

Chess Players That You May (or may not) Have Heard Of

For every Bobby Fischer or Magnus Carlsen there are hundreds of lesser players that have still made a significant contribution to the game we love, but not be nearly as well known. I have tried to compose a list of players that I find interesting for one reason or another, and write up short biography about them. Many, but not all, of these players were American. One was the de facto world chess champion of his time, others played for the world championship (or wanted to play for it). Some others were especially adept at writing books on chess, or editing a weekly chess column for a major newspaper.

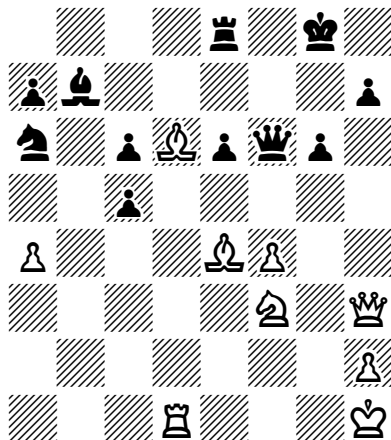
In no particular order, I present:

- **Howard Staunton, 1810-1874**

Howard Staunton was an English master who was the de facto "world champion" from around 1843 to 1851. His *Chess Players Handbook* was the authority on the game well into the 20th century. The Staunton Gambit (a line in the Dutch Defence), as well as the English Opening (1 c4) are named for his advocacy of these lines. The chessmen that we all use today are called the "Staunton Pattern" because when they were created in 1849, he lent his name to the sponsorship of this new design.



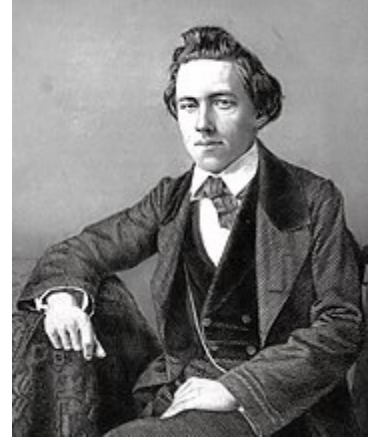
Staunton wrote a chess column for the *Illustrated London News*, and was very influential. In the pre-Internet days of 1845, Staunton participated in an electric telegraph chess match, Staunton's only chess failing was his ducking of a match against the American Paul Morphy, who had traveled to Europe on Staunton's urging.



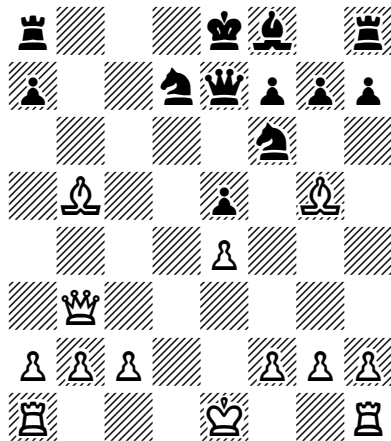
This is the position of Staunton-Horwitz, London 1851, after 43...Qxf6. Play continued 44 Ng5 Qg7 45 Be5 Qe7 46 Bxg6 1-0.

- **Paul Morphy, 1837-1884**

Paul Morphy, "The Pride and Sorrow of Chess". Morphy was born in New Orleans to a wealthy and distinguished family. He is rumored to have learned the game by watching others play. He is widely acknowledged as the greatest master of his time. Morphy played in the First American Chess Congress in New York in 1857. This was a knock-out tournament which Morphy won handily, defeating Lichtenhein and Paulsen along the way. The American Chess Association attempted to organize a match between Morphy and a European champion (Staunton, Anderssen or Harrwitz) on US soil, but the attitude in Europe was that Morphy should make the pilgrimage instead.



