

KINGS, QUEENS & ROOKIES

The Tata Steel Chess Tournament
A Celebration of 85 Years







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A Celebration of 85 Years

New In Chess
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Preface





TATA STEEL CHESS TOURNAMENT

by **DGT**

A Jubilee Edition

This book is about chess; in particular about chess played in Wijk aan Zee, a coastal village in the northern part of the Netherlands. Every winter chess players and chess enthusiasts from around the world gather in this small village that has been the host of the Tata Steel Chess Tournament (that initially started as a tournament for employees of Koninklijke Hoogovens) since 1968. And because we share the same focus on strategic thinking and developing creative solutions for complex problems, Tata Steel is linked to chess.

Throughout the years, the Tata Steel Chess Tournament has become one of the most prestigious events on the international chess calendar. A tournament that has been described as the ‘Wimbledon of Chess’ every year attracts the very best chess grandmasters in the world, along with thousands of amateur players, live event visitors and online visitors from around the world.

This year’s edition of the Tata Steel Chess Tournament is special as it celebrates its 85th anniversary. And during its history, some of the biggest names in chess history have played at the tournament. Visitors have witnessed the rise and domination of players like Max Euwe, Tigran Petrosian, Magnus Carlsen, Viswanathan Anand and Garry Kasparov. Of the eight World Chess Champions since 1946, only the names of Vasily Smyslov and Bobby Fischer are missing.

To celebrate this jubilee edition of the Tata Steel Chess tournament, we have collected the most memorable games that have been played throughout its history. This book is a collection of those chess games and should serve as

an inspiration for everybody who loves the game of chess. Together with additional anecdotes and personal memories, it provides an interesting historical overview of a well-known sports event.

As a fan of the game and a longtime employee of Tata Steel, I'm proud of this collective memory of a game played by millions around the globe. I hope you will enjoy the complexity and brilliance of the games we collected for you.

Hans van den Berg
CEO Tata Steel Nederland



The Past 25 Years





My Wijk aan Zee

Dutch grandmaster Erwin l'Ami knows the history of the Tata Steel Chess Tournament intimately. He has played in or visited all events in the past 25 years. He fondly reminisces about the tournament and winners such as Kasparov, Anand, Aronian and Carlsen.

Wijk aan Zee, a small village on the coastline of the North Sea. In summer, when the temperatures are high, it's the place to be for beachgoers or surfers, something I never experienced first-hand, since I never visit Wijk aan Zee in summer. For chess players, there is only one time of the year to visit this 'hamlet', as Nigel Short once coined it, and that's in January. I have been going there for the last 25 years.

My first memory dates back to the tournament of 1998. It was called the Hoogovens Chess Tournament at the time, and some (most?) of the older participants in the amateur sections have endearingly kept calling it that way to this day. I vaguely remember that the excitement started in the car as we drove to the playing hall. The street lights leading into Wijk aan Zee were all decorated with chess themes. As a 12-year-old kid, I thought it was amazing that the entire village was so involved with the chess tournament. Much more vivid is the memory of first entering the playing hall, De Moriaan. I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere; this was the place to be! My father and I were certainly not the only visitors and add to that the hundreds of amateur players, and it's easy to imagine that the place was packed! I recall slowly making my way to the main attraction at the far end of the hall: the Grandmasters! Of course, Jan Timman was playing, and so were Shirov, Karpov and Polgar, and not to forget the later tournament winners, Kramnik and Anand. Most of them I saw for the first time in three

dimensions, and on the way out I even managed to get an autograph from Anatoly Karpov. A very exciting day indeed!

It was around that time that I completely immersed myself into the game of chess, playing every classical/rapid/blitz event I heard about. This newfound passion happily coincided with the rapid rise of the first chess platforms on the internet. Playing chess online non-stop proved both a lot of fun and detrimental to my school results.

