

A by BRAD DARRACH

ngry voices rattled the door to Bobby Fischer's hotel room as I raised my hand to knock. "Goddammit, I'm sick of it!" I heard Bobby shouting. "I'm sick of seeing people! I got to work, I got to rest! Why didn't you ask me before you set up all those appointments? To hell with them!" Then I heard the mild and dignified executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation addressing the man who may well be the greatest chess player in world history in a tone just slightly lower than a yell: "Bobby, ever since we came to Buenos Aires I've done nothing but take care of you, day and night. You ungrateful —!"

It was 3 p.m., a bit early for Fischer to be up. Ten minutes later, finding the hall silent, I risked a knock and Fischer cracked the door. "Oh yeah, the guy from LIFE. Come on in." His smile was broad and boyish but his eyes were wary. Tall, wide and flat, with a head too small for his big body, he put me in mind of a pale transhuman sculpture by Henry Moore. I had seen him twice before but never so tired.

Just inside the door I stopped short. The room looked like a terminal moraine of bachelorhood. Bedclothes in tortured piles on the floor. Socks, underwear, bags, newspapers, magazines jumbled on the spare bed. Boxes stacked all over the couch, and on the floor between the beds a single graceful banana peel. The only clean place in the room was a small table by the window, where a set of handsome wooden chessmen had been set up for play. Serenely beautiful, an altar in the debris of battle.

A battlefield is what Fischer's life has been for the last 11 months. In May, coming off a winning streak of seven games in international tournament play, the 28-year-old Brooklyn prodigy entered the challenge rounds for the world's chess championship. In the first of three elimination matches he destroyed Russia's Mark Taimanov, 6-0, the first shutout

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Relaxing at an Argentine ranch, chess prodigy Bobby Fischer smiles a winner's smile — partly because he recently defeated Russia's Tigran Petrosian, partly because he has just managed to ride a gaucho pony without breaking his neck.

Bobby Fischer is a ferocious winner

'I shouldn't have kicked him, you can't go around kicking people'

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ever achieved in grandmaster play. In the second match he finished off Denmark's Bent Larsen by the same score. In his contest with Russia's Tigran Petrosian, completed two days before I arrived in Buenos Aires, Fischer pushed his winning streak to 20, then caught a bad cold and lost a game. But with the match tied at 2½-2½, Fischer changed his hotel, got a good night's sleep and ran the last four games against the former world's champion in a brutal display of power. Sometime next spring, at a place still to be decided, Fischer will meet Russia's Boris Spassky in a best-of-24-games battle for the world title Spassky now holds. Spassky is a formidable chess master, but even some top Soviet experts now expect Fischer to end Russia's 35-year domination of the game and become the first American ever to hold the title.

"Congratulations on your victory," I tried to say.

"Yeah, yeah," Fischer mumbled shyly and turned away to grab a coat and tie. "Got to eat. Starved. Talk later." And he hurried off to breakfast with about twenty Russian chess magazines tucked under his arm.

In the lobby people rushed up to Fischer from all directions. He looked startled and irritated. Argentina is chess-crazy (there are 60 chess clubs in Buenos Aires alone) and for more than a month he had been stalked day and night by Latin adoration. A white-haired man collared him now and spoke earnestly. A young girl grabbed his arm and said something intense that made him pull back and then stride away. A U.S. TV sports team puffed along at his elbow, but he wasn't having any. "Later!" he flung at them and, tilting forward, lurched off with a powerful wambling stride that made him look like Captain Ahab making headway in a high wind.

