



C O L U M N I S T S

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

Lev Alburt & Al
Lawrence

"How About a Nice Game of Chess?" —Any Time

Sidney Samole (1935-2000)

Here's one of those personality-profile questions for you. Which would you rather do: give everyone in the world a friend on call, or be chess world champion? Let's not embarrass one another—we'll keep our answers private. But say you *couldn't* be the world champion.

If you *could* give everyone in the world a tireless, faithful, uncomplaining companion who shared his special interest, you'd expect to be enormously famous and universally praised—at least weekly on CNN—, right? If you eventually made these Man-Fridays speak English (or Spanish if you play *ajedrez*, or German if you play *Schach*, or French if you play *échecs*) and even move their own pieces, like a good little partner, you'd say you worked a miracle and deserved the Nobel Peace (well at least "Piece") Prize. And if you then improved your Robbinses so that they could be adjusted to play just a *little bit worse* than their human masters, could statues in the Smithsonian be denied you?

Well, you probably didn't even know the name of the chess Prometheus who brought the warm flame of a chess game to any lonesome player on a rainy midnight. But chances are Sid Samole (Sa-MOLE-ee), whose passing on July 30th of this year is much mourned by his family and his many friends, touched your life. He may even have spoken to you, after a fashion. "How about a nice game of chess?" his sorcerer's apprentice might have asked.

Sid was the man who dreamed, patented and produced the first commercial chess computer. And the fact is he *was* a world chess champion, many times over. He wasn't a tournament chess player, although he played a tough and shrewd game. But he holds—through his computers—perhaps more world and national titles than anyone else. (Photo: *Sidney Samole, 1935-2000, the man who made sure we always had a chess opponent.*)



At this point, we have to make a theoretical aside—as chess players, we're used to that. Here's the conundrum—does an inventor get credit for the accomplishments of his creations? Dr. Frankenstein got the fictional blame. Shouldn't someone who actually succeeded in creating that perfect partner and assistant get the credit? We knew you'd agree.

By the way, don't confuse Sidney Samole with the people who screwed up the Royal Game royally by momentarily psyching out Garry Kasparov so that every non-chessplayer in the world now thinks that computers play better than people. (Actually, such "weakies," as Bobby Fischer called non-tournament players—or non-players, since they were all the same to him, that is, beneath contempt—always thought computers were king. Even 'way back in the days of those chip-challenged tabletop models of the late 1970s that barely knew outposts from outlets, *hoi polloi* thought computers were invincible. We "real" players laughed derisively—for just a few

years, until Sid made his minions so incredibly strong so incredibly fast.) The people who brought you Deep Blue, remember, constructed a huge, supercomputing mainframe, so big that it had to stay in one spot and telephone Garry to make a move. Then, after the last match, it got an unlisted number, humming, gloating and thanking its lucky algorithms. But here's the segue—Sid (in the form of one of his highly portable chess portmanteaus) actually drew Deep Blue in 1988 to win the overall Association for Computing Machinery—then the Big Kahuna of computer chess championships.

Here's a partial list of Sidney Samole's championships.

Sidney Samole's World & National Chess Championship Titles
1980: •Wins First World MicroComputer Championship in London, England
1981: •Wins Second World MicroComputer Championship in Travemunde, Germany
1983: •Wins Third World MicroComputer Championship in Budapest, Hungary
1984: •Wins Fourth World MicroComputer Championship in Glasgow, Scotland
•Wins First Canadian Main Frame Computer Championship in Montreal, Quebec
1985: •Wins First US Computer Championship in Mobile, Alabama
1986: •Wins Second US computer Championship in Mobile, Alabama
1987: •Wins Third US Computer Championship in Mobile, Alabama
1988: •Wins Fourth US Computer Championship in Mobile, Alabama
•Ties for first at the ACM Championship by drawing Deep Thought

The World Chess Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Museum

Sid's last act for chess constitutes probably the most thoughtfully planned chess endowment of all time, providing for the most impressive building dedicated to chess in the world. It's the new, official home for the World Chess Hall of Fame (yes, it has FIDE's official imprimatur and incorporates the US Chess Hall of Fame as well). Sid and his business-partner son Shane worked tirelessly with architects to make the museum a traffic-stopper—and purchased a location where there was plenty of traffic to stop.

