

# Did This Man Save the 1972 World Championship?

As **Stuart Lassar** tells it, a white lie made history by securing a Reykjavík table tennis bout with Bobby Fischer.

By **MENACHEM WECKER**

**B**oth chess and table tennis can be rapid-fire contests, where strategy and ability to anticipate future moves are paramount, and where pressure lands squarely on one pair of shoulders at a time. So it's appropriate that a table tennis bout eased the mind of the notoriously persnickety Bobby Fischer, who was on the verge of abandoning the 1972 Reykjavík championship games.

"The irony is that people describe table tennis as 'chess on speed.' It doesn't surprise me that there's this connection," said Gordon Kaye, former USA Table Tennis chief executive officer. (Table tennis is the Olympic-level sport, while ping-pong, a name whose copyright Parker Brothers once held, tends to refer to a recreational variety, per Kaye.)

If the 1972 bout, said to have pitted Fischer against a visiting table tennis player, really convinced the grandmaster to play subsequent chess matches, it would be one of the most important moments in U.S. and world chess history. But the opponent's identity is elusive.

Fact-checking anecdotes about Fischer can be like trying to photograph Bigfoot or chasing Winnie the Pooh's Heffalumps and Woozles. Few have so much mystique and mythology surrounding them as does the Chicago-born prodigy, who went on to denounce both his national and religious identities in dramatic and hateful fashion. Even Fischer's reclusiveness can be said to be overly mythologized, but it is clear that the man, who in 1958 became history's youngest grandmaster, was very private.

One man who was decidedly outside Fischer's immediate orbit—a Brooklyn native who is now in his mid-70s and living in Vienna, Austria—remembers spending an hour or two with Fischer between the second and third matches of the 1972 World Championship games. As Stuart Lassar recalls, he was flying on Icelandair's predecessor from New York to Iceland, intending to watch one of the matches, when he read in a magazine that Fischer—who was the same age as he, 29, and also from Brooklyn—enjoyed playing ping-pong recreationally.

"I concocted the crazy idea to try to contact him," Lassar said, in an interview spanning dozens of emails.

Somehow (more on this below), Lassar convinced Fischer's handlers that he was a champion table tennis player, which he was not, and soon found himself in a room with Fischer, and perhaps two or three others, playing table tennis for two hours. "The truth is that I was never a table tennis star, but I was a sort-of, OK table tennis player," Lassar said. "I

lied in Iceland, because I wanted the chance to play with Bobby."

Lassar, who also admits to being a weak chess player, discovered after two rallies that Fischer was a weak table tennis player. But he thinks the time the two spent facing each other across the nine-by-five-foot ping-pong table made history by calming Fischer, who went on to defeat Soviet champion Boris Spassky. Fischer had previously wanted to quit and return to New York.

"Accidentally, on that day I showed up and played with him. That put him in a good mood, and he changed his mind," Lassar said. "So, I think that it is because of me that Bobby became world champion. Now, isn't that a pretty modest claim? However, I think it is true."

Even if Lassar's finagling put Fischer in the mood to stay, it required wizardry and a lot of hard work on the latter's part to defeat the Russians at what was then thought of as their own game. Lassar's declared intervention doesn't take away from Fischer's hard-earned, almost-wasn't-many-times-over championship. But the thought for this Vienna septuagenarian's intercession, history may have played out so differently, is very sobering. It's a big if, though.

**There's some evidence supporting Lassar's story**, even if it's nearly impossible to verify it completely. A July 30, 1972 *New York Times* article, running United Press International (UPI) reporting, states that "Fischer played table tennis for more than an hour today against Stewart Lassen, an American player who was a member of the United States table tennis team that met the Chinese world champions in New York earlier this year." Stewart Lassen wouldn't be an unthinkable error for Stuart Lassar.

A search for "Stewart Lassen" and "Bobby Fischer" returns just four Google hits: the *Times* article and three other news stories that are reprints. The same is true of a Lexis Nexis news search. A search for "Stewart Lassen" and "table tennis" returns the same four hits on Google, making it highly unlikely that the UPI story got right the name of a player who was part of the U.S. table tennis team. (UPI didn't respond to several queries.)

