

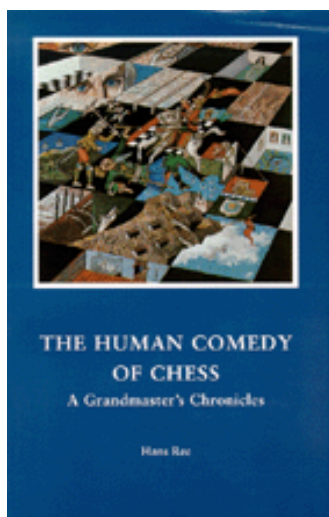


C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

The Human Comedy of Chess



by Hans Ree

Leko's Stations of the Cross

George Koltanowski, who as a storyteller didn't always confine himself to the literal truth, described in his booklet *Chessnecdotes* a scene that supposedly took place at an Olympiad, after the round was finished. The grandmasters were sitting in the restaurant and Kortchnoi exclaimed that he was really the greatest Patzer of the tournament, as he had lost his game against Pomar by pure oversight. But Tal contradicted him, saying that he himself was the greatest Patzer, because of his poor game against Larsen. Then a voice at another table called out: "Say, Grandmaster Damjanovic, don't you have something to say too?"

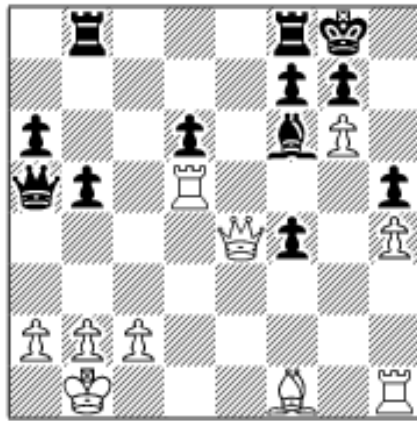
Actually my database has it that Tal and Larsen never played each other at an Olympiad and that Kortchnoi and Pomar only made an uneventful draw in 16 moves at the Olympiad of Skopje 1972, where Damjanovic – actually a strong player who was too often the butt of this kind of anecdotes – did not play. Maybe it is not fair to attack old stories with the destroying power of a modern database.

Anyway, I recently imagined a conversation between Peter Leko and Jan Timman that might develop along the lines of Kolty's anecdote. Leko might say: "What I did in Linares on Friday March 3 was really horrible. Against Vallejo Pons I agreed a draw in a position that was so easy to win that everybody saw it, except me. I am really the most stupid chessplayer in the whole world."

"Oh no," Jan Timman might answer. "Only three days later I did something much worse at the Reykjavik Open against Helgi Ziska, a fifteen-year old boy from the Faroe islands. I didn't give a draw in a winning position, I resigned while I only had to take his Queen to force his own resignation. It's really me who is the most stupid player in the world."

And I, if I had been present at that imaginary conversation between the two chess giants, wouldn't I have something to say too? Certainly. Against the Dutch IM Coen Zuidema I once resigned in a position where I didn't even have to find a good move to make a draw; just shuffling my King to and fro would have been sufficient. Obviously it is me who is the most stupid player in the world.

After the first leg of the tournament in Morelia (Mexico) and Linares (Spain) Leko was leading and he seemed to be in fine form, having won three games in excellent style. Then in the first round that was played in Linares something happened that must have caused him some sleepless nights. He agreed a draw in a winning position.



Leko-Vallejo Pons, after Black's 24th move.

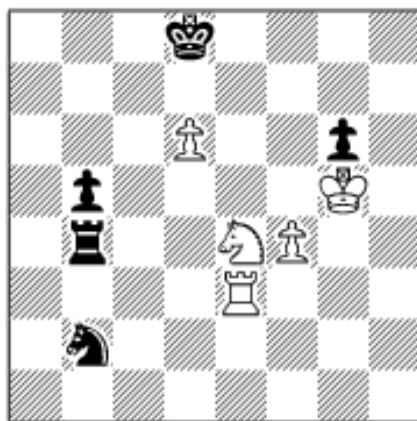
I wonder who offered the draw here. According to the rules it should be the player who had made the last move, Vallejo Pons, and in that case it almost appears as if his offer carried a hypnotic suggestion. Would he have seen that he was lost and tried a draw offer as a last recourse? That would have been bad manners and also bad tactics. I think it's more likely that Leko offered the draw.

The way to win is obvious and straightforward: 25. gxf7+ and now after 25...Kxf7 White would win on the spot by 26. Bc4. I think this pretty move must have been overlooked by Leko, for in the other variation, after 25...Rxf7, the simple winning line starting with 26. Bd3 and 27. Qh7+ can hardly be missed or miscalculated.

Even after this unfortunate accident Leko was still in clear first place. Nothing fatal had happened, but in the way a splinter in one's finger may not hurt at first, but then slowly cause a festering wound, this draw may have affected Leko's self-confidence. At least that is how we journalists like to describe an event, with a story line heavily leaning on pop-psychology.

