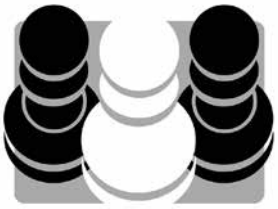
How I Became a Chess Grandmaster

By

Vinay Bhat



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Preface

Chess has been a major part of my life since I was about 6 years old. I quickly fell in love with the game and shot up to set the record for youngest National Master (NM) in the US at the age of 10½ years. I continued to play regularly until my senior year of High School, becoming an International Master (IM) just before turning 16. After a break from regular tournament play for almost five years, I started playing again after graduating from college and was awarded the International Grandmaster (GM) title at the age of 24.

I left the professional chess arena three years later, and I've switched over to the Data Science field (broadly, Statistics, Machine Learning, Analytics, and Data Engineering). My roles there have run the gamut from entry-level to executive and keeping pace in an evolving field has been a fun challenge.

Luckily, working on chess taught me a lot about how to learn, and my progress in the Data Science field has led me to rethink some of my previous chess training choices. While I've achieved a lot in the chess world, my progress beyond 2200 was not at all straightforward. There were plenty of detours, missed learnings, and forgotten learnings along the way.

This is my first book, but I've always enjoyed writing. I used to write regularly on my own chess blog (An Unemployed Fellow, at https://vbhat.wordpress.com) from about 2008 through 2014. This book combines a few of my constants: chess, trying to improve, and writing.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who've played a big role in my chess development as teachers, supporters, sponsors, coaches, peers, students, and organizers.

All of it starts with my mom. I'm not only lucky that she knew how to play and taught me, but also because she was an excellent first coach even well after I had moved past her own skill level. For someone who had never seen or heard of a chess tournament before her kids got into chess, she learned a ton about chess and the chess world to help me.

Not far behind my mom on the list would be my dad and brother. Both my parents sacrificed a lot to give me a chance in chess. We weren't poor, but we also weren't close to being rich, and chess training and travel do cost money. My brother also helped me both directly and indirectly: directly through our countless practice games against each other and indirectly through continued encouragement even after I passed him on the rating lists.

Thanks also to two coaches who had an outsize impact on my development and improvement. Richard Shorman was my first teacher aside from my mom and both his love of the game and his method of teaching left a big imprint on my view of chess. GM Gregory Kaidanov was my first professional coach. I often wasn't the ideal student, but I'm thankful that he persevered, and his efforts helped me get the IM title and achieve a big leap in strength overall.

IM David Pruess and GM Josh Friedel were two of my frequent tournament and training partners, and we have spent many hours analyzing and working together. Finally, coaching Sam Shankland for several years (he's now well beyond any level I reached) was almost as much a benefit for me as I'd like to think it was for him.

Thanks are also owed to the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco and IM John Donaldson most specifically. The Mechanics became my chess home starting in about 1997 and was where I did battle most frequently. The Institute also continues to provide some level of chess sponsorship to junior players and is home to an amazing library. Getting a library card there helped open a whole new world of chess books to me.

And finally, thanks also to Daniel Schwarz, Yian Liou, and Josh Friedel for their feedback during my writing process.

Vinay Bhat
San Francisco, January 2023

Chapter 12

College and Organizing

Soon after my tournaments in China, I started at UC Berkeley (Cal) in August 2002. I finally had my first GM norm and was rated just over 2430 FIDE (and 2500 USCF), and I felt confident that if I kept playing even a little bit, I'd be able to get the GM title. I wasn't chasing it though, and I ended up almost completely skipping tournament chess over the next two years.

I also skipped collegiate chess entirely. That was a big contrast with high school, and another contrast with high school is that we could have fielded a strong team at the national collegiate level for one year. David Pruess and Dmitry Zilberstein overlapped with me for one year at Cal.

One commentator was looking forward to that, comparing our lineup to the classic New York Yankees lineups with Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. It was a flattering comparison at the time, but nowadays we'd barely make an impression with several college chess teams in the US attracting top-tier talent from around the world.

Unfortunately, as a public school in a state going through a government budget crisis, the Cal chess team lost whatever modicum of support it had, and my scholastic team chess career ended in high school. I also stopped studying, practicing, and coaching and even curtailed how much online blitz I played in favor of settling into college life and a busy academic course load.

My coursework mirrored my varied interests with classes ranging from modern Asian history, Calculus, Hindi, Neurobiology, Physics, and more. My two favorite classes ended up being a statistical modeling course (that would now be considered an introduction to Machine Learning) and 19th century Russian Literature. I later graduated with degrees in both Statistics and Political Economy in May 2006.

Still, as the 2004 summer rolled around, I accepted my invitation to the US Junior Championship. I was taking summer classes while working on campus (in the networking hardware department), and my friend Dima and I would drive around for work blasting the local rap radio station. Chess wasn't on my mind, but I hadn't forgotten about it entirely, and I wanted to play the Junior championship one last time, so I put in a vacation request for one week for the tournament. In preparation for that event, I realized my opening lines needed work and so I ended up focusing there, starting with John Watson's *Play the French*.

IM Dmitry Schneider – IM Vinay Bhat

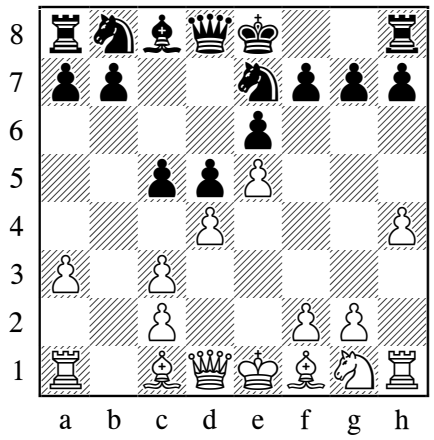
Linsdborg 2004

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♗xc3† 6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.h4

Dmitry was a regular opponent for me over the years and I had the Black pieces in most of our games. We tended to jump around from one French line to another, and while this was our first game in the Winawer, it wasn't a surprise for him as I had already played it earlier in the event.

His h-pawn push is a relatively modern treatment of the position. White looks to gain space on the kingside with h4 and h5, and then develop his pieces according to how Black develops.

All of 7.♕g4, 7.♘f3, and 7.a4 are serious tries for an advantage as well.

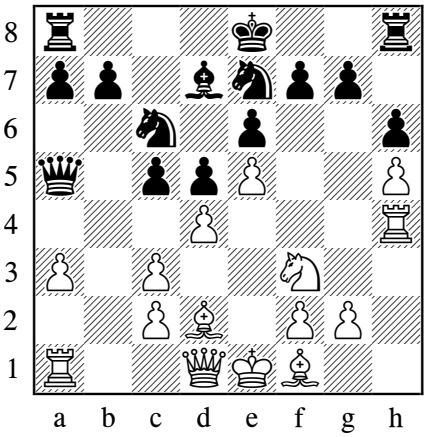


7...♘bc6 8.h5 ♕a5 9.♗d2 ♗d7 10.♘f3

At the time, I was trying to follow the approach that Watson advocated. However, I didn't fully remember the line and left to my own devices, I decided to cover g5 and h6 because 10...0–0–0 11.♘g5 ♖df8 12.h6 looked unpleasant to me. I later played and won with the Watson-approved 10...0–0–0 against Van Riemsdijk in 2006 (see Chapter 13).

