
Chess and The Evolution of the Modern Athlete

Situating the 2018 World Chess Championship in Sports History

Technical Writing Final Project
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Chapter 1

The Opening

Something has been taking a few extra hours out of my schedule for the past two weeks. I am not talking about extracurricular activities or internship applications. Classes are not the primary suspect either, which I am glad for. The 2018 World Chess Championship, currently being played in London, is a twelve-game classical chess match between the World Chess Champion, Magnus Carlsen of Norway, and his challenger, Fabiano Caruana of the United States. Since November 9th, I have been engrossed in all aspects of this event: the media coverage, the press conferences, and the games themselves. For starters, the storylines surrounding this edition of the championship have left little to be desired. Carlsen, who has been ranked #1 in the world since 2011, is facing his toughest opponent in Caruana, who is currently right behind Carlsen in the world rankings.

Classic	Rapid	Blitz	Top100	Enter Name or Country	
#	Name	Classic	Rapid	Blitz	Age
1	Carlsen	2835.0	0.0	2880.0	2939.0
2	Caruana	2832.0	0.0	2789.0	2767.0

Figure 1.1: A mere 3 rating points separates the two championship contenders in classical chess (*Photo Credits: 2700chess.com*)

Additionally, Caruana is the first American since the infamous Bobby Fischer, who was world champion from 1972 to 1975, to challenge for the throne of world chess (it has been a 46 year wait!). As far as actual gameplay, Carlsen and Caruana are also considered to be the world's best chess calculators outside of actual chess engines. The match itself certainly proved this to be true: all 12 classical games resulted in a draw and each player only had a few chances of winning throughout the match. In the end, Carlsen only retained the title by winning 3 straight rapid games in the tiebreak portion. The champion, who has now successfully defended his title on 4 separate occasions, recognized just how close the match was. During

the post-match press conference, he said, "Fabiano was the strongest opponent I've played so far in a world championship match. In classical chess he has at this point just as much right as I do to call himself the best in the world. I'm very happy to have overcome this great challenge. I'll continue to work to get better."



Figure 1.2: Magnus Carlsen (left) and Fabiano Caruana (right) deep in thought during the WCC (Photo Credits: [Maria Emelianova/Chess.com](#) and [Lennart Ootes](#))

This quotation is just one of many that made its way to viewers like me via social media. Like most casual fans, I had responsibilities during the last few weeks that made a trip to London fairly unreasonable. As a result, I depended on social media coverage and online streams for news about the match. I frequently visited the Twitter stream for the championship's official [#carlsencaruana](#) hashtag to learn about the public's analysis of the match. In-depth analysis videos on YouTube and unprecedented coverage by mainstream news outlets like The Guardian and The New York Times kept me updated even if I missed out on viewing the games live. When I did get a chance to tune in, I listened to commentary provided by top grandmasters on popular chess websites like [chess.com](#) and [chess24.com](#). Ultimately, I was able to intimately experience the match through these online resources despite my physical separation from the venue.

Olimpiu G. Urcan
@olimpiuurcan

Follow ▾

This is a good moment to celebrate the good side of Twitter. What an incredible time we live in: master-class reactions, multiple commentary hotspots, legends calling in, advanced graphics, instant engine-induced enlightenment. Back in 1927 all they had was a pair of eyeglasses.

12:02 PM - 26 Nov 2018

Erwin l'Ami
@erwinlamli

Follow ▾

With commentary by Kasparov, Aronian, Nakamura, Giri, Svidler, Grischuk and others, you would almost forget to tweet.
[#CarlsenCaruana](#)

11:35 AM - 26 Nov 2018

Figure 1.3: Appreciation for how closely the public could follow the championship from all angles (Tweet Credits: [Olimpiu G. Urcan](#))

Figure 1.4: The names refer to a former world champion, the 11th, 16th, 5th, 19th, and 9th-ranked chess players in the world respectively (Tweet Credits: [Erwin l'Ami](#))

Every tweet, comment, and post about the event also shaped my understanding of the match as a part of sports history. We know chess players are paid to play a game. For chess professionals, the ability to correctly interpret a chess position is their ability to "make the right pass" or "find the open receiver". For top grandmasters like Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana, doing this part of their job well literally determines how heavy their pockets will be after any given tournament and how likely they will be invited back to face the world's toughest competition. Yes, chess players do not physically exert themselves as much as their counterparts involved in mainstream sports. Their sport isn't commercialized and televised as prolifically as mainstream sports. And yes, chess players might lack the swagger Americans typically associate with stars like Lebron James, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Tom Brady.

