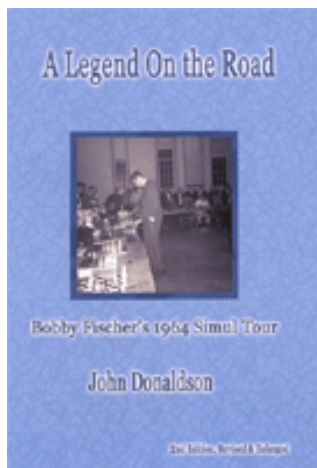




COLUMNISTS

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Hosted by
Mark Donlan



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From the Archives...

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The Kibitzer, by Tim Harding

Bobby Fischer, 25 Years On

For my generation, who started playing chess in the early 1960s, it comes as a shock to realise that is now a little over 25 years since the American genius Bobby Fischer became World Chess Champion. To my regret, he is the one postwar world champion (not counting Alekhine) whom I never saw play nor ever spoke to.

Fischer's summer 1972 title match against Boris Spassky in the Icelandic capital, Reykjavik, brought to an end the Soviet postwar monopoly on the chess crown and was the culmination of a career that began in the late 1950s. Already at 15 years of age he was a grandmaster, a record at that time, and his battle to reach the top (sometimes, it seemed, a battle with himself) was the background for all the major chess events of the 1960s; when he didn't play (as in the two Candidates series won by Spassky) he was like Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's feast.

It seemed to many people in the West that the world championship finals of 1966 and 1969 lacked some meaning because the world's best player was not competing just as Kasparov's absence from this year's FIDE “knockout world championship” will detract from the meaningfulness of whoever emerges as victor. No doubt Spassky himself felt this during his reign from 1969-72.

Bobby Fischer's impact on the chess scene may be less obvious to those who have come to chess during the 1980s (during which decade Fischer did not compete at all) and the 1990s (when his sole appearance was his strange “re-match of the century” in 1992, played contrary to U.N. embargo during the Yugoslav civil war).

Grandmaster John Nunn, in his recently published new edition of the book *The Development of Chess Style* (based on an original work by Euwe), writes that: “While it is a cause for regret that Fischer did not continue to produce scintillating games, he perhaps had a greater

impact on chess than any other twentieth century player.” This is certainly no exaggeration.

He was born in Chicago on March 9, 1943 so he is still not too old to make another comeback, especially when you consider that Smyslov reached the Candidates Final in 1984, 30 years after he first played a match for the world title and 27 years after becoming world champion. However, in Fischer’s case such a comeback does appear improbable. After reviewing some of the highlights of Fischer’s career, I have picked out three games to illustrate his almost faultless and universal style of play.



A smiling Bobby Fischer with Jack Collins.

His first career landmark was when he became the youngest winner of the U.S. Junior Championship in 1956. He retained the title in 1957 and went on to win the U.S. Open (on tiebreak from GM Arthur Bisguier). At the end of the year he took first prize in the 1957-8 U.S. Championship, a point clear of Reshevsky (the first of eight successive victories in the national championship), and so qualified for the 1958 Portoroz tournament, the next stepping-stone towards the world title. He was still not 15 years old, still at school.

The fairytale continued a few months later in Yugoslavia where Fischer played the interzonal with great maturity, especially in the second half, and took the sixth qualifying place with its automatic qualification for the GM title. The next year, the Candidates tournament (an eight-player event where each competitor played his rivals four times) was a great learning experience for the now 16-year-old, who now dropped out of school to concentrate on chess.

In the next few years he played several major events: third with Keres behind Tal and Gligoric in Zurich 1959, first prize with Spassky in Mar del Plata 1960 (followed by a poor result in the Buenos Aires event), second behind Tal in the great Bled 1961 event that had everyone who mattered except Botvinnik, and first by two and a half points in the 1962 Stockholm interzonal.

Yet the one great prize eluded him. At the 1962 Curacao Candidates tournament, he came only fourth (well behind Petrosian, Keres and Geller) and (almost certainly unfairly) accused the Soviet players of colluding against him. This was Fischer’s first big setback; for all his great talent, he was still a little young and inexperienced to take on the USSR’s best. However, Fischer continued to play the U.S. Championship, including his incredible 11/11 clean sweep in the 1963-64 event.



