

opening repertoire

the Sveshnikov

Cyrus Lakdawala

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

Also by the Author:

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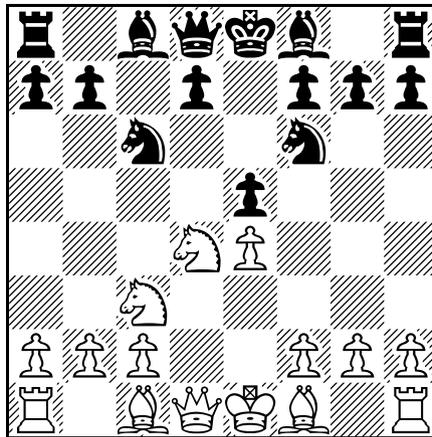
The Slav: Move by Move

The Trompowsky Attack: Move by Move

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Introduction



Do you sometimes wonder about our long distant Devonian fish ancestor who decided to emerge from the water and wobble on to land, becoming the world's first amphibian? What prompted them to do it? Then there is the question of the Sveshnikov Sicilian. What urge compelled Jacques Mieses to push his e-pawn to the fifth rank against Siegbert Tarrasch in the very first Sveshnikov Sicilian in 1888? Wasn't he afraid of that giant hole created on d5, or the newly created backward d-pawn? Then Jorge Pelikan began playing the line in the 1950s. However, it wasn't until GM Evgeny Sveshnikov honed it in the early 1970s that it became a real weapon. Then Peter Leko and Vladimir Kramnik began playing it in the late 1990s and early 2000s, re-energizing the opening.

In the present day, it is world champion Magnus Carlsen, who has embraced the Sveshnikov. So from a biblical sense, Mieses begat Pelikan, who begat Sveshnikov, who begat Leko, Kramnik and Carlsen. And as Carlsen goes, so goes our book. I used Carlsen as our Sveshnikov role model for this book, so whenever possible, we cover the lines he plays. Unlike other black openings, with the Sveshnikov, we don't seek bland equality. Instead, we crave imbalance and the possibility of swift retaliation.

Choosing our opening is similar to choosing our religion. To practice, we must first generate faith. Mine was instant with the Sveshnikov. A couple of decades ago my friend,

National Master David Hart, was over at my house and we were playing online blitz. I got a challenge by a GM, whose name I don't even recall. As a joke, David goaded me into meeting the GM's 1 e2-e4 with 1...c7-c5. Then David re-goaded me into playing a Sveshnikov, a position which previously only triggered fear, since I had never played or studied it in my life. In the past, I had experimented with the Najdorf and the Dragon, who both made no secret of their utter contempt of me and I abandoned them both in disgrace. To our shock, I won the blitz game against the GM easily. I had found my Sicilian and have never looked back. Since then I have played the Sveshnikov with dog-like faith. Do you remember that *Seinfeld* episode where George Costanza does everything exactly contrary to his natural inclination and then he is handsomely rewarded for it? Well, the Sveshnikov is the same for me. The opening goes completely against my natural strategic stylistic grain, yet for some reason, it works for me.

The difference between study and over the board battles is the difference between receiving a post card from Venice and actually going there on vacation. Our opening choices are mirrors of who we are, rather than molders of us. We strive for a level of mastery in our openings where our effort is effortless. The only way to get there is via diligent, repetitive study. The Sveshnikov is not an easy repertoire to master. Choosing our opening repertoire – much the same as our vote – is a way of declaring our beliefs to the world. The goal of this book is to navigate the wilderness into easy-to-understand ideas, civilizing that which was once untamed within our mind.

The Sveshnikov is a High-end Aggression Opening

When a gorilla seeks to take control and goes alpha, he thumps his chest and bellows warnings to potential rivals. Primatologists refer to this behaviour as “threat display dominance”. This also describes the Sveshnikov Sicilian, which can be a scary place. The time has come for me to issue to the readers, warnings, encouraging slogans and homilies. My student, professor Joel Sneed, once told me, “I love the Sveshnikov but can't play it, since the time I did, I thought I was going to have a heart attack!” So here is what you get when you play the Sveshnikov.

-  High blood pressure.
-  A dangerously elevated heart rate.
-  The sweats, including heightened body temperature.

This sounds bad, until we consider that we also get.

-  Heightened alertness via intensified, adrenalin-fuelled focus.
-  Intensified killer instinct. Our normal instinct for self-preservation is magically transformed to rage.

The Svesh is deeply entrenched in the Old Testament eye-for-an-eye ethos. The hell with

turning the other cheek. Basically our universal answer to everything is violence. Trust in the cosmic balance. We give White a d5-hole to aim at and take on a backward d-pawn. In exchange we receive an endless supply of energy and initiative.

The Sveshnikov is a Theoretically Dense Opening

The Sveshnikov is an exceptionally difficult opening to master and sometimes it may feel as if the variations retreat from us, as if in a dream we are unable to remember. When it comes to chess talent, there are the impoverished and the obscenely wealthy, yet when it comes to natural talent, I'm guessing that most of us are born in the middle class. If you are an average level club player, this opening is a tough climb. But if you are willing to put in the effort, the Sveshnikov can be yours. Those who love a clean, orderly world, shouldn't ever play the Sveshnikov, which is a painting created by an evil Jackson Pollock.

Some openings are so complex and so theoretically daunting, that they may feel suitable only for titled players. My feeling is there is no such thing as an opening so complex, that it is unfit for public consumption – as long as we, the public, are willing to put in the hard work to study the opening's deepest secrets. If you do, the opening will no longer feel like an ocean of confusion. At first glance, the Sveshnikov starting position may feel as if Black is determined to violate as many principles as possible in a single chess game. The reality is that our opening is 100% sound and one of Black's highest scoring Sicilians, where *Black* is actually the one with the plus score (50.9% at the time of this writing, in my database). The fact that Carlsen took it up and scores well with it, should reassure us further. The Svesh levies upon us the following tributes.

The Sveshnikov is All About Piece Activity and the Initiative

When we hand over control of d5 with ...e7-e5!?, we must endure a backward and potentially weak d6-pawn. We also hand over (temporary) control of the d5-square. Now when it comes to d5, the psychological jurisdictions of both sides seem to overlap, in that both players feel that they – and not the other guy – deserve eventual control over the square. In exchange for these concessions.

