



## SKITTLES ROOM



Love it or hate it, there is no doubt that Garry Kasparov's new book, the first in a series about the world chess champions, has caught the attention of the chessplaying public. At [ChessCafe.com](http://ChessCafe.com) alone, it was reviewed, Kasparov himself was interviewed, several columnists have written about it, and there is an ongoing thread on the Bulletin Board about the book. We are now pleased to present another, different look at this work.

Patrick Wolff is an American grandmaster who played professionally from 1989-1995. Patrick was U.S. Junior Chess Champion in 1984 and 1987, and U.S. Chess Champion in 1992 and 1995; he was Viswanathan Anand's second several times from 1992-1995, including the Indian grandmaster's 1995 World Chess Championship Match against Kasparov. Patrick is the author of two books: (1) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess*; and (2) *Kasparov Versus Anand: The Inside Story of the 1995 Chess Championship Match*. He also has a popular instructional chess web site at [www.wolffchess.com](http://www.wolffchess.com).



We hope you enjoy...

## *My Great Predecessors:* Another Perspective

by Patrick Wolff

Garry Kasparov's book, *Garry Kasparov on My Great Predecessors*, is the first of (at least) three volumes whose objective is to analyze the evolution of chess thought over the past century and a half by demonstrating the continuous progress of chess through the play of the world champions. This is a monumental

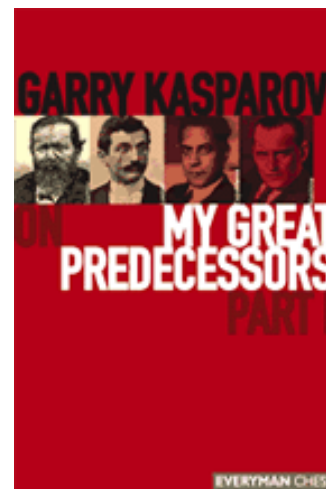
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project. We all know that chess has evolved enormously over the past 150 years, but just how and to what degree is one of the favorite topics for chess devotees to debate. How many times have you had a conversation that started, “How would [Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, etc.] do if he were to play in Linares and had a year to book up on the latest openings?” Or what about, “Who was stronger: Morphy, Capablanca, Fischer, or Kasparov?” The questions are unanswerable – which of course is the whole point – but they reveal a deep mystery about chess: We know our understanding of chess has changed over time, but how much and exactly how?



Kasparov is uniquely able to analyze this question. Chess is different than other sports, in that the better you understand it, the better you can do it. You do not need to be a great soccer (a.k.a. “football”) player to analyze a team’s strategy or a player’s skill, because understanding how to run or kick or pass does not equal the ability to do any of these things. Not so in chess. The better you are able to analyze the chess of the great players, the better you are at playing chess. And so it follows that the understanding of all chess fans necessarily depends on the analysis and writing of the greatest chess players.

The “dependency” I describe above is not just some theoretical construct. It is very tangible. For example, every serious chess fan “knows” that Steinitz’s greatest contribution to chess was to recognize that the exploitation of advantages follows logically from a plan that is rooted in the positional characteristics of whatever position is at hand – that is, a plan cannot simply be imposed on a position, but instead must follow from the position. How do we know this? We know it because that is what Lasker told us! Is it accurate? I don’t know. Probably it is an extremely astute observation; but probably also it is an exaggeration. (After all, were Steinitz’s opponents just playing whatever moves came into their heads??) Yet we believe it because the greatest player of the era that immediately followed Steinitz proclaimed it.

I admit the example above is somewhat stylized, and our opinions about all the great players – including Steinitz – are a lot more nuanced than simply to be decreed by a single grandmaster. But the point remains: our view of our heritage and our history is inevitably determined in large part by the views of our greatest players.

And that brings us back to Garry. Certainly no one is better able than he to have a profound effect on our view of the evolution of chess thought as expressed in the play of the greatest players of the past. So if he were to be successful in his project, it would be destined to leave a great and permanent imprint on how all chess players think about the game and its history.

