

How good is your chess?

Wolfgang Unzicker died on 20th April 2006, at the age of 80. He was the leading player in post-war Germany until around 1970, when Robert Huebner took over that mantle. Given the strong chess culture in Germany, 25 years at the top is an achievement in itself, but it is all the more remarkable considering that Unzicker was never a professional player: he studied law and became a judge.

Unzicker was German champion on seven occasions between 1948 and 1965. He represented his country thirteen times in the Olympiad between 1950 and 1978. His tournament performances were consistently good. He tied first with Spassky in Sochi in 1965; he was 4th in the fantastically strong Piatigorsky Cup in Santa Monica 1966, to take just two examples. Unzicker never gave up playing. He represented his club, Tarrasch Munich, until his death.

Wolfgang Unzicker was open, friendly, kind-hearted and decent; a true ambassador for a country attempting to recover its self-image after the war. In these articles I have occasionally made the link between character and chess-playing style: in my experience chess-players often express something of themselves when they play. That was certainly the case with Unzicker.

He was above all straightforward. He was a classicist: he claimed the centre, and played by recognised positional principles; he was unafraid to attack. In 1956 Unzicker played a match against Keres in Hamburg. All eight games featured the Ruy Lopez – different variations admittedly – but it says something about both players that they remained true to their classical precepts. Unzicker did not come off well on that occasion: 4 losses and 4 draws over the 8 games.

Earlier that year the two had faced each other in the heavyweight Alekhine Memorial, held in Moscow. Botvinnik and Smyslov shared first with 11/15. Unzicker scored a creditable 8/15. Propping up the tournament table we find England's finest, Harry Golombek, with 2½/15. This was the golden era of Soviet chess, and it says much that Unzicker was able to hold his own in such company.

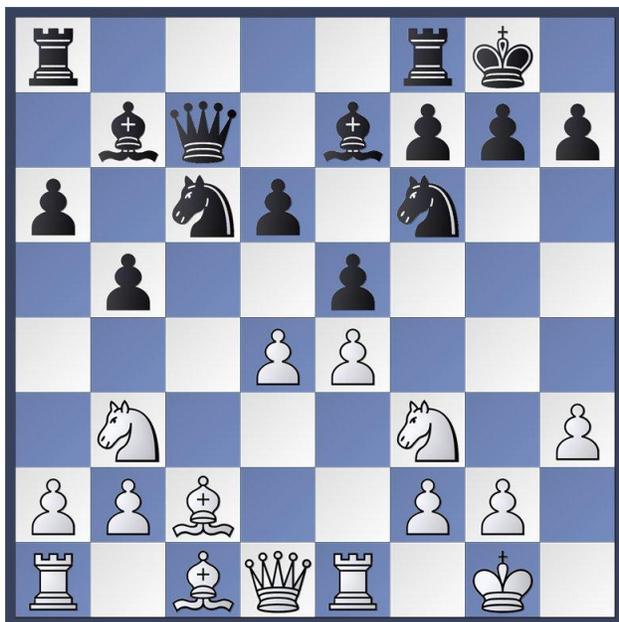
Naturally, the opening of the game between Unzicker and Keres was a Ruy Lopez. And on this occasion, the German came out victor.

Cover the page with a card with a card or sheet of paper, lowering it gradually to reveal it a line at a time. Begin after the first diagram. Whenever Black has moved, stop and try to guess Black's reply which will be on the next line. Try to analyse as much as you would in a game – it could earn you bonus points. The article will test your standard of play or, if you prefer, just enjoy a fine game.

W.Unzicker – P.Keres

Alekhine memorial, Moscow 1956.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0–0 Be7 6.Re1 b5 7.Bb3 d6 8.c3 0–0 9.h3 Na5 10.Bc2 c5 11.d4 Qc7 12.Nbd2 cxd4 13.cxd4 Nc6 14.Nb3 Bb7



15.Bg5

Three points. This is an unpretentious and straightforward developing move. A little more pressure is brought to bear on Black's central position, and the way is prepared for a rook to come to the c-file to greet Black's queen.

