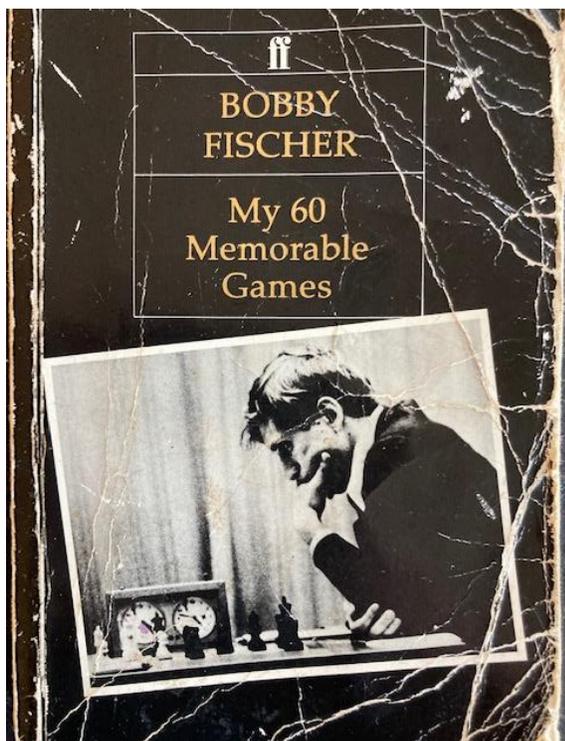


Spassky, Boris - Quinn, Mark [B23]
Dublin Simultaneous March 1991, 21. 03.1991
[IM Mark Quinn]

There is a school of thought that one should be wary of meeting one's heroes. There is always the distinct possibility that they will not live up to our exalted notions of them. For this reason, it was probably best that I never met my childhood hero Bobby Fischer. I can't remember when I first heard of the American maverick who single-handedly dismantled the entire Russian Chess apparatus to become world champion. My fascination turned to something of an obsession after my dad, Tom, presented me with Bobby Fischer's classic bildungsroman 'My Sixty Memorable Games.'



I was enraptured by Fischer's brilliance, his tactical nous, the pointilliste precision of his strategic play. He was a glorious talent. An incredible prodigy. The complete player.

I set about tracking down every game Fischer played. Down in the local library, I found

a book that included all the games from Fischer's 'Match of the Century' against Boris Spassky in Reykjavik in 1972. This was Fischer's crowning glory - the match that saw him become the eleventh world champion. It was also the match that almost never happened and probably wouldn't have, if Henry Kissinger hadn't taken it upon himself to telephone Fischer to tell him to get his ass over to Iceland and play Spassky. In the popular imagination, the contest had begun to symbolise a battle between the two competing ideologies of western capitalism and Marxist communism. Fischer's win dented the Soviet Union's claims to intellectual superiority over the west. Then just when he was at the very peak of his powers and fame, Fischer refused to defend his title and vanished without trace.

The pure drama of Fischer's disappearance captivated the chess world for the next two decades. Where had he gone? There were rumours that he had joined a religious cult. Some said he was down and out and homeless in L.A.? Maybe Fischer was simply waiting in the long grass, biding his time, evaluating the right moment to return and regain his crown from Garry Kasparov.

I still harboured this fanciful notion back in 1991 when it was announced that Boris Spassky, the last man to have played Fischer nineteen years earlier, was on his way to Ireland. Kilkenny Chess Club had somehow managed to track down Spassky in France and he had accepted their invitation to visit the Marble City. Spassky would give two simultaneous displays in Dublin before he headed to Kilkenny.

News of Spassky's impending visit to Ireland spread like wildfire through the Irish Chess Community. The unprecedented publicity surrounding Fischer's match against Spassky had led to a huge surge in interest in chess globally. A significant portion of Irish Chess players had been inspired to take up the game in the wake of the match and they were still playing two decades later. Many would see the chance to play Spassky as a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Then aged fifteen, even though I was one of Ireland's highest-rated juniors, I doubted I would get a chance to play Spassky. I would

Sicilian Move-Order Magic:
Boris Spassky vs Mark Quinn, Dublin Simultaneous
March 1991

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have settled for a chance of seeing the man in action but then a few days before he was due to arrive in Ireland, I received word, that if I wanted it, a place had been reserved for me in the first Dublin simul.

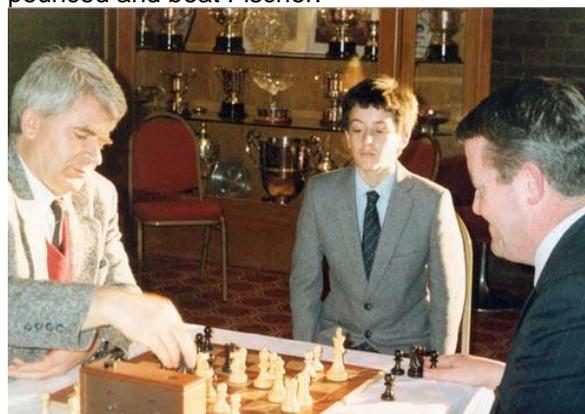


Playing in the Ormonde Hotel Dublin back in 1991. The Ormonde was a popular venue for city centre chess tournaments in the 1980s and 1990s. Situated by the Liffey, this historic Dublin hostelry, which is due to reopen after a lengthy redevelopment, was where the Sirens chapter of James Joyce's Ulysses takes place.

To this day, I am not entirely sure whose idea it was to give me the nod. It may well have been Eamon Keogh, Michael Crowe or Robert Hand, all of whom were deeply involved in running Irish Chess at the time. I didn't really know Eamon or Michael on a personal level in those years. Later in life, they would become great friends. One thing I can say for sure is that I doubt I would have subsequently gone on to become an IM were it not for Eamon and Michael's considerable efforts over the following two decades in promoting Irish chess and providing opportunities for Irish chess players to play against strong international opposition. Whoever it was invited me to play against Spassky, needless to say, I was determined not to let them down.

In the days running up to the simultaneous, I wondered how do you even begin to prepare to play someone like Spassky with black? I leafed through my cherished copy of Fischer's 'Memorable Games' where a game

against Spassky had made one of the sixty. Fischer had surprised Spassky in the encounter by abandoning the Sicilian defence in favour of playing his King's Pawn to e5 on move 1. Even though Spassky must have suspected Fischer had a specific idea up his sleeve, the Russian did not shy away from proffering his super-sharp and ultra-aggressive King's Gambit which Fischer duly accepted. This game was one of only three losses Fischer included in his 'Memorable Games' collection. Fischer managed to get an advantage out of the opening thanks to clever preparation, but after a series of seemingly innocuous missteps with his queen, Spassky pounced and beat Fischer.



Boris Spassky plays some blitz games against National Master Eamon Keogh in Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis Club on the afternoon of the first Dublin Simul. Eamon also took on Spassky in an exhibition tennis match for the assembled press that afternoon, where Spassky showed he was a force to be reckoned with on and off the board.

On the night of the simul, I was one of twenty-seven players to take a seat in a large, plush conference room in a computer software company in an industrial park on the outskirts of Dublin. The atmosphere was electric as Spassky arrived. Finally, it was game on!

It would be a night to remember, as not only would I get a chance to play one of the idols of my youth, the former world champion gave me a move-order masterclass, demonstrating in chameleon-like-fashion how white can finesse move-order in the Open Sicilian so as to trick an opponent into entering systems they don't usually play. It was a valuable lesson, that has served me well, with both colours, to this day.

1.e4

'Best by test' according to Bobby Fischer.

