

# Capablanca: A Primer of Checkmate

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BOSTON

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# Introduction

Two capsule biographies, one less often told:

José Raúl Capablanca y Graupera was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1888. José learned chess at age 4 by observing his father's games. A popular legend goes that little José pointed out his father's incorrect knight move, and when his elders asked, "Oh? Just what do you know?", the boy showed them by beating his dad in his very first game.

The elder Capablanca took José to the Havana Chess Club, where the youngster was soon defeating all the adults. In 1901, at age 13, José won a 12-game match against Cuban champion Juan Corzo. After that, Capablanca concentrated on his schoolwork, until a 1909 match with Frank Marshall, in which he routed the American champion 8-1 with 14 draws.

Not every participant at the international San Sebastián tournament of 1911 believed Capablanca deserved entry, but the young Cuban won the tournament. He even won the brilliancy prize against Dr. Ossip Bernstein, one of the objectors.

Capablanca went on to compile one of the most spectacular tournament and match records in chess history. He suffered the fewest losses of any grandmaster — between 1916 and 1923, Capablanca did not lose a single tournament or match game, including the 1921 world championship match against Emanuel Lasker, who was No. 1 for 27 years.

Capablanca's air of invincibility — plus his rapid calculation at the board and a seeming effortless clarity in his moves — earned him the nickname, "the human chess machine." Mikhail Botvinnik, who was world champion for 15 years, said he thought Capablanca displayed the greatest natural talent at chess. This natural ability contributed to Capablanca's self-admitted laziness: a fanatically hard-working Alexander Alekhine took the title in 1927.

The deposed champion played some of the best chess of his life while trying to secure a rematch with Alekhine, but one never took place. Even as late as 1939 — three years before Capablanca's death — Alekhine was declining offers for a rematch. The 1939 Chess Olympiad was Capablanca's last tournament, at which he won a gold medal. Alekhine — representing France — avoided Capablanca until the end, sitting out the France vs. Cuba Olympiad match.

Botvinnik also said: "You cannot play chess unless you have studied [Capablanca's] games." Capablanca was one of the game's finest teachers by example, but for textbook instruction, there was none better than Cecil Purdy.

Born in Egypt in 1906, then raised in Australia, Cecil John Seddon Purdy didn't learn chess until he was 16, but after just a year of practice, he was determined to be a chess writer.

Purdy's notebooks from the early 1920s included prospective titles like "Method of Thinking in Chess" and "Chess Made Easy," seeds for instructive books and articles that would move the American world champion Bobby Fischer to call Purdy "the best chess teacher in the business."

If Capablanca was "The Chess Machine," then Purdy was "The Technical Writer." While Capablanca's playing style was celebrated for its orderliness, Purdy's gift was an ability to distill a master game to its elements, and explain how those parts fit together.

Purdy published and edited magazines — *Australasian Chess Review*, *Check*, *Chessworld* — that served improving chessplayers from 1929 to 1967, providing pithy and memorable advice on every phase of the game, while recommending study habits and thinking patterns. Purdy followed his own counsel well enough to win the first world championship of correspondence chess, and the Australian over-the-board championship four times.

The purpose of this book is to make the case that Capablanca — the intuitive prodigy — and Purdy — the methodic educator — were teaching the same things.

At the very heart of winning chess, Purdy broke it down to two things, one positional and one tactical.

*Threats are the basis of winning chess.*

Threats are the lifeblood of a chess game, Purdy also said. Threats drive a chess game forward — if neither side makes a threat, a game of chess will only end through boredom.

A chessplayer is rarely as comfortable at the board as when his opponent's move is a quiet, non-threatening move. Ideally, a chess move should be as menacing as possible while developing one's forces.

Whether one is attacking or defending, the goal is to do so while bringing up unused pieces and pawns. According to Purdy:

*The root principle of position play right through the game from opening to ending is: Use inactive force.*

Superior force conquers. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu said: "The art of using troops is ... when [greater] his strength, attack him. ... A small force is but booty for one more powerful."

Maybe Purdy was referring to the Chinese military strategist here: "Can a force be inactive? In a military sense, yes, of course. In the chess opening, nearly all one's forces are inactive, so it's there the principle works most clearly; we call it development."

