Feb 9, 2017 | 18:23 by chess24 staff

Paul Keres VI: The Eternal Second

8

Paul Keres will always be remembered as one of the greatest players never to become World Champion. He never even got to play a match, though as the latest instalment of Joosep Grents' centennial series on the Estonian legend shows, he couldn't have come much closer. From 1953 until 1959 he finished second in three Candidates Tournaments in a row. Youngsters Bobby Fischer and Mikhail Tal also appear on the scene, with Keres more than holding his own as he enters his fifth decade.

43-year-old Keres (left) plays 22-year-old Tal in an Estonia-Latvia match in Tallinn in spring of 1959. Later that year Keres beat Tal in three of their four Candidates Tournament games but still finished 2nd to the Magician from Riga and missed out on a World Championship match | photo: Gunnar Vaidla, ESM F 188:56/B 1419, Estonian Sports Museum

Once again we've added most of the games discussed in this article to our broadcast system, with the 36 games featuring some true gems. Select a game below to view it with computer analysis:

	White	Evaluation	Black
1	GM Keres, Paul	○ ½ - ½ ●	GM Reshevsky, S.
2	GM Bronstein, D.	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Keres, Paul
3	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Petrosian, T..
4	GM Keres, Paul	○ 1 - 0 ●	GM Stahlberg, G.
5	GM Boleslavsky	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Keres, Paul
6	GM Geller, Efim	○ 0 - 1 ●	GM Keres, Paul

« ‹ … 1948-1952 1953-1959 1960-1962 … › »

1953-9 The Eternal Second

by Joosep Grents

Having ended the last article on a high note, it's perhaps surprising - or not that surprising to those who've followed this series - that this one has to start on a low. The immediate run-up to the Zurich Candidates Tournament failed to inspire much confidence in Keres' supporters. After winning the Soviet Championship for two years in a row, you would have expected Keres to be in contention in 1953 as well, but it was not to be. Keres:

> The 20th Championship was one of my weakest performances, not only in the Soviet Championships, but in the whole preceding decade. The quality of my games was also the lowest I'd shown in years.

Keres finished the tournament in shared 10-11th place. As he noted after the 1948 World Championship, every player has their ups and downs, but that wasn't the real issue here. While every player has them the interesting question is how they come about, with the reasons varying greatly among players. Some are far more prone to suffer from such swings which, first and foremost, are down to a player's character. As Heuer so elegantly put it, "your style is your personality". He comments:

> These two Soviet Championships enlighten us about Keres' chess character… *(While)* Ragozin admired "the usual cold-bloodedness" of Keres, the man himself was happy with his increased ability to concentrate… But now *(after the 20th Soviet Championship)* Suetin noted: Keres' biggest liability is his lasting depression after setbacks, which is strongly reflected in his creative alertness and thus his form…
>
> Why do some speak of "usual cold-bloodedness" while others talk about "lasting depression"? … It appears Keres was able to remain cold-blooded even in the most critical situations, but that's true only in situations where he was somewhat in control of things, where he was allowed to work properly. When he was forced to think about the intricacies of the moment things didn't go so well, sometimes even to the extent that depression was entirely possible.

Getting into the specifics of these explanations is too ambitious a task to be properly undertaken in these articles, but I will attempt to return briefly to the subject later on. What was clear was that despite his poor run-up to the Candidates Tournament, Keres was still one of the main favourites to become Botvinnik's next challenger.

Zurich Candidates 1953

The World Championship cycle that had been decided upon was a gruelling one: potential participants in the Candidates Tournament first played 20 games in the Interzonals. Keres, however, was seeded directly into the Candidates Tournament, which was by no means a less gruelling event. The contest in Zurich lasted for over two months, and every participant played an exhausting 28 games. The Soviets were again eager to ensure a Soviet challenger. The only non-Soviet players who could have shattered such a plan were the American Reshevsky and the Argentinian Najdorf, while other prominent Western contestants, such as Euwe, tended to be past their best before date.

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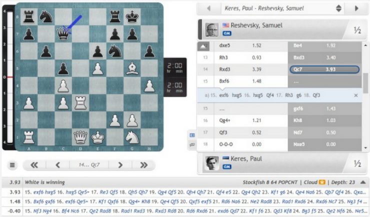
Keres's start was decent - his 5/8 featured wins over Szabo, Stahlberg and Boleslavsky and a second-round loss to Averbakh. His sceptics could point to his subsequent performance, however, as he was forced to concede defeat against his main rivals Bronstein and Smyslov, and after 14 rounds stood on 50%. Despite such setbacks, flashes of brilliance still lit up Keres' games. Heuer:

> He pushes very hard, plays defiantly and occasionally that ignites sparks of brilliance, as in the frequently cited game with Reshevsky. However, even there the sparks of originality remained incomplete.