Kasparov

The next year, my father and I returned to Wijk aan Zee for a number of visits. One day stood out: January 20th, 1999, the day when Kasparov produced his masterpiece against Topalov. Anyone unfamiliar with this game, I would recommend to look it up elsewhere in this book, where I analyse it in great detail. The game is regarded as one of the best ever played, and I would certainly not disagree. Seeing that game live was one of my most electrifying chess experiences ever. The excitement was shared with all the other spectators as to all of us it was obvious that we were witnessing something truly special. The fact that Kasparov would score an amazing 10/13 and win the tournament is not the first thing I remember from this event. The masterpiece that Kasparov created against Topalov, and the experience of seeing it unfold from up close, certainly is. When years later the playing hall was redecorated, the culmination of Kasparov's dazzling combination, 37.Rd7!!, was depicted on a giant wallpaper behind the Grandmaster Groups.

In 2000, my own Wijk aan Zee journey started, in the so-called Reserve Group, a small open tournament parallel to the Grandmaster groups. The biggest name in the group was undoubtedly the Serbian grandmaster Borislav Ivkov. Having won a copy of Donner's *The King* at a blitz tournament earlier that year, I was very well aware of who he was! The group also featured several young talents, which, over the years has become a specialty of the Wijk aan Zee organizers. Besides the top group with the best grandmasters there is a structure of lower groups that offer young talents the opportunity 'to rise through the ranks'. From lower groups where they gain valuable experience they can promote to a higher group. Many big names



For many years the crucial position of the game Kasparov – Topalov featured prominently in the artwork on the wall behind the Masters in the playing hall.

have made their debuts in Wijk aan Zee at an early age. Magnus Carlsen, who first played in the C Group in 2004, is the most prominent example, but the list is very long. For instance, when I made my debut in the Reserve Group in 2000, one of the other participants was 15-year-old Alexandra Kosteniuk, and in the second round I got demolished by a small boy named Ivan Cheparinov. Rated a relatively modest 2089, Ivan would proceed to make an IM-norm. Fast forward ten years and we were both working as seconds for Veselin Topalov when the Bulgarian was battling for the World Championship! And in Round 7, I got to play against Dutch master Dick van Geet, who made his trademark move 1.Nc3 against me. Truly great experiences! What's more, the Reserve Group was played immediately next to the top groups. It was easy to have a quick peek at the big guns, which is of course hugely inspiring.

Sonnevanck

During the tournament, I stayed in Hotel Sonnevanck. The evenings there were just as memorable as the tournament itself. Hotel Sonnevanck is the place to be in Wijk aan Zee. The ground floor is a café and restaurant with a cozy atmosphere, and up the stairs there are a handful of simple hotel rooms. In the evenings, after all games had finished, many chess players, including some of the strongest in the world, would head there to have a drink, play blitz, or simply just unwind. As I was 14 years old, I didn't participate in the drinking part all that much, but I was ready to play blitz with anyone. Usually I did so until closing time, when it was time to go upstairs and get some sleep before the next round started! To this day, Sonnevanck remains a popular destination for chess amateurs in the evening, but it has become increasingly rare to encounter players from the Masters. In that respect, the world of top chess has changed significantly, and I consider my time in Sonnevanck in 2000 as belonging to an era that no longer exists.

Dutch IM Manuel Bosboom is in many ways an exponent of that era and he used to be a frequent visitor of Sonnevanck. In 1999 he made headlines when he replaced Alexei Shirov in the super-strong blitz event that was held on the rest day. Shirov had withdrawn as he had to see a dentist and the organizers had asked blitz specialist Bosboom to join the elite company that included almost all the stars from the top group. As it was, the last-minute replacement was the only one to defeat the final winner, Garry Kasparov himself! Many players would have been ecstatic after such a win, but Bosboom, being the down-to-earth man that he is, just casually commented that 'Kasparov had pressed too hard for the win'.

