

The Magnetic Queen

Rhys Goldstein, February 2017

“Let us say that a game may be continued in two ways: one of them is a beautiful tactical blow that gives rise to variations that don't yield to precise calculations; the other is clear positional pressure that leads to an endgame with microscopic chances of victory. I would choose the latter without thinking twice. If the opponent offers keen play I don't object; but in such cases I get less satisfaction, even if I win, than from a game conducted according to all the rules of strategy with its ruthless logic.”

– Anatoly Karpov

A few years ago I realized that, although I knew fair bit about the playing styles and games of a number of the most famous world champions—Kasparov, Fischer, Botvinnik, Alekhine, Capablanca, Lasker, Steinitz—I didn't really know much at all about one of the most successful: Anatoly Karpov. In fact, if anyone were to ask me “What's your favourite Karpov game?”, the only games that would have come to mind are a few that he lost spectacularly to Kasparov.

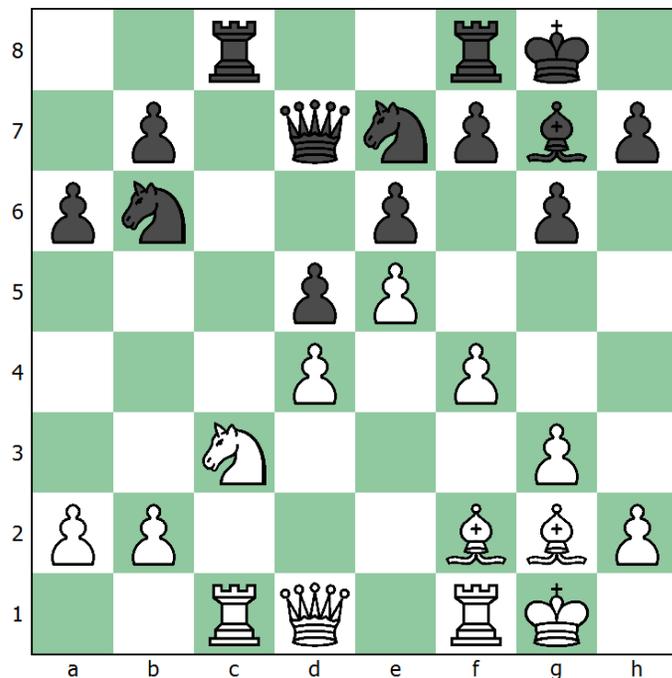
Strangely, although we remember Kasparov for his world championship victories over Karpov, the overall score in these matches was only 73-71 in favour of Kasparov. If Karpov had just won just a few more of those games and held the title through the late 80s, he would almost certainly have been the most decorated player ever. Of course Karpov also suffered the extreme misfortune a decade earlier of missing what I call *The Greatest Chess Match that Never Happened*: Fischer vs. Karpov, 1975. But even as it were, Karpov won over 160 tournaments, and finds himself on almost everyone's list of the greatest players of all time.

So why did I never bother to learn anything about Karpov's games? Well, it's because he has a reputation for being (Dare I say it?...) boring.

As stated in the quote at the beginning of this article, Karpov would always forgo “a beautiful tactical blow that gives rise to variations that don't yield to precise calculations” in favour of “clear positional pressure that leads to an endgame with microscopic chances of victory”. It's no wonder Karpov isn't known for the kind of spectacular games that inspire so many of us, the sacrificial mating attacks we see from the likes of Kasparov and Tal. Nevertheless, it became clear to me that Karpov has an important place in chess history. So I decided to learn more about his style of play, to discover my “favourite Karpov game”, and to see whether I would be bored or inspired by his “ruthless logic”.

What I found was that Karpov's best games feature interesting ideas that I had never seen elsewhere. In this masterpiece, Karpov uses his queen like a magnet and essentially moves the enemy pieces.

