San Sebastian 1911

Robert Irons

Foreword by Andy Soltis

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by Robert Irons

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From the Author

Capablanca has been my favorite player since I played my first tournament game in my early 20s, and in different books I have read stories about how he catapulted onto the world stage in 1911 at the international tournament at the Gran Casino in San Sebastian, Spain. The wonderful story about his first-round game against Bernstein was told and retold by author after author and verified by Capablanca himself in his book *My Chess Career*. I had seen some of the games from the tournament many times, but recently I had difficulty finding a tournament book so that I could review them all. I was eventually able to find more than I was hoping for after obtaining a copy of the definitive tournament book, written by one of the world's top players, Jacques Mieses, who was also the organizer of the event.

Details of the rules and regulations of the tournament are given, including the stipulation that "invitations will only be given to those masters who have achieved at least two fourth place prizes in international tournaments in the last decade." The fact that Capablanca did not meet that requirement is mentioned in the brief description of the players given in the introduction to the tournament book, although no mention is made of anyone disapproving of his attendance. In addition, the games are annotated by one of the strongest players in the world, Jacques Mieses. What more could a chess player want? Well, as an English-speaking chess player, I would prefer a tournament book in English, not German. *So ist das Leben!* (That's life!)

For my personal amusement I did not tell my wife that I had found the tournament book in German and ordered it. When the book arrived, I then showed it to her to see her reaction to the German text. Her puzzled look quickly left, and before I could explain that I was aware of the language issue, she recalled that one of our good friends, Gerard Nielsen, can translate German since he spent time on a military base in Germany. My amused look was quickly replaced by the realization that this was an opportunity; with Gerard's help, I could provide English-speaking chess players with an updated version of the tournament book, using computer software to analyze the games!

Neither Gerard nor I were confident that we would find a publisher interested in such a project, but I figured that I could invest some time in writing email pitches to chess publishers to gauge any interest. My

first several attempts were denied in some of the politest and most encouraging rejections I have ever received (and I have published in Academic journals for years), so I dug a little deeper and found a publisher that had recently produced a similar tournament book for the Cambridge Springs 1904 tournament: Russell Enterprises. Hanon Russell asked for more details, then a small sample of the work, and before long I was reviewing a contract. Hanon saw the value in a computer analysis of historic games, and on that point, he was spot on; the number of outright blunders in the games is startling, but perhaps understandable if we consider the context (which I attempt to do in the Addendum).

In addition to the updated analysis, I saw an opportunity to bring together commentary by other authors who have written on the games, to make this a kind of one-stop shopping for chess players who appreciate the history of the game. Further, during my research into the games, I found a number of other historical tidbits which I share within the analysis of some of the games. I found them interesting; I hope you do as well.

I am not a master; at the time of this writing, I am an active correspondence chess player, and I have achieved the title of Correspondence Candidate Master. I am convinced that the work I have done for this book has increased my understanding of the game; I can attest that it has increased my appreciation of the game and its history. However, it is important to point out one particular detail: in every game, where you see an evaluation symbol (see the Symbols page), that evaluation is provided by Stockfish. I offer my opinion often, but all evaluation symbols reflect the engine's opinion of the position. As for the commentary, the original text (by Jacques Mieses) was used as the basis of this manuscript. His work includes guest commentators like Dr. Tarrasch and Dr. Berthold Lasker. Similarly, while I have commented on each game, I have also included other guest commentators; authors like Soltis, Donaldson, Emanuel Lasker and Capablanca. The comments immediately after the moves tend to be from the Mieses manuscript, followed by other sources (if any), with my comments generally coming last. Any comments that make reference to Stockfish (SF) are also mine (with Stockfish's help, of course). Thus the current manuscript includes work from an array of authors, supplemented with modern analysis.

I have included two short chapters of my own (The Case for Capablanca and the Addendum), which are the result of having spent nine months going through these games and the other sources. I am a

data guy, a statistician by training, and I like to find the story behind the numbers. Those chapters reflect my attempt to understand the results of this tournament, to "find the story." I hope you find them entertaining or thought-provoking. Either way, I hope your interest in chess history is nourished by this work.

I am indebted to Gerard Nielsen for his translation of the tournament book, without which this project would never have left the starting gate. Many thanks also to Hanon Russell, whose patience and guidance helped make this project less onerous and more fun.

Robert Irons
Heyworth, Illinois
September 2024

Author's Dedication

To Ruth Ann, the love of my life, for encouraging me to pursue my joy, and for joining me in that endeavor. My heart is yours always.

Foreword

When the 2020s began, Magnus Carlsen quickly won more than 40 elite tournaments and matches. But the blur of constant Carlsen had a strange effect.