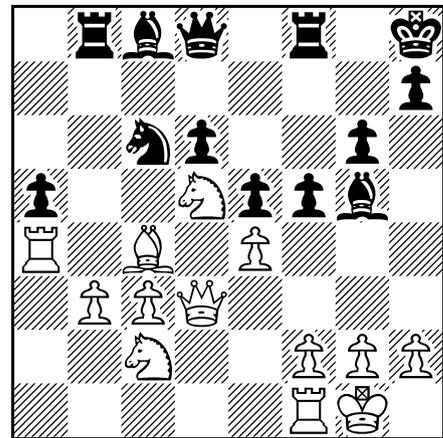
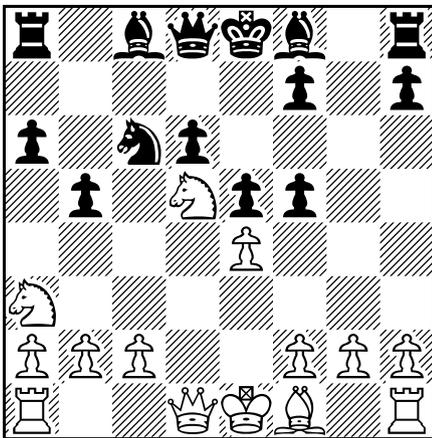
- a) We receive our fair share of the centre.
- b) We receive enhanced piece activity, compared with other Open Sicilian lines.
- c) Any Sicilian is an unbalancing proposition. With the Sveshnikov, we enhance the asymmetry to an even greater degree. We are pledged excellent return on our investment.
- d) Does it hint at an imperious nature when we brazenly attempt to seize the initiative, right from the opening and with the black pieces? Just as strategists are the natural constituents for the Caro-Kann or Petroff – tacticians, lovers of open games and players who love a heavy theoretical lift tend to feel at home within the Sveshnikov. The vast majority of positions we reach are high-end dynamic. You are not normally going to get such positions from the Caro-Kann and the Petroff, at least not on a routine basis. The nature of some openings is that they are moody and irritable. Sometimes the pawn structures you get will

give you the creeps. We must keep in mind that we always get piece activity in return. Eventually, we learn to trust it. Cross the opening with an inaccurate move order and there is no forgiveness on the Sveshnikov's side. The scale of complexity nearly always surpasses either side's ability to fully comprehend.

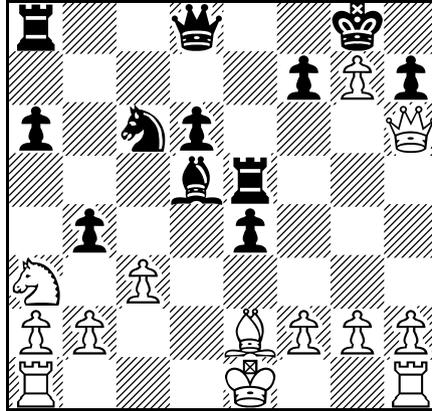
e) The Sveshnikov is a line well suited for lovers of instant liberty. Yet that liberty comes at the cost of a hole on d5 and backward d-pawn. Are we busted? No. You will find that Black generates compensating piece activity and often creates a pawn break on d5, even though, in the starting position of the Sveshnikov, it feels inconceivable. When this pawn break is achieved, we begin to understand how the middlegame develops. Black, much later on, either clogs d5 with a capture, where White recaptures with the e4-pawn. Alternatively, Black simply seizes control over the d5-break and plays the freeing ...d6-d5.

Black can sometimes just play around the hole. White will have control over it, but we just go about our business and generate counterplay elsewhere on the board. In essence, the d5-hole can be ineffective window dressing for White. Having played the Sveshnikov for two decades, I don't ever remember losing a game due to White's control over d5 or the fact that my backward d6-pawn was fatally weak. The "advantage" of White's (temporary) control over d5 and the "weakness" of our backward d6-pawn is often illusory. In many lines we break on f5 (sometimes twice, since in certain lines our f-pawns are doubled).

The following two diagrams are typical ...f5 breaks for our side.

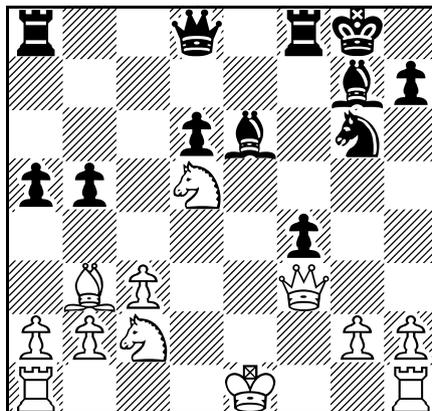


Black sometimes generates queenside play with a pawn break of ...b5-b4. Here is an example:

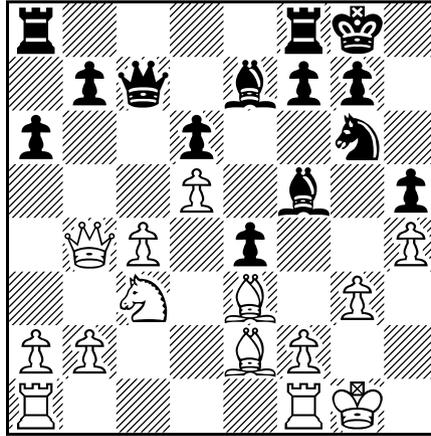


In some lines White hands us both the bishop pair and dark-square control. Winning with both is a recurring theme for Black. In many lines Black generates a direct assault on White's king, who often feels a sense of desertion. Now we may be material behind and our structure torn to shreds but we get our shot at checkmate! Just remember that a subtle mind (White) is sometimes unable to withstand the violence of a simpl-minded barbarian (us!). It's just that our simple, big idea is actually easier to implement than White's multiple incremental changes. On the downside, if we allow our attack to run its course, our weaknesses still remain and we have nothing tangible to show for them. Whichever way the game turns out, it makes for exciting chess. In essence, when we take up the Sveshnikov, we are given permission to give in to delirious abandon – in fact, it's mandatory!

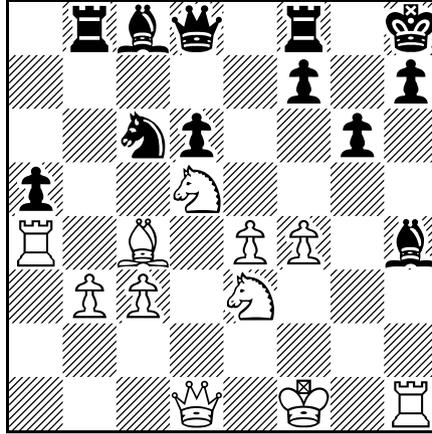
The dynamism of the Sveshnikov is clear from the diagram below (MacKinnon-Shabalov). White owns all the strategic pluses (with control over d5, Black's backward and isolated d6-pawn and ragged structure). Yet White is busted, since his king is desperately unsafe, wherever he places it.



