Features

May 22, 2017 | 22:26 by *chess24 staff*

Paul Keres VII: Last chance in Curaçao

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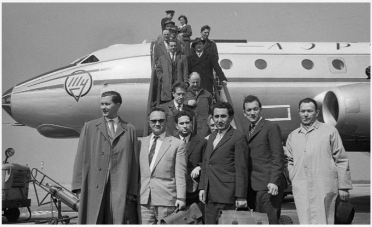
When Paul Keres was asked where he came closest to reaching a World Championship match against Mikhail Botvinnik, he responded “Curaçao”, referring to the 8-player, 28-round Candidates Tournament played on the Caribbean island in 1962. 46-year-old Keres went in to the penultimate round tied for first, but would once again finish second in a tournament infamous for Bobby Fischer’s accusations of collusion among the Soviet players. Joosep Grents continues his series on the life of the great Estonian player.



Paul Keres (left), alongside Efim Geller, Mikhail Tal, Tigran Petrosian and Viktor Korchnoi (with seconds Yuri Averbakh and Isaac Boleslavsky on the stairs), as the Soviet delegation stops in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on the way to the 1962 Candidates Tournament in Curaçao | photo: *Dutch National Archive* via *Douglas Griffin*

Once again we've added most of the games discussed in this article to the collection below (that now numbers 130 by Paul Keres) so you can replay them with modern computer analysis. Just click on a result to go to a game:

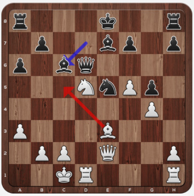
	White	Evaluation	Black
1	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Bilek, Istvan
2	GM Petrosian, T..	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Keres, Paul
3	GM Hort, V.	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Keres, Paul
4	GM Fischer, R.	○ ½ - ½ ●	GM Keres, Paul
5	GM Keres, Paul	○ 0 - 1 ●	IM Khasin, Abram
6	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Benko, Pal

« ‹ ... 1953-1959 1960-1962 1963-1975 › »

1960-62 Vintage Keres

by Joosep Grents

The beginning of the 1960s was not as revolutionary as we now imagine it. This was the case for Keres, in particular, since in 1960 he played only a couple of rather insignificant tournaments and his results were similarly casual. In Stockholm he took on a relatively weak field, with Kotov perhaps the only player expected to give him a fight. In the end Keres blundered a rook in his game against Sköld and had to accept third place. He managed to win the Balto-Georgian Championship, but not in an impressive fashion, needing to save lost positions against weaker opposition. The only high point of 1960 was his performance at the Leipzig Olympiad, where he won yet another individual gold (10.5/13), on board three, and managed to win some good games, including *Keres - Bilek, 1960*.



Here Keres went for 18.Bc5!

But these were mere flashes of brilliance while navigating a minefield of weaker players. In fact, Keres played no games against the world elite in 1960. Despite this, he remained in form and the 1961 Zürich tournament promised a return to the inter-war atmosphere he loved so much, even if much had changed since those years. In an interview with the local organizers, Keres talked about the difference:

> Clearly between then and now, there is a difference in the general approach to chess and the approach to individual games. One could say that in the thirties people focused on playing, while nowadays people increasingly focus on preparation.

Secondly, it was Fischer and the chess boom he would bring about in the West which started to encourage wealthy chess enthusiasts and businesses to invest in chess and chess tournaments, especially those where Fischer chose to participate. Fischer knew how to bargain the best conditions for himself and became known for his constant haggling with the organisers. Keres, having grown up in a slightly different era, was contemptuous of such behaviour. Heuer recalled 1947-8, when Botvinnik was furiously negotiating the best possible conditions and regulations for the World Championship tournament:

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> I remember how, just prior to the 1948 World Championship tournament, we sat in the office of Aado Slutski: Keres was there along with his coach Tolush - who was to become the special correspondent for the paper - and me, sitting in the corner and taking notes of Tolush's phone calls. I remember to this day the persistence of Keres in negotiating the highest possible fee for Tolush. This was at the same time when Botvinnik was in The Hague, trying to gain the best possible rules and regulations for the tournament. This also concerned Keres, but he quickly despised all this, even got angry: I will not engage in such stupidity! *(...)*
>
> Keres was no pushover, nor was he idealistically overbearing. In matters of everyday life, he would not hesitate to use his name as a key to unlock doors for himself. However, it's impossible to imagine a Keres who would have knocked at certain doors to score some extra points for himself. *(...)* He also refrained from psychological ploys and seemingly kept far from the hunt after ephemeral fame.

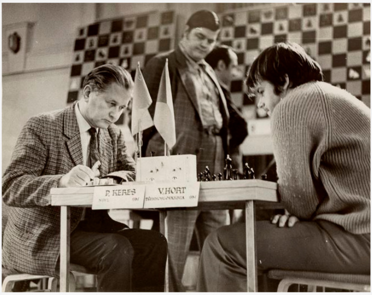
All in all, Zürich 1961 was much like the interwar tournaments Keres had grown up with. The organisers, primarily Meyer, were especially interested in providing comfort and everyday "luxuries" for the players, so that in between rounds the players were treated to various trips and receptions. Heuer notes that despite the passing of nearly three decades, the general environment of the tournament was reminiscent of the "old times", when players, despite being competitors at the board, were often good friends and would enrich and soften the competitive atmosphere with jokes and other entertainment, such as one of Keres' favourite pastimes: bridge. Heuer:

> However, the inevitable evolution of the game transformed it in the direction of fiercer competition, with the players growing increasingly distant from each other and isolation encouraged. Keres never felt himself completely at ease in such rigid environments, which goes to explain his clear antipathy towards such events.
>
> Tournaments like Zürich were his kind of tournament! It's where he loved to play, and it's where he often had the best results.

