

*In the **Limelight**:* Charles Hertan

Interview by Mark Capron



What do you do for a living? According to Wikipedia, you are a numismatist (Abraham Lincoln said everything is true on the internet :)). Is this something that you still do? What has been the rarest coin you have found?

Yes, I have been a professional numismatist since 1990 and spent 15 years working as a mental health clinician, which helped to inform my opinions and research about Paul Morphy's psychological problems. The rarest coin I have ever owned would be hard to say; I now own an obsolete bank note of which only six are known, but surprisingly it is worth under \$1000! I have sold many coins in the \$10,000-\$20,000 range and a few higher, but this is not that unusual in the numismatic community.

Wikipedia says that you enjoy wildlife photography. Do you have a favorite you would be willing to share?

I was seriously into landscape photography for several years. There are lots of woodland trails where I live in western Massachusetts and I was an avid hiker. I did a lot of gallery shows but these days my creative energy goes into writing.

Thank you for sending me several of your photos. They are amazing. I am selecting three to share here.

View from Long Mountain



Daniel Shay's Horse Caves



Hadley Field



I especially like this last one. I have always been partial to the mists and fog in photographs.

When did you begin playing chess. And who taught you?

I learned the rules at age 11, but quickly got serious a year later when I became close friends with Stephen Feinberg (just appointed Deputy Secretary of Defense by the President-elect!). Steve was a very gifted junior who made master at age 13—a very rare achievement at that time. He was active in the local chess club where we lived in Rockland County, NY. Soon we were attending all the tournaments we could in New York City—with no adult supervision! It was great fun, and I quickly improved, although I didn't make master until my late teens.

You recently wrote a great new book on Paul Morphy, *The Real Paul Morphy*. What were you working on that

led you to Morphy? And what eventually made you decide it would make a good book?

Originally, I was planning a book on the top 5-10 American chess players of all time. Then I really got swept up by Morphy's incredible play and unique story. As I did more research, I realized that no one had ever stitched together a compelling biography of Morphy which placed his important games in the context of his life events—giving equal weight to the man and his art.

The research in *The Real Paul Morphy* is excellent. There are lots of references and quotes from historical documents. How were you able to find and physically see these documents? Any good stories on the search process or how you stumbled onto anything?

All the research was done from books and the internet. Fortunately, there is a large body of source documents, letters, newspaper articles and other materials available through these routes. It is hard to wrap our heads around how famous Morphy was both in the US and abroad during his meteoric career, so much so that contemporary sources remain to be uncovered. To find something new I had to go beyond traditional chess research into topics such as New Orleans history, the Civil War and American slavery. Since I am quite a devotee of history books and memoirs, this search was very enjoyable. Probably my favorite discovery was the connection between Morphy's grandfathers and notorious Caribbean pirates! This was only vaguely alluded to by past authors, but I was able to corroborate these anecdotes with some more in-depth study.

The pirate connection was definitely a surprise when I read the book.

What is your personal chess library like and were you able to use it to help write *The Real Paul Morphy* or did you need to spend a lot of time at places like the White Collection in Ohio? What other places did you visit?

Like many people these days I collect less books than I used to, since they are so replaceable, although I will always prefer the look and feel of a good book to reading online. I only had a few Morphy books when I began, so I went on a buying spree. Research is the key to good non-fiction writing, so before I start, I buy everything I can related to the topic and add to that list as I go along. As the book starts to take shape you fill in the gaps. Believe it or not this was all done from home.

Which sources did you find the most intriguing?

As for Morphy sources, the memoir by family friend Leona Queyrouze adds a lot of depth to our knowledge about his childhood. I was very lucky to have *New In Chess* maga-

zine editor, Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, as my editor for this project. He is a Morphy specialist, and not only pointed me to Queyrouze, but contributed photos from his private collection and that of world-class Morphyana collector, David DeLucia. Among the non-chess sources, I really like Neil Sublette's [The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square](#).

I found your annotations to be very easy to read and understand. I especially liked how you wove things together and your use of colloquialisms. Is this just something that came natural or how did you develop this writing skill?

Thank you. I am very dedicated to the craft of writing; and I am a perfectionist, editing a manuscript many times until I get it just right. Good writing should be very natural and easy to read; but it takes a lot of hard work to achieve that ease. I have great respect for Dutch chess author, Willy Hendriks, because his prose flows so smoothly. I also conform to his preference for a light hand on annotations. These days with the availability of incredibly strong engines, it doesn't make sense to go too deep into the weeds with analysis. The reader can do that on his own, but what the author can offer is a framework for better understanding the logic of the positions in human terms.

