

# 250 Years of Chess

## The Chess Friends

The Man Benji, The Myth Sarang, and The Legend Vivi

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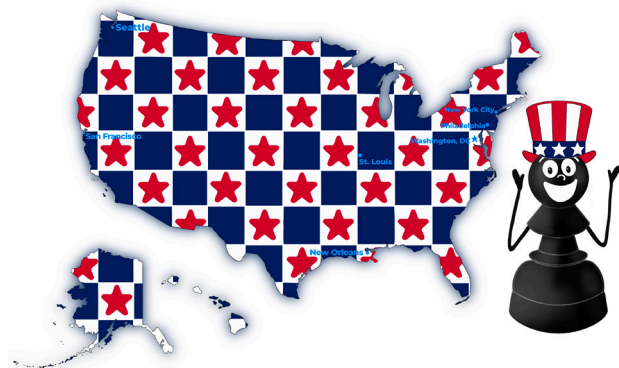
Howdy! It's The Chess Friends!

It's July, which means it is fre-e-e-dom for all the (chess) kids to finally enjoy summer! This July is super extra special because this year, we the People celebrate a big American day!

On July 4, 1776, the Founding Fathers of the United States of America got together to sign the founding document, the Declaration of Independence, getting America the freedom it deserved.

Now, 250 years later, we're here, living in a bustling place, filled with forests, mountain ranges, oceans left and right, and a vibrant chess scene! We have the most super GMs (2700+ FIDE), the most chess players in the top 100, the second most GMs (after Russia), the second most registered FIDE players (after India), and...The World's Most Famous Chess Friends (just kidding about that one!)

Over these 250 years, there have been so many Americans who contributed to the growth of chess, both locally and globally, and in this article, we want to trace the rise of American chess, from the early days all the way to present, and honor some of the chess legends who put the United States on the chess map!



### The Man Benji

*The first 100 years of US chess*

Before the United States was even on the political map, in the 1730s, there lived a super smart college student, way ahead of his time, who would play chess late into the night, writing his thoughts about the game until his candles went out. His name was **Benjamin Franklin**, and he became one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, drafting and signing the Declaration of Independence! If that was not enough, he also established the U.S. Postal Service, the first library, and public hospital! We also know him as a scientist and an inventor! And he was the first advocate of the game we all love: chess!

Though none of his games were recorded, we know he used chess in his diplomatic endeavors from [a painting of him playing against Lady Howe in London](#). When he served as a US Ambassador to France, he even played against French chess legend Philidor!

Benjamin collected his life-long experiences and thoughts about the benefits of chess in his 1786 essay [The Morals of Chess](#), where he described what chess sportsmanship is and what traits chess nurtures in those who play: Foresight, Circumspection, Caution, and Perseverance. After 250 years, his thoughts on chess still hold true today. What can I say...he was way ahead of his time!



Portrait of Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) by David Martin, 1767. Source: [Wiki](#).

[The Morals of Chess](#) became one of the first chess writing appearing from an American, and some even consider Benjamin Franklin as the Founding Father of American chess literature! He was the first ambassador for the game, popularizing chess, and perhaps thanks to him, chess was a big thing in the United States right from the start!

Maybe partially thanks to Benjamin who encouraged his country to play more chess, there lived a chess loving family in New Orleans. Their young son learned the game by watching his parents and guests play chess on Sundays. He became the first prodigy of chess, the unofficial World Chess Champion who still inspires us today.



agree who the Champion of the World was. And what was the better place to have this show than the United States of America?

Luckily for us, in the early 1880s, Wilhelm Steinitz moved to the United States, where he found a new home, eventually accepting American citizenship. In 1886, a match was arranged between Steinitz and Zukertort to determine the World Chess Champion! The match was held in three cities: New York, St. Louis, and New Orleans, and the first player to win ten games would be officially crowned as the first World Chess Champion!

Despite Steinitz's rough start of losing the first four out of five games, he bounced back with the ultimate comeback and clinched victory 12.5–7.5! It only feels fitting that Wilhelm Steinitz, an immigrant representing the American side, won the World chess title the same year that the Statue of Liberty was dedicated!

