The World Champions

MIKHAIL TAL

By

Garry Kasparov



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Series Introduction

It has been over 20 years since the publication of the five-volume series *My Great Predecessors* (*MGP*), portraying the history of the first twelve classical World Champions. The idea of revising the series thoroughly has been on my mind from time to time, but Everyman Chess did not show enthusiasm for the project.

In 2021 Everyman Chess was sold to the Play Magnus Group. I recorded a video for Chessable, one of their companies, based on *MGP – Volume 4*, covering the career of Bobby Fischer.

Play Magnus was soon sold to Chess.com, and in 2024 Everyman Chess was sold again, this time to Chess Elevation, reviving hope that the new owner would want to update the series.

They declined, but did re-issue the *MGP* series with a new layout, new cover artwork and nicer paper. These books are now available from Popular Chess – a rebranding of the old Everyman Chess – keeping this important piece of chess literature in print for future generations.

Instead of trying to rewrite *MGP*, Chess Elevation suggested that I should work with a new team on a new series, with the same topic, approached differently, keeping *MGP* with Popular Chess and releasing the new series under Chess Elevation.

For the *MGP* series, I worked with Alexander Shakarov and Dmitry Plisetsky, and was happy with the outcome. I want to use this chance to thank them once again. But for this project, working with a new team gives a different perspective, while using the latest technological advances to our advantage.

When we began the project in the late 1990s, first with newspaper articles, then the five books, we optimistically believed that with the help of strong chess playing programs (engines), we would be able to determine the objective truth of the games.

This turned out to be too optimistic. But, at heart an optimist, I believe that this time it may be possible to produce game annotations without major mistakes. Should the past change, we will incorporate corrections into future editions.

We decided to aim for sixteen volumes, covering those who won the Classical World Championship in matches: Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Euwe, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov, Kramnik, Anand and Carlsen.

It is my opinion that the tradition of the Classical World Championship ended when Carlsen decided not to defend his title in 2022. The World Champion is no longer the strongest player in the world.

It is therefore time to write the definitive history of the sixteen Classical World Champions.

I deeply respect other greats from chess history. Rubinstein, Keres, Bronstein, Korchnoi, Caruana and Topalov immediately come to mind. Some were, if only briefly, the strongest players in the world. But none of them won a World Championship match.

These books will be published out of sequence, starting with Volume 8, a book about my old hero and friend, Mikhail Tal!

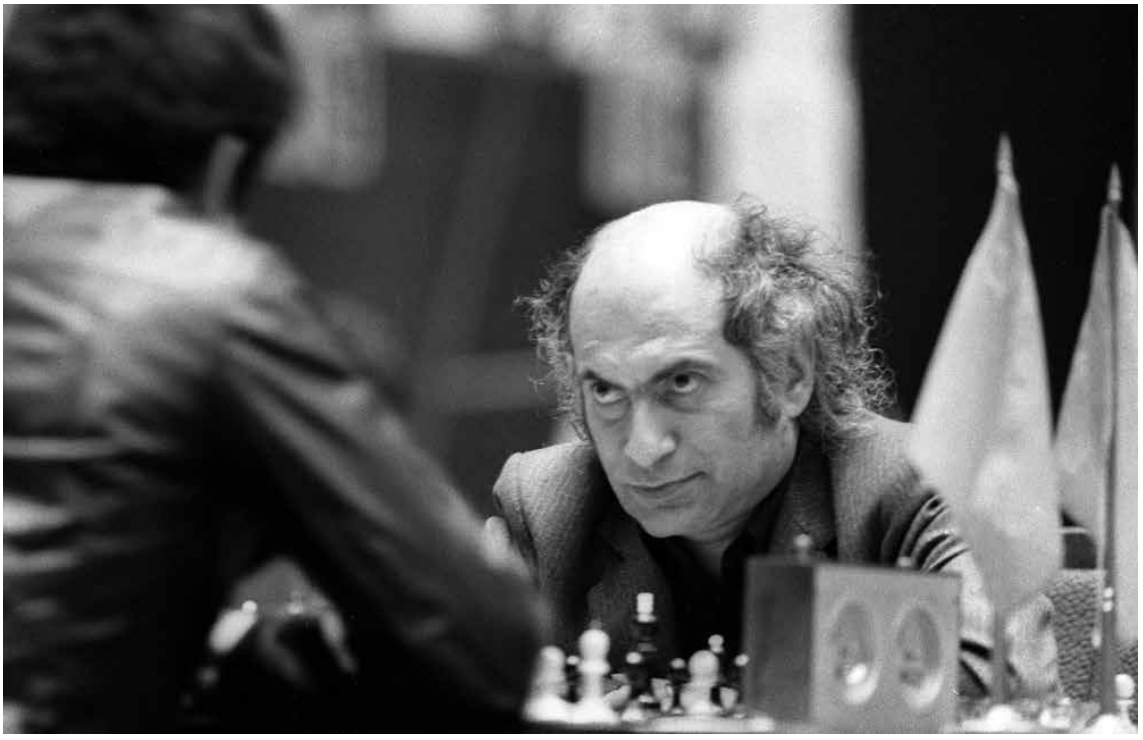
The core team for the new series consists of the Chief Editor of *New In Chess Magazine*, Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, arguably the greatest living chess journalist, and Grandmaster Jacob Aagaard. Other grandmasters are at this point loosely committed to work on later volumes.

