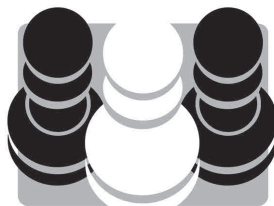


Street Smart Chess

By

Axel Smith



Quality Chess
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Preface

When does it pay off to play hard for a win? Or safe for a draw? And how do you adapt your playing style accordingly?

“Will you write a book about that?” asked my wife. “The best advice is to play as you usually do. You are going to sell a product no one needs! No wonder you came up with this idea on Black Friday.”

At GM-level you may need to take risks to beat your opponent, she said, since there are few unforced mistakes. At a lower level you can play on and await blunders.

However, playing on and adapting to the opponent or the tournament situation is no contradiction. I really think it’s an underrated skill. It is understandable that chess players want to focus on the position and the moves, but lifting your eyes to see the clock, your opponent and the game circumstances increases your probability of scoring. And that’s exactly what my wife has problems with.

“Will you write about forcing a draw against a higher-rated opponent? It’s a shame.”

She plays for pleasure. Others play for the spectators. I respect them, sometimes I even envy them, but this is a book about achieving results. My working title was “Cynical Chess”, but the publisher felt it had negative connotations. Their suggestion of “Canny Chess” was surely very good, only it lay outside my vocabulary.

My wife had another objection: you learn less with an attitude of cynically achieving the greatest number of points. She has a point, and in one sense, this is not a book about improving your chess understanding.

However, I think that’s exactly what you will do by finding out how the model players in this book approach different game situations. Because they do it by examining the position and using their chess knowledge.

Learning to beat lower-rated opponents the way David Navara does, to play positionally like Ulf Andersson, to turn water into wine like Magnus Carlsen and to get rich positions from the opening like his second Laurent Fressinet – that will certainly broaden your playing style. All those chapters are useful when playing against lower-rated opponents.

When playing against higher-rated opponents you can have a serve & volley repertoire like Peter Heine Nielsen, go for the kill like Baskaran Adhiban, play safe like Aryan Tari, or even for the draw like Bu Xiangzhi.

Is it worthwhile to imitate the style of the world’s best even though we don’t reach the same level? I think I have used the metaphor before, but I don’t remember where, so I will do so again: junior and amateur soccer teams play 4-4-2 (or any other established set-up) not only to prepare for a senior career, but also because it gives the best results.

We copy the professional players’ openings, so why not copy their attitude?

Finally, this is a book about avoiding excuses.

“I can’t help it, my opponent never wanted to create a game. He was White and exchanged all the pieces. What could I do?”

“My opponent was like a blind gunman. He turned around and emptied his magazine. A bullet happened to hit. What could I do?”

Those excuses came from the same player, and even though they might have eased his conscience after a bad result, they didn’t help him do better in the next game.

What could you do? Adapt! Playing by yourself, you can only look at the position, but game theory becomes important as soon as you have an opponent who is lower or higher rated. And that involves lifting your eyes and taking calculated risks – when necessary.

Finding those situations requires a lot of experience. Learning from good model players is a worthwhile shortcut.

