



BOOK REVIEWS

Analyzing an Enigma

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Why Lasker Matters by Andrew Soltis, 2005 Batsford, Figurine Algebraic Notation, paperback, 320pp., \$21.95

“Everyone is certain that Lasker was a great player, but it is hard to pin down the elusive quality that made him great. There are as many Laskers as there are interpreters ...” — Fred Reinfeld, *The Human Side of Chess* (1952)



Opinions have tended to differ more sharply about Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941) than about most other world champions. Little respected when he first took the title from an aging Steinitz in 1894, Lasker eventually proved himself by far the best player of his time by a series of impressive tournament victories and five successful title defenses. By the time he finally relinquished the crown to Capablanca in 1921, his chess prowess was universally acknowledged, even by his fiercest rivals, and he remained among the world’s top players for years afterward.



Yet even some who admired him found him rather an enigma. Euwe, in *The Development of Chess Style*, hardly seemed to know what to do with Lasker, devoting less space to him than to several lesser lights, and writing (seemingly as an excuse) “It is not possible to learn much from him; one can only stand and wonder.” Some in later generations seemed bent on harsh revisionism, dismissing Lasker altogether: Bent Larsen said “I

admired him ... until I studied his games,” while Fischer, in a famous 1964 article, called him “a coffeehouse player” and kept him off his all-time top ten list, while including others demonstrably inferior to Lasker.

Fischer did not explain how a coffeehouse player could hold the world title for 27 years, longer than anyone else before or since. Others tried — Réti attributed it to “common sense” (as if this was rare among chess masters), he also (along with Tartakower) cited “psychology,” a line often parroted since. Maróczy jokingly blamed Lasker’s potent cigars, Tarrasch half-seriously suggested hypnotism. Fine credited calmness and strong nerves, yet his colleague Reinfeld wrote “I do not trust the legend of Lasker’s equanimity.” Lasker himself added to the confusion by being rather evasive, unrevealing or even disingenuous when asked to explain his chess success.

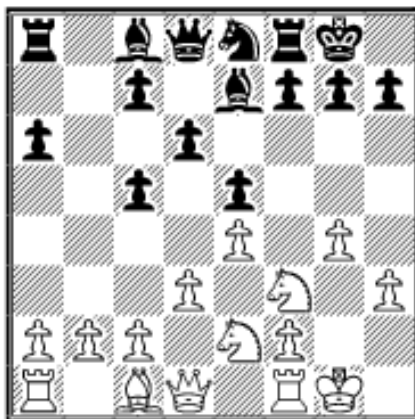
An odd thing about these hypotheses is that they generally did not involve Lasker’s actual chess skills. In the introduction to *Lasker’s Greatest Chess Games* (by Reinfeld and Fine, 1935) only two of the five “Appreciations” of Lasker mention them: Nimzovitch cites his maneuvering ability and his knowledge of weak color complexes, while Spielmann basically says Lasker simply could out-calculate everyone (“But Lasker! His eyes, his thoughts are everywhere.”).

It’s in an effort to find real *chess reasons* for Lasker’s chess success that GM Andy Soltis has written *Why Lasker Matters*. The book is basically a games collection, 100 in all, but with annotations designed to highlight Lasker’s real strengths, how he differed from his contemporaries, what he knew and could do that they did not and could not. On the whole, Soltis does a very good job.

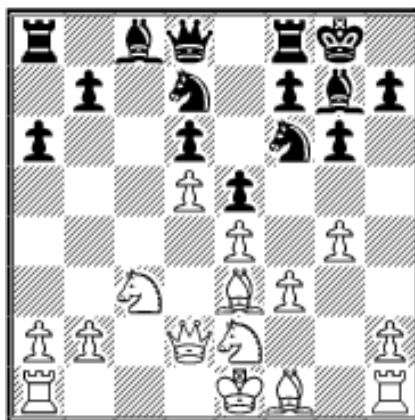
In a 5-page introduction, Soltis surveys some of the myths cited above. He is particularly hard on Réti, calling his hypothesis “The Psych Hoax.” (Later on he debunks Réti’s psychological interpretation of Lasker’s most famous game, against Capablanca at St. Petersburg 1914.) He notes Lasker’s evasiveness about his own talent, for example his 1935 claim

that it “lies in the sphere of combinations.” Soltis comments “Considering how rarely he combined, this must be one of his final jokes upon the chess world.”

