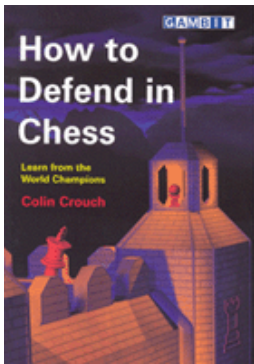




## SKITTLES ROOM

### From the Archives

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



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### From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

### A Passionate Defender

Larry Tapper

*How to Defend in Chess: Learn from the World Champions* by Colin Crouch, 2000  
Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 223pp., \$19.95 (Reissued by Gambit in 2007)

*How to Defend in Chess* begins with a simple and undeniable premise:

“Winning” is probably a more common word than “chess” in the titles of chess books. Yet “not losing” is just as important; defensive skill is an essential part of any strong player’s repertoire.

Writing a book about defensive technique presents a formidable challenge, however. It is easy enough to collect examples of winning strategies in the middlegame mating attacks, pawn storms, and so on. But it is not so easy to categorize strategies for surviving bad positions. One may even argue that the ability to defend has as much to do with character as technique.

International master Colin Crouch has solved this problem in an admirably effective way by focusing on the efforts of two players who were known for their defensive prowess: Emanuel Lasker and Tigran Petrosian. The author provides long and detailed expositions of twenty defensive struggles, ten by each champion. There are also several supplementary games, which serve a variety of purposes but are chosen mainly for some thematic connection to the featured games.

One pleasing by-product of the author’s conception is a book that will be of substantial interest to chess history buffs, even those who don’t particularly feel the need to brush up on their defensive skills. *How to Defend in Chess* is not merely a how-to guide; it is also an absorbing exercise in unconventional biography. Naturally most chess biographies highlight their subjects’ most familiar triumphs; so it is interesting to see a great player’s career traced through his toughest defensive challenges. The effect is somewhat like reading military history from the infantryman’s point of view rather than the general’s. In this book there is no trace of the customary illusion of invincibility.

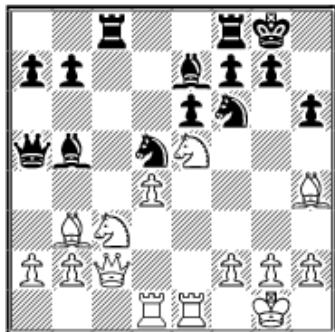
The featured games are presented in chronological order. The Lasker section begins with his celebrated victory over Pillsbury at Hastings 1895 and ends with the 66-year-old grandmaster holding a nasty-looking position against Spielmann at Moscow 1935. The Petrosian games also cover a long span, from a wild game with Smyslov at the 1951 Soviet championship to a difficult Ruy against Tal in the same tournament twenty-four years later. Each lesson is preceded by a few introductory paragraphs placing the featured game in historical context.

The author might have chosen to stay resolutely on course, answering only those questions that shed light on the main topic: What did Lasker and Petrosian contribute to the art of defense? What were their distinctive styles? What can we learn from their games? Crouch, however, could not resist the challenge of tackling all sorts of interesting questions that came up in the course of his research; and for this most of us will be thankful. The author’s

passionate interest in all chess matters shines through on every page.

Most notably, Crouch scrupulously reexamines received opinions about positions that have been analyzed by previous writers. For example, Game L9 is Euwe-Lasker, Zurich 1934, a nice win on the black side of the Orthodox QGD in which Lasker exploited minute weaknesses and his control of d5. The supplementary game (much more famous) is another successfully defended QGD, the tenth game in the 1921 Lasker-Capablanca match. If you've read a few chess books, you'll probably recognize the position after move sixteen:

Crouch comments:



So far, White is doing quite well, but Lasker now completely mishandled the exchanges of minor pieces with **17 Bxd5?** and Capablanca won famously...

Réti (in *Modern Ideas in Chess*) lavishly praised some analysis by Breyer which recommended 17 Bxf6 (!! Réti) 17...Bxf6 (17...Nxf6? 18 Ng6! Rfe8 19 Rxe6 fxe6 20 Bxe6+ Kh7 21 Nf8++ Kh8 22 Qh7+ Nxh7 23 Ng6#) 18 Bxd5 exd5, and White may consider either 19 Ng4 (Breyer; subsequent analysis suggested then 19...Bg5 20 f4 Bh4! 21 g3 Bd8 22 Qf5 Rxc3! with unclear play)