Heuer is speaking, of course, of *the famous encounter between Keres and Reshevsky*. The author of the 1953 tournament book, David Bronstein, remarks in admiration:

> If the reader should ask which game I liked the best of all in this tournament, I would have to pass over my own two encounters with one-time American wunderkind Samuel Reshevsky in favour of one of the tournament's most noteworthy games from the viewpoint of depth of conception, beauty and complexity. This game has been reproduced in chess journals in every language, and has been subjected to dissection by dozens of masters, almost all of them grandmasters, and even by Botvinnik himself - and yet we still cannot say with absolute certainty that this analysis represents the final answer.



	dxe5	1.52	Be4	1.92
13	Rh3	0.93	Bxd3	3.40
14	Rxd3	3.39	Qc7	3.93
15	Bxf6	1.48	...	

a) 15. exf6 hxg5 16. hxg5 Qf4 17. Rh3 g6 18. Qf3

15	...		gxf6	1.43
16	Qg4+	1.21	Kh8	1.03
17	Qf3	0.52	Nd7	0.50
18	0-0-0	0.00	Nxe5	0.00

3.93	White is winning — Stockfish 8 64 POPCNT | Cloud | Depth: 23
3.93	15. exf6 hxg5 16. hxg5 Qe5+ 17. Re3 Qf5 18. Qh5 Qh7 19. Qg4 Qf5 20. Qh4 Qh7 21. Qf4 e5 22. Qg4 Qh2 23. Kf1 g6 24. Qe4 Na6 25. Qb7 Qf4 26. Qxa...
1.48	15. Bxf6 gxf6 16. exf6 Qe5+ 17. Kf1 Qxf6 18. Qg4+ Kh8 19. Qe4 Qf5 20. Qxf5 exf5 21. Rd6 Na6 22. Ne2 Rad8 23. Rad1 Rxd6 24. Rxd6 Nc7 25. Ng3 f4 ...
-0.40	15. Nf3 Ng4 16. Bf4 Nc6 17. Qe2 Rad8 18. Rad1 Rxd3 19. Rxd3 Rd8 20. Rd6 Rxd6 21. exd6 Qd7 22. Kf1 f6 23. Qd3 Kf8 24. Bg3 f5 25. Qe2 Nf6 26. Ne5...

Stockfish 8 would have deprived us of a lot of fun by playing 15.exf6

After the move **41. Kd5!** "...the game was adjourned. Both players analysed all night and the next day as well - not the adjourned position, of course, but the game which led up to it."

The pity of modern chess is that even if such games get played nowadays, they are immediately subject to computer analysis which, without hesitation, hands us an immutable evaluation with all the winning lines and, in so doing, takes away all the fun. But the golden age of chess - that is, prior to computers intervening - was still a time when games such as this were analysed by people all over the world, giving them the joy of uncovering hidden variations in rich positions, even years after the games had actually been played.

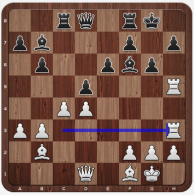
Despite *losing to Bronstein* right after this game, Keres switched gears and before the 24th round had stormed to wins *over Petrosian*, *Stahlberg*, *Boleslavsky* and *Geller* to lie in second place on 13/23, just half a point behind the leaders Smyslov and Reshevsky. *Keres faced Smyslov in the next round* and so had a chance to overtake him in the standings. However, the fact that it was an American, Reshevsky, who was level with Smyslov in first place, meant that an internal fight amongst the Soviet players was, to put it mildly, not to be encouraged. Aleksei Sutov describes what followed:

> Keres was summoned by the leader of the Soviet delegation, Postikov, and told that he was not allowed to play for a win against Smyslov, since it would benefit Reshevsky. Keres' second, Tolush, believes Smyslov was unaware of this. A tense conversation lasted several hours. Keres sharply rejected such a dishonourable agreement and became very upset.

Bronstein recalls:

> Keres came to the game in a competitive mood, but he seemed clearly upset and was red in the face. I saw he was unable to play. Smyslov, also a friend of Keres, noticed this, approached me and asked, "Why is Paul glowering at me like that? Have I somehow insulted him?" I didn't know what to say and remained silent.

Keres seemed to defy the Soviet suggestion to play for a quick draw and instead played sharply. However, the rook sacrifice he offered in order to get a strong attack was declined by Smyslov, who cold-bloodedly opted for counterplay on the queenside.



Modern computers say White is better if Black accepts the rook sacrifice immediately, but they also agree that Smyslov's 19...dxc4!! was a brilliant defence. The point is the bishop on b7 can now defend h7 from the e4-square

Again, since the evaluations of the day were not immediately objective, the players and spectators could take different views of the game. Smyslov, *in a later interview*, still appeared to be oblivious to the political pressure:

> Paul absolutely wanted to win, since with a victory he would have taken the lead in the tournament. Thus he put huge pressure on my king, and I had to defend precisely. During the game, at the decisive moment, I pondered for almost an hour whether to accept his rook sacrifice or not. Since I could not exactly foresee the complications it involved, I eventually intuitively declined the sacrifice, and made an intermediate move which gave me counterplay. Paul could still have achieved a draw, but no more. In the end he lost, since my counterattack grew too strong.

Bronstein:

> On the eve of the 24th round, Keres was a half point behind Smyslov, but Keres was due for his bye in the 25th round. In the event of a draw with Smyslov, he would fall either a point or a point and a half behind Smyslov, depending on how the latter scored against Reshevsky in Round 25. Thus we can see the psychological circumstances which impelled Keres to try his luck in a strange, sharp kingside attack, using only his two rooks without the aid of his pawns. Keres either could not or would not make methodical and logical preparations for his attack. As early as the 19th move he offered a rook, as the English expression goes, "for nothing".

