

Timur Gareyev and Blindfold Chess: An Appraisal

By John Knott

1. Introduction

This article examines the chess exploits of GM Timur Gareyev and puts into historical context his claim to have established a world record by playing 48 blindfold games simultaneously on December 3-4, 2016 at Las Vegas, Nevada. It also contains a brief review of Gareyev's chess career and gives a snapshot of him as a person; documents his blindfold chess activity; considers some important features of his blindfold events and examines some criticisms that have been raised; and it looks at the details of the 48-game event and comments on Gareyev's techniques and strategies in handling large blindfold displays, before offering a summary and some general conclusions.

2. Who is Timur Gareyev?

Timur Gareyev (sometimes spelled Gareev) was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, on March 3, 1988, when the country was still within the Soviet Union. He was taught chess at the age of six by his grandfather; played frequently with his family and friends, and entered his first rated competition at the age of eight. By the time he was ten he was studying chess between four to six hours a day on his own and also with Georgy Borisenko, a correspondence grandmaster who had coached Victor Korchnoi and Mark Taimanov and who was described by David Bronstein as one of the Soviet Union's greatest theoretical experts.¹ Gareyev was the Asian boys' under-14 champion in **2000** when aged 12; he became a FIDE master in **2003** and a grandmaster in **2004** at the age of 16; he represented Uzbekistan in the 36th Chess Olympiad (**2004**) at Calvia de Mallorca, Spain (as 1st reserve) and the 37th Olympiad (**2006**) at Turin, Italy (on Board 3). In **2007** he tied for first place with IM Vladimir Egin and GM Anton Filippov in the Uzbekistan National Championship²; and in the **2008** Asian Team Championships he played on the top board for Uzbekistan.³ As he developed as a chess player Gareyev gained inspiration from the games of Tal and Kasparov, and it was no

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln-ysuTvQrg> All links in this article were successfully accessed on June 27, 2017.

² http://ratings.fide.com/tournament_report.phtml?event16=11278

³ <http://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessplayer?pid=56780>

doubt largely from their influence that his passion became, in his own words, “finding interesting solutions in a dynamic way”.⁴

2.1 Achievements in the US

In 2005 Gareyev moved to the United States and studied Business Marketing at the University of Texas at Brownsville, later studying economics at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and receiving a B.A. degree. He has achieved many notable successes (and some setbacks) in regular tournaments. Here are a few of his most important performances:

- In **2009** he was =3rd in the National Open Championship (4.5/6) with Sargissian, Van Wely, Petrosian, Ehlvest and others, half a point behind the joint winners Akobian and Sevillano; and was =1st in the 75th Annual Southwest Open in Fort Worth, Texas.
- In **2010** he was 1st in the National Open (5.5/6).
- In **2011** he was 1st in the Chicago Open (7.5/9) ahead of Harikrishna; =3rd in the World Open (6.5/9), with Smirin, Harikrishna, Van Wely, Ehlvest and others, half a point behind Kamsky and Adams; =1st in the US Open (7.5/9) with Nakamura, Gelashvili and others.
- In **2012** he was 1st in the North American Open (8/9); =2nd in the Washington International (6.5/10) with Onischuk and Shabalov, half a point behind Kamsky; and =1st in the Metropolitan International Tournament at Los Angeles (7/9) ahead of Akobian and Shabalov.
- In **2013**, after transferring to the US Chess Federation, Gareyev entered the US Championship and was placed =3rd (6/9), half a point behind Kamsky and Alvarez, and ahead of Onischuk, Robson, Akobian, Christiansen, Benjamin, Shabalov and others; =1st in the 49th Annual American Open (6.5/8), and =1st in the North American Open (6.5/9).
- In **2014** in the National Open Championship he was =2 (with 4.5/6) behind Kamsky; =1st in the Millionaire Chess Open (6.5/9); and 1st in the 50th Annual American Open (7/8).
- In **2015** Gareyev had relatively poor results in the strongly contested US Championship (coming 11th with 4/11 behind Nakamura, Robson, So, Onischuk, Kamsky, Akobian and others), and in the National Open Championship (scoring only

⁴ See note 1, above.

3.5/6 to reach 26th place behind strong competition which included Dreev, Kamsky, Nyzhnyk, Lenderman, Rauf Mamedov and Dlugy), but later in the year he won the Figueira da Foz Open in Portugal undefeated (8.5/9).

- In **2016** Gareyev was =1st in the 52nd Annual American Open (6.5/8).

Gareyev's FIDE rating peaked at 2682 in February 2013. He remains a strong GM with a FIDE rating in June 2017 of 2620 for standard games (putting him at 177 among active players in the world) and 2624 for blitz. But in recent years he has been more interested in blindfold rather than sighted chess, and particularly in playing multiple blindfold games simultaneously – an activity at which he has become very proficient.⁵

2.2 Gareyev the person

In appearance, Gareyev has sometimes been quite striking in recent years, even somewhat eccentric on occasion, with frequent changes of distinctive hair-styles and with his often wearing multi-colored and exotic clothes in the fashion of a media-conscious sports personality or celebrity. He has been described as “one of the most energetic mavericks of the chess world”.⁶ Gareyev describes himself as “a free spirit and creative person” and “somewhat of a thrill seeker”. In addition to practicing yoga and meditation, Gareyev has a keen interest in healthy food, eating copious amounts of fruit and vegetables and preferring a vegan diet, which he finds gives him greater mental clarity and a higher energy level.

Gareyev is keen to challenge body and mind, and has taken up a number of sports and extreme activities. He enjoys hiking and playing football, is a licensed sky diver and BASE jumper; he likes to ride motorcycles; he has trained for a triathlon, and has taken part in two marathons.⁷ Consistently with his thrill-seeking, Gareyev in 2009 expressed a desire to pursue his passion for tournament poker.⁸ Later, however, he said that he found poker “rather

⁵ Biographical details derived from multiple sources including www.blindfoldking.com , http://www.uschesschamps.com/search?search_api_multi_fulltext=gareev , <http://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessplayer?pid=56780> , <http://www.chessdom.com/?s=gareyev> , https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timur_Gareyev www.chessbase.com , <http://chessevents.com/?s=gareyev&submit.x=9&submit.y=7> , and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnysuTvQrg> . There are some disparities between the various sources, and some ambiguities, so the details shown should be regarded as broadly representative rather than definitive. Where there are differences in recorded tournament results, those on the US Chess Federation website have been preferred: <http://www.uschess.org/msa/MbrDtlTnmtHst.php?13262157> . The site states that results within cross-tables are NOT in tiebreak order and that players may not be listed in the same order as the prize lists from an event.

⁶ By Marck Cobb at <http://en.chessbase.com/post/the-maverick-play-hard-party-heartily-290513>

⁷ Details from www.timurgareyev.com , www.blindfoldking.com and <https://new.uschess.org/news/timur-gareyev-to-attempt-blindfold-world-record/>

⁸ <http://www.uschess.org/content/view/9050/508>

slow”.⁹ But if he were to follow that course he would not be the first modern chess player to do so.¹⁰ And the mnemonic techniques that he has developed for blindfold chess could easily be applied to card games. From numerous reports and interviews Gareyev comes across as intelligent and highly articulate, as having an engaging and friendly personality, as an adventurous person who seeks challenges, and as being genuinely interested in other people. But his activities and openness may have a downside in exposing a vulnerability.



Timur Gareyev combining meditation and risk-taking (Photo courtesy www.blindfoldking.com)

An illustration is provided by Gareyev’s account of being attacked by what he called a gang of gypsies after celebrating winning the Figueira da Foz, Portugal, tournament in November 2015, and waking up the following morning in the local hospital. There is a photograph on the chessbase website of Gareyev sporting two black eyes.¹¹ The Canadian grandmaster Kevin Spraggett, a former world championship candidates quarter-finalist, who also participated in the tournament (being placed 11th, with 5/9), and who was with Gareyev for part of the evening, attributed the incident to some immaturity on Gareyev’s part and thought that Gareyev was naïve in staying out alone at night in an unfamiliar environment. He described Gareyev as “a very friendly person, who has serious social-skill deficits [and] the

⁹ When interviewed by Leo Laporte <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72cIHELik80>

¹⁰ The German GM Roland Schmalz, who, using the playing name Hawkeye, was for a long time a very strong blitz player and the highest rated bullet player in the Internet Chess Club, virtually abandoned chess in 2006 and moved to Australia to concentrate on playing poker. FIDE Master Ylon Schwartz, after some earlier successes, became a professional poker player and won nearly US\$4 million in the 2008 World Series of Poker. Among other chessplayers, GM Alexander Grischuk, with a FIDE rating (in June 2017) of 2761, has also taken a keen interest in poker. And historically, several grandmasters, including Janowski, seem to have been addicted to gambling.

¹¹ <http://en.chessbase.com/post/adventures-in-portugal>

emotional development of an adolescent”, and recorded how, during dinner earlier in the evening, it became clear to several of the chessplayers that Gareyev “seemed not to be aware that he was insulting people, especially women.”¹²

3. Early Experience with Blindfold Chess

Although Gareyev tried playing blindfold chess when he was a child he did not take further interest in it until around 2011, when he thought that he would enjoy the challenge that it created. In April 2012 he played four games simultaneously at the Laura Bush Library, in Austin, Texas (+4); then ten games at the Houston Chess Club (+10); 12 games at the Checkmate Chess Club, Austin (+12); 19 games at the Lone Star College-CyFair, Cypress, Houston in September 2012 (+16, =1, -2); and 18 games at the Westlake Chess Association, Austin (+17, =1).¹³ Gareyev suggested that, in chess, “powerful vision and emotional association with the goal is the fuel for success.” He has said that his original inspiration for developing his chess talent in playing blindfold came from watching the film *Man on Wire*, a documentary made in 2008 about Philippe Petit’s high-wire walk in 1974 between the Twin Towers of New York’s World Trade Center. Later, Gareyev derived further inspiration and ideas from George Koltanowski’s book *In The Dark*.¹⁴

In terms of an increasing number of opponents in blindfold chess, Gareyev progressed to

- **27** on the island of Oahu, Hawaii on December 23, 2012 (+24, =2, -1 in 9 hours, including about 1 hour of breaks)¹⁵
- **33** at St Louis on April 30, 2013 (+29, =4, in 10 hrs 39 min)¹⁶

¹² <https://kevinspraggettonchess.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/setting-the-record-straight/>

¹³ Details from <http://chessmaine.net/chessmaine/2016/12/timur-gareyev-breaks-simultane.html> and <http://en.chessbase.com/post/breaking-the-record-a-50-board-blindfold-attempt-120913> and www.blindfoldking.com

¹⁴ <http://www.blindfoldking.com/apps/blog/categories/show/2035549-blindfold-chess-> *In The Dark* (Chess Enterprises, 1985) is a revised version of Koltanowski’s *Adventures of a Chess Master* (first pub. David McKay, 1955; reprinted Ishi Press, 2011).