Lassar's recollection, though his memory is a bit weak on this, is that he was the umpire or one of the umpires for the table tennis match between the U.S. and Chinese teams, when the latter reciprocated the U.S. team's visit known as "ping-pong diplomacy." Lassar thinks they picked him, "because I was one of the few table tennis players who could count up to 21," he said. "I am pretty sure that during a break in

the exhibition, I played five points against the world champion Zhuang Zedong. I seem to remember that I paid \$1 for each point played; that is, I gave him \$5 after about 30 seconds. But I can say that I have played against a world table tennis champion.” (This, too, is a difficult memory to verify.)

“The *Times* article came close to getting my name right, and I haven’t a clue where they got this information, but they were wrong about my being a member of the team,” Lassar said. “I was the umpire.”

Volume five (1971-1972) of the meticulously-detailed *History of U.S. Table Tennis* by Tim Boggan, a U.S. table tennis historian and former official and member of the USA Table Tennis Hall of Fame, includes a photo, whose caption identifies Lassar as an umpire at an April 18, 1972 exhibition game between Chuang Tse-tung and Chang Hsieh-lin. (Lassar confirmed that it is him in the photo.) And volume four of Boggan’s history (1963-1970), notes that one “Stu Lassar” was “later in Iceland Bobby Fischer’s t.t. [table tennis] sparring partner as the eccentric grandmaster relaxed for his famous World Championship match with Boris Spassky.” Lassar said he knows Boggan “only peripherally,” having met him at two New York table tennis clubs.

“I never spoke to Tim about my experience in Iceland and can’t possibly imagine how he found out about this,” Lassar said. “For me, the Tim Boggan remark and the *Times* article seem to be pretty much backup to my story. I mean, where would the *Times* come up with such a story? Or Tim, for that matter?”

Asked if he recalled how he found out about the sparring table tennis match with Fischer, Boggan said in an email that his memory on this matter is “somewhat vague.”

“I know I did talk to Lassar at a tournament or two, so it’s quite possible that’s how I got this information. If not, I had confidence that what my source said was accurate,” he said. “I feel certain Lassar did play table tennis with Fischer in Iceland.” Pressed further about the recollection, Boggan added, “I strongly believe Fischer enjoyed the exercise with Lassar.”

Lassar appears more than half a dozen times in Boggan’s book, which lists him as a former U.S. Table Tennis Association intercollegiate chair. Several others in the U.S. table tennis community vouched for the reliability of Boggan’s research. So Boggan and an apparent pair of mistakes in a name in the wire story appear to place Lassar in an Icelandic hotel room playing ping-pong with the soon-to-be world champion Fischer.

**Unfortunately, Lassar has no souvenirs** of any sort that can place him in Reykjavík at the time, let alone within a ping-pong ball’s arc of Fischer. The earliest passport he still owns is from 1975, and the only relevant things in his attic were proof that he taught at Brooklyn Technical High School until the end of June 1972 and of a German course he took in Germany from July 31 to the end of September 1972. “July 1972 is unaccounted for,” he said. “What a surprise.”

Lassar also found a later column by Boggan about a July 1971 table tennis tournament in New York that included this statement: “Lassar, in case you didn’t know, was Bobby Fischer’s practice partner in Iceland when Fischer won the World Chess Championship from Boris Spassky—yep, Stuart played ping-pong with Bobby every day to keep him in shape,” Boggan wrote in the article.

“Part of this is true,” Lassar said. “I played one evening with him, not every day. But where did Tim Boggan get this from?”

Lassar’s parents are the only ones he thinks were aware of his trip, but they died long ago. The U.S. State Department website states it maintains records of issued passports, which it releases under certain circumstances, but cautions that its records do not include references added to passport documents, such as stamps. A spokesperson for

Iceland’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs said tracking down official records from 1972 entries into Iceland would be “very difficult.”

The only other way that Lassar can think of to definitively place himself in a room playing table tennis with Fischer is a conversation with renowned *LIFE* photographer Harry Benson, now 89. Lassar remembers two officials, one the head of US Chess, watching him and Fischer volley. After a while, the two said to Fischer that they thought they should go fetch Benson. Soon Benson was taking “tons of pictures of us from all angles,” Lassar recalled.

