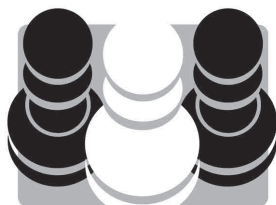


# Fischer – Spassky 1972

## Match of the Century Revisited

By

# Tibor Karolyi



Quality Chess  
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# Preface

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When Quality Chess offered me that chance to write about the 1972 World Chess Championship match, I instantly felt the responsibility to discuss the most magnetic chess event of all time. Robert James (Bobby) Fischer was not only a phenomenal player, but also a charismatic and controversial person. Fischer's early life and chess career up to 1972 has been documented in the companion volume *The Road to Reykjavik*. In this book, we pick up where the previous work left off, discussing all aspects of the "Match of the Century" followed by the return match between Fischer and Spassky in 1992.

Since I started working on it, the current book has evolved considerably. To set the stage for the 1972 match, I initially decided to showcase a few of Spassky's best games, along with some biographical information about the reigning World Champion at the time. However, I found Spassky's games and career so exciting and rich in content that this introduction expanded exponentially, so the decision was taken to make a dedicated two-volume biography on Spassky's life and career, which I continue to work on at present. Another major change came later in the book. I initially intended to cover the 1992 match as not much more than an appendix to the main topic of the 1972 battle. The original plan was to analyse a few games from 1992, without making too big a topic of it. However, I was so taken by the 1992 games, as well as the historic significance of Fischer's return after twenty years, that the 1992 coverage ended up at over 160 pages! As you can tell from the title of this book, the primary focus always has been and still is the 1972 match; but I trust the readers will not mind having the expanded 1992 coverage as a bonus.

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As far as I know, Spassky is the only World Champion not to write a book on his career. The same can almost be said about Fischer; true, the American authored the classic *My 60 Memorable Games*, but the latest game to feature in that book was from 1967. Fischer never wrote about his phenomenal run from 1970 to 1972, when he became World Champion – even when he was short of money, despite the fact that any such book(s) would have been extremely lucrative for him. The lack of books by these two great players leaves a hole in chess literature; and although I could never hope to fill it, I feel I have achieved my objective of contributing something unique and of value to chess readers.

The publication of this book will mark fifty years since the end of the Reykjavik 1972 match, when Bobby Fischer became World Champion. In *The Road to Reykjavik* I covered Fischer's early career relatively lightly; but from 1970, I examined Fischer's chess more deeply than any previous author, and was able to make a lot of new discoveries. The bibliography contains many books about Fischer's career, especially the 1972 match, but most of them were written before chess engines were anything like as strong as nowadays. The last book I know of which covered

some games of the match in depth was Kasparov's *My Great Predecessors IV*, which was published in 2004. Garry analysed five games from this historic match, whereas in this book I analyse all twenty of the games which were contested. Among other important discoveries, I believe I have produced a definitive assessment of the endgame arising after Fischer's notorious 29...♙xh2 move from Game 1. Many great players have analysed this endgame through the decades and Kasparov concluded that it was winning for White, but my analysis demonstrates that Fischer could have held the endgame in numerous ways, and the losing mistake actually did not occur until several moves later.

In general, it is no surprise that when analysing games from fifty years ago with modern tools, one can unearth new discoveries which overturn previous assessments. Even so, I was surprised by both the number and the magnitude of some of the improvements I was able to bring to light. One such example arises later in the match when, in a quiet-looking position, Fischer gave Spassky a chance to advance his kingside pawns in a primitive way that would have either won a piece or forced a catastrophic weakening of Fischer's own kingside. Spassky missed the unexpected yet basic winning continuation, as did everyone else who commented on the game.

With chess engines becoming increasingly stronger and the scope of tablebases gradually expanding, I have no doubt that improvements on my analysis will be discovered – but I suspect that such improvements will mostly be in the form of fine-tuning of variations and assessments, with no – or very few – complete reassessments of my analysis.