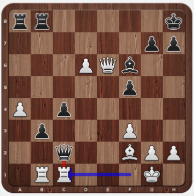
It should be no surprise, then, that the favourite to win, Petrosian, already lost to Keres *in the second round*. After that, Keres smoothly cruised to tournament victory with an undefeated 9/11. You can perhaps claim that Zürich wasn't an absolutely top event, since it featured only the stars Keres, Petrosian, Gligorić and Larsen alongside a somewhat weaker field. But Keres could afford to spare some of the weaker players, since he beat not only Petrosian but Gligorić as well. Alois Nagler:

> The tactful humour of Keres is unforgettable. In the international tournament of 1961, played in Zürich, the following story unfolded. After a few opening moves - it was a common variation of the Spanish - Keres covered his forehead with both of his hands and studied the position... for about half an hour. Finally he made his move, stood up and went for a walk in the playing hall. I then immediately approached him and asked if the variation had really been that complicated that he had to spend such a long time for such an obvious move. Keres smiled slyly and said: "No, not at all!" The position had not been hard for him at all, but what had been hard was concealing an afternoon nap from the spectators and the opponent. "Apparently I acted so well that even you, my dear friend, were unable to detect it."

While some escaped with a game of afternoon naps, his ability to make the relatively weaker players suffer by shocking them with his play is perhaps best exemplified by *his game against the 18-year old Vlastimil Hort* in the European Team Championships of 1961, played in Oberhausen.



Keres and Hort would go on to play another eight games, including this final encounter in Tallinn in 1975, just months before Keres died | photo: Dmitri Prants, ESM F 219:101/C 1047, *Estonian Olympic Sports Museum*

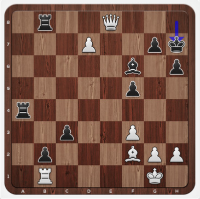


Here Keres sacrificed his queen with **35...Qxc1+!** Schach-Echo:

> This queen sacrifice startled the player with the white pieces (the youngest member of the Czechoslovakian team at only 18 years of age) to such a degree that he literally fell off his chair.

After **40...Kh7** Tal recalls:

> The wall of people surrounding the table clearly thought that now the game had to be over. After all, White can choose to win whichever rook he wants, thus winning the game. Hort probably thought the same was true. Trying to remain calm, he then approached the arbiter and asked for another queen. As usual, one could read nothing from Keres' face. Once we had analysed the position more deeply, we suddenly realised that Black is not that much worse after all. Queening the pawn can be met with c2, and despite having two queens on the board, White has nothing better than a perpetual!
>
> The round was already over. Hort pondered over his secret move for about 40 minutes. Keres approached us and asked in a slightly coy fashion: "Can't this position be played for a win?" After dinner the analysis began, and it became clear that White was in for a bitter fight for a draw. Hort's situation was further worsened when his secret move was immediately committal.



41.d8=Q Keres:

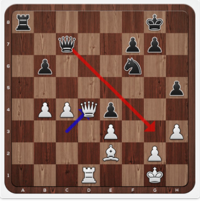
> Funnily enough, this apparently natural move turns out to be the crucial mistake. 41.Qxb8 would have offered White good chances of survival.

Another 10 moves and the game was over, with Keres picking up the prize for the best game with the win. Tal: “Astonishing play!”

Keres on the way to beating Hungary's Gedeon Barcza at the same event | photo: *Gerhard Hund*

This was temporary, however, as in Bled 1961 a loss in the first rounds against Bisguier meant that Keres could not keep up with the youthful prowess of Tal and Fischer. In the end he finished with only one loss and seven wins, along with 11 draws. +6 would at first sound like a very good result, but in the era of Fischer and Tal +6 was only good enough for third place, and Fischer could only shake his head in disillusionment, as even his +8 was not good enough to win the tournament. It was Tal who completely dominated the event by winning 11 of his games!

While Keres finished in shared third place, his play was hardly exceptional. He had to work hard, especially against Fischer, saving a clearly worse position *in their game*.



26.Qg3!? Who would dare provide Fischer with two passers? Passive defence was clearly not for Keres and the counterplay gamble was enough to save half a point.

Keres rounded off the year by playing in the Soviet Championship, held in Baku. Keres:

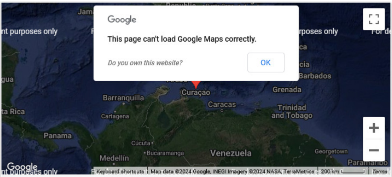
> I could not find my game in this tournament. It's possible that it was due to exhaustion after an eventful year, or it might be that I was demoralised by my blunder in my game with Khasin. Most of my games ended in draws and I finished in shared 8th place.

Keres - Khasin, 1961 is somewhat characteristic of his losses in this period, with an elementary oversight the common denominator.