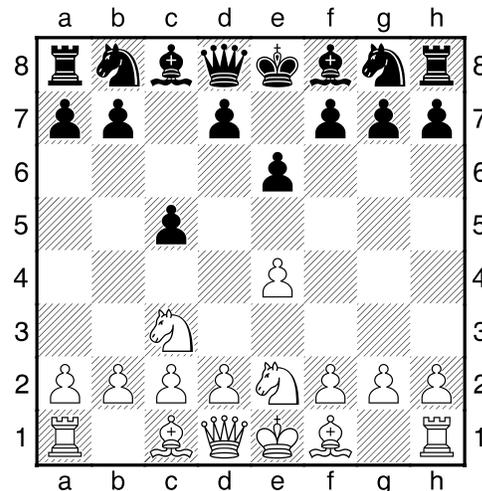
1...c5

I had only taken up the Sicilian Scheveningen the previous year. Even though I had far more experience in the French Defence, something more aggressive and double-edged was required. When you have a chance to take on a chess legend you have to go for it. I knew the Sicilian was the right choice, providing, of course, I managed to make it out of the opening alive.

2.Nc3

Spassky gives the impression that he is gearing up for a closed Sicilian and perhaps the game would have gone along those lines had I played 2...Nc6. After 2...e6 I was hoping to tempt the former world champion into an open Sicilian where I could play my favourite Scheveningen Sicilian.

2...e6 3.Nge2!



A tricky move to face if you only play one specific variation of the Sicilian as black, as was the case when this game took place. Spassky reserves the option to play g3 and enter a Closed Sicilian

while also reserving the option to push in the centre with d4. 3...Nc6 is the most natural move in this position after which the game could transpose into a Taimanov Sicilian were white to play 4.d4. These days I would be happy with that outcome as the Taimanov is part of my repertoire. The problem back in 1991 was that I had never played the Taimanov before and didn't think it was a good idea to try to bluff a former world champion in the opening. As I watched Spassky move swiftly around the room, I realised that we had only played three moves and he had already outwitted me!

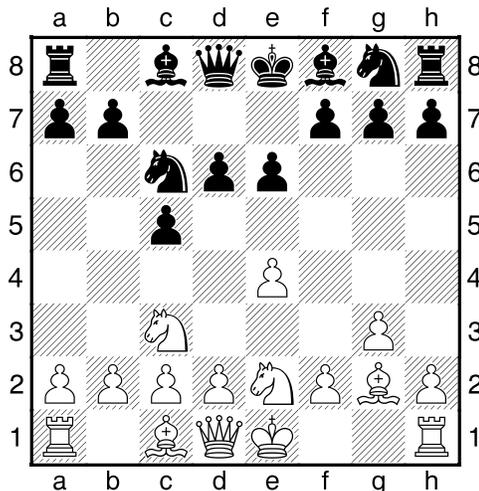
3...d6

Hedging my bets. If 4. d4 cxd4 5. Nxd4 Nf6 I would have been back in familiar Scheveningen terrain but Spassky continues his move-order trickery and toys with the idea of a Closed Sicilian.

4.g3!

An annoying move. If 4.d4 cxd4 5.Nxd4 Nf6 once again I would be happy out, which is to say, back in a Scheveningen, although I suspect Spassky wouldn't exactly have been trembling in his boots at the prospect.

4...Nc6 5.Bg2



Now if 5...Nf6 6. d4 cxd4 7. Nxd4 the game would transpose into the g3 line versus the Scheveningen where white keeps a small edge but black has good chances of mixing things up and getting a complicated position. It slowly dawned on me that after 5...Nf6 Spassky might simply castle and then play d3, h3, Be3 and f4, g4 etc. entering the kind of closed Sicilian set-up that requires skillful handling to defend as black. Black's problem in acquiescing to a closed Sicilian with his knight on f6 rather than e7 is that e7 is by far the best place for the black knight in that scenario.

We were only five moves into the game and already I was presented with an awkward choice.

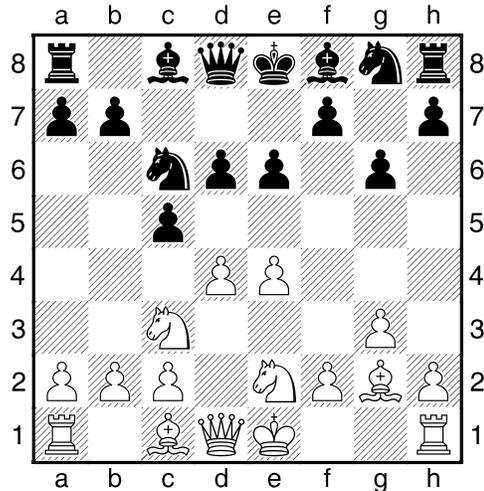
Play 5...g6 and attempt to fianchetto the dark-squared bishop on g7 after white has time to push d4 and the black pawn on d6 could become vulnerable in subsequent play.

Alternatively, choose 5...Nf6 and find myself in an inferior version of the Closed Sicilian against one of the world's leading experts in the line. In such situations there is no easy or even correct answer. All you can do is take a leap of faith and see what happens. My gut told me my best chance lay in an open Sicilian no matter how unusual or dicey the ensuing positions might seem.

5...g6!?

Inviting d4, an invitation Spassky took all of a millisecond to accept.

6.d4!

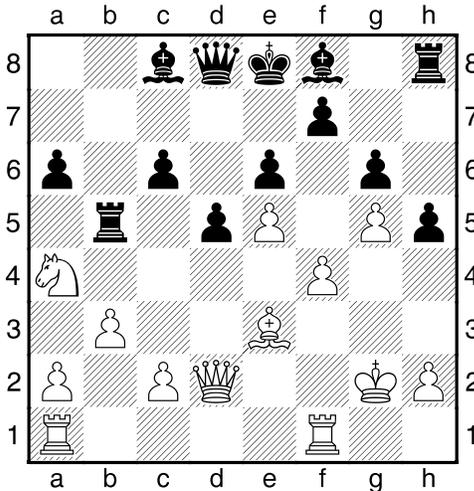


6...cxd4 7.Nxd4 a6

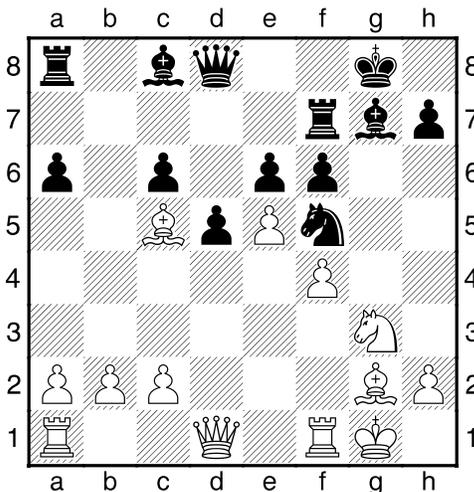
An unfortunate necessity as Nb5 attacking d6 must be stopped at all costs. Black falls further behind in development which highlights the drawback to playing a Hybrid Sicilian which is a mishmash of the Scheveningen and Dragon variations. Contrary to first appearances, however, black's set-up is not as compromised as it first looks, and it isn't that easy for white to take advantage.

8.0-0 Bg7 9.Be3

I was most afraid of 9.Nxc6 in the game as white can follow up with a quick e5 after which I have to close the position with d5, leaving a gaping hole on c5 for a white knight or bishop to occupy. Spassky rejected this line most likely because he could see that black has good counterattacking chances on the kingside. Here are a few sample lines. 9...bxc6 10.e5 d5 11.f4 Ne7 12.Be3 (12.Na4 Nf5 13.g4 Nh4 14.Be3 Rb8 15.Qd2 h5 16.g5 Nxg2 17.Kxg2 Rb5 18.b3 Bf8!



