

# The Capablanca-Pokorny Fiasco

Edward Winter


**THE CHESS WEEKLY**  
4 Court Square, Brooklyn, N. Y.  
Editor-in-Chief - - MAGNUS SMITH.

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Vol. IV. October 30, 1909. No. 5.

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IS IT “ASTONISHING” THAT HE “ARRIVED AT AN ABSURD CONCLUSION”?

 FITTING CONCLUSION to perhaps the most gigantic hoax ever sprung on the American chess public is furnished in an article emanating from the sanctum of the *American Chess Bulletin*, and published in the *New York Sun* of October 24th. Relating the particulars of the great Pokorny-Capablanca affair the article states that:—

From page 66 of the 24 July 1909 issue of the *Chess Weekly*

:

‘Before sailing for Havana on board the steamship *Merida* yesterday, José R. Capablanca, the Cuban chess champion, announced the receipt by him of a challenge from Rudolf [*sic*] Pokorny, the new chess champion of Mexico, who is desirous of playing him a match of 15 games in New York next October.’

The same item, reproduced from the *Brooklyn Eagle*

, reported Capablanca’s reaction:

'Within six weeks, I will be back to get in shape for my matches with Pokorny and Rubinstein.'



José Raúl Capablanca

Pages 173-174 of the August 1909 *American Chess Bulletin* reported:

'With most admirable pluck, in view of the world-wide renown so recently achieved by the master he has challenged, Rudolf [*sic*] Pokorny, the new chess champion of Mexico, has declared his readiness to meet José R. Capablanca in a series of 15 games for \$500 a side, the meeting to take place in October. The Cuban has accepted, and a most interesting event is in prospect wherewith to open the fall season of 1909.

The conditions of the match will be made public in a short time. The challenger makes some novel propositions, the most revolutionary of which is that every drawn game be scored to the credit of the player having the black pieces, thus throwing the onus of playing to win upon White. Furthermore, he desires to play at the rate of one game, or two if necessary, each day, and under a time-limit of 20 moves an hour.

Mr Pokorny, who is a countryman of Steinitz, having been born in Tischnovitz, Austria, 29 years ago, acquired the title of Mexican champion by winning the recent tournament for the title in which he made a score of 52 wins and 4 losses. This is a

record which marks him as a player with ability far above the average. Second and third prizes were awarded to A. Sandoval and L. Smith, respectively.'

These biographical details had already been included in the above-mentioned article in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Pokorny's photograph appeared on page 204 of the September *Bulletin*, with the caption 'Mexican champion':



The planned match with Capablanca was soon scrapped. The October issue of the *American Chess Bulletin* (page 225) stated:

'We are in receipt of a letter from the manager of the establishment of which Rudolf [*sic*] Pokorny is the head in the City of Mexico, reading as follows:

"Mr Pokorny, having sustained an accident, will be unable to attend to his proposed match, making it therefore indispensable to postpone it until further notice."

The foregoing has reference to the match with Capablanca, which New Yorkers had hoped would open their winter season.'

'The failure of Mr Pokorny of Mexico, in consequence of an accident sustained by him, to appear in this country for the proposed match with Capablanca, has been a source of general disappointment. In some quarters the Mexican expert, for it seems the title of "champion" has been applied to him erroneously, is regarded as a man of mystery. Through Mr Louis Uedemann of Chicago we learn that the Austro-Mexican had been a resident of that city some years ago and was well known to chessplayers there. However, aside from our own correspondence with him, we have further substantial evidence that he is a man of flesh and blood. But for our sense of justice to the others concerned, we might hesitate to make public a communication received from a representative body of Mexican chessplayers. Its contents are of live interest, however, and have a direct bearing upon the question of the Mexican championship, which appears to be exercising our friends across the Southern border quite as much as the succession to Pillsbury's title is the bone of contention here. The letter, from the Club Internacional de Ajedrez signed officially by its president and other officers and subscribed to by its most prominent members, is appended herewith in full by request:

"Dear Sirs,

We have noticed that in the August and September issues of your paper reference is made to Mr Rudolph Pokorny as "Mexican champion", and we present to you the following facts so that you may appreciate the circumstances on which Pokorny stands to call himself "Mexican champion".

Early last spring, the "Club Internacional de Ajedrez México" started a tournament merely for the entertainment of club members and prizes were offered for the winners, but this tournament was never considered as a championship event, because the best Mexican players were unable to attend the tournament, and never did attend it.

