

Bent Larsen's Best Games

Praise for Bent Larsen

“His chess writing is among the best, combining analysis with humour and psychological understanding of the fight.”

Peter Heine Nielsen, former Danish Chess Champion

“Of the many chess masters I have met, Bent is the most original.”

Anatoly Karpov

“He aims for the initiative and always plays for a win.”

Max Euwe

“Together with his love for and deep knowledge of chess, it is the refined humour of this outstanding player and highly cultured person that makes his comments so unique.”

Mihail Marin, former Romanian Chess Champion

“Larsen is a fighter. He is always searching. I am a realist, but he is a romantic.”

Miguel Najdorf

“His enormous talent together with his inexhaustible optimism generated a specific, inimitable style.”

Garry Kasparov

“He bears an amazing resemblance to Nimzowitsch with his extremely dynamic play, conforming to a single strategic goal.”

Lev Polugaevsky

“With a fine sense of humour Larsen explains his aggressive and unconventional approach to chess, in a way that is instructive to players of all levels.”

Christopher Lutz, former German Chess Champion

“His boldness and his concrete and non-routine approach to positions cannot fail to appeal to all connoisseurs of chess.”

Tigran Petrosian

“Larsen is one of the greatest fighters in chess, prepared to fight to death with both White and Black.”

Raymond Keene, former British Chess Champion

“One of the best books in the entire history of chess. A masterpiece.”

Alfonso Romero Holmes, former Spanish Chess Champion

Bent Larsen

Bent Larsen's Best Games

Fighting Chess with the Great Dane

New In Chess 2014

Contents

| | |
|--|------------|
| Introduction: The Will to Win. | 7 |
| Author's Preface | 21 |
| Editor's Foreword | 23 |
| | |
| Chapter 1 Beginnings | 25 |
| Chapter 2 Scandinavian Champion | 34 |
| Chapter 3 International Master | 37 |
| Chapter 4 Grandmaster!. | 40 |
| Chapter 5 Ups and Downs. | 52 |
| Chapter 6 Experiments | 61 |
| Chapter 7 Involuntary Pause | 75 |
| Chapter 8 Great Leap Forward | 91 |
| Chapter 9 Difficult Choice. | 113 |
| Chapter 10 The Public Wants Sharp Play | 124 |
| Chapter 11 Satisfactory Results | 131 |
| Chapter 12 1967: A Crazy Year | 143 |
| Chapter 13 1968: Another Busy Year. | 172 |
| Chapter 14 1969: About My Style | 179 |
| Chapter 15 Lugano to Solingen 1970 | 192 |
| Chapter 16 The Palma de Mallorca Interzonal 1970. | 197 |
| Chapter 17 Palma de Mallorca 1971 | 206 |
| Chapter 18 Teesside 1972 | 209 |
| Chapter 19 My First Victory against Smyslov | 214 |
| Chapter 20 Leningrad Interzonal 1973 | 221 |
| Chapter 21 Manila 1973 | 225 |
| Chapter 22 Las Palmas 1974 | 231 |
| Chapter 23 The Spanish Team Championship 1974. | 240 |
| Chapter 24 Manila 1974 | 242 |
| Chapter 25 Report from Orense 1975 | 252 |
| Chapter 26 Manila 1975 | 257 |
| Chapter 27 Spanish Team Championships 1975 | 263 |
| Chapter 28 Biel Interzonal 1976 | 265 |

| | | |
|---|---|------------|
| Chapter 29 | Las Palmas Tournament 1976 | 277 |
| Chapter 30 | Lanzarote 1976 | 290 |
| Chapter 31 | Costa Brava 1976 | 297 |
| Chapter 32 | Spanish Team Championships 1976 | 302 |
| Chapter 33 | Geneva 1977 | 306 |
| Chapter 34 | Las Palmas 1977 | 310 |
| Chapter 35 | Ljubljana/Portoroz 1977 | 320 |
| Chapter 36 | Spanish Team Championship Alicante 1977 | 326 |
| Chapter 37 | Bobby Fischer | 333 |
| Chapter 38 | Bent Larsen's Extraordinary Personality | 339 |
| Chapter 39 | Bent Larsen's Exhausting Curriculum Vitae | 341 |
| Larsen's Achievements until 1973 | | 343 |
| Index of Openings | | 345 |
| Index of Games | | 348 |

The Will to Win

by Peter Heine Nielsen, Dan H. Andersen and Thorbjørn Rosenlund

Bent Larsen was born on March 4th, 1935 near Thisted, a small town in northern Jutland. By a strange coincidence, Aron Nimzowitsch died 12 days later. The Latvian grandmaster had lived in Denmark since 1922, and his death at only 46 meant that there was no one of comparable strength in Denmark during Larsen's rise to the world elite.

