

Stuart Rachels

The Best I Saw in Chess

Games, Stories and Instruction from an Alabama Prodigy Who
Became U.S. Champion

New In Chess 2020

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Preface

The games in this book were played at slow (or ‘classical’) time controls, with no delays or increments, between two people sitting across from each other.

This is a book about chess, illustrated with material from my games. The book addresses so many topics in strategy and competitive play that it could be called a ‘complete chess course’, if that phrase isn’t taken too expansively.

A benefit of studying my games is that you’ve never seen them before. Which is good. Less good is that you may not know me. So let me tell you about myself, to begin our friendship while providing some context for all the chess to come.

I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and played 1,011 rated games from the ages of 9 to 23, or from 1979 to 1993. My rating began at 1496 (USCF) and rose steadily until it passed 2600 (USCF), when I was 20. I never played professionally, and I retired upon entering graduate school. I wrote this book in my 40s in Alabama.

The exhilaration of competition and the joy of mental absorption – that’s why I played chess. I loved it. I still love it. My brother David taught me the moves around my 8th birthday, and before I turned 12 (or more precisely: at 11 years, 10 months and 13 days) I became the Youngest Master in American history, when my rating reached exactly 2200 before plummeting down into the 2120s. So I made master about four years after learning the rules – or let’s say five, because I wasn’t master strength until I was 12¾, when Dave Gertler and I shared top honors in the 1982 U.S. Junior Open. Up to then, I don’t think any American had made master so quickly. In an earlier era, it took Bobby Fischer seven whole years (can you believe that?!).¹ At 12 years and 9 months, I was the youngest U.S. Junior Open Champion in history, because Fischer had been a decrepit 13 years and 4 months. (I won \$225; Fischer won a portable typewriter.)²

1 Fischer became a master at 13 and learned the rules at 5 or 6. Why ‘5 or 6’? As an adult, Fischer said in an interview that he learned at 6: see the documentary *Bobby Fischer Against the World* (2011), at 10:38. Yet when he was just 15, Fischer wrote of learning the moves ‘early in 1949’ – which suggests 5, since Fischer was born on March 9, 1943: see Bobby Fischer, *Bobby Fischer’s Games of Chess* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. xi.

2 Bobby Fischer, *Bobby Fischer’s Games of Chess* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. xiii.

The curse of my career story is consistency. I represented the U.S. in both the 1984 and 1985 World Under-16 Championships. Both years, I finished 7-4 and tied for 5th. Not bad, I guess. But instead of averaging 5th, I would rather have averaged 15th – with one 29th-place finish and one world title! Streaky players can trumpet their triumphs, but steady players can only boast boringly about their ratings.

Two players were vital for my development: Kyle Therrell (then called ‘Dana’), my best friend and local rival; and my trainer from the age of 12, IM Boris Kogan. From Kyle, I learned all of my openings, one pairing at a time. Here was our drill: When the pairings were posted before a round, we’d hurry over to a quiet spot. ‘What does so-and-so play?’ I’d ask. My next question was, ‘What do I do against that?’ And finally I’d ask: ‘How is that supposed to be for White/Black?’ Without Kyle, I would have been lost – especially because Boris Kogan had no interest in opening theory. From Boris, I learned the finer points of position evaluation. Kogan played like Petrosian. ‘You must play *seemple* chess,’ he always told me. ‘Kviet moves.’ Thanks to Boris, I eventually became a weak strong player. Without him, I would only have become a dangerous patzer.

When I went to college in Atlanta, Georgia, at age 17, I had just become the highest-rated American player under the age of 21. At that hiccup in history, Max Dlugy was too old (21), Gata Kamsky (13) and Ilya Gurevich (15) were too young, and I outrated Patrick Wolff (19), who usually outrated me. Yet I felt like half a failure: I hadn’t gotten any stronger in the last year; Wolff, I knew, was actually better than me (and maybe Alex Fishbein was, too); I had never won a prestigious event; not only was I untitled, but I had no norms; and, most importantly to me, I knew I had failed to transition from ‘top junior’ to ‘top American player’. A rating of 2545 (USCF) put me in the country’s top 50, but only barely. All talent and no results seemed to sum it up.

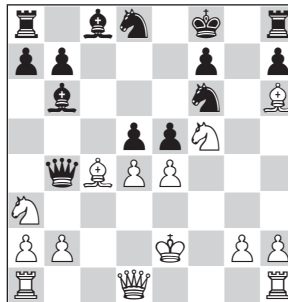
Happily, though, I had an unexpected ‘second life’. Despite my immersion in college, the next summer I won the U.S. Junior Championship, on my 6th try. This earned me a spot in the 1989 U.S. Championship – a 16-player, invitational round robin. ‘You’re lucky it’s a zonal year!’ my brother joked. When I went undefeated in that event, tying for first, I did indeed qualify for the 1990 Interzonal (the next step towards the World Championship). But also, in one swoop, I became an IM, earned the equivalent of two GM norms (with half-a-point to spare), pushed my USCF rating over 2600, became a top-20 American player, won \$5,000, and was given the full cover of *Chess Life* (in February, 1990). At 20

years and 2½ months, I was the youngest U.S. Champion since Fischer.³ This one event spurred a sea change in my self-image.

I never became a GM, and I played so little internationally that my FIDE rating always lagged behind my strength (my final Elo was 2485; my final USCF was 2605). The rating system used by Jeff Sonas on chessmetrics.com weights recent games especially heavily and thus favors my profile. According to it, I peaked at #152 in the world in April of 1990, with a rating of 2604, and was among the top 100 players in history aged 20 years and 7 months (for players up to December 2004)⁴, making me 8th at that age among Americans, behind Kamsky, Fischer, Seirawan, Evans, Denker, Dlugy, and Lombardy. In 1990, I was arguably the second-best amateur in the world, after GM Simen Agdestein of Norway.

I'm most proud of this: in the four most prestigious events I played in – three invitational U.S. Championships and the 1990 Interzonal – my combined score was positive: 11 wins, 10 losses, and 26 draws, or 24-23. So, when I played the big boys, I held my own. And that, I suppose, means I was one of them.

P.S. This book can't be too bad, I think, given that a game which didn't make the cut included this position:



Maybe I'll put this game in a future book, titled 'Poorly Played Games with Cool Positions'.

P.P.S. Shouldn't chess sets be sold with an extra black pawn? I'm always losing those things.

³ Larry Evans was 19 in 1951, and Fischer was 14 in 1957. Later, Kamsky would be champion at 17, and Nakamura at 16.

⁴ More precisely, chessmetrics.com puts me in 98th-100th place (<http://www.chessmetrics.com/cm/CM2/SingleAge.asp?Params=199510SSSS3S105517000000121000000000025610247>), accessed August, 2019.

(French for ‘Black’), I wrote ‘Vassili Yvantchouk’. Our game began:

Game 5 Modern, Classical

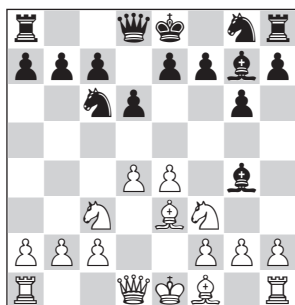
Stuart Rachels

Vasily Ivanchuk

2390

Paris Wch U16 1984 (5)

**1.e4 d6 2.d4 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7 4.♗f3
♙g4 5.♙e3 ♘c6**



So far, this is Smyslov-Timman, Wijk aan Zee, 1972. In those days, Timman says, he ‘spent too little time on serious opening research,’ which is why some of his openings were ‘quite dubious’.²⁰

6.♙b5

‘That’s the problem,’ Timman laments. ‘White will get a superior structure almost by force, and he obtains the upper hand in the centre as well.’²¹

6...a6 7.♙xc6+ bxc6 8.h3 ♙d7

Passive. Timman tried 8...♙xf3

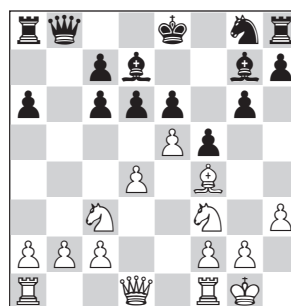
9.♗xf3 e6 but had a clear

disadvantage after 10.e5 ♗e7 11.♗e4

♗d5 12.♙g5 ♗b8 13.0-0. Black is

weak on f6, and his knight will be evicted from d5 with c2-c4.

