

Cyrus Lakdawala

Tal

move by move

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

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Introduction

Things are not what they appear to be; nor are they otherwise. – Surangama Sutra

The nature of miracles is they contradict our understanding of what we consider ‘truth’. Perhaps the miracle itself is a truth which our minds are too limited to comprehend. Mikhail Nekhemevich Tal was just such a miracle worker of the chess board. His games make us believe that anything, however unlikely, is possible, if we are able to back it up with imagination, daring and computer-like calculation/intuition. He revelled in confusing opponents, who were otherwise regarded as competent.

One of the most – if not the most – beloved players of all time was born on November 9th, 1936. Tal was a born prodigy, and not just in chess. He was reading by age three, and could perform three figure multiplications in his head by age five. His memory was close to photographic, as well. By age 15 he had already skipped three grade levels and begun University. In 1955, by age 19, he made it to the USSR Championship and his high-risk fantasy play caught the eye of several GMs, as well as the public and the press who immediately made him their darling. In 1957 Tal did the impossible by winning the USSR Championship at age 20. There followed dominating tournament performances, including the Interzonal. He normally won by completely squashing the lower half of the field.

Tal’s reputation itself became a weapon, so much so that his opponents began to play like children spooked by an adult’s ghost story. In this way, Tal essentially began each game as if he had already won. When it came to the young Tal, it appeared as if he were hell-bent on self-destruction, yet didn’t succeed, since he kept winning! To many of his opponents, it felt as if he balanced out his incredible luck with a lack of common sense. From the late 1950’s on, with each year that passed, Tal’s rivals felt less and less equal against his rising skills. Each game against Tal was an ordeal to be survived, rather than a chess game to be played.

The World Championship Match with Botvinnik

What has chess come to? – Mikhail Botvinnik after losing his 1960 world championship match against Tal.

To Botvinnik's and Smyslov's deep annoyance, the Tal-loving chess public considered his play a supreme act of transcendence, of which no other mortal was capable. For those who looked upon Tal's impertinent style with scepticism, it is human nature to distrust that which we don't understand. In 1960, Tal was undisputedly the best tournament player in the world, but matches were a different thing altogether. How would Tal fare against the ageing iron logician?

In a duel between a strategist and a tactician, the former tends to have a reach and speed advantage in the ring, while the latter relies on a single colossal knockout punch. In a feud between an honest person (Botvinnik) and a criminal (Tal, of course!), the criminal holds an advantage, since he is unconstrained, outside the law.

In this match, to everyone's surprise Tal dared to challenge Botvinnik strategically – although the trademark tactics were clearly woven within all the games. Tal obviously altered his style and played Botvinnik with an uncharacteristic degree of respect. Now you may argue that Tal playing strategically is a little like Mozart signing the devil's contract to be the greatest composer of his day. The trouble is Mozart could have had his wish without owing the devil a thing. I'm convinced that Tal was the dominant player in the world in 1960, and could have beaten Botvinnik – who was then past his prime – playing in his normal, con-artist tactical style (which he indeed did in some of the games of the match).

Even playing in this careful style, Tal still managed to turn a position from stable to chaotic, almost without any sense of transition. That which we would consider platitudinous advice today, like: "In the opening phase, develop quickly and strive to control the centre *before* attacking," was akin to divine revelation in Morphy's era. The most impenetrable barrier in the universe is the person who examines the data with a mind already made up, even though circumstantial evidence suggests the exact opposite.

By the Botvinnik/Smyslov era, the top players had somehow settled into a false belief that chess had to be played only one way: correctly, from a strategic base. Tal, in a sense, the new Morphy, radically altered the Botvinnik/Smyslov 'correct play' paradigm, by successfully violating this deeply held belief, and in doing so, rekindled our sense of wonder of the game. He single-handedly turned the Botvinnik/Smyslov age of correctness and reason on its head, by playing and winning in a style which people couldn't even imagine.

The chess world suddenly realized that our game is not exclusively some technical exercise, but instead, a place of imagination and bluff. Organization is just as important as content. A library may have a book within its walls which holds the deepest secrets of the universe, yet if we are unable to locate it, it's as if the book never existed in the first place. In the same way, Botvinnik knew perfectly well that many of Tal's moves were semi-sound or outright unsound. The problem he was unable to solve was: where was the refutation embedded within the maze of calculation?

Tal, like no other player, preyed on our primal fear of the darkness. He complicated until Botvinnik's vaunted logic felt useless, as he groped about to orient himself in the dream-like sense of dislocation which threatened to envelop and flood his brain, assailing it with a hundred competing and contradictory impulses. Game after game, Botvinnik experienced

rising discomfort, as the familiar and comfortable slipped away irretrievably, only to be replaced with the terrible unknown, which in turn induced confusion, fatigue and time pressure errors. Botvinnik soon realized that a game against Tal was in essence an attack upon his psyche.

The Disastrous Rematch

Profit and loss, defamation and fame, praise and blame, suffering and joy; all of these are impermanent; and thus why should any of them cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction? – The Dhammapada

We are reminded of the cliché: Easy come, easy go. Tal, who endured a total of 12 surgeries in his life, lost his return match, almost without a fight, due to his declining health of a kidney. In Tal's weakened condition, Botvinnik was able to enforce maddening order upon virtually every game, where Tal's powers of logic were almost childlike when compared with Botvinnik's stark perfection in that realm. In his weakened state, Tal was incapable of pushing the positions to the brink of madness – and beyond – as he pulled off in the first match.

Tal's reign as world champion was the shortest ever. To make matters worse for Tal, Botvinnik played bolder in the rematch, refusing to back down from calculation battles. And with Tal's poor health, this critical power was removed from the equation. Pretty much every one of Tal's slumps may be attributed to his poor general health. He didn't exactly help matters by his heavy smoking, and he drank like a man who owned a spare liver.

In the 1965 Candidates' matches, Tal eliminated both Portisch and Larsen, but then was defeated by the surging Spassky, who went on to defeat Petrosian for the world championship.

Resurgence in Later Years

I'm always making a comeback, but nobody ever tells me where I've been. – Billie Holiday

Just as it looked like Tal's failing health would force him into a dignified early retirement, around 1972 Tal went on a tear, shattering Petrosian's non-losing streak (68 games without a loss), by going an unbelievable 83 games without loss. Add to that the risks Tal took in his games, and it reaches the level of unbelievable. Then in the early 1980's he did it again, this time going 80 games without a loss. In 1988, Tal won the second World Blitz Championship at Saint John, New Brunswick, ahead of the reigning world champion Kasparov and also ex-champion Karpov. I can't explain it. Can you?

