



Greg Nowak
Photo by Daren Guyaz

Queens and Cowboys Play Against an Octopus in Montana

by Ryan Newhouse

The state of Montana may conjure images of rugged mountains, large ranches, and Big Sky, but what about an octopus that plays chess? Although Greg "The Octopus" Nowak may not be the typical Montanan, he is a dedicated one. Dedicated to chess that is. Greg Nowak, a seven-time Montana state chess champion, earns his living playing chess. In a state with cowhands, fly fishermen, and old mining towns, Nowak manages to scrape together a living by running a chess club, playing in tournaments, and offering chess challenges to the citizens of Missoula, Montana, where Nowak resides.

Nowak makes his mark

Nowak's introduction to chess, as a nine-year-old living in Milwaukee, was an accidental one. Nowak recalls entering a dime store in 1956 to shop for his cousin's birthday present. He bought a plastic chess set, and when he took the gift home to wrap it, Nowak decided to keep the set for himself and buy his cousin something else. "I did buy him something nice," Nowak says with a broad smile.

It wasn't long before Nowak's chess talent was well-noted in Milwaukee, a city already rich in chess history. The city was a home to Arpad Elo, father of the Elo rating system, and to two former USCF presidents, Marshall Rohland and Fred Cramer. Within a year of learning the game, Nowak began playing chess competitively in the Milwaukee Playground System, a scholastic tournament series sponsored by the *Milwaukee Journal*. Every year, the winners from each age group in the Playground System gathered for a championship match. For five straight years, Nowak won the championship for his age group. At 15, however, he

was not allowed to play. "They told me it was time to let someone else have a chance to win," recounts Nowak. "I was better at that age," he adds, "than that kid [Joshua Waitzkin] in the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*."

No longer allowed to play in the Milwaukee Playground System, Nowak began his serious chess studies by playing adult masters

at the Hawthorn Glen Chess Club. The director of the Club, Ernest Olfe, predicted that Nowak would be the next Bobby Fischer (a statement not far from the truth, with respect to Nowak's result against Fischer during an exhibition Fischer gave against 57 of Milwaukee's best players at the Plankinton Hotel) Nowak, who was a junior in high school at the time, drew against the champion using the Najdorf system of the Sicilian Defense.

Nowak was at his personal best during his time in Milwaukee. He achieved a rating of 2265, was crowned state speed chess champion for six years, and won many city tournaments. Unfortunately, Nowak's chess lifestyle was drastically altered when the Hawthorn Glen Chess Club was destroyed by fire. When the club reopened across town, its members were not as easily replaced as the sets and boards. Of the 120 active members the club had before the fire, only one quarter of them continued to play in the new location. Nowak no longer found the variety of competition he needed at the club.

Over the next 20 years, Nowak's chess life became much quieter. He took up playing international postal chess in the early 1980s. As a member of the ICCF (International Correspondence Chess Federation), Nowak obtained a rating of 2385, and even played in the semifinals for the World Championship of Postal Chess.

Postal chess and serious competition, however, took a back seat for Nowak when he moved to Missoula, Montana, in 1991. Within seven years, Nowak opened his own club and named it the Clandestine Chess Club. "At 56, not many people can say they own their own chess club," Nowak says proudly.

Nickname Sticks

Although many people have heard of "The Octopus," not everyone knows how he got his name. Some believe his name describes the way he picks up his opponents' pieces off the board, as if his fingers were tentacles enveloping captured prey. Nowak was actually given the nickname, "The Octopus," by a local newspaper reporter who witnessed him playing an exhibition against 52 players simultaneously. The reporter thought Nowak looked like an octopus standing in the midst of all those boards. Those who do get to play against Nowak one-on-one do so on the Windsor Castle chess set that Nowak won at his first tournament in 1956. He carries it with him everywhere he goes.

Since "The Octopus" moved to Missoula, he has been visiting area schools, directing tournaments and giving chess lessons to students. Every other year, Nowak is asked to give an exhibition in a Missoula school against over 100 junior-high-school students. Nowak is also working with a manager of a local Barnes & Noble bookstore ordering chess books for the store. The manager admits to Nowak that the books he picks are selling three times faster than the ones that are shipped directly from their headquarters.

Nowak now

On most days, one can find Nowak in a local coffee shop sipping black coffee and playing through key games from one of five filled notebooks with his Windsor Castle chess set. "I try to study qualitative games, not quantitative," says Nowak. He prides himself on knowing more atypical chess positions than the average player. One local coffee shop has sponsored "The Octopus" and offers a gift certificate as a prize to anyone who beats Nowak in the "10-to-1 Challenge," where the opponent gets ten minutes on the chess clock and Nowak only gets one minute. To date, there has been only one known victor.

But one of Nowak's major contributions to chess, as many in Montana see it, is the integration he strives to achieve between USCF and non-USCF players. Every October, he directs a tournament in Polson, Montana, that pits rated members against non-members. Nowak sees the tournament as a way to spark interest in chess by giving people a taste of the game at a different level. This year's tournament brought in 22 players, a record attendance for the tournament. Every day Nowak is thinking of how he can bring more Montanans to the chessboard to play for fun or competitively. And no, Montanans don't call their knights "horses."

If you would like to write to "The Octopus," send letters to: Greg "The Octopus" Nowak, Hellgate Station, P.O. Box 8572, Missoula, MT 59807.