After that, Wilhelm Steinitz (who changed his name to William) defended his World Title three times before giving the torch to Emmanuel Lasker. Steinitz became known as the Founding Father of Modern Chess.

Every chess player has an immortal game at some point. Steinitz's Immortal Game from 1859, known as [The Battle of Hastings](#), came from the Italian opening against Curt von Bardeleben. In the game, William showed how to exploit the position where your opponent is too slow to castle. The answer is...a calculated romantic attack! In this position below, Steinitz had an astonishing idea: to take his rook on a walk! Can you find the idea that starts with what appears to be a rook sacrifice?

The position after move 21 in the Wilhelm Steinitz vs Curt von Bardeleben game. White to move and win!

[See diagram top of next column]

The answer is 22.Rxe7+ Kf8 23.Rf7+ Kg8 24.Rg7+ Kh8 25.Rxh7+...and Black resigned.

There is a lot to learn from "The Father of Positional Chess,"



and the first undisputed World Champion. He showed the world that you can achieve excellence in chess not only with intuition and natural talent, but also with hard studying and finding your own style. Perhaps that is his greatest gift to us all!

Now, I'm going to turn it over to Sarang, who brings us to the early 20th century.



Frank Marshall (1877–1944), before 1904. Source: [Wiki](#).

## The Myth Sarang

### The 1900s of US chess

The 1900s of American Chess started with a bang! The first US Open was held in 1900 in the city of Excelsior, Minnesota, and won by Louis Uedemann. In 1939, the United States Chess Federation (USCF) was formed and began to organize the nation's official chess matches, supporting chess participation and popularization.

**Frank Marshall** was one of the strongest players of the early 20th century and was U.S. Chess Champion from 1909 to 1936, the longest in US chess history, also leading the US to four consecutive gold medals at the Chess Olympiad. He was known for his aggressive, imaginative style, with a fitting nickname 'The Great Swindler,' and his influence went beyond competition because he helped strengthen chess culture in the United States in many ways. He also has multiple openings named after him, for example Marshall Gambit and Marshall Defense are both solid openings as Black. He also founded the Marshall Chess Club in New York, which has been instrumental in growing chess in the USA.

Here's a game of Frank Marshall, as Black against Stefan Levitsky, [played in Breslau in 1912](#).



Levitsky played 20. Qh5?? With the intention to capture Black's rook. This is a huge mistake and Levitsky missed this beautiful move as Black. Can you find it? It's 20...Rxf2!

Black is attacking White's rook and has a threat of Rxf2 sacrificing the rook to mate!

The game went...21. Re5 Rh6 22. Qg5



And now, Chess Friends, brace yourselves for the most stunning combo in chess history! Believe me, you'll be shocked. First, Frank Marshall sacrifices...THE ROOOOOOOOOK!

22...Rxh3! If White takes Black's rook 23.gxh3, Black plays 23...Nf3+ with a royal triple fork! Levitsky played 23...Rc5, attacking the queen with a threat of Rc7 and Qxg7 mate:



In response, Frank Marshall finds the most golden move of all time:

23...QUEEN TO G3!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This is crazy! White has to take Black's queen to avoid Qxh2#. Let's say White takes 24.hxg3, we now have mate in one with 24...Ne2#! If they play 24.fxg3, we have 24...Ne2+, the king is forced to move 25.Kh1, and we have a back rank mate, 25...Rxfl#. If White takes 24.Qxg3, we play 24...Ne2+ with a fork, then 25.Kh1 Nxg3+ 26.fxg3 Rxfl# on the back rank. Levitsky resigned here.

This game is famously known as "[The Gold Coins Game](#)," because apparently after Frank played ...Qg3, the move was so brilliant that the spectators threw gold coins on the players and board! What a move!

Another big name in American Chess in the 1900s was another chess prodigy, who grew up to be the strongest player in the world. Polish-American **Samuel Reshevsky** was the top American player for nearly four decades after Marshall. He won the US Chess Champion title eight times! Only Bobby Fischer could match that! Samuel also famously tied for third in the 1948 world championship and reached the semis of Candidates in 1968.

