

Upon the Shoulders of Giants: Part II-Jack Spence

By John Tomas (2071)

With Howard Ohman's death, Jack Spence once again became active in Nebraska organizing. I say once again because in the '40s and '50s, Jack had been extremely active -- he had been the major force behind the 1959 US Open in Omaha and had been deeply involved in 1949 as well. He stopped organizing and playing much in Omaha because of a deep-seated disagreement with Ohman over how the Omaha club was to run. I really don't know the details, but I suspected that Spence wanted the club to rate games played in the tournaments it sponsored, and Ohman opposed it.

Record

Spence first came into the Nebraska limelight with strong showings in the 1947 and 1948 Nebraska Championship, but his first (and only) Nebraska Championship came in the inaugural Midwest Open in 1951. In spite of a number of excellent results in that tournament, including second places in 1955 and 1958, and a tie for second in 1969 with Bud Narveson, he never again won the title. To make up for that, he had a number of excellent results in

Omaha events -- 2nd in the 1950 Omaha Experts, a first in the 1955 Swenson Championship as well as a clear second in the 1970-71 Omaha City Championship.

Other Activities

But, more than most other players, Jack's contribution to chess was not confined to tournaments or games won. In fact, I know of few players of his stature who did more for chess at all levels than he did during his time. He was, for example, a serious problemist specializing in two-move problems.

But, what he was best known for was his publishing efforts. He edited the *Nebraska Chess Bulletin* from 1947-1959. The *NCB* was a journal of record whose production values rank with the best in state magazines even today. It is an invaluable source for anyone interested in the history of chess in Nebraska. A bound volume of its complete run is one of my proudest possessions.

Later, after the Omaha club was renamed after Howard Ohman, and the Omaha Y.M.C.A. moved to new quarters, Spence resumed chronicling Omaha and Nebraska chess in his quarterly newsletter *The Ohman Memorial Club Newsletter* -- an invaluable source of local games and results during the period.

But, Jack's work was of more than local and regional significance. In the '50s, he put out a series of mimeographed "volumes" on major American tournaments -- notably the Rosen-

wald, the US Championship, and the US Open. These "Spence Limited Editions" were virtually the only source for top-flight American games of the period, and they made Jack, if not famous, at least known around the world. In 1968, Jack and Richard McClellan visited the US Open in Snowmass at Aspen in Colorado. I was playing in the event and was present when Robert Byrne, one of Jack's long-time friends, introduced him to Bent Larsen. At the time, Larsen was probably among the top four or five players in the world along with Bobby Fischer, Tigran Petrosian, Mikhail Botvinnik and Boris Spassky. He had, in fact, come to Colorado directly from his victory in his Candidates Match over the great Hungarian player Lajos Portisch. When he was introduced, Larsen immediately smiled and said "Spence Limited Editions!"

Jack's unique library helped him in another of his publishing ventures. Unlike Richard McClellan whose extensive chess library was at one point one of the largest private collections in the world, Jack preferred quality to quantity. He had one of the fullest collections of bound volumes of the important Chess magazines in the world. He had an almost complete run of the *British Chess Magazine*, a complete run of B.H. Wood's *Chess*. He had complete runs of both *The American Chess Bulletin* and *Chess Review* as well as almost complete runs of a number of German-language periodicals (such as the *Weiner*

Schachzeitung and the *Deutsche Schachzeitung*). He mined these for annotations for books on some of the major attacking players including Rudolph Charousek and Rudolph Spielmann.

If you have never tried your hand at chess publishing, you may not understand how much work went into these efforts. Today, you can enter games into a database with a mouse, create diagrams with another program, and write the text and integrate it with the games in a word processing program. I am doing that as I describe the process. Jack had none of these tools. He had to check the games for accuracy, type the games out on a typewriter, proof them once again, enter corrections and then set the diagrams by hand. I've done work like that -- I helped to edit the bulletins for the 1983 World Youth Team Championships in Chicago (with a word processing program alone) and 1979 US Open in Chicago (with only a typewriter) -- it is absolutely backbreaking labor. Jack did it not once, but many times, essentially without remuneration.

