

# The Perfect Game

BY MARK R. JOHNSON

It's the dregs of summer and we're hoofing along the Carter-Moriah range in the Whites. Cold rain consumes us and the fog is drawn tight like a curtain. We've been on the trail only for a bit—our bunks at Carter Notch Hut are still warm—and have about a dozen miles to cover before we reach the town of Gorham and thumb home. The trail is muddy and slick. Already, we're soaked through. And my friend, Ed, has a problem.

It's probably not what you're thinking. Ed is a compulsive chess player, with a fixation on—maybe a downright fetish for—the game. And we've been occupied with legions of kings, queens, and pawns all summer long, largely at his insistence.

The scorecard is in Ed's favor. Still, I beat him once or twice, and for that he'll never let me rest. His mission for the summer seems to be to obscure my meager gains in a landslide of losses.

We both are working for the summer at AMC's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center. Ed handles trail-related questions at the front desk, and I work in the kitchen, scrubbing pots the size of hot tubs. Shortly, we'll return to our respective collegiate landscapes, but for now we're getting in as much of the outdoors as we can.

Ed's brought a pocket-sized chess set on this trip. It's one of his 10 Essentials. It's the type with magnets so small you can barely pick them up, let alone discern which one is which.

Hiking along ahead of me, Ed suddenly drops his pack by the trail and sits down in a swirl of purple poncho. We're on top of Carter Dome, well exposed at nearly 5,000 feet. Without glancing up, he digs out the game, flicks it open, turns a chunk of granite into a table, and starts setting up the pieces. I stand there looking at him. Chess? Now? He's unmoved.

The last thing I want to do, at 7 a.m., in these conditions, with a solid day's hike in front of us, is stop and sit. But he's unflinching. He sets up my side of the board.

I consider leaving him. But he has a determined spirit that's hard to shake. Besides, if I walk, he'll only make the hike unbearable with his complaining. So I drop my pack with a sigh, and take my place across from him. Ed quickly launches a rice-sized pawn into attack. It's begun.

From the start, the downpour threatens to drown us out. Puddles build up on the board. My knights are knee-deep in water. Ed's king wallows in a pool. A stream cuts through no-man's land.



But our pieces, like us, sit tight.

Normally, Ed would take me to the cleaners pretty quick. But that was back at the lodge—a place steeped in his past victories. Out here in the wilds, in the rain, I am in a raw, gaming frame of mind. Early on, much to my amazement and Ed's consternation, I capture his queen.

But Ed, as you may have gathered, is a serious competitor. Playing one-on-one basketball behind our bunkroom, he would routinely dive for a loose ball—on pavement. So, even with a diminished army, he takes several of my

best pieces. Without a queen, though, there is an impending sense of doom. We both know it. Still the game goes on.

While Ed leans into the board and studiously contemplates a move, I peel an orange and savor the opportunity, strange as it is, to stop and observe our surroundings.

Wind-swept conifers lean, resiliently, from their granite grip. Mosaics of lichen bloom like miniature alpine gardens. Even the puddles on the trail, pecked with raindrops, are something to inspect. There is clarity in taking a pause—and this game has given us the chance to find it.

Then it's my turn. And for a moment after the phrase falls from my mouth, there's only the sound of water pattering on our rain gear and on the plastic, black and white checked board. It's a satisfying sound, this "checkmate." Saying it through steamed breath, in the mountains, in the rain, lends some extra reward.

Ed was a pretty good sport—even though he wanted to stop every 100 yards for a rematch. But as the hike warmed up, we forgot about the game. The rain relented and the fog parted, and we feasted on sweeping views of the green valleys and velvety Presidentials.

It was our last chess match before going our separate ways. And the last backpack trip of the summer. A fitting farewell memory, the two of us perched on a cold, wet peak in soggy gear and sodden boots, lost in the absurdity of it all. It was, I think, the perfect game.

You probably don't need a portable game board or even a friend like Ed to make the most of your time in the wilds. But we all need something to slow us down. Because that's what it's all about anyway. That, and keeping your queen, of course.

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