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The Kibitzer

Tim Harding
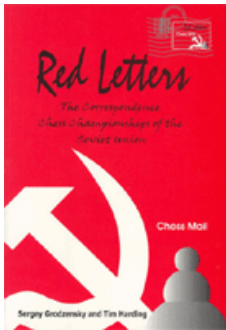
Playing the Morphy Number Game

Did you ever play chess with anyone who had played against somebody who had played somebody who played Paul Morphy? I did, on at least two occasions, maybe more.

In writing this article, I must start by acknowledging a debt to Taylor Kingston who first wrote on this subject at **ChessCafe.com** in 2005. You can still read his article here in the Archives, where he gives a detailed explanation of what this is all about, so I shall summarise.

Briefly, any chess player who has had at some time a reasonably strong opponent (competitively or in a simultaneous display or even a friendly game) can connect themselves to the great American champion Paul Morphy by a path of games linking you through that opponent to bygone generations. The number of 'degrees of separation' between you and Morphy depends on how many links are required. Players who actually met Morphy over the board had a Morphy number of 1, people who met them had a Morphy number of 2 and so on.

If that is not clear, and you have not read Kingston's article, I think it will soon be explained by the examples I shall give.

Most readers, unless you are very young or have not got out much in the chess world, probably have a Morphy number not higher than 6 and many of you will have a Morphy number of 5. Older readers like myself are quite likely to have a Morphy number of 4. The numbers of living 3s must now be extremely small. Kingston named grandmasters Andor Lilienthal and Arturo Pomar who, I believe, may still be alive. There could be a few others, but they are likely to be in their late eighties or nineties, so probably no new 4s will be created, and in a few years 4 will be the lowest number for living players.

Although Morphy lived until 1884, he played very little chess after his European tour of 1858-9, and this makes it very challenging to find connections to him. Probably most British players would be connected to Morphy through long-lived English contemporaries Henry Bird (1830-1908) or Rev. John Owen (1827-1901) who were still playing chess in the early 1890s, while continental players might be connected via Adolf Anderssen (1818-79) or Louis Paulsen (1833-91).

Kingston also names about a dozen others who played Morphy but who are less likely to provide a route to a low Morphy number because they were older or their post-Morphy chess careers of shorter duration. However, it may be that more players with a low Morphy number can be found once one remembers that although the American genius did not play in the 1858 Birmingham tournament, he did go there on the train and played some informal games and a blindfold simultaneous. This could be a significant occasion for the Morphy numbers game because there were probably few if any other occasions when Morphy played people who were not from the top ranks of the London chess establishment. (Following this event, he went to Paris and started his match with Harrwitz.) The names of Morphy's opponents can be found through the contemporary newspapers and then we can see where they lead.

Kingston, for example, did not mention the Rev. George Salmon (1819-1904) of Trinity College Dublin, who was a long-lived person who played chess near the end of his life - one of the most important criteria for finding a path to low Morphy numbers. In the 1850s Salmon was a strong and active player. At the Yorkshire Chess Association meeting in Leeds on 22 May 1850, he
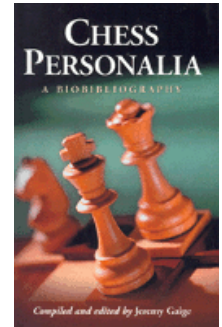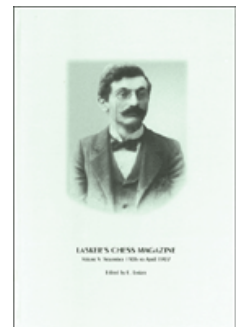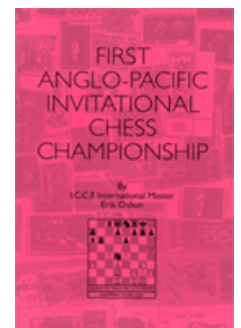
lost badly in a miniature to Saint-Amant, but he gathered a notable scalp by beating Harrwitz in an interesting game that was also published.

George Salmon - Daniel Harrwitz
Yorkshire Chess Association meeting Leeds, 22.05.1850
Ruy Lopez [C60]

From *Bell's Life in London*, 15 September 1850: "Fine game played at the Yorkshire Chess Festival, this last May, between M[onsieur] Harrwitz and the Rev Mr Salmon, of Dublin."

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 Bd6

The point of this strange-looking move will be seen at moves 6-7.