Personality

Jack Spence was one of the most gregarious of all the chess players I have ever met. He was a fixture at just about any tournament within a hundred or so miles of Omaha. I remember him with a smile on his face and a perpetually unlit cigar in his mouth. Jack had an enormous fund of ready

stories almost all of them humorous, and most often the joke was on Jack himself.

An example:

During the 1959 US Open in Omaha, a number of the stronger players evinced a desire for paid female companionship, and Jack undertook to provide them with it. He succeeded to such an extent that at the end of the tournament, tournament director George Koltanowski groused that he didn't know whether he was directing "a chess tournament or a Roman orgy!"

Jack had his degree in law from Creighton and he spent his whole life practicing in Omaha. Like many a "small-town" lawyer he did not specialize but dabbled in just about everything, from divorces, bankruptcies to the occasional criminal case. (My own family had occasion to make use of his services when my father died in 1963). Howard Ohman once confided to me that he thought Jack was an excellent lawyer; his problem was that his criminal defendants were always guilty!

Jack had his law offices in the old Securities building on 16th street, an edifice that looked like it stepped out of a Raymond Chandler novel in depression-era Los Angeles. Jack had mild political ambitions (he regularly ran as an elector for conservative presidential candidates) and he took his daily meals at the Northrup Jones cafeteria, then the informal center of Omaha political activity.

Style and Games

From the very beginning of his tournament play, Jack was a dyed-in-the-wool attacking player who loved gambits of all sorts. He was particularly fond of the gambit in the Vienna Game which was a specialty of Weaver Adams 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nxe4 4.Qh5. Unlike other attacking players, his style never really matured. This early example catches many of his strengths and weaknesses very well.

1947 Nebraska Closed (Omaha)

White: Lee Magee

Black: Jack Spence

Notes by John Tomas

1. d4, f5 2. g3, e6 3. Bg2, Nf6 4. Nf3, d5 5. 0-0, Be7 6. c4, 0-0 7. Nc3

Black's move order has given White the possibility of an immediate 7.b3 followed by 8.Ba3 exchanging Black's good bishop.

7... c6 8. Rb1

White is playing a slow and somewhat outdated plan, especially since the rook is not needed on b1 to enforce b4. However, it has the virtue of leading Black into a horrible mistake. Botvinnik's move is 8.Bg5 aiming to exchange the bishop for either the knight or the dark-squared bishop, and play e3 followed by Ne2-f4-d3.

8... dxc4?



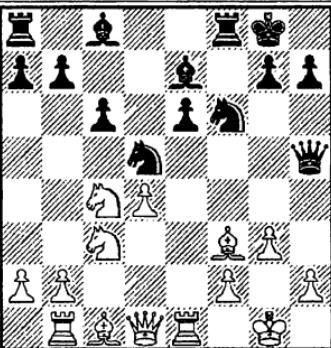
The whole point of the Stonewall is to provide Black with a solid base in the center for midgame expansion. Thus, this move is about as antipositional as you can get. Black should simply play 8...Ne4 9.Qc2 Nd6! 10.c5 Nf7 when, because of his retarded development, White will find it difficult to prevent an early ...e5 whereupon Black will have equalized completely.

9. Ne5, Nbd7 10. Nxc4, Nd5 11. e4!, fxe4 12. Nxe4, N7f6 13. Nc3

Because of Black's cramped position, White wants to avoid the exchange of minor pieces. In this case, that suggests 13.Ng5! when 13...h6 14.Nf3 solidifies White's grip on the position.

13... Qe8 14. Re1, Qh5 15. Bf3?

