

How I Became a Chess Grandmaster



VINAY BHAT

QUALITY CHESS



How I Became a Chess Grandmaster

By

Vinay Bhat

I finished the event with a dominant 9/11
score and with mostly fresh positions in every



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Key to symbols used

?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
!?	a move worth considering
?!	a move of doubtful value
†	check
#	mate

Preface

Chess has been a major part of my life since I was about 6 years old. I quickly fell in love with the game and shot up to set the record for youngest National Master (NM) in the US at the age of 10½ years. I continued to play regularly until my senior year of High School, becoming an International Master (IM) just before turning 16. After a break from regular tournament play for almost five years, I started playing again after graduating from college and was awarded the International Grandmaster (GM) title at the age of 24.

I left the professional chess arena three years later, and I've switched over to the Data Science field (broadly, Statistics, Machine Learning, Analytics, and Data Engineering). My roles there have run the gamut from entry-level to executive and keeping pace in an evolving field has been a fun challenge.

Luckily, working on chess taught me a lot about how to learn, and my progress in the Data Science field has led me to rethink some of my previous chess training choices. While I've achieved a lot in the chess world, my progress beyond 2200 was not at all straightforward. There were plenty of detours, missed learnings, and forgotten learnings along the way.

This is my first book, but I've always enjoyed writing. I used to write regularly on my own chess blog (An Unemployed Fellow, at <https://vbhat.wordpress.com>) from about 2008 through 2014. This book combines a few of my constants: chess, trying to improve, and writing.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who've played a big role in my chess development as teachers, supporters, sponsors, coaches, peers, students, and organizers.

All of it starts with my mom. I'm not only lucky that she knew how to play and taught me, but also because she was an excellent first coach even well after I had moved past her own skill level. For someone who had never seen or heard of a chess tournament before her kids got into chess, she learned a ton about chess and the chess world to help me.

Not far behind my mom on the list would be my dad and brother. Both my parents sacrificed a lot to give me a chance in chess. We weren't poor, but we also weren't close to being rich, and chess training and travel do cost money. My brother also helped me both directly and indirectly: directly through our countless practice games against each other and indirectly through continued encouragement even after I passed him on the rating lists.

Thanks also to two coaches who had an outsize impact on my development and improvement. Richard Shorman was my first teacher aside from my mom and both his love of the game and his method of teaching left a big imprint on my view of chess. GM Gregory Kaidanov was my first professional coach. I often wasn't the ideal student, but I'm thankful that he persevered, and his efforts helped me get the IM title and achieve a big leap in strength overall.

IM David Pruess and GM Josh Friedel were two of my frequent tournament and training partners, and we have spent many hours analyzing and working together. Finally, coaching Sam Shankland for several years (he's now well beyond any level I reached) was almost as much a benefit for me as I'd like to think it was for him.

Thanks are also owed to the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco and IM John Donaldson most specifically. The Mechanics became my chess home starting in about 1997 and was where I did battle most frequently. The Institute also continues to provide some level of chess sponsorship to junior players and is home to an amazing library. Getting a library card there helped open a whole new world of chess books to me.

And finally, thanks also to Daniel Schwarz, Yian Liou, and Josh Friedel for their feedback during my writing process.

Vinay Bhat

San Francisco, January 2023



Introduction

“You stand like you was a chess player.”

“Yeah, I used to be.”

“Used to be, huh.”

On September 5, 2013, I was in New York City (NYC) to see some friends and watch the US Open (for tennis). I decided to cut through Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem that afternoon, and I paused to watch a chess game. Some NYC parks are famous for having dozens of players throughout the day, but this wasn't one of them. They were the only two people playing that afternoon.

I stopped to observe and the elderly man playing the white pieces looked at me and made that opening comment and then expressed some skepticism after my reply.

Without thinking, I had stopped a few feet away from the board, not hovering right by it, and that was all he needed to see.

A few months later in January 2014, I had the chance to meet and play blitz with Magnus Carlsen. Magnus had just beaten my chess idol, Viswanathan (Vishy) Anand, in the World Championship. I had already met several World Champions from Spassky to Anand, but I hadn't played any of them, and my closest encounter with a near-World Champion was all the way back in 1992.

That year, David Bronstein had visited the San Francisco Bay Area and the *Capa Chess Academy*, 20 minutes from where I grew up. The chess center was run by Joseph Siroker, and maybe he knew Bronstein or maybe Bronstein was just in the Bay Area to play a match against the chess program Deep Thought, but either way, Siroker arranged a blitz game between us.

I heard he was a GM, but I didn't understand his place in chess history at the time. I was only 8 years old and rated about 1700, while he was 68 years old and rated 2465. Thankfully, I had the sense to write the game down afterwards in my scorebook.

Vinay Bhat – GM David Bronstein

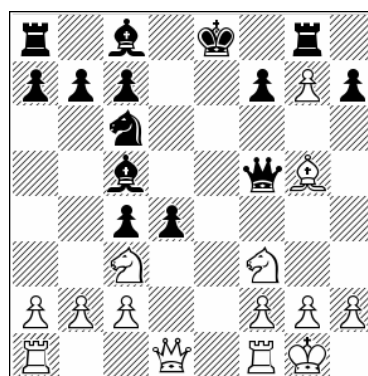
Palo Alto (5) 1992

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♘f6 4.d4 exd4 5.0-0
♙c5 6.e5 d5 7.exf6 dxc4 8.fxg7 ♖g8 9.♙g5 ♚d5?

The Max Lange Attack was my go-to until I was about 2200, but at the time, I must not have known more about this line.

The correct move is 9...♙e7.

10.♘c3 ♚f5

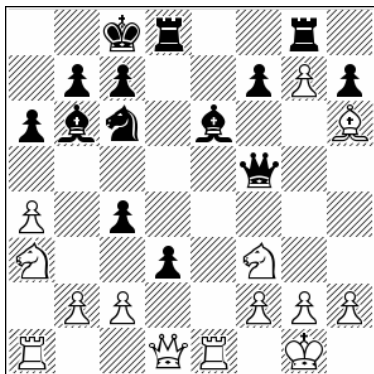


11.♘b5?

11.♖e1† (or 11.♘e4 first) 11...♙e6 12.♘e4 with the twin threats of ♘f6† or ♘h4 is crushing. If Black plays 12...♖xg7, then 13.♘h4 traps the black queen. While if 12...♙e7, the simple 13.♙xe7 and 14.♘xd4 leaves White with a winning advantage.

After my game continuation, it's just one-way traffic in Black's favor.

11...♖b6 12.a4 ♕e6 13.♗h6? 0-0-0 14.♞e1 a6
15.♘a3 d3



16.cxd3 cxd3 17.♞d2 ♕d5 18.♗g5 ♞xg7
19.♗xd8 ♞xg2† 20.♘f1 ♞h3 21.♘g1 ♞xf2#
0-1

At that time in 1992, I was attending a children's chess class at a local public library every Friday. One of my fellow classmates then was Joe Lonsdale Jr., and by 2014, he was a successful entrepreneur and investor.

He was hosting a dinner at his home with Magnus, and through my local connections to Joe, I was invited to join as well. Although I was already retired from professional chess, I jumped at the opportunity.

As we were introduced to each other, Magnus shared that he had first seen my name in *New in Chess* (2002, #6), where a game of mine versus GM Wang Yue was featured. Even in 2014, I remembered the general tactical idea I used to win an exchange and that I botched the conversion and settled for a draw (see Chapter 11 for this game). The last thing I expected was for Magnus to know that. Instead, the World Champion was explaining to me how I botched the win! I was surprised but also in awe of his recall. I had played the game, and yet I didn't remember it as well as he did.

His natural competitiveness also came through even before we played a game of blitz. Prior to the following game, he played a game versus Joe (last rated around 1500) and didn't want any spectators (especially me) giving Joe any hints about impending threats. Joe and I then played a

bughouse game against Magnus and another guest (rated around 1300). Joe and I won, thanks to the overwhelming amount of material force I collected. Magnus was clearly not thrilled.

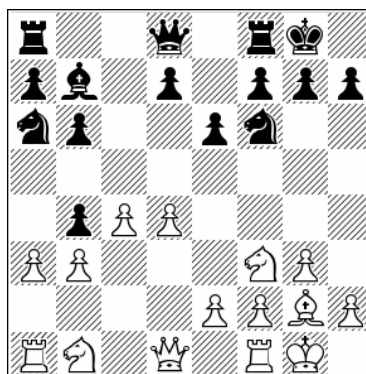
So still on a high from our initial conversation, aware of his competitiveness, and with some vague memories of a previous brush with Bronstein, Magnus and I set up the board to play a game of blitz ourselves.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Magnus Carlsen Woodside (g/5) 2014

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 b6 4.g3 ♕a6

I used to play both 3.♘f3 and 3.♘c3, but the Queen's Indian felt less theoretical so I chose that. But now I surprised myself, as I had only ever played 5.♞a4, 5.♞b3, and 5.♞c2 in tournament play.

5.b3 ♕b4† 6.♗d2 c5 7.♗g2 ♖b7 8.♗xb4 cxb4
9.0-0 0-0 10.a3 ♘a6

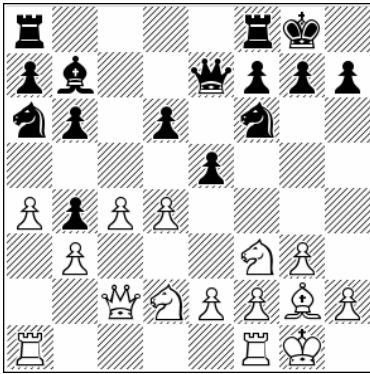


This is a serious theoretical line, but having ventured into this line on a whim, I now came up with something outside the normal 7 moves White typically tries here.

11.♘bd2 ♞e7 12.a4

Magnus finally began to think. A few days later, I looked up this position and saw only one game featuring a plan with a3-a4 instead of exchanging on b4, and that was between Ivanchuk and Grischuk from 2007. Magnus continued with a typical central dark-square strategy for this opening.

12...d6 13.♖c2 e5



14.d5?!

I quickly became unhappy with this decision as while the d5-pawn kills the b7-bishop, it hands Black the c5-square. Now I'd consider both 14.e3 and 14.a5 as better alternatives.

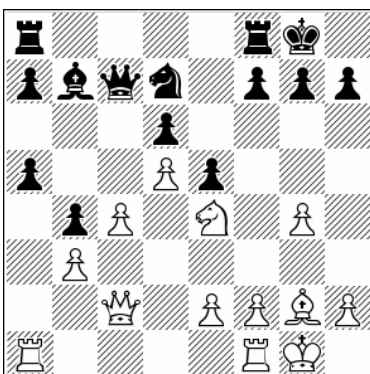
14...♗c5

14...e4 might look enticing, but after 15.♗d4 e3 16.♗e4, Black's activity is a mirage and he has gifted White's pieces great squares.

15.a5 ♖c7 16.♗g5 bxa5 17.♗de4 ♗cxe4 18.♗xe4 ♗d7

18...♗xd5? 19.♗xd6! ♖xd6 20.♖fd1 leaves White on top.

19.g4!



My last move might look strange, but I needed to keep the e4-square to contest c5. Now it was Magnus's turn to really think.

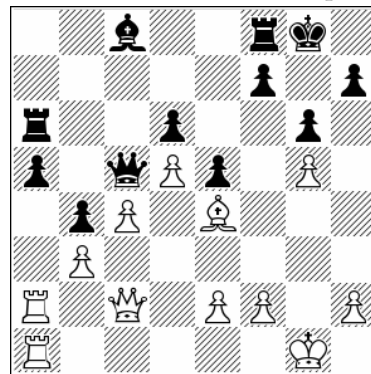
19...a4!

A surprise, but it quickly made sense. If he can't dislodge the e4-knight, then he'd just be waiting for me to double rooks on the a-file when Black will be much worse. I was looking at 19...♗b6 (trying to prepare 20...a4 under better

circumstances), but then 20.♖xa5 ♗xd5 21.♖b5 is good for White.

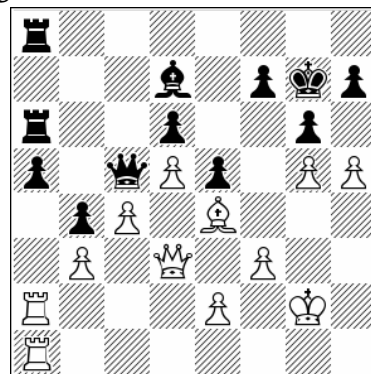
20.♖xa4 a5 21.♖fa1 ♖a6 22.♖4a2 ♗c5 23.♗xc5 ♖xc5 24.♗e4 g6 25.g5 ♗c8

This bishop wasn't doing much on b7 and so he repositioned it to support an a-pawn lever on the queenside. Instead, 25...f5 forces White's hand, but it also distracts Black from the queenside.



Now, similar to his decision with 19...a4, I didn't want to wait around for him to prepare that a-pawn break, so I pushed forward on the kingside.

26.♗g2 ♗d7 27.h4 ♗g4 28.f3 ♗d7 29.♖d3 ♖fa8 30.h5 ♗g7



31.f4!

Black's plan of breaking with ...a4 isn't going to directly win, but there's no reason to wait for it.

It was at this moment that Richard Shorman – who was the first coach for Joe Lonsdale and me and so had also been invited to the dinner – commented, “don't you know that it's rude to beat a guest?”

31...exf4 32.♖f1 ♖e3 33.♖xe3 fxe3 34.hxg6?! hxg6 35.♖f3? a4 36.♖xe3 ♖e8?!

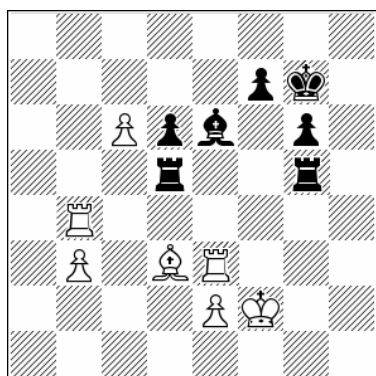
I'm not sure why he didn't play ...a3, as that pawn pretty much means he's playing for two

results. By leaving the pawn on a4, he risks something, and it should have cost him to go pawn-grabbing on g5.

37.♔f2 ♖e5 38.♙d3!

White is back on top.

38...♖xg5 39.c5 ♖a5 40.c6 ♙f5 41.♖xa4 ♖xd5 42.♖xb4 ♙e6?



In a tough position, Magnus briefly stumbled. It took me all of a couple of seconds after the game to see one win here with 43.♖b7, which clears the way for the b-pawn while threatening 44.♖xe6, but an even more forceful win is 43.♖xe6! fxe6 44.♖b7† and 45.b4. There's no good way then to stop the c-pawn.

Before this move, I had 32 seconds compared to Magnus's 30 seconds (there are multiple video recordings of our game), and I was playing almost without a pause.

43.♖c4? ♖c5

All of a sudden, I realized that 43.♖c4 was a mistake.

White is still winning, but now it's less obvious and the pressure of the clock started to creep in. The only win now is with 44.♖xe6! fxe6 45.b4, as Black's rook is helpless against the connected passers supported by the bishop. Not hard to see in a classical game, but here, time was of the essence.

After a brief pause to lament my last move, I traded and soon found myself down a couple of seconds on the clock with a much worse position.

44.♖xc5? ♖xc5 45.♙e4 d5 46.♙f3 ♖xc6 47.♖d3 ♖c5 48.b4 ♖b5 49.♖d4 ♔f6 50.♔e3 ♔e5 51.♙g2 f5 52.♙f3 g5 53.♙g2 f4† 54.♔d3 ♙f5† 55.♔c3 g4 56.♙f1 ♖b8 57.♙g2 ♖c8†

0-1

We each had less than 10 seconds left on the clock at this point, but there was no point in trying to flag him in such a position.

As soon as the game was over, I realized I had blown it. My one game against the World Champ, and I was oh so close, and yet in chess, close doesn't really count.



How this Book is Structured

I started playing chess in 1991, and I stopped playing competitively in 2010 with my last classical event coming in 2014. Over the rest of the book, I'll share other key games, experiences, and memories while illustrating how I progressed from opportunities to play with Bronstein to Magnus.

The structure here broadly follows chronological order as I went from one major milestone to another (to NM, IM, GM, and then trying to improve as GM), but within those sections, the chapters are sometimes grouped by other themes than just time.

As the structure traces my general development as a player with gains, losses, and plateaus, I'll also look back at what I did to improve as a player, how I would evaluate those choices now, and how I might generalize those learning choices more broadly.

I have a good short-term memory but am notoriously forgetful on a longer time scale (see Chapter 18). I had the benefit here of referencing my post-game notes for most of the games I played from 1995 onwards. That work helped me improve then, but it also provided useful context here for my thinking during or soon after the game. I've tried to keep that human context in mind to enrich the objective lines and evaluations while annotating the games for this book, and to improve the objectivity, I've reviewed all my older notes with the help of Stockfish 15. The games I will share are often far from perfect, but when incorporating the engine's input, I will try to highlight areas where the fundamental evaluations would have changed with more accurate play. The final product is especially intended for those rated about 2000 on up.

Chapter 1

A Fast Start to National Master

In some ways, chess is an easy game. There are just a few rules for how the pieces move and how the game ends. And there are many more people who know those rules and how to play than ever set foot in a tournament hall.

My mom was one of those people. Her dad had taught her when she was growing up, and she then taught my brother and me. It was 1991 and I was about 6 ½ years old (my brother, Harish, is 5 years older than me). Both of us took to chess very quickly, while my dad only learned a little bit later. He was spending plenty of time driving us around to chess clubs and tournaments, so why not learn how to play too?

In the early 1990s, the San Francisco Bay Area was one of the best places in the US to grow up as a chess player, maybe second only to New York City. There were numerous chess clubs, plenty of youth and adult players playing local events, and a sizable group of masters who were at least semi-active. The local chess club for me was the Koltanowski (Kolty) Chess Club, 10 minutes from our home. I never saw Koltanowski there, but there were often dozens of other players every Thursday evening.

Around that same time, my parents found out about a local kids' class taking place at the Fremont Public Library on Friday afternoons. My mom was not comfortable driving on the highway at the time, but that was essentially the only way to get there, and she overcame her fears to drive Harish and me there regularly. Taught by Richard Shorman, the students in that kids' class were known as the Blue Knights. Mr. Shorman's second-in-charge was Robert Pellerin, a local police detective.

There were 4 things Shorman emphasized:

- 1) Memorize (and hopefully absorb) *The 30 Rules of Chess* by Reuben Fine
- 2) Participate in the main group activity, which was guessing games from some of the old chess greats (Adolf Anderssen, Paul Morphy, and Jose Capablanca)
- 3) Solve simple combination & tactical puzzles
- 4) Have fun playing

Mr. Pellerin added a 5th for me: 5) study the endgame. Whether in the group class or with my mom helping me read chess books, this became a steady regimen for my first two years.

When guessing games, the key thing Shorman emphasized was thinking at least 3 moves ahead. Technically, this was 3-ply ahead (3 half moves versus 3 full move-pairs), but the point was to think: “OK, I’ll go here – then I think my opponent will go here – and when they do that, I’ll follow-up with this.”



My first chess coach Richard Shorman

This was a great habit to instill from the get-go. I’ve seen many beginners who get used to pushing pieces around the board thinking only of the threat that they’re making, or those who get around this follow-up question by thinking of their opponent playing the most accommodating move after which their attack wins a piece immediately. “Hope chess” was not part of the Shorman program.

For tactics and endgames, we started with recognizing very simple captures and so on and similarly checkmating with a queen or rook. But very quickly, I graduated to doing problems from Fred Reinfeld’s books (*1001 Winning Chess Sacrifices and Combinations* and *1001 Brilliant Ways to Checkmate*). My mom would often help me set up the problems on a board for me to solve and mark off whether I got it right or wrong.

Mr. Pellerin, meanwhile, gifted me a book called *Pandolfini’s Endgame Course* (by Bruce Pandolfini, of course). Again, my mom helped me read and set up the positions in the book, and this was another well-worn book in my collection.

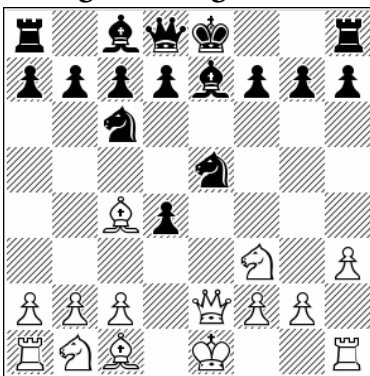
Vinay Bhat – Edmund Rendler
Campbell 1991

At just over 7 years old, I sat down across from Mr. Rendler, one of my earliest rated games from the Kolty Club. He must've been over 70 years old at the time and he outrated me by about 100 points, as I was 1068 USCF and he was about 1150 USCF. Non-chessplayers often look at an age gap like that and say, "I feel sorry for the kid" or "That adult should pick on someone their own size." Chessplayers though tend to know differently.

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♘c6 3.♗c4 ♖f6 4.d4

I picked up this gambit from guessing Morphy and Anderssen games.

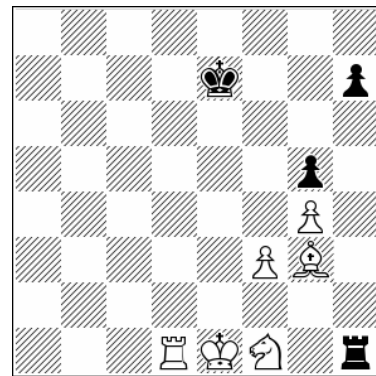
4...exd4 5.e5 ♗g4 6.h3 ♗gx5 7.♞e2 ♗e7



An obvious mistake, but given our level, I'll refrain from making more comments about the objective quality of moves in this game until the final sequence.

8.♗xe5 ♗xe5 9.♞xe5 0-0 10.0-0 ♗f6 11.♞g3 ♗h4 12.♞h2 d5 13.♗d3 c5 14.c4 ♗e6 15.b3 dxc4 16.bxc4 ♗f6 17.♗a3 ♗e7 18.♞e5 ♖c8 19.♞e4 g6 20.♞xb7 ♖c7 21.♞f3 ♞a8 22.♞xa8 ♖xa8 23.♗c1 ♗g5 24.♗xg5 a5 25.♗e4 ♖e8 26.♗f4 ♖a7 27.♗d5 ♗xd5 28.cxd5 ♖e4 29.♗d6 d3 30.♗xc5 ♖d7 31.♗d2 ♖e2 32.♗e3 ♖xd5 33.♖ab1 ♗g7 34.♖fe1 ♖xe1† 35.♖xe1 ♖b5 36.♗b3 a4 37.♗d4† ♗h6 38.♗d2 ♖d5 39.♗a1 ♖c5 40.♗e4 ♖c2 41.♗f1 ♖xa2 42.♖d1 f5 43.♗c3 ♖c2 44.♗xa4 ♖a2 45.♗c3 ♖c2 46.♖xd3 ♖c1† 47.♖d1 ♖c2 48.♗e1 g5 49.g4 ♗g6 50.♗b1 ♖c6 51.♗d2 fxg4 52.hxg4 ♖e6† 53.♗f1 ♖d6 54.f3

♗f7 55.♗e1 ♖h6 56.♗e5 ♖h1† 57.♗f1 ♗e6 58.♗g3 ♗e7

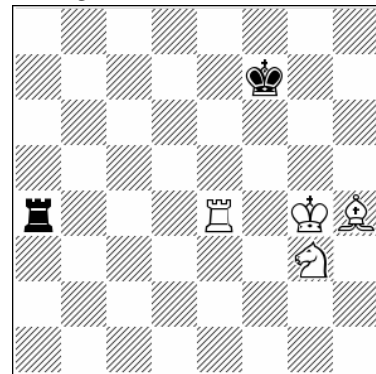


59.f4

It's interesting to see how willing I was to trade away pawns in this endgame. The easiest way to win would be to pick up Black's pawns, either before or after a trade of rooks.

59...gxf4 60.♗xf4 ♗e6 61.♗f2 ♖h3 62.♗g3 ♗f7 63.♖e1 ♖h6 64.g5 ♖g6 65.♗h4 h6 66.gxh6 ♖xh6 67.♗g3 ♖g6† 68.♗h3 ♖a6 69.♗g3 ♖a3 70.♗g4 ♖a4† 71.♖e4

This game made an impression on a lot of people in the area at the time, probably because a kid who just turned 7 years old was playing this marathon game and trading down into a bishop and knight endgame.



71...♖xe4† 72.♗xe4 ♗e6 73.♗f4 ♗d5 74.♗f5 ♗c4 75.♗f6 ♗d5 76.♗d2 ♗d6 77.♗e4 ♗e6 78.♗e5 ♗d7 79.♗d5 ♗c8 80.♗c6

"No wrong-colored corner for you!"

80...♗d8 81.♗f3 ♗c8

81...♗e7 82.♗g5 keeps the fence around Black's king.

82.♗f4 ♗d8 83.♗g5† ♗c8 84.♗e5

“Never mind, feel free to proceed to that corner if you want!”

84...♖b8 85.♘d7† ♕c8

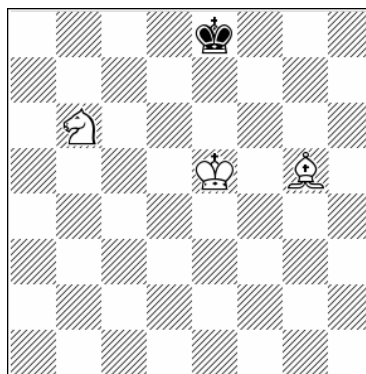
“No thank you!”

86.♙f4 ♘d8 87.♗b6 ♕e7 88.♔d5 ♖f6 89.♔e4
 ♕e6 90.♙c7 ♖f6 91.♖f4 ♕e6 92.♔g5 ♖f7
 93.♖f5 ♕e7 94.♔e5 ♖f7 95.♙d8 ♕e8 96.♙g5

OK, now I was in business. Despite the hiccup on move 84, I had looked at this endgame and remembered two rules for it:

1) You can only checkmate on the side with the same-colored corner as your bishop

2) Checkmate follows quickly if you can set up a box around the king in that corner, e.g., with pieces on g5, e5, and e7, in this case.



96...♖f7 97.♖f5 ♕e8 98.♔e6 ♖f8 99.♗c4 ♔g7
 100.♗e5

White has two vertices of the box constructed, and the king will complete it.

100...♖f8 101.♔d7 ♖g7 102.♔e7 ♖g8
 103.♙h6 ♖h7 104.♙f8 ♖g8 105.♗d7 ♖h8
 106.♖f7 ♖h7 107.♗f6† ♖h8 108.♙g7#
 1-0

Not bad for my 3rd tournament ever. Not only did I checkmate with bishop and knight relatively smoothly, but I also showed the patience to sit at the board for hours and stay up well past my bedtime.



Napping across my parents' laps as an 8-year-old in 1992

My Chess Diet

As a kid, I read several other Pandolfini books after his *Endgame Course*, books such as *Chesscizes*, *Chess Openings: Traps And Zaps*, and *Bobby Fischer's Outrageous Chess Moves*. I was taking my chess study seriously: I found a number of mistakes and typos in the texts, and I even wrote a letter to the publisher and Mr. Pandolfini, but I don't actually know if it ever reached them or him.

I'm not sure what exactly drew me to chess, but the problem-solving angle was likely a big factor. As a kid, I also became hooked on reading mysteries while now I focus on more data-related investigations.

In any case, on this diet of Shorman lessons, Pandolfini books, and practice at home, I moved up the ranks very quickly. From a starting rating of about 1000 in the summer of 1991, I took off:

- By the end of 1991, I was about 1400 USCF
- By the end of 1992, I was about 1700 USCF
- By the end of 1993, I was about 1900 USCF
- By the end of 1994, I crossed 2200 USCF

That's about 4 years from learning to play to National Master!



My mom, Vijaya, in 1992

I only went to the group lessons at the Fremont Public Library for about one year. After that, Mr. Shorman still came by our house every so often with a tabletop chess computer for practice games – the Elite Avant Garde chess computer – but the lessons were less structured than in the group class. Meanwhile, he had pointed me to Irving Chernev's books, and his love of the game was infectious.



My brother, Harish, between moves in 1992

After going through *Logical Chess Move by Move*, I (or we, given my mom was often reading these to me) moved on to *Practical Chess Endings*, *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*, and *Capablanca's Best Chess Endings*. Of those books, the Capablanca book was my most cherished and I ended up trying to find every book about Capablanca I could get. I later spent the most time with *Chess Fundamentals* and *My Chess Career*, both by Capablanca himself.

And as I made my way through these books, I graduated from the Reinfeld combination books to first tackle *Combination Challenge* by Hays and Hall, and then Chess Informant's *Encyclopaedia of Chess Combinations*. I was already hooked on chess and with over 1000 problems each, I had plenty of practice material available and no problem sitting down to solve them.



Deep in thought as a 7-year-old in 1991

Vinay Bhat – Frank Say
Berkeley 1994

While the Kolty Club was my main tournament spot, my parents were willing to drive me (and often my brother as well) around the Bay Area on the weekends to places like Palo Alto, Burlingame, San Francisco, Berkeley, Richmond, and Walnut Creek.

Berkeley had a strong chess culture when I was growing up. The UC Berkeley campus was host to most of those events, with the People's Tournament and Class Struggle being the two

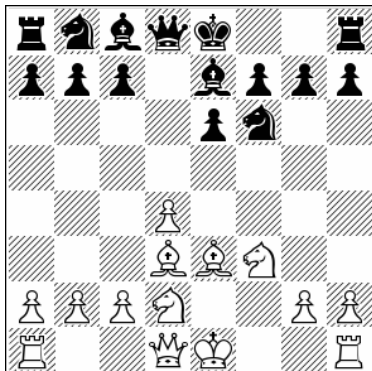
marquee events on the calendar. Thanks to Elizabeth Shaughnessy in particular, they still have a strong youth chess program, but the open/adult events are less frequent than they used to be. This next game was my first master scalp: I was 1850 USCF and my opponent was 2307 USCF.

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘e3

This gambit won't set the world on fire, but my White repertoire centered around gambits and sidelines. The most mainstream opening I was playing was the Grand Prix Attack against the Sicilian (1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 and 3.f4).

3...dxe4 4.♘d2 ♘f6 5.f3 exf3
5...♘d5 is more testing.

6.♘gx3 ♙e7 7.♙d3



7...♘d5

The start of a bad plan. Securing the bishop pair might look attractive, but White's development isn't slowed at all, and Black loses a kingside defender in the process. Instead, he should have prepared to strike back in the center with a move like ...c5 by starting with 7...♘bd7.

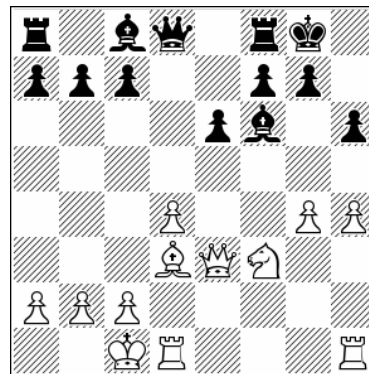
8.♙e2 ♘d7 9.♘e4 ♘xe3 10.♙xe3 h6?

Black lets his final chance to play ...c5 safely slip by: once White castles, Black loses the check on a5 that'd have indirectly guarded the pawn. Instead, 10...c5 11.0-0-0 cxd4 12.♘xd4 0-0 is still better for Black.

11.0-0-0 0-0?!

Black continues to overestimate his defenses or underestimate White's coming attack. Trying to castle queenside isn't easy anymore (although still better than castling into it) and he doesn't have any easy ...c5 option anymore either. For example, 11...♘f6 12.♙b1 ♙d7 13.c4! and Black still doesn't have anywhere safe to put his king as ...♙c6 walks into d4-d5.

12.g4 ♘f6 13.♘xf6† ♙xf6 14.h4

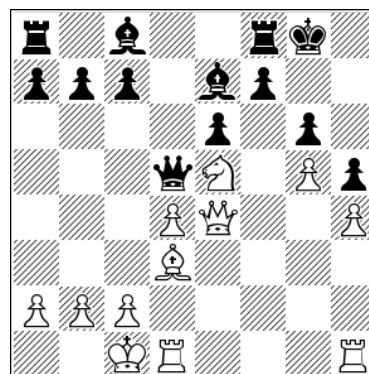


I certainly wasn't missing the f2-pawn now!

14...♙e7 15.g5 h5 16.♙e4 g6 17.♘e5 ♙d5?

Losing quickly, but there's nothing good at this point.

17...♙e8 guards g6 for another move, but White can turn up the heat with simple and straightforward moves: 18.♙hf1 (threatening to play 19.♘xf7 and then 20.♙xg6†) 18...♙d7 19.♙f6! highlights Black's helplessness. If he takes the rook, White will invade via h5 or h6 eventually, while if he leaves the rook there, ♙df1 is going to hurt.



18.♘g6! ♙xe4 19.♘xe7† ♙g7 20.♙xe4 c6

Black can't even try to trap the e7-knight, as 20...♙d7 21.♙xb7 releases the c6-square.

21.♘xc8 ♙axc8 22.♙df1 ♙cd8 23.c3 ♙d7 24.♙f6 ♙h8 25.♙hf1

1-0

I've played about 1500 rated games (classical and rapid) in my career, and I don't remember the specifics of most of them now. I tend to remember the context of a game more than the specific moves, but for some games, I can recall a key motif or pattern.

I also played many practice games, especially in those early years. Harish was typically a little higher rated than me through 1993 and we played dozens of games (he dominated). A local master, Lee Corbin, also held kids' practice tournaments and so I met and played a lot of local juniors that way. Then in 1993, having largely passed most of them by rating, I found new practice partners through the Kolty Club.

Non-chessplayers often assume that I must not have lost much as a child. Nothing could be further from the truth: between tournament and practice games, I lost over 100 games those first few years. I wasn't studying with other players or taking formal lessons, so these losses ended up being another way for me to learn and pick up on patterns.

One of those occasional practice partners was Teri Lagier, another regular at the Kolty Club. When tournaments weren't on the schedule, we'd often play a game. And while both of us were just under 1900 USCF before this next (rated) game in 1994, I soon moved on to practicing against stronger players in the area: local experts and masters such as Steve Jacobi, Peter Yu, and Alan Stein.

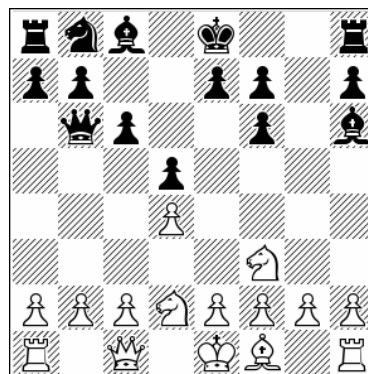
Teri Lagier – Vinay Bhat
Campbell 1994

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♙g5 c6

While my White opening repertoire was filled with gambits, my Black repertoire was much more solid. Against 1.d4, I typically played Slav and QGD-style setups, while against 1.e4, I exclusively played the Petroff Defense (1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6).

These kinds of openings were great for me as a beginner: the central situation is often clarified early, Black castles quickly, and Black's free to develop all his pieces. It's not for nothing that GMs have a hard time cracking these at the top level.

4.♘bd2 ♖b6 5.♙xf6 gxf6 6.♖c1 ♙h6



Years later, I played this kind of setup from the White side via the Trompowsky (e.g., 1.d4 ♘f6 2.♙g5 c5 3.♙xf6 gxf6 4.d5 ♖b6 5.♖c1), and I won a number of nice games (see Bhat – Stein in Chapter 12 for one example). This is a better version for Black as his pawn is on d5 instead of White's.

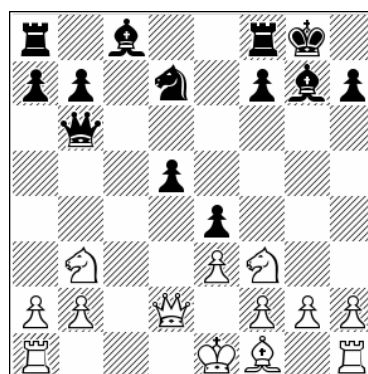
7.e3 ♘d7 8.c4 e5 9.dxe5

9.♙e2 is better, as opening the center invites trouble.

9...fxe5 10.♖c3 ♙g7 11.cxd5 cxd5 12.♘b3 0-0

Things are already looking dicey for White as Black's central pawns are mobile. It's not clear where White can find safety.

13.♖d2



13...e4

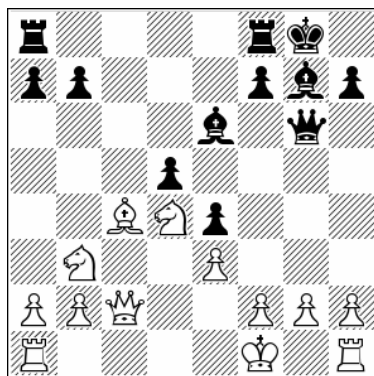
A natural advance but also the positionally correct pawn push. Usually when you have control of the center and the advantage of the bishop pair, you want to put your pawns on the same color square as your opponent's bishop. That's because while it can cancel out the effect of each player's same-colored bishop, it typically amplifies the power of the unopposed bishop.

13...d4 was tempting too, though, and tactically it's justified here as Black can break any blockade on e4 later with moves like ...f5, ...d6, and so on.

14. d4 e5 15. e2 g6!

Even at a young age, I could keep the entire board in my line of sight. White's next isn't inspiring but there's nothing better, as castling kingside allows 16...h3.

16. f1 c4 17. c2 e6 18. xc4



18...xc4!

I wasn't going to let White rest. White can eliminate Black's bishop pair, but that exchange will strengthen Black's central pawn chain while opening the f-file as well.

19. dxe6 fxe6 20. d2 b5

Once again, maximizing the advantage.

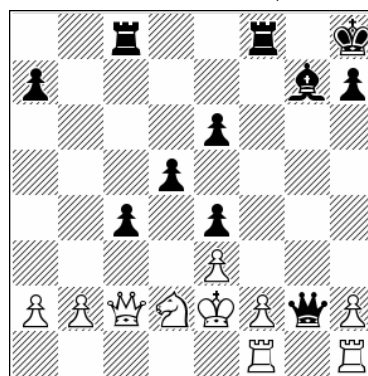
21. c1 bxc4 22. e2

White capitulates, but it was getting ugly anyway.

22...xg2 23. c1 h8!

Quietly lethal.

The modern Stockfish 15 engine prefers 23...c3, but my king move was subtle and strong (and barely Stockfish's second choice).



24. hg1 xf2† 25. xf2 xg1 26. xe4 g4† 0-1

Impersonating a High School Student

My older brother started playing at the same time, followed the same general program, and stayed ahead of me from 1991 through most of 1993. He was clearly talented but was also starting relatively late compared to the top juniors at the time. By 1993, he was already in High School and excelling across a bunch of other areas: academics, speech & debate, swimming, tennis, his high school newspaper, math and science competitions, and so on. He started a chess club at Lynbrook High School in San Jose, but for the first two years in 1993 and 1994, his high school team was largely non-existent. Enter a supposed ringer: me!

I was in 3rd grade during the 1993 National High School Championship, but I entered anyway. For my school, I also put down Lynbrook High School. Both of us were under 2000 at the time and both of us scored 4/7. Not bad for the two of us, but team scores were collected across the four best scores from the team.

The next year though, he had a full team with three others (all below 1400). Still, I joined him and his high school teammates at the 1994 National High School Championship. Our story was that I was so far ahead in math that I attended a High School algebra class. Now that wasn't true at all (and in fact, for a couple of weeks in 4th grade, I struggled mightily with long division before it clicked), but the organizers

gave us a green light. This time, both of us were rated about 2000 and we both finished on 5/7 while the rest of the team outperformed their ratings. As a group, we finished as a top-20 team in the country!

The only problem is that we finished one spot ahead of Lynbrook's arch-rivals in San Jose: the private Bellarmine College Preparatory High School. They filed an official complaint that I wasn't really a High School student and so my score for the team should be nullified. The complaint was upheld, and while there was another player's score to substitute, the team dropped out of the top 20 and took home no trophy.

The ruling followed the letter of the law, but we felt like the complaint violated the spirit of the competition. None of us forgot this incident, and so when I was truly in High School four years later, I took special pleasure in beating Bellarmine players like a drum in every local, state, and national event that I played in, either individually or as a team.

The World Youth Under-10 Championship

The World Youth in 1994 was held in Szeged, Hungary over the summer. It was my first-ever tournament abroad and both my parents traveled with me. My parents were new to tournament chess, and while my mom especially was learning a lot about the chess world, we got some help from another local parent.

One advisor in a lot of areas for that event was Jordy Mont-Reynaud's mother, Randy. Jordy was another big local talent, and he briefly set the record for youngest national master in US history before I broke it by a few more months. Through her, we learned about local events, connected with organizers, and got an insider's view into what some of these tournaments would be like (Jordy had won the silver medal in the 1993 World Youth Under-10 himself).

I don't remember anything about Szeged besides the game experience. We used to file into a cavernous playing hall with viewing balconies all around. Given the heat of the Hungarian summer, we also had to carry in at least 1 liter of water or drinks to stave off any dehydration or heat stroke.

Pairings had gone up for the first round the day of the event but then they came down for revisions. I had seen the pairings after that, so I went to my board and dutifully wrote down my name and my opponent's name on the scoresheet: "Tigran Petrosian (Armenia)".

The kid sitting across from me was not Tigran Petrosian though. But he could see what I had written down and he called some of his compatriots over to chuckle about it: "Who's this guy who thinks he's playing an old World Champion in the Under-10 division?!" The confusion was sorted out, and he found the right board and I did get to play against the World Champion's namesake.

These World Youth Championships featured a lot of future chess stars and were an early chance to meet later friends and competitors. Without databases and easy access to information, I didn't prepare for anybody in particular. But looking at copies of prior years' bulletins, I felt that Alexander Grischuk might be the strongest player in my age group. Amusingly, I didn't realize he was a year older than me and so he'd be in the Under-12 division that year.

Even without Grischuk in my section, the tournament was plenty difficult. The time control was 40/2, 20/1, G/30, so games could last up to 7 hours. I tested those limits in four early games, each lasting over 6 hours: Petrosian (draw), David Smerdon (draw), Giorgi Paresishvili (I won), and Mark Paragua (I lost). I started out against three future GMs, and I finished in a tie for 6th place in the Under-10 group with plenty of other big names.

Vinay Bhat – Arkadij Naiditsch

Szeged 1994

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.f4 g6 4.♗f3 ♕g7 5.♙b5 e6

The Grand Prix Attack was my main anti-Sicilian for years. 5...♗d4 is Black's usual response, not allowing White to double Black's pawns by capturing on c6.

6.e5

This sets up the threat of ♗e4 and if the knight reaches d6, it'll be a royal pain for Black. Most players start with 6.♙xc6 bxc6 7.e5, and then after 7...d5, it reaches a characteristic position that could also have been reached after 6...d5 7.♙xc6 now.

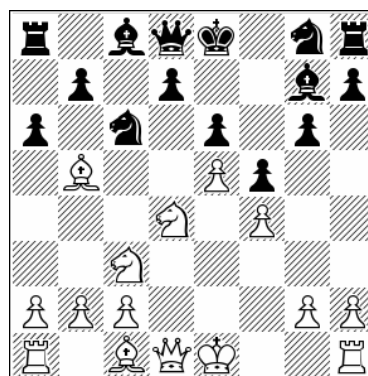
My basic plan then would be to try and target the c-pawns after castling with moves like b3, ♗a4, and ♙a3. Naiditsch tried to stop the knight a different, but worse, way.



6...f5? 7.d4

A good decision. Normally in the Grand Prix, White tries to keep the center somewhat closed and sets up a pawn chain along c2-d3-e4-f5 to attack on the kingside. After ...f5 though, opening the center will expose the backward d7-pawn and leave Black's bishop buried alive on g7.

7...cxd4 8.♗xd4 a6



9...♙e2?!

This lets Black off the hook as he can prepare ...d6, so given a second chance, I'd prefer to take on c6. Maybe I was worried about the endgame after 9.♙xc6 dxc6 10.♙e3 c5, but even if Black takes the queens off, White's so far ahead in development that Black will be toast. For example, 11.♗b3 ♖xd1† 12.♖xd1 b6 13.♗a4 ♗b8 14.♗d6 and White's dominating.

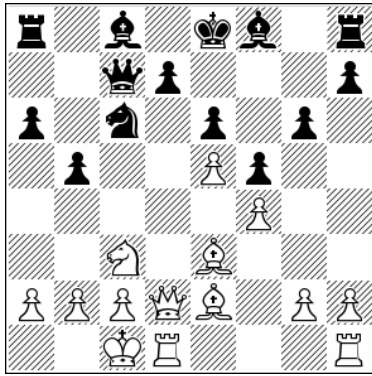
9...♙f8?

It's true the bishop was hitting its head against the wall from g7, but repositioning it like this is a luxury too far. Black could have played ...♗ge7 and tried to break free with ...d6 or ...b5 and ...♙b7.

Another option was 9...♙xe5, a neat tactical resource. If White takes back, Black has ...♗h4† and ...♗xd4. But still, I was happy with 10.♗xc6 ♙xc3† 11.bxc3 bxc6 12.♙a3 or 11...dxc6 12.♙d3 as I thought my dark-squared bishop would dominate on the weakened squares.

10.♙e3 ♖c7 11.♗d2 ♗xd4 12.♗xd4 ♗e7 13.0-0 ♗c6 14.♗d2 b5

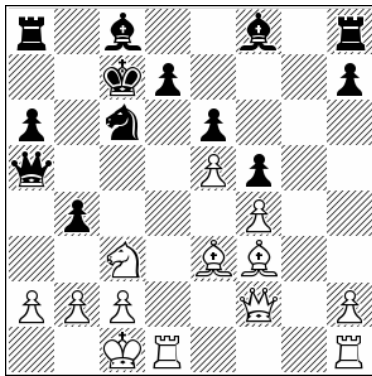
14...♙b4 looks more active, but if Black ever takes on c3, his dark squares will be left even weaker. So White can respond with a3 and then after a bishop retreat, continue cracking open the kingside with g4.



15.g4 ♖a5

15...fxg4 would be a big mistake because of 16.♗e4, with the idea of either ♖d6† or ♗f6†.

16.gxf5 gxf5 17.♗h5† ♖d8 18.♞f2 ♗c7 19.♗f3 b4



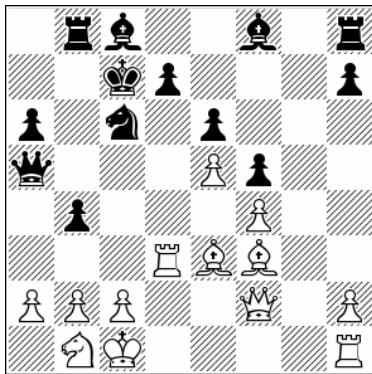
20.♗b1

20.♗d5! would have been an artistic finish: 20...exd5 21.♗b6†! ♞xb6 22.♗xd5† is the point. My game move though doesn't jeopardize the win.

20...♞b8

20...♞xa2 loses in a similar way to the game finish: 21.♗xc6 dxc6 22.♞h4! winning: the twin threats of ♞d8† and ♞f6 are unstoppable.

21.♞d3!



There are other ways to win, but this calmly prepares to increase the pressure on the d-file.

Black isn't going anywhere, or at least not anywhere good.

21...♞xa2

21...♗e7 would have prevented the game finish, but it only postpones the inevitable. I was going to continue with 22.♞hd1, with the general plan of 23.♗d2, 24.♗b3, and 25.♗c5 to crack open Black's dark squares. Even here, White can invite Black to take on a2 because the queen is sidelined on a2. In the game, Black allows an even easier invasion as White doesn't have to exchange Black's dark-squared bishop to enter on the kingside dark squares.

22.♗xc6 dxc6 23.♞h4

Threatening a checkers style ♞h4-d8-b6-a7 checkmate.

23...♞b7 24.♞f6 b3 25.c3

1-0

Black is losing a rook for nothing.

Vinay Bhat – David Navara

Szeged 1994

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♞g4

I had graduated from the 3.♗e3 French Gambit to the Nimzowitsch Gambit in the Advance French. This one isn't as bad, but it's also not that good.

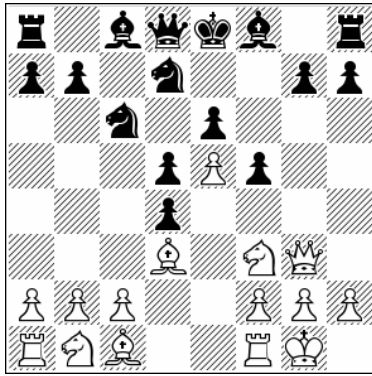
4...cxd4 5.♗f3 f5

5...♗c6 would be normal. Earlier in the same tournament, David Smerdon played this way against me with ...♞c7 and ...♗d7 to follow. He held on to his extra pawn through the endgame, but I held a draw after a marathon 6+ hour game.

6.♞g3

I was going to sacrifice a pawn one way or another!

6...♗e7 7.♗d3 ♗ec6 8.0-0 ♗d7



Black's maneuvers have netted a number of gains: he's played ...f5 safely, which disrupts White's potential activity on the kingside and he's also developed his knights to c6 and d7, whereas often they end up eyeing each other's squares from c6 and e7.

9.♖e1?!

I'd now prefer 9.c3 as White needs some open lines to justify being down a center pawn. The computer points out the incredible 9.b4 is even better than 9.c3, but I'm not sure I'd find that even now as a GM.

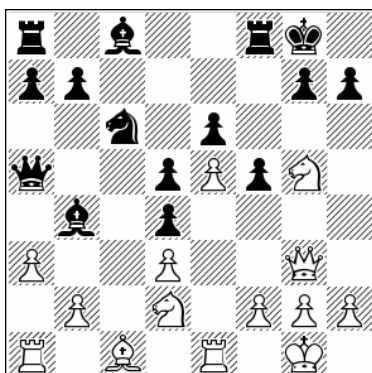
9...♗c5 10.♗g5

Played partly to try and dissuade Black from putting a piece on e4 and partly to show some aggression as compensation for the pawn. The immediate threat is ♗xh7 (as ♖g6† indirectly guards the knight).

10...♗xd3

Black buys into the aggression story but he should have kept the knight to drop into e4 later. After 10...h6 11.♗h7 ♖f7, White's compensation is snuffed out.

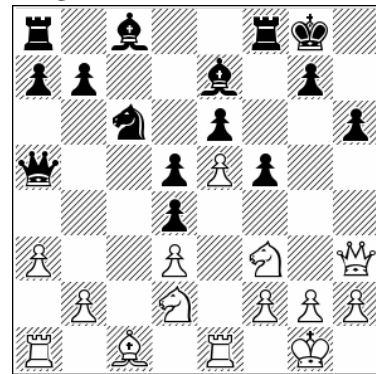
11.cxd3 ♗b4 12.♗d2 0-0 13.a3 ♖a5



14.♖h3

Looking at this game now, an attack with 14.axb4! ♖xa1 15.♗xh7! ♗xh7 16.♗f3 is begging to be played. Then, ♖h4† and ♗g5 is the obvious threat, but there are bishop discoveries to think about too with Black's queen on a1. The computer points out that it's a draw though after: 16...f4! 17.♖h3† ♗g8 18.♗g5 ♖f5 19.♖h7† ♗f8 20.♖h8† ♗e7 21.♖xg7† ♗e8 22.♖g8† ♖f8 23.♖g7 ♖f5

14...h6 15.♗gf3 ♗e7



16.♖g3

16.♗f1 was better, especially given the upcoming maneuver I executed. White will connect his rooks faster this way and he can route the knight to e2 via g3 (and possibly have the shadow of ♗h5 looming at some point too). That would be about equal.

16...♗h7 17.h4

Restraining Black from kingside land grabs while also preparing some further piece rearrangements. Black plays the next phase of the game too slowly and lets White untangle.

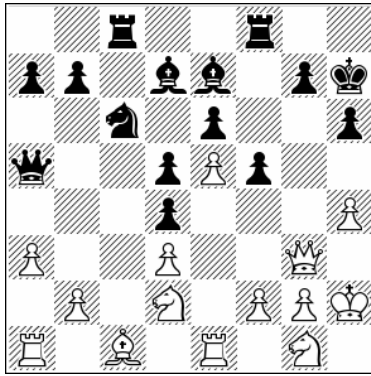
17...♗d7

17...♗b4 looks clever, hitting d3 and threatening a fork on c2, but White has two good responses. One is the simple 18.♗xd4, but 18.♗b3 ♖a4 19.axb4 ♖xb3 20.h5 is also good.

18.♗h2

This prepares a regrouping of knights that would have been better executed with 16.♗f1.

18...♖ac8 19.♗g1



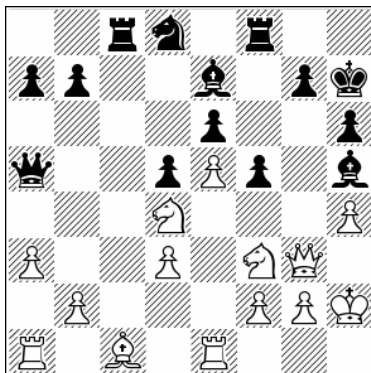
19...♞d8?

Too slow. At first glance, 19...♞b4 fails to 20.♞b3 ♖a4 21.♞xd4, but Black should actually be quite happy about this because after 21...♞c2 22.♞xc2 ♙xh4! and with ...♞xc2 next, Black has the pawn and the compensation. Even if Black misses the ...♙xh4 intermezzo in advance, Black activates his pieces nicely by trading knights and bringing his rook into White's camp.

20.♞df3

Once again, we're back to equality.

20...♙e8 21.♞e2 ♙h5 22.♞exd4



22...♙xf3

This releases the immediate pressure on e6, but it also feels like a bad trade after spending 3 moves to activate the bishop. I'd have played 22...♖a4 and then ...♖d7 to support e6.

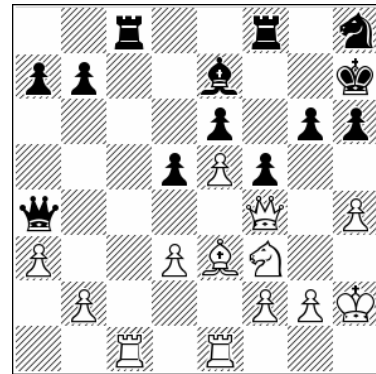
23.♞xf3 g6

Played to stop the real threat of h5, ♖g6†, and ♙xh6, but this weakens the kingside further. Once again ...♖a4 was better, with ...♖e8 in reserve to cover g6 if needed.

24.♙d2 ♖a4 25.♞ac1 ♞f7 26.♙e3 ♞h8

A mysterious retreat.

27.♖f4!



Simple and strong – my judgment was correct that the endgame transition would be in my favor. The c-file is shared equally for the moment, but because the e6-pawn isn't easy to defend, White will eventually wrest control of it away from Black and so gain the advantage.

27...♖xf4† 28.♙xf4 ♞f7

28...♞g7 unfortunately is too slow because after 29.♞d4 ♞f7 the e6-pawn is guarded, but h6 isn't, and it will fall with tempo against the f8-rook.

28...♙xh4 looks flashy, but each of 29.g3 29.♞xh4 g5 30.♞f3, and 29.♙e3 all give White the advantage thanks to his knight eventually making its way to d4.

29.♞d4 ♙xh4

The only way to save the e6-pawn is to trade on c1 and allow a later ♞c7 but exchanging e6 for h4 isn't an even trade.

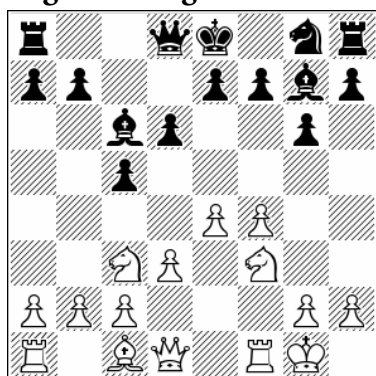
30.♞xe6 ♞g8 31.g3 ♙e7 32.♞c7 ♞g5 33.♙xg5 ♙xg5 34.f4 1-0

By the fall of 1994, I was approaching 2200 USCF and fully aware of the NM record. That prompted me to play more frequently than I may have otherwise and so I crammed in some weekend events in November and December 1994. This next game was one of my wins during that final push to NM, and in so doing, I set the record for youngest NM at just over 10½ years old.

My opponent in this game, Romulo Fuentes, consistently hovered around the 2100-2200 rating band. He always seemed to be smiling and was very kind to me and my family. Thanks to him, the Filipino way of pronouncing my name (with a B sound instead of a V in Vinay) became a common way for me to hear my own name at tournaments around the Bay Area.

Vinay Bhat – Romulo Fuentes
San Francisco 1994

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.f4 d6 4.♙b5 ♙d7 5.♙xc6 ♙xc6 6.♘f3 g6 7.0-0 ♙g7 8.d3



8...♙d7

Not a typical plan, but it makes some sense as White's usual strategy here is to play f5 (even if a sacrifice) and attack on the kingside.

Instead, 8...e6 9.f5 ♘f6 was a regular guest in my play, and I even had this position 3 times against Adrian Keatinge-Clay, an older local junior player who had already made it to National Master.

9.♙d2

9.♙e1 turns out to be a little more common in the database, but it's likely to transpose, as Black's plan in recent GM matchups in this position centers around the same ...f5 setup that Fuentes played here.

9...f5 10.♙e1 ♘f6 11.e5 ♘h5 12.♙e2

An obvious question is whether White's e-pawn should continue to e6 or not.

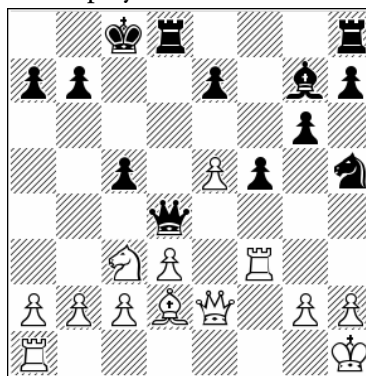
I made the right call by not advancing: 12.e6 ♙c8 13.a4 0-0 14.♙e2 ♙f6 15.♙ae1 b6 and Black can

play around the e-pawn comfortably. White's knights have no good prospects while the black bishops crisscross the position with more space coming via ...a6 and ...b5.

12...♙xf3 13.♙xf3 dxe5 14.fxe5 ♙d4† 15.♙h1 0-0

Taking on e5 instead would have walked into ♙e3 and e-file pressure: 15...♙xe5 16.♙e3 ♙d6 17.♙e6 ♙d7 18.♙e1 ♙f6 19.♘d5! would be rough.

After the text move 16.♙e1 suggests itself, but I really wanted to play ♘b5 for some reason.



16.♙e1?! b6 17.a4 f4 18.♘b5?!

Black's last move truly introduced a threat to the e5-pawn so I should have pushed forward with 18.e6. Black's knight can come back into the game then, but White still has some queenside chances.

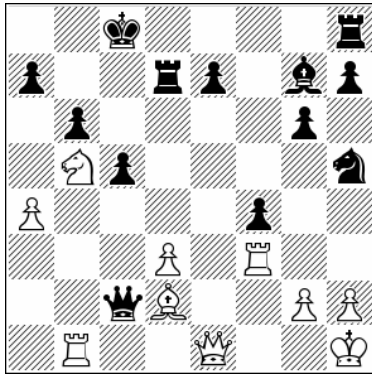
18...♙xe5 19.♙f1?!

19.♘xa7† ♘b7 20.♘b5 ♙xe1† 21.♙xe1 ♙d7 22.♙xf4 ♙xb2 is slightly better for White after 23.♙g5!.

19...♙xb2? 20.♙b1?

My tactical antenna must not have been raised just yet: 20.d4! would have been winning thanks to the various pins and skewers on the c-file and a1-h8 diagonal. The immediate threats are ♙c3 or ♙b3.

20...♙xc2 21.♙e1 ♙d7



22.d4

Now I found (or at least played) this move, but it's the wrong moment objectively.

22.a5 was a better way to continue. Black is up 3 pawns but it's a mess and the computer points to 0.00 across the board after multiple different continuations for Black. A frustrating evaluation given the apparent complexity, but modern chess engines cut through this kind of noise quickly.

22...c4?

I would've had a hard time proving my compensation after 22...♙xd4. White still has some tricks after either 23.a5 or 23.♘xa7† ♞xa7 24.♞e6† and 25.♞xb6, but objectively Black is winning.

23.♞c3

One of Shorman's chess aphorisms while studying Anderssen and Morphy games was "more force, more force!" Those greats often found inventive ways to involve more and more pieces in their attacks until it was overwhelming. Involving rooks from the side (instead of the more typical frontal attack) became one of my common motifs.

23...♞xa4?

23...♞f5 was necessary, and the position after 24.♞xc4† ♔d8 25.♞bc1 ♔e8 is still a mess.

24.♞e6!

Taking advantage of Black's last error. White's pieces swarm Black's position.

24...♔d8 25.♞xc4 ♞a6

A sad square, but there wasn't anywhere else to go. The a2-square is no safe harbor due to 26.♞c8†, for example.

26.♞bc1 ♔f6 27.♞c8† ♞xc8 28.♞xc8† ♔xc8
29.♞c6† ♔b8 30.♞xf4†
1-0

Mate is inevitable.

A Progress Report

I quickly became hooked on chess after my mom introduced me to the game. My chess diet was heavy on tactical puzzles, gambits and attacking chess from the Morphy side, and strategic and endgame play from the Capablanca side.

My style and strengths tracked with what I was studying. I was a good tactician for my level, with a strong preference to bring my pieces out quickly and easily, even at the cost of a pawn. Once I had developed, I was happy to maneuver around in the vague direction of my opponent's king.

That also points to my intuitive nature: I didn't typically come up with plans through a series of questions and answers and a logical train of thought. Instead, I felt my way through options quickly and then decided.

Putting it together at the board, I had become the youngest National Master in US history!

Between my study of Morphy and Capablanca, I was busy internalizing classical principles. There are multiple summations of those principles, each with slight variations, but I'll share *The 30 Rules of Chess* by Reuben Fine here as they were my north star. Even though Mr. Shorman had us memorize them, I

broke some of them regularly by jettisoning a pawn for insufficient compensation or bringing my queen out a little too quickly. Luckily for me, I often recovered thanks to my tactical eye and strong piece play.

Opening Rules

- 1) Open with a center pawn.
- 2) Develop with threats.
- 3) Play knights before bishops.
- 4) Castle as soon as possible.
- 5) Avoid developing the queen too early.
- 6) Do not move the same piece twice without a good reason.
- 7) Use your minor pieces to fight for the center.
- 8) Maintain at least one pawn in the center.
- 9) Make as few pawn moves as possible.
- 10) Avoid sacrificing without a clear and adequate reason. For a sacrificed pawn you must:
 - a) Gain 3 tempi, b) Deflect the queen,
 - c) Prevent castling or d) Build a strong attack

Middlegame Rules

- 1) Have all your moves fit into definite plans. A plan must be:
 - a) suggested by some feature in the position
 - b) based on sound strategic principles
 - c) flexible, concrete, and shortTo evaluate a position, consider:
 - a) Material, b) Pawn Structure, c) Piece Mobility, d) King Safety, and e) Enemy Threats
- 2) Combinations are based on double attack.
- 3) When ahead material, exchange pieces (especially queens) but not pawns.
- 4) Avoid serious pawn structure weaknesses.
- 5) In cramped positions, free yourself by trading pieces.
- 6) Do not bring your king out with your opponent's queen on the board.
- 7) If your opponent has one or more exposed pieces, look for a combination.
- 8) In superior positions, attack the enemy king by opening lines for your pieces.
- 9) In even positions, coordinate the action of all your pieces.
- 10) In inferior positions, the best defense is a counterattack.

Endgame Rules

- 1) Activate your king.
- 2) Avoid passive pieces that merely defend.
- 3) Passed pawns must be pushed.
- 4) The easiest endgames to win are pure pawn endings with extra pawn(s).
- 5) When ahead material, exchange pieces, not pawns.
- 6) Do not place your pawns on the same color squares as your bishop.
- 7) Bishops are superior to knights when there are pawns on both sides of the board.
- 8) Rooks belong behind passed pawns.
- 9) A rook on the seventh rank is often worth a pawn.
- 10) Blockade passed pawns using the king.

Chapter 2

Running in Place

Getting to 2200 at the end of 1994 was a major accomplishment, and the subsequent months and years marked a clear break with the preceding ones. The changes started with a victory lap of sorts.

One quick change was the amount of attention I received. At 10 years and 176 days, I was the new record holder for youngest National Master in US history and several news outlets with local and national audiences asked for interviews. It was definitely strange in 4th grade to have TV cameras at my school, filming me playing touch football with a Nerf during recess for example, but most of the channels and papers did a piece and then moved on.

Their articles and segments set a reference point to Fischer, who was 13 when he reached 2200 himself. But that was a different era; in the 90s, chess information was starting to become more widely distributed and tournament options had grown too (both by-products of Fischer's own fame). And in reality, the prior record holder was my fellow Bay Area prodigy, Jordy Mont Reynaud; I held the record for about 4 years until Hikaru Nakamura broke it in 1998.



Making the rounds during a simultaneous exhibition at the Berkeley Chess School in 1996

Another change was that requests started to come in for exhibitions and school seminars. Most of the exhibitions were small affairs, but one very special one was at the Hawaii governor's mansion in 1996. Jordy and I did a tandem 72-board exhibition (we alternated making moves across all 72 boards) that took 5 hours to complete. The school seminars were also memorable: I was speaking to kids my own age and I didn't have a lot of certainty in my thoughts and conclusions!

The biggest change for me though was that I got a new coach. Mr. Shorman hadn't been a true coach for a while and at the magical 2200 mark, I found a new coach, Savely Polavets. He was a local master (about 2300 USCF) and played at the Kolty Club on occasion. His son was also my older brother's classmate, and so we accepted his offer to be my coach at the end of 1994.

Chess in the Silicon Age and Valley

At the same time in the mid-90s, consumer access to home computers and early usage of the internet were taking off. Being situated in the Silicon Valley was a prime location to be taken along for the ride and in March 1995, Eric Schiller helped organize an exhibition event in conjunction with the local software company Mindscape.

Mindscape made many software games, but for us, they were known for *Chessmaster*. Organized alongside the Pan-Pacific International in San Francisco (won by Korchnoi), we had a double round-robin of rapid chess with 4 players: Jordy, Jennie Frenklakh, myself, and Chessmaster 4000. The winner would get a new Intel 486 PC with Windows 3.1 and all the Mindscape games.

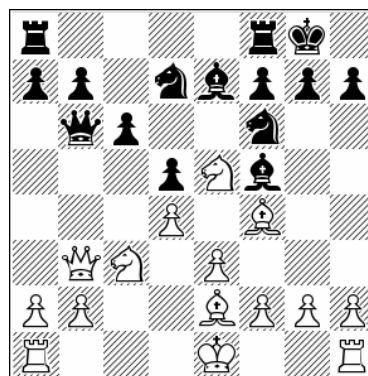
I finished in a tie for first (with the Chessmaster program), and so I took home a new Windows PC. It was a big upgrade from our older Macintosh (where I practiced against Sargon IV), and I started to play regularly against the computer after that. Schiller's efforts also netted Jordy and me a stipend to play in the next Hawaii International, which is how we ended up doing a 72-board tandem simul at the governor's mansion in Honolulu. Soon after, I got a copy of ChessBase 3. I wasn't using ChessBase in a very recognizable way to a modern method, but I was certainly an early adopter of computers in chess. Everything seemed to be going well.

NM Sean Fitzpatrick – NM Vinay Bhat
Berkeley 1995

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 e6 3.c4 c6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♘c3 ♗f5
6.♜b3 ♜b6 7.♙f4 ♘d7

Under Polavets' guidance, I started playing the Semi-Slav Triangle in response to 1.d4. Here, my opponent wanted to head towards a QGD Exchange structure, but with my bishop already developed to f5, Black's doing just fine.

8.e3 ♘gf6 9.♙e2 ♙e7 10.♘e5 0-0



11.♜xb6?!

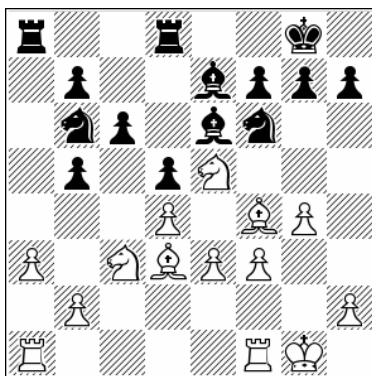
White could have waited for this, but he didn't want to continue worrying about Black trading on b3 himself. The ...♙c2 follow-up won't win the b3-pawn, but the doubled b-pawns can still be unpleasant to play with. I was thinking a trade followed by ...a6 would give me a small edge thanks to my better pawn structure.

11.g4 ♖e6 12.♗xd7 ♗xd7 13.f3 is a better way for White to proceed though. Black can't easily avoid a queen trade and White's king isn't truly that exposed here.

11...axb6 12.0-0 b5 13.a3 ♗b6 14.g4

Black's already secured a queenside space advantage, so White decides to play on the kingside. This is also a very typical expansion for the QGD Exchange.

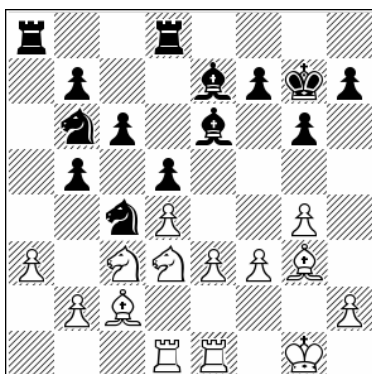
14...♗e6 15.f3 ♜fd8 16.♗d3



16...♗e8!

I both liked playing with the knights and had a good sense for the right squares for them. Sometimes that led me to make too many knight moves or start with a knight when I should have done something else, but here this maneuver is spot on.

17.♗c2 ♗d6 18.♜fe1 ♗dc4 19.♗d3 g6 20.♗g3 ♖g7 21.♜ad1



21...h5!

Making inroads on the kingside. If White takes on h5, Black won't recapture but will slide past with 22...g5!. After that, White is denied the f4-square and Black maintains the better structure.

White also can't rush 22.♗f4 because the b2-pawn (and a3-pawn soon after) falls.

22.h3

Keeping his structure solid, but now Black can make use of the open h-file.

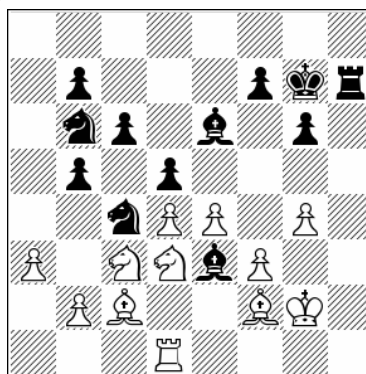
22...hxg4 23.hxg4 ♗g5

Probing further. White drops the bishop back to guard e3, but that in turn weakens his hold over h2. He correctly rejected 24.f4 because it shuts in his own bishop and weakens g4, but the best defense was 24.♖f2 followed by ♗f4 when possible. White needs to challenge some of Black's active pieces, and he also doesn't need to fear doubled f-pawns if Black does trades on f4.

24.♗f2?! ♜h8 25.♖g2 ♜h7 26.e4 ♜ah8 27.♜h1 ♗e3

This highlights some of White's weak squares and pawns but 27...♗e3† was better directly. After the trade on e3, White's d-pawn is difficult to defend.

28.♜xh7† ♜xh7



29.♜h1?

29.exd5 was necessary: 29...♗xd5 30.♗xd5 ♗xf2 31.♖xf2 ♜h2† 32.♖g1 ♜xc2 33.♗5b4 ♜e2 is still better for Black, but at least White isn't losing material immediately thanks to 34.♖f1 ♜h2 35.♖g1. Black's still better after retreating his rook, but the game continues.

29...♜xh1 30.♖xh1 ♗xf2 31.♗xf2 ♗xb2

This begins a short dance of knights, but with a pawn to the good and fewer weak spots (b7 is the

only potentially weak pawn), Black's cavalry romp to victory.

32.♖d3 ♗2c4 33.exd5 ♗xd5 34.♗b1 ♗de3
35.♗b4 ♕d5 36.♗xd5 ♗xc2 37.♗b4 ♗4xa3
38.♗xa3 ♗xb4

Now it's two pawns to the good and White's knight is dominated to make matters worse.

39.♔g2 ♔f6 40.♔f2 ♔e6 41.♔e3 ♔d5 42.g5 b6
43.f4 ♗a2 44.♗b1 c5 45.dxc5 bxc5

0-1

This is a game I'd be happy to play even now from the black side!

Competitive Breakthroughs

1995 was also the start of a turnaround in my personal score against Jordy. Through the end of 1994, I had struggled to an 0-13 record in rated games against him!

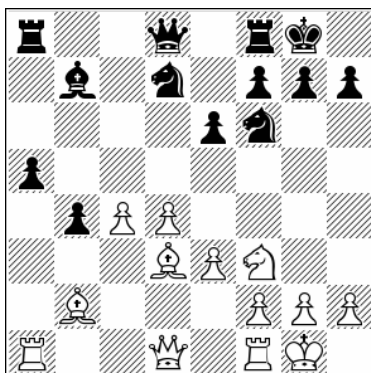
He was about one year older than me and he similarly shot up to 2200, so it made some sense that he was better than me as I was coming up too. But the rating gap also wasn't so large to explain away an 0-13 record.

NM Jordy Mont-Reynaud – NM Vinay Bhat San Francisco 1995

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 c6 4.♗f3 dxc4

Starting down the main line of the Noteboom and following my coaching from Polavets, who in an interview with a local publication, said he wanted me to play more like a "street fighter."

5.a4 ♗b4 6.e3 b5 7.♕d2 a5 8.axb5 ♕xc3 9.♕xc3
cxb5 10.b3 ♗b7 11.bxc4 b4 12.♗b2 ♗f6 13.♕d3
♗bd7 14.0-0 0-0



15.♖e1

Even now, this is the most popular move. Jordy paired a natural talent for chess with some more formal coaching and training than me.

15...♖c7 16.e4 e5 17.h3

We'll see why White doesn't really want to take the seemingly free e5-pawn soon enough. Current theory (and practice) has White clearly on top after 17.c5!.

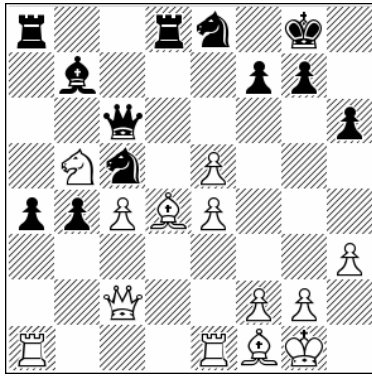
17...♖fd8 18.♖c2 h6 19.dxe5?

White could still have played 19.c5 with similar ideas to 17.c5, but this whole concept wasn't well understood at the time. By taking on e5, White finally releases the awkward central tension, but also releases Black's knights and effectively imprisons his own bishops.

19...♗e8 20.♕f1

20.e6 is a natural follow-up, to reopen the b2-bishop's diagonal before Black secures that square with a knight. The problem though is that after 20...fxe6, White doesn't have a great next move. Black will play ...♗c5 next and White can't add pressure on the long diagonal or use the now vacant e5-square.

20...♗c5 21.♗d4 a4 22.♗b5 ♖c6 23.♕d4



23...b3

The computer prefers 23...♟b3 followed by the prosaic 24.♞ad1 ♜xd4 and ...♞c5, with a winning advantage thanks to the queenside passers. Instead, I had ideas of either taking the e4-pawn (without giving up a4) or sacrificing an exchange on d4.

24.♞b2

And indeed, after 24.♞c1 ♞xd4 25.♜xd4 ♞b6 26.♞a3 ♜c7, Black's position is clearly better. But still, this is more complicated than 23...♟b3.

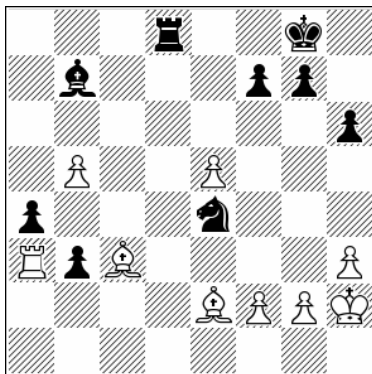
24...♜xe4 25.♞e3 ♜c7 26.♞a3

The blockade is in name only.

26...♜xb5 27.cxb5 ♞c2!

Another transition into an endgame to increase my advantage.

28.♞d3 ♞xb2 29.♞xb2 ♜c5 30.♞c4 ♞d1† 31.♞h2 ♞d2 32.♞e2 ♞ad8 33.♞c3 ♞xe2 34.♞xe2 ♜e4



Now, 35.♞a1 ♞d2 36.♞f3 b2 is winning as is 35.♞a5 b2. We had gotten low on time here (it was a G/60 minutes event) and I stopped writing the moves down, but I won the game soon enough.

0-1

I never did climb my way back on the lifetime score with Jordy, but including this game, I did score 10½/15 after that 0-13 start.

My progress continued with some limited success against IMs and GMs. I beat GM Arthur Bisguier at the 1996 American Open, but Bisguier was 67 years old and rated about 2385 FIDE (and 2450 USCF). Younger GMs than Bisguier typically dominated me though. I was performing similarly against a range of IMs, so this next game with Fedorov, a strong IM rated over 2550 USCF, was a notable moment.

IM Vladislav Fedorov – NM Vinay Bhat

Los Angeles 1996

1.e4 e5 2.♟f3 ♟f6 3.♜c3 ♜c6 4.d4 ♞b4

4...exd4 is the normal move and is what I played much later in my 1...e5 career. But for many years as a kid, I stuck with 4...♞b4.

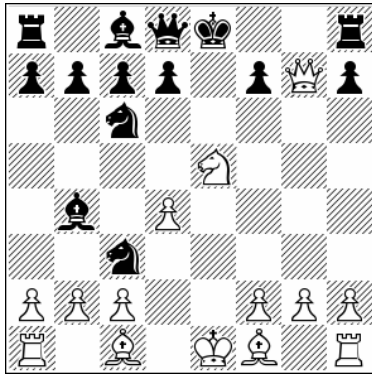
5.♜xe5

5.d5 was what most of my opponents chose and it's the more challenging option. In the 7th round of this very same open tournament, NM Harutyun Akopyan chose that continuation: 5...♟b8 6.♞d3 (6.♜xe5 ♞e7 7.♞f4 d6 is good for Black) 6...♞xc3† 7.bxc3 d6 8.h3 ♜bd7 9.♞e3 0-0 10.0-0 b6 11.♜d2 ♜c5 12.♞f3 ♜e8 13.g4 ♞d7 14.♞e2 ♞c8 15.♞h2 ♜a4 16.c4 c6 White is still better but we drew after a long maneuvering game.

5...♜xe4

5...♞e7 is the more common move, going back nearly a century to games like Spielmann – Bogoljubow, Stockholm 1919.

6.♞g4 ♜xc3 7.♞xg7



7...d5?

7...f8 is the right way to proceed, but opening theory wasn't my jam: 8.a3 e5 9.dxc6 dxc6 10.e5+ e7 11.e7+ xe7 12.d2 f5 13.xc3 xc3+ 14.bxc3 xc2 led to only a marginally better endgame for White in Thilakarathane – Esipenko, 2018.

8.c3 f6 9.fxf6 xf6 10.dxc6 xc3+ 11.bxc3 dxc6

The pawn structure is the same as in the Esipenko endgame above, but White has kept his dark-squared bishop here for Black's knight. That non-swap makes this version much better for White.

12.d3 d5

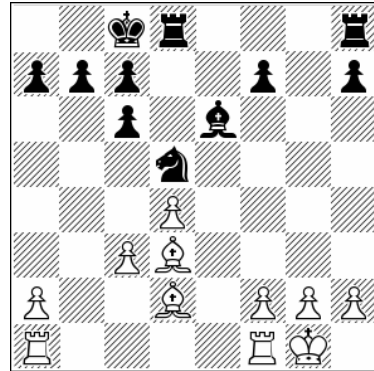
I mentioned earlier that opening theory wasn't my jam and a funny thing about that is that earlier in 1996 – as Black against GM Tal Shaked – I played into this exact line and continued with: 12...e6 13.d2 d5 14.0-0 b6, immediately going after the c4-square. But Tal played 15.g5 and then I had some trouble with my king in the center. Despite that loss, here I was, ready to try again in this worse endgame, and while I'm happy that I had analyzed my own game to find an improvement, I missed the clearly better improvement on move 7.

13.d2

13.c4 b6 (13...b4 14.e4 leaves the knight offside.) 14.e3 e6 15.c1 f6 16.0-0 f7 was a better way for White to play as Black's knight doesn't have any good footholds around the center. In the game, White gets his kingside pawns

moving sooner, but he also doesn't bother Black's knight.

13...e6 14.0-0 0-0-0



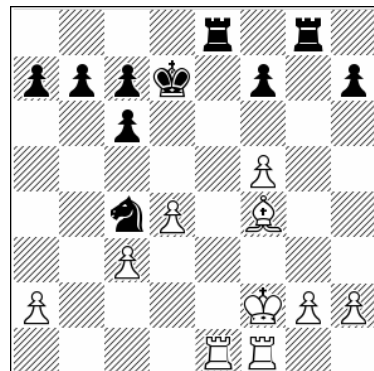
15.f4

It's already too late for 15.c4, as after ...b6, White can't defend both the d- and c-pawns.

15...b6 16.f5 e4 17.xc4 dxc4 18.g5 de8 19.ea1 hg8

19...d7 was slightly more accurate as there's no need to kick White's bishop away just yet.

20.f4 d7 21.f2



21...b2?

Tilting at windmills. I was right to reposition the knight, but the ...d3 fork is easily dealt with and the knight doesn't have any other good options from b2.

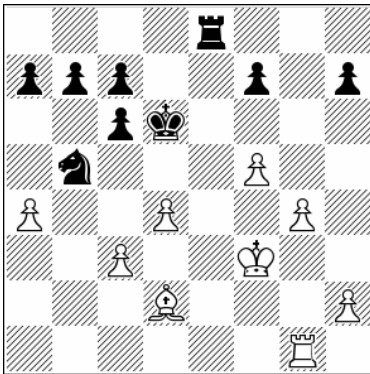
Black does need to find a way to utilize his knight (which isn't currently controlling any truly key squares or attacking any real weaknesses) and a way to use his queenside majority. With that in mind, starting with either 21...b6 (heading for d5) or 21...d6 (hitting f5 and possibly heading for b5) are better. Black would have approximate equality in either case.

22. ♖xe8 ♖xe8 23. ♔f3 ♗c4

I acknowledged the mistake with 21... ♗b2 and returned home. Netting the e-file is nice, but without any immediate entry-point there, it's not that useful either.

24. g4 ♗d6 25. ♖g1 ♗b5 26. ♙d2 ♔d6 27. a4

Technically not a mistake, but it's a practical error as the subsequent win is much less straightforward now. Instead, going after the h7-pawn with 27. ♖g3! was very strong, and I likely would have regretted my wasted ... ♗c4-b2-c4 sortie.



27... ♗a3 28. ♙f4† ♔d5!

Correctly judging that activity is more important here than the c7-pawn.

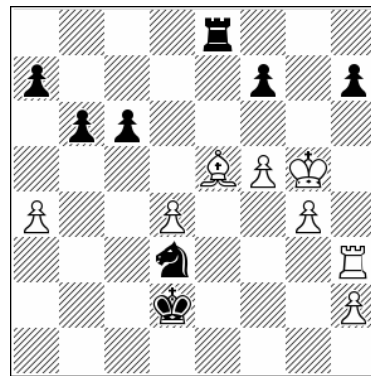
29. ♙xc7 ♔c4 30. ♖c1?

Fedorov's level was dipping as he ran low on the clock. Instead, 30. ♙e5! ♔xc3 31. ♔f4 ♗c4 (31... ♗c2 32. d5† is the idea) 32. ♔g5 c5 and White should just march on with 33. ♔f6 and all the complications favor him. This same king walk is what White should do against the plan of making a passed a-pawn right away instead with 30... b5 (or 30... a5 first, with 31..b5 to follow).

30... ♔d3 31. ♙f4?!

31. ♔f4 ♗c4 32. ♔g5 ♗e3 introduces some problems for White, but after Black's next, it becomes an even more difficult win for White.

31... ♗c2 32. ♙e5 ♔xc3 33. ♔f4 ♔d2 34. ♖b1 b6 35. ♖b3 ♗e1 36. ♖h3 ♗d3† 37. ♔g5

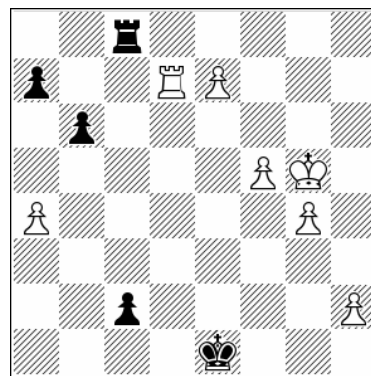


37...c5!?

A good practical try. I thought I was looking at a draw after either 37... ♗xe5 or the game move, and I chose this one because the variations after 37... ♗xe5 appeared more forcing and so might have been easier for him to navigate in time trouble.

I had looked at 37... ♗xe5 38. dxe5 c5 39. ♔f6 c4 40. e6 fxe6 41. fxe6 ♖f8† 42. ♔g7 ♖c8 43. e7 c3 44. ♖f3, when both sides can sacrifice their rooks for the advanced pawns and it ends in a draw. There are also other lines here that I didn't see after 40. e6, but they all should end in a draw with best play.

However, White has a study-like win after 37... ♗xe5, starting with 38. dxe5 c5 39. ♖xh7! c4 40. ♖xf7 ♖c8!. It looks like White is in trouble as the c-pawn will queen, but White's own mass of pawns win the day after: 41. ♖d7† ♔e1 42. e6 c3 43. e7 c2



44. ♖d8! c1=♚† 45. ♔h5 ♚e3 46. e8=♚! ♚xe8† 47. ♖xe8† ♖xe8 48. g5 winning.

38. ♖xh7?

As it turns out, my assessments of both 37... ♗xe5 and 37...c5 were wrong. My miss after 37...c5 hinged less on an amazing resource (like

44.♖d8) and more on an evaluation after: 38.♙g7! cxd4 39.♙xd4 ♖g8† 40.♕f6! ♖xg4 41.♙e3† ♕c2!? 42.♖xh7 ♖xa4 43.♖xf7 While material is officially equal, White's disconnected passed pawns are better than Black's connected passed pawns, and even now, I haven't found a clean way to sacrifice the knight and escape into a rook and bishop vs rook endgame.

38...c4 39.♖xf7 c3 40.♙d6?

A classic move 40 blunder allows me to wrap up easily. 40.♖c7 keeps a draw within sight.

40...c2 41.♙a3 ♖c8 42.♖e7 ♖c3 43.f6 ♖xa3 44.f7 c1=♖ 45.f8=♖ ♖xa4 46.♕g6 ♖xd4 47.♖f5 ♖c5 48.♖xc5 bxc5 0-1

Travels Around the Chess World

In 1995 and 1996, I didn't play in the National High School tournaments with my brother – I was already playing plenty of other events and my brother's High School team also had filled out quite well. They could compete for a top team finish without my controversial participation.

While I skipped those events, I did play in 3 other national youth events during those two years:

- The National K-5 championship in '95 (when I was in 5th grade), which I won
- The National K-9 championship in '96 (when I was in 6th grade), which I won
- The National Under 16 (cadet) championship in '95, a round-robin with the top 10 players under-16 in the country; I received a drubbing from older, stronger players like Igor Shliperman, Charles Gelman, and Dmitry Zilberstein.

I was by far the youngest player at the Cadet and one of the lowest rated, so I wasn't too discouraged by my last place finish. Meanwhile, I was very happy with the K-9 win as there was some real competition in that age group.

On the world stage, my results only improved. The 1995 World Youth (Under-12) Championship was in Brazil and my parents accompanied me. As would become normal, it was during the school year and so I carried a bunch of books and coursework to work through along the way. For the first time though, I also had some opening preparation: a small binder of hand-written opening notes. Those notes look quaint now, but they were a step up in seriousness for me.

That packing list underscores that these trips weren't about tourism for me. Chess was the priority and spending extra time and money on sightseeing (along with more time away from school) wasn't a priority. Instead, I spent most of my time inside the playing area and the hotel room, even for meals.

This last piece was an additional wrinkle for me, as I grew up vegetarian (and I still am now). Nowadays, many more places around the world recognize a vegetarian or vegan diet, but in 1995, many of the wait-staff or restaurants we went to while traveling abroad looked at us with some measure of confusion. At the World Youth in Brazil, we were trying to order a vegetarian version of *arroz maluco*, a Brazilian fried rice dish. The waiter was genuine in explaining that there was only a little bit of ham in the rice, and that there were plenty of vegetables, so it was OK for us to eat. But we insisted on no ham at all and that really confused him. Eventually, he agreed to ask about our desired modification and the resulting vegetarian dish was really quite good – so good that we went back repeatedly for this – but his confusion wasn't unique.

My parents' typical workaround was to bring a portable kitchen with us: rice cooker, portable electric stove, one pot, and plenty of Indian spices and preparations. With a mini-fridge in the room and a grocery

store nearby, we (really my parents) cooked up a storm in the hotel rooms. On the plus side, I typically ate well at these events, but one typical downside was that our bags were always very heavy. The first time we did this though, we learned how to pack our bags the hard way.

On our way to the World Youth, we were pulled off a flight because one of our check-in suitcases didn't pass security. It had a rice cooker in it, which was fine on its own, but the empty cooker was then filled with some other materials to maximize space usage. Unfortunately, that made it look like a bomb to the scanners. The airport security officials had cut open the bag but after we explained what was going on and they saw with their own eyes what was inside, they helped us tape it back together and we were able to travel onward.



Before a World Youth game in 1994 against Mark Paragua, while David Smerdon looks over.

The 1995 World Youth (Under 12) Championships

Just like the prior year, the field at the 1995 World Youth was littered with people who'd go on to be strong players later. I started off well with 5/6 before facing Bacrot. He was the top seed at 2395 FIDE and would soon go on to set the record for youngest GM in the world.

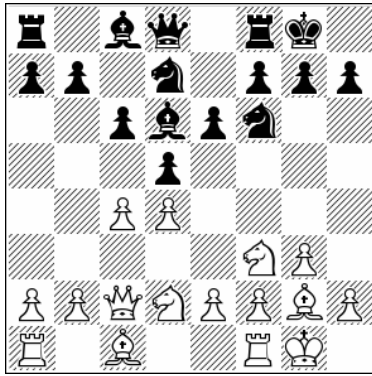
FM Etienne Bacrot – Vinay Bhat
São Lourenço 1995

bishop isn't well placed here in these Closed Catalan lines.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 c6 4.g3 ♕d6

5.♗g2 ♘f6 6.0-0 0-0 7.♙c2 ♘bd7 8.♘bd2

At the time, I had no real idea about playing against the Catalan and so I followed a seemingly natural set of developing moves. However, the



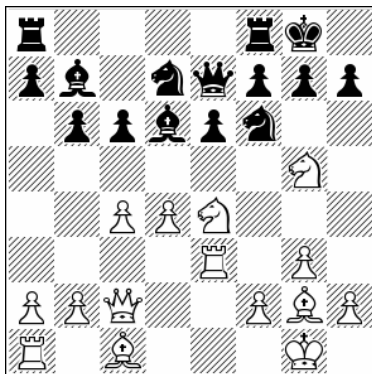
8...Qe7

Not a great spot for the queen, but the immediate 8...b6 would run into 9.cxd5 cxd5 10.Qc6, hitting d6 and a8.

9.Ra1 b6 10.e4 dxe4

With the bishop on d6, I was effectively obliged to take on e4 versus maintaining the central tension as would become my later preference in this opening.

11.dg5 e3 12.Rxe3 Bb7 13.dde4



13...Bc7

13...h6 was a clear improvement. After 14.dxf6+ dxf6 15.df3 it's still not easy for Black to unwind, as ...c5 walks into d5 and moving the queen off of e7 allows c4-c5 from White. Still, Black is very much alive here.

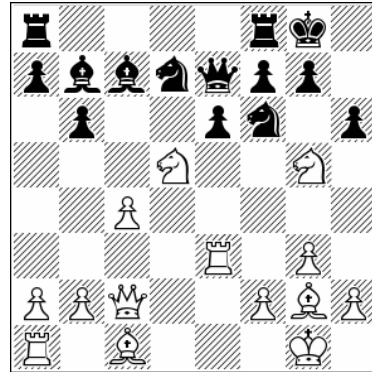
14.d3

There were other ideas to try and maintain or increase the advantage, but Bacrot must've had the game continuation in mind with this retreat. The main alternatives were to immediately swap on f6 or play b4 (taking advantage of the B3 skewer) to try and brute force the c5 advance, both of which are objectively better than his game choice.

14...h6 15.d5 cxd5

15...hxg5 was a fair alternative: 16.dxc6 Bxc6 17.Bxc6 Rad8 18.Bg2 Be5 19.b3 with a small and stable plus for White.

16.dxd5



16...dxd5??

An incredible choice.

16...Bxd5 17.cxd5 Rac8 18.dxe6 hxg5 19.exd7 Qxd7 is neither hard to find nor a clearly bad position. White has the bishop pair, but Black is well developed and can look forward to his bishop getting to c5 quickly while White finds new squares for his queen and the e3-rook.

17.Qh7#

1-0

What a way to lose!

After the game, Bacrot's coach, GM Iosif Dorfman, came up and said, "thank you, we were very worried about the game beforehand".

I tried to take it as a compliment.

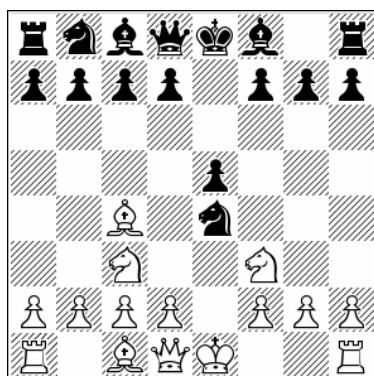
I ran into some trouble in the opening in that game, and that was typical for me. The Catalan is a serious opening, but even when facing a bad opening line, I sometimes didn't pay enough attention to what was going on.

My brother, who was rated about 2000 at the time, had some of the same strengths and weaknesses as me. Aside from his preference for Alekhine over Capablanca, we were studying similar material. And after one game at the 1995

US Open, GM Walter Browne observed that he played the middlegame and endgame well, but a lack of opening attention was holding him back. We knew the same could be said about me, but I still didn't change my approach for some time.

One example of my serious inattention was in the Petroff, where I faced the following gambit once at the World Youth, and multiple times in the subsequent years:

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♙c4 ♘xe4 4.♘c3



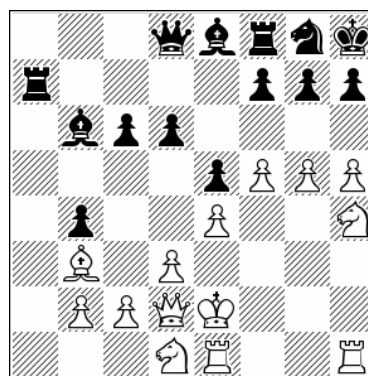
This is an obscure gambit that is also bad, but in this event and for years later, I played along with: 4...♘xc3 5.dxc3 ♙e7 6.♘xe5 0-0 7.♖h5 ♖e8.

Black has multiple better ways of dealing with this, e.g., 4...♘f6 5.♘xe5 d5, or 4...♘d6, or 4...♘c6, or 4...♘xc3 5.dxc3 f6 6.0-0 g6 (the official refutation). But instead, I played into the best-case scenario for the gambit. I managed to score well from this position after 7...♖e8, but that was despite the quality of the position. Some of that learned resourcefulness came in handy in the following game.

Surya Shekhar Ganguly – Vinay Bhat

São Lourenço 1995

A Vienna Game had gone horribly wrong for me, and Ganguly had been building up for an attack for some time. I was desperately trying to cover my kingside from every angle possible with the knight on g8, bishop on e8, and the rook on a7, and I finally had a moment of daylight to try and get some counterplay.



24...d5!?

White is still on top after 25.♘f2, but instead he took advantage of the newly vulnerable f8-rook to grab a pawn first.

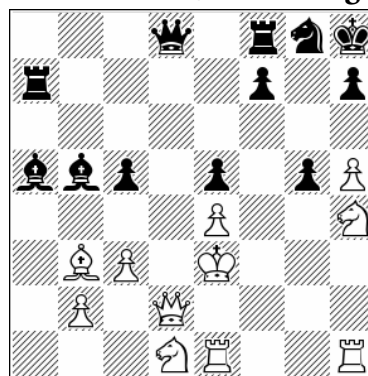
25.♖xb4 c5 26.♖d2 ♙a5 27.c3?

27.♘c3 was correct, but only because of some crazy lines after: 27...dxe4 28.♘g6†! I wasn't expecting that move, but luckily, Black can hang on after some similarly creative defense: 28...fxg6 29.hxg6 exd3† 30.cxd3 ♘h6! 31.gxh6 ♖xf5 All of Black's prophylactic defensive measures were needed for this operation.

27...dxe4

The evaluation already has turned in Black's favor. One problem is that 28.dxe4 loses to 28...♙b5† 29.♙e3 ♖xg5†!. White tries to block the black queen's diagonal, but that ends up costing too much material.

28.f6 gxf6 29.dxe4 ♙b5† 30.♙e3 fxg5



31.♘f5 ♖xd2† 32.♙xd2 ♘f6

Every black piece surges forward. White is toast.

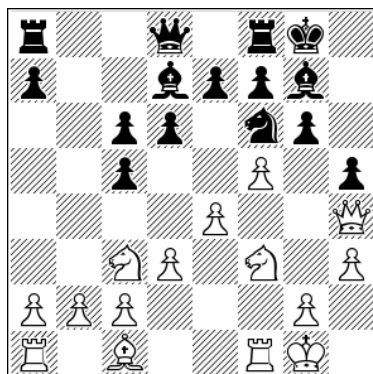


Chatting with Surya Shekhar Ganguly before a World Youth game in 1995.

33. ♖f2 ♜d8† 34. ♕e3 c4 35. ♙c2 ♙b6† 36. ♕f3
 ♜d2 37. ♞e2 g4† 38. ♖xg4 ♞xe2
 0–1

Vinay Bhat – Ni Hua
 São Lourenço 1995

In the final round, I quickly achieved a dream position for White in the Sicilian Grand Prix Attack. There are multiple good ways to proceed, and the common theme across them is the weak g6-point.

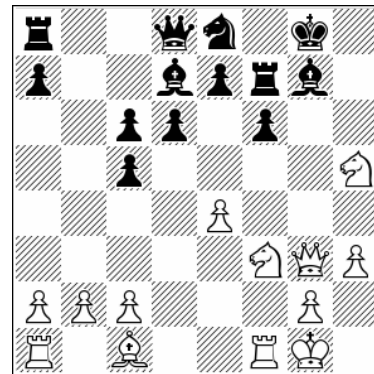


13. ♖e2 gxf5

13...e6 looks better, but then 14.fxg6 fxg6
 15. ♞g3 is still ugly for Black as both g6 and d6 are

under attack. Still, this draws it out longer than the game continuation.

14. ♖g3 ♖e8 15. ♖xh5 f6 16. ♞g3 fxe4 17. dxe4
 ♞f7



18. ♞g6

One of a couple of finishing ideas. Black's helpless in the face of White's threats.

18...♞b8 19. ♖g5 fxg5 20. ♞xf7 ♙e6 21. ♞xg7†
 ♕f8 22. ♞h7
 1–0

This win brought me into a tie for 2nd: Etienne Bacrot took clear first, with Ganguly, Dmitry Batsanin, and myself just behind.

The 1996 World Youth (Under 12) Championships

For the '96 World Youth in Spain (on the island of Menorca), I was now a bit more confident about my standing in these junior events and felt good about my chances. In the final round, I would have tied for first if I converted a winning position against Mark Paragua, but instead, a loss left me with the bronze medal.

After the event, we found out about a friendly draft the American team coaches had with each other about who might win a medal. Schiller had drafted me, and so he “won the prize” of me nudging him into the hotel pool after the closing ceremony.

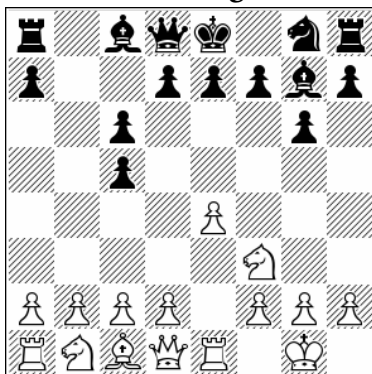
Also in 1996, there was a Rapid World Youth Championship a month after the classical event, held at the EuroDisney resort in Paris. I found success there as well, finishing in a tie for 2nd in the Under-12 group with Pentala Harikrishna. If it was a good year for me, it was an amazing year for Kamil Miton, who won gold in both the regular and rapid events!

Vinay Bhat – Jesus Alberto Alcazar Jimenez
Cala Galdana 1996

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5

An inspired choice and an early signal of a favorite opening in the future. There were 3 coaches for the US team that year: GM Benko, IM Silman, and FM Schiller. With a bunch of kids to support, those three divvied up responsibilities and each of us got some 1:1 time to prepare and some 1:1 time to go over our games. I hadn't played the Rossolimo before, but Silman and Benko convinced me to play it and showed me some basics.

3...g6 4.♙xc6 bxc6 5.0-0 ♙g7 6.♞e1



6...e5

6...♘h6 and 6...♘f6 are both more popular now. In Chapter 6, I share a game against Efimenko where he continued with 6...♘f6.

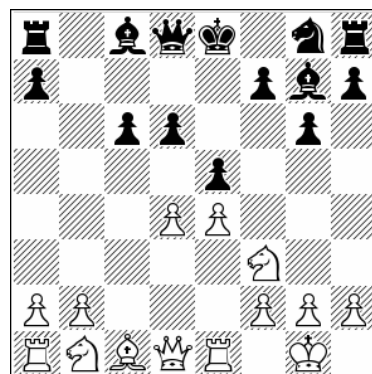
7.c3

Continuing to fight for a central advantage.

7...d6?!

More common among strong players is 7...♘e7, the main point being that the knight is likely to come to e7 anyway, but Black's d-pawn can maybe go to d5 in one-go. For example, 8.d4 cxd4 9.cxd4 exd4 10.♘xd4 0-0 11.♘c3 ♞b8 and Black continues to maintain flexibility with ...d6 or ...d5 on the cards later.

8.d4 cxd4 9.cxd4



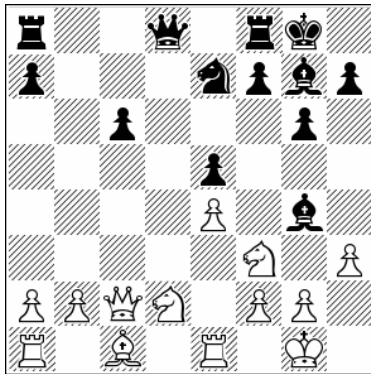
9...♙g4?

A big mistake. Black needed to take on d4 and then get to castling quickly. The c6-d6 pair may look weak then, but there's still some dynamism in them and Black's g7-bishop won't be shut in behind the e5-pawn. Now after the pawn trade on e5, the structure is very much in White's favor.

10.dxe5 dxe5

I'm not sure if Black recognized the danger, but trying to avoid the in-game pawn structure with 10...♙e5 wouldn't helped much either. White just brings the knight to c4 after 11.♘bd2 ♘e7 12.♗c4 and Black has to play the ugly ...f6 or lose material.

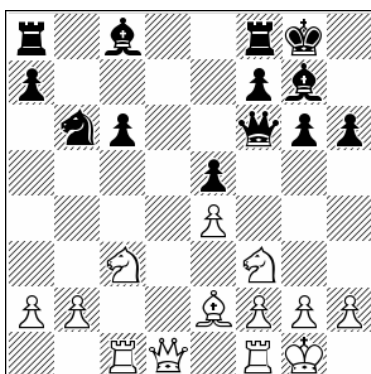
11.♙c2 ♘e7 12.♗bd2 0-0 13.h3



13...♙e6

Instead, 13...♙xf3 14.♗xf3 highlights one difference between my 11.♙c2 and the now most-popular 11.♗bd2 ♘e7 12.h3 continuation. In that case, if Black retreats with 12...♙e6, then after 13.♙c2 0-0, we've transposed back to this game. But in case of 12...♙xf3, White plays 13.♙xf3 and the argument is that the knight is better on b3 or c4 than f3. I'd take White either way.

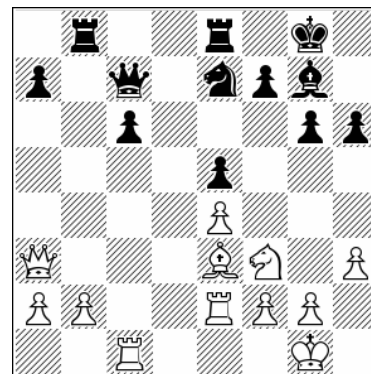
One thing to note about this pawn structure is that a very similar structure is actually possible via the Moscow Variation of the Semi-Slav: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3 e6 5.♙g5 h6 6.♙xf6 ♙xf6 7.e3 ♘d7 8.♙d3 dxc4 9.♙xc4 g6 10.0-0 ♙g7 11.♙c1 0-0 12.e4 e5 13.d5 ♗b6 14.dxc6 bxc6 15.♙e2 (note there are some similar continuations instead of 11.♙c1 that also can reach this structure).



When I started playing the Semi-Slav in 1997, I quickly encountered this pawn structure, and my first reaction was concern for Black's position. But actually, it's not particularly dangerous and the optical advantage would often disappear quickly enough as Black developed. White typically looked elsewhere in general for an advantage in the Moscow.

Like in that Moscow position, Black here has the bishop-pair advantage and a split pawn structure (with exactly a7, c6, e5, and a kingside fianchetto). One big difference is that there White has a light-squared bishop that struggles to find much to do while here White has his dark-squared bishop, which is perfect for both attack and defense. The queenside can actively be targeted by the bishop and if it stays on the c1-h6 diagonal, it also prevents Black from trying to activate his own bishop on that square which is a common maneuver in the Moscow position.

14.♗b3 ♙xb3 15.♙xb3 ♙c7 16.♙e3 h6 17.♙ac1 ♙ab8 18.♙a3 ♙fe8 19.♙e2



White's position is easy to play: bring the pieces out and target Black's weaknesses. Black decides to lash out in the center, but it only turns into more weaknesses.

19...♙b5 20.b3 f5 21.♙a4 ♙b7 22.♙ec2 a5 23.♙c5 ♘c8 24.♗h4

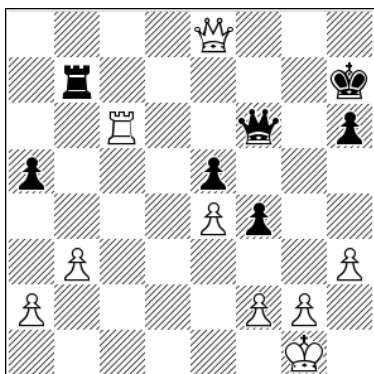
Again, I was happy to execute a full-board press on Black's position.

24...f4 25.♗xg6 ♙f6 26.♗f8!?

I'm not really sure why I played this – maybe I wanted to execute the upcoming tactical sequence?

It's winning, no doubt, but the simple 26.♔a3 jumps out at me now.

26...♘d6 27.♙xd6 ♖xd6 28.♗xc6 ♗xf8 29.♗xf6 ♗xf6 30.♗xe8† ♔h7 31.♗c6



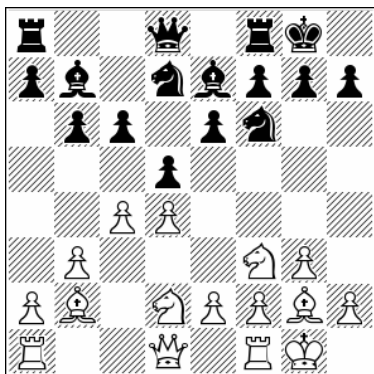
Black could easily have resigned here but he continued, and the finish was:

31...♗g7 32.♗h5 ♗f7 33.♗xh6† ♗xh6 34.♗xf7† ♔h8 35.♗e8† ♔h7 36.♗xe5 f3 37.♗f5† ♔h8 38.♗xf3 ♗c1† 39.♔h2 ♗c7† 40.g3 ♗c2 41.e5 ♗xa2 42.e6 ♗a3 43.♗f6† 1-0

Arkadij Naiditsch – Vinay Bhat
Cala Galdana 1996

This was a critical game for me later in the event. After an undefeated run through 8 rounds, I lost to Vladimir Belov, so I needed a win here to stay in the hunt for a gold medal.

1.♘f3 d5 2.d4 c6 3.g3 ♘f6 4.♙g2 e6 5.0-0 ♘bd7 6.b3 ♙e7 7.♙b2 0-0 8.c4 b6 9.♘bd2 ♙b7



By transposition, we've arrived at a Closed Catalan. This line would later become a regular part of my practice, but this was one of the first times I played this position, and it wasn't on

purpose: I just didn't want to play it like I did against Bacrot. Otherwise, Naiditsch's move order allowed me to bring my bishop out to f5 before playing ...e6, which usually promises an easier position.

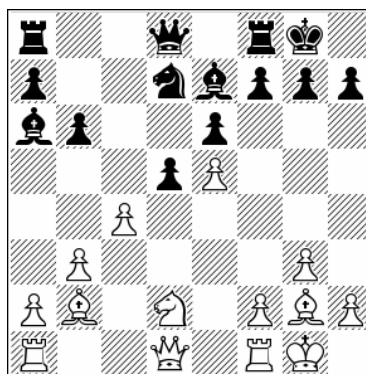
10.♘e5

White has a lot of alternatives in this position, but true to his style, Naiditsch continues aggressively. After 10.♗c2 for example, I had some success with just continuing to develop: 10...♗c8 11.♗ad1 ♗c7 12.e4 ♗fd8 as in games versus IM Dean Hergott and Marcel Martinez. That same slow approach is also possible now, but I was tempted to saddle White with doubled e-pawns.

10...♘xe5 11.dxe5 ♘d7 12.e4 ♙a6?

12...♘c5 would be a simple way to deal with White's early advances in the center: the d5-pawn is now well protected and the d3-square is weak so Black shouldn't have any real problems. 13.exd5 cxd5 14.♗e2 ♗c8 15.♗fd1 ♗c7 would be a good developing maneuver – the rook potentially can help on the d-file but also frees up a8 for the queen too, allowing the f8-rook to come into the game.

13.exd5 cxd5



14.♗e1?

