

Honoring two of the game's true originals

Chess is a game of just a handful of pieces — king, queen, bishop, knight, rook and pawn — but an infinite number of characters.

We too often focus on the game's very best players, and forget it is the friends and out-sized personalities you encounter

along the way who make chess the most enjoyable means

fever for frittering a lifetime. Chess lost two of its most memorable practitioners in recent days: the utterly original British author, theorist and organizer IM Michael Basman and the indefatigable FM John Curdo, the face of New England chess for decades with a likely never-to-be-broken record of 1,009 tournament wins of all kinds over eight decades of competition, including 17 Massachusetts state championship titles, four U.S. Senior Open victories or co-victories, and innumerable Saturday quads and weekend Swisses wherever a tournament was being organized somewhere in the northeastern corner of the country.

Basman, who died last month at the age of 76, was a fine player, tying for first in the 1973 British national championship (losing in a playoff to IM William Hartston) and playing for the British Olympiad team. But he likely to be best remembered for his books and his maverick devotion to unusual opening systems. He gave the world the "Killer Grob" (1. g4!), the "Borg Defense" (1 ... g5, i.e. the Grob Reversed), and the Creepy Crawly, (1. a3 followed by 2. h3), lines that would make Tarrasch roll over in his grave but which Basman doggedly defended as sound.

Basman employed his pet St. George Defense (1 ... b6) in perhaps his most famous win, a victory over the notoriously hard-to-beat Swedish GM Ulf Andersson at the famed yearend Hastings Tournament in 1974. The St. George here quickly evolves into a more conventional Queen's Indian, but Black's utterly original waiting strategy here is classic Basman chess.

Black's 9. Bf4 a6?! 10. Rcl



Curdo-Byrne after 19...Bf8

allows White to secure a clear edge out of the opening, as the shaky, underdeveloped Black's queenside will come under heavy pressure. The first sign that we have left the realm of the conventional comes on 13. Rfd1 Kh7?! 14. h3 Kg8?! 15. Kh2 Kh7?! 16. g4 Kg8 — well, you get the idea. Black apparently concludes he can only disimprove his position with active play, and embarks on a weird rope-a-dope plan of trivial waiting in hopes his world-class opponent will punch himself into exhaustion trying to break down the defense.

When Basman's king gets tired of his two-step, it's the Black bishop's turn to tick-tock between b7 and a8, again twiddling thumbs while White prepares for the final assault. It should be said that Andersson enjoys a clear advantage amid all this temporizing, but it takes just one suboptimal move for Black's strategy to pay off.

Thus: 29. h4 Nfd7 30. Nxd7? (eliminating the tension too soon; White is still better in lines like 30. Qc3 Nxe5 31. dxe5 c5 32. b4 c4 33. g5) Nxd7 31. Re2 Re8 32. Kh3 Bxf4, and Black's first move of the game past the middle of the board also shows the first glimmer of a counterattacking idea. By 37 Qd3 h5!, White is not yet losing, but his only active play to targeting the hard-to-get Black c-pawn, while Basman's pieces are suddenly coming to life.

Andersson stumbles to the time control as his opponent takes over the play, with no more temporizing moves needed: 38. gxf5? (winning the pawn is not worth the damage this does to White's pawn structure and kingside defense; 38. Nxd7 hxg4+ 39. Bxg4 Bxd7 40. Kg3 a5 41. Qd2 is still equal) 39. Kg3 (and here, White can hold the line with 39. Nxd7 Rxd7 40. Re1 Re7 41. Re5)

Nxc5 40. Rxc5 Bxf5, and Black is already markedly better.

There's one little hiccup along the way, but an invigorated Black manages to put away a no-doubt dispirited and disoriented White: 44. Qc3 c5? (Qf5 45. Rh1 g6 was better) 45. Qxc5?? (just losing; it seems White can still hold on 45. dxc5 d4 46. Qd2 Re3 47. Rel!) Qf5! — the queen will invade via the kingside and Black's pieces collaborate harmoniously in the finale.

Thus: 46. Qxd5 (Rh1 Re3 47. Kf2 Rxf3+! 48. Kxf3 Qe4+ picks off the rook) Qh3+ 47. Kf2 Qh2+ 48. Bg2 Qxf4+ 49. Bf3 Bg4! (the cleanest kill; 49 ... Qxc1 50. Qxd7 Re6 is also good enough) 50. Rc3 Qh2+ 51. Bg2 Qxh4+ 52. Kgl Rel+ 53. Bfl Bh3, and White resigned facing hopeless lines like 54. Rxf3 Qxf3 55. Qa8+ Kh7 56. Qg2 Qxh5 57. Qf2 Rd1 58. b3 Qg4+ 59. Kh2 Rxd4 60. Be2 Qh4+ 61. Qxh4+ Rxh4+ 62. Kg2 Rd4 with a won ending.

