

What We Can Learn From Bobby Fischer

by Dr. Frank Brady

Nov. 19, 2011

Dallas, Texas

Sometime in 1964 as I was walking to my apartment in Greenwich Village with Bobby Fischer, I offhandedly asked him if he would give me chess lessons, in return for my teaching him how to play billiards.

He said, “Okay, for your *first* lesson, read and study every column of *Modern Chess Openings*, together with all the footnotes.” Realizing that was a monumental task, and thinking I might be able to shortchange it a bit, I asked him what the *second* lesson would be.

“Do it all over again.” he said.

I like to tell this story because in some ways it best illustrates Bobby’s approach to studying chess: he was a relentless student of the game. In his time, he was the most booked-up player in the world, and those were the

days without computers, making it considerably more difficult to access games from around the world.

In my biography of Bobby, *Endgame*, I outlined many of the ways that he studied, but I recommend that you go back to *My 60 Memorable Games*, not just for the depth and beauty of his content, but also as a display of his scholarship of the game, filled with unique insights and references to games and treatises of the past.

In *Endgame*, I wrote the following story, which might be worth repeating. I beg indulgence of those who have already read the book:



In March of 1960 the 17-year-old Bobby was to fly to Mar del Plata, the seaside resort on Argentina's Atlantic

coast, south of Buenos Aires. Bobby thought he would walk through the tournament easily until he learned that David Bronstein and Fridrik Olafsson were also going to play, in addition to the 23-year old Grandmaster from Leningrad, Boris Spassky. But it wasn't Spassky or Olafsson that Fischer was worried about on the eve of the Mar del Plata tournament. It was Bronstein.

A week before he left for Argentina, Bobby and I had dinner at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, hangout of avant garde artists and abstract impressionists, and one of Bobby's favorite eating places. The night we were there, Bobby was not aware of who some of the people in the restaurant were: Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline having a conversation at the bar, and Andy Warhol and John Cage dining together. Bobby just liked the pub food served there – it was a meat and Shepherd's Pie kind of

a place – and that no one ever seemed to notice him, so busy were they gawking at the art celebrities of the day. Bobby could eat in peace at the Cedar.

We slid into the third booth from the bar, and ordered bottles of beer.. The waitress did not question his age, even though he had just turned seventeen and was not legally old enough to drink in New York State (eighteen was the age limit). Bobby knew the selection without looking at the menu. He tackled an enormous slab of roast prime rib, which he consumed in a matter of minutes. It was like he was a heavyweight boxer having his last meal before the big fight.

He had just received in the mail the pairings chart and color distribution from Mar del Plata. Bad news: he was to have black against both Bronstein and Spassky.

During a lull in the conversation – which was typical since Bobby didn't like to talk much, and was not embarrassed by long silences – I asked, “Bobby, how are you going to prepare for this tournament? I've always wanted to know how you did it.” He seemed unusually chipper, and became interested in my interest. “Here, I'll show you,” he said, smiling, and he slid from the other side of the table to sit next to me, cramming me into the corner of the booth. He took out his battered leather pocket chess wallet; all the little pieces were lined up in their respective slots, ready to go to war in an instant's notice.

As he talked he looked from me to the pocket set, back and forth – at least at first – and therein commenced a scholarly treatise of the method of his preparation. “First of all, I'll look at the games that I can find of all of the players, but I'm only going to *really*

prepare for Bronstein. Spassky and Olafsson I'm not that worried about." He then showed me his one and only game with Bronstein – a draw – from Portoroz two years earlier. And he began making comments about every move that they each had made, disparaging Bronstein's choices one moment, lauding him the next. The variety of choices he was considering and explaining was dazzling, and overwhelming. In the course of his rapid analysis he looked at almost *every* piece and pawn on the board, and discussed the ramifications of why or why not moving it would be an optimum or negative choice. It was like watching a movie with a voice-over narration, but with one great difference: He was manipulating the pieces and speaking so rapidly that it was difficult to connect the moves with his discussion. I could not follow the tumbling out of the ideas that he was expressing as he shifted the pieces. He said: "Bronstein couldn't play

there as it would weaken his black squares;” or “I didn’t think of this.” He frowned. And then, smirking, “No, was he *kidding*?”