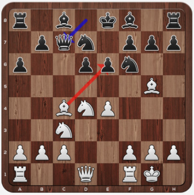
The attack, had the rook sacrifice been accepted, would have been rather fierce, so Bronstein's evaluation is not fully to be trusted here. Keres' own evaluation of what happened is perhaps the most objective and, like Smyslov, he makes no mention of any pressure on him:

> If I had succeeded in winning I would have been leading the tournament with every hope of emerging with ultimate victory, but a draw would also have left my hopes intact, and therefore I should not have played in so risky a style in this game. However, I again repeated a mistake I've made so often before and staked everything on one card. I offered my opponent an extremely complicated piece sacrifice, the acceptance of which would have seen Smyslov come under a fierce attack. But, after long reflection, Smyslov discovered an excellent defence and, once I had sacrificed the chance of securing equality in favour of an ill-considered plan, the consequences were soon apparent. I suffered an ignominious defeat and in so doing I had not only thrown away all chance of first place, but was once again back in fourth.

This crucial loss allowed Smyslov to take the lead in the standings and Keres finished the tournament with a sequence of draws against Reshevsky, Bronstein, Taimanov and Najdorf, interposed by a *win over Gligorić*. His final result was *shared second place with Reshevsky and Bronstein*, as Smyslov went on to challenge Botvinnik a year later.

Interlude: Still a favourite

In between the 1953 and 1956 Candidates Tournaments lay the Olympiad in Amsterdam, where Keres found himself "relegated" to fourth board in what was to become the winning Soviet team. Such a low board meant that Keres absolutely destroyed his opposition on the way to an individual gold medal on board four, with an unprecedented score of 13.5/14! In the match between the Soviets and the Czechoslovakians, Keres faced Jaroslav Sajtar and secured the Soviets match victory after producing *an exceptional miniature* featuring a typical Najdorf sacrifice on e6.



9.Bxe6! is a sacrifice that strong players have missed since - after 9...fxe6 10.Nxe6 Qc4 11.Nd5! White has a big edge

All the other boards were drawn.

Golombek recalls:

> In Amsterdam in 1954 he scored 96.4% on fourth board and won another game, against Sajtar of Czechoslovakia, that was so brilliant that the Soviet non-playing captain Kotov told me that it was "a true Soviet game". I told this to Keres who, with the closest to acerbity I ever saw him show, said, "No. It was a true Estonian game."

By that time, Keres had taken on the role of a true Estonian national hero, and not without reason. Heuer:

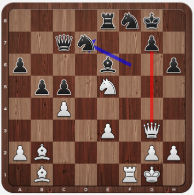
> During all the Candidates Tournaments, I sat at the nightly editorial boards and had to answer thousands of phone calls. Sometimes dozens of phones went off and it seemed as if nothing apart from the Candidates Tournament even existed at the time. Every second place finish for Keres only inspired further chess fever. The longer this went on, the more disappointing it became, the more desperately people hoped…
>
> Once I was traveling in a train from Riga. Those who weren't asleep conversed, and the topic of Keres surfaced. People immediately recalled how he lost to Filip in Amsterdam. It was technical chess talk, so to speak. Only one girl, a university student with a rigorous gaze, had stayed silent earlier, but now she suddenly declared, "It made me cry." After that everyone became silent. Such a feminine outburst said more than dozens of essays or treaties could ever say on the topic of who Keres was for us.

Paul Keres at work | ESM F 367:164/C 1624, *Estonian Sports Musuem*

Before the Interzonals for the next Candidates Tournament, both Smyslov and Keres traveled to England to participate in the Hastings Christmas tournament. In the end, Keres and Smyslov shared first place with 7/9, though while Smyslov posted an unbeaten result, Keres was forced to win an extra game after *he managed to lose to Andrija Fuderer*, who ended up third.

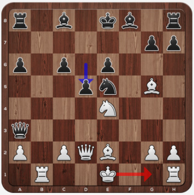
Amsterdam Candidates 1956

The World Championship cycle now featured an Interzonal tournament from which the top nine finishers would play in the Candidates Tournament. Considering his form, finishing in the top nine was not a difficult feat for Keres, who went into the contest with a clear goal of winning the Interzonal. It was Bronstein, however, who earned the first brilliancy prize of the tournament *for beating Keres*. In spite of this, there was some vintage Keres on the board. First off, Spassky was forced to *resign promptly after a queen sacrifice*…



30.Qxg7+!! ended the game

…followed by *Najdorf capitulating in his own variation after a mere 25 moves* and yet another *Najdorf scalp was provided* by Fuderer, whose appetite for pawns was suicidal and fully justified the "poisoned pawn" epithet his moves acquired: Keres concluded the game in a mere 18 moves!



Keres finished in style with 16.0-0! Qa4 (of course 16…dxe4 17.Qd8#) 17.Bh5+ Kd7 18.Rxf8+! resigns (18…Rxf8 19.Nc5+)

Keres finished second with 9 wins, 9 draws and two losses, to Bronstein and Stahlberg, while Bronstein won with an impressive undefeated +10, =10.

The real pressure, however, lay ahead. The Amsterdam Candidates was a double round-robin featuring Bronstein, Keres, Smyslov, Spassky, Szabo, Petrosian, Geller, Filip, Panno and Pilnik.

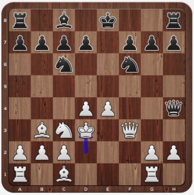
Not found

The tournament lasted for five weeks, with everyone playing 18 games. Keres, having reached the age of 40, decided to adopt a different strategy:

> I employed new tactics in this tournament, the chief idea being to save as much energy as possible. For this end I was ready to incur a series of short draws whenever the position offered very few realistic chances of obtaining an advantage.

To what degree can we agree with this? Well, this strategy also implied that Keres should play vigorously when still full of energy, and what could be a more ideal time for that than *the first round game against Bronstein*!

