

Capablanca on Moscow, 1925

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Capablanca wrote an account of the Moscow, 1925 tournament, together with his proposals for a new form of chess, in the *Revista Bimestre Cubana* of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, Volume XXI, Number 2, March-April 1926. Below is our translation:

'The 1925 Moscow International Tournament – Modifying Chess for Battles between Top Masters by J.R. Capablanca

The vicissitudes of the recent major international chess tournament held in Moscow have given rise to endless comment. Before the start, it was assumed that the battle for first place would be between Dr Lasker and me. However, the scene changed very quickly. It is true that Dr Lasker began very well, but the old masters Bogoljubow, Rubinstein and Marshall were not to be left behind. Moreover, young Torre, a new and little-known player, gathered such momentum that he notched up a whole series of points and, with the competition well advanced, there was no shortage of people thinking that the gifted Mexican player would cause a great surprise by taking first place. While all this was happening, I, the "world champion", was faring very badly, and for the first time in my life I was virtually at the tail-end of the list, so far from the top places that no longer did anybody take me into consideration for one of these positions.

Although rather philosophical, very observant and completely dispassionate in my judgment about everything concerning chess and its great exponents, I was nonetheless unable to understand the curious phenomenon that was occurring. I could comprehend perfectly well that my own work was not at all effective, but I could not see anything outstanding in that of the other players. All of those whom I have mentioned were doing fairly well, especially Dr Lasker, but Dr Tartakower who, up until then, had been playing with greater precision than anybody else, was not obtaining such good practical results as the others. For my own part, I did not understand why it should be impossible for me to concentrate my faculties for four hours at a time.

Then there was a sudden change. The different factors arising in these battles began to produce various effects according to circumstances. The tension caused by struggles of this kind took as its first victim Rubinstein. He began losing one day after another, and was soon left behind. Marshall and Torre had their setbacks. Then suddenly it seemed that Lasker too could not stand the pace. Only Bogoljubow was still, as it were, on his feet. As to myself, with the practice of the first rounds and motivated by a couple of defeats at the hands of inferior players, I at last succeeded in entering into the spirit of the battle, and, by means of a great effort, in concentrating my faculties rather better for the subsequent effort required; and thus day after day I not only improved my tournament position but was even finally attaining my maximum strength. The description above explains the final order in the contest. Bogoljubow, despite his loss to me, held such an advantage that he remained in first place by a wide margin. Lasker, with his great experience, was able to ride out the storm

and take second prize by half a point. By winning seven and drawing two in my last nine games, I reached third place. With the aid of his experience, Marshall held on sufficiently well to end in fourth position. Torre, who was first only for one day, shared fifth and sixth places with Tartakower. The latter reacted admirably during the final three rounds of the contest.

The above shows the vicissitudes of Moscow, and even though it is true that similar things have happened before, there can be no doubt that the ups and downs were such that it must be agreed that there were special factors which had a great influence on such unusual happenings. The tournament was organized by the Soviet government department in charge of all matters related to chess, in accord with the directors of the Moscow Chess Club. The committee responsible for directing and organizing the tournament was composed of young members who, although enthusiastic and eager to do this well, were lacking in experience. The result was deficient organization as regards the needs of players for showing all that they were capable of producing, however much the committee did to rectify defects once these were pointed out by one of the foreign masters. But it is clear that things should have been foreseen, since almost invariably when the remedy had the desired effect the harm had already been done, and in some cases it was not possible to apply the remedy. I imagine that some of the other masters left Moscow thinking the same as I did; that is, they were very grateful for being well received and well treated, but at the same time were very grieved not to have been able to show their true powers.