While Keres managed to keep the likes of Spassky, Bronstein, Tal and Taimanov at bay, he lost games not only to Khasin but also to Vasiukov. Amid the cascade of draws, he won only four games, against Vladimirov, Kots, Shiyanovsky and Savon. In other words, both losing and winning against somewhat weaker players. As his games lacked the usual sparkle, it should come as no surprise that people were more and more inclined to attribute that to his age. However...

Curaçao Candidates 1962

Curaçao was to be an arduous tournament, dragging on for nearly two months. Keres, Tal, Petrosian, Fischer, Geller, Korchnoi, Benko and Filip would not only face each other four times, but have to face the tropical climate as well.



Curaçao

You would, at first, assume that would be the last thing the oldest contestant needed. However, in an extensive interview Keres gave prior to the tournament, he came up with a surprising response when asked whether the climate would affect the players:

> That's doubtful. The sea compensates for the heat quite well, so that the climate should be healthy and favourable. Besides, Curaçao is a recognised holiday resort. But South America in general is quite capricious - you can find places that have an unbearably humid and hot climate which are almost next to places that have a mellow maritime climate. The distance between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, for instance, is a mere 100 kilometres, but while you can feel at home in Montevideo the air in Buenos Aires is so warm and humid that it can make you feel you're suffocating. It's even more puzzling, then, that the first settlers gave it such a name, which in translation stands for good air. However, I still believe that Curaçao is a well-chosen location for a tournament lasting two months.

Slightly optimistic, no doubt, for the climate was not the kind one could acclimatise to easily, and failure to do so clearly took its toll on the players - on some more than on others. It also meant that physical form and the physical condition of the players was more important than in other tournaments. Averbakh:

> It appears to me that Keres is a veteran only in the formal sense of the word. Regular sport and exercise has allowed him to maintain freshness and strength. Despite his 46 years of age, Keres' physical condition is in no way inferior to that of his younger opposition.

However, the younger generation would have weapons of their own and when asked which of his rivals had made the most progress compared to earlier tournaments, Keres was quick to point out the obvious:

> Fischer, whose earlier games were often riddled with spontaneity, has made great progress and has become more mature and confident... His victory at the Interzonal was undoubtedly impressive and significant. However, it's one thing to play in a tournament where all you need is a place in the top six. Playing for only first place - against even stronger opposition - is something completely different. In any case, he's the most dangerous opponent for our quintet. All the Soviet players are equally capable of becoming the challenger. The weakest player of the eight is most likely Benko, who, as in the previous cycle, qualified last. But apart from Fischer, I don't see any remarkable improvements in other players.

The rising stars of Fischer and Tal were merely one complicating factor for the bookies. Add to that the interference of the Soviet chess machine with its own stars, mature and young, and it became clear that picking favourites was anyone's guess. The only sign of a potentially cold deck was suggested by Gligorić, whose prediction was prophetic:

> The one thing I can be certain of is that a single Fischer can't be stronger than five Soviet grandmasters.

However, the Soviet machine was perhaps not as well-oiled as it might have appeared afterwards. A curious organisational detail in Curaçao was that the Soviet players did not have private seconds. Instead, they were provided with two "communal coaches": Averbakh and Boleslavsky. They would assist the players with the analysis of adjourned positions and help them prepare for their games, but this was hardly ideal for such a long tournament. Keres criticised this in the interview and he was not alone in doing so. Tal:

> As the fight for the first places was conducted among the Soviet players, our coach Boleslavsky was forced to be neutral. During our crucial games, we were left to our own devices, both in preparing for the games, and analysing our adjourned positions. When we were playing the Western players, meanwhile, a line formed behind his door! I would hope that this unsuccessful experiment will not be repeated.

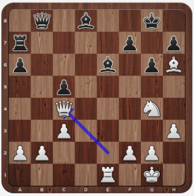
Not found

While many of the players and organisers had thought of the climate as entirely suitable, this view shifted as soon as the competition heated up as well. Heuer:

> People were trying to avoid the heat by hiding in the water. Everyone swam. Keres and Averbakh were especially notable for this - they more or less already lived in the water. The exception was Fischer. It was rumoured that he never took off his jacket when there was a crowd around, preferring casinos to the beaches and trying his luck at card games.

Slow and Steady

The tournament kicked off with a surprise as both Tal and Fischer managed to start with 0/2. While Fischer achieved some redemption in the next round against Filip, Tal went on to lose in the third round as well, this time to Benko. Tal's decision to play started to seem dubious, since he had just gone through a kidney operation prior to the tournament. It was becoming increasingly clear that he hadn't recovered sufficiently well. Keres had started calmly and went on to extend his unbeaten individual record *against Benko with a win in a mere 28 moves*. However, this was followed *by resigning against Fischer* in the next round, and after the first cycle of games Keres stood on 4/7 with Geller and Petrosian, while Korchnoi was just half a point ahead.



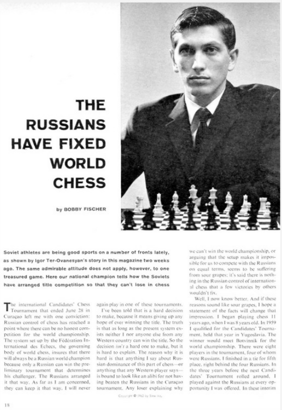
The position after Fischer's 27.Qxc4! He was relentless, with play continuing 27...Qd6 28.Qa4! Qe7 29.Nf6+! Kh8 30.Nd5!

