New Stories about Old Chess Players



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Baron von Heydebrand und der Lasa

It is not clear if he should be considered a "forgotten" master, but several people have told me independently that they would like to know more about Tassilo von Heydebrand und der Lasa (1818-1899). It may seem strange, but von der Lasa manages to be both an underrated and an overrated player from chess history.

Von der Lasa was one of the "Pleiades," the group of Berlin players and analysts that included Bledow and Bilguer. Then, as now, strong chess players seem to come in two flavors: educated, cultured people for whom chess is one of several intellectual activities, and others who essentially live for chess, and may seem quite coarse away from the chessboard. Von der Lasa was very clearly of the first type, a highly successful and influential diplomat, extremely well read and an excellent writer, and rather wealthy. Every chess player seemed to like and respect von der Lasa, both as a player and a person. However, because of his diplomatic career, which involved a lot of travel and attention to work, he was unable to play nearly as often as the other great players of his time. Thus, von der Lasa did not play at London 1851 (though his absence was noted with great regret by Staunton, who emphasized that Anderssen was the second-best player in Germany), nor in any other tournament, despite a lifelong interest in chess extending well into the period when tournaments became more common. His reputation is based largely on match play, but these were not glamorous showdowns played in front of a crowd; some were even played in private at his home.



Since von der Lasa did not have famous tournament or high-profile match wins, he was largely forgotten as a player after his death, though his writings (especially the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, which he edited for the first four editions, and his work on chess history) remained very influential. For many years, von der Lasa was considered a minor figure in chess history, when compared to the likes of Saint Amant, Staunton, Anderssen, Morphy and others who grabbed the attention of the world, even the attention of those who knew little of chess. The closest von der Lasa came to international chess celebrity was during the Morphy craze, when a rumor went about that he would return from Brazil to challenge Morphy, and that Morphy would delay his return to the U.S. for this match. Lasa telegraphed that this rumor was completely unfounded, and some people viewed him as Morphy's last potential challenger, given that the match with Staunton seemed to have fallen through.

For many years, accounts of the romantic period were unlikely to mention von der Lasa at all. Already by the time of his death, his status as one of the real leading players was largely forgotten; his *London Times* obituary says that in his day he met all the old masters of the past generation, including Staunton, Mayet, Anderssen, von Bilguer, Buckle, Cunningham, Jänisch, and others, with many of whom he could hold his own pretty well in practical play (*The Times*, Aug 22, 1899). This is actually quite an understatement of his ability.

Von der Lasa's reputation in chess history has more recently become much greater, because, in my opinion, of two distinct important sources. One was a 1985 article by Nathan Divinsky in the *British Chess Magazine*, "The Mighty Baron." You can see important points from this article summarized in a Diggle article here. Divinsky looked at games of von der Lasa against top players (30 games from the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games*, 40 from Bachmann's *Aus Vergangenen Zeiten* Volume 2, and 9 from various other sources), and found that he had a remarkably good score against the top masters of his time. Later, Divinsky had access to Lasa's entire chess library (perhaps the best in the world for its time, and still kept intact); he no doubt found many other forgotten von der Lasa games, but did not complete a planned biography on the subject before his death.

The second boost to von der Lasa's reputation has come from the statistical rankings applied to game databases, especially Jeff Sonas' <u>Chessmetrics</u>, where von der Lasa comes out as top player in the world for an extended period, enough for people to really take notice and place him in the top rank of players. Before that, Dr. Arpad Elo's *The Rating of Chessplayers Past and Present* (1978) rated nearly 200 players who died too soon to receive an official FIDE rating. Of these, there are about 35 or 40, born circa 1800-1840, who could reasonably be called "Lasa and his contemporaries." Among them, the highest rated are Morphy (2690), Steinitz (2650), Anderssen and, yes, von der Lasa (both 2600).

