

YOUR OPPONENT IS OVERRATED

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO INDUCING ERRORS

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About the Author

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Also by the Author:

The Dark Knight System

This book is dedicated to my wife Caroline. Her support has been essential to all my successes, but for this book she went above and beyond.

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Introduction

The Problem

We all play about as well as we can manage, given the amount of effort we can spare for chess. We have our ratings and a certain average percentage of wins (plus draws divided by two) that we can expect depending on the level of our opposition. We read books to improve, and study openings, but after a certain point this doesn't seem to have any impact. *Perhaps this is because our study is generally based on the premise that the only road to improving our results is to improve our accuracy.* Some of us may need to think about chess in a much different way.

Your Opponent

We have a fallible opponent. He's messing up every game. Even when he stumbles upon the right moves, it's often for the wrong reasons. I'd even go so far as to say he's overrated. And yet if we play our "normal best" game those errors may not appear frequently, and they may not be severe. Surely there is some way to expose his ignorance. But he's familiar with the common tricks and traps. We'll need to be subtle. Cagey. Persistent. Overwhelming. So we will not merely go about our business – we will at times go out of our way and actively induce errors in our opponent's play. Right?

No Draw!

The originally intended title for this book was "No Draw!" As it turns out, avoiding draws and inducing errors generally amount to the same thing. There is no way to win otherwise drawn games without inducing errors, so it is really the same subject, and I believe I may use the phrases nearly interchangeably.

The benefits of avoiding draws are considerable, even if it does not improve a player's results overall. It is a very common occurrence in tournaments that we need to win a particular game. Perhaps there is money on the line, or a tournament title, or a Master title that depends on temporarily achieving a certain rating. Naturally, we want to play as well as we can, but there is an additional consideration because a draw may be worthless, or nearly worthless. Should we play our "normal best" game, or can we do better by playing differently to avoid a draw? Obviously, it is pointless to avoid draws if all those draws turn into losses, but if some of those draws (let's say about half) can be turned into wins, we

increase our chances of achieving our goals. That is what this book is about, though as we go on, we may realize that it is about other things as well. Allow me to elaborate on this, since it helps explain why it might be so important to play fewer draws.

Imagine two players, “Mr. Draw” and “Ms. NoDraw”. (See how progressive I am?) Mr. Draw makes the maximum percentage of draws. Therefore, if he plays a player of the same rating, the result is always a draw. If he plays a player in the next higher class, he will lose approximately half the time and draw half the time, while if he plays a player in the next lower class, he will win half the time and draw half the time. Whatever this player’s skill level, he will never win a tournament unless he is vastly superior to the rest of the field, and he will have a hard time winning prize money, because he will almost never have any exceptionally good results. (This is especially true for Swiss System tournaments, though it also holds true for round robin events.) For the same reasons, his extreme consistency will make it nearly impossible for him to earn the norms that are required for certain prestigious titles.

Ms. NoDraw has the same playing strength as Mr. Draw, but she never draws. Against players in her own class, she wins half and loses half. Against players in the next lower class, she wins 75% and loses 25%. She is not a “better” player than Mr. Draw, but she gets to win tournaments sometimes, and places in the money more often. If her playing strength is close to 2500 FIDE, Ms. NoDraw is a Grandmaster, while Mr. Draw is not. Ms. NoDraw is well known because of a few outstanding results. If it matters to her, she is also more popular with fans and spectators because her games are more exciting to watch. She gets invited to more tournaments. Maybe not all of these arguments apply to you, but there are additional benefits to playing fewer draws. With your fighting style, you learn more about what works and what doesn’t. And since you rarely accept or offer draws, your games are longer, and you accumulate more experience, especially in endgames, a stage of the game in which many of your opponents are weak. Your opponents start to fear you, since every time they play you, they are stuck in the ring with you until there is only one of you left standing. You develop your fighting spirit, competitive instincts, and mental stamina while other players are sitting on the sidelines. Your attitude is of great benefit to you, and ultimately helps raise your standard of play.

“I don’t need this book.”

Some players are, consciously or unconsciously, already using many of the ideas, techniques, and attitudes presented here. In my biased opinion, they probably still need this book. Players who are intuitively playing as combatively and competitively as possible need to bring their techniques into their conscious mind in order to gain better control over them. After all, there is a time and a place for everything, and *overuse is probably even more dangerous than underuse*. As for players who are using all their competitive tools consciously, there is still the danger that they will at some point have a bad result and lose faith, especially since their play will not be properly understood, even by many of their fellow chessplayers. I will present both examples and arguments to buck up the spirits of any disillusioned adventurers.

No Draws Ever?