Despite his visits to Sonnevanck (or perhaps because of?), Manuel won the Open that year, scoring 7 out of 9, and qualifying for the Grandmaster B Group. In 2021 his biography, *Chess Buccaneer*, was published and I am sure many more books could be filled with his life story. Although he does not belong to the very top, he is one of the most popular chess players of the Netherlands, and beyond. In those days, meeting him almost weekly in rapid and blitz events all over the country, was highly inspiring for me!

In 2000, Kasparov, of course, won the main event, scoring 9.5/13, without

any losses and 1.5 points clear of the field. He played his trademark powerful chess, choosing the Najdorf against 1.e4 and the Grünfeld against 1.d4. A fragment from his game against Van Wely in Round 3 featured in Netflix's *The Queen's Gambit* and is, therefore, ironically, most likely one of the most viewed chess games ever. In short, my debut in 2000 was an extremely memorable event for me.

In 2003, I was again invited to play in Wijk aan Zee, this time in a 10-player round-robin called 'Meestertienkamp', which turned out to be the precursor of the Grandmaster C Group that was introduced the next year. I made my final IM-norm, which wasn't a very tense affair since I already secured it with one round to go. The days were spent similarly to the year 2000 with long evenings in Sonnevank. But, of course, there was a big difference compared to the previous years: Kasparov wasn't playing. At the time we were sure that he would play in Wijk aan Zee in future tournaments, but unfortunately that never happened.

Next up was the era of Vishy Anand and, soon afterwards, of Magnus Carlsen. Anand won the tournament of 2003, while Judit Polgar had one of her best performances ever, finishing sole second, undefeated with 8 points from 13 games. It was also a good year for Loek van Wely. Over the years he had had quite some bumpy rides in Wijk aan Zee, scoring minus-5 in 2000, minus-3 in 2001, and to cap it all, minus-7 in 2002. For 2003 Loek had decided to negotiate an appearance fee based on his result in the tournament. What it came down to, is that the organizers would have excellent value for money in case Loek would score his 'usual' result, but his earnings would increase significantly in case he scored 50% or more. Needless to say, that is what happened! Having spent a lot of time in Eupen with his trainer Vladimir Chuchelov proved fruitful and he ended the tournament with a very respectable +1 score. In the two years that followed Loek also held his own, on both occasions scoring 50%.

While these were good years for Van Wely, the opposite was true for Jan Timman. The winner of 1985 – and shared winner of 1981 – played his last Grandmaster A Group in 2004. Eight years later, in 2012, he made a reap-



pearance in the Grandmaster B Group. In those years, a huge pavilion was erected on the village green. The opening and closing ceremonies took place in the pavilion and during the tournament it was here that experts provided commentary on the games of the grandmasters. Timman was immensely popular with the spectators, as I was subtly reminded of when I had won a game and was asked to show it to the audience in the pavilion. As I was proudly showing all kinds of subtleties, I noticed that Jan had entered the pavilion as well, accompanied by one of the organizers. He had won, too, and was ready to show his game. As he stood there waiting, I felt how all the chess fans were eagerly anticipating my departure from the stage. Needless to say, I knew what I had to do and rushed to the end of my game at lightning speed.

Having mentioned my fondness of Sonnevanck, I may add that I am certainly not the only one with good memories of the place. One evening, Jan was to meet his wife there! Jan had a great result in the Grandmaster B Group in 2014, when he scored 8.5 from 13, sharing second place with Baadur Jobava. However, an unstoppable Ivan Saric topped the field that year with 10/13, preventing Jan from promoting back to the Grandmaster A Group.

