

Steve Brandwein, Professional Chess Hustler

Posted by eric on Sunday, June 12 @ 06:10:32 CDT



(I found this on chess dryad about Mechanics main stay Steve Branwein...adding to the Mechanics lore.)-e

It has been an open secret for more than three decades that one of the strongest chess players in the United States is not a tournament player at all. This person is virtually unbeatable in five minute chess. Even strong masters who have played him hundreds of games have never defeated him even one game of chess.

It is not merely that nobody can beat him over the majority of chess games in a session: It is that nobody can beat him even one individual game of chess.

Steve Brandwein

Already, if you are in the know, you will know the name of that person. His name is Steve Brandwein.

I did actually see one player who could beat him. The name of that player was Miguel Najdorf. Najdorf mopped him up game after game, to the amazement of all. However, Najdorf was known as one of the strongest five-minute players in the world. Brandwein did win a few games, but not many, against Najdorf.

What makes Brandwein virtually unbeatable? The best way to explain this is that Brandwein has a passive style. Most of his moves are backwards. He is fond of retreat. He likes to offer his opponents a banana during the game. At the same time, he is tactically sharp. As soon as the opponent creates a weakness or makes the slightest error, he pounces. Once Brandwein has the advantage, the opponent is finished. Brandwein is known for accuracy and the absence of blunders.

Brandwein used to be a tournament player, but his last tournament was the 1964 US Open in Boston. Brandwein had a good result in that tournament and won lots of rating points. His rating at the conclusion of the tournament was 2297. Since he never played another tournament game of chess, his rating in perpetuity is just three points below 2300. However, nobody doubts that his real strength is well over 2400.

Brandwein's father was a sports writer for the New York Times. However, tragically, the father died at an early age in the 1950s, when Steve was a little boy.

Brandwein makes his living as a professional chess hustler. However, calling him a hustler does not really describe what he does. What he really does is give chess lessons. The opponents who play him know that he is unbeatable. Most of them have never won a game from him. They know in advance what the final score is going to be.

They come in with their weekly paychecks and sit down to play Brandwein. They all hope that today will be the big day: The day when they will finally win just one game of chess, just a single game, from Steve Brandwein.

For most, that dream day of joy and happiness never comes. Many men have gone to their graves having never won a game of chess from Steve Brandwein.

I was once in that category. I have been playing Steve Brandwein since the 1960s. I have won at least one game of chess from every grandmaster with whom I have ever played a long session of chess. I have defeated Najdorf, Dzindichashvili, Browne, Benko, Polgars3, Kupchik, Edward Lasker and many other famous players individual games of chess, but I had never won a game against Steve Brandwein. There are many players much stronger than I am who have never beaten him either. I have beaten some of the best, not a session of games but just one game out of many. However, I could never beat Steve Brandwein, not even one game.

Then, in 1996, I saw Steve Brandwein in the Mechanics Institute Chess Club in San Francisco and he offered to play me. I accepted of course and to my great surprise I won one of the first games. Then, to my great astonishment, I won the next game, too. So, the most amazing and incredible thing had happened. I had actually won two games of chess in a row against Steve Brandwein.

Of course, I realized that something must be wrong and that Steve Brandwein must be seriously ill. There is no way that I could possibly beat him two games of chess when he is at his full strength.

I have never seen a picture of Brandwein published anywhere. Somebody just sent me this picture and I decided to put it on my website.

By Sam Sloan