

In Memoriam - David Lees

David Lees--Chess Master, Teacher and Gadfly

by Lee Enderlin

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I vividly remember the first time I saw National Master Dave Lees. It was during my first visit to the Springfield Chess Club in 1992. Dave was playing five minute chess with IM Dr. Josef Vatnikov who had recently immigrated to the United States from Russia. The two of them were capturing pieces and banging them down hard on the clock they were using. A friend of mine poked me in the arm. "That's Lees and Vatnikov," he pointed out. To be honest, I didn't know who Dr. Vatnikov was, but the name Dave Lees sounded oddly familiar. I couldn't understand why at the time because until then, I had never been involved with organized chess or even been a member of the USCF. Months later, however, the mystery was solved.

Shortly after first meeting Dave, I volunteered to be the editor of the Western Mass. Chess Association's newsletter, a job I still hold. With that came a closer association with Dave and over the next four years, a personal friendship.

Dave's chess career is chronicled in his highly regarded book, *The Chess Games of David Lees*, which is not only full of annotated games, but also contains a history of chess in western Mass. and numerous anecdotes. For instance, on his way to his honeymoon in New York City with his bride of just one day, Ramona, in 1969, Dave actually drove to the New Britain Chess Club where the annual Massachusetts vs. Connecticut match "just happened" to be going on (of course, he knew that). He was asked to play for Connecticut which, as a member of the Hartford Chess Club, he was entitled to do. In the meantime, the captain of the Mass. squad penciled him in for their team, too. As Dave says in his book, "When the pairings went up, I was scheduled to play Board 3 for Massachusetts and Board 1 for Connecticut! It would have been even funnier if I were on Board 2 for both teams. Then I could have taken a quick draw with myself, and left for New York! That would have made Ramona happy!" Eventually, Dave ended up playing Board 1 for Connecticut, much to the howl of the Massachusetts team, against then Mass. State Champion Ed Formanek. Dave won, though the match ended in a 15-15 tie.

"I wasn't too thrilled about it at the time," Mona said years later, "but I got used to it. Dave used to love to tell that story. I think he felt guilty about it." Personally, I think it was Dave's way of telling the world what a wonderful girl he married.

It is the games in his book that show what kind of person Dave was. The annotations are in great

depth--Dave was not the kind of master who tries to "hide" his ideas. Indeed, generous to a fault when it came to chess, he was a respected and admired mentor for many members of the Springfield Chess Club with his impromptu lessons. Despite the lateness of the hour, his answer was always "Yeah, sure" to the question, "Take a look at just one more position, Dave?" One of his informal students in the late 1970's was a young Patrick Wolff who went on to become New England's only native grandmaster.

Dave had a great sense of humor and a love for old movies and current events, but he took chess very seriously--a little too seriously as some raucous MACA and New England Chess Association meetings can attest. Later, he'd laugh at his confrontational behavior and admit that taking chess too seriously was one of his biggest flaws. It's not surprising, though, that all the photos in existence of him hovering over a board or holding a trophy show an unsmiling, almost stern face. You don't need a Ph.D. in psychology to see that this intensity was the fuel of his competitive fire.

He learned the game at a young age, exhibiting a natural talent to defeat his peers and even his adult counselors at summer camp every year (at this age, Dave also beat everyone at checkers). He dropped the game for awhile, picking it up again in high school where he really began studying it.

In 1965, he won the Armed Forces Chess Championship in Washington, D. C. with a score of +6 =2 -1. As a member of the Air Force, he was stationed in Texas at the time. While there, he was a familiar participant in numerous civilian and military tournaments, drawing the attention of Jude Acers who wrote some very nice, though not always accurate, things about Dave in "Texas Knights." For instance, he wrote that Dave would have a hard time in the upcoming Championship because one "Robert Fischer was now in the Army." Of course, Fischer never served in the Armed Forces. What Mr. Acers was correct in, though, was his assessment of Dave's talent: "The extreme danger of this newcomer is hiding in the closet. Lees is promising as a major master prospect on many counts. "There's no question that in his prime, Dave had a good shot at earning an International Master title and at one point, had even earned a norm toward that goal. However, the dual pressures of fatherhood and career forced him to keep his chess efforts local thus depriving him of the international tournaments necessary to make further norms. Dave himself, though, didn't think that even if he had ever been given the opportunity, he would have made grandmaster.