At the Café de la Régence in Paris, Morphy easily defeated Harrwitz, Anderssen and others. But despite Morphy's best efforts, Staunton provided excuse after excuse why he was unavailable to play, despite competing in a chess tournament during this time. Only 21 years old, and Morphy was hailed as the world chess champion. Morphy played 1 e4 as an opening move, and favored gambits, especially the King's Gambit and the Evans Gambit. After returning home in 1859, Morphy would not play in tournaments or serious matches without giving his opponent odds. He soon abandoned chess and intended to start a career in law. Morphy suffered from mental illness, and that, together with the US Civil war, meant that most of his playing days were over. In 1883 he met Wilhelm Steinitz in New Orleans, but refused to discuss chess with him.



This position occurred in the game Morphy-Duke Karl / Count Isouard, Paris, 1858, after 11...Nbd7. Play continued 12 O-O-O Rd8 13 Rxd7 Rxd7 14 Rd1 Qe6 15 Bxd7+ Nxd7 16 Qb8+ Nxb8 17 Rd8#.

- **Harry Nelson Pillsbury, 1872-1906**

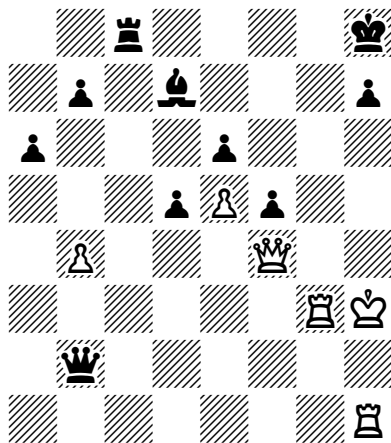
Pillsbury was a leading American chess player who died way too young, at age 33. He was raised in Massachusetts, moved to New York City in 1894, and later to Philadelphia in 1898. By age 18, and only having played chess for two years, he was beating noted expert, H N Stone. At age 20, Pillsbury won a match from Wilhelm Steinitz



(who gave him odds of a pawn). Pillsbury's rise was meteoric, and in 1895 the Brooklyn Chess Club sponsored him to play in Europe at the Hastings Chess Tournament, in which all of the greatest players of the time participated. Pillsbury won the tournament, ahead of reigning world champion Emanuel Lasker, former champion Steinitz, recent challengers Chigorin and Gunsberg, and future challengers Tarrasch, Schlechter and Janowski.

Pillsbury's next stop was St Petersburg, 1895-96. Pillsbury was in the lead after the first half of the tournament, but he fell ill, ultimately finishing third behind Lasker and Steinitz.

Pillsbury was a very strong blindfold player. His record was 22 simultaneous games at Moscow 1902. Although he won the US championship in 1897, his health continued to deteriorate, and he succumbed in a Philadelphia hospital in 1906. Had he not died prematurely, he would likely have been the first American world chess champion.



This is the position of the game Pillsbury-Maroczy, Paris 1900 after 43...Rc8. Play continued 44 Qh6 Qxe5 45 Qxh7+ Kxh7 46 Kg2#.

- **Joseph Blackburn, 1841-1924**

Blackburn was a leading British player from the early 1860's until his death in 1924. Nicknamed "The Black Death", he won many tournaments, and was active in popularizing chess with simultaneous and blindfold exhibitions. The story is that he first played draughts (checkers), but then heard of the exploits of Paul Morphy across the pond, and switched to chess.

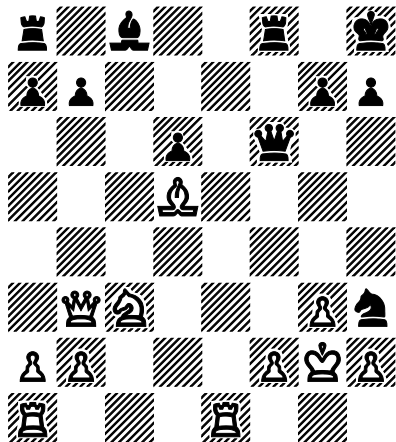


The Blackburn-Shilling Gambit (1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Nd4?!) is named after Blackburn because he purportedly used it to win quickly against amateurs.

Blackburn won the British championship in the 1868-69 season and was regarded as England's best player. He had success in his first major international tournament, Baden-Baden 1870, sharing 3rd place. Blackburn played in at least one major tournament from 1870 to 1899 and was usually a high prize winner.

His 1876 match against Steinitz was the first time that spectators were charged an entrance fee to watch a chess match.

