



THE MAN WHO CHANGED
21ST CENTURY AMERICAN CHESS

Rex Sinquefield

By Pete Tamburro

For over a decade, Rex Sinquefield and his wife Dr. Jeanne have been the driving force behind the contemporary chess boom in the United States. It all started with setting up a unique chess environment in a cozy neighbourhood in Saint Louis, MO. Nowadays, it is impossible to name a significant chess event in Saint Louis and the U.S. without a reference to the Sinquefields.

It's a pleasure to speak with you about the Hall of Fame since your role in its continued existence is so crucial. What motivated you back then after the Miami site had closed in 2009 to fund the move to St. Louis?

I thought the institution itself was so important to maintain. I was honestly quite surprised and happy to get the phone call. I said we would be happy to take the institution and do right by it. I think they really have done much more than the Hall of Fame did before.

Who initiated the conversation?

They did. I forget who. The US Chess Trust – maybe Harry Winston because I knew him in Chicago 40 or 50 years ago. We were very happy to take the museum.

What was your vision back then, and how does it compare with your vision for its future today?

Back then my first vision was to see what it was we had and then we would think about adding on. Opportunities to do that evolved over time – by acquiring objects, receiving donations and memorabilia objects, creating events – music venue and a lot of art as well. It became a cultural event place.



Photos Courtesy:
World Chess
Hall of Fame

IM John Donaldson,
Emily Allred and
Rex Sinquefield



You've put together a professional staff. What qualities did you look for in the people you hired and are you still active in determining who's on the staff?

Actually, I was never very active. Joy [Bray -*Ed.*] did it all. When I opened the [St. Louis -*Ed.*] chess club she just appeared out of the sky as a gift from God. She hired museum curators to run the museum and a music coordinator for the music. You can print that!

You have other interests and causes too, like your educational foundations and your music initiatives as well as the St. Vincent's home for children, where you were brought up. How do you apportion your time?

I do what I'm told. Education stuff takes place with our education staff. We necessarily get involved in politics and the shaping of public policy and changing city and state fiscal policy to benefit our goals. I'm on the board at St. Vincent, but don't spend much time with that. I'm a trustee at St. Louis University. It is very important and I do spend time at that.

You also created the St. Louis Chess Club across the street. What was your idea behind that?

Well, it was just to start a little chess club to take it into the inner-city schools, and other people picked up the ball and

ran with it. Where we are was one of the best neighborhoods in the U.S., yet there is easy access to the inner city. That area was home to the Nobel Prize winning poet T.S. Eliot. Tennessee Williams was raised in this area. He wrote *The Glass Menagerie*, an autobiographical story. The building he lived in is now known as The Tennessee. [4633 Westminster Place]. We have quite an easy access to the cities so we can be helping kids most in need. These kids have no choice where they go to school. Their parents have no financial options or any options for a good education. They may have the worst education, so we give something to them.

Because of your financial sponsorship of tournaments, you have put chess on a completely new level and attracted a good many talented players to the St. Louis area. Other than having them play here, what else do you ask them to do, if anything, to promote chess?

We don't ask very much because they're constantly on the international circuit. They are not only the best in the United States, but the world as well. They are always travelling in Europe and soon the Middle East. We host high level tournaments here that are the best in U.S. by far. Three or four or five have moved to St. Louis. Having the world's top players living here is very nice.

As a follow-up, I recall I.A. Horowitz travelling around the country giving simuls and talks as did Frank Marshall before that. Would that be something you would also want to encourage these players to do?

We've done that here. We put on simuls. Our grandmasters have put on a good number of simuls. We do them in the schools. My chess coach, Jennifer Shahade, does stuff in the schools here, especially with the girls and in Philadelphia where she lives.

Years ago, young Bobby Fischer gave a notorious interview to Ralph Ginzburg, as you probably remember. Fischer commented, as Horowitz and Rothenberg put it, that prospective patrons were repelled by the manners of the chess players and their neglect of formal attire. Considering the events of the last U.S. championship do you think he was onto something?

I don't think so. In fact, what's ironic about that remark is that when you look at old photos when he got older, he not



only appears always in suit and tie, but the other players had jackets and ties – showing respect for the game. Our top tournament players today, though not in coats and ties, are suitably attired and conservatively attired. These players have an unbelievable amount of individual talent and commit to hard work to maintain their station in life.

Speaking of Fischer, you have a wonderful exhibit on him extending through April – celebrating the 50th anniversary of the match with Spassky. What made you decide to go ahead with the exhibit in spite of Fischer’s unfortunate remarks in the years after the match and his behavior at the second match?