From 1972 to 1976, Dave played little tournament chess and concentrated on promoting it instead. It was just as well since these were the years of the Fischer Boom and Dave provided invaluable service to the chess newcomers by organizing tournaments and giving lectures. He began to get active again as a player in 1976, but suffered a blow which stopped him altogether. In 1980, at the age of just 37, Dave suffered a heart attack so bad it required open heart surgery. This and other health problems kept him out of tournaments for almost three years, until the 1983 Western Mass. and Conn. Valley Championship where he went +2 =3 -0. He admits it took him "awhile to hit my stride," but some of his best chess was still ahead of him.

One of his greatest performances over the board was at the 1986 World Open in Philadelphia. He scored +4 =2 -3 for a performance rating of 2401 against players whose average rating was 2396. A favorite game of his from that event was a hard-fought 45 move loss to Viswanathan Anand (that game is published in his book). The following game from that tournament, with notes from Dave's book, was played against the renowned International Master, Vivek Rao. It is an excellent example of Dave's attacking style and the tactical fireworks for which he was so well known. How many players would have found Black's stunning 34th move, particularly over the board?

IM Rao--NM Lees

World Open

Philadelphia

July 3, 1986

Queen's Gambit Declined

Notes by NM David Lees

1. d4 d5

2. c4 e6

3. Nf3 Nf6

4. Nc3 c5

5. cxd5 exd5

Better is 5...Nxd5, the Semi-Tarrasch Defense.

6. Bg5 cxd4

7. Nxd4 Be7

8. e3 0-0

9. Be2 Nc6

10. 0-0 Be6

Black has reasonable development, but his isolated d-pawn remains a liability.

11. Rc1 Kh8

I was not sure how to continue, so I played a waiting move.

12. Nxc6

Somewhat surprising as the Black pawns are reunited, but White's idea is quite logical and positionally correct.

12. bxc6

13. Na4

White's plan is to control the c5 and d4 squares keeping the Black c-pawn backward and weak.

13. Qd7

14. Bf3

Not 14. Nc5 Bxc5 15. Bxc5 Rxc5? Ne4 winning.

14. Rfc8

15. Qd4 Rab8

16. b3 Rb4

17. Qd2 Bg4

Black is becoming more aggressive because the endgame is against him.

18. Bxg4

Perhaps 18. Nc5 Bxc5 19. Rxc5 is stronger.

18. Rxc5

19. Bf4

Necessary if White is to play for the win. Instead, 19. Bxf6 allows Rxc5+ 20. Kxc5 Qg4+ 21. Kh1 Qf3+ with at least a draw.

19. Rg6

20. f3

Preventing 20...Ne4, but creating a slight weakness in White's Kingside pawns.

20. Bd6

21. Bxd6 Qxd6

22. Qd4 Rh6

23. g3 Rg6

Threatening 23... Rxc3+ 24. hxg3 Qxc3+ 25. Kh1 Qh3+ draw.

24. Rc2 Rc7

25. Nc5 Nd7

26. Nxd7 Rxd7

27. Rfc1 h6

28. Kg2

Here or on the next few moves, 28. Rxc6 Qxc6 29. Rxc6 Rxc6 is worthless for White.

28. Re6

29. Rc5 Rde7

30. R1c3 Qd7

31. b4

White's pressure on the c-pawn remains strong. Black, therefore, must continue to harass White's King.

31. Rf6

32. Qd3 Re5

33. a4 Rh5

34. g4

The critical position in the game.

34. Rxf3!!

This must have surprised White.

35. Kxf3?

Over the board, White probably found it hard to believe that Black's sacrifice is sound. Also bad is 35.gxh5? Qg4+ 36. Kh1 Rf2 and White will be mated. The correct move is 35. Qd4! Rhh3 36. Rxc6 Rxe3 37. Rxe3 Rxe3 38. Qxe3 Qxc6 39. Qxa7 Qc2+ with a draw most certain.

35. Rh3+

36. Ke2

White plans to run his King to the Queenside for safety. The options are:

A) 36. Kf4? Qd6+ 37. Kf5 g6#

B) 36. Kg2? Qxc3+ 37. Kh1 Qf3+ 38. Kg1 Rh5 wins.

C) 36. Kf2 Qxc3 37. Rxc6 Rxh2+ 38. Ke1 Qg3+ and mate in two.