Tal and Fischer had both started poorly, with Tal on 2 points and Fischer on 3. For many commentators this was already enough to dismiss any talk of them winning. However, while Tal would continue to suffer and play badly, the American managed to recover from the two losses as he replaced an element of arrogance with serious effort. He had realised that he had to give it his all in order to play well in the tournament, though his over-confidence would come back to haunt him. In his 9th round game against Geller he lost a pawn but entered a drawn rook endgame. He offered a draw, but Geller refused. Fischer then became upset and, after making his last two moves before the adjournment, he stood up and exclaimed, “What does Geller want of me?”, later declaring at the press centre, “I can draw this with my eyes closed.” Unfortunately, his last move before the adjournment had been a mistake and Geller went on to exploit it and win the game with precise play.

Keres was perhaps the player least in the spotlight during the early stages of the tournament. He was willing to make quick draws, especially with other Soviet players. Curiously, all the games between Petrosian, Keres and Geller in the tournament ended drawn. This was no coincidence. Korchnoi:

> This was perhaps the only time when the Soviet authorities did not intervene to determine any competition among the Soviets. On this occasion it was Petrosian personally who set up this controversy and he was helped by his friend, Geller. Keres was a wise man, but he was not cunning, he took the bait, while he could have refrained. The three players had privately agreed that they would draw all their games with each other. Tal and I were not included in this scheme. But in the end they colluded against Keres.

While Curaçao has often been presented as an example of Soviet collusion against Fischer, that’s largely because the context in which people approach the topic of Curaçao tends to be Fischer’s accusations of the Soviets manipulating the event.



THE RUSSIANS HAVE FIXED WORLD CHESS

by BOBBY FISCHER

Soviet athletes are being good sports on a number of fronts lately, as shown by Igor Ter-Ovanesyan's story in this magazine two weeks ago. The same admirable attitude does not apply, however, to one treasured game. Here our national champion tells how the Soviets have arranged title competition so that they can't lose in chess

The international Candidates' Chess Tournament that ended June 28 in Curaçao left me with one conviction: Russian control of chess has reached a point where there can be no honest competition for the world championship. The system set up by the Fédération International des Echecs, the governing body of world chess, insures that there will always be a Russian world champion because only a Russian can win the preliminary tournament that determines his challenger. The Russians arranged it that way. As far as I am concerned, they can keep it that way. I will never again play in one of these tournaments.

I've been told that is a hard decision to make, because it means giving up any hope of ever winning the title. The truth is that as long as the present system exists neither I nor anyone else from any Western country can win the title. So the decision *isn't* a hard one to make, but it is hard to explain. The reason why it is hard is that anything I say about Russian dominance of this part of chess—or anything that any Western player says—is bound to look like an alibi for not having beaten the Russians in the Curaçao tournament. Any loser explaining why we can't win the world championship, or arguing that the setup makes it impossible for us to compete with the Russians on equal terms, seems to be suffering from sour grapes; it's said there is nothing in the Russian control of international chess that a few victories by others wouldn't fix.

Well, I now know better. And if these reasons sound like sour grapes, I hope a statement of the facts will change that impression. I began playing chess 11 years ago, when I was 8 years old. In 1959 I qualified for the Candidates' Tournament, held that year in Yugoslavia. The winner would meet Botvinnik for the world championship. There were eight players in the tournament, four of whom were Russians. I finished in a tie for fifth place, right behind the four Russians. In the three years before the next Candidates' Tournament rolled around, I played against the Russians at every opportunity I was offered. In these interim

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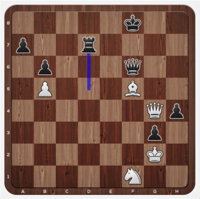
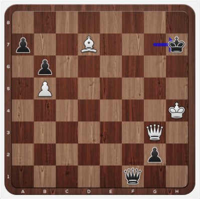
However, to place it in its proper context - that of the tournament conditions - drawing with two of his Soviet colleagues could hardly have been a winning strategy for Keres. Neither was it for Geller nor Petrosian, for that matter. Keres had a clear motivation to join the "drawing pact" as part of his usual strategy of attempting to conserve energy. Quick draws, whether prearranged or not, were the way to do that. Keres was 46 years old at the time, and two months of intense competition in a tropical climate would be extremely exhausting. It was only natural, then, that he sought ways to spare energy for the rest of the tournament. After all, such draws have been, are, and will be a normal feature of tournament chess. Presenting it as a form of cheating, or a way to collaborate specifically against Fischer, is far-fetched, to put it mildly. Even if there had not been prearranged draws between the three Soviet players, Fischer would likely still have finished below them, as he finished with negative scores against both Geller and Petrosian, and only an equal score of 2-2 with Keres. His time was still to come.

In any case, Korchnoi fell behind after losing a piece in a winning position against Fischer in round 12, meaning that Keres, Petrosian and Geller had good chances of finishing the second round of games in the lead. Keres claimed a win against Filip and then faced Fischer in the 14th round in *a game of truly epic proportions*.

