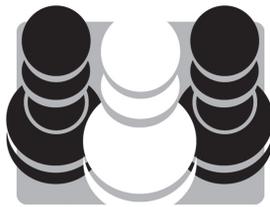


Mikhail Tal's Best Games 1

The Magic of Youth

By

Tibor Karolyi



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Introduction

Tigran Petrosian once stated: “A genius in chess is someone who is ahead of his time, but this can be seen only later, by looking back. From this point of view, very few can be called geniuses. Morphy, Steinitz... perhaps Tal. The Riga grandmaster introduced into chess something that was not fully understood by his contemporaries. Unfortunately, all too soon we gained the opportunity to look back with admiration at the peak of Tal’s remarkable play.”

I dare to contradict the ninth world champion – not for the positive sentiments expressed in the above passage, but for his use of the word “perhaps” before Tal’s name. I would argue that Tal was unquestionably a genius, who was far ahead of his time.

Tal’s Chess Career

The Tal phenomenon is unique in the history of chess. He became World Champion in 1960 at the age of twenty-three, the youngest ever at the time, beating Mikhail Botvinnik by a resounding 12½–8½ margin. Further details can be found in the second volume *The World Champion*. Tal stunned the chess world, not only with his amazing playing strength and competitive results, but with his uniquely imaginative and risky style of play. Tal’s spectacular games and charming personality endeared him to chess fans in a way that had never occurred before and may never be seen again.

All world chess champions are exceptional individuals whose games helped to enhance the wider understanding of chess. This is especially true of Tal, the eighth World Champion. Before his ascent of the world rankings, nobody imagined that such success could be achieved by playing as sharply as Tal did. I cannot think of another player in chess history who taught his rivals as much about the power of attack and, indirectly, the value of good defence.

Despite his reputation for sharp, wildly risky play, in 1972-73 Tal set a record for the longest unbeaten streak among top players in modern chess history. Even more amazingly, in 1973-74 he broke his own record. Neither streak has been broken by any player since. This period of Tal’s career will be examined in the third volume, entitled *The Invincible*.

Among Tal’s other achievements, we may note a massive haul of sixty-one tournament victories (including shared first places). He was also an amazing blitz player, winning the second World Blitz Championship and many other events. Tal was superb at simulms and an engaging presenter at chess workshops. He was a revered chess author; many consider his *Life and Games of Mikhail Tal* to be the best chess book ever written. He even had success as a second, helping Karpov to win the world championship.

The People's Champion

All world champions and other elite players are respected for their achievements, but not all of them are loved by the chess public. I was lucky enough to play in two of the same tournaments as Tal, in Tallinn and Tbilisi, and I saw how much the people in both cities admired and loved him. In my conversations with Russian players, from strong grandmasters to amateurs, when Tal's name was mentioned, their first reaction was often to exclaim that he was a genius.

Many chess rivalries involve some degree of personal animosity, but in Tal's case, it was rare to hear a bad word spoken about him, even from his competitors. Even though Tal was not a Russian national, one of the strongest tournaments on the Russian calendar is the Tal Memorial in Moscow. In Latvia, there are even plans to produce an opera about him.

Most world champions are known and referred to by their official names; for instance, if we take the example of Tal's world championship rival, he was always known as "Mikhail" Botvinnik. Tal, on the other hand, had exactly the same first name, but was addressed and referred to as "Misha" by almost everyone who knew him.

About this Project

Tal's games have always attracted attention. The Magician himself has analysed and commented upon them, and many other excellent authors and annotators have done the same. It raises the question: why produce a three-volume work on Tal's career?

My objective in writing this series has been to document Tal's career and best games with a level of attention and thoroughness that has never previously been attempted. Apart from consulting the obvious databases and reading a lot of books, I also contacted dozens of great players who shared their memories of Tal, both as a person and as an opponent. The resulting collection of Tal's remarkable games, mixed with documentation of his career and life events, with shared memories from people who were there at the time, makes this a project unlike any other devoted to Tal.

It is always interesting to re-examine the games and analyses of old masters using modern computer engines. This is especially true when dealing with Tal's games, many of which featured wild, irrational positions and almost unfathomable complications. By combining human reasoning with modern technology, I was able to shed new light on many such games. Obviously Tal's spectacular attacking games feature heavily in the three books, but I have also included a few games to highlight his skill in quieter positions and endgames. I also paid attention to broader trends such as Tal's opening choices and style of play, which varied from tournament to tournament and over the years.

