

THE SNARKY DICTIONARY OF CHESS

By Bob Basalla

Taking a cue from Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* with its many pithy, clever, sarcastic and irreverent entries liberally salted with pellets of truth (Example: "Peace: A period of cheating between two wars."), presented here are samplings of a prospective chess version in the same vein: *The Snarky Dictionary of Chess* which may or may not amuse or infuriate. You be the judge.

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Adjournment

An integrity maintaining method of suspending a two-player game to be continued at a later time after the position has been thoroughly dissected by other players, endgame book consultation and/or chess engine scrutiny. (See also Correspondence Chess.)

Ajeeb

A chess term which inevitably elicits the reflexive response, "Gesundheit."

Analysis

The process of breaking one's butt to competently understand a particular opening, middlegame or endgame position, appropriately consolidating the two root words: "anal" and "lysis."

Arabian Mate

One of a harem.

Bare King

An embarrassing situation where a monarch is exposed to naked aggression.

Bishop

The piece most readily sharpened into a shiv.

Black

The side first privileged with information on what the other side (White) intends to do, undoubtedly an advantage.

Blackburne

A supposed player who burned those with the black pieces or burned the opponent when handling the black pieces. *The first proof that many supposed famous names from chess history are really concocted fakes. More will follow...*

Blitz

Chess contested at the spinal cord level.

Blunder

A brilliancy appreciated by a cult of one.

Brain

Organ intelligently designed for the cognition of chess. How this is advantageous to the organism as a whole and its continued propagation is still a mystery to evolutionary biologists who sweep the whole controversy under the rug by refusing to address it at all.

Brilliancy

A blunder later discovered to be sound.

Bye

Only opponent with which all players truthfully claim a plus score, though some just barely.

Caissa

Yet another goddess to which no one prays.

Capablanca

Translated, the name of this alleged chess great in English means White Head (actually Head White), in other words, the head of the white chessmen, an obvious fake.

Caro Kann

Yeah, but you can't.

Castling

Unlikely procedure codified in the rules where, violating common sense, a building passes over, under, around or even through the king, a one square at a time only piece here inexplicably moving two.

Center

The squares a1, h1, a8 and h8 to those of the hypermodern school according to Eliot Hearst (*Chess Life*, July, 1962).

Cheapo

A slang term coined by Dr. Karl Burger, a specialist in the technique, whose modus operandi is to threaten something so obvious only an idiot would fall for it, and usually does. (Also from Eliot Hearst's *Chess Life*, July, 1962 article.)

Check

In general praxis a move most often played with the hope that it will actually turn out to be a mate.

Checkmate

An elitist rule designed to preserve the dignity of two cross-bearing pieces of wood or whatever by disallowing their capture.

Chess

A popular variant of Bughouse employing only a single board and usually just two players.

Chess Clock

Paired relativistic time pieces that temporally dilate for the opponent while simultaneously constricting for the observer.

Chess Club

Ego-system of piscine denizens looking to improve their game's fitness through judicious natural selection of good moves.

Chess Problems

Artificial positions you cannot solve, as if you weren't having enough trouble solving the non-artificial chess positions you faced.

Chessboard

Circumscribed universe where all meaningful action occurs according to self-imprisoned unfortunates.

Chessmen

The original "tools of ignorance." The term later became better known in another context as a quote by Herold "Muddy" Ruel (career from 1915-1934) describing the equipment required for his career as a baseball catcher (oversized mitt, face mask, chest protector, shin guards, etc.).

Combination

An agglomeration of tactical elements determined to be connected post hoc.

Correspondence Chess

Long distance competition based on the honor system where two chess programs battle it out with minimal assistance from other chess programs or their human possessors.

Damiano's Defense

A discredited opening, which should have been obvious considering its name stems from a misspelling of a pizza box.

Development

An often-random occurrence in a chess game akin to fate or karma. Chess, like s***, happens. The true acolyte fancies they can control the game's evolution, especially in the opening stages.

Discovered Check

The dawning realization that one or both kings have been under attack for one or more moves.

Doubled Pawns

Visual multiplicity due to inebriation. (See Scotch Gambit)

Draw

Controversial conclusion to a chess game caused mainly by the schism between adamant factions, some in support, some not, in other words, the eternal rift between the halves and the halve nots.

Echecs

A chess term which inevitably elicits the reflexive response, "Gesundheit."

En Passant

An arbitrary and confusing rule, rendered in French to lend it a certain cachet, designed to make chess seem more abstruse and difficult to the already perplexed student.

