

# The Role of the Loser

Rhys Goldstein, March 2015

*"I have not given any drawn or lost games, because I thought them inadequate to the purpose of the book."*

– Jose Capablanca ("My Chess Career")

*"I had a toothache during the first game. In the second game I had a headache. In the third game it was an attack of rheumatism. In the fourth game, I wasn't feeling well. And in the fifth game? Well, must one have to win every game?"*

– Saviely Tartakower (after 5 losses)

*"Don't even mention losing to me. I can't stand to think of it."*

– Bobby Fischer

There are countless books, articles, and videos explaining how to win, or at very least draw, a game of chess. Almost never are we given any advice on how to lose. But how you lose, I argue, matters. However unwanted, the loser's role is an important one.

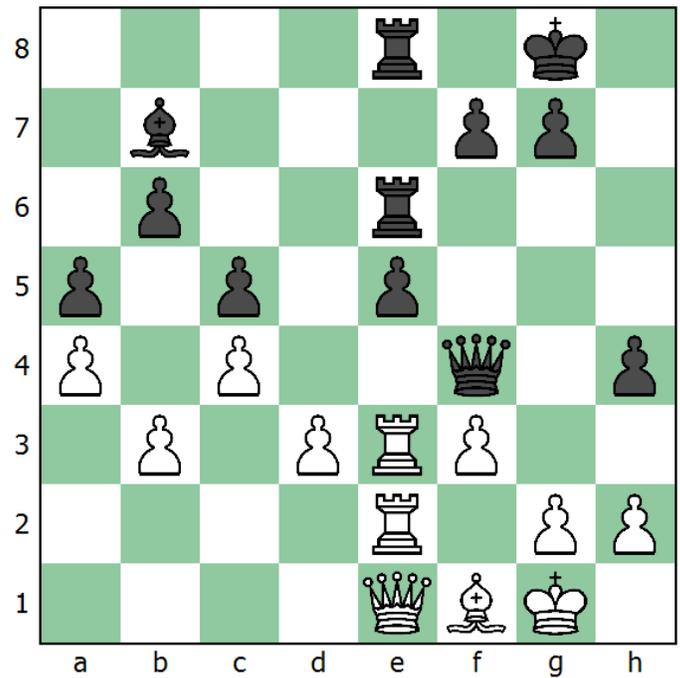
## Prospectless Positions

*"The psychological effects of having to hold a prospectless position for what might seem an infinite amount of time does nothing to aid the defender's concentration."* – Michael Stean

Having a prospectless position is different from having a worse position or a completely lost position. If you are worse, you should play aggressively in an effort to turn the tables. If you are completely lost, then you may simply resign. Having a prospectless position means that you are worse, and that you have no way to improve your position, but you must keep playing because your opponent has no obvious way to force the win.

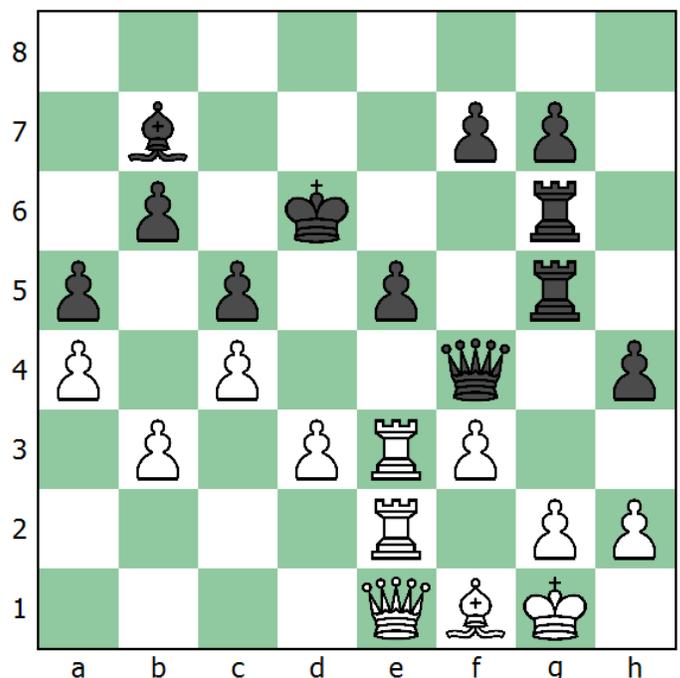
Below, despite having arranged Alekhine's Gun on the e-file, White has a prospectless position.

