

## A Moment with Jan Timman: Grandmaster and Author

*A personal recollection of a chess clinic and simultaneous exhibition at the Province House in Haarlem, 27 September 2006*

\*\*\* by Rob van Son \*\*\*

On 18 February 2026, the chess world lost Jan Timman (1951–2026) — grandmaster, author, and one of the most influential players of his generation — who passed away at the age of 74. His death prompted me to revisit a vivid memory from twenty years earlier: an evening at the Province House in Haarlem, where I had the privilege of attending a clinic he gave after I had won a prize competition.

Before the break, Timman guided the fifteen prize winners through a selection of instructive positions, sharing his characteristic clarity and depth. After the break — at our collective request — he gave a simultaneous exhibition. To my surprise and honour, he offered me a draw after thirty moves, a gesture I have never forgotten.

In the years that followed, I wrote down my recollections of that memorable evening, and the article was eventually published in *Selective Search magazine*, which at the time focused primarily on computer chess. Looking back now, I realise even more how remarkable Timman's career truly was: a world championship candidate who challenged the dominance of Karpov and Kasparov, a winner of countless elite tournaments, and a prolific writer whose books and articles enriched chess literature for decades. My respect for him has only grown with time, both as a player and as a writer. It is in that spirit that I republish the article here, as a small tribute to his enduring legacy.



A handshake with Jan Timman at the start of the clinic — Haarlem, 27 September 2006

Photo by the Province of North Holland

In late May 2006, I was alerted to an advertisement in the weekly Dutch door to door paper "De Echo" in which the administration of the Province of North Holland was running a prize contest.

The contest question was: "Where will this year's Dutch chess championship be held?"

For such a complicated question, I felt I should sit down and think carefully about where it might be held this time. As a chess player you're used to thinking deeply, so it occurred to me that perhaps the championship would take place in Hilversum.

I sent an email with the correct answer to the province's communications department. The advertisement stated that the winners would receive a written notice towards the end of June.

In the meantime I visited the championship twice and enjoyed the games, which were played from 17 to 29 June 2006 in 'Studio 22' at the media park complex in Hilversum, also known as the Idols studio. When you enter the studio, the footpath is bordered on the left by demonstration chess boards and on the right by rows of chairs for spectators who wanted to sit close to the action. During my visits most of those chairs remained empty, and the stands further back were only sparsely occupied. Perhaps it was the holiday season, the hot weather, or the football World Cup in Germany, but inside the spacious playing hall you didn't notice any of that. A very effective air conditioning system created a pleasantly cool atmosphere, something players at this level certainly needed to keep a cool head. The Dutch top player played on an elevated stage, with a shiny Cadillac on a turntable to the left of it, dangling like a carrot before the players. Above the stands hung flat-panel displays, allowing visitors to follow the games clearly despite the distance to the stage.

Keeping a cool head did not always work, because on one of my visits I witnessed a huge quarrel between the grandmasters Sergei Tiviakov and Friso Nijboer. After a long game that had taken several hours, Friso was in serious time trouble with very little left on his clock. He offered Sergei a draw, which was not accepted. Friso played on and, shortly after, almost lost on time. He then tried to convince the referees that the position was a draw and that Sergei was trying to win on the clock. After much confusion among the players themselves, other participants, and members of the press who also interfered, the two arbiters returned to the stage. They ruled that the position was still playable and that a draw could not be claimed. Friso signed the scoresheet with an aggressive gesture and stormed off. I had stepped onto the stage as well and watched the scene unfold from up close. A press photographer told me he found the situation very annoying.

Jan Timman was also back in action at the National Championship, but he clearly wasn't in good shape and finished near the bottom of the rankings. His worst game was the one against Friso Nijboer with Black: already in a difficult position, he blundered on move 18 and allowed an immediate winning reply. Timman resigned at once, and the game was over in just nineteen moves. Despite his disappointing tournament, Timman did show flashes of his old brilliance. With White he produced a fine attacking win against Jan Smeets in just 22 moves — a reminder that even in a difficult event, his class was still unmistakable.

Sergey Tiviakov, the newly crowned Dutch chess champion of 2006, had secured the main cash prize of the tournament, but also received an additional bonus: four weeks of driving in a luxury Cadillac. There was just one problem — he didn't have a driver's license. The organizers then offered the car to runner-up Ivan Sokolov who, despite also lacking a license, gladly accepted it since his wife could drive. While the Cadillac stood gleaming on its revolving stage, Tiviakov was left with only the bottle of champagne meant for the key handover. To this day, I still find it odd that no alternative gift was arranged.

At the end of June and in July I received no notice that I had won the contest. I wasn't surprised; I'm not usually very lucky in such matters, and perhaps I should stop entering these things altogether.

