

Atle Grønn

Games and Goals

The story of Simen Agdestein and his time

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Contents

Prologue – Foreshadowing from a hotel room.	7
PART 1 Family background and environment (1974-1982)	11
1 Hooked on chess	12
2 Paternal inheritance.	21
3 Maternal inheritance	30
4 Conquering the pond.	35
PART 2 Youngest in Norway, youngest in the world (1982-1988)	41
5 Teenager in a grown-ups' world	42
6 Facing the world elite.	59
7 Nordic battles.	74
8 The title that got away	91
9 The year in Dreamland	101
10 Free and adrift.	111
PART 3 Chess, football or life (1988-1993)	117
11 The impossible choice.	118
12 Striking abilities	124
13 Unfree	147
14 Meeting God	151
15 Flashes of greatness.	157
16 Farewell to the good life?.	168
17 The fall.	174
PART 4 An almost ordinary chess player (1994-2023)	185
18 'What do I do now?'	186
19 With and versus Carlsen	195
Epilogue	219
Simen Agdestein's greatest victories	225
The chronology of the chess player	253
Simen the footballer in the press	265
Sources	267
Index	269

PROLOGUE

Foreshadowing from a hotel room

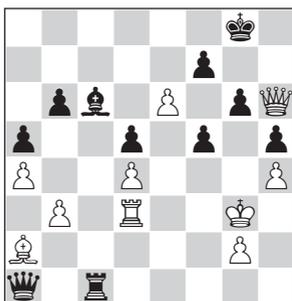
‘I know I am one of the greatest chess talents in history. I was born special, and I have to learn to live with, accept that. I am the one chosen to sacrifice for – and to be sacrificed to – chess.’ (Simen Agdestein, diary entry, Evry, France – 23 May, 1987)

Scarcely two months later, optimism had turned to despair: ‘I hereby disclaim any responsibility for what I might write. I am so angry I could burst. You may not know what it means, but I have just lost on time in a winning position.’

Those last lines above were written in a hotel room in Baguio in the Philippines during the World Junior Championship in 1987, addressed to a girl named Liv. The letter was never sent, but wound up, like so much from that time, in the attic of a childhood home in Asker.

When I was granted access to these boxes, I understood that Simen Agdestein was just the Chess Player I was searching for. Norway’s legendary football trainer Egil ‘Drillo’ Olsen imparted to a young Simen the wisdom of the three types of person: those who don’t play cards, those who play cards – and Card Players. Drillo was in the latter category when it came to 52 cards, Simen with 32 pieces on 64 squares.

Modern chess may well blossom on the Internet, but without the solitary despair in a hotel room after losing on time on the 40th move, the game is much the poorer. Readers must picture the Baguio hotel room for themselves, and Liv must also be left to the imagination, but the position, which in this case is quite complicated, is the first diagram of this book.



**Del Campo – Simen Agdestein,
World Junior Championship 1987 (1-0, White
won on time)**

Black has a winning position after 40...♙e8!
41.e7 ♖f1!, when White’s king is mated before
Black’s.

Chess is blessed in that we can, several decades later, freeze the action and capture the moment where Simen lost the game on time. In this way, chess history is completely unlike other forms of sporting history.

The competition can be relived on the page of a book as if one was an eyewitness to the moves.

It is no secret to anyone in Norwegian chess that Simen Agdestein is an exceptional player, but just as important for our story is that Simen also had a passion for the game and a vulnerability in his temperament that characterizes true Chess Players of all levels. His story is full of hope and doubts as well as inner and outer demons that many will recognize when we go behind the moves and see what Chess Players really think about. And by that, I don't mean chess variations.

This is a book about chess the way it was. About chess before computers changed the game globally, and before Magnus Carlsen made the board game public property in Norway. This is the story about chess from the end of the 1970s and onwards, seen through the undoubtedly best and most interesting chess player Norway produced before Carlsen. If Carlsen is to Norwegian chess what Vishy Anand is for Indian chess, Simen is more like a mysterious Sultan Khan, the man from Punjab who beat Capablanca in the 1930s before he suddenly didn't want to compete further in this dangerous board game, and ended his days as an 'ordinary' man in Pakistan.

Simen Agdestein was chosen to live out our dream. He had the ability, and had to bear the burden for the rest of us, averagely gifted woodpushers in Norwegian chess. It was Simen who would spend the 1980s sitting alone in a hotel room, pondering a complicated 'adjournment', and the meaning of life.