Axel Smith

Vernet-les-Bains, November 2020

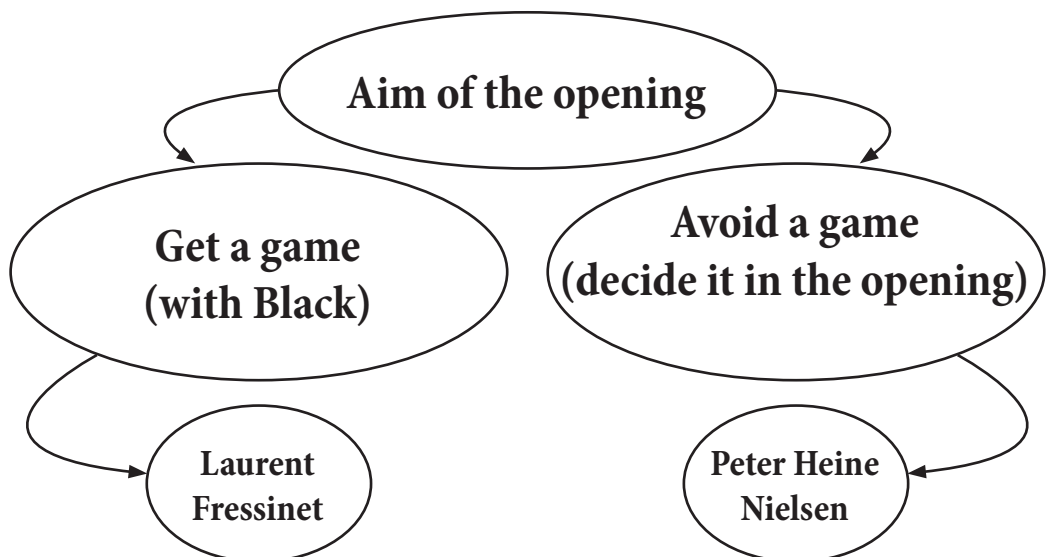
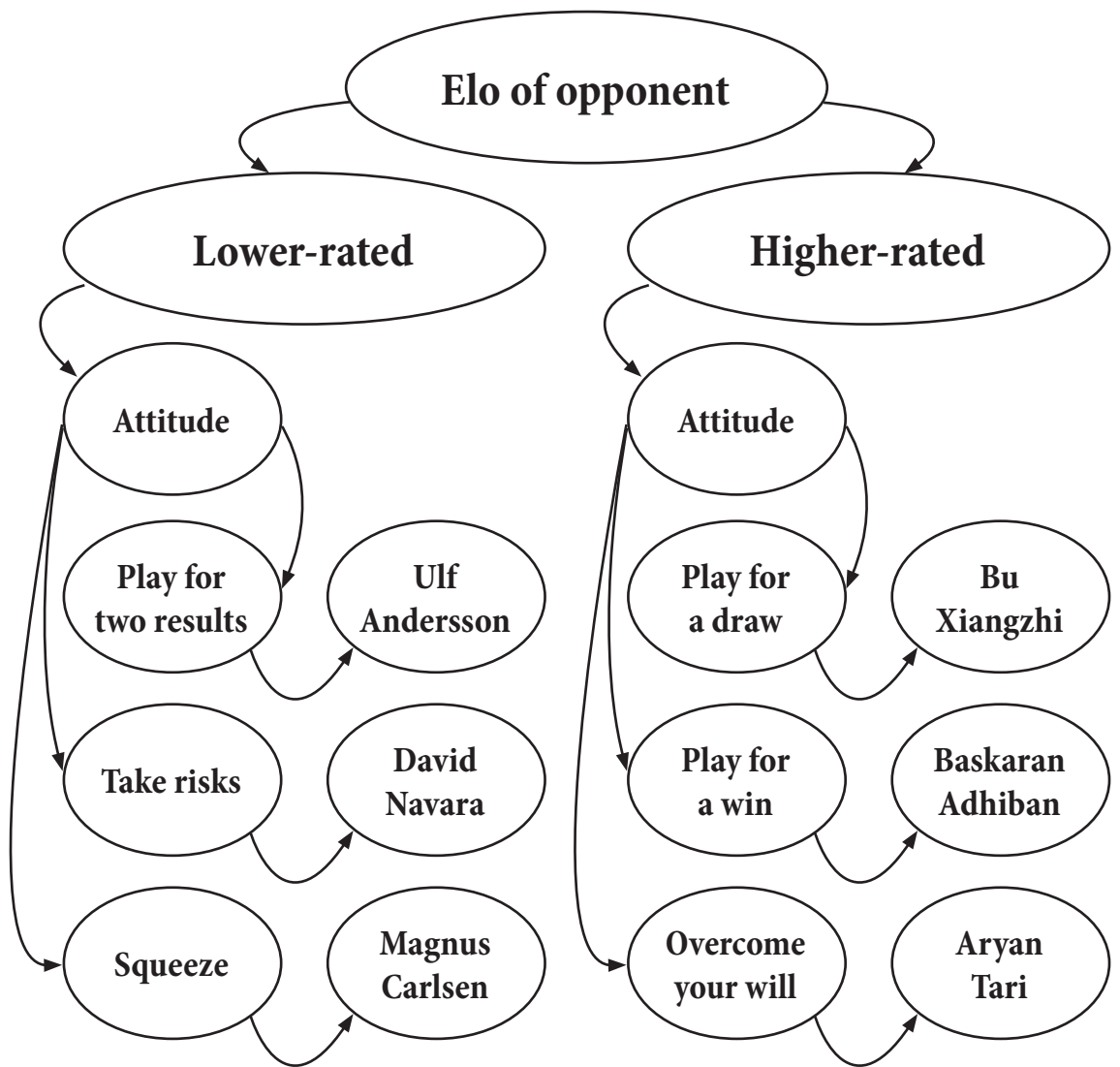
P.S. Elo rating is not everything – a lesson I learned already as a kid after I made a repetition with rook and two pawns versus rook because my opponent was rated 85 points higher than me.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all the players who have patiently answered questions and explained their games: Baskaran Adhiban, Ulf Andersson, Bu Xiangzhi, Laurent Fressinet, Peter Heine Nielsen, David Navara and Aryan Tari. Without them – no book.

