



Capablanca and his Analysts

by Stephen Berry

Did Capablanca's personality sway judgments on his play?

(This article was originally written some twenty years ago, well before the age of the modern chess computer program. In the year 2003, I took the opportunity to subject some of the analysis in the games to the rigours of Fritz 7. 2003 comments are italicised and in brackets.)

Capablanca was in his own way just as popular with the general public as his more extroverted successor Bobby Fischer. His charm, good looks and elegance made him a firm favourite with people who were not especially interested in chess. The attractive personality appears all the more impressive when linked to his dominance at the chess board. Capablanca himself said, "There have been times in my life when I came very near to believing that I could not lose even a single game. Then I would be beaten, and the lost game would bring me back from dreamland to earth." The aura of invincibility was of course not always a positive factor. Some blamed his defeat by Alekhine in 1927 on the fact that he didn't take his opponent seriously. Playing over a number of Capablanca's games recently, the thought struck me that perhaps some of the judgments of the annotators had been adversely affected by the dazzling reputation of this famous man.

Capablanca's first major tournament triumph was at San

Sebastian in 1911. The comments to his first round game against Bernstein from Golombek, Prins and Tarrasch are extremely interesting.

Ruy Lopez Capablanca White Bernstein Black

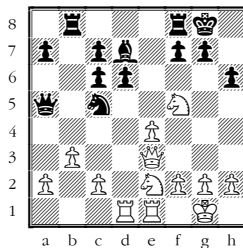
1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 Nf6 4 0-0 Be7 5 Nc3 d6 6 Bxc6+ bc 7 d4 ed 8 Nxd4 Bd7 9 Bg5 0-0 10 Re1 h6 11 Bh4 Nh7 12 Bxe7 Qe7 13 Qd3 Rab8 14 b3 Ng5 15 Rad1 Qe5 16 Qe3 Ne6 17 Nce2

Here Bernstein began a manoeuvre which should have ruined Black's position.

17 ... Qa5?

Allowing the white knight to secure an excellent post. 17 ... Nxd4 18 Nxd4 Rfe8 was better.

18 Nf5! Nc5?

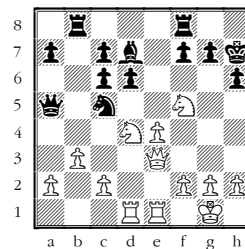


It turns out that Black dare not play 18 ... Qxa2. Golombek gives the line 19 Qc3 (*threat 20 Ra1*) 19 ... Qa6 20 Nf4 f6 21 Qg3 g5 22 Ng6 Rf7 23 Nxf6ch Kg7 24 Nxf7 Kxg6 (*24... Kxf7 25 f4!*) 25 Nxd6 cd 26 Rxd6 Rb7 27 e5.

Better than decentralising the knight however, was 18 ... Rfe8.

19 Ned4 Kh7

White threatened both 20 Nxc6 and 20 Qg3.



20 g4

"A very interesting way of continuing the attack" (Golombek).

"A typical Capablanca move" (Prins).

"This continuation of the attack is certainly weak" (Tarrasch). He goes on to state his reasons.

If Black does nothing and allows g5 and gh he can then play ...g6 and bring the White attack to a standstill. Tarrasch also points out that it is difficult to find a good continuation of the attack, but fails to point out an improvement on 20 g4.

It is only Prins who, though not critical of 20 g4, gives another move – namely 20 c3! It certainly seems strong. The variations are:

(a) 20 ... Bxf5 21 Nxc6! winning material e.g. 21 ... Qb5 22 Nd4 or 21 ... Qb6 22 Nxb8 Re8 23 b4.

(b) 20 ... Ne6 21 Qg3 g6 22 Qh3 h5 23 Qe3 and wins.

(c) 20 ... Qa6 21 b4 Ne6 22 Qg3 Rg8 23 e5 and Black has great

difficulties e.g. 23 ... d5 24 b5 or 23 ... de 24 Nf3 or 23 ... Nxd4 24 Nxd4 de 25 Rxe5 Qxa2? 26 Qd3+ followed by 27 Ra5 Qb2 28 Rb1.

It will soon be evident how critical this lost opportunity was.

“A brilliant offer of two pawns for a profoundly conceived attack on the king.” (Golombek). But is it correct? (Fritz 7 thinks that White is simply throwing away two pawns for little compensation. It recommends 22 a4 here.)