He loved chess, but perhaps not in the way the reader believes. Simen was no Luzhin in Nabokov's *The Defense*, an obsessed chess talent with no interest in life beyond the board. Simen had to make impossible choices between life's temptations and his calling as a chess player. The harder chess forces in Norway tried to drag him to the board, the more he resisted.

And then there's football. Simen's mother has kept thousands of newspaper clippings from that time. It's not all the folders with old chess columns that make the biggest impression today on me as a chess player, but the mostly forgotten football clippings.

In 1988, ten years before 'Drillo' Olsen led Norway to a 2-1 victory over Brazil in the FIFA World Cup in Marseille, he was Simen's coach for the club Lyn in Oslo: 'Simen is gold,' Drillo repeatedly told the Norwegian press back then. But the deeper insights of Drillo, a true intellectual and football nerd who was known as the 'mad football professor', were not always properly understood and appreciated before his tremendous success with the national team.

In 1990, the Norwegian newspaper *Arbeiderbladet* had a full-page with the headline ‘Simen doesn’t know how good he is...’ The quote came from Simen’s new coach at Lyn, Erling Hokstad. Hokstad, who was usually quite modest in his assessments, continued: ‘I have never seen a striker of Simen’s caliber. He is undoubtedly the best in Norway. He could have played for any European top club. Simen is something quite extraordinary.’

I can’t say that I knew Simen Agdestein the person well at that time, even if I played in the same club, was in the same room, met him over the board, exchanged a few words with him, and knew everything said and written about him. Nevertheless, I can’t call the protagonist of this book ‘Agdestein’. ‘Carlsen’ is fine, that is another world, a different generation, and gradually, a completely different, unique story. I am a bit uncomfortable writing ‘Magnus’, ‘Bobby’ or ‘Garry’. But with ‘Simen’ it’s different. Simen is my youth.

Yet two things prevented a close friendship between us then: I was four years younger, and I looked up to Simen as a star the likes of which Norwegian chess would never experience again. With time, age, and of course, Carlsen, Simen’s star would glitter less brightly, and he became one of the pieces of Norwegian chess, like the rest of us. And we became chess friends.

The idea of this book arose in 2019, when we had a chance meeting in the Oslo neighborhood of Bislett, the place I grew up, and a short stroll from the Oslo chess club on Bogstadveien. Simen was back in the apartment he had rented out for a quarter century. When he literally fled – in dramatic fashion – from the area in the early 1990s, his rating was at its peak, while his quality of life had reached an absolute nadir.

Our hero’s personal anti-climax, caught in a kind of black hole, becomes a kind of climax in the story of Norway’s first grandmaster. ‘We can end the story there,’ Simen said to me. ‘No, let’s follow you up to the duels against Carlsen,’ I replied. There is a direct line from mentor Agdestein to pupil Carlsen: The pair constitute the Norwegian school of chess, where chess is not a science, but a game, and sport.

Simen gave me the boxes from his attic in Asker, Myrabakken 27, which also included 300 curled, unpublished scoresheets – a treasure trove of Norwegian chess. With already published games, his life’s work now consists of about 1800 tournament encounters – or one game, an exam, every day for five years.

This sounds like a lot, but the total is actually unusually low for a modern grandmaster that has soon competed for 50 years. When he was at his best, months could pass without us seeing him. When Simen actually

sat down at the board it was a special occasion for Norwegian chess. In those days, it was all we needed to be thrilled. For me, happiness was complete if I, as a chess mad teenager, also managed to get hold of the game to play through.

This is also the story of pieces outside the chessboard – from teammates on the national football team, to world champions Simen has met: Smyslov, Tal, Spassky, Karpov, Kasparov, Kramnik, Anand and Carlsen. And, of course, the other legends, like Korchnoi, Ivanchuk, or Shirov. There are those from the Soviet, analytical chess school of Polugaevsky, Salov and Bareev. And there is the battle for the West, against Hübner and Timman, or the English chess wave of Miles, Short and Adams, as well as the fight for Nordic supremacy against ‘the four Icelanders’ and legends like Danish Bent Larsen and Swedish Ulf Andersson.

The book is also a chess journey to local Norwegian conditions, where the pieces awaken in a gymnasium, or a classroom via chess characters such as the philosopher, the second and the fruit wholesaler – personalities who have formed Simen and created Norwegian chess culture.