or 19 Qf5. Marovic (in *Play the Queen's Gambit*) suggests that 19...Bc6 is good enough for equality after the queen move (e.g. 20 Ng4 Bg5 21 f4 g6, or 20 Nd7?! Bxd7 21 Qxd7 Rfd8). But White surely has no need to panic over Black's ineffective bishop-pair; quiet but firm play with 20 Re3 should keep an advantage. To the modern player, the remarkable feature of Breyer's analysis of 17 Bxf6 is that the move should ever have been thought of as anything out of the ordinary. White's natural course of action is surely to stabilize the pawn-structure in the centre, and to ensure that Black too has to defend an isolated queen's pawn; Bxf6, eliminating one of the defenders of d5, is a logical part of this plan. Indeed, the Bxf6 exchange is now standard in various Queen's Gambit positions... An interesting example of how our understanding of positional play has evolved over the generations.

Somewhat digressive, but a very nice piece of work anyway.

When it comes to explaining the main topic the art of defense Crouch follows fairly conventional lines, though he continues to be wary about accepting received opinions uncritically. According to Crouch, Steinitz laid the foundations of modern defensive play by demonstrating the unsoundness of unprepared attacks and promoting the avoidance of weaknesses. Lasker learned these lessons from Steinitz, but Lasker's special knack was not so much avoiding bad positions as knowing how to play them, setting the hardest possible problems for his opponents. Finally Petrosian was the great master of Nimzovitchian prophylaxis, taking appropriate measures at the slightest hint of trouble.

Crouch is particularly fond of the insight (which he credits to Steinitz) that it helps to think of the board not as a single battleground, but as a collection of potentially strong and weak sectors. The general idea is to defend weak sectors with the most economical possible means so that you can attack elsewhere. As he puts it:

An important modification needs to be made to the received version of the Steinitz teachings, which suggest that you should attack when you are better and defend when you are worse. You must also attack where you are better, and defend where you are worse. If, when you are under pressure on one side of the board, you decline to create pressure on the other side of the board, then you will lose the initiative on that side of the board, and the attacker will dominate the game.

In addition to the extensive concrete analysis, *How to Defend* offers copious portions of such general maxims, typically set off by italics. This sets Crouch apart from many modern writers who tend to be shy about generalizing.

It's hard to say whether the author's teaching approach is entirely successful. Many of the featured game annotations strike me as being very much in the style of club lectures, in which the lecturer faces the daunting task of holding the interest of an audience ranging from masters to duffers. Crouch does not assume a great deal of knowledge on the reader's part; but on the other hand he has attempted to get to the bottom of difficult positions that have baffled previous annotators.

A good example of the author's style is his commentary on the game Dückstein-Petrosian, Varna 1962. The introductory comments set the stage in a typically interesting way:

The first two featured games ... show Petrosian playing adventurously in the opening, getting into trouble, and using great resourcefulness in escaping... As Petrosian's play matured, and as it became more realistic for him to think about launching a serious assault on the supreme title, he paid more attention to the question of how to avoid getting into bad positions in the first place...

This ultra-minimalist approach carried Petrosian through both the Stockholm Interzonal (+8 =14) and the Curacao Candidates (+8 =19) without defeat, and qualified him to play a match against Botvinnik. After these heavy-duty events, the Varna olympiad must almost have come as light relief. In those days, the question was not whether the Soviet team would win, but by what margin.... It was just this margin of skill that meant that Petrosian could not content himself with draws. The need to score some victories forced him to adopt a more open and provocative style of play. The following game against an Austrian master, which has been used in several textbooks, shows aspects of both the young Petrosian and the iron Tigran; there is a fascinating mix of provocation and prophylaxis.

In the game Petrosian played a rather provocative side variation of the Caro-Kann, castling queenside. The move that drew the most attention came after White's move eighteen:

In the diagrammed position Petrosian played **18...a5!!**, evidently breaking the rule that one shouldn't make weakening pawn moves on one's own king's wing. Crouch comments:



So why should this position be an exception? What was going through Petrosian's mind?

If we were to forget about Black's king, and imagine it safely tucked away on the kingside somewhere, then ...a5 would seem a perfectly natural reaction on the queenside...It is only natural that Black should want to challenge the pawn on b4, to knock away the support from the c5-pawn. Only the position of the king makes ...a5 seem, superficially at least, unnatural. Yet Steinitz also taught us that the king is a

strong defensive piece, able to guard all adjoining squares, and can look after himself particularly, we might add, if he has the support of queen, rook, bishop, and a couple of pawns.

