

# CHESS LIFE



## Oh, My Aching Brain!

GM Timur Gareyev pedals his way to a blindfold simul world record in a 48-game Las Vegas extravaganza

# Chess Life

## MARCH

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES

38 COVER STORY

BLINDFOLD CHESS

The "Chess Machine"  
Pedals to Record

BY JAY STALLINGS &  
JENNIFER VALLENS

GM Timur Gareyev Sets  
Blindfold Chess World Record



GM Timur Gareyev being led by Marck Cobb to the stationary bike that was his base of operations for 19 hours.

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Psychic pain. That is the term that occurred to us when we first saw this picture of GM Timur Gareyev deep in thought on his stationary bike during his world-record blindfold exhibition. The full story begins on page 38.

PHOTO BY LENNART OOTES

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While ultimately it is the player sitting alone at the board, their foundation for success almost always starts with good coaching. Our three medal winners in Batumi exemplify this.

# The “Chess Machine” Pedals to Record



PHOTO: LENNART OOTES

## GM Timur Gareyev Sets Blindfold Chess World Record

By **JAY STALLINGS** & **JENNIFER VALLENS**

**G**randmaster Timur Gareyev not only broke the blindfold chess world record by successfully completing 48 simultaneous games on December 3-4, 2016 in Las Vegas, Nevada, he did so with style and panache. While besting the record of 46 set by German FM Marc

Lang in 2011, he managed to accomplish the feat in less time, against a similarly-rated field, with an impressive 80.2 percent winning percentage (compared to Lang's 75 percent).

The Uzbekistan-born, but now world-travelling grandmaster, played 1,370 moves

over 19 hours—and never once saw a board. Just to get an idea of the quality of his play, let's jump right into one of our favorite moves from the night.

**(See game top of next page)**

## SEARCHING FOR THE BEST

Jonathan Mikolic (2059)  
GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
December 3-4, 2016



BLACK TO PLAY

While this is a win for Black, Gareyev always searched for the best move throughout this spectacle (or perhaps the one that would encourage resignation soonest!). In this position, Gareyev thought for about 45 seconds and played **1. ... Bxb3**, to which his opponent immediately replied [2.] “a2 pawn captures b3” (the preferred method of relaying moves to Timur—each player called out their own moves). What would you play next?

Mike Zaloznyy, a national master, was making Timur’s moves on the board for him. Timur began to say, “Knight to a- ...” and before Gareyev said the complete move, Zaloznyy was already placing the knight on a5, until adjusting it upon hearing “... 7.” Just as you are doing now, the crowd of roughly a dozen that was moving with Gareyev from board to board (actually, Gareyev wasn’t moving at all—he was on a stationary bike pedaling the equivalent of about 50 miles over the 18½ hours event), cocked their heads for a moment in curious surprise, then, spectator by spectator, began to smile and nod. You see it now, don’t you?

When Gareyev came back around to that board, Mikolic resigned in the face of the now obvious plan of 3. ... Nb5 and 4. ... Nc3.

*A fire alarm, a cheating accusation, a misheard move, and, of course, there was “Cow Man.”*

## JOURNEY TOWARDS A WORLD RECORD

Jennifer Vallens met Gareyev when her son Evan played in a tournament in San Diego in January of 2014 (Evan was part of the U.S. Amateur Team West group that made the cover of the May 2015 *Chess Life*).—Vallens is a chess mom with a background in marketing and started OFF da ROOK, a chess organization that runs scholastic chess events and includes a chess website and newsletter ([www.offdarook.com](http://www.offdarook.com)). Gareyev, always passionate about sharing his love of chess and the adventure it brings, told Vallens of his dream to break the world record, and the two of them began brainstorming. They spent the next two years developing a blindfold chess tour in support of the ultimate record-breaking challenge.

That ultimate challenge came to life on December 3, 2016 at University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Juan and Sabrina Jauregui of the Las Vegas Chess Center helped Vallens with the organization.

And what an event it was! A fire alarm, a cheating accusation, a misheard move, and, of course, there was “Cow Man.”

The event began early with a meet and greet the night before that provided the players an opportunity to mingle. FM Tom Brownscombe, a player, a national tournament director, and former US Chess Scholastic Director, assisted Vallens as they assigned boards to all 48 players. The event was originally planned as a 47-board event which would break Lang’s record of 46 games from 2011. But when additional players wanted to join, Gareyev felt the more the merrier. It was close to becoming a 50-board extravaganza!

