

What Chess Coaches Don't Tell You

John Doknjas and
Victoria Doknjas



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What Chess Coaches Don't Tell You by John and Victoria Doknjas, offers a totally new perspective on improvement in chess. This book teaches chess players how to work harder and smarter in order to achieve their goals, using every tool at their disposal. Most chess books teach openings, endgames, tactics, but very few books teach players how to work on chess by themselves. This is what makes this work so unique and innovative.

Over the years, many chess players have come to me for advice on how to improve, and I never know what to tell them. From now on, I will recommend that they read this book! I have been using most of the advice recommended in this book, both for myself and my students, and the results have been wonderful. I can clearly feel that my work ethic has improved, thanks to this book. Having worked with Victoria and John, I can safely say that their method works extremely well, for players of any level. Spending time with these two authors has taught me the importance of analyzing my own games, as well as playing training games, and I believe that this advice applies to any chess player looking to improve.

Also, children and parents who enter the chess world are often disoriented because there is so much information available. This book, however, offers valuable and detailed advice to parents on how to guide their children towards their goals. Victoria, who has 3 master-level sons, is the best person to answer any questions related to parenting in chess!

Overall, this book guides chess players in their improvement, regardless of their level. From beginner to grandmaster, every player can benefit from a steady, structured and detailed workplan.

International Master Shawn Rodrigue-Lemieux

2022 World U18 Champion

What Chess Coaches Don't Tell You is a must-read for those who are either just starting out in chess or those who feel stuck and have not made any progress lately. I recommend this book because it can help you avoid making unnecessary mistakes and enlighten you about the things you should know.

Indeed, it is an insightful book that contains crucial information for ambitious chess players and their parents who wish to get the most out of their time and efforts. It offers advice and techniques that enable players to set their goals clearly and work efficiently toward achieving them. Many kids start out in chess and show immense potential. However, oftentimes, talent is not enough; thus, the players have to study chess with either a coach or by themselves, which can be difficult, frustrating and confusing. Fortunately, this book teaches its audience the most effective methods to do so by narrowing down the steps to success, which include how to maximize the benefits of analyzing one's games as well as how to create a solid and pertinent opening repertoire.

Woman Grandmaster Maïli-Jade Ouellet

2019 Woman Continental Champion

In their masterpiece, *What Chess Coaches Don't Tell You*, the dynamic duo of Victoria Doknjas, MBA and Juniors to Masters Chess Academy Co-founder, and her son John Doknjas, FIDE Master and established chess author, have unlocked the mysteries of the puzzling and confusing world of chess coaching. Victoria's business savvy, organized way of thinking, and crystal-clear explanations combine nicely with John's technical and coaching expertise to provide the reader with a valuable road map, which is often neglected or completely ignored in other chess literature. This book is a must-read for all aspiring chess players and their parents who wish to learn the best practices and methodologies for developing an effective chess coaching plan. Coaches and chess trainers will also find it quite useful to fine-tune their teaching methods and gain insight into the best ways to help their students achieve their chess goals.

Taken from years of experience coaching junior players, the Doknjas' have compiled and presented their best teaching tips and advice for players of all levels and ages to achieve success on their chess journey. As I explored the different chapters, I was pleasantly surprised to find that there were several teaching tools and techniques that I, an experienced National Master and chess coach with 15 years of teaching experience, was missing out on! I found the FAQ chapter for Parents or Those New to Competitive Chess to be especially helpful, and I will no doubt recommend this book to many chess families seeking how best to navigate the complex world of chess training and competition.

National Master Josh Sinanan

President, Washington Chess Federation

The book is a comprehensive manifesto for chess players and parents of players. The authors stress the importance of developing an individualized plan for chess improvement, focusing on strengths and weaknesses, and setting specific goals. The book provides recommendations on how to form a solid foundation of chess knowledge and how to be more self-sufficient in one's own chess studies. It aims to empower chess players and parents to take control of their own learning journey and achieve their goals, emphasizing that there is no "magic" formula for instant improvement, but rather a practical approach utilizing available resources.

If you are a chess coach, a chess parent or a chess player this book will help speed you, your student or their parents along the journey to chess mastery. Highly recommended as a work of love created by two people who know what they are talking about.

National Master Vladimir Drkulec

President, Chess Federation of Canada

About the Authors

John Doknjas is a FIDE Master and was the 2021 British Columbia Champion. He has won several strong tournaments including the Grand Pacific Open, the Langley Open, and the 2017 Canadian U18 Championship. John is a chess teacher with over 9 years of experience and has annotated games for distinguished national chess publications.

Victoria Doknjas, MBA was the Canadian Head of Delegation at the North American Youth Chess Championship (2014 and 2017) and at the 2015 World Youth & Cadet Chess Championships (in Greece). She won the 2016 Canadian Senior Woman Champion title and co-founded the Juniors to Masters Chess Academy.

Also by the Author, John Doknjas

Opening Repertoire the Modern Benoni

Opening Repertoire the Sicilian Najdorf (with Joshua Doknjas)

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Foreword

When the authors of this book asked me to write a few words about it, I happily accepted, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because I was intrigued by the topic of the book - I considered it thought-provoking and quite novel among so many opening and tactics books. Second, because our joint ventures with both Victoria Doknjas and FM John Doknjas, together with FM John's previous works as an author were a guarantee that I will see something extraordinary; and last, but not least, my GM and FIDE Trainer "ego" was also challenged in a positive way - will this book teach me new methods?

Reading through the chapters, I wasn't disappointed at all: I enjoyed seeing advice for both parents and players, introducing the element of goals and motivation into the sometimes dull process of training; I have learned a few new tricks on how to use free resources to build an opening database, and I was impressed by the emphasis the authors put on maybe the most important chapter of chess training, the game analysis. Still, while I was progressing through all chapters, my feeling was "OK, but I know and apply most of these as a trainer, why do the authors think I am not telling this to my students?"

And then it hit me - I might know most of this NOW, but it would have been a great assistance to have someone tell me all of this as a player, or when I started my coaching career. Maybe also my parents would have appreciated this when my career as a player was only at the beginning. Thus, *What Chess Coaches Don't Tell You* is (apart from being an excellent read) extremely useful for players, their coaches and parents alike - the book asks the readers a large number of important questions and provides an even bigger number of answers to frequently asked or even to unasked questions. It also has a downside though: after reading this book, one can never again use the excuse "oh, I didn't know about this - our coach never told us!"

