

Merijn van Delft

Mastering Positional Sacrifices

A Practical Guide to a Vital Skill in Chess

New In Chess 2020

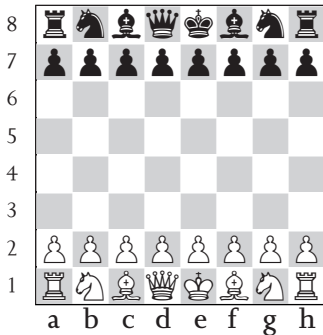
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Explanation of symbols

The chessboard with its coordinates:



- White to move
- Black to move
- ♔ King
- ♚ Queen
- ♖ Rook
- ♗ Bishop
- ♘ Knight

- ± White stands slightly better
- ∓ Black stands slightly better
- ± White stands better
- ∓ Black stands better
- +− White has a decisive advantage
- −+ Black has a decisive advantage
- = balanced position
- ! good move
- !! excellent move
- ? bad move
- ?? blunder
- !?! interesting move
- ?! dubious move

Introduction

Welcome dear reader, you are holding in your hands a chess book on strategy. My name is Merijn van Delft, I am an International Master from the Netherlands, born in 1979, and I have always been a chess trainer and coach, more than anything else. I grew up in Apeldoorn, and have lived and worked in Amsterdam and Hamburg. I will be your guide on a very exciting tour along the most important strategic topics in chess. We will come across legendary battles and amazing concepts, covering everything from the old masters until the most recent developments.

The title of this book is *Mastering Positional Sacrifices*. My favourite theme in chess has always been the positional sacrifice, so writing a book about it, about three decades after I first learned about this theme, feels like a natural thing to do. I am thrilled to share my thoughts with you on this exciting subject.

Definition

As opposed to tactical sacrifices, positional sacrifices are of a more abstract, non-forcing and long-term nature. Positional sacrifices often have something mysterious about them, and when they work out well, they are beautiful. The secret lies in the fact that in chess it is not enough to simply count the pieces. Material, time and space are constantly interacting.

Speaking of definitions, I do not believe in a strict definition of what a positional sacrifice is. I think it is a dimension, rather than a category. A dimension that runs from purely tactical (concrete, short-term) to very positional (abstract, long-term) – in the same way that open/closed and dynamic/static are useful dimensions to describe chess.

Target audience

My hope is that this book will be a pleasant read for many chess players. I am trying to write for as broad a readership as possible, but let me give a mild warning to beginning chess players: this book may not be the best place to start for you. However, I am sure it is worth returning to, once you have collected a little more chess knowledge and experience. Please have a look at the bibliography in the back of this book for a number of books I recommend. Playing regularly and analysing your own games with a chess trainer/coach is the well-established way to improve in chess.

Here is a mild warning for very experienced players as well: you may come across a fair amount of examples that you already know. I considered it my job to combine the most impressive classical games with new material, and to find a nice balance there. Smile if you recognize something, and contact me if I forgot a great example that should have been in the book. Who knows we can add it in a future edition.

Reading guide

A feel-good book is what this is meant to be. It should be fun to play through the games and the book can easily be used for entertainment purposes only. If you are simply seeking inspiration, feel free to open it at a random page and check the diagrams. The most exciting moments are always covered with a diagram and described in the text that follows.

Having said that, my main intention has been to present the material as systematically as possible. My goal was to create a unique framework of positional sacrifices. The structure should have an inner logic and should help the reader to build up his knowledge systematically. Reading the book from start to finish probably allows you to make the most of it.

I do realize that most chess students and chess enthusiasts rarely finish a book. They start full of ambition, but sooner or later everyday distractions prevail. My advice is to scan the diagrams, only play through the games that seem interesting to you, and save the rest for some other time. Studying this book should be an enjoyable experience, not a pain.

Book structure

Reading the book from start to finish is like time travelling from the old masters, via the World Champions, to the latest engines. We have just entered a new decade, and the most recent games I have included in the book were played at the Wijk aan Zee 2020 tournament. The book consists of four parts. The first three parts contain a total of 115 carefully selected games and Part IV contains 48 well-tested exercises.

Part I consists of Chapter 1-4 and discusses the fundamental themes: piece play, pawn structure, colour complex, domination. The inner logic is that we look at pieces, pawns and squares in turn, and the ultimate goal is domination. The first part of the book is designed to be a basic course in mastering positional sacrifices. Especially Chapter 3 on colour complexes can be a challenge for less experienced players. Once you've made it through the first part of the book, you should have a good idea of what a positional sacrifice is.

Part II consists of Chapters 5-6 and systematically treats typical positional sacrifices: pawn sacrifices and exchange sacrifices. These are the

two types of sacrifice that occur so frequently that they can be considered standard instruments of positional play. The second part of the book is designed to consolidate and deepen our newly acquired knowledge. Knowing a few standard sacrifices makes it easier to recognize the possibility of sacrificing something in your own games and may give you more confidence in trying to do so.

