



C O L U M N I S T S

*From the
Archives*

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [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](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Hoisting the Hippopotamus by Lev Alburt and Al Lawrence

Standing Tal: Mikhail, Yin; Bobby, Yang

To several current generations of chess players, Mikhail Nekhemyevich Tal was muse. At the close of the 1950s, chess was entrenched in a sort of “scientific determinism” of positional play. Modern defensive technique and strategy had seemed to long ago put an end to the 19th-Century fireworks of Adolf Anderssen and Paul Morphy. Chess on a high level was seen as simply too “correct” to allow such nonsense.

World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik, hero of the Soviet Republic and leader of the Russian chess hegemony, himself claimed only to be “first among equals” such as compatriots Smyslov and Bronstein. We can almost see a circle of Soviet GMs with white lab coats and clipboards somewhere in an antiseptic chamber in Moscow, squinting with scientific detachment through microscopes at chess positions and scratching out lines of algebra on a chalkboard. Into this exalted Kremlin chess “laboratory” burst young Misha Tal, the irreverent “gangster of the chessboard” (to take a line from Smyslov himself), shaking up the formulae and stirring in a large beaker full of fun.

This month marks the passing of Mikhail Tal, eighth chess world champion.

The Wizard of Riga succumbed eight years ago in Moscow on June 28, 1992, at the age of only 55, to a more than 30-year battle against ill health.

Developing his pieces and sacrificing them somewhere, Tal instilled the Heisenberg Principle to chess in the form of the imaginative sacrifice, what he called “fantasy;” saving us from the dull pomposity of chess as pseudo-science and showing that there was still room for beauty and poetry. Where his contemporaries shuffled, Tal sacrificed. As Ragozin said, “Tal doesn’t move the pieces by hand; he uses a magic wand!” Or, as Bronstein put it, “Tal develops all his pieces in the center and then sacrifices them somewhere.”

Tal was unique, even among the 14 men who have held the official world championship. (Why it’s hard for us to not give this number as 13, with an asterisk explaining Las Vegas, is a different article.) He was unpretentious and disinterested in wielding the influence in Russian, *vliyaniye* normally relished by the kingpins of the old Soviet dynasty. Tal also showed that even a chess world champion could be completely free of gravitas and that it was possible for a man to rise to the very top of his profession and not have an enemy in the world.

Born in Latvia on November 9, 1936, Tal was not a child prodigy. When he did begin to ascend, however, he soared so rapidly that in 1957 he was both the youngest Soviet champion ever and a rare case that required FIDE to award him the title of international grandmaster while waiving the normal requirement that it first recognize him as master!

When Tal beat Botvinnik for the world championship in 1960, he was at the time the youngest world champion ever, full of vigor and brilliance, an uneven, raw talent. Then, within months, he developed what was to become a lifelong illness and handicap to his play. He was found to have a diseased kidney. Ever devoted to chess, Tal would play blitz between rounds of even important tournaments. In the hospital for the removal of the offending organ in 1969, Tal reportedly talked chess until the anesthesia-mask was strapped on! During his convalescence, he would sneak out of the hospital to play at the local chess club.

Shades of Rasputin

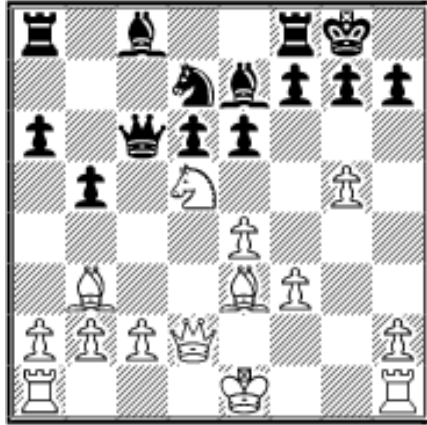
Some of Tal’s GM colleagues found it hard to accept what was happening to them. It was natural for his peers to look for reasons to explain why suddenly what seemed “coffee-house” chess was chalking up wins against them. How could they succumb to such brutal tactics? Some actually thought that they were victims of mesmerism. After all, there was The Stare. The famous story about Pal Benko’s wearing dark glasses to avoid being hypnotized by the Wizard is true. It’s also true that Tal countered Benko by donning a pair of comically oversized novelty shades he had borrowed from Tigran Petrosian. Misha wore his dark glasses for only a few moves for a laugh from the spectators and the directors, while Benko kept his on until hopelessly lost at move 20, victim of another “hypnotic” performance by Tal. Let’s take a peek, being careful of the glare.