*Fischer at a 1964 Simul in Fitchburg, MA.
Photo: WachusettChess.org*

For the 1965 (and all subsequent) Candidates series, the format was changed to knockout matches but Fischer declined to play in that cycle, the first of his “retirements.” His walkout at Sousse, in a dispute over playing conditions and the tournament schedule, led to his second “time-out” which left Petrosian and Spassky to dispute the world throne a second time, although he did play some relatively minor events in 1968. Few outside the USSR now doubted that Fischer really was the world’s best player if he could only get his act together.

Then in March 1970 Fischer was lured back to competition for the USSR-Rest of the World match in Belgrade where he played board two (Larsen insisted on top board) and defeated Petrosian 3-1. First prizes at Rovinj/Zagreb and Buenos Aires followed but in the Siegen olympiad Fischer lost one game, to Spassky.

Then, in November-December 1970 came the mammoth Palma de Mallorca interzonal where Fischer completed what he had left unfinished at Sousse three years earlier. twenty-three games, 18 and a half points. Trailing on 15 points were Larsen (the only one to beat Fischer), Geller and Huebner. Then came 1971, the Candidates matches and the two great whitewashes: Taimanov 6-0 in Vancouver (May), Larsen 6-0 in Denver (July). Petrosian was the final obstacle: Buenos Aires in September/October. Fischer won, then lost; three draws followed and then four wins for Fischer put him through to challenge Spassky.

The 1972 world championship match nearly did not happen, until London financier Jim Slater stepped in to boost the prize fund. Fischer began tentatively, losing the first game with a blunder in the ending and defaulting game two in a row over television cameras. Game 3 (see below) saw the match resume with a win for Fischer and he steamrolled on from there.

After this match, he did not play in public again for 20 years, and was stripped of the world title in 1975 following a well-documented row with FIDE in which he demanded what most people agreed were unreasonable conditions for the world title defence match against Karpov. In this case Fischer really trapped himself because, despite the three-year lay-off, he

should have been able to beat the (then) relatively inexperienced Karpov even in a traditional best-of-24-games match, but he had never played Karpov and may have feared the unknown.

However, you don't have to admire Fischer the man to be impressed and fascinated by his play. As Nunn says in the book already cited, he turned the methods of the Soviet school of chess against it: Botvinnik-style scientific study of all areas of the game, in-depth openings preparation that has probably only been equaled or bettered by Kasparov, and a passionate will to win that only Alekhine and Larsen could match.

Any loss by Fischer was news, especially if it was against a player not in the very world top (e.g. to Kovacevic at Rovinj/Zagreb). His openings repertoire was fairly narrow but virtually impeccable. He did not force play into particular channels but played with great objectivity into whatever offered the best winning chances, be it a tactical or positional middlegame or an ending. He rarely lost the initiative, but could defend well when it was necessary. He could be brilliant but did not seek brilliancy for its own sake; he preferred the point on the crosstable. Psychologically he was strong, usually coming back with powerful wins to avenge past defeats, e.g. against Larsen and Spassky.

In such a column as this there is no room for in-depth notes but I have selected three games and would recommend you to play them through offline, taking your time and trying to guess Fischer's next move.

I did not want to select any of those games which are well known from his classic book *My Sixty Memorable Games*, but that ends with Sousse 1967. Much of the best was yet to come.

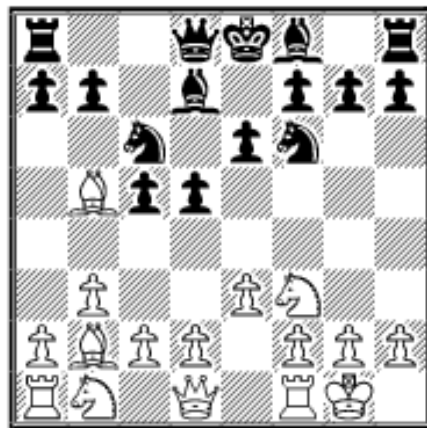
The first game comes from a late round in the 1970 interzonal when Fischer could relax a bit as he was home and dry; he used the occasion to vary from his once habitual "best by test" 1 e4. His opponent was the Brazilian prodigy Henrique Mecking:

Fischer - Mecking

Palma Mallorca izt (21), 1970

Larsen's Opening [A06]

1 b3 d5 2 Bb2 c5 3 Nf3 Nc6 4 e3 Nf6 5 Bb5 Bd7 6 0-0 e6



Mecking has defended passively, in effect allowing Fischer to play a Nimzo-Indian with reversed colours. His fifth move prevents the doubling of his c-pawn but it is well known that an early Bd2 is a weak move against the "Nimzo."