The museum is located at 13701 SW 119th Avenue in Miami. This happens to be right beside the Florida Turnpike, where hundreds of thousands of cars pass by the building each day. To make sure he attracted enough attention and made a statement for chess at the same time, Sidney had the building's exterior designed as a muted chessboard. And the building's entryway? A forty-five-foot-tall "Castle." A rook, of course. (*Hoist* co-author Al Lawrence teased Sidney once about how people might say going into his building was a "rook." Al's friend of more than two decades smiled at him the way Sidney always did when he knew Al was funny but wrong. "They'll say 'castle'," he said quietly. In Miami for Sid's funeral, Al wanted to see the Samole Museum again. He got a little lost and asked the locals at a Latino-dominated service station for directions to the chess building. "Donde está el museo de ajedrez, por favor?" Al ventured. "Oh," they smiled. "You mean that new *castle* building?")



Excilibur Electronics and the adjoining Sidney Samole Chess Museum—chessboard exterior and a location just off the Florida Turnpike in Miami



That's a 45-foot "castle" entryway, not a rook!



Artist rendering of interior of entryway to the Museum.



Sketch of Museum's interior, including interactive displays. Incline at left leads to theatre.

A few Sidney Samole firsts:

1977: •Patented first commercial computer chess game

1986: •Awarded first 2100 USCF-certified rating for a commercial computer; First win by a commercial computer against an International Master (USCF 2553) at the US Open in Somerset, New Jersey

1988:•Produced first commercial MicroComputer to be awarded a USCF Master rating (2325)

Where no man had gone before

How the first commercial chess-playing computer came into being is, in addition to being Sid's story, a science-fiction tale, and a story of enterprise—actually, the Enterprise. You probably recall that the name of this stalwart WWII aircraft carrier was co-opted and flashed around the TV universe at "warp speed," as the beloved spacecraft of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock (the original, *cheapo-production-generation*). They were the sci-fi swashbucklers who saved the universe each week on cue, during the years of tumultuously changing values between September 1966 and June 1969, a time when Americans particularly needed to feel such optimism.

Largely as a result of his role in the tale of the chess-playing microcomputer's "going where no one has gone before," Sid became a multi-millionaire entrepreneur. Throughout his life he remained straightforward and self-deprecating about his success.

The last real job I held working for someone else without trying to take over his company was when I was 16, slicing corned beef in a deli because the pay included all you could eat. I had an insatiable appetite as a kid.

It's true I'm an entrepreneur, and that I'm pretty successful. That translates into more than 20 years of failures, one after the other, until finally I put one over the top. I've been broke many times, but I was never poor.

Timing is everything—even in the 24th century

During the nearly three years that Captain Kirk and Spock made their maiden TV voyages, Sid had been in Canada and Hawaii. There he was so busy as president of a franchise for Beltone Hearing Aids in Toronto and Montreal, and then as a partner of a non-franchise hearing aid retailing corporation in Honolulu, that he didn't even bother owning a television, since he had no time to watch it. (Photo: Sharon and Sid Samole in 1990 at the Lawrence's wedding.)



So the first time Sid saw *Star Trek* was in its reruns in 1976, at a moment when technology was just far enough advanced, with Intel's 8080 microprocessor and a brand-new component called ROM (the now familiar Read-Only Memory), to make a chess-playing micro-computer conceivable. Additionally, it was at a time when Sid owned and operated Fidelity Electronics, a hearing aid manufacturing firm Sid had built up with contracts from the Veterans' Administration. Among its other cutting-edge technology, his firm produced high-tech, bio-medical products, such as "myo-electric" hands, prostheses that could actually be controlled by the brain impulses of amputees.

Herein lies one of those delightful and mysterious historical connections. The very first, and most famous, chess "automaton," first exhibited in 1769, was called the "Turk." Probably one of the pioneering cabinet illusions—the type of magic-trick used over the following centuries to saw a lovely assistant in half or make a caged lion disappear—the "Turk" held within it a strong chess player who manipulated

the apparatus to defeat the stunned and spooked public. It's easy for your co-authors to think of Sidney Samole in something of the same way—a little bit of him in each of his 20th-Century "automatons." But the connection goes beyond low-versus high-tech and metaphor. The "Turk" incorporated one of the first artificial models of a working hand and arm. This apparatus actually contributed importantly to the development of the field of prosthetics!