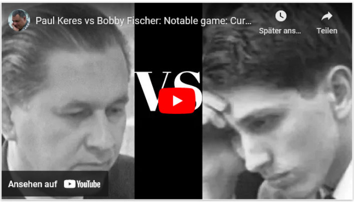
The game itself is rich and demands full analysis, but let's look at the conclusion. Fischer:



> **66.Bxd7!** During the game I considered it a mistake and that now Black can win at will. However, Keres had calculated and seen one move further. **66...Qf2 67.Kh3 Qf1 68.Kh4 g2 69.Qb4 Kf7 70.Qb3 Kg7 71.Qg3 Kh7!**



> The long awaited peace. Now I was convinced that I will win. Of course, White will play 72.Bf5+ and after 72...Qxf5 73.Qxg2 Qf4! 74.Qg4 Qxg4 75.Kxg4 Kg6! and Black will win the opposition, picking up White's last pawn. **72.Qe5!!** What is this?! Keres doesn't even try to stop the pawn from queening! After a while my excitement waned. The more I analysed the position, the more it dawned on me that there is no win in the position.



Evans:

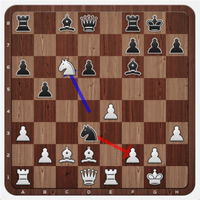
> Alekhine once said that to beat him, you have to beat him three times: in the opening, in the middlegame and in the endgame. These words are equally valid for Keres.

This meant that halfway through the tournament, it was Geller and Petrosian who shared the lead with 9 points, while Keres was in sole second place with 8.5 points.

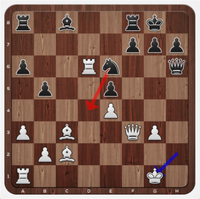
Record breaking

The exhausted players found some relief, since before the second half of the tournament they were given six days of rest. Keres' wife also finally arrived in Curaçao at that time. Heuer notes that Keres has often said that hearing and being able to speak Estonian to others during long and arduous trips always invigorated him. The timing seemed ideal, as when play resumed Keres went on to win against Filip and Tal, with the latter engaging in *a sharp game despite his poor physical condition*. It's beyond doubt that Keres was one of the most uncomfortable opponents for Tal, as their head-to-head record shows. And so it was that the somewhat "crippled" Tal was no opposition to Keres in this game, as the Estonian won in brilliant fashion:

18.Nd3! was followed by the flawed **19.Nc6?** which allowed a pretty combination:



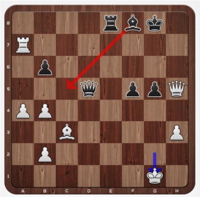
19...Nxf2! 20.Qf3 Nxh3+ 21.Kh2 Be5+ 22.Nxe5 dxe5 23.Rad1 Nf4 24.g3 Ne6 25.Bc3 Qg5 26.Rd6 Qh6+ 27.Kg1



27…Nd4! And the rest was a matter of technique.

These two wins inspired a third, as now it was *Korchnoi's turn to resign*. Meanwhile Geller and Petrosian honoured their arrangement and agreed to a draw after a mere 16 moves. The suspected pact continued, as Keres then drew in 22 moves against both *Petrosian* and *Geller*. But the third round of games belonged to Keres. *Benko went on to lose to him in curious fashion*, as he describes:

> Brilliant Paul lived through numerous tragic minutes. He was in contention for first place when we met in the third round of games. He had White against me, I played the Sicilian and even achieved a little edge. I then played an unsound sacrifice and was forced to draw the game with a perpetual. Having only my last seconds on the clock, I played the move which forced a perpetual, but didn't place the piece correctly on the square but a little outside it *(Jan Timman's book on the Curaçao tournament claims that "Benko was so nervous when making the move **38...Bc5+** that he knocked over a few pieces.")*. Keres then hit the clock again and said "Place your piece correctly!"



38...Bc5+! was the only move to draw, and Benko found it...

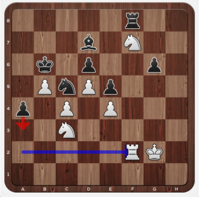
> I was clumsy and these were my last seconds on the clock. While placing the pieces back properly I saw that my time had run out. I was forfeited. I didn't protest the decision, but I was angry and thought to myself: "I'll push you against the wall at the most delicate moment!"

Heuer:

> The pieces were flying like rockets. This was of no use for Benko whose flag fell on the 38th move when he still had a perpetual at his command... A commentator claimed that Keres was speechless after the game. But far more might be lost with such games than first meets the eye, despite the fact that you still get a full point for it.

A point is a point, but some points come at a cost. Keres' lifetime score against Benko now stood at seven to nothing, but such a loss undoubtedly motivated Benko for his last encounter with Keres. After all, he had achieved a good position against Keres in the game he just lost.

In the final round of the third cycle, Keres faced Fischer. He again played a move that he had prepared especially for Fischer in the Chigorin variation of the Closed Spanish: **11…Nd7**. But while in their first game, Fischer went on to win by responding with 12.dxc4, now he deviated and played **12.d5**, likely aiming to avoid lines that Keres had prepared for him after their previous encounter. Fischer played the aggressive plan of g4-Nh2 but in the end got nowhere, as Keres *went on to win yet another game of 70+ moves*.



68...a3! and Fischer's defences were overloaded. He couldn't stop the pawn, keep the e4-pawn and defend the f7-knight.

Keres analyses with Fischer | photo via Mark Weeks, *Chess For All Ages*

Heuer:

> It was as if the Eternal Second had been reborn. In the third round of games he scored 6/7 - a new record for the Candidates Tournaments. As Curaçao was the last such Candidates Tournament, it will be an eternal record (if the cycle isn't changed again).