I won't lie to you: Learning this repertoire requires an enormous level of toil on your part. Not only to memorize the moves, but also to understand deeply the sometimes baffling ideas and temporary breaks from reality. Some people mistakenly believe that playing the Sveshnikov requires the talent of a prodigious memory, a flair for the initiative and a strong tactical eye. But then I ask: did reading just come naturally to you? Or did someone first teach you how to read? In the same way, the more we study and play it, the less and less baffling the Sveshnikov's ideas seem to be.

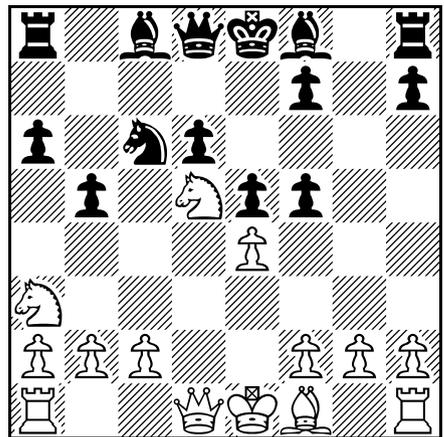
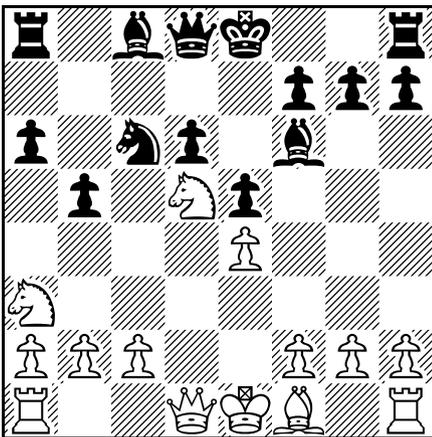


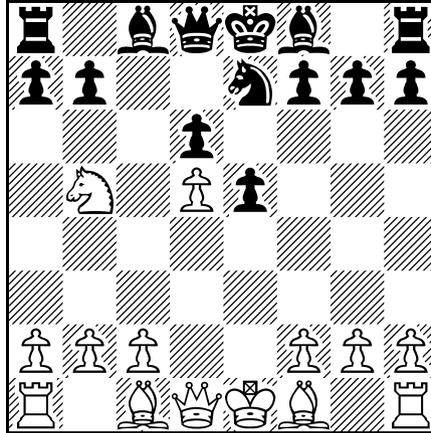
It's a dangerous proposition to invest in a guess, yet that is exactly what we do on a routine basis in the Sveshnikov. The above diagram is from Karjakin-Carlsen, Shamkir 2019. On his last move Carlsen calmly castled, leaving his h5-pawn en prise. Did this decision really receive the Mandate from Heaven? Well, I don't know. For the pawn, he got e5 for his knight and play on the kingside light squares. Such a speculative sacrifice remains gauzy for a long time. Only after many moves can we say definitively whether it worked or not. In the Sveshnikov, we are confronted by such agonizing decisions, virtually every game we play. Take a look at the following diagram.



Have you ever heard a high school band attempt to play a symphony, just slightly, annoyingly off key? In the above diagram it's move 22 and we are just starting with a tabiya position! The theory reconfigures the position to resemble an LSD trip from the 1960s. This is not a position we jump into lightly. To play Sveshnikov well, we should have an aptitude for open positions, since our *goal* is to open with the breaks ...d6-d5 and ...f7-f5.

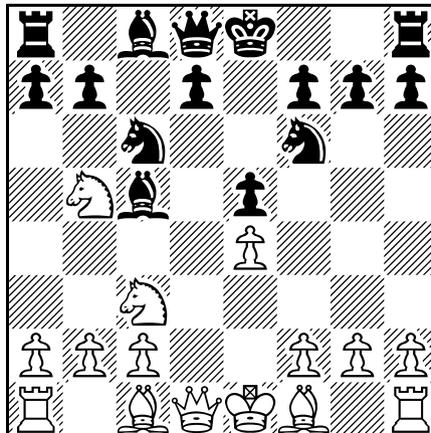
When we don't understand an advanced technology, it can first appear to us as magic. The more we study and play it, the less and less mysterious the Sveshnikov becomes. The next three diagrams are the most important in the entire book. Each contains multiple tributaries. Be patient with yourself and you will eventually master all three, along with their subsets.





In the third position above, I learned through social media that lies travel faster than truth. In the past, 8...Qb8 (the line covered in *Sveshnikov: Move by Move*) was considered the sound line, while 8...Qe7!? was relegated to the maybe playable category. This all changed when Carlsen essentially retained his world champion's crown with this line against Fabiano Caruana. Subsequent attempts to bust him in the line have ended in terrible failure for all those who tried. So in this book we trust in Carlsen and look at his line against White's 7 Qd5 variation.

The Mamba: 6...Qc5



I'm pushing your boundaries of both loyalty and trust by proposing this crazy line. It is a close relative of the Cobra (1 e4 c5 2 Qf3 Qc6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Qxd4 Qf6 5 Qc3 e6 6 Qdb5 Qc5!?). As it possesses similar venomous qualities I have decided to christen it the Mamba.

Some of us don't feel comfortable playing non-international brand name openings.

Despite appearances, Black's last move 6...♗c5!?, which ignored White's threat to plonk a knight down on d6, is free from contradiction. We care about our results and are nervous about any risky, unproven lines. I just want to calm you down by telling you this line is purely optional, suited only for the adventurers among us.

Is the individual thinker driven to extinction in the opening stage of the game? If Big Brother Theory's job is to indoctrinate us with correct versus incorrect, it is a chess writer's job to put out lesser played options, which tend to confuse and devastate booked-up opposition. If you are tired of playing well-known opening lines which feel worn out via overplay or overanalysis, to the point where it seems as if all our opponents play the line error free, then maybe give this one a try. The 6...♗c5 line and the Sveshnikov proper are different openings, yet not so far apart.

Black's last move, the 6...♗c5!?, provocation, is an attempt to step outside the normal Sveshnikov framework. One look at the previous diagram and you believe this is a good place to bring up the universal mom admonition: "If Cyrus jumped off a bridge, would you do it too?" Of course, we chess players are far wiser than Mom and we play all sorts of dangerous openings which skirt the periphery of respectability. Why? Because others do it as well!

