

The best of games, the worst of games: A Reykjavík diary tells the tale of two...

By Peter Henner

Chess players in the United States are generally regarded as somewhat nerdy, if not downright weird. However, in Iceland, chess is very respectable and good chess players are actually held in high esteem. I had always wanted to visit Iceland, partly because of chess, partly because it is a spectacular and interesting country, and partly because I wanted to experience Scandinavian culture.

This month, I finally got my opportunity. The Icelandic Open chess tournament, a 10-round tournament held between May 31 and June 8 was open to anybody, and the playing schedule, one round a day, at 5 p.m. except for the two Saturdays, was conducive to "chess tourism"—having most of the day to travel and sightsee, while playing in the evening. My wife, Nancy, and I planned a two-week vacation, spending the first 10 days in Reykjavík with another six days to tour the country.

Iceland is everything I would have expected: very friendly people, fantastic hiking, and all of the amenities of modern culture. (I strongly doubt that Icelanders would tolerate the poor quality of Internet service in rural New Scotland where I live.)

The country relies entirely on hydroelectric and geothermal energy, has clean air and water, and I was amazed at drivers who actually obey speed limits. Unfortunately, my memories of the country are bittersweet because of my performance in the chess tournament.

If someone had told me that, on the same day, I would win a game and draw a game against two International Masters, I

be playing Bjorn Thorfinnsson, an International Master rated 2377. Although I had White, he had a significant attack by Move 14. Still, I was able to obtain a theoretical material advantage: rook and two pawns against bishop and knight.

The game got complicated and, as a result of a mistake, I had to give the rook back for a bishop, and wound up in an end game with two pawns against a bishop. Fortunately for me, he missed a win, and I somehow held on for a draw, after more than four hours and 63 moves of play.

We analyzed the game afterward. Bjorn described his experi-

olated King pawns.

However, somehow I managed to break up his attack, take control of an open file, and actually have a slight advantage into the end game. A few mistakes by my opponent gave me a winning position, and I did not hesitate to turn down his belated offer of a draw. It was the last game to finish, taking four-and-a-half hours and 62 moves.

Walking back to my apartment. I remember thinking that, regardless of what happened in the rest of the tournament, I should be happy. I would have cause to remember that thought a week later.

beginning to think that I might really be able to go somewhere as a chess player now that I have closed my law office.

However, I missed a forced draw and managed to misplay the resulting endgame, and eventually lost. Once again, the game lasted four and a half hours, and we were the last game to finish.

June 3

We had our first experience driving on an unpaved road in Iceland, in pouring rain. We also went to the famous Blue Lagoon, which is an overpriced tourist ripoff (\$100 to soak in an artificial pool).

I played Fide Master Thorsteinn Thorsteinnsson, who asked me

tions of a house built in the Ninth Century, and then visited the island of Videy, which was the home of the administrator of Iceland in the 18th Century, and is also the site of the Imagine Peace Tower conceived by Yoko Ono in honor of John Lennon.

Although my opponent Lofur Baldvinsson was rated only 1706, I was keenly aware that he had defeated a Grandmaster in the first round, and that he was much stronger than his rating. He played an opening that I have had trouble defending against, and I lacked confidence in my ability to defend against it and failed to choose the strongest defense. I began to doubt my ability to analyze the position properly, and just did not play well, and lost.