The wild opening developed slowly for hours and, as the game passed into the third hour of play, Keres finally played the strongest continuation **8.d4!**, after which he cemented his king on d3!



The remarkable position after Keres plays 11.Kd3

It was certainly a creative approach, and one that echoed his correspondence childhood games in the more dubious lines of the King's Gambit. This was no correspondence game, however, but a game at the Candidates. The players both put everything into analysing the rich position, and with only 20 moves on the board Keres had run his clock down to a mere six minutes. That might sound disastrous at first, but Bronstein had only a minute left by the same time. The players then understandably simplified the position, making it easier to play. After an adjournment and resumption, a draw was agreed.

Keres talked about the organisation of the tournament in a later interview back home:

> The tournament was very popular among spectators, despite the fact that no player from the Netherlands took part, and the local newspapers were covering the tournament with daily reports in a relatively detailed manner.
>
> Even the organisers had not expected such a great interest and the playing hall used for the tournament was not very large, intended only for about a couple of hundred people. When the competition heated up, the playing hall was completely packed and it became more difficult for the players themselves, as this couple of hundred people were smoking their thick Dutch cigars. So it was not only the lack of time that haunted the players, but even a lack of air.

Despite all this, in the following games Keres' new approach seemed to serve him well, as he was able to start off with 5.5/7, trailing the leader Geller by half a point. Keres:

> It was in the opening round of the second series of games that I had my decisive meeting with Bronstein, who obtained good pressure out of the opening and adjourned the game in a very favourable position for him. But on resumption Bronstein failed to find the best continuation, got into great time trouble and during that lost not only his advantage but also eventually the game. Since Geller lost to Petrosian at around about the same time I was now in the sole lead.

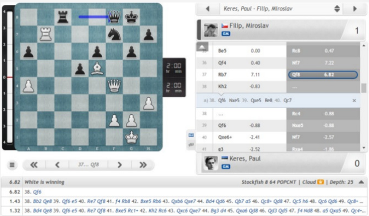
The next couple of rounds provided only frustration for Keres, as despite achieving what he considered strategically winning positions against Pilnik and Spassky, he was unable to convert them into a full point. This allowed Smyslov and Geller to catch up with him. Not all seemed lost, however, as *Keres was to play Filip in the next round*.

When the tournament reached its critical stages, the playing hall could not accommodate all the spectators anymore and the organizers had to close the doors and announce that all tickets had been sold, for the first time in the history of Dutch tournaments. To compensate for this they organised demonstration boards in the hallways, where they would show the most interesting games.

One of those was undoubtedly Keres' penultimate round encounter with Filip... When the critical moments arrived, Keres' failure to convert his strategically winning positions in the previous games appeared to affect him, but let's hear his own account of the game from a later interview:

> The game with Filip, played in the penultimate round, was the most unpleasant. Because the game was extremely important it was very tense to play, but I still managed to achieve what was a clearly winning position. But then again the notorious time pressure started to haunt me, and what happened was that I managed to find - as my colleagues later joked - the only move in the position that loses *(laughs)*. And so I placed my king on such an unfavourable square that my opponent was able to force the queens off the board with check and the position transformed 180 degrees, from completely winning to completely lost. With this I lost a critical point and all hopes of first place.

Keres apparently saw four winning plans for himself and opted for **38. Kh2?**, which he thought won most clearly. Filip's **38...Rc4!** gave him the edge instead.



Keres, Paul - Filip, Miroslav

Filip, Miroslav GM 1

	Be5	0.00	Rc8	0.47
36	Qf4	0.40	Nf7	7.22
37	Rb7	7.11	Qf8	6.82
38	Kh2	-0.83	...	

a) 38. Qf6 Nxe5 39. Qxe5 Re8 40. Qc7

38	...		Rc4	-0.88
39	Qf6	-0.88	Nxe5	-0.88
40	Qxe6+	-2.41	Nf7	-2.57
41	g3	-2.52	Rxa4	-1.86

Keres, Paul GM 0

6.82 White is winning — Stockfish 8 64 POPCNT | Cloud | Depth: 25

6.82	38. Qf6
1.43	38. Bb2 Qe8 39. Qf6 e5 40. Re7 Qf8 41. f4 Rb8 42. Bxe5 Rb6 43. Qxb6 Qxe7 44. Bd4 Qd6 45. Qb7 a5 46. Qc8+ Qd8 47. Qc5 h6 48. Qc6 Qd6 49. Qc8+ ...
1.32	38. Bd4 Qe8 39. Qf6 e5 40. Re7 Qf8 41. Bxe5 Rc1+ 42. Kh2 Rc6 43. Qxc6 Qxe7 44. Bg3 d4 45. Qxa6 Qd8 46. Qd3 Qd5 47. f4 Nd8 48. a5 Qxa5 49. Qc4+...

Keres put up a valiant fight after losing his knight as well, but it was clear that the train for a match with Botvinnik had yet again left the station, with Smyslov on board. With Keres' mood ruined, he played poorly in the final round against Petrosian and achieved a draw only thanks to the mistakes of his opponent during a time scramble. Yet another second place. The only upside to the result was that he automatically qualified for the next Candidates Tournament.

Inter-Candidates Performance

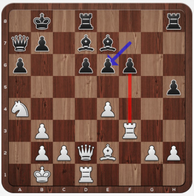
In the immediate aftermath of such a disappointing result you might not expect Keres to shine spectacularly in subsequent tournaments, and you would be both right and wrong. Immediately after the Candidates Tournament he travelled to Hamburg and played a friendly match against Unzicker. Keres dominated his German opponent and won the match with a final score of 6-2. In the Moscow Olympiad Keres shone on third board, winning an individual gold medal (9.5/12) with the obviously dominant USSR team.

