

James Sherwin

**The Life & Games of a
Self-Taught Warrior**

James Sherwin

Foreword by Andy Soltis

Games Annotated by John Donaldson



2026

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James Sherwin
The Life & Games of a Self-Taught Warrior
by James Sherwin

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Introduction

In my acceptance speech on being inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame, I said that I like to think that I stand for a proposition that is no longer valid – that it is possible to have been a non-professional chess player without formal training who could play with, and even beat, anybody. (Indeed, this book has 57 of my games against the prominent players of my era.) All the while, I was a practicing attorney and businessman and helping to raise a family of three daughters. Unfortunately, no one can do that anymore. Chess nowadays is a rigorous full-time sport that demands intensive training with a retinue of grandmasters and computer engines. Nostalgia prompts me to think that it was better in the good old days.

I first learned chess when I was about five from a friend who had a chess set and a leaflet about the rules. My parents did not play, but my paternal grandfather was a respectable player who, as family lore had it, had once drawn with World Champion José Raúl Capablanca in a simultaneous exhibition. I lived in my paternal grandparents' apartment for over a year when I was in the fourth grade, and that was a very happy year of my childhood. We used to play gin rummy regularly and occasionally broke out the chess board as well.

The other schachic family influence was my paternal aunt's husband, Arthur Levine, a dentist on Long Island. He had a custom-built chess table with a drawer for the Staunton pieces and used to play correspondence chess. It was he who first introduced me to chess by mail. More importantly, he gave me my first chess books, *Cambridge Springs 1904* and Nimzowitsch's *My System*.

In my actual life, chess, lawyering, business, and family were nearly always happening all at once.

James Sherwin
Bath, England
May 2026

Foreword

American chess is at its best when several U.S. players are among the world elite and enjoying their career peaks. We can see one of those golden eras today, with Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura, Wesley So and the several other remarkable Americans high on the international rating list.

But a comparable period, of roughly two-plus decades, began in the 1950s.

It is easy to call this “the Bobby Fischer years.” But it was also the prime of Pal Benko, Art Bisguier, Donald and Robert Byrne, Larry Evans, William Lombardy and Edmar Mednis. And the aging Samuel Reshevsky was still good enough to qualify for two Candidates tournaments during those years.

Those nine players have been inducted into the US Chess Hall of Fame. No other era of American chess can make such a claim. The tenth and most recent inductee of that time is James Terry Sherwin. He is virtually unique because he defeated many of the leading players of his era – including Fischer twice – while pursuing a fulltime career far away from a chess board. It is hard to imagine a modern player competing in an event as strong as a U.S. Championship in the evening after a full day’s demanding work at his office.

When Sherwin broke away to enter a weekend Swiss System open, New York fans would be entertained by one of his wild time scramble finishes with opponents like Benko. Spectators ringed the board as they flashed out the final moves with both clocks on tilt.

When IM Anthony Saidy, another time pressure addict, was asked the source of Sherwin’s success, he wrote: “TACTICS! Otherwise he could not have survived the last 15-20 moves before the time control in nearly

every game that was a real crowd-pull. Only when facing him, did I think my own time-management was sober.”

Sherwin’s life story is also unique. He read *War and Peace* at 7 and entered Columbia College at 15. Chess was only one of the subjects he mastered. His progress up the chess pyramid was avidly followed by American fans. In one year, his name appeared 117 times in *Chess Life*.

While his career as an attorney was beginning he had his finest chess accomplishments, in a U.S. Championship and earning the international master title in an Interzonal.

There are more than 4,000 IMs in the world today. But when the title was inaugurated, in the 1950s, it was rarely granted. Only three other players – the future Grandmasters Lajos Portich, Evgeny Vasiukov and Istvan Bilek – were honored with the IM title in the year that Jimmy was.

Sherwin was among the world’s top 100 players off and on for a decade and peaked at number 62, according to chessmetrics.com. He never became a GM. His multifaceted professional career got in the way. “The best thing I have done in my life,” he said, had nothing to do with chess. It was his legal fight that spared a condemned man from the electric chair.