10...h6

Amusingly, by playing this I unwittingly transposed into a game that Dmitry had played a few weeks prior with the black pieces.



11.♖h4!

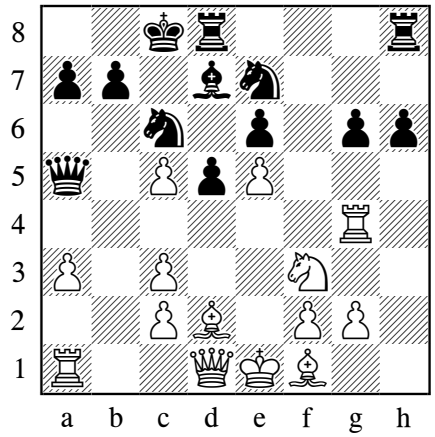
This move looked strange to me at first glance, but there is some good reasoning behind it. Black's usual plan in these positions is to open things up with a timely ...f7-f6, which chips away at White's central pawn chain.

With 11.♖h4, White is planning to stop that idea by forcing Black's g-pawn forward. The obvious drawback is that the rook is still not very well placed on g4, but White hopes to open the 4th rank too with dxc5 and then to swing the rook over to the queenside. There are some strong GMs who've played like this (Morozevich, Radjabov, and others) and at the time of this game, Morozevich had won a nice game with this maneuver, so I suspect Dmitry was using that as a reference point.

In contrast to 11.♖h4, 11.♗d3 had been the usual move here. One possibility then is 11...c4 12.♗e2 0–0–0 13.0–0 ♕a4, transposing to a game that Dmitry had played just a couple weeks before this one, except with the Black pieces (Matsuura – Schneider, Brazil 2004). He also shared that he thought 12...0–0!? might

be even better. It's true Black doesn't have too many pieces guarding his kingside, but at the same time, White doesn't have anything immediately, and there is no way to stop ...f7-f6, when Black opens the center and gains the f-file for future maneuvers.

11...0–0–0 12.♖g4 g5 13.hxg6 fxg6 14.dxc5



White should make this capture soon as otherwise Black can lock things up with ...c4, restricting the g4-rook and taking away the d3-square from White's bishop. Black's plan then would be to play ...♖df8, ...g5, ...♗e8-h5 when his better pieces would give him a clear advantage.

14...g5

There are a lot of options here, but I tried to immediately embarrass the g4-rook (with ...♗d7-e8-h5 ideas) and to surround the e5-pawn (with ...♘e7-g6), which would allow to me to start a pawn roller in the center.

14...♕xc5!? was also possible, and can't be wrong, but this pawn didn't seem to be going anywhere so I wanted to go after e5 first.

14...♖df8!? was another move I considered, and it could transpose after 15.♖b4 ♕c7 16.♖b2 g5.

I didn't spend much time on 14...♕c7 as I wanted to save the queen for the c5-pawn in some lines. Had I played this, after 15.♗d3 g5 16.♖b1 we could have transposed to Morozevich – Pelletier, Biel 2003: 16...♖hg8 (16...♘xe5 was better.) 17.♕e2 ♖df8 18.c4! ♘g6 19.cxd5 exd5 20.♗a6! and Black was in big trouble. Black's overly slow play here let Morozevich's creativity take over.

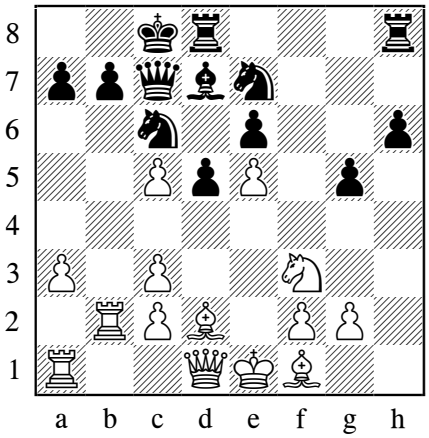
15.♖b4!

White swings his rook over before it potentially gets stuck on the kingside. 15.♖b1 is interesting though, planning to hassle Black's queen and creating some threats along the b-file. Black could take on c5 to start, but I was planning 15...♘g6 16.♗d3 ♘gxe5 17.♘xe5 ♘xe5 18.♖gb4 ♘xd3† 19.cxd3 ♗c6 20.d4 e5 with good counterplay.

15...♕c7

Accepting the exchange sacrifice with 15...♘xb4? 16.axb4 ♕c7 isn't such a great idea, as White immediately gets his play going with 17.♖xa7. Black's in real trouble with moves like 18.♗a6 on tap.

16.♖b2



16...♖df8

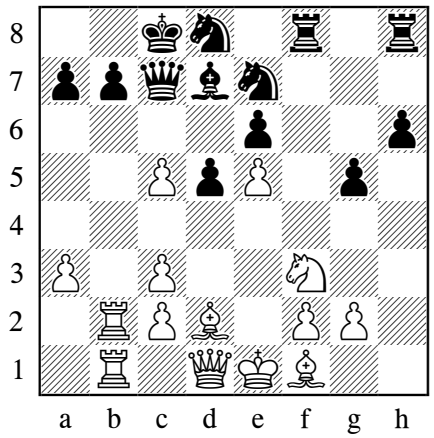
I spent a lot of time to come up with this move, the plan being to guard the b7-pawn

with ...♘d8, and then to increase the pressure on the e5- and c5-pawns.

16...♘xe5 17.♘d4 wasn't too appealing to me: White is going to increase the pressure on the b-file and Black's minor pieces are stuck. ...♘e7-c6 doesn't work because of ♘b5 and ...♗d7-c6 doesn't work because of ♘xe6. Black is then forced to play 17...♕xc5, but 18.♖ab1 b6 19.♕e2 gives White some initiative.

Alternatively, 16...♘g6 17.♖ab1 ♘a5 18.♘d4 and White's already threatening to sacrifice on b7 and follow up with ♗a6.

