Chess Accidents

by Bill Wall

Here are some accidents to chessplayers.

In the 1890s, Otto Roething (1865-1915) was a trapeze artist in a German circus. His circus career was cut short by a serious accident. He then moved to New York and became a chess professional, winning the New York State chess championship in 1903.

On April 14, 1891, Captain George Henry Mackenzie (1837-1891), a Scottish-American chess master, may have died of an accidental overdose of morphine, according to Dr. S. B. Minden. He was suffering from tuberculosis at the time and was taking morphine to ease the pain.

In November 1892, an accidental shooting occurred in William Steinitz's house in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. His previous American secretary, Williams, accidently shot his new German secretary, Treital, in the house. Treital lost an arm.

In 1913, Austrian chess master Julius Perlis (1880-1913) died of an accidental death while climbing the Alps. During a pleasure trip, he went astray and spent the night on a mountain. He died of extreme exposure to low temperatures during a climb in the Austrian Inntaler Alps. He froze to death.

On November 18, 1920, John Herbert White (1880-1920) died in a bicycle accident. He was co-author with R. G. Griffith of the first three editions of Modern Chess Openings. He was the Secretary of the Hampstead Chess Club.

On January 31, 1924, Curt von Bardeleben (1861-1924) may have thrown himself out of the second-floor window of his boarding home in Berlin and died of his injuries. Other sources say he fell out by accident. Seeking some fresh air, he opened a low silled window and fell out. He was living in extreme poverty at the time.

In 1929, Richard Reti was involved in a traffic accident when he was hit by a street car in Prague while crossing the road. He was taken to a hospital to heal, but developed scarlet fever while in the hospital in Prague and died.

In December 1930, Alexander Alekhine accidently set his room on fire and almost died. He fell asleep at his hotel in Yugoslavia with a lighted cigarette in his hand. The

cigarette set fire to the bedclothes and the flames spread to the furniture. Alekhine woke up and barely escaped with his life. He was taken to a hospital suffering from burns.

On November 11, 1932, Frederick Yates died in his sleep at his home in London from a gas leak due to a faulty gas pipe connection. A gas company official proved that no gas tap was turned on. It was ruled an accidental death.

On August 20, 1935, Mrs. Agnes Stevenson accidentally walked in front of a propeller blade and died. She was on her way to Warsaw to play in the ladies' world chess championship. Mrs. Stevenson arrived at Posen by plane from Berlin on Tuesday, the 20th and went through customs. While hurrying back to the plane, she walked into the propeller which struck her on the head and killed her instantaneously.

On May 30, 1937, Herman Steiner (1905-1955) was on his way back to Hollywood from the annual North-South chess match when he was involved in an automobile accident and hit a car head-on. Steiner's passenger was Dr. Robert B. Griffith (1876-1937), who played Board 2 for the South (Steiner played Board 1). Griffith died in the car crash and the driver in the other car was critically injured. Dr. Griffith was a medical doctor for the Hollywood film industry. He was the physician for Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin.

In 1937, Jacques Mieses (1865-1954) was in a street accident which resulted in lameness in one leg.

In 1938, three women, Mary Bain, Mrs. McCready and Miss Weart, returning from the US Open chess tournament in Boston were in a car accident after their car skidded on slippery pavement and crashed into a telegraph pole.

On February 17, 1940, the several times New England chess champion, Harold Morton (1906-1940), died in Iowa after a car accident. His passenger, Al Horowitz (1907-1973), was seriously injured. They were travelling together giving tandem simultaneous chess exhibitions across the country. Morton was driving on the return trip from the west back to an exhibition in Minneapolis when he collided with a truck. Morton was killed instantly and Horowitz suffered a concussion and other injuries.

In 1942, an accidental call by the tournament director allowed Samuel Reshevsky to become US chess champion. The flag of Samuel Reshevsky's clock fell against Arnold

Denker in the U.S. chess championship in New York. This should have resulted in Reshevsky forfeiting and losing on time. However, the tournament director, Walter Stephens, who was standing behind the clock, flipped it around and, looking at Reshevsky's side of the clock, now appearing as if it was Denker's side of the clock, announced that Denker lost on time. He refused to correct his error explaining, "Does Kemesaw Mountain Landis reverse himself?" The crowd demonstrated its disapproval with boos and jeers. Denker filed a protest as Reshevsky was not keeping his own score and the players were using a battered chess clock that had no flag indicators. If there were no flag indicators, how did Stephens know who lost on time? The erroneous ruling allowed Reshevsky to tie for 1st place with Isaac Kashdan. Reshevsky then won the play-off match to become U.S. champion six months later.