Some people are very strongly anti-draw, and have even suggested changing the rules of chess to avoid or prohibit draws. I will right now make a distinction between a “win oriented” attitude, which can be valuable even in games where a win is not essential, and a “drawphobic” attitude, which can be detrimental even in games where a win is very desirable. I used to be drawphobic myself in my attitudes and play, but this is generally counterproductive. To try to squash draws out of existence or, alternatively, to deny how useful half-points can be to a player is to be at odds with reality, which is always a dangerous thing. Still, if my attitude was somewhat drawphobic, it did help me to develop strategies to avoid them. I firmly believe that it is not at all necessary to produce a large percentage of unwanted draws.

Draws are normal, right?

Everyone knows that a draw is the normal result of a well-played game. White’s first move advantage is nowhere near enough to force a win. When strong players play each other, draws are extremely common, in part because trying too hard for a win is often punished by a loss. For one player to win, it will require his opponent to make one, two, three, or even more mistakes, depending on their severity, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, that’s one way of looking at things, and here’s another. Mistakes are inevitable. In virtually every game, even at the very highest levels, your opponent will make enough mistakes so that it is possible for you to win. In those few cases where your opponent does not make enough mistakes for you to win, it is because you did not present him with enough opportunities to go wrong. The normal result of a game is a win.

Don’t we make mistakes, too?

Yes, which is why we sometimes draw and sometimes lose. A draw is normally much better than a loss, and we will not help ourselves by berating ourselves for every draw, but neither should we cling to the delusion that our draws are the inevitable result of well-played games. On the contrary, they usually result from games that are played equally badly by both sides. (Some of such games may fairly be described as “well fought”, or as good games in a sporting sense, but this is not the same thing.)

Terminology

To speak intelligently about the subject of inducing errors and avoiding draws, we need an appropriate vocabulary. The most important word for our subject is nettlesomeness which in a chess context is the degree to which a player or a move tends to induce errors in the opponent’s play. I have to admit I had never heard of nettlesomeness until reading about the 2013 Anand-Carlsen World Championship match. As Carlsen started to pull ahead, articles appeared online attributing Carlsen’s success to his “nettlesomeness”, a term coined by International Master and computer scientist Dr. Kenneth W. Regan. Apparently, a player’s average accuracy, as measured against the strongest computer programs, is not a

constant, but is affected significantly by one's opponent (and not simply according to their rating). If we are playing about as well as we can, perhaps the best way to become more successful is to arrange to have our opponents play worse.

Hope Chess?

There is a type of chess practised by certain players where one tries to set traps for his opponent with little concern for the integrity of his own position. The classic example of this is the so-called "Scholar's Mate" (1 e4, 2 Bc4, 3 Qh5, 4 Qxf7 matel). White is planning, or "hoping", for Black to overlook the threat, but he is not very well prepared for the scenario where Black turns out to be competent. This is often referred to derisively as "hope chess". You might think that hope chess is only practiced by beginners, but I have seen forms of it at most levels. But isn't nettlesomeness merely a kind of hope chess? I don't look at it that way. You could say that hope chess is a kind of nettlesomeness (to the degree that it works), but playing nettlesomely does not have to mean knowingly choosing inferior moves. We are constantly faced with choosing between approximately equal moves. If we can figure out which one is more likely to cause trouble for the opponent, certainly we should choose that one. And maybe we should be willing to make a small sacrifice of position to increase the likelihood of errors. In doing so, we start on the slippery slope towards "hope chess", but as long as our hopes are realistic, the average gain may be worth the cost (particularly if the position on the board is such that we have little to lose).

Without further ado, let's see how to go about demonstrating that our opponent is overrated.

By the way, thank you Daniel I. Miller for our many discussions relevant to this topic.

Chapter One

The Opening

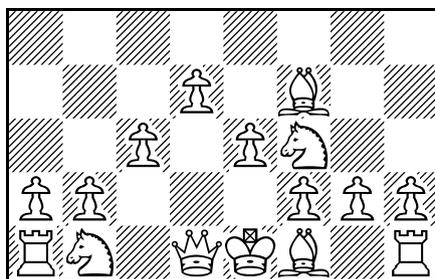
In the search for nettlesomeness and decisive results it makes sense to start in the opening. There are a great variety of sound openings and “everyone knows” that certain openings are combative whereas other openings are drawish.

Openings known to be combative are the Sicilian (29.4% draws), Modern (28.2%), King’s Indian (29.6%), and Grünfeld (36.8%). We all know that the French (30.4% draws), Caro-Kann (32.7%), Slav (38.3%), and Queen’s Gambit Accepted (35.9%) are boring and drawish.

Admittedly, statistics can be misleading, but the first thing we notice in looking at the data is that some of the things “everyone knows” are not supported by the numbers, and even where they are, the differences are mostly tiny. The “boring” French is only 1% more drawish than the “dynamic” Sicilian, and the “combative” Grünfeld is more drawish than the “old man’s” Queen’s Gambit Accepted.