100 games follow, annotated at length over 311 pages. They are presented in chronological order, beginning with Tietz-Lasker, Breslau 1889, and ending with Thomas-Lasker, Nottingham 1936. As we said above, the notes are designed to highlight Lasker’s unique strengths. An example is this, from Game 1:



11...h5!! — “So why the double exclamation?” Soltis writes. “Wasn’t the idea of ...h5 routine, predictable — totally obvious? The answer is: Not in 1889.” Soltis goes on to compare this position one “that King’s Indian players wrestled with more than 70 years later when they tried to find a solution to the Saemisch Variation”:



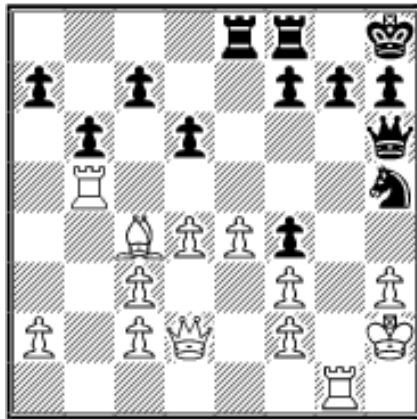
Soltis continues “White’s edge becomes manifest if he can play Ng3 and h2-h4-h5. But Svetozar Gligoric introduced a daring idea, 11...h5!, in 1958.”

This introduces one of the keys to Lasker's success: that in strategic ideas he was years, even decades ahead of his time. This is more or less true of most world champions, and with regard to Lasker the claim is not new — it was mentioned, for example, by R.N. Coles in *Dynamic Chess* (1956). But Coles showed only one game, while Soltis provides many examples.

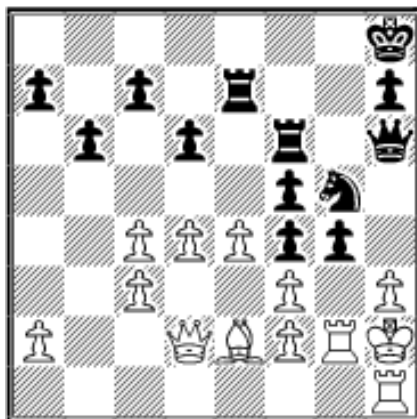
Soltis describes Lasker's other strengths as one reads through the games. To summarize the main ones:

- Lasker tended to evaluate positions in terms of specific targets, rather than abstract generalities such as development, space, weak squares, mobility etc.
- He had a great knack for creating positions where the “margin for error” was in his favor, i.e. it was much harder for his opponent to find good moves, even if the position was theoretically even.
- He was undogmatic, violating general principles when he felt confident in doing so.
- He understood positional sacrifices.
- He used tactics for positional goals, rather than as an end in themselves.
- He knew how and when to aim for complications to fight back from an inferior position.
- He had a talent for “creeping moves.”
- He used the clock as the “33rd piece.”

A few more examples of how Soltis supports his thesis with annotations. The following position, from Janowski-Lasker, match, Paris, 1909, game 2, illustrates the importance of a specific target over general considerations:

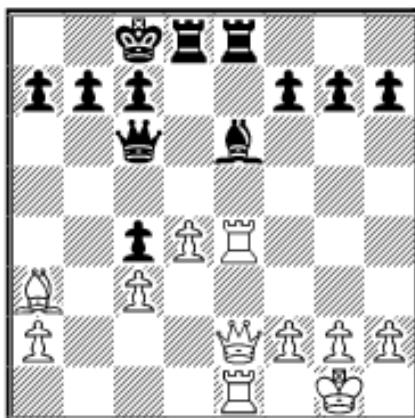


White seems to have all sorts of advantages: more space, more mobility, a big pawn center, bishop vs. knight, and open files for his rooks, while Black's queenside light squares are weak. Soltis comments "Normally, being able to place a bishop on a hole like c6 or d5 or to double rooks on the g-file would be significant. That's because we think superior mobility can be translated into other advantages. Here it can't." In fact, Lasker showed that White's f- and h-pawns are more vulnerable than Black's g-pawn: **21.Rbg5 f6 22.R5g4 g6! 23.Bd3 Re7 24.c4?** — Hoping for c4-c5 to open lines on the queenside. **24...Ng7!** — "The knight heads for e6 and from there to g5 to attack the targets h3 and f3. The maneuver is made possible by White's last move, which prevents him from playing 25.Bc4 Ne6 26.Bxe6." **25.c3 Ne6 26.Bf1 f5! 27.R4g2 Rf6 28.Bd3 g5 29.Rh1 g4 30.Be2 Ng5!**