However, as a side note, it should be understood that the game between Keres and Fischer didn't finish before half of the games in the next cycle of games had already finished (it was adjourned twice), so despite this being a game from Round 21, Keres did not have any points for it in the table after the third round of games ended. You have to keep this in mind when checking the standings after Round 21, since such standings are purely formal.

1. **Keres** 14.5/21; 2-3. **Geller**, **Petrosian** 14/21; 4. **Korchnoi** 11/21; 5. **Fischer** 10/21; 6. **Benko** 9/21; 7. **Tal** 7/21; 8. **Filip** 4.5/21

The rest is history

The tournament claimed its first true victim as the end of the third round of games was also the end of the tournament for Tal. His illness had worsened and he was taken to a hospital where the doctors examined him for a whole week and then suggested that he withdraw from the tournament. In the end it was FIDE's decision that the former champion would not take any further part in the tournament.

Douglas Griffin
@dgriffinchess · **Follow**

1962 Curaçao Candidates' Tournament - the hospitalised Mikhail Tal is visited by Bobby Fischer. (A famous photo - credit unknown.) #chess

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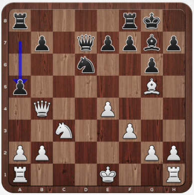
When play continued, Keres drew with Filip and was free during the next round as Tal was now out of the equation. While he was forced onto the sidelines, his competitors went out of their way to organise crucial attacks. Petrosian, known for his brilliant and solid defence, now sacrificed two pawns and a bishop to *crush Korchnoi in a mere 21 moves*. Geller was not so fortunate against Fischer, who brought Geller's undefeated run in the tournament to an end, seeing Geller drop to third.

In the next round both Keres and Petrosian drew with Korchnoi and Geller respectively and were set to meet in the next round. In Keres' correspondence with Eduard Tubin, he summed up the situation:

> The tournament is about to finish here, with only four games to go... Currently I am in shared first with Petrosian on 15.5 points, while Geller is third with 15 points and has already played a game more than we have. So Petrosian and I still have to play 4 games, while Geller has only 3 games left. Of course, everything is still possible, but it's probable that the first two places will be decided between me and Petrosian. Which one of us will be the winner will depend on our last games. Petrosian has perhaps slightly easier opposition, but this should not play any crucial role in the end. Crucial is who has the best nerves and who can concentrate the best for the decisive round of games. I have to say that everyone is already fed up with this tournament so that many foolish things might happen in the last rounds. But we shall play and see what the future holds. These FIDE officials should themselves sit down and try playing their 28-round tournaments!

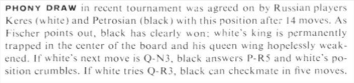
It was clear that the conditions had started to weigh on some of the players. Keres' indignation is barely articulated in official interviews, but was clearly evident in a more private sphere. In any case, the stage was set for the two leaders to lock swords. In all other circumstances, the Keres - Petrosian game would likely have been the crucial game, the climax, the tournament decider. But this was 1962 and Curaçao: *Keres - Petrosian, 1962*



The final position after Petrosian played 14...a5

Heuer:

> Among the numerous mysterious incidents that occurred in Curaçao, this was the most mysterious. You don't need to have high qualifications to realise that the final position is not just slightly worse or better for one side - White is in big trouble. It was this game which made Fischer shout about the Russians cheating in some form. Curiously, while his article appeared in the prestigious *Sports Illustrated* magazine, the magazine itself was quite inept when it came to covering chess. This resulted in a comical mishap. Fischer claimed that in about five moves, White's position would crumble. Apparently, the editors either thought that it doesn't sound good enough, or could only interpret it in terms of checkmate. In any case, it went to print with Fischer saying that White will be mated in five moves.



PHONY DRAW in recent tournament was agreed on by Russian players Keres (white) and Petrosian (black) with this position after 14 moves. As Fischer points out, black has clearly won: white's king is permanently trapped in the center of the board and his queen wing hopelessly weakened. If white's next move is Q-N3, black answers P-R5 and white's position crumbles. If white tries Q-R3, black can checkmate in five moves.

Even Fischer would struggle to find mate-in-5 after 15.Qa3... | source: *Sports Illustrated*

The position is obviously quite grim for White and while the public was left unaware of the private agreement between Petrosian, Geller and Keres, it was in full effect when this draw was agreed. But the fact that Keres actually drifted into a worse position so easily should have been cause for concern. What had the man said?

> Crucial is who has the best nerves and who can concentrate the best for the decisive round of games. I have to say that everyone is already fed up with this tournament so that many foolish things might happen in the last rounds.

Can one consider such statements the writing on the wall? Did Keres not already subconsciously accept the possibility of such mishaps by justifying them in advance? In any case, the enormous 6 out of 7 in the third round of games had clearly cost him most of his reserves of energy. He was not a young man anymore, as Rozental pointed out when commenting on the prearranged draw *Geller - Keres*:

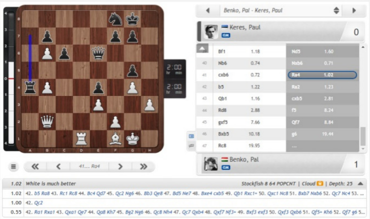
> Keres was tired and looked miserable. Now it's already clear that it will be extremely difficult for him not to stumble in the final rounds. Petrosian is still fresh, more than a dozen years younger and it should be beyond doubt that he will not lose.