NN vs Goldstein (Vancouver, 1999)



Position after 30.K(h1)g1. Black to move.

There is simply no clear way for White to make progress. The queen and rooks have nothing to do, and the bishop on f1 is as bad as they come. But Black has yet to demonstrate a winning plan, so White should neither resign nor resort to any desperate sacrifice. Believe it or not, Houdini gives Black only a 0.7 advantage on depth 28. So play continued and the following position was reached.



Position after 40...R(e6)g6. White to move.

## 41.Rxe5?? ... 0-1

White blunders a rook and resigns a few moves later. To understand the blunder, one need only compare the diagram above with the one shown for move 30. White had just made 10 consecutive moves only to end up with exactly the same depressing arrangement of pieces. This doesn't mean that White played those 10 moves poorly, for it is unclear whether there was anything better. White had a prospectless position: the kind of position that, as Micheal Stean points out, does nothing to aid the defender's concentration.

So we know why White blundered. It was due to a loss of concentration in a prospectless position. The question is, does it matter that White blundered? Would White have lost anyway?

Suppose that White had played the logical 41.Rf2, adding an extra defender to the f3 pawn. I would like to think that, as Black, I would have found the courage to go through with my plan, which was to sacrifice a rook on g3. The following is one of many ways the game might have continued.

**41.Rf2 h3 42.g3 Rxc3+! 43.hxc3 Qxc3+ 44.Bg2 hxc3 45.f4 Rh6!** (threatening 46.Rh1#) **46.fxe5+**

Here Black must be careful. The obvious 46...Ke7 allows 47.Rxf7+! Kxf7 48.Qxc3 and White wins.

**46...Qxe5!** (still threatening Rh1#) **47.Rxc2 Qf6 48.Qg3+**

Notice how White's defensive play in this hypothetical line leads to some counterplay.

**48....Kd7 49.Qg4+ Kc7 50.Qg3+ Kc8 51.Qg4+ Kb8 52.Qg3+ Ka7**

Surprisingly, Houdini gives Black a 7-point advantage here due to the exposed nature of the White king. White might equalize with 53.Qxc7 were it not for the fact that after 53...Rh1+! 54.Kxh1 Qxc7, Black wins the queen for a rook.

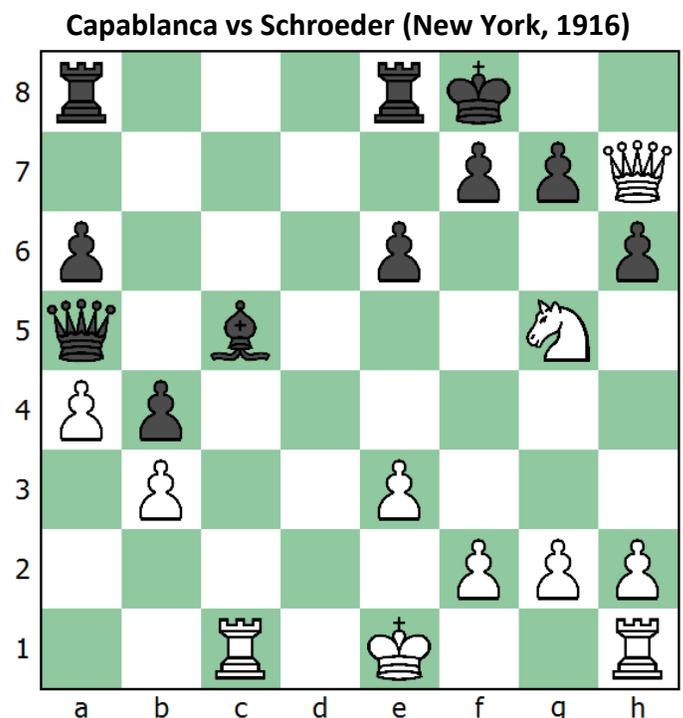
There are many other exciting lines, all of which end badly for White with proper play. But the point is to show that good chess games do not occur unless the loser plays well. In this case I was denied a satisfying win (or perhaps an exciting loss!) by my opponent's blunder. In other cases I have done the same, denying my opponent an admirable win. Similar blunders occur in higher level play as well. Let's look a classic example.

