

History of the Arizona Chess Championship

(From "The Arizona Woodpusher", Spring 1991, Editor Myron Lieberman)

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Updated by multiple sources and various player's memories, Spring 2009

During the Jan-Feb 1991 **Schwarz Memorial** state chess championship tournament, some of us were reminiscing, comparing batting averages, etc. We were having a little trouble remembering who had held previous titles, and I heard some stories that I didn't quite believe. I thought I remembered some review articles, and finally managed to dig them up. Since those articles were a decade and a half old, I thought it was time for another.

The best documentation for the state championships is to be found in the Jan-Feb issues of the Phoenix Chess Club's publication *The Arizona Woodpusher*. Especially useful were the 1976 and 1978 review articles. With the help of these issues and of Myron Lieberman (who was there acting as Tournament Director for most of the last two decades), I'll try to update these archives.

Before the "Schwarz Memorial"

<u>Year</u>	<u>Arizona Chess Champion</u>	<u># of times</u>
1926	R. Phillips Hunter	1
1927.. .1954	??	
1955	Norman James	1
1956	Norman James	2
1957	Norman James	3
1958	Peter Leuthold	1
1959	John Alexander	1
1960	Charles T. Morgan	1
1961	Charles T. Morgan	2
1962	Jack L. Gibson	1
1963	Ronald D. Wright	1
1964	Sam G. Priebe	1
1965	Jack L. Gibson	2
1966	Jack L. Gibson	3
1967	Jack L. Gibson	4

In the pre-Schwarz era, the state champion was determined by winning the Arizona Open. But, we've had trouble determining how far back the Arizona Open goes. I'm intrigued by the earliest entries above, and who was Norman James? Maybe someone out there can shed some extra light.

When I (Bob Rowley) joined the Phoenix Chess Club in 1968 as a high school senior, Charles Morgan had just moved away, but his reputation as a master strength player still lingered on.

Jack Gibson was a high school English teacher in Phoenix. He had a major influence on my early career, and also achieved master strength in the days when there were no Arizona masters. He had a reputation as the great endgame player (like my first chess hero, Capablanca). Other players would tell me stories of how Gibson might lose a piece, but could still beat you in the endgame. So, as you can see, he was a legend in his own time. He was active during my first decade of tournament play, tying for first with me in the 1973 championship, narrowly losing the playoff match after three draws.

I can still envision Ron Wright, an original thinker on and off the board, and Sam Priebe. They both taught some hard chess lessons (you know, the kind where you learn a new idea by

losing to it). My aversion to double rook endings dates back to a loss to Ron, and after trying and losing with my first Sicilian Defense to Sam, I only average one or two Sicilians a decade.

The Schwarz Memorial

Rudolph Schwarz (3/26/1895 - 11/1/1959), a medical doctor from New York, retired to Phoenix in the late 1950s. He joined the Encanto Chess Club (established in 1952) and was active in advocating a club requiring USCF membership, so that rated tournaments could be held. In June of 1958, nine or ten chessplayers met at Elmer and Mabel Burlingame's residence to form the 100% USCF Phoenix Chess Club, and elected Dr. Schwarz as the first President.

I met Mabel over the board a few times. She was still one of America's top rated women until well into her sixties. I'd be interested in finding out who the other charter members of the Phoenix Chess Club were. I believe some of them were Col. Paul Webb, Armand Bosco (my long time and close friend until his death in 1986), and perhaps Jack Gibson?

In 1959, during a Phoenix-Tucson match, at a place called **The Den** on 15th Ave, between Virginia and Thomas, while playing a game with a woman from Tucson, Dr. Schwarz fell ill and died. In this respect, he followed in the footsteps of other chess greats (Capablanca, Alekhine, etc.), spending some of their last moments at the chessboard. I don't know how the match came out, but the more superstitious of us still get nervous whenever we have to play female Tucsonians.

Col. Webb (1905 - 3/12/1988) was the greatest boon to Arizona chess in the sixties and early seventies. When I knew him, his wife was living in West Virginia for health reasons, and he lived alone in a small house, which was packed wall-to-wall with chess books, magazines, and historical documents. He ran tournaments, started school chess programs, prison chess programs, and helped turn the Phoenix Chess Club into the largest 100% USCF club in the country with over 400 members. Beginning in 1981, it no longer required USCF membership to belong to the club. Col. Webb's total devotion, the club membership declined, and it eventually disappeared completely in the 1990s. In 1979, with his own health failing, he went back east to retire with his wife. When the "grand system" (described in the next paragraph) of determining the state champion was created, he suggested that the finals be named after Dr. Schwarz.