Here's Sid in his own words on the moment of inspiration that was to produce such an enormous boon to chess around the world, and at the same time was to make him a very wealthy man:

Fidelity was doing about two and a half million dollars annually in sales when, watching an episode of Star Trek, I saw Spock playing chess against the ship's computer. I was fascinated. What a great idea!

I like to play chess, but could never find someone to play with—certainly not when I was available, with my crazy work schedule.

The following morning, I was telling my secretary about the program. She said that her boy friend, then an engineer with Zenith Radio, could build a chess-playing computer. I told her to ask him to give me a call.

We talked, and within a few months, he delivered a working bread-board model. (A bread-board model is an electronic product working model laid out on a board with lots of holes in it, allowing the engineer to add and subtract components.) It didn't play very well, but it did make legal moves.

The engineer wanted \$25,000 for his work. Sid always *hated* up-front costs. Instead, he negotiated a deal that gave the engineer a 1% royalty on the new invention. Over the years, that agreement cost Fidelity Electronics more than a million dollars. Characteristically, Sidney loved to tell this story and laugh at himself.

Sid's patent was tied to a keyboard entry system that let the computer know the moves being made against it. Sidney didn't at that moment anticipate sensory input, in which a player presses the chessboard squares to give the computer this information. After a few years, once sensory input was designed, Sid's patent was worthless, and other companies could manufacture and sell chess computers. This probably kept Sid from piling up 100 million dollars. Many lesser men would have been greedy and bitter. But Samole often poked fun at himself about his limited patent. Sid's self-deprecating humor won over many who would have otherwise been jealous and held his success against him.

Under Sid's guidance, Fidelity made one model, out of wood. Even though Sid hadn't read any chess books, he came to the same conclusion that serious players had come to over the centuries.

I decided we had to use coordinates of letters and numbers to operate the keyboard. But instead of using what later I discovered was algebraic notation, I insisted on reversing it, using letters up and down the board and numbers from left to right. After all, who ever heard of apartment E2? It's always 2E! So when the first models came out, they were both amazing and amusing to the chess world!

Be sure to see the Museum's exhibit of the Chess Challenger, the first commercial chess computer. It quite literally changed the history of how we play and study chess. On it you can still see Sid's logical but mistaken idea of how to label the ranks and files—an idea that *did not* change the history of chess notation. No one talks about winning by attacking on the "8-file."

Making the right moves

After building three working models and four non-working models, Sid decided to promote his new brainchild at Chicago's Consumer Electronics Show in January 1977. Another man would have taken years to bring the product to market, but Sidney had done it in months. It was clear that Sid's, and his chess computer's, time had come. This trade show was famous for using glitzy, high-tech pizzazz to court and cater to buyers—those jaded and hard-to-impress rulers of retail. But Sid, who had learned to be cautious about overhead, rented a small booth, just four feet wide, setting up simple tables so that he and his salesmen could demonstrate his Chess Challenger to anyone who happened to be interested.

Standing like good salespeople, we bent over the tables at nine in the morning and didn't straighten up until the day's final bell. All day long we were actually tossing orders over our shoulders, not taking time to file them or even to put them in a box till closing time. That day we sold Sears, Montgomery Wards, Neiman Marcus, and what seemed like everyone else in the retail business. That experience taught me that you didn't have to be a great salesman if you had a truly innovative product!

Sid was modest. Under his both imaginative and careful management, Fidelity prospered. Chess computers were hot, and Sid's keyboard-entry models held the field for a time. He went on to produce computerized bridge, checkers, and Othello. He designed and manufactured computerized gin and cribbage, as well as other card games. Fidelity manufactured all its games in the US. Sid took his company from two and a half million dollars in annual sales in 1976 to five million in 1977. Then Fidelity doubled its sales to 10 million in 1978. It soared to 27 million in 1979, and to an astonishing 40 million in 1980.

Fidelity could afford and profit from serious national advertising. That seemed right. After all, the idea for his flagship product had come to Sid while watching TV.