The slots of his pocket set had become so enlarged from thousands of hours of analysis that the half-inch plastic pieces seemed to jump into place kinesthetically, at his will, or by just a flick of his long fingers. Most of the gold imprint on each piece designating it was a bishop, king, queen, or whatever,, had worn off as a result of their years of use, but Bobby knew what each piece represented – they were like his friendly pets.

“The problem with Bronstein,” he went on, “is that it is almost impossible to beat him if he plays for a draw. At Zurich he played 20 draws out of 28 games! He’ll play for a win against me, I’m sure, and I’m not playing for a draw.”

Resetting the pieces in seconds, again almost without looking as he put them into their home slots, he said, “He’s hard to prepare for because he can play any *kind* of game, positional or tactical, and any kind of opening.” He then began to show me, from memory, game after game –it seemed like dozens – of the openings that Bronstein had played against the variations that were Bobby’s favorites. Multiple asides and outcomes leapt from his mind, and he didn’t only consider Bronstein’s efforts, but he also displayed games that Louis Paulsen played in the 1800s and Aaron Nimzovitch had experimented with in the 1920s, and others that had been played just weeks before, games gleaned from a Russian newspaper. All the time he *weighed* possibilities, *suggested* alternatives, *selected* the best lines, discriminated, decided. It was a history lesson and a chess tutorial but mainly it was an

***amazing* feat of memory, and a microscopic analysis of the positions at hand. I realized that although he had memorized the moves of the games – ancient and current – he was then and there working out the nuances for the first time as he spoke and moved, as if he were on an exploration of mapless territory, recreating the roads to the perfect conclusion of the game.**

His eyes, slightly glazed, were now fixed on the pocket set, which he gently held open in his left hand, talking to himself, totally unaware of my presence or that he was in a restaurant. His intensity seemed even greater than when he was playing a tournament or match game. His fingers sped by in a blur, and his face showed the *slightest* of smiles, as if in a reverie. He whispered, barely audibly:” Well, if he plays *that*...I can

block his bishop.” And then raising his voice so loud that some of the customers stared: “He won’t play *that*.”

I began to quietly weep, aware that for the two hours that we sat at dinner, I was in the presence of genius.



What does this story *teach* us about Bobby Fischer that we might use in teaching others? Well, *perhaps* one might glean that Bobby had an almost eidetic memory – which he did – but that is of little use to most students of the game, because many are not so equipped to memorize vast lines, variations and complete games of the past. It *might* teach us that without the *passion* for the game, his love for chess that was inherent in everything Bobby did concerning chess,

he would not have bothered to take the time and energy, nor have the *patience* to involve himself in games from the past, or from the present. Of *course* Bobby *wanted* to win – *desperately* – and he always wanted to improve on his game, as most of us do –but his *scholarship* of the game, his constant study of it, was because of his *love* for chess. He analyzed his past losses *and* his past wins. He was known to lock himself away in a hotel room for an entire weekend just so that he could understand and master a particular Rook and Pawn ending.

Bobby Fischer considered himself an artist, and he became interested in all aspects of chess. *Show Bobby* an obscure or arcane move in a particular variation, and he was in his glory, analyzing it. Once, on a train heading up to the New York State Open – I tournament that he ultimately won -- I showed him a sacrifice in the

rarely-played Swiss Gambit, and he looked at it for a few minutes, and then said, “It’s really a stupid move, but it’s interesting.” He then went on to consider every possibility resulting from this “stupid” move, from both the black and white side: he just enjoyed playing and analyzing chess. Excuse the redundancy, but he was thoroughly in love with the game.