Any specific reason you decided on Fritz 18 as the computer program to partner up with on the analysis and annotations?

I thought a 3300 rated engine would be plenty strong to convey the key points of the game, but I have since changed my mind. The book is now in its second printing, and when the 3rd printing comes out, likely in 2025, it will probably be updated with SF17 analysis. The first edition out now may become highly collectible—almost all the hardcover Morphy books I had to buy cost \$150+ in the aftermarket!

Would you elaborate a bit more on changing your mind about the chess engine?

I have been corresponding with AI legend GM Larry Kaufman, who helped me understand the quantum leap from engines like Stockfish which use a version of neural networks, to the older programs that don't. I will leave it at that for now...more to come.

I recently did a review on a book about Gideon Stahlberg and that author had spent ten years working on it. How long did it take for you to complete *The Real Paul Morphy*?

Four years. I started during the Covid pandemic. I was quite relieved when the first café in my area reopened, since I prefer to do all my writing in cafes!

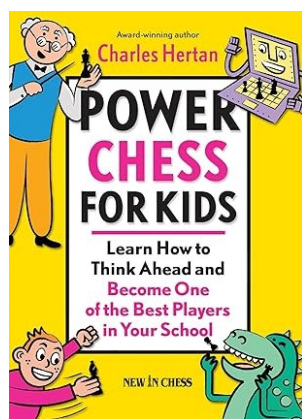
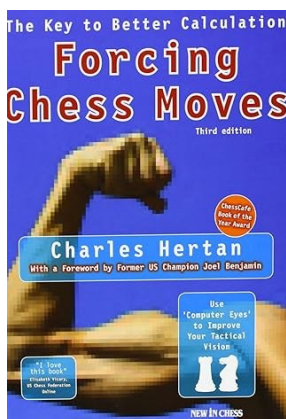
The Real Paul Morphy is the seventh book you have written in the chess world, if I am not mistaken. Which book gave you the most pleasure writing and why?

This book was the most fun to write, since it allowed me to indulge in my love of history and biography and do some very interesting research. I also knew that if done well, it would attract very strong interest. I am being contacted and friended by Morphy lovers around the world—his appeal is timeless.

The Real Paul Morphy	NIC	2024
Strike Like Judit!: The Winning Tactics of Chess Legend Judit Polgar	NIC	2018
Start Playing Chess!: Learn the Rules of the Royal Game	NIC	2016
Basic Chess Openings for Kids: Play like a Winner from Move One	NIC	2015
Power Chess for Kids: More Ways to Think Ahead and Become One of the Best Players in Your School (Volume 2)	NIC	2013
Power Chess for Kids: Learn How to Think Ahead and Become One of the Best Players in Your School	NIC	2011
Forcing Chess Moves: The Key to Better Calculation	NIC	2008

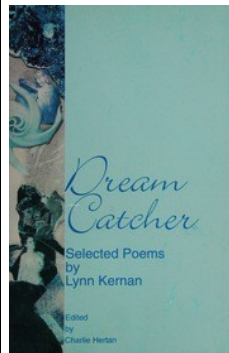
Which book has done the best sales-wise and any thoughts as to why it did so well?

Forcing Chess Moves remains highly popular, and winning the 2008 Chess Café Book of the Year Award certainly helped. Among my kids' books, the *Power Chess for Kids* series is a bestseller, as chess books go.



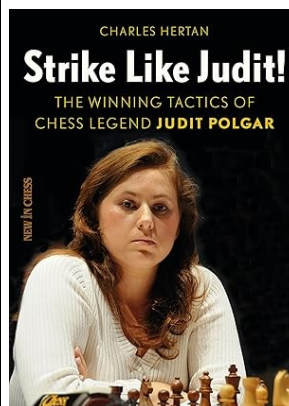
Besides your scientific papers related to your career, I see you also compiled and edited a book of your late

mother's poetry called *Dream Catcher: Selected Poems* by Lynn Kernan. A very nice tribute. Is this the only book outside of chess?



Dream Catcher is the only non-chess book I have produced to date. I could certainly write about other things—but having such a terrific publisher, *New In Chess* in the Netherlands, makes it extremely attractive to continue making chess books.

Forcing Chess Moves and *Strike Like Judit!* are both centered around tactics. What made you decide to write these books? Did they evolve out of your coaching?