Tal's dazzling powers finally began to fade by the early 1990's, in lock step with his declining health. Normally, age brings with it increased caution, but with Tal, not so much! As he grew older, his aggression continued unabated, with only the pretext changing. Time

itself lacked the power to alter his core style, which was an unrepentant optimism. The natural optimist like Tal always envisions what he can gain, rather than worry about the potentiality for loss. It's as if he only looks forward and is incapable of seeing what is behind him.

Tal's Style

Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste.

Our own unique styles are rare melodies, never to be exactly replicated, when we pass from the world. There are many different forms of currency in chess. To Tal, initiative, attack and the creation of combinational potential were the three most important. His motto in rationalizing his shady sacrifices (many of which were maddeningly vague abstractions, more than concrete ideas): "Better to be poor and among the living, than to be rich and dead." He just naturally picked moves which left almost zero possibility of an amicable settlement with the opponent.

Tal famously said that he attempted to clear a path in the "dense forest...where there is only room for one." He also tried to create positions where "two times two is five". Chess journalist John Henderson wrote: "Just like Shabalov's legendary mentor, the great Mikhail Tal, there's a 'fear factor' element when you played him, and he won many spectacular games with unsound sacrifices because his opponents saw 'phantom attacks' that proved afterwards to be unsound."

Tal was either unwilling or unable to recognize shared realities, which he revoked and replaced with his own: i.e. "It's not a bad thing to be down material." Tal disagreed and many of his opponents must have doubted his hold on reality. Sometimes Tal's sacrificial indulgences would go horribly awry and he would lose like an amateur. Yet he believed in his own magic. So much so, that in the very next game he would be back to his old tricks, completely unchastened and unrepentant, so that his opponents found it difficult to call him to account. His erratic thoughts and speculations over the board were utterly unguessable by the rest of us, whose minds functioned on the basis of the rational.

Tal realized early on, that his mark always falsely believed that he or she is the actual con-artist, who plans to come away with something for nothing. He would lure them into the darkness with sacrifice (I am hard pressed to find Tal games in this book where he *didn't* sacrifice), and once the relentless campaign of mischief began, it was all but impossible for the opponent to restore order. Imagination tends to fall flat if combined with incomprehension of a position's essence. If Capablanca's play epitomized intuitive elegant simplicity, then Tal was the evil twin who strove for anarchy.

Yet, like Capa, Tal achieved his aims just as intuitively, where his tactical intuition would allow him to successfully navigate utterly incomprehensible positions. But don't get me wrong. There were few players who were capable of out-mathing Tal's famed intuition/calculation abilities. He was essentially the modern day computer, versus most of his

opponents, who represented the 1970's high school nerd with a slide rule. Yet Tal still relied on his intuition, which doesn't require calculation in every instance. Instead, images were formed in his subconscious, with the solution instantaneously delivered to his conscious mind. I sense that is how Tal kept his bearings in the most bewildering of positions.

When I play over Capablanca's or Fischer's games, it is easy to fall sway to the delusion: 'I too can play like this!'. When I play over Tal's dream-like games, the thought to play like him is impossible, since his self-ordering chaos feels utterly unreachable, for me, the ordinary. Tal was the only player who was capable of producing miracles and magic on the chess board. Complex calculations drifted through his mind with unconscious ease of motion, while we ordinary mortals couldn't untangle some his positions if given the luxury of a week of study.

Tal's great contribution to our game is that he showed us that chess is not just an accountant's ledger, with scored tallies of debt and income. He used sacrifices as routinely as we use money to purchase what we want. In Tal's case, what he 'bought' were three items:

1. Energy for his initiative.
2. Attacking chances.
3. Enhanced tactical opportunity.

The Patron God of Sacrifice: Tal's Gambles

"It ain't right, Atticus," said Jem. "No, son, it ain't right." – *To Kill a Mockingbird*

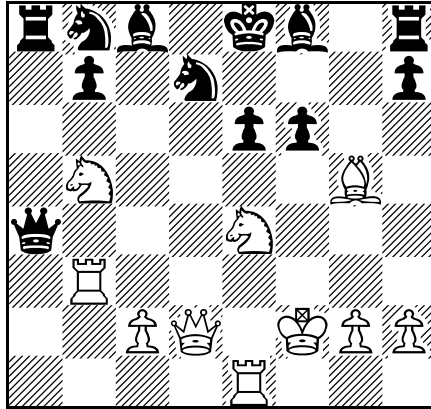
There are no atheists among gamblers, who all pray to their lucky star. Tal never believed in the philosophy that a small portion of a certainty is sometimes better than going for 100%, with an all-or-nothing gamble. Tal, in direct contradiction of Abe Lincoln, sincerely believed that he really could fool all of the people, all of the time. Tal was the greatest entertainer within the theatre of the mind. Why? In game after game he was willing to risk it all, just to give the audience a thrill. I guess bravery, foolhardiness and innocence have a lot in common.

Tal was a born gambler, on par with Katherine Parr, the last (and luckiest) of Henry VIII's wives, who managed to pull off the impossible, by retaining her head during her tenure by cleverly outliving Henry. Most GMs believe: when a variation is inherently incorrect, precedence and numbers don't matter. Even though a billion people believe a lie, the force of their numbers fails to magically turn the lie into the truth. Now most great players are seekers of truth on the chess board. Shockingly, Tal didn't care about abstract notions of eternal truth. He just wanted to win, and he was willing to play *deliberately* shady moves and sacrifices to achieve his aims: to confuse and fluster the opponent.

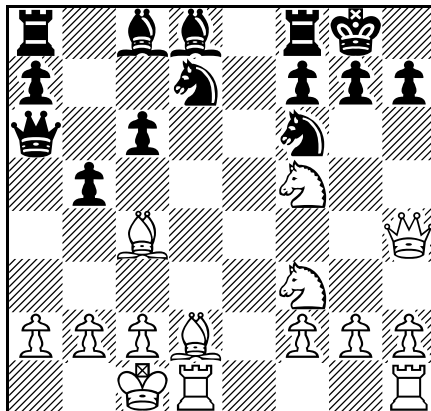
Have you ever argued with someone, realized that their reasoning is flawed, but were unable to refute their illogic? Well, now you know just how Smyslov, Botvinnik and many, many others felt when they lost to Tal. After intense study of Tal's games, my own games felt pas-

sionless and depressingly devoid of ups and downs. A sacrifice or a combination's stature is revealed not by its length, but by the depth of originality. In this book there are probably more sacrifices and more combinations than in all my other player-books combined.

