



BOOK REVIEWS

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Splendid Gems in Flawed Settings

Taylor Kingston

The 100 Best Chess Games of the 20th Century, Ranked, by GM Andrew Soltis, 2000 McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina USA, hardcover, English algebraic notation, 265 pp., \$45.00.

Though at the moment we are technically not quite done with the last 10% of the Common Era's second millennium, the recent rolling of all four digits on the Big Chronometer has prompted a spate of books, polls and articles on the theme of the

"Most/Greatest/Best/Biggest/Whateverest" chess players, events, moves, etc., of the 20th century. Our subject here is one of the

more ambitious entries in this genre. As is usual with McFarland products, it is a handsome, clothbound volume, nicely printed, almost "coffee table" quality. Prominent in front is a large gold "100" that seems to say "This is an **Important Book**."



Perhaps this hint of ostentation made me more than normally wary of "judging a book by its cover." Thus I felt I should give it an especially thorough examination. To the author's credit, this was in many ways an interesting, enjoyable, instructive task, and rarely boring. In some ways it is a highly successful work; in particular it achieves its primary goal, of finding and presenting great games. On the other hand, there are some notable lacks and disappointments, and grounds to doubt some of its conclusions. Prior to writing this review, I noticed some newsgroup postings that indicated an above-average level of interest in the book. To address those, and for the reason stated above, this will be a fairly lengthy review.

Unlike another such recent book, John Emms' *The Most Amazing Chess Moves of All Time*, in *The 100 Best* Soltis tries to evaluate whole games, and not just for single-move surprise value, but for their overall excellence. Also unlike Emms, Soltis seems to have done a substantial amount of first-hand research, going through many magazines (primarily *Informant*, the *British Chess Magazine*, and *Chess Life*), plus



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numerous game collections and tournament books (the bibliography lists 65), dating from 1900 to 2000. From these he selected a starting base of 7,000 games, all of which "had previously gained some attention, if not celebrity status". Soltis played over all of these, winnowing them down to 300 semi-finalists.

An evaluation of these 300 was then done according to five at least partially objective criteria: **(1) Overall Aesthetic Quality**. Perhaps the least definable quality, entailing beauty, "sparkle and energy," and an absence of their opposites to any significant degree. A game with a brilliant combination but a poor prelude (e.g. the Levitsky-Marshall "Gold Pieces" game), or a poor denouement, scores poorly. This also entails economy; Soltis deducts for dawdling or irrelevant flash when a decision could be forced more directly. **(2) Originality**, "to reward what is creative and ingenious, and not mechanical and imitative." This can be relative, the innovation of 1920 being stock technique in 1990. **(3) Level of Opposition**. This refers not to titles or ratings but quality of play. A game in which an unknown rises to once-in-a-lifetime greatness counts more than one in which Kasparov plays badly. Many potentially great games end prematurely due to poor resistance by the loser. **(4) Soundness, Accuracy, Difficulty**. The winner of a great game should make few if any unsound or second-best moves, and should have difficult obstacles to overcome. **(5) Breadth and Depth**. Ideally, "a great game is a series of sparkling, intriguing ideas, with no dry patches." This rules out most miniatures (no space to develop ideas) and most very long games ("dry patches" of wood-shifting). It also rewards games "in which many of the beautiful ideas occurred only in unplayed variations rejected by an accurate defender".

To the 300 semi-finalists Soltis gave a score from 1 to 20 on each criterion. A "perfect" game would thus score 100 points. Before disclosing his top 100, Soltis first discusses the "most overrated games" and the "near misses." Among the former are Fischer-Tal, Leipzig Olympiad 1960 (too many mistakes); Sämisch-Nimzovich, Copenhagen 1923 (the "Immortal Zugzwang Game," inflated by the winner's hype); Lasker-Napier, Cambridge Springs 1904 (tactical errors only found years later); Réti-Bogolyubov, New York 1924 ("Black's play is dreadful"); and Lasker-Capablanca, St. Petersburg 1914, which "derives much of its reputation from the situation under which it was played". The near misses include Capablanca-Janowski, San Sebastian 1911 (late meltdown reverses won game); Kotov-Matanovic, Stockholm 1952 (loser's blunder precludes wonderful combinational opportunity); and Ivanovic-Cebalo, Yugoslavia 1986 (brilliant game lost by time-forfeit). Some other candidates were rejected due to doubts about their authenticity, e.g. the apocryphal Adams-Torre 1920, or Botvinnik-Chekhov,

Moscow 1935, which is suspected of being a composed game.