Dear reader, I invite you to join me in following the story of a rivalry like nothing else in the history of chess. Let us enjoy the masterpieces and the new discoveries from their games!

Tibor Karolyi  
Budapest 2022









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# Chapter 2.6

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## Missed Opportunities

Before the next game, Spassky took another time out.

### GAME 14

**Robert J. Fischer – Boris Spassky**

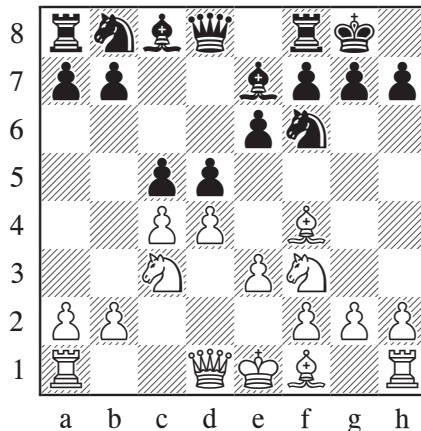
Reykjavik 1972

1.c4 e6 2.♘f3 d5 3.d4 ♘f6 4.♗c3 ♙e7 5.♙f4!

Fischer not only varies his choice of opening line, but also wisely chooses a variation that traditionally offers relatively little opportunity for Black to create winning chances. With a three-point cushion, a draw would not at all be a bad result for the American. Interestingly, Fischer chose this line regardless of the fact that Spassky had beaten Petrosian and Larsen in it and had not lost a single game in the variation.

5...0-0 6.e3 c5

Spassky twice chose 6...♗bd7 against Larsen, whereas against Petrosian and Portisch he pushed the c-pawn two squares, which was the main line at the time.



**7.dxc5 ♖c6**

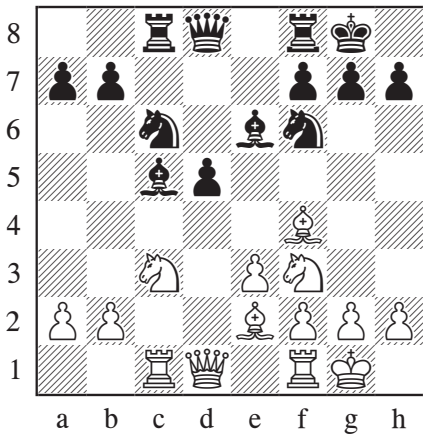
Spassky deviates from 7...♙xc5 8.♖c2 ♗c6 9.a3 ♖a5 10.♞d1 ♙e7 11.♗d2 e5 12.♙g5 d4 13.♗b3 ♖d8 14.♙e2 ♗g4!?, which yielded a draw eleven moves later in Portisch – Spassky, Havana (ol) 1966.

**8.cxd5**

Fischer settles for a small advantage. At the highest level, this move gives few hopes of creating winning chances; but more importantly, Black's possibilities of instigating a fight are rather limited.

**8...exd5 9.♙e2 ♙xc5 10.0-0 ♙e6 11.♞c1 ♞c8**

Spassky had this position earlier against Gligoric, which they reached via an Exchange Variation move order.



**12.a3**

Fischer not only deviates from the above-mentioned game, but introduces a novelty.

12.♙g5 ♙e7 13.a3 h6 14.♙h4 ♗e4 15.♙xe7 ♗xe7 16.♗xe4 dxe4 17.♗d4 ♙d5 18.♞xc8 ♖xc8 19.♖d2 ♞d8 20.♞c1 ♖b8 21.h3 ♗c6 22.♗xc6 ♙xc6 was equal in Gligoric – Spassky, Hastings 1966, and they went on to share the point.