Grandmaster Gergely Szabo,
FIDE Trainer

Introduction

Are you an adult or junior chess player who has taken private chess lessons for years, but feel that you haven't been progressing? Or are you a parent of a junior chess player who feels that because you don't know how to play chess, you therefore can't help your child? In both cases, there is a lot of reliance on the chess coach who has been given a free-hand as to the private lesson content and direction.

So often is the case that we meet with parents of junior chess players and they would lament about their previous private coach experience, saying "since I don't know chess, I assumed that our chess coach was doing the best for my child". Or the adult chess player would say "I assumed that my chess coach had an overall plan for my chess learning". Our response is "First tell us, what are your chess goals – both short term and long term?" In the parent and child case, it is also important that their chess goals are in alignment – oftentimes parents assume their child wants to become a Chess Master, but only after actually sitting down and seriously discussing with their child what his/her chess goals are, do they find out that their child doesn't want to be a Chess Master, nor put in the required hard work, and instead wants, for example, to win the school championship. If goals are not verbalized, how can an effective plan be created to achieve those goals? If your chess coach has never asked you what your chess goals are, how can your chess coach properly develop a plan specifically for you to attain your goals – or maybe there is no grand plan at all?

Likely your chess coach has some sort of rough plan, but also likely, if you have never been asked or been made to seriously consider what your actual chess goals are, the plan is a generic one. Effective chess training is not a "one size fits all" situation. Developing a well thought out individualized plan, which focusses on the specific chess player's unique weaknesses and strengths, is the first step towards making improvements, strengthening play, and attaining more in-depth chess knowledge, all of which helps us down that path towards reaching our chess goals.

This book covers the essential elements needed to form a solid chess knowledge foundation. By learning and incorporating these essential elements, this will further help chess players get the most out of their learning with their chess coach. Our book also provides recommendations on how players can learn to be more self-sufficient in their own chess studies without a coach. Parents of junior chess players can also benefit from this book as the knowledge it provides will empower them to help steer the private chess lessons and learning process to be more efficient and effective.

Make no mistake in that there is no “magic” in this book that will instantly transport chess players to the next chess level – however, it does contain something better: it provides solid suggestions to help improve your chess knowledge. Too often chess players, or their parents, pay for countless hours of private chess lessons hoping that there is some “magic chess master sprinkle dust” that will be dispensed which will effortlessly and instantly, or at least eventually, transform them into a stronger chess player. Even if the chess players are willing to work hard, they often lack the knowledge of the best direction that will help them reach their chess goals. Look at the Energizer Bunny who is constantly working and working and working, but if he’s not pointed in the right direction, he could waste an enormous amount of time just going around and around and around in circles, all the while not making much progress towards his desired destination.

One of our goals for writing this chess book is to help chess players understand some of the core elements that many chess coaches don’t automatically tell you, but will give you more control over the direction and success of your chess studies, and in doing so, will help in identifying and attaining your chess goals. Note that if your goal is to become a grandmaster instantaneously after reading this book, then this is not the book for you. However, if your goal is to get a better understanding of how to establish what your chess goals are and from that derive a plan to attain those chess goals, all the while in supporting your chess learning journey with a practical approach that would include how best to utilize your available resources like chess software and websites, chess books, your chess coach, chess friends and colleagues, and other potential training partners, then we are pleased to be part of your chess learning journey.

Setting up a Solid Chess Foundation, With or Without a Chess Coach

We begin our book by tackling the key activities that chess players need to know in order to build a solid foundation for their chess training regime. All of which can be done whether you are self-training or have a chess coach.

Working Hard with a Set Purpose

What does working hard mean exactly?

Defining Chess Goals and Developing a Plan to Achieve Them

The first step is to define your chess goals and develop a plan to achieve them. Once your chess goals have been established and your plan developed, we discuss the important elements that make up a proper training regime; and that is where you are to direct your hard work on a regular and consistent basis.

Analyzing Your Games

By properly and consistently analyzing your games, you can discover your areas of strength and weakness, and most importantly, it can provide direction on where to focus your chess studies.

Creating an Opening Database

It's important to know your opening lines, so building an opening repertoire and regularly studying and improving your openings can help you to start all your games off well.

Will to Win: Essential Endgames

Those eager chess players who are willing to fight tooth and nail to the very end often are rewarded with favourable results. Studying certain elementary endgames can come in handy if you're playing a game that simplifies into one of them (or an endgame that shares similarities with what you've studied).

Tactics and Chess Studies

Regularly solving tactics problems and chess studies are highly beneficial to developing good tactical pattern recognition that you can then employ in your games.

Slowing Down

Good chess play requires slowing down, in order to do things such as deliberating between candidate moves, figuring out why the opponent moved there, devising how to improve badly placed pieces, and much more.

Training Games

Training games from a set position that enter into specific chess topics are helpful, as are training games with stronger opponents, which can help build confidence when playing higher rated opponents at tournaments.

Tension: To Exchange or Not To Exchange

Mature chess play often evolves from patiently building up your position, as well as maintaining the pressure and complexity of the position. Studying such positions and working on exercises can help you develop these skills.

FAQ for Chess Parents or Those New to Competitive Chess

The competitive tournament chess world can at times seem complex and confusing for those who are new to it, as well as for those who have been playing in it for several years. This section is made up of questions that we have been asked over the years by chess players and chess parents alike.

So, let's get started with this familiar story about a turtle and a bunny.

Tortoise or Hare

We are all familiar with Aesop's Fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare", where an overconfident hare accepts the challenge to race the slow, but steady tortoise. Halfway through the race, the hare decides to play in the meadow since he has such a huge lead, and even takes a

little nap. The dedicated and hard-working tortoise continues the race, never wavering from his goal, which results in his arrival across the finish line, soundly beating the hare.

There are many different types of chess players. Some are “naturally” talented and like the hare, they start off very strong and shoot out of the racetrack with a tremendous lead over the rest of their competitors, winning trophies and competitions for the first few years. Overtime, these naturally talented players start to lose their initial advantage as some of the competition, like the tortoise, are dedicated and hard working, and have taken the painstaking time to study, practice, and then study and practice even more; and they learn to persevere and overcome obstacles in their chess lives in order to attain their goals.