Thus the 300 became 100. With little further ado, we give you here what probably no other review will: the full list. In keeping with the principle of saving the best for last, we present them in ascending order (the reverse of the book), and give the contestants, venue, year, result, number of moves, and the game's "Soltis score."

- 100.** Mason-Janowski, Monte Carlo 1902, 1-0, 65. Score: 71
- 99.** Stean-Browne, Nice Olympiad, 1974, 1-0, 32. Score: 72
- 98.** Janowski-Tarrasch, Ostende 1905, 1-0, 37. Score: 73
- 97.** Capablanca-Treybal, Carlsbad 1929, 1-0, 58. Score: 73
- 96.** Lazard-Gibaud, Paris 1909,1-0, 25. Score: 73
- 95.** Fischer-Tal, Curaçao 1962,1-0, 63. Score: 75
- 94.** Szabó-Botvinnik, Budapest 1952, ½-½, 78. Score: 75
- 93.** Rubinstein-Hromádka, Mährisch-Ostrau 1923, 1-0, 29. Score: 75
- 92.** Duras-Teichmann, Ostende 1906, 1-0, 64. Score: 76
- 91.** Tal-Hecht, Varna Olympiad 1962, 1-0, 49. Score: 76
- 90.** Ilivitsky-Polugaevsky, Russian Federation Championship 1953, 0-1, 44. Score: 76
- 89.** Karpov-Kasparov, World Championship match, Moscow, 1985, 0-1, 40. Score: 77
- 88.** Gligoric-Petrosian, Belgrade 1954, 1-0, 36. Score: 77
- 87.** H. Olafsson-Levitt, Reykjavik 1990, 1-0, 28. Score: 77
- 86.** Rubinstein-Spielmann, San Sebastian 1912, 0-1, 42. Score: 77
- 85.** Idígoras-Panno, Mar del Plata 1955, 1-0, 48. Score: 78
- 84.** Szabó-Benko, Costa Brava 1975, 1-0, 77. Score: 78
- 83.** Tarrasch-Spielmann, San Sebastian 1912, 0-1, 32. Score: 78
- 82.** Keres-Reshevsky, Zürich-Neuhausen Candidates 1953, ½-½, 41. Score: 78
- 81.** Geller-Karpov, Soviet Championship, Moscow 1976, 1-0, 47. Score: 78
- 80.** Ivanchuk-Yusupov, Candidates Match, Brussels 1991, 0-1, 39. Score: 78

- 79.** Kasparov-Shirov, Horgen 1994, 1-0, 38. Score: 78
- 78.** Petrosian-Gligoric, Rovinj-Zagreb 1970, 0-1, 33. Score: 78
- 77.** Nimzovich-Rubinstein, Berlin 1928, 1-0, 32. Score: 78
- 76.** Petrosian-Unzicker, USSR-West Germany match, Hamburg 1960, 1-0, 55. Score: 79
- 75.** Botvinnik-Portisch, Monte Carlo 1968, 1-0, 26. Score: 79
- 74.** Bogolyubov-Monticelli, San Remo 1930, 0-1, 38. Score: 79
- 73.** Ivkov-Portisch, Bled 1961, 1-0, 36. Score: 79
- 72.** Lilienthal-Capablanca, Hastings 1934/5, 1-0, 26. Score: 79
- 71.** Grünfeld-Alekhine, Carlsbad 1923, 0-1, 34. Score: 79
- 70.** Fischer-Spassky, match, Sveti Stefan 1992, 1-0, 41. Score: 80
- 69.** Tarrasch-Réti, Vienna 1922, 1-0, 40. Score: 80
- 68.** Smyslov-Kotov, Moscow Championship 1943/4, 1-0, 42. Score: 80
- 67.** Nimzovich-Rubinstein, Dresden 1926, 1-0, 46. Score: 80
- 66.** Larsen-Petrosian, 2nd Piatigorsky Cup, Santa Monica 1966, 1-0, 29. Score: 80
- 65.** Nezhmetdinov-Chernikov, Russian Federation Team Championship 1962, 1-0, 33. Score: 80
- 64.** Taimanov-Polugaevsky, Soviet Championship, Leningrad 1960, 1-0, 23. Score: 81
- 63.** Marshall-Tchigorin, Ostende 1905, 1-0, 30. Score: 81
- 62.** Spielmann-Eliskases, match, 1932, 0-1, 32. Score: 81
- 61.** Capablanca-Bernstein, St. Petersburg 1914, 1-0, 46. Score: 81
- 60.** Portisch-Kavalek, Wijk aan Zee 1975, ½-½, 38. Score: 81
- 59.** Shashin-Korchnoi, Leningrad Championship 1973, 1-0, 35. Score: 81
- 58.** Tarrasch-Teichmann, Ostende 1905, 1-0, 68. Score: 81
- 57.** Polugaevsky-E. Torre, Moscow 1981, 1-0, 40. Score: 81

