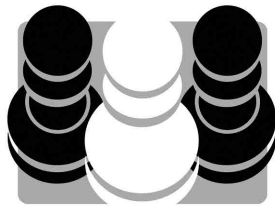


Mikhail Tal's Best Games 2

The World Champion

By

Tibor Karolyi



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Preface to Volume 2

The World Champion is the middle volume of our three-part investigation into Mikhail Tal's life and career. We will rejoin the story after the climactic events of *The Magic of Youth*, where Tal's superb score of 20/28 at the 1959 Candidates tournament earned him the right to challenge Botvinnik for the world title.

Tal's 1960 match against Botvinnik was the most eagerly anticipated world championship match in decades. Not only was it a clash between generations; it also featured two strong personalities with diametrically opposing chess philosophies. Tal stunned the chess world (not to mention Botvinnik) with his ferocious attacking style in a way unlike any other player before him.

Tal's career probably featured the most dramatic ups and downs of any world champion. After losing the rematch to Botvinnik he was still one of the strongest players in the world, but his performance was hampered by extensive health problems. Tal's maverick personality and bohemian lifestyle made him a fan favourite, but were not necessarily conducive to success over the chessboard.

Despite the health problems and other challenges he faced, Tal remained one of the world's best and most popular players throughout the 1960s and early 70s. I hereby invite you to turn the page and enjoy the next phase of the story of Tal's life and magical chess ability.

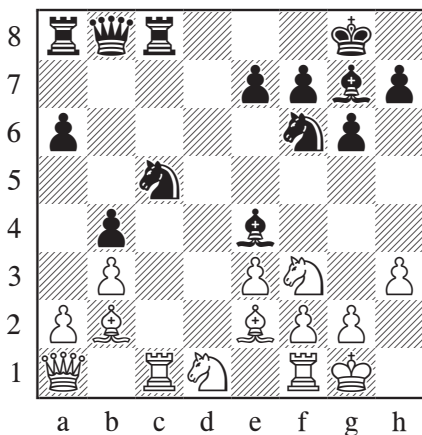
Tibor Karolyi
Budapest, June 2015

GAME 10

Burkhard Malich – Mikhail Tal

Leipzig Olympiad 1960

1.d4 c5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 g6 4.♗f3 ♙g7 5.♙e2
0-0 6.dxc5 ♗a6 7.0-0 ♗xc5 8.♗c3 b6
9.♖c2 ♙b7 10.b3 d5 11.♙b2 dxc4 12.♙xc4
♖b8 13.h3 a6 14.♞ac1 b5 15.♙e2 ♞c8
16.♖b1 b4 17.♗d1 ♙e4 18.♖a1



18...♖b7!

Malich has played the opening passively, and Tal already has the more active position. Before doing anything else, he increases the pressure on the a8-h1 diagonal in order to limit the movement of the f3-knight.

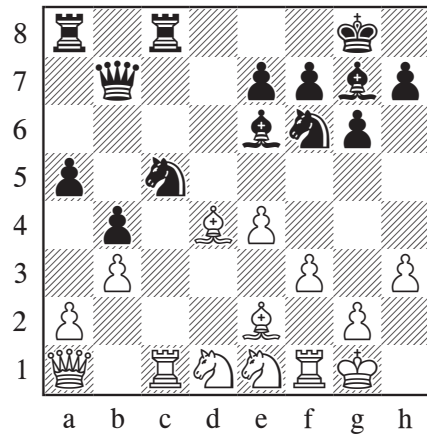
19.♗e1 a5

With six of his opponent's eight pieces on the back rank, Tal prepares to attack on the queenside.

20.f3 ♙f5 21.e4?!

Malich plays the move that Tal provoked. He should have preferred 21.♙c4 a4 22.e4 ♙d7 23.♖b1 when White is still struggling, but is better off than in the game.

21...♙e6 22.♙d4



22...a4!!

Tal does not bother to defend the knight, and simply goes full steam ahead on the queenside.

23.♞xc5

White has nothing better than taking the piece. If 23.bxa4? ♞xa4 24.♖b1 ♗fxe4! 25.♙xg7 ♗d2 Black wins.