Even the most ardent Magnus fans had difficulty recalling specific events: For example, was it in the 2020 Clutch International that he beat Fabiano Caruana in those dramatic finals?

Or was it the 2023 Generation Cup? Or in one of those blitz marathons in 2021 or 2022? Each tournament seemed momentous – at the moment – but soon faded away.

Yet there was a time when the grandest of grandmaster tournaments were unforgettable. San Sebastian 1911 was one.

No round robin with a classical time control has ever had all ten of the world's best players, retro-rating analysis indicates. A select few had the nine highest rated. Among them are Linares 1993, the 2015 Sinquefield Cup and Norway Chess 2017.

San Sebastian also had nine – and would have uniquely had all ten, as the organizers had sought. But Emanuel Lasker, who was about to get married, declined his invitation.

There were several reasons for such a historic strong field. First, Lasker was hinting he was receptive to another world championship match. There was no qualifying system to identify a proper challenger. What mattered were a player's reputation and his financial sponsors.

Nothing would burnish a reputation more than winning San Sebastian 1911. It was a *de facto* candidates tournament. Twelve of the players who entered it were strong enough to warrant a world title match. The lowest rated of them was David Janowski, according to chessmetrics.com. He had just lost a world championship match with Lasker.

Another reason for such a strong field was money. The four top cash prizes were substantial. But 80 to 100 francs were awarded for each point scored by the non-prize winners. "Point money" was rare. In a

typical event of this era, most of the players went home without any remuneration and had to cover their out-of-pocket expenses.

That changed at San Sebastian 1911. Tournament organizer Jacques Mieses introduced the custom of "hospitality." The players were reimbursed for their travel expenses and were provided with meal money. Mieses understood the needs of elite players. He was still among the world's 25 best players. And he knew what a chess tournament in a classy casino would feel like. He had played in all four of the Monte Carlo internationals at the turn of the century.

Great games make great tournaments memorable. San Sebastian had several. Among them: José Capablanca's much-anthologized win from Ossip Bernstein and Janowski. Akiba Rubinstein's trademark mixture of clarity and calculation to beat Capa. Aron Nimzovich's queen trap of Paul Leonhardt and his strategic masterpiece against Richard Teichmann.

Of course, no tournament of this era – or even the current one – withstands the brutal scrutiny of Stockfish, *et al*. As you read this book you may see several moves in each game bearing the discourteous scars of engine analysis. They are marked as dubious ("?!") or worse. This is understandable because the players were making the kinds of mistakes that innovators always do. (Many games played by the world's best players in today's "Freestyle/Fischerandom" tournaments are treated much worse by computers.)

The San Sebastian players were relying to a great degree on the antique teachings of Wilhelm Steinitz, out-of-date opening manuals and what they remembered from the very few endgame texts. Defensive skill was poorly understood. Opening prep was slim. Some of the invitees started thinking before move eight. Capablanca seemed shocked when Siegbert Tarrasch blitzed off his first 16 moves against him in three minutes. (The time limit, common for this era, was one hour for the first 15 moves. Capa would make forty moves in two hours the standard once he became world champion.)

In fact, the last hour of many San Sebastian games was much more interesting than the first. The players were rewriting endgame theory. For example, a basic rule – a king, rook and two uncompromised pawns always beats a king and rook – had been widely accepted as gospel. Even if the superior side is stuck with a rook pawn and bishop pawn, theory said he would win easily if he knew to advance the rook pawn first, as in Albin-Weiss, Vienna 1890. But this view was overturned in San Sebastian's game 25 by Frank Marshall's clever defense, which has been studied ever since.

Rudolf Spielmann later wrote a short book about rook endgames. He could have filled it with examples from this tournament, including Marshall's tempo-gaining technique in game 32. Or the trap Siegbert Tarrasch set for Nimzovich in the first round, which Tarrasch called "a beautiful problem-like sequence." Every master today knows how the "short side" defense, with a king and rook, can draw against king, rook and pawn. Spielmann and Amos Burn provided an unintentional lesson on the subject at moves 62/63 in game 26.

That illustrates how these great players were adding new pages to their own education. For instance, Capablanca was pushed to the brink by Carl Schlechter in game 62. If it seems vaguely familiar, it should be. Capa used the same themes in one of his most famous victories, against Janowski five years later. A pawn structure that seemed to confuse the Cuban in 1911 became his elegant weapon in 1916.

As for the openings, San Sebastian gave strong hints of the Hypermodern revolution to come. This is the tournament in which Nimzovich was ridiculed for introducing 1.e4 e6 2.d3 to master play and forcing his colleagues to take notice of 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘f6!?.