In fact, 1979 saw Sid, normally a firm believer in containing costs, spend \$125,000, not including the cost of production, to put a 30-second commercial spot on the popular Sunday evening news show *60 Minutes*. The spot featured a then-amazing talking chess computer that spoke to its opponent during the game. On that special night, while on business in New York City, Sid was staying at the Park Plaza Hotel on 59th Street across from Central Park. He made sure to be in his room, in front of the television. As anyone would, he was having second thoughts. *Thirty seconds—for 125 thousand bucks?! I must be nuts!* he thought. He sat swishing a snifter of cognac, watching the set in its polished wood armoire. The cameras cut away from Mike Wallace, and Fidelity's big moment came on screens across America. In what seemed to Sid less time than it took to castle, the spot was over. Sid sat for a very long evening looking out the window at Central Park in the dark. How could he have spent over \$4,000 a second on *that*?

The next morning when Sid called his office, it took him quite a while to get through. When he did, his harried staff explained that Fidelity's telephones were ringing off the desks. There was a reason companies spend six figures to show their wares on prime time television. Millions of people had learned about Fidelity, and hundreds of them were calling to find out about the magical chess computer that spoke. Sid continued to make the right moves, and Fidelity grew ever bigger.

Living in the Garden of Eden, guarded by an attack crane

Certainly Sidney was an extraordinary businessman. He was also an unsurpassed family man. In 1979, having chalked up success after success, Sidney decided to move both his family and his entire business away from the cold gusts off Lake Michigan to Miami. He purchased several rare acres of ground rising above sea

level in residential Miami. How did they find the property? Actually, Sharon and Sid had occasion to go to dinner at a four-star restaurant in Miami. They liked its location so much, they bought the restaurant and replaced it with a rambling home.

Resembling a prestigious US embassy abroad, Sid's family grounds, which he and wife Sharon named "Eden au Lac," are secluded behind a seven-foot-high wall that permitted Sidney to shelter his collection of classic luxury cars, and to indulge his love of rare plants and exotic animals. Visitors to his home grounds on the way to a few sets of tennis or an Olympic-sized swim might say hello to beautiful and rare Lemurs (a favorite of Sharon's) and would certainly be closely guarded by Stella, an imposing Stanley Crane who once roamed the grounds, looking for foolishly bared toes. On the way, guests would pass a pair of black swans swimming in an Edenic pond (the *Lac* in "Eden au Lac," featuring a waterfall. The wall above the cascading water is adorned with a mural by internationally renowned artist Yakov Heller. Through hard work and smart moves, Sid had brought his family to an earthly paradise.

Visitors inside the main house would come across, among other unusual finds, an extremely rare Miami wine cellar—Sid was, typically, planning ahead when he had selected a hard-to-find "hill." Descending into a connoisseur's collection, visitors are watched over by an eerily realistic human skeleton named "Fortunato," after Edgar Allan Poe's unfortunate, walled-up dupe in the *Cask of Amontillado*. The presence of the skeleton argues for enjoying your vintage wine while you can. It also discourages a visitor from hanging behind when his host leaves the cellar. (Careful planning again?)

Knowing when to duck

Sid never lost his sense of timing. By 1989, a recession was in the wind, and Sid was sensitive to its warning breezes. He sold Fidelity Electronics at the top of its value to Hegener and Glaser. H&G, a German public firm headquartered in Munich, manufactured and distributed a popular European line of chess computers under the brand name "Mephisto." H&G wanted to crack open distribution in the US, but couldn't do so, partly because Fidelity had earned such a lock on the American market. So H&G was ready to pay a fancy *pfennig* to buy out its fiercest competitor and at the same time take the left lane of the US marketing *autobahn*. Unfortunately for H&G, you can own the road, but you still have to drive the car. After five profit-making years under Sid's leadership, Fidelity faltered quickly under the new management. Four years of trying to use German methods to sell electronics in America put the once proud industry leader to rest.

Just waiting to see what will pop up

In the fall of 1992, Sid bought the rights and patented a non-electronic but nevertheless innovative product. What looked like a large canvas frisbee could be thrown into the air above your head—only to pop open like a parachute and land on the ground a complete, waterproof tent. All in three seconds! It was no toy but an almost effortless way to pitch a real camping tent. Before long Sid and his crew were back in trade shows—this time hunting and camping exhibitions—tossing tents in the air and taking orders. Of course Sid developed many ingenious applications.