4 c3 Nf6 5 Qe2 0–0 6 0–0 Ne7 7 d3 c6 8 Bc4 Bc7 9 Bg5 Ng6 10 Nbd2 d5 11 Bb3 h6 12 Be3 Qd6 13 Ne1 Kh7

Better 13...b5 to make all safe on that side - George Walker.

14 g3 Bh3 15 Ng2 Bxg2 16 Kxg2 d4 17 Nc4

"Well played" comments Walker.

17...Qd7 18 cxd4 exd4 19 Bd2 b5 20 Na3 a5 21 Rac1 a4 22 Bd1 Bd6 23 f4

"We now prefer Mr Salmon's position. This move is very telling."

23...Bxa3 24 bxa3 Rfe8 25 Qf2 Rac8 26 Bb4

"A Bishop well translated."

26...Red8 27 h3 Nf8 28 g4 Ne6 29 g5! hxg5?

This is very unwise, but Walker made no comment. Harrwitz appeared to underestimate the coming attack; he should have played 29...Ng8.

30 fxg5 Nxg5 31 Qh4+

"Mr Salmon plays very finely here."

31...Kg6

Black thinks he can save his piece but this should have been immediately refuted.

32 Rxf6+?!

This may still be favourable to White, but Salmon missed the crushing move 32 Rf5 when 32...Nfh7 unguards h5 and allows mate in one.

32...gxf6 33 Bg4 Qc7 34 Bf5+!

34 Bxc8 is possible but White plays for the attack.

34...Kg7 35 Qg4 Rb8?

35...Rg8! was necessary. White cannot win the knight but has good compensation for the exchange down; e.g., 36 Rg1! (stronger than 36 Bd2 Kh8 37 Qh4+ Nh7+ 38 Kh1 Rg6 39 Bf4 Qb7 with chances for both sides.) 36...Kh8 (36...c5 37 Bd2) 37 Qh5+ Nh7+ 38 Kf3 Rg6 39 Bxg6 fxg6 40 Rxg6 and White has winning chances.

36 Kh1?

A nervous move that could have spoiled the game. 36 h4 at once is correct.

36...Re8?

This is a fatal waste of a tempo. After 36...Rh8!, White would have nothing better than 37 h4 Rxh4+ 38 Qxh4 Rh8 39 Bf8+ Rxf8 40 Kg2 leading ultimately to a lost endgame.

37 h4 Rh8 38 Kg2

Now all is well again for White, as the knight is doomed and the bishops are very strong especially after the next manoeuvre.

38...Rh6 39 Be1!

39 hxg5 is in fact playable, but White understandably wished to avoid counterplay based on a check at h2.

39...Rg8 40 Bg3 Qa5

"All first-rate. This game is throughout of a very high order."

41 Bf4

"Happy again."

41...Kh8 42 hxg5 fxg5 43 Rh1!?

"Highly imaginative. Examine its bearings."

Salmon once more prefers to avoid risk. 43 Bxg5 involves a self-pin, but could be played since 43...f6? walks into a pretty mate: 44 Bxf6+! Rxf6 45 Rh1+, etc.

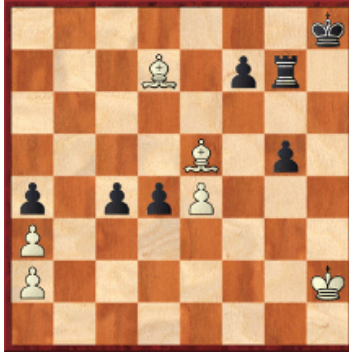**43...Rxh1 44 Be5+ Rg7 45 Kxh1 Qe1+ 46 Qg1 Qh4+ 47 Qh2 Qxh2+ 48**

Kxh2

Black is now effectively a piece down, his rook and extra pawns being doomed.

48...c5 49 Bd7 c4 50 dxc4
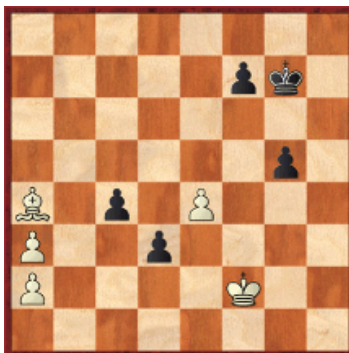
50 Bxb5 c3 51 Bxa4 also wins.