Let me first say that these claims that von der Lasa was among the top players

of his time are not merely some weird revisionist history that would have seemed absurd to chess players of the period. A quote from a British newspaper of the time explicitly calling von der Lasa the best player in Europe is given in my previous article, "<u>Early World Rankings</u>." Von der Lasa was viewed as a very strong player, and players as diverse and mutually antagonistic as Staunton, Morphy (who reportedly felt that von der Lasa was the best player of his time), Anderssen, and Kieseritzky had high praise for his chess. Certainly, he would have been one of the favorites to win in London 1851, but he did not play.

However, the notion that von der Lasa was the dominant player in the world for a period of more than 10 years is more than a bit of a stretch. (I found this claim on a website. Stan Vaughan, a notorious and eccentric chess personality, seems to have, among his other oddities, an intense dislike of Staunton, and talks of how much stronger von der Lasa was than Staunton.) In large part, these claims come from the statistical analysis of wins in game databases. However, these databases contain a highly skewed sample. Von der Lasa was a good correspondent, and regularly answered requests from chess journals with scores from games he was proud of. I am not accusing von der Lasa of misrepresenting himself in any way, but he naturally submitted games that he won, much more frequently than his losses. For example, although we know that Szén won two of three games played against von der Lasa on a trip to Berlin, and have all the game scores (Szén's wins will be seen in another article) the databases seem to have only von der Lasa's win over Szén.

Von der Lasa participated in at least five events that can reasonably be called matches, though I believe none of these were played for financial stakes. In 1845-46, he scored 4-2 against Anderssen. In 1846, he played a series of games against Löwenthal; the sources I have are inconsistent on the result. Die bedeutendsten Schachzweikampfe 1851-1860 gives a score of 5 wins by von der Lasa, with 2 drawn games. However, Bachmann in his Ubersicht der Spielerfolge der bedeutendsten Schachmeister, part of the Teplitz-Schönau 1922 tournament book, gives the score as 3 wins by Löwenthal, with 2 draws. In 1850, he scored 4 wins and a loss against Schulten. In 1851, after several months of notes on an anticipated match between Anderssen and Lasa, a single line in The Chess Player gives the current score of the match as Lasa ahead 10-5, indicating that the match is continuing. In 1853, he played a series of games against Staunton; the usual score given is +5 -4 = 4 for Lasa (one game is sometimes not counted; I believe the view is that the game was abandoned because of Staunton's poor health). Other series of games include Szén beating von der Lasa in 2 of 3 games during a visit in 1838. Lasa mentions in a letter beating Buckle in 2 of 3 games played in 1843.

There is one result sometimes cited that is quite mysterious. *The Oxford Companion to Chess* says that Lasa won the majority of games in a series against Staunton in 1844. This may be true (Whyld certainly has read more sources than I have), but if so it was not known at the time; Volume 1 of *The Chess Player* published in 1851 (page 56) states explicitly that the two men had never played each other. I originally believed that this was the result of confusing Staunton with Buckle, since the reports in the *Chess Player's Chronicle* had von der Lasa winning a majority of games against Buckle. However, I later was informed that Divinsky wrote in the *Proceedings of the Chronicle of Chess Historians*, 2002 that Lasa played 7 games with Staunton in 1844, at Berlin, and won 5 to 2. Thus, I now imagine that Divinsky was the source for the *Companion*'s claim. However, since Staunton writes in the *Chess Player's Chronicle* that he had the pleasure of making the personal acquaintance of von der Lasa in their 1853 encounter, I still do not believe that the two played in 1844.

I found a web reference that the president of the San Francisco club, a Dr. Marshall, had achieved a 2-3 score against von der Lasa, presumably when the latter was in the U.S. and far past his prime chess years.

