

Capablanca Interviewed in 1939

Edward Winter

Below is our translation of an interview with Capablanca published in the Buenos Aires magazine *El Gráfico*, 1939 and reprinted on pages 103-107 of *Homenaje a Capablanca* (Havana, 1943):

'Amongst the new talents there are two who stand out more as great masters than the others: Botvinnik and, on a secondary level, Keres. Also Alekhine, of course; but he is not new; he is old like me. Keres plays admirably well; his sense of fantasy is enormous, his imagination fiery. But his judgment is unsteady. He does not always know if the game in front of him is won, lost or drawn; and when it is won it also sometimes happens that he does not know for sure why and how it is won. Then, understandably, he hesitates and selects his plans more through temperament than through a judgment which has not managed to form. [*Entonces,*

explicablemente, vacila y escoge sus planes más que por un juicio que no ha llegado a formarse, por temperamento.

] However, it is a defect to substitute, at certain points in a game, judgment with instinctive impulses which rise up from temperament – aggressive impulses in the case of Keres, defensive ones in other players. In the highly instructive game we played in the Team Tournament which finished in this beautiful city a month ago, I offered him a draw because there was no way at all that it could be won, either by him or by me. Keres did not accept my offer then, and only did so six moves later. How was it that, six moves before, he had not seen with the same clarity as I that it was impossible to force the game? It cannot be believed that Keres would attempt to win against me in an absolutely drawn position, so the only explanation is that his reasoning had not yet crystallized into concrete judgment; to use the same word as before, he was hesitating. ... Against Eliskases, also in that tournament, Keres had to choose between accepting a draw in a perfectly balanced rook ending and trying to force matters with a peculiar king excursion. He picked the latter and lost. Why? Because in circumstances where visual foresight is not sufficient, where accurate judgment is necessary, Keres is still not fully developed.

Old Lasker, however, was astonishing in the sureness of his judgment. When a position was submitted to him, he examined it for a while and then, rapidly, without wasting time analyzing, he would state, "White is better" or "Black is better" or "It is a draw", and he was not mistaken.

It is difficult to judge oneself. Nonetheless, the general opinion of masters is that the precision and speed of my chess judgment were superior to Lasker's. In chess one can lose with age the strength and fullness of one's vision, sureness in the order of one's moves, resistance to fatigue, etc., but one never loses one's judgment, and I imagine I still possess

it Precise positional judgment, the overall vision of every maneuver in the interdependence of its cogwheels, is what characterizes a great master. It is not a question of a great master seeing any number of isolated moves or of his knowing how to construct a mate; all that is to be taken for granted. What counts is that he should have ideas, and that these ideas should be accurate. That when he is shown any position he should not beat about the bush but should say without hesitation: "This is won, and the win is secured by maneuvering on this or that wing, like this." I recall that during the Moscow, 1925 tournament – Tartakower often refers to this – various famous chessplayers had been studying a particular position for three hours, without being able to reach a conclusion. I was passing by at that moment and they asked me my opinion. I was not in doubt for a single second, and I told them: "This is won; and it is won like this, and this." And I was not mistaken.

This knowledge of what has to be done, this "professional skill", is what, with the exception of Botvinnik and, at a lower level, Keres, I fail to observe in the other young players, even though many of them shine on account of their memory, fantasy, will to win and other equally estimable abilities. When, for instance, I compare their games – some of which are very attractive – with those of old Lasker, the difference is immediately obvious. Lasker, apart from having a profound knowledge of chess, was a fighter. His first chess [sic] work was entitled [...] *Kampf* ("Fight"). He is a man of a thousand resources at the chessboard. I still have clearly in mind the impression made upon me by one of his games against his constantly outshone rival, Dr Tarrasch. Lasker never paid excessive attention to the theoretical studies of his compatriot Dr Tarrasch, firstly because he was a basically practical player and secondly because Lasker did not attribute to these studies more importance than they deserved. Nevertheless, on a particular occasion he slipped into an inferior position to which Tarrasch induced him and suddenly found himself at his rival's mercy. It was then that Lasker showed his fighting spirit. Instead of making the ordinary move which would have occurred to any other master, whereby he would sooner or later have lost or, with difficulty, drawn, Lasker sacrificed a pawn. But what a sacrifice! I have seen no such sacrifice in any modern games! It was impossible to know whether it should be accepted or refused. As the saying goes, "it shook the board". Here was the "eccentricity" of the old teacher of philosophy and mathematics of the University of Breslau who took his opponents by surprise. The result was that after a few moves it was Lasker, not Tarrasch, who had the better game. This game shows any chessplayer the extraordinary quality of play, which he possesses even today as a glorious septuagenarian, of Dr Emanuel Lasker, world champion for 25 [sic] years.

