

Nomination of Lazlo Ficsor for the MN Chess Hall of Fame

By Nels Truelson

At the tender age of 19, Lazlo Ficsor was playing in the 1956 chess championship for his home province in his native Hungary. A champion rifle marksman who later attained the highest category of “master” in that sport, Lazlo was no slouch at chess either. However, this was not to be his day. Just before the last round, the historic October, 1956 Hungarian revolt against the Soviet Union’s puppet government broke out, thus changing the course of young Lazlo’s life. Upon the Soviet’s successful suppression of the revolt, a month later Lazlo escaped to Austria, from which he was then flown to America, along with many other refugees. Arriving in New Jersey in November, Lazlo decided to settle in Minnesota, mistakenly having been led to believe that its climate was the most similar to Hungary’s. Oh, well....

Unaware that there was any chess activity in the state, Lazlo played no chess during his first two years in Minnesota. He then met fellow Hungarian expatriate Paul Kirchner, who put him in touch with the chess community. His first tournament in Minnesota was the 1959 state championship, won (to no one’s surprise) by Curt Brasket. In the decades that followed, Lazlo fine-tuned his game, and became a regular participant in tournaments, local clubs, and the Twin Cities Chess League (TCCL). He won dozens of trophies and cash prizes at these events.

Qualifying for the state playoffs his first time in 1966, Lazlo went on to achieve that honor a total of six times, which was then more than any player other than Brasket. It should have been seven. As late as 1993, then at age 56 but still a formidable foe, Lazlo scored 4½ out of 6 points at the Minnesota Open, tying for 3rd place, being edged out of 1st place by half a point. This occurred while being paired up four times, including to Leonard Johnson (2343), Leo Stefurak (2367), and two-time state champion Roger Rudolph. This gave Lazlo a 43 point uptick in his rating, and earned him the highest performance rating of his group. But alas, an early withdrawal and a bye from his opponents conspired to knock his tie-break down to the first alternate position. Such are the slings and arrows of the tie-break systems we use.

Also in 1966, Lazlo first participated in the TCCL, joining the Park Avenue team, which won that year. He hitched up with the Boondockers in the eighties, and the Oldies But Goodies in his final 1998-2000 seasons, both of which included first place finishes in their divisions. Lazlo was also well-known for the chess parties graciously hosted at his residence, which were attended by a number of the state’s top players. Sometimes a promising young player was invited to these gatherings, an honor I fondly recall receiving as a teenager.

In Lazlo’s six playoff appearances, besides winning the state title in 1976, he took clear second place in two others. But in appreciating all of the above, it was Lazlo’s magical year of 1976 that overshadows his many other chess achievements. And to fully understand the significance of this turning point, we must again return to Curt.

Of Brasket's 16 state titles, nine occurred in consecutive years (1967 through 1975), a record streak that has yet to be surpassed. These years coincided with the beginning of my own tournament career, so I was keenly exposed to its effects. It was more than just the streak; it was the seeming inevitability of it. Brasket won just two of those playoffs 5-0, but the draws given up in the others appeared to be by his design, with no real threat to his title ever being posed. These years also included some of Brasket's triumphs at Lone Pine, which probably contributed to this aura.

In one fell swoop, Lazlo Ficsor shattered this illusion of inevitability, thereby allowing the rest of us to dream. Finishing a full point ahead of the field, Lazlo became the new king of the hill, and simultaneously seemed to open the door for so many others. That it took Brasket five more years to briefly return to the throne was perhaps incidental, but there would be no turning back.

But Lazlo wasn't done. Driving the point home that this was no accident, he then flew off to Atlanta to conquer the field at the 1976 U.S. Amateur Championship. This was the first National title for a Minnesotan since Brasket and Charles Alden took their turns at the U.S. Junior Open many years earlier. Coming up to the 1976 year, Lazlo had worked hard at his chess, and his efforts were duly rewarded.

For all of the above reasons, I hereby submit for induction the name of Lazlo Ficsor, a most worthy candidate for the Minnesota Chess Hall of Fame.