It seems odd to me that we do not have game scores from these matches, even though I believe Lasa kept all the scores; we have a few of the games, when Lasa sent them to journals sometimes many years after they were played. I had hoped to get these from Divinsky's book, but it seems that we will have to wait for someone else to pick up the project. Divinsky mentioned finding games against such players as Lange, Buckle, Rivière, and Horwitz, which do not appear in the standard databases. An attempt to collect the known games of von der Lasa can be downloaded here. If I have not made any errors, the results against named players in this collection are +6-3 vs. Anderssen, +4-8=2 vs. Bilguer, +5 - 3 = 2 vs. Bledow, 1-0 vs. de Rives, +1 - 1 vs. Dufresne, +13 - 11 = 9 vs. Hanstein, +4 - 1 = 2 vs. Jänisch, = 2 vs. Löwenthal (frustrating, since it still allows either version of the match score to be correct!), +10-2=2vs. Mayet, 1-0 vs. Otto, 1-0 vs. Schorn, +5 -4 =4 vs. Staunton, 1-0 vs. Szén, 1-0 vs. Vitzthum, and 1-0 vs. von der Goltz. The database chessgames.com contains a different set of 130 Lasa games. It is quite easy to find other von der Lasa games not in these files; I will list some below, but many of these are simply games selected from the Schachzeitung/DSZ, which no doubt contains many more of his games.

I have checked that these games were not in the Trier file above, though I haven't checked whether some might duplicate each other, or checked carefully against the games in chessgames.com. A game vs. Heinemann in 1888 is available here, a Lasa-Jänisch 1842 game not included above is in Tim Harding's *The Kibitzer* "A History of the City of London Chess Magazine (Part 2)," a game Lasa-Nielsen 1874 is in "A History of the City of London Chess Magazine (Part 1)." A game Lasa-Allies 1860 is in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games*, and I believe is not in the downloaded games. A game vs. Anderssen is game 353 in the Anderssen collection annotated by Burnett. A game vs. Jänisch appears on page 675 of Schlechter's edition of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*, and a game against Hanstein appears in footnotes 6-7 on page 746. Golombek's column in the London *Times* of April 30 1983 gives a game against Jänisch that is not in the Trier file. A game against Buckle appears in the *Chess Player's Chronicle 1846*, as well as Hilbert's collection of Buckle's games in the *Quarterly for Chess History*.

I found several games in my few issues of *Chess Player's Chronicle* extracted from *SZ* that did not appear in the file; *Chess Player's Chronicle 1852* page 109 gives a game against Dufresne; note that here and elsewhere, Staunton refers to von der Lasa as Heydebrand. *CPC 1854* has 3 games against Allies played at P+1 (pgs 273-275), a game with an interesting opening vs. De Rives on page 276, and two games (one unfinished) against "another German player of deserved eminence" on pages 28-39. *CPC 1856* has two games vs. Allix at P+1 (33, 34), three games vs. Hanstein on pages 132-134 (in one of these games, each players preferred the other's position, so they switched sides in mid-game! How do you score that in a database!?), a game vs. Hanstein (which I give below) on page 206, and the two losses to Szén in the encounter mentioned earlier on pages two and three.

Lasa-Hanstein, game and notes from Chess Player's Chronicle 1856 p. 206 (notes in italics by Fritz8): 1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.h4 g4 5.Ne5 h5 — At this stage in the opening several defences may be adopted. Nf6, in the present state of our theory, seems to be the most forcible move. 6.Bc4 Rh7 — The hpawn having been advanced, as in this game, the great Chess-Players of the Continent have recommended this move. In England, Nh6, followed by Mr. Knight's clever invention, has received more favour. See the English Chess treatises. 7.d4 d6 8.Nd3 — The first player may obtain a showy, but hardly a sound, attack by now giving up his bishop and knight for the rook and two pawns upon the f file. At odds this mode of play is said to be much more advantageous. 8...f3 — This move is played at an earlier stage in the next game. The reader should notice the importance of this exchange of moves. 9.g3 Bg7 10.Be3 c6 11.Nc3 b5