The AZ championship system mentioned in the previous paragraph, which began with the 1968 championship and disappeared in the 1990s, started with qualifying tournaments (such as the **Copper State Open** in Phoenix and the **Desert Open** in Tucson). The top players from these tournaments, the qualifiers, joined the state's highest rated seeded players in a candidates tournament, eventually called the **Col. Paul Webb Memorial Candidates Tournament**. The top five contestants from the Webb Memorial then join the incumbent champion for the ten round, double round robin **Dr. Rudolph Schwarz Memorial Tournament**. In those days, I was proud to have the "most meaningful" championship of all US states. We should have pretty accurate records of the Schwarz competitions, because by 1968, the Phoenix Chess Club and its publications were going strong. The statistics we could muster are presented below.

<u>Year</u>	<u>AZ Chess Champion</u>	<u># of times</u>	<u>Score</u>		
<u>Wins/Draws/Losses</u>					
1968	Charles T. Morgan	3	/	/	/
1969	David O. Hestenes	1	/	/	/
1970	David O. Hestenes	2	/	/	/
1971	Robert J. Rowley II	1	8.5 / 9	8 / 1 / 0	
[One player did not compete in the second half of the tournament.]					
1972	Herbert Hickman	1	6.5 / 10	/	/
[William B. Abbott tied for first, but lost a two game playoff match.]					
1973	Robert J. Rowley II	2	6.5 / 10	5 / 3 / 2	
[Jack L. Gibson tied for first, but lost a four game playoff match, 3 draws and 1 loss.]					

1974	Robert J. Rowley II	3	8.0 / 10	6 / 4 / 0
1975	Robert J. Rowley II	4	7.0 / 10	6 / 2 / 2
	Mehmed I. Prcic	1	7.0 / 10	5 / 4 / 1
[Rowley and Prcic became co-champions after tying a 4 game playoff match.]				
1976	Timothy G. Brown	1	5.0 / 8	4 / 2 / 2
[One player dropped out in the first half, but after playing at least one game. At age 15, Tim probably still holds the record for youngest champion.]				
1977	Robert J. Rowley II	5	7.5 / 10	6 / 3 / 1
	Timothy G. Brown	2	7.5 / 10	6 / 3 / 1
1978	Robert J. Rowley II	6	8.0 / 10	7 / 2 / 1
1979	Robert J. Rowley II	7	7.0 / 10	4 / 6 / 0
1980	William A. Wharton	1	6.0 / 10	/ /
1981	Tony Brown	1	/ 10	/ /
1982	Robert J. Rowley II	8	9.5 / 10	9 / 1 / 0
1983	William A. Wharton	2	6.5 / 10	5 / 3 / 2
	Spencer R. Lower	1	6.5 / 10	5* / 3 / 2
[Note: there as a 3 way tie between Will Wharton, Spencer Lower, and Richard Ketcham. They played 4 game matches against each other. Wharton and Lower remained tied and were named co-champions. Lower and Ketcham had forfeit wins against a player who withdrew during the second half of the original ten games. So, Will Wharton must hold the record for most games played in a Schwarz+playoff with 18 games!]				
1984	Kenneth C. Larsen	1	8.5 / 10	8 / 1 / 1
1985	William A. Wharton	3	6.0 / 9	5 / 2 / 2
	Spencer R. Lower	2	6.0 / 9	5 / 2 / 2
[Note: one player did not compete in the second half of the tournament.]				
1986	William A. Wharton	4	6.5 / 9	5 / 3 / 1
[Note: one player did not compete in the second half of the tournament.]				
1987	Darko Sertic	1	6.5 / 10	6 / 1 / 2
1988	Kenneth C. Larsen	2	9.0 / 10	8 / 2 / 0
1989	Kenneth C. L arsen	3	7.5 / 10	5 / 5 / 0
1990	Robert J. Rowley II	9	7.5 / 10	5 / 5 / 0
	Kenneth C. Larsen	4	7.5 / 10	5 / 5 / 0
[I remember coming out of an 8 year retirement, because it looked like Ken was on a rampage the last few years and would put a dent in my record. I felt good to tie.]				
1991	Robert J. Rowley II	10	8.0 / 10	7 / 2 / 1

Dr. Hestenes was a Physics professor at ASU, now an emeritus professor, famous worldwide for his creation and applications of Geometric Algebra. Coincidentally, while we were battling it out over the boards, I was a Physics student, and worked with Dr. Hestenes as a graduate student. As a chess player, Hestenes was an unusually fast starter. How many of us can say, as he can, that our **first** rating was over 2000?