That's all very well, but having seen my opponent's bishop move to b7 on the previous move, I think I would want to snap the centre shut as quickly as possible: 15.d5 (three points) appeals to me. The bishop should now be on the other diagonal – d7 is the correct square, but it takes time to get there. Keres repeated this system with the black pieces on a few occasions, and he had to face this very move three years after this game. After 15...Na5 16.Nxa5 Qxa5 17.a4 Rfc8 18.Bd3 Nd7 19.Bg5 White quickly won a pawn, although the Estonian managed to hold the draw in the end, Larsen-Keres, Zurich 1959.

I don't like 15.Be3 as much: it takes away some protection from the e-pawn. After 15...Nb4 16.Bb1 Rfc8 17.dxe5 dxe5 18.a3 Nc2 19.Bxc2 Qxc2, the game is already heading in the right direction for Black, Sievilainen-Nei, Kuopio 1990.

15.Bd2 (two points) strikes me as better motivated, controlling the b4 and a5 squares.

15.dxe5? would not cross my mind. Resolving the tension in the middle of the board is a huge mistake, throwing away White's space advantage. Black puts the rooks on the c and d files and looks fine.

15...h6

16.Bh4

One point. There is no choice. Giving up the bishop pair with 16.Bxf6? Bxf6 is a positional mistake.

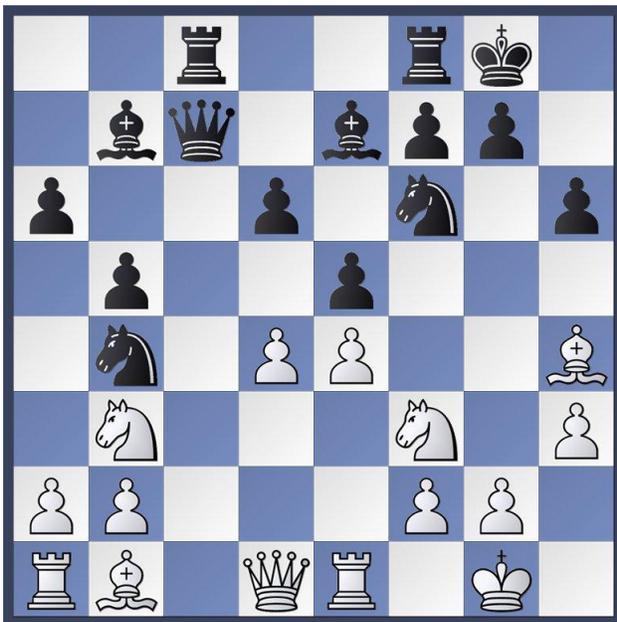
16...Nb4

Not long after this game, Keres attempted to improve his play with 16...Nh5, but still found himself under pressure after 17.d5 Nd8 18.Bxe7 Qxe7 19.Nfd4 Nf4 20.Nf5 Qf6 21.Re3 Kh7 22.a4 bxa4 23.Rxa4 (Bronstein-Keres, Amsterdam 1956). White has the classic Spanish space advantage, giving play on both sides of the board. However, the position is still complex, and Keres managed to turn the game around and win.

17.Bb1

One point. That bishop has to be kept too, even if it means blocking in the rook on a1 (temporarily).

17...Rac8



18.Re2

Three points. Preventing the knight from hopping into c2, although it is a pity to have to move the rook from the first rank.

The move I would like to play is 18.Qd2, attacking the knight. However, if Black takes a deep breath and plunges with 18...Nc2! he is doing well: 19.Rc1 (19.Bxc2 Qxc2 is fine for Black) 19...Nxa1! (this is the point) 20.Rxc7 Nxb3 21.Qc2 Bxe4 22.Qxb3 Rxc7 23.Bxe4 Nxe4 24.Bxe7 Rxe7. Black has two rooks for the queen, and that should be enough to win.

18.Qe2 (one point) isn't as bad, but I still think Black should be brave: 18...Nc2 19.Rc1 Nxa1 20.Rxc7 Rxc7 21.Na5 Ba8 22.Bd3 Rc1+ 23.Kh2. I'd rather not have a knight in the corner, but there is no way of getting at it, and one day it might emerge. Anything could happen.