¹⁵ <http://en.chessbase.com/post/hawaiian-che-warfare-training-lives> and <http://en.chessbase.com/post/breaking-the-record-a-50-board-blindfold-attempt-120913> The score is not given in either report but is mentioned in Eliot Hearst’s article of September 19, 2013, available at http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2013/09/gm_gareyevs_blindfold_displays_have_created_exciting_publicity_but_are/

¹⁶ <http://www.uschesstrust.org/gm-timur-gareev-defeats-29-in-blindfold-simul/> and <http://www.uschesschamps.com/news/gm-timur-gareev-defeats-29-blindfold-simul> and <http://en.chessbase.com/post/33-board-blindfold-simul-at-us-championship-050513> After competing in the US Championship, which started the day after his 33-game blindfold event, Gareyev travelled to Lindsborg, Kansas, and took on 40 games, which he played blindfold for about 3½ hours and then finished sighted,

- **35** at Austin on September 21, 2013 (+23, =10, -2).¹⁷ He also took on **35** opponents at Santa Clara, California, on March 12, 2016 (+32, =2, -1, in about 12 hrs).¹⁸

4. Gareyev's Targets: The Records of Marc Lang

Gareyev was gradually approaching a challenge to the existing record of 46 blindfold games, established by the German FIDE master Marc Lang in the year 2011. As will be known to our readers, Lang, in a series of large blindfold events, played

- **15** blindfold games simultaneously in June 2009 (+5, =9, -1)¹⁹; he increased this to
- **23** games in November 2009 (+9, =12, -2)²⁰
- **35** games in November 2010 (+19, =13, -3)²¹
- **46** games on November 26-27, 2011 (+25, =19, -2). Lang played these at Sontheim an der Brenz in Germany, thereby establishing what is generally regarded as a world record for simultaneous blindfold chess, by exceeding the total of 45 played by Najdorf at Sao Paulo in January 1947 (+39, =4, -2).²² And on July 16-17, 2011 Lang established another record by playing
- **60 consecutive** blindfold games at 5 minutes + 5 seconds a move, also at Sontheim an der Brenz, exceeding Koltanowski's run of 56 consecutive games, played at San Francisco in December 1960 at 10 seconds a move (+50, =6 in 9¾ hours). In the 60 games Lang scored +45, =11, -4 in 14 hours.²³

winning all the games within a further hour: <http://en.chessbase.com/post/the-maverick-play-hard-party-heartily-290513>

¹⁷ <http://www.blindfoldking.com/about-timur>

¹⁸ <http://chessthings.com/blindfoldchess.php> and <https://new.uschess.org/news/the-blindfold-king-from-california-to-new-york-city/> Some photographs and 4 of the games are at <https://en.chessbase.com/post/blindfold-king-timur-gareyev-on-tour>

¹⁹ Further details at

http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2009/06/german_master_plays_15_simultaneous_blindfold_games_will_try_to_break_germa/

²⁰ Further details at

http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2010/06/marc_lang_holder_of_new_german_simultaneous_blindfold_record_will_try_46_ga/

²¹ Further details at

http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2010/12/simultaneous_blindfold_fm_lang_plays_35_can_he_beat_najdofs_world_record_o/

²² Further details of Lang's event at

http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2011/12/after_64_years_new_world_blindfold_record_set_by_marc_lang_playing_46_games/

²³ Further details at

http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2011/08/consecutive_blindfold_rapid_games_fm_lang_sets_new_world_record_of_60_beati/

5. Lang's Records Attacked

Gareyev tackled both records that Lang had established. First, on September 24, 2016 Gareyev played **64** *consecutive* blindfold games at Coralville, Iowa (scoring 85.9% with +54, =2, -8 in just over 10 hrs), beating Lang's record for consecutive blindfold games²⁴; and on December 3-4, 2016 he played **48** *simultaneous* games (scoring 80.2% with +35, =7, -6 during a period of about 19 hours) exceeding Lang's simultaneous performance.²⁵

6. A Further Achievement: Tandem Blindfold Chess

Meanwhile, as recorded elsewhere on this website, on July 31, 2015 Gareyev had collaborated with Lang in a tandem display, in which the pair played blindfold as a team against sighted opponents in seven games simultaneously, moving alternately without consultation, winning five and drawing two. In doing so, they exceeded the total of six games played in tandem fashion by Alekhine and Koltanowski at Antwerp in February 1934 (+3, =2, -1); but purists will note that the 2015 event contained occasions when a blindfold player made consecutive moves in a game, and so fails the test for a strict tandem event and does not qualify as a world record.²⁶

Subsequently, on June 25, 2017 at Houston, Texas, Gareyev collaborated with FIDE master Warren Harper to play nine blindfold games simultaneously without consultation. The blindfold players took White on the odd numbered boards and played with clocks. They won all the games. This was a remarkable achievement, but it seems likely that the event is vulnerable to the same criticism as is the Gareyev-Lang event on seven boards.²⁷

²⁴ A report with photographs and all the game scores is available at <http://en.chessbase.com/post/timur-gareyev-breaks-world-consecutive-blindfold-chess-record>

²⁵ The games and some photographs are shown at <http://en.chessbase.com/post/timur-gareyev-world-record-blindfold-attempt> The games are also available here: <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/world-blitz-record-2016> . As for the final score, the chess24 website initially showed Game 48, with Gareyev having the black pieces against Bjorn Rost, as a loss by Gareyev, although after the last move attributed to him Black is clearly winning. Gareyev has explained that he actually had the white pieces in that game, as an additional game was included shortly before the start, increasing the total to 48. The anomaly of Gareyev's having White on two consecutive boards was somehow partly a result of the inclusion of several online opponents.

²⁶ Further details are in one of Eliot Hearst's articles at http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2015/11/the_worlds_two_best_blindfold_players_succeed_in_a_tandem_simultaneous/

²⁷ The games, and some remarks by Lucas Anderson, the organizer, are available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/chess/comments/6jfovo/we_are_lucas_anderson_chess_historian_fm_warren/ . I have not seen a detailed explanation of how the event was organized, but I note that Lucas Anderson states that the blindfold players "did not move from board 1 to 2 to 3 to 4—instead, they jumped around as their opponents moved and hit their clocks." In such activity it would seem to be very difficult to ensure that a blindfold player never made consecutive moves in any game, even though the two blindfold players may have been playing moves alternately.

7. Some Remarks on Gareyev's Early Blindfold Games

In his first blindfold simultaneous event, involving four games, Gareyev sat facing the boards, but without seeing them. He wore a manufactured blindfold which he had brought with him, this indicating that the event was not impromptu. The four sighted players were young boys and the games were over within less than 20 minutes. It is reported that the boys had USCF grades of about 1200. This was not a very demanding task for Gareyev but it is fair to say that the playing conditions were not good. The boys announced their own moves but did not always move immediately when it was their turn; the acoustics seemed to be poor; and the teller was not very experienced, and in a film of the event can be seen hesitating before making some moves.²⁸ Gareyev said that “As it started off, it was a challenge to remember the opening moves. Toward the middle-game, the positions would settle down in my mind and the rest became a matter of technique.”²⁹

After this event Gareyev became very enthusiastic about blindfold chess, seeing it as an exciting activity which presented a serious challenge and provided him with a worthwhile objective on which to focus. He later said: “Playing blindfold chess is like driving a racing car, and regular chess is driving a regular car. It’s using the same strategy but in a more exciting and challenging way.”³⁰

7.1 *Some events with staggered starts*

In later blindfold events, when Gareyev played against increasing numbers of opponents, he realised, of course, that the events could be expected to last longer, probably much longer, because not only would his task be more difficult by reason of the increased burden on his memory, but each round of moves would require him to consider more positions and make more responses. From the details in our book, Gareyev was familiar with the times taken in earlier events by blindfold players during the 19th and 20th centuries, and he hit upon a novel method of reducing both the demands on memory and also the overall length of an event. Gareyev’s idea was to start the games in several “waves”, with further games being added in batches once the games in the initial wave had sufficiently progressed. So, in a sense, such an event would include overlapping parts of games being played simultaneously; but the arrangement would mark a fundamental departure from the traditional form of a simultaneous

²⁸ A film of the 4-game event is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzqv6eLYgul>

²⁹ <http://www.uschess.org/content/view/13204/842/>

³⁰ <http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/2016/02/19/blindfolded-and-unbeaten-chess-master-puts-wild-show/80260838/>

display. In fact, it does not seem appropriate to put such an event into the same class as a truly simultaneous performance.

It seems that Gareyev adopted this plan not only for his 27- and 33-board displays but for most of his other displays given up to that time on more than 12 boards. In an article of September 19, 2013 Eliot Hearst explained that Gareyev had recognised that he would not be able to apply such a procedure in any record attempt, and added the following details of the 27- and 33-board events:³¹

“In the former (Hawaii) display he started with 10 players, 10 more players joined the opposition after another hour and a half, and the final 7 entered after another hour. In the latter (St. Louis) display 18 players started at 9 AM, 6-8 more at 10:15 AM, and the final 7-9 at 11:30 AM. Gareev calls this method of staggering the entry of players the use of ‘waves’; other equally applicable words might be ‘stages’ or ‘steps’ or ‘phases’. However, he does state that in the St. Louis display all 33 were actually playing at the same time after the final ‘wave’ entered, although many games were close to finishing and others were of course just beginning.”

In essence, competing against waves of players in groups has more in common with playing a series of smaller simultaneous events rather than one large, truly simultaneous, event. The distinction is important.

7.2 *Strength of sighted players*

Another important feature of many of Gareyev’s displays has been that although in some there were players with gradings approaching or higher than the so-called expert level of USCF 2000, the majority of his opponents in the large events were relatively weak players; in some cases, *very* weak. For example, details are available for most of the participants in Gareyev’s 33-game display which took place at St Louis on April 30, 2013. Four of the players did not have ratings. The USCF ratings of the 29 remaining players ranged from 476 to 2020, of whom two were classed as experts (over 2000), three were Class A players (1800-1999), and five were Class B (1600-1799). Six players were rated below 1000. The overall average USCF rating of those 29 players was 1363.³²

³¹ The full article is available at http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2013/09/gm_gareevs_blindfold_displays_have_created_exciting_publicity_but_are/

³² The individual ratings are listed at <http://www.uschesschamps.com/news/gm-timur-gareev-defeats-29-blindfold-simul>

In a later display, when Gareyev took on 35 opponents at Santa Clara, California, on March 12, 2016, USCF ratings were listed for only 28 of the players. Of these, two were rated above 2000 (the higher being 2013); one player was Class A (1800-1999); one player was Class B (1600-1799); and *eleven* were rated below 1000, the lowest being 100. The average rating of the 28 rated players was 1251.³³

In the event held on 24 September 2016, when Gareyev played 64 blindfold games *consecutively* the games were played at various speeds, and included 35 normal games at 5 minutes, 15 games at 3 minutes + 2 seconds v. 5 minutes + 2 seconds, 12 “960” (Fischer Random) games, mostly at 5 minutes, and two 5-minute games of which one had a 2-second delay and the other a 2-second increase for each move. Gareyev scored +54, =2, -8, giving 85.9%. The average USCF rating of 59 of the opponents was 1432 (based mostly on Blitz figures), within the range 243 to 2147, with five unrated players³⁴. Of those with a rating, there were twelve above 2000 (including eight instances of the same player, at 2147); 2 were Class A (being two instances of a player rated at 1948); ten were Class B; 24 were rated between 1000 and 1599; and *eleven* were below 1,000. In five of Gareyev’s eight losses he ran out of time, and during the games 37-42 he seemed to the organiser (Eric Vigil) to be exhausted and started making mistakes and sustained four losses.³⁵

On that occasion the sighted players included Joseph Wan, the K-6 US Champion in 2014, who played eight of the games, winning five, losing two (including a Fischer Random game where he also played blindfold with an extra 2 minutes), and drawing one. Wan proved to be a tough opponent, and the fact that he played eight games had a considerable, and somewhat disproportionate, effect on the outcome. In the event, Gareyev’s result was consistent with the outcome of the 60 consecutive games played by Marc Lang (who achieved 84%), save that Lang’s opponents are reported to have had an average rating of approximately 1750 (based on 52 players, the remaining 8 being unrated), which was considerably higher than that of

³³ The average is derived from the individual ratings listed at <https://en.chessbase.com/post/timur-gareyev-breaks-world-consecutive-blindfold-chess-record> .

Where more than one opponent is shown on a particular board, the highest rating has been used.

³⁴ There are some contradictions in a list on the website shown in the previous note, which suggests that there were in fact 13, not 12, games played in Fischer Random style; and that there were 11, not 12, players rated above USCF 2000; and that there was one player, not 5, unrated. The unrated players were in Games 9, 16, 40, 57 and 58.

³⁵ Actually, 5 losses in that area if Game 43 is included. See note 33, above.

Gareyev's opponents.³⁶ The average strength of the players who opposed Gareyev may, however, have approximated that of the 56 players whom Koltanowski fought in the consecutive-games event of December 1960.

Despite those two main, and serious, criticisms that can be raised against many of Gareyev's blindfold displays, namely a lessened burden arising from the deferred starting procedure in many of his "simultaneous" events; and the fact that although some of his opponents have been relatively strong, many, particularly in the larger events, have been weak (or very weak) players; Gareyev's achievements nevertheless show that he is a highly skilled blindfold player, capable of processing many games at once. From the time when he developed a particular interest in blindfold chess, Gareyev has played several thousand blindfold games, not all of them in the US.

8. Other Features of Gareyev's Blindfold Displays

There are several other distinctive features of Gareyev's blindfold displays that merit attention, including the arrangement of colors; the method of announcing moves; the style of play; and Gareyev's conduct during displays.