9.0-0 e6 10.e5 f5 11.♙f4 ♗b8



Black’s sorry opening only buttressed my optimism. He’s behind in development, his dark squares are weak, and his bishops are boxed in. After 12.♞e1! ♗h6 13.♗a4! ♗f7 14.c4 ♗b7 15.exd6 cxd6 16.c5!, White is already winning (Stockfish). But I wanted to protect my b-pawn.

12.♗a4

A decent sally, if the idea is to play c2-c4 and to refute 12...c5 tactically. However, I was already intending the rancid moves to come.

12...c5 13.c3?

A pity that I did not play 13.exd6!! (Stockfish) 13...♙xa4 (13...cxd6?! 14.♗xc5 wins) 14.♞e1! ♙d7 15.dxc7!.

Now let’s consider two moves:

A) 15...♗b6 16.dxc5 ♗xc5

17.♙d6 and instead of the engine’s

17...♗c6 18.♗e5!, I prefer my line:

17...♗b5 18.♗d4 ♗c4 (18...♗d5

allows the annihilating 19.♗xe6!

20 Jan Timman, *Timman’s Titans: My World Chess Champions* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New In Chess, 2016), p. 88.

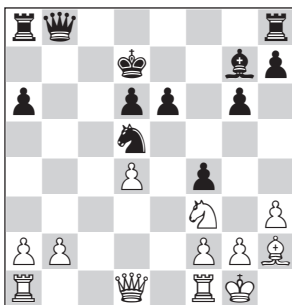
21 Jan Timman, *Timman’s Titans: My World Chess Champions* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New In Chess, 2016), p. 89.

♙xd1 20. ♘xg7+ ♚f7 21. ♚axd1
 ♚xg7 22. ♙e5+ 19. ♘xf5! gxf5
 20. ♙h5 mate!! Had those moves
 been played, might my picture be
 displayed today at the World Chess
 Hall of Fame in St. Louis, Missouri?;

B) 15... ♙b7 16. dxc5! gives White
 tripled pawns and an overwhelming
 initiative for the sacrificed piece.
 A logical sequel is 16... ♘f6 17. ♙e5
 (preventing castling) 17... ♙c6
 18. ♙d6! ♙xd6 19. cxd6 (a funny
 pawn structure!) 19... ♙c6 20. ♘d4
 ♚d7 21. ♘b3! ♘h5 22. ♘c5+ ♚c8
 23. ♚ad1 with a winning position
 (Stockfish).

I didn't consider 13. exd6!! seriously
 because I couldn't calculate it out
 to the end. However, if your sacrifices
 are always sound, then you don't make
 enough of them. Trust your judgment.
 Take a few risks. Just don't abuse
 the privilege.

**13...cxd4 14.cxd4 ♘e7 15.exd6?
 cxd6 16. ♘c5? ♘d5 17. ♙h2 f4
 18. ♘xd7 ♚xd7**



A revolting series of moves. It's as
 though I thought the object of chess
 were not to checkmate the enemy
 king but merely to prevent it from
 castling. With these moves, I've let

Black undouble his c-pawns, I've
 swapped off Black's worst piece
 (his light-squared bishop), and I've
 let him catch up in development.
 Moreover, I've done all this to
 force Black's king to d7, where it
 is safe and will be well placed for
 the endgame. From this point on,
 Yvantchouk played like Ivanchuk
 and ground me into dust: 0-1 (46).

That night, I walked into the dining
 hall feeling utterly dejected. When
 I passed the Soviets' table, the
 Soviet coach, GM Alexey Suetin,
 reached out and roughed up my
 blond hair with a sympathetic
 smile. This gesture cheered me
 up for half a second. That night,
 my trainer, Boris Kogan, gave me
 a tongue-lashing like I'd never
 received as a player (and he didn't
 even know about 13. exd6!!). When
 we played over the game and Boris
 saw my 'revolting series of moves',
 he stood up – he was too agitated
 to stay seated. He began pacing.
 'You played these moves? This
 shows you have no understanding
 of chess! No understanding at all! I
 am a bad teacher!' He went on like
 this for a while. I was angry at him
 for berating me – didn't I feel bad
 enough already? But I was 14, so I
 took my lumps.

Looking back, I understand these
 events from Boris's point of view.
 Two and a half years earlier, he
 had emigrated from the U.S.S.R.
 He had no ambitions as a player,
 but he loved to teach. And he had

found a good student, despite living in the chess-starved South. And now, here we were, playing for the World Championship; here was Boris's chance to show his former compatriots that he was still in the game, that his pupil was as good as theirs. And what happened? I lost to the Soviets in consecutive rounds, and I played so badly in the second game that it made Boris look bad. Of course he was upset.

Two Postscripts

A week later, Ivanchuk and I played basketball for two or three hours, as both teammates and opponents. 'Chuky' was so uncoordinated that I was constantly having to dodge his elbows and his skull. Oddly enough, that afternoon endeared him to me: he couldn't play worth a lick, but he was out there anyway, trying his best.

One more memory: at the 1988 World Junior Championship, Ivanchuk was in terrible time trouble in round 4 against Lars Bo Hansen of Denmark. I could see their game from my table. For over half an hour, Ivanchuk was shifting around excitedly in his chair, grunting, slamming pieces, and banging the clock. At one point, he even knocked the clock off the table. I found his behavior distracting, and I wasn't even playing him.

At the same time, Ivanchuk was playing splendidly. When they reached the time control, Hansen's

position was hopeless. Ivanchuk got up and left the room. When he returned, he offered a draw. I assumed that the Soviet coach, Anatoly Bykhovsky, had told him to. The next day, I asked his opponent whether he had been upset with Ivanchuk during their game. 'No,' Lars replied thoughtfully. 'I wasn't angry. I just thought he couldn't help it.'

The Controlled Blitz

In general, when your opponent is in time trouble, you should ignore it. Stay calm; keep trying to find the best moves; move at your normal pace. Yet you needn't always ignore your opponent's time shortage. You may also employ any of three strategies. Each can work, if implemented judiciously. First, you can complicate the position or set a specific trap; your opponent might falter for lack of time. This is especially smart if you're losing and thus have nothing to lose. This ploy works best when your initial move is unexpected. Second, you can slow down your rate of play. That's right, don't speed up; slow down. I describe the benefits of this strategy in my game with Fedorowicz in 'Two Rogue Sozins'.

Third, if you can prepare not only your next move but also your follow-up to a logical reply, then you can perform a 'controlled blitz'. You do this by moving, recording your move, and then responding

instantly to your opponent's reply. In this way, you can put pressure on your opponent without unduly trusting your powers of foresight. Naturally, the effectiveness of these strategies will depend on the size of the increment. If a player can never have less than two minutes, then his time pressure can never be too severe.

Here's an example of the controlled blitz in action.

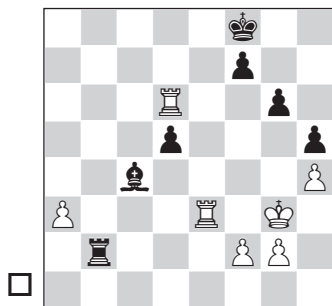
Game 6

Stuart Rachels

Margeir Petursson

2550

Manila izt 1990 (2)



Position after 36...♖b7-b2

White is up the exchange with an outside passed pawn. The win is a matter of technique, as they say. However, I wasn't sure I had any. At any rate, I didn't care to find out. I preferred to exploit my opponent's time trouble, if I could. Petursson had only a minute or so to make his next four moves.

I began to think. The most obvious continuation seemed to be 37.♖d8+

♔g7 38.♖d7 with the nasty threat of 39.♖f3. Black doesn't want to swap rooks with 38...♖b6 and 39...♖f6 because, once Black's rook is gone, White can activate his king hassle-free, and then the win is trivial. (In general, when queens are gone, a player who has only one rook should be especially loath to lose it – unless he is trading it for his opponent's only remaining rook.) So Black's toughest defense after 38.♖d7 must be 38...♖d2 39.♖f3 d4. Now I wanted to win Black's d-pawn with 40.♖f4, but after 40...♖d3+ my rook must return to f3 to defend my a-pawn. Hmmmm. As I mulled this over, I realized that Petursson was probably thinking the same thoughts. However, unlike me, he had to be ready to make these moves quickly, starting with ...♔g7 and ...♖d2. This gave me an idea. What if I go 37.♖d8+ ♔g7 and then play 38.♖c3 rapidly? Petursson will be poised to play 38...♖d2, but that move would lose to 39.♖xc4! ♖d3+ 40.♔f4 dxc4 41.♖xd3 cxd3 42.♔e3. Of course, a GM will see such a tactic, but even so, if he's taken by surprise then he might become flustered by the clock and err in some way.

