

The Legend of Buster Smith

In the inner cities of the U.S. and in the capitals of Europe, where pool checkers is taken as seriously as chess, the quiet bachelor postal clerk from Chicago was known as the best American who ever played the game.

by [Adam Langer](#)

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**The Legend
Carl "Buster" Smith
Chicago, IL
The American Champion
(In Pool Checkers)**

From 1965 - 1992, Mr. Smith competed in 22 APCA National Tournaments—winning 11 and finishing 2nd or 3rd, 8 times. Such was his impact on the game.

From the outside, the green-and-white house on Warren Boulevard near Ashland doesn't look much different from any of the other buildings in the neighborhood. The paint has started to peel and the windows are gray and sooty. The only thing a little unusual about it is the dusty checkerboard propped in one of the downstairs windows.

You go down the cement stairs at the front and open the creaky wooden door that leads into the basement. Orange flames rumble in an electric fireplace. A faded American flag hangs on the wall. In the center of the room checkerboards lie atop six tables. Two men sit across from each other at one of them, looking silently down at their board. The only sounds are the rain outside, the O'Jays on the radio, and the occasional clacking of checker pieces.

On the wall a bathroom rug hangs with its underside facing out. On the rug in Magic Marker someone has written "Buster's Place."

Buster Smith used to come here in the afternoons, before his shift at the post office. He'd sit down at one of the tables and wait for someone to challenge him to a game. He didn't like to play for money; he played because he loved the game. And when newcomers sat across the table from the quiet, unassuming Buster, they were dumb enough to think they could beat him. The old-timers knew better; they knew that Buster Smith was without a doubt the greatest checker player in Chicago.

The greatest American-born checker player that ever drew a breath, some say, and without a doubt the greatest Chicago ever had. An international grand master who played in tournaments in Italy, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union, Smith won at least a dozen American national championships. In 1938, when he was 17, Buster Smith became the checker champion of Chicago. On the day he died, October 8, 1992, Buster was still the undisputed champion.

Most people give up the game of checkers when they get out of grade school. Some graduate to playing chess; others stop playing games altogether. But checkers isn't always such a simple game. Historians trace

its origins all the way back to ancient Egypt; checker players were painted on the walls of King Tut's tomb. Homer spoke of checker players in *The Odyssey* and Peter the Great is said to have been an avid player. Legend has it that Napoleon used to carry a checkerboard around with him to amuse himself when he grew tired of waging actual battles. In the former Soviet Union, the game is held in an esteem equal to chess.

There are a great number of variations on the game, and rules differ from country to country. The game Buster Smith usually played is called American pool checkers or Spanish checkers and it is common in this country among older African American and Eastern European men.

American pool checkers differs from garden variety checkers in a couple of ways. First, whereas in straight checkers you can only jump an opponent's piece by moving forward, in pool checkers you can eliminate pieces by jumping either forward or backward. And second, in straight checkers, kings—the double pieces that have been crowned by reaching the opponent's home row, can only move one space at a time, but in pool checkers they can move as far as they can go on a diagonal. Pool checker players call that piece “the flying king.” Variations on pool checkers are played in Europe, Brazil, and the former Soviet Union among other places.

Every year in the United States there are national checker championships with matches that can last as long as marathon chess games. The game looks deceptively easy. The rules are not complicated and anyone can learn how to play in a few minutes. But mastery is something that can take a lifetime. There are tons of books on the subject and plenty of well-known opening moves, but trying to beat a grand master is next to impossible. Pool checker players say that an amateur coming in and beating a grand master would be like someone coming off the street and defeating Boris Spassky: it just doesn't happen.

How pool checkers got to African American communities in Chicago, Detroit, Saint Louis, and other American cities is something upon which checker historians don't always agree. But it may have traveled from France to Louisiana during the days of French colonial rule and grown popular there among black slaves. It certainly came north during the great

migration of the early 20th century. The game's popularity in America appears to have peaked during the Depression, when many would have had time on their hands to play. Checker clubs sprouted up in city parks, community centers, and barbershops.