At the London Grill, a transplanted English pub of pleasantly peeling charm, Fischer made for a back table and ordered two 12-ounce glasses of fresh orange juice, the largest steak in the house, a mixed green salad and a pint bottle of carbonated mineral water. Five minutes later he ordered another glass of orange juice, and by the time he was ready for a huge dish of bananas and superrich Chantilly cream he had finished his fourth pint of mineral water. He ate with the oral drive of a barracuda and talked incessantly about how wonderful the food was. "Look at that juice! Fresh, not frozen! And where else can you get a glass that big for less than ten cents? Look at that steak! It's almost two inches thick. And you can really taste it! Not like that lousy American meat, all full of chemicals. This is natural meat! I tell you, Argentine food is the finest

in the world, the finest in the world! They really go in for quality here. Like clothes. You can get a tailor-made suit here for less than \$100, and they last! Shoes too. They got the best shoes in the world here. Look at this pair I got on. Here, look at them!" Quickly untying an enormous brown shoe, he took it off and handed it across the table. "Look at that sole! It's composition and I'm telling you it's strong! I go through an ordinary pair of shoes in days. Days! But I've had this pair for a year and it's still great. I mean I love America and I'd never be anything else but an American, but things are falling apart up there. Everybody doing his own thing just won't work. We need organization! We need to get back to basic values!" Shaking his head sadly, he ordered another dish of bananas and Chantilly.

At sundown, as he does at sundown every Friday of his life, Fischer disappeared into his room for 24 hours of solitary meditation. He is a member of the Church of God, a fundamentalist California-based religious sect, and he takes his religion seriously. He won't talk about it, though. He won't talk to the press about any aspect of his private life. But a good deal is known.

Child of a broken marriage, Bobby grew up in Brooklyn with a dominant mother and an absent father. He seemed lonely and a little withdrawn,

Never a man to enjoy the scenery when he can look at a chessboard, Fischer works out a problem on his chess wallet (right) as he takes a trip in a small plane. Later he tries another sport (below) with somewhat less skill but the same furious will to win.



in no way a remarkable child, until one day when he was 6 his older sister happened to bring home a chess set. From that day, Bobby's destiny has possessed him. Father, mother, friends: all the people he needed he found in a set of chess figures, all the world he wanted was there in a square foot of space.

At 13, Bobby won the U.S. junior championship. At 14, Bobby ripped through eleven matches, three with grandmasters, to become U.S. champion—the youngest ever. But his mother felt strongly that he was too little appreciated. She went to Washington and picketed in Bobby's behalf—one day she actually chained herself to the White House gate. Acutely embarrassed, Bobby gradually pushed her out of his life. At 17, he quit school ("Teachers," he said, "are jerks") and lived alone in a warren of chess literature.

At 18, Fischer played with such demonic brilliance that chess masters were sure he would become world's champion the next year. But after a tournament in Curaçao, he accused the Russians of playing to let their own best players win and fighting like tigers to make Fischer lose. In a fury of humiliation, he refused to meet the Russians again until the rules were rewritten. The press jeered him as a bum loser, but at great cost to his career he held out. The world organization of chess has now dropped the tournament sys-



tem in world championship play and substituted the series of individual matches Fischer wanted. *Mano a mano*, he reasoned, talent would tell.

Talent and erudition. Fischer is the profoundest student of chess who ever lived. He reads incessantly, forgets nothing, turns knowledge into action with monstrous precision and ferocity. "No other master," a German expert told me, "has such a terrific will to win. At the board he radiates danger, and even the strongest opponents tend to freeze, like rabbits when they smell a panther. Even his weaknesses are dangerous. As white, his opening game is predictable—you can make plans against it—but so strong that your plans almost never work. In middle game his precision and invention are fabulous, and in the end game you simply cannot beat him."

At sundown on Saturday Fischer burst out of an elevator into the lobby of his hotel. An even bigger crowd was there. Dead-white with hunger after a day without food, he put his head down and headed for the street. He had promised an American TV network an interview that evening, but he pushed the cameraman aside impatiently. "Later, later!" Shutters clicked on all sides as he hit the sunlight. A husky Argentinian *paparazzo* gave pursuit, snapping shots every few feet. Suddenly

Fischer swerved at him, grabbed for his camera but missed, then gave him two quick kicks in the right leg. Before the photographer could regain balance, Fischer turned the corner and was gone. Looking shaken, the photographer sat for some time on the fender of a nearby cab. "*Bobby es loco*," he muttered, shaking his head.