It is impossible for one person to work through all the material of 200 years of chess history alone. A team is needed. This team has a clear leader. Me. These books express my views, my vision, with the major decisions taken by me.

Garry Kasparov
New York, March 2026

CHAPTER 1

Tal Through my Eyes



Tal facing me in the 1982 Interzonal Tournament – a big fight ending in a draw

Ladies and Gentlemen... Mikhail Tal!

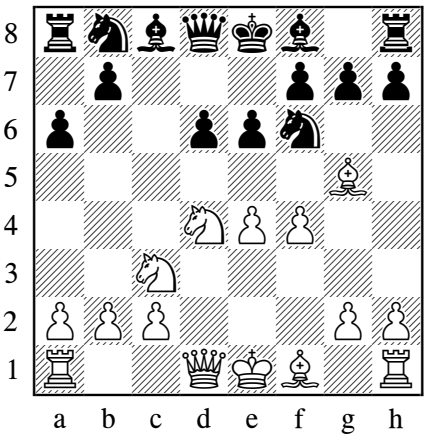
I was born in 1963, two years after a young Mikhail Tal, aged 24, lost the return match for the World Championship to Botvinnik. By the time I got to play him for the first time, I was not yet 11 years old. It was March 1974, and I was in Moscow for a tournament where the Pioneer Palace teams were playing against each other. I represented my hometown of Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. (My origins are a bit complicated, with Armenian and Jewish roots, born in Azerbaijan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, I represented Russia, and much later ran for the role of President of the Russian Federation.) Because we had reached the final, Tal gave a simul to our team. I was emotionally unprepared to play him, played badly and soon lost.

In 1978, Tal was my last round opponent in the Soviet Championship, giving me a two-week warning on the date of our encounter. It was my first outing in that championship, and I wanted to secure a draw in this game, after which I would automatically qualify for the 1979 championship. Tal only had to draw to secure tournament victory. Peace was soon agreed. After the game, Tal asked if I wanted to join him downstairs to play some "real chess", by which he meant blitz. I was only too pleased to play one of my heroes and immediately agreed. My coach, Alexander Nikitin, followed us and wrote down the games. He was in obvious panic, after I lost the first three games. Here is the first of those games.

Mikhail Tal – Garry Kasparov

Tbilisi (blitz) 1978

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

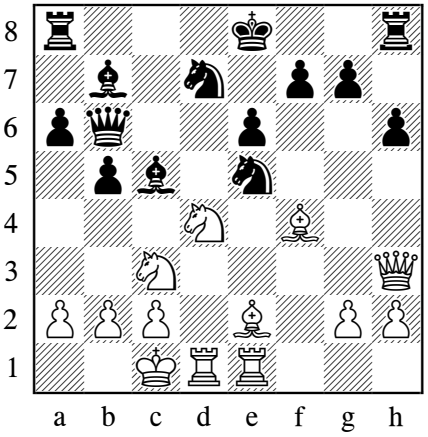


7...b5!?