In 1944, Al Horowitz was in a train accident near Fresno, California. Several passengers were killed and hundreds were injured. Horowitz and his wife escaped serious injury.

On June 26, 1944, world woman chess champion Vera Menchik-Stevenson (1906-1944) died in a German bombing of London. She and her sister died in Kent after a German V-1 rocket hit her home (the bomb shelter in the garden remained intact).

On April 1, 1945, Hungarian chess champion Zoltan von Balla (1883-1945) died in a traffic accident after colliding with a Soviet tank in Budapest, Hungary.

In 1945, Herman Pilnik (1914-1981) of Argentina was involved in a car accident on his way to Los Angeles to play in the Pan American Chess Congress. Two other occupants of the car were hospitalized with broken bones. Pilnik, who had lost his plane reservation, proceeded by car to Los Angeles from Dallas, Texas. He crashed his car into an unlighted and parked truck at night near El Centro, Arizona. The car overturned with part of it hanging over the edge of a steep embankment. Pilnik spent two days in a hospital in Yuma, Arizona and missed his first-round game against Sammy Reshevsky. Pilnik arrived after a 3-day delay.

In 1950, six US Open participants were in a car accident after leaving Detroit. They were injured in an accident at Batavia, New York, when their car overturned on a rain-soaked road. The new crowned US Open Champion Arthur Bisguier broke a rib and had a gash in his forehead. Kit Crittenden, former North Carolina champion, broke his collar-bone. Larry Evans was badly bruised in the accident. Walter Shipman had to have leg put in a cast for an injured ankle.

On April 27, 1954, Leon Tuhan-Baranowski (1907-1954) died in a car accident in Frankfurt, Germany. He was a Polish-Belarusian chess master.

In July 1955, Nancy Roos (1905-1957) was in a car accident just before the U.S. women's championship and had spinal injuries. She recovered to win the women's championship a few months later.

In 1957, American chess master Max Pavey died of accidental radiation poisoning.

In June 1960, American sailor Michael George was charged with accident death after striking a spectator with a broken beer bottle, cutting his jugular vein. The spectator, Clinton Curtis, bled to death. Michael George had just lost a chess game played at Chumley's Greenwich Village restaurant at 86 Bedford Street in New York. George got mad at Curtis when Curtis criticized George's chess game after he lost.

In 1960, Mikhail Tal was driving to the 14th Chess Olympiad in Leipzig, Germany when he got into a car accident. He was unable to play the first 3 rounds, but when he did show up to play, he played board 1 for the USSR. He won 8 and drew 6 games and only lost the final round, to Englishman Jonathan Penrose. That cost him the gold medal for board 1, and he settled for silver.

On August 31, 1961, chess master Norman Whitaker (1890-1975), chess expert Glenn Hartleb, and a 16-year-old boy were driving in Arkansas when they got into a car accident, killing Glenn Hartleb. Apparently, Whitaker and Hartleb were too tired to drive, and they allowed the 16-year-old to drive. He lost control, hit a bridge abutment and overturned the car. They were returning home after playing in the US Open in San Francisco.

In 1962, Norman Whitaker drove from Germany to Oslo in his Volkswagen beetle and crashed his car when he reached Oslo. He was hospitalized for chest wounds for a few days after that.

On February 10, 1967, French master Pierre Rolland (1926-1967) died in a car accident. He was French champion in 1956.

In 1967, International Master Arpad Vajda (1896-1967) died from accidental gas poisoning from a gas leak in a faulty oven.

In 1970, at the chess Olympiad in Skopje, Yugoslavia, Viktor Korchnoi accidently overslept and missed his round against Spain, forfeiting his game. The round started at 3 pm and Korchnoi showed up after 4 pm.

In the 1972 Walter Browne suffered a sports accident when he broke his ankle playing racquetball. His foot was put in a cast but Browne refused to use crutches or a cane.

In 1972, the wife of GM Larry Evans (1932-2010) was in a car accident. Evans rushed to the hospital and was unable to play the last round at Lone Pine.