## What Might Have Been

*"Oh! this opponent, this collaborator against his will, whose notion of Beauty always differs from yours and whose means (strength, imagination, technique) are often too limited to help you effectively! What torment, to have your thinking and your fantasy tied down by another person!"*

– Alexander Alekhine

Alekhine's over-the-top quote may reflect what Capablanca was thinking in 1916 after having the misfortune of beating Alfred Schroeder a little too quickly. In *Great Brilliancy Prize Games of the Chess Masters*, Fred Reinfeld titles this game "What Might Have Been". Let's see why.

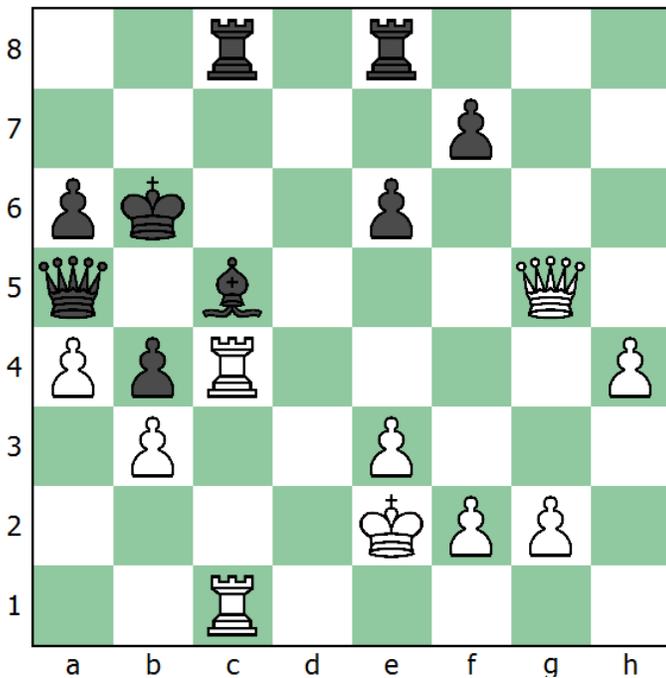


*Position after 20.K(g8)f8. White to move.*

## 21.Qh8+!! Ke7

Capablanca appears to have fallen for a trap, since his Queen and knight are now both in jeopardy. But with his incredible foresight, Capablanca sees compensation for the knight in the form of a passed h-pawn combined with the poor position of Black's queen and bishop.

## 22.Qxg7 hxg5 23.Qxg5+ Kd6 24.Ke2! Rac8 25.Rc4 Kc6 26.Rhc1 Kb6 27.h4



Position after 27.h4. Black to move.

So far Black has played well, considering that he was forced to defend against White's threats of winning material. But at this point Schroeder misses a spectacular loss by neglecting the most logical strategy, which is to free his pieces by 27...Rc7. Had this been played, the following is *what might have been*: 28.h5 Rec8 29.h6 Bd6 30.Qa5+ Kxa5 31.Rxc7 Rxc7 (Capablanca points out that if 31...Bxc7, 32.Rc6! paralyzes all of Black's pieces) 32.Rxc7 Bxc7 33.f4 Bd8 34.g4 Bf6 35.g5 Bh8 36.e4 Kb6 37.f5 exf5 38.exf5 Kc5 39.g6 fxg6 40.fxg6 Kd6 41.g7 Bxg7 42.hxg7 Ke7 43.g8=Q and amazingly White wins by only one move!

I suppose we should not be too critical of Schroeder for avoiding a continuation that loses anyway. In light of the fact 27...Rc7 leads to defeat, Black's actual move 27...f5 can be considered just as good. What is unfortunate, however, is the blunder that occurs a few moves later.

## 27...f5 28.Qg7 Re7 29.Qe5 Rc6?? 30.Rxc5 1-0

Black resigns because of 30...Rxc5 31.Qd6+, but this fork could have been prevented by playing Rc6 a move earlier. After 27...f5 28.Qg7 Rc6!, White would have to play accurately to avoid giving Black counterplay. A good continuation for White is 29.h5 Rec8 30.h6 R6c7 31.Qe5 Kb7 32.h7 Rxh7 33.Rxc5 Rxc5 34.Rxc5 Qb6 35.a5 Qd8 36.Qxe6 and White's advantage is winning. The beauty of this line is that it shows the accuracy of White's 24<sup>th</sup> move, Ke2. If White had instead castled, the final capture on e6 would not be possible as Black could respond with Qd1 giving mate.