[Interviewer
question: But master:
if you took Dr Lasker
world championship
title when the great
Berlin master was in
the plenitude of his
powers, and if modern
players, in your
opinion, are clearly
inferior to Lasker, how
do you explain the fact
that some of them have
finished above you in
many international

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tournaments? How do you explain your seventh place at the AVRO tournament in Holland?]

In the AVRO tournament I played under physical conditions that were absolutely abnormal. Although I am not up to date with chess literature, I played the openings well in all my games for the simple reason that I have judgment. But after the first three hours of play, I felt my head was splitting. It was impossible for me to think and coordinate ideas. Against Fine I had two won games; against Alekhine I should have won one game; and another one against Keres, thanks to an advantageous position which I built up conscientiously. But at the moment of transforming my advantage into victory, I found that my brain was not functioning and I then continued playing not with my head but with my hands. Despite the bitter cold of Holland in November, I immersed my congested head in icy water to try to clear it, although without any result ... I thus participated in the AVRO tournament playing like an automaton after the third hour, and it is therefore understandable how frequently I failed to win.

If this intellectual powerlessness had stemmed from a cerebral defect, I would have withdrawn from the chessboard. Capablanca would have bidden farewell to the game of which he was champion, and whose crown he aspires to regain. But my brain, fortunately, was still working well. My mental deficiencies were due to very high blood pressure and related circulatory disorders which did not tarnish the clarity of my judgment. It is curious that I began to notice these disorders in 1936, the year in which my performances were superior to those of the other masters. In that year I won the Moscow tournament ahead of Botvinnik, Flohr, Ragozin, Lasker, etc. and a month later I shared first prize at Nottingham with Botvinnik, above Euwe, Reshevsky, Fine, Alekhine, Flohr, Lasker. ... And yet, despite these successes, I felt weak. At the adjournment of my last game at Nottingham, against Bogoljubow, which I needed to win to pull away from Botvinnik and take first prize alone, I analyzed the position for a while and concluded that, unless my opponent had sealed a particular move, in which case the game would be drawn, I should win. When battle recommenced, Bogoljubow's envelope was opened. He had not sealed the correct move, the only one to draw. However, I then forgot all the analysis I had undertaken moments before, absolutely all of it, as if a sponge had soaked up my ideas; convinced – and I still don't know why – that the game was drawn in any case, I maneuvered listlessly for a draw in a won position.

The first doctors I consulted about these lapses that suddenly occurred in my brain were not correct, but now others have managed to determine the cause: blood pressure. They have put me on a diet of milk, fruit and vegetables which has brought about a moderate decrease in my blood pressure; I say "moderate" because such blood pressure cannot be reduced suddenly, or the remedy would be worse than the disease.

Now, with lower blood pressure, I feel physically much better. I am not the Capablanca of 1918 when, at the age of 30, my conception was even more lucid and effective than the Capablanca of 1921, who won the world championship. But now my brain is functioning with very acceptable regularity. Armed with this relative regularity and my customary correct chess judgment, I feel capable of doing battle with young players, who still have not attained the perfection in reasoning which characterizes Lasker and me, and of defeating them. Proof of this may be found in my performance in the final round of the International Team Tournament where, irrespective of names, I played better than anybody else. I was not lost

in any games and although there were some in which I did not force matters because no personal interest justified a great effort, I also won others in very unobtrusive style.'

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