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Legendary Chess Careers

# Lajos Portisch



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## KEY TO SYMBOLS

=	Equality or equal chances
±	White has a slight advantage
∓	Black has a slight advantage
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+ -	White has a decisive advantage
- +	Black has a decisive advantage
∞	unclear
∞̄	with compensation
↔	with counterplay
↑	with initiative
→	with an attack
Δ	with the idea
□	only move
N	novelty
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
+	check
#	mate



## PREFACE

How well do we know the great players of the relatively recent past? Their names are certainly well-known in chess circles and even non-chessplayers may be aware of who they are. However only a very few people know their careers in detail and what exactly they achieved. We know about some facets of their style but in my opinion not as deeply as their chess deserves.

We all know that Timman played a world championship final match against Karpov – and that Portisch was a world championship candidate many times. But we still do not know about the richness of their play and the quality of their achievements in any great detail. I have noticed that chess writing has reached a significant junction from which it has several ways to develop. Yes, world champions' careers are well documented. Of course it possible to repeat that a certain world champion was an amazing attacking player, another crowned chess king was such a fine positional player, but it is difficult to say new things about such champions. By now most of the great chess games by the champions have been analysed with the help of the computers. Writers have to go into much greater detail, just as your author undertook with Nick Aplin, devoting a whole book to Karpov's endgame play.

In this book I take another direction. I investigate the chess of those players who were great, but whose status lies just below the level of the world champions. According to my knowledge, the style of this book is new and hopefully revelatory.

In most interviews, players usually reflect on their careers, but their talk is not combined with serious analysis.

Originally, I undertook 6 interviews with legendary players. I consider myself fortunate that players like Gaprindashvili, Hort, Portisch, Seirawan, Timman and Torre were ready to talk to me for this project. In this book the set of interviews with Portisch is published. A similar series of exchanges with Timman is already published and for benefit of the readers, all of the interviews will follow.

These players each achieved an enormous amount of success. They were without doubt world-class players.

Actually, in combination, they comprise well over a century of the best players of their countries – nations which have great traditions and high levels of chess.

Why interview them? First of all, it is necessary to form an opinion about their achievements and also to give them an opportunity to share their colossal experience. In chess the best players of the present day will never talk sincerely about their opening preparation and will never share opinions on many chess matters. It would be senseless to ask Topalov or Anand, if they could tell us what the best line is against the Dragon.

The players I interviewed still play, but because of their age they can talk freely and sincerely about training and chess matters like building an opening repertoire.

Some of the great players analysed their best games in public but I feel it is still worth looking at their chess with the eye of a trainer and asking some searching questions.

I very much enjoyed talking to them and I got the impression it was pleasant for the former giants of chess. It is hoped that reading these interviews with the players who forever put their names into the history of chess will provide you with many happy hours of reading. I would like to express my special thanks to Nick Aplin who provided some guidance on the nature of the written text. I would also like to express my gratitude to chessplayers like Yochanan Afek, and my countrymen Ivan Bottlik, Peter Gyarmati, Tamas Schenker, Csaba Balogh who helped me with finding data and arranging meetings.

Also I would like to say thanks to my friends Ashot Nadanian and Andras Toth who followed through the process of writing and encouraged and inspired me that it was worth putting the effort into this book. Of course I very much appreciate the players who wrote an appraisal for the book.

Ultimately the biggest thanks are dedicated to the great players who consented to be interviewed.



## INTERVIEW

It is very hard to choose who has been the greatest Hungarian chessplayer. There are only three players whose names can appear in a realistic judgement. The name depends on which aspect one judges. Geza Maroczy was a world-class player between 1905 and 1912. In some of those years when the world champion Emanuel Lasker did not play, Maroczy displayed the best chess in the world. However, the world champion was superior to him. Peter Leko played a match for the world championship title and he was one game away from beating Kramnik, the world champion, but even in that year, Kasparov and Anand were at least no less formidable than him and they did not participate in that world championship. Though Leko's career is far from over, his career has declined ever since.

If one judges the extremely high level of being a world championship candidate and the duration of the career, one must choose the Hungarian number one for three decades and 8-time world championship candidate Lajos Portisch.

I was working on Fischer's openings and when Fischer died, the Hungarian grandmaster called him the greatest player ever and especially

praised his level in the openings. For me Kasparov is equally great and it felt like in the opening he was the best of all. Afterwards, the idea came to my mind that Portisch felt Fischer was so good because the great American player held his best novelties and new ideas for him. For example, playing the exchange Spanish for the first time in his career against Portisch, indirectly shows a lot of respect from the American champion toward the Hungarian grandmaster.