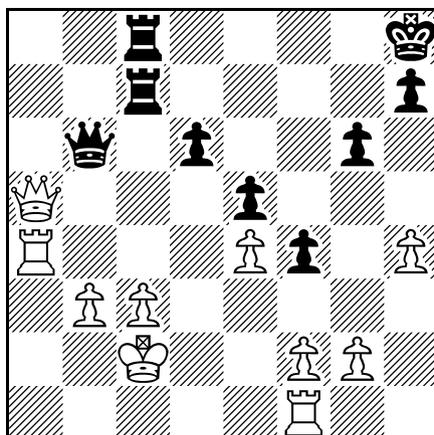
I thought my quirky Sveshnikov sideline would sell better if I named it the 6...♗c5 variation, rather than Cy's Folly, which is perhaps the more accurate name. I started playing around with this rare move in the early 2000s in online blitz and, to my complete shock, found the line is actually sound, despite poor statistics in the database. A good salesperson believes in the product being sold, so I tried the line 11 times in my own tournament games, against opposition ranging from 2024 to 2375, with an average rating of 2193. My results so far: 10½-½ – a 91.7% score. In my very first online blitz game the 6...♗c5 line took out a GM in 12 moves. The first time I tried it in a tournament game, I beat a 2350 in 14 moves. This opening clearly contains ambush value and I encourage you to try it as a surprise line against unsuspecting opponents.

I'm confident I won't regret placing this line in the book. I encourage you to rise above partisan beliefs and try this line out. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the results.

Many thanks as always to Nancy for proofreading.

We have a lot of ground to cover, so let's get started on the book.

Cyrus Lakdawala,
San Diego,
March 2020



31...♖xa5

Also strong is 31...♖xc3+! 32 ♜xc3 ♜xc3+ 33 ♙xc3 ♜b5 34 ♜c4 ♜a5+ 35 ♙b2 ♜d2+ 36 ♜c2 ♜d4+ 37 ♙b1 ♜xe4 38 ♜d1 d5. It's one of the great joys to push the d-pawn to the fifth rank. White is unable to hold the game due to Black's surging central pawns.

32 ♜xa5 ♜xc3+ 33 ♙b2 ♙g7 34 ♜d1

After 34 ♜a7+ ♙h6 35 g4 fxg3 36 fxg3 ♜xg3 37 ♜ff7 ♜h8 38 b4 ♜g4 39 ♙c3 ♜xe4 40 b5 d5 41 b6 ♜c4+ 42 ♙d3 ♜b4 43 ♜ab7 ♜xh4 44 ♜fe7 ♜d4+ 45 ♙e3 ♜e4+ 46 ♙d3 ♜c8 47 ♜xh7+ ♙g5 White's b-pawn isn't getting through, since his rook is in front of the pawn.

34...♜c2+ 35 ♙a3 ♜xf2 36 ♜xd6 ♜c7 37 ♜xe5 ♜xg2

Our destination seems far away when we are exhausted. White's rooks are out of alignment to halt the push of the f-pawn and everything about Black's position suggests imminent death.

38 ♜ee6 0-1

After 38...♜f7 39 e5 ♜e2 40 ♜d3 ♜e3! 41 ♜d1 f3 42 ♜f1 ♜f4 43 ♙b2 ♜xh4 the g-pawn rolls forward and Black wins. 38 ♜d3 didn't work either, as after 38...♜f7 39 ♜f3 h6 40 ♙a4 ♜g3 41 ♜f1 f3 42 ♜c5 ♜g4 43 ♙b5 ♜xh4 44 e5 ♜e4 45 b4 g5 Black's pawns are too fast.

Game 2

D.Jakovenko-A.Shirov

Foros 2007

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 e5

This game is the classical strategist versus tactician match-up, the maker versus the breaker. My friend Alexei Shirov's entire career was in defiance of statistical improbability. So it's no surprise that the Sveshnikov is one of his favourite lines.

6 ♘db5 d6 7 ♙g5 a6 8 ♘a3 b5 9 ♘d5 ♙e7 10 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 11 c3 ♙g5 12 ♘c2 0-0 13 a4 bxa4

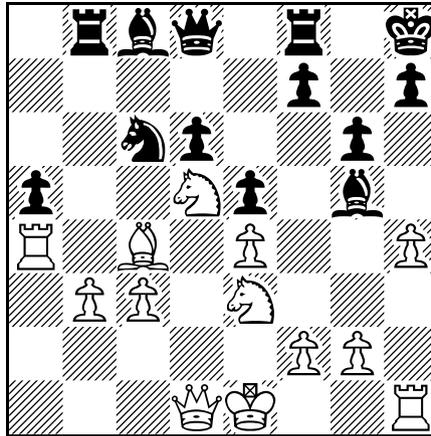
14 ♖xa4 a5 15 ♙c4 ♗b8 16 b3

White covers the tender b-pawn, while keeping open the option of a rook swing to the kingside or centre later after ♖a2. White can also play 16 ♖a2 immediately (as we'll see in Games 4 and 9), though as b2-b3 generally follows at some point, a transposition to 16 b3 lines is most likely.

16...♙h8 17 ♘ce3 g6

Just a reminder: if the coming chaos raises your blood pressure, and causes ragged breathing and unpleasantly elevated heart rate, then you can always bail out with the more mellow option 17...♙e6 which is examined in Games 6-9.

18 h4!



Oh Lord, give us this day our daily mate! Despite appearances, this pawn sacrifice is absolutely sound. This is one of our greatest – if not *the* greatest – challenge for Black in this variation. It is essential to study this game and the coming ones with great care.

18...♙xh4!

Black should accept the gift. Others are worse:

a) 18...♙xe3?! 19 ♘xe3 scores poorly for Black. Play can continue 19...♘e7 20 h5 g5 21 0-0 ♙b7 22 ♘d5 ♙xd5 23 ♙xd5 ♖c8 (after 23...♘xd5 24 ♗xd5 Black's a and d-pawns look desperately weak) 24 ♙c4 f5 25 ♙e6! ♖xc3, S.Sjugirov-A.Krapivin, St Petersburg 2009. Here White can endanger the black rook with 26 ♙c4! ♗b6 27 ♗d2 ♖g3 28 ♖xa5 fxe4 29 ♖a6 ♗c5 30 ♖xd6 and Black is strategically busted.

b) 18...♙h6?! 19 h5 ♙g7 20 ♗d2! (threat: h5xg6, followed by ♖xh6 and then horrible discovered checks on Black's helpless king) 20...♖h8 21 g3 f5 22 f4 fxe4, W.Przybylski-M.Swicz, Rewal 2008. White has a promising attack, as well as control over the central light squares.