Like Basman, Curdo, who died Sept. 30 at the age of 90, was a tough pairing for even the strongest grandmasters, and collected a number of notable scalps over his long career. Perhaps his most famous victim came at the 95th U.S. Open in Chicago in 1994, against long-time New York Times columnist and one-time world championship candidate Robert Byrne. Curdo digs himself a deep material hole early in this Moscow Sicilian, but keeps attacking and setting problems for his opponent until finally the grandmaster missteps.

Both sides violate some opening fundamentals in the early play, and Curdo as White misplays a chance for a real edge on 10. d5 e6?! 11. Ng5! (hitting e6 and clearing a path for the queen into the attack) dxe5, when 12. Qh5! looks crude but effective in lines such as 12 ... 0-0-0 (g6?! 13. Qf3 f5 14. dxe6 Bxe6 15. Bxe5 Rg8 16. 0-0-0, and it's hard to see Black surviving the coming attack. Instead, Byrne weathers the storm after 12. Qf3?! f6 13. dxe6 Bc6 14. Qf5 Be7, when 15. Nf7 0-0 16. Qg4 g6 17. Nh6+ leaves the players with roughly equal prospects.

Unwilling to give up his attack, Curdo rolls the dice with an unsound piece sacrifice on 15. 0-0-0?! g6 16. Qh3 fxf5 17. Bxe5

0-0 18. Qh6, only to be met by 18 ... Rf6!, an exchange sac that blunts the White mate threat and should give the defender a decisive edge. But Curdo's aggressiveness is rewarded when his higher-rated opponent fails to see there's still some poison in the position.

The end comes suddenly on 19. h4 Bf8?? (see diagram; 19 ... g4! was both mandatory and winning; e.g. 20. h5 Bf8 21. Qg5 Rxe6 22. hxg6 Rxe6 23. Qh4 Bh6+ 24. Kbl Bxg2 25. Rhel Bf3, with a big material edge and all the defensive bases covered) 20. Qxh7+!! (and not 20. Qxg5?? Rf5 21. Qe3 Qxa2 22. b3 Rxe5! 23. Qxe5 Bg7 24. Qe3 Qb2+ 25. Kd2 Rd8+ 26. Ke2 Qxc2+ and mate is not far off) Kxh7 21. hxg5+ Kg8 (Kg7 22. Bxf6+ Kg8 23. Rh8 mate) 22. gxf6, and Byrne resigned facing a ferocious mating array. White wins easily after 22 ... Bh6+ (Bd6 23. f7+ Kf8 24. Bxd6+ Kg7 25. Be5+ Kf8 26. Bf6 Qe2 27. Rh8 mate) 23. Rxf6 Bxg2 24. f7+ Kf8 25. Rh8+ Ke7 26. Rxa8, and White soon to be queened pawn will help deliver checkmates in a couple of moves.

Andersson-Basman, Hastings Tournament, Hastings, England, December 1974

1. Nf3 b6 2. g3 Bb7 3. Bg2 e6 4. 0-0 d5 5. c4 Nf6 6. d4 Be7 7. Nc3 0-0 8. Ne5 h6 9. Bf4 a6 10. Rcl Ra7 11. gxf5 exf5 12. Qb3 Ba8 13. Rfd1 Kh7 14. h3 Kg8 15. Kh2 Kh7 16. g4 Kg8 17. Bg3 Bb7 18. e3 Ba8 19. a3 Bb7 20. f4 Ba8 21. Rd2 Qd6 22. f5 Qd8 23. Bf4 Bb7 24. Rgl c6 25. Bf3 Nh7 26. Rcl Bd6 27. Na4 Bc7 28. Kg3 Nf6 29. h4 Nfd7 30. Nxd7 Nxd7 31. Re2 Re8 32. Kh3 Bxf4 33. exf4 Rxe2 34. Bxe2 Qe7 35. Bf3 b5 36. Nc5 Bc8 37. Qd3 h5 38. gxf5 Qf6 39. Kg3 Nxc5 40. Rxc5 Bxf5 41. Qc3 Bd7 42. Qd3 Ra8 43. Rcl Re8 44. Qc3 c5 45. Qxc5 Qf5 46. Qxd5 Qh3+ 47. Kf2 Qh2+ 48. Bg2 Qxf4+ 49. Bf3 Bg4 50. Rc3 Qh2+ 51. Bg2 Qxh4+ 52. Kgl Re1+ 53. Bfl Bh3 White resigns

Curdo-Byrne, 95th U.S. Open, Chicago, August 1994

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. Bb5+ Nd7 4. d4 Ngf6 5. e5 Qa5+ 6. Nc3 Ne4 7. Bd2 Nxc3 8. Bxd7+ Bxd7 9. Bxc3 Qa6 10. d5 e6 11. Ng5 dxe5 12. Qf3 f6 13. dxe6 Bc6 14. Qf5 Be7 15. 0-0-0 g6 16. Qh3 fxg5 17. Bxe5 0-0 18. Qh6 Rf6 19. h4 Bf8 20. Qxh7+ Kxh7 21. hxg5+ Kg8 22. gxf6 Black resigns

• David R. Sands can be reached at 202/636-3178 or at dsands@washingtontimes.com.