

AN EVENING WITH GARRY KASPAROV

By Calvin Hori

The Set-Up

Perusing the Chessbase website one day in April, I came across an article that described an unusual auction on Ebay involving former World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov (GK). The Kasparov Chess Foundation (KCF) was auctioning off 25 seats to play Kasparov in simultaneous chess exhibition at the New York Athletic Club on the evening of June 12. The simul was to be followed by a dinner and talk time with GK. The initial bid was \$2,000 with a “Buy it Now” price of \$5,000. Reminding myself that since this was a charitable event and thus the expenses for the event were tax-deductible, I decided to bid for a chance to participate in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I ended up winning a seat for the minimum price. In fact, not all the seats were sold and the simul was to have 20 participants.

The Pre-Event

It was a beautiful evening in New York on June 12th 2006 when I arrived at the famous New York Athletic Club at 6:00 PM. The 20 boards were neatly set up on 4 tables forming a rectangular enclosure. Cocktails and hors d'oeuvres were being served. After brief introductory comments by the president of the KCF, Michael Khondarkovsky, GK welcomed everyone and then posed with each participant for photos prior to making his opening move. As I sat there wondering whether he will open with d4 or e4 against me, I began to realize what was about to unfold. I, a lowly club player, will be making a move against a man who has achieved the highest rating in history and is almost universally regarded as the greatest chess player of all time. A man who, at 22, became the youngest World Champion in 1985 and held the title for 20 years. A man who ranks up there with Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan as one of the most recognizable men in the world. My hands were moist and my heart was pounding when GK came to my board, shook my hand, posed for the picture, adjusted the pieces and moved his queen pawn forward 2 spaces. The battle had started.....

The Game (s)

GK moved clockwise rather swiftly around the tables during the opening moves. I replied 1...Nf6 when he came around a second time and he quickly replied with 2. Nf3. The game eventually evolved into a Tarrasch variation of the QGD. After I moved 11...h6, a strange thing happened. GK paused at my board for a good 5-6 minutes. A crowd gathered around. One of 2 things was racing through my mind. Either I had him in trouble (unlikely), or he was pondering some spectacular combination which will blow me out of the game. As he continued to ponder the position, I looked around and saw several quizzical looks on the spectators' faces. I contemplated offering him a draw to break the tension, but decided against it. Finally, he moved 12. Bxf6 and moved on.

Positionally, I was crushed after that move, but decided to play on, not wanting to be the first to fall. I ended up resigning on the 22nd move in a totally lost position. I was the 5th or 6th victim of Kasparov but the result was irrelevant-I had a memorable experience.

The rest of the field dropped out one by one, until there were only 3 players left-a twenty-something woman, a 7 or 8-year old boy and a gentleman who I later learned was an expert-level player. The boy was finally mated in a little over 40 moves and the woman resigned shortly thereafter. I later learned that the boy was National Kindergarten Champion a couple years ago. The expert had taken Kasparov into a bishop vs. knight endgame. GK's intricate knight maneuvers eventually netted him a decisive pawn. The gentleman finally resigned at 9:30 pm to a round of applause.

The Aftermath

A very nice dinner followed. During dessert, GK talked about his foundation and its mission to increase chess interest in elementary schools around the world. He then took questions from the audience. The evening concluded with him signing books. I lugged 5 books to New York for him to sign. He graciously signed them all for me and posed for a nice picture. As he signed my copy of "My Great Predecessors IV", he said he plans to add 7 more books to the series with the next one being an analysis of his games with Karpov coming out next year.

All in all, the evening was an unforgettable experience which has created memories that I will cherish for the rest of my life.