For the purpose of inducing errors and avoiding draws, I suggest we ignore database statistics almost entirely. Far more relevant are our personal statistics with certain openings.

For example, I often play the London System (1 d4, 2 ♘f4, 3 e3, 4 c3, 5 ♗f3, etc),



which does not have a reputation for generating decisive results, to say the least (it is often called “The Boring Opening”). I also know how to play 1 e4, so isn’t it obvious that I

should open with the king's pawn in any game where a win is important? Not necessarily, because this is a question about a person, not just about an opening. In approximately 50 London System tournament games, I have produced exactly zero unwanted draws. (Thrice I drew when it suited me, once against GM Khachiyan, once to help win a team tournament, and once when a decisive result was less important to me than getting home quickly.) At the risk of belabouring the obvious, *our personal results are surely more relevant to our opening choices than the rest of the chess world's results or the opening's reputation.*

Even more relevant are the types of positions we expect to reach with our opening; and most relevant of all are the positions we expect to reach against the particular opponent we are playing.

Yes, there is an opponent (an overrated one, or so I've heard), and he has his input into the type of position as well. Even in generally wild openings, our opponent (especially if he is White) may have an opportunity to deaden the game. We can prepare the Botvinnik Semi-Slav only to have our opponent play the Exchange Slav. We can play the Göring Gambit (1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 c3), but when our opponent declines with 4...d5 5 exd5 ♗xd5 6 cxd4 ♙g4 7 ♙e2 ♙b4+ 8 ♘c3 ♙xf3 9 ♙xf3 ♗c4, we find ourselves in a tepid end-game after 10 ♗e2+ ♗xe2 11 ♙xe2.

But all is not gloom and doom. Sometimes our knowledge of our opponent indicates that he will choose not to enter the most feared (dry) variation. Going into the third round of the 2009 Virginia Closed, I was 2-0 and due Black against Andrew Samuelson. He was not a player I could expect to beat routinely, but a win would dramatically increase my chances of winning the tournament, particularly since the first tie-break was cumulative (big reward for early points). At that time it was normal for me to play 1 e4 g6, but I knew he would be well prepared. On the other hand, I had substantial experience with the Caro-Kann as a young teenager, and he had no way of knowing this. The only problem was that I did not enjoy the positions reached after 1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3, particularly when I needed to win – in fact, that's why I gave up the opening. However, the database revealed that he only played 3 e5 and 3 f3, systems I felt particularly comfortable meeting. Furthermore, I took 3 f3 as an indication that he had trouble meeting the Caro-Kann. I was not right on every detail, but my general impressions were correct. He avoided the main lines and tried 3 exd5 cxd5 4 ♙d3, but he did not know it well, made errors as expected, and I had a large advantage by the time we reached the middlegame, and a winning advantage in the end-game. Alas, my technique was poor, and we nonetheless reached a draw. However, in this context the result is beside the point – which is that knowledge of an opponent can help you to correctly decide to use an opening that would not normally seem suitable for playing for a win.

Furthermore, it is not only our opponent who can play the role of opening spoiler. For instance, if our opponent looks forward to a quiet and drawish Petroff's Defence, we can foil him completely. Adithya Balasubramanian was faced with this situation in the last round of the 2008 Virginia Closed. A draw was not appealing to him since it opened up the

possibility of being beaten on tie-breaks (by me, should I happen to win). Therefore he chose 1 e4 e5 2 ♖f3 ♗f6 3 ♜xe5 d6 4 ♜xf7! (the Cochrane Gambit) – a variation that, as he wrote in the *Virginia Chess Newsletter*, “could not possibly lead to a draw”. He produced this comment with a bit of irony since the game did, in fact, turn out to be a draw, but it was certainly not the fault of the opening.

Every game has an opening, and if we don’t feel like we had good chances later, maybe we should have tried harder to make chances earlier. In games we must win, we cannot afford to let the opening pass without trying to create opportunities. If we cannot find an advantage, we should at least reach a position from which it seems realistic to play for a win.

The reader will at some point notice that this book is heavy with my own games. This is not because of their quality (which is mediocre) but because I have detailed first-hand knowledge of the circumstances under which they were played, and these details are very important for our discussions.

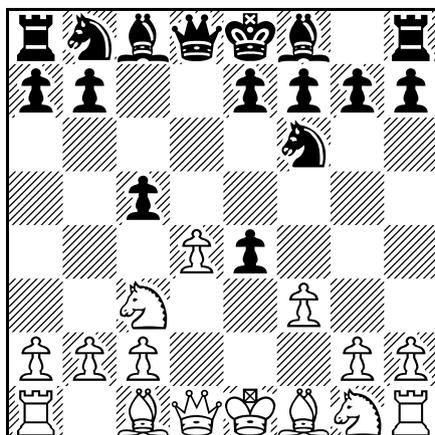
Game 1
M.Thurber-J.Schuyler
Las Vegas 2008
Blackmar-Diemer Gambit

Since this is a chapter on openings, and it was my opponent who had the correct and successful opening strategy, he is the real hero of this game, even though he lost. However, as the opening comes to a close, we will spend more time considering my own point of view, in anticipation of certain ideas that come up later.