50...bxc4

51 Bxa4!?

This almost jeopardises the win. 51 Bxd4 is safer, ruling out connected passed pawns. the a-pawn could wait. 51...Kh7 52 Bxg7 Kxg7 53 Bxa4 Kf6 54 Bc2 Ke5 55 a4 Kd4 56 Kg3. Also 51 Bb5 and 51 Kg3 would be better than the text.

51...d3 52 Kg2 Kg8 53 Bxg7 Kxg7 54 Kf2!?

54 Bb5 is more accurate, forcing the pawns forward so they can be blockaded: 54...d2 55 Ba4 Kf6 56 Kf3 Ke5 57 Ke3 g4 58 Kxd2 Kxe4 59 Bc2+ Ke5 60 a4 f5 61 a5 g3 62 Ke2 and the rear a-pawn will eventually become a queen.

54...Kf6?

54...g4! was the best chance, requiring White to be very accurate:

a) 55 Ke3 g3 56 Bb5 d2 57 Ba4 Kf6 58 Bc2 Ke5 59 a4 g2 60 Kf2 Kd4 61 a5 Kc3 62 Bd1 Kb2 63 a6 g1Q+ 64 Kxg1 c3 65 a7 c2 66 Bxc2 Kxc2 67 a8Q d1Q + with drawing chances in the queen ending.

b) 55 Bb5! d2 56 Ba4 (56 Ke2? g3 57 Ba4 Kf6 transposes to the previous note.) 56...Kf6 57 Bc2 Ke5 58 a4 is just good enough to win; e.g., 58...Kd4 59 a5 Kc5 60 a6 Kb6 61 Kg3 Kxa6 62 Kxg4 Ka5 63 Kf3 c3 64 Ke3 Kb4 65 Kd3 f6 66 a4 and wins by zugzwang.

55 Ke3

Now the black pawns are once more under control.

55...Ke5 56 Bb5 d2 57 Kxd2 Kxe4 58 Bxc4 f5 59 a4

"The chance of war. This poor Pawn, broken and almost worthless, becomes worth a monarch's ransom."

59...g4 60 a5 f4 61 a6 g3 62 a7 1–0

Salmon possibly could provide a route to a low Morphy number for Irish players, if one could only find out the names of Salmon's Dublin opponents in the friendly games he played up to his death. Dr Salmon rarely played games in public in later years, but was one of a consulting committee of three who played Steinitz in 1881 when he visited the Irish capital and some obituaries show he continued to enjoy chess to the end.

The first opponent whom Morphy met on his visit to Birmingham in August 1858 was James Stanley Kipping (1822-1899), secretary of the Manchester Chess Club. The *Birmingham Daily Post* of 27 August 1858 says that Morphy arrived in the city at about four o'clock the previous afternoon and 'immediately commenced play' with Kipping. It was an Evans Gambit, won by Morphy, according to the *Era* next Sunday. In fact they played two games in the Evans, each taking White once, and Morphy won both.

This was one of those games.

Paul Morphy – James Kipping
Birmingham, offhand game, 1858
Evans Gambit [C52]

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 b4 Bxb4 5 c3 Ba5 6 d4 exd4 7 0–0 d6

Offering transposition to the Normal Position, which could be reached by 8 cxd4 Bb6, but 7...Bb6 is more accurate to rule out White's next move.

8 Qb3!?

Waller's Attack.

8...Qf6 9 e5! dxe5 10 Re1 Bb6

Other "book" lines are

a) 10...Nh6 11 Bg5 Qf5 12 Qa3 f6 13 Bxh6 gxh6 14 Bd5 Bxc3 15 Nxc3 dxc3 16 Bxc6+ bxc6 17 Qc5 Bd7 18 Nxe5 - *Sovremenny Debyut*;

b) 10...Bd7 11 Bg5 Qf5 12 Qxb7! Rb8 13 Rxe5+! Qxe5 14 Bxf7+ Kf8 15 Qxb8+ Nxb8 16 Nxe5 dxc3 17 Bb3 Ne7 18 Nc4 Bb4 19 a3 Bc5 20 Nxc3 with advantage - *Bilguer's Handbuch*.

11 Bg5 Qf5 12 Nxe5 Nxe5 13 f4

13...dxc3+

13...f6! "needs to be examined" according to the second edition of *Play the Evans Gambit* by Harding and Cafferty (1997). Analysis with the computer program Deep Rybka-3 shows this to be a promising defence and Black's best

try.