In 1972, Grandmaster Georgi Tringov (1937-2000) at the 20th Chess Olympiad in Skopje, Yugoslavia, was playing Viktor Korchnoi. At time control, Tringov was to seal his next move. Tringov wrote his sealed move on his scoresheet and thought he sealed his scoresheet in the envelope. When the game was resumed, the arbiter opened the envelope. In the envelope was Korchnoi's score sheet but not the one belonging to Tringov. The arbiter ruled the game a forfeit win for Korchnoi, which the Bulgarian team captain protested. After the Olympiad was over, it was learned that Tringov had accidentally placed his score sheet in his pocket. Tringov discovered his mistake several days after his forfeit but was too ashamed to admit his mistake to the organizers of the Olympiad.

In May 1974, Grandmaster Ljubomir Ljubojevic (1950-) was severely injured in a car accident.

In July 1975, Grandmaster Nicolas Rossolimo accidently fell down some stairs at his chess studio in Greenwich Village. He died of injuries from his fall several days later. He was 65.

On November 8, 1977, Viktor Korchnoi, age 46, was injured in a car accident with a broken right hand and other injuries. Korchnoi's taxi collided with a Swiss army truck on its way to Zurich. The car rolled over three times. He asked for a postponement in his world championship semi-final match with Spassky. Raymond Keene was also a passenger, but not seriously injured.

In the 1979, Milan Matulovic (1935-2013) was convicted of vehicular manslaughter and served 9 months in prison for a car accident in which a woman was killed.

In 1979, Joseph Fielder, a chess player in Wisconsin, was killed in a car accident. Every year, Wisconsin holds a Joe Fielder memorial.

In 1979, Billy Watt (1959-1979) of Taylorsville, NC died in a car accident. He was an active chess player and was on the North Carolina State champion chess team at Alexander Central HS in Taylorsville. A Billy Watt Memorial was held in Statesville, NC for many years.

On January 25, 1982, British chess master Ian Duncan Wells had a fatal accident when in Rio de Janeiro Brazil after swimming. He had just finished an international junior chess tournament. He got caught in an undertow at the Copacabana beach and drowned.

In 1982, the Ugandan chess team forfeited their first-round match at the 1982 chess Olympiad in Lucerne, Switzerland because they showed up late. They accidently went to the wrong city, thinking the chess Olympiad was at Lugano, Switzerland instead of Lucerne, Switzerland. Lugano was the home of the 1968 chess Olympiad.

In 1983, Hungarian Grandmaster Janos Flesch (1933-1983), while returning from the Kasparov-Korchnoi match in London to a chess tournament in Ramsgate, he became involved in a car accident. Both he and his wife died in the crash.

In 1985, Grandmaster Tony Miles injured his back in an accident. At the Tilburg tournament, he played several of his games lying face down on a table due to his back problems.

On Aug 27, 1986, GM (1984) Georgy Agzamov (1954-1986) died at the age of 31. After finishing a chess tournament in Sevastopol in the Crimea, he was accidentally killed when he took a shortcut to go swimming, fell off a cliff between two rocks and became trapped. People around him heard his cries for help, but he was too deep down a cliff, and by the time rescue crews got to him, it was too late. He was the first Uzbekistand grandmaster. At one time he was ranked number 8 in the world, with a 2728 rating. He died a week away from his 32nd birthday.

In 1987, Viktor Korchnoi was playing Anatoly Karpov in a tournament in Brussels. In a drawn position, Korchnoi accidently touched his king on his 48th move, which would have led to a loss of his knight and loss of the endgame. Instead of resigning normally, he took his hand and swept all the chess pieces off the chessboard and onto the floor before storming out.

On November 13, 1988, International Master Bela Perenyi (1953-1988) died in a car accident near Kistelek. He was travelling to a chess tournament in Saloniki.

In 1989, Brian Yamin was an honor student and promising chess player. He was killed in an automobile accident in Indianapolis. A scholarship was created in his name.

In 1990, FIDE president Florencio Campomanes (1927-2010) barely escaped death as he had a car accident in Uganda. The president of the Uganda Chess Federation sitting next to him was killed.

In 1990, GM Guillermo Garcia Gonzales (1953-1990) died in a car accident in Havana, Cuba while on his way to the airport to play in the 1990 Chess Olympiad in Novi Sad.

In 1993, FIDE master Billy Colias (1966-1993) died at the age of 27 after an accidental mix of Tylenol and alcohol. His liver and kidneys shut down, already weakened from his earlier chemotherapies from cancer.