8.1 Selection of colors

Traditionally, in a simultaneous event the single player, whether with sight of the boards and pieces or playing blindfold, has almost always taken the white pieces in all the games. That has generally been regarded as the single player's prerogative; and as being some compensation to him for competing against many opponents; and also as a help to him in acquiring the initiative, giving him the best prospects for success and for reducing both the overall time of an event and the effort required to complete all the games. In a *sighted* simultaneous display, the benefit for the single player of taking White on all boards is probably universally accepted. And in a blindfold simultaneous event on a few boards the same holds true.

Where, however, a simultaneous blindfold event involves more than a few boards, perhaps more than five to ten for most blindfold players, then having the white pieces on all boards is liable to create an additional burden for the blindfold player. This is because of the increased

³⁶ See note 23, above, for Eliot Hearst's comments on Lang's performance.

difficulty in keeping the games separate and distinct during the early stages, before each of the games has acquired its own individual character. When Gareyev has played more than a few blindfold games at once he has generally taken the black pieces on half of the boards—it seems, usually on alternate boards. Such a procedure immediately halves the task of keeping the games distinct from each other, the only downsides appearing to be the loss of the advantage of the first move on those boards and also less control over the choice of opening (which will affect any pre-planned memory aids). It is worth remembering that when Najdorf played 45 games in 1947 he took the black pieces on a few boards,³⁷ but most of the famous blindfold players in the 19th and 20th centuries had the white pieces on all boards in a simultaneous display. A common theme in their comments was that the greatest difficulty in a sizeable display was in differentiating between games in the early stages.³⁸

A film of an OFF da ROOK Conejo Valley 17-game blindfold simultaneous event of 2014, organized by Jennifer Vallens, showed that Gareyev had White and Black on alternate boards, and that he took rather a long time at the start of the event before moving from one game to the next. His procedure was to call out the number of a board when he was ready. During the intervening time, between making his move in a particular game and dealing with the next game, Gareyev was processing the situation according to a pre-planned scheme, by which he invested each game with a distinctive mental label, in order to anchor the details in his mind in such a way that he could readily retrieve the information later.³⁹

In a 12-game blindfold simultaneous event at the Demuth Community Center in Palm Springs on February 13, 2016, Gareyev had the white pieces on six of the boards, and his opponents' moves were announced by a teller. Gareyev scored +11, =1 in 3½ hours. After the event he was asked by Shad Powers, a sports columnist for *The Desert Sun*, what was happening during the periods of typically 20 seconds, but sometimes two minutes, *after* Gareyev had made a move and before he went to the next game. Powers had noted that when it was Gareyev's turn to move he almost always made his move quickly, but there was then a pause before he went to the next game. Gareyev said: "I'm envisaging the board, but not all

³⁷ See pages 91-98 of *Blindfold Chess* for a description of Najdorf's blindfold displays.

³⁸ We comment in some detail on this in Chapter 10 of *Blindfold Chess*.

³⁹ A film of part of the 17-game event was available on youtube.com early in 2017 but is no longer accessible. A similar, and typical, report of deliberation over the early moves of a blindfold event was made in relation to one of Pillsbury's displays: "At no stage of the performance did he consume as much time as he did for the first moves": see *Blindfold Chess*, p. 56.

the pieces all the time, it's more about the active pieces, the pieces that are likely to be in play." He explained that he could anticipate the moves that good opponents would be likely to make, so he could react quickly to those, but that after an unusual move he would need to slow down and think about the whole board again. Notably, this anchoring of the position was something that, when necessary, Gareyev did *after* he had made his move, and before going to the next game, giving himself some advance preparation for possible future developments.⁴⁰

8.2 *Announcement of moves*

In most simultaneous blindfold events, and certainly in those occurring before computers have featured, a blindfold player has called out his moves in one of the standard forms of chess notation, and his moves have been executed on the various boards on his behalf, usually by a referee or "teller", but sometimes by the sighted players themselves; and usually the teller (but sometimes the players themselves) have called out the responses, once made.⁴¹ Among the players in the past who have relied on their opponents to call out moves was Alekhine, during at least part of his display on 28 boards in Paris in 1925. In *Blindfold Chess* we speculated that this may have been seen by Alekhine as a possible help in identifying individual games, and he may even have thought to gain some information from the inflection of an opponent's voice; but the actual benefit, if any, may have been small, and probably confined to the initial stages (where it would be most useful) because on some boards new players were substituted when the initial players became tired or had to leave.⁴²

In many of Gareyev's blindfold events the sighted players, rather than a teller, have announced their moves. It is clear that Gareyev believes that from this he gains some additional support in separating the games and, importantly, in returning to the correct game when it is his turn to move. But relying on many different people to make announcements, with a variety of voices and with different degrees of clarity, and at various volumes, is liable to introduce complications. In some of the events for which films are available, on www.youtube.com and elsewhere, it is difficult to understand some of the announcements. That may be due partly, but not entirely, to deficiencies in the recordings. Of course, similar

⁴⁰ <http://www.desertsun.com/story/news/local/2016/02/19/blindfolded-and-unbeaten-chess-master-puts-wild-show/80260838/>

⁴¹ The procedure for a typical display is described in the Introduction to our book, at page 2 onwards.

⁴² We discuss Alekhine's displays at pages 73-83 of *Blindfold Chess*. The substitution of players also occurred in several other large blindfold displays, for example Najdorf's.

problems could occur where an experienced teller announces the moves, but that is less likely. Nevertheless, Gareyev claims that he has gained help from hearing an individual player's voice, and that "when you hear that voice it had a particular quality whether you associate it with an older gentleman, or a youngster, somebody might have a raspy voice and you're like 'oh man, that's that Albin gambit' or something. That's definitely a big anchor."⁴³

A typical difficulty can occur with the identification of the file on which a piece moves, particularly with files b, c, d, e and g, which have somewhat similar sounds. Of these, probably the easiest to confuse are b and d. For example, the announcement of the move of a Knight from c3 to d5 could (subject to the position) be understood as a move to b5. There is not likely to be the same potential confusion when files a, f or h are involved, as their sounds are distinctive. But with, for example, Rooks moving along a rank in the endgame there is ample scope for misunderstandings if moves are not announced clearly or if the acoustics in the playing room are not good. Ambiguities of this nature will not occur when moves are relayed via text or empty boards on computer screens, as in the Amber Tournaments, but the use of computers may raise other issues.⁴⁴

One of the players in Gareyev's 48-game event (who won his game and then stayed to the end as a spectator) identified this very point. He said, referring to *other* displays: "One difficulty which I have seen at Timur's simuls is in understanding the moves back and forth. For me, many moves are not clear so that is mostly where the mistakes he makes occur from not understanding people when they say their move. Although he did have people helping with this during the entire event I imagine after many hours everyone makes mistakes regardless."⁴⁵

Usually, but not totally consistently, in blindfold events Gareyev will announce his moves in a long algebraic form, such as "Queen d1 to f3" for a move of a piece, or "c3 to c4" for a pawn move; but sometimes he shortens his announcements, particularly at the start of a game, when he might just say "e4" or "Knight f3". His opponents tend to follow the same plan.

⁴³ Interview with Macaulay Peterson on *chess24*, April 11, 2017: <https://chess24.com/en/read/news/gareyev-gets-guinness-world-record-in-blindfold-chess>

⁴⁴ As recorded in Eliot Hearst's article of December 16, 2011 about Marc Lang's 46-game event: see note 22, above.

⁴⁵ Comment by "teacher09" on December 6, 2016 at www.chess.com/news/view/timur-gareyev-plays-blindfold-on-48-boards-5729

Using the long form takes slightly longer, and over several hundred moves in a large event will add a small, but noticeable, amount of time; but the benefit outweighs that disadvantage in two important ways. First, the long form gives Gareyev greater help in the identification of the particular game and in recalling its essential features; and secondly, it also helps to reduce errors arising from announcements, by identifying two squares connected by a legal move, rather than just the target square.

An unusual feature when Gareyev played 12 blindfold games simultaneously at the Michna Palace in Prague on June 5, 2016 during the Čez Chess Trophy festival (scoring +10, =2 in 4½ hours), was that his opponents spoke a mixture of languages—Russian, English and Czech—when announcing their moves.⁴⁶ Other factors that may more frequently arise from announcements being made by the sighted players include hesitancy, which could be disturbing for the blindfold player, and the introduction of errors. Both would be less likely where moves are announced by an experienced and competent teller. So while it would be at the blindfold player's option as to how the sighted players' moves were relayed to him, the potential assistance that he may gain from hearing the opponents' individual voices has to be balanced against some potential drawbacks. Most blindfold players are likely to develop a preference for one method rather than the other. Gareyev was wise to have tellers announce his opponents' moves during most of the record attempt. The sighted players called out their moves for the first few rounds, which Gareyev found helpful in separating the games, then experienced tellers took over, in 3-4 hour shifts.⁴⁷

8.3 Style of Gareyev's blindfold play

What is probably for most people an attractive feature of Gareyev's blindfold games is his dynamic style of play, often including opening gambits, sharp attacks and sacrifices. In this respect his play is reminiscent of the swashbuckling style of some of the 19th century blindfold players, such as Morphy, Blackburne and Zukertort. Even in regular tournaments Gareyev appears to enjoy aggressive and risky play, even against the strongest opponents. For example, in the 2015 US Championship Gareyev adopted the Wing Gambit against GM

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVml1cvyaRc> and <https://praguechess.cz/index.php?modul=&akce=&orderby=1869&strankovani=7&zobrazeni=ano&langue=en>
Another player who encountered announcements (and also made his own) in a foreign language was the American Harry Pillsbury. All the moves in his 21-game blindfold display at Hannover in 1902 were announced in German.

⁴⁷ Timur Gareyev and Jennifer Vallens, "The New Blindfold King: Timur Gareyev takes world record to 48 games", [2017] *New In Chess*, Vol. 1, p.72, at 76.

Kamsky (FIDE rating 2680)⁴⁸; and in the 2015 Hawaii Chess Festival he played the so-called Humphrey Bogart Gambit against GM Shankland (FIDE rating 2661)⁴⁹. Both games were drawn after lively play. This style seems to be entirely consistent with Gareyev's general approach to life, as outlined earlier.

In light of this, it should not come as a surprise that when Gareyev plays blindfold games, where the opposition is generally much weaker, he plays aggressively and demonstrates his tactical ability. For example, in a 10-game blindfold simultaneous event at Stockholm in May, 2016, where Gareyev had the white pieces in all the games, there occurred the following wide range of openings, in many of which Gareyev selected sharp or unusual lines:

Board 1: Queen's Gambit (Declined) with a piece sacrifice at move 9 (1-0 in 20 moves)

Board 2: Danish Gambit (Declined) (1-0 in 19 moves)

Board 3: Dunst's Opening (1.Nc3⁵⁰) with several sacrifices (1-0 in 44 moves)

Board 4: Reti's Opening (1-0 in 30 moves)

Board 5: English Opening (1-0 in 28 moves)

Board 6: Grob's Opening (1.g4) (1-0 in 18 moves)

Board 7: Polish Opening (1.b4⁵¹) (1-0 in 24 moves)

Board 8: Trompovsky Opening (1-0 in 31 moves, with a choice of mates)

Board 9: King's Gambit Accepted (1-0 in 29 moves)

Board 10: Caro-Kann (½-½ in 32 moves)

Gareyev scored 9½/10 in 3 hours 17 minutes. The sighted players' ratings were from 1100 to 2085, with five rated above 1900, and averaged 1607.⁵² The wide range of openings, including several that are theoretically suspect, was intended to introduce some fun into the proceedings while helping Gareyev to differentiate between the games, and was also designed to present his opponents with unfamiliar situations where his greater knowledge and understanding would create good prospects. A potential benefit from adopting such a strategy

⁴⁸ 1.e4 c5, 2.b4!? Game available at <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/us-championship-2015/4/1/3>

⁴⁹ 1.d4 Nf6, 2.g4!?? Game available at <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/hawaii-chess-festival-2015/4/1/1>

⁵⁰ Also known, among other names, as the Van Geet Opening.

⁵¹ Also known as the Sokolsky Opening.