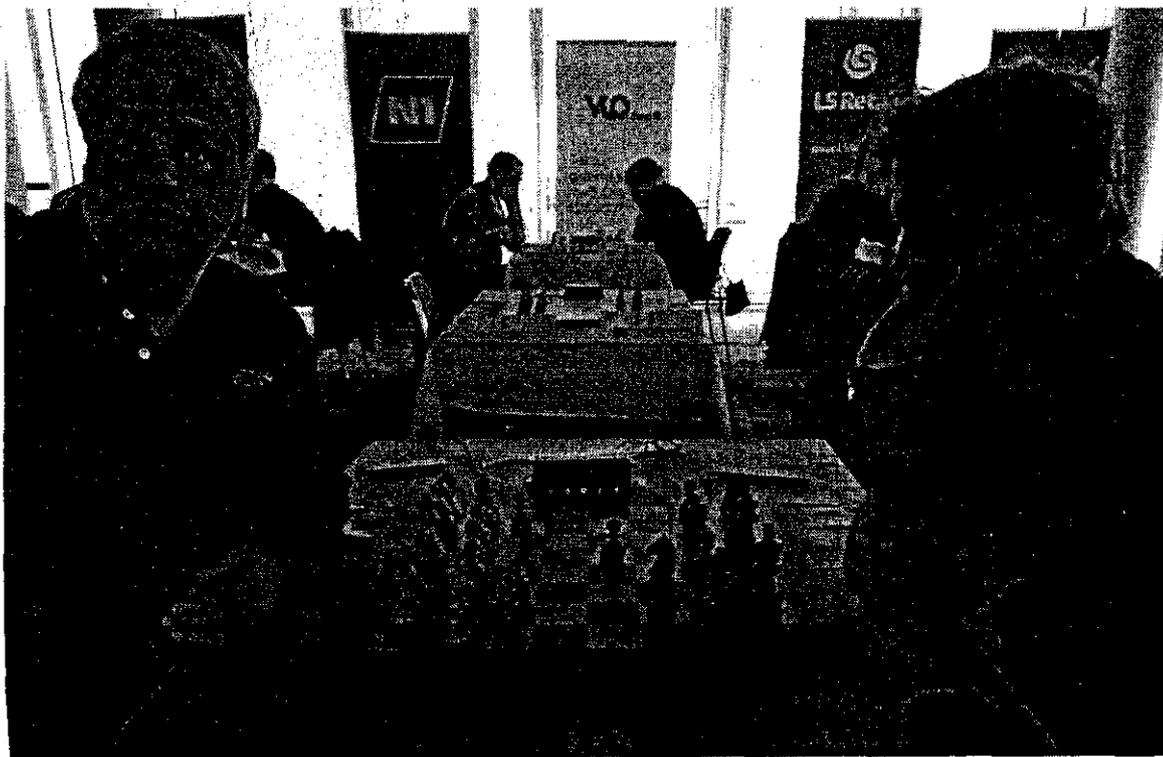
June 5

We hiked to a volcanic crater in the morning, and were joined by several Icelandic school groups, which were having field days at the end of the school year, and then visited the outstanding National Museum.

My opponent was Sigridur Bjorg Helgadóttir, a very quiet and shy young woman of 20 who appeared to be about 13. (Icelandic last names are the first name of the father followed by "son" for males or "dóttir" for females).

For some reason, I was totally unable to calculate accurately. I thought that I had some attacking chances, but completely misread the position, played some horrible moves, and lost in 25 moves. The next morning, when I analyzed the game with my computer, I was shocked by what I was not seeing and wondering how I could be playing so badly.

I now had a score of 2 ½ - 4 ½,



two International Masters, I would not have believed it. And, if I had also been told that I would lose two successive games against 12-year-old players rated under 1400, I would not have believed that either. However, in the same tournament, I did both.

Following is the daily diary I kept of unfolding events.

May 31

We arrived in Reykjavik a little after midnight on Friday morning, just after the sun had set, and about an hour before it rose. As we learned to our sorrow, our apartment was right across the street from a construction site, where, throughout our stay, we were serenaded by pile drivers.

We spent much of the day walking around the city of Reykjavik, a very pleasant and walkable small city.

I went to the tournament site about 4:30 in the afternoon, and paid the registration fee of 16,000 Icelandic kronor (about \$140). My first-round game was against Petur Johanneson, an older man rated 1000, who played quickly and badly. I was happy to finish the game by 6 o'clock since I was still jet lagged.

June 1

I looked at the tournament website from my computer at my apartment and knew that I would

ences visiting the United States, and how he taught a gentle lesson in humility to a street chess hustler in New York City (I assumed it was in Washington Square Park) who approached him by saying, "Let me show you how to play chess, white boy."