Part III consists of Chapters 7-9 and is about testing the limits. Like with extreme sports, we are going to examine how far we can go when we sacrifice material. How much can we sacrifice, and what do we need in return? We will see how the strongest and most creative players in the history of chess have been willing to take considerable risks to test the limits. If you want to become a strong chess player, you will have to risk something, and you have to try out what is possible and what is not. This leads to a deeper understanding of the way material, time and space interact. Finally, we will look at what we can learn from chess engines and how we can use them for our training purposes.

Part IV consists of Chapter 10 (Exercises) and 11 (Solutions to exercises), and contains our training material. The 48 exercises in Chapter 10 are divided over 4 sets of 12. Level 1 should be doable for every reader, but with Level 2 and 3 the difficulty rises sharply. At Level 4, most readers will feel lost. In the introduction to Chapter 10, I explain how you can make the most out of the training material. Read the instructions carefully to avoid a frustrating experience! Finding the right concept or being on the right track is a great feeling, but it requires a certain amount of dedication. This fourth part of the book is the concluding step towards mastering positional sacrifices.

While the book focusses on positional sacrifices, along the way we will touch upon several related subjects. Positional chess is not isolated from tactics. Chess is still 99% tactics, and we will have a lot of fun coming across a broad range of tactical motifs. Along the way, you will increase your general opening knowledge and your knowledge of attack and defence. We will also analyse the occasional endgame. While we are working on these different fields of chess technique, we will keep in mind the tournament hall and discuss the relevant psychological and practical aspects. Whenever we are talking about positional sacrifices, psychology is never far off, for both players.

Training advice

A final piece of advice: do not be afraid to make mistakes in your own games and try new things. The average game at the chess club or in the tournament arena is not as smooth and impressive as the collection of

examples in this book. Try sacrificing pawns and exchanges in your blitz games, and bit by bit you will learn to recognize new opportunities in your more important games.

A brief history

We are almost ready to start with the chess. Let me give a quick overview of the history of chess, just to set the stage and to enable you to view the games we are going to study in the right historical context.

The earliest documented chess game with the modern rules is believed to go back as early as 1475. Those were completely different times, and chess must have developed very slowly.

The first famous positional players were François-André Danican Philidor (1726-1795) and Howard Staunton (1810-1874). Very early examples of positional sacrifices from their games and analyses include themes like the pawn steamroller and the exchange sacrifice. Seen through modern eyes, the games from the 19th century were generally still not very impressive. Positional play basically still had to be discovered. Staunton, in his unofficial 1843 World Championship match with Pierre de Saint-Amant, played for a direct attack from any situation.

Only as the level of defence went up, positional chess became necessary as a means to outplay the opponent. The first official World Champions, Wilhem Steinitz (1836-1900) and Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941), played a key role in formulating the principles of positional chess. In the 1920s, the Hypermodernists (Nimzowitsch, Réti, Breyer) gave chess important impulses with their creative positional concepts. The 1950s seem to have been a crucial stage in the history of chess as well, with players like David Bronstein (1924-2006) regularly making positional sacrifices.

A major breakthrough was Garry Kasparov's rise to the top in the 1980s. His dynamic approach to chess, his testing of the limits and his search for new ways, facilitated the transition to modern chess as we know it today. After Kasparov retired in 2005 and the computer engines became stronger, Veselin Topalov impressed the chess world with his trademark positional sacrifices. Today, positional sacrifices are regularly played by many top players. Magnus Carlsen has lifted chess to a next level, and the latest revolution was caused by AlphaZero.

The bishop pair

Before we start studying positional sacrifices, there are two topics I would like to discuss, which are fundamental parts of the required prior strategic knowledge for appreciating this book. The first of these is the bishop pair. Since a bishop can only move on one colour, two of them complement each other well. As a consequence, bishops should not be lightly exchanged against knights. The bishop pair can be a long-term force, as we will see in the following classical game.

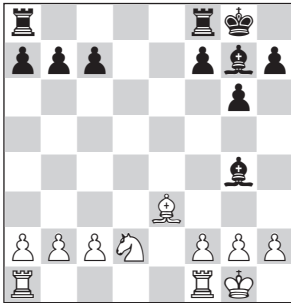
Game 1

Berthold Englisch

William Steinitz

London 1883 (14)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 g6 4.d4 exd4
5.♗xd4 ♙g7 6.♙e3 ♗f6 7.♗c3 0-0
8.0-0 ♗e7 9.♚d2 d5 10.exd5 ♗exd5
11.♗xd5 ♚xd5 12.♙e2 ♗g4 13.♙xg4
♙xg4 14.♗b3 ♚xd2 15.♗xd2



This is a very clean early example of the bishop pair offering a large positional advantage. Black's strategy in this type of endgame can be summarized as follows:

1. Restricting the opponent's minor pieces;
2. Keeping one pair of rooks on the board;
3. Gaining space;
4. Preventing counterplay;
5. Opening the position if possible.

15...♖ad8

Centralization can never hurt, but gaining space with 15...a5 would have been strong as well.

16.c3 ♗fe8 17.♗b3 b6!