⁵² The 10 games from the Stockholm event are available at <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/blindfold-king-timur-gareyev-stockholm/1/1/1>

is that, when it succeeds, it is likely to produce a number of quick victories, thereby reducing a blindfold player's overall burden, and also giving his remaining opponents less time for thinking between moves. The danger, of course, is that a strong opponent may emerge from the complications with a winning position. But dynamic play and risk-taking is something that seems to appeal to Gareyev. In that respect he no doubt gains inspiration from Tal, one of his role-models, who spoke of taking an opponent into a "dense forest of unexplored variations, onto a narrow mountain path, where there is room for only one ... [where] the percentage of possible mistakes automatically increases. But such games afford everyone much greater pleasure."⁵³

8.4 Gareyev's conduct during blindfold events

As will have been clear from earlier remarks, Gareyev easily falls within the scope of the popular expression "fitness fanatic". He places great stress on keeping mind and body in good condition by exercising, eating healthy food, and practising yoga and meditation.⁵⁴ A striking feature of most of the blindfold displays that Gareyev has given in the last few years has been his use of an exercise cycle, which he pedals (or "spins") the whole time while playing. He hit upon this idea while at an elementary school at Fort Collins, Colorado, during a 3,000-mile week-long motorcycle tour. In a recent article in "New In Chess" Gareyev described how this came about. He wrote: "I hopped on a stationary bike in the gym during a break of preparation for the blindfold chess the next day. As I pedaled the bike, I decided, just for kicks, that I would experiment with riding the bike during the event. What I discovered was that the steady movement of the bike made such a difference in my focus and flow of blindfold chess."⁵⁵

⁵³ G. Kasparov, *My Great Predecessors, Part II* (Everyman Chess, 2003) p. 382.

⁵⁴ Gareyev claimed that the nutritious effect of the food he ate during the 48-game blindfold event was important in enabling him to maintain a high level of concentration: see interview at note 43, above.

⁵⁵ Timur Gareyev and Jennifer Vallens, "The New Blindfold King: Timur Gareyev takes world record to 48 games", [2017] *New In Chess*, Vol. 1, p.72, at 74. Gareyev expands on this, and compares a large blindfold display to an "ultra-marathon", at: <https://new.uschess.org/news/timur-gareyev-to-attempt-blindfold-world-record/>



Timur Gareyev exercising mind and body (Photo courtesy Lennart Ootes)

Elsewhere, Gareyev said: “Exercising while playing chess not only helps direct blood flow to my brain, but also empowers me with a consistent rhythm of play. Once I get in the rhythm, exercising creates ‘white noise’ vacuum for my thoughts and visualization process to flow.”⁵⁶ Subsequently, Gareyev has always tried to incorporate exercise into his blindfold displays. He found that apart from helping to keep him mentally alert, the use of an exercise bike helped him to overcome distractions caused by people whispering. He said: “Since incorporating a spin bike into my performance, I found that I am more engaged and able to interact and talk with the players, and small noises no longer have the same effect on me.”⁵⁷

So much for general considerations relating to Gareyev’s blindfold play. Now for a review of Gareyev’s attempt to break the world record for simultaneous blindfold games which had been established by Marc Lang in November, 2011 at Sontheim an der Brenz in Germany, when Lang played 46 games, scoring 75% with +25, =19, -2, in a little over 21 hours.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ <http://www.nevadachess.org/2016/12/gm-timur-gareyev-breaks-world-record/>

⁵⁷ As note 55, above, at p.75.

⁵⁸ See above, note 22, for further details of Lang’s performance.

9. Gareyev's 48-Game Simultaneous Event

On December 3, 2016, after a delay of some months owing to the difficulty of securing a suitable venue, and abandoning plans for the event to take place in Hawaii or Chicago or Prague or Stockholm (for all of which venues there had been discussions), Gareyev made an attempt at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, to break Lang's record of 46 simultaneous blindfold games. Gareyev's sighted opponents comprised 43 who were physically present, most of them belonging to the Las Vegas Chess Center, and 5 players competing via the Internet from Brazil, Sweden, New York and Utah. The distant players included 92-year-old Luciano Nilo de Andrade, living in Brazil, who had been one of Najdorf's 45 opponents in the 1947 world record blindfold event.⁵⁹ As has been widely reported, Gareyev completed the 48 games in a total time of 19 hours (including interruptions), scoring 80.2% with +35, =7, -6.⁶⁰



*Alberto Mascarenhas, Luciano Nilo de Andrade and Albert Silver.
The board position occurs after Timur Gareyev's 12th move, ... e6xd5.
The game ended in a draw. (Photo courtesy Albert Silver)*

⁵⁹ Luciano Nilo de Andrade wrote to us in 2009 after reading our book, and Eliot Hearst summarised his comments about Najdorf's performance in an article on April 11, 2009, available at http://www.blindfoldchess.net/blog/2009/04/najdorfs_only_surviving_1947_opponent/. Nilo de Andrade's game against Najdorf is shown on page 304 of our book. A short film of Nilo de Andrade during his game against Gareyev shows a rather confused scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sldhCOB-ak>

⁶⁰ There were interruptions of half an hour during a fire alarm and also while an objection made by one of the players about Gareyev's microphone was being investigated. Gareyev credits a number of people for helping to ensure that the event took place, in particular Jennifer Vallens of OFF da ROOK Entertainment, who had acted as his chess organizing partner since early 2014, and also Juan and Sabrina Jauregui of the Las Vegas Chess Center, Joe Sly of UNLV, Marck Cobb, Keith and Ray of Killer Dutch Productions, and Lennart Ootes.

9.1 Comments on the strength of the sighted players

Very surprisingly, for a modern event of this nature, there are some uncertainties and some contradictions regarding the strength of the opposition. All the games are shown on the chess24 website.⁶¹ According to those details, among the sighted players (or teams) listed in the Games section, 26 had USCF ratings ranging from 895 to 2200. The weighted average of the figures shown is 1626.7. No ratings are shown in that section for the opponents in the remaining 22 games. However, the Standings section of the report on the chess24 website names 54 players and states that the average rating was 1673, based on the 30 players (including some team members) for whom figures are provided in that section.⁶²

The director of the event was FIDE master Thomas Brownscombe, a USCF certified National Tournament Director and a FIDE licensed National Arbiter. Brownscombe has twice won the Nevada state chess championship and also twice the Kansas state chess championship. He currently has a USCF rating of 2200 and a FIDE rating of 2149, but in the past his peak ratings were 2351 USCF and 2335 FIDE. As well as being the director of the record attempt, Brownscombe was also one of the sighted players. (His game is shown later.) During his report of the event Brownscombe mentions the ratings of several of the sighted players.⁶³ Comparing his details with those shown at chess24 reveals some differences. Some of the differences are more significant than others, but it is not at all clear why there are any differences, unless the figures were taken at different dates. But whatever the net effect of this might be, there remain a large number of players for whom no ratings have been publicly provided, and whose strength is a matter of conjecture, save to the extent that it may be inferred from the games themselves.

⁶¹ The 48 games are available at <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/world-blitz-record-2016> and also at <http://en.chessbase.com/post/timur-gareyev-world-record-blindfold-attempt>

⁶² It appears from the chess24 website (see previous note) that five games were played by teams, namely LVDS A; LVDS B; Konzana Team; Let's Play Chess Team; and El Dorado Team. Single rating figures are shown for two of the teams; no rating is shown for the other three. If any players were rated, other than the 26 for whom figures are provided, it is not clear why those other ratings were not also shown. I would have expected that if ratings were available for other players, they would have been shown on the chess24 website, or on Gareyev's website, or in one of the articles in *New In Chess* (see note 47, above) and *Chess Life* (see note 64, below). It would also have been helpful to see details of the times at which the various games finished.

⁶³ <http://www.lasvegaschesscenter.com/gm-timurs-world-record-fm-ntd-tom-brownscombe/>



Timur Gareyev playing 48 blindfold games on December 3-4, 2016 (Photo courtesy Lennart Ootes)

An article in *Chess Life*, authored by Jay Stallings and Jennifer Vallens⁶⁴, gave some interesting details of the event and stated that over half of the sighted players had ratings above 1700, but that it was not possible to calculate the overall average because six players did not have ratings.⁶⁵ Details for the players said to be rated were not provided in that article, and I am not aware that more details have been published than those mentioned above. However, Jennifer Vallens has kindly made available a summary of the event, showing the board numbers and players' names and the results of the games (which all correspond to those shown on the chess24 website) and also ratings for most, but not all, of the sighted players. The ratings include nine which are absent from the chess24 website, leaving thirteen instances where a rating was not provided. The additional nine ratings, which I understand are all for USCF standard games, are as follows:

Board No.	Sighted Player	Rating
7	Lucan, Marius	2155
9	Ramirez, Jose	1911
17	Clay, C.	758
18	Lyle, Shiwani	632

⁶⁴ "GM Timur Gareyev Sets Blindfold Chess World Record", *Chess Life*, March 2017, pp.38-43 at 39. See also note 55, above, and related text.

⁶⁵ When interviewed by Macaulay Peterson, *chess24.com*, April 11, 2017, Gareyev put the average rating at "1700-1800": <https://chess24.com/en/read/news/gareyev-gets-guinness-world-record-in-blindfold-chess>

20	Konzona TEAM	1441
24	Mikolic, J.	2053
31	Steel, Ben	772
43	Lester, Titus	328
45	Smith, J.D.	1929

In analyzing the ratings I have, in addition, used a figure of 2125 for Board 44, where 92-year-old Luciano Nilo de Andrade and Albert Silver, an international chess journalist and former champion of the city of Rio de Janeiro, were playing,⁶⁶ That increases the total number of available ratings to 36, leaving 12 games unrated. The 36 available ratings can be broken down into the following categories:

USCF Rating	Number of players
2200-2399 (National Master)	1 ⁶⁷
2000-2199 (Expert)	4
1800-1999 (Class A)	12
1600-1799 (Class B)	5
1400-1599 (Class C)	4
1200-1399 (Class D)	1
1000-1199 (Class E)	3
800-999 (Class F)	2
600-799 (Class G)	3
400-599 (Class H)	0
200-399 (Class I)	1
Total	36

The average for the 36 games for which ratings are available is 1565.⁶⁸ Of the remaining 12 games, Gareyev won 11 and drew 1, indicating—as one might have assumed from the

⁶⁶ See above, note 59 and related text, and also the photo immediately before s.9.1. FIDE ratings for Nilo de Andrade and Silver are given by Brownscombe (see note 63, above) as 2003 and 2149 respectively. I have taken the average of these figures and converted them from FIDE to USCF ratings using the same ratio as emerges from a comparison of Brownscombe’s ratings at the time of the event, to produce an estimated combined USCF rating of 2125.

⁶⁷ Thomas Brownscombe, USCF 2200. See details on website shown in note 63, above.

⁶⁸ There were 20 players with ratings above 1700, somewhat short of the “more than half” mentioned in the *Chess Life* article referred to in note 64, above, and related text.

absence of ratings—that those 12 players performed less well than the players for whom ratings are available. It is a matter of speculation as to what effect those 12 games would have on an overall average, but using an estimated average rating of 1200 for each of them—which may be higher than merited, given that they scored only 4.2 per cent between them—would reduce an overall average for the 48 games to 1474. This is considerably lower than any of the previously published figures; but even this may be generous.

Some of the games finished within a few moves, and in a way that suggests that those sighted players may have been surprisingly weak to take part in an attempt at a world record. For example, one game was finished in 10 moves; one in 12 moves; two in 13 moves; and 2 in 14 moves. Of course, the length of a single game does not, of itself, give an infallible guide to a player's strength.⁶⁹ But it does put one on enquiry. And when an opponent loses *three* pieces within the first eight moves—a seemingly impossible feat, but one player managed to do this; or is mated in ten moves, as was another player; or starts a game with Ng1-h3 followed by a2-a4 and is mated on move 12, as also happened; then one is entirely justified in raising questions. Two of the three games just mentioned involved players who are among the 12 ultimately unrated, suggesting that an assumed rating of 1200 for them, as a component of an overall average of 1474, would indeed be generous.