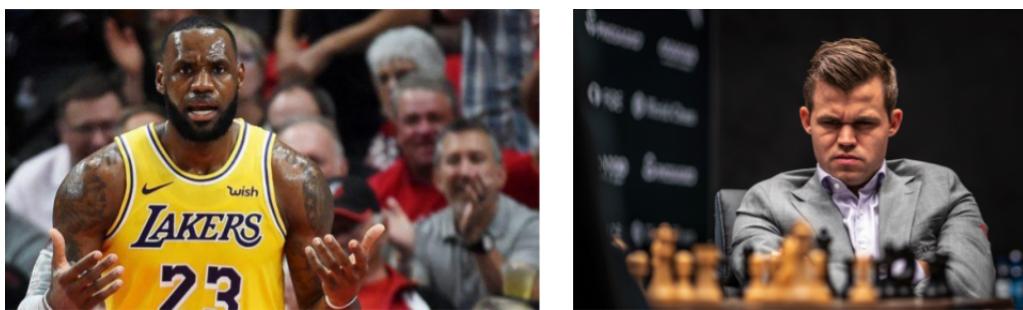


Figure 1.5: Different uniforms, same stare (*Photo Credits: NBC Sports and US Chess*)

Nonetheless, coverage of the championship that started the moment Caruana qualified to be Carlsen's challenger has viewed chess as a legitimate sport and the players as bonified athletes. It is important to note that the social media platforms and modern streaming solutions that have shaped this view didn't even exist 10 years ago. So how were chess players seen when such technological innovations were decades away from being invented?


Grand Chess Tour
@GrandChessTour

Following

The game between Carlsen and Caruana attracted ESPN, HBO, Sports Illustrated and the legendary Harry Benson. In fact, there was so much media at the @STLChessClub that for the first 15 minutes of the game only media was allowed in the playing hall while the fans waited in line



Figure 1.6: A game between Carlsen and Caruana during the 2018 Sinquefield Cup hosted at the St. Louis Chess Club this past summer was a highly-publicized preview of the match that would happen months later in London (*Image Credits: Grand Chess Tour*)

Furthermore, how has the definition of the modern athlete shifted in response to this view that chess players are legitimate athletes? Let's start exploring the answers to these questions by looking at the game itself. What really is this game of chess?

Chapter 2

The Preparation

2.1 Origins

Chess has a longer history than most of the sports we're used to seeing on the big screen today. One of its oldest ancestors, named *chaturanga*, was first played in India some 1500 years ago and only bears some resemblance to what we see on modern chess boards. If you consider games that barely relate to modern chess and theories proposed by a number of other cultures, which some historians have done, the origins go back even further. Nevertheless, the point is that chess is really, really old.

Chaturanga, much like chess, was a two-player game that simulated a battle between two armies through the strategic movement of opposing sets of game pieces. It is unclear if those who commonly played the game held any sort of special status. From ancient India, this game traveled to the Persian Empire where the game was adopted and became known as *chatrang*. In the mid-7th century, the Muslim Conquest of the Persian Empire brought the game to ancient Arabs, who altered its name to *shatranj*. These Arabs eventually moved westward and brought the game to Europe which is where the game we know as chess began to take shape.

2.2 Chess Players as Hobbyists

As the game started to put down roots in Europe, history tells us that it was an activity experienced mostly by the rich. According to Patricia Simon, an art history and women's studies professor at the University of Michigan, "chess was a leisurely upper-class pursuit frequently played between a heterosexual pair in the medieval period" (59). Additionally, she remarks that "chess also became a disciplined exercise for aristocratic men who both entertained themselves and sharpened their combative wits at the chessboard" (59). At this point in history, those who played