...when the position which is optically better for white remains extremely unclear.) 12...Nf5 13.Bf2 g5 14.Ne2 (14.g4 Ne7!) 14...gxf4 15.gxf4 f6 16.Ng3 0-0 17.Bc5 Rf7 with a very weird position that is extremely hard to assess.

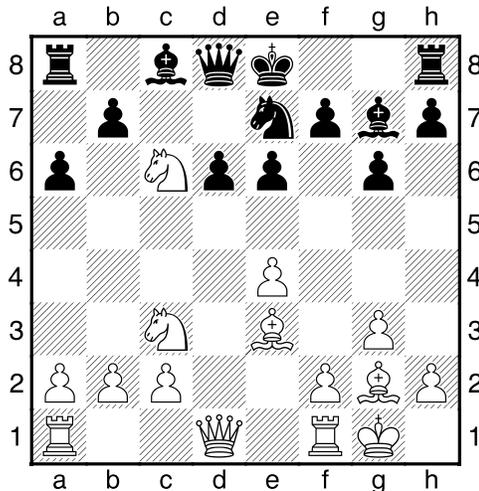


White seems to have the better chances with more actively placed pieces. The black bishop on c8 appears rather restricted, but black threatens to take on e5, can mobilise the a8 rook to b8 and even swing the f7 rook over to b7 depending on how the game evolves on the

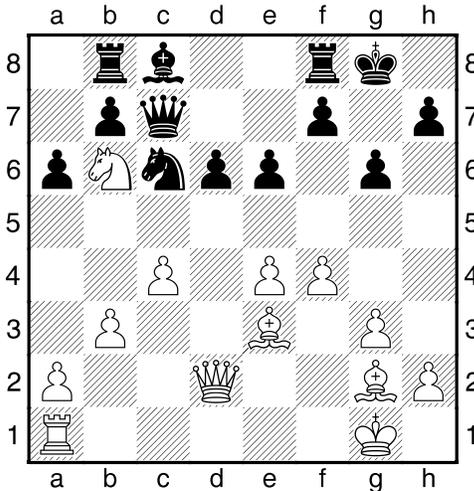
kingside. The white bishop on g2 appears more actively placed, but in reality, it is also restricted by the strong black pawn centre. The position is very unclear and quite possibly easier to play for black as it is white that has to find a good plan while black can carry on improving the placement of his pieces.

9...Nge7 10.Qd2

10.Nxc6! promises white a big edge.

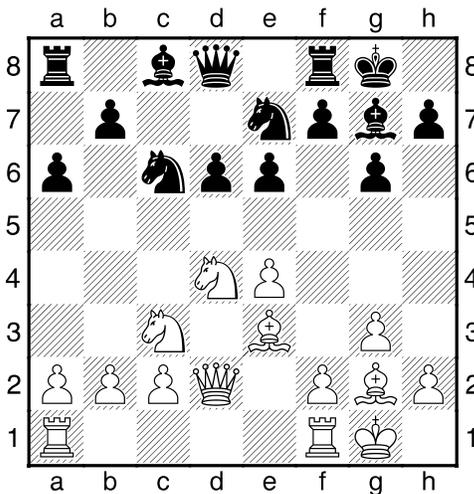


Here, the computer engine Stockfish recommends Nxc6 as leading to an advantage for white, although one wonders how many humans would feel comfortable following the computer's recommendation to continue by sacrificing an exchange in a bid to crack black's defensive set-up. 10...Nxc6 11.Qd2 0-0 12.f4 (Not 12.Rad1? after which black can turn the tables on white after 12...Ne5 13.Qxd6 Qxd6 14.Rxd6 Nc4 when white cannot avoid losing material as both the knight on c3 and the white rook will be attacked after 15.Rd3 Nxb2!) 12...Na5 13.b3 Qc7 14.Na4 Bxa1 15.Rxa1 Nc6 16.Nb6 Rb8 17.c4!

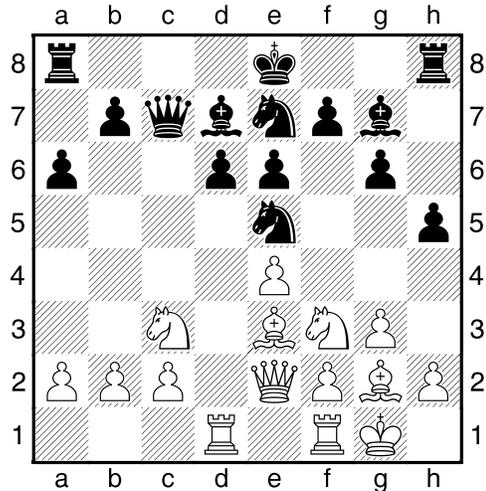


White has an impressive positional clamp on the centre and black will have to endure a difficult defence. Now back to the main game and the position after...

10...0-0



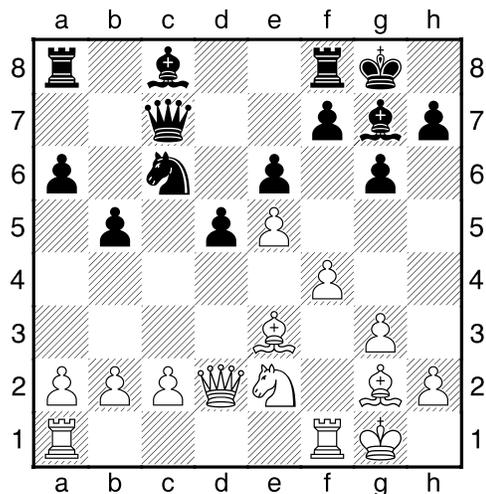
Here, I should have taken my chance to avoid white exchanging knights and perched my knight on e5 after which the white queen must move again and black's position is suddenly looking much improved. 10...Ne5! 11.Qe2 h5! ensuring the black knight can go to g4 if white plays f4. 12.Rad1 Bd7 13.Nf3 Qc7



Black stands very well in spite of the odd-looking pawn structure!

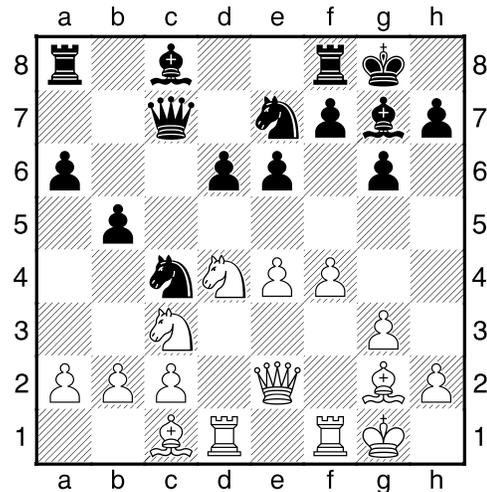
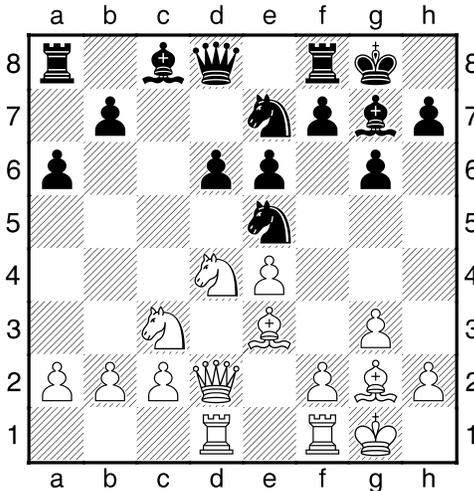
11.Rad1

Last chance to play 11.Nxc6! after which the game takes on the appearance of the classical variation of the French Defence if white plays e5 and black closed the centre with d5. The game might continue 11...Nxc6 12.f4 b5 13.e5 d5 14.Ne2 Qc7 after which white has a space advantage but black's set-up is extremely solid.