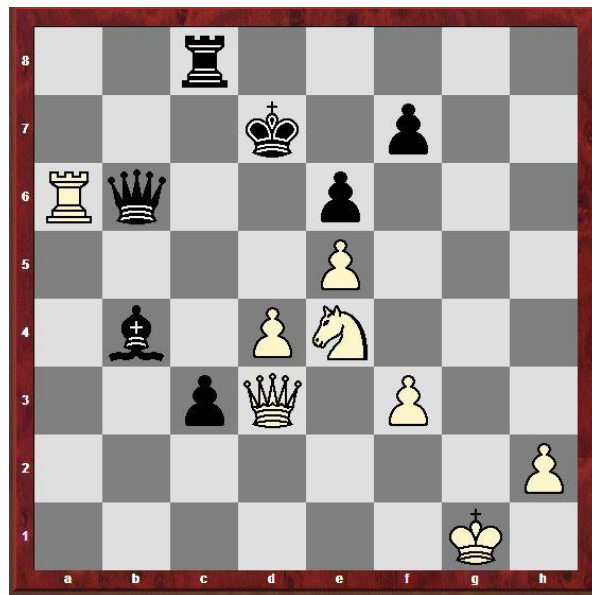
I am not aware of any attempt that may have been made to explain any of the differences and inconsistencies highlighted above, or to provide any other basis for assessing the overall average strength of the sighted players, bearing in mind that twelve ratings are still not available. This is a rather surprising situation in modern days in the context of an attempt to break a world record. For most historical events, much less information is available than one could reasonably expect to be available nowadays, with many more amateur players now taking part in chess competitions, generating a wealth of recorded data. Admittedly, it is probably difficult to find players who are prepared to sit through a chess event that is likely to last the best part of a day. Nevertheless, if it is the case that there is no reliable way of assessing the strength of many of Gareyev's opponents (other than as suggested above), then one has to wonder whether entry to an event such as this should be restricted to players for whom there *are* verifiable ratings. This would mark a departure from previous events, but it

⁶⁹ After all, Anand, one of the strongest players of the last three decades, and a challenger for the world championship, once lost in six moves when playing the Petroff Defense in a tournament game: Zapata v Anand, Biel, 1988.

has, of course, always been implied that all opponents would be of at least a certain minimum standard. What has not been expressed in the past is what that standard should be, but clearly there should be some lower limit as well as an adequate overall average. As noted above, rather surprisingly ten players had ratings below that of Class C, of which the lowest was 328—which is analogous to putting a professional boxer into the ring against a six-year-old.

9.2 *The duration of games as a factor in the reliability of outcomes*

With an event taking as long as 19 hours, factors such as tiredness become more relevant than in normal games, for both the blindfold and the sighted players, thereby increasing the prospect of error; and will affect different players to different extents. In consequence, the outcome of games is likely to depend on factors other than chess skill to a greater degree than in normal games. One game in particular illustrates this.⁷⁰ Gareyev was Black. His sighted opponent was Andrew McGregor, who, in the position shown in the following diagram, has just played the active **38.Ra1-a6**. (The not so obvious Kg1-g2, getting the King off the back rank and the black diagonal, seems somewhat better; but it is easy to find good moves after the event, with the help of a powerful computer program).

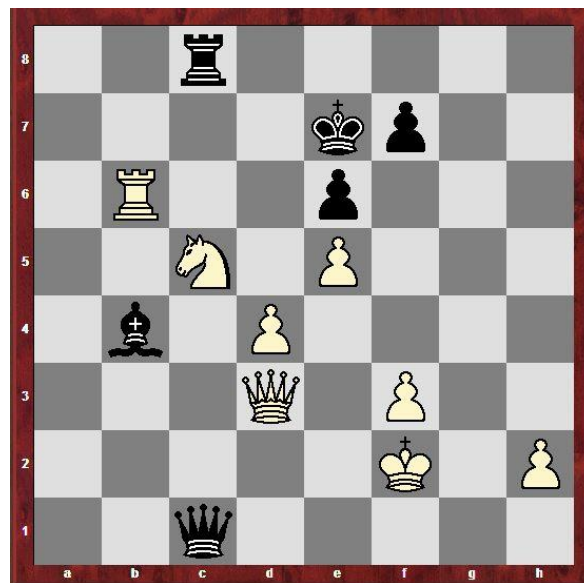


Andrew McGregor v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 38.Ra1-a6

In this lively position White is a pawn up, but Black's c-pawn is dangerous, particularly in view of White's last move, and there are practical chances for both sides. Now, Black's most

⁷⁰ This game is numbered 8 in the list provided by Jennifer Vallens and also on the chess24 website, where the moves of the games are shown at <https://chess24.com/en/watch/live-tournaments/world-blitz-record-2016>

accurate move is 38. ... Qxa6, with a possible continuation 39.Qxa6 (39.Nf6+ is also playable) c2, 40.Nf6+ Kd8, 41.Qb6+ Rc7, 42.Qb8+ Rc8, 43.Qb6+ with a draw by perpetual check. Instead of first capturing White's Rook, however, Gareyev immediately advanced his c-pawn with **38. ...c2**. Here, White's best reply would have been 39.Rxb6, as after ... c1=Q+, 40.Qf1 Qe3+ (40. ...Rg8+ transposes), 41.Kg2 Rg8+, 42.Ng3 Qd2+, 43.Kh1 Black must attend to the safety of his own King, leaving White with two extra pawns and excellent winning prospects. But, instead, White played the tricky-looking **39.Nc5+?!** This gives Black good chances because, if the Knight is captured, White's King will be less secure than in the earlier lines, where the Knight played an important role blocking the g-file. (A possible sequence would be 39. ...Bxc5, 40.dxc5+ Ke7, 41.Rxb6 c1=Q+, 42.Kf2 Qxc5+, 43.Qe3 Qc2+, 44.Qe2 Qh7 with various threats.) However, Gareyev finds an even better response in **39. ... Ke7**, when there followed **40.Rxb6**. White's other main try, 40.Qxc2, involves giving up the exchange after ...Qxa6, 41.Nxa6 Rxc2, 42.Nxb4, when the d-pawn will fall. The game continued **40. ... c1=Q+**, **41.Kf2**, reaching another critical position.



Andrew McGregor v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 41.Kg1-f2

Here, the most important features are the exposed position of both Kings, and Black's concentration of forces on c5. Black has a clear winning line in 41. ... Rxc5, when the capture of the Rook allows a fork by Black's Queen on c5, leaving Black with an extra piece; and, instead, even 42.Rb7+ fails to ...Rc7, preserving the extra piece, as 43.Rxb4 would allow a quick finish after ...Rc2+ (which would also be the response to the capture of the Bishop a

move earlier). Another move from the diagrammed position, and which Gareyev actually played, was 41. ... **Qe1+**; promising-looking in view of the potential support from Black's Rook on the open g- and h-files. But trapping the King is an illusory goal, because after the forced reply 42.Kg2 it turns out that Black has nothing better than a draw by perpetual check, as otherwise White's pieces become too dangerous. In the game, however, instead of playing 42.Kg2, McGregor resigned, evidently believing that his position was lost, which was a pity, given the time and effort he had put into the game.



Andrew McGregor at about move 13 in his game against Timur Gareyev (Photo courtesy Lennart Ootes)

There is an illuminating report by a spectator, who suggested that McGregor, after being at the board from 8 a.m. until about 3.30 a.m. the next day, seemed to be too tired to continue. After the resignation Gareyev reportedly said: “Are you sure? You want to keep playing? I have no idea how I’m going to win.” But, according to the report, McGregor gathered his things quickly and left the building without speaking to anyone.⁷¹ A disappointing end to a hard fought and entertaining game, and illustrating the increased likelihood of errors—by both players—when games last so long. McGregor himself is reported to have said later: “After 19 hours I was almost delirious and had many thoughts, some of which were actually about chess. I was a pawn up in the endgame, but instead of focusing on the game I was

⁷¹ Comment by “Dark Army” on December 5, 2016 at www.chess.com/news/view/timur-gareyev-plays-blindfold-on-48-boards-5729 . Gareyev’s reported response is reminiscent of encouragement given by Najdorf to some opponents during his 1947 world record event: see *Blindfold Chess*, p.95.

having a wide range of thoughts, like ‘Maybe I should just resign’, and the counter ‘Timur took a day of my life, I’m going to beat him for that!’⁷²

10. Some Other Games from the 48-Board Event

That was a rather extreme example of the effect of tiredness in an event of such duration, but there were other instances where errors may well have been partly induced by tiredness. That is what may have happened in the following game.

Game No. 21

White: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

Black: Stephen Merwin

Opening: Queen’s Gambit, Chigorin Defense

1.d4 d5, 2.c4 Nc6, 3.Nc3 dxc4, 4.d5 Initiating an aggressive line. **4. ... Ne5, 5.f4 Ng4, 6.h3** Preferring to dislodge the Knight before rather than after consolidating the center, so as to avoid a Queen check at h4 after Black moves his e-pawn. **6. ... Ng4-f6, 7.e4 e6, 8.Nf3** Now directly guarding h4. **8. ... exd5, 9.e5 c6.** Instead, seeking to keep the Knight by 9. ... Nd7 would result in the loss of his center pawns, while 9. ...Nh5 could have led to 10.Qd5 Ng3, 11.Bxc4 Qxd5, 12.Nxd5 Rb8, 13.Rh2 c6, where White has an edge, despite the awkward temporary position of his King’s Rook. **10.exf6 Nxf6, 11.Ne5 Bc5?! 11. ... Be7,** developing, and guarding the Queen, was safe, while 11. ... Bb4 (anticipating 12.Bxc4 Ne4) was more active. **12.Bxc4! Bf5** Developing a piece and allowing his King to maintain a guard on f7 in the event of a Queen exchange after the now threatened ... dxc4. An alternative was 12. ...0-0. **13.Bd3** If, instead, 13.Qe2 0-0, the Bishop would still need to retreat. **13. ... Ne4!, 14.Nf3** Covering the weakness at h4 **14. ... 0-0.** Even sharper was 14. ... Qe7, 15.Qe2 Bf2+! After the move actually played, Chigorin would not have been happy to lose his last Knight. **15.Bxe4 Re8!, 16.g4 Bxe4, 17.Kf1 Bxf3, 18.Qxf3 d4!, 19.Ne4 Qd5, 20.Nd2 Qd7.** Black correctly avoids the exchange of Queens, which would have passed the advantage to White in view of his extra piece. If, instead, 20. ... Qe6, then 21.Kg2 just about holds the position until White can develop his c1 Bishop. **21.Nb3** Gareyev prefers not to offer a repetition of moves by 21.Ne4 **21. ...Bb6, 22.a4.** Playable, but this removes one of the defenders of the b3 Knight (relevant, because of a likely future advance of Black’s d-pawn) and the intended threat to Black’s b6 Bishop takes several moves. It would be safer to develop his own Bishop

⁷² <https://new.uschess.org/news/blindfold-king-breaks-world-record/>

to d2, which would also bring the a1 Rook into the game. **22. ... Qe6!** Aiming at both e1 and b3.



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Steven Merwin
Position after 22. ... Qd7-e6

Here, Gareyev blundered badly, with **23.a5??** How does one explain this move? Did Gareyev forget that his Bishop was on c1? Did he think that the King could somehow escape? Did he mis-hear Black's move? After his previous move, had he pre-programmed a4-a5 so firmly into his mind that he played it almost automatically? The only hope of survival was 23.Kg2, although after 23. ... d3!, 24.a5 (with the defense of the Knight removed, it is now too late for Bd2) ... Qxb3, 25.axb6 Qc2+, 26.Kg3 d2, 27.Bxd2 Qxd2, 28.Rhd1 Qb4 Black has the advantage. After the move actually played, it was all over. **23. ... Qe1+**, and White resigned as after 24.Kg2 Re2+ he would have to give up his Queen. **0-1** Black played energetically throughout and fully deserved the result.

In another game, Gareyev blundered four times, and lost against a player rated at USCF 632. Gareyev has explained that the rather erratic moves in this game occurred because he had difficulty in piecing together the opening theme, partly because he was to some extent thrown by the moves of his not very experienced opponent. Evidently he announced several illegal moves, and was still trying to establish the correct set up throughout the game. By the time Gareyev had fully clarified the position he was a piece down and decided to resign the game.