To my surprise, at the beginning of August a letter appeared in my mailbox. It was from the Province of North Holland. I quickly grabbed the envelope and read the following: "From the large number of correct answers, 15 prize winners were drawn. You are one of the lucky ones! You have won a chess clinic with Jan Timman at the Province House in Haarlem on Wednesday evening, 27 September, at 6:30 PM. The clinic includes a sandwich buffet."

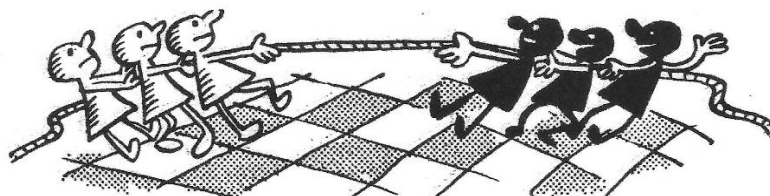
I couldn't believe what I saw and immediately reached for my Van Dale, the great dictionary of the Dutch language. It explained that a clinic is a form of intensive group training, mainly in a sporting context. I was thrilled to have won a prize, and even more excited at the prospect of being trained by Holland's most famous chess player.

I have always admired Timman, and now I have won a clinic with him! Being eight years younger than Jan, I belong to a generation for whom his games are exemplary. I have the privilege of training with the nine-time Dutch champion, who in 1982 was "the Best of the West" and the world's number two. A brilliant analyst, author, and winner of countless elite tournaments, Jan's creative spirit endured even through tough losses against the Soviet "chess machines." His most notable setbacks came in his 1986 semifinal against Yusupov and his 1993 FIDE World Chess Championship final against Karpov.

It was Wednesday, 27 September, and I hurried to catch the train to Haarlem in time. In my backpack I carried my copy of *Een sprong in de Noordzee* ("A Leap in the North Sea"), Timman's short story collection about which I hoped to ask him a few questions. A "good" habit of the Dutch Railways is that if you miss your train, you can reliably count on doubling your travel time while waiting for the next one. And when the train finally arrives, it is usually so crowded that you end up standing pressed against the door, using its window to see where you are. To complete the misery, you are surrounded by tired-looking fellow passengers who, after a long day behind their screens, stare blankly into the distance.

After arriving in Haarlem, I continued on foot to the Province House, following a small map the provincial government had sent me. It turned into a bit of a sightseeing tour of Haarlem; after barely half an hour of brisk walking, the building finally came into view. I hurried through the numerous gates and eventually noticed a light burning somewhere. I crossed an inner courtyard and, in a maze of corridors, fortunately ran into a catering assistant who pointed me in the right direction.

On the door it said "Committee Room 2." I went inside and was immediately confronted with a room full of winners seated behind tables, chessboards in front of them. I also noticed a few provincial employees, and in the middle of the room stood Jan Timman. I had arrived a bit late and found that the enumeration of Timman's successes over the years was nearly finished. Most of the prize winners were being photographed one by one with the grandmaster. I say most, because I still had to step into the centre of the room to be photographed as well. A large demonstration board served as a backdrop. I quickly took off my coat and wiped the sweat from my long evening walk off my forehead. Timman gave me a firm handshake and did not let go until the photographer had done his job. Let's just hope my shiny forehead doesn't stand out in the photo...



The clinic began. Timman discussed a few interesting endgame studies and a game he had recently played — and won — in England. The winners, from different parts of the Netherlands, including some children, offered good suggestions in response to Timman's question about which move could be played in the position on the board. Every now and then a chess piece fell to the floor, and Timman picked it up with a sigh, giving me the impression that he might need to work a bit more on his overall fitness.

After a good hour, the signal for the break was given. We moved to the hall, where a table with appetising sandwiches and several bottles of soda was waiting for us. We enjoyed the food and drinks together.

During the break, I took Timman's book *Een sprong in de Noordzee* from my bag and asked him a few questions about the chapter from which the book's title is derived — the one about Norman Willem van Lennep. Between 1893 and 1896, Van Lennep served as editor-in-chief of the *Tijdschrift van den Nederlandschen Schaakbond*, magazine of the Dutch Chess Federation, and played a key role in founding what is now the KNSB. Although a strong and ambitious player, he never reached the absolute top. He is best known for his excellent report on the 1895 Hastings tournament. Pressured by his father to find a "respectable" job in London, he sadly failed to do so. Struggling with his homosexuality, he decided in 1897 to jump overboard during the Harwich–Hoek van Holland crossing, choosing a sailor's grave at only 25 years of age.

When the clinic resumed, the prizewinners simply preferred that Timman give a simultaneous exhibition. One of my favourite replies to 1.e4 is 1...c6 — the Caro–Kann Defence — and Timman kindly allowed me to steer the game straight into the main line. We followed theory for nearly twenty moves, and by move thirty the position had settled into an essentially equal endgame. Then, to my surprise, Timman offered me a draw — a gesture I accepted immediately. I took the opportunity to ask him to sign my copy of *Een Sprong in de Noordzee*, which he did with his usual kindness. Stockfish later confirmed the balance: my rook on g5 was pressuring the h5 pawn, forcing his rook to defend from h1, while my king was slightly more active. I was more than satisfied with the result.

