

Akiba Rubinstein

*Uncrowned Chess
Champions*

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Boroljub Zlatanovic

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*To my beloved wife Marijana,
my son Vasilije,
and my daughter Nikolina.*

Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☞	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+-	White has a decisive advantage
-+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌒	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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Preface

There is a term known as “*chess culture*.” It does not refer to the cultural behavior of chess players, dress codes, or anything directly related to the formal aspects of the game. Rather, it denotes familiarity with chess history—the study of the creative legacy of great players, their lives, and everything connected with the past of chess and its most important events.

This book truly deserves your attention. By enjoying the wonderful games of Akiba Rubinstein, you enter the realm of chess culture. This work, dedicated to the study of the great master Akiba Rubinstein, offers knowledge that every serious chess enthusiast should possess, and this collection of beautiful chess creations unquestionably deserves a place in your library.

After each chapter, one is tempted to add a chess symbol (!?), as every chapter merits special attention. It is difficult to judge what is more beautiful or more fascinating, since everything here is worthy of admiration. You will see how the quality, imagination, and technique of games from that era reached an extraordinarily high level.

Through engaging and lively commentary—never dry or mechanical—you are granted a glimpse behind the scenes of the chess stage, discovering what so often remains unseen.

I have said enough. I sincerely wish you great enjoyment in what follows.

Dragoljub Jacimovic
December 2025

Introduction

The best way to begin the *Uncrowned Champions* series is with the great Akiba Rubinstein. Whatever I do, I like to build my work on logical foundations, and therefore Akiba must be presented first. Why? Quite simply, there has never been a player in the history of chess who cared so persistently and so profoundly about logic.

Moreover, Akiba did not merely use logic to find good moves—he helped create chess logic itself. How? You have surely heard of centralizing and harmonizing the pieces as a fundamental strategic principle. Akiba was the first to apply this idea consistently. You have also heard that pawn action should only be undertaken once the pieces are optimally placed—again, Akiba was the pioneer. And what about the famous principle of “do not rush”? Once more, Akiba was the first to embody it fully.

As we can clearly see, we are fully justified in saying that Akiba Rubinstein was the first complete chess player—the first to master chess logic in its entirety. He was the first to play clear, plain, methodical chess. No unnecessary extravagance, no reckless risk-taking, no bluffs, no wild sacrifices—none of that. Only sound, logical moves, combined with a persistent striving for centralization and harmony.

Such a chess maestro must be your number-one mentor—especially if you have not yet reached master level. Everything starts with him. Your chess education, your journey from club or café player to master, should begin with Rubinstein. He is a leading mentor for many phases of the game, especially the middlegame and the endgame.

Every proper chess education should begin with the endgame, and therefore our first chapter is devoted to Rubinstein’s endgame masterpieces. Do not worry, however—most of the games presented in this book are also excellent tools for learning endgames. The next chapter focuses on centralization, where you will learn to appreciate its immense benefits. This is followed by a chapter on various strategic concepts, helping you become familiar with the foundations presented throughout the book.

Chapters on activity and harmony, and finally on logic and psychology, conclude the work. The emphasis throughout is on synthesizing these core concepts, without

ever losing sight of activity, harmony, and logic. In the final section, psychological aspects are introduced to illustrate the real struggle of chess—the battle between two human beings, with emotions fully involved.

The 64 games presented here are my personal selection, chosen for their logic, instructive value, and beauty, as I perceive it. I sincerely hope you will enjoy the material and develop your own appreciation and love for Akiba Rubinstein and his style. My lifelong mentor should become yours as well.

I truly believe that adopting his ideas, principles, and concepts is essential for reaching true master level. And if you are already a master, I am confident this book will still broaden your horizons and teach you many new and important things. Above all, I hope you will fall in love with Akiba's style and discover how natural and effective it is to apply his concepts in your own games.

I would be grateful if you would share your opinions and suggestions with me at **borzlat@gmail.com**.

With full devotion,
Sincerely yours,
IM Boroljub Zlatanovic
December 2025



Endgame Masterpieces

You have probably heard more than once that Akiba Rubinstein was a true master of rook endgames—and for good reason. In fact, he was a master of endgames in general. Thanks to his unmatched—indeed unrivaled—drive for centralization and harmony, he is one of the finest possible mentors for learning endgame play. Let us also not forget that he was among the first to apply the principle *“Do not rush”* frequently and consistently.