The winning Soviet team in the 1956 Olympiad. From left to right: Taimanov, Botvinnik, Smyslov, Keres, Kotov, Geller, Bronstein | photo: Svetlanov Boriss, ESM F 188:60/C 449, *Estonian Sports Museum*

Keres commented on his form:

> However, I did worse in the Alekhine Memorial in Moscow. I lost two games in this tournament: to a good attack by Unzicker; and due to blundering a pawn against Szabo in an equal endgame. But these losses were not the issue here. The main issue was my inability to win against relatively weaker opponents, as my main rivals did.

One of the reasons Keres was able to digest this result more easily lay elsewhere. With only one round to go, Botvinnik was a full point ahead of Smyslov and faced his supposedly out-of-form "customer" - Keres. Botvinnik had just won two games coming into this game, so he must have been in an optimistic mood, and contrary to his usual approach of closing the position down completely he decided to go for something more to the taste of Keres. The Estonian grandmaster needed no second invitation to open up the position and put immediate pressure on Botvinnik.



20.Rxf6! was the start of the end for Botvinnik - 20...Bxf6 21.Qxd6+ with 22.Nb6+ next move was of course not an option

Keres *dominated the game and posted a surprise win*, which allowed Smyslov to catch Botvinnik in the lead and ultimately share first place. Keres finished in an unimpressive 7th.

He realised that his inability to beat relatively weaker opponents was one of the prime reasons for such a result, but perhaps it was his victory over Botvinnik that somehow affected his attempts at fixing this problem. Let's keep this in mind for the Candidates Tournament that now followed.

Interlude: The New Generation

Remembering very well his own eruption onto the world chess scene at a young age, Keres knew to be highly cautious about the younger generation that now started to come into its own. First it was Latvian star Mikhail Tal who shone brightest. Tal recalled following the 1948 World Championship:

> Some were fascinated by Botvinnik, some liked Smyslov, but most of the boys were cheering for Paul Keres. By the way, this is completely natural and not only due to chess. It did not hurt that Tallinn was, after all, not that far from Riga.
>
> This was followed by two Soviet Championships… During those times they demonstrated the games in Riga Chess Club and I can still remember the excitement about the last round games and the applause that followed the two final round victories of Paul Keres, which after all were able to satisfy anyone's tastes.
>
> Time went by. And at the beginning of 1954, the Latvian SSR team travelled to play a match with the team of the Estonian SSR. I had to play on the first board. Of course meeting the legend had already long been one of my dreams, but the only thing that annoyed me about our first meeting was that it was a team event and I felt I could not be of much use to my team. By the way, others understood this perfectly and tried to console me: never mind that, our women are going to lose anyway, so what does it matter if we lose on the first board of our men's team!
>
> The night drive went very fast, but when we arrived in Tallinn in the morning we were... well, to say we were surprised would be an understatement - we were stunned. It is hard to put into words what members of our team (mostly 17-20-year-olds) felt, after seeing that it was Paul Keres himself who had come to pick us up - he was the one who invited us into his car and gave us a lift to the hotel.

Later that night Tal played his *first ever game against a strong grandmaster - Keres*. He had to concede defeat on the white side of a King's Indian, but it seems he didn't mind too much.

By 1959, Tal had inspired the Soviet chess scene with his unpredictable play and sacrificial style, earning nothing but praise. He went into the Candidates Tournament after winning a strong tournament in Zurich with 11.5/15. Tal:

> If someone asks me which tournament evokes the most pleasant memories, then Zurich 1959 often comes to mind. It was a real pleasure to play there, especially due to the microclimate created by the presence of the leader of our small Soviet delegation Paul Keres and Maria Keres. It didn't even feel that there was a huge age difference between us, because Paul never taught you directly, but always shared his rich experiences with us. It was only later that I realized this was his way of subtly preparing me for meeting my next opponents. However, in order to get at least a draw out of him, I had to push very hard.

Tal wasn't the only one to excite the chess world. Soviet dominance over world chess had become so unrivalled that when the news broke in 1957 that a 14-year-old had won the US Championship, people might at first have thought it was something out of a collection of April Fools jokes. But 'the child' who already at the age of 13 had played 'The Game of the Century' soon took to the world stage. He went on to participate in the Interzonal and, while sceptics believed that a 15-year-old with no international experience was not a realistic contestant for a top 6 finish (to qualify for the Candidates Tournament), the boy had this to say: "I can draw with the grandmasters, and there are half-a-dozen patzers in the tournament I reckon to beat." It goes without saying that he was the youngest ever participant in the Candidates Tournament after a tie for 5-6th place in the Interzonal and also became the youngest grandmaster in the history of chess at only 15 years of age. It's perhaps superfluous to mention his name at this point, since everyone knows that this was Bobby Fischer.

Not found

In light of the rise of young stars such as Tal and Fischer, the future of chess seemed brighter and full of potentially exhilarating challengers. Among them, however, there still lurked the aging Keres, whose quest for a World Championship match was far from over. He was soon to find himself in a similar position to that of Alekhine, who interpreted the refusal of opponents to play a match against him with, "they're all waiting till I'm sixty". He was not getting any younger. Keres did, after all, finish behind Tal and shared third place with Fischer in Zurich 1959, *drawing with the former*, and *losing to the latter*. Age subtly knocked on the door, for in his game with Fischer he had worked out how to make a draw during the adjournment, but then forgot the drawing line upon resumption and lost the game...

