



COLUMNISTS

Past Pieces

Olimpiu G. Urcan



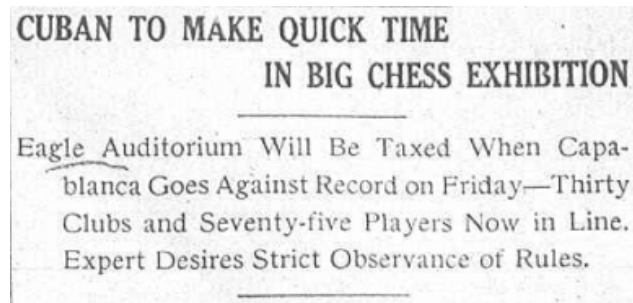
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Max Wolfson: Unwitting Pioneer

On Friday, February 12, 1915, Lincoln's Birthday, José Raúl Capablanca gave a record-breaking sixty-five board simultaneous exhibition in Brooklyn at The Eagle auditorium. The announcements for this event, sponsored and supported by all the major chess clubs on the American East Coast, initially attracted seventy-five players from thirty clubs and these numbers quickly grew. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of February 10, 1915 published a brief report sprinkled with quotes from an interview given by Capablanca:



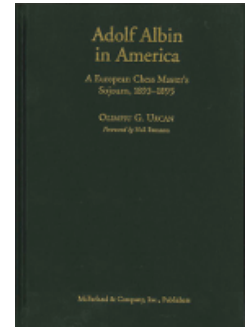
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[...] Capablanca was found by an Eagle reporter yesterday afternoon at the rooms of the Manhattan Chess Club, where he was indulging in a few games of "lightning" chess with some friends. He won them all, for his keen eye seemed to detect without effort the slightest weakness in the line of his opponent. Wherever a breach occurred, a few sledge hammer blows did the rest. Faultless accuracy invariably marked the conduct of his own development. In watching the phenomenal player and the manner in which his chess thoughts materialized into moves, slipped from his finger tips, one could at least get some faint notion how it will be possible for him, on Friday, to circle around the sixty-four boards, pick up the theme of each game with barely so much as a glance at the position, snap a piece into place, and then move on to his next opponent.

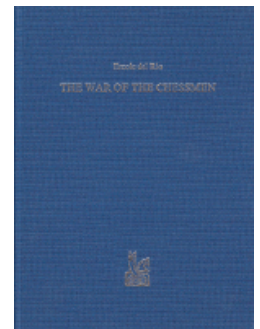
"Consultation?" said Capablanca when approached about the possible problem of accommodating more players than there will be boards, "why, I shall not mind. Let them do it by all means. 'Come one, come all.' say I; the more the merrier. While we are at it, we might as well do this thing up brown. But please have it understood that there must be no shifting of the positions. When I arrive at each board, the player must be ready with his move and make it promptly. This is no ordinary affair where we have all night in which to get through, and these things count. – While I am about it, I want to make a good record for time, too. This cannot be done, unless all my opponents observe the strict rules of simultaneous play.

"Another thing – at other times I have been want to pass a player by if he had a difficult position and was not ready with his move, but, obviously, this sort of things will be out of order on Friday. There will be no excuse for anybody's not being ready when he has all the time to think while I am visiting sixty-three other boards. Of course, when some of the players begin to drop out, it will be easier for me and my calls at the remaining boards will be more frequent. But the same rule I have mentioned must be observed all the way through, if we are to finish by supper time. I'm ready for the fray and hope there will be a record crowd."

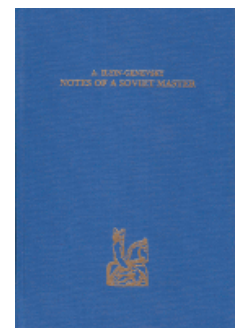
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Capablanca displayed keen interest when shown the special dispatch to The Eagle from Colorado Springs relating how Marshall had played there against fifty-one opponents on Thursday, with the loss of only one game. "I see they're taking notice out there," said the Cuban. "Maybe, my new record will not hold out for long. There's a lot of chess activity out West; in fact, interest in the game is spreading all over the country. It has been very plain to me since my return after an absence of over a year. Still, I think the sixty-four will hold them for a while. If not, perhaps I'll take another fling at it. I regard it as good sport." [...]

After seven hours, walking before 500 spectators to make a move at each of the sixty-five boards, Capablanca scored $+48 - 5 = 12$ against eighty-four opponents individually or in consultation. An extensive report published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of the next day opened with the following words:

It was exactly on the stroke of midnight, last night, when a little young form, showing no signs of fatigue and with the agility of a cat, swung upon the tall-end of a fast moving De Kalb avenue car, directly in front of The Eagle Building, and was off to his home in Manhattan, there to sleep the sleep of the just and the innocent that comes only to those youthful in years and without the serious responsibility of life which makes furrows in the brow of the harried toiler in the great bee hive of New York. It was José R. Capablanca, chess champion of Cuba, homeward bound after one of the most strenuous days of all his brilliant career, seven hours of which had been spent uninterruptedly in the auditorium on the second floor of the Eagle Building, playing against eighty-four players stationed at sixty-five boards. [...]