By studying the games in this chapter—and in the book as a whole—you will surely agree with these statements. Let us now examine a few masterpieces. Yet it is important to analyze every endgame in this book carefully in order to fully appreciate Rubinstein’s mastery and legacy.



Game I

♀ Schlechter, Carl
♂ Rubinstein, Akiba
🌐 San Sebastian 1912

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. ♘c3 ♘f6 4. ♙g5 dxe4

If you want to play this variation correctly, follow Rubinstein’s guidance!

5. ♘xe4 ♘bd7 6. ♘f3 ♙e7 7. ♘xf6+ ♘xf6 8. ♙d3

All this is normal. With his next move Rubinstein "invites" his opponent to exploit the "weakness" on c6.

8... b6 9. ♘e5

Even this is normal.

9... ♙b7



Position after: 9... ♙b7

15... ♖c8!

15... ♘d5 immediately can be parried
by 16. c4! Now neither 16... ♙xg5
17.cxd5 nor 16... ♘b4 17. ♙xe7 ♔xe7
18. ♔d2 are really promising for Black.

16. 0-0-0?

White doesn't feel the position. Black can more easily control any weak squares with the knight rather than the bishop. White can more easily neutralize the bishop than the knight.

16. ♖xf6! ♜xf6 17. c3 is OK for White. Next can come a4 with play on the a- and/or b-file.

16... ♞d5!

A fantastic reaction. Black keeps the knight, which is more dangerous against White's weaknesses.

17. ♖xe7

17. ♖d2 is clearly inferior after 17... b5 when Black has chances on both flanks and White even has a problem with the worse bishop.

Position after: 15. xf3

17... ♔xe7 18. ♔b1 ♖hd8 19. ♖hg1
g6 20. ♞e5

(see diagram next page)



Position after: 20. ♞e5

20... ♞b4!?

Maybe bluff, maybe a genius idea. The truth is somewhere in the middle, but one thing is clear – Finis santificat media! Black will offer a knight exchange and set his opponent the "problem of exchange". White will fail to solve it, so the idea is validated.

20... f6 21. ♞d3 ♔f7 with the idea of transferring the knight to e7, perhaps then to f5, and to liberate the 5th rank for the rook is more standard.

21. c3 ♞c6 22. ♞xc6+?

Maybe not obvious, but a serious mistake; Black can more easily access White's kingside pawns without knights on the board.

22. f4 is a better option.

22... ♜xc6 23. ♜d3



Position after: 23. ♜d3

23... ♜d5!

Rubinstein is ready to attack the kingside pawns.

24. ♜h3

24. f4! ♜h5 25. h3 looks like a more solid defense. Now 25... ♜h4 can be parried by 26. ♜g4!

24... h5 25. ♜f3?



Position after: 25. ♜f3?

25. f4 is a good move. The pawn is equally safe, but Black's next powerful resource would be eliminated. Black remains better but has nothing clear.

25... e5!!

One of the brightest proofs that Rubinstein was a true endgame magician. With this unexpected move Black opens the doors for an invasion, with practically all his pieces.

26. dxe5 ♖xe5 27. ♜e3

Otherwise, Black can exchange rooks with ... ♜f6 and gain the 7th rank.

27... ♜xe3 28. fxe3 ♜e6

The rook can immediately go to the f6-square – it's just a matter of style.

29. ♜e1

29. ♜g3 would change nothing after 29... ♜f6.

29... ♜f6 30. ♜e2



Position after: 30. ♜e2

30... ♔e6

The next stage is king activation.

31. ♔c2 ♔e5 32. c4

32. ♔d3 would prevent nothing. Black has 32... ♜d6+ and king invades with decisive impact.

32... ♔e4 33. b4

An act of desperation to get some play on the opposite wing. Alas, the game will be trivially decided on the kingside.

33... g5

There is no need to go for the e3-pawn.

34. ♔c3 g4 35. c5 h4 36. ♜g2 ♜g6 37. ♔c4 g3

Black is clearly faster.

