

9) Know yourself

“True mastery transcends any particular art. It stems from mastery of oneself – the ability, developed through self-discipline to be calm, fully aware, and completely in tune with oneself and the surroundings. Then, and only then, can a person know himself.”

Bruce Lee

One of the most common problems amongst players who come to me for lessons is that they want to play like Mikhail Tal. Occasionally, very occasionally, this is an appropriate style for someone to adopt. Usually it is not.

Being ruthlessly objective about one's capabilities is one of the most valuable traits a chess player can have and it is simultaneously cultivated by playing the game. The chessboard has a way of ferreting out all of our weaknesses from vanity to pride and sloth. One of the signs of great players is that they are highly objective about both weaknesses and strengths. Here, for example, is a passage from *The Middle Years of Paul Keres* in which the great Estonian Grandmaster describes how he learned to conserve his energy by not playing too much. Such thoughts are typical of those who devote their lives to mastery:

“It is often said in the earliest part of my career that I conducted single, decisive games with an insufficient sense of responsibility and earnestness. But my participation in the training tournament at Leningrad and Moscow showed that such was also the case with me in whole events. It was naturally my desire to make acquaintance with the chess-masters of the Soviet Union and measure my strength with them over the board and, finally, to get to know their method of play and their various researches into the game of chess. But I should not in any way have undertaken this in the sort of form I found myself after the AVRO Tournament. I should have copied the example of Botvinnik who quite rightly refrained from taking part in this training tournament.

“Naturally, the consequences of this thoughtless behaviour on my part were not long in coming, especially when one takes into consideration the good playing calibre of the tournament participants. I lost two games in the very first rounds and had to make a vastly concentrated effort in order not to collapse completely. I succeeded in winning three good games in the middle part of the tournament, these being a highly complicated struggle against Tolush, one with an interesting exchange sacrifice against Levenfish and a well carried out King-side attack against Smyslov. But in a whole series of games I conducted play in a style beneath criticism, as for example in easily won endgames against Reshevsky and

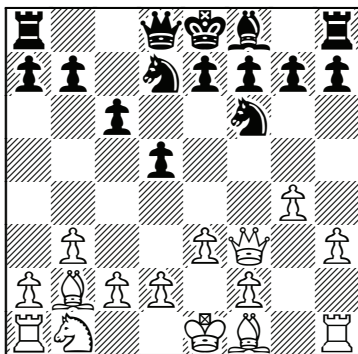
Rabinowitsch, or in the encounter in the last round with Alatortsev. I stood well for quite a long time, but in the end my physical reserves were exhausted. I lost both of the last two games and finished up in the lower half of the table.

“The result of this tournament was indeed bitter for me, but also extremely instructive. Shortly after the Leningrad-Moscow Tournament I was invited to take part in a fine international tournament in Kemeru, but this time I did not repeat my mistake. I refrained from participating and only took part in national matches against Latvia and Lithuania. The next tournament in which I took part was some months later, the Easter Tournament at Margate. This time I was fresh once again, played very good chess and won the first prize, one point ahead of Capablanca and Flohr.”

The following game is an example of the same thing. During an open tournament with some double-round days it makes sense for more mature players to play a tight, cautious game and not take too many risks. But in the following encounter Mark Taimanov paid insufficient heed to such considerations and I managed to beat him.

Game 11
M.Taimanov-N.Davies
Gausdal 1992
Nimzowitsch-Larsen Attack

1 ♖f3 ♘f6 2 b3 d5 3 ♙b2 c6 4 e3 ♙g4 5 h3 ♙xf3 6 ♚xf3 ♘bd7 7 g4!?



This is not the way that a man of over 60 years of age should be playing.

Although it might be a good move from an objective point of view, the loosening of White's position exposes him to greater risk. Where, for example, will White's king find safety?

7...e5 8 g5 ♘e4 9 h4 ♙b4!?

Fast and direct development is often a good response to an opponent's exotic play. In addition to pinning White's d-pawn, this provokes a weakening of his queenside with a2-a3.

10 ♙h3 ♚e7

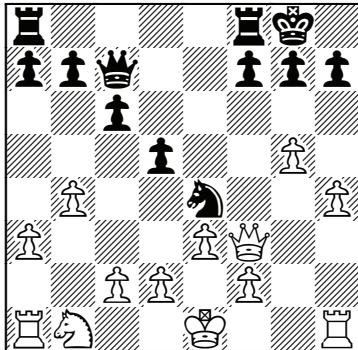
I would have liked to have played another natural move in 10...0-0 but then 11 ♚f5! ♘b6 12 f3 ♘d6 13 ♚xe5 is very strong. Consequently I decide to force White into taking the knight on d7 in order to get the e5-pawn.