Capablanca has awarded the second brilliancy prize for this game. According to Capablanca, the award was influenced by the queening line that he had to explain to the committee because it did not occur in the game. Schroeder deserves credit for playing well enough to allow Black a prize-winning victory. However, had he maintained his concentration in a prospectless position, the game would have been considerably more thematic. Capablanca would have had to demonstrate the impact of the passed h-pawn over the board.

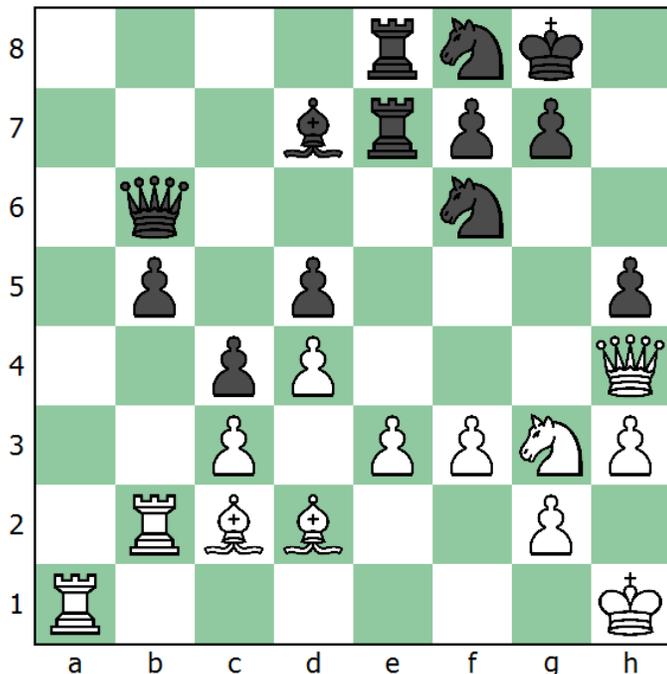
## How to Lose Better

*"What we shouldn't forget is that it takes two very good players to create a brilliant game. I always feel **the role of the loser in a brilliancy is underestimated**. I always thought the loser should really get the money for the brilliancy prize. The winner's happy anyway."*

– Bill Hartston

We have seen two examples of poor positions lost quickly due to a blunder. It is time to be inspired by an example of excellent albeit losing play. In my opinion, one of the most commendable losses ever was that of Andre Lilienthal at the great Moscow tournament of 1935. Of course Viacheslav Ragozin also deserves credit for winning the game.

### Lilienthal vs Ragozin (Moscow, 1935)



We join the game at move 27 with Lilienthal in a dream position on the White side of a Nimzo-Indian Defense. White has the two bishops, a rook on the only open file, the other rook attacking a backward pawn, an immediate threat of 28.Nxh5 winning a pawn, and the simple positional threat of 28.e4 taking full control of the center.

It is a little strange that we should be praising Lilienthal for converting such a colossal advantage into a loss. But no human player should be faulted for having overlooked one of the most shocking sacrifices in the history of chess.

### 27...Rxe3!! 28.Bxe3 Rxe3

It takes a fair amount of positional understanding to fully appreciate the magnitude of Black's

exchange sacrifice. On the one hand, Black obtained a pawn and bishop for the rook, which amounts to a very small material loss. Yet in this particular situation, the sacrifice is truly astonishing. First of all, the bishop Black obtained for the rook was the bad bishop, the one blocked by its own pawns. Secondly, White regains the pawn immediately with the threat of taking on f6 followed by a threat on the d5 pawn.

### 29.Nxh5 Nxh5 30.Qxh5 Bc6 31.Qg5

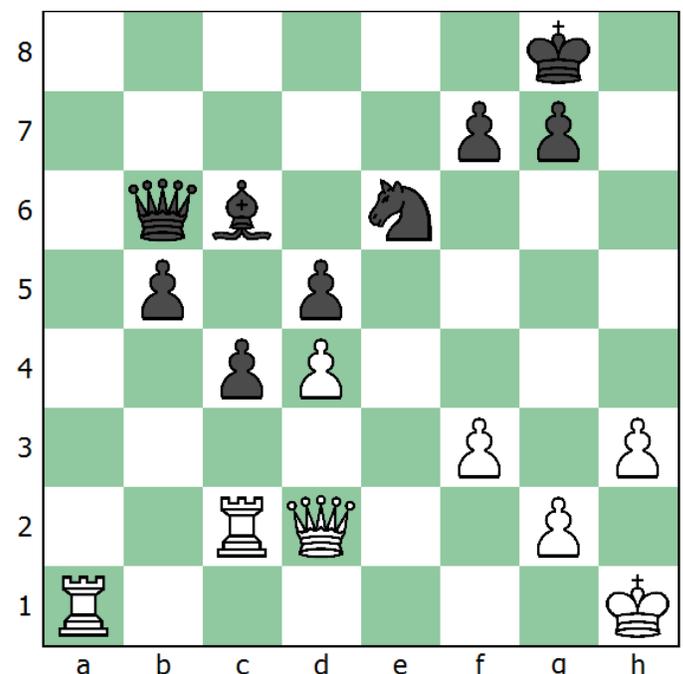
White's last move sets up a trap. If Black captures on c3, the White queen will move to d2 and cut off all retreat squares. Remarkably, Black walks into this trap and gives up a second exchange.