The test readers had many valuable comments. Jean-Clément Ulles visited our Catalan village in the Pyrenees and decided to spend a year in Sweden to improve his English. I welcomed him with the extensive task of correcting the draft. That gave Martin Jogstad an easier read when he checked the chess content. Finally, Anders Sandström is a creative journalist who has taught me a lot, not least about headings, puns and punchlines. When lacking ideas, I always ask myself what he would have written. Or wait for him to call.

Also thanks to Quality Chess for sharing their knowledge and believing in all my proposals. However, my next book may go beyond their limits.



Chapter ①

Beating Higher Rated Opponents

The Shortcut to Creative Solutions



GM Baskaran Adhiban

- Residence:** Chennai, India
Born: August 15th, 1992
Achievements: 3rd in Tata Steel 2017
Top scorer on Board One in the World Team Championship 2019
Destiny: Beating top players

“Know thy place”

Why even try beating someone purportedly stronger? Notwithstanding the quote, common in religious texts, there can be several reasons: the tournament situation; pure pleasure; that you are not (yet) any good at playing safe; or simply the ambition to improve.

A stronger player is liable to be stronger in all areas of the game; the task is thus to reduce the influence of playing strength! That means increasing the impact of chance, and even though you can say that chess is a game with complete information (and therefore without chance), everyone has less control in messy positions. An unexpected move may turn up as a welcome or unwelcome surprise, even for strong players.

Playing safe against stronger opponents prolongs the game, but normally decreases the probability of obtaining points. Magnus Carlsen is one of many who recommend an aggressive attitude against stronger opponents. To *Chess24* he said: “There’s this thing called ‘sudden death aversion’, that I think affects a lot of people. You make decisions that give you a lesser chance of winning overall, but decisions that at least extend the game or the match, because you feel like, ‘as long as I’m in it I have a chance, and losing it right now because I did something risky would be very unpleasant.’ I very much understand that, but you’re not always going to maximize your chances this way. The strategy that’s almost always correct is: if you’re down, complicate; if you’re winning, simplify! If you believe that you’re weaker you should always try and complicate as much as possible.”

Carlsen concluded that weaker players should take risky decisions. And if it leads to a loss, well, you should be comfortable that you still took the correct decision: “It’s not like

you’re not going to hate yourself after, but you can still make those decisions!”

The best way to reach messy positions is to play for an attack, where positional factors matter less. It cannot be done in all positions, of course; your pawns and pieces need to be placed reasonably well. But when there is an opportunity, you should go for it, like our model player always does.

Baskaran Adhiban is one of the most creative attackers at the elite level and has many scalps under his belt. In the Sharjah Masters in 2018, he had to play well to qualify for India’s team in the Olympiad. Even playing Black against a 2700-opponent, he was, as he explains below, focused and eager to play for a win.

Yuriy Kryvoruchko – Baskaran Adhiban

Sharjah Masters 2018

Annotations by Baskaran Adhiban

This was the second game of a double-round day. After the morning game, I just went back to the hotel and rested, and only prepared until move three.