To enhance the main show, Gareyev and Vallens brought in Keith and Ray Ryan of Killer Dutch Productions to stream the event live and asked chess tech and photography guru Lennart Ootes to assist with the broadcast. Your lead reporter was asked to do the commentary. As I was already a huge fan of Gareyev’s, I accepted without hesitation! Gareyev’s good friend and supporter Marck Cobb, former president of the Karpov International School of Chess, assisted with the set up of the event and acted as Gareyev’s guide for breaks, as well as serving as the lead “move maker” for Gareyev. Other key team members were Juan Jauregui who helped secure the players and acted as a “mover,” Ryan Phillips and Mike Zaloznyy (live online game analysis), and Joe of Joe’s Magic Foods who provided Gareyev with his much-needed fuel for the day. But it wasn’t just this first-rate team and a star-making performance by Gareyev that made this event successful. There were 48 wood pushers who committed their time to support the popular grandmaster in his personal quest to set a world record.

We had players from all over the world. The players on boards 1-43 were mostly made up of locals from the Las Vegas Chess Center but also included players who traveled from California, Colorado, Kansas, Washington, and Tennessee to participate. Boards 44-48 were reserved for players who participated online (from Brazil, Sweden, New York, and Utah) through [playchess.com](http://playchess.com). Lennart Ootes made sure the connection to our online players was never lost and that their moves were accurately and physically represented over the board as well.

Of the 48 players, most notable is Luciano Nilo de Andrade, a 92-year-old, expert-level player who played online from Brazil. This was not the first time Luciano had played against a blindfolded grandmaster. He played on board #27 against GM Miguel Najdorf in his record-setting, 45-board simultaneous exhibition in 1947 in São Paulo, Brazil!

Over half of Gareyev’s opponents were rated above 1700, though the average rating is impossible to calculate due to six of the players being unrated.

In the entertaining game below, our aggressive-playing hero’s class-B opponent doesn’t hang any pieces, but slight inaccuracies result in mate on the 21st move.

SICILIAN DEFENSE,  
WING GAMBIT (B40)

GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
Peter Bodziony (1733)

1. e4 c5 2. b4

The Wing Gambit!

2. ... cxb4

Discounting the unsound nature of the Wing Gambit, Gareyev’s play during this game

was extremely accurate.

3. Nf3 e6 4. a3 Nf6 5. e5 Nd5 6. axb4 Bxb4 7. c4 Nb6 8. Ba3!

Played to remove the protector of Black’s weak dark squares in the center (especially d6).

8. ... Qe7 9. Bxb4 Qxb4 10. Nc3 a6?

Bodziony is likely concerned about 11. Nb5, but this allows Gareyev’s pieces to quickly come alive and invade Black’s position. Development and king safety (10. ... Nc6 or 10. ...

0-0, for example) are typically the top priority when your opponent has some initiative.

**11. Rb1 Qc5 12. Ne4 Qc6 13. Nd6+ Ke7 14. Ng5 f6 15. Qh5! fxe5**

15. ... fxe5?? 16. Qxg5+ Kf8 17. Qd8 mate or 15. ... g6? 16. Qh6 results in an unstoppable queen invasion.

*“... you’ll see a mind existing in an ostensive paradox of pure calculation and ingenious innovation.”*

—ANDREW MC GREGOR

**16. Nge4! Rf8**



And here, Gareyev forces mate in five moves:

**17. Qg5+ Rf6 18. Qxg7+ Rf7 19. Qxf7+ Kd8 20. Qf6+ Kc7 21. Ne8 mate.**

When asked if he always played the best move he could find, Gareyev replied, “Ultimately most players were strong, so there was little room for fishy play, even though I did pull off a couple of fun bluffs,” adding his trademark staccato laugh.

Andrew McGregor, aka “The Chess Boxer,” donned a black-and-white checkerboard outfit that (when he was seated with the hoodie pulled down) was mistaken by an online viewer as a cow costume. He was quickly given the nickname “Cow Man” by the Twitch.tv audience (who tossed out playful comments at the rate of two or three per second throughout the entire event—there were 25,000 overall views on the site). The exuberant McGregor exclaimed, “I think it was transformational for



## GM Timur Gareyev Stats

**Born:** Uzbekistan, March 3, 1988

**Titles Earned:** FM (2003), GM (2004)

**Highest Ratings Achieved:** FIDE—2682; US Chess—2780

**College Chess Team:** University of Texas at Brownsville, 2005-6; 2009-11

**Highest Rankings (Both achieved in February, 2013):** 67th on FIDE list; 3rd in U.S.

**World Record for Most Simultaneous Blindfold Games Played (48)**

**Record versus 2300-2599 US Chess players in 2016:** 36-0-21 (no losses!)

**Vegan, skydiver, marathoner, free spirit. His brain is currently under study by the Rissman Memory Lab at UCLA.**

me as a chess player. Besides Timur's imagination-defying feats of blindfold, if you look at his games you'll see a mind existing in an ostensive paradox of pure calculation and ingenious innovation. At his core he is a chess machine that doesn't make mistakes, so playing with that level of expectation in my own game transformed me as a player and I now see the game with fundamentally more depth and joy."