Bjorn couldn't let that go, but he did refund the hustler's money after beating him a few times.

In the evening game, I played a second International Master, Saevar Bjornason. Mr. Bjornason informed me that there were too many Americans in Iceland, and that some Icelanders were happy to see the American base close in 2006.

After the game, he complained of being "an old man" (according to the Fédération internationale des échecs website, he is two years younger than I). I did not play the opening well, and was defending a difficult position with doubled

Tough match: International Master Saevar Bjornason, left, and Peter Henner play chess at the Icelandic Open tournament. After four-and-a-half hours and 62 moves, Henner scored an upset victory. Henner's previous match ended in a draw with another international master. The rest of the tournament did not go as well for Henner.

— From the Icelandic Open website

But on June 1, I began to fantasize a spectacular result, possibly even achieving a performance norm for an international title. The next day's tournament report remarked on the surprising result of the American player drawing one of Iceland's top players.

June 2

Nancy and I spent the day visiting the site of Iceland's first parliament, which is also the location where the European and North American geological plates join, and then hiking three miles to a swimming place where cold river water is geothermally heated above 100°.

I played another Icelandic master, Sigurdur Pall Steindors-son, and was more than holding my own when I offered a draw at move 35. I was fantasizing the shock waves of an American First Category player starting the tournament with a 3-1 record, and

before the game if I was a lawyer. (I assume he looked me up on the Internet, and saw my website.)

I made the kind of positional mistakes that 1800 players normally make when we play masters, and lost. Thorsteinn graciously gave me information about Reykjavik and offered to try to get tickets for a Jethro Tull concert the following Sunday. (Unfortunately, Nancy and I had to leave Reykjavik early that day.)

Although I had lost my last two games, I still had achieved a performance rating of about 2150, and had an even score of 2 ½ - 2 ½. I could now look forward to being paired down against lower-rated opponents, with the expectation of achieving a positive score and gaining some rating points.

June 4

In the morning, we visited a museum in downtown Reykjavik built around the original founda-

with three games to play and no realistic chance of playing any more high-rated players. I was also very upset by my poor play.

Normally, I would think seriously about withdrawing from the tournament at this point. However, I had come all the way to Iceland for the experience of playing against Icelandic players, and we were not scheduled to leave Reykjavik until the weekend in any event.

June 6

Nancy and I did the most popular mountain hike in Iceland, to Mt. Esja, about 15 miles from Reykjavik. The hike was about 2,500 feet of climbing over four miles with the last half-mile scrambling over steep wet rocks in a complete fog.

My game was against 12-year-old Heims Pall Ragnarsson, rated 1388, and probably a couple of hundred points stronger. I played as bad a game as I have ever played.

At three key points, I managed to find very bad moves, after I had taken advantage of my opponent's poor play to salvage a lost game. I also began to notice that my thinking seemed to be impaired: I would analyze a prospective move for several minutes, make the move, and then realize I had

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tournaments

— On the trail of Bobby Fischer: At the Icelandic Open —

completely overlooked something that was obvious.

When I analyzed the game, the next day, I was shocked at what I wasn't seeing, and, of course, was keenly aware that I don't usually lose games to players rated under 1400.

From a chess standpoint, I had nothing more to gain from the tournament: I had lost five straight games, playing worse in each one. I planned to withdraw, and asked not to be paired for the ninth round.

June 7

Nancy had planned a variety of activities for this date, and it was just as well that I did not have to be back at the tournament site for a 5 p.m. game. We visited the grave of Bobby Fischer, hiked to the top of a 200-foot waterfall (and I did a trail run of about three miles upstream from the waterfall), and had a lobster dinner at a well-regarded seaside restaurant.

Icelandic lobster is somewhat different than what we are used to: Lobsters are somewhat smaller and the only viable meat is in the tail: 600 g of lobster tail was more than enough food for a meal.