Today in Chicago the number of clubs is dwindling, but a few players remain. They play every afternoon in the basement on Warren called Buster's Place. They play in the back room of a shoe repair shop at 47th and Indiana, and in barbershops at Ogden and Homan and in Evanston. They play at the headquarters of the Chicago American Pool Checker Club at 74th and Vincennes. And in the summer, when the weather's nice, you can find the "tree players" under the tree in the park across from Gladys's Luncheonette, at 45th and Indiana.

They call Mose Johnson the "Mayor of the Tree" because in the summer you can almost always find him playing checkers across from Gladys's. Like many other members of the Chicago pool checker community, he still hasn't gotten over the death of Buster Smith.

"I'll never forget Buster," he says. "His name will be around for years and years. They'll know him all over. We play out under the tree and we talk about Buster. We tell little bitty kids about him, and when they play they want to play like Buster. He was a genius. He hardly ever missed a move. He'll be known for centuries."

Carl Sylvester Smith was born in Chicago on January 26, 1921. He grew up on the south side and learned checkers from his father, who gave him the nickname Buster. Smith wrote in his scrapbook that when he was 11 he was hounded by a checker-playing prodigy named Thomas, who kept challenging him to checkers matches and then beating him soundly.

“He beat me and beat me until I began to see a little light. He aroused my curiosity for becoming a player,” Smith wrote. And soon Buster wasn’t losing to anybody.

In the 30s, when Buster was attending Wendell Phillips High School, he became more serious about the game and began to collect books on the subject. He entered city tournaments in 64-square pool checkers and the so-called “big board,” 100-square pool checkers, a more-difficult game that is still quite popular in Russia. Buster played in his first two Chicago tournaments without distinguishing himself, but in 1938 he defeated champion Major McGill and acquired the checkers crown. He never relinquished it.

William Langley, a member of the Detroit American Pool Checker Club, came to Chicago more than 50 years ago to play Buster. “I came north from Columbia, South Carolina,” Langley recalls. “Back in South Carolina my dad had a junk shop that sold old wood and iron, and these guys used to hang around there and play checkers. I started watching these guys beating up on each other, and pretty soon I put a few games together and these guys couldn’t even draw me.

“I moved to Detroit and I played all the top players there, so I came to Chicago looking for Buster. I couldn’t find him so he came to Detroit looking for me. I came into my house and my wife said, ‘There’s a little man upstairs who wants to play some checkers.’ We wrestled for four or five hours and I couldn’t win. We played all day and all night, and I don’t think I defeated him once. I quit playing him.”

“The best I got from him was a string of draws,” says Lorenzo “Oldsmobile Junior” Pickens, who started playing against Smith in the 40s. During the

summer Pickens plays outside under the tree across from Gladys's and in the winter you can find him in the back of the shoe repair shop at 47th and Indiana. His nickname distinguishes him from other well-known Chicago players like Pontiac Junior, Cadillac Junior, and Junior Guy.

“He was a boy wonder,” said Pickens. “He was a beast, the meanest thing you ever saw on a checkerboard. Everybody who ever beat him talked about it for a long time. Some players would take lucky games from him and they'd be talking about it forever. All the checker players knew who Buster was, and if they didn't know they soon found out.”

“His name was bandied about in the south,” says Dr. Ervin Smith, of the Saint Louis American Pool Checker Club. “From as early as I can remember, his name was legendary. I remember hearing about him when I was back in Augusta, Georgia. The word was out.”

Buster Smith served in Okinawa during World War II and won a couple of Victory medals. He came back to Chicago and took a job at the main post office as a night mail clerk. It was the job he held until he retired in 1986.

One of the best-known players of the 1940s was Clyde “Kingrow” Black of New York, also a renowned historian of the game. Black beat Smith in the first match they played. But when Buster Smith returned to New York City in 1947, he defeated Black 14 games to 4. In his scrapbook, Smith called it one of the most memorable matches of his life.

“Black beat Buster, and he put out a book on checkers,” says Oldsmobile Junior Pickens. “When Buster came back, he had to write book two.”

