

Chapter Two

2008: The Birth of the Thinking Process

As the title suggests, 2008 was a momentous chess year for me. It marked the beginning of my return to tournament chess in a regimented way but without stifling creativity. Even my opening choices are chosen with less random influence and are no longer dependent on mood. Central to this change is my chess thinking process which is now broken down into a series of formal but repeatable process steps.

After my retirement in 2007, I suddenly found time for a lot interests put on hold while in the service. Amicable sibling diplomacy landed me a job as President of a small start-up and privately-held company. This pioneering company is the brainchild of my younger sister, Ann Marie, who currently attends the Owner/President Management (OPM) program at the Harvard Business School. Being used to multiple hats in the service, it did not

faze me a bit when assigned other responsibilities as Chief Information Officer and Vice President of NC Staffing, a medical staffing agency based in Little Rock also founded by my entrepreneurial sister, which is the parent company of the start-up.

One of the job perks is the ability to take frequent vacations to play chess. However, I was unhappy almost to the point of disgust with my chess experience since 1994. One day while introspectively reflecting on the sorry affairs of my chess skills, a light bulb lit up. I wondered if I could do what in management is known as a technology transfer. Specifically, I wanted to explore the possibility of harnessing what I know in my professional trade and apply those which I affirm to be universally applicable principles into chess. Some notable masters of the game have written avowedly about the mer-

its of chess principles in business and in life. I have always suspected the analogy to be the case of “the cart before the horse”. In a way, I took exactly the opposite approach.

After this reflection, I concluded that my chess was totally devoid of any semblance of a thinking process. As it were, my move selection routine, my methods of acquiring chess knowledge, my tournament preparation regimen could be described as ad hoc. It was ironic that I lacked a logical process for a purportedly logical activity. Does it sound like you? It was just a matter of time for my penchant for process improvement to cross over into my chess. The imminent fusion of the two interests was meant to coalesce since I am known everywhere to be an avid process guy. In my mind every human activity as mundane as doing laundry, stacking a refrigerator and the like, no matter how simple, can be broken down into process steps.

Even gourmet cooking as an art form follows a well-guarded recipe. Any process step is a valid candidate for improvement as none ever reaches a state of perfection. I am passionately drawn to fixing things including those that work to make them even better. It was not hard to see my chess requiring more than just cosmetic repair; it needed total replacement.

Disgusted with the status quo, I formulated a chess thinking process inspired by the combined philosophies of Cleanroom Software Engineering

and Six-Sigma, which are known for their strong emphasis on error prevention. My chess thinking process is making a bold claim that it will help any player improve regardless of age. By extension, it will capacitate the disciplined practitioner of the process secure lasting chess improvement. And with the improvement, as it is in my experience, there comes the desired benefit of fully enjoying the game in its better form where you are on the winning side more often.

The chess thinking process I am about to share with you is a product of deliberate thought. So far, it has proven its efficacy on more than one occasion. The rest of the story is yet to be told in the near future as the process continues to evolve towards maturity. A disciplined and rigorous application of the process in every game over time will make its use less of a conscious act. The goal is to assimilate the process until it becomes more of a subconscious act. When I reach that level of competence, it will enable me to scale the ELO summit of 2200. I sincerely wish your improvement efforts will be richly rewarded as well.

Let me now describe to you what this process is in this chapter, and then I will offer for your examination a body of evidentiary facts arguing for its effectiveness in the remainder of the book. My initial foray into the playgrounds ruled by the big boys in events like the 2008 New England Masters, the 2008

Pan-American Continental Championship, the 2009 Mid-America Open and the 19th North American FIDE Invitational have secured for the process positive proof of its veracity and efficacy, and these events are dealt with at length in their own separate chapters.

Tactics: A New Approach

First, let's consider some relevant issues necessary to frame our discussion within a defined context. The bulk of the ideas in this chapter first saw light in a column I wrote for www.chessville.com. Some of the ideas were revised, extended and expanded for the book. Most of the illustrative games were all played in the second half of 2008 and the first half of 2009.

Tactics as a subset of chess are either overly emphasized or detrimentally ignored by players below master level. We all seem to agree that the mastery of chess tactics finds its utmost expression in the practical demonstration of tactical skills in actual games. A high score denoting proficiency obtained from a tactics server or a similar tool is meaningless to us if it does not translate to positive results in our games. With regards to the plurality of methods we employ in the acquisition and sharpening of tactical skills, the list abounds in proportion to differing philosophies found in literature to date. But what is lost often in philosophical discussions on the very subject of chess ability and improvement is the

fact that tactical skill by its nature like any other skills can be acquired, developed and sharpened.

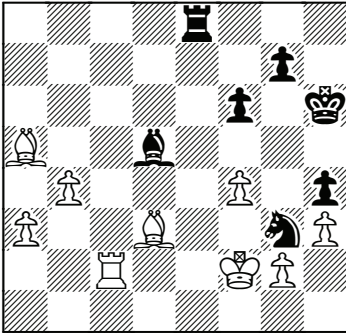
Only a handful of chess writers truly understand the best method of acquiring tactical skills. Most authors believe, as evidenced by the books and software available on the market, the repetitive solving of puzzle exercises is the best approach to developing tactical skills. In my view, *the best way to learn tactics for players below master level is to actually play over the moves leading to the staging point of the puzzle*. The staging point for our purposes is simply the initial diagrammed position of the puzzle.