When the reader encounters an unknown name, think of the mosaic in a Russian novel, such as Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, or *Notes from Underground* – to mention three classics that brush up against our story. *The Brothers Karamazov* becomes in our translation *The Brothers Agdestein*. Our minor characters, a mediocre or great chess master, give life to the protagonist. The names in themselves are not important, but the various characters together form the chess that used to be.

Tolstoy’s technical digressions of military strategy in *War and Peace* become for us digressions in the form of chess diagrams, where each game fragment makes up the grand story of *Win, Loss and Draw*.

But first and foremost we shall dig down into the mind of a young chess player. The chess player is always alone with their thoughts. What, now, is the meaning of this, and where does the path forward lead – if chess is just an escape? With us on the journey we have Simen’s dusty ‘notes from underground’, recorded in the margins in the course of a chess life, and stashed away in an attic for over 30 years.

‘I have just discovered something that helps. To write. I can’t quite free myself from the thought that one day someone is going to read what I write. But I will try not to let that prevent me from writing freely, exactly what I think. One day this will be valuable.’ (22 May, 1987, rapid chess tournament in Evry, France)

PART 3

Chess, football or life (1988-1993)

CHAPTER 11

The impossible choice

Apart from his games, what were his goals? In life and elsewhere? The time had come to decide. Up to now, nothing was spoiled – as long as Simen made the ‘correct’ choice. But what exactly was that? Right for us, or right for him?

Simen could still find his permanent spot in the world elite of chess for the next 20 years. Third place in the hierarchy after Kasparov and Karpov seemed achievable. Even though he might feel himself as limitless as Carlsen would in his way to the top 20 years later, for Simen there was really only one measure of success – Kasparov.

Was football a help or a hindrance for his chess? And how good was he, really, at football? According to legendary trainer Drillo Olsen, Simen was unique, without perhaps Simen understanding that himself. And all the while, that sneaky thought kept bothering the young man: Was he happy?

‘I can’t choose between my left and my right arm,’ Simen said of the choice between chess and football. The small, huge choice that Simen took, late in the summer of 1988 was, in retrospect, one of the most fascinating I have seen from a top athlete and national celebrity. He chose the third path, as an anonymous university student at Oslo Blindern.

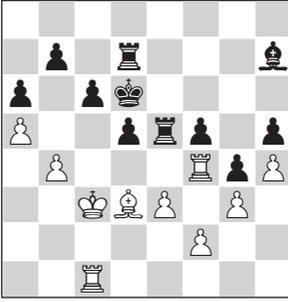
But neither chess nor football would let go of Simen. He became a state scholarship holder thanks to chess and a national team player in football. This idyll could hardly last for long?

No respect for wobbly ‘puddings’

The Norwegian championship in Asker in July 1988 was my debut in the elite section. I experienced close up how Simen played from another planet.

It was of course important for Asker Schakklubb to get our major star and former local resident to play in the Norwegian championship. So he received special treatment, scheduling his first round game against Ole Christian Moen in a way that did not collide with his away match for Lyn against Eik-Tønsberg in the second football division. Chess adjusted itself, so that Simen could play both here and there.

In round two, he brushed aside Rune Djurhuus’ King’s Indian, and in the third round Simen won with Black in a completely locked position against his old rival Berge Østenstad. It was pure magic how Østenstad’s fortress crumbled against one of Simen’s trademarks: the ‘bad’ light-squared bishop.



**Berge Østenstad – Simen Agdestein,
Asker 1988**

51...♖e4!? 52.♙xe4 dxe4. The position is still objectively equal, but at least there is some imbalance and a reason to play on (0-1, 65 moves).

With Black in the fifth round against reigning Norwegian champion Jonathan Tisdall, Simen surprised with a Najdorf Sicilian, and laid down an invitation to the spectacular Gothenburg Variation. Simen used a lot of time, and it was clear that he didn't have a very good idea of what he was doing.

Tisdall was completely surprised, and after great efforts, managed to dig out a double piece sacrifice from his memory, first a knight on e6, then a bishop on b5.



**Jonathan Tisdall – Simen Agdestein,
Asker 1988.**

Gothenburg Variation.

The bishop move from f1 to b5 creates the threat of castling short, with a deadly check to the black king. The game continued 13...♙g7? 14.0-0 ♘e5 15.♖f6? (as the Soviet chess school demonstrated anno 1955, White's attack is decisive after 15.♙g3!) 15...♙xf6 16.gxf6+ ♙h7 17.f7 ♖f8 18.♙e8 ♙d7! 0-1.