Are you a “hare”? If so, be thankful for the talent that you are blessed with, and then consciously make the effort to add to your natural talents. That is, make the decision to work hard by being willing to learn, to train with dedication, to be open to instruction, and to practice, practice, practice.

Are you a “tortoise”? If so, accept that you will need to try and try again in order to achieve. If you stick with it, you will develop a strong work ethic that will serve you well on into your chess career. Be thankful that you are blessed with the knowledge that you will need to work hard, and then make the conscious decision to do so. Learn from your mistakes, be open to being taught new things, and practice, practice, practice.

Whether you started the race as a tortoise or a hare, you alone must make the decision on how best to go forward on your own path. Choosing wisely, and responsibly, will allow you in time to attain your goals both in chess, and more importantly, in life.

Acknowledgements

I, Victoria, want to express my gratitude to my family for their encouragement and support during this writing project. Having been blessed with three amazing sons who are accomplished National and Provincial Chess Champions, outstanding chess coaches and chess book authors, and simply just all-around great guys.

Thank you to my parents, Howard and Kay Jung, for their years of support; and to Team Doknjas: both to FIDE Master Joshua Doknjas and National Master Neil Doknjas for your input and suggestions during the writing process; to Dave Doknjas for your proofreading assistance and your never-ending support and love for our sons and me; and immense gratitude especially to my co-author, FIDE Master John Doknjas, who without his encouragement and chess coaching expertise, this book would not have been possible.

I, John, would like to thank my family (Victoria, Dave, Joshua, Neil) for their continual support. Also, our thanks to Byron Jacobs for making the project possible, and Grandmaster Gergely Szabo for his encouragement, feedback, and writing the Foreword to this book.

John Doknjas and Victoria Doknjas,
Canada, June 2023

Chapter Three

Analysing Your Games

One of the most important ways that you can improve your game, which is often bypassed or overlooked, is analyzing your own games *before* showing them to your chess coach. Many chess coaches ask their students to send them their tournament games, or worse, ask to see their games at the start of their private lesson. If your coach is seeing your games for the very first time during your lesson, then that means he hasn't taken the time to deeply analyze your games beforehand. So, he hasn't had the chance to identify any bad patterns that need to be addressed, nor has he prepared any homework for you on this topic. It's better if your coach asks you to send your game notations ahead of time, but even here, if he doesn't ask you to do any self-reflection (by reviewing and annotating your games) then you are missing out on some very insightful learning.

Players need to *first* review and annotate their games on their own *before* reviewing them with their chess coach, if they have one. The most effective way to learn and improve your chess is to be self-critical of your games and review them by yourself, aiming to find 2-3 things which you can improve. If you just have your chess coach point them out for you, then there is way less of a chance for you to fully learn from the game and retain it. Learning requires a certain amount of effort and struggle – as that is a big part of the natural learning process.

The best way to analyze your own games is to first enter them into some chess software that can store them, like ChessBase, or use the game analysis feature on one of the online chess playing platforms. Then review your game move by move until you find a critical moment. Note that a critical moment is a point in the game where the next move will alter the direction of the game in a very good or very bad way. For example, in life, if you choose to have cereal instead of eggs for breakfast, likely that is not a life altering decision; but who you choose to marry, whether you attend university in your hometown or in another country – these types of decisions are significant and life-changing. Similarly, critical moments in a chess game are decision points in the game which can potentially change

your position from a winning one to a losing one, or vice versa.

Now, identify all the critical moments of your game for both Black and White, and then find better moves or variations. Remember there were two opponents playing this game, and it is vital to understand the mistakes made (and the great moves achieved) from both sides. For example, you may have won the game, but upon review, you see that your opponent executed the wrong move order which resulted in him losing material. Well, what happens the next time when you play a similar game, and this time your opponent is stronger and finds the right move order – you should know how to respond correctly. So, remember there is always something to learn from your games whether the result was a win, loss, or draw.

Once you are finished identifying all the critical moments and have added better moves or variations, provide wording to explain why these are critical moments. Then at the end of your game notation, write 2-3 things that you learned from this game, or describe what this game was about. Now you are in a position to use a chess engine to further review your game by yourself, or to then discuss your game with your chess coach. Having already reviewed your game by yourself, the chess engine or chess coach should be able to add that extra layer of analysis – but you have already done much of the heavy lifting by first reviewing your game(s) ahead of time and trying to learn what went wrong and what went right.

Annotating your games should be as if you are telling a story. Each game that you play tells a story and that's what you need to capture in your game annotations. In the beginning, you can state which opening this was and if it was the main line or a side line. When you hit a critical moment, you can describe the position from both White and Black's point of view, and state who is better and why; then provide better move options for White and/or Black, with the appropriate commentary to prove why you consider these moves better than what was played in the original game. In the end, state the "moral" of the story, or a few things which can be learned from this game. By annotating your games like this, it provides a complete look at your game, where it's as if you are teaching someone else what happened during the game, and what can be learnt from it.

Here is a summary of steps to annotate your game, with or without a chess coach:

If you don't Have a Chess Coach

1. Enter your games in some fashion, such as with ChessBase, or with the game analysis feature on one of the online chess playing platforms.
2. Slowly move through your game and identify all the critical moments.
3. For each critical moment, find better moves, or variations, for both Black and White.
4. Add words to describe the game as if you are telling a story where there is a beginning, exciting things that happen in the middle, and then an ending with a few things we can learn.
5. When you reach the end of the game notation, write down 2-3 things that you learned from this game, or what this game was about.

6. Now you can turn on the chess engine to see if it agrees with the critical moments that you identified, and to see if you missed any critical moments. If you missed some critical moments, review them carefully along with the engine's suggested better moves or variations, and try to understand why these variations are better ones.

If you Have a Chess Coach

The steps are essentially the same except for the last part:

1. Enter your games in some fashion, such as with ChessBase, or with the game analysis feature on one of the online chess playing platforms.

2. Slowly move through your game and identify all the critical moments.

3. For each critical moment, find better moves, or variations, for both Black and White.

4. Add words to describe the game as if you are telling a story where there is a beginning, exciting things that happen in the middle, and then an ending with a few things we can learn.

5. When you reach the end of the game notation, write down 2-3 things that you learned from this game, or what this game was about.