17.♖ab1 ♘d8



18.♕e2

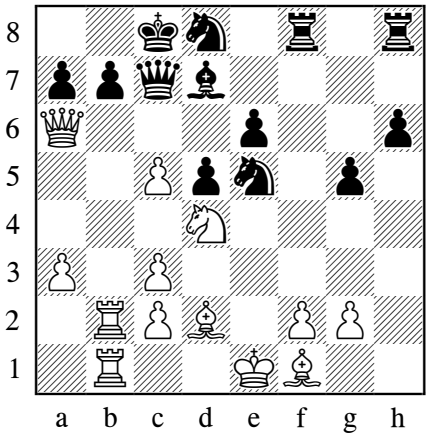
A good move, even though my first instinct was that it was a bad idea to block the ♗f1.

One of White's problems is that after moves like 18.♘d4 or 18.♗d3 g4, Black will take on e5 with check and White is reduced to offering a queen trade with ♕e2. That reduces White's attacking potential while the disappearance of the e5-pawn means Black's central pawns can start rolling.

18...♘ec6 19.♘d4 ♘xe5 20.♕a6?

Flashy, but second-best.

20.♘b5 was correct, when after 20...♗xb5 21.♕xb5 ♘ec6 (21...♘g4 22.f3 doesn't lead anywhere for Black) 22.♗e3 e5 is fine for Black. But compared to the prior 18.♗d3 variation with a similar structure, the presence of queens on the board should help White to generate more counterplay.



20...♔b8

I spent a few minutes on accepting the queen sacrifice, and once I convinced myself there wasn't an easy way to win (and in fact, I thought I'd be worse), I had no trouble in deciding on this move.

21.c4 ♘ec6!

This is what he missed, and it leaves the queen awkwardly placed.

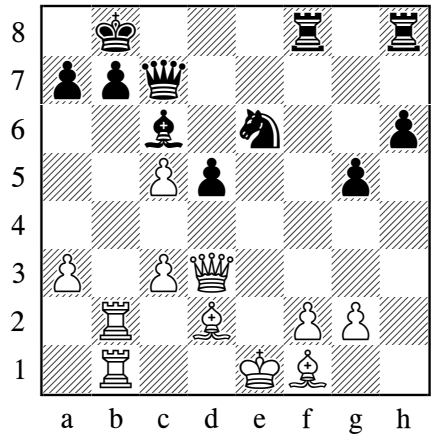
21...♔a8? allowed 22.♕a5, when White's on top – b7 is still weak and more of White's pieces are becoming active.

Now White has to exchange on c6 because 22.♘b5? drops a piece after 22...bxa6!.

22.♘xc6† ♗xc6 23.cxd5 exd5 24.♕d3 ♘e6 25.c3

25.♗e3 guards the c5-pawn but runs right into 25...d4! 26.♗xd4 ♘xd4 27.♕xd4 ♖d8!? 28.♕g4 ♖he8† 29.♗e2 ♔a8 which sidesteps

any tricks on the b-file and prepares ...♖e4. Black is well on top.



This is an ongoing theme for the rest of this game: White's king is somewhat exposed, but Black doesn't quite have an open road in. He will need some sacrifice to truly crack open White's shell.

25...♘xc5

25...♘f4 was the main alternative, but I didn't see why I shouldn't grab the c5-pawn. The only potential downside was that this opens the g1-a7 diagonal, but I didn't see any real impact of that.

26.♕d4

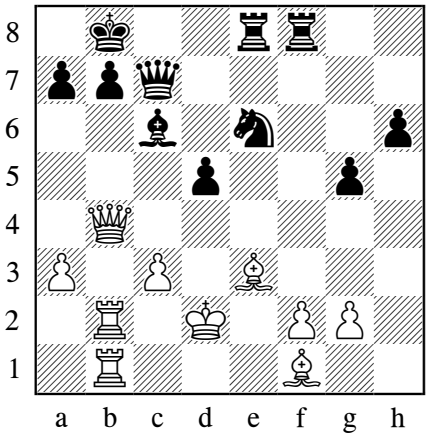
26.♕g3 exchanges queens, but White isn't well placed for the endgame: 26...♖e8† 27.♔d1 ♕xg3 28.fxg3 ♗a4† 29.♔c1 ♖hf8 30.♗b5 ♖e4, with a huge advantage.

26...♘e6 27.♕b4 ♖e8 28.♗e3 ♖hf8

I had spent time on 27...d4 (on the prior move) but wasn't able to see any clear path to an advantage and I expected to be better. And again, on this move 28...d4 29.cxd4 ♘f4 looked natural but I couldn't find a clear advantage after 30.♕c5. But the straightforward 30...♘xg2† (30...♘d5 would transpose to the game but having removed some options for White as well) 31.♗xg2 ♗xg2 would leave Black with a clear plus in the endgame.

White's next move rewards my indecision.

29.♔d2?!



29...d4!

I had been looking at this option for the previous 3 moves, and with four minutes left to reach move 40, I finally played it on instinct. Giving up the d-pawn opens another central file, opens the diagonal for the light-squared bishop, creates a square on d5 for Black's knight, and shuts in White's dark-squared bishop. For my extra pawn, that seemed a worthy price.

30.cxd4 ♘f4!? 31.♕c5 ♘d5 32.♗a6

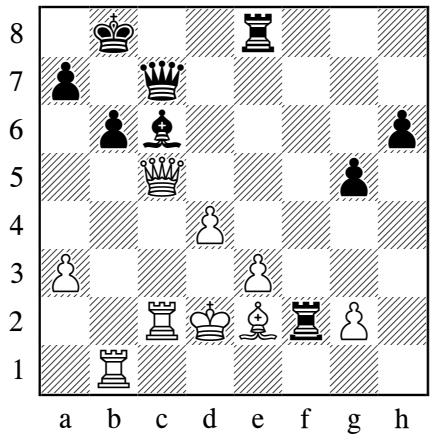
32.♗b5 is too slow, as 32...♘xe3 and 33...♖f2† wins.

Meanwhile, 32.♖xb7† ♗xb7 33.♕xd5 ♔a8 leaves Black up an exchange, and White's king is at least as exposed as Black's. Still, this is probably what I would have chosen to try and confuse the issue a little bit.

32...b6 33.♖c2

33.♗b5? bxc5 would be a bad slip.

33...♘xe3 34.fxe3 ♖f2† 35.♗e2



35...♕g3!

Black's attack lands first.

Now 36.d5? guards the e3-pawn, but doesn't do much else: 36...♗xd5 and White has no response to Black's attack.

Meanwhile, 36.♕xc6? loses to 36...♕xe3† 37.♔d1 ♖f1† 38.♗xf1 ♕e1#.

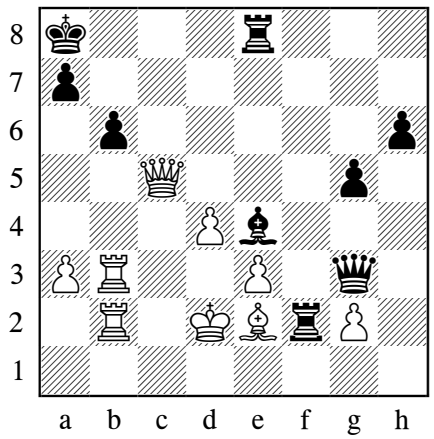
36.♖b3 ♗e4

This is enough to win, but there was a neater finish: 36...♖xe2† 37.♔xe2 ♖xe3†! Deflecting White's rook from the b-file. 38.♖xe3 ♕xg2† 39.♔d1 ♕g4† and Black will take White's queen on the next move.