Buster Smith claimed that between 1954 and 1963 he didn't lose a single match. In 1965, when the first championship of the American Pool Checker Association was held in Detroit, Smith became the national champ. And it was about this time that he started receiving international attention.

Smith was invited to take part, all expenses paid, in tournaments in Italy and the Netherlands. Stories in Amsterdam newspapers from the time

indicate that Smith was regarded as something of a curiosity: the only American participating in these tournaments, and with no formal training, Smith was able to beat international grand masters.

One reporter, who followed him to his hotel room, described in detail Smith's fascination with Agatha Christie, cops-and-robbers movies, and Coca-Cola. Another wrote that "The U.S., which is still seen through the eyes of checker players as an undeveloped country, will soon have its fight for the top in the near future. The play of Carl Smith has left no doubt about this."

Although Smith never won an international tournament, he finished in the top five on several occasions. He also played well against Iser Kuperman and Vladimir Kaplan, two of the greatest Soviet players of all time, both of whom were trained practically from birth to do nothing but play checkers. Both have since moved to the United States. In the 60s Smith received a plaque from Charles de Gaulle honoring him as an international grand master.

In 1968 Smith accepted the first of several invitations he would receive to play in the Soviet Union. During trips to Moscow and Samarkand, newspapers compared him to American chess master Bobby Fischer though he was certainly less eccentric and far more polite. He talked little about his travels to his friends. He did remark that he felt better treated abroad than he did in his own country and that his talents were better appreciated there.

When Kaplan and Kuperman came to America, a rivalry developed between the Soviets and Smith. He and Kaplan, who is now retired and living in Brooklyn, played a number of two-man tournaments. Smith could not beat Kaplan in a match until 1981, when he defeated him twice in a 14-game match in New York. The rest of the games were draws. The last time they played was in Chicago in 1988. In this 14-game match, Smith won 1-0.

"Even though we played against each other, he was my very good friend for 20 years," says Kaplan, the author of several books about checkers. "We played matches in New York and he stayed at my home, and when we

played in Chicago I stayed at his home. He was very hard to defeat because he was such a strong defensive player. He knew a lot of methods to defend difficult positions. He was a real gentleman and a wonderful player. He probably had more Russian checker books than I did. Nobody can say a bad word about Carl Smith.”

“When you talk about someone from America going to Russia and being able to compete with a Kaplan, it’s like someone coming from Russia and being able to compete with Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan,” says Fred Schurn, a systems analyst and a member of the Chicago American Pool Checker Association.

“A lot of people talk about Michael being the best basketball player,” says Carl Prince, a Chicago attorney and an avid checker player. “Personally, I think Magic is the best all-around player. But then there’s Bird you have to take into consideration. You don’t have those type of people in the American checker world that can touch a Buster. You have to talk about Buster, and then you have to talk about the others in a different light altogether. He was so far ahead of everybody else.”

In 1991 Smith finished ahead of Iser Kuperman in the national tournament. Kuperman disputed the title, reportedly storming out without even shaking Buster’s hand. He did not return to the tournament in 1992, when Buster Smith finished first again.

“I played all the guys in the tournaments and I didn’t fear any of them,” remarks Al Lambert, an administrator with the Department of Children and Family Services and an up-and-coming checker star. “I feared Buster though. I truly feared him.”

It’s been said that chess and checker players lose some of their abilities as they grow older. But talking to those that knew him best, it appears that if anything Smith got better with age. Once he retired from the post office he studied constantly, and he became virtually unbeatable.

“Last year I got to watch Buster play,” says Ervin Smith. “And he was playing with more aggressiveness than I had ever seen. When Buster beat Kuperman in LA, it was like watching Schwarzkopf against Hussein. He was like a forward-marching machine. He was going with abandon, playing the whole game on the opponent’s side of the board.

“You get people talking spiritually about how he was playing. I never saw him playing with that aggressiveness before. You talk about premonitions of death. He was just overpowering guys over the last two years. You think people start losing their mental ability when they get older. Nobody got a chance to say that about Buster. Buster, to the very end, seemed to be playing better than he had in 20 years.