6. (Optional) Now you can turn on the chess engine to see if it agrees with the critical moments that you identified, and to see if you missed any critical moments. If you missed some critical moments, review them carefully along with the engine's suggested better moves or variations, and try to understand why these variations are better ones.

Note that if you have a chess coach who reviews your games with you, this step is optional, and in fact, a good chess coach will want to see from your annotations what you know and what you don't know, *not* what your chess engine knows. This will help your chess coach to zero in on patterns of weaknesses in your play, which will in turn allow him to help you become stronger in these areas.

7. You are now ready to meet with your chess coach to discuss any questions that you have and to hear your coach's thoughts on your game. See if you captured all the critical moments, and if you don't understand why the suggested moves are better, then ask your chess coach to help you fully understand the chess concept.

Additional Suggestions

1. During a tournament, if you have time immediately after your game, then ask your opponent to review the game with you in the skittles room (i.e., the room provided by the tournament organizers for players to review their games together). Realize that your opponent is not going to give you a chess lesson – rather it should be more like two peers discussing a multi-tiered puzzle or a series of problems where both should gain some additional insight by hearing the game from the opponent's point of view. Note that there are all kinds of players and people, so avoid the grouches and be open to reviewing your game with an opponent who is respectful and friendly.

2. Another helpful tip, when you have finished annotating your game(s), show it to your parent, sibling, chess buddy, etc. Go through your game(s) as if you are teaching them and point out the critical moments, the better moves and variations, and the 2-3 things that this game was about. Encourage them to ask questions, and hopefully you have learned enough about your game so that you can confidently answer them. When you reach a point where you know something well enough that you can teach it to someone else, then you *really* know it, and have truly learned some things from your annotation work.

We are going to walk you through the process of how to analyze your games. In the following exercises, we'll give you games to annotate. After you've practiced annotating a game, there will then be "solutions" for you to see how your analysis compares to ours. Note that it's obviously fine if your analysis doesn't match up exactly with ours, but hopefully the solutions will help guide you in improving your game analysis skills.

Please set up a chess board and then go through each game. A physical board is good to use – but going through the game on a computer is also fine. Afterwards, do the exercises for the game, which are the following:

1. Play through the game and identify the critical moments.
2. Find variations, or better moves for Black and White.
3. Provide justification that explains why you consider these critical moments.
4. Compare the critical moments that you found and the variations that you came up with to what the engine points out.
5. At the end of the game, write 2-3 things that you learned.

After completing each step, please review our solution for that step before proceeding to the next step, as it is cumulative. For example, STEP 2 will involve further annotating the solution that we provided for STEP 1.

Exercise 1

Step 1: Play through this game and identify the critical moments. There are a number of critical moments in this game, try to identify as many as you can.

As a reminder, a critical moment is a point in the game where the next move can change the direction of the game in a very good way or in a very bad way - a game changer; or a critical moment can be when the game has finished going through a major change and you will then need to reassess to find new plans.

A.Liu–J.Doknjas

North American Youth Chess Championships U16 2014

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 g6 7 f3 ♙g7 8 ♘ge2 0-0 9 ♘g3 h5 10

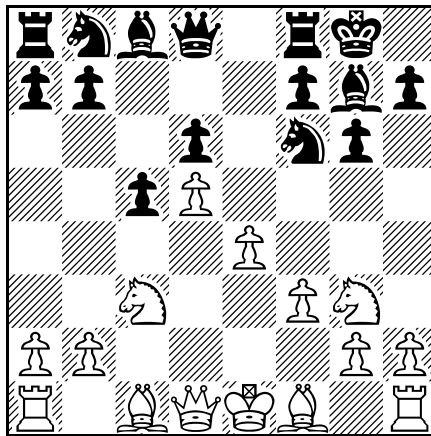
♖g5 a6 11 a4 ♚c7 12 ♚d2 ♜h7 13 ♙h6 h4 14 ♙xg7 ♚xg7 15 ♜ge2 ♚e7 16 ♜f4 f5 17 ♙e2
 g5 18 ♜d3 ♜d7 19 exf5 ♜e5 20 ♜f2 ♜c4 21 f6+ ♚xf6 22 ♚c1 ♜e3 23 ♚g1 ♜f5 24 ♜ce4
 ♜d4 25 ♚c3 ♚f8 26 b4 b6 27 a5 ♜f6 28 ♚b1 ♜xd5 29 ♚d2 ♜f4 30 ♙d1 d5 31 axb6 dxe4 32
 ♜xe4 ♙f5 33 bxc5 ♚ad8 34 b7 ♜xf3+ 35 gxf3 ♚xd2 36 ♚xg5+ ♚xg5 37 ♜xg5 ♙xb1 38 c6
 ♚dd8 0-1

Solution

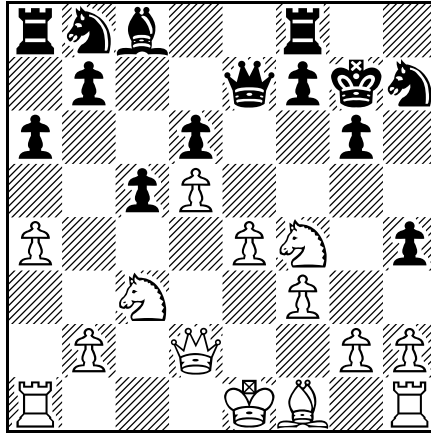
Below are five critical moments in this game. If you found critical moments that are different from these five, that's fine, as long as you justified why you think they were critical moments.