Restricting the opponent's minor pieces.

18.h3 ♙e6 19.♗fd1

19.♗d4 would have been a less passive defence.

19...c5!

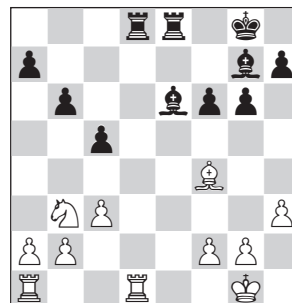
Further restricting White's minor pieces.

20.♙g5 f6!

This may seem to leave ♙g7 passive, but that is missing the point.

Black's dark-squared bishop will be activated at a later stage.

21.♙f4



21...♔f7

In the endgame, the king should play an active part.

22.f3 g5!

Following through with the strategy.

23.♖xd8 ♜xd8

Exchanging exactly one pair of rooks suits Black perfectly well, as it reduces White's counterplay, while keeping enough winning potential.

24.♙e3 h6!

Thematically preparing the advance of the f-pawn.

25.♞e1 f5 26.f4 ♙f6

Keeping the tension. Gaining space with 26...g4 was also fine.

27.g3

27.♘d2 was a better defensive try.

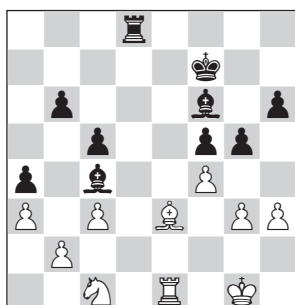
27...a5

Increasing the pressure.

28.♘c1 a4

Gaining more space.

29.a3 ♙c4



Black is achieving total domination.

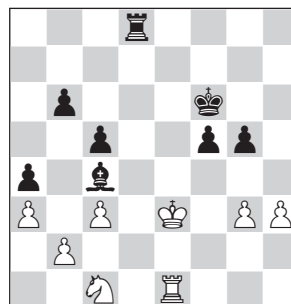
30.♕f2 gxh4!

After systematically improving his position, Steinitz finds a concrete way to break through.

31.♙xf4 ♙g5 32.♙xg5

32.♕f3 ♙xf4 33.♕xf4 is well met by 33...♕f6 followed by ...♞d2.

32...hxg5 33.♕e3 ♕f6



34.h4

This allows a complete liquidation to a winning king and pawn endgame.

34.♞h1 ♕e5 loses as well, due to 35.h4 f4+ and Black is crashing through.

34...gxh4 35.gxh4 ♞e8+ 36.♕f2 ♞xe1 37.♕xe1 ♕e5 38.♘e2 ♙xe2 39.♕xe2 ♕f4!

The decisive move.

40.c4 ♕g4 41.♕e3 f4+ 42.♕e4 f3 43.♕e3 ♕g3 0-1

Conclusion: the bishop pair is a long-term advantage, which is often implicitly present in game analyses, and is therefore important to keep in mind.

The role of the king

In the opening, we generally castle in order to bring the king into safety. In the middlegame we want to keep the king safe, while in the endgame the king should play an active role. The value of the king in the endgame is estimated at 4 points, i.e. stronger than a minor piece and weaker than a rook. Sometimes the king can play an extraordinary role, as we will see in the following famous game.

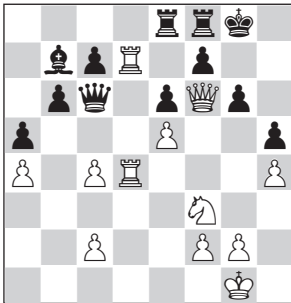
Game 2

Nigel Short 2660

Jan Timman 2630

Tilburg 1991 (4)

1.e4 ♘f6 2.e5 ♘d5 3.d4 d6 4.♘f3 g6
5.♙c4 ♘b6 6.♙b3 ♙g7 7.♚e2 ♘c6
8.0-0 0-0 9.h3 a5 10.a4 dxe5 11.dxe5
♘d4 12.♘xd4 ♚xd4 13.♞e1 e6
14.♘d2 ♘d5 15.♘f3 ♚c5 16.♚e4
♚b4 17.♙c4 ♘b6 18.b3 ♘xc4
19.bxc4 ♞e8 20.♞d1 ♚c5 21.♚h4
b6 22.♙e3 ♚c6 23.♙h6 ♙h8
24.♞d8 ♙b7 25.♞ad1 ♙g7 26.♞8d7
♞f8 27.♙xg7 ♙xg7 28.♞1d4 ♞ae8
29.♚f6+ ♙g8 30.h4 h5



So far the king has been patiently sitting on g1, while White kept improving his other pieces and created a dominant position.

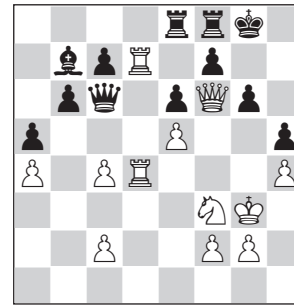
31. ♚h2!

The start of an amazing king march.