After Garry

Back to the years after Garry. Anand initially filled the gap by winning three times, in 2003, 2004 and 2006. Which takes his total to five victories, as his first win dates back to 1989(!), while he also won in 1998. Vishy obviously belongs to the select group that can call themselves 'one of the best chess players ever'. This is easy to sense when you talk chess with him. I remember playing Vishy in the German Bundesliga a couple of years ago, when he defeated me swiftly. I proposed to have a look at the game to which he agreed, but, unfortunately, there was no chess set to be found anywhere. Therefore we started discussing the game without one. If the game itself had proven to be too tough a challenge for me, it was nothing compared to what was coming next. Vishy, notoriously quick at throwing out lines, started throwing an avalanche of lines at me, causing me enormous trouble to keep

track of the pieces. Essentially, I just managed to nod at the lines he was spouting, as by the time I had caught up with him, he would already have jumped elsewhere. My only contribution to the proceedings was when yet another set of moves came my way and, pushing myself to the limit and feeling very uncertain, I remarked that there had been an illegal move in the line he proposed. Perhaps Vishy was just checking if I was still paying attention!

I was playing the B Group in 2006 when Vishy won the main tournament, and as such, I got to see his victory from up close. The word that automatically comes to mind is 'ease'. It never looks like Vishy is doing something difficult, or that any hard work is involved. His overall demeanour almost borders on boredom. In that sense, he is the complete opposite of Garry Kasparov, who by his mere expression never concealed the enormous amount of energy that he put into a game.

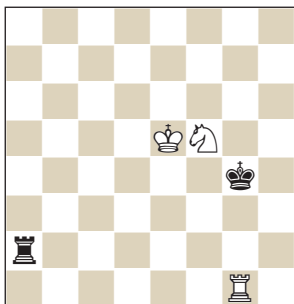
In those years, a new generation came to the fore, with Levon Aronian as the prime representative. With his trusted companion and second Gabriel Sargissian he had brought Armenia gold at the 2006 Turin Olympiad and now they took Wijk aan Zee by storm, as Aronian shared victory in 2007 and 2008. Levon has a flamboyant, romantic playing style, which is rare these days. Of all the absolute top players my encounters with him have perhaps been the most successful. I always sensed that Levon didn't quite enjoy playing the underdog in a tournament. As a result, he would sometimes take excessive risk or play in a generally unbalanced manner. The two topsy-turvy draws we made in Wijk aan Zee are a good indication of that! When Aronian is in good shape, he can defeat anyone. Carlsen has praised him often, mentioning him as one of the few people that have regularly outplayed him. Kasparov once tweeted that 'the chess world is a better place when Aronian plays well!', congratulating him on a tournament victory. His wins in 2012 and 2014 take his total to four, making him one of the most successful players in Wijk aan Zee history. In the early 2010's it seemed destined that Aronian and Carlsen would be playing for the world title one day and I think it is a great shame that this never materialized!

Magnus Carlsen

In 2004, on the eve of the tournament, Jan Smeets told me about the competition he was going to face in the C Group in Wijk aan Zee. One boy bothered him somewhat. A young Norwegian kid that he saw as a threat to his ambition to promote to the B Group. I had seen some stories about the boy, but as I am not easily impressed, I assured Jan that all this was probably blown out of proportion. Surely a country without much chess history couldn't suddenly produce an extraordinary player? A couple weeks later Magnus Carlsen won the C Group with a plus-8 score, showing a slight judgement error from my side. Magnus was promoted to the B Group in 2005 and the next year he played there again and shared first place with Alexander Motylev. In the meantime, I had played in a tournament in Gausdal in 2004, where I managed to decide a theoretical debate against Magnus in my favour, which effectively ended the game. The following year, in a rapid-event in the Netherlands, I once again defeated him, 1.5-0.5 and so, when I faced Magnus in 2006 in the B Group I felt pretty confident! Once again, this turned out to be a judgement error. In a mere 2-3 hours I was brushed aside in what felt like a completely one-sided game. Only two years later, Magnus won the main event, further proof of his astronomic rise. We met again in 2011. By that time Magnus had already shot up to the top spot in the world rankings, while I was making my debut in the top group. People are often asked where they were at a moment of great historical impact. To this day I remember the exact spot where I was when the phone call of Jeroen van den Berg came in with the invitation. The feeling of excitement is hard to describe! This was the stage I had always wanted to play on as a kid.