The tournament was started with 15 entries and some of the participants on several accounts retired before they had played one game. A call was issued to the participants who had retired, urging them to report at club headquarters to play their games and, not responding to the call, it was decided that the tournament be declared ended and that the person who had won the most games be declared winner of the tournament. Mr Pokorny was the one who at that moment had won the most games and therefore he walked out with first honors, but you will see that he has unjustly called himself "Mexican champion".

We also want to rectify the score of Mr Pokorny, which was 21 wins and 4 losses, quite a difference from what he claims.

In order to support the above statements, below you will note a protest of the members of the "Club Internacional de Ajedrez México" and we would feel under obligations to you by your publishing this letter in your esteemed paper, in justice to all concerned.

Thanking you in advance, we remain,

Yours very truly,

José L. Requena, President; B.J. de Uriarte, E. Irnaz y Baume."

'We hereby protest the assertion that Mr Rudolph Pokorny has made of being chess champion of Mexico. He has never won this title in our club rooms or anywhere in this Republic.'

The *Bulletin* then commented:

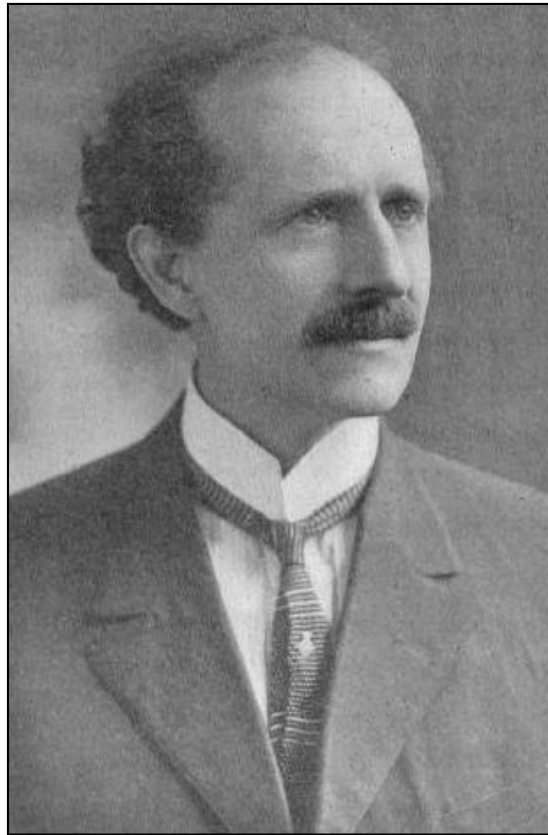
'The missive speaks for itself, and needs no elucidation on our part. It remains only for us to add that a Mr L. Vallejo was kind enough to place us in possession of details contained in a clipping from a Mexican illustrated paper, at the time of Mr Pokorny's success. This was the source of the information that led to our introduction of him as champion of Mexico. A subsequent exchange of correspondence with Mr Pokorny personally resulted in the establishment of an understanding between him and Mr Capablanca. The last instalment of what gave every promise of being an important chapter in international chess history was the postponement requested by Mr Pokorny's manager as published in the October number.

It is only just to Mr Pokorny to state that in none of the letters addressed to us did he make any reference to the title of Mexican champion or sign himself as such. The protest, we may add, reached us after the contents of the October issue had been completed.'

However, the February 1910 *American Chess Bulletin* (page 43) was less tolerant:

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'The *Mexico Daily Record* has started a chess column conducted by R. Pokorny, "Champion of Mexico". The latter clings to the title, despite the protest made by the officers and members of the Club Internacional de Ajedrez. We regret to detect a certain bitterness in the philosophy of Mr Pokorny, but are pleased to learn that "most charming games have been played between Mr P. Buzuriaga and Mr Pinto at the Casino Español, where the cream of the chessplayers of Mexico gather and where Mr Sánchez Gavito entertains with clever and selected humor, adding zest to dry lessons given by Don Rodolfo"'



Hermann Helms, the Editor of the *American Chess Bulletin*

Meanwhile, the *Chess Weekly*  
from page 130 of the 18 September 1909 issue:

adopted a mordantly sceptical approach. The passage below comes

'For many weeks the Metropolitan press has been busy with the announcements of a coming great match between the new chess star of America, José R. Capablanca, and some great Mexican player named Pokorny. We, as well as the rest of the chess world, have been waiting with pleasant anticipation for this great event. It is true that the name of Pokorny was quite unknown to us until the busy scribes of the Metropolitan press thrust him upon our notice, but so many astonishing things are happening in chess that we were quite willing to take it for granted that Pokorny was a great player and we had some hopes that Capablanca might even excel his drawing record in this match. But, alas, our hopes have been ruthlessly shattered. A cablegram has just been received from Pokorny announcing that he had met with some accident, the nature of which was not disclosed, and that the match would have to be indefinitely postponed. Thus, this contest, in company with the Marshall-Showalter match, passes into the misty land of things that never were and never could be.