But here is the interesting question about what we can learn from Bobby Fischer: could he have even been greater, stronger, more dynamic, if he had had a chess *teacher*? Bobby *learned the fundamentals* of chess from Carmine Nigro, a debt that he freely acknowledged. He has said, however, that he learned nothing from Jack Collins, a point of view I dispute, but that Collins himself sort of agreed with, saying that he never really *taught* Bobby (although I witnessed a form of teaching when

they were analyzing): Collins wrote in his book *My Seven Chess Prodigies*:

“Geniuses like Beethoven, Leonardo daVinci, Shakespeare and *Fischer* come out of the head of Zeus, seem to be generally programmed, know before instructed.” Collins’s interpretation notwithstanding, Bobby’s programming was not innate: he *taught* himself, memorized the games and lines, and variations, as if his brain *was* a computer. He did this not only with chess, but with other games as well, You might be familiar with the famous “15” puzzle (show) invented by Sam Lloyd, one of the great chess problemists of his day. Bobby claimed to be the World’s Champion of the so-called “15 Puzzle” (although to my knowledge no tournament was ever held to prove that claim). It was a forerunner of Rubik’s cube. He would hand me, and others, the game and instruct us to mix up the numbers at random. He would then ask how we would like the

numbers to be re-arranged: odd numbers vertically, even numbers horizontally, numbers ascending or descending, or any other such pattern or combination. We would then hand him back the game, with the numbers and positions selected by random, and in a matter of *seconds* he could figure out how to solve the puzzle and then hand it back to you perfectly completed. It wasn't until *years* later that I *discovered* that Bobby had created pages and pages of lists of *routes* to the desired destinations; in effect he had created his own *Modern Chess Openings* of the "15" puzzle. He *wasn't* figuring it all *out* at the moment; he had the solutions, or at least the strategies to the solutions, or their patterns memorized. He was, in effect, a pattern recognition machine.

I would like to speculate on something else concerning Bobby's chess career, and this a bit

controversial because it concerns learning. I say “speculate” because I cannot prove what I am going to say. We all know that late in his life, Bobby said he was giving up the *old* chess, and that he invented a new variation of the game called Fischer Random, where the pawns remain on the second rank, but the *pieces* are shuffled at the commencement of every game, thereby canceling out all of the opening book knowledge gained throughout the ages. It is *my contention* that Bobby had worked out charts that would follow even this new, highly complicated variation of chess, something in the long run that might take 100 or more volumes of a *Modern Chess Openings*, for example, to understand and memorize. It’s not so far-fetched, considering Bobby’s approach to the old chess, and to the “15” puzzle. If he could do something like that, with Fischer Random, and then played a match against say a Kramnik or an Anand, he would or *could* emerge from

the opening, invariably with a superior position, and then rely on his proven prowess in the mid-game and ending. Perhaps this is what he was driving at all along during the latter years of his life.

It is absolutely true that prior to the 1972 match, he had memorized all 355 of Spassky's games that were published in the *Weltgeschichte des Schachs* series, some 14,000 moves. Even if these games were not committed to memory, just playing them over would have given Bobby a gestalt, a conduit into the mind and style of Spassky. Jack Collins would have his students – *I'm not saying that he did this with Fischer* – play over 100 games from each of the World's Champions, starting with Steinitz. But not just play over them, but question them, understand them, challenge them. And as you may know, many of Collins's students went on to become this country's finest players.

Bobby lived within walking distance of the Brooklyn Public Library, and they had a fairly large chess collection. Over the years he claimed to have read every chess book that they had – about 1,000 books – and he said he gleaned from them whatever nuggets of wisdom they contained, separating the wheat from the chaff

As an *educator*, I believe that it is not necessarily essential to have a teacher to progress in chess, but, of course, it helps. Bobby's teacher was essentially himself. But a *great* chess teacher will lead the student to think for him or herself and to enable the student to learn and to progress, eventually, *without* the teacher, the hallmark of true education. It's a wonderful experience when a student corrects the instructor - or just shares an insight that is completely original. You know you have succeeded at least with that student, and

at least with that lesson. Teaching, as Emerson once said, is a great learning experience...or can be.

