

Jay Bonin and Greg Keener

# Active Pieces



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# About This Book

**I**t's an established culinary fact that too many cooks spoil the broth, and I think it's safe to assume that any book with more than one author runs similar risks. However, we have taken a lot of effort to create a streamlined text for the reader here, in which Jay's games are presented and analyzed with his own ideas front and center in every variation. Of course, we checked these variations with the help of our silicon friend *Houdini*, who sometimes showed us paths leading into the dark woods of uncertainty that we occasionally invite the reader to explore with us. However, throughout the book any reference to "I" or "myself" should be read as if Jay were speaking, with the one exception of this very page in which I – Greg Keener – have a chance to chat directly with you the reader.

As a tournament director at the Marshall Chess Club over the last few years, I have seen Jay Bonin win tournament after tournament – not always finishing in clear first place, but very often finishing "in the money." I recall one of his longer winning streaks when he managed to come in clear first or tied for first a remarkable 9 events in a row. This is not an easy feat, even for a veteran GM. I recall scratching my head and wondering just how on earth was he so consistently "lucky" when it came to playing in open Swiss events. While talking with a group of club members one day, I posed the following question: How does Jay win? This was not a rhetorical question. I actually wanted to get a concrete answer. I knew that he had a variety of pet systems he liked to play, but so do most tournament players. I was aware that he favored endgames with knights, and that he was a tricky tactician in original positions as well. But what I was really looking for was a more complete answer to my question, one that focused on how he won Swiss event after Swiss event. So I approached him one evening at the Marshall Chess Club with this question in mind. His answer, which wasn't entirely forthcoming at first, is what you're holding in your hands.

My contribution to this book has been mostly in prodding Jay with further questions, helping to structure his thoughts and to present the material in a way that I hope comes close to answering my original inquiry. Poring through thousands of unpublished games, we tried to isolate those that were not only interesting, but which also fit into certain themes that I think the reader will find intriguing and engaging in equal measure. Of course, my greatest challenge as co-author was to coax the genius out of Jay and present it to the reader in a logically consistent format. A book, after all, is not made up of ideas but of words and sentences, and – in the case of a chess book – many, many diagrams.

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Ultimately, I wanted to help bring this book into existence because it is a book that I have wanted to read and no one else had written it yet. Having read it now, I can say Jay has answered my question to my satisfaction, and I hope that you will find as much pleasure in reading his reply as I did in transmitting to you.

Greg Keener  
*New York City, July 2016*

# Preface

The journey began in February 1970, when I was in junior high at Andries Hudde JHS in Brooklyn. I was in homeroom, waiting for classes to begin, when I noticed two classmates playing chess on a wooden peg board. That caught my eye and I tried to follow the moves, unsuccessfully. Later that day, I went to a toy store in my neighborhood, where I bought a Hasbro plastic set with instructions and managed to teach myself how to play. Soon I was playing with my classmates, though all I can say was that I knew how to move the pieces and not much more than that.

For the next couple of years I was a casual player, until the summer of 1972. When Bobby Fischer went to Iceland to battle Boris Spassky for the World Chess Championship, I was working as a camp counselor in the Manhattan Beach Jewish Center. While on a break in the counselors' lounge, I caught a glimpse of Shelby Lyman analyzing the Fischer-Spassky match on television. I was immediately hooked. Bobby Fischer was an inspiration to me and I started to look for places where I could play chess more seriously. I looked in the phone book, and the first place I found was the Chess and Checker Club of New York in Times Square. The place was jumping, with a TV on the premises to follow the match live. I went there four times to follow the match, and on my last visit I played one of the local hustlers, a tall, imposing man named Petar Lovrich. After losing two games and paying my time, I barely had enough money to get home. The next club I visited was Charles Hidalgo's Chess House. A nicer place by the looks of it, it was there that I learned that chess can be played with a clock. I started playing speed chess and was nervous at first, but soon would get the hang of it.

As a junior at James Madison High School, I played for the chess team. One match was against Sheepshead Bay HS; I played first board. My opponent was Paul Wurmbrand, who beat me like a drum – a very humbling experience! Talking with him afterward, I learned from Paul that he was a member of the Marshall Chess Club. It wasn't like the other clubs I went to: I had to ring a bell and was surprised to see that it was the famous chess teacher Bruce Pandolfini who had buzzed me in. He was in the middle of a chess lesson as I walked up the stairs, when a nice older man, Bill Slater, greeted me as if I had been a member of the private club for years. Bill made me feel right at home, even playing some games with me. I was really impressed with how classy and busy this club was – the style of the pieces, the wooden clocks. There were blitz games, bughouse, and consultation games, and each table had an individual light above it. After Fischer beat Spassky, many people joined the club in the ensuing chess craze, and I was happy to be a part of it.