18.a4!? (three points) is perhaps the most interesting of the alternatives. It is a standard strategy in the Spanish: chip away at the b5 pawn, and open up the a-file for the rook. If 18...Nc2 19.Bxc2 Qxc2 20.axb5 axb5 21.Ra7 is very uncomfortable. Instead, Black should probably just hang tough

with 18...Rfe8, preparing to put more pressure on the e4 pawn.

18...Nh5

19.a3

Four points. A precise and thoughtful move.

The automatic exchange, 19 Bxe7 only allows Black to regroup: 19...Qxe7. If White attempts to trap the knight on b4 with 20 d5, Black seizes the initiative on the kingside: 20...Nf4 21 Rd2 f5, undermining the d5 pawn.

This last variation highlights one of the drawbacks of the move 15 Bg5: Black can often force an exchange with ...Nh5, getting rid of the hemmed in bishop on e7, and preparing to sit the knight on the superb f4 square. Without the dark-squared bishop, it is difficult to get rid of this knight. White must take care; but Unzicker does.

19...Nc6

Black cannot go in for an exchange: 19...Bxh4? loses material to 20.Nxh4 Nc6 21.d5 Na5 22.Rc2 – Black is stretched as the knight on h5 is en prise as well as the queen – 22...Qd8 (the only way of continuing the game) 23.Nxa5 Qxa5 24.b4 Qa4 25.Nf5, and Black is about to collapse completely.

20.d5

Four points. As is so often the case in the Spanish, Black's queen's knight has to make an awkward retreat.

Exchanging on e7 still would not have brought White any gains.

20...Nb8

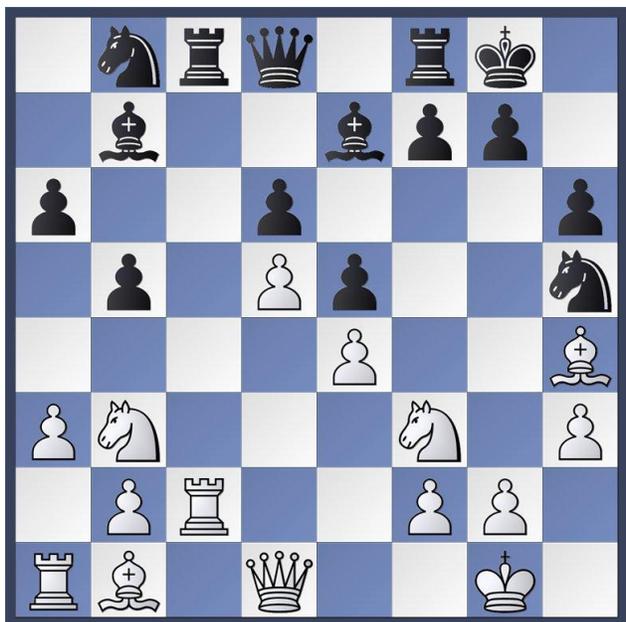
Instead of this, what would you play on 20...Nd8...?

White can win a pawn with 21.Rc2 Qd7 22.Nxe5! dxe5 23 Qxh5. Take two bonus points if you spotted this.

21.Rc2

Two points. The rook is going to have to move once the Black knight arrives on f4, so it may as well move with tempo. For that reason 21.Bxe7 Qxe7, removing the queen from the c-file, is inaccurate.

21...Qd8



22.Na5

Four points. I like the way that Unzicker holds his nerve, maintaining the tension in the position. While a little more calculation might be involved for White, it is also more testing for Black.

22.Bxe7 Qxe7 23.Na5 (two points for this continuation) isn't bad, but Black has an easier defensive task ahead.

22...Rxc2

Black must play like this. Let's deal with some basic tactics: 22...Qxa5 23.Bxe7 Rfe8 24.Bxd6 wins; 22...Bxh4 23.Nxb7 Qe7 24.Nxh4 Qxh4 25.Rxc8 Rxc8 26.Nxd6 wins; as does 22...Ba8 23.Rxc8, etc.

23.Nxb7

Three points. Once again, not the easy move, but the most testing move for Black.

Instead, White could satisfy himself with 23.Bxc2 (one point), and a nice positional advantage on the queenside, but Black finds counterplay on the kingside with 23...Bc8! (back to the right diagonal) 24.Bxe7 Qxe7, followed by ...Nf4 and ...Qf6.