1.e4 c6!?

No problem playing for a win with the Caro-Kann!

2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5

4.c3 ♖c6 5.♗f3 allows 5...♙g4 when Black gets a very favourable Advance French.

4...e6

The new trend thanks to Vishy Anand, who played it against Vitiugov in the Grenke Chess Classic only ten days earlier.

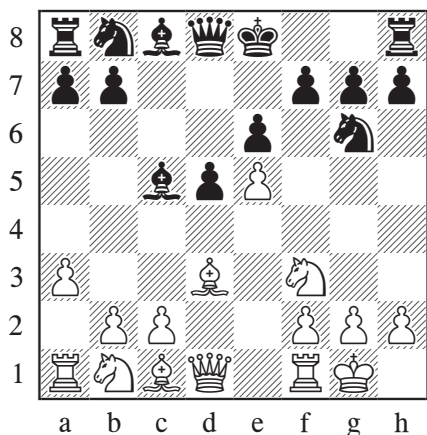
5.♗f3 ♙xc5

Black moved the c-pawn twice, but don’t forget that White also lost a tempo with the d-pawn.

6.a3 ♖e7 7. ♘d3 ♗g6

7...0-0 8. ♘xh7† and White wins, as so often happens with a pawn on e5.

8.0-0



8...♗c6

The natural 8...0-0 could be met by: 9. ♗g5! An interesting idea mentioned in a Facebook post by Hagen Poetsch. 9... ♖c7! (9...h6 10. ♗xf7 ♗xf7 11. ♖h5 and White wins) 10. ♖h5 h6 11. ♗xf7 ♖xf7 12. ♘e3! (12... ♘xg6 is met by 12... ♖xf2†! 13. ♖xf2 ♖xf2 and Black threatens the queen as well as mate) 12... ♗f4! 13. ♖xf7† ♖xf7 14. ♘xc5 ♗xd3 15. cxd3 ♗c6 Black has sufficient compensation for the pawn.

9.b4 ♘b6

Keeping the bishop on the active diagonal.

10.♘b2

White's plan starting with 6.a3 allowed him to smoothly protect the e5-pawn, though fianchettoing a bishop always loses control over a square in front of the king.

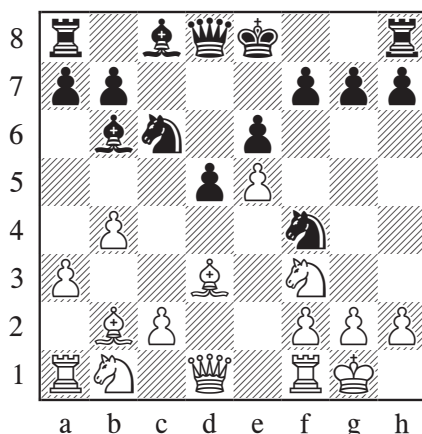
I was actually out of theory already.

10...♗f4!?

So here comes the knight! The nice memories from this game made me repeat the opening

against Sergey Karjakin today. [Axel Smith: Adhiban was showing me this game after the last round of the 2019 World Team Championship in Kazakhstan.] However, I deviated with 10...0-0 and at some point, I went wrong in an equal endgame. Karjakin needed to play accurately and take some risks in order to gain an advantage, but he did not want to do that, so I got lucky.

In the first three rounds of the World Teams everyone wanted to beat me, so I got chances and won those games. For the rest of the tournament, my opponents started to play safe and the remaining games were drawn.



11.c4

Kryvoruchko played very fast and was still in book, following Karjakin – Topalov from the Vugar Gashimov Memorial in 2017.

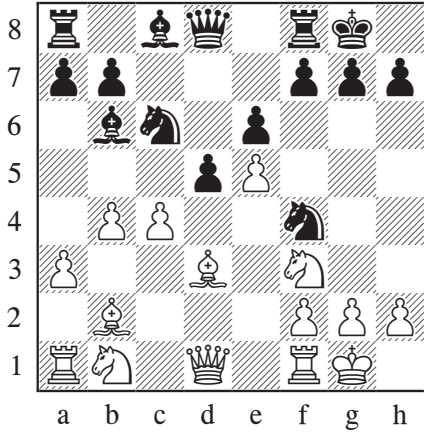
Vitiugov – Anand, Karlsruhe/Baden-Baden 2018, went 11. ♗bd2 0-0 12. ♗b3 and Black could have continued in similar spirit to my game: 12...f6! 13. exf6 gxf6 With a messy position.