The most provocative thing I could think of playing. I wanted to play the real Mikhail Tal.

8.e5 dxe5 9.fxe5 ♕c7 10.♕e2 ♘fd7 11.0–0–0 ♗b7 12.♕g4 ♕b6 13.♗e2 ♘xe5 14.♕h3 ♘bd7 15.♖he1 h6 16.♗f4 ♗c5?

16...♗e7!? with unclear play was better, but I was seeking counterplay.



17.♘xe6!

I certainly got to play the real beast!

17...fxe6?!

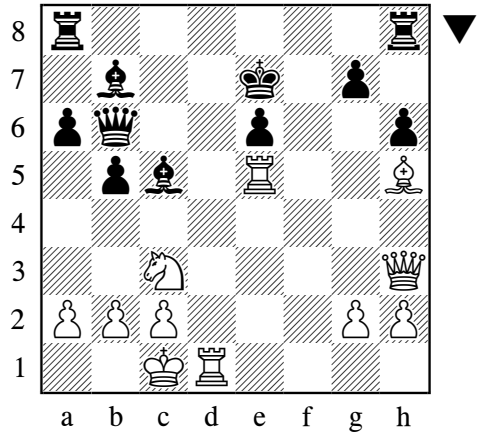
This seemed forced.

After 17...♕xe6, 18.♗g4 would win on the spot.

But I could have tried to close the e-file with 17...♗e3†!? 18.♗xe3 ♕xe6, although after 19.♕g3, White's attack would still have been difficult to defend against.

18.♗h5† ♔e7 19.♗xe5 ♘xe5 20.♖xe5

The material is equal, the position isn't.



20...♖hf8 21.♕g3 g5 22.♕d3 ♔f6 23.♖de1 ♖g8 24.♕h7

I resigned. Mate is near.

1–0

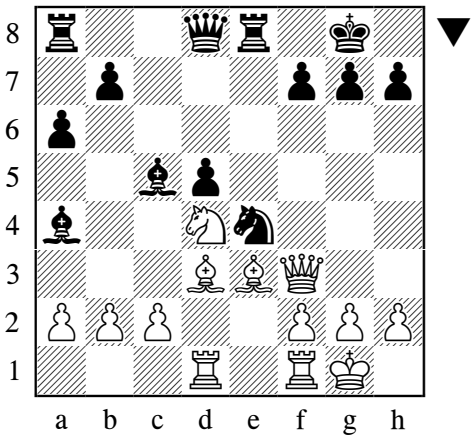
After losing the first three games, I decided to change my approach. In the second game, I had been swindled in the endgame, and rejected a perpetual, only to be immediately mated. In the third game I was hit with a ♘xg7 sacrifice and mated again.

Nikitin looked as sad after I lost the first three games as he looked thrilled after I won the next four. I chose to no longer freely follow Tal into the open landscape of all-out war, but instead opted for a more technical style. In the end the score was 7–7, a tie. The fourth game is given below.

Garry Kasparov – Mikhail Tal

Tbilisi (blitz) 1978

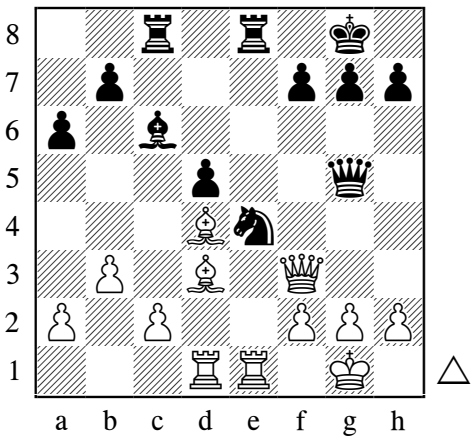
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 c5 4.exd5 exd5 5.♗b5† ♗d7 6.♕e2† ♗e7 7.dxc5 ♘f6 8.♘b3 0–0 9.♗e3 ♖e8 10.♘f3 a6 11.♗d3 ♗a4 12.♘fd4 ♘bd7 13.0–0 ♘xc5 14.♘xc5 ♗xc5 15.♕f3 ♘e4 16.♖ad1



16...♗xd4?!