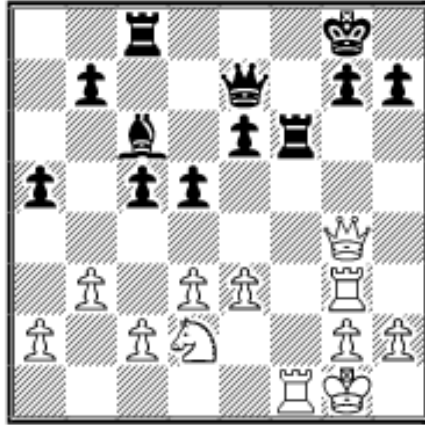
7 d3 Be7 8 Bxc6 Bxc6 9 Ne5 Rc8 10 Nd2 0-0 11 f4

Now White has a good Bird's opening formation Mecking seeks relief by exchanges but Fischer moves his pieces smoothly into good squares.

11 Nd7 12 Qg4 Nxe5 13 Bxe5 Bf6 14 Rf3 Qe7 15 Raf1 a5 16 Rg3 Bxe5 17 fxe5 f5

Mecking probably realised 17 g6 would leave his king position fatally compromised Fischer now switches plans. Rather than continue with an unclear attack, he takes the extra pawn on offer (though it will be doubled and isolated) because both of his pieces will be superior to their opposite numbers.

18 exf6 Rxf6



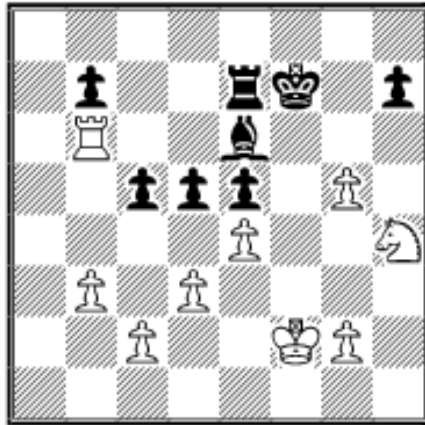
19 Qxg7+! Qxg7 20 Rxf6 Qxg3 21 hxg3 Re8 22 g4!

The pawn will support the pieces and can later be exchanged for the h-pawn to give Fischer a passed pawn.

22...a4 23 Nf3 axb3 24 axb3 Kg7 25 g5 e5 26 Nh4 Bd7

This is necessary to stop the knight reaching d6 via f5.

27 Rd6 Be6 28 Kf2 Kf7 29 Rb6 Re7 30 e4



With the black rook tied to defending b7, Fischer fixes e5: also weak because the bishop cannot defend it.

30...dxe4 31 dxe4 c4 32 b4 Bg4 33 Ke3

Typical Fischer pragmatism, centralising the king and getting it off the open file before making his pawn break. Here a computer program like Fritz5 would claim that 33 Nf5+ is the winning move but why exchange pieces when the knight (although temporarily “on the rim”) is the superior piece?

33 Rd7 34 g6+ Kf8 35 gxh7 Rxh7 36 Ng6+ Ke8 37 Nxe5 Bc8 38 Nxc4 Kd8 39 Nd6 Rg7 40 Kf2 Kc7 41 Nxc8 Kxc8 42 Rd6 1-0

Here is the crucial game from the 1972 match where Fischer opened his account:

Spassky - Fischer

Reykjavik Wch (3), 1972

Modern Benoni [A77]

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 c5

In the days when world title matches were contested by the likes of Botvinnik, Smyslov and Petrosian, only “politically correct” moves like 3 d5, 3 b6 or 3 Bb4+ would have been countenanced here. Fischer, however, was never afraid to play the sharpest opening lines like the Najdorf Sicilian or Modern Benoni because he had studied them in greater depth, probably, than anybody else in the world. His move-order route to the Benoni should be noted.