19 g3

White wants to play f2-f4 and then transfer the a4-rook all the way over to h2.

19...♙g5!

The comp tells me that 19...♟f6 is playable, but in my database Black scores miserably with the move. An example is 20 ♖a2 ♟g7 21 f4 exf4 22 gxf4 ♜e8 23 ♖ah2 h6 with a promising attacking position for White, H.Ollmann-J.Barrios Troncoso, correspondence 2007.

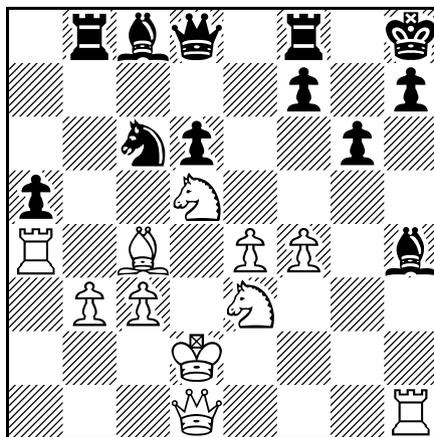
20 f4 exf4

It isn't easy to seal a fire hydrant, once it breaks and sprays water everywhere. Now all hell breaks loose.

21 gxf4 ♟h4+

Disrupting White's castling.

22 ♔d2



A wild position which, as you may have guessed, is prone to erratic fluctuations of fortune. White's ambitious plan is to tuck his king out of the way on the queenside and then play ♖a2 and ♖ah2, attacking down the h-file. Of course this takes a lot of time, so it is Black's job to generate play in the middle before White's attack becomes overwhelming. The comps say Black's position is playable. In the next game we consider 22 ♔f1.

22...♞e7

As always, it is essential to chip away at White's control over d5.

23 ♔c1

An alternative is 23 ♜g1 ♞xd5 24 ♞xd5 ♟f6! (Black scores well after this move) 25 ♜h2 h5 26 ♞xf6 ♜xf6 27 ♜g3 d5! 28 ♟xd5 (after 28 exd5 ♟f5 29 ♖xa5 ♖a8 30 ♖xa8 ♖xa8 Black's attacking chances offer sufficient compensation for White's three passed pawns; the comp assesses it dead even here) 28...♞d8 29 ♜g5 ♜xg5 and a draw was agreed in H.Walsh-A.Bubir, correspondence 2008. Otherwise play might have continued 29...♜g5 30 fxg5 ♖xb3 31 ♖xa5 with equal chances in the ending.

23...♞xd5 24 ♞xd5 ♟e6

Or 24...♟f6 25 ♖a2 ♜g8 26 ♔b1 ♟b7 27 ♜f3 ♜g7 (a fianchettoed rook makes an odd impression; the rook is out of play, yet it also keeps the black king safe) 28 ♜e3 ♟xd5 29 ♟xd5 ♜c7 30 ♖h3 ♔g8 31 ♖a4 h5 32 ♔a2 ♖b4! (the rook can't be touched) 33 ♖a3 ♖b5 with

equal chances, J.Trusewicz-M.Glazman, correspondence 2005.

25 ♖d4+

After 25 ♖a2 ♗xd5 26 ♖xd5 ♖f6 27 ♖d4?! (White should keep queens on the board with 27 ♖d2) 27...♖xd4 28 cxd4 ♗d8 Black is a pawn up in the ending, A.Mista-A.Shirov, Warsaw (rapid) 2008.

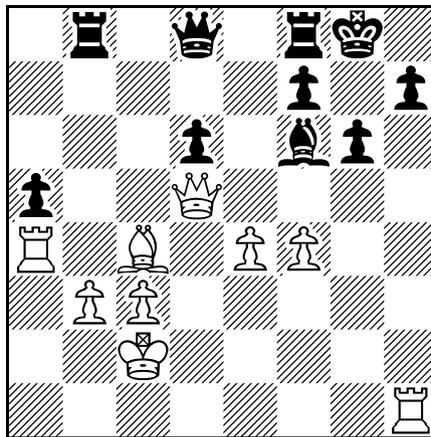
25...♗g8 26 ♖b1

If 26 ♖a2 ♗xd5 27 ♖ah2 ♗xc4 28 ♖xh4 ♖b6! 29 ♖xb6 ♖xb6 30 bxc4? (30 ♖xh7! is correct; e.g. 30...♖xb3! 31 ♖h8+ ♗g7 32 ♖1h7+ ♗f6 33 ♖xf8 ♖xc3+ with winning chances for Black) 30...h5 and White is busted in the ending, down a pawn and with the inferior structure, I.Aliaga Fernandez-V.Feliciano Ebert, Araruama 2011.

26...♗xd5 27 ♖xd5

One feature of this line is that it often evolves into an opposite-coloured bishops situation. Now Black's extra pawn isn't all that valuable. The deciding factor will be king safety, enhanced by the opposing bishops. My slight preference is for Black.

27...♗f6 28 ♖c2



This move was new. Yes, it's depressing that theory must be learned until almost move 30 these days, but this is the world we live in. 28 ♖xa5 was seen in K.Lagno-M.Voiska, Turin Olympiad 2006. I slightly prefer Black's attacking chances after 28...♗xc3 29 ♖a6 ♖a8! 30 ♖xd6 ♖b8.

28...♖b6

Threatening to infiltrate on f2.

29 ♖f1 ♖e3 30 ♖d3 ♖c5 31 ♖d1!?

An optimistic frame of mind makes everything look ten times better than it actually is. Also, when we have an iron will to win to the point of addiction, quitting cold turkey is actually easier than cutting back. Is Jakovenko playing for the full point? Maybe White should repeat with 31 ♖d5.

31...♖b6?!

Opening Repertoire: The Sveshnikov

More accurate was 31... ♖f2+ 32 ♗d2 ♖f3.

32 ♗g3?!

After 32 ♖f3! ♔g7 33 ♗d5 ♖g1 34 ♗xa5 White stands slightly better.

32... ♗a8

If 32... ♖c7 then 33 ♗d5 ♖e7 34 ♖e3 ♗b7 35 ♗dx5 and I prefer White.

33 ♗d5 ♖c7 34 ♗f5

34 ♗dx5? ♗xa5 35 ♗xa5 ♗xb3 36 ♔xb3 ♖xa5 leaves White a pawn down with an exposed king.

34... ♗d8 35 ♗d5 ♖c7

Getting out of the way of e4-e5.

36 ♖h3 ♗a7

White has full compensation for the missing pawn, but no advantage.

37 ♖e3 ♗b8 38 ♗d3 ♗d8 39 ♗d2?!