31... ♞c8

31...♞c8 loses to the impressive 32.♘g5! ♙xd7 and now 33.g4! leaves Black amazingly helpless to White's direct mating attack.

32. ♙g3 ♞ce8



Nothing special so far, you may think, but now the real point is revealed:

33. ♙f4!

With a board full of pieces, the white king marches all the way to h6 to help checkmating Black.

33... ♙c8 34. ♙g5

Black resigned, as 34...♙h7 loses to 35.♚xg6+.

Conclusion: this game was exceptional, and normally the king will have to wait until the endgame before it can play an active role. Still, it is essential to understand that the king is not just a liability, but has a certain hidden

potential, which can materialize at unexpected moments. By the way, this is a game that every experienced chess player has seen a million times already, but will never cease to awe new generations of chess players. Please bear with

me if you knew it already, since there is amazing new material in store for everyone.

Merijn van Delft
Amsterdam, March 2020

CHAPTER 2

Pawn structure

In this second chapter, we will move from piece play to pawn structure as the predominant theme. Having a superior pawn structure tends to be a long-term advantage, and is therefore a natural theme in the realm of positional sacrifices. In the same way that pieces become more dangerous if they work well together, pawns gain added value if they are well positioned and coordinated.

2.1 Perfect pawn centre

The best known pawn formation is the perfect pawn centre: pawns on e4 and d4 with white or on e5 and d5 with black. If you get this for free, you tend to be automatically better. Since your opponent usually will not give you much for free, a very interesting and fundamental method is to make a small material investment in order to gain the perfect pawn centre. Both the King's Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.f4) and the Queen's Gambit (1.d4 d5 2.c4) are based on this principle. By studying a few examples, both classical and modern, we will see how these well-known opening strategies have evolved over time. The first example is a famous game by the first official World Champion, Wilhelm Steinitz. It is a most impressive early bird among positional sacrifices, since it is daring, imaginative, has a great flow and eventually has a truly modern look to it. Keep in mind that his opponent, Louis Paulsen, was another heavyweight from the early days.

Game 12

William Steinitz

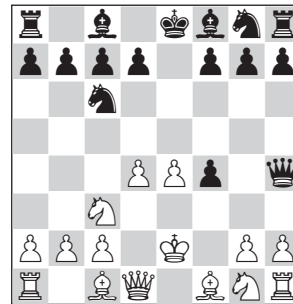
Louis Paulsen

Baden-Baden 1870 (13)

1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.f4

The Vienna version of the King's Gambit.

3...exf4 4.d4 ♚h4+ 5.♙e2



This is the famous Steinitz Gambit. White gives up the right to castle in a fairly radical way, in order to establish a perfect pawn centre. A truly amazing innovative idea. Our modern understanding of chess is based on what the giants of the past have tried and tested. Of course, ways have been established for Black to get nice counterplay a

long time ago, but it is important to understand where we come from.

5...d6

A promising alternative is 5...b6 with the idea ...♙a6+ and ...0-0-0.

6.♟f3 ♘g4 7.♙xf4

Regaining the gambit pawn.

7...0-0-0

7...♙xf3+ 8.♚xf3 was the confident idea. Steinitz was famous for his handling of the king, showing that it is a strong piece in itself.

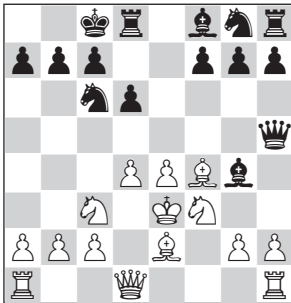
7...f5 8.exf5 0-0-0 was a healthy alternative for Black, breaking down the perfect pawn centre and securing counterplay.

8.♚e3!

A fantastic trademark move, restoring the harmony in White's position.

8...♖h5 9.♙e2

Calm development of the pieces, which is in the spirit of White's positional gambit.



9...♖a5?

A serious mistake, which hands the initiative to White.

With the pawn sacrifice 9...g5 10.♟xg5 ♟f6 Black could have secured good counterplay.

10.a3!

Little pawn moves like these can be highly effective. White prepares a pawn storm on the queenside.

10...♙xf3 11.♚xf3!

A brilliant recapture.

The automatic 11...g5 12.♙g3 ♙g7 with a powerful attack.

11...♗h5+

Now 11...g5 12.b4 wins for White.

12.♚e3 ♗h4 13.b4?

This is a bit too early.

White should have secured his king first with 13.g3 ♗e7 14.♚f2.

13...g5?

This weakens Black's position on the kingside, more than anything else.

13...f5! was Black's last chance at counterplay.

14.♙g3 ♗h6 15.b5

From now on it is one-way traffic.

15...♞ce7 16.♞f1

A pretty move, not only claiming control over the half-open f-file, but freeing the way for the king to walk back to g1.

16...♞f6 17.♚f2 ♞g6

Better fighting chances were offered by 17...♞xe4+ 18.♞xe4 f5, although White can favourably return the piece in several ways.

18.♚g1

Mission accomplished. Now it looks as if White has castled, with a winning positional advantage.