When I called him and asked him to give an interview, I mentioned to him my idea. Perhaps I was nervous and because of it I did not express myself properly, which led to a misunderstanding and he thought the interview would be about Fischer. I was naturally very happy when he agreed to the interview.

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**T.K.:** Please say a few words about your family background! Did anybody play chess in the family?

**L.P.:** *My father played chess a little. My brother and I received a chess set as a Christmas present. My parents wanted to present a game. My favourite Auntie*

*Bozsi could also play chess. Probably one of them taught us the rules. Later we kept going to watch adults playing chess at the riverside of Zala. I think it was like that in the first year.*

**T.K.:** Antal Csuti's name is well known in Hungarian chess circles and Zalaegerszeg, the many times Hungarian team champion, wears his name as he was your junior trainer. How did you study under him?

**L.P.:** *We also started to play with the adults at the riverside and the better players belonged to a club. Zalaegerszeg was a small town in the late forties. I do not exactly know when he started to train us. But by the time I went to secondary school in 1952 I had already won the pioneer championship and belonged to the club.*

**T.K.:** I searched for Csuti's games in the database but in vain. What was his playing strength?

**L.P.:** *I would expect that he was a trainer for children. I do not even know if he played tournament games. He gave lectures to us, and lent us chessbooks. I can recall Maroczy's and Bedo's endgame book. But even Budapest players had few books only like Pachman's.*

**T.K.:** Did he teach proper openings for example?

**L.P.:** *His favourite was King's gambit, so we had to learn it. He also liked the Traxler Gambit, I think it is in 1.e4 e5 with ♗c4 but I am no longer certain about it. The most important thing was he liked to work with children and he made us love chess.*

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I managed to trace down one Csuti game with the help of the excellent endgame composer Peter Gyarmati. He is from Zalaegerszeg as well.

He told me he was also one of Csuti's pupils.

He still did not play with the Portisch brothers. Later once the number of players grew he had to play as well.

From Csuti, Gyarmati went under the coaching of Ferenc Portisch, whom he very much praises as a trainer.

Here is the game Peter sent me.

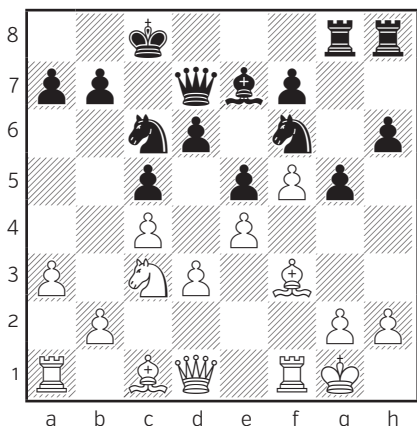
By the way Peter told me Csuti did not only teach opening and middle-games, but his endgame trainings were decent as well.

• **A. Csuti**  
 • **P. Gyarmati [B23]**

FIRST CATEGORY TOURNAMENT 1971



1.e4 c5 2.f4 ♘f6 3.♗c3 d6 4.♗f3  
 ♗c6 5.d3 ♕g4 6.♕e2 ♕xf3 7.♕xf3  
 e5 8.o-o ♖d7 9.f5 ♕e7 10.♗e2 o-o-  
 o 11.c4 h6 12.a3 g5 13.♗c3 ♗dg8



14. ♕h5 ♕d8 15. ♕e3??

This move blunders a piece.

15...g4!

And the pupil went on the win the game.

I was not able to find a winning game by him. Anyway this game probably shows his level. Incidentally, according to Gyarmati, uncle Csuti had a serious disadvantage as he had to stand all the time during the game. He used to be a carpenter.

He had fallen and became disabled for the rest of his life. He lived 150 meters away from the club, and it took him a serious effort to overcome that distance. His love for chess was limitless. He died unexpectedly in 1972 as Peter Gyarmati recalls.



T.K.: How often and how much did you train then?

L.P.: *There was no clear timetable, we all played chess as much as school and other obligations allowed. We of course had the holidays when we could play tournaments as well. I soon became the best player in Zalaegerszeg. When I played at my first semi-final of Hungary it was still just for fun. I did not understand what was a purposeful preparation for a game. If one plays a tournament game in the afternoon, it is not recommended to spend the whole day before in the Luna Park. One boy who is a relative of mine, and with whom I ate every day at their place, suggested that we go to Luna Park. This left its mark on my result...*

T.K.: What caught your imagination in chess?

