

Why Do We Play Chess?

A few years ago, I was playing at one of the Willmar Team Challenge tournaments when a group of non-players happened to walk past the room we were playing in. They paused for a second to look in and then I heard one of them say something about "...wasting my time like that...". If I were a little more confrontational in nature, I might have walked out into the hallway and asked whoever made that remark if they ever went fishing, watched auto racing, or played golf. Since those are three of the most popular pastimes in America, I'm sure I would have connected on least one of them.

I then would have pointed out that in fishing, a person spends money on a license, bait, fishing equipment, maybe their own boat and trailer, all to have a chance to get a fish that may be too small to eat, or the wrong species, or, if one is into 'catch and release', is simply thrown back into the lake or river that you are fishing in! It is much more time-efficient and economical to simply go down to the grocery store and buy the fish, already cleaned and ready to bake or fry.

In the case of auto racing, people spend money to watch a bunch of cars go around in circles, creating noise and having a negative environmental impact. At the end of the race, the cars which do not get wrecked and actually finish the race, leave the race track, having spent time and money to not actually go anywhere!

And as for golf, well Mark Twain called that activity "a good walk, spoiled". There are better, more environmentally sound ways to get exercise which do not require acres and acres of prime real estate and tons and tons of chemicals to maintain. In short, it's not an efficient use of either time, money, or land.

Now before the chess players reading this who happen to be into one or more of those activities start forming a lynch mob, let me add that I personally have nothing against any of those activities. In fact, I'm glad that people enjoy doing those things. I'm just illustrating the point that if you really want to analyze human activity, what we do for recreation, like a lot of other things, isn't exactly logical as far as being the most efficient use of our time and resources.

In his classic chess book **Chess for Fun and Chess for Blood**, Edward Lasker had several of his friends write short essays at the beginning of the book on the value of playing chess. As an intellectual exercise, that was extremely valuable. Each of them had their own reasons and found their own value in chess. I know every chess player, at different times in their lives, must grapple with guilt over the time they spend on chess. There are always other things which are screaming for our attention and time, and most of the people in our lives are more likely to want us to spend our time on those things than on chess. Play chess or mow the lawn? Play chess or clean out the garage? Play chess or go to Aunt Sally's birthday party? As we get older and our personal responsibilities increase, it gets harder and harder to choose chess.

I think if we all remember that the simple fact that we enjoy chess is all the justification we need to play it, we should be O.K. There is more to life than work and a 'honey-do' list. Chess gives us a chance to unwind and do something totally out of the ordinary as far as a 'normal' day is concerned. And the friendships we form through playing chess are an important part of our lives. Why do we play chess? That's a question only you can answer. Just remember that it is your life to live and no one else's. If the worst thing people can say about you at your funeral is "Well, he/she did play a lot of chess...", then I would call that a life well-lived.