We asked Lennart Ootes about his experience working this event. The Dutch-born chess-tech specialist grinned and replied, "It's a lot of work, especially for a duration of 19 hours. But I must say Timur inspired me to work hard and carry on. If he can do it, I can do it." He went on to say the world record itself "... is formidable. It was so amazing to be part of it, and to see it in real life."

## THE ACCUSATION

After only a few hours of play, Brownscombe was approached by a player with a shocking claim: "I think Timur might be getting some help." The ever-objective national arbiter listened as the player explained that he was concerned because Gareyev had a wire visibly coming up from inside his shirt.

Brownscombe brought it to Vallens, who explained that it was a microphone and transmitter, not a receiving device, but Marck Cobb insisted that play should be stopped temporarily so that the device could be shown to the player and to the Twitch.tv viewing audience. Perhaps finding it easier to believe that he was cheating than remembering 48 boards, the player could not be convinced at that time, and also raised a concern that the method of delivering food to the blindfolded grandmaster while he played might also give him signals on which moves he should make! Brownscombe pointed out that it was reminiscent of the infamous yogurt accusations from the Karpov-Korchnoi World Championship match of 1978 (Korchnoi's team claimed Karpov's receiving of blueberry yogurt at the board could have been a coded message).

In the end, all suspicions were alleviated. The device was removed, replaced by a less-suspicious standing microphone. The player claimed that he only had concerns because "sometimes he would make really bad moves against bad players." For the rest of us, we continued to be amazed at his strongest moves. Here, he quickly dispatches his highest-rated opponent Tal-style.

## RUY LOPEZ (C78)

FM Tom Brownscombe (2200)  
GM Timur Gareyev (2703)

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6  
5. O-O Bc5 6. Re1 Ng4 7. Re2 O-O 8. c3 d5  
9. exd5? e4 10. dxc6 exf3 11. gxf3



11. ... Nxh2!

Also good is 11. ... Nxf2.

12. Re5 Qf6 13. Rxc5

After this move, Gareyev recited the remaining moves without hesitation!

13. ... Nxf3+ 14. Kg2 Bh3+!

14. ... Qg6+ works as well.

15. Kxh3 Qh4+ 16. Kg2 Qg4+ 17. Kf1 Nh2+  
18. Ke1 Rfe8+, White resigned.

## FIRE!

While no physical harm came from a smoking meal in the kitchen, the blaring sound of the fire alarm throughout the entire building had players and spectators alike covering their ears. In a video of Gareyev when the alarm sounded, you can see that he seems practically unfazed, but fans were concerned that this would throw him off his game. After UNLV's fire department (yes, picture a big fire truck rolling up with sirens blaring) cleared the building, nearly 30 minutes had passed and everyone took their places once again. The move-maker announced the board, the player announced his move, and, amazingly, play continued as though it had never stopped!

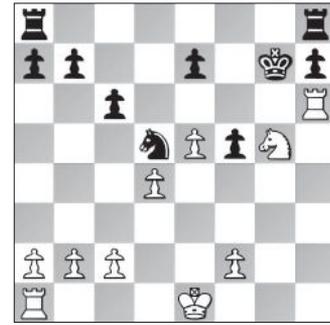
By now, a few more games were starting to finish and Gareyev took his first loss. Solid play by his 1900-rated opponent brought them to a position with just a slight advantage for White, when Gareyev's memory failed him by the slimmest of margins (one pawn, one square off).

## FOR WANT OF A SQUARE

GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
Tony McCarthy (1897)

(see diagram top of next column)

After McCarthy announced 18. ... Kg7 (diagram), Gareyev replied "rook captures e6", but as you can see, the e-pawn still sat firmly on e7. Gareyev consented that he must play the move, and the game was soon over.



WHITE TO PLAY

19. Re6?? h6 20. c4 hxg5 21. cxd5 Kf7! 22. Rxe7+ Kxe7 23. d6+ Ke6 24. O-O-O Rh2, White resigned.

## A FREE QUEEN—WELL, 33% OF THE TIME

A favorite theme among all game analysts is "parting with the lady." Confidently sacrificing your queen is uncommon in sighted games, so seeing Gareyev do it twice during the event impressed us all!