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A flyer for the Greater New York Scholastic Championships at the Hotel McAlpin caught my eye, and I played in the Novice section on the advice of my school team's faculty advisor. It was a good decision, as I tied for first with 7 out of 8, winning a nice trophy. It was Bill Goichberg who directed my first event, and 44 years later he's still directing major U.S. tournaments. Two months later I played in my first Marshall Chess Club competition. It was the Thursday Night Open, which is still running today. My opponents were mostly Class A and B players and my first USCF rating was 1412.

My rating went up very quickly, jumping to first category in a year, expert in two years, and master two years after that. As my game improved, I looked for more and more opportunities to play. There was "Chess City," later known as the "Gameroom." I played in the U.S. Open at the then-Statler Hilton, now known as the Pennsylvania. In 1974 and 1976, I played in the Pan-American Intercollegiate, which was the tourney that put me over 2200. In 1977 I played in my first FIDE-rated event at the Manhattan Chess Club and scored 5/9, earning a FIDE rating. However, other than sporadic tournaments at the McAlpin every couple of weeks and the Thursday Night Marshall tournaments, there wasn't nearly as much chess activity as there is in New York today. Then in 1980, when Bill Goichberg opened up The Chess Center of New York, everything changed. It was a chess palace, with tournaments every day of the week and it was the place where my legacy started. Along with the late Lesley Braun, I played over three hundred games in 1981 and we were both featured in a *Chess Life* article by Andy Soltis as America's most active chessplayers.

Over the next 35 years, I would average between 400 and 500 tournament games a year, sometimes playing over 700 games in a single year. Most of these games would be held at the Chess Center of New York until it closed in 1984, then the Manhattan Chess Club from 1984 until its closure in 2002, and finally the Marshall Chess Club, where most of my games currently take place. Along the way there were such tournaments as the New York State Championship (which I have won four times) and numerous club championships at the Marshall, Manhattan, Queens, and Nassau County chess clubs. In 1997, I won all four of these clubs' championships.

All of this practice was supplemented by serious study, but not the kind of systematic, step-by-step program that we tend to think of nowadays. Instead, I would take copies of the *Chess Informant*, going through the games and deeply scrutinizing the annotations and commentary until I felt I understood what was going on.

When Greg Keener approached me to write this book, I went to the USCF website to check my stats; these were the totals since 1991 when the USCF started keeping records: I had played 13,122 games, of which 8,133 were wins, 3,151 were draws – and 1,838 were losses. As I've been playing since 1972, one might only

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guess at how many tournament games I have played in total. The most interesting for me is the last figure: 1,838 losses. Nobody likes to lose, but I've taken it in the chin over 1,800 times. Despite many tournament wins, I have also suffered some really gut-wrenching defeats, after which I have had to rebound, get up off the mat, and try again. In this book, you'll see what makes me tick, how I adjust and readjust, and then also – I hope – learn how to do so yourself.

Jay Bonin  
*New York City, July 2016*

## Chapter 1

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# Keep It Complicated, Stupid

When I go to a tournament, I go with certain expectations: I expect to get the kind of game that I like – a nice sterile game, preferably a queenless middlegame or an endgame with at least one knight left on the board. Often, though, I can't get the kind of game that I want and find myself one way or another forced into complications. I observe the strengths and weaknesses in a particular player's game, make adjustments; my opponents do likewise. Many players who have faced me regularly have observed my preference for knights, so they will try to remove them early on, even if this leaves them slightly worse. Others will play aggressively and attack early in order to take me out of my comfort zone – which is often a good idea if you're the weaker player and trying for an upset victory. Anyone who has read the late IM Simon Webb's *Chess for Tigers* can tell you that the best way to trap a "Heffalump" is to lure them into a swamp of tactical complications.

It's this kind of uncertainty that makes chess so exciting! If it were always simple, it would be boring and in all likelihood I would no longer be playing today. In this chapter, you will find a few of my least simple games, containing sparkling complexities that temporarily confuse even strong chess engines such as *Houdini* and *Komodo*.