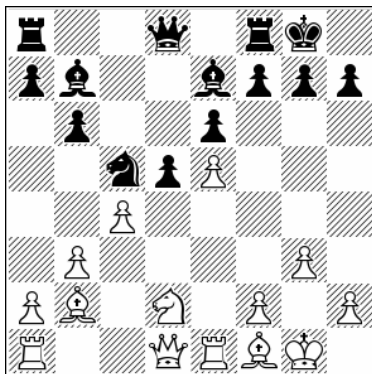
Nowadays, I'd play 14.cxd5 without thinking and I'm sure Naiditsch would as well. The white bishops rake across the board, and with a pawn as well, the compensation is obvious. For example, 14...exd5 15.♙xd5 ♙xf1 16.♘xf1 ♗c8 (16...♘c5 is better, offering to return the material and get some initiative on the light squares for the pawn. White, in turn, would do well to ignore it and just develop

with moves like ♞e3 and ♝f3 .) $17.\text{♞e3} \text{♞c5}$
 $18.\text{♝g4}$ and the initiative will only grow.

14...♞c5

Now we've transposed into something like the $12...\text{♞c5}$ line, but with $...\text{♙a6}/\text{♞e1}$ exchanged for $...\text{♞c8}/\text{♝e2}$. Given White's next move, this turns out to be a positive exchange for Black, but he could have taken on d5 here again and allowed the fork on d3. It's nowhere near as good as a move ago, but there's still some plus to be had.

15.♙f1 ♙b7!



Now the exchange of bishop moves has completely worked in my favor: White has more space optically, but Black's pieces have good squares and targets to attack.

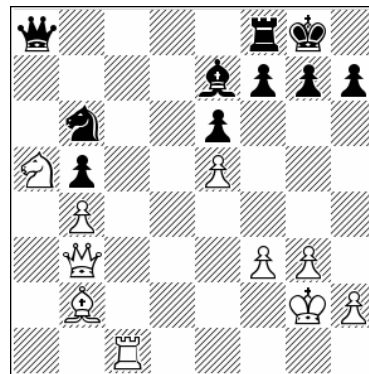
16.b4 ♞d7 17.a3 a5 18.♝b3 dxc4 19.♞xc4 axb4 20.axb4 ♙d5 21.♙g2 ♞xa1 22.♞xa1 ♙xg2 23.♞xg2 b5

Fixing the target on b4. White's extra space has left weak pawns and squares behind.

24.♞a5 ♝a8† 25.f3

Neither $25.\text{♞g1} \text{♝e4}$, nor $25.\text{♝f3} \text{♝xf3}†$
 $26.\text{♞xf3} \text{♙xb4}$ are safe havens.

25...♞b6 26.♞c1



26...♞d5!?

$26...\text{♞c8}$ makes more sense to me now. White has a clear weakness on b4 and his bishop and knight are worse than their black counterparts; the rooks though aren't all that different in activity so trading them off reduces some risk to Black and further exacerbates White's problems. In the game, I thought I was forcing some positive tactical exchanges after $27.\text{♞c6}$, but I had missed White's strong 29th move.

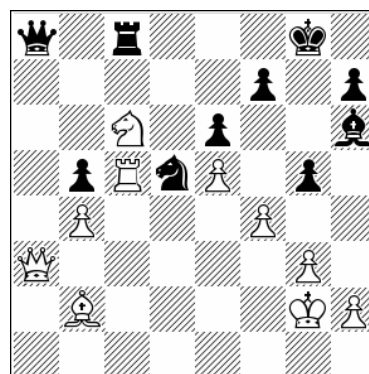
27.♞c6 ♙g5 28.f4 ♞c8 29.♝a3!

The only move to save White (he can't move the c6-knight without allowing a nasty discovery, and taking on g5 is just a miserable endgame), but one move is all it takes. I hadn't seen this when playing $26...\text{♞d5}$ earlier.

29...♙h6 30.♞c5

With Black's bishop temporarily sidelined and White's knight more active on c6 than a5, I'd have taken the chance to trade down with $30.\text{♝xa8} \text{♞xa8}$ $31.\text{♞a1}$. The game move ($30.\text{♞c5}$) doesn't technically jeopardize the about-equal evaluation, but it rides a finer edge than trading down first.

30...g5!

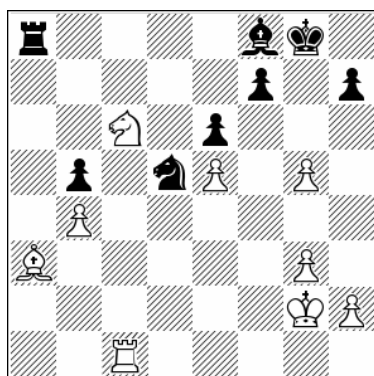


This creates luft, strikes at White's kingside pawn chain, and threatens a tricky ...♙f8-attack against White's queenside. The combination of threats confused my opponent, and he went wrong quickly.

31.fxg5 ♙f8 32.♖c1

32.♙xa8 ♖xa8 leaves White with the bad choice of allowing ...♖a2 winning the bishop or a knight fork on e3 (if ♖c2).

32...♙xa3 33.♙xa3 ♖a8



34.♖a1?

The final mistake – White had to play 34.♗a5 and try to survive the endgame against Black's passed b-pawn.

34...♗e3† 35.♗f3 ♗c2 36.♖a2 ♗xa3 37.♗d4

There are multiple ways to get out of this pin and I didn't have any trouble reeling in the full point.

37...♖d8 38.♗e4 ♗c4 39.♗xb5 ♖b8 40.♗a3 ♗xa3 41.♖xa3 ♖xb4† 42.♗f3 ♖b2 43.♖a4 ♖xh2 44.♖h4 ♖a2 45.♖e4 ♗g7 46.♖e1 ♖a4

0-1

A Progress Report

There were a lot of positives in my play across these games. I was having success in new openings, across maneuvering struggles, and during endgame battles. These successes led to me to three cornerstones of my approach going forward.

First, while openings got the most attention in the chess-material world, I didn't find them to be particularly important to my results. I took advantage of opening errors like the ones Ni Hua made against me, but I often came back from bad opening positions against strong players like Fedorov and Ganguly. Instead, I continued to focus on middlegame and endgame examples.

Second, and relatedly, I started to better recognize the value of defense. Previously, as a sub-2200 player, my comebacks tended to hinge on tactical oversights more than anything else. But now I was putting up resistance against IMs like Fedorov in the endgame too and that started to build up my confidence in this area. As I was also playing stronger players myself, I started to run into stiffer resistance too. As it often turns out, it's not easy to win a won game!

Finally, these games underscored to me the benefit of studying my own games, even if I didn't find an exact opening antidote against Fedorov or Naiditsch. And like the validation on the defensive side, seeing the benefit of my self-study made it easier to do more regularly. I reaped the benefit of this for my entire career, partly through general self-improvement but also thanks to the repeated nature of many chess openings, structures, and patterns.

Despite those positives, there was one complication: my rating barely moved for those two years. I had hit an invisible wall of sorts. I'll save the more detailed post-mortem for the next chapter, but one non-chess factor behind my rating stagnation was my attitude towards chess at the time.

I was playing primarily because I enjoyed it, not for any long-term goals. The next rating level or title sometimes crossed my mind, but GM or World Champion were not what I was thinking about. Because of the NM record, some interviewers would prompt me for such goals, but I'd respond with answers like, "that'd be nice, but it's a long way off" or, "I try to take it one game at a time."

This wasn't me being prematurely professional in my answers. Rather, I've always been inclined towards shorter-term goals and aspirations, and so some of my successes during this time left me unbothered by this plateau.

Chess was still my primary extracurricular activity, but my schedule was getting busy with other activities. I was busy with Little League baseball before later switching to tennis and then swimming. I also became hooked on collecting baseball cards and playing a card-based game called Magic the Gathering. In fact, most of the prize money I was winning in small events basically turned into cards of one kind or another, much to my parents' chagrin.

Chapter 3

Post-Mortem Lessons

One of the biggest positives for my chess development was that my parents almost never pressured me to study or play. My drive was more organic than imposed. And while I certainly wanted to win, I also just loved the game.

In 1995, the US Open was held about an hour away from where we lived in California. The rounds for the main event were in the evening, and because we couldn't easily afford to stay onsite for 10 days and because the late-night drive back home would be difficult, I skipped that portion and played the side events during the day when it was easier for my mom to drive. Whether I won or lost, I took it in stride: another player there commented that even after a bad game, he couldn't tell what happened from my expression. I was seemingly always smiling.

I played dozens of rated games there and more than 200 over the course of 1995 and 1996, winning many and losing several. But after shooting up to 2203 (USCF) by the end of 1994, at the end of December 1996, my rating had only inched upward to 2232 (USCF).

At some point, every chess player struggles to improve, and the game becomes difficult. This was my first brush with that kind of plateau. I was still enjoying excellent results at the National and World Youth levels, but I was treading water overall.

What happened? It all seemed so simple before!

New Study Habits

At the end of 1994, I started working with a new coach and I had lessons most weeks for one hour. Outside of that time, Mr. Polovets sometimes assigned me homework, typically consisting of things like a few problems or annotating a game. He gave me 2 books in Russian filled with tactics and simple calculation problems. The Cyrillic notation and common chess symbols were easy to pick up, even if I didn't understand much else.

Besides that, I largely continued with my previous study plan from 1994: all things Capablanca and some tactical puzzles. I eventually picked up a copy of Bobby Fischer's *My 60 Memorable Games* and Kotov's *Think Like a Grandmaster*. I read through the Kotov book once, but I couldn't bring myself to think as he described; Fischer's book was much more interesting by comparison. I also got my first real opening books, primarily on the Petroff and double King Pawn openings.

At this point, it's a well-understood truism in chess that you need to study your own games and learn from them to improve, maybe even to just maintain your level. And thanks to Mr. Polovets, I had started

occasionally annotating my own games in 1994 and grew that habit in 1995 and 1996. Even though I had an early version of ChessBase, I did my annotations with pencil and paper.

These annotations were very focused on my assessments and short variations; they also typically included one thing that I had done well or could improve on. Despite being short, they were useful introspection and a great habit.

The Weakest Link

My easy-going attitude was admirable in a lot of ways, but my parents began to have some doubts about the value of my lessons with such a prolonged plateau. After two-plus years, they made a decision, and I switched coaches from Mr. Polovets to GM Gregory Kaidanov. My rating gains quickly resumed, jumping up about 100 points in 1997 and another 150 points over the following two years.

There are several possible reasons for both my plateau and the quick growth in 1997, ranging from how often I was playing, to how and/or what I was studying, to questions around my natural ceiling, to my attitude towards chess and everything in between. With some time and perspective, it now feels clear to me that a brief plateau was fair to expect given how quickly I reached 2200 but that the two-year plateau was primarily driven by my study topics and study habits.

I was following the adage of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” when I should have been following a different one: “a chain is no stronger than its weakest link.” By largely studying the same things in the same ways as before, certain weaker parts of my game didn’t improve and so my overall chess level didn’t significantly improve.

What I could have used was a map to help navigate through a plethora of possible material to know what might help most to get to the next level. I came across topics of tactics, attacks, and positional play, but how did that relate to strategy? How much does specific opening knowledge count? When should different topics be emphasized? While I read multiple books growing up as a chess player, I didn’t come across the answers on my own.

A good coach can help with this for sure, and starting in Chapter 4, I’ll share some examples of how Kaidanov helped me in this area and re-focused my efforts, but first, I’ll make a detour to provide a framework that – in retrospect – would have been useful.

The Lay of the Land

My annotations helped build my self-assessment, but they tended to be specific conclusions. I’ve always been detail-oriented and what I could have used here was the ability to map those specific findings to more general concepts and later study topics. Here’s what I would have in mind now for general concept areas and broad skills in each:

Calculation & Visualization

Pattern recognition of tactical patterns (e.g. combinations)

Thinking Ahead (i.e. calculation)

Generating candidate moves (e.g. intuition, logic, heuristics/checklists)

Endgames

Basic technical endgames (e.g. elementary mates, basic K+P, basic R+P)

Advanced technical endgames (e.g. R+B vs R, fortresses)

Complex endgame strategy (e.g. transitions from middlegame to endgame, non-theoretical endgames)

Openings (theory and/or middlegame structures and patterns)

Your own openings as White

Your own openings as Black

Popular openings that you don't play

Strategy (common concepts)

Piece Play (e.g. knights versus bishops, two bishops, improving pieces, bad bishops, outposts)

Pawn Play (e.g. weak squares, IQP, hanging pawns, minority attacks)

Prophylaxis (i.e. anticipating and/or restricting your opponent's ideas)

Dynamics

Material (force), time, and quality (e.g. sacrifices, attacking concepts)

Balancing positional (strategic) and dynamic factors

Transformation of advantages

Practical Considerations (primarily for tournament players)

Time (e.g. time management, speed chess, time pressure)

Nerves and Resilience

Fitness

There are, of course, other ways to orient many of these categories and choices but to me, they seem to be at the right level of detail to be useful.

None of these concepts would have been truly novel to me at the time. But without such a map, I struggled to generalize from specific findings in my annotations to something more broadly useful and more actionable. Assessing myself in these areas would have helped me identify what my weakest links were, and with that, new material to study and work on.

I purposely haven't ranked these concept areas: different skills may be more valuable at different times in a player's development. For example, a beginner needs to focus on being able to think ahead and recognize basic (short) combinations and patterns. They should know the basic checkmates. Memorizing 10 or 15 moves of opening theory is a waste because (1) they won't get to replay that at the 1000 rating level and (2) even if they could play it out, they wouldn't be able to play once they regurgitate those moves – it's wasted knowledge.

I believe those foundations (basic combinations and basic endgames and checkmates) are requirements for improvement; after that, there are many paths to improve as a player and no one path is necessarily better than another; the benefit of the framework is that you can use it to help you and/or a coach assess where you might want to shore up weaknesses.

A Self-Assessment

For example, on the openings front, I was playing some reasonable openings as Black in general (the Petroff and Triangle/Noteboom) and had tried to learn some typical middlegame patterns and structures aside from the basic theory. I certainly did have real holes, in the Catalan for example (like the Bacrot game and some others that I didn't share) and Double King Pawn (the 3.♙c4 gambit example is one such case, but also specifically the Four Knights which I seemed to face somewhat regularly).

As White though, I was still playing unassuming opening lines and for the most part, I wasn't trying to study much theory and typical middlegame structures.

I also only provided one example of it in the last chapter, but the tactical blunder versus Bacrot wasn't as atypical as I would have liked. In 1995 and 1996 specifically, I found a sizable number of one and two-move blunders. Maybe I was losing my focus during the game.

As for strengths, I started with tactical patterns and basic technical endgames and continued to work on those, so those generally were strong areas for me; Capablanca games helped with positional play in general as well and some endgame strategy. While I picked the prior games on purpose, there were several other games with good maneuvering that I could have chosen as well and at times, I could be very attentive to finding small tactical opportunities in the position.

All in all, these strengths didn't disappear and in some ways were reinforced during these two years. But when playing fellow players around and above 2200, if I didn't get one of "my" positions, my weaknesses were exploited much more often than in prior years by lower-rated players. The end result for me was a jumble of good and bad games, good and bad results, and oscillation within a small rating band.

Styles and Preferences

Part of the reason I'm spending so much time on my early years is that a chess player's style is often developed early on. Preferences, however slight, begin to develop and these often carry through to later developments. However, one thing to note is that as chess players improve – especially at the IM and GM level – virtually everybody moves slightly towards the intersection of these breakdowns, towards a more universal approach.

As Magnus Carlsen likes to say, "having preferences means having weaknesses" and as your opposition gets stronger, they will notice your preferences more quickly and take advantage of them more regularly. Players like Tal and Topalov are rightly known as dynamic players, but they played quiet positions and technical ones quite well too; similarly, Petrosian and Kramnik were able to attack and calculate well.

In 2009, I bought a book called *Foundations of Chess Strategy* by GM Lars Bo Hansen. One general topic from that book that stuck with me was his breakdown of chess style along two major dimensions.

Along one dimension, he posited there are players who lean more towards intuition versus logic. And then on the other dimension, there are players who rely more on concrete moves (he calls these facts) versus general principles. Pulling from his work then, here's the resulting 2x2 with his labels for the grouping:

	Facts	General Concepts
Intuition	Activists "Trial and Error"	Reflectors "Alternatives"
Logic	Pragmatics "What must be done must be done"	Theorists "A model for everything"

He provides some example players in each group:

- Activists include players like: Vishy Anand
- Reflectors include players like: Anatoly Karpov, Michael Adams
- Pragmatics include players like: Garry Kasparov, Bobby Fischer, Boris Spassky

- Theorists include players like: Vladimir Kramnik, Peter Leko

These are meant to be tendencies and behaviors that exhibit themselves when tough decisions must be made; nobody fits perfectly into one of these categories. Given some set of positions and games, it's likely that many Grandmasters will agree most moves because they are the right moves, regardless of their individual styles. But when faced with tougher decisions and so-called critical moments, these elements of style crop up more frequently.

Hansen's matrix is related to the concept map I shared earlier, because our stylistic preferences help reveal some of our likely strengths and some methods to become more universal (and likely stronger).

What was my own style at the time? I was making plenty of mistakes across all these areas so my location within these two dimensions is fuzzier than it might later be, but given many of the examples already shared, I'd characterize myself as:

- Relying on intuition more than logic: this has always been true for me, but especially earlier in my chess career, I tilted heavily in this direction
- Leaning slightly towards general principles over concrete lines: I tended to play pretty quickly and as my post-game annotations revealed, I didn't look at a lot of variations. Instead, I often started with the principles from the *30 Rules* and would look to a few, short variations at most to make a decision.
- Leaning slightly to dynamic over static positions: in Chapter 1, for example, I described myself as aggressive-positional

Hindsight is 20/20

In the mid-1990s, many current technical advances in teaching and learning weren't an option, but reading was a natural fit for my development as I had a research mentality from an early age. Given that, trading a few events for some different reading probably would have been beneficial for my improvement.

Generally, game collections from a few strong players would likely have helped: every game collection I've seen from a strong player has examples that draw on all aspects of the game, even if they have their own relative strengths and weaknesses and preferences in different areas. And more specifically, studying areas outside my existing strengths and natural style would have likely helped me continue to improve sooner.

Would I have plateaued for 2 full years had I known all this in advance? Probably not, but I'm also not sure what that alternative would have really been. It's likely that I would have continued to try and balance school, chess, and other activities, and so I might have improved a little faster but not so much as to have radically upended my chess trajectory.

Either way, I'm lucky that this long plateau didn't dull my love for the game.

Chapter 4

Course Correcting



With my gold medal and trophy after the 1998 Pan-American Championships

I began working with GM Gregory Kaidanov in 1997, and I kept the same general cadence that I previously had: one hour per week. As he was in Kentucky, we couldn't meet easily in person and so we had lessons over the phone with a chessboard in front of each of us. Given it was a landline phone, other calls couldn't get through for the hour we were talking!

It was an awkward setup compared to what is now very normal to teach online, but we made it work. I'm not sure why we didn't eventually move to the Internet Chess Club (ICC) for example, but we stuck with our setup for a few years. And my preference for a physical board never went away, as even 15 years later while traveling with a powerful laptop and ChessBase, I'd also pack a roll-up board and pieces to play through positions on the board versus relying solely on the on-screen visual.

The primary content of our lessons was game review (I would send any games I played recently, with my notes if possible); and then the other two main areas were in what I would now call the "Calculation & Visualization" and "Openings" competency areas of the prior chapter's framework. In this way, we immediately started work in some of my weaker areas. By contrast, if it didn't arise in a specific game, we didn't cover any endgames or a more systematic review of middlegame concepts. That was almost certainly a by-product of having just one hour per week.

Aside from the phone lessons, I had two in-person sessions with Kaidanov as well: he flew to the Bay Area for two weekends, and we worked 8 hours a day each Saturday and Sunday. It was during these sessions that nearly my entire repertoire was rebuilt on both the White and Black side. We started on the Black side against 1.d4, 1.c4, and 1.♘f3 setups with Semi-Slav approaches (e.g., 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c6 4.♘f3 ♘f6).

He also suggested a whole host of new openings as White including the Exchange Ruy Lopez (1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙xc6), the King's Indian Attack against the French (1.e4 1...e6 2.d3), and 3.♙b5 systems against the Sicilian (the Rossolimo with 1.e4 1...c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 and the Moscow with 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5†), with the King's Indian Attack against the 2...e6 Sicilian (with 3.d3). I slowly started playing these openings starting in November 1997. The second session would happen in 1998 and it's where I learned the French over the weekend.

I also started to read more chess books in general from 1997-2000. These included:

- I bought Bronstein's *Zurich 1953* tournament book in 1997 and that became a constant source of study for me. (This is also when I realized who I played back in 1992.)
- Shereshevsky's *Endgame Strategy* was added to my library at Kaidanov's suggestion.
- In 1998, my chess idol Vishy Anand published a best games book (*My Best Games of Chess*) and that vaulted to the top of the list for me.
- And over my time with Kaidanov, I also picked up a series of books by Dvoretsky & Yusupov: *Positional Play*, *Secrets of Chess Tactics*, *Opening Preparation*, and *Training for the Tournament Player*. I didn't work through all these equally, but *Positional Play* was the one that I enjoyed the most.

Sometimes it's not easy to self-diagnose, and that's where I hope the prior chapter is helpful. But with Kaidanov, I had a GM coach who quickly (and correctly) identified what I should focus on.

In 1997, I gained about 100 rating points and notched a few draws against clearly stronger GMs. With that in mind, I began to occasionally play non-World-Youth competitions outside the US as there were more norm opportunities abroad than in the Bay Area. I played three norm-eligible events in 1997 and while I came up empty in each, I also showed clear progress.

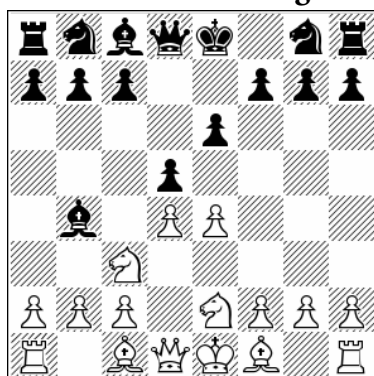
My work with Kaidanov paid off in various youth events in 1998 as well. I won the 1998 Pan-American Under-14 Championship in Brazil and then later in the year, I tied for first with another talented US junior player, Dmitry Schneider, in the US Cadet (Under-16) Championship in Nashville, Tennessee.

After an off-year at the 1997 World Youth, I tied for 3rd in the 1998 World Youth Under-14 Championship as well.

Especially in these early years, I was guilty of largely ignoring the opening, and I often played my openings on auto-pilot. I was mirroring the way I used to guess games, where the first 7-8 moves were often shown before I began guessing. While preaching awareness throughout the game, Kaidanov especially drew my attention to examples where I wasn't thinking for myself in the opening and missing opportunities as a result. This next game was an example of putting that coaching into practice.

Vinay Bhat – FM Fred Lindsay
North Bay 1997

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.♗ge2



4...♗c6

4...dxe4 5.a3 is the most common continuation. White is likely to get his pawn back, as hanging on to the pawn with 5...♗xc3† 6.♗xc3 f5 creates a bunch of weaknesses in Black's position, but after something like 5...♗e7 6.♗xe4 ♗f6, White's setup isn't threatening.

With 4...♗c6, Lindsay goes for a more combative approach.

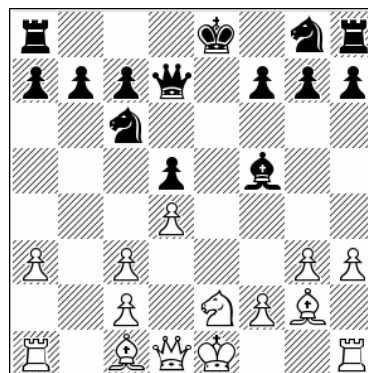
5.a3 ♗a5 6.exd5

Both 6.b4 and 6.e5 are more popular.

6...exd5 7.g3 ♗g4 8.♗g2 ♗xc3† 9.bxc3 ♗d7?!

9...♗ge7 is the most common move here, but my recommendation would be 9...♗a5, immediately controlling the weak c4-square. All of these moves (9...♗ge7, 9...♗d7, and 9...♗a5) are likely to be on Black's radar if left to his own devices and starting with 9...♗a5 doesn't put the other two developing moves at risk. As it turns out, the same can't be said of developing the queen first.

10.h3 ♗f5



11.c4!

This makes good use of the doubled pawns to seize the initiative, and is the reason why I believe 9...♗a5 to be more accurate.

11...dxc4 12.d5 ♗ce7 13.♖b1?!

13.g4 was better, trying to prevent Black from developing his kingside. For example, 13...♗g6 14.f4 f5 (14...f6 15.♖b1 now is a better version, as Black can't play ...♗f6.) 15.g5 0-0-0 16.♗b2 highlights Black's problems developing.

13...c6?

Black provokes the white pawn forward. He was right to think he could round the pawn up, but it happens under poor conditions. Instead, 13...♗f6 14.d6 ♗xd6 15.♗xd6 cxd6 16.♖xb7 ♗e4 17.♗xe4 ♗xe4 18.0-0 is equal thanks to White's more active pieces and Black's inability to castle easily.

14.d6 ♗c8 15.♗d4

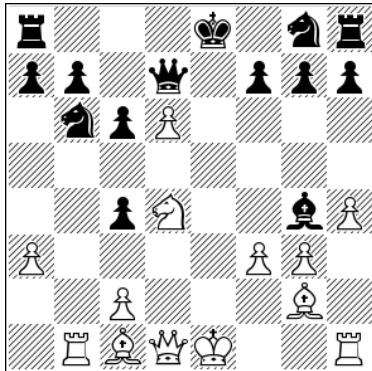
Threatening ♖xb7 and ♗xc6†.

15...♗b6 16.h4?

A mysterious choice, especially given my general comfort sacrificing pawns. 16.0-0 is more

obvious, when Black has nowhere to put his king with ♖e1† coming. If 16...♙h3, White has multiple ways forward and the most natural is 17.♖e1† ♗f8 18.♙h3 ♚xh3 19.♚f3 ♘f6 20.♙g5 with a dominating position.

16...♙g4 17.f3

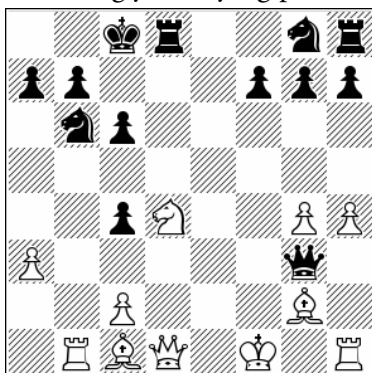


17...♚xd6

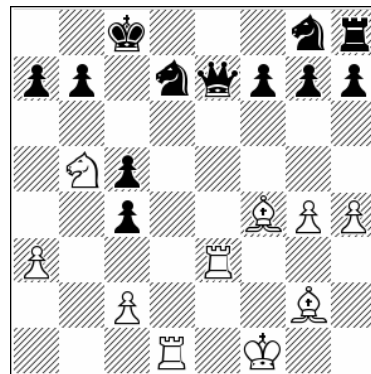
Retreating first is no picnic: 17...♙e6 18.0-0 ♘f6 (18...♚xd6? 19.♘xe6 ♚xd1 20.♘c7†! ♗d7 21.♖xd1† ♗xc7 22.♙f4† ♗c8 23.♙h3† wins) 19.♘xe6 fxe6 20.♖e1 0-0 21.♙h3 ♖ae8 22.♚d4 and White's two bishops and activity far outweigh any pawn deficit.

18.♙f4?!

We both thought this was the right move, but we missed a key point about 18.f4. We looked at 18.f4 ♚xg3† 19.♗f1 0-0-0, and assessed it as good compensation for Black, with 3 pawns for the piece and a seemingly annoying pin on the d-file.



But it turns out there's nothing to worry about for White: 20.♖h3! ♚c7 21.♙e3, and the computer cold-bloodedly points out that 21...c5 22.♘b5! ♖xd1† 23.♖xd1 is winning. For example, 23...♚e7 (or 23...♚e5 24.♘d6† ♗b8 25.♘xf7 ♚f6† 26.♖f3) 24.♙f4! ♘d7 25.♖e3!.



A real brilliancy! Black is officially ahead in material, but he's not using most of it.

18...♚e7†?

The obvious way to save the bishop but now I got a second chance to secure a winning plus.

Instead, correct was:

18...♚d5!

Taking advantage of the unprotected g2-bishop.

I was planning:

19.0-0

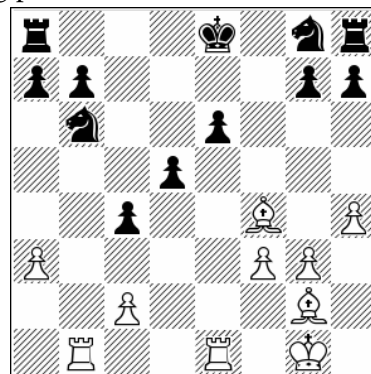
19.♗f2 0-0-0 is also equal. Then:

19...♙e6?

19...♙c8! We both missed this long retreat. After 20.♖e1† ♘e7 Black's position is difficult to crack.

20.♘xe6 fxe6 21.♚xd5 cxd5 22.♖fe1

This leaves White down two pawns, but with a winning position:



The e6-pawn is going to fall, and the bishops will dominate from the center (he'll often be able to put them on e5 and e6 and then start pushing his pawns forward). Here are two sample lines. If:

22...♘f6

After 22...♗d7, White can pry open the queenside with 23.a4!.

23.♙h3 0-0 24.♙xe6† ♗h8 25.♙e5 ♖fe8 26.♙d4

White has a strong bind. The bishops crisscross the board and Black's knights have no way to a good outpost and no way to kick the bishops away either. White has ideas of a4 and g4, expanding on both sides decisively.

These are all nice lines, but we both missed 19...♙c8!

19.♖f2 ♗e6 20.♜xe6 fxe6 21.♙h3!

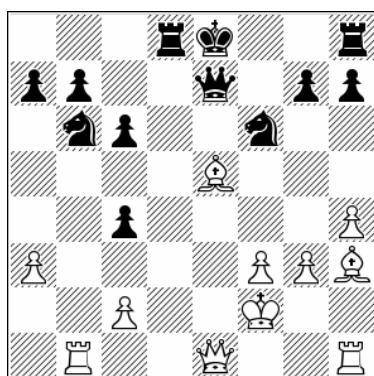
Aiming to strand Black's king in the center right away.

Starting with 21...♞e1 instead allows Black time to castle eventually as there is no threat of 22.♞xe6 like there is with 22.♙xe6 now.

21...♞d8

21...♜f6 would have set a trap: Black is hoping for 22.♙xe6? ♜e4†! 23.fxe4 ♞xe6 with a clear plus. But after 22.♙d6! ♞f7 23.♞e1, White is winning straight away.

22.♞e1 e5 23.♙xe5 ♜f6



24.♙c7! ♞d4 25.♞xe7† ♜xe7 26.♞he1† ♜f7 27.♙e6† ♜g6 28.g4

Just like some of the prior endgames, this one is completely winning for White despite being down a pawn.

28...h5

28...h6 sees Black buried alive after 29.h5† ♜h7 30.♙f5† ♜g8 31.♙xb6, when White is effectively playing up a rook.

My next move has the right idea behind it, but it turns out that 29.♙e5 is slightly more accurate.

29.♙f5† ♜f7 30.♙e5 ♞d2† 31.♜g3

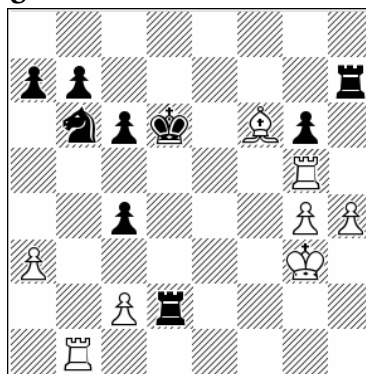
The nuance I missed is that after 31...♞e8, White doesn't have time for 32.♙xf6 32...gxf6 33.♙g6† because of 32...♞xe1 immediately. That rook trade relieves a lot of the pressure on Black's position.

Had I started with 29.♙e5, the e6-bishop would have kept the e-file closed, so in the equivalent position, I could have won with 29...♞e8 30.♙xf6 gxf6 31.♙f5† ♜f7 32.♙g6†.

31...hxg4?! 32.fxg4 g6 33.♙e6†

And now 33.♙xf6 ♜xf6 34.♞e6† ♜f7 35.♞xg6 was more forceful: the connected passers and imperial bishop on f5 make things simpler than the game continuation.

33...♜xe6 34.♙c3† ♜d5 35.♙xf6! ♞h7 36.♞e5† ♜d6 37.♞g5



This is where the 33.♙xf6 continuation shows its relative strength. White is winning the g6-pawn here as well, but the light-squared bishop on f5 would have done double duty of attack (with the white pawns marching to g6 and h7) and defense (of c2). The dark-squared bishop by contrast does help cover h8 eventually, but it's not as secure and so 37...♜d5 38.♞xg6 ♜c5 gives Black some hopes of escaping with a draw.

37...♜e6 38.♞xg6 ♜f7 39.h5 ♞xc2 40.♞f1! ♜d5 41.♙d4† ♜e8 42.h6 ♜e7 43.♞g7 ♞xh6 44.♞e1 1-0

I was very happy with this game for multiple reasons. I had worked hard from the get-go and recognized the value of the pawn-sacrifice with 11.c4. Then, while I missed one possible brilliancy

with 18.fxg4 and a queen-sac, I recognized a domination theme with the bishop pair. And overall, while I played plenty of gambits growing

up, I now seemed to be developing as a more dynamic player by choosing activity over material, even outside of a planned opening.

My Approach to Chess and Competition

The next four chapters dive into a few thematic groups from 1997 to when I became an IM in early 2000. But interestingly, in late 1997 and early 1998, I had a pair of conversations that helped draw some boundaries on my development.

As I wrote in Chapter 2, I knew there were several steps before becoming World Champion and most players didn't succeed in that goal. And as I became stronger, I was less accepting of a loss, but I still wasn't that upset about losing either. The reality is that chess wasn't my primary focus.

As in previous years, I played in the 1997 World Youth Championship (held in Nice, France), this time in the Under-14 division. A little more than halfway through the event, I was playing one of the Russian players, Dmitry Batsanin, as Black on Board 1. I chose the Scandinavian Defense – an opening that's left me with a few scars across various World Youths – and Batsanin obtained an opening advantage and then outplayed me afterwards as well. His only problem was that he was taking so much time that by move 35, he only had 2 seconds left for 5 moves.

Amazingly, he managed to make the time control and later won the pawn-up endgame in fine style. Immediately after the game ended, multiple people told me that in the first time-control, he was making his moves before I had finished hitting the clock after my move. GM Ron Henley was one of the US coaches that year and he was arguing that given an arbiter was watching, I should file a challenge to have the result overturned. I decided it wasn't worth it.

Henley wasn't thrilled and the ensuing dialogue is etched into my memory:

Henley: *“If you were walking on down the street, and it's a narrow path, and there's someone coming from the opposite direction... would you keep walking or try to step to the side as soon as you could?”*

Me: *“I probably would step to the side, let them pass first.”*

Henley: *“That attitude isn't going to win you any world titles.”*

I went into a mini-tailspin after that loss, losing the next two in strange fashion, and so for the first time, I wasn't playing for a medal in the last round.

Looking back, it's an odd hypothetical, but I also think he was right about my attitude and what it takes to be the World Champion. I've spoken with 5 world champions (Spassky, Karpov, Kasparov, Anand, and Carlsen) and while Anand appeared to be the exception that proves the rule, he had more desire and competitive spirit at the board. I would compete at the board myself, but in my own youth events, I could typically shake off a loss or bad result a little too easily by comparison.

A few months later, Kaidanov posed a very different question, but one that also drove at what my ambitions were. Specifically, he asked, “How much did you care about chess versus academics?”

His main point was that I could get better at chess with my commitment level at the time, but to make a big leap – to try and make the jump to a world-class player while in High School – I'd need to focus a lot less on schoolwork. We discussed tradeoffs not just around studying the middlegame and endgame, but even specifics openings. We landed on my learning the King's Indian Attack and French

Defense, for example, because with a busy class schedule, we didn't think I would have the time or energy to grasp the Open Sicilian as White and a main-line Sicilian as Black.

One thing that's not in the prior chapter's learning framework is the question of "How much time do you have for chess?" For me, I decided to stick to my classes and eventually upped the academic workload even more, so we designed my repertoire to be relatively compact and to suit my style as he assessed it. Our lesson content focused on my generally weakest points, and he recommended books in other areas that I could study if I wanted to. It was right of him to ask and even push a little bit, but I'm also happy with the decision I made.

Why Chess was always #2 Growing Up

Setting the National Master record attracted a lot of attention and clearly highlighted my potential. So, when Kaidanov asked, why didn't I jump at making the commitment? A lot of that has to do with how I was raised and my own varied interests.

My parents were born and brought up in India and immigrated to the US in 1975. My dad had a pharmacist's license from India, but unfortunately, that license wasn't worth anything in the US. So, he worked his way up by stocking shelves until he could put himself through pharmacy school again and get a state license. My mom had a degree in botany, but that didn't translate to much in the US and she later worked on reporting in an accounting office before becoming a teaching assistant in local elementary schools.

In India, there is an unwritten hierarchy of professions with careers like doctor and engineer being at the top of the list. My parents never pushed me to pursue one of those careers, but they did emphasize the importance of school. That worked for me because I generally liked a lot of my classes and activities.

This meant that chess always came after school for me, but it also meant that I kept busy with a number of other things too: I played a bunch of sports growing up (soccer at first, then Little League baseball and tennis primarily); I was a voracious reader (at both the library and bookstores, where instead of buying a book, I'd often sit and read a book for hours); and I pursued several academic-adjacent activities (such as the Geography Bee in elementary school to the Science Bowl in high school).

All those interests meant that I had a lot of different ideas growing up about what I might do later. For various stretches, I wanted to be a librarian (I like being around books) or a detective (I especially liked reading mystery novels and trying to solve the underlying puzzle). Growing up, playing chess was not something that I saw as a likely full-time job.

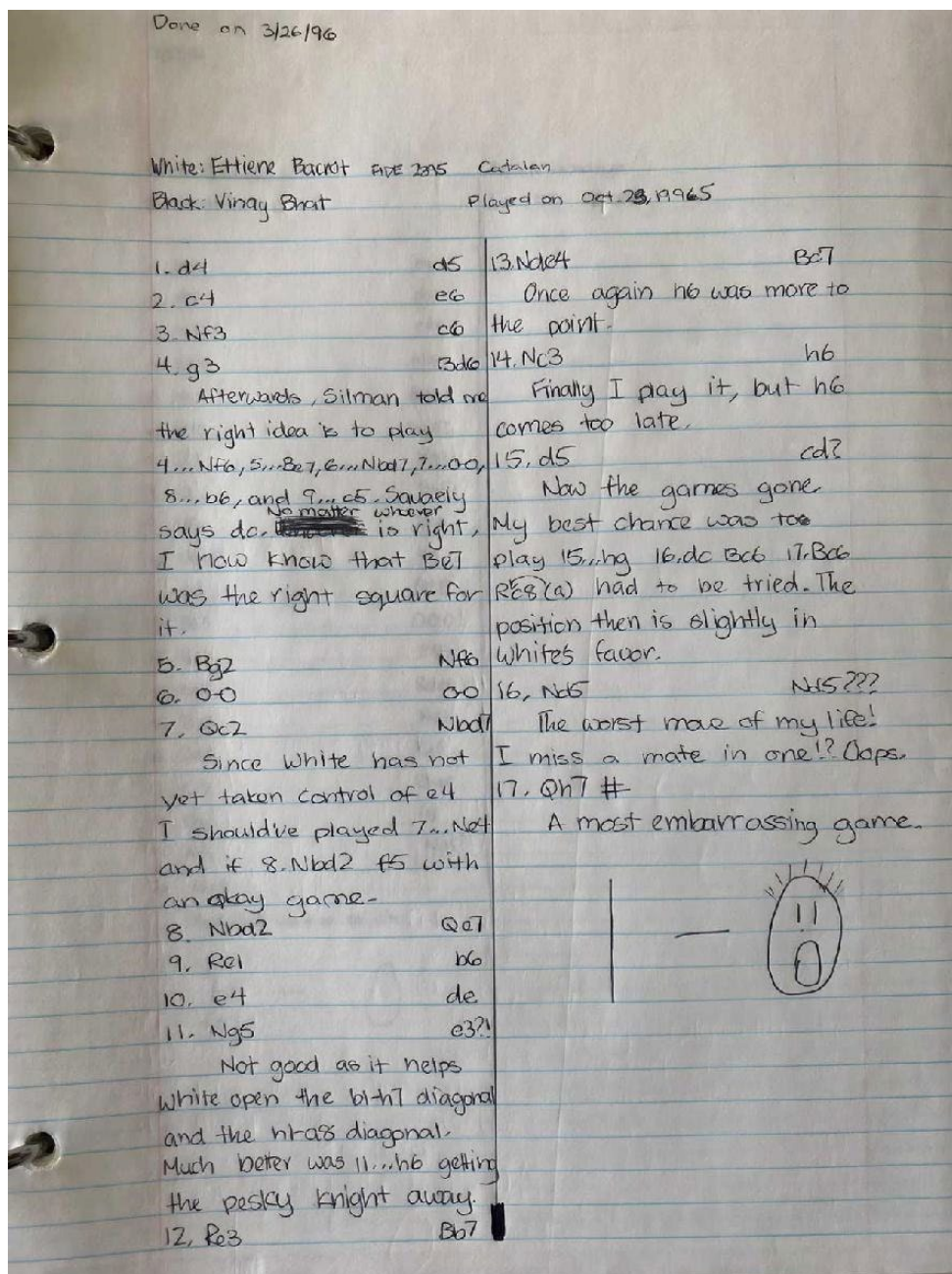
For different reasons, this outlook was close to the general public's view in the US too, where chess had largely receded from the news after the Fischer years and the 1970s. To make any travel and coaching more affordable, my dad tried to get some corporate sponsorship, but to no avail. Setting records received attention, but beyond that, anybody saying chess was their job would likely be met by the follow-up, "But what do you really do?"

Within the US chess community though, my results tended to draw a lot of attention. I was on a very short list of American players consistently finishing on or near the podium at nearly every World Youth event, and Henley wasn't alone in hoping or suggesting World Championship contender aspirations. It wasn't until towards the end of my High School years, when Hikaru Nakamura started setting a new performance bar that that spotlight moved away. In a way, I was lucky that my approach to chess was at odds with those bigger goals – I could continue to keep playing without worrying about (or even acknowledging) those potential pressures too much.

Years later, when I applied to colleges in 2001, I applied as a Political Science major to universities like UC Berkeley and Stanford. This start in Political Science though, didn't fit the traditional Indian view of a promising career path or a successful academic record: even many of my relatives in India looked at me strangely those first 1-2 years of university especially. I later moved towards a more technical focus with Statistics and Political Economy, but I still took classes across Hindi, Neuroscience, Russian Literature, and Physics.

On the next pages are the first page from a sample of my handwritten annotations to my games. I have binders full of them, primarily of games from 1995 through 1997 before I started to use ChessBase more frequently, and these were the kind of notes I sent Kaidanov.

The following photos show how I used to annotate my games, with examples against Bacrot (from Chapter 2), Peter Thiel, Cyrus Lakdawala, and Nikita Maiorov. As I progressed, I went over more and more of my own games and in increasing depth as well.



White: Cyrus Lakdawala 2560
 Black: Vinay Eneit 2293

- 1. Nf3 d5
- 2. g3 Nf6
- 3. Bg2 e6
- 4. O-O Be7
- 5. b3 O-O
- 6. Bb2 b6
- 7. c4 Bb7
- 8. e3 Nbd7
- 9. Qe2

This is not best as Black gets his d7 knight to e4. 9) d4 seems correct after which Rcb followed by c5 seems good.

- 9. ... Nc5
- 10. d4 Nce4

With a knight on e4, Black can relieve some pressure by exchanging knights.

- 11. Nbd2 Bdb
- 12. Rfd1 Qe7

Threatening Bb3 which White promptly stops.

- 13. a3 a5

I didn't feel like allowing White the chance to squeeze me with b4 and c5. Each move -

- 14. Ne5 Nd2
- 15. Qd2 Rac8
- 16. c5 e5
- 17. Nd3 Ne4

Lina Grunette Memorial Day 5/25/11
 G/60; Catalan

- 18. Bc2 Rfe8
- 19. Bb3 Rcd8
- 20. b4!?

This move begins some sharp play. White aims to squeeze Black either by giving him a weak a-pawn, an open a-file, or by taking control over c6 and other white squares.

- 20. ... c6
- 21. Nbd1? Aiming at Nb6.

- 21. ... ~~h5~~ h5
- 22. Bc1

22) Nc6 fails to Bc6 23) Qc6 Nf2!! which wins material for Black.

- 22. ... Qf6
- 23. Ra2 h4
- 24. Bg2

Black's constant threats cause White to spend time

defending and reacting to each move.

- 24. ... Bf8??

Ops!! I knew my position was good, and that the c-pawn would hang if I ever played Bb4, but in near time pressure,

White: Mikita Maionov Black: V. Bhat World Youth 10/98
2085 2235 B-14

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 c6 4. Nf3 Nf6 5. e3 Nbd7 6. Qc2 b6

[I had prepared this line, expecting 7. cd5]

7. Be2

[1. cd ed (1... cd5 8. Nb5 Bb4 9. Bd2 Bd2 10. Nd2 ±) 8. Bd3
Bb7 8.0-0 Bdb =]

7... Bb7 8.0-0 Be7 9. b3 Rcb 10. Bb2 Qc7 11. Rfd1

[White has chosen a timid system. Black is fine.]

11. Qc1 12. Rac1 Qb8 13. Qb1 Qa8!?

[This was one of my favorite moves in these kinds of positions.
My idea was that if white plays e4, I will have built
up pressure along the diagonal beforehand. The only
drawback is that after 14. cd cd, for example, the
queen is out of play.]

14. h3 Bdb?!

[I was fishing around for an idea, but just couldn't find
one I liked.]

[14. h6!? This move is almost always useful.]

15. a3 Be7

[This was my "brilliant" plan. I wanted to provoke 16. b4
after which 16... dc4 17. Be4 c5, Black is certainly not
worse and probably better.]

16. Qa1 Not falling for my waiting tactics. Rfd8 17. a4

[Forcing issues. Continuing to wait, with say 17. Re2 seems
better. The opening of the position, as in the game, doesn't
favor White.]

17... Bb4 18. Na2 Bf8 19. a5 dc4 20. bc4

[20. Bc4? c5 21. Be2 Bd5 is highly unpleasant for White.]

20... c5 21. Nc3 cd4 22. cd4 b5!?. Clarifying the position.

Done on 12/18/95

White: Peter Theil	Petroff	2243-2156
Black: Vinay Bhat	8/30, 20/30	
1. e4	e5	They are Bf2+, Qb2, or f6.
2. Nf3	Nf6	White carries 2 with ...
3. Ne5	d6	15. Bg6 Bf2+
4. Nf3	Ne4	16. Kf1
5. Qd4 d4	Bc7 d5	Too risky. Better was
6. Qd3 Bd3	Bc7 Be7	16. Kh1.
7. Qc3 Qc3	Rf8 Bg4	16 ... h3
Correct, Black will get a very	17. Rd5	Nc6
cramped position with 2... Nf6.	18. c3	Rf8
8. Nd2	Nd2	White is now in a bind
9. Bd2	Qc3	as his knight cannot
10. h3	Bh5	move and his other
11. Re1	c5!?	pieces have little scope.
A risky choice but	19. b4	Bg3
Black doesn't want to have	20. Qd2	Re4
a dull, boring game.	Black develops the	
12. d5	Bc5	rook here for two reasons:
13. Re5!	Bg6	(a) to stop Bf4, (b) to
14. Bg5?!		keep e6 available for the
The wrong move. White	21. b5	Ne7
should have played 14. Bg6,	22. Bc7	Re7
15. Bc3, and 16. Qd2 even though	23. Rd1 Rd1	Rae8 Rae8
he doesn't win the d-pawn.	24. Qd4	Qa5
14. ...	25. a4	Re4
Now Black has 3 threats	26. Qd3	Qb6

A Progress Report

Every chessplayer stumbles or plateaus at some point and I was no exception. After struggling to show progress for two years, my work with Kaidanov paid immediate dividends. That work focused on calculation and the opening, smoothing out relatively weak spots arising from my older, narrower focus on parts of the middlegame and endgame. And as seen in the Lindsay game, I was starting to reflect some of that at the board too.

Kaidanov also asked me to think more about my motivations and commitment level, and my answers ended up shaping my study plan. As we'll see over the next four chapters, even though we spent a good amount of time on the opening, it wasn't very variation-heavy: it was context-aware to both how I played and why and how much time I made for chess. As I progressed, he continued to tweak and tailor our lessons to me.

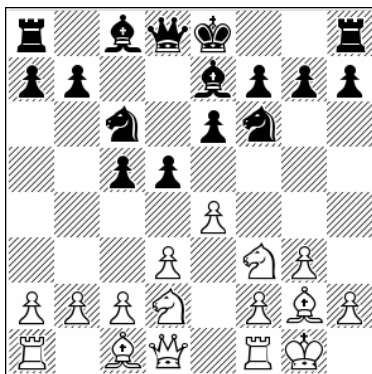
Interestingly, this was another lesson that I didn't quite internalize right away. I had an implicit idea about my own reasons to play while I was growing up, but Kaidanov pushed me to say those out loud at the time. And as seen in Chapter 16, this wasn't something I was great at doing on my own.

Chapter 5

Adventures in the King's Indian Attack

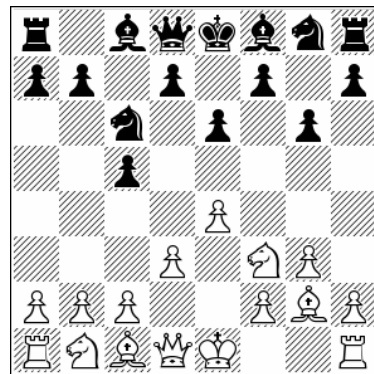
I switched to the King's Indian Attack (KIA) soon after my game with FM Lindsay (Chapter 4), and it quickly became a staple in my repertoire. While there are many flavors of the KIA, for me it always started with 1.e4, and then only if Black had restricted their light-squared bishop with ...e6. Practically, that meant I played it against the French Defense and certain lines of the Sicilian Defense, with two distinct flavors across those openings.

The French flavor typically started as: **1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5 3.♘d2 ♘f6 4.♘gf3 c5 5.g3 ♘c6 6.♙g2 ♙e7 7.0-0**



Black has a couple different ways to play this: one is to castle kingside and launch a queenside offensive (see the Akopyan game to end this chapter), but there's also a setup with ...b6, ...♙b7, ...♚c7, and ...0-0-0. Once I started playing the French, both these setups were my most frequent responses to the KIA.

Meanwhile, the Sicilian flavor typically started as: **1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d3 (or 1.e4 1...e6 2.d3 c5 3.♘f3) 3...♘c6 4.g3 g6 5.♙g2**



There's more flexibility for both sides here as Black can aim for central setups with either ...e6/...d6, ...e6/...d5, or ...e5/...d6. While I encountered the ...e6/...d5 setup most often by far (see the upcoming games versus Cartagena and Zilberstein), the ...e5/...d6 setup is more reliable in general.

Overall, the KIA served me quite well: from 1997 onward, I scored 23/33 with it and outperformed my own average rating by 124 points.

Hip Hop and the KIA

Fast forward a decade to 2007 and 2008, and I helped Adisa Banjoko at a few Hip Hop Chess Federation events around the Bay Area. (Some people may do a double-take when reading that last sentence, but the Hip Hop Chess Federation was a real thing.) Often, it'd be at a school or a library with dozens of kids. The teachers were a mix of local hip-hop artists, mixed martial arts fighters, and tournament chess players, all of whom loved chess. At one event in 2007, RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan was joining IM Josh Waitzkin as the main stars of the show.

I'm a huge hip-hop fan, and even more specifically, a huge Wu-Tang Fan. So, meeting him was like me (as a chess fan) meeting Anand. Aside from some short lessons and speeches, we played a couple blitz games as well. He admitted his instincts were always towards attacking and tactical positions, but that a lot of openings bottled up his possibilities.

I suggested the King's Indian Attack as something to consider. At the time, I thought it might be a way to channel some of his energies while making a solid center and providing clear ways for his pieces to come out. Looking back though, that recommendation doesn't hold much water.

It's true the first few moves of the opening are easy to play, but more often than not, there isn't a real attack in the King's Indian Attack and the play proceeds on maneuvering grounds and smaller nuances. Something that promises a little more open play for the pieces would have made more sense. Luckily, he didn't take my advice too seriously!

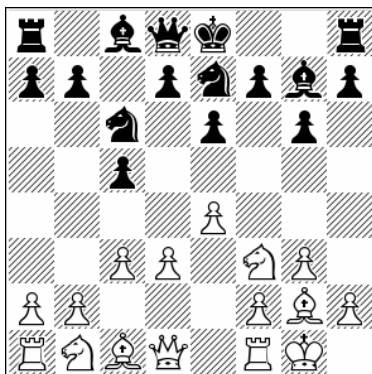
Vinay Bhat – IM Omar Cartagena

San Francisco 1998

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d3 ♘c6 4.g3 ♘ge7 5.♙g2 g6
6.0-0

I later tested d4 ideas to transpose into an Open Sicilian (see Chapter 7 for Bhat – Hummel).

6...♙g7 7.c3



7...d5

7...0-0 8.d4 cxd4 9.cxd4 d5 (9...♖b6 is too hasty: 10.d5 ♙xb2? 11.♙xb2 ♖xb2 12.dxc6 ♖xa1 13.cxd7 ♖d8 14.♖b3! ♖f6 15.dxc8=♖ ♖axc8 16.♖xb7 with a big advantage) 10.e5 f6 is another combative line for Black.

8.♖e2 0-0 9.h4

When there wasn't a knight on f6 to kick away, I typically didn't rush with e4-e5, but that often gave Black an opportunity to play ...e5 themselves and reach a reversed Fianchetto King's Indian. The threat of h5 is a little annoying here, but White should play e5 sooner rather than later so as to get kingside operations going.

9...h6 10.♘bd2 b5 11.e5 ♖b8

11...b4?! 12.c4 ♙b7 13.♘b3 ♖b6 14.♙e3 d4 15.♙f4 is positionally disastrous for Black: the queenside remains closed to him and White has a free hand to bring a knight around to e4 and then f6 and/or d6.

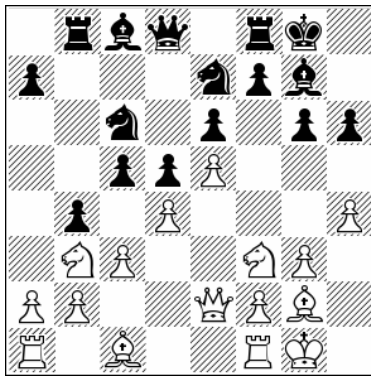
During the game, I preferred 11...♖b6 to try and hold d3-d4 up, but White can likely continue with ♖e1 and standard KIA maneuvers with good chances.

12.d4 b4 13.♘b3

This forces Black to clarify the central tension.



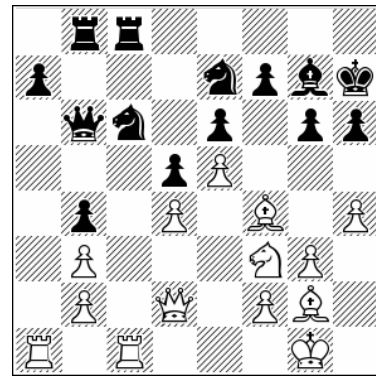
With RZA during a Hip Hop Chess Federation (HHCF) event in 2008



13...cxd4 14.cxd4 ♖b6 15.♞d1 ♔a6 16.♚e1 ♘b5
17.♙f4 ♙a4 18.♛d2 ♕h7 19.♞dc1

Now White is threatening to play ♖b3-c5 so Black felt obliged to exchange on b3.

19...♙xb3 20.axb3 ♞fc8

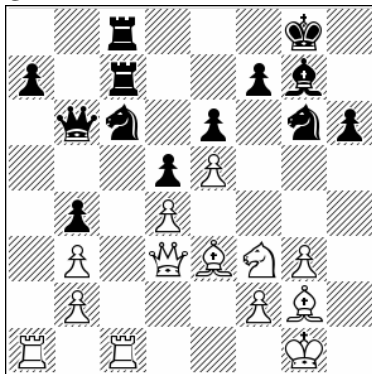


It might seem as though Black has things together: White has no attack, Black has traded his bad bishop, and Black can prepare trades down the c-file, but that's too simplistic. He's actually in big trouble, with weaknesses on both sides of the board, no clear counterplay, and a space disadvantage that will become more apparent as the heavy pieces come off the board. I started with a probing queen move, targeting both a6 and g6.

21.♛d3 ♞c7 22.h5 ♞bc8 23.hxg6† ♖xg6

The problem with 23...fxg6 is that the e6-pawn is weak: 24.♖a6! ♚b8 25.♖ca1, followed by ♕h3.

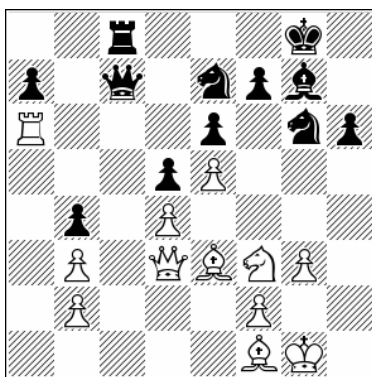
24.♕e3 ♖g8



25.♕f1!

This supports a ♖a1-a6 sortie (the immediate 25.♖a6 runs into 25...♗xe5!), closes off the 1st rank to checks, and introduces the possibility of a queen and bishop battery on the b1-h7 diagonal.

25...♗ce7 26.♖a6 ♚b8 27.♖xc7 ♚xc7



28.g4

There's no reason to rush: 28.♚d2 would have won a pawn, but the pawn move takes the f5-square away from Black. The knights are quickly running out of squares and the g7-bishop also can't be unlocked by ...f6 due to weaknesses across the 6th rank.

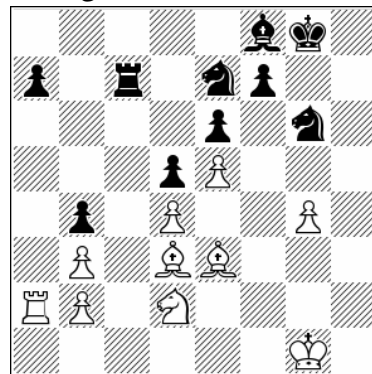
28...♚c2 29.♚xc2 ♖xc2 30.♖a2 ♕f8 31.♕d3 ♖c7 32.♗d2

I wanted to make way for a kingside push with f4 and f5, and my idea with the knight on d2 was to bring it to h5 via f1 and g3. All fair in terms of general plans, but it does give Black one chance to try and break free, and so starting with ♖g1-g2-g3 was better.

32...h5! 33.f3

I didn't want to allow Black any sort of outpost on f5 for his knights so I didn't spend much time on 33.gxh5 ♗h4, but after 34.♕g5 ♗hf5 35.♗f3, it is an extra pawn. I typically preferred approaches that kept a lid on my opponent's pieces when possible.

33...h5! 34.f3



34...♗h4?

This turns out to be a waste – Black should have tried a setup with ...♗c6, ...♕e7, ...♕d8, and ...♖g7 instead but it's still no picnic. White has various ideas to increase the advantage, either on the c-file with ♖a1-c1 (hence ...♕d8 to guard the rook), knight transfers to the kingside (either g5 via f3 or f6 via f1-g3-h5), or even some queenside operations against the b4-pawn.

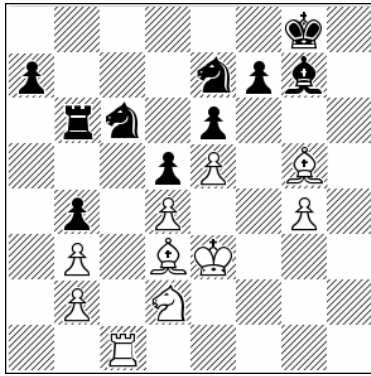
35.♖f2 ♕g7 36.♖a4 ♗c6 37.♖a1 ♗g6 38.♖c1

This is where Black wishes he had his bishop on d8 instead of g7.

38...♗ge7 39.♕g5

Threatening ♕xe7, taking advantage of the pin, and thereby gaining a tempo to support the d4-pawn with his king. After that, the knight will head for the kingside.

39...♖b7 40.♖e3 ♖b6



41. ♖f1 ♜f8 42. ♗g3 ♜xe5

Desperation, but there was nothing else. If 42... ♗g8 trying to save the bishop by exchanging it off, then 43. ♗h5 and if Black persists with 43... ♗h6?, 44. ♗xh6+ ♜xh6 45. ♖f6! sets up too many threats for Black to defend against.

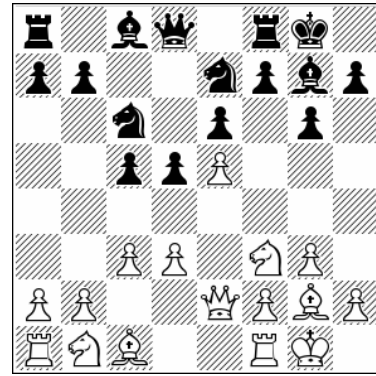
43. dxe5 ♗xe5 44. ♗h5 ♗xb2 45. ♞c7
1-0

FM Vinay Bhat – FM Dmitry Zilberstein
Berkeley 1999

Dmitry (Dima) was a very difficult opponent for me for many years. We first played in the 1995 US Cadet (U-16) Championship and then later regularly at the CA State High School Championship. He didn't put up as big a score against me as Jordy did (Dima was +4, =2 in our first 6 games) but I was also an NM when we started playing so his dominance was a bit more obvious. His first move here was a surprise, but he wanted to enter the KIA specifically and I was happy to oblige.

1. e4 e6 2. d3 c5 3. ♗f3 ♜c6 4. g3 d5 5. ♞e2 ♜ge7
6. ♗g2 g6 7. 0-0 ♗g7 8. c3 0-0 9. e5

In contrast to the Cartagena game earlier, I fixed the central pawns straight away instead of 9.h4.



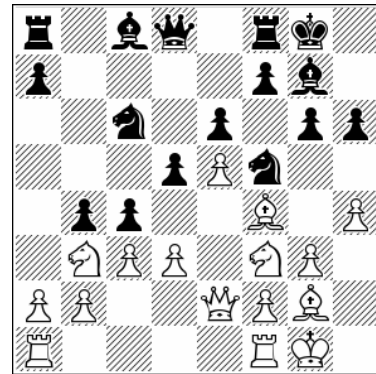
9... ♗f5 10. ♗f4?!

A little too routine: the bishop can become exposed here for no reason, so White should have started with 10. ♗bd2.

10... h6 11. h4 b5 12. ♗bd2 b4 13. ♗b3

Black is fine after 13. cxb4 ♜cd4 14. ♗xd4 ♜xd4 15. ♞d1 cxb4.

13... c4!

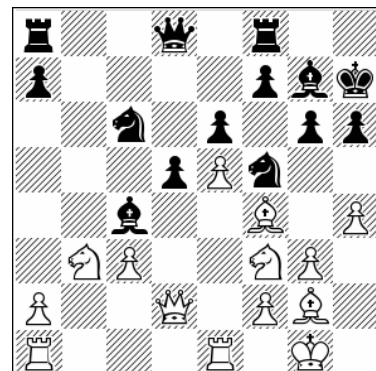


I hadn't expected this move, but it makes sense to open up the queenside.

14. dxc4 ♗a6 15. ♞fe1

The best move. If 15. ♗fd2? bxc3 16. bxc3 g5!, or 15. ♗bd2? bxc3 16. bxc3 ♗a5 with a clear plus in either case.

15... bxc3 16. bxc3 ♗xc4 17. ♞d2 ♜h7



18. ♖fd4!?

I wasn't sure whether to put a knight on d4 or start with 18. ♗h3. In the end, I wanted to try and straighten out my pawns so I offered a trade on d4 and set up some tricky choices for Black.

The idea of 18. ♗h3! is to get rid of the knight so White can dominate from d4, but I didn't love the position after 18... ♖b8 19. ♗xf5 gxf5 20. ♖bd4 ♗d7 as there wasn't any clear play and my split pawn structure bothered me.

Meanwhile, 18. ♖bd4! ♖fxd4 19. cxd4 (19. ♖xd4 ♖c8 and again, White's left with the c3-pawn) 19... ♗a5 seemed a little too easy for Black.

18... ♖fxd4?

One of two clear mistakes that Black makes in this game. While taking with this knight was the right answer to 18. ♖bd4, taking with the other knight was the better response to 18. ♖fd4. Maybe I bamboozled him with my knight move, or maybe he just misevaluated the resulting position.

18... ♖fxd4 19. ♖xd4 (19. cxd4 ♗xb3 20. axb3 ♗b6 is now rather annoying) 19... ♖xd4 (19... ♗a5 20. h5 g5 21. ♖xf5 exf5 22. ♗e3 ♗xe5 23. ♗d4 ♗xd4 24. ♗xd4 ♖ae8 is about equal, but normally Black wants to take back on f5 with his g-pawn, so even though he's up a pawn here, it might feel a little risky.) 20. cxd4 ♖b8 is about equal.

19. cxd4 ♗xb3

Otherwise, the knight is going to land on c5 later and be the best minor piece on the board.

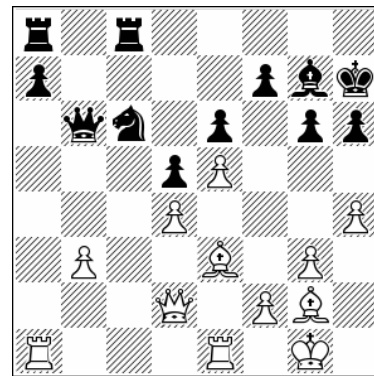
20. axb3 ♗b6 21. ♗e3

Now Black needs to avoid 21... ♗xb3?? 22. ♖eb1 ♗c4 23. ♗f1.

21... ♖fc8

In a lot of ways, this is very similar to the position versus Cartagena: put (for White and Black, respectively, each time) a pair of pawns on b2 and b4 and knights on f3 and e7 and we have basically the same position! This one is a slight improvement for Black given the piece exchange

and more open queenside, but White's still better here.



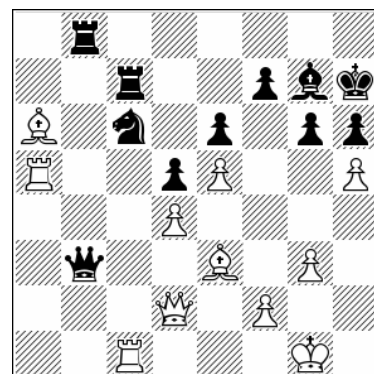
22. ♖ec1

Now I'd prefer to start with 22. h5 before Black reconsiders the ...h5-choice. For his part, Black should've played ...h5 when possible (on the previous move or for the next two moves).

22... a5 23. ♗f1 ♖ab8 24. h5!

Finally, and an important move.

24... ♗xb3 25. ♗a6 ♖c7 26. ♖xa5



26... ♗b6

Black offered a draw here. Objectively, he's clearly worse, and our ratings were about the same at this point, but I think he was hoping our lifetime score would nudge me in the direction of a peaceful outcome.

26... ♖xa5 27. ♖xc7 ♗b6 28. ♖xf7 ♗xa6 29. ♗xh6 wins: the h5-pawn now plays a big role as White cracks open the kingside.

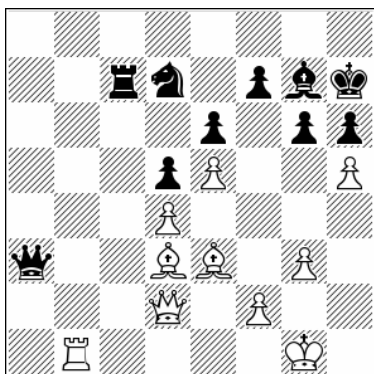
27. ♖b5! ♗a7 28. ♖xb8 ♖xb8 29. ♗d3

White's relied on some tactics to achieve favorable trades. He's rid himself of the weak b3-pawn and his other trumps remain: more space, the better minor pieces, and the more secure pawn structure.

29...♖d7

I'd have preferred to trade the last pair of rooks: 29...♞xc1† 30.♞xc1 ♖d7 31.hxg6† fxg6 32.♔g2 ♖f8 33.♞b1, but the pressure endures. The rook on the c-file feels like it should provide some counterplay, but it'll soon shoot into thin air.

30.♞b1! ♞a3



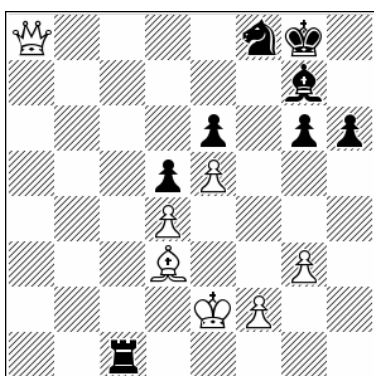
31.♔f1!

A nice idea. White will put his king on e2 so ...♞c3 is not a threat and then will play ♞h1 before opening the h-file.

31...♖f8 32.♔e2 ♞c3 33.♞a2 ♔g8

Another mistake, but Black was in time pressure, and there isn't anything much better to recommend.

34.♞c1 ♞xc1 35.♙xc1 ♞xc1 36.hxg6 fxg6 37.♞a8



There's no fortress here.

37...♔h7 38.♞e8 ♞c7 39.f4 h5 40.♞d8! ♞f7 41.♞g5 ♙h6 42.♞xh5 ♔g7 43.♞h4 ♖d7 44.♙b5 ♖f8 45.♙e8 ♞a7 46.♔f3

Getting the king away from any checks. I was in no rush and didn't want to have anything to target.

46...♖h7 47.♔g4 ♞b7 48.♞d8 g5 49.♙d7 gxf4 50.♙xe6 ♖f8 51.♞f6† ♔h7 52.♙f5† 1-0

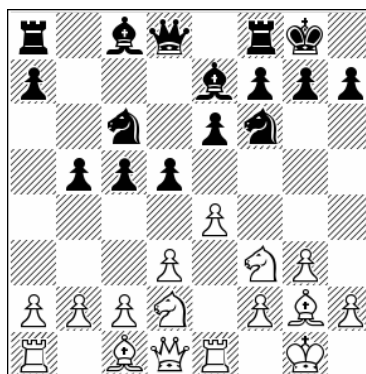
In the previous chapter, I mentioned a conversation with GM Ron Henley during the 1997 World Youth. I also mentioned that I lost the next two games in that tournament, one of which was in a Sicilian-flavored KIA that later turned into a reversed Fianchetto King's Indian. After my loss, Henley asked if I had studied the *Zurich 1953* book by Bronstein, as the Fianchetto King's Indian was the opening *du jour* then.

He was a little surprised to hear I had studied it and still managed to lose, but either way, it may have worked out for me in the long run. He gave me a book he had written on the King's Indian Attack that was an extremely helpful resource with plenty of great games and examples across a variety of lines, some of which came in handy for this next game, played in the US Junior (U-20) Championship.

FM Vinay Bhat – FM Harutyun Akopyan

San Francisco 1999

1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5 3.♖d2 ♖f6 4.♖gf3 c5 5.g3 ♖c6 6.♙g2 ♙e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♞e1 b5



This variation of the KIA is double-edged and both sides have to walk a tight-rope to survive. Henley's book showcased several games from the German GM Wolfgang Uhlmann that highlighted a lot of Black's counterattacking and defensive

potential. While this game isn't the best advertisement for that work, studying those games helped me build a big score in general from both sides of this position.

9.e5 ♖d7 10.h4 a5 11.♗f1 b4 12.♙f4

12.♗1h2 ♙a6 13.♗g4 ♖d4! with counterplay as in Lau – Uhlmann, Potsdam 1988.

12...♙a6 13.♗1h2

13.♗e3 a4 14.c4!? bxc3 15.bxc3 d4! with counterplay again, as in Savon – Uhlmann, Skopje 1968.

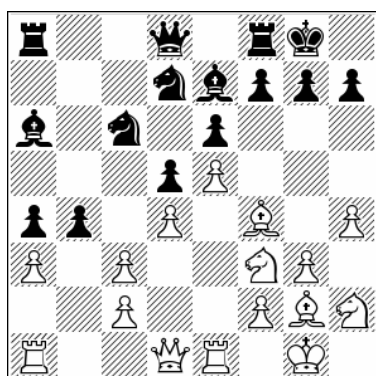
13...a4 14.a3 c4?!

14...bxa3 is the main line and what I played as Black.

15.d4

There's a reason Black shouldn't rush with ...c4: White has the option of 15.axb4! cxd3 16.c3! with a dominating position in the center and queenside (and the d3-pawn isn't safe either). But then we wouldn't get to enjoy the crazy complications that arose in the actual game.

15...c3 16.bxc3



Now, if 16...bxa3 17.♗g5, White starts a dangerous attack that is typical of the KIA. I used to play a lot of games against Chessmaster and then Fritz 5, and those programs really struggled to evaluate these attacks. Even a modern engine like Stockfish 15 needs to get to a surprising depth (depth 30 and beyond, for example) to see the danger here. Having compared my notes to this game over time (I annotated it for myself in 1999, but also for publication in 2000, 2004, and now

again), I've noticed some real changes in evaluations for later positions (skip ahead to the craziness around move 32 to see some of that).

16...bxc3 17.♗g5

Tempting, but given Black's potential improvement on move 18, it would be better to play 17.h5 and attack that way. In general, White has two attacking plans in this variation: weaken the dark squares with h4-h5-h6 or leave h5 open for a queen and play ♗g5. The play tends to be extremely concrete and messy in either case.

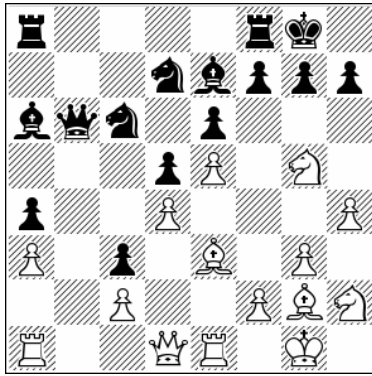
17...♞b6?!

An improvement over what Dutch GM Friso Nijboer played against my coach at the 1998 Olympiad. That game continued: 17...♗b6? 18.♞h5! ♙xg5 19.♙xg5 ♞e8 20.♙f6! ♗xd4 21.♗g4 ♗f5 22.♞g5 ♖h8 23.♙xg7† ♗xg7 24.♗f6 ♞d8 25.♞h6 and White was winning in Kaidanov – Nijboer, Elista (ol) 1998.

Instead, if Black wanted to defend with this ...♞e8 idea, he needed to play that on move 17: 17...♞e8 then if 18.♞h5 ♙xg5!, and no matter how White takes back, Black has the key ...f5 defensive resource and White can't save his queen and play *en passant* at once so the kingside will be more secure. This is a typical KIA defensive motif, but in this specific case, playing 17...♞e8 probably isn't great due to 18.♞e3. Another demerit for this ...c4-c3 idea versus the traditional ...bxa3 lines.

18.♙e3

While the kingside attack is dangerous, Black has two main defensive patterns. One is to bring a knight to f5 (preferably by grabbing the d4-pawn), from where it defends the kingside and especially the g7-square. A second pattern is to defend the h7-pawn via the b1-h7 diagonal, either with a bishop from d3 or with a queen that grabs the c2-pawn. Thus, before bringing his queen out, White defends the d4-pawn.



18...h6?

The prophylactic 18...♖b2! is best. The point is that if White wants to bring his queen out into the attack, he'll have to allow Black's queen to swing around for defense too via c2. And 19.♖b1 ♗a2 stays in touch with the c-pawn without any clear way to evict the queen, while 20.♗a1 ♖b2 21.♖b1 would be a high-class draw.

19.♘h3 ♖fb8 20.♗g4 ♙f8

Black decides to defend actively, which is the right call. The d4- and c2-pawns are more important to White than the h6-pawn is for Black.

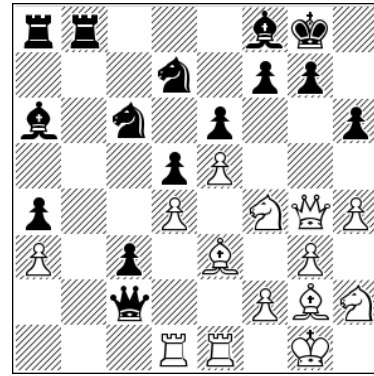
21.♗ad1?

I had a blind spot to the natural 21.♘f3!, being dead set on ♖h5 and ♘g4. However, that move is much better as the a-pawn remains defended and the knight is back in the game. After 21...♖b2 22.♖ec1, White still has ♙xh6 or ♘f4xd5 ideas and White's attack will land quicker than Black's queenside counterplay.

21...♖b2 22.♘f4

Now 22.♖c1? is too slow. You might think that White's saved his c2- and d4-pawns so what's the problem, but after 22...♖xa3 23.♙xh6 ♘xd4! anyway, White has to give up most of his attack after 24.♖xd4 gxf6 and Black is on top.

22...♖xc2



23.♖c1?!

Of the e6- and d5-pawns, I wanted to take the e6-pawn now, but that doesn't work quite yet. Hence the rook move to open that up, but I had missed Black's 24th move.

The immediate 23.♘xe6? fails to 23...♙e2! 24.♖xe2 ♖xe2 25.♖xe2 fxe6, and like in some King's Indians (with colors reversed), White's dead in the water on the queenside after his kingside attack dries up.

But 23.♘xd5! was the best move by a long margin. The knight threatens to come in with decisive impact on f6 and c7, while eyeing the c3-pawn in case either of those squares are not worthwhile jumping to. Trading knights by taking on d5 leaves more weaknesses for Black, so the best move is: 23...h5! 24.♖xh5 exd5 25.♙xd5 ♘d8 leaving a mess on the board.

23...♖b3 24.♘xe6?!

This turns out to be the worst of White's aggressive knight moves (♘xd5, which isn't as strong as it was on the last move, or ♘h5, which is stronger now than it was on the last move with Black's queen off the b1-h7 diagonal).

24...♙c8?

This backwards move came as a very unpleasant surprise. I hadn't even seen it while he was thinking! Akopyan had the right idea, but his execution could have been better by starting with 24...♘dx5 and only after 25.dxe5 playing ...♙c8. But thrown for a loop, I reacted poorly and then chose what might be the worst choice between all of ♘c7, ♘xf8, ♘xg7, and ♘f4.

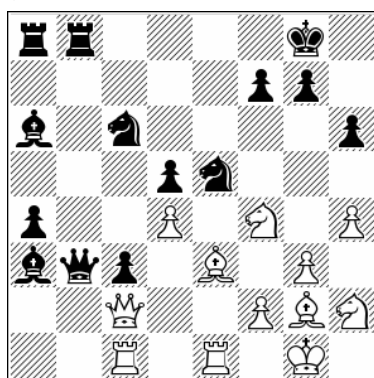
Instead, 24...♖dxe5! 25.dxe5 ♗c8! was the right defensive scheme – White’s best now is to bail out into an exchange-down endgame: 26.♖d4 ♗xg4 27.♖xb3 axb3 28.♖xg4 ♗xa3 29.♗xc3 ♗b4 30.♗xb3 ♗xe1 31.♗xb8† ♗xb8 32.♗xd5 with good chances to draw.

25.♖f4?

I obviously saw Black’s next move, but if I was planning to retreat, why not trade with 25.♖xf8? That’s a solid continuation for White, but best would actually be 25.♖xg7 when the tactics work out for White.

That isn’t very hard to find, so this just wasn’t my day for precise calculation.

25...♖dxe5 26.♗e2 ♗a6 27.♗c2 ♗xa3!

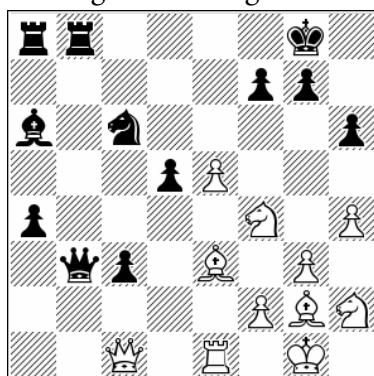


Another unfortunate surprise.

28.♗f5!

The product of a 30-minute think. White leaves everything hanging in the balance.

I started by looking at 28.dxe5? ♗xc1 29.♗xc1, when with 2 pieces for a rook and 2 pawns, I thought there might be some good chances for me.



But the more time I spent on 29...d4 30.♗xc6 dxe3 31.♗xa8 the less I was enthused. White comes out a piece ahead for a pawn, but I couldn’t see any clear way of blockading the pawns and Black has alternatives along the way too.

One of those alternatives is 29...♗c4. Even there, I didn’t think my attack was landing as quickly as Black’s after 30.♖g4 (or 30.♖h5, or 30.e6).

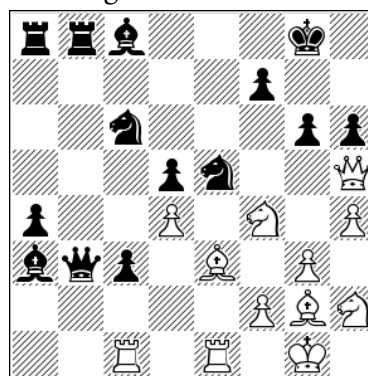
Meanwhile, 28.♗xc3? ♗xc1 29.♗xc1 ♖c4 and 28.♗xd5? ♗xc2 29.♗xc2 ♖b4! aren’t any fun for White.

28...♗xc1

I was happy to see this. For one, some pieces come off the board which just reduces the amount of confusion to wade through; but secondly, Akopyan was thrown off by my ♗f5 move and had spent a lot of time in response.

I was expecting:

28...♗c8 29.♗h5 g6



30.♖xg6!?

30.♗xh6 ♗f8! 31.♗g5 ♗e7 32.♗h6 ♗f8 is an instant draw.

The text move was actually a serious idea I was considering. It turns out that Black’s best is to force a draw just like after 30.♗xh6 above, but I thought maybe this would goad him into playing on.

30...fxg6

30...♖xg6? 31.♗xd5 is of course bad for Black, with ♗xb3 and ♗xg6† threatened.

31.♗xh6 ♗f8! 32.♗g5 ♗e7

With a draw.

When I showed him these lines after the game, he said he hadn’t seen it or else he’d have bailed out

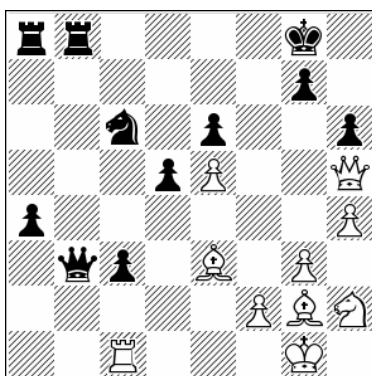
this way too, so I was right to judge that he wasn't comfortable either.

29.♖xc1 ♘c8 30.♚h5 ♘e6

30...♖a5!! is a Stockfish 15 highlight (and could also feature after 28...♘c8). It's a devastating idea, guarding d5 and if 31.dxe5 d4! is a killer blow.

Akopyan's move is natural and objectively good enough, but it requires a lot of inhuman precision.

31.♜xe6 fxe6 32.dxe5



32...♖b7?

Akopyan was already in time pressure, but he again had the right idea of trying to secure the kingside before pushing his a-pawn. The rook isn't a versatile enough defender though.

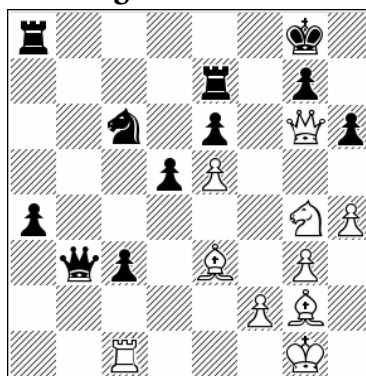
Against 32...a3, I was planning 33.♚g6 ♔h8 34.♜g4 ♚b7 35.♜xh6 gxh6 36.♚xh6† ♚h7 37.♚xe6 and I felt I had practical chances at least, with Black's king completely exposed and my bishops potentially being able to join the attack with ♘e3-g5-f6 or ♘g2-d5 for example. As it turns out, I underestimated my position here, as even if Black pushes his a-pawn forward and ends up with two rooks versus White's two bishops, White is the one who is winning.

Black could also have tried to keep White's queen out of g6 with 32...♜e7 but the kingside is still weak for the time being before the knight lands on f5. After 33.♘h6!, Black's knight and pawn are unable to withstand White's attacking firepower.

Black does have one winning defensive setup and it starts with 32...♚b7!. Here is a sample line that required heavy assistance from the engine. (During the game I planned 33.♚g4 so I'll focus on that, but the alternatives such as 33.♘h6, 33.♖xc3, and 33.♜g4 all fail too.) 33.♚g4! ♚d7! 34.♘h6 ♖b4! 35.♚g5 ♚e7! Black's defenses are holding steady.

So objectively Black hadn't thrown away the win earlier, but luckily for me, the decision complexity was asymmetric. I needed to throw my pieces forward and there weren't many choices for how to do that, so all my moves suggested themselves. In contrast, Black had a ton of choices, and any misstep was typically going to be fatal.

33.♚g6 ♖e7 34.♜g4



34...♜xe5

An unhappy choice, but the alternatives weren't pleasant either. 34...a3 was the heads-down approach, but either knight move is going to win the game. For example, 35.♜f6† ♔f8 36.♘h6 a2 37.♚h7.

35.♜xe5 a3 36.♜c6 ♖f7 37.♚xe6 a2 38.♘d5 ♚b2 39.♚xf7† ♔h8 40.♘h6! gxh6

40...♚xc1† 41.♘c1 a1=♚ 42.♚h5#

41.♚f6†

1-0

Having reached move 40, Akopyan had a moment to think and saw the impending checkmate.

My Learnings and Progress

The KIA was a key part of my repertoire for many years. It featured heavily across all my IM norms, including this win against Cartagena, and even future successes as seen in Chapter 21.

These games helped me better recognize when a small disadvantage in a seemingly closed position could snowball. Both Cartagena and Zilberstein granted me some clear static advantages (e.g., more space, the bishop pair, and/or a better pawn structure) in return for a trade or two. In both games, I felt White had the better position, but if I switched places with my opponent, I wouldn't have said Black was that much worse.

On a related note, these two games saw me gain a space advantage thanks to my central d4-e5 pawn chain. One of the *30 Rules* recommends avoiding trades in such situations because then your opponent won't feel as constricted. Still, in both cases, trading some of the heavy pieces was beneficial – sometimes that reduced my opponent's counterplay (and so I could bring my king to e2, as in the Zilberstein game), but it also could stretch my opponent's defensive assignments past a breaking point (as in the Cartagena game).

In analyzing these games afterwards, I also recognized that I could improve on my prophylaxis. My games with Zilberstein and Akopyan featured some missed (or mis-timed) choices. I needed to get in the habit of asking myself more regularly about the tradeoff between better achieving my own goals and trying to thwart my opponent's.

Finally, Henley's *King's Indian Attack* book was one of the first opening books that I read which was built around complete games versus just opening variations. That had me looking for more complete games in my other openings and to think about the opening as a less purely distinct phase of the game. Opening books that emphasized typical middlegame and tactical patterns, such as McDonald's *Mastering the French*, became the kinds of opening books I gravitated towards.

Chapter 6

Knights, Bishops and the ♖b5 Sicilian

Another new cornerstone of my repertoire under Kaidanov were the ♖b5 Sicilians. I had played the Rossolimo once before (against Alcazar Jimenez, from Chapter 2), but that was as a surprise. Now, though, I focused on both 1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♖b5 and 2...d6 3.♖b5† (against 2...e6, 3.d3 with the KIA was the plan). The ♖b5 Sicilians introduced several interesting middlegame structures and more variety than what I encountered with the King's Indian Attack.

There was another common theme to my openings then: trading a bishop for a knight. Alongside these Sicilian lines, I started playing the Exchange Ruy Lopez (1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♖b5 a6 4.♖xc6) and I had already been playing the Semi-Slav Noteboom.

(1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗c3 e6 4.♗f3 dxc4 5.a4 ♖b4 and so on, and Black takes on c3 soon; as in my game with Mont-Reynaud from Chapter 2)

I always enjoyed playing with the knights, but there is a bit of a chicken and egg problem in dissecting whether it was preference or learned. Most likely, it was a combination of the two.

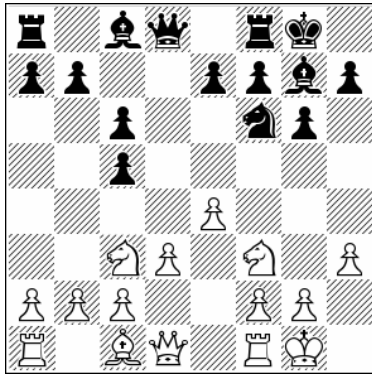
Like the KIA, the ♖b5 Sicilians suited me quite well: I played 63 games across the ♖b5 Sicilians and scored 36.5/63. Not as good a percentage as the KIA, but most of my losses came in my first year playing it and I still outperformed my own average rating over time by 78 points. Expanding on the bishops for knights opening philosophy, I outperformed my own average rating by 170 points in the Exchange Ruy Lopez, so this became a real pattern for me.

NM Vinay Bhat – IM Carlos Perdomo New York 1998

My dad came to the US in 1975 and his first jobs were stocking the shelves in pharmacies in New York City. By the mid-1980s, my parents and older brother moved to the Bay Area, and by the late 1980s, he was in an industry pharmaceutical job while working in a pharmacy at night and taking classes at San Jose State University for a master's degree in Quality Assurance.

In 1998, I played in 3 norm-eligible events and one of them was in New York. Given my dad's history there, he accompanied me, and we stayed with one of his old college classmates who had settled down in Long Island.

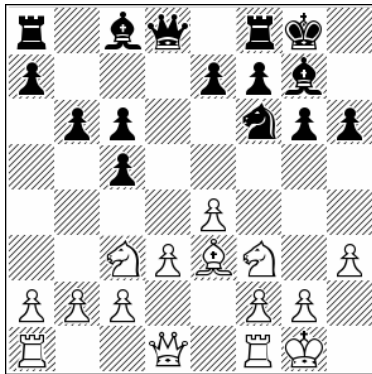
1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♖b5 g6 4.♖xc6 dxc6 5.h3
♖g7 6.d3 ♗f6 7.♗c3 0-0 8.0-0



8...b6

I faced this setup a couple of times in the late '90s, but now the earlier ...e5 setups dominate completely (Black could still get to that with ...d7 and ...e5 instead). With the game move, Black tries to avoid shutting in his dark-squared bishop and instead maneuver his knight around to e6 via e8 and c7. However, that knight transfer is very slow and in the interim, Black lacks central control.

9.♙g5 h6 10.♙e3



10...♗h7 11.a4

Unnecessary, and in my post-game notes, I preferred 11.d2 and 12.f4 immediately. The following year, I used that more direct approach to win a key game against FM Vladimir Mezentsev.

11...♞c7 12.d2

I was preparing a central-kingside expansion with f4. Black's next move mixes the ...e5 and ...f6 systems in a poor way.

12...e5 13.f4 ♖h5?

Perdomo's plan was intended to jam up the kingside, but my opponent either had not seen my next two moves or he had underestimated them.

13...exf4

This was necessary, but Black's lost some time and that means White can claim some nice central squares.

14.♙xf4 ♞e7 15.♗c4 ♗e8 16.e5!?

16.♞f3 is also reasonable

16...♙e6 17.♞e2

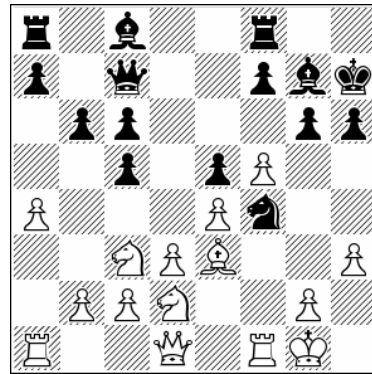
This prepares ♗e4 without having to worry about the e5-pawn after some trades.

17...♙xc4 18.dxc4 ♗c7 19.♗e4 ♗e6 20.♙h2 ♗d4 21.♞d3

White is ready to sink into f6 or d6; grabbing the e5-pawn is maybe best but White's on top with a solid plus after:

21...♙xe5 22.♙xe5 ♞xe5 23.♗f6† ♗g7 24.♗d7

14.f5! ♗f4



15.g3!

I wanted to get rid of the knight and after quickly seeing that I could open the h-file for the low price of a pawn, I pushed forward.

15...♗h5

15...♗xh3† 16.♗g2

The h-file is going to open up to Black's detriment. For example:

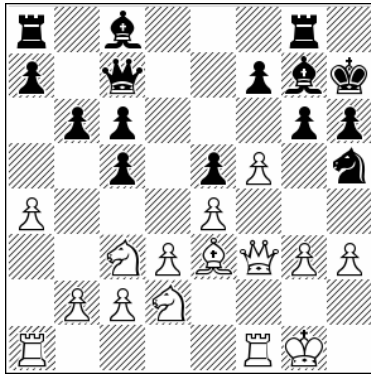
16...gxf5

16...♗g5 17.♙xg5 hxg5 18.f6 and it's easy to see that White wins a piece or wins on the h-file quickly: 18...♙h6 (18...♙h8 19.♞h1† ♗g8 20.♞xh8† is curtains.) 19.♞h1 ♞d7 20.♞h2 ♞h8 21.♞h1 is simple and decisive.

17.exf5 ♗g5 18.♙xg5 hxg5 19.♞h5† ♙h6 20.♞h1 ♞d6 21.♗de4

Black is finished.

16.♞f3 ♞g8



17. d2

I wanted to play g4 but didn't want to worry about Black sacrificing a pawn with ...d4 to get dark-square play.

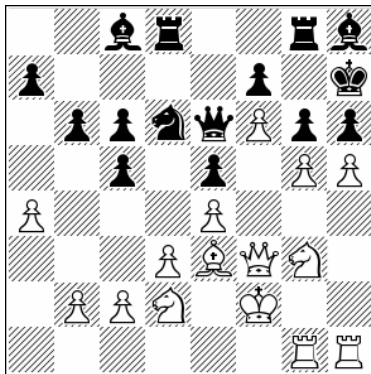
17...d4 18.g4 d7 19.f2

Black doesn't have any counterplay, so I took my time to set up my kingside battering ram.

19...a8 20.d3 c8 21.h1 h8 22.a1 e7 23.h4 d8

Black's reduced to waiting for the axe to fall. Tactical tricks like 23...d4? 24.xg4 gxf5 don't provide any relief after 25.dxf5 xg4 26.dxe7 for example.

24.g5 d6 25.f6 e6 26.h5



26...g4 27.hxg6† xg6 28.xg4 xg4

Black has exchanged queens, but his position is still in total ruins.

29.h4 e6 30.d3 c4 31.dxe5 cxd3 32.cxd3 g8 33.g8h1

White just ups the pressure and the rook on g6 watches for a while.

33...b3 34.d5 xf6 35.dxg6 dxf5 36.exf5 hxg5 37.h8†

1-0

The 1998 World Youth was the first in a series held in a small Spanish town on the Valencian coast, Oropesa del Mar. I had struggled at the end in 1997 and a year later, the competition was only getting tougher. The top seed was Kamil Miton (again!), but the Under-14 group also had future 2700-players like Bu Xiangzhi, David Navara, and Zahar Efimenko for example. After a one-year break from a top-5 finish in 1997, I finished with a strong 8/11. That was good for a 3rd place tie, behind Bu Xiangzhi and Navara, and tied with Efimenko.

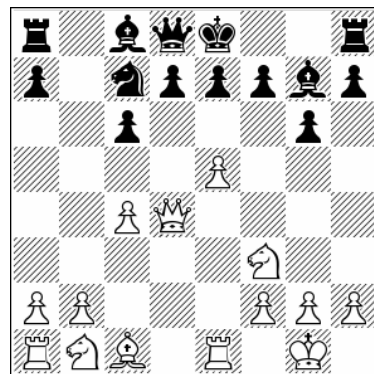
Vinay Bhat – FM Zahar Efimenko

Oropesa del Mar 1998

1.e4 c5 2.d3 d6 3.b5 g6 4.xc6 bxc6 5.0-0 g7 6.e1 d6

Nowadays, 6...d6 is the more topical way to play this position, but this development scheme is still played by some stronger players.

7.e5 d5 8.c4 d7 9.d4 cxd4 10.xd4



10...d5

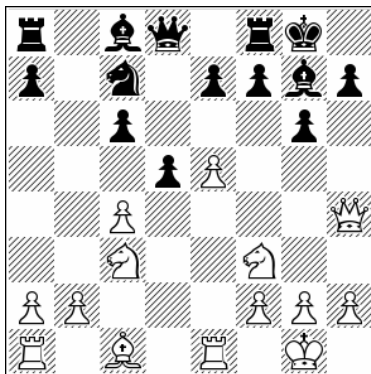
10...d6 is the better move. I had faced this once before already, but my opponent didn't follow-up properly. 11.h4 a5 (11...d6 was Kasparov's choice in two recent blitz games versus Anand and Caruana) 12.d3 e6 13.dg5 c7 14.dxe6 dxe6 15.e4 b8 16.b3 h5 17.da4 0-0 18.a3 fd8 19.f4 and Black was completely bottled up. White contested the d-file and then won with c5, e3, and b6, as in Bhat – Kaugars, Sunnyvale 1997. Once again, a central plus left unchallenged led to long-term troubles.

11. ♖c3 0-0

11... ♗e6 12. ♖h4 d4 13. ♗e4 h6 14. ♖g3 with h4 and then queenside play is good for White. The e5-pawn and e4-knight are really holding Black down.

11... ♗a6 12. cxd5 cxd5 13. ♖h4 is also an easy plus for White – lagging development with kingside weaknesses isn't a good combination.

12. ♖h4



12... ♗e8?!

He had played the initial opening moves relatively quickly but slowed down for this, probably realizing that he was in some trouble. However, this doesn't really help.

I'd have tried to slow White's kingside activity and then pivot to development. To that end, 12... h5 stops ♗h6 while also safeguarding the h7-pawn better. Still, after 13. h3, it's still not easy for Black to develop and keep everything under control.

13. ♗h6 ♗h8 14. ♖ad1

Simple chess. White just brings his pieces out and has a great position.

14... ♗e6 15. ♗e4 ♖b8

Given Black's next move, he should have started with 15... ♖c8, but Efimenko was clearly a bit discombobulated.

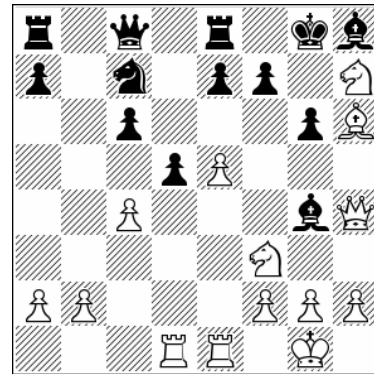
16. ♗g5 ♖c8

Pawn-grabbing loses in a straightforward manner: 16... ♖xb2 17. ♗xh7 ♖xa2 (17... ♗xh7? 18. ♗c1† winning the queen.) 18. ♗hg5 ♖xc4 19. ♖d4 ♖c3 20. ♗f8! is a very typical mating

pattern on the kingside here. Black does have a trick to extend the game with 20... ♖xe1! but it's still losing after 21. ♗xe1 ♗xe5 22. ♗ef3 ♗f6 23. ♖h6.

17. ♗xh7! ♗g4

17... ♗xh7? 18. ♗g5† ♗g8 19. ♗f8! is that same mating net again.



The only thing helping Black here is that White's pieces are clustered on the kingside.

18. e6!?

Not the only winning approach, but it keeps the initiative.

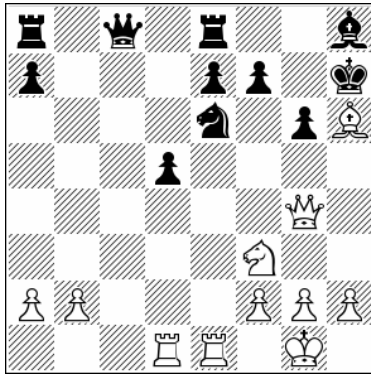
I saw 18. ♗hg5 f6, but wasn't sure how to continue. After the game, I found 19. ♖d4! ♗h5 20. g4, a caveman-style breakthrough that was discoverable at the board.

18. ♗c1 ♗xf3 19. gxf3 ♖f5 20. ♗g5 ♗g7 21. ♖d4 f6 looked like a good defensive setup for Black, but the computer throws cold water on this one too: 22. ♖h7† ♗f8 23. ♖g4! – I don't feel so bad about missing this one compared to ♗hg5.

18... ♗xe6

18... ♗xe6 19. ♗f4! ♗g7 20. ♗hg5 and White is winning. For example, 20... ♖b8 21. ♖h7† ♗f8 22. ♗xe6† ♗xe6 23. ♗h6 was one winning line I saw.

19. ♖xg4 ♗xh7 20. cxd5 cxd5

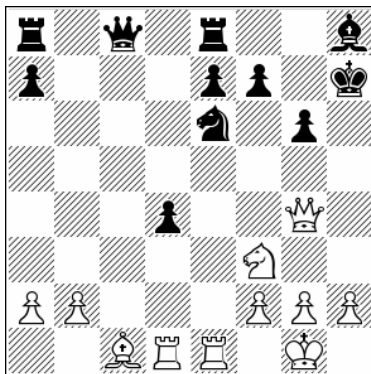


21. ♖c1?

A lazy move. Having an extra pawn after ♖xd5 is a significant plus, but I should have secured more than this.

21. ♖c1! ♔d7 22. ♘g5† was a cleaner way to crown my effort: the knight is pinned, so Black is completely lost. 22... ♖xh6 23. ♘xf7† ♔g7 24. ♘e5 is a nice sequence that's very much within my wheelhouse of knight tours.

21...d4?



22. ♖xe6!

Oops – it turns out the d5-pawn wasn't the only threat for White. Black should have played ... ♔g8 instead of saving his d-pawn. Now Black loses a key defender and the kingside gets ripped open.

22... ♖xe6 23. ♘g5† ♔g8 24. ♖h4 ♔g7 25. ♖h7† ♔f8 26. ♖xg6

1–0

Alongside the tie for third, that World Youth stands out in my memory for the analysis and blitz sessions. I had played (and lost to) Mark Paragua a few times by then, but we were still friendly, and our parents used to talk regularly at these events.

As players, coaches, and parents congregated in the analysis hall after a game, we'd also run into each other there.

One of those days, we ended up sitting down next to Teimour Radjabov. Radjabov was in the Under 12 group (he won it) and at some point, we started commenting on his analysis. Analysis led to blitz, and then a marathon blitz session on one of the rest days during the event. The three of us played blitz for hours at a stretch with Radjabov coming out slightly ahead in the end.

At that time especially, I was better at blitz than classical chess. For example, I punched well above my rating class to take 3rd place overall in the 1996 US Open blitz tournament. And later in 1996, I signed up for the Internet Chess Club (ICC) and for years, my blitz rating on ICC hovered around 2800. Ratings there were inflated, and the very top players like Nakamura and Grischuk hovered around the 3400 range, but 2800 was much closer to the top than my classical rating. Sometime later, as a GM, I crossed the 3000 ICC blitz threshold but that was about where I topped out.

By the way, this wasn't the first or last time that I enjoyed my downtime from tournament play with blitz. There were often plenty of players interested in relaxing and unwinding on rest days or after an event by playing blitz or bughouse. Looking back, it's interesting to think that simply playing more chess was relaxing, but we clearly were all hooked!

Vinay Bhat – IM Ronald Cusi

San Francisco 1998

1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♖b5 d6

Most people chose either 3...g6 or 3...e6 against me, including Cusi later. Here though he had a different structure in mind.

4.0-0 e5

I only faced this setup with ... ♘c6 and ...d6 two more times in my career. In both, I gained a small advantage after the opening that I turned into wins following 4... ♔d7 5. ♖e1 ♘f6 6. c3 a6

7. ♖f1 ♗g4 8. d4, and then 8...cxd4 9. cxd4 e5 10. d5 ♘d4 11. ♙e3 ♚xf3† 12. gxf3 ♙d7 13. ♘d2 as in FM Bhat – FM Raceanu, World Youth (U-16) 1999 or 8...e5 9. dxc5 dxc5 10. ♘bd2 as in IM Bhat – IM Khismatullin, World Youth (U-18) 2001.

5.c3 ♙d7

5...a6 6. ♙xc6†!? bxc6 7. d4 cxd4 8. cxd4 ♗g4 9. dxe5 dxe5 10. ♛c2 is an even worse version of the structure I reached versus Alcazar Jimenez from Chapter 2.

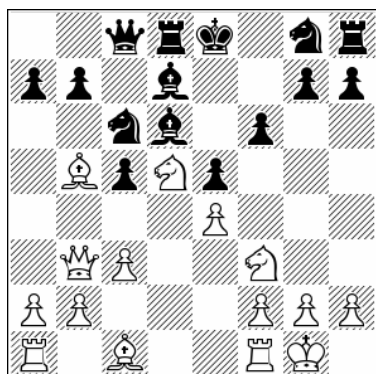
6.d4 ♙e7 7.dxc5

7. d5 ♘b8 8. ♙d3 would be my choice now as Black has a bad Czech Benoni, but I wasn't comfortable with 1. d4 setups then. I was still better after the exchange on c5, but I needed to develop quickly to emphasize my advantage, while the d5 move would have left a static space advantage and better pieces too.

7...dxc5 8. ♘bd2 ♛c7 9. ♘c4!?

I could have restricted future queenside activity with 9. a4, but I was drawn to the knight transfer around to d5.

9...♞d8 10. ♛b3 f6 11. ♘e3 ♛c8 12. ♘d5 ♙d6



So far, Black's played in a very provocative manner, but White's acted quickly to seize key squares and diagonals.

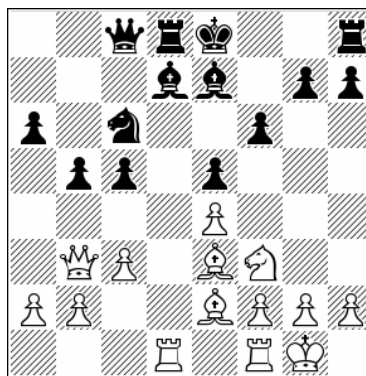
This would have been a good chance to double-down on that with 13. ♞d1. The threat of ♘xf6† basically forces 13... ♙e6 when 14. ♙c4 renews that same threat. Sure, Black can play 14... ♖f7 but then White can play more simply with 15. ♘e3 and Black's going to be struggling for a while.

13. ♙e3?! ♘ge7 14. ♘xe7?

But this is very accommodating, and I'm not sure why I traded away my strong knight.

The straightforward 14. ♙c4 would have continued to hold the diagonal for the time being. The only thing I can think of now is that I missed a trick after 14. ♙c4 ♘a5. This looks good for Black at first, but White has: 15. ♘xf6†! gxf6? 16. ♙f7† ♖f8 17. ♙h6#

14... ♙e7 15. ♞ad1 a6 16. ♙e2 b5



After some twists and turns, the opening experiment has paid off for Black – he has an about equal Lopez structure. Luckily, I didn't experience any regret for my prior mistakes and continued to fight.

17. a4 ♘a5 18. ♛a2 ♙e6

My idea was to meet 18... bxa4 with 19. ♘d2, when the idea of ♘c4 felt like easy compensation. That's true, but actually 19. ♘h4! would be even better.

19. ♞xd8† ♙xd8 20. ♛a3 c4

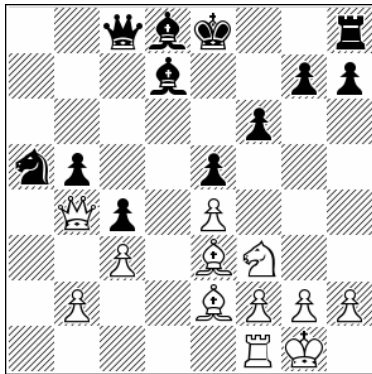
Black's playing for a win too – the simpler move would be ... ♙c4, but then mass trades are likely. Instead, he prefers to keep the better light-squared bishop.

21. axb5 axb5 22. ♛b4

Not a bad move on its own, but I clearly didn't have a good follow-up in mind. After the game, I liked 22. b4, but that's also about equal after 22... ♘b3.

22...♙d7

Black is threatening ...♗b7 and ...♙e7, winning White's queen. Still, I'd now choose 22...♖c6 23.♗d2 ♗b7 24.♗a3 ♖f7 as a more comfortable path to the better side of equality for Black.



23.♗a3

23.♗h4! was again a key resource. There are two key points here: the f5-square is guarded but that light-squared bishop is needed to guard the queenside too; the second point is that even after 23...g6, White can play 24.♗f5! because gxf5 allows ♙h5 checkmate! So instead, Black would have to play 24...♗b7 but then White is still better after 25.♙b6!. White really has to play energetically to punish Black for keeping his king in the center this long.

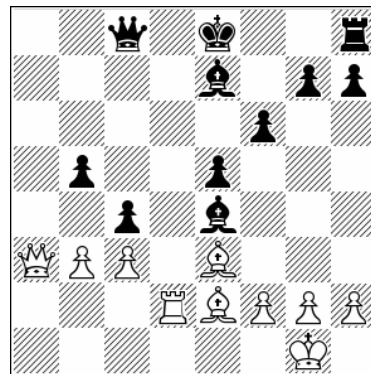
23...♗b3 24.♖d1 ♙c6 25.♗d2?!

25.♗h4 was again the right way to go, but I clearly wasn't seeing that knight move. The e4-pawn is indirectly guarded because 26.♗a7 would be very annoying.

25...♗xd2 26.♖xd2 ♙xe4 27.b3

27.♗b4 ♙c6 28.b3 ♙e7 29.♙c5! is a very nice pawn sacrifice that highlights Black's lack of coordination. Without a safe king and connected major pieces, White only has a short window to strike and I let it mostly pass during the game.

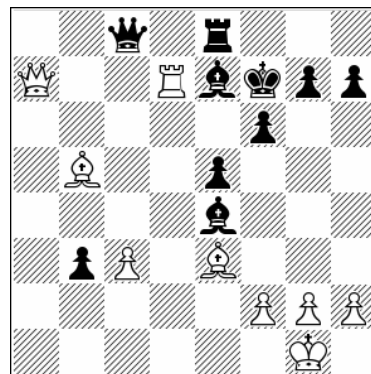
27...♙e7



28.♗a7!?

I was playing for a win still and so I decided to jettison the pawn. 28.♗a2 was the main alternative, but the endgame after 28...0-0 and mass trades on c4 is equal.

28...cxb3 29.♙xb5† ♖f7 30.♖d7 ♖e8



31.♖c7

I played this with about 5 minutes left on my clock – with a bit more time and not being clearly worse, I was still pushing for a win.

After 31.♗a4!? ♙c2, I couldn't make heads or tails of who was really better; as it turns out, the evaluation here is equal too so I didn't miss out on anything.