Although the games are a big part of the project, I believe the readers will also be interested to find out about Tal the man. While the chess takes centre stage, I have also included details of Tal's family background, life events, his relationship with his trainer, and other relevant information that frames his career in a more meaningful way than merely presenting his games and results.

Final Thoughts

Although I have had the privilege of authoring books on such outstanding players as Kasparov, Karpov and Judit Polgar, writing about Tal was a unique experience. To begin with, it was incredibly hard to decide which of Tal's games to include, as so many of them featured wonderful ideas. I also had a different feeling when I was approaching the end of the project. While I enjoyed writing my previous books, I always had the feeling towards the end that I would be glad to finish them. In Tal's case, the closer I got to the end, the more strongly I felt that I would miss working on his games.

There are many people who helped me along the way, and I have mentioned them separately in the Acknowledgements section. Most of all, I would like to thank Tal himself, for his magical games which have inspired and brought joy to countless chess fans.

Preface to Volume 1

In this, the first of three volumes, we will cover Tal's early life and career up to the end of 1959. In the earliest available games in 1949, he was a talented twelve-year-old. We will follow his rise from strong Latvian junior, to Latvian Champion, to Soviet Champion, to the most formidable player in the world who earned the right to challenge Botvinnik for the highest title in chess. At the end of 1959, Tal has only just turned twenty-three. At that time, no other player in chess history had achieved so much at such a young age. Being Tal, it was not just his results that were stunning, but also his astonishing creativity and the incredible risks he took.

Along the way, I will shed light on Tal's family background and some of the events in his life, both positive and negative, which may have affected his chess. The early chapters feature several little-known games: unpolished gems displaying the raw talent of a future champion. Some of the games from later years are well known, but in virtually all cases I managed to improve upon existing analyses and offer new insights. I also found plenty of magical games that did not become especially famous. The most exciting part of the writing process was working on those games which had not been heavily analysed anywhere else. Even using a powerful computer, at times it was hard to make sense of the complications, such as Tal's ability to conjure chaos.

Dear Reader, I invite you to turn the page and immerse yourself in the magic of Tal's games and career. I can assure you, you will not be disappointed.

Tibor Karolyi
Budapest, March 2014

Soviet Championship Final

Tal's first event of 1956 was his first ever Soviet Championship Final, which took place in Leningrad. Despite the absence of such notable players as Botvinnik, Smyslov, Keres, Petrosian and Bronstein, the event was still extremely strong.

Tal started by venturing a risky Modern Benoni against Antoshin and got away with a draw. The game score of his second game is confusing: after beautifully outplaying Khasin in a Sicilian, he apparently made two blunders within a short time. Perhaps the moves were not entered correctly, but I was unable to work out what the correct moves should have been. Whatever the true story, Tal eventually won the game.

In the third round, Tal produced the type of game for which he is famous. His opponent was Vladimir Simagin, who played forty-four games against the world champions. He won two, drew twenty-two and lost twenty. He played two subsequent games against Tal, losing the first and drawing the second of them.

GAME 41

Mikhail Tal – Vladimir Simagin

Soviet Championship Final, Leningrad 1956

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d6

Simagin had never played this opening before; perhaps he underestimated Tal's playing strength.

3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.f4 ♚b6?!

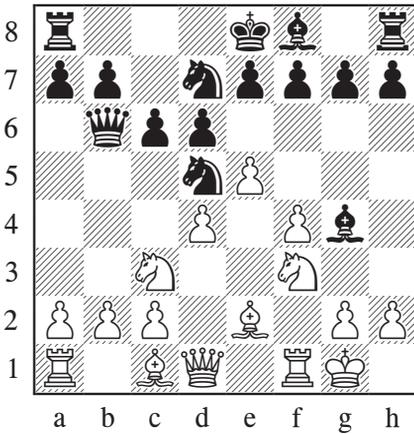
A strange choice. Nowadays 4...♚a5 is a well-known system, but it was not played until 1967 according to the database.

5.♘f3 ♙g4 6.♙e2 ♘bd7 7.e5!

Tal plays the opening forcefully, gaining space with tempo.

7...♘d5 8.0–0

8.♘e4 is strong as well, but Tal's move works out perfectly.