4 d5 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 Nc3 g6 7 Nd2 Nbd7 8 e4 Bg7 9 Be2 0-0 10 0-0 Re8 11 Qc2 Nh5!?



The move of the match, perhaps: yet again Fischer, unaffected by dogma, plays his knight to the h-file. In the Palma interzonal he had selected 11 Ne5



against Gligoric but an antidote had since been discovered. The dilemma for Spassky is (since it is undesirable to allow the knight into f4) that he can damage Fischer's pawn but only at the cost of giving up the bishop-pair.

12 Bxh5 gxh5 13 Nc4

13 b3 has also been seen but is not clearly better.

13...Ne5 14 Ne3 Qh4

This is Fischer's active idea but Psakhis suggested 14 Ng4! in his book "The Complete Benoni."

15 Bd2

Spassky drifts into trouble. Psakhis says White should play 15 Ne2 Ng4 16 Nxg4 hxg4 17 Ng3 Be5 18 Bd2 with some advantage.

15...Ng4 16 Nxg4 hxg4 17 Bf4

Here 17 Ne2 was definitely superior.

17...Qf6 18 g3?

As 18 Qd2 could be answered by 18 b5 the right move is probably 18 Bg3 with ideas of opening the f-file. Now Spassky's king position becomes a serious weakness which Fischer methodically sets out to exploit.

18 Bd7 19 a4 b6 20 Rfe1 a6 21 Re2 b5!



22 Rae1

After 22 axb5 axb5 23 Rxa8 Rxa8, the typical anti-Benoni breakthrough 24 e5 fails to 24 Ra1+ 25 Kg2 dx5 26 Rxe5 b4 27 Ne4 Qa6 with the winning threat of Qf1.

22...Qg6 23 b3 Re7 24 Qd3 Rb8 25 axb5 axb5

Black now threatens to win the exchange by 26 b4 and 27 Bb5.

26 b4 c4 27 Qd2 Rbe8 28 Re3 h5



As White is now completely under restraint, Fischer can seek a winning plan at leisure. He probes the kingside.

29 R3e2 Kh7 30 Re3 Kg8 31 R3e2 Bxc3

More pragmatism: Black gives up the apparently



strong fianchettoed bishop for the knight to win a pawn although this leaves opposite colored bishops and gives White a couple of temporary threats.

32 Qxc3 Rxe4 33 Rxe4 Rxe4 34 Rxe4 Qxe4 35 Bh6 Qg6 36 Bc1 Qb1 37 Kf1 Bf5 38 Ke2 Qe4+ 39

Qe3 Qc2+ 40 Qd2 Qb3 41 Qd4 Bd3+ 0-1

Black sealed the bishop check and on resumption after overnight analysis, Spassky resigned when he saw the move. If 42 Ke3 (to avoid losing the b-pawn with check) 42 Qd1 43 Bb2 Qe1+ 44 Kf4 Qd2+ wins the bishop.

The 1992 Spassky-Fischer match was not on the same level, with Spassky well below his 1972 standard in most games (although he led at one stage). The match was 90 percent media hype, but it still saw some good play, particularly from Fischer who produced a few opening novelties. Game 11 was good fun:

Fischer - Spassky

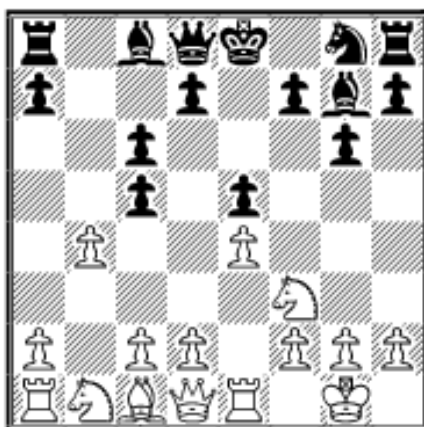
Sveti Stefan m (11), 1992

Sicilian Defence [B31]

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 g6 4 Bxc6

This used to be postponed but by 1992 the immediate exchange was becoming the trend. The main point is that if Black recaptures with the d-pawn White can delay castling and adopt a plan based on 5 h3 (to avoid ...Bg4).