**12...h6 13.♙g3**

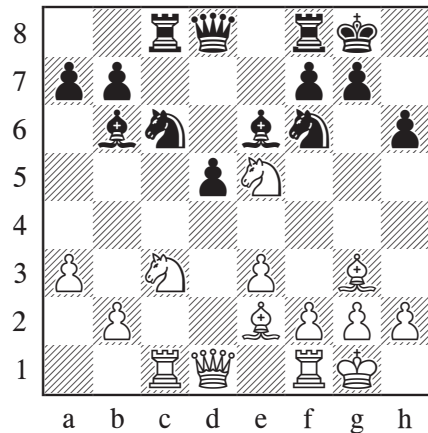
Fischer's move does not pose many problems, but other moves were also fairly harmless.

On 13.♗e5 both 13...♙d6 and 13...♗e7 are playable.

Or if 13.♗a4 ♙e7 14.♗c5 (14.h3 is met by 14...♗e4) 14...♙xc5 15.♞xc5 ♗e4 16.♞c2 ♖f6 and Black's position is healthy.

**13...♙b6 14.♗e5**

It is classical to exchange minor pieces when playing against an isolated pawn: with fewer pieces, one can more easily set up pressure against the isolani.



**14...♗e7!?**

Spassky tries to keep the middlegame complex; he may have considered exchanging the g3-bishop for the knight.

Simplifying with 14...d4 would give an equal game: 15.♗xc6 ♞xc6 16.exd4 ♙xd4 17.♙f3 ♞c4 18.♗b5 and a draw is the most likely outcome.

**15.♗a4 ♗e4**

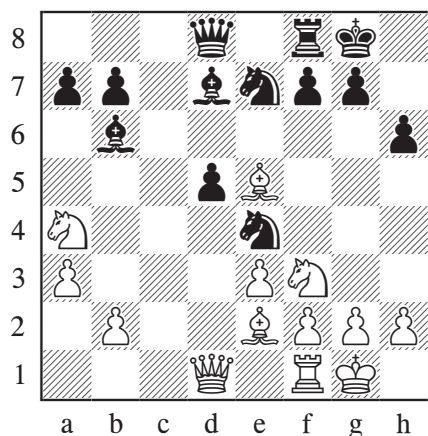
Spassky again refuses to look for a draw by simplification. For example: 15...♞xc1 16.♖xc1 d4 17.♗xb6 (but not 17.♞d1? due

to 17...♙b3) 17...♖xb6 18.exd4 and Black can easily keep the balance with 18...♗e4 or 18...♞c8.

**16.♞xc8 ♙xc8 17.♗f3 ♙d7 18.♙e5**

It is reasonable to transfer the bishop to the long diagonal.

Considering the game continuation, 18.♗xb6 would have been a smart and safe choice. After 18...♖xb6 19.♙e5 ♞c8 20.♙d4 White's advantage is mostly symbolic, but the position is safe and it's hard to imagine that Fischer would have fallen into any danger from here.



**18...♙xa4!**

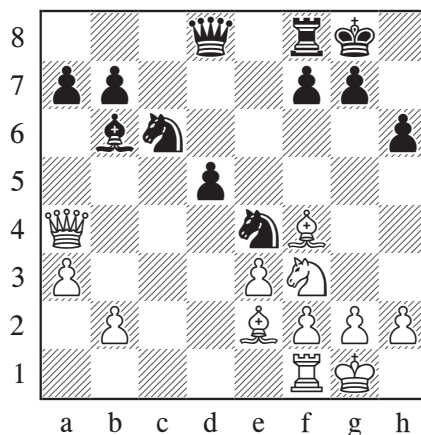
Spassky plays actively. He gives up the bishop pair to improve his knight and now all his minor pieces will stand superbly.

**19.♖xa4 ♗c6 20.♙f4??**

Fischer spent six minutes on this move. When one plays a new opening, it can surprise the opponent, but it can backfire as well. When the middlegame is reached, mistakes can occur due to a lack of familiarity with typical tactics and positional themes. As we will see, Fischer's choice is an awful move, whereas in the Najdorf, for instance, he would have never made an equivalent mistake. Another important point is that Fischer was not used

to playing for safety rather than to win; and I think in this game he was doing exactly that.