Those axioms about threatening moves and using inactive force pertain to every position we'll ever see on the board. Above the board, Purdy looks inside a chessplayer's head:

*The chief factor in chess skill is the storing of patterns in the mind, and the recognition of such patterns in actual play.*

## Introduction

When a chessplayer sits at the board with steam coming from his ears, face red and pulling his hair out, it's because he doesn't know what to do.

But when a chessplayer has seen the position before, he can proceed with confidence. If the structures or piece configurations are in the player's memory, he doesn't have to reinvent the wheel — he can search his memory for the kind of move that worked before.

Checkmating patterns are the most valuable motifs a chessplayer can know. After a player learns the rules, and how the pieces move, the next thing he learns is often one of the simplest checkmating procedures — like the double rook roller or king plus queen vs. king.

The more checkmating methods the player recognizes, the more games he is able to win. In 1953, the authors Renaud and Kahn categorized and demonstrated many different checkmating themes in *The Art of the Checkmate*. The present book shows that Capablanca — legendary for his immediate sight of the board and recognition of the correct plan — finished some of his brightest games with the same checkmates described in *The Art of the Checkmate*.

Capablanca strived for efficiency, partly because he was lazy (“if businessmen gave as little time to their business as I generally give to chess, they would all go bankrupt in a very short time,” he said). He looked for the shortest routes to winning chess games, and often that meant playing for mate.

By compiling an anthology of Capablanca's games that end in checkmate, it is hoped that a gap in chess literature will be filled. Capablanca is widely considered the greatest endgame player ever, and chess author Irving Chernev sought to instruct players in the queening of a pawn in his 1978 book *Capablanca's Best Chess Endings*. But a successful ending at chess can come about in two ways — pawn promotion or checkmate — and this book picks up Capablanca's instructive endgame play where Chernev's book left off.

## Chapter 3

# The Power of the Double Check

A check may be answered by moving the king, capturing the checking piece, or interposing between the checking piece and the king (unless the checking piece is a knight).

In the case of double check, it can only be answered by moving the king, which makes possible some powerful trickery.

### Game 6

New Orleans 1855

White: Judge A.B. Meek

Black: A.N. Other

King's Gambit

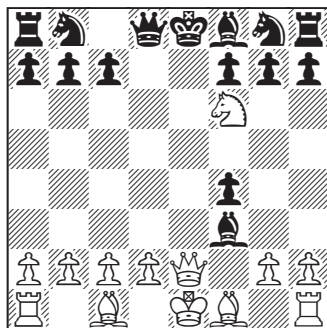
1. e4 ...

Judge Meek lost several games to Morphy, but he's also remembered for winning this one.

1. ... e5  
2. f4 exf4  
3. ♖f3 d5  
4. ♖c3 ...

Some sources identify Black as "Abdor," but give the gamescore as 4. exd5 ♖xd5 5. ♖c3 ♖d8 6. ♖e4 ♗g4 7. ♖e2 ♗xf3 8. ♖f6#, which makes no sense (why would White play 6. ♖e4, unless as a recapture?).

4. ... dxe4  
5. ♖xe4 ♗g4  
6. ♖e2 ♗xf3?  
7. ♖f6# 1-0



The double check means that both checking pieces are *en prise*, but immune to capture and unable to interpose.

### Game 7

Kiev 1914

Simultaneous exhibition

White: J.R. Capablanca

Black: Masyutin

Staunton Gambit

1. d4 ...

This game is significant in my education as a chessplayer. In that most effective way of practicing chess — covering a master's moves and guessing them while replaying the game — it's most helpful to study a master with a classical approach, or whose style is close to one's own.

Before I discovered Capablanca-Masyutin, I was determined to be the next David Bronstein — the most

artful grandmaster — but when my teacher asked me to guess at a Bronstein game of similar length, I guessed an unacceptable number of the moves correctly. On Capablanca-Masyutin, I did much better.