31.fxg4 — Or 31.Qxf4 Nxf3+ 32.Kg3 Qh4#. **31...f3 0-1.**

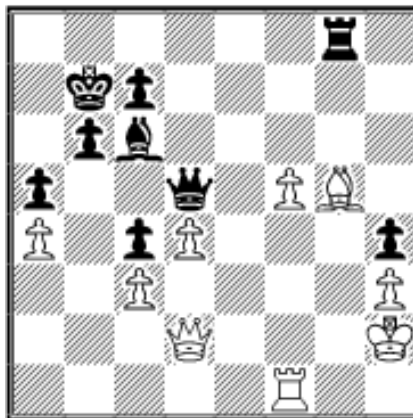
More on the theme of targets is seen in Steinitz-Lasker, World Championship rematch, Moscow, 1896, game 3:



Soltis writes “Black wants to unpin his bishop so he can play ...Bd5 or ...Bf5-d3. An ‘economy of means’ would be served by ...Rd7/...Red8.” **16...Rg8!** — “Black’s move is much deeper and is based on ‘Find the targets.’ Black’s chances are vastly greater in a middlegame compared with the ending, and that means he has to go after g2, the one point White cannot protect for long.” **17.Re5 b6 18.Bc1 g5!?! 19.Rxg5!** — “Ignoring the sack [*sic*] with 19.f3 was a serious alternative. The drawback is that it sentences White to abject passivity.” **19...Rxg5 20.Bxg5 Rg8 21.f4 Bd5 22.g3 Kb7**

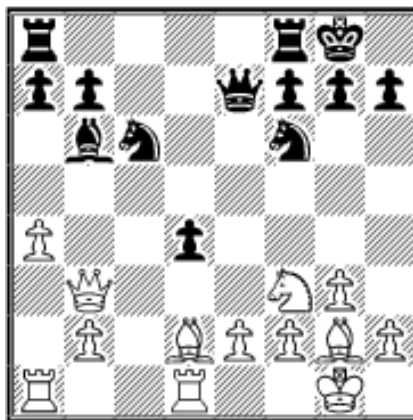


Here Soltis highlights another of his themes: “The position is equal by various measures. But not by margin for error. Black can afford a few mistakes and still be able to draw an ending. White, however, can avoid disaster only by finding some difficult moves. For example, 23.Qh5! and 23...Bh1 24.Qh3 has been found to be White’s best. But how many players are willing to bet their future on such an artificial-looking defense?” The game eventually ended in this position:

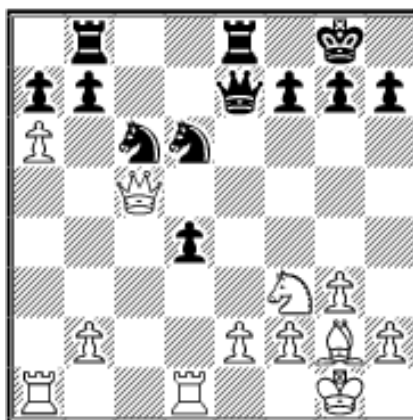


where the significance of g2 as a target is very clear.

An example of Lasker's knack for "creeping moves": short, seemingly innocuous but subtle moves that have major effects, is seen in Lasker-Tarrasch, St. Petersburg 1914:



Soltis writes: "The threat is 16.a5 and 17.a6 with mayhem to follow on the long diagonal. For instance 15...Rfe8 (not 15...Qxe2?? 16.Re1 Qa6 17.Bf1) 16.a5 Bc5 17.a6 Rab8? 18.Qb5 Ne4 19.Bf4 with advantage (19...Bd6 20.Bxd6 Nxd6 21.Qc5!)