One of the hidden themes of the tournament was how fickle opening theory can be. Look at the Ruy Lopez Open Defense in game 21 and you'll see Mieses's claim that the natural 17.h×g3 f×g3 18.♕d3 is dubious in view of 18...♗f5. This judgment remained "book" for more than 30 years. But opening theory is written with an eraser.

Mieses' conclusion was reversed by Vasily Smyslov's instantly famous queen sacrifice, 19.♕×f5!, in the 1945 Radio Match. Suddenly the "book" verdict changed to "White wins." But the eraser had to be used again, after another 30 years. Today the 17.h×g3 line is regarded as dubious for White – just as Mieses said.

Beneath the surface there were other hotly debated theoretical disputes that are invisible to us today. For instance, the Lopez Open Defense was threatened with refutation by 8.a4!?. Then Schlechter showed the power of 8...♘×d4! 9.♘×d4 e×d4 in his 1910 world championship match.

But a new threat to the Open Defense was found in the surprise 10.♘c3!?, the "Berger Variation." This won games for White after 10...d×c3? 11.♗×d5. Even the foremost champion of the Open Defense, Tarrasch, met it meekly (10...♘f6) at San Sebastian. He saved the game thanks to a swindle that became famous in endgame literature – and confirmed his epigram about all rook endings being drawn.

But one year later, at San Sebastian 1912, Tarrasch introduced 10...♘×c3! 11.b×c3 c5, so that c×d4 would be answered by ...c4!. The Berger Variation never survived.

Context is everything when you try to understand a great tournament of the past. The final crosstable of San Sebastian 1911 comes into perspective when you appreciate how many of the players were playing at or near their very best. For example, Milan Vidmar had a tournament career that lasted more than a half-century. But San Sebastian was his greatest result, in terms of performance rating. Usually a player has a "career tournament" when his opponents play badly**.** But this was also the fourth-best tournament of the careers of Rubinstein and Marshall and the fifth-best of Capablanca.

In sum, San Sebastian 1911 is one of the most influential tournaments in history. It prompted other organizers to try to get the world's top ten players. It introduced "hospitality" and the financial basis for the careers of professional players. And it firmly established Capablanca's claim to be a future world champion.

Even before he went to San Sebastian, the Havana Chess Club wrote to Lasker and offered to host a Capa-Lasker match. The match would last until one of the players scored ten victories. Lasker replied that the drawish nature of modern chess made a ten-win match impractical. It "might last half a year or longer," he said.

But Lasker eventually agreed to play a title match in 1921 with an eight -victory rule. He became the only player to resign a world championship match, when he was trailing 0-4, with ten draws. For Capablanca, it was the end of a journey that began ten years before at San Sebastian.

Andy Soltis
New York
August 2024

Rubinstein (½) – Bernstein (½) Center Counter Game
This is the first contest between Rubinstein and Bernstein wherein Rubinstein misses out on winning through a conspicuous oversight. Rubinstein makes the most of Bernstein's opening choice, building up a solid advantage and preventing any real counterplay, until move 41. One slip gives up all of the advantage and another half-point is lost.

Teichmann (½) – Vidmar (½) Ruy Lopez
The second draw was between Teichmann and Dr. Vidmar, although the former had a slight advantage for a while. The game follows a rather modern variation of the Open Ruy Lopez, with Vidmar making the next-to-last mistake on move 23. Teichmann's last mistake is to offer a draw in a winning position!

Duras has the bye.

(15) Schlechter – Janowski
Vienna Game [C25]

1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♗c5 3.♘f3 d6 4.♘a4 ♗b6 5.♘×b6 a×b6 6.d4 e×d4 7.♕×d4=

SF prefers 7.♘×d4 ♘f6 8.♗d3 0-0 9.0-0 ♘c6 10.c3±.

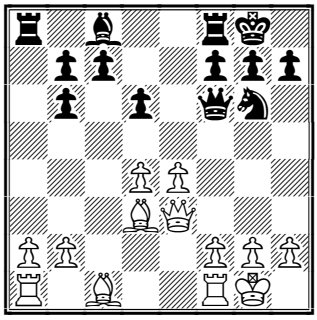
7...♕f6?! ±

Here Black can maintain equality with 7...♘f6 8.♗d3 c5 9.♕c3 h6=.

8.♗d3?!=

White can get more with 8.♗g5 ♕×d4 9.♘×d4 ♗d7 10.♘b5! ♗×b5 11.♗×b5+ ♘d7 12.f3±.

