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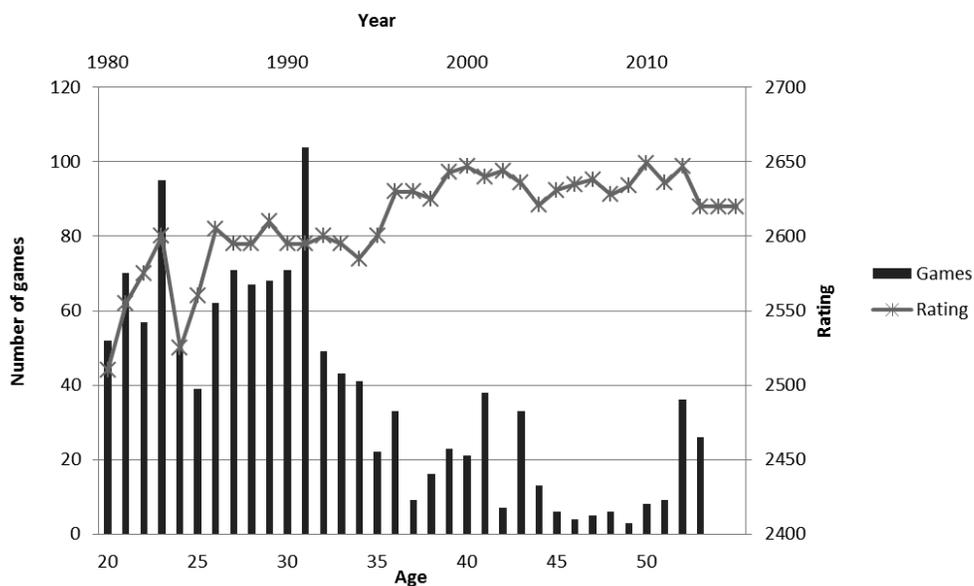
GM Yasser Seirawan

Date of birth: 23th March 1960
Place of birth: Damascus, Syria
Highest Elo: 2658 (age 51)

Quote:

“My style is based around provocation and counter-punches. I like waving a red flag at the opponent!”

Yasser Seirawan's chess rating, 1980-2015



Career highlights include:

World Junior Champion 1979
4-times US Champion
Dutch Open Blitz Champion 2011 and 2012

Publications include:

‘Winning Chess’ series
Chess Duels: My Games with the World Champions, 2010

Interview with Yasser Seirawan

GM Yasser Seirawan grew up in America, learnt chess at age 12 and became World Junior Champion at the age of 19. Yasser was long-time editor of *Inside Chess* magazine and is a popular chess commentator including for the *Chess24* website. In this interview, given at the 2015 Tata Steel tournament in Wijk aan Zee, Yasser describes how chess has changed during his lifetime and illustrates this with some interesting games.

How did your chess comeback in 2011 come about?

I put myself in self-mate! In 2003 I announced my retirement from chess. Chess was in trouble as we didn't have a unified chess world. For the next few years I played just Dutch League but no tournament chess.

Around 2011 I was very impressed by what the St Louis Chess Club had done for US chess. Before, the centre of US Chess had always been Manhattan. The idea that in 2011 the centre of the US chess scene had moved from Manhattan to Missouri was as random as... a world chess champion from Norway! The St Louis Chess Club had rescued the US Championship, which now was a professional event with an excellent prize fund. I wrote a nice email to the directors thanking them on behalf of chess grandmasters for what they had achieved, saying I hoped one day to thank them in person.

That was the self-mate. I straightaway got an email back saying we accept your invitation, please come and play and tell us what you think!

I played in the US Championship and it felt strange, like everything was wrong. The first problem was my jetlag in round 1 against Christiansen. I was seeing ghosts, getting mixed up and played an awful game.

I soon realized my openings were really poor. I had never been great at openings – they were always a bit soft you could say, no topical Grünfelds or Sicilians – I just wanted positions to play. At the US Championship all these guys were preparing well beyond me. This also affected my clock handling. In my career I had never been afflicted by time-trouble but here I was always behind on time.

On the plus side, however, the longer the games went on, the better I felt. I was warming up!