Bent Larsen learned to play chess in 1942, when he was confined to bed with a series of children's diseases. He joined a chess club in 1947, and in swift succession he became club champion, city champion, and provincial champion, usually with a 100 per cent score.

At 16 he had his international debut at the 1951 Junior World Championship in Birmingham, where he finished fourth (Ivkov won). He won his first Danish championship in 1954, and at the age of 19 he was the strongest player in Denmark, a position he kept for at least 35 years.

In the USSR a boy could go to the local pioneer palace and play chess against very strong players. The very best would continue to special programs and schools, and there would be strong tournaments and training sessions with grandmasters. In Denmark there was nothing of the sort. Larsen himself has dismissed the notion that it would have been better for his chess development to have been born in Moscow. He worked alone and felt comfortable with it.

One thing Denmark did have was world-class chess writing, represented by Aron Nimzowitsch and international master Jens Enevoldsen. Their highly individual kind of writing, with its emphasis on the intensity of the fight, was undoubtedly an inspiration for Larsen. He began very early to write for newspapers and *Skakbladet* (the chess magazine of the Danish Chess Federation), and together with simuls and lectures this made it possible for him to carve out a professional career.

In Larsen's opinion, the biggest boost to his chess understanding came from annotating the games of the 1953 Candidates' Tournament in Zürich for *Skakbladet*. By the end of the year he felt confident that his understanding of the game was at grandmaster level, but he lacked practical playing strength.

At the Amsterdam Olympiad in 1954 he scored 71% and was rewarded with the title of International Master. The year after he defeated the Icelandic chess hero and future FIDE president Fridrik Olafsson in a match for the Nordic Championship. Then came the first great breakthrough, when he scored the highest percentage on Board 1 at the Moscow Olympiad in 1956. This gave him the Grandmaster title, a much more select title then, when there was only a handful of active grandmasters in the world. In the finals he defeated Gligoric in a classic game, and even the great Botvinnik had to fight with his back to the wall before his tenacious defence secured the draw.

Larsen studied engineering at the technical college in Copenhagen, and most people, including the officials of the Danish Chess Federation, wanted him to take his exam and get a steady job. Their reasons were probably a mixture of disdain for professional sports and a genuine feeling that a career as a professional chess player was not a good choice in the long run. Chess did not reward its professionals well. Carl Schlechter starved to death in 1918. Janowsky died poor and lonely in a rented room. Tartakower died a bitter man. Fifty years later Larsen smiles and says about his decision to become a professional that he did, indeed, spend most of the nights studying chess instead of engineering, but there never was a conscious decision. It just kind of happened.

The years after the triumph in Moscow were difficult ones for him. His results were modest and his games were very uneven. Strategic masterpieces were followed by weak moves and strange defeats. He experimented and played sharp set-ups.

With hindsight you can see that this period was the difficult learning process which was a prerequisite for later greatness, something that many young masters give up in advance, perhaps afraid of losing their newly won prestige and high rating. Indeed, the historical ratings show that Bent Larsen slipped down the list, from no. 9 in the world in 1956 to no. 50 in 1963.

Then came the second breakthrough: the 1964 Interzonal Tournament in Amsterdam. Twenty-four players, five of them from the USSR. 1-4 Smyslov, Spassky, Tal and Larsen 17; 5. Stein 16½; 6. Bronstein 16. Larsen had a positive score against the Soviet stars and won famous games against Spassky and Bronstein.

In the Candidates' matches Bent Larsen first defeated Ivkov, 5½-2½. In the semi-finals he was defeated by the narrowest of margins by Tal: 5½-4½.

It was a great match between two uncompromising fighters, and the first game was probably a shock for the Russian side.