Of course, the title of this chapter is a reference to the famous acronym, K.I.S.S. – "Keep It Simple Stupid" – which is attributed to the renowned aeronautical engineer Kelly Johnson, whose design contributions were integral to the production of the SR-71 Blackbird spy plane as well as many other jet aircraft produced by Lockheed Skunk Works. Originally, the acronym was intended to remind engineers to keep their designs simple and elegant – so simple that the designs could be called "stupid." K.I.S.S. has also been used by software developers as well as animators in search of ever more elegant minimalism. In general, this is also the kind of chess that I like to play, grinding out victories from simple, small advantages without needlessly over-complicating matters. Interestingly, the business world of management consulting adopted the phrase as well, inserting a comma and thus making the adage a derogatory imperative (as in "keep it simple, stupid" – implying that the person to whom they are speaking is stupid, as opposed to the antecedent to which the pronoun "it" refers).

But in this chapter we will not keep it simple. Over the years, I've played in many fast time-control games, anywhere from Game/30, where players must complete all their moves in thirty minutes, to Game/45 and Game/60. In these

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faster time controls, time pressure is very likely, so a player should whip out the first 10 to 15 moves very quickly to leave more time for the rest of the game. Often, it comes down to who can complicate *better*, which means avoiding captures and responding to threats with threats rather than passive defense. The “game within the game” is to play anything that makes your opponent think and use up time on the clock. So as simple as I would like to be, I find myself playing complicated games frequently as well, in order to win fast time-control tournaments. The games in this chapter are therefore instructive not only for their intrinsic “chess value,” but also because they offer insight into how an International Master routinely wins Swiss System tournaments by playing the game within the game. Let the complications begin!

## Oliver Chernin – Jay Bonin

Marshall Chess Club, New York 2013

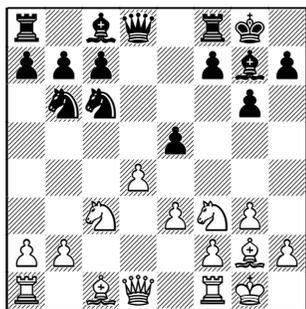
1.♭f3 ♭f6 2.g3 g6 3.♗g2 ♗g7  
4.0-0 0-0 5.c4

Oliver finally transposes into his favorite English.

5...d5 6.cxd5

He keeps it sharp. I get active piece play, but my opponent gets a central pawn mass.

6...♭xd5 7.d4 ♭c6 8.♭c3 ♭b6  
9.e3 e5



Black forces a decision.

10.d5 ♭a5 11.e4 c6 12.♗e3 ♭ac4

Here is where I decide to go for complications. 12...cxd5 was simpler, but it released the tension in the center, while the computer likes the solid 12...♗e8.

13.♗c5 ♗e8 14.b3 ♭d7

The point behind my plan, as without this move I am lost.

15.♗xa7 ♗xa7 16.bxc4 ♭c5

Maybe 16...cxd5 was the way to go.

17.♖c2 f5

Oliver has won a pawn, but he will miss that dark-squared bishop! Now Black gets an initiative.

18.♭d2 f4 19.♭b3 ♗f8

Now my dark-squared bishop comes into the fray.

20.♭xc5 ♗xc5 21.gxf4

Creating more weaknesses. 21.♖h1 is better.

21...exf4 22.♗fe1

## Keep It Complicated, Stupid

Hoping to get in e4-e5.

**22...♖f6**

Stopping e5 and now ...f4-f3 is a threat.

**23.♠a4 ♕d4 24.♖ab1 f3** and Black won. 0-1

### Jay Bonin – Mackenzie Molner

U.S. Chess League, New York 2007

This game won the “Game of the Week” prize in the United States Chess League. At the time, Mackenzie was not yet a GM but a quickly rising National Master, and was perhaps a bit too creative with his opening play, allowing an enterprising sacrifice in this particular game. WGM Jennifer Shahade had this to say about my play in the following encounter:

A victory for New York in this battle of former teammates. Bonin wins a clean attacking game after finding the knight sacrifice, 18.♠xf7!. One thing I liked about this game is that if White had missed the opportunity to sack, his attacking chances would have been slim. Even in the final position, it's nice that White can only win with one move, 29.♕e6+, although both players probably saw this a few moves before.

**1.d4 ♠f6 2.♠f3**

I play this move in order to prevent the Benko Gambit, which I myself play from time to time.

**2...c5 3.d5 b5 4.♕g5 ♠e4 5.♖d3 ♠xg5 6.♠xg5 g6**

Or ...h7-h6 and ...♠g5-h7.

**7.♖xb5**

I've won a pawn, but give Black the initiative in return.

**7...♕g7 8.♠d2 ♠a6**

Now with threats of ...♠b4 and ...♖b8, I have to return the pawn.

