

A Brief History of Chess Notation

by David Zechiel

(written in 1997)

For as long as people have played chess, they have wanted to show off their victories to their fellow players. Chess notations were a logical solution to this problem. There have been two dominant notations used in the history of chess, but as we move into the 21st century it appears that only one will survive.

First, let's consider Descriptive notation. Descriptive was used exclusively in Europe until the 18th century. It is still used in the United States, Britain and Spain (however, most new books are only being published in Algebraic). The earliest examples of Descriptive that I could find convinced me that people midway thru the last century had nothing but time and paper on their hands. Consider these fragments from Staunton's Handbook of Chess (from the 1840's):

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. P. to K's 4th. | 1. P. to K's 4th. |
| 2. K's Kt. to B's 3d. | 2. P. to K. B's 3d. |
| 3. Kt. takes K's P. | 3. P. takes Kt. |
| 4. Q. to K. R's 5th (ch.) | 4. P. to K. Kt's 3d. |
| 5. Q. takes K's P. (ch.) | 5. Q. to K's 2d. |
| . | . |
| 10. Castles on K's side | 10. K. to his 2d. |

Notice the use of the period to indicate abbreviation, the use of the apostrophe to indicate possessiveness as well as the use of '4th.' and '3d.' to indicate the square and the use of '(ch.)' to indicate check. To my mind you could spell out 'check' just as easily as '(ch.)'.

Also notice that castling, the word 'to' and the word 'takes' are all spelled out and that if a piece moves to a square on it's own file, then it's 'his' square! Lastly, notice that the white and black moves are each numbered.

A few years later at the 1st American Chess Congress in 1857 (Morphy's big win) the style has shortened slightly. Note that the possessiveness is gone.

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. P. to K. 4th. | 1. P. to Q. B. 4th. |
| 2. K. Kt. to B. 3d. | 2. Q. Kt. to B. 3d. |
| 3. P. to Q. 4th. | 3. B. P. takes P. |
| 4. K. Kt. takes P. | 4. P. to K 3d. |
| . | . |
| 9. Q. R. to B. sq. | 9. Castles |

Also, the castling direction is only specified if it is ambiguous. By the end of last century at Hastings in 1895 (Pillsbury's big win) the notation being used was almost readable by today's standards.

1 P to K 4	P to K 4
2 K Kt to B 3	Q Kt to B 3
3 B to B 4	B to B 4
4 P to Q Kt 4	B x Kt P
.	
12 Q to R 4	Castles Q R
.	
15 Q to R 6, ch	K to Kt sq

Note that the black and white moves are only numbered once and that all use of the period has been eliminated. 'to' is still in place but the capture word 'takes' has been replaced by 'x'. Also the square number no longer has 'th.' or 'd.' attached to it. Spaces are found between all of the codes, but they will be squeezed out by 1911 when the hyphen replaced the word 'to'.

Games from New York 1924 and Nottingham 1937 look like this:

1 P-K4	P-K4
2 Kt-KB3	Kt-QB3
3 B-Kt5	P-QR3
4 B-R4	Kt-B3
5 Castles	B-K2
6 R-K	P-Q3
.	
8 BxKtch	PxB

Sometime in the '40's the codes O-O and O-O-O took the place of the word 'Castles'. My copy of Modern Chess Openings 7th edition published in 1948 uses these codes. That copy of MCO is still using 'Kt' to represent 'knight'. A copy of Chess Review Magazine from 1952 shows use of 'N' to represent 'knight'. Descriptive notation hasn't evolved very much from this point except for things like using a plus sign to indicate 'check' (although I saw this used as early as 1911).

Algebraic notation was introduced by Arabs in 9th and 10th centuries AD and is universal today. I have a copy of the USSR v Rest of the World match book that is printed in Russian. All the words are printed in the Cyrillic alphabet, but the games use 'a'-h' to record the squares! Algebraic has been the official notation of FIDE since 1981.

Long algebraic names a piece, the square it started from and the square it is moving to. For example:





1 Pe2-e4	Pe7-e5
2 Ng1-f3	Nb8-c6
3 Bf1-c4	Bf8-c5
4 O-O	Pd7-d5
5 Pe4:d5	

The colon was used to indicate captures as well as the 'x'. Today when captures are indicated the 'x' is found more often.

Short Algebraic not only eliminates the source square (except for ambiguities), it doesn't use a symbol for the pawn, for 'captures' or for 'to'. Consider:

1 e4	e5
2 Nf3	Nc6
3 Bb5	a6
4 Bc6	dc6
5 O-O	

International publications such as Chess Informant use this short form of Algebraic but use a figurine in place of the letter that represents the piece being moved.

1 e4	e5
2  f3	 c6
3  b5	a6
4  c6	dc6
5 O-O	

Thus the diagram symbol for a knight is used in place of the letter 'N'. This short form, called 'Figurine Algebraic' is standard for all new books that hope to have international sales.

Correspondence chess players find themselves playing people from far away countries who don't speak a common language, much less use a common chess notation. In order to convey your move to your foreign opponent an international notation was developed. Moves are written down as a four digit number and the board is configured as:

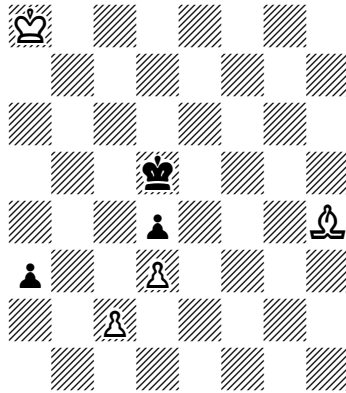
18	28	38	48	58	68	78	88
17	27	37	47	57	67	77	87
16	26	36	46	56	66	76	86
15	25	35	45	55	65	75	85
14	24	34	44	54	64	74	84
13	23	33	43	53	63	73	83
12	22	32	42	52	62	72	82
11	21	31	41	51	61	71	81

e4 would be sent as '5254'. Black castling queen side would be '5838'. In a similar vein Louis Udemann developed a special code for cable matches (which were the rage earlier this century) that uses a board like this:

MA	NA	PA	RA	SA	TA	WA	ZA
ME	NE	PE	RE	SE	TE	WE	ZE
MI	NI	PI	RI	SI	TI	WI	ZI
MO	NO	PO	RO	SO	TO	WO	ZO
BO	CO	DO	FO	GO	HO	KO	LO
BO	CI	DI	FI	GI	HI	KI	LI
BE	CE	DE	FE	GE	HE	KE	LE
BA	CA	DA	FA	GA	HA	KA	LA

The Udemann code for e4 would be 'GEGO' and Black castling king side would be 'SAWA'.

Lastly we consider a notation that was developed by David Forsyth of Glasgow around the turn of the century. He wanted to be able to record the position of a chess board without having to make a 64 square diagram. His 'Forsyth' notation does this smartly. Consider one of my favorite problems: White to move and win.



This diagram would take some time to record, but in Forsyth it would appear as:

K7/8/8/3k4/3p3B/p2P4/2P5/8

White pieces are represented in UPPERCASE, black in lowercase. The slashes (/) divide the ranks. The numbers represent empty squares. You start at the 'top' of the board (White's eighth rank). Read the notation as: 'white king, seven empty squares. Next rank empty. Next rank empty. The fifth rank has three empty squares, a black king and four empty squares' etc. If you need to copy a position down quickly, Forsyth should be considered.

I hope that you have enjoyed this review of chess notations. Any questions (especially the answer to the problem) or comments should be directed to david@zechiel.com.