

The Greatest

Cyrus Lakdawala



POPULAR CHESS

About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 40 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

Also by the Author:

1...b6: Move by Move

1...d6: Move by Move

A Ferocious Opening Repertoire

Anti-Sicilians: Move by Move

Bird's Opening: Move by Move

Botvinnik: Move by Move

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The Classical French: Move by Move

The Colle: Move by Move

The Four Knights: Move by Move

The Modern Defence: Move by Move

The Nimzo-Larsen Attack: Move by Move

The Scandinavian: Move by Move

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Introduction

The Subject which Launched 10,000 Arguments

Is it really possible to catalogue greatness? It's no different than claiming that Johann Sebastian Bach was a 'better' composer than John Lennon. Any time the debate of who is the greatest chess player of all time arises on my Facebook page, two things occur with absolute predictability:

1. I get way more hits and comments than posts on any other subject.
2. We live in the era of the easily offended and the perpetually outraged. Violent fights break out, with name-calling, unfriending and blocking.

Everyone's list is different, so if someone posts that Anand doesn't make it to his or her 10 greatest players of all-time list, the Anand super-fan is certain to respond: "I strongly urge you to stay on your medication! Anand is the GOAT and would crush Carlsen or Kasparov with an 8-0 sweep, in a 14 game match!" Then the response is: "Idiot! Kasparov defeated Anand in a world championship match! How can Anand be ahead on the list?" "You are the idiot! Anand was but a child when he played Kasparov!"...and so on, and on.

Then there were violent arguments about Kramnik not being on my top 10 list, since he beat Kasparov. Someone insisted that my list is a touch racist, since it consists mainly of white males (they forgot that Capablanca and Anand were not white males), while someone else accused it of being sexist, since Judit Polgar wasn't in my top ten. Sigh. Anyway, I beg you not to send me hate messages if my list will be different than yours (which it is certain to be).

The Three Eras: Romantic, Classical, Electronic

The younger generation believes history began on the day of their birth. They tend not to be interested in chess history and if the elders don't instill a love of it, then in generations to come, kids of that era will not know the names Paul Morphy or Wilhelm Steinitz. Then these games languish in dark obscurity, eventually sliding into oblivion. Let's not allow that to happen. How do we accurately compare Morphy to Carlsen, or Blackburne to Nepomniachtchi? The answer is we can't. The vast distance of time pushes it past an apples to oranges situation. It's more an apples to an Egg McMuffin. The past embeds itself into the present and to my mind there are three eras:

1. Romantic, which is the time of Philidor to around 1899.
2. Classical, 1900 to the late 1980s, before chess engines and databases began to proliferate.
3. The Electronic/Computer/Database era, 1990 to the present.

Romantic Era List

The recording of chess games ensures that when we pass from this world, our ideas still remain. This was the most difficult list to put together, since there were no ratings and most of us, including me, have gone over many more of Kasparov's and Carlsen's games than Staunton's. Maybe it's human nature to take for granted our benefactors, since it's unpleasant to realize that we are in their debt. Long dead great players continue to influence us, past the confines of their graves. We are the inheritors of the accumulated knowledge of such past giants, which we should not take for granted. The scriptures tell us to honour thy fathers. Here they are:

Paul Morphy. A Facebook friend once wrote on my page about Morphy: "Carlsen said during an interview that he had over 20k positions of GM games memorized. How many building blocks did Morphy have to work with?" Morphy is the genuine forbearer, the true portent of the present-day chess player. He understood, as we all do today, that we should develop rapidly in the opening *before* launching an attack and understood that one must fight for control over the centre. When we compare his games against his contemporaries, it's very much the same as watching a 2300-rated master, playing 1000-rated Sunday Starbucks coffee-house players. He is at the top of this list, mainly due to his almost infallible intuition.

Wilhelm Steinitz. I once enraged a huge number of Facebook friends when I declared that if Lasker and Steinitz were born in the same year and played in their primes, Steinitz would win. When they all pointed out that Lasker crushed Steinitz in their 1897 world championship match, I reminded them that Lasker was 29 years old and Steinitz, 60. This is the same age difference as if Fischer in 1975 had defended his title against Botvinnik.

Akiba Rubinstein. What a pity that Lasker didn't give Rubinstein, the pre-Capablanca, a shot at his title.

Harry Nelson Pillsbury. Pillsbury was one of the biggest question marks of the 19th century. His premature death robbed us of a potential world championship match against Lasker, which would have been epic.

François-André Danican Philidor and Louis-Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais. Numbers five and six on this list dominated their respective eras.

Siegbert Tarrasch. According to the ChessMetrics website, Tarrasch was the greatest number two player of all time. During the period October 1890 to November 1906, he was the number two ranked player in the world for a staggering 111 different months. If not for Emanuel Lasker, Tarrasch would surely have been world champion. In fact, an ageing Steinitz challenged Tarrasch for the world chess championship, but Tarrasch declined, since he didn't want to take the time out from his medical practice. This may have been the blun-

der of Tarrasch's life. Lasker challenged Tarrasch to a match as well at the time, but Tarrasch declined, citing that Lasker had really not proved himself. Not playing Steinitz would come to haunt Tarrasch, since Lasker filled the match void, accepted Steinitz's challenge, beat him handily and then held on to the title for nearly the next three decades.