The balance is maintained with 39 ♗a1.

39... ♔g7

Also strong is the immediate 39... h5! 40 ♖e3 h4 with an edge for Black.

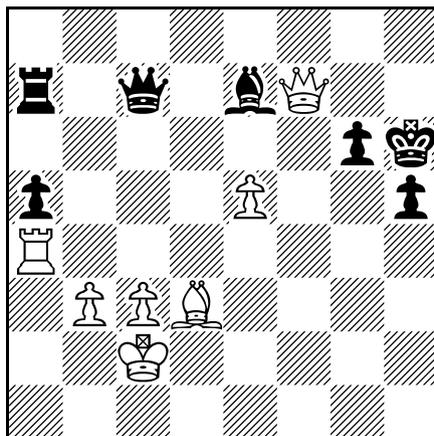
40 ♗d3 h5! 41 e5!?

Jakovenko doesn't want to just sit around and wait with 41 ♗d5 and see how Black proceeds.

41... dxe5 42 fxe5 ♔e7 43 ♖f4

Attacking f7.

43... ♗xd3! 44 ♖xf7+ ♔h6 45 ♔xd3



Exercise (combination alert): Find Shirov's tactic and Black gets a winning position.

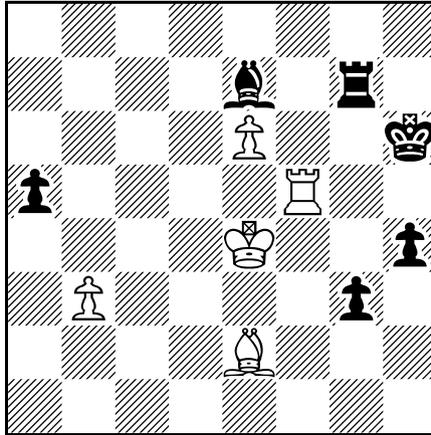
45... ♖xc3+!

Answer: Queen sacrifice/discovered attack.

46 ♖xc3 ♗b4+ 47 ♖d4 ♜xf7

Black's two connected passed pawns are decisive, since White's e-pawn is blocked.

48 e6 ♜g7 49 ♜a1 g5 50 ♜f1 g4 51 ♖e4 ♗e7! 52 ♗e2 h4 53 ♜f5 g3 0-1



There is nothing to be done about the coming ...g3-g2. If 54 ♜h5+ ♖g6 55 ♗f3 then 55...g2! overloads White's bishop.

Game 3
Z.Hracek-A.Mista
Czech League 2006

1 e4 c5 2 ♖f3 ♗c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♖f6 5 ♗c3 e5

Remember: if you don't want to enter the position we reach below, I have a safe out for you on the 17th move with 17...♗e6, which we look at later in the chapter.

6 ♗db5 d6 7 ♗g5 a6 8 ♗a3 b5 9 ♗d5 ♗e7 10 ♗xf6 ♗xf6 11 c3 0-0 12 ♗c2 ♗g5 13 a4 bxa4 14 ♜xa4 a5 15 ♗c4 ♜b8 16 b3 ♖h8 17 ♗ce3 g6 18 h4!

Unfortunately for us, this gambit hasn't been consigned to history's dumpster of unsound lines. White's sacrifice is both sound and dangerous.

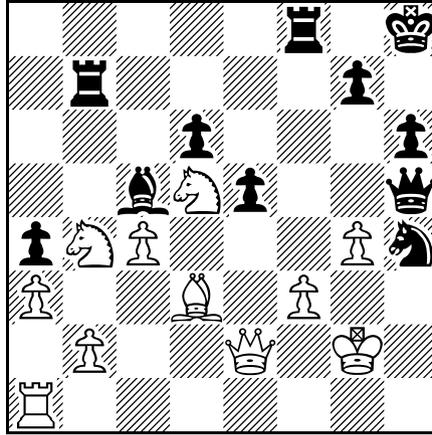
18...♗xh4 19 g3 ♗g5

19...♗f6 is playable and will be analysed (by transposition) in the next game.

20 f4 exf4 21 gxf4 ♗h4+ 22 ♖f1

This move is a paradigm-altering idea. This position may be the single most difficult challenge for the Sveshnikov side in the entire book. What is the difference between placing the king on f1, or on d2, as we saw last game?

1. On d2, White's king is considerably safer, since it will scurry away to the safety of the queenside.



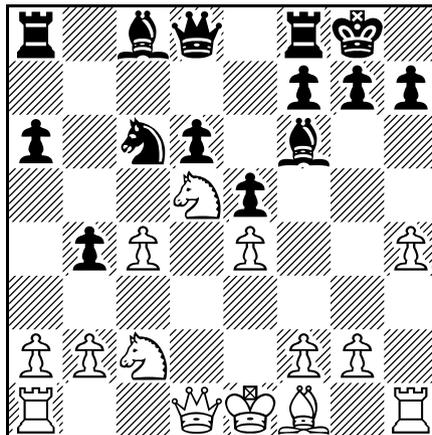
After 43 ♔g3 ♚g5 44 ♜f1 ♞b7 45 ♙e4 ♘f5+! 46 ♙xf5 ♞xf5 47 ♘d3 h5 White's game collapses completely.

Game 17
F. Caruana-S. Mamedyarov
 Shamkir 2016

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 e5

Some people are born to fight. GM Shakhriyar Mamedyarov belongs in this category, so the Sveshnikov is a perfect fit for his confrontational style.

6 ♘db5 d6 7 ♙g5 a6 8 ♘a3 b5 9 ♘d5 ♙e7 10 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 11 c4 b4 12 ♘c2 0-0 13 h4



The sophisticated idea of this move is to pre-empt Black's ...♙g5.

13...a5

Instead:

a) 13...♙e6 doesn't alter much. White should again refrain from 14 ♖cxb4? ♖xb4 15 ♗xb4 ♜b6 16 a3 a5, when Black has regained his sacrificed pawn with a big advantage.

b) 13...♙xh4?? loses on the spot to 14 ♜h5.

14 g3

Logically covering h4, while preparing to fianchetto.

14...♙e6 15 ♙h3

15 ♙g2 a4 16 0-0 b3! 17 axb3 axb3 18 ♜xa8 ♜xa8 19 ♖xf6+ gxf6 20 ♗e3 ♗d4 21 f4 was L.Dominguez Perez-B.Gelfand, World Team Championship, Tsaghkadzor 2015. Black's chances are no worse after 21...♜a6.