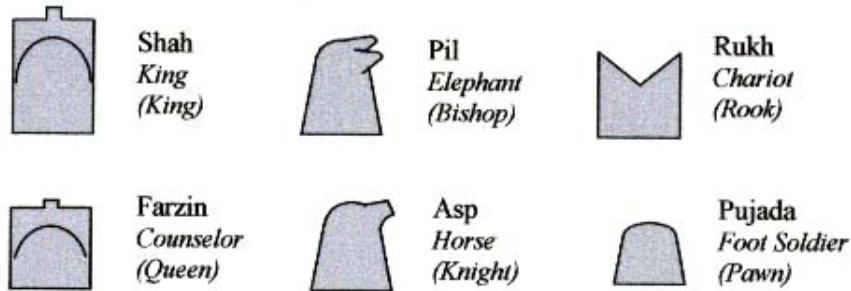


Figure 2.1: The pieces used in the ancient game of shatranj (*Image Credits: [Ancientchess.com](#)*)

chess did so for fun and were most definitely not considered to be athletes of any kind (nor did they intend to frame themselves in such a way).

2.3 Chess Players as Competitors

Competitive chess made its first significant strides during the 19th century. In 1851, London, which was already home to a bubbling chess community, hosted what is considered today to be the world's first official international chess tournament. Those who participated were not chess players by trade; a handful of teachers took part while the eventual winner, Adolf Andersson of Germany, was a chess hobbyist who spent most of his time teaching math. Andersson also went on to win the 1862 London Chess Tournament, which was the first tournament that incorporated timing in chess (they used hourglasses). Following Andersson's two-decade long reign at the top of the chess world, a long line of chess greats followed in his footsteps and began to treat chess like a legitimate sport and an actual profession.

Wilhelm Steinitz, an Austrian chess player who had participated in the 1862 tournament went on to become the 1st official chess world champion in 1886. Steinitz, unlike Andersson, eventually dedicated all of his time to chess and developed a significant amount of chess theory for his 1889 book *The Modern Chess Instructor*. Emanuel Laskar, who defeated Steinitz in the 1894 World Chess Championship, made the professional prospects of chess more attractive by pushing for higher pay for chess players. Then came Jose Raul Capablanca, who crushed Laskar in the 1921 version of the WCC. Capablanca actually walked away from his educational aspirations and his hopes of playing professional baseball to pursue chess full-time and did so rather successfully. These first three world champions, along with numerous other serious chess players at the time who played in tournaments, wrote chess books, and started chess clubs helped sustain and promote the competitive possibilities of chess. As a result, the game had become a legitimate

sport by the time Capablanca became the 3rd World Chess Champion.

Professor Arpad Elo's virtual rating list of history's greatest players in the pre-Fischer era				
#	Name	Rating	Notes	
1	Capablanca	2725	3rd World Champion (1921–27)	
2	Botvinnik	2720	6th World Champion (1948–57; 1958–60; 1961–63)	
3	Lasker	2720	2nd World Champion (1894–1921)	
4	Tal	2700	8th World Champion (1960–61)	
5	Alekhine	2690	4th World Champion (1927–35; 1937–45)	
6	Morphy	2690	World Champion 1858–62 (unofficial)	
7	Smyslov	2690	7th World Champion (1957–58)	
8	Petrosian	2680	9th World Champion (1963–69)	
9	Reshevsky	2680	7-time US Champion; =1st Buenos Aires 1920	
10	Spassky	2680	10th World Champion (1969–72)	
11	Bronstein	2670	World Championship Challenger 1951	
12	Keres	2670	Soviet Champion 1947, 1950, 1951; 2nd at 1953	
13	Korchnoi	2665	World Championship Challenger 1978, 1985	
14	Fine	2660	=1st AVRO 1938	
15	Geller	2655	6 time Candidate; twice Soviet champion	
16	Boleslavsky	2650	=1st Budapest Candidates 1950	
17	Euwe	2650	5th World Champion (1935–37)	
18	Steinitz	2650	1st World Champion (1886–94)	
19	Rubinstein	2640	Bad Pistyan 1912 or =1st St Petersburg 1907	
20	Najdorf	2635	2-time Candidate 1950 & 1953; Amsterdam 1956	
21	Pillsbury	2630	Hastings 1895	
22	Portisch	2630	8-time Candidate	
23	Timman	2630	FIDE World Championship Challenger 1993	
24	Flohr	2620	Leningrad-Moscow 1939	
25	Gligoric	2620	3-time Candidate (1953, 1958, 1968)	
26	Kholmov	2620	=1st Soviet Championship 1963	
27	Kotov	2620	Twice-Candidate: Budapest 1950 & Zurich 1951	
28	Larsen	2620	4-time Candidate: 1965, 1968, 1971 & 1975	
29	Maroczy	2620	Ostend 1905	