Joseph Blackburn. Blackburn was a long time second-ranked player, who just never could close the gap against Steinitz.

Adolf Anderssen and Mikhail Chigorin. The last two on the list were top ranked mad dogs, who were both pre-Tals.

Classical Era Top Tier List

1. Garry Kasparov

The Never-ending War

“What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.” Friedrich Nietzsche

There can be no truce in a never-ending war. In the early 15th Century there were two popes, one in Rome and the other in Avignon. In the 1980s the endless debate was: “Who was the better/greater player: Karpov or Kasparov?” The truth is Kasparov would not have been Kasparov, if not for Karpov, who in a sense, was Garry's greatest teacher, since he learned from the matches. Kasparov was not a complete chess player, until he faced Karpov, in what felt like an endlessly long match. Karpov, one of the greatest natural strategists, taught Kasparov by filling in missing element. Only then did Kasparov (at least in my opinion) become the greatest player of all time.

The Oceanic Qualities of Kasparov's Power

In his prime Kasparov's chess was devoid of even a single weakness or psychological flaw:

1. He is the perfect mix of immense natural ability with the added ingredient of a capacity for intense study.

2. His calculation power was unmatched.

3. His combinational skills were staggering, for his time or for any other.

4. Kasparov possessed a natural, intuitive feel for both attack and the initiative.

5. His opening preparation was unmatched.

6. His imagination soared, especially in complex positions.

Initially, Kasparov struggled with three weaknesses:

1. He lacked supreme strategic mastery, at least he initially fell short of Karpov.

2. His endgame mastery was also not at Karpov's level.

3. He was too stylistically aggressive to be considered a great defensive player.

All three problems vanished, due to a single cause: his eternal rival, Anatoly Karpov. Kasparov fixed all three flaws by playing what almost appears as an endless single match against Karpov, who in a strange way, became Kasparov's teacher.

2. Magnus Carlsen

As I wrote these words, Magnus had a horrible start for the Superbet Poland Rapid & Blitz. Then he scored a staggering 10½ out of 11 against a world class field and coasted to clear first place. Facebook friend and former National Master Dan Avery wrote this about Magnus on my page: “This is Woods decimating the field at the British Open or Messi scoring a glorious 35-meter free kick against Liverpool. If you are playing him, sometimes all you can do is shake your head and laugh. And resign on move 20, as Rapport did!”

In the earlier part of the tournament, it almost felt as if Magnus was goofing around, offering odds to his opponents. The tournament was played in Warsaw, so as a joke Magnus, playing black against Poland’s number two Radoslaw Wojtaszek, responded to 1 d4 with 1... b5, the Polish Defence.

According to Kasparov, Magnus is a hybrid of Fischer and Karpov. He writes: “Magnus is a lethal combination of Fischer and Karpov. It’s very unusual because Fischer’s style was very dynamic, just fighting to the last pawn, using every resource available. Karpov was very different. He had an unparalleled ability to use every piece with the maximum effect; minimal resources always produced maximum effect. So now imagine that you merge these two styles. It’s like squeezing every stone for a drop of water, but doing it just for 50, 60, 70, 80 moves. I mean, Magnus can go on as long as Fischer, with all his passion and energy, and at the same time being as meticulous and deadly as Karpov by just using every little advantage.”

3. Anatoly Karpov

Keeping my opinions to myself isn’t really my strong suit and placing Karpov ahead of Fischer is a controversial decision, certain to earn me a torrent of future criticism/ire when this book is published. “The boy has no clue about chess and therefore absolutely no future as a chess player,” said Mikhail Botvinnik about the young Karpov, whose ability as a prognosticator of chess talent comes under question. On the other hand, when interviewing Boris Spassky in 1987 for Copley News Service, I asked, “Which player has the greater natural chess ability: Kasparov or Karpov?” Spassky answered without hesitation: “Karpov”.

Chess is a universe of interdependence. The concept of ‘left’ makes no sense without ‘right’, nor does ‘up’ mean anything without its corresponding ‘down’. Karpov, like Capablanca, Smyslov, Tal (yes, Tal, since he possessed a supernatural tactical intuition), Fischer and Magnus, fit in that category of world champions whose intuition always corresponded to the position’s secret essence, its inner harmony.

Much like Ding Liren’s situation with Magnus, Karpov became world champion after his not-match against Fischer. Karpov fell under the giant and looming shadow of Bobby Fischer and, like Ding, faced the ‘He isn’t the real champion’ criticism. Karpov went on to prove himself a great champion and in my opinion, actually slightly passed his great predecessor Bobby, not in dominance, but in most other metrics.