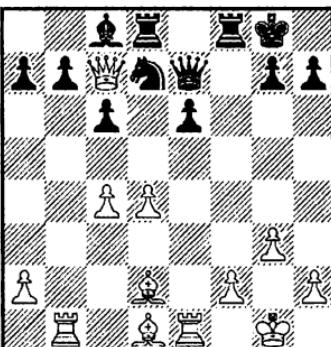
I feel confident that several years later, Magee, who had good claim to being the best Nebraska player in the '50s, would have immediately exchanged queens with 15.Qxh5! Nxh5 16.Nxd5 cxd5 17.Ne5 which simply leaves Black gasping for breath in a position where almost every basic endgame is losing for him.



15... Qe8 16. Qe2, Bb4 17. Bd2

White also has the option of 17.Nxd5! when after 17...cxd5 18.Bd2! and Black is either forced to exchange on d2 eliminating his good bishop (because 18...dxc4? 19.Bxb4 Rf7 runs into 20.d5! winning immediately) or play 18...Be7 19.Ne5 leaving White with a solid grip on the position. White's problem in this game is that he appears intent on retaining as many pieces as possible when such positions require judicious exchanges to exploit the weak squares.

17... Qe7 18. Ne5, Bd6 19. Rbc1, Nxc3 20. bxc3, Bxe5 21. Qxe5, Bd7 22. Bd1, Rad8 23. Rb1, Bc8 24. c4, Nd7 25. Qc7?!



White's queen is simply a target here, and Magee will have to spend two moves to return it to the kingside. 25.Qe2 is best when White retains a significant advantage.

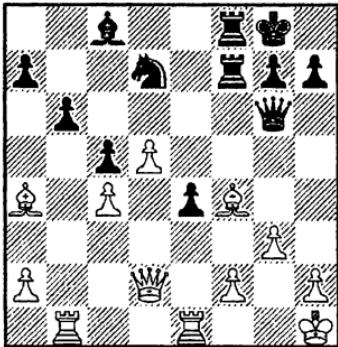
25... Qf6 26. Be3, Rf7 27. Qa5, e5!

Black finally breaks out. White still has the edge, but the game has now become extremely double-edged, and the slightest mistake will cost the offending side the game.

28. d5, b6 29. Qd2, Qg6 30. Bc2, e4!? 31. Ba4?!

I don't understand why White doesn't simply take the vulnerable "e" pawn. Even Bd4, targeting the pawn seems superior. Black will retain some compensation, but surely that is better than moving the bishop away from the vulnerable kingside.

31... c5 32. Bf4, Rdf8 33. Kh1

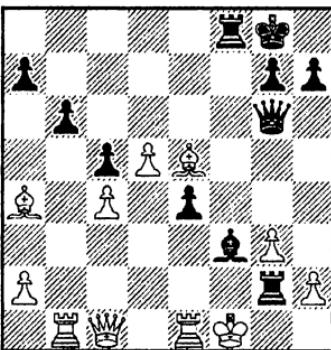


33... Ne5!!

This must have come as a terrible shock to Magee, especially if he was in time trouble. Naturally, he cannot allow the knight to set-

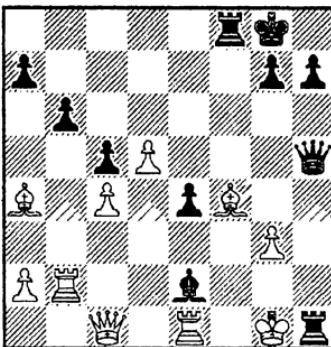
tle on f3, so he grabs the material and hopes, but the hopes are in vain -- Black has a forced win.

34. Bxe5, Rxf2 35. Qd1, Bg4 36. Qc1, Bf3+ 37. Kg1, Rg2+ 38. Kf1



38... Rxh2 39. Rb2, Be2+ 40. Kg1, Qh5 41. Bf4, Rh1+ 0-1.

In many ways this is the typical Spence game -- dubious opening play and positional difficulties surmounted by a sudden tactical explosion when his opponent is insufficiently vigilant.