In 1994, chess master Air Force Captain Charles Meidinger was in a car accident on his way to an Armed Forces tournament in Fort Knox, Kentucky. He totaled his car and rented a car to play in the tournament. He showed up at the tournament with a neck brace and won the event.

In 1994, at the Moscow Chess Olympiad, the organizers accidently posted two different locations for the first round between Bermuda and Kyrgyzstan. One team sat down at boards in one playing area, and the other team sat down in another area. Both teams waited for the other team. After 40 minutes, someone discovered the error and got the two teams together in one playing area.

In 1998, David Hooper (1915-1998) was killed in a car accident in Somerset, England. He was 82. He was a former international player and author of several chess books.

On August 20, 1999, Ken Home was involved in an airplane accident and died. He was flying home in his own airplane from the US Open Chess Championship in Reno when his plane developed engine troupe and crashed into a house in North Las Vegas. Ken and his wife died. Another chess player, John Trivett, who also participated in the US Open, was pulled from the wreckage by bystanders. He suffered burns on over 35% of his body, but survived.

In November 1999, Grandmaster Alek Wojtkiewicz broke his leg in an accident. But that didn't stop him from giving a simultaneous exhibition. He played 25 players simultaneously at the Arlington Chess Club in Virginia. He had to be wheeled around on a wheelchair to all the boards. He won 23 games and drew two games.

On September 24, 2000, International Master Jaan Eslon (1952-2000) died from injuries after a car accident.

On February 18, 2001, USCF Executive Director Dr. George De Feis was injured in an auto accident while attending the US Amateur Team East tournament in New Jersey. He was in intensive care in Morristown, New Jersey and suffered a brain injury.

In 2001, five chess players died in a car wreck in India while going to an All-India chess tournament. They were part of a 10-member chess team that were involved in a head-on collision with a bus. The other 5 members were in critical condition.

In 2002, Ilze Rubene (1958-2002) died in a car accident. She was a Latvian Woman International Master. In 1976 and 1995, she won the Latvian women's championship.

In 2003, an accidental fire destroyed Alex Dunne's house and killed his wife and grandson while he was away at a chess tournament. Dunne is a chess master and long-time Chess Life columnist ("The Check is in the Mail'). The fire ripped through his Sayre, Pennsylvania home around 4 am. Alex was playing at the US Amateur Team Championship in Parsippany, New Jersey.

In October 2003, Russian GM Ruslan Ponomariov and former world champion became the first grandmaster to forfeit a chess game because he accidently left his mobile phone on. It rang during his game in round 1 of the European Team Championship in Bulgaria. He lost his game to Swedish GM Evgeny Agrest (who lost a game in 2004 when his cell phone rang) in his Ukrainian team match versus Sweden. Ponomariov protested and refused to sign the scoresheets indicating his loss.

In May 2005, Nigel Short was in a car crash while driving from Messinia to Athens. His car was struck by an oncoming vehicle which had skidded uncontrollable off a wet bend. His passenger was Sergey Karjakin, who was the youngest grandmaster in the world.

In 2005, GM Alexander Stripunsky was in a terrible car accidnet just before the 2005 US chess championship. He played his chess games wearing dark sunglasses to

protect his left eye, which was badly injured in the accident. He tied for 1st in the 2005, US chess championship, but lost to Hikaru Nakamura in the playoff match.

In 2006, WGM Lilit Mkrtchian was hospitalized after a car accident in Armenia.

On July 26, 2006, British chess player Jessie Gilbert, fell from the 8th floor of the Hotel Labe in Pardubice, Czech Republic. At the time, she was playing in the Czech Open. It may have been an accident as it was reported she had consumed beer and vodka from the room's minibar.

In February 2007, Florencio Campomanes was involved in a car accident in Turkey that left him in intensive care. He was on his way to the airport for a return flight to the Philippines after the FIDE Presidential Board meeting in Antalya, Turkey when the driver lost control of the vehicle. The car overturned and plunged over the side of the road. Campomanes was sitting in the back seat and not wearing a safety belt. He was thrown from the car, which was badly damaged. Campomanes was operated on for 7 and 1/2 hours to repair broken bones in his legs, hands, neck and face.

In April 2007, Reuben Beukes died in an automobile accident in Namibia. In 2006, he won the National Chess Championship of Namibia.

On June 30, 2007, GM (1992) Maxim Sorokin (1968-2007) died of complications from a car accident that occurred while driving home from the Candidates matches in Elista, Kalmykia at the age of 39. He died in the Elista hospital several days after an auto crash on the road from Elista to Volgograd.