1 d4 d5 2 e4

What’s this? The Blackmar-Diemer Gambit? “Everyone knows” that it is unsound, just like the Smith-Morra and the King’s Gambit. Nevertheless, Thurber’s decision is 100% correct, even and especially since he is outrated by 500 points. In the late Simon Webb’s excellent book *Chess for Tigers*, his advice for playing stronger players is to get aggressive. “Play that unsound gambit,” he urges. It is always dangerous to try to hold a gambit pawn, especially in a less-familiar position. Knowing this, many strong players simply decline all gambits, even though in many cases the declining variations do not promise equality. I was not determined to remain a pawn ahead, but I had tried to develop a method of taking the initiative.

2...dxe4 3 ♗c3 ♗f6 4 f3 c5



This is the “Brombacher” variation, which I decided was practically a refutation of the Blackmar-Diemer. This assessment would have been highly optimistic, even had there been no holes in my analysis.

5 ♖f4!

Thurber makes an excellent guess, selecting an even more obscure, more aggressive, and more unsound gambit continuation, offering a second pawn. Indeed, I had not studied this position at all – a recipe for disaster. I would have been more than willing to go back in time and play 2...c6.

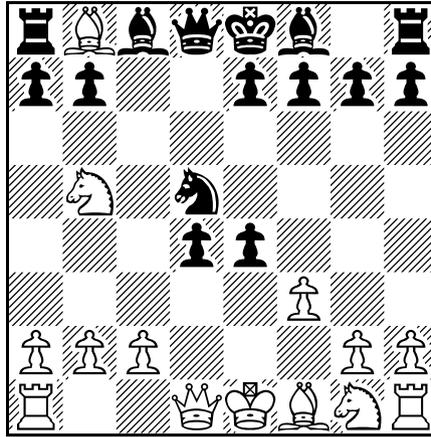
I had been anticipating 5 d5 ♗a5 6 ♕d2 e3 7 ♕xe3 g6 and 8...♕g7, when I expected sooner or later to be punishing White on the dark squares, and perhaps rounding up the d-pawn with ...a7-a6, ...b7-b5, ...♘8d7-b6, ...♕b7, ...♗d8, etc. Of course, White may be able to make some use of his turns as well. Also, he may have tried 6 fx4 ♘xe4 7 ♗f3 ♘xc3 8 ♕d2 and 9 ♕xc3 with good compensation for the pawn – the exact kind of situation I should have been trying to avoid.

5...cxd4! 6 ♘b5 ♘d5?

One good move and one bad move is about par for the course in a position like this. Instead, the simple 6...♘a6 gains a big plus. I should have kept the e4-square under control.

It is worth taking a minute to ask: what if Black had actually played 6...♘a6 - ? Well, then White struggles and presumably loses, and then looks very foolish for his opening play. I may even mention the game to my friends: “Hey, I thought that guy would at least try to give me a game. Instead, he tried this ridiculous opening and went down without a fight. Pathetic!” In fact, I’m pretty sure I said that exact thing after somebody tried the Englund Gambit against me a while back. The fact is, you don’t beat better players without taking some risks, and if you take risks, you are probably going to wind up looking stupid when they don’t work. Playing gambits, sound or otherwise, is not the only way to take risks, and it is not the only way to play for a win, but there are often opportunities to unbalance the game in the opening, and you should be prepared to seize them.

7 ♖xb8!



It was hard for me to believe White would play such an anti-positional, anti-attacking, anti-developing move, but it is necessary, and suddenly all the tactics (the ones I could see, anyway) work in White's favour.

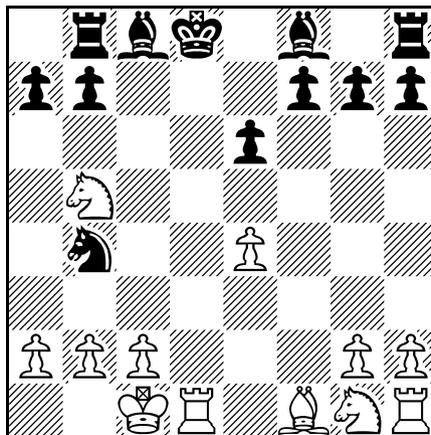
7...♖xb8?!

According to *Stockfish*, even this obvious recapture is incorrect. 7...d3! maintains the attack on the bishop while also threatening 8...♖a5+ (8 ♖g3 ♖a5+ 9 ♖c3 is met by 9...♗e3, ...♘xc2 and ...♘xa1). An excellent example of the difficulty of playing such positions well.