There is an interesting fight is to come.

11...Ne5!



Finally taking my chance to generate some real counterplay. The knight eyes up c4 and g4 and hopes to throw a spanner in the works of whatever plan white comes up with.

12.Qe2

White responds with the standard queen shuffle. Now that the white rook is on d1, if required, the bishop on e3 can slip back to c1.

12...Qc7

Removing the queen from the d-file and preparing to support a knight on c4.

13.f4 Nc4 14.Bc1 b5?!

A natural thematic response, supporting the knight on c4, preparing Bb7 and even threatening b4 after which white's knight on c3 would need to relocate to an inferior square.

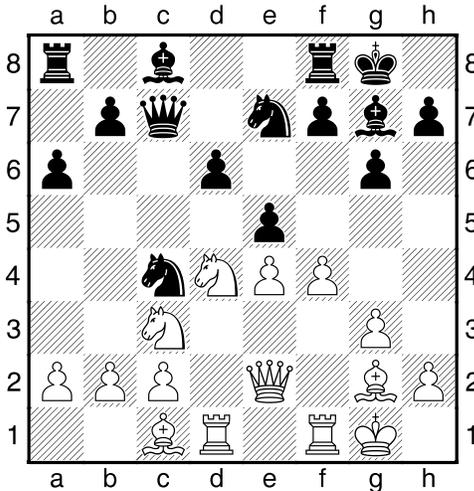
Remarkably, 14...b5 is somewhat inaccurate, however. There was a much stronger move which would have led to a double-edged position where black can fight for a significant advantage.

Calculating all the variations accurately after 14...e5 was well beyond my capabilities back in 1991, which is not to say I would fare better today.

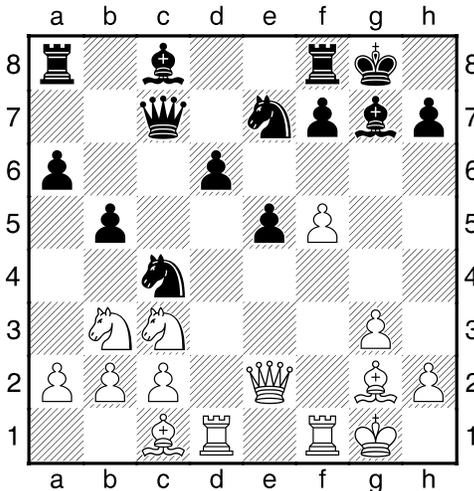
That being said, when it comes to building and maintaining confidence in your powers of calculation, it's no harm, sometimes, to be magnanimous with yourself, so I'm prepared to give myself the benefit of the doubt 😊 Sometimes, all you need to get over the line in chess is the belief that you can and will find the correct lines. The more you play an opening or a specific type of position the more fine-tuned your intuition becomes in nudging you towards choosing the best lines.

Back in 1991 I hadn't enough experience with the Sicilian to draw down on. I hadn't played or analysed enough games in the line. Hence, 14...b5 materialised on the board and I missed my best chance to cause genuine problems for the former world champion.

I should have opted for 14...e5! taking the opportunity to kick the well-placed d4 knight away from the centre.

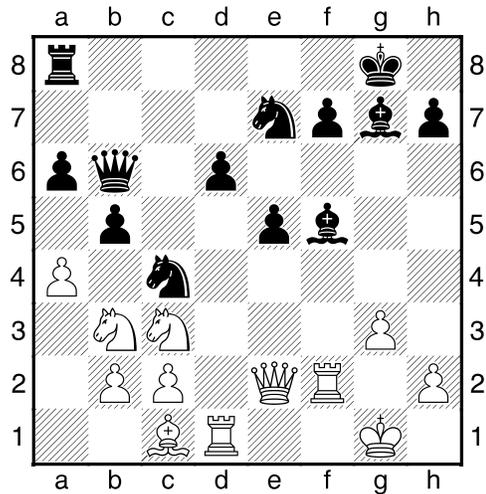


The reason I declined to play 14...e5 was because I was worried about the position after 15.Nb3 b5 16.f5! when black has no choice but to take on 16...gxf5. Then after 17.exf5 White is simultaneously threatening to play f6 forking the knight and bishop as well as threatening to take the black rook on a8.



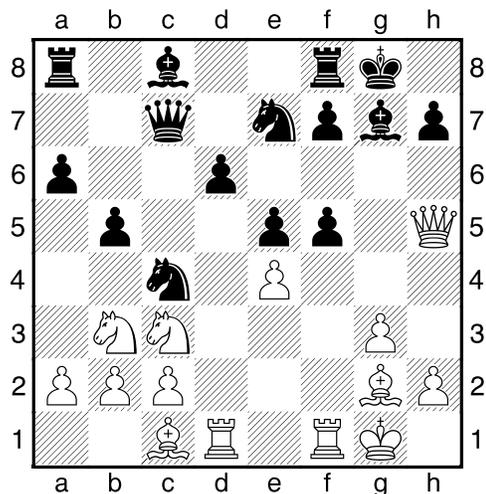
I had visualised this position but was uncertain how to evaluate my chances after 17...Bxf5 18. Bxa8 when white grabs the exchange. As it happens, black does not need to take the bishop on a8 immediately but can first

seize control of the g1-a7 diagonal by Qa7+. Then after 19.Rf2 Rxa8 20.a4 Qb6! Black stands very well.



On paper white has a slight material advantage, but in reality, the position is far easier to play as black. White will struggle to prevent black's d-pawn from advancing to d5 and now that he no longer has a light-squared bishop, white will find it difficult to find a safe haven for his king.

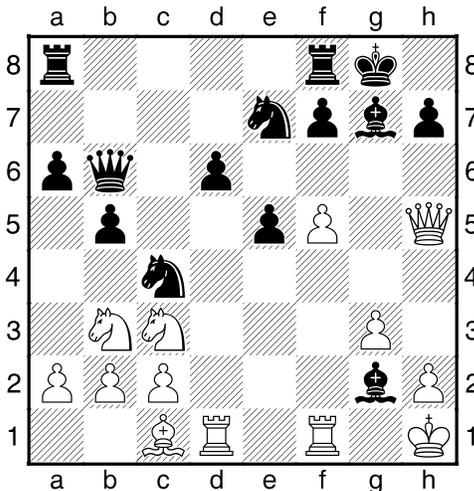
The other variation that occupied my precious thinking time as Spassky made his way around the room was 14...e5 15. Nb3 b5 16. f5 gxf5 17. Qh5! Seizing the opportunity to bring white's queen to a dangerous attacking outpost



Black dare not take on e4 as either the white bishop on g2 or knight on c3 can take back on e4 with all sorts of dangerous attacking opportunities against the black king. So what is black to do?

Once again, as in the variation analysed above, I had missed how useful taking control of the g1-a7 diagonal with my queen would be. I underestimated how disruptive 17...Qb6+ would be as it forces the white king into the corner and ensures that black will be able force the light-squared bishops off with check in a few moves.

The game would most likely continue 18.Kh1 Bb7 19.exf5 Bxg2+!