But don’t mistake the way he juggled life’s priorities for a casual attitude towards chess. In 1975 a prominent financial magazine, *Dun’s Review*, asked company presidents and other senior executives of major American businesses about their enjoyment of chess. They talked about how it provided a relaxing diversion. Sherwin saw the game very differently.

“I never play chess for fun,” he said. “It is a game that brings out the killer instinct and is a terribly aggressive ego trip. When you win, you are immensely elated; when you lose, you are crushed.”

In the pages that follow you’ll learn some intriguing never-told-before nuggets of chess lore. For example, how as president of the American Chess Foundation he tried to lure all three Polgar sisters to the U. S. “We almost got them,” he recalled. You’ll read his account of how David Bronstein flirted with his wife Judy during an international tournament and tried to get her to move in with him in Moscow.

Most of all you’ll understand someone who had the ability to be one of the greatest players of his time and preferred to enjoy chess on his own terms.

His good friend Eliot Hearst, a classmate at Columbia and frequent U.S. Championship invitee, curtailed his own chess ambitions to pursue an academic career in psychology. In 1999 he and Sherwin reunited to give a tandem simultaneous exhibition on the college's Low Plaza.

They were repeating an exhibition they had given 50 years before. They felt that being nearly 70 they only had energy for five hours. But they played 63 opponents, from 10 am to 6 pm.

Then Hearst "went home and didn't even want to think about chess," he recalled, in a letter to the publication *Columbia College Today*. "But Jimmy rushed down to the Manhattan Chess Club to play in a speed-chess tourney that started around 8 p.m. He never could get his fill of chess."

Andy Soltis
New York
February 2026

1953 U20 World Championship Finals

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	T
1	Panno	*	½	1	1	½	½	1	1	5½
2	Darga	½	*	½	1	½	1	1	1	5½
3	Ivkov	0	½	*	½	1	1	0	½	3½
4	Olafsson	0	0	½	*	0	1	1	1	3½
5	Penrose	½	½	0	1	*	0	½	0	2½
6	Keller	½	0	0	0	1	*	1	0	2½
7	Sherwin	0	0	1	0	½	0	*	1	2½
8	Larsen	0	0	½	0	1	1	0	*	2½

**23. ♖×g2 ♜×d4 24. ♙×f6 ♜×f6
25. g5 ♙c5 26. ♜e4 1-0**

**7.0-0 ♜c6 8.d5 ♜e7 9. ♜e1
c5?!**

A model example of how to attack with the IQP against a future World Championship Candidate.

Today 9...♜d7 and occasionally 9...♜e8 are played. The King's Indian was still in its early development in 1953.

(12) James Sherwin – Bent Larsen

World Junior Championship
Copenhagen 1953
King's Indian [E98]

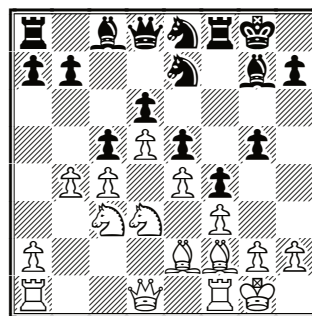
10. ♜d3 ♜e8 11. ♙e3

11.f4 was also strong as after 11...e×f4 12. ♙×f4, Black's knights are far from d7 and control of the critical e5-square.

Danish Grandmaster Bent Larsen (1935-2010) was considered one of best in the world in the later '60s and early '70s. Although he is probably most remembered for the whitewashing at Fischer's hand in the 1971 Candidates' match, he played creative, powerful chess most of his career. He was Danish champion six times and qualified for the Candidates' cycles four times.

**11...f5 12.f3 f4 13. ♙f2 g5
14.b4**

**1.d4 ♜f6 2.c4 g6 3. ♜c3 ♙g7
4.e4 d6 5. ♜f3 0-0 6. ♙e2 e5**



14...cxb4

Black would like to play 14...b6, but this fails tactically to 15.bxc5 bxc5 16.♗xc5! dxc5 17.d6 when White recovers the sacrificed material with a clear positional advantage after 17...♝xd6 18.♞xd6 ♗xd6 19.♗xc5 or 17...♗xd6 18.♗xc5 ♖f6 19.♗b5 ♗g6 20.♞d5+ ♗e6 21.♝xd6 ♗f8 22.♝xd8 ♖xd8 23.♗xa7.