8 ♗xd4 e6 9 fxe4 ♘b4?!

Here 9...♘b6 10 ♗e5 ♖d7 11 ♘c7+ ♔e7 is playable for Black. This is another example of something I was unlikely to figure out unless I was familiar with the position. After the text move, I was in a bit of trouble.

10 ♗xd8+ ♔xd8 11 0-0-0+



Let's switch points of view for a minute, and consider my predicament. I am about to be stuck in a pawn-down endgame against a player I would have expected to beat routinely had the game proceeded in any "normal" kind of way. Putting aside my regrets, what should my attitude be at this point? Am I trying to salvage a draw? No, no, no! This is so crystal clear that I don't think it is possible to construct a reasonable counter-argument. Don't forget, even at 500 points lower-rated, he is still overrated. If I find ways to set him problems, he will make enough mistakes that I can win. The details of how to do this are less important than the initial attitude – that initial decision and determination that starts the ball rolling.

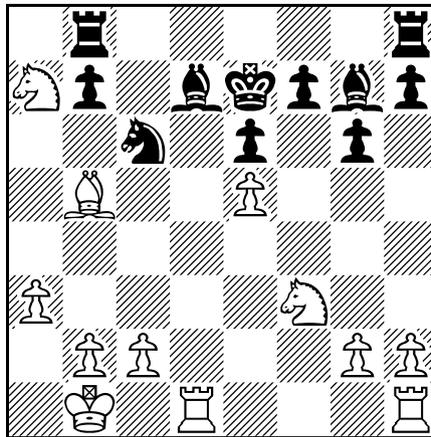
11...♔e7!

Considering that I need to activate my bishops in order to get counterplay, this was a bit counterintuitive to me at first. However, aside from blocking the f8-bishop, my king is perfectly placed on e7, safe from bishops, knights, and rooks. The bishop will just need to find some other way out. 11...♔e8 is no more efficient anyway because it blocks the h8-rook instead.

12 ♖xa7 ♘d7 13 a3 ♘c6 14 ♘b5 g6 15 ♗f3 ♘h6+ 16 ♔b1 ♘g7

By now I'm happy I was forced into fianchettoing this bishop. I assumed that 17 e5 was not playable for White – or that, even if it was playable, my opponent would assume it wasn't. This kind of guesswork is acceptable under the circumstances.

17 e5!?



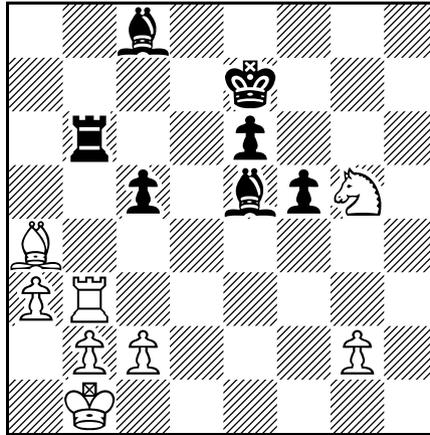
17...f5?!

Mobilizing my kingside majority. If 18 exf6, I reactivate my bishop and create a passed e-pawn. Only after the game did I realize I could have played 17...♗xe5!! 18 ♗xe5 ♘xb5 and if 19 ♗xf7 then 19...♘a4!! (this was the idea I missed) 20 ♗xh8 ♖a8, trapping both knights to reach an endgame where Black is at least equal. This was exactly the kind of tactical shot I needed.

18 ♗xc6+ bxc6 19 ♘c4 ♖b6 20 ♖d3 ♗hb8 21 ♖b3 h6 22 h4 c5 23 ♖d1 ♘c8 24 ♖dd3 ♗xb3 25 ♘xb3 ♖b6?!

Much better is 25...g5! (I have been preparing this move, and the time is now) 26 hxg5 hxg5 27 ♖xg5 ♙xe5, which threatens 28...c4 and 29...♖xb2+.

26 ♙a4! g5 27 hxg5 hxg5 28 ♖xg5 ♙xe5 29 ♖b3 ♗d6 30 ♗d3 ♖b6 31 ♖b3



31...♖xb3!

At times, my incompetence in this game reached staggering proportions, but disdain-
ing the repetition was absolutely correct. It is true that, with best play, the game should
probably be a draw anyway, but this is barely worth mentioning – we all know best play is
not going to occur. It is also true that there is some risk of losing, especially if I am unwill-
ing to let go of the possibility of winning when that becomes necessary. Some risks are
worth taking. Besides, why should I be pessimistic when I outrate my opponent?