Bled-Zagreb-Belgrade Candidates 1959

Keres and Smyslov were both seeded directly into the tournament, courtesy of their 1st and 2nd place finishes in the previous Candidates Tournament, while the Interzonals had ensured both Tal and Fischer qualified alongside Benko, Gligorić, Petrosian and Ólafsson.

DR FILIP
FUSTER
AVERBAH
MATANOVIĆ
LARSEN
FISCHER
SHERWIN
TALJ
CARDOSO
GLIGORIĆ
PETROSJAN
DE GREIFF
ROSSETTO
SANGUINETI
NEIKIRH
PANNO
BENKO
GOLOMBEK
GLAVNI SUDIJA
SZABO
BRONSTEIN
OLAFSSON
PORTOROŽ
1958
PACHMAN
MEĐUZONSKI ŠAHOVSKI TURNIR FIDE

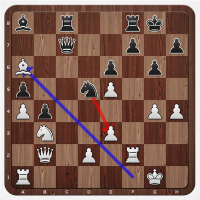
A collage of the participants of the 1958 Portoroz Interzonal | source: *soloscacchi.altervista.org*

The players would meet each other four times, twice in Bled and once in both Zagreb and Belgrade.

Romantics take the lead

The tournament started with a bang, as playing Fischer, Keres *curiously parted with his queen in the opening* - a variation Keres had specifically prepared for Fischer. However, he subsequently pushed a little too much, found himself in a rook and knight vs. queen endgame and then stumbled into a mate.

Keres was not the only one who failed to live up to early expectations. After two rounds, all the favourites (Smyslov, Keres, Tal and Gligorić) had already managed to lose a game. After *beating Smyslov*, Keres then faced Tal in the third round. Tal got a pleasant position and then *did what Tal does best*... sacrificed a piece:



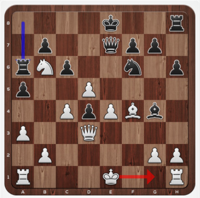
28...Nxe3! (29.dxe3? Qc6! threatens mate and hitting the bishop on a6) However, in a won position, Tal failed to come up with the most critical continuation and "upon resumption of the adjourned position Keres worked with such methodical precision that it was as if he was writing the secrets of his technique onto a single grain of rice." (Heuer) Keres went on to win.

This was followed by Keres losing the thread in his game against Petrosian and, after resumption, he again allowed himself to be mated. The tournament book comments: "However hard it was for Keres to lose such an important point, he still exhibited exceptional manners, resigning with a smile on his face."

Keres continued with wins over Benko and Ólafsson and finished the first round of games in shared first with Petrosian and Tal on 4.5/7. Despite beating Keres, the young Fischer found himself out of the equation already on 3/7.

Candidates Tournament 1959
Später ans...
Teilen
Ansehen auf YouTube

In the next round of games the leading trio became a duo, as Petrosian fell behind. Keres continued without losing, stealing full points from *Fischer*, *Benko*, *Ólafsson* and even Tal, who had come into the game after *wiping Smyslov off the board* with a series of flashy sacrifices, including a queen sacrifice. This clearly inspired him to continue in a similar vein against the similarly "romantic" Keres. *Tal sacrificed material for a counterattack in the centre against Keres' uncastled king*, but while there was certainly some compensation for the sacrificed material, Keres ruthlessly refuted the sacrifice and emerged with a clearly winning position, prompting resignation from Tal.



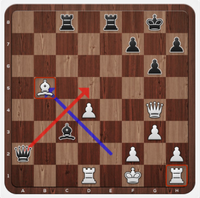
Tal threw down the gauntlet with 20.0-0!? - Keres accepted the challenge with 20...Rxb6

While Tal's sacrificial style had seen him demolish the rest of the field, Keres remained unfazed by the sacrifices and took full advantage of this throughout the tournament. As a result of his 5.5/7 in the second round of games, Keres emerged as the sole leader with 10/14, while Tal trailed by half a point. Keres was interviewed at that point:

> I respect my opponents, but I am not afraid of them. If there is something I should be afraid of, then it's my own nerves and fatigue.

Woes

Keres was justifiably concerned with potential fatigue as in his next round game with Fischer, *he simply blundered a piece while on the verge of equalizing*, playing **24.Bb5??**:



24...Qd5! was a simple double attack on the bishop and the h1-rook.

Tal, meanwhile, struggled against Smyslov, but escaped with a draw and thus caught Keres in the lead. After the next round Tal found himself already in the lead as his win over Gligorić granted him a half a point lead over Keres, who drew a complicated game with Smyslov. The two were then set to meet in the next round. When Tal was later asked about the crucial game of the tournament, he named the one that follows.

Keres gained a slight advantage out of the opening and then *went for a kingside attack*, but Tal approached the game clinically and continued to grab pawns. Heuer:

> *(Keres')* attacks are flashy, but nervous. The sacrifice of two pawns is then followed by an exchange sacrifice. All the remaining white pieces are looming around Black's king... Tal then miraculously finds a paradoxical defensive move. Now Keres should have accepted his fate, i.e. a draw. However, the temptation to rehabilitate himself as quickly as possible was apparently too enticing. Keres plays for a win and loses.