Figure 2.2: The first 3 world champions are rated highly even though they played before an official way of ranking and rating chess players existed (Photo Credits: 2700chess.com)

While Capablanca also contributed significantly to chess theory, he also desired to see a standardization of rules in competitive chess. This is yet another aspect of modern chess that aligns with mainstream sports; like any other professional sport, chess requires rules that dictate gameplay, pay, and scheduling. Capablanca's desire for such rules was a logical response to the nature of chess as a sport at the time. The official world championship matches only happened if enough prize money was raised by a challenger. Additionally, serious chess players only earned moderate financial rewards if they racked up good performances at tournaments. As a result, the legitimacy of competitive chess as an actual sport was questioned because of its economic practicality. Yes, many people played it seriously and it was firmly established in Europe but could it be a full-time job for years to come?

With these thoughts in mind, Capablanca proposed the "London Rules", a set of guidelines intended for future use in world championships that set the size of the world championship purse at no less than \$10,000. Top players at the time signed off on these rules but the financial requirement did hinder those who couldn't foot the bill. Take Akiba Rubinstein as an example. Rubinstein was a Polish grandmaster who been on track to challenge Lasker, the 2nd world champion, to a world championship match before World War II broke out. In 1927, Rubinstein was unable to fundraise the \$10,000 required to challenge Capablanca and his bid to be-

come world champion fizzled quickly. In this way, the "London Rules" ensured that players competing in a world championship would receive fair compensation but also turned away others who could not find the resources to even make an official challenge. Capablanca recognized that these rules would still allow the best chess players to challenge for the world title because of the prize money they would hypothetically earn from other tournaments.

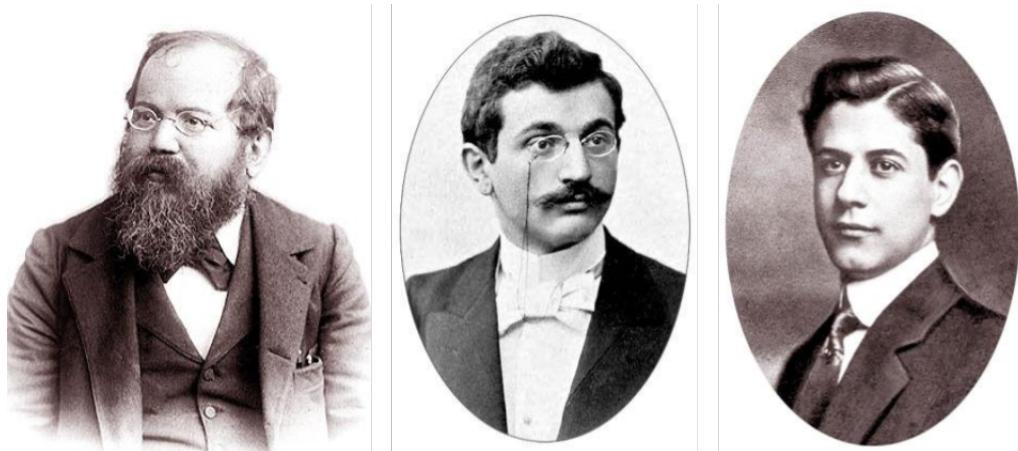


Figure 2.3: Steinitz (left), Lasker (middle), and Capablanca (right) all contributed to the game of chess and helped increase its feasibility as a profession (*Image Credits: Chess-games.com*)

This was true for his immediate successor, Alexander Alekhine of France. In 1927, Alekhine raised enough money with the backing of the Argentinian Chess Federation and went on to beat Capablanca to become the 4th World Chess Champion. At this point in history, chess as a competitive sport had gained significant traction across Europe. Effectively organizing the competitive spirits of players across the world would characterize the coming decades of international chess.