37.♖cb2

37.♖cc3 is simply met by 37...♔a8! 38.♕b5 ♖ef8 39.♖b2 ♖xe2† 40.♕xe2 ♖f2, winning.

37...♔a8



I had less than a minute with no increment left at this point, but I also wanted something to drink, so I got up to refill my water glass. My opponent and the handful of spectators looked shocked, but I had everything under control.

38.♕b5 ♖c8 39.♕a6 ♗b7 40.♕b5 ♕xg2 0–1

While the Winawer was a good addition to my repertoire, I had forgotten at least two important things about playing competitively again. First and foremost, I hadn't done anything to mimic the kind of focus and mental stamina I'd need to play 9 long, high-level games one after the other. And secondly, this event was being held in Lindsborg, Kansas, a town with a population of about 3,000 and one that didn't turn out to have much in the way of vegetarian food. Unlike some of my prior travels, I didn't arrive well prepared for that at all.

So, while I did reasonably well over the first three days (with 3/5, I was half a point behind the leader), I lost my last 4 games of the event and in increasingly embarrassing fashion.

In one game, my opponent's coach (the strong IM Victor Frias) remarked that I must never have studied Capablanca because otherwise I wouldn't have made the positional mistakes I made in that game. He wasn't trying to be sarcastic or ironic.

Then, in a game against Josh Friedel, I spent more than 5 minutes considering a king move before realizing it would move into check from a neighboring piece. He also told me that at one point, I started talking out loud at the board (I don't remember this). Luckily Josh and his second (Alex Betaneli) took pity on me and let me tag along to get lunch afterwards in a neighboring town with many more food options for me.

And to finish the event, I failed to notice that my opponent was attacking my bishop on move 16 and so I had nothing better to do than resign after my opponent took it on the next move. I was already worse to be fair, but it didn't need to end like that!

Thoroughly embarrassed, I went back to Berkeley and focused again on my job and my classes. This experience felt like a huge step backward, and I didn't make any plans to play again. My return to chess was later made in a roundabout way, thanks to a side project with two friends.

A Left Turn to Organizing and Coaching

A few months before that US Junior tournament, my friend David Pruess approached Andy Lee and me about our interest in opening a chess center in Berkeley. Unlike the existing Berkeley Chess Club, his vision was for a full-time chess center that would be open throughout the year and hold events, host lessons, and put on exhibitions. All three of us were interested and willing to put in time after school and on the weekends to make it work.

We found a venue that we could rent; I set up and developed the initial website; and we figured out finances and set lesson rates to support the club. This was largely a labor of love, as we paid ourselves infrequently and well below a normal teaching rate, redirecting the rest to fund the ongoing operations of the club.

I worked at the club until my graduation in May 2006 and helped on occasion through the end of the chess center in 2007. During that time, we ran nearly 200 USCF rated events including a few international, norm-eligible tournaments. The first of those was in 2005, and it was a double round-robin, with Yermolinsky ("Yermo"), Atalik, and Sharavdorj as the GMs.

On a Friday evening (April 1, 2005), Sharavdorj was playing Yermo. Yermo was better but threw it away in time pressure during the first time-control and then had to defend a pawn-down rook endgame. Both players were now nearing time pressure in the second (sudden death) time control. Then, suddenly, the power went out for a six-block radius: an electrical transformer had blown!

The club had some windows but there wasn't a lot of light at that hour, so as the TD, I briefly debated adjourning the game. Yermo was opposed to that because it was a somewhat theoretical R+P endgame and so if the players could study it, it'd become a more academic exercise.

We decided to have the game continue, physically moving the board closer to the windows (and any remaining light) and adding a flashlight as well (held up by Andy Lee, the tallest person in the crowd). The handful of spectators were slowly engulfed by the shadows as the endgame wore on until it was finally pierced by Yermo's deep voice.

"*Vinaaay! Where's Vinay?*" he bellowed.

I popped out the shadows nearby. Yermo wanted to claim a 3-time repetition. But neither of them was keeping score and I wasn't writing down the moves for them either, so there couldn't be a valid claim. Yermo didn't like that at all and made that clear. Sharavdorj wasn't comfortable in English, but he made it clear he agreed with me that the game needed to continue.

The debate continued with Yermo escalating with something to the effect of: "This isn't a blitz game" (except with much more colorful language). Luckily, I got the players to agree to continue with the stipulation that I'd start to write down the moves for them. The game ended in a draw shortly thereafter without any appeal to my scoresheet. We never did fully reconstruct the game, and so I entered it as having ended in a draw after move 60.

Rediscovering Chess Playing

One exhibition that we organized at the Club was a "Man versus Machine" match in October 2004, in which I played Fritz8, which I lost in a clean sweep. It wasn't a normal tournament and the games had plenty of interesting content, but it also didn't do much to sweep aside any self-doubt after the absolute stinker I had at the US Junior Championship.

But at the end of 2004, the Mechanics Institute decided to hold another norm event (the Michael Franett Memorial), and for the first time, I was invited as one of the IMs. As a competitor, I had some desire to redeem myself after the US Junior and Fritz8 matches. But my chess confidence was in shambles too, so it felt like a toss-up decision. The tiebreaker ended up being a sense that I owed them for organizing many similar events when I was growing up, so I said yes, and this time I started preparing about one month in advance.

I don't remember why, but I decided to buy *Creative Chess Strategy* by GM Alfonso Romero and I ended up devouring it during that month. The book covers a lot of ground, but centers on the middlegame, and was an excellent set of annotated games for me to study. One thing he emphasized was how a routine approach wouldn't work in some positions, and one way I decided to act on that was by blowing up my repertoire for the event to challenge myself to play new positions out of the gate. It worked out beautifully.

I didn't pick the most cutting-edge openings: my biggest switch was from 1.e4 to 1.d4, and to cut down on the theory I needed to learn, I decided to play the Trompowsky against 1...♘f6 and well-trodden but secondary lines against 1...d5. But I was excited to play again and finally, unlike Ostap Bender, I managed to play a move besides 1.e4. While 19th century Russian literature was my favorite class, the subsequent 20th century material was excellent as well and Ilf & Petrov with *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf* were some favorites. I'd like to think these next two games are nearly as entertaining as a good Bender adventure.

