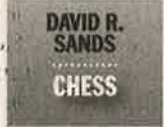


# Singular event — the time Marshall risked his crown

9/19/23

A singular event in the annals of American chess took place exactly 100 years ago this year. And we mean “singular” not in a good way.

Frank Marshall's place in the U.S. chess pantheon is secure — one of the game's original grandmasters, originator of the great Marshall Gambit and co-founder of Manhattan's great Marshall Chess Club,



captain of four storied U.S. gold medal-winning Olympiad teams in the 1930s.

But one of Marshall's greatest claims to fame — his reign as U.S. champion from 1909 until he voluntarily relinquished the title in 1936 — should come with a huge asterisk: In those 27 years, Marshall defended his crown just once — and nearly lost.

The year was 1923 and the challenger was German emigre Edward Lasker, a distant cousin of reigning world champ Emanuel Lasker who not only held down a full-time job as an engineer but dealt with attacks of kidney stones during the title match. (No fun, take my word for it.) Still, in a match that spread out over three months and nine cities (including Game 15 right here in the District of Columbia), Marshall barely held off his dogged challenger, winning 9½-8½. In an era before sanctioned championship cycles, Lasker's bid for a rematch went nowhere, and Marshall never risked his crown at the board again:

In the match itself, Marshall got off to a disastrous start against his underdog opponent, losing the first two games. Famous for his legendary swindles at the board, Marshall in Game 2 actually gets suckered by Lasker, who played an unsound gambit on the Black side of a Vienna Game on the theory that the champion, a famous attacker, would be less comfortable playing defense.



Marshall-Lasker, Game 4, after 16 ... dxe3

Black goads White first with 9. Qg3 Qe7!? (simply 9.0-0 10. Kd1 exf4 11. Qxf4 c6 leaves White with no positional compensation for having lost the right to castle) 10. Bb3 0-0-0 11. Rf1 Nf5!?, a piece offer that shouldn't work but which clearly surprised White.

Marshall keeps his bearings at first with 12. Qg5! (exf5? exf4+ 13. Be6+ fxe6 14. Bxf4 exf5+, with advantage to Black) 13. fxe5 Qxe5 14. Qf4 Qe7 15. g4! d5 (Nd4 16. Qxf6) 16. gxf5, winning the piece. By 18. dxe4 Bb4, Black is down a piece with only some vague pressure and hopes of a central attack as compensation.

The computer engines say Black is busted, but it's not so easy to convert over the board. Indeed, Marshall almost immediately goes astray after 20. Bh4 Rd4 (with an actual threat — 21 ... Bxc3+ 22. bxc3 Rxe4+ 23 Kd1 Rd8+ 24. Kc1 Qa3+ 25. Kbl Rxh4, and White's game is a mess) 21. Bd5 Re8 22. Bxf6? (throwing away his advantage; 22. Kf2! Rd2+ 23. Kgl Rg8+ 24. Khl Qe5 25. Rf2 defends) Qxf6 (now threatening 23 ... Rxd5 exploiting the double pins) 23. Rdl c6, effectively winning back the piece. White compounds his woes on 24. Rxd4 (Bb3? Bxc3+ 25. bxc3 Rdx4+ is even more powerful now) Qxd4 25. a3? (selling out the bishop too cheaply; it's a likely draw after 25. Bxc6! bxc6 26. Qd3 Bxc3+ 27. bxc3 Qxe4+ 28. Qxe4 Rxe4+) Bxc3+ 26. bxc3 Qxd5 27. Qd3 Qxe4+ 28. Qxe4 Rxe4+ 29. Kd2 Rh4, and Black has the better pawn structure

and a more active rook. White now is fighting for a draw.

White's 31. Rg3 Rh5 32. Rg7? is an understandable attempt to activate the rook, but only results in the loss of a pawn after 32 ... Ke7 33. Rg8 33. Rg3 Rxf5) Rxf5 34. Rb8 Rd5+! 35. Kcl b6 36. Rc8 c5 37. Rc7+ Rd7. When the rooks come off, Marshall's king must deal with Black's kingside pawns while Lasker's king can go marauding on the queenside.

In the final position, Black easily wins the pawn race and White resigned.



Marshall was far more in his element two games later, scoring his first full point of the match from the White side of a Tarrasch QGD. With 10. Bg5 d4?! (provocative in a position where 10 ... 0-0 was indicated) 11. Bxf6 Qxf6 12. Ne4 Qe7 13. Nxc5 Qxc5 14. Rcl Qb6 15. Ng5, White has the open, attacking game he craves, as well as a target in the advanced d-pawn.