15.♗xb4 ♖f6

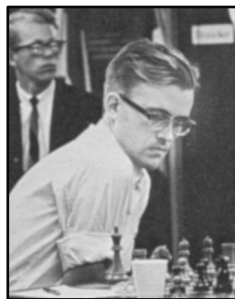
Black has no time to organize play on the kingside with the traditional plan of ...♖f7, ...♗f8, ...♞g7, ...♗g6, ...h5 and ...g4. For example, 15...♖f7 16.♗d3 ♗g6 17.c5 and White's play on the queenside is much too fast.

16.c5 ♞g6

Larsen continues to dream of a kingside attack, but 16...dxc5 would have fared no better after 17.♗xc5 ♞g6 18.♖c1 and again White's play on the queenside comes much too quickly.

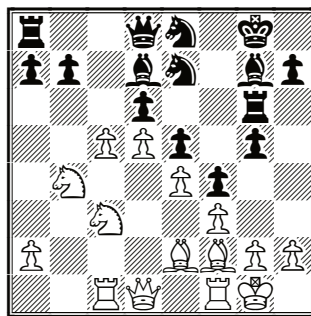
17.♞c1

17.c6 is the preference of Stockfish, with the idea of meeting 17...b6 with 18.♗a6. While it will be hard for Black to generate an attack on the kingside after the trade of light-square bishops, the game continuation seems equally good and easier to play.



Bent Larsen

17...♗d7

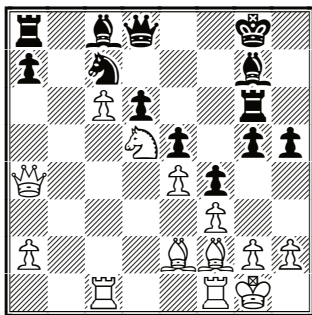


17...dxc5 18.♗xc5 b6 19.♗f2 ♗d7 (19...h5 20.♗c6) 20.a4 h5 was more stubborn but after 21.♗b5, Black is struggling.

18.c6! ♗c8

18...bxc6 19.dxc6 ♗e6 20.♗cd5 is winning on the spot.

19.cxb7 ♗xb7 20.♞a4 h5 21.♗c6 ♗xc6 22.dxc6 ♗c8 23.♗d5 ♗c7



24. ♖a5!

This final blow finishes Black off.

**24... ♗e6 25. ♖xd8+ ♗xd8
26. ♗e7+ ♖f7 27. ♗xg6 ♖xg6
28. c7 ♗e6 29. ♗c4 ♗xc7
30. ♗b3 ♗b5 31. ♗d5 ♖b8
32. ♖b1 1-0**

(13) I.A. Horowitz – James

Sherwin

U.S. Open

Milwaukee1953

King's Indian Defense [E76]

American International Master I.A. (Al) Horowitz (1907-1973) was among the top ten in the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s. A prolific chess author, he is best known for having co-founded *Chess Review* in 1933.

**1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 g6 3. ♗c3 ♗g7
4.e4 d6 5.f4 c5**

Black normally castles before playing this move but there is nothing wrong with advancing the c-pawn early. It takes away the sequence 5...0-0 6. ♗f3 c5 7. ♗e2

cxd4 8. ♗xd4 ♗c6 9. ♗e3 for White, not that this is something to worry about.

6. ♗f3

6.d5 is more common these days.

After 6...0-0, 7. ♗f3 e6 8. ♗e2 exd5 9.cxd5 transposes into a line that also arises from the Benoni while 9.exd5 is also playable.

6.dxc5 is met by 6... ♖a5 (6...0-0 7.cxd6 exd6 8. ♗f3 ♖b6 9. ♗d3 ♗a6 is a more dynamic approach) 7. ♗d3 ♖xc5 (7... ♗fd7!?) 8. ♗f3 ♗c6 9. ♖e2 0-0 10. ♗e3 was seen in Geller-Gligorić, Saltsjöbaden Interzonal 1952 and Keres-Bronstein, Zürich Interzonal 1953.