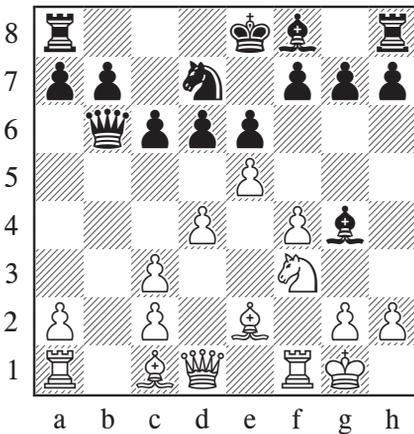


8...♖xc3?!

Simagin cannot resist doubling the enemy pawns, but in return White obtains a solid support for the d4-pawn as well as an open b-file. He should have preferred 8...e6.

9.bxc3 e6?

Simagin does not smell the danger. Instead 9...♙xf3 10.♙xf3 would have led to a difficult, but probably not yet lost position for Black. It is worth adding that after 10...dxe5 11.fxe5 ♖xe5 12.♙e4 ♖d7 13.♙f4 White has tremendous compensation for the pawn.



10.♖g5!

Tal goes after the king.

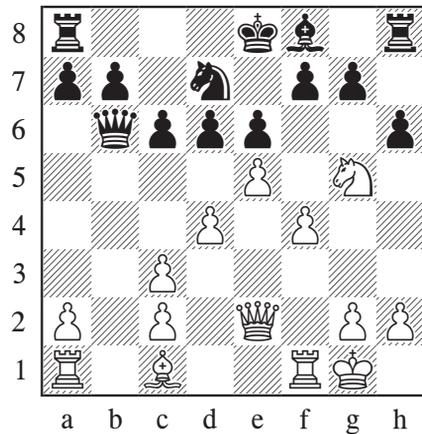
10...♙xe2

The exchange of bishops leaves Black's kingside bare, but there was no choice as 10...♙f5? 11.g4 wins.

11.♙xe2 h6

11...g6 12.f5! cracks the kingside open.

11...♙e7 12.exd6! ♙xd6 (12...♙xg5 13.fxg5) 13.f5 also puts Black in a hopeless situation.



12.♖xf7!

Tal gives up the knight to blast through to the black king.

12...♙xf7 13.f5!

Opening more attacking lines.

13...dxe5?!

Simagin prepares to take a walk with his king in the centre. Other moves were also not cheerful for Black, but objectively they were somewhat better.

13...♙g8

Looking for a shelter. White can break the defence with the help of some beautiful sacrifices.

14.exd6!

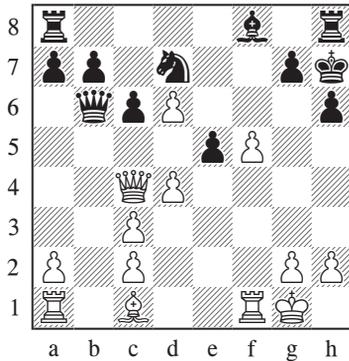
14.fxe6 ♖xe5 15.♙e3 ♙a5 is not so clear.

14...e5

14...♖f6 15.♙xe6† ♙h7 16.♙xh6 ♙a5

(16...♖e8 17.♙f7) 17.♙g5 ♖d5 18.♙xf6
gxf6 19.d7 ♖g8 20.g3 White has too many
pawns for the piece.

15.♙c4† ♔h7

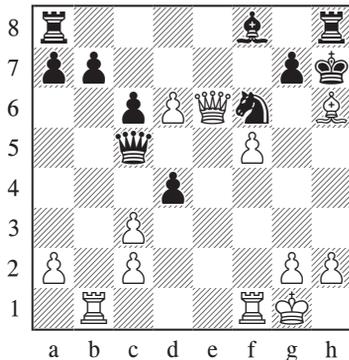


16.♙xh6!! exd4

16...♙d8 17.♙e6 ♙f6 18.♙xd7 ♔xh6
19.dxe5 ♙xe5 20.♖ae1 White wins.

17.♙e6 ♘f6 18.♖ab1 ♙c5

18...♙d8 19.♙f4+–



19.♙xg7!!

Opening up the kingside with devastating
effect.

19...dxc3† 20.♔h1 ♙xd6

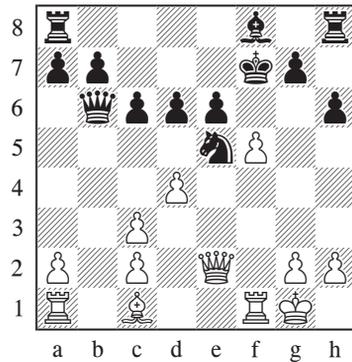
20...♙xg7 21.♖f3+–

21.♙xf6

Black has no chance.

