al Lawrence

The first thing to say about *Blindfold Chess* is that a book of this importance to its subject is rare in any discipline. This new hardback from McFarland & Company, Inc., is thorough, thoughtful, and scholarly—and, at the same time, very enjoyable to read—in its examination of a niche in chess culture that has fascinated both players and non-players for centuries. It's easy to recognize that this volume will be the standard reference work on blindfold chess for a very, very long time.

Because the authors concentrate on a narrow substratum of the chess art—one that some, admittedly, may consider a sideshow—the work is able to “drill down” to a very deep level of erudition. But there's a lot here for the casual reader as well, for anyone who loves the lore of chess and admires spectacular, off-beat achievements. (This book has come to the right place!) In fact, the authors go a long way toward connecting blindfold chess to the mainstream of chess history and development.

The book is divided into three major discussions:

- I. The History of Blindfold Chess;
- II. Psychology of Blindfold Chess; and
- III. Blindfold Chess Games.

Part I reviews practitioners “Even Before Philidor” (often erroneously cited as the blindfold chess pioneer), whose two- or three-game blindfold exhibitions were a European sensation. Hearst and Knott show that such demonstrations went back to at least 700 A.D. We get a review of all recorded blindfold greats—including world-class over-the-board players like Paul Morphy, Joseph Blackburne, Johannes Zukertort, Harry Pillsbury, Richard Reti, Alexander Alekhine, Miguel Najdorf, Reuben Fine, Viswanathan Anand, Anatoly Karpov, Vladimir Kramnik, Alexander Morozevich, and even Magnus Carlsen. And we get some very interesting statements from the players themselves. For example, Garry Kasparov told the organizers of the Amber blindfold event in 1993, “that he wanted to ‘stay mentally well’; he was apparently anxious about ‘going mad’ if he played blindfold chess seriously.” On the other hand, Larry Christiansen credits

his barnstorming days giving blindfold exhibitions with making over-the-board analysis “a breeze.” Reti made a similar point.

Part II was my own favorite. I can't resist factoid-toppers like: Although only 12% of the general population is left-handed, about 20% of tournament chess players are south-paws—probably because spatial skills are mainly controlled by the right side of the brain, and chiefly manifested on the left side of the body. But there's more here than random facts. Part II is a thorough review of

45-game exhibition in 1947. Who was the best-ever blindfold player? Alexander Alekhine.

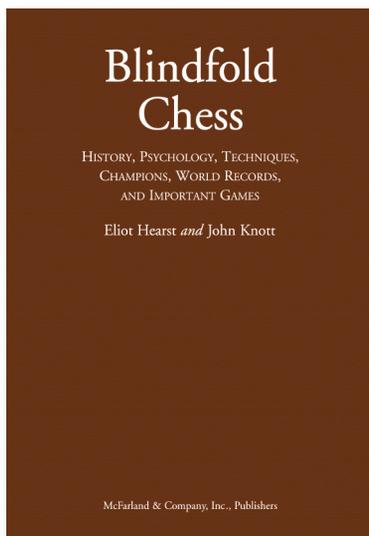
It's worth noting that the book's co-author, Eliot Hearst, was one of the top young USCF players of the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, Hearst, from the black side of a Ruy Lopez, defeated Robert Fischer with a swashbuckling counterattack at the 1956 Rosenwald Memorial in New York, just three rounds after Bobby had played the “Game of the Century” against Donald Byrne. Hearst went on to write a popular column for *Chess Life* in the 1960s. He left chess to get his Ph.D. in psychology, and is now a distinguished professor emeritus at Indiana University. Along the way, he published important articles on the psychology of sports and games, learning, and memory. His co-author John Knott, a British barrister and writer, has also researched blindfold chess for three decades.

When I talked with Hearst by telephone, I couldn't resist bringing up an Ambrose Bierce-like definition from his 1962 humorous *Chess Life* piece “A Gentle Glossary”:

Blindfold Chess: a skill, through which minor masters can gain a world-wide reputation; outlawed in Russia because Morphy and Pillsbury died crazy.

Hearst didn't recall poking fun at the phenomenon of sightless play nearly 50 years ago, and points out that after spending the intervening half-century researching the achievements of the great blindfold players, he regrets the jab. His book debunks the legend that blindfold chess is a dangerous strain (even though Capablanca demurred playing *sin ver*—the Spanish term for “blindfold chess”—saying “I don't want to kill myself!”).

Yes, \$65 strikes most of us, your reviewer included, as a lot for a book these days. (I'm waiting for news of a bibliophile bailout.) The discounters will probably get the book down close to \$50. The entire book is impeccably indexed and bibliographed and offers a lay-flat binding. (Go online to blindfoldchess.net for excerpts, updates, and other guilt-assuaging rationales for spending the money.) Since I believe that true excellence must be rewarded, I hope plenty of readers will part with the price of a passé cell phone to get the definitive work on blindfold chess—along with some wonderful chess reading. ■



BLINDFOLD CHESS: History, Psychology, Techniques, Champions, World Records, and Important Games. Eliot Hearst and John Knott, McFarland & Company, Inc. (2009), 445 pages, \$65.00 from uscfsales.com.

“psych lit” on the subject: “Research on General Chess Skill,” “Psychological Studies and Commentaries on Blindfold Chess,” “The Techniques of Blindfold Champions,” and “The Supposed Health Hazards.”

Part III consists of 444 notable blindfold games, nearly all annotated, from Philidor to Anand. It contains all available games from record-setting events, and lots of other notable games.

The authors don't shy away from offering their very informed opinions. Who deserves to be considered the blindfold record-holder? Not János Flesch but Miguel Najdorf, for his