### 31...Rxc3! 32.Qd2 Rxc2 33.Rxc2

White is up two exchanges for a pawn, while Black is stuck with a bad bishop and a knight on the back rank. Yet after the next move, the board appears to have completely transformed.

### 33...Ne6

In one motion Black centralizes a piece, closes the e-file, and threatens immediate capture on d4.



Position after 33...Ne6. White to move.

It is not clear whether White's position is losing. In fact computers tend to suggest White is okay. Yet one can appreciate how depressing it must have been for White to have had a dominating position just six moves earlier only to now find himself in a defensive role. It is easy to imagine the White player falling victim to frustration and playing poorly from here on. But if that had been the case, this game would not have been remembered. By playing extremely well, Lienthal forces Black to prove that the double exchange sacrifice was sound. Though the end result is a loss all the same, White's efforts allowed the game to become a favorite among grandmasters ever since.

How should one play in a prospectless position? The answer is this: make logical moves. Of course one should look for complications when the opportunity presents itself. But sometimes one must defend well in order to create such opportunities. What we witness here is active and very logical defense.

The first step is to defend the d4 pawn from immediate capture. Unfortunately this means taking a rook off the only open file.

### 34.Rd1 b4

The next step is to stop the connected passed pawns from further advancing. Unfortunately, they cannot both be stopped; either b3 or c3 is coming. But White does not give up. Instead he assesses the situation using the following logic.

Question: Which pawn does Black prefer to push?

Answer: The c-pawn. With pawns on c3 and b4, the bishop can go to a4 and clear away any heavy piece attempting to blockade the pawns.

Question: How can White prevent the c-pawn from advancing?

Answer: by attacking the b-pawn.

### 35.Rb2!

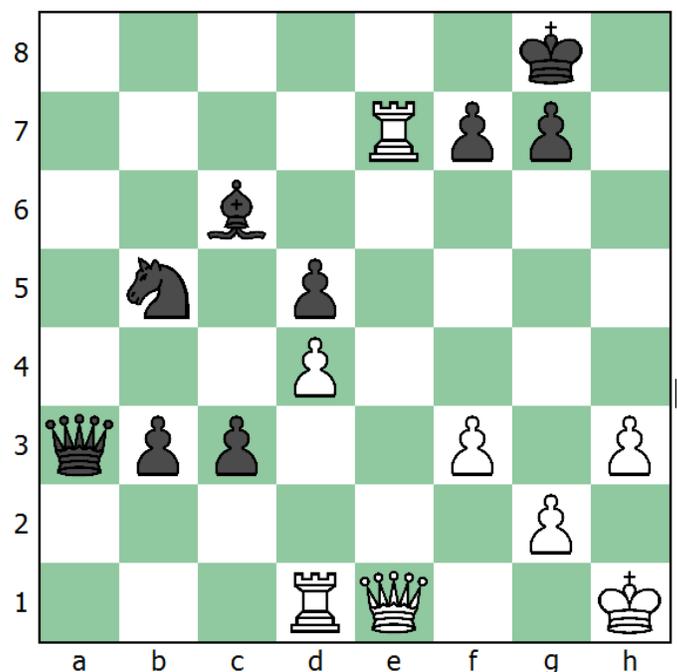
Many would dismiss this maneuver because it seems to invite the very move Black wanted to play anyway: 35...c3 now forking the White's queen and rook. Lienthal maintained his concentration, and recognized that 35...c3 can be met by 36.Qxc3 since the b-pawn is pinned. So Black must advance the b-pawn instead, allowing White to set up a dark-squared blockade that the light-squared bishop cannot challenge.

