

The Boston Globe

Weekly chess column

CHESS NOTES

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When Harold Dondis became intrigued by the game of chess after a professional career had been established, he often visited chess areas while traveling on other matters. He recalls going from San Francisco to Sonoma, Calif., where George Koltanowski held an outdoor chess festival. Koltanowski was the chess editor of the San Francisco Chronicle and wrote a daily column. While in New York, he watched the match between the triumphant USSR and the United States and marveled at the technique of David Bronstein, Larry Evans, and others.

Unaware of the chess clubs in New York, he often took the subway to Washington Square. There was a chess house in the park nearby, and with admiration he watched while speed players contested again and again with what seemed to be the Ruy Lopez.

But on the Boston Common there was no such chess house. The great activity was at the Boylston Club at the corner of Tremont and Boylston. It was there that Harry Nelson Pillsbury, winner of the 1986 Hastings tournament, often played. Dondis many times walked through the Boston Common and the Public Garden. There was no chess there. Later the rising rents forced Boylston to move to the YWCA, still permitting a walk through the Common. But Boylston again was forced to move and chess at the Huntington Avenue YMCA also disappeared. Boylston then moved to Somerville. Now chess has blossomed in Cambridge, at a cafe in Harvard Square, where Murray Turnbull started the tradition of taking on all comers, and chess has thrived there at chess tables that accommodate players of all ratings.

Now, however, comes an announcement from “Friends of the Public Garden” that a new plaza has been renovated around the Brewer Fountain. The “Friends” is a private-public spirited group that works with the Boston Parks Department and the mayor’s office to improve the Boston Common. The renovated plaza area now includes daily live piano music, a food vendor, a “reading room” area for books and newspapers, 30 cafe tables and chess sets. Chess is even now being played there. So, chess will in fact return to Boston — no doubt in a more muted way than the wild activity at Harvard Square, where all kinds of chess warfare is waged.

Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, which has promoted the Larry Christiansen simultaneous exhibitions at South Station, was hired by the “Friends” in August 2009 to generate new sources of revenue for the Common, and clearly this Plaza is one of the results of the Biederman activity. Chess flourishes in the suburbs, at Harvard Square, in Somerville at Boylston, and in Natick with the Metrowest CC, one of the most successful chess clubs in the country. Now it has returned to Boston.