Pal Benko – Mikhail Tal

Zagreb, 1959

Sicilian Defense

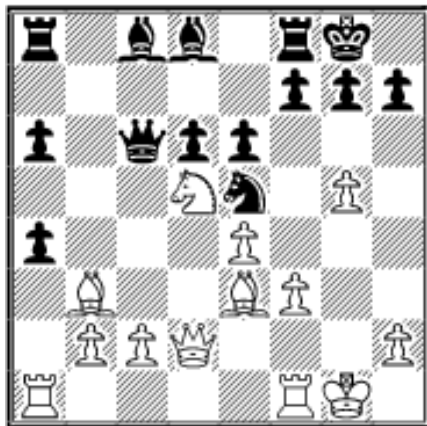
**1 e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Bc4 e6 7 Bb3 b5 8 f3 Be7
9 Be3 0-0 10 Qd2 Qc7 11 g4 Nc6 12 Nxc6 Qxc6 13 g5 Nd7 14 Nd5**



Tal himself probably won more games with this last move against the Sicilian than anyone else. Is Benko, behind his glasses, holding up a mirror to the Wizard?

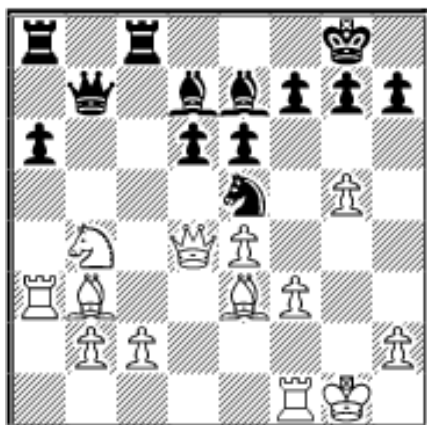
Of course the knight is untouchable. If 14...exd5, then 15 Bxd5, x-raying the rook.

14...Bd8 15 a4 Ne5 16 0-0 bxa4



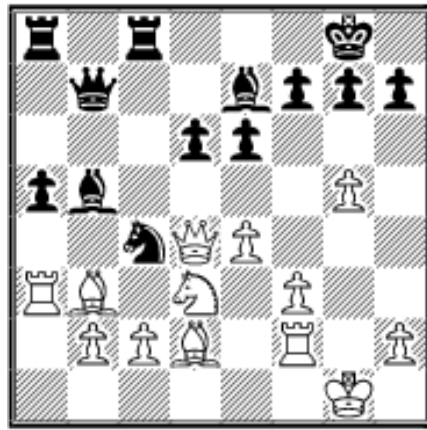
Now neither the rook nor the bishop can recapture. If 17 Rxa4, then 17...exd5 18 Bxd5 Qxa4. If 17 Bxa4, then 17...Qb7, and Black threatens ...exd5, as well as ...Nc4xe3, with the possibility of ...Bb6 preventing White from recapturing with his queen.

17 Nb4 Qb7 18 Rxa4 Bd7 19 Ra3 Be7 20 Qd4 Rfc8



White has a hopeless position, with his pieces forced into awkward posts and with no prospects, Benko has played “through a glass, darkly.” Having ruled out hypnotism, he finally removed his glasses.

21 Bd2 Bb5 22 Rf2 a5 23 Nd3 Nc4



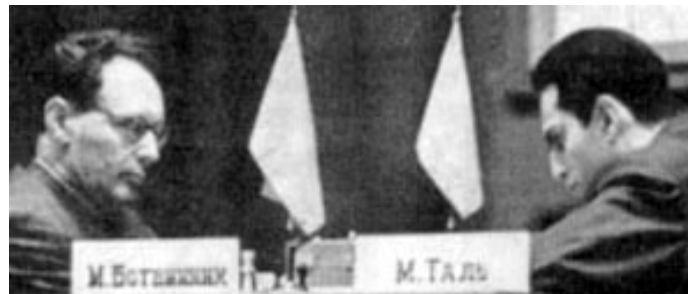
Black begins to cash in his positional winnings.