- 56.** Capablanca-Tartakower, New York 1924, 1-0, 52. Score: 81
- 55.** Euwe-Keres, match, Rotterdam 1939/40, 0-1, 34. Score: 81
- 54.** Tolush-Botvinnik, Soviet Championship, Moscow 1945, 0-1, 40. Score: 82
- 53.** Alekhine-Böök, Margate 1938, 1-0, 25. Score: 82
- 52.** Capablanca-Nimzovich, Bad Kissingen 1928, ½-½, 39. Score: 82
- 51.** Short-Timman, Tilburg 1991, 1-0, 34. Score: 82
- 50.** Réti-Rubinstein, Carlsbad 1923, 1-0, 50. Score: 82
- 49.** Polugaevsky-Ftácnik, Lucerne 1982, 0-1, 29. Score: 82
- 48.** Taimanov-Psakhis, National Team Tournament, Moscow 1981, 0-1, 35. Score: 82
- 47.** Kholmov-Keres, Soviet Championship, Tbilisi 1959, 1-0, 29. Score: 82
- 46.** Gelfand-Dreev, Tilburg 1993, 0-1, 44. Score: 82
- 45.** Rubinstein-Em. Lasker, St. Petersburg 1909, 1-0, 40. Score: 82
- 44.** Euwe-Najdorf, Zürich-Neuhausen Candidates 1953, 1-0, 37. Score: 82
- 43.** Alatortsev-Boleslavsky, Soviet Championship, Moscow 1950, 0-1, 27. Score: 83
- 42.** Kasparov-Anand, World Championship Match, New York 1995, 1-0, 38. Score: 83
- 41.** Bronstein-Ljubojevic, Petropolis Interzonal 1973, 1-0, 41. Score: 83
- 40.** Botvinnik-Vidmar, Groningen 1946, 1-0, 60. Score: 83
- 39.** Petrosian-Spassky, World Championship Match, Moscow 1966, 1-0, 30. Score: 83
- 38.** Flohr-Rellstab, Hastings 1931/2, 1-0, 36. Score: 83
- 37.** Korchnoi-Tal, Soviet Championship, Erevan 1962, 1-0, 54. Score: 83
- 36.** Atalik-Miles, Iraklion 1993, 0-1, 30. Score: 83
- 35.** Spassky-Polugaevsky, Soviet Championship, Baku 1961, 1-0, 42. Score: 83
- 34.** Szabó-Sigurjónsson, Reykjavik 1968, 0-1, 40. Score: 83

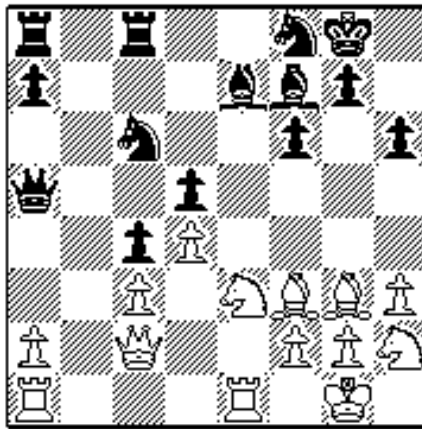
33. Alekhine-Yates, Carlsbad 1923, 0-1, 50. Score: 83
32. Spassky-Bronstein, Soviet Championship, Leningrad 1960, 1-0, 23. Score: 83
31. Thorbergsson-Tal, Reykjavik 1964, 0-1, 39. Score: 84
30. Bisguier-Benko, US Championship, New York 1963/4, 0-1, 31. Score: 84
29. Kasparov-Smirin, Soviet Championship, Moscow 1988, 1-0, 41. Score: 84
28. D. Byrne-Fischer, New York 1956, 0-1, 41. Score: 85
27. Maróczy-Tartakower, Teplitz-Schönau 1922, 0-1, 35. Score: 85
26. R. Byrne-Fischer, US Championship, New York 1963/4, 0-1, 21. Score: 85
25. Karpov-Kasparov, Linares 1993, 0-1, 27. Score: 85
24. Keres-Dyckhoff, European Correspondence Olympiad 1935/36, ½-½, 55. Score: 85
23. Gligoric-Fischer, Bled 1961, ½-½, 33. Score: 85
22. Chekover-Kasparyan, match, Erevan 1936, 0-1, 36. Score: 85
21. Botvinnik-Capablanca, AVRO 1938, 1-0, 41. Score: 85
20. Réti-Alekhine, Baden-Baden 1925, 0-1, 40. Score: 85
19. Ivkov-Ciric, Yugoslav Championship, Zenica 1953, 1-0, 41. Score: 86
18. Larsen-Spassky, USSR vs. Rest of the World, Belgrade 1970, 0-1, 17. Score: 86
17. Portisch-Pintér, Hungarian Championship 1984, 0-1, 33. Score: 86
16. Johner-Nimzovich, Dresden 1926, 0-1, 40. Score: 86
15. Johansson-Tegelman-Rey Ardid, Sweden-Spain correspondence match 1933/35, 1-0, 47. Score: 87
14. Lazarevic-Gaprindashvili, Women's Candidates, Vrnjacka-Banja 1961, 0-1, 33. Score: 87
13. Geller-Smyslov, Candidates Match, Moscow 1965, 1-0, 31. Score: 87
12. Tal-Aronin, Soviet Championship, Moscow 1957, ½-½, 36. Score: 87
11. Botvinnik-Smyslov, World Championship Match, Moscow 1954, 0-1, 33. Score: 87

