



The Power of Subtle, Quiet Moves

The 2006 Championship of Russia (Upper League) was a triumph for the new generation of Russian chess: all seven qualifying spots to the Superfinal (a 12-player round robin scheduled for December) went to young grandmasters – the oldest of them just twenty-two. Behind them came such well-known, highly experienced and highly-rated players as Vladimir Malakhov, Alexei Dreev, and Alexander Khalifman.

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The Instructor

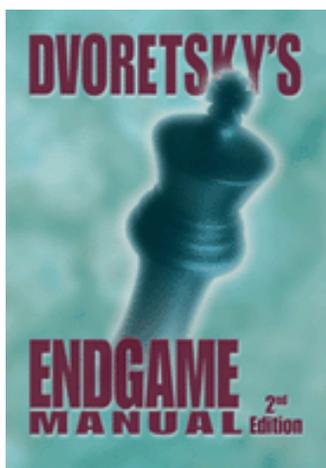
Mark Dvoretsky

I am happy for the young players' successes – in part, because the great majority of them are very congenial, smart and well-behaved. Uncompromising fighters over-the-board, in life they maintain excellent relations with one another, without envying anyone's accomplishments. I have never heard of dirty dealings or tricks directed against their comrades – and oh, how many such stories could have been told about Soviet-era grandmasters!

In the old days, I would regularly assist my students at their tournaments, while also paying attention to their opponents play. Naturally, I would first share the results of my observations with my students, but I also often shared my conclusions in print or in personal meetings with interested players. These days, I hardly ever go to tournaments, and coming up with an objective opinion based upon watching someone's play on the Internet is pretty tough – that is, of course, if you don't spend much time every day analyzing the games as they finish. This is why I don't wish to write anything about the creative achievements of those who played in the Upper League: nobody needs another shallow impression – and sometimes, such things can actually do harm. But I did follow the games of the tournament winner – my own pupil, Ernesto Inarkiev – and I do have something to show there.

For those who are not familiar with Inarkiev, let me describe him as a modern young man, in which upbringing, goodwill and openness blend harmoniously with a strong character, competitiveness and ambition. In this regard he strongly reminds me of another student of mine, Artur Yusupov, who in his own day grew into one of the world's strongest grandmasters. Such a combination of qualities, ranked of course alongside an obvious talent, induced me to pay attention to Ernesto five years ago, when he appeared at one of the sessions of my chess school. We began working regularly with him.

Within one year, the 16-year-old Inarkiev scored a brilliant victory in the Russian under-20 Championship, outstripping his nearest rival by two full points (which is a fantastic margin for an 11-round Swiss). Soon, he became a grandmaster. Then came a lull, due partly to the fact that Ernesto was distracted by too many



tournaments, at the expense of his training. Later, he acknowledged this error and settled into a more normal tournament schedule.

Inarkiev's preparation for the Russian Championship Upper League took place at sea. Naturally, he spent plenty of time on his openings, but he needed almost none of his preparation (no problem – it'll come in handy later). However, his physical training did prove useful: he managed to accumulate an extraordinary reserve of freshness and energy, no less vital for success than purely professional knowledge and techniques.

Before traveling to the tournament, we did some special training aimed at putting the mind on a war footing and warming up the decision-making process. Of course, you're not going to accomplish too much in just a few days – such work cannot substitute for full-scale training sessions. Nevertheless, if you do it right, this work can bear fruit. We have done similar things before. As Ernesto says, he sees the positive influence of such training on his sporting form and his final result.

Although I knew that Inarkiev had already reached a level of mastery sufficient to allow him to reach the Superfinal (and said as much before the tournament), I was still pleasantly surprised by the maturity he showed in all of his games. Earlier, Ernesto would sometimes display positional floundering in between excellent victories. This time no such thing happened; only once did he stand worse throughout the entire tournament. In the opening, as a rule, he got nothing special, but afterwards, time after time, he would outplay strong opposition.

Of course, there were occasional inaccuracies – nobody has ever found a way to eliminate them entirely. Ernesto and I have gone over them already – so let them remain strictly between us. What I would now like to show you are a few episodes in which the champion demonstrated really high-class play.

Wins come in different ways – for example, as a result of powerful opening preparation or a terrible oversight by the opponent. I have always found myself powerfully engaged by situations in which, at a critical moment, one player manages to dig deeper into the secrets of the position, allowing him to tip the scales in his favor. This was just how Inarkiev achieved his success – and, as a rule, by very modest means – subtle, quiet moves whose meaning could only be discerned by intense analysis.