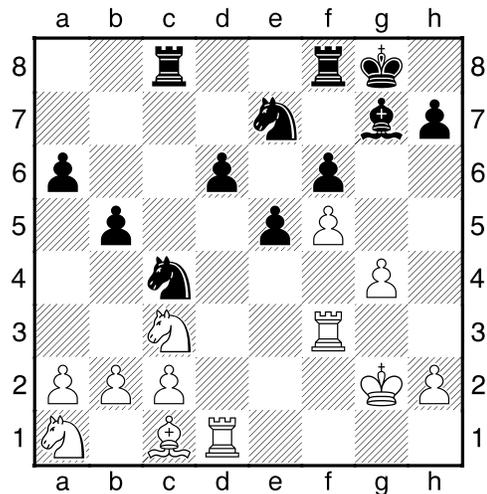


Black exchanges bishops and only then addresses white's advancing f-pawn. 20.Kxg2 Qc6+! The queen check is an important *zwischen-zug*. The black queen now switches its attention to the important and recently unoccupied h1-a8 diagonal. Now if the white king simply retreats, the white knight is denied access to the vital e4 square by the black queen which will reign supreme on the long diagonal, after which, a subsequent d5 will be hard to stop.

White's best here is to retreat the queen to block the check and to offer an exchange of queens. This would be a major concession, however, as white would effectively be abandoning any hope of generating an attack against the black king. It is white's best, however. In these kinds of positions, once it is clear that there is no hope of breaking through on the

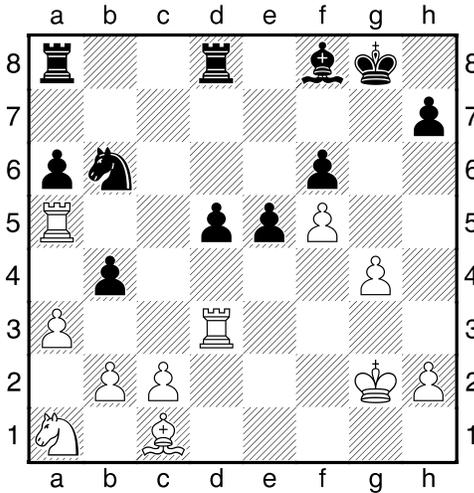
kingside, white focus must shift to restraining or delaying black's attempts to achieve d5 for as long as possible.

After 21.Qf3 Qxf3+ 22.Rxf3 f6 23.g4 (Necessary to prevent black from playing h5 after which the white rook on f3 would be tied down to the defence of the f5 pawn) 23...Rac8 Black Activates the rook and puts x-ray pressure on the c2 pawn – the Achilles heel of white queenside. Remarkably, white's best here would be the awkward retreat... 24.Na1! which holds the white queenside together and is by no means as silly as it looks.



Then, were I to play most accurately, the game might continue Rfd8 25.Rfd3 b4! 26.Nd5 Nxd5 27.Rxd5 Bf8 after which white is powerless to stop Nb6 followed by d5. Black would get a nice edge after 28.R1d3 Nb6 29.Ra5 Ra8 30.a3 d5! (See the diagram on the following page)

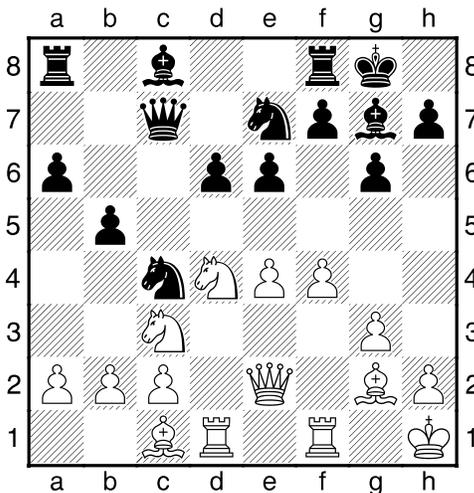
Obviously, here we are a long way from the game, and there were many other forks in the path leading to the above position. When analysing one's games, you have to consider the best moves for both sides and presume that both players will find them. Although, it can be helpful to consider potential mis-steps and enticing traps, whether they be attractive but ultimately unwise tactics or positional cul-de-sacs.



So 14...e5! was good for black after all. At the time, I wasn't an experienced enough Sicilian player to trust my intuition which told me it should be all-right, so I punted for b5. A few moves later, I would realise I had missed my best chance. I have digressed somewhat from the actual game so let's return to what actually happened after Spassky played...

15.Kh1

A useful prophylactic move. The white king sidesteps potential checks on the a7-g1 diagonal.



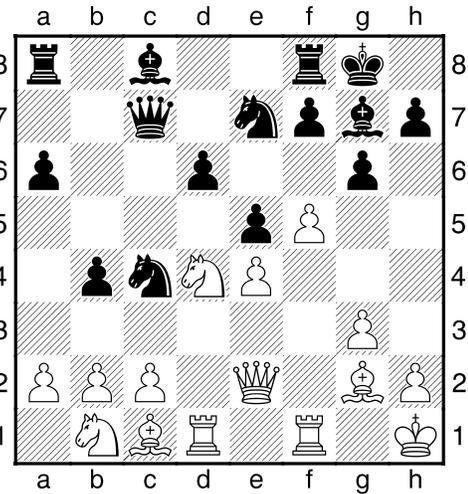
15...b4!

Chasing the knight away to prepare for a push in the centre.

16.Nb1 e5

I was extremely happy as I played e5 as it felt as though white would now have to go into full retreat. Spassky had other ideas, however, and was extremely quick to play f5 which I had completely overlooked.

17.f5!



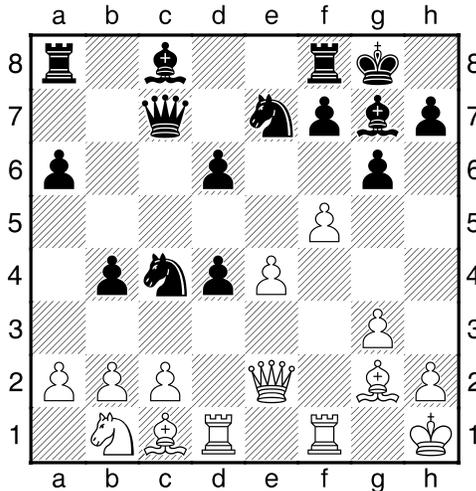
I felt that my position had improved significantly over the previous moves and was optimistic that a tangible advantage was in the offing. This 'happy feeling' led me to let my guard down and when Spassky whipped out f5, I was considerably deflated. I should have seen it coming.

It is very easy to lose objectivity when your opponent surprises you with a move you should have seen. Still more so, when your opponent is moving swiftly round a room and you have only a few minutes till he arrives at your board and you have to respond.

17...f6?

Almost three decades of hindsight later, I can readily understand why my fifteen-year-old-self

chose 17...f6? instead of the far superior 17...exd4!

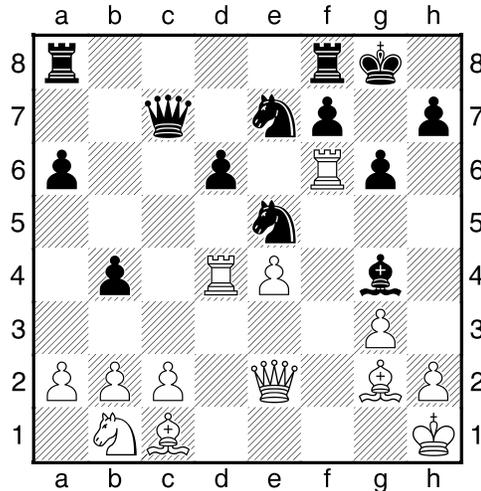


By taking the knight on d4, I would ruin my nice pawn centre and be saddled with weak doubled d-pawns. If engaging in this kind of structural self-sabotage against a former world champion appeared foolhardy, then I would have considered the idea of giving up my dark-squared bishop on g7 as pure lunacy.