For us, the key learning event is not in the finding of the solution to the puzzle but in the knowing of how to set up the conditions leading to a given position where a tactical combination exists. In others words, the learning benefit is greater to us if we know the specifics of constructing a mating net than finding the mate itself. By extension, we benefit more by knowing how to construct a dual attack, a skewer and a fork than the actual execution of these attacks. The master is better at disguising or staging the pre-conditions to these attacks than us. Our goal then is to reach parity with the master in this area as the way to improve. *Anyone can solve a puzzle, but can anyone play the moves leading to the puzzle?*

Let's look at some examples:

Game 6

P.Svidler-B.Gelfand
ACP World Rapid Cup,
Odessa 2009



In this position, between two grandmasters from the world's elite, Black has just played 52... $\text{Ra}8\text{-e}8$ confining the white king and limiting his movement to only two squares. Black is clearly lost, but playing on will not make him any more lost so he sets up a clever swindle starting with the text move. This is an example of an active staging of a tactical opportunity. Black is working towards a specific configuration involving the combined powers of the rook and knight in the construction of a mating net. Watch him camouflage his intent and craftily orchestrate his deception culminating in one of the biggest swindles of 2009:

53 b5

White responds by pushing his passed pawn onward to coronation while cleverly protecting the e1-square,

a potential invasion point for the rook.

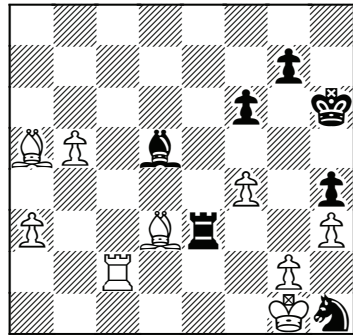
53... $\text{Ng}1+$

Black continues with his sinister plans with the decoy check, forcing White's king away from the e3-square now that the e1-square is not available to him.

54 $\text{Kg}1$

White happily obliges and attacks the knight on h1. So, now what?

54... $\text{Re}3$

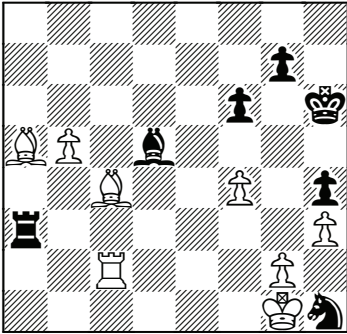


After this move White is facing the practical problem of how to defend the attacked bishop presently and the a3-pawn subsequently. Of a more serious concern to him is how to simultaneously defend the e1-square and the bishop. If White defends the bishop with 55 $\text{Bd}2$, Black wins material starting with 55... $\text{Re}1+$ followed by 56... $\text{Ng}3$. Now you see why White chooses the text move:

55 $\text{Bc}4$

White decides to offer Black two choices: a bishop trade or the a-pawn. Mind you, this is not the blunder.

55... $\text{Rxa}3$



When under attack, if you have a choice of different captures, capture first the piece that has a potential for furthering your opponent's mating ambitions.

White has a choice between capturing the bishop or the knight. The square vulnerable to threats by the bishop near the white king is g2, but this square is sufficiently protected by the rook. The knight is a different story, especially when it becomes a protected piece around the king. A knight firmly planted on g3 will condemn the rook to the defence of the first rank. Based on the above considerations, the piece posing the greatest threat to the king is the knight and not the bishop. Therefore, it is the default choice for capture.

56 ♖xd5??

This is the losing blunder based on a faulty assumption involving move sequence. White is temporarily up a bishop and a pawn but he is dead lost because mate takes precedence over material superiority.

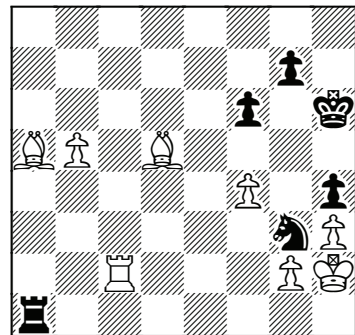
I think White incorrectly assumed

that Black had to play ...♗g3 first before he could threaten mate, for which White had ♖a2 defending against both the mate and the threat to the bishop on a5. Well, Black is not after setting up a mate threat because there is already one. The rook which was originally on a8 finally reaches a1 via the most improbable route aided by deception and trickery. This is just one more compelling proof that creativity fuelled by tenacity sees no limit in chess.

56...♖a1+ 57 ♔h2

The accidental location of the knight means the f2-square is covered so the king is forced to step onto the execution square. Next we see the killer follow-up. This is the kind of deceptive staging skill we ought to be acquiring and sharpening if we want to get very far in chess.

57...♗g3 0-1



Seeing that the mate couldn't be averted, Svidler resigned. We can only imagine the elation of triumph Gelfand felt after completing his miracle save and creative effort.