10. Rotlewi-Rubinstein, Lodz 1907/8, 0-1, 25. Score: 87
9. Tal-Hjartarson, Reykjavik 1987, 1-0, 43. Score: 88
8. Stoltz-H. Steiner, Stockholm Interzonal 1952, 1-0, 34. Score: 87
7. Gufeld-Kavalek, Student Olympiad, Mariánske Lázně 1962, 0-1, 32. Score: 88
6. Lilienthal-Ragozin, Moscow 1935, 0-1, 47. Score: 88
5. Kasparov-Topalov, Wijk aan Zee 1999, 1-0, 44. Score: 89
4. Bogolyubov-Alekhine, Hastings 1922, 0-1, 53. Score: 89
3. Capablanca-Marshall, New York 1918, 1-0, 36. Score: 91
2. Polugaevsky-Nezhmetdinov, Russian Federation Championship, Sochi 1958, 0-1, 33. Score: 92
1. Estrin-Berliner, World Correspondence Championship 1965/8, 0-1, 42. Score: 92

(Note: Soltis applied no tie-breakers. For games of the same score, order is arbitrary and not to be considered significant. Thus #1 and #2 are actually "co-winners." There is at least one error in the ranking or scoring: the game at #9, Tal-Hjartarson 1987, has a score of 88, yet #8, Stoltz-Steiner 1952, has an 87. Either they were switched in the rankings or a score is misprinted.)

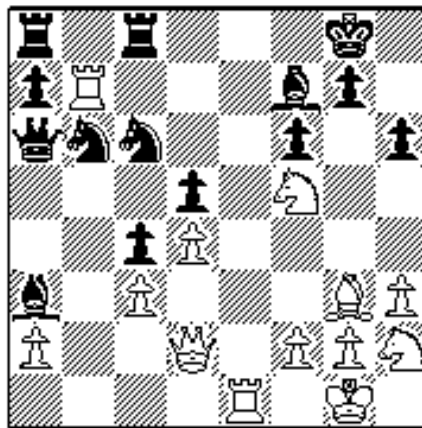
The list is not actually presented this way in the book. Instead, starting with #1, Soltis presents each game in full with annotations, preceded by an introduction (usually brief biographical notes on the players) and followed by its score on each of the five factors. Each game gets on average about 2¼ pages.

While there will surely be argument over the ranking of particular games, there can be little doubt that on the whole this is a list of greatness. Even the "last-place" games show brilliance and subtle niceties of calculation. For example at this point in #98, Janowski-Tarrasch, Ostende 1905 (*See Diagram*),



it looks like White can win a pawn with 27 Nxc4 dxc4 28 Bxc6 Rxc6 29 Rxe7. However, Janowski saw that instead of 27...dxc4 Black could play 27...Qa6! 28 Ne3 Nxd4. Therefore he played the quiet **27 Qd2**, truly activating the threat of 28 Nxc4, and after **27...Ba3 28 Rab1 Nd7**