2.4 Chess Players as Representatives

Today, chess has an international governing body. Much like the National Basketball Association or National Football League governs the sports of basketball and football respectively here in the states, FIDE, or the World Chess Federation oversees chess competition on an international level. According to their official website, the federation was created in 1924 because "in those days, there was no common code governing the Laws of Chess or uniform regulations for International Competitions". For twenty years, the federation's influence was not felt in world championship play due to a multitude of reasons; the organization was comfortable with Capablanca's "London Rules" being the official world champi-

onship guidelines and had placed an emphasis on organizing a Chess Olympiad or "Tournament of Nations" that would bring together teams of players from different countries to compete for a team chess title.

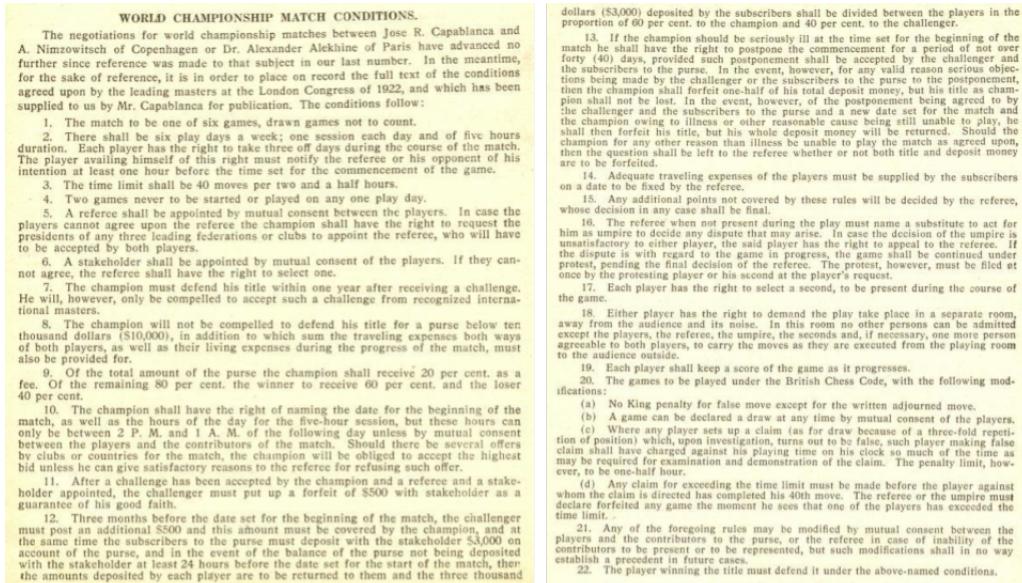


Figure 2.4: One version of Capablanca's London Rules covered everything from match length and time controls to match schedule and appointment of a referee (*Image Credits: Dec. 1923 Edition of the American Chess Bulletin*)

In 1948, FIDE organized an impromptu tournament to determine the next king of chess in response to the unexpected death of Alexander Alekhine in 1946. Mikhail Botvinnik of the Soviet Union won the 5-man tournament in front of thousands of spectators and the USSR's hold on the title of World Chess Champion officially began. This tournament is significant to the game of chess because the leadup to the championship helped FIDE outline official procedures for determining how future world championships would be contested. This new structure gave the professional chess scene a rhythm of sorts; instead of having to wait for challengers to raise money for a championship bid, spectators and players alike were able to look forward to regularly scheduled world championships and qualifying matches. Today, the World Chess Championship follows a revised 2-year cycle that differs slightly from the original 3-year cycle specified by FIDE. Within this cycle, players must fulfill certain performance criteria in tournaments leading up to the Candidates Tournament.

As its name suggests, the candidates who participate in this tournament compete for a potential match with the World Chess Champion. The world championship match that will be played in 2020 will feature the winner of the 2020



Figure 2.5: 3 Russians, 2 Americans, an Armenian, an Azerbaijani, and a Chinese player competed in the most recent Candidates Tournament; Fabiano Caruana, pictured 2nd from the left on the bottom row, just lost the championship match to Magnus Carlsen (*Image Credits: Chess.com*)

Candidates Tournament and Magnus Carlsen.

