

Introduction

Ljubomir Ljubojević belongs to a generation of extraordinary chessplayers, all born in the early 1950s, the greatest of whom is Anatoly Karpov, who was born in 1951.

Other rival grandmasters, born at around that time, are Ulf Andersson (1951), Jan Timman (1951), Zoltan Ribli (1951), Gyula Sax (1951), Andras Adorjan (1950), Robert Hübner (1948), Alexander Beliavsky (1953), and a number of others.

All of them went on to become candidates for the world championship, with the exception of Andersson and Ljubojević, which didn't prevent either of these from being classified as world number 3 at various times.

I believe that another book about him is called for, in addition to the one I know, *Ljubomir Ljubojević*, by Dragoljub Joksimović, published by Zofi Service in 2011, which has a splendid introduction and games with commentaries from *Informator*.

He is usually called "Ljubo," and that's how I shall often refer to him in the book. His best period was in the 1970s and 1980s, when he won a huge number of tournaments, amongst them Brussels 1987 and Barcelona 1989, in both cases sharing first place with Kasparov.

New in Chess magazine devoted the whole of its 1987 issue 6 to the Brussels tournament, where Ljubojević and Kasparov drew for first place. It's an excellent publication. The headings for the interviews with the two winners are significant. Kasparov's reads: "I certainly did not play worse than Ljubo," while Ljubojević's is: "I am playing much more creatively than Kasparov". These are clearly the words of two rivals who at that time didn't consider themselves to be of widely differing strength.

I find it curious that not only have I played against Ljubo in simultaneous displays that he gave in the Club Argentino de Ajedrez in Buenos Aires but I also had the honour of playing against him in the 1988 Thessalonica Olympiad.

Ljubo speaks several languages fluently, one of which is Castilian Spanish (even before he settled in Linares, Spain, when he married a lady from Linares). He is very expressive and magnetic, and it's a pleasure to listen to him speak passionately on all topics.

I have been unable to carry out my original idea, which was to include interviews with my much admired Ljubo, where he would express his opinions on chess and other matters that interest him, but Ljubo, in a very friendly fashion, declined to be interviewed.

The book is written in the “Move by Move” format, with questions and exercises, a method which is effective for both training and teaching.

It has been a pleasure to study the games of Ljubojević in depth and to write about his style of play, which is so pleasing and original.

I hope the result has proved satisfactory and that you enjoy Ljubo’s beautiful and instructive games.

Ponteareas, March 2022

Dedicated to the Club Argentino de Ajedrez

Structure of the book

The book begins with a brief pen portrait of Ljubojević. The main section consists of 40 annotated games dating from 1970 to 2008 and the book concludes with a list of his best performances.

The introduction to the games includes information about the tournament and about Ljubo's chess career.

The commentaries also discuss how Ljubojević's playing style evolved.

Ljubomir Ljubojević

Ljubomir Ljubojević was born in Titovo Uzice, Yugoslavia, (nowadays Uzice, Serbia), on the 2nd of November 1950.

At the start of his career he stood out because of his dynamic and original style; he came to be referred to as “the New Tal”. Later his style broadened and its positional side became much more complete. Writing this book, I was struck by his masterly handling of the pair of bishops.

In spite of his strength he was never a Candidate for the World Championship. One reason may be his poor theoretical preparation. He could come out on top through improvisation, but this required using up a lot of energy in each game.

Jan Timman commented that this shortcoming in the opening is one of the reasons why Ljubojević lost so often to Kasparov. It is possible that he felt intimidated by the great difference in preparation.

On the other hand, Ljubojević defeated Karpov several times from 1982 onwards, in “Ice Cold Tolya’s” best period, when he was losing very few games.

At the age of 14 he was a promising football player, but he was injured. Fortunately his father took him to the Red Star Club in Belgrade and chess became his passion, a passion for which, possibly, he had even more talent.

In 1970 the Argentine master Miguel Ángel Quinteros, then 22 years old, decided to go and play in tournaments in Yugoslavia, to improve his level and to achieve the title of Grandmaster. It was the right decision; he achieved his aims.

A young man from the organisation went to meet him at the train station for the first tournament he went to, in Cacak. He helpfully carried his suitcases for him and Quinteros asked him who were the favourites for the tournament. Almost certainly the name of the then little known Ljubojević, 19 years old, did not arise in the conversation.

When the tournament began Quinteros saw that the friendly young man who went to meet him was in fact Ljubomir Ljubojević, who had a bye in the first round, and who was sent to the station because he knew him by sight as he had been a spectator at the 1970 Siegen Olympiad, played a few months earlier.

Quinteros and Ljubojević became friends and were often seen together in 1970s tournaments.

Ljubo visited Argentina many times. The first time was after his bitter experience at the Petropolis Interzonal tournament in 1973, where he was in first place after

the 10th of 17 rounds, but lost spectacularly to David Bronstein in the 11th round, after turning down a draw. In the following rounds he fell apart.

We used to watch him play any number of rapid games against Miguel Najdorf in the Club Argentino in Buenos Aires.

“He is generally very good company: sharp yet friendly, witty and to the point,” as one of his greatest chess rivals, the Dutchman Jan Timman, described him in *New in Chess*, “Brilliantly gifted... He is a unique character in the motley crew that the chess elite is; creative, original, talkative, emotional, explosive and warm”.

About Ljubojević’s chess Timman said: “I think that after Kasparov and Karpov, I have learned the most from him”.

Unlike the strongest Yugoslav masters (except Gligorić), already in 1970, Ljubojević was not content to draw with grandmasters; he wanted to defeat them.

As a junior he was good, but he didn’t achieve any great success; Ljubojević’s talent awoke from 1970 onwards and in 1971 his chess-playing level exploded.