13...♘xe5

This seems to be the best defensive try,
although Black is still in trouble.



14.♙e3!

14.fxe6† ♔g8 is less convincing.

14...♙b5

After 14...♙a5 15.dxe5 ♙xe5 16.♙d3! ♔g8
17.♙d4+– White will get a super-strong
pawn on e6.

15.fxe6†

15.♙h5† ♔g8 16.♖ab1 (16.fxe6? g6!)

16...♙c4 17.dxe5 ♙xc3 18.♖f3 ♙xe5

19.♖xb7 is also dangerous for Black,
although I did not find a forced win for
White.

15...♔g6

After 15...♔g8 16.♙xb5 cxb5 17.dxe5 Black
has almost no chance.



16.♙f2 ♔h7 17.♖ab1 ♘g4 18.♙h4 ♙e2

19.♖be1 ♙xc2 20.♙xg4 ♙g6 21.♙xg6† ♔xg6

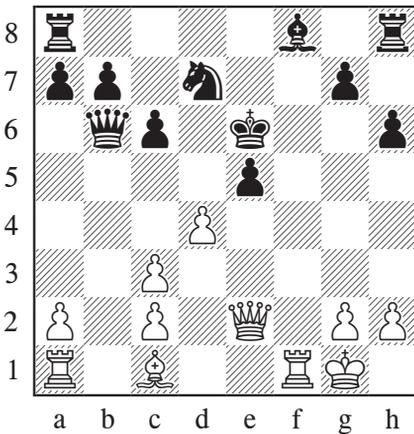
22.♖f7 ♖e8 23.♖xb7 ♖xe6 24.♙f2

White wins at least a pawn for nothing.

14.fxe6†

Another option was 14. ♖h5† ♕e7 15. fxe6 ♕xe6 16. ♖f7† ♕d6 17. ♖b1 ♖xb1 18. ♔a3† ♕c7 19. ♖xb1 reaching the same position as in the game.

14... ♕xe6



15. ♖b1!!

This is vintage Tal! He would go on to become famous for such moves. Before playing it, he would have needed to calculate roughly a dozen moves in advance and judge the ensuing position correctly.

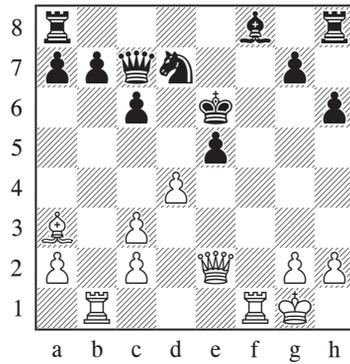
15. ♔f4 and 15. ♔e3!?: both offer White the better chances, but neither option is anywhere near as convincing or as beautiful as Tal's move.

15... ♖xb1

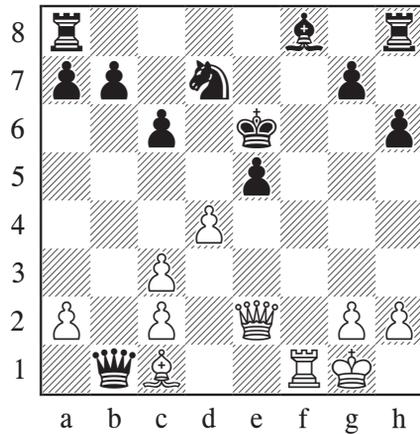
Other moves were no better:

15... ♖a6 16. ♖g4† ♕d6 (After 16... ♕e7 17. dxe5 b6 18. e6 ♜f6 19. ♖g6 White's attack breaks through.) 17. ♔f4! exf4 (17... b5 18. dxe5†+-) 18. ♖xf4† ♕e7 19. ♖c7 White wins.

15... ♖c7 16. ♔a3! (16. ♔f4 b5 17. ♖be1 ♖e8 18. ♖h5 ♔d6 19. dxe5 wins just as easily, but the text move is more eye-catching.)



16... ♔xa3 17. ♖g4† ♕d6 18. ♖g6† ♜f6 19. dxe5† White wins.



16. ♖c4†

By driving the king to a dark square, Tal prepares a check followed by picking up the queen.