I went to the tournament site just to watch the games. I had a nice talk with my second-round opponent, Bjorn, who was one of the leaders of the tournament. He told me that his last-round game would be against his brother, who is also an International Master, and that he needed to win to get a Grandmaster norm. He also told me that Icelandic chess players are watched closely, and he would have to win the game honestly.

I spent some time, too, talking to the mother of my eighth-round opponent who was very supportive of her son's chess playing, but happy that he was also very interested in playing football (soccer).

By Peter Henner

This year, The Icelandic Chess Federation decided to contest the national championship in an open tournament (the Icelandic Open), not only open to all Icelandic players, but also to foreigners.

Four foreign players, including one American, myself, traveled to Iceland to play in this tournament. (See accompanying article "The best of tournaments, the worst of tournaments: a Reykjavik Diary.")

Iceland is, per capita, the strongest chess-playing country in the world. Although the population of the country is only 300,000, it has 12 Grandmasters and 13 International Masters.

The country is also famous for hosting the 1972 world championship match between the American Bobby Fischer, and the Soviet Boris Spassky. Fischer spent his last years in Iceland, which graciously provided a home for him after his legal troubles made him persona non grata in the United States.

He is buried in the churchyard of a small rural church, outside of the small city of Selfoss, about 50 miles from Reykjavik.

In many ways, European tournaments are far more civilized than tournaments in the United States. Boards, sets, and clocks are routinely provided, and the boards are set up in advance by the tournament organizers.

The time control uses an "increment" — at the Icelandic Open, 30 seconds — which is automatically added to a player's time after each move. This means that a player will have a minimum of 30 seconds for every move, which eliminates the horrible time pressure scrambles common to United States tournaments where a player may need to make a number of moves virtually instantaneously.

The increment also means that



— Photo by Nancy Lawson

Paying homage to a chess great, Peter Henner visited the grave of Bobby Fisher on his recent trip to Iceland.

harbor, and mountains — at least on the occasional periods of time when it was clear outside; it rains a lot in Iceland. The chess federation was given the site for free, and, while it was very spacious, it was also an unfinished floor with bare concrete walls and the absence of insulation did create a noise problem since the room for analysis was separated from the

followed by RPI at 2 ½ - 3 ½, the Capital Region team at 1-5, and Albany B, also at 1-5.

Follow-up on the news

My March 21 column described a tragic situation, where Georgian IM Salome Melia was trying to raise money for an operation for a rare medical condition that threatened the life of her five-month-old daughter. There was a

an unrated player, he was able to play fourth board, and, while he did defeat some very strong players, and obtain a performance rating of over 2200, we did not have the opportunity of seeing him play against other top players.

Unfortunately, Dr. Ilonze was only in the area for medical studies for this academic year, and he will be leaving the Capital

in playing football (soccer).

I decided to play my last-round game, even though I knew I would be playing another kid rated less than 1300. As bad as I was playing, I had come to play chess, and felt that I wanted to be part of the tournament.

June 8

I went for an early morning run along the waterfront.

My game against Bjorn Holm Biriksson was even worse than my previous games. I simply could not see anything on the board, I had no confidence in my ability to analyze anything, and was easily distracted by the noise in the tournament room. I had thought that, even so, I should be able to beat a player rated 1182, but still lost.

Nancy and I went for a whale watch that evening. I was sufficiently upset that I did not return to watch the playoff for the Icelandic championship.

Bjorn Thorfinnsson won his last round game to tie for first place with GM Hannes Stefansson, who had won the championship 11 times, including the past three years. Unfortunately, I can not claim to have drawn the 2013 champion: Bjorn drew the first game of a G/25 match, but lost the second one to permit GM Stefansson to win his 12th title.

Although we very much enjoyed our second week in Iceland, including an epic 11-hour hike to the top of a glacier, I could not, and almost three weeks later still have not, recovered from the shock of losing six games, and turning what could have been a great personal victory into a shattering defeat.

It was about 10 days before I stopped having bad dreams about losing chess games. My performance rating for the tournament was an embarrassing 1616 – my FIDE rating may drop to 1800. I decided not to play in the last match of the Capital District Chess League, and I do not know when I will be ready and able to play tournament chess again.