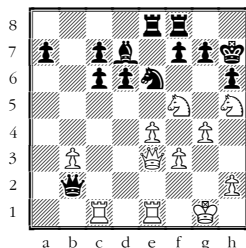
22... Qxa2?

This move is universally criticised. Golombek, Prins and Tarrasch all give 22 ... Qb6 exchanging queens as better. After 23 Kg2 Black would then have only slightly the worse ending. ?

Again Bernstein takes stick from our three commentators for this move. Tarrasch and Prins recommend 23 ... Qa5 as relatively best, though White gets the better ending after 24 Ra1 Qb6 25 Rxa7. Golombek gives 23 ... f6! 24 Nh5 (threat 24 Nhxg7) 24 ... Rf7. This is very solid, but was poor Bernstein’s move really so bad?

**24 Rc1 Qb2
25 Nh5**

Black is threatened by 26 Rc3 and 27 Nhxg7. How should he defend?



Prins also believes that 26 e5 is a threat. After — say — 25 ... Bc8 26 e5 Oxe5 27 Qd2 Qd5 28

Nf6+! gf 29 Qxh6+ Kg8 30 Rxe6 White wins. Unfortunately Black can play 27 ... Ng5! intending 28 ... Nxf3+ completely turning the tables.

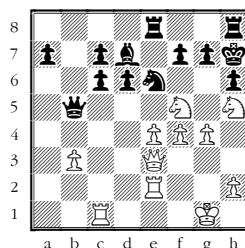
25 ... Rh8?

Black defends against 27 Nhxg7 but overlooks the move played by Capablanca. After 25 ... g5! he would have stood no worse. White can try 26 e5 Nf4! (not 26 ... f6 27 Qd3!) 27 Nxf4 (mate was threatened) 27 ... Bxf5 28 Nd3 Bxd3 29 Oxd3+ Kg8, but Black gets the better game. Golombek attributes the move 26 ... Nf4! to Capablanca. Neither Prins nor Tarrasch consider it, assuming the black position to be already lost. Golombek goes on to suggest that White’s best course would now be to seek a draw by 26 Rc3 Nf4 27 NxN PxN 28 Qxf4 Qxc3 29 Qxh6+ with perpetual check.

The attentive reader can hardly resist the following question. How is it possible that White should have to take a draw after Bernstein had made so many bad moves and Capablanca so many good ones? He might also ask another question. What if after 26 Rc3 Black decides to play 26 .. f6 instead of 26 ... Nf4? White’s compensation for the 2 pawns then appears to be of an extremely fragile nature.

(Fritz 7 agrees that 25 ... g5 is good for Black. But it thinks that 25 ... Rg8 is even stronger. One line would then be 26 Rc3 Ng5 intending 27 ... Bxf5)

26 Re2 Qe5 27 f4 Qb5



28 Nfxg7!

Bernstein is not given another chance. It only remains to point out that 28 ... Rd8 is no defence (as Tarrasch believed). White plays 29 f5 Nf8 (29 ... NxN 30 Nf6 mate) 30 Qc3 Qc5ch 31 Qxc5 dc 32 e5 (Prins) or 30 g5 Qb6 31 PxP Qxe3+ 32 Rxe3 Kxh6 33 Kf2 Rg8 34 Rg1 Nh7 35 Nf6! (Golombek).

(In this last line, Fritz 7 points that 35 Reg3 is mate in 8! Also, if 29 ... Nc5 30 Qc3 Qxe2 31 Ne8! is a pretty win.)

The game ended:

28 ... Nc5 29 Nxe8 Bxe8 30 Qc3 f6 31 Nxf6+ Kg6 32 Nh5 Rg8 33 f5+ Kg5 34 Qe3+ Kh4 35 Qg3+ Kg5 36 h4 mate.

At least that is how Golombek says the game ended. Prins maintains that Bernstein resigned after White’s 34th move, Tarrasch that it was only after White’s 35th!

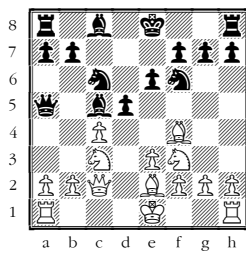
It is of course difficult to criticise the winner of a complicated game, especially when he is Capablanca. However, a better interpretation of the game seems to be that Bernstein went wrong with 17 ... Qa5 and 18 ... Nc5 but that Capablanca reciprocated by 20 g4. After Bernstein had regrouped Capablanca played an attractive but unsound two-pawn sacrifice which proved too difficult for Bernstein.