Up until 1882 timekeeping of chess games was performed with an hourglass. It was Blackburn who suggested the concept of chess clocks, and these were invented by Thomas Bright Wilson of the Manchester Chess Club, and they were introduced at London 1883.



This position is from the game Steinkuehler-Blackburn, Manchester 1863, after 19 Bd5. Play continued 19...Qxf2+ 20 Kh1 Qg1+ 21 Rxf1 Nf2+ 22 Kg2 Bh3#

- **Aron Nimzowitsch, 1886-1935**

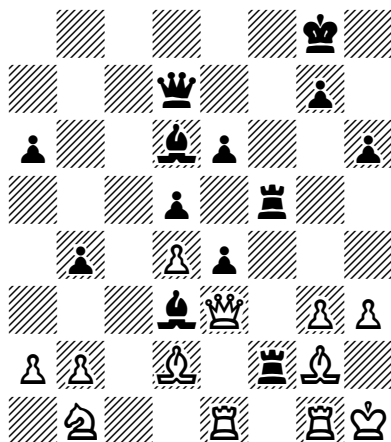
Aron Nimzowitch was a Latvian born-Danish player and writer. While he was a strong player in his prime, he is best remembered for his influential contributions to chess theory in his two seminal books, *My System* and *Chess Praxis*. There are many editions and translations of these books, and they are still considered required reading by new chess players today.



The height of Nimzowitsch's career was the late 1920's and early 1930's, where he was only behind Alekhine and Capablanca (two great world chess champions). His successes include Copenhagen 1923, Dresden 1926, Carlsbad 1929 and San Remo 1930 among others.

Nimzowitsch had several openings named after him, most notable the Nimzo-Indian Defence (1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4), the less often played Nimzowitsch Defence (1 e4 Nf6), as well as others (the Nimzowitch-Larsen Attack [1 Nf3 and 2 b3], and the Sicilian Defence: Nimzowitch Variation [1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nf6]).

GM Hein Donner called Nimzowitsch "a man who was too much of an artist to be able to prove he was right and was regarded as something of a madman in his time. He would be understood only long after his death."



This is the final position from the "Immortal Zugzwang Game", played in Copenhagen 1923 between Friedrich Saemisch and Nimzowitsch.

Black has just played 25...h6!! and white resigned! He doesn't have a good move to make. If 26 Kh2 or g4, black can respond with 26...R5f3.

- **Frank Marshall, 1877-1944**

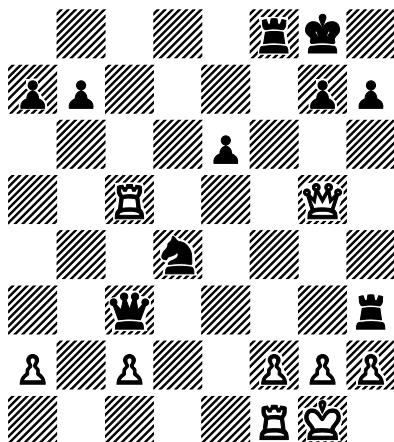
Frank James Marshall was an American chess player and was the US Chess Champion from 1909 to 1936 (passing it to Sammy Reshevsky). He was one of the strongest players in the early part of the 20th century. Marshall learned to play chess at the age of 10, and by age 13 was one of the leading players in Montreal. Marshall won the 1904 Cambridge Springs International Chess Congress, ahead of world champion Emanuel Lasker. When Pillsbury died in 1906 holding the title of US champion, Marshall declined the title until he won it in competition in 1909.



He played a match for the world championship against Lasker in 1907, but lost badly, going +0 -8 =7. In 1914 he played in the famous St Petersburg tournament, placing 5th behind Capablanca, Lasker, Tarrasch and Alekhine. This was the tournament where the Russian Tsar Nicholas II formally conferred the title of "Grandmaster" on the top five finalists.

Frank Marshall opened the Marshall Chess Club in New York City in 1925, and it's still going strong today (one of the few private chess clubs) at 23 W 10th St, New York City.