The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 13, 1915
[Click [here](#) to enlarge image]

The entire report, in the original newspaper copy, is available via the link provided above. It makes for a fascinating reading with all sorts of unique details and statistics of this "genuine chess picnic," as the March 1915 issue of the *American Chess Bulletin* coined it. One of the games that must have caused the Cuban some lost sleep was his loss to Max Wolfson, an adolescent player from Brooklyn Boys' High School who was stationed at board fifty-two. The game appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of February 13, 1915 and in the March 1915 issue of the *American Chess Bulletin* (Vol. 12, No. 2, page 46). It was also given by Edward Winter on pages 51-52 of his [Chess Facts and Fables](#) (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006). The score of the game was accompanied by small excerpts from a correspondence between Winter and Irving Chernev kept in 1975 in which the latter drew attention to this game "in which a high-school boy (whom I knew) won by some Nimzowitsch ideas which were new to the world – and possibly even to Nimzowitsch." Quite appropriately, the editor of the prodigious [Chess Notes](#) headlined the item as follows: "Anticipating Nimzowitsch?"

José Raúl Capablanca – Max Wolfson

Simultaneous Exhibition
Brooklyn, 12 February 1915
Queen's Fianchetto Defense [A50]

1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.Bd3 Bb4 6.Qe2 d6 7.f4 Qe7 8.Nf3 c5
9.d5



[FEN "r2k2r/pb2qppp/1p1ppn2/2pP4/1bP1PP2/
2NB1N2/PP2Q1PP/R1B1K2R b KQkq - 0 9"]

9...Bxc3+ 10.bxc3 Na6 11.e5! Nd7 12.dxe6 Qxe6 13.f5

13.Ng5!? Qe7 14.e6 fxe6 15.Nxe6 Bxg2 16.Rg1 Bf3 17.Qe3 Qh4+ was perhaps even better for White.

13...Qe7 14.e6 fxe6

Tempting was 14...Ne5 15.Nxe5 dxe5 16.0-0 (If 16.Qxe5 then 16...0-0-0 17.Qg3 fxe6 and Black is more than fine.) 16...0-0 17.Qg4, but with a clearly better position for the Cuban master.

15.fxe6 Nf6 16.Ng5

Much more forceful would have been 16.Nh4! g6 17.0-0 0-0 18.Bh6 with serious winning chances.

16...0-0-0



[FEN "2kr3r/pb2q1pp/np1pPn2/2p3N1/2P5/
2PB4/P3Q1PP/R1B1K2R w KQ - 0 17"]

17.Nf7?

This reduces White's advantage. 17.0-0! Rhf8 18.Nf7 was correct.

17...Bxg2!

The importance of this move is that it denies the white king any safety.

18.Rg1 Bf3 19.Qxf3 Qxe6+ 20.Kd1

The alternative was 20.Be3 Qxf7 21.Qa8+ Nb8 22.Bf5+ Nfd7 23.Be4 Ne5 24.Rf1 Qc7 25.Bf5+ Rd7 26.Rf4 g5 27.Re4 with sharp and unclear play.

20...Qxf7 21.Qa8+ Nb8 22.Bf5+

Marginally better was 22.Kc2 Qd7 23.Bg5 Rhf8 24.Raf1 Qa4+ 25.Kb2 with complicated play.

22...Nfd7 23.Be4 Ne5 24.Bd5 Qd7 25.a4 Nec6 26.a5



[FEN "Qnkr3r/p2q2pp/1pnp4/P1pB4/2P5/2P5/7P/R1BK2R1 b - - 0 26"]

Capablanca attempted to force the young Wolfson into submission with another pawn push, but this is too optimistic and neglects the safety of the king. Superior was 26.Kc2 Rhf8 27.Bd2.

26...Nxa5! 27.Rxa5?!

Preferable was 27.Rg3 Rhf8 28.Bg2 Rf5 29.Bh3 g6 with slight chances of saving the game.

27...bxa5 28.Bf4 Rde8 29.Kc1?

29.Kd2 was much better.

29...Re7 30.Kb2 Rhe8 31.Bg3 Re2+ 32.Ka3 R8e3 33.Rc1 Rd3 34.Be1 Rde3 35.Rb1 Ra2+! 36.Kxa2 Qa4+ 0-1

While little other biographical details are readily available on Max Wolfson, a brief fragment from the February 13 *Eagle* report recorded the following:

"[...] Max Wolfson, the bright-faced captain of the well-nigh invincible team of Boys High, must be regarded as the real hero of the occasion. Single-handed he engaged the famous master opposed to him and, after playing an irregular defense, which led to a most complicated game, succeeded in forcing the Cuban's resignation after 36 moves. Capablanca gave in when he faced a mate in two moves, and the sensational sacrifice of a rook, which accompanied it, elicited from his the remark "Very fine."

