

Chess and Women

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Illustration from *Die Schachspieler und ihre Welt* by Arpad Bauer (Berlin, 1911)

We offer from old literature a digest of quotes and references on the theme of chess and women.

The *Chess Player's Chronicle*, 1848 (pages 371-372) had an account of the annual dinner of the Northumberland Chess Club on 2 November of that year, at which J.J. Hunter's speech was reported as follows:

'Mr John J. Hunter then said there was one indispensable toast, always sure of a most cordial reception, but which had not yet been given, and, lest it should be omitted, he incurred the responsibility of proposing it. The toast he meant was "The Ladies". He had found amongst the fair sex many formidable opponents in the chess field, and although some gentlemen professed to make it a point of gallantry to indulge them with a conquest occasionally, he believed they now frequently made a virtue of necessity, and veiled a want of skill under an appearance of respectful deference. On the present occasion, therefore, he proposed "The Ladies, and especially those who are chessplayers".'

'Chess and the Fair Sex', on pages 121-122 of the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, 15 March 1881. The unnamed author's declarations included the following:

'... there are none with whom we should imagine the game of chess should find greater favour than with the fair sex. As a rule, they have at their disposal a greater amount of leisure than men have. Their duties are lighter – if, at least, we except from the list those which the inexorable law of fashion requires they should fulfil. It must often happen they grow weary of that terrible ordeal of pleasure in all its ever-varying phases which Society deems imperative. Fashionable novels, after a few experiences, are apt to grow wearisome, and in the evenings especially, when the men folk are at their clubs, ladies must often feel the need of something intellectually attractive – something that is likely to arouse in them a stronger interest than scandal-mongering and the ordinary small talk of the day. There was a time when a knowledge of chess was looked upon by women as well as men as a valuable accomplishment; and there is no reason why it should not be so regarded now.'

'Moreover, as we read some little time back in a short treatise on the game – "not only should it" – that is, chess – "share the drawing-room, but become an ever-ready resource against listlessness and

indolence. Experience vouches its value as a domestic charm; and every young lady will do wisely in acquiring the power of adding its fascination to the attractions of Home”.’

‘We say unreservedly that chess is a game which is worthy of being cultivated by ladies. It is pleasantly quiet, and they possess many of the qualities which should characterize the votary of the game. They have patience, they are nice in calculating, as well as quick in devising a means of attack or defence. It has far too much variety ever to grow tiresome, and especially in the long wintry evenings, if only as affording rest from the unceasing whirl of fashionable pleasure, should it once more find a place among the recognized home pastimes of the day.’

‘Das Schachspiel und die Frauen’ by H. von Gottschall in the May 1893 *Deutsche Schachzeitung* (pages 129-133). One of the more sympathetic articles on the subject published in the nineteenth century.

‘A Scientific Hint for Women Players’ on page 196 of the September 1897 *American Chess Magazine*:

‘Verily, this is a world of strange happenings, and still stranger explanations. Many conservative men (a fair correspondent avers they are brutes more or less) have strongly contested the claim that a woman could play a consistently good game at chess. They persistently declare that, though the play of this or that woman may be, at times, of a fair order, it is inevitably erratic, and subject to those illogical aberrations which science, as exemplified in chess, most severely frowns upon. Now, if there is any foundation for this charge, it is evident that the women’s game must be affected by some extraneous cause that does not influence the men, and there has been much puzzled inquiry as to what that cause can be. It has remained for the *Troy Times* to solve the great mystery. It declares, on the authority of “a great scientist” – what a pity we do not know his name – that the cause of the present intellectual activity of our women-folk is due to the use of wire hair-pins. He explains the matter in a charmingly lucid manner which, as so often happens with scientific explanations, leaves

the unscientific reader in rather more of a muddled entanglement than ever, but when “boiled down” it amounts to this: that the wire hair-pins excite “counter-currents of electricity”, whatever they may be, and so bewilder the wearer’s brain with strange vagaries, and lead them to do whimsical things. Now, it would be well for players to take note of this, for the “wire hair-pin” theory explains many things. It is evident that when a woman wears a handful of wire hair-pins there is an amount of electrical disturbance going on around her scalp that puts good chess out of the question. When she wears shell contrivances her head is clear and cool, and she plays the fine, winning game her friends admire. So, in future tournaments, one of the rules governing the play should be: “All ladies-players are requested to wear shell hair-pins.”



