

Soltis tells the story behind the iconic New York Times picture

# Blitzing against Bobby Fischer

In his forthcoming memoir, grandmaster and journalist Andrew Soltis explains how he got his picture in the rival New York Times. The paper was covering the certifiably unbeatable Fischer. Not only chess was at stake, but also his career as a reporter.

by Andrew Soltis

I got to play Bobby Fischer on one afternoon and it happened when he was certifiably unbeatable. In August 1971 the Manhattan Chess Club celebrated the opening of new quarters. To mark the occasion, Bobby suggested that the 94-year-old club host a five-minute tournament and he offered to play in it. This was during Fischer's remarkable Candidates match winning streak.

Luckily for me, the speed tournament was scheduled for a Sunday. I was half-way to an IM title but only played tournament chess on an occasional weekend. Chess was my hobby. It was not my life.

I was a cub reporter for the *New York Post*, a quirky tabloid. The *Post* editors could throw any task at me and they did: I covered murders, election campaigns, airplane crashes, Women's Lib rallies, court trials and labor union strikes. I was often assigned to produce

a 'matcher.' This was a catch-up story that confirmed key details in a story that had previously appeared in one of the *Post*'s rivals, the *Daily News* or *New York Times*.

I was invited to play in the Manhattan Chess Club speed tournament because I had won the championship of the rival Marshall Chess Club in four of the previous five years. I was never a great speed player. But when the Marshall held its own elite speed tournament a

Bobby offered the Manhattan Chess Club to play in the blitz tournament

few weeks before I avoided embarrassment by beating Sam Reshevsky and Donald Byrne and tying for third place behind Donald and Arthur Bisguier.

When I showed up for the Manhattan's tournament I was surprised to find the *New York Times* had sent a reporter and photographer to cover the tournament. Or, rather, to cover Fischer.

In the first round, I was paired with the guest of honor. Our game began **1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♙c4 e6 7.♙b3 b5 8.0-0 ♙e7 9.♙f3 ♙d7**

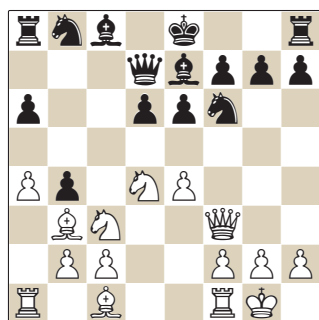
Fischer's last move was new to me. It enabled him to meet 10.e5 with 10...♙b7. It also protected e6 in case I sacrificed on that square.

One year before, Walter Browne had played 9...♙d7 against me in a weekend open. He counted on 10.e5 dxe5 (11.♙xa8 exd4). He overlooked 11.♗xe6 and resigned after 11...e4 12.♗xg7+ ♖f8 13.♗xe4 ♙c6 14.♙h6 ♙xe4 15.♗h5+.

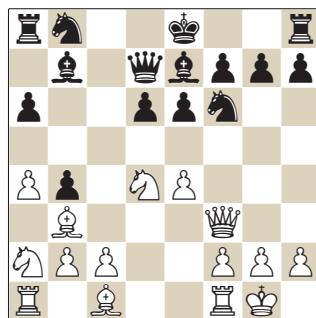


A standing-room-only crowd in the Manhattan Chess Club watched Fischer's first-round game as Andy Soltis made his tenth move. Among the spectators is veteran IM Hans Kmoch (left of Fischer), the arbiter of Bobby's US Championship victories, and Fischer's longtime mentor John W. Collins, sitting at the background chessboard, head resting on left hand.

It was Walter's shortest loss and my quickest win from a GM.  
My game with Fischer began to go downhill:  
**10.a4 b4**



**11. ♖a2? ♙b7!**



I realized I had missed a chance for 11.a5!. That would have threatened 12.♙a4 and freed a square for ♖a4.

Without that trick, my position deteriorated quickly.

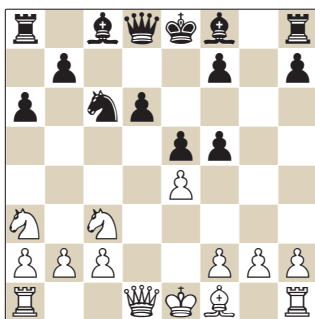
But Fischer had a reputation for moving too quickly when he got a winning position in a speed game. He later blundered – yes, Fischer did blunder on rare occasions. He allowed me to win his queen for a rook and a pawn.

I had played my earlier moves slowly because... well, my opponent was Bobby Fischer. Now I became very nervous because... well, I was winning. I was soon down to seconds. There was no increment. (This was nine years before Fischer filed a patent for his revolutionary clock.)



I began making illegal moves. I replaced them with legal ones. Legal but lame. It was a relief when I realized he was about to promote a pawn. I could resign in good conscience.

I lost our second game without a fight, playing a then-rare opening,  
**1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 ♘c6 3.♟c3 ♟f6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♟xd4 e5 6.♟db5 d6 7.♟g5 a6 8.♟xf6 gxf6 9.♟a3 f5**



I was hoping to catch him in trap I had seen in a Russian magazine (10.♟h5? d5!). But Fischer quickly played **10.♟c4 ♟g7 11.♟h5** and won soon after **11...0-0 12.exf5 ♟d4 13.♟d3**

I didn't realize until the final round was over that I had scored 18-2 in my non-Fischer games. I had finished second. This was well behind Bobby but a half point ahead of Robert Byrne, in third place. I relaxed – until the *Times* reporter asked to interview me.

I realized that the *Times* might make a big deal about Fischer. I would be scooped on a story in which I was a prime participant. For a reporter, this would be more than just embarrassing. It could be career-crippling.

I hurriedly called the *Post's* city desk and explained the situation. The editor on duty didn't know tripled pawns from the Triborough Bridge. But he understood that he would share the blame if the *Times* ran a big Fischer story the next day and there was nothing from the clueless *Post* reporter on the scene.

He ordered me to write a 'matcher.' I dictated 300 words off the top of my head. I had to remember what I had



told the *Times* reporter so I would have something very similar in my story.

The *Times's* daily edition was printed in two sections in those days. The first page of the second section, known as the 'second front,' was usually dominated by one story and a photograph. Sure enough, the day after the tournament, the story on the *Times's* second front ran under the headline 'Fischer Munches a Bagel and Finds 11 Rivals a Piece of Cake.'

There was a five-column photo – huge by *Times* standards – showing Bobby looking intently as I was about to make my 12th move in our first game. In the background, some fans stood on tables to watch. In the front row of the audience sat New York's chess royalty: Hans Kmoch, Jack Collins, Walter Goldwater, *Chess Life* editor Burt Hochberg and even Robert Byrne's future wife Maria. Somehow chess got more attention than the other article on the second front, an in-depth look at the plight of New York's prostitutes.

When I arrived for work the next

day, I was congratulated by older *Post* reporters I hardly knew. Editors who rarely noticed me smiled when they caught my eye. My mother bought five copies of the *Times*.

I only felt relief: I had avoided disaster by writing the matcher. ■

*From Deadline Grandmaster: A Chess Memoir. Hardcover, \$39.95. Will be published August 2024.*  
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