The game illustrates dramatically what can happen when a blindfold player does not firmly anchor the opening moves into his mind and loses track of a position.⁷³

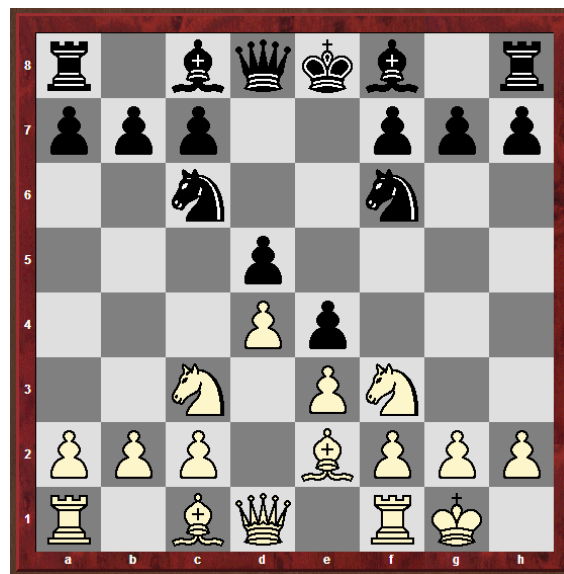
Game No. 18

White: Shiwani Lyle

Black: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

Opening: Queen Pawn, Four Knights

1.d4 d5, 2.Nf3 Nc6, 3.e3 Nf6, 4.Nc3 Here, 4. ... Bg4 would have been a reasonable response, but no doubt recognising that he faced an inexperienced and over-cautious opponent, Gareyev seeks to obtain the initiative with an active move. But it is a mistake. **4. ... e5?** Now, the straight-forward capture with the d-pawn would have given White the advantage. But, instead, Lyle plays **5.Be2**, and after Gareyev takes the opportunity to remedy his position with **5. ... e4**, she inexplicably ignores the threat on her f3 Knight and nonchalantly castles. **6.0-0??**



Shiwani Lyle v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 6.0-0?

One mistake gives rise to another. Also ignoring the threat, Gareyev plays **6. ... Be7??**, his second blunder. Lyle now notices that her Knight is under attack and moves it, but not to the best square. **7.Ng5** which led to **7. ... 0-0, 8.f3! exf3** Certainly not a mistake, but more enterprising would have been **8. ... h6, 9.Nh3 Bxh3** followed by **... exf3** and **... Qd7. 9.Bxf3**

⁷³ Paragraph based on personal communication from GM Timur Gareyev.

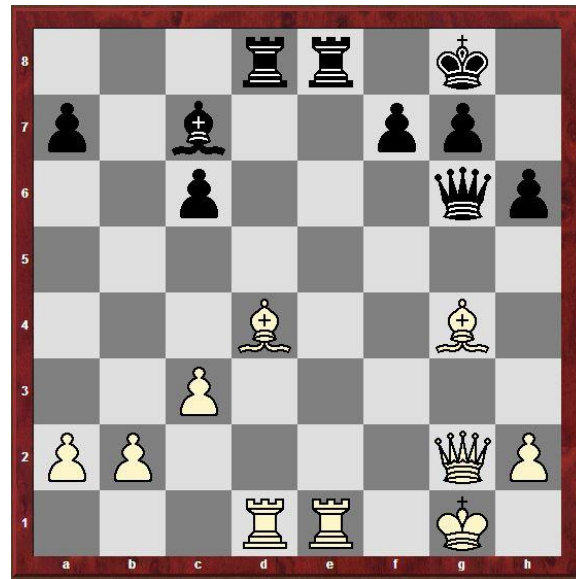
Capturing with the Knight is more logical. **9. ... h6, 10.Ne4?** Necessary, of course, was **10.Nh3. 10. ... Nxe4, 11.Nxe4**



Shiwani Lyle v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 11.Nc3xNe4

Now, the routine capture on e4 would have left Gareyev with an extra piece, but instead he plays **11. ... Ne5??**, which is his third blunder. And after **12.dxe5** Gareyev misses an opportunity to equalize by capturing the e4 Knight, and makes his fourth serious mistake with **12. ... c6??** There followed a series of normal moves: **13.Ng3 Qc7, 14.e4 Qxe5, 15.exd5** Now, realizing that his situation is desperate, and that capturing on d5 would lead to unwelcome simplification, Gareyev seeks to conjure up an attack. **15. ... Bh4**. Lyle responds actively and follows up with a series of good moves: **16.Re1** and there followed **16. ... Qf6, 17.Nh5! Qg6, 18.g3 Bd8, 19.Be3 Bf5, 20.c3 Bc7, 21.Nf4 Qf6, 22.dxc6 bxc6, 23.g4** White retains the advantage, but this move allows a little trickery. Better would have been **23.Qd4** (when if ... Be5, then **24.Qc4** or **Qc5**) allowing the a1 Rook to develop. **23. ... Bxg4, 24.Bxg4 Bxf4, 25.Qd2** This is all right, but the most straight-forward plan was to exchange pieces by **25.Bxf4 Qxf4, 26.Qf3 Qg5, 27.Kh1 Rad8, 28. Rad1. 25. ... Bc7, 26.Rad1 Rad8, 27.Qf2 Qg6, 28.Qg2** Instead, **28.Qf5** would have forced the exchange of Queens after ... **Rd6 29.Kh1!** (not the immediate capture, because then the g4 Bishop will be pinned and lost) **28. ... Rfe8, 29.Bd4**, stopping any further trickery. Gareyev remains a piece down, but he has a pawn and some counter-play. As the White King is exposed and all the heavy pieces are still on the board, he had some practical chances. Now, however, White has blocked all

counter-play, and Gareyev, now fully familiar with the position, and faced with the likely exchange of several pieces, resigned. **1-0**



Shiwani Lyle v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Final position after 29.Be3-d4

10.1 The nature and the consequence of errors

One should not be surprised in an undertaking of this magnitude, involving a single player fighting without sight of board or pieces against 48 opponents, and where the event lasts the best part of a day, that the blindfold player may commit errors that he would not make in a sighted simultaneous display. Some such errors may arise from a mistaken recollection of the location of some of the pieces (as must have happened in Gareyev's game against Lyle); some may result from not noticing a feature of a position (as appears to have been the case in the game against Merwin); some may be caused by an error in calculation or a faulty strategy; and others may be the consequence of under-estimating the strength of the opponent and embarking on a suspect plan, possibly trying too hard to liven up a game. And underlying these features may be the effect of tiredness or simply the limitation of human faculties.

Similar considerations may also apply in a blindfold event to the sighted players, who are likely to be affected by the additional factor of boredom between moves. In a sighted simultaneous event on, say, 25 boards, after the first few moves the opponents are likely to be faced with increasing intervals before the single player returns to their board. In a blindfold event the intervals will be longer, and where 48 games are involved the sighted players may have to wait for more than half an hour before making another move.

The preceding games illustrate the types of errors that were made by Gareyev and some of his opponents. Each error had the capability of changing the outcome of a game, and several did. As illustrated above, and to a much greater extent than in normal tournament games, the errors in an event of this nature are likely to have resulted from, or been contributed to by, factors other than pure chess ability. As an example for a sighted player, that was the case with Andrew McGregor's resignation in Game 8. Consequently, an assessment of the strength of the sighted players based purely on the results of the games may not be reliable, which reinforces the comments made earlier about the difficulty of estimating the strength of the unrated players and thus establishing a reliable, overall average. Similarly, because of tiredness a result may not reflect the true strength of a player at blindfold play, with the additional possibility that a position may not have been recalled accurately, as illustrated dramatically by Gareyev's game against Shiwani Lyle.

10.2 Dynamic play by Gareyev

Despite the magnitude of some of the blunders just examined, Gareyev's play overall was relatively free of serious errors, and in some of the games he won in a spectacular way. Consistently with his normal style, but perhaps remarkably for someone playing a large number of blindfold games, Gareyev produced some dynamic and exciting chess, and in 18 moves gained a convincing victory over his highest-rated opponent, Thomas Brownscombe, a FIDE master. While an ideal strategy for a simultaneous blindfold player is to reduce the number of games as rapidly as possible in order to lessen the overall burden of an event, most blindfold players have tended towards a risk-limiting approach, particularly against their stronger opponents. A notable exception from the 20th century was Alekhine (commented on later).

Game No. 4

White: Thomas Brownscombe

Black: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

Opening: Ruy Lopez, Møller Defence

1.e4 e5, 2.Nf3 Nc6, 3.Bb5 a6, 4.Ba4 Nf6, 5.0-0 Bc5, A move favored by Alekhine in his early playing days. **6.Re1** 6.c3 is the usual move here. **6. ... Ng4, 7.Re2 0-0, 8.c3** If, instead, 8.h3, Black can safely offer a piece sacrifice with ... f5! **8. ... d5, 9.exd5?** White is now technically lost as Black can blast open the King-side. Probably best was 9.Bxc6 bxc6, 10.d4, when White is safe.



Thomas Brownscombe v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 9.e4xd5?

9. ... e4!, 10.dxc6 After 10.d4 Black would still have a strong attack, similar to that in the game. 10. ... exf3 11.gxf3 Nxh2! Gareyev continues in sparkling form. Capture of the Knight allows mate in a few moves after 12. ... Qh4+. 12.Re5 To adapt a remark by Weaver Adams: If White plays differently he just loses differently. 12. ... Qf6, 13.Rxc5 Nxf3+, 14.Kg2 Even the desperate 14.Qxf3 does not help after 14. ... Qxf3 15.d4 Re8, 16.Be3 Rxe3! 12. ... Bh3+! Gareyev must have enjoyed this. 14. ... Qg6+ also wins, and in fact mates a move earlier.



Thomas Brownscombe v Timur Gareyev (blindfold)
Position after 14. ... Bc8-h3+!

15.Kxh3 Qh4+, 16.Kg2 Qg4+, 17.Kf1 Nh2+, 18.Ke1 Rfe8+, 0-1

That win must have given Gareyev a large boost of confidence. In a game against Scott White, Gareyev again played in energetic fashion, and also achieved a distinctive finish. Gareyev played a modern version of the Morra Gambit.

Game No. 15

White: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

Black: Scott White

Opening: Sicilian, Morra Gambit

1.e4 c5, 2.d4 cxd4, 3.c3 dxc3, 4.Bc4!? Nc6, 5.Nf3 e6, 6.Nxc3 a6, 7.Bc4 Nge7, 8.0-0 Ng6, 9.Bg3 b5, 10.Bb3 Be7. Here, a normal and safe move would be 11.Rc1 or Qe2, but Gareyev continues in gambit style with **11.Nd5!**



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Scott White
Position after 11.Nc3-d5!

The move gains relevance because the Black King is in the center, and the move has the immediate threat of 12.Bc7, winning the Queen. Black reacts with the natural **11. ...exd5** and play continued with **12.exd5 0-0**. If, instead, Black tries to keep the extra piece by 12. ... Na5, there could follow 13.d6 Bf6, 14.Re1+ Kf8, 15.Qd5! Nxb3, 16.Qxa8 Na5 (Instead, 16. ... Nxa1 would be a blunder, leading to immediate loss after 17.Rc1), 17.Rac1 Nc6 18.Rc2 with an approximately equal game but with plenty of tactics still ahead. **13.dxc6 dxc6, 14.Qc2 Qb6, 15.h4** Still playing energetically. **15. ... c5** Aiming to trap the Bishop, but safer

would have been 15. ... Bg4, developing a piece and connecting his Rooks, while discouraging the further advance of Gareyev's h-pawn, and also threatening to disrupt Gareyev's King-side pawns by capturing the f3 Knight. **16.Bd5 Bb7, 17.Bxb7 Qxb7, 18.h5 Nh8.** A dismal place for the Knight, which does not manage to escape from this tomb. **19.Rfe1 Rad8, 20.a4 c4, 21.axb5 axb5, 22.Qf5.** Gareyev's better piece development gives full compensation for his pawn deficit. **22. ... Bf6, 23.Be5 Qd5, 24.Rad1** Or 24.Ra6!, with the aggressive plan of threatening to capture on f6 with the Rook then with the Queen. **24. ... Qe6,** challenging Gareyev's undefended Queen. If, instead, 24. ... Qxd1, then 25.Rxd1 Rxd1+, 26.Kh2 Bxe5, 27.Nxe5 h6, 28.Nc6 Re8, 29.Qxb5, with about equal chances as Black is still handicapped by the poor position of his Knight. An interesting try instead of simply capturing the Queen would be 25.Bxf6!? which would possibly lead to a repetition of moves by 25. ... Qd5 Re5, 26.Qd1+ Re1, etc.



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Scott White
Position after 24. ... Qd5-e6

25.Rxd8! Qxf5?? It was necessary to capture the Rook. Perhaps the sighted player thought that Gareyev had overlooked that his Queen was not defended. The move played gives Gareyev the opportunity for a spectacular finish. **26.Rxf8+ Kxf8, 27.Bd6+ Be7, 28.Rxe7! Qd3.** The Queen has nowhere to hide. A last, desperate, attempt to survive by 28. ... g6, is frustrated by 29.h6! (The most accurate, but 29.Re5+ also wins) f6, 30.Rxh7+ Ke8, 31.Rxh8+ Kd7, 32.h7 g5, 33.Rd8+ and the h-pawn will be promoted. **29.Re6+** and Black resigns. **1-0**

Gareyev also achieved a striking finish in another game which started as a Sicilian gambit, this time the venerable Wing Gambit, a favorite of Frank Marshall's in sighted simultaneous displays in the early 20th century.