Bobby Fischer was an anomaly, and I do *not* necessarily offer him as model of how to progress in chess, pedagogically speaking. There are others who have gone far in chess by studying alone but few of the greats in modern times have done it: Karpov *and* Kasparov both had Botvinnik at various times; Magnus Carlsen *had* Kasparov, now Nakumara has Kasparov. Alex Lenderman, a newly crowned Grandmaster told me that *his* teacher, GM Georgi Kachesvilli was not only teaching him *chess*, but was teaching him about life, as well. Bobby Fischer please note. There are many other examples, and not just Grandmasters teaching Grandmasters, but rank and file teachers in public and private schools - many of you -- who inspire and guide their chess students to reach a level of expertise, if not

just pure enjoyment of the game. Of course, although Bobby for the better part of his career had little help from a “teacher,” he was learning from others all the time. Grandmaster William Lombardy once wrote:

“It’s true that he works alone, but he is learning from the games of others all the time. To say that Bobby Fischer developed his talent all by himself is like saying that Beethoven or Mozart developed without the music that came before them. If other chess players had never *existed* for Bobby Fischer to learn from, then there would *be* no Bobby Fischer.”

When Bobby was training and was analyzing with one of his peers, he often asked the other player to sit away from the board...because he didn’t want to enter a tangent of thought that he felt was possibly unproductive. Again, Bobby Fischer tutored himself.

To emphasize once again, his passion, in 1958, when he became the youngest Grandmaster in history, we had a party for him at the Marshall Chess Club, and Dr. Edward Lasker, who was then president of the Club, gave this quite formal speech of congratulations honoring and extolling Bobby's great achievement, and awarding him, in behalf of the Club, a beautiful gold watch and all the while as Dr. Lasker was speaking, what was Bobby doing on the sidelines? Playing chess with his friends!

To Bobby a game of chess was a dialogue, a process that assumes two different points of view, and he was open to listen to both: bad moves *and* good ones: open positions and cramped positions; superior attacks and impenetrable defenses: all the while asking himself: what were the *nuances*? The *essence* of the

strategy. Dr. Max Euwe once wrote that Fischer didn't think of moves per se, but of systems.

When he was very young and just learning the game, Bobby instinctively took both sides of the board when he was playing his mother, for example. He would beat her playing white, and then turn the board around, go back a few moves, and he would assume the black side. Even at *six years of age*, as much as he wanted to win, he was also interested in the dynamics and architecture of the game. Prof. Bartlett, Amy Bogan and Prof. Krawczyk taught us something this morning about face and object

If we can just *instill* in our chess students a *love* for the game, rather than necessarily the pursuit of personal denouements that they may achieve, and teach them to hitch their wagons to the beauty of chess, rather

than to the star quality of becoming Grandmasters – not that that should be discouraged – I believe chess educators would be providing a great service. Not all students have the same endowments, or the astronomical IQ that Bobby had, or that fabulous memory, or just those hours and hours of preparation that Bobby engaged in, but just about *all* can appreciate a beautiful endgame study of a Petroff or a Rinck, or a deep combination of an Alekhine or of a Fischer himself. Yes, Bobby Fischer wanted to win above all else, but remember he did once say, “All I want to do *ever* is *play* chess.” He didn’t say *win* at chess. Only a person who could love the game could say something like that.

Please don’t misinterpret what I am saying: of course chess teachers should attempt to show students the path to victory. But chess is such a wonderfully lyrical pursuit, as Bobby Fischer has shown us in his

games, his analysis, and his writings, that we should incorporate in every lesson a demonstration and explanation of *why* a particular move, or a combination or series of move – if is not self-evident -- can be considered as melodic as a piece of music by a Satie or Debussy, or a painting by Renoir or Monet.

Teach the student to embrace the aesthetics of the game, not just to *lust* over winning, and you will lead them to a great enjoyment and possibly a fulfilling life.