

Capablanca in the *English Review*

Edward Winter

We reproduce an article by Capablanca entitled 'Chess' published on pages 459-462 of the *English Review*, November 1922:

'I am always being asked, What kind of a brain must a chess champion possess? What qualities are essential? What relation is there between chess and other mental activities? What about Englishmen? etc. To begin with, I can only say that I have today a rather poor memory, though as a child I could remember anything with ease. My record is to have repeated, when a small boy, three pages of history after I had read them once, without missing a single word. But as I have grown older – in fact since I became a first-class chess player – I have always tried to forget everything which I have not considered essential to remember, and I have succeeded so well in my training that I now have difficulty in remembering things in general. It so happens, now, that while there are several experts who remember every serious game I have played in the last 22 years, I can hardly remember a single one of them. A game played today I may hazily keep in my head for a few weeks, but after that it is gone forever. No doubt my present poor memory is a cultivated one. I have been influenced to adopt this system in order to avoid loss of sleep after a hard struggle at night. Thus I can go to sleep right after a game, whether I win or lose, and one hour after a long, strenuous, simultaneous *séance* against any number of opponents I may be found peacefully sleeping in my bed.

In a general way the memory of chess experts is like the memory of the great musicians. Just the same as a great pianist, for instance, can sit down and play for hours without looking at the score of any of the works he plays, a chess master can go through endless games and variations which he has unconsciously stored in his mind. The great musicians see the notes in their minds' eyes as though they were in front of them. In just the same way the chess master sees the moves and positions. If momentarily they forget a note or a move, the previous note or move, as the case may be, will remind them of the one to follow. There is a logical sequence that helps the expert to overcome his difficulties. In fact, it should be noticed that there must be some analogy between the minds of a musician and a chessplayer. I know several eminent musicians who are very fond of chess, and on the other hand nearly all the expert chessplayers are very fond of music. We must mention as the most striking case that of Philidor, the pioneer of the modern theory of chess, a chess genius, the strongest player of his epoch, who was also one of the eminent French musicians of his time. What kind of brain is required to be a chess champion I could not say, but I hold that outside whatever natural gifts in that direction one may possess it is very important, if not altogether essential, to have a fairly good general education, so that having a greater outlook one may look upon the so-called game from a broader point of view. This should be more true now than formerly, since chess has progressed enormously during the last 60 years, and to become the champion is a far more difficult task now. In this respect it would be well to call attention to the fact that while it is true that there have been in the past, as there are at present, some great chess players who are nonentities at anything else and who

have very little culture of any kind, on the other hand all the world's champions of the last 60 years, not including myself, have been men with more than a common general culture. That was the case with Anderssen, Steinitz, and Lasker. In this respect I can lay no claim to pre-eminence of any sort. All that can be put forth on my behalf is that I have read and seen a great deal, that I have an open mind, and that I am ready to learn anything on any subject. It might be well to call attention to the fact that chess as generally played by the large majority of players is merely a game more difficult than other games, but when played by the leading masters it ceases to be a game and becomes what might be called a minor scientific art. At its present stage of development it has a great deal of a science, but it has also a great deal of an art. Whether it will ever become an absolute science is only a matter of speculation. With regard to the essential qualities in the make-up of a champion it is difficult to lay down a dictum. It might be possible for a player to attain the highest place through the unusual power of one or two qualities that might be merely normal in another player fully as strong through the development of other qualities, which in their turn are only normal in the first case. There are, however, two qualities which seem to be absolutely essential in order to obtain pre-eminence in chess. They are: unusual powers of concentration and the power to visualize positions which may arise from the position in front of the player. It has often been stated that a mathematical brain was required in order to excel as a chessplayer. While it is true that Anderssen was a professor of mathematics and that Lasker is a mathematician, we find that Morphy was a lawyer and Philidor a musician. That so far as champions are concerned. With regard to other players who have never been champions, but who have become world's figures in chess, we may mention, amongst others, Tarrasch, a physician; Pillsbury, a lawyer; Alekhine, a lawyer; Zukertort, a physician. In England itself we have in the 50s Howard Staunton, a Shakespearean scholar, and Buckle, an historian. Surely there is enough variety in the mentalities of the few men we have mentioned. At present the only eminent players with mathematical brains are Dr E. Lasker, ex-world's champion, and Dr M. Vidmar. Incidentally, we may add that Dr Vidmar is a well-known authority amongst electrical engineers, as he has published some excellent treatises on the subject. He is also a professor at the University of Ljubljana, Czechoslovakia [*sic* – Yugoslavia], and at the same time managing director of some engineering works in the above-named city, all of which does not prevent him from being one of the foremost chessplayers in the world, which shows that excellence in chess is not incompatible with excellence in other directions.

We come now to the point regarding the country and the people most adept at the game. While in the past the Jews and the Slavs have been most prominent, I do not believe that it is necessarily a matter of race. On the other hand, as chess has progressed and to excel at it has become more difficult, the question of climate has, in my opinion, come in more as a determining factor. Evidently, since chess is by its nature an indoor game, it should be played more in countries with cold climates and long winter nights than in countries where the weather is always inviting the individual to go outdoors. Englishmen are generally patient, determined, and serious-minded. These are excellent qualifications for chess. Unfortunately in their schooldays they spend most of their spare time outdoors, hunting during the winter. Chess is consequently not generally learned at an early age, which is the proper time to learn in order to become a good player. There are, nevertheless, throughout England a very large number of very good players, and if there is not at present anyone of them who ranks amongst the best in the world, it is mainly due to lack of proper support in the form of international contests. It is only through close contact with the best experts that the standard of play can be raised. There has been only one big international tournament in England in the last 23 years. I hope that in the future more support will be given for such contests, so that England may soon occupy once more a leading position in chess.

There are some considerations in regard to chess as an educational force that might be interesting to consider. Chess with regard to the mind might be said to be what sports or athletics are with regard to the body: a way to exercise and give pleasure at the same time. Morally, it tends to keep away those who play it from other dangerous indoor activities. Betting is uninteresting; more, betting is practically out of the question, because of the very nature of the game, a fact which should commend it to the attention of educationists. As a social factor it occupies a unique position. It brings together men from all stages of the social scale, regardless of creed or religion. The game is the same all over the world. In travelling from one place to another one can have no better recommendation to assure him a warm welcome than to be a chessplayer. All one has to do anywhere throughout the world is to find out where the chessplayers meet and to go there. Many a time I have seen a stranger come into a leading chess club and ask for one of the officials. His statement that he was a chessplayer visiting the town and his address was all that was required. He was promptly asked to make himself at home. If he wanted an opponent one was soon found for him, and thus he soon became acquainted with people whom he could not perhaps have met in any other way.'

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