I looked at the position afresh and decided that trying this little ploy couldn't hurt me; the rook move is safe and doesn't really change the position. So I played

37.♖d8+

and after

37...♔g7

I quickly scribbled ‘♖d8+’ on my scoresheet and played

38. ♖c3!

It worked. Petursson’s hand instinctively went for his rook, but then he withdrew it, as if he’d just noticed that I hadn’t played 38. ♖d7. Margeir seemed rattled. Again, he reached out to play something but then pulled back his hand. Finally, he bashed out

38... ♗a2?

And then I played

39. ♖d7

With my rook on c3, Black has no defense to the threat of 40. ♖f3. So, Black resigned. Instead of 38... ♗a2?, 38... ♗b7 would have maintained the status quo.

If you wish to blitz out a longer sequence, do so at your own peril. In the penultimate round of the 1989 U.S. Championship, GM Boris Gulko, playing White, offered me a draw in mutual time pressure, which I gladly accepted. Then I went into the analysis room, which was abuzz. IM Jack Peters was leading the discussion of my game. ‘What do you think of the final position?’ several people asked me. I walked up to the demo board and began trotting out my intention. After several moves, I played ...♗h8!?, the justification of my risky-looking idea. The room erupted with protests! This was because the move was illegal (White had a bishop on f6), and my whole variation was nonsense. Yet, as I

told the crowd, not only had I been planning to play those moves, but I was planning to play them instantly in order to confound my opponent! If you use the ‘controlled blitz’, then you must abide by the rule that governs the event. In my day, the rule was: you cannot make your second move until you have written down your own first move. More generally, you cannot skip more than two ‘half-moves’ on your scoresheet (skipping one full move is allowed), unless you are short of time.

Amazingly, Boris Gelfand – future Challenger to the World Championship – didn’t know this rule when we played in the 1988 World Junior Championship. Gelfand, as White, performed the controlled blitz: he moved; I replied; and he moved again, but without touching his scoresheet. I then did something unusually physical in the middle of a serious chess game. In a quarter-second, I decided against summoning the arbiter about Gelfand’s transgression – after all, my flag would fall as I explained the situation; we’d have to deal with the language barrier (Boris spoke Russian; I spoke English); it would disturb the players around us; it would disrupt the flow of our game; and Gelfand and I would each be tempted to think about the position ‘off the clock’ while the dispute was being settled. In short, the whole thing promised to be a major hassle. Also, in the end, White would not

be penalized in any serious way. So, when Gelfand hit the clock, I immediately slapped it back (bang bang!) one-minute style, without making a move. Gelfand peered up at me quizzically – he must've been startled, but he just seemed puzzled. Not knowing how to say 'update your scoresheet' in Russian, I simply pointed at Gelfand's scoresheet. What he did now made a big impression on me. Without hesitating, he looked down at his scoresheet, filled in half a move, and quickly re-hit the clock, making it my move again. Both the speed of his adjustment and the fact that he wrote down only half a move (and not the full 1½ moves missing, nor even one full move) speaks to his competitive prowess.²² This incident lasted about five seconds.

Very Strong Piece

The 1990 Interzonal was a tough tournament. How often can you get a minus score (I ended on '-1') yet finish ahead of Kamsky, Portisch, Smyslov, and Vaganian? I played GMs Adams, Chandler, Dzindzichashvili, Petursson, Short, and Spraggett – not to mention the players who beat me in rounds 7, 8, and 9! I hadn't lost three straight since turning 14. After that goose-egg trifecta, my unintended 'Swiss Gambit' got me paired against a 2400 in round 10, IM Assem Afifi of Egypt. I wanted to prepare for

my opponent, but all I knew was that super-GM Robert Hübner had punished Afifi in an earlier round for playing a risky line in the Sicilian. I didn't think he'd try that line again. Wrong!

Game 7

Sicilian Defense, Accelerated Dragon

Stuart Rachels

Assem Afifi

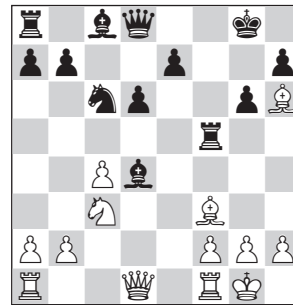
2400

Manila izt 1990 (10)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 g6 5.c4 ♗g7 6.♙e3 d6 7.♘c3 ♖h6 8.♙e2 0-0 9.0-0 f5 10.exf5 ♗xd4

An odd-looking move, but 11.♙xd4?! ♘xf5 is awkward for White.

11.♙xd4 ♗xf5 12.♙f3



Hübner-Afifi continued 12...♙g7 13.♙xg7 ♖xg7 14.♙e4 ♖f7 15.♗d2 ♗b6 16.♙d5 e6 17.♙xc6 ♗xc6 18.♖ad1 ♗xc4 19.♗xd6 1-0 (31).

Against me, Afifi played

12...♙xc3 13.bxc3 ♘e5 14.♙e4 ♖h5 15.♙e3

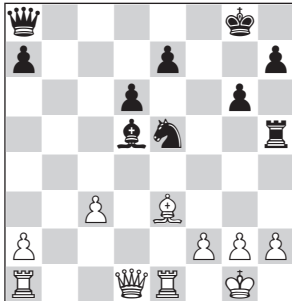
My bishops, I felt, give White a nice edge, and I wasn't worried when Black sacrificed the exchange.

²² I feel certain that Gelfand wasn't breaking the rules knowingly. He had nothing to gain from causing a commotion, and he is known to be an ethical player.

15...♙e6? 16.♙xb7 ♘xc4 17.♙xa8
♚xa8

If 17...♙xf1? 18.♙d5+ wins outright.

18.♞e1 ♙d5



Perhaps Afifi expected 19.f3? ♙xf3! with a fierce attack.

19.f4!

Now on 19...♘c4 20.♚g4, Black has nothing for the exchange. So he must keep sacrificing.

19...♙xg2 20.fxe5 ♙h3 21.♞e2

Not 21.♚d2? ♞h4! when White is ill-placed to meet 22...♞g4+.

21...♚f3

More challenging was 21...♞h4.

During the game, I planned to rescue my king with 22.♙f2, seeing that 22...♞g4 23.♙e1! ♚h1+ 24.♙d2 wins. But Black should try 22...♙g4, attacking h2 and e2. Now I saw the sneaky corner-move 23.♚h1 and liked my chances after 23...♚f8+ 24.♙e1 ♙xe2 25.♙xe2 ♚f5 26.♚d5+ ♙g7 27.♞f1 ♞xh2+ 28.♞f2.

Did you notice the error in that last line? I missed that after 23.♚h1? (23.♙e1 is still equal²³), 23...♙f3!! is a humdinger. White is in trouble after 24.♚xf3 ♞xh2+ 25.♙g3 ♞h3+ or 24.♚g1 ♞g4 25.♚f1 ♞g2+

(Houdini). This means that 21...♞h4 22.♙f2? is only equal.

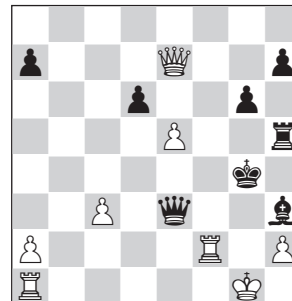
The correct continuation after 21...♞h4 is 22.♚b3+! ♙g7 23.c4!! (Houdini). At the board, I thought 22.♚b3+ would misplace my queen, but 23.c4!! opens up the third rank, preventing 23...♚f3?? due to 24.♙h6+!. The most logical continuation is 23...♞g4+ 24.♙f2 ♚g2+ 25.♙e1 ♚f1+ 26.♙d2 ♚xa1. How hard it is to see at move 21 that, after 27.exd6, White's king is safer on d2 than Black's king is on g7! White is winning, but it still takes several difficult variations to prove it (Houdini).