4. Bobby Fischer

This is the guy who would have been the GOAT, had he continued playing after he became world champion. If domination is the metric, then Bobby wins by a mile. Just imagine if the top player in the country today is 14 years old. He wins the U.S. Championship without a loss and comes one point ahead of the next player. Well just this happened in 1957. Bobby, then age 14, won the U.S. Championship with eight wins, five draws and zero losses, a full point over the then heavy favourite Sammy Reshevsky.

‘Heretic! How dare you place Bobby below Kasparov, Carlsen and Karpov?’

Nobody asked me this question, but I assure you that they will, the minute this book comes out, since with Fischer’s fanatical fans, there is no compromise on the issue. I already discussed why Karpov is placed ahead of Fischer. Here is my reasoning on why I place Kasparov and Carlsen ahead of Fischer: Kasparov and especially Carlsen dominated in a high-information era, while Fischer’s was an era of low information, where by a miracle, he outworked the combined efforts of the Soviet chess machine. My theory is that it’s far, far more difficult to dominate now than in the 1960s and 70s, mainly since the overall level of chess understanding rose exponentially.

Fischer was a massive overachiever, while poker-playing, I-don’t-really-want-to-bother-defending-my-title Carlsen can confidently be labelled an underachiever, since not one person in the world believes Carlsen outworks his rivals. I place Kasparov at the top, since he mixed talent with Fischer’s fanatical work ethic. Carlsen would be in the number one spot, if he worked harder and was more ambitious, i.e. defending his world championship title. Maybe if Carlsen changes his mind, plays in the next Candidates and then regains the tile and holds it for at least the 15-year period of Kasparov’s reign (Kasparov didn’t defend his title from 1995 to 2000 and refused to play Shirov, due to a dispute about the prize fund), then it would be difficult not to call him the greatest ever player.

Bobby pretty much quit playing after beating Spassky and to the untalented it represents a kind of blasphemy to squander a rare gift. Not only did he refuse to play during his uneventful reign as world champion, he refused to defend his world championship title by denying Karpov a match.

5. Emanuel Lasker

Sorry Bobby, Lasker was a lot more than a “coffee-house player”. His hanging on to the title for 27 years and the fact that he kept beating world-class players into his sixties, places him as a top candidate for the longevity title.

6. José Raul Capablanca

Imagine what life would be like if all your wishes were instantly granted. That is how Capablanca played chess, early in his career. Capablanca lost some of his peak years due to relative inactivity from the first world war. Many place him lower than sixth, citing weak opposition. Maybe I’m displaying stylistic bias by placing him this high, but this is where I believe he stands on the list.

7. Alexander Alekhine

The Capablanca-Alekhine rivalry reminds us of the Karpov-Kasparov feud. My belief is that Alekhine was slightly weaker than Capablanca, to the same degree that I place Karpov just below Kasparov.

8. Mikhail Botvinnik

Botvinnik's peak was seen in the years *before* he became world champion, due to the second world war. His critics claim that he remained champion so many times, mainly due to the somewhat unfair rematch clause, yet there was no question who the best player in the world was from the mid 1940s to around 1950.

9. Vishy Anand

A five-time world champion gets a spot on the list, although I know there will be hell to pay from Vishy's Indian fans, for placing him this low on the top 10 list. I've faced his Indian fans' wrath many times on Facebook, when they claim he is number one of all time and I dispute this. I remind them that I'm also Indian, but they only call me a traitor for this.

10. Mikhail Tal

The problem with being a creative person is that a sizeable portion of the population considers you nuts. But Tal's 'crazy' was in the crazy-like-a-fox category. The ultimate virtuoso of deception, he taught us that superiority in numbers isn't everything. He would undoubtedly be much higher on the list had he enjoyed good health. When we play over his games from the late 1950s, they seem to systematically be devoid of any organizing principle, except one: create chaos. His incredible resurgence to number two in the world, in the 1970s, is the reason he made the top-10 list, over other candidates like Kramnik, Smyslov, Petrosian, Spassky and Korchnoi.

Computer/Database Era List

Of course Magnus leads this list by a mile. And who is number two? There basically is no number two on the list! It's essentially a long tie for second place between Ding Liren, Alireza Firouzja, Fabiano Caruana, Ian Nepomniachtchi, Hikaru Nakamura, Wesley So, Levon Aronian, Maxim Vachier-Lagrave, and Anish Giri. They keep shifting places, almost on a daily basis, and it's impossible to say with certainty which one of these players is the next best, although Ding has something the rest of the second-placers are missing: he is the current world chess champion.

The Metrics of How we Define 'The Greatest'?

When we say "greatest of all time" what metric, criterion or criteria are we using? The following are what I consider for my picks:

Highest Rating of All Time

Well, this one is pretty easy to solve. If this is your criterion, then Magnus is your GOAT, since his stratospheric peak rating of 2882 is not going to be passed any time soon. But is he really the highest-rated player ever? There is some debate about rating inflation, but from my research, ratings have inflated by 3.6 points per year until around 2014, when ratings began to deflate. For example, Boris Spassky was world champion in 1971, with his peak rating of 2690. At the time of writing, 2690 would place him at 48th in the world. Howard Staunton was a giant of his era, yet Chessmetrics estimated his rating if he was alive around the year 2004, at just below an Elo of 2000.