The position would be equal after 20.♙g3 ♖f6 21.♖b5 or 20.♙d4 ♗xd4 21.♗xd4 ♖f6 22.♙d3.



**20...♖f6?**

This move was praised by Soviet commentators and even Reshevsky did not criticize it. The queen move gives Black a pleasant game and Spassky used only one minute for it, but he misses a golden opportunity to win.

**20...g5!!**

None of Nei, Byrne, Florian or Varnusz mention this missed possibility. Spassky was extremely adept at playing with an isolated pawn, but hunting down the dark-squared bishop in this fashion rarely happens.

**21.♙g3**

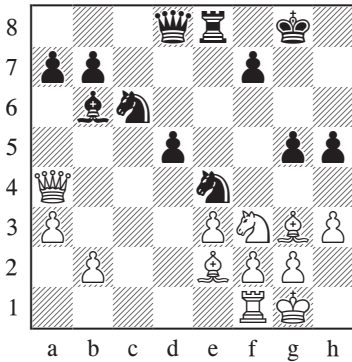
21.♙e5 g4 wins a piece.

**21...h5! 22.h3**

Now Black has several ways to bring down White's resistance.

**22...♞e8**

22...♗xg3 23.fxg3 ♞e8 (Also after 23...♙xe3† 24.♗h1 ♖c7 25.♖b3 d4 26.♖b5 White would have big problems and small hopes.) 24.♗h1 ♞xe3 Black has every chance of converting the extra pawn.



23. ♖h2 g4

23... ♗e7!? followed by ...g4 is also good enough.

24. hxg4 hxg4 25. ♘d4 g3

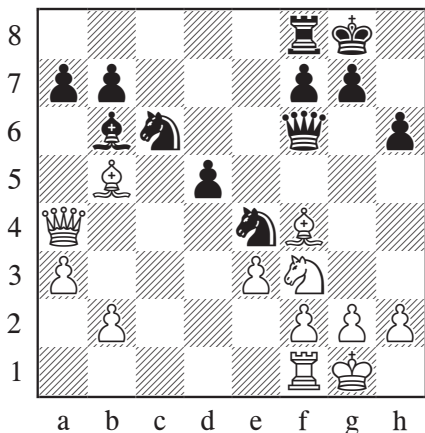
Black is winning.

21. ♙b5?

Fischer errs again. This time he is lucky only to lose a pawn while retaining drawing chances.

21. ♖b1? ♗e8 wins, as White is unable to handle the twin threats of ...d4 and ...♗xf2! followed by ...♗e4.

White's best is 21. ♗b5! and with a few precise moves he can equalize: 21...d4 (21...♗d8 22. ♙d3 is equal; Robert Byrne gives 21...♗e8 but does not consider 22. ♗xd5!, after which 22...g5 23. ♙g3 ♗xb2 24. ♙c4 reaches a level position.) 22. ♙d3 ♗e8 23. ♙xe4 ♗xe4 24. ♗d2 ♗e7 25. ♗c4 White gets away with it.

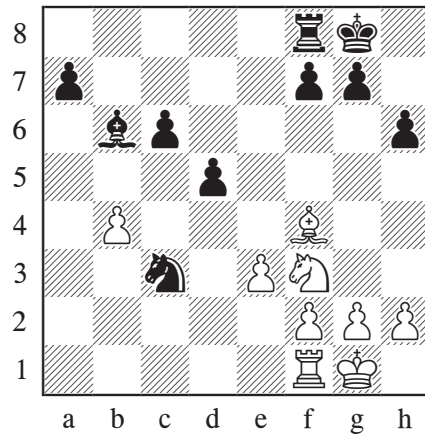


21... ♗xb2 22. ♙xc6 ♗c3!

Spassky forces the queen exchange.

Nei calls it: "An important interpolation, which Fischer did not catch in time."