FIDE's renewed approach to professional chess set players up to be official representatives of their home country. This was especially true for professional players from the Soviet Union and the United States during the 2nd half of the 20th century. After Botvinnik's victory in 1948, the title stayed in Soviet hands until 1972, when Bobby Fischer of the United States rose through the ranks of the chess world to challenge for the title of World Chess Champion. Fischer's match with reigning champion Boris Spassky, dubbed the "Match of the Century", was much more than a battle between two individuals over the chessboard because of the Cold War's ongoing effect on the relationship between the U.S. and USSR. Nicholas Gilmore of *The Saturday Evening Post* described the political undertones of the match when he wrote the following:

The event was hugely publicized as a pitting of the West and the Communists during the Cold War, and the game of chess as a metaphor of strategy and domination didn't hurt. The Reykavik (the match was held in Iceland) faceoff was PBS's highest-rated show at the time, and the whole experience even spawned a Broadway musical.

Fischer ended up dominating Spassky over the board as millions of Americans watched from home and thus won at least a symbolic victory for his country. Despite his victory, the psychology of the match negatively affected Fischer. Even prior to the match, possible Soviet collusion during several tournaments had already gotten to Fischer's head. Fischer was known to be wildly disillusioned with



Figure 2.6: Bobby Fischer (left) and Fabiano Caruana (right) brought their minds to the chess board in hopes of bringing the World Chess Champion title back to the United States but only one was successful (*Photo Credits: The Olympians and Niki Riga*)

many aspects of chess (i.e. he had issues with championship format, alleged pre-arranged draws between his rivals) and this disillusionment began to appear in Fischer's comments about matters away from the board. He became candidly anti-American near the end of his life and after the 9/11 attacks, he called the event "wonderful news" during a radio interview in the Philippines. Rene Chun of *The Atlantic* documented the reaction to Fischer's horrible comments back in 2002 when she wrote the following:

The United States Chess Federation had always been willing to ignore Fischer's public antics, no matter how embarrassing. He was, after all, Bobby Fischer - the greatest player in the history of the game. But this was too much. On October 28 of last year the USCF unanimously passed a motion denouncing Fischer's incendiary broadcast.

At this point, even some of Fischer's biggest supporters began to view him as an embarrassment to the game of chess and to the United States as a whole. Taking Fischer as an example, it is evident that chess players, as ambassadors for the game of chess and for the respective countries they chose to represent, had the ability to represent their nation poorly. In mainstream sports, a comparison can be drawn to domestic violence cases that involve American football players. Within this context, a player's off-field actions have always reflected poorly on the franchise they play for and this often causes the team to release the player. While most chess players have not been caught up in such controversial incidents, the spotlight on the most well-known grandmasters who play against each other in the best tournaments does shed light on their behavior away from the board. For Fischer, this spotlight revealed his rapid descent into insanity and strained his relationship with his own country. For those at the top of the game today, such a spotlight, when mixed with

the rise of technology and social media, makes being a chess professional much more than moving pieces on a board.

Chapter 3

The Middlegame

Hobbyist. Competitor. Representative. These three roles describe the aspects of a professional chess player that are seen by the public. The best chess players today love playing chess as a hobby. The chess community knows this because top grandmasters are present on the same chess websites amateur and casual players often use to play one another. Top grandmasters also love to compete with other strong players. This occurs most often in tournaments and matches that are visible to those who physically attend such events, watch the events online, or read about the events afterwards. Lastly, professional chess players are representatives when they sit down at the chess board. During the 2018 World Chess Championship, this was especially true for Fabiano Caruana. He was pegged as the one with the hopes of American chess and sports fans riding on his every move and was even compared to Bobby Fischer in some articles. In general, the coverage of the 2018 World Chess Championship serves as a good example of how all three of these layers have been harnessed in some fashion through technology to mold a new identity for chess players as athletes.

Searching for the Next Bobby Fischer, the U.S. Finds Fabi

Fabiano Caruana, 26, has dedicated much of his young life to chess. This month's world championships could be the moment all those games pay off.



Figure 3.1: Caruana, who now lives in St. Louis and trains at the world-renowned St. Louis Chess Club, was certainly carrying the hopes of some enthusiastic chess fans here in the states (*Photo Credits: Daniel Acker, Article Credits: Pia Peterson*)

3.1 Playing the Pros

The idea that chess players are legitimate athletes became a reality because of technology's ability to package the game in an attractive and deliverable way for audiences across the globe. Nowadays, most chess fans won't sign up for a local tournament in their area if they want to play some chess for fun. They'll visit chess.com or lichess.org, create an account, and play with random strangers who have the same idea in mind. And that's exactly who they'll play for the most part: random strangers of similar chess proficiency who might be tapping on their phones from across the globe. On the other hand, any player can play a game against professional players online. While top professionals often prefer to play stronger opponents when they're online, a number of grandmasters have given their time to normal online players (See Figure 3.2).