15...♜b8

Another option is 15...a4 16 ♗ce3 ♗d4 17 ♖f1 b3 18 axb3 (or 18 ♙g2 ♜b8 and Black stood no worse in M.Rüfenacht-V.lotov, correspondence 2015) 18...♗xb3 19 ♜a2 ♗c5 and Black looks comfortable, A.Motylev-B.Grachev, Sochi 2017.

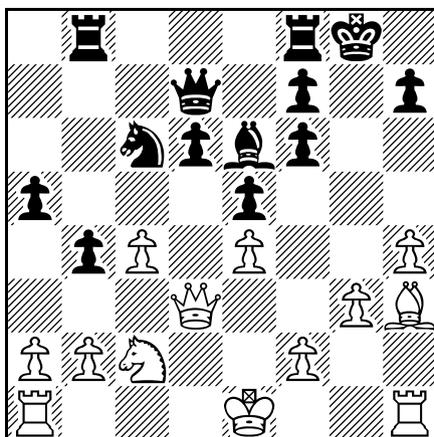
16 ♜d3

16 b3 ♗d4!? 17 ♗xd4 exd4 18 ♙xe6 fxe6 19 ♗f4 d3! 20 0-0 ♙xa1 21 ♗xe6 ♜e7 22 ♗xf8 was J.Stephan-L.Dos Reis, correspondence 2007. Black looks just a shade better after 22...♙d4 23 ♜xd3 ♙c5 24 ♗xh7 ♖xh7. I would rather have Black's piece over White's three extra pawns.

16...♜d7!?

We of the Sveshnikov clan tend to be unafraid of doubled f-pawns. After 16...a4 17 b3 Black stands okay, F.Caruana-L.Van Wely, Wijk aan Zee 2014.

17 ♖xf6+ gxf6



Okay, so our f-pawns are doubled, but it's not so easy for White to exploit them.

18 ♙f5

18 ♙g2 was seen in W.So-H.Pascua, Philippines Championship, Manila 2008. Here Black

can try 18...b3! 19 axb3 ♖b7 20 ♙a3 ♘b4 21 ♖d2 ♘xc2+ 22 ♖xc2 ♖b4+ 23 ♖d2 a4! with pressure for the sacrificed pawn.

The text is Caruana's attempted improvement. He tries for a light square bind. Black looks okay in this version too.

18...♖b7!

Mamedyarov takes aim at e4 and the h1-a8 diagonal with his queen. 18...♙xf5 19 exf5 is also playable.

19 ♘e3

And certainly not the greedy 19 ♖xd6?!, when 19...♙fd8 20 ♖c5 ♙xf5 21 exf5 ♘d4 22 0-0-0 ♙dc8 wins.

19...♘d4

Black's power on the dark squares nullifies White's on the opposite colour.

20 0-0 b3!

The idea here is to artificially isolate the c4-pawn.

21 a3

It's logical to close queenside lines if White is playing for a win. Later on, Caruana may have regretted this decision, since the b2-pawn became a huge problem for him in the endgame. Instead, 21 axb3 ♖xb3 22 ♖d1 ♖xd1 23 ♙fxd1 ♙a8 24 ♙a3 ♙fb8 25 ♙da1 ♘b3 26 ♙1a2 ♘c1 27 ♙a1 ♘b3 is a repetition draw.

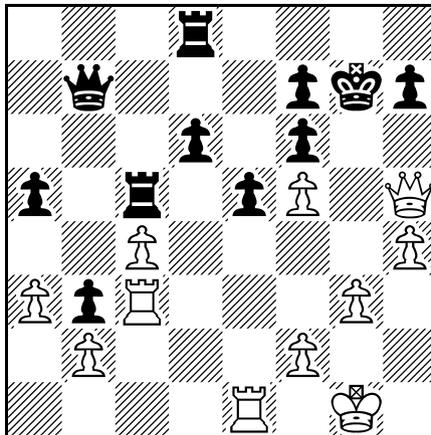
21...♙h8 22 ♙ac1 ♙bc8 23 ♙fe1 ♙c5

The game is balanced.

24 ♖d1

Intending to swing the queen over to h5, which induces Black's next move.

24...♙xf5 25 ♘xf5 ♘xf5 26 exf5 ♙d8 27 ♖h5 ♙g7 28 ♙c3



Caruana wants to launch an attack, which is pretty much impossible against Black's well-protected king. White must watch out for both his c4-pawn and also ...d6-d5 breaks.

28...h6 29 ♙ee3?!

Opening Repertoire: The Sveshnikov

Caruana overestimates his attacking chances. He doesn't have time for g2-g4, ♖g3 and g4-g5. He should have moderated his ambitions. The game remains in balance after 29 ♖g4+ ♔h7 30 ♜d1 a4 31 ♗h5 ♜c7 32 ♜d5.

29...a4

Protecting b3.

30 ♗e2

30 g4? ♜h8! negates g4-g5 ideas.

30...d5

Stronger was 30...♜dc8! 31 g4 d5! 32 ♗f3 ♗d7 33 g5 (or 33 cxd5 ♜xc3 34 ♜xc3 ♜xc3 35 ♗xc3 ♗xd5, threatening ...♗d1+ and ...♗c2!, while 36 ♗e1 ♗d3 sees White overextended) 33...d4 34 ♗h5 ♜h8! 35 gxh6+ ♔f8 36 ♜cd3 ♜xc4 and White is strategically busted.

31 ♗f3?

31 cxd5 ♜cxd5 leaves White vulnerable on both the first and second ranks, but this is better than the game continuation. After 32 ♗f3 ♗a7 33 ♜c4 ♜d4 Black is in control but not fully winning, with White's position a shadow, neither alive nor dead.

31...♜dc8! 32 cxd5 ♜xc3 33 ♜xc3 ♜xc3 34 ♗xc3 ♗xd5

The ending may look even, but White is completely busted for the following reasons:

1. Black's king is completely safe from perpetual check attempts.
2. There is no remedy to Black's threat ...♗d1+ and ...♗c2, after which White's b2-pawn falls.

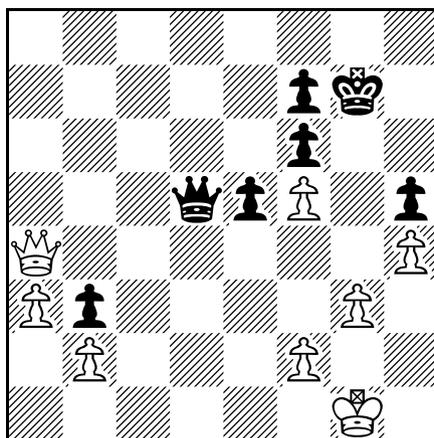
3. When b2 falls, White is too slow in the promotion race.

