



C O L U M N I S T S

Dutch Treat

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In Memoriam: Leo Kerkhoff

I was shocked when I learned that Leo Kerkhoff had died on March 28 at the age of 62. He was two months younger than I. We had played each other in a Dutch junior championship in 1964 and of course later we met often, as the Dutch chess world is rather small. For a few years we played for the same club, which at the time was called Volmac Rotterdam and now just Rotterdam, as in the old sponsorless days. He was not only a strong chessplayer, but also a pleasant and cheerful man.



His fellow clubmember Wim Westerveld, who knew him better than I did, wrote a loving obituary on the website of the Rotterdam chess federation.

He hadn't seen Kerkhoff during the last few years and without really thinking about it he had supposed that everything was alright with him, as one tends to do in such cases. I had thought so too, but we were wrong, as it turns out that Kerkhoff had been gravely ill already for two years.

All kinds of memories came back to me. That junior championship of 1964 in which we played. A very young Jan Timman also took part; it was the first time I met him and people were already predicting a great future for him. But in 1964 Kerkhoff became the junior champion. In my database the tournament is presented as an Under-18 championship, but this cannot be true, as both Kerkhoff and I were 19 years old and an U-18 Dutch championship didn't even exist at that time.

It was held in Rotterdam and the young players from other cities were put up in a youth hostel, where they had to wash the dishes in the evening and perform other domestic tasks. *Nil nisi bene* about the dead, but I think Kerkhoff, who lived in Rotterdam and was staying at home, had an advantage over us.

Reading about that championship I also remembered that in our game I had awfully mishandled the opening, though the details had vanished from my mind. Replaying the game from the database I saw that it had been very bad indeed and it seems inconceivable that nowadays a promising young player of the same age would show comparable ignorance.

Two years later Kerkhoff took part in the second group of the IBM tournament in Amsterdam. On the website of the Corus tournament, Gert Ligterink tells (in Dutch) that he was taking part in the tournament also, in a much lower group. His own games meant less to him than the impressive performance of Botvinnik, who in the first six rounds scored six points in the main group. But then in the seventh round the focus of his attention became a game played by Kerkhoff in the B-tournament against the Austrian IM Andreas Dückstein. This says much about the beauty of that game, for also Botvinnik's game from that round must have been exciting for Dutch chess lovers. He was beaten by the Dutch IM Johan Barendregt, a gifted amateur.

Here is the game that understandably made such a big impression on Ligterink.

Leo Kerkhoff - Andreas Dückstein

IBM•B Amsterdam 1966

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 Nc6 5.Nf3 Qb6 6.a3 c4 7.Be2 Bd7 8.Nbd2 Na5 9.0-0 Ne7 10.Rb1

The plan of breaking up the queenside, which had been worked out by Kerkhoff together with his trainer Hans Bouwmeester, has gone out of fashion. Nowadays White plays on the kingside. Under the right circumstances Kerkhoff's scheme can be quite effective.

10...Ng6 11.g3 f6 12.b4 cxb3 13.c4 fxe5 14.cxd5 exd5 15.Nxe5 Nxe5 16.dxe5 Bf5 17.Rxb3 Nxb3 18.Nxb3 a6 19.Be3 Qd8 20.Nd4 Bh3 21.Bb5+ axb5 22.Qh5+ g6 23.Qxh3 Qd7 24.e6 Qe7 25.Rc1 Bg7



26.Nf5

The final blow in a highly spectacular game. If Black takes the knight, he will lose his queen.

26...Qf6 27.Nd6+ Ke7 28.Rc7+ Kxd6 29.Bf4+ Qxf4 30.Rd7+ Kc6 31.gxf4 Bd4 32.Qf3 Black resigned.

Such was Kerkhoff's style, always playing for the attack, not caring for material. There is a variation of the Ruy Lopez that in the Netherlands is called the Kerkhoff variation. It is a model of the kind of chess that he liked. Black sacrifices a piece at an early stage

and unfathomable complications will follow.