A quick draw is perhaps the reason for such an interpretation, but with two rounds to go Keres was to play Benko and Fischer, while Petrosian faced Fischer and Filip. Geller, who was half a point behind the leaders, only had one more game to play: against an opponent who would then go on to steal the show: Benko.

While Petrosian and Fischer drew their game, *Keres played Benko*, who commented:

> It is beyond doubt that my game with Keres in the last round of the Curaçao tournament was one of the most important games of his career, as in case of a draw he would have shared first place with Petrosian and forced a playoff to find the challenger to Botvinnik. If he won he would have become the challenger directly. This vastly important game for him was adjourned in a position in which I had an advantage.

Keres chose an unusual King's Indian Attack and failed to fully equalise out of the opening, leaving him on the back foot for the rest of the game. The game was adjourned after **41.cxb6**. Keres' secret move was **41...Ra4**.



Benko, Pal - Keres, Paul

Keres, Paul 0

	Bf1	1.18	Nd5	1.60
40	Nb6	0.74	Nxb6	0.71
41	cxb6	0.72	Ra4	1.02
42	b5	1.22	Ra2	1.23
43	Qb1	1.16	cxb5	2.81
44	Rd8	2.88	f5	8.24
45	gxf5	7.66	Qf7	8.84
46	Bxb5	10.18	g6	19.44
47	Rc8	19.95	...	

Benko, Pal 1

1.02 White is much better — Stockfish 8 64 POPCNT | Cloud | Depth: 25

1.02 42. b5 Ra8 43. Rc1 Rc8 44. Bc4 Qd7 45. Qc2 Ng6 46. Bb3 Qe8 47. Bd5 Ne7 48. Bxe4 cxb5 49. Qb1 Rxc1+ 50. Qxc1 Nc8 51. Bxb7 Nxb6 52. Qc7 Nc4 53. ...

1.00 42. Qc2

0.55 42. Ra1 Rxa1 43. Qxa1 Qe7 44. Qa8 Kh7 45. Bg2 Ng6 46. Qc8 Nh4 47. Qc7 Qxb4 48. Qxf7 Nf3+ 49. Bxf3 exf3 50. Qxf3 Qxb6 51. Qf5+ Kh6 52. Qf7 g6 5...

If Keres and adjournments had made it into the modern chess computer age the task would have been so much easier...

He commented:

> Just before the adjournment I made an inaccuracy in mutual time trouble and got a difficult position. The next afternoon I had to resume the game after only having half a day for analysis of the adjourned position. I could not sacrifice a night for this end, as after two months of intense fight, physical rest was essential.
>
> After some analysis it became clear to me that Benko had two strong continuations against my secret move, both of which gave him good winning chances. But these continuations were very complex and demanded most of the time that I had for analysis. That's why I analysed other continuations superficially, being confident - and with good reason - that they are not dangerous if handled properly.

But while Keres was alone in his analysis, as the Soviet players had no seconds, Benko found himself an unlikely source of help. Benko:

> After a little while, Geller and Petrosian entered my hotel room and offered their help for analysis, so that I would win the game against their compatriot. It was disgusting. I told them that in case of fair play the position is drawn and told them to get out of my room.

Is there anything to add here? One can perhaps understand Petrosian in his wish to plot against his nearest rival, but the draw-trio was in truth more of a duo when it came to collaboration. Sosonko:

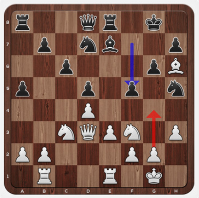
> For Soviet grandmasters, *(Keres)* always remained somewhat foreign and it was not just because of his slight accent. His whole character, his manners, polyglotism, tennis, bridge, elegant bow ties, dapperness, politeness and stoic peacefulness all set him apart from the people they usually met in the corridors of "Dynamo", "Trud", "Lokomotiv", in the Sports Committee or even in everyday life.

Setting all that aside, you could say that "whatever it takes" was clearly the approach. That can be a maxim either of villains or of champions, and Petrosian was about to find out where he ranked.

Keres:

> When I went to resume the game, I was excited to see which of the continuations Benko would choose to play. To my surprise, he played b4-b5 without much thought, freeing me from all my problems. And here the inevitable reaction to my earlier efforts finally materialized. I played for the cxb5 plan which I had not properly analysed and which actually immediately lost a piece.

Petrosian thus took a half-point lead going into the last game. Perhaps somewhat strangely, he offered Filip a draw in a slightly better position and Filip, confused by the reasoning of Petrosian, agreed. This meant that *if Keres beat Fischer in the last round*, he would have shared first and forced a playoff to decide the challenger.



16.g4?! This goes to show that Keres fully intended to mix things up. Everything seemed to work out well as Fischer went slightly astray and by move 23 Keres had achieved something to work with. But what followed were a couple of inaccuracies allowing Fischer to exchange off most of the board and the disappointed Keres had no option but to accept the inevitable draw, and with it, the title of the Eternal Second. Mind you, he still had to work for it.