23...♞xc5 24.♙xc5 axb3 25.a4

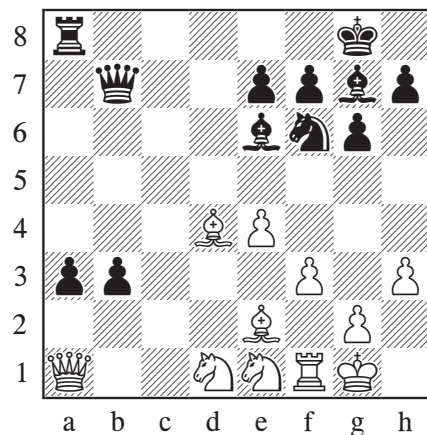
If 25.♗b2? ♗d7 26.♙e3 ♞xa2 Black regains the piece and wins easily.

25...bxa3

Tal's idea prevails: his mighty connected passed pawns are irresistible.

26.♙d4

26.♙xa3? ♖a7† wins.

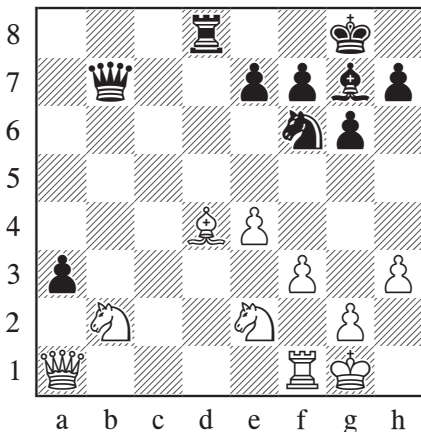


26...♖d8!

Malich must have been hoping to return his extra piece to eliminate Black's queenside pawns. Tal refuses to allow it, and gets ready to eliminate the bishop on d4.

27.♘d3 ♗c4 28.♘f4 ♕xe2 29.♘xe2 b2

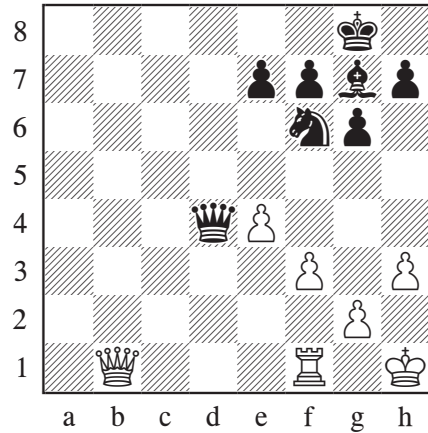
Black can also win by slower means, but Tal decides to force the issue. It would be interesting to know whether he played it because he was certain he was winning, or whether in fact he was unsure but could not find anything better. In any case, his play in the game makes a convincing impression.

30.♘xb2**30...♖xd4! 31.♘xd4 axb2 32.♖d1 ♖b6 33.♙h1 b1=♖**

Tal chooses to cash in the b-pawn to pick up the white knight. Keeping the pawn with 33...♘xe4 34.fxe4 ♕xd4 would have reached a different type of winning endgame; alternatively, 33...♘h5 34.♘e2 ♖c3 35.♖d8† ♕f8 36.♖b1 ♖xe2 37.♖b8 leads to the same type of position as in the game.

34.♖xb1 ♖xd4

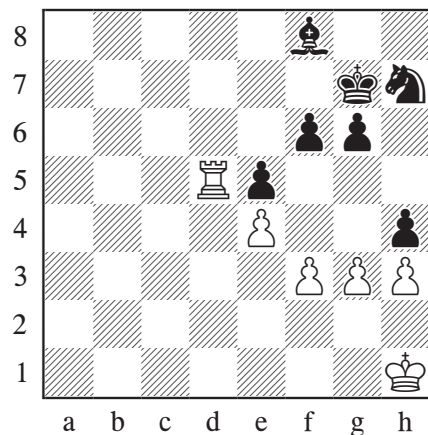
Black's material advantage is enough to bring home the full point. There is still some work to do, but Tal makes no mistake in the endgame.

**35.♖d1 ♖e5 36.♖d8† ♕f8 37.♖c1 h5 38.♖c8 ♘h7 39.♖a8 ♙g7 40.♖d5 ♖c3 41.♖d8 h4 42.♖d1 ♖e5**

I was unable to find out when the game was adjourned. It is interesting that Tal was happy to exchange queens. An alternative winning plan was to set up an attack with his queen and bishop on the dark squares.