IM Vinay Bhat – FM Alan Stein

San Francisco 2005

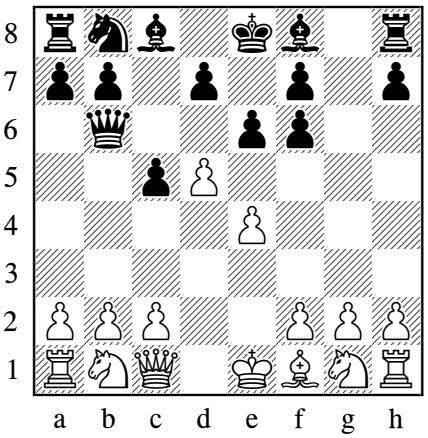
1.d4 ♘f6 2.♗g5

My opening surprise paid quick dividends. Alan had known me and how I played since the early 90s as he was a few years older and grew up in the Bay Area. He spent 10 minutes here debating how to respond.

2...c5 3.♗xf6 gxf6 4.d5 ♕b6 5.♕c1 e6 6.e4!

Taking advantage of the fact Black didn't stop this (5...f5 is normal, instead of 5...e6).

Both 6.♘c3 and even 6.g3 crossed my mind, but 6.e4 was natural and once I saw the possible attack that follows, I didn't spend all my time solving the position. In that sense, I didn't make the same mistake here as against Mikhalevski (Chapter 10).



6...♗h6?

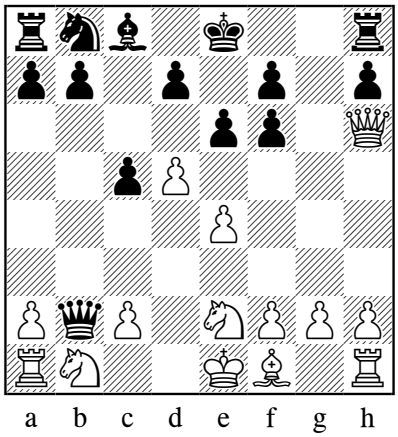
When he played ...e6, I figured this was his plan. The only problem is that the added moves help White tremendously: the f-pawn and black king position is much weaker, and White has time to sideline the black queen.

Instead, 6...♗g7 7.♘c3 0–0 8.♘ge2 followed by g3 leaves White with a pleasant plus. Alternatively, 6...f5!? 7.exf5 exd5 attempts to reach a messy position, but White is better after 8.♘c3.

7.♕xh6

Basically forced (as 7.♘d2 loses a pawn to 7...♗xd2†), but this also refutes Black's plan.

7...♕xb2 8.♘e2



8...♕xa1

Black doesn't have to take this rook right away but waiting also doesn't help much.

One way to wait would be with:

8...d6

This prepares to bring the b8-knight to the defense of his center immediately, but it comes up short:

9.♘ec3 ♘d7

9...♕xa1 transposes to the note to Black's 9th move.

10.♗b5! ♕xa1 11.dxe6

11.♕xf6?! 0–0! is an easy move to miss, but an idea that saves Black from a worse fate in a number of lines.

11...fxe6 12.♕xf6 ♖f8 13.♕xe6† ♔d8 14.0–0

Winning for White.

Another attempt to shore things up is with 8...♔e7, but unsurprisingly the king isn't a great defender in the middlegame: 9.d6†! ♔e8 (9...♔xd6 allows 10.♕d2† and 11.♕c3 to save the rook) 10.♘ec3 and once the f-pawn falls, mate on e7 is hard to avoid. For example, 10...♖g8 11.♕xf6 ♘c6 12.♗b5 ♔f8 13.♗xc6 bxc6 14.0–0 ♕xa1 15.♘d2 ♕b2 16.♘c4 followed by ♘e5 and checkmate.

Like the *30 Rules* say, material is just one factor in evaluating a position! White's piece quality and Black's lack of king safety are the common thread across all the concrete reasons Black can't defend himself here.

9.♘ec3 ♕b2

9...d6 10.♗b5†

10.♕xf6 0–0! again clouds the issue.

10...♔e7

Now Black seems to have a better version than what happens in the game, but White's attack is still too strong:

11.e5! fxe5

11...dxe5? 12.0–0! ♘d7 13.d6†! ♔xd6 14.♘d2! and Black's queen is lost as if it moves to b2 or c3, a knight fork will pick it up.

12.0–0

Black is toast. To prove the win in all lines would take a lot of variations, but there is basically one primary concept that connects most of White's wins: he will play ♘c3-e4 (and ♕f6†/♕g5†) or even ♘b1-d2 (to bring that knight to e4 with tempo after ...♕xc3).

10.♗e2!

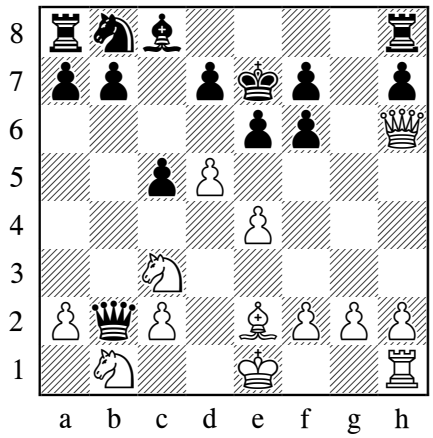
I couldn't find anything immediately forcing with 10.d6, 10.♕xf6, or 10.♗b5, so I just

decided to develop a piece and prepare to castle. A refreshingly practical approach.

10...♔e7

10...a6 attempts to keep the white pieces out of b5, but this is not a luxury Black can afford. 11.♕xf6 ♕c1† 12.♗d1 shows the extra developing move (♗e2) coming in handy. Then, 12...♖g8 13.♘d2! cuts the black queen off and adds to Black's central dark square worries. One finish could be 13...b5 14.e5! with ♘c3-e4-d6† to follow.

Meanwhile, 10...d6 11.0–0 ♔e7 12.e5! fxe5 13.♘e4 is akin to the 9...d6 lines, and like those is winning for White.



11.d6†!

11.e5 was my second choice and the move Alan was more afraid about. After 11...fxe5 I didn't see anything too clear, so I decided to stick with d6†, but I missed 11...fxe5 12.♕g5†! when 12...♔e8 13.d6 is crushing.

11...♔xd6 12.♕xf6 ♕c1† 13.♗d1 ♖g8 14.♘d2

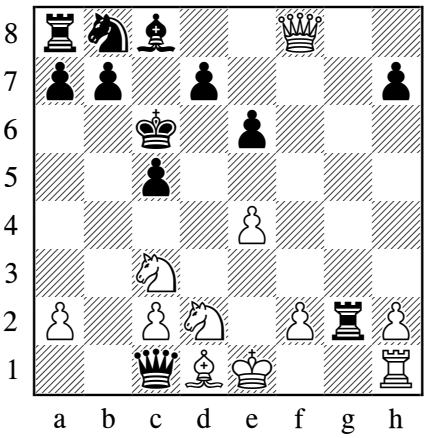
Stopping Black's idea of ...♕g5.