11...0-0

Karjakin – Topalov, Shamkir 2017, continued 11... ♗xd3 12. ♖xd3 dxc4 13. ♖xc4 and the b1-knight has a juicy spot on d6. Exchanging on d3 helps White develop;

I didn't feel there was any need for that yet. Let's keep the attacking knight!

11...dxc4 12...♙xc4 is also very sad for Black.



12. ♖c3

The critical attempt seems to be 12.c5 ♙c7 and:

a) 13.b5? runs into 13...♗xe5!, which I rejected on some grounds. I can only imagine what they were! Irrespective of how White captures, the double threat after ...♙g5 wins back the piece: 14.♗xe5 ♙g5 15.g3 ♙xe5 and the rook on a1 is hanging in the line 16.♙xe5 ♙xe5 17.gxf4 ♙xa1.

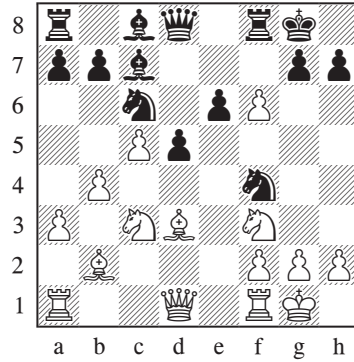
b) 13.♙c2 f6 14.exf6 e5! A stunning idea! 15.b5 (15.fxg7 ♜f7 looks scary for White as Black has a mighty pawn centre and all his pieces are pointing at the kingside, looking for blood.) 15...♙xf6! 16.bxc6 bxc6 Black has fantastic compensation for the piece.

12...f6!?

This position had been reached before, but no one had mustered the courage to play this! I felt this was the most natural move, opening up for the queen and rook. I just had to make sure it was not losing on the spot.

13.exf6

Sometimes the game of chess is all about the right order of moves: 13.c5! ♙c7 14.exf6



With the bishop on c7, Black should avoid 14...♙xf6 15.♗xd5.

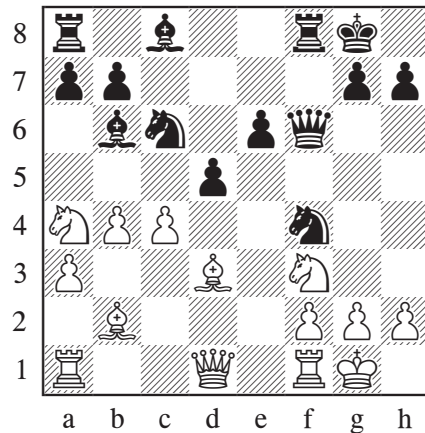
After the better 14...♗xd3 15.♙xd3 gxf6 the engines prefer White, as Black will find it hard to get the centre rolling.

There are other interesting alternatives, maybe even the piece sacrifice 14...e5 15.b5 ♙xf6 16.bxc6 bxc6.

13...♙xf6 14. ♗a4

14.cxd5? exd5 and the c8-bishop joins the fight.

It's too late for 14.c5 since the bishop has another square available: 14...♙d8! and Black has no complaints.



14...♙d4!

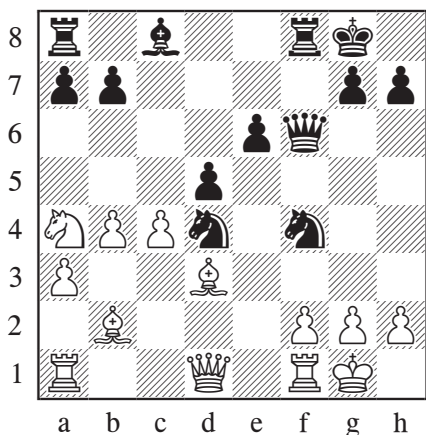
A very strong idea which completely turns the game around!