Game No. 3

White: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

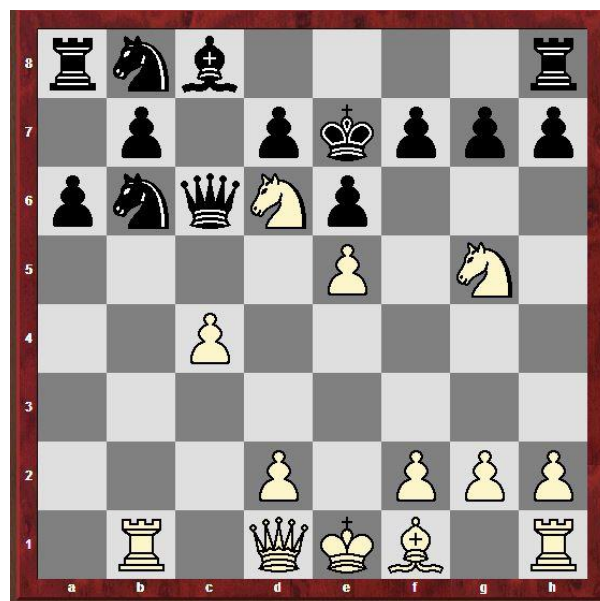
Black: Peter Bodziony

Opening: Sicilian, Wing Gambit

1.e4 c5, 2.b4!? cxb4, 3.Nf3 e6, 4.a3 Nf6, 5.e5 Nd5, 6.axb4 Bxb4, 7.c4 Nb6, 8.Ba3 Qe7,

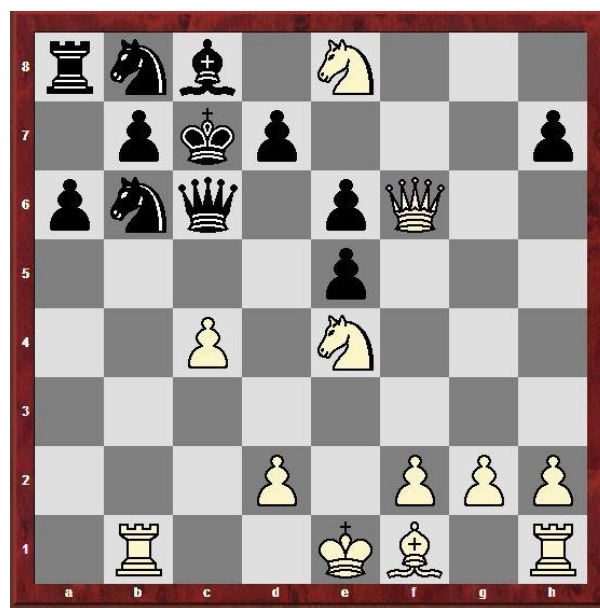
This early development of the Queen marks the start of Black's troubles. Preferable was the more natural ... Nc6. **9.Bxb4 Qxb4, 10.Nc3 a6?** Black wishes to prevent Nc3-b5, from where it would threaten to move to either d6 or c7; but the Knight can still reach d6 via e4, and the move played leaves Black way behind in development. Reasonable alternatives would have been 10. ... Nc6, or 10. ...0-0, when if 11.Rb1 then ...Qe7 followed by ...Nc6.

11.Rb1 Qc5. Here, a safe and routine continuation for White would have been 12.d4 Qa5, 13.Qd2 Nc6, 14.Bd3 Na4, 15.Nxa4 Qxa4, 16.0-0 with a large advantage to White. However, the blindfold player embarks on an even better plan. **12.Ne4!** aimed at preventing Black from castling and creating a bind to hamper his development. **12. ... Qc6** This blocks the natural developing square of the b8 Knight. But even ... Qa5. 13.Nd6+ Ke7, 14.Qb3 offers Black no hope. **13.Nd6+ Ke7, 14.Ng5!**



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Peter Bodziony
Position after 14.Nf3-g5

Also good was 14.Nd4 Qc5, 15.Qh5!, highlighting how much Black's troubles arise from his lack of normal development. **14. ... f6** Black's position is now beyond redemption. The attempt to keep out White's Queen also fails, e.g. 14. ...h5, 15.Ngxf7 Nxc4, 16.Bxc4 Qxg2, 17.Rf1 Nc6, when the straight-forward 18.Nxh8 Nxe5, 19.Rb6 offers Black no hope. **15.Qh5! fxe5** Instead, 15. ... fxg5? leads to immediate mate by 16.Qxg5 Kf8, 17.Qd8#, while 15. ... g6 allows 16.Qh6 (or Qh4) with an overwhelming attack. **16.Nge4** White now threatens a similar finish. **16. ... Rf8**. If the alternative 16. ...Kd8, Black would be suffocated after 17.Qg5+ Kc7, 18.Qxg7 Rd8, 19.Qxe5. **17.Qg5+ Rf6, 18.Qxg7 Rf7, 19.Qxf7+ Kd8, 20.Qf6+! Kd7, 21.Ne8# 1-0**



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Peter Bodziony
Final position after 21.Nd6-e8 mate

A well-deserved win for Gareyev after dynamic play. His opponent was sporting in allowing a distinctive finish by not resigning earlier.

In another game, which started with the Scandinavian Defense, Gareyev sacrifices a pawn in the opening to get out of the standard lines, and later offers a Knight sacrifice to open up the position of the Black King.

Game No. 23

White: Timur Gareyev (blindfold)

Black: Sean Russell

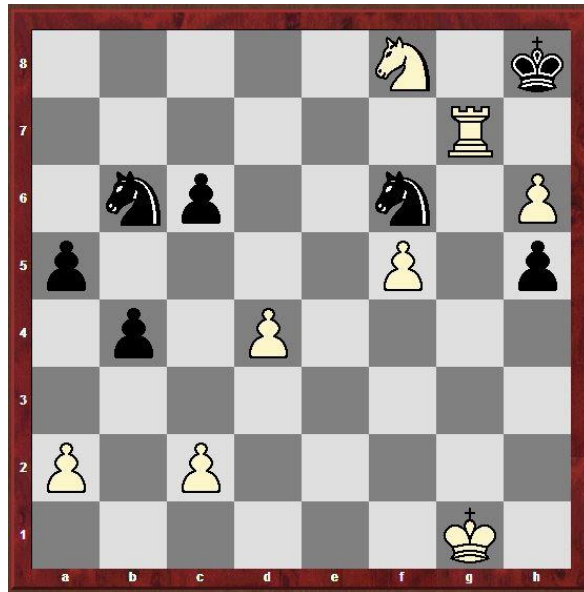
Opening: Scandinavian Defense

1.e4 d5, 2.exd5 Qxd5, 3.Nf3 Nf6, 4.d4 Bg4, 5.Be2 Qa5+, 6.b4!? Qxb4+, 7.Bd2 Qd6, 8.Nc3 c6, 9.Rb1 Qc7, 10.Ne5 Bxe2, 11.Qxe2 e6, 12.0-0 Be7, 13.Bf4 Qc8, 14.Rb3 The Rook lift allows for more pressure on the b-file and also action on the King-side. b5, 15.Ne4 a6?!, More to the point was to exchange Knights on e4 and then drive off the e5 Knight. 16.Nxf7!? Typical Gareyev style. 16.Re1 was a good alternative. 16. ... 0-0, If, instead, 16. ... Kxf7, 17.Ng5+ Kg8, 18.Nxe6 (or 18.Re1), White has full compensation for the sacrificed piece. Black's position is rather uncomfortable, but he would be better off than after the move actually played. 17.Nfd6 Bxd6. The main alternative was 17. ... Qd8. 18.Bxd6 Rf7, 19.Ng5 Raa7, 20.Re3 Also good was 20.Nxf7 Rxf7, 21.Re1. 20. ... Rfe7, 21.Bxe7 Rxe7, 22.Re1



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Sean Russell
Position after 22.Rf1-e1

Gareyev, an exchange up, has achieved a dominating position. 22. ...Nd5. There are no saving moves. With best play, White is winning in all variations. 23. Rxe6 Nd7, 24.Qxe6+ Qxe6, 25.Rxe6. Here, the move shown for Black on the chess24 website is 25. ...Nd7, with the continuation 26.Re7?? N5f6??.; but moves are recorded in the wrong order. The actual sequence was 25. ...Nf6, 26.Re7 Nbd7, reaching the same position. Now, Gareyev easily demonstrating his advantage. 27.Ne6 g6, 28.g4 Nb6, 29.Rg7+ Kh8, 30.g5 Nfd7, 31.Re7 Here, Gareyev was just testing his opponent, who avoids the threatened mate. 31. ...Kg8, 32.Rg7+ Kh8, 33.Re7 Kg8, 34.h4 a5, 35.f4 b4, 36.h5 gxh5, 37.f5 h6, 38.gxh6 Nf6, 39.Rg7+ Kh8, Now that the Rook is supported by the h-pawn, the Knight is free to deliver mate from either f7 or g6, each of which squares it can reach in either of two ways. 40.Nf8. With no other way of preventing mate, Black resigned. 1-0



Timur Gareyev (blindfold) v Sean Russell
Final position after 40.Nf8

10.3 Duration, and unusual features of the 48-game event

This article has examined seven of the 48 games and has drawn attention to several games which were finished in an unusually short time. There are also some notable features among the remaining games, which interested readers may wish to investigate for themselves. These include some further blunders and some further good play, and several examples where Gareyev plays unusual and energetic moves in the opening. But there were two non-game incidents that should be mentioned.

In order to provide Gareyev and his opponents with sustenance, a chef was continually cooking food and preparing drinks. Unfortunately, three hours into the event this activity set off the building's fire alarm. The building was evacuated, and play was interrupted for half an hour. This would have been a most unwelcome distraction for Gareyev, but he said that he made the most of it by enjoying the sunshine while he was outside. And later, at about six hours into the event, one of the sighted players caused another interruption. He suggested that the wireless microphone equipment that Gareyev was using to announce his moves may have been a means by which Gareyev was receiving help. It took some time to reassure the sighted player that this was not so: another unwelcome distraction for Gareyev. In the past, several blindfold exhibitions, including some given by Paulsen and Blackburne in the 19th century, were interrupted to allow the blindfold player to take a meal; and in one of Paulsen's events the games were spread over several days. Those arrangements were rather unusual, but they

were planned breaks, without the drama of a fire alarm or an unfounded charge of cheating. Gareyev did well to resume play without difficulty after the two interruptions.