Meanwhile, 31.♙c5!? was another move I looked at but this seemed to be a clear draw: 31...b2 32.♖xe7† ♖xe7 33.♗xe7† ♖g8 34.♙c4† ♖h8 35.♙a2 ♗g8! 36.♗f8! with a draw.

31...♗g4 32.♙f1

32.♙xe8† ♖f8! is lost for White.

32...♙d5

The position isn't simple, but the drawing margin is still large as Black has (and can start with) 32...♙xg2 33.♙xg2 ♗d1† (and ...♗g4†). Thus,

even though 32...b2 drops a pawn to 33.♖a2†, Black can still draw there.

Meanwhile, 32...♗e6 is probably Black's best try as White has only one move to maintain the balance: 33.♗a4! ♕d5 34.♕c5 and White should really bail out with some exchanges and picking up the b-pawn (with either c4 and ♗xb3 or ♗b5 and c4).

33.♕c5?

I thought this was staying in the drawing margin, but this could have been one step too far.

33.h3 ♗e6 34.♕c5 b2 35.♕d3 holds the balance, but just barely.

33...b2?

33...♔g8 still appeared to be a draw to me: 34.♖xe7 ♖a8 (this transposes to 33...♖a8 34.♖xe7† ♔g8) 35.f3! ♖xa7 36.♖e8† ♔f7 37.fxg4 ♔xe8 38.♕xa7 b2 39.♕d3 ♕a2 40.♕xh7

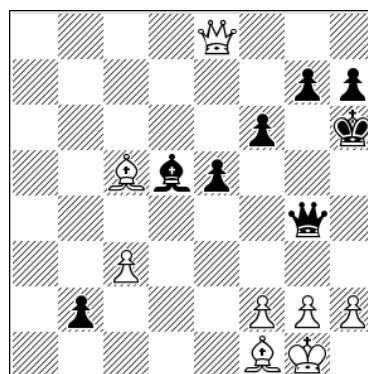
But as I found out after the game, 33...♔g6! was winning: 34.♖xe7 ♖xe7 35.♗xe7 ♕xg2 is the winning idea and Black's king has enough room to roam after 36.♗e8† ♔g5.

34.♖xe7† ♖xe7 35.♗xe7† ♔g6 36.♗e8† ♔h6?

Cusi was scrambling to make it to move 40 and he thought he was in good shape now: 37.♗b5?

runs into 37...♕xg2, winning. That's true, but he missed something for me.

Instead, he could have escaped with a draw after 36...♕f7 37.♗b5 ♕c4! 38.♗xb2 ♗d1.



37.♕e3†! g5 38.♕c5!

1-0

A nasty surprise for Black – after trying to figure something out, he resigned just before his flag fell. A very important win for me in that tournament, and by following up with a win against IM Omar Cartagena later (from the previous chapter), I set myself up well to get my first IM norm.

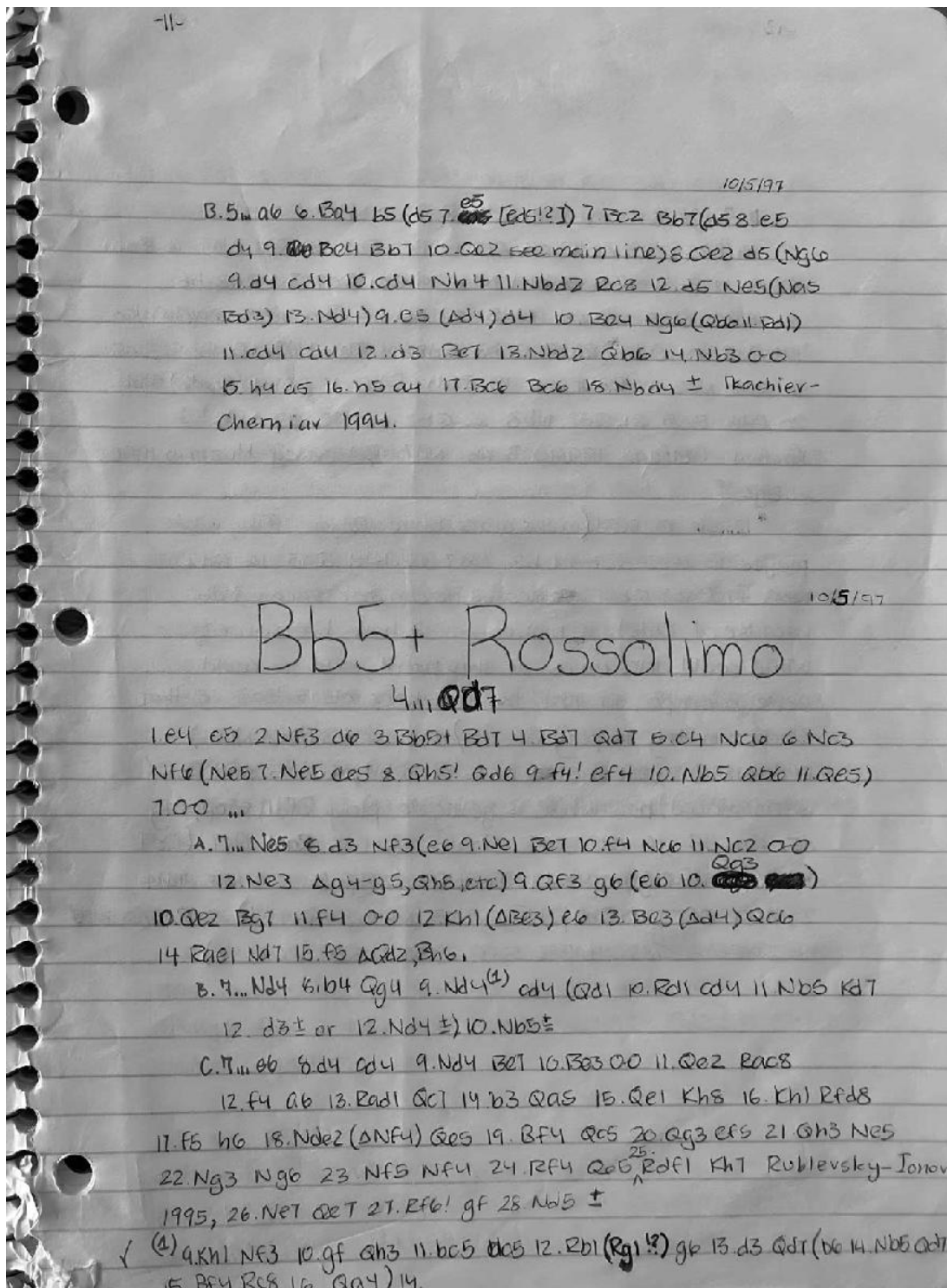
Below is a picture of my opening notebook from the first of two in-person training sessions with Kaidanov, in October 1997 – my lines for the entire ♕b5 Sicilians were a total of 4 pages of notes! It wasn't until I was 2000 or so that my opening preparation started to become more detailed.

ROSSOLIMO 3. Bb5

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Ncb 3. Bb5 g6 4. Bc6 dcb 5. h3 Bg7
 6. d3 c5 7. Be3 Qe7 8. Qd2 Nf6 9. Nc3 Qd 10. Bb6 as
 11. 0-0-0 b5 ^{12. Bg7 Kg7} 13. Ne2 a4 14. g4 ^{15. a3} 15. b3 Ba6 (Ac4)
 16. Ng3 (Acg5, Nf5) Rf8 ^{17. g5 Nd7} 18. h4 Red8 ^{19. h5}
 c4 ^{20. h6 h6} ^{21. Nf5!} g5 ^{22. e5}

14. Qe3 Re5 15. g4 a3 16. b3 c4 17. g5 Nd7 18. dc4
 bcb 19. Qd4 Bcb 20. Qc6 ∞
 15...c4 16. g5 Nd7 17. dc bc 18. Qcb Qdb 19. Ed6 cb3
 20. cb3 f5 (f6 21. Rhd1 Ne5 22. Rcb Ne4 23. Rct7 Rf7
 24. gfb Kf6 25. Rf7 Kf7 26. Nc5+) ^{21. and1 Rg1} 21. Rcb fe4 23. Nd2
 Rf2 24. Nc3 e3 25. Nde4 e2 26. Nf2 ed/a 27. Nfd1.

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Ncb 3. Bb5 e6 4. 0-0 Nge1 5. c3
 A. 5...d5 6. ed5 Qd5 (Nf5 7. c4! cd4 [Bd7 Nf5 (dc5! & ANf5; Bf1?)
 Be7 9. Qh5 Bg5 10. Bg5 Qb6 11. c4 Ndb4 12. dc5 Qc5 13. Nc3
 h6 14. Ne4 Qe5 15. Qh4 or Rfe1] 8. Qd4 Ed7 9. Qg4 Nf6
 10. Qg3 ∞) 7. Re1 Bd7 8. Nc3 Ng6 9. Bc4 Qh5 10. d4
 cd4 11. Nb5 Rcs (0-0-0 12. cd4 ± Ulibin-Makarov 1991) 12. Be2
 Qd5 (dc3 13. bc3) 13. ~~Qd5~~ ^{Nfd4} Nd4 14. Nd4 Qa5 15. Bf3!
 Qc7 16. Nf5 Aq4.
 ! 7. Bcb bcb 8. d3 Be7 9. ~~Qe2~~ 0-0 10. ~~Qc4~~ Nb4 11. Rd1 ANc3, Be3, b3, Ne4, etc



My Learnings and Progress

The ♠b5 Sicilians were another key part of my repertoire for years. I enjoyed playing with knights, and in return for trading a bishop for knight, I often found myself with advantages in space or development.

Static space advantages played to my strengths. I could probe for a weakness and use that space advantage to swarm my opponent's position or capitalize with a short tactical sequence.

I wasn't always as accurate with a dynamic initiative though, as I sometimes took my foot off the gas a little too quickly (like against Cusi with 14. ♖xe7 or against Efimenko with 21. ♗c1). This became a focus area for my lessons with Kaidanov, and I started to make larger strides in this area over the following years.

Chapter 7

San Francisco: My New Chess Home

1998 was a banner year for me: I won a gold medal at the U-14 Pan-American Championship, tied for first in the US Cadet (U-16) Championship, tied for 3rd in the World Youth (U-14), and scored my first IM norm. Going into 1999 then, I had the IM title as my next goal, and as they had stronger events than anywhere else around the Bay Area, the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco became my chess home.

Most of my chess habits and balance with other activities remained, but I started to read more chess books. At first, my options were limited to ones I bought such as *Zurich 1953* and *My 60 Memorable Games*, but once I got a library card at the Mechanics Institute in 1999, I was able to access many more.

The biggest problem at times was picking what to study and then making the trip back to San Francisco (an hour each way for me) to return the book. To get around that, I sometimes checked a book out, photocopied the entire thing at my dad's workplace nearby, and then returned the original to the library!

Coincidentally, three times was the charm for each of my IM norms. I had played in three norm-eligible events in 1998 and made my first norm in the 3rd event. The pattern held with my next two norms coming in the third event from the prior norm. This next game was one of four wins that carried me to first place and a 2nd IM norm.

FM Vinay Bhat – FM Patrick Hummel
San Francisco 1999

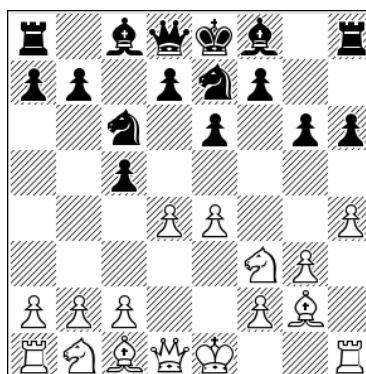
1.e4 e6 2.d3 c5 3.♘f3 ♘c6 4.g3 ♘ge7 5.♙g2 g6
6.h4!?

This is a typical probing move against the fianchetto, especially when the opponent's knight doesn't control the next square (in this case, there's no f6-knight to control the h5-square).

After multiple games where I played the standard lines with 6.0-0 and 7.c3, I decided to play a more Open Sicilian-like setup with d4. But first I wanted to try and provoke Black to move his own h-pawn, which would either give White an

additional target on h6 later or a free hand with the g5-square.

6...h6 7.d4



This was a new move at the time, but I hinted at the possibility after my 1998 game against Cartagena. The position takes on an Open Sicilian flavor but with the h4/...h6 moves thrown in, and I liked the potential target on h6.

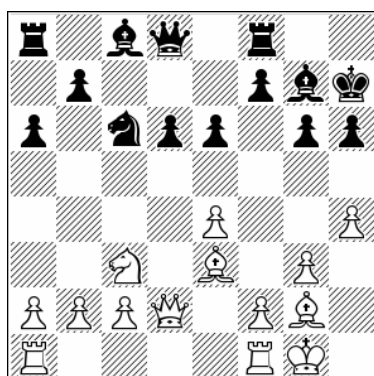
7...cxd4 8.♖xd4 ♗g7 9.♖xc6 ♖xc6?!

9...bxc6 10.0-0 (10.♗d6 ♖b6 11.♖c3 ♗a6 favors Black. This is one place where White probably wishes he could play ♗g5 at some point.) 10...♗a6 11.♞e1 d5 12.♖d2 was my plan, but this is only about equal.

10.0-0 0-0 11.♖c3 d6 12.♗e3 a6 13.♗d2

Now, though, my opening experiment has gone perfectly: Black has a problematic d6-pawn and a weak h6-pawn.

13...♗h7



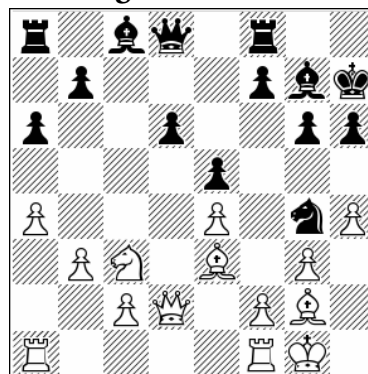
14.a4

I initially planned 14.♞fd1 because of the line: 14...♖e5 15.b3 ♖g4 16.♗d4 ♖c7 17.♞ac1 The rooks on c1 and d1 secure the c2-pawn (once the knight moves from c3) and add pressure to d6. But instead, 15...♖c7 16.♞ac1 b5 wasn't so clear to me. Black has ...♞d8 to reinforce the d6-pawn and White doesn't seem to be fast enough to bother Black.

I then looked at 14.♞ad1 ♖e5 15.b3 ♖g4 16.♗d4 ♖c7 17.♞fe1 ♗d7, but this looked too slow as well, as I need to get the knight off the c-file and Black only needs two moves to guard d6 (...♞fd8 and ...♗c6). The computer kindly points out, however, that 18.♗xg7 ♗xg7 19.♗h3 presents a concrete pathway to a clear plus, but I didn't see that option.

Once I gave up on rook moves to d1, I decided to restrict Black on the queenside, even if it meant that he would get the bishop pair.

14...♖e5 15.b3 ♖g4 16.♗d4 e5 17.♗e3



17...f5?

An instructive mistake. With the e3-bishop not going anywhere just yet, Black could have developed with 17...♗e6 and then been just in time to pin White's knight to c2 after 18.a5 (threatening ♗b6, for example) 18...♖xe3 19.♖xe3 ♞c8. This would be very much akin to a Najdorf structure and should be fine for Black. The active ...f5 runs into problems due to strategic and tactical factors.

18.exf5!

Opening the long diagonal slows down Black's already lagging development.

18...gxf5 19.♞ad1 ♖xe3

And meanwhile, the planned 19...f4? does nothing now because of the tactical trick 20.♗c5!, when Black can't even temporarily shut in a bishop with 20...f3 because of 21.♖d3†!, winning.

20.♖xe3

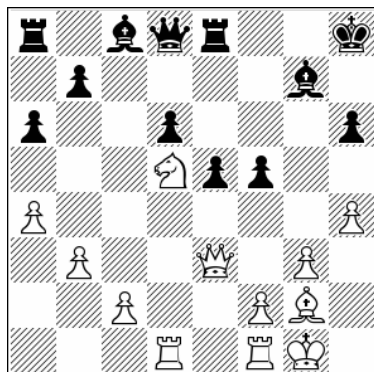
20.fxe3? was briefly tempting, but I decided that Black was going to get too many key squares after 20...e4. With the bishop landing on e5 next, White's the one who's in some trouble.

20...♞e8

20...e4 was still the right plan, trying to get the bishop to e5, but here White's structure is more compact so the d5- and f4-squares (along with a possible f3 break) should provide a stable

advantage. One example could be: 21.♖d5 ♜b8
22.f3 exf3 23.♞xf3 ♕e5 24.♞d3 with a clear plus.

21.♖d5 ♜h8



22.♞b6!

A queen trade removes a key defender for Black and basically cements the static advantages for White. I used this type of queen trade very well as a junior player.

22...♞b8 23.a5 ♕f8 24.c4

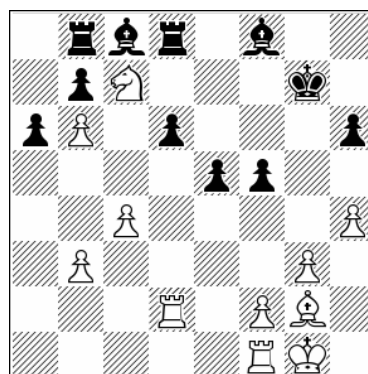
Setting up a complete bind on Black's position. The b8-rook can't move, the c8-bishop can't move, and the e8-rook can't move.

24.♗c7 ♞e7 25.♞xd6 was officially more accurate, but I wasn't really calculating much at this point – it seemed straightforward enough to slowly constrict Black's position more and more before it would have to break. Still, this is winning after 25...♞xc7 26.♞xh6† ♕xh6 27.♞xh6† ♖g8 28.♕d5†.

24...♞xb6 25.axb6

25.♗xb6!? was also fair – I felt fixing the b-pawn and securing the c7-square was better than the version with the knight on b6 though.

25...♞d8 26.♗c7 ♖g7 27.♞d2



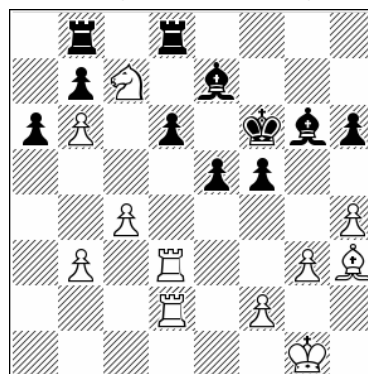
27...♗f6

Black could have taken this opportunity to jettison a pawn with 27...d5! as his dark-squared bishop might come to life. White's still better after taking on d5, but I could have avoided this altogether with 27.♞d5.

28.♞fd1 ♕e6 29.♞d3 ♕e7 30.♞1d2 ♕f7 31.♕h3
♞f8 32.♞f3 ♕g6 33.♞e2 ♕d8 34.♞d3 ♕e7
35.♞ed2

I had seen the winning plan already with f2-f4, but I felt I could shuffle around as my advantage wasn't going anywhere.

35...♞fd8 36.♗d5† ♖e6 37.♗c7† ♗f6



38.f4!

Finally! Aside from the game continuation where Hummel took on f4, there are two basic options: Black can wait with the central structure or play ...e4 himself.

38...exf4

Against 38...e4, the easiest is to play 39.♞d5 followed by some combination of h4-h5, ♞d5-a5, and ♞d2-d5 winning some material while keeping the bind.

If Black tries to sit tight with 38...h5, there are multiple ways to proceed. The most straightforward is to force ...e4 with rook pressure

when White can revert to the plan of doubling rooks on the 5th rank to win f5. After 39.♖e2 ♗f7 40.♘d5† ♗xd5 41.♖xd5, White wins a bunch of pawns.

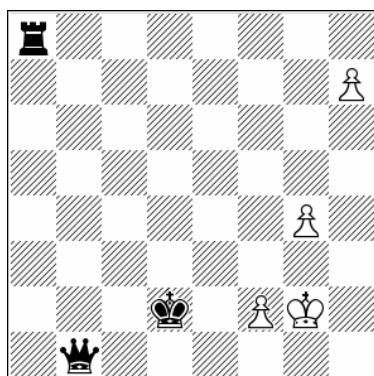
39.♘d5† ♗f7 40.♘xf4 ♗h7 41.♖d5 ♗g8 42.♗f2 ♖bf8 43.♖e2



Receiving an award from Neil Falconer, along with many of the drivers behind the Mechanics Institute's chess program: FM Jim Eade, IM Vince McCambridge, and FM Mark Pinto.

At that point, I was nearly 2400 FIDE and my results against GMs were starting to improve. A couple months later for example, I turned an advantage in a rook and pawn endgame into the following position versus GM Roman Dzindzichashvili.

GM Roman Dzindzichashvili – FM Vinay Bhat
San Francisco 1999



1–0

White's not up any material and doesn't need to take anything quickly either – simply increasing the pressure on Black's position raises the temperature enough to make it unbearable. These kinds of wins were some of my favorites as I liked the idea of being like a boa constrictor at the board.

I had just promoted with 60...b1=♖ but I was down to seconds left and it was a sudden death time control (no delay, no increment). I couldn't tell exactly how much time we had because we were using an analog clock, and it was one of those less sturdy analog clocks which you can – when you hit it hard enough – make the flag jump and fall before you actually run out of time.

So as delicately as I could, I tried to collect all his pawns (giving up my rook in the process), but just before I could deliver checkmate ... my flag fell! The game therefore ended in a draw and Dzindzi was laughing when he said, "It's not like you were winning the whole time!" That was definitely true: an otherwise equal, but complicated, rook, knight, and pawn endgame turned into a tougher and then lost rook and pawn endgame for him. I was a bit annoyed that I didn't finish him off in time, but he

had also blown me away earlier in the year, so progress was progress.

After that, in each of the next 7 tournaments where I played a GM, I put points on the board regularly; my performance rating in just those 22 games was 2543 FIDE but it took quite a lot longer for my real rating to catch up. This next game was one of the more memorable in that stretch.

GM Eduard Gufeld – FM Vinay Bhat

Las Vegas 1999

I first met Gufeld in 1996 and he occasionally gave group lectures in the Bay Area. At one of those, I bought his book *My Life in Chess*, but it never really clicked with me. Our one tournament game started as one opening before morphing into another and eventually settling in somewhere between a KIA and a Closed Catalan: either way, I was happy.

1.g3 d5 2.♗g2 ♖f6 3.d3 e6 4.♘d2 b6

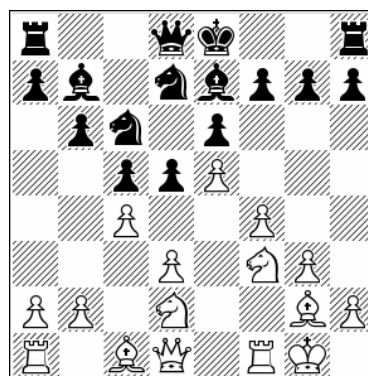
I gave this move a “?!” when I first annotated the game. That’s harsh, but it is more cooperative than needed. White’s setting up to play e4 when we’ll reach a King’s Indian Attack like setup, and the way I played it, I let White achieve a stronger e5-wedge because he can support it with f2-f4 immediately instead of with ♖g1-f3.

Instead, 4...c5 5.e4 ♖c6 6.♘gf3 b6 would have been a normal way to get to the ...b6 setups against the KIA, and in general, I did well with this kind of setup.

5.e4 ♗b7 6.e5 ♖fd7 7.f4!

Taking advantage of Black’s move order to firmly secure his central spatial advantage.

7...c5 8.♘gf3 ♖c6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.c4!



Normally in the KIA, White would have to support his e5-pawn with pieces and so would play moves like ♖e1, ♗e2, ♖f1, and ♗f4 but here he’s able to immediately poke at my center.

Now I had an unenviable set of options: if I push past with ...d4, White gains the e4-square and a free-hand to expand (probably on the kingside); taking on c4 both gives away the e4-square but also likely the d-file long term; and maintaining the tension means having to avoid “bad” pawn recaptures that free up White’s f- and e-pawns to rush forward.

10...♖b4?!

10...b5! is another option, similar to a future idea from the game but with a more immediate execution. The point is that after 11.cxd5 exd5, White isn’t actually ready to push forward with his e- and f-pawns yet, while Black needs just one move to get his king to safety.

11.♗b3?

A strange move and he must’ve overlooked at least one of my next two moves.

On 11.♗e2, I was planning 11...b5 12.a3 ♖c2 13.♖b1 ♗b6 and I thought Black was fine. This is correct, but I had missed that 13.♖a2! is rather annoying. Then after b3 at some point, Black’s knight is going to have to go to d4 and Black will be saddled with weak and doubled d-pawns.

So, instead 11...♖b8 12.a3 ♖4a6 with a rearrangement of knights on c7 and c6 would have been best. White’s better, but there’s still plenty to play for.

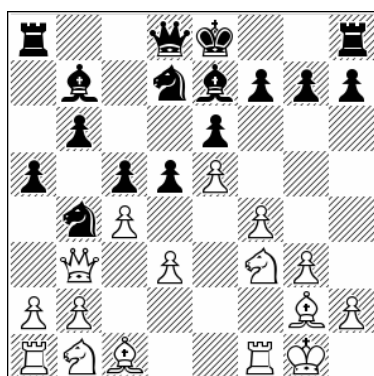
All that said, 11.♖b1! is even better than 11.♙e2 and thematic after c4: the knight comes back around to c3 to pressure d5 and is still ready to come to e4 if the opportunity arises.

11...a5!

Now if White tries to kick the knight, his queen is in trouble: 12.a3? a4 13.♙c3 d4 and Black is just winning; White can't even safely sacrifice a minor piece at this point.

Meanwhile 12.a4?! stops Black's plan of queenside expansion but after 12...0-0 it's White's pawn structure that has a lot of holes.

12.♖b1



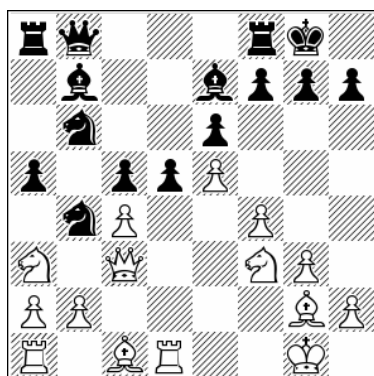
12...b5!

I needed to act quickly – retreating meekly was not part of the plan.

13.♖a3

13.cxb5 ♙b6 14.♙d1 ♙xb5 and the initiative (and advantage) are firmly in Black's hands.

13...bxc4 14.dxc4 ♖b6 15.♙d1 ♙b8 16.♙c3 0-0



After the queenside maneuvers, Black has improved the position of both his knights while

White's developed only in name: neither the queen nor the a3-knight are where White wants them.

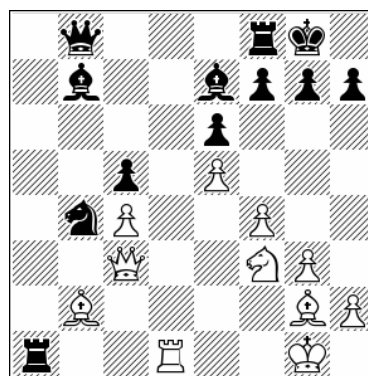
17.b3 a4 18.♙b2 axb3

Nowadays, I'd prefer to keep the queenside tension with 18...♙c6 with ...♙b7 and/or ...♙fd8 to follow. Black is better either way but releasing the tension quickly without any clear follow-up or advantage makes it more likely that I let a better queenside/central transformation slip by.

19.axb3 dxc4 20.♖xc4

During the game, I agreed with the knight recapture because I thought that after 20.bxc4 ♖a4 21.♙b3 ♙e4 White was going to have real trouble untangling, but actually after 22.♖e1 White's going to trade some pieces – Black's still better, but it's not as big an advantage as I had thought.

20...♖xc4 21.bxc4 ♙xa1

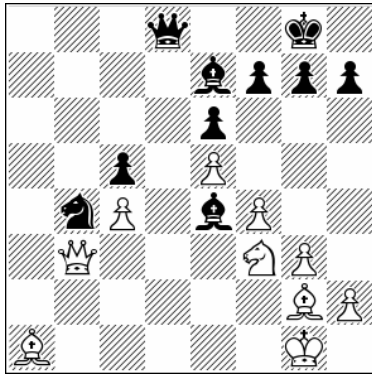


At this point, Gufeld offered me a draw (without making his move). I had no intention of taking it, but I only told him to make his move first, which he didn't want to hear.

22.♙xa1

And now I told him I'd like to play on.

22...♙d8 23.♙xd8† ♙xd8 24.♙b3 ♙e4!

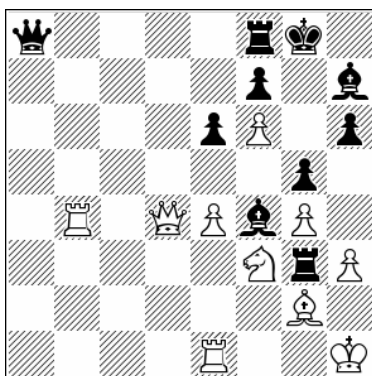


Officially, White has more space, but with a reduced piece set, it's more space to defend versus more space to maneuver within!

25.h3

25.♙f1 was the only move – White needs to defend all the entryways into his position. Still, after something like 25...♘c2 26.♙c3 g5! his position is going to come apart one way or another. This may look artificial, but Black has three better pieces (his queen, the e4-bishop and knight) and White is tied up, but there isn't an immediate breakthrough. Thus, the old “more force” aphorism was top of mind, and the addition of the e7-bishop to the initiative or kicking the f3-knight away (with ...g4) tilts the scale.

I was able to use a similar idea many years later as well:



White's pieces are somewhat stuck, but Black also doesn't have an immediate way in. With 35...♙g6!, I prepared to break things open with ...h5. Similar to this Gufeld game, adding one more piece (with an advance in front of my own king) shatters the defense.

In that game, White immediately went wrong with 36.e5? (and lost after 36...♙xf3 37.♙a4 ♙xh3† 38.♙g1 ♙d3, as in GM Movsziszian – GM Bhat, Mallorca 2009), but even after the better 36.♙a4 ♙d8!, White is objectively losing. Trades offer no safe haven: after an exchange on d8, Black can win by playing ...h5 or doubling rooks on the 3rd rank, and later picking up the f6-pawn with ...♙e5xf6.

25...♘c2! 26.♙c3

26.♙b2 ♙d1† 27.♙h2 ♙e2 is curtains.

26...♙d3!

It's all over, and Gufeld knew it.

27.♙b8† ♙f8 28.♘g5 ♙xg2 29.♙xg2 ♘e3†

0-1

By the time he resigned, Gufeld was very upset, and it was as though steam was emanating from his ears. We were playing on the top boards in Vegas, on a small stage that was roped off so we wouldn't be crowded by spectators. He angrily resigned by stopping the clock and storming away without shaking hands. He then came back to the board but refused to sign the scoresheets, and he even made a show of crumpling up his scoresheet and throwing it to the side. While he paced, he kept muttering. At first, I thought I wasn't hearing him clearly, but then I realized it wasn't English. Yermolinsky was playing on the board next to us, so I asked him what Gufeld was saying. He just chuckled and told me, “I think you can guess.”

Recently, after the popular Netflix show *The Queen's Gambit* was released, there was a lot of debate about the fidelity of the chess to actual tournament play. One seemingly controversial scene seemed to be where one of Beth Harmon's opponents (a master in the show) offers a draw in a losing position, and after it's declined, he resigns.

Gufeld's draw offer was not followed literally by resignation the next move, but it was effectively made in a losing position. And that's at the GM level, so below the GM level, I would be very

confident that it's happened. In junior events, I've even had an opponent try to sneak a captured piece back onto the board: this happened to me at the 1995 World Youth Championship – the arbiters intervened when our scoresheets matched but the board differed by one rook. In open events, I've

also seen 2200+ players throw pieces at an opponent after losing (in a blitz tournament) or cry at the board to try and steal a draw through their opponent's pity. People can do strange things when they're about to lose a game of chess.

A French connection

The previous chapters focused on new openings from the White side. What about the Black side? Well, my two losses in that 1998 World Youth were to Navara and Evdokimov (also a future GM) and they both came in the Scandinavian (1.e4 d5). I still played the Petroff at times, but the Scandinavian had become my go-to.

While researching for this book, I came across something that GM Lubosh Kavalek wrote about me in the Washington Post:

“Another 14-year-old hopeful, a Californian master, Vinay Bhat, won brilliantly last month in a San Francisco tournament, besting the field that included some strong International masters. Shortly before that Bhat finished third in the World Youth championship (14 and under section) in Spain. However, his game against the 13-year-old Czech prodigy, David Navara, suggests that he is in a need of more solid openings.”

I doubt Kaidanov saw the article either, but the point was a valid one, and Kaidanov prioritized teaching me the French in a 2-day training camp, after which I played it for the first time in January 1999. The decision was largely made by Kaidanov – I trusted him to pick something good and we had already agreed that the Sicilian was likely more work than I could or would put in. My early results in 1999 with the French were not great, but as the year progressed, my results improved and now it's the opening I'm most known for.

GM Jaan Ehlovest – FM Vinay Bhat

San Francisco 2000

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 ♙b4 5.e5 h6
6.♙c1

A new move to me, and so I used the 6.♙d2 and 6.♙e3 lines as an analog here. In a 2-day camp and summarizing lines into less than a dozen pages, we didn't cover every variation in detail.

6...♘e4 7.♗g4 ♔f8 8.♘ge2 c5 9.a3



9...♙xc3!?

A new move at the time of the game, with 9...♙a5 being the normal move. In the main 6.♙d2-line, I used to play 6...♙xc3 7.bxc3 ♘e4 8.♗g4 ♔f8, and I figured White's bishop must be worse on c1 than d2. Some strong GMs and

French experts have since followed suit including Volkov, Korchnoi, and Kindermann.

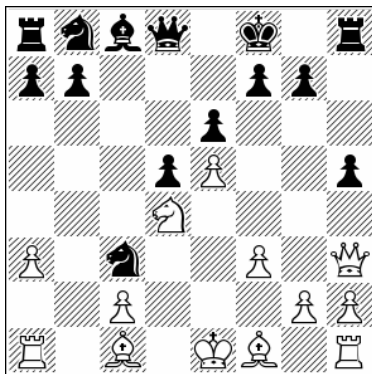
10.bxc3 cxd4 11.f3

11.cxd4?! felt loose to both of us after 11...♘c6 12.c3 (12.f3? ♖a5† 13.c3 ♘xd4!) 12...♗a5 13.♗f3 b6 with good play on the light squares.

11...h5!

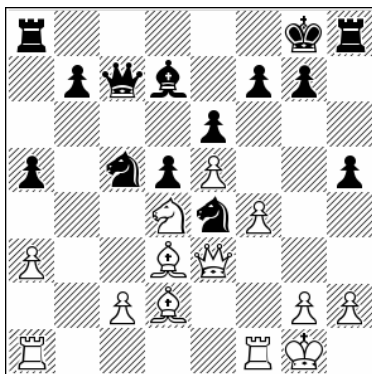
An important in-between move. White's queen gets pushed to the side before Black takes on c3, as going to f4 now walks into 12...g5, trapping the queen. Both sides focus on their development after this.

12.♗h3 ♘xc3 13.♘xd4



Both sides now focus on their development and try to bring out the rest of their pieces. This is a little easier for White, who can still castle normally; for Black, his coordination will not be as good for some time, but he also has an extra pawn for his trouble.

13...♘d7 14.♙d2 ♗c7 15.f4 ♘e4 16.♙b4† ♔g8 17.♙d3 a5 18.♙d2 ♘dc5 19.♗e3 ♙d7 20.0-0



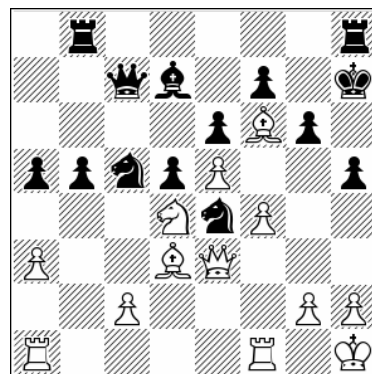
I wasn't entirely sure how to proceed here – Black's up a pawn but his pieces aren't all that well

coordinated, and his king is a bit less secure. I settled on a kingside blockade, but taking on d2 first before that, or playing ...h4 to try and soften up White's kingside looks better now. The game remains complicated, and White has some compensation either way, but my choice in the game was probably the lesser of those 3 options because I weakened the dark squares and let White keep his bishop; at the time, I felt my knights were stronger together.

20...g6 21.♙e1! ♔h7 22.♙h4 ♖ab8 23.♔h1

I was expecting 23.♖ab1 to try and stop ...b5, but I was planning to play 23...b5 anyway, as I recognized the need for counterplay. White's bishop maneuver was a surprise and now I saw some danger on the kingside via the dark squares and a later g4 push. After 23...b5 24.♘xb5, for example, 24...♙xb5 25.♙xb5 ♗b6! prevents White from focusing on the kingside.

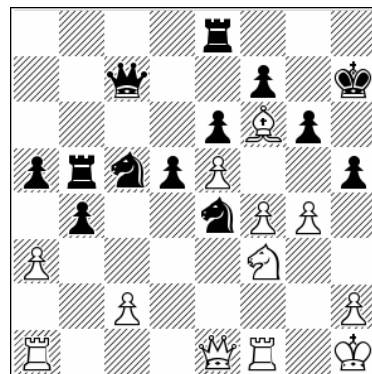
23...b5 24.♙f6



24...♖he8

I decided between ...♖hc8 and ...♖he8 after seeing some lines where I could use the rook to support an ...e6-e5 push later.

25.♘f3 b4 26.♗e1 ♙b5! 27.♙xb5 ♖xb5 28.g4!



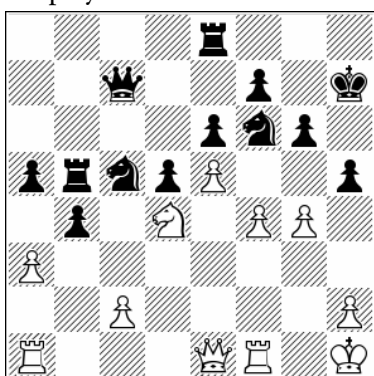
Both sides have gotten what they wanted – Black’s traded off one of White’s dangerous pieces (the light-squared bishop) while White hasn’t been distracted on the queenside and is launching his own attack. The position is still quite complicated and both of us were nearing time pressure, so it’s no surprise that some mistakes start to creep in.

28...♖xf6 29.♗d4

A reasonable move, but for concrete reasons, it would have been better to go to g5 and cover the e4-square.

If 29.exf6 ♗e4 (29...♞xf4 is also reasonable as it turns out, but I wasn’t going to take this pawn.) 30.gxh5 ♗xf6 31.♗g5† ♖g8 32.hxg6 fxg6, and Black is still better. His kingside pawns are ruined, but the same could be said for White’s position, and Black has some easy routes for active play via the c-file and 4th rank (after say ...d4 and ...♞f5 in some lines).

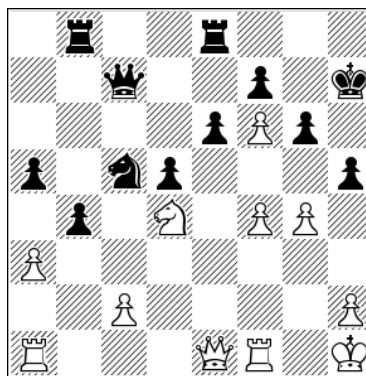
Instead, 29.♗g5†! ♖g8 30.exf6 keeps the e4-square guarded. But because White’s attack is going to break through otherwise, Black should move his knight there anyway: 30...♗e4! 31.gxh5 (31.♗xe4 dxh5 opens the 5th rank for Black’s rook) 31...♗xg5 32.hxg6 (32.fxg5 d4) 32...♗e4 33.f5 is officially equal according to the computer, but a nightmare to play into.



29...♞bb8

I was already in the habit of sacrificing exchanges, so I’m surprised I didn’t go for 29...♗xg4! 30.♗xb5 ♞c6 31.♗d4 ♞b6, when with ...♗e4 to follow, Black’s just dominating. I felt I was on top after the game continuation with ...e5 and I didn’t look elsewhere hard enough.

30.exf6



30...e5

Justifying my choice with 24...♞he8, but it turns out that 30...♗e4! 31.gxh5 ♞g8! 32.♞e2 g5!! is winning for Black. Truly inhuman and there’s a few more lines like that in what could have followed.

31.♗f3

Objectively not bad, but practically speaking, 31.gxh5 was the better chance. Black is also winning here, but it’s a true tightrope: 31.gxh5 exd4 32.hxg6† ♗xg6 33.f5† ♖h5! 34.♞d1† ♖h4! 35.♞d2 ♞e3!! Obviously neither of us saw this at the board, and Ehlvest said he’d have preferred to take on h5 had he seen my coming counterplay on the h-file.

Meanwhile, taking on e5 allows 31...♞xe5 which is clearly bad.

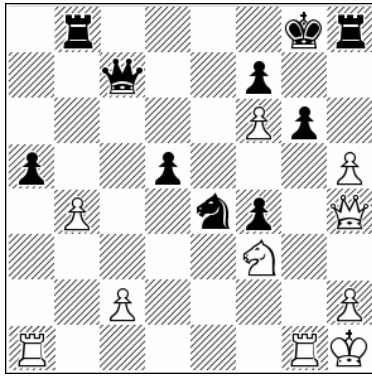
31...exf4 32.♞h4 ♞h8 33.axb4 ♗e4

33...axb4! is a viable alternative, but with the kingside a more obvious target for both of us, I wanted to bring more force into the vicinity.

34.gxh5

For example, 34.bxa5 ♖g8! 35.g5 ♖h7! was what I was thinking during the game. I thought that with White’s attack stalled, I could just pick up the queenside pawns, and have a good position and the engine agrees this is completely winning for Black.

34...♖g8 35.♞g1



Both of us were in dire time trouble by now and needed to make it to move 45 to get more time.

35...♘g3?

I was ecstatic to play this, feeling a brilliancy prize within reach, and it came as such a surprise that Ehlvest nearly popped out of his chair.

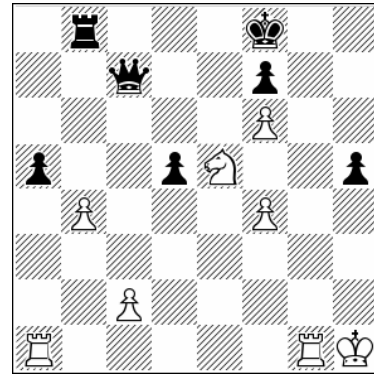
My original plan when playing 31...exf4 was to play 35...♙xc2, but I changed my mind once I saw I could win the queen. However, this simple move would have been winning as ...♘g3 is still a serious threat but Black has ideas of ...♘f2 or ...♗xh5 as well.

Another way to win was 35...♗xh5 36.♙xh5 ♘f2 37.♘g2 gxh5 38.♘xf2 ♘f8, but I didn't have time to look for more options after already spending some time to find 35...♘g3. The devil is in the details for why this version of winning the queen wins while the game continuation only draws.

36.hxg3

Even though Ehlvest was surprised by my move, he quickly sacrificed the queen – the alternatives are easy to dismiss by a process of elimination.

36...♗xh5 37.♙xh5 gxh5 38.gxf4 ♘f8 39.♘e5!



At the last moment, Ehlvest found this saving resource and it highlights the key difference between the 35...♗xh5 queen-win versus my 35...♘g3 queen-win. White's h-pawn has teleported to f4 and supports this knight move to pin Black's king down. White's threat to bring a rook to g7 or a second rook to the g-file secures a draw.

39...♙c3!

Played with seconds left. Everything else leads to a draw as well.

For example, 39...♗xb4 40.♗g7 ♗xf4 (40...♙c3 41.♗xf7 ♘e8 42.♗d1! is a miracle draw!) 41.♗xf7 ♙xf7 42.♘xf7 ♘xf7 43.♗xa5 with a drawn endgame.

Or, 39...♗b6 40.♗xa5 ♗xf6 41.♗a8 ♘e7 42.♗gg8 ♘e6 43.♗gc8 ♙b7 44.♗cb8 with equality: a perpetual "check" against Black's queen.

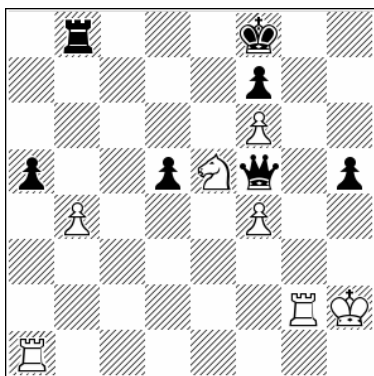
40.♘h2!

Also dashed out with seconds left. Not 40.♘d7 ♘e8, when White can't save the knight and stop mate on h3.

40...♙xc2

40...♙d2 41.♘h1 ♙c3 42.♘h2 ♗b5! is an interesting try to give Black some winning chances, although this comes up short too. The repetition by the way is just to show what happens with the extra check on d2 – so long as White doesn't allow ...♙xf4, it doesn't help. 43.♗ae1 ♙xc2 44.♗g2 ♙f5 45.♘d7 ♙xd7 46.♗eg1 ♙g4 47.♗xg4 hxg4 48.bxa5! and White escapes with a draw again.

41. ♖g2 ♗f5



42. ♘d7† ♕e8

42... ♗xd7 43. ♖ag1 ♗g4 44. ♖xg4 hxg4
45. bxa5! ♖a8 is basically the same as 40... ♗d2†.

43. ♘xb8 ♗xf4† 44. ♕h1 ♗h4† 45. ♖h2 ♗e4†

After the smoke had cleared (the time control was 45 moves in 2 hours), I realized I had nothing better than a draw.

46. ♖g2 ♗h4†

½–½

My Learnings and Progress

Each of these games featured some new opening line for me (and my opponents). And in each, I relied upon some prior experiences: with the KIA to reach a new kind of Open Sicilian against Hummel, with the KIA and the Closed Catalan against Gufeld, and by analogy through the MacCutcheon sideline against Ehlvest. I was relying less on opening books for new ideas, and I approached most new positions through the lens of my own prior games.

I was also continuing to get better at identifying what pieces to trade to grow an advantage. Against Hummel, the queen trade clamped down on the queenside and left him relegated to a miserable defense afterwards. Meanwhile, against Gufeld, I had the better minor pieces, and I also recognized that trading both pairs of rooks would allow me to really exert pressure with those other pieces.

One area where my play was sometimes more touch-and-go was with decisions around pawn structures. I had become used to the kinds of closed centers as seen in the Gufeld game, but I often made pawn-structure decisions based on shorter-term considerations. Thus, I recognized that Hummel's ...f5 was premature because there were quick tactics that favored me after 19. ♖ad1. But I struggled with the decision to play ...g6 against Ehlvest, and only later regretted that choice. This could have been one more general area of study that could have helped me bypass some of these harder-earned lessons.

Still, with my more narrowly focused work, I had gotten to 2400 FIDE and had two IM norms, so I was still quite happy with my progress.

Chapter 8

Becoming an International Master

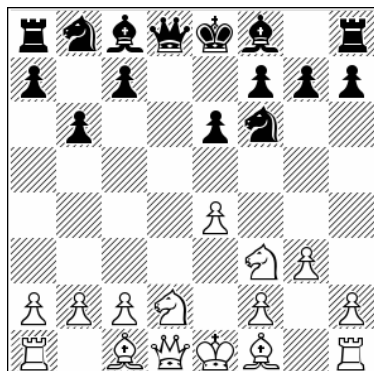
As my High School years rolled along, my tournament schedule shrank and revolved mostly around events at the Mechanics. In April 2000, they held another IM norm eligible event, the Zemitis International. The tournament was during the school year, so on weekdays I attended classes for most of the day before my mom would drive me up to San Francisco. The early rounds didn't suggest that this was going to be my event as I mixed in wins with very avoidable losses, but things turned around for me in the middle of the event.

FM Vinay Bhat – IM Guillermo Rey
San Francisco 2000

1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5 3.♘d2 ♘f6 4.♘gf3 b6

This was the fourth time I was playing the KIA against Rey, and this was his fourth setup against it. He might have chosen 4...b6 for this game as I had recently lost to Leonid Kritz at the 1999 World Youth Championship after that. In that game, I chose 5.c3 but didn't like my later position at all. Then a year after this game with Rey, I experimented with 5.e5, transposing into more typical French structures with e5, d4, and c3.

5.g3 dxe4 6.dxe4



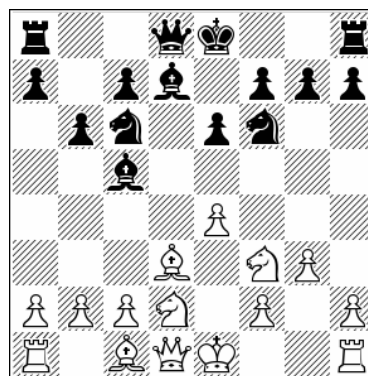
6...♙c5!?

When I later started playing this same 4...b6 with the Black pieces, I preferred 6...♙b7.

7.♙b5†!

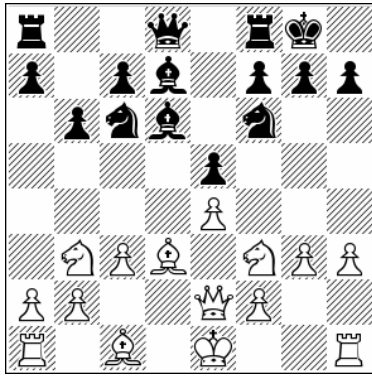
Flicking this check in forces Black to make some concession.

7...♙d7 8.♙d3 ♘c6



Black wants an equal share of the center and so he gets ready to play ...e5 himself. Meanwhile, White can't advance there yet himself because of ...♘g4.

9.♘b3 ♙d6 10.c3 0-0 11.h3 e5 12.♙e2

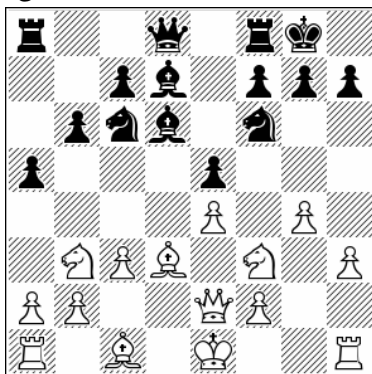


Now the structure resembles an Italian Game (1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♗f6 4.d3) where Black has played ...d5 and then exchanged on e4. One difference here is that White's played the g2-g3 move, which almost never happens naturally in the Italian. At the time, I played those positions somewhat often from the White side, while my experience on the Black side only came later as a GM. My opponent though didn't typically play this from either side.

Three things stand out about this position:

1. Neither player's minor pieces are particularly nice right now: the f3-knight and the f6-knight are reasonably placed, but every other minor piece currently has no clear influence.
2. The central pawns are fixed, so both sides will have to look elsewhere to improve their piece placement.
3. And without central pawn breaks on the horizon, White doesn't need to rush to castle.

12...a5 13.g4



This wasn't played with purely aggressive intentions. I started with this move because it could enable kingside castling, but soon after, I realized there could be other reasons too.

13...♙e7?!

The queen comes out and prepares a transfer of the c6-knight to e6 (via d8), from where it can hop to c5 or f4 potentially. With the pawn on c3, the knight isn't doing much on c6.

This is a typical plan but badly timed. I suspect that Rey was also thinking I was going to castle quickly and maybe it was only after my next two moves that my plan dawned on him.

If he expected the upcoming kingside assault, he might have preferred to fight back quickly himself with 13...a4 14.♗bd2 ♙e6, when Black is in good shape. If White single-mindedly attempts the same maneuver as in the game, Black's counterplay arrives very quickly, for example: 15.♗f1?! ♗d7! 16.♗g3 ♗c5 17.♙c2? ♗a5 and the c4-square (and later d3) are problems. Instead of allowing that, White should prefer 15.♗c4 with a fair position.

14.♗bd2!

I was starting to think about a knight transfer to f5 and while 14.♗h4 was possible, I wanted to improve the lesser knight with no prospects first. This move also had the added benefit of having some ♗c4 ideas to keep the pressure on e5 (to prevent a straightforward ...♗c6-d8-e6 maneuver).

14...♙c5?

On 14...♗d8!, I didn't see a good way to continue the attack after 15.♗f1 ♗e6 16.♗g3 g6.

Instead, I planned 15.♗c4, but that isn't so simple either after 15...♗b7!, when both 16.♗h4 ♗c5 17.♙c2 ♙b5 and 16.♗e3 ♗c5 17.♙c2 ♙c6 are awkward to deal with.

With those two moves eliminated, that leaves 15.♗h4 as the right continuation, as the threat of ♗f5 draws the g-pawn forward. After 15...g6 16.♗c4 ♗b7, White has 17.♙g5 and in contrast to the 15.♗c4 ♗b7 variation, White is in time here to disrupt Black's piece play. This position is about equal.

15.♗f1! ♗d8?

I'd prefer 15...♖e8 16.♘g3 f6 17.♘f5 ♔f7 now. The f5-knight is a thorn in Black's side, but Black hasn't opened any kingside files for White, so it's not trivial to increase the pressure.

Black's play with ...♗e7, ...♘c5, and ...♘d8 doesn't make a good impression. The odd move out is ...♘c5 which doesn't fit the knight transfer at all, and this one-move difference is all I needed.



16.♘g3 ♖e8 17.♘f5

Now by comparison to 15...♖e8, Black doesn't have a good square to tuck his queen away: f6 and e6 aren't safe (because of ♘g5 and ♘c4, respectively) and so Black must trade on f5.

17...♙xf5 18.gxf5 ♘d6 19.♖g1 ♔h8

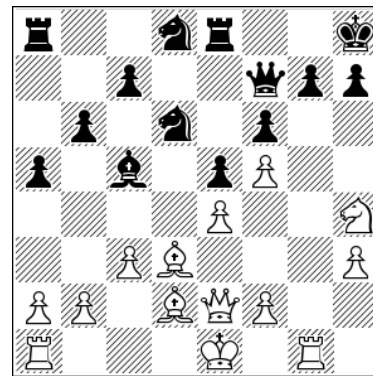
19...f6 plays out similarly to the game. For example, 20.♘h4 ♘c6 21.♗h5 ♖f7 22.♘g6 ♗e8 23.♖g4 ♘e7 24.♗xh7! ♔xh7 25.♖h4† ♘g8 26.♖h8#.

20.♘g5

Drawing the f-pawn forward, which then lets White get the ideal attacking setup of ♘h4 and ♗h5.

20...f6 21.♘d2 ♘6f7

Black can't stop ♘h4 but he can try to stop ♗h5 with 21...♗f7 22.♘h4 ♖e8.



During the game, I was planning the brute force approach with 23.♘g6† hxg6 24.♖xg6 followed by 0-0-0 and ♖dg1, which is good.

But White has a more beautiful win with the very sophisticated 23.a4!! For example, 23...♖c6 24.♘b1! and the bishop will land on the key diagonal unopposed, after which ♘h4-g6† is devastating.

22.♘h4 ♘h6

22...♘g5 blocks the g-file, but the h-file is still a problem. One way forward is 23.♘g6†! hxg6 24.fxg6 ♘g8 25.♗h5.

23.♗h5

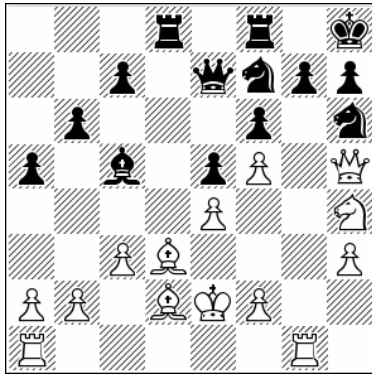
White has multiple ways to win from here on out – 23.♘h6 gxf6 24.♗h5 for example, but I didn't want to let Black think about plugging the g-file with ...♘f7-g5.

Offering a queen trade with 23...♗f7 now runs into 24.♘g6†, and White will soon crash through on the kingside.

23...♘df7 24.♔e2!

From here, the king guards both d3 and f2, and allows the a1-rook to swing into action via the g-file.

24...♖ad8



25. ♖xg7!

No surprise, but it was still a fun move to play.

25... ♔xg7 26. ♖g1†

26. ♕xh6† ♜xh6 27. ♖g1† also wins, and it was my first thought. But upon further review, I liked the game continuation more and it is indeed slightly more accurate.

26... ♔h8 27. ♜g6† hxg6 28. fxg6

OK, while White had plenty of alternative winning moves before, not everything wins – for example, 28. ♖xg6?? ♜d7 would be very embarrassing! White has nothing better than a draw after 29. ♔e1 and then a kingside repetition.

28... ♜g5

Or 28... ♜d6 29. g7† ♔g8 30. gxf8=♜† ♔xf8 31. ♕xh6† ♔e7 32. ♕c4 ♜xh6 33. ♖g7†!, winning.

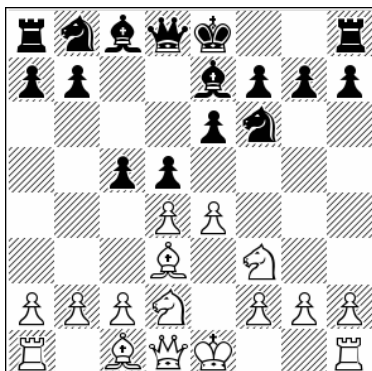
29. ♜xh6† ♔g8 30. ♕c4†

1–0

FM Levon Altonian – FM Vinay Bhat

San Francisco 2000

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. ♜d2 ♕e7 4. ♜gf3 ♜f6 5. ♕d3 c5



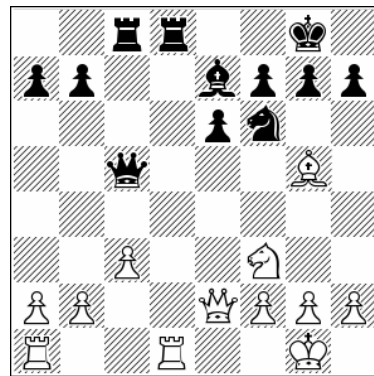
6. exd5

Altonian offered me a draw as he only needed 50% the rest of the way for an IM norm. Given that, I'm surprised he didn't play 6.dxc5, which he had already played against me in blitz on ICC. For example, after 6...dxe4 7. ♜xe4 ♜xe4 8. ♕xe4 ♜xd1† 9. ♔xd1 ♕xc5 10. ♔e2 ♜d7 the position is equal and closer to the kind of outcome he was playing for. Either way though, I wasn't looking for a quick draw.

6... ♜xd5 7. dxc5 ♜bd7 8. ♜e2 ♜xc5 9. ♕b5†

9. ♕c4 is normal but he was trying to just get some pieces off the board. Both sides continue and complete their development normally after this.

9... ♕d7 10. ♕xd7† ♜cxd7 11. 0-0 0-0 12. ♜b3 ♖ac8 13. ♕g5 ♜c5 14. ♜xc5 ♜xc5 15. c3 ♖fd8 16. ♖fd1

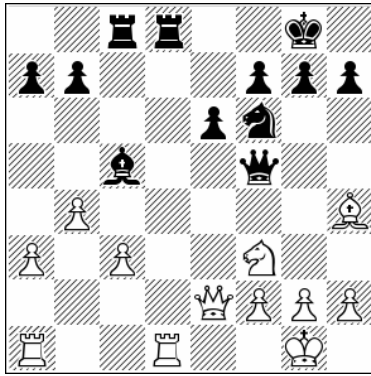


There's not a lot going on in the position so both of us were probably happy: Altonian because he only needed a draw, and me because of how comfortable my position was. Still, I wasn't sure what to do next and while I didn't know where to put it, I decided my queen didn't belong on c5.

16... ♜a5 17. a3 ♜f5 18. ♕h4

Putting the bishop on the a1-h8 diagonal (d4, for example) makes more sense. White could then try to put a knight on e5 and get his queenside majority moving with c4 for example. Still, White's move doesn't disrupt the general equilibrium.

18... ♕c5 19. b4



19...♙f8

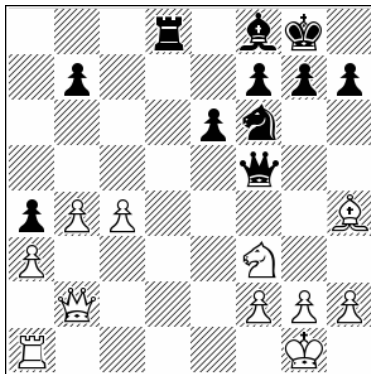
Trying 19...♞xd1† 20.♞xd1 ♘e4 for some tactics is short-sighted after 21.♚d3 ♙f8 22.c4. It's still equal after 22...♘d6, but there's no good reason to give up the d-file.

20.c4 a5 21.♞xd8

Not 21.♚b2? which drops the c-pawn after 21...♞xd1†, but 21.♙xf6! ♚xf6 22.c5 was quite safe for White.

I was getting a little more excited as this game went on, as my future activity was taking shape in my head. Black's getting the d-file and soon can fix a weakness on a3.

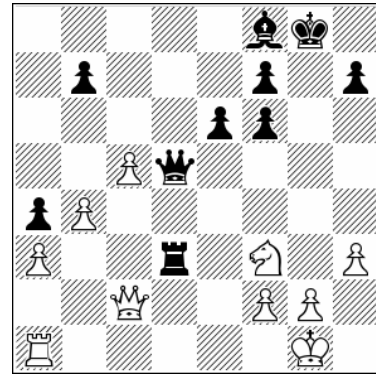
21...♞xd8 22.♚b2 a4!



23.♙xf6 gxf6!

Trading into the endgame is worse as then White's king comes out immediately; the a3-pawn is a weakness, but there isn't any second one. Meanwhile, my king is not truly in danger after this recapture.

24.h3 ♞d3 25.c5 ♚d5 26.♚c2



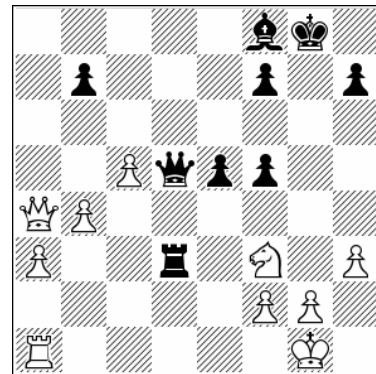
26...f5?

This turns out to be a mistake, but it wasn't easy to spot the problem in advance. Rushing forward with the e-pawn backfires, for example 26...e5 27.♚xa4 e4 28.♘h2 ♚d4 29.♞f1 ♙xc5 30.♘g4!, but 26...♚b3 offered a small, enduring plus. Instead, I was banking on the initiative over the a4-pawn.

27.♚xa4

White offered another draw, but at this point I was ahead on the clock and I felt like I was better on the board too.

27...e5



28.♘e1?

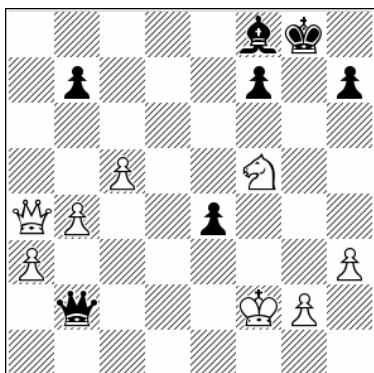
The problem with 26...f5 would have surfaced after 28.♚e8!. I had seen this move, and planned 28...e4 29.♘e5 ♞d2, when the variety of threats with ...e3, ...♚d4, and ...f6 all seemed too much to deal with. On 30.♞f1, for example, 30...f6 simply wins the white knight.

But I completely missed 30.♞e1! when on 30...f6, White has the now-obvious 31.♞e3! to win and if Black tries to stop that with 30...f4, the knight is let out of its cage and 31.♘g4 is simple enough.

28...♖b3!

While White is up a pawn, his pieces are terribly coordinated and Black has clear, aggressive intentions: push the e- and f-pawns, play ...♖b2, ...♗d4, and so on. It's objectively difficult and with time pressure starting to kick in, Altounian's difficulties were compounded.

29.♘f3 e4 30.♘d2 ♖b2 31.♘f1 ♗d4 32.♘e3 ♖xf2 33.♔xf2 ♗xa1 34.♘xf5 ♗b2†



35.♔f1?

Up until now, White hadn't completely lost control of equality. Black missed his one chance with 26...♗b3 earlier and White missed the counterpunch of 28.♗e8, but White's knight maneuvers kept him on the narrow path to a draw. This throws it all away, thanks to a quiet little queen move.

The alternatives were:

35.♔e1? ♗c3† 36.♔f1 (36.♔f2 ♗d2† 37.♔g1 ♗c1† transposes to the game.) 36...♗d3†! 37.♔e1 e3 wins.

35.♔g3? ♗e5† 36.♔g4 h5† 37.♔xh5 ♗xf5† also wins.

But 35.♔e3! would have drawn – for example: 35...♗c1† 36.♔xe4! draws. And also 35...♗xg2 36.♗d1! ♗xh3† 37.♔xe4 ♗xa3 38.♗g1† ♔h8 39.♗d4†, and White can escape with a repetition.

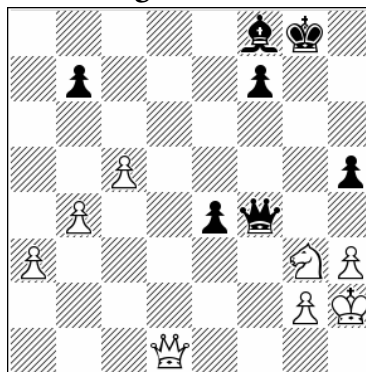
35...♗d2!

A deadly short move, threatening both ...♗f4† or ...e3 while stranding White's queen on the sidelines.

36.♔g1 ♗c1†

36...e3 was also winning.

37.♔h2 ♗f4† 38.♘g3 h5 39.♗d1



White's best chance is to get into an endgame and hope that he can trade some pawns, but that falls just short.

39...h4 40.♗g4† ♗xg4 41.hxg4 hxg3† 42.♔xg3 ♔h6!

I wasn't about to let him pick up e4 easily.

43.b5 ♔f8 44.a4

44.c6 bxc6 45.b6 ♔e3! 46.b7 ♔a7 47.♔f4 e3 48.♔f3 ♔e7 wins.

44...♔e8 45.♔f2 ♔f8 46.c6

46.♔e3 ♔xc5† 47.♔xe4 leaves Black with multiple ways to win the endgame. He can blockade the queenside with his bishop or his king, and in either case, the other piece goes to the kingside and waits for White to run out of moves.

46...♔c5†

0-1

I was careful to the end – playing 46...bxc6 would have allowed the nice intermediate move 47.♔e3! and Black doesn't get to blockade the queenside quite so easily here (without trading another pawn). It's still winning, but not as simply: 47...cxb5 48.axb5 and Black has to set up a ...♔g5/...f6 blockade quickly on the kingside and force White out of moves on the queenside to slowly win.

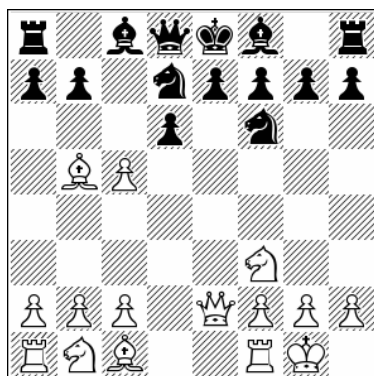
In the game, after 46...♙c5† 47.♚e2 bxc6 48.bxc6 ♗d8, Black's king can pick up the pawns without White's king even approaching.

FM Vinay Bhat – IM Zoran Ilic
San Francisco 2000

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5† ♗d7 4.d4 ♗gf6 5.0-0 ♗xe4

A surprising choice. I was expecting 5...cxd4 6.♙xd4 e5 7.♙d3 h6 because he played this kind of Najdorf structure. Most people though, played 5...a6 against me and in Chapter 11, I'll share a game in that line versus Wang Yue.

6.♙e2 ♗ef6 7.dxc5



7...e6

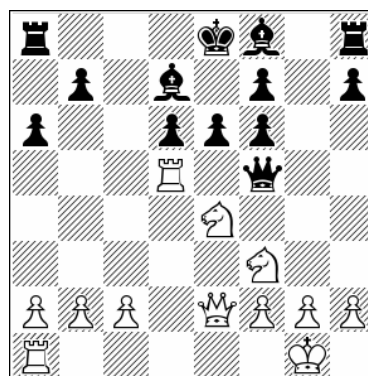
The open d-file becomes a real problem after 7...dxc5 8.♖d1. For example, 8...♙c7 9.♗e5 e6 10.♙f4 ♙d6 11.♗xd7 is winning. Meanwhile, I had seen that 8...a6 9.♙c4 e6 10.♗g5 ♙e7 (not 10...♙b6 11.♙xe6!) was given in some sources as “unclear”, but I correctly evaluated the position after 11.♙f4 to be dominating for White.

8.♖d1!

8.cxd6 was much more common at the time, but the rook move buries this line.

8...♙c7 9.♗c3 ♙xc5 10.♙g5 ♙e7

This isn't good, but if you're working backwards and looking for an improvement, 10...a6 doesn't promise much hope either: 11.♙xd7† ♙xd7 12.♙xf6 gxf6 13.♗e4 ♙f5 14.♖d5! is very artistic.



The rook can't be taken because of a knight fork, and the alternatives aren't pleasant:

14...♙b5 15.♙e3 ♙g6 16.♗h4! ♙g7 17.♗f5! ♙g6 18.♙d4! is winning.

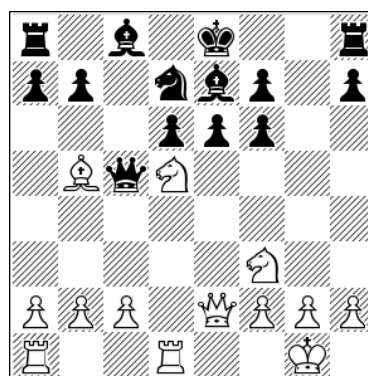
14...♙g6 15.♗h4 ♙g7 16.♗f5 ♙g6 17.♗fxd6† ♙xd6 18.♗xd6† ♗f8 19.♖d3 and White should be winning based on Black's lack of coordination and exposed king.

14...♙f4 15.g3 ♙h6 16.♗xd6† ♙xd6 17.♖xd6 ♙c6 18.♗d4 and Black's position is depressing.

11.♙xf6 gxf6

11...♙xf6 12.♗e4 is not in Black's interest.

12.♗d5!

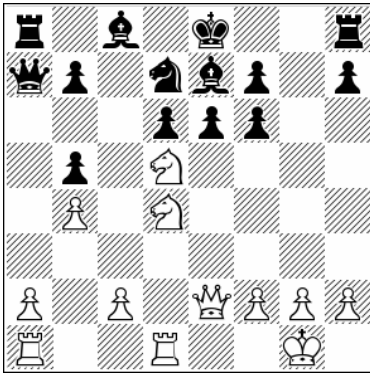


Threatening b4, winning the black queen. Meanwhile, taking the knight allows White to get a safe, sizable advantage with 12...exd5 13.♖e1 0-0 14.♙xd7 ♙xd7 15.♙xe7 ♙e6 16.c3.

12...a6 13.b4 ♙a7 14.♗d4!

Not 14.♗c7†? ♗d8 15.♙xd7 (15.♗xa8 axb5 with a big plus for Black.) 15...♗xc7! and Black's very much alive.

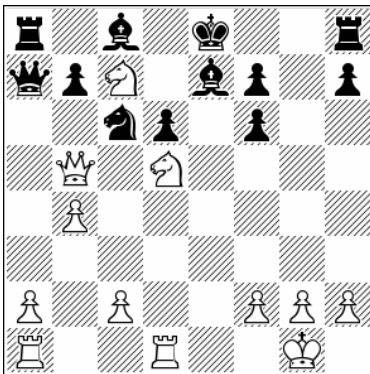
14...axb5



15.♖xe6!

The knights stampede through Black's position.

15...♗e5 16.♙xb5† ♗c6 17.♗ec7†



17...♔d8?

This made it easy for me as Black's king is more immediately exposed on the queenside. Objectively, 17...♔f8 doesn't save Black, but it offers more chances for White to go wrong. The key for White is to not settle prematurely by taking the a8-rook right away. Instead, with 18.♗xe7 ♗xe7 (18...♗xe7 19.♙e8†) 19.♙d3, White can keep the attack going. After a subsequent ♗d5†, White is likely to pick up the h7- and f6-pawns and still have his options to cash out later.

18.♗xa8 ♙xa8 19.♙b6† ♔d7 20.♙c7† ♔e8 21.♗b6

Virtually everything is winning, but this is the most straightforward.

21...♗d8 22.♙xc8 ♙xc8 23.♗xc8 1-0

A fun game to play and very picturesque, but it was also basically all home preparation, and not even my own home cooking but from *Chess Informant!*

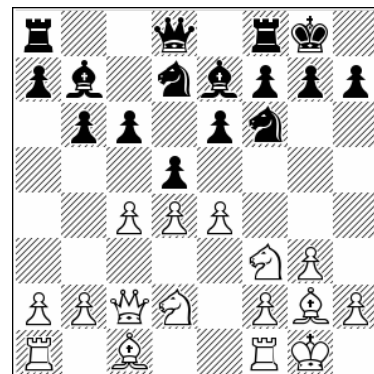
Up until 17.♗ec7†, this was Andreev – Popov, St Petersburg 1998, as annotated in *Chess Informant* 74. For some reason, this original game doesn't appear in any other database I've seen, but it carried me to victory that day.

FM Richard Lobo – FM Vinay Bhat
San Francisco 2000

1.c4 e6 2.♗f3 d5 3.d4 c6 4.♙c2 ♗d7 5.g3

This was a common way for people to reach the Catalan against me. With the initial Triangle setup, Black loses some of the usual flexibility to meet this as the e6-pawn blocks his light-squared bishop and the main Catalan lines with ...dxc4 would involve a tempo loss as it'll take two moves to play ...c5.

5...♗gf6 6.♗g2 ♗e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♗bd2 b6 9.e4 ♗b7



This kind of Closed Catalan was becoming one of my pet systems. Kaidanov and I hadn't gone over anything in the Catalan, so I had developed this system through my own play and analysis.

I shared one early prototype of this setup (against Naiditsch) in Chapter 2, but after my game with Marcel Martinez at the 1999 US Junior Championship was seen and published, many more people wanted to play the Catalan against me.

Looking at my statistics from the database, I intentionally started playing this position with this

general idea of not being in a rush to take on e4 in early 1998. If I look at all the Closed Catalans I've faced since then: I scored 16½/22 against a 2313 FIDE average (my FIDE average was 2368) and a +137 performance. Despite multiple games against 2600+ players, my only loss was that game to Marcel. Not bad at all.

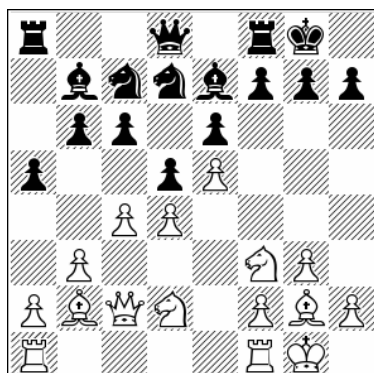
10.e5 ♖e8 11.b3

Despite those great results, after becoming a GM, I never played this setup as Black. Black's center has dynamic potential with ...c5, and it's important for White to take on d5 quickly to secure a useful space advantage in the resulting fixed-center structure.

With that in mind, the only time I faced this as White, I happily continued: 11.cxd5 exd5?! (11...cxd5 would be more in line with how I'd have played it back then – but then I figured I'd put my KIA skills to use by playing: 12.♞e1 ♕a6 13.♜f1 ♞c8 14.♝d1 ♜c7 15.h4 – from a Catalan to the KIA. See my game versus Tiviakov in Chapter 21 for a similar approach.) 12.♞e1 ♜c7 13.♜f1 ♜e6 14.♜e3 c5 15.♜f5 cxd4 16.♜3xd4 with a clear plus in Bhat – Perunovic, Reykjavik 2009.

As seen in the Chapter 5 game with Akopyan, the KIA attacks can require a lot of exact calculation and play. Most of my Catalan-playing opponents probably weren't familiar with the KIA to begin with and that made their stumbles in these complications later more likely, but once I connected the dots myself across those openings, I recognized there was a lot of danger here for Black.

11...♜c7 12.♕b2 a5

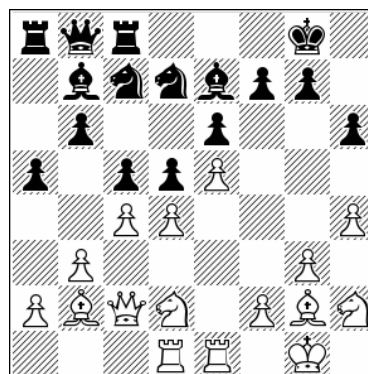


Part of my typical approach to these positions. I didn't want to rush with ...c5 because White's extra space means he can keep the central tension longer and when exchanges occur, Black's going to have some problems with his queen and rooks. The a-pawn advance is thus meant to be a useful move to soften up the queenside with ...a4 in the future while also providing a little bit of air for Black's intended regrouping with ...♝b8 and ...♞c8. In some rare instances, I even played this with ...♞a7 and ...♝a8 ideas.

13.♞fe1 ♝b8 14.♞ad1 ♞c8 15.h4 h6 16.♜h2

16.♜f1 was an interesting try, but with accurate play, Black can easily neutralize White's attacking ideas: 16...c5 17.♜e3 b5! White wants to play ♜h2-g4, ♝c2-c1, ♜xh6†, and so on unhindered, but Black is going to blow the entire center open well before that.

16...c5!



I had been preparing this anyway, but the timing was perfect with White's pieces drifting towards the flank. Again, I wasn't looking to release the tension right away and wanted to play 17...b5 next.

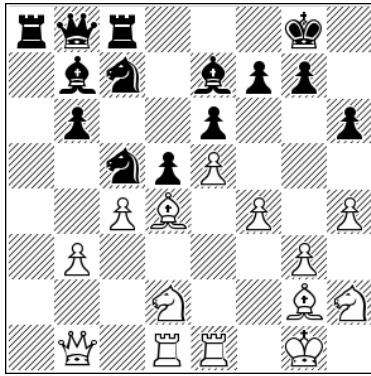
17.♝d3 a4 18.f4?

White mistakenly continued as though he were better and could launch an attack on the kingside.

18...cxd4 19.♕xd4 ♜c5 20.♝b1

20.♝f1 leaves the queenside unprotected after 20...axb3 21.axb3 ♞a2! or 21...♞a3!.

20...axb3 21.axb3

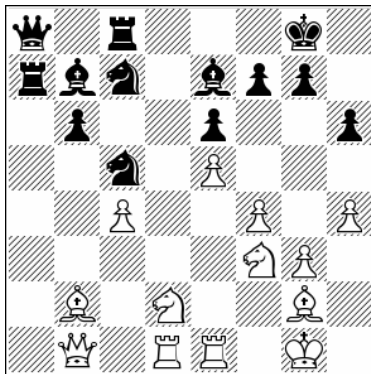


21...Ra3!

Black slowly starts to unwind. After the game, Lobo told me he wasn't expecting most of my moves and had thought I'd play 21...dxc4 22.bxc4 Ra3, but I didn't think Black had so much after 23.Re3. Instead, I wanted to keep the central tension a bit longer as a trade on d5 just brings another black piece forward.

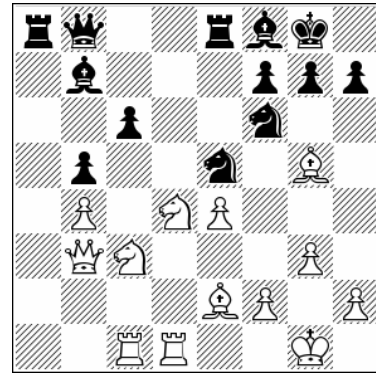
22.Qb2 Ra7 23.Nhf3 dxc4 24.bxc4 Ra8

Here, the queen helps exert pressure on the long diagonal and the a-file; it's only the c8-rook and c7-knight that aren't really doing something useful yet but with ...b5 on deck, they will be able to join the party. To that end, 24...b5 was also worth considering, and Black is also winning after that move.



There's a surprising amount of potential energy in Black's setup. During the game, I thought I was winning here and many years later, Stockfish agrees. Seeing that potential energy worked out to my benefit multiple times down the road.

Years later, in a 2009 game against GM Blushtein from a different opening, my opponent misjudged a similar situation by playing 25.f4? in the following position:



Instead, 25.Qxf6 was natural to ruin Black's kingside structure, but we both assessed that to be about equal in this situation (there's more discussion of this structure in Chapter 18).

After 25.f4? Nc4 26.e5 Ra3 27.Qb1 Nd5 28.Nxd5 cxd5, White had overextended and despite no material deficit and no immediate threats, he's completely losing. If pawns could move backwards, f4-f2 would be ideal. And interestingly, White's dark-squared bishop is terribly placed for this f4-e5 pawn structure in both examples. Without this teleportation though, the game ended quickly: 29.Qf3 h6 30.Qh4 Ra7 31.Qh1 Rxf3! 32.Nxf3 d4 33.Rf1 Ra3!, and White threw in the towel.

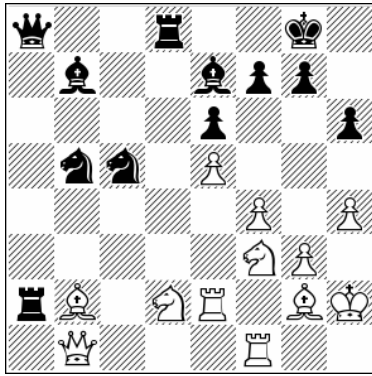
25.Re2

Both here and on the next move, I'd have played 25.Qd4, but even so, after 25...Rd8 26.Re2 Ra3 27.Qh2 N7a6, Black is still winning with moves like ...Rd3 to follow.

25...Rd8 26.Qh2 Ra2 27.Rf1 b5!

Once I recognized that my c7-knight was my only problem piece and adding that to the mix would overwhelm White, this move jumped to the top of the list.

28.cxb5 Nxb5



Material is equal, the white pieces and king aren't under immediate attack, White has more space on the kingside, and all the pawns are on one side of the board ... and yet the position is utterly lost for White.

29.h5 ♕d5 30.g4 ♖a4
0-1

The black pieces are just going to trample everything in their path.

With that 4-0 run, I secured my International Master title a few months before my 16th birthday! I followed it up later in the month with a tie for first in the Saitek CEA National High School (K-12) Chess Championships (tied with Harutyun Akopyan), so April 2000 was an especially good chess month for me.

My Learnings and Progress

I was thrilled to get the IM title and felt good about my progress in general. In Chapter 2, I mentioned that I preferred to set nearer-term goals for myself and getting one norm after another became the goal after Kaidanov helped turn my play around in 1997.

My success in this event largely came from occasionally great opening preparation coupled with getting middlegame positions that played to my strategic strengths built over the prior years. Lobo, for example, ran into problems in my pet anti-Catalan structure. He wasn't the first player to grab more space in this structure only to later realize he was completely over-extended (and he wasn't the last either).

These games also highlight two inter-related aspects of planning and piece play that I had focused on. As the *30 Rules* suggested, I tried to keep my plans flexible and in equal positions specifically, focus on piece improvements. In key moments, I chose to reposition my b3-knight against Rey and my queen from c5 against Altounian. In response, Rey specifically didn't mirror that flexibility when he started with his bishop (14...♗c5?) instead of starting with his knight (14...♞d8!), while Altounian rushed forward with his queenside pawns before he realized that just made new weaknesses.

How did I decide what piece to improve and how? The process I had internalized revolved around three steps: recognizing my poorly placed pieces, identifying where I'd like to have them instead, and then figuring out how to get there. Over time, this became more and more intuitive. It's relatively easy to play with the pieces that are already on good squares – but building upon Mr. Shorman's "more force!" aphorism from Chapter 1 – finding ways to use more of my pieces together was something I used to gain the upper hand over my opponents.

Chapter 9

Sharpening My Style

With the IM title wrapped up, my focus shifted even further towards school. I was entering 11th grade in August 2000 and those final two years in High School would be important for college admissions. I took several Advanced Placement classes, did coursework on the side at the local community college, and I started leading the school's Science Bowl team as well. Chess continued to be number two for me.

That academic focus brought an end to my fruitful work with Kaidanov in the fall of 2000. I spent a handful of hours working with GM Alex Yermolinsky in 2001 – who helped me with some more complex endgames and endgame strategy – but aside from that, I was back to working on my own again.

From August 2000 to August 2002, my rating went up about 30 points. That's not too dissimilar in absolute terms to how I fared earlier from 1995-1996, but this plateau was a little different. One difference was that I was playing much less frequently: I played only 11 rated events during this 2-year period. Another difference was that for the first time, I was showing flashes of being a GM-caliber player.

My tournament schedule was built around school holidays in the summer and winter, and I turned in multiple performances at or around the GM norm performance rating level of 2600 FIDE. Still, it sometimes took me a few games to get going, and so I threw in some clunkers too, most often when I played again for the first time in a while. That cadence led me to my second event of the summer, the Toronto Summer International.

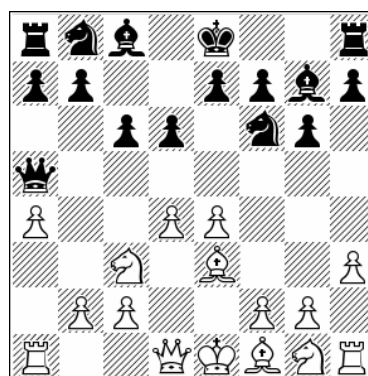
IM Vinay Bhat – GM Arthur Kogan

Toronto 2000

1.e4 g6 2.d4 d6 3.♘c3 c6 4.a4

I typically used g3-setups against the Pirc (as in 3...♗f6 4.g3), but here I decided to stop ...b5 first. It's not the most challenging approach, but it's simple and straightforward and should promise some edge. However, my next move was a real deviation from my typical setup.

4...♗g7 5.♗e3 ♗f6 6.h3 ♖a5



7.♙d2

After the game, Kogan suggested 7.♗d3 with the idea of potentially transferring the g1-knight to c4 via f3 and d2, which is also good for White.

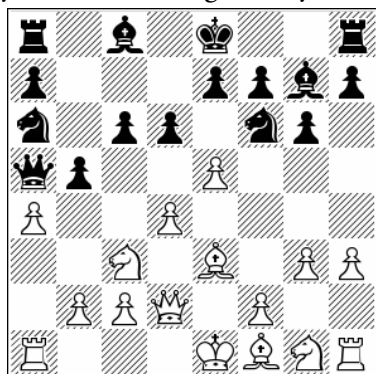
With the a1-rook undefended, Black gains the option of playing ...b5, but the immediate 7...b5 fails for tactical reasons: 8.b4! ♖xb4 9.axb5, and Black's queen will be caught offside.

7...♗a6 8.g3?!

Too routine. 8.g4 was more incisive, as the g5-advance is useful to have in reserve, and it also would have better fit the rest of White's setup angling for more space and control everywhere.

8...b5 9.e5?

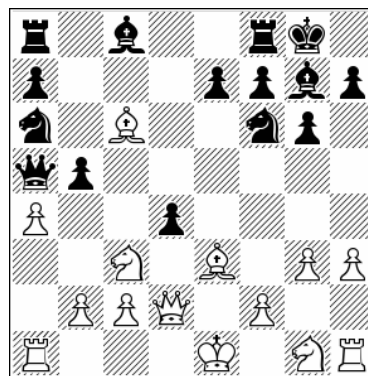
A mistake, but it took an extended post-mortem to convince me of that fact. It's true that Black is fine after 9.♗g2 b4 and 10...e5, as White's knights get in the way of his other pieces and Black has good central control. But with my king still in the center, opening the center with 9.e5 is risky in principle, and that should have set off more warning bells in my head. Going back a move, had I played 8.g4, then 9.g5 would've been a safe and strong way to kick the knight away from f6.



After 9.e5, one obvious question is what if Black plays 9...dxe5. After 10.dxe5 b4, White has no good way out of the double-attack, for example: 11.exf6 bxc3 12.bxc3 ♗xf6 with a clear plus, while 12.fxg7? cxd2† 13.♗xd2 fails in comparison to the game continuation, as the d4-pawn is not there to stop Black from playing 13...♖e5†.

Because of that, I was planning 9...dxe5 10.♗g2. The first two moves I considered were easy enough to reject: (1) 10...exd4? 11.♗xc6† wins and (2) 10...♗b7? allows 11.dxe5 b4 12.exf6, when Black would really prefer not to have his bishop stuck on b7. However, 10.♗g2 0-0 was more difficult to work out for both of us. The position

after 11.♗xc6 exd4 was the main focus of our post-mortem:



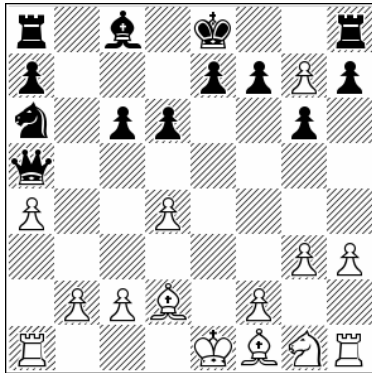
I had seen that 12.♗xb5? ♗b4! would turn the tables on me, with threats against all of c6, e3, and c2. And I saw some danger after 12.♗xa8? dxe3 13.♖xe3 ♗b4 14.0-0-0 bxa4, when despite the material plus, I didn't see any way to hold Black back on the queenside.

Instead, I settled on 12.♗xd4 ♖b8 13.♗xb5 ♗b4 and now I thought 14.♗c3! was a clever way to get out of trouble (c6 and c2 were under attack). He continued a little further with 14...♖b6 15.♗g2 ♖d8 16.♖e2 and concluded that White was OK. As it turns out, I had stopped altogether too early, while he had overlooked the much stronger 15...♗b7!. White can't play a move like 16.♗f3 safely because of 16...♗e4, but there isn't much else to recommend.

Looking at these lines, it can seem like everything hinges on accurate calculations – and that certainly has a real part to play, as this could have been calculated out. But given I was trying to enter these complications unprovoked and that too from an equal position (not a position of strength), I should have given some more consideration to the general sense that my position here was a tenuous one.

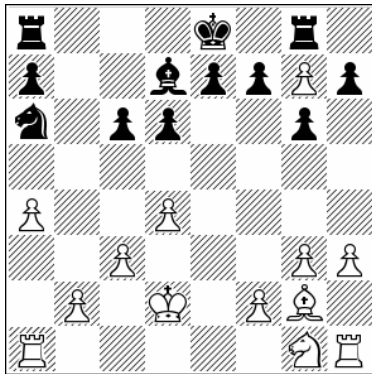
Luckily for me, after a long think, Kogan talked himself out of taking on e5 and bailed out with a seemingly safer option that led directly to an endgame.

9...b4 10.exf6 bxc3 11.fxg7 cxd2† 12.♗xd2



Thanks to the d4-pawn, there's no way to hang onto both the queen and h8-rook here.

12...♖xd2† 13.♔xd2 ♜g8 14.♙g2 ♙d7 15.c3



Nothing immediate is happening here. Technically White is up a pawn, but the pawn on g7 is just waiting to be captured. However, White is still slightly better: he has slightly more space thanks to his set of pawns on the 4th rank and his bishop is the more active one on the long diagonal.

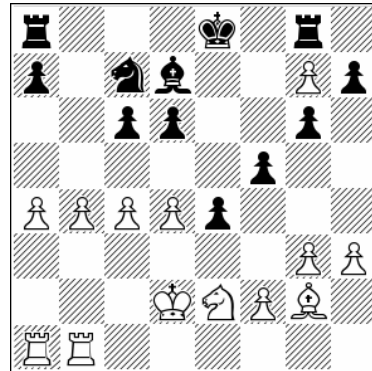
15...e5

Black decides to fight against both trumps with his e-pawn, but the resulting pawn-chain isn't truly secure and leaves behind several weaknesses if the position opens.

Because of that, I initially felt that Black should prefer a defensive setup centered around ...d5 to accomplish the same general aim. For example, 15...d5 16.b4 ♘c7, with ...f6 and ...♔f7 to follow. However, after the game, I recognized that even ...d5 leaves some weak squares behind, and so continuing the prior line, White can head for the great c5-square with something like 17.♘e2 f6 18.♘c1!

Given both 15...e5 and 15...d5 create future targets, Black's best bet is to keep his pawn structure compact for as long as possible. But with more space and the slightly more active pieces, White's advantage will endure.

16.♘e2 f5 17.b4 e4 18.♞hb1 ♘c7 19.c4



White's plan is very simple: expand on the queenside (starting with b4-b5) and then reopen the g2-bishop's diagonal with f3. The pressure on the central light squares from e4 to c6 will force at least one concession in terms of weak squares or improving White's piece activity.

19...♙e6

Black waits for White to determine the central structure. An alternative plan would have been to play for ...d5 on this or the next move. The delayed approach is quite risky though after something like: 19...0-0-0 20.b5 d5

20...c5 21.f3 is similar to the game.

21.c5

Now if White gets a chance, he'll consolidate with ♘c3 and have a mostly free hand on the queenside. But if Black tries to grab the b5-pawn while he can, he's going to come under a withering attack:

21...cxb5 22.axb5 ♘xb5 23.♘c3 ♘xc3

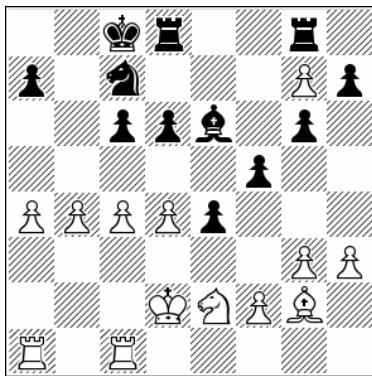
Or 23...♘xd4 24.♞xa7.

24.♔xc3 ♞xg7 25.♞xa7

Black's completely tied up and his king's in trouble (♙f1-a6 is a real mate threat!).

Better is the immediate 19...d5, after which White can ratchet up the central tension with: 20.f3 ♞xg7 (20...exf3 21.♙xf3 dxc4 22.b5 is painful) 21.b5 ♞e7 22.fxe4 fxe4 23.♘c3 and White is still on top, but a decisive advantage is still some ways away.

20.♖c1 0-0-0



Black offered a draw here, but it was easy for me to say no. At the very start of this endgame, I thought my advantage was minimal, but already at this point, I felt the win was close!

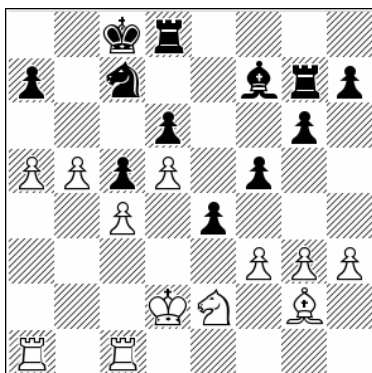
21.b5 c5 22.d5

He was surprised that I played this so quickly, but there's no reason to wait and invite tactics based on Black playing ...d5 later himself. I assessed it as a straightforward win if I opened the e-file later.

22...♙f7 23.a5

There's no need to hurry to break things open: the f3-break isn't going anywhere but Black could try to sneak in ...a5 at some point later and largely immobilize White's queenside pawns.

23...♖xg7 24.f3



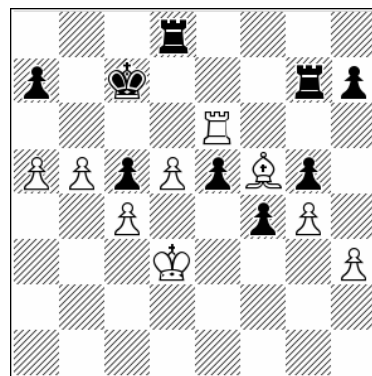
24...exf3 25.♙xf3

The e4-pawn would've become isolated and eventually rounded up if Black tried to hang on to it. But the trade is no picnic either – White now largely controls 6 ranks to just 2 for Black. That's a big improvement over the start of the endgame

where White held 4 ranks to Black's 3, with the 5th rank being contested.

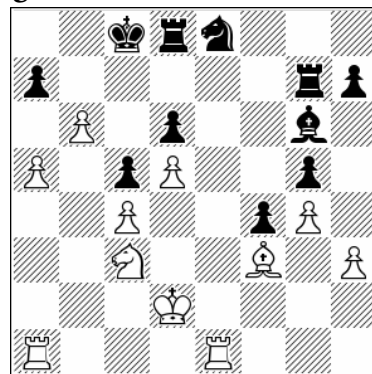
25...g5 26.♖e1 ♖e8 27.g4 f4

27...♙g6 gives White a couple options. One relatively direct approach is: 28.♖g3 f4 29.♖e4 ♙xe4 30.♙xe4 ♖f6 31.♙f5† ♖c7 32.♖e6 ♖d7 33.♖ae1 On both the last move and this one, b6† would be even stronger, and as I later used that motif during the game, I might have switched over to it here. But my first thought was to double rooks on the e-file, so I'll share that approach instead. 33...♖e5 34.♖1xe5 dxe5 35.♖d3



White is winning here because Black has no way to trade rooks easily (e.g. 35...♖d6 36.♖e8 ♖d8 37.b6† wins) and so he can only watch as White turns the screws. One winning plan is to round up the kingside pawns and then turn his attention to advancing on the queenside. For example, put the king on e4 and before taking on e5, undermine f4 with ♖h6 and h4, after which the e5/f4/g5 chain falls and White's king continues to march forward.

28.♖c3 ♙g6 29.b6!



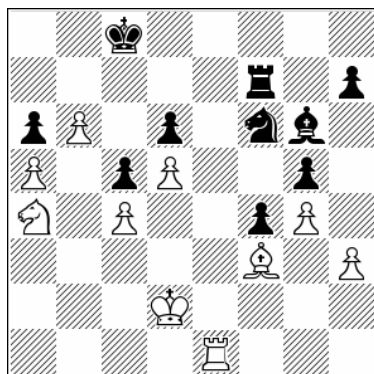
29...a6

Black keeps things closed, but at the cost of a protected passer on b6.

By comparison, 29...axb6 30.axb6 ♖b7 leaves White with many ways to win. Simplest is 31.♗b5 ♔d7 (31...♖xb6 32.♖e7 leaves Black cut off everywhere.) 32.♖a7 ♖db8 33.♙e4!, after which Black's position falls apart. Black's rooks are tied up on the queenside and his knight is tied to the d6-pawn's defense, which leaves the bishop to hold the kingside alone. Removing it allows White to swing a rook over to h6 via e6 and clean up.

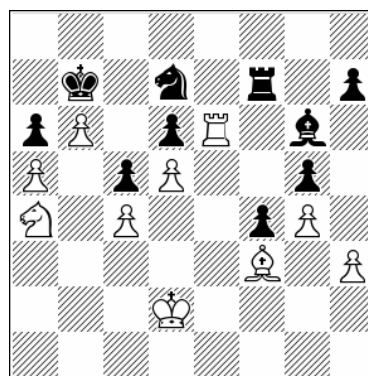
In such a dominating position, if you don't see a breakthrough immediately, identifying a key piece or point in the opponent's camp that is slowing you down can surface the key breakthrough.

30.♖e6 ♖f7 31.♖ae1 ♗f6 32.♖e7 ♖d7 33.♖xf7 ♖xf7 34.♗a4!



I was quite good at small combinations like the one that follows. Black's only plan is ...♗d7-e5 and I didn't want to allow even a shred of activity if I could help it.

34...♗d7 35.♖e8† ♔b7 36.♖e6



36...♗d7

I was hoping he'd play 36...♖f6 37.♖e7 ♖f7 when there's a nice little mating net with: 38.♗xc5†! dxc5 39.d6† ♔c8 40.♖e8#

37.♗xc5† dxc5 38.♖xe5 ♖d7 39.d6† ♔b8 40.♖xc5 ♖xd6† 41.♖d5

1-0

In the final round, I quickly drew as Black against GM Eduardas Rozentalis. That left him in clear first, half a point ahead of me, but it left me with a score of +4 against strong opposition, I began celebrating a GM-norm performance. Unfortunately, my celebrations were premature.

I had tripped myself up with two rule changes that were still pending and not yet enacted. For one, I had raised my first-round opponent's rating to 2200 for the performance rating calculations. And more fundamentally, this event followed a typical schedule in the US and Canada at the time with 9 rounds over 5 days (one single-round day followed by 4 double-round days). Both these rules would only be relaxed by FIDE starting in 2001.

Still, I didn't beat myself up much when I found out that I had jumped the gun. I didn't expect to beat Rozentalis with Black when he was looking for a draw, and I was thrilled with my overall performance.

My Study Program

My first chess idol was Capablanca, and that influence feels clear when looking at some of my earlier games. As I expanded my horizons with Fischer's games starting in 1995 and then Anand's games soon afterwards thru 1999, I was studying more concrete and aggressive players. My play followed suit, but that generally

made it more well-balanced than before. During this 2000-2002 period of self-study however, my play sharpened considerably, and I veered towards concrete play and tactical complexity.

To some degree, that was a by-product of my opening choices – openings like the French and Semi-Slav were leading to sharper positions than the more classical openings I started with like the Petroff and Queen's Gambit Declined. But what I studied (or more accurately, what I concluded from what I studied) and the growing strength of the computer helped push me further towards this style of play.

My self-directed study revolved around reading books and playing (maybe a little too much) blitz and bullet on the Internet Chess Club. Aside from some opening references like Sadler's *The Semi-Slav*, there are a few books that I spent a meaningful amount of time with: Yermolinsky's *The Road to Chess Improvement*, Shirov's *Fire on Board* and Shereshevsky's *Mastering the Endgame*.

Each of these books were useful and eye-opening, but the first two were drivers behind my stylistic shift. Among other insights, Yermolinsky criticized many annotations of classic games of the early 20th century as one-sided, and highlighted that for his own improvement, he needed to set aside some of those classical examples and well-known manuals of the 1950s-1960s due to the complexity of the modern game.

I felt that complexity was mirrored and expanded upon in Shirov's own games. In many places, Shirov's repertoire lined up closer to mine than prior players I studied. And while there was no game collection to study, I also noticed I was playing a lot of the same openings as Alexander Morozevich and started paying more attention to his games.

This direction also seemed supported by the growing strength of chess programs. A normal computer could already compete with many GMs and it was clear to me that they were only going to get better. All these examples seemed to push me in this direction without ever taking a specific decision one day to change my style.

Looking back however, I was skipping some useful material for my own development. Yermolinsky's awareness and understanding was much greater than mine when he began to focus more on concrete factors. That shift cost me sometimes at the board with more miscalculations and on the clock, as I tried to calculate more and check my lines. Hindsight is 20/20, but I would have benefited from any combination of more classical, strategic, or calculation practice.

GM Jaan Ehlevest – IM Vinay Bhat San Francisco 2000

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3 ♘h6

This was my preferred approach versus the Advance French. One of the main moves for Black is 5...♘ge7, and with 5...♘h6, Black tries to get the knight to f5 but without blocking the bishop on f8. That can come in handy after 6.♘a3 cxd4 and 7...♙xa3 for example.

6.a3

I played a few games in the general structure after 6.♙xh6 gxh6 (sometimes before or after a3) – the pawns are ugly, but Black gets a lot of central

counterplay later with ...♙g7 and ...f6 and I generally scored well here with Black.

With 6.a3, White's idea is to play b4 to gain space and clarify the central tension. In case Black trades on d4, the b4-pawn can also be used to kick Black's knight from c6, or as a bridge for the ♘c3-a4-c5 maneuver.

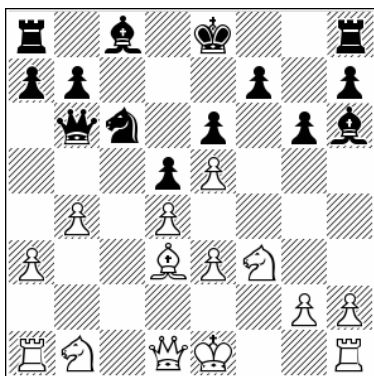
6...♘f5 7.b4 cxd4 8.cxd4 ♖b6 9.♙e3

9.♙b2 is the main alternative and slightly more popular. I'll share a memorable game (Sandipan – Bhat, China 2002) in that line in Chapter 11.

9...g6!?

I knew the main move here was 9...f6 but I couldn't remember all the theory at the board. Meanwhile, I knew 9...g6 was viable as well and I decided to choose the less forcing opening line. After the game, we both learned about a recent Morozevich game (within the prior week) from the FIDE Knockout Championships. Had I known about Morozevich's strong play in that game, I might have braved 9...f6 anyway, but ignorance was bliss for me that day.

10.♖d3 ♜xe3 11.fxe3 ♗h6



12.♞e2

Ehlvest's move is the most common one, but 12.♞d2 was the latest novelty from Morozevich. That game continued 12...♗d7 13.♜c3 ♜e7 14.g4 with major complications in Morozevich – Milos, New Delhi 2000. The initial analysis on this was very rosy for White, but it's not quite so simple.

12...♗d7

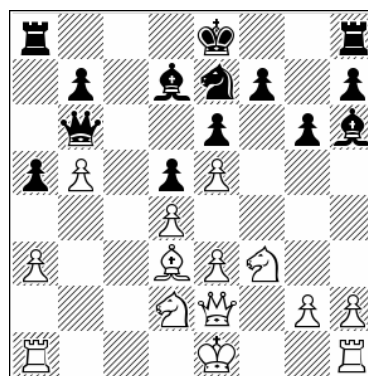
White has two ways of developing the knight with an eye towards c5: c3 (and then a4) or d2 (and then b3). Ehlvest chose the d2-square, but many years later, GM Shabalov chose 13.♜c3 against me. That game (Shabalov – Bhat, PCL [rapid] 2019) continued: 13.♜c3 ♜e7 14.g4 ♜c8 15.♜d1 a5 16.b5 a4 17.0-0 0-0. I ended up winning a topsyturvy encounter, but this was still a better version of the game continuation.

We reached essentially the same position here later, but with White's knight on d2 instead of d1, and as we'll see, it's worse on d2.

13.♜bd2 a5!

Ignorance was not bliss for Ian Thompson later in this same event. Some days later, he played 13...♜e7? against the very same Ehlvest! After 14.♜b3 a6 15.♜c5 ♗b5 16.♗xb5† axb5 17.g4, White began turning the screws in Ehlvest – Thompson, San Francisco 2000. Why would Ehlvest repeat this line later in the event? In the game, he had a major choice on move 15, and I suspect he looked at it in-between and decided his choice here was the wrong one.

14.b5 ♜e7



White is at a crossroads. Black has two ideas with either ...a4 or ...♜f5 and White can focus on the kingside with a g4-advance or he can focus on the queenside with an a4-advance. In either case, each side gets to execute one of their main ideas.

Ehlvest chose to play on the kingside, but that was the wrong decision and likely where he'd have deviated against Thompson if they reached this same juncture.

15.g4

Instead, I'd now prefer:

15.a4!

During the game, I was focused on:

15...♞c8

Instead of this, Black should start with 15...♜f5. One key point now is that after 16.g4? ♜xe3 17.g5, there is 17...♗xg5! 18.♜xg5 ♞xd4 which is good for Black. In the similar 15...♞c8 16.♜b3 ♜f5 line, the b3-knight guarded the d4-pawn.

White therefore has to take on f5 straight away, but 16.♗xf5 exf5 is a viable defensive setup. Black can still sacrifice an exchange on c5 if he has to, but he also has ideas of ...♗e6 and ...♗f8 to try and secure his weak squares. I had seen this during

the game, but I underestimated the resiliency of this position.

16. ♖b3

This could also have come about after 15. ♖b3 ♜c8 16. a4. Now I liked the looks of:

16... ♞c3

16... ♖f5? might be tempting, and while 17. ♙xf5 is survivable, 17. g4! is not. After 17... ♖xe3 18. g5, Black is losing a piece while retreating sees White achieve his goals on both flanks.

17. ♖c5 ♞xc5 18. dxc5 ♜xc5 19. ♔f2 0-0 20. ♞ac1 ♝b6

Black's pawn structure is solid, he has the bishop pair, and a pawn for the exchange. But, on further inspection, his minor pieces aren't great aside from the h6-bishop and so White should be better here.

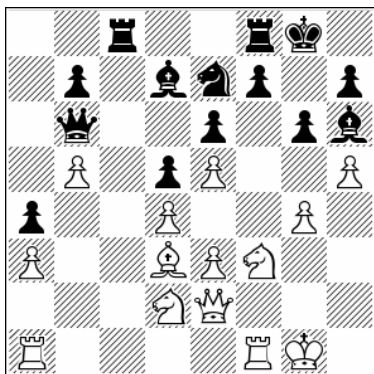
15... a4

White's d2-knight is hemmed in, and White is left with weakened pawns on a3 and b5.

16. 0-0 0-0 17. h4

White tries to start an attack on the kingside. A slower approach with 17. ♞fc1 for example, doesn't promise much success – White actually has more readily available weaknesses than Black (pawns on e3, a3, and b5, along with the c3-square). Black has two main options: he can play on the c-file directly, or he can first try to provoke g5 by playing ... ♙g7 (which threatens ... f6 later and the open center should favor Black's bishops). Either way, I like Black's position overall.

17... ♞ac8 18. h5?



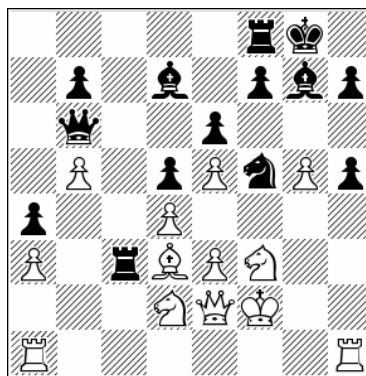
18... g5!

This may be surprising, but Black can make use of the open g-file at least as well as White can!

19. g5

White decides to try and keep the h-file open. Taking back on h5 leads to an ugly-looking structure after 19. g5 ♖h5 20. ♙xf5 ♙xf5, but it's White's structure that is falling apart first (... ♙xb5 or ... ♞c3) and Black's king is in no real danger.

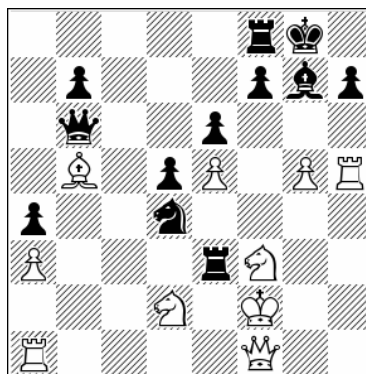
19... ♙g7 20. ♔f2 ♞c3 21. ♞h1 ♖f5



22. ♖e1

This stops the threat of ... ♙xb5, but it leaves White vulnerable on the kingside. 22. ♞xh5 was a reasonable, practical try because White's likely to get at least some material advantage (or at least equality) for his trouble after 22... ♙xb5! 23. ♙xb5 ♞xe3 24. ♝f1.