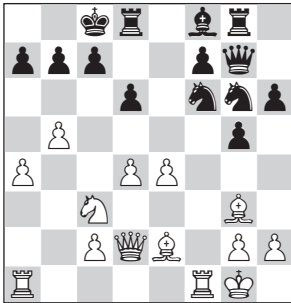
18...♗g7

Modern players would have tried the more active 18...♞f4, but it does not change much.

19.♗d2 h6 20.a4

White dominates the entire board.

20...♖g8



21.b6!

This pawn sacrifice has become a standard procedure to open files.

21...axb6 22.♖xf6!

Gallery play.

The simple immediate 22.a5 won easily as well.

22...♖xf6 23.♔g4+ ♖b8 24.♘d5

♖g7 25.a5

Black is helpless.

25...f5

25...b5 26.a6 wins as well, as Black has no pieces to defend his king.

26.axb6 cxb6 27.♘xb6 ♘e7

On 27...fxg4, 28.♖c3 checkmates.

28.exf5 ♖f7 29.f6 ♘c6 30.c4 ♘a7

31.♖a2

The fight is over, all of White's pieces are working at full strength.

31...♘b5 32.♘d5 ♖xd5 33.cxd5

♘d4 34.♖a7+ ♖c7 35.♖c1+ ♘c6

36.♖xc6# 1-0

Vladimir Kramnik and Veselin Topalov had a fierce rivalry during the second half of their careers. At some point, whoever had White, would win in great style. The following game is good example.

Game 13

Veselin Topalov

2780

Vladimir Kramnik

2795

Wijk aan Zee 2008 (9)

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6

Taking immediately with 2...dxc4 is not as effective as against the King's Gambit, since White has no problems regaining the pawn and his king is safe.

3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 e6

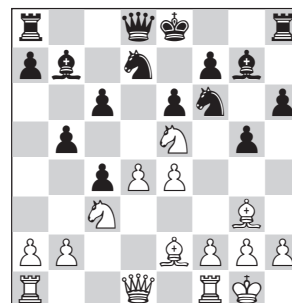
The Semi-Slav is a potentially very sharp opening, as we will soon see.

5.♔g5 h6 6.♔h4 dxc4 7.e4 g5 8.♔g3 b5

This is the starting position of the Anti-Moscow Gambit. White has a perfect pawn centre and the safer king, as long-term compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

9.♔e2 ♖b7 10.0-0 ♘bd7 11.♘e5 ♔g7

Personally, I have always considered 11...h5 to be the more practical option.



12.♘xf7!?

This spectacular positional piece sacrifice made headlines around the chess world in those days.

12.♘xd7 ♘xd7 13.♔d6 is the main line.

25...♖ad8!

Bringing the final piece into play.

26.♔e1

After 26.♔a4 very strong is 26...♘f5.

26...♖d3 27.♔f2 ♘f3!

Black can play as he wishes, but this is the most convincing, in the spirit of the position. 28.♙xd3 ♘xh2 is mate.

28.♖h1 ♖de3

Completing the domination.

29.♖hg1 ♘h8

Emphasizing that White can't move.

30.♖h1 b5! 0-1

Finishing in style. Once the white knight is dislocated, everything collapses.

We will now look at one more game with the King's Gambit, before we put it aside as a museum piece. While the opening is objectively not very good, it did play a major role in the history of chess, in exploring the limits of what is possible and what is not.

Game 35

Manuel Bosboom

Erik Teichmann

Ramsgate 1984

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.♘f3 g5

Of many lines, this has always been regarded as the main one.

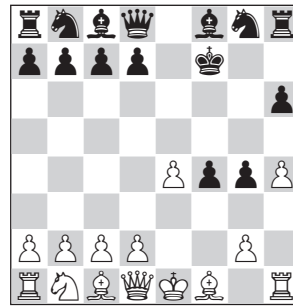
4.h4 g4 5.♘g5

5.♘e5 is the alternative.

5...h6 6.♘xf7!?

A daring piece sacrifice, which is still tricky to meet over the board, if you are not well prepared.

6...♙xf7



This position was already known in the 18th century, maybe even earlier.

7.♘c3

This positional interpretation of the position is rather modern though, and was first played by Glazkov in 1975, as far as I can see.

7.♙c4+ is also met by the typical pawn sacrifice 7...d5 which serves to ease Black's development.

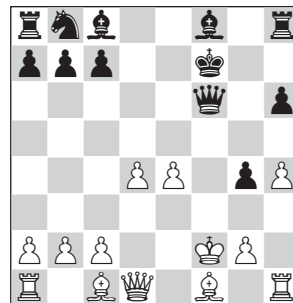
7...d5 8.d4 f3

After 8...♘f6 it is doubtful that White has enough compensation for the piece.

9.♘xd5 ♘f6 10.♘xf6 f2+?

This is a serious mistake, after which White gets very nice play for the piece. Correct was 10...♔xf6 and Black has the upper hand.

11.♙xf2 ♔xf6+



12. ♖g3!

The king is remarkably comfortable here and White's development will be very fast now.

