

## WOMEN VS MEN

### The Battle of the Sexes as played out in Movie Chess Scenes

By Bob Basalla

If you work on something long enough you notice things. While gathering the material and subsequently writing my tome *Chess in the Movies* (2005) I made an interesting observation: in movies of the 1970s where a gal was playing chess with a guy the female almost always won! I chalked this up as an artifact of the era's women's liberation movement, "I am woman, hear me roar," as singer Helen Reddy put it on her iconic record. Film makers were responding to the times and giving the audience what they wanted, or at least what many of them expected. Several times in the book write ups for these movies I noted this fact, or what I took to be fact.

But is it really true? Did women in film win at chess with men more often in the 1970s or is this just one more misremembrance concocted in my info overburdened brain? We all are capable of recalling in good faith things that, if reliable evidence becomes available, prove to be not so. In my own case, for decades I thought I knew the members of the chess team (the Parma Granites) I captained to a championship in the Cleveland Chess Association's Club League, Division 1, in the 1982 season. But when I had occasion to look up other information contained in the *Cleveland Chess Bulletin* from that time, and for the fun of it flipping to the pages chronicling our team's exploits to bask once more in the big upset we pulled off that year, I discovered to my surprise that the roster of players I thought I had in that magical season was really the list of team members I captained *the following season*! While there was some overlap in the rolls it was clear that somehow in the intervening years I had conflated the (third place) 1983 team for my championship 1982 team. My certainty was such that had I needed to swear under oath that my memory was correct I would have instantly done so. Human memory, mine and yours, can be fallible, subject to degradation and erroneous reconstruction.

So, is my memory that women consistently beat men at chess in 1970s movies a real one or merely another mistaken conflation? Fortunately, because of my long-time hobby of chronicling cinematic chess moments, I actually have a way of deciding the issue. I can comb through my voluminous files, as of this writing nearing 6000 entries (the book had 2000), and see what is actually there.

Unfortunately, faulty memory is not the only corrupter of fact. As the owner of a standard issue human brain, I am subject to all the problems inherent in "meat computer" technology. I can be biased in a number of ways. This is true even if I am making a point of trying to be scrupulously honest in my investigation. I could be selectively biased, cherry picking the data in the movies I choose to include or exclude; or I could exhibit confirmation bias, cherry picking for results by preferentially accepting evidence that conforms to my thesis (that women in '70s movies beat the men much more than the other way around) and dis-

counting evidence that doesn't. Maybe even cultural bias or other biases could come into play to skew the objectivity of the results. The way to try to avoid all this: set up criteria for movie inclusion and exclusion *beforehand* and stick with it; and have as much openness in the process as possible so that others, if they wish, can duplicate and confirm (or disconfirm I guess) my work. In other words, apply *scientific method principles* as best I can without peer review or boasting about any PhD in statistics or other relevant fields. It is the best way we know, so far, to keep from fooling ourselves, let alone others. So here goes...

We start with some ground rules. For the purposes of this discussion, I am taking the definitions of "women" and "men," "female" and "male," in their traditional sense. To employ the modern formulations of multiple genders and gender fluidity to this issue and view the data through such prisms would quickly turn the topic of this investigation into ideological mush. Those who insist I must do so are free to stop reading now.

To attempt to test my thesis, I plan on dividing the data (individual movies and chess scenes) into their various decades. For ease of description, I am choosing to use traditionally identifiable decade designates such as the 1940s being Jan. 1, 1940-Dec.31, 1949, and the 1950s as Jan. 1, 1950-Dec.31, 1959, and so on. I am perfectly aware that these do not exactly conform to the fifth decade of the 20th Century (Jan. 1, 1941-Dec. 31, 1950) and sixth decade of the 20th Century (Jan 1, 1951-Dec. 31, 1960), but the former are what the average person generally thinks of when viewing decades. The one-year frame shift between these two viewpoints on calendrics is unlikely to alter the results in any case.