There is no reason to part with the two bishops voluntarily. After this White has an edge.

17.♗xd4 ♕g5 18.♖fe1 ♖ac8 19.b3 ♗c6



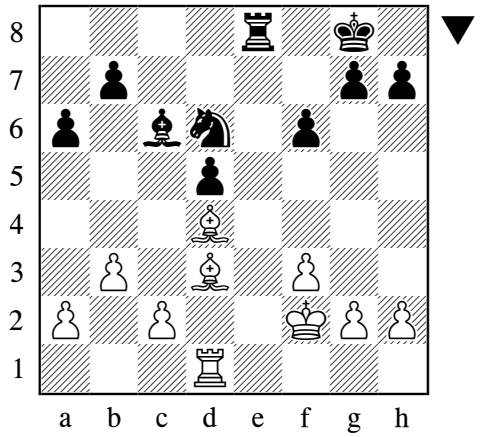
20.♕e3 ♕xe3

Tal should probably have kept the queens on the board, to get the most out of the support his knight gets from the d5-pawn.

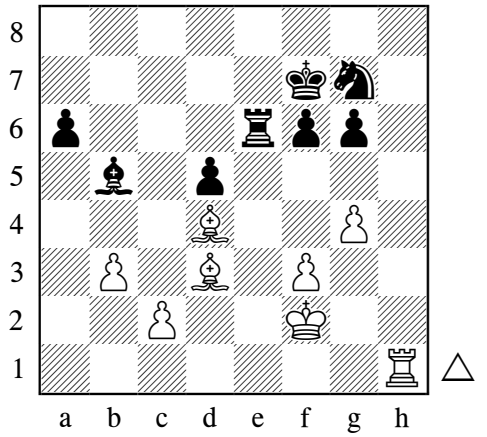
20...♕h4!? was more practical, with a small advantage for White.

21.♖xe3 f6 22.f3 ♘d6 23.♖xe8† ♖xe8 24.♔f2

With the two bishops and a better pawn structure, White's advantage is considerable.



24...♔f7 25.a4 g6 26.g4 ♖e6 27.h4 ♘e8 28.h5 ♘g7 29.hxg6† hxg6 30.♖h1 b5 31.axb5 ♗xb5



I had made great progress, but here I misplayed the position a bit.

32.♗xb5?

Stronger was 32.c4! dxc4 33.bxc4, where White has a decisive technical advantage after 33...♗c6 34.♖h6, or 33...♖d6 34.cxb5 ♖xd4 35.♔e3.

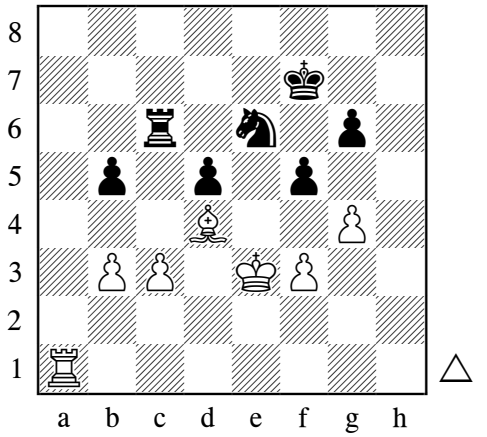
32...axb5 33.♖a1 ♖c6?

33...♖e7! would have been a good defensive move. The knight is coming to e6 and the rook to c7, creating counterplay and reasonable drawing chances.

34.c3

34.♖a7†! would have been inconvenient for Black.