12... ♟c6

12... ♟e6 may have been the best try.

13. ♟c4+

The immediate 13.e5 was strong.

13... ♖e8 14.e5 ♜d8?

This fails tactically, and gives White a winning position.

Black could have more or less kept the balance with 14... ♜g6.

15. ♜d3!

The key move, getting full control over the position.

15... ♜e7

15... ♟xd4 16. ♜g6+ ♟d7 17.e6+ is a disaster for Black; if 15... ♜xd4 16. ♜g6+ ♟d8 17. ♞d1! wins the queen because of 17... ♜xd1 18. ♟g5+.

16. ♜g6+

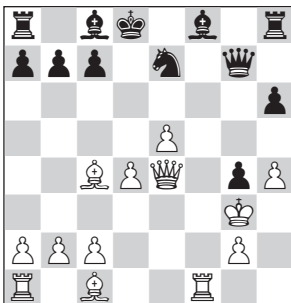
The immediate 16. ♞f1 was the most accurate.

16... ♟d8 17. ♞f1 ♜g7

Black's last chance to fight back was 17... ♟d7.

18. ♜e4

Keeping full control over the position.

18... ♟e7**19.h5!**

This is how it works: consistently take away squares from your opponent.

19... ♖e8 20. ♟e3

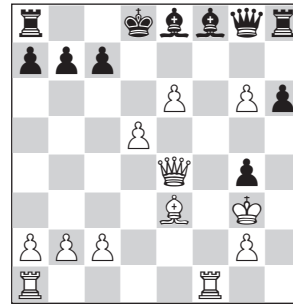
White is not yet interested in winning the queen with 20. ♞f7 but rather enjoys dominating the position.

20... ♜h7 21. ♟f7+ ♟d8 22. ♟g6

Nicely using the outpost on g6.

22... ♜g8 23.d5

Taking away further squares from Black.

23... ♟d7 24.e6 ♟xg6 25.hxg6 ♟e8**26. ♞f7!**

This move flows naturally from what happened before. White turns the piece sacrifice into a rook sacrifice.

26... ♟xf7 27.exf7 ♟d6+ 28. ♖xg4 ♜f8

Black can hardly breathe.

29. ♟d4 c5 30. ♟f6+ ♟c7 31. ♜e6

31. ♖h5 would have nicely fit in the picture as well.

31...h5+ 32. ♖h3 ♜h6 33. ♞f1 ♞hc8**34.g7 ♜h7 35. ♟e5**

White calmly finishes the game.

35... ♟xe5 36. ♜xe5+ ♟b6 37.f8 ♜

1-0

36. ♖xe4!

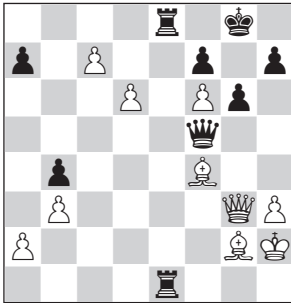
After any other move Black would be fine, but this second exchange sacrifice kills all counterplay.

36... ♗xe4 37.d5

The white bishops are defending the king and supporting the pawns, and in this respect they are not inferior to the rooks.

37... ♖ce8 38.d6 ♖e1+ 39. ♖h2

White has fully organized his position.

39... ♗f5 40. ♗g3 g6**41. ♗g5**

Keeping it simple.

41... ♗xg5

If 41... ♗e6 42.d7 ♗xd7 43. ♗h6 wins.

42. ♗xg5 ♖d1 43. ♗c6 ♖e2+ 44. ♖g3

Black is running out of checks: **1-0**

We already know that the Sicilian Dragon is full of positional exchange sacrifices. Now we will see that they can even be combined.

Game 83

Sergey Karjakin 2727

Teimour Radjabov 2744

Sochi 2008 (13)

1.e4 c5 2. ♖f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4. ♖xd4 ♖f6 5. ♖c3 g6 6. ♗e3 ♗g7 7.f3 0-0

8. ♗d2 ♖c6 9. ♗c4 ♗d7 10.0-0 ♖c8**11. ♗b3 ♖e5 12. ♖b1**

12.h4 we saw in the game Nyköpp-Soltis.

12...a6

The more straightforward 12... ♖c4 13. ♗xc4 ♖xc4 is met by 14.g4, and here after 14...b5 15.b3 ♖c5 White has the tactical blow 16. ♖e6! which started to put the Dragon under serious pressure in the late 1990s.

13.h4 h5 14.g4

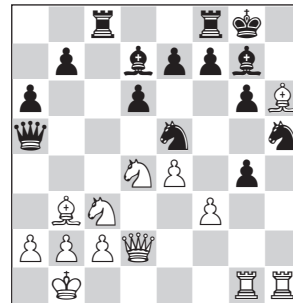
This is the hardcore approach, trying to slay the Dragon, as Bobby Fischer used to call it.

14...hxg4 15.h5

The standard follow-up, trying to open files against the black king.

15... ♖xh5 16. ♖dg1

Usually, one rook is needed to keep central control, but here White is going all in.