Time after time, Tal rushed into Death's arms and survived the dance. Just look at some of the positions he reached:

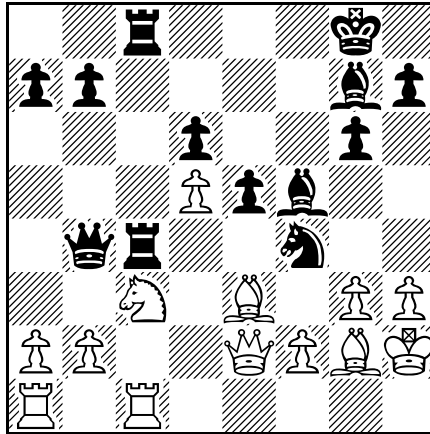


The attack always whispered seductive invitations to Tal, who could never resist. In this position Tal was White against Tolush from a Poisoned Pawn Najdorf (to enter this line as Black against Tal is the same as walking into a seedy looking bar in the rough part of town, despite the fact that there is no bouncer). With his g5-bishop hanging, Tal played ♙e1!! , a move backed up by today's comps, yet incomprehensibly difficult to find over the board. He found the hidden refutation's pattern, so randomly and so deeply embedded within the geometry, that it is next to impossible for a human (other than Tal!) to decode it.



Restlessness is the great tempter, which whispers into our ear: 'You can have more, on

condition you are willing to commit yourself to risky action.’ In this case Tal, leading the Candidates’ tournament with Smyslov as Black chasing him, earlier rejected a favourable unloseable ending, and entered this mess. On his last move he played ♖h4, allowing ...bxc4. Tal managed to sufficiently confuse a former world champion and swindle his way to victory. When we are busted, we tend to discard reason to embrace madness. Tal is the only player I can think of who embraced madness when his position was perfectly good! His move decisions in this game are the conscienceless ‘id’ acting upon every crazy impulse, without fear of consequences.



To tell Tal to refrain from a semi-sound sacrifice, was the equivalent of reasoning with a two-year-old as you pass by the mall’s toy store. He was merely a helpless passenger to his creative desires, which always took control of his decision-making process – even with the world championship on the line. The threat of debtors’ prison never pressed on Tal’s conscience, and this is clearly a case of will co-opting reason. He led Botvinnik by a point in his 1960 match.

In this game Tal sensed that Botvinnik had imposed his will upon the position, and that Tal would slowly be ground down strategically, unless he could alter the landscape radically. So on his last move he unleashed ...♖f4!?!? – a move which nearly caused a riot among the spectators, and which reminds us of a celebratory ape swinging through the jungle’s trees. After making such moves, he would wait for a receptive part of his unconscious mind to attune to the new circumstances. For Tal to have the audacity to commit to such an obviously unsound sacrifice – and against Botvinnik, with the world title on the line – is akin to the newly ordained priest declaring to his congregation: “I think the scriptures are wrong about quite a few things. Let me explain why.”

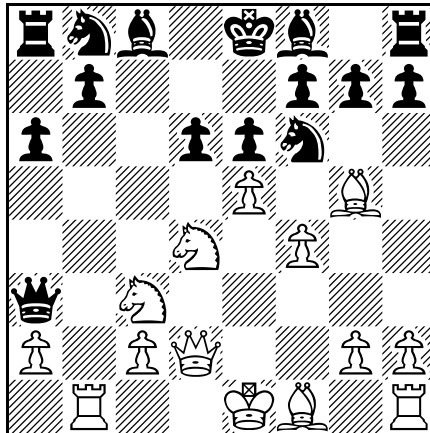
Tal always believed his fairy godmother would rescue him, just before disaster struck. In this case the move took its toll on the flustered Botvinnik’s clock, while Tal’s forces exploded in exultant rage, allowing chaos to lead them where it would. He intuitively understood that an act of rash folly can also be a weapon, since its very audacity disorients a ra-

Game 4
M.Tal-A.Tolush
 USSR Championship, Leningrad 1956
Sicilian Defence

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♔g5 e6 7 f4 ♖b6 8 ♚d2 ♗xb2 9 ♚b1

Spassky famously crushed Fischer with 9 ♘b3 in their world championship match: 9...♗a3 10 ♔xf6 gxf6 11 ♔e2 h5 12 0-0 ♘c6 13 ♗h1 ♔d7 14 ♘b1 ♖b4 15 ♗e3 d5? (a violation of the principle: *Avoid opening the position when behind in development*; Black is probably still okay after 15...♘e7) 16 exd5 ♘e7 17 c4 ♘f5 18 ♚d3 h4? 19 ♔g4 ♘d6 20 ♘1d2 f5 21 a3 ♖b6 22 c5 ♖b5 23 ♗c3 fxg4 24 a4 and Black's queen is trapped, B.Spasky-R.Fischer, Reykjavik 1972.

9...♗a3 10 e5!?



Principle: *Open the game and create confrontation when leading in development.* Today, this line exists on the fringes of disreputability (although some brave Shirovian GMs still adhere to it), and has mostly been replaced with 10 f5.

10...dxe5 11 fxe5

White gets an open f-file and displaces the f6-knight, at the cost of a chronically weak e-pawn.

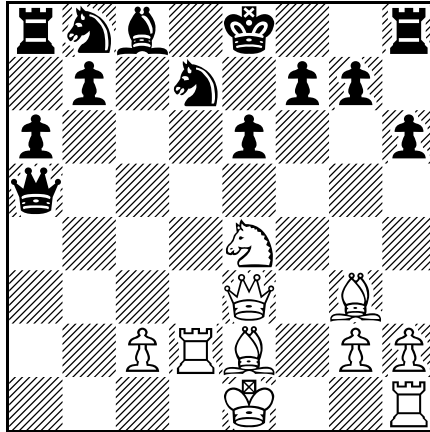
11...♘fd7 12 ♘e4!?

White's most principled move. Tal offers his a-pawn and dodges ...♔b4 and ...♗a5 ideas, while eyeing the d6- and f6-squares. Instead, after 12 ♔c4 ♗a5 13 0-0 ♘xe5 14 ♚be1 ♘xc4! (or 14...♘bc6 15 ♘xc6 ♘xc6 16 ♗f4 ♔c5+ 17 ♗h1 0-0 18 ♘e4 ♔e7 and objectively, Black should survive and convert, although it won't be easy with so many pieces hovering over his king, A.Kosten-J.Tisdall, London 1982) 15 ♗f4 ♘d6 16 ♘e4 ♗c7 17 c4 ♘b5 18 cxb5 ♗xf4 19 ♔xf4 f6 I prefer Black, despite the fact that his development stands at zero. Queens have

been removed from the board and Black's two pawns should be decisive, since his position remains almost weakness free, H.Gaida-S.Jalanskis, correspondence 2002.