“That’s a theme of this game: There are many semi-forcing variations to consider. Almost none lead to a clear edge until several moves into the future and usually involve [*sic*] ‘creeping’ moves like 21.Qc5. This is an area in which Lasker was Tarrasch’s superior.”

A sub-plot running through the book, and adding historical interest, is the long-running Lasker-Tarrasch feud/rivalry. For example, Soltis describes how after Lasker won at Nuremberg 1896, Tarrasch, who finished a disappointing =3-4th, “got his revenge in the tournament book where he created a ‘luck scoretable’ to show how many extra half points and points Lasker had benefited from ... a remarkable example of sour grapes.” Tarrasch did a similar thing with his annotations to the 1907 Lasker-Marshall World Championship match (which Lasker won +8 –0 =7). After Lasker defeated Tarrasch +8 –3 =5 a year later, Tarrasch stopped producing “luck scoretables.”

It appears that Soltis, long something of a technophobe, may have begun to recognize the usefulness of databases in historical research. For example, discussing the famous game Lasker-Napier, Cambridge Springs 1904, he notes how critical Réti was in *Masters of the Chessboard* (1933) of Lasker’s opening: **1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.Nf3 g6 4.d4 cxd4 5.Nxd4 Bg7 6.Be3 d6 7.h3 Nf6 8.g4 0-0 9.g5.**



Yet, Soltis notes, before writing *Masters* Réti had himself played the same moves twice, against Weenink at Rotterdam 1919, and against Sämisch at Kiel 1921. Either Andy is even more well read than we’d thought, or he’s learned to do

ChessBase position searches. Also, his more traditional sources, in particular Ken Whyld's *Collected Games of Emanuel Lasker* (The Chess Player, 1998), are the right ones for the job here.

Soltis may also be availing himself of computer-assisted analysis, or else he's checking notes by analysts who do — for example the above-cited Napier game is terrifically complex, so much so that the 1935 notes by Reinfeld and Fine now look silly, but Soltis does not lose his way. Of the games we spot-checked, the only hole worth noting was in the aforementioned Lasker-Tarrasch, St. Petersburg 1914, where a few moves earlier in the line leading to the “creeping move,”



White appears to have had a much stronger, non-creeping alternative in 20.axb7!, e.g. 20...Qxb7 21.Qxb7 Rxb7 22.Bxd6 Nxd6 23.Nxd4 Nxd4 24.Bxb7 Nxe2+ 25.Kg2 Nxb7 26.Rxa7 Nc5 Re7!! +- . Such minor omissions aside, Soltis' analysis seems on the whole accurate, instructive, and most important for the book's purpose, illustrative of Lasker's strengths.

We note a few other minor flaws. As in most Soltis books, we see the usual grammar and spelling errors, e.g. “cache” for cachet, and the “k” he inexplicably puts at the end of “sac.” He continues to earn his soubriquet “sourceless Soltis.” We knew the provenance of one Torre quote only because we happened to write it ourselves when translating Velasco's *Life and Games of Carlos Torre*. Perhaps the most glaring instance of non-attribution comes at the book's conclusion, where Soltis writes:

“It used to be said that Lasker, unlike his contemporaries, formed no school of thought. But we’re all his students.”

This is clearly a paraphrase of Reuben Fine, from *The World’s Great Chess Games* (1976), p. 51:

“In the conventional sense, [Lasker] has founded no school. But in reality all chess players are his pupils.”

Rather than the vague “It used to be said,” why not give Fine credit? The book’s conclusion, which ends with this paraphrase, is something of an anticlimax. After tackling at considerable length a major question, i.e. “Why *does* Lasker matter?”, one would expect some sort of grand summation. And some tournament crosstables and career records would have made clearer just how much Lasker did matter. Instead, after the last game, there are merely two brief paragraphs. It’s as if Soltis suddenly remembered a pressing engagement.

However, the quick exit detracts only a little from what is otherwise quite a good book. As with *Bobby Fischer Rediscovered* (2003), Soltis has presented some new insights on a major chess figure in an intelligent and instructive style. *Why Lasker Matters* will help readers both to improve their own chess, and to understand a great but enigmatic player.

[Order](#) *Why Lasker Matters*
by Andrew Soltis



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