## Impressions from the event



**Rob van Son at the front board during the simul, considering his next move**  
Photo by the Province of North Holland



**Jan Timman in action during the simultaneous exhibition**  
Photos by Rob van Son



A thoughtful moment as Jan Timman considers the possibilities on the board  
Photo by Rob van Son

Sixteen players took part in the simultaneous: the fifteen prizewinners and an official from the provincial government. The latter was seated next to me and was almost literally blown off the board. After a long struggle, one of the other prizewinners also managed to draw Timman, reaching an endgame only a pawn down. The remaining players all lost, though they kept the grandmaster occupied for quite some time. In the end, Timman scored fourteen wins and two draws.

Finally, the Province of North Holland gave us prizewinners a beautiful pen in a wooden box as a reminder of the event. And Timman received a bottle of wine as well, a small gesture from the organizers that suited his bohemian spirit.

I thanked the organizers and Timman for the wonderful evening and prepared myself for the long walk back to the station. I arrived home in the early morning hours — with some help from the Dutch Railways — but I didn't mind in the slightest. A draw and my signed book were more than enough to guarantee a good night's sleep.

And Timman? I wish him well and hope he can regain the strength to cross swords once more with the giants of the chess world. As the Dutch grandmaster Jan Hein Donner once said to him: "Chess is a narrow, thorny path full of hardship." Timman himself wrote in his book *Het smalle pad* ("The Narrow Path"): "Even if I have to defy a waterfall in a wooden tub, I am armed to the teeth for the natives waiting for me below."

I hope that many chess players can find courage in these words after a dramatic game.

**Author: Rob van Son**

Based on previous Dutch and English versions; fully revised in March 2026

### ***A tribute to Jan Timman (1951–2026)***

GM Jan Hendrik Timman – Rob van Son

Simultaneous exhibition game, Haarlem, 27-09-2006

#### **B19 Caro-Kann, classical, Spassky variation**

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nd2 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Bf5 5.Ng3 Bg6 6.h4 h6 7.Nf3 Nd7 8.h5 Bh7 9.Bd3 Bxd3 10.Qxd3 e6 11.Bf4 Qa5+ 12.Bd2 Qc7 13.O-O-O Ngf6 14.Ne4 Nxe4 15.Qxe4 Nf6 16.Qe2 Bd6 17.Kb1 O-O-O 18.c4 c5 19.Bc3 cxd4 20.Nxd4 a6 (last book move).



**21.Nb3 Bc5?** A suboptimal choice by Black. Instead of this, he could have gone for immediate simplification with 21...Qc6 22.f3 Bc7 23.Nd4 Qc5 24.g4 Qe5 25.Kc2 Qxe2 26.Nxe2 Rhg8, which the engine considers slightly better for White.

**22.Be5** A principled centralizing move. However, the engine prefers a quieter buildup with 22.Rc1 Qc6 23.Nxc5 Qxc5 24.g4 Qc6 25.Rhe1 Qd6, leading to a clear advantage for White — a line Timman could have chosen.

**22...Qc6!** A precise and resourceful move. By keeping the queen active, Black maintains equality. Stockfish even slightly prefers 22...Rxd1+ 23.Rxd1 Qc6 24.f3 Nxf5, but the difference is minimal.

**23.Nxc5 Qxc5** A natural continuation for both sides; the position remains balanced.



**24.b3** As an alternative, the engine also considers 24.Rxd8+ Rxd8 25.f3 Ne8 26.Bc3 Qf5+ 27.Ka1 Rd6 28.a3 f6, leading to a playable position for both sides.

**24...a5** Black chooses active queenside play. A more precise approach would have been 24...Rxd1+ 25.Rxd1 Nxf5 26.Qxh5 f6 27.Qf7 Qxe5 28.Qxg7 Qf5+ 29.Kb2 Qe5+, which keeps the game fully equal.

**25.Bxf6** A logical decision to exchange the knight. The engine, however, points to a more flexible plan with 25.Qb2 Rhe8 26.Bd4 Qc6 27.Bc3 b6 28.f3 e5 29.Rxd8+ Rxd8 30.Bxe5 Nxf5, resulting in a balanced position.

**25...Qf5+** A calm and accurate reply, effectively maintaining equality for Black.



**26.Qc2 Qxc2+ 27.Kxc2 gxf6** Black accepts the doubled pawn, but it carries no real downside; the structure remains solid and fully playable.

**28.Rd3 Rxd3 29.Kxd3 Rg8** The rook enters the game with tempo, and the position is now clearly equal. Both sides have active pieces, but neither has realistic winning chances.



**30.g3 Rg5** With this final rook move, Black removes any remaining winning chances for White. After I played 30...Rg5, Timman offered a draw — which I accepted immediately.

1/2–1/2