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Bent Larsen

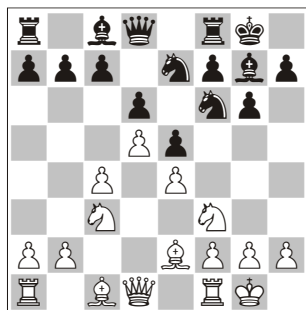
Mikhail Tal

Bled Candidates' Match sf 1965 (1)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7

4.e4 0-0 5.♘f3 d6 6.♙e2 e5

7.0-0 ♘c6 8.d5 ♘e7



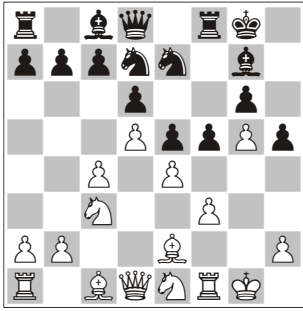
9.♘e1

Larsen's favourite move, despite diversifying in many ways later, most notably with 9.♙h1!?, one point being that Black's natural 9...♘h5 can be met by 10.♘g1 ♘f4 11.♙f3, followed by a later g2-g3, forcing Black's knight back, as for example in the second game of Larsen's match against Curt Hansen in 1988.

9...♘d7 10.f3 f5 11.g4!?

A line which has recently regained popularity, but which in 1965 was only in its very early stages. White tries to nip Black's attack in the bud by blocking the structure on the kingside.

11...h5 12.g5



12...h4?!

After this game generally condemned, but a principled try to refute White's strategy. The pawn on g5 is now isolated and difficult to defend.

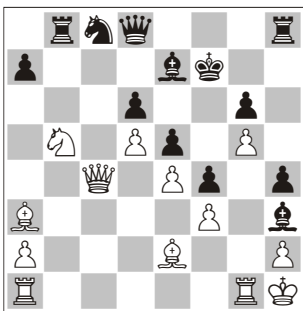
13.♘d3 f4 14.♙h1 ♕f7 15.c5!

A novelty. Black cannot comfortably take the pawn, as 16.♗b3 threatens 17.d6+.

**15...♖h8 16.♗b3 b6 17.cxd6
cxd6 18.♗a3 ♘c5 19.♘xc5 bxc5
20.b4 cxb4 21.♗xb4 ♙h3
22.♖g1 ♖b8 23.♘b5 ♘c8
24.♙a3 ♙f8**

Play has proceeded logically, almost in a symmetrical fashion. White defends his weakness on the kingside, while at the same time opening up targets on the queenside. Black has defended well on the queenside, and is now ready to fulfil his strategic objective by pocketing the g5-pawn.

25.♗c4 ♙e7



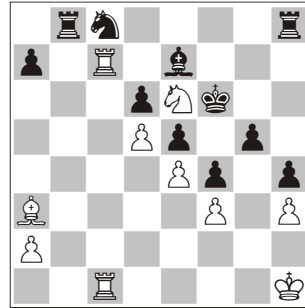
26.♗c7!

White's strategy is deeper. Unlike Black, he does not try to defend his weakness, but instead exchanges the queens, removing Black's best defender. Then slowly but securely he will break through along the c-file.

**26...♗xc7 27.♘xc7 ♖h5 28.♙f1
♙xf1?!**

Keeping the bishop with 28...♙d7 would give some hope of controlling vital squares on the c-file, and thus would have been a better defensive try. White, however, has excellent compensation.

**29.♖gxf1 ♖xg5 30.♘e6 ♖h5
31.♖ac1 ♙f6 32.♖c7 ♖h8
33.♖fc1 g5 34.h3**



The position has crystallized. Black is a pawn up, but he is strategically lost. He has no active possibilities, and can only wait for White's breakthrough. Larsen has patience. First he must prevent all counterplay before the game is adjourned.

**34...♖g8 35.♖7c6 ♙f7 36.♙g2
♙f6 37.♙f1 ♖h8 38.♙e2 ♖g8
39.♙d3 ♖h8 40.♖c7 ♘b6
41.♖1c6 ♖hg8**

The sealed move, but Tal resigned without further play. White wins in numerous ways, from the prosaic 42.♙xd6 to the flashy 42.♘f8!?. Black was held in an iron grip, and if you did not know the names of the players, you might think Petrosian was White.

And in the tournament in Belgrade, a few months later, he again lost to me. Some games are worth more than a point!