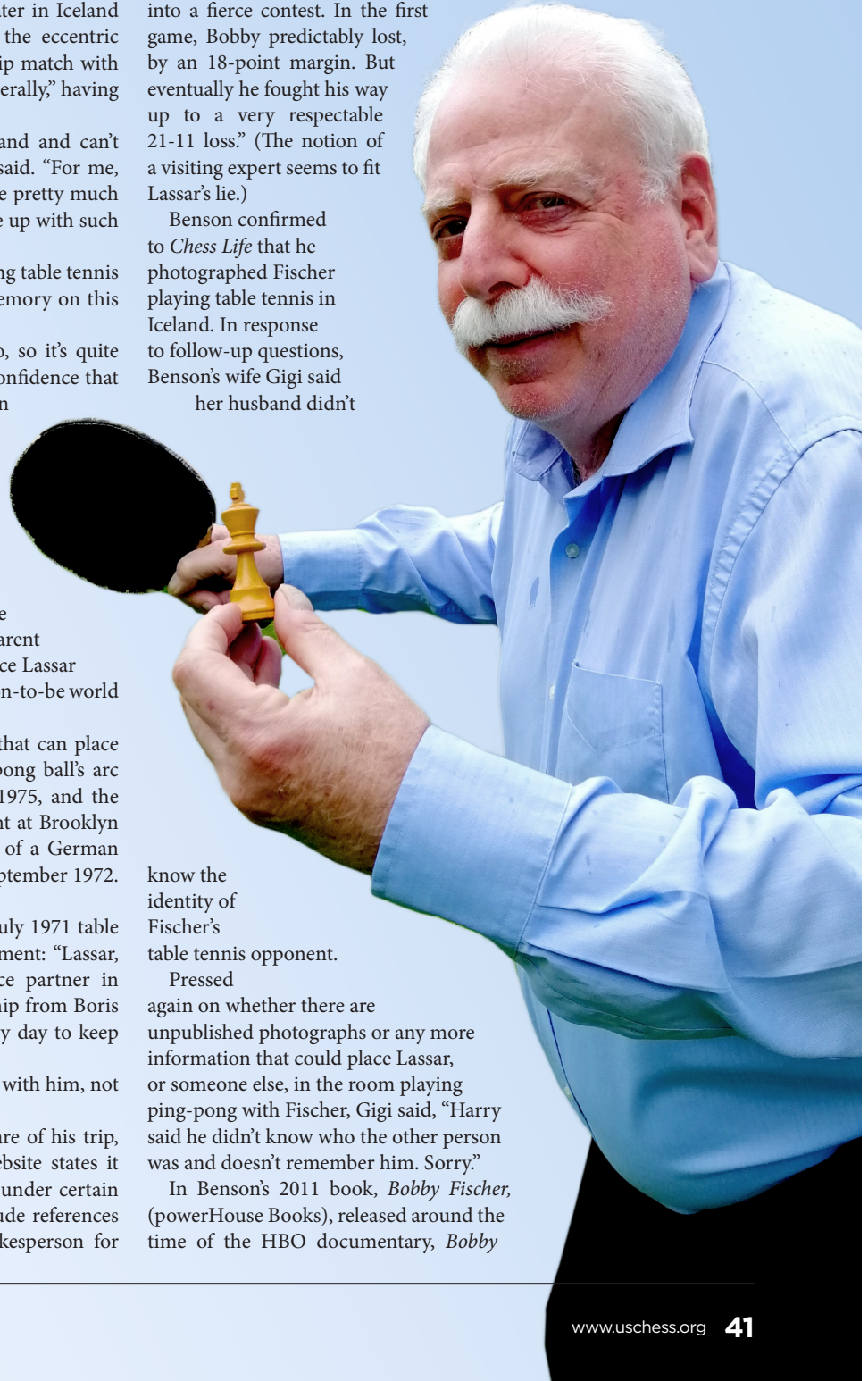
On page 42 of the August 1972 issue of *LIFE*, a photo of Benson’s shows the table tennis net in the foreground, with Fischer, hunched over, either having just hit the ball or poised to do so with a look of sheer determination. The caption notes a “A friendly game of Ping Pong with an American expert who was passing through Reykjavik turned into a fierce contest. In the first game, Bobby predictably lost, by an 18-point margin. But eventually he fought his way up to a very respectable 21-11 loss.” (The notion of a visiting expert seems to fit Lassar’s lie.)