8...♘c6 9.♕e3 ♘ge7 10.0-0 0-0 11.c3 ♘g6 12.♘d4 ♘×d4 13.c×d4



13...♖a4?!±

This ends up being a waste of time. More to the point is 13...c5 14.d5 ♕e7 15.♖e1 f5 16.e×f5 ♕×e3 17.♗×e3 ♗×f5=.

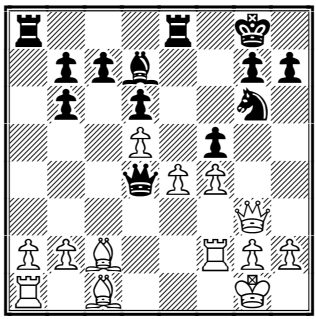
14.d5

While the text looks good to me, the following line is interesting. 14.♗b5 ♖a4×d4 15.♗d2 ♕e5 16.♗c3 ♖×e4 17.♗×e5 ♖e4×e3 18.f×e3 ♘×e5, but 14...♖b4 followed by 15...♕×d4 wins a pawn (*Vienna Chess Times*).

14...♗d7 15.♗c2 ♖aa8 16.f4 ♖fe8 17.♕g3!? =

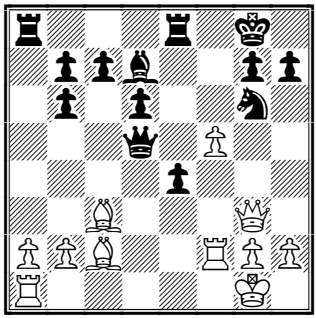
SF believes that White can maintain a slight advantage here with 17.♖f2 ♗a4 18.♗d3 ±.

17...♕d4+ 18.♖f2 f5



Very daring. 18...♗d7-f5, apparently winning a pawn, is refuted by 19.♗e3 ♕b2 20.♖b1 ♕a3 21.♖b3. The best move was 18...f7-f6. Mieses 2: 18...f6 19.♗d2 ♕×b2 20.♗c3 ♕a3 21.h4 ±.

19.♗d2 f×e4 20.♗c3 ♕×d5 21.f5



On 21.♗b3, Black can sacrifice the queen with advantage: 21...♕b3 22.a×b ♖a1+ 23.♖f1 ♖f1+ 24.♔f1 ♖f8=.

21...e3?! +−

A mistake. The right thing to do is ♗×f5, whereupon White would continue the attack with h2-h4 but his success is questionable. Black could have held with 21...♗×f5 22.♖e1 ♕c5 23.b4 ♕b5=.

22.♖ff1 e2 23.♗b3

This is good, but even stronger is 23.f×g6! ♕c5+ 24.♔h1! e×f1♕+ 25.♖×f1 ♕×c3 (25...h6 26.♖f7 ♖e5 27.♖×d7 +−) 26.♕×c3 +− .

23...e×f1♕+ 24.♖×f1 ♕×b3 25.a×b3 ♘e5 26.f6 ♘g6

Mieses: 26...g6 27.♗×e5 ♖×e5 28.♕f4 ♖f5 29.♕h6 ♖×f1+ 30.♔×f1 ♔f7 31.♕g7+ ♔e6 32.f7 c5 33.♕g8! ♔e7 34.♕×a8 ♔×f7 35.♕d8 ♗e6 36.♕×d6 +− .

27.f7+ 1-0

(16) Capablanca – Burn
Ruy Lopez [C77]

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.d3 d6 6.c3

This position saw a slight resurgence in the early 1940s, then again in the late 1970s, still again in the mid-1990s, and has become hugely popular again since the early 2000s. It has been recently played by the likes of Carlsen, Caruana, Morozevich, and Tiviakov.

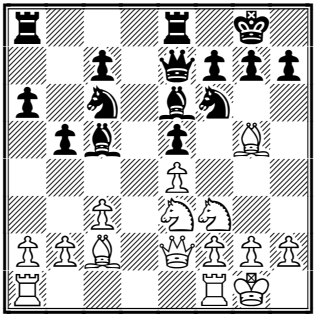
6...♗e7 7.♘bd2 0-0 8.♘f1 b5 9.♗c2 d5

Taking central space, pressuring White's center, and threatening to open the center while the white king has not yet castled. The position is equal.

10.♕e2 d×e4 11.d×e4 ♗c5?±

Not at all satisfactory, for the "pinning" of his knight gives rise to a lot of trouble. A preferable line of play is 11...♘d7, to be followed in due course by ♘c5 and ♘e6. (Helms, ACB) SF disagrees and finds that after 11...♘d7 12.♘e3 ♗d6 13.0-0, Black has nothing better than 13...♘f6±. Instead, SF prefers 11...♗e6 12.♘e3 ♗d6 13.0-0 ♘e7 14.h3 ♘g6=.