14...♔c6

It's already checkmate after: 14...♘c6?? 15.♘b5#!

And while 14...a6 covers b5, Black has other problems. There are multiple wins, and I was planning 15.♘c4† ♔c7 (15...♔c6 16.♕e5! with checkmate to follow – Black's queenside lives in a self-made cage.) 16.♘d5† ♔c6 (16...exd5 17.♕b6#) 17.♘e7†.

15.♕xf7! ♖xg2 16.♕f8!



White's attack is easy to conduct: Black is playing with so many fewer pieces and so many holes in his position that White can make simple improvements and threats to bring the point home.

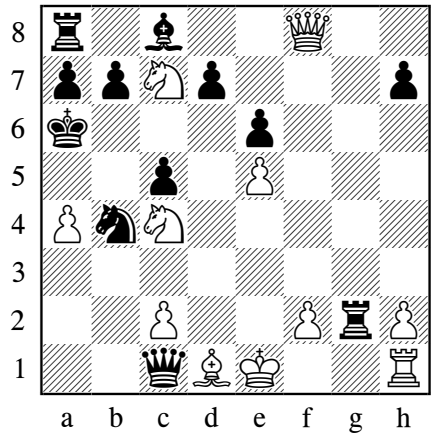
16...♘a6 17.e5 ♔c7 18.♘b5† ♔b6

18...♔c6 19.a4 also forces a win. 19...b6 20.♕f3†!? is one possible winning line.

19.a4 ♘b4

Walking into a nice self-mate, but there's nothing better.

20.♘c4† ♔a6 21.♘c7#
1–0



A picturesque finish! After the game, Alan jokingly told the tournament director to "please lose the scoresheets".

FM David Pruess – IM Vinay Bhat

San Francisco 2005

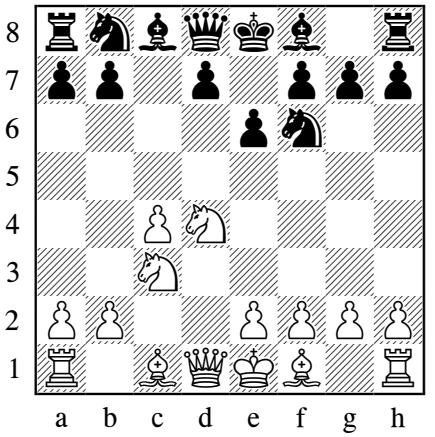
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3

After a couple minutes of thought, David decided to call my bluff with this move. He realized that I wasn't a Nimzo-Indian player (or any sort of 1.d4 ♘f6 player), so he presented me with a choice: play 3...♗b4 and the Nimzo for the first time (from either color); play a QGD with 3...d5 (not part of my repertoire for 10 years); or play 3...c5 and head for a Benoni, which I also didn't ever play. Following my pattern after reading *Creative Chess Strategy*, I went for Option C.

3...c5 4.♘f3

But this was a real shock for me. I had expected David to take the challenge of the Benoni and maybe even go for the Taimanov Attack. I had nothing special prepared there, so to some degree, I'm lucky he didn't go for it. I also didn't know anything about this transposition into a Symmetrical English.

4...cxd4 5.♘xd4



5...d5

I was debating between this move and 5...♗b4, 5...♘c6, and 5...♗c5. All of them looked reasonable, but once again, I hesitated with 5...♗b4 because that felt like a Nimzo-like position. Meanwhile, 5...♗c5 is almost never played, but I'm not entirely sure why. And it turns that 5...♘c6 is the most common move, leading to a very theoretical line of the Symmetrical English.

David responded somewhat quickly with the most popular move, but both 6.♗g5 and 6.e3 are also played relatively frequently.

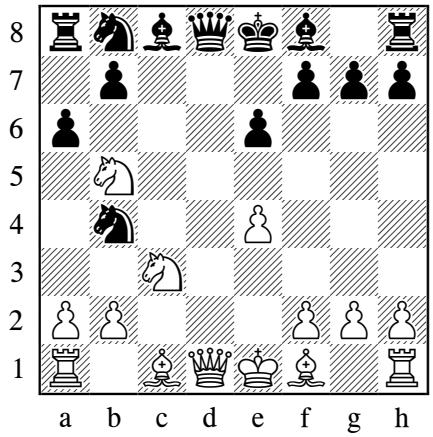
6.cxd5 ♘xd5 7.♘db5 a6

One of many fair choices in a position with a long history – Alekhine chose 7...♗d7 in 1922 for example.

8.e4

8.♘xd5 axb5 9.♘c3 ♕xd1† 10.♔xd1 b4 11.♘b5 ♖a5 12.e4 ♗c5 is quite pleasant for Black.

8...♘b4



9.♗g5?

Objectively wrong, but he ratchets up the chaos factor with this move.

9.♕xd8† ♔xd8 10.♘a3 was what I was expecting, with a solid position for Black after something like 10...♗c5 11.♗f4 ♔e7 12.♖c1 ♘d7 13.♗e2 b5 14.0–0 ♗b7.

9...f6

While taking the bishop is obviously bad after 10.♘c7†, both 9...♕a5 and 9...♕b6 took a bit more time to calculate and compare to the pawn move. After some consideration, the pawn advance looked correct (and is correct).

10.♗xf6

In for a penny, in for a pound. The alternative 10.♕h5† g6 11.♖d1 ♘c2† 12.♔e2 ♕b6! leaves Black winning.

10...♕xd1†

10...gxf6 11.♕h5† ♔e7 12.♖d1 ♘c2† 13.♔e2 ♕b6, and now while 14.♘d6 comes up short after 14...♘d4†, I was worried about 14.e5. The computer points out the clever 14...♗d7! though, and that would largely rebuff White's attack.

Instead, I bailed out into a complex endgame that I couldn't calculate to the end, but where I felt I must have some plus.

11.♖xd1 axb5 12.♖d8† ♔f7 13.♖xc8 ♔xf6

13...gxf6 prepares the immediate ...♗g7, but I thought I'd lose my queenside doing this and I didn't particularly like my kingside structure either. 14.a3 ♘4c6 15.♗xb5 ♖g8 16.♖c7† ♗e7 17.0–0 and Black is slightly better. After b7 falls, White will have 3 pawns for the piece, and while the pawns won't be far advanced, Black's pieces aren't well coordinated either.

14.a3

This looks best to me, but there is a plethora of alternatives to consider – for example, White can take on b5 in a couple ways or start chasing Black's king, either with f4 or with his rook after h4. Against all of them, Black can defend by trying to take advantage of the fact that if the knights on b4 and c3 are removed, then Black will have ...♗b4† to break the pin with tempo.

