

TOURNAMENT TALK

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Catfish Derby Days: A Minnesota Original By Sam Smith

Every chess player has some regrets when it comes to the game we love. Blown opportunities, "won" games we end up losing, blunders, mishandled endgames, opening disasters, etc.; there never seems to be an end to the mistakes we can make! One of my biggest chess mistakes did not occur on the chess board while the clock was ticking away but rather when I turned down a personal invitation to a new chess tournament. In 1995, I met James Kanne at a chess tournament in Marshall, MN and after the games were over, he gave me a flyer for a chess tournament he was just getting off the ground. It had the strange name of "Catfish Derby Days" and was being held in the small Minnesota town of Franklin.

Perhaps because I was going through a period of job uncertainty and transition at the time, and was busy with a wife in college and teenagers to raise, I declined his invitation to the 4-year old tournament. In fact, I didn't make an appearance there until 2002 and soon realized that I had missed out on seven years of a most unique and fun-filled event. Franklin, like most towns in Minnesota, has its own summer celebration; in this case, a fishing contest on the Minnesota River for the biggest catfish. In addition to the fishing tournament, there are volleyball and softball games, a street dance, antique stores, craft shops, garage sales, concession stands, and other fun ways to enjoy the 4th weekend in July. And a chess tournament.

And what a tournament! Most players, after hearing about a chess tournament in a small town like Franklin (population:), would think that there probably wouldn't be more than 6 players, with 4 of them being unrated...WRONG!! Try multiplying

that attendance by a factor of 8, 9, or even 10. Try Minnesota legends with names like Brasket and Adler. Try players like Stanislav Smetankin, with a rating over 2500. In two of the 7 Catfish Days that I have attended, a player with a 2400 rating *didn't* win first place. This ain't no community ed chess tournament, folks! In any given year, you might encounter a field containing everything from grandmaster-strength players to raw beginners, and everything in between.

There could be any number of reasons sited for the popularity of Catfish Days, which for a number of years has been the largest summer-time tournament in Minnesota. One is the fact that it is practically within a stone's throw of casinos like Jackpot Junction and that the entire Redwood Falls / Morton area is a great tourist attraction. Another might be because of the laid-back, small town atmosphere. Or because of the large number of respectable cash prizes and beautiful trophies offered at the tournament itself. Maybe it is that some of the chess players from the Twin Cities metro area want to help promote chess in the out-state region and it isn't too far from where they live. Or that the tournament is held in the well-lit, air-conditioned Franklin library.

Whatever the reasons for its popularity, Catfish Days has gained a large and loyal following of chess players who look forward each June to receiving their letters from James telling them it's time to get registered. My family and I have turned Catfish Days into our summer vacation weekend and so while I bust my brains trying to win chess games, my wife and son hit the shops, garage sales, countless stores, and many historical landmarks. There are several good hotels and motels in the area, with many chess players staying at The Morton Inn, located midway between Redwood Falls and Franklin.

So don't make the same mistake I did and wait to try this tournament. You'll enjoy the small-town atmosphere of Franklin where "Minnesota Nice" is on display, including the famous Friday night potluck after the first round games. And while you're enjoying the good food and new friends, make sure you thank James for all the great work he does (and has done for 17 years) in organizing, promoting, and directing this

tournament. Because he's the *biggest* reason for the popularity of Catfish Days!