Dominance over Peers

The top in dominance would be Wilhelm Steinitz and Paul Morphy for the Romantic period, Bobby Fischer in the Classical, Garry Kasparov in that hazy place between the Classical and Modern periods, and, finally, Magnus Carlsen in our current era. Now I know with 100% certainty that one of my history-ignorant students will question why Steinitz is on the list. According to Chessmetrics, in April 1876 Steinitz was rated an astonishing 199 points above his closest rival, Henry Bird.

Longevity

If the metric is the ability to play at a world class (or exceedingly high) level for decades, then our picks must include Emanuel Lasker, who held on to the world championship title for 27 years and was a world-class player for a vast expanse of time, from 1889 to around 1935. Vasily Smyslov, at age 63, played a Candidates semi-final match against the young Garry Kasparov and came tantalizingly close to being one match win away from playing for the world championship in his sixties. In fact, he was a candidate eight times: 1948, 1950, 1953, 1956, 1959, 1965, 1983, and 1985, which is surreal.

Then there is Victor Korchnoi, who was beating top GMs (Caruana) just weeks from his 80th birthday. There is also the case of old man, has-been Mikhail Tal, who by the late 1960s was fading due to ill health from his peak strength in the late 1950s. Then suddenly his rating began to rise in the 1970s, until he reached a number two ranking in the world by 1978, behind then world champion Karpov. At age 53, Vishy Anand is at the time of this writing, rated 2754 and ranked number nine in the world, which in this age, is a miracle. Yet I don't yet place him as a clear candidate for the Longevity crown, since he played so few games in the past few years.

Tournament Wins

Is there such a thing as world champion of tournament wins? If this is your metric, then your GOATS are Bent Larsen and Anatoly Karpov.

Longest Unbeaten Streak – the Invincibility Factor

There are players who have gone a crazily high number of games without a single loss.

As mentioned earlier, Capablanca went 10 years without losing a game. Mikhail Tal broke Capablanca's record of 95 games, with 46 wins and 49 draws, between October 1973 and October 1974. Kasparov went 10 years without losing with the white pieces. Then Ding broke Tal's record with 100 unbeaten games. Sergei Tiviakov beat that record, although his opposition was rated considerably lower. Then Magnus Carlsen smashed the record again with a staggering 125-game undefeated streak against world-class opposition.

Ahead of Their Time

Have you compared Paul Morphy's games to those of his contemporaries? As I mentioned earlier, it almost feels like you are looking at games between a present day National Master and a bunch of Starbucks coffee-house players who have never read a chess book. Morphy would bring out his pieces rapidly and fight for control over the centre, while his opponents would clownishly launch premature attacks, or go material grabbing when grossly behind in development. We get the same feeling with Steinitz's games, where he would fight for key squares or power on a certain colour, while his opponents flopped about, randomly. Capablanca, Fischer and Carlsen also give us the eerie feeling that they are time travellers from the future, since strategically all three were so far ahead of their time, while Tal was tactically ahead of his.

A Combination of Domination/Highest Rating/Time at the Top

Here, Kasparov is the top choice.

Natural Ability/Intuition/Harmony

I sometimes daydream that I will be abducted by aliens who then surgically implant my brain with a Capablanca/Tal/Fischer/Karpov/Carlsen/Kasparov neuro-augmentation chip, as an experiment to see if a washed up has-been (who never really was) 63-year-old IM can rise to the level of world chess champion. So far, the aliens have let me down and I'm still stuck with this clunker, untalented brain.

There are some players who make what appear to be unexceptional looking moves, placing pieces on ordinary squares. Then 19 moves later, we see that the same piece is in the right place, at exactly the right time. Some positions are difficult to describe, yet we can still experience a kind of wordless awareness. The other name for this feeling is intuition.

There are a lucky few, the great minimalists of chess history, whose best games appear so effortless and smooth, that we get the feeling that the pieces – which dance, rather than brawl – are extensions of their minds. In the Romantic and Classical eras, the greatest players were the ones with the most natural ability. Our candidates for top in this metric would be Morphy, Capablanca, Sultan Khan, Reshevsky, Smyslov, Tal, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov, Nepomniachtchi, Nakamura and Carlsen.

Clutch Performances

Fischer, virtually on his own, defeated the vast resources of the Soviets to defeat Spassky. Kamsky's match run almost rivalled Fischer's, during the PCA and FIDE qualifiers and then Candidates matches, reaching finals in both – and as a teenager. Then Kamsky found himself down 6-4 against Vishy Anand, who was in his prime and who was a single draw away from winning the match. Only Karpov was able to stop Kamsky in their 1996 world championship match.