The next example also gave me plenty of food for thought. The game was played at Carlsbad 1929.

Nimzo-Indian

Capablanca White Mattison Black

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 Qc2 c5 5 dc Nc6 6 Nf3 Bxc5 7 Bf4 d5 8 e3 Qa5 9 Be2



9... Bb4

And this deliberate loss of time is indefensible.” (Golombek).

“Consistent, and within the scope & Black’s intention to maintain the tension in the centre ..” (Prins).

Golombek gives as best 9 ... d4 10 ed Nxd4 11 Nxd4 Bxd4. Prins thinks that White stands better after 12 Bd2.

10 0—0 Bxc3
11 bc 0—0
12 Rab1!

The white rook pins the black bishop to c8 at the same time preventing 12 ...b6, e.g. 12 ... b6 13 Bd6 Rd8 14 Rb5 Qa6 15 cd ed 16 Bc7 and 17 Rxb6.

12 ... Qa3

“Black is still unhappily obsessed with the idea of profiting from his queen excursion.” (Golombek).
“A preparation for ... b6 and the consistent maintenance of the tension.” (Prins).

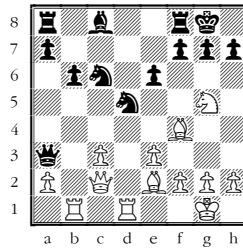
13 Rfd1 b6

Black threatens to complete his development with 14 ... Ba6.

14 cd Nd5

As both Golombek and Prins point out, 14 ... ed fails because of 15 c4. If then 15 ... dc 16 Bd6 or 15 ... Be6 16 cd wins.

15 Ng5



15 ... f5?

Golombek thinks the position is in any case hopeless. He gives 15 ... Nf6 16 Bd6 and 15 ... g6 16 Bf3 “with a similar effect to that in the actual game.”

Prins believes that it is only here that Black blunders. “Scarcely had Black laboriously freed his bishop than he imposes on him a new burden, the protection of e6.” He gives 15 ... g6 as the correct move and appends the following variations:

- (a) 16 Ne4 Nxf4 17 ef Qe7 18 Nd6 Rd8
- (b) 16 Bf3 Bb7 17 c4 (17 Bxd5 ed 18 c4 Ne7 19 e4 Rac8) 17 ... Nxf4 18 Rd7? Nb4
- (c) 16 c4 Nxf4 17 ed Rd8 (18 Rxd8+ Nxd8 19 c5 Bb7)

Who is correct? Certainly 15 ... g6 is better than 15 ... f5 but I doubt if it achieves equality. In variation (b) after 17 Bxd5 ed 18 c4 Ne7 White can try 19 Ne4 (threatening 20 Bd6 or 20 Nf6+) 19 ... de 20 Bd6 Qa5 21 Rb5 Qa6 22 Bxe7 Rfe8 23 Bf6 when the control of the black squares, queen’s file and the unfortunate position of the black queen should lead to White’s advantage.

(I still like my original suggestion of 19 Ne4, but Fritz 7 points out two further excellent possibilities after 15 ... g6 16 Bf3 Bb7 17 Bxd5 ed 18 c4 Ne7:

- a) 19 e4 Rac8 [19 ... Rfc8 20 Rb3 Qa5 21 Qb2 dc 22 Ra3 Rd8 23 Rd2 Qc5 24 Qf6] 20 Qc1! Qxc1 21 Rbxc1 h6 22 Nh3 and White is winning a pawn.
- b) 19 c5! [perhaps best] 19 ... Rfc8 20 Rb3 Qa4 21 Qb2 threatening 22 Qf6 and the pawn on c5 still cannot be taken 21 ... Rxc5 22 Bd6)

16 Bf3

Intending 17 c4, 17 Rxd5 or 17 Nxe6. There is only one temporary defence.

16 ... Qc5

Mattison probably played 15 ... f5? to prevent 17 Ne4 at this point.

17 c4!

Threat 18 Rb5. If 17 ... Nxf4 18 Rb5 Qe7 19 Bxc6 Qxg5 20 ef.

17 ... Ndb4
18 Qb3 e5
19 a3! Na6
20 Bxc6 Resigns

It’s mate after 20 ... Qxc6 21 c5 dis ch Kh8 22 Nf7ch Kg8 (22... Rxf7 23 Rd8+) 23 Nh6 dbl ch Kh8 24 Qg8+ etc.