23...Qc7

24.Qxc2

Two points. It appears odd to block the bishop in this way, but Unzicker has a clever idea in mind.

The alternative recapture, 24.Bxc2 (one point), was tempting as White can attempt to win a pawn: 24...Qxb7 25.Nxe5!? – the knight on h5 is hanging – 25...Bxh4 26.Qxh5. Here Black has two decent responses: 26...Bxf2+ 27.Kxf2 dxe5 28.Qxe5 Qb6+ 29.Kf1 Rc8 30.Bd1 Nd7, gives Black reasonable compensation for the pawn in view of White's slightly weak king and the fact that the

central pawns can be blockaded. Or if Black prefers, 26...Qc7 hangs on to the pawns: 27 Qxh4 Qxc2; once the knight moves, Black captures on b2. Chances are balanced.

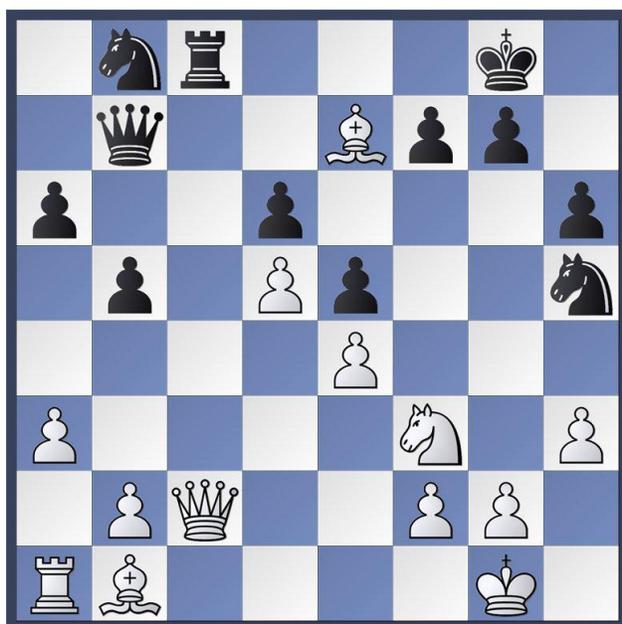
24...Qxb7

25.Bxe7

One point. Finally White exchanges, but the conditions are now perfect. The idea is that after the recapture, 25...Qxe7, the queen is deflected, and so White succeeds in gaining control over the open file. White has two methods of increasing his grip over the queenside: 26.Ba2, with the idea Rc1; or 26.a4 bxa4 27.Rxa4, followed by swinging across to the b or c files. Black still has counterplay on the kingside with ...Nf4 and ...Qf6, but there is no doubt that White has the better chances.

25...Rc8

A crafty Zwischenzug...



26.Bxd6

Seven points. White does not play along.

Let's look instead at the standard 26.Qd2 (one consolation point). The boot would suddenly be on the other foot: 26...Qxe7 27.Bd3 Qc7. In this case it is Black who controls the open file, and White must take care. Actually, I would say that the position is roughly level – White has the entry points covered on the c-file. 28 g3! is a good move, preventing the knight reaching f4, and so maintaining the bishop on d3. It is interesting that Unzicker declines this safe continuation and plays an ambitious queen sacrifice.

26...Rxc2

27.Bxc2

One point. What does White have for the queen? A rook, bishop and pawn. Nominal material parity. Let's look at the positional factors. First and foremost, there is the powerful protected passed pawn on d5; second, the bishop pair; third, Black's knight on f4 is out on a limb; and fourth, White has a compact position. That's important when playing against a queen. The queen needs targets, so struggles against a solid set-up.

Does all of that add up to a win? No. Or perhaps I should say, not yet. Knight's are difficult pieces to cope with – good at blockading, and good at being tricky. And if White makes a slip, the queen can do untold damage. But it is definitely White who is looking to press home the advantage.

