

State Checkers Champion Promotes The Game

By Randy Olson

If you think checkers is just a kid's game, you better think again. Just spend some time talking or playing checkers with Gene Ellison of Omaha, Illinois. He is the reigning Illinois State Checkers Champion and also serves as the Secretary/Treasurer of the Illinois State Checkers Association. While Ellison has a very deep understanding of the game, he is always willing to share checkers problems, popular moves, tips or provide in-depth instruction to anyone who wants to learn more about the popular game.

Ellison says that checkers has been around a long time, yet there is still a number of myths and misinformation associated with the game.

"The checkers game actually dates back to about 4,000 B.C. with the first documented instructional book about the game published in Valencia around 1547," says Ellison. "The first-known English book about checkers was published in 1756 in England."

Checker boards can often still be found in coffee shops, restaurants and in the toy departments of many stores, yet the color scheme of the board and pieces found in these locations is not accurate to how the game was originally designed and still played in tournament settings. "The true color of an official checkers board is green and buff (tan), not red and black like many have seen or played on," says Ellison. "The official colors of the pieces are actually white and red, not black and red like many people often think."

While many people consider chess to be a complicated, intellectual game, Ellison proves that the game of checkers is much deeper than meets the eye. "There are literally thousands of possible combinations of moves," says Ellison. "You have to think several moves ahead to really be successful at checkers."



He demonstrated that fact to me by literally replaying a historical game from 1878 move-by-move on a checkers board in front of me. There are a number of checkers books and Web sites that have actual games recorded based upon how the squares are numbered. "The squares of a checker board are numbered 1 through 32 and you play on the dark color (green)," says Ellison. "It's great that many of the smartest players through the years have documented the moves of their past games in print or online, which allows us to literally replay the game move-by-move many years later."

Ellison points out that one of the basic rules of checkers is that all jumps must be taken and that once a player touches a piece, they must finish their move.

The collection of books, magazines and manuals that Ellison has compiled in his basement is like a shrine to the game. Thumb through a few books and you will soon discover that Teddy Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, George Washington, Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Houdini and Gen. Ulysses Grant were all very ac-

tive checker players in their day.

Ellison didn't really get serious about competitive checkers until about 1981 when he had a chance encounter with a passerby at the Omaha crossroads gas station. The person gave Ellison some checkers magazines and the name of a former State Champion from Alton. Shortly thereafter, Ellison played in his first tournament and has been Secretary/Treasurer of the Illinois State Checker Association since 1993.

"Some players are such masters of the game that they play blind-fold matches and memorize the board and location of each piece, allowing others to make the moves on their verbal command," says Ellison.

The Illinois State Checkers Tourney is held in April at the Illinois Centre Mall in Marion. There is just a \$10 entry fee. The National Checkers Hall of Fame is located in Petal, Mississippi and the reigning World Champion is Ron

King of Barbados, who beat a player from Kentucky for the title. There are two ways to play checkers. The "go-as-you-please" method, which is the most common, or the "restrictive move" method which requires players to draw an instructional card from a deck. There are three classes or skill levels of tournament competitive checkers. They include expert, major and minor, also referred to as A, B, and C. A typical tournament match consists of seven rounds of two games each, 14 games total. Players receive two points for a win, one point for a draw, and zero points for a loss.

Checkers is still a great game to play from the youngest to the oldest, or the beginner to the expert. If you would like to test your skill against the current state champion or get more information about checkers and the state association, contact Gene Ellison at 618-962-3321. You can also visit a popular informational Web site at www.USACheckers.com.



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