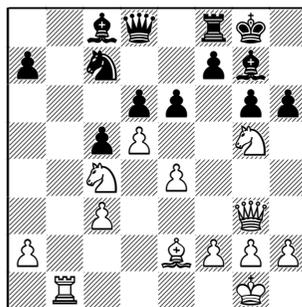
**9.c3 ♖b8 10.♖d3 ♖xb2 11.♠c4 ♖b8 12.e4**

Preparing to complete development.

**12...d6 13.♕e2 0-0 14.0-0 ♠c7 15.♖ab1 ♖xb1 16.♖xb1 e6**

At this point I was worried about 16...♕a6, which would pin my c4-knight to the loose e2-bishop and thus remove an important element from the queenside. The move 16...e6 seeks counterplay in the center but weakens the d6-pawn, setting the table for the sacrifice two moves later.

**17.♖g3 h6**



**18.♠xf7!**

A strong positional sacrifice that works because of Black's move 16.

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In return for the knight, White gets a couple of pawns and threatens ♖b8 too!

**18...♞xf7 19.♘xd6 ♜f8 20.♞b8 ♖d7**

Black is stepping on his own toes.

**21.♘xc8 ♞xc8 22.♞b7 exd5 23.♙g4**

What could Black do? I was also threatening g6!

**23...♞a4 24.h3**

Making *Luft* to avoid the embarrassing back-rank mate that would follow after 24.♙xc8?? ♖d1#.

**24...♞xe4**

If the rook moves, then White has ♖xc7 with mate threats.

**25.♙xc8 d4 26.cxd4 cxd4 27.♞xc7 ♞e1+ 28.♔h2 ♙e5 29.♙e6+**

Saving my rook and leaving Black without any further serious threats. For instance, on 29...♔f8 30.♞f7+; or 29...♔h8 30.♞c8+ ♔h7 31.f4 winning. **1-0**

### Jay Bonin – Tatiana Vayserberg

Marshall Chess Club Chp,  
New York 2006

This game won the brilliancy prize for the 90<sup>th</sup> annual Marshall Chess Club Championship. On move 23, I sacrifice my queen, only to have her reappear three moves later on a8.

**1.d4 f5**

Black wants to play a Dutch, but I sidestep the main lines with an offbeat move. If instead 1...e6, seeking to reach the Dutch through a different move order, she will have to play a French after 2.e4.

**2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♙g5**

This bishop move is annoying for Dutch players to face, as it threatens not only to double their pawns and spoil their fun early, but also lays a not-so-subtle positional trap. For instance, if now 3...e6 then White can immediately respond with 4.e4!, when White will already have a lasting edge, having achieved the thematic pawn break on e4 against the Dutch at such an early stage in the opening.

**3...d5 4.♙xf6 exf6 5.e3 ♙e6**

Black prepares to go queenside, as castling kingside would give me attacking chances with a timely h2-h3 and g2-g4.

**6.♙d3 ♘c6 7.♞f3 ♖d7 8.a3 0-0-0**

Now I know where the black king lives and can begin to reroute my pieces accordingly.

**9.♘ge2 g6 10.♘f4 ♙f7 11.♙b5**

Not so much to pin the knight as to vacate the useful d3 square for my f4-knight to redeploy to the queenside.

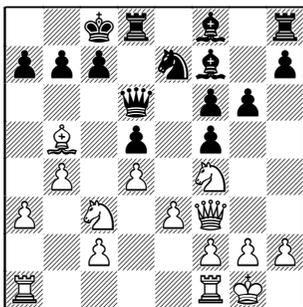
**11...♞d6 12.0-0**

Here I considered taking the c6-knight and playing with the knight pair against the bishop pair in this semi-

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closed position, but then I thought that my b5-bishop had a bright future attacking Black's king someday and decided to keep it after all. My opponent must have sensed that I was contemplating playing  $\text{♗xc6}$ , though, as on the very next move she denies me this exchange by retreating her knight to e7.

**12...♗e7 13.b4**



The race to attack begins! The logical result of opposite-side castling. Black will advance on the kingside while I will pressure the queenside.

**13...h5 14.♗d3 g5 15.♗c5 g4 16.♖e2**

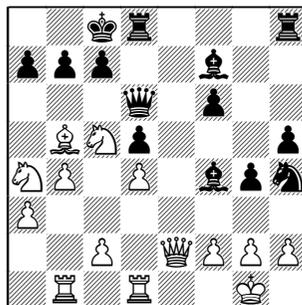
Here  $16.\text{♖g3}$  would have ended Black's kingside pressure, but after the exchange of queens it isn't clear if White has anything on the queenside either. The text move is slightly inferior but keeps the tension.