Benson confirmed to *Chess Life* that he photographed Fischer playing table tennis in Iceland. In response to follow-up questions, Benson’s wife Gigi said her husband didn’t

know the identity of Fischer’s table tennis opponent.

Pressed again on whether there are unpublished photographs or any more information that could place Lassar, or someone else, in the room playing ping-pong with Fischer, Gigi said, “Harry said he didn’t know who the other person was and doesn’t remember him. Sorry.”

In Benson’s 2011 book, *Bobby Fischer*, (powerHouse Books), released around the time of the HBO documentary, *Bobby*



*Fischer Against the World*, the photographer wrote of Fischer playing “an occasional serious table-tennis match against a world-class player who happened to be at the resort at the time,” referring to Fischer’s legendary workout program to prepare for the Iceland match. But Benson is referring not to a world-class visiting player in Iceland; the matches Benson describes took place at Grossinger’s Catskill Resort Hotel in New York in May, two months before the Match of the Century’s onset.

“Bobby would talk to me like a boxer in training—he had obviously seen newsreels of boxers being interviewed while they trained. He would say, ‘I’ve got to be fit. I’ve got to be strong. The Russians are very aggressive, but they’re not going to wear me down. Never,’” Benson wrote. “Bobby did have a strong body. He was tall and actually quite handsome with an infectious smile—when he smiled. When he was tired he could plop himself down and fall asleep for a few minutes as if on cue. He was like a child that way.”

Two of Benson’s photos in the book show Fischer with table tennis paddles in hand hitting the ball, and in another, he holds the paddle at his side. None of the pictures offer any hint of an opponent. Another chess and ping-pong history dead-end, or stalemate.

**A potential problem** with Lassar’s story is one Archie Waters. When Waters died in 2001 at 83, the Associated Press reported that he was a “mentor to chess prodigy Bobby Fischer” who “befriended the teenage Fischer in Brooklyn in the 1950s and accompanied the chess genius to Iceland during his landmark world title match against Russian Boris Spassky in 1972.”

“Waters played ping-pong with Fischer between his matches with Spassky,” the AP reported about the Brooklyn native, who became the first black member of the the Marshall Chess Club of New York, where Fischer also played. Writing in the September 2015 issue of *Chess Life*, Frank Brady echoed the point. “In the 1950s, Archie Waters was the first black player who became a member of the Marshall. He was a journalist, checkers champion, class A chess player, and a life-long friend and ping-pong companion of Bobby Fischer’s,” Brady wrote. (In his book *Bobby Fischer: Profile of a Prodigy*, Brady records that Fischer played ping-pong with “friends” at the Loftleidir hotel following the ninth game in the match.)

In 1972, *Editor & Publisher* reported that *Long Island Press* reporter Waters “has been visiting his boyhood friend, Bobby Fischer, in Iceland, helping to ease the challenger’s mind by being a ping-pong companion and checking out the hall for cameras. The two were Brooklyn pals.”

And then there are the Archie Waters papers, which are housed in the Sonnichsen Special Collections department at the University of Texas at El Paso’s library. These documents shed considerable light on the experiences of the former columnist for the *El Paso Times* and the *Long Island Daily Press*. In a typed document with handwritten edits, Waters recorded that he had a two-week vacation coming up in his job as a *Daily Press* reporter, and he decided to seize the “great opportunity” to go to Iceland to watch the Fischer-Spassky match.

At the hotel, Waters saw reporters swarming around Fischer in the lobby. Fischer, who was tall, could see over the group, and Waters showed him the table tennis paddles he had in tow and indicated he was available to play. “He looked at me—interested, no doubt, at my appearance in this faraway land—but said nothing,” Waters wrote. Then one night, when he was sitting alone in the lobby, a clerk summoned him to the phone. It was Fischer. “You got your paddles?” he asked. “Yes,” Waters said. “I’ll be right down,” said Fischer.