This is real chess history! In round 14 of the Interzonal tournament in Gothenburg 1955, this variation, which begins with the black pawn move to g5, got its baptism of fire. A few years of Argentine preparation lay behind the move. The Argentine trio Najdorf, Panno and Pilnik all had Black in this round, against three Soviet grandmasters, Keres, Spassky and Geller respectively.

Efim Geller from Odessa took charge, sank deep into thought, and showed the way by finding 13.♙b5!! – the bishop move that the Argentinians had overlooked in their analysis. Spassky and Keres had a discreet glance at the neighboring board and repeated the formula: 3-0 to the USSR over Argentina.

Somewhere in Siberia a Russian amateur worked out that the move 13...♞h7!! should still have been able to hold the balance for Black. In the 1958 Interzonal tournament, three years after Gothenburg, an odd situation arose when then 15-year-old Bobby Fischer went swimming on a rest day with the 20 years older Yugoslav star Svetozar Gligoric. The young Fischer mentioned that he had seen the improvement ...♞h7 in a Soviet chess magazine. What did Gligoric think about that? They analyzed the position together, and when they later met in round 21, Fischer played precisely that, ♞h7!, with a draw in 32 moves being the result.

However, the three Argentinians all chose the more natural 13...♙g7? as did Simen, who didn't know the Fischer story. Fortune favored the brave when Tisdall couldn't remember the details of the Soviet solution, and Simen won just five moves later.



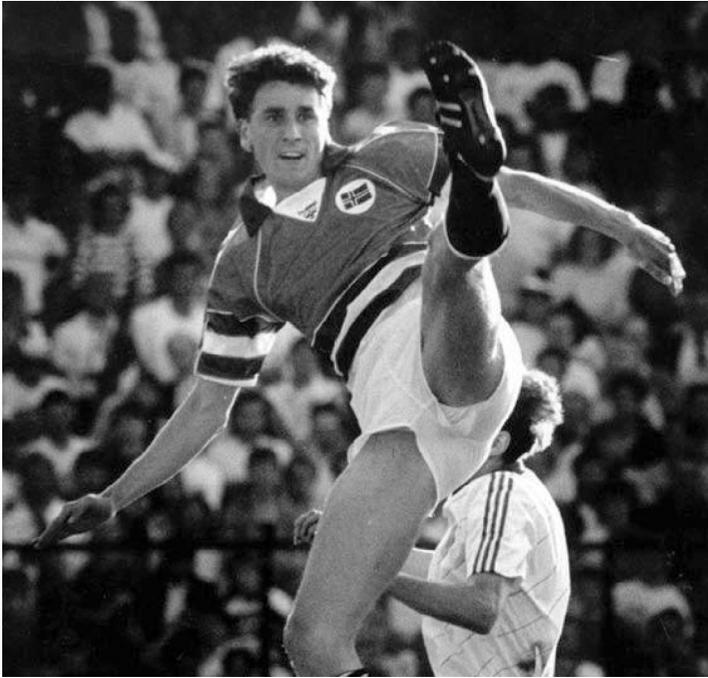
Jonathan Tisdall (b. 1958). Norwegian-American, with Japanese mother and Irish father. Norway's second grandmaster in 1995. Energy-intensive playing style based on arduous calculation. Chess author and trainer. Translator from Norwegian to English of this book.

If the goal was to win a game against a slightly weaker player, the choice of the Gothenburg variation approached madness. Not because the moves were objectively bad, but because Simen didn't know what he was doing.

The point was that Simen threw himself into the deep end to fight boredom and conformity. He sought out Tisdall's home turf, variation crunching. Later Carlsen has said that this is something that he has learned from Simen: One should constantly test out types of position that one doesn't know from before. This searching and curious, universal style is part of the core of the Norwegian school of chess.

Without knowing it, Simen could appear arrogant when playing against us Norwegians. With one exception he was better than everyone at everything. Øgaard was a strong positional player, but Simen was better. Østenstad was good at defense, but Simen was better. Tisdall was a good calculator, but Simen was better. The only thing that could give Simen something extra was Helmers' theoretical expertise.

Gausel, known for his colorful metaphors and allegories, painted the



The footballer, defending the Norwegian colors in 1989.



Reidar Jørgensen (1904-1985), Simen's maternal grandfather, was the first Norwegian to run the 1500 meters under 4 minutes.



Isak Steinberg (1889-1960), Simen's biological paternal grandfather, had a dramatic life.



