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Gene Milener  
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# "CHECKMATES"

## The TV Show

### INTRODUCTION

Chess is the most popular board game ever invented, by far. Television shows about chess are successful in Europe today, especially in Russia. In England, the BBC's show "Master Game" had a successful run for many years during the 1980's.

I believe that television shows about chess can find a market here in America, but only if they use an effective format.

The format I propose in this treatment essay involves celebrities who play chess, and it emphasizes making them look good.

### TV FORMAT ELEMENTS

#### **BAD ELEMENTS TO AVOID:**

[1] No need for chess Grandmasters.

For the hosts of the show, a certain level of chess expertise is needed. But it is far more important that the hosts and commentators have a fast speaking style, and have an entertaining way of commenting on the event as it is occurring.

Players rated as Expert are far more numerous, giving a much larger pool in which to find hosts that would have entertaining television appeal.

[2] No need to adhere to real time.

Post-game editing and production should be used to what ever advantage possible. This could include hurrying through less important segments of a game, to fit into the allotted air time, or to flex to the number of moves in the game (unknowable at the start). It could also include editing in sidebar analysis comments at crucial points during the game.

[3] Do not present a weakly played chess game.

Many celebrities enjoy playing chess, but few are truly strong players. Any plausible format is going to require relatively rapid play, without time for long thinks. Even those celebrities with exceptionally good chess skill cannot play strong chess at these high speeds. All celebrities could too easily blunder or make obviously poor moves, risking embarrassment to themselves, and deflating the audience when a good game is suddenly ruined.

As explained later, the celebrities' task should be to choose from among a list of strong moves recommended by a chess computer; not to figure out great moves on their own.

## **SHOW FORMAT DETAILS**

The show uses two hosts, one assigned to White, the other assigned to Black. These hosts should be chess experts or masters, but they should not be full-fledged grandmasters. It is far more important that they be entertaining to listen to, or even pretty to look at (that's right, women have made inroads into chess, see Note\_1).

As the show begins, the roles of the hosts include greeting the audience, and introducing the people playing the color pieces each host is assigned to. During the middle of the show, each host chats with his/her assigned players. "Why did you pick that move?", and so on. Also, the hosts should light-heartedly try to intimidate the other co-host by saying things like "I think my team is building an attack against your king side that cannot be defended against in time!"; with a verbal reply like "You're going to have to sacrifice a piece to break through my king's defenses, but that will cause your center to collapse!".

### **[ ] HOSTS**

One host per color of pieces, White and Black.

Each host is a chess expert, but not a full-fledged grandmaster. An entertaining speaking style is far more important.

### **[ ] CELEBRITIES, INDIVIDUALS OR TEAMS**

The two sides, White and Black, are either individual celebrities, or are teams composed of 2-4 celebrities. This treatment essay is written in terms of teams.

### **[ ] ROTATING TEAM CAPTAIN**

Team captains are needed to move the pieces, but permanent team captains should be avoided. Each celebrity should share in the spotlight.

So, for the first few moves teammate #1 is the captain, then it rotates to teammate #2, then to #3, then back to #1 etc. A dedicated display hidden from the audience can remind the players at all times who is the current captain.

## [] PER TURN

The strongest 3 legal moves are displayed, as recommended by the computer. Before being allowed to consult or talk to each other, the teammates each press a numbered button on their personal keypad to vote for the move they feel is best.

During the perhaps 10 seconds the teammates are allotted to press one of their buttons, the in-studio audience would be encouraged to shout out the move they think it best (to provide ambience).

After all the teammates have voted, the vote of each teammate is displayed. Also displayed is the strength the computer assessed for each listed move; so the players and audience can know the team picked the best or the least best move.

Now the teammates can discuss the chosen move, light-heartedly complain to each other, and so on. Meanwhile, one of the teammates physically moves the piece on the board.

Occasionally as time permits, their host can ask a celebrity to explain or comment.

DETAILS: If no single move wins the voting outright, then a simple computerized algorithm should randomly choose among all moves that tied for first in the voting. Perhaps, if the computer evaluates that White has the advantage, then the algorithm would settle on the weakest of the moves that tied for first in the voting.