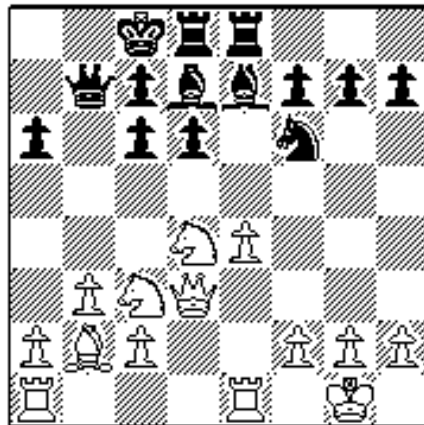
29 Rb7! Nb6 30 Nf5 Qa6 (See Diagram),



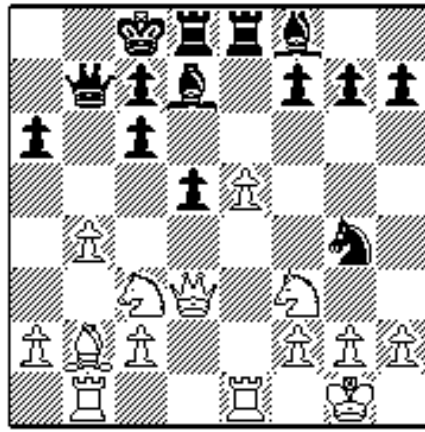
Janowski unleashed a decisive combination: **31 Nxh6+! gxh6 32 Rxf7! Kxf7 33 Qxh6 Kg8** (33... Ne7 34 Bh5+; 33...Bf8 34 Bh5+ Kg8 35 Qxf6 Nd8 36 Re8) **34 Qg6+ Kg8 35 Qxf6+ Kg8 36 Qg6+ Kh8 37 Re5!**, 1-0.

And here is game #100, Mason-Janowski,

Monte Carlo 1902 (See Diagram).

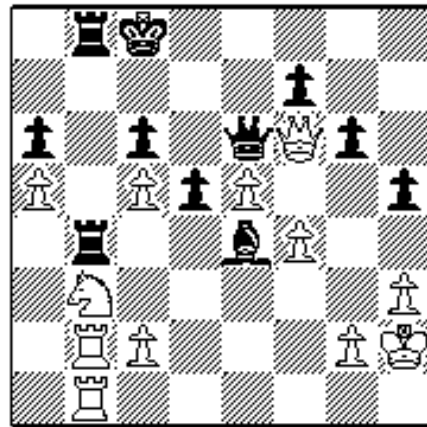


To prevent Black from expanding by ...c6-c5, White played **14 b4!**, seeing that if 14...Qxb4 15 Qxa6+ Qb7 16 Qd3 Qxb2? 17 Rab1 Qa3 18 Rb3 Qa7 19 Reb1 Be6 20 Nxc6 wins. Play continued **14...Bf8 15 Rab1 d5 16 e5! Ng4 17 Nf3** (See Diagram).



either 25 Na5 or Nc5+) **24 Nxc6**. Eventually the game arrived at this position (*See Diagram*),

Now "not 17...Bxb4 because after 18 h3 Nh6 19 Ba1 the Black bishop is pinned and threatened by 20 a3, e.g. 19...Bf5 20 Qe2 d4 21 a3 with a strong attack." White then won a pawn after **17...g6 18 h3 Bf5 19 Qd2 Nh6 20 a3 Ng8 21 Nd4! Be6 22 Na4 Nh6 23 Qc3! Nf5** (23...Kd7 24 Nb3 and



these are among the "worst" games of the collection shows the level of quality here.

whereupon Mason concluded brilliantly with **48 Qh8+ Kd7 49 Nd4!! Rxb2 50 Qxb8!! Rxb8 51 Rxb8 Kc7 52 Nxe6+ Kxb8 53 Nd4 Kc7 54 g4 h4 55 c3 Kd7 56 Kg1 Kc7 57 Kf2 Kd7 58 f5 gxf5 59 gxf5 Kc7 60 Ke3! Bg2 61 Nf3 Bxh3 62 Nxh4 Bg4 63 Kf4 Be2 64 Nf3 Bxf3 65 Kxf3, 1-0**. That

Some choices are familiar: Byrne-Fischer 1956 (#28, the "Game of the Century"), Bogolyubov-Alekhine 1922 (#4, considered by Chernev the greatest game ever played), Capablanca-Marshall 1918 (#3, the famous debut of the Marshall gambit), Kasparov-Topalov 1999 (#5, a latter-day rival to Bogolyubov-Alekhine). Some are less well known, such as the correspondence games, and some are rather obscure: Nezhmetdinov-Chernikov (#65), Idígoras-Panno (#85), and Lazard-Gibaud (#96).