An uncanny thing happened that night in Fischer's room. Like a turtle he shrank into himself and gathered his world about him. First he switched on a Sony shortwave radio and fiddled till he picked up some soft rock from London. Then out came the Russian chess magazines. (Fischer seldom ventures beyond "chess Russian" but he reads and speaks Spanish fluently.) Eyes smoked with introspection, he played through 10, 15, 25 games at frenzied speed, slamming the pieces at the board like darts and muttering savage or mocking or fascinated comments under his breath. It was genius in full rage and it went on for almost an hour before he glanced up and remembered I was there.

"I shouldn't have kicked him," he said. "You can't go around kicking people."

Then his eyes smoked again and he raced through a dozen more games. This is it, I thought. This is Bobby's life. Sleep all day. Grab some food. Hole up with a shortwave radio or a tape re-

recorder or a TV set and play chess with himself all night. No people in his life if he can help it. Just a small circle of undemanding electronic acquaintances. A man alone in a monomania.

"He's not a bad guy, I guess," Fischer went on, apparently unaware that 20 minutes had elapsed between sentences. "It's his job that's bad."

He turned the radio up. "That's Victor Sylvester!" he said excitedly. "Listen to that sound! Rich, huh?" I gulped, then nodded interestedly. Victor Sylvester is the British Lawrence Welk.

"I despise the media," Fischer went on, looking straight at me and scowling. "'Goodbye, media man. Spreading your paranoia across the land. Creating situations that you don't understand.' They're destroying reality, turning everything into media," he said, turning the volume higher still.

The phone rang. It was Svetozar Gligoric, the Yugoslav grandmaster, calling from Venice. Fischer glowed. Gligoric is one of his warmest admirers. "Gligo! Thank you. What? . . . I was a little bit worried after the second game, yeah. . . . Well, in the fifth he had a good position but he didn't try to win. . . . That's right, these matches are somehow easy for me. . . . But I feel I've been in my best moment for many years. . . . Spassky? He's a very solid player but—well, you

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He fell for a collie, a horse and a little red flower

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know. . . Congratulations from Spassky? No, nothing. . . Bye, Gligo."

He put the phone down, grinning. "I haven't had any congratulations from Spassky yet. I think I'll send him a telegram. CONGRATULATIONS ON WINNING THE RIGHT TO MEET ME FOR THE CHAMPIONSHIP."

About one a.m. we went out for lunch. No photographers in the lobby, but Fischer wasn't taking any chances. We slipped down the back stairs and out a side door and then hugged the wall till we were two blocks from the hotel. "I guess we shook those jerks," Fischer said. Then he walked for about 20 blocks through the night city at a pace that made me feel like Dopey the Dwarf scrambling to keep up with the big folks. The streets were full of young couples strolling entwined and kissing. Fischer looked over their heads and hurried by. I wondered if he noticed them until he darted a glance at a parked car where a man in his 40s or 50s was necking with a young girl. "Did you see that?" Fischer exploded. "Disgusting!"

We ate at a Chinese restaurant. Fischer ordered two main dishes, one made with duck and the other with pork, as I remember, and then swizzled them around with his fork till he had a sort

of soupy slush. "Terrific food here!" he mumbled, eyes shining.

After lunch we hiked at high speed until five a.m., covering at least eight miles. Fischer talked with a boisterous boyish eagerness about all his favorite subjects: chess, money, the Russians, electronic gadgets, chess, clothes, food, the Russians, chess, science, ecology, urban problems, noise. For a man widely assumed to have tunnel intelligence, he showed a remarkable spread of interests. But the more he talked the clearer it became that all his information was factual, not emotional. It came from books, magazines, newspapers, television—the media he despises. Not long before dawn he was telling me how terrible cities are for people, how much he loves nature and the open countryside. I told him about a big *estancia* (ranch) I knew of and suggested that we fly out in a small plane and spend the next day there. He was at first delighted at the thought but then he stared at me, the color draining from his cheeks and his jaw dropping a little, as though he had just been jabbed in the gut. "I don't know about the plane," he said slowly. "Suppose the Russians—like, did something to the motor or something. I mean, people don't realize how important chess is to their image. They'd really like to get rid of me now."