1. ... f5

Like the hugely popular Sicilian — 1. e4 c5 — the Dutch Defense approaches the center from the direction opposite White's, and immediately unbalances the position, but the Dutch move does nothing to aid Black's development and exposes his king. "What a delight! I love playing against the Dutch," said world champion Tigran Petrosian.

2. e4 ...

In the Havana 1913 tournament book, Capablanca wrote that the Staunton Gambit 2. e4 is White's best answer to the Dutch Defense.

2. ... fxe4

2...d6 might be tried, and if Black solves the problem of a backward e-pawn, he can get a good game.

3. ♖c3 ...

The immediate effect of 2. e4 fxe4 is that White is enabled to make three consecutive moves to threaten e4.

3. ... ♖f6

4. ♕g5 ...

Threatening 5. ♕xf6 plus ♖xe4, but that threat is greater than its execution. "Once the threat is carried into effect, it exists no longer, and your opponent can devote his attention to his own schemes," said Capablanca.

4. ... c6

An unnecessary pawn move. White has also won a good number of brilliancies after the more common 4...e6.

5. f3 ...

White's conquest of the center by 6. fxe4 is a strong positional threat, persuading Black to lose time with another capture. 5...d5 6. fxe4 dxe4 7. ♕c4 is a mess for Black.

5. ... exf3

6. ♖xf3 e6

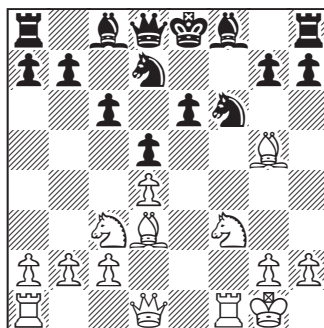
Had Black played this at move 4, he could now play ...♕e7 and ...0-0.

7. ♕d3 d5

8. 0-0 ...

Three extra moves in development usually justifies a pawn sacrifice in the opening. Black's excessive pawn moves mean that White has four moves to show for the gambit pawn.

8. ... ♖bd7



9. ♖e5 ...

The goal is to introduce the queen with a threat, but the f6-knight — reinforced by the d7-knight — prevents ♖h5+. 9. ♖e5 opens the queen's diagonal to h5, while White presses on the knights in three directions: ♖xd7,

## The Power of the Double Check

♙xf6, and ♖xf6. 9. ♖e2 is a threat that can be ignored: 9...♙e7 10. ♖xe6 ♗c5.

9. ... ♙e7

Not 9...♗xe5, because 10. dxe5 h6 11. ♙g6+ is very bad for Black, but for breaking the pin on the f6-knight, Black threatens to swap White's best-placed piece by 10...♗xe5.

10. ♙xf6 ♙xf6

A stronger defense is 10...♗xf6, and then White will have to be more inventive than 11. ♖xf6 ♙xf6 12. ♖h5+ g6 13. ♙xg6+ hxg6 14. ♖xg6+ ♗e7 15. ♖f7+ ♗d6 16. ♗c4+ dxc4 17. ♗e4+ ♗d5 18. ♗xf6+ ♗d6 19. ♗e4+ ♗d5 20. ♗c3+, where White could claim a draw.

11. ♖h5+ ♗e7

White is well ahead following 11...g6 12. ♙xg6+ hxg6 13. ♖xg6+ ♗e7 14. ♖xf6. The key to the position after 11...♗e7 12. ♖f7+ is that Black is chased into a burrow — 12...♗d6-c7-b8 — but if Black can be persuaded to move the d7-knight, the seventh rank is unblocked.

12. ♙xh7! ...

An exceptional psychological move. 13. ♗g6+ is a bluff, but Black can't resist the move that prevents that fork while attacking the pinned bishop on h7!

12. ... ♗f8

13. ♖f7+ ♗d6

14. ♗c4+! ...

The first knight sacrifice that must be accepted. Black played 12...♗f8, so 14...♗c7 is impossible.

14. ... dxc4

15. ♗e4+ ♗d5

16. ♖f5+ ...

Forcing the king to the e-file so that inactive force can be used.