His first win came in the second round.

Kosteniuk - Inarkiev

Championship of Russia, Upper League (2) 2006

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.Re1 b5 7.Bb3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3 Bb7 10.d4 Re8 11.Nbd2 Bf8 12.d5 Nb8 13.Nf1 Nbd7 14.Ng3 Nc5 15.Bc2 c6 16.b4 Ncd7 17.dc Bxc6 18.Bb3 h6 19.Qd3 Qc7 20.Nh4 Qb7



This position occurred in Svidler – Almasi, Neum 2000. Black is ready for the important central advance d6-d5. After 21.Ng6 d5 22.Nxf8, Almasi selected 22...de?! 23.Qe3! Nxf8 (23...Rxf8 is bad, in view of 24.Nf5 Nh5 25.Nxh6+! gh 26.Qxh6) 24.Nf5 Nd5 25.Qg3 Ng6 26.Nd6, with an initiative for White. According to the notes in *Informant #79*, 22...Nxf8 23.Nf5 Re6! would have maintained equality.

Sasha Kosteniuk preferred **21.Nhf5 d5** – and here she played the surprising tactical blow **22.Nh5!**

Seeing the game over the Internet, I made the logical assumption that White's interesting novelty was the result of home preparation. However, Inarkiev later advised me that his opponent had spent plenty of time thinking about her moves and apparently found this new idea at the board. This shows how easy it is to reach false conclusions when you are not watching the game live.

Ernesto correctly decided that 22...Nxh5?! 23.ed would give White the advantage, so he accepted the challenge and followed the most principled line.

22...de! 23.Qg3 Nxh5 24.Qg6!

24.Nxh6+ Kh7 25.Qh4 gh 26.Qxh5 Bd5— would be a mistake.

24...Kh8!

This cold-blooded defensive move is best here.

25.Qxh5 Bd5



Up until this point, Kosteniuk had played precisely, but now she wavered. She had to go for the piece sacrifice: 26.Bxh6!. True, after 26...gh, 27.Nxh6? fails to 27...Nf6!—+, but there is the tactical blow 27.Nd6!!.. I won't provide the accompanying variations, since the thrust of this article is beyond the detailed analysis of these fragmentary presentations. Let me just say that White could have maintained the balance.

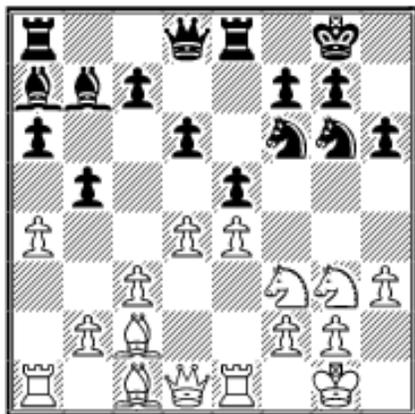
The actual game continuation, **26.Qh4?**, was met by the standard defensive maneuver in these kinds of positions: **26...Re6!**. With the kingside reinforced, Black neutralized his opponent's attacking possibilities and then competently exploited the long-term strategic advantages of his position.

A similar sort of struggle occurred in the fourth round.

Kornev - Inarkiev

Championship of Russia, Upper League (4) 2006

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 Nc6 4.Nf3 Bc5 5.c3 a6 6.Bb3 d6 7.0-0 Ba7 8.Nbd2 0-0 9.h3 Ne7 10.Re1 Ng6 11.Nf1 Re8 12.Ng3 b5 13.a4 Bb7 14.d4 h6 15.Bc2



Now comes an inconspicuous, but very important move.

15...Bb6!

What's the point? It turns out that this allows Black to prepare the central blow d6-d5. An immediate 15...d5?! would not be good, in view of 16.Nxe5 Nxe5 17.de Nxe4 18.Nxe4 de 19.Qxd8 Rxd8 (Black should take with the other rook, but this is not possible because

of 20.ab, which is why the bishop needs to

move away from a7) 20.Kf1!?, and the e4-pawn goes lost.

But now White is faced with a difficult decision: how best to prepare for the opening of the center. The drawback of the natural development of the bishop – 16.Be3 – is that it weakens the e4-pawn, as we see in the variation 16...ed 17.Bxd4 c5!. Inarkiev believes that White's strongest move was the modest 16.Bd2!, after which the break 16...d5 becomes dubious in view of 17.Nxe5! (17.de de 18.ef ef 19.Rxe8+ Qxe8 is dubious) 17...Nxe5 18.de Rxe5 19.Bf4, and Black must either allow the pawn to go to e5 – which is rather uncomfortable – or sacrifice the exchange on e4. And 18...Nxe4 19.Nxe4 de 20.Bxe4 Bxe4 21.Rxe4 Qd5 22.Qe1 leaves Black a pawn down.