43.♖d4 ♖xd4 44.♖xd4 e5 45.♖d5 f6 46.g3

Malich sensibly tries to swap pawns. Please note that Tal's bishop would be the wrong colour to win in the event that he was left with only the h-pawn.

**46...g5 47.♙g2 ♕b4 48.f4!**

Malich keeps exchanging pawns. This is certainly a better try than 48.♖b5 ♕e1, when

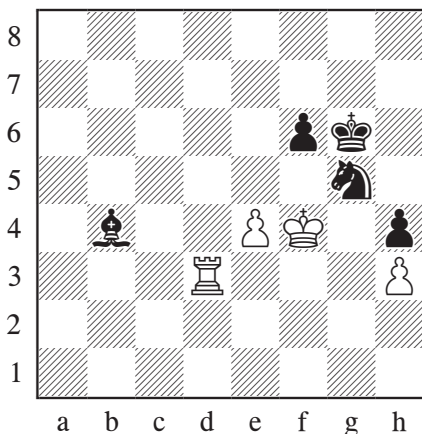
Black easily wins by posting his bishop on g3 and transferring his knight to f4.

**48...xf4 49.gxf4 gxf4 50.♔f3 ♖g5†
51.♕xf4 ♕g6!**

51...♖xh3†?? would be a blunder due to: 52.♕g4! (52.♕f5? ♖f2 53.♖d7† ♕h6 54.♕xf6 h3 wins for Black) 52...♖f2† (52...♖g5 53.e5! draws easily) 53.♕f3! White's king traps the knight. (53.♕xh4? ♖c3! 54.♖c5 [54.♕g3 ♖xe4†] 54...♖xe4 wins) 53...♖e1 54.♕e2 h3 55.♖h5 ♕g6 56.♖h8 White draws.

52.♖d3

52.e5 f5 wins.



52...♖e1!

With this move Tal wins one of White's pawns by force.

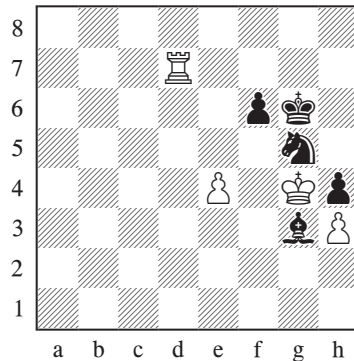
53.♖d8??

With one of his pawns about to drop off, Malich desperately tries to activate the rook; his blunder may also have been influenced by time trouble.

53.♖d7 would not have offered any serious resistance either, and in fact Black has two ways to win:

a) The prosaic 53...♖xh3† 54.♕g4 ♖f2† 55.♕xh4 ♖xe4† reaches a winning endgame, as the Nalimov tablebase confirms.

b) It would be nice to think that Tal would have found the following much prettier solution: 53...♖g3† 54.♕g4



54...♖f7! and White has to give up his rook.

53...♖e6†

0-1

In the penultimate round Tal was White against Ghitescu. Tal got a clear advantage from the opening, but misplayed the position and was even in some danger of becoming worse. However, the Romanian player went wrong before the time control and Tal capitalized.

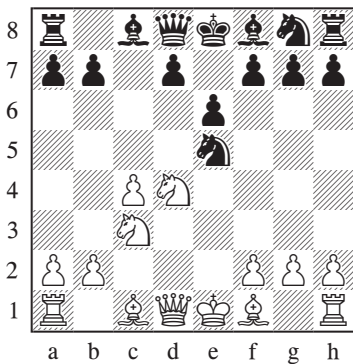
The final round took place on the 8th of November, the day before Tal's birthday. He asked the captain to be rested, but the request was in vain, and Tal had to face Penrose of England with the black pieces. With hindsight, perhaps he should have played a safer opening than the Modern Benoni. A pragmatist such as Karpov would adapt his approach according to how much energy he had, and play for a solid draw when he needed to – but not Tal. In a complicated middlegame Penrose sacrificed a pawn for the initiative. Tal got a worse position and blundered a piece. He fought on for as long as he could, but eventually had to resign.

Thus Tal suffered his first loss as World Champion. The defeat cost him the individual gold medal for performance on top board, although he still finished with the second-highest score for Board 1, and the highest among those whose teams qualified for the top group after the preliminaries. Botvinnik performed well on the second board, and Fischer's percentage on Board 1 for the USA was just slightly below Tal's.