Sadly, the first volume fails in its project. What follows is a review that is unfortunately largely critical. So before we examine why the project is unsuccessful in this first volume, I want to pause to highlight three things:

1. Overall this is a terrific book, and if you love chess you should buy a copy. There are many wonderful games with great analysis, making it an enjoyable and instructive read.
2. When I say the first volume “fails” in its project, I only mean that Kasparov falls short of the extremely grand ambition that he set himself. There are still many nuggets of historical wisdom within these pages, interwoven with the terrific chess.
3. I do not mean my criticism to be unfriendly. I have great respect for Kasparov’s attempt, and I believe all chess players owe him a debt for undertaking this project. It is my hope that my thoughts may add to a collective discussion that will enhance the future volumes.

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Suppose that Pablo Picasso, while alive and at the height of his powers, had announced he was going to write a book demonstrating the continuous progress of painting through the works of the great artists who had preceded him. Suppose even for fun that he said the book would be given the un-self-deprecating title, “My Great Predecessors.” Imagine the excitement of art lovers everywhere in anticipation of this book! What would people want of such a work?

What they would *not* want is a running historical narrative that starts from some point in the past and follows a steady, chronological progress month after month, year after year. And they would certainly be bored by historical details explained for their own sake. Who would want to read from Picasso what any art professor around the world could already write? Why be constrained by a narrative structure that would require the great artist to recount detail after detail, simply because that is the order in which they occurred? They would expect the bold juxtaposition of paintings that others had never considered; they would anticipate that the great artist would find hidden nuances in past works – missed by lesser critics – and that he would demonstrate how these nuances shaped and developed more recent paintings. In short, they would want Picasso to define explicit themes and they would want him to analyze those themes both within individual works and across different works across time.

I was anticipating something similar from our Picasso of chess.

Unfortunately, the narrative structure of the book is its greatest shortcoming. To begin with, I am utterly bored by all the historical storytelling. If I want history, I’ll read something by any of the numerous chess historians. I have seen certain reviews focus on particular historical details as recounted in the book and take issue with them. For myself, I just don’t care. I don’t want Kasparov to mire himself in historical details, because Kasparov is not a historian! If I need to understand some particular part of history to understand a particular theme Kasparov is explicating, then fine, let’s get into it. Otherwise, put the history aside.

But an even more damaging consequence of the book’s narrative structure is that

it leads Garry to analyze each game on its own. There is nothing wrong with analyzing each game on an individual basis, this is after all the normal way to analyze a game. But if you want to make grand generalizations about the historical evolution of chess thought, then a case-by-case analysis isn't going to work. If you want to understand a particular game, you analyze that game. If you want to understand the evolution of chess thinking as expressed in particular themes, you need to identify the themes and analyze them across different chess games in different times. Trying to do evolutionary analysis on a game-by-game basis leads to empty and shallow generalizations that do not hold up when compared across games.

Let me provide a couple of examples that highlight the effects of the tendency noted above. I can't hope to "prove" this is the case with only a few examples, but by providing some examples my hope is that the pattern should be evident to those who read the book.

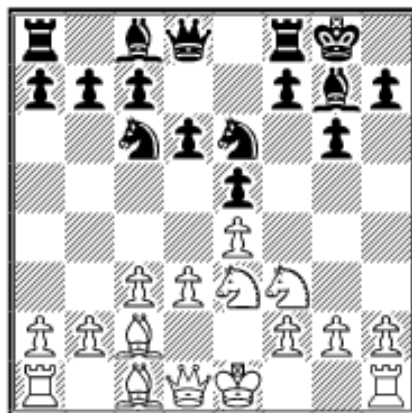
### First Example

Consider the following famous game between Steinitz and Chigorin, in their 1892 World Championship match (game #25 in the book):

Steinitz-Chigorin, Havana 1892, World Championship Match, 4<sup>th</sup> Game 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. d3 d6 5. c3 g6 6. Nbd2 Bg7 7. Nf1 O-O