12.Nxb5 d5 — The queen's knight could not have been taken with profit, as the hostile bishop could then have occupied d5. 13.Bb3 — The move on which White must have relied when he took the b pawn. (*Fritz prefers 13.Bf4 dxc4 14.Nc7+ Kf8 15.Nc5 Na6 16.Nxa8 with a roughly equal position.*) 13...dxe4 14.Nf4 — Threatening again to occupy d5 with the bishop, if the knight be taken. 14...Nf6? — *Better 14...Ne7! 15.Nc3 Nf5 16.Kf2 (if 16.Bf2? e3) 16...Nxe3 17.Kxe3 f5 18.Qd2*

Qd6 19.Rad1 Bh6 and after exchanges on f4, Black's three connected passed pawns bode well for the endgame. **15.Nc3 Bh6 16.Qd2 a5 17.0-0-0 Bb7** — Black's pieces have not the unity of action which White displays in this game. Those who love a comparison between the different styles of play may contrast in the games preserved to us the systematic development of Herr Von Der Lasa's forces with the resource of Herr Hanstein; not, however, carrying the theory too far, as in these players of the first class they will find "omnia magna." **18.Rhe1 Qd6**



19.Bf2 — Missing 19.Nxh5! Nxh5 (or 19...Bxe3 20.Nxf6+ Qxf6 21.Rxe3) 20.Nxe4 Qg6 21.Bxh6 Qxh6 (or 21...Rxh6 22.Ng5+ Kd7 23.Nxf7) 22.Ng5+ Kd7 23.Nxh7 and wins. **19...Bxf4 20.gxf4 Nbd7 21.Nxe4 Nxe4 22.Rxe4+ Kf8 23.Bg3 c5**



24.Qe1 — An extremely able rejoinder, menacing, if Black take rook, the attack upon his two rooks, and also bringing the white queen's rook into still better play.
24...Qa6 25.d5 Nf6 26.Bc4 — Preventing Black from gaining time subsequently.
26...Qb6 27.Re7 Bc8 28.d6 Qb4 29.Qe5 — This move seems to be more conclusive than d7, although the advance of the d-pawn would also, we believe, give White the advantage. (*Strongest was 29.Re8+!* Kg7 (if 29...Nxe8 30.Qe7+ and mate in 8)

30.Qe5 etc.) 29...Qxc4 30.Qxf6 Be6 31.d7 Bd5 32.f5 Rh6 33.Rxf7+ — The best mode of terminating the game. Re8+ leads to mate in four, not three, moves. 33...Bxf7 34.d8=Q+ Rxd8 35.Rxd8#

Basterot's book *Traite elementaire du jeu des echecs* gives a game against an amateur on pages 451-2. The book *Social Chess* by Mason gives a game won by von der Lasa as Game 46. This book does not give the names of losers of games; when trying to look up the game elsewhere, I noted that chessgames.com gives this game twice, with opponents listed as Jänisch and Z. Jakovljev! *Chess Brilliants*, a book by I. O. Howard Taylor of Norwich, gives a game Goltz-Lasa, which does not seem to appear elsewhere.

Another major source of Lasa games is the 1843 edition of the *Handbuch des Schachspiels*. Opponents are not identified, but one can often guess since the first name is given and a dot for each letter. Thus, M.... is probably Mayet, B..... Bledow, etc. I give the page number of games not found in the Trier file, and opponent as listed in the Handbuch in parentheses.

Page 79 (E..), 108 (Bilguer), 110 (-. -), 111 (H.....), 112 (M....), 130 (J.....), 133 (H.....), 144 (M....) (two such games), 160 (B.....), 168 (H.....), 169 (M....), 232 (H.....), 234 (H.....), 244 (B....), 275 (H.....), 282 (H.....) (two such games), 296 (M....), 304 (M....), 304 (H.....), 335 (M....), 336 (M....), 350 (H.....), 362 (M....), 368 (J.....) with P+1 odds, 374 (M-.) with QN and move odds.