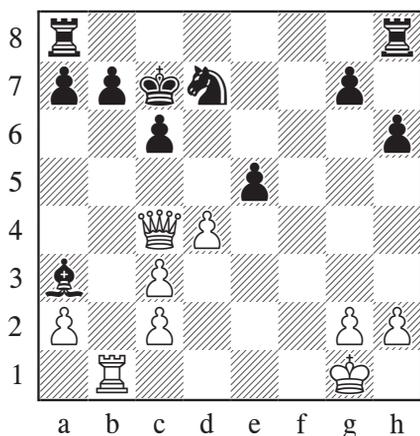
16... ♕d6

16... ♕e7 17. ♔a3† ♕d8 puts the black king in relative safety, but it costs him too many pawns. 18. ♖xb1 ♔xa3 19. ♖xb7 ♖c8 20. ♖xa7 ♔d6 21. ♖f7 ♖c7 22. ♖a8† ♖c8 23. ♖xc8† ♕xc8 24. ♖xg7 ♖f8 25. ♖xh6 Black has hung on to a rook, bishop and knight against a queen, but White is winning thanks to his passed pawns.

17. ♔a3† ♕c7 18. ♖xb1 ♔xa3

Black has a material advantage, with a rook, bishop and knight versus a queen. However,

his pieces lack harmony and his king remains under fire.



19. ♖b3 ♕e7

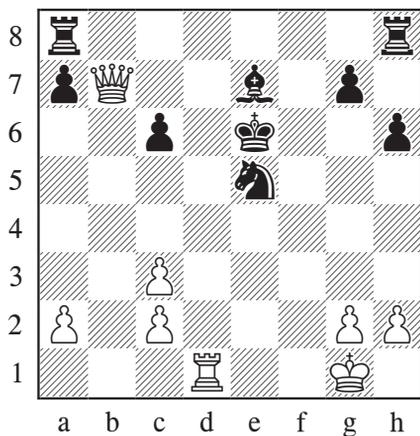
In the event of 19...b6? 20. ♖xa3 Black has no chance without the bishop.

20. ♖xb7† ♔d6 21. dxe5†!

Tal opens the position around Black's king.

21... ♖xe5 22. ♖d1† ♔e6

The weary king sets off on another mini-expedition of the central squares.



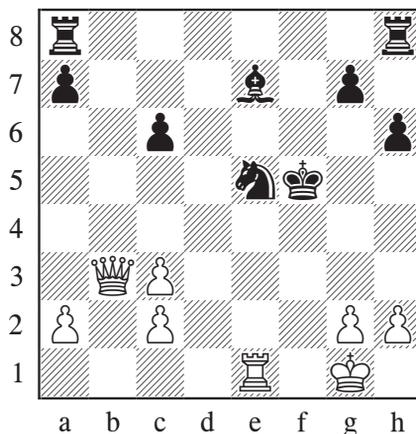
23. ♖b3† ♔f5 24. ♖f1† ♔e4

Forced, as after 24...♔g6 25. ♖e6† ♔f6 26. ♖f5† ♔f7 27. ♖xe5 White wins.

25. ♖e1†!

Tal's move does the trick, although there was an equally good alternative: 25. ♖e6! ♕c5† 26. ♔h1 ♖he8 27. ♖e1† ♕e3 28. ♖h3 ♖c4 29. ♖d7 Black loses the knight.

25... ♔f5



26. g4†!!

This lovely move exploits the fact that the black pieces are overloaded.

26... ♔f6

Black cannot avoid losing material, for instance 26...♔g6 27. ♖xe5 or 26...♖xg4 27. ♖e6†.

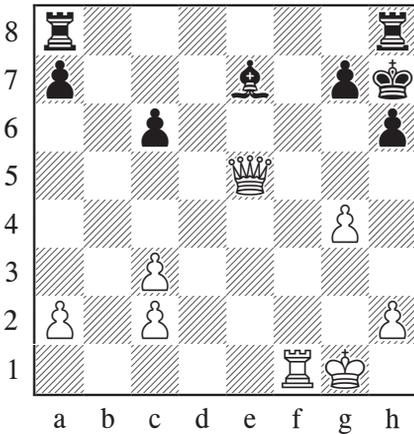
27. ♖f1† ♔g6 28. ♖e6† ♔h7

The king finally finds safety, but Black has paid a heavy price in giving up his knight.

There was no way of avoiding the material loss, as 28...♔f6 would have been met by 29. ♖f5† ♔f7 30. ♖xe5.