**24 Bxc4 Rxc4 25 Qe3 Rxc2 26 Bc3 Rxf2
27 Nxf2 Qc7 28 Ra1 Qc4 29 h4 a4 30 Kg2
Rc8 31 Qa7 Bf8 32 Re1 Qb3 33 Qb7??
Bf1+ 0-1**

Mikhail, Yin; Bobby, Yang

Three-time World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik was in a singular position to judge Tal. Botvinnik lost his crown to Tal in 1960 and then won it back from him in 1961. In general, Botvinnik was a man who revered his own opinions (we admit that he had a lot of justification) and was not one to shirk the responsibility of criticizing those who didn't share them.

Additionally, Botvinnik preferred to enter an important match with some dislike for his opponent, or at least some psychological distance from him. (We can see this psychology today most frequently in professional boxing matches, framed by threatening glowers during referee instructions and empathetic hugs after the bell.) Botvinnik's complaint about Tal? He confided to Lev Alburt this damning fact: "I couldn't make myself dislike him." For example, when Botvinnik, the challenger after all, approached Tal for his thoughts about the lights that the former champ preferred or the set and board he wanted, Tal would say he was sure that anything Botvinnik chose would be just fine.



Tal showed none of the pre-match maneuvering, tension and histrionics that characterized Fischer's off-the-board behavior. In fact, in a sense, Tal put all of his "incorrect" behavior into the moves he played, while Fischer put all of his "correct" behavior into his moves. Fischer, with his ultra-dry classicism, took no deliberate chances on the board and relished the moment he "crushed his opponent's spirit." Tal would sacrifice a piece if he saw no direct refutation, even in a world-championship match game! He relished the explosive poetry that he consistently found under the noses of his more practical peers for its own intrinsic beauty.

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

The story Tal tells in his wonderful autobiography, [*The Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*](#), about his victory over Evgeny Vasyukov in the 1965 Soviet Championship is the perfect illustration of all these traits and at the same time gives us a chance to explain further the origin of the name of our monthly **ChessCafe** column.

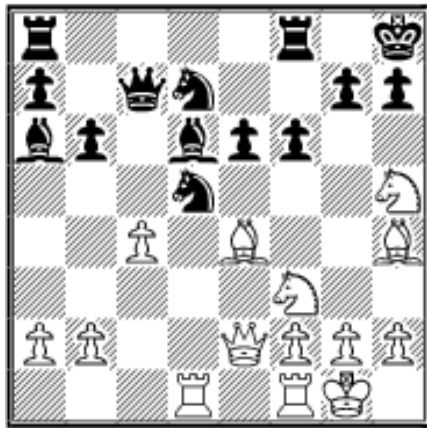
Suffering from a cold in addition to his “normal” background of serious ill health, Tal still played to win. He finished in a very respectable third place, and his game against Vasyukov was key. It began:

Mikhail Tal – Evgeny Vasyukov

Kiev, 1965

Caro Kann Defense

1 e4 c6 2 Nc3 d5 3 d4 dxe4 4 Nxe4 Nd7 5 Nf3 Ng8f6 6 Ng3 e6 7 Bd3 c5 8 0-0 cxd4 9 Nxd4 Bc5 10 Nf3 0-0 11 Qe2 b6 12 Bf4 Bb7 13 Rad1 Nd5 14 Bg5 Qc7 15 Nh5! Kh8! 16 Be4 f6! 17 Bh4 Bd6 18 c4 Ba6!



Black has made some very strong choices, and here Tal knew he was faced with difficult decisions of his own. “How is White to continue?” he writes. Moving the rook to defend the c-pawn is taking a step backward, and Black would still enjoy his pin. Tal points out that if 19 Bd3, Black has 19...Nf4 20 Nxf4 Bxf4 21 Qxe6 Nc5, and Black enjoys himself. “The position demands strong measures,” Tal writes, “but 19 Bxh7 is insufficient in view of 19...Kxh7 20 Qe4+ Kh8! 21 Qxe6 Bxc4.” Tal began to calculate the knight sacrifice on g7.