We basically just overlooked it. We don’t know what happened to him after the first match. He was not the Bobby Fischer we grew up to know and love. What happened to him with his unpredictable and bizarre behavior, we will never be sure. What he did for chess was immense. Kasparov, in an op-ed obituary wrote that in addition to everything else he did in chess the gap between him and the rest of the chess players we’d never seen before and may never see again. His *My 60 Memorable Games* is lauded by grandmasters as a masterpiece.

What have you noticed the most about the reception to the exhibit?

It’s spectacular. Shannon and Emily have impressed everyone with everything they’ve gathered. It’s just the details of the artifacts – an era without databases and without computers. Reminds you of all that was done by hand without computers, and yet he mastered all of it.

We have Fischer’s Boris Spassky Red Book. He used to say give me a date and I’ll give you all the moves. I asked Caruana what he thought of Fischer, and Caruana said he was unbelievably precise. Caruana took 100 Fischer victories and asked the computer to find a significant improvement and it found none.

Eight weeks ago – out of the blue – there was a call from France from Boris Spassky Jr. “My father has a lot of memorabilia.” We sent three people to France. We’re going to bring him here. He won’t move to St. Louis, but we’ll make the offer anyway.

Did you personally use your influence to acquire some of the artifacts? Which ones?

We purchased a set from an auction in NY and bought his storage locker from Pasadena



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with his personal library of books and magazines. It became available when he died.

Let me ask you a question. The Frank Marshall trophy – a nice big silver cup whose possession would rotate to the new winner. The last U.S. champ I saw a photo of holding the cup was Bobby Fischer. I asked Frank Brady what he thought happened to it. A possible theory he suggested was that it might be in a storage container. Did you find it?

I didn’t even look for it. I didn’t know about this story. I’m going to talk to our staff to find that trophy. In the original collection we have the Morphy cup with the goblets, but no silver platter.

In American Chess Magazine #25, we did an interview on the relationship of music and chess with FIDE master and opera singer Nathan Resika. You have intertwined both music and art into the Hall of Fame exhibits and activities. What are your thoughts on the relationship between chess, art and music?

There is a natural human affinity to all three. All three appeal to the artistic side of human beings. It seems natural that they be side by side.



What do you see as the impact of the Hall and the Chess Center on St. Louis and, indeed, the neighborhood?

Everybody thinks they've died and gone to heaven. A lot of chess players are always walking around. The locals come around. Trash talking is mandatory. There is a wonderful milieu reminiscent of Europe in early 1900s.

I've been intrigued by the variety and quality of the exhibitions. How do you and your staff come up with these ideas?

I'd love to tell you it's my brilliance, but our staff show enormous imagination and create tasteful exhibits. Tens of thousands visit every exhibit.

You also make a point of combining music, art and chess for the public. Your exhibition on Kubrik's Space Odyssey chess game had an interesting quote from the artist Drummond: "If you are a chess fan, you can follow along as the game is being played in the exhibition, but if you just enjoy art then you can enjoy the art." That's a great concept. How often can you mix chess with art and music? You gave a grant to MUNY for *Chess: The Musical* from the 1980s. What came of that?

Next year MUNY (The St. Louis Municipal Opera Theatre), using a grant from us, will perform *Chess: The Musical*. It was a huge success in England but flopped in NY. They [MUNY] do an amazing job with the largest open area music site.



▲ World Chess Hall of Fame youtube channel

Are there video tours of all the exhibitions in an archive that are available after the exhibition is closed?

You can find them on our website and on our youtube channel (scan the QR code) with over five million downloads. Visiting GMs lecturing can be found as well. The website is another place to look:

<https://worldchesshof.org/exhibitions>

By creating these exhibits that cover the history of chess in its artistic and cultural form, do you see that as a way to give chess a more polished image?

The Fischer Exhibit is very stylish and classical. Locals come and are blown away by the artifacts and stuff they never knew existed. John Donaldson (*Bobby Fischer and his World*) came in and gave a talk with information I never knew. I was surprised to learn that Fischer's mother, Regina, graduated Hoban H.S. in St. Louis at sixteen, went to the Washington University of St. Louis for a while and then went to Moscow.

Kasparov mentioned to me in an interview when running for FIDE president that chess should stay away from Las Vegas for image reasons. Do you agree with that? What is the message that chess should send out?

I don't know. If there were a way to bet on chess it wouldn't diminish interest. Chess fans don't have the money people that like to bet have.

One of the key reasons Carol Meyer was chosen as Executive Director was for her skill in fund raising. You have raised several million dollars a year for several years. Do you see that continuing support spreading to other major donors and how does chess become successful at that?

It is a gradual process. I do see it spreading as we are making the calls and we've got some influential people that serve on boards that can help us find contributors.

Where does Rex Sinquefeld go from here?

I'll probably go home only two blocks away.

Not letting you off that easy...

More of the same. Everything we've tried has worked and it's a testimony to the staff that do the work. There is a very low turnover, and they are very talented.