It seems a pity that some method cannot be found to curb the over-zealous imagination of our busy Metropolitan chess scribes.'

Pages 9-10 of the 9 October 1909 *Chess Weekly*

related at some length the report in

the *Bulletin*

that Pokorny would not be playing against Capablanca:

'... For weeks the Metropolitan press was steadily supplied with interesting details of most satisfactory progress in the negotiation between the two masters or their managers. Mr Pokorny showed a graceful, though gradual, willingness to yield several points in the initial stipulations, to which exception had been taken when the challenge was conditionally accepted by Mr Capablanca's press agents. Thus, interest in the coming event was kept at the boiling point during Capablanca's sojourn in Cuba.

It was, therefore, with considerable regret, if not surprise, that on Capablanca's return to meet his antagonist we read in the *Bulletin* that the great event had been called off ...

The sad intelligence from the house that Jack built caused great disappointment. ... But, coming suddenly from nowhere, poor Pokorny, like Biela's comet, having burst into splendor, seems to have "blown up" or vanished into thin air – or gas.

We have suffered the most intense excitement during the rise and fall of this overcharged chess meteor and, with others, would like to know whether Pokorny had a real existence and met with an accident resulting in disintegration, or was composed of such stuff as dreams are made of and properly faded away when someone "accidentally" fell out of bed.

In order to clear up the mystery, we offer a year's subscription to the *Chess Weekly* to the first one giving us information that will lead to the identification of the said Rudolph Pokorny, or the "Manager of the establishment of which Pokorny was the head" or to the identification of the establishment itself.'





The *Weekly* returned to the attack on pages 29-29 of its 23 October 1909 issue:

'We have been waiting patiently for something more than the bare assurance that such a person as Rudolph Pokorny exists. It now seems most conclusively that the title of Mexican Chess Champion, gratuitously bestowed on Mr Pokorny by the *American Chess Bulletin*, was purely an effort on the part of the editors to give fictitious value to an insignificant news item. This "faking" of news has naturally called forth an indignant protest from members of the Mexican club at which Pokorny played, and has compelled the *Bulletin* to the humiliating admission that Pokorny had never in any way made claim to the title of Chess Champion of Mexico, but that the editors themselves had constructed the title out of their imagination after perusing a "Mexican illustrated paper", which thus remains most carefully unidentified. The chess writers who exploited Mr Pokorny as an eminent chess master, who made him issue a challenge to play Capablanca a match, who made him, day by day, advance and withdraw conditions for the said match, do not seem to think it necessary to offer any further explanation of an affair that looks like a barefaced swindle on the American chess public. We heartily approve of legitimate newspaper advertising, but the entry of yellow journalism into the chess arena cannot tend to elevate or benefit our noble game – besides, the field is too small to warrant the effort.'

More appeared on page 37 of the *Chess Weekly*, 30 October 1909:

'A fitting conclusion to perhaps the most gigantic hoax ever sprung on the American chess public is furnished in an article emanating from the sanctum of the *American Chess Bulletin* and published in the *New York Sun* of 24 October. Relating the particulars of the great Pokorny-Capablanca affair the article states that:

"Under date of 13 October, however, the *American Chess Bulletin* quotes Pokorny as follows:

'Prior to my accident, which occurred of late, I had different intentions to those acquired since. Contemplating and analyzing carefully the careers of great champions of the noble game, I arrive at an absurd conclusion, which has as a result an astonishing resolution. It is the abandoning of the game for good. Morphy retired from it for similar motives to mine, with the difference only that he did so too late, whereas I am doing so not too early.'

Now the writer indulges in a philosophical essay on chess, life, etc., winding up with the remark: 'Why then should a rational man seek results and a lasting perfection where there is none and likely never to be any?'"

Our first thought, after perusing the fervid lines of the above auto-obituary, was one of unutterable regret that a peer of the immortal Morphy had passed out of the world of chess without leaving behind so much as a trace to mark the play of his genius.