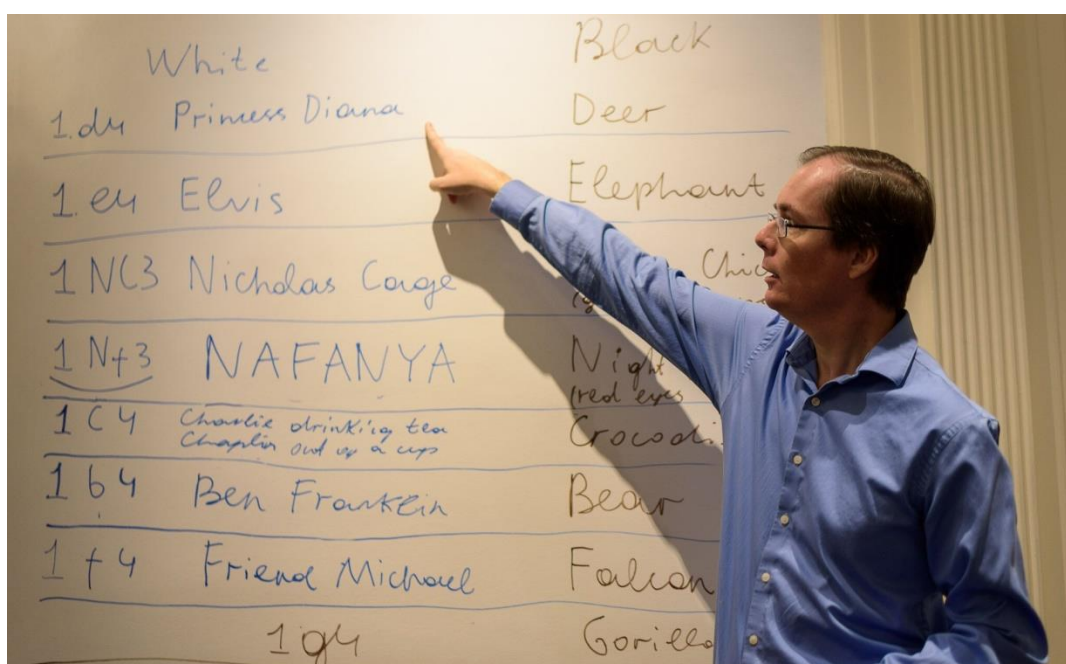
Timur Gareyev (center, in white T-shirt) with organizers and some players, spectators, family and friends, taken shortly after the finish of the 48-game event, including (next to him) his father and mother (Farid Gareyev and Ana James), and to the right, Jennifer Vallens the chief organizer, Marck Cobb (former president of Karpov International School of Chess), Sabrina and Juan Jauregui of the Las Vegas Chess Center, and behind Jennifer Vallens is Jay Stallings, the commentator for the event. (photo courtesy Lennart Ootes, who played a key role with the online technology and who manually recorded the moves of all the games)

It seems that the first game started at 8.00 a.m. on Saturday, December 3, 2016 and the last game finished at just after 3.30 a.m. on the following day, giving an overall duration (including interruptions) of a little over 19 hours. During the event, Gareyev took eight breaks of about ten minutes each, to stretch his legs and visit the rest-room; and, as mentioned, the fire alarm caused a break of about half an hour.⁷⁴ Allowing some further time for dealing with the microphone challenge, means that the actual playing time was approximately 17 hours. During that time, according to the details on the chess24 website, Gareyev played a total of approximately 1370 moves. With a net playing time of 1020 minutes, this gives an average time of 45 seconds a move. This means that, on average, a complete circuit while all the games were still alive would have taken about 36 minutes. During the first few moves, a circuit would likely have taken longer, while Gareyev was fixing the openings in his mind; and in the latter stages of the event, when many of the games had already finished, a circuit would have taken less time. Fast play overall, but still a long time for the sighted opponents to wait between moves.

⁷⁴ Details from *New In Chess* article: see note 54, above.

11. Memory Techniques for Blindfold Chess

I had intended to offer some comments about the mnemonic techniques that Gareyev developed to help him remember the progress of the games in a simultaneous blindfold event; but this article is already long enough, and Gareyev has now provided some details himself, in the *New In Chess* article mentioned earlier.⁷⁵ Gareyev credits James Jorasch, the founder and CEO of the New York strategic consultancy Science House, and who is himself a strong amateur chessplayer, with helping him develop personalized mnemonic techniques for coping with the memory tasks of a large blindfold event. Jorasch was one of the distant competitors in the 48-game event. Particularly intriguing are some photographs of a white-board taken during a training session, available on the chessbase website and elsewhere, indicating how Jorasch and Gareyev assigned names and characters to individual games and opening systems.⁷⁶ This topic may be addressed at some future time.



James Jorasch of Science House, during a memory training session with Timur Gareyev (Photo courtesy Albert Silver)

12. Final Comments and Conclusions

Gareyev's achievement was a remarkable one. Such a task, as he himself recognized, has much in common with a long-distance running event, such as "an ultra-marathon".⁷⁷ Owing

⁷⁵ See above, note 74.

⁷⁶ Albert Silver, "Gareyev breaks the world blindfold simul record", <http://chessbase.in/news/timur-gareyev-world-record/>

⁷⁷ <https://new.uschess.org/news/timur-gareyev-to-attempt-blindfold-world-record/>

to the limitation of human faculties, there comes a point when it is exceedingly difficult to balance the needs of maintaining a sufficiently high quality of sighted players to make a blindfold event meaningful, against the need for the blindfold player as a result of good play to achieve a respectable score in a realistic time. I believe that, looked at as a whole, Gareyev's performance met that balance, despite some criticisms that can be raised about the strength of some of the players, and about some blunders he made. Accordingly, I consider that Gareyev's performance in playing 48 games qualifies as a world record for simultaneous blindfold chess, beating the previous record of 46 games held by Marc Lang.⁷⁸

In the past, as each new world record was established, there were predictions that the performance would never be bettered. This even happened when, in 1782, Philidor played two blindfold games at once—and despite the fact that out of the two games he achieved just one draw, losing the other game.⁷⁹ Can Gareyev's record be beaten? One would have to answer: Yes, and possibly by Marc Lang (who now has an incentive) or by Gareyev himself, who has expressed the intention of taking on 55 games at once. It would, however, be highly desirable if in any future attempt, participation were to be restricted to players with a recognized and verifiable and adequate rating, and if all the games were to be published, together with all ratings, the finishing time of each game, and details of the procedures adopted for the event. It is only in that way that a proper standard can be set and maintained.

My personal view is that the way forward for blindfold chess players is not to seek to increase the total number of games played simultaneously, but to concentrate on meeting stronger opposition on, say, 10 or 12 boards at a time (or on even fewer boards against the clock). It is only by restricting the number of games that an exhibition can be conducted to a reasonable standard and completed in a reasonable time, not much in excess of that occupied by a theatrical performance or some sporting event. In contrast, when there is a large blindfold challenge, taking almost a whole day to complete, not only is there the question of whether a sufficiently high standard can be maintained, but the task puts an undue strain not simply on the blindfold player but also on his opponents and the organisers. Even for the sighted players, stamina is as much in demand as chess ability.

⁷⁸ The 48-game event has been ratified by *Guinness World Records*:
<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/72345-most-simultaneous-blindfolded-chess-wins>

⁷⁹ *Blindfold Chess*, p. 22.

12.1 “The greatest” blindfold player

The question has been asked whether Gareyev can now be regarded as “the greatest blindfold player of all time?” In fact, an answer in the affirmative was offered in the *Chess Life* article mentioned earlier, by Jay Stallings and Jennifer Vallens.⁸⁰ The question, and the proposed answer, are evidently directed towards more than the sheer number of games played simultaneously: they seem to be directed towards the quality of play in a sizeable event. And the answer proposed in that article is preceded by a mention of Alekhine’s performance in playing 26 games in New York in 1924 against “numerous opponents who were strong masters”, and by this comment:

“Many claim that Alexander Alekhine possessed the greatest blindfold skill ... but the fact that he never attempted a bigger number [than 26] suggests he might have realized how challenging it becomes once you move from 30-something to 40-something boards.”

In our book *Blindfold Chess* Eliot Hearst and I catalogued all known records, going back to the time of Philidor. These included several for Alekhine, namely:

- 26 games in New York in April, 1924, scoring 71.2% (+16, =5, -5) in 11.5 hours
- 28 games in Paris in February, 1925, scoring 83.9% (+22, =3, -3) in 12.8 hours
- 32 games in Chicago in July, 1933, scoring 73.4% (+19, =9, -4) in 12.5 hours

As for the strength of the sighted opponents in the New York event, Alekhine himself made a telling comment when writing about his performance:

“The séance, as usual in America, was excellently organised; however it came as something of a surprise to me that the composition of my opponents was unusually strong. Suffice it to say that on the first eleven boards there played first class amateurs, the best representatives of Manhattan and Marshall Chess Clubs. Of names now known on the international scale, such people as Kashdan, Herman Steiner, and Kevitz could be mentioned. For this reason, one has to call the result, sixteen wins, five draws, and five losses, entirely satisfactory.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ See note 55, above.

⁸¹ *Blindfold Chess*, p. 76. Of the players named by Alekhine, Isaac Kashdan later became a grandmaster, won the US Open Championship in 1938 and 1947, won or came second in numerous international tournaments, and was awarded nine medals for his performances in five Chess Olympiads; and Herman Steiner later became an international master, won several international tournaments, won the US Open Championship in 1942 (equal first with Yanofsky) and 1946, and the US Championship in 1948.

A photograph of the 1925 event at Paris is on the cover of the paperback edition of our book, and appears on Gareyev's website. In our book we also referred to an interview that Alekhine gave in Chicago, after playing 32 blindfold games. There, Alekhine said:

“I found less difficulty in playing 32 games than I had anticipated, considering that it was my first performance on such a scale in six years. But I would have no fear in tackling 35 and possibly up to 40. I can carry that many games in my mind, but every additional game means more time, and the element of fatigue enters. It might be an idea to devote two days to such an exhibition. I would of course agree not to look at a chess board at any time until the performance was over. Under these conditions, I am confident that I could carry on 40 games blindfold and would not set the limit even there.”⁸²

And in August, 1933, shortly after arriving in San Juan at the start of a tour of Puerto Rico, Alekhine made the following remarks about his performance at Chicago:

“Since 1925 I had never played a simultaneous blindfold exhibition like that one and it is understandable that I am not in the best condition. But I can tell you that despite my effort, and I do not want to deny it was a great effort, I achieved a good score and when the play ended I was not particularly tired. I believe that in these blindfold exhibitions I could face as many as 48 players at a time.”⁸³

Although there is, of course, a difference between claiming to be able to play 48 blindfold games simultaneously, and actually playing that number, I believe that Alekhine's performances show that full confidence may be placed in his claim. Alekhine had a phenomenal chess memory, as illustrated by some incidents to which we refer in *Blindfold Chess*. He also had a strong determination to succeed at any chess endeavour in which he participated; and I believe that had he been given a sufficient incentive to play 48 blindfold games simultaneously he would have prepared himself adequately for the task. One has only to recall Gligorić's description of Alekhine about to challenge Capablanca for the world championship, as “a warrior of iron will and armed to the teeth”. It is understandable that the authors of the *Chess Life* article were extremely pleased (and justifiably so) at the outcome of

⁸² *Blindfold Chess*, pp.80-81, quoting from *Chess Review*, September 1933. As we pointed out, Alekhine probably meant 8 years, not 6, since his previous, sizeable display.

⁸³ *Blindfold Chess*, p.81, quoting from *Quarterly History of Chess*, 1000, p.123, in turn citing *El Mundo* (San Juan) August 15, 1933.

Gareyev's display, but if they had had all these matters in mind, I believe they would likely have expressed themselves differently.⁸⁴

Taking into account the overall quality of Alekhine's play, with very few errors, and having regard to the strength of his opposition, I consider that it is Alekhine who was the greatest blindfold player of all time.⁸⁵ This is, of course, a subjective opinion, based on an examination of many hundreds of blindfold games from all the major events. Another contender for that position might have been Pillsbury, based partly on his well-known 21-game display at Hannover in 1902, when his opponents included 18 candidate masters who were just below the strength of the players in the main tournament. But on that occasion Pillsbury scored only 40.5% (+3, =11, -7); so although his performance is generally regarded as setting a world record, in objective terms it was a failure. As Alekhine pointed out, the task was beyond Pillsbury's powers, although he acknowledged that Pillsbury was "one of the greatest masters of blindfold play of all time".⁸⁶

Timur Gareyev is to be congratulated on achieving what, on any reasonable analysis, was a world record in playing 48 games simultaneously, blindfold, and achieving a creditable result—despite some criticisms that can be made—and accomplished despite two significant and unplanned interruptions, which might well have distracted a lesser player.⁸⁷

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This article was posted on <http://www.blindfoldchess.net> on July 18, 2017

⁸⁴ A correction to the *Chess Life* article was published by the editor in the May issue of that periodical in these terms: "The March 2017 cover story 'Blindfold King' incorrectly stated that Alexander Alekhine had never attempted more than 26 blindfold games simultaneously, when in fact, he had played 28 in 1925, and 32 in 1933. He once offered to play 40 boards, and stated that he believed he could face as many as 48 simultaneously."

⁸⁵ The same claim was made by both authors of *Blindfold Chess*, at p.73 – admittedly, before Marc Lang and Timur Gareyev burst onto the scene. Alekhine emphasised the high standard of some of his blindfold games by including them in his books of game collections.

⁸⁶ *Blindfold Chess*, p.58. Pillsbury unwisely handicapped himself, not only by allowing the use of German notation, but by performing on what was intended to be a rest day in the main tournament and, moreover, allowing his opponents to consult among each other and to analyze by moving the pieces.

⁸⁷ I am grateful to Eliot Hearst for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article; and to Jennifer Vallens for supplying photographs and a list of the available ratings for the 48-game event; and to GM Timur Gareyev for clarifying several points.