L.P.: *Possibly being a comfort-lover, I thought in chess one needs to work less than in music. Later I realized I was wrong. Also the joy of winning, any child is happy to be able to defeat adults. It was stimulating for me as well.*

**T.K.:** Whose games had a strong effect on your chess?

**L.P.:** *It is very hard to tell now. I remember during the 1950 world championship candidate tournament in Budapest my brother Feri made several boards. We did not have enough pieces so we replaced the pieces with buttons. We called ourselves by the players names. I was Keres and he was Bronstein and we played simultaneously several games. At that time I had no favourite player, but later I managed to obtain two of Nimzowitch's books, which had a great affect on me. I think like many other players I was lucky to start with him. It was no accident in those years my favourite opening was 1.e4 ♘c6.*

**T.K.:** What was the first considerable success you can recall?

**L.P.:** *It came fairly late, but it must be mentioned that I started chess late. Maybe that is the reason I am still not fed up with chess. In the summer of 1954 at age of 17 I won a master tournament at Keszthely, yet I made the candidate master title, which was a notable title then. There were strict criteria to achieve titles.*

**T.K.:** Do you have any memorable games from this tournament?

**L.P.:** *I lost to Bely who was a problem opponent for me as he beat me four times.*

**T.K.:** How much were you satisfied with your result World Junior championship in 1955?

**L.P.:** *With some difficulty I made fourth place in the end. I met Spassky for the first time. He won the tournament. My score was good for a promising young player from the countryside. I had not proved much till that point. It helped me raise my confidence.*

**T.K.:** When did you qualify from the semi-final of the Hungarian championship to the final for the first time?

**L.P.:** *Before that tournament was the World Junior championship. With the confidence from the World Junior championships I won the semi-final. As I remember I played well that tournament. I needed to try almost everything several times till I achieved something. I failed at the first three semi-finals, but I qualified the fourth time. Maybe great talents improve faster, also I started late and I was from the countryside, which limited the possibilities.*

**T.K.:** Is there any memorable game from the event?

**L.P.:** *The problem is that I no longer remember who played there.*

**T.K.:** I can check in the database.

**L.P.:** *I do not think it is in the database. It seems that Filep beat me, but*

*I do not know. I am not against putting a lost game into the selection. I think Florian was in my group, but he trained me so probably we drew (In reality Florian won with Black).*

**T.K.:** What style of play did you adopt as a junior?

**L.P.:** *I played sharper. I used aggressive openings like the 4.♔g5 and 4.f3 variation of the Nimzo Indian defence with White, these becoming popular again. With Black I used the King's Indian, maybe I played it later. But the Nimzo Indian, which I played with White was a basic pillar of my Black repertoire almost all my career. I played weird openings like 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 a6 hoping they would play 3.d4 and they often did it. I also played things like 1.e4 Nc6 2.Nf3 e6.*

**T.K.:** You were talented in music as well. Was it a tough decision to become a professional?

**L.P.:** *I started university and finished one year. I played the violin, now music is my passion but then it was somewhat of an obligation. (Ferenc the younger brother told me their parents were not against the decision to become a professional chessplayer. Ferenc was a very strong international master with a few grandmaster norms. His best result was a third place at the Hungarian championship).*

**T.K.:** When did they select you for the Hungarian Olympic team?

**L.P.:** *I won two selection events. One was the Alekhine in 56, there was a tie-break between myself and Benko, we scored 8,5 out of 11 games. Maybe the other event was the Szikra I think I shared first place.*

Barcza also made 9,5 out of 13 games. I am thankful to Ivan Botlik who provided me with this result.

*I made 50 percent in my first final. That was not great but not bad at all. The selection committee had other players to choose like Bilek or Forintos. It was close but they selected me to be a reserve player.*

**T.K.:** What memories do you have from the event?

**L.P.:** *Against Milic, I had a really very exciting game in the last round. I played the 3.e5 French with White. There was huge time trouble and the stakes were extremely high. The other three games were drawn; I had to win for the silver medal.*

*I had extremely good nerves then. Sandor Fulop who was the secretary of the federation whom I liked very much, told me he nearly had a heart attack when I had no time and I was taking off an imagined piece of my hair from my jacket. By the way he is now living in Argentina and we still maintain our friendship.*

**T.K.:** Let's join the time-trouble.