16. ... ♔xe4

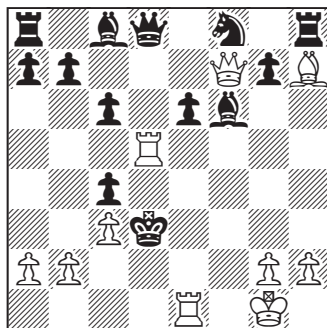
17. ♖e1+ ♔xd4

18. c3+ ...

For many years, in every position, I could hear an old chess teacher's voice inside my head asking what I could do to bring up more new force. When I finally started doing it consistently, the voice disappeared, and I was so relieved.

18. ... ♔d3

19. ♖d5# 1-0



The double check is the only checkmating move. The h7-bishop neatly covers c2. Capablanca probably envisioned the whole king hunt at 12. ♙xh7!, even though he was busy playing against a crowd.

## Game 8

La Habana 1913

White: Juan Corzo

Black: J.R. Capablanca

Old Indian Defense

1. d4 ♗f6

2. c4 d6

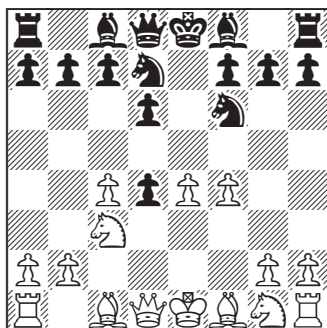


Two weeks earlier in New York, Capablanca played the Old Indian against Kline “with the idea of taking the game out of the usual lines ... now nearly every player is familiar with it.” He wrote that in 1920, and by the 1950s, the King’s Indian move 2...g6 had almost completely superseded the Old Indian (because the dynamic potential of the bishop on g7 was judged to trump the possible weakness of d6).

3. ♘c3      ♖bd7  
 4. e4      e5  
 5. f4      ...

Of doubtful value, said Capablanca. 5. f4 overreaches in the center and neglects White’s development. White has an advantage in center control — compare the c- and d-pawns — his next job is mobilizing his pieces. White has the advantage after the modest 5. ♘f3 c6 6. ♕e2 ♕e7.

5. ...      exd4



Necessary, said Capablanca, before White played 6. ♘f3 or 6. fxe5 to leave Black with a very bad game. As usual, he left the rest for the student to work out. 6. ♘f3 would have renewed the threat to e5, after which 6... exf4 is unacceptable for bringing up a white piece and capturing away from

the center, while 6...exd4 7. ♘xd4 is a more significant gain of time for White than ♗xd4 because knights need more time than queens to reach the other side of the board.

6. ♗xd4      ♘c5  
 7. ♕e3      ♗e7

Black blocks his bishop, but develops with a threat. The bishop is better on g7, anyway, where the white queen is in its sights.

8. ♘d5      ♘xd5  
 9. exd5      ♕f5

Anticipating 10. 0-0-0 g6, after which 11. ♗xh8? ♗xe3+ is more effective because the white king is cut off. Then 12. ♖d2 ♗e1+ 13. ♖d1 ♗e4 is winning for Black.

10. ♘f3      g6  
 11. ♖f2      ...

The unpin also guards the bishop, so 12. ♗xh8 is a more serious threat.

11. ...      ♖g8  
 12. ♖e1      ♕g7  
 13. ♗d1      ...

Black must be vigilant. Even though White is in retreat, he threatens 14. ♕xc5.

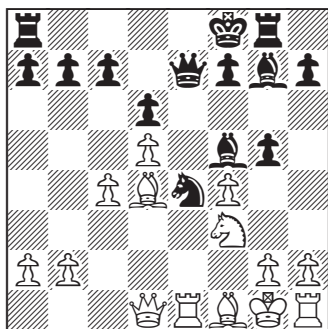
13. ...      ♘e4+  
 14. ♖g1      ♖f8

According to Capablanca, 14... 0-0-0 exposes Black to attack. Black avoided, for instance, 15. ♕xa7 ♕xb2 16. ♕d3 ♖ge8 17. ♗b3 ♕g7 18. ♖b1 b6 19. ♕xb6.

15. ♕d4      g5!

Threatening 16...gxf4 to gain a pawn while unleashing the rook.

## The Power of the Double Check



16. ♖xg7+ ...