It then occurred to us that we had never seen anything like this quotation in the

*American Chess Bulletin*

the *Bulletin*

is it not? It must be simply that we cannot see it.

. A reference to the latest issues of

proved a fruitless search. Still, it must be there, for: "if you see it in the *Sun*, it's so",

Just as we have laid the ghost himself – lo, there appears a ghost-letter. Unfortunately, having no "medium" on our staff, we have no opportunity to glean wisdom from the "philosophical essay on chess life, etc.", referred to by this gifted sage of Caissian journalism, as forming part of the original communication. However, if we may judge of the whole from the few lines which have



come before us in visible ink we should certainly agree with Rudolf the Modest, that he has retired, "not too early" – nor too well. Chorus: Amen.'

The Weekly

reached its summit of sarcasm in a two-page spread in the 9 November 1909 issue:

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31—P×P	P×P
32—Q-Kt3ch	K-B2
33—Q×QP	R×P
34—R-QB	R-R3
35—R-B7ch	K-Kt
36—Q-B5	R-R8ch
37—K-R2	B-R3
38—Q-B3	Resigns

(a) In order to hold the center, Black plays usually the unnatural move 3... Kt-Q2. But it is later shown, that Black has no good continuation. White threatens to get a direct attack by P-KB4 on the King's side. Black can not in any way hold the center and should,

After publishing in our last issue the announcement of Pokorny's retirement from chess, we thought the incident closed. Since then, however, we have received two letters from Mexico, which we have not space to quote in full, but which we give as nearly as possible verbatim. Mr. Sandoval also sends us a game played by Pokorny, which we publish with notes by our office boy. We have credited both writers with a year's subscription to the CHESS WEEKLY.

To the Editor of the Chess Weekly.

Dear Sir:—Respecting your article in the CHESS WEEKLY regarding my humble personality, I wish to claim the one year's subscription, by giving you the best of any information you may ask for. Believe me that I am a sincere admirer of the clever description of the occurrence. Of course, business is business, eh?

Thanking you for past favors, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

R. POKORNY.

Mexico, D. F., October 28, 1909.

To the Editor of the Chess Weekly.

Dear Sir:—I have just seen in the "CHESS WEEKLY" your article regarding Mr. Pokorny and his proposed match versus Mr. Capablanca.

I wish to win the prize of one year's subscription to your paper and will try for it. The following is the very truth:—

Mr. Pokorny came to the International Chess Club unknown, and was admitted. \* \*

Mr. Pokorny is a Bohemian and has an establishment in this city. He is at the level of most of our average players, some of whom know of Chess only what any one can learn from the books in three or four months study. The club started a tournament in which several beginners and none of our best players took part. One of the players scarcely knew the moves of the chess men. The tournament—if it can be called a tournament—remained unfinished and the president of the club, Mr. Jose Luis Reguena, personally provided and presented gold medals as souvenirs to the winners.

The object was only to awaken enthusiasm for the Royal game and to call the attention of amateurs to the recently established club. It was never mentioned that the winner would be recognized as Champion.

therefore, time his move so that he can later play P×QP, before White advances P-QB3. White played the opening very well. (b) This move is certainly not the best, but a good continuation for Black is not apparent. (c) This wins the BP. If 18... P×B, White plays B-Ktsq, followed by P-KB4, and the attack is irresistible. (d) Black tries to mix things up. (e) Until now, White has played excellently. But he now overlooks the stronger move, 28. KtxBP, when Black should resign at once.—Notes translated from the *D. Woehensach*.

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All of the above facts lead me to believe that his intended match with Capablanca, and his accident, were greater jokes than his Mexican Championship title.

I will add so you can judge of the so called tournament, that there was no umpire, no time limit, no fixed dates of play,—all the players were playing at the rate of three or four games at each session, and none of the games were recorded.

I am sending you without comment a recorded game won by the writer from Capablanca's challenger months after the tournament.

Yours very truly,

ANDREAS SANDOVAL.

Mexico, D. F., October 25, 1909.

### KING'S BISHOP OPENING.

Game played in the International Chess Club.