The first moves of Simen in the Lilliput class (under-15) of the 1974 Norwegian Championship. (Photo: private collection)



Successful in junior sports contests. (Photo: private collection)



The Bondi school team in Asker. Simen on the far right next to older brother Espen. (Photo: private collection)



Simen and Nigel Short on an excursion during the 1981 Junior World Championship in Mexico. (Photo: private collection)

PART 5

Simen Agdestein's greatest victories

This collection of games is representative of Simen's play at its best. They reflect his style with White and Black, his calculation skills and strategic profundities, his attacking chess, as well as to some degree, his materialism and his endgame technique.

In order to preserve the historical context I have brought forth the oldest published, original annotations. Most of the analysis is Simen's own from *Norsk Sjakkblad* (NSb). I have checked all of the moves with the engine analysts of today, so I can attest to the quality of play, but I don't want to sully the text with new computer evaluations. I have instead quietly removed various side variations from the original analyses when these do not feel relevant or up to the standards of modern readers and machines.

Game 1 Hort-Agdestein

A brutally simple attack against an experienced world-class player, from the 1984 Olympiad where Simen took his first GM-norm as a 17-year-old. This is classic and classical play in a sound Nimzo-Indian, the way strong players often win with Black against weaker opposition. What is most sensational about this game is that such an approach worked against such a strong player.

Nimzo-Indian Defence E32

Vlastimil Hort Simen Agdestein

Thessaloniki Olympiad 1984

Agdestein's annotations from NSb 9-10/1984

1.d4 ♘f6 **2.c4** e6 **3.♘c3** ♙b4
4.♙c2 0-0 **5.a3** ♙xc3+ **6.♙xc3** b6
7.♘f3 ♙b7 **8.e3** c5!?

This is a very popular and respected variation, but this move has only been played in a few known games.



9.dxc5

Hort criticized himself for this move after the game. It is difficult to assess it as a definite error.

9...bxc5 10.♙e2

Pachman's recommendation.

10...♘e4 11.♙c2 f5 12.b3 ♘c6



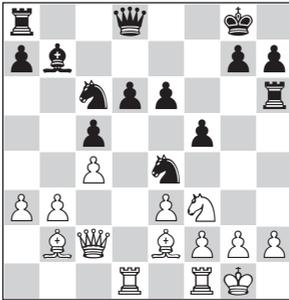
13.0-0

White should have considered 13. ♖b2, but then Black could have considered 12... ♖f6 on the previous move.

13... ♖f6

The attack will be strong.

14. ♖b2 ♖h6 15. ♖ad1 d6



16. ♖fe1

This looks a bit strange, but on 16. ♗e1 there comes 16... ♖h4 17. h3 and White can't get rid of the knight on e4 by playing his pawn to f3 without surrendering the g3-square.

16... ♖e7 17. ♖f1 ♗d8!

The knight will be well placed on f7, and 18.g3 is hindered due to 18... ♗xg3.

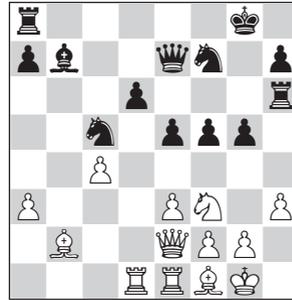


18. ♖e2 ♗f7 19. b4

White's plan to fianchetto doesn't work: 19.g3 ♗fg5 20. ♗xg5 ♗xg5

21. ♖g2 ♖xg2 22. ♖xg2 ♖b7+ 23. f3 ♗xf3!

19...g5 20.bxc5 ♗xc5! 21.h3 e5



22. ♖d5?!

Desperation. A more interesting attempt was 22.g4!?

22... ♖xd5 23.cxd5 g4 24. ♗d2

The rest of the game is an execution.

24...gxh3 25.g3 ♖b7 26. ♖c1 e4 27. ♖c4 ♗e5 28. ♖a2 h2+ 29. ♗h1 ♗cd3 30. ♖xd3 ♗xd3 31. ♖f1 ♖c8 32. ♖a1 ♖g7 33. ♖b1 ♖c3 34. ♖b7 ♖xc1

White resigned.

Game 2 Agdestein-Schüssler

A perfectly executed kingside attack from the Nordic Championship in 1985, where Simen took his third GM-norm and became the youngest grandmaster in the world. There are many pieces hanging in many variations, and as always in those days Simen (and his opponent) were in time pressure, but it is precisely in such situations that Simen could forget time and space and become hyper-concentrated.