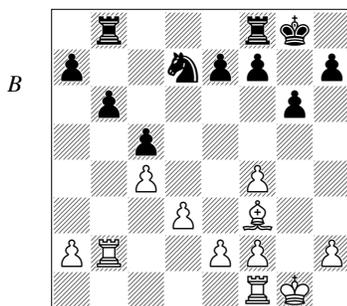


Photograph by Natasha Regan

Yasser Seirawan – Ray Robson

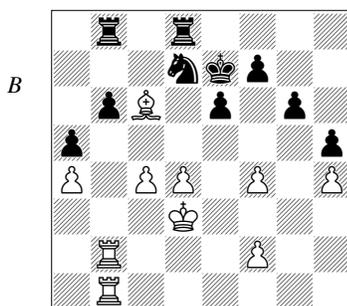
USA Ch, Saint Louis 2012

1 c4 ♘f6 2 ♘c3 g6 3 g3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 ♙g2 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♙g7 7 ♖b1 ♘d7 8 c4 0-0 9 ♘f3 c5 10 0-0 ♖b8 11 d3 b6 12 ♙b2 ♙xb2 13 ♖xb2 ♙b7 14 ♗d2 ♗c7 15 ♗f4 ♗xf4 16 gxf4 ♙xf3 17 ♙xf3 (D)



The position is pretty equal out of the opening. Now Yasser starts to get into his stride!

17...♖fc8 18 ♙g2 e6 19 a4 a5 20 ♖fb1 ♙f8 21 ♙f1 ♙e7 22 ♙e1 ♙d6 23 ♙d2 ♙c7 24 e3 h6 25 h4 ♗g8 26 ♗g1 h5 27 d4 cxd4 28 exd4 ♙d6 29 ♙c3 ♗g8 30 ♗gb1 ♙e7 31 ♙d3 ♗d8 32 ♙c6 (D)



32...♙f6 33 ♙xd7 ♗xd7 34 ♖xb6 ♗bd8 35 d5 ♙f5 36 ♖b7 ♙xf4 37 ♗xd7 ♗xd7 38 ♙d4 g5 39 hxg5 h4 40 ♗b8 ♙xg5 41 ♙e5 exd5 42 ♗g8+ ♙h5 43 cxd5 h3 44 d6 f6+ 45 ♙e6 ♗h7 46 ♗g1 ♙h4 47 ♗h1 ♙g4 48 d7 ♗h8 49 ♙xf6 1-0

Sadly the US championship ended at just the wrong moment for me. I was warmed up!

I went back to my peaceful retirement world and then received an email inviting me to the World Team Championship. I replied saying they had the wrong person; I had not played enough games to even meet the activity criteria for selection so I wasn't even qualified to play. It turned out I was qualified but did I want to go? In the end friendships swung it. My colleagues insisted they really wanted me to go – Gata Kamsky was especially persuasive.

One of my best friends, John Donaldson, was captain. What does a best friend do? Start me off with three blacks in a row! It all turned out fine though.

How is it to play chess nowadays as an experienced player?

There was a tournament in Amsterdam with seniors against juniors. Whilst the youngsters were winning the games, the professors were winning the post-mortems. Ljubojević was brilliant at

post-mortems. He would always give strong opinions, though would sometimes change his mind a couple of minutes later.

Youngsters tend to be strong at analysing and their openings are better, the older have a good positional understanding as the games progress.

Do you think that some players adapt better than others to long playing careers?

Walter Browne would beat me in my teenage years (6 losses and 1 draw). In later years I began to improve my score. My god what a calculator he was! He would analyse a position to the nth degree, well beyond my horizon, and to a definitive purpose (he calculated until the position was clear). He was like a volcano at the board, always intense and perpetually in time-trouble. I thought that one day he must burn himself out. And that did happen as he had a decline in his mid-40s.

Conversely **Anatoly Karpov** is a scary player. Why? His intuition is flawless. Strategically he is so gifted. Pairing that talent with a really good opening repertoire made him World Champion. I thought this guy would remain the world champion for 40 years!

I think of **Garry Kasparov** as the best player of all time but we tend to forget that in 1984 Karpov was leading 5-0 against him. If it had gone to 6-0 Kasparov may never have recovered. As it was, it ended up derailing Karpov. Garry was still at his peak in 2005 when he stepped away from chess. Garry had been a calculator like Walter Browne. A meteor-like force who defied gravity!

How does chess work now compare with your time as a full-time professional?

I've done some work with two young players, **Daniel Naroditsky** and **Wesley So**.

Naroditsky is a child of the digital age. It is extraordinary for me to watch his use of computers and how he manages to absorb so much information.

Wesley So also has a great knowledge of how to make use of computers. I always thought of chess as pattern-recognition. The more patterns you are aware of, the more quickly ideas come to you. When working with a computer on the 2D screen, somehow these patterns are very apparent. Players can assimilate this information at a very rapid rate. Sometimes I see Nakamura looking up into the air during the opening phase, and it seems to me as if he's replaying clicking on the screen in his head!

I was helping Wesley to prepare for a tournament via Skype and trying to trick him in a position of which I had very deep knowledge. I gave him a position and said I was not interested in calculation but wanted him to find and describe ideas. He did that – and very well – but then 15 minutes into the 1-hour lesson, he also gave me a precise calculation line to resolve the position!

How would you describe your own playing style?