Tal was able to relieve the pressure on his king, emerged with three passed pawns and soon had a full point to show for it. Keres now trailed Tal by 1.5 points and took a rather quick draw in his next round game against Petrosian, while Tal won yet again, on this occasion against Ólafsson. And while Keres followed up with three wins in a row against Benko, Gligorić and Olafsson, this only reduced Tal's lead by half a point, since the Latvian also continued his winning ways.

Not a photo-finish

At the outset of the final round of games played in the Yugoslavian capital of Belgrade, Keres knew that all he had to do to win the tournament was to beat Tal in their individual encounter and score more than Tal against the rest of the field. Heuer:

> As it turned out, it was the second, seemingly easier, part which actually proved to be harder for him!

Both Keres and Tal started off with a victory, as *Keres beat Fischer*, levelling their mini-match score (2-2), while Tal managed to score a point against Smyslov who, after winning a piece, blundered mate in time trouble. Winners' luck, as they say. But all hopes of catching Tal seemed to go up in smoke as Keres' passive play allowed *Smyslov to deliver a knockout blow on behalf of Tal*, who went on to exploit it to the fullest by scoring yet another win.

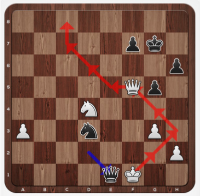
Keres then faced Tal for the last time in the tournament. Keres:

> At that moment, Tal was leading by a margin of 2.5 points over me. I had therefore to play for a win at all costs in order to retain even theoretical chances of gaining first place.

With his back against the wall, *Keres produced a masterpiece*. Playing with the black pieces, he reached a position that he felt was deceptive:

> The position that has now arisen might seem at first glance... much more favourable for White than it really is. He enjoys the advantage of two bishops and controls the important d4-square, while his opponent's pawn structure reveals marked weaknesses on the queenside. But if one tries to suggest a plan by which White can increase his supposed advantage then one is pulled up short by unexpected difficulties. It becomes apparent that Black's position also contains various advantages that should not be underestimated.

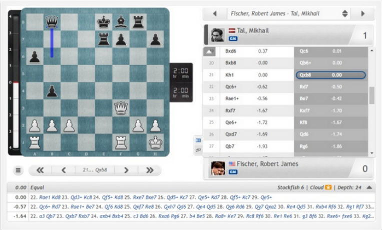
After getting an edge in the middlegame, Tal stumbled into a queen and knight endgame in which his king did all the walking, as it was forced on a lengthy trip to the other side of the board, allowing Keres to pick up all the white pawns the king had left behind. He then slowly pushed his own.



The position after Keres played 44...Qe1+. Tal's king now goes on a long walk!

Keres promptly picked up the best game prize for such play. With the help of this game, and with four rounds still to go, Keres had reduced Tal's lead to 1.5 points, but to imagine that Tal would lose enough points for Keres to catch him... would not be too far-fetched!

With two rounds to go, the lead melted to a mere point and Tal faced his tenacious young rival, Fischer, in the penultimate round. Before this game, Tal had won every single individual encounter between the two. In their penultimate round game, however, Fischer played the opening with vigour and threw down the gauntlet, *challenging Tal to a tactical skirmish*. The 16 year-old Fischer achieved an advantage, but then went astray in curious fashion. Fischer used to write down moves before he would make them, and just before making his 21st move Fischer had written down 21.Rae1 on his scoresheet.



Fischer, Robert James - Tal, Mikhail

Tal, Mikhail 1

	Bxd6	0.37	Qc6	0.01
20	Bxb8	0.00	Qb6+	0.00
21	Kh1	0.00	Qxb8	0.00
22	Qc6+	-0.62	Rd7	-0.50
23	Rae1+	-0.56	Be7	-0.42
24	Rxf7	-1.67	Kxf7	-1.70
25	Qe6+	-1.72	Kf8	-1.67
26	Qxd7	-1.69	Qd6	-1.74
27	Qb7	-1.93	Rg6	-1.86

Fischer, Robert James 0

21... Qxb8

0.00 Equal — *Stockfish 6 | Cloud | Depth: 24*

0.00 22. Rae1 Kd8 23. Qd3+ Kc8 24. Qf5+ Kd8 25. Rxe7 Bxe7 26. Qd5+ Kc7 27. Qe5+ Kd7 28. Qf5+ Kc7 29. Qe5+

-0.57 22. Qc6+ Rd7 23. Rae1+ Be7 24. Qf6 Kd8 25. Qxf7 Re8 26. Qxh7 Qd6 27. Qe4 Qd5 28. Qg6 Rd6 29. Qg7 Qxa2 30. Re4 Qd5 31. Rxb4 Rf6 32. Rg1 Rf7 33...

-1.64 22. a3 Qb7 23. Qxb7 Rxb7 24. axb4 Bxb4 25. c3 Bd6 26. Rxa6 Rg6 27. b4 Be5 28. Ra8+ Ke7 29. Rc8 Rf6 30. Re1 Re6 31. g3 Bf6 32. Rxe6+ fxe6 33. Kg2...

However, before executing the move on the board, he noticed Tal had smirked upon seeing it. Fischer took it as a bad sign and decided to play **21.Qc6+?** instead, after which Tal was able to keep his extra piece and convert his advantage into a full point. When Tal later asked Fischer why he had rejected 21.Rae1, the American responded: "When I wrote it down, you laughed!"

Paul Keres plays 16-year-old Bobby Fischer in Bled in the 1959 Candidates Tournament | photo: *Wikipedia*

Fischer's hesitation spelled the end of the tournament for Keres, as following this result he could not catch Tal anymore. So despite having made a valiant effort - *beating Gligorić in the penultimate round encounter* - he played with no joy or purpose in the last round and finished the tournament as he started: by losing with two rooks against a queen, *this time to Ólafsson*.