Flat and green, the springtime pampas looked like ironed Ireland. Less than an hour out from Buenos Aires the plane landed on a shaved strip of pasture—oops! wrong *estancia*. Three minutes later we saw "Santa Elena" painted on a tin roof and swooped down to a waiting pickup truck. Hotel-bound for almost a year, Fischer stared at the grass the way a prisoner stares at sunlight. "Wow!" was all he could say at first. "Wow!"

The manor house was a comfortable old steep-roofed bungalow set in a park of tropical pines and towering sycamores. A fat, friendly collie came waddling across the lawn. Ruby was her name and for Fischer it was love at first sight. For two hours they romped and cuddled and hiked all over the estate. At one point Ruby attacked an armadillo but Fischer dragged her off and for a good ten minutes he looked shaken. It made me wonder if he had seen some



Fischer is a city boy born and bred, but he showed country instincts in the Argentine countryside. He tumbled about with a friendly collie named Ruby and at one point actually rescued an armadillo from her jaws. An

Argentine cow pony provided a spine-jarring but exciting ride. Once, apparently overcome, he dropped suddenly to his knees in the middle of a prickly field and sniffed a little red flower that smelled, he said, like a rose.

Photographed by HARRY BENSON



thing of himself in the small terrified creature.

Back at the house the vivacious housekeeper served us a tasty Argentine pot roast slathered with vegetables. In a rush of euphoria Fischer tossed off two glasses of red wine, the first drinks anybody I know had ever seen him take.

After dinner, with Ruby trotting loyally alongside, Fischer went riding. He jumped in the saddle, put the reins around his own neck and said giddy up! He was scared and he took a terrible jouncing but he was dead game. Afterward he fell asleep in a hard porch chair with Ruby sleeping on the floor at his feet. "People are really nice out here," he murmured in wonder as we left. "You can trust them, you know?"

At Santa Elena, Fischer was more open than at any time during the days I spent with him. On the way home in the plane, while night closed around us like a big rose and he sat hunched over his chess wallet playing furious solitaire, I made notes on what he had said.

"Americans like a winner. If you lose, you're

nothing. . . . I'm going to win, though. . . . It's good for the match that Spassky has a plus score against me. We've met five times. He's won three times and we've drawn twice. But I'm a stronger player and a long match favors me. . . ."

When I told him I had heard that Spassky gives up all private life for at least six months before a championship match, lifts weights, does road work and sees a psychoanalyst every day, Fischer smiled mysteriously and said: "No kidding." When I asked how he intended to train, he shrugged and said: "I don't know. Go along as usual, I guess. Study. Play some tennis, maybe. Walk. I like to walk, you know."

When he wins the championships? "I'll play a lot, stake matches. Not like the Russians. They win the championship and then hide for three years. Every few months, anyway twice a year, I'd like to get up a purse and meet a challenger. It's good for the game, keeps up interest in chess, and it's good for the bank account. I want to get some money together. Like take professional football. All these athletes making hundreds of thousands of dollars. Contracts, endorsements,

If there's room for all of them, there ought to be room for one of me. I mean, after all, I'm a great goodwill ambassador for the United States. Besides, I want money so I can tell some people I don't like to go. . . . yeah."

My last night in Buenos Aires, the *paparazzi* ambushed Fischer. Returning to his hotel after a three-hour walk, he was set upon by a gang of about 15 photographers and "reporters," most of them working for a local scandal sheet that had promised to "persecute" Fischer until he gave an interview. The "reporters" crowded around him, digging their shoulders into his ribs and hissing insults into his face while the photographers recorded his discomfort. Pale with anger, Fischer thrust through the mob to the elevator. But in his room he began to grin, then laughed so hard he almost fell off the couch. "It's like chess!" he explained in high glee. "I knocked off one of their pieces, so they went after the king. But I got away, I got away! Wow, am I hungry! Soon as they're gone, let's sneak out and get something to eat!" ■