**Anatoly Karpov vs Gata Kamsky
(Alekhine Memorial, Moscow, 1992)**



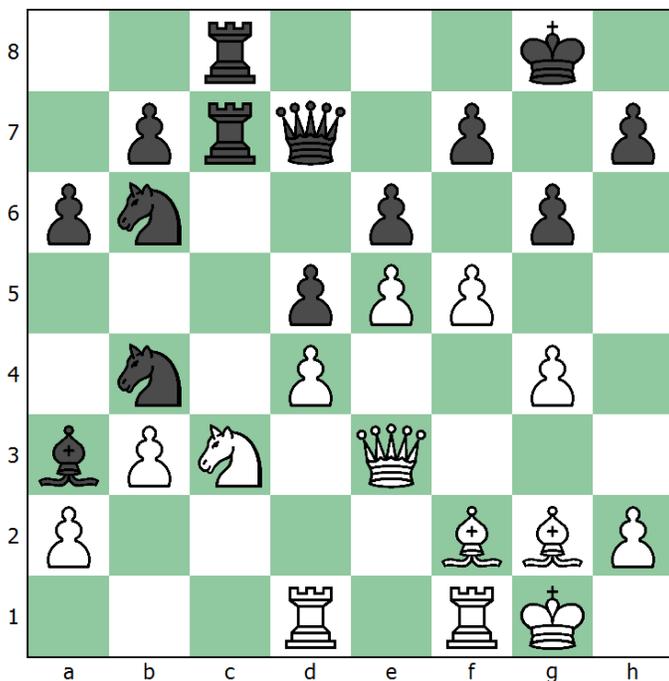
Position after 16...a6. White to move.

Playing the white pieces, Karpov has a clear space advantage in the center and the option of expanding on the kingside with moves like g4 and f5. On the other hand, Black has done well to trade off his light-squared bishop, which would have been blocked by his own pawns. Black appears to have play on the queenside.

17.b3

This limits the scope of the black knight on b6. But it also weakens a3 and c3, and Black takes notice.

17...Rc7 18.Qd2 Rfc8 19.g4 Bf8 20.Qe3 Nc6 21.f5 Ba3 22.Rcd1 Nb4



Position after 22...Nb4. White to move.

What's going on? Karpov has given up the c-file, and must now save his knight on c3. He would like to play 23.Nb1 hitting the very restricted bishop on a3. But then 23...Nc2 attacks the queen and allows the bishop to return to f8 to defend the king.

23.Qh6! Qe8 24.Nb1! Bb2 25.Qd2!! Nc2

Very interesting! Karpov's 23rd move Qh6 threatened f6 and Qg7#, so Black played 23.Qe8 in order to meet 24.f6 with 24...Qf8. But then Karpov

retreated his knight to b1 and forced Black's bishop to infiltrate on b2 (the only safe square). Then Karpov withdrew his queen to d2 and forced Black's knight to infiltrate on c2 (the knight and bishop were forked). White uses his queen like a magnet, pulling enemy pieces around the board and even into his own territory.

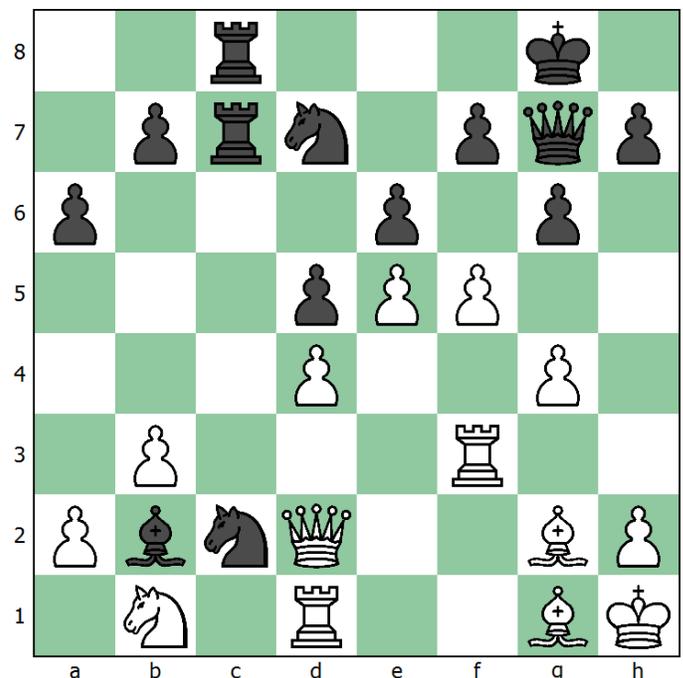
Black is a little stuck now. He can't advance a rook to c2 because the square is occupied by his own knight. He can't move the knight since the White queen will capture his bishop on b2. He can't move the bishop (except into the corner...a bad square) because it will be captured by White's knight.

Karpov now finds a neat way to lift a rook to the 3rd rank in order to threaten a kingside attack. The three-move operation begins with the king.

26.Kh1! Qe7 27.Bg1 Nd7 28.Rf3 Qb4

Black wants to trade queens and free his pieces. Karpov wants to keep Black tied up on the queenside, so he uses his magnetic queen to pull Black's queen to the opposite side of the board.