22.♞f2! ♚xe3 23.♚d5+ ♙g7

Not 23...e6?? (or 23...♙h8??) 24.♚a8+ ♙g7 25.♚f8 mate.

24.♚f7+ ♙h6 25.♚f8+ ♙g5

26.♚xe7+ ♙g4

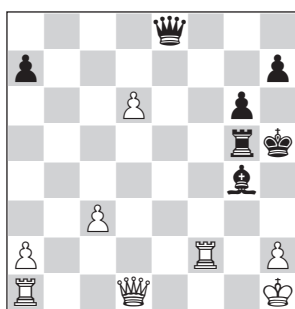


27.♚xd6

Winning, but even stronger was 27.exd6!, creating a powerful passed pawn. I chose 27.♚xd6 because I had calculated it accurately: I foresaw the game continuation, which goes well for White, as well as the picturesque 27.♚xd6 ♞g5 28.♚d4+! ♙h5+ 29.♙h1,

23 23.♙e1 ♙xe2 24.♚xe2 ♚h1+ 25.♚f1 ♚e4 26.♚f2 ♞h3 27.♙d2 ♚d5+ 28.♙c2 ♚e4+ 29.♙d2 ♚d5+, draw – Houdini.

when White forces off the queens, remaining an exchange up. After 27.exd6! ♖e5, White mustn't get careless with 28.♗xh7?? ♗e1+. He isn't getting mated, but 29.♖f1 ♗e3+ 30.♖f2 ♗e1+ is a draw. So White should play either 28.♗f7 or 28.♗f6 in order to fortify his defense of f1. But which one? Either way, Black will play 28...♗g5, threatening 29...♔h5+, so the question is where White's queen should be in order to help White meet that threat. The answer is 28.♗f7! ♗g5 29.♗xh7! (Houdini), pocketing a pawn and preventing discovered checks. No shame in missing that! The other option, 28.♗f6?, might look good after 28...♗g5 29.♗d4+ ♔h5+ 30.♔h1 – White seems to have weathered the storm, as he did in the line I calculated with White's pawn on e5. But because that pawn is now on d6, the heavy rains continue: 30...♗e8!! (Houdini) threatens 31...♗a8+ and forces 31.♗d1+ ♔g4.



analysis diagram

The great Houdini then gives two nifty lines, ending in draws:

A) 32.♗f1 ♗e4+ 33.♗g2 ♔f5!
34.♗f3+ ♗xf3+ 35.♖xf3 ♔e4

36.♖af1 ♖d5 37.♔g1 ♔xf3 38.♖xf3
♖xd6, draw; and

B) 32.♗d2 ♗e4+ 33.♗g2 ♖d5!
(but not 33...♔h3?? 34.♗xg5 mate)
34.♗f2 ♔f3 35.c4 ♗g5 36.♖ag1. Now
Black takes twice on g2 and makes a
perpetual with his queen on e1 and
e4.

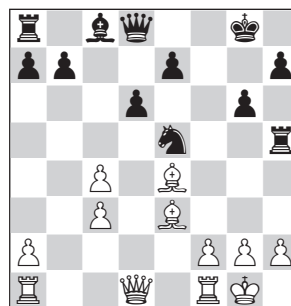
27... ♗xc3 28. ♗d1+ ♔h4 29. ♖f4+

Forcing the king to g5, where
Black's rook wants to be.

29... ♔g5 30. ♖f3!

Now White is simply the exchange
up: 1-0 (51). Black's attack is over,
and he cannot take the e-pawn and
survive: 30...♗xe5 31.♗d2+ ♔g4 (if
31...♔h4, then 32.♗f2+ wins after
either 32...♔g4 33.♗g3+ or 32...♔g5
33.♖e1!) 32.♗g3+ ♔f5 (32...♔h4
33.♗b4+! mates) 33.♗f2+ ♗f4
(or 33...♔e6 34.♖e1) 34.♖f3 ♗g5+
35.♔h1 and White wins.

That game was hard work, but
it seemed easy by interzonal
standards. Afterwards, my
opponent and I looked at it. To me,
it seemed obvious that Afifi needed
a new opening. Afifi, however,
blamed his troubles on his 15th
move.



Position after 15. ♔h6-e3

In the post-mortem, Afifi sensibly tried 15...♖c7 (instead of 15...♙e6). I don't recall what lines we looked at, but in one key position, Afifi slid his knight from e5 back to f7. Then he tapped on the knight with his index finger. 'Very strong piece,' he said, with feeling.

For a moment, I studied that knight on f7. Then I studied Afifi's face. Was he joking? A very strong piece? That knight? I try not to laugh at my opponents after I beat them, so I maintained a poker face. But I found Afifi's opinion to be absurd. My overall feeling was: this guy is a terrible player.

However, the more we looked at the position, the more I thought that Afifi had a point. On f7, the knight prevents ♙h6 and helps defend Black's kingside; the knight stops ♙d5 from being a check; if Black plays ...e7-e6, then the knight protects d6; and, finally, the knight may later return to e5 in order to harass White's c4-pawn under better circumstances. After some more analysis, Afifi repeated his verdict: 'Very strong piece.' Again, he tapped on the knight.

Life goes on. But a few days later, I saw a surprising sight: Vasily Smyslov, visibly irritated! 'I could literally count the number of times I saw him angry,' said Smyslov's old friend Genna Sosonko.²⁴ The aging

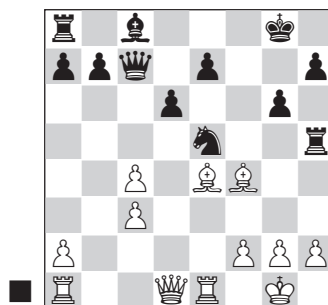
World Champion was conducting a post-mortem – with Afifi.

Game 8

Vasily Smyslov 2570

Assem Afifi 2400

Manila izt 1990 (12)



Position after 15. ♙f4 ♖c7 16. ♞e1

Their game continued

16...♘f7! 17. ♖e2 e6 18. ♞ad1 ♔g7
19. ♗d2 e5 20. ♙e3 ♖xc4 21. f3
♗c7 22. g4 ♞h4 23. ♙d5 h5 24. ♙xf7
♔xf7 25. ♙g5 ♞h3 26. ♖xd6 ♖xd6
27. ♞xd6 ♞xf3 28. ♞d8 ♔e6 29. ♞e8+
♔d6 30. ♞d8+ ½ -½

Six years earlier, Smyslov had been a Finalist in the Candidates Matches; the man who vied for the title in 1954 (and won it in 1957) missed vying for it again, 30 years later, only because of that upstart from Baku, Garry Kasparov. But neither Botvinnik nor Kasparov had taught Smyslov how to overcome that very strong piece!

24 Genna Sosonko, *The World Champions I Knew* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2013), p. 116.

CHAPTER 9

Blunders

Best Lesson

When you see a good move, sit on your hands. So goes the saying from the Soviet School of Chess – and so true! The best lesson I ever got was at age 9. I had known the moves for only a year, but I was beating Birmingham, Alabama’s fifth-best player in the city championship round-robin tournament.

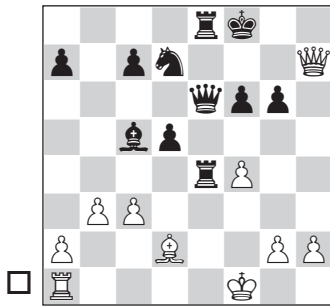
Game 48

Michael Thornton

1776 USCF

Stuart Rachels

Birmingham, Alabama 1979



Position after 30...♔f7-f8

‘Troton’ threw everything at my king, but his attack fell short. The sacrifices had been exciting, and so all the best players in the city had gathered around our board. Desperately, White tried **31.f5**. Now 31...♖xf5+ (or even 31...♗f4+) is mate in two, but I was so excited that I didn’t even look at White’s move. Instead, I dashed out **31...♖a6+ 32.c4 dxc4**. After punching the clock, I glanced up at Kyle Therrell – his approval meant

the most to me in the room. But Kyle was turning away and shaking his head. What’s that all about?

32. ♗h6 mate.

