

# There Are None So Blind

by Hadiyah Abdul-Alim, Age 12

"Have you ever played a blind guy?"

This is what the silver-haired man who sat across me from me asked as I set up my chessboard at the Continental Class Championships this past Columbus Day weekend in Crystal City, Virginia.

My first thoughts were, "What do you mean?" But I answered with a simple "no."

As we set up our boards, I noticed that the man with rough hands and gray eyes—his name is Henry Olynik—had a mini board that had small holes in it with pieces that had a small round cylinder attached to them. I assumed it was so that he could put the small ends at the bottom of the pieces in the holes so that he would be able to touch the pieces without them falling.

I also noticed that the black pieces had a small spike on top of them so Henry could tell the difference between the white and black pieces.



Courtesy of chesscafe.com

## Rules

Playing someone that is blind is different from playing someone with sight. A few ways things are different is that you have to call out all of your moves and repeat the move that the person says so that the person can be sure that you have the same move as them.

Another difference is that when the person tells you a move you have to make their move on your board so you can keep track.

It also takes longer for someone who is blind to make a move because the person has to be sure that he or she can make that particular move. Also, since someone who is blind can't write down his or her moves, Henry took

his "notation" by using a voice recorder.

Based on my experience with Henry, I think there should be another rule. The person with sight should remind the person that is blind to hit the clock because if not they would run out of



The author, standing in front of the Pulitzer Building at Columbia University.

time and lose unfairly.

Another way that playing a blind person is different is that Henry had to have an aide come in every now and then to tell him how much time he had left on his clock and to escort him to the restroom.

Ordinarily in chess, there is a "touch move" rule. That means if you touch a piece, you have to move it.

Henry joked that touch move wasn't required because he couldn't see if I touched a piece or not.

## He made it look easy

As Henry took his time touching the pieces and using the holes to find where a square was I saw that it looked very difficult not knowing and being positive about where your pieces were. However, Henry looked as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

Henry told me his chess rating is 1011. A chess rating is a point system that shows how good you are. The higher the number the better you are.

My rating is 823, which means Henry is a better player than me.

Henry told me that he was blind and all that he could see was gray. I decided to ask: "How did you become blind?"

Henry told me that he had a brain tumor. "My rating used to be about 1650 but as my eyes deteriorated so did my game," Henry said as he explained why his rating had dropped.

## On the moon!

He mentioned that he was an engineer and that he helped build the landing pads for Apollo 11.

"I let my kids touch the landing pads so their fingerprints are probably on the moon somewhere!" he said, laughing.

Henry told me he came to the United States from Ukraine during World War II. He also told me that before he came to America, his family was taken by officers in black uniforms to a slave labor camp. Continuing on he said that on the way to America from Ukraine with his family was the first time he tried ice cream and Coca Cola.

"When I first tasted Coca Cola I spit it out because it burned my mouth and I thought it was poison," Henry said.

Towards the end of our game Henry made a blunder. In chess lingo, a blunder means to make a serious mistake. His mistake was not knowing that when he moved his knight, the piece that looks like a horse, to a certain square I could take it. After I took his knight, he said: "Even blind guys make mistakes, well especially blind guys." The game ended in a draw.

Before I played Henry I thought there was only one way to see the pieces, but this experience has taught me that there are multiple ways to "see" the board.