A.Liu – J.Doknjas
 North American Youth Chess Championships U16 2014

1 d4 ♜f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♜c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 g6 7 f3 ♙g7 8 ♜ge2 0-0 9 ♜g3
 Critical moment #1:

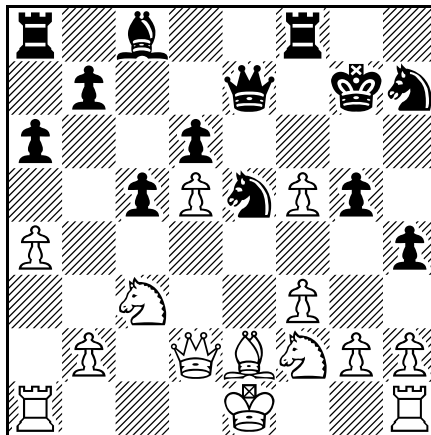


9...h5 10 ♙g5 a6 11 a4 ♚c7 12 ♚d2 ♜h7 13 ♙h6 h4 14 ♙xg7 ♚xg7 15 ♜ge2 ♚e7 16 ♜f4
 Critical moment #2:



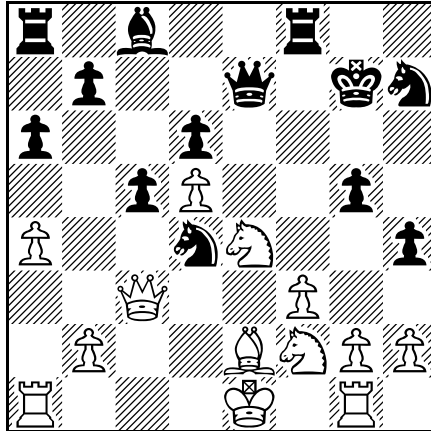
16...f5 17 ♖e2 g5 18 ♘d3 ♗d7 19 exf5 ♘e5 20 ♗f2

Critical moment #3:



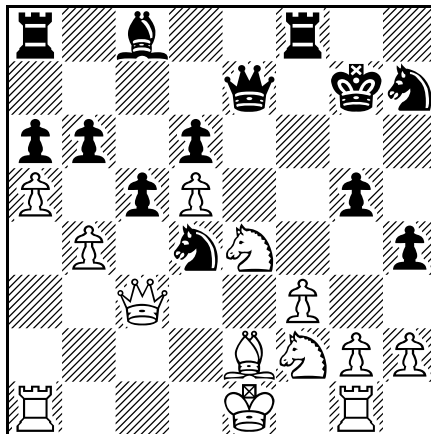
20...♗c4 21 f6+ ♖xf6 22 ♚c1 ♘e3 23 ♖g1 ♗f5 24 ♗ce4 ♗d4 25 ♚c3 ♖f8

Critical moment #4:



26 b4 b6 27 a5

Critical moment #5:



27...♖f6 28 ♜b1 ♘xd5 29 ♚d2 ♗f4 30 ♙d1 d5 31 axb6 dxe4 32 ♘xe4 ♙f5 33 bxc5 ♜ad8 34 b7 ♗xf3+ 35 gxf3 ♜xd2 36 ♜xg5+ ♚xg5 37 ♗xg5 ♙xb1 38 c6 ♜dd8 0-1

Step 2: Now, your next task is to provide variations, or better moves, for each critical moment whether it is for Black or for White (and provide brief comments explaining the variations/moves).

Do this for the five critical moments that we've listed here, as well as for any additional critical moments that you found. If you think that a move played in the game was the best continuation from a critical moment, then you don't need to provide variations; rather, write a note saying why the game move was best.

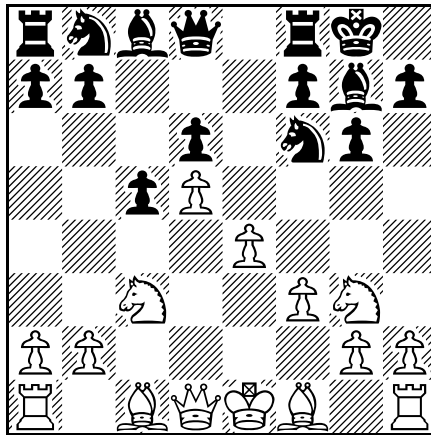
Solution

In this game, we've provided examples of variations for each critical moment. Let's take a look:

A.Liu – J.Doknjas
 North American Youth Chess Championships U16 2014

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 g6 7 f3 ♙g7 8 ♘ge2 0-0 9 ♘g3

Critical moment #1:

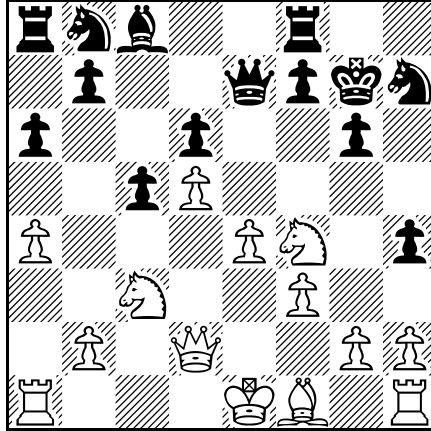


9...h5

9...h5 is a good move, but opting to play on the queenside instead is also good. For example, after 9...a6 10 a4 ♘bd7 11 ♙e2 ♘e8 12 0-0 ♖b8 13 ♙e3 ♘c7, Black's pieces are working together to push for ...b7-b5.

10 ♙g5 a6 11 a4 ♙c7 12 ♙d2 ♘h7 13 ♙h6 h4 14 ♙xg7 ♙xg7 15 ♘ge2 ♙e7 16 ♘f4

Critical moment #2:

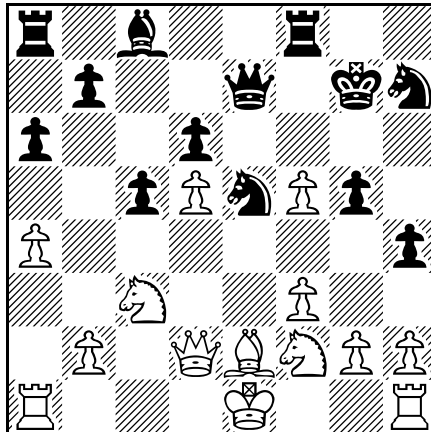


16...f5

16...♞d7 might have been more solid than what was played in the game (even though Black's attack ended up working out). After 17 ♙e2 ♞e5 18 0-0 f5, only now Black makes this pawn push, since his knight is active on e5. If the knight were still on b8, then it would have to go through the d7-square, but this would temporarily block the c8-bishop (allowing ♞e6+).

17 ♙e2 g5 18 ♞d3 ♞d7 19 exf5 ♞e5 20 ♞f2

Critical moment #3:

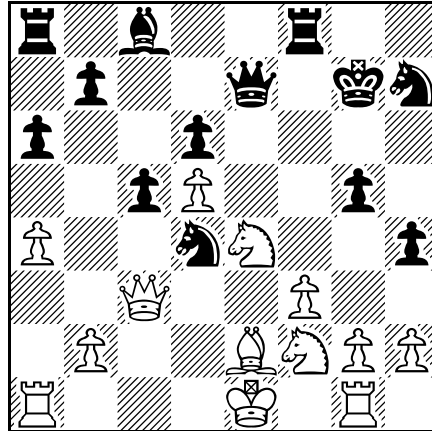


20...♞c4

20...♙xf5 may look a little safer, but Black's 20...♞c4 move in the game seems best, as...♞c4-...♞e3 catches White's king in the centre and prevents it from castling.