35 ♗b4 h5

Reversing the order with 35...♗d1+ 36 ♔g2 h5! is slightly more accurate.

36 ♗xa4

After 36 ♗e1 ♗f3 White can barely move.



Exercise (critical decision): Should Black play 36...♙d1+, followed by 37...♚c2 - ? Or should he play 36...e4 - ? In one line the assessment is -10.36 – more than a full queen up for Black; while in the other the assessment plummets shockingly to 0.00. Which line should Black play?

36...♙d3??

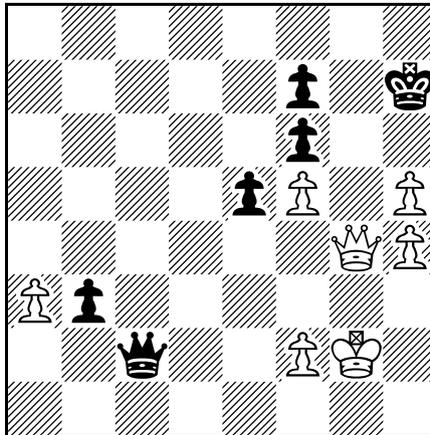
Both action and inaction produce consequences. This is a catastrophic error, after which White should hold the draw.

Answer: Black wins easily with the more vigorous 36...e4! 37 ♙a7 ♙d2 38 a4 ♙xb2 and Black wins the promotion race by a mile.

37 g4! ♙b1+ 38 ♙g2 ♙xb2 39 gxh5

White has just enough to hold the draw here.

39...♙c2 40 ♙g4+ ♙h7



Exercise (critical decision): White can play 41 h5-h6, or he can play 41 ♙a4, pinning Black's b-pawn. One line holds the draw, while the other loses. Which one would you play?

41 h6??

This is where your insane dog decides to dig up your backyard, for absolutely no reason. Most of us find it comforting that super-GMs make double question marks on occasion, the same way we do.

Answer: 41 ♙a4! holds the draw after 41...♙d1 42 ♙c4! ♙g8 43 h6! b2 44 ♙b5! ♙g4+ (not 44...b1♙?? and it is Black's king who is mated after 45 ♙e8+ ♙h7 46 ♙xf7+ ♙h8 47 ♙g7 mate) 45 ♙f1 ♙d1+ and Black must take perpetual check.

41...♙xh6 42 ♙g8 ♙xf5

Opening Repertoire: The Sveshnikov

Now there is no perpetual check.

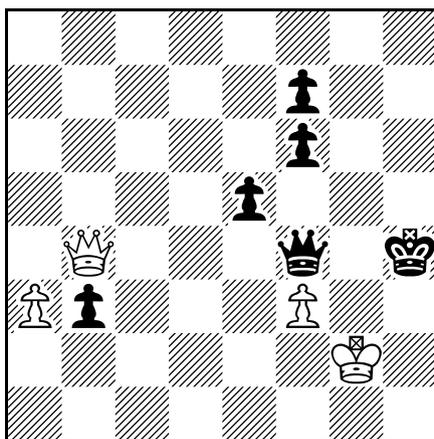
43 ♖f8+

If 43 ♖h8+ ♖h7, the problem is that 44 ♖xf6+ fails miserably to 44...♗g6 *check*, when queens are removed from the board and Black's b-pawn promotes.

43...♗h5 44 f3 ♕xh4

Easier is 44...♗c2+! 45 ♖h3 ♗c4! 46 ♖h8+ ♕g6 47 ♖g8+ ♔f5.

45 ♖b4+ ♖f4!



Also winning is 45...e4! 46 ♖xb3 ♖h3+! 47 ♔f2 ♖g3+ 48 ♔e2 ♖g2+ 49 ♔d1 exf3 50 ♖xf7 ♖e2+ 51 ♔c1 ♖e5 52 ♖a7 ♖e1+ 53 ♔c2 ♖e2+ 54 ♔b3 f2. Black promotes and again there is no perpetual check.

46 ♖xb3

In a famine it can be a long time before our next meal. The presumptuous pipsqueak on b3, who earlier made so much trouble for White, just fell. On top of that, White is now the only one with a passed pawn. These factors are still not enough to save Caruana, since mating threats begin to arise around his king.

46...♗d2+ 47 ♔f1 ♔g3!

Threatening 48...♖f2 mate.

48 f4+

There is no choice. 48 ♖b6?? allows 48...♗d1 mate.

48...♔xf4 49 a4 f5 50 ♖b5 ♖d1+ 51 ♔f2 ♖c2+ 52 ♔f1 f6! 53 ♖b4+

After 53 a5 ♔f3 54 ♖d5+ ♔e3 White doesn't have a single reasonable check, and 55 ♔g1 f4 56 a6 f3 forces mate.

53...e4

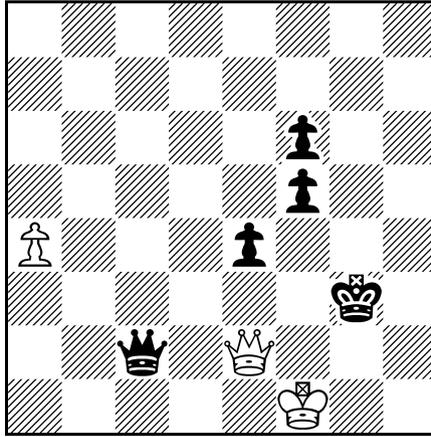
There are way too many pawns sheltering Black's king and there is no way White can force a perpetual. His passed a-pawn is slower than Black's mating/promotion threats.

54 ♖b5 ♔g3

White's endangered king shivers in his hovel.

55 ♕e2

Or 55 ♕xf5 ♕d1 mate.



Exercise (critical decision): Work out the ramifications of a queen swap into a king and pawn ending. Does Black win?

55... ♕xe2+!

Answer: Black is faster after the queen trade.

56 ♕xe2 f4 57 a5 f3+ 58 ♖f1 e3 0-1

Have you ever played a game where a week's worth of energy has been drained in just a few hours' time? This game surely must have felt this way to Caruana and Mamedyarov. After 59 a6 White is too slow; e.g. 59...e2+ 60 ♖e1 f2+ 61 ♕xe2 ♕g2 and Black promotes first.

Game 18
G.Prassas-S.Halkias
Ano Liosia 2000

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 e5 6 ♘db5 d6 7 ♙g5 a6 8 ♘a3 b5 9 ♘d5
♙e7 10 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 11 ♙e2

This move may be safe, but it certainly won't give White an edge. The general consensus is that White's bishop is best placed on c4.