White’s bishop seemed to come zooming out of nowhere. It shattered me. I’m not sure when I wrote ‘B-R6 mate!’ in jagged letters on my scoresheet, but seconds after the blow, I jumped up and ran outside. I was crying hysterically and was as angry as I could be. My father, who was directing the event, hustled out after me. As I stormed down the sidewalk, he managed to catch up with me, but I was unfit for human company. He had to shout just to be heard over my hysterics. At one point, he got a step ahead of me and turned around – jogging backwards past the imposing concrete streetlights on University Boulevard – and held up his hands, displaying his palms, so I could punch at them like a little boxer. ‘Sometimes winning feels bad,’ Michael Thornton said to the other players after I stormed out. But within a few months, I understood

that this was the best thing that had happened to me as a player. Before this game, I often moved impulsively; I was an energetic little boy. But afterwards, I never did. One trauma cured me.

Post-Thornton, I always performed a *neurotic last-moment blunder check*. If I wasn't in time trouble or playing prepared moves, I would try to clear my head after deciding on my move – but before playing it – and ask myself, 'Is there anything obvious I'm missing?' Thanks to this habit, I almost never hung pieces in rated games. And I never again got checkmated – not once. I always resigned first.

Hands Held High

One player who watched my debacle was Jack Gwin. Five years later, he had his own rough moment.

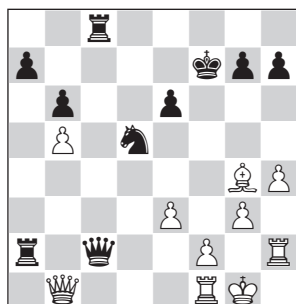
Game 49

Stuart Rachels

Jack Gwin

1996 USCF

Midfield 1984



Position after 34. ♖h1-h2

Jack had been outplaying me, but now he played **34... ♗xe3??**. After **35. fxe3+**, he picked up his queen and took my rook on h2. Getting mated felt disconcerting, even though I knew it wasn't real. 'I'm sorry Jack; you're in check,' I said. Chuckling in surprise, Gwin quickly changed his move to **35... ♗e7**. In the confusion, it didn't occur to me that he'd been required to play either 35... ♖f2+ or 35... ♖f5 because he'd touched his queen. Nor did I notice the amusing possibility of winning a rook with 36. ♖xa2. But no matter; after **36. ♗xc2 ♖cxc2 37. ♖b4+**, Black resigned.

Jack's blunder had the same cause as mine: tunnel vision brought on by excitement. I got so excited about playing 31... ♖a6+ that I couldn't see the kingside; Gwin got so excited about 34... ♗xe3 that he couldn't see the f-file. Sit on your hands.

Sucker

Game 50 Nimzowitsch Defence

Stuart Rachels

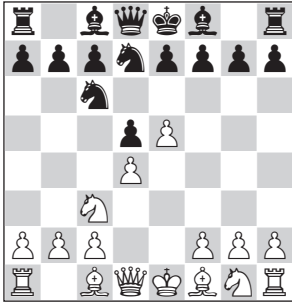
Ed Gaillard

2204 USCF

Chicago 1989 (3)

In the third round of the 1989 U.S. Open, a master played a funny opening against me:

1. e4 ♗c6 2. d4 d5 3. ♗c3 ♗f6? 4. e5 ♗d7



Black played these moves confidently; obviously, he was ready for 5.♘xd5. Only in a mousetrap can you find free cheese. Equally obvious was the advantage I could get after 5.f4 ♘b6 6.♙e3: Black is cramped, and his bishop cannot escape to f5 because 7.g4! would increase White's spatial advantage. In fact, my position after 5.f4 ♘b6 6.♙e3 would be so comfortable that I would already be a heavy favorite to win, given that I outrated my opponent by about 350 points. But what about that d-pawn? I've never refused a gift; if it's free, it's for me. So I started looking. After 5.♘xd5: 5...e6 is harmless; 5...♘dx5 6.dxe5 loses a piece; and 5...♘b6 6.♘xb6 axb6 7.♙e3 is the worst gambit I've ever seen. As the tree told the lumberjack, I was stumped! For the life of me, I couldn't see a price tag on that pawn. So I played

5.♘xd5??,

and after

5...♘db8!

I wanted to hide under a pile of coats. I'm losing back the pawn, the queens are coming off, and it's dead equal. After **6.♘e3 ♙xd4**

7.♙xd4 ♘xd4 8.g3, I played a lot of moves but eventually conceded the draw.

Welcome Interruption

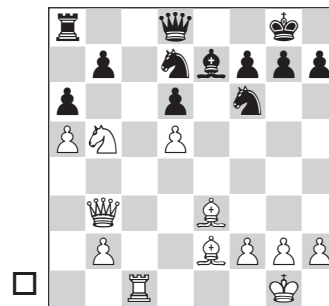
Game 51

Stuart Rachels

Charles Hall

2036 USCF

Hollywood 1985



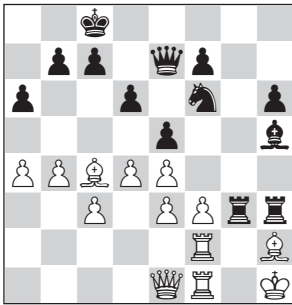
Position after 21...♙c8-d8

I had been aiming for this position. I intended to play 22.♘c7 in order to win Black's b-pawn after 22...♙c8 23.♙xb7 or 22...♙b8 23.♙a7. But then I noticed 22...♙c8 23.♙xb7 ♘c5! 24.♙xc5 ♙xc7, when I must lose material. Ugh! Now what? I could sacrifice the exchange in this variation with 24.♙xc5. Or I could just retreat my knight now – should I move it to d4, or must it come back to c3? As I sat there, I realized that I had botched the opening; my advantage was gone. In fact, I was becoming quite annoyed with myself, when my thoughts were interrupted by my opponent's resignation. Apparently, he thought 22.♘c7 was decisive.

with Muhammad Ali's rope-a-dope strategy (Foreman-Ali, Zaire 1974), a defender in chess must stay alert, waiting for a chance to become active.

Black can still win after 25. ♖g2! ♜xf3 26. ♖gf2 with careful play: 26... ♜xf2 27. ♗xf2 ♖g6 (not 27... ♗g4?? 28. ♗f5+) 28. b5 (on 28. ♗g3, threatening ♗h4, 28... ♗d7! is strong) 28... a5 29. ♗b3 ♘b8 30. ♗g3 ♗e2! 31. ♗xe2 ♜xg3 32. ♗h2 ♖g5 33. ♗d1 ♗g4, and Black has a decisive advantage (Houdini). Care to argue?

25... ♖gg3 26. d4



26... ♗h7!

Black doesn't rush to cash in by taking the f-pawn. I'm helpless, so Denton adds his queen and knight to the attack. Admittedly, he misses the beautiful 26... ♗xe4!! 27. fxe4 ♗f3+! 28. ♜xf3 ♜xh2+! 29. ♘xh2 ♗h4 mate (Houdini). However, 26... ♗h7! is good enough.

27. ♗e2 ♗h4

Threatening to take on f3 with either piece; for after 28... ♗xf3+ 29. ♗xf3 ♜xf3 30. ♜xf3 (or 28... ♜xf3 29. ♗xf3 ♗xf3+ 30. ♜xf3, transposing) comes 30... ♜xh2+

31. ♘g1 ♜h1+ 32. ♘f2 ♗h2 mate. Even worse, from my bloodied perspective, is that Black intends to play 28... ♗g5 first. After ... ♗g5, Black can choose among ... ♗xe4, ... ♗xf3, and ... ♗xf3+. White's set-up is, how should I put this? Not a fortress.

28. ♖g1 ♗xf3+ 29. ♗xf3 ♜xf3 30. ♗e2 ♗xe4 31. ♖gg2 ♗g5 0-1

Down two pawns and bound in knots, I threw in the towel. Houdini assesses the final position as '-22', meaning 'Black's position is like being 22 pawns up.'

For me, losing was never the emotional opposite of winning. Losing was wretched; winning was just relief.

Well done, Tom! But let's look at a different game, please ...

Seventeens

Game 93

Stuart Rachels (age 17; 2541 USCF)

Zsuzsa Polgar (then-IM; age 17; 2495)

New York 1987 (7)

The Polgar sisters from Hungary – Susan, Sophia, and Judit – are the most famous female players in history. Judit is still the best woman ever, and Susan was second when she retired. I'll call Susan 'Zsuzsa' because that is her original, Hungarian name, which I've always called her by. 'Zsuzsa' is not hard to say (twice you make the 'zh' sound in 'massage'), and it has more zing and zip than 'Susan'.

