

Ripley's

by Bill wall

In 1918, sports writer and cartoonist LeRoy Robert Ripley (1890-1949) created something similar to Ripley's — Believe It or Not! It was a newspaper panel series that appeared in the New York Globe, which later became a radio and television show. His interest was sports feats to little-known facts. Some of his subjects covered chess. In 1929, publishing mogul William Randolph Hearst syndicated his column and published it in 17 newspapers worldwide. Ripley's Believe It or Not! Is now a franchise with 1,000 cartoon panels, 30,000 artifacts, and 20,000 photographs.

In his 1930s radio show, Ripley devoted two radio episodes to the game of chess. One episode was about a game of chess that was fatal to a sultan of Egypt in 1249. While playing chess, he was poisoned by his wife. Another episode was how a game of chess drove a man crazy. In the 1800s, a mad Hungarian Count was told to play chess with a student to help his concentration. The count and the student played chess for 6 years. The Count was cured, but the student went out of his mind.

In September 1953, a 5-page story called "History Was Changed in a Chess-Game" was published in Ripley's Believe It or Not Magazine #1, published by Harvey Comics. In the story, Thomas Paine (1737-1809), author of "The Rights of Man," was arrested in Paris for favoring the exile of the French King rather than execution. He has a last-minute reprieve from the French guillotine after his wife, disguised as a young poor man, defeats Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) in three games of chess at a tavern. The story was first published by Ripley in 1944.

In 1962, a Ripley's Believe It or Not feature tells of an event in 1408 when Prince Yusuf of Granada was ordered slain by his brother, Muhammad VII, but was granted his last request — permission to finish a game of chess. As Ripley put it, "the monarch died while the game was in progress, and his condemned brother became Yusuf III, King of Granada." (source: "Most Dramatic Checkmate," *Chess Review*, March 1962, p. 68)

In 1986, a Ripley cartoon was published in newspapers about Bobby Fisher. The text read, "Bobby Fischer: the American chess genius, in 1958 at age 15, became the youngest international grandmaster. He won the world chess championship in 1972 by defeating Boris Spassky of Russia and hasn't played in public since! In the 1850s, Paul Morphy, the only other American World Champion, also quit competing at the height of his career." (source: *Citizens' Voice* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), July 25, 1986, p. 56)

In 2004, a book called "Ripley's Believe It or Not!: In Celebration" was published. One of the articles was how chess was invented. Ripley wrote, "The following legend is told in connection with the invention of the game of chess. An East Indian Potentate was so pleased with the game that he promised the inventor, a slave, the fulfillment of any wish. The slave asked for the number of grains of wheat which would result, if one grain were placed on the first square of the chess-board, two on the second, four on the third, etc., i.e., each time twice as many as on the last. At first glance, this wish seemed to be a modest one, but calculations showed that it would be impossible for the king to keep his promise, even if he owned the whole earth and spent his entire life growing wheat on it. The result is: 18 quintillions, 446 quadrillions, 744 trillions, 73 billions, 709 millions, 551,615 grains."

In 2006, the Ripley's — Believe It or Not website published the fact that chess champion Susan Polgar played 1,131 games of chess and won 1,112 of them over a 17-hour period in August 2005. Believe it or not, Susan Polgar was unaware of the Ripley addition about her chess until 2009 until someone sent her a link to the Ripley website. (source: *Susan Polgar Global Chess Daily*, May 27, 2009)

In 2015, the Ripley's Believe It or Not museum at the London Pavilion, Piccadilly Circus in London devoted a whole gallery to Alice in Wonderland to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the iconic Alice in Wonderland. There was a huge Alice in Wonderland chess set on display as you walk in.

On January 28, 2017, a Ripley's Believe it or Not comic strip noted that chess prodigy Bobby Fischer died at the age of 64 — living one year for every square on the chess board.

In 2017, the Ripley's — Believe It or Not website, weird news section, published text on chess boxing and pointed out that the idea came from a French comic book (graphic novel), "Froid Equateur" by Enki Bilal. However, in the book, a chess match took place after the boxing match. (source: www.ripleys.com, Aug 9, 2017)

In 2019, a Ripley's Believe It or Not! Beyond the Bizarre book had an entry for the world's largest chess piece, which appeared on page 79. This is the big chess king in front of the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis. It stands 20 feet tall with a 9 foot base. The piece was 10,860 pounds and is hand-carved from mahogany wood.

Ripley's added a story about the Mechanical Turk. (source: "An 19th-Century Chess-Playing Robot: The Mechanical Turk," *ripleys.com*, Aug 5, 2019)

Ripley's Believe It or Not chronicled George Koltanowski's (1903-2000) amazing chess records several times. One record was in 1937, in Edinburgh, Scotland, against 34 players simultaneously without losing a game. Another was against 56 opponents consecutively in San Francisco in 1960, again without a loss.

The Ripley's Believe It or Not museum in Niagara Falls has a chess board made entirely of matchstick.