23. ♗b4 ♗xb4 24. axb4 bxc6



25. ♙e5!

Fischer has lost a pawn but not his composure; he finds the best way of resisting.

25... ♗b5 26. ♗c1 ♗c8

It would have been most accurate to insert the attack on the bishop at this juncture:

26...f6!

It is hard to tell whether it would be enough to win, but would surely have made Fischer work for a draw for many hours.

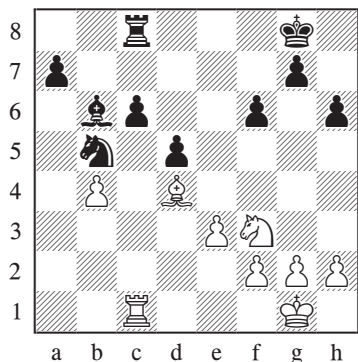
27. ♙d4

27. ♙b2 ♗c8 28. ♗d4 would not change much.

27... ♗c8

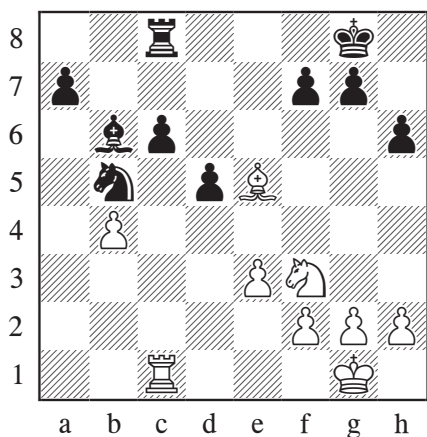
27... ♗xd4 28. ♗xd4 ♙xd4 29. exd4 ♗b8 30. ♗xc6 ♗xb4 31. ♗f1 ♗xd4 (31...a5 doesn't help due to 32. ♗c5) 32. ♗a6 White holds without problems, despite the pawn deficit.





28.♙f1 ♜f7 29.♙e2 ♙e7

I think this is the best position Spassky could have reached after winning the pawn. Black is a pawn up and White has no counterplay. However, Black can't easily create a passed pawn or find a target to attack. The outcome is uncertain, but I get the impression that White's drawing chances are better than Black's winning chances.



27.♞d4!

Fischer gives Spassky no time to play ...a5 and make the c-pawn passed. Even that would not necessarily win, but it is preferable not to allow it.

27...f6?

Spassky blunders a pawn.

In his *CHESS* article, Stewart Player refers to Game 14 when alleging that Spassky was happy

to lose the Reykjavik match with a view to getting an even more lucrative future rematch against Fischer. Player refers to Game 14 as a critical moment in the match, claiming that Spassky had a clear win available at the moment when he blundered with an extra pawn. The game continuation is indeed a blunder, but no clear win exists. As mentioned above, Black's best winning try was on the previous move, but even there I think White can hold with perfect defence. By now, I am fairly certain that Black has no way to win, although he could certainly have made a better attempt.

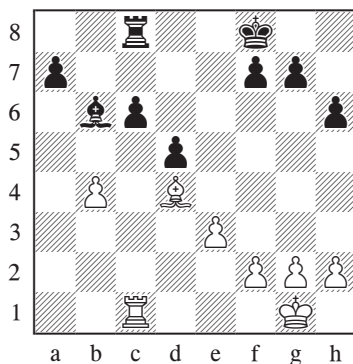
The right way to preserve winning chances is: 27...♞xd4 28.♙xd4

Interestingly, Nei thinks that after this continuation "White cannot long hold out", while his co-author Byrne writes that it "would have presented considerable difficulties in the way of winning." Let's take a look:

28...♙f8

28...f6 29.♙f1 is similar.