In the then united Yugoslavia, where chess was very popular, he became a national idol.

What is astonishing is that he could reach such a high point almost without studying openings (compared with his rivals). “He managed to camouflage his lack of homework with his improvising skills and his keen sense for certain openings,” commented Jan Timman in *New in Chess*.

I heard the Yugoslav Grandmaster Milorad Knezević (1936 – 2005), his second in a number of tournaments of that period, at the end of the 1070s and the beginning of the 1980s, comment admiringly that Ljubojević had an exceptional memory; his preparation was based on “copying” the lines that he saw stronger masters play in the tournaments he was taking part in.

Timman says that Ljubojević would often ask him if what he had played was “theory”. The times were different; now it would be unthinkable, but it is a sign of Ljubojević’s unusual talent.

Likewise, I am sure that, at least in the 1980s, he did devote a lot of time to preparation. His repertoire changed, and his position as 3rd in the world in 1983 and 1984, as well as his remaining among the 10 best players in the world for many years, have no other explanation.

As regards the possibility of his competing for the world title, Dragoljub Joksimović related in his aforementioned book on Ljubojević that he said to him: “If I had had the best conditions, the best experts and coaches in my team, the same as the players from the USSR had got, there is the question of whether I could have been better than Karpov and Kasparov”. Even then, modestly, he did not take that for granted: “Maybe they are more talented than me,” he concluded.

Selected Games

Game 1

1970, the blast-off year

Ljubojević had achieved a certain amount of success as a junior, but it was nothing exceptionally brilliant. Everything began to change from 1970 onwards.

At the age of 19 his first important win was in the Sarajevo tournament, where he shared first place with the former world junior champion Bruno Parma. He was unbeaten with 10 points out of 15, against well-known grandmasters such as Pal Benko and Albin Planinc, among others.

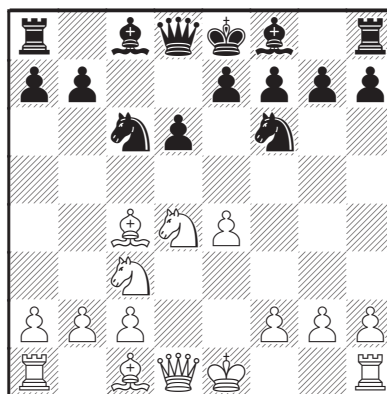
At the end of 1970 he was also successful in the Cacak tournament, sharing first place with Albin Planinc.

In 1970 he achieved the title of International Master. At that time the IM and GM titles were greatly valued, as there were relatively few IMs, and far fewer GMs.

Let's look at his win against another former world junior champion.

- ▷ **Bojan Kurajica**
- ▶ **Ljubomir Ljubojević**
Sicilian Defence [B57]
Sarajevo (2), 21.03.1970

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♗c3 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♗f6 6.♙c4



6...♙d7

Question: I'm not familiar with this opening; this move doesn't seem very flexible, does it?

Answer: It's certainly not an essential move, but there's a specific reason behind it: Black wants to play the Dragon Variation, but the immediate 6...g6 can be answered with 7.♘xc6 bxc6 8.e5!, when 8...dxe5? loses to 9.♙xf7+; some very strong players have defended the position arising after 8...♘g4, but it's not to everyone's taste.

7.0-0 g6 8. ♖xc6 ♙xc6

Question: Here we can see another reason why 6...♙d7 was useful, can't we?

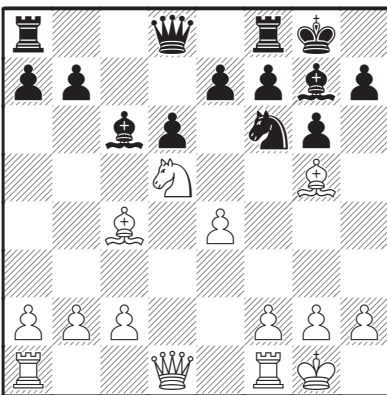
Answer: Well, it's not clear that this is better than 8...bxc6, recapturing "towards the centre," as the general rule advises, controlling the d5-square and thus preventing the game continuation.

Ljubojević himself subsequently preferred this, against Andrei Sokolov in Linares 1989. Both recaptures are of similar worth.

9. ♘d5 ♙g7 10. ♙g5 0-0

Black also plays 10...♙xd5 11.exd5 0-0, which leaves Black with a backward pawn on e7, exposed on the half-open e-file, but also restricts the action of White's light-squared bishop; instead, Ljubojević prefers to maintain the tension in the position.

I think that in general, other things being equal, Ljubojević preferred to play with, rather than against, the bishop pair.



11. ♖e1?!

White also maintains the tension; subsequently a more annoying idea was discovered: 11. ♙xf6 ♙xf6 12. ♘xf6+ exf6 13. ♙d4.

Question: That looks good for White; his pawn structure is much superior and he has the plan of ♖ad1. Isn't White simply much better?

Answer: Things are not so serious for Black, because he can gain some activity and slightly improve his structure with the manoeuvre 13...f5! 14.exf5 ♙g5, threatening mate, followed by...♙xf5, and the white advantage is not really a worry.

Exercise: How did Ljubojević reply to 11. ♖e1?

Answer:

11...e6!

Forcing White to prove that he has achieved something with his active moves 9. ♘d5 and 10. ♙g5.

12. ♘c3?

White is unwilling to admit that he has gained nothing with his active moves, which would be the case in the event of exchanging with 12. ♘xf6+ ♙xf6 13. ♙xf6 ♙xf6 14.c3, with equality.

The move played is more ambitious, although it implies another admission, that White has lost two tempi with this knight.

Exercise: How can Black try to profit from those two lost tempi?