Most lovely is the queen sacrifice plus double checkmate — 16. fxg5 ♗xg5 17. ♖xe7 ♗h3+ 18. gxh3 ♖xd4# — but White played a logical defense. First he opened d4 for an attacking knight move, then he kept the g-file closed.

16. ... ♖xg7  
 17. ♗d4 ♖d7  
 18. f5 ...

Besides preventing the opening of the g-file, 18. f5 also stops Black from playing ...f5, so 19. ♖d3 is threatened.

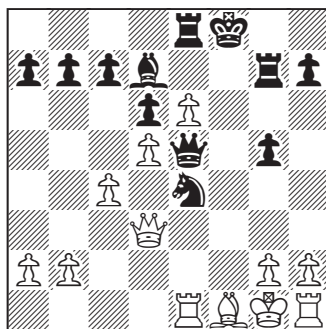
18. ... ♖e5

Capablanca gave the alternative 18...c5 19. dxc6 bxc6, enabling Black to maintain the knight with ...d5.

19. ♖d3 ...

The only threatening development White could make that keeps the knight protected.

19. ... ♖e8  
 20. ♗e6+ fxe6  
 21. fxe6 ...



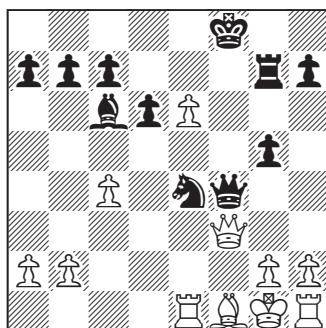
21. ... ♖xe6!

A startling move. After the mundane 21...♖xb2 22. ♖xe4, the d7-bishop and e8-rook are shut out.

22. dxe6 ♖c6

If White could pass now, Black wouldn't have a threat, so he would make one with 23...♖e7. White could then develop his bishop — 24. ♖e3 ♖xe6 25. ♖d3 (25. ♖xa7? b6 seals off the queen, threatening 26...♖d4+ with a winning attack) — but his king rook would still be buried.

23. ♖f3+ ♖f4



24. ♖e3 ...

Remarkably, the side that's behind in material offers to trade queens.

## Capablanca: A Primer of Checkmate

Black's lead in mobility leads to a winning position in Capablanca's notes: 24. ♖xf4+ gxf4 25. h4 (Black is also ahead after 25. ♙e2 ♜f6) 25...f3 26. ♞d1 f2+ 27. ♙h2 ♜g3 28. ♞d2 (28. ♞d4 is much better, preventing 28...♙g4, and snuffing Capablanca's idea 28...♜xh1 29. ♙xh1 ♞xg2 because of 30. ♖f4+) 28...♜xh1 29. ♙xh1 ♞xg2!.

24. ... ♙e7  
 25. b4 b6  
 26. b5 ♙b7  
 27. g3 ♜d2  
 28. ♖c3 ...

Capablanca recommended 28. ♙g2 instead. The endgame following 28. gxf4 gxf4+ 29. ♙f2 fxe3+ 30. ♙xe3 ♙xh1 31. ♙xd2 is better for Black.

28. ... ♜f3+  
 29. ♙f2 ♖f8

White missed this when he played 28. ♖c3, the champion wrote.

30. c5 ...

30. ♞d1 ♜e5+ 31. ♙g1 ♖a8 is a winning coordination of queen and bishop in an unusual setting.

30. ... ♜e5+  
 31. ♙g1 ♜f3+  
 32. ♙f2 bxc5

Less perilous than 32...♜xe1+ 33. ♙xe1 ♙xh1 34. cxd6+ cxd6 35. ♖c7+ ♙xe6 36. ♙h3+ ♙f6 37. ♖c3+ ♙g6, even though Black is winning.

33. ♖a5 ...

Unable to break into c7 by cxd6+ plus ♖c7+, White spends additional time, and his counterplay comes up very short.

33. ... ♜e5+  
 34. ♙g1 ♖f3  
 35. ♖xc7+ ♙f6  
 36. ♖xd6 ♖xh1+  
 37. ♙f2 ♖xh2+  
 0-1