#chess24 #banterblitz #petersvidler
Banter Blitz with GM Peter Svidler - November 14, 2018

Figure 3.2: Peter Svidler, a Russian grandmaster who is currently ranked 19th in the world, accepts challenges from users of the chess24.com website during "Banter Blitz" chess sessions; he trash talks as well, hence the name!

This virtual intimacy between fans and professionals is possible because of the Internet. During the 2018 World Chess Championship, the influence of such virtual intimacy was felt on Twitter; fans who had become familiar with Magnus Carlsen's online and over-the-board reputation praised the skill he showed during the match's faster tiebreak portion using some very specific language (See Figure 3.3).

This virtual intimacy doesn't exist in mainstream sports. As a youngster, you



Figure 3.3: Magnus Carlsen has won numerous tournaments on [lichess.org](#) under the username "DrDrunkenstein" and his overwhelming victory in the championship's tiebreak portion reminded chess fans of his online self (*Image Credits: David Hill*)

might dream about playing against Lebron James or Stephen Curry. For most aspiring basketball players, getting good enough to even make it onto the court with those players is nearly impossible. With chess, the skill gap between someone like me and a top-20 professional player is huge but does not reduce my chances of playing someone of that caliber because online chess platforms have made such interactions commonplace. Some grandmasters are happy to engage in such interactions for the sake of promoting chess as a sport and educating casual and amateur players about the game. How might this inform our definition of the modern athlete? It tells us that the type of modern "pro" athlete that is seen through the contemporary chess player is able and often willing to interact with fans on a level playing field.

3.2 Watching the Pros

While casual fans like me enjoy would enjoy playing against the best professionals, the results of these clashes would most likely be one-sided. Competition between those players makes for much more exciting chess. As mentioned previously, the 2018 World Chess Championship featured the world's two best players. It is not surprising then that the event broke online viewership records on numerous fronts.



Figure 3.4: There was nearly a 50,000 difference in viewership between the last day and tiebreak day of the championship match!

According to Twitchtracker.com, the "Chess" category on the popular streaming

platform [Twitch.tv](#) saw record viewership on numerous occasions. When I was able to watch the match myself, the record for highest number of viewers was broken on 4 occasions. The stream run specifically by [Chess.com](#), the world's leading chess website, contributed the largest number of viewers to this count and also saw a new peak in viewership.

Amongst mainstream media outlets, [The Guardian](#), [The New York Times](#), and [ESPN](#) all covered the event in some capacity. These well-known media outlets helped spread chess news to sports fans who didn't even follow chess before the world championship match (See Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5: Tweets like this should be encouraging to chess fans, organizers, and players! (*Tweet Credits: [Jacob Maestri](#)*)

As a result, the online traffic surrounding this recent championship match was busier than ever before. This is important because chess viewership is far behind that of any mainstream sport. The amount of money put into chess also pales in comparison to how much funding other sports get. Therefore, this rise in chess viewership during the 2018 World Chess Championship confirms what we know to be true about the modern athlete: viewership of an athlete's sport drives the sport's growth and the world's increased familiarity with the individual athlete herself.

3.3 Judging the Pros

Social media has become intertwined with how we view athletes. One public misstep from a high-profile athlete can spread quickly across multiple social media platforms. Just ask Magnus Carlsen. In the last classical game of the recent championship, Carlsen offered a draw to Caruana even though chess engines gave his position on the board a favorable evaluation. Spectators, who had been hungering for a decisive result for 11 games, assumed that Carlsen would continue playing such a position. When the word broke that a draw had been agreed upon, the chess world blew up. Fans called out Carlsen for being a coward and many said he didn't deserve to win the title after ending the match in such an uninspiring

way. Chess enthusiasts were embarrassed that their champion, as *the* representative of chess, had shied away from a fight in front of thousands of potential new chess fans.