Zsuzsa is five months my elder, and so we might have played in some world youth championship. Instead, we were paired in a monstrously strong New York Open. Before the game, we chatted pleasantly – two 17-year-olds who had just met – and I asked her why her English was so good. ‘Oh,’ she replied modestly, ‘I have visited the States many times.’ My goodness, I thought; if I had visited Budapest ‘many times’, I don’t think I’d be sitting here, chatting in Hungarian!... But maybe Zsuzsa studied English as part of her intensive upbringing. I don’t know; I like Polgar games more than Polgar books.

Zsuzsa and I never became friends, but I have one fond memory of her. In Adelaide, Australia, a year after this game occurred, she and I played tennis on an off-day during the World Junior Championship. The court was secluded, so once we started playing, I felt cut off from the chess scene entirely. Zsuzsa is reputedly good at table tennis, but she was new to tennis; and so, like all beginners, she was at times comically bad – swinging and missing, or hitting the ball wildly off mark.

Until then, I had seen Zsuzsa in two modes: as a serious competitor (over the board) and as an articulate young woman (away from the board). But, as she floundered away on the tennis court, she was just cute. Sometimes, she giggled with embarrassment. Other times,

after a botched shot, she would hide her face in her hands and shake her head back and forth, as if to say, ‘I’m so terrible, isn’t it funny?’ For a few hours, we were just teenagers.

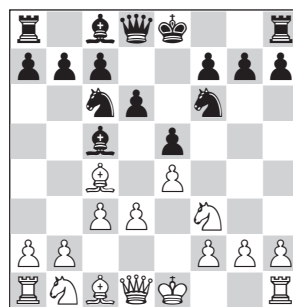
In New York, however, we were opponents. At the top of my scoresheet, I wrote my USCF rating by my name, whereas I gave Zsuzsa her FIDE rating. I did this to make my rating seem higher than hers. However, my FIDE-strength was probably 50 points below hers. She was the better player, and I knew it.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3

These days the world’s elite are playing even more quietly, with 4.0-0 ♘f6 5.d3. It must be hard to get an advantage against 2700s who are booked to the gills with computer lines.

4...♘f6 5.d3 d6

Rejecting Kortchnoi’s 5...a6! because she doesn’t plan on playing ...♙a7.



6.0-0

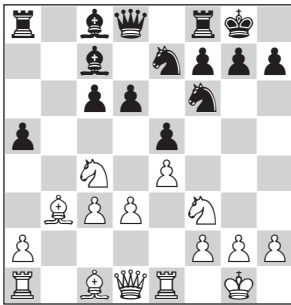
Recent theory views 6.b4 ♙b6 7.a4 a5 8.b5 ♘e7 as the main line. However, White isn’t better. After 6.b4 ♙b6, I’d try 7.♘bd2.

6...0-0 7.b4 ♖b6 8.♗bd2 a5

In general, the Quiet Piano promises White a long game but no advantage. With 8...a5, Zsuzsa embarks upon an enterprising plan of development, which was new to me. Also fine was 8...a6, even though the move is illogical; if Black is going to play ...a7-a6, then she should play it on move five, to let her bishop reach a7 in one go.

9.b5 ♗e7 10.♖b3 c6

So now the bishop can go to c7 after ♗c4. Black could even omit ...c7-c6 and allow ♗xb6 cxb6 – but most players like to keep their bishops.

11.bxc6 bxc6 12.♗c4 ♖c7 13.♞e1**13...♗g6?!**

Developing with 13...♖a6 is better. However, Zsuzsa wanted to attack my king, so she wasn't eager to commit her bishop to the queenside.

14.d4?!

Premature. I missed Black's reply. After the game, I thought I'd missed a good move: 14.♖a3, exerting pressure on Black's d-pawn. However, after 14...♖a6 (ready to meet 15.♖a4 with 15...♖b5) White has little.

Instead, White can take advantage of 13...♗g6?! with 14.♖a4! – the attack on c6 is awkward for Black: 14...c5 permanently weakens b5 and d5, while protecting c6 is passive (White is better after 14...♖b7 15.♞b1 ♞b8 16.♖a3).

14...♖a6!

Threatening 15...a4, winning a piece – because my d-pawn no longer defends my knight.

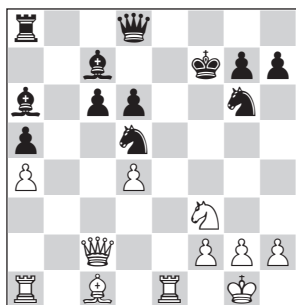
Thus Zsuzsa completes her development, without letting me complete mine.

Black will have the initiative for the next 40 moves.

15.dxe5

A natural alternative is 15.a4, stopping 15...a4 and preparing 16.♖a3. However, Black may play either 15...♖xc4 16.♖xc4 ♗xe4 17.♞xe4 d5 or 15...♗xe4 16.♞xe4 d5 17.♞e1 ♖xc4. Having overlooked 14...♖a6, I was quick to conclude that these lines favor Black, so I decided to dissolve the tension with 15.dxe5. This is typical chess psychology: I was rattled, so I chose the safest course.

In fact, my move is correct, but only just; 15.dxe5 is equal, as is 15.a4 ♗xe4 (with best play!), whereas 15.a4 ♖xc4! favors Black slightly. Let's see why. First, on 15...♗xe4, a critical position arises on 16.♗cx5! ♗xc3! (after 16...dxe5? 17.♞xe4, White's light-squared bishop is much stronger than Black's) 17.♗xf7 ♞xf7 18.♖xf7+ (18.♞c2 d5! equalizes – Houdini) 18...♗xf7 19.♞c2 ♗d5.



analysis diagram – showing how equality results from 15.a4 ♖xe4.

In this tactically pregnant position, my analysis diverges from the computer's. (What a surprise.) I thought I'd found a nice line: 20. ♖xc6 ♗ge7 21. ♖e7+! ♗xe7 22. ♗g5+ ♖g8 23. ♖e4! ♗c4! 24. ♖xh7+ ♖f8 25. ♖h8+ ♗g8 26. ♖a3! with a ferocious attack. However, 20. ♖xc6 ♗b4! (instead of 20... ♗ge7?) favors Black (Houdini). Best is 20. ♖f5+! ♖g8 21. ♖e6+ ♖h8 22. ♗g5 ♖f6 23. ♗f7+ ♖g8 24. ♗h6+ with a draw by perpetual check (because 24... ♖f8?? 25. ♖g8 mate favors White). Yet Black is better after 15.a4 ♗xc4! 16. ♗xc4 ♗xe4 17. ♖xe4 d5 – he wins back the piece, and White will have to work to recoup his pawn, because 18. ♗xd5?! exd5 and 19...e4 obviously favors Black. Correct is 18. ♗g5 ♖c8 19. ♖e1 dxc4 20. ♖e2 (Houdini). Of some interest, however, is my heroic exchange sacrifice (after 15.a4 ♗xc4! 16. ♗xc4 ♗xe4 17. ♖xe4 d5), which the machine scoffed at: 18. ♗a2? dxe4 19. ♗g5 (threatening 20. ♖h5) 19...h6 20. ♗xe4. White's bishop on a2 is worth a rook – or so

I thought – but after 20...exd4, the tactics favor Black because White is not fully developed: 21. ♖h5 (21. exd4 ♗xh2+! nets a pawn due to 22... ♖h4+ and 23... ♖xe4) 21... ♖h4! 22. ♖xg6 ♖xh2+ 23. ♖f1 ♖h1+ 24. ♖e2 d3+! and White goes down (Houdini).

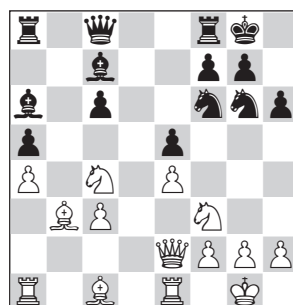
15...dxe5 16. ♖e2

I knew it looked funny to walk into a pin, but the pin is harmless. White's knight on c4 is hard to attack, and White can reinforce it.

16... ♖c8

A sly move, although nothing was wrong with 16... ♖d7 or 16... ♖e7. From c8, the queen spies my kingside and avoids confronting my rooks on the open files.

17.a4 h6



Keeping my bishop and knight off of g5.