“The sacrifice was not altogether obvious, and there was a large number of possible variations, but when I conscientiously began to work through them, I found, to my horror, that nothing would come of it. Ideas piled up one after another. I would transport a subtle reply by my opponent, which worked in one case, to another situation where it would naturally prove to be quite useless. As a result my head became filled with a completely chaotic pile of all sorts of moves, and the famous ‘tree of the variations’, from which the trainers recommend that you cut off the small branches, in this case spread with unbelievable rapidity.

And then suddenly, for some reason, I remembered the classic couplet by Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky:

Oh, what a difficult job it was to drag out of the marsh the hippopotamus.

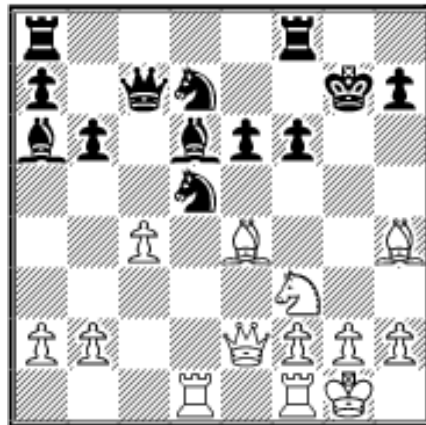
I don’t know from what associations the hippopotamus got onto the

chessboard, but although the spectators were convinced that I was continuing to study the position, I, despite my humanitarian education, was trying at this time to work out: just how would you drag a hippopotamus out of the marsh? I remember how jacks figured in my thoughts, as well as levers, helicopters, and even a rope ladder. After a lengthy consideration I admitted defeat as an engineer, and thought spitefully: ‘Well, let it drown!’ And suddenly the hippopotamus disappeared going off the chessboard just as he had come on. Of his own accord! And straightaway the position did not appear to be so complicated.

Now I somehow realized that it was not possible to calculate all the variations, and that the knight sacrifice was, by its very nature, purely intuitive. And since it promised an interesting game, I could not refrain from making it.

And the following day, it was with pleasure that I read in the paper how Mikhail Tal, after carefully thinking over the position for 40 minutes, made an accurately calculated piece sacrifice ...”

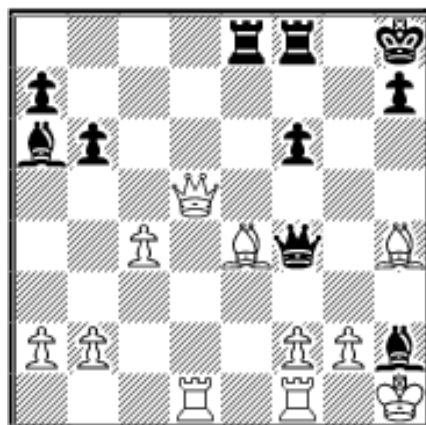
19 Nxb7! Kxb7



Black has to recapture. Now if 20...Nf4, then 21 Qd2, and if 21...Bxc4, then 22 Nxe6.

**20 Nd4 Nc5 21 Qg4+ Kh8 22 Nxe6 Nxe6
23 Qxe6 Rae8 24 Qxd5 Bxh2+ 25 Kh1 Qf4**

The moves have been virtually forced since the knight sac, except for Black's last. Vasyukov should have tried 24...Qxc4 to force an ending that, although better for White, is likely drawn.



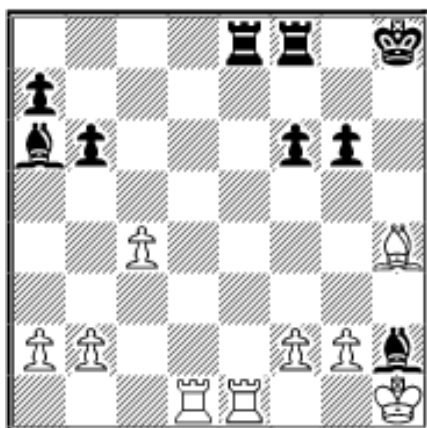
26 Qh5

Now if 26...Rxe4, then White wins with 27 Rd7.