27...f6

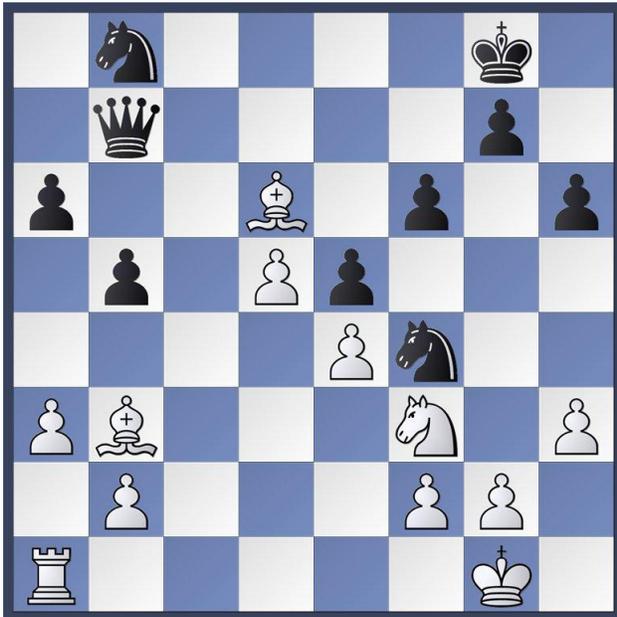
28.Bb3

Three points. The bishop points at Black's king, and makes way for the rook to come to c1. That is indeed the main threat. If Black plays the natural 28...Nd7, he is already in serious trouble: 29.Rc1, followed by penetration.

Instead, you might have been tempted to block out the knight from f4 with 28.g3. Deduct five points. Unfortunately for White, this allows some neat tactics: 28...Nxf3! 29.fxf3 Qb6+ 30.Kg2 Qxd6 wins a useful pawn and exchanges off a bishop. What about 29.Bxb8...? Black can turn the game round with 29...Ne2+ 30.Kf1 Nf4! 31.Bd6 Qd7, threatening the bishop and devastation with ...Qxh3+.

28...Nf4

Here comes trouble. I wouldn't move the rook to the c-file...



29.Rd1

Three points. Black's knight is more or less cut out of the game, and the rook goes behind the

passed pawn.

There was another way to make progress, one that to me looks tempting: 29.Bxb8 (three points) 29...Qxb8 30.d6+ Kf8 31.Rd1.

The advantage of playing like this is clear: it is less complicated - the blockading knight is eliminated, and the d-pawn advances with the rook behind it. The disadvantage is also clear: Black's task is simplified as the bishop pair has gone. Here's a plausible continuation from this point: 31...Ke8! (The king needs to blockade the d-pawn. White's challenge is how to bring his knight into the attack) 32.g3!? Ng6! (32...Nxb3+? 33.Kg2 Ng5 34.Nxg5 fxg5 35.Be6, followed by penetrating on c8 with the rook) 33.h4 (with the idea h4-h5 and Nh4) 33...h5 34.Ne1, with the idea Nc2-e3. The outcome remains open.

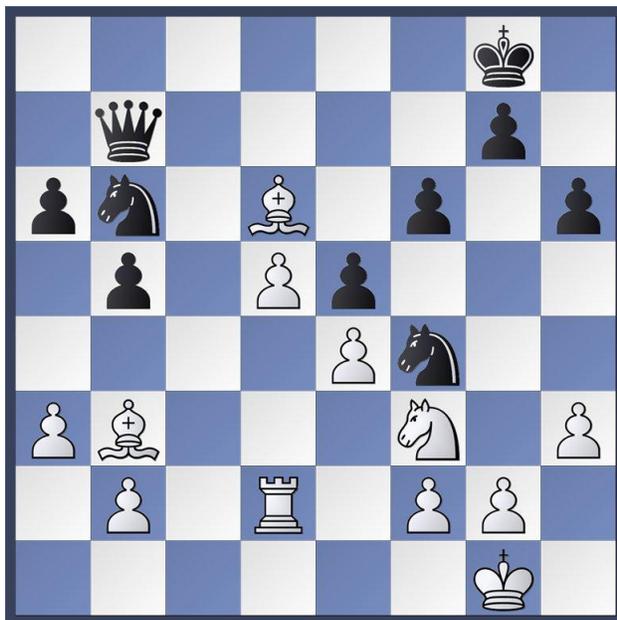
However, keeping the bishop pair is the principled move.