Lasker underestimates the danger and pays a drastic price: 15 ... Bf5 16. e4!? (e3! was more to the point, but fortunately for Marshall, Black misses the tactical rationale for the move) dxe3? (see diagram; now 16 ... Bg6 17. Nh3 0-0 18. Nf4 would have led to rough equality) 17. Rxc6! bxc6 18. Qd6, and the exchange sacrifice leaves Black's game on the ropes.

Give him the initiative and a king to target, and Marshall had few peers in seeing through an attack: 18 ... Bd7 19. Qe5+ Kf8 20. fxe3, and for the modest material investment, White has a massive attack, a half-open f-file, and a huge lead in development. White cashes in on 20 ... f6 21. Rxf6+! (by far the most decisive way forward; Black will have holes all over his position even if he manages to avoid mate) gxf6 22. Qxf6+ Ke8 23. Qxh8+ Ke7 24. Qe5+ Kd8 — Black still has a knight and two pawns for the rook, but his broken position and misplaced pieces can't organize a defense.

Marshall doesn't falter: 28.

Nb5+ (Nc4+ Qc7 29. Nb6! Qxe5 30. Nxd7+ Kc7 31. Nxe5 was another nice road to victory) Kc8 29. Nd6+ Kb8 30. Qe7 Qc7 31. Qf8+ Ka7 32. Nb5+!, winning back that sacrificed exchange after 32. Kb6 (cxb5 33. Qxa8+) 33. Qxa8 Kxb5 34. Bfl+.

Black faces a lost ending two pawns down, but hastens his demise with a final king walk down the plank: 43 ... Bb4 35. Qf8+ c5 (Ka4 36. b3 is mate) 36. Qg7 c4 37. Kh2 Qc6 38. Qc3+ Kb5 39. Qb3+, and Black resigned as there's no saving the ending after 39 ... Kc5 40. Qxc4+ Kd6 41. Qxc6+ Kxc6 42. Bd3.

## Marshall-Lasker, U.S. Championship Match, Game 2, New York, March 1923

1. e4 e5 2. Nc3 Nf6 3. Bc4 Nc6 4. d3 Bc5 5. f4 d6 6. Nf3 Bg4 7. h3 Bxf3 8. Qxf3 Nd4 9. Qg3 Qe7 10. Bb3 0-0-0 11. Rf1 Nf5 12. Qg5 g6 13. fxe5 Qxe5 14. Qf4 Qe7 15. g4 d5 16. gxf5 g5 17. Qf3 dxe4 18. dxe4 Bb4 19. Bxg5 Rhg8 20. Bh4 Rd4 21. Bd5 Re8 22. Bxf6 Qxf6 23. Rd1 c6 24. Rxd4 Qxd4 25. a3 Bxc3+ 26. bxc3 Qxd5 27. Qd3 Qxe4+ 28. Qxe4 Rxe4+ 29. Kd2 Rh4 30. Rf3 Kd7 31. Rg3 Rh5 32. Rg7 Ke7 33. Rg8 Rxf5 34. Rb8 Rd5+ 35. Kc1 b6 36. Rc8 c5 37. Rc7+ Rd7 38. Rc6 f5 39. Rh6 Kf8 40. Rh5 f4 41. Rh4 f3 42. Rf4+ Rf7 43. Rxf7+ Kxf7 44. Kd2 Ke6 45. Ke3 Kd5 46. Kxf3 Kc4 47. Kg4 Kxc3 48. Kg5 Kxc2 49. Kh6 Kb3 50. Kxh7 c4 White resigns

## Marshall-Lasker, U.S. Championship Match, Game 4, Chicago, March 1923

1. d4 d5 2. Nf3 e6 3. c4 c5 4. cxd5 exd5 5. Nc3 Nc6 6. g3 Nf6 7. Bg2 Be6 8. 0-0 Be7 9. dxc5 Bxc5 10. Bg5 d4 11. Bxf6 Qxf6 12. Ne4 Qe7 13. Nxc5 Qxc5 14. Rc1 Qb6 15. Ng5 Bf5 16. e4 dxe3 17. Rxc6 bxc6 18. Qd6 Bd7 19. Qe5+ Kf8 20. fxe3 f6 21. Rxf6+ gxf6 22. Qxf6+ Ke8 23. Qxh8+ Ke7 24. Qe5+ Kd8 25. h4 Kc8 26. Nf7 a5 27. Nd6+ Kb8 28. Nb5+ Kc8 29. Nd6+ Kb8 30. Qe7 Qc7 31. Qf8+ Ka7 32. Nb5+ Kb6 33. Qxa8 Kxb5 34. Bfl+ Kb4 35. Qf8+ c5 36. Qg7 c4 37. Kh2 Qc6 38. Qc3+ Kb5 39. Qb3+ Black resigns

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