En Prise

An efficacious method of relieving oneself of extraneous material (a *Chess Life* reader's response to a call for additional definitions beyond those given in Eliot Hearst's July, 1962 article.)

English

Spin put on a piece slid into place.

Euwe

Results of an exercise to construct the shortest possible unpronounceable name.

Family Fork

Communal utensil in a chess-minded household.

Felt

Pool table remnants pointlessly affixed to the base of chessmen.

Fianchetto

Pinnocchio's "uncle."

File

Tool employed to rasp down bad bishops, so they won't stand out as tall pawns.

Fischer

The particular spelling of this common surname has a certain likelihood of indicating the possessor is Jewish, thus making it the perfect sobriquet behind which to hide an anti-semite.

Fool's Mate

Spouse of an inveterate chess player.

French Defense

An opening system whose trademark pawn skeleton replicates the famed Maginot Line which, as we all know, worked so well in the second World War.

Gambit

According to Samuel Boden, giving up a pawn for the sake of being seen as a swashbuckling player, while getting a lost game.

Game

Term misused by the lay public to mean "match."

Grandmaster

(See Master)

Harrwitz Bishops

Proprietary configuration of clerics that is best avoided so as to not incur the steep licensing fee.

Helpmate

See King's Gambit

Hypermodern

A young chess adherent with ADHD issues.

In-Between Move

Taking an extra turn while your opponent avails themselves of the restroom.

Indian Defenses

Originally named in "honor" of the supposedly ambushing nature of these openings. Somehow the nomenclaturists missed the Pawnee.

J'Adoube

An utterance most often heard just after the wrong piece is touched, and realized as such.

Kibitzer

In chess, a meddler, a loathsome giver of unsolicited advice on how others should run their games. In other words, a politician.

King

Privileged piece so cowardly that it runs away or must be shielded from danger, so germ averse that it always keeps social distance of at least one square from its riff-raff counterpart, all the while hypocritically insisting that everyone else, whatever their individual interests, must be sacrificed if need be to the "greater

good,” defined as his well-being. In other words, a politician.

King's Gambit

Synonym of Helpmate.

Knight

A piece known for its deceptive movement as well as its deceptive name glorifying the unseen rider rather than his mount.

Legal's Mate

Any continuation that has to actively profess it is comporting with the rules has a lot to hide, as when someone begins an assertion, “Let me be honest with you...”

Life

Intervals of varying length between two chess games.

Living Chess

A contradiction in terms, a Maroczymoron if you will (see Life above).

Losing the Exchange

Getting the worst of a trade, as a pack of gum for the latest opening treatise or a confiscatory entry fee to an expensive Open.

Master

Designation marking the moment where chess gains full control of its victim. In extreme cases of subordination, the term is inflated to Grandmaster.

Match

Term misused by the lay public to mean “game.”

Morphy

“Morph,” loosely meaning “change into,” makes an unlikely name for a chess player constantly altering the positions of pieces, a name sort of like Dick Tracy (“Dick” a policemen, combined with “Tracy” one who traces, i.e. a detective). A bogus moniker, clearly.

Move

Onerous obligation to change a chess position against one's will, whether or not the position actually needed changing, all in service of the paramount goal of starting the opponent's clock.

Najdorf

A phony chess historical name apparently designed to gain maximum points as a Scrabble “bingo.”

Noah's Ark Trap

Mount Ararat, traditionally.

Opening Trap

Unnecessarily speaking at the board.

Overprotection

A positional theme first emphasized by Aron Nimzovich later discovered to be merely a symbolization of Nimzo's relationship with his mother. (Based on Eliot Hearst's item in his July, 1962, *Chess Life* article).

Passed Pawn

A chess foot soldier that successfully traversed the alimentary system.

Patzer

A relative term derisively applied to weak chess players such as all humans when compared to the latest chess engine.

Pawn

A nuisance unit, cheapened by sheer numbers which mainly serve to chain one's game, blocking key lines at inopportune moments, only becoming useful upon promotion into something else. But at that point they are no longer pawns, are they?

Pawn Majority

A pawn preponderance on one side of the board that stands to prevail provided it comports with the outcome of the electoral college.

Perpetual Check

Misleading terminology as all instances conclude in a finite amount of time.

Pin

Effective tactic in chess despite holding it for a three count does not guarantee a win, nor does knocking one off constitute a spare, nor does possessing one portend a trip to the prom.

Post Mortem

After the game outgrowth by which one takes back his bad moves and endeavors to keep the opponent's bad moves intact, thereby proving that one had a won game all along.

