

Sam And Ernie, A Retrospective

By Michael Murray

Sam and Ernie were good friends and chess competitors for many years before I met them. Our lives intersected about 15 years ago, long past their prime chess days, and what I write focuses mostly on what was not their most significant years, in terms of chess or anything else. Sam's name will be less familiar to readers of *Northwest Chess*, but for the last twenty years, he was as much a part of the North Olympic Peninsula chess scene as Ernst.

Back in 2004, I had recently retired and moved to Port Townsend. Walking into a local ice cream parlor, I noticed people playing chess in the back. Even though it had been a quarter century since I'd played serious chess, I couldn't resist checking it out. The players weren't very strong and I was ready to leave when Ernst Rasmussen walked in. We had played a couple times in the 1960s, and vaguely knew each other. I had always associated Ernst with Tacoma, but it turns out he had been living in Port Townsend for several years. We played a few blitz games. As we were leaving, he mentioned a local guy with whom he played regularly, and said he'd tell him there was new blood in town. The next week at the ice cream parlor, Ernst introduced me to Sam Hill. The three of us played some risers, more blitz. At the end of the session, Sam mentioned that Ernie and occasionally others had a standing invite to gather at his house every Thursday at 7 PM to play more serious chess. This had been going on for several years. Sam gave me his address and I was surprised to find he lived only about a block from me. So, I started heading over to Sam's every Thursday, and this continued for the next fifteen years. Mostly, we played Game20 time control, clock move, not for rating points, trophies or prize money, but always for blood.

Others would sometimes show up. Dennis McGuire played fairly regularly. Sam's friends from his days in Alaska



Sam Hill analyzing a game at Mike Murray's home in Port Townsend.
Photo credit: Mike Murray.

would sometimes visit. Once, Peter Cleghorn sat in for an evening of blitz. The last few years Greg Freeze, an attorney, moved from Oregon to Port Townsend and joined us. Sam's living room and dining room could handle eight players comfortably, but we usually had three or four.

Sam had worked carpentry, architectural drafting and construction in Alaska before moving to Port Townsend. Ernst was a bricklayer and commercial fisherman. Dennis had done commercial diving and fishing and owns a commercial building in Port Townsend. All three were adept at building and fixing things.

With Sam living so close and both of us retired, we spent a lot of time playing, analyzing, talking chess and became close friends. If ever at a loss for something to do, I could simply call Sam, and we'd get together for some chess or a general bull session. His wife, Ingra, a charming, warm-hearted person, patiently put up with all this geezer goings-on.

Ernst's chess world centered on the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit. He told

me that, in the 1960s, he was ready to abandon chess until he discovered that opening. He studied it intensely, played correspondence theme tournaments with it, subscribed to magazines devoted to it, played it over-the-board every chance he got, and knew it well. All the typical pawn structures, sacrifices and combinations were at his finger-tips. I would estimate he played at least 250 points above his normal Class A strength when he could steer the game into a Blackmar-Diemer, and he used it to collect the scalps of some pretty strong players.

He had a fair amount of recognition in Blackmar-Diemer literature. For example, Gary Lane's "*Blackmar-Diemer Gambit*" includes the games Rasmussen-Ingred, Oregon, 1988, Rasmussen-Douwhaite, World Open 1988, Rasmussen-Watherman, Washington, 1967, Rasmussen-Hanlen, Correspondence, 1982, Rasmussen-Orlov, Tacoma, 1992, Rasmussen-Beardsley, Correspondence, 1994, two games between Rittenhouse-Rasmussen, Correspondence, 1986, and Rasmussen-Litowsky, Las Vegas, 1993,

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