21 f6+ ♜xf6 22 ♛c1 ♞e3 23 ♜g1 ♞f5 24 ♞ce4 ♞d4 25 ♛c3 ♜f8

Critical moment #4:

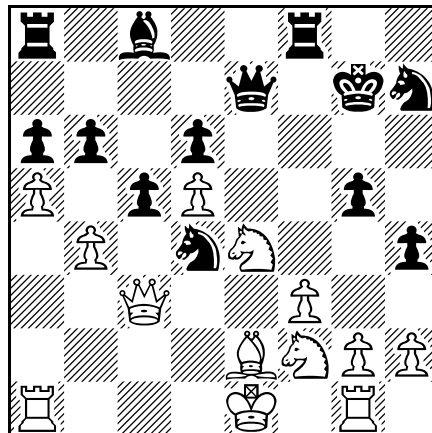


26 b4

A good move, as White needs to get counterplay quickly. Now the c5-pawn cannot take on b4 since this would drop the d4-knight.

26...b6 27 a5

Critical moment #5:



27...♞f6

A strong response. Black ignores White's queenside attack, and instead brings his knight back into the game, creating the threat of...♞xd5.

28 ♜b1 ♞xd5 29 ♚d2 ♞f4 30 ♙d1 d5 31 axb6 dxe4 32 ♞xe4 ♙f5 33 bxc5 ♜ad8 34 b7 ♞xf3+ 35 gxf3 ♜xd2 36 ♜xg5+ ♚xg5 37 ♞xg5 ♙xb1 38 c6 ♜dd8 0-1

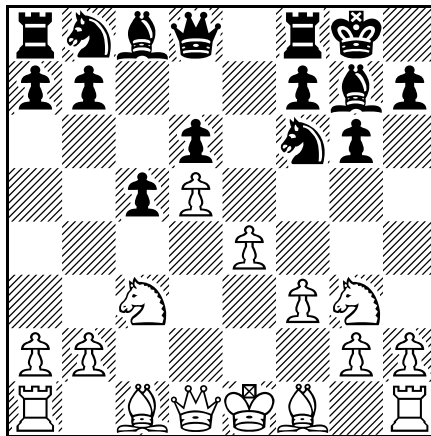
Step 3: Your next task is to provide a justification for each critical moment, i.e., explain why each critical moment should in fact be considered a critical moment.

Solution

Here we'll go through some critical moments, with explanations for why they're critical moments. Note that when you annotate games, you don't have to make it as long as what we've shown here. Our main goal is to walk you through the process and explain what we are doing in detail.

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1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 g6 7 f3 ♙g7 8 ♘ge2 0-0 9 ♘g3
Critical moment #1:

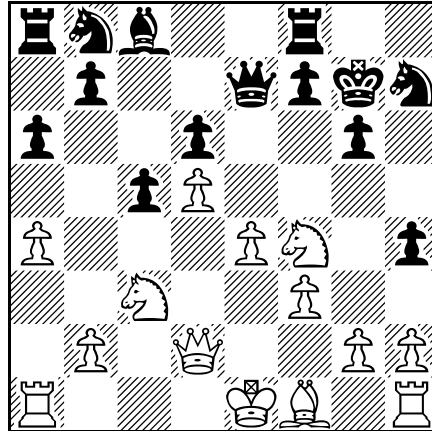


This is a critical moment because White is preparing to develop the f1-bishop and castle. If he does this, his king will be safe for the foreseeable future. So, Black must decide if he wants to disrupt White's plan with a quick attack.

9...h5

9...h5 is a good move, but opting to play on the queenside instead is also good. For example, after 9...a6 10 a4 ♘bd7 11 ♙e2 ♘e8 12 0-0 ♗b8 13 ♙e3 ♘c7, Black's pieces are working together to push...b5.

10 ♙g5 a6 11 a4 ♗c7 12 ♗d2 ♘h7 13 ♙h6 h4 14 ♙xg7 ♙xg7 15 ♘ge2 ♗e7 16 ♘f4
Critical moment #2:



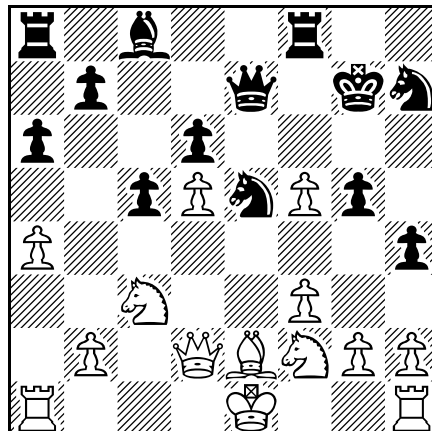
As in the previous critical moment, White is once again preparing to develop the bishop and castle kingside. Black must decide how to react.

16...f5

16...♘d7 might have been more solid than what was played in the game (even though Black's attack ended up working out). After 17 ♕e2 ♖e5 18 0-0 f5, only now Black makes this pawn push, since his knight is active on e5. If the knight were still on b8, then it would have to go through the d7-square, but this would temporarily block the c8-bishop (allowing ♗e6+).

17 ♕e2 g5 18 ♗d3 ♖d7 19 exf5 ♗e5 20 ♖f2

Critical moment #3:



Yet again, White is ready to castle. Black has to decide whether he wants to stop this – and if so, how?

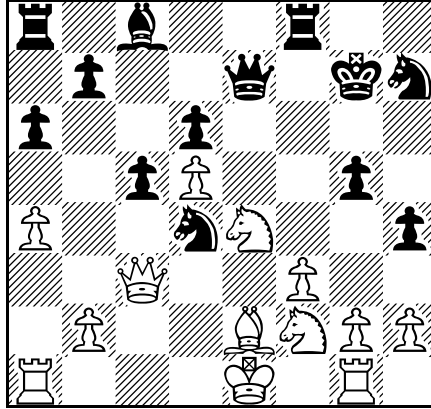
20...♗c4

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20...♙xf5 may look a little safer, but Black's 20...♘c4 move in the game seems best, as...♘c4-...♘e3 catches White's king in the centre and prevents it from castling.