26...Qxe4 27 Rfe1

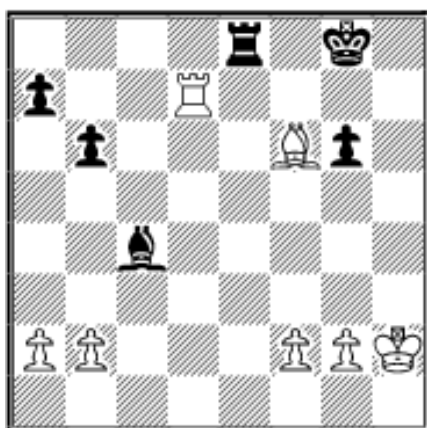
An error that could have let the hippo slip back into the marsh. Tal points out that 27 Rde1 was stronger. Now Black gets another chance...

21...Qg6 28 Qxg6 hxg6



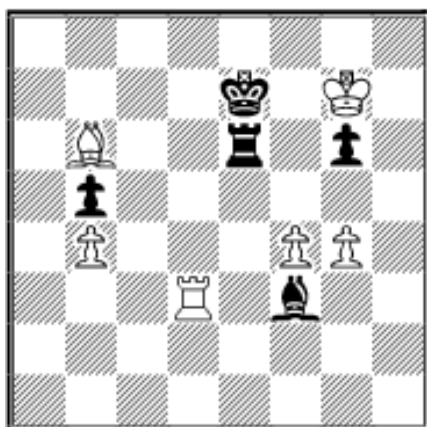
...but misses it again. The zwischenzug 28...Rxe1+ draws. As in many of Tal's sacrificial games, his opponent grows short of time under the pressure of trying to find a series of best defensive moves. Typically, Tal's sacrifices lead to a long-lived initiative, and out-of-time victims have to make momentous decisions in seconds.

29 Bxf6+ Kg8 30 Rxe8 Rxe8 31 Kxh2 Bxc4 32 Rd7



White's advantage may look ephemeral after all, he's but a pawn up in the dreaded bishops-of-opposite-color ending. Indeed, without the rooks, the position is drawn. But with his rook on the seventh and an unopposed dark-square bishop, Tal advances his king, whips up nothing less than a mating attack, and wins.

32...Re6! 33 Bc3 Bxa2 34 Rxa7 Bc4 35 Kg3 Bd5 36 f3 Kf8 37 Bd4 b5 38 Kf4 Bc4 39 Kg5 Ke8 40 Ra8+ Kf7 41 Ra7+ Ke8 (sealed move) 42 b4 Bd5 43 Ra3 Kf7 44 g4 Re2 45 Bc5 Re5+ 46 Kh6 Re6 47 Rd3 Bc6 48 Rd8 Re8 49 Rd4 Re6 50 f4 Ke8 51 Kg7 Be4 52 Bb6 Bf3 53 Rd8+ Ke7 54 Rd3



If 54...Bxg4, then 55 Bd8+ Ke8 56 Bg5 and wins.

54...Be2 55 Bd8+ Ke8 56 Rd2 Re3 57 Bg5 Bd3 58 f5 1-0

Actually, Lev Alburt had a run-in with the Dreaded Stare. At a moment during one of their first games together, Lev couldn't help but glance up at Misha as his wide-open brown eyes, topped by their prominent dark brows, were riveted on Alburt. Lev, from a younger, less superstitious generation that had already incorporated Tal's imaginative approach into their games, unconsciously reacted as if the stare were some kind of joke, laughing softly. Tal immediately roused himself from his trance. Never one to distract his opponent on purpose, he remembered Lev's reaction. Alburt was never again the recipient of the Stare. Our conclusion: the much-touted stare was probably only an absent-minded habit.

Life after Botvinnik

Sometimes it seems that current chess fans think of Tal as washed up after 1961, the year he began to battle his illness and the year Botvinnik took back the crown. It's true that Tal made his greatest accomplishment (the greatest any chess player could achieve) as a very young man. But his love of chess and of competition was lifelong. Indeed, he preferred to play more than 100 tournament games per year in top-flight competition. He continued to study. Later he went from a one-sided attacking genius to a complete player of the highest level. (He joked that he would sometimes look at his old games and laugh, but envy the fact that he could play those old sacrifices because at the time he didn't know better!) But even if Tal had never won the world championship, he would be remembered as one of the greats. Sound like an overstatement? Let's make a very brief list:

- From 1949 to 1990, Tal played in 55 strong international round robins, winning first place in 19 and second in 7!
- Played in eight Olympiads in five he scored best-board results, and in three Olympiads, he scored the best overall results;
- Won the Soviet Championship an unsurpassed six times, a record shared only by Botvinnik;
- World Championship Candidate in 1965, and 1968-69;
- Played 86 games in top-level competition without a loss during 1972-73.
- Tied for first with Karpov at one of the strongest tournaments ever held, Montreal, 1979;
- Held a FIDE rating of 2710 in 1979!;
- Placed third in the 1985 Interzonal at the age of 49.