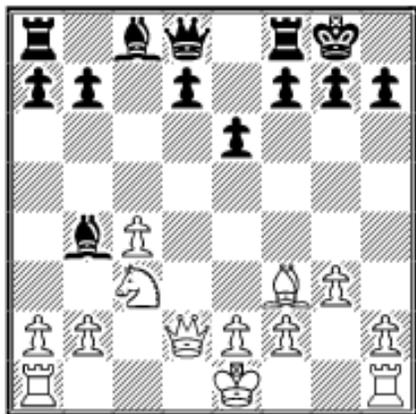
Alexei Kornev played the timid **16.Bd3**; there followed **16...d5! 17.ed Qxd5 18.ab ab 19.Rxa8 Bxa8**, and Black had completely equalized. Soon after, Black exploited his opponent's oversights and even managed to win.

The next day Inarkiev, with 3 points out of 4, had to cross swords with the sole leader, who had accumulated half a point more.

Inarkiev - Khismatullin

Championship of Russia, Upper League (5) 2006

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Nf3 c5 5.g3 Nc6 6.Bg2 Ne4 7.Bd2 Nxd2 8.Qxd2 cd 9.Nxd4 Ne5 10.Nf3 Nxf3+ 11.Bxf3 0-0



GM Moiseenko has reached this position twice with White to my knowledge. He played the natural moves: 12.0-0 Rb8 13.a3. Bologan was able to draw with the retreat to e7 in the Tripoli knockout tournament of 2004 (FIDE called this event a “World Championship,” but how can you have a tournament for the highest title without the participation of the majority of the leading grandmasters?). But 13...Bxc3!? 14.Qxc3 b6 15.Rfd1 Bb7, with approximate equality, looks safer (Moiseenko – Parligras, Warsaw

2005).

Inarkiev thought for a while and discovered an excellent strategic solution to the problems facing White.

12.Rc1!

Now White answers the exchange on c3 by recapturing with the rook and then moving it to d3, neutralizing Black’s natural queenside fianchetto plan.

12...a6 13.0-0 Qc7 14.Rfd1 Rd8

Going after material involves too great a delay in development: 14...Qxc4 15.a3 Bxc3 16.Rxc3 Qb5 17.Qd6!? Qxb2 18.Rdc1.

15.Qg5!

One more pointed prophylactic move! White will not allow the bishop to retreat to its natural square e7.

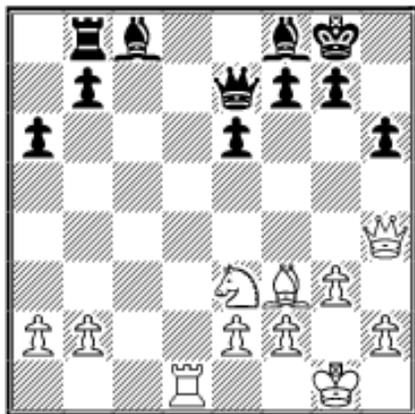
15...h6 16.Qh4 Bf8

Black wouldn’t mind entering a “hedgehog” formation after d7-d6, but his opponent knows how to forestall this.

17.c5! d5 18.cd Rxd6 19.Nd5 Qd7 20.Ne3

The knight is aiming for the important c4-square.

20...Rb8 21.Rxd6 Qxd6 22.Rd1 Qe7



23.Nc4!

White would achieve nothing after 23.Rd8 Qc7 24.Qd4 e5. In his effort to exploit his opponent's lag in development, Inarkiev does not hesitate to make the "positional sacrifice" of doubling his own pawns. Black had to accept: 23...Qxh4 24.gh Be7 25.Nb6 (25.h5 b5 26.Na5 Kf8 27.Nc6 Rb6 is safe for Black) 25...e5 26.Nxc8 Rxc8, and after 27.Bxb7 Rc2 or 27.Rd7 Kf8 28.Rxb7 Bxh4 29.Bd5 Be7, he retains excellent chances to save this inferior

"opposite-colored bishop" endgame.

23...g5? 24.Qd4 b5

24...Qc7 doesn't help: 25.Nb6 e5 (25...Be7 26.Rd3! with the decisive threat 27.Rc3) 26.Qd8+.

