Bent Larsen’s Best Games

Praise for Bent Larsen

“His chess writing is among the best, combining analysis with humour and psychological understanding of the fight.”
Peter Heine Nielsen, former Danish Chess Champion

“Of the many chess masters I have met, Bent is the most original.”
Anatoly Karpov

“He aims for the initiative and always plays for a win.”
Max Euwe

“Together with his love for and deep knowledge of chess, it is the refined humour of this outstanding player and highly cultured person that makes his comments so unique.”
Mihail Marin, former Romanian Chess Champion

“Larsen is a fighter. He is always searching. I am a realist, but he is a romantic.”
Miguel Najdorf

“His enormous talent together with his inexhaustible optimism generated a specific, inimitable style.”
Garry Kasparov

“He bears an amazing resemblance to Nimzowitsch with his extremely dynamic play, conforming to a single strategic goal.”
Lev Polugaevsky

“With a fine sense of humour Larsen explains his aggressive and unconventional approach to chess, in a way that is instructive to players of all levels.”
Christopher Lutz, former German Chess Champion

“His boldness and his concrete and non-routine approach to positions cannot fail to appeal to all connoisseurs of chess.”
Tigran Petrosian

“Larsen is one of the greatest fighters in chess, prepared to fight to death with both White and Black.”
Raymond Keene, former British Chess Champion

“One of the best books in the entire history of chess. A masterpiece.”
Alfonso Romero Holmes, former Spanish Chess Champion
Bent Larsen’s Best Games
Fighting Chess with the Great Dane
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The Will to Win

by Peter Heine Nielsen, Dan H. Andersen and Thorbjørn Rosenlund

Bent Larsen was born on March 4th, 1935 near Thisted, a small town in northern Jutland. By a strange coincidence, Aron Nimzowitsch died 12 days later. The Latvian grandmaster had lived in Denmark since 1922, and his death at only 46 meant that there was no one of comparable strength in Denmark during Larsen’s rise to the world elite.

Bent Larsen learned to play chess in 1942, when he was confined to bed with a series of children’s diseases. He joined a chess club in 1947, and in swift succession he became club champion, city champion, and provincial champion, usually with a 100 per cent score.

At 16 he had his international debut at the 1951 Junior World Championship in Birmingham, where he finished fourth (Ivkov won). He won his first Danish championship in 1954, and at the age of 19 he was the strongest player in Denmark, a position he kept for at least 35 years.

In Denmark there was nothing of the sort. Larsen himself has dismissed the notion that it would have been better for his chess development to have been born in Moscow. He worked alone and felt comfortable with it.

In Larsen’s opinion, the biggest boost to his chess understanding came from annotating the games of the 1953 Candidates’ Tournament in Zürich for Skakbladet. By the end of the year he felt confident that his understanding of the game was at grandmaster level, but he lacked practical playing strength.

At the Amsterdam Olympiad in 1954 he scored 71% and was rewarded with the title of International Master. The year after he defeated the Icelandic chess hero and future FIDE president Fridrik Olafsson in a match for the Nordic Championship. Then came the first great breakthrough, when he scored the highest percentage on Board 1 at the Moscow Olympiad in 1956. This gave him the Grandmaster title, a much more select title then, when there was only a handful of active grandmasters in the world. In the finals he defeated Gligoric in a classic game, and even the great Botvinnik had to fight with his back to the wall before his tenacious defence secured the draw.
Larsen studied engineering at the technical college in Copenhagen, and most people, including the officials of the Danish Chess Federation, wanted him to take his exam and get a steady job. Their reasons were probably a mixture of disdain for professional sports and a genuine feeling that a career as a professional chess player was not a good choice in the long run. Chess did not reward its professionals well. Carl Schlechter starved to death in 1918. Janowsky died poor and lonely in a rented room. Tartakower died a bitter man. Fifty years later Larsen smiles and says about his decision to become a professional that he did, indeed, spend most of the nights studying chess instead of engineering, but there never was a conscious decision. It just kind of happened.

The years after the triumph in Moscow were difficult ones for him. His results were modest and his games were very uneven. Strategic masterpieces were followed by weak moves and strange defeats. He experimented and played sharp set-ups.