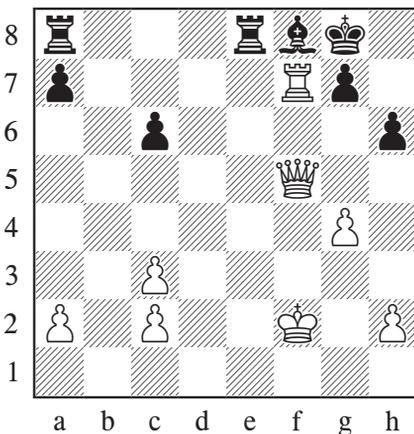
29. ♖xe5

The position should be a relatively straightforward win for White. The only complicating factor is the slightly exposed position of the white king.



29...Rhe8 30.Rf7 ♔f8 31.♖f5† ♕g8
32.♔f2!?

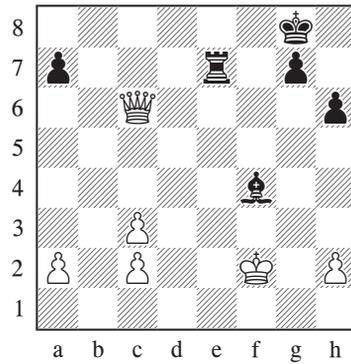
Tal finds a creative way to hide his king. However, a more efficient winning move is 32.♖g6! as Black will have to drop one of his queenside pawns: 32...Rc1† (32...Rd8 33.♕g2 ♖e3 34.c4 ♖e5 35.♖xc6 ♗d4 36.♖g6 ♖xc4 37.♖f3 White wins as the rook defends his king.) 33.♕g2 ♖ae8 34.♖f3 ♖1e6 35.♖f7† ♔h8 36.♖xa7 White should win quite easily from here.



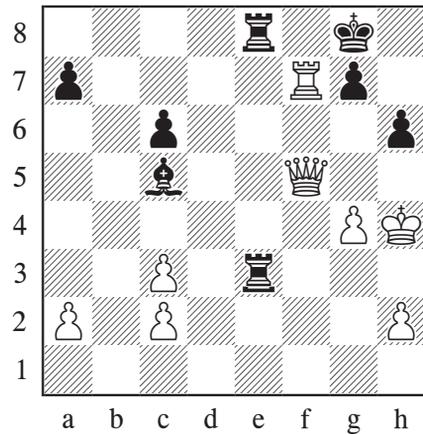
32...Rc1† 33.♕g3 ♖e3† 34.♔h4 ♖ae8

Psakhis suggests 34...♕e7†! with the idea of: 35.g5 ♕xg5† 36.♔h5 ♖ae8 37.♖g6 ♖h3† 38.♕g4 ♖h4† 39.♕g3 ♖e3† 40.♔f2 ♖f4† 41.♖xf4 ♕xf4 42.♖xc6 ♖e7 Psakhis thinks that

Black's fortress may work, but I think White can break it:



43.♖d5†! ♔h7 (After 43...♔f8 44.♖f5† ♖f7 45.♖c8† Black's king has to go to the open part of the board. Alternatively, if 43...Rf7 44.h4 the white king may help to support the c-pawn.) 44.♖f5† ♔g8 45.♖xf4 ♖f7 46.♔e3 ♖xf4 47.♔xf4 The pawn ending is winning for White.



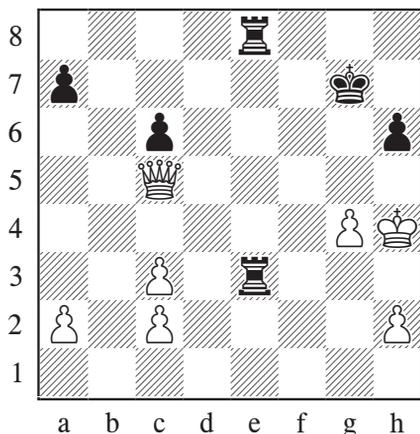
35.♖xg7†!

Tal sacrifices back an exchange, which releases most of the pressure on his king and wins two pawns and obtains a passed pawn.

35.♖g6 seems tempting but is less convincing: 35...♕e7†! 36.g5 ♕f6! 37.♔h5 ♖3e5 38.h4 (38.♖xf6 ♖xg5† 39.♖xg5 hxg5 40.♖xc6 ♔f7! Black probably holds.) 38...♖8e6 39.♖xa7 ♕e7

40.♖xe7 ♜xe7 41.♙xc6 ♜5e6 42.♙d5 g6†
43.♔g4 ♔h7 After many 'only moves' Black has good chances to hold.