After the Olympiad Tal was invited to perform a simultaneous exhibition against the top Czechoslovakian juniors. The opposition was strong, with future grandmasters such as Hort, Smejkal, Jansa and Plachetka among the twenty participants. The format was unusual, as the first thirty moves were played via radio in 1960; then, in January of 1961, Tal travelled to Prague to finish the games. Tal did not play his normal openings, and experimented with 1.c4 or 1.d4 in several games. Even in his 1.e4 games, he would try out openings such as the King's Gambit, although on the whole he seemed to take a practical approach for the simul, and did not play as sharply as normal.

Interestingly, this simul saw Tal make one of the most important novelties of his career:

1.c4 ♘f6 2.♘c3 e6 3.e4 c5 4.e5 ♘g8 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘xe5



8.♘db5!

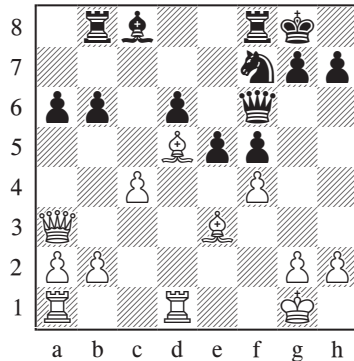
Tal's novelty was repeated only sporadically for over a decade, but it started to catch on in the mid-1970s. It has since become established as a dangerous main line, and has been tested in many hundreds of games, proving once again that Tal was far ahead of his time. I find it surprising that Tal does not refer to this game in his book.

Korchnoi had once played 8.♘f4 against Tal in the 1956 Soviet Championship, so it is possible that Tal's subsequent analysis of that game was what sparked his new idea.

8...a6 9.♘d6† ♘xd6 10.♖xd6 f6 11.♘f4

11.♘e3 has since become established as the main line.

11...♘f7 12.♖a3 ♘e7 13.♘e2 0-0 14.0-0 e5 15.♘e3 b6 16.♘f3 ♖b8 17.♖fd1 f5 18.♘d5 ♘xd5 19.♘xd5 ♖f6 20.f4 d6



21.♖xd6!

With this sweet move Tal obtained a clear advantage in Tal – Falta, Prague (radio simul) 1960, although a later error, combined with his opponent's stubborn defence, caused the game to end in a draw.

Tal's performance against the best Czechoslovakian juniors was impressive: he was unbeaten, with eleven wins and nine draws. I asked grandmaster Vlastimil Jansa to share his memories from the event. Here is what he wrote:

“Yes, it was a big event in Prague! Mikhail Tal was very popular at that time; he was still young, and of course I was even younger. The first part of this famous simul and the moves from all twenty games were announced on our radio (two moves daily), and in all the newspapers. It received a lot of attention – almost everybody knew about it in our country. The concluding part of the games took place in the beautiful Lucerna Hall in the centre of Prague (close to the venue of the 1931 Prague Chess Olympiad). There were many hundreds of spectators; the luxury hall was completely full. I played on the first board – it was great! Misha Tal was friendly towards us as well as the spectators. I was happy to make a draw, and was even happier six years later in Sarajevo when I managed to beat him in a normal tournament game.”

Towards the end of 1960 Tal played a semi-rapid game (one hour each) against Gideon Stahlberg. Tal had the white pieces and won easily. His final tournament of the year, which started in December 1960 and ran into January 1961, was in Stockholm. In the first round Tal was White against Johannessen, and after a dubious pawn sacrifice he was lucky to equalize. A later mistake led to a lost position for Tal, but his Norwegian opponent went wrong and allowed Tal to escape with a draw. In the second round Tal exploited Nilsson's dubious play and won convincingly.

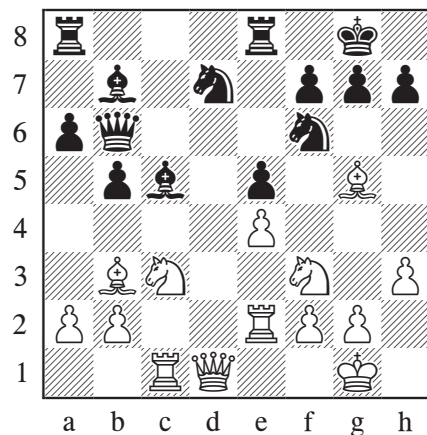
Tal's next opponent was Wolfgang Unzicker, who was known as the strongest amateur in the world at that time. Unzicker was indeed one of Germany's top players for two decades, and he faced eight world champions from Euwe to Karpov. In sixty-eight games against them, he scored four wins, forty-one draws and twenty-three losses.