**16...f4 17.exf4 ♗f5 18.♗fd1 ♗h4 19.♗3a4**

I'm not going to protect my f4-pawn with  $19.\text{g3?}$ , since it allows  $19...\text{♗f3+}$  followed by  $...h5-h4$ . Instead, I decide to stick to the program and

marshal my queenside forces for a breakthrough.

**19...♗h6 20.♗ab1 ♗xf4**



**21.♗a6!**

There's no turning back.

**21...bxa6 22.b5!**

This pawn turns out to be a choo-choo train, as it is immune from capture. If  $22...\text{axb5}$ , then  $23.\text{♖xb5}$  and mate to follow, as the c5-knight controls the key escape square d7.

**22...♗de8**

This move misses the point and now White's plan is unstoppable. Black could have fought harder with the calm and cool  $22...\text{♗d7!}$ , when White's position is still preferable, though with best play Black may have practical chances of surviving. One interesting line leads to a position where Black has three minors for the queen but is still worse due to poor piece coordination and a lack of king safety:  $22...\text{♗d7}$   $23.\text{b6 cxb6}$  (of course not  $23...\text{axb6}$ )  $24.\text{♖xa6+ ♗d8}$   $25.\text{♗b7+}$ , winning the queen)  $24.\text{♗xb6+ axb6}$   $25.\text{♖xa6+ ♗c7}$   $26.\text{♗xd7 ♗xh2+}$   $27.\text{♗h1}$

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♙xd7 28.♞xb6 ♞c8 29.♞xd6+ ♙xd6  
30.♞b1.

## 23.b6

The final, pretty point: 23...axb6  
24.♞xa6+ either mates or wins the  
queen.

## 23...♞xe2 24.bxa7

There is no stopping this pawn from  
reaching the promised land.

## 24...♙xh2+ 25.♙h1 ♙d8

The only move that forestalls mate,  
as ♞b8# is threatened.

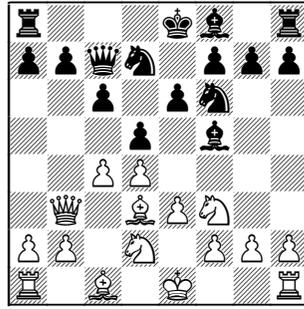
**26.a8♞+** ♙e7 **27.♞xh8 ♗f5**  
**28.♞b8** and Black resigns, as there is  
no answer to 29.♞f8#.

1-0

**Jay Bonin –**  
**IM Alexander Ostrovskiy**  
Marshall Chess Club, New York 2012

Alex and I have are both creatures  
of habit, and have played this opening  
many times. Despite that fact,  
he managed to surprise me with an  
enterprising sacrificial attack in this  
game after carefully building up pressure  
on the dark squares. My plan in  
this position after 9.♞c2 is to retain a  
central majority as a latent long-term  
threat and to grind out a simple edge  
in a long and boring game, but move  
23 changed all that!

**1.d4 d5 2.♗f3 ♗f6 3.c4 c6 4.**  
**♗bd2 ♙f5 5.♞b3 ♞c7 6.e3 ♗bd7**  
**7.♙d3 e6**



This move is going for sharpness  
rather than the bland position that occurs  
after 7...♙xd3 or the waiting move  
7...♙g6. After the text move, Black will  
get saddled with doubled pawns following  
the bishop trade, but in return will gain  
an open e-file on which to place his rooks  
and apply pressure to White's position.

**8.♙xf5 exf5 9.♞c2 g6 10.cxd5**  
**♗xd5 11.a3**

A prophylactic move thrown in to  
preempt the harassing ...♗b4.

**11...♙e7 12.0-0 0-0 13.b3 ♙f6**  
**14.♙b2 ♞fe8 15.g3**

Another prophylactic pawn push.  
This one takes the sting out of a possible  
...f5-f4 break, which is Black's plan  
with the doubled pawns in this position.

**15...a5 16.♞ac1 ♞e7 17.♞fd1**  
**♞ae8 18.♗c4 ♙g7 19.♗e1**

This knight gets redeployed to d3  
to support a b3-b4 pawn break. Black's  
pieces look active, but where is the  
pawn break?

**19...♗7f6 20.♗d3 ♗e4 21.b4**  
**axb4 22.axb4 ♙h6 23.♞b3**