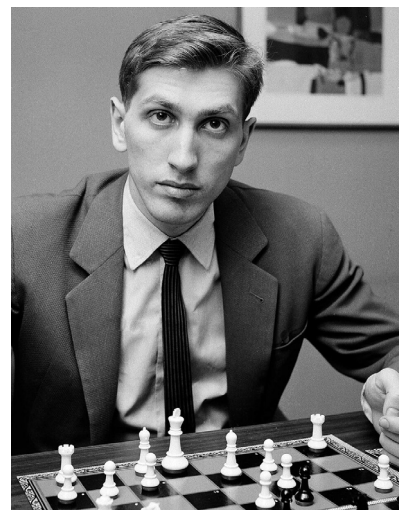


Samuel Reshevsky in 1921, photo from the magazine Plus Ultra, Argentina. Source: [Wiki](#).

Throughout his chess career, Reshevsky played 11 World Champions, a record that still holds today! The Champs he faced were Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, and Karpov, the second through 12th World Champs.

After the International Chess Federation (FIDE) was founded in Paris, France in 1924, and a formal title of Grandmaster was established, in 1950 the committee selected several players worldwide to give the first Grandmaster titles, without common nowadays qualification path and norms. Out of the first 27 GM titles, two went to American players: Samuel Reshevsky and Reuben

Fine, who would win the US Open every time he chose to play: seven!



Robert James (Bobby) Fischer (1943–2008), 11th World Chess Champion. Distributed by the Associated Press in 1966. Source: [Wiki](#).

**Bobby Fischer** transformed chess on a global scale when he won the World Championship in 1972, which made him the first and only American chess World Champion, holding it until 1975. His influence also continued through Fischer Random, later known as Chess960, a variant where the back row pieces are shuffled, introducing a new way of thinking in the opening. Fischer's legacy is in his brilliance, and the chess boom it produced in America and worldwide!

In 1956, Bobby, as Black, played his famous game against Donald Byrne in New York. The game became known as [The Game of The Century](#). Look at this position:



Byrne just played 17.Kf1, escaping Fischer's check. Now, can you find the brilliant queen sacrifice for Fischer?

Chess Friends, brace yourselves because another crazy move is coming!

17.Be6!!

If White takes Black's queen, which Byrne did, Fischer has lots of compensation with ...Bxc4+, ...Ne2+, ...Nxd4+ and ...axb6, which is enough to seal the deal.

Fischer's legacy endures and has been the inspiration for many great books and movies that continue to fascinate the chess players for generations to come.

Now let's turn it over to The Legend Vivaan to talk about the present!

## The Legend Vivaan

*US Chess Today*

There are lots of American legends among us today. In fact, three Americans have achieved a peak FIDE ELO above 2800, namely **Fabiano Caruana** (2844, achieved in 2014), **Wesley So** (2822, achieved in 2017), and **Hikaru Nakamura** (2816, achieved in 2022). A fun fact about Fabiano is he's Italian American. Wesley is Filipino American. Hikaru is Japanese American. We are a nation that thrives with amazing immigrants and chess is no exception!

Chess today is so much more than Super GMs, World Champions, and legends. It's a game that unites people and brings people together across all walks of life, and the USA is at the center of that.

For example, consider **GM Susan Polgar**, a Hungarian American chess coach, teacher, author, pioneer, and World Champion. Her work through her life, and through her foundation, has brought chess to so many and grown the sport

immeasurably. Ukrainian American **GM Irina Krush** was the youngest ever to win the US Women's Chess Championship, doing so at 14, and has championed the US Women's team to silver and bronze medals at the Chess Olympiad!

In the pandemic, chess streaming exploded, and the US is at its center. Canadian Americans **Alexandra and Andrea Botez** (@botezlive) have millions of followers who enjoy chess through their content and learning from them. **IM Levy Rozman** (@gothamchess) is nicknamed "The Internet's Chess Teacher" and many have improved considerably through his videos and became fans of our game, including us through Chessly! He has over two billion YouTube views! Streamer "Jedi Master" **FM James Canty** (@GMCanty) became the first American World Champ in Chess Boxing! We love playing bullet with him and being on his stream!