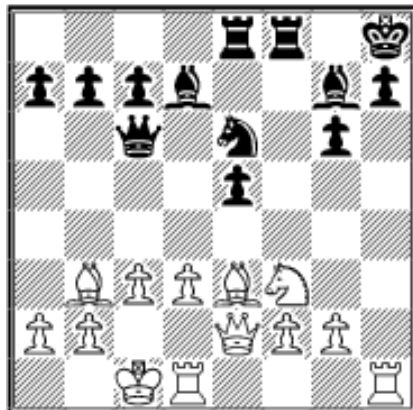
8. Ba4 Nd7?! 9. Ne3 Nc5 10. Bc2 Ne6



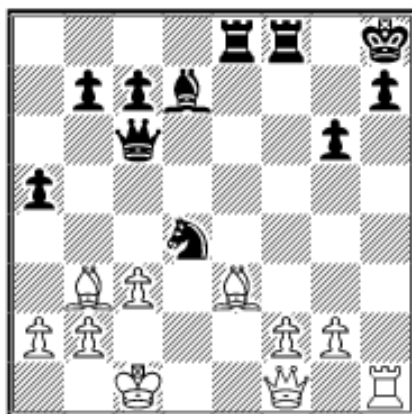
11. h4! Ne7 12. h5 d5 13. hxg6 fxg6?



14. exd5! Nxd5 15. Nxd5 Qxd5 16. Bb3 Qc6  
17. Qe2 Bd7 18. Be3 Kh8 19. O-O-O Rae8



20. Qf1! a5 21. d4! exd4 22. Nxd4 Bxd4 23.  
Rxd4! Nxd4?



24. Rxh7+! Kxh7 25. Qh1+ Kg7 26. Bh6+  
Kf6 27. Qh4+ Ke5 28. Qxd4+ 1-0

This is a famous game, and rightly so. It's a lovely attack, and Steinitz played very well to trounce Chigorin. But Kasparov's paragraph comment after the game strikes me as a peculiar "historical assessment" of the game:

"A very deep game, demonstrating that Steinitz's superiority over his contemporaries was in his global understanding of chess.

Here he outplayed his opponent simply and imperceptibly, without moving beyond the third rank. Moreover, this was no ordinary opponent, but one of the most outstanding players of that era, a real contender for the supreme title. But he was unable to do anything! Steinitz as though looked into the future: his stealthy plan with d2-d3, c2-c3, Nd2-f1-e3 and Bc2 became the prototype of modern maneuvering play..."

Hmm, really? I'd like to take issue with two key claims in this description:

1. What's the big deal about "not going beyond the third rank?" It's a funny feature of the game, to be sure, but I don't think people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had much trouble understanding the importance of open diagonals and files leading to the king!

2. In what way did Steinitz “look into the future” with his “stealthy plan”? This makes it sound like Steinitz was the first person to appreciate the opening plan. But this just isn’t true. In fact, Kasparov himself analyzes a game played two years earlier between I. Gunsberg and M. Chigorin: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.d3 d6 6.c3 g6 7.Nbd2 Bg7 8.Nf1 O-O 9.h3 (this is exactly the same position as the Steinitz-Chigorin game except that ...a7-a6 and h2-h3 have been included) 9...d5! and Black quickly took the initiative. True, the addition of h2-h3 and ...a7-a6 helps Black, but it clearly shows that these positions were not some invention of Steinitz – if anything he was looking into the past, not the future!

Here is how I would characterize the same game:

“A very deep game, showing that even in his older years Steinitz was a very dangerous attacker. Chigorin’s anti-positional plan of ...Nd7-c5-e6 was nicely met by h2-h4-h5. Chigorin must have been upset when he realized how much time he had lost in the opening to misplace his knight; otherwise he would have chosen the obviously correct 13...hxg6 instead of the overly aggressive 13...fxg6. Probably Chigorin was hoping to “justify” his play by opening the f-file, but after Steinitz isolated the e-pawn and got his bishop to the murderous a2-g8 diagonal, it was clear he had a large advantage. The finish was lovely and has justly been immortalized.”

I acknowledge that my description has no grand historical generalizations, but it does have the advantage of being much more accurate, in my view.