My initial intention was 14...♖h6 15.♗xb6 axb6 which felt decent during the game, but the comp doesn't agree and gives White quite some advantage.

14...e5 15.♗xb6 axb6 16.cxd5 ♙g4 17.dxc6 ♗xg2 also looked very interesting, but our iron friend gives 18.♙xe5 as clearly winning for White.

15.♗xd4 ♗xd4

Once the knight on f3 has been exchanged, the white king comes under huge fire. He is in trouble now.



16.♖h1

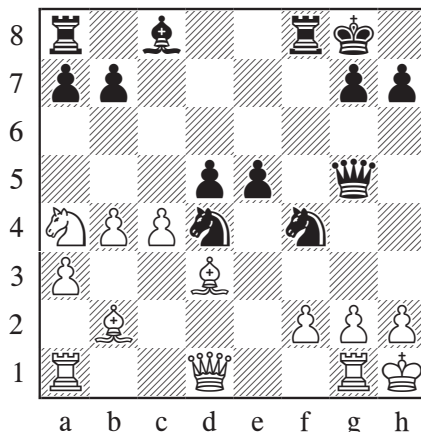
At first you might think that Black's 14th move doesn't work due to 16.♙xd4 ♖xd4 17.♙xh7† winning the queen. This could create a blind spot and stop you looking any further, but you have to push yourself. And then you find 17...♖h7 18.♖xd4 ♗e2† and Black wins back the queen with an extra piece.

16...♖g5 17.♖g1

17.g3 ♗xd3 18.♖xd3 ♗f3 with a mating attack against h2.

17...e5!

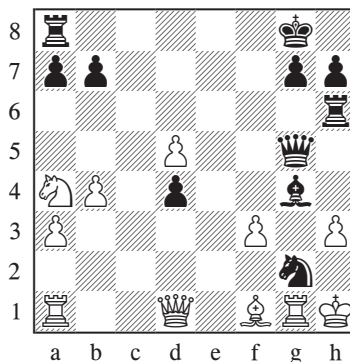
Never back down! The last piece joins the fight.



18.cxd5

I was surprised to see this as I expected his sense of danger to be on high alert already! Especially with the king on h1 and the rook on g1.

The following lines were worked out with the help of Salem Saleh and Viorel Iordachescu during the post-mortem: 18.♙xd4 exd4 19.cxd5 ♖f6! 20.♙f1 (20.♖f3 ♖h6 and White has no good way to prevent ...♖h4) 20...♖h6 21.h3 ♙g4 22.f3 (22.♖xd4 ♗xg2! wins) 22...♗xg2!! And now:



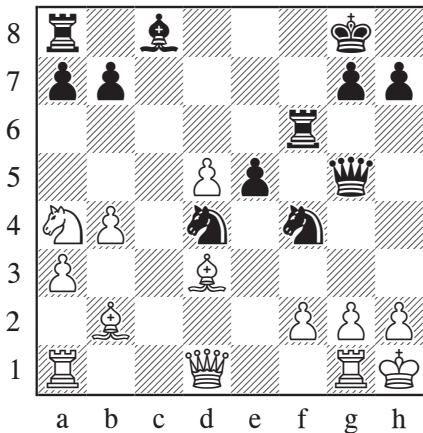
a) 23.♖xg2 ♖xh3† 24.♖g1 ♖e3† (I think we can be forgiven for missing 24...♖h4 with mate on h1) 25.♖f2 ♖g3† 26.♙g2 ♙h3 Black wins.

b) 23.fxg4 ♖xh3† 24.♔xg2 ♚e3 with mate in three.

During dinner the same evening, Wang Hao mentioned 18.♙f1!? as the best try, which is true, though after 18...♗f6! 19.♙xd4 exd4 20.♚xd4 ♖h6 the attack is just too strong. The threat is ...♖xh2† and 21.h3 is met by 21...♚f5, threatening ...♘xh3. After 22.♚e3 ♙d7 the bishop finds a wonderful diagonal: 23.♘c5 d4 24.♚g3 ♙c6 White cannot hang on much longer.

