

Caissa Kismet: Meeting Kit Crittenden

Separated by Sixty Years, Two NC Champions Share Their Love for Chess

Reported by Tom Hales



FM Ron Simpson (Left) and NM Charles “Kit” Crittenden at Caribou Coffee in Chapel Hill

When I began my search for Kit Crittenden nearly one year ago, the idea of personally meeting the North Carolina chess icon was little more than a pipe dream. Young Kit made a name for himself way before my birth, winning the 1948 state championship at age fourteen, and becoming North Carolina’s first National Master. After more than a decade of dominance which included five NC chess championships, he had long since moved to other states to focus on a successful career in philosophy.* Had it not been for the Internet and a bit of luck, Kit Crittenden might have remained hidden from this researcher forever.

*(Dr. Crittenden’s recently completed work, “Language, Reality, and Mind: A Defense of Everyday Thought,” was published in April 2009 by Macmillan)

Since our initial contact via email, Dr. Crittenden and I have corresponded regularly regarding his tenure in North Carolina chess. He has been generous with his time, and has entrusted me with boxes full of original score sheets, clippings, photos, and old *Gambits*. I set about full bore to digitize this wealth of material, which he promised would “test my resistance to overwhelm.” While the task has certainly been daunting, I am enjoying the process. The first batch of games, which spans from 1948 through 1949, is nearly ready for publication.

When I learned that Dr. Crittenden would be visiting North Carolina this year, and that we might arrange a meeting near Raleigh, it seemed quite fitting to include our current state champion FM Ron Simpson in the plans. Simpson explains, “Some time ago Tom Hales spoke with me about North Carolina’s youngest State Champion, Dr. Charles “Kit” Crittenden. I was extremely honored and excited when Tom organized an evening for us to talk, play chess, and have dinner.” So arrangements were made with Crittenden after he arrived in Raleigh for his annual visit with friends and family. It wasn’t altogether a simple matter; this man is busier than most half his age! The details were finally arranged through a combination of emails and phone conversations, handled by Crittenden with modern dexterity on his new Blackberry.

As I made my way to the Red Roof Inn at Research Triangle Park, Crittenden’s self-described temporary home, the ninety-minute drive gave me plenty of time to reflect. While much of my initial nervousness had dissipated due to our phone conversations, an understandable amount of apprehension remained. Foremost in my mind was a desire to make the most of an extraordinary opportunity.

When Kit answered the door, I was immediately struck by his lack of pretense and his friendly manner, which quickly set me at ease. He wore blue jeans, casual black shoes, and a khaki Boonie hat which remained draped behind him indoors. His aviator-style glasses were practically unnoticeable--perfectly suited to his face--and did not diminish his intense gaze. A distinguished, balding head of hair was accented by a tiny pony tail behind. Several stacks of books peppered his bed and a small desk area where he appeared to be working on something important. His warm demeanor and ready handshake proved that he had not strayed far from his North Carolina roots.

When Ron Simpson arrived about fifteen minutes later, Kit and I were busy looking at a game on my laptop from a match he played with Bill Adickes in 1949. That game had been adjourned, with no result indicated, but Crittenden obviously had a win. Kit confirmed with me that he had indeed won their match. After a few minutes of casual conversation, we loaded into Kit’s large white rental sedan. Ron and I offered to drive, but Kit knew of a good local coffee place, so he became the pilot for the first leg of our journey. Unfortunately, the coffee shop was closed for the evening, so we settled for a nearby Waffle House.



NM Kit Crittenden is a formidable competitor!

After ordering one tea and two coffees, we became so engrossed in conversation that we didn't even break out a chess set! Crittenden recalls, "It was enjoyable discussing our disparate chess backgrounds, and interesting to talk about our attitudes toward rules we all learn when we begin to play: 'develop knights before bishops, rooks are worth five pawns, bishops three', etc." He continued, "Tom became interested in chess and developed as a player pretty much by himself, as I understood it, in a small town outside of Asheboro. Ron Simpson had a very different background in Brooklyn, as his chess bio on the NCCA website explains. I have to say that it is marvelous to see an African-American as the NC chess champion, especially someone generous with his time and energy, teaching other players."

Simpson elaborates, "Our love for chess and the value that it provides to all people were obviously common ground. We talked about our experiences with tournaments, playing in New York, and the relationship chess has to life. I can only imagine what playing chess was like in the 1950's. Dr. Crittenden's recollection of [W.A. Scott](#) and events surrounding the Southern Championship held in Durham in 1950 made me proud to be speaking with a man who stood up for a universal truth." Simpson continued, "Chess is a truly amazing experience. How many human endeavors force people to overcome racial prejudice? We spoke on the differences between now and then; realizing that life is made mostly from our choices. The consequences of our actions place us in the positions we play, as all chess players know all too well."

After more than one hour of rich conversation, I tipped our long-suffering waitress, and couldn't resist the urge to introduce my honored guests as we headed out. It isn't every day that the Waffle House sees two such distinguished gentlemen darken its doors! From there, we headed back to the Red Roof Inn. After a brief discussion, it became clear that I was the driver-elect for our journey to Chapel Hill and the Tandoor Indian Restaurant. I felt a bit uncomfortable at the prospect of Kit Crittenden having to squeeze into my gas-sipping Honda Fit, until he explained that his personal vehicle is a Toyota Prius! How cool is that?

Our restaurant selection was influenced by Kit's vegan lifestyle, a philosophical choice which I greatly admire. The Tandoor Indian Restaurant had a nice atmosphere, with fine tablecloths, interesting décor, and good service. My food was quite tasty, although I indulged in a less austere choice which included lamb. Ron ordered a shrimp dish, and we all shared an order of Naan, a cracker-like spicy Indian bread with salsa dip. Ron and I washed it all down with water, but Kit ordered mango juice without hesitation. So if any of you see me sipping mango juice at my next tournament, you will understand why! (Are these the juicy details?)

We completed our evening at the Caribou Coffee shop nearby, a cutting-edge place that stays busy for a reason. We had difficulty finding a parking space, and finally settled on a lot across the street. The shop was overflowing with college students, many with open books or laptops. We stuck out like a sore thumb after breaking out a chess set, but the students were quite tolerant of our minor commotion.



NM Kit Crittenden (Left) and Tom Hales prepare for a blitz game

I took on Crittenden in the first five minute game as Ron headed for a bathroom break. After a feeble attempt with black to mimic Kit's own Caro-Kann style, the folly of my plan became evident. I was not about to beat him with his own moves! In a later game, I turned the tables and managed to win with a sharp Steiner attack against his Caro-Kann. I report this with all humility, and the proviso that NM Crittenden had not played serious chess in about twenty years. These were simply five minute games. The odds of my beating him with normal time controls are probably equal to my chance of winning the lottery (which several recent emails indicate I have). As to our final tally—my lips are sealed. Suffice it to say we had a lot of fun.

Ron Simpson explains, "Our competitive side emerged as we played to win, but enjoying the moment was our real goal, which was achieved." I got many good photos with some assistance from Ron, and also video of the two Champions in action. If you would like to see it for yourself, simply [CLICK HERE for VIDEO](#). (For good karma, please rate this video generously!) A second video of lesser quality is also posted, containing a complete game which has been transcribed and published at www.asheborochess.com in the NC Chess Games Database.

Alas, the night ended too soon. I will count this meeting among my most cherished chess memories. Work continues on the "Crittenden Archive Project," my effort to document the career of one of North Carolina's greatest players. Stay tuned to www.ncchess.org and www.asheborochess.com for more information.

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