Figure 3.6: Many in the chess world believed that 12 draws in the classical portion of the championship would drive away sponsors and casual spectators alike (*Tweet Credits: The Bristol Chess Times*)

On the contrary, the recent world championship challenger was judged favorably by the institutions and people he represented at the match. Caruana, formerly an Italian grandmaster, carried the hopes of the St. Louis Chess Club, the U.S. Chess Federation or USCF, and the U.S. into their match against Carlsen. Based on his exemplary performance and incredibly humble attitude in defeat, he was seen in a positive light by these entities and by fans all around the world (See Figure 3.7). Evidently, chess players, as representatives of the game itself, have been placed under more scrutiny because of social media. As a result, the modern athlete as seen through the lens of chess affirms the existing mold as someone who is constantly under scrutiny for actions on and off "the field". Who would stand trial for the first two? No welcome party was needed for the fridges.



Figure 3.7: U.S. Chess, the mayor of St. Louis and the St. Louis Chess Club congratulated and thanked Caruana on Twitter for his valiant effort during the 2018 WCC (*Tweet Credits: U.S. Chess, Mayor Lyda Krewson, St. Louis Chess Club*)

Chapter 4

The Endgame



Figure 4.1: The St. Louis Chess Club has helped increase the popularity of chess among young kids in St. Louis through classes for all levels (*Photo Credits: The Economist*)

4.1 Conclusion

Chess has made its way from hobby for the select few to sport fit for the masses. While its early history is grounded in chess-like games originally played outside of the Western world, its growth was spurred on by players who wanted to test their mettle against others through matches and tournaments. As a result, friendly competition between aristocrats took a backseat to organized competition between chess hobbyists from all around the world. The first chess tournaments held during the 1800s helped bring certain players to the forefront of the chess world. An

official world championship match, established in 1886, pushed these players to consider competitive chess as a profession. The best players of the early 20th century were further encouraged in this by the "London Rules", which attached clearer guidelines for gameplay and a larger financial reward to the title of World Chess Champion. Beginning in the mid-20th century, the alignment of the Cold War with a lengthy Soviet grip on the world title cast a political shadow on the US-USSR battles over the board. In particular, the 1972 World Chess Championship that pitted Bobby Fischer against Boris Spassky framed both players as representatives of their respective countries. Fischer, who struggled psychologically with the Soviet chess machine that constantly opposed him, dealt with disillusionment and developed anti-American views later in his life. He was cut off by the U.S. Chess Federation because of these misaligned values and his anti-American view of the 9/11 attacks. Professional chess players, taking Fischer as an example (a good one on the board, a negative one off), must recognize that their actions away from the board can have profound impact on whom they represent at the board.

Today, chess is still an up-and-coming sport. The game in America lacks sponsorships, funding, and general interest. Despite this, chess is a sport that allows for a particularly intimate form of interaction between players and fans: relatively unskilled fans can actually play top grandmasters in an online setting. Fans can also easily watch high-level tournaments. The 2018 World Chess Championship was one such tournament. The media coverage of this event taught us about two ways in which professional chess players are similar to other athletes. Firstly, chess players rely on viewership of their sport to be known and well-known by the public. Secondly, chess players, as representatives of their sport at the very least, are under scrutiny at and away from the board like other pro athletes.

It all comes back to technology. Media coverage made the 2018 World Chess Championship seem like a mainstream sports event. Immediate Twitter reactions and cheeky post-game remarks at the press conferences certainly made it feel that way. As we look ahead to chess tournaments in the future, whether or not the media will continue to cover chess players like their mainstream counterparts is up in the air. This past championship benefitted from being the sport's most important event. Will we see similar treatment and coverage for more run-of-the-mill chess events? We won't know until the next event comes around. Until then, I might just help the cause and share about how exciting of an event the championship was. Feel free to join me!

4.2 Author's Notes

The history of chess didn't just jump from Bobby Fischer's reign as world champion to the present day. In between, the chess world saw all-time greats such as Anatoly Karpov, Garry Kasparov, and Vishwanathan Anand all spend some time

as world champion. As you know, the current king of chess is Magnus Carlsen of Norway. Carlsen, in preparation for the 2018 World Chess Championship, adopted an all-vegetarian diet, exercised by running and playing basketball and soccer, and then trained for hours each day alongside a chess board. For the pundits who claim that chess isn't a real sport because of the lack of physical activity needed to play, take that!



Figure 4.2: During a tournament in August, the Chess World Champion got some much needed exercise at Washington University's very own Francis Field! (*Photo credits: Magnus Carlsen's Instagram*)