Two rounds before the end Leko was still leading, a half-point ahead of Levon Aronian. Leko had made eight draws in a row, but it was obvious that in the 13th round as Black against Veselin Topalov he would have to work hard for his draw.

In fact Topalov had him under pressure during the whole game, but Leko defended well and at the 54th move the draw was within easy reach.



Topalov-Leko, after White's 54th move.

Here 54...Kd7 55. Kxg6 Nc4 would have been a simple draw. After 56. Rd3 (the Rook ending after 56. Rf3 Nxd6 57. Nxd6 Kxd6 is drawn also) Nxd6 57. Nxd6 (or 57. Rxd6+ Ke7 and Black regains his piece) 57...Rxf4 58. Nxb5+ White might still have tried to win with Rook + Knight against Rook. But though Kasparov once managed to do this against Judit Polgar (when they were both forced to blitz their moves), I cannot imagine Leko losing this

endgame.

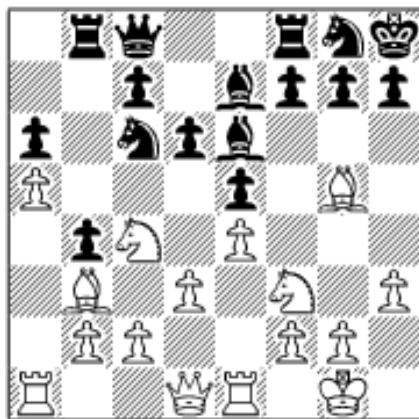
He actually played **54...Rb4-d4** and after **55. Ne4-f6 Rd4xd6 56. Re3-e8+ Kc7 57. Re8-e2** he had to give up either the exchange or a piece and finally lost.

So Leko had first given a draw in a winning position and then he had lost a simple endgame. Now before the last round he was sharing first place with Aronian,

Topalov and Radjabov.

According to an eyewitness, during that last game Leko looked like a man who had lost all his power and interest. Still, when Leko wants to make a draw as White, he makes it. But with his rivals Topalov and Radjabov playing the underdogs of the tournament Vallejo Pons and Bacrot, Leko couldn't be sure that a draw would bring him anything substantial.

When you don't know if you should play for a draw or for a win, you usually end up playing for a loss, and in fact Leko played his last game far below his normal strength.

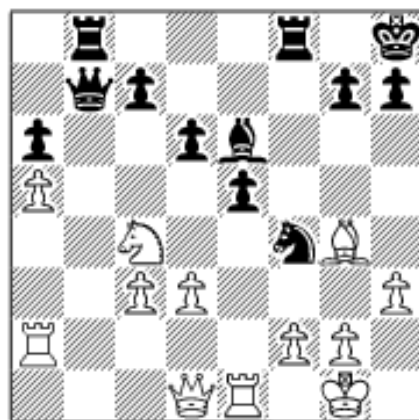


Leko-Aronian, after Black's 14th move.

By 15. Bxe7 Ngxe7 16. d4 exd4 (the piece sacrifice 16...Bxh3 is not correct) 17. Nxd4 Nxd4 18. Qxd4 White would have reached a quiet position which would be very difficult to lose, but because of the tournament situation he wanted more and played:

15. c2•c3 b4xc3 16. b2xc3 f7•f5 17. Bb3•a4
After this move Black gets a clear advantage, but already White had some small difficulties.

17...f5xe4 18. Ba4xc6 e4xf3 19. Bg5xe7 Ng8xe7 20. Bc6xf3 Ne7•g6 21. Bf3•g4 Ng6•f4 22. Ra1•a2 Qc8•b7



White is already lost. Black is threatening mate and after 23. f3 there are several winning methods, a simple one being 23...Bxc4 24. dxc4 Qc6, threatening 25...h5 among other things.

23. Bg4•f3 Qb7•b3 24. Ra2•c2 Nf4xd3 25. Qd1xd3 Qb3xc4 26. Qd3xc4 Be6xc4

Being a pawn up in a positionally superior position Black quickly won.

As both Topalov and Radjabov drew their games, Aronian took clear first place. He is a very interesting player who seems to have a strangely light-hearted attitude to chess. The Russians call him a genius and maybe he is. Have a look at the interview that Misha Savinov had in September 2005 for the ChessCafe. Savinov asked: "Do you have something of Larsen's traits?" and Aronian answered: "Yes, I like jumping with my pieces here and there and pushing the pawns. Normally it makes my position just rotten. But then I try to create some active play, increase tensions, look for tricks. I enjoy crooked position."

Jump around, push some pawns and when your position has become rotten, just look for some tricks and everything will be alright. Can that really have been the way for Aronian to reach fifth place on the world ranking list and win a super-tournament? There must be more to it.



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