## QUEEN SAC

GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
Scott White (1889)



POSITION AFTER 24. ... Qe6

25. Rxd8! Qxf5?

Perhaps Scott assumed that Gareyev didn't see that his queen was hanging, or perhaps he missed the upcoming 28th or 29th move.

26. Rxf8+ Kxf8 27. Bd6+ Be7 28. Rxe7!  
Qd3 29. Re6+, and Black resigned as he must now part with his own queen!

## SCOTCH GAMBIT (C44)

GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
Shenlone Wu (1003)

1. e4 e5 2. d4 exd4 3. c3 Nf6 4. e5 Qe7 5. cxd4 d6 6. Nf3 Nc6 7. Bb5 Bg4 8. O-O dxe5 9. dxe5 Nd7 10. Nc3 Ndx5? 11. Nxe5! Bxd1 12. Nxc6 bxc6 13. Bxc6+ Kd8 14. Rxd1+ Kc8 15. Bxa8 Qh4 16. g3 Qh3 17. Be3 Bd6 18. Nb5, Black resigned.

(see next game, next page)

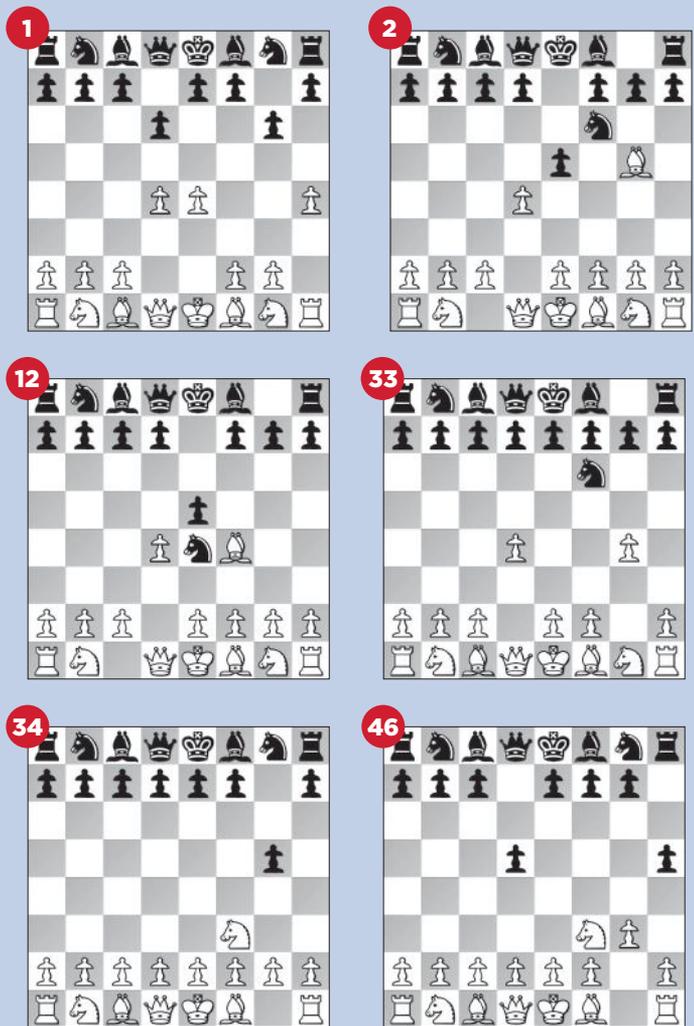
## How Did He Do It?

Blindfold players over the years have relied on different techniques to keep track of the games. All agree that the toughest challenge is to keep track of which position goes with which board. In other words, “Did I play a Danish Gambit on board 28 or was it board 38?”. The most influential blindfold player on Gareyev, showman extraordinaire GM George Koltanowski, would sometimes play 1. e4 on boards 1-5, 1. d4 on boards 6-10, and 1. c4 on boards 11-15, etc. to help him remember the positions.

For this event, Gareyev’s main tool was a “Memory Palace.” He worked with James Jorasch, the founder and CEO of Science House in New York, to help develop his technique. In a simplistic (and thus slightly inaccurate) analogy let’s go to YOUR house and imagine that I remove the vase from the entry way, move a book across your coffee table in your living room, and take the cereal out of your cupboard in the kitchen. Now, do you remember what I changed in your entry way? Well, Gareyev simply had to do that for 48 boards, for 1,370 moves, over 19 hours!