29.Qh6! Qf8 30.Qg5! (threat: fxe6) Qg7 31.Qd2!!



Position after 31.Qd2. Black to move.

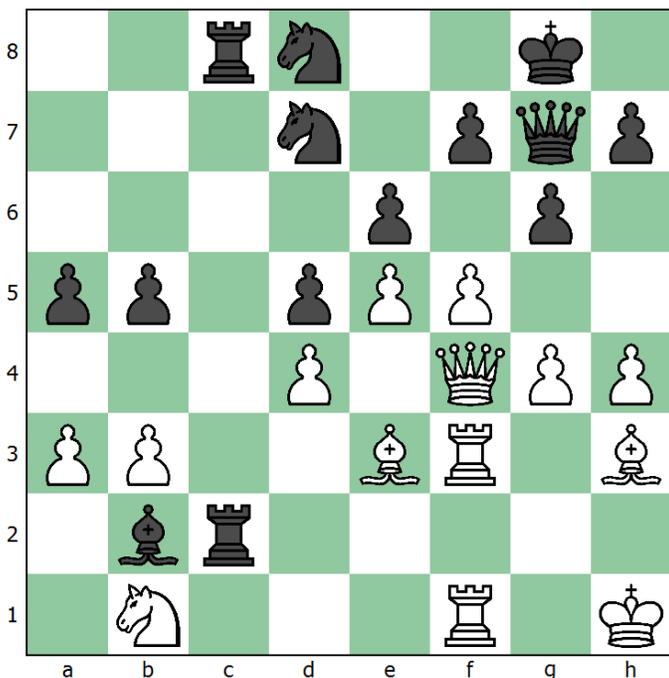
The queen's return to d2 is surprising at first, yet it makes perfect sense. What White has essentially achieved, in the last three moves, is to transfer his opponent's queen from b4 to g7 while keeping everything else the same. Black's queen followed White's queen to the kingside in order to keep the king safe. Now it is trapped on g7, since ...Qf8 would be met by fxe6 and Black cannot recapture.

To his credit, Black at least finds a way to break the pin that is keeping his knight on c2.

31...b6! 32.Rdf1 a5 33.h4 Nb4!

Thanks to ...b6 and ...a5, the knight is safe on b4. The bishop is safe too, since 34.Qxb2 is met with 34...Rc2 35.Qa3 (or 35.Qa1) Ra2 and the White queen is trapped.

34.a3 Rc2 35.Qf4 Nc6 36.Bh3 Nd8 37.Be3 b5



We have reached the defining moment of the game. White's rooks, bishops, and queen are all lined up and ready for battle. We would expect moves like 38.h5, or maybe 38.f6 followed by 39.h5, opening lines against Black's king. Will Karpov charge into battle with a furious kingside attack?

38.R3f2

Apparently not. Karpov simply offers a trade of rooks. We are reminded of the quote:

"Let us say that a game may be continued in two ways: one of them is a beautiful tactical blow that gives rise to variations that don't yield to precise calculations; the other is clear positional pressure that leads to an endgame with microscopic chances of victory. I would choose the latter without thinking twice."

How disappointing. Karpov's previous moves 32.Rdf1, 33.h4, 36.Bh3, and 37.Be3 seemed to be in preparation for a dramatic attack on the king. But instead he simply trades a pair of rooks, and shortly after he will trade the other pair. It is no wonder Karpov is often overlooked when seeking inspiration from the world champions.

But wait! What if 38.R3f2 is actually a brilliant attacking move?

We assume from the position that White should attack by opening a file on the kingside. But on the queenside, there is a file already open for White: the c-file. True, Black is currently in possession of this file. But Black only has two major pieces in the area, whereas White has three! White's queen and two rooks can overpower Black's two rooks, who lack the support of their queen. After trading all the rooks, Karpov's queen may very well invade Black's position via the maneuver Q(f4)-f2-c2-c8.

Black cannot reinforce his rooks with his own queen, since it's still trapped on g7. And Black cannot simply withdraw his rook, because White would capture the bishop that has been stuck on b2 for much of the middlegame. The magnetic effect of Karpov's earlier queen moves has stretched out Black's army, making possible the highly original attack that has just been initiated with 38.R3f2!!.