14 Kh1 Bd4

14...f6 (also mentioned in our book) is met by 15 Bxg8 Kf8 16 fxe5 Rxg8 17 exf6 Bd7 18 f7 Qxf7 19 Qa3+ This looks stronger than "winning" the queen by 19 Be7+. 19...c5 20 Nxc3 with a winning attack.

15 Nxc3

15...Kf8

15...Nf6! is better, e.g.,

a) 16 fxe5 Ng4 17 Nb5 Bxa1 18 Nxc7+ Kf8 19 Qb5 Bd7 20 Qc5+ Kg8 21 Rf1 Qxf1+ 22 Bxf1 Rc8.

b) 16 Bxf7+ Kf8 17 fxe5 Ng4 (17...Qxg5 18 exf6 is less clear.) 18 e6 Nf2+ and Black has a draw (at least).

16 Rad1 Nxc4 17 Qxc4 Be6 18 Qxd4 f6

19 Ne4

19 Nb5! is stronger (Dinic-Loncarevic, corr Yugoslavia 1967).

19...b6

19...Re8! might yet defend.

20 Ng3 Qc5 21 Qxc5+ bxc5 22 Rxe6 fxg5 23 fxg5 g6 24 h4 Kf7 25 Re5 h6 26 Ne4 hxg5 27 Nxg5+ Kf6 28 Re6+ Kf5 29 Rd5+ Kg4 30 Re4+ 1-0

Black resigned in view of 30...Kg3 31 Rd3+ Kf2 32 Rf3#.

Then on the evening of Friday the 27th, Morphy, playing blindfold, met eight opponents, who were all named in various papers including *The Morning Chronicle* of Tuesday 31 August, whose report was copied from the *Birmingham Journal*. The *Era* column of 5 September is also a reliable source, since the chess editor Löwenthal was present in Birmingham throughout the congress. Morphy lost to Kipping and drew with Thomas Avery (1813-94), President of the Birmingham Chess Club. Salmon was one

of the six players whom Morphy defeated. The others were Lord Lyttelton (1817-76), president of the chess association and four lesser known players: Mr. Carr, secretary of the Leamington Chess Club, Dr Freeman (of the Birmingham club), Mr. Rhodes and Mr. W. R. Wills, secretary of the Birmingham club. Here is the game with Salmon which was quite interesting.

Paul Morphy – George Salmon
Birmingham blindfold simultaneous, 1858
Evans Gambit [C51]

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 b4 d5 5 exd5 Nxb4 6 0–0 Ne7 7 Nxe5 0–0

7...Nbxd5 is better.

8 d4 Bd6 9 Nc3 Bf5 10 Bb3 a5 11 a3 a4 12 Nxa4 Nbxd5 13 c4 Rxa4 14 cxd5 Ra5 15 Qf3 Bg6 16 Re1 Bb4 17 Re2 Nf5 18 Bb2 Qa8 19 g3 Qa7 20 Nxg6 hxg6 21 Re5 Bxa3 22 d6!

22...Bb4 23 Rexa5 Bxa5 24 Qd5 b6 25 d7 Qa8 26 Rc1 Qxd5 27 Bxd5 b5 28 Bc6 Nd6 29 d5 Bd2 30 Rd1 Bg5 31 f4 Bd8 32 Ba3 f5 33 Re1 Kf7 34 Bxb5 Rh8 35 Bxd6 cxd6 36 Re8 Rf8

Black hopes that bishops of opposite colours will save him, but Morphy will break the blockade by marching his king to c8 and there is nothing Black can do about it.

37 Kf2 g5 38 Ke3 g4 39 Kd3 g5 40 Bc6 gxf4 41 gxf4 Rg8 42 Kc4 Rf8 43 Kb5 Rg8 44 Ka6 Rf8 45 Kb7 Rg8 46 Kc8 Bb6 47 Rxg8 Kxg8 48 d8Q+ Bxd8 49 Kxd8 1–0

Freeman is often mentioned in contemporary reports but I do not know his dates; he was Lord Lyttelton's regular correspondence opponent. George Lyttelton himself did not play in formal contests, although a keen amateur, and is unlikely to be a route to a lower Morphy number than could be obtained via Kipping, for example. Rhodes was possibly the Leeds player John Rhodes whose dates are given as 1814-98 in Jeremy Gaige's *Chess Personalia*, and if so he could be a source of low Morphy numbers, but Rhodes is not an uncommon surname. I have no further information on Carr and Wills.