Game 29

Bird's Opening

Bent Larsen

Boris Spassky

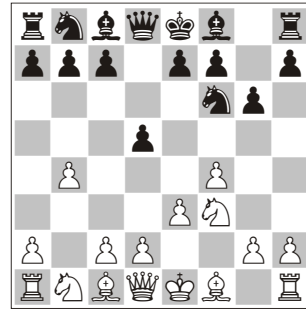
Amsterdam Interzonal 1964

1.f4

In Round 20 I drew an interesting game with Tal, which ensured my place in the Candidates' Tournament. In Round 21, a reaction set in as I played very badly against Stein and lost. Now, at the start of Round 22, Smyslov and Spassky had 16 points, Tal, Stein and I had 15½; Bronstein 15. Since only three Soviet players could qualify, my five rivals probably suffered more from nervous tension than me. On the other hand, there is a tendency to relax when you are safe, and that probably cost me the game against Stein.

To avoid another setback, I decided to do something special. It began with the first move. Throughout the tournament I had played 1.e4 (Bishop's Opening, Vienna Game, Caro-Kann Exchange Variation, and lesser-known lines against the Sicilian). The results were brilliant, but those lines no longer held a surprise factor. In my last game with white I played Bird's Opening. Most masters don't think much of it, but I chose it for the important reason that they neither play it nor know much about it. I know it very well, and I had thought up many original ideas in it. Now I used it as a challenge to Spassky, to see what ideas he could come up with.

1...d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.e3 g6 4.b4!?



Nothing special, according to the experts. Some grandmasters criticised the move because they believe that White should concentrate play on the kingside in this opening. Nonsense! The Bird doesn't confine itself to just the one flank.

After 1.f4 I think that the fianchetto of the c1-bishop is the most logical. However, 4.b3 allows Black to play ...c7-c5 and ...♘c6. Many years ago I came up with the idea of b2-b4. The drawback is the weakening of the queenside. However, I have had a good degree of success with it and it doesn't worry me.

4...♗g7 5.♗b2 0-0 6.♗e2 ♗g4

The right idea. Black is ready to give up the bishop pair to play ...e7-e5. One possibility for White is to defer castling, for example, continuing with 7.a4, but it is likely that, with correct play, this line would transpose to the game.

Spassky later suggested 6...a5 7.b5 a4, considering it an interesting possibility, which I cannot understand. But then commentators are inclined to criticise almost all the loser's moves.

7.0-0 c6 8.a4 ♘bd7 9.♘a3 ♗xf3

Against 9...♗e8 White would have replied 10.♘e5.

10.♗xf3 ♗e8 11.d4

The ...e7-e5 advance was a dangerous threat. The text move is necessary, but weakens the e4-square; in my opinion,

50...♟f8 51.♞g1!

A waiting move aimed at luring the black pawn to the sixth rank. Whether it wins or not, I do not know, but it's a very subtle idea. Besides, drastic measures lead to nothing.

Black's reply is forced, as 51...♞c8 is weak owing to 52.♘e6+ ♟f7 53.♞g7+ ♟xg7 54.♘xg7 ♟xg7 55.♟xe7+ ♘f7 56.♟d7 ♞c5 57.♟xf5 c3 58.♟xe4 c2? 59.♟d4+.

51...c3 52.♟e6!

As far as I know, Spassky and Bondarevsky hadn't looked at this during their analysis. With the advantage of two pawns, the exchange of queens is not normally to be feared. Black must exchange.

If 52...♟h8? it's mate in two with 53.♟f7+, and if 52...♟g7? 53.♟e5! ♟xe5 54.fxe5 Black cannot save the knight because of the mating threats.

52...♟xe6 53.dxe6 ♟g7

Of course, this is obligatory to avoid mate.

54.♘xe4+ ♟h6

The alternative 54...♟f8? is suicide because of 55.♘c5!.

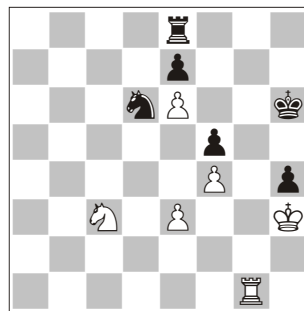
Analysis by many grandmasters after the game led to the conclusion that 54...♟h7 was better, but this does not seem true.