My style is based around provocation and counter-punches. I like waving a red flag at the opponent!

Which players have influenced you?

My style isn't exactly modelled on Korchnoi or Bent Larsen though these players are excellent counter-attackers.

I was impressed by Tigran Petrosian. A lot of his play clicked with me. I see myself as a pretty good strategic player, not especially an attacker but a counter-attacker.

Against Tal I have a good record. It's funny how it goes. Korchnoi remarked:

Keres tended to beat Korchnoi.

Tal would beat Keres.

Korchnoi beat Tal.

My own style worked well against Tal. He was an attacker and I knew the attack was coming, he couldn't contain himself and blasted open the position. I was ready for it!

Tal was a long-time hero of mine. I had read and re-read his book *Life and Games of Mikhail Tal* and his book on the 1960 World Championship match. On a first reading I just thought "Wow!" and on a second reading "I still have a lot to learn about chess".

How are you finding the counterattacking style these days?

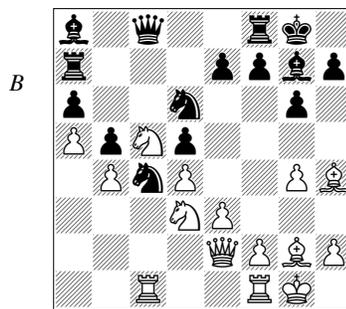
This style will always exist just like in boxing. Today's chess is vastly different though from the Karpov era. Dynamic play is now dominant. When Karpov played, you couldn't take on a disadvantage such as an isolated pawn; he would accumulate small advantages and just beat you! Dynamic play, looking for resources even when defending is in the ascendancy. Players are defending so much better. In the old days if you got an advantage, your opponent would collapse. Today there are fewer wipe-outs and far more titanic struggles. When I was coming back and had the advantage I had to exert myself much more than I used to.

In the recent Gashimov Memorial there was a good example of the fantastic defensive mentality of the modern players:

Vladimir Kramnik – Fabiano Caruana

Gashimov Memorial, Shamkir 2015

1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♘f3 g6 3 ♙g5 ♙g7 4 c3 0-0 5 ♘bd2 d5 6 e3 ♘bd7 7 ♙e2 c5 8 0-0 b6 9 a4 a6 10 b4 ♙b7 11 a5 cxb4 12 cxb4 b5 13 ♖c1 ♘e8 14 ♘b3 ♘d6 15 ♘e1 ♘c4 16 ♘d3 ♖a7 17 ♙h4 ♙a8 18 ♙f3 ♘f6 19 ♚e2 ♘e8 20 g4 ♘ed6 21 ♙g2 ♚c8 22 ♘bc5 (D)



In the old days, players understood that if Kramnik has a knight on c5 against you, then you had a duty to just collapse and lose! The modern players keep on fighting as if nothing has happened. Look what Caruana did!

22...♖e8 23 ♙g3 ♚d8 24 ♖cd1 e6 25 f3 ♚e7 26 ♙h1 ♙h6 27 ♘f4 ♘b7 28 ♘cd3 ♘d8 29 e4 ♘c6 30 exd5 ♘xb4 31 dxex6 ♘xd3 32 ♖xd3 fxe6 33 ♚e1 ♚d8 34 h4 ♖f7 35 g5 ♙g7 36 ♙h3 ♖xf4 37 ♙xf4 e5 38 ♙g3 e4 39 ♖d1 ♙d5 40 ♙e5 exf3 41 ♚f2 ♚xa5 42 ♙g4 ♖f8 43 ♖d3 ♚b4 44 ♙g3 h5 45 gxh6 ♙xh6 46 ♙h2 ♘d2 47 ♖a1 ♘e4 48 ♚c2 ♘xg3 49 ♖xa6 ♙e4 50 ♙xf3 ♚e1 51 ♚b3+ ♙h8 52 ♙xe4 ♖f2+ 53 ♙h3 ♚f1+ 54 ♙g4 ♖f4+ 0-1

In the World Team Championships, my team captain John Donaldson gave me Black again against Ilya Smirin. It was a sharp line in the Caro-Kann Advance. Then the guy makes a sharp move.

I'm a pawn-grabber. Give me a pawn and I'm in heaven! Of course he had certain compensation but darn it I thought, that is a pawn. There are only a handful of examples where I have been offered a pawn, not seen a concrete refutation, and not taken it. This time I didn't see a refutation and didn't take the pawn. It was a draw.

He'd been playing quickly (30-45 seconds per move). He made the sacrifice quickly. I was intimidated. Since he was still in his preparation I was influenced not to take the pawn. In the post-mortem my opponent said "I'm sorry Yasser: that was a *fingerfehler*!" The pawn sacrifice had not been deliberate and I had been intimidated.