21 f6+ ♖xf6 22 ♔c1 ♘e3 23 ♖g1 ♗f5 24 ♘ce4 ♗d4 25 ♔c3 ♖f8

Critical moment #4:



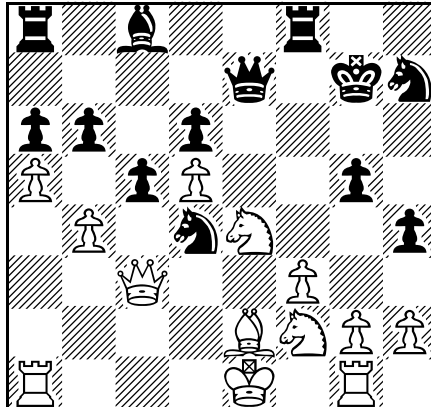
This is a critical moment because Black has a strong initiative in the centre. If White wants chances, he'll need to get counterplay now.

26 b4

A good move, as White needs to get counterplay quickly. Now the c5-pawn cannot take on b4 since this would drop the d4-knight.

26...b6 27 a5

Critical moment #5:



White's queenside attack has so far been a success, and Black's b6-c5 pawn chain is on the verge of collapse. Black must decide whether to continue defending the queenside, or to resume his attack in the centre.

27...♞f6

A strong response. Black ignores White's queenside attack, and instead brings his knight back into the game, creating the threat of...♞xd5.

28 ♜b1 ♞xd5 29 ♚d2 ♞f4 30 ♙d1 d5 31 axb6 dxe4 32 ♞xe4 ♙f5 33 bxc5 ♜ad8 34 b7 ♞xf3+ 35 gxf3 ♜xd2 36 ♜xg5+ ♚xg5 37 ♞xg5 ♙xb1 38 c6 ♜dd8 0-1

Step 4: Your next task is to analyze with an engine, seeing where it improves on some of your analysis (or points out something that was missed entirely). If you feel the engine identifies a new position as a critical moment, note it down and explain why it's a critical moment.

Solution

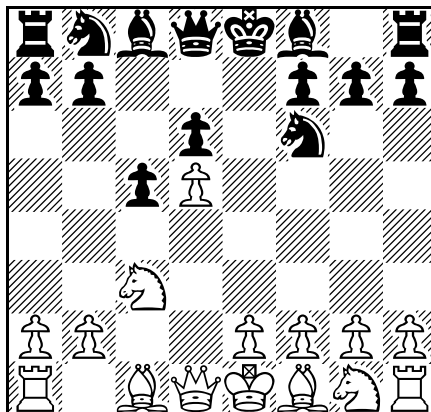
Here we'll analyze the game with an engine, pointing out some of the moments where it disagrees with the analysis, or where it suggests new moves that we haven't covered. We will place diagrams in the main places where engine analysis is done, so that you don't have to go through the pre-existing annotations to find where we've made additions.

One of the engines we'd recommend using is Stockfish, which is easily either the first or second best engine in the world. The other top of the line engine is Leela, but it's harder to use for most users due to its reliance on a GPU. However, if you use a different engine for your analysis, that is also completely fine. The top engines are all vastly stronger than the best humans in the world.

When going through this game, you may notice that the number of critical moments has roughly doubled. This is due to the engine pointing out a number of things which weren't included in our previous analysis of this game.

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1 d4 ♞f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♞c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6



The engine doesn't like Black's position. However, if you're in a position that is well-known and early on in the opening, the engine's opinion can sometimes be taken with a pinch of salt. That being said, the Benoni (the opening of the current position) is known to be quite risky.

6 e4 g6 7 f3 ♟g7 8 ♞ge2 0-0 9 ♞g3

Critical moment #1: This is a critical moment because White is preparing to develop the f1-bishop and castle. If he does this, his king will be safe for the foreseeable future. So, Black must decide if he wants to disrupt White's plan with a quick attack.

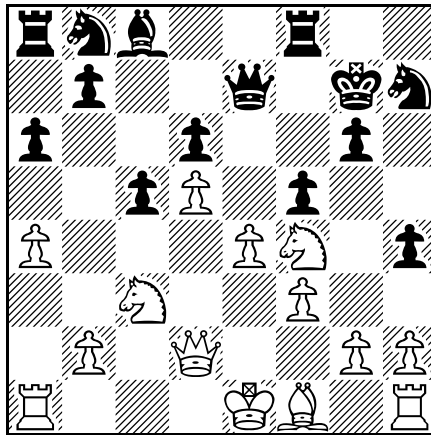
9...h5

9...h5 is a good move, but opting to play on the queenside instead is also good. For example, after 9...a6 10 a4 ♞bd7 11 ♟e2 ♞e8 12 0-0 ♜b8 13 ♟e3 ♞c7, Black's pieces are working together to push...b5.

10 ♟g5 a6 11 a4 ♜c7 12 ♜d2 ♞h7 13 ♟h6 h4 14 ♟xg7 ♞xg7 15 ♞ge2 ♜e7 16 ♞f4

Critical moment #2: As in the previous critical moment, White is once again preparing to develop the bishop and castle kingside. Black must decide how to react.

16...f5?

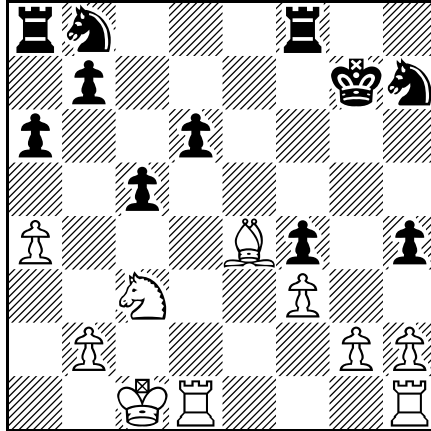


Engine critical moment #1 (new critical moment): The engine really doesn't like this move. However, for a human playing White it's not so trivial to refute over the board. In the 17 0-0-0 variation we'll see why the engine dislikes 16...f5, and how White should play against it. By the way, we've labeled this position as a new critical moment, since the engine says it's bad. This means that if White's accurate, he can gain an advantage (but if he's not accurate, then Black will have a good attack).