16... ♗a5 17. ♗h6

The exchange of dark-squared bishops would instantly give White a winning attack.

17... ♗f6!

The first thematic positional exchange sacrifice. The minor pieces are more essential in the defence than the rooks.

18.fxg4 ♖xc4 19.♔xf8?

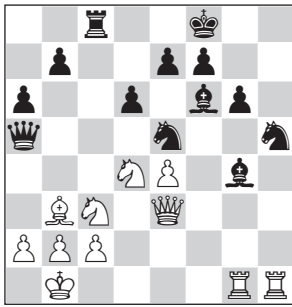
A strange materialistic decision, after which all of Black's problems are gone.

19.♔f4 and 19.♔g5 are the critical moves here, with highly complicated, interesting play.

19...♖xf8

The first relieve: having an unopposed dark-squared bishop makes Black's position fairly secure.

20.♖e3



20...♖xc3!

Soon after the first typical positional exchange sacrifice, the second one follows, everything played in true Dragon spirit. Black eliminates the option of a ♖d5 jump, taking the sting out of White's play.

21.♖xc3

21.bxc3 ♔g7 and all files on the kingside remain closed.

21...♖xc3

Black has no problem exchanging queens, as his compensation is of a positional nature.

22.bxc3 e6

Further restricting White's minor pieces.

23.♔c4

Finding a creative way to defend.

23...♖xc4 24.♖xg4 ♔e5

Black has two pawns for two exchanges and a superior pawn structure. As long as the rooks do not find anything to attack, Black is comfortable.

25.♖g2 b5

25...♖e7 is a natural alternative.

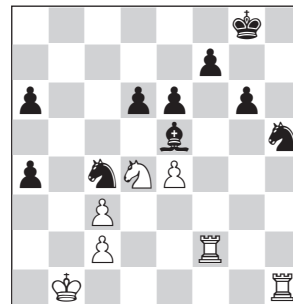
26.♖f2

White could have tried the immediate 26.a4.

26...♖g8

Black wants to prevent the white rook from entering, but the immediate 26...♖f6 would have been strong.

27.a4 bxa4



28.♖a2?

White's position is difficult to play. 28.♖c6 ♔xc3 and only then 29.♖a2 was the right way to play.

28...♖f6 29.♖e2 d5

Now the tactics start to work in Black's favour.

30.exd5 ♖xd5 31.♖h3

White is forced to return an exchange.

31...♔xd4

Good judgement, giving up the strong Dragon bishop.

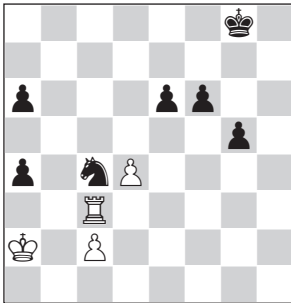
32.cxd4 ♖f4 **33.♖eh2** ♖hx3 **34.♖hx3**
g5!

The black kingside pawns are starting to roll.

35.♖g3

After **35.♖c3** ♖d2! and now **36.♖c8+** ♔g7 **37.c4** it is amazing how strong the g-pawn is after **37...g4!**.

35...f6 **36.♖c3**



36...♖d2!

The knight is working wonders.

37.♖d3 ♖e4 **38.c4**

One would think that White should have enough counterplay with his own passed pawn, and that his rook should be worth something. In reality the black knight is doing a great job, and the black king can help stopping the c-pawn, while the white king remains passive.

38...♔f7 **39.c5** g4?

The correct move-order was **39...♔e7** and the c-pawn is going nowhere.

40.c6 ♔e7 **41.d5**

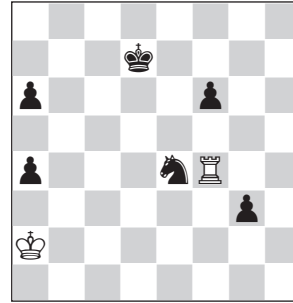
Karjakin is one of the best defenders in the world, and finds a way to stay in the game.

41...exd5 **42.c7** ♔d7 **43.♖xd5+** ♔xc7

44.♖f5

Disturbing Black's coordination.

44...g3 **45.♖f4** ♔d7



46.♔b2?

This loses after all. White could have made a draw with **46.♖xe4** f5 **47.♖e1** f4 and now the instructive key move **48.♖g1!**, stopping the pawns from moving any further. Both kings will head for the kingside, and with accurate play White can hold.

46...♔e6!

Sacrificing the knight in order to fully activate the king, who basically takes over the function of the knight.

47.♖xe4+ ♔f5 **48.♖e1** ♔g4

Thanks to the a-pawns, Black wins.

49.♔c2 g2 **50.♔d2** ♔g3 **51.♔e2**

And now the finishing touch on the other wing:

51...a3 **52.♖a1** a2 **0-1**

The following game is a special occurrence for several reasons. It is a recent game at the highest possible level. Although the game was highly untypical right from the start and relatively difficult for both players, they hardly made any mistakes. On top of everything, they made a maximum amount of exchange sacrifices.