In the 2013, Sinquefeld Cup, **GM Fabiano Caruana** had a rating performance over 3100! In 2016, in the London Chess Classic, he played **GM Hikaru Nakamura**, where he found a brilliant queen sac. The game now carries the name **Just Fab.**



In this position, Fabiano plays the brilliant 19.Qxf6!

After 19...Bxf6, Black is up a queen for two knights. Believe it or not, the engine evaluation here is +1 for White! Talk about an amazing positional sacrifice to find over the board!

Fabiano further improved his position with 20.Nd5 Qd8 21.Nf5 Rb8 22.Nf6+ Qxf6 23.Rxd6 Be6 24.Rhd1 O-O 25.h5 Qg5+ 26.Be3, resulting in the board shown below:



Note that here Fabiano has crazy mating ideas on the kingside. With the awesome knight on f5 threatening h6, a well-positioned bishop pair, strong rooks, and an open g-file, it's about to go down, and fast, for Black. The game proceeded with 26...Qf6 27.Nxh6+ Kh8 28.Bf5 Qe7 29.b5 Qe8 30.Nxf7+ Rxf7 31.Rxe6 Qxb5 32.Rh6+ at which point Hikaru resigned. Do you see why?

[see diagram top of next page]

Though Black is still +1 materially, there's nothing they can do. After 32...Kg8, White can proceed with 33.Rg1+ Kf8 34.Rh8+ Ke7 35.Rxb8

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Qxb8 36.Bc5+. Note here that ...Ke8 gets mated with Rg8+ Rf8 Rxf8# and if ...Kf6 Rg6#, leaving ...Qd6 losing the queen or ...Kd8, which is met by Rg8 also winning the queen.

In 2007 in Barcelona, **GM Hikaru Nakamura** had an [“Immortal” queen sac of his own against GM Krasenkow](#). Hikaru is also one of the biggest Twitch streamers worldwide (@GMHikaru) and watching him do puzzle rush is truly something else!

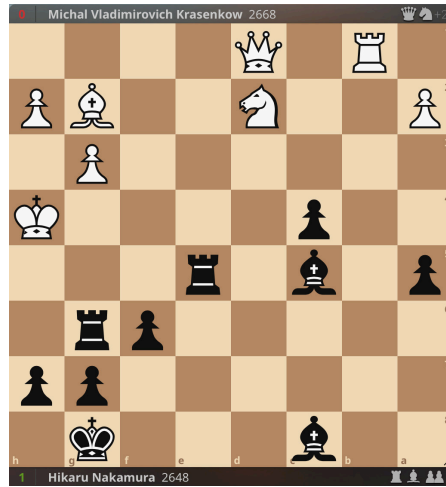
Here’s the position after 21.Bxf6, and at this moment Black is up a pawn but the position is crazy!



In this moment, Hikaru finds the amazing 21...Qxf2+! Do you see how epic this is?

After 22.Kxf2 Bc5+ 23.Kf3 Rxf6+ and now materially White is up a queen for two pawns and a bishop, but look at Black’s crazy attack and how strong the bishops and rooks are! What can White

even do? 24.Kg4 Ne5+ ...uh-oh another piece into the attack for Hikaru with that knight! 25.Kg5 Rg6+ 26.Kh5 f6 (threatening ...Rh6#) 27.Rxe5 Rxe5+ 28.Kh4 Bc8, and at this point White resigned. Here’s the final position:



Note that White is still up a queen for a rook and two pawns so +2. That said,

there’s no way for White to defend this position. If White plays g4, Black wins with ...Bf2+ Kh3 Rh6#. If White plays a3, Black wins with ...Rh6+ Qh5 Rexh5# (or if you want to be fancy ...g5#)! White’s only move to survive a little longer is Bd5, but even then, Black can play ...Rxd5 g4 Rd3 Qf3 Rxf3, already way up now but mate coming, Nxf3 Rxf3. At this point, it’s mate in two but we’ll leave the mate-in-two puzzle here for you! 😊

We want to wish you all a very happy 4th of July, and wish our United States of America an amazing happy 250th anniversary!

This month, may you enjoy the fireworks not only in the sky, but also on the chess board!

Three Cheers, Fellow Future Master Chess Friends!

The Man Benji,  
The Myth Sarang,  
The Legend Vivaan