35...♔xg7 36.♙xc5



36...♜8e6?

Black passively defends his c-pawn and misses his one real chance to cause problems.

Giving away the pawn was gloomy for Black as well: 36...♜8e7 37.♙xc6 ♜f7! Psakhis found this strong move. (37...♜e2 38.h3 ♜xc2 39.♙d6 ♜ce2 40.c4 White should win without any special problems.) 38.♙c8 ♜e2 (38...♜ff3 39.g5 hxg5† 40.♔xg5 ♜f7 White has good winning chances.) 39.h3 ♜e3 40.c4 ♜ff3 41.♙d7† White should win.

Much more challenging was:

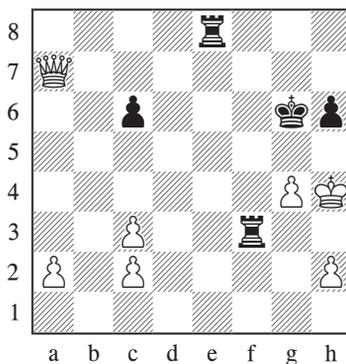
36...♜f3!

Tal mentions that Simagin missed an opportunity to draw. I am not sure if this was correct, but this move would certainly have made White's task a lot more difficult.

37.♙xa7†

After 37.♙d4† ♔f7! 38.c4 ♜e3 39.♙d7† ♔g6 40.♙xc6† ♔g7 White can win the queenside pawns, but afterwards he has no more than a perpetual check.

37...♔g6



38.♙g1!

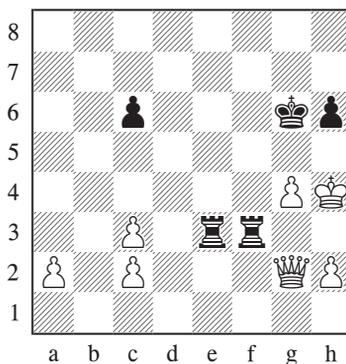
The queen temporarily retreats to a passive position to deal with the mating threats.

38...♜e3

38...♜xc3 39.♙f2 ♜e3 (39...♜e5 40.a4 ♜d5 41.♙f4 ♜dc5 42.a5+-) 40.♙f5† ♔g7 41.g5! hxg5† 42.♔xg5 ♜c4 (42...♜f3 43.♙d7† ♔f8 44.♔g6 ♜ce3 45.♙xc6+-) 43.♙d7† ♔f8 44.♔g6 Black gets checkmated.

39.♙g2

White's king and queen are paralysed but the a-pawn is free to run.



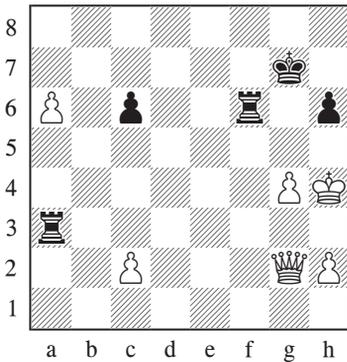
39...♜xc3 40.a4 ♜a3

After 40...♜fe3 41.a5 ♔g7 42.a6 ♜a3 43.g5! White opens a path to the black king and wins.

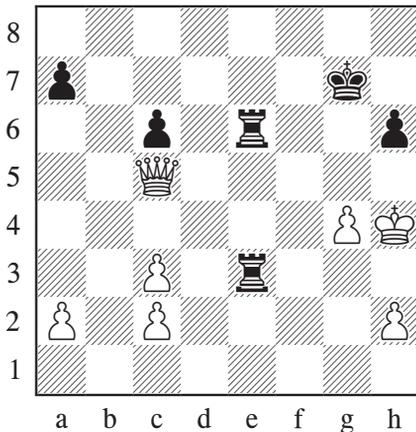
41.a5 ♔g7

41...♜fc3 42.♙e4† ♔g7 43.♙e5† ♔g6 44.♙f5† ♔g7 45.g5 wins.

42.a6 ♜f6



I will break off the analysis here. After checking some lines with a computer, I am still not entirely sure of the final evaluation. The two main paths are 43.g5 ♖g6 44.c4 and 43.♖e2 ♜ff3 44.♖e7† ♔g6; in both cases White is close to winning but Black may (or may not) be able to hang on.



37.♖xa7†

Now the passed a-pawn will play a vital role. Black's rooks are overloaded, and will not be able to restrain the pawn while also defending their king.