Then there is of course Kasparov, who in vampire fashion, returned from the dead from a five-point deficit in his first world championship match against Karpov, who collapsed at the end from exhaustion until the match was halted. Then Kasparov defeated Karpov in the subsequent rematch, to begin his long reign as champion. I consider this achievement the greatest single clutch performance in chess history. If Karpov had won that sixth game and the match, maybe we would be considering him the greatest of all time.

Combinational Vision

This is a tough one since there are so many worthy candidates. My picks are Kasparov in top spot and then a big tie for second between Alekhine, Tal, Anand and Carlsen.

Attacking Skill

Alekhine, Keres, Nezhmetdinov, Tal, Spassky, Judit Polgar, Kasparov, and Nepomniachtchi.

Defensive Ability

The great defenders understood: just because your plot fails, doesn't mean you automatically die. Your new goals are: survive, escape and formulate new plots. My list: Lasker, Capablanca (10 years without a loss!), Petrosian, Korchnoi, Fischer, Tal (95 games without a loss), Karpov, Kasparov (a reminder: Kasparov was down 0-5 in his first match against Karpov and didn't lose it), Carlsen (125 games without a single loss), and Ding Liren (100 games unbeaten).

The Dynamic Element

Here we speak of mastery of the initiative. My picks are Alekhine, Keres, Nezhmetdinov, Botvinnik (this one may surprise you, but I assure you he belongs in this list), Tal, Spassky, Kasparov, Anand, Topalov, Nepomniachtchi and Carlsen.

Strategic Planning/accumulation

Morphy, Steinitz, Capablanca, Smyslov, Botvinnik, Petrosian, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov (yes, he clearly belongs on this list), Kramnik, Carlsen, and Ding Liren.

Endgame Skill

Rubinstein, Lasker, Capablanca, Smyslov, Fischer, Korchnoi, Karpov, Kasparov, and Carlsen.

Opening Preparation

Alekhine, Botvinnik, Fischer (he survived the Soviet machine's preparation to beat Spassky), Kasparov, Anand, and Carlsen.

Creativity

Number one on the list is the great David Bronstein. Other candidates are Nimzowitsch, who spawned the Hypermodern School, Larsen, Tal, the iconoclastic English IM Michael Basman, who often opened his games with 1 g4!?, Morozevich, Kasparov, and Carlsen.

Irrational Positions/Risk-Takers

The clinical term for these guys is anti-social personality disorder: Nezhmetdinov (yes, a bat-guana crazy IM heads my list of all-time crazy players) Tal, Larsen, Korchnoi, Kasparov, and Carlsen (yes, despite what you have heard, Magnus takes more insane risks than any other player of his era).

Error-free Play and the Accuracy Factor

Not a single chess player in history can truthfully utter the words: "All my decisions are beyond criticism." Yet there are a few who came close. My list includes Capablanca, Fischer, Kasparov, Karpov and Carlsen.

Presentism/Nostalgia Bias

What is presentism? It refers to the natural tendency to overvalue our current generation of players over those of past eras and the misguided belief that whoever is the current world champion (or the world's number one ranked player) must be the greatest of all time. Nostalgia bias is its opposite, where players of the past were all giants and today's players are schmucks in comparison. I (try to) avoid both such biases in my picks.

The Format of this Book

Due to space limitations, I was not able to cover every possible metric for GOAT and, for example, I don't have a chapter on the greatest endgame players of all time. Also for the games selection, I tried not to pick uber-famous games which you likely have seen multiple times, although a few do fit this category. The games selection is heavily biased towards those of my top pick, Kasparov. By comparison, only two of Magnus's games are in the book, so be warned: my games selection was not a democratic process.

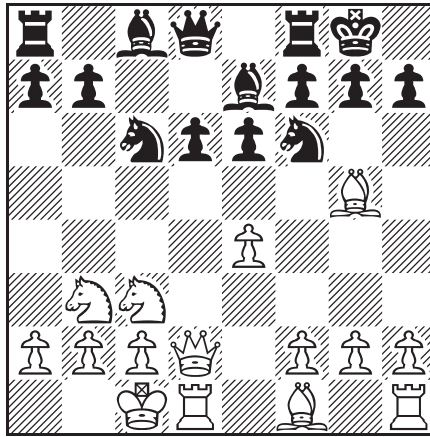
Cyrus Lakdawala
San Diego, California
October 2024

Game 9
Mikhail Tal-Alexander Koblencs
 Riga 1957
Sicilian Defence

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 ♘c6 6 ♙g5

The Richter-Rauzer Sicilian.

6...e6 7 ♚d2 ♙e7 8 0-0-0 0-0 9 ♘b3



Now Black must watch out for ♙xf6 ideas since recapturing with the bishop means that d6 hangs. Instead, 9 f4 is played more often today.

9...♚b6

This blocks the push of Black's b-pawn. In return, d8 is vacated for the rook. Another point of posting the queen to b6 is that 10 ♙xf6?! hands over the bishop-pair and dark squares. After 10...♙xf6 White is unable to grab d6, since then f2 hangs.

