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Players Get Deep into Swim of Pool Checkers

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Going by their nicknames, you might think they were gangsters or ballplayers instead of older gents whiling away the time with a board game. There's Hit Man and Big Willie and Junebug and Chicken George . . .

"They call me Concrete," says George Few, a 72-year-old contractor. "I play hard."

Every day, the men with the colorful handles drift into a shotgun house near Morris Brown College in downtown

Atlanta to play a game that's a timeless part of black life. They call it pool checkers, and they say its distinctive rules make for a faster, more challenging contest. Compared with straight checkers -- the old-fashioned game most Americans know -- this is like pro basketball.

And these guys definitely got game.

The Georgia Pool Checkers Association, as the club is known, has produced nine of the last 11 national champions, including this year's grandmaster. Calvin "Iron Claw" Monroe, a retired Atlanta firefighter, took the top prize for the third time at the tournament this summer in Memphis. Second place went to Albert "East Point" Barnett, a local home remodeler, who has bagged six titles and figures he would have won again if he'd tried a little harder.

"The best players are in Atlanta," Barnett says. "At least we think so."

The checkers champs may be masters of a fading domain. Inside the clubhouse, on a wall of portraits paying tribute to past winners, a grainy photo from the early 1970s shows a yard full of men in fedoras hunched over checkerboards.

"Back then, there wasn't enough room inside for everyone who wanted to play," Barnett says. "You could go just about anywhere in Atlanta and get up a checkers game in a barbershop or under a shade tree. Can't do that now."

The Atlanta club, which once had more than 100 dues-paying members, has



Michael Jordan plays Georgia Pool Checkers Association reigning champion Calvin Monroe (far right) aka Iron Claw, as Henry Miller (gray shirt) and Robert Ringer watch
PHIL SKINNER/COX NEWS SERVICE

fewer than half as many today. Nationwide, the number of chapters "Some of our clubs are just dying out," says the head of the American Pool Checker Association, Ervin Smith of Gahanna, Ohio. "Kids aren't interested in board games like this anymore. They don't have enough patience. They're too hyper. They want those video games."

While some members of the Atlanta group are in their 40s, almost all the others are old enough to draw a pension.

Some have belonged to the club since it was founded in 1966. For the most part, they grew up playing pool checkers in the inner city and now return, some of them on canes, from their homes across metro Atlanta.

GENTLEMEN OF LEISURE

"We are gentlemen of leisure, and this is the way we fellowship," says Wyatt "Coach" Gresham, a retired postal worker with a bushy white beard and a T-shirt that shows an open Bible under the words "Soul Food."

The gentlemen play in a narrow white-frame house on Griffin Street, just off Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. Behind the security-barred door, there's a long room with nine blue-and-white checkerboards bolted to three folding tables and a rummage sale of old metal chairs, each with at least three mismatched cushions in various stages of spilling their stuffing. There's a big TV up front and a battery of vending machines heavy on the orange soda and pork rinds in the back.

House rules are simple: no cussing, drinking, or gambling.

"We try to keep it so the ladies can come by when they want to," says club President Few, who can't recall a woman actually becoming a member.

Despite the regulations, things can get a little raucous. As games heat up in the early evening, the room fills with the sound of good-natured trash talk, gospel singing and the clicketyclack of pieces striking boards like so many castanets.

"Don't tell me I can't jump!" one player shouts at his opponent. "I'll jump when I'm ready, sucker."

There aren't as many all-nighters as there used to be, but some members still play several times a week for hours on end. Most have keys to the place.

A LITTLE RUSSIAN HELP

After he married last year, Roosevelt "Chicken George" Collins, a 48-year-old custodian, found himself explaining why he spent so much time away from home playing checkers. He said it was better than some of the stuff he used to

do on the streets.

E.W. "Hit Man" Seay, a retired postal worker, is so devoted to the game that he once gave a checkers-themed eulogy at the funeral of a fellow member. "Everyone's looking for the kingdom," he recites, "because there's power in the crown."

Monroe, the reigning champ, learned to play when he was a boy hanging around his uncle's store in Anniston, Ala. After he moved to Atlanta, he found it a soothing pastime during 23 years with the Fire Department.

"Checkers was a form of therapy for me," he says. "Firefighting is a stressful job. I saw dead bodies and all sorts of things. Playing this game was like going fishing."

Monroe was always good, but he didn't become a grandmaster until he befriended Vladimir Kaplan, a Russian immigrant in Brooklyn, N.Y., who won multiple pool checkers titles. Monroe studied under Kaplan for years, learning in person and in games conducted over the phone.

Checkers is enormously popular in Europe. But except for the occasional Russian, pool checkers in the United States has traditionally been the province of black men.

Some players would like to see that change. Barnett, whose six titles have netted him six \$500 checks, would welcome more diversity, if only to sweeten the pot at the national tournament.

"We need more white people playing pool checkers," he says bluntly. "When white people get involved in something, they figure out a way to make money at it. Shoot, I'd go pick 'em up and throw 'em a cookout if we could get more white people to play."

Others are happy with things the way they are -- the same old guys enjoying the same old game in the same old neighborhood.

It's a typical afternoon at the club, and Monroe is locked in a tense match with an old nemesis, Michael "Draw Man" Jordan, a former Greyhound driver known for his ability to snatch stalemates from the jaws of defeat.

"He's like Holyfield," Monroe says. "You hit him, and he hits back hard."

Jordan doesn't look up. After winning a couple of games and eking out a few draws, he's lost four straight and is focused on avoiding a fifth. One more defeat and he'll have to buy everyone a snack or a drink -- house rule.

But they don't call Monroe "Iron Claw" for nothing. When he clutches his fifth straight game, he doesn't whoop or pump a fist. He lifts his large, intense eyes

from the board and fixes them on his opponent.

"Peanut butter crackers would be good," he says.

That's pool checkers for checkmate!

How it's different: Two main ways: In pool checkers, unlike straight checkers, uncrowned pieces can jump forward and backward, and kings can range the length of the board, jumping pieces several squares away.

Where it came from: The game evolved from a European version know as Spanish pool checkers. Where pool came from is anyone's guess. Some think it has to do with pieces moving to and fro like billiard balls.

Why blacks? It's been speculated that slaves picked up the game from the Spanish in New Orleans and the Caribbean.

As for how it became so identified with black men, Ervin Smith, head of the national pool checkers group, has an explanation: "I think it's for the same reason you see these kids wearing baggy pants down to their knees. It's the desire to have something different. Look at our name: American Pool Checker Association."