“I think before he died, Buster discovered the science of checkers,” says Smith. “There must have been a science to it. I don’t know if he left any secret papers, but I think that maybe Buster, without writing anything down, came close to mastering the science of the game. That’s what I like to think anyway.”

“Buster’s game may have dropped, but we wouldn’t have known it,” says Fred Schurn. “We wouldn’t know it because he was so damned far ahead of us anyway.”

Buster Smith successfully fought colon cancer in the 80s, but he missed a couple of tournaments because of it. On the day he died in October, Smith was taking a friend to the hospital for her radiation treatment. On the bus ride over, he complained of headaches. Later that day, he passed away in his apartment on West Fulton Street in a room filled with books about checkers and dozens of trophies.

Everyone who talks about Smith says pretty much the same thing. He was the quietest guy they ever knew, the most unassuming. He didn’t need to brag about his accomplishments; everyone knew he was the best. He never smoked, never took a drink, never drove a car. He lived alone because, he said, he liked his peace of mind. He was seldom angry and he was gifted with extraordinary patience. He never got married and, though he won

tons of tournaments, he said he never made more than \$5,000 from checkers in his whole life.

“He was just so quiet,” says Ervin Smith. “If you went into the checker hall, he was the last person you’d think to go and play. Lots of players are loudmouths. They say, ‘You can’t whup me!’ Buster was the opposite of that.”

“He worked at the post office, and it has been said that he would sit at his little cubicle and he would work there for eight hours and never open his mouth,” says Carl Prince. “He was an extremely humble person. He didn’t talk a lot. You had to solicit information from him. If Buster were a politician and you rated him on a scale from one to ten, he would rate a minus five, because he was not a vain person. He was not a braggadocio person. If I could have played the kind of checkers he played, you’d be lucky if I let you walk on the same street as me. I’d make you get out of my way.”

“He said nothing when you were playing him,” says Mose Johnson. “When you were through, he’d always shake your hand, but he never said nothing but smile.”

“Buster’s uniqueness was that even when he was playing a person like me, Buster would sit at the table with you and an outsider would come around and the outsider would think you were a top checker player because he took the same amount of time with you as he did with everybody else,” says Prince.

“He gave you the same amount of respect he gave every player,” says Schurn. “There’s a joke going around that Buster was playing a little boy and the little boy was like five years old. Now Buster was playing in Russia and everywhere else and he’s playing this little boy and the little boy made a move and Buster was looking at it for like five minutes.

“Everyone was saying, ‘Buster, he’s just a little bitty boy. What are you doing?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, but you don’t know what he knows.’ He

respected everybody and that's true and that's why I liked to play him even though there was no way in the world I could ever beat him. He played me the same way as he'd play anyone else. And that's where you can learn. Sometimes I'd make a move and he'd say, 'Well, you could have done this and this and this.' And I wouldn't have seen any of it. He gave everybody the same amount of respect and then he'd beat you."

"Last time I played him was on a train," says Charles "Pecan" Thompson, a longtime member of the Chicago American Pool Checker Club. "We were taking the City of New Orleans and we played all night on it. We pulled out of the station in Jackson, Mississippi, and when we stopped playing, we were pulling into Union Station. The train takes about 14 hours, but we were so into the game that we didn't realize the time. I finally wound up winning a couple, but the score was 18-2.

"There were games I thought I'd won and he'd pull a draw out of it. Then, he'd set it up and show me how he did it. He'd show me all the finer points. He didn't try to hold anything back. He was the type who would share his knowledge with you if you had the patience or the time to sit and listen to what he had to say. Most people didn't."

"Everybody who played him learned a lot," said Lorenzo Pickens. "You never heard Buster doing a whole lot of talking. Once in a while he'd chide you for making a bad move, tell you what you could have done but you couldn't anymore. He could sit at a table for hours and not get tired. He'd get so bad that you'd be scared to play him."

Among the letters and newspaper clippings Smith collected over the years, there is a letter from a well-known checker player named Little George Ramsey written in 1962.