By 1995, Sid's tents were popping open all over the nation on movie screens in the major Paramount Pictures release *Congo*, written by Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*. In one of the many stunning compliments to Sid's entrepreneurial career, *Congo's* script even claimed that NASA developed these special tents! Of course Sid made the most of the opportunity. When the June release opened, *one thousand* movie theaters displayed the tents in a promotional scene in their lobbies. Audiences were told to purchase their own Pop-Up tents at their local Sears. Soon

Sid's tents were falling to earth from Australia to the Arab Emirates.

Excalibur Electronics

He joined the firm his super-salesman son Shane had founded in Sid's absence from the electronic-chess marketplace. Sid became Chairman of the Board of Excalibur Electronics of Miami, and he and his son were an unstoppable team. Beginning in 1992, Shane had taken Excalibur from a startup company to a firm that owned most of the US chess computer market. Excalibur's products are now carried by the top 200 retailers in the US and Canada. From Toys R Us to Sears and Sharper Image, and in thousands of smaller retailers, you can see Excalibur's knight-in-armor logo. "We make you think!" is the very appropriate motto of the Excalibur team, headquartered next to the Sidney Samole Chess Museum in Miami.

Along the way, Shane and Sid got together with longtime friend Al Lawrence and his partners to produce their patented invention, Night Navigator, a hand-held device that allows anyone, without special expertise, to locate night-sky objects such as constellations and planets. You can even simply point the product at an object to identify it. In three successful years in the market place with Night Navigator, Sid and Shane had placed the product everywhere, from FAO Schwartz to Sears, Penney's, and dozens of top cataloguers. Next year, even Radio Shack will carry a version. Co-author Lawrence owes a lot to the Samole friendship and business acumen.

Giving back to chess

For decades Sidney Samole sponsored chess. Fidelity sponsored first prize in many US Open Championships. In 1988 Fidelity sponsored the US Invitational Championship when this flagship event was in danger of not being held. In 1988 the US Chess Federation honored Sid with its highest award for corporate sponsorship, the Gold Koltanowski Medal. On June 11, 1994, Excalibur sponsored the largest and most successful one-day chess promotion in history, the US Chessathon in New York City's Grand Central Station, where chess-playing children dominated the huge main room, decked with USCF banners. Approximately 400,000 people witnessed the event!

In 1995 Sidney was appointed a trustee of the US Chess Trust. In 1996 he was elected Vice President of the US Chess Hall of Fame. In 1997 the US Chess Trust renamed the chess museum "The Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Chess Museum."

Commercial chess computers have dramatically advanced the popularity of the royal game, first in the US and then around the world, by capturing the public's imagination. Chess computers have helped tens of thousands to learn chess. And chess computer manufacturers—led by Sid's example—were some of the very first sponsors to contribute significant and consistent sources of income to organized chess.

As a matter of fact, it was largely through the popularity of the chess computers in its own growing 1980s sales program that the United States Chess Federation was able to purchase outright its two-story headquarters in New Windsor, New York, on the Hudson River an hour north of Manhattan.

Today it's hard to imagine the chess world without computers. And it's equally hard to imagine being able to appreciate fully American chess history without understanding the position of Sid Samole—and visiting the World Chess Hall of Fame & Sidney Samole Museum. Opening its doors to the public in 2001, the Museum honors the most important men and women in US chess history, enshrines fascinating memorabilia, and offers chess movies (in its own theatre) and interactive computer displays for all ages. Among its historical keepsakes is Sid

Samole's first commercial chess microcomputer, the legendary 1980 World Computer Chess Champion, Chess Challenger—the product inspired by science fiction.

Sidney Samole was a big-muscled man who could leg-press more than a thousand pounds. But he was a man of many kinds of strengths, among them humor, great dignity, and the inclusiveness to involve anyone in a project who could really contribute. The people who worked with him followed him for decades, across state lines and company identities. That original engineer who created the first working chess program? That's Ron Nelson—he's still with the Samole business, Excalibur Electronics in Miami.

Sidney gave us chess players a lot, and he enjoyed doing it. He's missed, as all great men are missed, in different ways by different people. Those who know his contributions to the history of US and world chess lament the passing of his galvanizing presence in that arena. His friends miss his advice, his humor, his keen insight, and his unwavering support. His family misses their patriarch in thousands of private ways.

We're partially consoled by the fact that Sidney will remain with us for a long, long time—through his museum and through the partners he gave us. We like that fact. *How about a nice game of chess?*

We enjoy and learn from your Email. Feel welcome to send your thoughts directly to AlforChess@aol.com

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