GAME 11

Mikhail Tal – Wolfgang Unzicker

Stockholm 1960/61

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6
5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♞e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.c3 0-0
9.h3 ♘b8 10.d4 ♘bd7 11.c4 c6 12.c5 ♞c7
13.cxd6 ♙xd6 14.♙g5 c5 15.dxc5 ♙xc5
16.♘c3 ♙b7 17.♞c1 ♞b6 18.♞e2 ♞fe8



19.♘d5!

Tal forces an exchange which allows him to uncover a weakness in Black's position.

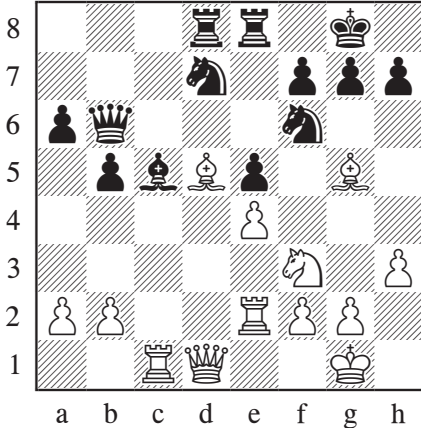
19...♙xd5

19...♘xd5 20.♙xd5 is also problematic for Black: 20...♙xd5 (20...♙d4 21.♘xd4 exd4 22.♙xb7 ♞xb7 23.♞xd4 wins a pawn) 21.♞xd5 ♞a7 22.♞d1! An important subtlety. (The automatic 22...♞d2? would let the advantage slip after 22...♘b6!) 22...♘f8 23.♘xe5 White is a pawn up for nothing.

20.♙xd5 ♞ad8?!

20...♞ac8 is a better try, although the accurate continuation 21.♞ec2 a5 22.♘e1! ♞c7 23.♘d3 ♞ec8 24.♘xc5 ♘xc5 25.♞e2 ♘fd7 26.♙e3 leaves Black horribly tied up by the pin.

Unzicker's move looks like a logical attempt to exert pressure on the d-file, but he misses Tal's chance to raid on the black king.



21.♞c2!

With this and the next few accurate moves, Tal uncovers a weakness when it looks like none exists.

21...♙e7

21...♞c8? would be too late because of 22.b4.

22.♞c6!

Tal wins a big tempo and opens a crucial line for his queen.

22...♞a5

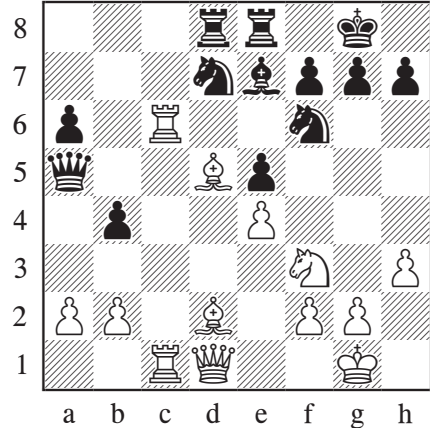
22...♞b8 can be refuted by: 23.♙xf6! ♙xf6 (23...♘xf6 24.♙xf7† ♔xf7 25.♞b3† ♔g6 26.♘h4† ♔h5 27.♞f3† leads to mate, as Tal points out) Tal writes that he was planning 24.♞xa6, but 24...♘b6 enables Black to fight on for a while at least. Had the position occurred on the board, I expect he would have found 24.♞c7! or 24.♞b3! ♞e7 25.♞xa6, either of which would have won more clinically.

23.♙d2!

The bishop vacates the g5-square.

23...b4

23...♞a4 24.♙b3 ♞xe4 gives White a choice between 25.♙xf7† and 25.♘g5, both of which win easily.



24.♙xf7!

Tal's two previous tempo-gaining moves were designed to set up this finale, which opens up Black's king decisively.