25.Qe5! White won the exchange and then the game.

In Round Six, Inarkiev confidently outplayed Artyom Timofeev; however, he was unable to convert his extra pawn. And now he faced a difficult game, with the black pieces, against one of the most experienced top-class participants in the tournament: Alexey Dreev (who has, in the past, also been a student of mine). Dreev was a half-point behind and naturally would be looking to win. It would be important to choose the proper approach to this game.

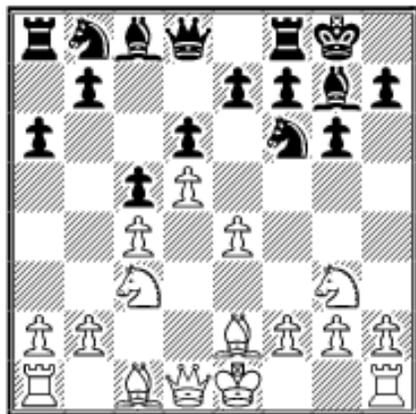
Dreev - Inarkiev

Championship of Russia, Upper League (7) 2006

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Nge2 0-0 6.Ng3

It seems Alexey had never played this before. Evidently, he chose a rare plan to steer the game into a strategic battle where Dreev's advantage in experience might tell.

6...a6 7.Be2 c5 8.d5



8...b5!

The main thing for Ernesto was not to lose. But he had enough experience to know that a passive approach would be suicidal, since it usually leads to the loss of the initiative, with all the sad consequences that follow. He decided on a pawn sacrifice, believing correctly that, in this situation, closely akin to the Benko Gambit, White's knight would not be too well-placed on g3.

9.cb ab 10.Nxb5

10.Bxb5 is also played.

10...h5!

Aggressive moves can sometimes also have a prophylactic effect. This flank diversion creates a threat against the e4-pawn – in this way Black forces the queen knight's retreat, which in turn prevents his opponent from establishing a strongpoint on b5 (after an eventual a2-a4).

11.Nc3 Qb6

Now we see another advantage of the h-pawn's advance: White's castling is impeded, since h5-h4 would then force the knight to retreat to the poor square h1.

12.Nf1 Ba6 13.Ne3 Nbd7 14.0-0 Rfb8 15.Re1 Ra7

Black's plans include transferring the knight via e8 and c7 to b5. However, on 15...Ne8, Inarkiev worried about the positional bishop sacrifice 16.Bxh5!? g4 17.Nf5 (or 17.Qxh5), allowing his opponent to create dangerous kingside threats. With his rook at a7, he could move his knight away from d7 and thereby defend the pawn at e7.

16.h3 Bxe2 17.Rxe2

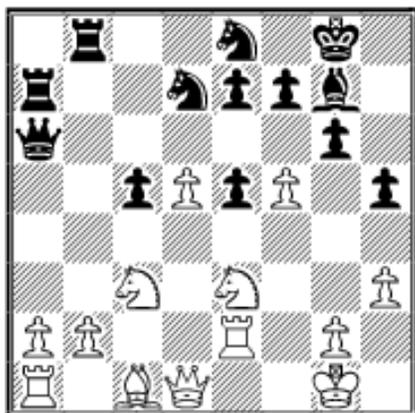
On 17.Qxe2, Black has either 17...Qa6 or 17...Qb4 18.Nc2 (18.Nc4 Nb6) 18...Qb6.

17...Qa6 18.f4 (Otherwise, Black would continue 18...Ne5.) **18...Ne8**

Things are not going so well for Dreev, as there appears to be no clear plan for him. Predicting the outcome of any particular decision seems impossible, so White is forced to play without clear markers – move on move. Experienced players, as a rule, try to avoid such situations, which are more suited to young, energetic competitors with stronger nerves (and Alexey is certainly no exception). It's no accident that by now, White had already fallen into time-pressure. Still, Inarkiev didn't have much time either.

On 19.Rc2, Black would have continued with his intended knight transfer 19...Nc7. Dreev decides on a rather typical pawn sacrifice – but also a rather dubious one in this situation.

19.e5 de 20.f5



20...Nd6

A natural move, but probably not the best. Black, of course, must take control of the e4-square, before the enemy knight gets there. But it would have made sense to play 20...Rb4! instead, and not block the sixth rank just yet. The rook aims at d4 or f4, while 21.Nc2 will be met by the exchange sacrifice 21...gf!, and 21.fg is very strongly met by 21...Qxg6!. It was just this idea of recapturing on g6 with the queen that apparently escaped

Inarkiev's attention.