12...♖xa2

Black can also toss in 12...h6 13 ♗h4 ♜xa2 14 ♖d1 ♜d5 15 ♜e3 ♜xe5 16 ♗e2 ♗c5 17 ♗g3 ♗xd4 18 ♖xd4 ♜a5+ 19 ♖d2. The comps like Black, while White scores 72.6% from 583 games.



Question: Why then the discrepancy between computer evaluation and human performance?

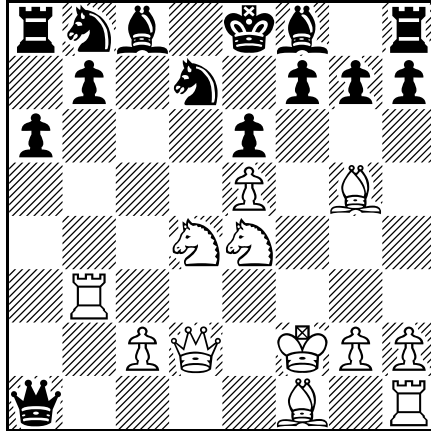
Answer: Conclusion: White's practical chances may outweigh Black's objective advantage, mainly since we humans have the bad habit of blundering when on the defensive – even when our position is objectively a good one.

13 ♖b3

This allows Black to disrupt White's castling. Superior is 13 ♖d1 ♜d5 14 ♜e3 ♜xe5 15 ♗e2 ♗c5 16 0-0. White may have full attacking compensation for his three missing pawns, I.Cheparinov-M.Roeder, Kallithea 2008.

13...♜a1+ 14 ♗f2

This position occurred seven times in my database. Black's score? Zero!



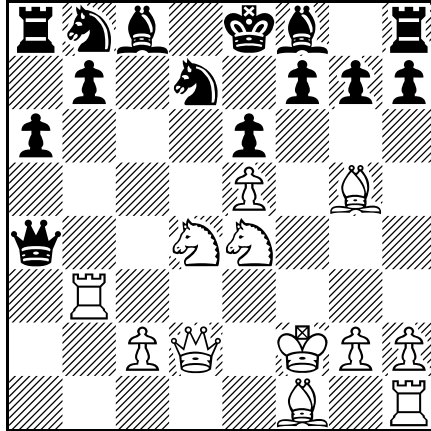
Question: Is the position inherently bad for Black?

Answer: Not at all. *Komodo* assesses at dead even. The problem, of course, is that White generates a fierce initiative for the sacrificed pawns, and for a human, navigating the maze for Black is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, on a practical level. The only player I can think of who consistently won from Black's side of the Poisoned Pawn line was Fischer, and even he got clobbered in the line when he faced Spassky.

14...♔a4?

A genie's deepest wish is to escape the confines of her bottle. But then when she gets out, she must serve Larry Hagman (Major Nelson) for the remainder of his life.

Komodo suggests the unplayed 14...h6! 15 ♖c3 ♘c6 16 ♘xc6 bxc6 17 ♙b5!! ♚xh1 18 ♙xc6 hxg5 19 ♙xa8. Now Black escapes with 19...♙c5+! 20 ♖xc5 ♘xc5 21 ♘d6+! ♚e7 22 ♚xg5+ ♚d7 23 ♚d2 f6 24 ♚d4 fxe5 25 ♚xc5 ♖f8+ 26 ♙f3 ♖xf3+! 27 gxf3 ♚xh2+ 28 ♚f1 ♚h1+ 29 ♚e2 ♚g2+ 30 ♚e1 ♚h1+ and White should take perpetual check, since 31 ♚d2? ♚xf3 32 ♘xc8?? loses to 32...♚d5+ 33 ♚xd5+ exd5 with too many pawns for the piece.



Exercise (critical decision): White must sacrifice before Black catches up in development. Our candidate moves are 15 ♖xe6 and 15 ♗b5. One of them wins, while White stands worse in the other. Which one should Tal play?

15 ♗b5?!

Attacks are creatures who grow surly when unfed. Nature designed Tal's brain for imagination, not specificity. Korchnoi once had the colossal gall to call Tal a "weak calculator". What he meant by that was that Tal calculated intuitively, rather than in a pure numbers-cruncher-fashion, like Lasker, Korchnoi and Kasparov. "The wrong piece and on the wrong square!" writes Kasparov.

Answer: Tal incorrectly rejected 15 ♖xe6!! Clearance. Sometimes a simple geometric association may spring a hidden combination's lock within our mind: 15...fxe6 16 ♖d6+ ♗xd6 17 ♗xd6 (threatening mate on e7) 17...♗f8+ 18 ♖g3 ♖f6 (the only move; if 18...♗f7?? 19 ♗xe6+ ♖f8 20 ♗c4 and Black must resign) 19 exf6 gxf6 20 ♗e2! (threatening a nasty check on h5) 20...♗d7 21 ♗h5+ ♗f7 22 ♗c5 ♗c6 23 ♗xc6+ ♖xc6 24 ♗xf6 with a winning position for White.

15...axb5 16 ♖xb5 f6!

Living in a harsh, unforgiving environment tends to burn away all traces of sentimentality, since our prime directive is survival itself. Black must take action, since the growing threat of White's attack can no longer be tolerated. Tolush finds the only defence, giving air to his king. 16...♗xe4?? walks into 17 ♖c7 mate.

17 exf6!

Tal offers a second piece avoiding the natural but weak continuation 17 ♖ed6+? ♗xd6 18 ♖xd6+ ♖e7 19 exf6+ gxf6. Black remains up a piece, while his king remains safe enough, for now at least.

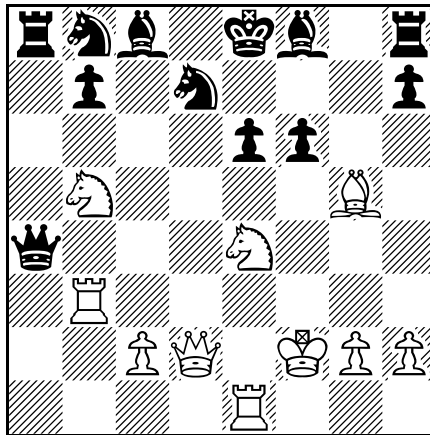
17...gxf6?!