38. hxg3 hxg3 39. ♔b5 bxc5 40. bxc5



Position after: 40. bxc5

Rubinstein's elegant decision now brings an immediate win.

**40... ♔f3 41. ♜g1 a6+!
0-1**

Game 2

 Reti, Richard
 Rubinstein, Akiba
 Gothenburg 1920

1. e4 c5 2.  f3  f6?!

Nimzowitsch's move deserves a better reputation.

3. e5

3.  c3 is another option.

3...  d5 4.  c3

The idea is to gain time.

4... e6 5. g3

5.  xd5 exd5 6. d4  c6 followed by ...d6 is unclear.

5...  c6 6.  g2



Position after: 6.  g2

6...  xc3?

6... d6 is OK and more common here. The idea is to ask White to take on d5 when the light-squared bishop will be liberated.

7. bxc3?

White prefers center control.

7. dxc3! prefers development and is better here. 7... d6?! [7...  c7 is correct, but anyway 8.  f4 is much better for White.] 8. exd6  xd6 9.  e2 with White's faster development is horrible for Black.

7... d6 8. exd6  xd6 9. 0-0 0-0



Position after: 9... 0-0

10. d3

10. d4 is OK, but White prefers a static setup.

10...  e7 11.  e3  d7 12.  d2?!

12. $\text{N}d2$ to place the knight on c4 with queenside play is more common.

12... $\text{K}c7$ 13. $\text{R}fe1$ $\text{R}ad8$ 14. $\text{Q}f4$
 $\text{Q}d6$ 15. $\text{Q}xd6$ $\text{K}xd6$ 16. $\text{K}e3$ b6 17.
 $\text{N}d2$



Position after: 17. $\text{N}d2$

The play to here has been fairly normal. After both sides finish their development, they try to improve their pieces. Black does the same with his knight...

17... $\text{N}e7!$

Black sends the knight to a better spot (d5 or f5) at the same time opening a route for the bishop (aiming at the a4-square).

18. $\text{N}c4$ $\text{K}c7$ 19. $\text{K}e5?$

A bad idea. The side with doubled pawns has an extra open file. Thus, major pieces should be kept on the board. Generally, pawn defects are more accessible in the endgame.

19... $\text{K}xe5$ 20. $\text{N}xe5$ $\text{Q}a4!$ 21. $\text{R}e2$
 $\text{N}d5!$ 22. $\text{Q}xd5$



Position after: 22. $\text{Q}xd5$

22. c4 $\text{N}b4$ is clearly heavily in Black's favor.

22... $\text{exd5}!$

This fixes the pawn structure and leaves the knight without an outpost. White will not have play on the semi-opened e-file.

23. $\text{R}ae1$ $\text{R}fe8$ 24. f4 f6 25. $\text{N}f3$ $\text{K}f7$
 26. $\text{K}f2$



Position after: 26. $\text{K}f2$

26... $\text{R}xe2+!$

Trading rooks forces the white pieces to go passive.

27. ♖xe2 ♜e8 28. ♖xe8

28. ♖d2 has its reasons, but it is difficult to go for such a move. 28... ♜e6 keeps a huge advantage on Black's side. Black would work towards a king invasion on the queenside.

28... ♜xe8 29. ♞e1 ♜e7

Black activates the king.

30. ♜e3 ♜e6 31. g4

To prevent the invasion of Black's king.

31... ♜d6

White's position looks impregnable, but in praxis it is very difficult to prove this.

32. h3



Position after: 32. h3

32. ♜d2? for instance, loses to 32... ♞d7 33. h3 h5!—+

32... g6!

Black prepares ...h5 to open a path for the king.

33. ♜d2

White wants to swap the roles of the pieces. But it is a bad idea to defend a pawn with a king and the knight can't neutralize the black pieces.

33. d4 is ugly, but is better. 33... ♜c6 can be met by 34. g5 fxg5 35. fxg5 ♜d6 36. ♜f4 with no achievement for Black.

33... ♞d7 34. ♞f3 ♜e7

Rubinstein prepares ...h5.

34... h5 falls to 35. ♞h4!

35. ♜e3 h5 36. ♞h2

36. gxh5? gxh5 37. h4 ♜e6 is awful for White.

36... ♜d6 37. ♜e2?



Position after: 37. ♜e2?