White.	Black.
R. Pokorny.	A. Sandoval.
1—P-K4	P-K4 (a)
2—B-B4	Kt-QB3
3—Kt-KB3	P-KR3
4—P-Q4	P×P
5—KtxP	Kt-K4
6—B-Kt3	P-Q3
7—Castles	P-QB3
8—P-KB4	Kt-Kt5
9—P-B5	Q-R5
10—P-KR3	OKt-B3
11—Kt-KB3	Q-Kt6 (b)
12—Kt-B3	Kt-R4??
13—Kt-K2 (c)	Q×Kt
14—P×Q? (d)	KKt-B3
15—Kt-B3	B-Q2
16—R-B2	B-K2
17—R-Kt2	R-KB
18—P-B4	Castles
19—P-K5	P×P
20—P×P	Kt-Q4
21—KtxKt	P×Kt
22—P-B6 (e)	B-B4ch
23—K-R	P-KKt3
24—Q×P (f)	B-Kt3
25—B×P (g)	B-B3
26—Q-B4	R-R
27—B-Kt7? (h)	KtxB
28—P×Kt (i)	R×P mate (j)

(a) So far, both players follow the books. (b) Probably a hasty move. (c) The beginning of a profound

shunning a "wooden horse." (f) Lasker might have found a different way to prepare for the end, but allowance should be made for individual style. (g) Naturally. (h) The logical continuation. (i) Hazardous. (j) Black's move, of course, is very timely, but White may content himself with the reflection that human foresight is not infallible. And did not Jove nod?

The above is the only one of Mr. Pokorny's games of which we have the score, and his play up to the time of the "accident" on the twenty-eighth move, seems so entirely different from the style of Capablanca, that a comparison of the relative strength of the two players is difficult, if not impossible to formulate. This much we may say: there are positions in which we believe we could determine Capablanca's next move, but we doubt our ability to gauge the scope of Mr. Pokorny's versatility in any situation short of "zugzwang." It was, doubtless, on this basis that the editors of the *American Chess Bulletin* sought to put their "champion" to a test with Capablanca.

The following two games were played in the Amateur Tournament of the B. C. F. Congress, 1909. While the play was by no means

remained unfinished and the president of the club, Mr. Jose Luis Reguena, personally provided and presented gold medals as souvenirs to the winners.

The object was only to awaken enthusiasm for the Royal game and to call the attention of amateurs to the recently established club. It was never mentioned that the winner would be recognized as Champion.

The first notice we had in Mexico of the Capablanca-Pokorny match was through the American Chess Bulletin. Most of the members of the club protested against the pretensions of Mr. Pokorny and a letter was sent to the American Chess Bulletin for insertion. This Mr. Pokorny has met with no accident to my best knowledge and that of my friends. He continues to call at the club every night.

28—PxKt (i) RxP mate (j)

(a) So far, both players follow the books. (b) Probably a hasty move. (c) The beginning of a profound combination. (d) The "champion" now seems to have slightly the better game, but— (e) Disdaining the marooned knight, or instinctively

The following two games were played in the Amateur Tournament of the B. C. F. Congress, 1909. While the play was by no means faultless, the champions found in it a pleasant relaxation from their more serious discussions of the Q-P. Opening and Four Knights' De-

For ease of reference the game is reproduced below:

1 e4 e5 ('So far, both players follow the books.') 2 Bc4 Nc6 3 Nf3 h6 4 d4 exd4 5 Nxd4 Ne5 6 Bb3 d6 7 O-O c6 8 f4 Ng4 9 f5 Qh4 10 h3 N4f6 11 Nf3 Qg3 ('Probably a hasty move.') 12 Nc3 Nh5?? 13 Ne2 ('The beginning of a profound combination.') 13...Qxf3 14 gxf3? ('The "champion" now seems to have slightly the better game, but — .') 14...Ngf6 15 Nc3 Bd7 16 Rf2 Be7 17 Rg2 Rf8 18 f4 O-O-O 19 e5 dxe5 20 fxe5 Nd5 21 Nxd5 cxd5 22 f6 ('Disdaining the marooned knight, or instinctively shunning a "wooden horse".') 22.. Bc5+ 23 Kh1 g6 24 Qxd5 ('Lasker might have found a different way to prepare for the end, but allowance should be made for individual style.') 24...Bb6 25 Bxh6 ('Naturally.') 25...Bc6 26 Qc4 Rh8 27 Bg7? ('The logical continuation.') 27...Nxc7



28 fxg7? ('Hazardous.') 28...Rxh3 mate ('Black's move, of course, is very timely, but White may content himself with the reflection that human foresight is not infallible. And did not Jove nod?')

We see no further references to the affair in the *Chess Weekly*, which closed down with its 12 March 1910 issue. Is it possible to find anything about Pokorny in the Mexican press?

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