Game 84

Ding Liren 2813**Magnus Carlsen** 2835

Wijk aan Zee 2019 (1)

1. ♘f3 ♖f6 2. g3 b5 3. d4 e6 4. ♙g5

With this move the game is quickly heading for new territory.

4. ♙g2 ♙b7 is still normal.

4...c5 5.d5

Grabbing some space, although White will not be able to maintain this outpost.

5... ♖a5+ 6. ♙d2 ♖b6 7. dxe6 fxe6

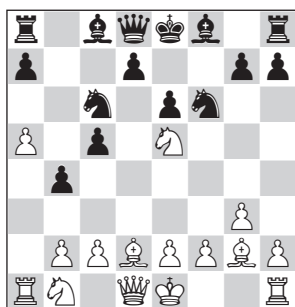
Keeping an asymmetrical structure.

8.a4 b4 9.a5 ♖d8

After this untypical intermezzo, both sides now continue their development, although it does not take long for the next unusual thing to happen.

10. ♙g2 ♘c6 11. ♘e5

Ding Liren is not afraid to enter the complications.

**11... ♘e5!**

Carlsen takes up the challenge and sacrifices the exchange.

12. ♙xa8 d5

A very uncommon situation has arisen, which is difficult to judge. White's fianchetto bishop is cut off

from the other pieces, but will not be trapped.

13.a6 ♙d7 14. ♙b7

The bishop has found a stable square.

14... ♙d6 15. ♙g5 ♘f7

From Kovalev-Nakamura in Chapter 1 we have learned that this can be a very good square for the knight.

16. ♙xf6

Giving up the dark-squared bishop in order to increase the pressure on the light squares.

16... ♖xf6 17. ♘d2 0-0 18.0-0

At last, both sides have brought their respective kings into safety.

18... ♖xb2

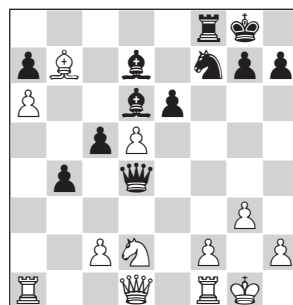
Black now has a pawn for the exchange and the position is dynamically balanced.

19.e4

Maximizing the pressure on the light squares.

19... ♖d4

Black has another creative idea in mind.

20.exd5**20...e5!**

A positional pawn sacrifice, keeping the white bishop shut out of the game.

21. ♖b3 ♚e4 **22.** ♗d3 ♜g4

Black keeps avoiding the exchange of queens, in order to keep chances against the white king.

23. f3 ♜h5 **24.** ♗d2

White is working hard to create stable squares for his pieces.

24... ♗g5 **25.** ♖c6

Now there is a route for the bishop, back into the game.

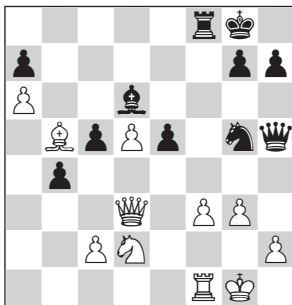
25... ♖h3

The logical reply.

26. ♖b5!

A positional exchange sacrifice in return.

26... ♖xf1 **27.** ♜xf1



Black now needs to do something, otherwise he is worse.

27... ♜xf3!

The third exchange sacrifice of the game. Admittedly, it is tactical.

28. ♗xf3 e4 **29.** ♜e3

White keeps a cool head.

29... ♗xf3+ **30.** ♜xf3!

The fourth exchange sacrifice of the game, neutralizing Black's attacking play.

30... ♜xf3

Now the queens are exchanged as well, with complete equality.

31. ♜xf3 exf3 **32.** ♖f2 ½-½

At the very start of the new decade, the running gag amongst my teammates was: you better hurry, if you still want to make it into Merijn's book. Obviously, Erwin l'Ami already scored a few hits in the previous chapters, but in the very first round of Wijk aan Zee 2020, he played a beautiful game that fits perfectly in the current chapter.

Game 85

Erwin l'Ami 2606

Anton Smirnov 2604

Wijk aan Zee 2020 (1)

1. d4 d5 **2.** c4 c6 **3.** ♗f3 ♗f6 **4.** e3

This is called the Slow Slav, which is a solid universal weapon for White, to deal with all different versions of the Slav Defence at once.

4... ♖g4

4... ♖f5 is the other main line.

5. ♜b3

White's main alternative is to start with 5.h3.

5... ♜b6 **6.** ♗e5 ♖f5 **7.** cxd5 ♜xb3

8. axb3 ♗xd5 **9.** ♖d3 ♖xd3 **10.** ♗xd3

This quiet position seems to be a bit easier to play for White.

10... ♗a6 **11.** ♖d2 e6 **12.** ♖e2

Since the queens are exchanged, there is no need to castle anymore, and it is better to keep the king in the centre.

12... ♖e7

12... ♗ab4 was the most consistent.

13. ♗a3 0-0

For Black it also made sense to stay flexible with the king, and rather put one of the knights on b4.