He played many games with this line around 1970. Nowadays the variation isn't popular anymore, and I can understand why, but when I looked at some recent games I found that a few adventurous souls still have it in their repertoire, as a clear refutation has not yet been found after all these years.

Here is a game in which the Kerkhoff attack triumphs, played in the Dutch championship of 1970. Eddy Scholl became Dutch champion that year, losing only one game, a game for which Kerkhoff got the brilliancy prize.

Eddy Scholl • Leo Kerkhoff

Dutch Championship 1970

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 d6 5.0-0 Bg4 6.h3 h5

This is what the Dutch know as the Kerkhoff variation. He wasn't the first to play it, but he analysed the line extensively and played many beautiful games with it. At this moment White cannot accept the sacrifice, but later he will take the piece.

7.d4

Those who want to avoid the coming complications play 7.Bxc6+ bxc6 8.d4, when Black should give up his sacrificial intentions and play 8...Bxf3 9.Qxf3 exd4 10.Rd1 Qf6. I don't really trust it for Black, but volunteers can still be found.

7...b5 8.Bb3 Nxd4 9.hxg4 hxg4 10.Ng5 Nh6 11.f4

At the time this was the critical position of the variation. Its problems are not yet completely solved and in 2000 Jan Timman as Black ventured into this jungle twice.

11...d5 12.Bxd5 Bc5 13.Be3 Qd6 14.b4 Bb6

What to say about this crazy line? I wouldn't trust Black's position for a penny, but Kerkhoff thought differently, for two years later he reached it again in the Dutch team competition against Kees Dekker.

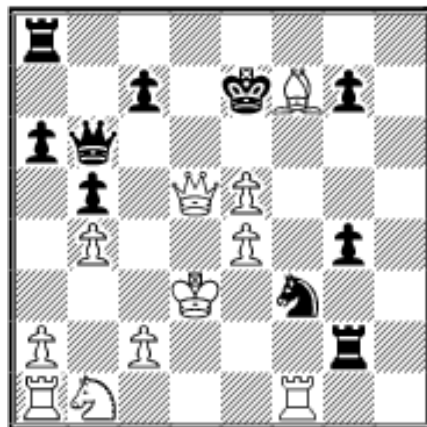
15.Nxf7 Nxf7 16.Bxf7+ Kf8 17.fxe5

At first sight this looks fine for White, as after 17...Qxe5 18.Bd5+ Ke8 19.Qxg4 White is winning. But Black has a strong counterblow.

17...Nf3+ 18.Kf2 Bxe3+ 19.Kxe3 Qb6+ 20.Ke2 Rh2 21.Qd5

The right move was 21.Rf2, with a very unclear position. The computer spews a variation ending in perpetual check.

21...Rxc2+ 22.Kd3 Ke7



Now White has to give his queen. Materially he gets enough compensation, but Black's attack continues.

23.Rxf3 Rd8 24.Qxd8+ Kxd8 25.Re3 c5

After 25...Rg1, to keep White's queenside imprisoned, Black would be clearly winning.

26.bxc5 Qxc5 27.Nd2 Qxe5 28.Nb3

The decisive mistake. After 28.c3 it would still have been a fight.

28...Qc7 29.Bd5 Rxc2 30.Kd4 Qb6+ 31.Kd3 Rc3+ 32.Kxc3 Qxe3+ 33.Kb4 g3 34.Rf1 g2 35.Rf8+ Ke7 36.Rf7+ Ke8 37.Rxg7 Qe1+ 38.Ka3 g1Q 39.Rxg1 Qxg1 40.Kb4 Kd8 41.Bb7 Kc7 42.Bxa6 Kb6 White resigned.

As Gert Ligterink relates, Leo Kerkhoff's cremation was attended by many people from many different spheres of life. There were chess and bridge players, but also people who had known him as a yachtsman or a skier or just as a man with an exhilarating zest for life.

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