With hindsight you can see that this period was the difficult learning process which was a prerequisite for later greatness, something that many young masters give up in advance, perhaps afraid of losing their newly won prestige and high rating. Indeed, the historical ratings show that Bent Larsen slipped down the list, from no. 9 in the world in 1956 to no. 50 in 1963.

Then came the second breakthrough: the 1964 Interzonal Tournament in Amsterdam. Twenty-four players, five of them from the USSR. 1-4 Smyslov, Spassky, Tal and Larsen 17; 5. Stein 16½; 6. Bronstein 16. Larsen had a positive score against the Soviet stars and won famous games against Spassky and Bronstein.

In the Candidates’ matches Bent Larsen first defeated Ivkov, 5½-2½. In the semi-finals he was defeated by the narrowest of margins by Tal: 5½-4½.

It was a great match between two uncompromising fighters, and the first game was probably a shock for the Russian side.

KI 2.2 - E99
Bent Larsen
Mikhail Tal
Bled Candidates’ Match sf 1965 (1)
1.d4  f6 2.c4  g6 3. c3  g7
4.e4 0-0 5.f3  d6 6.e2  e5
7.0-0  c6 8.d5  e7

9.e1
Larsen’s favourite move, despite diversifying in many ways later, most notably with 9.h1!? , one point being that Black’s natural 9...h5 can be met by 10.g1 f4 11.f3, followed by a later g2-g3, forcing Black’s knight back, as for example in the second game of Larsen’s match against Curt Hansen in 1988.

9...d7 10.f3  f5 11.g4!?  
A line which has recently regained popularity, but which in 1965 was only in its very early stages. White tries to nip Black’s attack in the bud by blocking the structure on the kingside.

11.h5 12.g5
12...h4?!  
After this game generally condemned, but a principled try to refute White’s strategy. The pawn on g5 is now isolated and difficult to defend.  
13.\(\text{\=d}3\) f4 14.\(\text{\=h}1\) \(\text{\=f}7\) 15.c5!  
A novelty. Black cannot comfortably take the pawn, as 16.\(\text{\=b}3\) threatens 17.d6+.  
15...\(\text{\=h}8\) 16.\(\text{\=b}3\) b6 17.cxd6  
\(\text{\=cxd}6\) 18.\(\text{\=a}3\) \(\text{\=c}5\) 19.\(\text{\=x}c5\) bxc5  
20.b4 cxb4 21.\(\text{\=x}b4\) \(\text{\=h}3\)  
22.\(\text{\=g}1\) \(\text{\=b}8\) 23.\(\text{\=b}5\) \(\text{\=c}8\)  
24.\(\text{\=a}3\) \(\text{\=f}8\)  
Play has proceeded logically, almost in a symmetrical fashion. White defends his weakness on the kingside, while at the same time opening up targets on the queenside. Black has defended well on the queenside, and is now ready to fulfil his strategic objective by pocketing the g5-pawn.  
25.\(\text{\=c}4\) \(\text{\=e}7\)  
\begin{center}  
\begin{tikzpicture}  
\draw (0,0) -- (5,0) -- (5,5) -- (0,5) -- cycle;  
\end{tikzpicture}  
\end{center}  
26.\(\text{\=c}7\)!  

White’s strategy is deeper. Unlike Black, he does not try to defend his weakness, but instead exchanges the queens, removing Black’s best defender. Then slowly but securely he will breakthrough along the c-file.  
26...\(\text{\=x}c7\) 27.\(\text{\=x}c7\) \(\text{\=h}5\) 28.\(\text{\=f}1\) \(\text{\=xf}1\)?!  
Keeping the bishop with 28...\(\text{\=d}7\) would give some hope of controlling vital squares on the c-file, and thus would have been a better defensive try. White, however, has excellent compensation.  
29.\(\text{\=g}fx1\) \(\text{\=x}g5\) 30.\(\text{\=e}6\) \(\text{\=h}5\)  
31.\(\text{\=a}c1\) \(\text{\=f}6\) 32.\(\text{\=c}7\) \(\text{\=h}8\)  
33.\(\text{\=f}c1\) g5 34.h3  
\begin{center}  
\begin{tikzpicture}  
\draw (0,0) -- (5,0) -- (5,5) -- (0,5) -- cycle;  
\end{tikzpicture}  
\end{center}  
The position has crystallized. Black is a pawn up, but he is strategically lost. He has no active possibilities, and can only wait for White’s breakthrough. Larsen has patience. First he must prevent all counterplay before the game is adjourned.  
34...\(\text{\=g}8\) 35.\(\text{\=c}6\) \(\text{\=f}7\) 36.\(\text{\=g}2\)  
\(\text{\=f}6\) 37.\(\text{\=f}1\) \(\text{\=h}8\) 38.\(\text{\=e}2\) \(\text{\=g}8\)  
39.\(\text{\=d}3\) \(\text{\=h}8\) 40.\(\text{\=c}7\) \(\text{\=b}6\)  
41.\(\text{\=f}1\) \(\text{\=g}8\)  
The sealed move, but Tal resigned without further play. White wins in numerous ways, from the prosaic 42.\(\text{\=x}d6\) to the flashy 42.\(\text{\=f}8\)?! Black was held in an iron grip, and if you did not know the names of the players, you might think Petrosian was White.
And in the tournament in Belgrade, a few months later, he again lost to me. Some games are worth more than a point!

