

Capablanca: An everlasting chess genius



Havana, March 8 (JIT) - 82 years have passed since that fateful day, when death surprised the Cuban Jose Raul Capablanca in the middle of one of his usual gatherings at the Manhattan Chess Club, in New York City.

On March 8, 1942, the brilliant chess player, the only Latin American capable of occupying the universal throne of the Science Game, lost his match with life at only 53 years of age, due to a cerebral aneurysm. Since that day, much has been written and spoken about an incomparable player, whose talent continues to be an obligatory reference for most of his successors.

Up to the present day, 23 chess players have won the universal crown, but few have achieved triumphs of the magnitude of those signed by the illustrious Havana native, who embraced the world of chess when he was only four years old with an impressive ease.

Only eight years later, he won the Island's top title and by 1909 all doubts about his promising future were dispelled, when he defeated the American champion Frank Marshall in an uncontested manner.

Capablanca's vertiginous ascent reached its climax in 1921 with the beginning of his reign. He was then 33 years old when he snatched the privilege from the German Emanuel Lasker, in a match in which he displayed the extraordinary precision in his analysis that characterized his entire career.

The German had no qualms in describing him as the only genius among the great players he knew, while highlighting his innate ability to take advantage of the opponent's weaknesses.

Other illustrious rivals of the time, among them Rudolf Spielman and Savielly Tartakower, also spared no praise in referring to the Cuban, who exhibited the condition of world champion until 1927.

Capablanca based his game on an uncommon intuition and a brilliant strategy marked by simplicity which, according to the Russian world champion Mikhail Botvinnik, had a "unique, genuinely profound beauty".

It fell to Alexander Alekhine to take credit for stopping the Cuban's unbeatability, something for which the Russian-French player never found an explanation. "I don't understand even now, after so many years, how I managed to beat Capablanca", said the player who never granted him a rematch.

Historians say that the rivalry between these two greats bordered on animosity, to the point that during their confrontations neither would remain seated while the other meditated.

Even during his reign, Alekhine refused to play in several tournaments in which Capablanca participated. However, upon learning of the death of the player from the island, he said that the world "has lost a great chess genius, whose caliber we will never see again".

INCALCULABLE TALENT

It is an almost impossible task to gauge in numbers the talent exhibited by Capablanca in front of the 64 squares, or to know how far he would have gone if he had not died prematurely.

Those who have followed his career say that he won 302 of his 583 official games. They also say that 246 of his games were drawn, and only 35 times he tilted his king.

Some formulas applied long after his death suggest that his Elo coefficient could have been as high as 2,725 points, although these calculations are speculative.

Nevertheless, the most accepted statistics indicate that Capablanca remained undefeated between 1916 and 1924, despite the fact that this was a period in which he was intensely active, playing 63 games in various tournaments.

ETERNAL LEGACY

The different way in which Capablanca assimilated chess, as well as his exquisite and precise technique inspired talented players who later reached the highest level.

Many consider him an idol, but few like the Russian Anatoly Karpov, who expressed his fervent admiration during his visits to the island.

For the world champion between 1975 and 1985, and from 1993 to 1999, "the ideal in chess can only be a collective image", but he did not hesitate to consider Capablanca as the closest to that reality. "His book was the first one I studied, from beginning to end. Of course, his ideas influenced me," he assured.

Earlier, the legendary Mikhail Tal, who held the world crown between 1960 and 1961 under the flag of the Soviet Union, had said about the Cuban that "it was a delight to see the virtuosity with which he exploited small advantages.... He is the personification of a technique taken to perfection and automatism. He was a man of extraordinary talent. His way of playing the endgame is considered the summum of mastery".

In his homeland, Capablanca remains an idol. The study of his best games appears as an almost obligatory step for those who, from an early age, intend to shine in the art of the game.

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