An additional factor that helps Black is that the centre is completely open, with Black having the better grip on the four central squares. It is in the centre and near-centre of the board that pieces are at their most manoeuvrable, with simultaneous influence on both sides of the board. This applies particularly to the diagonal-moving pieces...The black queen on c7 protects the vital square b7, yet also adds to the pressure against the white kingside... A black bishop on c5 would guard various critical approaches to the black king, and also attack White's f2. Both pieces also give support to the possibility of creating a knight outpost on d4. A centralized knight on a fifth-rank outpost works on both flanks as well as in the centre.

The point of Petrosian's 18...a5! is not to defend the king. Rather, it is to break White's pawn-roller so he can take control of the centre, the first stage in the ultimate objective of dominating the whole board. It is an inspired defensive move because it is an inspired attacking move.

If this were a club lecture, at this point I'd expect a quick scan of the audience to reveal some gratefully attentive beginners, some yawning veterans, and a variety of reactions in between. But wait! There's much more!

The game continued **19 Rad1 Rxd1 20 Rxd1** and here Petrosian played **20...Rh4**, a dubious move according to Crouch. Dückstein, however, failed to exploit this slight inaccuracy. Crouch thinks that instead of **21 bxa5**, Dückstein should have tried the interesting centralizing maneuver **21 Qd3!**, a move overlooked by previous annotators such as Clarke and Vasiliev. Crouch provides a good deal of compelling analysis in support of this discovery. Here is an excerpt:

If Black ignores the centre, then White must capture the centre! In view of the various threats on d8, and in view of **21...Be7?!** being a probable loss of tempo in later play, **21...Ka7** is critical. Then **22 Nxg5!**, and now:

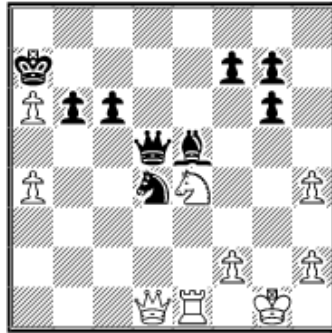
1) **22...Qxh2+ 23 Kf1 gxf5 24 Qd8 Qh1+ 25 Ke2 Re4+ 26 Kd2 Qxg2!** Now it is

obvious that White has an easy draw if he wants it, which is enough to show the superiority of 21 Qd3! over the move chosen, but it is not so clear he can play for more...

So now the veterans are all ears and the beginners are starting to look puzzled. And there's still more to come, the game analysis concludes with a long philosophical note that could puzzle or inspire anybody.

After 21 bxa5 Bxc5 22 a6 b6 23 Re1 Ka7 24 Be5 Qd7 25 Ne4 Bd4 26 g3? [26 a5!] Bxe5! 27 gxh4 Nd4 28 Qd1 Qd5, Petrosian found himself comfortably in control:

Here Crouch observes:



This whole game is puzzling if one is used to thinking of central control as a permanent asset. All through the game the appearance is given that one of the players tries to control the center, then relinquishes the centre, which the opponent then temporarily takes over, then abandons. The whole question makes more sense if one sees the chess struggle not as a seamless whole but rather as a series of multiple skirmishes across a geographically differentiated chessboard... While both players recognize the need to keep a presence in the centre, the game will be strategically decided on the

flanks, where the potentially decisive weaknesses are...

So what of the centre? The point is that the centre is a reservoir of strength for pieces located there, as such pieces may move to either flank at very short notice. On several occasions, this reservoir has been drawn upon, as play has sharpened on one or other of the flanks. This gives the impression of the centre being unnecessarily abandoned, when in fact it is being used correctly. A situation has now been reached however, that we may say with only a little simplification of the truth that Black controls the centre. It is noticeable that Black does not actually win the game in the centre. Instead, his priority is to make the centre as secure as possible, to make it a permanent reservoir of strength, and then win the game on the flanks...

Here is a passage that could only have been written by someone who has read Nimzovitch and is not ashamed to admit it! These observations may be quite helpful to many readers, though: the "geographical" view of the board Crouch advocates may encourage players to think more creatively. On the other hand, I could imagine some readers asking themselves, what was that Crouch said about the center? Occupy it but then leave it if you actually want to do something? Or something like that?

In the end, I do not think that the unevenness and occasional obscurity of the presentation matter very much. As any club lecturer knows, you can't please everyone all the time. The important thing is the author's full engagement with the subject, which Crouch amply demonstrates throughout the book. Given the task at hand, the author could have gotten away with treating each game as a pat object lesson, an approach we have seen in too many chess books. Instead, he has gone in quite the opposite direction, viewing each game as a deep conundrum to be analyzed and pondered from every conceivable angle. The result is a fascinating book that delivers a great deal more than it promises.

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[Order](#) *How to Defend in Chess*  
by Colin Crouch

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