"Tell me," the letter says, "don't you have any serious matches anymore? Doesn't any top player from other cities come over to give you a serious workout? Am I the only one? How can you play so long without eating? I was so hungry I was almost sick to my stomach when I quit playing you. You guys act like mechanical men. The next time I play you, I am quitting after 6 hours and eat."

At the bottom of the letter, Smith has written simply, “Smith-4 Ramsey-0.”

“I recall he played Ohio Mitchell once and Buster beat him five-nothing,” says Schurn. “Ohio was a boisterous bully-type guy. After he lost, he went across the street, got something to eat, and came back. He knew Buster was better, but he said ‘You beat me 5-0, but put some money down, goddamn it. You can’t beat me then. I can’t play no fun checkers.’ Buster was a very mild guy. He said ‘I’ll play you.’ Real quiet.

“They had been playing before and he had beaten this guy and they’d play a couple and then they’d draw a couple, but when they put that money down, Buster wouldn’t let him draw one. He didn’t let him draw one when they put that money down. Buster didn’t like the fact that Ohio had gotten loud and boisterous with him. He beat him every game. That’s the way Buster was. I never saw checkers like that. Buster beat him with a game and I begged him for two weeks to show me. He never did. Later I found it in a book of Russian games. It was a vicious shot, the same shot he shot Ohio with—vicious.”

“Buster was not a fighter. He did all his fighting on the board,” says William Langley. “When I traveled with him to Italy in 1967 to see him play, he had one of the Russians beat, but the Russian asked Smith to give him a draw and Smith said, ‘All right, I’ll give you a draw’ even though he had the game won. The Russian knew it. That’s why he was begging for a draw. I practically cried, ‘Buster you could’ve beaten this guy.’”

Some say Smith had a photographic memory. Others say he had mastered a sort of mental telepathy. Most say that it was an indefatigable ability to analyze and memorize that gave him such success. And, though he didn’t show it, he hated to lose, and he’d replay games he had lost until he figured out a way to win.

“I can sit down and figure out my moves one or two moves ahead,” says Eddie Smith, a retired electrician and member of the pool checker club here in Chicago. “He could see 20 moves ahead. He remembered games he played 20 years ago. How are you going to beat someone with a memory like that?”

“In Europe they called him the ‘Remise Artist,’ which meant that he was able to find a draw in any game,” says Langley. “Buster was a very thorough checker player. He and I communicated and we didn’t say a word. He could tune into another person’s thought and figure out how he was going to move. Telepathy is a great thing if you don’t use it for dirty things.

“A lot of people are so far behind that they haven’t heard of mental telepathy, but the Russians know about it and Buster knew about it,” Langley continues. “He’d sit there and he’d hesitate and he’d know where you were going to move. It amused me because he was so far ahead of his opponents in that kind of thing. I don’t remember many players here in America besides myself and Buster who had the talent to transmit and receive a thought. I knew I had it when I was up in my study and I transmitted the thought to my wife that I wanted a glass of water so she would come back with a glass of water for me. She looked at me and said, ‘Don’t transmit that thought to me. I ain’t your servant.’

“If you want to be able to transmit and receive thoughts, you have to have a clear mind. You can’t think you’re better than people or mess yourself up with a lot of malarkey. Smith had this brotherly love and he respected everybody. He had a clean mind; that’s why he could do it.”

“Think of what he could have done if he had the opportunity to go to college and apply his talents,” says Ervin Smith. “Think of the kind of contributions a man with a mind like that could have made.”

“He accomplished everything he did without any formal training,” says Carl Prince. “If he had gotten all the training they give to checker players in Russia, he would have been the greatest player who ever lived.”

“The Russians had books that we didn’t have. That’s true,” says William Langley. “But I figure it like this. Buster had to learn everything from scratch at first. When I was a boy, we didn’t have any recipes for apple pie. We just dumped some butter and some nutmeg and some apples and we made an apple pie. And you know something? It tasted good. That’s how

Buster learned checkers. He might not have had the best recipe, but he made the best pie.”