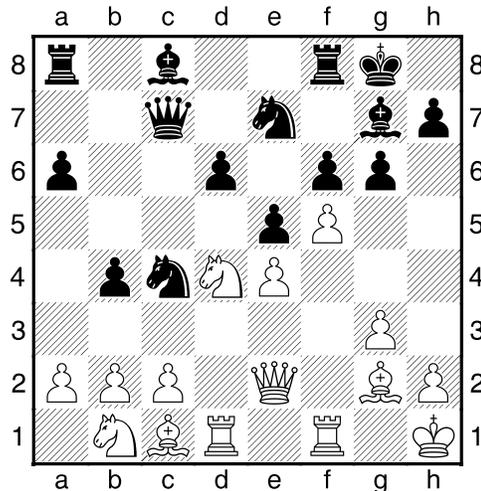
Even today, as an experienced international master, the ensuing positions look highly dubious on first sight, but scratch a little deeper beneath the surface and it becomes apparent that in spite of his control of the d and f files and the ability of the white bishop to go to h6, it is extremely difficult for white to generate any real chances against the black king. Black will plant a knight on e5 from where it will dominate the centre of the board and begin, gradually, to marshal the rest of the black troops to their optimum positions.

The thing was, I just didn't like the look of the position after 17...exd4 18.f6 Bxf6 19.Rxf6 Ne5 20.Rxd4 Bg4 I just couldn't believe that I wouldn't get steamrolled on the kingside, although I couldn't see how. It was a classic case of playing the man rather than the position. Now there is no question that the following position is hard to assess but once you enter into a specific opening set-up, you have to trust the structures

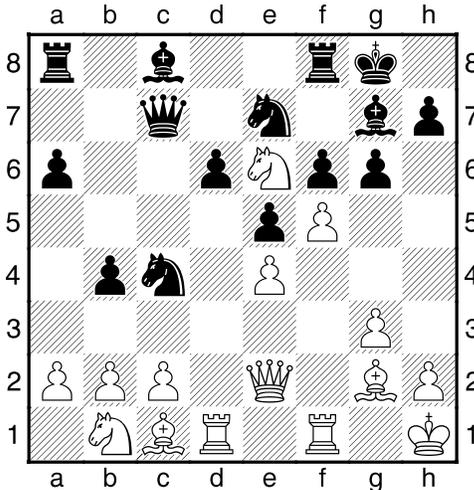
that opening gives rise to. Had I done so, I would have realised that my position wasn't so bad after 20...Bg4, although a tense, difficult battle would have lay ahead.



The aim of 17...f6? was to stop white's f-pawn in its tracks but in doing I allowed Spassky set another thematic attacking idea in motion. Take a moment to consider the position below. What would you play as white?



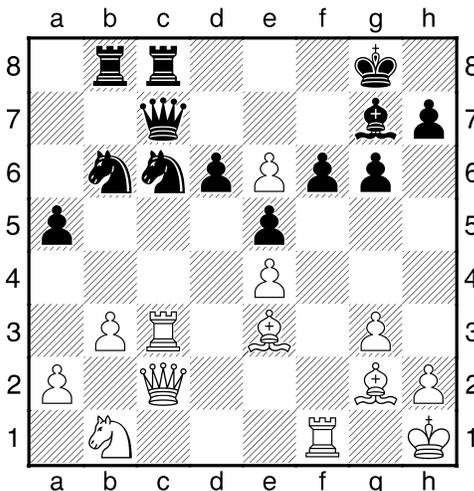
18.Ne6!



You can't allow a player of Spassky's class to play a knight to e6 and hope to survive the complications. That is of course, unless he is also playing fifteen other people! As the knight landed on e6, I hedged my bets and bit my lip. 'Head down and say nuthin' as the Dublin saying goes.

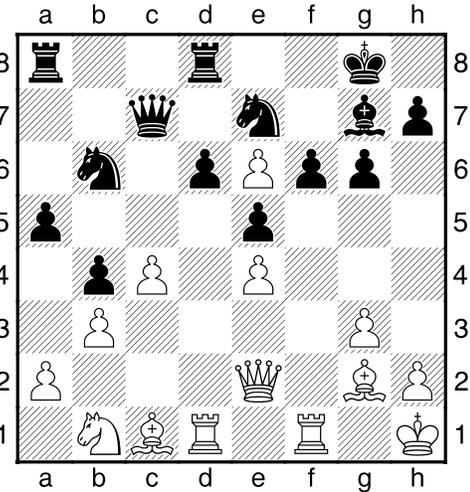
18...Bxe6 19. fxe6 a5 20.c3

Alternatively 20.b3! Nb6 21. Be3 Rab8 22.c4 bxc3 23.Qc2 Rfc8 24.Rd3 Nc6 25.Rxc3



when white is clearly better and black's chances of surviving into an endgame are beginning to look rather bleak.

20...Rfd8 21.b3 Nb6 22.c4!

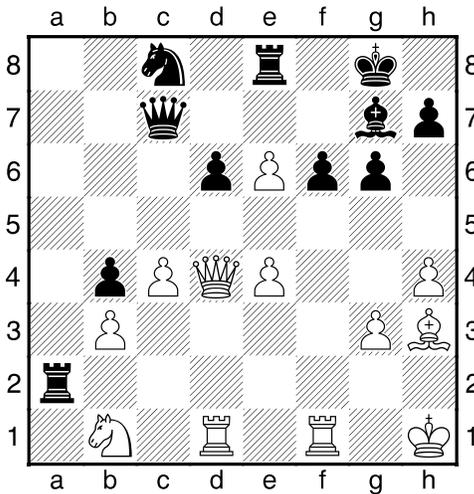


With this natural move, white clamps down the centre and I was under no illusions that my position was looking increasingly suspect. I figured my best bet was to reorganise my pieces and start circling around the isolated white pawn on e6.

22...Qc8?!

Harrying the pawn immediately, but a more annoying set-up for white to face would have been to begin by moving the rook from a8 to c8, preparing to fight for control of the c-file in the event of the position opening up after an exchange on d5. Then black should play Qc6 keeping an eye on the potentially weak e4 square. Finally, black must play Nb6-a8-c7 after which the pawn on e6 will be vulnerable. Black would still be in serious 'long-term' trouble but during the game I felt this was the best fighting chance. The computer engine Stockfish recommends a different approach based on generating queenside counterplay by Nc6 and a4 which leads to a very messy position which is definitely better for white but black is still very

much in the game. 22...Nc6 23.Be3 a4 24.h4
Re8 25.Qd3 Nd4 26.Bh3 Nc8 27.Bxd4 exd4
28.Qxd4 axb3 29.axb3 Ra2!

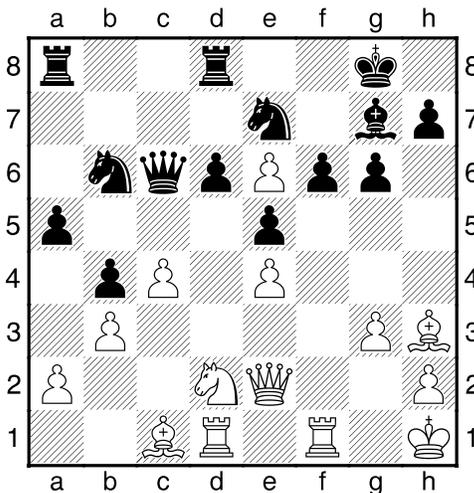


With just the kind of glorious mess I enjoy puzzling out to this day, which is why the Sicilian remains my favourite defence to 1. e4

23.Bh3 Qc6

By playing Qc8 to c6 I effectively lose a tempo which I can ill afford to spare.

24.Nd2!



Spassky spies a path for his knight to d5 via f3, h4, g2 and e3!