Marshall has several opening variations named after him, the most prominent is the Marshall Attack in the Ruy Lopez (1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 O-O Be7 6 Re1 b5 7 Bb3 O-O 8 c3 d5). Marshall apparently sat on this variation for 10 years in order to spring it on Capablanca (Capa won). Marshall was known as a colorful tactical player in the Morphy tradition, playing the King's Gambit and the Vienna Game as white.



This is one of the most famous combinations to be played in chess. The game is Levitsky-Marshall, Breslau 1912. White just played 23 Rc5, and play continued 23...Qg3!! White resigned. This move is so spectacular, you might think it was a typo at first. Legend says the board was "showered" with gold pieces after Marshall's last move. It may be they just gave him his winnings.

- **Irving Chernev, 1900-1981**

Irving Chernev was a national master level chess player, and a prolific Ukrainian-born American chess author. He emigrated to the US at age 5 and was devoted to chess. He wrote 20 books on the topic of chess, among them

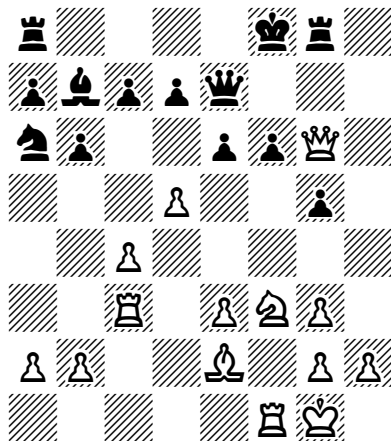


- *Chessboard Magic!*
- *The Bright Side of Chess*
- *The Fireside Book of Chess*
- *1000 Best Short Games of Chess*
- *Practical Chess Endings*
- *Combinations, the Heart of Chess*
- *Capablanca's Best Chess Endings*

and others.

Chernev's style is honest and folksy. Owning almost all of his books, I can safely say that he is my favorite chess author, living or dead. If you are considering one of his books, I recommend *The Chess Companion*.

While Chernev could play the game, his contribution to chess is through literature. Professionals who have examined his work are astounded by the scarcity of typographical errors in writing throughout his life, and his ability to convey his message cleanly and clearly.



This position occurred in the game Chernev-Cruz, New York 1940, after black played 17...Rg8. Play continued 18 Ne5 Rg7 {18...Rxc6 allows 19 Nxc6+ winning the exchange} 19 Qh6 {threatening to win the queen} Kg8 20 Ng6 Qd8 21 Qh8+ Kf7 22 Ne5+ {it's mate in two} 1-0.

- **David Bronstein, 1924-2006**

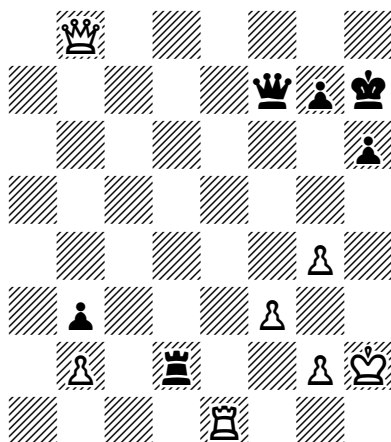
David Ionovich Bronstein was a Soviet grandmaster born in Tserkva, Ukrainian SSR, Soviet Union. He is considered to be one of the greatest players to never be world champion. In 1950 he came *this close* to becoming the World Champion of Chess. He was one of the strongest players from the mid-1940's to the mid-1970's He learned chess at age 6 from his grandfather. He became a master at age 16. Surviving WWII, Bronstein started playing competitive chess again in 1944, and won both of his games in the USA v USSR radio chess match in 1945.



He earned the title of Grandmaster in 1950, then won the Interzonal to qualify for the Candidates Tournament in Budapest. He had to defeat Boleslavsky in a playoff match in order to play for the World Championship against Botvinnik in 1951. This match saw the lead swing back and forth several times, and every game was played hard to a clear finish. Bronstein lead by one point with two games left, but lost the 23rd and drew the 24th, resulting in a tie (which left Botvinnik the champion, since he needed to be defeated to be replaced).