## [] GIANT BOARD AND PIECES

For the most compelling visual effect, a giant chess board and pieces should be used. The average piece should be reach up to a man's belly button.

The pieces should be bright colors, like red and royal blue (not literally white and black). Additional shading colors might be wise on the piece tops, to maximize the distinguish-ability of each piece.

## [] STRUGGLING BACK TO EQUALITY

When one team (color) obtains a significant advantage over the other, the list of computer suggested moves shown to the winning team should be diluted. Instead of listing the 3 strongest moves, the list should contain the moves ranked 1-3-5, for the color that has the advantage. This will give the other team a better chance of keeping alive their realistic hopes for victory.

POKER: In televised Poker, the home audience is shown the percentage chance each hand has to win, just before the final card is revealed.

For chess, the home audience could be shown the latest numeric evaluation of the position (where +1.0 means the White is ahead by the equivalent of one pawn, and -0.7 means Black is ahead by two thirds of one pawn).

## [] ENDING THE GAME

The game ends when one of the two assistant computers resigns. They can be set to resign when the it evaluates that one color has a large advantage over the other, and/or likely outcome of continuing would be a long slow death.

Due to time constraints, the computers would probably need to resign as soon as a theoretically won endgame position is achieved.

If the allotted time runs out, the winner would be whomever has the current computer numeric evaluation in their favor.

**DRAWS:** For a game that is headed for a draw, the list of recommended moves could be diluted, increasing the likelihood of a weak move that could be exploited to create decisive winning chances.

As a final way to determine a show winner after a drawn game, the celebrities could be presented with 9 simple tactical puzzles (chess positions), and whoever solves the most within 1 minute wins the show (tie-break could be whoever was first to solve any of the puzzles).

## [ ] ENDING THE SHOW

The two hosts identify the crucial move of the game.

Ideally the hosts could be joined for this by a professional female chess player with camera appeal; someone great at chess like Alexandra Kosteniuk, or Ruslan Goletiani, or Susan Polgar, or Jennifer Shahade.

Other commentators could be any one of the many teenage chess phenoms.

Perhaps CGI graphics would be available to enable the commentators to illustrate their analyses.

## **SEASON BUILDS TO CLIMAX**

Our chess television show can build interest toward a grand finale by using a knock-out format of weekly matches. The show could sign 8 celebrities (or celebrity teams), which would mean 7 show episodes.

This will be greatly favorable publicity for the finalists, beyond mere exposure.

## **CELEBRITY FAMILY MEMBER AS TEAMMATE**

It would be nice to have a TV actor as a contestant, say Josh Holloway from 'Lost'. But it could add interest to have Josh form a team with one of his non-famous family members, like his father. That team could play against Sandra Bullock and her brother.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

[1] The show length should be 60 minutes, not 30 minutes.

A game of chess might typically use 40 move-pairs, or 80 plies. The show's pace might be 20-30 seconds per ply, clearly requiring more than a half-hour episode.

[2] The show should have a companion internet web site.

After the game, both celebrities could sit together and record video of themselves commenting on a replay of the game. They could say what they were thinking after each move (or with some high frequency).

The web site should offer for sale replicas of the giant board and pieces used on the show.

[3] Garry Kasparov suggested this use of computers.

The best chess player of all time, Garry Kasparov, seriously proposed that professional competitive chess allow players to use computers during their live over-the-board games. So that fundamental aspect of my proposed television format is not unprecedented.

This show treatment's computerized aspect, of each turn consisting of choosing one move from a computer recommended list, is what makes it plausible to have each color be a team of two or more people.

[4] The winner of each show earns a charitable donation to his favorite charity.

[5] Broadcast targets: ESPN, Bravo, SpikeTV, PBS, GSN.

[6] The show should present chess as a "sport", not as a mere "game".

Chess is a "digital sport"; where as baseball is an "analog sport".

## **NOTES**

[Note\_1] Here are some people to interview for the jobs of co-hosts:

<http://www.chesspics.com/rating.php?r=1>

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