Game 29

Bird’s Opening

Bent Larsen
Boris Spassky
Amsterdam Interzonal 1964

1.f4

In Round 20 I drew an interesting game with Tal, which ensured my place in the Candidates’ Tournament. In Round 21, a reaction set in as I played very badly against Stein and lost. Now, at the start of Round 22, Smyslov and Spassky had 16 points, Tal, Stein and I had 15½; Bronstein 15. Since only three Soviet players could qualify, my five rivals probably suffered more from nervous tension than me. On the other hand, there is a tendency to relax when you are safe, and that probably cost me the game against Stein.

To avoid another setback, I decided to do something special. It began with the first move. Throughout the tournament I had played 1.e4 (Bishop’s Opening, Vienna Game, Caro-Kann Exchange Variation, and lesser-known lines against the Sicilian). The results were brilliant, but those lines no longer held a surprise factor. In my last game with white I played Bird’s Opening. Most masters don’t think much of it, but I chose it for the important reason that they neither play it nor know much about it. I know it very well, and I had thought up many original ideas in it. Now I used it as a challenge to Spassky, to see what ideas he could come up with.

1...d5 2.f3 f6 3.e3 g6 4.b4!? Nothing special, according to the experts. Some grandmasters criticised the move because they believe that White should concentrate play on the kingside in this opening. Nonsense! The Bird doesn’t confine itself to just the one flank.

After 1.f4 I think that the fianchetto of the c1-bishop is the most logical. However, 4.b3 allows Black to play ...c7-c5 and ...c6. Many years ago I came up with the idea of b2-b4. The drawback is the weakening of the queenside. However, I have had a good degree of success with it and it doesn’t worry me.

4...g7 5.b2 0-0 6.e2 g4 The right idea. Black is ready to give up the bishop pair to play ...e7-e5. One possibility for White is to defer casting, for example, continuing with 7.a4, but it is likely that, with correct play, this line would transpose to the game.

Spassky later suggested 6.a5 7.b5 a4, considering it an interesting possibility, which I cannot understand. But then commentators are inclined to criticise almost all the loser’s moves.

7.0-0 c6 8.a4 bd7 9.a3 xf3

Against 9...e8 White would have replied 10.e5.

10.xf3 e8 11.d4 The ...e7-e5 advance was a dangerous threat. The text move is necessary, but weakens the e4-square; in my opinion,
50...f8 51.g1!
A waiting move aimed at luring the black pawn to the sixth rank. Whether it wins or not, I do not know, but it’s a very subtle idea. Besides, drastic measures lead to nothing.
Black’s reply is forced, as 51...c8 is weak owing to 52.e6+ f7 53.g7+ xg7 54.xg7+ xg7 55.xe7+ f7 56.d7 c5 57.xf5 c3 58.xe4 c2? 59.d4+.

51...c3 52.e6!
As far as I know, Spassky and Bondarevsky hadn’t looked at this during their analysis. With the advantage of two pawns, the exchange of queens is not normally to be feared. Black must exchange.
If 52...h8? it’s mate in two with 53.f7+, and if 52...g7? 53.e5! xe5 54.fxe5 Black cannot save the knight because of the mating threats.

52.xe6 53.dxe6 g7
Of course, this is obligatory to avoid mate.