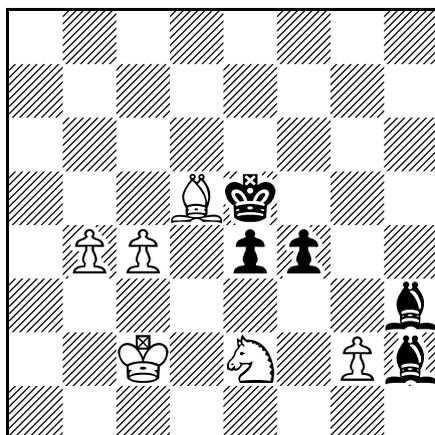
32 ♙xb3 ♙f4 33 ♖f3 e5?!

My bishop should be heading for f1 to target White's weak pawn, hence 33...♙a6!. If
White prevents this with 34 c4, his own bishop and, in fact, his whole queenside, become
paralysed.

34 ♙d5 e4 35 ♖g1!

Other moves are already losing, which was one of the reasons I had headed for this po-
sition – it can be hard to find and play ♖g1. Instead, 35 ♖h4 (or 35 ♖e1 ♙d2) 35...♙g3 36
♖g6+ ♙f6 37 ♖f8 ♙d6 traps the knight.

35...♙d6 36 c4 ♙e5 37 ♙c2 ♙h2 38 ♖e2 f4 39 b4 cxb4 40 axb4 ♙h3!?



This may have been taking things a bit far, and had White played 41 gxh3! f3 42 ♔d2! f2 43 ♖g3! ♕xg3 44 ♔e2, I would probably have lost, regardless of the theoretical assessment.

41 ♖xf4

I had overlooked this, though it is not as strong as it seems.

41...♕g4! 42 ♕xe4?

White started to worry that he might be unable to stop the e-pawn after, for instance, 42 ♖g6+ ♔d4 43 ♔d2??, but here White has the clever 43 ♖e7 e3?? 44 ♖c6 mate! I suppose White also figured that, with Black's last pawn off the board, he could not possibly lose. This is wrong on two counts. First of all, there are many traps for White to avoid. Secondly, there is the very real possibility of losing all the pawns and reaching an endgame with a knight vs. two bishops, which is theoretically lost. I should say that no less a player than author and IM Anthony Saidy was undone by the same misconception in a 134-move marathon game against Walter Browne.

42...♔xe4

This last part of the game is conducted badly by both players, in part due to time trouble. We are playing mainly off the delay. Not to belabour the point, but when there is a time scramble, who wins? It should be profitable to bet on the higher-rated player, with little regard for the position.

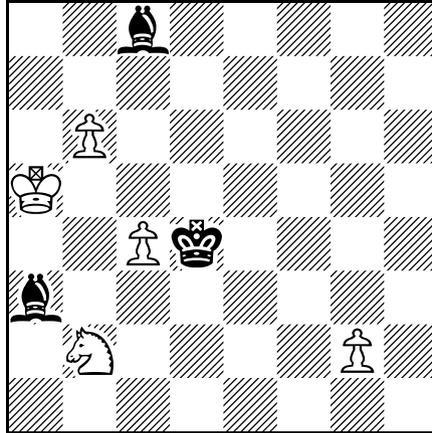
43 ♖h3?

43 ♖d5.

43...♔d4 44 ♖f2 ♕f5+ 45 ♔b3 ♕g3?

45...♕e6.

46 ♖d1 ♕e6 47 ♖b2 ♕e1 48 b5 ♕a5 49 ♔a4 ♕b6?! 50 ♔b4 ♕c5+ 51 ♔a5 ♕a3 52 b6 ♕c8



53 ♖a4??

By now the game is a draw if White finds 53 ♖b5! ♙xb2 54 ♖c6, but I had successfully predicted White's blunders in the time scramble.

53...♙xc4 54 g4??

White had to play 54 b7 ♙xb7, when he soon loses his g-pawn as well, but I am far from guaranteed to be able to pull off a win with two bishops vs. knight.

54...♙b4 mate

The lesson is to believe in your opponents' incompetence, whether they are 1200, 1800, or 2400. Even players who are not very strong will not go far wrong unless they are presented with challenges, and the best place to start posing problems is as close as possible to move one.

Game 2
R.Young-J.Schuyler
 New York 1989
Latvian Gambit

In this game from 1989, I really put Webb's (then unknown-to-me) advice ("play that unsound gambit") to the test. What could be more unsound than the Latvian? And yet at this point I had been playing it as my main weapon for years! This time I was against a senior master, but if it was suitable for weaker players, it was perhaps even more suitable for stronger players, who have more positional and opening knowledge to obliterate.