29...Nd7

30.Rd2

Two points. A cool move. The rook cuts out a check on e2 and prepares to switch to the c-file again.

30...Nb6



31.Bc7

Two points. Clearly, the bishop needs to make way for the d-pawn, but is this the right spot? This is a seductive square: the bishop is immune from capture because of the discovered check, and the queening square is controlled.

However, 31.Bb4 and 31 Bc5 both deserve three points: on these squares the bishop has more

influence over the kingside.

31...Nc4

32.d6

Two points. There is no need to exchange off bishop for knight.

32...Ne6

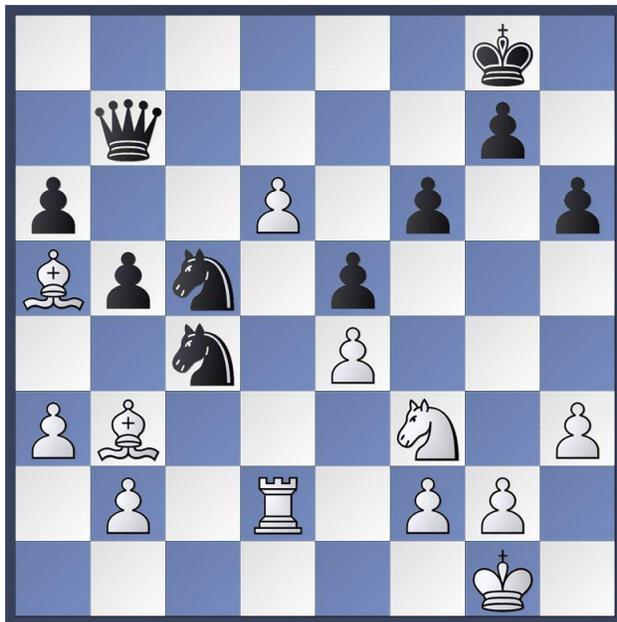
The d-pawn's advance has allowed the knight back into the game. The position is getting more complex.

33.Ba5

Two points. The bishop was threatened and had to move. This highlights that White made an error on the 31st move: the bishop should have retreated in the other direction. However, the irony is this: I wonder if this inaccuracy tempted Keres to over-reach? His next move has the hallmark of a man who believes his moment has arrived. But it is the fatal mistake. I'm guessing that time pressure was a factor too: if he had had time to reflect, I'm sure he would have been able to restore his mental equilibrium.

33...Nc5

The correct move was 33...Qd7, forcing an exchange: 34.Bxc4 bxc4. In this case it is hard to imagine that White can win. For example: 35.Bb4 Nf4 - threatening ...Nd3 -36.Ne1 Kf7. Black has the d-pawn under control. A draw is the most likely result.



34.Bb4

Six points. Easy to miss in the heat of battle. The knight is forced to retreat, and White resumes the initiative.

Perhaps Keres had imagined that White had to play 34.Bxc4+ bxc4, when White must tread

carefully for a couple of moves, but a draw is the most likely result: 35.Rd5! Nd7 36.Bc3!, for example, is super solid.

34...Nd7

Instead, 34...Nxb3 35 d7 forces the pawn home with a decisive material advantage.

35.Rc2

Five points. If the rook can force itself through to c7, Black's position will collapse.

35...a5

Desperate distraction. But let's look at a couple of the alternatives. What about the straightforward move 35...Qc6, supporting the knight? White attacks the knight again: 36.Nd2, and Black bolsters the knight again: 36...Ndb6. What should White play now?

37.a4! (two bonus points) is the key that unlocks Black's position. The pawn cannot be prevented from advancing to a5, and then the c4 point collapses.

And what about 35...Qxe4...? How should White react?