A move based on the philosophy: just because we don't fully comprehend a danger, doesn't mean we should deny its existence. Black incorrectly declined. Sometimes I get jealous of my chess comps and begin to believe that my books arise from their non-existent minds, rather than my own faulty, yet existent one. In this position though, there is no way any human's mind is capable of working his way to the correct path – at least without the help of chess computers.

Black should eliminate a dangerous attacker with 17...♖xe4! (sometimes it's just easier to say "yes" to an opponent's demands, rather than expend the energy required to resist it) 18 f×g7 ♜c5+ 19 ♞e3 ♞f5+ 20 ♞e2 ♞g4+ 21 ♞e1 ♞a1+ 22 ♞f2 ♞f5+ 23 ♞e2 ♞g8! (23...♞g4+ is perpetual check) 24 ♞xa1 ♞g4+ 25 ♞e1 ♞xg7 26 ♞g3 ♞e4+ 27 ♞d1 ♞a6 28 ♞d6+ ♞xd6 29 ♞xd6 ♞e5!. Black forces the queens off the board and retains all the winning chances in the coming ending.

17...♞xf6 is also superior to Tolush's choice: 18 ♞xf6+ g×f6 19 ♞xf6 ♜c5+ 20 ♞e1 ♞g8 21 ♞c7+ ♞f7 22 ♞f3 ♞e4+ 23 ♞d1 ♞b4 24 ♞xb4 ♞xb4 25 ♞c3+ ♞g6 26 ♞xb4 ♞a1+ 27 ♞e2 ♞xh1 28 ♞g3+ ♞f7 29 ♞f3+ and the game ends in perpetual check.

18 ♞e1!!



A luminous example of Tal's intuitive approach to irrational positions. His move is played with the philosophy: a magnifying glass can't generate energy without sunlight. In order to reach a correct conclusion, we must exclude the insignificant (his hanging bishop and knight!), just as much as we must include the necessary (his once dormant rook entering the battle via e1). Tal is determined to sequester every possible resource to his war effort, even at the risk of depleting his attacking forces through sacrifice. This is his third piece offer, which Kasparov called "a brilliant flash of genius." Every white piece participates in Tal's attack.

Everyone else on earth would play 18 ♞xf6+?! ♞xf6 19 ♞xf6 ♜c5+ 20 ♞e1 ♞e4+ 21 ♞d1 e5! (threat: ...♞a1+) 22 ♞c7+ ♞f7 23 ♞xa8 ♞g4+ 24 ♞c1 ♞xf6 25 ♞h6+ ♞g6 26 ♞f1+ ♞e6 27 ♞d2 with an exceedingly difficult position to assess. Black is up material, but his king

still remains in danger. The comps say dead even, which is code for unclear.

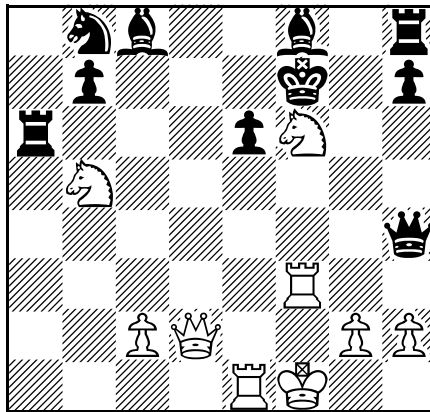
18...♖a6?

Tolush fights for ownership over d6, which lapses unresolved. Correct was the counter-intuitive 18...♘c6! (18...fxg5?? 19 ♘c7+ now wins, in view of 19...♙f7 20 ♖f3+) 19 ♙xf6 ♗xe4 20 ♘c7+ ♙f7 21 ♙xh8! (or 21 ♖xe4 ♘xf6 22 ♖f3 ♖a5 23 ♖xf6+ ♙xf6 24 ♗c3+ e5 and Black's king still doesn't look very safe to me) 21...♗h4+ 22 ♙g1 ♖a3! (preventing White from slipping his rook into the attack, via the third rank) 23 ♘xe6 ♖xb3 24 ♘xf8 ♘xf8 25 cxb3 ♘e6 when Black stands worse, but harbours reasonable chances to survive.

19 ♙xf6 ♘xf6 20 ♘xf6+ ♙f7 21 ♖f3

White's attack is out of control. Even stronger was 21 ♘e4!, keeping Black's queen out of defensive reach: 21...♖g8 22 ♗f4+ ♙e8 23 ♘c7+ ♙d8 24 ♘a6 ♘a6 25 ♗f7! leaves Black completely busted.

21...♗h4+ 22 ♙f1!?



Exercise (critical decision): Black can play 22...♗c4+, picking up the b5-knight. Should he do it?

Answer: It's a trap! Tolush correctly avoids the c4 check.

22...e5!

Black's defensive idea, although slow in presenting itself, finally begins to assume form. It takes a brave person to willingly allow a discovered check. Tolush devotes the full force of his concentration upon the safety of his lightly guarded king. With his last move he allows his a6-rook to participate in the defence, while freeing his light-squared bishop.

Tolush correctly avoids Tal's trap with the greedy 22...♗c4+?? 23 ♙g1 (of course, White is completely busted if he saves the knight at the cost of swapping queens, with 23 ♗e2? ♗xe2+ 24 ♖xe2 ♙e7; Black's king is safe and he will convert his extra piece in the ending) 23...♗xb5 24 ♘d5+! ♙e8 (likewise, if 24...♙g8 25 ♗g5+ ♙g7 26 ♘e7 mate or 24...♙g6 25 ♖f6+ ♙h5 26 ♖e5+ ♙g4 27 ♗f4 mate) 25 ♘c7+ ♙e7 26 ♘xb5. Black loses his queen and his

25 ♖xe5+ ♔g7

The king gingerly places one foot forward, the way an inexperienced tight rope walker tests his balance. 25...♔h5 is of no help: 26 ♖d1!! (threatening a nasty discovered check with his f3-rook; Kasparov is of the opinion that Tal would have found this comp-shot over the board) 26...♔h6 27 ♖d2+ ♖g5 and now White wins with the pretty deflection combination 28 ♖h3+! ♕xh3 29 ♖f7+, forking king and queen.

26 ♖g3+! ♖xg3

Not much choice in the matter. Black must place aside his old ways of material comfort, with only bleak deprivation in his future:

a) 26...♔h6 27 ♖f7+! ♕xf7 28 ♖d2+ ♔h5 29 ♖e5+ ♖g5 30 ♖xg5 mate.

b) 26...♔f6 27 ♖d8+ ♕e7 28 ♖xh8+ ♔f5 29 ♖f3+ ♖f4 30 ♖xh7+ ♔g5 31 h4+ ♖xh4 32 ♖g6 is also mate. “You are my honoured guest. Welcome to my home,” says the queen.