I pick the game below not because it is a great game, but because it illustrates a point about chess of this time. Von der Lasa seems to have played the widest range of openings of any player of his day. This is probably because he was playing lines that he was preparing for inclusion in the Handbuch. In attacking lines, such as the King's Gambit, the theory (much of which he was formalizing in the *Handbuch*) looks quite a bit like important lines we know. In the next game, however, things look very different in what we oxymoronically call closed openings. Even in the d-pawn openings, players tried for the same slashing kingside attacks. Von der Lasa plays the game well, even if it looks nothing like games we see today. His opponent, almost certainly Mayet, unfortunately loses through a fairly basic error; White's 16th move is a blunder. Perhaps he does not realize that the threatened royal fork on e7 can be averted by Qe8, leaving two pieces attacked. He might think that the knight check will save his position, but von der Lasa has seen further. Von der Lasa's sharp 22nd move seals the game; mate is forced once the bishop is accepted.

M.... - von der Lasa, *Handbuch* (1843 edition), page 362: **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 f5 4.h3 Nf6 5.Bg5 Bb4 6.g4**



Kingside attack at all costs! 6...0-0 7.gxf5 exf5 — An interesting alternative that plays on the weakness White has just created is 7...dxc4, and if 8.fxe6 Qd5!. 8.e3 Be6 9.Qb3 Nc6 10.Nf3 Qd6 11.c5 Qd7 12.Bb5 Ne4 13.Ne5 Bxc3+ 14.bxc3 Qc8 15.Bxc6 bxc6



16.Nxc6? — Correct was 16.Bf4, when *Fritz8* prefers White. **16...Qe8! 17.Ne7+ Kh8 18.Bh4 g5 19.f3 gxh4 20.fxe4 Qxe7 21.exd5 Rab8 22.Qc4 Bxd5**



The *coup de grace* (or for Lasa, a better word would be *Todesstoss*, German for death blow), which also could have been played the move before. **23.Qxd5 Qxe3**+ **24.Kf1 Qd3**+ **1-0**. It's mate in at most 10.

How should von der Lasa's record be viewed? It is hard to dispute the fact that over a period of years, von der Lasa was competitive with everyone. The 1845/46 win 4-2 over Anderssen is a good result, but remember that Bledow had beaten Anderssen by more than this (5-0, 4-0-1, and 4-1 are given in various sources) in 1845. Assuming he beat Löwenthal, this is a good result, but this is before Löwenthal became a champion-class player. He defeated Schulten easily, but Schulten was a second-ranker beaten badly by many others. The eye-catching win is against Anderssen in 1851. Of course, there is a question on the final score and on whether Anderssen viewed it as a "real match." Anderssen lost by a similar score in informal games against Kieseritzky in London, but both in the great tournament and the all-play-all tournament Anderssen seemed much stronger. There is a similar story regarding Anderssen and Zukertort: after Zukertort won a series vs. Anderssen and claimed to have won a match, Anderssen said that was no match since there were no stakes, and beat Zukertort handily when they played what he viewed as a real match. Winning by the odd game in 13 against Staunton in 1853 is an acceptable result, but not a real sign of being the world's dominant player, since Staunton was not believed to be quite the best at that point in history.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that in the years 1846-53, Lasa was one of the very best players, and would not have been an underdog against any opponent. That is less than saying that he was the world's dominant player, however, and seems unfair to players who were putting their reputations on the line much more frequently, and with great success as well. Taking the border years (in which Lasa was active) as examples, in 1853, when Lasa edged Staunton, Harrwitz beat Williams, Löwenthal, and Szén, all strong players, in matches; it seems odd to call Lasa dominant over Harrwitz at this time. In 1845/46, Lasa beat Anderssen 4-2 and (let us presume) Löwenthal decisively, but Staunton beat Williams, Mongrédien, Harrwitz, Horwitz, and others, and Kieseritzky beat Harrwitz and Horwitz at about the same time. Lasa (unlike Staunton) seemed to feel no compulsion to prove that he was the world's best player. He was one of the best, but by not pursuing matches against other top players, there is no point in time when we can really say that he was the world's dominant player.

We'll close with a von der Lasa highlight:



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