The Sixties

While Jack was not exactly inactive as a player during the '60s, he had scaled back his play significantly. He no longer played in US

Opens out of state, though he did visit many of them -- Snowmass 1968, Chicago '73, Ventura '72 etc. He did find time to participate in the 1969 state championship in Lincoln and tied for second in the tournament behind Randy Mills out of Shawnee Mission, Kansas (perhaps, after Greg DeFotis of Chicago, the most talented Midwestern junior -- it was a great loss when emotional problems forced his withdrawal from competitive chess in 1969) with Bud Narveson and me, losing the title on tiebreaks (a pernicious practice that -- awarding state championships on tiebreak -- made no less pernicious by the fact that I more than once profited from it).

In the '60s and 70s, Jack started collecting games from US Opens and publishing them in a series of small booklets -- future IM Elliott Winslow and I helped out with a couple during the summer of 1973.

Perhaps the best indicator of his level of activity was the fact that he did not participate in a single city title event during the decade, after playing in virtually all of them in the '50s. It wasn't until the chess club had been relocated to the (then) new YMCA on 18th St. that Jack once again decided to try his luck in the 1970-71 Omaha City Championship.

To those reared on the one-day, Game/60 Swiss System events which are what current chess is all about, the Omaha City Championships of the past must seem

like spectacles out of the middle of the 19th century. In 1970-71, the championship was a 17-player, all-play-all event at 50 moves in 2.5 hours. And this was hardly the largest or longest event. In the '40s, tournaments were typically double-round events with as many as 30 games being played! In the 1972 event, the entry of over 30 players forced division of the field into two preliminary sections with 17 players and a single-round finals for the six qualifiers.

In March, it had become obvious that only Jack or I could win the tournament. Dan Reynolds, past Iowa State Champion and future Nebraska titleholder, had lost an early game to me, and then suffered a more grievous loss in the death of his wife which forced him to withdraw from the tournament. I had gone through the tournament unscathed and essentially untested. Many of the players who would dominate the Omaha scene over the next two decades were in that field, but they were too young and inexperienced to provide much opposition. For example, the tournament featured the first appearance of future master Mike Blankenau in the local lists. Mike later told me that he thought I would be easy pickings; how, he had wondered, could a long-haired hippie play chess? Jack had given up but one draw. The situation was identical to that of the 1970 championship when David Ackerman came into our final game 1/2 point behind me and proceeded to outplay me

from an absolutely wretched opening to win the title.

But, this was a year later, and I was on a roll. My rating had gone up from the low 2000s to about 2150, and I had not lost a game in almost seven months, since the Forest City Open in Rockford, Illinois in early August of 1970. So, even with Black, I was spoiling for a fight when Jack and I sat down in the Ohman Memorial Club to settle the Omaha title for that year.

1971 Omaha City Champ.
White: Jack Spence(2060)
Black: John Tomas(2150)
Notes by John Tomas

1. e4, d6 2. d4, Nf6 3. Bd3

An unsophisticated approach to the Pirc Defense. If he so chooses, Black can demonstrate exactly how silly a move it is by responding 3...e5! when we have reached a Philador Defense where White's bishop looks rather foolish. I preferred more dynamic play.

3... g6 4. f4, c5 5. d5, Bg7 6. c4?!

White might well prefer to transpose into more normal Pirc lines with 6.Nc3. The text is inaccurate for reasons which will soon become obvious.

6... 0-0 7. Nf3, e6 8. 0-0, exd5 9. exd5



Spence's unusual move order against the Pirc has resulted in a King's Indian type position where White has two major liabilities. It is similar to lines in the Four Pawns Attack (with the pawn on f4 and the exd5 recapture), but in the Four Pawns, White's bishop is on e2 and (of course) his knight on c3. It is also similar to the Bd3 lines against the Modern Benoni, but, again, White's knight would be on c3, and, most importantly, his pawn on f2. In fact, the presence of that pawn on f4 is the reason White has to castle before playing Nc3. These considerations suggest that Black should have a way to put White under immediate pressure. I would be lying if I told you that I realized most of this during the game -- it would be another 10 years before I would become fully aware of the power of such thinking. But I certainly realized that White's position was vulnerable.