36. Qxc3+

37. Kd2 Rxh2+

38. Kc1

It appears that the White King has made it to safety, but Black's attack is hardly over.

38. Qxb4!

Threatening 39. ...Qb2+ 40. Kd1 Rh1+ and mate next move. Defense is difficult. Consider the following tries:

A) 39. Rc2 (39. Rb3 Qxc5+) Rh1+ 40. Qd1 Rxd1+ and all of the Black pawns ensure the win.

B) 39. Kd1 Qb2! 40. Rc2 (40. Qf1 Qd2#) Qb1+ 41. Rc1 Qxd3+ and mate next move.

39. Rb5!

An inspired attempt to save the game. The Rook guards the b2 square, attacks the Black Queen, and threatens a possible Rb8+. Finally, Black cannot play 39....cxb5? because of 40. Rc8+ and mate next move.

39. Rh1+

40. Kc2

Unfortunately for White, 40. Kd2 fails to 40. ...cxb5! as the remaining Rook is pinned.

40. Qxa4+

41. Rbb3

Else White loses this Rook and remains many pawns down.

41. Qa2+

42. Rb2 Rh2+

Resigns 0-1

After 43. Kd1 Qxb2 White will have to give up the Queen with 44. Qc2 to avoid a quick mate.

Despite his successes, or maybe because of them, he did once tell me that his biggest disappointment in chess was his inability to defeat the indomitable John Curdo "when it counted" In tournament play, Dave was +0 =2 -5 against John. Dave's lone victory came in a simul that John gave at the Springfield Chess Club in 1966.

Dave was not only an excellent player and many-time champion, but a true ambassador for the game. He was well-known for traveling extensively throughout New England giving free lectures and simuls to local clubs and encouraging children to play. He was also the author of numerous, highly instructive articles for various chess periodicals. He had a knack for taking deep concepts and making them easy to understand for players of all levels and ages.

He also got involved in ways that he didn't write about. Back in the early 1980's, Shelby Lyman had a show on PBS during world championship matches. For an hour and a half each week (in later years, the show was cut back to an hour), Shelby and a panel of chess aficionados would analyze a game purporting to take place at the same time. Edmar Mednis was there virtually every week and the others rotated somewhat--I can remember James Sherwin being on several times. Most of the shows were taped in New York, but in 1984, one was taped at the local Springfield PBS affiliate, WGBY, Ch. 57, and the special guest that night was a fellow named Boris Spassky. In reality, Shelby had a fake teletype machine off camera and every once in awhile, someone would type in the moves of the game--which had actually taken place two or three days earlier--and ring a bell that would signal Shelby to say, "Oh, I see a move is coming in from our Moscow teletype." Then he'd tear off the move, announce it, put it on the demo board,

and a round of analyzing would go on. To preserve some sense of spontaneity, Shelby did ask his guests to avoid reading about the game in question beforehand. I used to watch those shows every Friday night at 11:00.

When Shelby came to Springfield, he needed someone who was chess literate to operate the "teletype" machine. Who better than Dave? Although he never appeared on camera, Dave did get listed in the credits. When he told me about this a couple of years after I first met him, it finally dawned on me where I had heard of him before--in those closing credits some ten years earlier!

At the time of death October 19, 1996 at the age of 53, Dave was active as a promoter serving on the boards of the New England Chess Association, the Massachusetts Chess Association, Connecticut Chess Inc., and the Western Massachusetts Chess Association. The latter, along with its affiliated Western Mass. Scholastic League, was a prime concern of his. He was instrumental in re-establishing it in 1989 following a ten-year period of dormancy. Ironically, and most fittingly, he was playing in a tournament when he died. The Springfield Chess Club Championship was on going on at the time. It was being played, as it always is, at one game a week over eight or so weeks. Dave had played a couple of games in the prior weeks and was scheduled to face Bob Campbell the following Monday night. Dave spent Friday evening at the home of a friend, Cam Catarino, showing Cam some ideas he hoped to use against Bob in three days. The next morning, after seeing his beloved Ramona off to work, Dave's heart finally gave out. To say that he is sadly missed is to greatly understate just how important he was to the chess world throughout New England and to Western Massachusetts in particular. And to his friends, even those like me who had the privilege to know him and learn from him for all too short a time.

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