In a ping-pong room, Waters found Fischer’s chess analyzer and others, and soon a “rise-and-fly” round robin was underway, with players on the sidelines replacing losers in an agreed upon order. Soon it was Waters’ turn to play Fischer. He had won some “tiny contests” back home but had never played Fischer before. “In the short warmup I stroked the ball gently. He blasted it back. I said to myself he plays chess

to win. I play table tennis to win. I’m sorry, but I’m going to beat this guy,” Waters wrote.

Figuring that Fischer knew little about the “chop stroke”—what one would call a “slice” in lawn tennis—Waters chopped everything back to Fischer, who didn’t know how to return them. “Probably none of his friends had ever shown him,” wrote Waters, who found Fischer wasn’t a gracious loser.

After losing point after point, the grandmaster stared at Waters and slammed the ball at him, rather than at the table. Fischer missed, but Waters figured he was looking to see how the latter would react. “He evidently wanted me to be a gentleman and drive the ball, because he couldn’t reply to a chop,” he wrote. “The ball whizzed past me. I quietly turned, picked up the ball, and put it back into play.”

As Waters recollected, he beat Fischer but didn’t gloat or do anything to suggest that he had defeated the great Bobby Fischer. “He sat down and I played the next person in line. Soon he and his endgame analyzer left to go bowling. The [lede] to one of my articles I sent back to my editors was something like this: ‘I beat Bobby Fischer. But it was not in chess. It was at table tennis.’ I play to win—just like Bobby Fischer does.”

But Waters’ recollection also doesn’t necessarily preclude Lassar having been one of the others playing in the round robin. For his part, though, Lassar said the news that Waters played table tennis with Fischer surprised him. “There was absolutely no mention of this on the night that we played,” he said. “I have never heard of Archie Waters.”

**Other potential leads** come up empty, too. Lassar thinks that two men who met him at the Loftleidir Hotel were the German grandmaster and collector Lothar Schmid, and chess official and Fischer’s manager Fred Cramer. “They would know exactly what happened,” Lassar said. “Unfortunately, both are dead.” Cramer died in 1989 and Schmid in 2013.

Lassar also questions some of the other things Boggan wrote about him, even when the information, which he calls “the most insignificant trivia that is possible,” is true. “He mentions that I flew to Detroit for a match. This is true, but where did he find out about it, and why would he care?” Lassar said. “Why would he bother to write about it?”

Other writings of Boggan’s also are confusing. On one page, Boggan includes a picture which Lassar and his wife is sure is him, but the photo appears to have been taken when the Chinese team played in Washington. “To be perfectly honest, I really do not remember ever having been to Washington,” Lassar said. “It’s a bit confusing.”

Adding of Boggan, Lassar said, “I think the guy just sat down every night and just wrote whatever came into his head. The amazing thing is that he would mention me.”

The other mystery is where the UPI reporter, who isn’t named, got Lassar’s name, or at least the name “Lassen.” Lassar was holed up in a small village in the Bavarian Alps learning German after leaving Iceland. That’s where he received a letter from his mother with two articles mentioning the table tennis playing—one the article in the *Times*.

“I don’t remember giving my name to anyone in Iceland, except probably the guy on the phone, who said he was Bobby’s manager,” he said. “I must have given him my name, because he called me back at the Pension to ask me to come to the Loftleidir Hotel.”

He thinks he may have also given his name to Benson, the photographer who doesn’t remember Fischer’s opponent. “The *Times* guy must have gotten it from one of these people,” he said. “In other words, these guys must have told the *Times* guy that I had been playing with Bobby. If that doesn’t prove my story, what does?”

When it comes to stories about Fischer, this might be pretty close to proof, even if it’s far from rock solid. 📌

*Benson, Harry. Bobby Fischer. powerHouse Books, 2011. ISBN Hardcover: 9781576875810. 144 pages. (Available from www.amazon.com, \$31.62).*