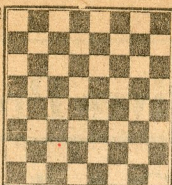


chess

by richard shorman



BOTVINNIK LECTURES

At the end of July this year, former world champion Mikhail Botvinnik visited the ancient Russian town of Vladimir and held an audience of about 400 spellbound with a frank and penetrating dissertation on chess and chessplayers. Note that his lecture was delivered long before the Spassky — Korchnoi match, won by Spassky, 6½-3½. (Abridged article from CHESS, Sept. 27, 1968, pp. 3-8.)

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Calculator And Programmer

A master in his chess play has two functions.

First of all, he functions as a calculating and solving mechanism because he has to consider possible moves and analyze variations. Without this function you cannot play chess.

Second, and just as important, is the ability to program oneself, to perfect one's individual program and modify it in a perpetual search for improvement. One may consider a player who gives due attention to this function as guiding himself by a definite program or algorithm. In perfecting his algorithm, a chess master's achievements are affected by his analytical ability, his physical state and his age.

Boris Spassky

Spassky is an exceptionally sober player with enviable good health. He is a good psychologist. He is a sound judge of situations and of the balance of strength between himself and his opponent. He rarely gets into time trouble. You cannot confuse him. He is always in a happy and confident state of mind and does everything equally well. Spassky's play is always that of a very good grand master.

It is this combination of qualities that has enabled Spassky to achieve outstanding successes.

Viktor Korchnoi

Although somewhat older than Spassky, Korchnoi is in peak form.

According to an unofficial ranking system which assesses the results of all leading players, Korchnoi ranks second below Fischer. Spassky places a little below Korchnoi, but his match scores against Goler (5½-2½) and, especially, Larsen (5½-2½) will undoubtedly have moved him up.

It is well known that Korchnoi plays every game keenly, taking risks in straining to win. Spassky, on the other hand, plays at full power only at the most crucial moments, playing less important games rather prosaically. Hence his ranking is lower than Korchnoi's, but this is no reason for concluding that Korchnoi is the better player.

The two are quite different. Korchnoi always considers that his fine positional understanding and his deep knowledge of theory (not book theory, but his own theory of the openings) should bring him success.

Korchnoi can do what the majority of chess players cannot: stick it out when defending a difficult position and then, when given the opportunity, switch instantly to a counter-attack. His combination of courage and accurate calculation enables him to overcome the nervous strain caused by difficult situations. Spassky avoids such positions. Thus, it is hard to say which of them will win. Only 12 games makes a pretty short match. Spassky is the stronger practical player, but he has a hard fight on his hands.

Tigran Petrosian

Petrosian has the most original talent of all our grand masters. Not the greatest talent. I consider, for example, that Geller's talent is more striking. But the way Geller plays has been seen before. The way Spassky and Korchnoi and even Tal play is not new. Players like Petrosian, however, have rarely been seen in the past. He has a marvellous capacity for posting his pieces so shrewdly that attacks against his position meet with the maximum of hindrance. This is a very subtle style which one seldom encounters and to which it is very difficult to adjust.

I did not succeed in this task myself and so lost the world title to him in 1963.

But apart from chess style and talent there is also practical playing strength. It is here that Petrosian's deficiencies appear. He does not have those qualities which are essential for a World Champion.

Whereas he maintained his standing nicely in the first three years of his reign, after he beat Spassky the failures began. Right after the match, he played poorly at Santa Monica, where Spassky came in first. Then he had only moderate results in a whole series of events. Quite recently in the not particularly strong international tournament at Bamberg, won impressively by Keres, Petrosian was a whole two points behind the leader, even though he had resourcefully salvaged two half points by offering draws to Teufel and Schmid when he had a lost position against each of them.

His play has been so uncertain that, as less than ten months remain to the final match, he should be hard at work on a precise plan of preparation. He should be taking on dangerous opponents in order to recover his previous form. He ought to have embarked on a serious program for reviving his playing strength, but to all appearances he has not done so.

On his return from Bamberg, Petrosian rather impulsively decided to take part in the Moscow Championship — for Moscow a strong event but for Petrosian a comparatively weak one, which could not benefit him in the least. He has since become chief editor of the new weekly newspaper, "64," a job that demands a lot of time and energy and that will not help him at all in preparing for a match with either Spassky or Korchnoi. Petrosian's position is undoubtedly difficult, but not hopeless as he has great talent, and a World Championship match can always go either way.