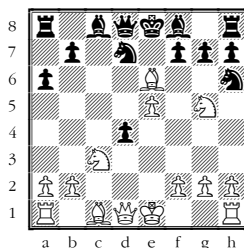
Finally a curious game from Margate 1935.

Q.G.D. Slav
Capablanca White Miseses Black

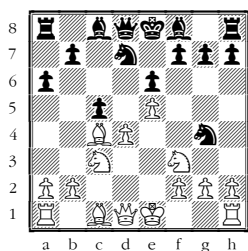
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 Nf3 Nf6 4 e3 e6 5 Nc3 Nbd7 6 Bd3 dc 7 Bxc4 a6 8 e4 c5 9 e5 Ng4

Golombek writes, “Miseses thought for half an hour before making this ingenious move.

Capablanca took the same time to find a reply and said after the game: 'I'm nearly dead with fatigue. He made what appeared to be a silly move — but it wasn't.' And indeed the move has considerable point, since it threatens 10 ... cd 11 Qxd4 Ndx5!'



(Fritz 7 confirms that 15 ... Ke7 and 15 ... Kf6 both lose and 15 ... Kd6 is refuted by 16 Bf4+. Amazingly, Fritz seems to think that 15 ... Kf5! (boldly forward) refutes the white combination. Many of the lines are for computers only e.g. 16 Qf7+ Nf6 17 g4+ Kxg4 18 Rg1+ Kh3! when Fritz gives Black the upper hand. Frankly, after 19 Ne2! I doubt that Black can survive – unless readers can prove to the contrary?)



It seems that an improvement must be sought here if anywhere. The position is roguishly difficult and it is easy to see why Capablanca released the tension with 12 Bxd7+ rather than running out of time trying to find a direct win that perhaps wasn't there.

This article was first published in *Chess* magazine in May 1983.

10 Ng5! Nh6

White can try:

If 10 ... cd 11 Qxg4 dc 12 Nxf7! (Golombek).

(i) 12 Nd5 but after 12 ... Nxe5! Black is O.K.

11 Bxe6 cd

Golombek demonstrates that 11 ... fe loses to 12 Nxe6 Qa5 13 Bd2 cd 14 Nd5!

(ii) 12 Qxd4 appears more promising e.g. 12 ... fe (*now forced*) 13 Nxe6 Qa5 14 Bd2! or 13 ... Qb6 14 Qc4?! Nxe5? 15 Nc7+ Kd7 (15 ... Kd8 16 Bg5+) 16 Qa4+! Qc6 (16 ... Kxc7 17 Nd5+) 17 Nxa8 Qxa4 18 Nb6+ Kc6 19 Ncxa4. Unfortunately after 14 Qc4?! Black can play 14 ... Nc5 15 Nxf8 Bf5! (15 ... Rxf8 16 Be3) 16 Be3 Rc8 and White has great difficulties.

12 Bxd7+ Qxd7 13 Nce4 Qb5! 14 a4! Bb4+ 15 Bd2 Bxd2+ 16 Qxd2 Qxe5 17 0—0 0—0 18 Rfe1 Qd5 19 Nf3 Nf5 20 Rad1 Rd8?

Black here tried to hang on to the d-pawn but after **21 Qg5!** ran into difficulties. Capablanca gave 20 .. Bd7 as better after which it is difficult for Black to lose e.g. 21 Nc3 Qa5 22 Nxd4 Nxd4 23 Qxd4 Bc6.

(Here Fritz 7 points out that after 12 Qxd4 fe 13 Nxe6 Qa5 14 Bd2, 14 ... Nc5! 16 Nxf8 Nb3 is strong.

Golombek nowhere points out an improvement for White from moves 12 to 20. But is that possible? Were the bizarre black knight moves, the white sacrifice on e6, all merely the prelude to a sleepy equality on move 20? Go back to move 12.

(iii) 12 Nxf7! Nxf7 13 Bxf7+ Kxf7 14 e6+! Kxe6 15 Qb3+ and Black is struggling e.g. 15 ... Ke7 (15 ... Kf6 16 Nd5+ Kg6 17 Nf4+!) 16 0-0 and if then 16 ... dc 17 Re1+ Kd6 18 Bf4+ is murder.

In this last line Black can also try moves such as 15 ... Kd6 or 15 ... Kf5 but it's hard to believe the black king will emerge unscathed. It would certainly be unusual if the position at move 12 were not won for White!