18. ♖a2

An artful move, breaking the pin and putting indirect pressure on f7. The drawback is that the queen has left the kingside.

18... ♖h8

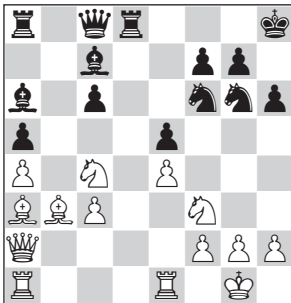
Vacating the a2-g8 diagonal. No one knows how the game will develop, but Zsuzsa's 18... ♖h8 shows

aggressive intentions; she hopes to play ...f7-f5 later.

19. ♖a3

This felt like the right square for the bishop. Also, I must admit that I liked the odd configuration of my queenside forces. Yet Black's knight can now settle on f4, and my pieces on the a-file cannot defend my king. Instead, 19. ♖d2 would have maintained the tension. Black can lash out with 19... ♗h5, but I can regroup with 20. ♗e3. All eight minor pieces and all six major pieces are still on the board; the game is wide open.

19... ♖d8



20. ♗cd2?

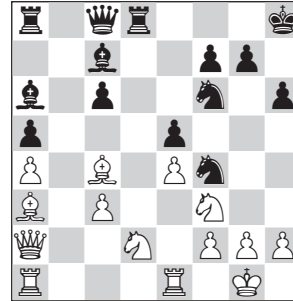
Why retreat a well-placed piece? Not only was my knight active on c4, but now Black can play the powerful 20... ♗f4 without fear of 21. ♗xe5.

I had a tough decision because the natural 20. ♖ad1 ♗xd1 21. ♗xd1? allows 21... ♗xe4. Nor did I like 20. h3? ♖d3! 21. ♗c2 ♗xf3! 22. gxf3 ♗xh3 with a ferocious attack. With no bright ideas lighting up my mental runway, I played 20. ♗cd2 in order to attack f7, and because I thought I could maintain

equality after 20... ♗f4 21. ♖c4. But Black's attack is too strong. Correct was 20. ♖ad1 ♗xd1 21. ♖xd1! with equality (Houdini).

20... ♗f4 21. ♖c4

Anyone who would contemplate 21. ♖xf7 ♗g4 22. g3 has poor survival instincts.



21... ♗g4

The game has reached its climax. Black should win – but does not. To anticipate matters, after 22. g3, Black repeats the position (22... ♗h3+ 23. ♖g1 ♗f4+ 24. ♖g1) and then plays 24... ♗d3 25. ♖e3 ♗xf2!? 26. ♖xf2 ♖b6. That position is certainly dangerous for White, but shouldn't Black bring every piece into the attack before resorting to unclear sacrifices? Why not intensify Black's attack?

Instead of 21... ♗g4, Black could win with the almost positional 21... ♖xc4 22. ♗xc4 (if 22. ♗xc4 ♗xg2! wins) 22... ♖b6! (Houdini). Adding the bishop to Black's attack breaks White's back. On 23. ♗xe5? ♗xd2 wins. White, in fact, has nothing better than 23. ♖c5 ♖xc5 24. ♗xc5 ♗d3, losing the exchange. But let's see the power

of Black's attack after two plausible alternatives to 23. ♖c5:

A) 23. ♖xf7 ♖g4 24. g3 ♖h3!
25. gxf4 ♖xf2+! 26. ♔xf2 (26. ♔h1 ♜xd2! 27. ♔xd2 ♔g4 28. ♔f1 ♖f3 mate) 26... ♔g4+ 27. ♔e2 (if 27. ♔g1 ♜xd2! wins) 27... ♖g2+ 28. ♔d1 ♖xf3+, winning (Houdini); and

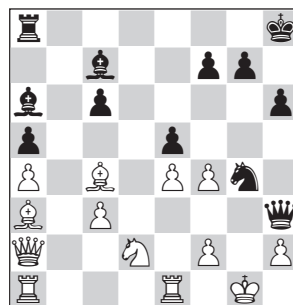
B) 23. h3 ♔xh3+! 24. gxh3 ♖xh3
25. ♖c5 ♖xc5 26. ♖xc5 ♔h5!
27. ♖xe5 ♖g4+ 28. ♔f1 (28. ♔h1 ♜xd2! 29. ♔xd2 ♔f4 30. ♜g1 ♖h4 mate) 28... ♔f4 29. ♜e3 ♖h3+
30. ♔e1 ♔g2+ 31. ♔e2 ♔xe3 32. ♔xe3 ♜xd2 33. ♔xd2 ♖xf3, winning (Houdini).

Yet Zsuzsa's natural choice –
21... ♖g4 – should also have won.

22.g3 ♔h3+

Black may again win by adding her dark-squared bishop to the attack: 22... ♖xc4 23. ♖xc4 ♖b6!
24. ♔xe5 ♖h3! 25. gxf4 ♔g4 26. ♔xg4 (on 26. ♔df3 ♖xf2+ 27. ♔h1 ♔xe5 28. ♔xe5 ♖xe1, Black wins due to the threat of 29... ♜d2) 26... ♖xg4+ 27. ♔f1 ♜xd2 28. ♜e2 ♖h3+ 29. ♔g1 ♖xf2+!! (devastating!) 30. ♔xf2 (30. ♜xf2 ♖g4+ 31. ♔f1 ♜ad8 leaves White defenseless) 30... ♜ad8!, and White is overwhelmed. Black's immediate threat is 31... ♖xh2+ 32. ♔f3 ♜d3+, and 31. ♜ae1 ♜d3 32. ♜xd2 ♖xh2+ 33. ♔f1 ♜f3+ 34. ♜f2 ♜xf2 is mate (Houdini).

Black also has a problem-like way to try to win, but White has a problem-like defense: 22... ♜xd2!? 23. ♔xd2 ♖h3 24. gxf4 ♔g4 and now:



analysis diagram –
showing why 22... ♜xd2!? would not have won.

A) After the 'automatic' 25. ♔f1, White is in big trouble after 25... exf4 (threatening 26...f3): 26. f3 ♖b6+ 27. ♔e3 (or 27. ♔h1 ♔f2+ 28. ♔g1 ♖xf3 and then mate) 27... ♔xe3 28. ♖xa6 ♔c2+ 29. ♔h1 ♖xf3 mate;

B) However, White equalizes with 25. ♖c5! (guarding f2 instead of h2). The line is nifty: 25... ♖xh2+ 26. ♔f1 ♖d6! 27. ♖b6! c5! 28. ♔e2 ♖xf2+ 29. ♔d1 exf4 30. ♖xa6 ♜xa6 31. ♔c4 ♖f3+ 32. ♖e2 ♖xc3 33. ♜c1 ♖b3+ 34. ♖c2 ♖f3+ 35. ♖e2 ♖b3+ with a draw by perpetual check (this b-line is Houdini's). Close, but no cigar! When Tal was asked about combinations that don't work, he sighed. 'Everyone has a wife who's left them,' he said.¹³⁶

23. ♔g2 ♔f4+

The best move, aiming to return to 24. ♔g1 ♖xc4 25. ♖xc4 ♖b6!, as discussed.

However, Black also had a strong continuation that does not involve ... ♖b6. On a good day, a strong

136 Genna Sosonko, *The World Champions I Knew* (Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess, 2013), p. 173.

attacker might find it through a combination of calculation and intuition. Initially, the role of calculation is just to confirm that Black has no obvious forced win, given the current balance of attacking and defending forces. However, intuitively, the win feels very close – White’s defense seems to succeed just barely. How, then, can Black soften White up, so that the next round of calculations might be more gratifying? Even without seeing things to the end, Black might consider 23...♙xc4 24.♚xc4 ♜xd2 25.♞xd2 ♜d8. With these last two moves, Black has traded his rook on a8 for White’s knight on f3. Thus, Black has swapped an inactive piece for a defending piece – and given White’s precarious position, this tips the scales. On 26.♞a2 ♞h5! (throwing another piece on the fire) 27.f3 ♜xd2+! 28.♞xd2 ♞5f4+ followed by 29...♚xf3+ leads to checkmate. So White should play 26.♞e2 because then 26...♞h5 27.f3 ♜xd2?? isn’t check but allows 28.fxg4. Black may then play 26...♞f4+ 27.♞f1 ♞xe2 28.♚xe2 ♚h3+ 29.♞e1 (not 29.♞g1 ♜xd2! – a reprise of 24...♜xd2 – 30.♚xd2 ♞g4 31.f3 ♙b6+ and wins) 29...♞g4 30.♙c5 ♞xh2 (Houdini) – Black is a pawn up.