11 ♙xd7+ ♚xd7 12 ♙xe5 0-0

Black wants to play along the e- and f-files. What started out as a quiet Nimzowitsch Attack has been transformed into something more closely

resembling a King's or Blackmar-Diemer Gambit.

13 a3 ♖a5 14 b4 ♖c7 15 ♖xc7 ♜xc7



16 ♜f4?

The position was already looking scary for White, but after this it becomes downright bad. His extra pawn becomes worthless and Black still has a powerful initiative.

The best was probably 16 ♘c3 when 16...♖xc3 17 dxc3 ♜e5 18 ♖d2 f6 19 g6 hxg6 20 h5 seems fairly level in the endgame.

16...♜xf4 17 exf4 ♜ae8 18 ♖f1 f6 19 d3 ♘d6 20 ♘c3 fxg5 21 fxg5 ♘f5

The knight is en route for the d4-square from where it ties White down completely.

22 ♖g2 ♘d4 23 ♜ac1 ♜f4 24 ♖f1

24 ♘d1 ♜e2 25 c3 ♘f5 is hardly better.

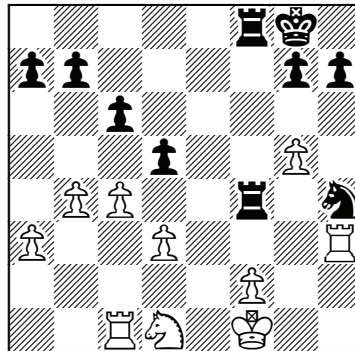
24...♜ef8 25 ♘d1

If 25 ♜h2 then 25...♘f3 would win the pawn back with an ongoing initiative.

25...♘f5 26 ♜h3 ♘xh4 27 c4

Desperately trying to activate his rook on c1, but Black's reply prevents

this while simultaneously depriving White's knight of the e3-square.



27...d4 28 ♜c2 ♘f3 29 ♜e2 ♜g4 30 ♜h1 ♜f5

Threatening 31...♜fxg5 followed by 32...♜g1+. This prompts further desperation.

31 g6 ♜xg6 32 ♘b2 ♖f7 33 c5 ♜fg5 34 ♜c2 ♜e6 35 ♜e2 ♜h6 0-1

White can't take on h6 because of 36...♜g1 mate.

Taimanov, like Keres, seemed to learn from the experience; several years later he played in a tournament I helped to organize in Wrexham in North Wales and won the classiest victory with technique and restraint. It seemed as if he'd made an inventory of his strengths and weaknesses and looked to compensate for his age by keeping the games fairly stable.

Taimanov's best game in this tournament was the following encounter with the American International Master John Donaldson. It could equally have been included in the section on attacking two weaknesses.

Game 12
J. Donaldson-M. Taimanov
 Owens Corning,
 Wrexham 1997
Bogo-Indian Defence

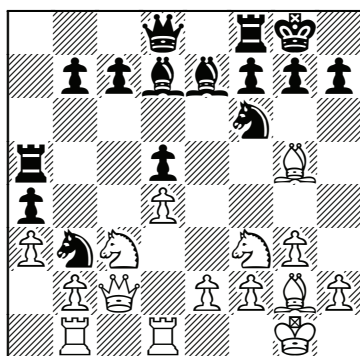
**1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗f3 ♘b4+ 4 ♙d2 a5
 5 g3 d5 6 ♖c2 ♗c6**

This is a system Taimanov has played for years so Donaldson must have been prepared for it. In fact he probably stands slightly better in the early stages.

**7 a3 ♙e7 8 ♙g2 0-0 9 0-0 ♙d7 10 ♖d1
 a4**

An important move which stymies White's efforts to make progress on the queenside. Later in the game Taimanov will use the a-file to great effect.

**11 cxd5 exd5 12 ♗c3 ♗a5 13 ♙g5 ♗b3
 14 ♖ab1 ♖a5!**



An original way to defend the d5-pawn and simultaneously activate the rook.

**15 ♗e5 ♙e8 16 e3 h6 17 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 18
 ♗d3 ♙c6 19 ♗b4 ♖d7 20 ♗ca2 ♙e7 21**

♗c1?!

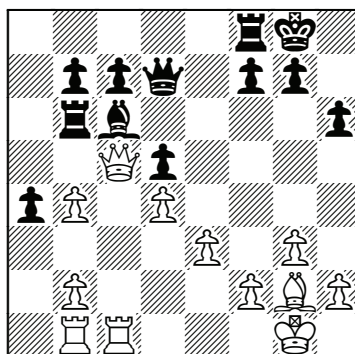
The start of a dubious plan: White believes that the doubled b-pawn position he is aiming for will be fine for him but he will be proved wrong.