9... b5?!

The Benko approach seems particularly appropriate here because of the considerations in the previous note.

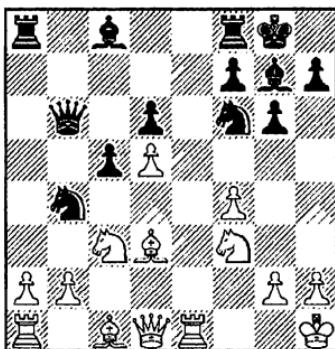
10. cxb5, a6 11. bxa6, Nxa6!

Normally, Black is more than happy to exchange the White bishop. But in this precise position, the Bishop is a target on d3.

12. Nc3, Nb4 13. Re1

White wants to retreat the bishop to f1, out of harms way.

13... Qb6! 14. Kh1?



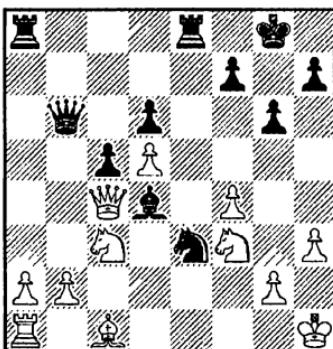
Spence took more than 20 minutes on this move and was looking increasingly unhappy. Unfortunately, his move leaves him in a lost position. Instead, 14.Bf1 c4+ 15.Kh1 Ng4 16.Re2 Nd3 17.Na4 Qa7! also leads him into a lost position. To survive, he has to take immediate action with 14.h3! when 14...Nbxd5 15.Nxd5 Nxd5 16.Bxg6 hxg6 17.Qxd5 Bb7! (but NOT 17...Be6?? 18.Rxe6! fxe6 19.Qxe6+ Kh8 20.Ng5 Qa7 21.Qxg6 Bd4+ 22.Kh2 Qg7 23.Qh5+ Kg8 24. Ne6 Qf6 when Black is lost) when Black obviously has compensation for his pawn.

14... Ng4!

This sudden tactical shot in

Jack's own style wins the game. It's funny that at times a single move can win a number of games in a short period of time. In this tournament, 14...Ng4! was responsible for three of my wins. (In descriptive, Kt-Kt5 was responsible for five of my wins!)

15. Re2, Nxd3 16. Qxd3, Ba6 17. Qc2, Bxe2 18. Qxe2, Rfe8 19. Qc4, Bd4 20. h3, Ne3!



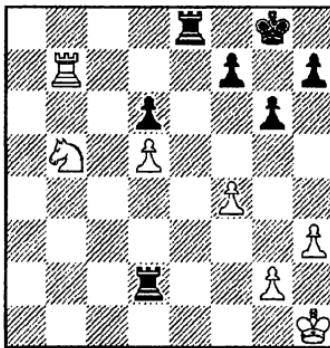
21. Bxe3, Qxb2!

Another sharp tactical exchange makes the game into purely a technical exercise.

22. Bxd4, cxd4

Black has to beware of 22...Qxa1+ 23.Bg1 when he may have some technical problems. In general, I have found that it is harder to win in positions with unusual balances of forces than in those with more conventional balances, and so I steered for the single exchange-up endgame.

23. Rb1, Qxc3 24. Qxd4, Qxd4 25. Nxd4, Rxa2 26. Rb7, Rd2 27. Nb5



If 27.Nc6 Kg7 28.Ne7 Kf6 29.
Nc6 Rxd5

**27... Rxd5 28. Rb6, Rd8 29.
g4, Rd2 0-1**