And that leaves out his prolific journalism. Many consider Tal the best who ever wrote on chess. He wrote many articles, authored and co-authored several classic books, such as [Tal-Botvinnik, 1960](#) and the already mentioned [Life and Games](#). What's more, from 1960 to 1970, he edited the Latvian magazine *Zahs*.

Extraordinary Talent, Rregular Guy

Generosity of spirit was natural to Tal. He seemed interested only in creating the fantastic on the chessboard, not in using the influence his talent could have given him to wield power among his colleagues. Unlike many of his fellow chess Olympians, he remained unassuming, accessible and good-humored willing to play chess with all comers. When other world champions would be too conscious of their ranking to indulge relative patzers, Tal would play blitz with nearly anyone. Since the universal club tradition at speed-chess sessions is that winner keeps playing and the loser gives up his place, Tal was often to be seen at the board with a long line of players queued up behind his opponent, waiting for their turn against the legend.

When he was relaxing in a local café or tavern between rounds wherever chess took him, he was both celebrity and one of the group. Complete strangers would recognize him, of course, and invite him to their table. It would have been more than enough to shake some hands and be pleasant. But Tal would routinely join

the group, swapping stories and sharing laughs. No wonder he was loved by the public.

In the Black

In 1988, Tal won the enormous World Blitz championship in St. John, Canada. In a post-event interview, a journalist referred to him as again a current world champion which could be technically argued, since the event was billed as a FIDE championship. Tal, however, immediately interrupted. "I've been the world champion," he said, "and I can tell you that I am not now the world champion." As a counterpoint to Tal's self-effacing demurring, it's interesting to note that, after winning the FIDE Action "World Championship" in Mazatlan, Karpov, who at the time recognized Kasparov as the "normal" world champion, referred to himself as "World Action Chess Champion."

But Tal did accept another benefit of winning at St. John the fifty-thousand-dollar first prize. Shortly after the event, he visited Steve Doyle at his Tom's River, New Jersey, chess club to give a simul. Afterwards, Tal wanted to see Atlantic City, and Steve was accommodating. Steve drove Tal to Resorts International, but only after insisting that Tal safely lock up the bundles of cash and checks he was carrying in a safety deposit box in the Tom's River Holiday Inn. He cajoled Tal into limiting his traveling stash to \$500.

Once at the casino, Tal plopped himself down at the roulette wheel. To Doyle's dismay, Misha put the entire \$500 on black. But he won. Steve grinned and suggested dinner. Tal left the \$1,000 on black. He won again. Steve tried to convince the champ to set back most of his winnings. After all, Steve, now CFO of a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, had respect for financial risks. But the Wizard let it ride. After winning four in a row on black, he switched to red, but kept betting the house. Two more spins and Tal had amassed \$32,000 truly a fortune in the old Soviet Union, and winnings he would not have to rebate to the authorities, as he would much of his tournament prize. Steve kept pleading, of course, but Tal went for the jackpot one more time. Predictably, he lost. Without changing his demeanor, Tal stood up and quietly headed to dinner with Steve. In fact, it turned into a long evening of nightlife.

Afterwards Doyle had to drive them back to Tom's River, of course. Heading north on the New Jersey Parkway, Steve was overwhelmed with exhaustion at the first rays of sunrise. Pulling over quickly to the shoulder of the highway, he mumbled a quick apology-explanation and immediately fell asleep. On waking up from a 45-minute nap, he looked across at the much older Tal to see him sitting wide-awake in the passenger seat, imperturbably chain-smoking, as always.

His Last World Championship Move?

Co-author Al Lawrence was fortunate enough to sit next to Tal at a small table during the final World Championship of his lifetime, Kasparov-Karpov, New York, 1990, about two years before Tal's death. Sipping coffee in the protection of a private meeting room, Tal and Lawrence watched famous GMs comment in turn on the game at an oversized board.