White should have played something like 21 h4 envisaging 22 ♙f3 and 23 ♙g2.

21...♗xc1 22 ♖dxc1?

It was not too late to bail out with 22 ♗xc6 after which 22...♖xc6 23 ♖xc1 (23 ♖xc6 ♗e2+ 24 ♙f1 ♗xg3+ 25 hxg3 bxc6 would also be fine for Black) 23...♖xc1 24 ♖dxc1 c6 looks equal and drawish.

22...♙xb4 23 axb4 ♖a6 24 ♖c5 ♖b6!



The contours of the coming endgame begin to emerge. Black's rook comes to the b-file in order to pressurize White's doubled and isolated b-pawns. And its colleague will join in later.

**25 ♙f1?! ♙b5! 26 ♖xc7 ♖xc7 27 ♖xc7
 ♙xf1 28 ♙xf1 ♖xb4**

Reaching an endgame in which Black has all the chances. The first problem White faces is the passivity of his rooks which get tied down to the

defence of his b2-pawn. If this were to fall, Black would obtain two connected passed pawns on the queenside.

29 ♖a1 ♗a8! 30 ♖a2 ♗a5!

Echoing Black's 14th move. The rook is headed for b5 from where it defends d5 and attacks b2.

31 ♖e2

After 31 ♖c5 ♖xc5 32 dxc5 ♖f8, Black's king would be en route for the c6-square from where it could pick up the c5-pawn.

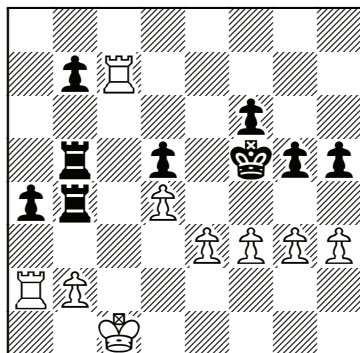
31...♖ab5 32 ♖c8+ ♖h7 33 ♖c2 ♖g6 34 ♖d2

This plan of bringing the king to the queenside doesn't work. It might have been better to put it on f3 and then wait.

34...♖f5 35 f3 h5 36 ♖c1

This also looks wrong because now Black breaks up White's kingside pawns. 36 h3 looks better so as to meet 36...g5 with 37 g4+.

36...g5 37 ♖c7 f6 38 h3



38...g4!

Drilling a hole into White's kingside pawn structure, after which Black's king can get in.

39 fxe4+ hxe4 40 h4

With White having set up his own passed pawn, the game finally sharpens. But with Taimanov having preserved his nervous energy with some sedate positional play, he handles the final stages better than his much younger opponent.

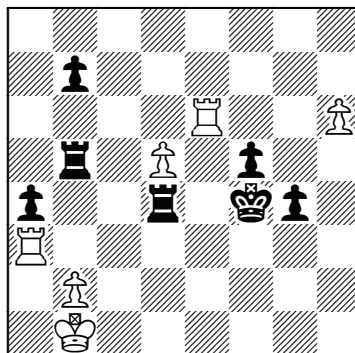
40...♖e4! 41 ♖e7+ ♖f3 42 h5 ♖b6 43 ♖a3

After 43 h6 Black would get his rook behind the passed pawn with 43...f5 44 h7 ♖h6 etc.

43...♖xg3 44 e4+ ♖f4 45 exd5 ♖c4+ 46 ♖b1 ♖xd4?!

The only slip in an otherwise excellent game. Black should have played 46...f5, advancing his passed pawns and stopping White's h-pawn in its tracks.

47 h6 f5 48 ♖e6 ♖b5



49 ♖h3?

Ingenious but bad. 49 h7 would have still made a game of it.

49...♖d2

And not 49...gxh3 because of 50 h7 etc.

50 h7 ♖bxb2+ 51 ♖c1?

Making it easy for Black. 51 ♔a1 had to be tried.

51...♖dc2+ 52 ♔d1 ♗h2!

The point. Threatened with 53...♖b1 mate, White has to exchange rooks.

53 ♗xh2 ♗xh2 54 ♖e7 g3 55 ♖g7 g2 0-1

After 56 ♖xg2 ♗xh7 Black would use his new passed pawn duo on b7 and a4.

How should someone go about performing such an inventory? The most vital ingredient is self-honesty, and because of this it makes sense to solicit the opinion of a strong player and instruct him not to spare your feelings. Once an accurate diagnosis has been made, the odds of finding effective medication improve considerably.