6...cxd4 7. ♗xd4 ♗c6 8. ♗c2

The text pretty much commits White to accepting doubled c-pawns. The alternative was 8. ♗e3 ♗g4 9. ♗g1 0-0 (the immediate 9...e5 is also good) 10. ♗e2 e5 11. ♗xc6 bxc6 12. ♗xg4 ♖h4+ 13. ♗f2 ♖xg4 14. ♖xg4 ♗xg4 15.f5 gxf5 16.h3 ♗h5 17.exf5 f6 18.0-0 with equal chances.

8... ♗d7 9. ♗e2

White does not have time to avoid the doubled pawns, protect his e-pawn and get castled. For example, 9. ♗d2 0-0 10. ♗e2 ♗c5 11. ♗f3? ♗d3+.

**9... ♗xc3+ 10.bxc3 ♗c5
11. ♗f3**

White could also sacrifice a pawn, counting on his two bishops for compensation. This might have been a better practical choice although after 11.♖d4 ♖xe4 12.♙f3 f5 or 11.♖e3 ♖xe4 12.♙f3 ♖c5, it is not clear White has enough for the sacrificed material.

11...♜a5 12.♜d2

12.0-0 ♙e6 13.♖e3 ♜xc3 14.♞b1 0-0 and White had insufficient compensation for the pawn, Teschner-Gligorić, Helsinki Olympiad 1952.

12...♙e6

This is the standard approach to lay siege to the c-pawn but Stockfish's suggestion of 12...g5 is also interesting, sacrificing a pawn for an ironclad grip on the e5-square after 13.f×g5 ♖e5.

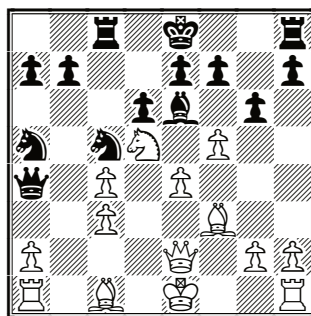
13.♖e3 ♜a4

13...♜a6 14.♜e2 ♖a5 15.♖d5 ♞c8 should lead to similar play.

14.♜e2 ♖a5 15.♖d5

15.0-0 ♙xc4 16.♖xc4 ♜xc4 17.♜e3 0-0 18.e5 d×e5 19.♜×e5 was a better try with compensation for the pawn.

15...♞c8 16.f5



16...♙d7?

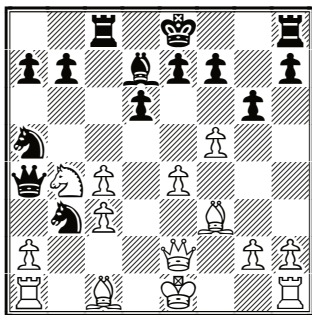
This move, Black's only serious error in the game, avoids undoubling White's pawns but more importantly allows the powerful knight to remain on the board. Correct was 16...♙×d5, trading the doubled c4-pawn for the weak c4-square.

After 17.c×d5 ♖ab3 18.♞b1 ♖×c1 19.♞×c1 ♖d7 20.0-0 ♖e5, Black has a large positional advantage and just as importantly an easy position to play. This is important as in the game, while he is often better, play is messy and deciding where to put the king a tricky issue.

17.♖b4?

Protecting the doubled c-pawn is not the solution to White's problems. More dynamic play was called for: 17.♙g5 f6 18.e5! d×e5 19.♖×e7 ♜xc4 20.♖xc8 ♜×e2+ 21.♙×e2 f×g5 22.♖xa7 g×f5 with roughly equal play.

17...♖cb3



18.a×b3

This move sacrifices the exchange but White should have offered a rook! 18.e5! offered equal play after both its acceptance and refusal:

18...♖×a1 19. exd6 ♖c2+! (This correctly returns material to get Black's pieces into the game. The materialistic 19...e6 fails to 20.♙e5 0-0 21.♙f6!, while 19...0-0 20.dxe7 ♖fe8 21.0-0 leaves White with a dominating position.) 20.♖xc2 e6 21.♙e5 0-0 22.♙f6 ♙xc4.

18...♖xc1 19.♖xc1 ♖xc4 20.exd6 ♖xd6 21.f6 e6 22.0-0 ♙a5.