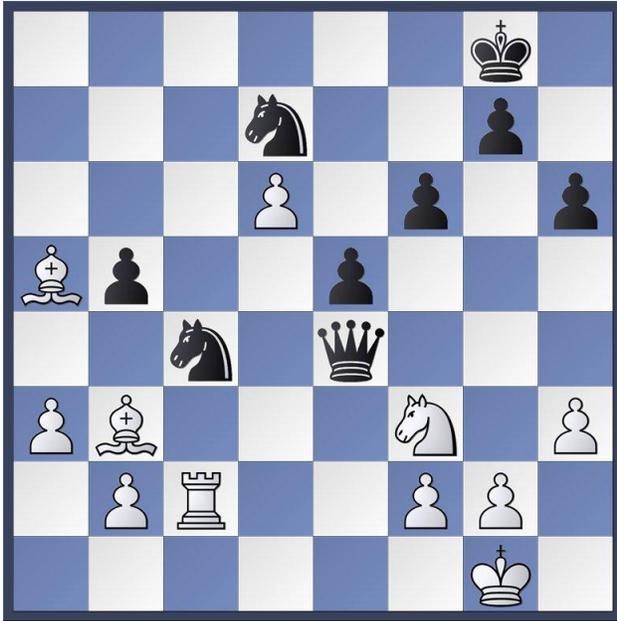
36.Nd2 (one point) is the move, attacking the queen and the knight on c4. It is interesting that once White breaks through, it is Black's king that suffers. For example: 36...Qd4 37.Nxc4 bxc4 38.Rxc4 Qxb2 39.Rc3+ Kh7 40.Bc2+ Kg8 41 Bg6! followed by Rc8 and mate; or 40...g6 41.Ba4 Nf8 42.Rc7+ Kg8 43.d7, and White forces the win of the knight.

These variations demonstrate the potency of the bishops, probing away at Black's king at long range; and incidentally fully vindicate Unzicker's strategy.

36.Bxa5

One point. There is no reason to decline.

36...Qxe4



37.Nd2

One point. Ensuring the elimination of the knight.

At first glance you might imagine that 37 a4 achieves the same, but Black has the resource 37...Kh7! and the fight goes on.

37...Qd3

Black is lost. Instead, 37...Qe1+ 38.Kh2 Qxf2 39.Nxc4 Qf4+ 40.g3 wins.

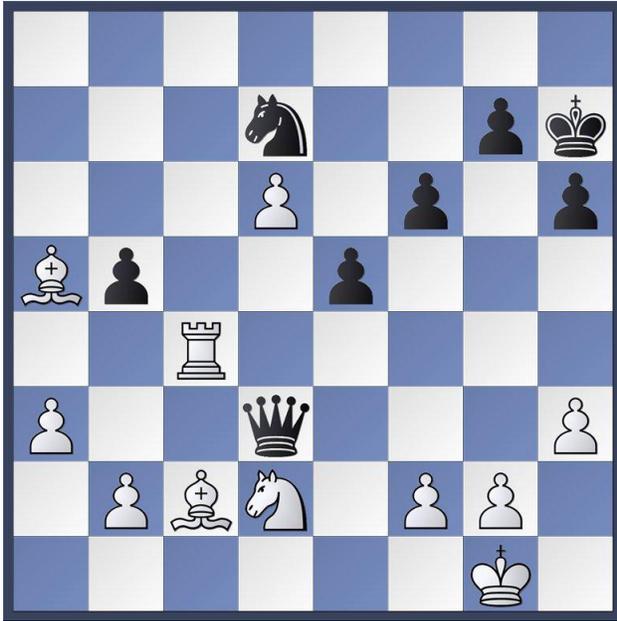
38.Rxc4

Three points. A satisfying way to conclude.

38...Kh7

39.Bc2

One point. And **Black resigned. 1-0**



Now add up your points.

- 68-73 Grandmaster
- 62-67 International Master
- 50-61 FIDE or National Master
- 40-49 County player
- 30-39 Strong club player
- 11-29 Average club player
- 0-10 Unlucky

The most notable aspect of this game was Unzicker's principled refusal to release the tension in the position at any stage. Playing moves that require less calculation is simpler, and these kind of moves can often be made quickly. However, this is a false economy of effort. Such half-best moves, like exchanging bishops on moves 19 or 20, would have made Black's defensive task far easier.

It should also be said that at no stage did Keres back down either. I'm thinking of his determination to fight for control of the c-file with 25...Rc8, provoking Unzicker into sacrificing his queen. If Keres had defended more coolly, he might not have lost. The players brought out the best in each other: a true heavyweight struggle.