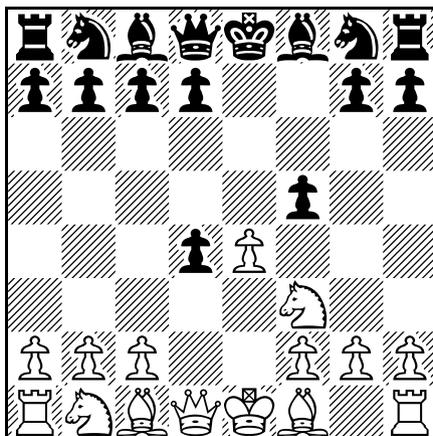
1 e4 e5 2 ♖f3 f5

What can I say? Of course this can't be any good "objectively", but it puts both real and psychological pressure on White immediately. I suppose a few people might have memo-

rized an antidote to the Latvian, though I had surprises in store for them too.

3 d4 exd4!?

The regular Latvian might not be surprising enough so, just to be sure, a new move on move three (as far as I knew at the time). The main line goes 3...fxe4 4 ♖xe5 ♜f6 5 ♘c3 d6 6 ♙g5 dxe5 7 dxe5 ♜xd1+ 8 ♚xd1, when it looks like Black is in trouble. I was unaware that 8...h6 9 ♙xf6 gxf6 10 ♜d5 ♙d7 11 ♜b6+ ♙c6 12 ♜xa8 fxe5 gives Black a playable game, but I probably wouldn't have been interested in playing it anyway. I wanted to make use of all my weird home analysis.



4 ♜xd4!

I see now that one relatively popular line runs 4 ♙c4 fxe4 5 ♜e5 d5 6 ♜h5+ g6 7 ♜xg6 ♜f6 8 ♜e5+ ♙e7 9 ♜xe7 ♜xe7 10 ♜xe7+ ♙xe7 11 ♙e2 ♜g8 with a dominating position for Black. I was definitely prepared for this.

You might think a Falkbeer with an extra tempo would be a strong choice but, after 4 e5, I would have been happy to try to close the position with 4...d5, when White doesn't really have anything special; if 5 exd6?! ♙xd6 6 ♜xd4 ♜f6 7 ♙c4 ♜e7+, Black is absolutely fine.

4...♜f6 5 exf5 c5 6 ♜f3?!

White really needs to take the bull by the horns with 6 ♜b5! d5 7 ♙f4 ♜a6 8 g4!, when Black is in deep trouble. The thing is, when opponents are surprised, they rarely take the bull by the horns, instead opting for "safer" continuations. In my defence, my analysis (done before the age of computers) had not indicated that Black could get into so much trouble. Anyway, the important thing is that I was able to analyse the moves that my opponents were actually likely to play.

6...d5

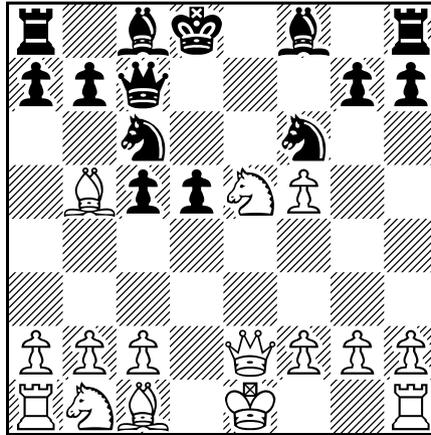
6...♜c6 is safer, but Black is obviously not interested in safety.

7 ♙b5+ ♜c6 8 ♜e5?!

This pseudo-aggressive move actually hands the initiative to Black. Do you see how dif-

difficult it is to react in a measured way to such a big surprise? White is first too conservative, and then too aggressive.

8...♔c7! 9 ♚e2 ♖d8!



I had foreseen this position in my home analysis, and correctly assessed it as good for Black, who has a big centre and will soon recover the gambit pawn.

10 ♘f3 ♙d6 11 0-0 ♚e8 12 ♚d1 ♙xf5 13 ♙g5 a6 14 ♙d3 ♙g4 15 h3 ♙h5

White has recovered from his shock and has started to play sensibly. Nonetheless, the opening has taken its toll on his nerves, and he now tries to “punish” me with a move that turns out to be way too greedy.

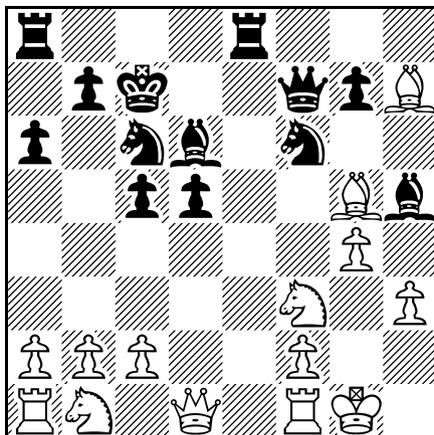
16 ♙xh7? ♚f7?

Transferring the queen to the kingside while preparing 17...♔c7!. However, this idea could have been implemented much more accurately by 16...♚d7!, which takes g4 under control and threatens 17...♘d4! (when 18 g4? loses to 18...♙xg4).