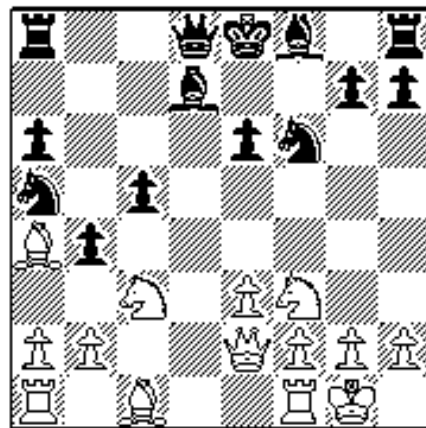
Estrin-Berliner at #1 may surprise many people outside correspondence chess, but in a recent poll by *Chess Mail* magazine it was chosen as the greatest postal game of all time. Since Soltis' scoring rewards factors which should be enhanced by slow postal time limits, I frankly find it surprising that there are not more correspondence games on the list. This may be due to the relatively smaller volume of postal play, or perhaps to a paucity of postal chess literature

in Soltis' bibliography.

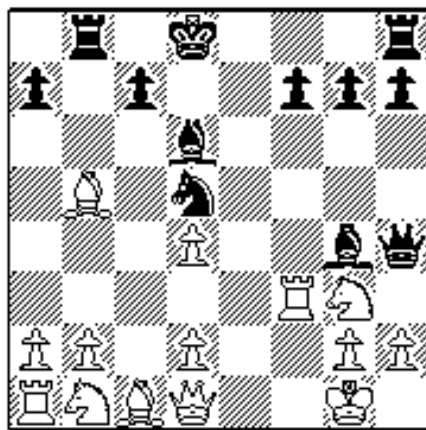
Most of the frequent names on the list: Rubinstein (7 times), Capablanca (7), Botvinnik (6), Fischer (6), Kasparov (6), Alekhine (5) are not surprising; all have reputations for depth, creativity, beauty, and near-perfect technique. It is also not surprising to see a good many highly erratic players: Spielmann, Yates, Janowski, Mason, Nezhmetdinov, who could lose to the worst but also beat the best on any given day. The relative absence of some other players likely will surprise. Emanuel Lasker shows up but once and Anatoly Karpov three times, but only as losers, while relative unknowns such as Mario Monticelli, Gregorio Idígoras and Alexander Shashin are winners. Frankly I like this; not only does it indicate that Soltis has done much research, but it is also encouraging to see an otherwise unremarkable player rising at least once to greatness.

Chessplayers being an argumentative lot, there will no doubt be much dispute over alleged wrongful over-ratings, under-ratings, omissions and inclusions. Off the top of my head I'll put in three cents' worth, wondering at the absence of Schlechter-John, Barmen 1905, Bogolyubov-Réti, Mährisch-Ostrau 1923, and perhaps Euwe-Lasker, Zurich 1934. However, every one of Soltis' choices that I played over was in some or many ways a wonderful game, so I see little point in quibbling.

Much of the annotation draws on previously published sources, though Soltis often adds his own comments. On the whole they are more than "light notes," but there is not great depth either. Lengthy variations are rarely given. Here, for example (*See Diagram*),



Alekhine-Böök,
Margate 1938, after 13
Rd1! we read "Black
cannot refuse the sack,
because 13...Qc7 14
Bxd7+ Nxd7 15 Ne4 is
ghastly. But 13 Ne5!
may be better."
Probably true, however
we are not told why. In
Estrin-Berliner, (*See
Diagram*)

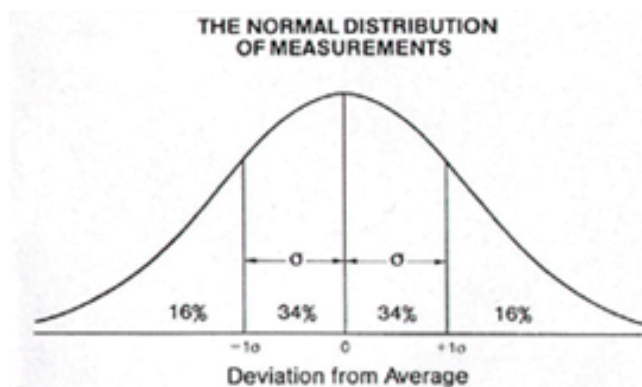


after 15 Be2?, Soltis writes "White's only error in the game. Subsequent testing indicated he should try to return material with 15 Nc3 Nxc3 16 dxc3 after which colossal complications follow 16...Rxb5 17 Qd3 Rh5." These complications are not discussed. However, it's clearly not Soltis'

intent to provide exhaustive annotation; this is a book to be read more for pleasure than Hübnerian rigor. The notes seem designed to invite the reader to analyze further on his own. Viewed that way, the book is a good combination of instruction and enjoyment.