In the 1953 Candidates Tournament in Switzerland Bronstein later admitted that there was pressure on the Soviet players to ensure that Smyslov finished ahead of Reshevsky and that he and Keres drew their games with Smyslov to ensure that outcome.

Bronstein has opening variations named after him in the King's Indian, the Caro-Kann Defence, and the Scandinavian Defence.



This position is from the game Bronstein-Korchnoi, Leningrad 1962, after 36...Kh7. Play continued 37 Re8 Qxf3 38 Rh8+ Kg6 39 Rxh6+ 1-0. This is like magic!

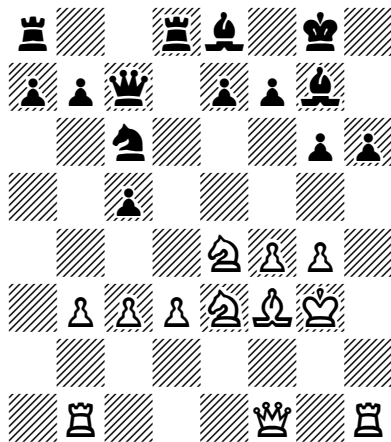
- **Vera Menchik, 1906-1944**

Vera Francevna Mencikova was a Russian-born Czechoslovak chess player who primarily resided in England. She was the first and longest running Women's World Chess Champion from 1927 to 1944. She learned the moves at age 9. She played her first competitive game of chess at age 14, and her family relocated to Hastings, England in 1921. Menchik defeated the British women's champion in 1925 and then won the inaugural Women's World Chess Championship in 1927.



In 1928 she began competing in master-level tournaments. At Ramsgate 1929 she tied for second with Rubinstein. She attended elite events for the next decade. Along the way she defeated future world champion Max Euwe and Mir Sultan Khan. Menchik was active until her death in 1944 when she was killed during a German air raid that destroyed her home during the Second World War.

Vera Menchik had many successes against male players besides Euwe. Any master level players that Menchik defeated were said to be members of the "Vera Menchik Club". This included six players (Reshevsky, Samisch, Miseses, Golombek and others) who ended up receiving the Grandmaster title.



This position was reached in the game Baratz-Menchik, Hastings 1927, after white played 25 c3. Play continued 25...Qxf4+! 26 Kf2 Ne5 0-1.

- **Isaac Kashdan, 1905-1985**

Isaac Kashdan was an American grandmaster and writer. He was twice the US Open champion, and he played five times for the US in the chess Olympiads, winning nine medals. His Olympiad record is the all-time best among American players.

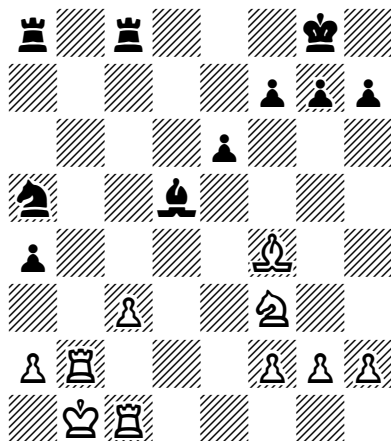
He was considered at one time to be a good candidate for world champion, but because he was at his playing peak during the Great Depression, he could not engage seriously in a chess career for financial reasons.



5. ISAAC KASHDAN

Kashdan never won the US (Closed) Championship. Before the first US Championship tournament in 1936, the current champion, Frank Marshall, could choose his opponent on his own schedule. By the time Marshall relinquished his title, Samuel Reshevsky and Ruben Fine had surpassed Kashdan in American chess circles.

In 1933 Kashdan helped found *Chess Review* magazine. Kashdan appeared on the TV show *You Bet Your Life*. He was awarded the title of Grandmaster in 1954, and that of International Arbiter in 1960. He helped organize and direct many tournaments, including the two Piatgorsky Cups, and the Lone Pine tournaments of the 1970s. He became the editor for the Los Angeles Times chess column for about 30 years. He was instrumental in organizing chess for juniors in California.