## Second Example

Consider the following encounter between Nimzovitsch and Capablanca from the St. Petersburg tournament, another famous game (game #81 in the book):

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bb5 d6 5.d4 Bd7 6.Bxc6 Bxc6 7.Qd3 exd4 8.Nxd4 g6



Here Kasparov quotes Capablanca as saying, “A novel idea, brought out on the spur of the moment, with the intention of putting White on his own resources and out of the normal forms of this defense with which Nimzovitsch is very familiar.” Kasparov notes that more normal at the time was 8...Bd7.

9. Nxc6 “?!” (Kasparov)

Here Kasparov says, “Only the exact Alekhine plan with 9.Bg5! Bg7 10.O-O-O justifies the exchange of the Spanish bishop,” and he gives some variations to show that White’s initiative is too strong.

He follows the analysis of 9.Bg5! by saying, “However, 9.Bg5! is already the next step forward in the comprehension of chess. It would probably also have been played intuitively by Morphy, and so Alekhine’s discovery can well be regarded as a creative development of his idea.”

Huh??

First of all, I don’t understand the sentence. In what way is Alekhine’s move a “creative development of [Morphy’s] idea?” Aren’t we basically seeing here a difference in chess styles? Alekhine loved the initiative, so it’s natural that he would play 9.Bg5 in this position, but I can’t see how we are seeing the evolution of chess thought in any real way. I certainly don’t see how it is “already the next step forward in the comprehension of chess,” and anyway, how could it be a step forward if he also wants to say that Morphy might have played this move?

Another problem with this note is that by Kasparov’s own analysis, even if 9.Bg5 is stronger there was nothing wrong with what Nimzovitsch played, and if he had followed up correctly he would have had the advantage...

9...bxc6 10.Qa6 Qd7 11.Qb7 Rc8 12.Qxa7 Bg7 13.O-O O-O



Here Nimzovitsch played 14.Qa6?! and was steadily outplayed. Tarrasch suggested the better move, 14.Bd2! with advantage. Kasparov quotes a long, windy passage by Capablanca about how you can’t just suggest a single move as an improvement, because, “the games of the great masters are not played by single moves, but must be played by concerted plans...” Then Kasparov outlines the sensible plan of (after 14.Bd2) b2-b3, a2-a4, Rad1, and if ...c6-c5 then the queen escapes via a6 and the black knight has

to guard the d5 square. He notes that Black retains some compensation, but White is objectively better.

Then Kasparov follows up with this paragraph: “We can hardly reproach Nimzovitsch for underestimating his opponent’s very deep positional idea, an amazing one for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The typical intuitive insight of a genius! Today, in the era of the Benko Gambit, everyone knows that in such instances the pressure of the rooks on the a- and b-files, supported by the powerful bishop on g7, together with pressure on the center, promises Black long-term counterplay. But at that time this was a revelation...”

Now first of all, let’s acknowledge the obvious: Capablanca may have just blundered a pawn with 8...g6. After all, he himself said that the idea was “brought out on the spur of the moment, with the intention of putting White on his own resources.” By his own admission, it doesn’t look like he put any thought into this at home before the game. Even so, it is still impressive that he squeezed everything he could out of the position. Capablanca definitely was an

intuitive genius, capable of finding the hidden resources in any position. If we grant him the benefit of the doubt and suppose that he foresaw the position after the 13<sup>th</sup> move before playing 8...g6, then his foresight at the board is even more impressive.

How interesting it would have been for Kasparov to identify this as a significant theme in the evolution of chess thought, and to trace its evolution across numerous games! As someone who used to play the Benko Gambit, I have some familiarity with some of the precursor games to that tabyia, of which this is one of the earliest. This would have been a perfect way to “demonstrate the continuous progress of the game through the play of the world champions.” Sadly, he does none of this. The particular game gets a good analysis, but there is no historical tracing of the evolution of chess thought. Instead, after a perfunctory quote by Botvinnik (“One of Capablanca’s classic games. The sacrifice of the a-pawn in similar positions followed by an attack on the opponent’s pawns along the a- and b-files has been adopted by many masters.”) we are on to another game in the same tournament, riding the rails of the book’s chronological narrative.