The reason given was the variation 54...♟h7 55.♘xc3 ♘c4 56.♘d5 ♞d8 57.♘xe7 ♘xe3, which is lost with the king on h6 because of 58.♘g8. However, with the king on h7, White still has winning chances, e.g. 58.♘xe7 ♞e8 59.♘g6 ♟g7 60.♘e5+ ♘g4?? 61.♟g5! or 60...♟f8 61.♞g6.

In fact, I was pondering another continuation: 57.e4!?. After 57...fxe4? 58.♘xe7 White would probably win, but 57...♞d6! draws.

55.♘xc3

The game has taken an unexpected turn: material is level and Spassky is once again in time trouble.

**55...♘e4??**

Even so, this is a startling misjudgement. After six hours of tough defence, Spassky loses his nerve. However, the position contains many surprising combinations, and subsequent analysis consistently showed White to be the winner.

A) As previously mentioned, 55...♘c4? is bad because of 56.♘d5 ♞d8 57.♘xe7 ♘xe3 58.♘g8+;

B) O'Kelly gave this pretty line: 55...♞b8 56.♘d5 ♞b3 57.♟xh4 ♞d3 58.♘xe7 ♞xe3 59.♘g8+ ♟h7 60.♘f6+ ♟h6 61.e7! ♞e6 62.♞d1, winning;

C) For years I have believed that this position was winning. But recently I looked at it again and asked myself why Black could not play 55...♞d8!!, with a view to replying to 56.♘d5 with 56...♘c8 and to 56.♞d1 ♟g7 57.♞d5 with 57...♞c8!.

So 55...♞d8!! is a draw! That is how close Spassky came to winning first place on his own.

56.♘xe4 fxe4 57.♟xh4 ♞a8

Or 57...♞f8 58.♞g5 ♞f6 59.f5 followed by ♟g4.

58.f5 ♞a2 59.♞g8 ♞f2 60.♞f8 1-0

Larsen's Achievements until 1973

ZONAL TOURNAMENTS:

- 1957 3rd/4th out of 18 with Donner in Wageningen.
1960 4th out of 10 in Berg en Dal (later annulled).
1963 2nd out of 20 in Halle.

INTERZONAL TOURNAMENTS

- 1964 1st/3rd out of 24 with Smyslov and Spassky in Amsterdam.
1967 1st out of 22 in Sousse.
1970 2nd/4th out of 24 with Geller and Hübner in Palma de Mallorca.
1973 5th/6th out of 18 with Hübner in Leningrad.

CANDIDATES' TOURNAMENTS:

- 1958 16th out of 20 in Portoroz.
1964 1st/3rd out of 24 with Smyslov and Spassky in Amsterdam.
1965 Won in a match against Ivkov (5.5 - 2.5) and lost to Tal (4.5 - 5.5).
Won against Geller (5-4) for the third qualifier.
1967 1st out of 22 in Sousse.
1968 Won against Portisch (5.5 - 4.5) and lost to Spassky (2.5 - 5.5).
Won against Tal (5.5 - 2.5) for the third qualifier.
1970 2nd/4th out of 24 with Geller and Hübner in Palma de Mallorca.
1971 Won against Uhlmann (5.5 - 3.5) and lost to Fischer (0 - 6).

INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS:

- 1966 3rd out of 10 (double round) in Santa Monica.
1967 4th out of 16 in Beverwijk.
3rd/5th out of 10 with Skold and Kinnmark in Stockholm.
3rd/4th out of 10 with Geller in Monaco.
2nd/3rd out of 9 with Olafsson in Dundee.
1st out of 20 in Havana.
1st/2nd out of 10 with Darga in Winnipeg.
1st out of 18 in Palma de Mallorca.
1968 1st out of 14 in Monaco.
1st in the U.S. Open in Snowmass (Colorado).
2nd/3rd out of 18 with Spassky in Palma de Mallorca.

Bent Larsen's Best Games

- 1969 1st out of 16 in Büsseldorf.
6th/7th out of 16 with Donner in San Juan de Puerto Rico.
1st out of 18 in Palma de Mallorca.
- 1970 1st out of 8 (double round) in Lugano.
First board for the team Rest of the World versus USSR:
drew with Spassky 1.5-1.5 and beat Stein.
1st out of 16 in Vinkovci.
- 1971 6th/7th out of 16 with Csom in Palma de Mallorca.
- 1972 1st out of 16 in Teesside (England).
- 1972 1st out of 16 with Smyslov, in Las Palmas.
8th/9th out of 16, with Mecking in San Antonio (Texas).
- 1973 1st out of 16 in Hastings.
1st out of 16 in Manila.