27 ♖xb7+ ♖d7 28 hxg3

Black’s problem is that the d7-knight is pinned, while he is already behind in material, with an insecure king. Conclusion: Black is completely busted.

28...♖b6 29 ♖c7 ♕c5

Or 29...♖xb5 30 ♖xd7.

30 ♖xd7!

Tal, unafraid of ghosts, correctly ignores the coming ...♕c4+.

30...♕c4+ 31 ♖e2 1-0

31...♕xe2+ 32 ♔xe2 ♖e8+ 33 ♔d3 leaves Black down too deep materially.

Game 5

M.Tal-V.Simagin

USSR Championship, Leningrad 1956

Caro-Kann Defence

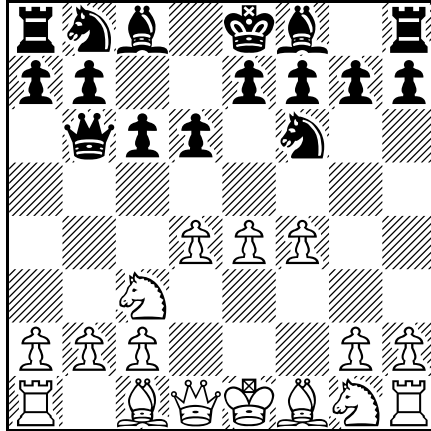
1 e4 c6

The position we reach normally arises after the move order 1...d6 2 d4 ♖f6 3 ♖c3 c6.

2 d4 d6!? 3 ♖c3

3 c4 either leads to a King’s Indian or Old Indian set-up.

3...♖f6 4 f4 ♖b6?!



A move made with the philosophy: only a rigid mind perceives unorthodoxy as a crime, to be punished. I'm all for creativity, but this is perhaps going too far. We get the distinct feeling that this bizarre home remedy tincture isn't likely to heal Black's soon-to-be-ailing position.

Question: Why did Black bring his queen out so early in the game?

Answer: For now, Black submerges his intent. The trouble is not that Black brought the queen out. Instead, she was brought to the wrong square. Simagin probably hoped his queen move tied Tal's dark-squared bishop down to defence of b2. It ended up being a target for White's pieces.

Better was 4...♖a5 (Black threatens ...♗xe4 and plays for an ...e5 break) 5 e5 ♗e4 6 ♕d2 (White hands over the bishop-pair; the main lines run 6 ♗f3 and 6 ♕d3 ♗xc3 7 ♗d2) 6...♗xd2 7 ♗xd2 d5 8 ♗f3 ♕g4 9 ♕e2 e6 10 h3 ♕xf3 11 ♕xf3 c5 and Black achieved a decent French-like position, without a bad, light-squared bishop, D.Grazian-C.Lakdawala, San Diego (rapid) 2010.

5 ♗f3 ♕g4 6 ♕e2 ♗bd7 7 e5!

Tal plays e5 before his opponent can do so.

7...♗d5

After 7...dxe5?! White has a pleasant choice of opening the f-file with 8 fxe5 or playing 8 dxe5, after which Black is virtually forced to sacrifice a pawn with 8...♗d5 9 ♗xd5 cxd5 10 ♗xd5 e6 11 ♗b3 when he lacks compensation.

8 0-0 ♗xc3!?

This move only helps White. I would avoid opening the position and play 8...e6.

9 bxc3

Of course, White is happy to capture with the pawn, since this strengthens his centre, while opening the b-file in preparation for a tempo-gaining ♗b1.

9...e6 10 ♖g5!

When an opponent dared to provoke Tal, his mood grew excitable – which for him was synonymous with murder. Tal’s last move was played with an undertone of implied warning. He increases his development lead to dangerous levels, as he contemplates knight sacrifices on either e6 or f7.

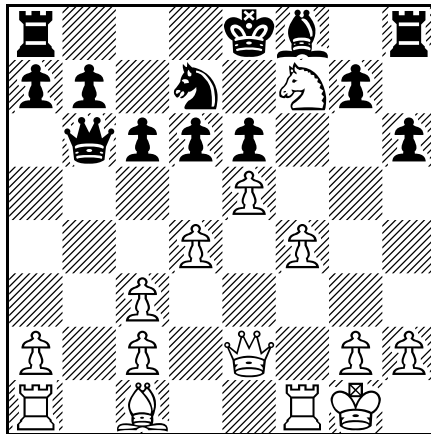
10...♙xe2 11 ♖xe2 h6

Black’s best move in an already bad situation:

a) 11...g6? fails to halt White’s f5 ambitions: 12 f5! gxf5 (12...exf5?? loses instantaneously to 13 exd6+) 13 ♖h5 ♗xe5 14 ♗xe6 ♖g6 15 ♗xf8 ♗xf8 16 ♖e1+ ♔d8 17 ♖xf7 and Black soon resigned in A.Pereira-F.Ribeiro, Lisbon 1995.

b) 11...♙e7? 12 f5! is a winning attack for White.

12 ♗xf7!



Black’s king goes for a ride. I bet Tal made this move instantly. The decision to sacrifice and play for mate was really made on his 10th move, and it’s too late for a change of heart.

12...♙xf7 13 f5

Central lines open with alarming rapidity.

13...dxe5

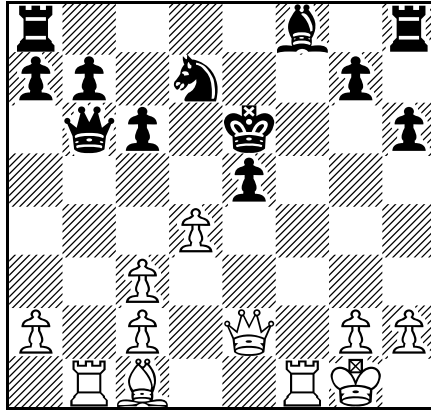
Instead, 13...♗xe5 14 ♙e3 regains the piece, since Black can’t afford 14...♗d7?? 15 fxe6+ ♙xe6?? 16 d5+ winning the house, or if 13...♙g8 14 exd6! ♗f6 15 ♙f4 exf5 16 ♖e6+ ♙h7 17 ♖xf5+ ♙g8 18 ♖g6 ♖d8 19 ♙e5 ♗d5 20 ♖xf8+! ♖xf8 21 ♖f1 ♗f6 22 ♖xf6 ♖e8 23 ♖g3 ♖h7 24 c4 with a dominating position for White.