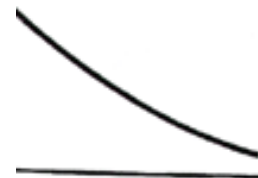
Having praised the book, now let me criticize it. First, two points about the scoring system, one minor, one major. Annotating Capablanca-Janowski, San Sebastian 1911, Soltis says "This gain-time-on-the-clock repetition is the first smudge on what could have been Janowsky's finest game." I do not agree. Aimless wood-shifting should be penalized, but an intentional repetition is not only practical time-management, but just as much an expression of control as a forcing line.

More importantly, there are statistical grounds to distrust the objectivity of the scores. As is well known, with a sufficiently large sample of people, a measurement of almost any common factor: height, weight, strength, speed, intelligence quotient, chess rating, etc., will tend to have a "normal" distribution. Depicted on a graph, this forms the so-called "bell curve" (see chart below, reproduced from Arpad Elo's *The Rating of Chessplayers*).

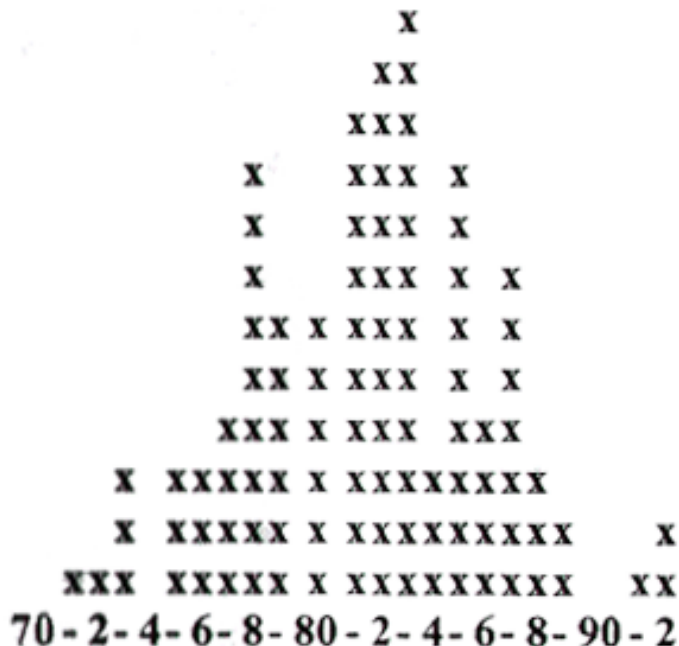


Scores on whatever is being measured increase from left to right. The high mid-point represents the mean, or average score. The vertical lines on either side represent the *standard deviation*. In a normal distribution, about 68% of the sample falls within one standard deviation above or below the norm; there are only a few individuals at the extremes, e.g. midgets and giants if we are measuring adult height. With chessplayers, there are a few hopeless patzers and a few grandmasters at either extreme, with the rest of us in between, most within Elo 1200 to 2000.

As with chess ratings, so with chess games. Most are mediocre, a mix of good and bad moves and ideas. Few are complete atrocities, a small number are masterpieces. It is that small number with which Soltis is dealing: the extreme right side of the bell curve. That means that if we truly have an objective measure of "greatness," the expected distribution of scores for the very greatest games does not have a bell shape, but approximates a wedge (see chart above right).



There should be an inverse correlation between a "greatness score" and the number of games achieving that score: the higher the score, the fewer games. There should be more games in, say, the 70-79 range than 80-89. However that is not what we see in *The 100*. Here is the distribution of their "Soltis scores" (see chart below).



Notice: we have, roughly, a bell curve, with a mean of about 82 and a standard deviation near 4, with the modal grouping almost exactly in the middle of the sample, and a pronounced thinning out to either side. This is contrary to statistical theory. With a sample of this size random variation to this extent is not impossible, but it is rather unlikely. The trend here would lead us to think that few or none of the original sample of 7,000 scored below 70, an obvious absurdity. More plausibly, there is some sort of bias in Soltis' scoring, perhaps an unconscious tropism toward a "Golden Mean" even where not appropriate. Or, alternately, such factors as "sparkle" and "beauty" elude quantification.