The above photograph is of Frau Ad. Keller of Elberfeld as Caïssa in the prologue to the operetta *Der Seekadett*. It appeared opposite page 44 of the Barmen, 1905 tournament book.

Lasker's Chess Magazine (April 1906, pages 276-277) reproduced an article entitled 'Women and Chess' from *The Saturday Review*. Some extracts follow:

'... in the whole of its enormous literature there does not appear the name of any woman among the stars of the first, second or third magnitude. One may go through volume after volume containing thousands of games and not find a single one played by women which any editor has thought worthy of a permanent record.'

'A careful examination of the games of players whom the world recognizes as great reveals the fact that the faculties and qualities of concentration, comprehensiveness, impartiality and, above all, a spark of originality, are to be found in combination and in varying degrees. The absence of these qualities in woman explains why no member of the feminine sex has occupied any high position as a chessplayer.'

'In the composition of chess problems, the element of competition is absent, and many women are considered good composers. Here the critic can and does exert a little influence. But when we look at the winners of tournaments for composing problems the names of women are again conspicuous by their absence.'

It seems quite clear that women have so far been unable to hold their own in open competition. Whether, or to what extent, it is a matter of physical constitution, we are unable to say. But a change in the spirit of women chessplayers might work wonders. The existence of "ladies' chess clubs" is a means of perpetuating mediocrity among its members. Of course, if exclusiveness is more important to them than improved play, they will continue in this way. If any women have any idea or ambition of holding a high position in the chess world apart and independent of sex, they will endeavor to meet all-comers in practice and so pave the way to take part in general tournaments. No player has ever existed who has been more than a shade superior to his contemporaries, and if women continue to play only with women the best of them cannot hold their own in a general tournament, because of the poor standard of the play they have been engaged in.'

Alekhine was to voice a similar argument regarding Vera Menchik when annotating

a 1939 game of hers on pages 220-221 of *Gran Ajedrez* (Madrid, 1947): ‘... it is totally unfair to persuade a player of an acknowledged superclass like Miss Menchik to defend her title year after year in tournaments composed of very inferior players. It is not surprising that after so many tournaments she has lost much of her interest, and plays some games casually, much below her strength. But such accidental difficulties could not possibly be decisive in a championship, if it were settled, like any title of importance, in a match and not in a tournament.’



Vera Menchik

‘Women’s Sphere in the World of Chess’, an article on pages 4-6 of the January 1908 *American Chess Bulletin* also quoted a few paragraphs from the above-mentioned *Saturday Review* article and commented:

‘To all of which we respectfully submit that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” and that women as a class can well afford the

loss of any additional prestige the game of chess might hold forth to them.

The home has been and still is woman's chief stronghold, whence she can achieve conquests that keep mankind under permanent subjection. Surely the average club room, with its smoke-laden atmosphere, is not the magnet to attract her, and it is here where mere man obtains the foundation of his knowledge and experience which his "concentration, comprehensiveness, impartiality and originality" are destined, in isolated cases, to transform into the genius of mastership. That no woman has attained a high position in chess because of the absence of certain qualities, as alleged, clearly is not proven ...'

The article in the *Bulletin* also featured the chess columnist Rosa (Rose) B. Jefferson of *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) and Luella Mackenzie of Iowa. The latter 'furnishes another example of a woman more than holding her own in competition with members of the sterner sex. Correspondence chess is her particular sphere, and this style of play certainly holds forth special attractions to women devotees of the game, most of whom have neither the opportunity nor inclination for cross-board practice at leading clubs.'