In 2008, FIDE president Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was in a car accident on the way to the airport in Kalmykia to go to the 38th Chess Olympiad in Dresden, Germany. He was unable to attend the opening ceremony.

In September 2008, Nigel Short accidentally left his cell phone with him went it rang, forfeiting his game. Short turned off his new Nokia cell phone and placed it on top of his table as he was playing in the European Union Open Championship. His phone had a low battery and it rang to remind its owner to charge it. The phone had been a gift from a sponsor at a recent chess tournament. Short was unaware that the cell phone beeped when it was low on battery power.

In January 2009, Philip Hogarty, a strong chess player, was killed when he was hit by a police car while walking across a badly-lit road in London. He suffered head injuries

and died later that day.

On April 21, 2009, National Master Landon Brownell (1989-2009) died after a car accident near Bakersfield, California. He was 19. In 2006, he won the National High School Championship.

On July 23, 2010, International Master Zdenko Krnic died from a hit-and-run accident. He was on the crosswalk in Belgrade when he was hit by a motorcycle driver, who then sped away. He was the Director and Chief Editor of Chess Informant at the time. He was 62.

In 2010, Tyrone Lee, a long-time Chicago chess player, was killed in a car accident while traveling to Tennessee.

In May 2011, Grandmaster Shakhriyar Mamedyarov was involved in a car accident. His Ranger Rover that he was driving collided with another vehicle in Sumgayit, Azerbaijan. He had minor injuries to his hand and right leg.

In October 2011, Grandmaster Eduardo Iturrizaga, the top player in Venezuela, got in a car wreck on his way to the airport to participate in a chess tournament in Barcelona. He was unable to make it to the tournament.

In 2012, six players from Soviet Georgia were all forced to forfeit their games at the 13th European Individual championship. They failed to arrive at the boards on time after accidentally setting their clocks wrong for Daylight Savings Time.

In July 2012, Ron Washington, accidently drowned in Lake Michigan. He was swept into the water and was caught in a rip current. He spent 20 years playing chess at the North Avenue Beach's "Chess Pavilion."

On January 4, 2013, Mike Anders died in a plane accident that he was piloting in Florida. He was a chess organizer in Kentucky.

In 2013, GM Andrei Istratescu and IM Dragos Dumitrache were involved in a car accident on the way to a Zurich chess tournament and had to withdraw.

In April 2013, six members of the Melbourne Chess Club in Australia were involved in a traffic accident after returning from a chess tournament in Canberra. Their car rolled off the freeway. Two of the chess players, Andrew Saint and Hannibal Swartz,

died. Two others, including International Master James Morris (1994-), were seriously injured.

On August 8, 2013, Grandmaster Igor Kurnosov (1985-2013) died in Chelyabinsk, Russia at the age of 28. He was hit by a car as he was crossing the street in Chelyabinsk and died at the scene of the accident. He was killed on the spot at 2:45 am. He was one of the top 20 GMs in Russia, rated 2680 at his peak.

In August 2013, correspondence grandmaster Mark Noble walked away from what could have been a fatal car crash. A car failed to stop at a stop sign, hitting the front end of Mark's car, just missing the driver's door.

On September 9, 2013, Alexander Bitman was killed by a hit-and-run car accident in Moscow. He was a chess master and co-developer of one of the first chess programs in the world.

In January 2015, Erich Spielman, age 92, was struck by a car driven by another 92-year-old in England and died. He was a chess player (winner of several club championships in Loughton) and the nephew of the famous chess player Rudolf Spielmann.

In November 2016, Russian grandmaster Yuri Eliseev accidently fell from the 12th floor of a Moscow apartment block and died. He had lost his grip on a balcony rail whil practicing parkour — the extreme sports discipline where people leap and hurdle through urban environments.

In December 2016, Emarje Watkins, age 13, was killed in an accidental shooting in Detroit. He was among a group of boys who were playing with a loaded gun. He was a competitive chess player who had won several chess trophies and medals.

On May 31, 2018, Chinese Grandmaster Ding Liren (ranked #4 in the world) was involved in a bicycle accident in the early afternoon and broke his hip. He was riding with his father when the 25-year-old fell off his bicycle making a turn at high speed. He went into surgery at the Stavanger University Hospital and had to withdraw from the Altibox Norway Chess tournament after playing just three rounds.