After four rounds, I had drawn all my games. I had even missed some chances along the way, so I was feeling confident. Magnus had, famously, lost to Anish Giri and drawn his other games, having a very slow start for his standards. Of course, he was going to do everything in his power to beat me in Round 5. He was clearly not in his best shape and was a tad slow in our encounter. That combination of factors led to an interesting time scramble from which he emerged with a pleasant endgame after move 40. Having to defend an ugly endgame, I was doing reasonably well, but of course Magnus,

being Magnus, kept posing problems. It is safe to say that Magnus is the best technician to have ever walked this planet. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say he is miles ahead of the competition in this area of the game. Around the second time control, things got out of hand for me. I had pinned my hopes on a stalemate trick that didn't work and lost a piece in the process. In the meantime, we had again entered time trouble. As a result Magnus let the win slip and we reached a pretty trivial rook and knight versus rook endgame. After roughly 7 hours of play, we reached the following position.



I have reached this type of endgame twice after my game with Magnus and defended it easily; there really isn't that much that can go wrong, provided your king isn't awkwardly placed in the corner. Simplest would now be 93...Kh5, though 93...Kh3 is also not bad. I decided on 93...Kf3 and Magnus instantly played 94.Nh4+. Something that is distinctly belonging to 'Wijk aan Zee' – or perhaps I just haven't noticed it anywhere else – is the very light sound of people whispering. Even though everybody tries their best to be silent or keep their voices as low as possible, the many, sometimes hundreds, spectators together produce a tiny rustling sound. It's a sound that is hard to describe and I don't hear it during play unless I really pay attention. However, I remember very well how at this point that whispering sound became clearly stronger as people realized what was unfolding. I had just blundered my rook. To this day I am regularly reminded of this endgame. Every time when it appears in a game, there will be a commentator pointing out that it's a pretty trivial draw, 'although it once was lost by l'Ami!'

Even though I have played in the top group in Wijk aan Zee twice, it is

safe to say that it is not my natural habitat. A minus-9 score from a total of 26 games certainly seems to point in that direction. Still, the sheer joy of playing there was unbelievable! Playing the world's very best, day in day out, was an experience I enjoyed every second of.

Most of the times I played in the Challengers, as the second group is called these days. In 2023, in the 85th edition of the Tata Steel Tournament, I will play there for the 14th time, which may well be a record. You would think that merely statistically I should have won the group at least once by now, but that hasn't happened just yet! I was close a couple of times, but I never clinched it. The transition from being one of the youngest participants in the tournament to now playing the world's youngest grandmaster, Abhimanyu Mishra, who is less than a third of my age, is an interesting one. I very much enjoy playing the new generation as they bring a new twist to the game.

Back to 2011. Despite my lending him a helping hand by losing rook and knight versus rook, Magnus did not win the tournament that year. However, he did so six more times in the years that followed, adding up to a grand total, for now(!), of an astonishing 8 victories. It is highly unlikely that this record will ever be broken. Simply the fact that Magnus has participated in Wijk aan Zee so often, combined with his obvious chess strength, makes it hard to imagine that anyone will ever get close. Magnus has said that crossing 2900 with his rating is a goal he aspires to achieve in the future, but I am sure he wouldn't mind a nice round figure like ten Wijk aan Zee victories on his list as well! Magnus is obviously hugely important for the Tata Steel Chess tournament. Over the years there were times when the budget had to be cut and players couldn't be offered their usual appearance fees. However, the knowledge that they would face Magnus Carlsen convinced many to accept their invitations anyway. Magnus's presence in Wijk aan Zee every year has given the tournament its status of the 'Wimbledon of chess', a status that used to belong to the super-tournament of Linares, which was Kasparov's favourite event. Why is Magnus always ready to come back to Wijk aan Zee? This question, and more in general the question of what makes Wijk aan Zee so special, I am asked quite often. It's hard to come up

with an answer that explains it all, but I think that Magnus's answer is probably quite similar to mine. He knows that the Tata Steel Chess tournament is an excellently run top-tournament, as he has come to Wijk aan Zee practically from childhood and he knows the event and the village inside out. He has played 234 games in Wijk aan Zee and has a ton of memories connected to them. That creates a deep bond, as is easy to imagine. Quite frankly, I think there is no other place where Magnus would want to start the year but in Wijk aan Zee!