10 f3

Reinforcing e4, while setting up an English Attack style plan with g2-g4 and h2-h4.

10...a6 11 g4

11 ♙xf6 offers Black full compensation after 11...♙xf6! 12 ♚xd6 ♖d8 13 ♚c5 ♖xd1+ 14 ♘xd1 ♚c7. Black has the bishop-pair and dark-square control, V.Jansa-V.Babula, Lazne Bohdanec 1995.

11...♖d8

This basically removes White's ♙xf6 idea from the table. Also, White must now be on alert for ...d6-d5 breaks.

12 ♙e3

This clears the path for g4-g5.

12...♚c7 13 h4?!

More accurate is the immediate 13 g5!

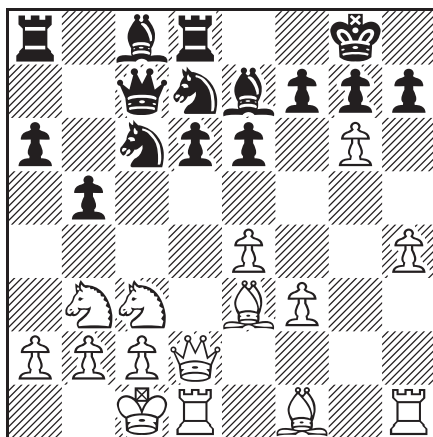
13...b5?!

13...d5! takes advantage of the white queen's position on the d-file.

14 g5

Now we transpose to the position after White's correct move order.

14...♘d7 15 g6!?



Initiative and attack were always more precious to Tal than mere money. Was there ever a time when Tal *didn't* go full Napoleon on an opponent? 15 h5 is the more cautious, un-Tal like approach.

15...hxc6?

Tal and his friend Rashid Nezhmetdinov taught the chess world that the Stalinesque ideal of correctness was not an absolute. They showed us that confusion itself can be weaponized. This is the wrong recapture.

Instead, 15...fxg6! follows the principle: *If your king is endangered, then capture away from the centre.* 16 h5 gxh5 17 ♖xh5 ♘f6 18 ♖h1 was N.Short-A.Muir, Gibraltar 2004. Maybe it's stylistic bias, but I don't believe in White's full compensation for the pawn after 18...d5!

16 h5 gxh5 17 ♖xh5

White's two open attacking lanes are worth more than Black's extra pawn.

17...♘f6

The engine doesn't like this move either, preferring 17...♘f6 18 ♖h2 g6 19 ♖h7 ♘f8 20 ♖h3.

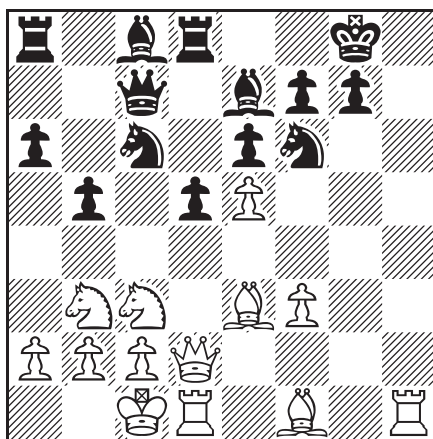
18 ♖h1

He wants his queen in front of the rook. An option is to place the rook on h3 to later triple on the file.

18...d5

Principle: *Meet a wing attack with a central counter*, which doesn't work all that well when you apply it too late, as is the case here.

19 e5!?



Tal, like his stylistic doppelganger Nezhmetdinov, loved complicating sometimes for its own sake. Stronger is 19 ♖f4!, intending ♗h2.

19...♘xe5!

Koblencs is wise to Tal's vile attempt at a filthy cheapo: 19...♗xe5?? 20 ♖f4 ♗f5 21 ♖d3 wins.

20 ♖f4?

The evaluation swings to Black's favour after this mistake, whereas White has a strong attack after 20 ♗h2! ♖f8 21 ♗h8+ ♘g8.

20...♖d6 21 ♗h2

White's mating threat is easily controlled.

21...♖f8!

Alternatively:

a) 21...♘d3+?? walks into Tal's trap: 22 ♖b1! (♗h8 mate is the threat) 22...♖f8 23 ♖xd6+ ♗xd6 24 ♗xd6+ ♗xd6 25 ♖xd3 leaves White up a piece.

b) 21...♘g6! is also effective. After 22 ♖xd6 ♗xd6 I don't see compensation for White's sacrificed pawns.

22 ♗h8+?!

This is actually a waste of time if Black finds the correct response.

22...♘g8?

22...♖e7! gives Black a winning position, since g7 is taboo. 23 ♗h3 is forced yet not so wonderful since White remains down a pawn, with Black attacking (23 ♗xg7?? ♗g8 24 ♗h6 ♘d3+! wins on the spot).

23 ♗h7

Suddenly, Tal generated attacking chances for the sacrificed pawns.

23...f5!

Koblencs finds a strong defensive resource:

The Greatest

1. The g7 point is now laterally covered by Black's queen. It can be further reinforced with ideas like ...♖a7 and ...♗d7.