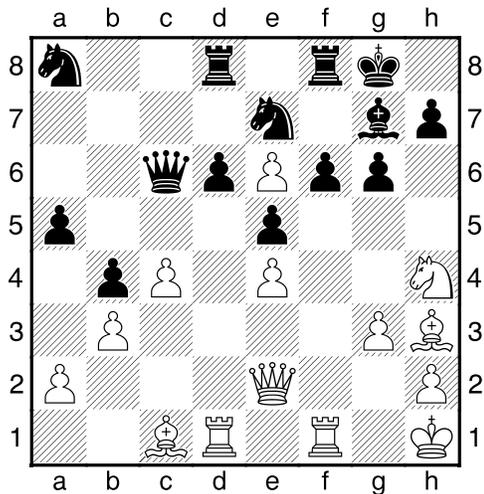
24...Rf8

All hands on deck. Time to move to maximum distraction mode. The black rook threatens to push f5 and also prepare for a possible, albeit highly risky, Bh6 in a bid to exchange the dark-squared bishops.

25.Nf3

Spassky continues his simple plan of re-routing the knight to d5. Conscious that I could, under no circumstances, let the knight reach its destination, I set about searching for tactical tricks to delay and distract and potentially discourage white from executing his plan.

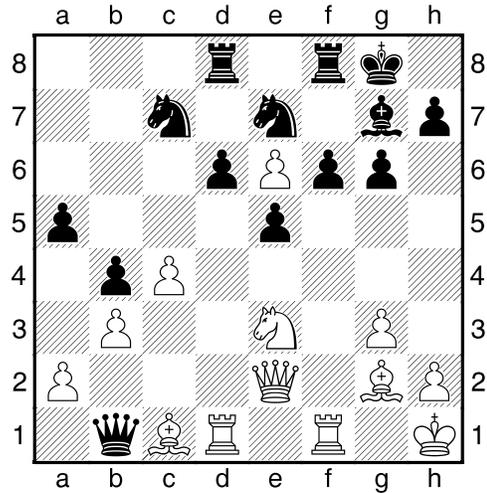
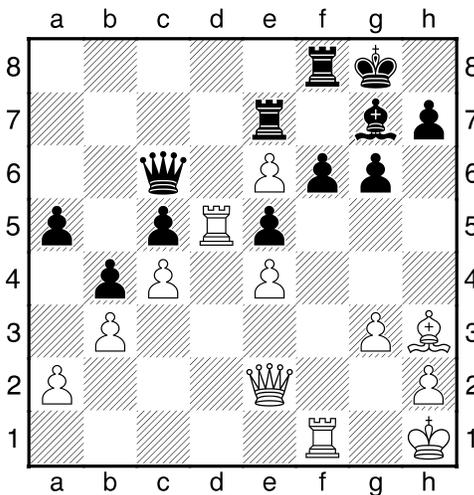
25...Rad8 26.Nh4 Na8



I retreated my knight to a8 and put on my best poker face. Spassky raised his hand as if he was going to make an immediate reply, then lowered it and sank into deep thought. Seconds ticked by, then minutes. I was puzzled. White is clearly better. What line could be troubling the former world champion?

Black is threatening Nc7 and then Na6 to c5 after which I would be eyeing up both of the e-pawns, while also preparing to try and generate

counterplay with a5-a4. I could see, however, that this defence could easily be dealt with by a timely Be3 exchanging the black knight as it arrives on c5, after which black is positionally bust and has no counterplay whatsoever. The relevant line is 28...Na6 29 Nd5 Rde8 30. Be3 Nc5 31. Bxc5 dxc5 32. Nxe7+ Rxe7 33. Rd5 winning a crushing position for white.



There is no immediate way to take advantage of the strange placement of the black queen deep behind enemy lines. White would love to play Bd2 but then the black queen takes the a2 pawn. If white doesn't come up with a concrete plan, black will play g5 creating an escape square for the queen on g6. White can't allow this and must force the issue...

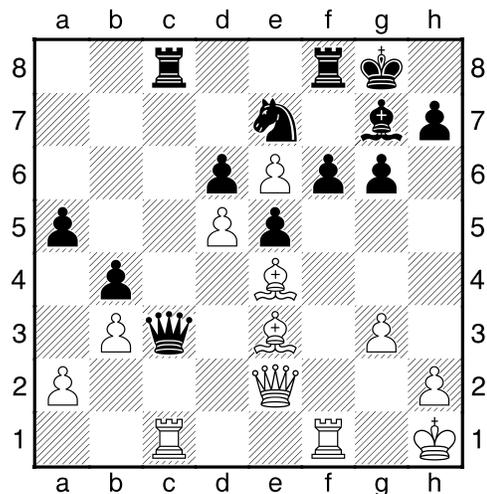
I mused that Spassky had to be analysing the queen sac line that was my last line of defence. For the white knight to complete its journey to d5 Spassky would have to sacrifice the e4 pawn which my queen would take with check. Spassky would retreat the bishop to g2 to block the check leaving the black queen with only one safe square deep behind enemy lines on b1! The critical line in question was...

27.Ng2 Nc7 28.Ne3 Qxe4+ 29.Bg2

after which Black has only one move, the highly provocative and slightly mind-bending albeit ultimately futile...

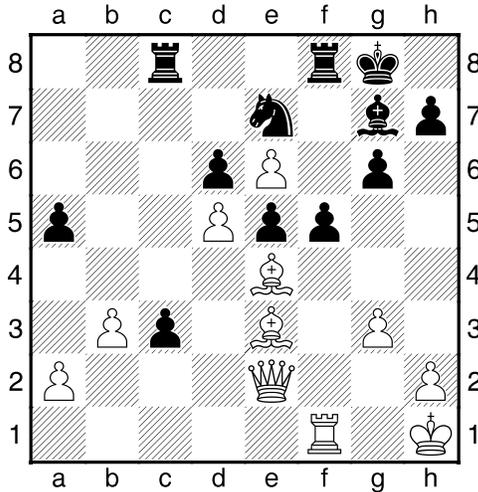
29...Qb1!

30.Nd5 Ncxd5 31.cxd5 Rc8 32.Be4 Qa1 33.Be3 Qc3 34.Rc1!



After which the black queen would be trapped and black must play his last card...

34...f5! 35.Rxc3 bxc3

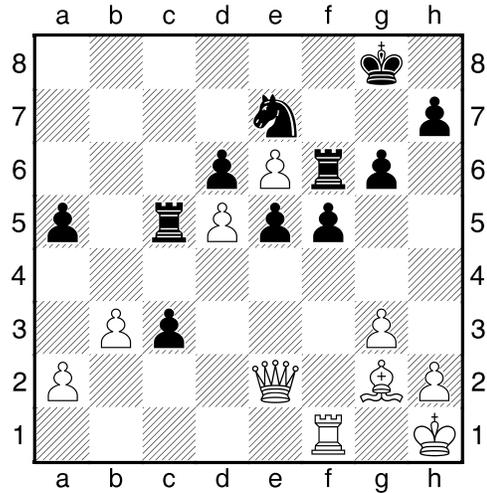


I had got to this point in my analysis when I decided to play Na8 and reckoned that f5 might give me some counterplay for the sacrificed queen as after a subsequent e4 the bishop on g7 would protect the black pawn on c3. If I could somehow manage to take the weak d5 pawn with my knight, I could hope to make life tricky for Spassky in the ensuing endgame if the central pawns started rolling. As it happens, the simple but effective idea...

36.Bg5!

...would have shattered any delusions I might have had of keeping my powerful dragon bishop on g7. I can't know for sure, but I suspect Spassky might have missed Bg5 while analysing the position ten moves back, a very easy thing to do, when you only have one opponent let alone a baker's dozen.