Black has three main choices here (24... ♞c3, 24... ♖xd4, and 24... ♙xe5) – he's better (or close to winning) in all 3, but they are listed from least to most clearly winning. I was planning on the middle option, so I'll concentrate on that here. After 24... ♖xd4:



25. ♔xe3 ♖f5†! On this and in the future, White's objectively "best" is to walk into a knight fork; but assuming he wants to avoid that obvious loss, a

sample finish could be: 26.♔f4 ♕xe5†! 27.♕xe5 ♖d6† 28.♕f6 e5†! 29.♕xf5 ♗e6#

25.♘xd4 ♗xd4 26.♘f3 ♗xf3†! 27.♕xf3 ♗e4† and one of the rooks will soon fall, from either e5 or g4.

25.♕d3

This is best and presents a real challenge. In my calculations, I was planning:

25...♘f5

This line is winning for Black, but he needs to leave the rook on e3 for just a bit longer with 25...♗c8! and the rook is going to enter on c3 with decisive effect soon. Maybe I'd have seen this if we got here, but if I continued to push the tempo, I might have missed the win.

The text move turns out to not be so simple:

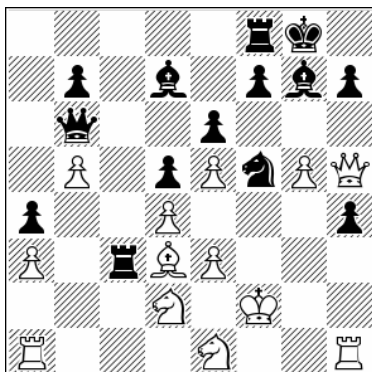
26.♕g2!

26.♕xf5? ♗xe5† 27.♕g2 ♗xf5 was my plan, and it's true that here Black is much better. He has four pawns for a piece, and White's pieces are uncoordinated and exposed.

26...♕xe5 27.♕xf5 exf5 28.♘xe5 ♗xe5

This is only marginally better for Black – his pawns are all over the place.

22...h4 23.♗h5



23...♕xe5! 24.♕g2

Black has a winning material advantage and a winning attack after either 24.dxe5 ♗xe3† 25.♕g2 ♗xd2† or 24.♕xf5 ♕g3† 25.♕g2 exf5.

24...♕g3 25.♘df3 ♘xe3† 26.♕g1 ♘f5

I also considered 26...♗xd3!?, but this knight retreat was simple enough.

27.♗d1 e5!

0-1

White could try 28.♕xf5 ♕xf5 29.♘xh4 ♕e4 30.♘eg2 but then 30...♗c1! leaves White with too many problems to solve. For example, 31.♘e3 ♗xd4 is the end for White.

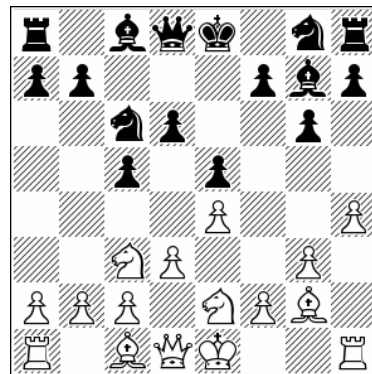
IM Vinay Bhat – GM Normunds Miezis

Chicago 2001

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3

Rossolimo and KIA setups (starting with 2.♘f3) were my primary lines, but I still had 2.♘c3 in my repertoire. With two games a day (the usual schedule in the US), there wasn't much time to prepare, but I noticed he liked a setup with ...e5 against the Closed Sicilian and I suspected I could get the game continuation to move 7, which I had been wanting to play for some time.

2...♘c6 3.g3 g6 4.♕g2 ♕g7 5.d3 d6 6.♘ge2 e5 7.h4



I first noticed this setup with 6.♘ge2 and 7.h4 in 1998, but it was a 1999 game between Short and Stohl that convinced me to play it. Like in my game against Hummel (from Chapter 7), this is another variation on a typical anti-fianchetto foray. In this case, Black's knight can still come out to f6, but with his pawns committed to c5 and e5 already, that's an awkward choice. White can jump in directly with 8.♘d5 or start with 8.♕g5, with a possible trade on f6 followed by h4-h5 to soften the kingside and ♘c3-d5 to claim key central squares.

7...h6 8.♘d5 ♘ge7 9.♘ec3 ♕e6 10.f4 ♘d4

10...exf4 11.♙xf4 ♖d4 12.♚d2 ♗ec6 13.0-0 ♗e5 led to a nice win for White in Short – Stohl, Batumi 1999.

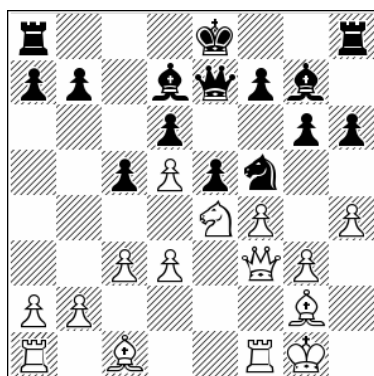
11.0-0 ♗xd5 12.exd5 ♙d7

12...♙f5 13.♗e4 leaves the d4-knight without a good retreat after c2-c3.

13.♗e4 ♚e7

After 13...♗f5, White can even consider 14.g4 ♗xh4 15.♗xd6† ♗f8 16.fxe5 with an overwhelming position.

14.c3 ♗f5 15.♚f3



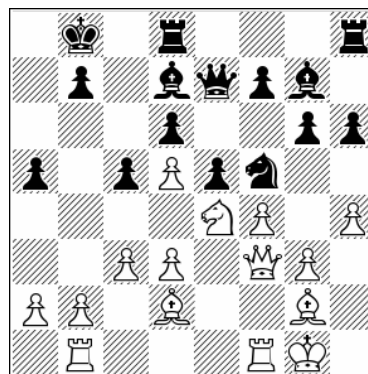
15...0-0-0

A surprising decision and a risky one. There's no way he didn't see some attacking options for White on the queenside, but he must've either felt they were too slow or that this was better than going kingside. White is still better after 15...0-0, but that's what I'd have played.

15...h5? gives up control of g5, and that's always going to be risky: 16.fxe5 dxe5 (16...♙xe5 17.♙g5 f6 18.♗xf6† wins) 17.d6! wins.

15...0-0 16.fxe5 ♙xe5 17.♙f4 is a small edge for White. White has a small spatial plus and the d6-pawn is a permanent weakness.

16.♚b1 a5 17.♙d2 ♗b8



What to do next? I obviously was gearing up to play on the queenside with b4, but the immediate 18.b4 cxb4 19.cxb4 allows both ...a4 and a later ...♗d4 so that didn't seem right. 18.a3 is also an obvious move to prepare b4, but then after 18...a4 19.b4 axb3, is the trade of White's b-pawn for Black's a-pawn ideal or should I be trying to get rid of Black's c-pawn? And how important is control over the d4-square?

Thinking like this, I then hit upon another possibility built upon the idea of opening the b-file and getting rid of Black's c5-pawn while keeping somewhat in touch with the d4-square. I was quite happy with myself, and my solution surprised Mieziš as well.

But 18.a3 a4 19.b4 axb3 20.♚xb3 ♙a4 21.♚b6 is straightforward and avoids any adventures with sacrifices like in the game. White would prefer that Black's pawn be on a5 instead of c5, but that's not too big a deal as he can increase the pressure on the b-file and look to reroute other pieces towards the queenside too. With the f5-knight his only truly active piece, Black's in big trouble in the long run.

18.b4?! cxb4 19.a3 exf4

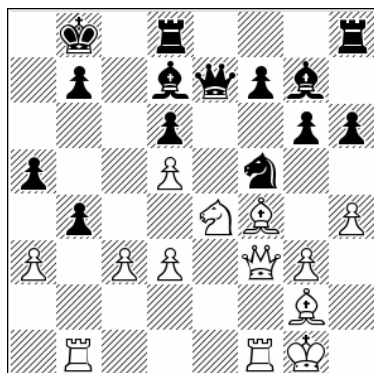
If Black continues chomping away with 19...bxa3, his position soon falls apart after 20.♚f2!. That kind of transfer to the queenside is exactly why I wanted to remove the c5-pawn.

Similarly, after 19...bxc3, White's attacking potential is apparent after the natural 20.♙xc3 recapture. White can think about maneuvers like ♚f2-b6, or in some cases, trading on e5 to try and unlock the d5-pawn – if he can push that pawn forward, then there is a lot of latent force ready to

land on b7. Black is not immediately lost, but his best options lead to a worse position and rely on the razor-sharp calculation of a computer engine.

20. ♖xf4

I didn't even consider the immediate 20. axb4, because 20... fxg3 appeared to be too high a price. Still, this was objectively the right move as the two attacks balance out to equality according to the machine.



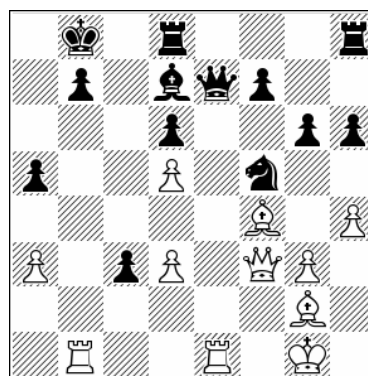
20... ♗xc3?

Black tries to control e1 and keep the b-file closed, or allow White to open it at the cost of his powerful knight, but this makes White's attacking concept look good.

20... bxc3 was an obvious move, but so was my planned reply 21. ♖fe1. With g4 to follow and the d6-pawn next on the menu, I thought Black was in big trouble. Luckily for me, he thought so too!

He can't blockade the e-file because 21... ♗e5 22. ♗xe5 leaves him open to either the d5-pawn advancing or the knight landing on c5 with tempo, but the cold-blooded computer sees it all more clearly. An exact series of moves starting with 21... ♗f8! 22. g4 c2! 23. ♖bc1 ♗d4† 24. ♔h1 g5! whirls up enough counterplay that sees Black end up on top.

21. ♖xc3 bxc3 22. ♖fe1



Things were back under control for me. I was a pawn down, but without any coordination across flanks, Black can't defend effectively.

22... ♗f6

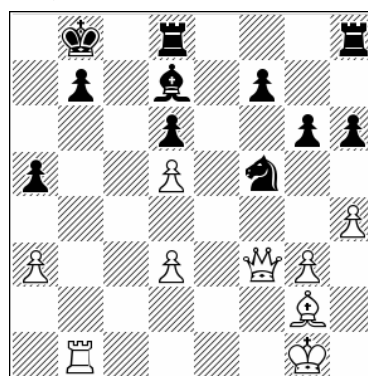
Or 22... ♗f8 23. ♗f2!, and simply routing the queen over finishes things. 24. ♖xb7† is already a threat (and would work, for example, against 23... ♖c8) and guarding the b7-pawn with 23... ♗c8 allows 24. g4 with 25. ♗b6 to follow.

Part of the point with 20... ♗xc3 was to remove pressure on d6, but it turns out there's another way to enable the queenside attack.

23. ♗e5! ♗xe5

23... dxe5 24. d6 and b7 falls.

24. ♖xe5 c2 25. ♖ee1 cxb1=♗ 26. ♖xb1

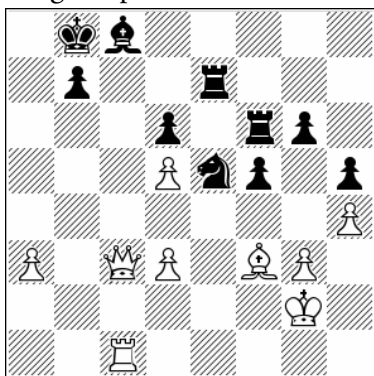


The air has cleared, and Black has a rook, knight, and pawn for the queen. On paper, that's fine but Black still has queenside weaknesses and only one active piece (the f5-knight). There are many ways to win this and the way I chose was reasonably straightforward: grab the a5-pawn, push my own a-pawn, and generally trade down so Black has fewer pieces to guard all his pawns. My first thought was to take the a-pawn with my rook,

but then I felt the rook would be sidelined, so I went after it with my queen.

26...♖he8 27.♚f2 ♘c8 28.♙e4 h5 29.♖b5 ♙d7
30.♖b1 ♘c8 31.♔g2 ♘h6 32.♚d2 ♘g4 33.♚xa5
f5 34.♙f3 ♘e5 35.♚b5 ♖e7 36.♖c1 ♖f8 37.♚b4
♖f6 38.♚c3 ♖f8 39.♚b4 ♖f6 40.♚c3

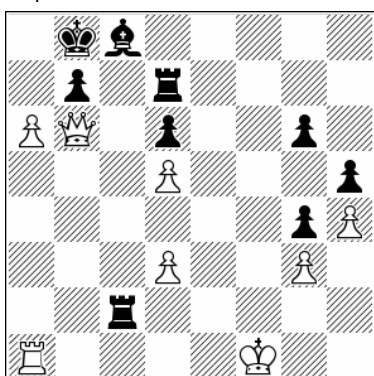
Repeating the position to make time control.



40...♖f8 41.♙d1 ♘g4 42.♚b4 ♖d8 43.♚b6 ♖dd7
44.♙xg4 fxg4 45.a4 ♖e8 46.a5 ♔a8 47.a6 ♔b8

47...bxa6 48.♚c6† ♔a7 49.♖b1 sets up a mating net.

48.♖a1 ♖e2† 49.♔f1 ♖c2



50.♖a4!

I wanted to trade rooks, and the way to do so is from c4.

50...♖c5 51.♖c4 ♖xc4 52.dxc4 ♔a8 53.axb7†
♙xb7 54.♔e2 ♔b8 55.♔e3 ♔c8 56.♔d4 ♖d8
57.♚b1 ♖g8 58.♚e4 ♖g7 59.♚e8† ♔c7 60.c5
♙c8 61.♚c6†

1-0

This game capped a 2600+ performance for me against four GMs and two other titled players, but the Chicago Open was only a 7-round event and not the requisite 9 for a GM norm.

IM Tibor Fogarasi – IM Vinay Bhat

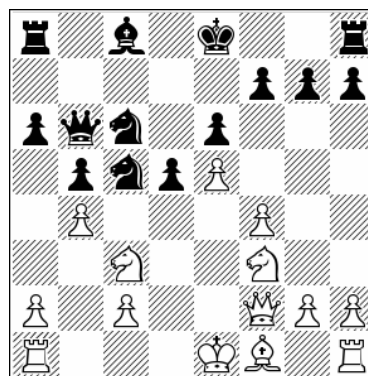
Budapest 2001

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.f4 c5
6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.♙e3 a6 8.♚d2 b5 9.dxc5

This was a common line at the time, but it's since been supplanted by setups where White doesn't try to stop Black's queenside pawn storm and instead continues with moves like 9.♙e2.

9...♙xc5 10.♙xc5 ♘xc5 11.♚f2 ♚b6 12.b4!?

A surprise, but I had seen the move before. 12.♙d3 b4 13.♘e2 a5 14.0-0 ♙a6 15.♔h1 ♘e7 is the normal line.



12...d4!?

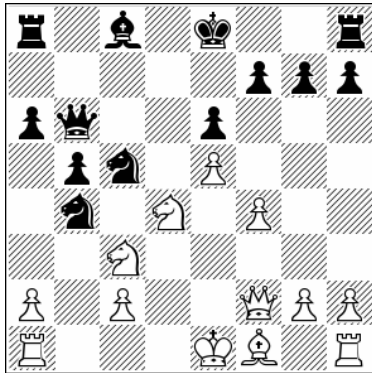
Half preparation and half inspiration at the board. I remembered looking at this move some time before, but I hadn't analyzed it deeply. But I also didn't feel like playing a quieter endgame after the "correct" 12...♘d7.

Interestingly, nobody else has ventured this move since, even though it's quite reasonable. By the way, the tactical point behind 12.b4 is that 12...♘xb4 is met by 13.♖b1 ♘c6 14.♙xb5! with advantage.

13.♘xd4

The only good move: 13.♘xb5 axb5 14.bxc5 ♚xc5 is much better for Black, while 13.bxc5 ♚a5 14.♚d2 dxc3 also leaves Black on top.

13...♘xb4

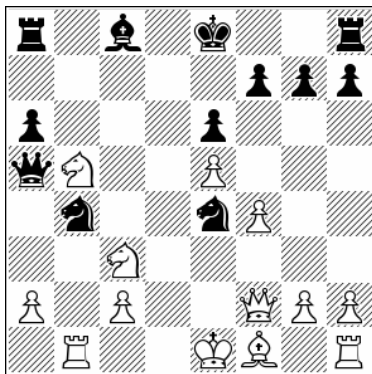


A picturesque position with the knights. Quiet development with 14. Qe2 for example now fails to 14... Nxa4! 15. Nxa4 Qxd4! and after the fireworks, Black will be up a pawn with the better pieces too. There isn't any turning back for either side.

14. Rb1 Qa5 15. Ndx5

Once again, it's hard for White to bail out with quiet moves, and this sets up some more picturesque knight positioning.

15... Ne4!

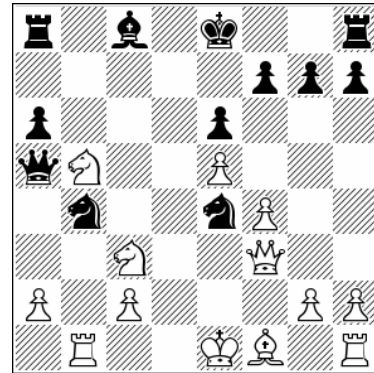


When I was considering 12...d4, I calculated two lines: one was with 13.bxc5 Qa5, and one was the game continuation, and I stopped when I saw this move. It's a good thing I didn't try to remember my notes any further, because when I checked them afterwards, they ended here with "unclear".

16. Qf3

16. Nxe4? Nd3+, 16. Qe3? Nxc2+ and 16. Nd6+? Nd6 17. exd6 Nxa2 do not end well for White.

16. Qf3

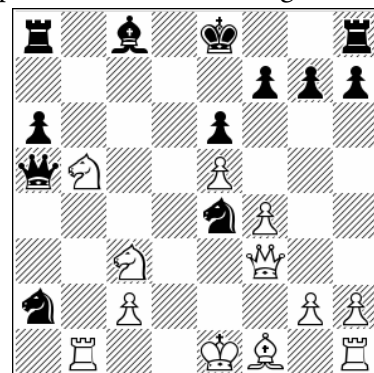


16... Nxa2

Again, I pursued the most complicated option. Black had viable alternatives, but they are in relatively more simplified positions.

16...axb5 could transpose to a 16... Nxa2 line after 17. Qxe4 Nxa2, but White also has another option here with the shocking 17. Qxb5+ Ke7 18. Nxe4, leaving the b5-bishop undefended and the white king vulnerable to a discovered check. But even with an extra piece, I haven't found more than a draw there for Black.

Meanwhile, 16... Nd5 is also interesting – White's continuation in the game is removed from consideration, so he's basically forced to defend the c3-knight a different way: 17. Qxe4 axb5 18. Rb3! (A typical resource in these lines to indirectly guard the c3-knight.) 18... Nxc3 19. Qc6+ Qd7 20. Qxc3 and whether he takes on a2 immediately or after a trade of queens, Black's advantage is minimal.



17. Nc7+

This was starting to feel like a bughouse position!

My opponent must not have enjoyed my knights hopping around his side of the board and tried to return the favor, but this could have cost him the

game. Proving it isn't trivial and the alternatives are also complicated, but a condensed rundown of some primary lines are:

17. ♖a1? ♜exc3 18. ♖c6† ♜f8 19. ♖xa8 ♜xb5† 20. ♜f2 ♖d2† 21. ♜g3 g5! keeps the attack going, whether White takes on c8 or not.

17. ♜d6†? ♜xd6 18. ♖c6† ♟d7 19. ♖xa8† ♜c8 leaves White without a way to guard the ♜c3 and so he'll be down two pieces for a rook with a worse position to boot.

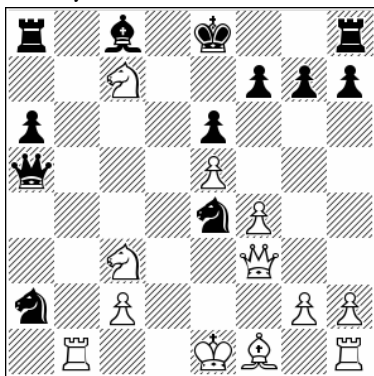
Correct was:

17. ♖xe4 axb5 18. ♖b3 0-0 18... ♜xc3 19. ♖c6† ♟d7 20. ♖xc3 0-0 21. ♖xa5 ♖xa5 22. ♜f2 f6 was actually my preference during the game, but the initiative isn't enduring and so this should end in a draw.

18... ♟d7 19. ♜f2 ♜xc3 20. ♖xc3 0-0 21. ♟d3 g6 22. ♖b3 ♖fc8 23. ♜g3 is slightly better for Black as White's pawns are the weaker set (c2 and f4 versus just b5), but any decisive result is a ways off.

19. ♟d3 g6 20. 0-0 ♜xc3 21. ♖xc3 ♖xc3 22. ♖xa8 b4

With a tiny plus. Black's structure is marginally better, and his pieces have more potential activity.



17... ♜e7!

His knight move did succeed in throwing me for a loop: I considered my move along with all of 17... ♜f8, 17... ♜d7, 17... ♜d8, and 17... ♖xc7 before deciding. I chose the right continuation objectively, but if Fogarasi was spending more time on the clock after the initial fireworks with 12... d4, now I was the one spending more time.

17... ♖xc7 was the easiest to reject: 18. ♜xe4 0-0 19. ♟d3 and White's on top.

17... ♜d8 (17... ♜d7 is similar) 18. ♖xe4! ♜xc3 19. ♖d4†! ♜d5† (19... ♜xc7?? 20. ♖d6#) 20. ♜f2 ♜xc7 21. c4! and there isn't any way to secure the extra piece.

17... ♜f8 18. ♖xe4 ♖xc3† 19. ♜f2 ♖a7 20. ♜xa6 is very similar to the game, but here Black's king is on f8 instead of e7. That means the h8-rook can't come into the game as quickly, but it also means that Black's king is safer after something like 20... g6, so this too is better for Black as the a6-knight remains awkwardly placed.

18. ♖xe4

Black wins after 18. ♜xa8? ♜axc3 19. ♖c1 ♟b7.

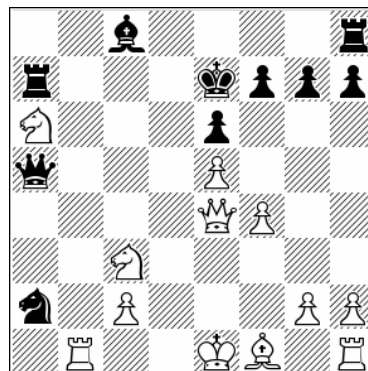
18... ♖a7

There were two relatively easy moves to reject here: 18... ♖xc7? 19. ♜xa2 is winning and 18... ♜xc3?! 19. ♖b4†! ♖xb4 20. ♖xb4 ♖a7 21. ♖c4 is fine for White.

I spent a good amount of time on 18... ♖xc3† 19. ♜f2 ♖c5† as I felt the queen must be better suited to the defense on c5, but I couldn't make it work. There are plenty of interesting variations here, many of which I didn't see at the time, but it's only equal in the end.

19. ♜xa6

19. ♖d4? ♖xc3† 20. ♖xc3 ♜xc3 and Black will win a piece. This is the difference compared to 18... ♜xc3, which allowed the queen trade on b4 instead of c3. Trading on b4 allows ♖b4-c4 to save the knight.



19...♙xa6?

After 19...♙xc3† 20.♔f2, I didn't see a way forward. Maybe I was discouraged by the similar position after 18...♙xc3† 19.♔f2 ♖c5† 20.♔f3 ♖a7 21.♘a6, and I was starting to feel pressure from the clock and focused on more forcing captures and checks.

Black does have a way forward here with 20...♞d8! 21.♘b8 ♞c7! and while Black hasn't taken anything or given a check, he is threatening to do so. With White's knight dominated and threats of ...♞d4 or ...♞d2, Black is winning. Sometimes an improving move is all you need!

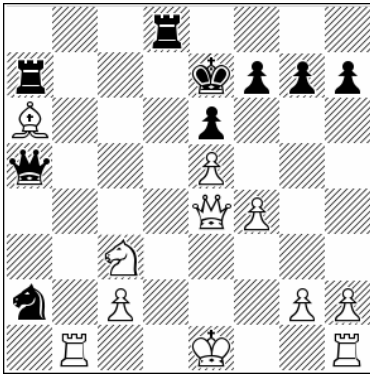
20.♙xa6 ♞d8

The alternatives were retreads or easy rejections:

20...♙xc3† 21.♔f2 ♖c5† takes us back to a 18...♙xc3† variation, which is only equal.

20...♘xc3? 21.♞b7†! ♔d8 22.♞b8†! ♔c7 23.♞b7† draws.

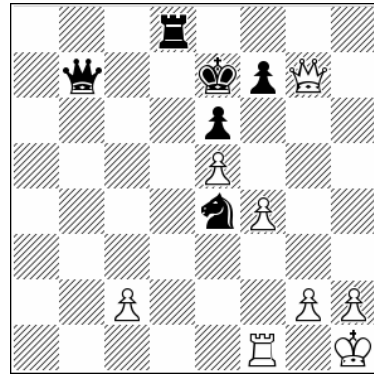
20...♞xa6? and 20...♙xa6? only invite trouble on the 7th and 8th ranks.



21.0-0?

I'm not sure what he missed, but 21.♞b7† would have saved the piece and drawn more easily than in the game. The main line I looked at runs 21...♞xb7 22.♙xb7† ♞d7 23.♙c6 (and not 23.♙b3 ♘xc3, as after 24.0-0 ♖c5† 25.♔h1 ♘e4, Black keeps the attack going) and it looks like White survives.

21...♘xc3 22.♞b7† ♔f8 23.♙xh7 ♞xb7 24.♙xb7 ♙b6† 25.♔h1 ♙xb7 26.♙h8† ♔e7 27.♙xg7 ♘e4



I had about a minute left at this point. On the board, the dust has settled and White has 3 pawns for the knight, and so after all the previous excitement, the position is about equal. Given my time situation though, White still had everything to play for.

28.h3 ♖c8

28...♞d2 29.f5 exf5 30.♞xf5 ♖d5 holds the position but not more.

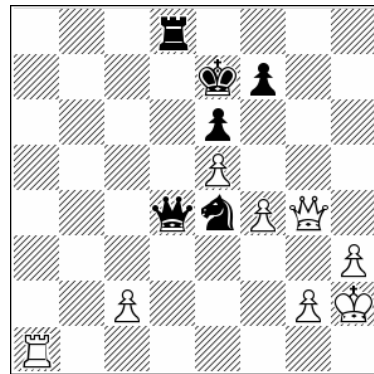
29.♞a1! ♖c5 30.♔h2 ♖e3

30...♙f2 31.♙g4 ♞h8 was another option I had about 25 seconds to think about, but when I realized that ...♞h4 isn't really a threat due to ♞a7†, I decided to play 30...♙e3.

31.♙g4 ♖d4

I also considered 31...♔d7!? trying to get the king to relative safety on the queenside, but then 32.f5 worried me.

After my move, I offered a draw (I had about 36 seconds left) but my opponent wanted to continue.



32.♞b1 ♘c5 33.♙g5† ♔d7 34.♙f6 ♞f8 35.c3 ♖d2

I didn't play 35...♖xc3 because of 36.♞d1† ♖c6 37.♞e7 and I figured White would have something. But actually after 37...♞g8!, Black's on top. Still, 36.f5 (instead of 36.♞d1†) would be a pretty straightforward equalizer without having to worry about ...♞f4† for example. Black's king is too exposed for serious winning chances to exist.

36.♞a1 ♖e4

36...♖c6 was another try, with the idea of baiting White into playing 37.♞e7? or 37.♞a7?, when 37...♞g8 turns the tables on White. But I didn't see what to do after a waiting move like 37.♖h1!? and so I decided to force a draw with 36...♖e4 straightaway.

37.♞a7† ♖c6 38.♞e7 ♞xf4† 39.♖g1 ♞f2†
40.♖h2 ♞g3† 41.♖g1
½–½

High School Chess

Starting with the Fall 1998 semester, I didn't have to impersonate a high-school student as I finally attended Lynbrook High School. While I didn't play many FIDE events during the school years, I played many team events with the high school team.

There was already a chess club, under the auspices of Mrs. Chopra, the same advisor-sponsor as during my brother's time there. In a school of about 1,600, we had about a dozen people at the chess club and three other rated players, all within the 800–1200 range. Still, we started competing in an intra-high-school league among local high schools. I tried to help as well, collecting materials and providing one-on-one lessons.

Over my four years there, the club grew in size and skill, but we never did win the California State High-School Team title. I played every team event, usually around 20 games a year and scored 100%, but in general my opposition wasn't within even 400 rating points of me. Our best team finish was as the 2nd best school team in 2001 (my results did net me the individual state title four times).

I also started coaching Matthew Ho, a talented junior who lived close-by. He was already about 1900 USCF when we started and while he went on to represent the US in multiple World Youth Championships, my own thinking about study and improvement were not very well formed.

My Learnings and Progress

These four games don't appear to share a lot in common: an endgame squeeze against Kogan, a middlegame smash against Ehlvest, a tactical skirmish followed by an endgame win against Mieziš, and a draw against Fogarasi after a long melee. But stylistically, I initiated or welcomed fireworks on the board in all these games, regardless of whether I had a real advantage or not.

This was a learning experience for me, as I was used to holding back until I had a clearer strategic plus already. I could study examples of dynamics, but theory was especially different than practice in this area. As a result, the Ehlvest game was a clean one, but all the others had me misjudging dynamic factors.

That brought about another learning for me: my new, default mode of play was more double-edged both for me and my opponents. Even experienced IM and GM opponents weren't automatically better in

this area. Many of my games from this period and beyond were not especially clean, but I was OK with that if it meant putting more pressure on my opponents.

Given this stylistic shift, I'd likely have benefited from more calculation practice, but even with what I was doing, my results improved overall during this period. Similar to how my early work with Kaidanov smoothed out the weakest links in my play, developing in this area helped raise my level even if the GM norms didn't immediately follow.

Chapter 10

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

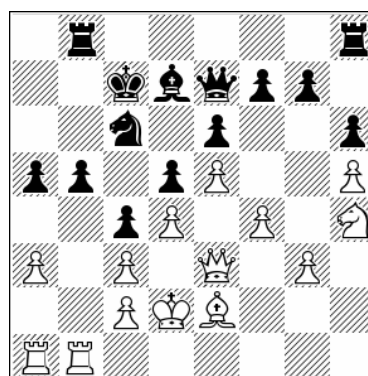
My stylistic shift beginning in the summer of 2000 led to some clear rewards, but it also carried some risks. I was starting to rely more on calculation and often relied too much on those concrete variations at the expense of a more general sense of what to do and what principles to follow. My chess work during this time though wasn't focused on reducing those risks or shoring up my weaknesses. That led to several games where I could swing from impressive play to wondering afterwards what I was doing at the board. The next game was played in the US Junior Championship in 2000.

FM Marcel Martinez – IM Vinay Bhat
Catonsville 2000

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙g5 ♙b4 5.e5 h6
6.♙d2 ♙xc3 7.bxc3 ♘e4 8.♗g4 ♖f8 9.♙d3
♘xd2 10.♖xd2 c5 11.♘f3 ♘c6 12.h4 c4 13.♙e2
♙d7 14.♗f4 b5 15.a3 a5 16.♗e3 ♖e8

This was the limit of what I could remember about this main-line French MacCutcheon. After the game, Marcel mentioned that he was following ideas from a pair of GM games (Christiansen – Korchnoi, Reykjavik 2000, and DeFirmian – Kaidanov, Salt Lake City 1999). There's plenty of content prior to the endgame, but I'll highlight only a few key moments and focus on the endgame.

17.♞hb1 ♞b8 18.h5 ♞e7 19.g3 ♖d8 20.♘h4
♖c7 21.f4



21...♞b7?

The start of an entirely bad plan. I obviously saw that ...b4 was possible, but I thought it'd be stronger with two rooks behind it. And then I decided that a knight on a4 would also make that advance stronger, so that Black would control the c3-square too.

One problem with this plan is after that eventual ...b4, White will exchange down on b4 anyway, so the doubled rooks don't add any real pressure. Secondly, the c6-knight is already in a useful position, as it adds some pressure to d4 after ...b4 undermines the c3-pawn.

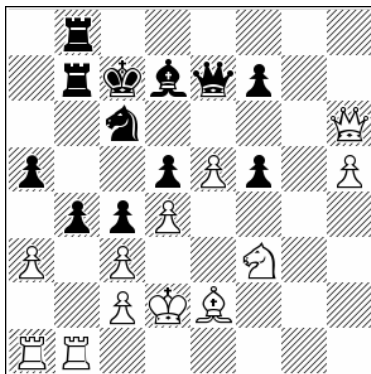
The biggest problem though is that I was thinking I was the only one with active intent when White can also expand on the kingside. Those g4/f5 and g4/g5 ideas are not idle threats! Taking the rook away from h8 allows White to isolate the h6-pawn after g4-g5 for example, while the ...♖a7-c8-b6-a4 maneuver is slow and can be undercut by g4/f5.

All of this points to the immediate 21...b4 as correct and that would have been about equal.

22.♖f3 ♜hb8 23.g4 ♖a7 24.g5 ♖c6 25.gxh6 gxh6 26.f5! exf5 27.♞xh6

There's no question the last few moves have tilted things in White's favor. I decided to try and get my queenside counterplay going finally, but it's a bit late.

27...b4



28.♗e3?

White could have played 28.axb4 straight away. For example: 28...axb4 29.cxb4 ♞xb4 30.♞h1! (30.♞xb4? ♞xb4† 31.♗d1 ♜e6 and Black's better.) 30...♞4b6 31.♞e3 leaves Black clearly worse.

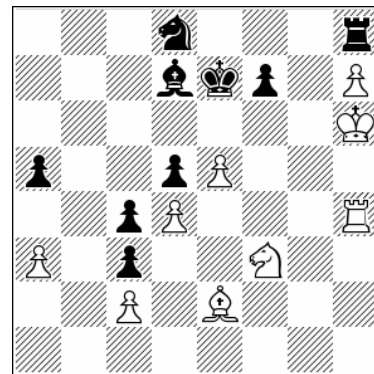
The next phase of the game leading to the time control at move 40 was played with me in some time pressure (I was down to 4 minutes already).

28...bxc3 29.♞xb7† ♞xb7 30.♞g7 f4†! 31.♗xf4 ♞b6! 32.♗e3 ♞e6? 33.♞f6? ♞g4 34.♞f4?

A mistake while playing on my time pressure. Instead, 34.♞d6†! ♗b7 35.♞xd5 was a simple win.

34...♞xf4†? 35.♗xf4 ♞b8 36.h6 ♞h8 37.♞h1 ♗d8 38.h7 ♗e8 39.♗g5 ♗e7 40.♞h4 ♖d8 41.♗h6?

Thanks to the 5-second delay, I had managed to make the time control with 3 seconds left on my clock. But sensing the win was close, Marcel was still playing quickly with 41.♗h6, and that was his undoing – a little prophylaxis with 41.♜d1! would've made it easy.

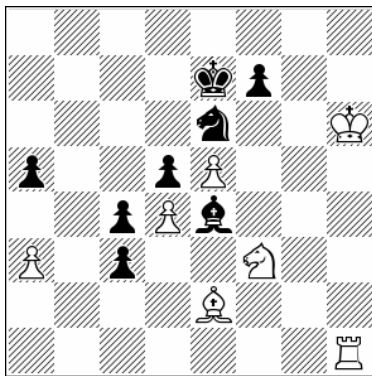


By elimination, I quickly realized my next move was my only chance – but I still sat there for 40 minutes thinking about the decision and calculating as far as I could. Not the smartest choice!

41...♜f5! 42.♗g7 ♞f8?

43.h8=♞ would be a major touch-move mistake because of 43...♖e6†, and so White must bring his knight forward to g5. During the game, I thought this would weaken White's control of d4 as compared to sacrificing the rook for the h-pawn directly. That's true in isolation, but it opens some more aggressive continuations for White that we'll see on move 46.

Upon discovering that improvement, I went backwards and re-evaluated this line with 42...♞xh7† and found it to be a more reliable draw than the game continuation. For example: 42...♞xh7†! 43.♞xh7 ♜xc2 44.♞h1 ♖e6† 45.♗h6 ♜e4!



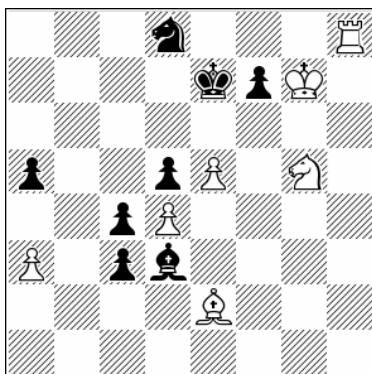
This turns out to be a draw, for example: 46.♖c1 c2 47.♗g5 ♖xd4 48.♗xe4 ♗xe2 49.♞xc2 ♗d4 50.♞c1 ♗b3 and it seems that the knight can dance around just long enough after 51.♞e1 dxe4 52.♞xe4 ♗d2 53.♞d4 c3 54.♞d6 ♗c4 55.♞c6 ♗xa3 56.♞xc3 ♗b5 57.♞c1 f6 with a draw. Quite the escape!

43.♗g5 ♞xc2 44.h8=♚

Marcel was still playing somewhat quickly and after queening, he (maybe jokingly) asked me, “are you ready to resign yet?” But during the game and even in the initial post-mortem, I was convinced that the win had already slipped away for White. That turns out to be a little optimistic, but it’s not easy to prove. In fact, even with about half the field analyzing the game with us afterwards, we didn’t get to the bottom of this endgame.

One suggestion from that post-mortem was 44.♞xc4, which does indeed win against either 44...dxc4 or 44...♞f5, but instead Black has 44...♞xh7! when he’s at least OK.

44...♞xh7 45.♞xh8 ♞d3



46.♞d1

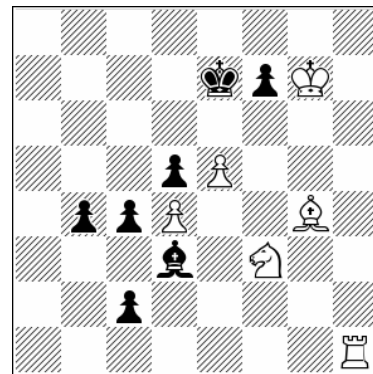
One of many candidate moves with the bishop. For starters, giving Black two connected

passers with 46.♞d3 cxd3 doesn’t look correct, and it isn’t: 47.♞h1 c2 48.♗f3 ♗e6† 49.♗h6 ♗f4 50.♗d2 ♗e2 51.♗b3 a4! and the pawns crash through.

Nor does 46.♞f3 impress, even though it was the main move we focused on in the group post-mortem. There’s a further serious branch after 46...c2 47.♞h1 ♗c6 48.♞xd5 ♗xd4 49.♗xf7. Now, 49...♗e2 50.♗h6 c1=♚ 51.♞xc1 ♗xc1 52.♗g8† is the big idea and the e-pawn wins for White. But with 49...♗f5†! instead, Black can turn the tables after 50.♗g8 ♗e3, when White is in real trouble.

With those moves eliminated, we also looked at 46.♞g4 during the post-mortem. I managed to convince the group this was drawn too, but on further review at home, it turned out I was wrong.

I was planning 46...c2 47.♞h1 ♗c6 48.♗f3 ♗b4 49.axb4 axb4 and I didn’t see any way to stop the pawns.

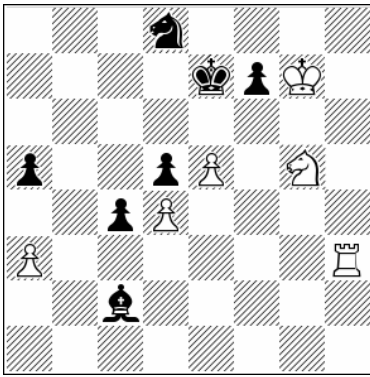


But again, White has to turn from defense to offense with 50.♞a1! b3 51.♞a7† ♗d8 52.♞d7†!. This is the only way to win against the phalanx of pawns.

Stockfish 15 instead recommends 46.♞g4! c2 47.♞h1 ♗c6 48.♗f3 ♞e2!, but I didn’t even consider this line. The idea is that after 49.♞c1 ♞d1 50.♗h6 f6 51.exf6† ♗xf6 Black has achieved a quasi-mutual zugzwang. However, with some prodding, Stockfish agrees that White should win this in the end.

All this confirms that 42...♞xh7 was indeed the right way to defend after time control.

46...c2 47.♙xc2 ♙xc2 48.♖h3



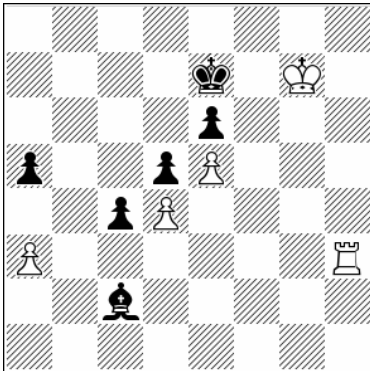
48...♗c6

I spent some time on 48...♗e6† too – and while I thought this was going to be a draw, I didn't think I was risking much with 48...♗c6 either. As it turns out, I played the right move for the wrong concrete reasons.

After:

49.♗xe6 fxe6

White needs to get his rook behind the c-pawn to have any winning chances and I didn't see any good way to do that.



For example:

50.♖h8 ♖d7

50...♙b3 51.♖c8 ♖d7 52.♖c5 a4 53.♗f6 ♙c2 54.♗g5 is an easier win to visualize: White's king walks around to b6 on the dark squares, and then with ♖c7† can slowly push Black back to make a ♗c6-d6 transfer possible.

51.♗f6 ♙f5 52.♖a8 c3 53.♖a7†!

53.♖xa5 ♙d3! is indeed a draw – White can only stop the pawn now from the side, which takes some work too: 54.♖a7† ♗c6 55.♖a8 ♗b5 56.♖c8 ♙c4 57.♖g8 c2 58.♖g1 ♙b3 59.♗xe6 ♗c4 with a draw. But I hadn't seen 53.♖a7†!. Then:

53...♗d8

Going to the c-file invites ♖xa5 because ♖c5 will be check

54.♖xa5 ♙d3 55.♗xe6!

Either the mating threats or pawns falling with check dooms Black.

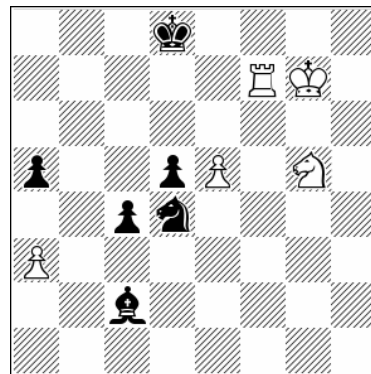
49.♖f3!

49.♗f3? ♙e4 and the central pawns are going to fall.

49...♗xd4?

I was (and still am) an optimistic player. Returning to d8 would have kept things equal, but I thought my move would stay within the drawing margin too. The point of 49...♗d8 is that after 50.♗xf7?, Black can still get the d4-pawn with tempo after 50...♗e6†, when White's pieces are placed less effectively than in the game after 50.♖xf7†.

50.♖xf7† ♗d8!



51.e6

51.♗f6! was reasonable, planning 52.♗e6† to bring the white king into the attack against his counterpart. Pushing forward with the e-pawn however doesn't spoil anything.

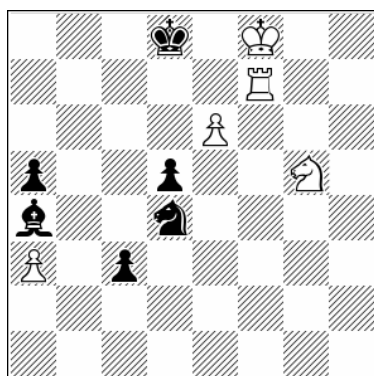
51...♙a4 52.♗f8?

I was focused on: 52.e7† ♖d7 (52...♗c8? is too slow: 53.♖f8† ♖c7 54.e8=♖ ♙xe8 55.♖xe8 c3 56.♖e1 c2 57.♖c1 ♗d6 58.♗f6 ♗c5 59.♗e6† wins) 53.♗f8 ♗e6†! 54.♗xe6 ♗xe6 and as the two connected passers trump the rook, White can't safely queen his pawn.

Stockfish is ruthless however, and points out that White has one way to win this and that's with

52.♖a7!. Similar to the line earlier with 48...♗e6†, White combines the threat of queening the e-pawn with checks on the c-file to gain control of the situation. For example, 52...c3 53.e7† ♕c8 54.♖xa5 c2 55.♖c5† ♕b7 56.♕f6 and Black is toast. The black pawns aren't going anywhere and the e7-pawn can't be held back forever.

52...c3



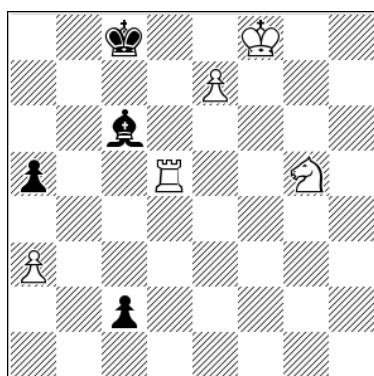
53.e7†

I had looked at 53.♖f4 as well, and originally thought this was White's last chance to draw: 53...c2 54.♖xd4 ♕c6! 55.♖xd5† ♕xd5 56.e7† ♕c7 57.e8=♖ c1=♖ with equality.

53...♕c8 54.♖f4 c2 55.♖xd4 ♕c6

Various databases show the game continued 55...c1=♖, but for one, I didn't play that, and two, that would lose to 56.♖xa4.

56.♖xd5



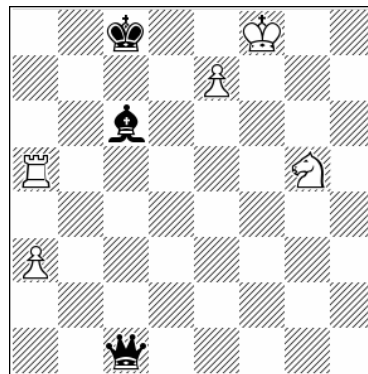
Marcel offered a draw here, but he was already off balance from this endgame having spiraled away to some degree, so I was happy to continue.

By the way, this is similar to the 53.♖f4 option, but with e7/...♕c8 thrown in, which I thought made all the difference in the world, because now White

can't get to the c-file safely due to ♖xd5 not coming with check.

56...c1=♖ 57.e8=♖†?

But the draw offer wasn't too far off base as 57.♖xa5!! is a draw.



White is not threatening to queen yet, because after e8=♖† ♕xe8, any recapture will lose material, but Black incredibly doesn't have any good way to regroup and keep the e-pawn under wraps. Some examples:

57...♖c3 58.♖a8† ♕c7 59.e8=♖ ♕xe8 60.♖xe8 ♖c5† 61.♖e7†

57...♕c7 58.♖c5! ♖xa3 59.e8=♖ ♖xc5† 60.♖e7† 57...♖e3 58.♗f7 ♕c7 59.♖a8 ♖c5 60.♖d8 ♖xa3 61.♖d6!

A study-like save!

57...♕xe8 58.♕xe8 ♖c6†

0-1

A memorable game, but when I went through my typical annotation process afterwards and summed things up, I had plenty of things to be critical about:

Positives: I fought until the end

Double-edged: I was overly optimistic (helped me win this game instead of potentially angling for a draw; but could also lead me to downplay the danger)

Negatives: I didn't manage my time well. I was unaware of typical early-middlegame plans in one of my main opening lines. I made plans while ignoring my opponent's potential activity.

The next three examples highlight each of these characteristics in more detail.

My Bag of Tricks

The chess world can be both big and small. At junior events with kids around my own age, I often saw the same players repeatedly, and that meant I also often saw their families.

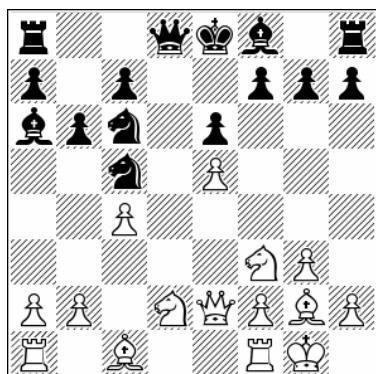
Whether we were competitive with each other or not, most other players and their families were nice in general to me. But I remember one opponent's relative used to keep up a steady stream of trash talk directed at me. Like a lot of trash talk, it was centered around how I wasn't very good but was very lucky. As he described it, I'd reach into my "bag of tricks" and out would come a win. If only that was the case.

Unfortunately for me, if he meant this as some psychological ploy, it worked. My undefeated +1 against his family member turned into some incredible fumbles on my part. In one, I was up a whole queen for a minor piece, but then later trapped my own queen in one move. So much for my bag of tricks.

I've suffered long losing streaks to multiple players at various points in my career, but this was the only time I experienced anything quite like that. Thinking about it now, these episodes fit more into an old Karpov – Korchnoi match than the rest of my chess experience. And there was a grain of truth to what he was saying: I did have a lot of experience playing worse positions after the opening as a kid. Either way, tournament play is competitive and if posing just one more legitimate challenge trips up an opponent, I was almost always willing to do that.

Ernesto Real de Azua – IM Vinay Bhat Oropesa del Mar 2000

1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5 3.♘d2 ♘f6 4.♘gf3 b6 5.g3 dxe4
6.dxe4 ♙b7 7.♖e2 ♙a6 8.c4 ♘c6 9.e5 ♘d7
10.♙g2 ♘c5 11.0-0



This game was played in the World Youth Championship (U-16). I was certain of the theory to this point, but my next step was unsure. Despite that, I played my next move quickly, after less than a minute of thought.

11...♖d7?

11...♙b7 is the correct move and one game there continued: 12.♘e1 ♖d7 13.f4 0-0-0
14.♘df3 ♘d4 15.♘xd4 ♙xg2 16.♙xg2 ♖xd4

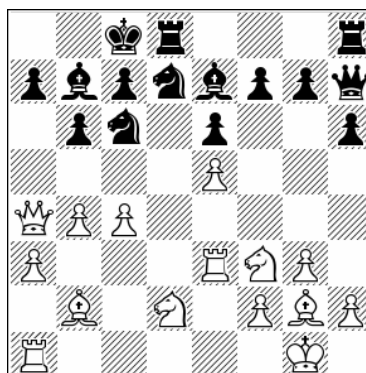
17.♙e3 ♖e4† with equality, as in Morozevich – Rozentalis, Moscow 1994.

With less space and many exposed pieces, I should have been looking to trade material as quickly as possible.

12.a3 ♙b7

I had seen 12.a3, but I gave it a cursory glance and assessed 12...♘a5 as fine for Black. But faced with the actual position, I realized that after 13.b4 ♘cb3, the simple 14.♖b1 (and not 14.♘xb3?) leaves Black in big trouble after 14...♘xc1 15.♖bxc1.

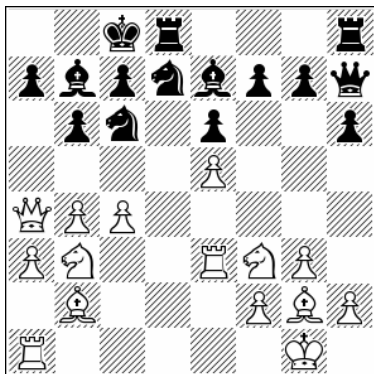
13.b4 ♖d3 14.♖d1 ♘d7 15.♙b2 0-0-0 16.♖e1
h6 17.♖e3 ♖h7 18.♖a4 ♙e7



I was upset at myself for getting into this mess: Black doesn't have any activity, his queen is sidelined on h7, and his queenside is coming under attack.

While my opponent thought and I sat there trying to figure out how I might put up some resistance, I landed on 19.♖e4 as the best move, but GM Daniel Naroditsky pointed to the even stronger 19.♖e1! in his book *Mastering Positional Chess*. My opponent though went in a different direction.

19.♖b3?



A quick glance at this position would suggest Black is utterly lost, and prior to White's last move that wouldn't be wrong.

19...b5!!

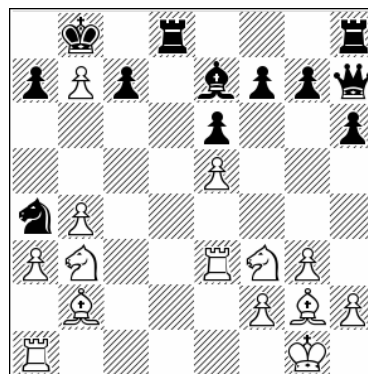
A few people walking by did a double-take and my opponent's eyes bulged in surprise when he came back to the board. It quickly dawned on him that White's queen will be trapped!

As it turns out, my move doesn't change the objective evaluation. White can still win this, but the nature of the game has changed completely. He must've been kicking himself for allowing this and now must really work at the board to calculate which variations are truly winning and which peter out into equality (or worse).

20.cxb5

Taking with the queen is also good for White, but it's a bit harder to prove and is more of a slow-burn advantage than a straightforward one.

20...♖b6 21.bxc6 ♖xa4 22.cxb7† ♖b8



23.♗d4?

This, though, is wrong. The bishop was attacked but it turns out he needed to put a knight on c6 right away with 23.♖a5 or 23.♖fd4. Both though require some calculation and White was probably tempted to keep the bishop as he can put a knight on a5 next.

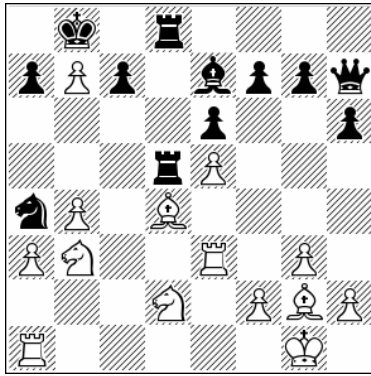
23.♖a5 ♖xb2 (both 23...c5 and 23...♗g5 are reasonable defensive tries, but they both come up short) 24.♖c6† ♖xb7 25.♖xd8† ♖c8 26.♖c6 ♗g5 27.♗b3 ♖a4 28.♖xa7† ♖d7 29.♗d1† ♖e8 30.♖d4 and White is winning. White is simply playing with too many more pieces.

The main line after 23.♖fd4! could run: 23...♗xd4 24.♖xd4 ♗g5 25.♗e2 ♖xb2 26.♗xb2 ♗d3 27.♖c6† ♖xb7 28.h4! wins. This is a difficult move to see from afar, as it's not on the side of the board he was expecting to play on. Winning the bishop leaves White with a rook and two minor pieces for the queen, and aside from the material issues, Black's king is still not safe.

23...♗d5!

With the simple goal of blocking the long diagonal a bit and adding some ...♗xa5-ideas if White tries to get to c6 via a5.

24.♖fd2 ♗hd8



25. ♖e4

This intermezzo with the bishop is again key for White. If White played the immediate 25. ♗xd5, he'd be lost after 25... ♖xd5 26. ♖a5 ♜c2!.

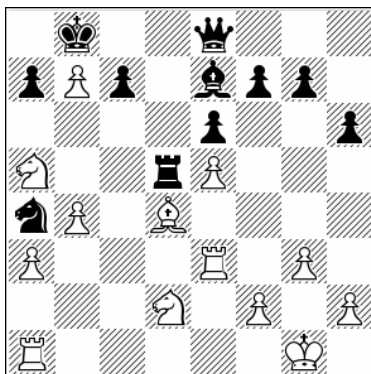
25... ♜g8 26. ♗xd5

Stronger was 26. ♖d3!, with ♖d2-c4 and ♖b3-a5 on tap.

26... ♖xd5 27. ♖a5 ♜e8?

I could have bailed out into a position with a queen for two rooks by taking on either a5 or d4 (27... ♖xa5 is definitely the better of the two, with 28. bxa5 ♜d8 29. ♖b3 ♖xb7 being about equal).

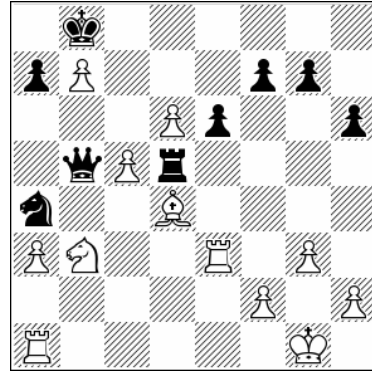
But my optimism had kicked in after finding ...b5 and I was dreaming of a situation with a ...c5 and ...♗d8 maneuver to kick the a5-knight away without also giving up my rook. In the game, I went headlong for that dream only to find out it wasn't quite as comfortable as advertised.



28. ♖db3!

Not 28. ♖c1?, when I had planned 28... ♖xd4 29. ♖c6† ♜xc6! 30. ♖xc6 ♖xd2 31. ♖f3 ♖xb7 32. ♖c1 f5 33. exf6 ♗xf6 with a nice plus.

28... c5 29. bxc5 ♗d8 30. ♖c4 ♗c7 31. ♖d6 ♗xd6 32. exd6 ♜b5



33. ♗xg7?

A strange mistake as the passed pawns are obvious trumps, but maybe he didn't see how to keep them?

However, there was a way starting with 33. ♖c1. For example, 33... ♖xb7 34. c6† ♖c8 35. d7† ♖c7 36. ♗xg7 and White has a free hand across much of the board. He can try to punch through with the bishop supporting the pawns or unleash some tactics with ♖d4 and ♖xe6.

33... ♖xc5 34. ♖xc5 ♜xc5 35. ♗f8 ♜c2 36. ♗xh6 ♖d1† 37. ♖xd1 ♜xd1† 38. ♖g2 ♜d5† 39. ♖g1 ♖xb7 40. ♗f8 ♜d1†

1/2-1/2

I was guilty of speeding through the moves just after my theoretical knowledge ended, but once again, some resourcefulness saved the day. Against stronger, more experienced players though, my bag of tricks turned out to have a limit.

Quick Thinker, Slow Player

Fast forward a number of years and I know what a typical scouting report on me as a GM would include: some opening tendencies, middlegame preferences and endgame weaknesses, along with some mention of my time management troubles. I was a relatively better blitz player than classical player throughout my career but given some time to think as an IM and GM, I found it easy to discover variations to calculate or decisions to ponder to fill up my allotted time.

As a kid, outside of fast time controls, I typically only got into time pressure on purpose. I picked this up from Simon Webb's *Chess for Tigers*, to goad my opponent into playing against my clock instead of the board. But as an IM and GM, time pressure became a frequent guest, and it became a more common problem for me starting in 2000 after I first self-diagnosed it in 1999 (the first time I mentioned it in my own notes is after the game I shared versus Dzindzichashvili in Chapter 7). Quite often, you would see me having to speed up dramatically by move 30, and the following was a particularly egregious example of that.

IM Vinay Bhat – IM Alexander Mikhalevski
Andorra 2001

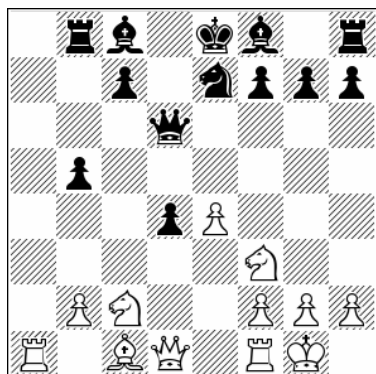
1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙xc6 dxc6 5.0-0 ♗d6

This was a line that theory seemed to focus on at the time, but not one that came up in my practice very often. Later, I typically played 5...♗f6 myself when facing the Exchange Ruy Lopez.

6.♘a3 b5 7.c3 c5 8.♘c2 ♘e7 9.a4 ♖b8

I hadn't seen this move before, but I don't think it's especially good. At the time, Black typically played 9...♙b7 and later, Anand somewhat regularly played 8...♙b7 even.

10.axb5 axb5 11.d4 cxd4 12.cxd4 exd4



I had spent a few minutes on 10.axb5 but now I sat down for a long think. My gut feeling was to continue with 13.♘cxd4, likely just because it

brings forward the knight that's furthest back. And it was an interesting option, with one possible continuation being 13...c5 14.♘xb5! ♗xd1 15.♘c7† ♔d7 16.♖xd1† ♕xc7 17.♙f4† ♖b7 18.♙xb8 ♔xb8 19.♘e5 f6 20.♘f7 ♖g8 21.♖d8 ♕b7 when I couldn't find any way to continue with 22...♘c6 next to kick the rook out (it turns out that 20.♘d7†! provides some advantage). I was often too quick to discount the value of a rook and pawn versus minor pieces in the endgame, so I didn't rate that position as a big advantage.

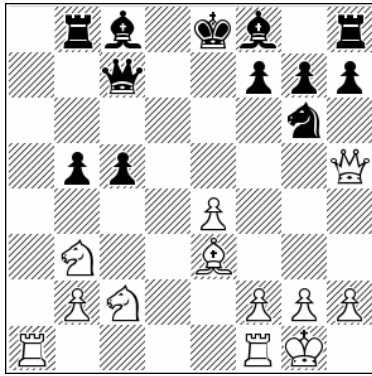
Taking back with the f3-knight didn't seem as natural to me by comparison, but after the obvious 13...c5, I liked the knights on c2 and b3. That's because if Black pushes (or is compelled to push) ...c4, White might be able to set up knights on c5 and b4. So eventually I made my choice.

13.♘fxd4 c5 14.♘b3 ♗c7

14...♗xd1 15.♖xd1 ♘g6 16.♙e3 was the kind of endgame where I saw a clear plus (it's hard for Black to develop and White's knights are headed for great squares), but 14...♘g6 is better and keeps White's advantage to a minimum.

15.♙e3 ♘g6 16.♗h5!

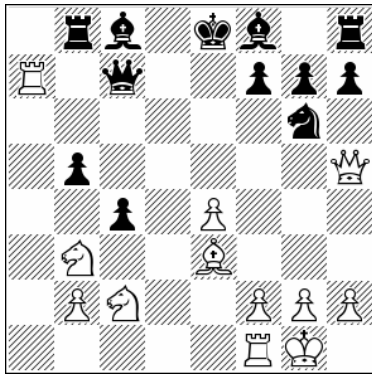
A very natural move, and my first instinct, but it cost me a lot of time.



16...d5

This runs into a neat response, but the alternatives aren't much better. Each of 16...e7, 16...d6, and 16...f4 drop (or eventually drop) the c5-pawn and don't get enough compensation for it.

The main alternative was 16...c4, but that invites White in with 17.a7.



Then, some possibilities are:

17...b7 18.xb5!

17...c6 18.c5 and White's initiative is going to trample Black with later ideas of c2-b4 or d4.

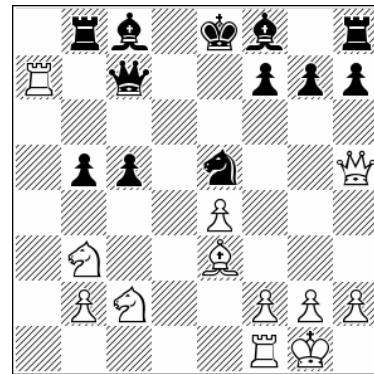
The main option I thought about was: 17...e5 18.xe5! dxe5 19.a5! d3 (There are two more branches: 19...d6 20.d1 d3 21.e1! and 19...e7 20.f4 d7 21.d1 is simple and strong.) 20.d6 b7 21.a8 d7 22.a5 c7 23.b6 With advantage to White.

Now there are a ton of variations that could be calculated here, and the above could easily be extended further, but a much more practical approach would have been to scan the possibilities and realize that if not for 16.h5, White doesn't have a lot of quick-strike options.

I had no doubt that I had some initiative after 16...c4, and I could've waited to size that initiative when (if) that position arose. Instead, I spent time on an exhaustive search at once and then spent time re-checking some things as I went along as with a closer horizon, it was only natural that I would find some improvements here and there.

17.a7!

The strongest move, but 17.f4 was also obvious and good. Still, my move fits a maximalist approach as after 17.f4 d6 18.e3, Black's likely to escape with "just" a pawn deficit after 18...g6.



17...b7

He played this pretty quickly, and so most of my previous thinking time went to waste!

One waste of time was my internal debate over possible winning lines after 17...xa7? – eventually I chose one path, but it wasn't time well spent.

After 17...xa7, I planned 18.xe5! e6 (18...e7 19.xc5 and 18...e7? 19.xb8 are easier) 19.dxc5 e5 20.xc5 b7 21.xg7 d7 22.d1!

Another possibility was 17...b7, but now 18.f4 is stronger as the insertion of 17.a7 b7 cuts down on a number of defensive options. For example, 18...d6 19.e3 (19.a5 is also good, and which naturally, I also calculated out) 19...f3! 20.gxf3 e4 21.d5! e5 22.f4 23.xc5 and Black's king remains stuck in the center.

In each of these lines, I recognized I had a strong initiative. But my tendency was to try and

solve the position when I could play more practically, and this game was one of my worst examples of that behavior.

18. ♖a8 ♕d6

Black still isn't off the hook after 18... ♖b8 19. ♖xb8 ♜xb8 20. ♘xc5.

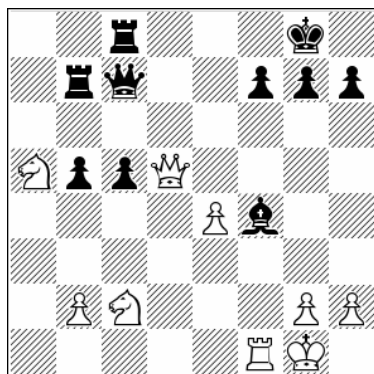
19. f4?

This wins material, but it's actually the worst of the 4 moves I considered (the other 3 being: 19. ♖d1, 19. ♘xc5, and 19. ♕xc5). But after thinking for a while, I decided to "just make a move" and I had forgotten that I hadn't found anything so impressive against 19... ♘c4. Luckily for me, he didn't play it.

19... ♘d3? 20. ♜d5 0-0 21. ♘a5!

Now White gets out of the possible fork via ...c4 and so wins material.

21... ♘xf4 22. ♕xf4 ♕xf4 23. ♖xc8 ♖xc8

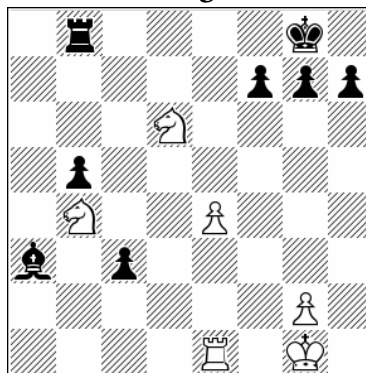


24. ♜xb7?

It would have been simpler to play 24. ♘xb7 ♕xh2† 25. ♖h1 ♕e5 26. ♘e3 with a winning advantage. Black does have 2 pawns for the piece, but his pieces are badly placed while White is poised to improve his position. With 27. ♘f5 likely next, White is in complete control.

In contrast, offering a queen trade negates some of White's piece activity and leaves Black with active ideas of creating a queenside passed pawn.

24... ♕xh2† 25. ♖h1 ♕e5 26. ♘e3?! ♜xb7 27. ♘xb7 c4 28. ♖b1 ♖e8 29. ♘d5 ♕d4 30. ♖e1? ♕xb2 31. ♘d6 ♖b8 32. ♖g1? c3 33. ♘b4? ♕a3



Uh oh. In 10 moves, thanks to my time mismanagement, the tables have completely turned. I continued to the time control out of inertia before resigning. This one stung.

In this game, my time management problem came from a desire for perfectionism and to solve the position up front. In some other games where at least the first move to play was less clear, some procrastination was a bigger driver. I saw this procrastination outside of chess too.

In December 2001, with college applications due by the end of the month, my parents were really trying to get me to finish my essays and submit the applications. I kept putting off their completion and was instead focused on trying to beat a baseball video game (specifically with a perfect winning season in the game). In the end, I did get all my applications in on time, but I submitted one of them on December 31 itself, just before going to a family friend's house to celebrate New Year's Eve.

I never quite fixed this in my chess play. While annotating games, in an effort to remind myself that my first instinct was generally solid, I would indicate whether a move was my first instinct or not. But a few bad games could sometimes push me back into over-thinking things; and just like these annotations could help build confidence in my instincts, I often scored well in time pressure, and so I didn't directly associate bad time management with bad results.

Managing the Middlegame and Myself

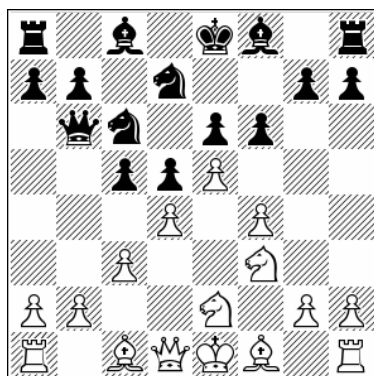
My willingness to fight at the board was generally a real asset, but every so often, I showed up without much energy or interest. When that happened, I didn't recognize or acknowledge that and play any safer or more conservatively. Instead, I played like I might in a casual blitz game, somewhat more focused on making a move or any move.

The next game also features an opening setup that gave me fits for as long as I played the 3.♘c3 ♘f6 French. At the time, it was only my second time seeing it and a relatively fresh problem.

IM Lothar Arnold – IM Vinay Bhat

Budapest 2001

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.♘ce2 c5
6.c3 ♘c6 7.f4 ♖b6 8.♘f3 f6



9.g3

About one month earlier, I lost to then-IM Hikaru Nakamura after 9.a3. The game made the *New York Times* chess column where Robert Byrne wrote about the game:

“Nakamura displayed his tactical acuity throughout his game with Bhat: he played the tricky opening with a sure hand, parrying a threatened counterattack deftly; he attacked single-mindedly in the early middlegame and won cleverly and efficiently in the endgame. Who needs more?”

If only I wasn't the opponent!

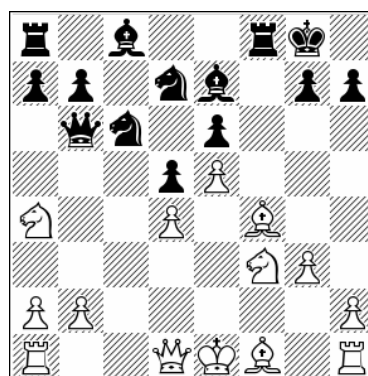
9...cxd4 10.cxd4 fxe5 11.fxe5 ♗b4† 12.♘c3 0-0
13.♗f4 ♗e7

A few months after this game, I played then-IM Constantin Lupulescu in the World Youth (Under 18) Championship. Instead of 13...♗e7, I

played 13...g5!? but after 14.♘xg5 ♖xd4 15.♖xd4 ♘xd4 16.0-0 h6 17.♗xd4 ♗xc3 18.♘xe6, White came out on top from the complications. That was a key 3rd loss in a row here.

The 4th lesson in this general setup came the following summer in China, where I lost to GM Larry Christiansen. It wasn't until I started to play a different kind of setup (with either a quicker ...b5 and/or ...f5) that I found any success in this French Complex.

14.♘a4



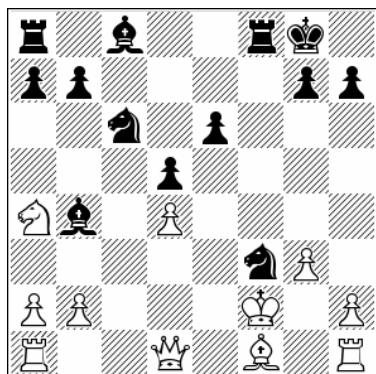
My notes from my post-mortem have this as a novelty, but I've since found a 1993 game with it. It's not particularly testing though, if Black is paying attention.

14...♖a5†

An indifferent move. My queen was attacked and so I quickly moved it. But there were plenty of good alternatives.

One fair option was 14...♗b4† 15.♘c3 ♗e7, and at a minimum, I could ask if White was only looking for a draw.

But I could have had a lot of fun with 14...♖b4†! 15.♗d2 ♜dxe5! 16.♗xb4 ♗xb4† 17.♝f2 ♜xf3 and Black has great counterplay: two minor pieces and two pawns (after the d4-pawn falls) along with central control and four minor pieces to use for coordination.



The Fogarasi game from Chapter 9 was from the same event, so this would have continued the theme of active knights!

15.♜c3 ♜b6?

Another indifferent move. It's clear that White is going to play on the kingside (and I should have recognized some of that danger from the prior Nakamura game) so this move doesn't pass any sort of sanity check.

Instead, repeating with 15...♖b6 was fair, but 15...♜c5!? 16.dxc5 d4! 17.♜xd4 ♖d8 was also playable. These sacrifices may seem crazy, but in this line of the French, sacrifices on e5 and d4 to unleash the center pawns were very typical ideas I had seen before.

16.♗d3 ♜c4?

16...♜b4 at least would prevent White from setting up the queen and bishop battery immediately. After 17.♗b1 ♜c4, White might have to retreat with 18.♗c1 and then 18...♗d7 at

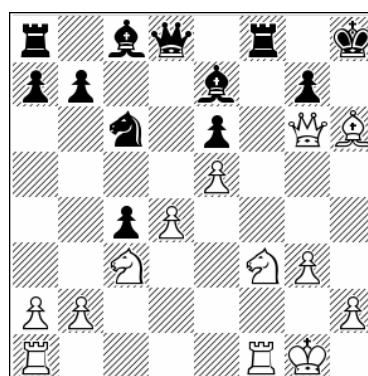
least starts a defensive maneuver to the kingside. It may not save Black, but it at least tries to stop White's plan.

White's next few moves are easy to play.

17.♖b1 h6

White's attack is straightforward and winning after 17...g6? 18.♗xg6 hxg6 19.♖xg6† ♜h8 20.♖h5† ♜g8 21.♗h6.

18.♗xc4 dxc4 19.♖g6 ♜h8 20.0-0 ♖d8 21.♗xh6



White is completely winning. After 21...gxh6 22.♖xh6† ♜g8 23.♖g6† ♜h8 24.♜e4, White's onslaught can't be stopped. An especially disappointing game where I put up no resistance.

In early 2001, a family friend had commented to my parents during a local event that my lack of a serious pre-game routine or preparation was holding me back, but at the time, I dismissed the feedback. But after a similarly mixed-effort in the World Youth (U-18) Championship to end 2001, even I had to acknowledge the pattern.

So while my initial post-game notes to this game versus Arnold focused primarily on the moves – problems with the opening and specific choices afterwards – I later made a note to think about how to better show up to play.

My Learnings and Progress

It didn't need to be that way, but I combined my shift for a more concrete style with much worse time management. I often made key decisions too quickly (like with 11...♖d7 against Real de Azua or most of the game versus Arnold) while making others too slowly (like with 41...♗f5 against Martinez or each of

16. ♖h5 and 17. ♝a7 against Mikhalevski). A saving grace for me was that I was slow to give up at the board, and that perseverance could regularly net me extra half-points.

Similar to my prior formula from Chapter 8 for improving my pieces, I could have benefited from a more disciplined approach to decision-making. A two-question formula I settled on later was to ask myself:

- 1) What was my intuitive feeling about a position? And then:
- 2) How confident was I in that choice?

My intuition was good for my level, and I could quickly see short tactical sequences. Paradoxically, many of my poor time management decisions were when I had a quick, high-confidence reaction (and instead spent a lot of time calculating concrete lines) or when I had no immediate idea (but played at lightning speed). This process is simple in theory, but I struggled to consistently strike the right balance in this area for many years.

That was partly a by-product of not coming to the board with a consistent mindset. I didn't have any pre-game routine and as a result, I could show up to play in a mental state all over the place. It wasn't until the events of Chapter 13 that I developed more of a routine. And so especially when I was having poor results or lacking practice, I could lapse into second-guessing myself and answering the "How confident am I?" question with a blanket "Not very!" answer.

Chapter 11

The First GM Norm

My chess schedule during 11th and 12th grades revolved around when I wasn't in school. The one exception was the US – China Chess Summit in 2001. Billed partly as chess diplomacy, it also made a lot of sense as a competitive chess match as well, and it would be the first of three events across 2001 and 2002 that I played with some of the top Chinese players at the time.

All three events were incredibly well organized, and I had a lot of fun just being around so many strong chess players. I considered myself a relatively strong blitz player but playing a bunch of games with GM Yasser Seirawan was eye-opening. I didn't revise my assessment of being relatively better at blitz compared to classical chess, but I did lower my estimation relative to other players!

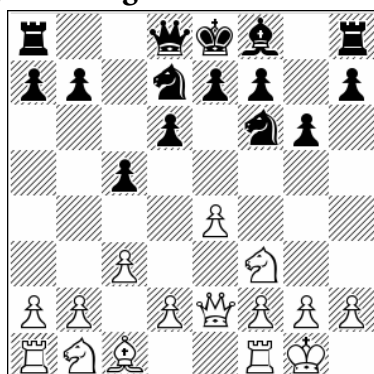
The 2001 match was set up with open, women, and junior teams. I led the US Junior team on Board 1, followed by Dmitry Schneider and Hikaru Nakamura as the reserve. The Chinese junior team featured GM Bu Xiangzhi on Board 1 (the then-youngest GM in the world), followed by Ni Hua, and Wang Yue as the reserve.

The actual chess mirrored some of my general chess trends during this time, with some of my best games mixed in with perplexing decisions. The first game of the match was one such clunker, as I turned an easily drawn endgame into a loss against Bu. I struck back in the 2nd game of the match.

IM Vinay Bhat – GM Bu Xiangzhi

Seattle 2001

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5† ♕d7 4.♙xd7† ♘xd7
5.0-0 ♗gf6 6.♚e2 g6 7.c3



White's plan is simple: claim a central advantage and then bring the rest of his pieces out. There were plenty of alternatives along the way here, with 4...♚xd7 being the main recapture by far, while 6.d3 (preparing ♗g5 and f4) and 6...e6 (without a kingside fianchetto) are both reasonable alternatives within this 4...♘xd7 sideline.

7...♙g7 8.d4 cxd4

Allowing e4-e5 is asking for trouble – for example, 8...0-0 9.e5 dxe5 10.dxe5 ♗g4 11.♙f4 left Black in big trouble already in Kaidanov – Gurevich, Lexington 1995.

9.cxd4 e5 10.dxe5 dxe5 11.♚d1 ♚b8

All the other potential squares for the queen leave it exposed one way or another. For instance, on e7 it can be hit by a bishop on a3 or by ♙g5 followed by ♜c3-d5; or if it goes to a5, the a3/b4 expansion will come. Nevertheless, this is still an awkward move to play.

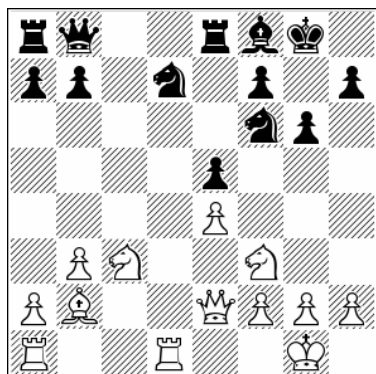
12.b3 0-0

Black can try to cut the bishop's diagonal off with 12...b5, but that comes at the cost of giving White c4. I was planning: 13.♙a3 b4 14.♙b2 0-0 15.♞bd2 with a solid plus for White, as Black's e5-pawn is still weak.

13.♙a3 ♞e8 14.♞c3

There's nothing to gain from 14.♙d6? ♞c8 15.♞a3 as after 15...♞c6, Black has started to free himself.

14...♙f8 15.♙b2



15...a5

Black tries to make luft for his queenside pieces. He'd like to bring his queen out now, but there still isn't a good spot for it: 15...♞c7 16.♞d5 (16.♞ac1 is also good for White.) 16...♞xd5 17.♞xd5 The e5-pawn is under heavy pressure and there's also the threat of ♞c1 which wins a piece thanks to a pin on the c-file (if Black interposes on c5) or the d-file (if Black retreats to d8).

16.♞ac1

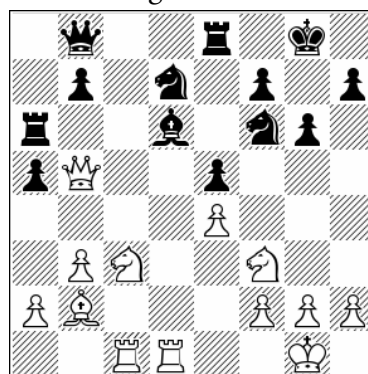
A slightly more precise continuation was 16.♞b5!, which should transpose to the game after 16...♙d6 17.♞ac1 ♞a6.

16...♞a6 17.♞b5

Also tempting was 17.♞d5!?, and it turns out to also be the better move. After a trade on d5, White will recapture with the rook and add pressure to e5 (and a5). It's likely enough pressure to win a clean pawn in a few more moves.

17...♙d6

Due to my slight inaccuracy on move 16, Black now has the option of playing 17...♞b6! when White can't play 18.♞xa5 because of 18...♙b4 19.♞a4 ♞c5 and White's queen is short of squares. Instead, 18.♞a4 is correct, but Black's rook is slightly better and White's queen is slightly worse off than in the game.



18.♞d5

I wasn't convinced by the quieter 18.♞d2.

Against 18...♞b6, I wasn't planning on 19.♞a4? ♙b4, but instead intended 19.♞e2!, when White's coordination and lack of weak pawns gives him the edge.

But I was less sure about 18...♞c8 19.♞c4 ♞c5 20.♞a4 ♙f8. This is indeed a mess, but 19.♞d5 would have kept a good advantage for White.

18...♞xd5 19.exd5

19.♞xd5 ♞f6 doesn't get anywhere.

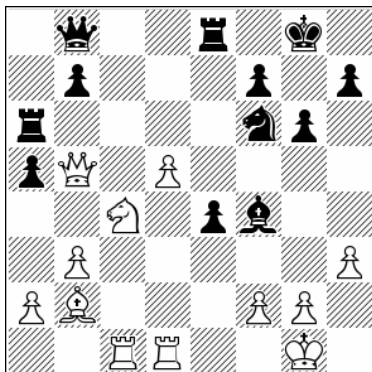
19...♞f6

19...e4 is easily met by 20.♞xd7 exf3 21.g3 when White's on top: he has better control of the long diagonal along with the stronger pawn on d5 versus the weak one on f3.

20.♞d2

Now, both this move and 20.h3 looked useful and I decided to start with the knight move because h3 was only necessary after ...e4, but the knight transfer is likely to be good regardless.

20...e4 21.h3 ♖f4 22.♘c4!



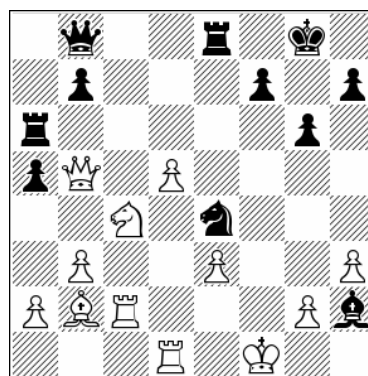
An exchange sacrifice, and not for the first or last time. This is a strictly positional sacrifice, as the compensation is all about the dark squares. After 22...♙xc1 23.♞xc1, Black won't be able to contest the dark squares and the white d-pawn can advance to sever Black's communication across the board.

Bu showed some surprise at my move, but he gathered himself and correctly declined the material.

22...e3! 23.fxe3 ♙h2† 24.♔f1?!

I rejected 24.♔h1 on the general grounds that I'd have to worry about a possible check from f2 here. But that isn't very likely to happen and so this was safer than my game continuation. For example: 24...♘e4 25.♞c2 ♞d8 26.♘b6 h5 (26...♞g3 27.♞d3! is one of many ways to win. The point is that on 27...♘f2† 28.♞xf2 ♞xf2, White has the nice in-between move 29.♞d4! to clean up.) 27.♞dc1 And White is crashing through on the 8th rank.

24...♘e4 25.♞c2



25...♘g3†?

Tempting, but this only helps White. I wanted to relocate my king anyway, primarily behind the central pawns and secondarily with some vague ideas of walking to the queenside to consolidate my extra pawn.

We had a long post-mortem of this game, and eventually we (mostly thanks to Seirawan) found the brilliant:

25...♞a8!

The point is that the rook wasn't doing anything on a6 (dreams of landing on f6 are just that: dreams), and by retreating, Black frees his queen up to enter the game. White can still secure an advantage, but it requires some bold play. For example:

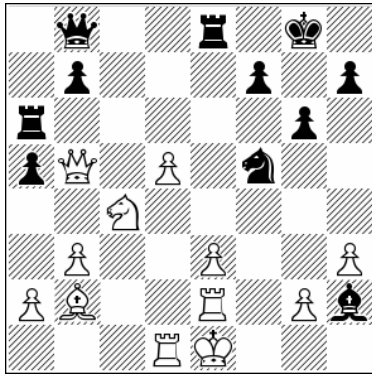
26.a4

26.♞b6 would be nice, but for the repetition with 26...♞a6 27.♞b5 ♞a8 – White can't go to d4 with his queen because of ...♞f6†. Too bad for that ♔f1 move!

26...♞c8 27.g4! ♞c7 28.♞g2

This is much more complicated than the game turns out to be. Without the a6-rook and with his queen stuck on b8, Black's coordination in the game is quite poor compared to this position.

26.♔e1 ♘f5 27.♞e2



Now my choice of 24.♔f1 over 24.♔h1 looks good. The king has further safety available on the queenside, but it's not even needed.

27...♞d8 28.♞d3 ♘g3 29.♙e5! ♚c8 30.♞f2 ♞e8
31.d6 ♚e6 32.♞f6
1–0

I drew a tightly contested game against Wang Yue in the third round before Bu returned for the final game. I had good chances in that one, but I lost the thread nearing time pressure and he won the game and the match. In aggregate, the US team ended up losing the match overall as well.

My First GM Norm

The second US – China match took place in July 2002 in Shanghai. Prior to the match, there was a chance to play in a high-level event being held in Qingdao and so most of the other US players chose to play there too.

I was lucky that this one was in July as I had only played one FIDE-rated event during 12th grade and that was back in October 2001 (the World Youth U-18 Championship). With my college plans set and summer vacation underway, I was able to do some studying and preparation in advance of the tournament. Still, I didn't have any real expectations for this first tournament back.

The tournament unfolded in an interesting fashion. In the first four rounds, I played four American GMs (Goldin, Kaidanov, Shabalov, and Christiansen) and we joked that I flew all the way to China to play them. At least the final five rounds saw me paired against players from around Asia.

Prior to this next game, I had drawn both Goldin and Kaidanov in topsy-turvy fashion. Against Goldin, I blitzed out an opening line thinking it was my preparation, only to realize at some point that I had mixed things up. I decided to sacrifice my queen for a rook and bishop to stem his initiative and eventually escaped into a fortress draw. Then against Kaidanov, I outplayed him in a KIA but I also felt awkward playing my old coach. In a much better position, I decided to force a perpetual instead of cashing in for a material advantage.

GM Alexander Shabalov – IM Vinay Bhat

Qingdao 2002

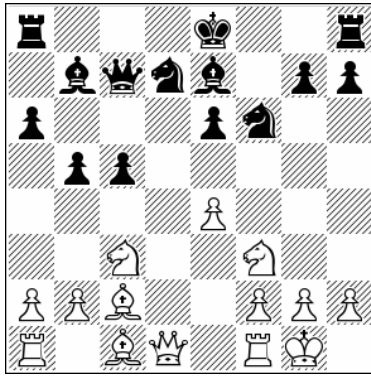
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 c6 4.♘c3 ♘f6 5.e3 ♘bd7
6.♙d3 dxc4 7.♙xc4 b5 8.♙d3 a6 9.e4 c5 10.d5
♚c7 11.0-0 ♙b7 12.dxe6 fxe6 13.♙c2

One of the many main lines of the Meran Variation in the Semi-Slav. I had played this a couple times already and had chosen 13...c4. But for this game, I prepared a specific sideline.

13...♙e7

After the game, both Kaidanov and Shabalov shared that they didn't have a high opinion of the variation. I, however, believed that Black was fine. I never really had much trouble convincing myself to sacrifice an exchange for compensation.

Interestingly, the next year, Kaidanov got to this same position himself as Black and chose 13...♙e7. While he didn't beat GM Gurevich in that game, he was pressing for much of it so maybe I helped him reconsider this variation.



14. d5 c6 15. f3

The main alternative is 15.f4 and it also leads to a highly complicated position with chances for both sides.

15...h6 16. h3

The tactical point – the h-pawn is pinned and the e6-pawn is attacked. Defending it with 16...f8 leaves Black very passive and doesn't introduce the threat of ...hxg5 either, so White can expand with f4. The exchange sacrifice I played was still preparation and a couple games had gone this route already.

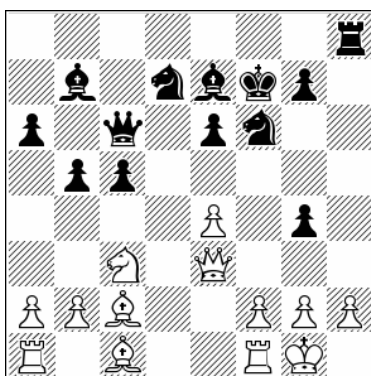
16...hxg5 17. xh8+ f7 18. h3 g4 19. e3

Most other GMs (like Karpov and Lautier) preferred 19.h4 here, but Shabalov had played 19.e3 once before and clearly believed in it.

19...h8

A new move, but a very natural one – Black claims the h-file and sets up threats of ...d6.

19...e5 had previously been seen, but then White can play 20.e2 safely, as 20...xe4 21.f3 works for White.



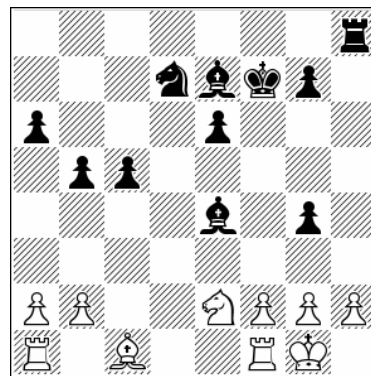
20. e2 xe4

Inviting an endgame transition, but a pawn is a pawn, and I didn't like the idea of his knight getting to g3 to guard the kingside. Years later, GM Vallejo Pons played 20...e5 and while he lost, Black has more attacking resources there than I originally thought.

21. xe4

There's a good reason to seriously consider 20...e5 because by taking on e4, Black invited 21.f3. I've gone back and forth on this line in the past, but at the board I thought it was playable (before flip-flopping back and forth and settling on playable finally).

21...xe4 22. xe4 xe4



This endgame is an interesting one – Black has a bishop and pawn for the rook, but he also has the bishop pair and is saddled with the more fragmented pawn structure. As nothing else immediate is going on (like White's rooks invading), I rated it as slightly better for Black because his minor pieces can take up good positions relatively quickly.

23. d1 b6

Going to e5 was also a serious option – both squares eye the c4-square, but from e5, there's a chance to go to c6 and d4 later while from b6, the knight can go to d5. I'm still unsure which is the right square, and the computer can't clear it up easily, but after calculating a decent amount at the board, I ended up deciding by picking the less exposed square.

24. f4

24. ♖g3 ♕d5 is not very pleasant for White, as now the a1-rook is stuck to the defense of the a2-pawn. Thus, his c1-bishop is stuck as he cannot guard the b2-pawn any other way.

Meanwhile, 24. ♖c3 leaves Black with a decision to make: 24... ♕c2! is a useful addition for Black, as after 25. ♖d2 ♕f5, the 26. a4 b4 27. a5 idea now runs into 27... ♖c4 hitting the rook on d2.

24... ♕f6

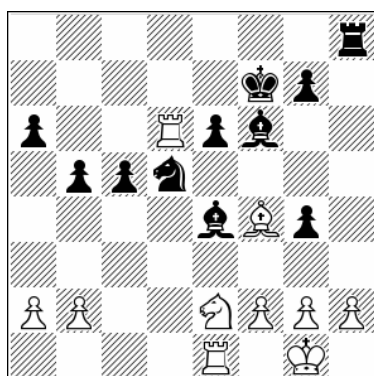
I struggled here to assess the pros and cons of different moves like 24... ♖d5, 24... ♖c8, and 24... ♕f6. For example, White controls the diagonal after 24... ♖d5 25. ♕e5, and while I could kick it away with 25... ♖h5, I didn't like the rook being on h5 after 26. ♕g3.

The main downside of my choice is that White can come in on the 6th rank. I expected that, but I also thought I could close the door behind the rook. Given all three are improving moves but none was clearly better than the others, I could have made a slightly quicker decision here to pick one and save my time for a future critical moment.

25. ♖d6 ♖d5

25... ♖c4 26. ♖xa6 ♕xb2 27. ♖e1 is not that clear, especially since the black knight stops its own pawns from advancing.

26. ♖e1



26... ♕f5!?

I was very happy with this move and in the post-mortem, Shabalov also praised it. It is indeed a good one, but it also cost me 29 minutes on the

clock to decide between this, 26... ♕d3 and 26... ♕xb2 primarily.

26... ♕d3? was tempting until I saw 27. ♖c1! ♖xf4 28. ♖xd3 ♖xd3 29. ♖xd3 ♕xb2 30. ♖d6 which isn't clear at all. In general, having more minor pieces on the board helps Black as they can coordinate better together than a lone minor piece.

26... ♕xb2 was the main alternative and once again, like some previous moves, there's no clear right or wrong choice between the game move and the primary alternative. The computer does prefer this more at depths in the 30s, but as the play continues after 27. ♖xa6, the evaluation trends towards equality in the end. I spent a lot of time on this position, but in the end, without a clear path, I decided to keep more minor pieces on the board.

27. ♖d7!?

Like Black on the prior move, White also had a number of alternatives. He could have transposed into a 26... ♕xb2 line with 27. ♖xa6 here himself (when I was going to take on b2). In the end, that would have been OK for White, but it is tempting to guard the b2-pawn.

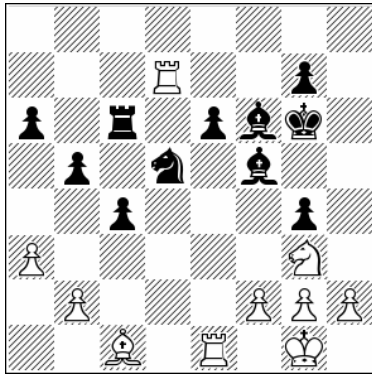
The immediate 27. ♕c1 looks bad because of 27... ♕e5, but White has a tactical trick here: 28. ♖d7+ ♖e8 29. ♖xd5! exd5 30. ♖g3! winning.

Instead, 27... ♖b4 generates a surprising amount of counterplay with the knight hopping into d3 (or potentially c2 and d4) next.

27... ♖g6 28. ♕c1 ♖c8 29. ♖g3 c4 30. a3

A useful defensive move as Black's last move set up a ... ♖b4-d3 transfer to create a guarded knight outpost. The knight would be a beast on d3.

30... ♖c6



31. ♖h1?

It's not news that Shabalov prefers dynamic positions, but when confronted with seemingly similar options, he often prefers the one with more complexity. Here, he wants to set up ideas of counterplay with f3 (and then play on the g- or f-files, hence moving his king away from the center) but he missed the real point of 30... ♖c6.

Prophylaxis with 31. ♗xf5 ♕xf5 32. ♖a7! was necessary. The a3-pawn cuts off the direct route to d3 and with ♖d7-a7, the indirect route is also restricted.

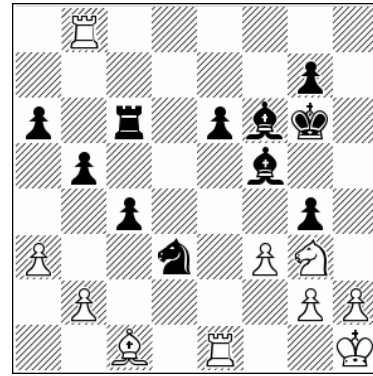
There is still one more way to d3, and I considered it with 32... ♗e7 33. ♖f1 ♗g6, but after 34. ♖e2 ♗e5 35. ♗d2 White has gained some ground for his pieces.

Instead, the endgame remains about equal after 32...c3 33. bxc3 ♗xc3 34. ♖d1 ♗d4 35. ♖f7† ♗g6 36. ♖f8.

31... ♗b6!

The knight is headed for d3 via a4 and c5! The rook guards the a6-pawn so that 32. ♖a7 or 32. ♖d6 doesn't gum up the works for Black. Now White is in real trouble and I think that Shabalov realized that quickly.

32. ♖b7 ♗a4 33. f3 ♗c5! 34. ♖b8 ♗d3



Black has achieved a lot since the prior diagram – his knight has slipped forward from d5 to d3 while White's played f3. Not exactly a fair trade. But as was my habit, I was getting low on the clock.

35. ♖f1 gxf3?!

I was stuck in the mindset of not wanting minor piece trades, and so I overlooked a much simpler continuation with 35... ♗xc1! 36. ♗xf5 exf5 37. ♖xc1 ♗xb2 38. ♖c2 ♗xa3. Three connected passed pawns is an overwhelming advantage.

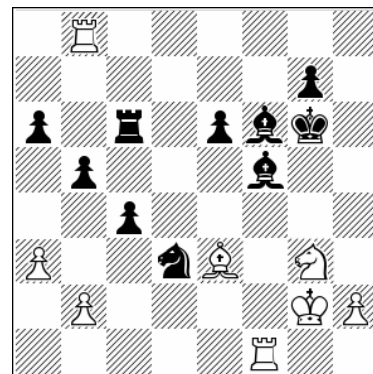
36. ♗e3!

White wisely saves the bishop even if it leaves the b2-pawn alone.

36... fxf2†

Again, not wrong, but 36...f2 would have been stronger as it keeps the kingside more closed.

37. ♖xg2



37... ♗xb2?

But this is a real mistake – I didn't see White's counterplay else I'd have played 37... ♗xb2 and Black is still winning.

38. h4!

Now I recognized something had gone wrong. There are still winning chances, but I continued to let the advantage slide.

38...♙e5?

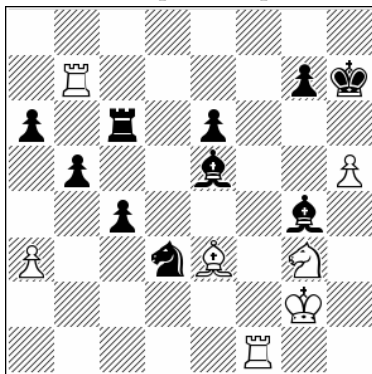
Taking on a3 would have provided more chances.

39.h5† ♖h7

39...♗f6 40.♞f8† ♕e7 41.♘xf5† gets in more trouble.

40.♞b7 ♙g4

Alternatives like 40...♞c7 41.♞xc7 ♙xc7 42.♘xf5 exf5 43.♞xf5 weren't appealing; while 40...♙xg3 41.♗xg3 faces the threat of h6 and Black also lacks a nice minor piece to press the queenside.



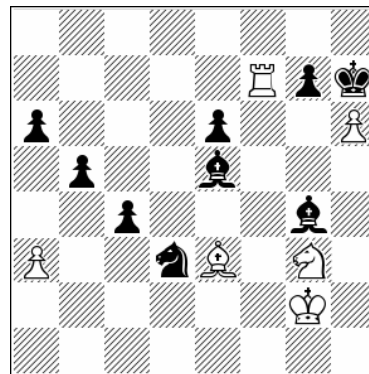
41.h6?!

Now Shabalov was in time pressure too. The time control for this tournament was 120 minutes for the game plus a 30 second increment per move, so there wasn't another time control we were trying to meet: the increment was all the extra time we'd get. With more time, Shabalov might have played 41.♞ff7 to prepare h6 without allowing my counter in the game.

41...♞c7 42.♞xc7

42.♞f7 ♞xf7 43.♞xf7 ♕g6! is tricky and good.

42...♙xc7 43.♞f7 ♙e5

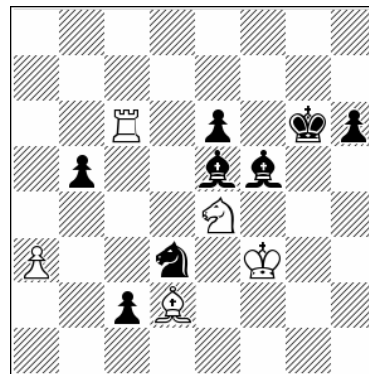


After some adventures, the endgame is still about equal but there's a decent amount of complexity left.

44.♘e4?

And this is one such mistake – White should have traded pawns on the kingside.

44...♗g6 45.♞a7 gxh6 46.♞xa6 c3 47.♞c6 c2 48.♙d2 ♙f5!? 49.♗f3



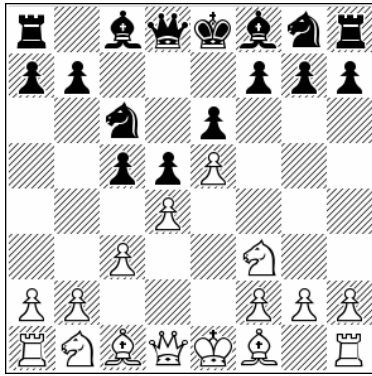
49...♙b2?

It's not particularly obvious in time pressure after 4 hours of play, but 49...♙d4! was winning. The immediate threat is 50...♘e5† and White has no good response. For example, 50.♞c8 ♘e5† 51.♗f4 ♘c4 52.♙c1 e5† picks up the e4-knight while 50.♞xc2 ♘f2! is a nice way to ensnare White. Trading down would leave Black up two pawns and an easily winning endgame.

50.♞xc2 ♙xa3 51.♙c3 ♙f8 52.♞g2† ♗f7 53.♗e3 ♘c5 54.♘g3 ♙g4 55.♞f2† ♗e8 56.♞xf8†
1/2–1/2

IM Chanda Sandipan – IM Vinay Bhat
Qingdao 2002

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3

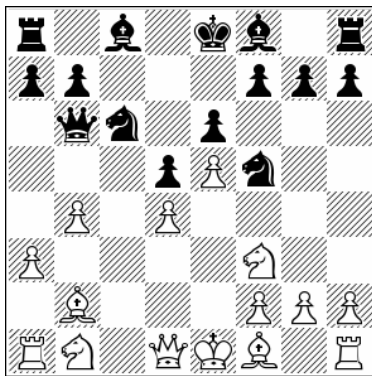


5...d7

In my game versus Ehlvest from Chapter 9, I mentioned that I typically played 5...h6 here, but I switched it up for this game as I hadn't found a good antidote to 6.d3 cxd4 7.xh6 gxh6 8.cxd4.

5...d7 allows White to play 6.a3 but Sandipan continued with another main option that rendered my choice moot.

6.a3 f5 7.b4 cxd4 8.cxd4 b6 9.b2

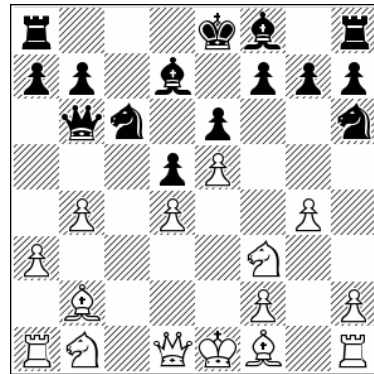


I had done some studying before this tournament, and I had played a number of practice games against the computer (Fritz8 was my engine of choice at the time) with 9...e7. My results there were especially poor and so I switched to developing the other bishop, and after this game, I never looked back – I've scored 100% in this line ever since!

9...d7 10.g4

The natural 10.e2 is also possible, but the problem is that if White doesn't kick the knight away from f5, White will have trouble developing. Bringing the b1-knight out drops d4 and playing b5 lets Black route his knight to c4. For example, 10...e7 11.d3 h5 12.b2 g5 13.h3 0-0-0! 14.b3 b8 with some advantage for Black, as in Bonafede – Bhat, San Marino 2006.

10...h6



11.g1

A valid alternative is:

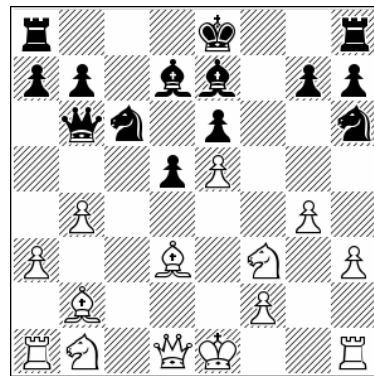
11.h3

Here are a couple examples from my play:

11...f6

11...c8!? 12.c3 a5 is also possible, albeit more complex.

12.d3 fe5 13.dxe5 e7



14.0-0

14.e2 0-0 15.bd2 f4 16.e3 af8 17.xb6 axb6 18.e2 f7 and Black's already better as in Govoni – Bhat, San Marino 2006.

14...0-0 15.e2 f7 16.b5 a5 17.d4 d8 18.bd2

With an about equal position as in Sertic – Bhat, San Leandro 2003.

11...f6 12.c3?

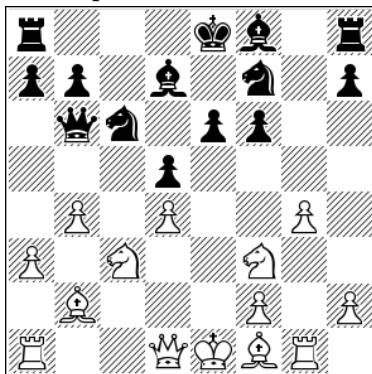
But this is the wrong way. Both 11.g1 and 11.h3 are viable lines, and in either case, Black is likely to break with ...f6. To me, the main difference between the moves from White's perspective is that if he plays 11.h3, White can exchange pawns on either f6 or e5. But if he plays 11.g1, White has to take on f6 because after the

exchange on e5, his king will have nowhere good to go.

After:

12. exf6 gxf6 13. ♖c3 ♗f7

Black has achieved a lot: he has destroyed White's e5-pawn, brought his errant knight back to a central square and maintained a compact center. In return White has maintained a space advantage, which means his pieces have the more active play.



Nevertheless, with accurate play Black should have equal chances.

14. ♗a4 ♜c7 15. ♝c1 ♜f4!

With good play for Black. Then:

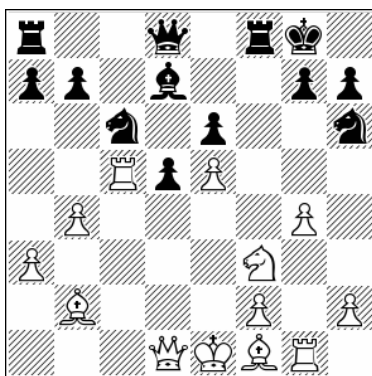
16. ♗c5 ♘xc5 17. ♝xc5 ♗g5! 18. ♗xg5 fxg5 19. ♙c1?!

This is the only move that people have played here, including Advance French expert Sveshnikov, but I would prefer 19. ♜d3 myself.

19... ♜xd4 20. ♜xd4 ♗xd4 21. ♝g3 ♝f8 22. ♙g2 h6 23. h4?! gxh4 24. ♝h3 h5!

With a clear advantage for Black as in Barbeau – Bhat, Montreal 2009.

12... fxe5 13. dxe5 ♙e7 14. ♝c1 0-0 15. ♗a4 ♜d8 16. ♗c5 ♘xc5 17. ♝xc5

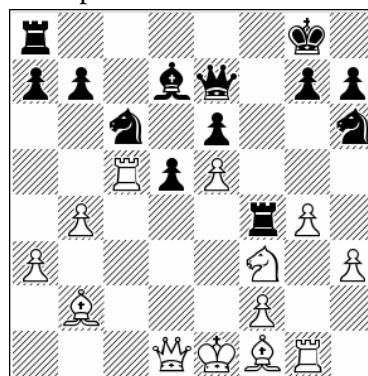


17... ♝f4!?

After 12. ♗c3?, the play has been according to typical plans. I spent some time here debating between this move and either ... ♜e7 or ... ♜e8. Each move has its plusses: ... ♜e7 attempts to start undermining White's queenside and doesn't prevent any future doubling of rooks on the f-file; ... ♜e8 prepares ... ♗e7-g6 and after kicking the c5-rook away, a ... ♙b5 or ... ♙a4 improvement of that piece; and ... ♝f4 immediately gets play going on the kingside with more major pieces coming to the f-file soon. Probably ... ♜e7 is best, keeping the option of putting a knight on f4 later with ... ♗f7-h8-g6, but the rook move is also good.

18. h3 ♜e7!

Playing ... ♜f8 would have doubled on the f-file faster, but I wanted to bring the a8-rook into the attack. As a plus, ... a5 is now a threat.



19. ♝c1?

Now the rook is badly misplaced, and White never gets another good opportunity to rectify that.

19. ♝c3 had to be played, supporting the weak f3-knight along the third rank, while possibly preparing either ♙b2-c1, trying to kick out the black rook, or ♝c3-e3, shoring up the e5-pawn as well. Still, after 19... ♝af8 20. ♝e3, Black has a few ways to keep his advantage. I was leaning towards 20... ♙e8, heading towards the e4-square and if 21. ♙d3? then 21... d4. White doesn't have the time to bring his pieces out, walk his king to safety, and guard the entire f-file.

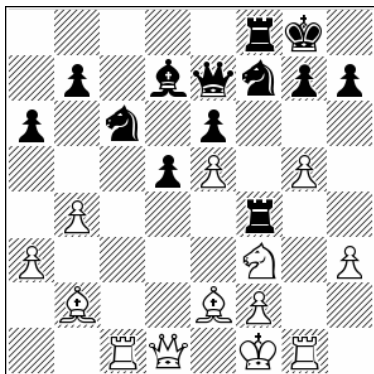
19... ♝af8 20. ♙e2 a6 21. g5

Setting a clever trap. Instead, 21. ♗f1? ♗f7 22. ♝g3 (22. g5 transposes to the game.) 22... ♗g5 and Black is practically winning.

21...♘f7

21...♘f5? fails to 22.♖g4! ♜e4 23.♞c2! and Black's going to have to give up some material.

22.♔f1



22...♘h8!

A powerful rerouting of the knight. I also considered 22...h6 to get the knight back into the game, but I didn't think opening the g-file like that was to my benefit.

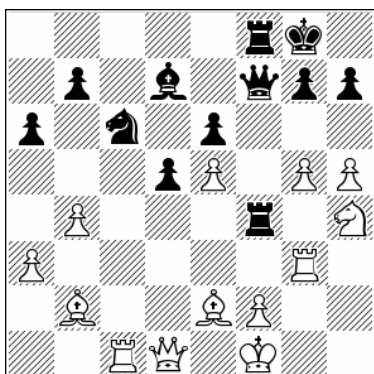
23.h4 ♜f7 24.♖g3 ♘g6

Black could have taken a pawn with 24...♖xh4, but that gives White a chance to try and improve his defensive setup with 25.♔g2 ♜f4 26.♞h1.

25.h5

25.♖h3 doesn't save White either: 25...♞f5 26.♔g2 ♜xf3! and White is going to lose lots of material to either a fork on h4 or f4.

25...♘h4 26.♘xh4



26...♖xh4

26...♖xf2† was also good, but I didn't see one key line and so I didn't take this direct route home:

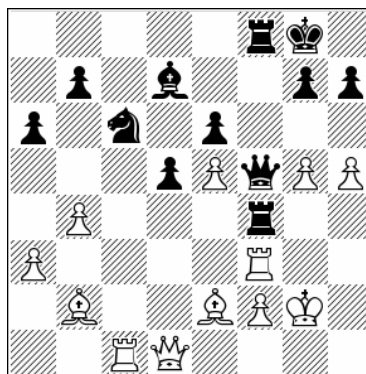
On 27.♔e1, I saw 27...♖f1† 28.♔d2 (or 28.♙xf1 ♞f2#) 28...♞f4† winning.