4 bxc6 5 0-0 Bg7 6 Re1 e5 7 b4!?



A new Wing Gambit-style move that succeeded dramatically. The normal plan was 7 c3 Ne7 8 d4. In Game 13 Spassky played 6 f6!? the ingenious to avoid a repetition of this line.

7 cxb4 8 a3 c5

If 8...bxa3 White could try 9 Bxa3 or 9 Nxa3!?) 9... d6 10 d4 exd4 11 e5 to open the centre.

9 axb4 cxb4 10 d4 exd4

If 10 d6 White gets strong play for his sacrificed material by 11 c3! bxc3 12 dxe5 dxe5 13 Qc2 with follow-ups like Ba3, Red1 and Nxc3-d5.

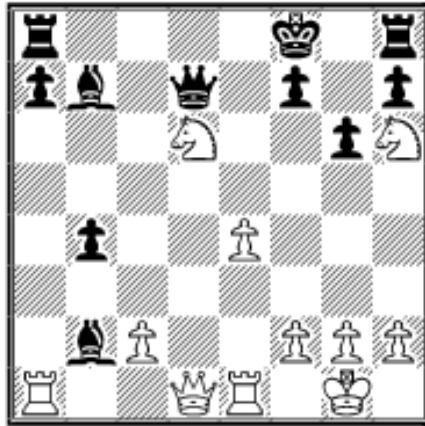
11 Bb2 d6 12 Nxd4 Qd7 13 Nd2 Bb7?

The losing move; chances are about equal with 13 Ne7 whereas now the black king is caught in the centre.

14 Nc4 Nh6 15 Nf5! Bxb2

Not 15...Nxf5?, as 16 exf5 is check.

16 Ncxd6+ Kf8 17 Nxb6



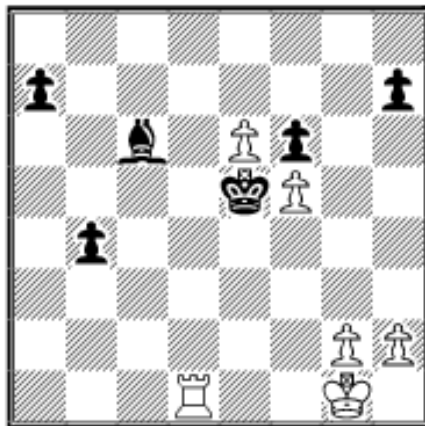
17...f6?

Here 17...Bxa1 18 Qxa1 obviously looks horrible, but Black could fight on by 18 Qxd6 19 Qxh8+ Ke7 20 Qxh7 Qe6. Now White has a dream attack.

18 Ndf7! Qxd1 19 Raxd1 Ke7 20 Nxb8 Rxb8 21 Nf5+ gxf5 22 exf5+ Be5

If 22...Kf8 23 Rd8+ Kg7 24 Re7+.

23 f4 Rc8 24 fxe5 Rxc2 25 e6! Bc6 26 Rc1 Rxc1 27 Rxc1 Kd6 28 Rd1+ Ke5



If 28...Ke7 29 Ra1 b3 30 Rxa7+ and the rook easily copes with the b-pawn.

29 e7 a5 30 Rc1 Bd7 31 Rc5+ Kd4 32 Rxa5 b3 33 Ra7 Be8 34 Rb7 Kc3 35 Kf2 b2 36 Ke3 Bf7 37 g4 Kc2 38 Kd4 b1Q 39 Rxb1 Kxb1 40 Kc5 Kc2 41 Kd6 1-0

Black resigned in view of 41 Be8 42 Ke6 and Kxf6 etc.

The 1992 match was played to the rules he had wanted for the 1975 Karpov contest that never was.

Fischer won by the margin of 10 wins to 5, with 15 draws, to earn a \$3.35 million purse. He moved to Hungary and has not played another competitive game in the five years since.

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