18...♗f6!

It's all over; there is no defence against the attack along the h-file.



19.♙f1

19.♙xd4 ♖h6 followed by a capture on h2 or h3 and then mate.

19.g3 ♖h6 20.gxf4 ♖xh2† 21.♔xh2 ♚h4† 22.♔g2 ♚h3 mate shows why ...e6-e5 was needed.

19...♖h6

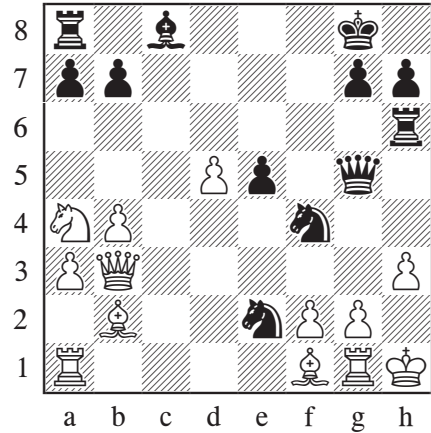
Threatening mate in two.

20.h3 ♘de2!

I was happy to execute this move!

21.♚b3

21.♙xe2 ♙xh3 with mate.



21...♙xh3

0-1

Bringing one more piece into the attack! Such a pretty finish!

“Only you can do that,” said my coach Alon Greenfeld about beating a 2700-player in 21 moves with Black in the Caro-Kann. The tournament went well with one more win and two draws against 2700-players, and I made it into the Olympiad team.

[Some of the comments to the above game were published in *New in Chess* in 2018.]

It is no coincidence that Baskaran Adhiban has received a wild card for the World Cup, and his Indian team a wild card for the World Team Championship. He is a player worth seeing, for his spectacular games as well as his positive attitude.

Is creative chess something typical for Indian players?

“Maybe. Sultan Khan was our first strong player and he played very originally with no openings at all. But nowadays openings have taken over everything.”

Can everyone learn to play attacking chess?

“It’s possible! When we are born we know nothing about chess, there is no prescribed playing style. However, I think the first book has a big impact. Mine was *Attack with Mikhail Tal*, while my friend Vidit Gujrathi’s was *Capablanca’s Best Games*. Today we are complete opposites.

“I sometimes want to challenge in the spirit of Tal, but honestly his attacks are not the strongest. He wanted to create beauty and have fun, while Alexander Alekhine played to kill.”

So how should one learn to attack?

“You must put positional play in the background. After a while you may not be sure which kind of moves you prefer. But you should not lose yourself in the process – balance is the key. I used to play moves that I didn’t consider best but that gave practical chances, but I am not doing that so much anymore. At least not in team events.”

And it can be done even against higher-rated players?

“There is this notion that you should play safe facing a higher-rated player and that a draw is a good result. But if you want to become better you have to beat them one day, so just believe in yourself and go for the kill. It happens to me all the time that I overplay, but I like to think that after a loss you learn a lot of things that you would not have learned if you had won. One loss is fine, you can always make a comeback and it’s not the end of life.

“I love to play unclear positions and basically look for creative solutions. But you have to feel that it’s interesting, calculate that it’s not bad and have the courage to actually play it. I once had an unbeaten streak that made me avoid sacrifices, but I felt very bad about myself.”

How to beat strong opponents – Adhiban’s Attitude

- Play for a messy attack! Preferably with the pieces on good squares as a positional foundation.
- Take the chance when it comes! You may only get one.
- Don’t be an angry loser! Losing is the best way to learn.

The shortcut to creative solutions

Going all in is not only a question of attitude, you also need to achieve those positions. The good news: there is a shortcut.

In 2019, AlphaZero revolutionized chess, beating the hitherto strongest engine with long-term pawn and piece sacrifices. Would it be possible for humans to play in a similar way? After all, we can’t keep the same control over a messy position as an engine. Magnus Carlsen was clearly inspired, but for anyone below his level?

Since then, I have heard several strong players asking the same question: what would AlphaZero have done in this position? Certainly, AlphaZero cannot be a model for beating higher-rated players (there are none!), but that doesn’t stop us from being inspired.