It might at first sound a little strange that Tal won, considering that he lost 3 out of 4 games against Keres in their individual match-up. However, once you realise it was not only 3 out of 4 against Keres, but that those 3 losses against Keres accounted for all but one of his overall 4 losses, everything falls into place. For it was the inability of Keres to crush the rest of the field as comprehensively as Tal which was his undoing. Tal was ruthless against almost everyone apart from Keres, dominating Fischer 4-0, sweeping aside Benko, Ólafsson and Gligorić 3.5-0.5 and Smyslov 2.5-1.5. Third-placed Petrosian was the only one, apart from Keres, who could tame the Latvian enigma and escape with four draws. You could say Keres was let down, in comparison, by his equal score against Fischer, which cost him a crucial two points, but beating Fischer is never as easy a feat as Tal made it look in 1959.

1959 Candidates Tournament

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Score
1	**Mikhail Tal** (Soviet Union)	xxxx	0 0 1 0	= = = =	0 1 = 1	1 = 1 1	1 1 1 1	1 1 1 =	1 1 1 =	**20**
2	Paul Keres (Soviet Union)	1 1 0 1	xxxx	0 = = =	1 = = 0	= = 1 1	0 1 0 1	1 1 1 0	1 1 1 1	18½
3	Tigran Petrosian (Soviet Union)	= = = =	1 = = =	xxxx	= = 0 =	0 = = 1	1 1 = =	1 0 0 =	= 1 1 =	15½
4	Vasily Smyslov (Soviet Union)	1 0 = 0	0 = = 1	= = 1 =	xxxx	0 = 1 0	= = 1 0	= 1 = 1	= 0 1 1	15
5	Svetozar Gligorić (Yugoslavia)	0 = 0 0	= = 0 0	1 = = 0	1 = 0 1	xxxx	0 1 = =	= = 1 0	= 1 = =	12½
6	Bobby Fischer (United States)	0 0 0 0	1 0 1 0	0 0 = =	= = 0 1	1 0 = =	xxxx	0 1 = 1	= 1 = 1	12½
7	Friðrik Ólafsson (Iceland)	0 0 0 =	0 0 0 1	0 1 1 =	= 0 = 0	= = 0 1	1 0 = 0	xxxx	0 0 = 1	10
8	Pal Benko (stateless)	0 0 0 =	0 0 0 0	= 0 0 =	= 1 0 0	= 0 = =	= 0 = 0	1 1 = 0	xxxx	8

Source: *Wikipedia*

Gligorić:

> Poor Keres! The tournament in Yugoslavia was the quest of his life. With 18.5/28 he would have won any previous such event, but yet again, at the age of 43, he was denied the match with Botvinnik that he had been anticipating for so long. How pale was his result three years ago in Amsterdam: one loss and three wins. But in Yugoslavia: six losses, but fifteen wins in return! What is that all worth, though, if Tal fights his way to 20 points!

The result continued the somewhat unfortunate trend of Keres finishing second, his results becoming increasingly both climactic and anti-climactic at the same time. This was already the third Candidates Tournament in a row where, despite all his efforts, he finished second. While the general perception of such a string of results was increasingly sympathetic, considering Keres unfortunate, the man himself had a different perspective:

> Once again I achieved second place in the Candidates Tournament. Someone might now think that I am deeply unhappy or discontent due to this. That's not the case. I can't understand why I should be unhappy. I didn't suffer a catastrophic performance… On the contrary, I'm completely content with my play. I still retained the opportunity to play in the next Candidates Tournament, and perhaps then the result will be better!

To an outside observer, it might at first seem as if such statements were simply the result of Keres trying to put on a brave face. However, those who were in contact with Keres and knew him relatively well were convinced of his sincerity. Heuer:

> It is clear that Keres means what he says here: fair play is not a fig leaf of some kind, nor is it a brave face to hide behind - it is quintessential Keres.

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*
- *Paul Keres V: The 1948 World Championship*

Comments 8

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tschukki

Post

DukeCrusher Feb 15, 2017 | 15:10

In the top picture, who is the guy playing black against Jan Gustaffson?

1 *reply* *report*

King_Size Feb 12, 2017 | 02:10

> awesome article. I love that the games are available in the "broadcast system" as if they were played recently. Chess24 should do more articles like this: old masters with match and tournament reports, and viewable games that bring them to life. Bravo!

Very true. These kind of articles should be a staple in Chess24.

0 *reply* *report*

King_Size Feb 12, 2017 | 02:08

Once again another good article on a great master. Looking forward to the next one.

0 *reply* *report*

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curonian Feb 10, 2017 | 17:14

> There is a serious falsification in the article!!!
>
> Keres, Bronstein, Boleslavsky, Spassky, Smyslov, Petrosian and so on... They all are citizens of USSR! So, where is the red flag?!

Keres was from the occupied Estonia. So you know where to go, Igor, right.

2 *reply* *report*

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ironmanth Feb 10, 2017 | 13:44

Magnificent article! Thank you so much for your painstaking effort to enlighten chess enthusiasts on this amazing player. The wonderful video and great pictures are real historical keepsakes.

0 *reply* *report*

Lex19 Feb 10, 2017 | 10:09

> There is a serious falsification in the article!!!
>
> Keres, Bronstein, Boleslavsky, Spassky, Smyslov, Petrosian and so on... They all are citizens of USSR! So, where is the red flag?!