The increment also means that a player is required to record all of his moves since, as the tournament director explained to me, a player has time to write down his moves. Both players are required to sign and turn in their score sheets, which have carbon copies for the players themselves.

On one occasion, the setting sun was an obvious problem for the players and the organizers scrambled to put up screens for us; this would not have happened at a United States tournament.

Although I was somewhat nervous about possible differences in chess tournament customs (I even e-mailed the tournament website to ask if there was a dress code in the tournament), the scene was generally very familiar to me, except for the amazing lack of conflict and the smoothness of operations.

All the pairings were done by computer immediately after the conclusion of the round; there were no arguments about pairings. Only once in 10 rounds did I hear any arguments at all. Players were generally very polite and courteous, far more than in United States' tournaments.

The tournament was played on the 20th floor of one of Reykjavik's tallest buildings, with spectacular views of the surrounding city,

analysis was separated from the main tournament room only by a curtain.

Schenectady teams lead

The Schenectady A team has clinched first place in the Capital District Chess League with a score of 4 ½ - ½, with one match left against the Albany A team. Its club rival, the Schenectady Geezers, finished second with a score of 4-2.

The Geezers were undefeated, at 3-0, and defeated the Uncle Sam Club with the help of a lucky win on first board when Phil Thomas tried too hard to win a drawn game and lost. Uncle Sam also finished with 4-2, but placed third on the basis of fewer game points.

However, the Geezers lost to the Albany A team, and then lost a tough match to the Schenectady A team, 2 ½ - 1 ½. There were draws between Phil Sells and Peter Michelman on Board 1, Carl Adamec and Jon Leisner on Board 2, and John Phillips and Dilip Aaron on Board 4. The only decisive game was on Board 3, where Bobby Roter returned from a long absence from tournament play, to defeat the Geezers Michael Mockler.

The Albany A club is fourth at 3-2. Even if Albany defeats the Schenectady A to finish at 4-2, it cannot gain enough game points to catch Uncle Sam. Albany A is

month-old daughter. There was a tremendous worldwide response to the fund-raising effort. Ms. Melia thanked everyone and announced that the surgery was scheduled for April 2, in Germany. However, neither any chess website, nor Ms. Melia's Facebook page has any further information. It is good to know that the chess community rallied to Ms. Melia's aid, and we can only hope that the surgery was a success.

Sabbatical

I have been writing this column for over three years. As some readers may know, I have recently commenced an indefinite sabbatical from my law practice, to devote the bulk of my time to other activities, including tournament chess, training for a marathon, and scholarly and creative writing.

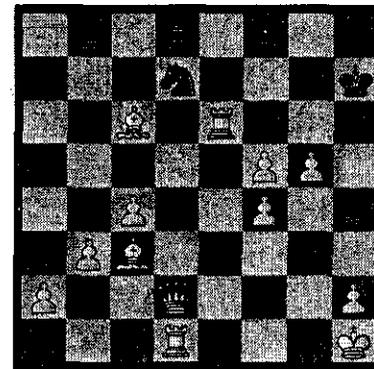
I will also take a sabbatical from writing this column, at least for this summer (when there is not too much chess news anyway), and possibly for the rest of this year.

This week's problem

The Uncle Sam Club's fourth board, Dr. Chibbzo Ilonze, was the Most Valuable Player in the Capital District Chess League this year, with a perfect score of 6-0. As

he will be leaving the Capital District soon.

In his last game in the CDCL, he defeated the Geezers' John Phillips. While Dr. Ilonze played a very strong game, he missed a forced win, which caused the ENYCA blogger Bill Little to comment, "Moves like this ... lead me to question if Dr. Ilonze is actually a 2200 player [because] a Master is unlikely to miss the killing move ____." See if you can find this killing move yourself.



Ilonze – Phillips, Schenectady Geezers – Uncle Sam match 2013

White to move and win
(Solution on page 8)

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