Game list

Games in Introduction

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|----|
| Bent Larsen - Mikhail Tal | Bled 1965 | 8 |
| Tigran Petrosian - Bent Larsen | Santa Monica 1966 | 10 |
| Boris Spassky - Bent Larsen | Belgrade 1970 | 14 |
| Anatoly Karpov - Bent Larsen | Montreal 1979 | 17 |

Games analysed by Bent Larsen

| | | | |
|---------|--|-------------------------------|-----|
| Game 1 | Bent Larsen - Lionel Joyner | Birmingham 1951 | 27 |
| Game 2 | Bent Larsen - Alex Nielsen | Esbjerg 1953 | 28 |
| Game 3 | Harald Enevoldsen - Bent Larsen | Copenhagen 1953 | 30 |
| Game 4 | Eigil Pedersen - Bent Larsen | Aarhus 1954 | 31 |
| Game 5 | Fridrik Olafsson - Bent Larsen | Reykjavik 1956. | 35 |
| Game 6 | Ossip Bernstein - Bent Larsen | Amsterdam 1954 | 37 |
| Game 7 | Bent Larsen - Francisco José Perez Perez | Gijón 1956. | 41 |
| Game 8 | Nikola Padevsky - Bent Larsen | Moscow 1956 | 44 |
| Game 9 | Bent Larsen - Svetozar Gligoric | Moscow 1956 | 45 |
| Game 10 | Hugh Alexander - Bent Larsen | Hastings 1956/57 | 49 |
| Game 11 | Octavio Troianescu - Bent Larsen | Wageningen 1957 | 53 |
| Game 12 | Erich Eliskases - Bent Larsen | Mar del Plata 1958 | 55 |
| Game 13 | Bent Larsen - Gideon Stahlberg | Sweden-Denmark 1958 | 58 |
| Game 14 | Carel van den Berg - Bent Larsen | Beverwijk 1959 | 62 |
| Game 15 | Bent Larsen - Jan Hein Donner | Zürich 1959. | 64 |
| Game 16 | Bent Larsen - Jan Hein Donner | Beverwijk 1960 | 68 |
| Game 17 | Bent Larsen - Theo van Scheltinga | Beverwijk 1960 | 69 |
| Game 18 | Efim Geller - Bent Larsen | Copenhagen 1960 | 70 |
| Game 19 | Karl Robatsch - Bent Larsen | Halle 1963 | 77 |
| Game 20 | Borislav Ivkov - Bent Larsen | Beverwijk 1964 | 80 |
| Game 21 | Bent Larsen - Theo van Scheltinga | Beverwijk 1964 | 84 |
| Game 22 | Svend Hamann - Bent Larsen | Holstebro 1964 | 87 |
| Game 23 | Bent Larsen - Francisco José Perez Perez | Amsterdam 1964 | 92 |
| Game 24 | Bent Larsen - Bela Berger | Amsterdam 1964 | 93 |
| Game 25 | Bent Larsen - Levente Lengyel | Amsterdam 1964 | 94 |
| Game 26 | Zvonko Vranesic - Bent Larsen | Amsterdam 1964 | 97 |
| Game 27 | Bent Larsen - Lajos Portisch | Amsterdam 1964 | 98 |
| Game 28 | David Bronstein - Bent Larsen | Amsterdam 1964 | 100 |
| Game 29 | Bent Larsen - Boris Spassky | Amsterdam 1964 | 107 |
| Game 30 | Bent Larsen - Aleksandar Matanovic | Zagreb 1965. | 115 |
| Game 31 | Jorgen Nielsen - Bent Larsen | Copenhagen 1965 | 118 |
| Game 32 | Bent Larsen - Alexey Suetin | Copenhagen 1965 | 119 |