Irrespective of Wolfson's fine finish, it was that "irregular defense" that deserves the attention of researchers and historians. The development of Black's pieces contain some critical elements of the ideas attributed to Aron Nimzowitsch. How conscious was Wolfson about the revolutionary concept of his defense? Did Nimzowitsch himself study the score of this game while reading the news of this record-breaking exhibition? These are just two of the many questions difficult to answer today.

That Wolfson's defense was no accident is proven by another episode that occurred nearly three months later on the premises of Boys' High. On June 4, 1915, Boris Kostić, who was touring the United States at that time, gave a five-board blindfold simultaneous exhibition at this school. Max Wolfson not only managed to score a good result (drawing against the more illustrious master), but a quick review of the game reveals that Wolfson adopted the same opening setup as in his game with Capablanca in mid-February. The June 13, 1915 *Eagle* column, which eventually offered the full score of the game, prefaced it with the following:

"[...] No score of the game was kept, but before Kostics' [*sic*] departure he was asked by his manager whether he could recall the course of this particular game. Notwithstanding that he had conducted four other games concurrently and several days elapsed, the blindfold expert sat down, and without using board or pieces called off the moves of Wolfson's game in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, quite as though he did not regard it was the extraordinary mental achievement it surely was. As he went along, Kostics [*sic*] commented upon the several stages of the game and complimented Wolfson's play, and in particular the eleventh move of the young Brooklynite, which broke up the Hungarian's [*sic*] center. The score of the game will no doubt find a place in Wolfson's scrapbook alongside that of his famous victory over Capablanca, which has already traveled across the ocean."

Boris Kostić - Max Wolfson

Blindfold Simultaneous Exhibition

Boys' High School, Brooklyn, 4 June 1915

Nimzowitsch Defense [B00]

1.e4 e6 2.d4 b6 3.Nc3 Bb7 4.Nf3 Bb4 5.Bd3 d6 6.a3 Bxc3+ 7.bxc3 Nf6 8. Qe2 h6 9.0-0 0-0 10.Ne1 c5 11.f4



[FEN "rn1q1rk1/pb3pp1/1p1ppn1p/2p5/3PPP2/P1PB4/2P1Q1PP/R1B1NRK1 b - f3 0 11"]

11...c4! 12.Bxc4 Nxe4 13.Bb2 Nd7 14.f5 d5 15.Bb5 Qc7 16.Qd3 a6 17. Bxd7 Qxd7 18.fxe6 fxe6 19.Nf3 Rac8 20.Ne5 Qc7 21.Qh3 Ng5 22.Qg4 Rce8 23.Rxf8+ Rxf8 24.h4 Ne4 25.Qxe6+ Kh7 26.Qg6+ Kg8 27.Rf1 Rxf1+ 28.Kxf1



[FEN "6k1/1bq3p1/pp4Qp/3pN3/3Pn2P/P1P5/1BP3P1/5K2 b - - 0 28"]

28...Nxc3?

Good play was offered by 28...Qe7 29.Qxb6 Nd2+ 30.Kf2 Nc4 31.Nxc4 dxc4 with balanced play.

29.Kg1

Kostic missed a clear win here with 29.Qe8+! Kh7 30.Bxc3 Qxc3 31.Qg6+ Kg8 32.Qf7+ Kh7 33.Qxb7 Qxd4 34.Nf3 Qc4+ 35.Kg1 Qc5+ 36.Kh2.

29...Bc8

Or 29...Ne4 30.h5 Qxc2 31.Qe6+ Kh7 32.Qf5+ Kg8 33.Qf7+ Kh7 and White has to be satisfied with the perpetual.

30.Bxc3

30.h5 Ne2+ 31.Kf2 Nf4 32.Qe8+ Kh7 33.c3 Bf5 34.Qf8 Qc8 was still offering nothing else than equality.

30...Qxc3 31.Qe8+ Kh7 32.Qg6+ 1/2-1/2



The *New York Tribune*, June 13, 1915

[Click [here](#) to enlarge image]

The *New York Tribune* of June 13, 1915 noted a few of Kostic's own words: "At no stage was I able to make the least impression. The boy is exceptionally talented." After graduating from Boys' High School, Wolfson studied at Columbia University, the same institution whose colours were defended by Capablanca during his student years. He played on the top board of the university's chess team in 1917 and early 1918. An alumni register indicates that a "Max Wolfson" was a student at College of Pharmacy of City of New York, Columbia University. An obituary in the *New York Times* of March 25, 1964 notes the death of Max Wolfson, a "pioneer in the field of pharmaceutical manufactories." Nothing else is known to us about Wolfson except for a handful of other games (mostly played with white). The questions prompted by the study of the two games discussed in this column could motivate further research and an attempt to clarify the unusually hypermodern over-the-board conduit of this high-school boy at a time when Nimzowitsch was busy finding new paths for black, one of them which turned out to be very similar to Wolfson's opening strategy against Capablanca and Kostic in the first half of 1915.

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