Herbert Hickman was an accountant who moved back east shortly after winning his title. That 1972 Schwarz was great for the spectators, tragic for me and Bill Abbott. In the last round, I needed a win over Abbott to clinch the title, or a (draw to catch Hickman). I was a pawn up and moving in for the kill when I dropped a rook, losing instantly, and allowing Abbott to catch Hickman. The playoff match was only two games long (almost like sudden death), and Bill Abbott thus lost his closest chance at a Schwarz title.

Mehmed (Mike) Prcic lived for a short time in Arizona. He was from Yugoslavia, said he was the brother-in-law of GM Ljubomir Ljubojevic, and played like he was. We split the playoff match (leading 2 to 1, I couldn't manage to avoid a loss in the fourth game), and so we set a precedent for having co-champions.

Darko Sertic was another Yugoslavian (watch out for these guys) master. He only lived in Arizona for a few years, and a number of us still miss his witty personality.

Will Wharton, Spencer Lower, and Ken Larsen were all from Tucson during their reigns, and are all still masters. Spencer lives in Cottonwood, I believe, and plays only occasionally, like me. Will and Ken have retired or semi-retired from tournament chess, Ken in Tucson and Will in the Phoenix area. All three are still active in Arizona chess decision making and, I believe, in kids' chess teaching programs. Bob Rowley just feels old and tired, doesn't want to teach chess, and enjoys, but isn't any longer much of a threat at, occasional chess tournaments.

Further Arizona State Chess Championship Titles

I'm not sure when the Schwarz style tournaments ended. The Qualifier / Candidates / Double Round Robin style was impressive and tended to really find the champion, cutting down on the effects of single bad days or lucky swiss pairings, while allowing everyone a shot at it. But, it takes a lot of time, the need to raise money, and born dedicated organizers. I miss the old way, but understand the problems. Eventually, some years didn't even have a title tournament, and other years had just a single round robin with invited top players.

In some recent years, we've taken to calling the single round robin tournament the **Paul Webb Memorial Chess Championship**. And the last time, I believe the winner of the Tucson Open was declared the champion. So, we've come full circle to the really old days when the winner of the Arizona Open was champion. Maybe the pendulum will swing back one of these days (when descendants of P.T. Barnum or Don King move to Arizona).

<u>Year</u>	<u>AZ Chess Champion</u>	<u># of times</u>	<u>Score</u>	
<u>Wins/Draws/Losses</u>				
1992	Tal Shaked	1	7.5 / 8	7 / 1 / 0
	[Note: one player played only two games while another dropped out after two games in the second half]			
1993	Tal Shaked	2	8.0 / 10	6 / 4 / 0
	[Note: played January 1993.]			
1994	Tal Shaked	3	3.5 / 6	2 / 3 / 1
	[Note: played October 1993.]			
1995	Tal Shaked	4	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
1996	Tal Shaked	5	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
	Matthew Guthrie	1	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
	[Note: was there a playoff? They were probably co-champions.]			
1997	Igor Ivanov	1	5.0 / 5	5 / 0 / 0
	[Note: played 2/28-3/02 1997.]			
1998	Kenneth C. Larsen	5	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
	James Todd	1	4.0 / 5	4 / 0 / 1
	[Note: was there a playoff? They were probably co-champions.]			
1999	[Note: no championship was played, so Larsen and Todd continued as co-champs.]			
2000	William A. Wharton	5	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
	[Note: played December 1999]			
2001	??			
2002	??			
2003	??			
2004	??			
2005	Mark Ginsburg	1	/ 5	/ /
	[This one was strangely played in May 2004, so Ginsburg was champ for 1.5 years.]			
2006	Mark Ginsburg	2	/ 5	/ /
	Nikolai Andrianov	1	/ 5	/ /
	Sonny Kamberi	1	/ 5	/ /
2007	Robert J. Rowley II	11	3.5 / 5	2 / 3 / 0
	Sonny Kamberi	2	3.5 / 5	/ /
2008	Levon Altounian	1	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0
	Mark Ginsburg	3	4.0 / 5	3 / 2 / 0

Vaishnav Aradhyula 1 4.0 / 5 3 / 2 / 0

[Note: this year, the winner of the Tucson Open (Jan 2008) became the new champion.
Were they co-champs? Or, was there a playoff? Or, did Lev take it on tiebreaks?]

2009
2010

[Note: the 2010 champ = winner of the 2009 AZ Chess Championship (Sep 2009).]