Bent Larsen's Best Games

| | | | |
|---------|--|--------------------------------|-----|
| Game 33 | Bent Larsen - Svend Hamann | Copenhagen 1965 | 122 |
| Game 34 | Salo Flohr - Bent Larsen | Copenhagen 1966 | 124 |
| Game 35 | Sture Nyman - Bent Larsen | Correspondence Game 1966. . | 128 |
| Game 36 | Bobby Fischer - Bent Larsen | Santa Monica 1966. | 131 |
| Game 37 | Bent Larsen - Tigran Petrosian | Santa Monica 1966. | 135 |
| Game 38 | Tigran Petrosian - Bent Larsen | Santa Monica 1966. | 139 |
| Game 39 | Efim Geller - Bent Larsen | Monaco 1967. | 144 |
| Game 40 | Svetozar Gligoric - Bent Larsen | Havana 1967 | 150 |
| Game 41 | Bent Larsen - Jacek Bednarski | Havana 1967 | 153 |
| Game 42 | Mark Taimanov - Bent Larsen | Havana 1967 | 155 |
| Game 43 | Lothar Schmid - Bent Larsen | Havana 1967 | 158 |
| Game 44 | Bent Larsen - Florin Gheorghiu | Winnipeg 1967 | 160 |
| Game 45 | Aivars Gipslis - Bent Larsen | Sousse 1967. | 163 |
| Game 46 | Bent Larsen - Borislav Ivkov | Palma de Mallorca 1967 | 165 |
| Game 47 | Eleazar Jimenez Zerquera - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1967 | 168 |
| Game 48 | Svetozar Gligoric - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1967 | 170 |
| Game 49 | Bent Larsen - Florin Gheorghiu | Monaco 1968 | 172 |
| Game 50 | Bent Larsen - Wolfgang Unzicker | Lugano 1968 | 175 |
| Game 51 | Milko Bobotsov - Bent Larsen | Büsum 1969 | 182 |
| Game 52 | Bent Larsen - Viktor Kortchnoi | Palma de Mallorca 1969 | 183 |
| Game 53 | Bent Larsen - Oscar Panno | Palma de Mallorca 1969 | 186 |
| Game 54 | Jesus Díez del Corral - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1969 | 189 |
| Game 55 | Antonio Medina - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1969 | 190 |
| Game 56 | Bent Larsen - Lubomir Kavalek | Lugano 1970 | 192 |
| Game 57 | Bent Larsen - Lubomir Kavalek | Solingen 1970 | 194 |
| Game 58 | Henrique Mecking - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1970 | 197 |
| Game 59 | Renato Naranja - Bent Larsen | Palma de Mallorca 1970 | 199 |
| Game 60 | Bent Larsen - Wolfgang Uhlmann | Las Palmas 1971 | 200 |
| Game 61 | Wolfgang Uhlmann - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1971 | 202 |
| Game 62 | Bent Larsen - Wolfgang Uhlmann | Las Palmas 1971 | 204 |
| Game 63 | Bent Larsen - Juan Manuel Bellón Lopez | Palma de Mallorca 1971 | 206 |
| Game 64 | Bent Larsen - Ljubomir Ljubojevic | Teesside 1972. | 210 |
| Game 65 | Bent Larsen - Robert Wade | Teesside 1972. | 211 |
| Game 66 | Bent Larsen - Bernard Cafferty | Teesside 1972. | 213 |
| Game 67 | Bent Larsen - Vassily Smyslov | Las Palmas 1972. | 214 |
| Game 68 | Larry Melvyn Evans - Bent Larsen | San Antonio 1972. | 217 |
| Game 69 | Bent Larsen - Brian Eley | Hastings 1972/73 | 219 |
| Game 70 | Josip Rukavina - Bent Larsen | Leningrad 1973 | 222 |
| Game 71 | Jan Smejkal - Bent Larsen | Leningrad 1973 | 223 |
| Game 72 | Bent Larsen - Ivan Radulov | Leningrad 1973 | 224 |
| Game 73 | William Lombardy - Bent Larsen | Manila 1973. | 227 |
| Game 74 | Miguel Quinteros - Bent Larsen | Manila 1973. | 228 |
| Game 75 | Bent Larsen - Lubomir Kavalek | Las Palmas 1974. | 236 |
| Game 76 | Bent Larsen - Augusto Menvielle | Las Palmas 1974. | 238 |

