

SIDNEY SAMOLE (1935-2000)*The Editor¹*

On July 30, 2000 Sidney Samole, the man behind the first series of microcomputers that played a reasonable game of chess, passed away. Probably many of you have forgotten or even did not know the name of this chess Prometheus who brought the game of chess in a silicon box to the world like Prometheus brought flame and fire to the earth. Sid Samole touched the lives of chess aficionados and computer-chess scientists alike. His characteristic proposal was: “*How about a nice game of chess?*”

Today it is hard to imagine the chess world without computers. And it is equally hard to imagine being able to appreciate fully American chess history without understanding the position of Sidney Samole. He was the man who dreamed, patented and produced the first commercial chess computer. Samole closely cooperated with Ron Nelson (his first protegee) and later with Dan and Kathe Spracklen. Together with them and through their computer programs he as the team captain holds many world and national titles. Here is a partial list of their championships.

Fidelity's creatures won the first four World Microcomputer Chess Championships (WMCCs): CHES CHALLENGER won in London 1980, FIDELITY X in Travemünde 1981, ELITE A/S in Budapest 1983, and ELITE X in Glasgow 1984. Moreover, they won the first four US Computer Championships, all held in Mobile, Alabama, in 1985, 1986, 1987 and 1988. A remarkable performance is its first place (tied with DEEP THOUGHT) in the 1988 ACM Championship.

In 1976, Sid owned and operated Fidelity Electronics, a hearing-aid manufacturing firm he had built up with contracts from the Veterans' Administration. Among its other cutting-edge technology, his firm produced high-tech, bio-medical products, such as “myo-electric” hands, prostheses that could actually be controlled by the brain impulses of amputees.

After building three working models and four non-working models, Sid decided to promote his new brainchild at Chicago's Consumer Electronics Show in January 1977. It was clear that Sid's, and his chess computer's, time had come. Under his both imaginative and careful management, Fidelity prospered. Chess computers were hot, and Sid's keyboard-entry models held the field for a time. He went on to produce computerized bridge, checkers, and Othello. He designed and manufactured computerized gin and cribbage, as well as other card games. Fidelity manufactured all its games in the US. By 1989, a recession was in the wind, and Sid was sensitive to its warning breezes. He sold Fidelity Electronics at the top of its value to Hegener and Glaser, a German public firm.

For decades Sidney Samole supported chess. For instance, Fidelity sponsored many first prizes in various US Open Championships. In 1988 the US Chess Federation honoured Sid with its highest award for corporate sponsorship, the Gold Koltanowski Medal. On June 11, 1994, Excalibur sponsored the largest and most successful one-day chess promotion in history, the US Chessathon in New York City's Grand Central Station, where chess-playing children dominated the huge main room, decked with USCF banners. Approximately 400,000 people witnessed the event! His last act for chess constitutes probably the most thoughtfully planned chess endowment of all time, providing for the most impressive building dedicated to chess in the world. It is the new, official home for the World Chess Hall of Fame (yes, it has FIDE's official imprimatur and incorporates the US Chess Hall of Fame as well). The museum is located at 13701 SW 119 th Avenue in Miami, Florida.

In 1995 Samole was appointed a trustee of the US Chess Trust. In 1996 he was elected Vice-President of the US Chess Hall of Fame. In 1997 the US Chess Trust renamed the chess museum “The Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Chess Museum.”

Largely as a result of his role in the tale of the chess-playing microcomputer's Sid became a multi-millionaire entrepreneur. Throughout his life he remained straightforward and self-deprecating about his success. Sidney gave the computer-chess researchers much to ponder and he enjoyed doing it. He is missed in different ways by different people.

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the permission by Mr. Hanon W. Russell to reprint parts of the article “How about a Nice Game of Chess? - Any Time” by Lev Albur and Al Lawrence, published in the Chess Café (www.chesscafe.com) (October 17, 2000). The current article is enriched with personal information.