As for the data itself, of the nearly 6000 entries in my *Chess in the Movies* database at the time of writing, there were 339 accounted instances of women chessing with men in fictional or largely fictionalized films. (I am leaving out of consideration documentaries on the Polgar sisters and the like as our interest lies in how film makers treated the woman/man interactions on the 64 when they had some choice in the matter.) Depending on one's point of view, 339 could be seen as a relatively small or a whopping big number. Whatever, it is the data we have; I know of no larger, more comprehensive listing anywhere. By rules I set long ago my list contains not only theatrical release movies and short subjects but also TV movies and miniseries (now referred to as limited series), while leaving out most TV programs (*Seinfeld*, *Bewitched*, *Law and Order* and such) with only a few PBS shows and some Sherlock Holmes related items grudgingly allowed in.

Our data runs the gamut from the silent era to the time of writing. The earliest chronicled example is the silent film *Malombra* (1917) where the man predictably prevails. The only two instances before 1940 where the woman won were *Mistress of Atlantis*

(1932) in which beautiful but evil Queen Antinea (Brigitte Helm) toys with her male captives by giving them a chance at freedom by defeating her at chess, an impossible task; and *Pennies from Heaven* (1936) showing an orphaned girl (Edith Fellows) downing her troubadour drifter friend (Bing Crosby). At the other end of the time scale the latest salient entries are *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) and two holiday offerings, *The Christmas Doctor* (2020) (she loses) and *Time for Us to Come Home for Christmas* (2020) (she wins). So, we have over a century of information about men vs. women in movies to sift through.

Our chief interest, though, is clear instances where one side beats or at least is obviously beating the other. Many scenes are either brief, do not show, or in some other way (verbally perhaps) indicate who has the upper hand. In the interests of avoiding any "fudging", I am declining to speculate on which player, man or woman, is superior in a scene unless the evidence would be obvious to any reasonable viewer. This winnows the main items of investigation to a bit over two hundred. Why not an exact number? Well, for you bean counters out there, it must be mentioned that some movies can be on several sides of the issue at once. As an example, in the 2020 NetFlix miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, the female prodigy main character both wins and losses against men during the program. That means the film's "testimony" cuts both ways.

So let us make a few lists by decade and see what shakes out.

The first is an overview of the whole 339. When broken down by decade an interesting anomaly comes into focus. There were 23 examples of women/men chess playing in films from the 1940s, 21 from the 1950s, 24 from the 1960s. But then a huge jump occurs. The 1970s have 47 examples! The 1980s drop back down to 29 before the more recent decades inflate their numbers into 50+ examples each. (I will endeavor to explain this latter fact later.) The key point is that the 1970s stand out, bracketed by much lower counts on either side. Why would this be?

Let us now sharpen our focus to only include instances where women win or are at least clearly winning against the men. (I am leaving out examples from before the 1940s and the stand-alone year of 2020 as having too few items to matter.) The first numbers are instances where she wins, the second in parentheses the ones she is winning, with the total at the end:

1940s---6 + (4) = 10  
 1950s ---6 + (2) = 8  
 1960s ---7 + (0) = 7  
 1970s -15 + (6) = 21  
 1980s ---5 + (5) = 10  
 1990s -12 + (7) = 19  
 2000s--13 + (7) = 20  
 2010s -20 + (5) = 25

And now let us repeat the process with the men winning or on the way to winning and their decade totals:

1940s---1 + (2) = 3  
 1950s---3 + (2) = 5  
 1960s---4 + (2) = 6  
 1970s---2 + (1) = 3  
 1980s---4 + (1) = 5  
 1990s---5 + (1) = 6  
 2000s---8 + (4) = 12  
 2010s--11 + (1) = 12

What is truly striking when one compares the women's list to the men's is that *throughout* movie history women are consistently the chess game winners! I had not anticipated this. The only truly narrow victories have the gals edging out their guy counterparts in the 1950s (8 to 5) and the 1960s (7 to 6). All the others are wipeouts. Especially notice the 1970s where the ladies have a 21 to 3 (man's *low* point of examples compared to woman's, until very recently, *high* point) advantage, seven times more!