18...♙×a1 19.0-0 ♙×c3 20.♖d5 ♙×b3

20...♙d4+? walks into 21.♖e3 ♙e5 22.♖d1 ♖xb3 23.♖f4 ♙g7 24.f6.

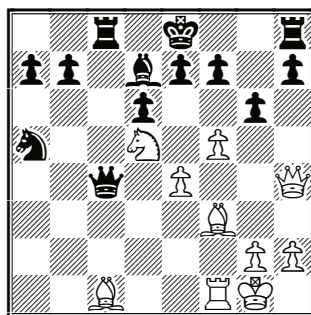
21.♙f2 ♙×c4?

This is a hard position to play. The text looks natural but Stockfish points to 21...♖c6! as the right idea, immediately bringing the knight back into the game.



I.A. (Al) Horowitz

22.♙h4?



The Oracle (Stockfish) suggests 22.♖b2 as White's correct course, preparing to throw the kitchen sink at Black. Its main line continues 22...♖b5 23.♖e1 f6 24.♖e2 ♙b3 25.f×g6 h×g6 26.♖xf6 ♖f8 27.♖xe7 ♖xf6 28.♙xf6 ♙e3+ 29.♙h1 ♖c1 30.♖xb5+ ♖c6 31.♖f1 ♖xf1+ 32.♖xf1 ♖xe7 33.♖b5+ ♖c6 34.♖xc6+ bxc6 35.♙e6+ with a draw by perpetual check.

22...f6 was also possible: 23.f×g6 h×g6 24.♖xe7 ♙c2 (and not 24...♙xe7? 25.♖xf6+ ♙xf6? 26.♖e2+) 25.♖xc8 ♙xf2+ 26.♖xf2

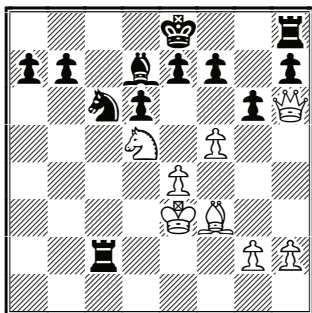
♙xc8 27.♙xf6 ♖f8 28.e5 with equal chances.

22...♜xf1+?

The desire to clarify the positional is understandable, particularly in terrible time pressure, but Black had far better. The centralizing 22...♘c6 was the answer, but it is not easy to see the follow-up which consists of ...♙d8 and ...♖e8 (to protect e7) followed by ...♘e5, ...♙e6 and ...♙d7 (or .. ♙c7-b8 if feasible) consolidating.

Finding this idea over the board and successfully implementing it would not be easy. Here is a sample variation of it in action:
23.♙e3 ♙d8 24.♖c1 ♜a4 25.♙d1 ♜a2 26.f×g6 f×g6 27.♙f3 ♖e8 28.♜×h7 ♘e5 29.♖f1 ♙e6 30.♙d1 ♙×d5 31.e×d5 ♙c7 32.h3 ♙b8 and Black is clearly winning.

23.♜×f1 ♖×c1+ 24.♙f2 ♘c6
25.♜h6 ♖c2+ 26.♙e3



26...♘e5

The plan of freeing the knight from the defense of e7 and resolving the

king's future was still possible (26...♙d8 27.♜g7 ♖e8). While not as strong as earlier it was still promising, however, Black had only seconds left on his clock.

27.♜h4 ♘c6 Draw

(14) James Sherwin – Edward Lasker

Marshall Juniors vs. Marshall Seniors

New York 1954

Tarrasch Defense [D34]

Edward Lasker is best remembered today for the books he wrote, but he was also a strong player who lost a match to Frank Marshall in 1923 for the U.S. Championship by the narrowest of margins, 9½-8½.

Lasker was almost 70 when this game was played, but as we will soon see still a formidable opponent.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5
4.c×d5 e×d5 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.g3
♘f6 7.♙g2 ♙e7 8.0-0 0-0
9.d×c5 d4?!

This gambit line is an interesting if not quite correct replacement for the more commonly seen 9...♙×c5.

10.♘a4 ♙f5 11.♙f4

11.b4!? is an interesting alternative which involves an exchange sacrifice after 11...d3. After