34...♘e6 35.♔e3 f5



36.gxf5?

An unfortunate intermediate move, making Black's defensive task easier.

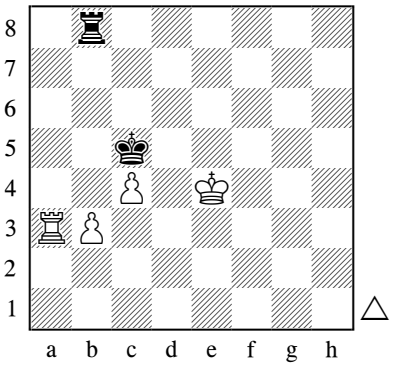
36.♖a5! was winning. For example: 36...f4† 37.♔d3 ♘g5 38.♖xb5 ♘xf3 39.♖xd5 ♔e6 40.♖a5 and the extra pawn will win the game for White.

36...gxf5 37.♖a5 ♘c7?

Passive play is doomed.

Black had to go for counterplay. After 37...f4† 38.♔d3 ♘g5! the draw is achievable, because

of the reduced amount of pawns. The main line is quite instructive: 39.♖xb5 ♘xf3 40.♖xd5 ♔e6 41.♖a5 ♘xd4 42.♔xd4 ♖d6† 43.♔e4 ♖c6 44.c4 ♖b6 45.♖a3 ♔d6 46.♔xf4 ♔c5 47.♔e4 ♖b8



Despite the two extra pawns, Black is making a draw by hugging the white pawns with the king.

38.♔f4 ♔e6 39.b4?

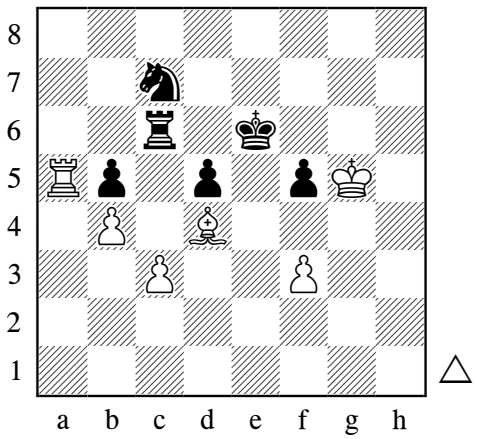
Giving Black a final chance.

39...♖c4?

The final error.

39...♖a6! was the last chance to hold the game. White needs the rook to put pressure on all the black weaknesses.

40.♔g5 ♖c6



41.♖a1!

Activating the rook.

41...♘e8 42.♖e1† ♔f7 43.♖e5 ♘g7 44.♖xd5 ♖g6† 45.♔f4 ♘e6† 46.♔xf5 ♖g5† 47.♔e4 ♖g2 48.♖xb5
1–0

Just as in Tbilisi in 1978, our lifetime blitz score was a tie. Not long before he died, we both participated in a blitz tournament in Moscow. Tal looked terrible! Although I would say that I could hardly believe it, when I heard he had died, it had also felt inevitable just weeks before. But no matter how ill, Tal was still Tal, and he won the first game. Like other great champions from the Soviet era that lived for chess, he was falling apart, and the only thing that remained strong was his feeling for chess. I have heard that those that visited Viktor Korchnoi in his final months were not sure if he recognized them, or if he was just incoherent. However, once the board came out and a recent game was shown, he still had the mental faculties of a grandmaster. I managed to return our lifetime score to balance in the second round.

While Tal was leading our individual score in simuls, and keeping a tie in blitz, I did get the better of him in classical. I won a training game we played in 1980, when he came to work with us in Baku. At this point, he was the number two rated player in the world, although his optimism in this game is mostly a reflection of there being nothing at stake and a desire to get things going. In a balanced position, he sacrificed a knight 'to make things happen', after which all that happened was that he was down a piece. Still, my defence was shaky, and he first had a draw a piece down, then later, after I returned the piece to get into a rook ending, this could have been drawn again. Tal, like Botvinnik, used training games