The Morals Of Chess

By Benjamin Franklin

(Circa 1786)

"The Morals of Chess" is an essay by the American philosopher Benjamin Franklin who in 1999 was inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame. It is one of the first texts about chess that was published in the United States and appeared in the first chess-related book that was published in Russia in 1791. The essay originally appeared in The Columbian Magazine in December 1786. Below is a modern paraphrase of his essay:

Playing Chess is the oldest and most universal game known to man; its origins well beyond the memory of history, and it has throughout the ages been the amusement of civilized nations such as Asia, the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. Europe has had it for over 1,000 years; the Spaniards had spread it over their side of America, and just now it begins to make its appearance in these Northern States. The game is so interesting in itself that it doesn't need the incentive of a prize for people to be engrossed in it, and so it is never played for money. Therefore, people who have time available for such activities can't find a purer game. The following article, written to correct some improper conduct among a few young friends, also shows that its effects on the mind are not just innocent, but beneficial to both the person who lost and the winner.

The game of Chess is not just an idle amusement. There are several valuable qualities of the mind, useful in every aspect of life that can be acquired or strengthened by it, which can become habits ready to be used in any occasion. For life is a kind of chess game where we often have points to gain, competitors or adversaries to contend with, and in which there are various good and bad events, that are to some degree, due to good judgment or the lack of it.

By playing at chess, then, we may learn:

1. Foresight, which looks a little into the future and considers the consequences of a certain action: For it occurs continually to the player, "If I move this piece, what will be the advantages of my new situation? How can my opponent use it against me? What other moves can I make to support it, and to defend myself from his attacks?"

2. Circumspection, which studies the whole chess board, or the scene of action, the relation between several pieces and situations, the dangers they are respectively exposed to, all the possibilities for helping each other, the probability that the opponent may make this or that move to attack this or other piece; and the different ways that can be used to avoid his attack or turn it against him.

3. Caution, not to make our moves too hastily. This habit is best acquired by observing strictly the laws of the game such as, "If you touch a piece, you must move it somewhere. If you set it down, you must leave it there." So it is best that these rules should be observed as the game becomes the image of human life, particularly of war: If you carelessly have put yourself into a bad or dangerous position, you can't obtain the enemy's permission to withdraw your troops and place them in a more secure spot. You must allow all the consequences of your rash decision.

And lastly, we learn by playing chess the habit of not being discouraged by seemingly unfavorable circumstances, but the habit of hoping for a favorable change and persevering in the search of a solution. The game is so full of events, there are so many turns and twists, its development is subject to many sudden changes of fortune, so that a player frequently discovers, after long contemplation, the means of extricating himself from a supposedly insurmountable problem. In this way one is encouraged to continue playing to the very end, with hopes of victory by our own skill, or at least getting stale-mated through the negligence of our opponent. And consider, often seen in chess, that particular instances of success in a game are likely to produce presumption, and as a consequence, carelessness—by which more is lost than was gained with any previous advantage. Misfortune, on the other hand, produces more care and attention by which we may recover what was lost. So we learn not to be too discouraged by our opponent's current success, nor to worry about the final outcome on every little check he receives while pursuing it.

We should, therefore, choose this beneficial game over others that do not come with the same advantages, and should consider every opportunity to play and enjoy it. And every action or word that is unfair, disrespectful, or in any way causes uneasiness, should be avoided as the

opposite of the immediate intention of both players, which is to have a good time.

Therefore, first, if it is agreed to play strictly by the rules, then those rules are to be observed exactly by both players; and the rules should not be insisted for one side while changing it for the other: This is not fair.

Second, if it is agreed not to observe the rules exactly, but one side demands some whims, he should be as willing to allow them to his opponent.

Third, no false move should ever be made to get yourself out of trouble, or to gain an advantage. There can be no pleasure in playing with a person that gets caught cheating.

Fourth, If your opponent takes a long time to move, you should not rush him, or express any annoyance at his delay. You should not sing, nor whistle, nor look at your watch, nor pick up a book to read, nor start tapping your feet on the floor or your fingers on the table, nor do anything that may disturb his concentration. All these things are unpleasant and do not show your skill in playing, but your slyness or your rudeness.

Fifth, you should not endeavor to distract and deceive your opponent by pretending to have made bad moves, and saying you have now lost the game, in order to make him very confident and careless, and not pay attention to your schemes. This is fraud and deceit, not skill in the game.

Sixth, when you win a game you must not brag or use insulting expressions, nor display too much pleasure; but attempt to console your opponent and make him or her less disappointed by every kind and civil words that may be used sincerely. For example, "You understand the game better than me, but you were a little distracted," "You play too fast," or, "You had the better game, but something happened to distract your thoughts, and that turned it in my favor."

Seventh, If you are a spectator while others play, be perfectly silent. If you give advice you will offend both parties: To the player against whom you give the advise because it may cause him to lose; and to the player you advised because, even though your suggestions may be good

and he follows it, he loses the pleasure he might have had if you had permitted him to think until it occurred to him. Even after a move or series of moves, you must not, by touching the pieces, show how it might have been played better. That can be irritating and cause disputes about the actual situation. Any talking to the players distracts them and is therefore irritating. Nor you should give the smallest hints to either party, by any kind of noise or gesture. If you do, you are unworthy to be a spectator. If you have a mind to express your judgment, do it by playing your own game when you have the opportunity—Not criticizing, meddling, or counseling the play of others.

Lastly, if the game is not to be played strictly, according to the rules above, then curb your desire to beat your opponent and just be pleased with a win over yourself. Don't eagerly snatch every advantage caused by your opponent's bad moves or distraction, but point out to him or her, very nicely, that such a move places or leaves a piece in danger and unsupported. Or that by another bad move, the king may be placed in a dangerous situation, etc. By this great civility (in contrast to the unfairness forbidden above) you may indeed lose the game to your opponent, but you will win something better: His esteem, his respect, and his affection; together with the silent approval and good will of impartial spectators.