Forcing Chess Moves did evolve out of coaching, and the work I did to help my students improve tactically. *Strike Like Judit!* was conceived as a tactical tribute to her legacy. At the time, I was writing a problem column for *New In Chess* magazine, and in my research I was just astounded by the beauty and fearlessness of her games.

Are you still actively coaching? If so, how many students do you typically coach?

I don't have much time for it now, due to my busy schedule working, writing, and raising a 9-year-old. I call myself 'the guru on the mountain'—I don't look for students, but if they find me, I will teach them.

Do you have a coaching philosophy or game plan you rely on, or do you tailor your approach to each individual?

I'm a believer in Soviet-school teaching methods—the first few years should be mostly learning all the basic tactical patterns and studying foundational endgames. These are the 'ABC's' of chess. Using one of the many good problem-solving sites online is a good adjunct, I like Lichess, because it is good and varied, and free. Openings can come later when you begin seriously competing; up until then knowing the basic principles of good development is enough.

Did the *Power Chess for Kids* books come from coaching in general or were there specific students that laid the groundwork as you helped them become better players?

These books cover all the tactical basics I allude to above, starting with the 'geometric patterns' pin, fork and skewer, and going deeper into various motifs such as deflection, double check, overworked piece etc. Then I add in the beginnings of thinking ahead by analyzing forcing moves 1.5 moves deep. These 'basics' aren't always thoroughly grasped, even by better players, and many adults have become fans of my kids books.

If you could tell the chess world one idea or one concept that would improve their game what would that be?

I have a study aid called 'The Hertan Hierarchy' which I devised to help students with their thinking process (you can find it online or in the 2nd edition of *Forcing Chess Moves*). Two principles covered there are always analyzing the most forcing moves first, and if no good ones are available, trying to play to your strength. Too many players default to defending their weakness.

The Hertan Hierarchy:

Opponent makes a move

- What is he/she threatening?
- Is there a direct (one move) threat or attack on a piece?
- What about a 2-3 move sequence of forcing moves?
- Did the piece moved uncover a threat by a different piece?

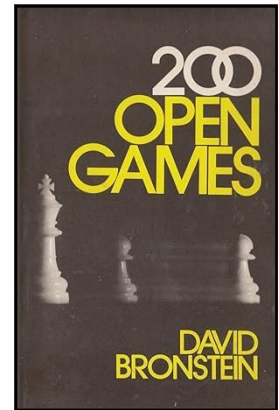
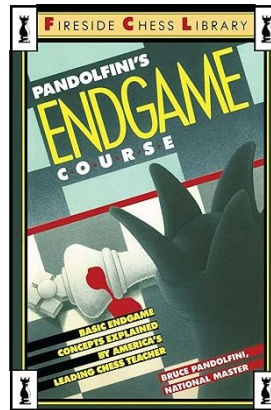
It goes on from here with further breakdowns to aid the thinking process.

Do you recall the first chess book you ever had?

Steve Feinberg and I used to study games from *The Chess Informant* and we had a copy of *Flank Openings* by Raymond Keene.

What are some of your favorite books, chess and non-chess?

There are so many, but to name a few, *My Great Predecessors* by Kasparov, *Pandolfini's Endgame Course* by Bruce Pandolfini, *200 Open Games* by Bronstein, and any history book by Nathaniel Philbrook.



Based on what I have seen you have an affinity for endgames. What endgame book(s) do you feel are the go-to book(s) for the aspiring player?

Pandolfini's Endgame Course is the most clear and readable ending book I have ever read, and the selection and explanation of key positions is fantastic. Any aspiring player who devours this book is guaranteed to improve. We all need to put in some endgame work at some point to reach our chess potential.

Who is your favorite player and what makes them special to you?

I will pick two, Paul Morphy and Magnus Carlsen. Paul elevated the art of chess to new heights by striving for objectivity and correctness. Both players were incredibly well-rounded, fantastic tacticians and great endgame players. Magnus wins games which would have been abandoned as drawn for the past 100 years; he is in my opinion the greatest of all time, but if Morphy had had the opportunity and longevity there is no telling what he could have accomplished, so I call him very possibly the most gifted player of all time.

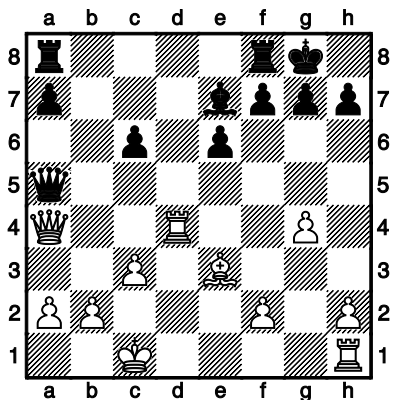
Do you have a favorite game?