16...♞d7 might have been more solid than what was played in the game (even though Black's attack ended up working out). After 17 ♟e2 ♞e5 18 0-0 f5, only now Black makes this pawn push, since his knight is active on e5. If the knight were still on b8, then it would have to go through the d7-square, but this would temporarily block the c8-bishop (allowing ♞e6+).

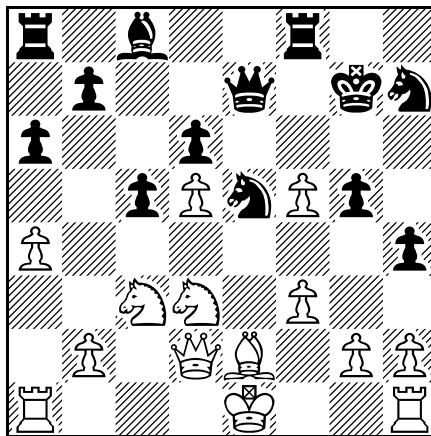
17 ♖e2

Engine analysis: After 17 0-0-0 g5 (17...♗d7? 18 ♗e6+ 18 ♗e6+ ♕xe6 19 dxe6 ♖xe6 20 exf5 ♖xf5 21 ♕d3 ♖f4 (21...♖f7 22 ♕xh7 ♖xh7 23 ♖xg5 leaves Black behind in development, and his h4- and d6-pawns are weak) 22 ♖xf4 gxf4 23 ♕e4, Black has weak pawns, and White is attacking the two on b7 and d6 simultaneously.



This helps to explain why the engine likes White so much here.

17...g5 18 ♗d3 ♗d7 19 exf5 ♗e5



Engine critical moment #2 (new critical moment). This is a critical moment since the engine doesn't like White's next move in the game. It suggests 20 f6+, or at least 20 0-0 to get the king safe. Therefore, this means that after 19...♗e5, White has an important decision to make on how to continue.

20 ♗f2?

Critical moment #3: Yet again, White is ready to castle. Black has to decide whether he

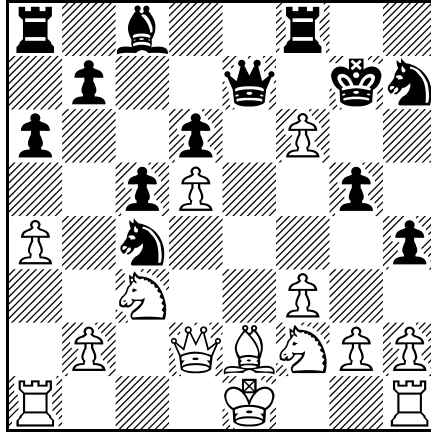
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wants to stop this – and if so, how?

20...♖c4!

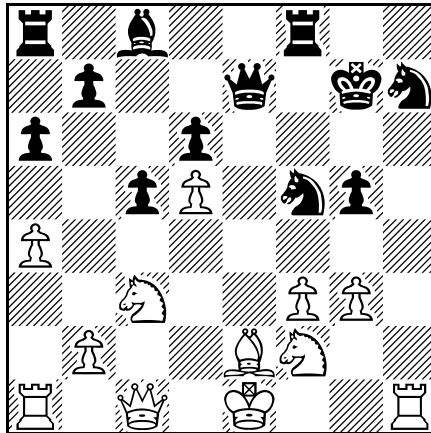
20...♗xf5 may look a little safer, but Black's 20...♖c4 move in the game seems best, as...♖c4–...♗e3 catches White's king in the centre and prevents it from castling.

21 f6+?



The engine dislikes this move. The reason is fairly clear, since it gives up a pawn for little compensation. White probably wanted Black's rook on f6, so that he could move a knight to e4 with tempo.

Engine analysis: 21 ♖c1 ♗e3 22 g4 hxg3 23 hxg3 ♗xf5 reaches a position that the engine gives as around equal.



This is a pretty fair assessment, as with the h-pawns gone, Black's king has become a bit more vulnerable.

21...♖xf6 22 ♖c1 ♗e3 23 ♗g1 ♗f5 24 ♗ce4 ♗d4 25 ♖c3 ♖f8

Critical moment #4: This is a critical moment because Black has a strong initiative in the centre. If White wants chances, he'll need to get counterplay now.

26 b4!

A good move, as White needs to get counterplay quickly. Now the c5-pawn cannot take on b4 since this would drop the d4-knight.

26...b6 27 a5

Critical moment #5: White's queenside attack has so far been a success, and Black's b6-c5 pawn chain is on the verge of collapse. Black must decide whether to continue defending the queenside, or to resume his attack in the centre.

27...♞f6!

A strong response. Black ignores White's queenside attack, and instead brings his knight back into the game, creating the threat of...♞xd5.

28 ♖b1 ♞xd5 29 ♔d2 ♞f4 30 ♙d1 d5 31 axb6 dxe4 32 ♞xe4 ♙f5 33 bxc5 ♖ad8 34 b7 ♞xf3+ 35 gxf3 ♖xd2 36 ♖xg5+ ♗xg5 37 ♞xg5 ♙xb1 38 c6 ♖dd8 0-1

Step 5: Your final task will be to write 2–3 things you learned about the game. This can often be accomplished by reflecting on what you learned from a few critical moments of your choice. Although, some things you learn can come from elsewhere in the game too.

Solution: What you learned – Game 1

Here is an example of three things which could be learned from this game:

- 1) If feasible, when your opponent is about to castle, try to cause problems for him before he can manage to do so (references moves 9 and 19).
- 2) At the same time, if you're behind in development, it's not always good to go on the attack against the opponent's king (references move 16). It's important to know when you're justified in attacking, and when you should just develop your remaining pieces.
- 3) When you're attacking and your opponent counterattacks, it's important to only deal with the counterattack if necessary. If their counterattack is not dangerous, then you should continue with your attack (references move 27).

Exercise 2

Step 1: Play through this game and identify the critical moments. There are a number of critical moments in this game, try to identify as many as you can.

V.Doknjas – I.Martinovsky
Bowser Builders Open Bowser 2018

1 ♞f3 c5 2 d3 g6 3 g3 ♙g7 4 ♞bd2 ♞f6 5 ♙g2 0-0 6 0-0 ♞c6 7 e4 d6 8 c3 e5 9 ♗c2 h6 10