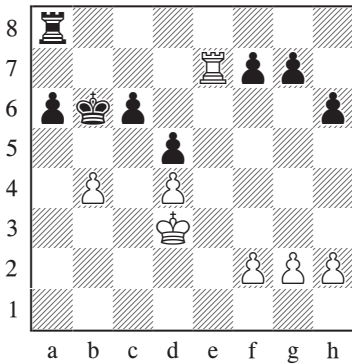
28...♙xd4 29.exd4 ♞b8 30.♙f1 and again it is hard to tell what Black can do with the extra pawn. I agree with Byrne's assessment, and believe White has good chances to escape with a draw. A logical continuation is 30...♞b6 31.♙e2 ♙f8 32.♙d3 ♙e7 33.♞c5 ♙d6 34.♞a5 (but not 34.♙c3? due to 34...♞b5) 34...a6 35.♙c3 and White is likely to hold.



29.♙f1 ♙xd4

29...f6 30.♔e2 According to one online comment I read, Pirc wrote that Fischer envisaged this position, with the idea of 30...♔e7 31.♙xb6 axb6 32.♖a1 and activating the rook. I have not been able to verify if the quote is accurate; but in any case, White has good drawing chances here too.

30.exd4 ♔e7 31.♖a1 ♖a8 32.♔e2 ♔d7  
33.♔d3 a6 34.♖a2 ♔c7 35.♖e2 ♔b6 36.♖e7

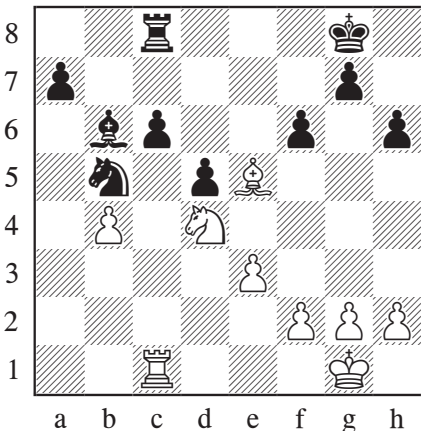


36...♖a7

According to Timman, this is a technical win. However, I agree with Sullivan who claims that White can hold with:

37.♖e8! a5 38.bxa5† ♔xa5

White should be able to draw with the help of the active rook. The most accurate plan involves pushing the kingside pawns, starting with 39.h4 or 39.g4.



28.♙xf6!

Fischer grabs the gift and the position soon becomes a dead draw.

28...♙xd4 29.♙xd4 ♖xd4 30.exd4 ♖b8  
31.♔f1 ♖xb4 32.♖xc6 ♖xd4 33.♖a6 ♔f7  
34.♖xa7† ♔f6 35.♖d7 h5 36.♔e2 g5 37.♔e3  
♖e4† 38.♔d3 ♔e6 39.♖g7 ♔f6 40.♖d7 ♔e6  
½-½

Fischer's uncharacteristic errors on moves 20 and 21 in this game are consistent with the earlier observation about his tendency to suffer a dip in form after a delay in the schedule. This game reminds me very much of Game 14 of the Kasparov – Anand World Championship match from New York 1995. Garry faced an opening he was not familiar with, uncharacteristically (for him) did not really want to play for a win, and found himself in trouble before outplaying Anand in a complicated middlegame. By the way, I have written three books on Kasparov and I think that game is my favourite from all his games.

In the last two games, Fischer played well below his usual incredibly high standard, but still scored 1½ points. This shows his class, but also indicates that Spassky was not at his normal level either. I think one of the reasons Petrosian lost the last four games against Fischer in their 1971 match was that he overdid things by employing a new opening in every single game. This worked insofar as Fischer was surprised and had to think from an early stage of each game, but Petrosian's subsequent middlegame play in each of those games was way below his usual competency.

The most important thing, though, was that Fischer had kept his three-point cushion and taken another step closer to the finishing line.





Fischer	0	0	1 ½	1	1 ½	1 ½	1	0 ½	1 ½	8 ½
Spassky	1	1	0 ½	0	0 ½	0 ½	0	1 ½	0 ½	5 ½