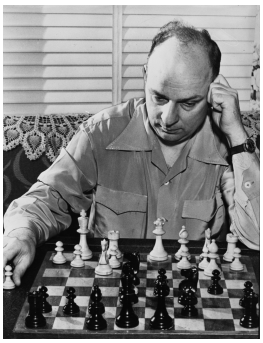
Arthur Dake (1910-2000)



Arthur William Dake, born in 1910 and raised in Portland, burst upon the international chess scene as a teenage phenomenon. He learned chess at age seventeen, and within three years was one of the best players in the world. In 1932, at a tournament in Pasadena, California, he defeated the World Chess Champion, Alexander Alekhine, who had only lost three tournament games in the previous nine years. Dake was a vital member of three victorious American Olympiad teams, and played at the master level into the last decade of his life.

Dake's parents were first-generation Polish immigrants (originally named Darkowski), and Arthur was raised in the rough-and-tumble south end of downtown Portland. He learned chess at the YMCA and soon dominated the Portland Chess Club. Without finishing high school, he joined the Merchant Marines, which took him to exotic ports in Japan, China, and the Black Sea. When he landed in New York City, Dake left the sailor's life and set up a chess stand, first on Coney Island and then in Times Square, playing all comers for twenty-five cents a game.

Dake soon realized that there was money to be made defeating New York's finest players at the Manhattan and Marshall chess clubs. In 1931, after a series of tournament victories, he was invited to represent the United States in the World Team Championship in Prague. The American team was victorious, and its players continued their winning streak at the Chess Olympiads at Folkestone in 1933 and Warsaw in 1935. In his father's homeland, Dake led the Americans by scoring the highest winning percentage of any participant in the event.

On the cruise back home from the tournament, Dake met Helen Gerwatoski, who had been born on Long Island and whose parents had moved back to Poland. A month after landing in New York, Arthur and Helen were married and had a child, Marjorie. During the Great Depression, Dake found it increasingly difficult to support his family with his earnings as a chess professional, so he moved back to Portland in 1937. He took a job with the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles where he had a thirty-five-year career.

Although Dake gave up professional chess, he never gave up the game. In 1946, he represented the United States in a diplomatic match in Moscow against a Soviet team. In the 1950s, he played in tournaments in the Pacific Northwest and in California. After retiring from the DMV in the 1970s, Dake returned to the chess arena and had remarkable wins against a younger generation of players on the East Coast and in Europe. In 1987, Portland hosted the U.S. Chess Open. At the age of seventy-seven, Dake served as grand marshal and scored six wins, two draws, and four losses. He was inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of fame in 1991, and the next year played in his last tournament, the U.S. Senior Open, where he took second place in an event reserved for those 50 years of age and older.

On his ninetieth birthday on April 8, 2000, Dake celebrated at a gala party hosted by the Portland Chess Club and attended by friends, family, and chess players from across the country. Twenty days later, he died in his sleep in Reno after a successful night of blackjack, his second favorite game.

Written by Casey Bush

Further Reading:

Bush, Casey. *Grandmaster from Oregon: The Life and Games of Arthur Dake.* Portland, OR: Portland Chess Press, 1991.

McClain, Dylan Loeb. "Arthur William Dake, 90, Chess Grandmaster." *New York Times.* May 11, 2000.

Parr, Larry. "Arthur Dake: An American Original," *Chess Life*, December 1984, p. 28.

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