21.fg

Having made this move, Dreev offered a draw and Inarkiev accepted. I'm not sure this was correct – his position was very good, and the scales clearly tipped in his favor (which, indeed, he understood). After 21...fg, White would have to deal with 22...e4; if the knight retreats (say, 22.Nc2), there's 22...Nf5, 22...Qc4 or 22...c4. Of course, there would have been no guaranteed win – anything could happen in a mutual time-scramble – but, all things considered, Black's practical chances were better.

How should we assess this episode? On the one hand, I'm reminded of the anecdote about the three whist players:

Three Englishmen are playing whist, at 10 pounds a point. One of them bids null (that is, bids to take no tricks), but takes 4 tricks (or 40 points lost). Suffering a heart attack, he dies. His opponents play out the rubber over his dead body. One says to the other:

“I say, Sir John, do you know – if our departed Sir William had led spades, instead of diamonds, we could have given him 6 tricks, instead of 4.

“And that would have been good, too.”

But on the other hand – if the following game hadn't turned out as well as it did, wouldn't he have had reason to lament the game he cut short yesterday? Well, history never runs backward; considering the final outcome, scolding Inarkiev for the only time in the tournament he displayed peaceful intentions is hardly fair.

The next game, from the penultimate round, decided the championship. Ernesto once again had black – this time against the top-rated Vladimir Malakhov, who shared the lead with him and two other players.

Malakhov - Inarkiev

Championship of Russia, Upper League (8) 2006

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba5 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.Bxc6 dc 7.d3 Nd7 8.Nbd2 f6

The main response to White's harmless system is considered to be 8...0-0 9.Nc4 f6 10.Nh4 Nc5 11.Nf5 Bxf5 12.ef Qd5 (or 12...Qd7). Once upon a time, I used to play this line with white, until I became convinced that he has nothing – the chances are about equal. Ernesto didn't remember the theoretical line, and, at the board, put together a more ambitious plan with the aim of castling long.

9.Nh4 g6 10.Nc4 Nf8



The knight could also have gone to c5, but it's hard to say which is the better square. In favor of the game continuation is the fact that Black can prevent the programmed central break d3-d4 by c6-c5.

The other programmed continuation is, of course, f2-f4. It could be played at once, since after 11.f4 ef (11...f5? 12.Nxf5) 12.Bxf4, both 12...g5? 13.Qh5+ Kd7 14.Bxg5 and 12...f5? 13.Nxf5 are bad for Black. But he plays 12...Be6 instead, and if the knight retreats

from c4, 13...g5 is now strong. And on 13.Nf3, there follows 13...Bxc4 14.dc Bc5+ 15.Kh1 Qxd1 16.Raxd1 Ne6, with a roughly equal ending. Obviously, Malakhov was not interested in such an early surrender of the battle for the advantage, but he was unable to think up anything better.

11.Bd2 b6!

Still another subtle, but very powerful prophylactic move, similar to those we saw in Inarkiev's previous games. He prepares to develop the bishop at e6, seeing that the immediate 11...Be6?! allows the unpleasant reply 12.Na5. Now it would be pointless to try to gain territory on the queenside by 12.a4, because of the simple 12...a5. The fact that he would be advancing pawns in the region of his king's future home, in violation of commonly accepted principles, mattered little to Ernesto: concrete positional considerations are more important than bookish abstractions.

Black's next few maneuvers are obvious: Be6, Qd7, 0-0-0. Meanwhile, it's hard to find a reasonable plan of action for White – at any rate, I don't know what to recommend for him here (perhaps now or on the previous move, he should still have played f2-f4, accepting equality; or else he should have played Bh6). Here,

we must either analyze the position in greater depth or call upon the assistance of a deep-thinking strategist for a solution.

In any event, Malakhov could not find a good plan and his position began to slide downhill fast.

12.b3 Be6 13.g3 Qd7 14.Ng2 0-0-0 15.Bc3



15...h5! 16.f4 h4!

Black already stands considerably better. And although, of course, the road to victory was still long and rocky, Ernesto traversed it successfully, becoming sole leader with one round to go. And considering the tactics of the battle for qualification to the Superfinal, he had also practically assured himself of victory in the tournament.

Had I shown these fragments without saying who the players were, wouldn't it have been easy to guess that they were taken from the games of, say, Petrosian – the selfsame reliance on “prophylactic thinking,” the same masterly pawn play. All in all, an excellent characterization of a young player's achievement – especially considering that he usually favors a lively, open battle full of combinations.

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