24...♔xf7 25.♞b3† ♔f8

25...♔g6 26.♘h4† ♔h5 27.♞f3† leads to a quick mate. Unzicker placed his king on the other available square, but resigned without waiting for 26.♘g5. This game was played on New Year's Eve, and what a way to finish a fantastic year! Tal not only won the World Championship match by a convincing margin, but continued to play great chess for the rest of the year.

1-0

The New Year started well for Tal, as he outplayed Stahlberg on the white side of a French Defence in extremely impressive fashion. You can find a large part of the game on page 106 of the first volume, in the notes to Tal – Veder from 1951.

Tal followed this with a draw in a sharp King's Indian against Uhlmann. He then overpowered Nielsen before taking a quick, possibly prearranged, draw with Kotov.

Tal's next two games were both Sicilians. In round 8 Tal was White against Martin Johansson, and made a standard d5 sacrifice in a promising situation. Johansson did not touch the knight but he fell into trouble all the same, and Tal brought him down with a direct attack. In the next round Tal faced Burehall, who reacted to the Sicilian by going for a closed system. Burehall tried to mount an attack in the middlegame, but Tal kept things under control and established a dominating position which he converted to victory.

In the 10th round Tal was White against Book. He failed to get an opening advantage and later became worse, but his opponent failed to capitalize and later went wrong, enabling Tal to win and preserve a half-point lead over Uhlmann before the last round. In order to guarantee sole first place, Tal needed to defeat Erik Lundin with Black. A fairly peaceful Sicilian ensued, but Tal obtained the advantage of the bishop pair, which he skilfully exploited in the endgame.

Tal thus won the tournament with the superb score of $9\frac{1}{2}/11$. His White openings were not particularly impressive, and his opponents might have played better in some games, but Tal still played well and took his chances when he needed to. Credit must also go to Uhlmann, whose score of $9/11$ would have been more than enough to win most tournaments.

1960 was a magical year for Tal. He not only crushed Botvinnik to become the youngest World Champion in chess history, but also produced some of the most impressive tournament performances of any champion in the months after winning the title. After doing some research on this topic, my opinion is that Topalov's tournament results in 2005 come closest to matching Tal's achievements. Karpov was also extremely impressive in 1975, but he (admittedly through no fault of his own) was not burdened by a match against Fischer, so he was able to put much more of his energy into tournaments.



1960 Summary

Tal played a total of fifty-five games in 1960. (This summary includes the entirety of the Stockholm tournament which ran into the early days of the new year, but excludes the Prague simultaneous exhibition.)

Tal played twenty-eight games with the white pieces, scoring nineteen wins, eight draws and one defeat: a staggeringly impressive tally, especially considering that eleven of those games took place in a world title match.

1.e4 remained Tal's main choice. He had the most trouble against the Caro-Kann, although he still achieved a healthy plus score of $+3 =3 -1$. Once Botvinnik's main defence is taken out of the equation, Tal's 1.e4 results from 1960 are stunning: from a total of eleven games on the white side of the Ruy Lopez, Sicilian and French, Tal dropped just half a point and won the other ten games. Tal also scored an impressive six wins and four draws in the closed openings.

Tal had twenty-seven games with the black pieces. He won ten of them, drew fifteen and lost only two. Here too, his percentage score is superb, considering the difficulty of a world championship match. Especially impressive is his score ($+5 =3 -0$) against 1.e4. Against the closed openings Tal had five wins, twelve draws and two defeats: a fine score, bearing in mind that ten of these games were against Botvinnik. Tal mainly used the Nimzo-Indian, Modern Benoni and King's Indian, all of which were trusty weapons for him.

1960 Results

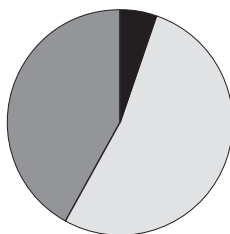
Tal – Botvinnik World Championship match: Won $12\frac{1}{2}-8\frac{1}{2}$ ($+6 =13 -2$)

West Germany – USSR match: $7\frac{1}{2}/8$ ($+7 =1 -0$)

Leipzig Olympiad (Board 1): $11/15$ ($+8 =6 -1$)

Stockholm (1st place): $9\frac{1}{2}/11$ ($+8 =3 -0$)

Total 73.6% ($+29 =23 -3$)



□ Wins ■ Draws ■ Losses