### Third Example

Consider the famous 6<sup>th</sup> game between Alekhine and Euwe in their 1937 Return World Championship Match (game #143 in the book):

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 dxc4 4.e4 e5 5.Bxc4 exd4 6.Nf3 “!?” (Kasparov)



If you live anywhere outside of Holland, this is a very funny position; if you live in Holland, it is occasion for a wince. Euwe thought for over an hour before playing the horrible move, 6...b5?? which simply lost to 7.Nxb5! (because 7...cxb5 8.Bd5 wins). The obvious point of Alekhine’s knight sacrifice is that after 6...dxc3 White plays 7.Bxf7+ Ke7 8.Qb3 with an attack. You can imagine how much scrutiny this position received after this game was played! To make a long story short, while it is not obvious and Black

has to endure some hair-raising complications, it turns out that after 6...dxc3 7.Bxf7+ Ke7 8.Qb3 cxb2!! Black gets a large advantage.

Kasparov has two general comments about this game. In his note to move six, he writes: “Such an idea could only have been thought up by Alekhine – a person who on a new level processed and whirled around in his mind all the ideas of the masters from the past.” Then at the end of the game (it’s not much of a game after Euwe’s atrocious 6<sup>th</sup> move) he writes: “Not a bad piece of preparation: one knight move – and Euwe was finished! The whole point is that Alekhine was able to climb to heights that were unknown to his opponent: this was a level of chess from the second half or even the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was this violent activity, this furious onslaught right from the opening that constituted Alekhine’s real strength!”

Kasparov has latched onto this game as signifying an important shift in opening preparation. Once again, I think he has a very interesting point to make. But once again, by focusing only on this single game, the expression of his idea comes out as shallow and superficial; this is a shame, because there is much to say that would have been truly fascinating, and Kasparov is uniquely positioned to say it.

If we take Kasparov at face value, then his comments add almost no value. In what way could this idea “only have been thought up by Alekhine?” If you showed me this position for the first time and asked me what White's best 5th and 6th moves were, I would probably have considered 5.Bxc4 exd4 6.Nf3 because of the obvious bishop tactic -- and I hardly think I am alone. When I consider contemporaries at that time, certainly Spielmann would have played this sequence with little hesitation. My point is that it is not that hard to see that 5.Bxc4 exd4 6.Nf3 is possible -- the real test is how well you analyze the resulting position.

And so the really interesting theme Kasparov could have focused on is opening preparation. Think of the difference between this move and, say, Kasparov's 10<sup>th</sup> game against Anand in the 1995 World Championship Match. Several interesting contrasts between these two cases are:

1. Alekhine's sacrifice came at a much earlier point in the game (showing the still relative immaturity of openings played at even the World Championship level)
2. Alekhine's move was entirely his own idea (whereas Kasparov built upon an idea of Tal's and followed a game played between two lower-level players several years earlier)
3. Alekhine analyzed the move by himself, without seconds (and certainly without a computer)
4. Alekhine's move was unsound, whereas to date we believe Kasparov's innovation was correct

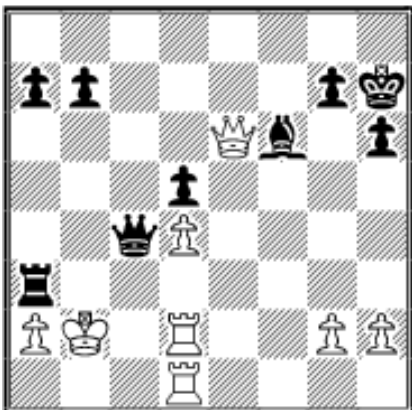
Each of these points highlight important ways that opening preparation has evolved in the intervening 58 years since these two games were played. An analysis of the evolution of opening analysis at the highest levels would have been fascinating. And I think Kasparov has some of these ideas in mind in his comments. But because he restricts himself to this single game, what we actually get is some pablum about Alekhine's unique genius. My point isn't that Alekhine was not a genius, of course he was. My point is that anyone could have made these comments about this game. It is a waste of Kasparov's unique abilities to restrain himself to such superficialities.