14 fxe6+

Even stronger is the line 14 ♖h5+! ♙e7 (14...♙g8 15 fxe6 instantly regains the piece, since any knight move is fatal: for example: 15...♗f6?? 16 ♖f7+ ♙h7 17 ♖xf6 and there is no defence to the coming ♖xh6 mate) 15 fxe6 ♙xe6 16 ♙e3 ♖a5 (16...♗f6 17 d5+ cxd5 18 ♖f5+ wins the queen) 17 dxe5 ♗xe5 18 ♖f5+ ♙d6 19 ♙f4 ♖e8 20 ♖ae1 and there is no remedy to ♖xe5, followed by ♖e1.

14...♙xe6 15 ♖b1!?

This visually startling shot (incorrectly given an exclamation mark by Irving Chernev, and awarded an overly generous double exclamation by Tal and Damsky) may only be White's second best continuation. Black is unlikely to survive the simple 15 ♙e3! (threat: d5+ and ♙xb6) 15...♗a5 16 ♗g4+ ♙e7 (16...♙d6? 17 dxe5+ ♙c7 18 ♖f7 ♗d8 19 ♗d1 is hopeless for Black) 17 dxe5 ♘xe5 18 ♗f5 and it becomes obvious that Black's king won't last long.

**15...♗xb1!**

Black's only move.

Question: I see that Black's last move loses his queen. Can he decline with 15...♗a6?

Answer: In the case of the decline, White whips up his attack with 16 ♗g4+ ♙d6 17 dxe5+ ♙c7 18 ♙f4 when Black can resign.

16 ♗c4+!

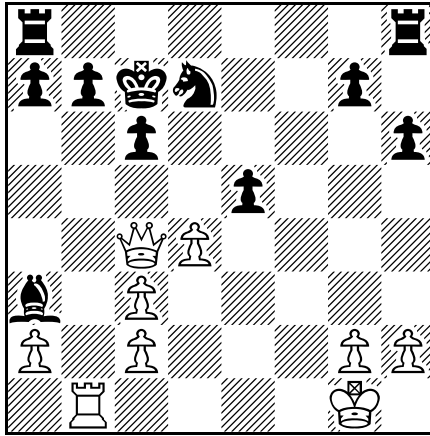
Forcing Black's king to a dark square, after which Tal wins his opponent's queen with the a3 discovery.

16...♙d6?

The king decides to pack up stakes and move out West, to begin a new sister-free life. But then he soon remembers she can still visit. We may reach an eminently logical conclusion, based on reasoned argument. Yet if our calculation is off by even a hair, we will still be wrong. Believe it or not, this natural move, where Black's king heads for refuge on c7, is the losing move.

Much stronger is the counter-intuitive 16...♙e7!!.. No human in the world would play this move, which looks like suicide. The move may actually save Black, in a position which feels utterly vacant of defensive opportunity: 17 ♙a3+ ♙d8 18 ♖xb1 ♙xa3 19 ♖xb7 ♗c8 20 ♖xa7 ♙d6 21 ♗f7 ♗c7 22 ♖a8+ ♗c8 23 ♖a6 ♖f8 24 ♗xg7 ♖f6 and Black still retains a prayer for survival. How painful when our opponent becomes the unexpected beneficiary of favourable geometry – without doing a damn thing to deserve it!

17 ♖a3+ ♔c7 18 ♚xb1 ♗xa3



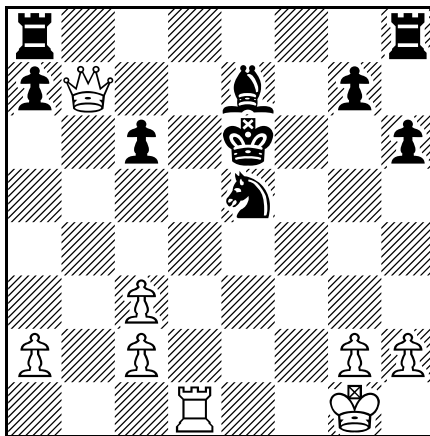
Exercise (combination alert): Do you see Tal's little tactic, which he must have foreseen when he began his combination with 15 ♚b1! ?

Answer: Double attack. Not only does White pick off b7, but he also drives Black's king into the middle of the board.

19 ♗b3! ♗e7 20 ♗xb7+ ♔d6

Black's king is clearly housed in a dilapidated fortress. There isn't much choice, since dropping back to d8 hangs two rooks.

21 dxe5+ ♗xe5 22 ♚d1+ ♗e6



Question: Doesn't Black have plenty of material for his queen?

Answer: Black gets two minor pieces and a rook for the queen – more than enough. However, material parity is not the issue. Black’s king is in dire trouble in the middle, and this factor is destined to cost him material later on.

23 ♖b3+ ♜f5

23...♜f6 24 ♖f1+ ♜g6 is close to the game’s continuation. I can’t tell you what comes next, otherwise I give away the answer to a future combination alert!

24 ♖f1+ ♜e4!?

Simagin clearly has a death wish, where his king oversteps the bounds of neutral observer, to active participant in the attack against him. Common wisdom dictates that it’s not such a good thing to have your king strolling about the middle of the board, when playing Mikhail Tal! When our plans go horribly wrong, we become Dr. Frankenstein, who continues to place hope in his diseased creation. 24...♜g6 once again reaches the position we talked about in the earlier note.

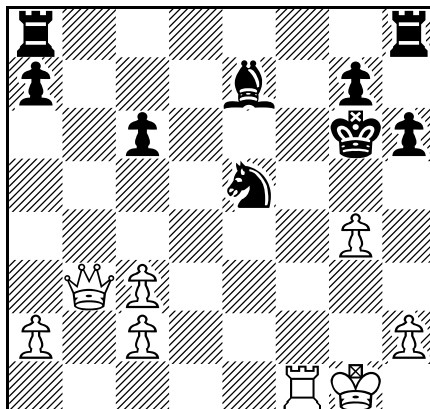
25 ♖e1+

This move, which disrupts White’s timetable for war, violates the principle: *When attacking, don’t chase the enemy king*. Instead, cut off exit squares. Even stronger is 25 ♖e6! (threat ♖e1+) 25...♙c5+ (25...♙f6 26 g3! threatens ♖f4+, driving the king even deeper into White’s territory, and if 26...♙g5 27 ♖f5 ♙f6 28 ♜f2! ♖ad8 29 ♖f4 mate) 26 ♜h1 ♖he8 27 ♖e1+ ♙e3 (or 27...♜f4 28 g3+ ♜g5 29 ♖xe5 mate) 28 ♖h3! ♗c4 29 ♖h5! ♖ad8 30 ♖c5! and wins.