17 g4?

Positional hara-kiri. The tactics White is trying to set in motion don’t actually work.

17...♔c7!



18 ♙xf6?!

18 ♙f5 is preferable.

18...gxf6 19 ♘c3?!

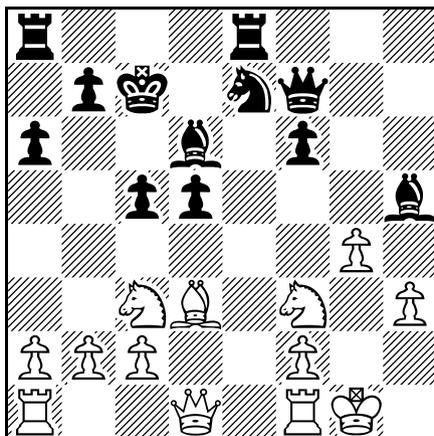
19 ♙f5 is again better, though White is probably losing anyway.

19...♘e7?!

19...d4! just wins.

20 ♙d3?!

20 ♚d3!? might be tried.



20...♖h8?!

20...♖g8 was stronger.

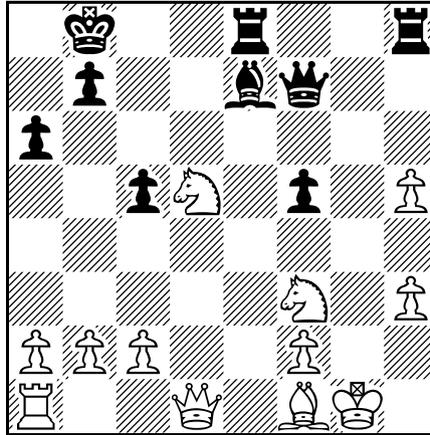
21 ♖e1 ♖ae8?

Absolute nonsense. I have no idea what I could have been thinking. After 21...♖ag8, White is still in serious trouble.

22 ♔f1 f5??

Completely unsound, and not in a way that poses real challenges to White. Just because a move is crazy and aggressive does not mean it's nettlesome.

23 ♖xe7+ ♕xe7 24 ♜xd5+ ♚b8 25 gxh5



White is winning by now, but the preceding play has taken more toll on his nerves, as well as his clock. His resources turned out to be insufficient to finish the game.

25...♖eg8+ 26 ♕g2 ♕d6 27 ♞b6?

The knight is already perfectly placed. This excursion makes no sense.

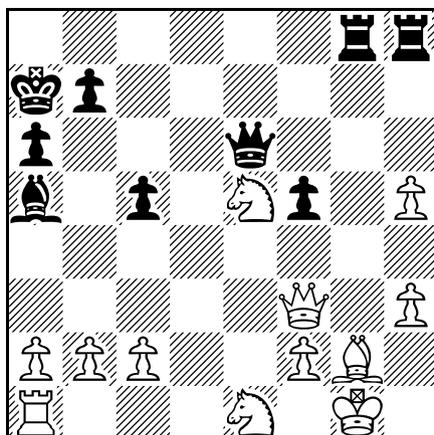
27...♕c7 28 ♜d7+ ♚a7 29 ♞e1? ♕a5?

This threatens 30...♕xe1 and 31...♖xd7, but I have missed a legitimate opportunity to get back in the game with 29...♖xg2+ 30 ♜xg2 ♖d8.

30 ♞e5 ♚e6

My computer keeps trying to tell me to take White's extra h-pawn, whereas from a practical standpoint, I felt it was much more important to keep my queen centralized.

31 ♚f3?



31...♖h7!?

My second opportunity to win back two pieces for a rook: 31...♖xg2+ 32 ♔xg2 ♚xe5 seems like the way to go. This time I made a decision to keep more tension in the position, and it did ultimately pay off.

32 ♘g6?? ♙xe1

Did I say ultimately? How about immediately? If you want to know how objectively lost I was before my opponent hung his knight, consider that *Stockfish* still calls this position equal. However, from a practical standpoint, I don't think either one of us thought White could escape from his downward spiral.

33 ♔f1 ♙a5 34 ♘f4 ♚e5 35 ♘d3 ♚h2 36 b4??

This despairing move cannot possibly work in White's favour, no matter how optimistically one looks at his position. It is directly, almost consciously, suicidal.

36...cxb4 37 ♘f4?? ♖xg2! 38 ♚xg2 ♚xf4 39 ♖d1 ♙b6 40 ♖d3 ♗g7 0-1

Other moves win more quickly, but this is the last move of the time control, and it is quite sufficient.

What is the lesson here? Opponents play terribly in sharp, unfamiliar positions, especially in the opening, when most players are used to recycling memorized variations rather than thinking for themselves.

Game 3
K.Polok-V.Malaniuk
Szkarska Poreba 2012
Four Knights Game

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6