But after 27.♔g1 ♞f4 28.♖h3 ♞xg5† 29.♔h1 ♖8f4 30.♞d2 I wasn't sure what to do. (30.♞g1 ♞xh4! But simply bringing more force into the attack with 30...♘xe5! or 30...d4 is decisive.

27.♖f3 ♖f4 28.♔g2

28.♖xf4 ♞xf4 and the pawns will drop like the proverbial ripe apples.

28...♞f5



29.♖xc6 ♞g4†

White's sacrifice was desperation and while there are many ways to win, mine was the most forcing.

30.♔f1 ♖xf3 31.♙xf3 ♖xf3

0-1

Mate is around the corner after 32.♖c1 ♙b5† so White resigned.

I added draws with GMs Pentala Harikrishna and Liang Chong, along with a long endgame grind against GM Zhang Zhong (my one and only game ever on the White side of the Berlin Defense in the Ruy Lopez). At +1 then after 8 rounds against 2584 FIDE opposition, I figured a draw in the final round would be enough for a GM norm.

As Black then against GM Dibyendu Barua, I offered an early draw, but he declined. However, he played an indifferent middlegame and when things were looking bad for him (down one pawn, and possibly losing a second), he offered me a draw.

I took it immediately. I wanted the norm, and a win wasn't going to get me first place anyway.

I was quite happy as I walked out and a few other players like Benjamin and Shabalov came up to congratulate me. But then the tournament director, Ignatius Leong, informed me that I actually needed to win that game! He shared what he described as the official formula (both category or performance norm calculations) and said either way, I had come up just short of 2600. I was floored, and it felt like a repeat of Toronto in 2000 (Chapter 9), only worse because I had a big advantage when I took the draw.

Several of us went to dinner and I remember Benjamin commenting that I was taking the news relatively well. In reality, I was sad and upset, but there was no reason to bring the others down, so I tried to enjoy the food and fireworks show along the waterfront. As it turned out, the adventure wasn't quite over yet.

The formal tournament standings and outcomes were produced that night and Mr Leong sought me out to tell me that he was the one who made an error in the calculations, and I had indeed made the norm. All's well that ends well.

The US – China Rematch

I had a great time in Qingdao. The tournament went well, the food was superb, and I was able to wander around the city without a chaperone. As the team continued to Shanghai, I was expecting more of the same, but our schedules and itineraries were much more rigid there as official guests for a national match. Wandering around the city was not so simple to arrange and I had a lot of trouble getting a decent meal even at the otherwise fancy, well-organized team dinners. My type of vegetarianism (no meat, fish, or seafood – but yes to eggs and dairy) was not immediately understood and it wasn't until the end of my trip that I started telling people I followed a Buddhist diet. That was stricter than what I was following, but it had the advantage of being very well understood.

Once again, I led the junior team ahead of Dmitry and Hikaru. Bu had graduated to the open team and opposing me now on Board 1 for China was Wang Yue, followed by Ni Hua, and Wang Hao as the reserve. In the first game, I held a draw on the Black side of the Moscow Variation of the Semi-Slav. In the second game, I had a golden opportunity in one of my favorite 3...♙b5† Sicilian lines.

IM Vinay Bhat – FM Wang Yue
Shanghai 2002

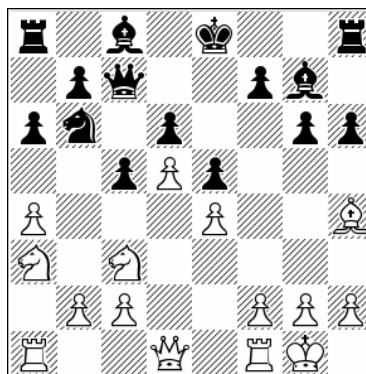
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5† ♘d7 4.d4 ♘gf6 5.0-0 a6 6.♙xd7† ♘xd7 7.♘c3 e6 8.♙g5 ♖c7

A familiar line given my game with Ilic (with 5...♘xe4 from Chapter 8). I had also won a nice game a year prior with 9.dxc5 ♘xc5 10.♖e1 f6 11.♙d2 b5 12.b4 ♘d7 13.a4 bxa4 14.♘xa4 ♙e7 15.c4! in Bhat – Winer, Tulsa 2001, but I decided to mix it up that day.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that Magnus told me in 2014 about seeing this game in *New in*

Chess. Later in 2014, he himself played 8.d5 instead of 8.♙g5.

9.d5!? e5 10.a4 g6 11.♘d2 ♙g7 12.♘c4 ♘b6 13.♘a3 h6 14.♙h4



14...0-0?

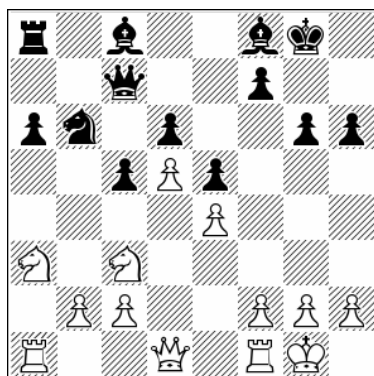
14...♔d7 15.a5 ♘c8 16.♘c4 b5 17.axb6
 ♘xb6 18.♘a5 with some advantage for White.
 Still, this was the right way to continue for Black.

15.a5! ♘d7 16.♙e7!

Now the natural 16...♞e8 walks into 17.♘ab5!
 axb5 18.♘xb5 ♞b8 19.♙xd6 and the black queen
 is trapped!

Meanwhile, 16...♞xa5 allows 17.♘c4 ♞c7
 18.♘xd6 and White gets a key pawn (and trade)
 before grabbing the exchange. So Black must give
 up the exchange straight up.

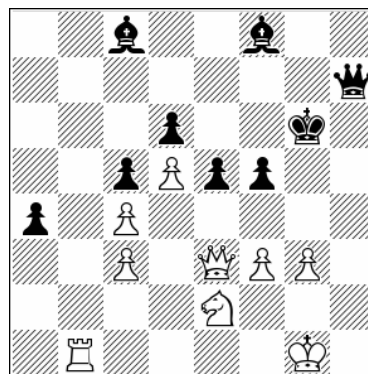
16...b5 17.axb6 ♘xb6 18.♙xf8 ♙xf8



19.b3

I'll skip quickly to a much later key moment
 but suffice to say that there are many ways to
 prosecute this advantage, and my play to about
 move 36 was quite reasonable and did slowly and
 consistently bring me closer to the full point.

**19...f5 20.♘c4 ♘xc4 21.bxc4 ♞b8 22.♞d3 ♞b4
 23.f3 h5 24.♘a2 ♞a4 25.♘c3 ♞b4 26.exf5 gxf5
 27.♘e2 h4 28.c3 ♞b6 29.♞fb1 ♔f7 30.♞e3
 ♞xb1† 31.♞xb1 ♔g6 32.g3 hxg3 33.hxg3 a5
 34.♔f2 ♞h7 35.♔g1 a4**



Now the most forceful way to win is with
 36.♞b8. My next move doesn't technically throw
 away the win, but given both of us were in some
 time pressure, I should have played it safer to reach
 move 40 and get some extra thinking time.

36.♞b6? a3 37.♞xc5?

37.♞xe5! was still winning: 37...a2 38.♞e8†
 ♔g7 39.♞a4 ♞h5 40.♔g2 is easy enough.

37...a2 38.♞a3 ♞h5!

And now it's suddenly equal. The difference
 of taking c5 versus e5 was the difference between a
 draw and a win and it's because ...f4 is possible for
 Black in the game after 39.♔g2. That turns into a
 quick draw by perpetual check, so I tried
 something else but it's also just a draw, albeit with
 a bit more chances for someone to go wrong.

**39.♞xa2 ♞xf3 40.♞c6 ♙b7 41.♞c7 ♙h6 42.♞xb7
 ♙e3† 43.♔h2 ♞f2† 44.♔h1 ♞f1 †
 1/2-1/2**

A critical miss on my part, both individually and
 for the overall match result.

In the next game of the match, Wang Yue landed
 a theoretical blow out of the opening and went on
 to win the game. At the end of the 4-round match,
 the US lost by an overall score of 20½-19½. One
 consolation prize for me was that I managed to
 sneak away to an unsupervised dinner with a few
 people from the US delegation, ensuring I had one
 great meal before leaving Shanghai.

My Learnings and Progress

I began to have some near-GM performances just after turning 16 in the summer of 2000, but I only made my first GM norm in 2002 just after turning 18. A key part of that leap from solid IM to making a GM norm was better understanding the dynamic value of the pieces. My sacrifices against Bu and Shabalov weren't about immediate returns and instead hinged on correctly assessing a more complicated set of factors.

This was a natural extension of my stylistic evolution starting from Chapter 9, where I was pushing the boundaries of my chess comfort zone and playing new kinds of positions. Given how important these kinds of dynamics are, if you don't find yourself playing many positions with a material imbalance, getting familiar with these examples and taking a shot at playing similar sacrifices can be a way to strengthen a weak link in your understanding and break through to another level.

I also continued to play especially well with knights. I mentioned in Chapter 8 that one way I came up with my plans was to ask myself how I'd like to improve a minor piece. The answers to that led to me finding a route to d3 via a4 and c5 against Shabalov and a route to h4 via h8 and g6 against Sandipan.

Chapter 12

College and Organizing

Soon after my tournaments in China, I started at UC Berkeley (Cal) in August 2002. I finally had my first GM norm and was rated just over 2430 FIDE (and 2500 USCF), and I felt confident that if I kept playing even a little bit, I'd be able to get the GM title. I wasn't chasing it though, and I ended up almost completely skipping tournament chess over the next two years.

I also skipped collegiate chess entirely. That was a big contrast with high school, and another contrast with high school is that we could have fielded a strong team at the national collegiate level for one year. David Pruess and Dmitry Zilberstein overlapped with me for one year at Cal.

One commentator was looking forward to that, comparing our lineup to the classic New York Yankees lineups with Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. It was a flattering comparison at the time, but nowadays we'd barely make an impression with several college chess teams in the US attracting top-tier talent from around the world.

Unfortunately, as a public school in a state going through a government budget crisis, the Cal chess team lost whatever modicum of support it had, and my scholastic team chess career ended in high school. I also stopped studying, practicing, and coaching and even curtailed how much online blitz I played in favor of settling into college life and a busy academic course load.

My coursework mirrored my varied interests with classes ranging from modern Asian history, Calculus, Hindi, Neurobiology, Physics, and more. My two favorite classes ended up being a statistical modeling course (that would now be considered an introduction to Machine Learning) and 19th century Russian Literature. I later graduated with degrees in both Statistics and Political Economy in May 2006.

Still, as the 2004 summer rolled around, I accepted my invitation to the US Junior Championship. I was taking summer classes while working on campus (in the networking hardware department), and my friend Dima and I would drive around for work blasting the local rap radio station. Chess wasn't on my mind, but I hadn't forgotten about it entirely, and I wanted to play the Junior championship one last time, so I put in a vacation request for one week for the tournament. In preparation for that event, I realized my opening lines needed work and so I ended up focusing there, starting with John Watson's *Play the French*.

IM Dmitry Schneider – IM Vinay Bhat

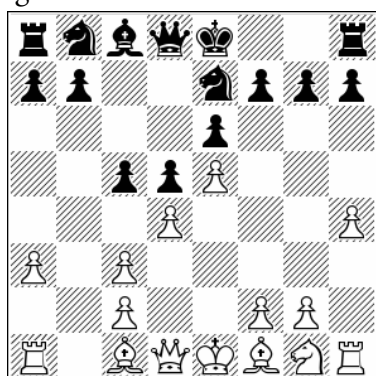
Linsdborg 2004

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘xc3†
6.bxc3 ♗e7 7.h4

Dmitry was a regular opponent for me over the years and I had the Black pieces in most of our games. We tended to jump around from one French line to another, and while this was our first game in the Winawer, it wasn't a surprise for him as I had already played it earlier in the event.

His h-pawn push is a relatively modern treatment of the position. White looks to gain space on the kingside with h4 and h5, and then develop his pieces according to how Black develops.

All of 7.♖g4, 7.♗f3, and 7.a4 are serious tries for an advantage as well.



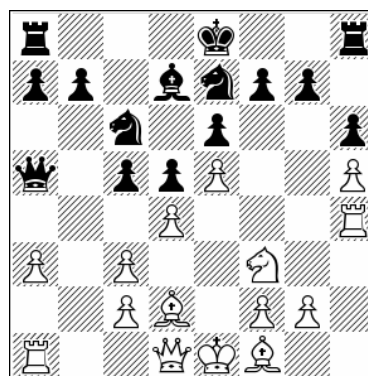
7...♗bc6 8.h5 ♖a5 9.♗d2 ♗d7 10.♗f3

At the time, I was trying to follow the approach that Watson advocated. However, I didn't fully remember the line and left to my own devices, I decided to cover g5 and h6 because 10...0-0-0 11.♗g5 ♗df8 12.h6 looked unpleasant to me. I later played and won with the Watson-approved 10...0-0-0 against Van Riemsdijk in 2006 (see Chapter 13).

10...h6

Amusingly, by playing this I unwittingly transposed into a game that Dmitry had played a few weeks prior with the black pieces.

11.♖h4!

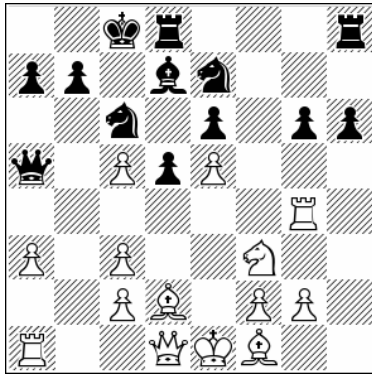


This move looked strange to me at first glance, but there is some good reasoning behind it. Black's usual plan in these positions is to open things up with a timely ...f7-f6, which chips away at White's central pawn chain.

With 11.♖h4, White is planning to stop that idea by forcing Black's g-pawn forward. The obvious drawback is that the rook is still not very well placed on g4, but White hopes to open the 4th rank too with dxc5 and then to swing the rook over to the queenside. There are some strong GMs who've played like this (Morozovich, Radjabov, and others) and at the time of this game, Morozovich had won a nice game with this maneuver, so I suspect Dmitry was using that as a reference point.

In contrast to 11.♖h4, 11.♗d3 had been the usual move here. One possibility then is 11...c4 12.♗e2 0-0-0 13.0-0 ♖a4, transposing to a game that Dmitry had played just a couple weeks before this one, except with the Black pieces (Matsuura – Schneider, Brazil 2004). He also shared that he thought 12...0-0!? might be even better. It's true Black doesn't have too many pieces guarding his kingside, but at the same time, White doesn't have anything immediately, and there is no way to stop ...f7-f6, when Black opens the center and gains the f-file for future maneuvers.

11...0-0-0 12.♖g4 g5 13.hxg6 fxg6 14.dxc5



White should make this capture soon as otherwise Black can lock things up with ...c4, restricting the g4-rook and taking away the d3-square from White's bishop. Black's plan then would be to play ...♞df8, ...g5, ...♙e8-h5 when his better pieces would give him a clear advantage.

14...g5

There are a lot of options here, but I tried to immediately embarrass the g4-rook (with ...♙d7-e8-h5 ideas) and to surround the e5-pawn (with ...♘e7-g6), which would allow to me to start a pawn roller in the center.

14...♙xc5!? was also possible, and can't be wrong, but this pawn didn't seem to be going anywhere so I wanted to go after e5 first.

14...♞df8!? was another move I considered, and it could transpose after 15.♞b4 ♞c7 16.♞b2 g5.

I didn't spend much time on 14...♞c7 as I wanted to save the queen for the c5-pawn in some lines. Had I played this, after 15.♙d3 g5 16.♞b1 we could have transposed to Morozevich – Pelletier, Biel 2003: 16...♞hg8 (16...♘xe5 was better.) 17.♙e2 ♞df8 18.c4! ♘g6 19.cxd5 exd5 20.♙a6! and Black was in big trouble. Black's overly slow play here let Morozevich's creativity take over.

15.♞b4!

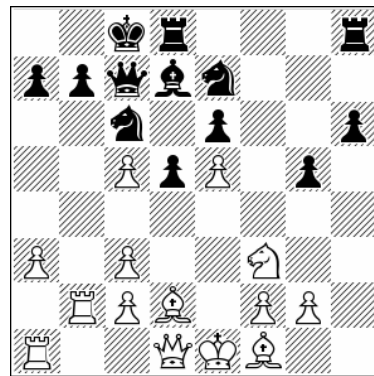
White swings his rook over before it potentially gets stuck on the kingside. 15.♞b1 is interesting though, planning to hassle Black's queen and creating some threats along the b-file. Black could take on c5 to start, but I was planning 15...♘g6 16.♙d3 ♘gxe5 17.♘xe5 ♘xe5 18.♞gb4

♘xd3† 19.cxd3 ♙c6 20.d4 e5 with good counterplay.

15...♞c7

Accepting the exchange sacrifice with 15...♘xb4? 16.axb4 ♞c7 isn't such a great idea, as White immediately gets his play going with 17.♞xa7. Black's in real trouble with moves like 18.♙a6 on tap.

16.♞b2



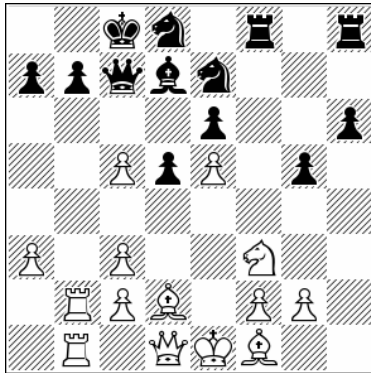
16...♞df8

I spent a lot of time to come up with this move, the plan being to guard the b7-pawn with ...♘d8, and then to increase the pressure on the e5- and c5-pawns.

16...♘xe5 17.♘d4 wasn't too appealing to me: White is going to increase the pressure on the b-file and Black's minor pieces are stuck. ...♘e7-c6 doesn't work because of ♘b5 and ...♙d7-c6 doesn't work because of ♘xe6. Black is then forced to play 17...♙xc5, but 18.♞ab1 b6 19.♙e2 gives White some initiative.

Alternatively, 16...♘g6 17.♞ab1 ♘a5 18.♘d4 and White's already threatening to sacrifice on b7 and follow up with ♙a6.

17.♞ab1 ♘d8



18. ♖e2

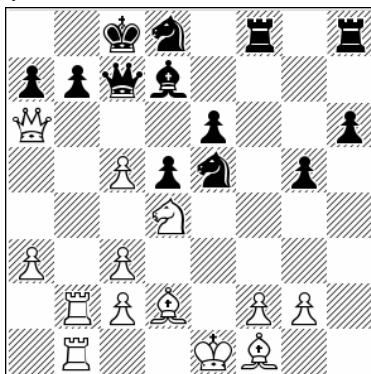
A good move, even though my first instinct was that it was a bad idea to block the ♕f1.

One of White's problems is that after moves like 18. ♖d4 or 18. ♕d3 g4, Black will take on e5 with check and White is reduced to offering a queen trade with ♖e2. That reduces White's attacking potential while the disappearance of the e5-pawn means Black's central pawns can start rolling.

18... ♖ec6 19. ♖d4 ♖xe5 20. ♖a6?

Flashy, but second-best.

20. ♖b5 was correct, when after 20... ♕xb5 21. ♖xb5 ♖ec6 (21... ♖g4 22. f3 doesn't lead anywhere for Black) 22. ♕e3 e5 is fine for Black. But compared to the prior 18. ♕d3 variation with a similar structure, the presence of queens on the board should help White to generate more counterplay.



20... ♖b8

I spent a few minutes on accepting the queen sacrifice, and once I convinced myself there wasn't an easy way to win (and in fact, I thought I'd be worse), I had no trouble in deciding on this move.

21. c4 ♖ec6!

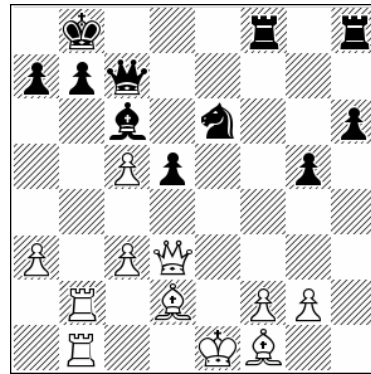
This is what he missed, and it leaves the queen awkwardly placed.

21... ♖a8? allowed 22. ♖a5, when White's on top – b7 is still weak and more of White's pieces are becoming active.

Now White has to exchange on c6 because 22. ♖b5? drops a piece after 22... bxa6!

22. ♖xc6† ♕xc6 23. cxd5 exd5 24. ♖d3 ♖e6 25. c3

25. ♕e3 guards the c5-pawn but runs right into 25... d4! 26. ♕xd4 ♖xd4 27. ♖xd4 ♖d8!? 28. ♖g4 ♖he8† 29. ♕e2 ♖a8 which sidesteps any tricks on the b-file and prepares ... ♖e4. Black is well on top.



This is an ongoing theme for the rest of this game: White's king is somewhat exposed, but Black doesn't quite have an open road in. He will need some sacrifice to truly crack open White's shell.

25... ♖xc5

25... ♖f4 was the main alternative, but I didn't see why I shouldn't grab the c5-pawn. The only potential downside was that this opens the g1-a7 diagonal, but I didn't see any real impact of that.

26. ♖d4

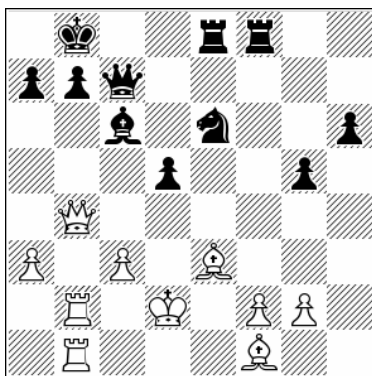
26. ♖g3 exchanges queens, but White isn't well placed for the endgame: 26... ♖e8† 27. ♖d1 ♖xg3 28. f3 ♕a4† 29. ♖c1 ♖hf8 30. ♕b5 ♖e4, with a huge advantage.

26... ♖e6 27. ♖b4 ♖e8 28. ♕e3 ♖hf8

I had spent time on 27...d4 (on the prior move) but wasn't able to see any clear path to an advantage and I expected to be better. And again, on this move 28...d4 29.cxd4 ♖f4 looked natural but I couldn't find a clear advantage after 30.♖c5. But the straightforward 30...♗xg2† (30...♗d5 would transpose to the game but having removed some options for White as well) 31.♙xg2 ♙xg2 would leave Black with a clear plus in the endgame.

White's next move rewards my indecision.

29.♗d2?!



29...d4!

I had been looking at this option for the previous 3 moves, and with four minutes left to reach move 40, I finally played it on instinct. Giving up the d-pawn opens another central file, opens the diagonal for the light-squared bishop, creates a square on d5 for Black's knight, and shuts in White's dark-squared bishop. For my extra pawn, that seemed a worthy price.

30.cxd4 ♗f4!? 31.♖c5 ♗d5 32.♙a6

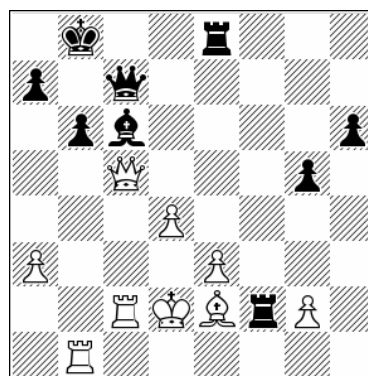
32.♙b5 is too slow, as 32...♗xe3 and 33...♖f2† wins.

Meanwhile, 32.♖xb7† ♙xb7 33.♖xd5 ♗a8 leaves Black up an exchange, and White's king is at least as exposed as Black's. Still, this is probably what I would have chosen to try and confuse the issue a little bit.

32...b6 33.♖c2

33.♙b5? bxc5 would be a bad slip.

33...♗xe3 34.fxe3 ♖f2† 35.♙e2



35...♖g3!

Black's attack lands first.

Now 36.d5? guards the e3-pawn, but doesn't do much else: 36...♙xd5 and White has no response to Black's attack.

Meanwhile, 36.♖xc6? loses to 36...♖xe3† 37.♗d1 ♖f1† 38.♙xf1 ♖e1#.

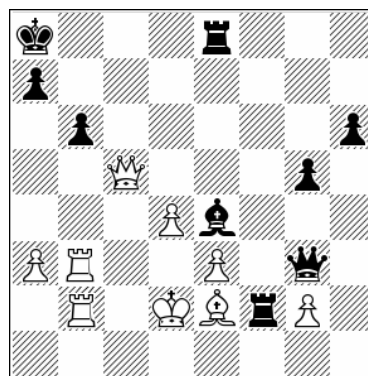
36.♖b3 ♙e4

This is enough to win, but there was a neater finish: 36...♖xe2† 37.♗xe2 ♖xe3†! Deflecting White's rook from the b-file. 38.♖xe3 ♖xg2† 39.♗d1 ♖g4† and Black will take White's queen on the next move.

37.♖cb2

37.♖cc3 is simply met by 37...♗a8! 38.♖b5 ♖ef8 39.♖b2 ♖xe2† 40.♖xe2 ♖f2, winning.

37...♗a8



I had less than a minute with no increment left at this point, but I also wanted something to drink, so I got up to refill my water glass. My opponent and the handful of spectators looked shocked, but I had everything under control.

38.♖b5 ♖c8 39.♖a6 ♙b7 40.♖b5 ♖xg2
0-1

While the Winawer was a good addition to my repertoire, I had forgotten at least two important things about playing competitively again. First and foremost, I hadn't done anything to mimic the kind of focus and mental stamina I'd need to play 9 long, high-level games one after the other. And secondly, this event was being held in Lindsborg, Kansas, a town with a population of about 3,000 and one that didn't turn out to have much in the way of vegetarian food. Unlike some of my prior travels, I didn't arrive well prepared for that at all.

So, while I did reasonably well over the first three days (with 3/5, I was half a point behind the leader), I lost my last 4 games of the event and in increasingly embarrassing fashion.

In one game, my opponent's coach (the strong IM Victor Frias) remarked that I must never have studied Capablanca because otherwise I wouldn't have made the positional mistakes I made in that game. He wasn't trying to be sarcastic or ironic.

Then, in a game against Josh Friedel, I spent more than 5 minutes considering a king move before realizing it would move into check from a neighboring piece. He also told me that at one point, I started talking out loud at the board (I don't remember this). Luckily Josh and his second (Alex Betaneli) took pity on me and let me tag along to get lunch afterwards in a neighboring town with many more food options for me.

And to finish the event, I failed to notice that my opponent was attacking my bishop on move 16 and so I had nothing better to do than resign after my opponent took it on the next move. I was already worse to be fair, but it didn't need to end like that!

Thoroughly embarrassed, I went back to Berkeley and focused again on my job and my classes. This experience felt like a huge step backward, and I didn't make any plans to play again. My return to chess was later made in a roundabout way, thanks to a side project with two friends.

A Left Turn to Organizing and Coaching

A few months before that US Junior tournament, my friend David Pruess approached Andy Lee and me about our interest in opening a chess center in Berkeley. Unlike the existing Berkeley Chess Club, his vision was for a full-time chess center that would be open throughout the year and hold events, host lessons, and put on exhibitions. All three of us were interested and willing to put in time after school and on the weekends to make it work.

We found a venue that we could rent; I set up and developed the initial website; and we figured out finances and set lesson rates to support the club. This was largely a labor of love, as we paid ourselves infrequently and well below a normal teaching rate, redirecting the rest to fund the ongoing operations of the club.

I worked at the club until my graduation in May 2006 and helped on occasion through the end of the chess center in 2007. During that time, we ran nearly 200 USCF rated events including a few international, norm-eligible tournaments. The first of those was in 2005, and it was a double round-robin, with Yermolinsky ("Yermo"), Atalik, and Sharavdorj as the GMs.

On a Friday evening (April 1, 2005), Sharavdorj was playing Yermo. Yermo was better but threw it away in time pressure during the first time-control and then had to defend a pawn-down rook endgame. Both

players were now nearing time pressure in the second (sudden death) time control. Then, suddenly, the power went out for a six-block radius: an electrical transformer had blown!

The club had some windows but there wasn't a lot of light at that hour, so as the TD, I briefly debated adjourning the game. Yermo was opposed to that because it was a somewhat theoretical R+P endgame and so if the players could study it, it'd become a more academic exercise.

We decided to have the game continue, physically moving the board closer to the windows (and any remaining light) and adding a flashlight as well (held up by Andy Lee, the tallest person in the crowd). The handful of spectators were slowly engulfed by the shadows as the endgame wore on until it was finally pierced by Yermo's deep voice.

“*Vinaay! Where's Vinay?*” he bellowed.

I popped out the shadows nearby. Yermo wanted to claim a 3-time repetition. But neither of them was keeping score and I wasn't writing down the moves for them either, so there couldn't be a valid claim. Yermo didn't like that at all and made that clear. Sharavdorj wasn't comfortable in English, but he made it clear he agreed with me that the game needed to continue.

The debate continued with Yermo escalating with something to the effect of: “This isn't a blitz game” (except with much more colorful language). Luckily, I got the players to agree to continue with the stipulation that I'd start to write down the moves for them. The game ended in a draw shortly thereafter without any appeal to my scoresheet. We never did fully reconstruct the game, and so I entered it as having ended in a draw after move 60.

Rediscovering Chess Playing

One exhibition that we organized at the Club was a “Man versus Machine” match in October 2004, in which I played Fritz8, which I lost in a clean sweep. It wasn't a normal tournament and the games had plenty of interesting content, but it also didn't do much to sweep aside any self-doubt after the absolute stinker I had at the US Junior Championship.

But at the end of 2004, the Mechanics Institute decided to hold another norm event (the Michael Franett Memorial), and for the first time, I was invited as one of the IMs. As a competitor, I had some desire to redeem myself after the US Junior and Fritz8 matches. But my chess confidence was in shambles too, so it felt like a toss-up decision. The tiebreaker ended up being a sense that I owed them for organizing many similar events when I was growing up, so I said yes, and this time I started preparing about one month in advance.

I don't remember why, but I decided to buy *Creative Chess Strategy* by GM Alfonso Romero and I ended up devouring it during that month. The book covers a lot of ground, but centers on the middlegame, and was an excellent set of annotated games for me to study. One thing he emphasized was how a routine approach wouldn't work in some positions, and one way I decided to act on that was by blowing up my repertoire for the event to challenge myself to play new positions out of the gate. It worked out beautifully.

I didn't pick the most cutting-edge openings: my biggest switch was from 1.e4 to 1.d4, and to cut down on the theory I needed to learn, I decided to play the Trompowsky against 1...♘f6 and well-trodden but

secondary lines against 1...d5. But I was excited to play again and finally, unlike Ostap Bender, I managed to play a move besides 1.e4. While 19th century Russian literature was my favorite class, the subsequent 20th century material was excellent as well and Ilf & Petrov with *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf* were some favorites. I'd like to think these next two games are nearly as entertaining as a good Bender adventure.

IM Vinay Bhat – FM Alan Stein

San Francisco 2005

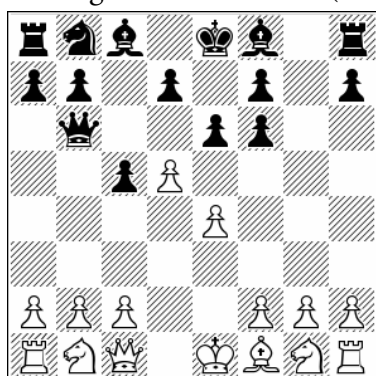
1.d4 ♘f6 2.♙g5

My opening surprise paid quick dividends. Alan had known me and how I played since the early 90s as he was a few years older and grew up in the Bay Area. He spent 10 minutes here debating how to respond.

2...c5 3.♙xf6 gxf6 4.d5 ♖b6 5.♚c1 e6 6.e4!

Taking advantage of the fact Black didn't stop this (5...f5 is normal, instead of 5...e6).

Both 6.♘c3 and even 6.g3 crossed my mind, but 6.e4 was natural and once I saw the possible attack that follows, I didn't spend all my time solving the position. In that sense, I didn't make the same mistake here as against Mikhalevski (Chapter 10).



6...♙h6?

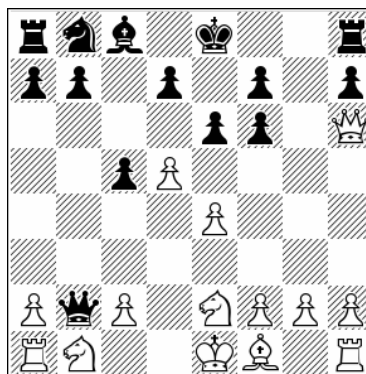
When he played ...e6, I figured this was his plan. The only problem is that the added moves help White tremendously: the f-pawn and black king position is much weaker, and White has time to sideline the black queen.

Instead, 6...♙g7 7.♘c3 0-0 8.♘ge2 followed by g3 leaves White with a pleasant plus. Alternatively, 6...f5!? 7.exf5 exd5 attempts to reach a messy position, but White is better after 8.♘c3.

7.♙xh6

Basically forced (as 7.♘d2 loses a pawn to 7...♙xd2†), but this also refutes Black's plan.

7...♙xb2 8.♘e2



8...♙xa1

Black doesn't have to take this rook right away but waiting also doesn't help much.

One way to wait would be with:

8...d6

This prepares to bring the b8-knight to the defense of his center immediately, but it comes up short:

9.♘ec3 ♘d7

9...♙xa1 transposes to the note to Black's 9th move.

10.♙b5! ♙xa1 11.dxe6

11.♙xf6?! 0-0! is an easy move to miss, but an idea that saves Black from a worse fate in a number of lines.

11...fxe6 12.♙xf6 ♖f8 13.♙xc6† ♔d8 14.0-0
Winning for White.

Another attempt to shore things up is with 8...♔e7, but unsurprisingly the king isn't a great defender in the middlegame: 9.d6†! ♔e8 (9...♔xd6 allows 10.♙d2† and 11.♙c3 to save the rook) 10.♘ec3 and once the f-pawn falls, mate on e7 is hard to avoid. For example, 10...♗g8 11.♙xf6 ♘c6 12.♙b5 ♔f8 13.♙xc6 bxc6 14.0-0 ♙xa1 15.♘d2 ♙b2 16.♘c4 followed by ♘e5 and checkmate.

Like the *30 Rules* say, material is just one factor in evaluating a position! White's piece quality and Black's lack of king safety are the common thread across all the concrete reasons Black can't defend himself here.

9. ♖c3 ♜b2

9...d6 10. ♘b5†

10. ♜xf6 0-0! again clouds the issue.

10...♔e7

Now Black seems to have a better version than what happens in the game, but White's attack is still too strong:

11. e5! fxe5

11...dxe5? 12. 0-0! ♗d7 13. d6†! ♙xd6 14. ♗d2! and Black's queen is lost as if it moves to b2 or c3, a knight fork will pick it up.

12. 0-0

Black is toast. To prove the win in all lines would take a lot of variations, but there is basically one primary concept that connects most of White's wins: he will play ♗c3-e4 (and ♜f6†/♞g5†) or even ♗b1-d2 (to bring that knight to e4 with tempo after ...♞xc3).

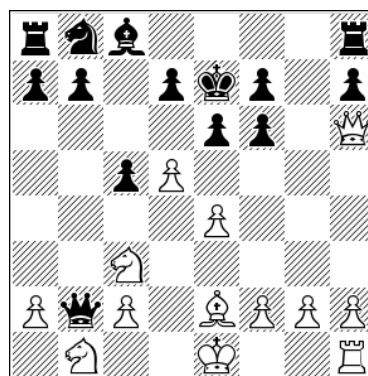
10. ♘e2!

I couldn't find anything immediately forcing with 10. d6, 10. ♜xf6, or 10. ♘b5, so I just decided to develop a piece and prepare to castle. A refreshingly practical approach.

10...♔e7

10...a6 attempts to keep the white pieces out of b5, but this is not a luxury Black can afford. 11. ♜xf6 ♜c1† 12. ♘d1 shows the extra developing move (♘e2) coming in handy. Then, 12...♞g8 13. ♗d2! cuts the black queen off and adds to Black's central dark square worries. One finish could be 13...b5 14. e5! with ♗c3-e4-d6† to follow.

Meanwhile, 10...d6 11. 0-0 ♔e7 12. e5! fxe5 13. ♗e4 is akin to the 9...d6 lines, and like those is winning for White.



11. d6†!

11. e5 was my second choice and the move Alan was more afraid about. After 11...fxe5 I didn't see anything too clear, so I decided to stick with d6†, but I missed 11...fxe5 12. ♞g5†! when 12...♔e8 13. d6 is crushing.

11...♙xd6 12. ♜xf6 ♜c1† 13. ♘d1 ♞g8 14. ♗d2

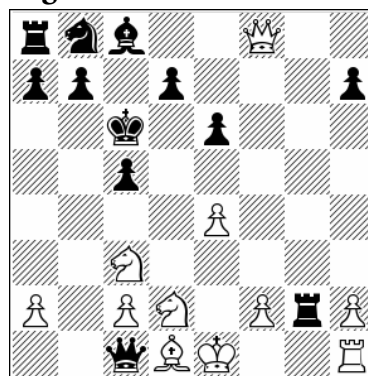
Stopping Black's idea of ...♞g5.

14...♔c6

It's already checkmate after: 14...♗c6?? 15. ♗b5#!

And while 14...a6 covers b5, Black has other problems. There are multiple wins, and I was planning 15. ♗c4† ♔c7 (15...♔c6 16. ♞e5! with checkmate to follow – Black's queenside lives in a self-made cage.) 16. ♗d5† ♔c6 (16...exd5 17. ♞b6#) 17. ♗e7†.

15. ♜xf7! ♞xg2 16. ♞f8!



White's attack is easy to conduct: Black is playing with so many fewer pieces and so many holes in his position that White can make simple improvements and threats to bring the point home.

16...♗a6 17. e5 ♔c7 18. ♗b5† ♔b6

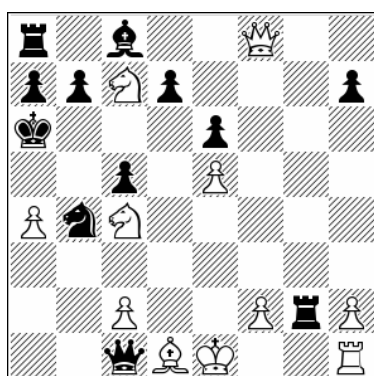
18...♔c6 19.a4 also forces a win. 19...b6 20.♖f3†! is one possible winning line.

19.a4 ♖b4

Walking into a nice self-mate, but there's nothing better.

20.♖c4† ♔a6 21.♖c7#

1-0



A picturesque finish! After the game, Alan jokingly told the tournament director to “please lose the scoresheets”.

FM David Pruess – IM Vinay Bhat

San Francisco 2005

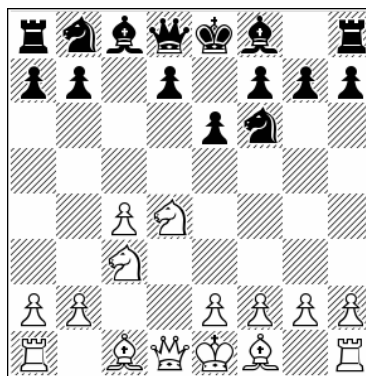
1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.♖c3

After a couple minutes of thought, David decided to call my bluff with this move. He realized that I wasn't a Nimzo-Indian player (or any sort of 1.d4 ♖f6 player), so he presented me with a choice: play 3...♗b4 and the Nimzo for the first time (from either color); play a QGD with 3...d5 (not part of my repertoire for 10 years); or play 3...c5 and head for a Benoni, which I also didn't ever play. Following my pattern after reading *Creative Chess Strategy*, I went for Option C.

3...c5 4.♖f3

But this was a real shock for me. I had expected David to take the challenge of the Benoni and maybe even go for the Taimanov Attack. I had nothing special prepared there, so to some degree, I'm lucky he didn't go for it. I also didn't know anything about this transposition into a Symmetrical English.

4...cxd4 5.♖xd4



5...d5

I was debating between this move and 5...♗b4, 5...♖c6, and 5...♗c5. All of them looked reasonable, but once again, I hesitated with 5...♗b4 because that felt like a Nimzo-like position. Meanwhile, 5...♗c5 is almost never played, but I'm not entirely sure why. And it turns that 5...♖c6 is the most common move, leading to a very theoretical line of the Symmetrical English.

David responded somewhat quickly with the most popular move, but both 6.♗g5 and 6.e3 are also played relatively frequently.

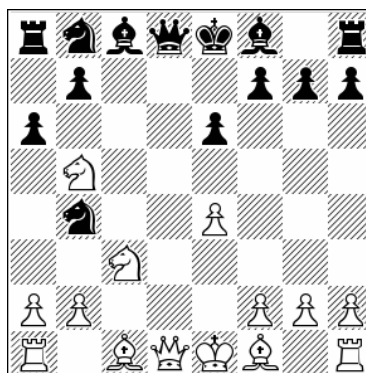
6.cxd5 ♖xd5 7.♖db5 a6

One of many fair choices in a position with a long history – Alekhine chose 7...♗d7 in 1922 for example.

8.e4

8.♖xd5 axb5 9.♖c3 ♖xd1† 10.♔xd1 b4 11.♖b5 ♖a5 12.e4 ♗c5 is quite pleasant for Black.

8...♖b4



9.♗g5?

Objectively wrong, but he ratchets up the chaos factor with this move.

9. ♖xd8† ♜xd8 10. ♘a3 was what I was expecting, with a solid position for Black after something like 10... ♙c5 11. ♙f4 ♜e7 12. ♞c1 ♚d7 13. ♙e2 b5 14. 0-0 ♙b7.

9...f6

While taking the bishop is obviously bad after 10. ♚c7†, both 9... ♖a5 and 9... ♖b6 took a bit more time to calculate and compare to the pawn move. After some consideration, the pawn advance looked correct (and is correct).

10. ♙xf6

In for a penny, in for a pound. The alternative 10. ♖h5† g6 11. ♞d1 ♚c2† 12. ♜e2 ♖b6! leaves Black winning.

10... ♖xd1†

10... gxf6 11. ♖h5† ♜e7 12. ♞d1 ♚c2† 13. ♜e2 ♖b6, and now while 14. ♚d6 comes up short after 14... ♚d4†, I was worried about 14.e5. The computer points out the clever 14... ♙d7! though, and that would largely rebuff White's attack.

Instead, I bailed out into a complex endgame that I couldn't calculate to the end, but where I felt I must have some plus.

11. ♞xd1 axb5 12. ♞d8† ♜f7 13. ♞xc8 ♜xf6

13... gxf6 prepares the immediate ... ♙g7, but I thought I'd lose my queenside doing this and I didn't particularly like my kingside structure either. 14. a3 ♚4c6 15. ♙xb5 ♞g8 16. ♞c7† ♙e7 17. 0-0 and Black is slightly better. After b7 falls, White will have 3 pawns for the piece, and while the pawns won't be far advanced, Black's pieces aren't well coordinated either.

14.a3

This looks best to me, but there is a plethora of alternatives to consider – for example, White can take on b5 in a couple ways or start chasing Black's king, either with f4 or with his rook after h4. Against all of them, Black can defend by trying to

take advantage of the fact that if the knights on b4 and c3 are removed, then Black will have ... ♙b4† to break the pin with tempo.

Thus, against 14. ♚xb5, I was planning 14... ♚d3† – while against each of 14. ♙xb5, 14. h4, or 14. f4, I was planning 14... ♚xa2. The b8-knight is indirectly defended after a trade on a2 due to the ... ♙b4 check.

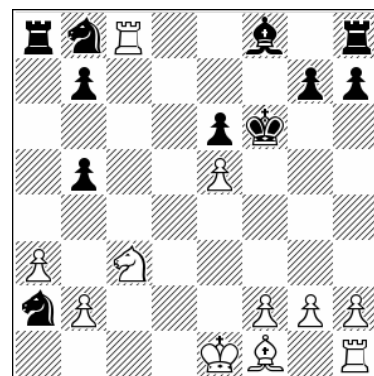
14... ♚a2!?

Extravagant, but after White's provocation with ♙g5 I couldn't help myself from playing this. It helped that I thought it was a good move too! Both 14... ♚4a6 15. ♙xb5 and 14... ♚c2† 15. ♜d1 ♚d4 16. ♚xb5 didn't look good for me.

But I underestimated 14... ♚4c6. Then 15. ♙xb5 ♚a7! is the key defensive maneuver, as after 16. ♞c7 ♚xb5 17. ♚xb5 ♚a6, Black is untangling. Continuing this line a little further with 18. ♞xb7 ♚c5 19. ♞b6 ♙e7, White has 3 pawns for the piece, but Black has the much better pieces and in the long run, that'll give him a big advantage.

15.e5!

15. ♚xa2 ♙b4† is obviously not good and the alternative exchange sac with 15. ♞xf8† is a little better by comparison, but still no fun after 15... ♞xf8 16. ♚xa2 ♜e5!.



15... ♜xe5

15... ♜g6 16. h4! and now the activation of the rook along the 3rd rank should be good enough for White to equalize at least.

15... ♜f7? allows White to get his rook off the 8th with tempo: 16. ♞c7† ♙e7 17. ♚xa2 wins.

16.f4†! ♖xf4

The king can defend itself! This is an amusing position: Black has two pinned minor pieces on the 8th rank and his knight is deep in enemy territory on a2. Meanwhile, his king fearlessly moves up the board.

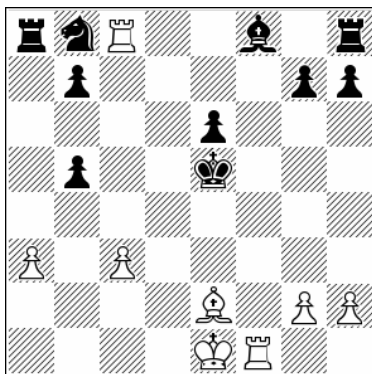
Not 16...♔f6 17.♘e4† ♖g6 18.♙d3 and White is better. Black's problem is that he can't escape the pins on the 8th rank.

17.♙e2?

It doesn't seem like the b-pawn is important right now, and David might have wanted to keep his bishop closer to home so that Black doesn't have ideas of ...♞a5 to try and break a pin on the 8th rank, but that pawn carries the day for Black. An improvement is: 17.♙xb5! ♘xc3 18.bxc3 ♔e5 19.♞f1 ♞a5 20.a4 ♘a6 21.♞cf8 ♞xf8 22.♞xf8 ♘c7 23.♞f7 ♘xb5 24.axb5 ♞xb5 25.♞xg7 White equalizes.

17...♘xc3 18.bxc3 ♔e5 19.♞f1

19.0-0? ♘a6! Both 19...♘c6 and 19...♘d7 are also good enough, but 19...♘a6 covers the c7-square, and so White has no choice but to take the rook on a8. 20.♞xa8 ♙c5† 21.♔h1 ♞xa8 wins.



19...b4!!

A bolt from the blue that leaves White with no good option. Taking on b4 releases one of the pins on the 8th rank, but moving past the b-pawn gives Black a strong passed pawn. White really needed to take that pawn on move 17.

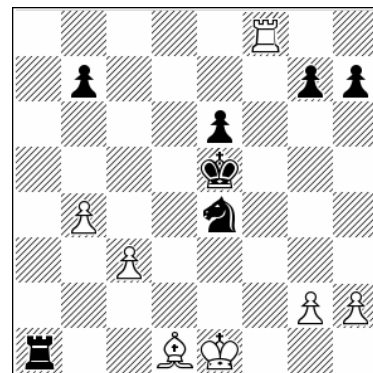
20.axb4

The only reasonable move. Taking on f8 immediately lets Black take on a3 and then run

with the a-pawn very quickly. Meanwhile, 20.a4 falls to the prosaic 20...♞xa4 and a subsequent ...bxc3 – for example, 20.a4 ♞xa4 21.♞xb8 bxc3 22.♞1xf8 ♞xf8 23.♞xf8 ♞a1† and 24...c2 will decide things.

David offered a draw after this move – I had about 50 seconds left while he had 18 minutes. But both of us had a 30 second increment as well, and I assessed the endgame as a win.

20...♞a1† 21.♙d1 ♘d7 22.♞f7 ♘f6 23.♞xf8 ♞xf8 24.♞xf8 ♘e4



Material is equal again, but White has a problem with his back rank and the c-pawn.

25.♞c8

25.♞f3 b5 just turns the screws on White's position. Black can play ...♞a2 or ...♞c1 later.

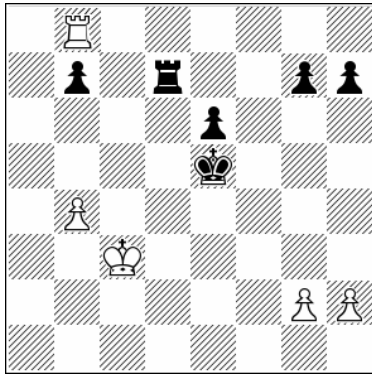
25...♔f4

I decided to repeat the position in slightly different ways to gain some time on the clock.

26.♞f8† ♔e5 27.♞c8 ♞c1 28.♞b8 ♞b1 29.♞c8

29.♞xb7 avoids the repetition, but to White's detriment: 29...♘xc3 30.♞d7 ♔e4! 31.b5 e5 32.b6 ♔e3 33.b7 e4 and after ...♘d1 and ...♞xb7, Black will have a winning endgame. His king and extra pawn are already quite active and far advanced.

29...♞c1 30.♞b8 ♘xc3 31.♔d2 ♞xd1† 32.♔xc3 ♞d7



This should now be an easy win for Black, as his pawns are safe with the rook on the 7th rank. Meanwhile, White's king is cut off and will have some trouble crossing the d-file. I normally think of the best position for a rook to be behind the passed pawn, then to the side of the pawn, and then in front of the pawn.

Black now has two major plans that I considered while David thought about how to defend this:

- 1) Escort the e-pawn up the board with the king in front of it.
- 2) Bring the king back to d6, then position the rook behind the e-pawn and push it while the king goes after White's b-pawn.

33.♔c4 ♕d6

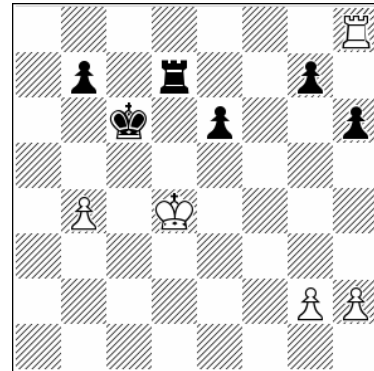
Unfortunately, walking the pawn up the board with the king means giving White counterplay with b5-b6 and ♖c8-c7. Thus, I

decided on the 2nd plan, which leaves nothing to chance.

34.♖h8 h6 35.♔d4

Rooks tend to be bad blockaders, so White tries to stop the e-pawn with his king but that leaves the queenside unattended.

35...♕c6†



36.♔e3

36.♔e3 ♖d2 37.♔xe6 ♖xg2 and now Black easily wins, with a passed pawn soon to appear on both sides of the board. After 36.♔e3, there are multiple winning approaches and I picked one that isn't any better or worse than the others.

36...♖e7 37.♔e4 ♕b5 38.♔e5 ♕xb4 39.♔d6 ♖f7 40.♖h7 b5 41.h4 ♕c3 42.g4 b4 43.g5 hxg5 44.hxg5 b3 45.g6 ♖a7 46.♖h3† ♕b4 47.♖h4† ♕a3 48.♖f4 b2 49.♖f7 ♖xf7
0-1

I finished the event with a dominant 9/11 score and with mostly fresh positions in every game. After the lows from the 2004 US Junior, my playing interest had been rekindled.

I played three more rated events through the end of college, two of which were organized by our East Bay Chess Club. I also came across all sorts of people and personalities as an organizer, many of which were challenging.

The marquee annual event we organized was the Berkeley Masters, a 9-round event with enough titled players to offer GM and IM norm possibilities. The 2005 edition was held in December and there were some heavy rains outside. As we were just below ground level (you needed to descend a few steps from the sidewalk to enter the club), we had some water flooding issues to deal with. Managing that during the game was tough, and I also had trouble for the entire event focusing on my play while dealing with pairings, player issues, and so on.

The flooding and cleaning up during a game weren't even close to the biggest headaches I had. Earlier in the year, at a small weekend tournament, Philipp Perepelitsky (around 2000 USCF) faced off against Andras Erdei (around 2200 USCF) in the second round. The time control was 40/2 and G/1, and by

move 30, both players were in serious time pressure. The game might've already been going Perepelitsky's way, but the time scramble clarified things: after some frantic play and clock banging, Perepelitsky emerged with a huge material advantage.

As they each realized they had made 40 moves, the reality of his lost position sunk in for Erdei. Even against a 2000 player, this would take a bona-fide miracle to turn around. He sat there for a while thinking and then he decided to pack his stuff up. He put away his scoresheet and pen, his water bottle and so on and then walked away with his backpack. He didn't stop the clock or say anything to his opponent. Instead, he just left the building, with Perepelitsky looking rather confused as to what was going on.

After a few minutes and knowing his opponent had left the building, Perepelitsky assumed his opponent was resigning. So, he stopped the clocks, packed up the set, and turned in his scoresheet.

That's when Erdei rushed back into the club! He had left, but there were some ground-floor windows that gave a view into the club area (those same steps down that opened it up to flooding also meant the windows looked down into the club!) and he was watching from the bushes by those windows. By stopping the clocks and packing up the set while it was Erdei's turn, Erdei claimed that Perepelitsky had effectively resigned.

Andy Lee (the main TD for that tournament) looked through the rulebook trying to figure this one out and decided that while packing up the set on his own was not the right thing to do, Perepelitsky could reasonably have expected Erdei's actions to constitute a resignation. With Erdei physically present again, Andy offered a compromise that they could continue the game with an approximate time per player and the position as per their scoresheets (which did agree).

That would've obviously meant continuing in a dead lost position and Erdei was looking to avoid a loss by any means whatsoever, so he continued to object. Andy called me to see what I thought and after catching up on the facts as observed by multiple people, I supported his decision. Erdei then refused to continue the game and so he was ruled to have lost the game.

The drama didn't even stop there as Erdei didn't let the matter go. He threatened action with the US Chess Federation (eventually other, even more experienced, TDs supported our ruling) and then threatened legal action (due to the emotional distress of having lost the game). I knew that the mom of one of my other students at the time (Phil Jouriles) was an Assistant District Attorney in San Francisco, so I asked her whether he had any legal grounds. She laughed and said that if it came to that, she'd happily represent us pro bono and he'd get laughed out of court. Erdei never did follow up on his written threat to sue. And while I've helped a couple friends organize tournaments since, after I stopped working at the club in the summer of 2006, I haven't been the organizer or TD for any tournaments since.

My Learnings and Progress

I wasn't playing a lot of chess while in college, and when I did play, my results were all over the map. I was encouraged by games like the one against Schneider, but I had at least as many negative examples. Still, my early struggles led to an internal breakthrough in 2005.

I was stuck in a rut as a chessplayer: I had been playing the same set of opening lines and reaching similar types of middlegames for several years, but that certainty and familiarity also bred some apathy. Romero's book covered enough ground that it could help me with some weaknesses in my play, but even more importantly, it kept my interest and helped remind me why I had become hooked to begin with. And for me, that was enjoying the creative aspect alongside the competitive one.

This re-discovery was akin to something Kaidanov had done for me earlier: there are many things to study and many ways to study, but the right study plan was tailored to me in terms of study time and interests. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach.

I should add that not all my experiments worked as well as the ones against Stein and Pruess, but that was fine by me. I knew that playing the same old way wasn't any guarantee of a good result either. This helped me rebuild my interest in playing, and that was critical for me to continue playing after college.

Chapter 13

A New Beginning

After graduating from UC Berkeley in May 2006 with degrees in Statistics and Political Economy, I had a few months off before starting a new job. I had lined up that job at Cornerstone Research, an economic consulting firm, during the school year. And like a lot of college students and graduates, I wanted to travel. Unlike most of them, I also wanted to play some chess!

Professional chess was not on my radar, but I decided to schedule a few tournaments over three months in Europe. My results during that time were pivotal in my later choice to pursue chess more seriously. I started with events in San Marino and Croatia and ended in Spain and Andorra with plenty of sightseeing in-between.

My play that summer was marked primarily by a return to basics: I was able to play in my typical aggressive-positional style without lapsing as often into semi-irrational positions as I did from 2000 – 2005 (Chapters 9 through 12). That in turn translated to good results: I notched positive results in each event and added my second GM norm with a round to spare. I also had a chance to reconnect with old chess friends and make some new ones.

Indians Abroad

Spain and in particular Catalonia have had a thriving chess scene for years. While the region hasn't produced a lot of top chess talent itself, there were a lot of tournaments there and a general appreciation for chess. When I was briefly living in Barcelona in 2010, the mom and pop at a local dry-cleaning shop asked me what I did for a living and then recounted how they followed the Kasparov – Karpov match in Seville for example. I haven't seen that general level of awareness in the US.

I also met a large contingent of Indian players as I wrapped up my summer tour. At first, they were simply chess acquaintances: I played a few of them in Andorra but we didn't talk much afterwards. Going from Andorra back to Catalonia changed all that.

There were several of us from the Andorra Open making that trip, and there was a divide between those who spoke Spanish and those who didn't. Those of us who spoke Spanish took a local bus to Balaguer and had no logistical problems. Meanwhile, the Indian contingent ended up booking their own minibus as transport and then ran into some troubles with their accommodations in Balaguer.

I learned this from the main organizer, Jordi Prio, as he met some of us at the bus station. Jordi spoke no English and the Indians spoke no Spanish or Catalan, so once he realized I was of Indian origin, he asked me if I could help bridge the gap!

At first, I was happy to help, but as our search for a good apartment dragged on, I wondered if spending my time as an interpreter was a good thing. In the end though, I got to know most of the group (such as Vishal Sareen, Abhijeet Gupta, Sahaj Grover, and others) better during those hours and quickly became friends with them. Our search ended in a win-win: they found a couple apartments to their liking, and I made a number of connections and friendships that carried me through many more years of chess.

Developing a Ritual

In my early years, I basically showed up and played. But after some rough events at the end of high school (as described in Chapter 10), I had made a note about paying attention to my own mind-state. One of the habits I picked up during this summer of 2006 was a pre-game ritual to try and arrive at the board more focused and ready to play. While tournament schedules didn't always accommodate it, my routine-oriented nature meant I tried to follow it even afterwards.

This won't be rocket science, but the main thing I tried to do was to show up rested and relatively stress-free. Playing with pressure was OK but other stress less so. And for me, there were 3 things I tried to do regularly before a serious game to steel myself for the competition to come:

- 1) get proper rest
- 2) listen to some specific music just before the game; and
- 3) enjoy a cup of coffee or tea.

Tournaments outside the US were most often one-game per day which was most conducive to sleeping well. But even still, I'd often try to take a quick power nap before afternoon/evening games to make sure I was well rested.

My pre-game music playlist was a combination of a couple Indian songs and a handful of American hip-hop. The combination may seem odd, but these songs consistently had me bopping my head to the beat or singing and rapping alongside the track.

The final part of the pre-game ritual was the easiest to arrange at most any event. I drink tea most often, but especially in Spain, I developed a soft spot for a cortado – a mix of espresso and warm milk.

In the Flow

During that norm run, Sahaj Grover noticed that I sometimes looked like I was saying things to myself at the board. Not saying things out loud, but my lips were moving as though I were speaking. He wasn't the first person to notice this, and I remember first being asked about it as early as the 2001 Chicago Open.

In any case, I wasn't mouthing words like “♠xc6, bxc6, 0-0” and so on. Instead, it seemed like when I was in a flow state at the board, I often had songs running through my head and I was saying the lyrics to myself. Those songs in my head never really distracted me, and typically it was a psychological boost if I noticed it. These next two games showcase some of that in-the-zone stylistic clarity.

One funny thing though that summer was that I began to think that the kind of song mattered to my result: I noticed that games where rock music was the backdrop to my chess thoughts, I lost some tough

games to GMs De la Riva Aguado and Oms Pallise, and so pretty quickly, rock was purged from my pre-game playlist!

IM Vinay Bhat – GM Julio Granda Zuniga

Balaguer 2006

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4

I had only lightly prepared 2.c4 before this summer series of events, and I felt good about that decision after beating GM Iordachescu with the Trompowsky in San Marino. But then a loss to GM Oms Pallise in Andorra poked some holes in my confidence about the Trompowsky versus GMs.

2...e6 3.♘f3 ♙b4†

I had spent most of my preparation time on the Queen's Indian, planning to meet 3...b6 4.g3 ♙a6 with 5.b3.

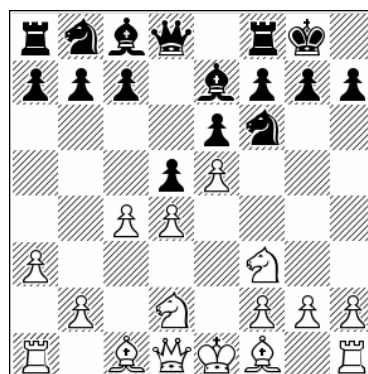
4.♘bd2 0-0

There are multiple alternatives here, with most people later choosing 4...b6 against me, but 4...d5 also is interesting.

5.a3 ♙e7

I didn't get a chance to go over this game with Julio afterwards, so I didn't ask him about his thought process here. After I played a3, he very quickly picked up his bishop and then he hesitated, put it back on b4, and thought for a few minutes before retreating to e7. Was he planning to take on d2? That does leave White with a pleasant advantage, but this retreat surprised me because I assumed that White had an even bigger advantage after 6.e4. Theoretically, this retreat got a lot of attention sometime later and it's still rather complicated, but this was before most of that excitement was being looked at by GMs.

6.e4 d5 7.e5



7...♘e4?

7...♘fd7 is the right move with ...c5 to follow to try and undermine White's center. Black does have less space, so advancing the knight helps by trading a pair of pieces, but it also helps White as the d2-knight can be tough to get out of the way. I'd have probably continued with: 8.♙d3 c5 9.cxd5 exd5 10.0-0 ♘c6 11.♖e1, which amusingly follows a game that Granda won – on the white side – back in 1988. So, he had some specific experience with this line already from both colors, but he chose poorly in this game.

8.♙d3

White can try to save a tempo with 8.♙c2, but I felt the queen belonged on e2 later rather than c2, so it felt like this wasn't much of a potential tempo gain.

8...♘xd2 9.♙xd2 dxc4 10.♙xc4 b6?!

This was my first idea for Black as well, but it's a bad one. The bishop can get to the a8-h1 diagonal in a couple ways, but the real problem is finding a good home for the b8-knight, and this simply takes away its means of activating itself.

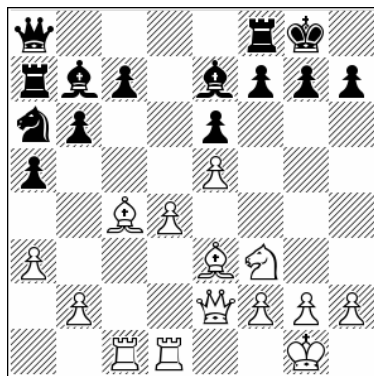
10...♙d7 is correct, planning to play ...♙c6, ...♘b8-d7-b6, with some light-square play. White's still slightly better, but this looks similar to a Queen's Gambit Accepted with 3.e4 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘d5 5.♙xc4 with one pair of knights traded, which isn't necessarily a bad thing for Black.

11.♙e2 ♙b7 12.0-0 a5?

Granda must not have liked the looks of ...c5, but that was still better. 12...c5 13.♖fd1 (13.dxc5 bxc5! gives Black some squares for his pieces [...♗b6, ...♘c6] and the pawn on c5 is only marginally weaker than its counterpart on b2.) 13...♗c7 14.♗ac1 with a solid plus.

Worse is 12...♘d7 13.♖fd1 c5 14.♙c3 ♗c7 (14...cxd4 15.♘xd4 wins) 15.d5! exd5 16.♙xd5 ♙xd5 17.♗xd5 when White has a huge advantage. Moves like ♗ad1 and e6 are going to be hard to stop. The negative impact of ...b6 is clear here, as Black's options to unwind are limited.

13.♗ac1 ♗a7 14.♖fd1 ♘a6 15.♙e3 ♗a8



I was all for this ...♗a7/...♗a8/...♙b7-setup in the Closed Catalan earlier, but here the center is more open. My position felt like it was playing itself.

16.♘e1 ♗d8 17.♗g4!

Thematic – with Black's pieces bottled up on the queenside, White turns his attention to the center and kingside. Part of Black's problems are that he has trouble challenging White's bishop with ...♙d5 due to ♙xa6 (and ♗xc7).

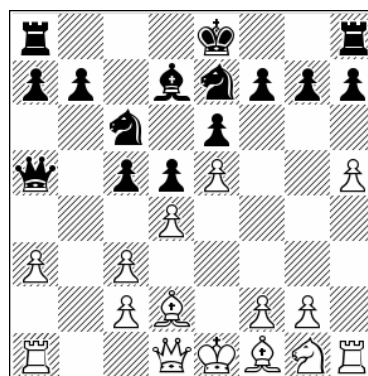
Granda's next move prepares that ...♙d5 move, but it's too slow.

17...♘b8? 18.♙xe6 fxe6 19.♗xe6† ♔f8 20.♗xc7 1-0

One sample finish is 20...♗e8 21.♙g5 ♘c6 22.♗d3! and mate is coming soon.

IM Herman Claudius van Riemsdijk
 – IM Vinay Bhat
 Balaguer 2006

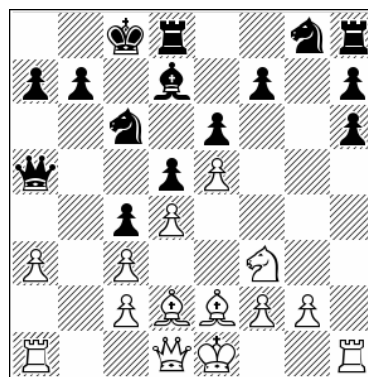
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 ♘e7 5.a3 ♙xc3†
 6.bxc3 c5 7.h4 ♘bc6 8.h5 ♗a5 9.♙d2 ♙d7



10.h6

10.♘f3 would transpose to Schneider – Bhat from Chapter 12 (page 180), but by this time, I understood that it was OK to allow h6 from White. Of course, theory moves on, and now this h6-move is more dangerous than I thought back in 2006. I'll skip over that opening discussion here though to get to the early middlegame.

10...gxh6 11.♘f3 0-0-0 12.♙d3 c4 13.♙e2 ♘g8!

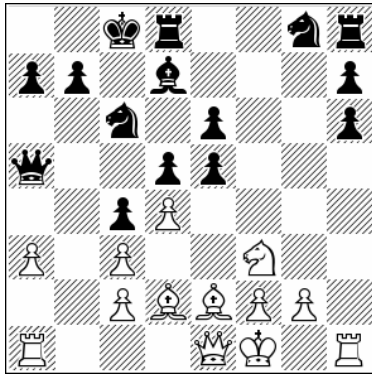


It's this invention of Uhlmann's that defangs this specific line for White. There are other ways to try and guard the h6-pawn, directly or indirectly, but none of them also prepare the freeing ...f6 break. Without that break, White is going to be dominating the center and kingside, but open the center a bit and then it'll be anybody's game.

14.♔f1!? f6 15.♗e1

Guarding c3 means that White can think about ♙xh6. Instead, 15.exf6 ♘xf6 16.♗xh6 ♘g4 17.♗h4 h5 with good counterplay.

15...fxe5



We both slowed down in unison now after a seemingly similar depth of preparation.

16. ♘xe5?

Trading minors isn't necessarily wrong, but specifically trading them on e5 is.

Instead with 16.dxe5, White can later offer a knight trade on d4. If Black trades there, White will have a stronger center than he gets in the game. 16...♖f8 17.g3 ♗c7 is one possibility, with a still messy position that is playable for both sides.

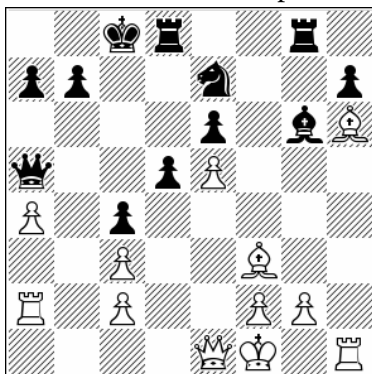
16... ♘xe5 17.dxe5 ♘e7!

There's no reason to continue trying to hang on to h6. Black needs to bring his pieces forward.

18. ♙xh6 ♖hg8 19.a4 ♙e8! 20. ♙f3 ♙g6 21. ♖a2

Guarding c2.

Instead, 21. ♙g5 ♖d7 22. ♗d2 ♙xc2! 23. ♗xc2 ♖xg5 24. ♖xh7 ♘c6 leaves Black on top.



21... ♙e4!

A strong choice. White can't win any pawn on e4 yet because of his weak back rank (made possible after 21. ♖a2). Meanwhile, removing the light-squared bishops weakens White's kingside

and makes it practically impossible to dislodge the strong knight from f5.

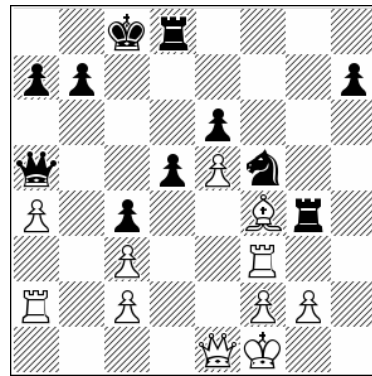
22. ♖h3

22. ♙xe4 dxe4 23. ♖h5 ♗d5 24. ♙e3 ♘f5 and the e5-pawn falls next.

22... ♙xf3 23. ♖xf3 ♘f5 24. ♙f4

Another example of Black's pieces coming alive can be seen after: 24. ♗d2 d4! 25.cxd4 ♗b6! Threatening ...♗b1† and so White doesn't have time to safeguard d4. But after 26. ♖a1 ♖xd4 27. ♗c1 ♖h4!, White is toast.

24... ♖g4



This was the idea of my 21st move, and White's position is effectively lost already. Black has the clearly better minor piece and the open g-file is one way for Black to increase his advantage. The immediate threat is ...♘h4.

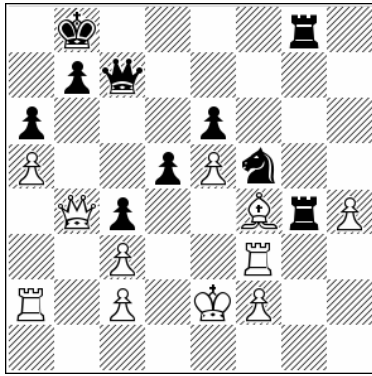
25.g3 h5! 26. ♗b1 h4 27. ♗b5 ♗c7 28.a5 ♖dg8 29. ♙e2 a6

Not 29...hxg3 30.fxg3 ♘xg3†, as after a series of trades on g3, White has ♗e8†. With this and my next move, I simply improved my king safety and underscored that White is helpless on the kingside.

30. ♗b4

Instead, 30. ♗b6 ♗xb6 31.axb6 hxg3 is a winning endgame, while after 30. ♗a4 ♗h7, White can only wait for the sword to fall on the kingside.

30... ♙b8 31.gxh4



31...♖xh4

This doesn't jeopardize the win, but there was a nicer finish.

I saw 31...♞xf4! 32.♞xf4 ♞xe5† 33.♔f3, but I didn't see what to do next. I looked at sequences like 33...♞g3† 34.fxg3 ♞e3† 35.♔g2 ♞xg3† 36.♔h1, but that's just a draw. However, I missed that 33...♞e1! is winning. White can't even bail out with 34.♞xf5 due to 34...♞e4#.

32.♞g3 ♔f5! 33.♞xg4 ♞xg4 34.♞f8† ♔a7 35.♔f3

On 35.♔h2, I planned to continue to pry things open with 35...d4, while against 35.♔c1, 35...♞xe5† is easy enough.

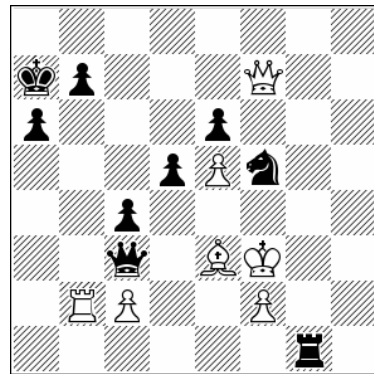
35...♞g1 36.♞b2

36.♞e8 ♞h7 and Black's going to get in, one way or another.

36...♞xa5 37.♞f7

37.♔e3† offers no salvation: 37...d4 when the d5-square is also opened up for Black's queen. (37...♔xe3?? would be a colossal blunder though, as after 38.♞f7, White's winning.) 38.♔xd4† (38.cxd4 ♞d5† and 38.♞f7 ♞d5† are also crushing) 38...♔xd4† 39.cxd4 ♞c3† ends things.

37...♞xc3† 38.♔e3†



38...♞xe3†!

0-1

A nice finish, as after White takes back on e3, Black has ...♞f1† and every king move will drop the queen thanks to a knight check from e3 or g3.

The Capacity to Work

My college years indirectly helped my chess. Prior to high school, I was rarely challenged with schoolwork. My parents like to tell and retell a story about a Parent-Teacher meeting when I was in 1st grade. The teacher had asked me why I came to school, and my answer was, "To play with my friends!" Then she asked, "But what about learning?" My answer was "Oh, that happens at home!"

High school was more of a challenge because I made it one. I graduated with nearly a full year worth of university credits in advance, accrued partly through Advanced Placement (AP) exams and partly through community college classes I took on the side. I even signed up for a few AP exams without having taken the associated class, but regardless, I scored well enough on every exam to skip that class when I got to college.

Classes at UC Berkeley, though, truly challenged me. I continued to take a heavy course load there, squeezing nearly 5 years' worth of coursework into 4 years, but most classes required real effort on my part. I used to scowl at some of the chess homework that Kaidanov asked me to do, but between college and my

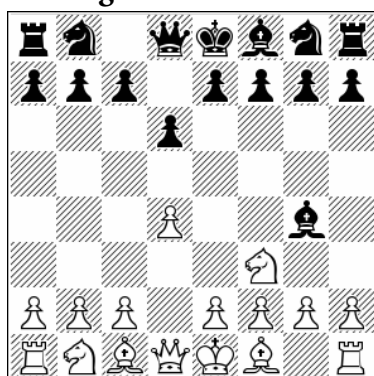
consulting job afterwards, I developed a newfound capacity to do quality work and learn under stricter time constraints.



After a lecture by Spassky at the Mechanics Institute in 2007, attended by many of the top Bay Area chess players at the time including David Pruess, Sam Shankland, Mark Pinto, Daniel Naroditsky, Dmitry Zilberstein, Josh Friedel, and Vince McCambridge

IM Vinay Bhat – IM Georgi Orlov Internet 2006

1.d4 d6 2.♘f3 ♘g4



3.e4

Earlier that summer in Europe, I had played 3.c4 and that game continued: 3...♘d7 4.g3 ♙xf3 5.exf3 c6 6.♙g2 as in Bhat – Scalcione, San Marino 2006. White needs to be somewhat careful about

Black setting up a light-square blockade with ...d5, and while I stopped that and won the game, I had made a note that 3.e4 was more challenging.

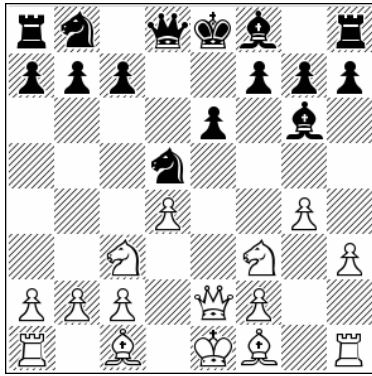
3...♘f6 4.♘c3 e6 5.h3 ♙h5 6.g4

I chose the most direct continuation – 6.♙e2 is a very normal move that should also be pleasant for White, but 6.♙e2 is maybe more clever as Black may not have as useful a move while waiting for g4 next.

6...♙g6 7.♙e2 d5

Black will have to fight for the center at some point, but he could wait with moves like 7...a6 or 7...c6. The most common choice is 7...c6, to recapture on d5 with a pawn.

8.exd5 ♘xd5



9...Nxe4!?

I spent 10 minutes on this move, and it turned out to be a new one. Other games that reached this position saw 9...Nxd5 or 9...Bg2. The 9...Bg2 move does make good sense as the doubled c-pawns aren't a big concern but I felt that with a space advantage, I should try to keep more minor pieces on the board.

9...Nd7

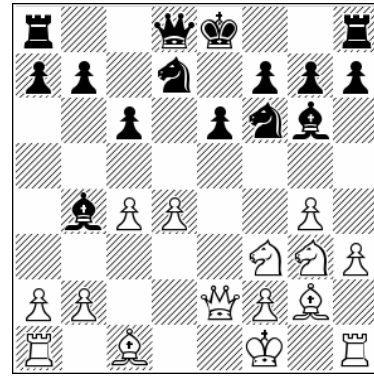
A critical test of White's decision would be 9...Bb4+ 10.c3 (10...Bd2 is both not in line with the no-exchange-policy, but also after 10...Bxd2+, White has no comfortable way to recapture.) 10...Bxe4!, taking advantage of White's undeveloped state. I felt that after 11.Wxe4 Ndxc3 12.bxc3 Bxc3+ 13.Bd2 Bxa1 14.Wxb7 Nd7 15.Wb1!, I was in business. Black can get the d4-pawn for the bishop but with two bishops, I evaluated that as better for White. Still, it's trickier than I expected after something like 15...Bxd4 or 15...Wf6, and so if I ever face this again, I'd likely choose 9...Bg2 over 9...Nxe4.

10...Bg2 c6 11.c4!

A tough decision, but the right one – White must keep Black from planting a knight on f4, so he must act now. One way is to kick the knight away with this move, while the other would be to close the diagonal with Ne5.

11.0-0? is too lackadaisical – Black responds with 11...Wc7 and with ...Nf4 coming next, it is Black who is better.

11...Bb4+ 12.Nf1! N5f6 13.Ng3



Once again avoiding any unnecessary trades. It was this position I had in mind when playing 11.c4. I had looked at a few variations here to confirm my general evaluation but the decider for me were more general considerations.

Running through some features of the position:

- 1) I've given up the right to castle, but my king isn't in any danger on f1; any ...h5 advances from Black will weaken his position more than mine.
- 2) I have more space and good prospects for my minor pieces. And
- 3) Black's king doesn't have a clearly safe spot.

13...Be7?!

13...Wc7 14.c5! leaves the bishop stranded and this is Black's main problem here. Meanwhile, 13...Nd5 14.Ng1 Nd3 15.Be3 leaves the d3-knight offside.

13...0-0 14.Bf4 b5! would have been a good way to strike back though – White would like to play Ne5 unopposed here, which he would be able to if he had played 13.Nxf6+ Nxf6 14.Bf4, but in this position, Black seems to have decent counterplay.

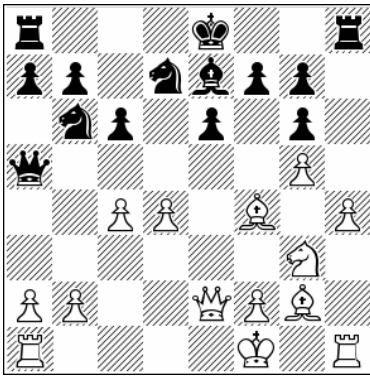
14.Bf4 Wa5 15.Nh4!

Black's one moment with 13...0-0 and 14...b5 has passed, and now White's vision with 11.c4 is actually being realized.

15...Nb6

15...0-0-0 16.g5 Ne8 17.d5 is one concrete operation that seems to be good for White, but the quieter 16.Ng1 also is strong.

16.g5 ♖fd7 17.♗xg6 hxg6 18.h4



Straightforward and strong. White's two bishops stand unopposed on their diagonals and Black doesn't have any good central breaks. That means he might just be waiting for White to expand or break, and that's not a good situation. Black now has a choice to go kingside or queenside, but it's not particularly pleasant either way.

18...♞d8 19.♗e4 e5

Neither 19...♗f8 20.♙e5, nor 19...0-0 20.h5 are fun for Black.

20.dxe5 0-0

20...♗xe5 21.c5! is good for White.

21.e6! fxe6 22.♙g3?!

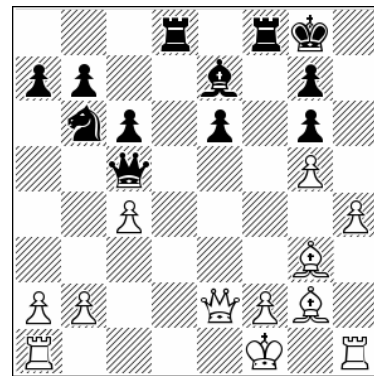
22.h5? is premature due to 22...♞xf4 23.hxg6 ♗f8.

But my original plan of 22.♙c7! was best, as after 22...♞c8 23.h5, White's attack is unstoppable. But with my clock ticking down, I got a little nervous about rushing the attack and missing something, so I decided to play it safe.

22...♗c5 23.♗xc5

23.♗c3 ♞b4 provides counterplay, and 23.h5 ♗xe4 24.♙xe4 ♞xg5 looked premature, but the computer points out the devilish 25.♙d5!, which is winning.

23...♞xc5



24.b3?

24.♙h3! was much better. I was down to about 5 minutes though and my first instinct was to safeguard the c4-pawn, because the e6-weakness wasn't going anywhere. In the game, I took on e6 with the queen, but the bishop is a better piece to put on e6 as the queen is more exposed there.

24...♞d4 25.♞xe6†

25.♞e1 ♞d3 and Black wriggles away.

25...♗h8?

Luckily for me, Orlov was down to 4 minutes himself and so he missed one last defensive chance: 25...♞f7 26.♞e1 ♙d6! and he'd have enough counterplay to draw.

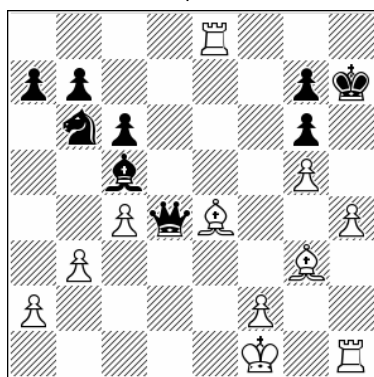
26.♞e1 ♙c5?!

26...♙d6 was better, but now after 27.♞e3 ♞xe3 28.♞xe3 ♙xg3 29.♞xg3 ♞d2 30.♞f3 White still will have the better endgame. Black will pick up a2 later to get to material equality, but White should develop with ♗g2 and bring the h1-rook out, when his better minor piece and pawn structure should pay some material dividends later. The difference here with 25...♞f7 is that Black's king has to spend some time getting back to the center, whereas there it was much better placed to start the endgame.

27.♞e2 ♞de8

27...♞d3 trades queens, but 28.h5 ♞xe2† (28...♞xg3 29.hxg6† and 30.♞h8† leads to checkmate) 29.♞xe2 ♞d1† 30.♞e1 ♞xe1† 31.♗xe1 gxf5 32.♞xh5† ♗g8 33.♙h3 is a hopeless endgame for Black.

28. ♖xe8 ♜xe8 29. ♞xe8† ♔h7 30. ♙e4!



White's king is safe and he can continue the attack. After Black's next, White only has one winning move but it's enough and it was easy for me to spot, even in some nervy time pressure.

30... ♜d7 31. h5 ♜xe8 32. ♙xg6† ♜xg6 33. hxg6† ♔xg6 34. ♞h8
1-0

My Learnings and Progress

Each of my games in this chapter ended with an attack against an unsafe king, but each was set up by a more single-minded strategic approach:

- Granda started to get into hot water when he ceded central space, but it became truly dangerous once he fianchettoed his light-squared bishop. My next moves were all part of a plan to restrict his queen and knight. The tactics became clear as he tried to regroup and left key squares undefended.
- Against Van Riemsdijk, once he mistakenly chose to exchange knights on e5 instead of d4, all my play was connected by a singular plan to develop kingside pressure. That focus led me to the ...♙d7-e8-g6-e4 maneuver to remove the key defender: the bishop on f3.
- Finally, against Orlov, I decided to seize a lot of space against his passive opening. Following that plan through, I consistently avoided piece trades and probed everywhere until pawn weaknesses emerged on the kingside.

The clarity I displayed in these games was more like how I played before my style veered towards complexity in mid-2000 and it led to a quick 40-point rating gain and my second GM norm. A great result, but it was still a stepping-stone to further progress.

Back in Chapter 2, I shared that I was asked in some interviews in 1995 and 1996 about my goals and the possibility of becoming World Champion. By 2006, I knew that the possible goal was really just a dream: my chess development lagged the competition in high school and then four years in college put that dream to bed. I also met Wesley So and Fabiano Caruana during my European travels in 2006, and while they weren't yet super-GMs, their talent was hard to miss.

Still, a formerly distant goal of becoming a GM appeared a lot closer. I felt like I had turned a corner in terms of quality of play and the real hurdle was finding time for chess. After my last tournament that summer in August 2006, it was another 10 months before I played a tournament game again. Then after a short sequence of events in June and July 2007, I again didn't play until one tournament in November 2007, and then was off again until May 2008.

Despite the long breaks between events, I wasn't studying consistently. My consulting hours were usually intense, with the average week clocking in at 50 hours and reaching 90 hours per week at the top end. During my less busy weeks though, I tried to get some chess study in, and I focused on two things: (1) trying to better understand some of the positional themes and motifs in my typical openings and (2) doing some calculation work. Looking back at some of the games from Chapters 9 and 10 along with some

of the losses I didn't share from tournaments in between, I concluded that focusing on those would provide the biggest return for a limited investment.

So, as was my habit, I found some books to help me along: Aagaard's *Excelling at Combinational Play*, Grooten's *Chess Strategy for Club Players*, Mednis's *How Karpov Wins*, Volokitin and Grabinsky's *Perfect Your Chess*. Even though I didn't finish any of those four books during this period from mid-2006 to mid-2008, what I did do directly targeted 3 of the 6 main areas I laid out in Chapter 3 (Calculation & Visualization, Openings, and Strategy) while indirectly contributing to the other areas. This was the most deliberate and prioritized work I had done on my own without a coach.

And in the end, the work paid off perfectly. In the next two chapters, I'll revisit a skill highlighted in Chapter 10 and then showcase some new, improved facets of my play in Chapter 15. Those positive developments, coupled with my natural style showcased in this chapter's games, helped me race forward to the Grandmaster title.

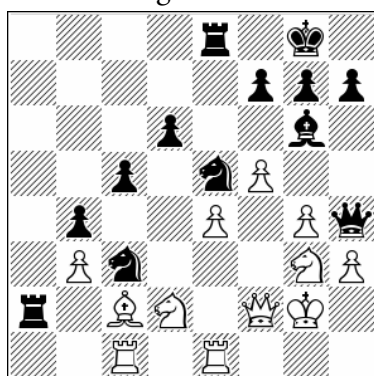
Chapter 14

Resilience and Luck

I won games across a variety of openings and styles of play, but that wasn't particularly unique among GMs. Instead, they seemed to notice another aspect of my play. At the end of one event during my summer series in 2006, I was talking to GM Delchev and he told me, "Your nerves are amazing! When you were playing on the increment versus Baklan, you didn't seem bothered at all by the clock or the position and that made him get nervous in response!"

Other players also sometimes referred to my lack of nerves or defensive grit, but whatever the word choice, all these comments revolved around some aspect of my resiliency. My old "bag of tricks" had turned into a more positive calling card!

IM Vinay Bhat – GM Vladimir Baklan
Balaguer 2006



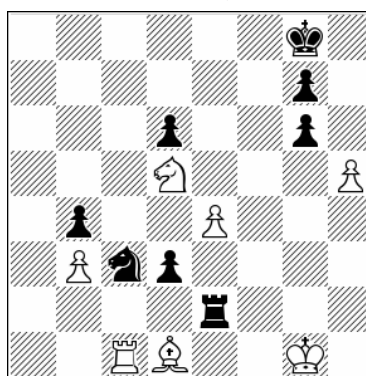
After misjudging a piece sacrifice of his, I ended up having to defend a tough position. An added complication was that I was down to just a few minutes left by that point; I ended up playing the last 30 moves of the 60-move game fluctuating from about 40 to 90 seconds of time left (thanks to the 30-second increment).

28...h5!?

I'll gloss over some of the details here and in the rest of the game, but both 28...♖b2! and 28...♘b5! were objectively stronger. Baklan's move

is natural though to crack open the kingside and doesn't technically jeopardize anything.

29.fxg6 fxg6 30.♘f3 ♕e7 31.♘xe5 ♖xe5
32.gxh5 ♜f8 33.♗d2 ♗d4 34.♗xd4 cxd4
35.♙g1 ♜f3 36.♘f1 d3 37.♙d1 ♜xh3 38.♞e3
♞xe3 39.♘xe3 ♞e2! 40.♘d5

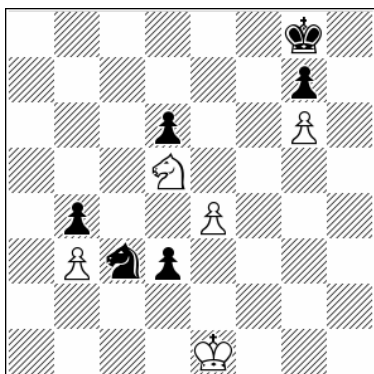


I made my last move with 3 seconds left on the clock. Thanks to the 30-second increment, I went up to 33 seconds and I continued to not only write the moves down, but the time left after every move. It was this behavior that Delchev called out specifically afterwards.

40...♞e1?

A big miss. Black's clearest win to date was here with 40...d2, as after 41.♞xc3 bxc3 42.♘xc3, he has 42...♞e3! and White's pawns are going to fall. White can struggle on with 43.♗e2 gxh5 44.♕f2, but the endgame is lost.

41.♕f2 ♞xd1 42.♞xd1 ♘xd1† 43.♕e1 ♘c3
44.hxg6



44...♗xe4

Unfortunately for Baklan, he wins the race after trading on d5 only in name: 44...♗xd5 45.exd5 ♕f8 46.♕d2 ♕e7 47.♕xd3 ♕f6 48.♕c4 ♕xg6 49.♕xb4 ♕f5 50.♕c4 g5 51.b4 g4 52.b5 g3 53.b6 g2 54.b7 g1=♞ 55.b8=♞ ♞c5† 56.♕d3 ♞xd5† 57.♕e2 with an easy draw.

45.♗xb4 ♘c5 46.♕d2 ♗xb3† 47.♕xd3 ♕f8
48.♕c4 ♘c5 49.♕d5 ♕e7 50.♗c6† ♕d7
51.♗d4 ♗a6 52.♗f5 ♗c7† 53.♕e4 ♗e6 54.♕d5
55.♕e4 ♗xg6 56.♗xg7 ♗e7 57.♗h5 d5†
58.♕e5 ♕c6 59.♗f4 ♕c5
1/2-1/2

I later played Delchev himself in both 2007 and 2008. Both games ended in a draw, with our 2007 game being relatively uneventful. But after our 2008 game in which he sacrificed a piece for a strong attack and ran into some resourceful defensive play to escape with a draw, we again were talking about just how exactly I survived.

The reality by the way is not that I have ice water running through my veins – I do get nervous at the board and in plenty of other situations. But I often can quickly quell and hide those nerves when they do show up.

As an example, I've presented at various Board of Directors meetings at work since leaving professional chess. The first one or two times, I expected to be a little nervous. But even after that, like clockwork, I would repeat the same pattern quarterly meeting after quarterly meeting. My heart rate would go from about 60-70 beats per minute well before the meeting to about 100 just before the start; then it would return to a normal level within a few minutes of the meeting starting! And this has happened for years at this point. I remember asking some fellow executives if they had noticed anything from my behavior or voice, but despite the butterflies inside, I was optically keeping it together.

That same projection of confidence likely helped me in that game versus Baklan.

Don't Panic

I included resilience in the section under Practical Considerations in Chapter 3 because it's important for a competitor, but it also is harder to acquire from practice alone.

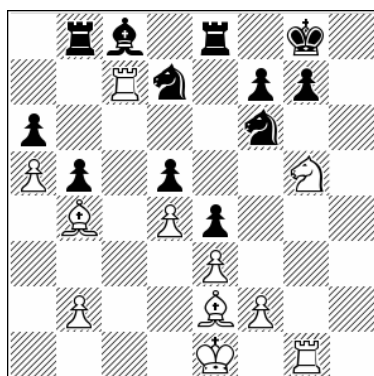
It really starts with a strong belief in yourself and your resources and then gets developed with experience. Various elements of chess study (such as calculation and theoretical endgames) can then be used to pose problems to your opponent. As a tennis player, it's akin to the idea there of making your opponent hit "just one more shot" – maybe they continue to play great, and they win the point, but you must pose the challenge and make your opponent actively win it.

For me, I had developed this skill throughout my chess career. I was used to getting bad positions after the opening and was used to defending or counterpunching from a young age. As I got better, I didn't end up in bad spots quite as often or quite as quickly, but I kept some belief in myself coupled with the determination to fight until the end.

Typically, those defensive efforts were about entering complications in the hope of bamboozling an opponent. Less often, I used an opponent's aggressive inertia to offer trades that when declined ended up alleviating some pressure in the end. But two of the more common examples cited by others when paying me a compliment about my resiliency didn't primarily involve those two techniques, and I'll share them here.

GM Eugene Perelshteyn – IM Vinay Bhat

Stillwater 2008



I found myself with another uninspiring position here after going pawn-grabbing in the opening. Black is mostly tied up and there's no evicting the b4-bishop or the knight from g5. But with ...♙b7 (and ...♞ec8) or ...♞b7, there seems to be some chance to bother White's rook at least. I decided that while 21...♙b7 and 22...♞ec8 would exchange a pair of rooks, it was better to try and do nothing. I largely was guessing that my second rook would help defend better than a second white rook could attack.

My next move was 21...♞b7, and it was followed by: ...♞b8, ...♞a8, ...♞b8, ...♞b7, ...♞a7, ...♞a8, a non-rook move, ...♞b8, a non-rook move, and ...♞b7. Eugene spent a lot of time considering his options and trying to find a breakthrough plan, and to be fair, he was still objectively winning through this entire sequence of 11 moves (9 of which were this queen's rook moving around b7, a7, a8, and b8). But whether I lulled him to sleep or if he started to miscalculate at the end of it all, my "do nothing" defensive approach ended up earning a draw from this dismal situation.

Keeping my head about me, despite letting an earlier advantage slip and a precarious time situation, worked out for me in this next game too. US Chess League games were not FIDE rated and typically played at time controls of G/75 or G/90, with a 30-second increment. This game received a lot of attention at the time, especially within US chess circles, because of my time situation and my opponent. I certainly was lucky in this game, but I'd chalk most of it up to my resilience.

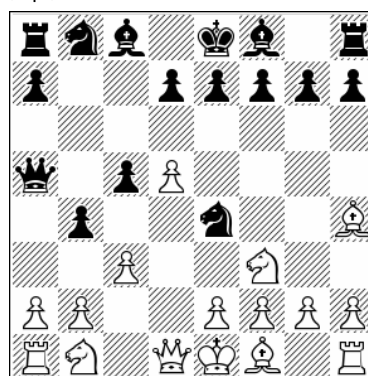
IM Vinay Bhat – GM Hikaru Nakamura

Internet 2007

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 c5 3.d5 b5

I'll share how I later dealt with the Benko in Chapter 17, but at the time, I was mostly a Trompowsky player and was generally just winging it outside of that.

4.♙g5 ♚a5† 5.c3 ♘e4 6.♙h4 b4

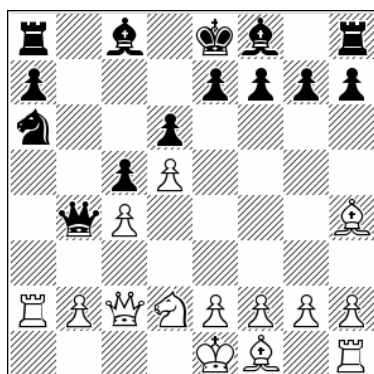


7.c4?!

This solidifies the standing of the d5-pawn but doesn't really do much to "punish" Black for his lack of central presence.

7. ♖c2 was more logical, hitting the knight on e4 and guarding the c3-pawn. 7...bxc3 8.bxc3 f5 9. ♗fd2 and White is clearly better. After the knights are exchanged (or Black retreats), White will have more pieces developed, better control of the center, and the ability to play e2-e4.

7...b3† 8. ♗bd2 bxa2 9. ♖b3 ♗a6 10. ♖xa2 ♖b4 11. ♖c2 ♗xd2 12. ♗xd2 d6

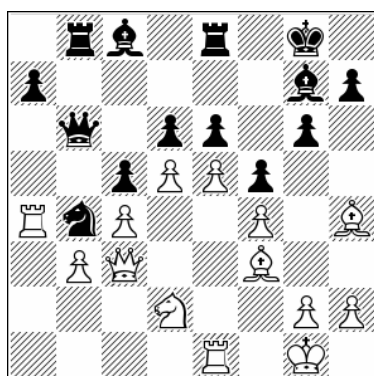


13. ♖a4

This was a big-think moment for me. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to kick the queen right away, play e2-e3, or play e2-e4.

Now I'd say that 13.e3 was best, but what I played in the game looks appealing as White gets a big center.

13... ♖b6 14. ♖c3 f6 15.e4 g6 16.f4 ♗g7 17. ♗e2 0-0 18.0-0 f5 19.e5 ♖e8 20. ♗f3 ♖b8 21.b3 ♗b4 22. ♖e1 e6



23. ♖a1?

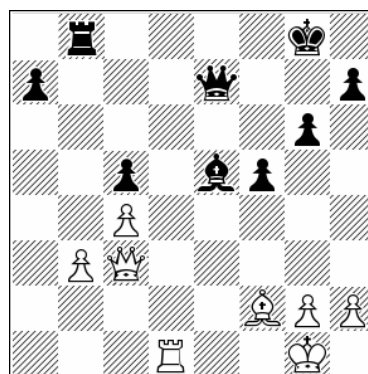
23. ♗f6! was better – I had seen this move, but during the game, I was spooked by 23...exd5? 24.cxd5 ♗xf6, as it's clear that White isn't going to take back on f6 immediately. However, I missed the nice little zwischenzug 25. ♗c4!, hitting the

queen on b6 and opening up a defensive line for the rook on e1. White is winning there.

23... ♗b7 24.dxe6 dxe5 25.fxe5 ♖xe6 26. ♗xb7 ♖xb7 27. ♗f3 ♗c6 28. ♗f2 ♖e7 29. ♖ad1

I had 58 seconds left, while Hikaru had 71 minutes.

29... ♗xe5 30. ♗xe5 ♖xe5 31. ♖xe5 ♗xe5



32. ♖e3?

32. ♖f3 was much simpler and maintains equality – the d5-square is a great square for the white queen, and Black can't cover it properly without giving up the c5-pawn.

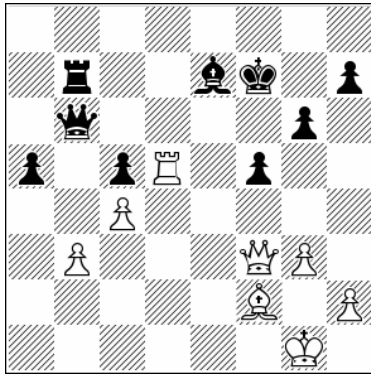
32... ♗d6

Now things aren't so easy – Black keeps his extra pawn, although there are definite conversion problems. With a slightly exposed king, weak queenside pawns, and problems exchanging those pawns into a winning endgame, Black is only slightly better.

33. ♖d3 ♖d8 34. ♖d5† ♗g7 35. ♖f3 a6 36. ♖d5 ♖c7 37. ♖c3† ♗f7 38.g3 ♖e8 39. ♖a1 ♖c6 40. ♖a5 ♖c8 41. ♖d2 ♗e7 42. ♖d7 ♗e8 43. ♖d5 ♗f7 44. ♖d7 ♖b8 45. ♖d3 ♖b7 46. ♖d5 a5

After a lot of shuffling on both sides' parts, Black starts to take a few too many liberties. Admittedly, it is still not easy to convert here for Black, but at least this doesn't appear to be the right way.

47. ♖f3 ♖b6

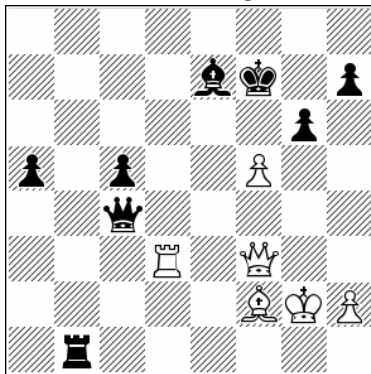


48.g4?!

A question mark for objective quality and an exclamation mark for the dramatic change in nature of the position. I could have kept up the defensive front with 48.♖d3 after which Black still shouldn't win, but I decided to roll the dice and take my chances in some complications. By this point, I had seen the position on move 52 (although I didn't see clearly through a number of the alternatives for each side along the way) and assessed that position as likely favoring me.

That assessment was overly rosy, but I can't complain about the result now.

48...♗xb3 49.♖d3 ♗xc4 50.gxf5 ♖b1† 51.♔g2

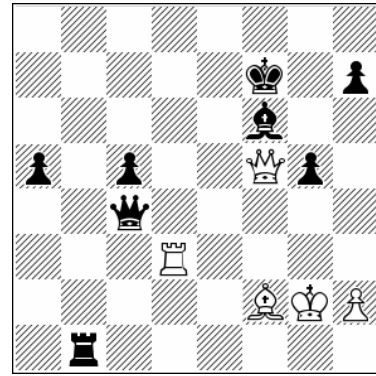


51...g5

Stronger was the cold-blooded 51...♔g8!, but Hikaru was playing quickly on my own time pressure. After 52.♗e2 ♕f8, it's not clear what White is doing.

52.f6! ♕xf6 53.♗f5!

Continuing to keep the pressure up and stronger than 53.♖d6, which might look tempting at first glance.



53...♖b2?

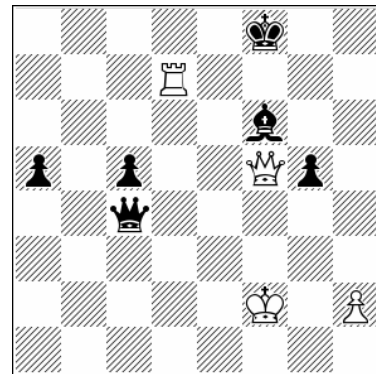
53...♖b4 was necessary, after which 54.♗xh7† ♔f8 55.♗h6† ♕g7 brings about a likely draw after any of 56.♖d8†, 56.♖f3† or 56.♗g6.

54.♖d7† ♔g8 55.♗xh7† ♔f8 56.♗f5 ♖xf2†

A computer can survive this sacrifice but it's not necessary.

Instead, 56...♗c3 sets up a neat trap as 57.♗g6? ♖xf2†! 58.♔xf2 ♕d4† turns the tables. So instead, White can play 57.♗e6 and the same sacrifice leads to a draw.

57.♔xf2



57...♗f4?

Accompanied by a draw offer, but this is a losing move. I was getting a bit tired of playing on the 30-second increment for so long, but I had no doubt about playing on.

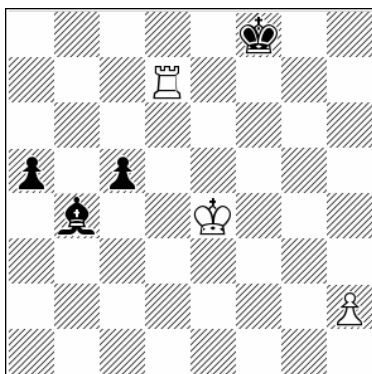
Instead, 57...♔e8! would've left the result up in the air: the computer can draw this one, but it's not so simple for a person to see after having been thinking for a few hours already.

58.♗xf4 gxf4 59.♔f3 ♕c3

The bishop needs to go to b4 to allow the pawns to advance, but this is time consuming and

leaves the bishop poorly placed. The endgame is lost regardless of what Black does at this point, largely because of the poor placement of Black's bishop and the horrible placement of Black's king on the 8th rank.

60. ♖xf4 ♗b4 61. ♖e4



61...c4

61...a4 62. ♖a7 a3 63. ♖d5 ♖g8 64. h4 ♖h8 65. h5 ♖g8 66. ♖e6 c4 67. ♖f6 c3 68. h6 c2 69. h7† ♖h8 70. ♖g6 c1=♚ 71. ♖a8† and mate follows. This is the common theme in this endgame – the pawns are stopped momentarily while Black can do nothing more productive; the white h-pawn runs up the board; and then finally, the white king slides over to start making mate threats a reality.

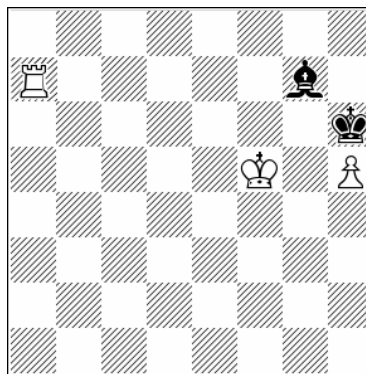
62. ♖c7 c3 63. ♖d3 ♖g8 64. h4 ♖h8 65. h5 ♗d6

If Black waits with 65... ♖g8, then 66. ♖e4 a4 67. ♖f5 a3 68. h6 and like in the note to move 61 above, White develops a mating net.

66. ♖a7 a4 67. ♖xa4 ♖h7 68. ♖a7† ♖g8

68... ♖h6 69. ♖a6 picks up the bishop.

69. ♖xc3 ♗f8 70. ♖d3 ♗g7 71. ♖e4 ♖h7 72. ♖f5 ♖h6



Now it's time for a little dance with the rook (and king). White makes use of latent mate threats (for example, in the game after 74. ♖b6† ♖xh5 75. ♖b3, winning the bishop or delivering mate from h3) to keep making forward progress.

73. ♖b7 ♗c3 74. ♖b6†! ♖h7 75. ♖d6 ♗b2 76. ♖c6 ♗d4 77. ♖e4 ♗g7 78. ♖f5 ♗d4 79. ♖f4 1-0

With the black bishop cut off from the c1-h6 diagonal, White pushes h6 himself, slides the king over to h5, and then uses the rook from the side to help escort the h-pawn up the board. This win received a lot of attention at the time, mostly because of my opponent, but my position and time situation and final turnaround helped solidify my reputation.

My Learnings and Progress

The first rule of defending a worse position is: don't panic!

The second is to remember you still have a role to play in the outcome.

Like in Fine's *30 Rules of Chess*, I preferred to counter-attack when possible, but one of the things I became better at was recognizing that waiting could be a fair defensive tactic too. Against Perelshteyn, I managed to sit tight and avoid making my bad position worse for long enough to give myself a chance to get lucky later. I almost kept that up against Nakamura until I lost my nerve. But still, as these three games against strong to super-strong GMs show, even the best players make mistakes and it's fair to push them to prove the win.

Finally, for my own specific conundrum of defending a worse position while in time pressure, I tended to rely on short variations: responses to threats and general desires to improve my position. When the tables were turned, I used that experience to my advantage. I didn't chase tactics and was happy to consider improving moves without a singular threat, knowing that choices would make my opponent's life harder.

Chapter 15

Chess for Pythons

I never looked at positional manuals like Nimzowitsch's *My System*. Instead, I got my positional lessons and themes from a steady diet of Capablanca games and Chernev books. This worked out just fine as I was able to get one GM norm and could score some points against GMs, but developing further in this direction accelerated my progress.

My work in this area really started in 2004 when I began working with Sam Shankland. Sam is now a very strong, 2700+ GM, but he was around 1800 USCF at the time. I had a few students in the 1800-2200 USCF range then, but Sam's own hunger for chess helped push me to develop a more focused learning program around positional concepts. Unlike my work as a High School student with Matthew Ho, this coaching work was more directed.

This coaching work certainly helped me as well, but when I looked back at patterns from my semi-recent losses, I felt that I should still do more in this area. One change was to deliberately focus on the positional motifs arising from my typical openings. And as I mentioned in Chapter 13, I also picked up *How Karpov Wins*.

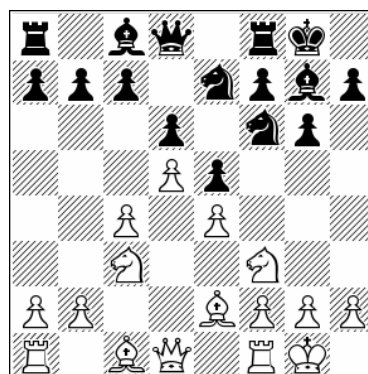
While Karpov's play wasn't a clear stylistic match, that difference would help me get out of (and expand) my stylistic comfort zone. Trying to make sense of the lightly annotated games myself and sometimes trying to guess the moves became useful practice. With a full work schedule, my 10 months between events flew by, so I had to prioritize my learning choices and didn't study every game in the book. But still, these study decisions paid off immediately with my 3rd and final GM norm and in the years that followed.

The next four games all saw me play in a somewhat less concrete style, instead featuring more prophylaxis, the accumulation of small advantages, and the exchange of one small advantage for another.

IM Vinay Bhat – GM Nidjat Mamedov

Benasque 2007

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♗g7 4.e4 d6 5.♘f3 0-0
6.♗e2 e5 7.0-0 ♘c6 8.d5 ♘e7



The King's Indian has fallen from grace at the very top now, but in 2007 there was still a decent amount of activity in this line with the 9.b4 Bayonet Attack dominating the theoretical discussions. Another main line goes 9.♘e1 ♘d7 10.♙e3 f5 11.f3, when White is banking on a queenside breakthrough and Black tries to build a battering ram on the kingside.

I preferred less main-line variations though, and my choice here with 9.♘e1 and 10.♘d3 was popular in the 1970s through the early 1990s (with Ivanchuk and Gelfand as strong proponents in the early 1990s).

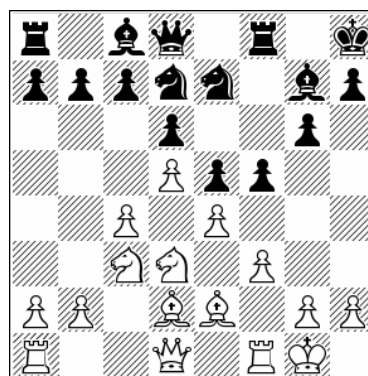
9.♘e1 ♘d7 10.♘d3 f5 11.♙d2 ♖h8!?

A quiet, sophisticated move that has become characteristic of the King's Indian in general over the years. Black no longer tries to checkmate White all the time on the kingside, but instead shows a bit of prophylaxis and plays more strategically himself. The king move prepares ...♘g8 to trade dark-squared bishops with ...♙h6. White usually needs to shore up his center with f3 at some point after which the exchange of bishops weakens all the dark squares in White's camp and leaves him with the lesser of his bishops.

