

Could Petrosian have held against Fischer?

4/18/2020 – The Fischer-Petrosian Candidates match of 1971 in Buenos Aires was the third and final round in the eliminations to determine the challenger for the World Championship 1972. After defeating two top grandmasters 6-0 each, the charismatic American faced former World Champion Tigran Petrosian who was considered to be almost undefeatable. Their match started 2½-2½, and then in game six Fischer scored a superb win that turned the match in his favor. Did Petrosian seal the wrong move, could he have defended to a draw? You can help endgame specialist Karsten Müller with his historical analysis.



Fischer came to Argentina after demolishing two of the world's strongest grandmasters in the quarter and semifinals: he defeated Mark Taimanov and then Bent Larsen with perfect 6-0 scores. After that Fischer faced former World Champion Tigran Petrosian, who many thought would be Fischer's stumbling block. Petrosian had the reputation of being the most resourceful defensive player of all time. In 42 preceding games he had been beaten only twice.

Grandmaster Dorian Rogozenco delves into Fischer's openings, and retraces the development of his repertoire. What variations did Fischer play, and what sources did he use to arm himself against the best Soviet players? Mihail Marin explains Fischer's particular style and his special strategic talent in annotated games against Spassky, Taimanov and other greats. Karsten Müller is not just a leading international endgame expert, but also a true Fischer connoisseur.

Fischer faced Petrosian in the Teatro General San Martin in Buenos Aires. The match was scheduled over twelve games, and the first player to score 6½ points would be the winner. Fischer was keen to keep his unbroken string of victories going, but in the first game, a Sicilian, Petrosian surprised him with a novelty in Fischer's favorite line. Suddenly the roles were switched: Petrosian was boldly attacking, Fischer was cautiously defending. But in a very promising position Petrosian played passively and decided to offer a draw – which Fischer refused! Very short of time Petrosian got into a hopeless position and resigned on the 40th move. Fischer had been outplayed, but had still won, making this his 20th victory in succession.

In the second game Fischer played recklessly and found himself in a terrible endgame, which he resigned after 32 moves. His great winning streak was over. The crowd inside the theater and in the lobby chanted, "Tigran! Tigran!"

Game three again gave Petrosian good winning chances, but as in game one he came into time trouble and Fischer managed to draw by repetition. The score was now 1½-1½, but Fischer knew it could easily have been 3-0 for his opponent. In all fairness he was not in great shape: he had caught a cold, and was unable to sleep because of noisy traffic rising from the Avenue of the Ninth of July, on which the hotel was located. He changed his rooms repeatedly, almost every day.

In the fourth game Fischer offered a draw after only twenty moves, and in the fifth game Petrosian offered one on move 34, which Fischer took four moves later. Had the Armenian ex-champion stopped the American's meteoric rise?

In game six Petrosian, who had White, looked relaxed and confident, while Fischer was pale and exhausted. After half an hour of play suddenly two stench bombs went off in the back of the theatre. Arbiter Lothar Schmid asked Petrosian and Fischer if they wanted to stop. Fischer asked if it was poison gas, and when Schmid assured him it wasn't, the game continued. Fischer became more relaxed and concentrated, and broke into Petrosian's queenside. The game was adjourned after move 41, with Petrosian sealing the move.

(1) Petrosian, Tigran V - Fischer, Robert James (2760) [A06]

Candidates f Fischer-Petrosian +5–1=3 Buenos Aires (6), 17.10.1971 [*Karsten Mueller*]

1.Nf3 c5 2.b3 d5 3.Bb2 f6 4.c4 d4 5.d3 e5 6.e3 Ne7 7.Be2 Nec6 8.Nbd2 Be7 9.0–0 0–0 10.e4 a6 11.Ne1 b5 12.Bg4 Bxg4 13.Qxg4 Qc8 14.Qe2 Nd7 15.Nc2 Rb8 16.Rfc1 Qe8 17.Ba3 Bd6 18.Ne1 g6 19.cxb5 axb5 20.Bb2 Nb6 21.Nef3 Ra8 22.a3 Na5 23.Qd1 Qf7 24.a4 bxa4 25.bxa4 c4 26.dxc4 Nbxc4 27.Nxc4 Nxc4 28.Qe2 Nxb2 29.Qxb2 Rfb8 30.Qa2 Bb4 31.Qxf7+ Kxf7 32.Rc7+ Ke6 33.g4 Bc3 34.Ra2 Rc8 35.Rxc8 Rxc8 36.a5 Ra8 37.a6 Ra7 38.Kf1 g5 39.Ke2 Kd6 40.Kd3 Kc5 41.Ng1 Kb5



his position has often been analysed, but I believe that none of the conclusions reached have been correct. I believe that the game should end in a draw, and that Petrosian made just one mistake, after which he is lost. But am I right in this opinion? **42.Ne2** [42.f4!! This amazing move has been proposed by Matanovics and Kasparov. Does it draw, or can our readers shatter the analysis?]

42...Ba5 43.Rb2+ Kxa6 44.Rb1 Rc7 45.Rb2 Be1 46.f3 Ka5 47.Rc2 Rb7 48.Ra2+ Kb5 49.Rb2+ Bb4 50.Ra2 Rc7 51.Ra1 Rc8 52.Ra7 Ba5 53.Rd7 Bb6 54.Rd5+ Bc5 55.Nc1 Ka4 56.Rd7 Bb4 57.Ne2 Kb3 58.Rb7 Ra8 59.Rxh7 Ra1 60.Nxd4+ exd4 61.Kxd4 Rd1+ 62.Ke3 Bc5+ 63.Ke2 Rh1 64.h4?! Kc4 65.h5 Rh2+ 66.Ke1 Kd3 0-1



In the above image, left, Fischer has just played 41..Kc5-b5. In the image on the right (and on our front page in colour), Petrosian is in the process of sealing his move

After this victory Fischer went on to win games 7, 8 and 9, ending the match with 6½-2½ points. After winning the final game he briefly acknowledged the cheers of the audience, and then slipped through a back door to go bowling with his friend Miguel Angel Quinteros until 3:30 a.m.

It was the key moment: Petrosian had sealed 42.Ne2, and when the game was resumed, at five o'clock the following day, Fischer simply tore through Petrosian's and won the game. You can replay the game and analyse it on your computer, iPad, Android tablet or your smartphone by scanning the QR-code and following the link.

We need your help

This is where we want to enlist your help. Leading endgame expert GM Karsten Müller wrote us: "Should we assume that the adjourned position before the sealed move is a draw (as most sources and analysts do)? Then where did Petrosian go wrong in the game – or did Fischer perhaps also go wrong later, and Petrosian then made another mistake? I personally think that there is exactly one mistake, and it is not the sealed move 42.Ne2. But this of course might be wrong and is very deep."



So do you think that Petrosian sealed a losing move? Is there a way he could have saved the game – either with a different move, or with a different strategy after 42.Ne2? This has been extensively discussed in chess literature, with no firm conclusion.



One big advantage is that you can start an engine (fan icon) that will help you to analyse. You can get multiple lines of analysis by clicking the + button to the right of the engine analysis window. The "!" key, incidentally, shows you the threat in any position, which is incredibly useful in the case of unclear moves.

You may also like to use more powerful engines to assist you in your efforts. Our chess program Fat Fritz, for instance, goes for some unconventional continuations and surprises...



There is one more thing you can do. It is a lot of fun, but also a serious challenge: click on the rook icon below the notation window. This will allow you to play the above position against Fritz, at your level of playing strength (e.g. "Club Player"), right here on the news page.