37...♔g6 38.♖a8 ♔f6

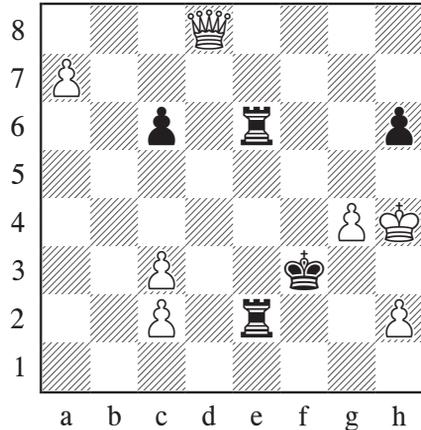
Simagin tries to create threats against Tal's king, but the plan is too slow.

39.a4 ♔e5 40.a5 ♔d5

40...♔e4 41.♖f8 ♜f3 42.♖b4† ♔e3
43.♖d4† ♔e2 44.♖c4† wins.

41.♖d8† ♔e4 42.a6 ♔f3 43.a7 ♜e2

43...♔g2 threatens mate in one, but after 44.♖d2† ♜e2 45.♖xe2† ♜xe2 46.a8=♖ White wins easily.



44.♖d3†

44.♖f8† ♔e3 (44...♔g2 45.a8=♖) 45.a8=♖ wins as well.

44...♜2e3

44...♜6e3 loses in the same way.

45.♖xe3†

45.♖f1† ♔e4 46.♖f5# would have been a nice way to end the game, but Tal's move was good enough to force resignation.

1-0

This game was well publicized. Grandmaster Bondarevsky analysed it in the tournament bulletin in such a way that generated an angry objecting letter from Simagin. Regardless of that controversy, chess fans were starting to get acquainted with the young talent from Riga and the way he could terrorize his opponents.

From playing through Tal's games, it looks as though his tournament strategy was to play

sharply throughout, even with the black pieces. In the fourth round he was slightly worse in the Benoni against Boleslavsky, but managed to draw. In the next game he was slightly better against Kholmov, but the latter defended well and drew. In the next game Tal lost against Boris Spassky who was in sparkling form in this whole tournament. In the seventh round Tal sacrificed a piece for virtually nothing against Bannik. He was hopelessly lost for most of the game, but eventually his opponent spoiled the win and somehow ended up losing. Tal's luck continued in the next game as Byvshev allowed him to salvage a perpetual check from what should have been a lost position.

Koblencs remembers an interesting story about Tal's next game. The day before the game, Tal's opponent, Mark Taimanov, a long-time friend of Koblencs, asked him "Why do you praise your pupil Misha?" He also told his wife to come and watch the game to see him teach the young pretender a lesson. The game started according to plan for the experienced grandmaster, who started to outplay Tal, but then he blundered a piece for two pawns. At that point, about an hour into the game, Taimanov left the room and telephoned his wife to tell her not to come to the playing hall after all! He eventually managed to save an unpleasant endgame.

In the tenth round Tal drew a worse position in the Benoni, then he turned around a worse endgame to defeat Lisitsin. He then held a marathon game against Korchnoi after defending with rook against rook and bishop. Tal followed with hard-fought draws against Polugaevsky and Averbakh, before winning a back-and-forth battle against Ragozin. Then in the penultimate round he lost to Zukharov, who prepared well and converted his advantage.

In the final round Tal faced Alexander Tolush, who was not in his best form but was still a fine attacking player. Tolush played thirty-three games against the world champions; he won four of them, drew ten and lost nineteen. In 1950 he finished equal second in the Soviet Championship, and in 1953 he won a tournament in Bucharest ahead of Petrosian, Smyslov, Spassky, Boleslavsky and Szabo. Tolush was also the trainer of Spassky, one of Tal's biggest rivals at the time.

The qualification system of the Soviet Championship meant that, by finishing at a certain level in the final rankings, a player could pre-qualify to one of the later qualification stages, or even straight to next year's final. It is quite possible that Tal needed to win to elevate himself into one of the desired qualifying spots.

GAME 42

Mikhail Tal – Alexander Tolush

Soviet Championship Final, Leningrad 1956

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 a6 6.♙g5 e6 7.f4 ♖b6

I found no previous games of Tolush in which he played the Najdorf, so he probably prepared the system and especially the Poisoned Pawn variation to use against Tal (although, as you will see in some of the following notes, he used it in several future outings).