25...♜f5 26 g4+

Another attacker is introduced. Both king and knight are overloaded and unable to capture g4.

26...♜f6 27 ♖f1+ ♜g6



Exercise (combination alert): An otherwise honest person may surrender to the complaints of an empty stomach to steal food. White to play and win material:

Answer: Double attack/pin.

28 ♖e6+! ♔h7

The trouble with 28...♙f6 is that Black loses the piece anyway, after 29 ♗f5+ ♔f7 and now White exploits the pin with 30 ♗xe5.

29 ♗xe5 ♖he8 30 ♖f7 ♙f8

Naturally not 30...♙f6?? 31 ♗xf6.

31 ♗f5+ ♔g8

The king's new job is to be his sister's yes-man. His duties: smile, nod and enthusiastically say "Yes!" to her demands, no matter how irrational.

32 ♙f2!

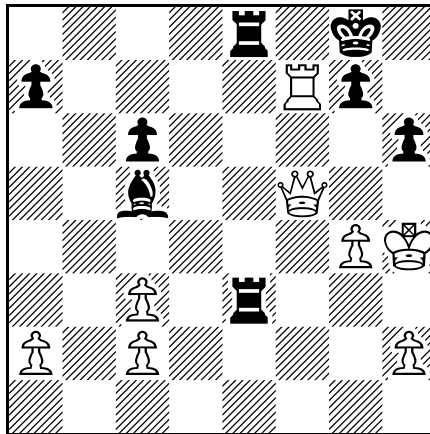
Tal prevents ...♖e2.

32...♙c5+ 33 ♔g3! ♖e3+ 34 ♔h4!

The two kings reversed roles, with Tal's on the fourth rank, and Black's back at home.

34...♖ae8

34...g5+?? is a helpmate after 35 ♔h5 ♖h3+ 36 ♔g6 and Black can resign.



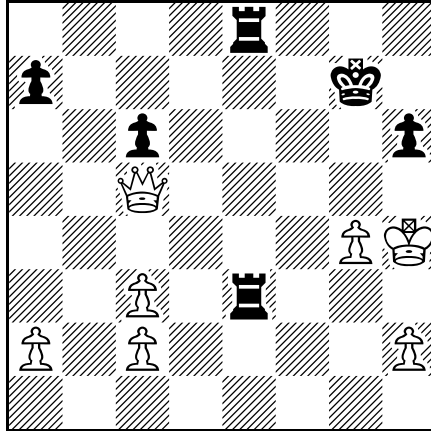
Exercise (critical decision): This is getting pretty scary for White's king. How does Tal make progress?

Answer: Return the exchange, for which White gets a safe king and begins to pick off black pawns.

35 ♖xg7+!

Extra material can be interpreted either as ammunition, to be stockpiled for a future battle, or as wealth, to be spent and invested. In this case, Tal goes with the latter interpretation.

35...♔xg7 36 ♗xc5



Exercise (critical decision): Black has a choice of covering either his c6- or a7-pawn. He can play 36...♖8e7, or 36...♖8e6. Only one of the moves offers any hope of salvation. Which one should he play?

36...♖8e6?

Tal's relentless pressure finally demands its cumulative toll, either through exhaustion, time shortage, or a combination of both. Simagin covers the wrong pawn.

Answer: Black had to try 36...♖8e7!. The trick to surviving time pressure is to grab hold of a single essential reality, in a world of hallucination and shadow. In this case Black's simple organizing principle is: *blockade on the second rank*. After 37 ♜xc6 ♖f7 it isn't so easy for White to find a puncture what is essentially a closed circle. Black's two remaining pawns remain safe for now and he can blockade passed 'c' and the kingside passer on the second rank. I'm not so confident Black can actually draw this, but this line was his only hope.

37 ♜xa7+

Now White's a-pawn is ready to roll forward.

37...♙g6 38 ♜a8 ♙f6 39 a4

Black is curiously out of synch, helpless to halt the advance of the a-pawn.

39...♙e5 40 a5 ♙d5 41 ♜d8+! ♙e4

Simagin avoids Tal's filthy little cheapo 41...♙c5?? (now Black's king is unable to escape the queen's dragnet) 42 ♜d4+ ♙b5 43 ♜b4+ ♙a6 44 ♜b6 mate.

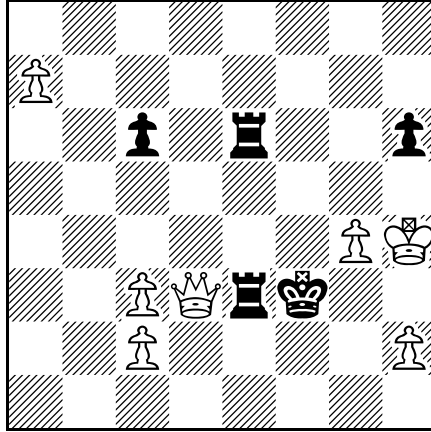
42 a6 ♙f3

Black desperately attempts to concoct a non-existent mating net around White's king.

43 a7 ♖e2 44 ♜d3+

Of course, Tal isn't likely to fall for the idiotic 44 a8♜?? ♖xh2 mate.

44...♖2e3



Exercise (combination alert): Psychologically, it's very difficult to spot a mate if our position is an easy win, since we don't bother to look. The black king's back aches from carrying the weight of an impossible defensive burden. Here, we come to the rarest of places, where the great Mikhail Tal missed a simple mate. Do you see it?

45 ♔xe3+ 1-0

The wealthy are more easily able to elude the law's punishments, when compared to poor criminals. The pangs which stab us the most are hasty decisions, now impossible to undo. "I shall assume command of the realm, while you take up your new duties as 'Vice-Monarch,'" says the queen, as she informs her brother of his demotion. The combination's solution remains incommunicably apart from Tal's mind, since he fell into a robotic 'everything-wins' mode. Of course, Tal's move had the same effect as mate, since it induced resignation.

Answer: Aesthetically superior would be 45 ♗f1+! ♕e4 (Black's king, like Moses, dreamed of leading his people to the Promised Land, yet perished before seeing it himself) 46 ♗f5 mate.

Game 6

M.Tal-A.Tolush

USSR Championship, Moscow 1957

King's Indian Defence

1 c4

Talk about pressure. Tal, Tolush and Bronstein were all tied for first in this final round of the USSR Championship. Bronstein only managed to draw, while Tal eliminated his only