Notice that 35.Rb2 is a very simple move. Strategically, it establishes a blockade on the right squares. Tactically, it prevents 35...c3 with a pin. But even simple moves like this are easy to overlook when the situation seems bleak.

### 35...b3 36.Qc3 Nc7 37.Re2

Since the bishop is unable to displace the blockaders, Black had no choice but to recruit the knight for this task. The knight withdrawal re-opens the e-file, which White immediately grabs. This is a good example of how a stubborn defense can lead to offensive opportunities.

### 37...Qa7 38.Qb4 Nb5 39.Re7 Qa3 40.Qe1 c3



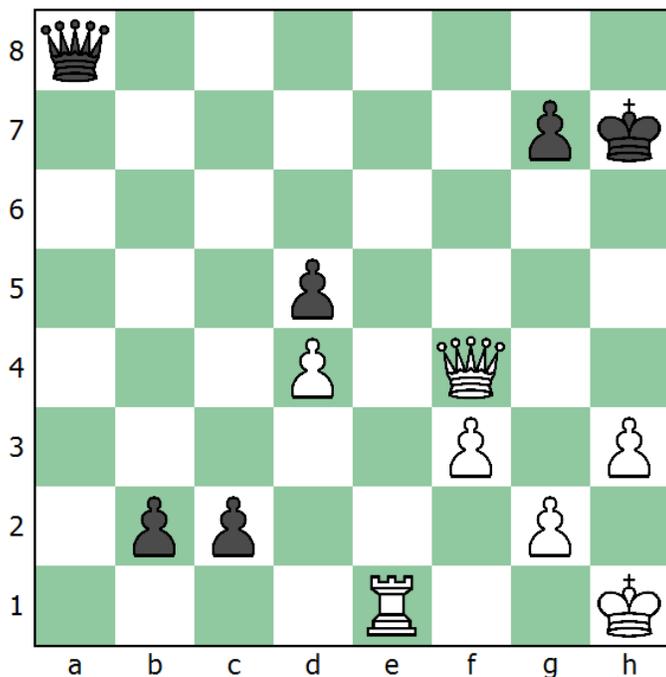
Position after 40...c3. White to move.

White has defended as well as can be expected of any human player. But unfortunately, Black's passed pawns are now far advanced and have excellent piece support. White decides his only hope is to go after Black's king, even if that means returning one of the exchanges.

**41.Re8+ Bxe8 42.Qxe8+ Kh7 43.Qxf7 Qa8 44.Re1 Nd6!**

The knight retreat defends the Black king while buying time for the pawns to advance. Black is actually willing to give up the knight if it means both pawns can obtain the seventh rank.

**45.Qc7 c2 46.Qxd6 b2 47.Qf4**



Position after 47.Qf4. Black to move.

White is up an entire rook, but the promotion of one of Black's pawns is now imminent. Such positions call for a trick or two, and this is what White has attempted with the previous move. In case of the very natural 47...b1=Q, White saves the game with 48.Qf5+. Thereafter 48...g6 allows a draw by perpetual check, while any other move permits 49.Rxb1 and White happily collects the two pawns for the small price of a rook.

Here Ragozin finds a move that simultaneously defends the king and threatens to promote either passed pawn. Deciding to make this fine move the last of the game; Lilienthal resigns.

**47...Qc6 0-1**

This was one of seven games officially recognized as the best of the Moscow 1935 tournament. Much of the credit goes to Lilienthal, who lost, because without his tireless efforts few would have been convinced that Ragozin's sacrifices were as brilliant as they actually were.

Incidentally, Ragozin deserves credit for contributing to two of the seven best games at the tournament: this one against Lilienthal, which he won, and another game against Capablanca, which Ragozin lost. Capablanca also took part in two of the best games: the one against Ragozin, which he won, and a historic game against then 66-year-old Emanuel Lasker, which Capablanca lost!

### Final Thoughts

*"I prefer to **lose a really good game** than to win a bad one."*

– David Levy

*"Playing chess has many aspects that can be useful in everyday situations like planning, concentration and combinations. You learn to win **but also to lose** and to be creative."*

– Judit Polgar

*"Most players [...] do not like losing, and consider defeat as something shameful. This is a wrong attitude. Those who wish to perfect themselves **must regard their losses as lessons** and learn from them what sorts of things to avoid in the future."*

– Jose Capablanca

*"All of the 60 [Memorable Games] here offered contain, for me, something memorable and exciting---**even the 3 losses.**"*

– Bobby Fischer