54.xe4+ h6
The alternative 54...f8? is suicide because of 55.c5!.
Analysis by many grandmasters after the game led to the conclusion that 54...h7 was better, but this does not seem true.
The reason given was the variation 54...h7 55.xc3 c4 56.d5 d8 57.xe7 xe3, which is lost with the king on h6 because of 58.g8. However, with the king on h7, White still has winning chances, e.g. 58.xe7 e8 59.g6 g7 60.e5+ g4?? 61.g5! or 60...f8 61.g6.
In fact, I was pondering another continuation: 57.e4!?. After 57...fxe4? 58.xe7 White would probably win, but 57...d6! draws.

55.xc3
The game has taken an unexpected turn: material is level and Spassky is once again in time trouble.

55...e4??
Even so, this is a startling misjudgement. After six hours of tough defence, Spassky loses his nerve. However, the position contains many surprising combinations, and subsequent analysis consistently showed White to be the winner.
A) As previously mentioned, 55...c4? is bad because of 56.d5 d8 57.xe7 xe3 58.g8+;
B) O’Kelly gave this pretty line:
55...b8 56.d5 b3 57.xh4 d3 58.xe7 xe3 59.g8+ h7 60.f6+ h6 61.e7! e6 62.d1, winning;
C) For years I have believed that this position was winning. But recently I looked at it again and asked myself why Black could not play 55...d8!!, with a view to replying to 56.d5 with 56...c8 and to 56.d1 g7 57.d5 with 57...c8!.
So 55...d8!! is a draw! That is how close Spassky came to winning first place on his own.

56.xe4 fx4 57.xh4 a8
Or 57...f8 58.g5 f6 59.f5 followed by g4.

58.f5 a2 59.g8 f2 60.f8 1-0
Larsen’s Achievements until 1973

ZONAL TOURNAMENTS:
1957  3rd/4th out of 18 with Donner in Wageningen.
1963  2nd out of 20 in Halle.

INTERZONAL TOURNAMENTS
1964  1st/3rd out of 24 with Smyslov and Spassky in Amsterdam.
1967  1st out of 22 in Sousse.
1970  2nd/4th out of 24 with Geller and Hübner in Palma de Mallorca.
1973  5th/6th out of 18 with Hübner in Leningrad.

CANDIDATES’ TOURNAMENTS:
1958  16th out of 20 in Portoroz.
1964  1st/3rd out of 24 with Smyslov and Spassky in Amsterdam.
1965  Won in a match against Ivkov (5.5 - 2.5) and lost to Tal (4.5 – 5.5).
       Won against Geller (5-4) for the third qualifier.
1967  1st out of 22 in Sousse.
1968  Won against Portisch (5.5 - 4.5) and lost to Spassky (2.5 - 5.5).
       Won against Tal (5.5 - 2.5) for the third qualifier.
1970  2nd/4th out of 24 with Geller and Hübner in Palma de Mallorca.
1971  Won against Uhlmann (5.5 - 3.5) and lost to Fischer (0 - 6).

INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS:
1966  3rd out of 10 (double round) in Santa Monica.
1967  1st out of 16 in Beverwijk.
       3rd/5th out of 10 with Skold and Kinnmark in Stockholm.
       3rd/4th out of 10 with Geller in Monaco.
       2nd/3rd out of 9 with Olafsson in Dundee.
       1st out of 20 in Havana.
       1st/2nd out of 10 with Darga in Winnipeg.
       1st out of 18 in Palma de Mallorca.
1968  1st out of 14 in Monaco.
       1st in the U.S. Open in Snowmass (Colorado).
       2nd/3rd out of 18 with Spassky in Palma de Mallorca.
1969  1st out of 16 in Büsum.
      6th/7th out of 16 with Donner in San Juan de Puerto Rico.
      1st out of 18 in Palma de Mallorca.
1970  1st out of 8 (double round) in Lugano.
      First board for the team Rest of the World versus USSR:
      drew with Spassky 1.5-1.5 and beat Stein.
      1st out of 16 in Vinkovci.
1971  6th/7th out of 16 with Csom in Palma de Mallorca.
1972  1st out of 16 in Teesside (England).
1972  1st out of 16 with Smyslov, in Las Palmas.
      8th/9th out of 16, with Mecking in San Antonio (Texas).
1973  1st out of 16 in Hastings.
      1st out of 16 in Manila.
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