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U.S. vs. Russia—at chess table

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A looming Soviet-American chess battle is the talk of the town these days. One Russian enthusiast seemed positively sure of the outcome.

"Fischer will win," he commented offhandedly.

"Why?" I asked, surprised by the absence of national partisanship.

"Because he's an offensive player. He'll take risks. Petrosyan's style is defensive."

Whatever the merits of the young man's opinion, there is no doubt that the forthcoming duel between Bobby Fischer and Tigran Petrosyan will generate ardent interest in this land of chess players.

The winner of the match, which begins Sept. 12, will challenge Soviet grand master Boris Spassky for the world title.

The world crown has been a Soviet monopoly since 1948. If the youth from Brooklyn beats Petrosyan, he will be the first foreigner since then to take on the world champion. Hence the excitement.

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A psychological battle already is under way in the Soviet press. Ever since Fischer's recent stunning defeat of Mark Taimanov and Bert Larsen and Petrosyan's close-edged victory over Viktor Korchnoi, Soviet chess experts have been commenting publicly that the upcoming match will be a tough one—for the American, of course.

Endurance test

Fischer is described as having a "classical approach" that is not comfortable for Petrosyan. But the 42-year-old Petrosyan is seen to have an advantage over "temperamental" chess players, who are unable to withstand his cool tenacity and outer calm.

Boris Spassky himself concedes, according to a press account, that the 28-year-old American invariably plays a high-class game. But he thinks ex-world champion Petrosyan is stronger.

Fischer's advantage, he says, is his youth and energy. Only a chess player who has a "passionate thirst for battle" could win 12 consecutive competition games, a fact that gives him a "psychological influence" over his opponents.

But this easy victory also has its darker side, the reigning champion adds. "Not having encountered strong opposition, the American grand master naturally could not receive the proper training as a chess player," he is quoted as saying. "Sooner or later Fischer will begin meeting with unpleasantness and it is not yet known how he will conduct himself in such a situation."

Fischer and Petrosyan first faced each other in 1958 and their current score is even: Each has won three games and 12 games were drawn.

Another Soviet grand master, Alexei Suetin, writes that one can dispute Petrosyan's tactics, which emphasize reliability of position and defense and often lead to a draw. But, he says, behind them lie a well-thought-out system and psychological calculations which even the toughest player finds hard to combat.

Lack of confidence

Suetin acknowledges Fischer's "superior play" in his recent matches although his victory is credited partly to Larsen's "poor game" and "incomprehensible mistakes." Fischer's strength doubles, he says, when



AP Photo

America's Bobby Fischer—a 'thirst for battle'

he feels a reliable supply of points. This seems to remove his "notorious nervousness."

The American, he concludes on a confident note, feels particularly unsure of himself when playing against Spassky, "a fact eloquently attested to by their personal encounters—three games won by the world champion and not a single one by Fischer."

Perhaps the most chilling comment is attributed to former Soviet world title holder Mikhail Botvinnik:

"What will Fischer do when the miracles end, when from a state of weightlessness he returns to reality, when he encounters a stiff rebuff?"

Sept. 12 promises to be a tension-filled day.