12.♗g5 ♗e6 13.♘e3 ♖e8 14.0-0 ♕e7

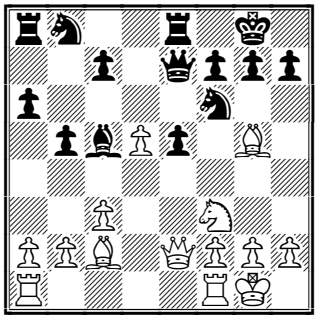


If 14...♗e7 15.♖ad1 (15.♖fd1±) 15...♕c8 16.♘d5 ♗g4?! (16...♘d7±) 17.♗×f6 ♗×f6 18.h3 ♗h5 19.♘×f6+ g×f6 20.♕e3 ♘a5 21.♘h4! ♗×d1 22.♖×d1, White has a ready-made attack with such moves as 22.♘f5, 23.♕h6 and 24.♖d3-g3.

15.♘d5±

Planting a thorn in his adversary's side, and from now on Black has an uphill game on his hands. (Helms, ACB)

15...♗×d5 16.e×d5 ♘b8?!+−



17.a4?!±

Giving up a significant part of his advantage. Much better is 17.d6! ♗×d6 (17...♕×d6 18.♖ad1+−) 18.♗×h7+ ♔×h7 19.♗×f6 ♕×f6 20.♕e4++−. You can see the difference in how the position is evaluated today versus how the old masters thought about it.

In the original book on the tournament Lasker says that 17.a4 "hits the weakness" while Golombek calls this, "A strong move which takes advantage of the fact that the black rooks are momentarily cut off from each other."

17...b4?!+−

This just loses. Both Lasker and Capablanca (1) prefer 17...♘bd7, which is reasonable. But it is all downhill from here.

18.c×b4 ♗×b4 19.♗×f6 ♕×f6 20.♕e4 ♗d6

After 20...♕g6, White wins with 21.♕b4 ♕c2 22.♖ac1 ♕d3 23.♖fd1.

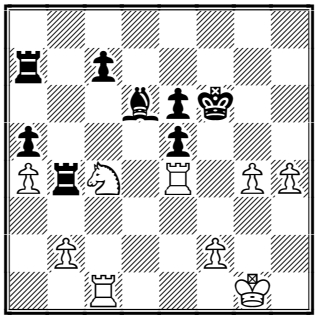
21.♕×h7+ ♔f8 22.♘h4 ♕h6 23.♕×h6 g×h6 24.♘f5 h5 25.♗d1

25.a5!

25...♘d7 26.♗×h5 ♘f6?!

26...♖ab8 is better.

27.♗e2 ♘×d5 28.♖fd1 ♘f4 29.♗c4 ♖ed8 30.h4 a5 31.g3 ♘e6 32.♗×e6 f×e6 33.♘e3 ♖db8 34.♘c4 ♔e7 35.♖ac1 ♖a7 36.♖e1 ♔f6 37.♖e4 ♖b4 38.g4



38...♖a6

Of course, not 38...♖×a4? because of 39.♘×d6 and White wins a piece.

39.♖c3 ♗c5 40.♖f3+ ♔g7 41.b3 ♗d4 42.♔g2 ♖a8 43.g5 ♖a6 44.h5 ♖×c4 45.b×c4 ♖c6 46.g6 1-0

(17) Nimzovich – Leonhardt
Four Knights Game [C49]

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗b5 ♗b4 5.0-0 0-0 6.♗×c6

Capturing the knight at this point is Nimzovich's innovation.

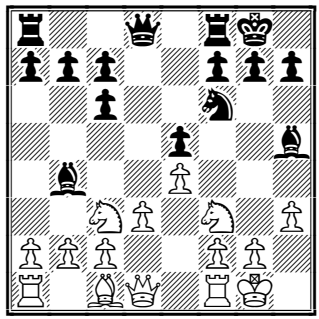
6...d×c6

6...b×c6?!. Both recaptures receive the same evaluation from SF.

7.d3 ♗g4±

SF 7...♘d7=.

8.h3 ♗h5



9.♗g5?!=

Mieses: 9.g4? ♘×g4 10.h×g4? (10.♘e2 ♘f6∓) 10...♗×g4 11.♔h1 f5 12.♖g1 −+ . SF 9.♕e2 ♗×c3 10.b×c3 ♗×f3 11.♕×f3 ♕d6 12.a4±.

9...♕d6 10.♗×f6 ♕×f6 11.g4 ♗g6 12.♔g2 ♖ad8 13.♕e2