Therefore the two players from the simultaneous most likely to provide new routes to low Morphy numbers are Kipping and Salmon, with Rhodes a third

possibility if one could prove it was the same Rhodes. For English players, Kipping is probably of particular significance because Blackburne (also originally from Manchester) never played Morphy and so has only a Morphy number of 2. Many amateurs who played Blackburne in the nineteenth century probably also encountered Kipping, who would therefore provide an alternative route (apart from Bird and Owen) to reach a Morphy number of 2. The latest date that I can find Kipping mentioned as an active player is 5 December 1885, when he drew two games on board five in the Manchester club's match with Liverpool: see Eric Nowell (ed.), *Chess and Manchester*, page 35. The same book notes (page 62) that Kipping "was made an honorary life member of the Manchester Chess Club in 1888, but he had long since ceased to visit the club when he died in April 1899." From which one may assume that Manchester players up to the mid- or even late-1880s probably played against him, and if one hunted hard enough in Manchester newspaper archives proof of this might be found. He could be a route by which some south Lancashire players not strong enough to have encountered Bird or Owen could be promoted from 3 to 2 status.

Likewise, as Salmon was President of the Dublin Chess Club (after the death of Sir John Blunden in 1890) and of the Dublin University Club, he probably played casual games as late as the 1890s (maybe even early 1900s) against many of the Dublin amateurs in friendlies. That would mean a lot of them were 2s, and via them and the leading Irish players between the world wars, a lot of the senior Irish players today are probably 4s. Kingston estimated "there are probably many thousands of MN4s alive today, and probably millions of MN5s. But MN3s are a vanishing breed." Five years after he wrote, that is going to be still more the case. The last British veteran of World War One died a few weeks before Christmas 2009 and of course he was well over a century old.

The following is speculation, but I think that I could probably prove the links if I had to. A retired Professor of Trinity College Dublin, my late mother's cousin John Victor Luce (now in his late eighties) could well be an MN3 without knowing it. The most likely connection would be through William Edward Thrift (1870-1942) who graduated from Trinity in 1893, and became a fellow in 1896. So Thrift certainly knew Salmon (who was Provost) and it is very likely they would have played chess in the common room. (Many years ago, when Nigel Short came to Dublin to give a simultaneous, Luce and I played a consultation game against him on the common room chess table after lunch, losing after a tough fight.)

In the 1890s, W. E. Thrift was a very active club player, as was a brother of his. He was still playing competitive chess in the 1920s and probably later; he himself was Provost from April 1937 until his death in 1942. As J. V. Luce's father, my great-uncle Professor A.A. Luce, was a colleague of Thrift and a keen player, his son J. V. could well have had the opportunity to play friendlies with Thrift. Then when the university chess club was reconstituted early in 1941 (as documents in the college library show), Thrift agreed to be President and at that time J. V. Luce was an undergraduate. There are also alternative number 2s who could link Salmon and Luce. Since John Luce played active chess for the Rathmines club until about ten years ago, if he is a three, then there must be a very large number of 4s still active in Irish chess, some of them quite young players. Here is a game won by Thrift.

William Thrift – E. L. Harvey
Hibernian Chess Association championship, Dublin 1892
Scotch Game [C45]

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 exd4 4 Nxd4 Bc5 5 Be3 Qf6 6 c3 Nge7 7 Bb5 0–0 8 0–0 Qg6?

Now White wins a pawn by a little combination.

9 Nxc6 bxc6 10 Bxc5 d6 11 Bxd6 cxd6 12 Bd3 f5 13 exf5 Bxf5 14 Bxf5 Nxf5 15 Qd3 Rab8 16 b3 Rb5 17 c4 Re5 18 Nd2 Qe6 19 Nf3 Re2 20 Rae1 Rxe1 21 Rxe1 Qd7 22 Qe4 Rf7 23 Qe8+ Qxe8 24 Rxe8+ Rf8 25 Re2 h6

26 g4 Ne7 27 Rxe7 Rxf3 28 Rxa7 d5 29 cxd5 cxd5 30 Rd7 Rd3 1–0

"And White, having the advantage of two passed pawns, wins" (*Dublin Evening Mail*, 21 Jan. 1892).