Chess in the USSR enjoys official support. The Government considers it a superior means of educating the mass of the people. Chess thus has an enormous public there, and it is easy to imagine the interest and enthusiasm with which the tournament was followed. Newspapers and magazines published articles on the competition and printed everything said by the masters which could be considered of general interest. Naturally, I, as world champion, was besieged by journalists and even by some chess masters who were writing for newspapers and magazines. I spoke with Dr Tartakower, a great master and also a friend of mine, and he published, in very condensed form, my ideas on certain reforms that I believed it would be appropriate to make in chess. I told him that previously in various newspapers and magazines things had been attributed to me which I had never said, and this seemed to me a good opportunity to clarify the facts and to expound the only modifications that I really considered appropriate, while at the same time clarifying that it was untrue that I had ever declared that chess had reached its limit and that to draw was easy. It is of course easy to understand how much has been written and said on this matter. In reality, what I have heard and read on it demonstrates that I have not been understood. Today chess has a great literature. There are thousands of volumes written on chess as it is played today. No player to date has managed to remain undefeated for an indeterminate period of time. I succeeded in going eight years, through four [*sic*] tournaments and two matches, without losing a single game, but finally Réti, at the New York Tournament of 1924, succeeded in scoring over me. Now in Moscow I have lost two games against players of lesser rank. The other contemporary players have not been able to achieve as much, so it seems that for now there need be no worry about the possibility of somebody being able to draw at will; but in reality, in my judgment, this is not so. On the contrary, there is cause for concern with regard to draws. It may be that we have not yet reached the point of being able to make draws at will, but if we have not arrived, we are not far away. In reality, I must ingenuously confess that under the proper conditions of training and health as, for example, at the end of the Moscow tournament, it was impossible for me to understand how I could be beaten in a game as long as I was confining myself to scoring a draw.

I am not saying this out of vanity since, in chess at least, I have never been vain. I say it out of conviction, admitting, of course, the possibility that I may be wrong. But let us accept that we have not yet reached that point, that is to say that there is absolutely nobody today who is capable of making a draw at will. Even so, we find that technique has advanced in such a way that today there are players of the second category amongst the masters who, by dint of their encyclopaedic knowledge, make themselves virtually invincible. And if this is the case now, and three-quarters of the process has occurred only in the past 20 years, what will happen within 50 years?

Consider the fact that the great masters of truly superior class, like Alekhine and Bogoljubow, young men, know every opening variation that has been frequently used by other masters; that Alekhine, for instance, who is only 33, knows every game played in any tournament or match in the past 25 years; that the similarity of the technical development of the majority of openings is such that even when one transposes the order of moves or plays something new or unknown, it is relatively easy to find the correct reply. Consider all this, even without taking into account other aspects more related to style, which would be difficult to explain and would make the present piece too long, and you will reach the conclusion that it is necessary to think very seriously about the question of draws if one does not wish to reach the point where there are several players who are completely invincible.

In reality, today there exists, as it were, a separate form of chess, which is understood only by the most select of the great masters, and which very often relies on a highly-developed technique which already today threatens to make talent equal to genius; that would make chess rather similar to what the game of draughts is today. Thus despite the old history of chess and the thousands of books written on chess played on a 64-square board, it is necessary to avoid what would undoubtedly be a disaster. In order to prevent, for a few centuries at least, technique from again becoming such a dominant factor, I have suggested increasing the field of operations. By making it larger, combinations would be greater and thus more difficult and interesting. The artistic side would have more scope, without the fundamental strategic principles being changed at all. To make only the changes that are necessary, I have suggested that instead of 64 squares there should be 100, i.e. a 10 x 10 board instead of 8 x 8. There would thus be two extra pawns and two more major pieces behind them. To complete the range of moves, one of the pieces would have the combined moves of the bishop and knight, and the other those of the rook and knight. One would be placed on the queen's side, the other on the king's side. Instead of having the option of moving one or two steps, pawns would be able to move one, two or three.

The remaining rules would stay the same.

It is not necessary to be a seer to conceive clearly what this new form of chess would be like. If today there are sometimes positions so complex that the master is hard put to solve them, what could not occur with a field of action almost double the present one and with powerful pieces which do not exist today?

What the *aficionado* generally appreciates most easily in a game of chess are the little, so-called brilliant, combinations. And I say "little" because when combinations are on a larger scale the *aficionado* generally does not understand them. As regards the great masters, they in general also lose their way in larger scale combinations. Today, with the present pieces and highly developed technique, larger scale combinations are extremely rare and there are few opportunities to carry them out. With the innovations outlined here, both the *aficionado*

and the master could frequently take delight in the kind of combinations within their respective reaches.

To avoid prolonging this exposé and also so as to give an indication of what could happen in practice, it may just be said that one of the new pieces, the one with the combined move of bishop and knight, could conquer the enemy king on its own, which is impossible at the moment.

There would be two classes of chess: one would be the present form. The other, a more advanced type, would be only for masters, but it could be understood by everyone familiar with the present game.'

To the Chess Notes [main page](#).

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