2. Black threatens to trap White's queen with ...♘g6.

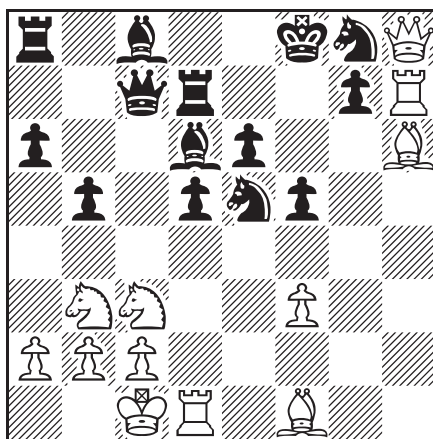
3. White must be on the lookout for ...♘d3+, which eliminates White's power on the dark squares.

24 ♗h6!

Tal eliminates both the ...♘g6 and ...♘d3+ threats, while exploiting dual pins.

24...♗d7

Of course, 24...♘g6?? fails miserably to 25 ♗xg7+ ♖f7.



Exercise (combination alert): Isn't Black winning? Threats include ...♘g6 and also ...g7xh6. Tal found a way to weasel out of both, while maintaining his attack. What would you play here?

Answer: Clearance sacrifice/double attack.

25 ♗xb5!!

Threats: ♗xd7 and also ♗g1.

25...♗f7?

Once again the dark magician managed to confuse his prey. Instead:

a) 25...axb5? (acceptance of the bishop, loses) 26 ♗g1! ♘g4 27 ♘xb5 ♗f4+ 28 ♖b1! ♗e5 29 ♗xf4 ♗xf4 30 fxg4 fxg4 and now comes a shocker: 31 ♘d6!!.. The knight can't be touched and ♘c5 is coming. White has a winning attack since 31...♗c7 is met with 32 ♗gh1! threatening ♗xg8+, to which there is no reasonable defence. If 32...♗xd6 33 ♗f1+ forces mate.

b) 25...♘g6! is Black's only move. Even then Tal's attack looks rather dangerous after 26 ♘d4! (threatening a fork on e6) 26...♗e7 27 ♗xg7+! ♗xg7 and now White has a mind-bending interference shot with 28 ♗d7!! ♗xd7 29 ♘xe6+! (overloaded defender) 29...♗xe6 30 ♗xg7+ ♖e8 31 ♘d5! ♘8e7 32 ♘f6+ ♖d8 33 ♗f7! ♗e5 (or 33...♗xf7? 34 ♗xf7 ♖c7 35 ♘e8+,

winning material) 34 ♖b1 ♜b8 35 b3 ♜b7 36 ♜h6. The engine assesses at a totally unhelpful '0.00' and the position remains an irrational mess, which suits Tal just fine.

26 ♜g1!

Yet another attacker is added to g7, while ...♘g6 is prevented.

26...♜a7 27 ♘d4!?

Tal misses 27 ♖xa6!! . If 27...♖xa6 28 ♘d4! (threatening a fork on e6) 28...♖c8 29 ♘db5! ♜d7 30 ♘xd6 wins, since the knight can't be recaptured due to White's pressure on g7.

27...♘g4!

This is a good defensive move to try and clog the pressure on g7.

28 fxg4 ♖e5?

Logical and wrong. Black's greatest resistance lies in the line 28...♖f4+! 29 ♖b1! ♖xh6 30 g5 ♖xg5 31 ♜xg5 ♜f4 32 ♜gh5! (threat: ♜xg8+!) 32...♜fc7 33 ♜h4 ♜f2 34 a4! axb5 35 ♘dxb5, although the engine still prefers White's position.

Instead, 28...gxh6?? loses to 29 ♖d7!! (interference) 29...♜xd7 30 gxf5 ♖f4+ 31 ♖b1 ♖g5 32 ♘xe6+. Now we see the point of moving the bishop to d7: Black is unable to capture with the now buried c8-bishop and White wins.

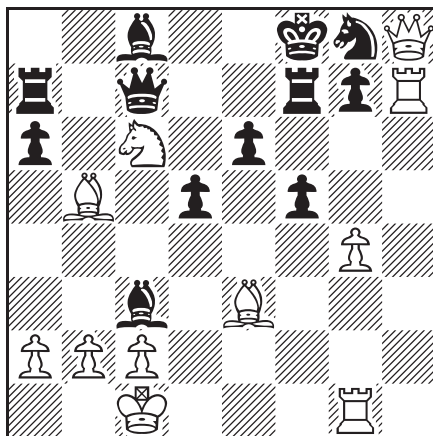
29 ♘c6?!

Violent instinct overwhelms thought. This is still favourable yet not best. Tal misses an instant win with 29 ♘f3!! axb5 30 ♘h4!. Black is unable to survive an invasion of g6.

29...♖xc3?

29...axb5! is the only try, although after 30 ♘xe5 ♜xe5 31 ♜f1! White still has a promising attack.