The main line goes 11...♘f6 12.f3, when after 12...f4 13.c5 g5 something like the traditional mess occurs. White attacks on the queenside (especially the c-file), while Black does the same on the kingside. I have played this position a few times and achieved excellent positions out of the opening, but I've also lost my way in the ensuing complications a couple times (e.g., in Chapter 20).

12.f3!?

12.♙c1 is the main line here, but I was new to this system at the time, and I couldn't remember what the exact move was against 11...♖h8.



12...c5

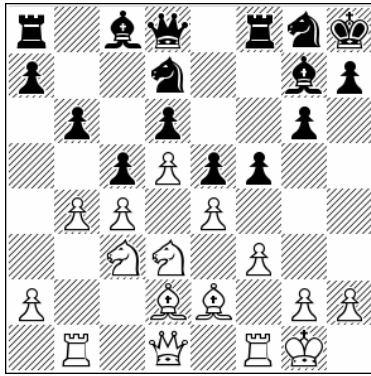
A traditional blocking move in the King's Indian. Black loses some flexibility on the queenside (by giving up the ...c6 break), but he hopes to slow White down on the queenside. However, every pawn push leaves behind some weaknesses and here, d6 is weak and c6 will be weak after a likely ...b6 to support the c5-pawn.

12...f4 would be the way to take advantage of White's move-order slip, as normally White gets the c5 advance in return for the weakening f3. However, committing to that attack is not really in Mamedov's positional style, so even if he knew about this nuance, he may not have been inclined to go for the all-out attack approach on the kingside.

13.♙b1 ♘g8 14.b4 b6

Given the game continuation, it's natural to ask whether 14...cxb4 15.♙xb4 ♙h6 might be an improvement. The semi-open c-file might benefit Black, while it's not easy for White to break in through the semi-open b-file.

However, now White can change tack and play to take advantage of his better development. 16.f4! White's development advantage means a central opening should favor him. For example: 16...exf4 17.exf5 ♙xf5 18.♘xf4 ♘c5 19.♘b5! and Black is struggling. He still has a weak d6-pawn and now the a1-h8 diagonal might prove to be a little embarrassing. Meanwhile, the e6-square is a bit of a headache, and Black has to figure out how to bring the rest of his pieces out.



15. ♖a4!

Threatening to invade on c6 or play ♘b5, hitting both a7 and d6. There was no reason to release the tension right away with 15.bxc5.

That could arrive at the game position after 15...♗xc5 16.♗xc5 bxc5 17.♖a4 a5, but both 15...bxc5 and 15...dxc5 are extra options for Black.

After 15...dxc5, Black can consider a knight transfer from g8 to d6 (via f6 and e8) for example, when his two knights cover a lot of useful squares.

Alternatively, after 15...bxc5, if White continues with 16.♖a4, Black has the new option of 16...♗b6 to keep White's queen and other pieces at bay.

15...cxb4

Alternatively, 15...♗b7 16.♗b5 ♗df6 17.exf5 gxf5 18.bxc5 dxc5 (against 18...bxc5?, 19.♗xd6 wins) 19.♗c3 (19.♗xe5 a6 20.♗c3 ♗xd5! with counterplay) 19...a6 20.♗a3 ♗d7 21.f4 e4 22.♗xg7 ♗xg7 23.♗e5 with a clear plus.

16. ♖xb4 ♗c5 17. ♗xc5 bxc5

17...dxc5 would have left White with a strong passed pawn on d5. Meanwhile, Black is left with the question of what to do when White pries open the b-file with a4-a5. 18.♖b3 ♗f6 19.a4 ♗e8 20.a5 and Black is in some trouble as compared to the similar note to White's 15th move. If he takes on a5, the c5-pawn is a goner, while if he doesn't, he won't be keeping White out of the b-file for long.

But now the b-file is open, and White's made more progress on the queenside than Black on the kingside.

18. ♖a4 a5

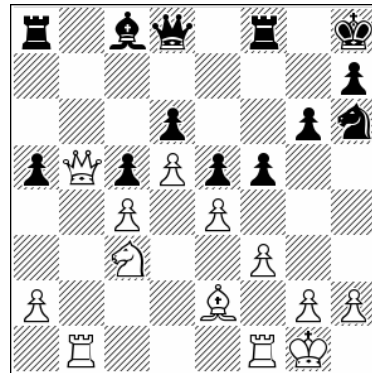
18...♗d7 keeps the queen out of c6 but lets the queen in via 19.♖a6. With 20.♗b5 likely to follow, White's well on top.

Now 19.♖c6 fails to 19...♗a6, so I worked on getting Black's queen out of the way to open up some more squares.

19. ♖b5! ♗h6

Finally Black manages to get a word in on the kingside. While the exchange is a plus, the timing tells you that something has probably gone wrong for Black: it comes 6 moves after it was prepared.

20. ♗xh6 ♗xh6



21. ♖b6!

The key move, and one my opponent admitted he overlooked after the game. The queen maneuvers carve out key squares for the white pieces and leaves Black's pieces disorganized.

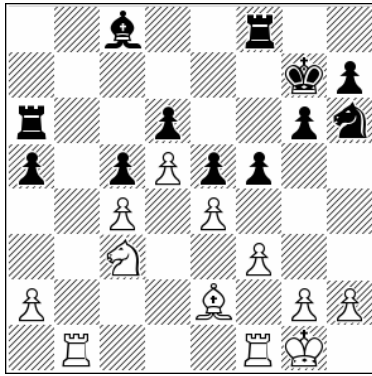
21... ♖f6

21...♖e7 22.♖c6 ♗a6 23.♖b6 ♖xb6 24.♖xb6 keeps the pressure on Black.

22. ♖c6! ♗a6 23. ♖c7

White's queen has taken an interesting path, zig-zagging up the board: ♖d1-a4-b4-a4-b5-b6-c6-c7. This sortie has left Black's queenside poorly coordinated with multiple weak pawns to look after. Black doesn't really want to exchange queens here, but his attack isn't close and 24.♖b8 is threatened.

23... ♖g7 24. ♖xg7 ♗xg7



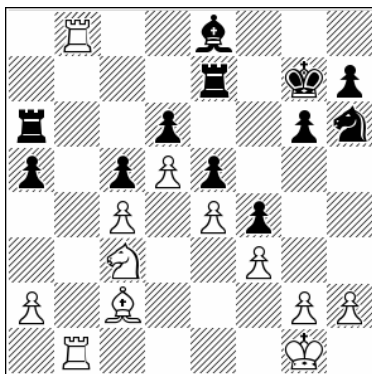
If you've read Shereshevsky's classic book *Endgame Strategy* (or any of several other endgame books), you'll have heard the "Principle of Two Weaknesses." Normally, you need at least two weaknesses to win an endgame, and here White has a bunch:

- 1) Black's a5-pawn is isolated
- 2) Black's d6-pawn is weak
- 3) Black's bishop on c8 lacks scope and can only shoot into thin air
- 4) Black's knight on h6 is off on the side of the board
- 5) Black can't contest White's control of the b-file, which will give him access to the 7th and 8th ranks.

Add it all up, and even though material is equal, the position is already winning for White.

White's next move prepares to improve the position of his bishop; Black cuts that off, but he's playing whack-a-mole with his various problems.

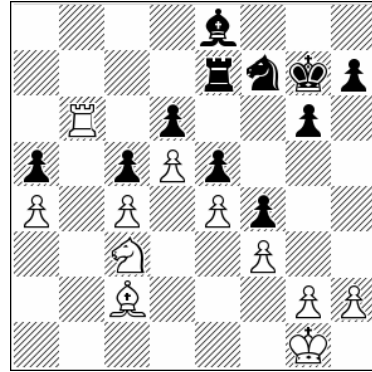
25.♔d1 ♕d7 26.♖b7 ♜f7 27.♔c2 ♕e8 28.♖fb1 f4
29.♖b8 ♜e7



30.♖b6

Trading one pair of rooks makes it impossible for Black to guard both d6 and a5 (and e8). This is often the case when one player has a number of weaknesses – some well targeted exchanges will show that they can't all be guarded.

30...♖xb6 31.♖xb6 ♜f7 32.a4



32...♖a7 33.♖b8 ♜f8 34.♜b5

Now the rook is overloaded. Staying on the a-file allows 35.♜c7, but abandoning the a-file lets White round up the a-pawn finally.

34...♖d7 35.♖a8 ♜e7 36.♖xa5 ♖b7 37.♖a8 ♖d7
38.a5

1–0

One possible finish could be 38...♖d8 39.♖xd8 ♜xd8 40.a6 ♜c8 41.a7 ♜b7 42.♜c7! and it's all over.

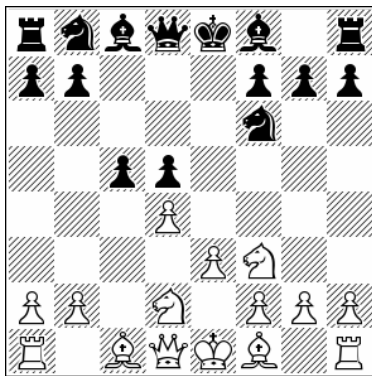
GM Marc Narciso Dublan – IM Vinay Bhat
Balaguer 2007

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♞f3 ♞f6 4.e3 e6 5.♞bd2

This is one way to sidestep the Meran complex (which begins with 5.♞c3). With deviations like 5.♞bd2, 5.♔d3, or 5.b3, White looks to sidestep Black's typical plan in the Meran of ...dxc4 followed by moves like ...b5 and potentially ...b4 with White's bishop on c4 and knight on c3.

It took me a while to find a comfortable reply to these setups, and my solution to 5.♞bd2 centered around the isolated queen's pawn. My next move obviously loses a tempo, but my claim was that White's knight on d2 isn't well placed for an opening of the center.

5...c5 6.cxd5 exd5



7.♙b5†

Just a couple of weeks earlier, I had faced 7.dxc5. That win against IM Ashwin continued: 7...♙xc5 8.a3 0-0 9.b4 ♙d6 10.♘b3, when 10...♘c6 11.♙e2 a5 equalizes comfortably.

Then, a couple of years after that game, GM Mark Bluvshstein deviated against me with:

7.b3

I responded with:

7...cxd4?!

7...♘c6 was actually what my notes had listed and it is better: 8.♙b2 cxd4 9.♘xd4 ♙d6 with a very playable IQP position. White's development is reasonably free, but Black's pieces all have decent squares. There are a number of strong GM games from this position.

8.♘xd4 ♙b4

I thought this was somewhat inconvenient for White, because Black has ideas of both ...♘e4 or ...♙c3. But Bluvshstein found:

9.♙d3 ♙c3?! 10.♙a3!

Black can't safely take on a1! I managed to defend after:

10...♘c6 11.♞c1 ♞a5 12.♘b5 ♙b4

But White was the one who was pressing in Bluvshstein – Bhat, Montreal 2009.

In both these examples, we ended up with an Isolated Queen Pawn (IQP) structure, and these initial games in 2007 became the launching point for me to play these structures more often, as will be described in Chapter 19.

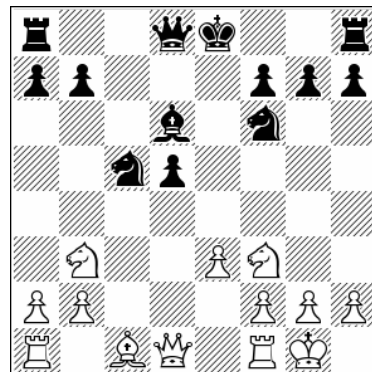
Most books cover the IQP from White's perspective (given openings like the Panov-Botvinnik in the Caro-Kann), but a lot of ideas and

plans translate well. As usual, the side with the IQP enjoys a bit more space for his (or her) pieces.

One key insight that I internalized was that typically with all 4 pairs of minor pieces on the board, the IQP-side often has some plus (thanks to that extra space and only so many pieces can occupy the square in front of the IQP). Then as minor pieces get exchanged, that advantage decreases and then gets reversed (i.e., with 3 pairs of minors it's about equal, then the setup generally gets worse and worse).

Narciso chose 7.♙b5† instead of Ashwin's 7.dxc5 precisely to trade one set of minors, but that was also his better bishop. The result, even with Black's tempo loss (from ...c7-c6-c5), is still an about-equal position.

7...♙d7 8.♙xd7† ♘bxd7 9.0-0 ♙d6 10.dxc5 ♘xc5 11.♘b3



11...♘ce4

Naturally Black doesn't want to exchange pieces, especially when the knight on b3 is not so well placed. White's plan with ♙b5† has led to a three minor piece IQP, which is typically about equal. This is no different really, but I did like that White's better bishop is the one that's been exchanged.

12.♙d2

12.♘bd4 0-0 13.b3 allows the bishop to develop to the diagonal safely, but Black can always just play 13...♞d7 14.♙b2 ♞ac8 15.♞d3 a6 with a pretty easy position. White can't generate much pressure against d5, and without that, Black's in no real danger despite the IQP.

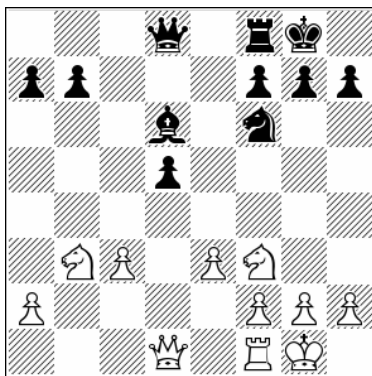
12...0-0 13.♖c1 ♖c8 14.♗c3?!

This is a small mistake. Going back a couple moves, White had two paths basically around how to develop his pieces.

One was to play ♗bd4 quickly, and then follow up with b3 and ♖b2 to activate this bishop.

The other was to play ♗d2, then play moves like ♖ac1, ♕e2, ♖fd1, and ♗e1. Both of which would keep things about even. By mixing the plans, White accepts a structural weakness without any pressure against the d5-pawn. Still, the position goes from being about equal to only a miniscule edge for Black.

14...♗xc3 15.♖xc3 ♖xc3 16.bxc3



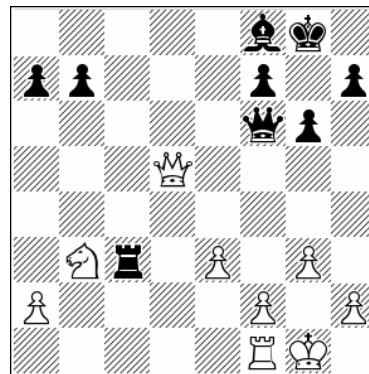
16...♕b6?!

I considered 16...♕c7 17.♕d4 b5 but I didn't want to commit my pawns forward just yet. There's nothing forcing in either continuation with 16...♕b6 or 16...♕c7, but given a trade of c3 for d5 is possible later, having this pawn forward helps Black's chances slightly later on.

17.♕d3 ♖c8 18.♖c1 g6 19.g3 ♗f8 20.♗fd4 ♗e4 21.♗e2

21.♗d2 was a little bit better. I was planning 21...♕b2 (21...♗c5 22.♕b1 doesn't seem to get anywhere for Black.) 22.♖c2 ♕a1† 23.♕f1 (23.♗g2? allows a nice, winning combination: 23...♕h1†! 24.♗xh1 ♗xf2†) 23...♕xf1† 24.♗xf1 ♗xd2† 25.♖xd2 ♖xc3 26.♗b3 and White will get his pawn back and keep Black's edge to a minimum.

21...♕f6 22.♖f1 ♗xc3 23.♗xc3 ♖xc3 24.♕xd5



24...♕c6?!

Black keeps a plus with both 24...♕a6 and 24...♖c2 as well, but the specter of an endgame with play on both flanks with the bishop versus knight is likely what helped me to win this game. The endgame is indeed a little better for Black, but Narciso went a little too far out of his way to avoid it and keep pieces on for potential counterplay.

In general, queen and knight often coordinate better than a queen and bishop, and in the endgame with pawns on both sides of the board, the bishop is generally more effective than the shorter-range knight. But each time he avoided the trade, Narciso gave a little bit of ground in the position and Black's pieces become more and more active.

25.♕a5 a6 26.♖d1 ♖c2 27.♗d4 ♕c5 28.♕a4?

White doesn't get another good chance to trade queens after this.

28...♖b2! 29.♕d7 ♖xa2

29...b5 was slightly better. There's a chance to get the a-pawn without giving up anything in return, but even that trade leaves Black well on top now.

30.♕xb7 a5 31.♕e4 ♖b2

31...a4 was stronger, but I wanted to prevent White from activating his rook with 32.♖b1 a3 33.♖b8 ♖b2 34.♖a8 a2 35.♗g2. While the pawn is great on a2, I didn't see a quick knockout and White might have some tricks on the kingside.

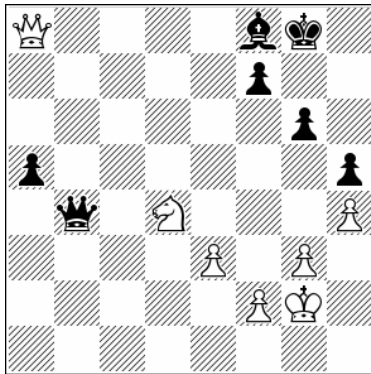
But, I missed 32...♖b2! when the position after 33.♖xb2 ♕c1† 34.♗g2 ♕xb2 turns out to be very similar to what happens in the game after 36...♕b4. My more cautious 31...♖b2 doesn't

throw away the advantage, but it wasn't the most incisive.

32. ♖a8 ♜b6 33. h4 h5 34. ♞a1?!

34. ♔g2 would have been my preference, to try and keep the rooks on the board.

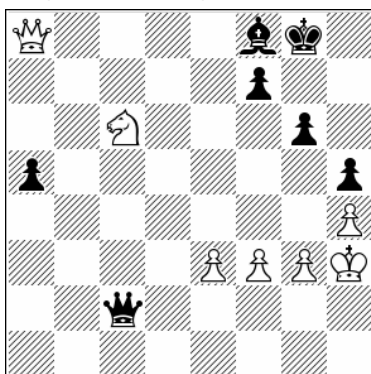
34... ♞b1† 35. ♞xb1 ♜xb1† 36. ♔g2 ♜b4



I was quite happy with the rook trade, as now I didn't see a good way for White to stop me from escorting the a-pawn up the board. While the queen and knight can coordinate well, with the play on both sides of the board, the knight's limitations are the dominant factor.

White should now have played 37. ♖f3 and 38. ♖g5 to make Black keep watch over the sensitive f7-square. Black should still win, but with 37. ♖c6, White accelerates the end as his king is left exposed.

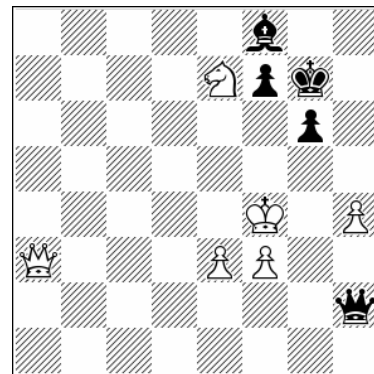
37. ♖c6 ♜e4† 38. f3 ♜c2† 39. ♔h3



39...a4 40. g4 hxg4† 41. ♔xg4

41. fxg4 ♜e4 leaves White all tied up.

41...a3 42. ♖e7† ♔g7 43. ♜xa3 ♜g2† 44. ♔f4 ♜h2†



45. ♔e4

This loses a piece, but the alternatives would walk into a quick checkmate. Narciso played on for a few more moves, but once he got a bit of time on the clock and could consider the position more comfortably, he threw in the towel.

45... ♜xh4† 46. ♔d3 ♜xe7 47. ♜b2† ♜f6 48. ♜b7 ♙c5 49. ♜b5 ♜f5† 50. ♔e2 ♜c2† 51. ♔e1 ♜c1† 52. ♔f2 ♙xe3† 53. ♔g2 ♜g1† 54. ♔h3 ♙f4 55. ♜b2† ♔h7

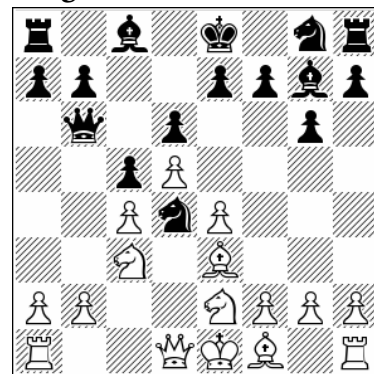
0-1

My willingness to just play the position (even if that meant trading down into the rook and bishop vs rook and knight endgame) led to a successful outcome here. And as this win helped me to my 3rd and final GM norm, the IQP became cemented as a cornerstone in my play going forward.

IM Vinay Bhat – GM Diego Flores

Balaguer 2007

1. d4 g6 2. c4 ♙g7 3. ♖c3 d6 4. e4 ♖c6 5. d5 ♖d4 6. ♙e3 c5 7. ♖ge2 ♜b6



8. ♖a4 ♜a5† 9. ♙d2 ♜d8 10. ♖xd4?

It was an offbeat opening and I was trying to play somewhat quickly to conserve time for later, but I missed a very strong move here.

10.♔c3! would have left Black embarrassed. Taking on e2 obviously loses, so the only way to avoid losing a pawn is 10...e5 11.dxe6 ♖xe6, but then 12.♔xg7 ♖xg7 13.♚d2 and Black's left with a bad structure and a very shaky d6-pawn that is likely to fall soon enough too. White's well on top.

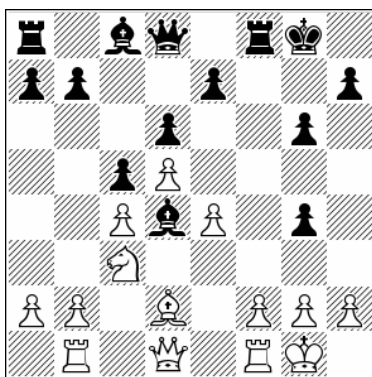
10...♔xd4?!

10...cxd4 didn't seem right to either of us because the diagonal is blocked and the pawn doesn't seem destined to be easy to defend, but this was the right move. There's no easy way for White to target the d4-pawn or rearrange his minor pieces nicely like I was able to do in the game.

11.♔d3 ♖f6 12.♖c3 0-0 13.0-0 ♖g4 14.♔e2 f5 15.♔xg4!?

Objectively, 15.exf5! gxf5 16.♔g5 is better, as the e7-pawn is a real annoyance and even a later advance of that pawn doesn't truly solve Black's structural issues. I was paying attention to White's structural advantage, but I was fixated on arranging minor piece trades to basically leave White with a good minor piece versus Black's light-squared bishop and plenty of holes in Black's camp. It worked out well for me, but Black had some better ways to defend in the game.

15...fxg4 16.♚b1



16...e5?!

I considered 16...e6 as well when I took on g4 earlier, but I assessed the position after 17.♖e2 ♔e5 18.♔c3 ♔xc3 19.♖xc3 to be comfortably better for White. Flores agreed, but now I'm less certain of

our assessments. After 19...e5, Black will have some consistent pressure on the f-file and the queenside isn't easy to crack. This same position with the black pawn on f7 instead of g4 would indeed be better for White.

In the game, Black also allows his d4-bishop to be traded away, but for White's knight and not White's bishop as in the above line. That turns out to be a critical difference, as the resulting opposite-colored bishop middlegame leaves White with extra attacking material.

17.♖e2! ♚h4 18.♚e1!?

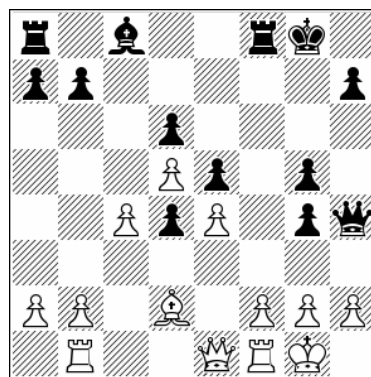
The queen move wasn't necessary, and 18.♖xd4 exd4 (18...cxd4 19.♚b3!) 19.b4 b6 20.♚c1 is quite pleasant for White. But the d4-bishop wasn't going anywhere and my queen move provoked another weakening from Black on the next move.

18...g5?!

18...b6 is more solid, and now White probably doesn't have anything better than 19.♖xd4 exd4 20.♚c1 with a small plus. (20.e5 ♔f5 isn't what White wants.)

19.♖xd4 cxd4

19...exd4 20.b4 (again, 20.e5 is premature due to 20...♔f5) 20...b6 21.e5! ♔f5 22.♚b3 and White is nearly winning already. Black has problems across the board.



20.♚c1!

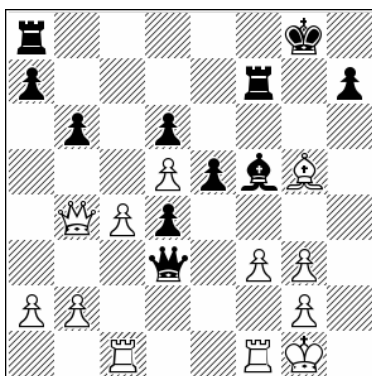
One idea with 18.♚e1 was to have some ideas around e5 after a possible trade on d4; but given Black recaptured here with the c-pawn, now I slid over to c1 to prepare a c5-push. After 20...h6 for

example, 21.♔b4 and a quick 22.c5 is good (although 22.b3 and 23.♖a3 is even stronger, but I didn't see that). Flores was banking on his next move to provide some good counterplay and at first, even Stockfish 15 agrees. But as it gets deeper and deeper into the position, it realizes White's well on top there too.

20...g3 21.hxg3 ♖xe4 22.♔xg5 ♜f7 23.♗d2 ♕f5?

The active move but it accelerates the end. 23...♗g6 24.♝bc1 ♕f5 25.♞fe1 covers Black's weaknesses temporarily but the difference in potential is obvious – Black has no objects to attack while White's ready to break on the c- and e-files and Black's kingside is going to be perpetually breezy.

24.♝bc1 b6 25.f3! ♖d3 26.♗b4



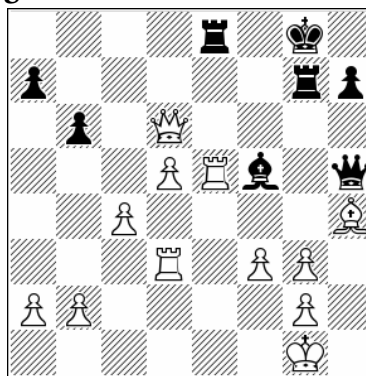
26...♕d7

26...♕g6 27.g4! catches Black's queen offside, and ♜fd1 and ♝d2 will round it up.

27.♗xd6

One pawn has fallen, but similar to the earlier note, Black doesn't even have any potential counterplay. The rest of the game is largely White playing checkers on the dark squares while Black can only watch.

27...♗f5 28.♕h4 ♜e8 29.♞ce1 d3 30.♞e4 ♗h5 31.♝d1 ♞g7 32.♞xd3 ♕f5 33.♞xe5



33...♝d7 34.♗f6 ♝f8 35.♗c6 ♗f7 36.♞de3 ♞c7 37.♞xf5 1-0

The Samford Fellowship

I decided to apply for the Samford Fellowship at the end of 2007. There aren't many sponsorship avenues in American chess, and there were even fewer then with the Samford being the largest by far. I wasn't a regular on the chess scene anymore, but I had also made the most of my recent events, wrapping up my 3 GM norms and gaining nearly 90 rating points after my debacle at the 2004 US Junior Championship from Chapter 12.

Winning the Fellowship would mean leaving my day job and turning professional, but I was happy to do that. Chess felt natural and I was bored and frustrated with my economic consulting work. I also didn't view the decision as a one-way door, as my degrees and work experience provided good option-value in case the chess path wasn't fruitful.

My initial hopes were to use the Fellowship to help support my development from about 2500 FIDE to 2600 FIDE, as that would bring me closer to being a Top 100 player. I saw the award stipend as valuable in two ways with that goal:

1) I could consider working with a coach again for the first time since parting ways with Kaidanov in 2001.

2) I saw it as a safety net in case I couldn't support myself solely through tournament play.

As it turned out, then-IM (and now GM) Irina Krush applied for the Fellowship too and both of us were effectively in our final year of eligibility. The Fellowship Committee took the then-unprecedented decision of naming multiple winners in early 2008.

In May 2008, I left my consulting job at Cornerstone and stepped off the ledge into the world of professional chess. I immediately crossed 2500 FIDE in my next event to formally earn the GM title.

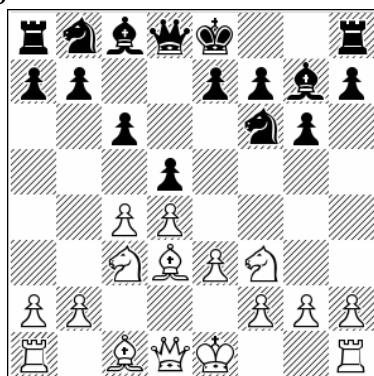
IM Vinay Bhat – GM Vladimir Burmakin

Benasque 2008

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e3 g6

The Schlechter Slav, a Slav-Grunfeld hybrid that is unambitious but very solid.

5.♘f3 ♗g7 6.♙d3



6...♘bd7?!

A small mistake in my view. The knight comes to d7 so as to later jump to d5 (after an exchange on c4), but with this move order, Black will never get to put a knight on d5.

6...0-0 7.0-0 is more usual, when Black has a few standard options. 7...♙g4 8.h3 ♗xf3 9.♗xf3 e6 is the normal line, when Black has a super-solid position with a bit less space against the two bishops.

7.cxd5

I decided to quickly cut across Black's plan of rerouting his d7-knight, and after the trade on d5, I felt Black's knight would be clearly out of place on d7 (it'd much rather be on b8 to go to c6!). Meanwhile, it seemed obvious where to put my pieces: the queen comes to b3, and if allowed, I'd play some combination of ♙d2, 0-0, ♖fc1, ♘a4, and ♘e5.

7...cxd5 8.♗b3 0-0

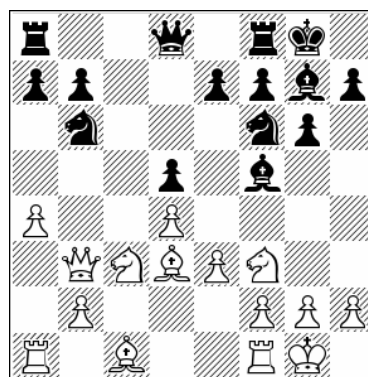
Black tries to avoid making a concession with ...e6, which would condemn his bishop to the c8-square. Still, maybe this was the right way to play it, and Burmakin defended this same setup against GM Jesse Kraai in 2009. Meanwhile, 8...♘b6 transposes back to the game after 9.0-0 0-0 10.a4.

9.0-0

The d5-pawn is taboo: 9.♘xd5? ♘xd5 10.♗xd5 ♘e5! and Black seizes the initiative.

9...♘b6 10.a4 ♗f5

10...a5 11.♘e5 centralizes the knight with some advantage. Meanwhile the inclusion of a4/...a5 has helped White by giving him a square on b5 and removing some of the support behind the knight on b6.

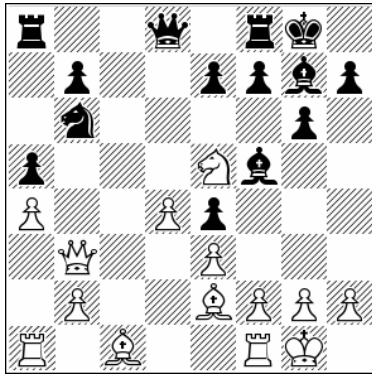


11.♙e2

White has no reason to exchange the light-squared bishops and give Black the c4-square.

11...a5 12.♘e5 ♘e4 13.♘xe4 dxe4

13...♙xe4 keeps the pawns in order, but then 14.♙d2 and it's not clear how Black is going to stop ♖c1-c5, ganging up on the a5-pawn.



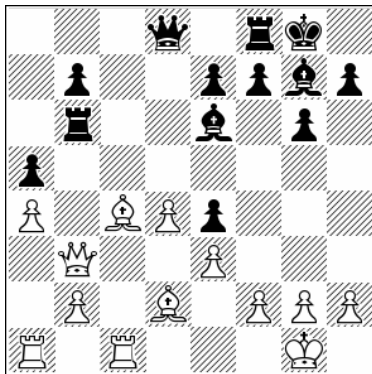
14. dxc4!

The knight on b6 is no gem, but the knight on e5 is also vulnerable. This exchange of knights only accentuates the fact that Black's bishops have no future. The one on g7 is blocked by the d4-pawn and if he plays ...e5, White pushes past with d5, gaining a nice passed pawn in the process. The one on f5 is blocked by its own pawn on e4, and can only hope for something on the a2-g8 diagonal.

14. e2? would drop a piece to 14...xe5.

14. d1 prepares e1-d2, but it allows Black to kick White's pieces back favorably with: 14...e6 15. a3 f6! 16. dg4 d7 17. h3 dxc4! and Black is taking over the initiative.

14...a6 15. e2 e6 16. ffc1 dxc4 17. e4xb6



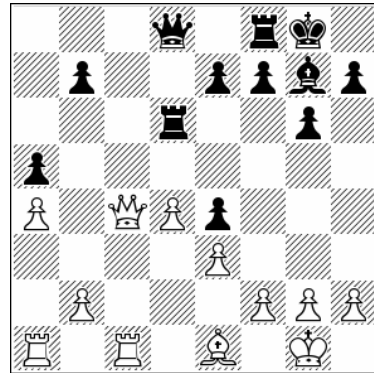
18. a2!

The key maneuver – White needs to prevent Black from playing ...e5 with the current piece arrangement. 18. a3 looks more active, but then 18...xc4 19. xc4 d6 and compared to the game continuation, White's queen is misplaced on a3. Black will play ...e5 next and White has no great target to add to the arsenal.

18...xc4 19. xc4!

It would be a little odd if Black could saunter in and take White's b2-pawn with impunity as there's nobody backing up the rook. Thus, I was looking for some way to keep my queen on a nice square and hit upon the tactical justification for why Black can't take the b2-pawn. After 19...xb2?, a little stutter-step with the bishop picks up the rook: 20. e3! b6 21. xa5

19...d6 20. e1



20...b6

20...e5 21. dxe5 xe5 22. b5! favors White, so Black protects his a5-pawn before playing for ...e5.

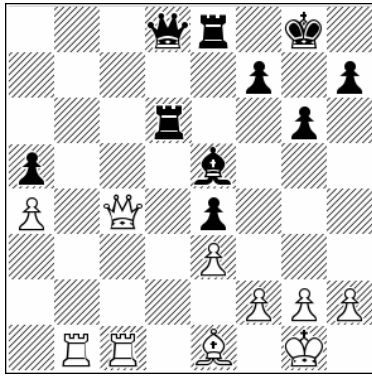
21. b4!

White can no longer stop ...e5, so he has to create another weakness or else his initiative will dry up. 21. b5 doesn't get anywhere now after 21...d5.

21...e5

21...axb4? leaves the b6-pawn vulnerable and the e7-pawn pinned. 22. xb4 d7 23. c6! Simply turning the screws on Black's position. If Black now tries to prepare ...e5 with 23...e8, he finds his queen short of breathing space after 24. a5! bxa5 25. xa5 and the queen can't keep in touch with the rook on d7 any longer.

22. dxe5 xe5 23. ab1 e8 24. bxa5 bxa5



It looks like Black has broken free. Earlier in the game (after ...dxe4), his bishops were a real problem, but here it looks like he's solved that problem and rid himself of the doubled e-pawns. However, he is still clearly worse! White has a nice target on a5 and the pawn on e4 is tough to defend without tactical help. White's bishop on e1 looks passive, but it is ideally placed to block the 1st rank and attack the a5-pawn. Meanwhile, White's rooks and queen control 2 open files, while Black's open d-file has no real entry squares.

25. ♖b5

25. ♖b7!? was another way of playing, taking advantage of the entry square on the 7th rank. 25... ♖ee6 26. ♗c7 ♗xc7 27. ♖bxc7 and it's tough for Black to hang onto his a5-pawn. However, I thought Black might have some defensive ideas in this endgame, so I decided to keep the queens on the board. As it turns out, Black's king is more exposed than White's.

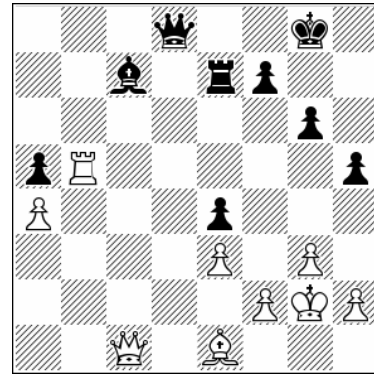
25... ♖d1 26. ♗c2 ♖xc1 27. ♗xc1 ♕c7

Now Black's bishop has been forced to abandon the important a1-h8 diagonal. White would like to build a battery along that diagonal now, say with a bishop on b2 and queen on c3. To do so, he must first take care of his own king's position.

28. g3 ♖e7

28...h5 drops a pawn: 29. ♖c5! ♕d6 (29... ♖e7? 30. ♕xa5! ♕xa5 31. ♖c8 winning.) 30. ♕xa5 with a clear pawn plus.

29. ♔g2 h5



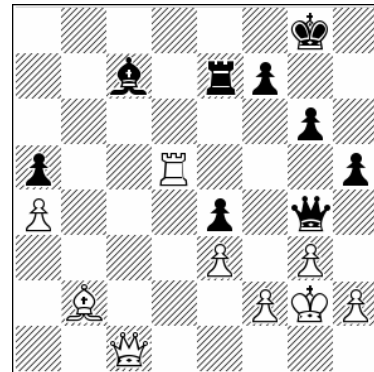
30. ♕c3

White can't be bothered and loads up the cannon. The immediate threat is ♕c3-f6, but the real threat is ♕c3-b2 and ♗c1-c3.

30... ♗d7 31. ♕b2?!

31.h3! was even more precise, making sure Black doesn't get any ideas of a perpetual along the weakened kingside light squares. 31... ♗c6 (31...h4? 32. ♕f6 picks up the stray h4-pawn.) 32. ♗a3! and White reloads the battery with ♕a1 and ♗b2. Black has no good defense to the threats.

31... ♗g4 32. ♖d5



White needs to guard the d1-square to allow his queen to move up. This happens to introduce another threat, which Burmakin missed.

32...h4?

32...f6 was necessary, to try and block the diagonal. This is where the queen on g4 is useful as the pawn is taboo due to ... ♗f3† (hence 31.h3 was stronger). Still, White is on top after 33. ♔g1! h4 (33... ♗f3 34. ♕a3 ♖g7 35. ♗c6 and White is breaking through.) 34. ♕xf6 hxg3 35. hxg3. Black doesn't have enough firepower to bother White.

33. ♗xc7!

1-0

Mate follows if Black takes back: 33... ♖xc7 34. ♖d8† ♔h7 35. ♖h8#



FIDE had ratified my 3 GM norms in 2007, but the title was conditional on crossing 2500. That led to me receiving my GM-title certificate at the same time as Josh Friedel becoming a GM and Sam Shankland becoming an IM!

I mentioned in Chapter 4 that my junior results drew an outsize amount of attention, but that I didn't feel it at the time. Some of that came around again in 2007 as I finished my GM norms and then officially received the title soon after in 2008. The US now has more than 100 GMs, but at the time, the US hadn't been producing many GMs over the prior decade. Following Jesse Kraai, I was only the second American-born GM in the prior 10 years, and one of a handful who developed primarily in the US over that time. Josh Friedel soon joined us, and the three of us along with IM David Pruess, later formed a foundational part of the GM-House.

My Learnings and Progress

These four games feature different openings and middlegame structures, but they shared two factors that I tried to keep in mind when playing more strategic and positional positions:

Pawn advances leave weak squares behind and around them. Against Mamedov, he kept his queenside pawn chain intact, but each of his pawn moves there left weak squares for my queen to probe. And against Flores, he gained a lot of space with his advances across the board, but those left his entire position open once his initial threats dried up.

When I had an advantage, I tried to keep an open mind to making that advantage more static (long-lived) through trades. My natural tendency was to turn this kind of strategic advantage into an attack (as in Chapter 13). But here, I let myself be guided by the position. Against Narciso, I correctly chose to trade

isolated pawns to gain a queenside majority and then offered to consolidate that with a queen trade. Meanwhile against Burmakin, I chose the correct moments to trade minor pieces and fix his a5-pawn in return for letting him finally activate his poor fianchettoed bishop.

Getting better at recognizing these opportunities as they arose added a new feature to my play and led to better results against GMs. And more tangibly, the games here first led to my 3rd and final GM norm and then crossing 2500 FIDE!

Chapter 16

The Struggle and Joy of Chess

Playing chess professionally forced me to think about how to study and play more effectively. Luckily, the Bay Area was still a great place to be around other strong chessplayers and a few of us decided to work together in our joint quest to improve. GM Jesse Kraai, IM David Pruess and I moved into a house together, with GM Josh Friedel a couple blocks away. While studying together had some benefits, it also was stressful at times.

I knew everybody before the move, but none of us had lived together. Some of the issues we ran into are typical problems of having housemates, but it often felt like extra drama and many of my non-chess friends joked about our antics as being readymade for a *Big Brother* reality show spinoff. Alongside that, none of us had worked in such a group before. I was more used to working on my own, and my group chess-work experience was limited to some after-hours studying with Pruess and Lee at the East Bay Chess Club.

Our most common training technique at the GM-House was to analyze positions together, whether it was from a book (such as *Tal vs Botvinnik 1960*), one of our own games, or from a trainer we brought in (we had a two-week session with GM Lev Psakhis, for example). We occasionally did some endgame studies or opening work together, but the position and game analysis dominated. I had some different study methods from earlier, but I didn't hold those opinions strongly and so went along with the group's flow.

There were a few downsides to our methods. For one, we talked about many positions and offered numerous ideas, but that rapid-fire approach often lacked the rigor that we needed during actual games. Secondly, we stuck to one study topic and method instead of diversifying techniques to better build up our strengths and shore up some weaknesses. And finally, a lack of applied practice meant that while I was seeing and hearing a lot of new information, I wasn't putting as much into practice as I could have. That effectively made the learning more passive than it could have been. The adjustments to living and studying together showed up in all our results. In the first 6 months of the GM-House, every one of us saw our ratings drop.

For me, that was a cold shower. I had moved into the GM-House after a string of good results, and with each middling-to-poor result, I noticed a little more self-imposed stress due to my own expectations combined with the 2-year time limit of the Samford Fellowship.

That pressure often turned itself into looking for a preconceived "good" result, which sometimes manifested as undue risks in an equal (or slightly worse) position against a lower-rated player or even

against similarly rated opponents. My housemates and some other players sometimes marveled at the chances I'd take – IM Joe Bradford even remarked on my guts “to have turned down that draw offer” – but it was a bit more complicated than that!

I generally didn't take the same kinds of risks against similarly or higher-rated players, and I performed at a 2550-clip against 2500+ players. It was easier for me to focus on the chess in those games versus fixating on the outcome.

The GM-House lasted for about two years, but my frustrations with my progress led to my exit after the first year, after which then-IM Sam Shankland moved in. My old housemates continued to tread water unfortunately, while Sam managed to power his way to a small rating gain before taking off after leaving.

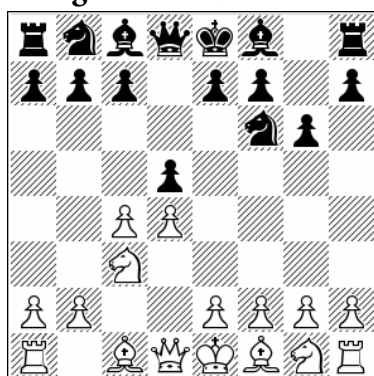
The change of scenery also helped me: I gained over 60 points in the year after moving out. I had learned a few things from studying with the group, but I also benefited from a clearer head and incorporating some additional techniques.

Some of those will be highlighted in the next few chapters, but one thing I got back to was trying to work on my calculation, again with exercises from books like Volokitin and Grabinsky's *Perfect Your Chess* and Gaprindashvili's *Imagination in Chess*. That work was a little late for the next game, but even still, it was one of my more memorable efforts.

During my GM-House tenure, we mostly played events within the US with one group trip abroad to France in February 2009 to play in the strong Cappelle-la-Grande International. Along the way, we visited one of Jesse's friends in Paris, Jason Stoneking. As a local, he took us to one of his favorite neighborhood restaurants one night. After we sat down and had some wine, he told the waiter (in French) that I was vegetarian and asked what they could do for me. The waiter turned to me in perfectly clear English, said, “This is not a pharmacy” and calmly walked away!

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Piotr Bobras
Cappelle-la-Grande 2009

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5



4.♘f3

The Grunfeld was a difficult opening for me to face. White can get a d4+e4 central structure very easily, and while I knew that those pawns didn't guarantee victory, my gut feeling about a lot of those positions in the Grunfeld was that “White is just better.” This clash between what my first

instinct would be and what a more reasoning or calculating look might show is part of the reason that the Grunfeld is basically the only major opening against 1.d4 that I never even tried to play in a rated game as an IM or GM.

At first I was playing 4.♗f4 systems. My results there were fine – a win against GM Kovchan to help me get my second GM norm – but every other game in that line versus a GM ended in a draw.

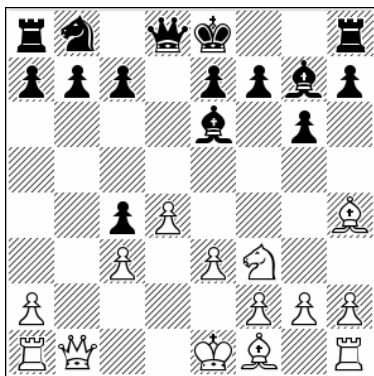
From there I switched to 4.♗g5, which became my default line to play. And then after playing that primarily for a while, I dabbled in the main lines with 4.cxd5 and 5.e4 without great success.

I have a database in ChessBase called “Tournament Prep” which includes one game entry (a set of lines really) for every game that I prepared for from about 2006 onwards. My theoretical files were

organized by opening and sub-variations, but I'd try to summarize my final plans into a short single game-file per opponent to make it easier for me to remember.

In the "Prep for Bobras" entry for this game, I wasn't planning on 4.♘f3 and I can't remember any specific reason for why I improvised at the board. I did play this move order a few other times as well, but this is a real gambit if Black plays 8...b5 instead of 8...♙e6 and I've never been that enthusiastic about that gambit for White.

4...♙g7 5.♙g5 ♘e4 6.♙h4 ♘xc3 7.bxc3 dxc4 8.e3 ♙e6



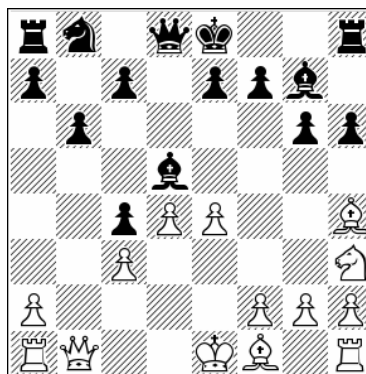
9.♙b1!?

I had started playing this in 2007 and this was to be one of my last tournament tries with this move; in later tournament games, I switched to the more common 9.♙e2. The queen move is very concrete, hitting b7 and guarding the e4-square in anticipation of some future central advance.

9...b6 10.♘g5 ♙d5 11.e4 h6 12.♘h3!?

On 12.♘f3, Black can keep in touch with the c4-pawn with 12...♙e6 as White can't safely kick it away with d4-d5 yet.

The text move was my big idea, with the point that 12...♙e6 would be met by 13.♘f4.

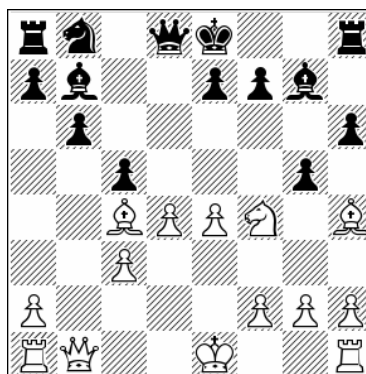


12...♙b7 13.♙xc4 c5 14.♘f4!?

Another mysterious choice at the board. I had previously only played 14.♙b3 here (and won those games) and simply noted that 14.♘f4 was interesting. Still, after a couple minutes thought, I played the knight move.

By the way, in my old notes before this game, that "interesting" tag was because of two lines: 14...cxd4 loses quickly to 15.♙xf7† and 16.♙b3† and 14...♙d7 15.e5 e6 16.♙xe6! is a surprising killer as well. But I hadn't looked at Black's next move, which is also the strongest.

14...g5!



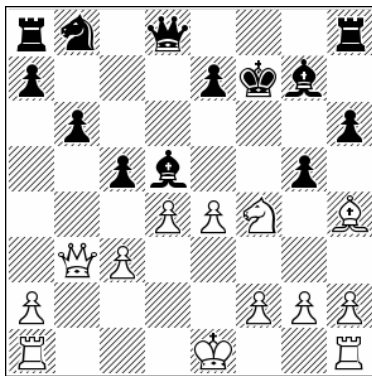
15.♙xf7!?

After a 22-minute think, I took the plunge. It's not that I thought it was winning, but:

- 1) I didn't see any clear way to beat it.
- 2) The alternative 15.♘h5 only looked like fair compensation to me.
- 3) This looked much more exciting than the knight move!

More concretely: 15.♘h5 gxh4 16.♘xg7† ♔f8 17.♘f5 e6, and 15.♘h5 0-0 16.♘xg7 ♔xg7 17.♙g3 cxd4 18.0-0 dxc3 19.♙b3 offer White only compensation and nothing more.

15...♙xf7 16.♚b3† ♕d5



17.exd5!

17.♘xd5 keeps the diagonal open, but only for one move: 17...e6 18.♘f4 ♚d7! and White's minor pieces are forked (as in the game), but he doesn't have any open files for his rooks.

17...♚d6!

Closing the a2-g8 diagonal is Black's best defense.

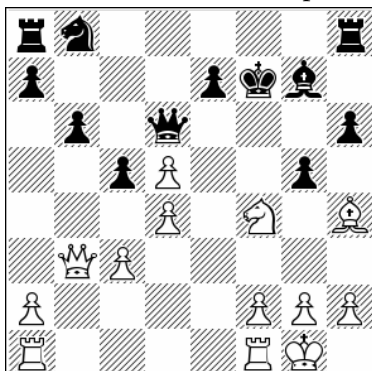
17...gxf4? 18.d6† ♙g6 19.♚e6† ♕f6 20.♚e4† ♙g7 21.♕xf6† exf6 22.♚xa8 wins.

17...gxh4? 18.d6† ♙e8 19.♘e6 ♚xd6 20.♘g7† ♙d8 21.0-0 also wins.

17...c4 was a valid alternative though, with the point that after 18.♚xc4 ♚c8, Black's queen is off the potentially vulnerable d8-square with tempo. I was planning 19.♚b3, but 19.♚d3! is even better and White's initiative remains similarly strong to the game continuation.

18.0-0!

White can't get both pieces out of the fork, so I just gave Black the choice of a capture.



18...♘d7!

White's initiative largely flows from threats to e7 directly (by putting 1-2 rooks on the e-file) or indirectly (with a latent d5-d6 check), and Black correctly estimated that taking either minor piece would cost valuable time to defend that point and so he rushes his knight over instead. An ideal setup for Black would be ...♘f8 and ...♕f6, as e7 is secure and most of the entry points along the e-file are covered too.

18...gxf4? 19.♚fe1 ♕f6 20.♚e6 ♚d7 21.♕xf6 exf6 22.♚ae1 ♙g6 23.♚c2† is winning.

18...♚xf4? 19.♕g3 ♚f5 20.♚ae1 ♕f6 21.f4 g4 22.dxc5 bxc5 23.♚e5! ♚d3 24.♚b7 and the attack rages on.

18...gxh4?! 19.♘h5! and Black is down one key move in his defense along the e-file: 19...♘d7 20.♚ae1 ♘f8 21.♚e4 with an ongoing initiative. For example, 21...♚d8 22.♚fe1 ♕f6 23.c4! and the attack continues with White's queen swinging over to the kingside.

19.♚fe1?

I agonized over the decision as to which rook was the right rook and, in the end, I made the wrong choice. The choice of ♚fe1 versus ♚ae1 didn't make a real difference in the lines I had calculated. But I ended up playing ♚fe1 because I figured that "just in case" there was a piece-down scenario I hadn't considered, it would be nice to have the option to have rooks on d1 and e1 potentially. In a way, that answered the question of "if I'm missing something, what gives me better option value?" But maybe the right question was "how can Black take advantage of a rook on a1 versus f1" and that might have led me to the correct 19.♚ae1.

Over the next few moves, neither rook move makes a material difference in the evaluation: any new branches that one rook move provides over the other results in the same evaluation.

19...♘f8!

The alternatives aren't as good:

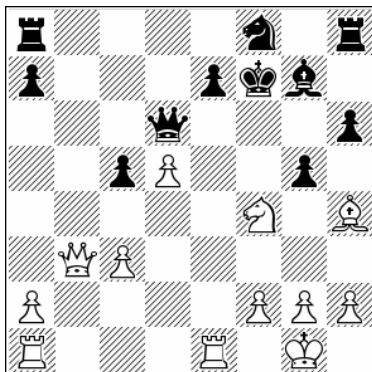
19...gxf4 20.♖e6 ♗xf4 21.d6 and the initiative continues.

19...♗xf4 20.d6† ♔g6 21.♙g3 ♗f5 22.♖e6† ♙f6 23.dxe7 ♜he8 24.♞ae1 leaves White with the initiative. He has 2 pawns for the knight, but one of those pawns is on e7, tying Black's rooks down. Meanwhile, Black's king is somewhat exposed and he can't easily tuck it away on a safe square: 24...♔g7? (24...cxd4! 25.cxd4 ♞ac8 remains unclear after either 26.♞a3 or 26.♞b4) 25.♞b5! and there's no good way to defend the knight.

20.dxc5!

A small nuance – White wants the b-file to be open so as to have ♞b3-b7 at a later date. This also opens the diagonal for the g7-bishop, but I wasn't so concerned about that yet.

20...bxc5



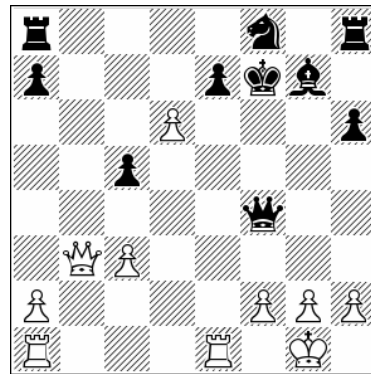
21.♙g3!

I had waited long enough for Black to take my minor pieces and waiting any longer would have meant Black would get them on his terms. This bishop move entails a double piece sacrifice, but Black must accept it.

21...gxf4 22.♙xf4! ♗xf4

If Black declines the 2nd piece, then the d5-pawn pushes forward, and White gets an attack for only one piece. 22...♞b6? 23.♞c4 ♘g6 24.d6† ♘f8 25.♖e4! ends the game. Everything is falling apart for Black.

23.d6†



23...e6?

My opponent didn't see 26.♖e3, and so he decided this was safer than 23...♔g6. Instead, the correct sequence was:

23...♔g6! 24.♞xe7 h5!

24...♙e5 25.♖e1 is a draw after 25...♞xh2† 26.♔f1 ♞h1† 27.♔e2 ♞h5† 28.♔f1 ♞h1† and White can't escape the checks.

25.g3

This is White's best chance.

White has one double-attack here with 25.♞b7 but Black can hit back with 25...♙xc3!. This valuable tempo means Black is winning.

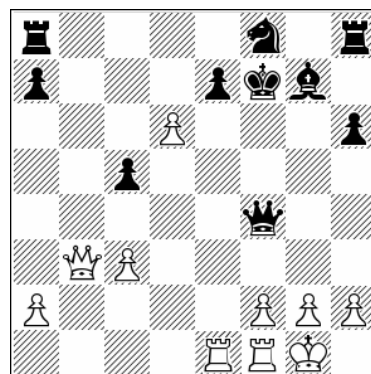
25...♞f5 26.♞b7 ♙xc3?! 27.♞c1

Illustrating the point behind g3 – Black's queen no longer controls c1!

27...♘e6 28.♞xc3 ♞ab8

It's complicated, but Black is on top.

Contrast this to the same position with White's rooks on e1 and f1 (which could have arisen after 19.♞ae1):



23...♔g6

Now 23...e6 is easier to reject because of 24.♖b7† and there is no later 25...♙xc3 double attack. And just like the above note:

23...♔g6 24.♞xe7 ♙e5 ♞e1 leads to a perpetual check.

24.♞xe7 h5

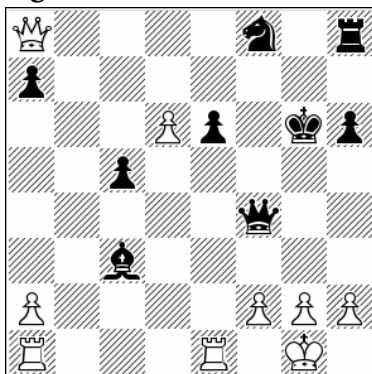
This shows another useful facet of having a rook on f1 instead of a1. White can draw with:

25.♞b7! ♞xd6

25...♙xc3 no longer hits any rook.

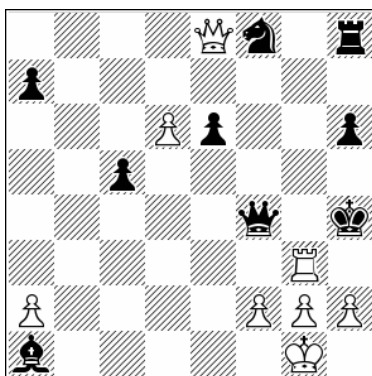
26.♞e4† ♔h6 27.♞e3† ♔g6 28.♞e4†

24.♞b7† ♔g6 25.♞xa8 ♙xc3



26.♞e4?

I saw 26.♞e3!, but I missed a forcing sequence that costs Black his queen after 26...♙xa1: 27.♞g3† ♔h5 28.♞e8† ♔h4



I only looked at 29.h3, trying to checkmate Black's king, but it falls short: 29...♞c1† 30.♔h2 ♙e5! (Pinning the white rook so that ♞g4† can't be played.) 31.♞f7 ♞f4! and Black wins.

However, White is better after 29.♞h3† ♔g5 30.♞h5† ♔f6 31.♞f3! winning the queen. With the d6-pawn and Black's poorly coordinated pieces,

White is close to winning: 31...♔g6 32.♞xf4† ♔xf4 33.♞h4† ♔f5 34.g3 ♔g6 35.♞h5† ♔f6 36.♞xc5 with a clear plus.

26...♞f5 27.♞ae1??

I followed up my miscalculation on move 26 with a huge lemon. For some reason, I forgot the bishop was on c3, and I only noticed once I let go of the rook on e1! A strange blind spot.

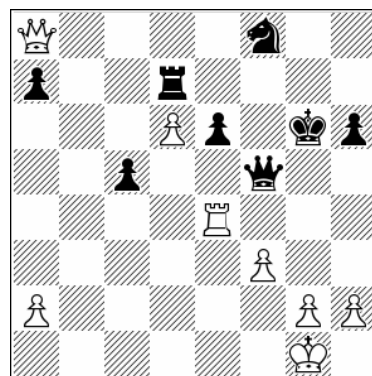
I had seen 27.♞d1 ♔d7 28.♞c6 ♔e5 and figured that Black was better. However, it's not so easy for Black after 29.♞a4! (29.♞b7 ♙d4 was all I looked at, when Black is much better) 29...♙d4 30.♞dxd4 cxd4 31.♞xd4 with continued compensation.

27.g4! was the best move, freeing the queen on a8. 27...♞f6 28.♞f1 ♔h7 29.♞b7 ♔g5 30.♞e3 ♙d4 31.h4! with a big plus again.

27...♙xe1 28.♞xe1 ♞h7! 29.f3

I was shocked I hung my own rook with 27.♞ae1, so I spent a couple minutes trying to refocus and then a few more minutes to find some way to keep fighting. The pawn push is useful, to dull any attack on f2, secure e4 as a transfer point, and create some room for White's king just in case.

29...♞d7 30.♞e4



30...h5!?

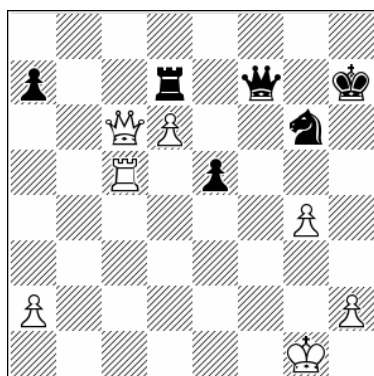
This takes away ♞e4-g4†, but 30...♔f7 would have been a better way to defuse that while also reintroducing the threat of ...♞xd6 (taking the pawn immediately would lose to 31.♞e8†). My next move was designed to open the kingside, not because there's any real benefit from that but because I needed to pose some practical problems

and given the time situation, I figured anything around Black's king would help.

31.g4 ♖f7 32.♙c6 ♔h7 33.♞c4 hxg4 34.fxg4 ♜g6?

34...e5! is the right idea. The knight is needed on f8 to support the rook.

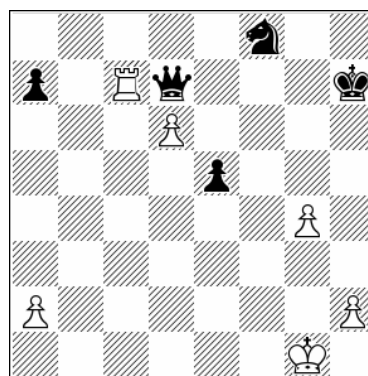
35.♞xc5 e5



36.♞b5?

Another bad miss, likely because I was tired from the effort so far. I had 5 minutes left here, so I had time to calculate, but while I saw the right move, I quickly rejected it.

36.♞xd7! ♞xd7 37.♞c7 ♜f8 was where I stopped, figuring that Black's king was close enough to get all the pawns.



But looking just a couple moves further shows that this is a draw: 38.h4 ♔g6 39.h5† ♔f6 (39...♔g5 40.♞xd7 ♜xd7 41.♔f2 is an easier draw to spot as neither black blockader can break free) 40.♞xd7 ♜xd7 41.♔g2 ♔e6 42.g5 ♔xd6 43.g6 ♔e7 44.h6 ♔f6 45.g7 ♔f7 46.♔f3 ♜f6 47.♔e3 ♔g6 48.g8=♞† ♜xg8 49.h7 ♔xh7 50.♔e4 draws.

36...♞e6 37.♞b7 ♞xg4† 38.♔f1 ♜f8 39.♞xd7† ♜xd7 40.♞c7 ♞d1† 41.♔f2

Now with an extra 30 minutes for each of us, I quickly gave up the ghost.

41...♞a4 42.♔f1 ♔g6 43.♞c8 ♞d1†
0-1

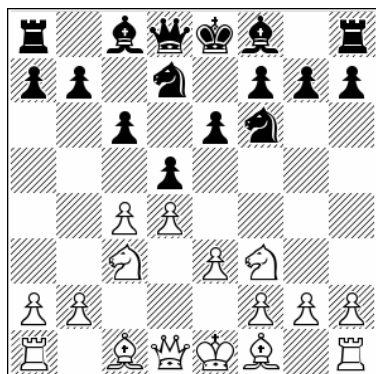
Finding Comfort in a Favorite Opening

After some time back stateside, I was on the move again to Europe, this time for the Reykjavik Open in Iceland. It was going to be my first time there, so I arrived a couple days early, and GM Yury Shulman had done the same. We decided to rent a car and do some sightseeing, and while driving around, Yury challenged me to try and be more specific with my goals and what I saw as my future in chess.

Unfortunately, the tournament itself was an unmitigated disaster. My games were riddled with indecision followed by bad decisions and my postgame notes were highly self-critical. Reading them now, it's a mixture of frustration, exasperation, and despondency with some ironic congratulations for a good move.

I had agreed to play a few days later in San Sebastian, so I continued on to the Basque region feeling quite negative about my chess. After one lucky escape at the start of the event, I started to play a little more freely. I can't say whether that was by design or out of frustration, but I started to string together some wins and in the 8th round, I faced off against a 2500+ IM (and soon-to-be GM) Daniel Alsina Leal. That game, a Semi-Slav Meran, didn't solve all my problems, but it and the San Sebastian event did help me get back on track in the confidence department.

By the way, I'd have a hard time picking a single favorite opening, but if I'm looking at my results, I can't argue against the Meran. This line of the Semi-Slav arises after something like 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 c6 5.e3 ♘bd7.



White's two main choices are 6.♗d3 (the Meran proper) and 6.♖c2 (the Anti-Meran). I started playing this as Black in 1998 and I began playing into it with White in 2006. While playing regularly from 2006 through early 2010, I scored 12/18 with Black (for a +50 performance). With White, I scored even better with 11.5/15 (for a +137 performance). I only had two losses over those 33 games.

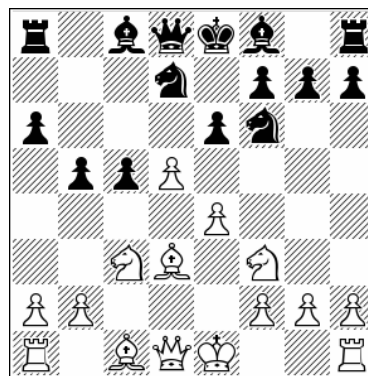
GM Vinay Bhat – IM Daniel Alsina Leal

San Sebastian 2009

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3

I had already played 3.♘c3 against GM Pablo San Segundo earlier in the event (a draw), but he had cut across my opening plans with 3...dxc4. In this game, I wanted a Semi-Slav and correctly guessed that he wouldn't play the Slav against me with 4...dxc4. It was only around the time he got the GM title (a little over a year from this game) that he started to mix in the Slav.

3...♘f6 4.♘c3 e6 5.e3 ♘bd7 6.♗d3 dxc4 7.♗xc4 b5 8.♗d3 a6 9.e4 c5 10.d5

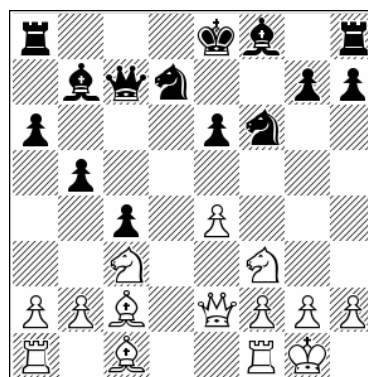


This was a position I typically saw from the Black side, and the only previous time I had it as White, I chose 10.e5 (a win against FM Kelleher). I felt that 10.e5 was a bigger challenge to this variation of the Meran than 10.d5, but I wasn't ready to deal with Anand's 15...♗b7 (from his 2008 World Championship Match with Kramnik). I later did give that a try though a few months later, as you'll see in Chapter 18 versus Amanov.

10...c4 11.♗c2 ♖c7 12.0-0 ♗b7 13.dxe6

13.♖e2 is another route to the same position, but gives Black the added choice of 13...e5. That push is less likely now after the trade because White gets the d5-square for his pieces.

13...fxe6 14.♖e2!?



A somewhat rare move, but I didn't have a lot of great ideas against my own favorite opening. I chose this primarily because I had done some work on the line the prior summer and felt that even though it was about equal, there were many variations with multiple critical junctures where Black could go wrong.

14...♗d6 15.♘d4 ♖b6!?

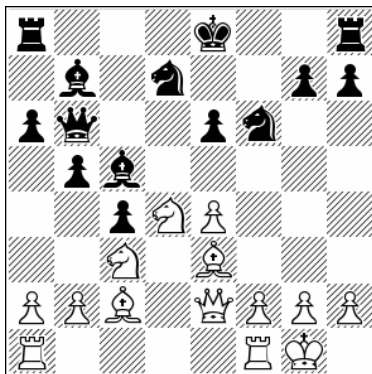
A surprise for me, although after I checked at home, this had been essayed once in 1998 and White quickly went astray.

Instead of 15...♖b6, the main line runs 15...♘c5 16.f4 e5 17.♗dxb5 axb5 18.♗xb5 ♖b6 19.♗xd6† ♖xd6 20.fxex5 ♖xe5 21.♖f5 ♖e7 22.♖xc4 but there are numerous branches along the way (and after) to keep track of.

16.♙e3

16.♗xe6 was my first thought, but after 16...♙xh2† 17.♗xh2 ♖xe6, White faces some real problems. He has the bishop pair, but the bishop on c2 is not very useful. Meanwhile, the e4-pawn is a big liability (...b4 is a threat) and his king is a little vulnerable. If he plays with f2-f3 to support the pawn, then the kingside dark squares become quite weak.

16...♙c5



17.♖fd1!

In the end, I decided that 16.♙e3 made sense, as Black has wasted two moves here with ...♖d8-c7-b6 and ...♙f8-d6-c5, while White has made two developing moves with ♙c1-e3 and ♖f1-d1. As to why this rook instead of the seemingly more natural 17.♖ad1? The answer to that will be seen shortly.

17...0-0

17...e5 is maybe better, but it's still not particularly pleasant after 18.♗f5 0-0 19.b4! ♙xe3 20.♗xe3 with a clear plus – Black's queenside majority has been stymied while White has nice squares on d5 and f5 for his knights and the d-file for his rooks. Admittedly, his bishop is not so great

on c2, but if Black has to exchange on d5 at some point, the bishop can come alive.

18.a4!

Asking a big question of Black's queenside pawn chain.

18...♙xd4

An unfortunate necessity as the alternatives are essentially losing by force.

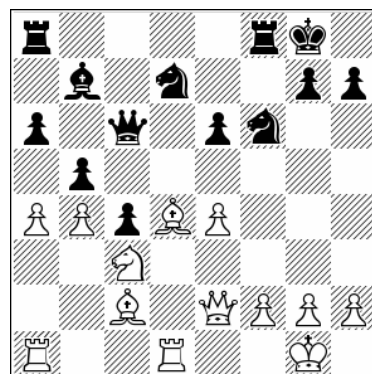
18...b4 19.a5! ♖a7 20.♗a4 b3 21.♗xc5! (21.♙b1!? is also good enough for an advantage – Black can't escape troubles on the g1-a7 diagonal.) And no matter which minor piece Black takes, he runs into a lost position after ♗xe6.

18...e5 19.a5! ♖a7 (19...♖c7 20.♗e6 and 19...♖d6 20.♗dxb5 are simple) 20.♗dxb5! axb5 21.♗xb5 ♖a6 (21...♙xe3 will net out to a queen and three pawns for White versus three minor pieces, but the minor pieces aren't doing anything) 22.♖xc4† ♗h8 23.♙xc5 ♗xc5 24.♖xc5 ♖ac8 25.♗c7 White wins. This a4-a5 push is why the rook needed to stay on a1 on move 17.

19.♙xd4

I spent about 10 minutes here, debating between this and 19.♖xd4. I wanted to play ♖xd4 but after 19...♖a5 (not 19...♖c6 20.♖ad1), I didn't like my piece coordination.

19...♖c6 20.b4!



Drawing on an idea from the Benoni to fight Black's queenside majority.

20...cxb3?

Black tries to play concretely, but the tactics aren't going to work out in his favor. He does get to misplace White's knight on a2 in this line, but the opening of the c-file and the activation of White's light-squared bishop is too much in return. His position after something like 20...e5 isn't particularly pleasant, but I would have tried to defend that position instead.

21. ♟xb3

Capturing on b3 first would mean that White's knight isn't shut out on a2, but the exchange of rooks there would also relieve some of the pressure is Black.

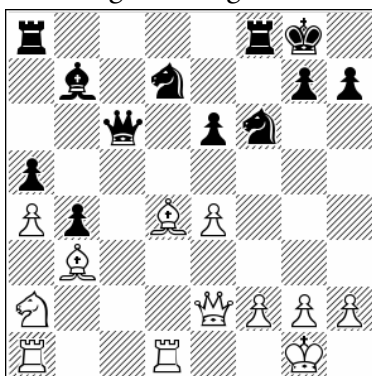
21...b4

A better try is 21...♞c5 offering the e6-pawn (after trades on c5). If White accepts the pawn sacrifice on e6, the open e-file and hanging knight on c3 cause some problems. White is better, but he relinquishes some initiative by cashing out.

It turns out that after 21...♞c5, even stronger is 22. ♟xc5 ♜xc5 23. ♞ac1 ♞b6 24. a5! (or 23...♚h8 24. ♞xb5), but I only found this cleaner solution in the post-mortem.

22. ♞a2 a5

Or 22... ♞xe4 23. ♞xe4 ♟xe4 24. ♟xe6† ♚h8 25. ♞xb4 with a big advantage.



23. ♞f3!

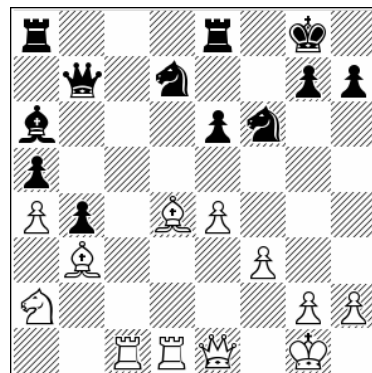
23. ♞ac1? was my original plan, but in the moment, I noticed that after the exchanges on e4 and e6, the endgame isn't really all that great for White. The bishops are nice, but the knight on a2 is horrible and the queenside pawn structure favors Black.

23... ♟a6

Natural, but I would have tried to alter the struggle by sacrificing my queen with 23...♞c5!?. It's still worse for Black after 24. ♞ac1 ♞xb3 25. ♞xc6 ♞xd4 26. ♞xd4 ♟xc6, but Black has more practical chances to hold this position than the game continuation.

With these kinds of defensive sacrifices in mind, I made sure to avoid d2 and slid my queen back.

24. ♞e1! ♞fe8 25. ♞ac1 ♞b7



26. ♞g3!

White is hitting Black from all over now. The queen threatens the kingside, while also supporting a rook invasion on c7.

26... ♞ad8

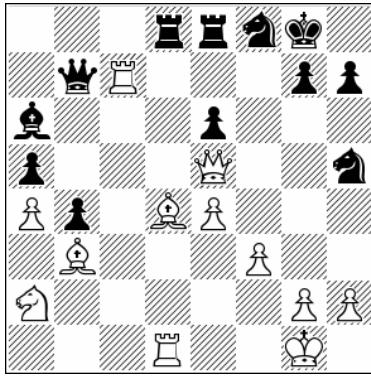
This is too meek, but after the game, he said he didn't see any good continuation. I would have played 26... ♞ac8 instead, with the defensive idea of 27. ♞xc8 ♞xc8 28. e5 ♞h5 (28... ♞d5 is possible too) 29. ♞g4 ♟c4! 30. ♞c1 ♟xb3! and once again, Black sacrifices a queen for practical defensive chances.

Because of this, I was planning 27. ♞xc8 ♞xc8 28. ♞c1! and then 28... ♞d8 29. ♞c7 to increase the pressure. Then after 29... ♟c8 30. ♞c1!, White can calmly bring his last piece into the game, and Black can only sit and watch.

27. ♞c7 ♞h5 28. ♞d6 ♞f8

28... ♞df6 was a little better, but after 29. ♞e5 ♞b8 30. ♞xa5 (or 30.g4), Black's position is a shambles.

29. ♞e5



29...♖g6 30.♗xe6† ♕h8 31.♚xg7†
1-0

Balancing my Motivations and Expectations

I wasn't enjoying being a chess professional in the first half of 2009, but it wasn't immediately obvious to me why that was the case. After that San Sebastian event, I was trying to figure out what went right there but also what had gone wrong before. I wouldn't be the first chessplayer to find less joy in chess as a professional than as a hobby, but it didn't seem to be about the work as I still enjoyed studying. Instead, it really seemed to be about my motivations and expectations.

Even as a little kid, chess had never been my #1 focus, so a professional's approach and attitude were a shock to my system. I came to realize that I valued the struggle and the content about as much as the result. I certainly preferred to not lose, but I also didn't want to make decisions primarily through the lens of a desired result. I wanted to be able to experiment and explore a little more at the board. For me to get back on track, I needed to enjoy creating again and not focus as much on the result.

At times, this clashed with the professional approach. I never sought out pre-arranged draws and rarely looked for quick draws during my career, both as a professional and not. As a GM, I did have a few draws of 15 moves or less, but none were pre-planned. And for better or worse, nobody ever offered to throw a game to me. Still, I saw or heard about plenty of offers on the table.

One of my frequent roommates while playing in Europe was GM Levan Aroshidze. At one event, another GM offered to throw a game to him (or accept a thrown game) for money. Levan wasn't on the take though.

Sometime later, when Levan and I weren't roommates, we were paired in the final round of an event. About 13 moves in, Levan offered me a draw. I thought about it for a few minutes and then decided to play on. The position was about even and we'd both get a bit of money with a draw, but I figured why not play on and see what happens. It turns out that decision didn't change the result, as we agreed to a draw about an hour later in an endgame. I followed the same approach of playing seriously against my housemates Kraai, Friedel, and Pruess.

The Struggle is Real

While nobody has tried to arrange a result with me, I have tried to throw a game before. Still, I managed to fail in this quest!

It was the 2008 Champion of Champions qualifier for a US Championship spot. It was a two-stage event, with a group stage blitz-event followed by a slower mini-match knockout format. Going into the

final round of the group stage, I had already secured the top seed and was paired with the Hawaiian state champ, NM Cornelius Rubsam. If I drew or won, I'd likely play then-IM Enrico Sevillano in the first round of the knockout stage while a loss would actually pair me against a much lower-rated opponent to start the next stage.

I didn't want to make it "too obvious" and so after following some well-known theory in the French Winawer, I purposely made what I thought was a clear blunder to throw the game. My hopes were raised when Rubsam started with the right first move, but then he bailed out to force a perpetual check right away! The draw meant that I played Sevillano in the first knockout mini-match and, as you might expect at this point given my fixation on the result this whole event, I lost and was eliminated.

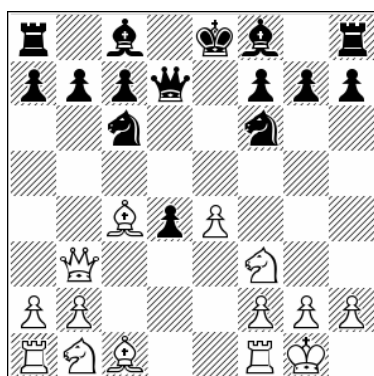
Getting back to my play as a Samford Fellow, my own internal evaluation function often erred on the optimistic side. That helped me play creatively at the board, but it also meant I could go a little too far. At my best though, which generally happened after my time at the GM-House, I found a way to balance my interest in the struggle with my desire for a good result. This next game saw things improbably hover around equality, even though at times I put a foot down on both sides of the line.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Christian Bauer
Cannes 2010

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e4

I had switched from meeting the Queen's Gambit Accepted with 3.e3 to 3.e4 in 2009 – my general results of mostly draws against it didn't change though!

3...e5 4.♘f3 exd4 5.♙xc4 ♘c6 6.0-0 ♘f6 7.♖b3 ♖d7



8.♙d2!?

Facing a sideline within a sideline – Black has bypassed some of the most common options – this was already at my preparation's limit. Amusingly, one of the earliest games in this line was Khalifman – Bauer, Istanbul 1999, so this was still well within his practice.

White has sacrificed a pawn and Black is behind in development and will have a difficult

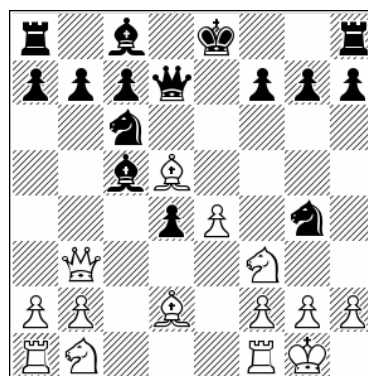
time unraveling safely. Still, White has to watch out for ...♘a5 ideas, hence this last move.

The most testing line might be 8.♘g5 ♘e5 9.♙b5 c6 10.f4, which has only been played twice: the first time was by Kasparov in 1985 against a computer, and the second was in Dreev – Bauer, Switzerland 2011, and Bauer has shelved the line ever since.

8...♘g4 9.♙d5

9.♙b5 also looks interesting here, but my bishop move is also fair, sidestepping any tempo-gain by ...♘e5 and maintaining the pressure. Left to my own devices, I would follow up with moves like ♘a3, h3, and bringing the rooks out.

9...♙c5



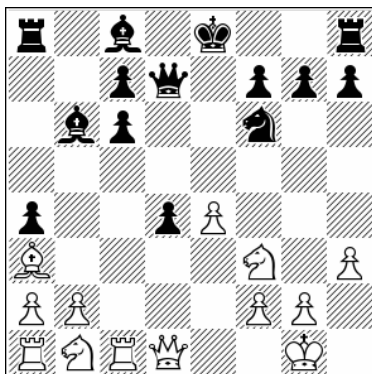
10.♙c1

Also possible was 10.e5, when White's compensation still feels clear, but there's no real advantage.

10...♙b6 11.♙xc6 bxc6 12.h3 ♘f6 13.♙b4

This creative method to prevent castling was my idea with 10.♙c1. Bauer had played somewhat quickly up to the previous move, but now began to join me in chewing up the clock. He can plug the diagonal with 13...c5, but then after 14.♙xc5 ♙xc5 15.♙xc5 0-0 16.♘bd2, White is left with clear positional trumps – he's more active and the c7-pawn is going to be a real liability. Still, Black has a path to equality here.

13...a5 14.♙a3 a4 15.♙d1



15...♘xe4

An interesting situation – Black is up two pawns, but his king is stuck in the center. Meanwhile, White isn't visibly better developed and somehow, the rook that started on h1 has not only hopped over the king (to f1) but the queen (to c1)!

The time control at this tournament was a typical 40/90 followed by G/30 (with a 30-second increment throughout). I was already down to 41 minutes while Bauer had only 33 minutes.

16.♘bd2

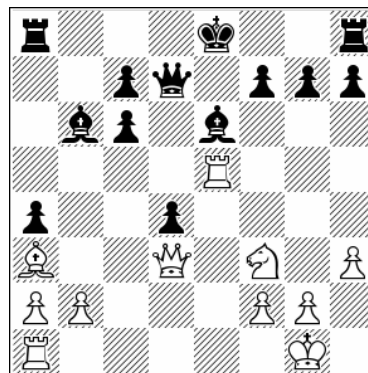
Not 16.♙e1 f5 17.♘bd2, because after 17...♙d5 18.♘g5, Black can free himself with 18...h6 19.♘gxe4 fxe4 20.♘xe4 ♖f7! when the bishops plus extra pawn should count for something.

16...♘xd2

Now 16...f5 allows 17.♘e5. But after the trade of knights, the open e-file means Black can't touch his f-pawn anymore.

Instead, 16...♙d5 17.♘xe4 ♙xe4 18.♙f1! ♙e6 19.♙e1 ♙d5 20.♙e5 ♙d7 21.♙d1 looks menacing, but now is a good moment for Black to return the material with: 21...c5! 22.♙xc5 ♙xc5 23.♙xc5 0-0 24.♙xd4 ♙e7 and the position should peter out to equality.

17.♙xd2 ♙d5 18.♙e1† ♙e6 19.♙e5 ♙d7 20.♙d3

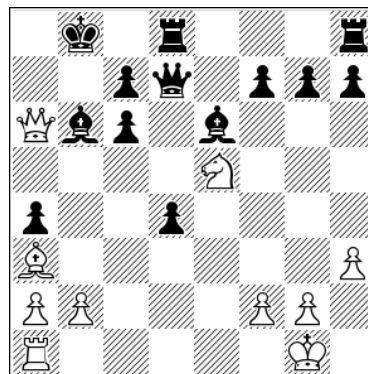


20...0-0-0?

Instead, 20...♖d8! would have been a great find. In a way, it's logical, given Black can't legally castle kingside and shouldn't castle queenside, so instead, he walks to relative safety on b7. White's best is to try and grab the d4-pawn and bail out with 21.♙c5, but Black is definitely on top.

By comparison to the earlier line with 16...♙d5, now 20...c5 is less effective: 21.♙xc5 ♙xc5 22.♙xc5 0-0 23.♘g5 g6 24.♘xe6 ♙xe6 25.♙xd4 is also about equal, but a slightly better version of it for White as he can still play against the c7-pawn here (and not just trade it for the a2-pawn).

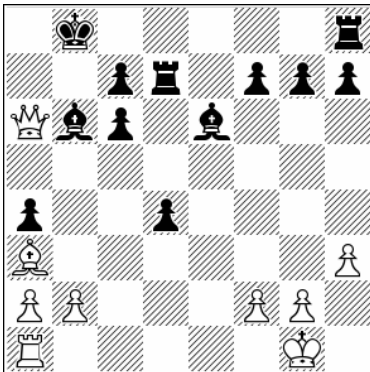
21.♙a6† ♖b8 22.♙a5! ♙xa5 23.♘e5 ♙b6



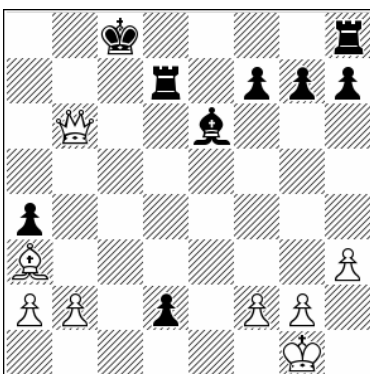
24. ♖xd7?

Throwing away a win! I should have gained a move with 24. ♖c1!, as the d-pawn isn't as scary as it looks: 24...d3 25. ♖xc6† ♜xc6 26. ♖xc6 ♜d7 (26...d2 loses by force after 27. ♖xb6† as the bishop joins the attack too) 27. ♖xb6† cxb6 28. ♜xb6† ♔c8 29. ♜c6† and White is going to pick up the d-pawn one way or another.

24... ♖xd7



25. ♖c1 was tempting, but I realized now that there was a subtle difference between winning the queen on d7 versus c6. White's threatening to take on c6, but also has ideas of ♗c5, so Black should push on with 25...d3. Then 26. ♖xc6 d2 27. ♖xb6† cxb6 28. ♜xb6† ♔c8 shows the difference compared to the similar position after 24. ♖c1 with Black's rook on d8 instead of d7.



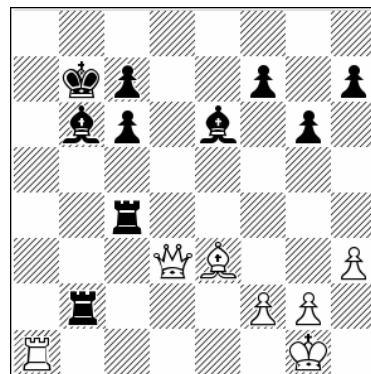
There, White has ♜b6-c6† and ♗a3-d6† to force the win of the d2-pawn and leave White with a winning plus. But here, 29. ♜c6† ♔d8 and White has no way to pick up the d2-pawn. A draw after 30. ♜a8† is the best White can get.

Meanwhile, 25. ♜xa4 c5 seemed to sideline my bishop, so I rushed back with the bishop first before grabbing the a4-pawn. I thought I was still better in this position, but after a few more moves,

I understood that I had the wrong evaluation. Black has a rook, bishop, and pawn for the queen, and I didn't think the two bishops were a real force at the moment.

But what I underestimated was the strength of the passed d-pawn: given the reduced material and Black's power behind it, it will occupy a lot of White's attention and so tilt the scales. With natural moves, Bauer made it clear that Black was in no danger at all, and in fact White needs to be careful despite the apparent material advantage.

25. ♗b4 d3 26. ♜xa4 ♜d4! 27. ♜a3 ♔b7 28. ♗d2 ♖a8 29. ♜c3 ♖xa2 30. ♜d1 g6 31. ♗e3 ♖c4 32. ♜xd3 ♖xb2 33. ♖a1



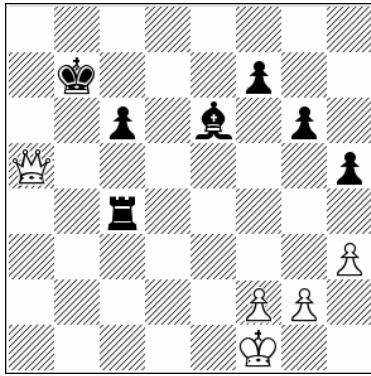
33... ♖b5

Both of us were down to a minute left to reach move 40. He was extremely close to playing 33... ♖cb4?? now, as he reached for (but didn't touch) that rook, and then right before he touched it, his eyes widened, he shook his head, and then thought for a few more seconds. It loses immediately to 34. ♜a6† ♔b8 35. ♜a8#.

34. ♗xb6 cxb6 35. ♜d8

Now I was confident I would draw this game. We continued for a while (we got an extra 30 minutes after move 40) but the outcome was never really in doubt.

35... ♖a5 36. ♖xa5 bxa5 37. ♜xa5 h5 38. ♔f1



I offered a draw here, but Bauer preferred to continue as White still has to be a little careful.

38...♔d5 39.g3 ♕f3 40.♖a3 ♔d5 41.♖a5 ♜e4
 42.♔g1 ♜d4 43.♞e1 c5 44.♞e7† ♔b6 45.♔f1
 ♔b5 46.♞e8† ♔b4 47.♞e1† ♔b3 48.♞b1† ♔a4
 49.♔e2 ♕b3 50.♞a1† ♔b4 51.♞a7 ♕e6
 ½-½



An animated post-mortem with friends and colleagues on the chess circuit, GM Davorin Kuljasevic and GM Jon Ludvig Hammer in 2009

My Learnings and Progress

I had officially become a GM, but things had only become more difficult in many ways. My competition was stronger, and the margins seemed to be narrowing. But most importantly, chess had become more difficult when it moved up to being #1 on my list.

Again, everybody struggles at times. I started by trying to solve the specific mistakes I was making in individual games, but that wasn't really what was holding me back. I needed to zoom out and reassess my own motivations and expectations, and eventually I found my way to those questions.

In retrospect, my mistakes were obvious: finding that sweet spot between playing for a result and the challenge was how I rekindled my interest back in 2005 while in college. Similarly, Kaidanov had pushed me to answer these questions back in 1997. But not for the first time, it took me longer to recognize what was going on and then to make sense of events.

Chapter 17

My Approach to Opening Preparation

After being awarded the Samford Fellowship in 2008, I invested more time into studying opening theory than ever before. My opening repertoire up through the IM title at 16 was very narrow. I would've liked to play more openings because the breadth of options always interested me, but I also didn't want to invest the studying time and memorization effort. From the IM title through the end of college at 21, I was playing a limited schedule and reduced my overall studying time further. But, to mix things up for myself, I was experimenting with non-mainline openings such as the Trompowsky.

The Trompowsky was fun, but I didn't believe it was a forever-opening for me, and so I began to try and tackle openings like the Nimzo-Indian and Grunfeld. There's definitely a tax involved in playing a major-league opening like the Grunfeld (or playing into it), but I came to see that as an investment against strong players and in my own development. I'll explain this more in the next chapter, but my move away from the French to the Ruy Lopez as Black against 1.e4 was partly in service of both goals.

Still, I typically avoided the absolute main-lines as White, gravitating instead towards other variations where I felt that even if it was objectively equal, it was some sort of unstable equality and not sterile. That seemed to lead me to play a lot of variations that were more popular anytime from the 1960s to 1990s. While top-GM practice had moved on from some of those lines, I felt they suited me for a few reasons:

- They were popular in a pre-computer era, which meant there might be some more undiscovered ideas to find.
- They weren't top of mind for most players, so they'd be less well-prepared than in the true main lines.
- Theory wouldn't change as frequently and/or I could narrow the likely theoretical scope, which would make it easier for me to remember it.

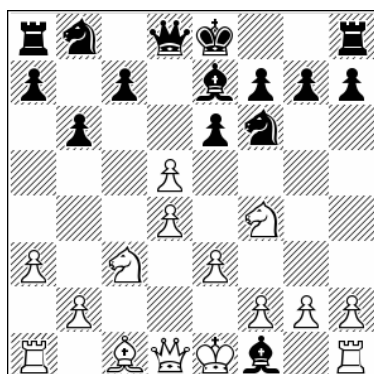
Thus, I typically avoided the main lines of the Slav and instead deviated with 4.e3 for example. That also could be used against the Semi-Slav after 4...e6, an opening I'd have to prepare for regardless. The same went for the Grunfeld where I primarily played 4.♘f4 and 4.♘g5 systems instead of 4.cxd5 and 5.e4 (after 1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5). And given my growing comfort in IQP positions, I chose 4.e3 against the Nimzo-Indian.

Games like the following suggested to me that there still was value in some older lines.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Alexander Ivanov

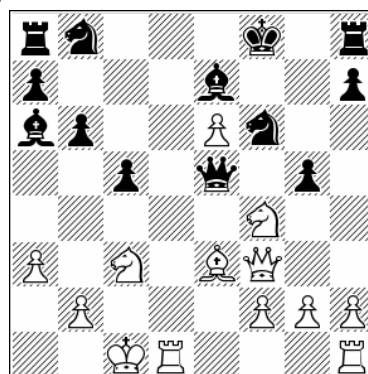
Miami 2008

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♘b4 4.e3 b6 5.♗e2 ♘a6
6.a3 ♘e7 7.♗f4 d5 8.cxd5 ♘xf1



The normal move here had long been 9.♖xf1 and had been seen in Botvinnik – Smyslov, World Championship (2) 1954, for example. But **9.dxe6!**?

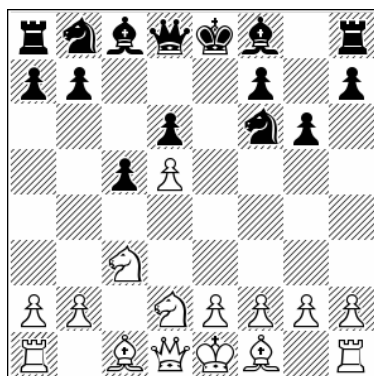
is also quite interesting. Surprised at my choice, Ivanov quickly went wrong after: **9...♘a6 10.exf7† ♖xf7 11.e4 c5?** (11...♘c4! is necessary to stay in the game) **12.e5 ♗xd4 13.e6† ♖f8 14.♗f3 ♗e5† 15.♘e3 g5 16.0-0-0!**



White has a winning advantage that I eventually converted.

Beating Up on the Benoni

Another opening in which I turned to a still venomous, older line was the Benoni. My first games versus the Benoni were in what's been termed the Modern Main Line: White plays ♗c3, ♗f3, e4, h3, and ♘d3. I did well enough with this, but many of the lines were too forcing for my taste and I wanted something more stable long-term, and I decided on an early ♗d2-system.



This 7.♗d2 move offers a lot of possible transpositions – there are direct ♗c4 lines, a Fianchetto with g2-g3 (where ♗f3-d2 is a common move) or even the Classical setups with 8.e4 and 9.♘e2.

My most preferred setup after 7.♗d2 did involve playing e2-e4, but with a knight's tour thrown in for good measure, as in this next game.

Is this line the most testing versus the Benoni? Probably not. And was I avoiding all concrete play

with this move? Also, no – but while I sometimes struggled to calculate all the exact moves required to find an advantage (at the time) with the Modern Main Line, I found myself more able to calculate the shorter, concrete lines I sometimes had to work through here.

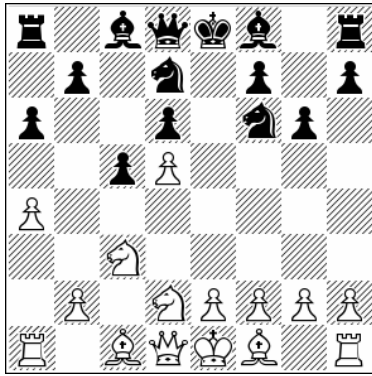
GM Vinay Bhat – GM Christian Bauer

Metz 2010

1.d4 e6 2.c4 ♗f6 3.♗f3 c5 4.d5 d6 5.♗c3 exd5
6.cxd5 g6 7.♗d2 a6

Against 7...♘g7 my preferred route was to migrate to a Fianchetto-like variation with 8.♗c4 0-0 9.g3. One example, against WIM Swaminathan, continued 9...b6 10.a4 ♗a6 11.♘g2 ♗b4 12.0-0 ♘a6 13.♗b5 with a nice plus.

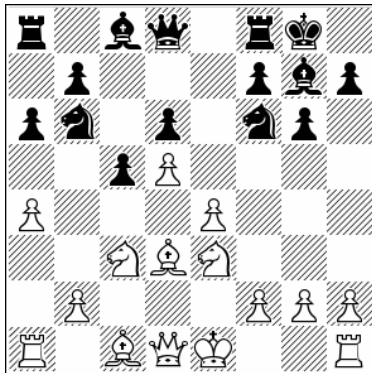
8.a4 ♗bd7



9.e4

I had previously played 9.♖c4, with one win versus Kaminski continuing: 9...♗b6 10.♗a3 ♜e7 11.g3 ♘e4 (11...♙g7 12.♙g2 0-0 13.0-0 ♝b8 14.h3 was Pruess – Akobian, Las Vegas 2007, which ended brutally for Black) 12.♙g2 ♗xc3 13.bxc3 ♙g7 14.♞b3 and White was well on top.

9...♙g7 10.♗c4 ♗b6 11.♗e3 0-0 12.♙d3

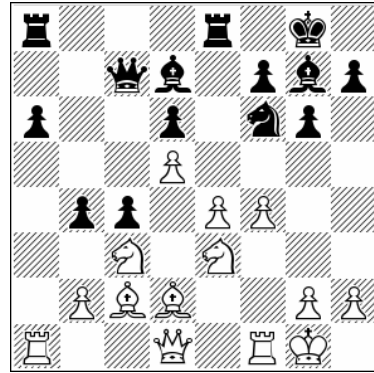


The related position without ...a6 and a4 included has been seen for decades, going back to Nimzowitsch – Marshall, New York 1927. But with those two pawn moves included, the b6-knight's position is a little more precarious and that's why I played 9.e4 this time and not 9.♗c4. White is always ready to flick the black knight away and regain full control over the c4-square.

12...h5!?

Bauer spent about 12 minutes here and I feel like he sensed some danger. It's not a normal Benoni at all with White's knight on e3, but it nicely counters Black's typical development and so he decided to try and exchange off some pieces to relieve the pressure. Often in the Benoni, Black has two knights that want the e5-square and so trading one pair can help and avoids any a4-a5/♗d2-c4 combo from White.

12...♞e8 also looks reasonable, but another Benoni expert, GM Nick DeFirmian, didn't have much luck with this: 13.0-0 ♞c7 14.♙d2 c4 15.♙c2 ♙d7 16.f4 ♗xa4 17.♗xa4 b5 18.♗c3 b4



This is a somewhat typical sacrifice for counterplay, but here White can simply refuse to play along. I played: 19.♞f3! bxc3 20.♙xc3 ♞c5 21.♞ae1 and Black's in big trouble. Nick tried 21...♗g4 22.♗h1 ♙xc3 23.bxc3 ♗xe3 24.♞xe3 ♞ab8 25.f5 but could find nothing better than 25...♙xf5 26.♞e2! ♙e6 27.dxe6 fxe6 which was still losing in Bhat – DeFirmian, San Francisco (rapid) 2012.

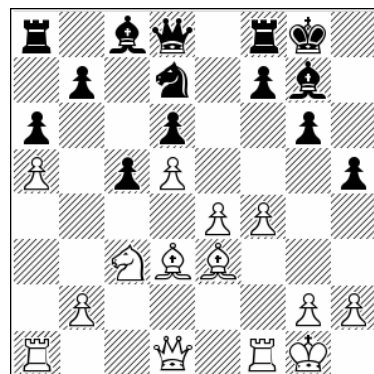
13.0-0

13.h3 h4 didn't seem right to me as Black might follow up with ...♗h5 and grab more kingside dark squares.

13...♗g4 14.a5 ♗xe3

14...♞h4 15.♗xg4 ♙xg4 16.g3! is a strong in-between move that leaves White winning after something like 16...♞e7 17.f3.

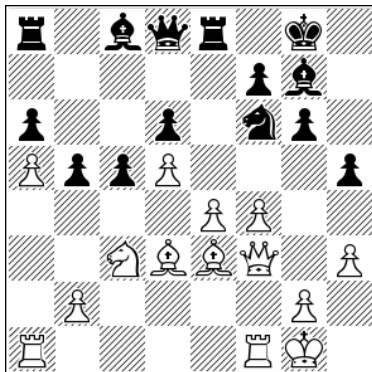
15.♙xe3 ♗d7 16.f4



White has several trumps: more space, the more active pieces, and plenty of dynamism in his

center with typical Benoni motifs of e5, ...dxe5, f5 to break down Black's position.

16...♖f6 17.h3 ♜e8 18.♞f3 b5



19.♙f2

Taking the bishop off the potentially exposed e-file and preparing either ♙f2-h4 or ♙f2-g3 to increase the central pressure. This is a typical anti-Benoni pattern, but I spent 30 minutes on this move, debating between 19.♙f2, 19.e5, and 19.axb6.

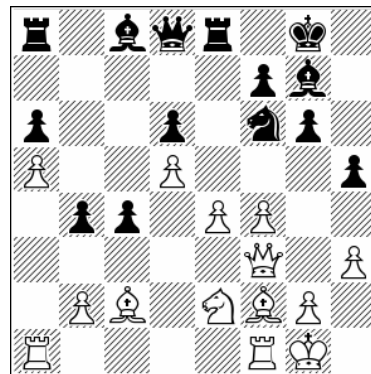
19.axb6 ♞xb6 20.♞f2 seemed to set up ideas of e5, but the confluence of pieces on the g1-a7 diagonal means that Black has resources with 20...♗xe4. The tactical trick in many lines is that Black has ideas of ...♞xe3 and ...♙d4 to skewer White's queen.

Meanwhile, I got lost in some variations after 19.e5 and so decided on the less forcing 19.♙f2, which seemed to preserve my options and also force Black into some decisions. Objectively, though, 19.e5 was slightly better.

19...c4

19...♙b7 20.♙h4 ♞d7 21.♞ad1 is what White wants, when moves like e5 hang in the air.

20.♙c2 b4 21.♗e2

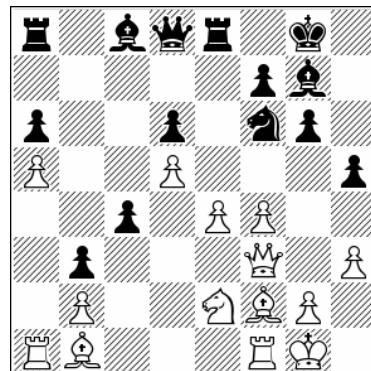


21...b3?!

It's only his next move that is the true blunder, but this move makes one commitment too soon. Bauer was trying to entomb the rook on a1 but this gives White the very useful c3-square for his knight, so even if Black follows it up correctly, White will have an easier time of it than after 21...♙d7.

Thus, a better move was 21...♙d7, keeping ...b3 in reserve, although it's true that after something like 22.♙h4 ♞c8 23.♗h1 ♙b5 24.♞ae1, White's still on top.

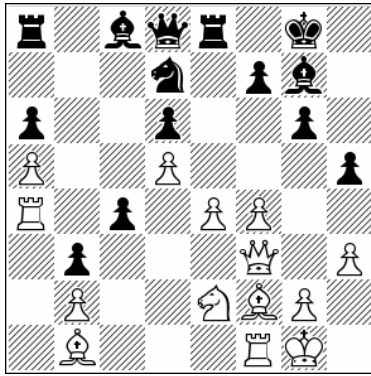
22.♙b1



22...♗d7?

22...♙d7 was best, but that wasn't Black's plan with 21...b3. After 22...♙d7, White has great squares for his minor pieces, and I was aiming to put a knight on c3 and bishop on h4. The game turns out even worse for Black though.

23.♞a4!



I tended to be good at finding rook lifts, and here this is the strongest move by a good margin.

23...♙xb2

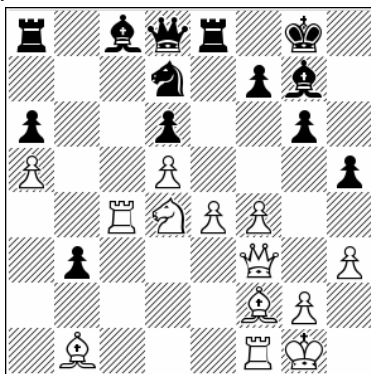
23...♖c7 24.♞c1 dials up the pressure.

24.♞xc4 ♙g7

24...♖xa5 25.♞c6 ♖b4 26.e5! and Black's position is falling apart. Taking on e5 allows ♙xg6!, for example.

25.♜d4

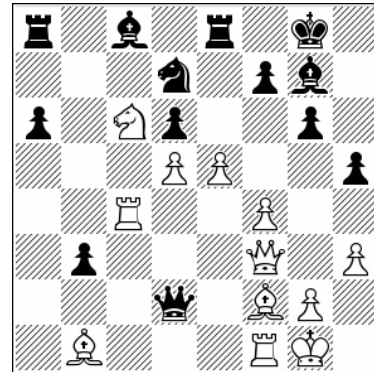
25.♞c6 was tempting, but I realized I wasn't going to win the game with just my rook on his side of the board. Like my old coach Mr. Shorman used to say, I needed some more force.



25...♖xa5

25...♙b7 26.♜c6 leaves Black's pieces short of air and with too many weaknesses to cover.

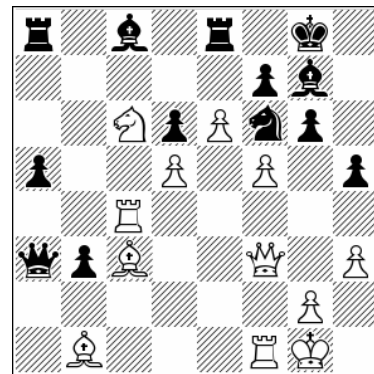
26.♜c6 ♖d2 27.e5



27...a5

27...dxe5 28.♙e1! was my plan: the queen is stuck and after 28...♖b2 29.♙c3 ♖a3 30.fxe5, Black's position is just terrible.

28.♙e1 ♖b2 29.♙c3 ♖a3 30.e6 ♜f6 31.f5



This is about as ugly a Benoni as you'll see.

31...b2 32.♖g3 ♞f8 33.fxg6 fxe6 34.♜e7† ♜h8
35.♖h4

1-0

Computers: The Gift and the Curse

I included a few pictures in Chapter 6 of my opening notes from 1997 on the ♙b5 Sicilian. My entire notes on both 1.e4 c5 2.♜f3 ♜c6 3.♙b5 and 2...d6 3.♙b5† took up a grand total of 4 pages. Back then, I often brought the latest *Chess Informant* issue with me when traveling to tournaments, and it would often be at least a month before notable games were published in magazines like *Inside Chess*. When I learned about Mark Crowther's *The Week in Chess* in the late-1990s, that was a sign of the increasing ease with which chess information was flowing around the world.

Taking advantage of those advancements in 2008, I typically started learning a new opening by collecting games from the database to see what the popular lines were currently and how those trends had

shifted over time. I kept a specific eye towards games between 2500+ players and annotated games. If I was going to play the opening regularly myself, I often would see what published material was out there on it and bought some more opening books as a result. Finally, I tried to practice the opening via blitz and rapid games.

While I could often play a new opening against a much lower-rated opponent without a lot of practice, developing some feel for the actual middlegames and possible decisions helped quite a bit when playing a new opening against similar or higher-rated opposition. Their own understanding of those openings had often been honed over a longer period, so going in cold was a recipe for disaster.

On the blitz side, I would typically make a new ICC account and play a bunch of blitz games to get some experience with the new opening. My short-term memory has generally been solid but practicing the opening in a low-pressure way helped build some muscle memory. And by starting a new account, I thought I'd see a variety of positions and lines played across the rating spectrum, while also (selfishly) preserving my 3000-blitz rating on my main account.

I also had a few practice partners from 2006 – 2010, primarily GMs Josh Friedel, Magesh Panchanathan, and Kidambi Sundararajan. All of us had made it to GM around the same time and I had gotten to know each of them through tournaments and travel. They became typical sparring partners for me and the several practice games we played helped me immensely.

Aside from those practice games, I never found most opening work that interesting on its own, so the vast majority of my opening lines were actually played, collected, or published by other people. Even when focusing on openings as a Grandmaster, it turns out my aversion to heavy opening preparation had continued!

GM Stelios Halkias – GM Vinay Bhat

Benidorm 2009

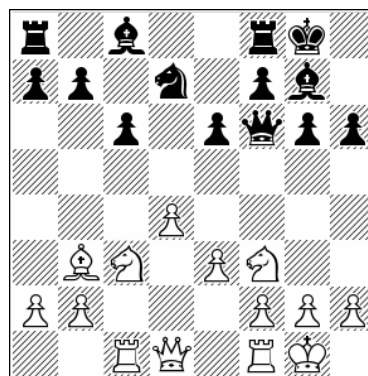
1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗f3 e6

I had been playing the Slav with 4...dxc4 and the Semi-Slav with 4...e6 for some time. I figured though that my reliance on the Slav more recently would mean he'd focus his preparation there.

5.♙g5 h6 6.♙xf6 ♖xf6

White has a number of choices here and while I was confident we'd get to this point, I wasn't sure what direction he'd choose next. To this point in time, I had done well against lines with 7.e3 and 7.g3, but was not as convincing against 7.♖c2 or 7.♖b3 (I had lost a game recently to GM Yermolinsky after 7.♖b3 for example). Halkias chose the absolute main line though.

7.e3 ♗d7 8.♙d3 dxc4 9.♙xc4 g6 10.0-0 ♙g7
11.♖c1 0-0 12.♙b3



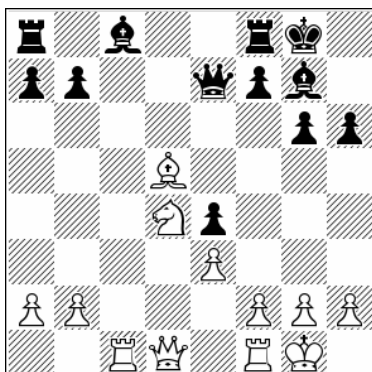
There are plenty of alternatives up to this point (and some later too), but that opening discussion is not really the focus here. At the board though, I spent a few minutes in a few spots to replay some of the lines in my head. However, Halkias took my “hesitation” on this and the next move as actual unfamiliarity.

12...♖e7 13.♗a4

13.♗e4 b6 14.♙a4 ♗b8! is a key idea for Black, so that he can bring out his light-squared bishop. Thus, White puts the knight on the less

exposed a4-square, and going towards the flank means Black should consider a central response.

13...e5 14.d5 e4 15.♘d4 cxd5 16.♘c3 ♘f6
17.♘xd5 ♘xd5 18.♙xd5



18...♙h3!

Halkias realized that my thinking earlier for a few minutes was only a refresher.

19.♙xe4

On 19.♙b3, I was planning 19...♞ad8 20.♙xb7 ♞d7 21.♙b3 ♙xg2 and Black has no problems: ...♙g5† will regain the piece.