Buster Smith’s name is still on all of the score sheets at the Chicago American Pool Checker Club at 74th and Vincennes, where they’re trying to figure out who will be the new Chicago checker champion. There is no apparent heir to his checker throne. The next national tournament is scheduled to take place in July in Petal, Mississippi, and a new checker champion will be crowned there. But Smith won’t be there. Neither will other checker giants like Victor Kraft or Ollie “Shotgun” Howard, who also passed away last year. Iser Kuperman has not been heard from since he walked out of the 1991 tournament, and Vladimir Kaplan’s health problems have forced him to retire from the game. Those who remain are fighting for second place behind Buster Smith.

There’s a “mug board” at the checker club, a chalkboard that lists players who have been beaten five straight times by the same opponent and must suffer the humiliation of donating 50 cents to the club fund. Buster is still the top “mugger” on the board.

Every night men gather here around checkerboards, smoking Newports, drinking from cans of cherry pop and cola. Dusty trophies sit atop an old Zenith television console. At one time they belonged to Buster. Crushed Old Style cans are strewn over the floor and dog-eared copies of checkers books stand on a makeshift bookshelf. A pay phone near the door is used mainly by players to call their wives. There are a couple of chalkboards on the walls. At one time they told of upcoming checkers matches; often now they speak of funerals.

“Funeral. Open Door Baptist Church,” the board says. “Eddie Smith’s daughter Edwina Smith passed this day in Alabama. In lieu of flowers, let us all donate as much as we can financially to help defray his expenses.”

Usually there are seven or eight matches going on at once here. Some players taunt and chide each other—usually the less experienced ones. The

others sit quietly, emulating Buster Smith, contemplating a move for a half hour or so. And in the wee hours of the morning, when all the matches are over, when new names have been added to the mug board, they talk. They talk about the healing powers of checkers. They talk about their jobs. But mostly these days, they talk about Buster.

“One of the last things Buster said to me was that we had to reach the school kids,” says Carl Prince around two o’clock on a Sunday morning. “Checkers is every bit as difficult, if not more so, than chess, and it should be given the same status and recognition as chess. If Buster had been more well-known, the game could have been popularized, but now there’s only a few of us left who know the game.

“You have no idea what kind of a player the man was, and outside of the checker world virtually nothing is known about him. Not even in the black community. Do not get the impression that the lack of recognition is racial. It has nothing to do with race. It’s just that it’s a game that’s not identified in the mind of the American public as being one that is associated with the opera crowd or the elite crowd. The checker clubs are in the inner-city areas where even blacks do not particularly go.”

Pecan Thompson has mugged two opponents twice tonight and is feeling quite content. He is one of the top contenders for the number-one checker position in Chicago. “I remember one time I was driving Buster home,” Thompson recalls. “I remember telling him that one of the reasons checkers isn’t popular is because it’s so staid. I said we need to find something to put more excitement in it. I said, ‘If we could make it more exciting to the onlookers, with more jumps and flashy play, maybe more people would start playing.’ He said, ‘Yeah, but you don’t understand. I know the game as it is and I don’t like to lose.’”

“We need to get more people involved in the game,” said Carl Prince. “We have lost giants this year. This year we lost the giant of them all, and it’s such a shame that we old ones have to go to our graves with this knowledge that we have.”

The weather's lousy and there's no one playing in the checkers club. No one's playing in the shoe shop on 47th, and the owner of the barbershop on Ogden has told the checkers players to clear out because there's no room for his customers anymore.

Mose "The Mayor" Johnson is standing in the doorway of Buster's Place on Warren, looking out on this dark, rainy afternoon. Al Lambert drives up in his black Firebird and gets out.

The two men shake hands and talk awhile. Then they turn off the lights and shut the door to Buster's Place and head for Lambert's car.

"You can follow us," Lambert says. "We're going to try to find a game."

"Think you'll find one?" I ask.

"Oh yeah," Lambert smiles. It seems sad that no one's playing at Buster's Place today.

"Buster wouldn't like that," Johnson says. "When he was around, he always knew where to find a game."