Quad

Muscle most likely to cramp up during a six-hour game.

Queen

Like Victor Borge's distinction between a viola and a violin, the chess queen's essential difference from pieces other than the king is that it burns longer. As far as distinguishing the queen from the king, well, queens are hornier.

Rank

Common stratagem where a tourney participant eschews showering for a few days before or during the event.

Ratings

Three or four digits holding far greater significance than Social Security Numbers and IQs combined.

Reuben Fine

The penalty paid for bringing deli fare into the tournament hall.

Rice Gambit

Matrimony.

Rook

A chess piece whose chief attribute derives from its use as the base of all stable towers of chessmen so far devised.

Ruy Lopez, Exchange Variation

A once popular line in the venerable Ruy Lopez opening which in subsequent analysis was greatly improved by *not* making the exchange.

Sacrifice

A piece or a pawn giving up its life for the game's greater good, or even more altruistically for no good whatsoever, a condition sometimes termed a Mistake-rifice. The more selfish among us

prefer to follow Tartakower's dictum and sacrifice only their opponent's pieces, sort of like favoring raising taxes in ways that only affect the other guy.

Scotch Gambit

Plying your upcoming opponent with alcohol before the round.

Selfmate

Caissic onanism.

Short

Not Tal.

Skewer

A player engaging in ratings puffery.

Skittles

Candy ass play.

Space Advantage

Greater room to draw back your chair as opposed to your opponent's backed against the wall.

Spielmann

"Spiel" meaning game in German makes the name "Game Man" rather too cute to be owned by an actual chess player.

Spite Check

Gallows humor, chess style.

Square

The smallest parcel of chessboard real estate within which a piece still active in the game must sit, unless of course it is advantageous to ambiguously straddle a few lines during a time scramble.

Stalemate

An unjust loophole in the Laws of Chess, obviously inserted by defense attorneys, wherein the condemned monarch is awarded an undeserved reprieve from loss by pleading poverty of moves.

Strategy

Pretending to know what you are doing when there is really nothing to do.

Swindle

A successful tactic appreciated from the victim's vantage.

Swiss

An outrageous but inexplicably popular pairing system possessing the following holes as recognized by those trapped in its cheesy vortex: Getting paired up; Getting paired down; Getting Black unless one wants it; Getting an opponent one doesn't personally get along with; Getting put on a table too near (or far away) from the air conditioning, the rest room or the water fountain, plus other complaints too numerous to mention.

Tactics

Pretending to know what you are doing when there is something to do.

Tal

Not Short.

Threat

A perk of the game, allowing one to publically take out one's aggressions in contradistinction to all those anonymous occasions on social media.

Time Control

A laughable concept for all too many players.

Time Pressure

Life affirming exhilaration partaken of by only the most discerning of chess players. The addictive qualities of this rush, more dear to them than mere wins, draw them again and again to the practice, moths to flames. "Why else play?" say many.

Touch Move

Duh, physical handling being the only reasonable way of shifting chessmen given that telekinesis is unproven and finely directed gusts of sufficient force are impractical, especially for weighted pieces.

Tournament

Group therapy pooling of the chess afflicted akin to Alcoholics Anonymous. Patients are judiciously paired to more effectively probe each other's weaknesses, sometimes resulting in catharsis for one.

Underpromotion

Cardinal reason given for poor attendance at a tournament.

White

The side obligated to prematurely tip their hand by being cursed to move first. You don't see college football overtime coin flip winners going on offense first, do you? There's a reason for that, just as in chess.

Zukertort

A combined German/English moniker slightly altering "Zug" (German for "move") and "Retort." What are the odds a real chess player would happen to have "move response" as their name?

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Per Wikipedia, we open up *The Snarky Dictionary of Chess* for submissions from the alleged outer world (after all, this could all be a figment of my solipsistic imagination or maybe a Matrix-style pseudo-reality). Find a way to get them to Bob Basalla and see your creative brain (pawn?) storms shower (credited, of course) onto a later iteration of this compendium.

After completing this article I came upon "A Gentle Glossery" by Eliot Hearst first published in the July, 1962 issue of Chess Life and later reprinted in Bruce Pandolfini's The Best of Chess Life and Review, Volume 2 (1987). It too created a chess dictionary based on the Ambrose Bierce model. A couple entries are remarkably similar to mine (see "Adjournment" and "Euwe"). I have included a few of his items here (with citation) as a presaging contributor (over six decades earlier!) to these efforts.