Thus, against 14.♘xb5, I was planning 14...♘d3† – while against each of 14.♗xb5, 14.h4, or 14.f4, I was planning 14...♘xa2. The b8-knight is indirectly defended after a trade on a2 due to the ...♗b4 check.

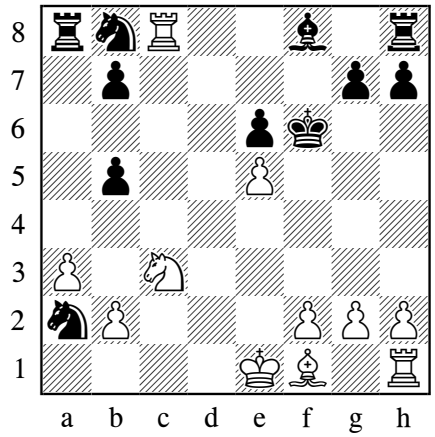
14...♘a2!?

Extravagant, but after White's provocation with ♗g5 I couldn't help myself from playing this. It helped that I thought it was a good move too! Both 14...♘4a6 15.♗xb5 and 14...♘c2† 15.♔d1 ♘d4 16.♘xb5 didn't look good for me.

But I underestimated 14...♘4c6. Then 15.♗xb5 ♘a7! is the key defensive maneuver, as after 16.♖c7 ♘xb5 17.♘xb5 ♘a6, Black is untangling. Continuing this line a little further with 18.♖xb7 ♘c5 19.♖b6 ♗e7, White has 3 pawns for the piece, but Black has the much better pieces and in the long run, that'll give him a big advantage.

15.e5†!

15.♘xa2 ♗b4† is obviously not good and the alternative exchange sac with 15.♖xf8† is a little better by comparison, but still no fun after 15...♖xf8 16.♘xa2 ♔e5!.



15...♔xe5

15...♔g6 16.h4! and now the activation of the rook along the 3rd rank should be good enough for White to equalize at least.

15...♔f7? allows White to get his rook off the 8th with tempo: 16.♖c7† ♗e7 17.♘xa2 wins.

16.f4†! ♔xf4

The king can defend itself! This is an amusing position: Black has two pinned minor pieces on the 8th rank and his knight is deep in enemy territory on a2. Meanwhile, his king fearlessly moves up the board.

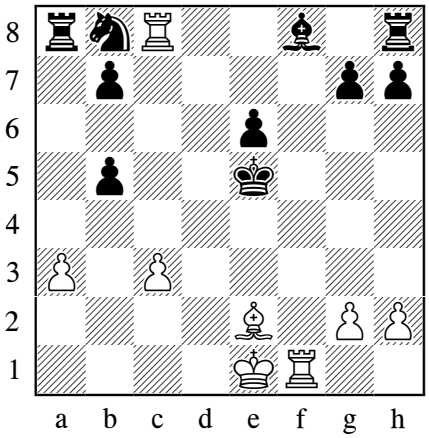
Not 16...♔f6 17.♘e4† ♔g6 18.♗d3 and White is better. Black's problem is that he can't escape the pins on the 8th rank.

17.♗e2?

It doesn't seem like the b-pawn is important right now, and David might have wanted to keep his bishop closer to home so that Black doesn't have ideas of ...♖a5 to try and break a pin on the 8th rank, but that pawn carries the day for Black. An improvement is: 17.♗xb5! ♘xc3 18.bxc3 ♔e5 19.♖f1 ♖a5 20.a4 ♘a6 21.♖cxf8 ♖xf8 22.♖xf8 ♘c7 23.♖f7 ♘xb5 24.axb5 ♖xb5 25.♖xg7 White equalizes.

17...♘xc3 18.bxc3 ♔e5 19.♖f1

19.0–0? ♘a6! Both 19...♘c6 and 19...♘d7 are also good enough, but 19...♘a6 covers the c7-square, and so White has no choice but to take the rook on a8. 20.♖xa8 ♗c5† 21.♔h1 ♖xa8 wins.



19...b4!!

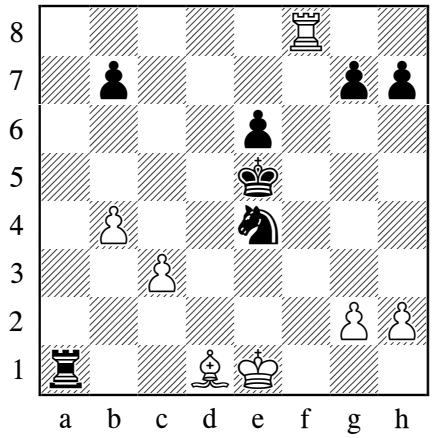
A bolt from the blue that leaves White with no good option. Taking on b4 releases one of the pins on the 8th rank, but moving past the b-pawn gives Black a strong passed pawn. White really needed to take that pawn on move 17.

20.axb4

The only reasonable move. Taking on f8 immediately lets Black take on a3 and then run with the a-pawn very quickly. Meanwhile, 20.a4 falls to the prosaic 20...♖xa4 and a subsequent ...bxc3 – for example, 20.a4 ♖xa4 21.♖xb8 bxc3 22.♖1xf8 ♖xf8 23.♖xf8 ♖a1† and 24...c2 will decide things.

David offered a draw after this move – I had about 50 seconds left while he had 18 minutes. But both of us had a 30 second increment as well, and I assessed the endgame as a win.

20...♖a1† 21.♗d1 ♘d7 22.♖f7 ♘f6 23.♖fxf8 ♖xf8 24.♖xf8 ♘e4



Material is equal again, but White has a problem with his back rank and the c-pawn.

25.♖c8

25.♖f3 b5 just turns the screws on White's position. Black can play ...♖a2 or ...♖c1 later.

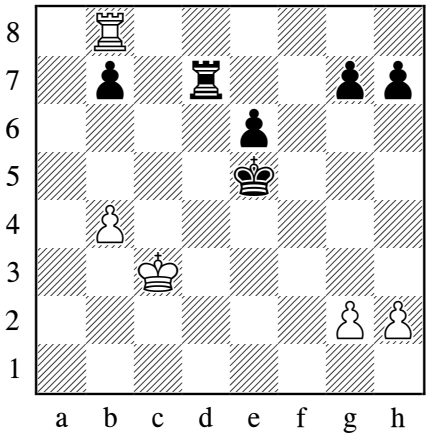
25...♔f4

I decided to repeat the position in slightly different ways to gain some time on the clock.

26.♖f8† ♔e5 27.♖c8 ♖c1 28.♖b8 ♖b1 29.♖c8

29.♖xb7 avoids the repetition, but to White's detriment: 29...♘xc3 30.♖d7 ♔e4! 31.b5 e5 32.b6 ♔e3 33.b7 e4 and after ...♘xd1 and ...♖xb7, Black will have a winning endgame. His king and extra pawn are already quite active and far advanced.