24.♞g1 ♞d3?

Now the position is equal. During the game, however, I saw none of Black’s wins, and so 24...♞d3

seemed like a strong, fighting move – Zsuzsa is showing who’s boss by forging ahead with her knight and declining to repeat moves.

25.♞e3

Playing 25.♙xd3 and 26.♚xf7 seemed out of the question against a strong tactician. If nothing else, Black can play 25...♙xd3 26.♚xf7 ♜d7 27.♚a2 (27.♚b3?! ♜b8 chases the queen back) 27...♞xe4 – I didn’t like it.

Now I needn’t fear 25...♙b6?!, because after 26.♞xd3 ♜xd3 27.♙xd3 ♙xd3 28.♚xf7 ♞a7 29.♚b3 ♜b7, White has 30.♙c5!, throwing cold water on Black’s initiative by exploiting the pin on the b-file.

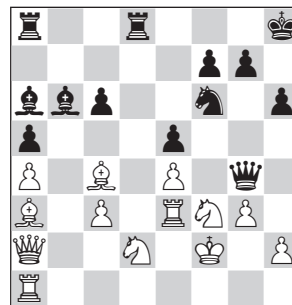
25...♞xf2!

Forceful play. For a moment, I thought of Fischer’s combination against Robert Byrne, which also began with ...♞xf2!, though the positions are much different.¹³⁷ I had seen this sacrifice coming but didn’t know where it would lead.

26.♞xf2

Finally, a piece is captured – move 26 is rather late!

26...♙b6



137 See Bobby Fischer, *My 60 Memorable Games* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969; Batsford edition, 2008), p. 300.

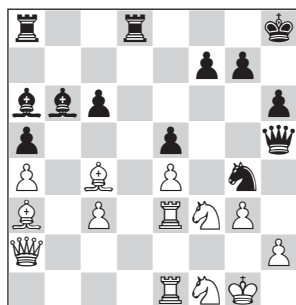
Black has sacrificed a knight for a pawn, and she can win back the exchange at any time. According to the standard point system (in which a rook = 5 points and a bishop or knight = 3 points), a rook and pawn are equal in value to a bishop and knight. In practice, the bishop and knight are often better, but here the open files might favor Black's rooks.

First, however, we must see whether I get pasted.

27. ♖ae1 ♜h3 28. ♔g1 ♘g4 29. ♚f1

A solid defense. Black can now equalize, if she desires, with 29... ♗xe3 30. ♘xe3 ♙xc4 31. ♜xc4 ♙xe3+ 32. ♞xe3 ♞d1+ 33. ♞e1 ♞xe1+ 34. ♘xe1 ♞b8 35. ♜d3 ♞b3 36. ♙c1 (Houdini).

29... ♜h5!



Polgar doesn't want to cash out, but she can't add any pieces to the attack, so she retreats her queen in order to threaten 30... ♗xe3 31. ♘xe3 ♜xf3. She also sets two traps. The first felt like a sucker's play: on 30. ♙xf7 g6!, White faces the double threat of 31... ♙xf1 and the still-possible 31... ♗xe3 32. ♘xe3 ♜xf3. The second trap is sprung

on 30. ♔g2, breaking the pin and defending my knight: 30... ♙xc4 31. ♜xc4 ♙xe3 32. ♘xe3 ♘h2!, winning a pawn (on 33. ♘h2? ♞d2+ wins) and preparing the way for a lethal ... ♞d2.

So, what should I do?

30. ♙c1?!

I was fond of this move, which brings the bishop into the defense. The idea is that after 30... ♘xe3 31. ♙xe3, Black cannot win a piece because her bishop on b6 is hanging (31... ♜xf3 32. ♙xb6 or 31... ♙xe3+ 32. ♞xe3). Very crafty, I felt.

However, neither trap Zsuzsa set was real, and my move comes in third. After 30. ♔g2!? ♙xc4 31. ♜xc4 ♙xe3?, White eschews 32. ♘xe3? ♘h2! in favor of 32. h3!! (Houdini).

I cannot remember seeing such a thing – White declines to recapture a bishop in order to threaten a lowly knight, which is protected! By a strange circumstance of geometry, 32... ♙b6? 33. hxg4 loses for Black because after 33... ♜xg4 (or 33... ♜g6) 34. ♘xe5, she cannot prevent both 35. ♘xg4 and 35. ♘xf7+. Nor can she play the aggressive 32... ♚f2? because her knight gets in trouble after 33. ♘xe3 (33... ♜xh3+ 34. ♔xf2 or 33... ♘h3 34. ♞h1 or 33... ♘d3 34. ♞d1). In these lines, White's minor pieces cover all the right squares. So Black must do something else after 32. h3!! – for example, 32... f5 or 32... ♙f4 or 32... ♘h2. Incredibly, White should win in each line. Sparing you the details, look at how bad Black is

doing after 32...♟f6 33.♞xe3: White threatens 34.g4 ♖g6 35.♞xe5; White's minor pieces are stronger than Black's rooks; and White's pieces deny those rooks the possible entry-points of b2 and d2. After 32.h3!!, Black's queen turns out to be misplaced, whereas White's is sitting pretty on c4.

In practice, White would probably win after 30.♞g2, so long as he saw 32.h3. Yet Black can get a small edge with 30...♞xc4 31.♖xc4 ♞xe3+! (instead of 31...♞xe3) 32.♞xe3 ♞xe3 33.♞xe3 f6 34.♞e2. Black is slightly better because her rooks have open lines, and White's minor pieces lack outposts as well as targets.

The other 'trap' leads to a draw: 30.♞xf7! g6! and now 31.♞e7!

The first point is that 31...♞xe3?? 32.♞f6+ ♞h7 33.♞g8+! ♞xg8 34.♖f7+ forces mate. So Black plays 31...♞xf1, when 32.♖e6!! (Houdini) brings the battle to fever pitch. The material is equal, and the attacks balance out. A logical conclusion is 32...♞xe3+ 33.♞xe3 ♞d1 34.♞f6+ ♞xf6 35.♖xf6+ ♞h7 36.♞b3! ♞c1! (36...♞d7? 37.♞xf1 wins) 37.♖e7+ ♞h8 38.♖f6+ with a draw by perpetual check (Rachels).

30...♞xc4?!

Zsuzsa believes me – her mistake. She should've won my c-pawn with 30...♞xe3! 31.♞xe3 ♖xf3 32.♞xb6 ♖xc3 33.♞xa6 ♖xe1 34.♞xd8 ♞xd8 (nine captures in a row!), when 35.♖c4 limits Black's advantage,

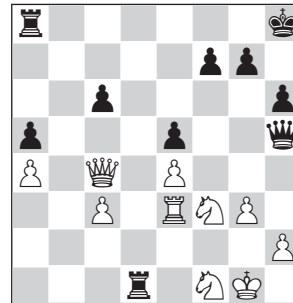
whereas 35.♖xf7! (opening the f-file) allows 35...♖b4!, making too many threats (...♞f8, ...♖b6+, ...♖d4+, ...♖xa4, and ...♖xe4; Houdini).

31.♖xc4 ♞xe3+ 32.♞xe3

Not 32.♞xe3?? ♞xe3 33.♞xe3 ♞d1+, winning a piece.

32...♞xe3 33.♞xe3 ♞d1

Zsuzsa is still playing energetically.



We've reached a major piece ending with roughly even material – White has two knights for a rook and pawn. White is no longer worse, but I still felt under pressure. I had to make seven moves in seven minutes (Zsuzsa had double that), and my king is not very safe. Black's last move, 33...♞d1, invites me to play 34.♖xc6 and to weather the storm after something like 34...♖b8 35.♞3d2 or 34...♞ad8 35.♞f2. I did not want to defend such a position when 'the evil genie of time trouble hangs like a fearful apparition over the game (Kotov).'¹³⁸ Instead, I sought to eliminate Black's active rook.

34.♞d3 ♖a1!?

138 Alexander Kotov, *Play Like a Grandmaster* (London: B.T.Batsford, 1978), p. 176.