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Finally, let me add some pure chess thoughts. First, two minor corrections (which are pretty obvious and so have probably already been noted elsewhere):



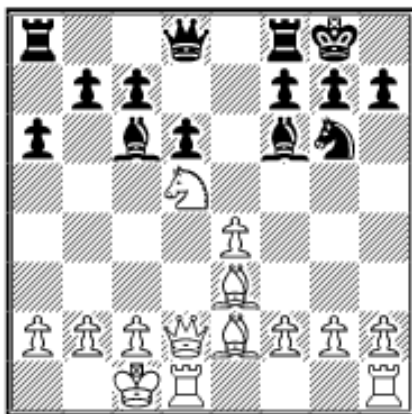
This position is taken from the game Anderssen – Dufresne, Berlin 1852 (game #4 in the book). Black played 11...b5?! and Kasparov quotes Euwe as saying, “Black wants to develop his queenside, but 11...O-O was better,” after which Kasparov says, “However, here too after 12.Nbd2 Bb6 13.Qb1 and Bxd3 White has a splendid attacking position.” But I don’t see what’s so splendid about White’s position after 13...d5! It seems to me that only Black can be better here.



This position is taken from the very famous game Pillsbury – Lasker, St. Petersburg 1895/96 (game #41 in the book). Here Kasparov says, “[F]or some reason, no one has pointed out the saving 28.Qf5+! Kh8 29.Kb1!” and then he gives some supporting variations. But Black should play 28...Kg8! to repeat moves to get back to a position that Kasparov had already analyzed to a win. (For those who are unfamiliar with the position, there are two key points; first, with the king on g8, Black can meet 29.Kb1 with

29...Bxd4!; and second, after 28...Kg8 if White plays 29.Qe6+ Black wins with 29...Kh8!)

Next, a more substantive suggestion:



This following position was reached in the game Lasker – Steinitz, World Championship USA/Canada 1894, 7<sup>th</sup> game (game #37 in the book).

This is a fascinating game, and Kasparov’s analysis is really terrific. (Dvoretsky used Kasparov’s analysis of this game as the basis of his August 13 “The Instructor” column.) The diagrammed position is the critical moment out of the opening. Lasker played 14.g4? and was quickly worse after 14...Re8!

Kasparov suggests 14.f3, 14.g3, and 14.Nxf6+ as improvements. My suggestion is 14.h4!?

The positional threat is 15.h5, and this is pretty serious. So Black has to take the pawn. Obviously bad is 14...Nxb4? 15.Nxf6+ Qxf6 16.Bg5, and it’s hard to see what Black gains by interpolating 14...Bxd5 15.Qxd5, so that leaves 14...Bxb4. Now 15.g3 Bf6 (or 15...Be7 16.f4 and now 16...f5?? is just losing after 17.Bc4) 16.f4. I acknowledge that the position is unclear, but I would much rather have White than Black here! White can play moves like Bf3 and Qh2 (maybe preceded by Rh5!?) and meanwhile Black is terribly passive. So maybe this is

one of White's most attractive lines in the diagrammed position?

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I confess that Kasparov's book left me deeply disappointed. I read very few chess books these days, but I literally counted the days when this book would be available and I purchased it as soon as it was. I had high hopes for this book, because the project as Garry defines it is fascinating and because Kasparov is one of the few people alive who could tackle it. Yet even though Kasparov fails in his grand project, the book is still a "must-have" for any serious chess lover, and I am certainly not sorry to have purchased it and read it through. Garry has selected some wonderful games, and in some cases his annotations really add to our understanding.

When I have taught people in the past, I have always said that one of the keys to improving your chess is to study the great games of the past, annotated by another great player. Usually this means reading autobiographical games collections, such as written by Alekhine, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Fischer, Karpov, or Kasparov. Korchnoi's recent 2-volume set fits this mold. Occasionally, a great player will write a book annotating other people's games, such as Bronstein's famous 1953 Zurich tournament book. To this elite bibliography we can now add Kasparov's first volume. We can all look forward to the future volumes, which will continue to enrich our chess literature.

Meanwhile, you are free to continue to debate who was "really" the best chess player of all time to your heart's content...

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