It's impossible to pick one, but I enjoy games where four

queens appear on the board for more than a move or two. Here's an entertaining example:

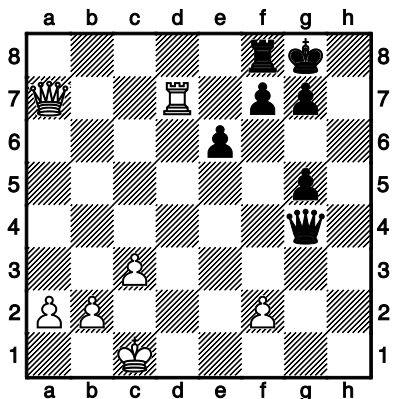
Polgar, J – Khalifman ,A Zurich Rapid London, 2009

1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♞c6 5.♞c3 d6 6.♞e3 ♟f6
 7.♞e2 ♞e7 8.g4 d5 9.exd5 ♞xd5 10.♞xd5 ♟xd5 11.♞f3 ♟a5+
 12.c3 ♞d7 13.♟b3 0-0 14.0-0 ♞xd4 15.♞xd4 ♞c6 16.♞xc6
 bxc6 17.♟a4



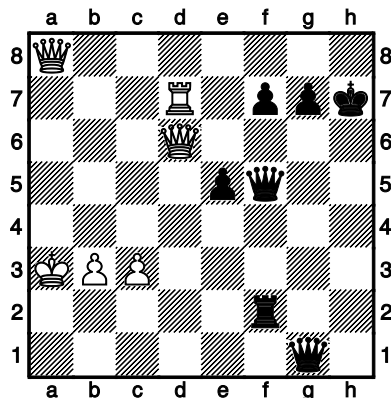
Nothing too exciting yet; black has neutralized white's attacking chances, so he has reason to be satisfied. But look what happens next...

17...♟c7 18.♟c4 c5 19.♞d2 ♞ad8 20.♞hd1 ♞xd2 21.♞xd2
 ♟xh2 22.♞d7 ♟h4 23.♟f4 h6 24.♟e5 ♞g5 25.♞xg5 hxg5
 26.♟xc5 ♟xg4 27.♟xa7



Both players are full-blooded attackers, so things get very interesting. Without switching on the engine my guess is that white is slightly better here, but black has great chances to hold. King safety is of paramount importance in any major piece ending, and black is a little better in that regard.

27...♟f4+ 28.♟e3 ♟a4 29.♞a7 ♟b5 30.♟d4 ♟f1+ 31.♟c2
 ♟e2+ 32.♟d2 ♟e4+ 33.♟d3 ♟f4 34.♟d4 ♟f5+ 35.♟c1 e5
 36.♟d2 g4 37.♞d7 ♟h7 38.a4 ♞a8 39.b3 ♟g6 40.♟b2 ♞h8
 41.♟a3 ♞h2 42.♟d6+ ♟h7 43.a5 ♞xf2 44.a6 g3 45.a7 g2
 46.a8♟g1♟



Black's advantage in king safety is now decisive.

47.♟d8 ♟c1+ 48.♟b4 ♟e4+ 49.c4 ♞f3 50.♟f8 ♞xb3+ 0-1.
Thank you!

The Souls of the Board

By Evangeline Juliet John Francis Kennedy

Beneath the silent checkered plain,
 A kingdom stirs, its fate in chain.
 The pawns march forth, a humble row,
 Dreaming of crowns they'll never know.

The knights weave arcs, in shadows glide,
 Guardians sworn, their paths untried.
 With unseen power, they leap unseen,
 Bridges of trust where war has been.

Bishops slide on angled ways,
 Paths of chaos, their truth ablaze.
 One eye on battle, one eye on peace,
 Whispering softly, "Our work won't cease."

The rooks stand firm by castle walls,
 Silent watchers, until duty calls.
 Straight as an arrow, their power flies,
 Breaking the calm with steady cries.

The queen, a tempest, boundless and free,
 Wields destiny's hand with mastery.
 She conquers worlds, she bends the tide,
 The force of empires at her side.

And the king, the crown, so frail yet grand,
 Holds the weight of the realm in his *trembling* hand.
 He cannot run, yet cannot fall,
 For the game's design protects it all.

But beyond the board, the truth unfolds:
 Each piece reflects the stories we hold.
 A pawn can rise; a queen may fall,
 In the chess of life, we play them all.