Therefore, while Soltis' system has clearly uncovered excellence, the exact ranking of his 100 should not be taken too seriously. These are all superb games, and to insist that, say, Lazarevic-Gaprindashvili is exactly 16 points greater than Mason-Janowski is futile. One may as well try to calculate the exact differential of artistry between Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and Picasso's *Guernica*.

Unrelated to the scoring, there is also a literary and historical problem: a lack of context and setting for many of these games. As a matter of course we are told the event in which each game was played. But in what round? What were the relative positions of the contestants? What, besides the game itself, was at stake? Were there any special factors affecting motivation or performance? Was there any special psychological interplay: a grudge, a rivalry, a political conflict? At what stage in their careers were the contestants: before, during or after their primes? Were there any important incidents leading up to the game, or any repercussions afterwards? With some games from famous tournaments and world title matches, such things may be common knowledge, but many of Soltis' 100 come from lesser-known players and events. Occasionally, as with Bronstein-Ljubojevic, Petropolis 1973, or Bogolyubov-Alekhine, Hastings 1922, he provides good scene-setting, but in other cases, we must content ourselves with the thumbnail biographies.

Yet these are often mere window-dressing, giving us no clue what made the accompanying chess games special. It's interesting that Oldrich Duras gave up chess in 1914 after marrying a wealthy woman, but this has no relevance to his win over Teichmann at Ostende 1906. I am surprised and amused that Veselin Topalov once tried bullfighting, but does that explain why he played 24...cxd4? and not 24...Kb6! against Kasparov at Wijk aan Zee 1999? And in some cases we don't even get mini-bio; for Shashin-Korchnoi (#59), a major upset, all we learn about Shashin is that he was 29. In

short, too often we don't learn what we really want to learn, and what Soltis, by profession a newspaper man, should tell us: *the story of the particular game*.

A contrasting approach is found in Ludek Pachman's *Decisive Games in Chess History* (1975). Compare the following two passages. First, Soltis, introducing Szabó-Benko, Costa Brava 1975: "László Szabó (1917-1998) said his chess career began, in a way, at 13 when he was competing in a swimming meet in Budapest and suddenly developed a 104-degree fever that was diagnosed as pleurisy. During the long walks he took during his recovery he discovered chess being played on park benches and fell in love with the game. Szabó found he had a scintillating tactical skill that made him one of the best Hungarian players within five years. His career as a bank clerk ended after World War II when his bank was almost totally destroyed by mines. So he became a chess professional for the rest of a very long career. One indication of his busy schedule: In 1956 he managed to be invited for a series of simultaneous exhibitions in Sweden — and scored 90 percent in the 1,279 games he played from the Arctic Circle on south."

Now Pachman, on the last round of the 1948 Interzonal at Saltsjöbaden: "At the Interzonal, the Hungarian grandmaster Szabó took the lead in the sixth round and held it right up to near the end despite a defeat at the hands of one of his chief rivals, Bronstein. After the 14th round the position was Szabó 10½, Bronstein 10, Boleslavski and Lilienthal 9. In the next three rounds the two leaders drew their games, but still remained out in front. Then in the 18th round Bronstein, with Black, refuted an incorrect sacrifice by ... L. Steiner, and scored an important point. Szabó was very near to winning his game, too, but he slipped up and only drew ... Going into the last round Szabó and Bronstein were thus equal in points ... The last round, however, turned everything upside down."

The contrast is obvious. Pachman sets the stage, puts us on the scene. Soltis gives us marginalia, introducing a game from Spain in 1975 by talking about Sweden in 1956. Pachman is reporting history, Soltis is writing light human interest. Ideally, the introductions should have both general biography and local immediacy. Thus we would better understand what made that game what it was. Without them these chessic gems are deprived of what a beautiful jewel should have: a proper setting.

So, if I may presume to give a "Soltis ranking" to Soltis' book, I would have to say that *The 100 Best Chess Games of the 20th Century* is probably not one of the 100 greatest chess books ever written. As with Soltis' other recent major work, *Soviet Chess 1917-1991*, it is very good in many ways, but could and should have been better. Yet it cannot be denied that it distills into one volume many of the game's highest and

rarest achievements. As long as readers don't waste time haggling over who got left out or put too high or low, it should provide them much pleasure and fascination.

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