Lawrence was shocked by Tal's appearance. His illness and his passion had demanded from him a great price. Although barely 54, he seemed physically an old and frail man. What hair he had left was white, and it was swirled around his head to cover the most territory, making him look more Merlin-like than ever. He had just traveled halfway around the world by jet, a challenge to even the young and healthy. On top of that, this 30th anniversary of his own unforgettable victory had brought him together with old chess adversaries and old friends. It was clear that his day had already included frequent ceremonial toasts to past battles. Tal's prematurely wizened face was heavy-lidded as he hunched over in his gray, double-breasted suit, his elbows on the table, his chin resting in his hands. The old stare was frankly a bit glazed.

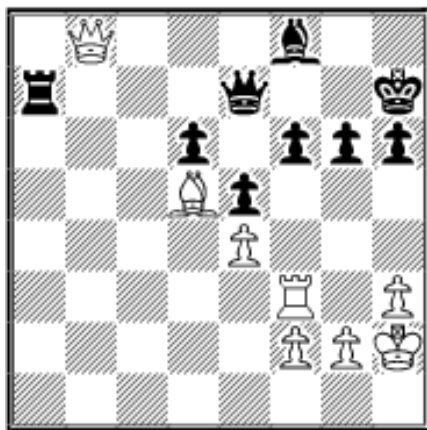
The position after 37 moves showed Kasparov with the initiative, letting a pawn go to build up an attack against Karpov's castled king. A top American GM was taking a turn at our private demonstration board, when it became clear the battling K's were reaching a critical point.

Garry Kasparov – Anatoly Karpov

Game 6, New York, 1990

Ruy Lopez

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 0-0 Be7 6 Re1 b5 7 Bb3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 Nd7 10 d4 Bf6 11 a4 Bb7 12 axb5 axb5 13 Rxa8 Qxa8 14 d5 Na5 15 Bc2 Nc4 16 b3 Ncb6 17 Na3 Ba6 18 Nh2 c6 19 dxc6 Qxc6 20 Bd2 Be7 21 Ng4 Ra8 22 Ne3 Nf6 23 Nf5 Bf8 24 Bg5 Nbd7 25 c4 bxc4 26 bxc4 Bxc4 27 Nxc4 Qxc4 28 Bb3 Qc3 29 Kh2 h6 30 Bxf6 Nxf6 31 Re3 Qc7 32 Rf3 Kh7 33 Ne3 Qe7 34 Nd5 Nxd5 35 Bxd5 Ra7 36 Qb3 f6 37 Qb8 g6



Al's eyes darted between the position and Tal, covertly checking Misha's face for signs of reaction. Surely, such an attacking game between the current titans stirred the old juices in the Wizard somewhere down deep. Kasparov was now the young attacking genius whose games regularly amazed rooms full of grandmasters. How much of this new genius could the "old" one follow?

The next Kasparov move was announced and repeated on the big board.

38 Rc3

At the exact moment the piece found its new square, Misha's exhausted stare suddenly twisted into an exaggerated, cartoon-like grimace of pure revulsion. Lawrence thought for a moment that the famous icon might hold his nose and cry "Phew!" Obviously, Tal had found the move to be a game-spoiler.

Everyone else for the moment accepted Emperor Garry's new clothes in the form of this "obvious" move, and Tal's face quickly regrouped itself to a guarded stare. But from that point on in the game, Karpov's defense began to take control. Only four moves later, Kasparov sealed his move in a drawn position.

38...h5! (The game is suddenly equal.) **39 g4 Kh6 40 gxh5 Kxh5 41 Rc8 Bg7 42 Re8 $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$**

Later, when the game had been analyzed worldwide, Kasparov's culprit-move was found to be the same one that instantly contorted Tal's face for that revealing moment at the table. The right plan was unearthed: 38 g4!! Is this what Tal saw immediately, jet-lagged and suffering from celebrations? Al bets it is.

Right up until life's last checkmate, Mikhail Tal, eighth chess champion of the world, still had the sorcery in his wand and in his eyes. His games will continue to inspire new generations of players to find the swashbuckling and the beautiful in chess.



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