29...♖c1 30.♖b8 ♘xc3 31.♔d2 ♖xd1† 32.♔xc3 ♖d7



This should now be an easy win for Black, as his pawns are safe with the rook on the 7th rank. Meanwhile, White's king is cut off and will have some trouble crossing the d-file. I normally think of the best position for a rook to be behind the passed pawn, then to the side of the pawn, and then in front of the pawn.

Black now has two major plans that I considered while David thought about how to defend this:

1) Escort the e-pawn up the board with the king in front of it.
2) Bring the king back to d6, then position the rook behind the e-pawn and push it while the king goes after White's b-pawn.

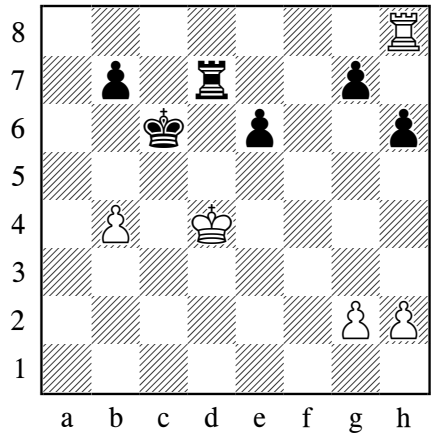
33.♔c4 ♔d6

Unfortunately, walking the pawn up the board with the king means giving White counterplay with b5-b6 and ♖c8-c7. Thus, I decided on the 2nd plan, which leaves nothing to chance.

34.♖h8 h6 35.♔d4

Rooks tend to be bad blockaders, so White tries to stop the e-pawn with his king but that leaves the queenside unattended.

35...♔c6†



36.♔e3

36.♔e5 ♖d2 37.♔xe6 ♖xg2 and now Black easily wins, with a passed pawn soon to appear on both sides of the board. After 36.♔e3, there are multiple winning approaches and I picked one that isn't any better or worse than the others.

36...♖e7 37.♔e4 ♔b5 38.♔e5 ♔xb4 39.♔d6 ♖f7 40.♖h7 b5 41.h4 ♔c3 42.g4 b4 43.g5 hxg5 44.hxg5 b3 45.g6 ♖a7 46.♖h3† ♔b4 47.♖h4† ♔a3 48.♖f4 b2 49.♖f7 ♖xf7 0–1

I finished the event with a dominant 9/11 score and with mostly fresh positions in every game. After the lows from the 2004 US Junior, my playing interest had been rekindled.

I played three more rated events through the end of college, two of which were organized by our East Bay Chess Club. I also came across all sorts of people and personalities as an organizer, many of which were challenging.

The marquee annual event we organized was the Berkeley Masters, a 9-round event with enough titled players to offer GM and IM norm possibilities. The 2005 edition was held in December and there were some heavy rains outside. As we were just below ground level (you needed to descend a few steps from the sidewalk to enter the club), we had some water flooding issues to deal with. Managing that during the game was tough, and I also had trouble for the entire event focusing on my play while dealing with pairings, player issues, and so on.

The flooding and cleaning up during a game weren't even close to the biggest headaches I had. Earlier in the year, at a small weekend tournament, Philipp Perepelitsky (around 2000 USCF) faced off against Andras Erdei (around 2200 USCF) in the second round. The time control was 40/2 and G/1, and by move 30, both players were in serious time pressure. The game might've already been going Perepelitsky's way, but the time scramble clarified things: after some frantic play and clock banging, Perepelitsky emerged with a huge material advantage.

As they each realized they had made 40 moves, the reality of his lost position sunk in for Erdei. Even against a 2000 player, this would take a bona-fide miracle to turn around. He sat there for a while thinking and then he decided to pack his stuff up. He put away his scoresheet and pen, his water bottle and so on and then walked away with his backpack. He didn't stop the clock or say anything to his opponent. Instead, he just left the building, with Perepelitsky looking rather confused as to what was going on.

After a few minutes and knowing his opponent had left the building, Perepelitsky assumed his opponent was resigning. So, he stopped the clocks, packed up the set, and turned in his scoresheet.

That's when Erdei rushed back into the club! He had left, but there were some ground-floor windows that gave a view into the club area (those same steps down that opened it up to flooding also meant the windows looked down into the club!) and he was watching from the bushes by those windows. By stopping the clocks and packing up the set while it was Erdei's turn, Erdei claimed that Perepelitsky had effectively resigned.

Andy Lee (the main TD for that tournament) looked through the rulebook trying to figure this one out and decided that while packing up the set on his own was not the right thing to do, Perepelitsky could reasonably have expected Erdei's actions to constitute a resignation. With Erdei physically present again, Andy offered a compromise that they could continue the game with an approximate time per player and the position as per their scoresheets (which did agree).

That would've obviously meant continuing in a dead lost position and Erdei was looking to avoid a loss by any means whatsoever, so he continued to object. Andy called me to see what I thought and after catching up on the facts as observed by multiple people, I supported his decision. Erdei then refused to continue the game and so he was ruled to have lost the game.

The drama didn't even stop there as Erdei didn't let the matter go. He threatened action with the US Chess Federation (eventually other, even more experienced, TDs supported our ruling) and then threatened legal action (due to the emotional distress of having lost the game). I knew that the mom of one of my other students at the time (Phil Jouriles) was an Assistant District Attorney in San Francisco, so I asked her whether he had any legal grounds. She laughed and said that if it came to that, she'd happily represent us pro bono and he'd get laughed out of court. Erdei never did follow up on his written threat to sue. And while I've helped a couple friends organize tournaments since, after I stopped working at the club in the summer of 2006, I haven't been the organizer or TD for any tournaments since.

My Learnings and Progress

I wasn't playing a lot of chess while in college, and when I did play, my results were all over the map. I was encouraged by games like the one against Schneider, but I had at least as many negative examples. Still, my early struggles led to an internal breakthrough in 2005.

I was stuck in a rut as a chessplayer: I had been playing the same set of opening lines and reaching similar types of middlegames for several years, but that certainty and familiarity also bred some apathy. Romero's book covered enough ground that it could help me with some weaknesses in my play, but even more importantly, it kept my interest and helped remind me why I had become hooked to begin with. And for me, that was enjoying the creative aspect alongside the competitive one.

This re-discovery was akin to something Kaidanov had done for me earlier: there are many things to study and many ways to study, but the right study plan was tailored to me in terms of study time and interests. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach.

I should add that not all my experiments worked as well as the ones against Stein and Pruess, but that was fine by me. I knew that playing the same old way wasn't any guarantee of a good result either. This helped me rebuild my interest in playing, and that was critical for me to continue playing after college.

This was taken in 1992, at the age of 8, after a long game that I lost. While I had plenty of success on my way up, I also had to get used to losing some key games as well