'Das Schach und die Frauen' by S. Tartakower on pages 122-125 of the January 1921 issue of *Kagans Neueste Schachnachrichten*. In amongst some historical facts about women's play, Tartakower gave his views on their relative lack of playing strength:

'Der einzige Grund, warum es die Frau auf dem Schachgebiete noch zu keiner Virtuosität brachte, liegt wohl darin, dass das Schach keine eigentliche Kunst ist, sondern auch einen Kampf darstellt, einen Sieg erstrebt, zu dessen Erreichung stets eine gewisse Rücksichtslosigkeit gehört, welche Eigenschaft eben dem holden Geschlecht viel zu wenig eigen ist.'

'Sohin sind die Beziehungen des zarten Geschlechts zu unserem edlen Spiele sehr mannigfaltig und, wenn das Schach das Leben verschönt, so verschönert die Frau das Schach.'

Below is an English translation:

‘The only reason why women have not yet achieved virtuosity in the field of chess is probably that chess is not a proper art but also depicts a battle with the aspiration of victory; attainment of victory always calls for a certain ruthlessness, which is precisely a feature far too little present in the fair sex.’

‘Thus the connections between the gentle sex and our noble game are richly diverse, and while chess brightens up life, women brighten up chess.’

‘Die Frau im Schachleben’ by Paula Kalmar (‘Austria’s first woman chess master’), on pages 21-23 of the March 1923 *Wiener Schachzeitung*. The article, originally published in the *Neue Freie Presse* of 20 February 1923, focused on chess life in Vienna and her own chess career.

‘Die Frau und das Schach’ by K. Ziebert, on pages 33-37 of the February 1926 *Deutsche Schachzeitung*. A general discussion, with few specific facts.

‘El Ajedrez y la Mujer’: editorial on page 369 of the August 1935 issue of *El Ajedrez Español* noting the increased interest in chess among women.

‘The Advance in Women’s Chess’ on pages 149-151 of the April 1936 *BCM*. A discussion of initiatives within FIDE and various national bodies to develop women’s chess.

‘The Present State of Women’s Chess’ on pages 125-130 of the March 1937 *BCM* was a follow-up article, largely concentrating on England. A ‘postscript’ was published on pages 189-190 of the April 1937 *BCM* and a ‘second postscript’ on

page 260 of the May 1937 issue.

‘El Ajedrez y la Mujer’ on pages 57-58 of *Enroque!!*, September 1941. An overview of the development of women’s chess.

‘Women and Chess’ by S. Snell on pages 81-82 of the March 1947 *BCM*. Personal reminiscences by a writer who was the only woman member of her club. (‘...in a long life-time I have known only two women who played chess – and I taught it to one of them’.)

‘As I owe much in alertness as well as pleasure to this great game, I wish women could share this – with the exception, perhaps, of those whose work requires considerable mental concentration. It is the average woman I have in mind – women whose horizon is bounded by shopping, housework, cooking, mending, and so on, varied by an occasional cinema or play, and a not-so-occasional gossip.

These interests of hers, useful and necessary though they may be, leave a great part of her mind fallow. It is stamped on and trodden down by routine, conventions, hard-and-fast habits. Under such conditions how can anything grow? There are many implements for digging up this fallow soil. The choice lies with individual temperaments. For my own part I have chosen chess ...’

‘Women and Chess’ by Elizabeth Westrup on page 203 of *Chess Life*, July 1961. A brief overview of female chessplayers throughout the centuries. The concluding paragraph read:

‘Why don’t more women in this country play chess? Many, of course, are just too busy with the everyday affairs of life. And yet a number of women do find time for bridge and canasta. Those who do play chess usually hesitate to venture into a chess club where they know there will be few women, if any at all. However, once they learn the game

and begin to play seriously, they find a great deal of mental stimulation and pleasure in it. Even getting beat by a good player can be fun, but winning a game from a man who considers himself a top-flight player is one of the most satisfying experiences a woman can have.'

Afterword: The above quotes appeared in C.N. 3274. A correspondent, Michael Clapham (Ipswich, England), mentioned in C.N. 3282 that pages 12-19 of *Chessworld* volume 1 number 3 (May-June 1964) had an article by Norman Reider entitled 'The Natural Inferiority of Women Chessplayers'. Another additional item is 'Among Women Chess Players' on page 13 of the January-February 1941 *American Chess Bulletin*; it provided an overview of women players in the United States.

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