30 ♖e3!!



Please keep in mind that hell is the devil's paradise. A move like this is proof that irrational positions cannot be broken down, scholastically. They are played by feel. The position before the move was crazy. Now let's multiply that by a thousand. Zwischenzug. Threat: ♖c5+ and ♜xg8+. Tal's solution is even stronger than the also winning 30 bxc3.

30...d4 31 ♖gh1!

He continues to foster an environment of fear and paranoia. Cheapo alert! The threat of ♖xg8+! arises once again.

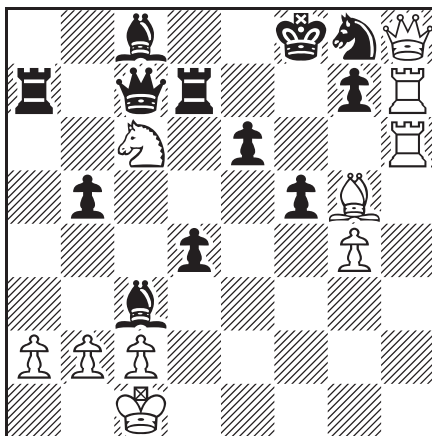
31...♗d7

Of course, f7 must be vacated to deal with the ♖xg8+ threat.

32 ♕g5?

You know the position is complicated if it's too confusing for Tal! 32 gxf5! wins: for example, 32...dxe3 (32...exf5? 33 ♖xg8+! ♔xg8 34 ♕c4+ forces mate in three) 33 fxe6!. There is no escape for Black's king, who is faced with the threat of ♖xg8+.

32...axb5 33 ♖h6!



33...d3?

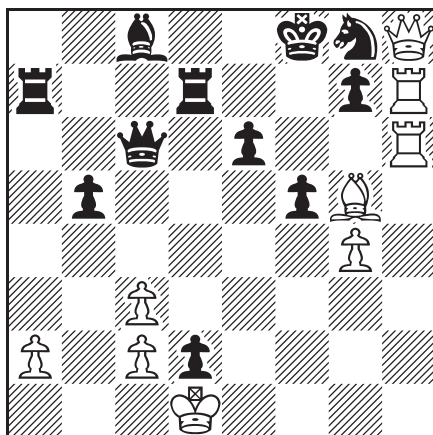
Tal's superpower was deception. His opponents knew he was trying to con them, yet despite this knowledge, many got conned all the same. Knowledge may be power, yet in chaotic positions, data only confuses us. Black misses two ways to save himself:

a) 33...♕xb2+! 34 ♔xb2 ♖xc6 (threat: ...♗xa2+!) 35 ♗f6+! gxf6 36 ♕h6+ ♗g7 37 ♕xg7+ ♔e7 38 ♕xf6+ ♔d6 39 ♗xa7 ♖c3+ 40 ♔b1 ♖e1+ and the game ends in perpetual check.

b) 33...♖xc6! also holds the game after 34 ♗f6+! gxf6 35 ♕h6+ ♗g7 36 ♕xg7+ ♔e7 37 ♕xf6+ ♔d6 38 ♕e5+ ♔d5 39 ♗xa7 ♕xb2+! 40 ♔b1 ♖c3! 41 ♕f4 ♖e1+ 42 ♔xb2 ♖b4+ 43 ♔c1 ♖e1+, with another perpetual check.

c) However, 33...gxh6?? 34 ♕xh6+ ♗g7 35 bxc3 wins.

34 bxc3 d2+ 35 ♔d1! ♖xc6



Exercise (combination alert): Black threatens mate on the move on f3. How should White continue?

Answer: Black's king is hunted down first via a rook check on f6.

36 ♖f6+!

After a move like this one, we either end up in heaven, or hell. There is no neutral destination.

36...♗f7

Instead, 36...gxf6 37 ♗h6+ ♗g7 38 ♗xg7+ ♖e7 39 ♗xf6+ ♖d6 40 ♗e5+ ♖d5 41 ♗xa7 wins, or if 36...♖e7 37 ♗xg7+ ♖d6 38 ♗xe6+! ♖xe6 39 ♗g6+ ♖d5 40 ♗d4 mate. I have never been dead and therefore have no idea if it's a good, bad or neutral state. In chess, the status of dead is always bad.

37 ♗xg7+! 1-0

The beast is set free. Following 37...♖e8 38 ♗xf7 ♗f3+ 39 ♖xd2 ♗f2+ 40 ♖c1 ♗f1+ 41 ♖b2 ♗xa2+ 42 ♖xa2 ♗c4+ 43 ♖b2 Black's checks stumble to an embarrassed halt, unless you want to give away the queen next move.

My buddy IM Tony Saidy, who is living chess history, never allows a single day to pass without emailing me. Tony sent me this crazy game, which is perfect for this chapter. People remember Art Bisguier as the guy who kept losing to Fischer. Many don't know how strong he was in the 1950s. In this game he fearlessly picks a fight against the great David Bronstein, in his prime.