		PET	KER	GEL	FIS	KOR	BEN	TAL	FIL	Total
1	Tigran Petrosian (USSR)		½½½½	½½½½	½1½½	½½11	½½1½	11½–	½11½	17½
2=	**Paul Keres (USSR)**	½½½½		½½½½	0½1½	½½1½	1110	1½1–	½11½	**17**
2=	Efim Geller (USSR)	½½½½	½½½½		11½0	½½1½	½½½1	½11–	½11½	17
4	Bobby Fischer (USA)	½0½½	1½0½	00½1		010½	01½1	½1½–	1½1½	14
5	Viktor Korchnoi (USSR)	½½00	½½0½	½½0½	101½		½½½0	10½–	1111	13½
6	Pal Benko (USA)	½½0½	0001	½½½0	10½0	½½½1		10½–	011½	12
7=	Mikhail Tal (USSR)	00½–	0½0–	½00–	½0½–	01½–	01½–		10½–	7
7=	Miroslav Filip (TCH)	½00½	½00½	½00½	0½0½	0000	100½	01½–		7

Not found

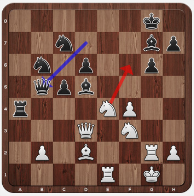
Keres - Geller playoff

A play-off for second place was forced because Benko, who played Geller in the last round, allowed himself to be flagged in a drawn position. Curiously, Benko was reportedly chewing on his sandwich when his flag fell. So much for sportsmanship. This crucial point allowed Geller to catch Keres. Benko's last round shenanigans upset both the spectators and some of the participants. Fischer adamantly declared his refusal to fly back on the same plane with Benko. Benko's reputation was murky to begin with and was not helped by his attempts to justify himself in later articles, where he spoke of time trouble as his "worst enemy". But enough of Benko.

The playoff was played in Moscow just two weeks after the tournament had ended. It was important firstly because it was not clear whether Botvinnik would choose to defend his title. If he didn't then the winner of the play-off would still play a World Championship match, against Petrosian. Secondly, only one of the players could be seeded into the next Candidates Tournament by default. Geller had a superior Sonneborn-Berger score, which meant that if the match was drawn, Geller would be declared the winner.

Petrosian, Fischer and Geller before the scandal in Curaçao | photo: *ChessPro*

The match started with two draws and both players exchanged wins in the third and sixth games. Notably, *Keres was on the verge of winning the sixth game*, but...



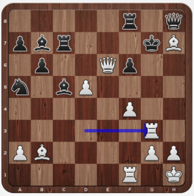
Heuer:

> **38.Nf6??** How to describe such a move when made by a World Championship candidate? A grave error? A hallucination? Keres might have seen the mirage of a mating combination... **38.Bxf6 Bxf6 39.Rg6 hxg6 40.Qg6 Bg7 41.Ng5** White still wrote this move down, but resigned without further play.

Geller had the initiative and pushed in the penultimate game, but Keres withstood the pressure and drew. The situation was now critical. Heuer quotes a commentator:

> In the crowd of 500 people there was little doubt that Geller would win the match. It's nowadays a common belief that a modern grandmaster can always make a draw when he wants to.

Either Geller was not a modern grandmaster or there is little truth to what the commentators believed, for Keres' attack initiated by a knight sacrifice *wiped Geller off the board in a mere 28 moves*.



The final position after Keres played 28.Rg3+

There is perhaps some justice in the world after all. But the fact remained that this was a match for second place, for the moral title of the Eternal Second, not the World Championship title, despite the fact that at the time the match was played, there still existed a possibility that Botvinnik would not choose to defend his title. You wonder what might have been, but it's all of little value, for Botvinnik decided to play and lost his title to Petrosian a year later. Despite everything, when Keres was later asked when he was closest to the desired match with Botvinnik, what was his answer? Curaçao.

Heuer:

> This is how Keres lost now truly the last chance to play a World Championship match. Before the start of the 1965 Candidates Matches a respected grandmaster wrote that in his opinion Keres has the best chance of winning. But this was just an act of deference, a traditional paying of respects to a veteran. He did not get a new chance.

About the author

Joosep Grents

Joosep is an Estonian chess enthusiast who learned chess at the age of five and began attending the Paul Keres Chess Club two years later. He recently graduated with a degree in History from Charles University in Prague, with his BA thesis set to be published by the university press.

See also:

- *Paul Keres I: Prince without a Crown (1916-36)*
- *Paul Keres II: A new chess superstar (1936-37)*
- *Paul Keres III: Avro 1938: Rightful challenger*
- *Paul Keres IV: The War Years*
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2hoch6 Jun 19, 2017 | 21:43

Chapeau!

Great series of articles!

I would highly appreciate, if you can create furthers articles about the great(est) players. The living and the deads.

E.g. Kortchnoi, Capablanca, Nimzovich, Spassky, but also Anand, Aronian, Ivanchuk just to name some of these - the bio's on C24 for these players are (no offense) somewhat superficial.
Thanks in advance

1 reply report

King_Size Jun 15, 2017 | 05:09

The wait was long but worth it. Another good article on the great player

1 reply report

DocteurPipo FM May 24, 2017 | 11:00

Great article, thank you very much !

1 reply report

BillBoBalboa May 23, 2017 | 23:32

An absolutely joyful series of articles. I have loved Keres' play for a long time and these articles have done this great player justice. Great pictures as well! Thank you. More of the same chess24 please

1 reply report

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jac17 May 23, 2017 | 21:44

How did Benko have a "murky reputation" ? Great article by Grents. Thanks, chess 24

0 reply report

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chesstiger139 May 23, 2017 | 13:59

I LOVE the picture of my hero (Tigran Petrosian) and his wife. The photo of Tal and Fishcer is a classic also.