(Incidentally, the obvious alternative 38.h5? allows 38...g5 39.Qxg5 Qxg5 40.Bxg5 Bxd4, and Black is probably better. However, 38.f6 Qf8 and then 39.h5 looks promising. The question is whether White can transfer his heavy pieces to the h-file before Black manages to cause devastation on the queenside or in the center. This all-or-nothing approach certainly *"gives rise to variations that don't yield to precise calculations"*, whereas Karpov as usual plays *"according to all the rules of strategy with its ruthless logic"*.)

38...b4 39.axb4 axb4 40.Rxc2 Rxc2 41.Rf2 Rxf2 42.Qxf2 Ba3

The alternative was 42...Bc3. I imagine Black was worried about a continuation such as 43.f6 Qf8 44.Qc2 threatening 45.Nxc3 bxc3 46.Qxc3 winning a pawn. This probably *"leads to an endgame with microscopic chances of victory"* (maybe slightly better than "microscopic"). In any case, Black plays his bishop to a3 so that after the capture Nxa3 and recapture ...bxa3, it would be possible to defend the a3 pawn by moving the queen to f8.

43.Qc2 Nxe5

Slightly desperate play by Black, but the passive 43...Nb8 allows White to improve unchallenged with moves like f6, Bf1, Nd2, h5, and then hxg6. Black's sacrifice to create complications reminds us yet again of Karpov's quote: *"If the opponent offers keen play I don't object"*.

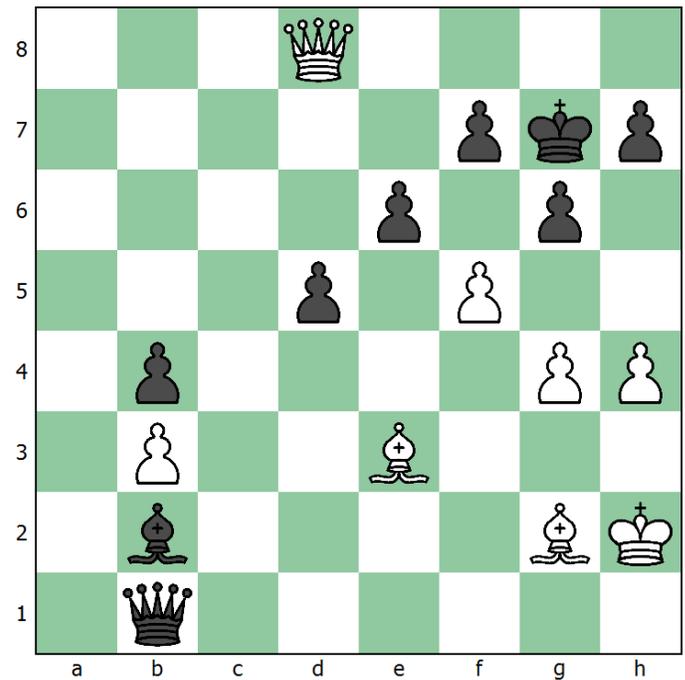
44.dxe5 Qxe5 45.Qc8 Qe4+

45...Qxe3 loses immediately to 46.Qxd8+ Kg7 47.f6+ Kh6 48.Qf8#.

46.Bg2 Qxb1+ 47.Kh2 Bb2

This guards the f6 square. Finally the bishop resumes its original role as defender of the king. But it's a little late.

48.Qxd8+ Kg7



Position after 48...Kg7. White to move.

Karpov now sacrifices a pawn and forces a trade of bishops. This gives Black material equality, but draws the king into a mating net.

49.f6+! Bxf6 50.Bh6+! Kxh6 51.Qxf6 Qc2

Black pins the bishop, delaying the inevitable.

52.g5+ Kh5 53.Kg3

Breaks the pin on the bishop, and closes the mating net. Note that 53.Kh3?? allows 53...Qf5+ 54.Qxf5 gxf5, and it is unclear whether White's bishop will prevail against Black's army of pawns.

53...Qc7+ 54.Kh3 1-0

Of course the continuation would have been 54...Qc3+ 55.Bf3+ Qxf3+ 56.Qxf3#.

Beginning with the 23rd move, a magnetic-like force seemed to pull Black's pieces to wherever the White queen went. Later, after breaking Black's coordination, the queen used a stolen file to attack the enemy king from behind. Karpov's games are far from boring for those inspired by unique ideas.

References: chessgames.com ([1066664](http://chessgames.com/1066664)) and Youtube ([43OYuVcLM48](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43OYuVcLM48) and [w2M3lmQ37Yw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2M3lmQ37Yw)).