36...Bf6 37.Bxf6 Rxf6 38.Bg2 Rc5



The best bluff. Optically, it might seem that black has some chances here of making life difficult for white. Black is threatening to promote his c3 pawn by c2 and c1. After black plays e4 the pawn on d5 might fall, then perhaps the pawn on e6. This possibility is immediately scuppered if you put this position into a computer engine as a winning plan for white is easily mapped out. Leaving our efficacious silicon friends to one side for a moment, let's go back to the game where I had just played **26...Na8**. You may remember Spassky had immediately raised his hand as if to play Ng2.

I had no doubts Spassky was quietly calculating a line leading to my imminent demise. Then, something quite remarkable happened, Spassky looked up from the position, smiled and offered me a draw.

I was completely taken aback. For a brief moment, I wondered should I decline the offer. What was I not seeing? Surely, Spassky wouldn't have offered me a draw unless he thought he was worse. I could sense that Spassky was surprised, possibly even amused, at my hesitation to accept the draw. I quickly scanned my position one last time. Even then at the tender age of fifteen, I was already suffering from the incurable optimism that is an essential trait of all chess players. Still, not even I could find a justification for continuing. My position felt, *and was*, way too dodgy. Luckily for

Sicilian Move-Order Magic:
Boris Spassky vs Mark Quinn, Dublin Simultaneous
March 1991

www.chessbud.ie mark@chessbud.ie

me, I quit while I was ahead and extended my hand accepting Spassky's offer.

Spassky smiled once again, gave me a brief nod of recognition, then turned abruptly on his heels and continued on to his next opponent. Whether Spassky offered me a draw so as he could concentrate on the remaining games or because he felt I had created enough problems for him on the board, I will never know. Were we playing one-to-one, there is no question he would have played on and most likely won.

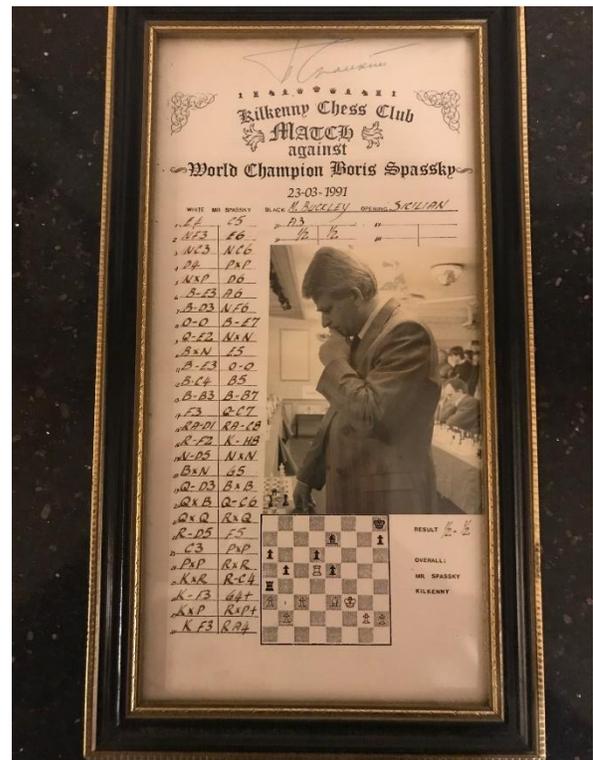
Chess simuls create curious dynamics, however, and following the adage that young players tend to be lucky, Spassky clearly decided that playing on against me might be more trouble than it was worth and cost him a half point or two elsewhere. Then again, perhaps, he could see how much a draw against him would mean to the dedicated chess obsessive sitting in front of him. Of the twenty-seven games played that evening, Spassky won twenty-five, drew two and lost none.

I learnt much from my game with Spassky that night and not just about tricky Sicilian move-orders. Spassky's charisma, his generous and easy manner was a pleasure to behold. As I went home that night, I was left in no doubt that in addition to being a brilliant tactician, ruthless strategist and canny endgame expert, a truly great champion knows his or her own worth. That's why they can carry themselves so lightly.

Spassky played one more simul in Dublin in Trinity College before heading to Kilkenny where he and Kilkenny Chess Club got on so famously, that Spassky accepted an invitation to become Honorary President of Kilkenny Chess Club, a title he still holds to this day.

When I was writing this piece, I got in touch with Maurice Buckley, Captain of Kilkenny Chess Club, to see if he had any photographs of the simultaneous Spassky gave against Kilkenny Chess Club. I have been playing for Kilkenny Chess Club since 2002 and am proud to call the city my home these two years past. Maurice sent me a photo not just of Spassky playing the simul in the ballroom of the Club House Hotel, the spiritual home of Kilkenny Chess, but also of the scoresheet of his own game against Spassky. Ironically, Maurice had ended up in precisely the kind of Sicilian Scheveningen I had been aiming

for after Spassky, once again, finessed the move order, this time with 2. Nc3 and then 3 Nf3. The Sicilian defence once again proved to be the right choice on the night as Maurice also achieved a memorable draw. Suffice to say, we had both played out of our skin and been rewarded by Caissa, the goddess of chess, for our efforts.



Spassky ponders a move during his simultaneous against Kilkenny Chess Club in the Club House Hotel in Kilkenny. The final position of the game Spassky- Buckley shown in the diagram above, was a far more clear-cut affair than my own game.

Just one year after Spassky visited Ireland, Bobby Fischer finally came out of retirement and agreed to play a return 'Match of the Twentieth Century' in Yugoslavia against his old foe and friend. It's hard to describe the sheer excitement chess players all over the world felt in anticipation of the rematch against Spassky. It was like all my dreams were coming true. Now

back from the wilderness, Fischer would pick up where he left off when he disappeared in 1972.

The return of the chess world's most famous prodigal son would not be straightforward, however. The Balkans were at war and the match in Sveti-Stevan and Belgrade was in direct contravention of American-backed UN Sanctions against Yugoslavia. Fischer was warned that there would be legal repercussions if he played the match, but nonetheless he proceeded undeterred. In spite of being understandably rusty, Fischer comfortably beat Spassky, thereby demonstrating that he was still a force to be reckoned with after two decades away from the game.

The personal price Fischer paid for breaking the sanctions would be considerable, however, not least on his mental health. One could argue that the extent of Fischer's psychological problems were already apparent during the first press conference with Spassky when Fischer spat on an order from the US authorities warning him not to play the match.

As someone who had idolised Fischer from an early age, I found the level of anger he exhibited against the world after his return in 1992 extremely unsettling. If only he could just focus on playing chess, I thought, everything would work out just fine, but Fischer would never play another match or tournament again.

Fischer's difficult and tragic life in the years leading up to his death in 2008 is well-documented. Now, thinking back to my brief and hugely positive encounter with Spassky in 1991, it seems such a shame that Fischer could not have been more like the man he beat to become world champion, that he wasn't able to continue his chess journey to its natural end as Spassky has. A happy outcome wasn't in Bobby's cards, however. Even the strongest minds can break. If you have to have heroes, maybe it's best to remember them when their star shone most brightly, then let them go.

For anyone interested in reading more about the background to Spassky's historic visit to Ireland, the late John Bradley wrote an entertaining piece on how Jack Lowry came up with the idea of inviting Spassky to Kilkenny and how the Kilkenny Chess Club members mobilised to turn that dream into a reality. The article gives a wonderful insight not just into Spassky the man but it also gives a sense of the playful and jovial atmosphere that was, and remains, the essence of Kilkenny Chess Club, something which makes the club's annual tournament each November one of the most popular weekend tournaments for professional and amateur players alike.

See <https://www.icu.ie/articles/434>