In Kingston's articles, English-based players other than Blackburne whom he lists as having Morphy numbers of 2 were Steinitz, Mackenzie, Zukertort, Mason, Burn, Gunsberg and even Reginald P. Michell who played Owen at the Hastings 1895 amateur section. (Michell is important as he played Botvinnik in the Hastings 1934-5 tournament.) Kingston also lists numerous continental 2s, of whom particularly significant are Maroczy and Mieses because of their long careers, including events played in Britain. (Maroczy won the amateur tournament at Hastings 1895, for example.) Many of the players born in the twentieth century who had Morphy numbers of 3 "achieved" this by playing either Maroczy or Mieses.

When he was researching his article, Kingston contacted me and no doubt a good many other people to see if we could help him determine what our Morphy numbers should be. The path I gave connected me to Morphy via Mikhail Botvinnik, who beat me at a simultaneous display in Oxford in 1967 when I was a student. As mentioned above, Botvinnik was a 3 because he played Michell who in turn had played Bird, who had played Morphy. Unfortunately I no longer have the score of my game with Botvinnik, as I lost the scorebook, but I do recall it was a Reti.

Ever since Kingston published his article, I have been trying to work out alternative ways to demonstrate that my Morphy Number is 4, but I have given up trying to find a way to be a 3. It is very unlikely that any 3s were born later than the 1920s. One thing that surprised me was that the range of birth years for MN4 players in Kingston's article ranged from 1904 to 1964. You would expect that somebody born before the First World War especially, Najdorf of Kotov for example, should have some way to be a number 3, but Kingston was working from published game scores, whereas for amateurs he allows contacts through less formal competitions.

So how many other ways could I be an MN4, apart from the Botvinnik route

(proven) and the Luce route (hypothetical)? One way I definitely proved was via the minor Swiss master Dr Martin Christoffel (1922-2001), who Taylor Kingston mentions. Christoffel, he noted, was 3 because he played Mieses at Hastings 1945-6. Mieses can be shown to be a 2 either via Paulsen (Nuremberg 1888) or Bird at Hastings 1895. I met Martin Christoffel at ICCF Congresses at least twice, and I do recall that I managed to swindle and beat him in Riga 1998 in the traditional ICCF blitz tournament.

I am also wondering if the late Bob Wade (whom I once played in a master tournament) could have been a 3? Possibly not, because he did not play in Europe until the late 1940s, but it may be that he encountered Maroczy or Mieses. Likewise, such players as Jonathan Penrose (whom I met over-the-board in a county match) possibly met those veterans; he certainly beat both Bogoljubow and Tartakower at Southsea 1950, but they were only 3s according to Kingston's article.

Another possible route to a 4 might be through Dr H. G. Schenk, who had played at Ebensee 1933 before coming to England and becoming President of Oxford University Chess Club at the time of Botvinnik's visit. I played Schenk in an Oxford league match around 1965, when I was still at school. Adjourning a pawn up, I was invited to his house for tea the next Sunday to conclude the game. He managed to draw it, but gave me a copy of his book *The Passionate Game*. I have not the necessary information to prove whether he was a 3 but there is a good chance he may have played a German or Austrian 2 in his youth.

Of course, if one restricts the path to the Morphy Number to "serious" games (i.e. not the casual games or simultaneous displays or blitz tournaments that Kingston allows) than many people will probably have a Morphy number one higher than allowed by Kingston. That is one reason why I should like to prove a path to a 4 through Dr Schenk, as my encounter with him was a rated game.

Another variant on this would be to calculate how many steps you have to go with won games in serious events to make you "champion" of your country, or a grandmaster, or somebody who was once world champion. (I will allow Correspondence World Champions for the purpose of this game.)

The person you beat must have beaten the next person in the chain in a serious game, and so on to your goal. As long as you permit yourself to include grandmasters, whom you may have met in simuls or even playing level when they were very young or very old, this may not be as hard as it sounds. Thus, at the Charlton Open of 1976 I beat Nigel Short (admittedly he was only 12 at the time, but his rating was already higher than mine). A few years later he beat Karpov, so my World Champion number is arguably 2*. Far better, of course, would be to win a game against somebody like Jonathan Penrose who actually beat a reigning champion. But I expect some of you readers out there have actually beaten World Champions yourselves, either before or after they had the title. Well done!

Now, try to work out your own Morphy number!

Comment on this month's column via our Contact Page! Pertinent responses will be posted below daily.