Here is my analysis and explanation of the results. (Data is objective, but analysis necessarily requires interpretation. These are mine.) I think the comparison validates my intuition that woman/man movie chess in the 1970s had much to do with reflecting, or perhaps, even cheerleading, the women's liberation movement of the day, breaking down the stereotype barriers and all that. But that would hardly explain female dominance in the other decades. What does? I would posit that women often won against men in movie chess for the *surprise value*. When the scene began the audience would "naturally" expect the guy to win and then—boom! —checkmate, he loses! Upsets are inherently more cinematically interesting story lines than yet another victory by the status quo. As far as the more recent decades go the larger number of examples in the 1990s to 2010s is mainly due to the increased volume of movie product coupled with better availability, leading to more comprehensive coverage in my notebooks. A concatenation of a resurgence of women's rights movements, political correctness, and a lingering "surprise effect" for women winning accounts for the huge disparities of filmic chess success between the sexes as we hurtle forward into the 2020s.

Space aliens provided only with evidence from movie chess scenes would be justified in concluding that the "fairer sex" was decidedly dominant in this particular board game activity. So, do these results then also suggest that the (mostly male) film makers actually thought women to be superior at chess? I think not, and I can marshal evidence from our database to support my contention. If it was truly thought that women were the better players, they should almost certainly have been shown more often than men in the activity of *instructing* the other side in the game. But that is demonstrably not the case. There are 19 tabulations in the files of men teaching women chess compared to a measly two instances of women teaching a man. (For the record, these two films are: *Blood and Sand* (1941) where a femme fatale (Rita Hayworth) prepares to show the moves to an unsophisticated young bull fighter (Tyrone Power), and *The Sea Chase* (1955) where a ship's first mate (John Qualen) admits to his captain (John Wayne) that a wartime female passenger (Wayne's beau in the plot, Lana Turner) is teaching him chess, not the other way around.) This fact supports the "women can be intellectu-

move.

*Picture Perfect Mysteries: Newlywed and Dead* (2019), another TV mystery movie series (Hallmark) where a photographer (Alexa PenaVega) attempts to improve on the play of a police detective (Carlos PenaVega) deciding upon his next correspondence game move.

In sum, all three of these parameters (chess instruction, prodigies, and kibitzing) indicate strongly that men overall were being perceived as superior in the Royal Game arena despite the inordinate reverses meted out in movie play. And until such time comes when it will not be seen by film makers, and ostensibly the public, as somehow novel for a woman to beat a man at a brainy board game, look for scenes with such attitudes to continue in future cinematic battles of the sexes. QED (I hope.)

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## 2025 update

*Halfway into our most recent decade we have the opportunity to reassess the findings in the above inquiry. We cannot just add these results as if they were part of the original investigation, though. That could potentially introduce a selective bias to the report, sort of like stopping the recounting of votes at a moment when your preferred candidate edges into the lead. (That has never happened before, has it?) We can, however, compare our new data with the study to see how well the fresh findings comport with the original. In short, it does.*

*First, I report the discovery of another female filmic chess prodigy, the eleventh known. In Dy Here Mat (1986), a film of Albanian pedigree, a girl shows promise at a local chess club and fulfills it by beating a visiting master in his simul.*

Three new entries from the 1980s all have the female winning (ambiguous outcomes not counting), increasing the distaff advantage in our tabulation from 10-5 to 13-5. Items from the 2010s also bolster the results: 8 more woman victories to 4 new men triumphs, making the totals when added to the original data change from 25-12 to 33-16, maintaining the 2-1 advantage neatly. As for the first half of the 2020s, it is more of the same. Women winners lead the men so far 15-8. Nothing in the new data indicates our original assessment was incorrect or somehow changing with time. QED again, I guess.

After seeing our tribute to GM Robert Hübner last issue, ICCF-World Champion GM Jon Edwards commented about Hübner's thoroughness. Hübner was the first person to crash *ChessBase* due to too many annotations. *ChessBase* then made the storage space much, much larger. Then a few years later, Jon himself, crashed ChessBase due to the length of his notes. *ChessBase* once again made the limit high enough that they don't believe anyone will crash the system again!