If a Memory Palace served as *strategy*, the tactics that he used (to differentiate the boards) were:

- 1) Playing white on the even boards, and black on the odd boards;
- 2) Meeting each opponent ahead of time and having them say something, like what they had for breakfast (most chose that);
- 3) Asking each opponent to use their own voice to announce their moves; and,
- 4) Playing obscure (or at least different) openings on almost every board.



As a matter of fact, only three boards looked identical after 2½ moves. After four moves, there were 48 distinct positions! Here are some of the most unorthodox opening positions and some startling statistics about Gareyev’s opening moves from the database on *chessgames.com* (The initial number is the board number matching the diagrams above): 1. Gareyev-Dashoff—3. h4 is White’s 10th most common move. 2. Babre-Gareyev—Of 5,424 games after 2. Bg5, this is the only time Black played 2. ... e5. 12. Dunn-Gareyev—3. ... e5 was played less than .5 percent of the instances of this position. 33. Gareyev-Stuart—2. g4 was played once every 1,000 games that start 1. d4 Nf6. 34. El Dorado-Gareyev—1. ... g5 was played once every 10,000 games after 1. Nf3. 46. Hildebrand-Gareyev—2. ... h5 is the only instance out of this move in 7,000 games.

### OOPS!

Gareyev parted with the lady in this game unintentionally. To his credit, his opponent had already achieved a small advantage.

### QUEEN’S FIANCHETTO DEFENSE (B00)

GM Timur Gareyev (2703)  
Marius Lucan (2072)

1. Nf3 b6 2. e4 Bb7 3. Nc3 h6 4. d4 g6

Mr. Lucan told me (and the Twitch.tv audience) in the post-game interview that he

had seen a lot of GM Gareyev’s games and knew that he had great success when the center pawns were advanced, so he chose a double-fianchetto opening.

5. Bc4 Bg7 6. O-O e6 7. d5 Ne7 8. Bf4 exd5 9. Bxd5 Nbc6 10. Qd2 g5 11. Bg3 d6 12. Rfe1 Nxd5 13. exd5+ Ne7 14. h4 g4 15. Nd4 O-O 16. Re4 h5 17. Qg5 Nxd5 18. Qxh5 Nf6 19. Qf5 Bxe4

(see diagram next column)

20. Qxe4?? Nxe4, White resigned.

It’s not every day that you beat a grandmaster,



and Mr. Lucan was ecstatic. After Gareyev resigned, Lucan was heard exclaiming “It’s the best day of my life!”



*“...there was little room for fishy play, even though I did pull off a couple of fun bluffs.”*

—THE BLINDFOLD KING

## How The Records Differ

Player	Games	Year	Win %	Avg. Moves	Method
Najdorf	45	1947	91.1	26	Sat in adjacent room
Lang	46	2011	75	24.5	Viewed players, moves by computer
Gareyev	48	2016	80.2	28.5	Blindfolded in same room, riding stationary bike

- Although some reports suggest that Najdorf was allowed to review notation, Luciano Nilo de Andrade does not recall anything of the such. He said that Najdorf played in a separate room and moves were relayed by a “teller”, Grandmaster Erich Eliskases. Some suggest that players in São Paulo at that time were not generally very strong. There were several masters there at that time, but none were ever mentioned to have played in this event.
- Lang’s accomplishment was very legit, especially considering that one of his opponents was rated 2350. Unlike Timur, he played facing the players, whose boards were hidden from his view, and typed his moves on a computer, being able to see only his opponent’s most recent move.
- Timur only heard his opponents. He improved on Lang’s time by over two hours despite playing 243 more moves than Lang.

While Gareyev’s memory occasionally failed him, it saved him in another game in which a misheard move resulted in two different positions—one on the board, and one in his head! Gareyev said all the moves backwards until they figured out which move had been misheard. I spoke with him about a month after the event and he told me that he could still recall almost all the games, and if there were indeed a few that he could not recall completely, he could get close. (See Sidebar: “How Did He Do It?”)

Many claim that Alexander Alekhine possessed the greatest blindfold skill (his 26 game simultaneous exhibition in New York in 1924 included numerous opponents who were strong masters), but the fact that he never attempted a bigger number suggests he might have realized how challenging it becomes once you move from 30-something to 40-something boards.

This all leads to a key question:

***Is GM Timur Gareyev the greatest blindfold player of all time?***

Scoring 80 percent on a record 48 boards over the course of 19 hours while hundreds remained riveted to their computers and another 40-50 chose to be there in person at 3:34 a.m. screams a resounding “Yes!” ♦