Every time he takes part, Magnus is obviously the favourite to win, but he cannot win them all. For many years Dutch chess fans were eagerly waiting for a countryman to win. In 1985 Jan Timman pulled off this feat, but his victory was followed by a severe drought. The emergence of Anish Giri renewed their hopes! Anish started his campaign by winning the B Group in 2010. He was only 15 years old and with his win he was promoted to the big stage. I already mentioned his win against Carlsen that followed, but it took him a few more years before he was ready to fight for tournament victory. In 2015, playing very well, he eventually shared second place. Three years later he shared first place with Carlsen after 13 rounds, which would have meant a shared tournament victory in the previous 77 editions. As fate would have it, the regulations had been changed that year. From now on a blitz-tiebreak would be played to determine the winner. Carlsen tends to be good in those and indeed he won convincingly.

The following year again saw a close race, with Anish needing to defeat the World Champion in the last round to win outright. Showing his strength, Magnus comfortably steered the game towards a draw, maintaining his half-point lead.

The pandemic

In 2021, the pandemic had a dramatic impact on the tournament. Due to restrictions, only the Masters played in De Moriaan, without any spectators. I was Anish's second as he started his next bid for first place. During the first half of the Candidates' tournament in Yekaterinburg, I had already seen



In 2021 only the Masters played, without spectators or amateurs.

first-hand that Anish did well under the tough circumstances caused by Covid. Endless testing, curfews, closed restaurants, it was tough on everyone, but some players dealt with the difficult circumstances better than others. We decided to stick to our own routines and didn't let much get in the way. Things went really well for Anish, who was dominating the tournament from start till – almost – finish. Carlsen did not have a good tournament and finished on +2, leaving it to others to fight for first prize. Anish looked set to take his chance but he stumbled against Firouzja in Round 12. A completely winning position eventually ended in a draw and the next day, with the black pieces, Anish required Houdini-like skills to save the game against Spain's David Anton. Those two draws allowed another Dutch grandmaster to jump on board. After 35 years without a Dutch winner, now suddenly two Dutchmen topped the standings as Anish and Jorden van Foreest had collected the same number of points! Recently, Jorden had been making considerable strides, but few had thought him capable of winning a tournament of this

calibre. I certainly hadn't! Jorden's play is incredibly sharp, the amount of risk he takes is huge and his opening preparation is very creative and entertaining. This can lead to performance swings in either direction and obviously in 2021 it swung the right way!

The blitz tiebreak between Giri and Van Foreest started with two draws before Jorden prevailed in a tumultuous Armageddon game. As I was Anish's second, this loss was of course a blow, but quite quickly I could switch the button and be happy for Jorden. He had gone beyond and above to achieve this result that was well deserved. The improvised afterparty – with everyone present having tested negative for Covid – took place in a hotel room and welcomed a small and select company.

In 2022 the tournament returned to a certain measure of normalcy. Magnus Carlsen won his eighth title scoring +6, and the Challengers returned, which included me. However, with Covid still around, measures remained strict and for a second year, the tournament did not have any amateur events or spectators. Fortunately, in 2023, the 85th anniversary of the Tata Steel Chess Tournament will be a festival as of old again. I can't wait to hear that rustling sound of spectators and see the sea of amateur players that fill up De Moriaan! Here's too many more jubilees!

Erwin l'Ami