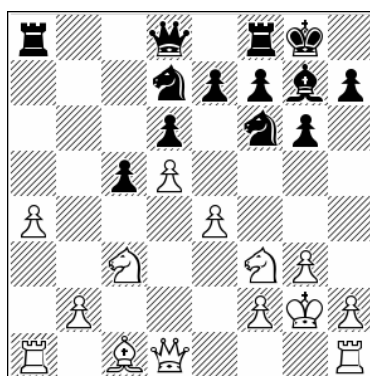
19...♙xe4 20.gxh3 ♞ad8 21.♙g4
½–½

I accepted White's draw offer. The draw is obvious after 21...♙xg4† 22.hxg4 ♙xd4 23.exd4 ♞xd4 24.f3 ♞e8 25.♞c2, but Black can keep queens on with 21...♙e7 as well. I didn't mind a quick draw against a solid GM – an easy day at the office!

But what about 18...♙h3! – isn't that an example of great preparation? Well... it actually wasn't my own discovery. Just a few days earlier, Svidler – Gelfand from the FIDE Grand Prix in Nalchik (Russia) featured that move, and I had happened to play through the game in my daily review of top-GM games. So while I did have to remember it during the game, I was mostly just standing on the shoulders of giants.

Putting the Benko to Sleep

The Benko Gambit (1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 and related versions with ...g6/♘f3 thrown in first) has always been conceptually fascinating. At times, I wished I was playing a decade or two earlier when there was a lot more exploration of openings like this. One reason the Benko is now so rare at the GM level is because of the following line of the Benko Gambit Accepted: White's 12.a4! move puts Black under serious pressure.



If you look in the database, you'll see some of my games from 2010 are some of the earliest ever with this line and the first games played by a GM. I wish I could take credit for this discovery on my own, but the thanks are really owed to a chess aficionado who posted in an online forum.

I had a subscription to the monthly Chess Publishing service to get annotated games on a regular basis with a focus on a wide range of openings. I also looked at their attached chess forum and in 2009, I noticed a thread raising this 12.a4 move as a possible improvement. I looked at the analysis posted and found

myself agreeing with most of the conclusions, and with just a bit more time on my own to refine things in a few spots, I had a primary weapon versus the Benko. Largely thanks to stumbling across this forum thread, I put up a perfect 100% score versus the Benko.

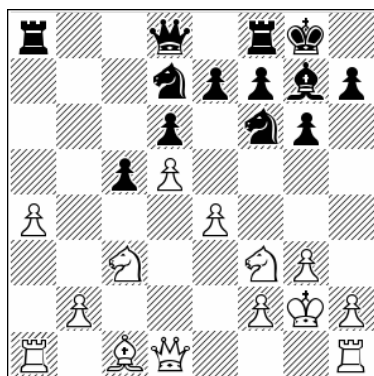
GM Vinay Bhat – IM Hugo Tirard

Metz 2010

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 ♙xa6
6.♘c3 g6 7.e4

At the time, 7.g3 was still considered the most challenging response to the Benko Gambit, but I was following something I read from an anonymous source on the internet.

7...♙xf1 8.♔xf1 d6 9.g3 ♙g7 10.♔g2 0-0
11.♘f3 ♘bd7 12.a4!

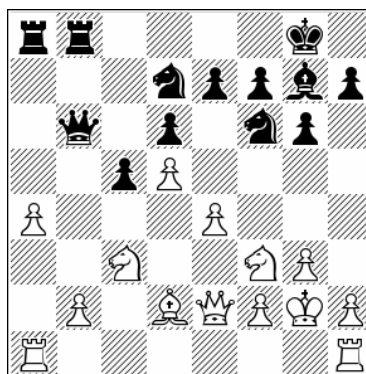


12...♗b6

12...♘g4 has been played a few times as well, and while 13.♗e2 has become more popular, I preferred 13.♘d2. For example: 13.♘d2 ♙xc3 14.bxc3 ♘gf6 15.♗c2 ♗b6 16.♙b2 ♘e8 17.c4 ♘c7 18.♙c3 and White is winning, as in Bhat – Lorenzo de la Riva, Spain 2010.

Besides 12...♘g4 and 12...♗b6, there are moves like 12...♗a5 or 12...♙a6 to consider, but I'm not very optimistic about Black's position in any of them.

13.♗e2 ♙fb8 14.♙d2!



The b2-pawn is poisoned, as after 14...♗xb2 15.♙hb1 ♗c2 16.♘e1, the queen is trapped. Tactically then, White completes his development and secures the queenside, after which advances there or in the center are on the cards.

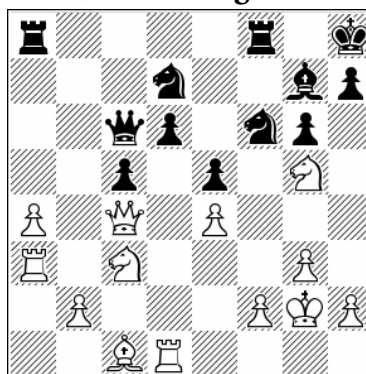
14...♗b3 15.♙hb1 e6

Black tries to break free, but his pieces aren't that well positioned for an opening in the center. But if he didn't do anything, White would push him back with ♙a3, b3, and then slowly rearrange on the queenside, all the while keeping his pawn plus.

16.♙a3 ♗b7 17.dxe6 fxe6 18.♙f4 ♗c6 19.♙d1

Now it's obvious that Black wasn't quite ready for the opening of the center.

19...e5 20.♗c4† ♔h8 21.♘g5! ♙f8 22.♙c1



White's position is winning, and while Tirard continued to struggle on, the result was never in doubt.

22... ♖b6 23. ♗e6 ♜ae8 24. ♗b3 h6 25. ♗f7† ♜xf7
 26. ♗xf7 ♗xe4 27. ♗xe4 ♗xe4† 28. ♗f3 ♗xf3†
 29. ♜xf3 e4 30. ♗f7 ♗c4 31. ♗b7 ♗d4 32. ♗xh6
 ♗xb2 33. ♗b1 ♗d4 34. ♗b8 ♜xb8 35. ♜xb8† ♗h7
 36. ♗f8 d5 37. ♜c8 e3 38. ♜xe3 ♗xe3† 39. ♗f3 c4
 40. a5 c3 41. a6 ♗c4 42. ♜c7† ♗g8 43. ♗h6
 1-0

These days, this line has largely put the Benko Gambit out of business. I suspect Magnus Carlsen using it to beat Bologan in 2012 did a little more for its popularity than my earlier wins, but still, it all started for me with that forum post.

My reliance on other people’s opening work occasionally backfired – two memorable losses were to Wang Yue (during the 2002 US – China Summit) and to GM Arkadij Naiditsch in 2009. But on balance, this decision to rely on existing games and material allowed me to put more energy into some other parts of my game: I still had to learn the openings and variations, but I could do the basic research more passively and instead put more effort into reviewing my own games, working on middlegame problems, or analyzing games from a game collection for example.

The technology was helping my opponents too, though. Over time, I found that against GMs, I wasn’t getting much with the 4.e3 Nimzo or 4. ♗f4 and 4. ♗g5 against the Grunfeld; and against lower-rated players, I was having to work harder to get an advantage too. As my preferred “unstable equality” became more elusive, I often tried to stay a moving target by having another line in most openings to keep people guessing.

When I played Sam Shankland at the 2010 US Championship for example, I prepared the Exchange Grunfeld with 10. ♗b1, a new line for me at the time. The first new move of the game came a few moves later and I finally took a walk around the playing hall after my 17th move, 17. ♗d2-b2. While Sam was thinking, I noticed a strange coincidence: the game between GMs Akobian and Yermolinsky had the exact same position as ours

after 17. ♗b2! Our games diverged at that point, and in the end, Yermolinsky’s response proved to be objectively better. No GM has repeated this line with 17. ♗b2 since, but somehow two of us played it on the same day at the same event.

My own opening research was usually done in conjunction with a chess engine. I tried to avoid turning my own brain off and letting it drive completely, but sometimes I was lured in and went for long, concrete variations that had my engine’s stamp of approval. This also seemed to work out in my favor: alongside a general explosion in the amount of theory everybody tries to remember, there are also more instances of a player forgetting a line they had looked at before, and so relatedly, the practical value of a real surprise only continues to grow.

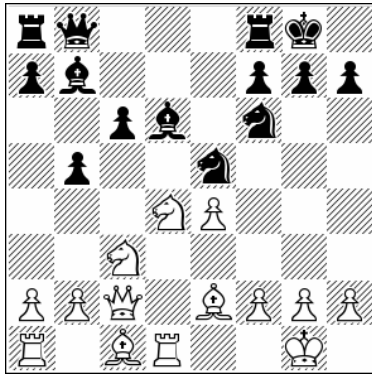
GM Varuzhan Akobian – GM Vinay Bhat Montreal 2009

The 2009 Montreal International was one of the strongest fields I’d play in. It was a 12-person Category 15 round-robin, with multiple 2700+ players. As the lowest-rated player in the field, there were plenty of aspects to my game that I would need to improve to compete with this group, and I figured some opening lines were likely to come up. One of them was the Anti-Meran line here after 11. ♗d1.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. ♗c3 ♗f6 4. e3 e6 5. ♗f3 ♗bd7
 6. ♗c2 ♗d6 7. ♗d3 0-0 8. 0-0 dxc4 9. ♗xc4 b5
 10. ♗e2 ♗b7 11. ♗d1

I’ll share what became my general antidote to this in the next chapter. But at the time of this game, I had prepared something very different.

11... ♗b8 12. e4 e5 13. dxe5 ♗xe5 14. ♗d4



14...b4

I'd already played this position from both sides after 14...♖ed7, so this was a very familiar position to me. But my pawn push was a new move, and it was a very committal choice.

Now the immediate 15.♗a4 walks into 15...c5, and so White flicks in a threat of his own first.

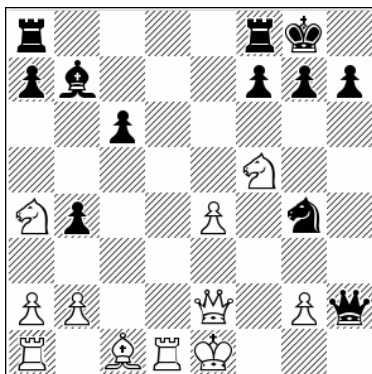
15.♗f5 ♕c5 16.♗a4

Positionally this is a disaster for Black – Black's queen and bishop are silly on b8 and b7 and the queenside advances have left a big hole on c5 – but I was banking on the following sacrifice.

16...♕xf2† 17.♗xf2 ♖eg4† 18.♕xg4

My opening file for this also included dozens of lines after 18.♗e1 ♜xh2 19.♕g5, but I concluded Black's position was very playable after both 19...♜ae8 and 19...♕c8.

18...♗xg4† 19.♗e1 ♜xh2 20.♜e2



My file also had multiple other options for White on moves 19 and 20, and most were lines I could work out over the board. So, while I was still in my preparation, the fact Akobian hadn't slowed down did worry me a little bit. Had I missed something?

20...♜ad8

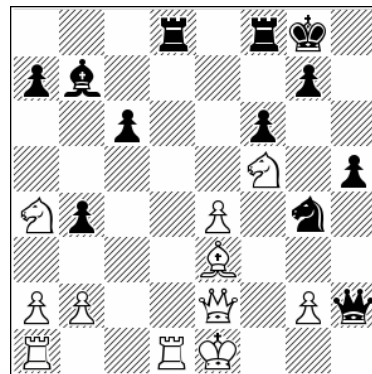
In my notes, I considered 20...♜fe8 as bad and 20...♜ae8 as interesting, but not as reliable as the game move. Still, GM Sedlak played this well after this game, so maybe there's still more to discover.

21.♕g5!

Varuzhan was still playing quickly: he started with 90 minutes and still had 88 here after 21 moves!

When I looked at this position for the first time, I also considered 21.♕e3 and 21.♞d2, but his bishop move is the strongest. At the time though, I had 21.♕e3 as the main line with this ♕g5 move as an inconsequential difference.

21...f6 22.♕e3 h5



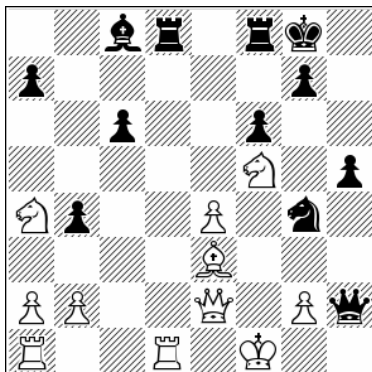
23.♗f1?

Var went in the tank for this move, spending 48 minutes, but he wasn't able to find or remember the best move. That turns out to be 23.♜f1! and the evaluation turns on the fact that White will later have ♜c4 with check (highlighting the 21.♕g5 intermezzo). The whole thing is incredibly concrete and difficult to work out at the board, as evidenced by Var's struggle.

At our post-mortem though, he suspected this was right and it was confirmed by some of the work he and GM Sargissian (his second) had done on this line. While nobody had played 14...b4 before, it isn't so crazy a try if you see this piece sacrifice, and so they had analyzed it too. Luckily for me, Var hadn't refreshed his memory on this specific line that day.

By the way, a quick rundown of some alternatives include: 23.♔f2 ♕a6!, 23.♕c5 ♕a6!, 23.♖f3 ♕a6!, and 23.♗c5 ♕c8, with at least equality at the end of all these lines.

23...♕c8!



I spent 7 minutes here double-checking things. Unlike Var, I had reviewed this in the morning.

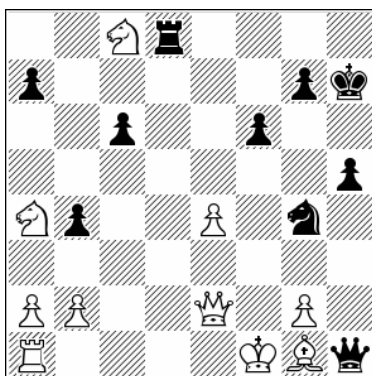
24.♗e7† ♔h7 25.♕g1!

White has to take some care here – he’s up material, but Black still has attacking ideas centered around ...f5, and so White should make sure to liquidate in the right order.

25...♖h1 26.♗xd8!

Again, trading on d8 is correct to prevent Black from attacking via ...f5 later.

26...♗xd8 27.♗xc8



27...♗h2†

Now though, Black has nothing better than to repeat, as he is down material otherwise.

28.♔f2 ♗g4† 29.♔f1 ♗h2† 30.♔f2 ♗g4† 31.♔f1

31.♔g3 is riskier, but also ultimately equal, after 31...g5.

31...♗h2†

½–½

I had done the work on this line myself and shared it with two other GMs for vetting, but we all missed the ♖c4† nuance added by ♕g5. Ignorance was bliss for me, but for Akobian, he was burdened by having to remember too much theory and/or the doubt given I had clearly prepared this line.

Still, had I known that this sacrifice with 14...b4 and 16...♕xf2† was not quite sound, I wouldn’t have played it in a serious game against a strong player. Outside of blitz or other unrated games, I never felt comfortable playing a total bluff in the opening.

Interestingly though, I was comfortable with bluffing later in the game: I occasionally turned down draw offers in worse positions, but each time, there was some context as to my opponent, the time situation, and/or my estimation of the danger in continuing. Up front, as in most openings, I wasn’t willing to take the same risk. In that sense, I viewed the struggle in the opening phase as one to be tolerated rather than one to be truly embraced, like I viewed the rest of the game.

My Learnings and Progress

Opening books and courses tend to dominate the market, but how important are openings really?

There’s no one-size-fits-all answer, but from my own progression, openings were relatively unimportant to me until NM and then gradually became more important at every step from IM to GM. There’s a lot

of pressure for chess professionals to generate new ideas, and as players delve deeper and deeper, there's even more difficulty in remembering all that research.

Still, the choice doesn't have to be between following cutting-edge theory (like taking on the main lines of the Nimzo-Indian) versus offbeat openings such as the Trompowsky. As my game against Ivanov shows, there's still plenty of life in older, less fashionable lines of mainstream openings. Heavy-duty opening research also wasn't the most interesting or fun part of chess for me, so even as a GM, I was happy to stand on the shoulders of giants.

Chapter 18

Ambidexterity in the Opening

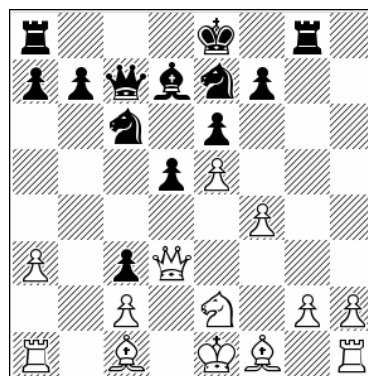
My memory, and especially my chess memory, has never been a particularly strong suit. When I focused on chess full-time, I saw improvements in my recall of games and positions, but that seemed to take me to average at best for a GM. I often mis-remembered specific opening move-orders and my own games.

In December 2008, I was going over a recent endgame of mine with everybody in the GM-House. I had an extra pawn against GM Alexander Stripunsky in a rook-and-pawn endgame with pawns on both sides of the board. I chose to follow a rook-on-the-side technique, based on an example I attributed to a Karpov – Seirawan game that Karpov converted.

My own endgame finished in a draw, and I was confused because I was certain I had seen that very similar technique work before. None of us could find such a game though! It became a running joke when we forgot something to say, “but Karpov – Seirawan!”

This highlighted a real challenge for me while studying more opening theory: how would I remember it all? One option was to stick to a narrow repertoire. I had done that for years but wasn't content to do that as a professional. I partly wanted to understand more positions more deeply, but I also thought my results would improve if I could pick an opening line based on my opponent.

One of the first ways my repertoire expanded as a GM was within the Winawer French. I had started playing it in 2004 (see Chapter 12), but starting in 2008, I felt there was a cloud over the 7. ♖g4 0-0 line. I began to investigate the Poisoned Pawn lines with 7. ♖g4 ♖c7 (or 7. ♖g4 cxd4). As usual, I poked around some sidelines in addition to looking at some of the main lines, which I took to be the position in the next diagram after 11... ♗bc6 12. ♖d3 ♘d7.



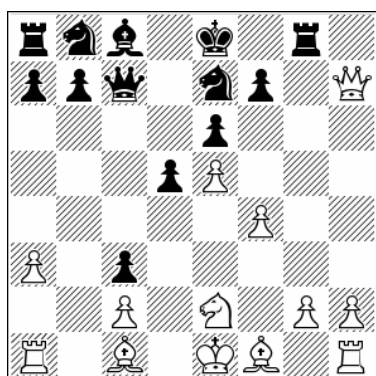
My faith in this version of the Poisoned Pawn wavered over time. It often felt like a maze of critical variations, a few of which were hanging by a thread. My results followed that characterization: chaotic positions regularly, but with only one loss in a wild game to Ray Robson. In late 2010, I switched to 11... ♗bc6 12. ♖d3 d4 as that seemed more stable.

To help myself and my leaky memory, I tried to summarize the Poisoned Pawn Winawer into a set of guidelines with typical plans and maneuvers and only some short, specific sequences listed out on one page. I made these opening notes for myself in multiple openings. Each was about one page long, and I tried to review it if I thought I'd see it that day. The Poisoned Pawn Winawer summary, along with my broad research approach to put it together, paid off in the next game.

As a side note, the most charitable explanation for my memory of that endgame technique was that I had seen the examples Van der Wiel – Seirawan, Haninge 1990, and Karpov – Knaak, Baden-Baden 1992. Those did feature some impressive, rook-on-the-side techniques, but unfortunately, they also didn't map closely to my endgame with Stripunsky.

FM Rahul Sangma – GM Vinay Bhat
Delhi 2009

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘xc3†
6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.♖g4 cxd4 8.♖xg7 ♖g8 9.♖xh7
♗c7 10.♘e2 dxc3 11.f4



11...♘d7

By 2009, I was already playing both 1.e4 e5 and 1.e4 e6, but I saw that Sangma had beaten GM Nigel Short in a Closed Lopez recently. Given his strong play in that game and my expectation of an Advance French, I chose the French. But the speed with which he was playing suggested some specific preparation against what I had most recently played (11...♘bc6 12.♖d3 ♘d7 versus GM

Becerra) and so I rolled the dice on my second line at the time.

12.♖d3 ♘f5?!

I said earlier that I don't play opening lines that I don't believe in, and this is the exception to prove the rule. When I was researching the Poisoned Pawn Winawer, I came across this 11...♘d7 and 12...♘f5 idea of Bronstein's, but I also found out that Khalifman had published a refutation starting with 13.♖g1. That is indeed the best move, but I viewed it as the first of many difficult moves to find over the board, and so I took the chance. My decision was likely helped along by some of the self-imposed pressure I was putting on myself to generate imbalances against slightly lower rated players.

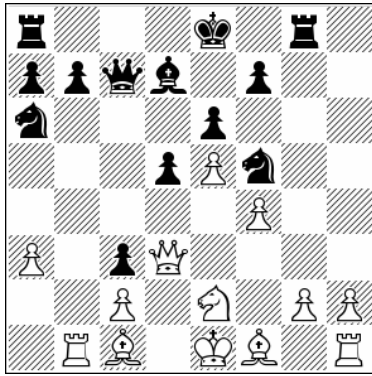
After a few minutes, Sangma continued in the spirit of an 11...♘bc6 line. And having played this once – and seen it annotated in some opening references afterwards – I never again played this line in a rated game.

13.♖b1

13.♘xc3 ♘a6! is the point behind Bronstein's original idea and this is quite nice for Black. The initiative conducts itself after ...♘c5, ...d4, and so on.

13.♖xc3 was the main alternative my opponent considered. He was concerned about 13...♖xc3† 14.♘xc3 ♘a6 with play down the c-file. That's a reasonable assessment, but I was going to play 13...♘c6, transposing back into the main lines! Amusingly, that would have been perfect for him, as he had prepared the main line there with 14.♖b1 – that's why he played 13.♖b1, hoping for 13...♘c6 14.♖xc3.

13...♘a6!



Utilizing Bronstein's idea here as well. Black threatens to play ...♖c5 and ...♗e4, when the knights will be a real problem for White. Now he sunk into thought.

14. ♖g1

14. ♖xc3 leaves Black with a bunch of options – both 14...♖c8 and 14...♗c5 are reasonable here, but I was planning 14...♖xc3† 15. ♗xc3 ♗c5 with solid compensation. Black has ideas for counterplay on the c- and g-files, along with ...d4. Now, however, I might be tempted to go with 14...♖c8 instead.

14... ♗a4!?

One move makes all the difference in the world. Black of course doesn't want to see his knight dislodged from f5 so he has to resort to tactics to maintain it, and these tactics only work because of the inclusion of 13. ♖b1 ♗a6.

I thought about 14...0-0 as well, not fearing any potential queen trade on the c-file because that opens up counterplay on the c-file. The choice hinges on the evaluation of the game continuation followed by 16. ♖xc3 d4, which I evaluated to be good compensation, but the computer considers castling to be the clearly better of the two positions.

15. g4 ♗c5

Now White has a number of options. 16. ♖h3? seems to set a trap for Black with 16...♗xc2 17. gxf5, but the trap turns out to be for White after 17...0-0!

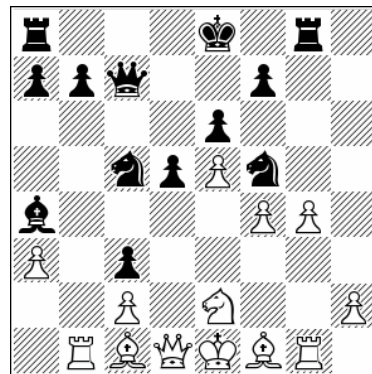
Meanwhile, after 16. ♖xc3, Black should avoid 16...♗h4 17. ♗d4 a6 18. ♖g3! when White's

consolidated the 3rd rank in typical Poison Pawn fashion.

I was planning 16. ♖xc3 d4, when trades on d4 cost White the c2-pawn in the end. So then 17. ♖c4 suggests itself, when my opponent and I differed in our preferred approach. He was worried about 17...♗xc2 18. ♖xc2 d3, which is complicated, but White should come out on top after dealing with the move-by-move tactics. I was instead planning 17...♗e3, with 18. ♗xe3 dxe3 19. ♗c3 ♖d8!, which is indeed good compensation for Black. The computer is more cold-blooded though and prefers 19. ♖g3 with advantage. Just a typical French!

16. ♖d1?

After another long think (he used up nearly an hour for his four moves starting with 13. ♖b1), he decided against the complications after 16. ♖xc3 d4. It'd be a reasonable move except for my response.



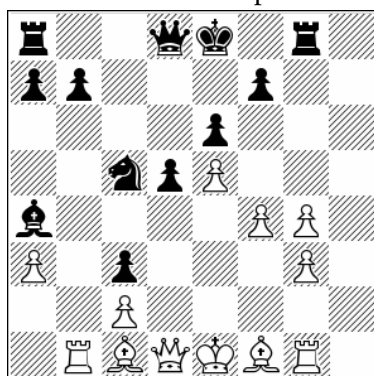
16... ♖d8!

A very strong backwards move that my opponent missed. Now 17. gxf5? ♖xg1 18. ♗xg1 ♖h4† 19. ♗e2 ♖xh2† 20. ♗e1 is reminiscent of Karpov – Kasparov, Linares 1993, where all of Karpov's pieces were on the 1st rank well into the game. This one also ends poorly for White after 20...♗xc2 or the even more forceful 20...♖g3† 21. ♗e2 d4! 22. ♖xd4 ♗xc2.

17. ♗g3 ♗xg3 18. hgx3

18. ♖xg3 ♖h4, threatening ...♗e4 or to take on h2, leaves Black clearly better. Still, even after the pawn recapture, Black is clearly better thanks to his better developed pieces and safer king

position. And unlike the normal Poisoned Pawn lines, Black isn't even down a pawn.



18...Nxe4?!

The knight looks better on e4, but that's not a guaranteed evaluation, and I had another piece to improve first. I also considered 18...Qe7 and 18...Rh8, but moving the knight forward felt natural enough and I didn't consider the b7-pawn to really be up for grabs.

18...Rh8 was most accurate. Rooks belong on open files! It's also not easy for White to deny Black the e4-square, but it's easier to see White seizing the h-file.

19. Qd3

19. Rxb7 Rb8 20. Rxb8 Qxb8 21. Qe3 Rh8 was my plan, when Black is dominating. For the low price of a pawn, Black has more ways into White's camp now on the b- and h-files.

White's best defensive setup is with 19. Qe3, and then after for example 19...Qe7 20. Rb4 Qc6 21. Qd3, White's position is worse but playable.

19...Qe7 20. Qf3? Qc5!

Admitting my prior mistake.

21. Rh1 d4 22. Rh7 0-0-0 23. g5

23. Qe2 would have covered the c2-pawn, but then Black can invade on the h-file: 23...Rh8! 24. Rh5 Qd7! with a clear plus, as after ...Qd5, the queen will get behind enemy lines.

23...Qxc2!

23...Qc6 was also possible, but after 24. Qe2, it takes some time to challenge the h-file – the

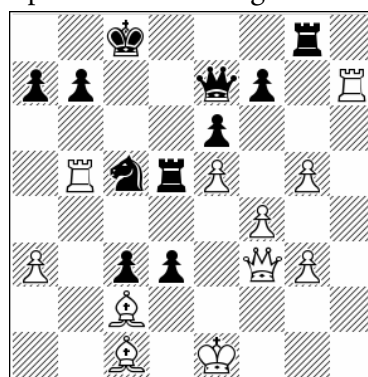
immediate ...Rh8 walks into g6, and after 24...Qf8 25. g4! Rh8 26. Rh5!, White continues to keep the kingside jammed up.

24. Qxc2 d3 25. Rb5

My opponent also seriously considered 25. Qd1, but Black's attack after 25...Qd7! is too strong. He still can't really move the bishop from c2, while Black's queen is going to come in on the light squares.

25...Rd5

My idea was to guard the c5-knight and prepare ...Rgd8 once the d-file was opened. But 25...Qb8! is even stronger: I missed that if White sacrifices on c5, Black can flick in ...d2† to save that passed pawn before taking back on c5.



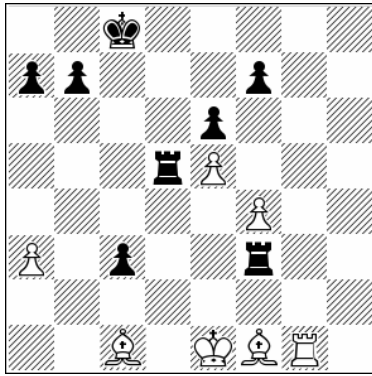
26. g6?

He anticipated my doubling rooks on the d-file, so he tried to deflect the g8-rook. But this only accelerates the end compared to the more obvious 26. Rxc5†.

26...Rxc5† 27. Rxc5 Qxc5 28. Qxd3 Qg1† 29. Qf1 Rxc3

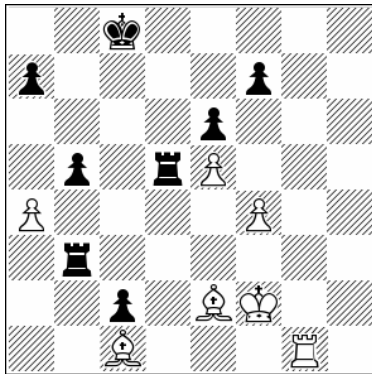
A key difference with the sacrifice on c5 before (on move 26) and after the g6 push.

30. Rh1 Rxf3 31. Rxc1



Nominally, White isn't doing so bad in this endgame, but Black's c-pawn is a monster.

31...c2 32.♙e2 ♖b3 33.♘f2 b5 34.a4



34...a6

I figured 34...bxa4 was winning, but I saw the winning plan in the game right away and didn't see the winning here quickly. Here's how it might have ended had I taken the pawn: 35.♙c4 ♖d1 36.♙xb3 axb3 37.♙a3 (37.♙b2 a5 38.♖e1 ♖b1! [I missed this idea] 39.♙a3 b2 wins) 37...a5 38.♖e1 ♖b1! – this is the key idea, whether White's bishop is on b2 or a3, as now ...b2 and queening is unstoppable in the long run.

35.♖e1 ♖b1 36.axb5 axb5 37.♙f3 ♖c5 38.♘e3 b4 39.♘d4 ♖c7 40.♖h1 b3 41.f5 ♖xc1 0–1

Most other players associate me with the French Defense and the Winawer in particular, and games like this with striking piece play helped build that perception. In fact, years after I stopped playing, I was speaking with GM Vishy Anand after he gave a short speech at Google and he asked me about whether I had seen some of his recent games in the Winawer – he specifically called out the line because, as he noted, I was a Winawer exponent.

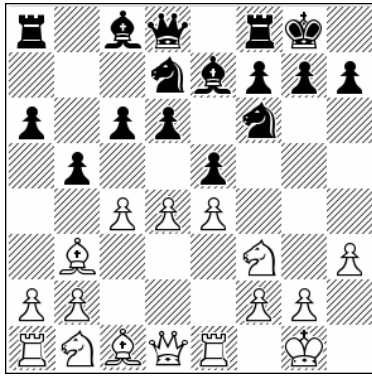
However, as I became more serious about chess, I decided to add the Ruy Lopez (also known as the Spanish Game) as Black against 1.e4. There were a lot of benefits of this addition for me:

- The positions were complicated without always being sharp (sharp often equating to more memorization in my book).
- There were a lot of major variations for Black to bounce between.
- Those major variations were generally on more stable ground than the Poisoned Pawn Winawer.
- They highlighted a number of different pawn structures and patterns that could be applied to many other openings and typical structures.

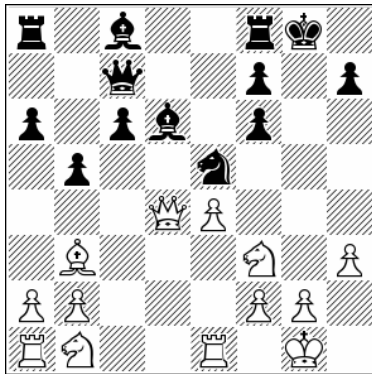
I've heard some strong players say that every serious chessplayer should play the Spanish Game from one side or another in their career, and I'm inclined to agree.

One of the main benefits for me was in terms of analogous structures and positions to other openings: learning and studying the Closed Spanish seems to translate to more positions than the French Winawer. My first main line in the Ruy Lopez was the Keres Variation, which has strong similarities to many Benoni structures. I later added the Zaitsev to my repertoire, which brought up some parallels to the Najdorf and King's Indian and even some possible transpositions to the Spanish Breyer. And from the Breyer, there's an amazing analog to a critical Semi-Slav structure that helped me truly believe in a possible solution to the challenges posed by the variation seen in my game with GM Akobian from the prior chapter.

Imagine a Breyer that starts with **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3 ♘b8 10.d4 ♘bd7**, and then the once common: **11.c4 c6**

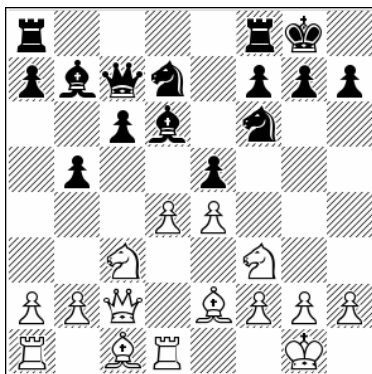


Now after 12.c5, Black should play 12...♖c7 and then after 13.cxd6 ♗xd6 14.♗g5, Black should play 14...exd4 15.♗xf6 gxf6 (not 15...♗xf6 16.e5) 16.♖xd4 ♗e5 with good play.



The resilience of Black's position was shown across numerous games from the 1950s and 1960s.

Compare this to a main line of the Meran (as seen in my game against Akobian from the previous chapter), with 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗f3 ♗f6 4.♗c3 e6 5.e3 ♗bd7 6.♖c2 ♗d6 7.♗d3 dxc4 8.♗xc4 b5 9.♗e2 ♗b7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗d1, and now 11...♖c7 (instead of 11...♖b8 which I played there) 12.e4 e5.



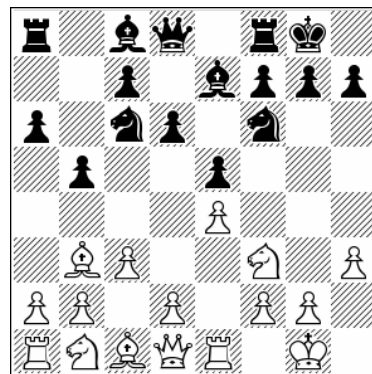
Then 13.g3 is one main line, while 13.♗g5 is another – in the first, 13.g3 ♗fe8 14.dxe5 ♗xe5 15.♗g5 ♗xf3† 16.♗xf3 ♗e5 17.♗xf6 gxf6 is about equal, while in the second 13.♗g5 exd4

14.♗xd4 ♗e5 15.♗xf6 gxf6 is again about equal. From two very different openings, we've arrived at very similar structures and piece arrangements! And while I felt strange allowing the doubled f-pawns in this Meran line, stumbling across this analogous approach built my confidence in the 11...♖c7 line of the Meran.

Finally, in a surprising twist even for me at first, my results in the Spanish were clearly better than with the French. I only started playing the Spanish in 2007, so simply comparing my results across the two from that time onwards, my performance rating differentials were significantly better with the Spanish than the French. Maybe it has to do with the objective quality of the opening, but stylistically, the Spanish often better fit my aggressive-positional tendencies than some of the more direct melees I found myself in with the French. Still, I could play some wild Spanish games too.

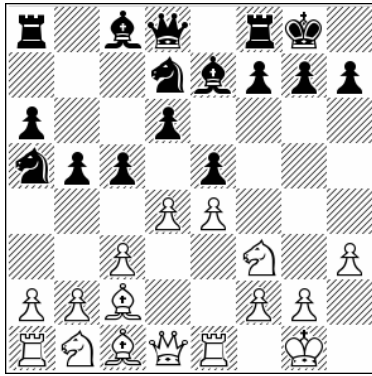
IM Ray Robson – GM Vinay Bhat Lubbock 2009

1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♗f6 5.0-0 ♗e7 6.♗e1 b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3



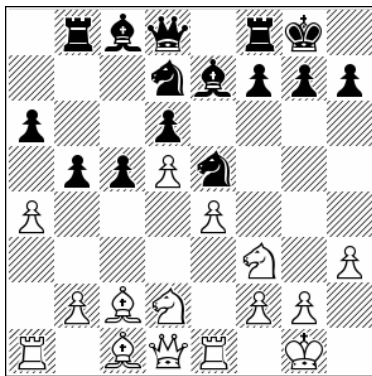
This is the real starting point for the main lines of the Closed Lopez, and at various times, I've played 9...♗a5, 9...♗d7, and 9...♗b7 here.

9...♗a5 10.♗c2 c5 11.d4 ♗d7



From the Chigorin Variation (9...♖a5), we've moved towards the Keres (or Graf) Variation and it's a somewhat more modern and combative approach. With ...♖a5 and ...c5, Black fought for central space, and with ...♖d7, he hopes to specifically target the central dark squares with ...♙f6.

12.♖bd2 exd4 13.cxd4 ♖c6 14.d5 ♖ce5 15.a4 ♜b8



So far this is all main-line theory and both of us had played quickly, but Ray's next move was a small surprise.

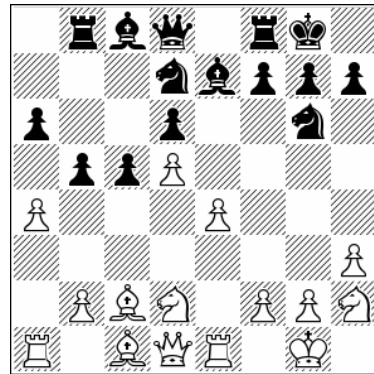
16.♖h2!?

The start of a plan to push Black off the board without any exchange on e5. It entails some cost though – White can only threaten f4 here after making additional weaknesses.

The main line at the time was 16.♖xe5, but that could lead to a number of tactically forced draws. I had done well there when my opponents wanted to play on further, including a nice win from 2007 against IM Lev Milman.

16...♖g6

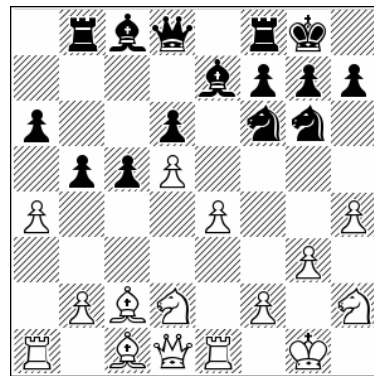
Black takes control of the f4-square and clears e5 for his other knight.



17.g3

17.♖df1 also prepares f4, but with 17...♙g5!, Black gets a favorable exchange of dark-squared bishops. After that, Black can really go to work on the central dark squares with ...♙f6, ...♖de5, and ...♖f4.

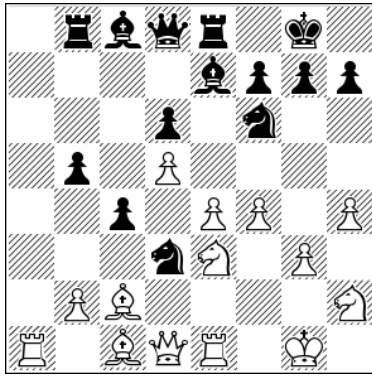
17...♖f6 18.h4



18...h5?

During the game, I thought this was the right move because it stopped h4-h5 and secured the g4-square. Unfortunately, it's a bit slow. I didn't have a 1-pager for this core opening line at the time!

18...♖e5 was the right move. It might seem weird to move this knight around so often – after all, didn't it go to g6 from e5 just a couple moves ago? True, but g2-g3 and h3-h4 have weakened White's position somewhat. Before the dark squares like f4 were key, but now White has those under control, and it's the light squares that need targeting. Here's one example of Black's potential: 19.♖df1 c4 20.♖e3 ♜e8 21.axb5 axb5 22.f4 ♖d3!



A typical sac in the Benoni, and if the pawn were on g6 and bishop were on g7, that's what this would be. 23.♙xd3 cxd3 24.♚xd3 ♜f8 25.♞d1 ♝xe4! 26.♞xe4 ♜f5 27.g4 ♜xe4 28.♚d4 ♚c8 left Black in full control in Erenburg – Hanley, Port Erin 2005.

19.f4

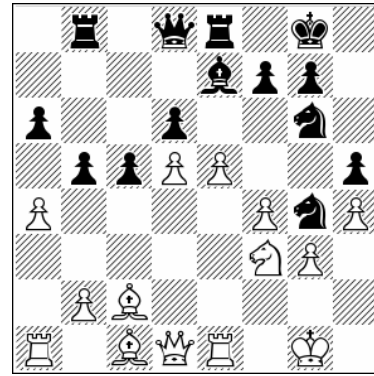
Now the g6-knight is dominated, the h5-pawn is a liability, and White is under no pressure anywhere. I spent about 40(!) minutes here, and that's largely a reflection of the fact I didn't like my position anymore.

19...♜g4?!

My original plan was 19...♞g4, with vague ideas of activating the bishop from f6, trading knights and planting a bishop on g4, and/or sacrificing something on h4. But after 20.♞df3, White already has ideas of e4-e5 (because a ♙xg6 intermezzo will eliminate one defender of the e5-square). Still, this was the right way to go, as after 20...c4, Black has more options than in the game.

I wanted a trade or two to ease my cramped position, but the bishop is a high price to pay as we'll see.

20.♞xg4 ♞xg4 21.♞f3 ♝e8 22.e5



22...♞f8

22...dxe5? 23.♙xg6 fxg6 24.fxe5 would be capitulation. The game doesn't look much better, but at least White doesn't have connected passed pawns.

23.♜f5!?

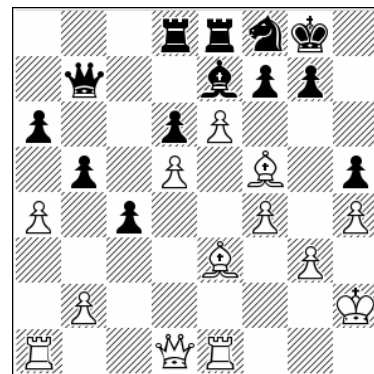
This was a little mysterious to me, but White was preparing to exchange knights on h2 without allowing any ...♚d7/...♚c8 ideas to support the g4-knight.

The above plan makes some sense, but I was more afraid of 23.axb5 axb5 24.♞g2, when Black has no real activity and no clear way to develop further, with ♞h2 on deck later.

23...♚b6 24.♞g2 ♝bd8

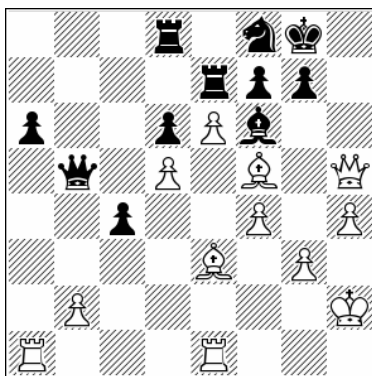
Strategically, Black's position is in ruins so he has to rely on tactics to keep himself in the game. With the rook move, Black sets up some latent threats against the d5-pawn.

25.♞h2 ♞xh2 26.♞xh2 c4 27.♜e3 ♚b7 28.e6



With ...dxe5 an actual threat, White pushes forward. This pawn is a real thorn in Black's side, but I was also happy to have a square for my bishop finally.

28...♙f6 29.axb5 ♖xb5 30.♗xh5 ♞e7



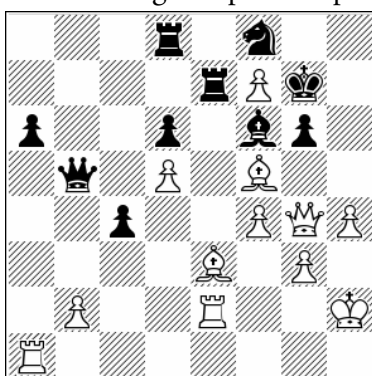
The position has optically become more random. Black's pieces have some squares and they're making some threats for once. Objectively though, White hasn't done anything wrong over the past 5 to 10 moves, but he needs to continue with a move like 31.♔h3! to maintain his winning advantage. That's not the most obvious move to make and Ray guarded his b-pawn instead.

31.♞e2? fxe6?

Throwing away my first shot at turning the tables: the random position cuts both ways. Best was:

31...g6! 32.exf7†
 32.♗g4 allows ♖xd5.
 32...♔g7
 32...♔xf7? 33.♙xg6†! ♗xg6 34.f5 wins.
 33.♗g4

Reaching the following complicated position:

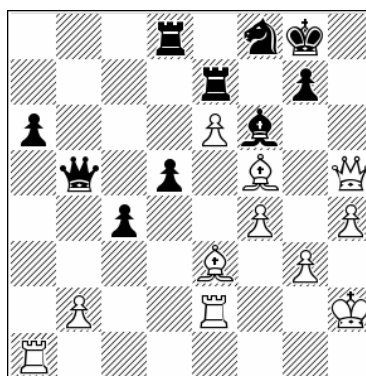


33...♞e3! 34.♞e3 ♖xb2† 35.♞e2 ♖xa1 36.♙xg6
 This is where I got stuck, as 36...♗xg6 loses to 37.h5 and White's pieces will eventually crash through. But after the calm:

36...♞b8
 There isn't a good discovered check. For example:
 37.♙h5† ♔h6

Black is OK!

32.dxe6 d5



My kingside wasn't looking good, but there aren't any immediate threats or clear ways in. Meanwhile, with the mobile d-pawn, I felt my counterplay was starting to take shape: ...d4 and ...♞d5 is a threat to start.

33.♙d2

33.♙f2!? was another option – it is better than 33.♙d2 against 33...d4, but Black can also keep the tension with 33...♞d6 and the practical challenge continues.

33...d4 34.♞a5 ♖b6?!

Instead, 34...♖xb2! was the best move but I was hesitant to put my queen in the line of fire. In the game continuation though, White has a very strong resource in 35.♞c5! and c4 falls. Given Ray was in time pressure, that would have been a very tough move to find, but it would have been a nasty surprise for me (I was also in some time pressure!).

After 34...♖xb2, there aren't any dangerous discoveries. After something like 35.♙e1 ♖b3 36.♞xa6 d3 37.♞ea2 the position is still unclear. White is preparing ♞a8 to get at the knight on f8 while Black's two pawns are not very far away from the promised land.

35.g4? d3 36.♞g2 ♙xb2

Getting out of the way of the g5 advance while preparing to play ...c3.

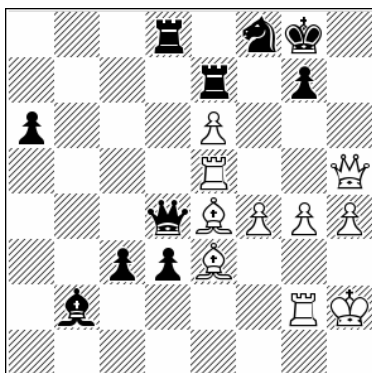
37.♙e4

The f8-knight crucially defends h7, so this prepares ♞f5 to eliminate it.

37...♙d4

A good move, but I had missed Ray's 39th move in the game and had I anticipated that, I might have chosen 37...♖xe6 instead. Then 38.♙d5 c3 39.♙xe6† ♗xe6 looked winning to me, but I played the queen move thinking that I didn't even need to give up the exchange.

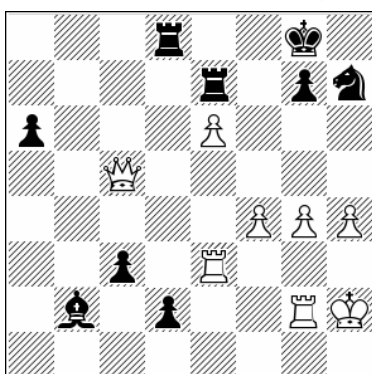
38.♖e5 c3 39.♙e3!



39...♗xe3!

The bishop move was a surprise, but I kept my head about me. A quick look around led me to the queen sacrifice, as my two connected passers would be hard to stop, and White doesn't have any attack without his bishops.

40.♙h7† ♗xh7 41.♖xe3 d2 42.♗c5



42...♖xe6!

42...♖ee8 is similar after 43.e7 d1=♗ (43...♖d7? would be a huge mistake – after 44.♗c4† ♗h8 45.♗f7! it's White who is winning!) 44.exd8=♗ ♖xd8. I preferred to see White's rook more exposed on e6 instead of e3.

43.♖xe6 d1=♗

The smoke has cleared, and Black has two minor pieces for the rook. In terms of potential

threats though, White doesn't have anything serious while Black has the c3-pawn and more pieces to target White's exposed king. White's next move tries to prevent Black from bringing his knight into the attack but reveals other weaknesses.

44.g5 ♗f8! 45.♖e7 ♗h5! 46.♗c4† ♗h8 47.f5

White has everything guarded – for now.

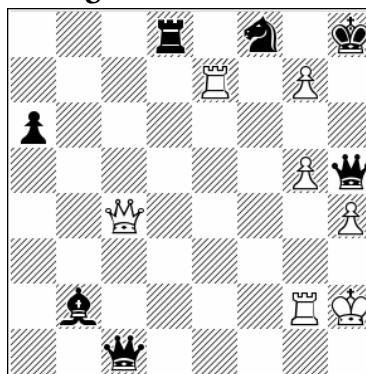
47...c2!

A finishing blow – the pawn, rook, and bishop all throw their energy into the fight.

48.f6

48.♖xc2 ♖d4 and White won't survive the onslaught.

48...c1=♗ 49.fxg7†



49...♙xg7

Good thing bishops move backwards. This second queen sacrifice is what finally finishes things off!

50.♗xc1 ♗xh4† 51.♗g1 ♙d4† 52.♗f1 ♗h1†
0-1

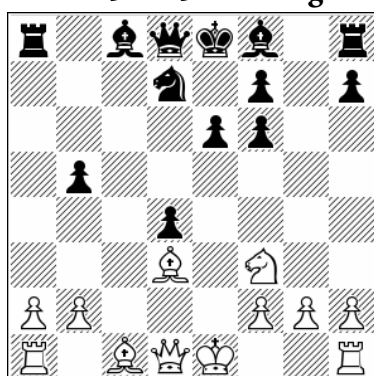
GM Vinay Bhat – GM Mesgen Amanov
Philadelphia 2009

When I was playing while in school or working, a tighter repertoire was much easier for me to manage and remember, but as I began playing much more frequently in 2009, I felt the pressure of preparing for most games and found more value in being a moving target in the opening.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗f3 ♗bd7
6.♙d3 dxc4 7.♙xc4 b5 8.♙d3 a6 9.e4 c5 10.e5

In Chapter 16, I shared an example with 10.d5. But a week or two before that game, GMs Yury Shulman and Abhijeet Gupta each told me they thought 10.e5 was the better move. At the time, all my tournament practice with 10.e5 was from the Black side (where I had scored well). But armed with their word and assuming Amanov had prepared something based on my Alsina Leal game, I rolled the dice on it at the board. Once again, I was relying on others for this information.

10...cxd4 11.♖xb5 axb5 12.exf6 gxf6



An unbalanced position has arisen. Black is up a pawn, but his pawn structure is shattered, and his king will probably spend the game in the center. Black's bishops have good diagonals, and his rooks can enter the game along the g- and a-files. White's position is solid, and he plays against the b- and d-pawns whilst trying to neutralize any pressure on the g-file.

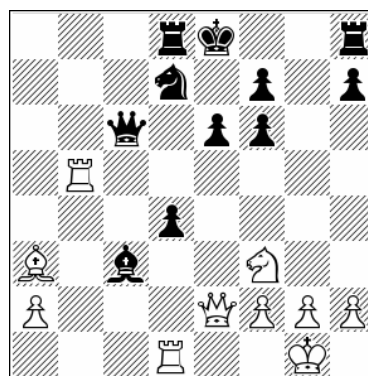
13.0-0

One quick way for White to go wrong is with 13.♗xd4 ♕c5 14.♕e4? ♖a4! and White's going to lose something along the 4th rank, as in Mont-Reynaud – Bhat, Fremont 1998.

13...♗b6 14.♗e2 ♕b7!?

The latest wrinkle at the time, popularized by Anand in his World Championship match with Kramnik in 2008.

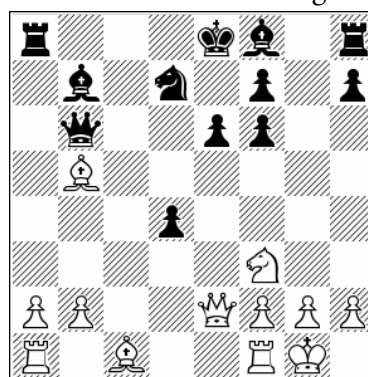
Up to this point, all my direct experience was with the older 14...♕a6. For example, from 2004: 15.♖d1 ♖d8 16.b4 ♕xb4 17.♖b1 ♕c3 18.♕a3 ♗c6 19.♕xb5 ♕xb5 20.♖xb5 and White has broken through on the queenside, but Black still has his central mass intact.



I continued creatively with 20...♖g8 21.g3 ♖a8! 22.♕b4 ♖g4! in Donaldson – Bhat, Los Angeles 2004. It's still quite complicated, but Black's rooks cause White all sorts of problems.

15.♕xb5

15.♕f4 is a valid alternative that might avoid some of the mess that arises in the game.



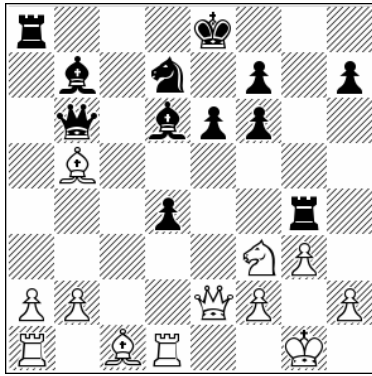
15...♕d6!?

Anand's choice in Game 3 of the match. Later in Game 5, he improved (or at least was the first to deviate) with 15...♖g8. It might seem strange to let White put his bishop on g3 (as would happen after 15...♖g8 16.♕f4 ♕d6 17.♕g3), but then Black can generate counterplay with ...f6-f5-f4.

16.♖d1

16.♗xd4 is tempting, but it doesn't lead to much against accurate play: 16...♗xd4 17.♖d1 ♕xh2†! 18.♗xh2 ♗h4† 19.♗g1 ♕xg2 20.♕xd7† ♗e7 21.♗xg2 ♖hg8† 22.♗f3 and after the king hunt, Anand's analysis says it's all a draw by force. I didn't remember all of that at the time, but I recognized there was some danger after Black's sacrifices on h2 and g2.

16...♖g8 17.g3 ♖g4



18. Qf4!

I backed into this ingenious idea after a 32-minute think. I started by trying and failing to recall the Kramnik – Anand game nuances and kicking myself for playing 10.e5 without any preparation. Then I decided to think for myself a bit and stumbled upon this move to dull Black’s attack.

- A few ideas suggested themselves:
- Bf3-d2, to try and kick the rook away and fight for the e4-square
- Qc1-f4, to block the d6-bishop’s diagonal (and try and play on the d-file)
- a2-a4 and b2-b4, which clears the 3rd rank for the white rook (to guard g3), prepares a4-a5-a6 to try and distract Black’s bishop on b7, and might also prepare Qb2xd4 to take the a7-g1 diagonal.

On 18. Bd2, I was focused on the position after 18...h5 19. Bc4 Qc5 20. Bxd6† Qxd6 21.f3 h4! which I couldn’t make heads or tails of as 22.fxg4 Qd5 looked risky to me. It turns out White can secure an advantage there, but upon further review of this after the game, Anand had pointed to 18. Bd2 Qe7!! as the antidote. That’s obviously not the end of the line, but there isn’t anything special for White there.

18.a4 is a decent idea, but it’s too slow: 18...Qc5 19. Bd2 Qd5 20.f3 Qc5 and Black’s attack is only growing.

18.b4 also looked interesting, and that idea came to me because of my prior experience on the Black side versus Donaldson, but it also seemed slow after 18...Qe7. It turns out this might favor White,

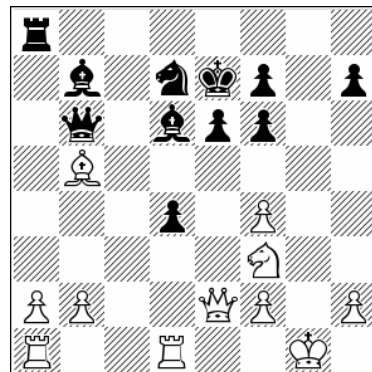
and that is why Anand deviated with 15...Bg8 in a later game, but those complications were beyond my abilities at the board.

In contrast, I saw 18. Qf4 Qxf4 19. Bxd4, and everywhere I looked, I was getting my piece back and reducing his attacking potential. After the game, I re-learned that Kramnik also played 18. Qf4, but then chose 18...Qxf4 19. Bxd4 with a whole different set of complications, as in Kramnik – Anand, Bonn (3) 2008.

18... Bxf4?

Against my planned continuation of 18...Qxf4 19. Bxd4, the correct line according to Anand is 19...Qf8! 20. Qxd7 Bd8 21. Bxd1 Bxd7!. White might still have some chances here in the end, but once again, I didn’t correctly peg this as Black’s best continuation. Luckily for me, after 18 minutes of thought, Amanov didn’t either.

19. gxf4 Qe7



Introducing the threat of ...Qxf3 (White can’t interject with Qxd7†) while making room for the rook to join the attack.

20.a4 Qc5

20...Bg8† 21. Qf1 doesn’t change too much at the moment. If Black plays 21...Qxf4? (21...Qc5 22. Bxd4 would transpose back to the game.) 22. Bxd4 wins material.

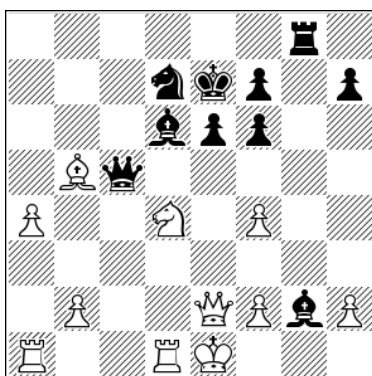
21. Bxd4

The pawn is nice, but more importantly, Black is prevented from setting up a queen-and-bishop battery on the diagonal, due to the check on c6 with a discovered attack.

21...♖g8† 22.♔f1 ♕g2†

22...♕xf4 covers the d2-square, so then ...♕g2† and ...♗b4† is a serious threat. White should respond with 23.♗c4 when if Black avoids the exchange of queens with 23...♗b6, White has 24.♔f5†!

23.♔e1



This might look scary for White, and indeed, after the game, GMs Jesse Kraai and Josh Friedel told me they assumed I was close to losing when they glanced at my position.

I had the benefit of spending more time on it though, and in this concrete situation, the evaluation is the exact opposite. White's king is relatively safe on e1, as he can block any checks on the a5-e1 diagonal, and meanwhile, he has some threats of his own (such as ♖ac1, ♗c4, ♔c6†, etc.).

23...♕h3

After a long think, Amanov decided on this move, opening the g-file. It's too slow, but there isn't anything better:

23...♕h1 24.♗e3 is similar to the game.

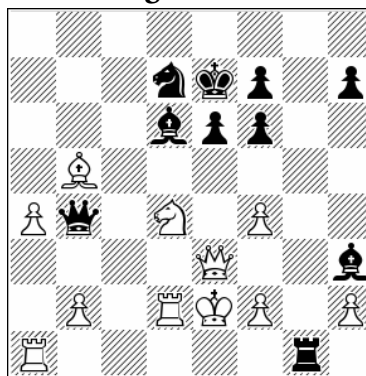
Any endgame after a straight queen trade (such as after 23...♗b4† 24.♗d2 is winning for White.

23...♕d5 24.♗d2 covers the b4-square and threatens ♔f5†, eliminating one of the dangerous bishops.

24.♗e3!

The threats of ♗xh3 or ♔c6† force Black's hand.

24...♗b4† 25.♗d2 ♖g1† 26.♔e2



26...♕g4† 27.f3 ♖g2† 28.♔e1 ♗xd2† 29.♗xd2 ♖xd2 30.♔xd2 ♕xf4† 31.♔e2

Technically Black has a bishop for the rook, but the distribution of pawns means that White's queenside pawns will run away with it.

31...♕h5 32.a5 ♔c5 33.a6
1-0

My repertoire didn't expand enormously as a professional player, but the additions I made helped with my understanding of more positions and helped me dance away from my opponent's preparation in many situations.

My Learnings and Progress

Building on the previous chapter, there's a lot of value in playing mainstream openings: they're more likely to stand the test of time and there's more likely to be patterns that translate to other openings and positions. Even my limited experience with the Ruy Lopez helped raise my general level while also adding practical value for any single game.

Given that benefit, how broad a repertoire should you have? The answer as usual is “it depends” – how much time do you have to study, how good is your memory, and so on, as there are costs and benefits to a wide repertoire. For example, one major opening that I effectively never played from either side was the Open Sicilian (1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 and 3.d4), and a few strong players such as IM John Donaldson and GM Sam Shankland have commented on this gap in my experience. Playing those positions from at least one side would likely have made me a more well-rounded chessplayer, but like Kaidanov asked me back in 1997, I needed to figure out how much time I’d be devoting to chess and what I hoped to get from it.

Whenever I played or studied less frequently, I’ve done better with a smaller, narrower repertoire. As a full-time player though, I began to expand my repertoire; not everything all at once, but adding a major opening line so as to have a 1A and 1B option. That ability to switch, sometimes even at the board (such as against Sangma and Amanov), had a lot of practical benefits.

A final note is something I did to help myself avoid Karpov – Seirawan snafus in the opening: a one-page summary did wonders for me in solidifying some of the concepts I wanted to keep in mind and even sometimes a critical move or pattern. These summaries have come in handy even as I have been playing less frequently.

Chapter 19

The IQP and Relatives

At the IM and GM level now, I'd expect many players to rely on opening books and/or preparation that cover typical positions through moves 15 to 20 on average. It's another thing to recall all of that at the board, but nobody is publishing a small pamphlet anymore about the ♘b5 Sicilians (2.♗f3 and 3.♘b5 versus 2...♗c6 or 2...d6). In contrast, my opening notes from 1997 on those ♘b5 Sicilians totaled 4 pages (see the pictures at the end of Chapter 6)!

That shrinking of the middlegame is typical of higher-level, modern chess as opening preparation at the top grows deeper and deeper. Still, even with deeper opening theory now, there's a real benefit to studying typical middlegame structures and concepts, especially for those of us below the upper echelon of players.

For me, one of those structures was with the Isolated Queen's Pawn (IQP). I didn't play any of the openings most associated with the IQP (e.g., the Caro-Kann or Tarrasch Defenses) but it was a possible transformation from the Semi-Slav Defense for me. My study of these structures started with Romero's *Creative Chess Strategy*, the book behind a lot of my return from semi-retirement during college. And while the IQP structure itself didn't provide me with any immediate objective advantage in these next games, my opponents seemed to find themselves uncomfortable with the atypical transformation.

As I played more frequently and my repertoire expanded, this structure with the IQP popped up in more and more places for me, from both colors. With the Black pieces, as I added the Slav to my repertoire, I started to meet 1.c4 with 1...c6, allowing a Caro-Kann transposition with 2.e4 and a potential IQP through the Panov-Botvinnik. And with the White pieces, my addition of the 4.e3 Rubinstein Nimzo-Indian saw me play with the IQP again. Those are traditional IQP pathways though, and I found that I wasn't typically able to outplay other GMs in those positions. I did, however, continue to find success by transforming the structure into an IQP-one in openings where IMs weren't expecting it.

IM Thomas Roussel-Roozmon – GM Vinay

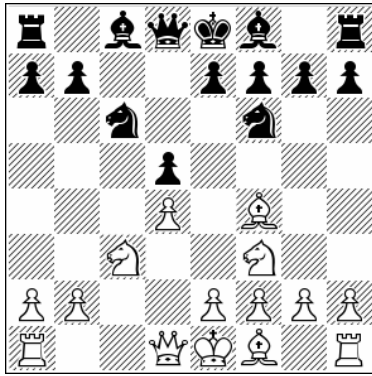
Bhat

Montreal 2009

3...cxd5 4.♗f3 ♗f6 5.♗c3 ♗c6 6.♘f4

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.cxd5

A small surprise, as I didn't think this was part of his usual repertoire. I assumed he was hoping for a quick draw.



6...Nh5?!

If Thomas was looking for a quick draw with the Exchange Slav, I had no such plans. This knight move borrows an idea that Dreev popularized.

6...e6 was Dreev's original idea. The plan is to play 7.e3 Nh5 8.g5 Bb6 9.Bb5 h6 10.h4 d7 but there are ways for White to gain an edge here, such as 11.0-0 g5 12.Bxc6 Bxc6 13.Ne5 Ng7 14.g3 with an advantage, as in Bhat – Becerra, Internet 2005.

Now though, Black can meet 7.g5 with 7...h6 directly, and after 8.h4 g5, Black has a better version of that Becerra game.

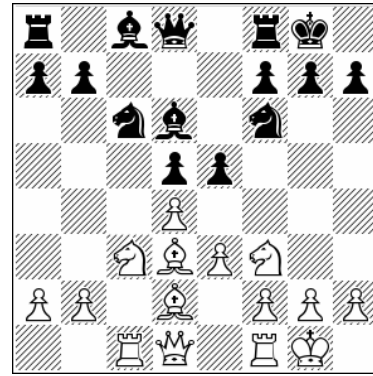
7.Bd2 e6 8.Bc1 Nf6

8...d6 would be more natural, not allowing the bishop to come back to f4, but I didn't like 9.e4 dxe4 10.Nxe4 when White seemed to have a good IQP position to me. Black's knight is sitting on the sidelines on h5 and White has a lead in development.

9.e3?!

9.f4 could have invited a draw offer with 9...Nh5. Instead, I was planning 9...d6 10.Bxd6 Bxd6 11.e3 0-0 with no problems for Black. The IQP after something like 12.d3 e5 13.dxe5 Nxe5 14.Nxe5 Bxe5 is safer for White though than what happens in the game.

9...d6 10.d3 0-0 11.0-0 e5!



A positive transformation into an IQP structure. If instead Black played something like ...d7, he'd essentially be down two tempi because of Bc1 and some other move that White could make (say Na4). Now, however, Black's argument is that White's "extra" moves (like d2 and Bc1) aren't truly useful here.

12.dxe5 Nxe5 13.e2

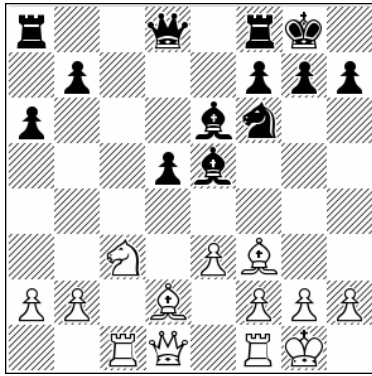
13.Nxe5 Bxe5 and Black is already threatening a sacrifice on h2, and a favorable liquidation of the IQP with ...d4. If, for example, 14.h3 Be8 White still has trouble getting his queenside pieces going because of the weak b2-pawn. Black has ideas of ...a6, ...Bb8 and ...Bd6 even, when White's kingside will be severely weakened to guard the h2-square.

13...a6

Covering the b5-square, and so keeping the c3-knight in check. One of Black's big ideas here is to make sure the d2/Nc3/Bc1 set of pieces stays bottled up.

Typically, the first priority when playing against an IQP is to secure the square in front of the pawn and then to increase the pressure on the pawn. In this sense, the d2-bishop really gets in the way for White.

14.Nxe5 Bxe5 15.f3 e6



Having all four pairs of minor pieces on the board usually gives the player with the IQP an advantage, while three pairs bring things closer to equality. The player with the IQP tends to want more minor pieces on the board, thanks to the space advantage the pawn provides.

Here though, even with only three pairs of minor pieces, Black's pieces are still slightly more active than White's and White can't develop his queen easily, as ♖b3 walks into ...d4. So Black still has a small pull.

16.g3

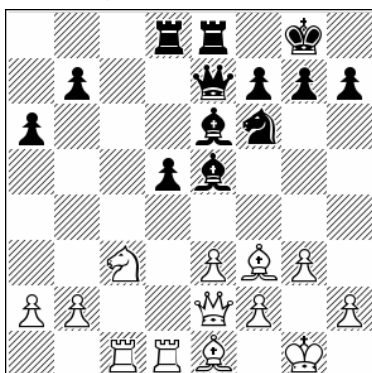
16. ♖e2 would be the ideal move, preparing to regroup with ♗c3 and ♜f4/♜g3/♜d4. Then White's pieces would make good sense. The only problem is that it doesn't work tactically: 16... ♗b8! guards the b-pawn in anticipation of taking on b2 (or h2).

16... ♗e7

Now Black guards the b7-pawn, and so the c3-knight is still stuck!

17. ♗e2 ♜ad8 18. ♜fd1 ♜fe8 19. ♗e1

This prepares the release of the c3-knight by guarding b2 (rushing with 19. ♜a4 would drop the pawn after 19...b5).



19...d4?

I had been planning this advance for a while, but only after playing it did I realize I mistimed it.

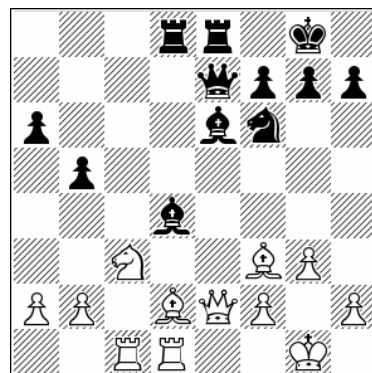
19...b5! was correct, securing the c4-square and preparing improving moves like ...♗a7 before playing ...d4. Here's a sample line: 20. ♗c2 d4 21. exd4 ♗xd4 22. ♜e2 ♗b6 and Black is still better. White has a weakness on f2 and ineffective minor pieces. Black's bishops are pointed in more productive directions.

20. exd4 ♗xd4 21. ♗d2?

Thomas didn't quite sense the danger and missed a golden opportunity to equalize: 21. ♜d5! was a tactical nuance introduced by ♗e1. The rook on d1 finally has some influence. 21... ♗xd5 22. ♗xe7 ♜xe7 23. ♜xd4 and now to maintain the balance, Black has to play the accurate 23... ♜de8!

It often doesn't seem dangerous to see the liquidation of the IQP with ...d4/exd4, but the problem is that there is often a difference in the piece activity of each side after that. This is because the side with the IQP usually controls 4 ranks of the board (as opposed to 3 for the other side) and therefore has more room to place his pieces actively before the pawn structure becomes symmetrical.

21...b5!



22. ♗g5?

22. ♗e3? now fails to 22... ♗c4 and White will lose a pawn on e3.

22. ♗f4 was the best, having already played ♗d2.

We'll see why 22. ♗g5 was wrong in a couple moves.

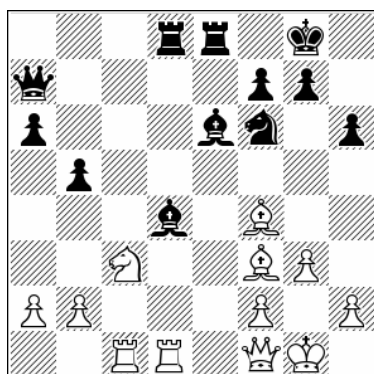
22...h6 23.♔f4

23.♔xf6 would also give Black a huge advantage after 23...♖xf6 – White’s queen is a sitting duck on e2 and Black’s bishops rake across the entire board in this open position.

23...♖a7!

Clearing the way for the e8-rook and adding pressure to f2. White is in big trouble.

24.♖f1



24...g5!

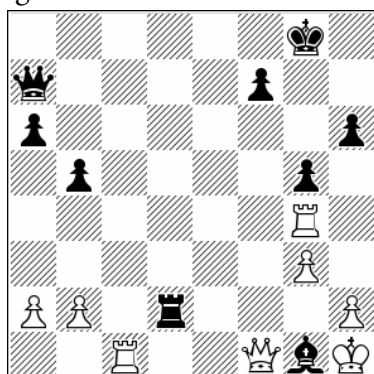
And this is the other big difference with inserting ♔g5/...h6 before playing ♔f4. The kingside weakness is incidental since White is not going to survive long enough to take advantage of that.

25.♔d2 ♘g4 26.♘e4

26.♔xg4 ♔xg4 27.♖e1 ♔xf2†! 28.♖xf2 ♖xf2† 29.♔xf2 ♖xd2† is similar to the game.

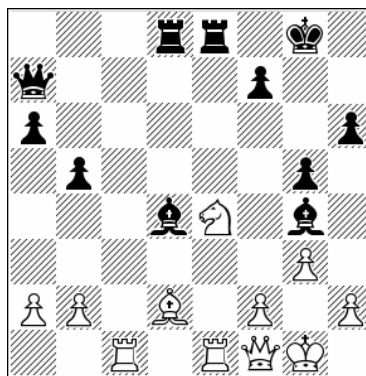
26...♔f5! 27.♔xg4

27.♖e1 doesn't save White either: 27...♖xe4 28.♔xe4 ♔xf2† 29.♔h1 ♔xe4† 30.♖xe4 ♖xd2 31.♖xg4 ♔g1!! is a brutal finisher.



Mate will be delivered via b7, a8, or h2!

27...♔xg4 28.♖e1



28...f5! 29.♘c3 ♔xf2†! 30.♖xf2 ♖xf2† 31.♔xf2 ♖xd2† 32.♔g1 ♖xe1† 33.♖xe1 ♔f7

Taking the pawn on b2 would of course be winning, but I saw no reason to give White any activity with his rook. The pawn isn't really going too far anyways.

34.b4 ♔f3

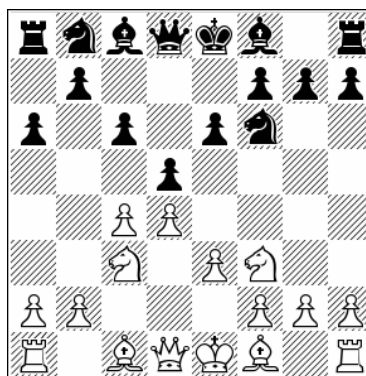
0-1

There's no defense to the threat of ...♖g2†, ♔f1, ...♖xh2, and meanwhile, White's knight on c3 is completely dominated and his rook has nowhere active to go.

IM Dean Ippolito – GM Vinay Bhat

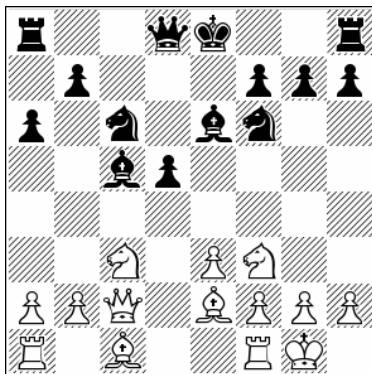
Lubbock 2009

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♘f3 a6!?



I was a half-point behind the leader (soon-to-be-GM Ben Finegold) going into this last-round game, and I wanted to surprise Ippolito as I was still hoping to catch Finegold for first. The 2012 Anand – Gelfand World Championship match was later a complete theoretical course in this variation.

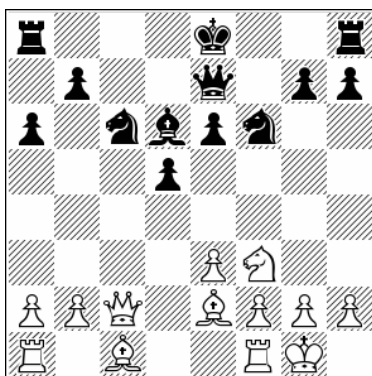
6. ♖c2 c5 7. cxd5 exd5 8. ♙e2 ♘c6 9. 0-0 ♙e6
10. dxc5 ♙xc5



11. ♘a4 ♙d6

11... ♙a7? was my first thought, but White can play 12. ♙xa6.

12. ♘c5 ♖e7 13. ♘xe6 fxe6



14. a3

White offered a draw with this move. After a few minutes of thought, I decided to decline the offer. With a potential first-place tie on the line, I wasn't inclined to take a draw.

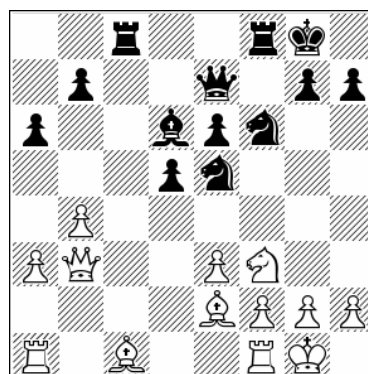
I also realized Black has nothing to fear from a trade of knight for bishop on e6 if White can't expose the e6-pawn shortly thereafter. And given White's not close to doing anything like that, Black even has a small plus.

White's last move exacerbates that, as by playing for a3 and b4, he's going to make it harder for himself to control the c4- and c3-squares later. Black will be the first to the c-file and has control of the e5- and e4-squares, from which he can jump to the queenside (via the newly weakened c4- and c3-squares) or target the kingside (via g4 and f2).

Instead of 14. a3, White could have stayed closer to equality with 14. ♙d2 0-0 15. ♙c3. It may not look

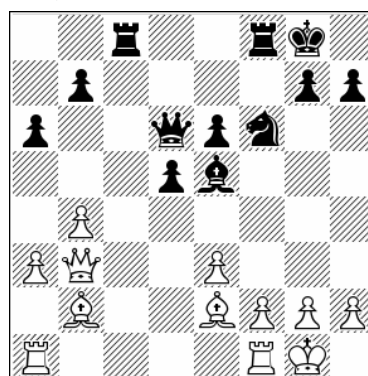
as active, but White won't be able to take back his queenside pawn moves once the first move or two of activity disappears.

14... 0-0 15. b4 ♖ac8 16. ♖b3 ♘e5!



Black is now ready to put his knights on c4 and e4, after which he'll control a lot of squares in White's camp.

17. ♘xe5 ♙xe5 18. ♙b2 ♖d6!



By putting a bishop or queen on the e5-square, Black exerts influence on both sides of the board.

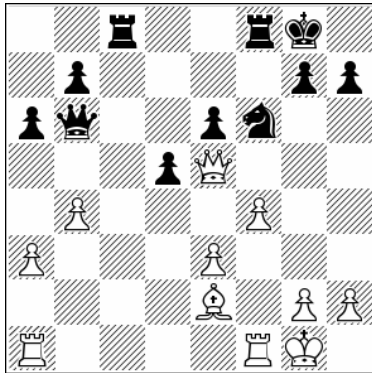
19. f4?

After a 20-minute think, White made a big positional concession.

19. ♙xe5 ♖xe5 leaves Black's queen in complete control – the c3-square can be used to double rooks on the c-file, while after 20. ♖ac1 ♘e4 the f2- and d2-squares are under pressure.

19. g3 ♘e4 20. ♖ad1 ♙xb2 21. ♖xb2 ♘c3 22. ♖c1 ♖e5 23. ♙d3 ♖f7 and Black is a little better. White has no active plan, and while it's not easy for Black to improve, he's the only one with any such aspirations.

19... ♙xb2 20. ♖xb2 ♖b6 21. ♖e5



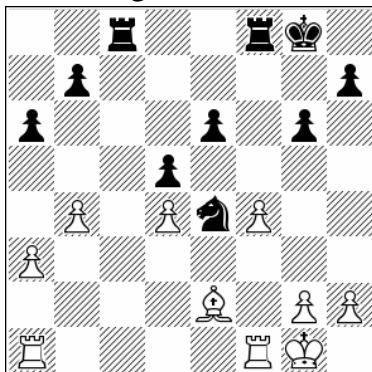
21...d4

21...c2 was tempting because of a little tactical shot: 22. d3? g4! 23. d4 xg2+! when Black wins, but 22. a1 instead keeps things together.

22. d4

After the game, Dean surprised me by saying he thought the endgame was holdable. There wasn't much to recommend as an alternative though. For example, 22. f3 c3 23. d4 xd4 24. exd4 xf3 25. xf3 xf4 and Black is winning.

22...xd4 23. exd4 g6!



Taking control of the f5-square. This helps Black by allowing his central structure to stay intact (if the pawns were exchanged after f4/...exf5 at some point, then d5 would become weak) and by allowing Black's king to step forward safely to f7.

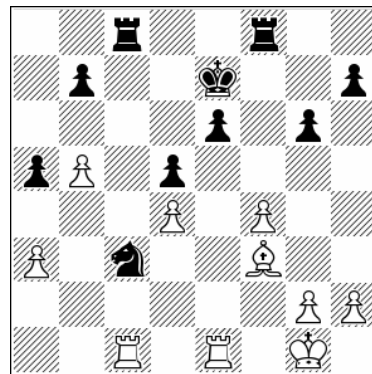
White's problem now is that all his weaknesses are static, and he has no real way of getting rid of them. The pawns on f4, d4, and a3 are all weak or potentially weak, and that keeps him from challenging the c-file at the moment.

24. b5

After 24. g3 c3 Black would just turn up the pressure.

Meanwhile, 24. a1 fails to 24...xc1 25. xc1 xf4 26. c7 f7 27. c8+ g7 and unlike the line with b5/...a5 thrown in, White doesn't have a weak pawn on a5 to target with a8. That's why Ippolito started with 24. b5, but the downside is that it puts another pawn on a light square.

24...a5 25. a1 f7 26. fe1 e7 27. f3 c3



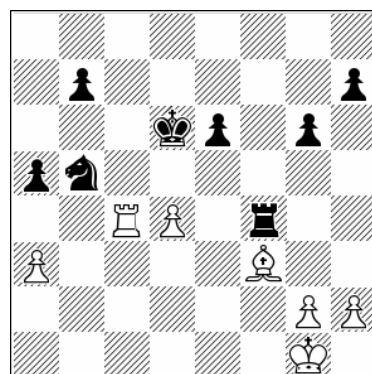
28. g4 f6 29. c2

29. g3 h5 30. f3 (30. h3? e2+! is a nice tactic that wins the exchange.) 30...d7 and Black is still in control. White's problem is that he can't make any lasting threats against Black's setup, while his own pawns will eventually fall off. For example, the b5-pawn is under fire at the moment, and after 31. b6 c6 32. f2 b5, one of the pawns on d4 and b6 will disappear in short order.

29...c4! 30. f3

30. ec1 b5 is the simplest for Black (30...xf4 should do the trick too). After 31. xc4 dxc4, 32. xc4 would be similar to the game, while 32. g3 d6 is also hopeless.

30...d6 31. ec1 b5 32. xc4 dxc4 33. xc4 xf4



34. a4

34. ♖xb7 is the obvious move, but after 34... ♗xd4, White is oddly helpless to stop ... ♗e2†, with either mate on f1 or the capture of the rook on c4 to follow.

34...b6 35. ♖d1 ♗c3 36.g3 ♗xd1

Not necessary, but it sets up an aesthetically pleasing finale.

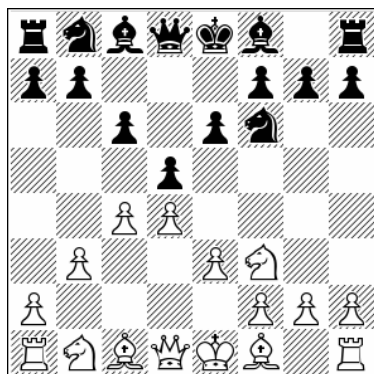
37.gxf4 ♗b2

0-1

Sometimes it feels so simple!

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Jorge Cori
Cappelle-la-Grande 2010

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 c6 3. ♗f3 d5 4.e3 e6 5.b3



After seeing the pairings, the previous evening, I was debating what to do against Cori in the opening. I was talking online with my friend GM Abhijeet Gupta, who kindly suggested that I try the 5.b3 Anti-Meran. After looking at it for about 30 minutes, I decided to give it a try. The connections I made starting in Balaguer 2006 (Chapter 13) continued to help me years later!

5... ♖b4†!? 6. ♗bd2 ♗bd7 7. ♖b2 0-0

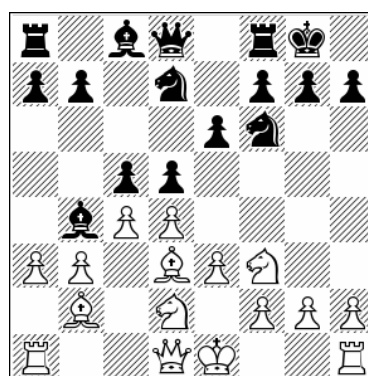
But at this point, I was wondering if he had seen my game from the previous day (as Black versus GM Reynaldo Vera) because I played 7... ♗e4 in this position instead, which was my own preferred method to try and equalize here. The plan was to play a Stonewall setup with ...f5 afterwards, which I used in several games with good success.

8. ♖d3 c5!?

A surprise, and one that bring about a hanging pawns structure quickly.

I was expecting 8...dxc4 9.bxc4 e5, when I was still planning to play with hanging pawns after 10...exd4 11.exd4. I evaluated this as slightly more pleasant for me, as the pawns control a good chunk of the center and the bishops behind them have excellent prospects. Black also has trouble targeting the pawns. Finally, with all the minor pieces on the board, White's space advantage should count for a bit more.

9.a3



9... ♖xd2†

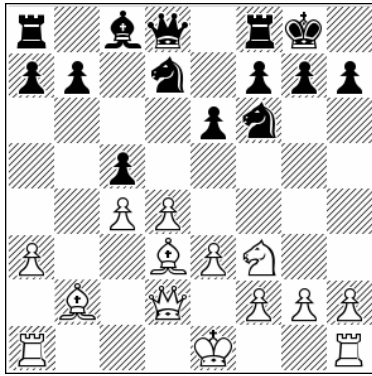
This trade is part of the 8...c5 plan.

If he retreated with 9... ♖a5?!, he's left with no good way forward after the simple 10.0-0. He wants to develop the c8-bishop with ...b6, but that scheme with the bishop on a5 is begging for that bishop to get in trouble later.

10. ♖xd2

Another option is 10. ♗xd2, but I didn't like the looks of 10...dxc4 11.bxc4 cxd4 12.exd4 e5!. This ...e5-thrust (or e3-e4 as White) is a common plan when playing against the hanging pawns. Black hopes to get a pawn to advance which will give his knights some squares in the center and here, it works because White isn't that well developed.

10...dxc4 11.bxc4



11...cxd4

I don't love this decision to release the central tension, but there isn't an easy recommendation. If he doesn't take on d4 right away, he has to reckon with d4-d5 or e3-e4-e5 advances.

For example:

11...b6

This would be nice, but a critical test is:

12.d5!

With the pawns on c5 and e3, White isn't giving up any squares by pushing forward.

12.e4!? is another critical line, which worried him even more after 12...cxd4 13.e5 ♖g4 14.♗f4. However, I didn't want to prematurely block my b2-bishop.

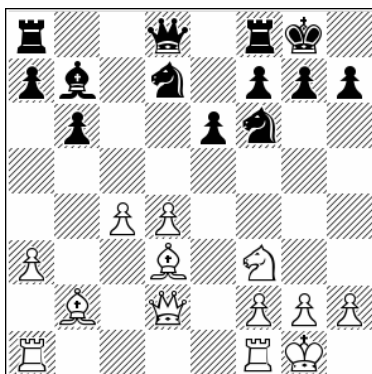
12...exd5 13.cxd5 ♙b7

13...♗xd5? 14.♙xh7† ♔xh7 15.♗xd5 wins, as White threatens the rook on a8 along with ♗h5† and ♗g5, with mate to follow.

14.♞d1!

Taking on d5 allows 15.♗c3 and the multiple open lines guarantee White a clear advantage.

12.exd4 b6 13.0-0 ♙b7



14.♗e2

Amusingly, we've transposed into a Nimzo-Indian Rubinstein (4.e3), where White has an

extra tempo! This is because Black lost a tempo with ...c7-c6-c5 in the opening phase. Although I didn't really need to know that to play the position, it was a useful bit of info – I played the Rubinstein Variation of the Nimzo while Cori didn't, so I could be satisfied from a practical point of view and an objective point of view (White is better here).

With my pawns on c4 and d4, Black has no real central squares for his knights. Meanwhile, White has a number of possible plans – if he moves the f3-knight, he can think about f2-f4-f5. He can also play on the queenside with a4-a5, softening up the b6-pawn. Black's traditional activity is via tactical ideas down the central files or with a queen on f4.

With that (and the game's developments) in mind, 14.♗e3! is an improvement. I was worried about 14...♗g4, as I thought then 15.♗e2? ♗c7! sets up a very annoying ...♙xf3 threat. However, 15.♗f4! is clearly stronger and after 15...♗gf6 16.♞fe1 ♗b8 17.♗e5, White enjoys a clear advantage. He has more space, the two bishops, and the more active pieces.

14...♗c7 15.♗d2 ♗f4

Now Black gets this nice square for his queen. The reason I'm not giving 14.♗e2 a dubious mark is because White can generally kick the black queen from f4 anyways in this position with a later ♗e2-e3. Thus, ♗e2 didn't jeopardize White's advantage, it just makes him spend a little more time consolidating here.

16.♞fe1

16.♗e3 is the typical rejoinder to ...♗f4 in hanging pawn structures. The idea is that any exchange of queens will solidify the weak d4-pawn and give White the open f-file. With only one pawn to worry about, Black will find it difficult to apply meaningful pressure against White's center. Here, though, I didn't like it for a concrete reason: 16...♗xe3! 17.fxe3 ♞fd8! Thanks to the hanging minors on the d-file, White doesn't have enough time to consolidate. Black will play ...♗c5 next and

then he'll be able to hop into e4, with fair chances to hold the endgame.

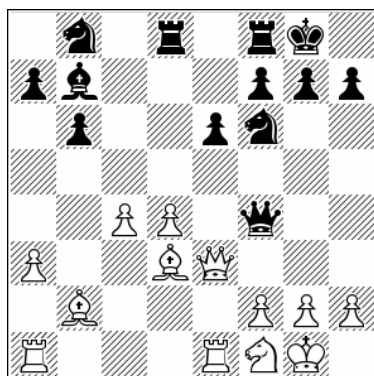
16...♖ad8 17.♟f1

Clearing the d-file so that ♖e3 can be played later on. The knight also is useful on g3 where it covers e4, eyes h5, and guards the kingside.

17...♞b8!?

A creative maneuver, trying to improve his worst placed piece. The knight on d7 lacked a central outpost, so now he routes it to c6, hoping to pressure d4, and possibly later on to a5 to pressure c4.

18.♞e3!



18...♞h4

There are no good choices at this point in the game for Black. He will suffer either way, and the question is what he thinks provides the best drawing chances. Cori decided to keep the queens on in the hope of finding counterplay.

18...♞xe3 19.fxe3 ♞e4 was certainly an option, but without Black's rook on a8, I thought this was a better version of the endgame from above: 20.a4! ♞d7 21.a5! with a clear plus. Black's queenside is a bit more deserted here than in the note with 16.♞e3. Black has no active plan, while White can slowly improve on the queenside (♟a3-b4 is one idea, for example). One big difference is the arrangement of Black's rooks (d8 and f8 here, a8 and d8 there). The arrangement on a8 and d8 is clearly desirable in this endgame.

19.h3 ♞c6 20.♖ad1 ♟h8 21.♟e2!?

Now the d4-pawn is well-defended. The bishop also takes away the h5-square from Black's queen and stays in touch with c4. The downside, compared to ♟b1, is that the bishop is less active and doesn't cover the e4-square. For that reason, I'd now prefer 21.♟b1.

21...♞e7

21...♞e4 takes advantage of White's last move, but I was happy with the endgame after 22.♞g3 ♞xe3 23.fxe3 ♞e7 24.a4 with a clear plus thanks to the space, the bishops, and the queenside weakness (on b6).

22.♞g3 ♞g6 23.♟c1

I was in no rush. This move takes away the kingside dark squares from Black and asks him what he's going to do while White improves his position.

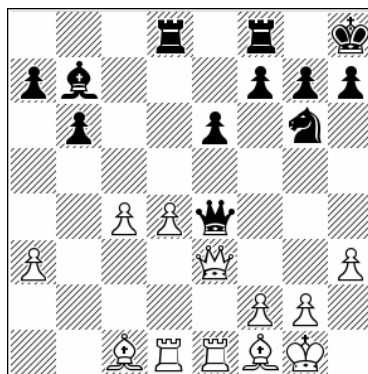
White's thematic break in hanging pawn structures is d5. The idea is to open the diagonal for the bishop and launch an attack on Black's king, and if White can maintain his d-pawn, it can also be a real force in the endgame as a passed pawn. Here, though, I didn't like 23.d5 ♞f4 (23...exd5? 24.♖d4! leaves Black's queen out of safe squares.) 24.♞xf4 ♞xf4 25.♟f3 ♖c8! with counterplay.

23...♞e4

Cori was already down to 1 minute here (to reach move 40; he had a 30-second increment as well), and he tries to get some pieces off the board.

But 23...♖fe8! is much more resilient, challenging White to improve.

24.♞xe4 ♞xe4 25.♟f1



The threat of a better endgame again pushes Black's queen away from an active square.

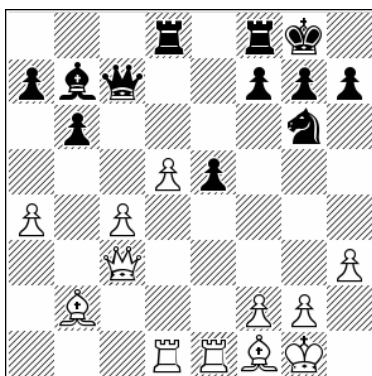
25...♖c6?

25...♖xe3 was better, as in the game Black doesn't last very long. Still, it's no fun after 26.fxe3 ♕e4 27.♕d2 f5 28.a4 and White goes to work on the queenside.

26.♕b2 ♖g8 27.♖c3 ♖c7

27...f6 leaves the e6-pawn quite weak. There's no immediate win, but Black is again just waiting for the hammer to drop. One idea is 28.a4 with a5 and play against Black's weakened queenside.

28.d5 e5 29.a4!



Time to open a second front.

29...♖fe8 30.a5 f6 31.axb6 axb6 32.♖b3 ♖h8 33.♕c1!

The discovered checks after ♖b3 were only incidental to White's main plan of targeting the weak b6-pawn. Black is helpless.

33...♗e7 34.♕e3 ♖d6 35.♖b1 ♗c8 36.♖ec1 f5 37.c5 ♖xd5 38.c6

1-0

These pawn structures aren't seen as often in top-GM play as they used to be. But studying them in detail – often through more classical examples – helped me understand them better and allowed me to switch into them as I wanted. And against opponents who were less familiar with these structures, that ability to comfortably transform the center turned into a serious competitive advantage.

My Learnings and Progress

These pawn structures with an IQP or hanging pawns are some of the most common pawn structures that pop up, and can be arrived at from many openings that aren't always associated with the structure. There are many nuances to these positions but the two general observations that stand out to mere:

The IQP grants a small space advantage. Typically, then, the more minor pieces on the board, the more likely it is that the IQP offers some small plus. And conversely, the fewer minor pieces on the board, the more likely it is that the IQP is a liability.

Whether it's an IQP or a hanging pawn structure, the ability to push one of the pawns (especially the d-pawn) is a critical idea to keep an eye on from both sides. Even if the result is a symmetrical structure, there's often a nagging initiative afterwards.

I can't say how often my opponents in these three games studied IQP positions, but it's unlikely they hadn't seen examples illustrating many of the patterns and motifs outlined above. But given how the games played out, they likely hadn't played them as frequently as me. And even strong players benefit from experience – it's always easier on paper.

Chapter 20

Chess Through the Mirror

Chess games provide an easy feedback loop through the result. But it's through the harder work of analyzing your own games that you can pinpoint areas to work on. I built that habit as a kid, starting with some games and general notes, before progressing to most games and a more consistent depth.

My process stayed somewhat consistent over the years: enter the moves and any recorded times soon after playing it, along with some variations and thoughts I had from the game and/or post-mortem. Then, usually after the end of the tournament, I'd revisit the game and my in-the-moment notes to enrich and/or correct them.

While I tried not to rely on the engine for that work, sometimes it was easy to lapse into that mode as computers became stronger and stronger. In the GM-House, we used to call this "relying on spacebar" (because in ChessBase, hitting spacebar is the default way to play the engine's first choice) and it can become a real crutch. But if I was being very diligent and doing this further examination myself, I would still eventually run my conclusions through the engine to make sure I wasn't missing something big. And then as I played more regularly, I spent more time trying to connect the dots over a longer time frame or across more games than just game-to-game improvements.

While doing that in 2009, I found an obvious opening trend. I was doing quite poorly in the main lines of the King's Indian. At first, I jumped to a broad conclusion and at least for me, over-connecting the dots was something I had to watch out for when doing this introspection.

When I realized my results in the King's Indian were poor overall, I began to think of patterns in my losses, most of which featured typical kingside attacks from Black. One defining characteristic of those positions is the locked center (f3-e4-d5 vs f4-e5-d6) and an otherwise full slate of pieces. I then realized that when I used to play the Classical French (3.♘c3 ♘f6), a similarly locked center with all the pieces on the board (e.g., 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♗fd7 5.♗ce2 c5 6.c3 ♗c6 7.f4) gave me all sorts of fits, as I shared in Chapter 10. I began to wonder if I needed to avoid all these kinds of locked centers.

Each of these observations of a challenge was correct individually, but the connection was a red herring. In actuality, I scored heavily in the locked King's Indian centers when it didn't devolve into pure opposite-side attacks (e.g., my game with Mamedov from Chapter 15). And while I did lose most of my early games in that French structure, my results turned around after 2002 in that structure. The final nail in the coffin for my concern was that taking the French structure and exchanging c-pawns on d4 (e.g. c5xd4 followed by c3xd4) brought about a structure that I reached via the Slav and my results there were very encouraging. Sometimes a lack of understanding or feel in one opening or variation was just that, and not an even broader indictment against my own play.

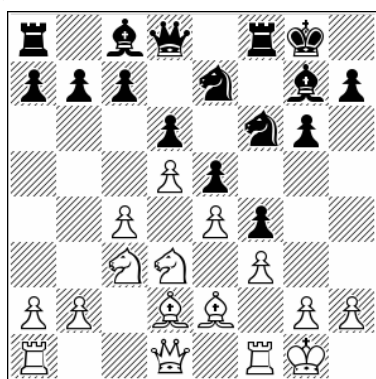
At the time, I was playing chess professionally and so I had plenty of time to look at my own games. With less time, I would have arrived at many of the same conclusions by taking a recent sample of losses (10 losses for example). Had I looked at just those games and identified where the big evaluation swings happened (either on my own or with the computer then; or with a coach if I had one), I could have classified them, and it would have highlighted some of the same conclusions: continue working on my calculation and consider some less tactically complex openings.

Of course, looking at just losses is a shortcut. Wins can be glossed over because from a sporting aspect the ends can justify the means, but the more serious you are about improving as a chessplayer, the more you must look at every game you play to understand strengths and weaknesses. Here's one such win that felt good in the moment, but that with more reflection still surfaced some challenges.

GM Vinay Bhat – IM Dionisio Aldama

Miami 2008

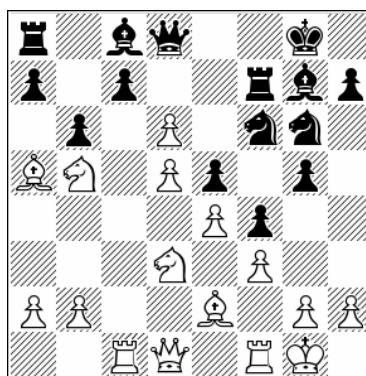
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7 4.e4 d6 5.♘f3 0-0
6.♙e2 e5 7.0-0 ♘c6 8.d5 ♘e7 9.♘e1 ♘e8
10.♘d3 f5 11.♙d2 ♘f6 12.f3 f4



This is the same opening line that I played against GM Nidjat Mamedov (he played 11...♙h8 – see page 216), and it was popular for some time through the 1980s and 1990s.

Aldama went for the main line with 11...♘f6. In the GM-House, we compared Black's desires here to "building the Death Star" with similar goals of destroying planets (or kings) in one go.

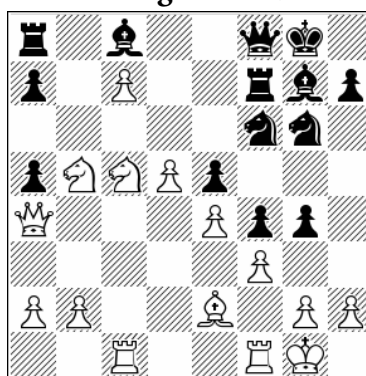
13.c5 g5 14.♙c1 ♜f7 15.♘b5 ♘g6 16.♙a5 b6
17.cxd6



17...bxa5?!

A bold decision. I would consider 17...cxd6 to be more circumspect though.

18.dxc7 ♜f8 19.♙a4 g4 20.♘c5



This was hard-earned, home preparation. One month before this game, I had played this same piece sacrifice against then-IM Bryan Smith and it took me 65 minutes to get to this position.

This time around, I moved quickly but an old habit of mis-remembering opening lines came up again. I knew I had played a suboptimal move order against Smith, and as 19.♘c5 looked obvious to me now, I figured 19.♙a4 must've been the

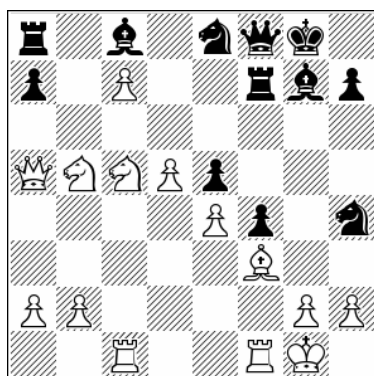
improvement. But actually, I played 19.♖a4 against Smith as well! The difference may not be huge, but the immediate 19.♘c5 holds back ...g4 for one more move.

This same kind of mix-up happened to me in other games too. For example, in a Semi-Slav, I once played a continuation against then-IM Irina Krush that I thought I had played (and equalized with) against GM Alejandro Ramirez. It wasn't quite as easy against Krush and it turned out that I had mixed up the setup she used for a different one that Ramirez had played.

20...gxf3

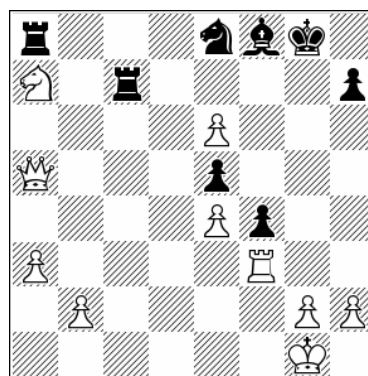
20...♘h4 is also interesting, but as the thicket of variations after that (or subsequently in the game) don't fit why I'm sharing this game, I'll skip the details. After taking on f3 immediately, 21...♘e8 next was Black's only chance to survive.

21.♙xf3 ♘h4 22.♖xa5 ♘e8



My opponent's cellphone actually went off while he was thinking here. I stopped the clock and called a TD over, but after conferring with another director and Aldama, they decided no penalty would be imposed. The interruption probably was more distracting for his thinking than mine.

23.♘e6 ♖e7 24.♘xa7 ♙f8 25.a3! ♙xe6 26.dxe6 ♘xf3† 27.♖xf3 ♖xc7 28.♖xc7 ♖xc7



29.e7! ♙xe7 30.♖d5† ♘f8 31.♖xa8 ♙c5† 32.♘f1 ♙xa7 33.♖c3 ♖e7 34.b4 ♙d4 35.♖c6 ♘f7 36.♖c8 ♖a7 37.♖e6† ♘f8 38.♖c8 ♖e7 39.♖f6† 1-0

A nice win on its own, and I demonstrated that I learned at least a little bit from my prior game with Smith. But concerning the specific King's Indian problem, I realized my approach against it didn't play to my strengths. Both my memory and calculation accuracy weren't really set up for these kinds of positions.

I could work on both those things, but in the interim, I also decided to move away from those sharp King's Indians to the classical 7.♙e3 Gligoric System. After that, even aside from any improvements on the calculation front, my results against the King's Indian turned around dramatically. It's relatively easier to find "unstable equality" against the King's Indian than against the Grunfeld or Nimzo, but the 7.♙e3 lines fit me better with a much narrower theoretical path and also more of a naturally aggressive-positional angle to them versus the more wild lines I was playing earlier.

Taking a wider lens than just one game helped me solidify my learnings in multiple ways. After all, repetition builds pattern recognition. But it also helped me generalize more observations: my natural tendency was to be hyper-focused on the specifics of a game.

One place where that popped up was in somewhat closed positions where I often had less space and was seemingly congested. Identifying one or two key exchanges could highlight how my

opponents might have overextended themselves, and after those trades, the pent-up energy in Black's positions led to White being trampled.

Those findings even came in handy when considering games like the one versus IM Cartagena in Chapter 5. In that example, I was the one with more space, but the specific reasons for why a trade of some major pieces made the win much easier could be generalized a little more broadly. I similarly saw patterns like the ones from the Closed Catalans and KIA in Chapters 7 and 8 (versus Gufeld and Lobo, with later echoes against Movsziszian and Bluvshstein).

For opening trends and some middlegame patterns, I was typically able to make good use of my introspection. One double-edged habit of mine that I made less progress on was around my interest in improving specific pieces. Sometimes these strategic plans were very clever, but sometimes I missed concrete alternatives or some hidden benefit to the original placement.

GM Etienne Bacrot – GM Vinay Bhat Montreal 2009

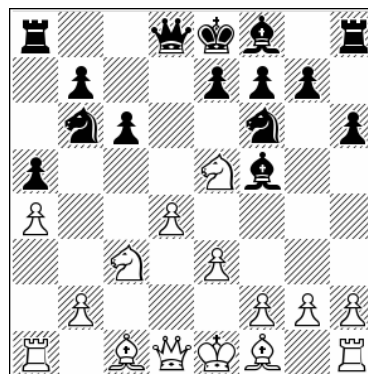
1.c4 c6

Offering a transposition into the Panov-Botvinnik and an IQP structure via 2.e4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.d4, but Bacrot wanted to play against the Slav instead.

2.♠f3 d5 3.d4 ♠f6 4.♠c3 dxc4

Similar to my move away from the sharpest King's Indian lines in 2009, I also moved away from the sharpest Semi-Slav lines in the Moscow Gambit after 4...e6 5.♠g5 h6 6.♠h4 dxc4. Instead, when given the chance, I played into the Slav and saved my Semi-Slav play specifically for the Meran variations.

5.a4 ♠f5 6.♠e5 ♠bd7 7.♠xc4 ♠b6 8.♠e5 a5 9.e3!? h6



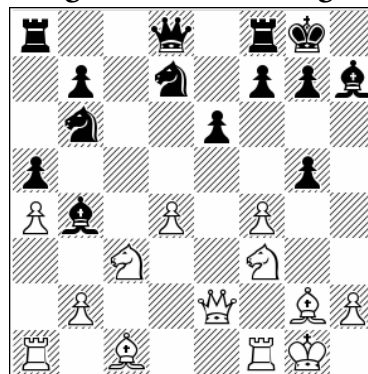
10.g4 ♠h7 11.♠g2 e6 12.0-0 ♠b4 13.♙e2 0-0

White has more space and some kingside attacking ambitions, but Black's position is quite solid. A year earlier, I had faced the same position against GM Davorin Kuljasevic with one difference: White's pawn was on g3 instead of g4.

14.f4 ♠fd7!?

Getting out of the way of the g4-g5 advance and trying to trade White's active knight on e5. I continued that central response to White's flank attack after White's retreat on the next move. A reasonable alternative was 14...♙e7.

15.♠f3 c5 16.g5 cxd4 17.exd4 hxg5



18.fxg5

18.♠xg5 is the natural follow-up, having played ♠f3 before, but now Black simply plays 18...♠f5 and the position after 19.♠xb7 ♖b8 20.♠e4 ♠f6 21.♠xf5 exf5 is just ugly for White, despite being a pawn up.

18...♠b8!?

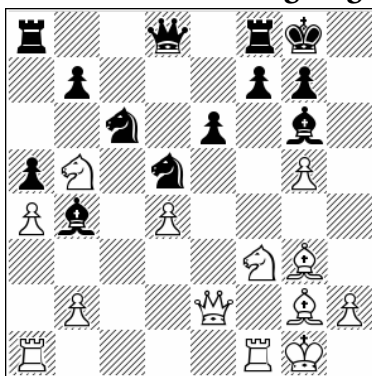
Despite surviving more than 17 moves this time around (I still remembered my 1995 disaster from Chapter 2!), I promptly started setting the board back up again.

More seriously, the idea was to reroute the knight to c6, as it wasn't doing anything active on d7 and was also obstructing the black queen. From c6, it would close the diagonal of the g2-bishop and pressure the d4-pawn.

After the game, Bacrot recommended 18...♖c8!. I had looked at that move, but was stuck after 19.♘h4 (a move that 18...♘b8 also stops as the white knight needs to stay in touch with d4). With the b7-pawn under attack and ideas of g5-g6, shattering Black's kingside and/or burying the h7-bishop, I didn't like my position. However, 19...♖c4! is quite strong there.

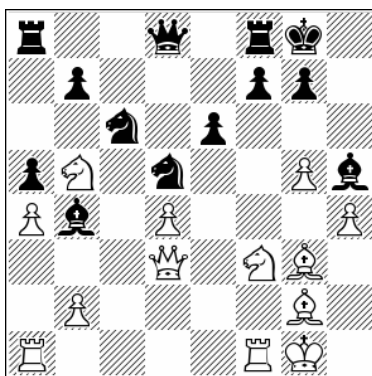
Meanwhile, 19.♙d2 ♘c4 would play into Black's hands, activating one knight and preparing to activate the other via b6 and d5.

19.♘b5 ♘c6 20.♙f4 ♘d5 21.♙g3 ♙g6!?



Like the knight maneuver, I now wanted to improve another ineffective minor piece. And while it didn't cost me in this game, these games in the Slav helped me recognize a tendency to sometimes over-maneuver.

22.h4 ♙h5 23.♚d3



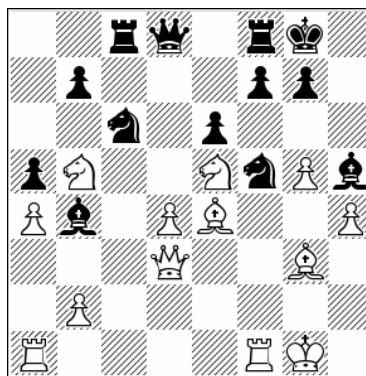
This was the reason Bacrot didn't like 21...♙g6 – White has guarded his g5-pawn and got

his queen out of the line of fire while lending additional support to the d4-pawn. But now, if you look at the minor pieces, it's hard to say Black has any bad minor piece while White's minor pieces aren't nearly as active.

23...♘de7

Heading for f5, but leaving the knight on c6 to hit d4 and guard the e5-square.

24.♘e5 ♖c8 25.♙e4 ♘f5!



