



GM Robert Hess (lower right) blitzes a group of Jets fans, who were perhaps expecting a different kind of blitz.

Grandmasters Blitz Meadowlands

The venerable Marshall Chess Club begins an exciting program that ties the NFL to the USCF

By Larry Price

SOMETHING UNUSUAL OCCURRED THIS SEASON at the first two home games of the New York Jets football team. In addition to the pre-game player warm-ups and traditional tailgating, a new activity was added: grandmaster chess. Visitors to the plaza surrounding the new Meadowlands stadium were able to play in a simultaneous (simul) contest conducted during the first week by 18-year-old Grandmaster Robert Hess and Grandmaster Maurice Ashley on the second. Playing on green and buff vinyl boards that matched the Jets team colors, the football fans/chess players seemed surprised and pleased at the chance to play a game before heading to their seats.

Bringing chess to the National Football League was the brainchild of Dan Biederman, the wizard behind the transformation of Bryant Park in New York City. About a year ago, he asked the Marshall Chess Club to take over the games concession in the park. Located in a beautiful space dominated by a huge lawn that is the site for myriad concerts, films and other summer activities, it seemed like a natural extension of the club's presence in New York. It soon became a popular meeting place for players of all strengths, including a number of grandmasters (GMs). Some months ago, Biederman's staff called again and asked if any GMs liked football. Of course the answer was yes, but the reason for the question was a surprise. Chess and football? Definitely a new relationship. Biederman explained: "The chess area in Bryant Park has been a big hit—people enjoy watching great players, learning and playing. Chess and football have a lot in common, so we knew this feature would appeal to fans."

Actually, the affinity between chess and football is a natural one. Both share a complexity of tactics and strategy and the battle imagery is there for anyone watching good chess or good football. While the sound of colliding linebackers is audible on the field, it rings just as loudly when thundering rooks invade the seventh. Getting a pawn to the sixth rank mirrors entering the red zone—score a touchdown, create a new queen. The similarities are many and it is clear that people have passion for both sports.

One such person is Grandmaster Robert Hess, who played football for Stuyvesant High School in New York and is a huge Jets fan. The 18-year-old prodigy achieved the coveted title at age 17, the youngest grandmaster in the United States at the time. He had just returned from Greece, where he placed second in the Negroponte International. Starting several hours before kick-off, Hess did quite a bit better than the Jets, who lost to the Ravens by a score of 10-9. He beat all comers in what might be called a "rolling simul." As games finished, new players took a seat at the board to challenge the amiable grandmaster. One player kept asking for another game, so Robert beat him three times while playing the rest of the field.

He described the experience: "... different players came to play multiple games, with many spectators whipping out their cell phones and cameras to capture the action."

With free tickets to a Jets Monday night opening game, his only complaint was that "... the best player I faced was a Ravens fan."

The second home game featured the Jets against the New England Patriots and Grandmaster Maurice Ashley, fresh from doing commentary with Garry Kasparov on Carlsen versus the World. Also a tremendous sports fan, he turned the simul into a physical event, bouncing from board to board and trash-talking as he went. He was a big hit and played almost 50 challengers with a perfect record. He made it a father-son simul by bringing his 8-year-old son, Jayden, who assisted on one board. Players ranged in age from 7 to over 70, and included members of the U.S. Coast Guard and several women. It was a novel experience, but Ashley relished the action and summed it up for all involved: "I've never played a simul with music blasting and thousands of raucous fans streaming past me. I had about as much fun as if I had actually scored a touchdown!"

As chess spreads from Bryant Park to the Meadowlands and beyond, what's next? Perhaps a simul that will fill Madison Square Garden.

Larry Price, vice-president of the Marshall Chess Club, is an avid football fan.