| | | | |
|----------|--|---------------------------------|-----|
| Game 77 | Jaime Mora - Bent Larsen | Alicante 1974. | 240 |
| Game 78 | Bent Larsen - Ljubomir Ljubojevic | Manila 1974. | 243 |
| Game 79 | Bent Larsen - Svetozar Gligoric | Manila 1974. | 244 |
| Game 80 | Evgeny Vasiukov - Bent Larsen | Manila 1974. | 245 |
| Game 81 | Eugenio Torre - Bent Larsen | Manila 1974. | 247 |
| Game 82 | Bent Larsen - Lajos Portisch | Manila 1974. | 249 |
| Game 83 | Guillermo García - Bent Larsen | Orense 1975 | 253 |
| Game 84 | Bent Larsen - Miguel Quinteros | Orense 1975 | 254 |
| Game 85 | Bent Larsen - Arturo Pomar | Orense 1975 | 255 |
| Game 86 | Bent Larsen - Florin Gheorghiu | Orense 1975 | 255 |
| Game 87 | Bent Larsen - Lubomir Kavalek | Manila 1975. | 257 |
| Game 88 | Eugenio Torre - Bent Larsen | Manila 1975. | 259 |
| Game 89 | Henrique Mecking - Bent Larsen | Manila 1975. | 261 |
| Game 90 | Arturo Pomar - Bent Larsen | Barcelona 1975 | 263 |
| Game 91 | Bent Larsen - Robert Hübner | Biel 1976 | 270 |
| Game 92 | Jan Smejkal - Bent Larsen | Biel 1976 | 271 |
| Game 93 | Vladimir Liberzon - Bent Larsen | Biel 1976 | 274 |
| Game 94 | Bent Larsen - Lajos Portisch | Biel 1976 | 275 |
| Game 95 | Jose Miguel Fraguela Gil - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1976 | 277 |
| Game 96 | Lajos Portisch - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1976 | 280 |
| Game 97 | Juan Manuel Bellón Lopez - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1976 | 282 |
| Game 98 | Bent Larsen - Orestes Rodriguez Vargas | Las Palmas 1976 | 284 |
| Game 99 | Bent Larsen - Efim Geller | Las Palmas 1976 | 285 |
| Game 100 | Roberto Debarnot - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1976 | 288 |
| Game 101 | Jose Miguel Fraguela Gil - Bent Larsen | Lanzarote 1976 | 290 |
| Game 102 | Bent Larsen - Orestes Rodriguez Vargas | Lanzarote 1976 | 291 |
| Game 103 | Bent Larsen - Aldo Haik | Lanzarote 1976 | 292 |
| Game 104 | Juan Manuel Bellón Lopez - Bent Larsen | Lanzarote 1976 | 293 |
| Game 105 | Bent Larsen - Juan Betancort | Lanzarote 1976 | 295 |
| Game 106 | Laszlo Szabo - Bent Larsen | Costa Brava 1976 | 297 |
| Game 107 | Bent Larsen - Arturo Pomar | Costa Brava 1976 | 299 |
| Game 108 | Bent Larsen - Roman Torán | Zaragoza 1976 | 302 |
| Game 109 | Roman Bordell - Bent Larsen | Zaragoza 1976 | 304 |
| Game 110 | Heikki Westerinen - Bent Larsen | Geneva 1977 | 307 |
| Game 111 | Gudmundur Sigurjonsson - Bent Larsen | Geneva 1977 | 308 |
| Game 112 | Bent Larsen - Fernando Visier | Las Palmas 1977 | 310 |
| Game 113 | Mikhail Tal - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1977 | 312 |
| Game 114 | Bent Larsen - Anatoly Karpov | Las Palmas 1977 | 313 |
| Game 115 | Juan Manuel Bellón Lopez - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1977 | 314 |
| Game 116 | Anthony Miles - Bent Larsen | Las Palmas 1977 | 316 |
| Game 117 | Bent Larsen - Jan Timman | Las Palmas 1977 | 317 |
| Game 118 | Svetozar Gligoric - Bent Larsen | Ljubljana/Portoroz 1977 | 320 |
| Game 119 | Iztok Jelen - Bent Larsen | Ljubljana/Portoroz 1977 | 322 |
| Game 120 | Bent Larsen - Vladimir Savon | Ljubljana/Portoroz 1977 | 324 |

Bent Larsen's Best Games

| | | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----|
| Game 121 | Antonio Medina - Bent Larsen | Alicante 1977 | 328 |
| Game 122 | Bent Larsen - Roberto Debarnot | Alicante 1977 | 329 |
| Game 123 | Robert Fischer - Bent Larsen | Portoroz 1958 | 333 |
| Game 124 | Robert Fischer - Bent Larsen | Zürich 1959 | 334 |