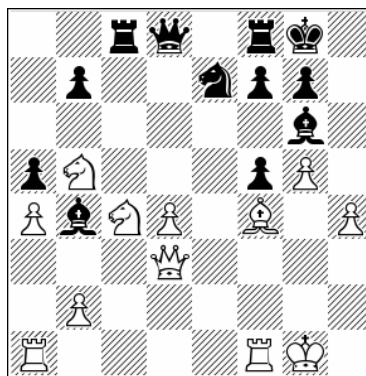
Anyways! Bacrot had missed the strength of this move. After a long think, he resigned himself to a trade.

26.♙xf5 exf5 27.♘c4

27.♚xf5 ♘xd4 is obviously no good.

27.♖xf5! is interesting though. Black has no knockout win, but after 27...♘xe5 28.♖xe5 ♙g6 29.♚f3 f6 Black has a strong attack. Both kings will only have one pawn sheltering them, but White's will be feeling the heat more than Black's.

27...♙g6! 28.♙f4 ♘e7 29.♘cd6 ♖c6 30.♘c4 ♖c8



31.b3? ♘d5 32.♙d6 ♖e8 33.♚f3 ♖e4! 34.♙g3 ½–½

A draw was agreed on White's offer. I had a little under 2 minutes at this point, and although I knew I was clearly better, I didn't see a quick knockout. Had I played on, my first thought was 34...♖c3!?. Bacrot hadn't seen this, but it is a good

move and Black is still clearly better (he'll win the d4-pawn most likely). But the best move is 34...♖c6, preparing to double on the e-file with ...♗ce6 while covering the soft d6-square.

Tradeoffs in Weaker Links

You may have noticed that of the chapter themes starting in Chapter 13 from my progress to Grandmaster and Samford Fellow, none of them explicitly call out the endgame. There are a variety of opening, middlegame, and practically-minded chapters, but nothing on the final stage. That's not an accident.

I didn't completely ignore the endgame, but I gave it less attention than every other dimension during that time. I brushed up on some technical endgames every so often, but I didn't make a real effort to broaden my lens there. And I suspect I spent less time on complex endgames or endgame strategy (non-theoretical endgames) than I should have.

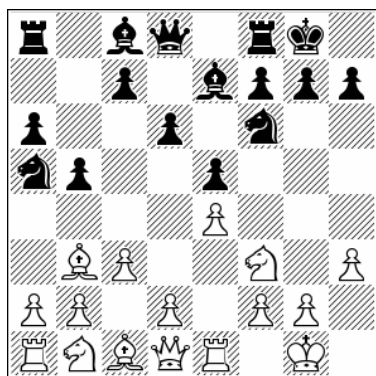
When I dove deeper into some of my games afterwards, I noticed I was leaving some half-points on the table from mistakes in the endgame. Given I improved on my play in a post-mortem myself, I could figure them out with some time, but that was the rub: I often didn't have much time by that stage and my clarity of thought was reduced after 3-4 hours of thinking already. This is typical of modern chess, especially in the now-popular 40/90, G/30+30 second increment (or even tougher, G/90+30 second increment time control).

Maybe now I would have mixed up some of my training to work on the endgame instead of some of the calculation and middlegame work I did. I never consistently got my hands around my time management issues, and the quality of my endgame play often tracked with how much time I had left.

This next game has several interesting moments leading up to an interesting endgame, and a little more time to think or a little more feel for the endgame would have helped. Either way, this was one of my most enjoyable games from that event for the struggle and the content.

GM Sergey Fedorchuk – GM Vinay Bhat
Navalmoral de la Mata 2009

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♗c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♗f6 5.0-0
♗e7 6.♞e1 b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3 ♗a5



I considered playing the Zaitsev (starting with 9...♗b7) but I felt more confident that he'd

respond to the Keres Variation with 12.♗bd2. A few months later in March 2010 at Cannes, I faced him again and chose the Zaitsev. That game ended in a draw after about 40 moves: a better result for me, but a much less interesting game.

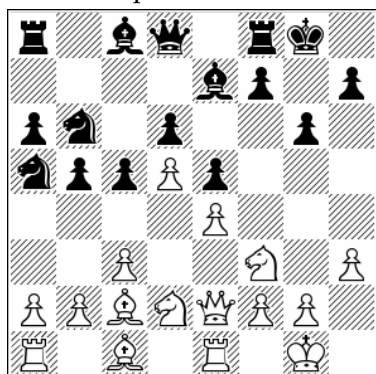
10.♗c2 c5 11.d4 ♗d7 12.d5 ♗b6 13.♗bd2 g6

13...f5 is the main alternative, but Black sometimes suffers a bit for his weakened light squares after trades on f5.

14.♞e2!?

A novelty at the time, and one that he had prepared.

My brief notes on this at the time included 14.♖f1 f5 (Leon Hoyos – Becerra, Lubbock 2007) and 14.b4 cxb4 15.cxb4 ♖ac4 16.♖xc4 ♖xc4, both of which I considered quite reasonable for Black.



14...f5?!

I felt this was the principled approach having played ...g6 on the last move, but it's important to deal with the possibility of b2-b4 and keep ...f5 in Black's back pocket for the time being. Instead, I chose to expand on the kingside when most of my pieces were on the queenside and my major pieces weren't connected. With more space, White will find it easier to play on both flanks.

One alternative was to play 14...c4, which isn't completely atypical and plans to reroute the knight from a5 to c5 via b7. However, I'm wary of fixing the queenside structure here so early and thought White could take advantage of this with 15.b4.

Instead, 14...♗f6 was certainly possible, heading for g7 to solidify the kingside fianchetto. But overall, 14...♗d7 makes the most sense. One idea for Black could be to play ...b5-b4 at some point and activate the bishop via b5 or a knight via a4.

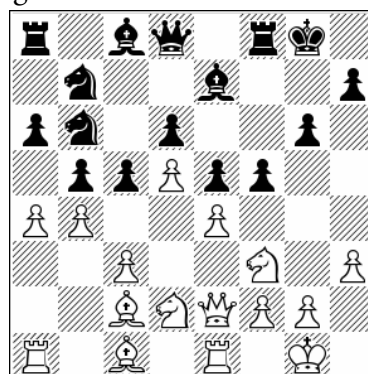
15.b4 ♖b7

This was my plan with 14...f5 – in the lines without ♜e2/...f5, this ...♖b7 move is extremely rare, but I didn't like the inclusion of ♜e2/...f5 after trades on b4.

Instead, with 15...♖b7, I hoped the knight was only temporarily inactive as the ...a5 break will release the bind.

16.a4!

I had not expected this move at all, figuring that the loss of the light-squared bishop was too high a price to pay for the opening of the a-file. However, White is banking on the bad position of the b7-knight to more than offset that.



16...bxa4?

This isn't a huge mistake objectively, but I'm giving it a question mark because I wanted the position after the minor piece exchange on a4 and I simply didn't ask myself what the correct move order was.

Black still has to do a little work to reach equality after 16...♖xa4 17.♗xa4 bxa4 18.♞xa4 (in contrast to the game, 18.♖c4 is now a real sacrifice after 18...♗d7). There is a path there, but with the entire board opening up, it's a very narrow path for Black.

17.♖c4! cxb4

After a very long think, I decided to release some of the tension.

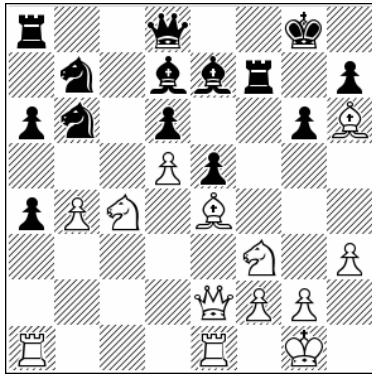
17...♖xc4 18.♞xc4 opens Black up to tactics on the a2-g8 diagonal.

17...♗d7 18.♖xb6 ♞xb6 19.exf5 ♗xf5 20.♗xf5 gxf5 21.♞xa4 is no longer so pleasant for Black, as his kingside is wide open.

18.cxb4 fxe4 19.♗xe4 ♗d7

Black would like to liquidate the queenside with 19...a5, but then 20.♖xb6 ♞xb6 21.♗e3! and Black can sadly retreat (21...♞d8 22.b5) or take the pawn and be subjected to a serious attack (21...♞xb4 22.♞c2). Neither possibility is fun.

20.♗h6 ♞f7



21. ♖fxe5!?

Radically changing the position – White will get a rook and pawn for two knights this way. If the knights had good central outposts (or the rooks were deprived of open files), this would be a bad idea, but here, White can make use of his rooks, while it's not so simple for Black to make sense of his knights.

Still, after the game, Fedorchuk criticized this decision, instead preferring 21. ♖a5! – which is indeed a better route to a plus.

21...dxe5 22. ♖xe5

I didn't bother calculating 22.d6 when playing 21...dxe5 – my move was nearly forced anyway – but as he was thinking, I did take a look. After 22.d6 ♙xd6! 23. ♙xb7 ♙b5! White is in a bad way.

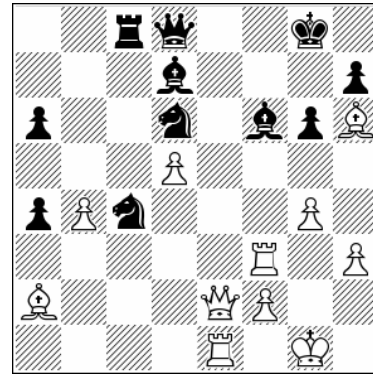
22...♖d6

22...♙f6 would be nice, if Black could get away with it. Sadly, he can't: 23. ♖c6 ♗e8 24. ♙xg6 hxg6 25. ♖xe7† ♖h7 26. ♙g5 is pretty miserable for Black. None of his pieces are doing anything useful and his king is feeling a breeze.

23. ♖xf7 ♖xf7 24. ♖a3!

The rooks need open files to make their presence felt, and this is a nice way to get the rook involved. The next several moves revolve around White trying to activate his pieces and open files/diagonals for them while restricting Black's minor pieces.

24...♙f6 25. ♙f3 ♖g8 26.g4!? ♖bc4 27. ♙b1 ♖c8 28. ♙a2



28...♙g5?!

I spent most of my time here on 28...♖e5, but I couldn't make heads or tails of what was going on. As it turns out, Black is fine there, and I had missed both some simple things and some complicated things.

Moving on from 28...♖e5, I decided to re-focus on the bishop move to force the issue. It's not a bad idea, and it takes a series of precise moves to avoid letting me regroup and then go to work with my better minor pieces.

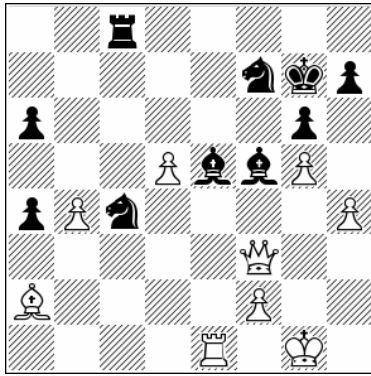
The engine points out that Black's best was 28...g5!, which didn't occur to me at all. Taking away the g5-threat and sidelining the h6-bishop (with a later ...♖f7 on the cards) puts Black on top, although some of the lines are inhuman.

29. ♙f8† ♗xf8 30. ♙xf8 ♖xf8

A totally different kind of interesting endgame arises after 30...♙xf8 31. ♙xc4 ♙e8 32. ♗f1 ♙xe1 33. ♗xe1 ♖xc4. I didn't like my coordination here that much, however.

Now White tries to make some inroads on the kingside with a sacrifice of bishop or rook to remove a defender at a key moment.

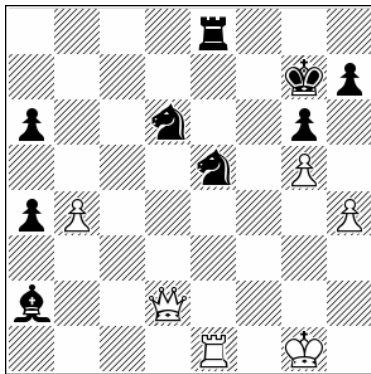
31. ♗f3† ♖g7?! 32. ♗g3 ♖f7 33.h4 ♙f6 34.g5 ♙e5 35. ♗f3 ♙f5



36.d6! ♖cxd6 37.♖d5! ♜e8 38.f4 ♙e6

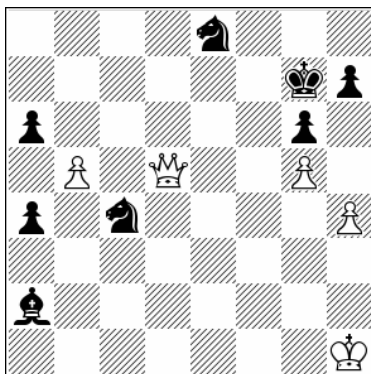
38...♙d4† is a nice check and discovered attack, until you realize that 39.♖xd4† is check too!

39.♖d2 ♙xa2 40.fxe5! ♖xe5



41.♞xe5

With less than two minutes, it was hard to find 41.♙h1!. We did notice the possibility in our post-mortem, but even then, after 41...♞ec4 42.♖d4† ♙g8 43.♞xe8† ♖xe8 44.♖d5† ♙g7, it looked like Black was surviving. However, as the computer kindly points out, White has the clever 45.b5! advance.



Black can't let the pawn through but taking on b5 loses the a2-bishop in the end (after ♖xb5, White will pick it up via ♖b2† or ♖xa4-♖a1† motifs). There are some fortresses with two knights against a queen, but there doesn't seem to be any

way to achieve that here as Black is always just too slow to trade the kingside down.

In the game, after Black recaptures on e5, White has another decision to make about what to take next.

41...♞xe5 42.♖xa2

After the game, Fedorchuk lamented this decision, but it looks like the alternative queen vs rook and bishop endgame is a draw as well. We were joined in the post-mortem by GMs Korneev and Shchekachev, and we all concluded that every path led to a draw at this point.

42.♖xd6 ♜e6 43.♖d7† ♙g8 44.♖xa4 ♙c4 45.♖d7 ♜e1† 46.♙f2 ♜f1† 47.♙g2 ♙b5 and it looks like Black has a draw.

In the game, Black has two main drawing ideas. One is to exchange off all the queenside pawns, and then his kingside setup will serve as a fortress. With a knight on f7 and rook on e5, Black will always have enough options to shuffle around. The second is to set up a fortress along the 6th rank, denying White a passed b-pawn. This would be done with a knight on f7 and rook on d6, guarding the a6-pawn. A key factor in this is that White's king has to be cut off on the kingside – then he has no entry point and White can't make any serious progress. If the white king is on the queenside though, then he has some ideas to try and chase Black's rook off the strong d6- or e5-outposts.

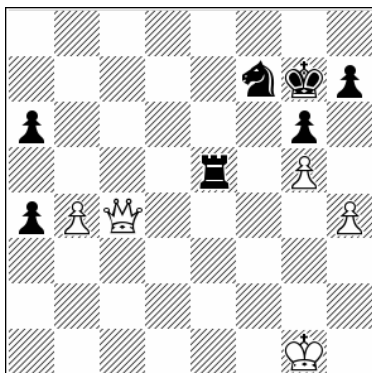
42...♞f7

Black can't force all the queenside pawns off yet with 42...a5 (due to 43.♖a1!), so I decided to go for the second drawing plan with a rook on the 6th rank.

43.♖c4!

A strong move and an unpleasant surprise in time pressure.

I had been expecting 43.♖xa4, against which I would have time to bring my rook back to the d6-square (43...♗e6 44.♔f2 ♖d6 is a draw).

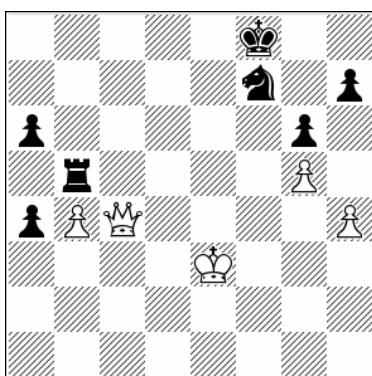


43...♗b5?

We were both playing on the 30-second increment at this point (there was no extra time here at move 40) and I couldn't decide between this and 43...a5.

My move saves the pawn but leaves the rook passive and without an easy path to get to d6. Instead, 43...a5! was the direct drawing route, but I needed a bit more time to realize the rook blockade could be broken. Then 44.b5 a3 45.b6 ♖e1†! 46.♔f2 ♖b1! and Black draws.

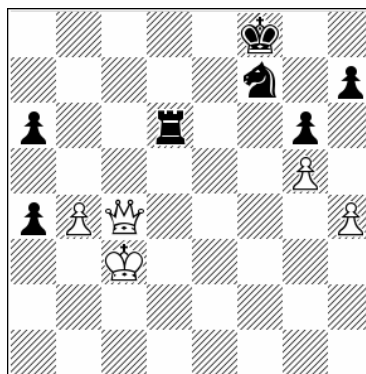
44.♔f2 ♔f8 45.♔e3



White's strategy here is simple – he wants to bring his king over to c3 to guard the b4-pawn and free his queen. The queen will then go after the a6-pawn, taking advantage of the fact that Black can't blindly set up a fortress along the 6th rank anymore with White's king so active. If White gets the a6-pawn, then the b-pawn will decide the game.

45...♞d6?

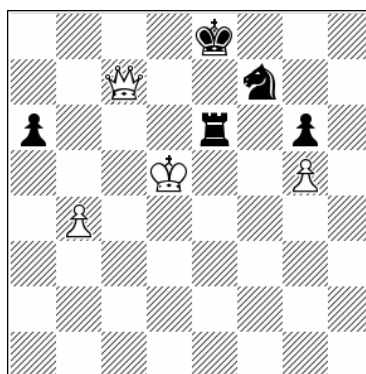
45...♗b6! 46.♔d4 ♖d6† 47.♔c3 (47.♔c5? ♖c6†! 48.♔xc6 ♞e5† 49.♔d5 ♞xc4 50.♔xc4 ♔e7 wins for Black) is the key branch:



47...♔g7 is the wait-and-see approach. However, with White's king on the c-file already, White can chase Black's rook off the 6th rank by threatening to transpose into a winning king and pawn endgame. After grabbing the a4-pawn, he'd typically try to arrange this with a queen on c7 and king on c5 for example.

47...h6 is the more active approach. And there is a key difference here compared to 47...♔g7 in that after 48.gxh6 ♞xh6, White can't make the same threat to sacrifice his queen into a winning king and pawn endgame as Black will have a route to the h4-pawn. Still, 48.♗c5 is good, when 48...hxg5 49.hxg5 ♔g7 50.♔b2 starts the same maneuver: it looks like the opposing g5- and g6-pawns carry White to victory again.

However, when I was looking at this endgame again, I realized that in the 47...h6 48.♗c5 hxg5 line, if Black brings his king to e8 (instead of hiding it away on g7), he can draw! For example, if White executes that same general strategy (take the a4-pawn, put the queen on c7, and king on c5), Black slides his rook to e6.



Then after a later ♔d5, we get a position like the above and again thanks to the trade of one pair

of kingside pawns, Black can allow a specific queen trade on e5 (not d6) with ...♖e5† and still draw! So as the notes suggest, there were a couple better defensive setups than what I used, but with limited time, I tried not to commit anything until I saw the fortress crumbling, by which time it was too late.

46.♖c7 ♘f7 47.♔d2 ♔g7 48.♔c3 a3 49.♖c6!
♞f5 50.♔b3 h6

This doesn't help Black's cause, but it's already too late for good suggestions. Black can't hang onto either of his a-pawns, so White's b-pawn is going to be the decider.

51.gxh6† ♔xh6 52.♖xa6 ♞f3† 53.♔a2 ♘e5
54.♖e2 ♞f5 55.b5 ♔g7 56.b6
1-0

With seconds left, I realized I was toast and let my flag fall.

My Learnings and Progress

There's no getting away from studying your own games, GM or not. Every game has some story, and every story typically has a lesson. My natural inclination, especially with my game recap process, was to look at each game in isolation. With more time, I tried to find patterns across very different kinds of games and longer horizons. When I had less time, I would just use a recent string of losses and look for patterns there.

One thing I had to watch out for was my own narrative-building tendency. On the one hand, I'd look at most games in detail and in isolation; but then when trying to draw a conclusion, I'd often jump to the broadest conclusion possible. As seen with the Aldama game and the King's Indian example, I had to regularly calibrate my own assessments.

For me, this kind of work also reinforced some concepts and planted some seeds for ideas that I could use in other games. I certainly didn't remember most of the specifics of my games with Gufeld and Lobo, but I was typically good at remembering some key patterns from my games. When somewhat similar positions came up in my games with Bluvshstein and Movsziszian, even those passive memories made my play much easier.

One final learning on my side was that even as a professional, I couldn't work on everything all at once. It was easy to acknowledge that when I had a full-time job outside of chess. But I learned it was OK to focus on one or two areas of need instead of everything. That left some bad habits in my play, but I was OK with those.

Chapter 21

Putting it All Together

My time as a professional player was marked by plenty of ups and downs. As I described in Chapter 16, my malaise after playing in Reykjavik was remedied somewhat by my time in San Sebastian. While my rating stayed flat during those few months, my attitude towards chess had ticked back up. I also moved out of the GM-House that summer, in the hope that might help me achieve a clearer mental state.

In June 2009, I was invited to the Quebec Invitational in Montreal. Thanks to a strong result there, I qualified for the Montreal International in September. That would turn out to be the strongest field I'd face, with multiple players over 2700 and a few more on the cusp of 2700.

My main studying goal was to work on some of my existing weaknesses to achieve a better balance on two main fronts:

- 1) My personal motivations (and the interesting positions I was striving for) with more objective evaluations.
- 2) My desire to calculate concrete lines with more practical considerations around time management.

One relative constant through the ups and downs was that I was always willing to do some work on my game. In the end, the work paid off. Despite the Montreal field out-rating me by 150 points on average, I finished in the middle of the pack, and I carried the gains forward. I didn't officially need to make more GM norms after having made my last two norms in 2006 and 2007. But had I needed them, I only had two more such performances across many more events in 2008 and 2009. I didn't quite feel I was keeping pace with my title at first, but this 8-month stretch gave me some additional peace of mind: I had six more GM-norm performances. I had finally found some balance across logical and concrete thinking, strategic and calculation modes, and practical time management.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Yury Shulman
Montreal 2009

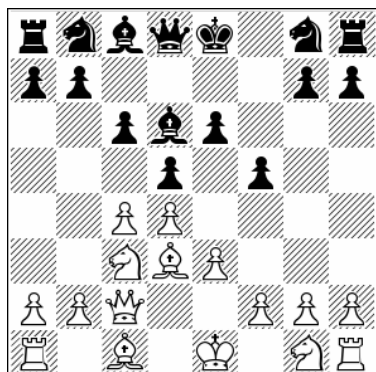
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c6 4.e3 ♕d6

A surprise. I thought that Yury followed his repertoire very consistently and so I was expecting to play a Meran after 4...♘f6 5.♘f3 ♘bd7.

Instead, this move signaled an interest to transpose to a Stonewall setup. Black could obviously start with 4...f5, but this can run into some difficulties after 5.g4!, a hallmark-move of modern chess. The main continuations then are 5...fxg4 6.♖xg4 ♘f6 7.♖g2! or 5...♘f6 6.gxf5 exf5 7.♖b3, and in both cases, White generates good pressure against Black's center.

The point of the bishop move then is to make White play another move first that either takes g4 off the table or draws the sting by setting up a tempo-loss later.

5.♙d3 f5 6.♚c2



The Stonewall has a solid reputation when White can't bring about an exchange of the dark-squared bishops. With an early e3 and ♖b1-c3, both ♙f4 and ♙a3 are off the table.

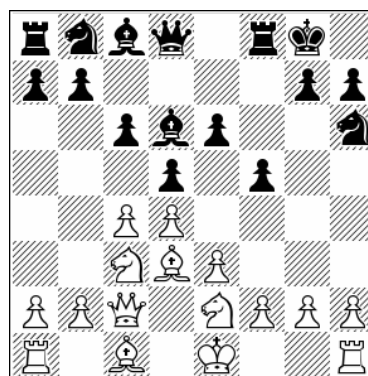
With 6.♚c2, White aims to play f3 and e4 later on, to take Black's central pawn chain head on.

6...♜h6!?

Another surprise, but he had prepared this based on my game versus Axel Rombaldoni earlier in the year. In that game, after 6...♜f6, I achieved an advantage after 7.f3 0-0 8.♞ge2 dxc4 9.♙xc4 b5 10.♙b3 ♜h8 11.e4 fxe4 12.♞xe4! ♙b4† 13.♙d2 ♙xd2† 14.♞xd2, but there were improvements for both sides along the way.

With the text move Black prepares to castle, but also leaves the d8-h4 diagonal open so that Black's queen might come out to f6 or h4. The f6-square could also be used by the other knight, via d7.

7.♞ge2 0-0



With the knight on f6, 8.f3 would be normal here. But in this situation, I was worried about 8...♜h8 9.e4 fxe4 10.fxe4 dxc4 (10...♞a6 is also fair) 11.♙xc4 b5 12.♙b3 e5! which is rather annoying.

Nothing is free though, and I felt that there must be some tradeoff with ...♜h6 versus ...♞f6. It hit me that Black's knight is well placed to meet my f3/e4 plan – but not as effective in helping initiate any active central play for Black. So, White doesn't need to rush with f3/e4 and I decided to get on with my development.

8.♙d2 ♜h8

Preparing Black's standard plan of ...dxc4 and ...e5 to free his light-squared bishop. That's the typical problem piece in the Stonewall.

9.h3

So far, I had been playing mostly normal moves for my anti-Stonewall setup. But here I had to come up with a real plan. My thought process went something like this:

1. I initially wanted to castle queenside and attack on the kingside, but after 9.0-0-0, it turns out Black's attack is faster and stronger (after 9...♞a6 10.a3 dxc4! 11.♙xc4 b5! and 12...b4). So I need to castle kingside.

2. Unfortunately, the immediate 9.0-0 would walk right into sacrifices on h2 (followed by ...♞g4† and ...♚h4), so I would have to make a preparatory move. That could be either f3 or h3.

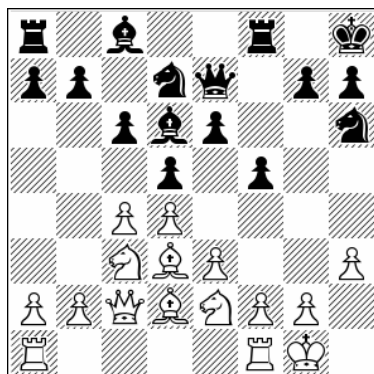
3. Which one to choose? Well, with 8...♜h8, he telegraphed his plan to take on c4 and then play ...e5. And in that resulting structure, it was

clear I'd prefer h3 to f3. For starters, it's more compact, but there are some concrete factors as well that will show up later in the game.

9...♖e7 10.0-0 ♘d7

10...dxc4 is the natural question, given Black's previous moves. After 11.♙xc4 e5, Black has achieved his goal of liberating his light-squared bishop to some extent, while getting rid of his backward e6-pawn.

Continuing my thoughts from the 9th move where I decided on h3 over f3, I realized I wanted to open up the position here to take advantage of my development advantage. This can be done with 12.dxe5! ♙xe5 (12...♖xe5 is similar after 13.f4) 13.f4! ♙d6 14.♘d4. The e3-pawn is backward, but only for a moment, as ♖ae1 and e4 are going to follow. As the position opens further, all of White's pieces will be pointed at the kingside and the h3-pawn helps restrict the knight on h6. In that position, Black would prefer that knight to be on f6 instead.



11.cxd5!?

This move took me some time to decide on, as it didn't feel right at first. White doesn't typically trade on d5 in the Stonewall unless the f5-pawn would be hanging after ...exd5 and there is an impending invasion on the c-file (after ...cxd5).

Meanwhile, I'd stopped Black's ...dxc4/...e5 plan through indirect means, but with Black's knight on d7, he could recapture on e5 later with a knight instead of a queen or bishop.

So, even though I wasn't getting the typical benefits of the cxd5 trade, I decided on the exchange to later open the center on my terms by

fixing the central structure before preparing f3 and e4 to crack it open.

Still, given a second go at this position, I might prefer the complications after 11.♖ae1 dxc4 12.♙xc4 e5, because in the game, there was a nuance on move 12 that both of us missed.

11...exd5 12.f3! g5?

The previous few moves from 8.♙d2 to 12.f3 had cost me about 30 minutes, but this lemon cost Shulman 31 minutes alone. Yury is also a concrete player, but I'm not sure what he saw here that convinced him to play this move.

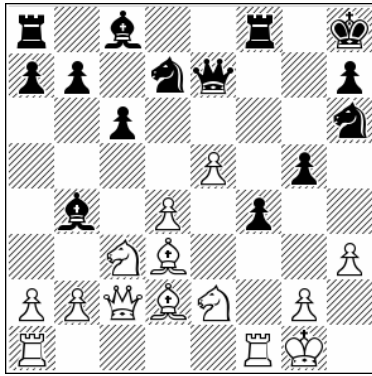
I was expecting 12...♘f6 and was going to execute my planned 13.e4 break. I assessed the position after 13...fxe4 14.fxe4 dxe4 15.♘xe4 ♘xe4 16.♖xf8† ♖xf8 17.♙xe4 as clearly better for me, with h7 hanging, Black's kingside structure being exposed after ♙xh6, and ♖f1 on the way too. But I had missed that after 17...♖f6, taking on h7 allows plenty of counterplay after 18...♘f5 while 18.♖f1 runs into 18...♙h2†. It turns out White is only slightly better here.

13.e4 dxe4

The alternatives aren't inspiring. For example, 13...♘b6 14.e5 ♙c7 15.h4! is great for White. Black's ideal response is 15...f4, but that fails to 16.hxg5 ♖xg5 17.♘xf4 ♖xf4 18.♘e2.

14.fxe4 f4 15.e5 ♙b4

The alternatives are again bad: 15...♙c7 runs into 16.♘d5!, while 15...♙b8 leaves Black very passive and undeveloped. I was planning 16.h4! to rip things open in White's favor. Opening the h-file like this only works because Black's bishop can't force White's king to the h-file with a check from b6 or c5.



16.a3

16.h4 no longer works so nicely, as after 16...♗g4! 17.hxg5? ♗dx5!, Black gets an attack of his own started. Again, Black's bishop needs to have the option of a check from b6 or c5 to offer counterplay.

16...♗xc3

I was going to mee16...♗a5 with the quiet 17.♖h1!, because Black doesn't have a good move at his disposal.

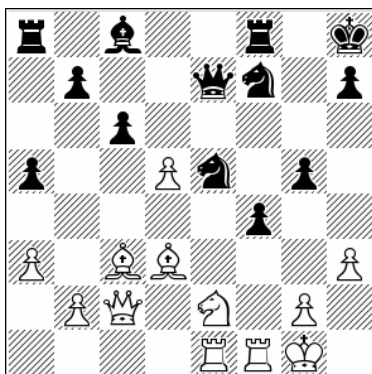
17.♗xc3 a5 18.d5!

The threatened skewer from b4 gained an extra tempo to execute this push. It's natural to open diagonals and squares for White's minor pieces.

18...♗xe5

18...cxd5 19.e6†! (19.♗d4 is also good) 19...♗f6 20.h4! tears Black's kingside apart. Once the f-file is opened, Black won't be able to maintain his knight on f6 and will lose quickly.

19.♖ae1 ♗hf7



20.♗d4

I decided to take the safe route. Now ♗d4-f3 is a big threat, simply winning the pinned knight

on e5, but 20.♗xf4! was flashier and even more forceful.

20...♖c5 21.♖h1 ♗xh3

Desperation. Most everything wins now, but I just stuck with the plan.

22.♗f3 ♖xd5 23.♗xe5 ♗xg2† 24.♖xg2 ♖g8 25.♗e4 ♖d8 26.♗g4 1-0

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Sergei Tiviakov

Montreal 2009

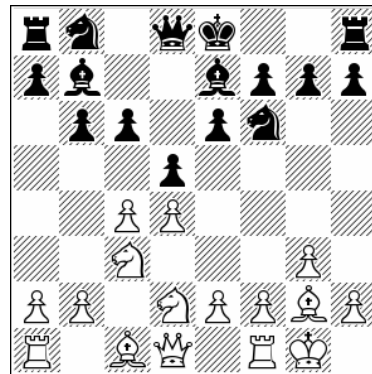
1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 b6 4.g3 ♗b7 5.♗g2 c6!?

A Tiviakov specialty. He generally likes to stick to sidelines where he can outplay weaker opponents. Thus, while he pretty much never plays 4.g3 ♗a6 (the most popular line amongst GMs), he plays this ...c6/...d5 setup, and also some sidelines after the also normal 5...♗e7 6.0-0 0-0.

6.0-0 ♗e7 7.♗c3

7.♖c2 d5 8.♗bd2 would transpose to a Closed Catalan, but I preferred the more active placement of the knight on c3.

7...d5 8.♗d2



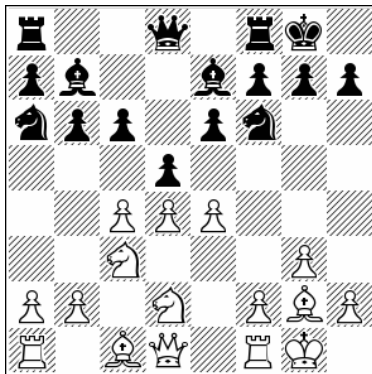
The most challenging move – according to Tiviakov!

In my preparation, I noticed he had published a survey on this variation and gave this move as the main line. It prepares e2-e4 while shoring up the c4-pawn. Why doesn't White go forward with the knight to e5? Because with more space, he doesn't want to be exchanging pieces, and the knight on e5 would be a prime target for exchange after ...♗bd7.

8...0-0 9.e4 ♘a6!?

He had also played 9...dxc4 in some prior games, one example being: 10.♗xc4 ♕a6 11.b3 b5 12.♖e3 b4 13.♗e2 ♕xe2 14.♖xe2 ♖xd4 15.♕b2 ♗b6 16.♗c4 with clear compensation for the pawn, as in Aronian – Tiviakov, Wijk aan Zee 2007. With two bishops, better development, and attacking chances on the kingside, I preferred White, but Tiviakov had defended this repeatedly since then as well.

With 9...♗a6, he chose a totally different development scheme but one I had also seen him employ before.



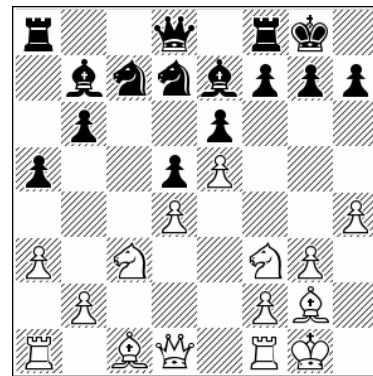
10.e5

I had looked at this position in my home preparation, but I had planned 10.a3 there. At the board, though, I knew that I really just wanted to get to one certain position, and so for that to happen, I should just play e4-e5 first and avoid any possible detours.

10...♗d7 11.cxd5 cxd5 12.a3!

Improving on a previous Tiviakov game by nixing any ...♗b4-d3 plans. In one prior game with this, he faced 12.♗f3, but after 12...♗c7 13.♖e1!?, Black seized the initiative on the queenside with 13...b5, as in Kogan – Tiviakov, Helsingor 2008.

12...♗c7 13.♗f3 a5 14.h4



14...♕a6

If Black continues as in the Kogan game with 14...b5, my plan was 15.♗e2!. The knight gets away from the advancing queenside pawns and looks for greener pastures on the kingside. It can, for example, go to f4 and h5. Play could continue: 15...a4 (15...b4? 16.a4! sees White block the queenside, and Black's minor pieces will have virtually no scope after b2-b3.) The text move stops a3-a4 from White, but now Black has had to spend some extra tempi to get ...b5-b4 in. After 16.♗g5!? h6 17.♗h3 b4 18.axb4 ♕xb4 19.♗ef4 White's attack on the kingside is going to be very strong. He has ideas like ♖g4 and ♗h5 at his disposal.

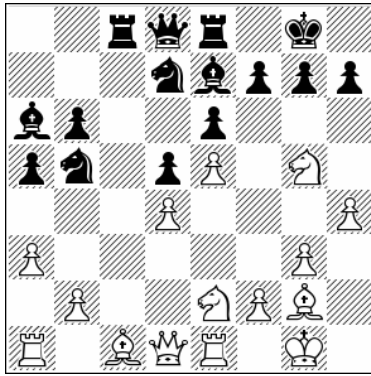
15.♖e1 ♗b5 16.♗e2

There's no reason to trade pieces and ease Black's congestion.

16...♖c8 17.♗g5 ♖e8

Clearing the f8-square for his knight to guard the h7-pawn.

17...♖c7 makes some sense, trying to invade on c2. If Black can exchange queens, then White's kingside attack will not be dangerous. But with 18.a4! ♗a7 19.♗c3, White seals the c-file again for some time – enough time to launch a real kingside attack. For example, 19...h6? 20.♗xe6! fxe6 21.♖g4 and with the twin threats of ♖xe6† and ♕xh6, Black is in big trouble.



18. ♖f4 ♜f8

Black is alert to the threat to his central pawn chain and wisely retreats his knight first to shore things up.

18...♞c7? would be very careless. With White's knights and bishop pointed at Black's central pawns, the warning bells should be going off that something might go horribly wrong! 19. ♖xf7! ♜xe6 20. ♖xe6 ♜xe6 21. ♞g4† (21. ♙xd5† also leads to mate after 21...♜xd5 22. ♞f3† ♜c4 23. b3† ♜xd4 24. ♞e4† ♜c5 25. ♞c4#) 21...♜f7 22. ♙xd5† ♜f8 23. ♞e6 and Black is helpless against ♞f7 or ♞g8 with mate.

19. ♙e3

Guarding the d4-pawn, thus giving White's queen the ability to move out to g4 or h5.

19...♞c7 20. ♙f1!

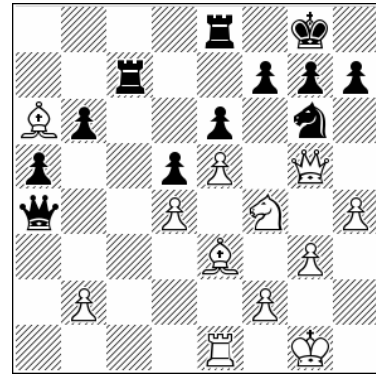
Black now has to be very careful with his queenside arrangement of minor pieces.

20...♞c2 21. ♞h5 ♙xg5 22. ♞xg5 ♜g6

Black offered a draw here. I hadn't started the tournament well, but in the previous game, I drew with Bacrot (as shared in Chapter 20). I took a draw there from a position of strength, but I didn't want to let an opponent off the hook a second time.

Now one option was 23. ♞ac1, but I saw a continuation to get two bishops for a rook, and I liked my attacking chances after that.

23. a4! ♜c7 24. ♞ac1 ♞xa4 25. ♞xc7 ♞xc7 26. ♙xa6



This was my idea with 23.a4. I have two bishops for a rook and pawn now, and I figured that Black's rooks don't have as much scope on the queenside as White's minor pieces do on the kingside.

The risk, though, is that White's bishop on a6 may be stranded after ...b5 and that's why 23. ♞ac1 was better actually – White doesn't get the favorable material balance, but he also doesn't risk losing his bishop!

26...b5!?

Played immediately. The time control here was 40/90 followed by G/30, with a 30-second increment throughout. He had about 30 minutes left at this point while I was down to 20, and preserving any thinking time was important for both of us.

With more time, he might have considered 26...♜xf4 more carefully, even though it opens the g-file for White after 27. gxf4. The g6-knight helps clog up the kingside, but the f4-knight also becomes a dangerous attacker soon.

After the possible trade, I focused on 27...b5 (to sideline the bishop again) and was happy with my position after 28. ♜h2! ♞b4 29. ♞g1 g6 30. ♞f6!. The threats of f5 and ♙h6 will force Black's queen back to f8 and that in turn frees the a6-bishop. However, 27...♞b4! is an improvement to keep things unclear.

Given this sequence began with my decision on move 23, the alternative 23. ♞ac1 would have kept more control over the position.

27. ♜h5!

White can try to save the light-squared bishop with 27.♘d3, but that would be a cop-out after coming this far.

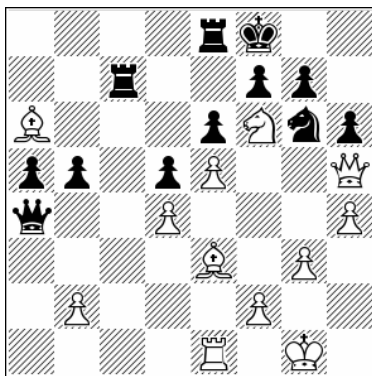
27...h6 28.♘f6† ♕f8

Black can't accept the sacrifice: 28...gxf6? 29.♖xf6 ♖h7 30.h5 and White is clearly on top. The knight can't move because the h6-pawn will fall, but after 30...♗b4 31.hxg6† fxe6 32.♖b1!, Black will have a tough time stopping ♕g2 and ♖h1 (or ♘xh6).

29.♘h7† ♕g8 30.♘f6†

One repetition to gain a minute on the clock (I was down to 8 minutes) and to get closer to move 40.

30...♕f8 31.♗h5!



31...♗b4 32.♖e2

I chose this move based on a general feeling that the e-file would open soon because Black can't allow the knight to sit on f6 for long. After taking back on f6, I then wanted the rook on the open e-file.

However, the engine points out that 32.♖f1! is even stronger. The point is that after 32...gxf6 33.♗xh6† ♕e7 34.exf6† ♕d7, White just plays on down an exchange with 35.♗h7! ♕d8 36.h5 ♘f8 37.♗d3! and gets the bishop out from a6. White is winning.

This becomes a bit of a theme going forward, as White has multiple ways forward and while none of my choices jeopardized the win in an objective sense, there were a few more clinical ways forward.

32...gxf6

After a long think, Tiviakov agreed the knight had to go, but by now he was down to 6 minutes left to reach move 40.

32... ♖a8

Chasing the a6-bishop is the alternative, which comes up short:

33. ♘xh6! gxh6

33...♖xa6? 34.♘xg7† ♕e7 (34...♕xg7 35.♗h7† ♕f8 36.♗g8† ♕e7 37.♗e8#) 35.♗g5 is winning for White. Black can't escape a deadly discovered check.

34.♗xh6† ♕e7 35.♗g5 ♕f8 36.h5

Black is toast. For example:

36...♖xa6 37.hxe6 fxe6 38.♗h6† ♕f7 39.♗h7† ♕f8 40.♗g8† ♕e7 41.♗e8#

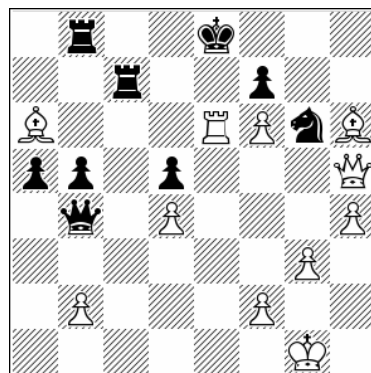
33.exf6 ♖b8!

A smart gamble – White's winning in any case but by anticipating a scenario where ♗xd5 is check and hits a8, he chose b8.

34.♘h6† ♕e8

34...♕g8 is met by 35.♘f4! and Black is doomed. His rooks are skewered, and if 35...♘xf4 (35...♖bc8 36.♘xc8 ♖xc8 37.♖xe6! is crushing) 36.gxf4, he doesn't have a good way of escaping the kingside mating net.

35.♖xe6†!



35...♕d8

After 35...fxe6 36.♗xg6† ♕d7 (36...♖f7? 37.♗g8† ♖f8 38.♗xe6† ♕d8 39.f7 is winning.) 37.♘f4! is the most clinical. Now ♗f7† is a huge threat while Black's pieces are stumbling over each other. 37...♕c6 38.f7 ♗e7 39.♘xc7 ♕xc7 40.♘b5! ♖b5 41.♗g7! sees White force the f-pawn home.

36.♖e3

36.♖xd5† would have been simpler – this would have been obvious if Black’s rook were on a8, but in time pressure, I didn’t want to evaluate the position after 36...♗d7 37.♖e4 fxe6 38.♖xg6 incorrectly. In the safety of a post-mortem though, White is winning here as the pawns can’t be stopped.

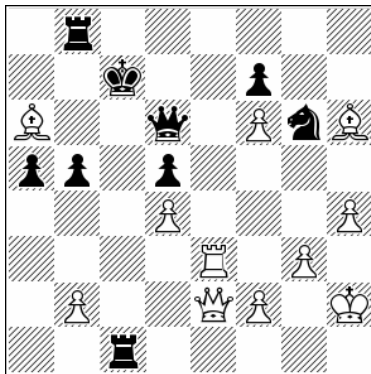
36...♗c1† 37.♔h2

37.♔g2? is the wrong move for two reasons. Generally speaking, White doesn’t want his king on a square that the g6-knight can attack in one knight hop, while concretely, it allows 37...♖c4. With this move, Black guards the d5-pawn and threatens a winning attack of his own with ...♖f1†.

37...♖d6 38.♖e2!

Threatening ♖e8†, with a winning attack, while incidentally threatening ♗xb5, freeing the bishop.

38...♔c7



39.♖e7†!?

Flashy, but there were good alternatives in either 39.♖e8 (which I didn’t see) or 39.h5 (which I did see).

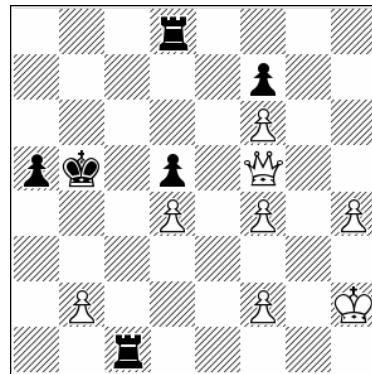
I rejected 39.h5, because after 39...♗h8, I was a little worried about my king’s position on h2, but I again missed ♖e8 which punches through Black’s defense.

In the game, Black has to accept the sacrifice as moving to b6 leads to checkmate.

39...♗xe7 40.♗f4 ♗f5 41.♗xb5 ♖xf4 42.gxf4 ♔b6 43.♖e5

43.♗d3 ♗xh4 isn’t particularly clear.

43...♗d8 44.♖xf5 ♔xb5



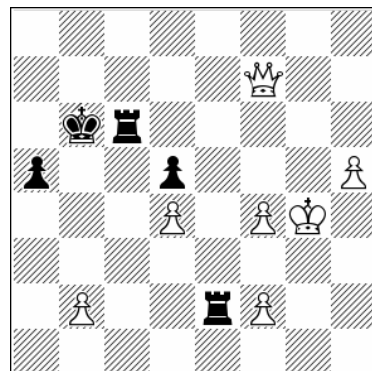
Well, after all the excitement of the previous 44 moves, you’d have thought somebody would have won by now. Sadly, for me, there was still work to be done.

With a queen and three pawns for the two rooks, this endgame is still winning for White. But all six of White’s pawns are isolated and the f-pawns are even tripled. Black’s main defensive ideas are in getting a passed pawn of his own, so I started with a little finesse to make sure Black’s king didn’t step forward.

45.♖d3†! ♔b6 46.♖h7 ♖c7 47.h5 ♗d6 48.♖g7 ♖cc6 49.♔g3 ♖xf6 50.♔g4

Even though White’s pawns aren’t connected, Black can’t set up a barrier along the 6th rank. With ♔g4-g5, White threatens to take twice on f6, and if the rook leaves the f7-pawn, White takes it, then plays f4-f5 and finally f5-f6 to break the blockade.

50...♖fe6 51.♖xf7 ♖e2



52.♔g3?!

A strange mistake. I had already noticed that Black's only defensive idea was to create a passed pawn, but I suddenly forgot about that now! This doesn't spoil the win, but it does make things a little more interesting than they should be.

This was another example of a strangely characteristic slip I had already noticed in a few of my games at the time. In some endgames after a few hours of play, I would suddenly choose the wrong pawn to take or save after having correctly chosen earlier.

52.b3! would be correct, preserving the b-pawn. The f2-pawn can't really be saved anyways, so it's more important to keep Black from getting any tangible counterplay. 52...♖xf2 53.♗xd5 and White can go about pushing his king and pawns slowly up the board, making use of the fact that all the king and pawn endgames are winning for him.

52...♖xb2 53.f5 a4 54.♗f8

This was my idea when I played 52.♔g3. The queen stops the a-pawn, while supporting both the f- and h-pawns. With Black's rook on b2, I thought that he couldn't get back in time to stop one of the pawns from queening. However, I forgot that he could try and drum up some counterplay from behind the pawns!

54...♖c3† 55.♔g2!

White had a choice here – to play 55.f3 or play 55.♔g2. In both cases, Black is going to be able to get the f-pawn probably (with ...♖b2-b3, for example, after f3). However, I chose to move the king back, as now if Black wants to stop the pawns, he has to double on the 2nd rank and give up his control of the a3-square.

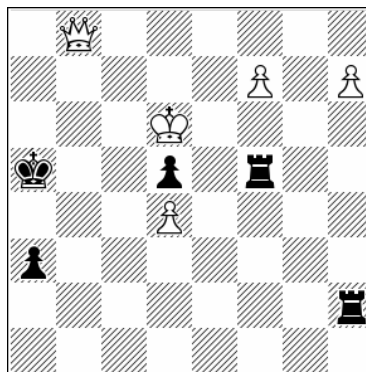
55...♖cc2 56.h6 ♖xf2† 57.♔g3 ♖h2 58.f6 ♖bg2†

There is no perpetual between g2 and h2 after 58...♖bf2 59.♗d6† ♔b5 60.♗xd5† ♔b4 61.f7. Instead, the f-pawn queens.

59.♔f4 ♖f2† 60.♔e5 ♖h5† 61.♔d6 a3 62.f7 ♖hf5

White also wins after 62...a2 63.♗b8† ♔a5 64.f8=♗ ♖xf8 65.♗xf8 a1=♗ 66.♗a8†.

63.♗b8† ♔a5 64.h7 ♖h2



65.♔c5

Down to 30 seconds or so, I decided to repeat the position to gain a minute on the clock. I had already seen the winning plan, but I also saw no reason not to give myself some extra time to think later. The mate threat means that Black can't go pawn hunting.

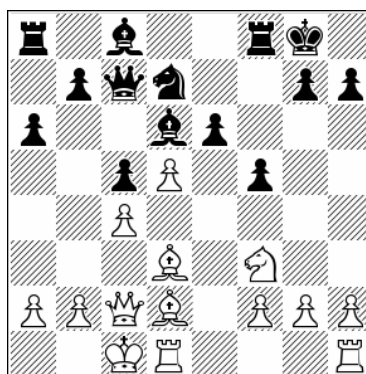
65...♖c2† 66.♔d6 ♖h2 67.f8=♗ ♖xf8 68.♗xf8 ♖xh7 69.♗b8!?

The a-pawn is stuck, as ♗a8† would win it. Meanwhile, Black can't play ...♔a4, as after ♔c5, he can't stop ♗b4 mate!

69...♖h3 70.♔xd5 ♖c3 71.♔d6 ♔a4 72.♗b1 ♖c4 73.d5 ♖c3 74.♔e7 ♖b3 75.♗e4† ♖b4 76.♗c2† ♖b3 77.d6 ♔b4 78.d7 ♖b2 79.♗e4 1-0

We join the following game where I have to make a key decision with Black.

FM Luis Gomez Jurado – GM Vinay Bhat
Palma 2009



Taking on d5 invites 16.♙xf5 and White is attacking both h7 and d5 still. So 15...♘e5 suggests itself, and that indeed is OK for Black after 16.♘e5 ♙xe5 17.dxe6 ♙xe6 18.♖he1 ♗ae8. But looking a little deeper into the position, I decided to take on d5 anyway.

15...exd5! 16.♙xf5?

16.cxd5 was the better practical decision as neither option promises White an advantage, but taking on d5 is a much easier position to play. One possible continuation is 16...♘e5 17.♘e5 ♙xe5 18.g4!? ♙d7 19.gxf5 c4 with mutual chances.

16...♖xf5! 17.♗xf5 ♘e5

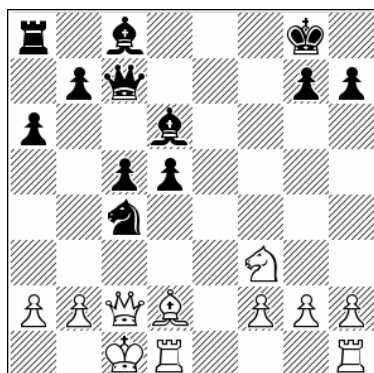
Black's sacrifice works in the short term because he picks up the c4-pawn, but longer-term, it revolves around the power of the two bishops. White now has a choice of where to put his queen.

18.♗c2

Black can meet 18.♗h5 with either 18...g6 or 18...♙g4 and later capturing on c4.

But 18.♗g5!? was a tricky idea that both of us underestimated during the game. In contrast to the game continuation, White can force his way in with the queen which promises some counterplay. For example, 18...h6 19.♗e3! d4!? (19...♘xc4!? 20.♗e8† ♙f8 21.♖he1 is similar.) 20.♗e4 ♘xc4 21.♗e8† ♙f8 22.♖he1 keeps Black under some wraps, thanks to the pin on the c8-bishop. Black is still a bit better after 22...b5, but White is much more active than in the game.

18...♘xc4



19.♗d3?

19.♖he1 ♙g4 20.h3 ♙xf3 21.gxf3 ♗f7 favors Black slightly. He's given up the bishop pair, but White's ruined kingside pawns and inactive pieces should be worth more than that. In a way, this is similar to positions from the French Defense where Black sacrifices an exchange on f3 with ...♖xf3 – it's a very common theme in French positions (especially the Tarrasch), and that's the analogy I was thinking of during the game. Black's minor pieces can't be easily challenged, and White's rooks aren't going to be very active anytime soon.

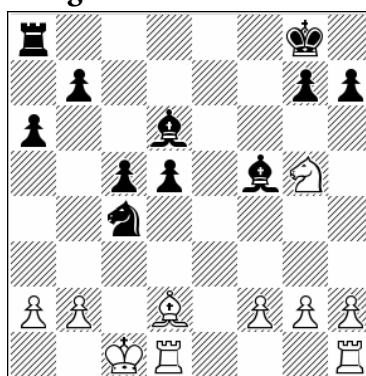
White also has other alternatives, but none of them are troubling.

19.♘g5 g6 helps Black get ready for ...♙f5.

Meanwhile, 19.♙g5 takes the g5-square away from White's knight, and so Black can play 19...♗f7 with ...♙f5 to follow.

And finally, 19.♙e3 keeps the g5-square free, but 19...♗c6 is simple enough with ...♙g4 next most likely, or with ...g6 and ...♙f5 if time permits.

19...♗f7 20.♘g5 ♗f5 21.♗xf5 ♙xf5



22.♘f3 ♙e4 23.b3

A reasonable choice, putting the question to Black's knight. In open positions, bishops are usually better than knights, but here, White's bishop on d2 isn't doing anything, while Black's knight on c4 is quite strong.

A fair alternative suggested by GM Josh Friedel after the game was:

23.♖he1

However, Black can slowly build up the pressure with:

23...♖f8 24.♗g5 h6 25.b3

The ♗g5/b3 idea was to keep a bishop for White, but playing b3 always leaves some weak squares behind.

25...♘a3! 26.♙e3 ♘b5

Targeting the newly weakened c3-square.

27.♖b2 ♗xf3 28.gxf3 d4 29.♗d2 ♖xf3

With a big plus for Black. White's pieces have been pushed back and Black has picked up a 2nd pawn (with a 3rd potentially on the way on h2 or f2).

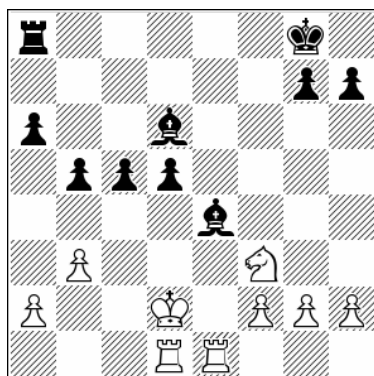
23...♘d2 24.♖xd2

24.♘d2 ♗xg2 25.♖hg1 ♗h3 leaves Black in control. He has a bishop and two pawns for the rook, but importantly, his bishops are quite active, his pawn structure is good, and White's rooks don't have any real active prospects. This endgame should be a win for Black.

24...b5 25.♗e1?!

By retreating, White prepares to kick the e4-bishop away but also blocks his own rook.

Bringing the rook out with 25.♖he1 looks natural, but doesn't save White. Black's central control and dominating bishops give him a largely free hand, and the best way to involve the rook is on the queenside.



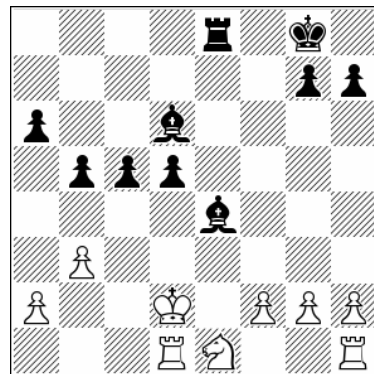
One option is 25...a5!?, aiming to open the a-file and activate the rook that way.

A more forcing and tempting option during the game was 25...c4!, which immediately threatens to win back the exchange (while keeping the pawn

plus). After a sequence like 26.♖c3 b4† 27.♖d4 (27.♖b2 sees White entomb his own king: 27...c3† 28.♖a1 ♖c8 29.♖e2 ♗f4 30.♘d4 c2 and Black wins) 27...♖c8! and Black is going to decisively push forward.

25...♖e8!

The knight on e1 keeps White's rook on h1 boxed in, so rather than trying to pry open the queenside, I can come in via the e-file now.



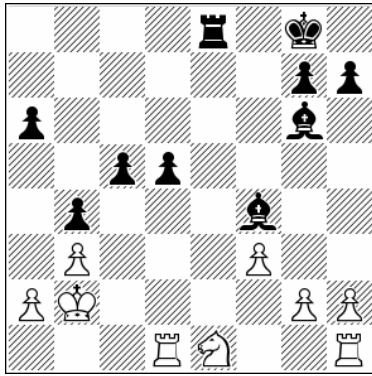
26.f3 ♗f4† 27.♖c3 ♗e5† 28.♖d2 ♗f4†

A trademark repetition and completely unnecessary. I wasn't in any time pressure, and I had seen a clear path to the win, but sometimes old habits die hard. Instead of "always check, it might be mate", I generally followed "always repeat the position once".

29.♖c3 b4† 30.♖b2 ♗g6

Black is essentially playing with an extra bishop, since White's rook on h1 is a helpless bystander to the proceedings. Black's rook will now invade on e2, after which the dark-squared bishop will deliver the final blow from the a1-h8 diagonal.

30...♗e5† 31.♖c1 ♗f4† brings about another repetition, so GM Josh Friedel asked me why I didn't do this one. Well, I actually thought about it, but then I realized that White could play 32.♖d2! and while his position is still lost, it isn't as clear as it is in the game. In the previous repetition, White's only way of breaking it was to play ♖e2, but that would leave him down a whole piece after ...♗c2† and ...♗xd1. In this case, he's only down a pawn.

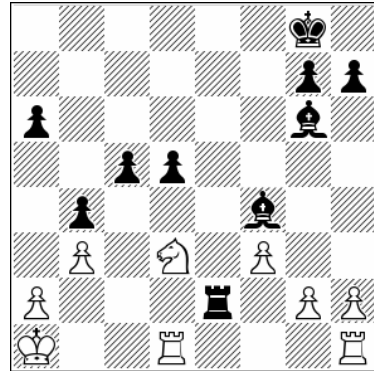


31. Nxd3

31. Rxd5 was what I expected. Black is still winning after: 31... Re2† 32. Qa1 Qd2! Mate is now threatened from c3, so White has to give up his rook. (32... Qe5† is also good enough, but after 33. Rxe5 Rxe5 34. f4 Re2 35. Qf3, White's knight gets to escape.) 33. Rxd2 Rxd2 And here's the difference between ... Qe5† and ... Qd2 – White's knight doesn't have time to get off the last rank as Black is threatening ... Rd1† and ... Rb1 checkmate.

The only way to prevent mate is to give up the knight on c2 or d3.

31... Re2† 32. Qa1



32... Qg5 33. h4

33. f4 allows a nice mating finish: 33... Qf6† 34. Qe5 Rxe5! 35. fxe5 Qxe5† 36. Rd4 Qxd4#

33... Qf6† 34. Qb1 c4
0-1



The winners' circle at the 2010 Seville International including GM Hichem Hamdouchi and GM Renier Vazquez

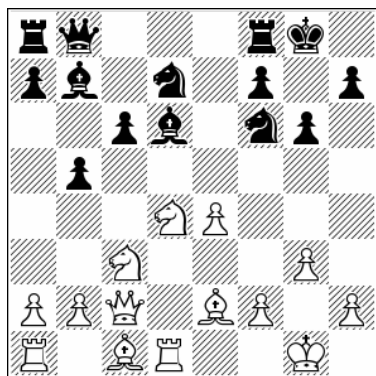
A Trophy Won and Lost

I picked up a pair of shared-first-place finishes during this time. I already shared two games from one of the events, against IMs Ippolito and Robson from the SPICE Cup (B-Group). The second came in the 2010 Seville Open. One key game featured an amusing, but devastating, arrangement of knights for my opponent:

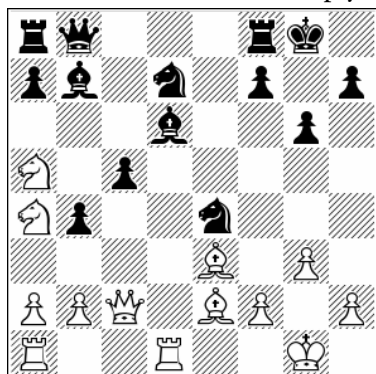
GM Vinay Bhat – GM Damian Lemos

Seville 2010

The start of the game featured a common line of the Semi-Slav Anti-Meran, but with 14...♖ed7 (instead of 14...b4 as against Akobian in Chapter 17) 15.g3 g6.



After a long think, I played 16.♗e3! and after his own consideration, Lemos played 16...b4! But he had missed 17.♖a4 c5 18.♖b3 ♗xe4? (18...♗xe4 is better, but White is still better after 19.♗d2) 19.♖a5! and White is simply winning.



There's no way to hold all the minor pieces against the main threat of a trade on b7 followed by f3. Lemos resigned (1–0 in 28) after struggling on for a few moves.

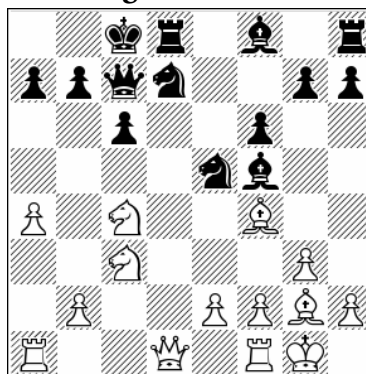
Tournament wins weren't very common for me, and I was averaging one a year from 2007 to 2010. For most of them, I have a picture with an organizer, maybe with a prize envelope or check in hand. But in Seville, we also each received a large trophy (see the photo on the previous page) and that posed a problem for me. I was flying to Morocco the next morning for a vacation, and given the timing, I didn't know how I could ship

the trophy home and I also didn't think I could comfortably board a plane with it. I ended up explaining my situation and returning the trophy to the surprised organizers. As luck would have it, my flight to Morocco was canceled, so I could have hung onto it!

GM Vinay Bhat – IM Yohan Benitah

Gibraltar 2010

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗f3 ♗f6 4.♖c3 dxc4 5.a4 ♗f5 6.♗e5 ♗bd7 7.♗xc4 ♖c7 8.g3 e5 9.dxe5 ♗xe5 10.♗f4 ♗fd7 11.♗g2 f6 12.0-0 0-0-0

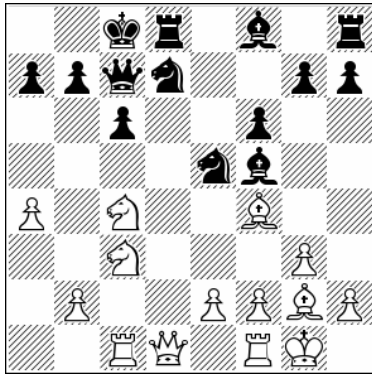


I was surprised by his opening choice, but having faced this once as White and having looked at this from the Black side, I decided to try and take the game in some new direction.

From the Black side, I had faced 13.♗xe5 ♗xe5 14.♖b3 when playing Alvaro Rosell. But after 14...♖f7!, White had nothing better than to exchange queens, and the endgame is alright for Black.

Meanwhile, 13.♖c1 ♗c5 14.♗xe5 fxe5 15.♖e3 was my continuation from Bhat – Savchenko, Palma 2009, but after 15...♗b3! 16.♖ad1 ♗c5! Black is OK in the pawn-down endgame after exchanges on e5. That game ended in a draw.

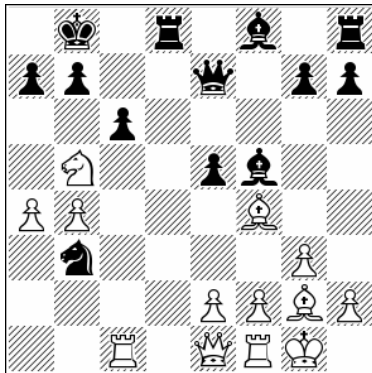
13.♖c1



13...Qb6?

A few weeks later, GM Bareev played this same move, but it's a big mistake.

The correct move is 13...Qc5, when 14.Ke1 is the only logical choice. Then 14...Qb8 was one possibility discussed after the game, but Benitah and I found a beautiful refutation: 15.b4! Qb3 16.Qxe5 fxe5 17.Qb5! Ke7



18.Rxc6!! White is much better after either 18...bxc6 19.Qc3! or 18...exf4 19.Qc3 Rxc8 20.Rxc8+ Qxc8 21.Qxb3.

Similarly, after 13...Qc5 14.Ke1, 14...g5 and 14...Qb3 both fail because they don't keep the c-file blocked after moves like b4 and/or Qb5 to open up White's attacking potential.

We also thought that 14...a5 would hold White back, but the computer points out the amazing 15.Qb5!! cxb5 16.axb5 b6 17.b4! anyway, with a winning attack.

That leaves only one move to keep Black in the game: 14...Qe6, which does force a trade on e5. After a possible 15.Qxe5 fxe5 16.Qe3 a6, White is still better, but it's playable for Black.

14.Qxb6!

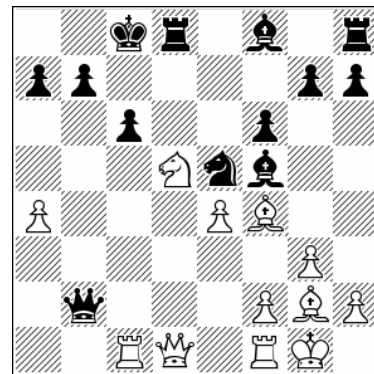
I found this at the board, and it buries this line for Black. The knight trade and my next move leap in suggested themselves, as White's ahead in development with a more secure king.

The surprising thing is that a couple weeks later, a much stronger GM than me (GM Krishnan Sasikiran), didn't play this move. 14.Qd2 was Sasikiran's choice, but it's rather passive and he achieved no real advantage after 14...Qb4 15.Qb3 Qe7 16.e4 (as in Sasikiran – Bareev, Moscow 2010), when 16...Qd3! 17.exf5 Qxf4 is equal.

14...Qxb6 15.Qd5! Qxb2

The principled reaction. The alternatives weren't very appealing either: 15...Qa6? 16.b4! White has an attack for free now, as the knight is still taboo.

16.e4!



This whole concept only works because 16...Qg4 fails due to 17.Qxe5!, and both b2 and g4 are hanging. White will end up a piece ahead whatever Black does. Maybe this is what Sasikiran overlooked.

16...Qe6 17.Rc2!?

I wanted the d4-square for my queen, so I kicked the queen away from b2. But both 17.Qe3 and 17.Qe1 were also good.

17...Qa3 18.Qd4 Qb8

A natural move, but it fails spectacularly.

18...a6? saves the pawn, but doesn't keep White's queen out of a7.

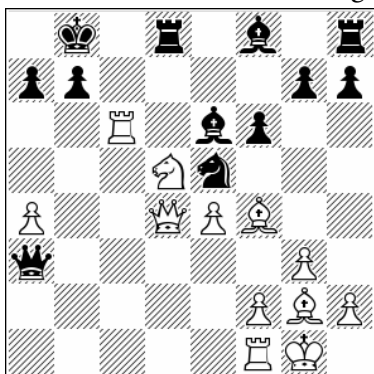
18...c5? tries to keep White's queen from a7, but now Black's queen can't come back to the defense on d6: 19.♙xe5 fxe5 20.♚xc5 wins. Mate on c7 and the e6-bishop are threatened, but after 20...♙xd5 21.♙h3†, mate is still coming.

18...♚d3!? looks like a better defense, but both of us saw the strength of White's attack after the following rook sacrifice. 19.♞xc6†! (19.♙xe5 is also good, for what it's worth, but both of us thought 19.♞xc6 was stronger during the game. 19...♚xc2 20.♚b6! is a beautiful motif, but it's not as strong as 19.♞xc6 objectively.) 19...bxc6 20.♚xa7 and Black's toast. To get out of the mate threats, Black will have to open the c-file, but then ♞c1† is going to be painful.

19.♞xc6!

White breaks through against a seemingly well defended point in Black's camp.

White would keep some initiative after 19.♞b1, but it's nowhere near as strong.



19...♙xd5

19...bxc6? leads to a quick mating net: 20.♞b1† ♔c8 21.♚xa7 and mate on b8, b7, or b6 is tough to avoid.

19...♙d6 is similar to the game, but slightly inferior because after 20.♞c3 ♚a2 21.♙e3 Black can't cover his queenside. If he plays ...♞c6, White just snaps it off, while ...b6 allows ♞xb6.

20.exd5

White's position is overwhelming enough that there are multiple ways to win here and on some later moves – as it turns out, 20.♞b1! ♚a2 21.♞cc1! is also winning, but that's a bit more complicated in my view.

20...♙d6

The rook was still untouchable, and so Black tries to complete his development. Given time, he'd follow with taking on c6 or defensive moves like ...♞d7 and ...♞c8, so I continued to press.

20...♚b4 doesn't really help after 21.♞c4 (21.♚a1!?) 21...♚d6 22.♞b1 ♞d7 23.♞c6! and White's rook makes a reappearance on the c6-square with decisive effect. For example, 23...♚xc6 24.dxc6 ♞xd4 25.♞xb7† ♔a8 26.♞b1 and Black can't stop c6-c7† next move.

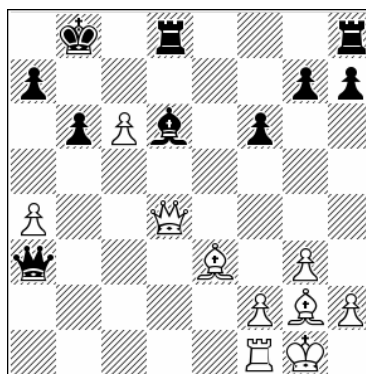
21.♙e3! ♞xc6

21...b6 just begs for White to sacrifice his rook again: 22.♞xb6† axb6 23.♚xb6† ♔c8 24.♙h3† ♞d7 25.♞c1† is just ugly.

22.dxc6 b6

22...♚c5 23.c7† will get the queen after an eventual ♞f1-c1 (23.♞b1! is even stronger, but I had seen 23.c7† and stopped there).

22...♙c5 also doesn't hold the fort: 23.♙f4† (23.♚xc5 is good enough as well) 23...♙d6 24.♞b1! and White's attack is irresistible.



23.c7†!

Opening the long diagonal so that the attack can continue on the light squares. Now if 23...♔xc7 24.♚c4† 24...♙c5 25.♙f4† and Black is lost.

23...♙xc7 24.♚e4 ♔c8 25.♚b7† ♔d7 26.♚c6†

There's more than one way to do the deed, but this seemed pretty straightforward.

26...♔c8 27.♙f4 ♚c5 28.♙h3† 1-0

My Learnings and Progress

These games were some of my favorites across my best run as a GM. I did well here across various aspects including tactics (as against Lemos), attacking play (as against Tiviakov and Benitah), balancing dynamics across material and piece quality (as against Gomez Jurado), and prophylaxis (as in my thought process against Shulman). Add in the games from the IQP chapter (Chapter 19), which were concurrent with these events, and my play had some strategic clarity to it as well.

The work I had put in, including the sometimes-turbulent times at the GM-House, was paying off. But just as important, I was in a good spot mentally. I understood what I was playing for, and I didn't have to worry about the result much.

Still, my time on the Samford Fellowship would be coming to an end after the two-year clock began in 2008, so towards the tail end of these tournaments, I had to start thinking about the future again.

Chapter 22

Chess as a Tourist



With GM Magesh Panchanathan and GM Josh Friedel in New York 2016

Thanks to chess, I've traveled to about 20 other countries. I played in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, and across those events, I've met players and people from everywhere. If nothing else, chess has been a great common language.

One recurring theme through all my chess travels was how often people guessed incorrectly about my race or ethnicity. For example, at the 2008 Miami Open, GM Josh Friedel and I went for dinner after a game. After we had some time to consider the menu, the waiter came over to ask us for our orders: he asked Josh

in English and then turned and asked me in Spanish! I answered in kind and didn't bother to correct his assumption.

Meanwhile, in different parts of Spain, people jumped to different conclusions. In Barcelona, several people assumed I was Peruvian. In Madrid and in Andalucía, many seemed to think I was from North Africa.

In 2009, I was traveling in Delhi along with GM Magesh Panchanathan. One day, some other Indian people stopped us and pointedly asked me for directions to Connaught Place. The timing couldn't have been better for me: I had been there just the day before and in my smorgasbord of subjects in college, I studied Hindi for two years, so I passed the pop quiz with flying colors. However, as the Indian native, Magesh was a bit flummoxed. Even though I'm of Indian origin, Magesh was born and brought up in India and had been in Delhi before.

All those chess travels took me to Barcelona during the summer and fall of 2010. I was renting a small apartment, and playing tournaments in and around the city. On the surface, things were good, but I had lapsed back into being negative about my chess. Feeling the stress, I was eating more and exercising less. Some friends who visited me there now joke about seeing "Barcelona Bhat", a version of me with an extra 20 pounds tacked on. I was back to being off balance.

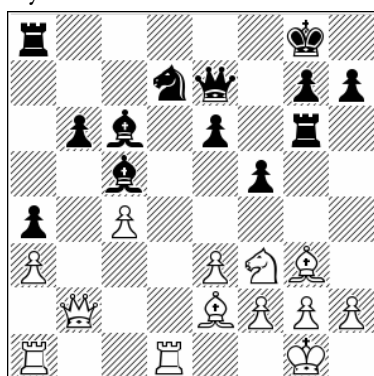
My chess wasn't in better shape, and while I still wasn't looking for a quick draw before getting ready to head back to the States (this was the final round of the last tournament on my calendar in 2010), I secretly was hoping that Karlsson would be late to the game.

I knew that he lived in the nearby town of Sitges, but it was a Sunday, so maybe there'd be some delay in getting to the playing hall? I can't remember ever hoping for something similar, and I was saved from dwelling on it further when he showed up early.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Lars Karlsson

Barcelona 2010

A Dutch Defense turned into a Stonewall and after 23 moves, we arrived at the following position with Black to play.



The position is about equal. Both sides have some pawn weaknesses, but neither side has a clear way to increase the pressure. Down to about 5 minutes, Karlsson rushed his next move. If he saw my response, he must have misjudged the result.

23...e5?

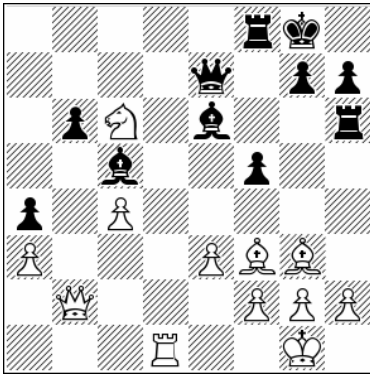
He rushed this, thinking I'd hop in with $\text{d}f3$ -e5 myself, but after a trade on e5, White loses a3 (or worse, g2).

Given I was likely to play the same sacrifice as in the game most any time after ...e5, he could have gained a tempo with 23... $\text{f}f8$.

24. $\text{f}f3$ $\text{f}f8$ 25. $\text{d}xe5$ $\text{f}f8$ 26. $\text{f}f3$ $\text{f}f8$ 27. $\text{d}d1$ $\text{f}f6$!

27... $\text{f}f8$ was better, and after 28. $\text{d}d5$ $\text{f}f8$ 29. $\text{d}d3$ the position remains murky. With both of us only having 3-4 minutes left to make move 40, anything could happen.

28. $\text{d}c6$



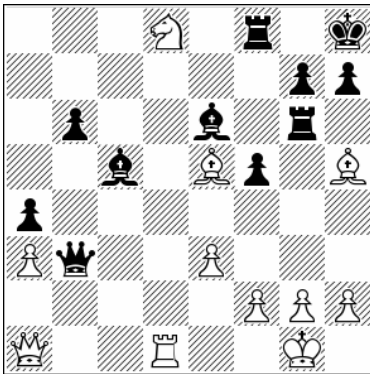
28...♖f6 29.♙e5 ♜h4 30.♙g3?

This wasn't my real intention, but down to a minute, I tried to sneak in a repetition to gain time and then follow with 30.h3 ♜g6 31.♙f4 after which White is still better (31.♙d6! is even stronger).

30...♜xc4 31.♘d8 ♜b3 32.♜a1 ♔h8?

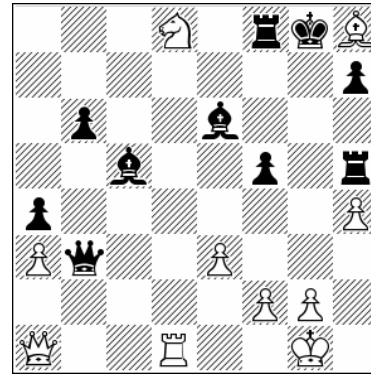
Time pressure strikes back, but in my favor this time. 32...♙c4 would have secured a big plus.

33.♙e5 ♜g6 34.♙h5



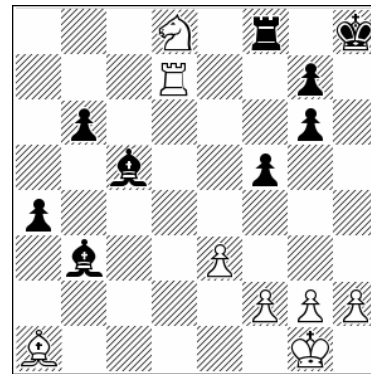
34...♜xa3

34...♜g5? 35.h4! ♜xh5 36.♙xg7† ♔g8 37.♙h8 is an amusing situation where White is down a rook but completely winning.



An atypical mating net!

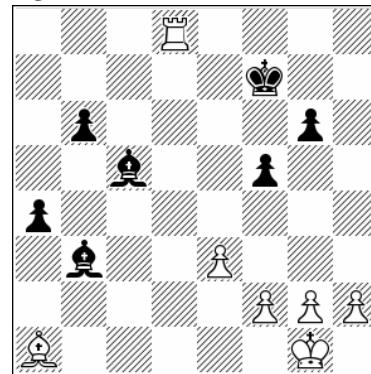
35.♙xg6 ♜xa1 36.♙xa1 ♙b3 37.♞d7 hxg6



38.♞xg7 ♞xd8

Giving up the exchange, but it was the only way to survive.

39.♞d7† ♔g8 40.♞xd8† ♔f7



With 40 moves complete, we each received 30 extra minutes. Officially, it's a rook for a bishop, but the connected queenside passers should level things out. Still, there's work to be done for Black to draw the game, and after two further slips, I had enough daylight to secure a win in the end (1-0 in 73 moves).

My Decision Calculus

So, I won my last game as a professional, but how did I end up hoping for a no-show?

After a very successful series of events starting in Montreal, I took a train from the French town of Metz to the Frankfurt airport on April 17, 2010. I had been living out of a suitcase for 5 months, competing in 7 tournaments across Spain, Gibraltar, and France, and I was looking forward to coming back home. But that morning, the ash cloud spewing out from an erupting Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland choked off air travel around all of Europe.

That cost me a little bit of time prior to the US Championship, but I still felt good going into that event. Unfortunately, my play didn't match. It wasn't a terrible result, but it certainly wasn't a good result either. And while thinking about my future after that event, it felt like I had answered an underlying question of my chess career.

Would I be continuing as a chess professional? No.

This wasn't a decision made lightly, and I shed a few tears for myself over conflicting thoughts. I had loved studying and playing in general, while also being frustrated and angry at times about the very same things. But the decision at this point was clear to me.

I saw a couple choices: continue in chess, as either a player and/or coach, or work a "normal" job again. I knew that playing chess professionally was going to be a tough road for me. I had set myself the goal of being 2600 FIDE by the end of my two years under the Samford Fellowship, but after falling from 2510 to 2475 my first year, I had only rebounded to 2559 my second year. I was still improving, but I wasn't improving overall as quickly as I had hoped. The highs of playing a great game didn't always smooth out the lows after a terrible one, and so the psychological price was adding up too.

I often enjoy teaching and had done a good amount of coaching outside of my time at the East Bay Chess Club. But when I was coaching as a main source of income (while at the club), I often found it less enjoyable: a lot of parents seemed more interested in their children learning than the children themselves. Extrapolating, I figured I would enjoy parts of being a coach, but that I might be doing plenty of high-priced babysitting as well.

From that perspective, trying to get back into an industry profession offered an enticing unknown. I had studied Statistics and Political Economy, so there were other fields besides economic consulting that could be open to me. I had been impressed with the caliber of people at the consulting firm, but the work itself was too routine and by-the-book for me and I was looking for something to flex more critical-thinking and creative muscles.

At that point, I had already agreed to play several tournaments in and around Barcelona and I had lined up a short-term apartment rental in the city, so I was going to honor that commitment. But I ended up just playing out the string rather than focusing just on chess, and that led to "Barcelona Bhat" and a string of poor results not fully salvaged by the Karlsson game.

A New Career

I had spent two college summers working in computer networking and quantitative finance, and then two years in economic consulting. I viewed the next job as a litmus test to some degree of what an industry job would look like. If it ended up like consulting, I wasn't going to rule out chess (and likely some coaching) as a career choice.

I decided to try and focus on jobs that would leverage my Statistics background, as I wanted something quantitative and enjoyed statistical programming. I ended up getting a job as a Marketing Analyst in San Francisco and then less than 6 months later, I started taking some online courses in Machine Learning. From there, I never looked back to professional chess.

I liked the work, I enjoyed the learning (I took a number of Masters and PhD courses at Stanford in their Statistics department while working), and I valued the lower level of stress compared to playing chess professionally. Since then, I've been working across all aspects of Data Science and Data Engineering. Some GMs I spoke with about my reasoning supported exploring a non-chess-playing option, while some suggested sticking with playing. At my best, I was ranked around #250 in the world among active players and so one GM asked me whether I thought I would ever get there in another field (he was implying that I should stick with chess). The data industry has no ratings, so I can't say for sure, but I have a solid case for having surpassed that.

People at work often ask how playing chess has helped me across disciplines. Maybe there is some small transference in areas like focus and concentration (I seem to be able to keep my focus relatively well over a long day of meetings) or sensing when to answer quickly or think more (and admit when I'm not sure). But maybe the biggest thing that's helped me is that chess can be unforgiving if you don't put in the work to improve yourself.

Analyzing your own games and developing a deeper understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses is paramount for the improving chess player. I suspect that being open to that growth mindset in my post-chess professional life has been the biggest contributor to my quick rise in Data. And from mentoring and coaching team members, I've had to think about developing skills across the Data Science spectrum, like what I recognize would have been useful to me back in 1995 and 1996.

My Relationship with Chess Now

Ever since December 2010, I've truly been a chess tourist – I skim the games of top-level events and average one rapid tournament per year, but I've played only one classical event in the past 11 years. With a full work schedule, I haven't done much teaching, but I've occasionally done a little on the side: Shankland (back when I could) and a then-IM Daniel Naroditsky (alongside his more regular coaches) for a short period as well.

I do sometimes miss chess – the playing, the friends, and the travel – but overall, I've been quite happy with my decision. Through my work, I've had a good outlet to flex in technical and creative ways, while also smoothing out some of the likely financial and psychological bumps I would have experienced in a chess career.

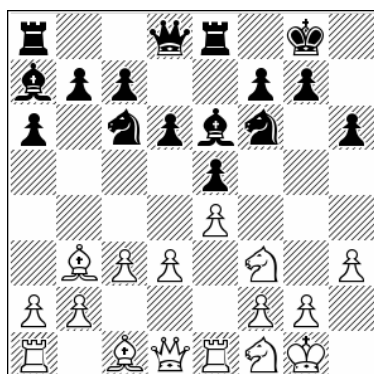
My most frequent chess-playing venue now is the US Chess League (USCL) and its modern, rapid-chess iteration, the Pro Chess League (PCL). I've been a regular participant for the SF Mechanics team in the USCL since the formation of the league and it's been where I've recorded some memorable performances (two wins against Nakamura for example, as well as several Best Game wins and all-USCL team nods). In the early days of the league, we had a San Francisco team with Friedel, Shankland, Pruess, and myself: a dominant team at the time.

GM Melik Khachiyan – GM Vinay Bhat

Internet 2011

I was nervous before this game as I hadn't played any slow games and only a handful of blitz games in the prior year. And even though I had told myself I would study before this USCL season, I ended up procrastinating on that goal.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3 ♘f6 5.d3 a6 6.♙b3 ♙a7 7.♘bd2 0-0 8.0-0 d6 9.h3 h6 10.♞e1 ♞e8 11.♘f1 ♙e6



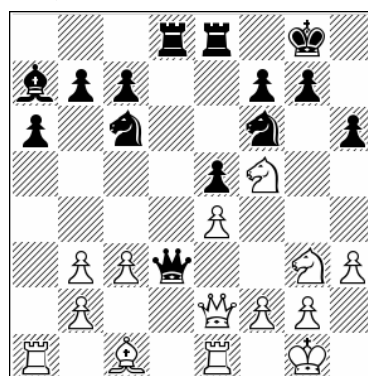
Melik had previously played the Exchange Ruy Lopez against me, but this time he went with the Italian Game. I had some trouble recalling the specific move orders, but this position looked familiar.

By a different route, we had arrived at my game against GM Vocaturo from July 2010. That game continued: 12.♙e3 ♙xb3 13.♞xb3 ♞d7 14.♙xa7 ♞xa7 15.♘g3 ♞e6 16.♞xe6 ♞xe6 17.d4 ♞e8 18.d5 ♘b8 19.a4 a5 20.♘d2 ♘bd7 21.♘c4 ♘c5 22.f3 ♘fd7 and my position was airtight in Vocaturo – Bhat, Balaguer 2010. The game ended in a draw after 43 moves.

12.♘g3

Avoiding the dark-squared-bishop exchange from the prior note. If White can arrange a setup with his knights on g3 and f5 along with a queen on f3, he'd really like to have that bishop to drop on h6 at some point. Black can't really prevent that knight transfer to f5, as ...♘e7 releases some central influence and allows d3-d4, so instead I struck back in the center.

12...♙xb3 13.axb3 d5 14.♞e2 ♞d7 15.♘h4 ♞ad8 16.♘hf5 dxe4 17.dxe4 ♞d3



18.♙e3?!

A little careless. This natural move allows Black to fix the queenside structure and saddle White with weak b-pawns.

Instead, both 18.♔f1 (bringing the king closer in advance of the endgame) and 18.♞xd3 ♞xd3 19.b4 were better options.

I also considered 18.♘h5, but I thought Black's position was easier to play after exchanges on e2 and f6 and ...♞d1†.

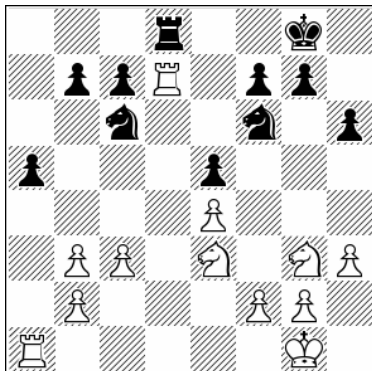
18...♞xe2 19.♞xe2 ♙xe3 20.♘xe3 a5!

Now the b3-pawn is fixed in its place. The a5-pawn isn't secure yet, but that is easy to do. White isn't truly worse yet, but he does have to be a little careful that he doesn't allow a knight hop to c5

unimpeded. For the time being, that can't happen because White will play ♞d5 .

I'd now prefer $21.\text{♜f1 g6 22.f3}$, but Melik went another way.

21.♞e1 ♞d7 22.♞ed1 ♞ed8 23.♞xd7?



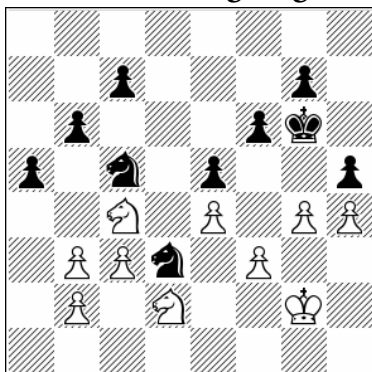
23...♞xd7!

The most natural recapture would be $23...\text{♞xd7}$. Black has only just doubled rooks on the d-file, so this maintains his control of the file while not walking into any pins by taking back with the knight. However, the situation has changed from a few moves ago when I said that Black shouldn't allow a knight into d5!

24.♞c4

$24.\text{♞d5 ♞c5}$ and White is in serious trouble. Taking on c7 lets Black take on b3 and play $...\text{♞d2}$, while if $25.b4$, then $25...\text{♞xe4}$ still picks up a pawn.

24...b6 25.♞d1 f6 26.♞f1 ♜f7 27.f3 ♞c5 28.♞xd8 ♞xd8 29.♞fd2 ♞de6 30.g3 ♞d3 31.♜f1 ♞ec5 32.h4 h5 33.g4 ♜g6 34.♜g2



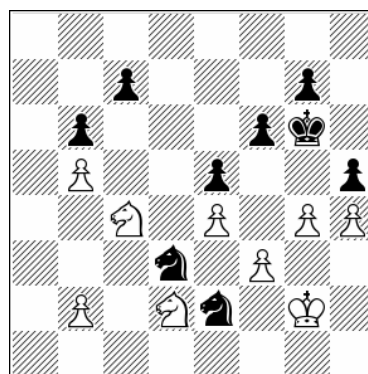
I wasn't sure whether to continue with $34...\text{♞c1}$ or $34...a4$.

After $34...a4 35.b4 b5!$, White has to abandon b2, as $36.bxc5 bxc4 37.\text{♞xc4}$ loses to $37...\text{♞xb2}!$.

The resulting structure after $36.\text{♞a3 ♞b3! 37.\text{♞xb3 axb3 38.♞b1 ♞xb2 39.♞d2 ♞d1 40.\text{♞xb3 ♞xc3}$ is one where White's b-pawn restrains Black's b- and c-pawns. Still, a pawn is a pawn.

However, the best move turns out to be the clever $34...\text{♞b7}!$, preparing $...b5$.

34...♞c1 35.b4 axb4 36.cxb4 ♞5d3 37.b5 ♞e2

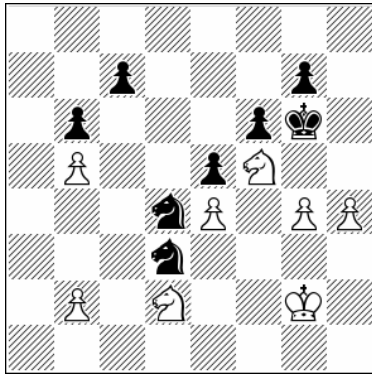


I took advantage of the fact that White's king had left f1 to come back and grab the b5-pawn (with $...\text{♞d4}$).

38.♞e3?

$38.\text{♞b1}!$ would have put up more resistance. Now $...\text{♞d4}$ is met by ♞c3 , but Black can also put White in a kind of zugzwang after $38...\text{hxg4 39.fxg4 ♜h6}$. White's knights need to stay where they are to guard (or potentially guard) b2 and b5 while king moves drop e4 in one (or more) moves, e.g., ♜f1 ♞g3† or ♜h2 ♞c5 . After $40.\text{♞c3! ♞xb2 41.\text{♞xe2 ♞xc4 42.♞c3}$ though, White has some drawing chances thanks to the b5-pawn holding back Black's two pawns.

38...♞d4 39.♞f5 hxg4 40.fxg4



40...♖xb2

Given White's potential improvement on move 42, I should have taken on b5 here.

41.h5† ♔f7 42.g5?

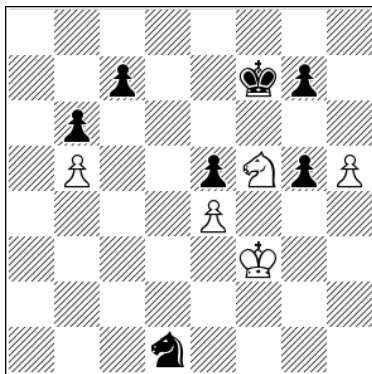
Typical of modern chess with a time control of G/90 with 30 seconds per move, neither of us had much time left for this endgame.

Better was 42.♖xd4! exd4 43.♖b3! d3 44.♔f3, when Black's knight is poorly placed and Black's weak pawns (especially c7) are perfect for White's knight to target. Black's still up a pawn here, but it's much closer to a draw after this sequence.

42...fxg5 43.♖f3

43.♖xd4 exd4 44.♖f3 d3 45.♖xg5† ♔e7 is a different story compared to 42.♖xd4. Now the rest of the game was quite simple.

43...♖xf3 44.♔xf3 ♖d1



45.♔e2 ♖c3† 46.♔d3 ♖xb5 47.♖e3 ♖d4 48.♔c4 c6 49.♖g4 ♔e6 50.♖e3 ♖e2 51.♖f5 ♔f6 52.h6 gxh6 53.♖xh6 ♖d4 54.♖g4† ♔e6 55.♖e3 ♔d6

0-1

An excellent game to return with. Even a year later, I continued to have some good results in the USCL.

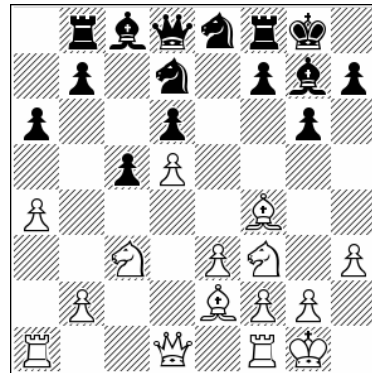
GM Vinay Bhat – GM Cristian Chirila

Internet 2012

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e6 4.♖c3 exd5 5.cxd5 d6 6.♖f3 g6 7.♔f4

In Chapter 17, I shared a game with GM Bauer where I chose 7.♖d2. That has been my most common choice for many years, but in the spirit of ambidexterity, I had started playing 7.♔f4 in 2010 as well and decided to go with it against a Benoni expert.

7...a6 8.a4 ♔g7 9.h3 0-0 10.e3 ♖e8 11.♔e2 ♖d7 12.0-0 ♖b8



13.♖a3!?

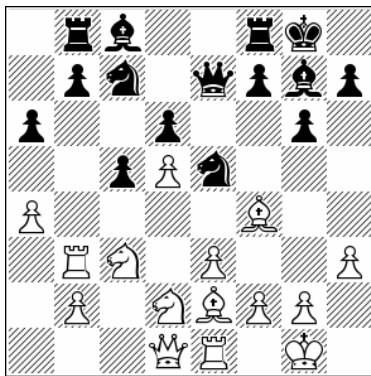
Even in my retirement, I liked bringing my rooks up the side of the board.

I saw a number of other options, such as 13.♖d2, 13.♖e1, and 13.♖c2 but I thought this rook transfer would be best to better secure the c3-knight and also pressure Black's queenside. However, an improvement for Black on move 16 is likely why other GMs have gone a different route.

13...♖e7 14.♖b3 ♖c7

14...♖e5 with ...♖c7 and ...c4 is one alternative defensive setup to bother the rook.

15.♖e1 ♖e5 16.♖d2



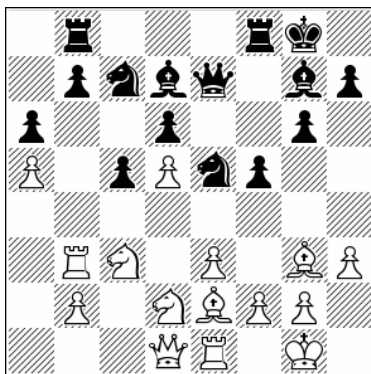
16...♙d7

16...b5! looks like it drops a pawn, but the activity Black gets makes it worth it. I'm a little surprised he didn't go for this as this kind of pawn sacrifice for activity is typical in the Benoni. 17.axb5 axb5 18.♙xb5 (18.♘xb5 ♘xd5 isn't good.) 18...♗xb5 19.♖xb5 ♙a6 20.♖xb8 ♖xb8 and Black has plenty of compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

17.♙g3

I was debating between 17.♙g3 and 17.a5, and not seeing a real difference between the two. I chose the bishop move to introduce the threat of f4.

17...f5 18.a5



Now White really has achieved an ideal setup – Black doesn't have any special counterplay anywhere, his pieces are cramped, and White has some time to prepare further operations in the center.

18...♗h8 19.♙f1

I could also have played 19.f4 ♗f7 20.♗c4, but I saw no reason to rush with f4. My real plan was to play e4 anyway, so why not prepare it?

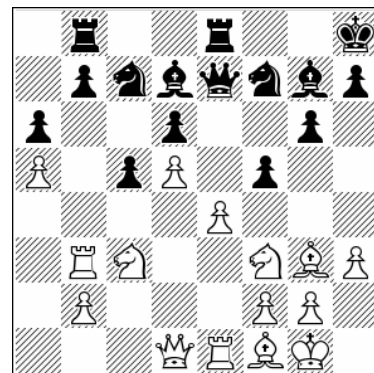
19...♖fe8

On this move and the previous one, I was going to meet ...g5 with f4. But now, I played e4 myself, effectively ruling out any ...g5/...f4 counterplay.

20.e4 ♗f7

20...♖f8 21.f4 ♗f7 22.exf5 ♖xe1 23.♙xe1 ♙xf5 24.♗c4 is a pleasant position for White – and one that could have arisen after 20.f4 ♗f7 21.e4 ♖f8 as well.

21.♗f3!



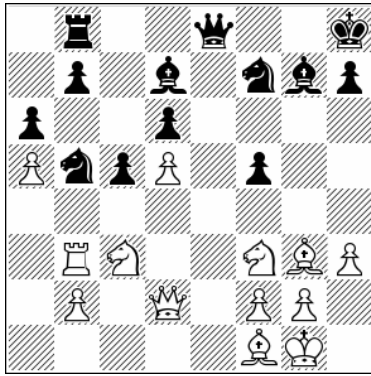
21...♖f8

My opponent spent 10 minutes here, maybe considering a possible material-grab starting with 21...♙xc3, but it doesn't really save him after 22.bxc3!. After 22...fxe4, White continues with 23.c4! and he can round the e-pawn up at his leisure. Black can also win an exchange with 22...♙a4 (this doesn't work after the 22...fxe4 23.c4 continuation because of 24.♖a1+), but with the e-pawn still around, White steamrolls Black with 23.e5!.

22.exf5 gxf5 23.♖xe8 ♖xe8 24.♖d2

24.♖b6 ♗a8 25.♖xd6 ♗xd6 26.♙xd6 ♖c8 27.♖b3 was also tempting, but I decided there was no good reason to sacrifice an exchange when normal moves would do.

24...♗b5

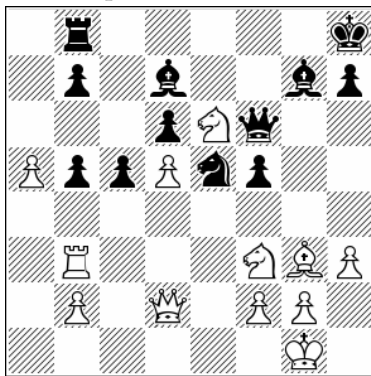


25. ♖e2!

Heading for the newly accessible weakness on e6, but with Black's position littered with weak points, there are multiple ways to increase the advantage.

25... ♜f8 26. ♗f4 ♖e5 27. ♙xb5 axb5 28. ♗e6 ♜f6

Neither 28... ♙xe6 29. dxe6 ♗c4 30. ♜d5, nor 28... ♜e7 29. ♗xg7 ♜xg7 30. ♗xe5 dxe5 31. f4! hold out much hope for Black.



29. ♗xc5! ♗xf3† 30. ♙xf3 dxc5 31. ♙xb8 ♜xb2 32. ♜e3 ♜a1† 33. ♗h2 ♜d4 34. ♜e7 ♜xd5 35. ♙g3

1–0

As I moved further and further away from my consistent studying and practice, my results in both the USCL and PCL became more volatile. My results suffered most of all in certain more-concrete openings where my leaky memory or stale preparation could lead me astray. Thus, my old favorite of the Semi-Slav Meran turned into a disaster zone with a series of losses to stronger, younger GMs like Ilya Nyzhnyk and Ray Robson.

Even in retirement, my connections with many in the Indian chess community paid dividends. I've already mentioned GM Abhijeet Gupta a number of times, whose opening tips always seemed to

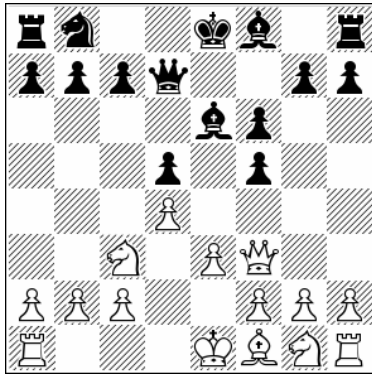
work out for me. And in 2014, my connection to Vishal Sareen (who I also met in Balaguer 2006) came back to help me. He was helping organize a strong open tournament in South Africa and although he knew that I hadn't played in a while, he asked if I was interested in playing. I jumped at the opportunity.

At that point, it had been four years since my last tournament game. I stopped playing online almost entirely after giving up professional chess, but I remembered how to move the pieces, and most importantly, I had internalized a few things about my own chess strengths and weaknesses. I tried to not make some of the mistakes I made at some prior events while on the Samford. For example, I didn't stray as far from my normal repertoire, I recognized some over-optimistic evaluations and asked myself again whether they were correct, and I forced myself to try and make a reasonable decision if I spent too long on a move. The chess wasn't always pretty, but the results were actually pretty good: in 11 games, including 8 against other GMs, I scored an undefeated 7½ points (4 wins and 7 draws).

Even more recently, the Mechanics Institute held a strong rapid tournament in 2019. With my office just a few blocks away, I agreed to play, but I couldn't quite get away early enough to take a nap or listen to my old, pre-game mix. I did, however, have enough time to get a nice cup of tea along the way. And again, sticking to somewhat simpler opening lines, my results felt great: I was seeded 12th and finished in a tie for 3rd with 4/5. Amusingly, three of the four games I won were against players I first played in the 1990s, including GM Zviad Izoria. My favorite game was the following though, where I had a chance to play the #2 player in the world at the time.

GM Vinay Bhat – GM Fabiano Caruana
San Francisco (rapid) 2019

1. d4 f5 2. ♗c3 ♗f6 3. ♙g5 d5 4. ♙xf6 exf6 5. e3 ♙e6 6. ♜f3 ♜d7

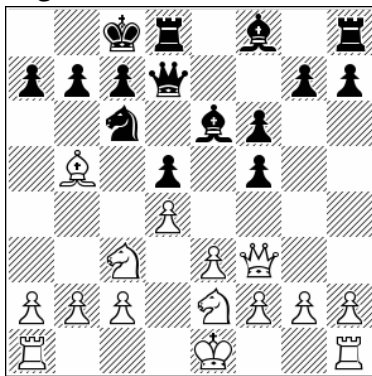


7.♙b5!?

Not the typical development scheme in this line of the Dutch, but I had played it a couple times back in 2006 and 2007.

But at the time of this game, I didn't remember that I later switched to the normal 7.♙d3 after finding limited success with 7.♙b5.

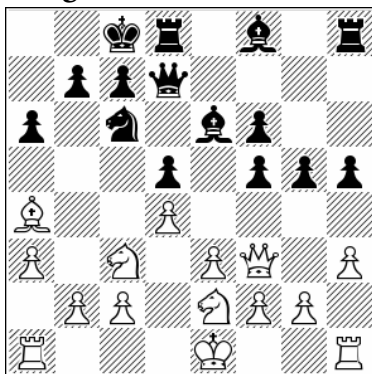
7...♘c6 8.♘g2 0-0-0



9.a3

9.♘f4 is better, with one example from my practice being: 9...g6 10.♘d3 ♖b8 11.a3 ♗d6 12.b4 with some advantage, as in Bhat – GM De la Riva Aguado, Andorra 2006.

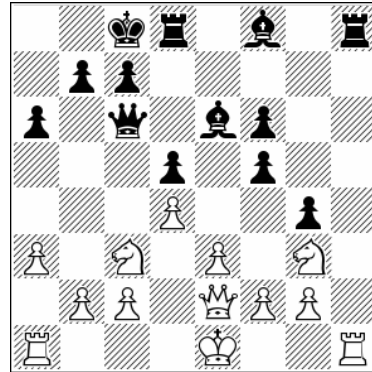
9...a6 10.♙a4 g5! 11.h3 h5



This pawn rush is troublesome because White's e2-knight blocks his queen from retreating.

I didn't really want to trade on c6, but the immediate ♘g3 walks into ideas with ...b5 and ...f4, when White's center is teetering.

12.♙xc6 ♗xc6 13.♘g3 g4 14.hxg4 hxg4 15.♗e2

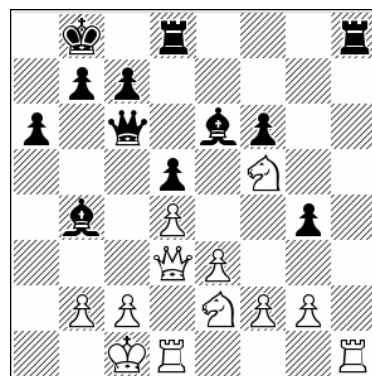


15...♙d6

15...♗xh1† 16.♘xh1 ♙h6 was more concerning in my view, because ...f4 is going to come soon. Still, things aren't so bad after 17.0-0-0 f4 18.exf4 ♙xf4† 19.♖b1 as the h1-knight can make its way back into the game and White's position is still solid.

Now I was debating between the game continuation and 16.♖d2 (which avoids the tactic on a3), but I felt the trade of a3 for f5 wasn't too bad for me, so I played the more ideal move of castling.

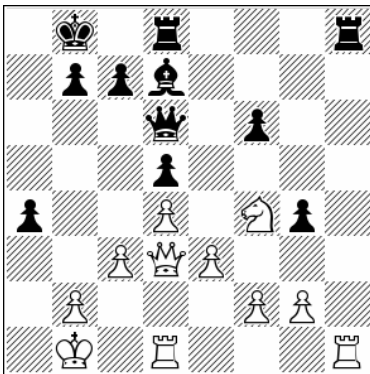
16.0-0-0 ♙xa3 17.♗d3 ♙b4 18.♘xf5 ♖b8 19.♘e2



After getting into some trouble earlier with my queen and kingside, I was satisfied with my position here. It's about equal as Black's bishop pair doesn't have a lot of scope and White's knights do have some squares to work with. My subsequent

plan wasn't a bad one, except that playing c3 unnecessarily opens up some queenside squares.

19...a5 20.♔b1 a4 21.c3 ♔d6 22.♖xd6 ♚xd6 23.♗f4 ♔d7

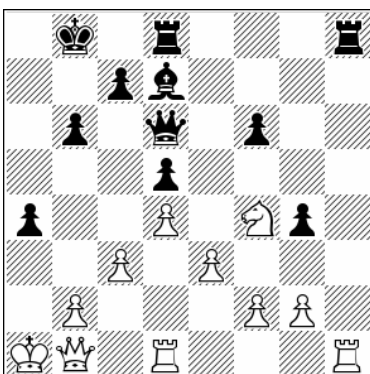


24.♔a1!?

After another long think (relatively speaking; the time control was G/15 with 2 seconds per move), I came up with a plan. I wanted to contest the h-file and for that, I needed to bring my queen to the 1st rank. I hit upon this idea of tucking the queen away on b1 from where it can support rook trades on h1 but also help keep watch on the queenside and even offer some favorable trades. This turns out to be a little too sophisticated.

24...b6 25.♚b1

25...♞c1 is simpler, asking the question of how Black is going to improve. The f4-knight is a great piece, holding the kingside and pressuring Black's center, so White can consider stepping away from the h-file too with moves like ♞hd1 and potentially even c4 later if he wants.



25...♔b7 26.♞xh8 ♞xh8 27.♞h1

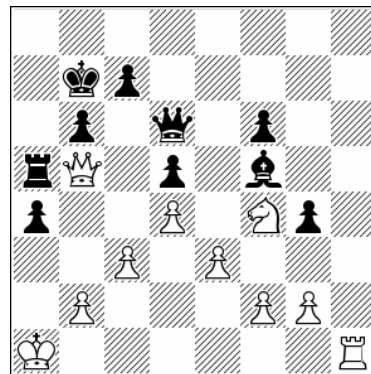
My key idea was that on 27...♞a8, I would play 28.♚a2! (hitting d5) and then 29.♚a3

(offering a favorable queen trade and blockading Black's a-pawn). The computer sees it as equal, but I felt that would be a little better for White. However, there's a flaw and after some time, Caruana found it.

27...♔f5! 28.♚f1 ♞a8

Now I wasn't happy at all, as my queenside is weak and my queen is not around. It's still only slightly better for Black but, low on time, I went down in flames quickly.

29.♚b5 ♞a5



30.♚b4?

30.♚e8! a3 31.b3! a2 32.♞h8 ♚a3 looked crushing to me, but 33.♗d3! actually holds. Black has to take on d3 because the alternatives will allow a check on b8 and ♗b4†, but 33...♔xd3 34.♚b8† ♔c6 35.♚e8† is a draw.

Black can improve by resetting things with 30...♞a8 31.♚b5 ♔e4 so it's not a forced draw, but there'd still be plenty to play for after that in a rapid game.

30...♚c6

Now White is in real trouble. 31.c4 is the only way to keep trying, but even that isn't good.

31.♞h8 a3 32.b3 ♞b5

0-1

Close, but no cigar. Still, I had finally gotten back to playing and simply enjoying the struggle!



Appendix – Photos



Above: Playing a game in 1991 versus my maternal grandfather, who taught my mom how to play chess when she was a child
Below: With the US team during my first World Youth Championship in 1994, coached by GM Pal Benko







This was taken in 1992, at the age of 8, after a long game that I lost. While I had plenty of success on my way up, I also had to get used to losing some key games as well



Above left: Discussing my play with my first coach, Richard Shorman. I was 8 years old but had already started playing in the High School section of State & National Youth Championships.

Above right: In 1995, at the age of 11, before a game – back when chess was easy!

Right: As a scholastic champion in 1999



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