This is the position from Stahlberg-Kashdan, Hamburg Olympiad 1930, after white played 24 Rc1. Play continued 24...Be4+ Ka1 25 Nb3+ 0-1

- **Larry Evans, 1932-2010**

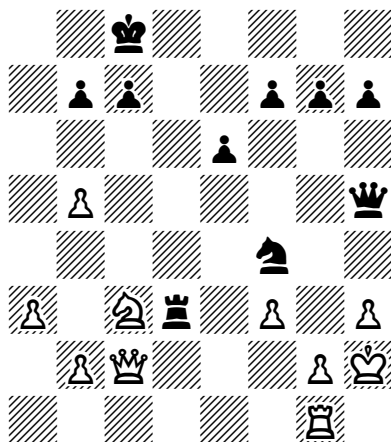
Larry Melvyn Evans was an American grandmaster, author and journalist. He won or shared the US Chess Championship five times, and the US Open Championship four times. We wrote the long running syndicated chess column "Evans on Chess" (a kind of "Dear Abby" for chess players).



Evans had the distinction of being one of the few people that Bobby Fischer could both trust and tolerate. He was Bobby's second for the Candidates matches leading up to the 1972 world chess championship against Boris Spassky. There's an interesting photograph of both Fischer and Evans in a swimming pool with an inflatable chessboard between them.

Larry wrote the introductions to Fischer's *My 60 Memorable Games*, one of the best and most honest chess books ever published (as Fischer included three of his losses in this book, he could hardly call it his "best" games). Evans was also the author of the 10th edition of *Modern Chess Openings*, an indispensable book in the 1960's.

When meeting him, Evans was personable. When asked to sign one of his books, he seemed delighted and commented, "So, I got some of your bread!?"



This position is from the game Yanofsky-Evans, Corpus Christi, TX, 1947, after white played 25 f3. Play continued 25...Rxf3 26 Rd1 Nxf3 27 gxf3 Nf2+ 28 Kg3 Qh3+ 29 Kf4 Qh2+ 30 Ke3 Ng5+ 0-1

- **Miguel Najdorf, 1910-1997**

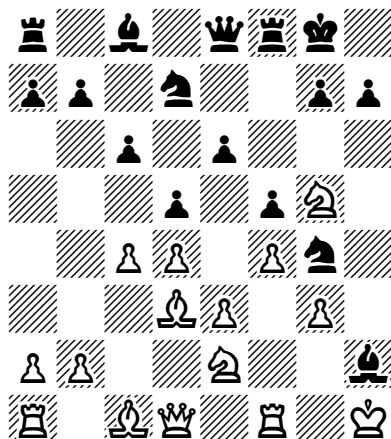
Miguel Najdorf was a Polish-Argentinean grandmaster. He learned the game in Poland, and was tutored by the likes of Savielly Tartakower (whom he always referred to as "my teacher"). He had good results in Warsaw, and was representing Poland in the 1939 Olympiad in Buenos Aires when WW II broke out and Poland was overrun by the Nazis. He became an Argentinian citizen in 1944. His wife, daughter, parents and four siblings were murdered in the Holocaust.



Najdorf was one of the grand old men of chess. Everybody liked him, even as they were losing to him. He excelled at blindfold chess, being able to play 45 games at one time, without sight of a chessboard!

The Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian Defence is named after him (1 e4 c5 2 Nf6 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6). This opening was immensely popular in the 1960's and '70's, as it was a personal favorite of Bobby Fischer, and was therefore trendy.

Najdorf was not invited to the 1948 World Championship tournament, but it's not because he was not worthy. At that point he was perhaps the second best player in the world. His lack of an invitation may be due to influence of the Soviet Chess Federation. Najdorf represented the West in the USSR v Rest of the World match in 1970.



This is the position from the game Glucksberg-Najdorf, Warsaw 1929, after white played 12 g3. Play continued 12...Qh5 13 Kg2 Bg1 14 Nxc3 Qh2+ 15 Kf3 e5 16 dxe5 Nxc3+ 17 fxe5 Nxe5+ 18 Kf4 Ng6+ 19 Kf3 f4 20 exf4 Bg4+ 21 Kxg4 Ne5+ 22 fxe5 h5# 0-1